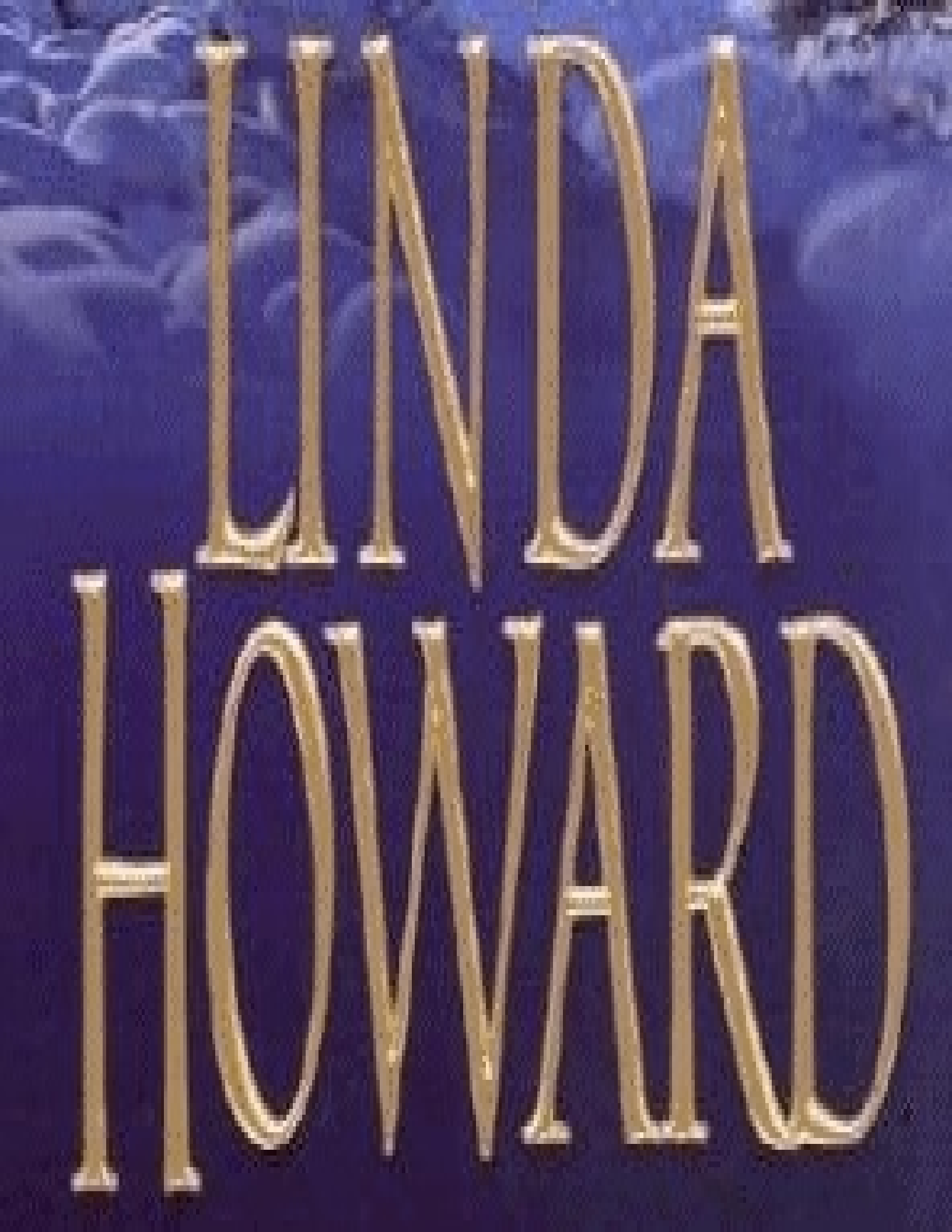

LINDA
HOWARD

Books by Linda Howard

The Way Home (???)
An Independent Wife (1982)
Come Lie With Me (1984)
Tears of the Renegade (1985)
Sarah’s Child (1985)
Almost Forever (1986)
Midnight Rainbow (1986)
Diamond Bay (1987)
White Lies (1988)
Heartbreaker (1987)
A Lady of the West (1990)
Angel Creek (1991)
The Touch of Fire (1992)
Mackenzie’s
- --1 Mackenzie’s Mountain (1989)
- --2 Mackenzie's Mission (1992)
- --3 Mackenzie's Pleasure (1994 est.)
- --4 Mackenzie's Magic (1996)
- --5 Game of Chance (2000)

Loving Evangeline (1994)
Dream Man (1994)
After the Night (1995)
Duncan’s Bride (1995)
Shades of Twilight (1996)
Son of the Morning (1997)
Now You See Her (1998)
Kill and Tell (1998)
All The Queen's Men (1999)
Mr. Perfect (2000)
Open Season (2001)
Stangers in the Night (2001)
- -- Lake of Dreams
- -- Blue Moon
- -- White Out

Dying To Please (2002)
Cry No More (2003)
Kiss Me While I Sleep (2004)

To Die For (2005)

The Way Home (???)

Prologue

The Beginning

Oaxon Malone didn't look at her as he said, "This won't work. You can be either my secretary or my mistress, but you can't be both. Choose."

Anna Sharp paused, her nimble fingers poised in suspended animation over the stack of papers she had been sorting in search of the contract he had requested. His request had come out of the blue, and she felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her. Choose, he'd said. It was one or the other. Saxon always said exactly what he meant and backed up what he'd said.

In a flash of clarity she saw precisely how it would be, depending on which answer she gave. If she chose to be his secretary, he would never again make any move toward her that could be construed as personal. She knew Saxon well, knew his iron will and how completely he could compartmentalize his life. His personal life never bled over into business, or vice versa. If she chose to be his lover—no, his mistress—he would expect to completely support her, just as sugar daddies had traditionally done over the centuries, and in exchange she would be sexually available to him whenever he had the time or inclination to visit. She would be expected to give him total fidelity while he promised nothing in return, neither faithfulness nor a future.

Common sense and self-respect demanded that she choose the upright position of secretary as opposed to the horizontal position of mistress, yet still she hesitated. She had been Saxon's secretary for a year, and had loved him for most of that time. If she chose her job, he would never allow her to get any closer to him than she was right now. As his mistress, at least she would have the freedom to express her love in her own way and the hours spent in his arms as a talisman against a future without him, which she would eventually have to face. Saxon wasn't a staying man, one with whom a woman could plan a life. He didn't tolerate any ties.

She said, her voice low, "If I choose to be your mistress, then what?"

He finally looked up, and his dark green eyes were piercing. "Then I get a new secretary," he said flatly. "And don't expect me to ever offer marriage, because I won't. Under any circumstances."

She took a deep breath. He couldn't have stated it any plainer than that. The wildfire physical attraction that had overtaken them the night before would never become anything stronger, at least not for him. He wouldn't permit it. She wondered how he could remain so impassive after the hours of fierce lovemaking they had shared on the very carpet beneath her feet. If it had been one hasty mating, perhaps they would have been able to ignore it as an aberration, but the fact was that they had made love over and over again in a prolonged frenzy, and there was no pretending otherwise. His office was permeated with sexual memories; he had taken her on the floor, on the couch, on the desk that was now covered with contracts and proposals; they had even made love in his washroom. He hadn't been a gentle lover; he'd been demanding, fierce, almost out of control, but generous in the way he had made certain she'd been as satisfied as he by each encounter. The thought of never again knowing that degree of passion made her heart squeeze painfully.

She was twenty-seven and had never loved before—never even, as a teenager, had the usual assortment of crushes or gone steady. If she passed up this chance she might never have another, and certainly never another with Saxon.

So, in full possession of her faculties, she took the step that would make her Saxon Malone's kept woman. "I choose to be your mistress," she said softly. "On one condition."

There was a hot flare in his deep-set eyes that just as quickly cooled at her last words. "No conditions."

"There has to be this one," she insisted. "I'm not naive enough to think this relationship—"

"It isn't a relationship. It's an arrangement."

"—this arrangement will last forever. I want to have the security of supporting myself, earning my own way, so I won't suddenly find myself without a place to live or the means of making a living."

"I'll support you, and believe me, you'll earn every penny of it," he said, his eyes moving down her body in a way that made her feel suddenly naked, her flesh too hot and too tight. "I'll set up a stock portfolio for you, but I don't want you working, and that's final."

She hated it that he would put their relationship— for it was a relationship, despite his insistence to the contrary—on such a mercenary basis, but she

knew it was the only basis he could agree to. She, on the other hand, would take him on any basis he desired.
"All right," she said, automatically searching for the words he could accept and understand, words that lacked any hint of emotion. "It's a deal."
He stared at her in silence for a long minute, his face as unreadable as usual. Only the heat in his eyes gave him away. Then he rose deliberately to his feet and walked to the door, which he closed and locked, even though it was after quitting time and they were alone. When he turned back to her, Anna could plainly see his arousal, and her entire body tightened in response. Her breath was already coming fast and shallow as he reached for her.
"Then you might as well begin now," he said, and drew her to him.

Chapter 1

Two years later
Anna heard his key in the door and sat up straight on the sofa, her heart suddenly beating faster. He was back a day earlier than he'd told her, and of course he hadn't called; he never called her when he was gone on a trip, because that would be too much like acknowledging a relationship, just as he insisted, even after two years, on maintaining separate residences. He still had to go home every morning to change clothes before he went to work.
She didn't jump up to run into his arms; that, too, was something that would make him uncomfortable. By now, she knew the man she loved very well. He couldn't accept anything that resembled caring, though she didn't know why. He was very careful never to appear to be rushing to see her; he never called her by a pet name, never gave her any fleeting, casual caresses, never whispered love words to her even during the most intense lovemaking. What he said to her in bed were always words of sexual need and excitement, his voice guttural with tension, but he was a sensual, giving lover. She loved making love with him, not only because of the satisfaction he always gave her, but because under the guise of physical desire she was able to give him all the affection he couldn't accept outside of bed.
When they were making love she had a reason for touching him, kissing him, holding him close, and during those moments he was free with his own

caresses. During the long, dark nights he was insatiable, not just for sex but for the closeness of her; she slept every night in his arms, and if for some reason she moved away from him during the night he would wake and reach for her, settling her against him once more. Come morning, he would withdraw back into his solitary shell, but during the nights he was completely hers. Sometimes she felt that he needed the nights as intensely as she did, and for the same reasons. They were the only times when he allowed himself to give and accept love in any form.

So she forced herself to sit still, and kept the book she'd been reading open on her lap. It wasn't until the door had opened and she heard the thump of his suitcase hitting the floor that she allowed herself to look up and smile. Her heart leaped at the first sight of him, just as it had been doing for three years, and pain squeezed her insides at the thought of never seeing him again. She had one more night with him, one more chance, and then she would have to end it.

He looked tired; there were dark shadows under his eyes, and the grooves bracketing his beautiful mouth were deeper. Even so, not for the first time, she was struck by how incredibly good-looking he was, with his olive-toned skin, dark hair and the pure, dark green of his eyes. He had never mentioned his parents, and now she wondered about them, about the combination of genes that had produced such striking coloring, but that was another thing she couldn't ask.

He took off his suit jacket and hung it neatly in the closet, and while he was doing that, Anna went over to the small bar and poured him two fingers of Scotch, neat. He took the drink from her with a sigh of appreciation, and sipped it while he began loosening the knot of his tie. Anna stepped back, not wanting to crowd him, but her eyes lingered on his wide, muscled chest, and her body began to quicken in that familiar way.

"Did the trip go all right?" she asked. Business was always a safe topic.

"Yeah. Carlucci was overextended, just like you said." He finished the drink with a quick toss of his wrist, then set the glass aside and put his hands on her waist. Anna tilted her head back, surprise in her eyes. What was he doing? He always followed a pattern when he returned from a trip: he would shower while she prepared a light meal; they would eat; he would read the newspaper, or they would talk about his trip; and finally they would go to bed. Only then would he unleash his sensuality, and they would make love for hours. He had done that for two years, so why was he

breaking his own pattern by reaching for her almost as soon as he was in the door?
She couldn't read the expression in his green eyes; they were too shuttered, but were glittering oddly. His fingers bit into her waist.
"Is something wrong?" she asked, anxiety creeping into her tone.
He gave a harsh, strained laugh. "No, nothing's wrong. It was a bitch of a trip, that's all." Even as he spoke, he was moving them toward the bedroom. Once there, he turned her around and began undressing her, pulling at her clothes in his impatience. She stood docilely, her gaze locked on his face. Was it her imagination, or did a flicker of relief cross his face when at last she was nude and he pulled her against him? He wrapped his arms tightly around her, almost crushing her. His shirt buttons dug into her breasts, and she squirmed a little, docility giving way to a growing arousal. Her response to him was always strong and immediate, rising to meet his.
She tugged at his shirt. "Don't you think you'd be better off without this?" she whispered. "And this?" She slipped her hands between them and began unbuckling his belt.
He was breathing harder, his body heat burning her even through his clothes. Instead of stepping back so he could undress, he tightened his arms around her and lifted her off her feet, then carried her to the bed. He let himself fall backward, with her still in his arms, then rolled so that she was beneath him. She made a tight little sound in her throat when he used his muscular thigh to spread her legs, and his hips settled into the notch he'd just made.
"Anna." Her name was a groan coming from deep in his chest. He caught her face between his hands and ground his mouth against hers, then reached down between their bodies to open his pants. He was in a frenzy, and she didn't know why, but she sensed his desperate need of her and held herself still for him. He entered her with a heavy surge that made her arch off the bed. She wasn't ready, and his entry was painful, but she pushed her fingers into his hair and clasped his head, trying to give him what comfort she could, though she didn't know what was wrong.
Once he was inside her, however, the desperation faded from his eyes and she felt the tension in his muscles subside. He sank against her with a muted groan of pleasure, his heavy weight crushing her into the bed. After a moment he propped himself on his elbows. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

She gave him a gentle smile and smoothed his hair. "I know," she replied, applying pressure to his head to force him down within kissing range. Her body had accustomed itself to him, and the pain of his rough entry was gone, leaving only the almost incandescent joy of making love with him. She had never said it aloud, but her body said it, and she always echoed it in her mind: / love you. She said the inner words again as he began moving, and she wondered if it would be for the last time.

Later, she woke from a light doze to hear the shower running. She knew she should get up and begin preparations for a meal, but she was caught in a strange inertia. She couldn't care about food when the rest of her life depended on what happened between them now. She couldn't put it off any longer.

Maybe tonight wouldn't be the last time. Maybe. Miracles had happened before.

She might hope for a miracle, but she was prepared for a less perfect reality. She would be moving out of this chic, comfortable apartment Saxon had provided for her. Her next living quarters wouldn't be color-coordinated, but so what? Matching carpets and curtains didn't matter. Saxon mattered, but she wouldn't be able to have him. She only hoped she would be able to keep from crying and begging; he would hate that kind of scene.

Being without him was going to be the most difficult thing she had ever faced. She loved him even more now than she had two years before, when she had agreed to be his mistress. It always squeezed her heart the way he would do something considerate, then go out of his way to make it appear as just a casual gesture that had happened to present itself, that he hadn't gone to any trouble to do something for her. And there was the concern he had shown over minor colds, the quiet way he had steadily built up an impressive stock portfolio in her name so she would be financially secure, and the way he always complimented whatever she cooked.

She had never seen anyone who needed to be loved more than Saxon, nor anyone who rejected any sign of love so fiercely.

He was almost fanatically controlled—and she adored it when his control shattered when they made love, though never before had he been as frenzied, as needy, as he had been tonight. Only when they were making love did she see the real Saxon, the raw passion he kept hidden the rest of the time. She cherished all of his expressions, but her most cherished image was the way he looked when they made love, his black hair damp with

sweat, his eyes fierce and bright, all reserve burned away as his thrusts increased in both depth and speed.
She had no photographs of him. She would have to keep those mental images sharp and polished, so she could take them out and examine them whenever the loneliness became too intense. Later, she would painstakingly compare his beloved face with another that was equally precious, and search for the similarities that would both comfort and torment her.
She smoothed her hands over her stomach, which was still flat and revealed nothing yet of the child growing within.
She had had few symptoms to signal her pregnancy, though she was almost four months along. This last period was the first one she had skipped entirely; the first one after conception had been light, and the second one little more than heavy spotting. It was the spotting that had sent her to the doctor for a precautionary exam, which had revealed that she was in good physical condition and undoubtedly pregnant. She had had no morning sickness, only a few isolated bouts of queasiness that had held no significance except in retrospect. Her breasts were now becoming a bit tender, and she had started taking naps, but other than that she felt much as she had before. The biggest difference was in the almost overwhelming emotions she felt for this baby, Saxon's baby: delirious joy at its presence within her; fierce protectiveness; a powerful sense of physical possession; impatience to actually hold it in her arms; and an almost intolerable sense of loss, because she was terrified that she would lose the father as she gained the child.
Saxon had made it plain from the start that he would accept no strings, and a child wasn't merely a string, it was an unbreakable chain. He would find that intolerable. Just the knowledge of her pregnancy would be enough to drive him away.
She had tried to resent him, but she couldn't. She had gone into this with her eyes open; Saxon had never tried to hide anything from her, never made any promises, had in fact gone out of his way to make certain she knew he would never offer anything more than a physical relationship. He had done nothing other than what he'd said he would do. It wasn't his fault that their birth control had failed, nor was it his fault that losing him would break her heart.
The shower had stopped running. After a minute he walked naked into the bedroom, rubbing a towel over his wet hair. A small frown pulled his brows

downward when he saw she was still in bed; he draped the towel around his neck and came over to sit beside her on the bed, sliding his hand under the sheet in search of her warm, pliant body. His hand settled on her belly. "Are you all right?" he asked with concern. "Are you sure I didn't hurt you?"
She put a hand over his. "I'm fine." More than fine, lying there with his hand resting over the child he had given her.
He yawned, then shrugged to loosen the muscles of his shoulders. There was no sign now of his former tension; his expression was relaxed, his eyes lazy with satisfaction. "I'm hungry. Do you want to eat in or go out for dinner?"
"Let's eat in." She didn't want to spend their last night together in the middle of a crowded restaurant.
As he started to get up, she tightened her hand on his, keeping him in place. He gave her a look of mild surprise. She took a deep breath, knowing she had to get this over with now before she lost her nerve, yet when the words came out they weren't the ones she had planned. "I've been wondering...what would you do if I happened to get pregnant?"
Like a shutter closing, his face lost all expression and his eyes frosted over. His voice was very deep and deliberate when he said, "I told you in the beginning, I won't marry you, under any circumstances, so don't try getting pregnant to force my hand. If you're looking for marriage, I'm not the man, and maybe we should dissolve our arrangement."
The tension was back, every line of his big body taut as he sat naked on the side of the bed and waited for her answer, but she could see no sign of worry in his face. He had already made his decision, and now he was waiting to hear hers. There was such a heavy weight crushing her chest that she could hardly bear it, but his answer had been no more than what she had expected.
But she found that she couldn't say the words that would make him get up, dress and walk out. Not right now. In the morning. She wanted to have this last night with him, held close in his arms. She wanted to tell him that she loved him just one more time, in the only way he would allow.

Chapter 2

Saxon woke early the next morning and lay in the dim light of dawn, unable to go back to sleep because of the echo of tension left behind by the question Anna had asked the night before. For a few nightmarish moments he had seen his entire life caving in around him, until Anna had smiled her quiet smile and said gently, "No, I'd never try to force you to marry me. It was just a question."

She was still sleeping, her head pillowed on his left shoulder, his left arm wrapped around her, his right hand resting on her hip. From the very first he hadn't been able to sleep unless she was close to him. He had slept alone his entire adult life, but when Anna had become his mistress he had abruptly found, to his surprise, that sleeping alone was almost impossible.

It was getting worse. Business trips had never bothered him before; he had, in fact, thrived on them, but lately they had been irritating the hell out of him. This last trip had been the worst yet. The delays, glitches and aggravations hadn't been anything out of the ordinary, but what he had once taken for granted now grated almost unbearably. A late flight could send him into a rage; a mislaid blueprint was almost enough to get someone fired; a broken piece of equipment had him swearing savagely; and to top it off, he hadn't been able to sleep. The hotel noises and unfamiliar bed had been particularly annoying, though he probably wouldn't have noticed them at all if Anna had been there with him. That admission alone had been enough to make him break out in a sweat, but added to it was a gnawing need to get back home to Denver, to Anna. It wasn't until he had had her beneath him in bed, until he had felt the soft warmth of her body enfold him, that he had at last been able to relax.

He had walked through the door of the apartment and desire had hit him like a blow, low down and hard. Anna had looked up with her customary smile, her dark eyes as calm and serene as a shadowy pool, and his savage mood had faded, to be replaced by pure sexual need. Walking through that door had been like walking into a sanctuary to find a woman made specifically for him. She had poured him a drink and brushed close to him, and he had smelled the sweet scent of her skin that always clung to their sheets, the scent that had been maddeningly absent from the hotel linens. The ferocity of the desire that had taken hold of him still left him a little shaken this morning.

Anna. He had noticed that serenity, and the feminine scent of her, from the very first day when he had hired her as his secretary. He had wanted her

from the beginning, but had controlled his sexual urges because he had neither wanted nor needed that sort of complication on the job. Gradually, though, the wanting had grown stron-ger, until it had become an unbearable need that gnawed at him day and night, and his control had begun crumbling.

Anna looked like honey, and he had been going mad wanting to taste her. She had silky, light brown hair, streaked with blond, and dark-honey eyes. Even her skin had a smooth, warm, honey tone to it. She would never be flashy, but she was so pleasant to look at that people continually turned her way. And those honey eyes had always been warm and calm and inviting, until finally he had been unable to resist the invitation. The frenzy of that first night still startled him, even in memory, because he had never lost control—until then. He had lost it with Anna, deep inside her hot, honeyed depths, and sometimes he felt that he had never gotten it back.

He had never let anyone get close to him, but after that first night he had known that he couldn't walk away from her as he had from the others. Acknowledging that simple fact had terrified him. The only way he had been able to handle it had been to completely separate her from the other parts of his life. She could be his mistress, but nothing else. He couldn't let her matter too much. He still had to constantly guard against letting her get too close; Anna could destroy him, and something deep inside him knew it. No one else had ever even threatened his defenses, and there were times when he wanted to walk out and never come back, never see her again, but he couldn't. He needed her too much, and he constantly fought to keep her from realizing it.

But their arrangement made it possible for him to sleep with her every night and lose himself over and over in her warm, pliant body. In bed he could kiss her and smooth his hands over her, wrap himself in her scent and touch. In bed he could feed his craving for honey, his savage need to touch her, to hold her close. In bed she clung to him with abandon, opening herself to him whenever he wanted, her hands sliding over him in bold, tender caresses that drove him wild. Once they were in bed together, it seemed as if she never stopped touching him, and despite himself, he reveled in it. Sometimes it was all he could do to keep from groaning in a strange, not completely physical ecstasy as she petted and stroked and cuddled.

Yet for all that they had virtually lived together for two years—the small distance that he insisted on retaining, so necessary for him, was in fact

negligible in terms of time—he knew little more about her now than he had before. Anna didn't bombard anyone with the details of her past or present life, and he hadn't asked, because to do so would give her the same right to question him about his own past, which was something he seldom allowed himself to even think about. He knew how old she was, where she had been born, where she had gone to school, her social security number, her former jobs, because all that had been in her personnel record. He knew that she was conscientious, good with details and preferred a quiet life. She seldom drank alcohol, and lately seemed to have stopped drinking altogether. She read quite a bit, and her interests were wide and varied in both fiction and nonfiction. He knew that she preferred pastel colors and didn't like spicy foods.

But he didn't know if she had ever been in love, what had happened to her family—in her personnel file, "None" had been listed in the next-of-kin column—if she had been a cheerleader or ever gotten into trouble for childish pranks. He didn't know why she had moved to Denver, or what her dreams were.

He knew only the surface facts that were there for anyone to see, not her memories or hopes.

Sometimes he was afraid that, because he knew so little about her, she might someday slip away from him. How could he predict what she would do when he knew nothing of her thoughts and had only himself to blame? He had never asked, never encouraged her to talk to him of those parts of her life. For the past two years he had lived in quiet terror, dreading the day when he would lose her, but unable to do anything to stop it. He didn't know how to reach out to her, how to hold her, when even the thought of letting her know how vulnerable he was to her had the power to make him physically sick.

The hunger grew in him as he thought of her, felt her lying so soft against his side, and his manhood swelled in response. If they had no other form of contact, they at least had this, the almost overwhelming sexual need for each other. He had never before wanted anything from a woman except sex; it was bitterly ironic that now he was using sex to give him at least the semblance of closeness with her. His heartbeat kicked into a faster rate as he began stroking her, easing her awake and into passion so he could ease himself into her and forget, for a while, everything but the incredible pleasure of making love to her.

It was one of those sunny days when the brightness seemed almost overwhelming, the air was clear and warm for late April, a perfect day, a mockery of a day, because she felt as if her heart were dying inside of her. She cooked breakfast, and they ate it on the terrace, as they often did during good weather. She poured him another cup of coffee and sat down across from him, then folded her hands around her chilled glass of orange juice so they wouldn't shake.

"Saxon." She couldn't look at him, so she focused on the orange juice. She felt nauseated, but it was more a symptom of heavy dread than of her pregnancy.

He had been catching up on the local news, and now he looked up at her over the top of a newspaper. She felt his attention focus on her.

"I have to leave," she said in a low voice.

His face paled, and for a long minute he sat as if turned to stone, not even blinking. A slight breeze rattled the newspaper, and finally he moved, folding the pages slowly and painstakingly, as if every movement were painful. The time had come, and he didn't know if he could bear it, if he could even speak. He looked at Anna's lowered head, at the way the sun glinted on the pale, silky streaks, and knew that he had to speak. This time, at least, he wanted to know why.

So that was the question he asked, that one word, and it came out sounding rusty. "Why?"

Anna winced at the raw edge to his voice. "Something has happened. I didn't plan it. It—it just happened."

She had fallen in love with someone else, he thought, fighting to catch his breath over the knot of agony in his chest. He had always trusted her completely, had never even entertained the thought that she might be seeing other men during his absences, but obviously he'd been wrong.

"Are you leaving me for another man?" he asked harshly.

Her head jerked up, and she stared at him, stunned by the question. He looked back at her, his eyes fierce and greener than she had ever seen them before.

"No," she whispered. "Never that."

"Then what?" He shoved himself away from the table and stood, his big body taut with barely controlled rage.

She took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

Just for an instant his fierce expression didn't change; then all of a sudden his face turned to stone, blank and hard. "What did you say?"
"I'm pregnant. Almost four months. It's due around the end of September."
He turned his back on her and walked to the terrace wall to look out over the city. The line of his shoulders was rigid with anger. "By God, I never thought you'd do this," he said, his voice harshly controlled. "I've been suckered all the way, haven't I? I should have known what to expect after the question you asked last night. Marriage would be more profitable than a paternity suit, wouldn't it? But you stand to make a good profit either way."
Anna got up from the table and quietly walked back into the apartment.
Saxon stood by the wall, his fists knotted as he tried to deal with both blind rage and the cold knot of betrayal, as well as the pain that waited, crouched and ready, to come to the fore at the least abatement of anger.
He was too tense to stand there long; when he couldn't bear it any longer, he followed her, determined to find out the depths of his own stupidity even though that would only deepen the pain. It was like the way a tongue would continually probe a sore tooth, in search of the pain. No matter how she tore him to shreds, he had to know, and then he would be invulnerable; no one would ever get to him again. He had once thought himself invulnerable, only to have Anna show him the chink hi his emotional armor. But once he got over this, he would truly be untouchable.
Anna was calmly sitting at her desk, writing on a sheet of paper. He had expected her to be packing, at the very least, anything but sitting there scribbling away.
"What're you doing?"
She jerked a little at his harsh voice, but continued writing. Perhaps it was only that his eyes hadn't adjusted to the dimmer light, but she looked pale and drawn. He hoped savagely that she was feeling just a fraction of what he was going through right now.
"I said, what are you doing?"
She signed her name to the bottom of the page and dated it, then held it out to him. "Here," she said, using an enormous effort to keep her voice calm. "Now you won't have to worry about a paternity suit."
Saxon took the paper and turned it around to read it. He skimmed it once, then read it again with greater attention and growing disbelief.
It was short and to the point.

I swear, of my own free will, that Saxon Malone is not the father of the child I carry. He has no legal responsibility, either to me or my child.
She stood up and moved past him. "I'll be packed and gone by tonight."
He stared down at the paper in his hand, almost dizzy with the conflicting emotions surging back and forth inside him. He couldn't believe what she had done, or how casually she had done it. With just a few words written on a sheet of paper she had prevented herself from receiving a large sum of money, because God knew he would have paid any amount, even bankrupted himself if necessary, to make certain that baby was taken care of, not like—
He started shaking, and sweat broke out on his face. Rage welled in him again. Clutching the paper in his hand, he strode into the bedroom just as she was tugging her suitcases out of the closet.
"That's a damn lie!" he shouted, and threw the crumpled paper at her.
Anna flinched but hung on to her calm demeanor. Privately she wondered how much more she could take before she broke down and began sobbing.
"Of course it's a lie," she managed as she placed the suitcases on the bed. "That baby is mine."
She gave him an odd look. "Did you have any doubt? I wasn't admitting to being unfaithful, I was trying to give you some peace of mind."
"Peace of mind!" It seemed as if all his control had been demolished. He was shouting at her again, when in the entire three years they had known each other he had never before even raised his voice to her. "How the hell am I supposed to have any peace of mind knowing that my kid...my kid—" He stopped, unable to finish the sentence.
She began emptying her dresser drawers into the open suitcases, neatly folding and placing each garment. "Knowing that your kid—what?" she prompted.
He shoved his hands into his pockets and knotted them into fists. "Are you even going to have it?" he asked raggedly.
She went stiff, then straightened to stare at him. "What do you mean by that?"
"I mean, have you already planned an abortion?"
There was no warmth or softness at all in her brown eyes now. "Why do you ask?" she questioned evenly.
"It's a reasonable question."

He really had no idea, she thought numbly. How could he even consider the idea that she might abort his child if he had any inkling at all about the way she felt? All of the love that she had expressed during those long, dark hours might as well have been kept hidden for all the notice he'd paid it. Maybe he had just accepted her passion as the skillful act of a kept woman, designed to keep a sugar daddy happy.

But she didn't say any of that. She just looked at him for a moment before stating abruptly, "No. I'm not having an abortion," then turning back to her packing.

He made an abrupt motion with his hand. "Then what? If you're going to have it, then what are you going to do with it?"

She listened to him with growing disbelief. Had she gone crazy, or had he? What did he think she was going to do? A variety of answers occurred to her, some obvious and some not so obvious. Did he expect her to list the numerous activities involved in caring for a baby, or was he asking what her plans were? Given Saxon's usual precision of speech, always saying exactly what he meant, she was even more bewildered.

"What do you mean, 'what am I going to do with it?' What mothers usually do, I suppose."

His face was grayish and covered with a sheen of sweat. "That's my baby," he said, striding forward to catch her shoulders in his hard hands. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep you from throwing it away like a piece of garbage!"

Chapter 3

Chills of horror trickled down her spine, rendering her momentarily incapable of speech. All she could do was endure his tight grip on her shoulders, wide eyes fastened on him and her mouth slightly parted in disbelief. She tried several times to speak, and when she finally managed it, her voice was a hoarse croak. "Throw it away? Dear God! That's sick! Why on earth would you ever say something like that?"

He was shaking. She could feel it now, in his hands; see it in the visible tremors of his big body. His distress had the effect of relieving her own as she suddenly realized that he was upset and in need of reassurance even

more, perhaps, than she was, though she didn't know why. Instinct took over and ruled her actions as she placed her hands on his chest.
"I would never do anything to harm your baby," she said gently. "Never."
His trembling intensified. His green eyes were stark with some savage emotion that she couldn't read, but he took a deep breath and locked his jaw as he fought to regain control. She saw the battle, saw what it cost him to win it, but in just a moment his hands were steady and his face, if still colorless, was as blank as rock. With great care he released her shoulders and let his hands drop to his sides.
"You don't have to leave here," he said, as if that was what they had been discussing. "It's a good apartment. You could take over the lease...."
Anna whirled away from him to hide the sharp upthrust of pain, all the more hurtful because, just for a moment, she thought he had meant that things didn't have to change. But he wasn't offering to preserve the status quo; he still intended to sever the relationship. "Don't," she said, warding off the words with a hand held back toward him. "Just...don't."
"Don't what?" he challenged. "Don't try to make it comfortable for you?"
She inhaled raggedly and let her head drop as she, in turn, tried to marshal her own control, but all she could find was weariness and a need for the truth. If this was the end, why not tell him? Pride? That was a pitiful reason for hiding something that had changed her life. She took another deep breath. "Don't ask me to stay here without you," she said. "You're the reason I'm here. Without you, I have no reason to stay." She turned and faced him, lifting her head so she could see him as she said in a clear, deliberate voice, "I love you. If I hadn't, I never would have come here at all."
Shock rippled across his face, turning it even whiter. His lips moved but made no sound.
"I planned to leave because I thought that was what you would want," she continued steadily. "You made it more than plain from the beginning that you didn't want any ties, so I didn't expect anything else. Even if you wanted to continue our—our arrangement, I don't think it's possible. I can't be a mother and continue to be your undemanding mistress, too. Babies tend to have their own priorities. So, under the present circumstances, I have to leave. That doesn't mean I'll stop loving you." Ever, she added in her thoughts.
He shook his head, either in disbelief or denial, and moved jerkily to sit down on the bed, where he stared unseeingly at the open suitcases.

Concern welled in her as she watched him. She had expected him to react with anger or cold retreat, but he truly seemed in shock, as if something terrible had happened. She walked over to sit beside him, her gaze fastened on his face in an effort to catch every fleeting nuance of expression. Saxon was hard enough to read when he was relaxed; his face looked like marble now.

Anna gripped her fingers tightly together. "I never expected you to act like this," she murmured. "I thought...! guess I thought you just wouldn't care."

His head jerked up, and he gave her a look like a sword edge, sharp and slicing. "You thought I'd just walk away and never give another thought to either you or the baby?" His tone was harsh with accusation.

She didn't back down. "Yes, that's exactly what I thought. What else could I think? You've never given me any indication that I was anything more to you than a convenient sexual outlet."

His heart twisted painfully, and he had to look away. She thought she was only a convenience, when he measured his life by the time he spent with her. Not that he had ever let her know; she was right about that. He had gone out of his way to keep her from knowing. Was that why he was losing her now? He felt as if he had been shredded, but he was in too much pain to be able to tell which was hurting worse, the knowledge that he was losing her or that he had fathered a baby who was also lost to him.

"Do you have a place to go?" he asked numbly.

She sighed inaudibly, releasing the last frail grasp of hope. "No, not really, but it's okay. I've looked around a little, but I haven't wanted to commit on anything until I talked to you. I'll go to a hotel. It won't take me long to find another apartment. And you've made certain I won't be strapped financially. Thank you for that. And thank you for my baby." She managed a faint smile, but he wasn't looking at her and didn't see it.

He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees, massaging his forehead with one hand. Lines of weariness were cut into his face. "You don't have to go to a hotel," he muttered. "You can look for another place from here. There's no point in moving twice. And we have a lot of legal stuff to get sorted out."

"No we don't," she said. He slanted his head to the side to give her another of those incisive looks. "We don't," she insisted. "You've made certain of my financial security. I'm more than able to provide for my baby. If you think I'm going to be bleeding you dry, you can just think again!"

He straightened. "What if I want to support it? It's my kid, too. Or didn't you plan on ever letting me see it?"
She was frankly bewildered. "Do you mean you want to?" She had never expected that. What she had expected was a cold and final end to their relationship.
That look of shock crossed his features once again, as if he had just realized what he'd said. He gulped and got to his feet, striding restlessly around the room. He had so much the look of a trapped animal that she took pity on him and said softly, "Never mind."
Instead of reassuring him, her words seemed to disturb him even more. He ran his hands through his hair, then turned abruptly toward the door. "I can't —I have to think things through. Stay here as long as you need."
He was gone before she could call him back, before she truly realized he was leaving. The front door slammed even before she could get up from the bed. She stared at the empty space where he had stood, and recalled the haunted look in his eyes. She recognized that he was more deeply disturbed than she had ever considered possible, but had no clue as to why. Saxon had kept his past so completely private that she knew absolutely nothing about his childhood, not even who his parents were. If he had any family at all, she didn't know about them. But then, it didn't necessary follow that she would; after all, he still had his own apartment, and his mail still went there. Nor did she think it likely that he would have given out his mistress's telephone number so his family could contact him if he didn't answer his own phone.
She looked around at the apartment she had called home for two years. She didn't know if she would be able to stay here while she looked for someplace else, despite his generous offer. She had been telling him nothing less than the truth when she had said that she didn't want to stay here without him. The apartment was permeated with his presence, not physical reminders so much as the sharp memories that would be a long time fading. Her child had been conceived in the very bed she sat on. She thought about that for a moment; then her lips curved in a wryly gentle smile. Perhaps not; Saxon had never felt the need to limit their lovemaking to the bed, though they had usually sought it for comfort's sake. It was, she supposed, just as likely to have happened in the shower, or on the sofa, or even on the kitchen counter, one cold afternoon when he had arrived while she was cooking dinner and hadn't been inclined to wait until bedtime.

Those days of wondrous passion were over now, as she had known they would be. Even if Saxon hadn't reacted as she had anticipated, the end result was the same.

Saxon walked. He walked automatically, without aim or care. He was still reeling from the twin blows Anna had dealt him, incapable of ordering his thoughts or controlling his emotions. He had controlled every aspect of his life for so long, closing a door in his mind on the things that had happened years before, and he had thought the monster tamed, the nightmare robbed of horror. Yet all it had taken to destroy his deceptively fragile peace was the knowledge that Anna was pregnant. And she was leaving him. God, she was leaving him.

He felt like raising his fists to the sky and cursing whatever fate had done this to him, but the pain was too deep for that. He would have crouched on the sidewalk and howled like a demented animal if it would have relieved even a portion of the swelling agony in his chest and mind, but he knew it would not. The only surcease he would find would be where he had always found it: with Anna.

He couldn't even begin to think of the future. He had no future, no anchor. The image of endless days stretching before him refused to form; he simply couldn't face even one more day, let alone an eternal procession of them. A day without Anna? Why bother?

He'd never been able to tell her how much she meant to him. He could barely tolerate even admitting it to himself. Love, in his experience, was only an invitation to betrayal and rejection. If he allowed himself to love, then he was making himself vulnerable to a destruction of the mind and soul. And no one had loved him, not ever. It was a lesson he had learned from the earliest reaches of memory, and he had learned it well. His very survival had depended on the hard shell of indifference he had cultivated, so he had formed layer after layer of armor.

When had it changed from protection to prison?

Did the turtle ever long for freedom from its boxy shell, so it could run unhindered? Probably not, but he wasn't so lucky. Anna had said that she loved him, and even if it wasn't true, in saying it she had given him the opportunity to stay just a little while longer, if only he had dared to take it. He hadn't, because it would have meant shedding at least a few layers of his armor, and the prospect filled him with a terror founded in earliest childhood and strengthened through long years of abuse.

When he arrived in front of his apartment door he stood staring at it in bewilderment, not quite certain of his location. When he finally realized that he was, in fact, at his own apartment, that he had walked several miles to reach it, he fumbled in his pocket for the keys.

The apartment was silent and musty when he entered, without any sweet welcoming presence. Anna had never been here, and it showed. He could barely stand to spend any time here. It was dark and empty, like a grave, and he was incapable of bringing any light into it. The only light he'd ever known had been Anna's, and he had shared it for too short a time, then driven her away with his own unbridled lust. He'd never been able to keep his hands off her. He had made love to her far more often than he ever would have thought possible, his male flesh rising again and again for the incredible sweetness of sinking into her and joining his body to hers. He had made her pregnant, and because of it he had lost her.

What would he do without her? He couldn't function, couldn't find it in himself to give a damn about contracts, or whether the job got done or not. Even when he had spent days on a job, he had always done it knowing that she was waiting for him. By working so hard, even if it took him away from her, he was able to take care of her and make certain she never had to do without anything. Every time he had expanded the stock portfolio he had set up for her, he had felt an intense satisfaction. Maybe he had thought that his diligent efforts in that would keep her with him, that they would show her that she was better off with him than with anyone else, or out on her own. He couldn't let himself think, even for a moment, that she might have stayed with him only because he was establishing her financial security. If he thought that about Anna, then he truly had nothing left to live for. No, he had always known that she had disliked that part of their arrangement. There had been no reason at all for her to stay... unless she did love him.

For the first time, he let himself think about what she had said. At the time, it had been too much for him to take in, but now the words circled tentatively in his consciousness, like frail birds afraid to light.

She loved him.

He sat in the silent apartment for the rest of the day and into the night, too far withdrawn into himself to feel the need for light or noise, and sometime during the dark hours he crossed an internal barrier. He felt as if he were pinning his desperate hopes on the slimmest of chances, as if he were

shooting for the longest odds, but he faced the cold gray fact that he could do nothing else.
If Anna loved him, he couldn't let her go like this.

Chapter 4

Anna had a bad night. She couldn't sleep; though she hadn't expected to sleep well, neither had she expected to lie awake for hours, staring at the dark ceiling and physically aching at the empty space beside her. Saxon had spent many nights away from her before, on his numerous business trips, and she had always managed to sleep. This, however, was different, an emptiness of the soul as well as of space. She had known it would be difficult, but she hadn't known it would leave this wrenching, gnawing pain inside. Despite her best efforts, she had cried until her head had started throbbing, and even then she hadn't been able to stop. It was sheer exhaustion that finally ended the tears, but not the pain. It was with her, unabating, through the long dark hours.
If this was what the future would be like, she didn't know if she could bear it, even with the baby. She had thought that his child, immeasurably precious, would be some consolation for his absence, and though that might be so in the future, it was a hollow comfort now. She couldn't hold her baby in her arms right now, and it would be five long months before she could.
She got up toward dawn without having slept at all, and made a pot of decaffeinated coffee. Today of all days she needed the kick of caffeine, but her pregnancy forbade it. She made the coffee anyway, hoping that the ritual would fool her brain into alertness, then sat at the kitchen table with a thick robe pulled around her for comfort while she sipped the hot liquid. Rain trickled soundlessly down the glass terrace doors and jumped in minute splashes on the drenched stone. As fine as the day before had been, the fickle April weather had turned chilly and wet as a late cold front swept in. If Saxon had been there, they would have spent the morning in bed, snuggled in the warmth of the bed covers, lazily exploring the limits of pleasure.
She swallowed painfully, then bent her head to the table as grief welled up overwhelmingly again. Though her eyes felt grainy and raw from weeping, it seemed there were still tears, still an untapped capacity for pain.

She didn't hear the door open, but the sound of footsteps on the flagstone flooring made her jerk upright, hastily wiping her face with the heels of her hands. Saxon stood before her, his dark face bleak and drawn with weariness. He still had on the same clothes he'd worn the day before, she saw, though he had thrown on a leather bomber jacket as protection against the rain. He had evidently been walking in it, because his black hair was plastered down, and rivulets of moisture ran down his face.

"Don't cry," he said in a raw, unnatural tone.

She felt embarrassed that he had caught her weeping. She had always taken pains to hide any bouts of emotion from him, knowing that they would make him uncomfortable. Nor did she look her best, with her eyes swollen and wet, her hair still tousled from a restless night, and swaddled from neck to foot in a thick robe. A mistress should always be well-groomed, she thought wryly, and almost burst into tears again.

Without shifting his gaze from her, he took off his jacket and hung it over the back of a chair. "I didn't know if you had stayed," he said, the strain still evident in his voice. "I hoped you had, but—" Then, abruptly, he moved with that shocking speed of his, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her quickly into the bedroom.

After a small startled cry, Anna clung to his shoulders. He had moved like that the first time, as if all his passion had been swelling behind the dam of his control and the dam had finally given way. He had swept her off her feet and down to the floor in the office almost in the same motion, then had come down on top of her before her surprise could give way to gladness. She had reached for him with desire that rose quickly to match his, and it had been hours before he had released her.

She could feel the same sort of fierceness in his grip now as he placed her on the bed and bent over her, loosening the robe and spreading it wide. Beneath it she wore a thin silk nightgown, but evidently even that was too much. Silently she stared up at his intent face as he lifted her free of the robe, then tugged the nightgown over her head. Her breath quickened as she lay naked before him, and she felt her breasts tighten under his gaze, as hot as any touch. A warm, heavy pooling of sensation began low in her body. He opened her thighs and knelt between them, visually feasting on her body as he fumbled with his belt and zipper, lowering his pants enough to free himself. Then his green gaze flashed upward to meet the drowning velvet brown of hers. "If you don't want this, say so now."

She could no more have denied him, and herself, than she could willingly have stopped breathing. She lifted her slender arms in invitation, and he leaned forward in acceptance, sheathing himself in both her body and her embrace with one movement. He groaned aloud, not just at the incredible pleasure, but at the cessation of pain. For now, with her slender body held securely beneath him, and himself held just as securely within her, there was no distance between them.

Anna twisted under the buffeting of a savagely intense sensual pleasure. The shock of his cold, damp clothing on her warm bare body made her feel more naked than she ever had before. The single point of contact of bare flesh, between her legs, made her feel more sexual, made her painfully aware of his masculinity as he moved over and inside her. It was too overwhelming to sustain, and she arched into climax too soon, far too soon, because she wanted it to last forever.

He stilled, holding himself deep inside her for her pleasure, holding her face and planting lingering kisses over it. "Don't cry," he murmured, and until then she hadn't known that there were tears seeping out of her eyes. "Don't cry. It doesn't have to end now."

She had cried it aloud, she realized, had voiced her despair at the swift peaking.

He brought all the skill and knowledge of two years of intimacy into their lovemaking, finding the rhythm that was fast enough to bring her to desire again, but slow enough to keep them from reaching satisfaction. There was a different satisfaction in the lingering strokes, in the continued linking of their bodies. Neither of them wanted it to end, because as long as they were together like this they wouldn't have to face the specter of separation. Withdrawal, right now, would mean more than the end of their lovemaking; it would be a parting that neither could bear.

His clothing became not a sensual pleasure, but an intolerable barrier. She tore at the buttons on his shirt, wanting the wet cloth out of the way, needing the pressure of his skin on hers. He rose enough to shrug his wide shoulders out of the garment and toss it aside; then he lowered his chest, and she whimpered in delight at the rasp of his hair on her sensitive nipples. He cupped her breasts in both hands and pushed them together, bending his head to brush light kisses over the tightly drawn nipples. They were a bit darker, he noticed, and the pale globes were a little swollen, signs of his baby growing within her flat belly. He shuddered with unexpected

excitement at the thought, at the knowledge that the same act he was performing now had resulted in that small life.
He had to grit his teeth in an effort to keep from climaxing right then. His baby! It seemed that knowledge wasn't quite the same thing as realization, and he had just been hit by the full realization that the baby was his, part of him, sharing his genes. Blood of his blood, bone of his bone, mingled inseparably with Anna, a living part of both of them. He felt a wave of physical possession like he'd never known before, never even dreamed existed. His baby!
And his woman. Honey-sweet Anna, smooth warm skin and calm, gentle dark eyes.
The crest had been put off too long to be denied any longer. It swept over them, first engulfing her, then him, her inner trembling too much for him to bear. They heaved together in a paroxysm of pleasure, crying out, dying the death of self and surfacing into the quiet aftermath.
They lay entwined, neither of them willing to be the first to move and break the bond of flesh. Anna slid her fingers into his damp hair, loving the feel of his skull beneath her fingers. "Why did you come back?" she whispered. "It was hard enough watching you leave the first time. Did you have to put me through it again?"
She felt him tense against her. Before, she would never have let him know her feelings; she would have smiled and retreated into her role of the perfect mistress, never making demands. But she had left that shield behind, baring herself with her declaration of love, and there was no going back. She wasn't going to deny that love again.
He rolled to his side, taking her with him, wrapping his arm around her hip to keep her in place. She shifted automatically, lifting her leg higher around his waist for greater comfort. He moved closer to deepen his tenuous penetration, and they both breathed infinitesimal sighs of relief.
"Do you have to go?" he finally asked. "Why can't you just stay?"
She rubbed her face against his shoulder, her dark eyes sad, "Not without you. I couldn't bear it."
She felt the effort it took him to say, "What if...what if I stay, too? What if we just go on as before?"
She lifted her head to look at him, studying his beloved features in the rain-dimmed light. She wasn't unaware of what it had taken for him to make such an offer; he had always been so diligent in shunning even the

appearance of caring, yet now he was actually reaching out to her, asking for the ties of emotion. He needed to be loved more than any man she had ever seen, but she didn't know if he could tolerate it. Love brought responsibilities, obligations. It was never free, but required a high payment in the form of compromise.

"Can you?" she asked, the sadness as evident in her tone as in her eyes. "I don't doubt that you would try, but could you stay? There's no going back. Things have changed, and they'll never be the same again."

"I know," he said, and the stark look in his eyes hurt her, because she could see that he didn't really believe he could succeed.

She had never before pried into his past, just as she had never before told him that she loved him, but their insular little world had unraveled with frightening speed and turned things upside down. Sometimes, to make a gain, you had to take a risk.

"Why did you ask me if I would throw our baby away?"

The question hung in the air between them like a sword. She felt him flinch, saw his pupils contract with shock. He would have pulled away from her then, but she tightened her leg around him and gripped his shoulder with her hand; he stopped, though he could easily have moved had he wanted to pit his strength against hers. He stayed only because he couldn't bring himself to give up her touch. She bound him with her tenderness when strength couldn't have held him.

He closed his eyes in an instinctive effort to shut out the memory, but it didn't go away, couldn't go away with Anna's question unanswered. He had never talked about it before, never wanted to talk about it. It was a wound too deep and too raw to be eased by "talking it out." He had lived with the knowledge his entire life, and he had done what he'd had to do to survive. He had closed that part of his life away. It was like tearing his guts out now to answer, but Anna deserved at least the truth.

"My mother threw me away," he finally said in a guttural tone; then his throat shut down and he couldn't say anything else. He shook his head helplessly, but his eyes were still closed, and he didn't see the look of utter horror, swiftly followed by soul-shattering compassion, on Anna's face. She watched him through a blur of tears, but she didn't dare break down and begin crying, or do anything else that would interrupt him. Instead she gently stroked his chest, offering tactile comfort rather than verbal; she

sensed that words weren't adequate to the task, and in any case, if she tried to speak, she would lose her battle with her tears.
But as the silence stretched into minutes, she realized that he wasn't going to continue, perhaps couldn't continue without prompting. She swallowed and tried to regain her composure; it was an effort, but finally she was able to speak in a voice that, if not quite normal, was still soft and full of the love she felt.
"How did she throw you away? Were you abandoned, adopted... what?"
"Neither." He did twist away from her then, to lie on his back with his arm thrown up to cover his eyes. She mourned his loss, but gave him the distance he needed. Some things had to be faced alone, and perhaps this was one of them. "She threw me into the garbage when I was born. She didn't put me on the church steps or leave me at an orphanage so I could make up little stories about how much my mother had really loved me, but she had been really sick or something and had had to give me away so I'd be taken care of. All the other kids could make up stories like that, and believe them, but my mother made damn sure I was never that stupid. She dumped me into a trash can when I was a few hours old. There's not much way you can mistake an action like that for motherly love."
Anna curled into a little ball on her side, her fist shoved into her mouth to stifle the sobs that kept welling up, her streaming eyes fastened on his face. He was talking now, and though she had wanted to know, now she had to fight the urge to clap her hand over his mouth. No one should ever have to grow up knowing about such ugliness.
"She wasn't just trying to get rid of me," he continued in an emotionless voice. "She tried to kill me. It was winter when she threw me away, and she didn't bother to wrap me in anything. I don't know exactly when my birthday is, either January third or fourth, because I was found at three-thirty in the morning, and I could have been born either late on the third or early on the fourth. I almost died of exposure anyway, and I spent over a year in the charity hospital with one problem after another. By the time I was placed in an orphanage, I was a toddler who had seen so many strangers come and go that I wouldn't have anything to do with people. I guess that's why I wasn't adopted. People want babies, infants still wrapped up in blankets, not a thin, sickly toddler who screams if they reach for him."
He swallowed and took his arm down from his eyes, which stared unseeingly upward. "I have no idea who or what my parents are. No trace of

my mother was ever found. I was named after the city and county where I was found. Saxon City, Malone county. Hell of a tradition to carry on. "After a few years I was placed in a series of foster homes, most of them not very good. I was kicked around like a stray puppy. Social services got so desperate to place me that they left me with this one family even though I was always covered with a variety of bruises whenever the caseworker came around. It wasn't until the guy kicked in a couple of my ribs that they jerked me out of there. I was ten, I guess. They finally found a fairly good foster home for me, a couple whose own son had died. I don't know, maybe they thought I'd be able to take their son's place, but it didn't work, for them or me. They were nice, but it was in their eyes every time they looked at me that I wasn't Kenny. It was a place to live, and that was all I wanted. I made it through school, walked out and never looked back."

Chapter 5

What he had told her explained so much about the man Saxon had become and why it was so hard for him to accept any semblance of love. If the first eighteen years of his life had taught him anything, it was that he couldn't depend on what others called love but which he'd never known himself. As he had said, there was no fooling himself with pretty stories that his mother had loved him when her actions had made it plain that she not only hadn't cared, but she had deliberately left him to die. Nor had he received any real affection from the overworked staff of the charity hospital. Children learn early; by the time he had been placed in an orphanage, he had already known that he couldn't trust anyone to take care of him, so he had retreated into himself as the only surety in his life. He had depended on no one except himself for anything.

It was a lesson that had been reinforced by his childhood, shunted from one foster home to another, meeting with abuse in some of them and fitting in at none of them. Where did an outcast learn of love? The simple, heartbreaking answer was that he didn't. He had had to rise above more than simple poverty. He had needed to surmount a total lack of the most simple human caring. When she thought of what he had accomplished with his life, she was awed by his immense willpower. How hard had he had to work to put himself through college, to earn not only an engineering degree but to

finish so high in his class that he'd had his choice of jobs, and from there go on to form his own company?

After the gut-wrenching tale of his childhood, they had both been emotionally incapable of probing any deeper. By mutual consent they had gotten up and gone through the motions of a normal day, though it was anything but. The past twenty-four hours had taken a toll on both of them, and they had retreated into long period of silence, punctuated only by commonplace matters such as what they would have for lunch.

He was there. He showed no indication of leaving. She took that as a sign of hope and did no packing herself. Right now, all she asked for was his presence.

It was late afternoon on that rain-drenched day when he said flatly, "You never really answered my question this morning. Can we go on as we did before?"

She glanced at him and saw that though stress was still visible on his face, he seemed to have come to terms with it. She wasn't too certain of her own reaction, but she would rather bear the strain herself than take the risk of putting him off now at a time when that might be enough to drive him away again.

She sat down across from him, trying to marshal her thoughts. Finally she said, "For myself, I would like nothing better. It nearly killed me to lose you, and I'm not too certain I can go through that again. But I can't just think of myself. We can't just think of our own arrangement. What about the baby? At first, nothing will matter to it but Mommy and Daddy, but assuming that we stay together for years, what happens when it starts school and finds out that other mommies and daddies are married? This is Denver, not Hollywood. And though no one frowns on a couple living together, the circumstances change when a baby is involved."

He looked down at his hands and said very carefully, "How is it different if you move out? Its parents still won't be married, but you'll be trying to raise it alone. Is that supposed to be better for it? I don't know what kind of a father I'd make, but I think I'd be better than nothing."

Her lips trembled, and she fiercely bit down on them. Dear God, was she making him beg to be included in his child's life? She had never intended that, especially in light of what he'd told her that morning. "I think you'd be a wonderful father," she said. "I've never intended to prevent you from seeing your child. It's our living arrangement I'm not sure of."

"I am. I want you, and you...you want me." He still couldn't say that she loved him. "We don't have to do anything right now. Like you said, it'll be years before it's old enough to compare us with other parents. You still have a pregnancy to get through, and God knows I won't sleep at night if I don't know you're okay. At least stay until the baby's born. I can take care of you, go with you to those childbirth classes, be with you during delivery."
Though his tone was confident, his eyes were pleading, and that was what broke down her resolve. If she pushed him away now, he might never recover.
"There's nothing I'd like better," she said huskily, and saw the lightning flash of relief in his eyes before he masked it.
"I'll move my clothes in tomorrow." She could only blink at him in surprise. She had expected him to return to the status quo, sleeping almost every night with her but returning to his own apartment every morning to change clothes before going to work. The thought of his clothes hanging next to hers in the spacious closet made her feel both excited and a little alarmed, which was ridiculous, because she had never wanted anything as much as she had wanted a full, complete life with him. But things were changing so swiftly, and her life was already in upheaval with her pregnancy. Control of her body was slipping further from her grasp with every passing day, as the baby grew and demanded more of her. Though her early symptoms had been scant, she could now see definite changes.
She had been fighting one of those changes all day, and it was all suddenly too much. Tears welled in her eyes as she looked at him, and began to roll down her face. Instantly he was beside her, putting his arms around her and tucking her head against his shoulder. "What's wrong?" he demanded, sounding almost frantic. "Don't you want me to move in? I thought I could take care of you better."
"It isn't that," she sobbed. "Yes, it is. I'm happy, damn it! I've always wanted you to move in with me, or ask me to move in with you. But you didn't do it for my sake, you did it because of the baby!"
Saxon tilted her face up and used his thumbs to wipe away her tears. His black brows were drawn together in a scowl. "Of course I'm doing it for you," he said impatiently. "I don't know the baby. Hell, I can't even see much evidence of it yet! I don't want you to be alone any more than necessary." The scowl intensified. "Have you been to a doctor?"

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Yes, I didn't realize I was pregnant until I saw the doctor. I went because my last period was just spotting, and the one before that was really light. I've hardly had any symptoms at all."
"Is that normal?"
"As normal as anything else is. The doctor told me everything looked fine, that some women spotted for the first few months and some didn't, that some women had morning sickness and some didn't. All I've really noticed is that I get tired and sleepy and that I want to cry a lot."
He looked relieved. "You mean you're crying because of the baby?"
"No, I'm crying because of you!"
"Well, don't." He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I don't like it when you cry."
There was no way he could know how it felt to be coddled and cuddled like that, how she had yearned for ft. Love had been in short supply in her life, too, though she had never known the direct brutality Saxon had suffered. Her most cherished dreams had always been about having a home with him, just an ordinary home, with the sweet security of routine and the sure knowledge that he was coming home to her every day. In her dreams he had always held her and shown her how much he cared, while in reality he had offered her physical intimacy and an emotional desert. This sudden turnaround was so much like a dream come true that she was afraid to believe in it. Even so, she wasn't going to do anything to end it prematurely. For as long as he stayed, she intended to savor every moment.
True to his word, he moved in the next day. He didn't say anything to her about it, but a couple of phone calls, one from someone interested in leasing his other apartment and another from a utility company double-checking the address for the forwarding of his bill, made it obvious that he was completely giving up his official residence. That, more than anything, told her how serious he was about preserving their relationship.
She watched him closely for signs of edginess, because their relationship had changed in far more fundamental ways than simply that he no longer had dual residences. She had told him that she loved him, words that couldn't be erased or forgotten; by his reaction to their short estrangement, he had revealed a lot more about how much he cared than he ever had before. Though they had been physically intimate for two years, this sort of closeness was totally new to him, and she could tell that sometimes he didn't know how to act. It was almost as if he were in a foreign country

where he didn't speak the language, cautiously groping his way about, unable to read the road signs.
He was increasingly curious about the baby and insisted on going with her to her next doctor's appointment, which was scheduled for only a few days after he'd moved in. When he discovered that an ultrasound photo later in her pregnancy might tell them the baby's sex, he immediately wanted to know when they would be able to do it, and how often the doctors were mistaken. Since it was the first interest he had shown in the baby's sex, she wondered if he was imagining having a son. He hadn't indicated a preference either way, and she had no decided preference, either, so they had somehow always referred to the baby as "it" rather than "he" or "she."
How would a son affect him? He would see more of himself in a boy, and it would be, in a way, a chance for him to correct the horror of his own childhood by making certain his own son never knew anything but love. In her mind's eye she saw him patiently showing a grubby, determined little boy how to swing a bat or field a pop fly. There would probably be years of attending a variety of ball games and watching with fierce pride every move the boy made. Every hit would be the best hit ever made, every catch the most stupendous, because the boy making it would be theirs.
Despite the dampening whispers of her common sense, she couldn't stop dreaming of a future with Saxon. One miracle had already happened: he hadn't disappeared when he'd learned of her pregnancy. She would continue hoping for another miracle.
Lying in bed that night, she nestled her head on his chest and listened to the strong, steady boom-boom of his heart. Her hand strayed down to her abdomen; the baby was hearing her own heart steadily pumping in the same rhythm, soothing and reassuring it just as Saxon's heartbeat soothed her. It was a wonderfully satisfying sound.
"You seemed really interested in the ultrasound," she said sleepily.
"Mmm," he grunted by way of a reply. Her head moved as she glanced up at him, though all she could see was his chin, and that not very well in the darkened room.
"Are you anxious to know what the baby is?"
He shifted restlessly. "I'd like to know, yeah. What about you? Do you have your heart set on a little girl?"
"Not really," she said, and yawned. "I just want a healthy baby, boy or girl, though it would be convenient to know ahead of time so we can have a

name picked out and a nursery decorated without having to use greens or yellows."
"A nursery," he said in a faintly surprised tone. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. All I can picture is this little person about the size of a skinned rabbit, all wrapped up in a blanket. It'll stay where we put it and won't take up much space. Why does something that small need an entire room for itself?"
She grinned in the darkness. "Because otherwise the entire apartment would be cluttered with all the paraphernalia necessary for taking care of a baby. And where did you think it would sleep?"
The question startled him; then he laughed, the rare sound booming under her ear. "With us, I guess. On whichever arm you weren't using. I would say it could sleep on my chest, but I understand they aren't housebroken."
She snickered, and he laughed again. More content than she could ever remember being in her life, she snuggled even closer. "I imagine you want a boy. All day today I kept having daydreams about you teaching him how to play baseball."
Saxon stiffened, his body going rigid all along her side. "Not especially," he finally said in a strained voice. "I'd really rather have a girl."
Surprise kept her silent, particularly because she didn't know what about the question had upset him. He didn't say anything for a while, and she began to drift off to sleep, but all drowsiness left her when he said quietly, "Maybe if it's a girl you'll love it more."

Chapter 6

“What about your family?" he asked carefully the next morning, as if wary of treading on unstable ground. In his experience, family was something other people had and, from what he'd seen at his foster homes, it wasn't desirable. But he wanted to know more about Anna, wanted to find out all he could about her in case some day he came home to find her gone. "Have you told them that you're having a baby, or anything about me?"
"I don't have any family," she replied as she poured skim milk over her cereal. Her manner was casual, but his interest sharpened immediately.
"No family? Were you an orphan?" He had seen a lot of orphans, sad and terrified children who had lost their entire world and didn't know what to

do. Maybe his situation, dire as it had been, was preferable to theirs. At least he hadn't lost someone he loved. His mother hadn't died; she had simply dumped him in the trash. Probably both she and his father were still alive somewhere, though he sincerely doubted they were together. He was more than likely the result of a short affair, at best, and more probably a one-night stand.

"Yes, but I was never in an orphanage. My mother died when I was nine, and my dad said he couldn't take proper care of me, so he sent me to live with his half sister. To tell the truth, he simply didn't want the responsibility. From what my aunt said, he'd always been irresponsible, never holding down a job for long, spending bis money in bars and chasing after other women. He died in a car accident when I was fourteen."

"What about your aunt?" he asked, remembering the "None" she had listed beside the next-of-kin information. "Do you still see her?"

"No. She died about a year before I went to work for you, but I doubt I'd ever have seen her again anyway. It wasn't a fond relationship. She and Uncle Sid had seven kids of their own. I was just an unwelcome extra mouth to feed, especially since she had never gotten along with Dad anyway. Aunt Cora looked as if she had posed for the painting 'American Gothic,' all prune-faced and disapproving, soured on life. There was never enough money to go around, and it was only natural that she provided for her own children first."

Anger swelled in him as he pictured her, a thin, lost little girl with big honey eyes, standing off to the side as he had often stood, never quite a part of a family unit. That had been the better part of his childhood, but it infuriated him that Anna had been subjected to such treatment. "What about your cousins? Don't you ever see them, or hear from them?"

"No, we were never close. We got along as well as most children who have been thrown together, but we never had much in common. They've all moved off the farm, anyway, and I don't know where they are. I suppose I could trace them if I wanted, but there doesn't seem any point in it."

Somehow he had never pictured Anna as being alone in the world, or of having a background in common with him. It shook him to realize that, in a different way, she had been just as deprived of nurturing as he had. She had never suffered the physical abuse, and perhaps that was why she was still able to reach out, to express her love. Even before he could remember, he had learned not to expect, or hope, or offer anything of himself, because

that would leave him open to hurt. He was glad Anna hadn't known a life like that.
Even so, it couldn't have been easy for her to tell him that she loved him. Had she been braced for
rejection? That was what he'd done, panicked and thrown her love back in her face. He had been terrified the next morning that she wouldn't be able to stand the sight of him after the way he'd run out on her. But she had taken him back, and thank God, she not only loved him, but she seemed to love his baby. Sometimes it seemed impossible.
"What about the foster family you stayed with?" she asked. "Do you ever call them, or visit?"
"No. I haven't seen them since the day after my high-school graduation, when I packed and left, but they didn't expect me to keep in touch. I told them goodbye and thanked them, and I guess that was good enough."
"What were their names?"
"Emmeline and Harold Bradley. They were good people. They tried, especially Harold, but there was no way they could turn me into their son. It was always there, in their eyes. I wasn't Kenny. Emmeline always seemed to resent it that her son had died but I was still alive. Neither of them ever touched me if they could prevent it. They took care of me, provided me with a place to stay, clothes, food, but there wasn't any affection there. They were relieved when I left."
"Aren't you curious if they're still alive, or if they've moved?"
"There's no point in it. There's nothing for me there, and they wouldn't be overjoyed to see me."
"Where did they live?"
"About eighty miles from here, in Fort Morgan."
"But that's so close! My cousins lived in Maryland, so it's at least reasonable that we haven't kept in touch."
He shrugged. "I left the state when I went to college, so it wasn't exactly convenient for me to visit. I worked two jobs to pay my tuition, and that didn't leave a lot of free time."
"But you came back to Colorado and settled in Denver."
"There's more demand for engineers in a large city."
"There are a lot of cities in this country. The point is, you're so close, but you never called them to tell them how college turned out, or that you were back in the state."

Temper edged into his voice. "No, I didn't, and I don't intend to. For God's sake, Anna, it's been fifteen years since I got out of college. They sure as hell haven't kept a candle in the window for me all this time. They knew I wouldn't be back."

She dropped the subject, but she didn't forget it. Harold and Emmeline Bradley. She committed their names to memory. Despite what Saxon thought, they had spent years raising him and were likely to be more than a little interested in what had become of him.

He left for work in silence, and returned that afternoon in the same brooding mood. She left him alone, but his silence made her quietly panic. Had her questions bothered him so much that he was considering terminating their arrangement? But he had started it by asking about her family, so he had only himself to blame. In the few days since she had told him of the baby she had become accustomed to thinking of him as more approachable, more hers, but suddenly she was very much aware of the wall that still surrounded him. She had knocked a few chinks out of it, but it was far from demolished.

Saxon hadn't liked all that talk about his foster family, but it had started him thinking. Unless he and Anna took steps to prevent it, this baby wouldn't have much of a family, either. He couldn't picture them having other children under their present circumstances, and to his surprise, he liked the idea of more children. He wanted them to be a family, not just live-in lovers who happened to have a baby.

He hadn't had pretty fantasies about his mother, but he had often wondered, with a child's bewildered pain, what it would be like to have a real family, to belong somewhere and have someone who loved him. It was a fantasy that hadn't lasted long under the merciless weight of reality, but he still remembered how he had imagined it, the feeling of security that was at the center of it and held everything together. He hadn't been able to picture parents, beyond tall shadowy figures that stood between him and danger. He never wanted his baby to have those kinds of fantasies; he wanted it to have the reality of a stable home.

Less than a week ago, just the idea of what he was now considering would have been enough to make him break out in a panicky sweat, but he had since learned that there were worse things. Losing Anna was worse. He hoped he never in his life had to live through another day and night like he'd

endured then, because he didn't think his sanity could take it. In comparison, what he was thinking now was a snap.
Thinking it was one thing, actually putting it into words was another. He watched Anna with troubled eyes, though he knew it was useless trying to predict her answer. Behind her customary serenity she was deep and complicated, seeing more than he wanted her to see, understanding more than was comfortable. With so much of her thought processes hidden from him, he wasn't at all certain how she would react, or why. If she loved him there should be no hesitation, but that wasn't necessarily the case. She was capable of sacrificing her own happiness—assuming he could make her happy—for what she thought best for the baby.
It was strange what an impact the baby had had on their lives months prior to its birth, but he didn't regret the changes. It was frightening; he had the sense of living on the edge, where any false move could send him over, but at the same time the increased openness and intimacy he shared with Anna were, without a doubt, worth every minute of worry. He didn't think he could go back to the previous loneliness he had taken for granted, even embraced.
Still, it was a decision that racked him with nerves. In the end, he couldn't say the words that would be an offer of himself, a statement of his feelings and vulnerability; instead he threw them out couched as a suggestion. "I think we should get married."
There was nothing he could have said that would have astounded her more. Her legs went weak, and she sat down heavily. "Marriage!" she said with a mixture of disbelief and total surprise.
He wasn't pleased that the solution hadn't occurred to her. "Yes, marriage. It makes sense. We're already living together, and we're having a baby. Marriage seems the logical next step."
Anna shook her head, not in refusal but in a futile effort to clear her head. Somehow she had never expected to receive a marriage proposal couched as "the logical next step." She hadn't expected a marriage proposal, period, though she had wanted one very badly. But she had wanted him to propose for different reasons, because he loved her and couldn't live without her. She suspected that was the case, but she would never know for sure if he never told her.
It wasn't an easy decision, and she didn't rush into speech. His face was impassive as he waited for her answer, his green eyes darkened and

watchful. Her answer meant a lot to him, she realized. He wanted her to say yes. She wanted to say yes. The question was whether she was willing to take the chance that he did love her and marry him on blind faith. A cautious woman wouldn't want to make a hasty decision that would affect not only the two of them, but their child as well. A broken marriage inevitably left its scars on all concerned.

She had taken a leap of blind faith in quitting her job to become his mistress, and she didn't regret it. The two years of loving him had been the best of her life, and she could never wish them undone. Pregnancy altered everything, she thought with a faint curving of her lips. She couldn't just think of herself now; she had to think of the baby. What was logical wasn't necessarily the best choice, even though her heart clamored for a quick acceptance.

She looked at him, her dark eyes grave. "I love you, you know," she said. Once such a statement would have made his face go blank in a refusal to hear. Now he steadily returned her gaze. "I know." The knowledge didn't make him panic; instead he treasured it, savored it, as the most precious gift of his life.

"I want to say yes, more than anything I've ever wanted, but I'm afraid to. I know it was your idea for us to stay together, and you've been wonderful, but I'm not certain that you'll still feel the same after the baby's born. As the old saying goes, then it becomes a whole new ball game. I don't want you to feel trapped or unhappy."

He shook his head as if to forestall the answer he sensed was coming. "There's no way to predict the future. I know why you worry about the way I'll react, and to tell you the truth, I'm a little scared myself, but I'm excited, too. I want this baby. I want you. Let's get married and make it official." He smiled wryly. "The baby could have Malone for a last name. The second generation of a brand-new family."

Anna took a deep breath and denied herself what she had wanted more than anything else. "I can't give you an answer now," she whispered, and saw his face tighten. "It just doesn't feel right. I want to say yes, Saxon, I want that more than anything, but I'm not certain it would be the right thing to do."

"It is," he said roughly.

"Then if it is, it will still be the right thing a month from now, or two months from now. Too much has happened too fast—the baby.. .you. I don't

want to make the wrong decision, and I think I'm operating more on my emotions now than on brainpower."
The force of his willpower shone out of his eyes, intensely green and focused. "I can't make you say yes," he said in a slow, deep voice. "But I can keep asking. I can make love to you and take care of you until you won't be able to imagine life without me."
Her lips trembled. "I can't imagine that now."
"I don't give up, Anna. When I go after something, I don't stop until I've gotten it. I want you, and I'm going to have you."
She knew exactly what he meant. When he decided something, he focused on it with a fierce tunnel vision that didn't let him rest until he had achieved his objective. It was a little daunting to think of herself as the object of that kind of determination.
He smiled then, a smile that was more than a little predatory. "You can take that to the bank, baby."

Chapter 7

Marriage. The thought of it hovered in her consciousness during the day and crept into her dreams at night. Several times every day she started to throw caution to the winds and tell him yes, but there was a part of her that simply wasn't ready to take such an immense step. She had been willing before to settle for being his mistress, but now she was unable to settle for being his wife; she wanted him to love her, too, and admit it to both her and himself. She might be certain that he did love her, but until he could come to terms with his feelings, she couldn't rely on that. He could say "I want you," but not "I love you." She couldn't blame him for having difficulty with the emotion. Sometimes when she was alone she cried for him, at first a discarded infant, then a lonely, frightened toddler, and finally an abused youngster with no one he could turn to for help. No one could have endured such a childhood without emotional scarring, without losing the ability both to give and accept love. When she looked at it clearly, she saw that he had reached out to her far more than could reasonably be expected.
She didn't really expect more, but she wanted it.
She couldn't get the Bradleys out of her mind. From what he had said, he had spent six years with them, from the time he was twelve until he was

eighteen. Six years was a long time for them to keep him and not feel something for him. Was it possible that they had offered him more than duty, but at the time he hadn't been able to see it for what it was? And how had they felt at not hearing from him ever again?
Surely they had worried, if they had any hint of human warmth about them. They had raised him from a boy to a young man, given him the only stable home life he had ever known until Anna had become his mistress and made a sanctuary for him in the apartment. It was always possible that it had been exactly as he remembered it, that losing their son had prevented them from feeling anything for him beyond duty and a sense of pity. Pity! He would have hated that. If he had sensed that they pitied him, no wonder he hadn't gone back.
But though she fretted about it for several days, she knew that she wasn't accomplishing anything with her worrying. If she wanted to know for certain, she would have to drive to Fort Morgan and try to find the Bradleys. It might be a useless trip, since nineteen years had passed; they could have moved, or even died.
Once she made the decision to go, she felt better, even though she knew Saxon would be adamantly against the idea. However, she didn't intend to let his opposition stop her.
That didn't mean she intended to be sneaky about it. After dinner that night she said, "I'm going to Fort Morgan tomorrow."
He tensed, and his eyes narrowed. "Why?"
"To try to find the Bradleys."
He folded the newspaper away with an angry snap. "There's no point in it. I told you how it was. Why are you worried about it, anyway? That was nineteen years ago. It's nothing to do with us now. You didn't even know me then."
"Curiosity, partly," she answered with blunt honesty. "And what if you're wrong about the way they felt? You were young. You could have misread them. And if you were wrong, then they've spent nineteen years feeling as if they lost two sons instead of just one."
"No," he said, and from the command in his voice she knew he wasn't refuting her suggestion but issuing an order.
She lifted her brows at him, mild surprise in her eyes. "I wasn't asking permission. I was letting you know where I'd be so you wouldn't worry if you called and I wasn't here."

"I said no."
"You certainly did," she agreed. "But I'm not your mistress anymore—"
"It sure as hell felt like you were last night," he interrupted, his eyes turning greener as anger intensified the color.
She didn't intend to argue with him. Instead she smiled, and her soft face glowed as she sent him a warm look. "That was making love." And it had been wonderful. Sex between them had always been hot and urgent, but since he had moved in with her it had taken on an added dimension, a shattering tenderness that hadn't been there before. Their love-making was more prolonged; it was as if, before, he had always been aware that he was going to have to get up and leave, and the knowledge had driven him. Now he was relaxed and leisurely in a way he hadn't been before, with increased pleasure as a result.
There was a flicker of tension across his face at the word "love," but it was quickly gone, with no lingering echoes.
"I'm not your mistress," she repeated. "That arrangement is over with. I'm the woman who loves you, who lives with you, who's having your baby."
He looked around at the apartment. "You may not think you're my mistress anymore," he said with soft anger, "but things look pretty much the same to me."
"Because you support me? That's your choice, not mine. I'll find a job, if it will make you feel better. I've never enjoyed being a kept woman, anyway."
"No!" He didn't like that idea at all. It had always been in the back of his mind that, if he kept her totally dependent on him, she would be less likely to leave. At the same time he had invested in stocks in her name to make certain she would be financially secure. The paradox had always made him uneasy, but he wanted her to be taken care of in case something happened to him. After all, he traveled a lot and spent a lot of time on construction sites, not the safest of places. He had also made a will a year ago, leaving everything to her. He'd never told her.
"I don't want you driving that far by yourself," he finally said, but he was grasping at straws, and he knew it.
"It's less than a two-hour drive, the weather forecast is for clear and sunny conditions tomorrow. But if you want to go with me, I can wait until the weekend," she offered.
His expression closed up at the idea. He had never been back, never wanted to go back. The Bradleys hadn't mistreated him; they had been the best of

all the foster homes he'd been in. But that part of his life was over. He had shut the door on it when he'd left, and he'd spent the following years working like a slave to make himself into someone who would never again be helpless.
"They may have moved," she said, offering comfort. "I just want to know."
He made a weary gesture. "Then pick up the telephone and call information. Talk to them, if they're still there. But don't involve me in it. I don't want to talk to them. I don't want to see them. I don't want anything to do with this."
She wasn't surprised at his total rejection of the past; it was hardly the type of memory he would embrace. And she hadn't expected him to go with her.
"I don't want to talk to them over the telephone," she said. "I want to drive up there, see the house. I may not approach them at all. It depends on what I find when I get there."
She held her breath, because there was one appeal he could make that she wouldn't be able to deny. If he said, "Please don't go, for my sake," then she wouldn't go. If he actually asked for anything for himself, there was no way she could turn him down. He had been rejected so much in his life that she wouldn't add to it. But because of those prior rejections, she knew he wouldn't ask in those terms. He would never put things in the context of being a personal consideration for him. He would order, he would make objections, but he wouldn't simply ask and say, "Please don't."
He refused to talk about it anymore and got up restlessly to stand at the terrace doors and look out. Anna calmly returned to her own section of the paper, but her heart was beating fast as she realized this was the first normal domestic quarrel they had ever had. To her delight, they-had disagreed, and nothing major had happened. He hadn't left, nor did he seem to expect her to leave. It was wonderful. He was already able to trust her enough that he wasn't afraid a disagreement could end their relationship.
She had worried that he would overreact to arguments, since they were part and parcel of every relationship. Normal couples had disagreements; probably even saints had disagreements. Two years ago, Saxon wouldn't have been able to tolerate such a personal discussion.
He was really trying, even though it was extraordinarily difficult for him to open up. Circumstances had forced him into revealing his past, but he hadn't tried to reestablish those protective mental walls of his. He seemed to accept that once the emotional boundaries had been crossed, he couldn't make them inviolate again.

She didn't know what she could accomplish by finding the Bradleys again. Perhaps nothing. She just wanted to see them, to get a feel for herself of what that portion of Saxon's formative years had been like. If they seemed interested, she wanted to reassure them that their foster son was alive and well, that he was successful and would soon be a father himself.
With his back still to her, Saxon asked, "Are you afraid to marry me because of my past? Is that why you want to find the Bradleys, so you can ask them questions about me?"
"No!" she said, horrified. "I'm not afraid to marry you."
"My parents could be anything—murderers, drug users. My mother may be a prostitute. The odds are pretty good she was. There may be a history of mental illness in my background. I'd be afraid to marry me. But the Bradleys won't be able to tell you anything, because no one knows who my parents were."
"I'm not concerned with your parents," she said levelly. "I know you. You're rock solid. You're honest, kind, hardworking and sexy."
"So why won't you marry me, if I'm such a good catch?"
Good question, she thought. Maybe she was being foolish in waiting. "I don't want to rush into something that might not be right for either of us,"
"I don't want my baby to be born illegitimate."
"Oh, Saxon." She gave a sad laugh. "I promise you I'll make a decision long before the baby is born."
"But you can't promise me you'll say yes."
"No more than you can promise me our marriage would work."
He gave her a brief, angry look over his shoulder. "You said you love me."
"And I do. But can you say that you love me?" she asked.
He didn't answer. Anna watched him, her eyes sad and tender. Her question could be taken in two ways. He did love her, she thought, but was incapable of actually saying it. Maybe he felt that as long as he didn't say the words aloud, he hadn't made the emotional commitment.
Finally he said, "Is that what it'll take for you to marry me?"
"No. It isn't a test that you have to pass."
"Isn't it?"
"No," she insisted.
"You say you won't marry me because you don't know if I can handle it, but I'm willing to try. You're the one who's resisting making a commitment."

She stared at him in frustration. He was too good at arguing, agilely taking her previous arguments and using them against her. She was glad that he felt sure enough of her to do it, but she could see what she'd be up against in the future if they did get married.
It would take a lot of determination to win an argument against him.
She pointed her finger at him, even though his back was still turned and he couldn't see her. "I'm not resisting making a commitment, I'm resisting making it now. I think I have a right to be a little cautious."
"Not if you trust me."
That turned back was making her suspicious. She gave him a considering look, then suddenly realized he had turned his back so she wouldn't be able to read his expression. Her eyes narrowed as she realized what he was doing. He wasn't as upset or even as indignant as he sounded; he was simply using the tactic as a means of maneuvering her into agreeing to marry him. It was all part and parcel of his determination to have his way.
She got up and went over to him, wrapping her arms around his lean waist and leaning her head against his back. "It won't work," she said softly. "I'm on to you."
To her surprise, she felt his chest expand with a low laugh; then he turned within the circle of her arms and looped his own around her. "Maybe you know me too well," he muttered, but his tone was accepting.
"Or maybe you need acting lessons."
He chuckled again and rested his cheek against the top of her head. But all humor was absent from his tone a minute later when he said, "Go see the Bradleys, if you have to. There's nothing there to find out."

Chapter 8

Fort Morgan was a small town of about ten thousand people. Anna drove around for a little while to get her bearings, then stopped at a phone booth to look up the Bradleys' address. What she would do if they weren't in the book, she didn't know. It could mean they had moved or died, or it might just mean that their number wasn't listed.
She could have asked Saxon, but she hadn't wanted to ask him for information to help her to do something of which he didn't approve. Besides, it had been nineteen years, and there was no guarantee the

Bradleys would still live in the same house, even if they had remained in Fort Morgan.
The phone book wasn't very big. She flipped through it to the Bs, then ran her finger down the column. "Bailey.. .Banks.. .Black.. .Boatwright... Bradley. Harold Bradley." She wrote down the address and phone number, then debated whether she should call them to get directions. She decided not to, because she wanted to catch them unawares, as it were. People could mask their true reactions if they were given warning.
So she drove to a gas station, filled up and asked directions of the attendant. Ten minutes later she drove slowly down a residential street, checking house numbers, and finally stopped at the curb in front of a neat but unpretentious house. It looked as if it had been built a good forty or fifty years before, with an old-fashioned roofed porch across the front. The white paint showed signs of wear but wasn't at the point where one could definitely say the house was in need of repainting. An assortment of potted plants was sunning on the porch, but there weren't any ornamentals in the small yard, which gave it a bare look. A one-car, unconnected garage sat back and to the side of the house.
She got out of the car, oddly reluctant now that she was here, but she walked up the cracked sidewalk and climbed the three steps to the porch. A porch glider, with rust spots showing where the thick white paint had chipped, was placed in front of the windows. Anna wondered if the Bradleys sat out there during the summer and watched the neighbors go about their business.
There wasn't a doorbell. She knocked on the frame of the screen door and waited. A gray-and-white cat leaped up onto the porch and meowed curiously at her.
After a minute, she knocked again. This time she heard hurried footsteps, and her pulse speeded up in anticipation. With it came a wave of nausea that had her swallowing in desperation. Of all the times to have one of her rare bouts of morning sickness! She only hoped she wouldn't disgrace herself.
The door opened, and she found herself face-to-face with a tall, thin, stern-faced woman, only the thin screen separating them. The woman didn't open the screen door. Instead she said, "Yes?" in a deep, rusty-sounding voice.
Anna was dismayed by the lack of friendliness and started to ask for directions as an excuse for being there, planning to leave without ever mentioning Saxon. But the tall woman just stood there with her hand on the

latch, patiently waiting for Anna to state her business before she opened the door, and something about that strength of will struck a cord.
"Mrs. Bradley?"
"Yes, I'm Mrs. Bradley."
"My name is Anna Sharp. I'm looking for the Bradleys who used to be foster parents to Saxon Malone. Is this the right family?"
The woman's regard sharpened. "It is." She still didn't unlatch the door.
Anna's hopes sank. If Saxon hadn't been exposed to any sort of love even here, where he had grown up, he might never be able to give or accept it. What sort of marriage could she have under those conditions? What would it do to her own child to have a father who always kept at a distance?
But she had come this far, so she might as well carry on. She was aware, too, of the compelling quality of the woman's steely gaze. "I know Saxon," she began, and with an abrupt movement the woman flipped the latch up and swung the screen door outward.
"You know him?" she demanded fiercely. "You know where he is?"
Anna moved back a step. "Yes, I do."
Mrs. Bradley indicated the interior of the house with a jerk of her head. "Come inside."
Anna did, cautiously, obeying an invitation that had sounded more like a command. The door opened directly into the living room; a quick look around told her that the furniture was old and threadbare in spots, but the small room was spotless.
"Sit," said Mrs. Bradley.
She sat. Mrs. Bradley carefully relatched the screen door, then wiped her hands on the apron she wore. Anna watched the motion of those strong, work-worn hands, then realized that it was more of a nervous wringing than it was a deliberate movement.
She looked up at her reluctant hostess's face and was startled to see the strong, spare features twisted in a spasm of emotion. Mrs. Bradley tried to school herself, but abruptly a lone tear rolled down her gaunt cheek. She sat down heavily in a rocker and bunched the apron in her hands. "How is my boy?" she asked in a broken voice. "Is he all right?"
They sat at the kitchen table, with Mrs. Bradley drinking coffee while Anna contented herself with a glass of water. Mrs. Bradley was composed now, though she occasionally dabbed at her eyes with the edge of the apron.

"Tell me about him," Emmeline Bradley said. Her faded blue eyes were alight with a mixture of joy and eagerness, and also a hint of pain.
"He's an engineer," Anna said, and saw pride join the other emotions. "He owns his own company, and he's very successful."
"I always knew he would be. Smart! Lordy, that boy was smart. Me and Harold, we always told each other, he's got a good head on his shoulders. He always got A's in school. He was dead serious about his schooling."
"He put himself through college and graduated near the top of his class. He could have gone to work with any of the big engineering firms, but he wanted to have his own business. I was his secretary for a while."
"Fancy that, his own secretary. But when he made up his mind to do something, he done it, even when he was just a boy."
"He's still like that," Anna said, and laughed. "He says exactly what he means and means exactly what he says. You always know where you stand with Saxon."
"He didn't talk much when he was here, but we understood. The child had been through so much, it was a wonder he'd talk at all. We tried not to crowd him, or force ourselves on him. It about broke our hearts sometimes, the way he would jump to do every little thing we mentioned, then kinda hold himself off and watch to see if we thought he'd done it right. I guess he thought we were going to throw him out if he didn't do everything perfect, or maybe even kick him around the way they'd done in some of those other homes."
Tears welled in Anna's eyes, because she could see him all too plainly, young and thin and still helpless, his green eyes watchful, empty of hope.
"Don't cry," Emmeline said briskly, then had to dab at her own eyes. "He was twelve when we got him, bone-thin and gangly. He hadn't started getting his height yet, and he was still limping where the woman who had him before us knocked him off the porch with a broom handle. He twisted his ankle pretty bad. He had some long, thin bruises across his back, like the broom handle had caught him there, too. I guess it was a regular thing. And there was a burn mark on his arm. Mind you, he never said anything about it, but the caseworker told us a man ground out his cigarette on him.
"He never acted scared of us, but for a long time he'd get real stiff if we got too close to him, like he was getting ready to either fight or ran. He seemed more comfortable if we stayed at a distance, so we did, even though I wanted to hug him close and tell him no one was ever going to hurt him

again. But he was kinda like a dog that's been beat. He'd lost his trust of people."
Anna's throat was tight when she spoke. "He's still distant, to some extent. He isn't comfortable with emotion, though he's getting better."
"You know him real well? You said you used to be his secretary. Don't you still work for him?"
"No, I haven't worked for him for two years." A faint blush stained her cheeks. "We're having a baby, and he's asked me to marry him."
The color of Emmeline's eyes was faded, but her vision was still sharp. She gave Anna a piercing once-over. "In my day we did things in reverse order, but times change. There's no shame in loving someone. A baby, huh? When's it due? I reckon this is as close to a grandchild as I'll get."
"September. We live in Denver, so we aren't that far away. It'll be easy to visit."
A sad look crept over Emmeline's lined face. "We always figured Saxon didn't want to have nothing to do with us again. He said goodbye when he graduated from high school, and we could tell he meant it. Can't blame him, really. By the time we got him, his growing-up years had marked him so deep we knew he wouldn't want to think about any foster home. The caseworker told us all about him. The woman who gave birth to that boy has a lot to answer for, what she did to him and the living hell she caused his life to be. I swear, if anyone had ever found out who she was, I'd have hunted her down and done violence to her."
"I've had the same thought myself," Anna said grimly, and for a moment her velvet brown eyes didn't look so soft.
"My Harold died several years back," Emmeline said, and nodded in acknowledgment of Anna's murmur of sympathy. "I wish he could be here now, to hear how well Saxon's turned out, but I guess he knows anyway."
Her rough, simple faith was more touching than any elaborate protestation could have been. Anna found herself smiling, because there was something joyous in Emmeline's surety.
"Saxon said you lost your own son," she said, hoping she wasn't bringing up a source of grief that was still fresh. Losing a child was something a parent should never have to experience.
Emmeline nodded, a faraway expression coming over her face. "Kenny," she said. "Lordy, it's been thirty years now since he took sick that last time. He was sickly from birth. It was his heart, and back then they couldn't do

the things they can now. The doctors told us from the time he was a baby that we wouldn't get to keep him all that long, but somehow knowing don't always help you prepare for it. He died when he was ten, poor little mite, and he looked about the size of a six-year-old."

After a minute the dreamy expression left her face, and she smiled. "Saxon, now, you could tell right off, even as thin and bruised up as he was, he was a strong one. He started growing the next year after we got him. Maybe it was having regular meals that did it. Lord knows I poked all the food down him I could. But he shot up like a bean pole, growing a foot in about six months. Seemed like every time we got him some jeans, he outgrew them the next week. He was taller than Harold in no time, all legs and arms. Then he started to fill out, and that was a sight to behold. All of a sudden we had more young gals walking up and down the street than I'd ever imagined lived within a square mile of this house, giggling to each other and watching the door and windows, trying to get a glimpse of him."

Anna laughed out loud. "How did he take being the center of attention like that?"

"He never let on like he noticed. Like I said, he was real serious about his schooling. And he was still leery about letting folks get close to him, so I guess dating would have been uncomfortable for him. But those girls just kept walking past, and can't say as I blame them. He made most boys his age look like pipsqueaks. He was shaving by the time he was fifteen, and he had a real beard, not a few scrag-gly hairs like most boys. His chest and shoulders had gotten broad, and he was muscled up real nice. Fine figure of a boy."

Anna hesitated, then decided to touch on the subject of Kenny again. Emmeline tended to get carried away talking about Saxon, perhaps because she had been denied the privilege for so many years. Now that she had finally met somebody who knew him, all the memories were bubbling out. "Saxon told me that he always felt you resented him because he wasn't Kenny."

Emmeline gave her a surprised look. "Resented him? It wasn't his fault Kenny died. Let me tell you, you don't ever get over it when your child dies, but Kenny had been dead for several years before we got Saxon. We'd always planned to either adopt or take in foster kids, anyway, after Kenny left us. Kenny's memory laid a little easier after Saxon came to live with us. It was like he was happy we had someone else to care about, and having

Saxon kept us from brooding. How could we resent him, when he'd been through such hell? Kenny didn't have good health, but he always knew we loved him, and even though he died so young, in some ways he was luckier than Saxon."
"He needs to be loved so much," Anna said, her throat tightening again. "But it's so hard for him to reach out to anyone, or let anyone reach out to him."
Emmeline nodded. "I guess we should have tried harder, after he'd had time to realize we weren't going to hurt him, but by then we were kinda used to keeping our distance from him. He seemed more comfortable that way, and we didn't push him. Looking back, I can see what we should've done, but at the time we did what it seemed like he wanted." She sat for a minute in silence, rocking back and forth a little in the wooden kitchen chair. Then she said, "Resent him? Never for a minute. Land sakes, we loved him from the beginning."

Chapter 9

Saxon's face tightened when she told him Harold was dead, and the brilliant color of his eyes dimmed. She had expected him to refuse to listen to anything about the Bradleys, but he hadn't. If he was curious, though, he was hiding it well, because he hadn't asked any questions, either. The news of Harold's death jolted him into showing interest, though reluctantly.
"Emmeline is still living in the same old house by herself?"
She told him the address, and he nodded. "It's the same house."
"She seems to be in good health," Anna said. "She cried when I told her I knew you." She took a deep breath. "You should go see her."
"No," he said shortly, dismissing the idea with a frown.
"Why not?"
She could feel him withdrawing, see his face closing up. She reached out and took his hand, remembering what Emmeline had said about letting him pull away when they should have pulled him closer. "I won't let you shut me out," she said. "I love you, and we're in this together."
His eyes were unreadable, but she had his attention. "If I had a problem, would you want to help me, or would you leave me to deal with it on my own?" she pressed.

There was a flicker of expression, gone too fast for her to decipher. "I'd take care of it for you," he said, and his hand tightened on hers. "But I don't have a problem."
"Well, I think you do."
"And you're determined to help me with it whether I think it exists or not, is that it?"
"That's it. That's the way relationships work. People butt in on other people's business because they care."
Once he would have thought it was an intolerable encroachment on his privacy, but though her determination was irritating him, at the same time it made him feel oddly secure. She was right; this was the way relationships worked. He'd seen it, though this was the first time he'd experienced it. Somehow their "arrangement" had become a "relationship," full of complications, demands and obligations, but he wouldn't have chosen to go back. For the first time in his life he felt accepted as he really was; Anna knew all there was to know about him, all the hideous details of his birth and childhood. She knew the worst, yet she hadn't left.
On a sudden impulse he lifted her astride his lap so he could look full into her face while they talked. It was an intensely personal position for talking, both physically and mentally, but it felt right. "It wasn't a good time of my life," he said in an effort to explain. "I don't want to remember it, or revisit it."
"The way you remember it is distorted by everything that had gone before. You think of them as cold and resentful of you because you weren't their son, but that isn't at all the way they felt." "Anna," he said patiently, "I was there." She framed his face with her hands. "You were a frightened boy. Don't you think it's possible you were so used to rejection that you expected it, so that's what you saw?"
"So you're an amateur psychiatrist now?" "Reasoning doesn't require a degree." She leaned forward and stole a quick kiss. "She talked for hours, telling me all about you."
"And now you think you're an expert."
"I am an expert on you," she snapped. "I've studied you for years, from the minute I went to work for you."
"You're pretty when you're mad," he said, abruptly enjoying this conversation. He realized with surprise that he was teasing her, and that it

was fun. He could make her angry, but she would still love him anyway. Commitment had its advantages.
"Then I'm about to get a lot prettier," she warned.
"I can handle it."
"You think so, big guy?"
"Yes, ma'am." He cupped his hands on her hips and moved her suggestively. "I'm pretty sure I can."
For a moment her eyelids drooped heavily in response; then she opened her eyes wide and glared at him. "Don't try to distract me."
"I wasn't trying."
No, he was accomplishing, without effort. She was far from finished with her efforts to convince him, though, so she started to get up. His hands tightened on her hips and kept her in place. "Stay right where you are," he ordered.
"We can't talk in this position. You'll get your mind on sex, and then where will we be?"
"Probably right here on this couch. Not for the first time, either."
"Saxon, would you please be serious about this?" she wailed, then stopped in astonishment at what she had just said. She couldn't believe she had just had to plead with him to be serious. He was the most sober of men, seldom laughing or even smiling. She had probably seen him smile more in the past week or so than in the rest of the three years she had known him.
"I am serious," he said. "About this position, and about Emmeline. I don't want to go back. I don't want to remember."
"She loves you. She called you 'her boy,' and she said that our baby would be her grandchild."
He frowned a little, his attention caught. "She said that?"
"You should talk to her. Your memory is onesided. They understood that you were wary of adults getting close to you, after the abuse you'd received, and that's why they didn't try to touch you. They thought they were making it easier on you."
A stark look came into his eyes as memories surfaced.
"Did you want them to hug you?" she asked. "Would you have let them?"
"No," he said slowly. "I couldn't have stood it. Even when I started having sex, in college, I didn't want the girl to put her arms around me. It wasn't until—" He broke off, his eyes unfocused. It wasn't until Anna that he had wanted the feel of arms around him, that he had wanted her to hold him

close. With all the other women, he had held their hands above their heads, or he had been up on his knees out of their reach. But that had been sex; with Anna, from the very beginning, it had been making love, only it had taken him two long years to realize it.
He would never have allowed Emmeline or Harold to hug him, and they had .known it.
Had his perceptions, and therefore his memories, been so distorted by his previous experiences? If what he had seen had been reflections in the carnival mirror of his mind, then nothing was as it had seemed. The beatings and general abuse he had suffered at the other foster homes had trained him to expect rejection, and he had been too young to be analytical.
"Can you really get on with your life unless you know for sure?" she asked, leaning closer to him. Those honey-dark eyes were pools he could drown in, and suddenly he pulled her tight against his chest.
"I'm trying to get on with my life," he muttered against her hair. "I'm trying to build a life, with you. Let the past go. God knows I've spent enough years trying to do that, and now that it's working, why dig it up again?"
"Because you can't let go of it! You can't forget your past. It's part of what made you the man you are. And Emmeline loves you. This isn't all for your sake. Part of it is for hers. She's alone in the world now. She didn't whine about it, or complain because you'd been gone for nearly twenty years and had never been back to see her. She just wanted to know if you were all right, and she was so proud to hear how well you've done."
Saxon closed his eyes, fighting to keep the images from forming in his mind, but it was a useless battle. Emmeline had always been the stronger personality; Harold had been softer, gentler. He could still see her face, strong-boned, plain, as spare as a desert landscape. Never malevolent, but stern and upright. Her standards of cleanliness had been of the highest; for the first time in his life, he had always had good, clean clothes, clothes he hadn't been ashamed to go to school in.
He didn't want to think that she had spent twenty years wondering about him, worrying. No one had ever worried about him before, so the possibility simply hadn't occurred to him. All he had thought about was making a clean break with his past, making something of himself and never looking back.
Anna thought you had to look back, to see where you had been, as if the landscape changed once you had passed it. And maybe it did. Maybe it would look different now.

From habit he thrust emotion away from him, and the logic of the thing was suddenly clear to him. He didn't want to go back. He wanted Anna to marry him. Anna wanted him to go back. The three ideas fell into place, and all at once he knew what he would do.
"I'll go back," he said softly, and her head jerked up, her doe-eyes big and soft and questioning. "On one condition."
They faced each other in silence for a moment. He remembered the beginning of their relationship, when she had said she would be his mistress on one condition, and he had refused it, forcing her to take him on his terms. She was remembering, too, and he wondered if she would refuse on principle. No, not Anna. She was infinitely forgiving, and wise enough to know that the one instance had nothing to do with the other. He also accepted that he wouldn't always win, but that was okay, as long as Anna was the victor. As long as she won, he won, too.
"So let's hear it," she said, though she already knew. "What's the condition?"
"That you agree to marry me."
"You'd reduce our marriage to a condition that has to be met?"
"I'll do whatever it takes, use whatever argument I have to. I can't lose you, Anna. You know that."
"You aren't losing me."
"I want it signed and sealed, on record in the county courthouse. I want you to be my wife, and I want to be your husband. I want to be a father to our kids." He gave her a crooked smile. "This is kind of like a way for me to make up for my own lousy childhood, to give my kids something better and have a real childhood through them."
Of all the things he could have said, that one got to her fast and hard. She hid her face against his neck so he wouldn't see the tears welling up in her eyes and swallowed several times so she would be able to speak normally.
"All right," she said. "You have yourself a wife."
They couldn't go to Fort Morgan immediately, because of his business commitments. Looking at the calendar, Anna smiled and made plans for them to go the following Sunday, and called Emmeline to let her know. It wasn't in Emmeline's character for her to bubble over with enthusiasm, but Anna could hear the pure joy in her voice.
The day finally came. As they made the drive, Saxon could feel himself tensing. He had been in foster homes all over the state, but he had lived in

Fort Morgan the longest, so he had more memories of it. He could picture every room in that old house, every piece of furniture, every photograph and book. He could see Emmeline in the kitchen, dark hair pulled tightly back in a no-nonsense bun, a spotless apron protecting her plain housedress, while mouthwatering smells from the stove filled the entire house. He remembered that she had made an apple pie that was almost sinful, rich with butter and cinnamon. He would have gorged himself on that pie if he hadn't always been wary of anything he liked being taken away, so he had always restricted himself to one slice and forced himself not to show any enthusiasm. He remembered that Emmeline had baked a lot of apple pies.
He drove to the house without any difficulty, its location permanently etched in his mind. When he parked at the curb, his chest tightened until he felt almost suffocated. It was like being caught in a time warp, stepping back almost twenty years and finding nothing had changed. There were changes, of course; the porch roof was sagging a little, and the cars parked in the street were twenty years newer. But the house was still white, and the undecorated lawn was still as neat as a hatbox. And Emmeline, stepping out on the porch, was still tall and thin, and her gaunt face was still set in naturally stern lines.
He opened the car door and got out. Without waiting for him to come around, Anna had climbed out on her side, but she made no move to walk forward and join him.
Suddenly he couldn't move. Not another step. With only the small expanse of lawn separating them, he looked at the woman he hadn't seen in two decades. She was the only mother he'd ever known. His chest hurt, and he could barely breathe. He hadn't known it would be like this, that he would suddenly feel like that terrified twelve-year boy again, brought here for the first time, hoping it would be better than the others, expecting more of the same abuse. Emmeline had come out on the porch then, too, and he had looked up at that stern face and felt only the old rejection and fear. He had wanted acceptance, wanted it so much that his heart had been pounding in his chest and he had been afraid he would disgrace himself by wetting his pants, but he hadn't let himself show it, because not having it at all was easier than facing another rejection. So he had closed himself off, protecting himself in the only way he knew.
Emmeline moved toward the steps. She wasn't wearing an apron; she had dressed up in one of her Sunday dresses, but she was wiping her hands on

the skirt out of habit. She stopped and stared at the tall, powerful man who was still standing at the curb. It was Saxon, without a doubt. He had turned into a breathtaking man, but she had always known he would, with that olive-toned skin, black hair and eyes like the clearest emeralds. She could see his eyes now, and the expression in them was the same as it had been twenty-five years ago when the caseworker had brought him to them, scared and desperate, and needing to be loved so much it had wrung her heart. He wouldn't come any closer, she knew. He wouldn't have back then, either, except for the caseworker's grip on his arm. Emmeline had remained on the porch rather than frighten him by rushing at him. And maybe it had been a mistake, waiting for him to be brought to her. Saxon needed for people to reach out to him, because he didn't know how to make the first move.
Slowly her face relaxed into a smile. Then Em-meline, that stern, reserved woman, walked down the steps to meet her son, her mouth trembling and tears running down her cheeks, her arms outstretched. And she never stopped smiling.
Something broke inside him with an audible snap, and he broke, too. He hadn't cried since he'd been an infant, but Emmeline was the only anchor he had ever had in his life, until he'd met Anna. With two long strides he met her in the middle of the sidewalk, caught her in his arms, and Saxon Malone cried. Emmeline put her arms around him and hugged him as tight as she could, as if she would never let go, and she kept saying, "My boy! My boy!" In the middle of his tears he reached out to Anna, and she flew around the car and into his arms. He held them both tight in his embrace and rocked them together, the two women he loved.
It was the twelfth of May. Mother's Day.

Epilogue

Anna woke slowly from what seemed like the deepest sleep she'd ever had and opened her eyes. The first sight she saw kept her from moving for a long, long time, as she reveled in the piercing sweetness of it. Saxon was sitting beside her hospital bed, just as he had been beside her all during labor and delivery. She had seen his face taut with worry and torment over her pain, filled with jubilation when she finally gave birth, his green eyes brilliant with tears as he stared wordlessly at his tiny, squalling offspring. He held the sleeping baby in his arms now, all his attention focused on the little creature. With infinite care he examined the tiny, perfect hands and minuscule fingernails, almost holding his breath as the little fingers folded over his big one in a surprisingly tight reflexive grip, even in sleep. He traced a finger over the almost invisible eyebrows, down the downy soft cheek, to the pink bud of a mouth. Their son fit almost perfectly in his big hands, though he had weighed in at a respectable seven pounds.

She eased around onto her side, smiling at Saxon when he snapped his attention to her. "Isn't he gorgeous?" she whispered.

"He's the most perfect thing I've ever seen." Awe was in his tone.

"Emmeline has gone down to the cafeteria to get something to eat. I practically had to fight her to get him away from her."

"Well, he is her only grandchild. For now."

He looked incredulous, remembering her labor, but then he looked at the baby in his arms and understood how she could consider the result as being well worth the effort. Then he smiled at his wife, a slow smile that melted her bones. "As long as the next one is a girl."

"We'll try our best."

"We still haven't decided on a name for him," he said.

"You can pick out his first name. I've already decided on his middle name."

"What is it?"

"Saxon, of course," she said. "The second Saxon Malone. We're starting a new family tradition, remember?"

He reached out and took her hand, then eased himself onto the side of her bed, and together they admired their son.

An Independent Wife (1982)

Chapter One

The phone on her desk rang but SaRie didn't look up from her typewriter or otherwise indicate that she'd even noticed the noise. With a sigh Brorn got to his feet and leaned across his desk to reach the phone and put the receiver to his ear. Sallie typed on, her brow puckered with concentration.

"Sal! It's for you," said Brom dryly, and Sallie looked up with a start to see Brorn lying stretched across his desk holding her telephone out to her.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Brom, I didn't hear it ring," she apologized, grinning at him as she took the receiver from his hand. He often ribbed her about being in another world, and it was nothing less than the truth; he often answered her calls as well as his own because usually she was concentrating so hard she didn't bear the phone ring.

He grinned back at her as he regained his seat and said, "It's Greg."

"Sallie," said Sallie into the mouthpiece by way of greeting.

And Greg Downey, the news editor, drawled, "Come see me, kid."

"I'm on my way," she said enthusiastically and hung up the phone.

As she switched off her electric typewriter and reached for the cover, Brom questioned, "Off again, birdie?"

"I hope so," replied Sallie, flipping her long braid back over her shoulder. She loved foreign assignments; they were like bread and butter to her. She thrived on them. Other reporters got jet lag-Sallie got her second wind. Her energy and good humor seemed inexhaustible, and as she rushed off to Greg's office she could already feel the adrenalin flowing through her system, making her heart pump faster and her whole body tingle with anticipation.

Greg looked up as she knocked on his open door and a smile softened his hard face when he saw her. "Did you run?" he asked dryly as he got up and crossed to her, closing the door behind her. "I just hung up the phone."

"Normal speed," said Sallie, laughing at herself with him. Her dark blue eyes sparkled with laughter and dimples peeped out of her cheeks. Greg looked down at her glowing little face and passed a hard arm about her to hug her briefly to him before releasing her.

"Do you have anything for me?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing for fight now," he replied, returning to his chair, and he laughed at the way her face fell.
"Cheer up, I've got good news for you anyway.
Have you ever heard of the Olivetti Foundation?" "No," said Sallie bluntly, then frowned. "Or have I? Who Olivetti?"
"It's a European charity organization," Greg began, and Sallie pounced in triumph.
"Oh-ho! I place it now. The world's blue bloods sponsor an enormous charity ball every summer, right?"
"Right," concurred Greg.
"Am I interested?" asked Sallie. "America doesn't have any blue blood, you know, only hot red blood."
"You're interested," Greg drawled. "The shindig is being held this year in Sakarya."
Sallie's face lit up. "Greg! Marina Delchamp?" "Yeah," he grinned. "How about that, eh? I'm practically giving you a vacation. Interview the dashing wife of the finance minister, attend the ritziest Party you've ever imagined, and all on the payroll. What more could you want?"
"Great!" she said enthusiastically. "When is it?"
"End of next month," he grunted, lighting a slim cigar. "That leaves plenty of time for you to buy any new gear if you don't have anything suitable for attending a charity ball."
"Smarty," she teased, wrinkling her pert little nose at him. "I'll bet you think I don't have anything in my closet except pants. For your infon-nation, I own quite a few dresses."
"Then why don't you ever wear them around here?" he demanded,
"Because, boss dear, you have a habit of sending me out to the wilds without a minute's notice, so I've learned to be prepared."
"And you're so afraid that you'll miss an assignment that you keep a packed bag under your desk," he returned, not at all fooled by her retort. "But I really do want you to dress up, Sallie. Sakarya could be an important ally, especially since the oil fields on the northern border are producing so heavily now. It helps that Marina Delchamp is an American and her husband is so influential with the King, but it never hurts to look your best."
"Umm, yes, the State Department will be relieved to know that I'm on their side," she said with perfect sincerity, keeping her face straight with an effort, and Greg shook his fist at her.

"Don't laugh," he warned her. "The boys in Washington are going all out with Sakarya. The King knows the power he has with those oil fields. Through Marina's influence with her husband Sakarya has become more pro-Western, but it's still an iffy thing. This charity ball will be the first time such an event has been held in an Arab country and it's going to be covered by all the news agencies. Television will be there, too, of course. I've even heard that Rhydon Baines will interview the King, but it hasn't been confirmed yet." Greg leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "There's a rumor going around that Baines is quitting television anyway.

Sallie's bright eyes dimmed a fraction. "Really?" she asked. "I never thought Rhy Baines would quit reporting."

Greg narrowed his gaze on her, his attention caught by her tone. "Do you know Rhydon Baines?" he asked incredulously. It didn't seem likely. Rbydon Baines was in a class by himself with his hard-hitting documentaries and interviews, and Sallie hadn't been a top-flight reporter for that long, but the girl did get around and she knew a lot of people.

"We grew up together," Sallie said casually. "Well, not really together, he's older than I am, but we come from the same town."

"Then I've got more good news for you," Greg said, leaning back in his chair and eyeing her sharply. "But keep it close. It's not supposed to be general knowledge yet. The magazine has been sold. We've got a new publisher."

Sallie's heart jolted. She wasn't sure if that was good news or not. A turnover at the top could mean a turnover at the lower levels, too, and she loved her job- World in Review was a first class publication; she would hate to see it ruined.

"Who's the new head knocker?" she questioned warily,

"Didn't you guess?" He looked surprised. "Rhydon Baines, of course. nat's why it's not definite about the interview with the King of Sakarya. I heard that the network offered him anchor man to get him to stay, but he turned them down."

Sallie's eyes became huge. "Rhy!" she repeated in a dazed tone. "My God, I never thought he'd come out of the field. Are you certain? Rby loved reporting more than-more than anything else," she finished, her heart almost stopping in alarm as she realized what she'd nearly said: Rhy loved reporting more than he loved me! What would Greg have said if she'd

blurted that out? She could see her job going down the drain anyway, without anticipating the event.
"The way I understand it," Greg expanded, puffing on his cigar and not noticing the slight hesitation in her speech, "he's signed with the network to do a certain number of documentaries over the next five years, but other than that he's coming out of the field. Maybe he's bored."
"Bored?" Sallie muttered, as if the idea was incomprehensible. "With reporting?"
"He's been on top of the heap for a long time," Greg replied. "And maybe he wants to get married, settle down. God knows he's old enough to have all of his wild oats sowed."
"He's thirty-six," Sallie said, struggling for control. "But the idea of Rhy settling down is ridiculous."
"Frankly, I'm glad he's coming in with us. I look forward to working with him. The man's a genius in his field. I thought you'd be happy with the news, but you look like someone's spoiled your Christmas."
"I-I'm stunned," she admitted. "I never thought I'd see the day. When will the news be made public?"
"Next week. I'll try to see that you're here when he comes in, if you like."
"No, thanks anyway," she refused, smiling ruefully at him. "I'll see him soon enough."
Returning to her desk several minutes later Sallie felt as if she'd been kicked in the gut and, rather than face Brom's questions, she detoured to the ladies' room and collapsed on the sofa. Rhy! Of all the news magazines, why did he have to choose World in Review? It would be almost impossible for her to find another job she liked nearly as well. It wasn't that Rhy would fire her, but she knew that she didn't want to work with him. Rhy was out of her life now and she had no room for him; she didn't want to be around him even on a professional basis.
What had Greg said? That perhaps Rhy wanted to marry and settle down? She almost laughed aloud. Rhy was already married-to her, and they'd been separated for seven years, during which time she had seen him only on television. Their marriage had broken up precisely because Rhy couldn't settle down.
Breathing deeply, Sallie stood up and smoothed her expression. Worrying about it now would interfere with her work and she was too much of a

professional to allow that. Tonight would be plenty of time to plan what she'd do.
That night as she dawdled over the grapefruit half that constituted her supper, her face brightened. The possibility was strong that Rhy wouldn't even recognize her; she'd changed a lot in seven years, lost weight, let her hair grow, even her name was different. And the publisher wouldn't exactly be rubbing shoulders with the reporters; she might go for weeks at a time without even glimpsing him. She was out of the country for long stretches, too.
Besides, would Rhy even care if he discovered that one of his reporters was his estranged wife? Seven years was a long time, and there had been no contact at all between them. The break had been final, absolute. Somehow neither one of them had gotten around to filing for a divorce, but there really hadn't been a need for one. They had gone their separate ways, built separate lives, and it was as if the year they'd been married never existed. The only result of that year was the drastic change in Sallie. Why couldn't she carry on with her job like always, even if Rhy did recognize her?
The more she thought about it, the more it seemed possible. She was good at her job and Rhy wasn't a man to let his private life interfere with work, as she knew better than anyone else. If she did her job and kept out of his way he would never let out any hint of their personal connection. After all, it was all over for Rhy, just as it was for her.
Usually Rhy never entered her thoughts unless she saw him on television, but now that his presence loomed so large in her life again she found the past crowding in on her. She tried to concentrate on other things and managed fairly well until she went to bed that night, when memories of that year swamped her.
Rhy. Sallie stared upward through the darkness at the ceiling, recalling his features and forming them into his face. She could do that easily, for she'd seen him on television any number of times these past seven years. At first she'd been left sick and shaking whenever she glimpsed his face and she would rush to turn the set off, but gradually that reaction had left her, turned into numbness. Her system had protected itself against such intense grief, allowing her to pick up the pieces of her shattered life and try to build again. The numbness had turned into determination and the determination into indifference as she learned to live without Rhy.

Looking back at the timid, insecure girl she had been, Sallie felt as if that girl had been a stranger, Someone to be pitied but not really worth wasting any grief over. The wonder wasn't that Rhy had left her, but rather that held ever been attracted to her in the first place. No matter how she considered it she just couldn't find any reason why a dynamic man like Rhy Baines would have wanted to marry a mousy little nonentity like Sarah Jerome. She hadn't been the gay, daredevil Sallie then, but Sarah. Quiet, plump, malleable Sarah.

Unless Rhy had married her just because she was malleable, someone he could control, push into the background when he wanted her out of the way, yet someone who would provide home and hearth when he did wander back home? if so, he'd been sadly disappointed, for she'd been malleable on every point except his job. Sarah wanted her husband at home every night, not flying off to report on wars and revolutions and drug smuggling, the very stuff that was the wine of life to Rhy Baines. She had sulked and nagged and wept, terrified that each time he left her would be the last, that he'd come home in a coffin. She wanted only to hold that strong man to her because she lived only through him.

In the end it had been too much for Rhy and he had walked out after only a year of marriage, and she hadn't heard from him since. She'd known that he wouldn't call her because his last words to her had been, "When you think you're woman enough for me, give me a call!"

Cynical, hurting words. Words that had clearly reYealed his contempt of her. Yet those words had changed her life.

Sighing at the sleep that evaded her, Sallie rolled onto her stomach and clutched the pillow into a ball against her chest. Perhaps tonight was a good time to dredge up all the memories and give them an airing. After all, she might shortly be seeing her long-absent husband.

They had been acquainted for years, as far back as Sallie could remember. Rhy's aunt had lived next door to the Jeromes, and as Rhy had been her favorite nephew it was nothing unusual for him to stop by at least once a week when he was growing up. The visits became fewer when he left town, but he never let too long go by without calling in on his aunt. By then he was beginning to make a name for himself as a reporter, and he had been hired by a television station in New York City. Occasionally he would walk across to the white picket fence that separated the two houses and talk to

Sallie's father, and if Sallie or her mother were about he would speak to them, sometimes lightly teasing Sallie about growing up so fast.
Shortly after she turned eighteen Sallie's parents were killed in a car crash and she lived alone in the small, tidy house she had inherited. It was paid for and the insurance money was enough to keep her going until she had recovered from her grief enough to begin looking for a job, so she let the days drift by, dreading the time when she would have to go out on her own, She became closer to Aunt Tessie, Rhy's aunt, for each lived alone. Aunt Tessie died in her sleep just two months after the death of Sallie's parents and Rhy returned home for the funeral.
He was twenty-eight, devilishly good-looking, with a dangerous quality about him that took her breath away. He was a man who lived on his nerve and his wits and thoroughly enjoyed it, and he'd just been snapped up by one of the major television networks, working as a foreign correspondent. He saw Sallie at his aunt's funeral and called the next day to ask her out. She had thought then that he must be bored, used to as he was to so much glamour and excitement, but she had known when she looked in the mirror that he wouldn't find any glamour or excitement with her. She was short, pretty enough in a quiet way, but a bit on the plump side. Her short mop of rich, dark hair .vas a good color, dark sable, but it lacked style and did nothing for her small face with its round cheeks. But Rhy Baines had asked her out and she went, her heart thumping half in fear and half in exhilaration at actually being alone with such a gorgeous, sexy man.
Rhy was a sophisticated adult; he probably meant nothing by the kiss he pressed lightly on her lips when he said good-night after that first date. He didn't even put his arms around her but merely tilted her face up with a finger under her chin. To Sallie, however, it was an explosion of her senses and she had no idea how to control it or mask her response to him. Simply, openly, she had melted against him, her soft mouth fused to his. Long minutes later, when he dragged his head back, he was breathing raggedly and, to her surprise, he asked her out again.
On their third date only his self-control preserved her innocence. Sallie was helpless against her attraction to him, having fallen head over heels in love, yet she was taken by surprise when he abruptly asked her to marry him. She had expected him to take her to bed, not to propose, and she humbly accepted. They were married the next week.

For six glorious days she was in ecstasy. He was a marvelous lover, patient with her inexperience, tender in his passion. He seemed amazed at the fiery passion he could arouse in his quiet little wife and for the first few days of their married life they devoted themselves to lovemaking. Then came that phone call, and before she knew it Rhy was throwing some clothing in his suitcase and rushing out the door with only a hasty kiss for her and a terse "I'll call you, baby," thrown at her over his shoulder.

He was gone for just over two weeks and she discovered by watching the evening news that he was in South America, where a particularly bloody revolution had slaughtered just about everyone in the previous government. Sallie spent the entire time he was gone crying herself to sleep at night and vomiting up her meals whenever she tried to eat. Just the thought of Rhy in danger made her cringe. She had just found him after the nightmare of losing her parents and she adored him. She wouldn't be able to bear it if anything happened to him.

He returned looking brown and fit and Sallie screamed her rage and fear at him. He retaliated and the quarrel that followed kept them from speaking for two days. It was sex that brought them together again, his surging appetite for her wildly responsive little body and her helpless yielding to him. That became the pattern of their marriage, with him gone for longer and longer periods even though she promptly became pregnant.

They had even quarreled over her pregnancy, with Rhy bitterly accusing her of becoming pregnant deliberately in an attempt to make him stay at home. She knew he didn't want children just now and that he had no intention of changing his job. Sallie hadn't even attempted to defend herself, for even worse than being accused of becoming pregnant as part of some scheme was the shameful knowledge that she had been too ignorant to take precautions. She had simply never thought of it and she knew that Rhy would be disgusted with her if he knew the truth.

When she was six months pregnant Rhy was wounded in a border skirmish between two developing African nations and he came home on a stretcher. She had thought that his close brush with death would bring him to his senses and for once she hadn't raged and nagged at him when he returned; she was too elated at the thought of having him with her permanently. Within a month, however, he was gone on another assignment even though he hadn't fully recovered from his wound, and he was still gone when she went into premature labor. The network brought him home, but by the time

he arrived she was already out of the hospital and their stillborn son had been buried.
He stayed with her until she was recovered physically from giving birth, but she was grief stricken at losing her baby and bilter with him because he had been absent during the crisis. When he left again the atmosphere between them was still cold and silent. Perhaps she should have realized then how indifferent Rhy had become to her, but it still came as a shock that he could so easily leave her forever, as he did on his next trip home. She had returned from buying groceries and found him sprawled on the sofa in the living room, his suitcase by the door where he had dropped it. His face was drawn with weariness, but his charcoal gray eyes had still held that characteristic bite as he looked her up and down, his manner one of waiting.
Unable to stem the words that jumped to her lips, Sallie began berating him for his inconsiderate behavior, his total lack of feeling for her after the trial she had undergone, the pain she had suffered. If he truly loved her he would get another job, one that would let him stay with her when she needed him so badly. In the middle of this, Rhy got to his feet and picked up his suitcase. As he walked out the door he had said sarcastically, "When you think you're woman enough for me, give me a call."
She hadn't seen him since.
At first she had been devastated. She had cried for days and leapt for the telephone every time it rang. Checks arrived from him every week for her support, but there were never any notes included. It was as if he would do his duty and support her, but had no interest in seeing her or talking to her. She wasn't woman enough for him,
At last, desperately, knowing only that her life wasn't worth living without Rhy, Sallie decided to make herself into a woman who was woman enough for Rhy Baines. With feverish determination she enrolled in the local college and set about gaining the knowledge that would transform her into a more sophisticated person. She signed up for language classes and crash courses in every craft she could think of, forcing herself out of her shyness. She got a job, a low-paying job as a clerk at the local newspaper office, but it was her first job and it was a start. With that paycheck every week, her very own paycheck, came something she could hardly recognize at first, but which became larger with each succeeding check: a sense of self-reliance. She found that she was doing well in her language classes, was, in fact, at the top of her class. She had a natural aptitude for words and languages and

she enrolled in a creative writing class. The time that this consumed forced her to give up her courses in crafts, but her interest in writing grew by leaps and bounds and she didn't miss puttering about with paints and straw.
Like a snowball, her forced activities grew in size and scope until she didn't have an idle hour in her day. Once she began making friends she discovered that it was easy, that she liked being with people. Slowly she began to emerge from the shell that had encased her for all of her life.
With all of her activities, Sallie was seldom still and often forgot meals. Pounds melted from her petite frame and she had to replace her entire wardrobe. She went from slightly plump to almost too thin, and as her face slimmed the exotic bone work of her skull was revealed. Without the roundness of her cheeks to balance them her dark blue eyes became huge in her face and underneath them her high, chiseled cheekbones gave her an almost Eastern quality. She had been attractive before, but now she became something more, a young woman who was striking and unusual. Never classically lovely, not Sallie, but now she stood out in a crowd. As her hair grew she simply pulled it back out of her way, not bothering to keep it cut, and the sable-colored mass began to stream down her back in a thick mane.
As she changed physically her entire manner changed. Her self-confidence soared; she became outgoing and found that she had a keen n-dnd and an appreciation of the absurdities of life that made people seek her out. She was enjoying herself, and thoughts of Rhy became fewer and fewer.
They had been separated for almost a year when she realized that as she had grown up, she had also grown away. The weekly check from Rhy was like a revelation, for as she stared at his bold, sprawling signature on the check she was stunned to find that the crippling pain was gone. Not only that, if Rhy came back to her now it would curtail the exciting new life she'd built for herself and she didn't want that. She had made herself over, made herself into a woman who was woman enough for Rhy Bainesand now she found that she didn't need him. She no longer needed to live through him; she had herself.
It was like being released from prison. The knowledge that she was self-sufficient and independent was like a heady wine, making her giddy. Now she understood why Rhy had put his job over her; like him, she had become hooked on excitement, and she wondered how he had lived with her as long as he had.

With a great sense of relief she mailed Rhy's check back to his address at the network, enclosing a note explaining that she had a job and was trying to support herself, therefore his support was no longer needed, though she did appreciate the thought. That was the last communication between them and that had been rather one-sided as Rhy had never replied to her note. The checks had simply ceased to arrive.

Then fate stepped into Sallie's life. A bridge she was driving across collapsed, and though she was far enough across that her car didn't slide into the river below, several behind her weren't so lucky. Without really thinking about what she was doing she helped in the rescue of the people who had survived the plunge into the river and obtained interviews with everyone involved. Afterwards she went to the newspaper office where she worked, typed up a report of the accident, including her own colorful eyewitness description, and gave it to the editor. It was printed, and she was given a new job as a reporter.

Now, at the age of twenty-six, she had completed her degree and was a reporter for one of the better weekly news magazines and her zest for new experiences had not waned. Now she fully understood why danger hadn't kept Rhy from his job, for she enjoyed

the danger, the heart-pounding excitement of taking off in a helicopter while ground troops sprayed automatic fire at the aircraft, the exhilaration of coming down in a plane with only one good engine, the satisfaction of a difficult job well-done. She had rented out her house and now lived in a neat two-room apartment in New York, a mere stopping place between assignments. She had no plants and no pets, for who would take care of them while she was halfway around the world? She had no romantic interests, for she was never in one place for long, but she had scores of friends and acquaintances.

No, she reflected sleepily as she finally began to doze off, she didn't want Rhy back in her life now. He would only interfere with the things she enjoyed. But, thinking about it, she didn't think that he would care what she did if by some chance he did recognize her, and that wasn't likely. After all, he hadn't thought about her in seven years. Why should he start now?

Chapter Two

Sallie stood before her mirror and studied the photograph she held in her hand of herself at the age of eighteen. Then she looked back at her reflection and studied the differences. The most obvious change was that now she had cheekbones instead of cheeks. The hair, too, of course, grown from a short mop that barely covered her ears into the thick braid that hung to her waist. The only thing that hadn't changed was her eyes, large, dark blue eyes, However, if she wore dark glasses whenever she thought she might run into Rhy she could continue indefinitely to keep her identity from him.

She had thought about it from all angles and decided not to rely on Rhy's good nature, which was a chancy thing at best. Rhy was hair-triggered, volatile, never predictable. The best thing to do was to avoid him whenever possible and try to keep Greg from introducing her to her own husband as an old friend from his hometown!

Rhy was supposed to arrive that morning; the news had been broken yesterday that the magazine had been sold to Rhydon Baines, who had resigned as a network foreign correspondent and would hereafter devote his time and talents to the publishing of news, except for occasional documentary specials. The entire building had hummed with the news. Veteran reporters had suddenly become uneasy, checking their credits, reviewing their work and comparing it to Rhy's direct, slashing style of reporting. And if Sallie had heard one comment from an excited woman about how handsome Rhydon Baines was she had heard a hundred. Even women who were happily married were thrilled to be working with Rhy. He was more than a top reporter-he was a celebrity.

Sallie was already bored with the entire business. First thing this morning she was going to ask Greg for an assignment, anything to get away until things calmed down. She'd already been three weeks between assignments so no one would think it odd that she was becoming restless. It was more than a month until the charity ball in Sakarya and she didn't think she'd be able to sit still that long.

Suddenly noticing the time, she cast a last quick glance over her slender form, neat and capable in dark blue slacks and a blue silk shirt. Her hair was pulled back and braided into one long fat rope and, as the final touch, she had added a pair of dark glasses. She could tell anyone who asked that she had a headache and the light hurt her eyes; the glasses weren't so dark that she couldn't work with them on if necessary.

Then she had to rush, and as the elevator in her apartment building was notoriously slow in arriving she used the stairs, running down them two at a time and reaching her bus stop just as the bus was closing its doors. She yelled and pounded on the doors and they slid open and the driver grinned at her. "Wondered where you were," he said jokingly. In actual fact, she was a regular bus door pounder.

She made it to the office with a minute to spare and collapsed into her chair, wondering how she had made it across the street without being hit at least six times. The blood was racing through her veins and she grinned. It was time for some action when her usual method of getting to work was beginning to seem exciting!

"Hi," Brom greeted her. "Ready to meet the man?"

"I'm ready to do some traveling," she retorted. "I've been here too long. I'm growing cobwebs. I think I'll beard Greg in his den and see if I can't get some action. "

"You're nuts," Brom informed her bluntly. "Greg's quick today. You'd be better off to wait until tomorrow."

"I'll take my chances," Sallie said blithely. "Don't you always? Hey, why the glasses? Are you trying to hide a black eye?" Brorn pounced, his eyes lighting up at the possibility that Sallie had gotten involved in a brawl somewhere.

"Nope." To convince him she raised the glasses to let him see for himself that her eyes were normal, then set them back in place on her nose. "I've got a headache and the light is bothering me."

"Do you have migraines?" Brom asked in concern. "My sister has 'em and the light always bothers her."

"I don't think it's a migraine," she hedged. "It's probably just a nervous reaction to sitting still for so long."

Brom laughed, as she had meant him to, and she made her escape to talk to Greg before Rhy arrived and all chance was lost.

As she neared Greg's open door she heard him on the phone, his voice curt and impatient, and Sallie's eyebrows rose as she listened. Greg was by nature an impatient man, one of the doers of the world, but he wasn't usually unreasonable but his attitude now didn't strike her as being reasonable. Brom was fight, Greg was "quicker" than usual, edgy and irascible, and she had no doubt that it was all due to Rhy's impending arrival.

When she heard the phone crash down into the cradle she poked her head around the door and inquired, "Would a cup of coffee help?"
Greg's dark head jerked up at the sound of her voice and his mouth moved into a wry grimace. "I'm swimming in coffee now," he grunted in reply. "Hell's bells, I didn't know there were so many idiots working in this building. I swear if one more fool calls me--”
"Everyone's nervous," she soothed.
"You're not," he pointed out. "Why the glasses? Are you so famous now that you've got to travel incognito?"
"There's a reason for the glasses," Sallie retaliated. "But because you're being nasty I won't tell YOU."
"Suit yourself," he growled. "Get out of my office."
"I need an assignment," she pointed out. "I'm at the snapping stage myself."
"I thought you wanted to be here to meet your old hometown pal," Greg shot back. "Anyway, I don't have anything to give you right now."
"Come on," she pleaded. "You've got to have a little something. No riots, no natural disasters, no political kidnappings? There's bound to be a story for me somewhere in the world!"
"Maybe tomorrow," he replied. "Don't be in such a hurry. For God's sake, Sal, I may need you around in case the Man gets testy. An old friend is nice to have around--
"To throw to the lion?" she interrupted dryly. Abruptly Greg grinned. "Don't worry, doll, he won't tear you to pieces, only maul you around a bit."
"Greg, you're not listening to me," she groaned. "I've been stagnating here for three weeks. I need to earn my keep."
"You don't have any sense," he observed.
"You don't have any sense of mercy," she retorted, "Greg, please."
"What's the damned hurry?" he suddenly yelled. "Dammit, Sal, I've got a new publisher coming in and he's not exactly a babe in the woods. I don't expect to have any fun today, so get off my back, will you? Besides, he may ask to see you, and I sure as hell want you here if he does."
Sallie collapsed into a chair, groaning aloud as she realized that she would have to tell Greg the truth. That was the only way he would give her an assignment, and perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing if Greg knew. At least then he wouldn't keep trying to throw her at Rhy. And realistically Greg had a right to know the circumstances and be aware of the complications that could arise from her very presence.

Gently she said, "Greg, I think you should know that Rhy might not be so glad to see me."
He was instantly alert. "Why not? I thought you were friends."
She sighed. "I can't say if we're friends or not. I haven't seen him in seven years, except on television. And there's something else. I wasn't going to tell you, but you'll need to know. Do you know that I'm married, but that I've been separated from my husband for years?"
Greg nodded, a sudden stillness coming over his features. "Yes, I know, but you've never said who your husband is. You go by your maiden name, don't you?"
"Yes, I wanted to do everything completely on my own, not capitalize on his name. He's very well-known. As a matter of fact, my husband is... umm ... Rhydon Baines."
Greg swallowed audibly, his eyes growing round. He gulped again. Sallie didn't lie, he knew, she was brutally honest, but-Rhydon Baines? That tough, hard-as-nails man and this fragile little fairy with her laughing eyes? He said roughly, "My God, Sallie, the man's old enough to be your father!"
Sallie burst into a peal of laughter. "He is not! He's only ten years older than I am. I'm twenty-six, not eighteen. But I wanted you to know why I want an assignment. The further away I am from Rhy, the better it is. We've been separated for seven years but the fact remains that Rhy is still my husband and personal relationships can get sticky, can't they?"
Greg stared at her in disbelief, yet he believed her. He just couldn't take it in. Sallie? Little Sallie Jerome and that big, hard man? She looked like a kid, dressed all in blue and with that fat braid hanging to her waist. He said softly, "I'll be damned. What happened?" She shrugged. "He got bored with me."
"Bored with you?" chided Greg. "C'mon, doll!" She laughed again. "I'm nothing like I was then. I was such a cowardly little snit, no wonder Rhy walked out on me. I couldn't stand the separations caused by his job. I made myself sick with worry and nagged him to death, and in the end he walked out. I can't say I blame him. The wonder is that he lasted as long as he did."
Greg shook his head. It was impossible to imagine Sallie as a timid person; he sometimes thought that she hadn't a nerve in her body. She was willing to take on anything, and the more dangerous it was the more she enjoyed it. It wasn't an act, either. Her eyes would sparkle and the color glow in her cheeks whenever the going got difficult.

"Let me get this straight," he muttered. "He doesn't know that you work here?"
"I wouldn't think so," she replied cheerfully. "We haven't been in touch in six years."
"But you're still married. Surely he sends you support checks-" He stopped at the outraged look on her face, and sighed. "Sorry. You refused support, right?"
"After I could support myself, yes. When Rhy left I had to fend for myself and somewhere along the way I acquired a backbone. I like doing for myself."
"You've never asked for a divorce?"
"Well ... no," she admitted, her nose wrinkling in puzzlement. "I've never wanted to remarry and I don't suppose he's ever wanted to, either, so we just never got around to a divorce. He probably finds it convenient, having a legal wife who's never around. No ties, but it keeps him safe from other women."
"Would it bother you? Seeing him again?" Greg asked roughly, more disturbed than he cared to admit by the idea of Sallie being married to Rhydon Baines.
"Seeing Rhy? No," she said honestly. "I got over him a long time ago. I had to, to survive. Sometimes it doesn't even seem real, that I was-that I ammarried to him."
"Will it bother him, seeing you again?" persisted Greg.
"Certainly not emotionally. It has to be over for him, too. After all, he was the one who walked. But Rhy does have a temper, you know, and he might not like the idea of his wife working for him, even under a different name. And he might not want me around to cramp his style. I have no intention of interfering in his private life, but he doesn't know that. So you see, it would be a good idea to send me on assignment and keep me away from him, at least at first. I don't want to lose my job." She topped all of this off with a sunny smile and Greg shook his head.
"All right," he muttered. "I'll find something for you. But if he ever notices that you're his wife I know nothing about it."
"About what?" she asked, playing dumb, and he wasn't able to stifle a chuckle.
Sallie knew better than to push her luck with Greg, so she left him with a quick, heartfelt "Thanks!" and went back to her desk. Brom was gone and

she was relatively alone, though only a partition separated their little cubicle from the others, and the clatter of typewriters and hum of voices were as plain as if there was nothing between her and the rest of the office.
By the time Brom returned with a steaming cup of coffee she felt more relaxed, her anxiety eased by Greg's promise to help keep her out of Rhy's sight. She finished the article she was writing and felt pleased with the end product; she liked putting words together to form ideas and felt an almost sensuous satisfaction when a sentence turned out as she had planned.
At ten o'clock the buzz of the office ceased momentarily, then resumed at a lower hum and without raising her eyes Sallie knew that Rhy had entered. Cautiously she turned her head away and pretended to search for something in the drawer of her desk. After a moment the buzz resumed its high pitch, which meant that Rhy had left after taking a quick look over the office.
"Oh, God!" a female voice cried over the others. "Just think, a hunk like that is single!"
Sallie grinned a little, recognizing the voice as that of Lindsey Wallis, An exuberant office sexpot with more mouth than brains. Still, there was no doubting that Lindsey was serious in her appreciation of Rhy's dynamic good looks. Sallie knew as well as anyone the effect her husband could have on a woman.
Fifteen minutes later her phone rang and she jumped on it, an action that raised Brom's eyebrows. "Get the hell out of the building," Greg muttered in her ear. "He's on his way to meet everyone. Go home. I'll try to get you out of town tonight."
"Thanks," she said and hung up. Standing, she collected her purse and said, "See ya," to Brom.
"Flying off, little birdie?" he asked, as he always did.
"It looks that way. Greg said to pack." With a wave she left, not wanting to linger, since Rhy was on his way down.
She stepped into the corridor and her heart nearly failed her when the elevator doors slid open and Rhy stepped out, flanked by three men she didn't know and the previous publisher, Mr. Owen. Rather than walk straight toward them she turned and went to the stairs, being careful to keep her eyes lowered and her head slightly averted, but she was still aware that Rhy had stopped and was looking after her. Her pulse thudded in her veins as she darted down the stairs. What a close call!

Waiting at the apartment for Greg to call nearly drove her mad with impatience. She paced the floor for a while; then excess energy drove her to clean the refrigerator out and rearrange her cabinets. That didn't take much time as she hadn't accumulated a lot of either food or utensils. At last she hit on the perfect way to pass the time: she packed her bags. She loved packing, going through her essentials and putting them in their proper place; she had her notebooks and assorted pens and pencils, a tape recorder, a dog-eared dictionary, several paperbacks, a pencil sharpener, a pocket calculator, replacement batteries and a battered flashlight, all of which traveled with her wherever she went.

She had just finished arranging them neatly when the phone rang and she answered it to hear Greg's terse voice giving her the welcome news that he had an assignment for her.

"It's the best I could do, and at least it'll get you out of town," he grunted. "You're on a flight to D.C., in the morning. A senator's wife is making big noises about a general leaking classified information at a drunken party. "

"Sounds pretty," Sallie commented.

"I'm sending Chris Meaker with you," Greg continued. "Talk with the senator's wife. You won't be able to even get close to the general. Chris will have a brief on it for you. Meet him at JFK at five-thirty."

Now that she knew her destination Sallie was able to complete her packing. She chose conservative dresses and a tailored pants suit, not her favorite clothes, but she felt that the restrained clothing would help her with the interview, making the senator's wife more trusting.

As usual, she could hardly sleep that night. She was always restless the night before she left on assignment if Greg gave her any warning of it. She preferred having to rush straight from the office to the airport, without having time to think, without wondering if everything would work out, without wondering what would happen if Rhy ever recognized her....

Chris Meaker, the photographer, was waiting for her at the airport the next morning and as she approached him with a grin and a wave he got to his feet, his tall, lanky body unfolding slowly. He gave her a sleepy smile in return and bent down to kiss her on the forehead. "Hi, doll," he said, his quiet, lazily deep voice making her grin grow wider. She liked Chris. Nothing ever upset him; nothing ever hurried him. He was as calm and deep as a sheltered lagoon. He was even peaceful to look at, with his thick sandy hair and dark brown eyes, his brow broad and serene, his mouth firm

without being stubborn. And most important of all, he never made a pass at her. He treated her affectionately, like a little sister, and he was protective in his quiet way, but he never made any suggestive statements to her or in any way acted as if he was attracted to her. That was a relief, because Sallie just didn't have the time for romantic ties.

Now he looked her up and down and his level brows rose. "Ye gods, a dress," he said, mild surprise evident in his voice, which meant he was astonished. "What's the occasion?"

Sallie had to grin again. "No occasion, just politics," she assured him. "Did Greg send that envelope he promised me?"

"Got it," he replied. "Have you already checked your luggage?"

"Yes," she nodded. Just then their flight was called over the loudspeaker and they walked over to the boarding area and through the metal detector, then on to the waiting jet.

On the flight to the capital Sallie carefully read the brief Greg had prepared. Considering how little time he'd had, he had included a lot of detail and she became absorbed in the possibilities. This wasn't the type of reporting she usually did but Greg had given her what he had, and she'd return the favor by doing her best.

When they reached Washington and checked into their hotel it looked as if doing her best wouldn't be good enough. While Chris lounged in a chair and leafed through a magazine Sallie called the senator's wife to confirm the appointment Greg had made for an interview that afternoon. She was told that Mrs. Bailey was sorry but she was unable to see any reporters that day. It was a polite, final brush-off, and it made her angry. She had no intention of failing to get the story Greg had sent her after.

It took an hour of phone calls to a chain of contacts but when the hour was up she had interviewed, over the phone, the hostess of the "drunken party" where the general had supposedly revealed the classified material. Everything was vehemently denied, except for the presence of both the general and Mrs. Bailey on the night in question, but when the indignant hostess muttered in passing that "Hell hath no fury" Sallie began to get the idea that Mrs. Bailey was a woman scorned.

It was a possibility. The general was a trim, distinguished man with metallic gray hair and a goodhumored twinkle in his eyes. After talking it over with Chris, who agreed with her theory, they decided to pursue that angle.

Forty-eight hours later, tired but satisfied, they caught a plane back to New York. Though her theory hadn't been verified by either of the two principals, the general or Mrs. Bailey, she was content that she knew the reason behind Mrs. Bailey's denouncement of the general. Once they had been checking they had found several restaurants in the capital area where the general had been seen dining with an attractive woman of Mrs. Bailey's general description. Senator Bailey had suddenly canceled a trip overseas to stay with his wife. The general's wife, who had shed twenty pounds and turned her graying hair into a flattering soft blond, was suddenly more in evidence at her husband's side. There was also only Mrs. Bailey's accusation against the general; no one else had added their word to hers and, moreover, the general had not been relieved of his post despite the furor in the press.

Sallie had telephoned all of that in to Greg the night before and he had agreed with her. ne article would be placed in that week's issue, and she had barely gotten it in under the deadline.

He was cryptic on the subject of Rhy, commenting only that the man was a mover, and by that she deduced that changes were being made. She would have preferred going on another assignment immediately, but Greg had nothing available and there were always expense sheets to complete and a report to type out. Thankfully, the weekend had arrived and she had a bit more time before she had to go in to the office.

On Monday morning, she reported to work with butterflies in her stomach, but to her relief and surprise the entire day went by without so much as a glimpse of her husband, though the floor buzzed with speculation on the changes he was making in the format of the magazine. She avoided the upper floors, no longer going up to see Greg when an idea came to her; she called him instead, and Brom commented that he'd never seen her stay in one place for so long before.

Tuesday was the same, except that that was the day the magazine hit the newsstands and Greg called to offer his congratulations. "I've just received a call from Rhy," he said gruffly, having picked up the shortened version of Rhy's name from her. "Senator Bailey called him at home this morning."

"Am I being sued?" Sallie questioned.

"No. The senator explained the entire situation and his wife is giving us a retraction of her previous statement concerning the general. You were right on target, doll."

"I thought I was," she agreed cheerily. "Do you have anything else I can do?"
"Just watch your back, doll. Several editors I know are mad as the devil that you're the only one who caught on to what was under everyone's noses."
She laughed and hung up, but the knowledge that her instincts had been right gave her a lift for the rest of the day. Chris came by at lunch and asked if she wanted to share a sandwich with him and she accepted. There was a small cafeteria in the building offering nothing more sophisticated than soup, sandwiches, coffee and cold drinks for those who couldn't get out for lunch, but the meager fare was more than enough for her. She and Chris shared a postage-stamp table and talked shop over cups of strong black coffee.
Just as they were finishing there was a stir among the other people eating lunch and the back of Sallie's neck prickled in warning. "It's the boss," Chris informed her casually. "With his girlfriend.-
Sallie sternly resisted the urge to turn around, but out of the comer of her eye she watched the two figures move down the cafeteria line selecting their lunch. "I wonder what they're doing here," she murmured.
"Testing the food, at a guess," Chris replied, turning his head to stare openly at the woman by Rhy's side. "He's checked into everything else. I don't see why he should overlook the food. She looks familiar, Sal. Do you know her?"
Sallie narrowed her eyes in concentration, examining the woman with relief, because that kept her from staring at Rhy. "You're right, she is familiar. Isn't she Coral Williams, the model?" She was almost certain of the woman's identity, that classic golden perfection could belong to no one else.
"So it is," Chris grunted.
Rhy turned then, balancing his tray as he moved to a table, and Sallie hastily lowered her eyes, but not before her heart gave a breath-stopping lunge at his appearance. He hadn't changed. He was still lithe and muscular, and his hair was still the same midnight black, his strong-boned face still hard and sardonic, tanned from long exposure to the sun. By contrast the woman at his side was a graceful butterfly, his exact opposite in coloring.
"Let's go," she said in a low tone to Chris, sliding out of her chair. She sensed Rhy's head turning in her direction and she carefully turned her back to him without any show of hurry. Chris followed her out of the cafeteria, but she was burningly conscious of Rhy's gaze on her as she left. That was

twice he had stared at her. Did he recognize her? Was her walk familiar to him? Was it her hair? That long braid was distinctive enough in itself, but she didn't want to have her hair cut because he would certainly recognize her then.

She was still shaken when she returned to her desk, due in large part to her reaction to Rhy's appearance. No other man had ever attracted her the way he did and she found to her dismay that the situation was still the same. Rhy had a raw virility, an aura of barely leashed power that set her heart to pounding and forcibly reminded her of the nights she had once spent in his arms. She might be free of him emotionally, but the old physical ties seemed to be as strong as ever and she felt vulnerable.

Out of habit she picked up the phone and called Greg, but he was out to lunch and she dropped the receiver back into the cradle with a ragged sigh. She couldn't just sit there; her nature demanded that she take some sort of action. At last she scribbled a note to Brom asking him to notify Greg that she'd taken ill with a headache and was going home for the rest of the day. Greg would see through the excuse, but Brom, wouldn't.

She hated to run away from anything, but she knew that she needed to think about her reaction to Rhy, and once she was home she did exactly that. Was it only because he was her husband, because she knew him as she knew no other man? He was her only lover; she'd never even been attracted to another man as she had been to Rhy. Old habits? She hoped that was it, and when she realized that she hadn't felt the least flicker of jealousy over Coral Williams she was relieved, because that proved she was over Rhy. All she felt for him was the basic urge between a man and a woman who found each other sexually alluring, nothing more. Certainly she was old enough to control those feelings, as the past seven years had proved to her.

The phone rang late that afternoon and when she answered it Greg said curtly, "What happened?"

"Rhy and Coral Williams came into the cafeteria at lunch while Chris and I were there," she explained without hesitation. "I don't think Rhy recognized me, but he kept staring. That's the second time he's stared at me like that, so I thought I'd better clear out." That wasn't exactly the reason, but it was a good excuse and she used it. Why tell Greg that seeing Rhy had upset her?

"You thought right," Greg said, sighing. "He was in my office not long after Brorn brought your note up. He wanted to meet you, since you're the only

reporter he hasn't met personally. Then he asked me to describe you, and he got a funny look on his face when I did."
"Oh, no," she groaned. "He's latched on to something-he would!" she said in swift disgust. "He's as fast as a snake. Did he ask where I'm from?"
"Be prepared, doll. He didn't ask that, but he got your phone number."
"Holy cow," she groaned again. "Thanks for doing what you could, Greg. If Rhy does find out I'll cover our tracks."
Greg hung up and she began pacing the floor, waiting for the phone to ring again. What should she say? Should she try to disguise her voice? But afternoon faded into evening and still the expected call didn't come, so at last she bathed and went to bed. But she slept restlessly, falling into a deep sleep only in the early hours of the morning.
It was the phone that woke her in the morning, the insistent ringing intruding slowly into her consciousness. At first she thought it was the alarm clock and she tried to shut it off but the ringing continued. When she realized it was the phone she grabbed it and in her haste dropped it to the floor. She hauled it UP by the cord and at last got the receiver to her ear.
"Hello," she muttered sleepily, her voice sounding thick.
"Is this Miss Jerome?" a deep, husky voice asked. There was a husky quality to that voice that tingled her nerves, but she was too sleepy to pick it up.
"Yes, this is she," she acknowledged, stifling a yawn. "Who is this?"
"I'm Rhydon Baines," the voice said and Sallie's eyes popped open. "Did I wake you?"
"Yes, you did," she said baldly, unable to think of any polite assurance to give him, and a deep chuckle made her shiver with reaction. "Is anything wrong, Mr. Baines?"
"No, I just wanted to congratulate you on the job you did in Washington. That was a good piece of reporting. Sometime when you're free come up to my office for a talk. I think you're the only reporter on my staff I haven't met personally and you're one of my best."
“-I-I will," she stammered. "Thank you, Mr. Baines."
"Rhy," he corrected. "I prefer to be on first-name basis with the staff. And by the way, I apologize for waking you up, but it's time you were up anyway if you're going to be at work on time." With another chuckle he said goodbye and hung up and Sallie gasped as she looked at the clock. She was

going to be late if she didn't hurry, but Rhy would wait a long time if he was waiting for her to put in an appearance in his office!

Chapter Three

The morning went by without anything happening, though she kept a weather eye out for any sign of Rhy. She had to trust Greg to warn her if she should disappear into the ladies' room, but her phone remained silent. Brom was sent out on an assigm-nent to L.A. and their little cubicle was silent after he left; her nerves began to fray under the strain. She ate an apple at her desk for lunch, not daring to risk going to the cafeteria or even venturing outside the building on the chance she might run into Rhy. She was beginning to feel like a prisoner!

Shortly after lunch Greg called and said, "Come up here, Sal. I don't want to talk over the phone." Her heart leapt into her throat and she rushed up the stairs to the next floor. Greg's door was open, as usual, and she went in. Greg looked up from the papers he was reading and his expression was grim. "Rhy's secretary just called. He wants your file. I had to send it up. I had no choice. He hasn't returned from lunch yet, so you've got a few minutes of grace. I just thought I'd warn you."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thanks for trying," she said, and managed a whimsical little smile. "It was a dumb idea, anyway, trying to hide from him. He probably won't care one way or the other."

Greg smiled in return, but his eyes were narrowed with worry as she left his office.

Deep in thought and facing the fact that Rhy would know her identity very shortly, she punched the elevator button instead of taking the stairs. She took a deep breath and braced herself.

Abruptly she realized that she was waiting for the elevator and the lights showed that it was coming up. Muttering to herself for her stupidity she turned on her heel and headed for the stairs, but just as she reached them the elevator doors slid open and a voice called, "Sallie Jerome! Wait a minute!" Her head jerked around and she stared at Rhy for several seconds, frozen in her tracks with horror, then she pulled the heavy door open and took a step, intending to run before she realized the futility of it. Rhy had taken a good look at her and the arrested expression on his face told her that she'd been

recognized. She couldn't avoid it any longer; he now knew who she was and he wasn't a man to let the matter drop. She released the door and swung back to face him, her delicate jaw tilting upward pugnaciously. "You wanted to see me?" she challenged.
He moved from his stance in front of the elevator and strode the few short yards that separated them. He looked taut, his skin pulled over his cheekbones, his mouth compressed into a thin line. "Sarah," he whispered savagely, his gray eyes leaping furiously.
"Sallie," she corrected, flipping her braid over her shoulder. "I'm called Sallie now."
His hand shot out and he gripped her wrist, his long fingers wrapping about the fragile bones as if to measure them. "You're not only called Sallie instead of Sarah, you're Jerome again instead of Baines," he hissed, and she shivered with alarm. She knew Rhy's voice in all of his moods, the well-remembered husky quality made it distinctive. It was a voice that could sound whispery and menacing when he was angry, rasping when he was hammering out a point on television, or low and incredibly seductive when he was making love. A wild little frisson ran along her nerves at the tone she could detect in his voice now. Rhy was in a dangerous temper and it paid to be wary of him when he was angry.
"I think you'd better come with me," he murmured, sliding his fingers from her wrist to her elbow and moving her to the elevator, "We've got a lot to say and I don't want to say it in the hallway."
He retained his light but firm hold on her as they waited for the elevator to return to the floor and a copyboy stared at them as he walked down the hall to disappear into one of the offices. "Let go of me," she whispered.
"No way, Mrs. Baines," he refused in a soft tone. The bell sounded as the elevator reached their floor and the doors slid open. He moved forward with her into the box and the doors slid closed, leaving her totally alone with him in that small space. His forefinger jabbed the number for the administrative floor and the elevator lurched into movement.
Sallie summoned all of her poise and gave him a polite little smile, deten-nined to hide the sudden coiling of fear in her stomach. I 'What do we have to talk about? It's been seven years, after all."
He smiled, too, but his smile wasn't polite; the savagery of it sent shivers down her spine. "Then let's talk about old times," he said between his teeth.
"Can't it wait?"

"No," he said softly. "Now. I've got a lot of questions and I want answers to them."
"I've got work to do-"
"Just shut up," he warned, and she did.
The elevator lurched to a halt and her stomach lurched with it. Rhy's manner made her uneasy and she didn't want to be alone with him, much less go through the inquisition she knew she was in for.
He ushered her out of the elevator and down the corridor to his private office. His secretary looked up and smiled when she saw them, but the words she started to say were halted when Rhy hurled "No interruptions" over his shoulder as he followed Sallie into his office and closed the door firmly behind them.
Sallie stood only a few feet away from him and blinked, trying to adjust herself to the reality of his presence. She had been forced to accept his absence and now she just could not accept his presence. He was a mirage, a figment of her imagination, far too virile and forceful to be real.
But he stood by the door, watching her with those unnerving gray eyes, and he was very real and solid. Rather than meet those eyes she let her gaze drift over his body and she noted automatically the way his dark brown suit fit him impeccably, the trousers molding themselves to the muscled length of his legs. Her pulse began to beat a bit faster and she caught her lower lip with her teeth.
"Rhy..." Her voice quavered and she cleared her throat, then began again. "Rhy, why are you acting like this?"
"What do you mean?" he asked, his eyes glinting dangerously. "You're my wife and I want to know what's going on here. You've obviously been avoiding me. Should I have ignored your presence, as you seem prepared to do with mine? Forgive me if I was slow on the uptake, baby, but I was surprised to see you and you caught me off-balance. I didn't think to pretend that I didn't know you."
She caught her breath in relief. "Oh, that," she said, sighing, weak now that she knew what he wanted. "Yes, I was avoiding you. I didn't know how you'd take the idea of my working for you and I didn't want to risk losing my job."
"Have you told anyone that we're married?" he barked.
She shook her head. "Everyone knows me as Sallie Jerome. I went back to my maiden name because I didn't want to use the influence of your name."

"That's big of you, Mrs. Baines," he murmured sarcastically, moving to his desk. "Sit down, I won't bite."
She took a chair, more than ready now to answer his questions. If he had been going to fire her he would already have done so; her job was safe and she relaxed visibly.
Rhy didn't sit down but instead leaned against his desk, crossed his long legs at the ankle and folded his arms across his chest. He was silent while his glittering gray eyes looked her over thoroughly from head to foot and Sallie began to tense again. She didn't know why, but he made her feel threatened even when he wasn't moving. Then his silence irritated her and she said tartly, "What did you want to talk about?"
"You've changed, Sarah-Sallie," he corrected himself. "It's a drastic change, and I don't mean just your name. You've grown a mane of hair and you've lost so much weight a good wind would blow you away. And most of all, you're doing adamned good job at something I would've sworn you'd never touch. How did you get to be a reporter?"
"Oh, that was just luck," she said cheerfully. "I was driving on a bridge when it collapsed and I wrote it up and turned it in to the editor of the newspaper and he changed my job from clerk to reporter."
"You make it sound almost logical for you to be
one of the top correspondents for a first-class news magazine," he said dryly. "I gather you like your job?"
"Ob, yes!" she said, ieaning forward eagerly. Her big eyes sparkled and she tripped over her words in her enthusiasm, "I love it! I never could understand why you were always so anxious to get back to work, but then I was bitten by the same bug. It gets in your blood, hooks you, doesn't it? I suppose I've become an excitement junkie, I only feel half-alive when I'm stuck here in the office."
"Your eyes haven't changed," he muttered almost to himself, his gaze locked on her face. "They're still as dark blue as the sea and so big and deep a man could drown in them. Why did you change your name?" he demanded abruptly.
"I told you, I didn't want to trade on your name," she explained patiently. "I wanted to stand on my own feet for a change and I found that I liked it. As for Sallie, somehow Sarah was changed to Saflie at college and I've been Sallie ever since then."
"College?" he asked, his eyes sharpening.

"Yes, Ifinally got my degree," she said, laughing a little. "After you left I took a lot of courses-languages and creative writing-but when I began reporting it took up so much time that I had to get my degree in fits and spurts."
"Did you go on a diet, too? You've changed everything else in your life, why not get a new figure?" He sounded almost resentful and she stared at him in bewilderment. Surely he didn't mind that she'd lost a little weight? It hadn't even been that much.
"No, I didn't go on a diet, losing weight just happened," she said, her tone reflecting her lack of understanding of the question. "I became so busy that I didn't have time to eat and that still holds true."
"Why? Why did you change yourself so drastically?"
A sudden tingle told her that this was not a casual conversation, a catching-up on old times, but that Rhy had deliberately brought her around to this question. For what reason she didn't know, but she didn't mind telling him the truth. After all, the laugh was on her. She raised her eyes to his. "When you left, Rhy, you told me to call you when I thought I was woman enough for you. I nearly died. I wanted to die. Then I decided to fight for you, to make myself into a woman you'd want, so I took a lot of courses and learned how to do a lot of things, and along the way I also learned how to do without you. End of story."
"Not quite," he said sardonically. "Your rascally husband has reentered and another chapter has started, and to make the plot really interesting he's now your boss. Let's see," he mused, "is there a company policy against employing relatives?"
"If there is," she returned clearly, "I was here first."
"But I'm the boss," he reminded her, a wolfish grin moving across his face. "Don't worry about it, baby. I don't intend to fire you. You're too good a reporter for me to let you go to someone else." He got to his feet and so did she, but he said, "Sit down, I'm not finished." Obediently she resumed her seat and he walked around to take his own chair, leaning back in it as he picked up a file.
Sallie recognized the file as belonging to personnel and she realized that it held her own records. But she had no reason to keep Rhy from reading it, so she watched as he leafed through it.
"I'm curious about your application," he said. "You said no one knows we're married, but what did you put down as your marital status?" he questioned.

"Ah, here it is. You've been very honest. You adn-tted to being married. But your husband's name is, SEPARATED-CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION.
"I told you no one knew," she replied.
He looked over the application and his brows abruptly snapped together. "Next of kin-none?" he demanded harshly. "What if you'd been hurt, even killed? That does happen, you know! How could I have been notified?, I
"I didn't think you'd care," she defended herself. "Actually, I didn't think about it at all, but I can see where you'd want to know. YOU might want to get married again someday. I'm sorry, that was thoughtless of me.-
A vein began throbbing in his temple and she watched it in fascination. It meant that he was furious, as she remembered all too well, but she couldn't think why he should be so angry. After all, she hadn't been killed, so she didn't see anything to worry about.
He closed the file and tossed it back onto his desk, his lips pressed into a grim line. "Get married again!" he suddenly shouted. "Why would I be fool enough to do that? Once was enough!"
"It certainly was," she agreed with heartfelt sincerity.
His eyes narrowed and he seemed to force his temper down. "You don't think you'd like to remarry?" he asked silkily.
"A husband would interfere with my job," she said, and shook her head. "No, I'd rather live by myself "
"You don't have any ... er ... close friends who object when you take off for days, even weeks, at a time?" he probed.
"I have a lot of friends, yes, but they're mostly in the business themselves so they understand if I go on assignment," she answered calmly and ignored the inference he made. It was none of his business if she had any lovers or not, and suddenly she felt it was important for her pride that he not know he was the only man who had ever made love to her. After all, he certainly hadn't lived the life of a monk, as witness the gorgeous Coral Williams!
"I've read a lot of your articles," he commented, switching to a different tack. "You've been in some tight places-Lebanon, Africa, South America. Don't your friends mind that you could get hurt?"
"Like I said, they're in the business themselves. Any of us could come back dead," she returned dryly. "It was the same with you, but you kept going. Why have you grounded yourself? You could pick your own assignments, and we heard you were offered the anchor job?"

"Maybe it's a sign of old age, but I got tired of being shot at," he said abruptly. "And I was getting bored, I wanted a change. I'd made some good investments through the years and when Review came up for sale I decided to make the change, so I bought it. I'm still signed with the network to do four documentaries for next year and that's always interesting. I have time to do more research, to build a background on my subject."
Sallie looked doubtful. "I think I'd prefer foreign assignments."
He started to say something when the phone on his desk buzzed. In swift irritation he punched the intercom line and snapped, "I said no interruptions!"
Simultaneously the door opened and a soft voice said, "But I knew you wouldn't consider me an interruption, darling. If you have some poor reporter on the carpet I'm sure you've already said all that needs to be said."
Sallie turned her head to stare in amazement at Coral Williams, who was breathtaking in a severe black dress that merely served to flatter her blond perfection. The model was a picture of self-confidence as she smiled at Rhy, fully expecting him to welcome her with open arms.
Rhy said evenly, "I see your problem, Miss Meade," and replaced the receiver. To Coral he said in the same even tone, "It had better be important, Coral, because I've got a lot on my mind."
Such as stumbling over his long-lost wife, Sallie thought to herself, involuntarily smiling as she got to her feet. "If that's all, Mr. Baines ... ?"
He looked frustrated and ill-tempered. "We'll talk about it later," he snapped, and she took it that she was dismissed. She made her exit with a triumphant grin at a visibly puzzled Coral and gave Rhy's secretary the same grin on her way out.
The first thing she had to do was relieve Greg's mind, so she stopped by his office on her way down. "He knows," she told him matter-offactly, sticking her head through the door. "It's okay, he didn't fire me."
Greg shoved his fingers roughly through his hair, rumpling the prematurely gray strands into untidy peaks. "You've aged me ten years, doll." He sighed. "I'm glad he knows, that's a weight off me. Is it going to be common knowledge?"
"I wouldn't think so," she hedged. "He didn't mention that. Coral is in his office now, and I don't think he'd want anyone fouling up that relationship."
"What a wonderfully understanding wife you are," he mocked, and she stuck her tongue out at him. With all of the tension behind her she attacked

the article she was writing with renewed vigor and finished it that afternoon. Again Chris stopped by her desk, this time to tell her that he was leaving that night for Miami. "Want to see me off?" he invited, and she readily accepted.

Sometimes it was nice to see a familiar face in the crowd when you got on a flight in the middle of the night, so she saw nothing unusual about Chris wanting her company. It wasn't until they were on their way to the airport that Sallie realized that Chris had sought out her company several times lately. She liked Chris, he was a good, steady friend, but she knew that it would never develop into anything more serious on her part. Rather than let the situation stew, she asked him frankly, "Just for the record, why are you asking me to lunch, to see you off, etcetera? Is it for a reason I should know?"

"I'm using you," he admitted just as frankly. "You're good company and you don't expect anything more than friendship. You keep my ego built up, too, because you're a great-looking woman."

She had to chuckle; in her opinion great-looking women were not petite dynamos with more energy than fashion sense. But it was still nice to have a man voice that opinion. "Thanks," she told him cheerfully, "but that still doesn't tell me why."

He raised his sandy eyebrows. "Because of another woman, of course. What else could it be?"

"Anyone I know?" she asked.

"No, she's not in this business. She lives in my apartment building and she's the nesting type. She wants a nine-to-five husband, and I can't see myself settling down into that routine. It's a standoff. She won't back down and neither will L"

"So what will you do?"

"Wait. I'm a patient man. She'll either come around or we won't get together, it's that simple."

"Why should she do all the giving?" Sallie asked indignantly, amazed that even reasonable Chris should expect the woman to make all of the adjustments.

"Because I know I can't," he mocked, smiling a little. "I know my limitations, Sal. I only hope she's stronger than I am and can make some changes."

Then he deftly changed the subject and Sallie realized that he had revealed as much as he was going to. They talked shop for the rest of the time, and she waited with him for his flight to be called, sensing that he felt vulnerable. Leaving for a long trip in the middle of the night with no one to see you off was a lonely experience, and she was willing to give him at least one familiar face to wave goodbye to.

It was after ten when she finally got back to her apartment and she quickly showered and got ready for bed. Just as she turned out the lamp the phone rang and she switched the light back on to answer it.

"Sallie? Where in hell have you been?" Rhy demanded impatiently, and as always his husky voice made her spine tingle.

"At the airport," she found herself answering automatically.

"Meeting someone?" he asked, and his voice became sharper.

"No, seeing someone off." She had recovered her poise, and she quickly asked, "Why are you calling?"

"You left this afternoon before we got anything settled," he snapped.

Mystified, she echoed, "Settled? What's there to settle?"

"Our marriage, for one thing," he retorted sarcastically.

Abruptly she understood and tried to reassure him that she wouldn't cause any trouble in the termination of their marriage. "We shouldn't have any trouble getting a divorce, considering how long we've been separated. And getting a divorce is a good idea. We should have done it sooner. Seven years is a long time. It's obvious that our marriage is over in every respect except legally. I see no reason why it shouldn't be ten-ninated on paper, too."

"You talk too much," he observed, the rasp coming into his voice that warned of his rising temper. Confused, Sallie fell silent. What had she said to make him angry? Why had he brought up the subject if he didn't want to talk about it?

"I don't want a divorce," he said a moment later. "I've found it very convenient, having a little wife tucked away somewhere."

She laughed and sat up in bed, pushing a pillow behind her back for support. "Yes, I can see where it would come in handy," she dared to tease him. "It keeps the husband-hungry women effectively at bay, doesn't it? Still, we've reached the point where to remain married is foolish. Shall I file or would you rather?"

"Are you being deliberately stupid?" he barked. "I said I don't want a divorce!"

Sallie fell silent again, stunned by his insistence. "But, Rhy!" She fiDally protested incredulously. "Whyever not?"
"I told you," he said with the manner of one explaining the obvious. "I find it convenient to have a wife."
"You could always lie!"
"Why should I bother? And there's always the chance of a lie being found out. No, thank you for the offer, but I think I'll keep you, regardless of who you have waiting in the wings to take my place."
Abruptly Sallie was angry. Why had he called her at all if he didn't want a divorce, and who was he to make snide remarks about anyone waiting in the wings? "You're just being obnoxious!" she charged furiously. "What's wrong, Rhy? Is Coral crowding you a bit? Do you need your convenient wife for protection? Well, you can hide behind someone else, because I don't need your cooperation for a divorce! You deserted me, and you've been gone for seven years, and any judge in the state will give me a divorce!"
"You think so?" he challenged, laughing aloud. "Try it. I've made a lot of friends and divorcing me could be harder than you think. You'd better have a lot of money and a lot of time before you start, and you'd better have a more reliable job. You're in a rather vulnerable position, aren't you? You can't afford to make your boss angry."
"My boss can go straight to-to hell!" she shouted furiously and slammed the receiver down, The phone began ringing again immediately and she glared at it for a moment, then when it continued its irritating noise she reached over and unplugged it, something she rarely did in case Greg needed to reach her.
Then she turned out the lamp and pounded her pillow into shape, but any chance for sleep was now remote. She lay in the darkness and fumed, wishing she could take her temper out on Rhy's head. Why had he called at all if he didn't want to talk about a divorce? If he wanted to use her to keep Coral at a distance he could just find someone else to do his dirty work for him! Personally, she thought Coral was just his type, someone poised and sophisticated who wouldn't care if her husband was more interested in his job than in his wife.
Then, as if someone had turned on a light in a dark room, she knew why Rhy was so stubborn about not getting a divorce, why he had asked all of those prying, suggestive questions about her friends. If she had learned

anything at all about Rhy during the year they had been together it was that he was a possessive man. He didn't want to give up anything that belonged to him, and that included his wife. It obviously didn't bother him that thousands of miles might separate them, that they hadn't seen each other in years, his attitude was that once his wife, always his wife. He might not want her anymore, but he was too stubborn to give her up if he thought anyone else might want to marry her. What he didn't realize was that her attitude was much the same as his: once was enough.

She admitted honestly to herself that she would never love another man as she had loved Rhy, and even though she had now recovered from the emotional damage he'd inflicted she didn't think she'd ever be able to love so passionately, so demandingly again. Neither was she willing to settle for a lukewarm, comfortable relationship after having known such a love.

Of course, there'd be no convincing him that she didn't want a divorce in order to marry another man. He'd never understand the need she felt to be free of him. While he'd been only a distant figure it hadn't bothered her, but now that he was going to be around pen-nanently she felt stifled. Rhy's character was too forceful, too possessive, and if he thought he had any legal authority over her he wouldn't hesitate to use it in any way he wanted.

For the first time Sallie seriously faced the possibility that she might have to hunt for another job. She loved her job, she liked working for World in Review, but there were other publications. And with Rhy threatening to fire her if she tried to divorce him the best thing she could do was spike that weapon before he had a chance to use it.

Chapter Four

Sallie stared morosely at the keys of her typewriter, trying to force words into a reasonable sentence, but her mind stayed stubbornly blank and so did the white paper rolled into the machine. She had always been so enthusiastic about her work, the words pouring from her in swift, flowing sentences, that this block she was experiencing was tying her nerves into kingsize knots. She'd never had this trouble before and she was at a loss. How could she write about something that bored her to tears? And this article was boring!

Brom had been summoned to Greg's office and now he returned. "I'm off," he announced, clearing the top of his desk. "Munich."
Sallie swiveled in her chair to face him. "Anything interesting?"
"A Common Market meeting. There's some trouble that could break it up. I'll see you when I get back."
"Yeah, okay," Sallie said, and tried to smile. Brom paused by her desk and his hand touched her shoulder. "Is anything wrong, Sal? You've been acting under the weather for a couple of weeks now. Have you seen a doctor?"
"It's nothing," she assured him, and he left. When she was alone again she turned back to the typewriter and scowled at it. She hadn't seen a doctor; there was nothing to cure boredom. Why was she being kept in the office? Greg knew that she did her best work in the field, but it had been three weeks since she'd returned from Washington and she hadn't been on a single assignment since then, not even a small one. Instead she'd been flooded with "suggestions" for articles that anyone could have written. She'd done her best, but she'd come up against a stone wall now and suddenly she was angry. If Greg wasn't going to use her she wanted to know why!
In determination she switched off her typewriter and made her way to Greg's office. He wasn't there, so she sat down to wait, and as she waited her temper faded, but her resolve didn't. The natural tenacity that kept her on a lead when she wanted a story also kept her firm in her decision to get to the bottom of why suddenly Greg was ignoring her. They'd always had the best of working relationships, respect mixed with affection, and now it was as if Greg no longer trusted her to do her job.
She had to wait almost forty minutes before Greg returned, and when he opened the door and saw her sitting there, a wary, concerned expression crossed his face before he quickly smoothed it away. "Hi, doll, how's the article going?" he greeted her.
"It isn't. I can't do it."
He sighed at the blunt announcement and sat down behind his desk. After toying with a pencil for a minute he said easily, "We all have problems occasionally. What's wrong with the article? Anything you can put your finger on?"
"It's boring," she said baldly and Greg flinched. "I don't know why you've been throwing all the garbage at me, so I'm asking you, why? I'm good at my job, but you aren't letting me do it. Are you trying to force me to resign?

Has Rhy decided that he doesn't want his wife working for him, but he doesn't want to make things look bad by firing me?"
Greg ran his fingers through his gray-brown hair and sighed, his hard, firm-jawed. face tense. "You're putting me on the spot," he muttered. "Can't you just let things rest for a while?"
"No!" she exploded, then calmed herself "I'm sorry, I think I know that it isn't your fault, you've always given me the assignments you thought I could handle. It's Rhy, isn,t it?,,
"He's taken You off foreign assignments," Greg affirmed.
Though Sallie had braced herself for something like that, to hear the words actually spoken and her suspicions confirmed was a worse blow than she had anticipated. She paled and visibly shrank in her seat. Taken off assignment! It was a deadly blow. All of the passion she'd offered to Rhy had been transferred to herjob when he walked out and through the years she'd learned that a satisfying job had enriched her life. She didn't doubt that a psychologist would tell her that her job was merely a substitute for what she really wanted, a man, and perhaps it had been at first. But she was no longer the same person she'd been seven years before; she was a mature, independent adult, and she felt as a musician rnight if his hands were crippled, as if her life had been blighted.
Through a throat thick with horror she murmured, 'Why?"
"I don't know why," Greg replied. "Look, honey, all I know is he took you off foreign assignment. You can still cover anything in the States and several things have come up but I kept you here because anyone could have covered the others and I wanted you available in case something more important developed. Maybe I was wrong. I was trying to do what was best for the magazine, but I know how you are about being in one place for too long. If anything comes up, regardless of what it is, do you want it? Just say the word and it's yours."
"It doesn't matter," she said wearily, and he frowned. Defeat wasn't something he expected from Sallie. Then she looked up and her dark blue eyes were beginning to spark with anger. "On second thought, yes, I do want it. Anything! If you can keep me gone for six months straight, that will be fine, too. The only way I'm going to keep from killing Rhy is if I'm kept away from him. Was this supposed to be kept secret, that I'm off foreign assignment?"

"I wouldn't think so," Greg denied. "I just didn't tell you because I kept hoping I could keep you satisfied on other jobs, but nothing came up. Why?"
"Because I'm going to ask Rhy that same question," she said, and a feline smile curved her mouth at the thought of engaging in battle with her arrogant husband.
Greg leaned back in his chair and studied the suddenly glowing little face, alight with the anticipation of a struggle. For a minute he'd been worried about her, afraid that vibrant energy had been snuffed, but now he grinned in appreciation. Sallie came alive when the going was roughest and that was one of the characteristics that made her one of his best reporters. "Give it all you've got," he said gruffly. "I need you back in the field."
Amanda Meade, Rhy's secretary, smiled at Sallie when she entered. Amanda had also been the secretary of the former publisher and she knew all of the staff-, proof of her discretion was that no talk had circulated about Sallie's private interview with Rhy, for which Sallie was grateful. She didn't want any gossip starting about them or Rhy might take it into his head to jettison her entirely in order to halt the talk.
"Hi, Sallie," Amanda greeted her. "Is there anything I can help you with, or do you need to see the boss?"
"The boss, if he's available," Sallie replied. "He's available for the minute," Amanda confirmed, "but he's got a lunch date with Miss Williams at twelve, so he'll be leaving shortly."
"I won't be long," Sallie promised. "Ask if he'll see me."
Amanda buzzed the inner office on the private line and Sallie listened as she explained the reason for the interruption. After only a few seconds she hung up and smiled again. "Go on in, he's free-and he's been in a very good mood lately, too!"
Sallie had to laugh. "Thanks for the information, but I don't think I'll ask for a raise, anyway!" Crossing to Rhy's office she entered and firmly closed the door behind her, wanting to make certain that none of their conversation was overheard. Rhy was standing by the huge plate-glass window, staring down at the hordes of people below as they surged up and down the street. He was in his shirt sleeves, with the cuff links removed and lying on his desk and the cuffs rolled back to reveal muscular forearms. When he turned she saw that he'd also removed his tie; he looked more like a reporter than a

publisher and he exuded an air of virility that no other man could quite match.
"Hello, baby," he drawled, his rough-velvet voice containing an intimate note that made her pulses leap. "It took you long enough to get here. I was beginning to think you were playing it safe."
What did he mean? Had Greg called to warn Rhy that she was coming? No, she'd just left Greg's office, and in any case he wanted her free to go on assignment. Printer's ink ran in Greg's veins, not blood.
"I don't understand," she said curtly. "What do you mean, it took me long enough?"
"For you to realize you'd been grounded," he replied, smiling as he approached her. Before she had a chance to avoid him he was standing before her, his hard, warm hands clasping her elbows and she quivered at his touch. She tried to move away and his grip tightened, but only enough to hold her. "I was going to tell you the night I called, but you hung up on me," he continued, still smiling. "So I waited for you to come to me."
Sallie was blessed with acute senses and now she wished that they weren't so acute, because she could smell the warm male scent of his body under the quiet after-shave he wore. He was close enough for her to notice that he still, after all these years, didn't wear an undershirt, because she could see the dark curling hairs on his chest through the thin fabric of his shirt. She tore her gaze away from his chest and lifted it higher to his cleanly shaven jaw, to his lips, relaxed and smiling, then higher still, to the direct gaze of those dark gray eyes under level black brows.
With supreme willpower she forced her attention away from his physical attractions and said in a half whisper, "Why? You know how much I love foreign assignments. Why did you take me off?. "
"Because I'm not that much of a newsman," he answered dryly, and she stared at him in bewilderment. He released her elbows and slid his hands warmly up her arms, drawing her with him to the desk, where he leaned against its edge and pulled her forward until she stood between his legs. He was more on her level in that position, and the mesmerizing gray eyes looking directly into hers prevented her from protesting at his closeness.
"What do you mean?" she managed, her voice no stronger this time than it had been before. His fingers were massaging the bare skin of her upper arms and involuntarily she began to tremble.

"I mean that I couldn't stand the thought of sending you into potentially dangerous situations," he explained softly. "South America, Africa, the Middle East are all political time bombs and I didn't want to take the chance that you might be caught in one of them if they explode. Europe-even in Europe there are kidnappings, terrorist groups, bombings in air terminals and on the streets. For my own peace of mind I took you off foreign assignment, though Downey nearly had a stroke when I told him. He thinks you're one of the best, baby. I could wring his neck when I think of the situations he's sent you into!"

"Greg's a professional," Sallie defended huskily. "And so am 1. I'm not helpless, Rhy. I've taken weapons training and self-defense courses. I can take care of myself. Staying here is driving me crazy! I feel as if I've been put out to pasture! "

He laughed and reached behind her for her braid, pulling it over her shoulder and settling the thick rope over her breast. He began playing with the braid, running his fingers over the smooth twists of hair and the comers of his mouth moved into another smile. "This is quite a mane," he murmured. "I'd like to see it out of this braid and spread across my pillow while I make love to you."

Sallie was rocked on her heels by his words and her cheeks paled. Of all the things he might have said she certainly hadn't expected that! She raised stunned eyes to him and saw his pupils dilated with desire; then he jerked her forward and she lay against him, trapped by the pressure of his powerful legs clasping hers and his arms as they slid around her.

She gasped at the contact of his hard, warm body and, as they always had, her senses began swinuning when he touched her. Fighting for control, she turned her head to him to demand that he turn her loose and he took advantage of the opportunity, fitting her more tightly into the curve of his body with the pressure of his arms, and bending his head down. His mouth was hot and forceful and drugging, and she began wriggling in his grasp, trying to escape from her inevitable response to him as much as she was trying to escape from the man himself. By stretching her willpower to its limits she managed to resist the probing of his tongue between her lips, keeping her teeth tightly clenched. After a moment he lifted his head and his breathing was faster, his eyes still eager.

"Open your mouth," he commanded huskily.

"You know how I want to kiss you. Let me feel your sweet little tongue against mine again."
He lowered his head again, and this time her willpower wasn't up to the demands she made on it. Her senses exploded with pleasure at the touch of his lips on hers and when his tongue moved demandingly she let her lips and teeth part and he gained possession of the sweet interior of her mouth. With a groan he tightened his arms and in response her hands slid up his arms and shoulders to climb about his neck. Her slim body quivered at the wild storm his kiss was causing, and helplessly she arched against him, gasping her need into his mouth as she realized just how strongly he was aroused.
It had always been like that. From the first kiss they had shared to the last time he'd made love to her, their physical responses to each other had been strong and immediate. She'd never wanted another lover because she'd known instinctively that no other man could arouse her as Rhy did, even now, despite all of the perfectly good reasons she had for not wanting to respond to him. Her body simply did not fisten to her mind, and after a few moments she stopped wanting to protest. She felt wildly alive and drowning at the same time, straining against him even as her senses were overwhelmed by the countless pleasure signals her nerves were giving out. When he lifted his mouth from hers she was so weak and trembly that she had to cling to him for support. Triumph gleamed hotly in his eyes as he held her up with one arm about her waist and with his free hand he cupped her chin and held it still while he pressed swift light kisses across her face and lips.
“Mmm", he groaned deep in his throat, "that still hasn't changed. It's still dynamite."
His words brought a measure of sanity to her fevered brain, and she struggled to put a little space between them. Yes, it was still dynamite, and it had nearly blown up in her face! She was a fool if she allowed Rhy to use his physical attractions to make her forget the reason she'd come up here.
"Rhy--don't!" she protested, turning her face away as his lips continued to nibble at her skin. "Let me go. I came up here to talk to you-"
"We've talked," he interrupted huskily, his voice going even lower and rougher, a signal which told her he didn't want to stop. "I'd rather make love now. It's been a long time, but not long enough for me to forget what it was like between us."

"Well, I've forgotten," she lied, once again avoiding his kiss. "Stop fooling around! I'm serious about my job and I don't like being grounded because you think that a woman can't take care of herself in a crisis."
He ceased trying to kiss her, but his eyes were impatient as he stared down at her. "All right, we'll talk about the job, then I want the subject dropped. I didn't say that I don't think a woman can take care of herself. I said that I didn't want you in a dangerous situation because I didn't think I could stand it."
"Why should you care?" Sallie demanded in surprise. "You certainly haven't exhibited much concern for my welfare since you walked out, so don't ruin my job by acting concerned now."
Abruptly he released her and she moved several feet away from him. She was glad of the distance; she needed all of her wits about her in order to handle Rhy, and his closeness clouded her brain with erotic fever. "My decision is final," he informed her curtly. "You're off foreign assignment, permanently."
She stared at him and her stomach lurched sickeningly at his words. Permanently? She could more easily stop eating than she could give up the dangerous excitement of the job she loved! He couldn't have thought of anything that would hurt her more if he'd planned this for years. "Do you hate me so much?" she murmured, her dark blue eyes turning almost to black with pain. "What have I ever done to you to make you treat me like this?"
"Of course I don't hate you," he denied impatiently, thrusting a long-fingered hand through his black hair. "I'm trying to protect you. You're my wife and I don't want you hurt."
"Drivel!" she cried, her small fists clenching at her side. "Being tied down is worse than anything that's likely to happen to me on assignment! I'm only halfalive here. I'm going crazy staring at that blasted typewriter hour after hour with nothing coming in my head to put down on paper! And don't say I'm your wife! The extent of our relationship was that we slept together off and on for about a year, then you went your way and I went mine, and I'm a lot happier now than I ever was with you. You were an even bigger flop as a husband than I was as a wife!" She stopped and drew a trembling breath, trying to control the urge to break something, to hit out at him with her fists. Tbough she had a temper she wasn't usually so uncontrolled and she knew that frustration had strained her nerves.

"Flop or not, you're my wife and you'll stay my wife," he stated coldly, dropping the words like stones on her head. "And my wife will not go on foreign assignments!"
"Why don't you just shoot me?" she demanded furiously, her voice rising. "That would be more merciful than driving me mad with boredom! Blast you, Rhy, I don't know why you married me anyway!" she concluded in acute frustration.
"I married you because I felt sorry for you," he informed her bluntly, and the simple statement left her gaping at him in outrage.
"YOU-YOU felt sorry for me?" she cried, and she thought she'd explode with rage. Of all the humiliating things to say to her!
"YOU were such a loneiy little thing," he explained calrnly, as if every word didn't lash at her raw nerves. "And so starved for affection, for a human touch. I thought, Why the hell not? I was twenty-eight years old. It was time I got married. And here was an added bonus. "
"Yes," she snapped, stalking to the window to stare down at the street below, anything to keep from looking at the mocking dark face, the sardonic eyes. "You got protection from all of your pursuing girlfriends!" With relish she contemplated planting a fist right in his mouth, except that Rhy wouldn't let her get away with that. She knew that he'd retaliate.
He grinned at her temper and walked up behind her, so close that his breath stirred the hair at her temple. "No, baby, the added bonus was the way you went wild whenever I touched you. You looked so quiet and tame, a plump little dove, but in bed you turned into a wildcat. 'Me contrast was fascinating."
"I can see you've had a lot of laughs over it!" she blurted, her face going crimson with humiliation. "Oh, no, I never laughed," he replied, his voice suddenly becoming soft and whispery. "The loving between us was too good. No other woman ever quite matched you. Everything else about you has changed, but not the way you respond."
Her pride stung, she retorted sharply, "Forget about that. It didn't mean anything."
"I think it did. It means I've found my wife again. I want you back, Sallie," he informed her silkily. Astonishment spun her around to face him, and she stared up at him with eyes grown huge in her small face. "You're joking!" she accused, her voice shaking. "It's impossible!"

"I don't think it's so impossible," he murmured, catching her close to him and pressing his face into her hair. "I never meant to let you go, anyway," he continued, his voice growing low and seductive. She knew that he was consciously using the erotic power of his voice to disarm and attract her, but recognizing his weapons didn't necessarily give her the strength to fight them. She shivered and tried to pull away, but his grip tightened.
"I thought you'd back down and call me. I was fed up with your nagging and determined to teach you a lesson," he said, raising his head and looking down into her astounded face. "But you didn't call, and I had my career to see to and time got away from me. Seven years is a long time to be separated, but we've both matured in that length of time, and I intend to pull on that leash you still have around your neck, sweetheart! "
"Don't be silly!" she said, shaking her head to deny his casual assumption that she had no choice in the matter, that she would tamely let him lead her about. He had a lot to learn about her! "It wouldn't work out, Rhy. We're two different people now. I'm no longer content to putter around a house. There are so many things I want to do that I may never get around to them all. I have to be on the move."
"I'll be traveling quite a bit with the documentaries I've signed to do. You could always quit your job and travel with me," he pointed out, and she recoiled from that suggestion as if he had thrown a snake at her.
"Give up my job?" she echoed, aghast. "Rhy, are you crazy? I don't want to spend my life tagging after you! This isn't just a job to me, it's my career, too. If you want us to be together so badly you quit your job." She drew her mouth into a hard line and glared her challenge at him.
"I make more than you do," he drawled. "It would be stupid for me to quit. Besides, I own this magazine."
"The entire idea of us trying to live together is stupid," she blasted him. "Why not just obtain a quiet divorce? You won't have to worry that I'll ask for alimony, I like supporting myself-"
"No," he interrupted, his jaw hardening as temper began to flicker in his eyes. "No divorce, under any circumstances."
"All right, maybe you can make it difficult for me to get a divorce," she acknowledged. "But I don't have to live with you and I don't have to work for you. There are other magazines, newspapers and wire services, and I'm good at my job. I don't need you or your magazine."

"Don't you? Like I've told you before, I have a lot of friends and if I put the word out that I don't want you working, believe me, you won't be reporting. Maybe you could get a job in a restaurant or driving a cab, but that'll be it, and I can stop that too if I want," His eyes narrowed on her and a grin split his dark face. "And in the meantime, you're still my wife, and I intend to treat you as such."

The threat was implicit in his words and she sucked in her breath. Alarm rioted along her nerves as she realized that he intended to resume his marital rights. "I'll get a court order forcing you to stay away from me! " she ground out, too angry now to back down even though she knew that, if dared, Rhy would go to any lengths to get what he wanted.

"A court order might be difficult to obtain if the right pressure is brought to bear," he mocked, enjoying his power over her. "And after a little while you just might decide that you like having me around, you did before. If I remember correctly, and I do, that was the basis of all your complaints, that I was never there. Let's try the whole bit again, hmm?" he murmured cajolingly. "And you wanted kids. We'll have kids, all you want. As a matter of fact, I'm willing to start on that project right now."

Sallie ground her teeth in rage, more upset than he could know by his reference to having children. The beast! "I've had a baby, thank you!" she choked, lashing out in her raging need to hurt him as she'd been hum as she still hurt. "And if I remember correctly, Mr. Baines, you didn't want him! I carried him alone, and I had him alone and I buried him alone! I don't need you or anything about you!"

"I don't care whether or not you need me," he said, his mouth tightening into a grim line at her reckless words. "I can make you want me, and that's all that matters. You can spit fire at me all you want, but you and I both know that if I want you I can have you. Make up your mind to it, you're mine and I'm not about to let you go. I'm ready to settle down now, for real this time. You're my wife, and I wouldn't mind a couple of kids before we're too old."

She strangled on the hot words that bubbled in her throat and jerked away from him. "No," she refused savagely. "No to everything. No to you and no to your kids. Let someone else have the honor! I'm sure Coral would be more than eager to take on the job, And since she's waiting for you now I won't keep you any longer!"

His roar of laughter followed her as she stormed out of his office and Amanda Meade stared at her with round eyes. Without a word Sallie slammed the door and stood in the hallway, shaking with temper. The most galling thing of all was that she was helpless. Rhy had the power to destroy the career she'd so carefully, lovingly created for herself and he'd do it without a moment's thought if he wanted her.

She returned to her desk and sank into her chair, trembling inside. Why was he doing this to her? He couldn't be serious---could he? The memory of his hot kisses returned vividly and blood surged into her cheeks. That hadn't changed! Was it just sex that he wanted from her, that and the challenge she now rePresented to his male ego? She had been his once and she might have guessed that he'd be unable to endure the thought that now she didn't want him.

The only thing was, she wasn't so certain now that she didn't want him. Making love with him was fantastic, and she'd never forgotten the heated magic of his caresses. For just a minute she sank into a delicious daydream of what it would be like to be his wife again, to live with him and sleep beside him and make love with him; then cold reality intruded. If she went back to him, then what? He'd already grounded her. He'd take her away from her job entirely, perhaps even get her pregnant again. Sallie thought longingly of a baby, but she knew Rhy well enough to think beyond that. She could see herself with a child and Rhy growing bored and restless as he had before, resentful that she'd become pregnant. He wouldn't be faithful; he wasn't now, so why should he be later?

He'd tire of her and she'd be both without a job and hampered by a baby. Top jobs in the reporting field were hard to come by and required more than dedication; they required a reporter's whole life. If she left the field she'd have a difficult time returning, carving another niche for herself, and if there was a baby, what would she do then?

The thought of what could happen if she returned to Rhy frightened her and she knew that if she had a choice she would take her job. It had never let her down as Rhy had. And she loved what she was doing. She knew just how precious her independence was, and she wasn't about to sacrifice it for physical gratification.

She couldn't think what to do. Her nature was to act, but in this situation there was nothing she could do. Rhy would block any effort she made to get another job unless she disappeared and took another name, moved to

another section of the country. The thought shook her; it seemed so drastic, but even before her nerves had settled she was making plans. Why should a little thing like creating another identity stop her? Hadn't she learned that she could handle almost anything? She would hate to give up her job, this particular job, but she could find another if she had to. The important thing was to stay away from Rhy.

It was still a few minutes before lunchtime, but she jerked the cover over her typewriter and slung her purse over her shoulder. If she knew Rhy he would start maneuvering immediately to hem her in, and she had a lot of things to do to protect herself.

She caught a taxi to the bank where she kept her checking and savings accounts and closed both of them out. She didn't know if Rhy could block any withdrawals if she needed money in a hurry, but it seemed wise not to take the chance. Over the years she had managed to save several thousand dollars, enough that she would be able to support herself while she looked for another job, and she felt more secure with the cashier's check in her purse. Rhy would find that she was no longer a helpless little ninny for him to intimidate!

She was rarely hungry, but she'd burned a lot of calories that morning and her stomach was beginning to protest. On impulse she stopped at the bar and grill just around the comer from the World in Review building and found an empty booth in a dark corner.

It was like going into a cave until her eyes adjusted to the dimness, then she recognized several of the staff either sitting at the bar or tucking into lunch in one of the dark booths. She ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and coffee and was waiting for her food when Chris dropped his lanky form into the seat opposite her. It was the first time she'd seen him since he'd returned from Florida, and she noticed how tanned he looked, even in the dimness of the bar.

"Florida suits you," she commented. "How have you been?"

He shrugged, his quiet face wry. "I'm still at a standoff, if that's what you're asking. What about you, doll? I've heard a rumor that you've been grounded."

"It's true," Sallie admitted, frowning. "Orders from the top."

"Baines himself? What'd you do?"

"It's not what I did, it's what I am. He thinks foreign assignment is too dangerous for me."

Chris snorted in disbelief. "C'mon, Baines is too good a newsman to ground you for a stupid reason like that. Level with me, Sal. What's going on? I saw him staring at you that day in the cafeteria."
"Oh, it's true that he thinks foreign assignment is too dangerous for me," she insisted. "But that's only part of the reason. He thinks I'd be a nice addition to his personal scalp collection, if you get my meaning. Unfortunately, I don't agree."
Chris whistled soundlessly through his teeth. "Big boss is after you, eh? Well, I agree with him that you're a fetching little witch. The orily difference is, I never had the guts to tackle you."
Sallie exploded into laughter, knowing that while Chris might like her well enough he'd never been attracted to her romantically. Though he was the footloose type he was attracted to nesting women; he wanted someone who could provide a stable base for him when he returned from his wanderings. Sallie was too much of a wanderer herself for Chris to be interested. He kept a straight face while she rocked with laughter, holding her sides, but his brown eyes danced with amusement.
Afterward they returned to work together, and as they entered the lobby Chris had his arm affectionately around her waist. The first person Sallie saw was Rhy, waiting for the elevator, and as he looked at them and saw Chris with his arm about her his eyes flared, then narrowed to furious slits.
"Uh-oh, trouble," Chris muttered to her, then gave her a grin. As the elevator opened and Rhy stepped in Chris compounded his sins by hugging her close and kissing the top of her head. In the last glimpse Sallie had of Rhy before the doors closed and hid him from view he looked murderous.

Chapter Five

"You fool," Sallie whispered to Chris, torn between laughter and genuine concern. Rhy was a dangerous man when he was angry. He was strong enough and wild enough and mean enough to handle just about anyone he wanted to handle, and he'd taken a lot of specialized training. Underneath his perfectly tailored three-piece suits Rhy was a half-civilized commando and he could hurt Chris badly. "Are you trying to get yourself killed? Rhy has a hair-trigger temper!"

"I didn't want him to take you for granted," Chris explained lazily. He gave her a crooked grin. "Feel free to use me any time you need the safety of numbers, the least I can do is return the favors you've done me. I use you, you use me in return."

Sallie drew in her breath. The idea was tempting, to pretend to Rhy that she was wildly in love with Chris, except that she didn't think she could act well enough to make it convincing and she would hate to push Rhy far enough that he lost his temper and hurt Chris.

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't think it'd be very smart to act out our charades in front of him," she declined. "I like your face as it is. But if you don't mind I'll throw up your name as a smoke screen to hide behind."

"Okay by me." He regarded her seriously. "Why are you trying to get away from him? He's got everything a man---or a woman--could want."

"I knew Rhy before he bought the magazine," Sallie explained with caution, not wanting to tell him too much. "He wants to renew the relationship and I don't. It's that simple."

"Except for the feeling that you're leaving a lot untold, I believe you," Chris mused almost to himself and left her with a smile.

After returning to her desk Sallie waited all afternoon for a call summoning her to Rhy's office, but the call didn't materialize and she finally realized that he was more subtle than that. He'd let her worry about it, become anxious and vulnerable. She'd show him!

With a flourish she pushed aside the article she'd been working on and rolled a clean sheet of paper into the typewriter. If Rhy wanted to play dirty, then she had no scruples about not doing her work. Instead of concentrating on that stupid article she'd begin her memoirs! If she wrote her life story down as it happened, when she got old it would be finished and she wouldn't have to try to remember all of the details!

Adrenalin flowed through her veins and her fingers flew over the typewriter keys. For the first time in weeks words spitted out of her brain and she scarcely paused to get them in order. She felt elated, alive again. Enthusiasm pulsed through her body.

Suddenly she dropped her hands, staring at what she'd written. Why play around with her memoirs? Why not take her own experiences and weave them into a novel? She'd always wanted to write a book but she'd never had the time. Now she had the time, and she wanted to laugh aloud at the thought of using Rhy's time and money to begin a new career for herself. Feverishly she put a fresh page in the typewriter, then sat for several minutes, stumped by her first problem-what name should she use for her heroine? Could she just leave a blank space and insert the name later? Then she realized that she had to have a name before she could visualize her character, and that thought led her to ponder the physical attributes of her creation. Writing a book was different from writing an article of an eyewitness report. Then she had facts to deal with, but with fiction she had to create the details herself. Except for that first creative writing course she was trained in facts and this was harder than she'd imagined.

But before the day was over she had sweated eight pages out of her imagination and she glared impatiently at the clock, which insisted that it was time she left. She slid her precious eight pages into a folder and tucked it under her arm. She would work on them at home, on her own typewriter. Seldom had anything held her concentration in such a tight grip and when she finally went to bed that night the plot and scenes kept darting around in her mind. This was a challenge that equaled the most dangerous of assignments, and she felt the same enthusiasm, the same drive to get it accomplished. She almost resented the hours she was forced to waste sleeping, but at last she drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep, the most restful she'd had in weeks.

For a week she worked on the manuscript during every spare moment, taking it to work with her, sitting up late at night and typing until she was so tired that she had to sleep. Rhy didn't call her and she was so caught up in her project that she ceased waiting for him to make a move. She was aware of his silence only with the outer edge of her consciousness, and she didn't worry about it. So long as he didn't try to resume their relationship she was content to let time slide by and, judging by the number of times she saw

Coral Williams either entering or leaving the building, Rhy felt no sense of urgency either.
She was ready to leave one afternoon when her phone rang, which startled her, as that had become a rarity. Since Brom was still away she snatched it up and heard Rhy's gravelly voice say tersely, "Get up here, Sallie. We have a problem."
Staring at the phone after he'd hung up, Sallie wondered about the nature of the "problem." Did he mean that they personally had a problem-if so, she had to agree--or did he mean that the magazine had a problem? Had something come up that required her personal qualifications? Was Rhy backed into a corner where he would have to use her or lose a story? She relished that thought as she made her way up to Rhy's office, wondering just how he would handle that situation.
Amanda waved her into Rhy's office with an urgent "They're waiting for you!" and when she entered she saw that Greg was also present, prowling restlessly about the office while Rhy was sprawled back in his big chair with his feet propped on his desk; he looked physically relaxed, but the glitter of his eyes revealed his mental alertness.
Greg turned as she entered and glared at her, his jaw belligerent. He always looked like that when he was upset and Sallie caught her breath in alarm. Without greeting Rhy she said huskily to Greg, "What's wrong? Has anyone been hurt?" Two years ago one of her closest friends had been killed in South America while covering a revolution, and the tragedy had made her highly sensitive to the risks they all took. She never worried about herself, but now she braced herself to receive the news that another reporter had been wounded, perhaps killed. Her tension was evident in her low-toned voice and Greg picked it up immediately.
"No, no one's been hurt," he assured her gently, remembering the only time he'd ever seen her break down, when he had told her that Artie Hendricks had been killed.
She sighed in relief and sank into a chair, glancing at Rhy to find his face still, his eyes furious.
Puzzled, she looked back at Greg. "Then what's wrong?"
"The Sakaryan charity ball is next week," Greg informed her, crossing the office to sit down beside her.
"Yes, I know. I was supposed to cover it," she said dryly and shot a scathing look at Rhy. "Who're you sending in my place?"

"I was sending Andy Wallace and Patricia King," Greg snapped. "But Marina Delchamp has refused to grant a personal interview. Dammit!" he exploded in frustration, pounding his fist on the arm of the chair. "It was all set up and now she refuses!"
"That doesn't sound like Marina," Sallie protested. "She's not at all snobbish. There must be a reason. "
"There is," Rhy drawled the answer from his relaxed position. "She won't talk to anyone but you, or so she says. Why does it have to be you? Do you know her personally?"
Sallie grinned as she realized that her wishful thinking had come true- Marina had placed Rhy between a rock and a hard place, and he wasn't enjoying the situation.
"Yes, she's a friend of mine," she admitted, and if Rhy thought it strange that she knew the gorgeous ex-model he said nothing. Now Marina was the wife of one of the most powerful men in Sakarya and in charge of the charity ball, and she could choose any reporter she wanted.
"Talk to her, convince her to talk to Patricia King instead of you," Rhy ordered. "Or get the interview over the phone." The satisfaction in his tone revealed that he thought he'd just solved the entire problem and she bristled, but struggled to hide her temper.
"I suppose when you're the wife of the finance minister you can give interviews or not, whichever you want," she said casually.
"Sallie," Rhy infon-ned her with deadly calm, "I'm ordering you to get that interview over the phone."
"But it won't work!" she said, widening her eyes in innocence. "Marina can talk to me whenever she'd like if that's all she wants. She wants to see me. And I have an invitation to the ball anyway," she finished smugly. She had been intending to take on part of her vacation next week and fly to Sakarya at her own expense, but now she saw a way of defeating Rhy and it was all she could do to stop herself from laughing aloud.
"It won't work," Rhy warned softly. "I said no foreign assignments and I meant it. You can't go." Beside her, Greg cursed beneath his breath in frustration and got to his feet, shoving his fists into his pockets. "She's the best reporter I've got!" he said in restrained violence. "You're wasting her!"
"I'm not wasting her," Rhy snarled, coming out of his chair with a lithe twist of his body that had him instantly poised, ready to react. In that instant Sallie read danger in his narrowed eyes. "I've told you before, Downey,

she's off anything that even smells like it might be dangerous, and that includes any damned party in an oil-rich desert where every power in the world is jockeying around trying to figure out how to get control of that oil!"
"Are you blind?" Greg bellowed. "She thrives on danger. She carries it around with her! Darnntit, man, she can't even catch a bus in a normal manner! Her everyday life would turn a sane person's hair gray!"
Deftly Sallie put herself between the two big, angry men and tilted her delicate jaw at Rhy. "If Marina refuses to see Patricia I suppose you just won't get an interview," she said, bringing the conversation back to its original subject. Triumph gleamed in her dark blue eyes. "It's me or no one. How much of a newsman are you?"
His jaw clenched in anger, but he shot a look at Greg. "Get out of here," he ordered harshly, jerking his eyes back to her. "My answer is still no."
"Suit yourself." She left the office with more poise than she would have thought possible, but chuckled to herself as she collected her belongings and left the building.
She wasn't surprised the next morning when she was directed to Rhy's office as soon as she entered the building. She stalled for a few moments, enjoying making him wait while she put up her shoulder bag and locked the manuscript in her desk, then she carefully wiped all traces of amusement from her expression as she went to meet him.
Instead of the frustrated anger she'd expected to see on his face he wore a look of intense satisfaction, and she felt a twinge of uneasiness. "I've solved our problem," he almost purred, moving close to her and reaching out to stroke her hair.
Diverted, she slapped his hand away in irritation. "I'm going to cut my hair!" she said curtly. "Maybe then you'll keep your hands to yourself."
"Don't cut it," he advised. "You wouldn't like the consequences."
"I'll cut my hair if I feel like it. It's nothing to you! "
"We won't argue that now, but I'm warning you, don't cut your hair or I'll turn you over my knee." With that threat he left the subject and quirked an inquiring eyebrow at her. "Don't you want to hear about my solution?"
"No. If you like it that well I know I'll hate it," she said, admitting fantastically that he'd obviously thought of some way to get around Marina.
"I wouldn't say that," he munnured. "You used to like it quite well. You can go to Sakarya, darling." He paused and watched her eyes fight up with

delight, then he delivered the bomb. "And I'm going with you. "
Aghast, Sallie stared up at him. Her thoughts whirled madly as she tried to think of some way out of this situation, but all she could say was, "You can't do that," in weak protest.
"Of course I can," he said, smiling in a predatory manner that gave her chills. "I own this magazine and I'm a newsman. Other than that, I'm your husband-all excellent reasons why I can go to Sakarya with you."
"But I don't want you along! I don't need you." "Poor baby," he said in mock sympathy, then reverted to his normal tone. "T'here's no way out of it. If you go, I go, I want to make certain that silky skin of yours stays whole."
“I’m not a child or an idiot. I can take care of myself."
"So you say, but you still aren't changing my mind. Sorry if I've messed up your plans. Did you have it set for your boyfriend to go along with you? What's his name-the photographer?"
The skin on the back of her neck prickled as she caught the threat in his tone and she knew that he hadn't forgotten that day when he had seen Chris hug her. "Leave Chris alone!" she flared. "He's a good friend."
"I can imagine. He went with you to Washington, didn't he?" Rhy gritted savagely, abruptly catching her wrist and pulling her against him. "And he's the one you went to the airport to see off, isn't he?"
"Yes, he is," she admitted, surprised that he should remember that. She tried to release her wrist, and he anchored her to him with his other arm, sliding it about her waist.
"Here's another warning for you," he ground out. "You're still my wife and I won't tolerate another man in your bed. I don't care how long we've been separated. If I catch him with you I'm going to push his teeth through the back of his head and then I'm going to take it up with you. Is that what you want? Are you trying to push me into proving how much I want you?"
Without waiting for an answer he bent his head and ground his mouth against hers, forcing a response from her and parting her lips to aRow his deeper kiss.
The familiar taste of his mouth tore away the years that had separated them, and she gasped at the lash of desire that sent her hands up to cling to his heavy shoulders as she pressed herself to him. It was their first kiss all over again. She melted, and her awareness of the world around her faded. Even as she responded to him she writhed inside with shame that she didn't have more self-respect than to be so vulnerable to him. He'd never really cared

about her, he'd admitted it, but he liked going to bed with her, and She was too weak to resist him. it was odd that no other man had ever tempted her as Rhy did, but then, she'd never known another man like him. He was hard and brutal, but he was strong, and the force of his personality swept lesser people to the side,

But their attraction wasn't all one-sided, she realized dazedly a moment later when his hard hands slid down to her waist and clenched almost painfully on her soft flesh as he pulled her even closer to his taut frame. He groaned against her lips and a tremor rocked through him. "Sallie," he muttered, lifting his mouth a scant inch from hers. "Let's go to my apartment. We can't make love here, there are too many interruptions." His voice was a low growl, rough with his passion, and she shivered in sensual reaction.

"Let me go," she protested, her hands suddenly finding the strength to push against him as panic flared with the realization that it might be impossible to control him now. Their brief marriage had given her an intimate knowledge of his nature and now she admitted to herself that she'd forgotten none of it. She knew by the dark flush on his cheekbones, the timbre of his voice, the dilated glitter of his eyes, that he was half-wild with desire, near the point where he would take her regardless of where they were.

"No," he denied, his mouth twisting savagely. "I told you I'll never let you go."

She fought her way out of his embrace, but she had the uneasy feeling that he'd allowed her to gain her freedom, and spots of color also stained her face as she stared at him. "You'll have to," she told him fiercely. "I don't want you anymore!"

"I just proved you wrong in that!" he said on a short bark of laughter.

"I'm not talking about sex! I don't want to live with you. I don't want to be your wife. I can't stop you from traveling with me, you're the boss, but I won't sleep with you."

"Won't you?" he murmured. "You're my wife, and I want you back. Legally you can't refuse me my marital rights."

His determination, the steel in his gray eyes, alarmed her and she stepped back from him. Desperately she seized on Chris, throwing his name up like a shield to hide behind. "Look, Rhy, you're an adult, surely you can understand that my affections are elsewhere. Chris is special to me-"

A little muscle in his jaw began to twitch and she stared at it in fascination, forgetting what she'd been about to say. Rhy's hands closed painfully on her

waist again and he ground out, "I told you what I'd do if I caught him with you and I meant it."
"Be reasonable," she implored, pulling vainly at his hands in an effort to ease the painful pressure. "For heaven's sake, I'm not demanding that you terminate your relationship with Coral!"
An odd expression crossed his face. "No, you're not, are you?" he said slowly.
He looked down at her with growing menace and to escape the impression she had of a time bomb ticking its way to the moment of explosion she managed a casual laugh. "I never thought that you'd live ihe life of a monk all these years." She tried to soothe the temper in him. "I've no right to object in any event."
Instead of soothing him her words seemed to inflame him more, and the tension in his arms lifted her on her toes. "I'm not that modem and openminded," he said almost soundlessly, his taut lips barely moving. "I don't want another man touching you P,
"Isn't that a dog-in-the-manger attitude?" she hurled at him and winced in pain as his fingers clenched. "Rhy, please! You're hurting me!"
He cursed vividly, then moved his hands from her waist in the manner of one freeing a bird and she swiftly moved a couple of steps from him, her hands automatically massaging her aching flesh. As he merely stood there watching her and made no move to break the silence that fell between them she decided that the best thing she could do was to get out of there. She couldn't handle Rhy when he was angry, he could reduce her to putty if he really lost his temper and she knew him well enough to know that he was on the verge of violence.
She edged toward the door and he moved suddenly, placing himself between her and her escape. "Don't fight me," he warned, still in that soft, nearly soundless voice. "You can't win and I don't want to hurt you. You're mine, Sallie."
Fear edged along her nerves. She'd seen Rhy in a lot of moods, in a lot of tempers, but she'd never before seen him with this wild savagery in his eyes. "I need to go to work," she muttered warily, watching him for any movement.
"You work for me. You go when I say you can go." He bit out the words, his eyes locked on hers, and she was helpless to look away. Was this how a snake paralyzed a bird?

Desperately she searched her mind for something to say that would break his concentration on her, but nothing surfaced and she squared her shoulders, ready to make a flight of it if necessary. She wouldn't be molested, not even by her own husband! All of the pride and dignity that she'd so painstakingly amassed for herself was in the tilt of her chin as she raised it at him. "Don't push me," she warned him evenly. "If you're even half the man you used to be you know that I'm not willing."
"You would be, after a minute," he retorted with brutal truth, but not by a flicker of her lashes did she betray the jolt he gave her with that statement. "Don't confuse the past with the future. The days are long gone when I thought the sun rose and set on you.“
"Good," he said, his mouth twisting. "I never wanted to be an idol. But don't make me out to be a villain, either."
With inner relief Sallie sensed that the danger was past, at least for the moment. She was tempted to try arguing with him about the trip to Sakarya, but she knew better than to provoke his temper again. "I really do need to get to work," she insisted.
After a moment he stepped to one side. "All right," he permitted, his tone at once tender and warning. "But we're not finished, baby, and when you go to Sakarya I'll be with you every inch of the way."
With that warning ringing in her head Sallie slipped past him and returned to her desk. She began trembling with delayed reaction and with difficulty she tried to concentrate on her writing. But she'd reached a slow spot. She couldn't decide just how the action should go and eventually her thoughts wandered back to Rhy.
Once she would have been delirious with joy if he'd announced that he wanted her with him, wanted her to have his children, but that was a long time ago, and she'd been a different person then. Why couldn't he accept that? Why was he so insistent on resuming their marriage?
She couldn't believe that he was motivated by jealousy. It had to be that possessiveness of his, because jealousy indicated caring, and she knew that Rhy had never loved her, not even in the early days. Their only bond bad been a sexual one and he wanted to renew that bond now, but she was determined to break the weakness that made her respond to him.
Then the thought occurred to her that it was one thing to be an ordinary, quiet, stay-at-home little housewife and quite another for her to be a globetrotting, successful reporter. She was more of a feather in his cap now,

wasn't she? She hadn't been glamorous enough for him before! Was that why he was suddenly so interested after years of neglect? Rage burned in her for a moment; then she had the disquieting thought that if that was the case he wouldn't have grounded her, he'd have kept her in the limelight. She didn't understand him; she'd never understand him. Why didn't he leave her alone?

It had to be the tension caused by her scene with Rhy that produced the pounding headache she had that afternoon when she went home. She wanted nothing more than peace and quiet, so she indulged herself with a hot bath and, rather than get dressed afterward, she merely pulled on her comfortable pink robe which zipped up to her throat and sat down at her typewriter to work her way out of the doldrums.

It was still early, not yet seven, when her doorbell rang and she frowned irritably as she switched the typewriter off. Just as she reached the door she thought better of opening it in case Rhy had decided to press his attentions.

"Who is it?" she asked warily-

"Coral Williams" was the cool reply and Sallie's eyebrows rose in silent astonishment as she unlocked the door and opened it.

"Come in," she invited the striking blonde, then indicated her robe with a movement of her hand. "I'm son-y about the way I'm dressed, but I wasn't expecting visitors."

I'No, that's true enough," Coral admitted, walking into the apartment with the prowling slink of a model. She was both cool and dramatic, dressed in a lemon yellow evening gown that should have made her hair look brassy but didn't. "Rhy is taking me to a Broadway opening, so I knew he wouldn't be here tonight."

Aha! Sallie thought to herself. It looked as if Coral was checking out the competition, but who had told her? "He isn't likely to be here any other night either," she denied, and the amusement in her eyes and voice must have gotten through to Coral because the woman bit her lip and flushed.

"Don't try to hide it from me," she said huskily, her voice growing thick as if she was near tears. "Rhy told me himself."

"What?" Sallie's voice rose in astonishment. Was Rhy going to start advertising their marriage? Did he think that public knowledge might weaken her stand?

"I know how hard it is to resist Rhy when he decides that he wants a woman," Coral was saying. "Believe me, I know! But you're not in his

league and he'll only hurt you. He's had other women, but he's always come back to me and this time won't be any different. I just thought I'd let you know before you get in too deeply with him."
"Thanks for the warning," Sallie said, her inner amusement breaking out in a smile that made Coral look at her in disbelief. She couldn't help it; she thought it was funny that her husband's mistress should wam her about becoming too serious about him! "But I don't think you have anything to worry about. I'm not interested in having an affair with anyone, and you'll be doing me a favor if you can keep Rhy's attention away from me."
"How I'd like to!" Coral admitted wryly, glancing at Sallie with disturbing honesty. "But I knew when I first saw you that Rhy was interested, and he won't give up easily. Why do you think he's going on this Sakarya trip with you? If I were you, and if you're on the level about not wanting an affair with him, I'd check into the hotel bookings, because if I know Rhy there'll only be one room available!"
"I know that," Sallie chuckled, "and I'm ahead of him. I've already thought of another place to stay. With a friend." She didn't add that the friend was Marina Delchamp and that she hoped to stay in the palace. She was fairly certain that Marina would offer her sanctuary and would, in fact, greatly enjoy helping her to thwart Rhy.
Suddenly Coral laughed. "Maybe I was worried about nothing. You seem more than capable of looking after yourself. It must be that braid that makes you look so young."
"Probably," Sallie agreed blandly, thinking that in all probability she was Coral's age.
"You've set my mind at ease, so I'll leave now. Rhy is supposed to meet me in half an hour and I'll probably be late." Coral glided to the door and Sallie opened it for her, feeling rather like a servant opening a door for a queen, but laughter still lurked in her eyes as she returned to her writing. Coral acting concerned for another woman was a performance worth watching! Not for a second did she believe that the beautiful model cared a snap of her fingers about another woman's feelings. What Coral so carefully guarded was Rhy's attention, his time, and with a shake of her head Sallie wondered what made Rhy so sinfully attractive.
Perhaps if she knew what made her so vulnerable to Rhy she'd be able to fight him, but she could pinpoint no concrete reason. It was everything

about him, even the qualities that made her so angry. He was all man, the only man she'd ever wanted.

Realization struck and the force of it made her break out in a cold sweat, but she forced herself to admit the truth. She still loved him; she always hadShe had tried to push her love away in self-defense against the crippling pain she'd felt when Rhy had left her, but she hadn't been able to kill it. It had flourished in the darkness of her subconscious and now she could no longer deny that it existed. She sat at the typewriter, staring blankly at the keys, and let the knowledge creep into her consciousness. She couldn't stop the tears that welled in her eyes, though she stubbornly refused to let them fall. Love was one thing, but compatibility was quite another, and she was no longer a starry-eyed young girl who believed that love could conquer all. She and Rhy were the mismatch of the century, even more so now than in the beginning. At least then she'd thought him the center of the universe and would gladly have followed him into the jaws of death if he'd only asked her.

But he hadn't asked her; he'd gone alone, disregarding her fears and clinging timidity. When had he ever cared how she felt? He was too forceful, too selfconfident, to put her opinion, her feelings, above his own. It had been that way then and it was still the same. Wasn't that how he was acting now? What she wanted just didn't count! Look at the high-handed manner in which he'd stopped her career in its tracks and demanded that she resume their married life. What about her plans, what she wanted out of life? Drawing several deep breaths, Sallie tried to force her thoughts into order. If she went back to Rhy what would she have? The answer was simple, she would have Rhy-for as long as he remained interested. Or perhaps she wouldn't even have his undivided attention at all. She couldn't discount Coral Williams, and Rhy had never promised fidelity. He'd made no promises at all, other than ones of physical pleasure. So, if she went back to him, she'd have sensual satisfaction and what joy she could find in his company.

On the other side of the coin, what would he gain from a reconciliation? Once again, the first thing that came to mind was sex. That fierce attraction was mutual, unfortunately, for it made him unreasonable. If Coral was pushing him for a commitment Sallie's return would put a stop to that particular demand, and from what Coral had just told her Rhy wouldn't have any worries that Coral might leave him. No, Coral would stay for as long as

Rhy wanted her, and if he could have both women at once he probably would.
Sallie winced from that thought. No, Rhy wasn't like that. She didn't think him capable of fidelity to any one woman, but he didn't play games. A woman had to accept him as he was. That had been their trouble. She'd wanted him to be something he wasn't: an ordinary husband. Rhy had refused to change, or even compromise.
So she'd changed, slipped out from under his thumb, and he resented that even while she challenged him. She'd belonged to him once and he couldn't tolerate the idea that she no longer wanted to. That possessive streak Of his had to be a mile wide. She'd been his once, and he wanted her back, and he'd move heaven and earth to get her, even if he had to destroy her career to do so.
She couldn't go back to him, though deep down she craved to do just that. Her own identity was at stake. Rhy would swamp her, smother her. Then, when he was no longer interested, he'd walk out, and she didn't think she could survive that again.
No, she had to follow her own path, and if it led her away from Rhy she had to accept that. Odd how she could love him and yet be willing to spend her life separated from him, yet that was the way of it. She knew instinctively that Rhy would destroy her sense of self, her confidence, if she allowed him control over her emotions again.
There was no hesitation; she had to choose the path that was right for her, and that path didn't include Rhy. Perhaps no other man would ever make her heart pound madly as the lightest touch from Rhy could do, but if that was the price, she'd pay it. She had to.
When this trip to Sakarya was over she would turn in her notice and leave town. She couldn't wait any longer. Rhy was closing in, and she'd have to keep her guard up every minute.

Chapter Six

The night before they were due to leave for Sakarya Sallie went to bed early, hoping that she'd be able to get to sleep since the flight would be long and she'd never been able to rest on a trip. She was always too keyed up, too restless, and to her dismay she felt the same way now. The thought of

traveling with Rhy, when every self-preserving instinct in her screamed to keep as far away from him as she could, had all her nerves tingling in mingled fear and expectation. It was rather like petting a beautiful tiger, wanting so desperately to touch something so lovely but knowing at the same time that the tiger could kill you.

She turned restlessly in the bed, tangling the sheets, and when the doorbell rang she jumped out of bed with a sense of relief and grabbed her robe, shrugging into it as she ran to the door. Just as she reached it she skidded to a stop and called, "Who is it?"

"Chris," came a muffled voice and Sallie's brow knit in puzzlement. What was he doing here? He'd been on the road a lot lately, due to Rhy's influence, no doubt, but he'd arrived back in town the day before, and he'd been fine earlier when she'd seen him long enough to say a quick hello. Now he sounded as if he was sick, or in pain.

Quickly she unlocked the various locks on the door and opened it. Chris had been slumped against the doorframe, and he straightened, giving her a glimpse of his drawn face. "What's wrong?" she asked swiftly, catching his sleeve and pulling him in so she could close the door. She fumbled with the locks again, then turned to him. He'd jammed his hands deep into his pockets and stood regarding her with deep, silent misery evident in his brown eyes.

Sallie caught her breath. Had someone been killed? That was always her first thought, her deepest fear. She held out her hand to him and he took it, squeezing her slender fingers in a painful grip. "What is it?" she asked softly. "Chris?"

"I didn't know it would hurt so bad," he groaned, his voice so low that she could barely hear him. "Oh, God, Sallie, I didn't know."

"Who is it?" she demanded, grasping his arm urgently with her free hand. "Chris Meaker, if you don't tell rne--

He shook his head as if to clear it, as if he'd abruptly realized what she thought. "No," he said thinly. "No one's dead, unless you want to count me. She's left me, Sallie."

Sallie gaped at him, remembering that he was in love with a woman who wanted the same things she'd once wanted, a nice, normal husband who came home every night, who fathered children and loved them and was around to see them grow up. Evidently the woman had decided that she couldn't live with Chris's job, with knowing that every trip could be his last

one. Granted, some of the assignments weren't that dangerous, but it was a high-risk job at best. She hadn't been able to take it, either, the constant worry about someone she loved desperately. Only by cutting Rhy out of her life had she been able to function again.
"What can I do?" she asked in quiet sympathy. "Tell me how to help."
"Tell me it'll get better," he begged, and his voice cracked. "Sallie, hold me. Please, hold me!" To her horror his face twisted and he began to sob, jerking her to him with desperate arms and holding her so tightly that she couldn't breathe. His entire body was shaking and he buried his face in her neck, wetting her skin and hair and collar with his salty tears. Great tearing sobs tore from him and she put her arms around him, giving him what he'd asked for, someone to hold him. She knew what he was feeling; dear God, she knew exactly what he was going through. She'd cTied that way for Rhy, feeling as if he'd torn her insides out and she'd die from the pain of it.
"It'll get better," she promised thickly, tears blurring her own voice. "I know, Chris. I've been there." He didn't answer, but his arms lifted her, taking her from the floor. He drew a deep, shuddering breath and swallowed, trying to control himself. "God knows it can't get any worse," he whispered, and lifted his head. For a moment his brown eyes, wet and miserable, stared into her wet blue ones, and then he dipped his head and fastened his mouth to hers, kissing her with silent desperation. Sallie understood and she kissed him back. He wasn't kissing her for any sexual reason; it was merely a reaching out for human contact, a plea for comforting. She'd always liked Chris; at that moment she came to love him. Not the deep, ravenous love she had for Rhy, not even a man-woman type of love. She simply loved him as a human being, a fellow creature who was vulnerable and who needed her. She'd never been needed in her life before; she'd been dependent on her parents, then dependent on Rhy. Certainly Rby had never needed her!
Chris pulled his head back and sighed; then he rested his forehead against hers. "What can I do?" he asked, but she knew that he didn't expect an answer. "How long does it take?"
Now that she could answer. "It took me a couple of months before I could even begin to function again," she told him truthfully, and he winced. "But I worked at getting over it harder than I've ever worked at anything in my life, either before or since."
"I can't believe she did it," he groaned.

"Did you have a fight?" Sallie asked, leading him to the sofa and pushing until he sat down heavily. His head moved wearily back and forth. "No fight.
Not even an ultimatum. My God, you'd think she'd at least give me a warning! If she wanted to tear my guts out she bull's-eyed first shot!"
Sitting down beside him, Sallie took his hand and held it. With the insight of someone who had been there, she felt that she understood very well the motives of Chris's unnamed lady. He thought it was perfectly all right for him to risk life and limb while she waited patiently at home for him-how much waming did he think she'd have of his death? Did he think the pain would be any less for her if she was suddenly told that he hadn't made it back? Men were so arrogant and selfish, even Chris, and he was one of the most likeable people she'd ever met. Aloud she said, "Don't expect someone to give in just because you can't. You'd have made each other miserable. Face it, you're better off apart."
"I've never loved anyone before," he protested hopelessly. "It's not so easy to give up someone you really love! "
"I did, and I didn't have a choice either. He left me flat on my face."
Chris sighed and stared at the pattern of the carpet, and Sallie could read his anguish in the lines of his face. Chris had always seemed younger than his years, as if life had passed within touching distance of him but had never actually touched him, glancing off his inner calm like light off of a mirror, Now he'd aged and the boyishness was gone from his face.
"Her name is Amy," he said abruptly. "She's quiet, a little shy. I guess it took me a year of chance meetings in the hallways before she'd do more than smile at me when I spoke. Then it took me another year to get her into bed-- He stopped and glanced at her, his mouth going grim. "Forget I said that. I don't usually kiss and tell."
"It's forgotten," Sallie assured him. "Did you ask her to marry you?"
"Not at first. I've never wanted to be married, Sal, I'm a lone wolf, like you." He shook his head as if he didn't understand himself. "It kind of sneaked up on me, the idea of getting married. So finally I asked her and she cried. She said she loved me but that she couldn't take my job, and she'd marry me if I changed jobs. Hell, I love my job! Mexican standoff."
"And she cut her losses," Sallie murmured.
"She also hedged her bets." He gave her a wry, self-mocking smile. "She had another game going with a nine-to-five guy. She told me tonight that

they're getting married later this year."
"Is she bluffing?"
Chris shook his head. "I don't think so. She's wearing a diamond."
After sitting quietly for a moment Sallie said frankly, "You've got a choice, you know. You can have Amy or you can have your job, but you can't have both. Decide which one's the most important to you and forget about the other."
"Did you forget about Your guy when you chose your job over him?" challenged Chris.
"You've got it wrong. I was in Amy's shoes, not
yours. He chose his job over me," said Sallie. "I've never forgotten him, but I've done very well without him, thank you."
It wasn't until Chris spoke that she realized how much infon-nation she'd given him with her stray comments; or perhaps it was just that Chris was intuitive, sensing her moods and thoughts without any concrete evidence. After looking at her thoughtfully for a moment he murmured, "It's Baines, isn't it? He's the one who walked out on you."
Her stunned expression had to tell him the answer, but after a minute she gathered herself enough to admit, "He's the one. And let me tell you, when Rhy Baines walks, he walks hard!"
"He's a fool," Chris said mildly. "But he wants you back, doesn't he?"
"Not permanently," Sallie replied with a touch of bitterness. "He just wants to play for a while." Chris looked at her for a long time, his brown eyes moving over her small face, shuttered now to keep from revealing any more of her inner pain. When it became evident that she had nothing more to say he leaned forward and gently kissed her, but this time he was offering comfort instead of taking it. Sallie closed her eyes and let the kiss linger, neither responding nor rejecting but letting time expand as his Mouth moved lightly over hers. She'd never been kissed like that before, without passion, as a friend.
The strident demand of the telephone caused Chris to remove his mouth and with a mun-nured "Excuse me" Sallie stretched to reach the yellow receiver. When she answered she felt a tingle of alarm when a husky voice demanded, "Have you finished packing?"
"Of course," she said crisply, feeling insulted that he felt he had to check up on her. What did he think she'd do, wait until the last minute to throw

everything together? Because of that, and also because of a certain streak of feminine perversity, she added, "I was just talking to Chris."
She could feel the thickness of the silence on the line; then the growing crackle of Rhy's anger leapt out at her. "Is he there?" he finally bit out, the words almost exploding from his lips. Sallie had a mental picture of him, his teeth bared in a snarl, his cheekbones taut and savage with his rage. The gray eyes would be flinty, with red sparks snapping in them. The tingle of alarm inside her changed to one almost of pleasure.
"Of course he's here," she responded, knowing that she was flirting with danger. What would she do if Rhy's temper roared out of control? The last thing she wanted to do was cause any trouble for Chris, but somehow Rhy goaded her past responsible actions. "I don't give up my friends just because you snap your fingers," she heard herself adding.
His voice was a low growl, almost too low to hear. "When I snap my something it won't be my fingers. Get rid of him, Sallie, and do it now."
Immediately she bristled. "I will not--
"Now," he whispered. "Or I'm coming over. I'm not playing, baby. Get rid of him. Then come back and tell me you've done it."
Furiously she tossed the receiver onto the table and got to her feet. Without a word, not wanting Rhy to hear anything she said to Chris, she held out her hand to him, and with a puzzled look he took it, rising lightly to his feet. Sallie led him to the door, then stretched on tiptoe and kissed him gently.
"I'm sorry," she murmured. "He's ordered me to get rid of you or he's going to come over here and get violent."
For a moment Chris looked like his old self, one eyebrow rising in mild mockery. "This sounds serious. Sallie, old girl, I think you've left a lot out of your story."
"I have, but there's no use in raking over old ashes. Will you be all right?', she asked, concern evident in her voice and eyes, and he quickly hugged her.
"Of course I will. Just telling you helped. Kissing you helped even more." He gave a crooked grin. "She knocked me for a loop, but I'm not giving up. She cried when she told me she's marrying this other guy, so it's not hopeless, is it?"
Sallie grinned back. "Doesn't sound hopeless to me."
He flicked her cheek with one finger. "Have a good time in Sakarya," he teased, and she stuck her tongue out at him. After he'd gone she carefully

locked the door and returned to glare balefully at the telephone receiver lying there waiting for her. She was tempted to let him wait a few more minutes, but it was like a dose of bitter medicine: soonest done, soonest over with.

With that thought she snatched it up and nearly snarled, "Well, he's gone!"

"What took you so long?" he barked -An demand. "I was kissing him goodbye!" she retorted furiously. "And now I'm telling you goodbye!"

"Don't hang up," came the soft warning. "I'm going to give Meaker just enough time to get home, then I'm going to call and make sure he's there. For your sake, you'd better pray that he goes straight home."

"Your bully act is getting boring," she snapped, and slammed the phone down, then unplugged it. Marching into her bedroom she unplugged that phone too, but not before it began finging. Muttering furiously to herself about what she'd like to do to RhY Baines, she stomped around the apartment turning off lights, then flung herself on the bed and once again tried to go to sleep. If it had been difficult before it was impossible now. She was burning with righteous indignation, and she wondered how anyone could be such a hypocrite. It was perfectly all right for him to blatantly carry on his affair with Coral right in front of her, but he had no intention of allowing her the same freedom. Not that she wanted to have an affair with Chris any more than he wanted one with her, but that was beside the point. Then her thoughts turned to the trip to Sakarya. After tonight Rhy would be his most demanding, his most seductive, and to her dismay she recalled that in the past he'd had no difficulty at all in getting her to bed. She'd been lucky that, since he'd discovered her identity, the only times he'd kissed her they had been in his office where there had been scant opportunity for a seduction scene; she had her doubts that she'd have been so successful in stopping him otherwise. She was too honest to delude herself even when the truth was painful. She loved Rhy, but even if she didn't she'd still want him physically. Only her pride and her deep-rooted fear of being hurt again kept her from giving in to him.

It was after midnight before she finally drifted into sleep and the flight to Paris, the first leg of the trip to Sakarya, was an early one. She was pale with weariness before she even left her apartment to meet Rhy at the air terminal. She was detennined to be as businesslike as possible, both to keep him at a distance and to show him that he hadn't upset her with his jealous rage of the night before, but right from the start her attitude was difficult to

maintain. When he saw her Walking toward him Rhy got to his feet and came to meet her, taking her larger tote bag from her arm and bending down to press a brief warm kiss on her lips. "Good morning," he murmured, letting his dark gray eyes drift down over her body. "I like you in a dress. You should wear one more often."

So he was going to ignore last night, was he? Though she'd intended to do the same thing she felt a flare of irritation that he'd beaten her to the punch. Then she shrugged mentally and gave him a cool glance. "I thought the Sakaryans would prefer dresses over pants." She usually wore pants while traveling both for comfort and convenience, but considering the nature of the assignment she'd packed only dresses. For the flight she'd chosen a lightweight beige dress, sleeveless, with a low-scooped neckline, but the dress also had a matching long-sleeved jacket, and she was wearing it now, for despite the heat of summer in New York City she often felt cool in the early mornings, and she'd learned from experience that the temperature-controlled jetliners were too cool for her. She had also changed her hair from the informal braid to a neat coil on the back of her head. There wasn't a lot she could do with her hair, because of its length, but for more formal gatherings she always put it up.

"I also prefer dresses," he commented, taking her arm. "You have great legs, and I like to see them. You used to wear dresses a lot, as I remember."

That's right, remind me, she thought savagely, but she managed to give him an impersonal answer. "When I started working I found that pants are more suitable for the type of work I do." To change the subject she questioned, "Do you have the tickets?"

"Everything's taken care of," he assured her. "Do you want a cup of coffee before the flight's called?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink coffee while I'm traveling," she felt compelled to explain, and took a seat in an armchair. The glint in his gray eyes as he seated himself opposite her told her that Rhy was well aware why she hadn't chosen the sofa, but she ignored him and amused herself by watching the parade of earlymorning travelers.

Their flight was five minutes late, and Rhy was already restless when the loudspeaker called their flight number. He got to his feet and took her arm, and suddenly he gave her a whimsical smile. "Those are some spikes you're wearing," he commented. "You come up to my chin ... almost."

"They're also dangerous weapons," she said, her mouth curving.

"Are they? Are you planning to use them on me?" he asked, and before she could turn her mouth away he swooped his head down and captured her lips in a hard, hungry kiss that took her breath away.
"Rhy, please!" she protested, determined to hide the curling response she felt whenever he touched her. "We're in public!"
"I get more chances to touch you in public than I do in private, so I'm going to take advantage of them," he muttered in warning.
"This is business!" she hissed. "Try to remember that. It won't do the magazine any good if a reporter acts badly in public."
"No one here knows you're a reporter," he retorted with a grin. "Besides, I'm your boss and I say it's okay."
"I have standards, even if you don't, and I don't like being pawed! Are you going to catch this flight or not?"
"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he drawled, and she caught his hidden meaning and flushed. Beyond any doubt Rhy was planning on a reconciliation during this trip, and she was equally determined to prevent such a thing from happening. Marina would never turn her away, she was certain, and she relished the thought of Rhy's fury when he found she'd evaded him.
But for now she faced a long flight in his company and she didn't relish that. Not only did his presence make her nervous, she was a restless traveler under the best of circumstances. Before they'd been in the air an hour she'd flipped through several magazines and made a stab at reading a paperback she'd brought with her, then abandoned that for a book of crossword puzzles. When she discarded that and tried reading her book again Rhy reached out and took her hand.
"Relax," he advised, rubbing his thumb across the back of her hand, a gesture guaranteed to keep her from relaxing. "It's a long flight, and you're as jumpy as a flea. You'll be worn-out before we get to Paris, let alone Sakarya."
"I'm not a good traveler," she admitted. "I'm not good at sitting still with nothing to do." Already she was bored, and she yearned for her manuscript, but she'd been afraid to risk losing it, so she had left it behind.
"Try to take a nap," he advised. "You'll need it."
"I can't do that, either," she said with a rueful grin. "I'm just nervous enough of heights that I don't trust the pilot enough to go to sleep and let him handle it all."

"I didn't know you were afraid of heights," he said, and she bristled.
"I'm not afraid, I'm nervous. There's a difference. I fly all the time--or used to-and I've been in plenty of tight spots without going to pieces. I've even enjoyed some of them. In fact, I once took a few flying lessons, but that's another thing I didn't have the time to keep up."
"You've been busy," he said on an odd note. "What other accomplishments have you added since we parted company?"
He seemed to resent that and she suddenly felt proud that she had accomplished so much. At least he'd know that she hadn't been pining for him. "I speak six foreign languages, three fluently," she enumerated coolly. "I'm a fair shot, and I've learned how to stay on a horse. I've had to give up a lot of things I've tried-and that includes cooking and sewing, because I realized how boring they were. Anything else?"
"I hope not," he retorted, his mouth quivering with amusement. "No wonder Downey sent you into so many hot spots, you probably bullied him into it!"
"Greg can't be bullied, he's tough as nails," Sallie defended her editor. "And he'd be in the field himself if he could."
"Why can't he? I remember him as one of the best, but he suddenly grounded himself, and I've never heard why."
"He was shot up pretty badly in Vietnam," Sallie explained. "And while he was recovering his wife died of a stroke. It was quite a shock, there'd been no warning at all, but all of a sudden she was dead. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and the little girl had a hard time adjusting to her mother's death, so Greg decided to stay home with the kids."
"That's rough," Rhy commented. "He doesn't talk about it much."
"But he told you?" he asked sharply.
"In bits and pieces. Like I said, he doesn't talk about it much."
"A field reporter doesn't need a family. The old Pony Express advertised for riders who were orphans and had no family ties, and I sometimes think that should hold true for reporters, too."
"I agree," she said sharply, not looking at him. "That's why I don't want any ties."
"But you're not a reporter any longer," he murmured, his long fingers tightening around her hand. "Consider this your swan song, because after this your position will be that of Mrs. Rhydon Baines."
Swiftly Sallie jerked her hand away from him and stared out at the cloud cover below them. "Are you firing me?" she bit out angrily.

"I will if you force me to. I don't mind if you work so long as you're home every night with me. Of course, when we have children I'll want you to be home with them while they're small."
She turned furious blue eyes on him. "I won't live with you," she said bitterly. "I can't live with you and be more than half-alive myself. The thought of being a housewife again is nauseating."
His mouth turned grim. "You're lying to yourself if you believe that. You've changed a lot of things, but you can't change the way you feel about children. I remember how you were when you were pregnant with our son-"
"Shut up!" she flared, her fingers curving into her palms as she strove to control her pain at the memory of her dead child. "Don't talk about my baby." Even after seven years the pain of losing him was raw and unhealed, and for the rest of her life she would mourn that small, lost life.
"My son, too," Rhy said tightly.
"Really?" she challenged, lowering her voice to keep others from hearing her. "You weren't there when I gave birth, and you were seldom home during my pregnancy. The only role you played was to physically father the baby. After that, I was on my own." She turned away, swallowing in an effort to control the tears that threatened as she remembered her son. She'd never heard him cry, never watched him look about at the strange new world he'd entered, but for several magic months she'd felt his movements as he kicked and turned inside her and he'd been real to her, a person, and he'd had a name. She had somehow known she would have a boy, and he had been David Rhydon Baines, her son.
Rhy's fingers closed over her wrist so tightly that the fragile bones ground together and she winced with pain. "I wanted him, too," Rhy grouud out, then almost flung her wrist aside. The next several hours passed in silence. There was no layover in Paris and Sallie guessed that Greg had made the arrangements, because he always arranged things as tightly as he could, sometimes resulting in a missed flight when the first flight was only a little late. She and Rhy had barely checked through customs when their connecting flight was called, and they had to run to make the plane. From Paris it was another seven hours before they landed at the new, ultramodern jetport in Khalidia, the capital of Sakarya, and because of the time change, instead of the night their bodies were ready for, they were thrown into the middle of the Sakaryan day.

Their weariness and the long hours had largely erased the constraint between them, and Sallie didn't protest when he took her arm as they walked across the tarmac to the low, sprawling air terminal. The heat was incredible, and she was actually grateful for Rhy's support.
"I hope the hotel's decent," Rhy muttered beneath his breath, "but the way I feel right now I don't care what it's like as long as I can catch some sleep."
She knew the feeling. Jet lag was worse than simply missing sleep, it was total drain. She certainly wasn't up to battling with Rhy over where she would sleep!
They couldn't find anyone who spoke English, but several of the Sakaryans spoke French and both she and Rhy knew that language well. The taxi driver who took them to the hotel in a remarkably battered Renault spoke a rough French, and from what he said they gathered that Khalidia was being overrun by Westerners. Many Europeans had already arrived, and many Americans, including a man with a big camera, and it was said that the King would be on American television. He did not have a television himself, but he had seen one, and he thought that the big camera was one used for making the pictures for the television.
He was talkative, as taxi drivers the world over seemed to be, and he pointed with pride to the gleaming new buildings existing alongside ancient structures baked white by the merciless sun. Sakarya had the intriguing blend of old and new that so many developing nations displayed, with gleaming Mercedes limousines purring up and down the same streets used by donkeys. Camels were still used for travel in the Sakaryan desert, but overhead contrails were left by the sleek, screaming jets of the Sakaryan Royal Air Command.
The King had been educated at Oxford but, despite his absorption of European culture, he was by nature a cautious man, rather resistant to change. The Sakaryan nation was not a new one; it dated back to the day of Muhammad, and the family of A] Mahdi had held the monarchy for over five hundred years. There were deeply ingrained traditions to consider whenever Modernization was discussed and for the most part life in Sakarya went on as before. Motorized vehicles were nice, but the Sakaryans had gotten along without them before and would not mind if suddenly there were no more automobiles. The jetport was too noisy and the people who arrived on the big jets had strange customs. However, the big new hospital was a source of pride and the children were eager to attend the new schools.

The man who had accomplished this modernization was the man Marina Delchamp had married, Zain Abdul ibn Rashid, the finance minister of Sakarya and a man of considerable influence with the King. He was a dark, hawklike man with the coal black eyes of his race, and he'd been an international playboy since his college days in Europe. Sallie wondered if he loved Marina or was attracted only to her shining blond beauty. Did Zain Abdul ibn Rashid cherish Marina's gallant spirit, her natural dignity?
She worried over her thoughts like a terrier, for it wasn't easy for East to meet West. The cultural differences were so vast. Despite their spasmodic correspondence and the long intervals between their meetings Sallie considered Marina a true friend and she wanted her to be happy. She became so engrossed with her worries that she forgot to watch the scenery and was startled when the driver said in French, "The Hotel Khalidia. It is new and rich. You like it, yes?"
Peering around Rhy's shoulder Sallie admitted that she liked it, yes. The hotel was shielded on three sides by a row of carefully nurtured trees and beyond the trees was a high rock wall. The architecture wasn't ultramodern; instead, every effort had been made to insure that the hotel blended with its surroundings. The inside might offer every modem convenience, and she sincerely hoped it did, but the outer facade could have been ageless; it was clean and uncluttered in line, built of gleaming white stone, with deeply recessed windows.
Trying to keep up with Rhy, Sallie found that she was ignored when she tried to explain which cases were hers and which belonged to Rhy. A black-eyed young man in Western dress gave his attention solely to Rhy, not even glancing at her, and she received the same treatment from the desk clerk. The young man disappeared with their luggage and Rhy pocketed the room key.
When they were a few steps away from the desk clerk Sallie caught Rhy's arm. "I want a room of my own," she insisted, looking him in the eye.
"Sorry. I've registered us as man and wife and you'll have a hard time persuading an Islamic man to give you another room," he informed her with evident satisfaction. "You knew what to expect when you came on this trip."
"What do I have to say to get it through you head-" she began in frustration, and he cut her short.
"Later. This isn't the place for a public argument. Stop being difficult, all I want is a shower and a few hours' sleep. Believe me, you're perfectly safe

right now."
She didn't believe him, but she had to retrieve her luggage, so she followed him into the elevator, and he punched the button for the fourth floor.
Even as tired as she was the charm of the room made her catch her breath and she barely noticed as Rhy tipped the young man who'd brought up their bags. Though actually only one large room, it was separated by intricate wrought-iron screens in two areas, a sitting room to the front and the bedroom to the rear. A balcony ran the length of the room and it was furnished with two white wicker chairs with thickly padded cushions and a wicker lounger. A Small tea table stood between the two chairs. Stepping onto the balcony, she could see the huge swimming pool below, set among palm trees, and she wondered if women were allowed to use the pool.
Returning to the room, she inspected the divanstyle bed and smiled at the number of vari-colored cushions that adomed it. The parquet floor was covered in this area by a rug that looked Turkish but was probably a mass-produced copy. That made no difference, the effect was still stunning. Of all the hotels she'd stayed in she already liked this one the best. The food might be terrible, the service nonexistent for all she knew, but she adored the room!
Then she looked up and met Rhy's penetrating gaze and she paled. He'd removed his jacket and his shoulders strained at the material of his white shirt, and something in his stance told her that he was alert to her every movement. "Why don't you take a shower?" he suggested. "I'll make some phone calls and make certain everything's set up for the interview, which could take a while."
She wanted more than anything to grab her suitcases and run, but she knew that Rhy was waiting for just such a move. She would have to trick him and she wasn't certain just yet how to manage it. And a bath sounded like heaven....
"All right," she agreed wearily, picking up her suitcase and taking it into the bathroom that opened off to the right of the sleeping area, carefully locking the door behind her.
Despite her weariness, the bathroom delighted her. It could have come straight out of a Turkish harem with the black-tiled sunken bath, the mosaics, the rich jewel-like colors. She flung her dress off and peeled off her damp underclothing, sighing with relief at the sensation of cool air on her sweaty skin. She turned on the crystal taps that let the water pour into

the huge tub and slid with a sigh into the cool water, then splashed about with a fantasy of having servants waiting to help her from the bath and prepare her body with perfumed oils for the coming night with the dark, exciting sultan....

Then reality intruded with the thought that she'd go mad under such circumstances, and she had enough to worry about now without bringing a sultan into it. She got out of the bath and toweled herself dry; then she debated what to wear. If she changed into street clothes Rhy would watch her like a hawk, but she had no intentions of parading around before him in a nightgown. She finally settled on a sapphire blue caftan and zipped herself into it, then took down her hair and brushed it vigorously.

She was too tired to braid it so she left it loose. After picking up her scattered clothing and tidying the bath she unlocked the door and carried her suitcase out.

Rhy was on the phone and he barely looked in her direction as she put belongings away, trying to behave as if she meant to stay. She wandered around the room, fighting to hold off the sleepiness that was growing stronger and listened as Rhy talked to several people.

After some time he covered the mouthpiece with his hand and said to her, "Why don't you go ahead and get some sleep? I don't know how long I'll be."

She didn't want to go to sleep, every instinct screamed against it, but she couldn't leave with him watching her. Besides, she was so tired; every bone and muscle in her ached from the long hours sitting in the plane. She could rest for just a few minutes until Rhy got off the telephone. She was a light sleeper; she'd hear him when he went into the bathroom.

She pulled the shades over the doors to the balcony and dimmed the room into semidarkness, then crawled among the pillows on the divan with a sigh of ecstasy. She stretched out her aching legs, turned her face against a pillow and was instantly asleep.

She was aroused some time later when someone muttered, "Move over," and she rolled over to make room for the warm body that slid next to her. Dimly she was aware that she should wake up, but she was so comfortable and the quiet hum of the central air conditioner lulled her back to sleep.

The time difference was confusing; when she woke it was dark, but she'd slept for hours. Still groggy, she peered at the dim figure coming out of the

bathroom. "Who is it?" she called thickly, unable to clear the cobwebs from her mind. She wasn't certain just where she was, either.
"Rhy," the rough-velvet voice answered. "I'm sorry I woke you, I was just getting a drink. Would you like a glass of water, too?"
That sounded heavenly and she sighed a yes, then began struggling into a sitting position. In only a moment a cool glass was being put into her hand and she drained it thirstily, then gave it back to him. He returned the glass to the bathroom as she fell back among the pillows and thought drowsily that he must have eyes like a cat because he hadn't turned on any lights.
Just when the bed dipped beneath his weight again she remembered that she'd been planning on slipping out and her heart lurched with fear. "Wait-" she gasped in panic, reaching out to thrust him away, and her hand encountered smooth warm flesh. Shocked, forgetting what she'd been about to say, instead she blurted out, "You don't have anything on!"
In the darkness he gave a rough chuckle and turned on his side to face her, his heavy arm sliding around her waist and overcoming her futile resistance to pull her snugly against him. "I've always slept in the raw ... remember?" he teased, his lips brushing her temple.
Her breath halted in her chest, and she began to tremble at the pressure of his strong, warm body against her. His male scent filled her nostrils and made her senses begin to swim. Desperately fighting her growing need to press herself to him and let him do as he wanted, she put her hands against his chest to push him away and instead found her slim fingers twining in the hair that covered his chest.
"Sallie," he muttered hoarsely, searching for and finding her lips in the darkness, and with a moan she lifted her arms to cling around his neck. She knew she should resist him but that had never been possible and even now, when she had such good reasons for fighting him, the temptation of knowing again such wild satisfaction kept her from shoving him away-
Nor was he unaffected; his big body was trembling against her when he lifted his mouth from hers, scattering kisses across her face and eyes. She felt him slide down the zip of the caftan and pull it from her shoulders, bunching it about her waist, then his shaking hands were exploring the delicately swelling breasts he had bared. Helplessly she buried her face in his shoulder, shuddering with the force of the desire he'd awakened, not wanting him to stop, knowing she'd go mad with frustration if he stopped.

Fiercely he stripped the caftan away from her and threw it aside, and she had a brief moment of sanity as he turned back to her. Her hands clutched at his powerful shoulders and she moaned weakly, "Rhy... don't. We shouldn't."
“You’re my wife," he muttered in reply, taking her in his arms again and pressing his weight over her. She gasped at the wild, sweet contact of his bare flesh against hers, then the passion-tart possession of his mouth over hers sucked away her protests, and again her arms lifted and clung about him.
It was as if the years of separation had never been; their bodies were as familiar with each other as they had been long ago. Caught up in the whirlpool of his passion she could only respond, only return the passion he so freely gave- He wasn't gentle; except for the first time, Rhy had never been a gentle lover. He was fierce, tender, erotic, wildly exciting, and she was unable to stem her passionate reception of his lovemaking. It was just as it had been before-no, it was better; he drove her beyond sanity, beyond caring, beyond knowledge of anything except him.

Chapter Seven

Sallie came awake slowly, too comfortable and content to easily relinquish her hold on slumber. She felt utterly boneless, weightless, as if she were afloat. Her body was moving up and down in a gentle rhythm and beneath her head a steady, soothing drum kept time with her heart. She felt so marvelous, so safe....
The shrill ringing of the telephone was a rude interruption into her euphoric state and she muttered a protest. Then her bed moved beneath her and she clutched at it, only to find that instead of sheets her fingers were clinging to hard, warm skin. Her eyes popped open and she raised her head as Rby stretched out a long, muscular arm and lifted the receiver from the bedside extension. "Hello," he muttered sleepily, his voice even huskier than usual as he wasn't completely awake. He listened a moment, said "Thank you" and hung up, then, with a sigh, closed his eyes again.
Hot color ran into Sallie's cheeks and hastily she tried to scramble away from him and pull up the sheet to cover her nude body. She was prevented from moving by his arms, which tightened about her, holding her in place

on his chest. His eyelids, with their thick black lashes, lifted and he surveyed her flushed, tousled, early-morning beauty with a satisfied gleam in his gray eyes.
"Stay here," he commanded huskily. His hand quested down her side, smoothing her silky skin, and he murmured against her ear, "I feel as if I have a kitten curled up on my chest. You hardly weigh anything."
Involuntarily she shivered in delight at his warm breath in her ear, but she made an effort to free herself, saying, "Let me up, Rhy, I want to dress-"
"Not yet, baby," he crooned, brushing her long hair back to press his lips into the small hollow below her ear. "It's still early, and we don't have anything more important to do than getting used to each other again. You're my wife and I like the feel of you in my arms."
"Estranged wife," she insisted, trying to arch her head away from his insistent lips, but instead she found herself merely tilting her head back to allow him greater access to her throat. Her heart began pounding when he found the pulse beating at the back of her neck and sucked at it hungrily, as if he wanted to draw her life's blood out of her body.
"We weren't estranged last night," he murmured. "Last night..." Her voice failed her and after a moment she managed to continue. "Last night was the result of memories, an old attraction, nothing more. Let's just mark it down to auld lang syne and forget about it, shall we?"
He relaxed back against the pillows but kept her cuddled close against him. Surprisingly her statement didn't seem to anger him, for he smiled lazily at her. "It's okay to surrender now," he informed her gently. ,I won the war last night."
She almost winced with pain at the thought of giving him up again, yet she knew she couldn't be happy with him now. She let her head fall onto his shoulder and for a moment she allowed herself to relish his closeness. He stroked her back and shoulders, playing with her hair, pulling it all to one side to drift over his chest and shoulder. His touch was sapping her strength, as always, and while she still had the presence of mind she raised her head from the haven of his wide shoulder and gazed at him seriously.
“It still won't work," she whispered. "We've both changed, and there are other considerations now. Coral's in love with you, RhY. You can't just turn your back on her and hurt her like that-or were you planning on keeping her on the side?"

"You're a little cat," he observed lazily as his hand began questing more intimately, "always scratching and spitting, but I've got a tough hide and I don't mind if you're a little temperamental. Don't worry about Coral. What do you know about her, anyway?" e confessed, "She came to my apartment," Salli to warn me that you weren't serious, that You always came back to her." She tried to squirm away from his boldly exploring fingers and found instead that the friction of her skin against his made her catch her breath in longing.

He swore beneath his breath. "Women," he growled, "are the most vicious creatures on earth. Don't believe her, baby, Coral doesn't have any hold on me. I do what I want to do with whomever I choose-and right now I choose my wife.-

"It isn't that easy," she insisted. "Please, Rhy, let me go. I can't make you understand when you're holding me like this--

"Then I'll keep holding you," he interrupted. "The bottom line is this, you're mine and you'll stay mine. I can't let you go and I hope you're not in love with that photographer of yours because if you are I think I'll kill him!"

White faced, Sallie stared at him, at his suddenly narrowed eyes and clenched jaw. He reacted on a Purely Primitive basis to the thought of another man touching her, and abruptly she knew that it had been stupid to let him think she was involved with Chris. Not only was that a challenge to Rhy's virile domination, it wasn't fair to Chris to use him as a shield. Rhy was dangerous, he could hurt Chris and it would be her fault.

On the other hand, it went completely against her grain to let Rhy have everything his way, especially after last night. He'd certainly had everything his way then; except for that one feeble protest she'd made she hadn't attempted to ward him off at all. Even that lone effort hardly counted, because she hadn't tried to fight him off, she'd only said "no" and of course it had been a waste of breath for all the attention Rhy had paid to it.

Nor did she feel free to tell him anything about Chris. Chris's calm, lazy manner went hand in glove with such a strong sense of inner privacy that she was still surprised that he'd confided in her, and she refused to betray that confidence just to pander to Rhy's ego.

She still hadn't said anything, and suddenly Rhy's patience snapped. His hands tightened on her and he rolled, taking her with him and pinning her firmly beneath him. "Maybe you need to be shown again just who you

belong to," he said violently, his mouth hard, his eyes glittering with an anger that wasn't quite anger.
Sallie's heart jolted as she felt his muscular legs parting hers, and she knew that he was going to make love to her again. Already she was drowning in the warmth that flooded her, and her heartbeat settled into a rapid pounding. But even as she slid her arms around his neck she heard herself insisting steadily, stubbornly, "I belong to myself. No one else."
"You're mine, Sallie! Damn you, you're mine!" With his violently muttered words echoing in her ears she gave herself up to this overwhelming possession and even though her mind protested her senses were too enthralled by the delights he offered to let her argue with his blindly possessive instinct. She loved him, loved him so much that after those seven long, lonely years without his touch, now that he'd overcome her resistance and made love to her again, she wanted nothing more than to revel in the intimacy of their closeness. He couldn't give her love, but he could give her this, and it was as much of himself as he would ever give any woman. She clung to his broad shoulders and matched his fiery demands with her own, and when he finally moved from her to collapse on his back they were both satisfied and trembling with exhaustion. Unable to stand the space in the bed that separated them Sallie slid across to him and curled up against his chest, her lips pressing against his throat. As suddenly as cutting off a light she was asleep, her hands clinging to him even in sleep, as if she couldn't bear to let him go.
Awakening from her doze, Sallie stirred, opened her eyes and raised her head to find Rhy just awakening, too, his eyes still sleepy. Memories of the many mornings years ago when they'd made love and gone back to sleep made her feel eerily as if those intervening years had never been. His hand smoothed her hair back from her face, then slid around to clasp her slender neck with those strong lean fingers. "You never did tell me," he whispered. "Are you in love with him?"
She closed her eyes in resignation. He had the determination of a bulldog. But what could she tell him? Would he believe her or even understand if she told him that the way she loved Chris wasn't romantic or even sexual? The fingers clasping her neck tightened warningly and she opened her eyes. "Chris is none of your business," she said finally, tilting her chin at the grim temper that hardened his mouth, "But I haven't slept with him, so make of that what you like."

Silence followed that challenge and confession for several minutes, and when she summoned the nerve to look directly at him again she was jolted by the look of raw desire on his face. "Don't ... don't look at me like that," she whispered, lowering her eyes again.
"I want you," he said hoarsely. "I'm going to have you. I'm glad that you don't have a lover now because I don't want any complications to stand in my way."
Wearily she shook her head. "No, you still don't understand. Just because I'm not sleeping with anyone doesn't mean that I want to take up our marriage again. For the record, I've never slept with anyone but you, but I just don't want to live with you. I don't think it'll work. Don't you see?" she pleaded. "I need my job the way you needed yours when we were first married. I can't be happy staying at home and cleaning house now, I need more, more than you're willing to give. I need my freedom."
His face was taut as he stared at her, his eyes restless. "Don't ask me to send you on a dangerous assignment," he muttered. "I can't. If anything happened to you and I was the one responsible for your being there I couldn't live with myself. But as for the job-maybe we can work out a compromise. Let's give it a try, see how we get along together. All we ever did before was make love. We didn't get to know each other as people. We'll be here for three more days. While we're here let's just enjoy each other and worry about the future when we get back to the States. Can we manage three days together without fighting?'I
"I don't know," she said cautiously. The temptation to enjoy those three days stole away her strength. She knew Rhy, knew that his idea of a compromise was to hem her in so that she had to do things his way, but there was nothing he could do while they were here. She had already taken the precaution of drawing out her savings, and once they returned to New York she knew she'd have to leave, but for now ... for now why couldn't she simply enjoy being with her husband and loving him? Three days was so short a space in which to store up enough memories to last a lifetime! Why couldn't he see that they were hopelessly incompatible?
"All right," she finally agreed. "But when we get back don't expect me automatically to move in with you. I'll hold you to that compromise,"
His strong mouth curved with amusement. "I never thought any differently," he said wryly, thrusting his fingers through her hair at the back of her head and pulling her down for his kiss. The kiss began casually, then gradually

deepened until they were clinging together in mutual need that could only be satisfied one way.

As they dressed to attend the half-party, half-press conference that Marina was giving prior to the charity ball, Sallie was struck by how familiar it seemed, the same routine of so many years ago emerging without them having to talk about it. She used the bath first, then, while she was putting on her makeup and arranging her hair, Rhy showered and shaved. He waited until she'd put on her lipstick, then grabbed her and kissed her, smearing the color outside her lip line, chuckling to himself as she flounced back to the mirror to repair the job. How many times had he done that in the past? She couldn't remember. It was part of their marriage, and when she met his eyes in the mirror she knew that he was remembering, too, and they smiled at each other.

The gown she'd chosen was a pale rose silk, simply cut, as her lack of stature wouldn't permit anything frivolous or she looked like a doll. The color was extremely flattering to her dark blue eyes and glossy sable hair and Rhy eyed her with male appreciation as he zipped her up.

"I don't think it's safe for you to leave this room." He bent down to murmur in her ear. "Some wild sheik will steal you and take you into the desert and I'll have to start a war to get you back again."

"What? And ruin a good story?" she mocked, meeting his eyes in the mirror. "I'm certain I could escape, and just think what good reading that would make!"

"I would laugh," he said wryly, "but I know firsthand the kind of dangers you've faced, and it damned near curdles my blood. It's one thing for me to risk my hide and quite another for yours to be endangered."

"Not really," she argued, leaning forward to brush her finger under her eye and remove a tiny smudge she'd just noticed. "When we were together before, I was terrified that you'd be hurt and I nearly died when you were shot. Now I understand what sent you back to the field as soon as possible, because I became hooked on excitement, too."

"It wears off," he said, an almost weary look passing over his hard features. "The danger became almost a bore, and the thought of sleeping in the same bed for more than a few days in a row grew in attractiveness. Roots don't necessarily tie you down, baby, they can help you to grow bigger."

"That's true, if the pot's large enough so that you don't become root-bound," she pointed out and turned to face him. She was smiling but the expression

in her eyes was serious and he tilted her face up to him with one long finger under her chin.
"But holding on to you is so much fun," he teased. "Don't you ever think of anything else?" She shook her head in amusement.
"When I'm with you? Rarely." His gray eyes took on a glint of passion as he looked down at her. "Even before I knew who you were all I had to do was catch a glimpse of that sassy braid switching back and forth across your trim little rear and I wanted to chase you down in the hallways."
Sallie smiled, but inwardly she recognized that all of his words, his actions, were based on physical attraction and not on an emotional need. Rhy wanted her, there was no doubt about that, but the realization was growing in her that he was incapable of love. Perhaps it was just as well. If he loved as intensely as he desired, his love could be soul destroying.
The party was being held in another hotel as the Al Mahdi palace was being readied for the ball and Marina's husband did not want their own home opened to the public for security reasons. The circular drive in front of the hotel was choked with limousines and there was a confusing mixture of accents as Europeans and Americans mingled with the native Sakaryans. Security was tight; the doors and lower windows were posted with guards, fierce-looking Sakaryans in boots and military uniforms, with cocky little berets on their heads, watching the crowd of foreign visitors with their fierce black desert eyes. Their credentials and invitation were checked and rechecked as Sallie and Rhy moved slowly forward in the swarm of people. But once inside they were guided smoothly into the suite being used and all outward signs of security vanished. There was soft, soothing music playing and the light tinkle of ice cubes against glass testified that many people were relaxing.
The suite was simply furnished in the Arabic way, but there were enough seats for anyone who preferred to sit instead of stand. The colors blended simply, golds and browns and whites, and Sallie discerned Marina's touch in the many plants and flowers that dotted the rooms and both cheered and soothed. She looked about for her friend but was unable to catch sight of her in the constantly moving flow of humanity.
"Why is the security so stiff outside?" she asked, leaning close to Rhy so no one else could hear her. "Because Zain isn't a fool," Rhy growled. "A lot of people would like to see him dead. Relatives of the King who are jealous of Zain's influence, religious purists who don't like his progressive politics,

terrorist left-wingers who don't need a reason, even Communists. Sakarya is an important hunk of real estate these da s."
"I heard about the oil reserves," she whispered. "Are they that large?"
"Massive. If the surveys prove correct Sakarya will have reserves second only to the Saudis."
"I see," she mused. "And since the finance minister is married to an American woman his sympathies will naturally lean to the West. That makes his influence with the King doubly important. Good heavens, is it safe for Marina to live here?"
"As safe as Zain can make it, and he's a cunning man. He intends to die of old age."
She intended to ask more but a flash of bright hair caught her eye, and she turned her head to see Marina bearing down on her. Her friend was gorgeous, glowing, her lovely spring green eyes sparkling with gaiety.
"Sallie!" she exclaimed, laughing, and the two hugged each other enthusiastically. "I wasn't sure you were going to make it! I couldn't believe it. Someone kept wanting to send another reporter in your place. I refused to see her, of course," she said with laughing triumph.
"Of course," agreed Sallie. "By the way, Marina, let me introduce my publisher, Rhydon Baines. He's the one who tried to foul things up for us."
"You're kidding!" Marina smiled up at Rhy and gave him her hand. "Didn't you know Sallie and I are old friends?"
"Not until after the fireworks," he said wryly. "I soon found out. Is Zain here? It's been a long time since I've seen him."
Recognition lit Marina's eyes. "You're that Rhy Baines? Yes, he's here somewhere." She turned her head to locate her husband, peering around groups of people. "Here he comes now."
Zain ibn Rashid was a lean, pantherish man with a darkly aquiline face and a rather cruel smile, but he wore his exquisitely tailored suit as casually as an American teenager would wear jeans. Sensuality curled his upper lip and hooded his piercing black eyes, and with a shock Sallie realized that she'd only met one other man who exuded that aura of raw sexuality, Rhy. It was ironic but rather inevitable that she and Marina had married the same type of man, both untamed and unlikely ever to be tamed.
"Rhy!" Zain had transferred his gaze from his wife to glance casually at the couple with her and now his black eyes opened with recognition and he

extended his hand. "I'd heard you were going to interview the King, then that the plans were changed. Are you going to do the interview after all?"
"No, someone else will do that. I'm here on a different matter entirely," Rhy said in a wry tone, nodding his head to indicate Sallie. "I'm here as a bodyguard for the reporter from World in Review. Sallie, let me introduce Zain Abdul ibn Rashid, the minister of finance-"
"And my husband," Marina broke in impishly. "Zain, Sallie is my friend I've been telling you about." Then she looked at Rhy. "What do you mean, bodyguard? I thought you were the publisher of the magazine?"
"I am," he admitted, unperturbed. "I'm also her husband."
Irrepressible Marina squealed and hugged Sallie again. "You're married! When did this happen? Why didn't you write me?"
"I haven't had time," Sallie blurted without thinking while she shot Rhy a glance that promised revenge. He merely smiled at her, well satisfied with his announcement.
Zain was grinning openly. "So you finally got caught. We'll have to celebrate, but when I don't know. Marina has thrown the country into an uproar. I'll be glad when this is over." He gave his wife a look that held for several seconds before he jerked his eyes away, but Sallie had seen his expression and she heaved an inward sigh of relief. He'd looked at Marina with absorbing tenderness before pulling his sardonic mask back in place. He really loved Marina; he hadn't chosen her simply for her golden beauty.
"I can't stay any longer, I have to circulate." Marina sighed, putting her hand on Zain's arm. "Sallie, I promise that after the ball we'll curl up and talk our heads off."
Sallie nodded. "I'll see you then," she said as Marina left to attend to the other guests, with Zain a watchful escort.
"She's beautiful," Rhy commented.
"Yes." She glanced at him from under her lashes. "Even more beautiful than Coral."
"Am I supposed to argue with that?" he drawled. She shrugged and didn't answer. Instead she questioned, "How long have you known Zain?"
"Several years," he said noncommittally. "How did you meet him?"
"What is this, an interview?" he parried, taking her arm and steering her to the side. He signaled a waiter who came over with a tray of glasses. Rhy took two glasses of champagne and gave one to Sallie.

"Why aren't you answering me?" she persisted, and at last he gave her an exasperated look. "Because, baby, I wouldn't like my answers to be overheard, and neither would Zain. Now be a good girl, and stop being so nosy."
She glared at him and turned her back, walking slowly among the ebb and flow of people as she sipped from her glass. Nosy! Asking questions was her job and he knew it. But he was the most contrary man she'd ever met, she thought idly, tracing her finger along the rim of a jade vase. Contrary and arrogant, he didn't know what it meant to be thwarted in anything he wanted.
"Stop sulking and start taking notes," he whispered in her ear. "Notice who's here and who isn't."
"I don't need you to tell me how to do my job," she flared, walking away from him again.
“No, what you need is a good spanking," he murmured, his long legs and greater strength making it easy for him to stay even with her in the press of people.
Perhaps he had hoped to get a rise out of her with that ridiculous statement, but she ignored him and continued her wandering progress through the suite. She rarely took notes at a function like this, having learned that it made people self-conscious. One of her assets was that she had an excellent memory and she used it, identifying the European blue bloods and financial giants. Social events weren't really her field, but she was able to put a name and a country to the important people and most of the not-so-important ones, as well.
Rhy caught her arm and leaned down to whisper, "There's the Deputy Secretary of State to your right. And the French foreign minister beside him."
"I know," Sallie said smugly, having already spotted the two men. "But I haven't seen a representative of a Communist nation, so I suppose Zain's influence is making itself felt."
Just then a tall, thin, distinguished gentleman with gray hair and kindly blue eyes approached them and extended his hand. "Mr. Baines," he greeted Rhy cordially in a clipped British public school accent. "Nice to see you again."
"It's a pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Ambassador," Rhy replied, taking the other man's hand. "Sallie, I'd like to introduce you to Sir Alexander

WilsonHume, Great Britain's ambassador to Sakarya. Mr. Ambassador, my wife, Sallie."
The pale blue eyes lit as the ambassador took Sallie's hand and gently lifted it to his lips with oldworld courtesy. "My pleasure entirely." He smiled as Sallie murmured a conventional greeting. "Have you been married long, Mrs. Baines?"
An impish smile curved her lips. "Eight years, Mr. Ambassador."
"My word! Eight years!" He gave her a startled glance and abruptly she wondered if he'd had reason to assume that Rhy wasn't married when he'd known him before. But if that was the case the ambassador covered his confusion with perfect poise and carried on without a hitch. "You hardly look old enough to have been married a year."
"That's true," Rhy agreed smoothly. "She's aged well."
The ambassador gave him a rather startled glance, but Sallie merely smiled at Rhy's impudence despite the hollow ache that had bloomed inside her at the thought of Rhy's blatant infidelities. She'd just have to get over that, she told herself firmly. Only a naive fool would expect a man like Rhy to be faithful; he was far too physical, and far too attractive!
It was several hours later, when they were at last in a taxi returning to their own hotel, that Sallie commented evenly, "Poor man, the ambassador covered up for you well, didn't he? But now he considers you a philanderer."
"I'd hoped you wouldn't notice," Rhy replied wryly, "but you don't miss much, do you? But don't paint me blacker than I am, Sallie. You said you never thought I'd live like a monk, but I very nearly did. I've had a lot of social dates that ended when I took the lady home, nothing more."
"You're lying," she stated without expression. "I suppose you expect me to believe that Coral Williams is just a friend?"
"She's not my enemy," he said, his mouth twitching in amusement. She didn't believe him when he continued. "I wanted to make you think she was my mistress to make you jealous, but I guess it didn't work."
She began to laugh in disbelief. She'd never heard such a ridiculous tale before in her life. Rhy was a sensual animal, his passions never far from the surface, and easily aroused. She'd have to be a fool to believe he'd been faithful to her during the seven years they'd been separated. She didn't even believe he'd been faithful to her while they'd been together! "Sorry." She laughed. "Try a tale that's more plausible. Besides, it doesn't matter."

He drew in his breath in a hiss, and glancing at him she saw the flare of anger in his eyes. "I'll make it matter," he promised her grimly. Or was it a threat?

She knew that he intended to make love to her as soon as they were in their hotel room in an attempt to tear down her convictions, and she eyed him warily. She'd agreed to spend the three days with him and she'd known that they would be sleeping together, but she intended to limit their lovemaking to the nights. After all, his desire was familiar to her, even after all these years. What she wanted to do was talk to him, learn about him, get to know him in the way she'd never known him before. He was her husband, but he was still a stranger to her. Sadly she realized that even though she planned on leaving when they returned to New York she was still searching for some way to believe that they could be happy together even when she knew the search was futile.

They had just entered the hotel room, and Rhy was shrugging out of his formal jacket when the phone rang. With an impatient curse he snatched it up and barked, "Yes?"

Sallie watched him as he listened, saw the frown that darkened his brow. "I'll be right down," he said, and hung up, then pulled his jacket back on.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"The desk. There's a message for me. I'll be right back."

After he'd gone she undressed and hung away her gown, then put on a lightweight white blouson dress, all the while mulling over what he'd said. A message for him? Why hadn't they given it to him over the phone or, better yet, when they'd walked through the lobby not five minutes before? It didn't sound plausible, and without hesitation she left the room and made for the elevators. She made her living by being curious, after all.

But she was more than curious, she was cautious. She left the elevator at the second floor and walked down the stairs the rest of the way. Her cautiousness was rewarded. She opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and looked out to see her husband standing with his arm around Coral Williams, who was staring up at him with tearstained eyes. Sallie couldn't hear what they were saying, but Rhy went with Coral to the elevators and the doors slid shut behind them.

Her lips pressed firmly together, Sallie returned to their hotel room and swiftly gathered her clothing. So much for his tale of being faithful! It had

to be more than a casual relationship for Coral to follow him to Sakarya. And she wasn't going to wait for him to listen to any more of his lies!
She had to act swiftly; she had no way of knowing how long he would stay with Coral. She scribbled a note, not paying attention to what she was writing, but it was something to the effect of sorry, she just wasn't interested. Then she picked up her suitcase and purse and left, once again taking the stairs.
Finding a taxi was easy, a fleet of them was waiting outside the hotel; her problem now was finding a place to stay. She was aware that hotels were few and far between in Khalidia. In French she explained to the driver that she wished to go to another hotel but not one that was well-known. He obliged, and when Sallie saw it she understood why it wasn't wellknown; it looked as if the French Foreign Legion should come swarming over the walls. It was small and old and simple, and the fiercely mustachioed man who seemed to be in charge looked her over thoroughly before saying something in his own language to the taxi driver.
"He says there is a room, if you wish it, but it is not of the finest," the driver translated. "Also you must pay in advance and you must stay in your room as you are not veiled and your man is not with you."
"That seems fair," Sallie replied. To stay in the room was just what the doctor ordered; it would insure that Rhy couldn't find her. "But what shall I do for food?"
The Sakaryan's dark eyes slid over her, and then he revealed that he spoke some French by informing her rustily that his wife would bring food to her, Delighted that she'd be able to communicate Sallie thanked him and beamed at him, her big eyes sparkling. When the driver had left Sallie lifted her suitcase and waited expectantly for her host to lead her way to her room. Instead he glared down at her fiercely for a moment, then leaned down and took the suitcase from her hand. "You are too small," he growled. "My wife will feed you."
Then he took her up the narrow stairs to her room and left her there, and Sallie examined what was to be her sleeping quarters for the next two nights. The room was spotless but contained only a single bed and a washstand on which stood a blue urn of water and a washbasin. But the bed was covered with an exotic spread and was strewn with cushions, and the mattress was comfortable, so she was satisfied.

The proprietor's wife brought up a tray loaded with cheese, bread, orange juice and coffee. She looked Sallie over from head to toe, her expression shocked at the sight of Sallie's slim legs, but she gave a timid smile in response to Sallie's grin.

After eating, Sallie took off her dress and shoes; if she was to be confined in this small room for fortyeight hours she might as well be comfortable. Digging in her suitcase she produced the long T-shirt that she had packed and pulled it on; wearing only that and her panties she was as cool as she could get and still have any clothes on. Then she unpacked her clothing and hung everything up to air.

With nothing else to do she lay down on the bed and tried to lose herself in one of the paperback books she'd brought, but the heat was becoming oppressive and she thought with longing of the air-conditioned comfort of the Hotel Khalidia. Flopping onto her back she raised the book to fan herself, and only then did she notice the old-fashioned paddle fan on the ceiling. "Shades of Casablanca!" she cried in delight, jumping up and looking about for the switch. She wouldn't even have sworn that the hotel was wired for electricity, but there was a switch on the wall, and when she flipped it the fan creaked into motion. The gentle movement of air against her skin relieved the sensation of smothering, and she fell back on the bed. She tried again to read her book, but thoughts of Rhy kept breaking into her concentration, and suddenly a raw sob burst from her throat. Amazed at her tears and yet helpless to stop them, she bowed her head onto the bed and wept until her chest hurt and her eyes were swollen. Crying for Rhy? She'd sworn seven years ago that he'd never make her cry again, and she had thought she was over all her illusions about him, but seeing him with his arm around Coral had hit her like a sledgehammer. Was she always going to be a fool over the man? What was the old saying? "I have cried for these things once already," or something to that effect, yet here she was crying for them again. And it was a waste of time.

She should be glad that she'd seen Coral before she'd allowed Rhy to make a complete fool of her. It was her stupid weakness for him that allowed her, even knowing that she was stupid, still to respond to his lovemaking--crave his lovernaking, if she was honest with herself. And subconsciously she'd been hoping that somehow things would work out between them. She might as well face the truth once and for all: the reasons Rhy wanted her back were not emotional ones; they were all physical. Sex between them was

good. It was more than good. They were a matched pair with their needs, their instincts and responses, each knowing just how to drive the other wild. And it wasn't anything they thought about; it was inborn in both of them, whatever it was that made each of them so physically attractive to the other. Having known his lovemaking, hadn't she refused all other men because she'd known that they couldn’t compare with what she'd had with Rhy? She couldn't see Rhy refusing women like that; his sexual appetites were too urgent and strong, but there was no doubt that he had a weakness for her. But sex just wasn't enough for her! She loved him and she wanted that love to be returned. They couldn't spend their lives together in bed; there had to be something else.

With fierce determination she dried her tears and looked about for something to do. Reading couldn't help and she wished that she had brought her manuscript with her. But even if it wasn't here she could write in longhand, couldn't she, and type it up when she returned home? She knew that she could lose herself in writing, push the pain inside her away.

She never went anywhere without several pads tucked into her bag so she dug one out and sat down on the bed with it balanced on her knee, as there was nothing to use for a desk. Grimly she made herself recall where she'd left off, and after a few minutes the writing became easier, So what if Rhy had let her down again? She still had herself, her newly discovered talent and her integrity. She had learned how to live without Rhy, and she'd been a fool to have stayed with the magazine once she had learned he'd bought it. She was vulnerable to him, she always had been, but she knew that she didn't dare let him resume the prominent position that he'd once held in her life. It had nearly destroyed her, that mad need for his touch, his smile, his presence.

But what if she had a baby? The thought came out of nowhere and she dropped her pen, her hand straying over her flat stomach, and she wondered. Thinking back, counting, she realized that it was possible, even likely. But there was a difference now: she wouldn't be terrified at being on her own. She would gladly welcome a chance to have her child all to herself. Part of her longed for a baby, ached to hold a small wriggling body in her arms. She'd never been able to hold her son; they had taken him away immediately and she'd had only a glimpse of his blue little face. Another baby ... another son. Suddenly she hoped it was so with a fierce, wild

yearning. Perhaps she couldn't have Rhy, but she could have his baby, and she could give to her child the love that Rhy didn't want.

Chapter Eight

On the morning of the charity ball Sallie was a mass of nerves, partly a result of being shut up in that tiny room for two days and partly because she so dreaded facing Rhy again. She knew as well as she knew the color of her eyes that he hadn't left the city; he was waiting for her to surface at the ball. He would be furious, and that was an understatement.

But she dressed in the lavender silk dress that she'd chosen for the ball and noticed that it darkened her eyes to violet. A touch of mauve eyeshadow made her eyes pools of mystery and she underlined the air of sophistication by pulling her hair back from her face in a severe coil that was secured by three tiny amethyst butterflies.

It was almost time for her taxi, so she picked up her suitcase, since she would not be coming back there after the ball, and carefully made her way down the narrow stairs, not wanting to turn her ankles in her high heels. The Sakaryan proprietor was seated just to the right of the stairs, and he got to his feet as she descended. His gaze went over her thoroughly, and she sensed the tension of his powerful muscles. She had the uncomfortable feeling that this Sakaryan would like to start a harem, with her as his first concubine!

But he said, in his rough French, "It is dangerous for you to be in this part of the city alone. I will walk with you to the taxi, yes?"

"Yes, thank you," she said gravely, and noticed that he didn't offer to carry the suitcase for her this time, but she was grateful for his escort even for the short distance to the taxi waiting outside. Her driver grinned and got out to open the door as they approached.

At the palace gates she had to leave the taxi as the driver wasn't cleared to enter the palace grounds. Her name was checked off on the list of guests and a hawk-faced guard escorted her to the palace and even stored her suitcase in a small cupboard before taking her to the enormous chamber that had been decorated for the ball.

Though she was early there were already a fair number of people standing about, the women dressed like so many butterflies, and the abundance of

jewels made her eyebrows arch. To her delight there were also a number of Muslim guests, and she was certain that not all of the dark men, some wearing their native headdress and some in European clothing, were Sakaryan; probably Rhy could put a name to most of them. And there were a few Muslim women, too, well dressed, quiet, looking about with their huge, liquid dark eyes. She would have loved to talk to them, ask about their lives, but she had the feeling that her nosiness wouldn't be very well received.

Suddenly Sallie felt a tingle along the left side of her face, and she lifted a hand to touch her cheek. Then she knew, and she turned her head slightly to look straight into Rhy's furious gaze. His eyes were like flint, his jaw carved out of granite. Sallie tilted her chin and gave him back as good as she got as he strode toward her with suppressed savagery in every line of his muscular body.

She stood her ground, and when he reached her he encircled her slim waist with his hard fingers, a grip that didn't hurt but which she knew she couldn't break. A voice gravelly with temper growled, "You need to be shown who's boss, baby, and I'm just the man to do it. Where the hell have you been?"

"At another hotel," she informed him casually. "I told you from the beginning that I didn't want to resume our marriage, and I meant it."

"You agreed to give it a three-day trial," he reminded her grimly.

"So I did. I'd have agreed to rob a bank if it would have kept you from watching me. So what?" She raised her head and looked him straight in the eye. "I lied to you and you lied to me. We're even."

"How did I lie to you?" he snapped, his nostrils flaring in rage that he had to control because they were in public.

"About Coral." She gave him a wintry smile. "You don't seem to realize that I don't mind if you had other women-I really don't care-" that was a lie if she'd ever told one "-but I do object to people lying to me. So you've been a virtual monk, have you? Am I to believe that Coral followed you all the way to Sakarya with tears in her beautiful eyes on the basis of a platonic relationship?"

"I don't know how you found out about Coral-he began impatiently, but she interrupted.

"I followed you. I have a nosy nature. It's part of being a reporter. So, my dear husband, I saw you comfort your mistress and take her to her room, and you didn't leave immediately or you would have caught me leaving!"

"It's your fault that I took her to her room," he snarled, his fingers tightening on her wrist. "I didn't ask her to follow me and I didn't lie to you. She isn't and never has been my mistress. But there she was, and she was crying, and I wondered if you'd been right when you said she was in love with me. I've never thought she was, she went out with other men, and I dated other women, but there was the possibility that you'd seen something I'd missed. I thought I owed her an explanation, so I took her to her room and told her the truth about us. Fifteen minutes later I went back to our room and found only that damned note of yours! I could break your neck, Sallie. I've been half out of my mind worrying about you!"

"I've told you I can take care of myself," she muttered, wondering if she could believe this or not. But she didn't dare believe him! How could she? She knew him too well, knew the strength of his sexual appetite.

Further conversation was prevented at that point by the entrance of the King of Sakarya, His Royal Highness Abu Haroun al Mahdi. Everyone bowed and the women curtsied, including the Americans in the group, and the King looked pleased. He lacked the stature of many Sakaryans, but five hundred years of rule were evident in his proud carriage and straightforward gaze. He greeted his guests first in perfect English, then in French, and finally in the Arabic tongue.

Sallie strained up on her toes for a better look at him, and for a moment her eyes were solidly locked with those of the monarch. After a second's hesitation he gave her a nod and a slow, faintly shy smile which she returned with her own warm, friendly smile; then they were blocked from view by a group of people moving closer to him.

"You've made a hit," Rhy observed with narrowed eyes.

"All I did was smile at him," she defended crossly, for it seemed as if he was accusing her of something. "Your smile is an open invitation, baby," he drawled.

He was going to be impossible; he would make the day as difficult for her as he could. "Isn't it time for the fashion show to begin?" she said, grateful for anything that would relieve her of his undivided attention.

"In half an hour," he replied, drawing her with him to the room where the fashion show would take place. Some of the top designers of the world had put together the show for Marina and already the chairs that had been placed about the runway were half filled. Exquisitely gowned women

laughed and chattered while their suave escorts looked on with veiled interest.
A thought struck Sallie and she muttered to Rhy, "I suppose Coral is modeling?"
"Of course," he affirmed, his voice hard.
"Then we might as well find seats," she sniped. "I don't suppose wild horses could drag you away."
His fingers bit painfully into her arm. "Shut up," he snarled. "My God, can't you just shut up?" His head snapped around and before she could protest he was marching her firmly out of the room. He barked a question at a guard who saluted smartly, for some reason, and led them down a passageway to a small room. Rhy bodily pushed her into the room and closed the door behind them.
Hoping to divert him from the black rage she could see in his face Sallie said hastily, "What room is this?" while she looked around the small chamber as if she was vastly interested.
"I don't care," Rhy replied, his voice so rough that the words were barely intelligible, and then he advanced on her with dark purpose evident in his face. Sallie backed away in alann but had taken only a few steps when he caught her.
He didn't say anything else; he simply pulled her to him and covered her mouth with his and kissed her with such devouring hunger that she forgot to struggle. It would have been useless in any case; she was no match for his strength and he held her so closely that their bodies were pressed together from shoulder to knee. Blood began to drum in her ears and she sank against him, held up only by his arms.
Long minutes later he lifted his mouth and surveyed her flushed, love-drugged face. "Don't talk to me about other women," he ordered in a low tone, his uneven breath caressing her lips. "No other woman can excite me like you do, even when you're not trying to, you little witch. I want you now," he finished on a groan, bending his head to brush her lips with his.
"That-that's impossible," she whispered, but her protest was only a token one. 'Me sensual fire that burned in him burned in her, also, and if he had persisted she wouldn't have been capable of resisting. As it was he retained some sense of their location and put her away from him with shaking hands.
"I know, dammit." He sighed. "I suppose we'd better go back if you want to see the fashion showand not another word about Coral," he warned darkly.

Her fingers trembling, she repaired the damage he'd done to her lipstick and offered him a tissue to wipe the color from his mouth. He did so, smiling a little at the smear of color that came off on the tissue.
"What did you say to the guard?" she finally asked, obeying a need to make nonvital conversation.
"I told him you were feeling faint," he replied. "And you did look pale."
"Do I now?" she wondered aloud, touching her cheeks.
"No. You look kissed," he drawled.
The blood was still rushing through her body in yearning when they took their seats for the fashion show, and the parade of models barely registered on her consciousness. She was too aware of Rhy's tall body beside her, so close that she could feet the warmth of him, smell the unique muskiness of his body. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest. Only Coral made any impression on her, her eyes fastened on Rhy as if drawn to him, the pouty, sensuous smile on her perfect mouth meant for him alone. Glancing sideways at Rhy, Sallie saw that his expression remained closed except for a slight tightening of his jaw that spoke volumes to her, and she looked back at Coral with nausea boiling in her stomach.
The program was full, every minute ordered. After the fashion show there was a thousand-dollar-a-plate dinner, with all of the proceeds going to charity. Then dancing, then entertainment by a top American singer, Sallie lived through the hours feeling as if she was walking underwater. Rhy was with her every minute, but she couldn't forget the fleeting expression on his face when he'd seen Coral.
Why was she allowing him to torment her Re this? She had no illusions about him, and she had already determined her own course of action. When they returned to New York she would leave, it was as simple as that. But for some reason she couldn't shake her deep sense of misery, and as a result she drank more champagne than she meant to, realizing that fact only when the room swirled mistily around her and she clutched at Rhy's arm.
"That's enough," he said gently, taking the glass from her fingers and setting it down. "I think you could stand something to eat, a slice of cake maybe. Come on."
With tender concern he made certain she ate, watching her closely all the while. When she felt better she smiled thankfully at him. "How much longer before the interview?" she murmured.
"Not much longer, honey," he comforted, as if sensing her unhappiness.

But at last it was over with and Sallie and Marina were alone in a private chamber the King had donated for their use. "He's really a dear," Marina explained. "I think he's shy, but he tries so hard to disguise it. And of course he was brought up to disregard women in every way but the physical, and he can't quite become used to meeting them socially despite his English education."
"Did your husband go to the same school?" Sallie asked, thinking that Zain didn't seem to have any problem with women.
"No, and his attitude could bear some improvement, too," Marina said with wry amusement. "Listen, he kept a harem until we were engaged. I made him give them all up before I would agree to marry him!" she explained smugly.
Sallie choked on her laughter and gasped. "A harem? You're kidding! Do they still have those things?"
"Of course, why do you think the royal families have so many princes? Muslim religion permits three wives and as many concubines as a man can support, and Zain most definitely had his selection of concubines to occupy his nights!"
I'What did you say to him to make him give them upT I
"I gave him a choice, he could have me or he could have other women, but I made it plain that I had no intention of sharing him. He didn't like the idea of giving up his harem, but he finally realized that my ignorant American mind just couldn't accept it."
Their eyes met and they went off into gales of laughter, and of course that was the moment when they were interrupted by Rhy and Zain, "I thought this was a serious interview," Rhy commented, strolling forward to drop his long length beside Sallie.
"And I thought it was a private one," she retorted. Zain's strong mouth quirked as he stretched his long frame out close to Marina, "We couldn't resist," he explained. "I introduced Rhy to His Majesty," he said, flexing his broad shoulders as if he was weary, and he chuckled at the memory. "I think I made some diplomats jealous, especially when they had a long chat in voices too low to carry!"
"The State Department will probably try to debrief me," Rhy added.
A memory clicked in Sallie's mind, and she said casually to Zain, "How did you meet Rhy?"

"He saved my life," Zain replied promptly, but no explanation followed and Sallie's eyebrows arched. "You don't need to know," Rhy teased. "We were both where we weren't supposed to be and we barely got out alive. Let it rest, baby. Tell us how you and Marina met, instead."
"Oh, that's simple enough." Marina shrugged. "We met in college. There's nothing unusual in that. Now, why don't you two run along? How can Sallie and I talk with witnesses present?"
Both men laughed, but neither made a move to leave, so they had to be included in the conversation. To be truthful, it was impossible to exclude them. Rhy wasn't there for an interview, but he was still a reporter and gradually he got one anyway. Despite her exasperation Sallie could only admire the way he posed his questions to Zain. Some were blunt, posed point-blank; others he merely hinted at, letting Zain evade the question or answer it as he wished. In response to that consideration Zain was open with his answers, and Sallie knew that she was listening to potential dynamite. He told Rhy things that perhaps even foreign heads of state hadn't been told, and he seemed to have perfect confidence that Rhy would know what he could report and what he should forget.
Slowly Sallie began to understand the razor-sharp brain of the man who handled the finances of a booming economy and was slowly easing his country into the twentieth century. He was an adventurer, but he was also a patriot. Perhaps that was why the King had such great confidence in his young minister of finance, why he was allowing Sakaryan policies to be shaped along Western lines.
The role that Marina played in those policies wasn't small, she realized. As Zain had vast influence with the King, so Marina had vast influence with Zain. She didn't know if he would admit it; a man who had kept a harem until fairly recently wasn't likely to admit even to himself that his wife was a major factor in the direction his politics had taken. Nor would the King be likely to be happy if told that Marina was the indirect influence behind his throne. Yet the smiling, beautiful young woman, so obviously in love with her husband, was playing a powerful role in a scenario that could affect the entire world through its effect of Sakaryan oil.
At last the conversation became more general and Marina asked if perhaps Sallie would be free to visit later on in the year. Sallie had opened her mouth to accept when Rhy broke in before she could say a word. "I'm set to be filming a documentary in Europe late this fall and early winter," he said,

"and Sallie will be with me. I don't know yet how the schedule will be, but I'll let you know."
"Do," urged Marina. "We see each other so little now. At least when I lived in New York we managed to catch each other in town once every month or so."
Sallie didn't comment, but privately she thought that Rhy was taking a lot for granted. Was he in for a surprise when she walked out of his life and disappeared forever!
It was late when they left the palace, and as they just had time to catch their flight Zain had arranged for an escort to the airport. Sallie and Rhy rode in Zain's personal limousine, and their luggage was checked and they were waved on board without pause.
Rhy had been ominously silent during the entire ride, and he was still not speaking when they buckled themselves into their seats. That suited her fine; she was tired and she didn't feel like arguing with him. Somehow she always came off second best when they fought. She was too impulsive, too reckless, unable to control her temper, whereas Rhy coolly plotted each move in advance.
When they were airborne the stewardesses began distributing the small airline pillows and blankets to those passengers who desired them, and because it was so late Sallie decided she would try to sleep and accepted them, then tilted her seat back. "I'm tired," she told Rhy's grim profile. "Good night."
He turned his head and his hard eyes burned her. Then he let his seat back, too, and slid his ann under her head, pulling her over to rest on his shoulder. "I've spent two hellish nights wondering where you were," he growled against her temple while he spread the blanket over her. "You'll sleep where you belong." Then he tilted her head back and his hard mouth closed on hers, claiming her lips in a possessive kiss that lasted long enough for him to be aware of her response. Then he drew back and resettled her head against his shoulder, and she was glad of the chance to hide her burning face. Why did she have to be so weak and foolish? Why couldn't she control her response to him?
After that kiss she was sure she wouldn't be able to sleep, but somehow she fell asleep immediately and woke only once during the long flight when she shifted and Rhy pulled the blanket up over her again. Opening her eyes in the dim cabin she looked up at him and whispered, "Can't you sleep?"

"I've been asleep," he murmured. "I was just wishing that we were alone." He pulled her close and kissed her again, leaving her in no doubt as to just why he wished they were alone. His kisses lingered and became hungry, pressing again and again to her mouth, until at last he muttered a frustrated curse and leaned his head back. "I can wait," he growled. "Barely."

Sallie lay against his shoulder and bit her lips to keep from whispering the words of love that sprang to her tongue. Tears burned her eyes. She loved him! It was so painful that she thought she'd scream. She loved him, but she couldn't trust him with her love.

They changed flights in Paris again and because the days they had spent in Sakarya hadn't been exactly restful jet lag hit both of them hard. Sallie had a splitting headache when they finally landed at JFK and from the taut, weary look on Rhy's face he didn't feel much better. If he had started an argument then she would have become hysterical, but instead he dropped her at her apartment and left without even kissing her.

Contrarily, that made her want to cry, and she lugged her suitcase up to her apartment and savagely emptied it. After taking a swift shower she fell on the bed and found to her fury that sleep eluded her. She remembered the sleepy sensuousness of his kisses during the flight, how comfortable she had been cuddled against his shoulder, the security of his arms. She burst into angry, aching tears and eventually cried herself to sleep.

But when she awoke the next morning her mind was clear. Rhy was driving her crazy, and if she didn't leave now, as she had planned, he would eventually wear her down. She would go to work today, type up the interview she had gotten with Marina and quietly turn in her notice to Greg. Then she would come back home, close up the apartment, pack her clothing and get on a bus going anywhere.

She dressed and took the bus to work, arriving a little late due to an accident that caused a traffic jam.

When she entered the noisy newsroom the clatter dropped to almost silence, and it seemed to her that everyone turned to stare at her. A blush rose to her cheeks without her knowing why, and she hurried to her little cubicle. Brom was there, busy at his typewriter, but when she sat down and pulled the cover off of her own typewriter he stopped what he was doing and swiveled in his chair to look at her.

"What's wrong?" Sallie demanded, half laughing. "Do I have something on my face?"

In answer Brom leaned over and turned her wooden nameplate to face her. Aghast, Sallie stared at it. It was a new nameplate. And instead of SALLIE JEROME it blatantly declared for all the world to see, SALLIE BAINES. She collapsed in her chair and stared at it as if it would bite her.
"Congratulations," Brom offered. "That must've been some trip."
She couldn't think of anything to say; she just continued to stare at the nameplate. Evidently it had only appeared that morning, and she wondered at Rhy's motive. Uneasily she sensed that he was drawing the net tighter about her and that perhaps she had waited too long to make her break. But there was no help for it now, and her professional integrity wouldn't permit her to leave without finishing the interview with Marina.
"Well?" Brorn prompted. "Is it true?"
"That we're married?" she replied crisply. "It's true enough, for what you want to make of it."
"And just what does that mean, Madam Sphinx?" "It means that a wedding does not a marriage
make," she mocked. "Don't take this too seriously."
"Listen, you can't be half-married, or casually married. Either you are or you aren't," he said in exasperation.
"It's a long story," she evaded, and was saved from further questioning when the phone rang. With a smothered sigh of relief she snatched it up. "Sallie Jerome."
"Wrong," Greg growled in her ear. "Sallie Baines. Your closet husband has gone public and it's a load off my mind. You had me in a tough spot if he'd found out I knew about you. But it's all over now and it's all between the two of you."
"What do you mean?" she asked warily, wondering if Rhy had done something else to hem her in that she hadn't yet heard of.
"Just that, doll. As far as I'm concerned you're not one of my best reporters now, you're his wife."
In blind anger Sallie forgot that she'd been planning on turning in her notice anyway and she hissed between her teeth, "Do you mean you won't give me any more assignments?"
"That's exactly what I mean. Take it up directly with him. For crying out loud, he's your husband and from what I can see he's more than willing to try a reconciliation."

"I don't want a reconciliation," she said, reining in her temper and keeping her tone low so Brom couldn't overhear. "But a reference will do just fine. Will you give me one?"
"I can't, not now that he's made it common knowledge that you're his wife. He's my boss, too," Greg explained dryly. "And he's made it clear that anything concerning you is to be okayed by him personally."
"Has he?" she demanded furiously as her anger broke out of control. "I'll have to see about that, won't IT' She slammed the phone down and glared at it, then turned her burning gaze on Brom, who threw his hands up in mock surrender and ostentatiously turned back to his typewriter.
She expected to be summoned to Rhy's office at any moment, and she couldn't decide if she wanted to see him or not. It would be an exquisite relief to unleash her temper and scream at him, but she knew that Rhy would also take advantage of her lack of control and would probably provoke her into revealing all her plans. The best thing she could do was to complete her report and leave. She knew her weaknesses, and the two worst ones were her temper and Rhy. The sensible thing to do was not to allow either of them to gain the upper hand.
She tried, but concentrating had seldom been more difficult. Her mind raced, going over her packing, the steps she had to take to close up her apartment, where she might go, and in the middle of all her plans would flash a picture of Rhy, naked, his eyes hungry as he reached for her, and her body would remember his touch and she'd tremble in reaction. She ached for him; why hadn't he come up to the apartment with her last night? Of course they'd both been tired, exhausted and irritable, but still... What a fool she was! The last thing she needed was more of his addictive lovemaking! It would be hard enough now to get over him, to forget again the wild sweetness that had consumed her.
The morning slipped past, and she grimly determined to work through lunch, but her plans were derailed when Chris stopped by her desk, his brown eyes shuttered as he silently lifted her nameplate and studied it, then returned it to her desk without comment. "Can you get away for a little while?" he asked quietly, but even so Sallie caught the undertone in his voice, perhaps because she was so miserable herself that she was sensitive to the suffering of others '.'It's lunchtime, anyway," she said without hesitation, turning off the typewriter and covering it. "Where do you want to go?"

"Will he mind?" Chris asked, and she knew who he meant.
"No," she tied, and gave him a cheeky little grin. "Besides, I'm not asking him."
He didn't speak again until they were out of the building and weaving their way through the hurrying, dodging, sidestepping lunch crowd that filled the sidewalks. He lifted his head and peered at the heat ball of the sun with slitted eyes as he commented, "Are you really married to him? It's not easy to get married that fast unless you detour through Vegas."
"I've been married to him for eight years," she admitted, not meeting the questioning glance that she felt him shoot at her. "And we've been separated for seven of those years."
They walked in silence for a while, then Chris caught her hand and indicated a coffee shop. That was as good as anything and they went inside, where they were shown to a small table along the wall. Sallie wasn't hungry and she chose only fruit juice to drink and a small salad, knowing that the salad wouldn't be eaten. Chris didn't seem very hungry either, for when their food came he merely drank his coffee and stared broodingly at the tuna sandwich on his plate.
"It looks as if you're back together now," he finally said.
Sallie shook her head. "It's what he wants." "And you don't?"
"He doesn't love me," she said sadly. "I'm just a challenge to him. Like I told you, he just wants to play for a while. It doesn't matter to him that he's destroying my life in the process. He's already wrecked my career, and he swears that he'll blacklist me, keep me from getting another job as a reporter."
Chris swore, something he rarely did, and met Sallie's surprised gaze with gold lights of anger leaping in his dark eyes. "How could he do that to you?" he muttered.
She managed a careless shrug. "He says he's afraid I'll get killed. That he can't stand the thought of me in the middle of a revolution." But how many times had Rhy left her to do just that, leaving her behind in a frenzy of worry?
"Now that I can understand," said Chris, giving her a wry smile. "I'll admit to having a few worries about your pretty little carcass myself, and I'm not even married to you."
"But you won't quit for Amy," she reminded him bluntly. "And I won't quit for Rhy-if I have any choice. He's hernming me in, Chris. He's tying me

down and smothering me."
"You love him."
"I try not to. I just haven't succeeded very well so far." Then she shook her head. "Forget about me. Is the situation still the same with Amy?"
He tilted his head a little to one side. "I still love her. I still want to marry her. But she still won't marry me unless I quit reporting, and the thought of stifling myself in a nine-to-five job makes me break out in a cold sweat."
"Can you give in? Greg did, for his kids."
"But he didn't for his wife," Chris pointed out. "He had to lose her before he left the field. If she were still alive he'd probably still be out there chasing down a story."
That was true and she sighed, looking away from him. The demands made by children were so much harder to deny than those made by adults because children saw things only in relation to themselves and couldn't comprehend that their parents' needs should be as important as their own. They had no compunction about making their needs clear, demanding that they be taken care of, while adults for some reason drew back, refrained from pushing too hard, knowing that no one owed them anything and therefore they didn't ask. Except she had asked-she had demanded-that Rhy change his job and stay with her, and it had gained her exactly nothing. Rhy had made it plain that her happiness wasn't his responsibility. He had his own life to live. Nor could she offer Chris any hope, any solution, for she could see none for herself No matter what they did, misery would be the result.
"I'm going to leave," she said aloud, then looked at him in horror, not having meant to announce her intentions.
He caught the look and waved his hand. "Forget it. It won't go any further," he assured her. "I kind of thought you might do that, anyway. You've got the guts to do what you have to do, no matter how it hurts. You're cutting your losses. I just wish I could."
"When you're ready you will. Don't forget, I've had seven years to get used to being without him." She gave him a tiny smile. "I'd even convinced myself that it was all over between us. It didn't take Rhy long to shatter that little fairy tale."
He looked at her as if he wasn't really seeing her, his dark eyes taking on the introspective blankness of someone walling himself up inside. He'd been hurt, just as she had. There was nothing so calculated to batter the self-esteem as to hear a loved one saying, "You have to change," the insidious

little phrase that really meant, "I don't love you as you are. You're not good enough." There were deeper hurts, more violent hurts, yet somehow that particular hurt had such a nasty sting. She knew it well now, and she swore that she'd never ask anyone to change ever again. Had Rhy been hurt by her insistence that he change? She tried to picture a confused, hurt Rhy and failed utterly. He had a stainless-steel character that never faltered, never let itself be vulnerable. He'd brushed her clinging arms off like so many cobwebs and went on his way.

"I'll get over her," said Chris quietly, and on his face was the smooth blank look of acceptance. "I guess I'll have to, won't IT'

They walked back to the office in silence, and as they entered the empty elevator Chris punched the button to close the door and held his finger on it, staring fixedly at her.

"Keep in touch," he said softly. "I wish it could've been you, Sal." He curved his hand around her neck and bent to lightly touch his lips to hers and she felt tears sting her eyelids. Yes, why couldn't it have been Chris for her, instead of Rhy?

She couldn't promise that she'd be in touch, though she wanted to. Once she left she couldn't risk doing anything that might give Rhy a clue to where to find her, and anything Chris didn't know he couldn't divulge. She left the elevator with only a long look into his face that said goodbye; then she went back to her desk and tackled the report again with grim determination.

The sense of now or never gave her the concentration she needed and in less than an hour she sent the finished report on to Greg's office. She stood and stretched her tired, cramped muscles and casually got her purse and left the building without speaking to anyone, as if she was merely leaving for an appointment, when in reality she intended never to return. She regretted that she had to leave without telling Greg, but he'd made it painfully clear that his first loyalty was to Rhy, and she knew that he would immediately report her resignation.

Caution made her cash the cashier's check she'd been carrying in her purse and convert most of the money into traveler's checks. Who knew what means Rhy might use to hold her? She had to get out and do it now.

It was almost three-thirty by the time she reached her apartment and it was only instinct, but when she opened the door the hair on the back of her neck lifted. She stared around at the familiar furniture and she knew that something was different. Looking about she saw that several things were

missing: her personal awards were gone, her books were gone, her antique clock was missing. Thieves!
Rushing into the bedroom she stared aghast at the emptiness. The closet doors stood open, revealing the lack of contents. Her cosmetic and toiletry items were gone from the bathroom, even her toothbrush. All of her personal items had disappeared! Then she went utterly pale and raced back into the bedroom to stare in horror at the uncluttered surface where her manuscript and typewriter had rested. Even her manuscript had been stolen!
A noise in the doorway made her whirl, ready for battle if the thieves had returned, but it was the landlady who stood there. "I thought I saw you," Mrs. Landis said cheerfully. "I'm so happy for you. You're such a nice girl, and I always wondered when you were going to get married. I'll hate losing you, but I know you're anxious to settle in with that handsome husband of yours."
A cold feeling settled in Sallie's stomach. "Husband?" she echoed weakly.
"He's the first celebrity I've ever met," Mrs. Landis rattled on. "But he was so nice, and he said he'd made arrangements for your furniture to be put in storage by this weekend so I can rent the apartment out again. I thought it was so thoughtful of him to handle it all for you while you were working."
By now Sallie had gotten control of herself, and she managed a smile for Mrs. Landis. "It certainly was," she agreed, her hands clenching into fists by her sides. "Rhy thinks of everything!"
But he hadn't won yet!

Chapter Nine

She was so angry that she was shaking helplessly, unable to decide what to do. She got on a bus and rode aimlessly, wishing violently that she could get her hands around Rhy's throat. He'd literally stolen her clothing, all of her personal possessions. That was bad enough, but she could get along without all that if she had to. The one thing she couldn't leave behind was her manuscript, and she couldn't think of any way to get it back, either. She didn't even know where Rhy lived, and his telephone number wasn't listed.
But she had to find somewhere to spend the night, and at last she left the bus and walked the teeming sidewalks in the steamy hot afternoon sun until weariness prompted her to choose a hotel at random. She checked in and sat

for a long time in a daze, unable to think of any action she could take. Her mind darted about erratically, trying to devise a way of retrieving the manuscript without having to see Rhy again. But to find the book she had to find out where Rhy lived, and to do that she had to talk to him, something that she wanted to avoid.

The theft of her book seemed to have paralyzed her, robbed her of her ability to act. She thought bleakly of simply beginning again, but she knew that it wouldn't be the same; she couldn't remember all of the details of her exact phrasing. She cried for a while, out of anger and despair, and when she finally decided to call Rhy at the office she realized that she'd waited too long; everyone would have gone home.

So there was nothing to do but wait. She showered, lay on the bed and watched television, then drifted to sleep with the set still on, only to waken in the early hours of the morning to the crackle of static.

She was starving because not only hadn't she eaten the lunch she'd chosen, she hadn't had dinner the night before, either, and her empty stomach was the last straw; curling up like a child she wept brokenly. How dare he!

But Rhy would dare anything, as she knew to her cost. She drifted back to sleep and when she woke again she had a pounding headache and it was nearly ten a.m. She took another shower and dressed, then breathed deeply several times and sat down by the phone. There was no way out of it. She had to talk to him.

Before her courage deserted her she dialed the office number and asked for Mr. Baines. Of course Amanda answered and Sallie managed a calm good morning before she asked to speak to Rhy.

"Of course, he said to put you through immediately," Amanda replied cheerfully, and Sallie's nerves screamed with tenNion as she waited for Rhy to come on the fine,

"Sallie." His dark, roligh-velvet voice in her ear made her jump and bang the receiver against her already aching temple. "Where are you, darling?"

She swallowed and said hoarsely, "I want my book back, Rhy! "

"I said, where are you?"

"The book-" she began again.

"Forget the damned b0ok!" he rasped, and it was all her nerves could stand. She gulped, trying to swallow the sob that tore out of her throat, but it was swiftly followed by another and abruptly she was crying helplessly, clinging to the receiver as if it was a lifeline.

"You-you stole it!" she accused between sobs, her words almost unintelligible. "You knew it was the one thing I couldn't If-,ave without and you stole it! I hate you, do you hear? I hate you! I never want to see you again-"
"Don't cry," he said roughly. "Baby, please don't cry. Tell me where you are and I'll be there as soon as I can. You can have your book back again, I promise."
"Written on water!" she jeered, wiping her wet cheeks with the back of her hand.
He drew an impatient breath. "Look, you'll have to see me if you want the book back. And since that seems to be the only hold I have on you, I'll use it. Meet me for lunch-"
"No," she broke in, looking down at her wrinkled slacks and top. "I-I'm not dressed."
"Then we'll have lunch at my apartment," he decided briskly. "I'll phone the housekeeper and have a meal prepared, so meet me there at twelve-thirty. We can talk privately there."
"I don't know where you live," she confessed, surrendering to the inevitable. She knew it was an error to see him again; she should just leave the manuscript and forget about it, try to start again, but she couldn't. Whatever the risk, she couldn't leave without it.
He gave her the address and instructions on how to get there, and just before he hung up he asked gently, "Are you all right?"
"I'm fine," she said bleakly, and dropped the receiver onto its cradle.
She got up to brush her hair and stared aghast at her reflection in the mirror. She was pale, hollow eyed, her clothing wrinkled. She couldn't let Rhy see her like this! And she didn't have so much as a tube of lipstick in her purse! But she did have money, and there were shops on the ground floor of the hotel. Making up her mind, she took the elevator down and hurriedly purchased an attractive white summer dress with a tiny floral design on it and a pair of white high-heeled sandals.
In another shop she bought makeup and perfume; then she dashed back up to her room. Carefully she made up her face and repaired the ravages of tears and worry, then dressed in the dainty cotton dress and brushed her hair out; she didn't have the time to do anything with it so she left it streaming down her back in a rich sable mane.

She took a taxi to Rhy's apartment, too nervous to face the crush of a bus at lunchtime. When she got out at his apartment building she glanced at her watch and saw that she was a few minutes late. She paid the taxi driver and hurried to the elevator and punched the button.
As soon as she rang the doorbell the door swung open and Rhy loomed before her, his dark face expressionless.
"I'm sorry I'm late-" she began, rushing into speech in an effort to disguise her nervousness.
"It doesn't matter," he interrupted, standing aside to let her enter. He'd discarded his jacket and tie and unbuttoned his shirt halfway, revealing the curls of hair on his chest. Her eyes riveted on his virile, masculine flesh and unconsciously she wet her lips with her tongue. Just the sight of him weakened her!
His eyes darkened to charcoal. "You teasing little witch," he muttered, and his long fingers moved to his shirt. He unbuttoned the remaining buttons and pulled the shirt free of his pants and peeled out of it, dropping it to the floor. The sunlight streaming through the wide windows gleamed on his chest and shoulders where a light dew of perspiration moistened his skin and revealed all his rippling muscles.
Sallie stepped back, wanting to escape from the need she felt to touch his warm skin and feel the steelness of muscle underneath, but she made the mistake of raising her eyes to his. The hungry, blatant desire she saw there froze her in her tracks.
"I want you," he whispered, advancing on her. "Now."
"I didn't come here for this," she protested weakly, and made a futile attempt to evade him. His long arms encircled her and pulled her against his half-naked body, and she began to tremble at the erotic power he had over her. The scent of his skin, the warmth, the living vibrancy of him, went to her head and intoxicated her so that she forgot about pushing him away.
He attacked with his mouth, overpowering her with kisses that demanded and devoured, sucking all of her strength away so she couldn't resist when his shaking hands moved over her curves and renewed his intimate knowledge of her. She raised her arms and locked them around his neck and kissed him back, her response burning out of control and fanning his own fires.
She rested plaintively against him when he raised his head to gulp in deep, shaking breaths and the half smile that formed on his mouth before being

quickly banished revealed that he was aware of his triumph, of her capitulation. With slow, easy moves, as if he didn't want to startle her, he unzipped her dress and slid it down to puddle around her feet. Sallie simply watched him in silence, her big eyes nearly black with desire. She couldn't resist; she couldn't make any plans. All she could do was feel, feel and respond. She loved him and she was helpless against his love.

But at least her desire was returned. She was dimly aware that he was shaking, trembling in every muscle of his big frame as he lifted her gently into his arms and carried her into his bedroom. He placed her on the bed and lay down beside her, his hands pulling at the bits of clothes that remained to separate skin from skin. He couldn't disguise his need for her, just as she had no defenses against him. Hoarsely he whispered to her, disjointed words and phrases that made her quiver in response and cling to him as she drowned in the tidal wave of sensation he evoked.

When the world had righted itself again she was lying in his arms while he slowly stroked her hair, her back, her arms. "I didn't intend for that to happen," he murmured against her temple. "I'd planned to talk first, eat our lunch together and try to act like two civilized people, but the moment I saw you nothing was important any longer except making love to YOU."

"That's all you ever wanted from me anyway," she said with simple, weary bitterness.

He gave her a brooding glance. "You think so? That's part of what I wanted to talk about, but first, let's see about lunch."

"Won't it be cold?" she asked, pushing her hair back from her face and sitting up and away from his arms.

"Steaks and salad. The salad is in the fridge, the
steaks are ready to grill. And I gave Mrs. Hermann the rest of the day off so we won't be disturbed."

"You have everything planned, don't you?" she commented without any real interest as she began dressing, and he swung his long legs over the side of the bed to stand and watch her lethargic movements.

"What's wrong?" he asked sharply, coming to her and cupping her chin in his hand to look into her pale face. "Are you ill?"

She felt ill, achy and depressed after the soaring passion of his lovemaking, and she was stupidly weak, But she knew that her only ailments were an inability to cope with Rhy and the fact that she hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours.

"I'm well enough," she dismissed his concern. "Just hungry, I suppose. I haven't eaten since yesterday morning."
"Great," he half snarled. "You need to lose some more weight. You must weigh at least ninety pounds. You need someone to watch you and make certain you eat, you little fool!"
He probably had himself in mind, but she didn't argue with him. In silence she completed dressing and waited until he had dressed also. Then she followed him into the neatly organized kitchen. He refused to let tier do anything and made her sit on a stool while he grilled the steaks and set the places on the table in the small dining room.
He opened a bottle of California red wine to drink with the meal and for several minutes they ate in silence. Then Sallie asked without looking up from her salad, "Where is my manuscript?"
"In the study," he replied. "You've got a way with words. It's good reading."
She flung her head back as anger struck her. "You had no right to read it!"
"Didn't IT' he asked dryly. "I thought I had a perfect right to read what you'd been writing all those days when you were supposed to have been working for my magazine. You've been drawing a check every week and not writing a word of the articles assigned to you. If it hadn't suited me to keep you quietly at your desk I'd have fired you weeks ago."
"I'll repay every penny I've drawn since you bought the magazine," she flared. "You still had no right to read it! "
"Stop spitting and scratching at me, you little cat," he said in amusement. "I did read it, and there's nothing you can do about it now. Instead, think constructively. You've got a manuscript with strong possibilities, but it's also got some rough edges, and there's a lot of work that needs to be done on it. You need a place to work on it where you won't be disturbed, and you certainly don't need to worry about paying the rent or buying groceries."
"Why not?" she muttered. "T'housands of writers worry about those things."
"But you've never had to," he pointed out. "For your entire life you've had financial security, and it's something you're used to. You won't have a paycheck coming in now, because you're off the payrolI as of yesterday, and it'll wor7y you when your savings begin shrinking. It takes time to write a book and get it on the market. You'll run out of money before then."
"I'm not a helpless baby and I'm not afraid of work," she replied.
"I know that, but why worry about any of that when you can live here, work on your book without interruptions and keep your savings?"

She sighed, feeling trapped. On the surface it was a logical suggestion, but she knew that the proposal was only a way of getting her back under his thumb where he thought she belonged. If she had any sense she would leave at the first opportunity, even if she had to sacrifice the manuscript, but she'd already passed up one such opportunity and she painfully admitted to herself that it was too late for her to gain her freedom. She was caught again in her own stupid, helpless love for Rhy, knowing that her love wasn't returned except in the lowest form-physical desire. He desired her, and for that reason he wanted her around now, but what would happen when he tired of her ?gain? Would he simply walk out as he had before? Knowing that she was leaving herself wide open for another broken heart she stared into her salad and said expressionlessly, "All right."

He drew in a quick breath. "Just like that? No arguments, no conditions? Not even any questions?" "I'm not interested in the answers," she replied, shrugging. "I'm tired of fighting you, and I want to finish my book. Other than that, I don't care."

"You're great for a man's ego," he muttered under his breath.

"You trampled all over mine," she snapped in reply. "Don't expect kid gloves from me. You've got what you wanted, me out of a job and living with you, but don't ask for blind adoration because I'm fresh out."

"I never asked for it anyway," he rasped. "And for the record, I'm not trying to chain you down. It was that particular job that I objected to, for reasons you know. All I'm asking from you is time for us to be together, to try to work things out. If we can't stand to live together for six months I'll consider a divorce, but the least we can do is give it a try."

"And if it doesn't work out we'll get a divorce?" she asked cautiously, wanting to be certain.

"Then we'll talk about it."

Glancing at his implacable face she saw that he wasn't going to give her a promise of a divorce so she gave in once more. "All right, six months. But I'm going to be working on my book, not cooking for you and washing your clothes and cleaning this place. If you're looking for a little homemaker you're going to be disappointed."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm a wealthy man," he said sarcastically. "I don't expect my wife to do laundry."

She lifted her head and stared at him. "What are you getting out of this, Rhy? Other than a sleeping companion, I mean, and you can have that

anytime you please without going to all this trouble."
His lids shadowed his gray eyes and he murmured huskily, "Isn't that enough? I want you. Let's just leave it at that.
To Sallie's surprise the arrangement worked rather well and they quickly fell into a routine. Rhy would get up every morning and prepare his own breakfast, then wake her with a kiss when he was ready to leave. She would linger over her own breakfast, then spend the rest of the morning in the study, working. Mrs. Hermann turned out to be a plump, gray-haired model of efficiency, and she took care of the apartment just as she had before, making Sallie lunch, cooking the evening meal and leaving just before Rhy arrived home.
Sallie would serve dinner herself, and while they were eating Rhy would tell her about how things were going with the magazine, what had happened that day, ask questions about how her book was progressing. She found herself remarkably at ease with him now, though their relationship never quite achieved true companionship. She sensed that they were both holding something of themselves back, but perhaps that was to he expected when two people with such strong wills tried to live together. There was always the thought that good manners should prevail or the frail fabric of their marriage would be torn beyond repair.
As the days turned into weeks and the stack of pages in the study kept growing she welcomed Rhy's advice and experience. Her own writing style was direct and uncomplicated, but Rhy had the knack of stripping an idea down to the bare bones. It became their custom after dinner for him to read what she'd written that day and give her his opinion. If he didn't like something he said so, but he always made it plain that he thought her overall effort was good. Sometimes she threw out entire sections and began anew, all on the basis of Rhy's criticisms, but at other times she stubbornly clung to her own words as she felt that they better conveyed her own meaning.
Her best work seemed to be done in the evenings when Rhy sat in the study with her, reading articles and paperwork he'd brought home with him or doing his preliminary research on the documentary he was scheduled to film within three months. He seemed content, all traces of the restlessness she remembered gone, as if he had indeed burned out his need for adventure. In an odd way she was also content; the mental stimulation she received from creating a book was more than enough to occupy her

imagination. They worked together in harmony and relative silence, broken only by the ringing of the telephone when Greg called, as he often did, and their own occasional comments to each other.
Then, when it was growing late, Sallie would cover the typewriter and leave Rhy still working while she bathed and prepared for bed. Sometimes he would work for an hour or more after she was in bed, sometimes he followed her closely to the shower, but always-always-he would get in bed with her and take her in his arms and the restrained civility of their manner would explode in hungry, almost savage lovemaking. She had thought his passion would wane as he grew used to having her around again, but his desire remained at a high pitch. Occasionally when they worked together she would watch his absorbed face, fascinated that he could look so calm now yet turn into a wild sensualist if she were to put her arms around him and kiss him. The thought teased at her brain until she would ache to do just that, to see if she could divert his thoughts from his work, but over the years she had developed a deep respect for a person's work and she didn't disturb him.
Only two incidents broke the surface harmony of those first weeks. The first occurred early one evening as she was clearing away the dinner dishes and putting them in the dishwasher. Rhy was already in the study, reading what she'd written that day, so when the phone rang she answered it on the kitchen extension.
"Is Rhy there? Could I speak to him, please?" asked a cool feminine voice and Sallie recognized it instantly.
"Certainly, Coral, I'll get him to the phone," she replied, and placed the receiver on the cabinet top while she went to the study.
He looked up as she entered. "Who was that?" he asked absently, looking down at the pages in his hand.
"It's Coral. She wants to speak with you," Sallie replied in amazingly level tones, and returned to the kitchen to finish her chores. The temptation to listen in on the kitchen extension made her pause for a second, but only a second, then she firrnly replaced the extension.
She tried to tell herself that it was nothing but jealousy eating at her insides. Coral had enough selfpossession that if she wanted to see Rhy she would have no scruples about calling him at home. Were they still seeing each other? Rhy never mentioned where he went for lunch---or with whom-and about once a week he was late getting home in the evening. As engrossed as

she was in the progress of her book she hadn't really noticed or thought anything of it, and she also knew that deadlines had to be met and things could happen that would make a long day necessary.
But Coral was so breathtakingly beautiful! How could any man not be flattered that such a lovely woman obviously adored him?
She couldn't stand it if Rhy was still seeing her, Sallie knew. For a while she had convinced herself that it didn't matter to her if Rhy had other women because she was over him, but now she knew differently. She loved him, and all her defenses had been shattered. He had won a complete victory, if he only knew it, but somehow she had kept herself from admitting aloud that she loved him. He never mentioned love, so neither did she.
When she didn't return to the study Rhy came in search of her and found her standing in the kitchen with her hands clenched.
"Aren't you coming-" he began, then cut his words off when he saw her taut face.
"I can't stop you from seeing her," Sallie said harshly, her eyes black with pain and fury. "But don't you dare let her call you here! I won't put up with that! "
His face darkened and his jaw tightened with temper, It was as if the weeks of politeness had never been. At the first sign of hostility their tempers broke free like wild horses too long held under control. "Hadn't you better get your facts straight before you make wild accusations?" Rhy snarled, coming forward to glower down at her. "You should've listened on the extension if you're so interested in my activities! As it happens, Coral asked me to have lunch with her tomorrow, and I refused."
"Don't deny yourself on my account!" she hurled rashly.
His lips twisted in a travesty of a smile. "Oddly enough, I've been doing just that," he ground out betwee,i his teeth. "But now, with your permission, I'll show you just what I have been denying myself!"
Too late she moved, trying to avoid his hands as they darted out to catch her, but he swung her up in his arms and strode rapidly to the bedroom. Furiously Sallie twisted and kicked but the difference in their sizes and strength left her helpless against his powerful body. He dropped her on the bed and followed her down, capturing her mouth with his and kissing her with such angry demand that her struggles turned abruptly into compliance. They made love wildly, their pent-up frustrations erupting in the force of their loving.

Afterward he held her clamped to his side while, with his free hand, he stroked over her nude body. "I'm not seeing Coral," he muttered into her hair. "Or any other woman. The way I Make love to you at night should assure you of that," he concluded wryly,
"It made me see red when she called," Sallie admitted, turning her head to brush her lips across his sweaty shoulder.
She could feel the tremor that ran through his body as her lips touched him and his arm tightened about her. "You were jealous," he accused, self-satisfaction evident in his tone. She gasped in a return of anger and tried to wiggle away from him, only to be hauled back against him for another whirlwind possession.
The second incident was her fault. One morning she decided to go shopping, the first time she'd done so since Rhy had moved her in with him. She needed several little things, and she passed the morning pleasantly, then decided to stop by and see her old friends at the magazine, maybe eat lunch with Rhy if he wasn't busy.
First she poked her nose into the large room where she'd worked and was greeted loudly and cheerfully. Brorn was off on assignment, and for a moment she felt a twinge of envy, then the exuberant welcome of the others made her forget that she was no longer a free-flying bird. After several minutes she excused herself and went up for a few minutes with Greg. She wasn't certain that she'd ever forgive him completely for switching over to Rhy's side, even though she was now living with her husband in relative harmony, but Greg was an old friend and he was dedicated to his job. She didn't want any coolness between them.
After a restrained greeting she and Greg rapidly regained their former easy mood. They parted with Greg's grinning comment that having a full-time husband must be good for her, she looked contented.
Like a cow, Sallie thought to herself in amusement as she went up to Rhy's office. She was still smiling when she stepped off the elevator and literally ran into Chris.
"You're back!" he exclaimed in instant delight, holding her at ann's length and looking her over. "You're blooming, darling!"
Sallie's eyes widened in dismay as she realized that she hadn't let Chris know that she was still in town. Greg knew, of course, but Greg wasn't exactly talkative about personal details. "I've never been gone," she admitted ruefully, smiling up into his dark eyes. "Rhy caught me."

Chris's eyebrows rose. "You don't look as if you're wasting away," he drawled mildly. "Maybe the situation isn't as bad as you thought it'd be?"
"Maybe," she said laughing. "Greg just told me that I look contented! I can't decide if I'm insulted or not. "
"Are you really happy, honey?" he asked in a gentle tone, and all of his joking was gone.
"I'm happy in a realistic way," she replied thoughtfully. "I don't expect heaven anymore, and I won't be destroyed when what I have ends."
"Are you so sure that it will?"
"I don't know. We just take every day as it comes. We manage to get along now, but who can say that it'll always be like that? What about you? Did you and Amy ... ?" She stopped, looking into the level, accepting brown eyes, and she knew that he was alone.
"It didn't work." He shrugged, taking her hand and leading her to the window at the end of the hallway, away from the elevator doors. "She's married to that other guy now, she won't even talk to me on the phone."
"I'm sorry," she murmured. "She got married so soon. I thought she wasn't supposed to marry him until later this year?"
"She's pregnant," Chris said rawly, and for a moment his face twisted with his inner pain, then he drew a deep breath and stared at Sallie with wry selfmockery. "I think it's my baby. Well, maybe it's the other guy's, I don't know, but I know that it could be mine, too. I'm not even sure Amy knows. I don't care. I'd marry her in a minute if she'd have me, but she said I'm too 'unstable' to be a good father."
"You'd marry her even knowing that she'd slept with another man while she was going out with you?" Sallie asked in amazement. That was love, love that accepted anything.
He shrugged. "I don't know what she did, but it wouldn't make any difference to me. I love her and I'd take her any way I could get her. If she called me now I'd go to her, and to hell with her husband." He said it in a calm, flat tone, then he shook his head. "Don't look so worried," he advised, a smile coming to his face. "I'm all right, honey, I'm not falling apart."
"But I care about you," she protested weakly. "And I care about you." He grinned down at her and suddenly lifted her in his arms, swinging her around giddily, laughing as she protested. "I've missed you like mad," he told her, his brown eyes turning impish. "I don't trust anyone else to give me advice on my love life-"

"Take your damned hands off my wife."
The toneless words were dropped like stones and Sallie struggled out of Chris's grip to whirl and find Rhy standing just outside his office door, his eyes narrowed to slits. Automatically she looked at his hands. They weren't curled into fists but were slightly cupped, his long fingers tense through his arms, his stance, relaxed and loose. Those hands could strike without warning, and Rhy looked murderous. She moved forward, casually putting herself between Rhy and Chris, but Rhy moved to the side and another clear path to Chris. As he moved Amanda came out of the office and stopped in her tracks at the sight of Rhy's bloodless face.
Chris didn't seem disturbed; he remained relaxed, his mouth curling into a wry smile. "Easy there," he drawled in his slow, humorous tone. "I'm not after your woman. I've got enough woman trouble of my own without taking on someone else's."
By then Sallie had reached Rhy, and she put her hand on his arm, feeling the rigid muscles there. "It's true," she told him, smiling like mad in an effort to hide the fear that had her heart thudding. "He's madly in love with a woman who wants him to settle down and stop dashing off to other countries at the drop of a hat, and he likes to tell me all about it. Does the plot sound familiar?"
"All right," Rhy uttered, his lips barely moving. His face was still frozen in white rage, but he growled at Amanda, "Go on to lunch. Everything's okay."
After Amanda and Chris had left she and Rhy stood in the hallway staring silently at each other. Gradually he relaxed and said tiredly, "Let's get out of this hallway. The office is private."
She nodded and preceded him into his office, and no sooner was the door closed behind them than he caught her in his arms, holding her to him so tightly that her ribs protested in pain.
"I've never been out with him," she managed to reassure him as she gasped for breath.
"I believe you," he whispered raggedly, his lips brushing across her temple, her cheek, the comer of her eye. "I just couldn't bear to see you in his arms. You're mine, and I don't want any other man touching you."
Her heart pounding, Sallie lifted her arms about his neck and clung to him. She was giddy with hope. The violence of his reaction couldn't be simple possessiveness; his emotions had to be involved to some extent for him to be shaking like this, his hands almost punishing as he touched her. But she

couldn't be certain, and she held back the most reassuring phrase of all that trembled on her tongue: I love you. She couldn't say it to him yet, but she had begun to hope.
"Hey, I came to see if you want to have lunch with me," she finally said gaily, lifting her head from its resting place on his shoulder.
"That's not what I want," he growled, his eyes straying suggestively to the sofa, "but I'll settle for lunch."
"I'm afraid we caused a scandal," she teased as she walked beside him to the elevator. "It'll be all over the building before the end of the day."
He shrugged negligently. "I don't care. Let it be a warning to any of your other pals who might want to hug you. I'm a throwback, a territorial animal, and I don't allow any encroachment into that territory."
At once she felt an icy shaft of pain in her heart. Was that all she was to him, a part of his territory? Thank heavens she'd kept silent a moment ago instead of blurting out her feelings for him! She was a fool to look for any deeper feelings from him; he didn't have any, and she'd always known that. He was a throwback, his instincts swift and primitive. He saw to the satisfaction of his needs and didn't waste time on anything as foolish as love.

Chapter Ten

The sense of accomplishment she felt as she stared at the last page of the manuscript surpassed anything she'd experienced as a reporter. It was finished! No longer was it a figment of her imagination. It existed; it had an identity. She knew there was still a lot of work to be done on it, rereading, correcting, rewriting, but now it was, for all intents and purposes, complete. Her hand reached for the telephone; she wanted to call Rhy and share this moment with him, but a wave of dizziness made her fall back weakly in the chair.

The dizziness was only momentary, but when it had passed she remained as she was, the impulse to call Rhy having faded. That was the fourth spell this week.... Of course. Why hadn't she realized? But perhaps she'd known all along and hadn't allowed the thought to surface until now. The book had claimed all of her attention, all of her energy, and she had pushed herself to complete it. But as soon as it was finished her subconscious had released the knowledge of her pregnancy.

Glancing at the desk calendar she decided that it had been the first night in Sakarya. "When else would it have been?" she murmured to herself. That was the first time in seven years Rhy had touched her, and she had immediately become pregnant. She gave a smile of self-mockery, then the smile became softer and she drew the calendar to her to count the weeks. Her baby would be due around the beginning of spring, and she thought that was a wonderful sign, a new beginning.

This baby would live, she knew. It was more than a new life, it was a strengthening of the fabric of her marriage, another bond between her and Rhy. He would make a wonderful father now, much better than he would have been years before. He would be delighted with his baby.

Then she frowned slightly. Fih-ning on the documentary was scheduled to begin next month, and Rhy had planned on taking her with him. He might change his mind if he knew she was pregnant. So she wouldn't tell him until after they returned! She wasn't about to let him leave without her; it would be a rerun of their early days, and she wasn't sure enough of either him or herself yet to endure a long separation.

She realized that she had a lot to do before then; first and foremost she needed to see a doctor and make certain everything was normal and that traveling wouldn't hurt the baby, and begin taking the recommended

vitamins. She should also buy new clothing, because by the time the filming was done she would probably have outgrown her present wardrobe. She pictured herself round and waddling and grinned. Rhy had missed most of her first pregnancy, but this time she would insist that he help her to do all of the little things she'd had to manage by herself before, like getting out of bed.

Of all the nights for Rhy to be late, she thought, he had to pick this one. He called at five and told her wearily that it would probably be eight or later when he made it home. "Eat without me, baby," he instructed. "But keep something hot for me. I don't think I can face a sandwich."

Swallowing her disappointment, she agreed, then suggested jokingly, "Do you need any help? I'm an old hand at meeting deadlines."

"You don't know how tempting that offer is." He sighed. "But work on the book instead, and I'll be home as soon as I can."

"I finished the book today," she informed him, her fingers tightening around the receiver. "So I'm taking a break." She had wanted to tell him when he first walked in the door, but she couldn't wait that long.

"You did what? Oh, hell," he said in disgust and Sallie's mouth trembled in hurt surprise. Then he continued, and she brightened again. "I should be taking you out to celebrate instead of working late. But I'll be home as soon as possible, then we'll do some private celebrating, if you understand my meaning."

"I thought you were tired." She laughed and his low chuckle sounded in her ear.

"I am tired, but I'm not dead," he replied huskily. "See you in a few hours."

Smiling, she replaced the receiver. After eating her solitary dinner she took a shower and settled down in the study to begin rereading the book, scribbling changes and corrections in the margins as she went. The work was absorbing, so much so that when she heard Rhy's key she was surprised at how swiftly the time had passed. She shoved the manuscript aside and jumped to her feet, then had to cling to the back of a chair for a moment when dizziness assailed her. Slowly. She must remember to move slowly.

Rhy entered the study, his tired face breaking into a grin as he surveyed her attire, a transparent dark blue nightgown and matching wrap. He tossed his jacket aside and tugged his loosened tie completely off, throwing it on top of his jacket. He began unbuttoning his shirt as he came to her. "Now I understand the charm of coming home to a negligee-clad wife," he

commented as he slid his arms around her and pulled her up on tiptoe for his kiss. "It's like a shot of adrenalin."
"Don't become too fond of the practice," she warned. "I just took my bath early because I had nothing else to do. Are you very hungry?"
"Yes," he growled. "Are you going to make me wait?"
"You know I meant for food!" Laughing at him, she crossed to the door. "Wash up while I set the table. I've kept things warm."
"Don't bother with the dining room," he called. "The kitchen is fine with me, and a lot handier." She did as he instructed and set his plate in the kitchen. He joined her there and while he ate they discussed the book. Rhy had already talked to an agent that he knew, and he wanted to hand the book over before they left for Europe.
"But it isn't ready," Sallie protested. "I've already begun making corrections for retyping."
"I want her to read it now," Rhy insisted. "It's a rough draft. She won't expect it to be word perfect right now."
"She?" Sallie asked, her ears pricking up.
"Yes, she," he mocked, his gray eyes glinting. "She's a bone-thin bulldozer by the name of Barbara Hopewell, and she's twenty years older than I am, so you can draw in your claws."
Sallie glared at him. She had the feeling that he'd purposely tricked her into revealing her jealousy and she didn't want him to gain too much of an advantage on her.
"Why are you in such a hurry?" she demanded. "I don't want you worrying about the book while we're in Europe. Hire a typist, do whatever you have to, but I want the book out of the way before we leave."
Because she was feeling resentful over his gibe about jealousy she propped her elbows on the table and gibed back at him. "Has the thought occurred to you that now that the book's finished I'll be bored sitting around here all day? I need to be looking for a job, not jaunting around Europe."
If she'd wanted to rile him she succeeded beyond her wildest expectations. He turned pale; then two hectic spots of temper appeared on his high cheekbones. Slamming his fork down on the table he reached across and grasped her wrist, hauling her to her feet as he stood up himself. "You never miss a chance to twist the knife, do you?" he muttered hoarsely. "Sometimes I want to break your neck!" Then he jerked her against him and brutally took her lips, not allowing her a chance to speak even if she could

have thought of anything to say, and with their mouths still fused he slipped one an-n behind her knees and lifted her easily, her slight weight nothing to his powerful arms.
Sallie had to cling to him; the swift movement as he jerked her to her feet had made her head swim alarmingly and she felt as if she might faint. Neither could she understand why he had reacted so violently, or what he meant about twisting the knife. Confused, all she knew was that she'd made him angry when she hadn't really meant to, and she offered him the only comfort she could, the response of her lips and body. He accepted the offer hungrily; the pressure of his mouth changing from hurtful to persuasive, and he carried her to the bedroom.
Afterward she lay curled drowsily against him, wrapped in the security of his own special male scent and the warmth of his nearness while he lazily stroked her abdomen and pressed kisses along the curve of her shoulder. "Did I hurt you?" he murmured, referring to his urgent lovemaking, and Sallie whispered a denial. "That's good," he replied huskily. "I wouldn't want to..." He paused, then after a moment continued. "Don't you think it's time you told me about the baby?"
Sallie sat bolt upright in the bed and turned to stare at him with huge eyes. "How did you know?" she demanded in astonishment, her voice rising. "I only realized it myself today!"
He blinked as if she'd jolted him in return; then he tipped his dark head back against the pillow and roared with laughter, tugging her down to lie against his chest. "I should've guessed," he chuckled, his hand smoothing her long hair away from her face. "You were so wrapped up in that book you didn't even know what day it was. I knew, darling, because I'm not a complete ignoramus and I can count. I thought you were deliberately keeping me in the dark because you didn't want me to have the satisfaction of knowing you're pregnant."
"Gee, you must think I'm a lovely character," she muttered crossly and, turning her head, she sank her teeth playfully, but firn-fly, into his shoulder. He yelped in pain and instantly she kissed the wound, but she told him defiantly, "You deserved that."
"Out of consideration for your delicate condition I'll let you get away with that," he mocked, tilting her face up for a kiss that lingered.
"Actually," Sallie confessed a moment later, "I wasn9t going to tell you just yet."

His head snapped around, and he cupped her chin in his palm, forcing her to look at him. "Why?" he growled.
"Because I want to go to Europe with you," she stated simply. "I was afraid you'd make me stay here if you knew I'm pregnant."
"Not a chance. I wasn't with you before, but I'm planning on being with you every day of this pregnancy-with your permission, Mrs. Baines, I'll even be with you when our baby is born."
Her heart stopped, then lurched into overtime. Too overcome to speak, Sallie turned her face into his shoulder and held him with desperate hands. Despite everything he had ever said-and all the things he had never said-she began to hope that Rhy really did care for her. "Rhy---oh, Rhy!" she whispered in a choked voice.
Misunderstanding the cause of her emotion he gathered her close to him and stroked her head. "Don't worry," he murmured into her hair. "This baby will be all right, I promise you. We'll get the best obstetrician in the state. We'll have a houseful of kids, you wait and see."
Clutching him to her Sallie thought that she'd be satisfied with only this one, if it lived. That, and Rhy's love, would make her life complete.
Caught up in a whirlwind of activity preparing for the trip to Europe, which included readying not only her own clothing but Rhy's as well, as he was working late more and more often in an effort to tie up all loose ends before they left, and hammering the book into its final shape, Sallie hardly had a moment to think during the next few weeks. The doctor had assured her that she was in perfect shape, though she could stand to gain a few pounds, and the baby was developing normally. He was also in favor of the trip to Europe so long as she remembered to eat properly.
She had never been happier. Four months ago she had thought that Rhy meant nothing to her, and all she wanted was to be free of his restricting influence. She still fumed sometimes at the high-handed methods he'd used to restore her to her position as his wife, but for the most part she was glad that he didn't know how to take no for an answer. She was more deeply in love with him now than she'd ever been as an insecure teenager, for she'd grown in character in those years away from him. Her feelings were stronger, her thoughts and emotions more mature. Now he acted as if he never wanted her out of his sight, and he seemed so proud of the child she carried that she sometimes thought he was going to hang a sign around her neck announcing her expectant state.

Disaster struck without warning a week before they were due to leave for Europe. It was one of those picture-perfect autumn days when the sunshine was warm and the sky was deep blue, yet the air carried the unmistakable fragrance of approaching winter. Sallie made one last shopping trip, determined that this would be it, and took her purchases home. She felt marvelous, and her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed; she was smiling as she put away the articles of clothing she had bought.

Her senses had always been acute, but she still had no warning of what was to come when the doorbell rang and she called out to Mrs. Hermann, "I'll' get it. I'm right here!"

She pulled the door open, smiling warmly, but the smile faltered as she recognized Coral Williams. The model looked beautiful, as always, but there was a haunted expression on the exquisite face that made Sallie wonder uneasily if Rhy had been wrong, if Coral was suffering because he'd stopped seeing her.

"Hello," she greeted the other woman. "Will you come in? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Thank you," Coral replied almost inaudibly,

walking past Sallie and standing uncertainly in the foyer. "I ... is Rhy here? I tried to phone him, but his secretary said he's out of the office and I thought he might perhaps..." Her voice trailed off and pity welled up in Sallie's throat. She knew all too well how it felt to suffer from the lack of Rhy's love, and she was at a loss as to what to do. She sympathized with Coral, but she wasn't about to hand over Rhy to the other woman, even if Rhy was willing.

"No, he's not here," Sallie replied. "He's often out of his office now. He's very busy preparing for our trip to Europe."

"Europe!" Coral turned very white, only her expertly applied makeup supplying any color to her cheeks. She was unnaturally pale anyway and the severely tailored black dress she wore only pointed up the hollows of her cheeks and her generally fragile appearance.

"He's filming a documentary," explained Sallie. "We expect to be gone about three months."

"He-he can't!" Coral burst out, clenching her fists.

A sudden chill ran up Sallie's spine and unconsciously she squared her shoulders as if in anticipation of a blow. "What is it you want with Rhy?" she challenged directly.

Coral stiffened too, staring down at Sallie from her superior height. "I'm son-y, but it's private."
"I don't accept that. If it concerns Rhy it concerns me. He is my husband, you know," she ended sarcastically.
Coral winced as if SaIllie'd scored a hit, then recovered herself to say scornfully, "Some husband! Do you really think he spared a thought for you when you were separated? The old adage of 'out of sight, out of mind' was never more true than with Rhy! He was out with a different woman every night, until he met me."
Sallie shuddered with the sudden violent desire to punch Coral right in that perfect mouth. The woman was only saying what she'd always thought herself, though privately she wanted very much to believe Rhy's assertions that his relationships with other women had been platonic. Certainly she couldn't fault his behavior since she'd been living with him again. A woman couldn't ask for a more attentive husband.
"I know all about your relationship with Rhy," she declared solidly. "He told me everything when he asked me to come back to him."
"Oh, did he?" Coral asked wildly, her voice rising in shrill laughter. "I doubt that. Surely some details are still private!"
Abruptly Sallie had had enough and she moved to open the door again so Coral could leave. "I'm sorry," she said firmly. "I'm asking you to leave. Rhy's my husband and I love him and I don't care what his past is. I'm sorry for you because you lost him, but facts are facts and you n-fight as well face up to them. He won't come back to you."
"What makes you so certain of that?" Coral yelled, losing all control, her face twisting with fury. "When he hears what I've got to tell him he'll come back to me, all right! He'll leave you without even a consoling pat on the head!"
For a moment the woman's certainty caused Sallie to waver; then she thought of the child in her womb, and she knew that Rhy would never leave her now. "I don't think so," she said softly, playing her ace. "I'm pregnant. Our baby will be born in March. I don't think any of your charms can equal that in Rhy's view."
Coral reeled backward as if she might faint, and Sallie watched her in alarm, but the woman recovered herself and burst into peal after peal of mocking, hysterical laughter, holding her arrns across her middle as if she found Sallie's announcement hilarious. "Priceless!" she gasped when she

had enough breath for words. "I wish Rhy could be here. This lacks only his presence to be the hit comedy of the year!"
"I don't know what you're talking about," Sallie broke in stiffly, "but I think you'd better go." The amused, malicious glitter in Coral's eyes made her uncomfortable, and she wanted only for the woman to leave so she could be alone again and recapture her mood of confident serenity.
"Don't be so sure of yourself!" Coral flared, her hatred plain on her face. "You managed to pique his interest by acting as if you wanted nothing to do with him, but surely you know by now that he's incapable of staying faithful to any one woman! I understand him. Some men are just like that, and I love him despite his weakness for other women. I'm willing to allow him his little affairs so long as he comes back to me, whereas you'll drive him mad with boredom within a year. And don't think a baby will make any difference to him!"
Beyond Coral, Sallie saw Mrs. Hermann hovering in the doorway, her round face frowning with worry as she listened to Coral's abusive tirade. Instinctively disliking having a witness to the nasty scene Coral was creating Sallie jerked the door open and snapped, "Get out!"
"Oh, I'm glad to go!" Coral smirked. "But don't think you've got everything your way! Women you make me sick, always acting so sure of yourselves and sticking your noses in where they don't belong, thinking some man will admire you! That's why Rhy pulled you off of foreign assignments, he said you were making a fool of yourself trying to act as tough as any man. And now you think you're something special just because you're pregnant! That's nothing so special. Rhy's good at getting women pregnant!"
Despite herself Sallie reeled in shock, not quite certain she understood what Coral was saying. The sight of her suddenly pale face seemed to give Coral some satisfaction because she smiled again and spat out, "That's right! The baby you're carrying isn't the only child Rhy has fathered! I'm pregnant, too, and it's Rhy's baby. Two months pregnant, honey, so tell me what that means about your perfect marriage! I told you, he always comes back to me!"
Having delivered her blow Coral stalked out with her head held at a queenly altitude. Unable to completely take in what the woman had said Sallie closed the door with quiet composure and stared across the room at Mrs. Hermann, who had pressed a hand over her mouth in shock.

"Mrs. Baines," Mrs Hermann gasped, her voice rich with sympathy. "Oh, Mrs. Baines!"

It was then that Sallie understood just exactly what Coral's words had meant. She was pregnant, and it was Rhy's baby. Two months pregnant, she had said. So Rhy had not only lied about his relationship with Coral, he'd continued it after his reconciliation with Sallie. In dazed horror she thought again of all the nights when Rhy had supposedly been working late. She'd never thought to call him at the office to check up on him. She would have been insulted if Rhy had checked up on her, so she'd accorded him the same respect and he'd abused it.

Numbly she went past Mrs. Hermann into the bedroom, Rhy's bedroom, where she'd spent so many happy nights in his arms. She stared at the bed and knew she couldn't bear to sleep there again.

Without thinking about it she jerked down the suitcases from the top of the closet and began filling them helter-skelter with the clothing she'd bought to take to Europe. She had money and she had a place to go; there was no reason for her to stay here another minute.

She paused briefly when she thought of the manuscript, but it was safely in the hands of Barbara Hopewell, and she would get in touch with her later. Later ... when she could bear to think again, when the pain had subsided from the screaming agony that was tearing her apart now.

When she carried the suitcases out into the hallway she found Mrs. Hermann there, hovering, wringing her hands in agitation. "Mrs. Baines, please don't leave like this! Try to talk things out-men will be men, you know. I'm sure there's an explanation."

"There probably is," Sallie agreed tiredly. "Rhy's very good with explanations. But I just don't want to hear it right now. I'm leaving. I'm going somewhere quiet and peaceful where I can have my baby, and I don't want to think about my husband and his mistresses. "

"But where will you be? What shall I tell Mr. Baines?" the housekeeper wailed.

"Tell him?" Sallie stopped and thought a minute, unable to think of any message that could adequately express her state of mind. "Tell him ... tell him what happened. I don't know where I'm going, but I know that I don't think I ever want to see him again." Then she walked out the door.

Chapter Eleven

The days passed slowly, dripping out of existence. Like a salmon returning to the place of its birth to spawn and die she had returned to her own origins, the little upstate town where she'd grown up, where she'd met Rhy and married him. Her parents' house was empty and neglected and many of the old neighbors had died or moved on and she didn't know any of the children who played now in the quiet streets. But it was still home, and she moved back into the small house and tidied it up, refurnished it with the minimum of furniture for her needs. Then she waited for time to work its magic healing process.

At first she was unnaturally calm, numbed by her sense of loss and betrayal. She'd just gotten used to living with him, and now she was alone again with the solitary nights pressing down on her like an invisible weight. She didn't try to think about it or straighten it out in her mind; there was no use in driving herself mad with if onlys and might have beens. She had to accept it, just as she would have to if he'd died.

In a sense that was what had happened. She'd lost her husband as irrevocably as if he had died. She was as alone, as empty. He was in Europe now, half a world away, and he might as well have been on another planet. Then she realized that she was neither alone nor empty. His baby moved inside her one day and she stood with her hands pressed over the gentle fluttering, overcome by the feeling of awe that a living creature was being nurtured inside her body. Rhy's baby, a part of him. No matter if she never saw his face again she would always have him near. That thought was both painful and comforting, a threat and a promise.

The numbness wore off abruptly. She woke in the dark, silent hours before dawn one morning, and her entire body ached with the pain of her loss. For the first time she cried, weeping with her face pressed into the pillow, and she thought about it endlessly, trying to understand the hows and whys of his behavior. Was it her fault? Was it something about her that challenged Rhy to subdue her, then forced him to lose interest once she was captured? Or was it Rhy's own nature, as Coral had charged, an inability to be faithful to one woman?

Yet that denoted a certain weakness of character, and that didn't describe Rhy. A lot of adjectives could be used to describe him-arrogant, hot-tempered, stubbom-but weakness in any respect wasn't one of them. She would also have sworn on his professional integrity, and she felt that

integrity was not an isolated thing in a person, restricted to only one field; integrity spread out, showing itself in every aspect of a person's behavior. So how could she explain his infidelity? She couldn't, and the question tore at her. She forced herself to eat only because of the baby, but even so she grew pale and thinner. Sometimes she woke up in the middle of the night to find her pillow wet, and she wanted Rhy beside her so badly that it was impossible to get back to sleep. At times like that she wondered why she'd run off, like a fool, and left the field clear for Coral. Why hadn't she stayed? Why hadn't she put up a fight for him? He'd hurt her, he'd been unfaithful, but she still loved him and surely it couldn't hurt any more if she'd stayed with him? At least then she'd have had the comfort of his presence; they could have shared the miracle of the growing child she carried. During those dark predawn hours she sometimes determined to pack her clothes first thing in the morning and fly to Europe to join Rhy, but always, when the morning came, she would remember Coral and the baby that she carried. Rhy might not want her to join him. Coral might be with him. Coral was more glamorous anyway, more suited for a life in the limelight with Rhy.

It wasn't in her nature to be indecisive, but for the second time in her life she'd lost her bearings, and both times had been because of Rhy. The first time she had eventually found her feet and pursued a goal, but now she was unable to plan anything more complicated than the basic needs of living. She ate, she bathed, she slept, she did what had to be done. She had read enough to know that part of her lethargy was due to being pregnant, yet that wasn't excuse enough to explain her total lack of interest in anything beyond the next moment.

As the late fall days passed and winter drew closer she became aware that Christmas was near. Somehow every Christmas since the death of her parents had been spent alone, and this one would be no different. But next year, she promised herself, gazing at a brightly decorated tree as she made her weekly trip to the nearest grocery store, she would have a real Christmas. The baby would be about nine months old, bright eyed and inquisitive about everything in its world. She would decorate a tree and pile gifts beneath it that would fascinate a crawling baby.

It was a vague plan, but it was the first plan she'd made since leaving Rhy. For the baby's sake she had to pull herself out of the doldrums. She had a book in the works; she needed to contact the agent and see about publication and perhaps start work on another book. She had to have some

means of taking care of the baby or the first thing she knew Rhy would be demanding custody of his child. Fiercely she determined that she'd never allow that to happen. Rhy had another child; she only had this one and she'd never let it go!

Two weeks before Christmas she finally made a firm decision and dialed Barbara Hopewell's office with her former briskness. When Barbara came on the line Sallie identified herself, and before the other woman could say anything she asked if any progress had been made in locating a publisher.

"Mrs. Baines!" Barbara gasped. "Where are you? Mr. Baines has been going mad, trying to complete filming in Europe and flying back here every free moment he has in an effort to trace you! Are you in town?"

"No," Sallie replied. She didn't want to bear about Rhy or how hard he'd been looking for her. Oddly enough, she'd expected that he would make an effort to find her if only because of the child she carried. "And where I am doesn't matter. I only want to discuss the book, if you don't mind. Has a publisher been found?"

"But..." Then Barbara changed her mind, and she answered in an abrupt tone, "Yes, we have a publisher who is extremely interested. I really need to schedule a meeting with you, Mrs. Baines, to go over the details of the contract. May I make an appointment?"

"I don't want to return to New York," Sallie said, her throat constricting at the thought.

"Then I'll be glad to meet you wherever you want. Just set the time and tell me the location."

Sallie hesitated, unwilling to divulge her hiding place, yet equally unwilling to leave it for a meeting at any other location. Then she quickly added up the dates and realized that Rhy would still be filming in Europe for another month. Barbara had said that he flew back as often as he could, but she knew that schedule, and it was a tightly packed one. The odds were that he would be unable to leave on a moment's notice even if Barbara did happen to be in touch with him and let slip that she'd talked to Sallie.

"All right," she agreed reluctantly and gave Barbara her address. They agreed on a time that Thursday for Barbara to come to the house.

That was only two days away and Sallie felt even more confident that Rhy wouldn't find out her hiding place. When she saw Barbara on Thursday she would get her promise not to tell Rhy; she hadn't wanted to discuss the

matter over the phone, knowing that anyone in Barbara's office could listen in on an extension.
She couldn't sleep that night; she was too anxious that she had made a mistake in revealing her bolt hole to relax. Somehow she had the feeling that Rhy was one step ahead of her, as usual. Lying in her bed, tense and unable to close her eyes, she imagined all sorts of what ifs: What if Rhy had been in New York even then? What if Rhy had even been in Barbara's office and was on his way upstate now? What if she got up in the morning to find him on her doorstep? What would she say to him? What was there to say? Tears seeped from beneath her lids as she squeezed them slightly shut in an effort to banish the picture she suddenly had of Rhy's dark, lean face. Pain pierced her sharply and she turned on her side to weep, hugging the pillow to her face in an effort to stifle the sobs. "I love him," she moaned aloud. That hadn't changed, and every day apart from him was an eternity. Abruptly, desolate in her loneliness, she admitted to herself that she wanted to go back to him. She wanted his strength, his physical presence, even if she couldn't have his love. She wanted him there to hold her hand while she gave birth to their child and she wanted to have other children. The thought of Coral and that other baby tore at her insides, but gradually she was realizing that her love, her need, for Rhy was stronger than her anger. She had to accept him as he was if she wanted to live with him.
She dozed eventually, toward dawn, and woke only a few hours later to the steady, dreary sound of cold rain pouring down. The sky was gray, the streets stark and cheerless. Snow had not yet arrived and given everything its winter-wonderland effect, but the trees were denuded of leaves and the bare branches rattled against each other like bones of a skeleton. There was nothing to get up for but she did, and managed to occupy herself by trying to work out a sketchy outline for another book. This one would be more difficult, she knew, for the first one had been partially rooted in her own experiences. This one would have to be totally from her imagination.
By midafternoon the rain had stopped but the temperature had dropped, and when she turned on the television she learned that the rain was supposed to begin again later that night, then turn to sleet and snow before morning. Sallie made a wry face at the weatherman on the screen. It was possible that bad road conditions would keep Barbara from making their appointment and she felt horribly disappointed. Her interest in the world around her was returning and she wanted to get on with the business of living.

After an hour of pacing around, boredom overcame her and she felt stifled in the small house. It was cold outside, and damp, but she felt that a brisk walk would clear the cobwebs from her mind and perhaps relax her enough so she could sleep that night. Not only that, she told herself righteously, but the doctor had wanted her to take some form of exercise every day. A walk was just the thing.

She wrapped herself up warmly, pulling on kneehigh boots and shoving her hair up under a dark fur hat that covered her ears. After buttoning her heavy coat up and wrapping a muffler about her throat she set off briskly, shivering at first in the cold air, but gradually movement wanned her and she began to enjoy having the streets to herself. It was almost sundown and the dreary sky made it that much darker. The water dripping from the trees onto the sidewalk and street was the only sound except for the clicking of her boots, and she shivered again but not from the cold this time. Why was she walking like an idiot when she could be back safe and snug in her warm house? And why was she running from Rhy when all she wanted was to be back in his arms?

Stupid, she mentally berated herself as she headed for home. Stupid, stupid, stupid! And spineless on top of that! She would be the biggest fool alive if she left the field clear for Coral! When this weather cleared up and she could travel safely she'd leave for Europe on the first plane out, and if she found Coral with Rhy she'd tear out all of that gorgeous blond hair. Rhy would not get off completely free, she promised herself, the light of battle sparkling in her eyes. She had a lot to say to him, but she meant to keep him! After all, hadn't these past seven years taught her that he was the only man for her?

Retracing her steps faster now, she turned the corner and came in sight of her house. She was so caught up in her plans that at first she didn't see the taxi in front of her house; it wasn't until a tall man who moved with the litheness of a panther ducked down to pay the driver that her gaze was drawn to the cab. She stopped in her tracks and the breath stopped in her chest as she stared at the proudly held dark head, bare despite the dripping trees. The taxi pulled away with a flash of red taillights and the man set a single flight bag on the wet sidewalk and stared at the house as if mesmerized by the sight of it. No lights were on and it could have been empty, she realized, except for the curtains that covered the windows. Was

that what he was thinking? she wondered with sudden pain. That it was empty after all?
"Rhy," she whispered and began walking again. The sound of her boots drew his attention and his head turned swiftly, like that of a wild animal sensing danger. He froze for a moment, then began walking toward her with a purposeful stride. Just like him, she thought, trying not to smile. There was no self-doubt in that man. Even when he was wrong he was confident. But when he was close, when he stopped with only three feet separating them, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out with pain. His lean face bore the marks of suffering; there were harsh shadows under his steely eyes and lines that hadn't been there before. He was tired of course, and the grayness of exhaustion enhanced the grimness of his expression. He'd lost weight; the skin was pulled taut over the high, proud cheekbones.
He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat and stared at her, his bleak gaze roving over her small, delicate face and her rounded form beneath her coat. Sallie quivered with wanting to throw herself into his arms, but he hadn't opened them to her, and she was suddenly afraid that he didn't want her. But why was he here?
"She lied," he said tonelessly, his voice even harsher than before and almost beyond sound ' His lips were barely moving as he seemed to force out his next words. "I'm dying without you, Sallie. Please come back to me."
Incredulous joy rocketed through her veins, and she closed her eyes for a moment in an effort to control herself. When she opened them again he was still staring down at her with a desperate plea in his gray eyes, his lips pressed grimly together as if he expected the worst. "I was planning on it," she told him, her voice tremulous with joy. "I'd just now decided that as soon as the weather cleared I was taking a plane to Europe."
A shudder quaked visibly through his body; then he pulled his hands out of his pockets and reached for her at the same time that she stepped forward. Hard arms enfolded her in a tight, damp embrace, and she put her arms around his neck and clung desperately, tears of happiness running down her face. He caught her mouth with his and held it, kissing her deeply and reassuring both of them that they were together again; then he lifted her completely off the ground, turning round and round on the sidewalk in a slow circle as they kissed.
At some point it began to rain again; they were both soaked by the time Sallie glanced up at the pouring skies and laughed. "What fools we are!"

she exclaimed. "Why don't we go inside instead of standing out in the rain?"
"And you don't need to catch a chill," he growled, putting her on her feet and leaning down to lift his flight bag. "Let's get dried off, then we can talk."
He insisted that she take a hot shower while he changed into dry clothing, and when she came out of the bath she found that he'd made coffee; two steaming cups were already on the table.
"Oh, that's good." She sighed as she sipped the hot liquid and it completed the warming job that the shower had started.
Rhy sank into a chair at the table and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "I need this to keep me awake," he said wearily.
Sallie looked at him, seeing his exhaustion etched into every line of his face, and her heart clenched painfully. "I'm sorry," she said softly.
He made a gesture with his hand, waving aside his weariness, and silence stretched between them. It was as if they were afraid to begin, afraid to say anything personal, and Sallie stared into her coffee cup.
"Chris is gone," said Rhy abruptly, not looking at her.
Her head jerked up. "Gone?" she echoed.
"He quit. Downey told me-hell, I don't know how long ago it was. Everything's a blur. But he quit, said he was moving on to another city."
For a moment Sallie had hoped that Chris and his Amy had gotten together, that he'd quit his job to settle down, but she knew that it just hadn't happened for Chris. A shaft of pain pierced her as she thought of how close she'd come to losing Rhy, and she quickly took another sip of coffee. She blurted, "I suppose Barbara called you?"
"Immediately," he acknowledged. "I owe her a lot to make up for that favor. I completely wrecked the shooting schedule to get on the first flight to New York. Everyone thinks I've gone berserk anyway, flying back and forth cross the Atlantic whenever we had a break. It drove me crazy," he admitted grimly. "Not knowing where you were, if you were all right, knowing that you believed what that vicious little tramp told you."
"Mrs. Hermann told you what she said?" Sallie asked, wanting to know if Coral's story had been related correctly. Wild hope was bubbling in her; he'd said that Coral had lied, and he certainly wasn't acting like a man who was guilty of anything.
"Word for word, with tears pouring down her face like a waterfall," Rhy growled. He reached out abruptly and took Sallie's free hand, clasping it

firmly in his long fingers. "She lied," he told her again, his husky voice taut with strain. "If you've ever believed anything, believe that. Coral may be pregnant, but I swear I'm not the father. I've never made love to her, though she tried hard enough to instigate an affair."
The words jolted Sallie. His voice had an undeniable ring of truth to it, but still she squeaked incredulously, "Never?"
A flush darkened his cheekbones. "That's right. I think I was a challenge to her ego. She just couldn't believe that I wasn't interested in sleeping with her even when I told her I was married and that I'd never been as attracted to any other woman as I was to MY wife," he said, watching her steadily.
Sallie blushed under his regard, and his hand tightened on hers. "I think she hated you because of that," he continued, his eyes never leaving her face. "I turned her down in favor of you, and she tried her best to tear us apart, to hurt you. Maybe she didn't plan on doing what she did, if you want to give her the benefit of the doubt. If she truly is pregnant she probably wanted me to give her the money for an abortion. A pregnancy is poison to a model, and I can't see Coral as a doting mother."
Sallie sucked in her breath. "Rhy, would you have?"
"No," he growled. "And I could've killed her when Mrs. Hermann told me what she'd done."
"But ... surely Coral has the money herself ..."Don't you believe it," he muttered. "She likes the high life too well to save anything and she loses heavily in Atlantic City and Vegas. She's not a good gambler," he finished starkly.
"But why did you go out with her at all if you weren't interested in her?" Sallie asked. That was the biggest flaw in Rhy's story. He and Coral had been constant companions, and she wasn't fool enough to think things hadn't progressed beyond hand-holding.
"Because I liked her," he replied abruptly. "Don't ask me for proof of my faithfulness, Sallie, because I haven't got any. I can only tell you that Coral wasn't my mistress, even before I found you again."
"Take it on trust?" she queried, her voice going tight.
"Exactly," he said in a hard voice. "Just as I have to take it on trust that you haven't been involved with any other man. You have no proof, either."
Sallie scowled down at the tablecloth and traced a pattern on it with the hand he wasn't holding. "I've never been interested in any other men," she

admitted with ill-grace, hating having to reveal that secret to him. "I've never even bothered to date."
"And for eight years you've been the only woman I could see," he replied in a strained voice, releasing her hand and getting up to stride restlessly around the small kitchen. "I felt like a fool. I couldn't understand why a timid little rabbit like you were then had gotten under my skin like that. I wouldn't have put up with one scene over my work from any other woman, but I kept coming back to you, hoping you'd grow up and understand that I needed my work. You said you were hooked on excitement, on danger, and that's exactly the way I was. A danger junkie.
"I never meant to leave you pernianently," be said jerkily. "I just wanted to teach you a lesson. I wanted you to beg me to come back to you. But you didn't. You picked up and carried on as if you didn't need me at all. You even sent my support checks back to me. I buried myself in work. I swore I'd forget about you, too, and sometimes I almost did. I enjoyed the company of other women, but whenever things began getting involved ... I just couldn't. It made me furious, but I'd remember how it had been with us, and I didn't want second best."
Sallie stared at him, thunderstruck, and he glared at her as if she'd done something terrible. "I made a lot of money," he said with constrained violence. "A lot of money. I bought some stocks and they went out of sight and I ended up a rich man. There was no longer any need to put myself on the line to get a story and getting shot at had lost whatever perverted thrill it had held for me, anyway. I wanted to sleep in the same bed every night, and finally I admitted to myself that if there was going to be a woman in that bed it had to be you. I bought the magazine and began trying to trace you, but you'd left here years before, and no one had any idea where you were."
"You tried to find me?" she asked, her eyes going wide with wonder. So Rhy hadn't simply forgotten about her for those years! "And this time? You've been trying to find me this time, too?"
"It seems like trying to find you has become a habit." He tried to make a joke, but his face was too tightly drawn to express any humor. "I didn't even think of hunting for you here. I've been checking with newspapers in all the major cities on the thought that you were likely to get a job as a reporter. You threw it in my face so often that you were bored without a job that I thought you'd go right back to work."

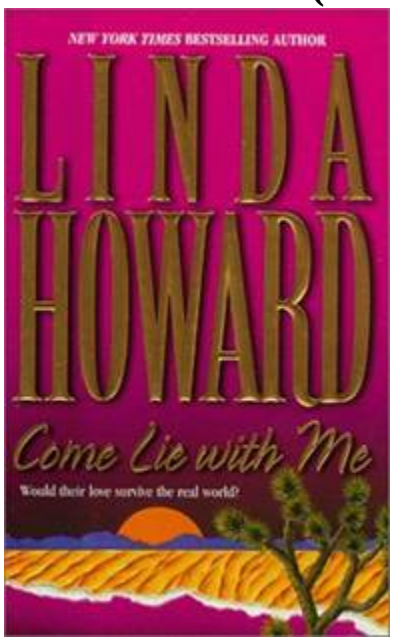
"I thought I'd be bored," she admitted, "but I wasn't. I had the book to work on, but most of all, you were there."
His face lightened curiously. "You sure put up a good fight, lady," he said wryly, and he gave her a wolfish grin that held no humor.
"I didn't have a chance," she denied. "Having me working for your magazine like I did gave you all the aces."
"Don't you believe it," he said roughly. "I caught a glimpse of a long braid swinging against a slim little bottom, and it was like I'd been kicked in the gut. Without even seeing your face I wanted you. I thought it was a vicious joke on me to find a woman I wanted just when I'd begun the search for my wife, but the few glimpses I had of you made me determined to have you. Then I ran into you in the hallway and recognized you. The dainty little elf with that bewitching braid was my own wife, changed almost beyond recognition except for those big eyes, and you made it plain that you weren't interested in anything about me. I'd spent eight years with the feel of you branded on my senses until I couldn't even see another woman, and you didn't care!"
"Of course I cared!" she interrupted, standing up to face him. She was trembling with strain, but she couldn't let him think that he meant nothing to her. "But I didn't want you to hurt me again, Rhy! It nearly killed me when you left the first time, and I didn't think I could stand it again. I tried to protect myself from you. I even convinced myself that I was completely over you. But it didn't work," she finished in a small voice, staring down at the tiled floor.
He drew a deep, shaking breath. "We're two of a kind," he said roughly. "We're as wary and independent as wild animals, the both of us. We try to protect ourselves at all costs, and it's going to be hard to change. But I have changed, Sallie. I've grown up. I need you more than I need excitement. It's hard to say," he muttered. "It's hard to deliberately leave yourself open to hurt. Love makes a person vulnerable, and it takes a lot of trust to admit that you love someone. Why else do people try so hard to hide a love that they know isn't returned? I love you. You can tear me to pieces or you can send me so high I lose myself. Trust has to start somewhere, Sarah, and I'm willing to make the first move. I love you."
Hearing him call her Sarah swept away all the long years of loneliness and pain, and she raised a face that was pale and streaked with slowly falling tears. "I love you, too," she said softly, making the words a litany of

devotion. "I've always loved you. I ran away because I was hurt. I was insecure and didn't feel that you loved me, and Coral tore me apart with her vile insinuations. But today I decided that I loved you too much to just let you go, hand you over to her without a fight. I was coming after you, Rhy Baines, and I was going to make a believer out of you!"
"Hey," he said just as softly, opening his arms and holding them open for her. "Go ahead. Make me believe it, darling!"
Sallie dived into his arms and felt them enclose her tightly. She couldn't stop the tears that wet his neck, and he tried to comfort her, gently kissing the moisture from her cheeks and eyes.
They had been apart for too long. His kisses became hungry and his hands roamed over her gently swelling body, and Sallie cried out wordlessly as desire flamed through her. He lifted her and carried her to the bedroom, the same bedroom where eight years before he'd carried her as an innocent bride and initiated her into the intoxicating sensuality of his lovemaking. It was the same now as it had been then; he was gentle and passionate, and she responded to him with all her reserve finally gone. When the fire of their desire had been sated she lay drowsily amid the tangled covers of the bed. His dark tousled head was pressed into her soft shoulder and his lips sleepily nuzzled the swell of her breast. His lean fingers stroked the slight swell his child made and he murmured against her flesh. "Was it all right? There's no harm in making love?"
"None," she assured him, lacing her fingers tenderly in the thick hair that curled onto his neck. She couldn't get enough of touching him; she was content to lie there with him resting heavily against her, wornout from traveling and their loving.
He was already half-asleep but he muttered, "I don't want to tie you down. I just want you to fly back to me every night."
"Loving you doesn't tie me down," she answered, kissing his forehead, which was all she could reach. And it didn't. She was surprised. Where had all her fears for her independence gone? Then she knew that what she'd really feared had been being hurt again. Rhy's love would give her a springboard to soar to heights she'd never reached before. She was free as she'd never been before, free because she was secure.
He didn't hold her down; he added his strength to hers.
"You've got talent," he whispered. "Real talent. Use it, darling. I'll help you in any way I can. I don't want to clip your wings. I fell in love with you all

over again when I found you, you'd grown up, too, and become a woman who drove me mad with your nearness and wild with frustration when we were apart."

Sallie smiled in the darkness. It looked as if all those crash courses so long ago had finally paid off. He went to sleep on her shoulder, and she slept, too, content and secure in his love. For the first time she felt that their need for each other was something permanent. She had always felt the tug of the bond that held her to him, but until now she hadn't known that he was equally bound to her. That was why there had been no divorce, why he hadn't even made an effort to obtain one. They belonged to each other and they always would.

Come Lie With Me (1984)



LINDA HOWARD

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Chapter One

The ocean had a hypnotic effect. Dione gave in to it without a struggle, peacefully watching the turquoise waves roll onto the blindingly white sand. She wasn't an idle person, yet she was content to sit on the deck of her rented beach house, her long, honey-tanned legs stretched out and propped on the railing, doing nothing more than watching the waves and listening to the muted roar of water coming in and going out. The white gulls swooped in and out of her vision, their high-pitched cries adding to the symphony of wind and water. To her right, the huge golden orb of the sun was sinking into the water, turning the sea to flame. It would have made a stunning photograph, yet she was disinclined to leave her seat and get her camera. It had been a glorious day, and she had done nothing more strenuous than celebrate it by walking the beach and swimming in the green-and-blue-streaked Gulf of Mexico. Lord, what a life. It was so sweet, it was almost sinful. This was the perfect vacation.

For two weeks she had wandered the sugar-white sands of Panama City, Florida, blissfully alone and lazy. There wasn't a clock in the beach house, nor had she even wound her watch since she'd arrived, because time didn't matter. No matter what time she woke, she knew that if she were hungry

and didn't feel like cooking, there was always a place within walking distance where she could get something to eat. During the summer, the Miracle Strip didn't sleep. It was a twenty-four-hour party that constantly renewed itself from the end of school through the Labor Day weekend. Students and singles looking for a good time found it; families looking for a carefree vacation found it; and tired professional women wanting only a chance to unwind and relax beside the dazzling Gulf found that, too. She felt completely reborn after the past two delicious weeks.

A sailboat, as brightly colored as a butterfly, caught her attention, and she watched it as it lazily tacked toward shore. She was so busy watching the boat that she was unaware of the man approaching the deck until he started up the steps and the vibration of the wooden floor alerted her. Without haste she turned her head, the movement graceful and unalarmed, but her entire body was suddenly coiled and ready for action, despite the fact that she hadn't moved from her relaxed posture.

A tall, gray-haired man stood looking at her, and her first thought was that he didn't belong in this setting. P.C., as the vacation city was known, was a relaxed, informal area. This man was dressed in an impeccable three-piece gray suit, and his feet were shod in supple Italian leather. Dione reflected briefly that his shoes would be full of the loose sand that filtered into everything.

"Miss Kelley?" he inquired politely.

Her slim black brows arched in puzzlement, but she withdrew her feet from the railing and stood, holding out her hand to him. "Yes, I'm Dione Kelley. And you are… ?"

"Richard Dylan," he said, taking her hand and shaking it firmly. "I realize that I'm intruding on your vacation, Miss Kelley, but it's very important that I speak with you."

"Please, sit down," Dione invited, indicating a deck chair beside the one she had just vacated. She resumed her former position, stretching out her legs and propping her bare feet on the railing. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"There certainly is," he replied feelingly. "I wrote to you about six weeks ago concerning a patient I'd like you to take on: Blake Remington."

Dione frowned slightly. "I remember. But I answered your letter, Mr. Dylan, before I left on vacation. Haven't you received it?"

"Yes, I have," he admitted. "I came to ask you to reconsider your refusal. There are extenuating circumstances, and his condition is deteriorating rapidly. I'm convinced that you can—"
"I'm not a miracle worker," she interrupted softly. "And I do have other cases lined up. Why should I put Mr. Remington ahead of others who need my services just as badly as he does?"
"Are they dying?" he asked bluntly.
"Is Mr. Remington? From the information you gave me in your letter, the last operation was a success. There are other therapists as well qualified as I am, if there's some reason why Mr. Remington has to have therapy this very moment." Richard Dylan looked out at the turquoise Gulf, the waves tipped with gold by the sinking sun. "Blake Remington won't live another year," he said, and a bleak expression crossed his strong, austere features. "Not the way he is now. You see, Miss Kelley, he doesn't believe he'll ever walk again, and he's given up. He's deliberately letting himself die. He doesn't eat; he seldom sleeps; he refuses to leave the house."
Dione sighed. Depression was sometimes the most difficult aspect of her patients' conditions, taking away their energy and determination. She'd seen it so many times before, and she knew that she'd see it again. "Still, Mr. Dylan, another therapist—"
"I don't think so. I've already employed two therapists, and neither of them has lasted a week. Blake refuses to cooperate at all, saying that it's just a waste of time, something to keep him occupied. The doctors tell him that the surgery was a success, but he still can't move his legs, so he just doesn't believe them. Dr. Norwood suggested you. He said that you've had remarkable success with uncooperative patients, and that your methods are extraordinary."
She smiled wryly. "Of course he said that. Tobias Norwood trained me."
Richard Dylan smiled briefly in return. "I see. Still, I'm convinced that you're Blake's last chance. If you still feel that your other obligations are more pressing, then come with me to Phoenix and meet Blake. I think that when you see him, you'll understand why I'm so worried."
Dione hesitated, examining the proposal. Professionally, she was torn between refusing and agreeing. She had other cases, other people who were depending on her; why should this Blake Remington come before them? But on the other hand, he sounded like a challenge to her abilities, and she was one of those high-powered individuals who thrived on challenges, on

testing herself to the limit. She was very certain of herself when it came to her chosen profession, and she enjoyed the satisfaction of completing a job and leaving her patient better able to move than before. In the years that she had been working as a private therapist, traveling all over the country to her patients' homes, she had amassed an amazing record of successes.

"He's an extraordinary man," said Mr. Dylan softly. "He's engineered several aeronautical systems that are widely used now. He designs his own planes, has flown as a test pilot on some top-secret planes for the government, climbs mountains, races yachts, goes deep-sea diving. He's a man who was at home on land, on the sea, or in the air, and now he's chained to a wheelchair and it's killing him."

"Which one of his interests was he pursuing when he had his accident?" Dione asked.

"Mountain climbing. The rope above him snagged on a rock, and his movements sawed the rope in two. He fell forty-five feet to a ledge, bounced off it, then rolled or fell another two hundred feet. That's almost the distance of a football field, but the snow must have cushioned him enough to save his life. He's said more than once that if he'd fallen off that mountain during the summer, he wouldn't have to spend his life as a cripple now."

"Tell me about his injuries," Dione said thoughtfully.

He rose to his feet. "I can do better than that. I have his file, complete with X rays, in my car. Dr. Norwood suggested that I bring it."

"He's a sly fox, that one," she murmured as Mr. Dylan disappeared around the deck. Tobias Norwood knew exactly how to intrigue her, how to set a particular case before her. Already she was interested, just as he had meant her to be. She'd make up her mind after seeing the X rays and reading the case history. If she didn't think she could help Blake Remington, she wouldn't put him through the stress of therapy.

In just a moment Mr. Dylan returned with a thick manila envelope in his grasp. He released it into Dione's outthrust hand and waited expectantly. Instead of opening it, she tapped her fingernails against the envelope.

"Let me study this tonight, Mr. Dylan," she said firmly. "I can't just glance over it and make a decision. I'll let you know in the morning."

A flicker of impatience crossed his face; then he quickly mastered it and nodded. "Thank you for considering it, Miss Kelley."

When he was gone, Dione stared out at the Gulf for a long time, watching the eternal waves washing in with a froth of turquoise and sea-green, churning white as they rushed onto the sand. It was a good thing that her vacation was ending, that she'd already enjoyed almost two full weeks of utter contentment on the Florida panhandle, doing nothing more strenuous than walking in the tide. She'd already lazily begun considering her next job, but now it looked as if her plans had been changed.

After opening the envelope she held up the X rays one by one to the sun, and she winced when she saw the damage that had been done to a strong, vital human body. It was a miracle that he hadn't been killed outright. But the X rays taken after each successive operation revealed bones that had healed better than they should have, better than anyone could have hoped. Joints had been rebuilt; pins and plates had reconstructed his body and held it together. She went over the last set of X rays with excruciating detail. The surgeon had been a genius, or the results were a miracle, or perhaps a combination of both, She could see no physical reason why Blake couldn't walk again, provided the nerves hadn't been totally destroyed.

Beginning to read the surgeon's report, she concentrated fiercely on every detail until she understood exactly what damage had been done and what repairs had been made. This man *would* walk again; she'd make him! The end of the report mentioned that further improvement was prevented by the patient's lack of cooperation and depth of depression. She could almost feel the surgeon's sense of frustration as he'd written that; after all his painstaking work, after the unhoped-for success of his techniques, the patient had refused to help!

Gathering everything together, she started to replace the contents in the envelope and noticed that something else was inside, a stiff piece of paper that she'd neglected to remove. She pulled it out and turned it over. It wasn't just a piece of paper; it was a photograph.

Stunned, she stared into laughing blue eyes, eyes that sparkled and danced with the sheer joy of living. Richard Dylan was a sly one, too, knowing full well that few women would be able to resist the appeal of the dynamic man in the photograph. It was Blake Remington, she knew, as he had been before the accident. His brown hair was tousled, his darkly tanned face split by a rakish grin which revealed a captivating dimple in his left cheek. He was naked except for a brief pair of denim shorts, his body strong and well muscled, his legs the long, powerful limbs of an athlete. He was holding a

good-sized marlin in the picture, and in the background she could make out the deep blue of the ocean; so he went deep-sea fishing, too. Wasn't there anything the man couldn't do? Yes, now there was, she reminded herself. Now he couldn't walk.

She wanted to refuse to take the case just to demonstrate to Richard Dylan that she couldn't be manipulated, but as she stared at the face in the photograph she knew that she would do just as he wanted, and she was disturbed by the knowledge. It had been such a long time since she'd been interested in any man at all that she was startled by her own reaction to a simple photograph.

Tracing the outline of his face with her fingertip, she wondered wistfully what her life would have been like if she'd been able to be a normal woman, to love a man and be loved in return, something that her brief and disastrous marriage had revealed to be impossible. She'd learned her lesson the hard way, but she'd never forgotten it. Men weren't for her. A loving husband and children weren't for her. The void left in her life by the total absence of love would have to be filled by her sense of satisfaction with her profession, with the joy she received from helping someone else. She might look at Blake Remington's photograph with admiration, but the daydreams that any other woman would indulge in when gazing at that masculine beauty were not for her. Daydreams were a waste of time, because she knew that she was incapable of attracting a man like him. Her ex-husband, Scott Hayes, had taught her with pain and humiliation the folly of enticing a man when she was unable to satisfy him.

Never again. She'd sworn it then, after leaving Scott, and she swore it again now. Never again would she give a man the chance to hurt her.

A sudden gust of salty wind fanned her cheeks, and she lifted her head, a little surprised to see that the sun was completely gone now and that she had been squinting at the photograph, not really seeing it as she dealt with her murky memories. She got to her feet and went inside, snapping on a tall floor lamp and illuminating the cool, summery interior of the beach house. Dropping into a plumply cushioned chair, Dione leaned her head back and began planning her therapy program, though of course she wouldn't be able to make any concrete plans until she actually met Mr. Remington and was better able to judge his condition. She smiled a little with anticipation. She loved a challenge more than she did anything else, and she had the feeling that Mr. Remington would fight her every inch of the way. She'd have to be

on her toes, stay in control of the situation and use his helplessness as a lever against him, making him so angry that he'd go through hell to get better, just to get rid of her. Unfortunately, he really would have to go through hell; therapy wasn't a picnic.

She'd had difficult patients before, people who were so depressed and angry over their disabilities that they'd shut out the entire world, and she guessed that Blake Remington had reacted in the same way. He'd been so active, so vitally alive and in perfect shape, a real daredevil of a man; she guessed that it was killing his soul to be limited to a wheelchair. He wouldn't care if he lived or died; he wouldn't care about anything.

She slept deeply that night, no dreams disturbing her, and rose well before dawn for her usual run along the beach. She wasn't a serious runner, counting off the miles and constantly reaching for a higher number; she ran for the sheer pleasure of it, continuing until she tired, then strolling along and letting the silky froth of the tide wash over her bare feet. The sun was piercing the morning with its first bunding rays when she returned to the beach house, showered and began packing. She'd made her decision, so she saw no need to waste time. She'd be ready when Mr. Dylan returned.

He wasn't even surprised when he saw her suitcases. "I knew you'd take the job," he said evenly.

Dione arched a slim black brow at him. "Are you always so sure of yourself, Mr. Dylan?"

"Please, call me Richard," he said. "I'm not always so certain, but Dr. Norwood has told me a great deal about you. He thought that you'd take the job because it was a challenge, and when I saw you, I knew that he was right."

"I'll have to talk with him about giving away my secrets," she joked.

"Not all of them," he said, and something in his voice made her wonder just how much he knew. "You have a lot of secrets left."

Deciding that Richard was far too astute, she turned briskly to her cases and helped him take them out to his car. Her own car was a rental, and after locking the beach house and returning the car to the rental office, she was ready to go.

Later, when they were in a private jet flying west to Phoenix, she began questioning Richard about her patient. What did he like? What did he hate? What were his hobbies? She wanted to know about his education, his politics, his favorite colors, the type of women he had dated, or about his

wife if he were married. She'd found that wives were usually jealous of the close relationship that developed between therapist and patient, and she wanted to know as much as she could about a situation before she walked into it.
Richard knew an amazing amount about Mr. Remington's personal life, and finally Dione asked him what his relationship was to the man.
The firm mouth twisted. "I'm his vice-president, for one thing, so I know about his business operations. I'm also his brother-in-law. The only woman in his life who you'll have to deal with is my wife, Serena, who is also his younger sister."
Dione asked, "Why do you say that? Do you live in the same house with Mr. Remington?"
"No, but that doesn't mean anything. Since his accident, Serena has hovered over him, and I'm sure she won't be pleased when you arrive and take all of his attention. She's always adored Blake, to the point of obsession. She nearly went insane when we thought he would die."
"I won't allow any interference in my therapy program," she warned him quietly. "I'll be overseeing his hours, his visitors, the food he eats, even the phone calls he receives. I hope your wife understands that."
"I'll try to convince her, but Serena is just like Blake. She's both stubborn and determined, and she has a key to the house."
"I'll have the locks changed," Dione planned aloud, perfectly serious in her intentions. Loving sister or not, Serena Dylan wasn't going to take over or intrude on Dione's therapy.
"Good," Richard approved, a frown settling on his austere brow. "I'd like to have a wife again."
It was beginning to appear that Richard had some other motive for wanting his brother-in-law walking again. Evidently, in the two years since Blake's accident, his sister had abandoned her husband in order to care for him, and the neglect was eroding her marriage. It was a situation that Dione didn't want to become involved in, but she had given her word that she would take the case, and she didn't betray the trust that people put in her.
Because of the time difference, it was only midafternoon when Richard drove them to the exclusive Phoenix suburb where Blake Remington lived. This time his car was a white Lincoln, plush and cool. As he drove up the circular drive to the hacienda-style house, she saw that it looked plush and cool, too. To call it a house was like calling a hurricane a wind; this place

was a mansion. It was white and mysterious, keeping its secrets hidden behind its walls, presenting only a graceful facade to curious eyes. The landscaping was marvelous, a blend of the natural desert plants and lush greenery that was the product of careful and selective irrigation. The drive ran around to the back, where Richard told her the garage area was, but he stopped before the arched entry in front.

When she walked into the enormous foyer Dione thought she'd walked into the garden of paradise. There was a serenity to the place, a dignified simplicity wrought by the cool brown tiles on the floor, the plain white walls, the high ceiling. The hacienda was built in a U, around an open courtyard that was cool and fragrant, with a pink marble fountain in the center of it spouting clear water into the air. She could see all of that because the inner wall of the foyer, from ceiling to floor, was glass.

She was still speechless with admiration when the brisk clicking of heels on the tiles caught her attention, and she turned her head to watch the tall young woman approaching. This had to be Serena; the resemblance to the photo of Blake Remington was too strong for her to be anyone else. She had the same soft brown hair, the same dark blue eyes, the same clear-cut features. But she wasn't laughing, as the man in the photo had been; her eyes were stormy, outraged.

"Richard!" she said in a low, wrathful tone. "Where have you been for the past two days? How dare you disappear without a word, then turn up with this… this gypsy in tow!"

Dione almost chuckled; most women wouldn't have attacked so bluntly, but she could see that this direct young woman had her share of the determination that Richard had attributed to Blake Remington. She opened her mouth to tell the truth of the matter, but Richard stepped in smoothly.

"Dione," he said, watching his wife with a cold eye, "I'd like to introduce my wife, Serena. Serena, this is Dione Kelley. I've hired Miss Kelley as Blake's new therapist, and I've been to Florida to pick her up and fly her back here. I didn't tell anyone where I was going because I had no intention of arguing over the matter. I've hired her, and that's that. I think that answers all of your questions." He finished with cutting sarcasm.

Serena Dylan wasn't a woman to be cowed, though a flush did color her cheeks. She turned to Dione and said frankly, "I apologize, though I refuse to take all of the blame. If my husband had seen fit to inform me of his intentions, I wouldn't have made such a terrible accusation."

"I understand." Dione smiled. "Under the same circumstances, I doubt that my conduct would have been as polite."
Serena smiled in return, then stepped forward and gave her husband a belated peck on the cheek.
"Very well, you're forgiven," she sighed, "though I'm afraid you've wasted your time. You know that Blake won't put up with it. He can't stand having anyone hover over him, and he's been pushed at and pounded on enough."
"Evidently not, or he'd be walking by now," Dione replied confidently.
Serena looked doubtful, then shrugged. "I still think you've wasted your time. Blake refused to have anything to do with the last therapist Richard hired, and he won't change his mind for you."
"I'd like to talk to him myself, if I may," Dione insisted, though in a pleasant tone.
Serena hadn't exactly stationed herself like a guard before the throne room, but it was evident that she was very protective of her brother. It wasn't all that unusual. When someone had been in a severe accident, it was only natural that the members of the family were overprotective for a while. Perhaps, when Serena found that Dione would be taking over the vast majority of Blake's time and attention, she would give her own husband the attention he deserved.
"At this time of day, Blake is usually in his room," Richard said, taking Dione's arm. "This way."
"Richard!" Again color rose in Serena's cheeks, but this time they were spots of anger. "He's lying down for a nap! At least leave him in peace until he comes downstairs. You know how badly he sleeps; let him rest while he can!"
"He naps every day?" Dione asked, thinking that if he slept during the day, no wonder he couldn't sleep at night.
"He tries to nap, but he usually looks worse afterward than he did before."
"Then it won't matter if we disturb him, will it?" Dione asked, deciding that now was the time to establish her authority. She caught a faint twitch of Richard's lips, signaling a smile, then he was directing her to the broad, sweeping stairs, with his hand still warm and firm on her elbow. Behind them, Dione could feel the heat of the glare that Serena threw at them; then she heard the brisk tapping of heels as Serena followed.
From the design of the house, Dione suspected that all of the upstairs rooms opened onto the graceful gallery that ran along the entire U of the house,

looking down on the inner courtyard. When Richard tapped lightly on a door that had been widened to allow a wheelchair to pass easily through it, then opened it at the low call that permitted entrance, she saw at once that, at least in this room, her supposition was correet. The enormous room was flooded with sunlight that streamed through the open curtains, though the sliding glass doors that opened onto the gallery remained closed.

The man at the window was silhouetted against the bright sunlight, a mysterious and melancholy figure slumped in the prison of a wheelchair. Then he reached out and pulled a cord, closing the curtains, and the room became dim. Dione blinked for a moment before her eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness; then the man became clear to her, and she felt her throat tighten with shock.

She'd thought that she was prepared; Richard had told her that Blake had lost weight and was rapidly deteriorating, but until she saw him, she hadn't realized exactly how serious the situation was. The contrast between the man in the wheelchair and the laughing man in the photo she'd seen was so great that she wouldn't have believed them to be the same man if it hadn't been for the dark blue eyes. His eyes no longer sparkled; they were dull and lifeless, but nothing could change their remarkable color.

He was thin, painfully so; he had to have lost almost fifty pounds from what he'd weighed when the photo had been taken, and he'd been all lean muscle then. His brown hair was dull from poor nutrition, and shaggy, as if it had been a long time since he'd had it trimmed. His skin was pale, his face all high cheekbones and gaunt cheeks.

Dione held herself upright, but inside she was shattering, crumbling into a thousand brittle pieces. She inevitably became involved with all her patients, but never before had she felt as if she were dying; never before had she wanted to rage at the injustice of it, at the horrible obscenity that had taken his perfect body and reduced it to helplessness. His suffering and despair were engraved on his drawn face, his bone structure revealed in stark clarity. Dark circles lay under the midnight blue of his eyes; his temples had become touched with gray. His once powerful body sat limply in the chair, his legs awkwardly motionless, and she knew that Richard had been right: Blake Remington didn't want to live.

He looked at her without a flicker of interest, then moved his gaze to Richard. It was as if she didn't exist. "Where've you been?" he asked flatly.

"I had business to attend to," Richard replied, his voice so cold that the room turned arctic. Dione could tell that he was insulted that anyone should question his actions; Richard might work for Blake, but he was in no way inferior. He was still angry with Serena, and the entire scene had earned his disapproval.
"He's so determined," Serena sighed, moving to her brother's side. "He's hired another therapist for you, Miss… uh, Diane Kelley."
"Dione," Dione corrected without rancor.
Blake turned his disinterested gaze on her and surveyed her without a word. Dione stood quietly, studying him, noting his reaction, or rather, his lack of one. Richard had said that Blake had always preferred blondes, but even taking Dione's black hair into consideration, she had expected at least a basic recognition that she was female. She expected men to look at her; she'd grown used to it, though once an interested glance would have sent her into panic. She was a striking woman, and at last she had been able to accept that, considering it one of nature's ironies that she should have been given the looks to attract men when it was impossible for her to enjoy a man's touch.
She knew what he saw. She'd dressed carefully for effect, realizing that her appearance would either be intimidating or appealing; she didn't care which, as long as it gave her an edge in convincing him to cooperate. She'd parted her thick, vibrant black hair in the middle and drawn it back in a severe knot at the nape of her neck, where she'd secured it with a gold comb. Gold hoop earrings dangled from her ears. Serena had called her a gypsy, and her warm, honey-tanned skin made it seem possible. Her eyes were a cat's eyes, slanted, golden, as mysterious as time and fringed with heavy black lashes. With her high cheekbones and strong, sculptured jawline, she looked Eastern and exotic, a prime candidate for a lusty sheik's harem, had she been born a century before.
She'd dressed in a white jumpsuit, chic and casual, and now she pushed her hands into the pockets, a posture that outlined her firm breasts. The line of her body was long and clean and sweeping, from her trim waist to her rounded bottom, then on down her long, graceful legs. Blake might not have noticed, but his sister had, and Serena had been stirred to instant jealousy. She didn't want Dione around either her husband or her brother.
After a long silence Blake moved his head slowly in a negative motion. "No. Just take her away, Richard; I don't want to be bothered."

Dione glanced at Richard, then stepped forward, taking control and focusing Blake's attention on her. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Remington," she said mildly. "Because I'm staying anyway. You see, I have a contract, and I always honor my word."
"I'll release you from it," he muttered, turning his head away and looking out the window again.
"That's very nice of you, but *I* won't release *you* from it. I understand that you've given Richard your power of attorney, so the contract is legal, and it's also ironclad. It states, simply, that I'm employed as your therapist and will reside in this house until you're able to walk again. No time limit was set." She leaned down and put her hands on the arms of his wheelchair, bringing her face close to his and forcing him to give her his attention. "I'm going to be your shadow, Mr. Remington. The only way you'll be able to get rid of me is to walk to the door yourself and open it for me; no one else can do it for you."
"You're overstepping yourself, Miss Kelley!" Serena said sharply, her blue eyes narrowing with rage. She reached out and thrust Dione's hands away from the wheelchair. "My brother has said that he doesn't want you here!"
"This doesn't concern you," Dione replied, still in a mild tone.
"It certainly does! If you think I'll let you just move in here… why, you probably think you've found a meal ticket for life!"
"Not at all. I'll have Mr. Remington walking by Christmas. If you doubt my credentials, please feel free to investigate my record. But in the meantime, stop interfering." Dione straightened to her full height and stared steadily at Serena, the strength of her willpower blazing from her golden eyes.
"Don't talk to my sister like that," Blake said sharply.
At last! A response, even if it was an angry one! With secret delight Dione promptly attacked the crack in his indifference. "I'll talk to anyone like that who tries to come between me and my patient," she informed him. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed him with a contemptuous curl to her mouth. "Look at you! You're in such pitiful shape that you'd have to go into training to qualify for the ninety-eight-pound weakling category! You should be ashamed of yourself, letting your muscles turn into mush; no wonder you can't walk!"
The dark pupils of his eyes flared, a black pool in a sea of blue. "Damn you," he choked. "It's hard to do calisthenics when you're hooked up to

more tubes than you have places for, and nothing except your face works when you want it to!"
"That was then," she said relentlessly. "What about now? It takes muscles to walk, and you don't have any! You'd lose a fight with a noodle, the shape you're in now."
"And I suppose you think you can wave your magic wand and put me into working order again?" he snarled.
She smiled. "A magic wand? It won't be as easy as that. You're going to work harder for me than you've ever worked before. You're going to sweat and hurt, and turn the air blue cussing me out, but you're going to work. I'll have you walking again if I have to half-kill you to do it."
"No, you won't, lady," he said with cold deliberation. "I don't care what sort of contract you have; I don't want you in my house. I'll pay whatever it takes to get rid of you."
"I'm not giving you that option, Mr. Remington. I won't accept a payoff."
"You don't have to give me the option! I'm *taking* it!"
Looking into his enraged face, flushed with anger, Dione abruptly realized that the photograph of the laughing, relaxed man had been misleading, an exception rather than the rule. This was a man of indomitable will, used to forcing things to go his way by the sheer power of his will and personality. He had overcome every obstacle in his life by his own determination, until the fall down the cliff had changed all that and presented him with the one obstacle that he couldn't handle on his own. He'd never had to have help before, and he hadn't been able to accept that now he did. Because he couldn't make himself walk, he was convinced that it wasn't possible.
But she was determined, too. Unlike him, she'd learned early that she could be struck down, forced to do things she didn't want to do. She'd pulled herself out of the murky depths of despair by her own silent, stubborn belief that life *had* to be better. Dione had forged her strength in the fires of pain; the woman she had become, the independence and skill and reputation she'd built, were too precious to her to allow her to back down now. This was the challenge of her career, and it would take every ounce of her willpower to handle it.
So, insolently, she asked him, "Do you *like* having everyone feel sorry for you?"
Serena gasped; even Richard made an involuntary sound before bringing himself back under control. Dione didn't waste a glance on them. She kept

her eyes locked with Blake's, watching the shock in them, watching the angry color wash out of his face and leave it utterly white.
"You bitch," he said in a hollow, shaking voice.
She shrugged. "Look, we're getting nowhere like this. Let's make a deal. You're so weak, I'll bet you can't beat me at arm wrestling. If I win, I stay and you agree to therapy. If you win, I walk out that door and never come back. What do you say?"

Chapter Two

His head jerked up, his eyes narrowing as they swept over her slender form and graceful, feminine arms. Dione could almost read his thoughts. As thin as he was, he still outweighed her by at least forty, possibly even fifty, pounds. He knew that even if a man and a woman were the same weight, the man would be stronger than the woman, under normal circumstances. Dione refused to let a smile touch her lips, but she knew that these weren't normal circumstances. Blake had been inactive for two years, while she was in extremely good shape. She was a therapist; she had to be strong in order to do her job. She was slim, yes, but every inch of her was sleek, strong muscle. She ran, she swam, she did stretching exercises regularly, but most importantly, she lifted weights. She had to have considerable arm strength to be able to handle patients who couldn't handle themselves. She looked at Blake's thin, pale hands, and she knew that she would win.
"Don't do it!" Serena said sharply, twisting her fingers into knots.
Blake turned and looked at his sister in disbelief. "You think she can beat me, don't you?" he murmured, but the words were more a statement than a question.
Serena was tense, staring at Dione with an odd, pleading look in her eyes. Dione understood: Serena didn't want her brother humiliated. And neither did she. But she did want him to agree to therapy, and she was willing to do whatever was necessary to make him see what he was doing to himself. She tried to say that with her eyes, because she couldn't say the words aloud.
"Answer me!" Blake roared suddenly. Every line of him was tense.
Serena bit her lower lip. "Yes," she finally said. "I think she can beat you."
Silence fell, and Blake sat as though made of stone. Watching him carefully, Dione saw the moment he made the decision. "There's only one way to find

out, isn't there?" he challenged, turning the wheelchair with a quick pressure of his finger on a button. Dione followed him as he led the way to his desk and positioned the wheelchair beside it.
"You shouldn't have a motorized wheelchair," she observed absently. "A manual chair would have kept your upper body strength at a reasonable level. This is a fancy chair, but it isn't doing you any good at all."
He shot her a brooding glance, but didn't respond to her comment. "Sit down," he said, indicating his desk.
Dione took her time obeying him. She felt no joy, no elation, in knowing that she would win; it was something she had to do, a point that she had to make to Blake.
Richard and Serena flanked them as they positioned themselves, Blake maneuvering himself until he was satisfied with his location, Dione doing the same. She propped her right arm on the desk and gripped her bicep with her left hand. "Ready when you are," she said.
Blake had the advantage of a longer arm, and she realized that it would take all of the strength in her hand and wrist to overcome the leverage he would have. He positioned his arm against hers and wrapped his fingers firmly around her much smaller hand. For a moment he studied the slim grace of her fingers, the delicate pink of her manicured nails, and a slight smile moved his lips. He probably thought it would be a cake walk. But she felt the coldness of his hands, indicating poor circulation, and knew the inevitable outcome of their little battle.
"Richard, you start it," Blake instructed, lifting his eyes and locking them with hers. She could feel his intensity, his aggressive drive to win, and she began to brace herself, concentrating all her energy and strength into her right arm and hand.
"Go," said Richard, and though there was no great flurry of movement between the two antagonists, their bodies were suddenly tense, their arms locked together.
Dione kept her face calm, revealing nothing of the fierce effort it took to keep her wrist straight. After the first moments, when he was unable to shove her arm down, Blake's face reflected first astonishment, then anger, then a sort of desperation. She could feel his first burst of strength ebbing and slowly, inexorably, she began forcing his arm down. Sweat broke out on his forehead and slipped down one side of his face as he struggled to reverse the motion, but he had already used his meager strength and had

nothing in reserve. Knowing that she had him, and regretting her victory even though she knew it was necessary, Dione quickly settled the matter by forcing his arm down fiat on the desk.
He sat in his wheelchair, a shattered expression in his eyes for a flashing moment before he closed himself off and made his face a blank wall.
The silence was broken only by his rapid breathing. Richard's face was grim; Serena looked torn between the desire to comfort her brother and a strong inclination to throw Dione out herself.
Dione moved briskly, rising to her feet. "That settles that," she said casually. "In another two months I won't be able to do that. I'll put my things in the room next to this one—"
"No," said Blake curtly, not looking at her. "Serena, give Miss Kelley the guest suite."
"That won't do at all," Dione replied. "I want to be close enough to you that I'll be able to hear you if you call. The room next door will do nicely. Richard, how soon can you have those changes made that I stipulated?"
"What changes?" Blake asked, jerking his head up.
"I need some special equipment," she explained, noting that the diversion had worked, as she'd intended it to. He'd already lost that empty look. She'd evidently made the right decision in being so casual about beating him at arm wrestling, treating the incident as nothing unusual. Now was not the time to rub it in, or to let him know that there were a lot of men walking the earth who couldn't match her in arm wrestling. He'd find out soon enough when they got into the weight-lifting program.
"What sort of special equipment?" he demanded.
She controlled a smile. His attention had certainly been caught by the possibility of any changes in his beloved home. She outlined her needs to him. "A whirlpool is a necessity. I'll also need a treadmill, weight bench, sauna, things like that. Any objections?"
"There might be. Just where do you plan to put all this?"
"Richard said he could outfit a gym for me on the ground floor, next to the pool, which will be very convenient, because you'll be doing a lot of work in the pool. Water is a great place for calisthenics," she said enthusiastically. "Your muscles still get the workout, but the water supports your weight."
"You're not putting in a gym," he said grimly.
"Read my contract." She smiled. "The gym is going in. Don't make such a fuss; the house won't be disfigured, and the equipment is necessary. An

Olympic trainee won't be getting the workout you're facing," she said with quiet truth. "It's going to be hard work, and it's going to be painful, but you'll do it if I have to drive you like a slave. You can put money on it: You'll be walking by Christmas."

A terrible longing crossed his face before he brought his thin hand up to rub his forehead, and Dione sensed his indecision. But it wasn't in him to give in to anyone else easily, and he scowled. "You won the right to stay here," he said grudgingly. "But I don't like it, and I don't like you, Miss Kelley. Richard, I want to see that contract she keeps harping about."

"I don't have it with me," Richard lied smoothly, taking Serena's arm and edging her toward the door. "I'll bring it with me the next time I'm over."

Serena had time for only an incoherent protest before Richard had her out the door. Trusting Richard to keep his wife away, at least for the time being, Dione smiled at Blake and waited.

He eyed her warily. "Don't you have something else to do besides staring at me?"

"I certainly do. I was just waiting to see if you have any questions. If you don't, I need to be unpacking."

"No questions," he muttered.

That wouldn't last long, she thought, leaving him without another word. When he found out the extent of her therapy, he'd have plenty to say about it.

It was evidently up to her to find her way around the house, but because the design was so simple, she had no difficulty exploring. Her suitcases were sitting in the foyer, and she took them upstairs herself, finally examining the room she'd chosen for her own. It was a room for a man, done in masculine browns and creams, but it was comfortable and suited her; she wasn't picky. She unpacked, a chore that didn't take long because she didn't burden herself with a lot of clothing. What she had was good and adaptable, so she could use one outfit for several different things just by changing a few accessories. The way she traveled around, from one case to another, a lot of clothing would have been a hindrance.

Then she went in search of the cook and housekeeper; a house that size had to have some sort of staff, and she needed everyone's cooperation. It might have been easier if Richard had remained to introduce her, but she was glad that he'd taken Serena out of the way.

She found the kitchen without difficulty, though the cook who occupied it was something of a surprise. She was tall and lean, obviously part Indian, despite the pale green of her eyes. Though her age was impossible to determine, Dione guessed her to be at least in her fifties, possibly sixties. Her raven black hair didn't hint at it, but there was something in the knowledge in her eyes, the dignity of her features, that suggested age. She was as imperial as a queen, though the look she turned on the intruder into her kitchen wasn't haughty, merely questioning.

Quickly Dione introduced herself and explained why she was there. The woman washed her hands and dried them with unhurried motions, then held her hand out. Dione took it. "My name is Alberta Quincy," the cook said in a deep, rich voice that could have been a man's. "I'm glad that Mr. Remington has agreed to therapy."

"He didn't exactly agree," Dione replied honestly, smiling. "But I'm here anyway, and I'm staying. I'll need everyone's cooperation to handle him, though."

"You just tell me what you want," Alberta said with pure confidence. "Miguel, who takes care of the grounds and drives Mr. Remington's car, will do as I tell him. My stepdaughter, Angela, cleans the house, and she'll also do as I say."

Most people would, Dione thought privately. Alberta Quincy was the most regal person she'd ever met. There wasn't much expression in her face, and her voice was even and deliberate, but there was a force to the woman that most people wouldn't be able to resist. She would be an indispensable ally.

Dione outlined the diet she wanted Blake to follow, and explained why she wanted changes made. The last thing she wanted to do was offend Alberta. But Alberta merely nodded. "Yes, I understand."

"If he gets angry, put all the blame on me," Dione said. "At this point, I *want* him to be angry. I can use anger, but I can't work with indifference."

Again Alberta nodded her regal head. "I understand," she said again. She wasn't a talkative woman, to understate the matter, but she did understand, and to Dione's relief she didn't express any doubts.

There was one other problem, and Dione broached it cautiously. "About Mr. Remington's sister…"

Alberta blinked once, slowly, and nodded. "Yes," she said simply.

"Does she have a key to the house?" Gold eyes met green ones, and the communication between the two women was so strong that Dione had the

sudden feeling that words were unnecessary.
"I'll have the locks changed," Alberta said. "But there'll be trouble."
"It'll be worth the benefits. I can't have his routine interrupted once I get him started on it, at least until he can see some improvement for himself and will want to continue with it. I think Mr. Dylan can handle his wife."
"If he even wants to any longer," Alberta said calmly.
"I think he does. He doesn't seem like a man to give up very easily."
"No, but he's also very proud."
"I don't want to cause trouble between them, but Mr. Remington is my concern, and if that causes friction, then they have to handle it as best they can."
"Mrs. Dylan worships her brother. He raised her; their mother died when Mrs. Dylan was thirteen."
That explained a lot, and Dione spared a moment of sympathy for both Serena and Richard; then she pushed thoughts of them away. She couldn't consider them; Blake would take all her concentration and energy.
Suddenly she was very tired. It had been a full day, and though it was only late afternoon, she needed to rest. The battle would begin in earnest in the morning, and she'd need a good night's sleep in order to face it. Starting tomorrow, her hands would be full.
Alberta saw the sudden fatigue that tightened Dione's features and within minutes had a sandwich and a glass of milk sitting on the table. "Eat," she said, and Dione knew better than to argue. She sat down and ate.
Dione's alarm clock went off at five-thirty the next morning. She rose and took a shower, her movements brisk and certain from the moment she got out of bed. She always woke instantly, her mind clear, her coordination in perfect sync. It was one reason why she was such a good therapist; if a patient needed her during the night, she didn't stumble around rubbing her eyes. She was instantly capable of doing whatever was required of her.
Something told her that Blake wouldn't be such a cheerful riser, and she could feel her heartbeat speeding up as she brushed her long hair and braided it in one thick braid. Anticipation of the coming battle ran through her veins like liquid joy, making her eyes sparkle and giving a rosy flush to her skin.
The morning was still cool, but she knew from experience that exertion would make her warm, so she dressed in brief blue shorts, a sleeveless cotton shirt with cheerful polka dots in red, blue and yellow, and an old pair

of tennis shoes. She touched her toes twenty times, stretching her back and legs, then did twenty sit-ups. She was capable of many more than that, but this was only a quick routine to warm up.
She was smiling when she entered Blake's room after a quick tap on the door. "Good morning," she said cheerfully as she crossed the floor to the balcony and opened the curtains, flooding the room with light.
He was lying on his back, his legs positioned a little awkwardly, as if he'd tried to move them during the night. He opened his eyes, and Dione saw the flare of panic in them. He twitched and tried to sit up, groping at his legs; then he remembered and fell back, his face bleak.
How often did that happen? How often did he wake, not remembering the accident, and panic because he couldn't move his legs? He wouldn't do that for very much longer, she determined grimly, going over to sit on the bed beside him.
"Good morning," she said again.
He didn't return the greeting. "What time is it?" he snapped.
"About six o'clock, maybe a little earlier."
"What're you doing here?"
"Beginning your therapy," she replied serenely. He was wearing pajamas, she saw, and wondered if he were able to completely dress himself or if someone had to help him.
"No one's up at this hour," he grumbled, closing his eyes again.
"I am, and now you are. Come on; we've got a lot to do today." She rolled the wheelchair to the side of the bed and threw the covers back, revealing his pitifully thin legs clad in the pale blue pajamas. His feet were covered with white socks.
He opened his eyes and the anger was there again. "What're you doing?" he snarled, reaching out an arm to whip the covers back over himself again.
He didn't want her to see him, but she couldn't permit any modesty to interfere. Before long she'd be as familiar with his body as she was with her own, and he had to realize that. If he were ashamed of his physical condition, then he'd simply have to work to improve it.
She snatched the covers away again, and with a deft movement scooped his legs around until they were hanging off the side of the bed. "Get up," she said relentlessly. "Go to the bathroom before we get started. Do you need any help?"

Pure fire sparked from his blue, blue eyes. "No," he growled, so angry that he could barely speak. "I can go to the bathroom by myself, Mama!"
"I'm not your mother," she returned. "I'm your therapist, though the two do have a lot in common."
She held the chair while he levered himself into it; then he shot across the room and was in the adjoining bathroom before she could react. She laughed silently to herself. When she heard the lock click she called out, "Don't think you can lock yourself in there all morning! I'll take the door off the hinges if I have to."
A muffled curse answered her, and she laughed again. This was going to be interesting!
By the time he finally came out she had begun to think she really would have to take the door down. He'd combed his hair and washed his face, but he didn't look any more pleased with being awake than he had before.
"Do you have any underwear on?" she asked, not making any comment on the length of time he'd spent in the bathroom. He'd timed that very nicely, stalling as long as he could, but coming out just before she did something about it.
Shock froze his features. "What?" he asked.
"Do you have any underwear on?" she repeated.
"What business is it of yours?"
"Because I want your pajamas off. If you don't have any underwear on, you may want to put on a pair, but it really doesn't matter to me. I've seen naked men before."
"I'm sure you have," he muttered snidely. "I have underwear on, but I'm not taking my pajamas off for you."
"Then don't. I'll take them off for you. I think you learned yesterday that I'm strong enough to do it. But those pajamas are coming off, the easy way or the hard way. Which is it?"
"Why do you want them off?" He stalled. "It can't be so you can admire my build," he said bitterly.
"You're right about that," she said. "You look like a bird. That's why I'm here; if you didn't look like a bird, you wouldn't need me."
He flushed.
"The pajamas," she prodded.
Furiously he unbuttoned the shirt and threw it across the room. She could sense that he would have liked to do the same to the bottoms, but they were

a bit more difficult to remove. Without a word Dione helped him back onto the bed, then pulled the garment down his thin legs and draped it over the arm of the wheelchair. "On your stomach," she said, and deftly rolled him over.
"Hey!" he protested, his face smothered in the pillow. He swept the pillow aside. He was shaking with fury.
She popped the elastic waistband of his shorts. "Calm down," she advised. "This will be painless this morning."
Her impertinent little gesture made his temper flare so hotly that his entire torso flushed. Smiling at his response, she began to firmly knead his shoulders and back.
He grunted. "Take it easy! I'm not a side of beef!"
She laughed. "How delicate you are!" she mocked. "There's a reason for this."
"Like what? Punishment?"
"In a word, circulation. Your circulation is terrible. That's why your hands are cold, and why you have to wear socks to keep your feet warm, even in bed. I'll bet they're icy cold right now, aren't they?"
Silence was her answer.
"Muscles can't work without a good blood supply," she commented.
"I see," he said sarcastically. "Your magical massage is going to zip me right onto my feet."
"No way. My magical massage is mere groundwork, and you should learn to like it, because you're going to be getting a lot of it."
"God, you're just loaded down with charm, aren't you?"
She laughed again. "I'm loaded down with knowledge, and I also come equipped with a thick hide, so you're wasting your time." She moved down to his legs; there was no flesh there to massage. She felt as if she were merely moving his skin over his bones, but she kept at it, knowing that the hours and hours of massage that she would give him would eventually pay off. She pulled his socks off and rubbed his limp feet briskly, feeling some of the chill leave his skin.
The minutes passed as she worked in silence. He grunted occasionally in protest when her vigorous fingers were a little too rough. A fine sheen of perspiration began to glow on her face and body.
She shifted him onto his back and gave her attention to his arms and chest and his hollow belly. His ribs stood out white under his skin. He lay with

his eyes fixed on the ceiling, his mouth grim.
Dione moved down to his legs again.
"How much longer are you going to keep this up?" he finally asked.
She looked up and checked the time. It had been a little over an hour. "I suppose that's enough for right now," she said. "Now we do the exercises."
She took first one leg, then the other, bending them, forcing his knees up to his chest, repeating the motion over and over. He bore it in silence for about fifteen minutes, then suddenly rolled to a sitting position and shoved her away.
"Stop it!" he shouted, his face drawn. "My God, woman, do you have to keep on and on? It's a waste of time! Just leave me alone!"
She regarded him in amazement. "What do you mean, 'a waste of time'? I've just started. Did you really expect to see a difference in an hour?"
"I don't like being handled like so much putty!"
She shrugged, hiding a smile. "It's almost seven-thirty anyway. Your breakfast will be ready. I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."
"I'm not hungry," he said, then a startled look crossed his face and she knew that he'd just realized that he *was* hungry, probably for the first time in months. She helped him to dress, though her aid managed to send him off into a black temper again. He was as sullen as a child when they entered the elevator that had been installed especially for him.
But the sullenness fled when he saw what was on his plate. Watching him, Dione had to bite her lip to keep from laughing aloud. First horror, then outrage contorted his features. "What's that mess?" he roared.
"Oh, don't worry," she said casually. "That's not all you're getting, but that's what you'll start off with. Those are vitamins," she added in a helpful tone.
They could have been snakes from the way he was staring at them. She had to admit that the collection was a little impressive. Alberta had counted them out exactly as Dione had instructed, and she knew that there were nineteen pills.
"I'm not taking them!"
"You're taking them. You need them. You'll need them even more after a few days of therapy. Besides, you don't get anything to eat until after you've taken them."
He wasn't a good loser. He snatched them up and swallowed them several at a time, washing them down with gulps of water. "There," he snarled. "I've taken the damned things."

"Thank you," she said gravely.
Alberta had evidently been listening, because she promptly entered with their breakfast trays. He looked at his grapefruit half, whole wheat toast, eggs, bacon and milk as if it were slop. "I want a blueberry waffle," he said.
"Sorry," Dione said. "That's not on your diet. Too sweet. Eat your grapefruit."
"I hate grapefruit."
"You need the vitamin C."
"I just took a year's supply of vitamin C!"
"Look," she said sweetly, "this is your breakfast. Eat it or do without. You're not getting a blueberry waffle."
He threw it at her.
She'd been expecting something like that, and ducked gracefully. The plate crashed against the wall. She collapsed against the table, the laughter that she'd been holding in all morning finally bursting out of her in great whoops. His hair was practically standing on end, he was so angry. He was beautiful! His cobalt blue eyes were as vivid as sapphires; his face was alive with color.
As dignified as a queen, Alberta marched out of the kitchen with an identical tray and set it before him. "She said you'd probably throw the first one," she said without inflection.
Knowing that he'd acted exactly as Dione had predicted made him even angrier, but now he was stymied. He didn't know what to do, afraid that whatever he did, she would have anticipated it. Finally he did nothing. He ate silently, pushing the food into his mouth with determined movements, then balked again at the milk.
"I can't stand milk. Surely coffee can't hurt!"
"It won't hurt, but it won't help, either. Let's make a deal," she offered. "Drink the milk, which you need for the calcium, and then you can have coffee."
He took a deep breath and drained the milk glass.
Alberta brought in coffee. The remainder of the meal passed in relative peace. Angela Quincy, Alberta's stepdaughter, came in to clear the mess that Blake had made with his first breakfast, and he looked a little embarrassed. Angela, in her way, was as much of an enigma as Alberta was. She showed her age, unlike Alberta; she was about fifty, as soft and cuddly as Alberta was lean and angular. She was very pretty, could even have been called

beautiful, despite the wrinkling of her skin. She was the most serene person Dione had ever seen. Her hair was brown, liberally streaked with gray, and her eyes were a soft, tranquil brown. She had once been engaged, Dione would learn later, but the man had died, and Angela still wore the engagement ring he'd given her so many years before.

She wasn't disturbed at all by having to clean egg off the wall, though Blake became increasingly restless as she worked. Dione leisurely finished her meal, then laid her napkin aside.

"Time for more exercises," she announced.

"No!" he roared. "I've had enough for today! A little of you goes a long way, lady!"

"Please, call me Dione," she murmured.

"I don't want to call you anything! My God, would you just leave me alone!"

"Of course I will, when my job is finished. I can't let you ruin my record of successful cases, can I?"

"Do you know what you can do with your successful record?" he snarled, sending the chair jerking backward. He jabbed the forward button. "I don't want to see your face again!" he shouted as the chair rolled out of the room.

She sighed and lifted her shoulders helplessly when her eyes met Angela's philosophic gaze. Angela smiled, but didn't say anything. Alberta wasn't talkative, and Angela was even less so. Dione imagined that when the two of them were together, the silence was deafening.

When she thought that Blake had had enough time to get over his tantrum, she went upstairs to begin again. It would probably be a waste of time to try his door, so she entered her room and went straight through to the gallery. She tapped on the sliding glass doors of his room, then opened them and stepped in.

He regarded her broodingly from his chair. Dione went to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. "I know it's difficult," she said softly. "I can't promise you that any of this will be easy. Try to trust me; I really am good at my job, and at the very worst you'll still be in much better health than you are now."

"If I can't walk, why should I care about my health?" he asked tightly. "Do you think I want to live like this? I would rather have died outright on that cliff than have gone through these past two years."

"Have you always given up so easily?"

"Easily!" His head jerked. "You don't know anything about it! You don't know what it was like—"
"I can tell you what it wasn't like," she interrupted. "I can tell you that you've never looked down at where your legs used to be and seen only flat sheet. You've never had to type by punching the keys with a pencil held in your teeth because you're paralyzed from the neck down. I've seen a lot of people who are a lot worse off than you. You're going to walk again, because I'm going to make you."
"I don't want to hear about how bad other people have it! They're not *me*! My life is my own, and I know what I want out of it, and what I can't… what I *won't* accept."
"Work? Effort? Pain?" she prodded. "Mr. Remington, Richard has told me a great deal about you. You lived life to the fullest. If there were even the slimmest chance that you could do all of that again, would you go for it?"
He sighed, his face unutterably weary. "I don't know. If I really, thought there was a chance… but I don't. I can't walk, Miss Kelley. I can't move my legs at all."
"I know. You can't expect to move them right now. I'll have to retrain your nerve impulses before you'll be able to move them. It'll take several months, and I can't promise that you won't limp, but you *will* walk again… if you cooperate with me. So, Mr. Remington, shall we get started again on those exercises?"

Chapter Three

He submitted to the exercises with ill grace, but that didn't bother her as long as he cooperated at all. His muscles didn't know that he lay there scowling the entire time; the movement, the stimulation, were what counted. Dione worked tirelessly, alternating between exercising his legs and massaging his entire body. It was almost ten-thirty when she heard the noise that she'd been unconsciously listening for all morning: the tapping of Serena's heels. She lifted her head, and then Blake heard it, too. "No!" he said hoarsely. "Don't let her see me like this!"
"All right," she said calmly, nipping the sheet up to cover him. Then she walked to the door and stepped into the hallway, blocking Serena's way as she started to enter Blake's room.

Serena gave her a startled look. "Is Blake awake? I was just going to peek in; he usually doesn't get up until about noon."
No wonder he'd been so upset when I got him up at six! Dione thought, amused. To Serena she said blandly, "I'm giving him his exercises now."
"So early?" Serena's brows arched in amazement. "Well, I'm certain you've done enough for the day. Since he's awake early he'll be ready for his breakfast. He eats so badly, I don't want him to miss any meals. I'll go in and see what he'd like—"
As Serena moved around Dione to enter Blake's bedroom, Dione deftly sidestepped until she once more blocked the door. "I'm sorry," she said as gently as possible when Serena stared at her in disbelief. "He's already had his breakfast. I've put him on a schedule, and it's important that he stay on it. After another hour of exercise we'll come downstairs for lunch, if you'd like to wait until then."
Serena was still staring at her as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Are you saying…" she whispered, then stopped and began again, her voice stronger this time. "Are you saying that I can't see my brother?"
"At this time, no. We need to complete these exercises."
"Does Blake know I'm here?" Serena demanded, her cheeks suddenly flushing.
"Yes, he does. He doesn't want you to see him right now. Please, try to understand how he feels."
Serena's marvelous eyes widened. "Oh! Oh, I see!" Perhaps she did, but Dione rather doubted it. Hurt shimmered in Serena's eyes for a moment; then she shrugged lightly. "I'll… see him in an hour, then." She turned away, and Dione watched her for a moment, reading wounded emotions in every line of her straight back. It wasn't unusual for the one closest to the patient to become jealous of the intimacy that was necessary between patient and therapist, but Dione never failed to feel uncomfortable when it happened. She knew that the intimacy was only fleeting, that as soon as her patient was recovered and no longer needed her services, she would go on to some other case and the patient would forget all about her. In Blake's case, there was nothing to be jealous of anyway. The only emotion he felt for her was hostility.
When she reentered the bedroom he twisted his head around to stare at her. "Is she gone?" he questioned anxiously.

"She's going to wait downstairs to eat lunch with you," Dione answered, and saw the relief that crossed his face.
"Good. She… nearly went to pieces when this happened to me. She'd be hysterical if she saw what I really look like." Pain darkened his his eyes. "She's special to me; I practically raised her. I'm all the family she has."
"No, you're not," Dione pointed out. "She has Richard." .
"He's so wrapped up in his work, he seldom remembers that she's alive," he snorted. "Richard's a great vice-president, but he's not a great husband."
That wasn't the impression Dione had gotten from Richard; he'd seemed to her to be a man very much in love with his wife. On the surface Richard and Serena were opposites; he was reserved, sophisticated, while she was as forceful as her brother, but perhaps they were each what the other needed. Perhaps her fire made him more spontaneous; perhaps his reserve tempered her rashness. But Dione didn't say anything to Blake. She began the repetitious exercises again, forcing his legs through the same motions.
It was tiring, boring work; tiring for her, boring for him. It made him irritable all over again, but this time when he snapped at her to stop, she obeyed him. She didn't want to browbeat him, to force her wishes on him in everything. He'd put in the most active morning he'd had since the accident, and she wasn't going to push him any further. "Whew!" she sighed, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand and feeling the moisture there. "I need a shower before lunch! Breaking off a little early is a good idea."
He looked at her, and his eyes widened in surprise. She knew that he hadn't really seen her all morning; he'd been preoccupied with his own condition, his own despair. She'd told him that he'd have to work hard, but now for the first time he realized that she'd be working hard, too. It wasn't going to be a picnic for her. She knew that she looked a mess, all sweaty and flushed.
"A bath wouldn't hurt you," he agreed dryly, and she laughed.
"Don't be such a gentleman about it," she teased. "You just wait. I won't be the only one working up a sweat before long, and I won't show you any mercy!"
"I haven't noticed you showing any, anyway," he grumbled.
"Now, I've been very good to you. I've kept you entertained all morning; I made certain you had a good breakfast—"
"Don't push your luck," he advised, giving her a black look, which she rewarded with a smile. It was important that he learn to joke and laugh with her, to ease the stress of the coming months. She had to become the best

friend he had in the world, knowing as she did so that it was a friendship that was doomed from the outset, because it was based on dependence and need. When he no longer needed her, when his life had regained its normal pace, she would leave and be promptly forgotten. She knew that, and she had to keep a part of herself aloof, though the remainder of her emotions and mental effort would be concentrated entirely on him.

While she was helping him to dress, a process that didn't anger him as it had that morning, he said thoughtfully, "You'll be spending most of your time dressing and undressing me, it seems. If this is the routine you're going to be following, it'll save a lot of time if I just wear a pair of gym shorts; I can put on a robe before we eat, and Alberta can bring trays up here."

Dione successfully hid her delight, merely saying, "That's your second good idea of the day." Secretly she was elated. From a practical standpoint he was right: It would save a lot of time and effort; however, it would also exclude Serena from most of their meals. That would be a big help.

It wasn't that she disliked Serena; if she had met her under different circumstances, Dione felt that she would have liked Serena very much. But Blake was her concern now, and she didn't want anyone or anything interfering with her work. While she was working on a case she concentrated on her patient to the extent that everyone else faded into the background, became gray cardboard figures rather than three-dimensional human beings. It was one of the things that made her so successful in her field. Already, after only one morning, Blake so filled her thoughts, and she was so much in tune with him, that she felt she knew him inside and out. She could practically read his mind, know what he was going to say before he said it. She ached for him, sympathized with him, but most of all she was happy for him, because she could look at his helplessness now and know that in a few months he would be strong and fit again. Already he was looking better, she thought proudly. It was probably due more to his anger than her efforts, but his color was much improved. He could stay angry with her for the entire time if it would keep him active and involved.

She was feeling satisfied with the morning's work as she walked beside him into the dining room, but that feeling was shattered when Serena plunged toward Blake, her lovely face bathed in tears. "Blake," she said brokenly. Instantly he was alert, concerned,, as he reached for her hand. "What is it?" he asked, a note of tenderness creeping into his voice, a particular tone that

was absent when he talked to everyone else. Only Serena inspired that voice of love.
"The patio!" she wailed. "Mother's bench… it's ruined! They've turned the pool into a madhouse! It looks awful!"
"What?" he asked, his brows snapping together. "What're you talking about?"
Serena pointed a shaking finger at Dione. "*Her* gym! They've torn up the entire patio!"
"I don't think it's that bad," Dione said reasonably. "It may be disorganized now, but nothing should be torn up. Richard's overseeing the installation of the equipment, and I'm sure he wouldn't let anything be damaged."
"Come see for yourself!"
Dione checked her watch. "I think we should have lunch first. The patio isn't going anywhere, but the food will be cold."
"Stalling?" Blake inquired coldly. "I told you, Miss Kelley, that I didn't want this house changed."
"I can neither deny nor confirm what changes have been made, because I haven't been outside. I've been with you all morning. However, I trust Richard's good sense, even if you don't," she said pointedly, and Serena flushed furiously.
"It isn't that I don't trust my husband," she began heatedly, but Blake cut her off with a lifted hand.
"Not now," he said shortly. "I want to see the patio."
Serena fell into immediate silence, though she looked sulky. Evidently Blake was still very much the big brother, despite his obvious ill health. His voice carried the unmistakable ring of command. Blake Remington was accustomed to giving orders and having them carried out immediately; his morning with Dione must have gone completely against the grain.
It was the first time Dione had been on the patio, and she found it beautifully landscaped, cool and fragrant, despite the brutal Arizona sun. Yucca plants and different varieties of cactus grew in perfect harmony with plants normally found in a much more congenial climate. Careful watering explained the unusual variety of plants, that and the well-planned use of shade. White flagstones had been laid out to form a path, while a central fountain spewed its musical water upward in a perfect spray. At the back of the patio, where a tall gate opened onto the pool area, was a beautifully

carved bench in a delicate pearlrgray color. Dione had no idea what type of wood it was, though it was gorgeous.
The patio *was* disorganized; evidently the workers Richard had hired had used the patio to store the pool furniture that was in the way, and also the materials that they didn't need at the moment. However, she saw that they had been careful not to disturb any of the plants; everything was placed carefully on the flagstones. But Serena ran to the lovely bench and pointed out a long gouge on its side. "See!" she cried.
Blake's eyes flashed. "Yes, I see. Well, Miss Kelley, it looks as if your workers have damaged a bench that I consider priceless. My father gave it to my mother when they moved into this house; she sat here every evening, and it's here that I see her in my mind. I want this whole thing called off before something else is ruined, and I want you out of my house."
Dione was distressed that the bench had been damaged, and she opened her mouth to apologize; then she saw the flash of triumph in Serena's eyes and she paused. To give herself time to think, she walked to the bench and bent down to examine the scarred wood. Thoughtfully she ran a finger over the gouge; a quick glance at Serena caught a hint of apprehension in those amazingly expressive eyes. What was Serena worried about? Looking back at the bench, the answer became readily apparent: The bench was undoubtedly damaged, but the gouge was old enough to have weathered. It certainly hadn't been done that morning.
She could have accused Serena of deliberately trying to cause trouble, but she didn't. Serena was fighting for the brother she loved, and though her battle was useless, Dione couldn't condemn her for it. She would just have to separate Serena from Blake so her work could continue without a constant stream of interruptions. Richard would have to bring that laser brain of his into use and keep his wife occupied.
"I can understand why you're both upset," she said mildly, "but this gouge wasn't done today.
See?" she asked, pointing at the wood. "It isn't a fresh scar. I'd guess that this has been here for several weeks."
Blake moved his wheelchair closer and leaned down to inspect the bench for himself. He straightened slowly. "You're right," he sighed. "In fact, I'm afraid I'm the culprit."
Serena gasped. "What do you mean?"

"A few weeks ago I was out here and I bumped the wheelchair into the bench. You'll notice that the gouge is the same height as the hub of my wheel." He rubbed his eyes with a thin hand that trembled with strain. "God, I'm sorry, Serena."

"Don't blame yourself!" she cried, rushing to his side and clutching his hand. "It doesn't matter; please don't be upset. Come inside and let's have lunch. I know you must be tired. It can't do any good for you to tire yourself out like this. You need to rest."

Dione watched as Serena walked beside the wheelchair, all concern and love. Shaking her head a little in amused exasperation, she followed them. Serena remained close by Blake's side for the rest of the day, fussing over him like a hen with one chick. Blake *was* tired after his first day of therapy, and he let her coddle him. Though Dione had planned to have another session of exercise and massage, she let it go rather than fight a battle to do it. Tomorrow… well, tomorrow would be another story.

Richard arrived for dinner, a practice that Alberta had told Dione was the usual whenever Serena came over, which was every day. He watched silently as Serena hovered anxiously over Blake, and though Richard had the original poker face, Dione sensed that he wasn't happy with the situation. After dinner, while Serena got Blake settled in his study, Dione took the opportunity to speak privately to Richard.

They went out to the patio and sat on one of the benches that were scattered around. Dione looked up at the countless stars that were visible in the clear desert night. "I'm having a problem with Serena," she said without preamble.

He sighed. "I know. I've had a problem with her since Blake had his accident. I understand how she feels, but it's still driving me crazy."

"He said something today about raising her."

"Practically. Serena was thirteen when their mother died, and it was quite a shock to her. It was weeks before she could bear for Blake to be out of her sight; it must've seemed to her as if everyone she loved was dying. First her father, then her mother. She was especially close to her mother. I know that she's terrified something will happen to Blake, but at the same time I can't help resenting it."

" Forsaking all others,'" Dione quoted, a little sadly.

"Exactly. I want my wife back."

"Blake said that you don't pay any attention to her, that you're wrapped up in your work."
He rubbed the back of his neck with restless fingers. "I have a lot of work to do, with Blake like he is. My God, what I wouldn't give to go home to just a little of the tender loving care that she smothers Blake with every day!"
"I spoke to Alberta about having the locks on the doors changed, but the more I think about it, the more I think it isn't such a good idea," she confessed. "Blake would be furious if anyone locked his sister out of his house. The problem is, I can't keep him on a schedule if she keeps interrupting."
"I'll see what I can do," he said doubtfully. "But any suggestion that will keep her away from Blake will go over like an outbreak of plague." He looked at her, and his teeth suddenly flashed white as he grinned. "You must have the steadiest nerves I've ever seen. Was it interesting today?"
"It had its moments," she replied, laughing a little. "He threw his breakfast at me."
Richard laughed aloud. "I wish I could've seen that! Blake's always had a hot temper, but for the past year he's been so depressed that you couldn't make him angry if you tried all day. It would've been like old times if I had been here to see him."
"I hope I can get him to the point where he doesn't need to be angry," she said. "I'm certain that he'll progress more rapidly if we aren't interrupted. I'm relying on you to think of something that'll keep Serena occupied."
"If I could, I'd have used it before now," he said in disgust. "Short of kidnapping her, I can't think of anything that will work."
"Then why don't you?"
"What?"
"Kidnap her. Take her on a second honeymoon. Whatever it takes."
"The second honeymoon sounds good," he admitted. "But there's no way I can get free until Blake returns to work and takes over again. Any more ideas?"
"I'm afraid you'll have to think of something on your own. I don't know her that well. But I need privacy to work with Blake."
"Then you'll have it," he promised after a moment's thought. "I don't know what I'll do, but I'll keep her away as much as I can. Unless Blake's completely dead, it shouldn't take him long to realize that he'd rather have you fussing over him than his sister, anyway."

At the obvious admiration in his voice, Dione shifted uncomfortably. She was aware of her looks, but at the same time she didn't want anyone to comment on them. Blake was her patient; it was out of the question for her to become involved with him in any sort of sexual relationship. Not only was it against her professional ethics, it was impossible for her. She no longer woke up in the middle of the night trying desperately to scream, her throat constricted by sheer terror, and she wasn't going to do anything to reawaken those nightmares. She'd put the horror behind her, where it had to stay.

Sensing her unease, Richard said, "Dione?" His voice was low, puzzled. "Is something wrong?" He put his hand on her arm, and she jumped as if she'd been stung, unable to bear the touch. He got to his feet, alarmed by her action. "Dione?" he asked again.

"I… I'm sorry," she murmured, wrapping her arms tightly around herself in an effort to control the trembling that had seized her. "I can't explain… I'm sorry—"

"But what's wrong?" he demanded, reaching out his hand to her again, and she drew back sharply, jumping to her feet.

She knew that she couldn't explain, but neither could she stand there any longer. "Good night," she said rapidly, and walked away from him. She entered the house and almost bumped into Serena, who was stepping out onto the patio.

"There you are," she said. "Blake's gone to bed; he was so tired."

"Yes, I thought he would be," Dione said," gathering her composure enough to answer Serena evenly.

Suddenly she felt very tired, too, and she was unable to stifle a yawn. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's been a long day."

Serena gave her an odd, considering look. "Then Richard and I will be leaving; I don't want to keep you up. I'll see Blake tomorrow."

"I'll be increasing his exercises tomorrow," Dione informed her, taking the opportunity to let Serena know that her presence would hinder rather than help. "It would be better if you waited until late afternoon, say after four."

"But that's too much!" Serena gasped. "He isn't strong enough!"

"At this point, I'm doing most of the work," Dione reassured her dryly. "But I'll be careful not to let him do too much."

If Serena heard the sarcasm that Dione couldn't quite suppress, she didn't let on. Instead she nodded. "I see," she said coldly. "Very well. I'll see Blake

tomorrow afternoon."
Well, will wonders never cease, Dione thought wryly to herself as she made her way upstairs. All she'd had to do was mention that Blake would be busy, and though Serena hadn't been happy with the situation, she'd agreed to it.
After she'd gotten ready for bed, she tapped lightly on Blake's door; when she didn't hear an answer she opened the door just enough to peek inside. He was sound asleep, lying on his back, his head rolled against his shoulder. With only the light from the hallway on him, he looked younger, the lines of suffering not visible now.
Quietly she closed the door and returned to her room. She was tired, so tired that her limbs ached, but after she was in bed she found that sleep eluded her. She knew why, and lay awake staring at the ceiling, knowing that she might not sleep at all that night. Such a silly, trivial thing… just because Richard had touched her.
Yet it wasn't trivial, and she knew it. She might have pushed the nightmare away, she might have restructured her life completely, but her past was hers, a part of her, and it hadn't been trivial. Rape wasn't trivial. Since that night she hadn't been able to bear for anyone to touch her. She'd worked out a compromise with herself, satisfying her human need for warmth and touching by working with her patients, touching them, but she could bear the contact only as long as she was the one in control.
On the surface she had recovered completely; she had built a wall between who she was now and who she had been then, never dwelling on what had happened, literally forcing herself to gather together the shattered pieces of her life and, with fierce concentration and willpower, actually mending the pieces into a stronger fabric. She could laugh and enjoy life. More importantly, she had learned how to respect herself, which had been the hardest task of all.
But she couldn't tolerate a man's touch.
That night had effectively prevented her from marrying and having a family. Since that part of life was denied her, she ignored it, and never cried for what might have been. Instead she became a vagabond of sorts, traveling around the country and helping other people. While she was on a case she had an intense relationship full of love and caring, but without any sexual overtones. She loved her patients, and, inevitably, they loved her… while it lasted. They became her family, until the day when it was over and

she left them with a smile on her face, ready to continue on to her next case and her next "family."

She had wondered, when she began her training, if she would ever be able to work with a man at all. The problem worried her until she decided that, if she couldn't, she would be handicapping her career terribly and made up her mind to do what was necessary. The first time she worked with a man she'd had to grit her teeth and use all her considerable determination to make herself touch him, but after a few minutes she had realized that a man who needed therapy obviously wasn't in any shape to be attacking her. Men were human beings who needed help, just like everyone else.

She preferred working with children, though. They loved so freely, so wholeheartedly. A child's touch was the one touch she could tolerate; she had learned to enjoy the feel of little arms going about her neck in a joyous hug. If there was one regret that sometimes refused to go away, it was the regret that she would never have children of her own. She controlled it by channeling extra devotion into her efforts for the children she worked with, but deep inside her was the need to have someone of her own, someone who belonged to her and who she belonged to, a part of herself.

Suddenly a muffled sound caught her attention, and she lifted her head from the pillow, waiting to see if it was repeated. Blake? Had he called out? There was nothing but silence now, but she couldn't rest until she had made certain that he was all right. Getting out of bed, she slipped on her robe and walked silently to the room next door. Opening the door enough to look inside, she saw him lying in the same position he'd been in before. She was about to leave when he tried to roll onto his side, and when his legs didn't cooperate, he made the same sound she'd heard before, a half sigh, half grunt.

Did no one ever think to help him change his position? she wondered, gliding silently into the room on her bare feet. If he'd been lying on his back for two years, no wonder he had the temperament of a water buffalo.

She didn't know if he were awake or not; she didn't think so. Probably he was just trying to change positions as people do naturally during sleep. The light in the hallway wasn't on now, since everyone was in bed, and in the dim starlight coming through the glass doors she couldn't see well enough to decide. Perhaps, if he were still asleep, she could gently adjust his position without his ever waking up. It was something she did for most of her patients, a gesture of concern that they usually never realized.

First she touched his shoulder lightly, just placing her hand on him and letting his subconscious become accustomed to the touch. After a moment she applied a little pressure and he obeyed it, trying to roll to his right side, facing her. Gently, slowly, she helped him, moving his legs so they didn't hold him back. With a soft sigh he burrowed his face into the pillow, his breathing becoming deeper as he relaxed.

Smiling, she pulled the sheet up over his shoulder and returned to her room. Blake wasn't like her other patients. Still lying awake over an hour later, she tried to decide why she was so determined to make him walk again. It wasn't just her normal devotion to a patient; in some way she didn't yet understand, it was important to her personally that he once again become the man he had been. He had been such a strong man, a man so vibrantly alive that he was the center of attention wherever he went. She *knew* that. She had to restore him to that.

He was so near to death. Richard had been correct in saying that he wouldn't live another year the way he was. Blake had been willing himself to die. She had gotten his attention that morning with her shock tactics, but she had to keep it until he could actually see himself progressing, until he realized that he could recover. She would never be able to forgive herself if she failed him.

She finally slept for about two hours, rising before dawn with a restless anticipation driving her. She would have loved to run on the beach, but Phoenix didn't have a beach, and she didn't know the grounds well enough to go trotting around them in the dark. For all she knew Blake had attack dogs patrolling at night. But despite her lack of sleep she was brimming with energy. She tried to burn off some of it by doing a brisk routine of exercises, but the shower she took afterward so refreshed her that she felt she was ready to tackle the world. Well, at least Blake Remington!

It was even earlier than it had been the morning before when she gave in to her enthusiasm and bounded into his room, snapping on the light as she did, because it was still dark.

"Good morning," she chirped.

He was still on his side; he opened one blue eye, surveyed her with an expression of horror, then uttered an explicit word that would have gotten his mouth washed out with soap if he'd been younger. Dione grinned at him.

"Are you ready to start?" she asked innocently.

"Hell, no!" he barked. "Lady, it's the middle of the night!"

"Not quite. It's almost dawn."
"*Almost*? How close to almost?"
"In just a few minutes," she soothed, then ruined it by laughing as she threw the covers off him. "Don't you want to see the sunrise?"
"No!"
"Don't be such a spoilsport," she coaxed, swinging his legs off the bed. "Watch the sunrise with me."
"I don't want to watch the sunrise, with you or anyone else," he snarled. "I want to sleep!"
"You've been asleep for hours, and you don't want to pass this sunrise up; it's going to be a special one."
"What makes this sunrise so special? Does it mark the beginning of the day you're going to torture me to death?"
"Only if you *don't* watch it with me," she promised him cheerfully, catching his hand and urging him upright. She helped him into the wheelchair and covered him with a blanket, knowing that the air would feel cool to him. "Where's the best place to watch it from?" she asked.
"By the pool," he grunted, rubbing his face with both hands and mumbling the words through his fingers. "You're crazy, lady; a certified lunatic if I've ever seen one."
She smoothed his tousled hair with her fingers, smiling down at him tenderly. "Oh, I don't know about that," she murmured. "Didn't you sleep well last night?"
"Of course I did!" he snapped. "You had me so tired I couldn't hold my head up!" As soon as the words left his mouth a sheepish expression crossed his face. "All right, so it was the best night I've had in two years," he admitted, grudgingly, it was true, but at least he said it.
"See what a little therapy can do for you?" she teased, then changed the subject before he could flare up at her again. "You'll have to lead the way to the pool; I don't want to go through the courtyard, since the workers have put so much of their equipment there. It could be tricky in the dark."
He wasn't enthusiastic, but he put the chair in motion and led her through the silent house to the rear entrance. As they circled around the back to the pool, a bird chirped a single, liquid note in greeting of the new day, and his head lifted at the sound.
Had it been two years since he'd heard a bird sing?

Sitting beside the pool, with the quiet ripple of the water making its own music, they silently watched the first graying of dawn; then at last the first piercing ray of the sun shot over the rim of the mountains. There were no clouds to paint the sky in numberless hues of pink and gold, only the clear, clear blue sky and the white-gold sun, but the utter serenity of the new day made the scene as precious as the most glamorous sunrise she'd ever seen. As fast as that, the day began to warm, and he pushed the blanket down from his shoulders.

"I'm hungry," he announced, a prosaic concern after the long silence they had shared.

She looked at him and chuckled, then rose from her cross-legged position on the concrete. "I can see how much you appreciate the finer things in life," she said lightly.

"If you insist on getting me up at midnight, naturally I'm hungry by the time dawn rolls around! Am I getting the same slop today that I had yesterday morning?"

"You are," she said serenely. "A nutritious, high-protein breakfast, just what you need to put weight on you."

"Which you then try your damnedest to beat off of me," he retorted.

She laughed at him, enjoying their running argument. "You just wait," she promised. "By this time next week you're going to think that yesterday was nothing!"

Chapter Four

Dione lay awake, watching the patterns of light that the new moon was casting on the white ceiling. Richard had worked miracles and informed her at dinner that night that the gym was now ready for use, but her problem was with Blake. Unaccountably he'd become withdrawn and depressed again. He ate what Alberta put before him, and he lay silent and uncomplaining while Dione exercised his legs, and that was all wrong. Therapy wasn't something for a patient to passively accept, as Blake was doing. He could lie there and let her move his legs, but when they started working in the gym and in the pool, he'd have to actively participate.

He wouldn't talk to her about what was bothering him. She knew exactly when it had happened, but she couldn't begin to guess what had triggered it. They had been sniping at each other while she gave him a massage before beginning the exercises, and all of a sudden his eyes had gotten that blank, empty look, and he'd been unresponsive to any of her gibes since then. She didn't think it was anything she'd said; her teasing that day had been lighthearted, because of his greatly improved spirits.

Turning her head to read the luminous dial of the clock, she saw that it was after midnight. As she had done every night, she got up to check on Blake. She hadn't heard the sounds that he usually made when he tried to turn over, but she'd been preoccupied with her thoughts.

As soon as she entered his room she saw that his legs had that awkward, slightly twisted look that meant he'd already tried to shift his position. Gently she put her left hand on his shoulder and her right on his legs, ready to move him.

"Dione?"

His quiet, uncertain voice startled her, and she leaped back. She'd been so intent on his legs that she hadn't noticed his open eyes, though the moonlight that played across the bed was bright enough for her to see him.

"I thought you were asleep," she murmured.

"What were you doing?"

"Helping you to roll over on your side. I do this every night; this is the first time you've been disturbed by it."

"No, I was already awake." Curiosity entered his tone as he shifted his shoulders restlessly. "Do you mean you come in here in the middle of every night and roll me around?"

"You seem to sleep better on your side," she said by way of explanation.
He gave a short, bitter laugh. "I sleep better on my stomach, or at least I did before. I haven't slept on my stomach in two years now."
The quiet intimacy of the night, the moonlit room, made it seem as if they were the only two people on earth, and she was aware of a deep despair in him. Perhaps he felt a special closeness with her, too; perhaps now, with the darkness as a partial shield, he would talk to her and tell her what was bothering him. Without hesitation she sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her nightgown snugly around her legs.
"Blake, what's wrong? Something's bothering you," she said softly.
"Bingo," he muttered. "Did you take psychology, too, when you were in training to be Superwoman?"
She ignored the cut and put her hand on his arm. "Please tell me. Whatever it is, it's interfering with your therapy. The gym is ready for you, but you aren't ready for it."
"I could've told you that. Look, this whole thing is a waste of time," he said, and she could almost feel the weariness in him, like a great stone weighing him down. "You may feed me vitamins and rev up my circulation, but can you promise that I'll ever be exactly like I was before? Don't you understand? I don't want just 'improvement,' or any other compromise. If I can't be back, one hundred percent, the way I was before, then I'm not interested."
She was silent. No, she couldn't honestly promise him that there wouldn't always be some impairment, a limp, difficulties that would be with him for the rest of his life. In her experience, the human body could do wonders in repairing itself, but the injuries it suffered always left traces of pain and healing in the tissue.
"Would it matter so much to you if you walked with a limp?" she finally asked. "I'm not the way I would like to be, either. Everyone has a weakness, but not everyone just gives up and lets himself rot because of it, either. What if your position were reversed with, say, Serena? Would you want her to just lie there and slowly deteriorate into a vegetable? Wouldn't you want her to fight, to try as hard as she could to overcome the problem?"
He flung his forearm up to cover his eyes. "You fight dirty, lady. Yes, I'd want Serena to fight. But I'm not Serena, and my life isn't hers. I'd never really realized, before the accident, how important the quality of my life was. The things I did were wild and dangerous, but, my God, I was alive!

I've never been a nine-to-five man; I'd rather be dead, even though I know that millions of people are perfectly happy and content with that kind of routine. That's fine for them, but it's not *me*."
"Would a limp prevent you from doing all those things again?" she probed. "You can still jump out of airplanes, or climb mountains. You can still fly your own jets. Is the rhythm of your walk so important to you that you're willing to die because of it?"
"Why do you keep saying that?" he asked sharply, jerking his arm down and glaring at her. "I don't remember heading my wheelchair down the stairs, if that's what you're thinking."
"No, but you're killing yourself just as surely in a different way. You're letting your body die of neglect. Richard was desperate when he tracked me down in Florida; he told me that you wouldn't live another year the way you were going, and after seeing you, I agree with him."
He lay in silence, staring up at the ceiling that he had already looked at for more hours than she could imagine. She wanted to gather him into her arms and soothe him as she did the children she worked with; he was a man, but in a way he was as lost and frightened as any child. Confused suddenly by the unfamiliar need to touch him, she folded her hands tightly in her lap.
"What's your weakness?" he asked. "You said that everyone has one. Tell me what torments you, lady."
The question was so unexpected that she couldn't stop the welling of pain, and a shudder shook her entire body. His weakness was obvious, there for everyone to see in his limp, wasted legs. Hers was also a wound that had almost been fatal, for all that it couldn't be seen. There had been a dark time when death had seemed like the easiest way out, a soft cushion for a battered mind and body that had taken too much abuse. But there had been, deep inside her, a bright and determined spark of life that had kept her from even the attempt, as if she knew that to take the first step would be one step too many. She had fought, and lived, and healed her wounds as best she could.
"What's wrong?" he jeered softly. "You can pry into everyone else's secrets, so why can't you share a few of your own? What are your weaknesses? Do you shoplift for kicks? Sleep with strangers? Cheat on your taxes?"
Dione shuddered again, her hands clenched so tightly that her knuckles were white. She couldn't tell him, not all of it, yet in a way he had a right to know some of her pain. She had already witnessed a lot of his, knew what

he thought, knew his longing and despair. None of her other patients had demanded so much from her, but Blake wasn't like the others. He was asking for more than he knew, just as she was asking him for superhuman effort. If she put him off now, she knew in her bones that he wouldn't respond to her anymore. His recovery depended on her, on the trust she could foster between them.

She was shaking visibly, her entire body caught up in the tremors that shook her from head to foot. She knew that the bed was vibrating, knew that he could feel it. His brows snapped together and he said uncertainly, "Dione? Listen, I—"

"I'm illegitimate," she ground out, her teeth chattering. She was panting with the effort it took her to speak at all, and she felt a film of perspiration break out on her body. She sucked in her breath on a sob that shuddered through her; then with a grinding force of will she held her body still. "I don't know who my father was; my mother didn't even know his name. She was drunk, he was there, and presto! She had a baby. Me. She didn't want me. Oh, she fed me, I suppose, since I'm alive to tell about it. But she never hugged me, never kissed me, never told me that she loved me. In fact, she went out of her way to tell me that she hated me, hated having to take care of me, hated even seeing me. Except for the welfare check she got for me, she would probably have dumped me in a trash can and left me."

"You don't know that!" he snapped, heaving himself up on one elbow. She could tell that he was taken aback by the harsh bitterness in her voice, but now that she had started, she couldn't stop. If it killed her, the poison had to spew out now.

"She told me," she insisted flatly. "You know how kids are. I tried every way I knew how to make her love me. I couldn't have been more than three years old, but I can remember climbing up on chairs, then onto the cabinets so I could reach the whiskey bottle for her. Nothing worked, of course. I learned not to cry, because she slapped me if I cried. If she wasn't there, or if she was passed out drunk, I learned to eat whatever I could. Dry bread, a piece of cheese, it didn't matter. Sometimes there wasn't anything to eat, because she'd spent all the check on whiskey. If I waited long enough she'd go off with some man and come back with a little money, enough to get by until the next check, or the next man."

"Dee, stop it!" he ordered harshly, putting his hand on her arm and shaking her. Wildly she jerked away from him.

"You wanted to know!" she breathed, her lungs aching with the effort they were making to draw air into her constricted chest. "So you can hear it!… Whenever I made the mistake of bothering her, which didn't take much, she slapped me. Once she threw a whiskey bottle at me. I was lucky that time, because all I got was a little cut on my temple, though she was so angry at the wasted whiskey that she beat me with her shoe. Do you know what she told me, over and over? 'You're just a bastard, and nobody loves a bastard!' Over and over, until finally I had to believe it. I know the exact day when I learned to believe it. My seventh birthday. I'd started to go to school, you see, and I knew then that birthdays were supposed to be something special. Birthdays were when your parents gave you presents to show you how much they loved you. I woke up and went running into her room, sure that today was the day that she would finally love me. She slapped me for waking her up and shoved me into the closet. She kept me locked in the closet all day long. That's what she thought of my birthday, you see. She hated the sight of me."

She was bent over, her body tight with pain, but her eyes were dry and burning. "I was living in the streets by the time I was ten," she whispered, her strength beginning to leave her. "It was safer than home. I don't know what happened to her. I went back one day, and the place was empty."

Her rasping breath was the only sound in the room. He lay as if he had been turned to stone, his eyes burning on her. Dione could have collapsed, she was suddenly so tired. With an effort she drew herself upright. "Any more questions?" she asked dully.

"Just one," he said, and her body clenched painfully, but she didn't protest. She waited, wondering in exhaustion what he would ask of her next.

"Were you eventually adopted?"

"No," she breathed, closing her eyes, swaying a little. "I eventually wound up in an orphanage, and it was as good a place as any. I had food, and a place to sleep, and I was able to go to school regularly. I was too old for adoption, and no one wanted me as a foster child. My looks were too odd, I suppose." Moving like an old woman, she got to her feet and slowly left the room, knowing that the air was still heavy with questions that he wanted to ask, but she'd remembered enough for one night. No matter what she had accomplished, no matter how many years had passed since she was a lonely, bewildered child, the lack of her mother's love was still an emptiness that hadn't been filled. A mother's love was the basis of every child's life, and

the absence of it had left her crippled inside just as surely as the accident had crippled Blake's legs.

Not surprisingly, she fell facedown on her bed and slept heavily, without dreaming, to awaken promptly when the alarm went off. She had learned, over the years, how to function even when she felt as if a part of her had been murdered, and she did so now. At first she had to force herself to go through the regular routine, but in only a moment the hard self-discipline had taken over, and she shoved the crisis of the night away. She would *not* let it drag her down! She had a job to do, and she'd do it.

Perhaps something of her determination was written on her face when she entered Blake's bedroom, because he promptly raised his hands and said mildly, "I surrender."

She stopped in her tracks and regarded him quizzically. He was smiling a little, his pale, thin face weary, but no longer locked in a mask of detachment. "But I haven't even attacked yet," she protested. "You're taking all the fun out of it."

"I know when I'm outgunned." He grimaced and admitted, "I don't see how I can give up without at least trying again. You didn't give up, and I've never been a man to back down from a challenge."

The hard knot of apprehension that had been tied in her stomach since he'd lapsed into depression slowly eased, then relaxed completely. Her spirits soared, and she gave him a blinding smile. With his cooperation, she felt that she could do anything.

At first he was capable of very little with the weights. Even the smaller ones were too much for him, though he kept gritting his teeth and trying to continue even when she wanted him to stop. *Stubborm* was too mild a word to describe him. He was hell-bent and determined to push himself to the limits of his endurance, which unfortunately wasn't far. It always took a long session in the whirlpool afterward to ease the pain from his tortured muscles, but he kept at it, even knowing that he was going to have to pay with pain.

To her relief he asked no more questions and in no way referred to what she'd told him of her childhood. Because of the extra demand he was making on his body, he was always sound asleep when she checked on him at night, so there were no repeats.

Over Serena's protests Dione also began giving him therapy in the pool. Serena was terrified that he'd drown, since his legs were useless and he

obviously couldn't kick, but Blake himself overruled her objections. He'd said that he liked challenges, and he wasn't backing off from this one. With his engineering expertise, he designed and directed the construction of a system of braces and pulleys that enabled Dione to lower him into the pool and hoist him out when the session was ended, something that he would soon be able to do for himself.

One morning, after she'd been there a little over two weeks, Dione watched him as he devoured the breakfast that Alberta had prepared. Already it seemed that he was gaining weight. His face had fleshed out and wasn't as gray as it had been. He'd burned a little during the first few days he'd been in the sun, but he hadn't peeled, and now the light tan he'd acquired made his blue eyes seem even bluer.

"What're you staring at?" he demanded as Alberta removed the plate before him and replaced it with a bowl of fresh strawberries in cream.

"You're gaining weight," Dione told him with immense satisfaction.

"Shouldn't wonder," Alberta snorted as she left the room. "He's eating like a horse."

Blake scowled at her, but dipped his spoon into the bowl and lifted a plump strawberry. His white teeth sank into the red fruit; then his tongue captured the juice that stained his lips. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?" he demanded grumpily. "To fatten me up?"

She smiled and didn't reply, watching as he demolished the fruit. Just as he was finishing Angela glided in with a telephone, which she placed on the table before him. After plugging it in, she gave him a shy smile and left.

Blake sat there, staring at the phone. Dione hid a grin. "I think that means you have a call," she prompted.

He looked relieved. "Good. I was afraid you wanted me to eat it."

She chuckled and got to her feet. As he lifted the receiver and put it to his ear, she touched his shoulder lightly and murmured, "I'll be in the gym; come down when you're finished."

He met her eyes and nodded, already embroiled in conversation. She heard enough to know that he was talking to Richard, and just the thought of Richard was enough to pucker her brow in a line of worry.

Serena had been very good after that first day; she'd come to see Blake only in the late afternoon, when Dione had completed her schedule for the day. She'd also learned not to wait until too late to arrive, or Blake would already be asleep. Most nights, Richard also arrived for dinner.

Richard was a witty, entertaining man, with a dry sense of humor and a repertoire of jokes that often had her chuckling in her seat, but which couldn't be repeated when Blake or Serena asked what was so funny.
Dione couldn't say that Richard had been less than a gentleman. In no way had he said or done anything that could be termed suggestive. It was just that she could read the deepening admiration in his eyes, sense the growing gentleness in the way he treated her. She wasn't the only one who felt that perhaps Richard was becoming too fond of her; Serena was subtle, but she watched her husband sharply when he was talking with Dione. In a way, Dione was relieved; it meant that Serena was at least paying attention to her husband. But she didn't want complications of that sort, especially when there was nothing to it.
She didn't feel that she could say anything to Richard about it either. How could she scold him when he'd been nothing but polite? He loved his wife, she was sure. He liked and admired his brother-in-law. But still, he responded to Dione in a way that she knew she hadn't mistaken.
She'd been the object of unwanted attention before, but this was the first time that attention hadn't been obvious. She had no idea how to handle it. She knew that Richard would never try to force himself on her, but Serena was jealous. *Part* of Dione, the deeply feminine part of her, was even flattered by his regard. If Serena had been giving her husband the attention he deserved, none of this would be happening.
But they weren't important, she told herself. She couldn't let them be important to her. Only Blake mattered. He was coming out of the prison of his disability, more and more revealing himself as the man he'd been before the accident. In another month she hoped to have him standing. Not walking, but standing. Letting his legs get used to supporting the weight of his body again. What she was doing now was dealing with the basics, restoring him to health and building his strength up enough that he would be able to stand when she demanded it of him.
She ran hot water in a plastic container and set the flask of oil that she used down in it to warm it for the massage that she always gave him before he went in the pool, in an effort to protect him from any chill. Not that a chill was likely in the hundred-plus-degree heat of a summer day in Phoenix, she thought wryly, but he was so thin, still so weakened, that she didn't take any chances with him. Besides, he seemed to enjoy the feel of the warm oil being massaged into him, and he had little enough joy in his life.

She was restless, and she prowled aimlessly about the converted game room, pausing to stretch her body. She needed a good workout to release some of her energy, she decided, and positioned herself on the weight bench.

She liked lifting weights. Her aim was strength, not bulk, and the program that she followed was designed with that in mind. For Blake, she was altering the program enough to build up the bulk of his muscles without pumping him up like a Mr. Universe. Carefully regulating her breathing, concentrating on what she was doing, she began her sets. Up, down. Up, down.

She finished her leg sets and adjusted the system of pulleys and weights to what she wanted for her arms. Puffing, she began again. The demand she was making on her muscles reached a plateau that was almost pleasure. Again. Again.

"You damned cheat!" The roar startled her, and she jerked upright, alarm skittering across her features. Confused, she stared at Blake. He sat in his wheelchair, just inside the door, his face dark red and contorted with fury.

"What?" she spluttered.

He pointed at the weights. "You're a weight lifter!" he bellowed, so furious that he was shaking. "You little cheat. You knew the day you beat me at arm wrestling that you'd win! Hell, how many men *could* beat you?"

She blushed. "Not everyone," she said with modesty, which seemed to make him even angrier.

"I can't believe it!" He was yelling, getting louder and louder. "Knowing how it would make me feel that a woman could beat me at arm wrestling, you made a bet on it anyway, and you *rigged* it!"

"I never said that I wasn't good at it," she pointed out, trying to keep the laughter out of her voice. He looked wonderful! If sheer rage could have put him back on his feet, he'd have been walking right then. A giggle escaped her control, and at the sound of it he began pounding his fist on the arm of the wheelchair; unfortunately he was pounding on the controls, and the chair began jumping back and forth like a bronc trying to rid itself of an unwanted rider.

Dione couldn't help it; she gave up even trying to keep a straight face and laughed until tears ran down her face. She howled. She beat the weight bench with her fist in mute mockery of the way he'd pounded the wheelchair controls; she clutched her arms across her stomach, gasping for

breath, and every new eruption of rage from him sent her off into renewed paroxysms.
"Stop laughing!" he thundered, his voice booming off the walls. "Sit down! We'll see who wins this time!"
She was so weak that she had to haul herself to the massage table where he'd propped his elbow and was waiting for her with a face like doom. Still giggling, she collapsed against the table.
"This isn't fair!" she protested, putting her hand in his grip. "I'm not ready. Wait until I stop laughing."
"Was it fair when you let me think I was wrestling a frail, *normal* woman?" he seethed.
"I'm perfectly normal!" she hooted. "You got beat fair and square, and you know it!"
"I don't know any such thing! You cheated, and I want a rematch."
"All right, all right. Just give me a minute." Quickly she squelched the remaining laughter that wanted to bubble out and flexed her hand in his. She began tightening her muscles. "Okay. I'm ready."
"On the count of three," he said. "One… twothree!"
It was fortunate that she was ready for the quick count he gave. She threw her entire body into the effort, realizing that the extra weight he'd gained and the few days of workouts that he'd had with the weights had increased his strength. Not by much, perhaps, but with the added impetus of his anger and the laughter that had weakened her, perhaps it would be enough to win the match for him.
"You cheated!" she accused in turn, gritting her teeth as she bore down with all her strength against the force of his arm.
"You deserved it!"
They panted and huffed and grunted for several minutes, and sweat began to run down their faces. They were close together, almost face to face, as their locked arms strained harder and harder. Dione groaned aloud. His initial burst of strength had been greater than hers, but not enough to make a quick end to it. Now it was a matter of stamina, and she thought that she could outlast him. She could have let him win, to soothe his ego, but it wasn't in her to trick him that way. If he won, it would be despite everything she could do.
Something of her determination must have shown in her face, because he growled, "Damn it, this is the part where you're supposed to let me win!"

She puffed, sucking in much-needed oxygen. "If you want to beat me, you're going to have to work for it," she panted. "I don't *let* anybody win!"
"But I'm a patient!"
"You're an opportunist!"
He ground his teeth and pushed harder. Dione ducked her head, a movement that placed her head in the hollow of his shoulder, and counteracted his move with everything she had. Slowly, slowly, she felt his arm begin to move back. The rush of strength that winning always gave her zoomed through her veins, and with a cry she slammed his arm down flat on the table.
Their panting breaths filled the room, and her heartbeat thundered in her ears like the hoofbeats of a galloping horse. She was still slumped against him, her head on his shoulder, and she could feel the pounding of his heart throughout his entire body. Slowly she pushed herself off him, letting her weight fall against the table. Like a rag doll, he slumped forward onto the table, too, his color fading almost to normal as he sucked in deep breaths of air.
After a moment he propped his chin on his folded arm and regarded her out of dark blue eyes that still held storm clouds.
Dione drew a deep breath, staring at him. "You're beautiful when you're angry," she told him.
He blinked in astonishment. Stunned, he stared at her for a long, long minute that hung suspended in time; then an odd little gurgle sounded in his throat. He gulped. The next sound was a full-throated roar of laughter. He threw his head back and clutched helplessly at his stomach. Dione began to giggle again.
He was rolling, howling with mirth, rocking back and forth. The abused controls of the wheelchair caught the impact of his fist again, and this time the jerky movements combined with his back and forth motion to pitch him out on his face. It was lucky that he wasn't hurt, because Dione couldn't have stopped laughing if her life had depended on it. She fell off her stool to lie beside him, drawing her legs up to her stomach. "Stop it! Stop it!" she shrieked as tears rolled down her face.
"Stop it! Stop it!" he mimicked, catching her and digging his fingers into her ribs.
In all her life, Dione had never been tickled. She'd never known what it was to play. She was so startled by the unbearably ticklish sensation of his

fingers on her ribs that she couldn't even be alarmed at his touch. She was screaming her head off, rolling helplessly in an effort to get away from those tormenting fingers, when another voice intruded on them.
"Blake!" Serena didn't stop to interpret the scene before her. She saw her brother on the floor, she heard Dione screaming, and she immediately assumed that a terrible accident had happened. She added her despairing cry to the din and dove for him, her desperate hands catching him and rolling him to her.
Though Serena wasn't supposed to be there during the day, Dione was grateful to her for the interruption. Shakily she rolled away from Blake and sat up, only then realizing that Serena was almost hysterical.
"Serena! There's nothing wrong," Blake was saying strongly, deliberately, having sensed his sister's state of mind before Dione had. "We were just playing around. I'm not hurt. I'm not hurt," he repeated.
Serena calmed down, her white face regaining some of its color. Blake pushed himself to a sitting position and reached for the blanket that usually covered his legs. As he covered himself, he demanded harshly, "What're you doing here? You know you're not supposed to come during the day."
She looked as if he'd slapped her, drawing back sharply and staring at him with a stunned look in her eyes. Dione bit her lip. She knew why he'd spoken so sharply. He'd become used to her seeing him, and in her presence he could sit around wearing nothing but a pair of briefs or gym shorts, but he was still sensitive about his body with everyone else, Serena most of all.
Serena recovered, lifting her chin proudly. "I thought this was supposed to be therapy, not play period." She lashed out as sharply as he had, and rose to her feet. "Excuse me for interrupting; I had a reason for seeing you, but it can wait."
Her outraged temper was evident in every line of her straight back as she marched out the door, ignoring Blake's rueful call.
"Damn!" he said softly. "Now I'll have to apologize. It's just so awkward explaining…"
Dione chuckled. "She's definitely your sister, isn't she?"
He eyed her warningly. "Don't be acting so cocky, young lady. I've found the weakness in your fortress, now. You're as ticklish as a baby!"
She prudently scooted out of his reach. "If you tickle me again I'll sneak up on you when you're asleep and pour ice water on you."

"You would, too, you wretch," he snorted, and glared at her. "I want a rematch in two weeks."
"You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?" she asked gleefully, getting to her feet and contemplating the problem of getting him from the floor to the table.
"Don't even try it," he ordered, seeing the speculative look on her face as she looked at him. She smiled sheepishly, because she'd been about to try lifting him herself. "Call Miguel to help you."
Miguel was Blake's chauffeur, handyman and, Dione suspected, bodyguard. He was short and lean, as hard as rock, and his dark face was marred by a scar that puckered his left cheek. No one had said how Blake had acquired his services, and Dione wasn't sure she wanted to know. She didn't even know where Miguel was from; it could have been any Latin nation. She did know that he spoke Portuguese as well as Spanish and English, so she suspected that he was from South America, but again, no one volunteered the information and she didn't ask. It was enough that he was dedicated to Blake.
Miguel wasn't one for asking questions, either. If he was surprised to find his employer in the floor, none of that surprise was reflected on his face. Together he and Dione lifted Blake and put him on the table.
"Miguel, I need another contraption rigged for me in here like the one by the pool," Blake instructed. "We can bolt a bar across the ceiling, this way," he said, indicating the length of the room. "With the pulley arm swinging in any direction we want, and running the length of the bar, I can get myself up and down as I please."
Miguel studied the ceiling, getting in his mind exactly what Blake wanted. "No problem," he finally allowed. "Will tomorrow be soon enough?"
"If you can't do it any faster than that, I suppose it will."
"You're a brutal slave driver," Dione told him as she was massaging his back with the warm oil.
"I've been taking lessons from you," he murmured sleepily, burrowing his head deeper into the cradle of his arm. The comment earned him a pinch on his side, and he laughed. "One thing about it," he continued. "I haven't been bored since you bulldozed into my life."

Chapter Five

He was already awake the next morning when she went into his room; he was bending from the waist and rubbing his thighs and calves. She regarded him with satisfaction, glad that he was taking an active part in his recovery.
"I had a long talk with Serena last night," he grunted, not looking up from what he was doing.
"Good. I expect the apology was good for your soul," she said, slipping behind him and kneading his back and shoulders.
"She was upset. It seems Richard has been leaving again as soon as he takes her home at night, and she thinks he's seeing another woman."
Dione's fingers stilled. Was it possible? She hadn't thought him the type to sneak around. It seemed so tawdry, and Richard wasn't a tawdry man.
Blake swiveled his head around to look at her. "Serena thinks he's seeing you," he said bluntly.
She resumed the motion of her fingers. "What did you tell her?" she asked, trying to stay calm. She concentrated on the feel of his flesh under her hands, noting that he didn't feel as bony as he had at first.
"I told her that I'd find out and stop it if he was," he replied. "Don't look so innocent, because we both know that Richard's attracted to you. Hell, he'd have to be dead not to be. You're the type of woman who has men swarming around her like bees around a honey pot."
Richard had said much the same thing about Blake, she thought, and smiled sadly at how far they both were from the truth.
"I'm not seeing Richard," she said quietly. "Aside from the fact that he's married, when would I have time? I'm with you all day long, and I'm too tired at night to put forth the energy that sneaking around would take."
"Serena said that she saw you on the patio one night."
"She did. We were talking about you, not making love. I know that Richard's unhappy with Serena—"
"How do you know that?"
"I'm not blind. She's devoted the last two years to you and virtually ignored her husband, and naturally he resents it. Why do you think he was so determined to find a therapist for you? He wants you walking again so he can have his wife back." Perhaps she shouldn't have told him that, but it was time Blake realized that he'd been dominating their lives with his physical condition.

He sighed. "All right, I believe you. But just in case you start thinking how attractive Richard is, let me tell you now that the one thing I won't tolerate is for Serena to be hurt."
"She's a big girl, Blake. You can't run interference for her for the rest of her life."
"I can do it as long as she needs me, and as long as I'm able. When I think of how she was after our mother died… I swear, Dee, I think I'd kill to keep her from ever looking like that again."
At least she'd had a mother who loved her. The words were on Dione's lips, but she bit them back. It wasn't Serena's fault that Dione's mother hadn't been loving. Her burden of bitterness was her own, not something to be loaded onto someone else's shoulders.
She pushed it away. "Do you think he really is seeing someone else? In a way, I can't see it. He's so besotted with Serena that no one else registers."
"*You* register with him," Blake insisted.
"He's never said anything to me," Dione replied honestly, though she was still stretching the truth a little. "How do you know? Male intuition?"
"If you want to call it that," he murmured, leaning back against her as he tired. Her soft breasts supported his weight. "I'm still a man, even if I couldn't chase a turtle and catch it. I can look at you and see the same thing he sees. You're so damned beautiful, so soft and strong at the same time. If I could chase you, lady, you'd have the race of your life."
The soft words alarmed her in a way that was different from the panic she normally felt when faced with a prowling, hunting male. Her hands were still on his shoulders, and his weight was resting on her; his body was as familiar to her as her own, the texture of his skin, even the smell of him. It was as if he were a part of her, because she was building him, remaking him, shaping him into the gorgeous man he'd been before the accident. He was her creation.
She suddenly wanted to rest her cheek on his shaggy head, feel the silky texture of his hair. Instead she denied the impulse, because it was so foreign to her. Yet his head beckoned, and she moved her hand from his shoulder to touch the dark strands.
"You're beginning to look like a sheepdog," she told him, her voice a little breathless and tinged with the laughter that they shared so often now.
"Then cut it for me," he said lazily, letting his head find a comfortable position on her shoulder.

"You'd trust me to cut your hair?" she asked, startled.
"Of course. If I can trust you with my body, why not my hair?" he reasoned.
"Then let's do it now," she said, slapping his shoulder. "I'd like to see if you have ears. Come on, get off me."
A shudder rippled down him, and he turned his eyes to her, eyes as blue as the deepest sea, and as primal. She knew what he was thinking, but she turned her gaze away and refused to let the moment linger.
A nameless intimacy had enfolded them. She was jittery, yet she couldn't say that she was really frightened. It was… *odd*, and her forehead was furrowed with a pensive frown as she plied the scissors on his thick hair. He was a patient, and she'd learned not to be afraid of her patients. He'd gotten closer to her than she'd ever allowed anyone else to get, even the children who had tugged the most strongly at her heartstrings. He was the challenge of her career; he'd become so much to her, but he was still a man, and she couldn't understand why she didn't get that icy, sick feeling she normally got when a man got close to her. Blake could touch her, and she couldn't tolerate the touch of any other man.
Perhaps, she decided, it was because she knew that she was safe with him. As he'd pointed out, he wasn't in any condition to do any chasing. Sexually, he was as harmless as the children she'd hugged and comforted.
"You look like Michelangelo, agonizing over the final touches to a statue," he said provokingly. "Have you cut a big gap in my hair?"
"Of course not!" she protested, running her fingers through the unruly pelt. "I'm a very good barber, for your information. Would you like a mirror?"
He sighed blissfully. "No, I trust you. You can shave me now."
"Like heck I will!" With mock wrath she practically slapped the loose hair off his shoulders. "It's time for your session on the rack, so stop trying to stall!"
In the days that followed nothing else was said about the situation between Serena and Richard, and though the couple continued to have dinner with Blake and Dione, the coolness between them was obvious. Richard treated Dione with a warmth that never progressed beyond friendliness, though Dione was certain that Serena wasn't convinced that the situation between them was innocent. Blake watched everything with an eagle eye and kept Dione close by his side.
She understood his reasons for doing so, and as it suited her to be with him, she let him be as demanding of her company as he wanted. She liked being

with him. As he grew stronger his rather devilish personality was coming out, and it took all her concentration to stay one step ahead of him. She had to play poker with him; she had to play chess with him; she had to watch football games with him. There were a million and one things that took his interest, and he demanded that she share them all. It was as if he'd been in a coma for two years and had come out of it determined to catch up on everything he'd missed.

He pushed himself harder than she ever would have. Because she could lift more weight than he could, he worked for hours with the weights. Because she could swim longer and faster than he could, he pushed himself to do lap after lap, though he still couldn't use his legs. And every week they had a rematch at arm wrestling. It was their fifth match before he finally defeated her, and he was so jubilant that she let him have blueberry waffles for breakfast.

Still, she was nervous when she decided that it was time for him to begin using his legs. This was the crux of the entire program. If he couldn't see some progress now in his legs, she knew that he'd lose hope and sink into depression again.

She didn't tell him what she had planned. After he'd done his sets on the weight bench she got him back into the wheelchair and guided the chair over to the parallel bars that he would use to support himself while she reeducated his legs in what they were expected to do. He looked at the bars, then at her, his trows lifted in question.

"It's time for you to stop being so lazy," she said as casually as possible, though her heart was pounding so loudly it was a miracle he couldn't hear it. "On your feet."

He swallowed, his eyes moving from her to the bars, then back to her. "This is it, huh? D day."

"That's right. It's no big deal. Just stand. No trying to walk. Let your legs get accustomed to holding your weight."

He set his jaw and reached out for the bars. Bracing his hands on them, he pulled himself out of the wheelchair.

The weight lifting came in handy as he pulled himself up, using only the strength in his shoulders and arms. Watching him, Dione noted the way his muscles bunched and played. He had real muscles now, not just skin over bone. He was still thin, too thin, but no longer did he have the physique of a

famine victim. Even his legs had responded to the forced exercises she gave him every day by forming a layer of muscle.
He was pale, and sweat dripped down his face as Dione positioned his feet firmly under him. "Now," she said softly, "let your weight off your hands. Let your legs hold you. You may fall; don't worry about it. Everyone falls when he reaches this phase of therapy." ,
"I won't fall," he said grimly, throwing his head back and clenching his teeth. He was balancing himself with his hands, but his weight was on his feet. He groaned aloud. "You didn't say it would hurt!" he protested through his teeth.
Dione's head jerked up, her golden eyes firing with excitement. "Does it hurt?"
"Like hell! Hot needles—"
She let out a whoop of joy and reached for him, drawing back as she remembered his precarious balance. Unbidden, her eyes moistened. She hadn't cried since she was a child, but now she was so proud she was helpless against the tears that formed. Still, she blinked them back, though they shimmered like liquid gold between her black lashes as she offered him a tremulous smile. "You know what that means, don't you?"
"No, what?" he panted.
"That the nerves are working! It's all working! The massages, the exercises, the whirlpool… *your legs*! Don't you understand?" she shrieked, practically jumping up and down.
His head jerked around to her. All the color washed out of his face, leaving his eyes glowing like blue coals. "Say it!" he whispered. "Spell it out!"
"You're going to walk!" she screamed at him. Then she couldn't control the tears any longer and they trickled down her face, blurring her vision. She brushed them away with the back of her hand and gave a watery chuckle. "You're going to walk," she said again.
His face twisted, contorted by an agony of joy; he let go of the bars and reached for her, falling forward as his body pitched off-balance. Dione caught him, wrapping her arms tightly around him, but he was too heavy for her now, and she staggered and went down under his weight. He had both arms arqund her, and he buried his face in her neck. Her heart gave an enormous leap, her blood turned by icy terror into a sluggish river that barely moved. "No," she whispered, her mind suddenly blanking, and her hands moved to his shoulders to push him off.

There was an odd quivering to his shoulders. And there was a sound… it wasn't the same sound of her nightmares.
Then, like someone throwing a light switch and changing a room from dark to light, she knew that this was Blake, not Scott. Scott had hurt her; Blake never would. And the strange sound was the sound of his weeping.
He was crying. He couldn't stop the tears of joy any more than she'd been able to a moment before; the heaving sobs that tore out of him released two long years of torment and despair. "My God," he said brokenly. "My God."
It was like a dam bursting inside her. A lifetime of holding her hurts inside, of having no one to turn to for comfort, no one to hold her while *she* cried, was suddenly too much. A great searing pain in her chest rose into her throat and burst out in a choked, anguished cry.
Her body shuddered with the force of her sobs, and her enormous golden eyes flooded with tears. For the first time in her life she was being held close in someone's arms while she cried, and it was too much. She couldn't bear the bittersweet pain and joy of it, yet at the same time she felt as if something had changed inside her. The simple act of weeping together had torn down the wall that kept her isolated from the rest of the world. She had existed on only a surface level, never letting anything get too close to her, never letting herself feel too deeply, never letting anyone know the woman behind the mask, because the woman had been hurt so badly and feared that it could happen again. She'd developed quite a defense mechanism, but Blake had somehow managed to short circuit it.
He was different from every other man she knew. He was capable of loving; he was at once a laughing daredevil and a hard-hitting businessman. But most of all, he needed her. Other patients had needed her, but only as a therapist. Blake needed *her*, the woman she was, because only her personal strengths had enabled her to help him with her trained skills and knowledge. She couldn't remember anyone ever needing *her* before.
She cuddled him close to her, stunned by the slowly increasing warmth inside her that was gradually melting the frozen pain that had dominated her for so long. She wanted to weep some more, because she was both frightened and excited by her new freedom to touch and be touched. Her hand stroked his hair, her fingers lacing themselves in the silky waves, as his tears finally stopped and he lay sweetly, limply against her.
He lifted his head to look at her. He wasn't ashamed of the tears that wet his face and glittered in his blue eyes. Very gently he rubbed his wet cheek

against hers, a subtle caress that mingled their happiness as well as their tears.

Then he kissed her.

It was a slow, wondering kiss, a gentle touch that sought but didn't pursue, a delicate tasting of her lips that lacked any aggressive, masculine need. She quivered in his arms, her hands automatically moving to his shoulders to shove him away if he progressed beyond the still-guarded borders of intimacy that she could accept. But he didn't try to deepen the kiss. He raised his mouth and instead touched his nose to hers, rolling his head back and forth in a light, brushing movement.

After a long moment he drew back slightly and let his gaze roam over her face with a certain curiosity. Dione couldn't look away from his eyes, watching the irises expand until they had almost swallowed the blue. What was he thinking? What caused that sudden flash of desperation that startled her, the shadow that crossed his face? His eyes lingered on the soft, trembling fullness of her lips, then slowly lifted to meet her gaze and lock in place. They stared at each other, so close that she could see her reflection in his eyes and knew that he could see himself in hers.

"Your eyes are like melted gold," he whispered. "Cat eyes. Do they shine in the dark? A man could get lost in them," he said, his voice suddenly rough.

Dione swallowed; her heart seemed to be rising to stick in her throat. Her hands were still on his shoulders; beneath the warmth of his flesh she could feel the flexing of his muscles as he levered himself up on his elbows, the weight of his body still pressed into hers from the waist down. She shivered, faintly alarmed by their posture, but too bemused by the emotional intimacy quivering between them to push him away.

"You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen," he murmured. "As exotic as Salome, as graceful as a cat, as simple as the wind… and so damned mysterious. What goes on behind those cat eyes? What are you thinking?"

She couldn't answer; instead she shook her head blindly as fresh tears made her eyes glitter. He sucked in his breath, then kissed her again, this time parting her lips and slowly penetrating her mouth with his tongue, giving her the time to decide if she would accept the caress. She was trembling in his arms, afraid to let herself be tempted by the gentle touch, yet she *was* tempted, terribly so. Her tongue moved hesitantly and touched his, withdrew, returned for another shy taste, and finally lingered. He tasted marvelous.

He deepened the kiss, exploring the ridges of her teeth, the softness of her mouth. Dione lay quietly beneath him, unaware of the growing force of his passion until suddenly his mouth turned hard and demanding, asking for more than she could give, reminding her abruptly and with chilling clarity how it had been with Scott—

The black pit of her nightmares loomed before her, and she squirmed under him, but he didn't feel the sudden tension in her body. His hands grasped her with the roughness of desire, and the last thread holding her control snapped.

She tore her mouth from his with a raw cry. "No!" she shrieked, sudden fear giving her strength. She shoved him away with all the considerable power of her arms and legs, and he rolled across the floor, bumping into the wheelchair and sending it flying across the room.

He pulled himself into a sitting position and seared her with a scathing, furious look. "Don't bother screaming," he snapped bitterly. "It's a cinch that nothing's going to happen."

"You can bet on it!" she snapped in return, scrambling to her feet and straightening her blouse and shorts, which had somehow become twisted. "I'm a therapist, not a… a convenience!"

"Your professional integrity is safe," he muttered. "From me, at any rate. You might want to try someone like Richard if you're really serious with your kisses, though I warn you right now, all of his parts are in working order and he might not be so easy to throw off!"

It was evident that his ego had been bruised, because she'd tossed him off so easily; he hadn't even noticed the wild expression that had touched her face. She gave silent thanks, then calmly retrieved the wheelchair and placed it beside him. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself," she said curtly. "We have work to do."

"Sure, lady," he snarled. "Anything you say. You're the therapist."

He pushed himself so hard for the rest of the day that Dione had to lose her temper with him that afternoon to make him stop. He was in the foulest mood she'd ever seen him in, surly and bleak. Even Serena was unable to coax him into a better mood that night over dinner, and he excused himself shortly afterward, muttering that he was tired and going to bed.

Serena's brows lifted, but she didn't protest. Richard got to his feet and said, "Let's go into the study for a minute, Blake. There are some things that I need to talk over with you; it won't take long."

Blake nodded briefly, and the two men left the room. Silence fell between Dione and Serena, who had never had much to say to each other.
Serena was apparently engrossed with the strappy white sandal she was dangling from her toes. Without looking up from it, she asked casually, "What's wrong with Blake tonight? He's like a hornet."
Dione shrugged. She wasn't about to tell Serena about the kisses that day, or the reason for Blake's ill humor. Instead she passed along the encouraging news that Blake, for some reason, hadn't. "He stood today. I don't know why he's so grouchy; he should be on top of the world."
. Serena's eyes lighted up, and her pretty face glowed. "He stood?" she cried, dropping the sandal to the floor and sitting upright. "He actually stood?"
"He had his weight on his legs, yes, and he could feel it," Dione clarified.
"But that's wonderful! Why didn't he tell me?"
Again Dione shrugged.
Serena made a rueful face. "I know; you think I make too much of a fuss over him. I do; I admit it. I… I'm sorry for my attitude when you first came. I didn't think you'd be able to help him, and I didn't want him to get his hopes up, only to be disappointed again. But even if he doesn't walk again, I can see that therapy has been good for him. He's gained weight; he's looking so healthy again."
Surprised by the apology, Dione didn't know what to say beyond the conventional disclaimer, "That's all right."
"No, it isn't all right. Richard's barely speaking to me, and I can't say that I blame him. I've treated him like the invisible man for the two years since Blake had the accident. God knows how he's been as patient as he has. But now I can't get close to him again, and it's all my fault. Still, I'm irrational where Blake's concerned. He's my security, my home base."
"Perhaps Richard wants that distinction," Dione murmured, not really wanting to get into a discussion of Serena's marital problems. She hadn't forgotten that Serena thought Richard might be seeing another woman, namely herself, and she didn't think that involving herself with them would be smart. She liked Richard enormously, and Serena had behaved remarkably well since their bad beginning, but still, she felt uneasy discussing Richard as if she knew him a lot better than she actually did.
"Oh, I know he does! The trouble is, Blake's such a hard act for any man to follow. He was the perfect older brother," she sighed. "Strong, affectionate,

understanding. When Mother died he became my rock. Sometimes I think that if anything happened to Blake, I'd die on the spot."
"Not a very considerate thing to do," Dione commented, and Serena looked at her sharply before giving a laugh.
"No, it wouldn't be, would it?"
"I've been jealous of you," Serena continued after a moment, when Dione showed no signs of picking up the conversational threads. "I'd been with Blake almost constantly since the accident; then you practically forbade me to come over except at a time *you* decided would be all right. I was livid! And almost from the beginning, Blake has been engrossed with his therapy, which has taken his attention away from me even when I am with him. He was so close to you, so obviously taken with you; you could get him to do all the things the other therapists couldn't even get him to think about."
Dione shifted uncomfortably, afraid that Serena was going to start talking about Richard. It looked as if there was nothing she could do to prevent it, so she decided she might as well hold up her end of the conversation. Lifting her head, she turned somber golden eyes on the other woman.
"I knew you felt that way. I regretted it, but there was nothing I could do about it. Blake had to come first; you were interfering, and I couldn't let you do that."
Serena arched her dark brows in a manner so like Blake's that Dione stared at her, taken by their similarities. "You were entirely right," Serena said firmly. "You were doing what you were supposed to do. It took about two weeks before I began to see the difference in Blake, and then I had to admit that I was resenting you on *my* behalf, not his. If I really loved Blake, then I had to stop acting like a spoiled brat. I'm sorry, Dione; I'd really like to be friends with you."
Dione was startled again; she wondered briefly if Serena's apology had any ulterior motive, but decided to take the younger woman at face value. When all was said and done, she herself was there only temporarily, so anything Serena said wouldn't affect Dione beyond the moment. Lifelong friendships didn't come Dione's way, because she'd learned not to let anyone get too close to her. Even Blake—however close they might be right now, no matter how well she knew him or how much he knew about her—when this was all over, she would be gone and very probably never see him again. She didn't make a habit of keeping in touch with her ex-patients, though she did sometimes receive cards from some of them at Christmas.

"If you'd like," she told Serena calmly. "An apology really wasn't necessary."
"It was for *me*," Serena insisted, and perhaps it had been. She was Blake's sister, and very like him. Blake didn't back down from anything unpleasant, either.
Dione was tired after the emotional impact of the day, and she didn't look in on Blake before she went to bed. The mood he'd been in, he was probably lying awake waiting for her to stick her head in so he could bite it off. Whatever was bothering him, she'd worry about it in the morning. She fell into a deep sleep, untroubled by dreams:
When she was jerked awake by her name being called, she had the feeling that the sound had been repeated several times before it penetrated her sleep. She scrambled out of bed as it came again. "Dione!"
It was Blake, and from the hoarse strain in his voice, he was in pain. She ran to his room and approached the bed. He was writhing, trying to sit up. What was wrong with him? "Tell me," she said insistently, her hands on his bare shoulders, easing him back.
"Cramps," he groaned.
Of course! She should have realized! He'd pushed himself far too hard that day, and now he was paying the price. She ran her hands down his legs and found the knotted muscles. Without a word she got on the bed with him and began to knead the cramps away, her strong fingers working efficiently. First one leg relaxed, then the other, and he sighed in relief. She kept massaging his calves, knowing that a cramp could return. His flesh was warm under her fingers now, the skin roughened by the hair on his legs. She pushed the legs of his pajamas up over his knees and continued with her massage. Perhaps he would go back to sleep under the soothing touch…
Abruptly he sat up and thrust her hands away from his legs. "That's enough," he said curtly. "I don't know what kind of a thrill you get out of handling cripples, but you can play with someone else's legs. You might try Richard; I'm sure he could do you more good than I can."
Dione sat there astonished, her mouth open. How could he *dare* to say something like that? She'd pulled her nightgown up to give her legs more freedom of movement when she'd climbed on his bed, and now she thrust the cloth down to cover her long legs. "You need slapping," she said, her voice shaking with anger. "Damn it, what's wrong with you? You know I'm

not seeing Richard, and I'm sick of your throwing him up to me! *You* called *me*, remember? I didn't sneak in here to take advantage of you."
"You'd have a hard time doing that," he sneered.
"You're pretty sure of yourself since you've gotten stronger, aren't you?" she said sarcastically. It made her doubly angry that he'd act like that after what they'd shared earlier. He'd kissed her. Of course, he couldn't possibly know that he was the only man to have touched her since she was eighteen, which had been twelve years before, but still… the injustice of it made her get to her knees on the bed, leaning forward as she jabbed a finger at him.
"You listen to me, Mr. Grouch Remington! I've been driving myself into the ground trying to help you, and you've fought me every step of the way! I don't know what's eating you and I don't care, but I won't let it interfere with your therapy. If I think your legs need massaging, then I'll do it, if I have to tie you down first! Am I getting through that hard head of yours?"
"Who do you think you are? God?" he roared, his face darkening so much that she could see it even in the dim light that came through his windows. "What do you know about what *I* want, what *I* need? All you think about is that damned program you've mapped out. There are other things that I need, and if I can't—"
He stopped, turning his head away. Dione waited for him to continue, and when he didn't she prompted, "If you can't… what?"
"Nothing," he muttered sullenly.
"Blake!" she said in utter exasperation, reaching out and grasping his shoulders and shaking him. "What?"
He shrugged away from her grip and lay back down, his expression bleak as he turned his face back to the windows. "I thought that learning to walk again would be the answer," he whispered. "But it's not. My God, woman, you've been around me for weeks now, running around in almost nothing sometimes, and those see-through nightgowns of yours the rest of the time. Haven't you noticed yet that I can't…"
When his voice trailed off again Dione thought she'd explode. "Can't what?" she tried again, forcibly keeping her tone level.
"I'm impotent," he said, his voice so low that she had to lean closer to hear him.
She sat back on her heels, stunned.
Once he'd said the words aloud, the rest poured out of him in a torrent, as if he couldn't control it. "I didn't think about it before, because what was there

to arouse me? It didn't matter, if I couldn't walk, but now I find that there's an opposite side to the coin. If I can't live life as a man instead of a sexless gelding, then it doesn't matter if I walk or not."
Dione's mind went blank. She was a physical therapist, not a sex therapist. It was ironic that he should even mention the subject to *her*, of all people. She was in the same boat he was in; perhaps she'd sensed that from the beginning, and that was why she hadn't been frightened of him.
But she couldn't let this prey on his mind, or he'd give up. Desperately she tried to think of something to tell him.
"I don't see why you'd even think you should be aroused by me," she blurted. "I'm a therapist; it's totally unethical for there to be any sort of relationship except a professional one between us. I certainly haven't been trying to seduce you, or even interest you! You shouldn't think of me like that! I… I'm more of a mother figure than I am anything else, so I'd think it was odd if you responded physically to me."
"You *don't* remind me of my mother," he said heavily.
Again she searched for something to say. "Did you really expect all of your capabilities to return immediately, just because you put your weight on your legs today?" she finally asked. "I would've been surprised if you had been… er, responding like that. You've had a lot on your mind, and you've been in terrible physical shape."
"I'm not in terrible physical shape now," he pointed out tiredly.
No, he wasn't. Dione considered him as he lay there, wearing only the bottoms of his pajamas. He'd started leaving off the tops several weeks ago. He was still lean, but now it was the leanness of a hard layer of muscle. Even his legs had fleshed out some as he gained weight, and thanks to the rigorous program he'd been following, he even had muscles in his legs, despite his inability to command movement from them yet. He was a natural athlete anyway, and his body had responded promptly to the training. His arms and shoulders and chest were showing the benefits of weight lifting, and the hours in the pool had given his skin a glowing bronze color. He looked incredibly healthy, all things considered.
What could she say? She couldn't reassure him that his mind and body would recover and let him respond normally, because recovery hadn't happened yet for her. She couldn't even say that she wanted to "recover." Perhaps she missed out on a great deal of human warmth by living the way she did, but she also avoided the pain of human cruelty. Until the accident,

Blake had led a charmed life. He had loved, and been loved, by more women than he could probably remember. To him, life wasn't complete without sex. To her, life was much safer without it. How could she even begin to convince him of something she didn't believe in herself?

At last she said cautiously, "You're better, yes, but you're not in top physical condition yet. The body is a series of complementary systems; when any part of it is hurt, all the systems cooperate in helping to speed healing. With the therapy program you've been following, you've focused your mind and body on retraining your muscles. It's part of the recovery process, and until you've progressed enough that such intense concentration isn't needed, I think you're being unrealistic to expect any sexual responses. Let things happen in their own time." After considering him for another minute, she tilted her head sideways. "I estimate that you're at about sixty-five percent of your normal strength. You're expecting too much."

"I'm expecting what any normal man expects in his life," Blake said harshly. "You were bubbling over with self-confidence when you promised me that I'd walk again, but you're not sure about this, are you?"

"I'm not a sex therapist," she snapped. "But I do have common sense, and I'm trying to use it. There's no physical reason why you shouldn't be able to have sex, so I'd advise you to stop worrying about it and concentrate on walking. Nature will take care of everything else."

"Stop worrying!" he muttered under his breath. "Lady, it's not the weather we're talking about! If I can't function as a man, what's the use in living? I'm not talking about just sex; there'd be no marriage for me, no children, and while I've never wanted to marry anyone yet, I've always thought that I'd like to have a family someday. Can't you understand that? Haven't you ever wanted a husband, children?"

Dione winced, physically shrinking away from him. He had an uncanny knack of hitting her where she was most vulnerable. Before she could stop herself, she blurted out thickly, "I've always wanted children. And I *was* married. It just didn't work out."

His chest rose and fell as he drew in a deep breath, and she could feel his gaze searching her face in the darkness. Surely he couldn't see anything more than an outline, since she was sitting out of the dim light coming through the windows, so why did she feel as if he could tell exactly how her lower lip was trembling, or see the sudden pallor of her cheeks?

"Damn," he said softly. "I've done it again, haven't I? Every time I say something, I stick my foot in my mouth."
She shrugged, trying not to let him know how thin her armor was. "It's all right," she murmured. "It was a long time ago. I was just a kid, too young to know what I was doing."
"How old were you?"
"Eighteen. Scott—my ex-husband—was twenty-three, but neither of us was ready for marriage."
"How long did it last?"
A harsh laugh tore from her throat. "Three months. Not a record-setting length of time, was it?"
"And since then? Haven't you been in love with anyone else?"
"No, and I haven't wanted to be. I'm content the way I am." The conversation had gone on long enough; she didn't want to reveal any more than she already had. How did he keep chipping away at the wall she'd built around her past? Most people never even realized it was there. She uncoiled her legs and crawled off the bed, tugging her nightgown down when it tried to crawl up to her hips.
Blake said a harsh expletive. "You're running, Dee. Do you realize how long you've been here without receiving a single phone call or a letter, without even going shopping? You've sealed yourself in this house with me and shut the world out. Don't you have any friends, any boyfriends on a string? What is it out there that you're afraid of?"
"There's nothing out there that frightens me," she said quietly, and it was true. All of her terrors were locked within herself, frozen in time.
"I think everything out there frightens you," he said, stretching out his arm and snapping on the bedside lamp. The soft glow drove away the shadows and illuminated her as she stood there in her white gown with her long, black hair streaming down her back. She looked medieval, locked away in a fortress of her own making. His blue eyes seared over her as he said softly, "You're afraid of life, so you don't let anything touch you. You need therapy as much as I do; my muscles won't work, but you're the one who doesn't feel."

Chapter Six

She didn't sleep that night; she lay awake, feeling the seconds and minutes ticking away, becoming hours. He was right; she was afraid of life, because life had taught her that she would be punished if she asked for too much. She had learned not to ask for anything at all, thereby risking nothing. She had denied herself friends, family, even the basic comfort of her own home, all because she was afraid to risk being hurt again.

It wasn't in her character to deny the truth, so she looked it in the face. Her mother wasn't a typical example of motherhood; her husband hadn't been a typical husband. Both of them had hurt her, but she shouldn't shut everyone else out because of them. Serena had made an overture of friendship, but Dione had backed away from it, doubting the other woman's motives. Those doubts were just an excuse for her own instinctive reaction to withdraw whenever anyone got too close to her. She had to take risks, or her life would be just a mockery, no matter how many patients she helped. She needed help just as much as Blake did.

But facing the truth and dealing with it were two very different things. Just the thought of lowering her defenses and letting anyone get close to her gave her a sick feeling. Even the little things were more than she had ever had, and more than she could handle. She'd never giggled with a girl friend far into the night, never gone to a party, never learned *how* to be with people in the normal manner. She'd had her back to the wall for her entire life, and self-protection was more than a habit: It was a part of her, branded into her cells.

Perhaps she was beyond changing; perhaps the bitter horror of her childhood had altered her psyche so drastically that she'd never be able to rise above the murky pit of her memories. For a moment she had a vision of her future, long and bleak and solitary, and a dry sob wrenched at her insides. But she didn't cry, though her eyes burned until her lids felt scorched. Why waste tears on years that stretched away emptily for as far as she could see? She was used to being alone, and at least she had her work. She could touch people through her work, giving them hope, helping them; perhaps it wasn't enough, but surely it was better than the sure destruction that awaited her if she allowed someone to hurt her again.

Suddenly a memory of Scott flashed into her mind and she almost cried out, her hands rising in the dark to push him away. The sickness in her changed to pure nausea, and she had to swallow convulsively to control it. For a moment she wavered on the edge of a black abyss, memories rising like

bats from a rancid cave to dart at her; then she clenched her teeth on the wild cry that was welling up in her and reached out a trembling hand to turn on the lamp. The light drove away the horrors, and she lay staring at the shadows.

To combat the memories she deliberately pushed them aside and called up Blake's face as a sort of talisman against the evils of the past. She saw his blue eyes, burning with despair, and her breath caught. Why was she lying there worrying about herself, when Blake was teetering on the edge of his own abyss? *Blake* was the important one, not her! If he lost interest now, it would wreck his recovery.

She'd trained herself for years to push her personal interests and problems aside and concentrate entirely on her patient. Her patients had reaped the benefits, and the process had become a part of her inner defenses when things threatened to become too much for her. She used it now, ruthlessly locking out all thoughts except those of Blake, staring at the ceiling so intently that her gaze should have burned a hole in it.

On the surface the problem seemed to be simple: Blake needed to know that he could still respond to a woman, still make love. She didn't know why he couldn't now, unless it was because of the common-sense reasons she'd given him just a few hours before. If that were the case, as his health improved and he gained strength, his sexual interest would reawaken naturally, if he had someone to interest him.

That was a problem. Dione chewed on her lower lip. Blake obviously wasn't going to start dating now; his pride wouldn't allow him to be helped in and out of cars and restaurants, even if Dione would allow him to disrupt his schedule so drastically, which was out of the question. No, he *had* to stay in therapy, and they were just now getting into the toughest part of it, which would require more time and effort, and pain, from him.

There simply was a shortage of available women in his life right now, a necessary shortage, but there nevertheless. Besides Serena, Alberta and Angela, there was only herself, and she automatically discounted herself. How could she attract anyone? If any man made a move toward her, she reacted like a scalded cat, which wasn't a good start.

A frown laced her brows together. That was true with all men… except Blake. Blake touched her, and she wasn't frightened. She had wrestled with him, romped on the floor with him… kissed him.

The idea that bloomed was, for her, so radical that when it first entered her consciousness she dismissed it, only to have it return again and again, boomer-anging in her mind. Blake needed help, and she was the only woman available to help him. If she could attract him…

A shudder rose from her toes and flowed upward to shake her entire body, but it wasn't from revulsion or fear, except perhaps fear at her own daring. Could she do it? How could she do it? How could she possibly manage such a thing? It wouldn't do Blake any good if he made a pass at her and she ran screaming from the room. She didn't think she would do that with him, but just the thought of trying to attract a man was so foreign to her that she couldn't be sure. Could she tempt him enough to prove to him that he was a man?

She couldn't let the situation progress into anything concrete; she knew that not only was it something she wasn't ready for, but an affair with a patient was totally against her professional integrity.

Besides, she wasn't Blake's type, so there was little chance of anything serious happening. She tried to decide if he would find her so lacking in expertise that she wouldn't appeal to him at all, or if his isolation for the past two years would blind him to her inexperience. He was fast leaving behind his morose preoccupation with his invalidism, and she knew that she wouldn't be able to fool him for long. Every day he became more himself—the man in the photo that Richard had shown her, with a biting intellect and a driving nature that swept everyone along with him like the force of a tidal wave.

Could she do it?

She trembled at the thought, but she was so shaken by what he'd said that night that she didn't push the idea away as she would have before. For the first time in her life Dione decided to try to attract a man. It had been so long since she'd cut herself off from sexual contact with anyone that she had no idea if she could do it without looking obvious and silly. She was thirty years old, and she felt as inexperienced and awkward as any young girl just entering her teens. Her brief marriage to Scott didn't count at all; far from trying to attract Scott, after her wedding night she'd gone out of her way to avoid him. Blake was a mature, sophisticated man, used to having any woman he wanted before the accident had robbed him of the use of his legs. Her only advantage was that she was the only available woman in his life right then.

She just didn't know how to arouse a man.
That unusual problem, one she'd never thought she'd face, was the reason she was standing hesitantly before the mirror the next morning, long past the time when she usually woke Blake. She hadn't even dressed; she was staring at herself in the mirror, chewing on her lower lip and frowning. She knew that men usually liked the way she looked, but were looks enough? She wasn't even blond, as Blake preferred his women to be. Her thick black hair swirled over her shoulders and down her back; she'd been about to braid it out of her way when she'd paused, staring at herself, and she still held the brush in her hand, forgotten, as she intensely surveyed the ripe figure of the woman in the mirror. Her breasts were full and firm, tipped with cherry nipples, but perhaps she was too bosomy for his tastes. Perhaps she was too athletic, too strong; perhaps he liked dainty, ultrafeminine women.
She groaned aloud, twisting around to study herself from the back. So many ifs! Maybe he was a leg man; she had nice legs, long and graceful, smoothly tanned. Or maybe… Her bottom, covered only by wispy, pink silk, was curvy and definitely feminine.
Her clothes were another problem. Her everyday wardrobe consisted mostly of things that were comfortable to work in: jeans, shorts, T-shirts. They were neat and practical, but not enticing. She did have good clothes, but nothing that could be worn while working and be practical, too. Her dresses weren't sexy, either, and her nightgowns were straight out of a convent, despite Blake's comment about her "running around in see-through nighties." She needed new clothes, things that were sexy but not transparently so, and definitely a real see-through nightie.
She was so preoccupied that she hadn't heard the sounds of Blake in his bedroom; when his rumbling, early-morning voice broke into her thoughts with an ill-tempered, "Lazybones, you overslept this morning!" she whirled to face the door as it swung open and Blake rolled his wheelchair through the doorway.
They both froze. Dione couldn't even raise her arms to cover her bare breasts; she was stunned by the shock of his entrance, so lost in her thoughts that she was unable to jerk herself back to reality and take any action. Neither did Blake appear capable of moving, though good manners demanded that he leave the room. He didn't; he sat there with his blue eyes

becoming even bluer, a dark, stormy expression heating his gaze as it raked down her almost naked body, then rose to linger over her breasts.
"Good Lord," he whispered.
Dione's mouth was dry, her tongue incapable of moving. Blake's intent look was as warm as a physical touch, and her nipples shrank into tiny points, thrusting out at him. He sucked in an audible breath, then slowly let his eyes dip lower, down the curve of her ribcage, the satiny smoothness of her stomach; his gaze probed the taut little indentation of her navel and finally settled on the juncture of her thighs.
An unfamiliar curling sensation low in her stomach frightened her, and she was finally able to move. She whirled away from him with a low cry, belatedly raising her arms to cover herself. Standing rigidly with her back to him, she said in a voice filled with mortification, "Oh, no! Please, get out!"
There was no obedient whirr of an electric motor as he sent the wheelchair into motion, and she knew that he was still sitting there.
"I've never seen anyone blush all over before," he said, his voice deep and filled with an almost tangible male amusement. "Even the backs of your knees are pink."
"Get out!" she cried in a strangled voice.
"Why are you so embarrassed?" he murmured. "You're beautiful. A body like that just begs for a man to stare at it."
"Would you please just leave?" she begged. "I can't stand here like this all day!"
"Don't hurry on my account," he replied with maddening satisfaction. "I like the back view as well as I did the front. It's a work of art, the way those long legs of yours sweep up into that perfect bottom. Is your skin as satiny as it looks?"
Embarrassment finally turned to anger and she stomped her foot, although it was largely a wasted effort, as the thick carpet muffled any sound her bare foot might have made. "Blake Remington, I'll get back at you for this!" she threatened, her voice trembling with anger.
He laughed, the deep tone vibrating in the quiet morning air. "Don't be such a sexist," he taunted. "You've seen me in only a pair of undershorts, so why be shy about my seeing you wearing only panties? You don't have anything to be ashamed of, but you have to know that already."
He evidently wasn't going to leave; he was probably enjoying himself, the wretch! She sidled around until she could reach her nightgown, where she

had thrown it across the bed. She was careful to keep her back to him, and she was so fiercely preoccupied with reaching that nightgown that she didn't hear the soft whirr of the wheelchair as it came up behind her. Just as she touched the nightgown a much larger hand appeared from behind and anchored the garment to the bed.

"You're beautiful when you're angry," he jibed, returning the teasing compliment she'd given him the day he'd become enraged when he had discovered that she lifted weights.

"Then I must be the world's most beautiful woman right now," she fumed, then added, "because I'm getting madder by the minute."

"Don't waste your energy," he crooned, and she jumped as his hard hand suddenly swatted her on the bottom, then lingered to mold the round, firm cheek with his long fingers. He finished with an intimate pat, then removed his hand from the nightgown.

"I'll be waiting for you at breakfast," he said smoothly, and she heard him chuckling as he left the room.

She wadded up the nightgown and threw it at the closed door. Her face felt as if it were on fire, and she pressed her cold hands to her cheeks. Furiously she considered ways of paying him back, but she had to stop short of physical harm, and that left out all the most delicious schemes she could imagine. It would probably be impossible to embarrass him in return; since he was in so much better condition now, she doubted if it would bother him if she saw him stark naked. In fact, from the way he'd acted that morning, he'd probably enjoy it and proudly let her look all she wanted!

She was seething, until the thought came to her that her scheme to attract him couldn't have gotten off to a better start. He hadn't been thinking about sex, really; he'd been indulging a streak of pure devilry, but the end result was that he'd become aware of her as a woman. There was the added advantage of the entire scene being totally spontaneous, without any of the stiffness that would probably result from any effort she deliberately made. That thought enabled her to get through the day, which was a difficult one. He watched her like a hawk, waiting for her to betray by either action or word that she was still embarrassed by the morning's incident. She was as cool and impersonal as she knew how to be, deliberately working him as hard as her conscience would allow. He spent more time than the day before at the bars, balancing himself with his hands while his legs bore his weight. He kept up a continuous stream of cursing at the pain he endured, but he

didn't want to stop, even when she decided to go on to other exercises. She moved his feet in the first walking motions they'd made in two years; sweat poured off of him at the pain in his muscles, unaccustomed to such activity. That night the cramps in his legs kept him awake for hours, and Dione massaged him until she was so weary she could hardly move. There were no intimate discussions in the dark that night; he was in pain, barely getting relaxed after one cramp was relieved before another one would knot in his legs. Finally she took him down and put him in the whirlpool, which relieved the cramps for the night.

She really did oversleep the next morning, but she had been careful to lock her door before she went to bed, so she wasn't afraid of an interruption. When she did wake, she lay there with a smile on her face as she relished how he would react to the interruption in his routine that she planned.

Over breakfast she said casually, "May I borrow one of your cars? I need to do some shopping today."

Startled, he looked up; his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Are you doing this because of what I said the other night?"

"No, of course not," she lied with admirable ease.

"I do need some things, though. I'm not much on shopping, but like every woman I have necessities."

"Do you know anything about Phoenix?" he asked, reaching for the glass of milk that he now drank without protest at every meal.

"Nothing," she admitted cheerfully.

"Do you even know how to get downtown?"

"No, but I can follow signs and directions."

"No need to do that; let me give Serena a call. She loves shopping, and she's been at loose ends lately."

At first the thought of shopping in Serena's company dampened Dione's enthusiasm for her project, but she realized that she would probably need another woman's opinion, so she agreed to his suggestion. Serena did, too; he'd barely mentioned it to her over the phone before he hung up the receiver, a wry smile tugging at his chiseled mouth. "She's on her way."

Then the smile gave way to a sharply searching look. "You didn't seem very enthusiastic," he remarked. "Did you have some other plans?"

What did he mean by that? "No, it's just that I had something else on my mind. I'm glad you thought of asking Serena; I could use her opinion on some things."

The searching look disappeared, to be replaced by one of lively curiosity. "What things?"
"Nothing that concerns you," she replied promptly, knowing that her answer would drive him crazy. He wanted to know the whys and wherefores of everything. He'd probably dismantled every toy he'd received as a child, and now he was trying to do the same thing to her. He probably did it to everyone. It was one of the characteristics that had made him such an innovative engineer.
As she quickly dressed for her shopping trip, she realized that lately Blake had shown signs of becoming more interested in his work again. He talked to Richard on the phone more than he had before, and designing the pulley system at the pool and in the gym had piqued his interest even more. Every night after dinner he made some mysterious doodles on a pad in his study, random drawings that resembled nothing Dione recognized, but Richard had seen the pad one evening and made a comment on it. The two men had then embarked on a highly technical conversation that had lasted until Dione put an end to it by signaling that it was time for Blake to go to bed. Richard had caught the signal and understood it immediately, giving her a quick wink.
The Phoenix heat prompted her to wear the bare minimum of clothing: a white sundress; the necessary underwear, which wasn't much; and strappy sandals. The weeks had slipped away, taking the summer with it, but the changing season wasn't yet reflected by any dip in the temperature. When she went downstairs to meet Serena, Blake gave her a quick, comprehensive look that seemed to take inventory of every garment she had on. Dione shivered at the fleeting expression in his eyes. He knew what she looked like now, and every time he saw her he was imagining her without any clothes. She should probably be glad, as that was what she wanted, but it still made her uneasy.
Serena drove, as Dione knew absolutely nothing about Scottsdale or Phoenix. The pale blue Cadillac slipped as silently as oiled silk past the array of expensive millionaires' homes that decorated Mount Camelback. Overhead, a sparkle of silver in the pure blue of the sky, one of the innumerable jets from the air bases in the Phoenix area, painted a white streak directly above their path.
"Blake said you had shopping to do," Serena said absently. "What sort of shopping? Not that it matters; if it exists, I know a shop that carries it."

Dione gave her a wry glance. "Everything," she admitted. "Dresses, underwear, sleepwear, bathing suits."
Serena arched her slim, dark brows in an astonished movement. "All right," she said slowly. "You asked for it."
By the time they'd had lunch several hours later, Dione firmly believed that Serena knew the location of every shop in Arizona. They had been in so many that she couldn't keep straight just where she had bought what, but that didn't really matter. What mattered was the steadily growing mound of bags and packages, which they made regular trips to the car to stow in the trunk.
Dione systematically tried on dresses that made the most of her dark coloring and tall, leggy build. She bought skirts that were slit up the side to showcase her long, slender legs; she bought real silk hosiery and delicate shoes. The nightgowns she chose were filmy, flimsy pieces of fabric that were held on her body more by optimism than any other means. She bought sexy lace panties and bras, wickedly seductive teddies, shorts and T-shirts that clung to her body, and a couple of bikinis that stopped just short of illegal.
Serena watched all of this in amazed silence, offering her opinion whenever Dione asked it, which was often. Dione couldn't quite decide if a garment was sexy without being blatant, so she yielded to Serena's taste. It was Serena who chose the bikinis, one a delicate shell pink and the other a vibrant blue, both of which glowed like jewels on Dione's honey-tanned body.
"You know," Serena mused as she watched Dione choose a skin-toned teddy that, from a distance, made her look as if she had nothing on at all, "this looks like war."
Dione was feeling a little frantic and out of touch by that time, and she merely gave Serena a blank look.
"I could almost pity Blake for being the target of such firepower," the other woman continued, laughing a little. "Almost, but not quite. From the effort you're making, Dione, I think you're out for unconditional surrender. Are you in love with Blake?"
That got Dione's attention with the force of a punch in the jaw. In love? Of course not! It was impossible. Blake was her patient;- falling in love with him would be against every professional ethic that she had. Not only that, how could she be in love with him? Couldn't Serena see that it was totally

out of the question? she wondered distractedly. It was just that Blake's was such a demanding case. She'd rebuilt him almost literally, molded him from a basket case into a strong, healthy man; she couldn't let him give up now, couldn't let all of that sweat and effort go to waste.
But suddenly, seeing through Serena's eyes the staggering amount of clothing she'd bought in one day, she realized what a hopeless effort it was. How could she ever have imagined that she'd be able to physically attract Blake Remington? Not only did she not know how to do it, but she'd probably go into screaming hysterics if she succeeded!
She sagged into a chair, crumpling the flesh-colored teddy in her lap. "It's no use," she muttered. "It'll never work."
Serena eyed the teddy. "If he's human, it will."
"All of these props are useless, if the actors can't perform," Dione said in self-disgust. "I don't know how to seduce anyone, least of all a man who's been around as much as Blake has!"
Serena's eyes widened. "Are you serious? The way you look, you don't *have* to seduce anyone; all you have to do is stand still and let him get to you."
"Thanks for the pep talk, but it's not that easy," Dione hedged, unable to tell Blake's sister the entire story. "Some men like my looks, but I know that Blake's always preferred blondes. I'm not his type at all."
"How you can look in a mirror and still worry about not being blond is more than I can understand," Serena said impatiently. "You're… sultry. That's the only word I can think of to describe the way you look. If he hasn't made a pass at you yet, it's because you haven't given him a go-ahead signal. Those clothes will do it for you. Then just let things develop naturally."
If only they would! Dione thought as she paid for the teddy and a bottle of heady perfume that the saleswoman had sworn drove her husband mad with lust.
She didn't want Blake mad with lust, just aroused. What a dilemma for her to be in! Life was just full of little ironies, but she couldn't find this one very amusing.
Blake wasn't in evidence when they arrived back at the house, and Dione could only be thankful for that. She didn't want him to have any idea of the extent of her shopping trip. Angela silently helped Dione and Serena carry all the packages up to Dione's room, and when asked about Blake's

whereabouts, the woman smiled shyly and murmured, "In the gym," before quickly walking out.
Serena gave a little laugh after Angela had left the room. "She's something, isn't she? I think Blake picked his entire staff on the basis of how much they talk, or rather, don't talk." Before Dione could make any comment, Serena changed the subject. "Do you mind if I stay for dinner? I know you probably want to start your campaign, but Richard told me this morning that he'd be late coming home tonight, and I'm at loose ends."
Far from being anxious to begin her "campaign," Dione was dreading it, and gladly asked Serena to stay. As she usually had dinner with them, Blake might think something was odd if all of a sudden she stopped the practice.
While Serena went to the den to entertain herself, Dione made her way down to the pool and entered the gym. She stopped abruptly. Blake was on the bars, balancing himself with his hands, while Alberta was on her knees, moving his feet in walking motions. From the looks of him, he'd been hard at it since she'd left with Serena that morning, and poor Alberta was frazzled, too. Blake wore only a brief pair of blue gym shorts, and he'd tied his shirt around his forehead to keep the sweat from getting into his eyes. He was literally dripping as he strained, trying to force his muscles to do his bidding. Dione knew that he had to be in a great deal of pain; it was revealed in the rigid set of his jaw, his white lips. The fact that he'd enlisted Alberta's help instead of waiting for her to return said something about his determination, but she was afraid that he'd tried to do too much. He'd paid for his excesses the night before with agonizing cramps, and she had the feeling that tonight would be a repeat.
"Time for the whirlpool," she said easily, trying not to sound anxious. Alberta looked up with an expression of acute relief, and achingly got to her feet. Blake, on the other hand, shook his head.
"Not yet," he muttered. "Another half hour."
Dione signaled to Alberta, who quietly left the room. Taking a towel frm the stack she always kept handy, she went up to him and wiped his face, then his shoulders and chest. "Don't push it so hard," she advised. "Not yet. You can do yourself more harm than good at this stage. Come on, into the whirlpool; give your muscles a rest."
He sagged against the bars, panting, and Dione quickly brought the wheelchair over to him. He levered himself into it; he seldom needed her help moving himself around now, since he was so much stronger. She

switched the whirlpool on and turned around to find that he'd been staring at her bottom as she bent over. Wondering how much she'd exposed in the unaccustomed dress, she flushed pink.
He gave her a wicked little smile, then grasped the pulley and swung himself over the pool, letting himself down expertly in the water. He sighed in relief as the pulsing water eased his tired, strained muscles,
"I didn't expect you to be gone all day," he said, closing his eyes wearily.
"I only shop once a year." She lied without compunction. "When I shop, it's an endurance event."
"Who won, you or Serena?" he asked, smiling as he lay there, his eyes still closed.
"I think Serena did," she groaned, stretching her tight muscles. "Shopping uses an entirely different set of muscles than weight lifting does."
He opened one eye a slit and surveyed her. "Why not join me?" he invited. "As the old saying goes, 'Come on in, the water's fine.'"
It was tempting. She looked at the swirling water, then shook her head regretfully as she thought of the many things that she needed to do. She didn't have time to relax in a whirlpool.
"Not tonight. By the way," she added, changing the subject, "how did you talk Alberta into helping you with your exercises?"
"A mixture of charm and coercion," he replied, grinning a little. His gaze slipped over the bodice of her dress; then he closed his eyes again and gave himself up to the bliss of the whirlpool.
Dione moved around the room, putting everything in place and preparing for the massage she'd give him when he left the whirlpool, but her actions were purely automatic. Their conversation had been casual, even trivial, but she sensed an entirely different mood under the cover of their words. He was looking at her, he was seeing her, as a woman, not a therapist. She was both frightened and exhilarated at her success, because she'd expected it to take much longer before she got his attention. The intent way he stared at her was sending messages that she wasn't trained to interpret. As a therapist, she knew instinctively what her patient needed; as a woman, she was completely in the dark. She wasn't even completely certain that he wasn't staring at her with derision.
"All right, that's enough," he said huskily, breaking her train of thought. "I hope Alberta's not going' to hold a grudge against me, because I'm hungry. Do you think she'll feed me?"

"Serena and I will let you have our scraps," Dione offered generously, earning a wryly appreciative glance from him.
A few minutes later he lay on his stomach on the table with a towel draped over his hips, sighing in contentment as her strong fingers worked their magic on his flesh. He propped his chin on his folded arms, the look on his face both absent and absorbed, a man concentrating on his inner plans.
"How long before I'll be able to walk?" he asked.
Dione continued manipulating his legs as she considered the answer. "Do you mean until you take your first steps, or walk without aid?"
"The first steps."
"I'll take a stab and say six weeks, though that's only a rough guess," she warned him. "Don't hold me to it. You could do it in four or five, or it could be two months. It really depends on how well I've planned your therapy program. If you push too hard and injure yourself, then it'll take longer."
"When will the pain ease?"
"When your muscles are accustomed to your weight and the mechanics of movement. Are your legs still numb?"
"Hell, no," he growled feelingly. "I can tell when you're touching me now. But after those cramps last night, I'm not certain I want to feel."
"The price to pay," she taunted gently, and slapped him on the bottom. "Time to turn over."
"I like that dress," he said when he was lying on his back and could stare at her. Dione didn't glance up, consciously keeping the flexing of her fingers in an unbroken rhythm. When she failed to comment he pushed a little harder. "You've got great legs. I see you every day, dressed in next to nothing, but I hadn't realized how good your legs are until I saw you in a dress."
She quirked one eyebrow. That statement alone verified her suspicion that he hadn't been aware of her as a woman, not really. She half-turned her back to him as she rubbed her hands down the calf of his right leg, hoping that the vigorous massage would lessen any cramps he might have. When the warm touch of his hand rested on her bare thigh, under her skirt, she gave a stifled half scream and jerked up straight.
"Blake!" she yelped, pushing frantically at his hand in an effort to dislodge it from under her dress. "Stop it! What are you doing?"
"You're playing with *my* legs," he retorted calmly. "Turnabout's fair play."

His fingers were between her legs while his thumb was on the outside of her thigh, and she flinched from the feel of his hand as her other leg instinctively pressed against him to halt the upward movement. Her face flushed brightly.
"I like that," he said huskily, his eyes bright. "Your legs are so strong, so sleek. Do you know what you feel like? Cool satin."
She twisted, trying to loosen his grip, and to her dismay his fingers slid even higher. She sucked in a lungful of air and held it, going still, her eyes wide and alarmed as she tried to still the flare of panic in her stomach. Her heart lurched drunkenly in her chest.
"Let me go, please," she whispered, hoping that the trembling of her voice wouldn't be as noticeable if she didn't try to talk loudly.
"All right," he agreed, a little smile moving his lips. Just as she began to sag in relief, he added, "If you'll kiss me."
Now her heart was slamming so wildly that she pressed her hand to her chest in an effort to calm it. "I… just one kiss?"
"I can't say," he drawled, staring at her lips. "Maybe, maybe not. It depends on how well we like it. For God's sake, Dee, I've kissed you before. You won't be violating any sacred vow not to become involved with a patient. A kiss isn't what I'd term an involvement."
Despite her efforts to hold her legs together and trap his wandering hand, he somehow moved a little higher.
"It's only a kiss," he cajoled, holding his left hand out to her. "Don't be shy."
She wasn't shy, she was terrified, but she could still hold on to the thought that Blake wasn't Scott. That alone gave her the courage to lean down and touch her lips to his as lightly, as delicately, as a breath of air. She drew back and stared down at him. His hand remained on her leg.
"You promised," she reminded him.
"That wasn't a kiss," he replied. The expression in his eyes was intent, watchful. "A real kiss is what I want, not a child's kiss. I've been a long time without a woman. I need to feel your tongue on mine."
Weakly she leaned against the table. I can't handle this, she thought wildly, then stiffened as the thought formed in her brain. Of course she could; she could handle anything. She'd already been through the worst that could happen to her. This was just a kiss, that was all…
Though her soft, generous mouth trembled against his, she gave him the intimate kiss he'd requested, and she was startled to feel him begin to shake.

He removed his hand from her leg and placed both arms around her, but he held her without any real force, only a warm sort of nearness that failed to alarm her. The hair on his bare chest was tickling her above the fabric of her sundress; the faintly musky smell of him filled her lungs. She became aware of the warmth of his skin, the roughness of his chin against her smooth skin, the light play of his tongue against hers. Her eyes had been open, but now they slowly closed, and she became lost in a world of sensation, the light only a redness against her lids, her senses of touch and smell intensified by the narrowing of her concentration.

This was what she wanted, she reminded herself dimly. She hadn't thought she would enjoy herself in the process, but the excitement that was beginning to course through her veins brought with it a warmth that could only be pleasure.

"God, you smell good," he breathed, breaking the kiss to nuzzle his face in the soft hollow of her throat. "What perfume is that?"

Giddily she remembered all the perfumes she'd tried. "It's a mixture of everything," she admitted in a bemused tone.

He chuckled and turned his head to claim her mouth again. This time the kiss was deeper, harder, but she didn't protest. Instead she kissed him back as strongly as he kissed her, and he finally fell back onto the table, gasping. "You're taking advantage of a starving man," he groaned, and she gave a spurt of laughter.

"I hope Alberta doesn't feed you anything," she told him, and turned away to hide the color that she knew still tinted her cheeks. She fussed over several insignificant details, but when she turned back he wasn't paying any attention to her. She disciplined her face into smoothness and helped him to dress, but there was a sense of determination about him that bothered her. It nagged at her all during dinner, where Serena entertained Blake with a wholly fictitious tale of their shopping trip.

What was he up to? She'd agonized over her scheme, gone to ridiculous lengths to put it into action, but somehow she still had the feeling that he was the one who was scheming, not her.

Chapter Seven

Dione, may I talk to you? In private, please." Richard's face was tight with strain, and Dione looked at him sharply, wondering at the bitterness that was so evident in his expression. She looked past him to the study door, and he read her mind.
"She's playing chess with Blake," he said heavily, thrusting his hands into his pockets and moving to the doors that opened onto the courtyard.
Dione hesitated only a moment, then followed him. She didn't want anything to be said about her being in his company, but on the other hand, she knew that Richard wasn't going to make a pass at her, and she resented feeling guilty for being friendly to him. Serena had continued her efforts at friendship, and Dione found that she really liked the younger woman; Serena was a lot like Blake, with his directness, his willingness to accept challenges.
Sometimes Dione had the uneasy thought that Serena could check on her more easily under the guise of friendship, but more and more it seemed that the thought came from her own wariness, not any premeditated'action on Serena's part.
"Aren't things going well?" she asked Richard quietly.
He gave a bitter laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. "You know they're not. I don't know why," he said wearily. "I've tried, but it's always in the back of my mind that she'll never love me the way she loves Blake, that I'll never be as important to her as he is, and it makes me almost sick to touch her."
Dione chose her words carefully, picking them like wildflowers. "Some resentment is only natural. I see this constantly, Richard. An accident like this really shakes up everyone connected to the patient. If it's a child who's injured, it can cause resentment between the parents, as well as the other children. In circumstances like these, one person gets the lion's share of the attention, and others don't like it."
"You make me sound so small and petty," he said, one corner of his stern mouth curving upward.
"Not that. Just human." Her voice was full of warmth and compassion, and he stared at her, his eyes moving over her tender face. "It'll get better," she reassured him.
"Soon enough to save my marriage?" he asked heavily. "Sometimes I almost hate her, and it's damned peculiar, because what I'm hating her for is not loving me the way I love her."

"Why make her take all the blame?" Dione probed. "Why not put some of that resentment on Blake? Why not hate him for taking her attention?"
He actually laughed aloud. "Because I'm not in love with him," he chuckled. "I don't care what he does with his attention… unless he hurts you with it."
Shock rippled through her, widening her enormous eyes. In the dimness of twilight they gleamed darkly gold, as deep and bottomless as a cat's. "How can he hurt me?" she asked, her voice husky.
"By making you fall in love with him." He was too astute, capable of summing up a situation in a glance. "I've been watching you change these last couple of weeks. You were beautiful before, God knows, but now you're breathtaking. You… glow. Those new clothes of yours, the look on your face, even the way you walk… all of that has changed. He needs you now so intensely that everyone else is wiped out of his mind, but what about later? When he can walk again, will he still watch you as if his eyes are glued on you?"
"Patients have fallen in love with me before," she pointed out.
"I don't doubt that, but have you ever fallen in love with a patient before?" he asked relentlessly.
"I'm not in love with him." She had to protest the idea, had to thrust it away from her. She couldn't be in love with Blake.
"I recognize the symptoms," Richard said.
As sticky as the conversation was when they were discussing Serena, Dione infinitely preferred it to the current line, and she moved jerkily away. "I don't have any sandcastle built," she assured him, clenching her hands into fists in an effort to keep herself from trembling. "When Blake's walking, I'll move on to another job. I know that; I've known it from the beginning. I *always* get personally involved with my patients," she said, laughing a little. That was all it was, just her normal intense concentration on her patient.
Richard shook his head in amusement. "You see so clearly with everyone else," he said, "to be so blind about yourself."
The old, blind panic, familiar in form but suddenly unfamiliar in substance, clawed at her stomach. *Blind*. That word, the one Richard had used. No, she thought painfully. It wasn't so much that she was blind as that she deliberately didn't see. She had built a wall between herself and anything that threatened her; she knew it was there, but as long as she didn't have to look at it, she could ignore it. Blake had forced her on two occasions to face

the past that she'd put behind her, never realizing what the ordeal had cost her in terms of pain. Now Richard, though he was using his coolly analytical brain instead of the gut instincts Blake operated on, was trying to do the same.
"I'm not blind," she denied in a whisper. "I know who I am, and what I am. I know my limits; I learned them the hard way."
"You're wrong," he said, his gray eyes thoughtful. "You've only learned the limits that other people have placed on you."
That was so true that she almost winced away from the thrust of it. Instinctively she pushed the thought away, drew herself up, marshaling her inner forces. "I think you wanted to talk to me about Serena," she reminded him quietly, letting him know that she wasn't going to talk about herself any longer.
"I did, but on second thought, I won't bother you with it. You have more than enough on your mind now. In the end, Serena and I will have to settle our differences on our own, so it's useless to ask anyone else's advice."
Walking together, they reentered the house and went into the study. Serena was sitting with her back to them, though her posture of concentration told them exactly what expression was on her face. She hated to lose, and she poured all her energies into beating Blake. Although she was a good chess player, Blake was better. She was usually wild with jubilation whenever she managed to beat him.
Blake, however, looked up as Richard and Dione came in together, and a hard, determined expression pulled his face into a mask. His blue eyes narrowed.
Later that night, when she poked her head into his bedroom to tell him good-night, he said evenly, "Dee, Serena's marriage is hanging by a thread. I'm warning you: Don't do anything to break that thread. She loves Richard. It'll kill her if she loses him."
"I'm not a home wrecker or a slut," she retorted, stung. Anger brought red spots to her cheeks as she stared at him. He had left the lamp on, evidently waiting until she told him good-night, as she usually did, so she could see exactly how forbidding he looked. Bewildered pain mingled with her anger to make her tremble inside. How could he even think… "I'm not like my mother," she blurted, her voice stifled, and she whirled, slamming the door behind her and fleeing to her own room despite the sound of her name being called demandingly.

She was both hurt and furious, but years of self-discipline enabled her to sleep dreamlessly anyway. When she woke hours later, just before her alarm went off, she felt better. Then she frowned. It seemed as if her subconscious could hear the echo of her name being called. She sat up, tilting her head as she listened.

"Dee! Damn it to hell!"

After weeks of hearing that particular note in his voice when he called her, she knew that he was in pain. Without her robe, she ran to his room.

She turned on the light. He was sitting up, rubbing his left calf, his face twisted in a grimace of pain. "My foot, too," he gritted. Dione seized his foot and forcefully returned his toes to their proper positions, digging her thumbs into the ball of his foot and massaging. He fell back against his pillow, his chest rising and falling swiftly as he gulped in air.

"It's all right," she murmured, moving her soothing hands up his ankle to his calf.

She devoted her attention to his leg, unaware of the fixed way he watched her. After several minutes she straightened out his leg and patted his ankle, then pulled the sheet over him. "There," she said, smiling as she looked up, but the smile faded as she met his gaze. Those dark blue eyes were as fierce and compelling as the sea, and she faltered in the face of his regard, her soft lips parting. Slowly his eyes dipped downward, and she was abruptly aware of her breasts, thrusting against the almost transparent fabric of her nightgown. A throbbing ache in her nipples made her fear that they had hardened, but she didn't dare glance down to confirm it. Her new nightgowns didn't hide a lot; they merely veiled.

Suddenly she couldn't withstand the force of his gaze, and she averted her eyes, her thick lashes dropping to shield her thoughts. His body was in her line of vision, and abruptly her eyes widened. She almost gasped, but controlled her reaction at the last second.

Jerkily she got to her feet, forgetting about how much the nightgown revealed. She'd accomplished her aim, but she didn't feel smug about it; she felt stunned, her mouth dry, her pulses hammering through her veins. She swallowed, and her voice was too husky to be casual when she said, "I thought you said you're impotent."

It was a moment before her words registered. He looked as stunned as she felt, then he glanced down at himself. His jaw hardened and he swore aloud.

A hot blush suddenly burned her face. It was ridiculous to stand there, but she couldn't move. She *was* fascinated, she admitted, completely bewildered by her reaction, or rather, her lack of it. As fascinated as a bird before a cobra, and that was a Freudian simile if ever she'd heard one.
"I must be psychic," he whispered rawly. "I was just thinking that that little bit of nothing you have on would rouse the dead."
She couldn't even smile. Abruptly, though, she was able to move, and she left the room as swiftly as she could without actually running.
That disturbing dryness was still in her mouth as she dressed, pulling out her old clothes rather than the clinging new garments she'd been wearing. There was no need to dress seductively now; that particular milestone was behind him, and she knew better than to play with fire.
The only problem was, she discovered as the days passed, that Blake didn't seem to notice that she'd reverted to her old clothes, her modest nightgowns. He didn't say anything, but she could always feel the blue fire of his gaze on her when they were together. In the course of therapy she was constantly touching him, and she gradually became accustomed to the way he'd wrap his fingers around her leg while she massaged him, or the frequency with which their bodies rubbed together when they were swimming.
Much sooner than she'd expected, he stood alone, not using his hands. He swayed for a moment, but his legs held and he regained his balance. He worked harder than any patient she'd had before, determined to end his dependency on the wheelchair. He paid for his determination every night with the torturous cramps that he suffered, but he didn't let up the killing pace he'd set for himself. Dione no longer organized his therapy; he pushed himself. All she could do was try to prevent him from doing so much that he harmed himself, and soothe his muscles at the end of every workout with massages and sessions in the whirlpool.
Sometimes she got a lump in her throat as she watched him straining himself to the limit, his teeth clenched, his neck corded with effort. It would soon be over, and she'd move on to another patient. He was already an entirely different man from the one she'd first seen almost five months before. He was as hard as a rock, tanned the color of teak, his body rippling with lean muscles. He'd regained all of his weight, and possibly more, but it was all muscle, and he was as fit as any professional athlete. She couldn't analyze the emotions that quivered through her when she watched him.

Pride, of course, even some possessiveness. But there was also something else, something that made her feel warm and languid; yet at the same time she was more alive now than she'd ever been. She watched him, and she let him touch her, and she felt closer to him than she'd ever thought possible. She *knew* this man, knew his fierce pride, the daredevil in him that thumbed his nose at danger and laughingly accepted any challenge. She knew his swift, cutting intelligence, the blast of his temper, his tenderness. She knew the way he tasted, the strength of his mouth, the texture of his hair and skin beneath her hesitant fingers.

He was becoming so much a part of her that, when she allowed herself to think about it, it frightened her. She couldn't let that happen. Already he needed her less and less, and one day in the near future he would return to his work and she would be gone. For the first time the thought of moving on was painful. She loved the huge, cool hacienda, the smooth tiles underfoot, the serene expanses of white wall. The long summer days she'd spent in the pool with him, the laughter they'd shared, the hours of work, even the sweat and tears, had forged a bond that linked him to her in a way she didn't think she could bear.

It wasn't easy admitting that she loved him, but as the gilded fall days slipped past, she stopped trying to hide it from herself. She'd faced too much in the past to practice self-deception for long. The knowledge that at last she loved a man was bittersweet, because she didn't expect anything to come of it. Loving him was one thing; allowing him to love her was quite another. Her golden eyes were haunted as she watched him, but she threw herself into their remaining time together with a single-minded determination to gather all the memories she could, to let no shadows darken the time she had left. Like pieces of gold, she treasured his deep chuckles, the blistering curses he used whenever his legs wouldn't do as he wanted, the way the virile groove in his cheek deepened into a dimple when he would look up at her, elated, at every triumph.

He was so vitally alive, so masculine, that he deserved a woman in every sense of the word. She might love him, but she knew that she wouldn't be able to satisfy him in the way that was most important to him. Blake was a very physical man; that was a part of his character that became more and more evident with each passing day as he regained command of his body. She wouldn't burden him with the tangle of somber memories that lay just under the calm exterior she presented to the world; she wouldn't make him

feel guilty that she'd come to love him. If it killed her, if it tore her to pieces inside, she'd keep their relationship on an even keel, guide him through the last weeks of his therapy, celebrate with him when he finally took those first, all-important steps, then quietly leave. She'd had years of practice in doing just that, devoting herself body and soul to her patient… no, the relentlessly honest side of her corrected. Never before had she devoted herself *body* and soul to anyone else, only to Blake. And he'd never know. She would smilingly say good-bye, walk away, and he'd pick up his life again. Perhaps sometimes he'd think of the woman who'd been his therapist, but then again, perhaps he wouldn't.

Her eyes were cameras, hungrily catching images of him and etching them permanently into her brain, her dreams, the very fiber of her being. There was the morning she went into his room and found him lying on his back, staring at his feet with fierce concentration. "Watch," he grunted, and she watched. Sweat beaded on his face, his fists clenched… and his toes moved. He threw his head back, giving her a blinding smile of triumph, and her built-in shutter clicked, preserving another memory; there was the scowl he gave her one night when she bested him in a long-fought game of chess, and he acted as outraged as he had when he'd discovered that she lifted weights. Laughing or frowning, he was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to her, and she watched him constantly.

It simply wasn't fair that one man should be so rich with all the treasures of manhood, tempting her with his strength and laughter, when she knew that he was forbidden to her.

The depths of her fey golden eyes held a world of silent suffering, and though she was very controlled whenever she thought anyone was looking at her, in repose her features reflected the sadness she felt. She was so engrossed with the discovery of her love, and regret for what could never be, that she failed to notice the sharp blue eyes that watched her in return, read the pain she felt and determined to find the cause.

As the early days of November brought the sizzling Phoenix heat down into the comfortable mid-seventies, the milestone that she had dreaded, yet worked for so determinedly, was finally reached. He'd been on the bars all morning, literally dragging his feet along, and he was so wet with sweat that his dark blue shorts were soaked and clinging to him. Dione was exhausted by the effort of crouching beside him, moving his feet in the proper motions, and she sank to the floor.

"Let's rest a minute," she said, her voice muffled by fatigue.
His nostrils flared, and he made a sound that was almost a snarl. With his hands clenched around the bars, his teeth bared with determination, he flexed his muscles and bore down with the strain. His right foot moved erratically forward. A feral cry tore itself from deep in his chest and he sagged on the bars, his head falling forward. Trembling, Dione scrambled to her feet and reached out for him, but before she could touch him, he pulled his shoulders back and began the agonizing process with his left foot. His head arched back and he gulped in air; every muscle in his body stood out from the strain he was subjecting himself to, but at last the left foot moved, dragging more than the right foot had, but it moved. Dione stood rooted beside him, her face wet with silent, unnoticed tears as she watched him.
"Damn it," he whispered to himself, shuddering with the effort it cost him as he tried to take another step. "Do it again!"
She couldn't take it any longer; with a choked cry she hurled herself at him, wrapping her arms around his taut waist and burying her face in the sweaty hollow of his shoulder. He wavered, then regained his balance, and his sinewed arms locked around her, holding her so tightly that she moaned from the exquisite pain of it.
"You witch," he muttered thickly, burrowing his fingers under her tumbled mane of hair and twisting his hand in the black mass of it. He exerted just enough pressure to lift her face out of his shoulder and turn it up to him so he could see her wet cheeks, her drowning, glittering eyes and trembling lips. "You stubborn, beautiful witch, you all but jerked me out of that wheelchair by the hair on my head. Shhh, don't cry," he said, his tone changing to one of rustling tenderness. He bent his head and slowly kissed the salty tears from her lashes. "Don't cry, don't cry," he crooned, his lips following the tracks of her silvery tears down her cheek, sliding to her lips, where his tongue licked them away. "Laugh with me, lady; celebrate with me. Let's break out the champagne; you don't know what this means to me… lady… no more tears," he whispered, sighing the words against her face, her lips, and as the last one became sound he settled his mouth firmly over hers.
Blindly she clung to him, hearing the tone of his voice, though the words didn't make any sense. His arms were living shackles, holding her to him, his long, bare legs pressing against hers, her breasts crushed into the dark curls that decorated his chest, and she wasn't afraid. Not of Blake. The taste

of him was wild and heady, his tongue strong and insistent as it moved into her mouth and tasted her deeply, possessively. Instinctively she kissed him in return, making her own discoveries, her own explorations. He bit gently at her tongue, then sucked it back into his mouth when she began a startled withdrawal. Dione's knees buckled and she sagged against him, which was enough to upset his precarious balance. He lurched sideways, and they tumbled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, but not once did he release her. Again and again his mouth met hers, demanding things that she didn't know how to give, and giving her a wild, alien pleasure that set her to trembling like a tree in a hurricane.

Her nails dug into his shoulders and she strained against him, mindlessly seeking to intensify the contact with him. Not once did she think of Scott. Blake filled her world. The sweaty male scent of him was in her nostrils, the slippery texture of his hot skin under her hands; the unbearably erotic taste of his mouth lay sweetly on her tongue. At some unknown point his kisses had slipped past celebration and become intensely male, demanding, giving, thrilling. Perhaps they'd never been celebration kisses at all, she thought fuzzily.

Suddenly he removed his mouth from hers and buried his face in the curve of her neck. When he spoke his voice was shaky, but husky with an undertone of laughter. "Have you noticed how much time we spend rolling around on the floor?"

It wasn't that funny, but in her sensitized state it struck her as hilarious, and she began to chuckle helplessly. He propped himself up on his elbow and watched her, his blue eyes lighted by a strange light. His hard, warm hand went to her stomach and slid under the thin fabric of her T-shirt top, resting lightly but soothingly on her bare flesh. The intimate but unthreatening touch calmed her almost immediately, and she quieted, lying there and watching his face with huge, fathomless eyes, in which her tears still glittered.

"This definitely calls for champagne," he murmured, leaning over to brush his lips lightly over hers, then withdrawing before the contact could start anew the searing fire of discovery.

Dione was under control again, and the therapist in her began to take over. "Definitely champagne, but first let's get off the floor." She rolled gracefully to her feet and extended her hand to him. He used his hands to place his feet in a secure position, then placed his forearm against hers, his hand cupping

her elbow. She stiffened her arm, and he used the leverage to pull himself up, swaying for a moment before he found his balance.
"What now?" he asked.
Someone else might have thought he was asking about the immediate future, but Dione was so attuned to him that she knew he was asking about his progress. "Repetition," she replied. "The more you do it, the easier it'll be. On the other hand, don't push yourself too hard, or you could hurt yourself. People get clumsy when they're tired, and you could fall, break an arm or a leg, and the lost time would really hurt."
"Give me a time," he insisted, and she shook her head at his persistence. He didn't know how to wait; he pushed things along, impatient even with himself.
"I'll be able to give you a ballpark figure in a week," she said, not letting him push *her*. "But I'll definitely be able to keep my promise that you'll be walking by Christmas."
"Six weeks," he figured.
"With a cane," she threw in hastily, and he glared at her.
"Without a cane," he insisted. She shrugged. If he set his mind to walking without a cane, he probably would.
"I've been thinking of going back to work," he said, startling her. She looked up and was tangled in the web of his blue gaze; it captured her as surely as a spider caught a helpless fly. "I could do it now, but I don't want to interfere with my therapy. What do you say about the first of the year? Will I be far enough along that working won't interfere with my progress?"
Her throat clogged. By the first of the year she'd be gone. She swallowed and said in a low but even voice, "You'll be out of therapy by then and can resume your normal schedule. If you want to continue your exercise program, that's up to you; you have all of the equipment here. You won't have to work as hard as you have, because I was building you up from a very low point. All you have to do now, if you want to continue, is maintain the level you're at now, which won't require such intensive training. If you'd like, I'll draw up a program for you to follow to stay in your present shape."
Blue lightning suddenly flashed from his eyes. "What do you mean, for me to follow?" he demanded harshly, his hand darting out to grip her wrist. Despite her strength, her bones were slender, aristocratic, and his long fingers more than circled her flesh.

Dione could feel her insides crumbling; hadn't he realized that when his therapy was completed, she'd be leaving? Perhaps not. Patients were so involved with themselves, with their progress, that the reality of other responsibilities didn't occur to them. She'd been living for weeks with the pain of knowing that soon she'd have to leave him; now he had to realize it, too.

"I won't be here," she said calmly, straightening her shoulders. "I'm a therapist; it's what I do for a living. I'll be on another case by then. You won't need me anymore; you'll be walking, working, everything you did before… though I think you should wait a while before climbing another mountain."

"You're *my* therapist," he snapped, tightening his grip on her wrist.

She gave a sad little laugh. "It's normal to be possessive. For months we've been isolated in our own little world, and you've depended on me more than you have on any other person in your life, except your mother. Your perspective is distorted now, but when you begin working again, everything will right itself. Believe me, by the time I've been gone a month, you won't even think about me."

A dark red flush ran up under his tan. "Do you mean you'd just turn your back on me and walk away?" he asked in a disbelieving tone.

She flinched, and tears welled in her eyes. She'd gone for years without crying, having learned not to when she was a child, but Blake had shattered that particular control. She'd wept in his arms… and laughed in them. "It… it's not that easy for me, either," she quavered. "I get involved, too. I always… fall a little in love with my patients. But it passes… You'll pick up your life and I'll move on to another patient—"

"I'll be damned if you're going to move in with some other man and fall in love with him!" Blake interrupted hotly, his nostrils flaring.

Despite herself, Dione laughed. "Not all of my patients are men; I have a large percentage of children."

"That's not the point." His flesh was suddenly taut over his cheekbones. "*I* still need you."

"Oh, Blake," she said in a half sob, half chuckle. "I've been through this more times than I can remember. I'm a habit, a crutch, nothing more, and I'm a crutch that you don't even need now. If I left today, you'd do just fine."

"That's a matter of opinion," he snapped. He shifted his grasp on her wrist and brought her hand up, cradling it to his beard-roughened cheek for a

moment before touching his mouth to her knuckles. "You shoved your way into my life, lady, took over my house, my routine, *me*… Do you think people forget volcanoes?"
"Maybe you won't forget me, but you'll discover, one day soon, that you don't need me anymore. Now," she said briskly, deliberately inserting cheer into her voice, "what about that champagne?"
They had champagne. Blake rounded up everyone, and between them they drank the entire bottle. Angela received the news of Blake's progress by gently crying; Alberta forgot herself so far as to give Dione a smile of self-satisfied complicity and drank three glasses of champagne; Miguel's dark face suddenly lighted, the first smile Dione had ever seen from him, and he toasted Blake with a silently raised glass, the two men's eyes meeting and communicating as memories flashed between them.
There was another bottle of champagne at dinner that night. Serena hurled herself into Blake's arms when he broke the good news to her, wrenching sobs of relief shaking her body. It took some time to quiet her; she was almost wild with the joy of it. Richard, whose face had become more and more strained as the weeks passed, suddenly looked as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. "Thank God," he said with heartfelt sincerity. "Now I can have that nervous breakdown I've been putting off for two years."
Everyone laughed, but Blake said, "If anyone deserves a long vacation, it's you. As soon as I get back into harness, you're relieved of duty for at least a month."
Richard moved his shoulders tiredly. "I won't refuse it," he said.
Serena looked at her husband with determined cheerfulness. "How about Hawaii?" she asked. "We could spend the whole month lying on the beach in paradise."
Richard's mouth thinned. "Maybe later. I think I just need to be by myself for a while."
Serena drew back as though he'd slapped her, and her cheeks paled. Blake looked at his sister, reading the dejection in her, and anger brightened the dark blue of his eyes. Dione put her hand on his sleeve to restrain him. Whatever problems Richard and Serena were having, they had to work them out by themselves. Blake couldn't keep smoothing the path for Serena; that was a large part of the trouble. He was so important to her that Richard felt slighted.

In only a moment Serena gathered herself and lifted her head, smiling as though Richard's comment had completely missed her. Dione couldn't help but admire her grit. She was a proud, stubborn woman; she didn't need big brother to fight her battles for her. All she had to do was realize that for herself, and make Blake realize it, too.

Dinner was an astonishing melange of items that weren't normally served together, and Dione suspected that Alberta was still celebrating. When the Cornish hen was followed by fish, she knew that the the three glasses of champagne had been too much. She made the mistake of glancing at Blake, and the barely controlled laughter on his face was too much for her. Suddenly everyone at the table was laughing, effectively banishing the silence that had fallen after Richard's rejection of Serena.

To keep from hurting Alberta's feelings, they made a valiant effort at eating everything placed before them, though she'd evidently gotten carried away and prepared much more than she normally did. If she hadn't been such a good cook, even when she was tipsy, it would have been impossible.

They could hear occasional bursts of song from the kitchen, and just the thought of Alberta, of all people, singing, was enough to bring on fresh bouts of hilarity. Dione laughed until her stomach muscles were sore. The champagne was having its effect on them, too, and she suspected that anything would have made them laugh at that point.

It was much later than usual when Serena and Richard left, and if nothing else, the champagne had destroyed the distance between them. Richard had to support his wobbly wife for the short distance to the car, and Serena was frankly hanging on him, laughing like a maniac. Dione was still sober enough to be glad that Richard handled his alcohol well, since he was driving, but she was also tipsy enough to fall into gales of laughter at the thought that it was a good thing Blake was still in a wheelchair; he'd never have made it up the stairs if he'd been walking.

He insisted that she help him undress, and she put him to bed as if he were a child. As she leaned over him to adjust the sheet, he caught her hand and pulled it. After the champagne, her balance, wasn't the best it had ever been, and she tumbled across him. He stopped her giggles by kissing her slowly, sleepily, then settling her in his arms. "Sleep with me," he demanded, then closed his eyes and fell immediately to sleep himself.

Dione smiled a little sadly. The lights were still blazing, and she was dressed in the royal-blue dress she'd put on to celebrate the occasion. She

hadn't had *that* much to drink. After a few moments she gently extricated herself from his sleep-relaxed grip and slid from the bed. She turned out the lights, then made her way to her own room and removed the dress, dropping it carelessly on the floor. She, too, slept deeply, and woke the next morning with a headache that tempted her to just stay in bed.

With admirable, if painful, self-discipline, she got out of bed and showered, then went about her normal activities. The champagne hadn't affected Blake as much as it had her, and he was as clear-eyed as usual, ready to begin his exercises. After helping him to warm up, she left him to it and went to take a couple of aspirin.

Serena came in just as she was about to go downstairs—a radiant Serena, whose mouth seemed curved in a permanent smile. "Hi," she said cheerfully. "Where's Blake?"

When Dione told her, she said, "Good, I came to see you, not him. I just wanted to ask you how the chase is going."

It took a moment before Dione realized what she meant; her "scheme" to attract Blake had been so short-lived that, in retrospect, it seemed silly that she'd gotten so upset over something so trivial. Other worries had taken over her time and attention. "Everything's fine," she said, forcing herself to smile. "I think everything's fine with you, too. You look better than I'd expected you to look this morning."

Serena gave her a wink. "I hadn't had that much to drink," she admitted without a hint of shame. "It just seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. You inspired me; if you could go after the man you wanted, why couldn't I? He's my husband, for heaven's sake! So I seduced him last night."

Despite her headache Dione chuckled. Serena grinned. "The war isn't won yet, but I've recaptured some lost territory. I've decided that I'm going to get pregnant."

"Is that wise?" So many things could go wrong. If the marriage failed, then Serena would be left to raise the child alone. Or Richard might stay because of the child, but that seemed like a hellish situation for all concerned.

"I know Richard," said Serena with confidence. "I've offended him, and it'll take him a while to forgive me, but I really think that he loves me. Having his baby will show him how much I love him, too."

"What he really needs is to know that you love him more than you love Blake," Dione said. She felt a little uneasy at giving advice; what did she

know about handling a love life? Her own brief experience with marriage had been disastrous.
"I *do*! I love Richard in an entirely different way from the way I love Blake!"
"If you were faced with a situation where you could save one of them, but not both of them, which one would you save?"
Serena paled, staring at her.
"Think it over," Dione said gently. "That's what Richard wants. Your wedding vows were to forsake all others."
"You're telling me that I have to let Blake go, to cut him out of my life."
"Not entirely; just change the amount of time that you devote to him."
"I shouldn't have dinner over here every night, should I?"
"I'm sure Richard wonders which house you consider your home."
Serena was a fighter; she absorbed Dione's words, and for a moment she looked frightened. Then her shoulders straightened and her chin went up.
"You're right," she said forcefully. "You're a dear!" She startled Dione by giving her a fierce hug. "Poor Richard won't know what's hit him. I'm going to positively smother him with tender loving care! You can be the baby's godmother," she added with a wicked twinkle.
"I'll remember that," said Dione, but after Serena had left she wondered if Serena would remember. By that time, Dione would be long gone.

Chapter Eight

The next day, without mentioning it to anyone, Dione began making arrangements to take another case. She'd give herself time to recover from the pain of losing Blake, time to adjust to waking up without knowing that he was in the next room. She'd begin at the end of January, she thought. Blake would be returning to work after the first of January, and she'd probably leave sometime around then.
Now that success was in his grasp, Blake pushed himself harder. Dione gave up even trying to rein in his energy. She watched him force himself along the bars, sweating, cursing steadily as an antidote against the pain and weariness, and when he was too tired to continue she'd massage his exhausted body, put him in the whirlpool, then give him another massage. She watched his diet more closely than ever, knowing how badly he needed

extra nutrition now. When cramps knotted his legs in the night, she rubbed them out for him. There was no stopping him.
It was time for him to leave the wheelchair behind. She brought in a walker, a four-legged half cage that provided him with the balance and stability he needed, and the pleasure of getting around under his own power was so great that he gladly endured the slow pace, the strain.
He didn't mention Serena's sudden absence from the dinner table, though Alberta immediately adjusted both her menus and the amount she cooked. The full dinners almost ceased; instead she began preparing small, light dinners, and Dione often found the table set with candles and a decanter of wine. The intimate atmosphere was another spike that crucified her heart, but as Blake welcomed the pain of therapy, she welcomed the hurt of his company. This was all she had, and the days were trickling away so swiftly that she felt as if she were grasping at shadows.
On Thanksgiving Day, following Blake's directions, she drove them to Serena's house for dinner. Except for being transferred from the hospital to home, it was the first time he'd been out since his accident, and he sat turned to stone, his entire body tense as his senses struggled to take everything in. In two years Scottsdale had changed, cars had changed, clothing had changed. She wondered if the desert sky seemed bluer to him, the sun brighter.
"When will I be able to drive?" he asked abruptly.
"When your reflexes are fast enough. Soon," she promised absently. She seldom drove, and she had to concentrate on what she was doing. She jumped when his hand rested on her knee, then slid up under the skirt she was wearing to pat her thigh.
"Next week we'll start practicing," he said. "We'll go out in the desert, away from all the traffic."
"Yes, fine," she said, her voice taut with tension caused by the warm hand on her leg. He touched her constantly, bestowing kisses and pats, but somehow his hand seemed much more intimate when she had on a skirt.
A smile twitched at his lips. "I like that dress," he said.
She gave him a harried glance. He liked every dress she wore, evidently. He was definitely a leg man. He slid closer and bent his head to inhale the perfume she'd used in honor of the occasion, his warm breath caressing her collarbone just before he pressed his lips into the soft hollow.

Simultaneously his hand slid higher, and the car wobbled dangerously before Dione straightened it.
"Stop it!" she fumed, pushing uselessly at his hand. "You're making me nervous! I don't drive that well anyway!"
"Then put both hands on the wheel," he advised, laughing. "I'm in the same car, remember? I'm not going to do anything that'll cause you to crash."
"You wretch!" she shouted as his fingers began stroking back and forth over her thigh. "Damn it, Blake, would you stop it! I'm not a doll for you to play with!"
"I'm not playing," he murmured. His fingers circled higher.
Desperately Dione released the wheel and grabbed his wrist with both hands. The car veered sideways, and with a curse he finally moved his hand, grabbing the steering wheel and bringing the car back under control.
"Maybe I'd better start driving *now*," he panted.
"You're going to be walking to Serena's!" she yelled, her face scarlet.
He threw his head back and laughed. "You don't know how good that sounds, lady! It would take me a while, but I could do it! God, I feel like a human being again!"
Abruptly she realized that his spirits were sky-high, the natural result of his victory and the experience of being away from the house. He was delirious with pleasure, drunk on his newfound freedom from the prison of his own body. Still, she was driving, and she was afraid that he was going to make her run into something.
"I mean it, stop fooling around!" she said sharply.
He gave her a lazy smile, a heart-stopping smile. "Lady, if I decided to fool around, you'd be the first to know."
"Why don't you go back to work tomorrow?" she demanded in sudden exasperation.
"We're closed for the holidays. I wouldn't have anything to do."
"I'm going to give you something to do," she muttered.
"Like what?"
"Picking your teeth up off the pavement," she said.
He threw his hands up in mock alarm. "All right, all right! I'll be good. Next thing I know, you'll be sending me to bed without my supper. I wouldn't really mind, though, because you always come to tuck me in, and I get to watch you running around in those thin nightgowns of yours that you think are so modest… Serena's house is the solar redwood and rock one."

He threw in the last sentence just as she opened her mouth to blast him again, and she maneuvered the Audi up the steep drive to where the house nestled against the mountain. By the time she'd gotten out of the car and gone around to help Blake wrestle with the walker, Serena and Richard had come out to greet them.

The steps were a problem for Blake, but he mastered them. Serena watched, an anxious look on her face, but she didn't run to help him. Instead she stayed firmly by Richard's side, her arm looped through his. Dione remained a step behind Blake, not out of servitude but to catch him in case he started to tumble. He looked over his shoulder at her and grinned. "Not bad, huh?" he asked.

"A regular goat," she replied, and only he caught her hidden meaning.

He gave her another of his breathtaking smiles. "Don't you mean mountain goat?"

She shrugged. "A goat is a goat is a goat."

His eyes promised retribution, but she felt safe from him for the time being. If he started anything on the drive back home, *she'd* get out and walk!

The traditional dinner had all of them groaning before it was over. Blake and Richard then retired to talk business, and Dione helped Serena clear the table. Serena had a cook, but she told Dione that everything had been prepared the day before and she'd given the cook the rest of the week off. "I don't mind being alone in the house with Richard," she said, laughing a little.

"Is Operation Manhunt going well?" asked Dione.

"At times." Serena laughed. "Sometimes I… ah… undermine his resistance. Then he'll freeze up on me again. But I think I'm winning the battle. He noticed that I've stopped going to Blake's every day."

"Did he ask you about it?"

"Richard? Not a chance! But he calls me almost every afternoon about some little something, as if he's checking on me."

They traded a few comments on the mule-headedness of men in general and finished cleaning the kitchen. When they finally emerged they discovered that the men were still deep in conversation about the company, with Richard going over some sort of electronic blueprint with Blake. Dione looked at Serena, and they both shrugged. Kicking off their shoes, they sat down, and Serena used the remote control to turn on the television set, which revealed two football teams tearing into each other.

Within ten minutes the men had left their technical conversation and were sitting beside the women. Dione liked football, so she didn't mind watching the game, and evidently Serena shared the same fondness for it. At first Dione didn't pay any attention to the hand that touched her shoulder, lying absently over it so that the fingers touched her collarbone. Gradually the touch firmed, shifted, and exerted pressure. Without quite knowing how it had happened, she suddenly realized that she was leaning back in the circle of Blake's arm, resting against his chest while his arm kept her firmly anchored there.

The startled movement of her body brought a knowing smile to his lips, but he merely held her more closely than before. "Shhh. Just watch the game," he murmured.

She was so rattled that nothing sank into her consciousness, but eventually the warmth of his body began to relax her. He would behave himself here, so she was free to enjoy the sensation, let herself drown in the heady scent of his skin. All too soon she would have only the memories of him to take out and savor.

The time passed swiftly. Incredibly they became hungry again, so everyone raided the refrigerator and constructed enormous sandwiches of turkey, lettuce, tomato and anything else they could find. Blake's sweet tooth demanded feeding, and he devoured what was left of the strawberry pie. The atmosphere was easy, comfortable, and he commented on it when they were driving home late that night.

"Serena and Richard seem to have patched up their differences," he said, watching her sharply in the dim light from the dash.

"I think they're well on their way," she said, carefully keeping her tone bland. She wasn't about to divulge anything Serena had told her.

When they got home Dione looked him squarely in the eye and smiled. "I really don't think there's any need for me to tuck you in any longer," she said sweetly. "You're perfectly mobile now. I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

As she let herself into her room she heard him doing a perfect imitation of a chicken clucking, and she had to bite her lip to stifle her laughter. The monster!

But when he called her several hours later, jerking her out of a sound sleep, she didn't hesitate. She hurried to his room and flipped on the light switch.

He was lying on his stomach, hopelessly tangled in the sheet as he tried to reach his left leg.
"Easy," she crooned, finding the cramp and briskly rubbing the muscle of his calf between her hands. He went limp with relief as the pain eased away.
"How much longer will this go on?" he muttered into his pillow.
"Until your muscles are used to the demands you're making on them," she said. "It's not as bad as it was. You seldom have a cramp in your right leg now."
"I know. My left leg drags more than the right. I'll always limp, won't I?"
"Who knows? It won't matter, though. You'll look smashing with a cane."
He laughed and rolled over on his back, tangling the sheet even more. Despite what she'd said earlier, Dione bent over him and automatically began straightening the sheet. "You managed to make a disaster area of your bed," she complained.
"I was restless tonight," he said, his voice suddenly strained.
Dione glanced up, and her hands froze at their task. He was staring at her, his gaze locked on her breasts. A look of such raw hunger was in his eyes that she would have flinched away if she'd had any strength in her limbs. But she continued to sit on the side of his bed, mesmerized by the way his gaze moved lovingly, longingly, over her female curves.
"Lady, what you do to me is almost criminal," he groaned in a shaky voice.
An odd tightening in her breasts made her close her eyes. "I've got to go," she said weakly, but for the life of her she couldn't make herself move.
"No, don't go," he pleaded. "Let me touch you… my God, I've got to touch you!"
Dione caught her breath on a sob as she felt his fingertips trace lightly over her breast, and she squeezed her eyes shut even more tightly than before. For a moment the awful unfamiliarity of a man's touch on her breast brought back a nightmare of pain and humiliation, and she made a choked sound of protest.
"Dee, honey, open your eyes. Look at me; look at how I'm shaking. Touching you makes me dizzy," he whispered fiercely. "I get drunk on the very smell of you."
Dione's eyes fluttered open, and she found that he'd moved closer, until his face was filling her vision. It was Blake's face, not Scott's, and his blue eyes were as dark and stormy as the sea, full of incredible hunger. His trembling

fingers were still moving only lightly over her breasts, though the heat of his hand burned her even through her nightgown.
"That… that's enough," she said, her voice thin, wavering out of control. "This isn't right."
"I need you," he cajoled. "It's been so long… can't you tell how much I need you? Please. Let me touch you, really touch you. Let me unbutton this granny gown and see you."
Even as the words were tumbling harshly from his lips, his agile fingers were slipping the tiny buttons of her nightgown free of the buttonholes. The buttons ran down to her waist, and he undid every one of them while she sat helplessly transfixed by the primitive call of his need. Slowly, with rapt attention, he opened the gown and pushed it off her smoothly tanned shoulders, dropping the cloth around her arms and baring her to the waist.
"I've dreamed of this," he whispered harshly. "I saw you, that morning… You were so perfect, so damned *female*, that you took my breath away."
Gently he cupped a breast in his palm, curving his fingers over its ripe curve as if he were measuring the heft of it.
Dione began to tremble, wild little tingles of sensation shooting through her body. She didn't know what to do, how to handle him. She had no experience with men other than her husband, and that had been a horror from start to finish, nothing that compared to the sweet pain of Blake's touch. Sweet, yes… and not really pain. Incredible. Unknown. A primitive exultation raced along her veins, heating her blood, making her feel stupidly, happily weak. She wanted to sink down beside him on the bed, but she couldn't do that. Despite the joy her body was feeling, her mind was still locked away from even the possibility of it.
Now both of his hands were on her, holding her breasts together. His head bent, and she sucked in a convulsive breath, staring down at his dark hair with terrified fascination. His tongue darted out and washed a cherry nipple, then he blew his warm breath across it, watching with delight as it tightened and thrust out at him. "That's beautiful," he breathed, and tasted the other one.
At last she could move, and her fingers threaded through his hair. She thought dimly that she'd pull his head away, but instead her palms pressed against his warm skull and held him to her, held his mouth to the tender flesh he was suckling as fiercely as any starving infant.

He released her nipple from his mouth and lay back, his hands sliding to her ribs and drawing her with him, pulling her down until she lay half-across him. He began kissing her with short, hard kisses that stung her lips. "I need you," he panted. "Please. I want you so much. Let me make love to you."
Dione moaned, a high, keening sound that reflected both the tumult he'd stirred in her and her fear of going any further. "I can't," she cried, tears suddenly stinging her eyes. "You don't know what you're asking of me."
"Yes, I do," he whispered, moving his mouth down to the line of her jaw, nipping at her with his teeth. "I'm asking you to let me love you. I want you so much that I'm aching all over. I can't sleep for dreaming about you. Let me be a man with you; let me bury myself in you and forget about the past two years. Make me whole again," he pleaded.
She'd spent too long nurturing this man, agonized over him too much, felt his pain, celebrated his triumphs, loved him. How could she refuse him now? She'd be leaving soon, and she'd never know the heady taste of him again. But she was shaking, almost convulsed with the fear of what he'd do to her. For him, she'd bear it, this one last time. The scars that Scott had left on her mind had ruined her forever, kept her from feeling the total pleasure of a man, and when Blake rolled, deftly placing himself above her, the nauseating panic that beat its wings in her stomach threatened to overtake her.
He saw the fixed expression in her enormous golden eyes and began to speak softly to her, making her realize his identity. With silent desperation she stared at him, her nails digging into his shoulders.
"It's all right," he murmured soothingly. "You know I won't hurt you; I'd never hurt you. Let's get you out of this," he said as he began thrusting the bunched cloth at her waist down over her hips, then stroking it away from her thighs. He leaned on his elbow and looked at her, drinking in and savoring all the details that he'd only dreamed about before. He steadied his shaking hand by flattening his palm on her stomach and sliding it over her satiny skin. One finger dipped into the tight little hollow of her navel, and she gasped again, but though her nails were digging so deeply into his shoulders that she'd broken the skin, the blind fear had left her face. Her eyes were locked on him, letting him know that for him, she would do this. Though she was afraid, she trusted him, and she would give him this one last gift, the pleasure of her body.

His hand slid lower, insinuating itself between her thighs and exploring, as he'd tried to do so many times before. She clenched her teeth in shock and tried to control her body's instinctive movement, but her thighs tightened as she tried to dislodge the alien touch.
"Honey, don't!" he cried. "I won't hurt you, I swear."
Dione swallowed and slowly regained control of herself, forcing her legs to relax. He was shaking all over, his body dewed with sweat, the color in his face as florid as if he burned with fever; she felt the heat of his skin beneath her hands and wondered vaguely if he weren't really fevered after all. His blue eyes were glittering wildly, and his lips were red, swollen. She removed one trembling hand from his shoulder and touched his face, placing her fingertips on his lips. "It's all right," she whispered thinly. "I'm ready."
"Oh, God, no, you're not," he groaned, kissing her fingers. "I wanted to wait, but I don't think I can."
"It's all right," she repeated, and with a muffled cry he moved to lie fully over her.
All of the love she felt for him welled up and made her body pliable for his touch; with her eyes wide open and locked on his face, she knew that this was Blake, and that she would do anything for him. Though her heart was slamming against her ribs with almost shattering force, though her entire body shook, she clutched his shoulders and drew him tightly to her.
He tried to be gentle, but the years of celibacy had destroyed a great deal of his normal self-control. When he parted her legs and felt the silkiness of her thighs cradle his hips, he moaned deep in his chest and took her with a single strong movement.
Hot tears burned her lids, then slid down her cheeks. This wasn't the agony she'd expected, but her body had been untouched for twelve years, and the pain and shock of his entry were all too real. To her astonishment, her flesh didn't flinch from him; she still lay soft and willing beneath him. She began to weep in earnest, not from the pain, which was already fading, but because suddenly she realized that Blake had given her as much as he was taking. He'd given her back her womanhood. The years had wrought their healing miracle, after all; it had taken Blake to make her realize it, Blake to make her love enough to overcome the past.
He lifted his head from her throat and saw the tears, and he paled. "No," he croaked. "Dee, what have I done? I'll stop—"

Inexplicably the tears mingled with laughter, and she caught him tightly, preventing the removal of his body. "Don't stop!" she said joyously, the words clogging in her throat. "I didn't know… I had no idea! No, don't ever stop—"

He caught the babbling words in his mouth, kissing her wildly and deeply, relief making him drunk. "I'm going to have to stop," he panted, beginning to move rhythmically on her. "It's been over two years, darling. I don't think I can wait—"

"Then don't wait," she said softly, her eyes shining. "This is for you."

He kissed her again, even harder than before. "The next one's for you," he promised hoarsely, just before he slid over the edge of control. Dione hugged him to her, accepting his body and his desperate, almost violent movements, cradling him, soothing him, and in a moment the storm had passed and he sagged against her.

She could feel the heavy pounding of his heart as he lay on her in the silent aftermath, feel the heat of his breath on her shoulder, the trickle of sweat that ran from his side and slipped down her ribs. She smoothed his tousled dark hair, adjusted his head more comfortably on her shoulder. He murmured something and his hand came up to cover her breast. She waited, lying there pressed into the bed by his weight, as his body relaxed and he drifted slowly, easily into sleep.

She stared up at the light that still blazed brightly; turning out the light hadn't occurred to either of them.

Exhaustion made her body heavy, but she couldn't sleep. The night had been a major turning point in her life, but she didn't know what direction to take. Or was it such a major turning point? Blake had taught her that she no longer needed to fear the touch of a man, but what difference did it make? If the man weren't Blake, then she didn't want him. It was the love that she felt for him that had enabled her to tear down her prison of fear, and without that love she simply wasn't interested.

Nor, she realized suddenly, could it ever happen again. She couldn't afford to let it happen. She was a therapist, and Blake was her patient. She'd violated her own professional code, totally forgotten the rules and standards that she'd set for herself. This was the worst mistake she'd ever made, and she felt sick with remorse.

Whatever happened, she had to remember that soon she'd be leaving, that she was only a temporary part of Blake's life. She'd have to be stupid to

jeopardize her career for something that she knew was only a moment out of time. I should have seen it coming, she thought tiredly. Of course Blake had been attracted to her; she was the only woman available to him. But she'd been so engrossed in her own misery and attraction that she hadn't realized that his actions hadn't been meant merely to tease.

Gently she shifted him to one side, and he was sleeping so deeply that he didn't flicker an eyelash. With slow, careful movements she sat up and reached for her discarded nightgown, pulling it over her head before she got to her feet. As she stood she winced at the unfamiliar soreness of her body, but forced herself to walk silently to the door and leave, turning out the light as she passed the switch.

In her own room she stared at her bed, but realized that it would be a waste of time to return to it. She'd never be able to sleep. Too many sensations, too many memories, were warring in her mind and body. Her bedside clock told her that it was a little after three; she might as well stay up the rest of the night.

She felt oddly empty, her regret canceling out the bittersweet pleasure she'd found in his embrace and leaving her with nothing. For a short while, in his arms, she'd felt wildly alive, as if all her fetters had fallen away. Reality was something less than that. Reality was knowing that the night meant nothing to him beyond the immediate satisfaction of his sex-starved body. She'd seen it coming from a mile away and still hadn't had the sense to duck; no, she'd taken the punch full on the jaw.

But mistakes were something to learn from, better textbooks than anything that ever got put into print. She'd picked herself up before and gone on, and she'd do it again. The trick was to remember that there was an end to everything, and the end of her time with Blake was coming at her with the speed of a jet.

She cringed inwardly at the thought, and in agitation walked out to the gallery. The desert air was cold, and she shivered when it touched her heated skin, hut she welcomed the shock of it. The night had been an emotional roller coaster, a ride that had left her stunned, bewildered. She'd gone from fear to acceptance, then to joy, followed by regret and a rerun of acceptance, and now she was afraid again, afraid that she wouldn't be able to pick up the pieces, afraid that life after Blake would be so hollow that it would be useless. Afraid, even, of the possibility that the fear he'd destroyed had been her strongest defense.

Chapter Nine

The sudden lancing of light across the dark gallery made her heart leap into her throat, and she turned her head to the left to warily eye the sliding doors to Blake's room, where the light was coming from. What had awakened him? When the glass doors remained closed, she turned back to stare out again into the blackness of the garden. She hoped he wouldn't come looking for her; she didn't think she could face him right then. Perhaps in the morning, when she was dressed in her familiar "therapist uniform" of shorts and a T-shirt and they were involved in the routine of exercise. Perhaps then she'd have herself under control and could act as if nothing unusual had happened. But now she felt raw and bleeding, every nerve exposed. Wearily she leaned her head against the railing, not even feeling how cold she'd become. A whirr came to her ears and she lifted her head, frowning. It was coming from her room… then it stopped just behind her, and she knew. Blake had used the wheelchair, because he could get around faster in it than he could using the walker. Her entire body tensed as she listened to him getting out of the chair, struggling for balance, but she didn't dare look around. She kept her forehead pressed against the cold metal of the railing, hoping without belief that he'd realize she didn't want to be disturbed and leave her alone.

First she felt his hands, gripping her shoulders, then the hard, warm press of his body against her back and the stirring of his breath in her hair. "Dee, you're freezing," he murmured. "Come inside. We'll talk there, and I'll get you warm."

She swallowed. "There's nothing to talk about."

"There's everything to talk about," he said, a hardness that she'd never heard before in his voice making her shudder in reaction. He felt the ripple of her muscles under his fingers and pulled her closer to him. "Your skin is icy, and you're coming in with me now. You're in shock, honey, and you need to be taken care of. I thought I understood, but you threw me for a loop tonight. I don't know what it is you're hiding, what you're afraid of, but I'm damned well going to find out before this night is over."

"The night *is* over," she told him thinly. "It's morning now."

"Don't argue with me. In case you haven't noticed, I don't have a stitch of clothing on and I'm freezing, but I'm staying right here with you. If you don't come inside I'll probably catch pneumonia and undo all the progress

you've worked for. Come on," he said, his tone changing into one of cajolery. "You don't have to be afraid. We'll just talk."
She shook her head, her long hair flying wildly and striking him in the face. "You don't understand. I'm not afraid of you; I never have been."
"Well, that's something," he muttered, dropping his arm to her waist and urging her to turn. She gave up and dully let him guide her inside, with his using her for balance. His pace was slow but remarkably steady, and he didn't really put any of his weight on her. He stopped to close the sliding doors, then guided her to the bed.
"Here, get under the covers," he ordered as he bent down to switch on the lamp. "How long have you been out there? Even the room is cold."
She shrugged; it didn't really matter how long it had been, did it? She did as he said and crawled into the bed, pulling the thick comforter up to her neck. Blake studied her pale, set expression for a moment, and his lips pressed grimly together. He lifted the cover and slid into the bed next to her, and she stared at him in shock.
"I'm cold, too," he said, and it was only half a lie. He slid his arm under her neck and curved his other hand around her waist, pulling her into the cocoon of his body heat. At first she was rigid; then the warmth began to penetrate her chilled skin and she started to shiver. His hand exerted just the slightest pressure and she moved with it, unconsciously pressing more closely to him in search of extra heat. When he had her settled, her head cradled on his shoulder and her legs tangled with his, he stroked the heavy black hair away from her face and she felt the pressure of his mouth on her forehead.
"Are you comfortable?" he murmured.
Comfortable wasn't the word for it; she was so tired that her limbs lay heavily, without strength. But she nodded, as he seemed to want an answer. What did it matter? She was just so tired…
After a moment he said with misleading mildness, "I thought you said you'd been married."
Surprise made her lift her head and stare at him. "I was." What did he mean?
Gently he threaded his fingers through her hair and forced her head back to his shoulder. "Then why was it so… painful for you?" he asked, his voice a rumble under her ear. "I damned near fainted, thinking that you'd been a virgin."

For a moment her mind was blank, struggling to understand what he was saying; then realization came abruptly and a hot flush warmed her cold cheeks. "I wasn't a virgin," she assured him huskily. "It's just that I haven't… it's been a long time."
"How long?"
With rising alarm she heard the determination in his voice, barely masked by the quietness of his tone. He meant to know everything, to uncover all her secrets. Twice before he'd torn away the protection of her forgetfulness, forcing her to remember the pains and failures that she'd tried so hard never to think of again. Did he like causing her pain?
"How long?" he repeated inexorably. "Talk to me, honey, because you're not leaving this bed until I know."
Dione closed her eyes in despair, swallowing in an effort to relieve the dryness of her mouth. She might as well tell him and get it over with.
"Twelve years," she finally admitted, the words muffled against his skin because as she said them, she turned her face into his throat.
"I see." Did he? Did he really see? Could any man really understand what goes through a woman's mind when her body is violated? A wild bitterness sprang out of the well of pain that she usually kept covered. He didn't care if he explored the clock's workings until it could no longer tick, as long as he discovered what had made it tick in the beginning. Her hands stiffened against him and she pushed, but now he was much stronger than she was, and held her welded tightly to him, his body hard and unyielding against hers. After a moment she gave up the futile effort and lay beside him in rigid rejection.
He curved his long fingers over her smooth shoulder and tucked her even closer to him, as if to shield her. "Twelve years is a long time," he began easily. "You had to be just a kid. How old are you now?"
"Thirty." She heard the ragged edge of panic in her voice, felt the way her heart began to skitter, the increased rhythm of air rushing in and out of her lungs. She'd already told him too much; he could put the pieces of the puzzle together now and read the whole ugly story.
"Then you had to be just eighteen… You told me that you got married when you were eighteen. Haven't you been in love since then? I know men have been attracted to you. You've got a face and body that turn my insides into melted butter. Why haven't you let someone love you?"

"That's my business," she cried sharply, trying again to roll away from him. He held her without hurting her, gently subduing her with his arms and legs. Goaded, maddened by the bonds that held her, she shrieked, "Men don't *love* women! They hurt them, humiliate them, then say, 'Whatsamatter? You frigid?' *Let me go*!"

"I can't," he said, his voice catching oddly. She was in no state to pay any attention to how her words had affected him; she began to fight in earnest, kicking at his legs, trying to scratch his face, her body arching wildly in an effort to throw herself off the bed. He snatched her hands away from his cheeks before she could do any damage, then wrestled her around until she was beneath him, his weight holding her captive.

"Dione, stop it!" he yelled. "Damn it, talk to me! *Were you raped*?"

"Yes!" she screamed, a sob tearing out of her throat. "Yes, yes, yes! Damn you! I didn't want to remember! Can't you understand that? It kills me to remember!" Another tearing, aching sob wrenched its way out of her chest, but she wasn't crying. Her eyes were dry, burning, yet still her chest heaved convulsively and the awful sounds, like someone choking on a pain too large to be swallowed, continued.

Blake's head fell back and he ground his teeth in a primal snarl, his neck corded with the rage that surged through him. His muscles trembled with the need to vent his fury physically, but a despairing whimper from the woman in his arms made him realize the need to control himself, to calm her. He held her and stroked her, sliding his palms down her body and feeling the marvelous tone of her sleek muscles even through the fabric of her gown. His lips nuzzled into her hair, moved on to discover the softness of her eyelids, the satin stretch of skin over her exotic cheekbones, the intoxicating bloom of her soft, generous mouth. He whispered to her, crooned endearments, reassured her with broken phrases that told her how lovely she was, how much he wanted her. He promised her with his words and his body that he wouldn't hurt her, reminding her over and over of the hour not long past when she'd trusted him enough to let him make love to her. The memory of that joining burned over his skin, but his need for her could wait. *Her* needs came first, the needs of a woman who had known too much pain.

Gradually she calmed; gradually she reached out to him, by slow degrees curling her arms around his muscular back. She was tired, so worn out from

the emotional strain of the night that she was limp against him, but he had to know, so he said again, "Tell me about it."
"Blake, no," she moaned, turning her head weakly away from him. "I can't…"
"You can; you have to. Was that why you got divorced? Couldn't your husband handle what had happened to you?" His questions fell on her like rocks, bruising her, and she flinched in his arms. He caught her chin and turned it back to him so he could read the nuances of her expression. "What kind of bastard was he, to turn his back on you when you needed him most? Did he think it was your fault?"
A high, strained peal of laughter escaped her, and she shut it off abruptly by clapping her hand over her mouth, afraid of the rising hysteria in her. "He… oh, this is funny! He didn't have any trouble handling what happened to me! *He* did it. My husband was the one who raped me!"
Blake went rigid, stunned both by her words and the way she began to laugh, gasping shrieks of laughter that again she shut off, visibly clenching herself in an effort to regain control. She attained it, but she used all of the inner strength she possessed, and as she lay in his arms she could feel the emotion draining away from her, leaving her heavy, spent…
"Tell me," he insisted, his voice so hoarse that she didn't recognize it.
Her heartbeat had changed from a frantic sledgehammer pounding to a ponderous rhythm; dimly she wondered at it, but what did it really matter? What did anything really matter? She'd had all she could bear tonight…
"Dione," he prodded.
"I don't know why I married him," she said dully. "I don't think I ever loved him. But he was handsome and he had money, something I'd never had. He dazzled me with it. He bought me things, took me places, told me how much he loved me. I think that was it; he told me that he loved me. No one had ever told me that before, you see. But I was still standoffish with him, and Scott couldn't stand that. I don't think anyone had ever said no to him before. So he married me."
Blake waited a moment for her to resume, and when she didn't he jostled her lightly. "Go on."
Her eyelids lifted slowly. She stared at him with half-veiled eyes, the glimmering, mysterious golden pools darkened to amber by the shadow of her lashes. "On our wedding night, he hurt me," she said simply. "He was so rough… I started fighting him. I was strong even then, and I knocked him

off of me. He went wild… He forced me to have sex with him, and he wasn't gentle. It was my first time, and I thought I was dying.
"I knew then that the marriage was an awful mistake, that I wanted out, but he wouldn't let me go. Every night I'd fight him again, and he'd force me again. 'He was going to teach me how to be a woman if he had to break every bone in my body,' he said. I couldn't stop fighting him," she muttered to herself. "I never could just lie there and let him get it over with. I *had* to fight back, or I felt like something in me would die. So I fought, and the more I fought, the rougher he got. He started… hitting me."
Blake cursed violently and she jumped, throwing her arm up to cover her face. She was so deep inside her bitter memories that she was reacting as she had then, defending herself. His curse changed into a groan and he cuddled her, coaxing her to lower her arm. "I'm sorry, darling; I didn't mean to startle you," he panted. "When he started hitting you, why didn't you turn him in to the police?"
"I didn't know that he couldn't do that," she said, tiredly. "I was so dumb; I read a lot of things about it afterward, but at the time I thought he had a legal right to do what he wanted with me, short of murder. He got worse and worse; he almost stopped wanting sex. He'd just start right in hitting me. Sometimes he'd go ahead and rape me, as roughly as he could, but most of the time he didn't."
"You stayed with him for three months? Isn't that how long you told me your marriage lasted?"
"Not even that long. That I stayed with him, I mean. I can't remember… He pushed me down the steps one night, and I landed in the hospital with a broken arm and a concussion. I was there for several days, and a nurse figured out that I hadn't simply tripped while going down the steps. She talked to me, and a counselor talked to me. I didn't go back to Scott. When I was released from the hospital, the nurse let me stay with her."
She was calmer now, the memories easier to bear. In her normal voice she said, "Scott's family was horrified by what had happened; they were good people, and when I filed for divorce they forced Scott to go along with it. They gave me a lot of support, paid for my training as a therapist, kept Scott away from me, even got him into psychiatric counseling. It must have worked; he's remarried now, and they seem very happy. He has two daughters."
"Have you kept in touch with him?" Blake asked incredulously.

"Oh, no!" she denied, shaking her head. "But while his mother was alive she kept track of me, sort of looked after me like a guardian angel. She never got over what had happened to me, as if it were her fault because Scott was her son. She told me when he remarried, and when her grandchildren were born. She died a couple years ago."

"So he lived happily ever after, and you've been dragging a ball and chain around with you for all these years," he said angrily. "Afraid to let anyone touch you, keeping people pushed away at a safe distance… only half-alive!"

"I haven't been unhappy," she said wearily, her lashes sweeping down. She was so tired… He knew all of it now, and she felt so empty, as if all the terror that had filled her for so long had seeped away, leaving her hollow and lost. The warmth of Blake's body was so comforting in the chill room; the steady rumble of his heartbeat in his strong chest was so reassuring. She could feel the iron in the bands of flesh that wrapped around her, feel the security of his strength. She'd given him that strength; it was only right that she rely on it now. She turned her face against him, inhaling and tasting on her tongue the heady scent of his body. He smelled of man, of sweat, of a clean grassy scent that eluded her when she tried to search it out. He had the musky smell of sex, a reminder of the incredible night. With a slow, gentle sigh, she slept, all of her senses filled with him.

When she woke she was alone in the bed and the brightness of the room told her that the morning was almost over. She wasn't fortunate enough to forget, even for a moment, the events of the night. Her eyes went to the gallery, but the wheelchair was gone, and she wondered how Blake could have left her bed and taken the wheelchair without waking her; she was normally the lightest of sleepers, coming awake at any unusual noise. But she'd been so tired… she was still tired, her body heavy and clumsy feeling, her reactions slow.

She eased out of bed, wincing at the unfamiliar soreness of her body. How could she have been so stupid that she'd let Blake make love to her? She was trying to get through these last days with him with the least amount of emotional damage, and she'd made it impossibly complicated. She should never have tried to arouse him; she didn't know anything about handling men, or handling herself, if it came to that. He'd said, "I need you," and she'd melted. A real pushover, she told herself contemptuously. He must

have seen her coming a mile away. Then, to top it all off, she'd told him about Scott.
She writhed inwardly with embarrassment. She'd managed for years to control herself, to keep herself from wallowing in the slimy pool of the past. So she hadn't been comfortable with men; what of it? A lot of women managed very well without men. When she thought of the way she'd clung to him, weeping and moaning, she wanted to die of shame. Her solitary nature hated the thought of displaying so much of herself to anyone, even the man who had taken up her days and nights for months.
Willpower had a lot to say for itself; it steadied her nerves, gave her the courage to shrug her shoulders and step into the shower as if there was nothing unusual about that morning. She dressed as she normally did, then went straight to the gym, where she knew she'd find Blake. There was no point in putting off their meeting, because time wouldn't make it any easier. It was best to face him and get it over with.
When she opened the door he glanced at her but didn't say anything; he was lying on his stomach, lifting weights with his legs, and he was counting. He was totally engrossed in the demands he was making of his body. With a slow but steady rhythm he lifted each leg in turn.
"How long have you been doing that?" Dione asked sternly, forgetting her discomfort as her professional concern surfaced.
"Half… an… hour," he grunted.
"That's enough. Stop right now," she ordered. "You're overdoing it; no wonder your legs give you fits! What are you trying to do, punish your legs for the years they didn't work?"
He relaxed with a groan. "I'm trying to get away from the walker," he said irritably. "I want to walk alone, without leaning on anything."
"If you tear a muscle you're going to be leaning on something for a lot longer than necessary," she snapped back. "I've watched you push yourself past the bounds of common sense, but no more. I'm a therapist, not a spectator. If you're not going to follow my instructions, then there's no use in my staying here any longer."
His head jerked around, and his eyes darkened to a stormy color. "Are you telling me that you're leaving?"
"That's up to you," she returned stonily. "If you'll do as you're told and follow your training program, I'll stay. If you're going to ignore everything I say and do what you want, there's no point in my wasting my time here."

He flushed darkly, and she realized that he still wasn't used to giving in to anyone. For a moment she expected him to tell her to pack her bags, and she pulled herself up, braced for the words that would end her time with him. Then he clenched his jaw and snapped, "All right, lady, you're the boss. What's the matter with you today? You're as touchy as a rattler."
Absurd relief washed over her, at both her reprieve from exile and the familiar, comforting ill-temper apparent in his words. She could handle that; but she knew beyond a doubt that she wouldn't have been able to handle the situation if he'd made any reference to the intimacy of the night, if he'd tried to kiss her and act like a lover.
She was so determined to regain the therapist-patient relationship that during the day she resisted his teasing and efforts to joke with her, turning a cold face to his laughing eyes. By the time they had finished they were snarling at each other like two stray dogs. Dione, having eaten nothing all day, was so hungry that she was almost sick, and that only added to the hostility she felt.
Her body was rebelling against her misuse of it when it was finally time for dinner. On wobbly legs she made her way down the stairs, her head whirling in a nauseating manner that made her cling to the banisters. She was so preoccupied with the task of getting down the stairs in one piece that she didn't hear Blake behind her, didn't feel his searing blue gaze on her back.
She made it to the dining room and fell into her chair with relief at not having sprawled on the floor.
After a moment Blake made his way past her and went into the kitchen; she was too sick to wonder at that, even though it was the first time she'd seen him enter the kitchen in the months she'd been living there.
Alberta came out promptly with a steaming bowl of soup, which she placed before Dione. "Eat that right now," she ordered in her gruff, no-nonsense voice.
Slowly Dione began to eat, not trusting her queasy stomach. As she ate, though, she began to feel better as her stomach settled; by the time she'd finished the soup the trembling in her body was subsiding and she wasn't as dizzy. She looked up to find Blake seated across from her, silently watching her eat. A wave of color heated her face, and she dropped her spoon, embarrassed that she'd begun eating without him.

"Lady," he said evenly, "you give the word *stubborn* a whole new meaning."
She lowered her eyes and didn't respond, not certain if he were talking about how hungry she'd been or something else; she feared it was the "something else," and she just couldn't carry on a calm, ordinary conversation about what had happened between them.
She made an effort to call a truce between them, though without lowering her guard an inch. She couldn't laugh with him; her nerves were stretched too tightly, her emotions were too ravaged. But she did smile and talk, and generally avoided meeting his eyes. In that manner she made it safely through the evening until it was time to go to bed and she could excuse herself.
She was already in bed, staring at the ceiling, when she heard him call. It was like an instant replay of the night before and she froze, a film of perspiration breaking out on her body. She couldn't go in there, not after what had happened the last time. He couldn't have cramps in his legs, because she'd heard him come up not five minutes before. He wasn't even in bed yet.
She lay there telling herself fiercely that she wouldn't go; then he called her name again and years of training rose up to do battle with her. He was her patient, and he was calling her. She could just check and make certain that he was all right, and leave again if there was nothing wrong.
Reluctantly she climbed out of bed, this time reaching for her robe and belting it tightly around her. No more going into his room wearing only her nightgown; the thought of his hands on her breasts interfered with the rhythm of her breathing, and an odd ache began in the flesh that he had touched.
When she opened the door to his bedroom she was surprised to see that he was already in bed. "What did you want?" she asked coolly, not leaving her position by the door.
He sighed and sat up, stuffing his pillows behind his back. "We have to talk," he said.
She froze. "If you like to talk so much, maybe you should join a debating team," she retorted.
"I made love to you last night," he said bluntly, going straight to the heart of the issue and watching as she flinched against the door. "You had a rough deal with your ex-husband, and I can understand that you're wary, but last

night wasn't a total disaster for you. You kissed me, you responded to me. So why are you acting today as if *I'd* raped you?"
Dione sighed, shaking her long hair back. He'd never understand something that she didn't really understand herself; she only knew that, in her experience, caring led to pain and rejection. It wasn't so much a physical distance she wanted from him as an emotional one, before he took everything she had and left her only a shell, empty and useless. But there was something he *would* understand, and at last she met his eyes.
"What happened last night won't happen again," she said, her voice low and clear. "I'm a therapist, and you're my patient. That's the only relationship that I can allow between us."
"You're closing the barn door after the horse is already out," he said with maddening amusement.
"Not really. You had doubts about your ability to have sex after the accident, and that was interfering with your training. Last night removed those doubts. That was the beginning and end of anything sexual between us."
His face darkened. "Damn it," he growled, all amusement gone. "Are you telling me that last night was just a therapeutic roll in the hay?"
Her lips tightened at his crudity. "Bingo," she said, and stepped out of his room, closing the door firmly behind her.
She returned to bed, knowing it was useless to think of sleep, but making the effort anyway. She had to leave. She simply couldn't stay until the first of the year, not with things as strained as they were now. Blake was almost fully recovered; time and practice would accomplish the rest of it. He didn't need her any longer, and there were other people who did.
Her bedroom door opened and he stood there, without the walker, moving slowly and carefully as he closed the door and crossed the room to her.
"If you want to run, I can't catch you," he said flatly.
She knew that, but still she lay where she was, watching him. He was nude, his tall, perfect body shamelessly exposed to her gaze. She looked at him and couldn't help feeling a thrill of pride at the ripple of muscles, the fluid grace of his body. He was beautiful, and she'd created him.
He lifted the sheet and got into bed beside her, immediately enveloping her in the warmth of his body. She wanted to sink into his flesh, but instead she made one more effort to protect herself. "This can't work," she said, her voice cracking with pain.

"It already has; you just haven't admitted it yet." He put his hand on her hip and pulled her to him, nestling her against him down the entire length of his body. She sighed, her soft breath tickling the hairs on his chest; her body relaxed in traitorous contentment.

He tilted her chin up and kissed her, his lips gentle, his tongue dipping into her mouth briefly to taste her, then withdrawing. "Let's get one issue settled right now," he murmured. "I've been lying to you, but I thought it best to keep from frightening you. I've wanted you since… hell, it seems like from the first time I saw you. Definitely since I threw my breakfast at you, and you laughed the most beautiful laugh I'd ever heard."

Dione frowned. "Wanted me? But you couldn't—"

"That's what I've been lying about," he admitted, kissing her again.

She jerked back, her cheeks going scarlet. "What?" she gasped, mortified when she thought of the effort she'd made to arouse him, and the money she'd spent on seductive clothes.

Wryly he surveyed her furious face, but braved the wildcat's claws and pulled her back into his arms.

"Several things you did made me think that you might have been mistreated," he explained.

"So you decided to show me what I'd been missing," she exploded, pushing at his chest. "Of all the sneaky, egotistical snakes in the world, you're at the top of the heap!"

He chuckled and gently subdued her, using the strength that she'd given him. "Not quite. I wanted you, but I didn't want to frighten you. So I pretended that I couldn't make love to you; all I wanted was for you to get to know me, learn to trust me, so I'd have a chance at least. Then you started dressing in those thin shirts and shorts, and I thought I'd go out of my mind. You damn-near killed me!" he said roughly. "You touched me constantly, driving me so wild I'd almost explode out of my skin, and I'd have to hide my reaction from you. Didn't you wonder why I'd been working like a maniac?"

She sucked in a shaky breath. "Is that why?"

"Of course it is," he said, touching her lip with his finger. "I tried to get you used to my touch, too, and that only made my problem worse. Every time I kissed you, every time I touched your legs, I was driving myself crazy."

Closing her eyes, she remembered all the times when he'd stared at her with that peculiar, hot light in his eyes. A woman with any real experience would

have known immediately that Blake wasn't impotent, but she'd been the perfect, all-time sucker for that line. "You must have laughed yourself sick at me," she said miserably.
"I haven't been in any shape to laugh, even if it had been a laughing matter. Which it wasn't," he said. "The thought that someone had hurt you made me so furious I wanted to tear the guy apart. Whoever he was, *he* was the reason you were frightened of me, and I hated that. I'd have done anything to make you trust me, let me love you."
She bit her lip, wishing that she could believe him, but how could she? He made it sound as if he'd been so concerned for her, and all he'd really been concerned with was his own sexual appetite. She knew how touchy he'd been about letting even Serena see him while he was less than perfect; he wouldn't want to make love to a woman who might pity him for the effort it took him to walk, or, even worse, might want him because of a morbid curiosity. Dione was the one safe female of his acquaintance, the one who knew everything about him already and was neither shocked, curious, nor pitying. "What you're saying is that you wanted sex, and I was handy," she said bitterly.
"My God, Dee!" He sounded shocked. "I'm not getting through to you, am I? Is it so hard for you to believe that I want *you*, not just sex? We've been through a lot together; you've held me when I hurt so much I couldn't stand it any longer, and I held you last night when you were afraid, but trusted me with yourself anyway. You're not just a sexual outlet for me; you're the woman I want. I want all of you: your temper, your contrariness, your strength, even your downright bitchiness, because you're also an incredibly loving woman."
"All right, I absolve you," she said wearily. "I don't want to talk about it now; I'm tired, and I can't think straight."
He looked down at her, and impatience flickered across his face. "There's no reasoning with you, is there?" he asked slowly. "I shouldn't have wasted my time talking to you. I should have just shown you, like I'm going to do now."

Chapter Ten

Dione drew back sharply, her golden eyes flashing. "Do all men use force when a woman isn't willing?" she said between clenched teeth. "I warn you, Blake, I'll fight. Maybe I can't stop you, but I can hurt you."
He laughed softly. "I know you can." He lifted one of her fists and carried it to his lips, where he kissed each knuckle in turn. "Darling, I'm not going to force you. I'm going to kiss you and tell you how lovely you are, and do everything I can think of to give you pleasure. The first time was for me, remember, but the second time is for you. Don't you think I can show you?"
"You're trying to seduce me," she snapped.
"Mmmm. Is it working?"
"No!"
"Damn. Then I'll have to try something else, won't I?" He laughed again, and pressed his warm lips to her wrist. "You're so sweet, even when you're mad at me."
"I am not!" she protested, practically insulted by his compliment. "There's not a 'sweet' bone in my body!"
"You're sweet smelling," he countered. "And sweet tasting. And the feel of you is sweet torment. Your name should be Champagne instead of Dione, because you make me so drunk I barely know what I'm doing."
"Liar."
"What did I do for excitement before I met you?" he asked wryly. "Fighting with you makes mountain climbing pale in comparison."
The amusement in his voice was more than she could bear; she was so confused and upset, but he seemed to think it was funny. She turned her head away to hide the tears that welled up. "I'm glad you're getting such a kick out of this," she muttered.
"We'll talk about that later," he said, and kissed her. She lay rigidly in his arms, refusing to let her mouth soften and mold itself to his, and after a moment he drew back.
"Don't you want me at all?" he whispered, nuzzling her hair. "Did I hurt you last night? Is that what's wrong?"
"I don't know what's wrong!" she shouted. "I don't understand what I want, or what *you* want. I'm out of my depth, and I don't like it!" The frustration she felt with herself and with him came bubbling out of her, but it was nothing less than the truth. Her mind was so muddled that nothing pleased her; she felt violent, but without a safe outlet for that violence. She'd been

violated, hurt, and though years had passed, only now was the anger breaking out of the deep freeze where she'd locked her emotions.
. She wanted to hurt him, hit him, because he was a man and the symbol of what had happened to her, but she knew that he was innocent, at least of that. But he had dominated her last night, manipulated her with his lies and his truths, and now he was trying to dominate her again.
Furiously she shoved at him, rolling him over on his back. Before he could react she was astride him, her face pagan with the raw force of her emotions. "If there's any seducing to be done, I'll do it!" she raged at him. "Damn you, don't you dare move!"
His blue eyes widened, and a rich understanding crossed his face. "I won't," he promised, a little hoarsely.
With a sensual growl she assaulted him, using her mouth, her hands, her entire body. A man's sexuality had always been denied to her, but now this man offered himself in spread-eagled sacrifice, and she explored him with voracious hunger. Much of his body she already knew: the sleek strength of his muscles under her fingers; the roughness of the hair on his chest and legs; the male scent that made her nostrils flare. But now she learned the taste of him as she nibbled at his ears, his chin, his mouth; she pressed her lips against the softness of his temple and felt his pulse hammering madly. She kissed his eyes, the strong column of his throat, the slope of his shoulder, the sensitive inside of his elbow.
His palms twitched as her tongue traced across them, and he groaned aloud when she sucked on his fingers. "Hush!" she said fiercely, crouching over him. She didn't want any break in her concentration. As she learned him, her body was coming alive, warming and glowing like something long frozen and slowly beginning to thaw. She moved upward, licked the length of his collarbone, then snaked her tongue downward through the curls of hair until she found the little nipples that hid there. They were tight, as hard as tiny diamonds, and when she bit them he shuddered wildly.
His flat stomach, ridged with muscles that were now writhing under her touch, beckoned her marauding mouth. She traced the arrow of downy hair, played a wet game of sneak attack with his navel, then slithered downward. Her silky hair draped across him as she kissed his legs from thigh to foot, biting the backs of his knees, dancing her tongue across his instep, then working her way back up.

He was shaking in every muscle, his body so taut that only his heels and shoulders were touching the bed. He was gripping the bedposts, his arms corded as he writhed in tormented ecstasy. "Please… please!" he begged hoarsely. "Touch me! Damn it, I can't take any more!"
"Yes, you can!" she insisted, panting for breath. She touched him, her hand learning him, stroking him, and something close to a howl broke from his throat.
Suddenly she knew. For such vital strength, for such tender power, there was only one resting place, and that was the mysterious depth of her femininity. Male and female, they had been created to join together, the two halves to make a whole. She felt breathless, stunned, as if suddenly the world had shifted and nothing was the same as it had been.
His body was a bow, taut and aching. "Take… me!" he rasped, both in plea and demand, and Dione smiled a radiant, mysterious smile that almost bunded him with the joy of it.
"Yes," she said, and with aching tenderness moved over him. She accepted him easily. He cried out, but lay still, letting her move as she wished. She looked at him, and golden eyes met blue, communicating wordlessly. She was awed by the rightness of their union, by the heated flares of pleasure that shot through her body. All the barriers were gone now; the fears and nightmares that had prevented her from letting herself enjoy the magic of giving herself to the man she loved had disappeared. She was sensual by nature, but events had taught her to deny that part of herself. No longer. Sweet heaven, no longer. He freed her, not only allowing her to be herself, but glorying in the woman she was. It was evident in the lost, rapt look he wore, the mindless undulating of his body.
She reveled in him. She adored him, she used him, she sank deeply into the whirlpool of the senses and welcomed the drowning. She was burning alive in the heat of her own body as the pleasure intensified and became unbearable, but still she couldn't stop. The moans and gasping cries that kept forcing themselves from his throat as he fought for control were matched by her own sounds of pleasure, until that pleasure became wildfire and she was consumed by it. She heard a wordless cry lingering on the night air and didn't recognize it as hers, or realize that it was joined by a deeper cry as Blake finally released himself from his sweet torture. She sank down, a long, long way, and sprawled weakly on him. His arms swept up and held her safely, securely in place.

He was kissing her, his mouth all over her face before finally settling on her lips and drinking deeply. She met his tongue with her own, and they lay together for a long time exchanging tired, leisurely kisses.
"You took me apart," he murmured.
"I put you together again," she said sleepily.
"I'm not talking about Humpty Dumpty, lady bird, I'm talking about what you did to me."
"Didn't you like it?"
"I loved it." A deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. "As if you had to ask." Then he sobered and pushed her hair away from her face so he could read her eyes. "Was it good for you?"
She smiled and ducked her head against him. "As if you had to ask."
"No bad moments?"
"None," she said, and yawned.
"Wretch, are you going to sleep on me?" he demanded in mock indignation, but his hands were tender as he stroked her. "You're tired, aren't you? Then sleep, darling. I'll hold you. Just don't move; I want to stay inside you all night."
She would have blushed, but she was too tired, too satisfied, and he made a wonderful bed. She was boneless, draped over him, protected by him. She eased into sleep with the steady throb of his heartbeat in her ear.
He woke her at dawn with his slow, tender movements. The room was chilled, but they were warm, heated by the excitement that began to curl inside. There was no urgency, no need to hurry. He talked to her and teased her, told her jokes that made her laugh, and her laughter somehow increased her inner heat. He knew her body as well as she knew his, knew how to touch her and make her writhe with pleasure, knew how to gradually move her up the plane to satisfaction. Her trust was a tangible thing between them, evident in her clear, shining eyes as she allowed him to handle her as he pleased. Even when he rolled her onto her back and pinned her with his weight, no shadow of ancient fear darkened her joy. He had earned her trust the night before when he had offered his own body for her enjoyment. How could she deny him the pleasure of hers?
There was pleasure for her, too, a deep and shining pleasure that took her breath away. It was so intense that she almost cried out her love for him, but she clenched her teeth on the words. The time with him was golden but

transient, and there was no need to burden him with an emotion that couldn't be returned.
"I'd like to stay in bed with you all day," he whispered against her satiny skin. "But Alberta will be up here soon if we don't put in an appearance. She was worried about you yesterday, almost as much as I was."
She buried her hands in his thick, dark hair. "Why were you worried? You knew why I was upset."
"Because I never meant to upset you. I didn't want to remind you of anything that had hurt you, but I did. You were so pale and cold." He kissed the enticing slope of her breast and smiled at the ripple of response that was evident under her skin.
They showered together; then he sprawled on the bed and directed her dressing. He wanted her to wear the slinky, seductive shorts she'd worn before, and his eyes glittered as he watched her pull them on. He had to return to his room to dress, as he'd come to her stark naked, and stark naked he walked down the hall, moving slowly but with increasing confidence and grace. Tears of pride stung her eyes as she watched him.
"It's a beautiful day," Alberta said with an odd smugness as she served breakfast, and it was so unusual for Alberta to make small talk that Dione glanced at her sharply, but could read nothing in the woman's stoic face.
"Beautiful," Blake echoed gravely, and gave Dione a slow smile that started her blood racing.
Their workouts were leisurely and remarkably short; Blake seemed more interested in watching her than in lifting weights or walking on the treadmill. He was relaxed, satisfaction lying on him like a golden glow. Instead of trying to slow him down, Dione scolded him for doing so little.
"I'm going to have to cut down on the amount you're eating if you aren't going to work any more than this."
"Whatever you say," he murmured, his eyes on her legs. "You're the boss."
She laughed and gave up. If he weren't going to work out, he might as well be walking. It was warmer out than it had been recently, so they walked around the grounds; the only support he used was his arm around her waist. She noticed that he was limping less; even his left leg moved without dragging as badly as it had.
"I've been thinking," he announced as they returned to the house. "There's no use in waiting until the first of the year before I go back to work. I'm

going back Monday; I'll get myself accustomed to the place and what's going on, before Richard takes off."
Dione stopped and stared at him, her cheeks paling. He saw her expression and misunderstood it; he laughed as he hugged her to him. "I'm not going to hurt myself," he assured her. "I'll just work in the mornings. Half a day, I promise. Then I'll come home and put myself in your hands again, and you can work me until I drop if that's what you want."
She bit her lip. "If you're capable of returning to work, then there's no need for me to stay at all," she said quietly.
He frowned, his hands tightening on her. "There's all the need in the world. Don't even think about leaving me, honey, because I won't let you. You're part of me. We've already been through this once, and it's settled. You're staying here."
"Nothing's settled," she denied. "I have to work, to support myself—"
"By all means, work if you want," he interrupted. "But you don't *have* to. I can support you."
She jerked back, indignant color staining her face. "I'm not a call girl," she snapped. "Or a lap dog."
He put his hands on his hips. "I'll agree with that, but I'm not talking about either of those," he said, his own temper rising. "I'm talking about marriage, lady, the 'till death do us part' bit."
She couldn't have been more startled if he'd turned green before her eyes. She stared at him. "You can't mean that."
"Why can't I mean it?" he demanded irritably. "This is a hell of a reception for the only marriage proposal I've ever made."
She couldn't help it; she laughed at the anger in his tone, even though she knew inside that he would soon forget her. He was still involved in their intense, isolated therapist-patient relationship, with the added complication of their physical involvement. She'd known that making love with him was a mistake, but she hadn't suspected that he would carry it as far as considering marriage.
"I can't marry you," she said, shaking her head to reinforce her refusal.
"Why not?"
"It wouldn't work."
"Why wouldn't it work? We've been living together for almost half a year, and you can't say that we don't get along. We've had some great times. We

fight, sure, but that's half the fun. And you can't say that you don't love me, because I know you do," he finished tightly.
Dione stared at him in silent dismay. She'd tried so hard not to let him know, but he'd seen through her pitiful defenses anyway. He'd demolished every wall that she'd built. She couldn't stay. She'd have to leave immediately, get away from him while she still could. "There's no sense in dragging this out," she said, pulling away from him. "I'll leave today."
Once she was free of his grip she knew that he wouldn't be able to keep up with her. Her conscience twinged at leaving him alone to make his way back to the house—what if he fell? But needs must when the devil drives, and her devil was driving her mercilessly. She went straight to her room and began pulling out her clothes. She was swift and efficient; she had all the clothes lying on the bed in neat stacks when she realized that the new clothes she'd bought made it impossible for her to fit everything into her two suitcases. She'd either have to leave them there, or buy another suitcase. If she bought another suitcase, she'd have to beg a ride from someone… no, where was her brain? She could always call a taxi. She didn't have to beg for anything.
"Dee, you're not leaving," Blake said gently from the doorway. "Put everything back and calm down."
"I have to leave. I don't have any reason to stay." It had been a waste of breath for him to tell her to calm down. She was utterly calm, knowing what she had to do.
"I'm not reason enough to stay? You love me. I've known for quite a while. It's in your eyes when you look at me, your touch, your voice, everything about you. You make me feel ten feet tall, darling. And if I still needed proof, I had it when you let me make love to you. You're not a woman to give herself to any man without love. You love me, even if you're too stubborn to tell me the words."
"I told you," she said, her voice muffled with pain. "I always fall in love with my patients. It's practically required."
"You don't go to bed with all of your patients, do you?"
He already knew the answer to that. He didn't need the miserable little shake of her head, or the whispered, "No," to reassure him.
"It's not one-sided," he murmured, coming up behind her to wrap his arms around her middle. "I love you so much I hurt. You love me, and I love you; it's only natural that we get married."

"But you *don't* love me!" she shouted, driven beyond control at hearing those precious words. It was unfair that she should be punished so much for loving him, but everything had to be paid for in coin. For daring to transgress, she would pay with her heart. She began to struggle against the bonds of flesh that held her, but he merely tightened his hold, not enough to hurt her, but she was securely restrained. After a moment of futile effort she let her head drop back against his shoulder. "You only think you love me," she wept, her voice thick with the tears lodged in her throat. "I've been through it before; a patient becomes so dependent on me, so fixated on me, that he confuses his feelings of need with love. It won't last, Blake, believe me. You don't really love me; it's just that I'm the only toy in your playground right now. When you go back to work you'll be seeing other women, and everything will fall back into proportion. It would be awful if I married you and then you found out it had all been a mistake."
"I'm a man," he said slowly. "There have been other women who I wanted, other women who caught my interest, but give me credit for being intelligent enough to know the difference between the way I felt with them and the way I feel about you. I want to be with you, talk with you, fight with you, watch you laugh, make love with you. If that's not love, honey, no one will ever know the difference."
"I'll know the difference, and so will you."
He sighed impatiently. "You still won't listen to reason, will you? Then let's compromise. Are you willing to compromise?"
She eyed him warily. "It depends."
He smiled even as he shook his head. "You'd think I'm a mass murderer, the way you're looking at me. It's just a simple deal. You say that when I get out more and see other women to compare you to, I'll realize that I've just been infatuated with you. On the other hand, I say that I love you and I'll keep on loving you, regardless of how many other women I see. To settle the issue, all you have to do is stay until I've had a chance to make that comparison. Simple?"
She shrugged. "I see what's in the deal for you; you win, either way. I know that you're planning to sleep with me, and I'm honest enough to know that if I stay, that's exactly how things will work out. If you decide that it was just a passing fancy after all, then you've lost nothing and had a bed partner while you thought about it."
"There's something in it for you, too," he said, grinning.

The wicked gleam in his eyes gave him away. She could have kicked him, but it seemed that he could always make her laugh no matter how upset she was. "I know, I know," she said, beginning to giggle. "*I* get to sleep with *you*."
"That's not such a bad deal," he said with blatant immodesty.
"You talk a good game, Mr. Remington," she said, still laughing despite all she could do to stifle it.
"That's not all I do well," he said, reaching for her and folding her against him. His lips found the slope of her throat and she shivered, her lashes falling to veil her eyes. "Think of it as therapy," he encouraged. "A sort of repayment for your own therapeutic knowledge. You gave me a reason to live, and I'll show you how to live."
"Egotistical."
"Truthful."
"I can't do it."
He shook her, then pulled her back to him and began to lay tender seige to her mouth, storming the barrier of her teeth and taking the treasure that lay beyond. "You will do it," he insisted softly. "Because you love me. Because I need you."
"Past tense: You needed me. That's in the past. You're on your own, and you're doing fine."
"I won't be doing fine if you leave me. I swear I'll put myself back in the wheelchair and not get out again. I won't go to work; I won't eat; I won't sleep. I need you to take care of me."
"Blackmail won't work," she warned him, trying not to laugh again.
"Then I'll have to try another tactic. Please. Stay for me. I love you, and you love me. What if *you're* wrong? What if I'm still as wild for you ten years from now as I am today? Are you going to throw that chance away just because you're afraid to believe it can happen?"
The pain that seared her heart told her that at last he'd hit on the real reason why she wanted to leave. She was afraid to believe in love, because no one had ever loved her. She stared at him intently, aware inside of herself that she had reached a personal milestone. She could play it safe and run, but people who played it safe never knew the intoxication of going for it all, of putting their hearts on the line. They never risked anything, so they never won anything. Everything had to be paid for; she reminded herself of that once again. All she could do was try. If she won, if by some miracle she

gained the golden apple, her life would be complete. If she lost, would she really be any worse off than she was now? She already loved him. Would leaving him now make the pain any less than leaving him later?
"All right," she said huskily, aware of the bridges burning behind her. She could feel the heat at her back. "I'll stay with you. Don't ask me to marry you, not yet. Let's see how it works out. An affair is a lot easier to recover from when it goes sour than a marriage is."
He quirked a dark eyebrow at her. "You're not overconfident, are you?"
"I'm… cautious," she admitted. "Marriage was traumatic for me. Let me take one hurdle at a time. If… if everything works out, I'll marry you whenever you want."
"I'll hold you to that," he murmured. "I'd like to marry you now. I'd like to make you pregnant right now, if I could. I was looking forward to our devoting a lot of time to that project, but now I'll have to take precautions. Our children will all come *after* we've been married for at least nine months. No one's going to count their fingers and smirk at our babies."
Her eyes were such wide, huge golden pools of wonder, that they eclipsed the rest of her face. The thought of children was so enticing that she was tempted to tell him that she would marry him right then. She'd always wanted children, wanted to be able to pour out die deep reservoir of love that was dammed up inside her. The care and nourishment that she'd never received from her own mother were there, waiting patiently for a child of her own. Blake's child: blue eyes; dark hair; that engaging grin that brought out his hidden dimple.
But a child was the one thing she couldn't gamble with, so she didn't argue with him. Instead she offered quietly, "I'll see a doctor and get a prescription."
"No," he refused, steel lacing his voice. "No pills. You're not taking any risks, however slight, with your body. I can handle it without any risk at all, and that's the way we'll do it."
She didn't mind; the thought that he was willing to take responsibility for their lovemaking was a warm, melting one. She put her arms around him and nestled against him, drinking in his scent.
"Tell me you love me," he demanded, cupping her chin in his palm and lifting her face to him. "I know you do, but I want to hear it."
A tremulous smile quivered on her lips. "I love you."

"That's what I thought," he said with satisfaction, and kissed her as a reward. "Everything will be all right, darling. Just wait and see."

Chapter Eleven

She didn't dare to hope, but it seemed as if he might be right. He bought a slim black cane that looked more like a sexy prop than something that was actually used as support, and every morning Miguel drove him to work. At first Dione fretted every moment he was gone. She worried that he might fall and hurt himself, that he'd try to do too much and tire himself out. After a week she was forced to admit that he was thriving on the challenge of working again. Far from falling, every day he improved, walking faster and with less effort. Nor did she have to worry that he was pushing himself too hard; he was in excellent shape, thanks to her program.

She almost drove herself mad thinking of all the women he was in contact with every day; she knew herself how attractive he was, especially with that intriguing limp. When he came home the first day she all but held her breath, waiting for him to say cheerfully, "Well, you were right; it was just infatuation. You can leave now."

But he never said it. He returned home as eagerly as he went to work, and they spent the afternoons in the gym, or swimming if the day was warm. December was a pleasant month, with the afternoon temperatures often in the high sixties and low seventies, though at night it sometimes dipped close to freezing. Blake decided to have a heating unit put in the pool so they could swim at night, but he had so much on his mind that he kept putting it off. Dione didn't care if the pool were ever heated or not; why bother with swimming when the nights were better spent in his arms?

Whatever happened, whatever the ending that was eventually written to their particular story, she would always love him for freeing her from her cage of fear. In his arms she forgot about the past and concentrated only on the pleasure he gave her, pleasure which she joyously returned.

He was the lover who she had needed; he was mature enough to understand the rewards of patience, and astute enough to sometimes be impatient. He gave, he demanded, he stroked, he experimented, he laughed, *he* teased, and he satisfied. He was as happily fascinated with her body as she was with his, and that was the sort of open admiration that she needed. The events

that had shaped her had made her wary of repressed emotion, even when that emotion was happiness, and the complete honesty with which Blake treated her gave her a secure springboard from which she launched herself as a woman, secure at last in her own femininity and sexuality.

The days of December were the happiest of her life. She had known peace and contentment, not a small accomplishment after the terror she'd survived, but with Blake she was truly happy. Except for the absence of a ceremony, she might already have been married to him, and each passing day the idea of being his wife became more firmly rooted in her mind, changing from impossible to implausible, then to chancy, then to a half-scared, hopeful "maybe." She refused to let herself progress beyond that, afraid of tempting the Fates, but still she began to dream of a long stretch of days, even years, and she found herself thinking up names for babies.

He took her Christmas shopping, something she'd never done before in her life. No one had ever been close enough to her to either give or receive a gift, and when Blake learned this, he embarked on a crusade to make her first real Christmas one that would boggle the imagination. The house was decorated in a unique and not always logical blend of traditional and desert styles; every cactus found itself sporting gaily colored bows or even decorative glass balls, if the spines were large enough. He had holly and mistletoe flown in and kept in the refrigerator until it was time to put them up, and Alberta entered into the spirit of the season by scouring cookbooks for traditional Christmas recipes.

Dione realized that they were all going to so much trouble for her, and she was determined to throw herself into the preparations and the happiness. Suddenly it seemed that the world was full of people who cared, and those she cared for.

She'd been half-fearful that Blake would embarrass her by giving her a lot of expensive gifts, and she was both delighted and relieved when she began opening her gifts to find that they were small, thoughtful and sometimes humorous. A long, flat box that could have held a watch or an expensive bracelet instead yielded an array of tiny charms that made her laugh aloud: a miniature barbell, a track shoe, a sweatband, a Frisbee, a loving cup trophy and a little silver bell that actually gave a tinny little chime when she shook it. Another box held the charm bracelet that the charms were supposed to go on; a third gift was a best seller that she'd picked up in a bookstore just the week before, then replaced and forgotten to buy in the

confusion of shopping. A lacy black mantilla drifted over her head and she looked up to smile at Richard, who was regarding her with an oddly tender look in his cool gray eyes. Serena's gift made her gasp and quickly stuff it back into the box, as Serena rolled with laughter and Blake immediately came over to wrestle the box away from her and hold up the contents: a very intimate garment with heart-shaped cutouts in strategic places.
"This was something you overlooked when you bought all those clothes to wage war in," Serena said innocently, her blue eyes as limpid as a child's.
"Ahhh, those clothes." Blake sighed in satisfaction.
Dione snatched the teddy… thing… whatever… away from him and replaced it in the box, her cheeks fiery red. "Why is everyone watching me?" she asked uncomfortably. "Why aren't you opening your own gifts?"
"Because you're so beautiful to watch," Blake replied softly, leaning down so only she could hear him. "Your eyes are shining like a little girl's. I have something else for you to… ah, unwrap later on tonight. Think you might be interested?"
She stared at him, her black pupils dilating until they almost obscured the golden rims. "I'm interested," she murmured, her body already quickening at the thought of the lovemaking they'd share later, when they were lying pressed together in his big bed.
"It's a date," he whispered.
The rest of the gifts were opened amid laughter and thank-yous; then Alberta served hot buttered rum. Dione seldom drank, having an aversion to alcohol that dated back to her earliest childhood, but she drank the rum because she was happy and relaxed and suddenly the old restrictions no longer mattered so much. The rum slid smoothly down her throat, wanning her, and when that was finished she drank another.
After Serena and Richard had left, Blake helped Dione up the stairs with a steadying arm around her waist. He was laughing softly, and she leaned into him, letting him take most of her weight. "What's so funny?" she asked sleepily.
"You are. You're half-drunk, and you're beautiful. Did you know that you've had the sweetest, sleepiest smile in the world on your face for the last fifteen minutes? Don't you dare go to sleep on me, at least until after you've kept our date."
She stopped on the stairs and turned fully into his arms, winding herself around him. "You know I wouldn't miss that for the world," she purred.

"I'll see that you don't."
She let him talk her into wearing the scandalous teddy that Serena had given her, and he made love to her while she had it on, then even that scrap of fabric seemed to get in his way and he stripped it off her. "Nothing's as lovely as your skin," he whispered, stringing kisses like popcorn across her stomach.
She felt drugged, her mind a little fuzzy, but her body was throbbing, arching instinctively to meet the rhythmic thrusts that took her to bliss and beyond when he left off kissing her all over and possessed her again. When they were finished she lay weak and trembling on the bed, protesting with a murmur when she felt him leave her side.
"I'll be right back," he reassured her, and he was, his weight depressing the mattress familiarly. She smiled and moved her hand to touch him lightly, all without opening her eyes.
"Don't go to sleep," he warned. "Not yet. You haven't unwrapped your last present."
She propped her lids open. "But I thought that you were… when we made love, I thought that…" she mumbled in confusion.
He chuckled and slid an arm behind her back, urging her into a sitting position. "I'm glad you liked that, but I have something else for you." He placed another long, slim box in her hand.
"But you've already given me so much," she protested, awakening at the feel of the box.
"Not like this. This is special. Go ahead, open it."
He sat with his arm still around her, watching her face and smiling as she fumbled with the elegant gold wrapping, her agile fingers suddenly clumsy. She lifted the lid off and stared speechlessly at the simple pendant that lay on satin lining like a cobweb of gold. A dark red heart, chiseled and planed, was attached to the chain.
"That's a ruby," she stammered.
"No," he corrected gently, lifting it from the box and placing it around her neck. "That's my heart." The chain was long, and the ruby heart slid down her chest to nestle between her breasts, gleaming with dark fire as it lay against her honeyed skin.
"Wear that forever," he murmured, his eyes on the lush curves that his gift used as a pillow. "And my heart will always be touching yours."

A single, crystalline tear escaped the confines of her lashes and rolled slowly down her cheek. He leaned over and caught it with his tongue. "An engagement ring wasn't good enough for you, so I'm giving you an engagement heart. Will you wear it, darling? Will you marry me?"
She stared at him with eyes so huge and deep that they drowned the entire world. For a month she'd shared his bed, trying to prepare herself for the day when she was no longer able to do so, savoring every moment with him in an attempt to store up pleasure as a squirrel stores acorns as insurance against a hard winter. She'd been certain that he would lose interest in her, but every day he'd returned to her and taken her in his arms, told her that he loved her. Perhaps the dream wasn't a dream, after all, but reality. Perhaps she could dare to believe.
"Yes," she heard herself say shakily as her heart and hungry yearnings overruled her head, and her head instantly tried to recover lost ground by adding, "but give me time to get used to the idea… It doesn't seem quite real."
"It's real, all right," he muttered, sliding his hand along her ribcage until a warm, full breast filled his palm. He studied the sheer perfection of her softly veined flesh, the taut little cherry tip that responded instantly to his lightest touch, and his body began to tighten with the familiar need that he could never quite satisfy. Gently he began to ease her down into a supine position. "I don't mind a long engagement," he said absently. "Two weeks is plenty of time."
"Blake! I was thinking in terms of months, not weeks!"
He looked up sharply; then as he saw the frightened uncertainty in her face, his gaze softened and his mouth eased into a smile. "Then name the day, darling, as long as it's within six months and you don't pick either Groundhog Day or April Fool's Day."
She tried to think, but her mind was suddenly fuzzy, entirely preoccupied by the rough, wonderful rasp of his hard hands over her body. His fingers slid between her legs and she gasped aloud, a hot twinge of pleasure shooting through her body. "May Day," she said, no longer really caring.
He was disconcerted, too, his senses caught by the rich beauty of the woman under his hands while he tried to make sense of her words.
"Mayday?" he asked, puzzled and a little shocked. "You're asking for help?"
"No… May Day, not mayday," she explained, exaggerating the two words so he could hear the pause between them. "The first of May."

"What about it?" he murmured, dipping his head to taste the straining nipples that had been tempting him. He was rapidly losing all interest in the conversation.
"That's when we're getting married," she gasped, her body beginning a slow, undulating dance.
Those words made sense to him, and he lifted his head. "I can't persuade you to marry me before then?"
"I… don't know," she moaned. Her nails flexed into his shoulders. He could probably talk her into anything he wanted, the way she felt now. Though they had made love only a short while before, the need that was filling her was so urgent that it might have been years since he'd taken her. She turned to him, her sleek, soft body crowding him, and he knew without words what she wanted. He lay back, his hands guiding her as she flowed over him and engulfed him. She was wild when she loved him like that, her long black hair streaming down her back, falling across his face when she leaned forward. She worshipped him with the ancient, carnal dance of love, and the ruby heart lay on her breast like a drop of liquid fire.
For two days nothing intruded on the spell of happiness that held them enthralled. Everyone was pleased with the engagement, from the taciturn Miguel to a bubbling Serena. Alberta was as satisfied as if she'd arranged it all herself, and Angela hummed all day long. Serena passed along Richard's best wishes; evidently a wedding was just what everyone wanted, and Dione almost forgot why she'd been so cautious in the beginning.
On the third day Serena arrived for dinner, alone and pale, though she was composed. "I might as well tell you, before someone else does," she said quietly. "Richard and I are separated."
Dione stifled her gasp of shock. They had been getting along so much better for the past several weeks that she'd stopped being concerned with their situation. She looked swiftly at Blake, and was shocked again at the change in his expression. She had known him as laughing, loving, teasing, angry, even afraid, but never before had she seen him so deadly and intent. Suddenly she realized that she'd never really felt the force of his personality, because he'd always tempered his actions with consideration for her. Now the steel, the sheer power, was showing as he prepared to protect his sister.
"What do you want me to do?" he asked Serena in a calm, lethal tone.
Serena looked at him and even smiled, her eyes full of love. "Nothing," she said simply. "This is something I have to work out with Richard. Blake,

please, don't let this interfere with your working relationship with him; this is more my fault than it is his, and it wouldn't be fair for you to take it out on him."
"How is it your fault?" he growled.
"For not growing up and getting my priorities straight until it was almost too late," she replied, a hint of the same steel lacing her sweeter voice. "I'm not giving up on him, not without a fight. Don't ask me any more questions, because I won't answer them. He's my husband, and this is a private matter."
He regarded her silently for a moment, then gave a brief nod. "All right. But you know that I'll do whatever I can, whenever you ask."
"Of course I do," she said, her face relaxing. "It's just that I have to do this on my own. I have to learn how to fight my own battles." As she spoke she flashed Dione a look that said, "See, I'm trying." Dione nodded in acknowledgement, then looked up to find that Blake had witnessed the little exchange and was also staring at her, a steely determination in his expression. Dione met his stare blandly; he could ask, but she didn't have to answer. If Serena wanted her brother to know that she was deliberately trying to put a distance between them, then she would tell him. If not, then he'd have to figure it out for himself. Richard and Serena didn't need any more interference in their marriage, and if Blake discovered that he was the basic cause of their separation, he was fully capable of taking it up with Richard.
Later that night, after he had made love to her with an intensity that left her dazed and sleepy, he said lazily, "What's going on between you and Serena? All those significant glances have to mean something."
It was a sneak attack, she realized, struggling to gather her wits. He'd made love to her as usual, waited until she was almost asleep, and caught her unaware. To make the situation more even, she cuddled against him and slid her hand down his side in a long, slow caress. When she reached his thighs she was rewarded by the clenching of his entire body.
"It was nothing," she murmured, pressing soft, hot kisses on his chest. "Just a conversation we had the day she took me shopping for all those sexy clothes that you liked so much. She must have a secret fetish for indecent underwear. She picked out most of those barely there nightgowns, and then she gave me that teddy for Christmas."
Hard fingers wrapped around her wrist, and he removed her hand from his body. Leaning over, he switched on the lamp and washed them with light.

Dione watched him, knowing that he wanted to be able to read the nuances of expression that crossed her face. She tried to shield her thoughts, but an uneasy coldness began to creep over her skin as she stared into his piercing blue eyes.
"Stop trying to change the subject," he ordered sharply. "Was Serena warning you away from Richard?"
That again! She stiffened, both angered and hurt by the way he had continually accused her of seeing Richard on the sly. How could he possibly think that of her? She had agreed to marry him only two days before, but for some reason he couldn't get it out of his mind that she might be involved with another man. She sat up, the sheet falling to her waist, but she was too angry to care if she were nude.
"What's with you?" she demanded furiously. "You sound like a broken record. What is it that makes you so suspicious of me? Why am I always the cause of any trouble between Serena and Richard?"
"Because Richard can never take his eyes off you when you're together," he replied, his mouth a hard line.
"I'm not responsible for Richard's eyes!" The injustice of it made her want to scream.
"Aren't you?" he snapped. "Whenever you look at him, it's as if you're passing secret messages."
"You just accused me of doing the same thing with Serena. Am I having an affair with her, too?" Dione exploded. She clenched her fists in an effort to control the burgeoning fury in her. It would be stupid to lose her temper, so she forcibly sucked in a deep, calming breath and made her muscles relax.
Blake eyed her narrowly. "If you don't have anything to'hide, then why won't you tell me what Serena meant by what she said?" he questioned.
Another sneak attack. She registered the hit and realized that again he'd caught her when her control was slipping. "If you're so curious, why don't you ask her?" she said bitingly, and lay down again, turning her back to him and pulling the sheet up to her chin.
She heard his breath hiss through his teeth a split second before the sheet was jerked away from her and thrown to the foot of the bed. An iron hand bit into her shoulder and turned her over, flat on her back. "Don't turn your back on me," he warned softly, and the cold uneasiness in her turned into icy dread.

Silently, her face white and set, she threw his hand off her shoulder. She had never, *never*, been able to passively endure, even when resistance cost her additional pain. She didn't think; she reacted instinctively, the automatic resistance of someone fighting for survival. When he reached for her, angered by her rejection, she eluded his grasp and slid from the bed.

It didn't matter that this was Blake. Somehow, that made it worse. His image blurred with Scott's, and she felt a stabbing pain that threatened to drive her to her knees. She had trusted him, loved him. How could he have turned on her like that, knowing what he did about her? The sense of betrayal almost choked her.

He sprang from the bed and reached her as she stretched her hand out for the doorknob. He grabbed her elbow and spun her around. "You're not going anywhere!" he growled. "Come back to bed."

Dione wrenched herself away from his grip and flattened her body back against the door. Her golden eyes were blind, dilated, as she stared at him. "Don't touch me," she cried hoarsely.

He reached for her again, then stopped abruptly when he looked at her and saw the fixed expression in her eyes. She was white, so pale that he expected her to slide into a faint at any moment, but she held herself tautly upright. "Don't touch me," she said again, and his arms dropped heavily to his sides.

"Calm down," he said soothingly. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you, darling. Let's go back to bed."

She didn't move, her eyes still locked on him as she measured every move he made, however slight. Even the expansion of his chest with every breath he took made an impact on her senses. She saw the slight flare of his nostrils, the flexing of his fingers.

"It's all right," he repeated. "Dee, we had an argument, that's all. Just an argument. You know I'm not going to hit you." He extended his hand slowly to her, and she watched as his fingers approached. Without moving her body somehow drew in on itself, shrinking in an effort to avoid his touch. Just before he would have touched her, she slid swiftly to the side, away from the threatening hand.

Inexorably he followed, moving with her but not coming any closer. "Where are you going?" he asked softly.

She didn't answer; her eyes were wary now, instead of blindly staring. Blake held out both his hands to her, palms up in supplication.

"Honey, give me your hands," he whispered, desperation threading through his veins, congealing his blood. "Please believe me; I'll never hurt you. Come back to bed with me and let me hold you."

Dione watched him. She felt odd, as if part of herself were standing back and watching the scene. That had happened before, with Scott, as if she somehow had to separate herself from the ugliness of what was happening to her. Her body had reacted mindlessly, trying to protect itself, while her mind had exercised its own means of protection by drawing a veil of unreality over what was happening. Now the same scene was being replayed with Blake, but it was somehow different. Scott had never stalked her, never talked to her in a crooning, husky voice. Blake wanted her to put her hands in his and go with him back to that bed, lie beside him as if nothing had happened. But what *had* happened? He had been angry, and he had grabbed her shoulder, throwing her to her back… no, that had been Scott. Scott had done that once, but they hadn't been in bed.

Her brow knitted, and she brought both hands up, rubbing her forehead. God, would she never be free of Scott, of what he had done to her? Blake's anger had triggered the memory of the other time, and though she hadn't confused their identities, she had been reacting to Scott, not Blake. Blake hadn't hurt her; he had been angry, but he hadn't hurt her.

"Dee? Are you all right?"

His beloved, anxious voice was almost more than she could bear. "No," she said, her voice muffled behind her hands. "I wonder if I'll ever be all right."

Abruptly she felt his touch, his hands on her arms, slowly drawing her to him. She could feel the tension in him as he folded her into his arms. "Of course you will," he reassured her, kissing her temple. "Come back to bed with me; you're cold."

Abruptly she felt the cold, the chill of the night on the bareness of her body. She walked with him to the bed, let him put her between the sheets and draw the comforter up over her. He walked around to the other side, turned out the lamp and got into bed beside her. Carefully, as though he were trying not to startle her, he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly to his side.

"I love you," he said in the darkness, his low tones vibrating over her skin. "I swear, Dee, that I'll never again touch you in anger. I love you too much to put you through that again."

Hot tears burned her lids. How could he apologize for something that was, essentially, a weakness in her? How long would it take before he began to resent the flaw in her nature? He wouldn't be able to act naturally with her, and the strain would tear them apart. Normal couples had arguments, yelled at each other, knowing that their anger didn't harm the love between them. Blake would hold himself back, fearing another scene; would he come to hate her because he felt restricted by her? Blake deserved someone whole, someone free, as he was free.

"It would probably be better if I left," she said, the words trembling despite all she could do to hold her tone level.

The arm under her neck tensed, and he rose up on his elbow, looming over her in the darkness. "No," he said, and he achieved the firmness that she had striven for but failed to obtain. "You're where you belong, and you're going to stay here. We're getting married, remember?"

"That's what I'm trying to say," she protested. "How can we have any sort of life together if you're constantly watching what you say and do, afraid of upsetting me? You'd hate me, and I'd hate myself!"

"You're worrying about nothing," he said shortly. "I'll never hate you, so forget that line."

The edge in his voice cut her like a razor, and she fell silent, wondering why she had ever been fool enough to actually believe that they could have a normal life together. She should have learned by now that love wasn't meant to be a part of her life. Blake didn't love her; hadn't her common sense told her that from the beginning? He was infatuated with her, lured by the challenge of seducing her and the hothouse atmosphere that his intense therapy program had generated. Hothouses produced spectacular blooms, but she should have remembered that those blooms wouldn't flourish in the real world.

They had to have that protected atmosphere; they withered and died when exposed to the often unfriendly elements of normal life.

Already the bloom of Blake's infatuation was dying, killed not by the attraction to another woman as she had feared, but by daily exposure to reality.

Chapter Twelve

Knowing that it was happening was one thing; preparing herself for it was another. Every time she glanced up and caught Blake watching her broodingly she had to turn away to hide the pain that twisted inside her. She knew that he was regretting his marriage proposal, but his pride wouldn't allow him to back out of it. Probably he would never ask to be released from the engagement; she would have to do the severing. She sensed that he still wasn't ready to admit that he'd been wrong, so she didn't try to take any action to break their engagement now. When the time came she would know, and she would free him.

New Year's passed, and, as he had planned, he began working full time. She could tell that he was always eager to leave the house, and he began to bring home a briefcase crammed with papers. Dione wondered if he brought work home so he would have an excuse to shut himself in the study and escape her company; then he mentioned that Richard had taken his suggestion and indulged in a month of vacation, and she felt guilty. He really was buried in paperwork without Richard to take part of the load off him.

One night he came to bed after midnight and groaned wearily as his body relaxed. Dione turned over and touched his cheek, trailing her fingers over his skin and feeling the prickle of his beard. "Do you need a massage to relax?" she asked quietly.

"Would you mind?" he sighed. "My neck and shoulders have a permanent kink in them from leaning over a desk. My God, no wonder Richard and Serena are having problems; he's had two years of this, and that's enough to drive any man crazy."

He rolled over on his stomach, and Dione pulled her nightgown up to her thighs, straddling his back and leaning forward to work her magic on his tight muscles. As her kneading fingers dug into his flesh he made a muffled sound of pain, then sighed blissfully as the tension left him.

"Have you seen Serena lately?" he asked.

Her fingers paused for a moment, then resumed their movement. "No," she replied. "She hasn't even called. Have you talked to her?"

"Not since the night she had dinner here and told us she and Richard had separated. I think I'll call her tomorrow. Ahhh, that feels good. Right there. I feel as if I've been beaten."

She rolled her knuckles up and down his spine, paying particular attention to the spot that he had indicated needed extra work. He made little grunting

noises every time she touched a tender area, and she began to laugh. "You sound like a pig," she teased.
"Who cares? I'm enjoying this. I've missed the massages; several times I've started to call you and ask you to come to the plant to give me a rubdown, but it didn't seem like such a smart thing to do in a busy day."
"Why not?" she asked tartly, a little irritated that he considered her to be a traveling massage parlor, and a lot irritated that he hadn't followed through on his idea.
He laughed and rolled over, deftly keeping his body between her thighs. "Because," he murmured, "this is what usually happens to me during one of your massages. Let me tell you, I had a hell of a time keeping you from realizing what was going on when you thought I was impotent and were so sweetly trying to turn me on to prove that I wasn't."
She moved off him like a rocket, her entire body blushing. "What?" she yelled furiously. "You *knew* what I was doing, and you let me go ahead and make a fool of myself?"
He laughed uproariously, reaching out to pull her into his embrace. "It didn't take me long to figure it out," he admitted, still chuckling. "As if you needed sexy clothes to turn me on… but I couldn't let you know what you were doing to me without frightening you away. Honey, you weren't seducing me; *I* was seducing *you,* but I had to let you think it was the other way around."
She burned with embarrassment, thinking of the things she had done, the revealing clothes she had worn. Then she felt his hand on her breast, and the heat intensified, but no longer from shame. He hadn't made love to her for several days; he had been coming to bed late and falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, and she had missed his touch.
"You don't really mind, do you?" he asked softly, pulling the nightgown over her head. "What are you doing with this thing on?"
"I get cold when you aren't in the bed," she explained, stretching her body in his arms, reveling in the rasp of his hair-roughened skin against hers.
With a growl he rolled her to her back and buried his face between her breasts. "I'm here now, so you don't need it," he said, his voice muffled by her flesh. He took her quickly, impatient after the days of abstinence. She held him even after he was asleep, her doubts momentarily eased by the passion of his lovemaking.

Serena called the next morning. "I've just talked to Blake," she said, laughing a little. "He practically ordered me to take you out to lunch. He said that you're going a little stir crazy with him so tied up at work. Does he really think I believe that?"
Dione laughed. "He thinks you're sitting there alone, brooding, and he wants you to get out of the house for a while. Shall we make him happy and go out to lunch?"
"Why not? I'll pick you up at twelve."
"I'm not brooding," Serena said firmly a few hours later as she bit into a crisp radish. "Richard wanted some time to himself, and I gave it to him. We didn't have an argument or anything like that. He's in Aspen. He loves to ski, and I've never learned how; he hasn't been since we were married, because he wouldn't do anything that I couldn't enjoy. I'm not athletic," she explained, grinning.
"You're not upset at all?"
"Of course I'm upset, but I'm borrowing a page from your book and keeping it all under control." She shrugged lightly. "We had a long conversation before he left, got everything out in the open. That's a first for Richard. He's so good at keeping his thoughts to himself that sometimes I want to scream. We decided that he's been under so much stress that the best thing to do was to get away from each other, let him relax and catch up on his sleep, before we did any more talking."
"Have you talked to him since he left?"
"No. That was part of the bargain. When he comes back we'll settle things once and for all."
Serena had changed a lot in the months since they had met, becoming a self-assured woman. Things might not work out for her, but she was facing the future with her chin up; Dione only hoped that she could do the same. While Blake was making love to her, she could forget that he was growing away from her, but they couldn't spend the rest of their lives in bed. The ruby heart rested warmly in the valley between her breasts; he had said that it was his heart, and she wouldn't be selfish. She would give his heart back to him.
"I know what we can do," Serena said firmly. "Let's go shopping! We can look for your wedding dress."
Shopping was Serena's cure-all, and Dione went along with it, though she couldn't work up any enthusiasm for any of the dresses that they looked at.

How could she be concerned with a dress for a wedding that would never take place?

Blake was so tired when he came home that night that his limp was more pronounced, but he cross-examined her over dinner, asking for a word-for-word repetition of everything Serena had said, how she had looked, if she had seemed worried. Dione tried to reassure him, but she could tell that he was anxious about his sister.

The passion of the night before wasn't repeated; when he finally came to bed he threw his arm over her and went to sleep before his mumbled "Good night" was out of his mouth. She listened to his steady breathing for a long time, unwilling to sleep and miss a moment of her time with him.

With calm resignation she made plans the next day for her future; she contacted Dr. Norwood and accepted a case, then booked a flight to Milwaukee. Her next patient was still hospitalized, but in three weeks he would be able to begin therapy, so that gave her three weeks to spend with Blake.

Every day he became more distant from her, more involved in his work, needing less from her. In her weak moments she tried to tell herself that it was just because he had so much work to do, but she couldn't believe that for long. She responded by doing as she had always done, shoving her pain and misery into a dark corner of her mind and building a wall around them. If it killed her, she would still leave him with her shoulders straight and not distress him by crying all over him. He wouldn't like that, and she wasn't the weepy type, anyway. She wouldn't just hit him with it; she would tell him that she was having doubts about their marriage, and that she thought it would be a good idea for them to spend some time apart. She would tell him that she'd taken another case, and that when it was finished they would discuss their situation. His conscience wouldn't bother him if she did it that way; he would be relieved that it was her idea.

She learned that Richard was back in town when he called her and asked if he could talk to her privately. She hesitated, and he said wryly, "Serena knows that I'm here. She suggested that I talk to you."

Why would Serena want Richard to talk to Dione?

What could she possibly tell him that Serena couldn't say just as well? But a third party could sometimes see more clearly than the ones involved, so she agreed.

He drove over early that afternoon. He looked younger than he had, tanned from his weeks in Aspen in the winter sun, and far more relaxed. The lines of strain that had been in his face were gone, replaced by a smile.
"You're even more beautiful than before," he said, leaning down to kiss her cheek. She didn't shy away from him now; Blake had taught her that not all men were to be feared. She smiled up at him.
"You're pretty great looking yourself. I gather you've seen Serena?"
"We had dinner together last night. She sent me to you."
"But why?" Dione asked, bewildered. They walked out to the courtyard and sat down in the sun. With the walls of the house keeping any wind away from them, the cool January day was pleasant, and she didn't even need a sweater.
Richard leaned against the concrete back of the bench, crossing his ankle over his knee. She noticed idly that he was wearing jeans, the only time she'd ever seen him dressed so casually, and a blue pullover sweater that made his gray eyes seem blue. "Because she's a smart woman," he mused. "She's known from the beginning that I was attracted to you, and our marriage can't work if you're between us."
Dione's eyes widened. "What?" she asked weakly. "But… but Serena's been so friendly, so open…"
"As I said, she's a smart woman. She knew that you didn't return my interest. You've never been able to see anyone but Blake. How I feel about you is something that I have to work out."
She shook her head. "This is ridiculous. You don't love me; you never have. You're in love with Serena."
"I know," he admitted, and laughed. "But for a while I was pretty confused. Serena didn't seem to care if I was around or not, and there you were, so damned lovely that it hurt to look at you, so strong and sure of yourself. You knew what you wanted and didn't let anything stand in your way. The contrast was striking."
Was that how he had seen her? As strong and confident? Hadn't he realized that she was that way only in her profession, that privately she was crippled, afraid of letting anyone get close to her? It was strange that, as astute as Richard was, he hadn't seen her as she really was.
"And now?" she asked.
"I'll always admire you," he chuckled. "But this visit is just for Serena's peace of mind. You were right all along; I love her, and I've been punishing

her because she relied on Blake instead of me. I freely admit to the illogic of it, but people in love aren't logical."
"She wanted you to be certain before you went back to her."
"That's right. And I am certain. I love skiing, but I spent the entire time I was in Aspen wishing that she was with me. You should hang out a shingle as a doctor in psychology," he said, laughing, and put his arm on her shoulder to hug her.
She walked him to the door and sent him on his way, glad that he'd ironed out his problems, but she was also depressed at the thought that she'd been involved in any way at all, however innocently. She walked back out to the courtyard and resumed her seat. She was tired, so tired of these months of emotional strain. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the winter sun, letting her thoughts drift.
"How long had he been here?"
The harsh voice sliced through the air and she jumped, getting to her feet and whirling to face Blake. "You're early," she stammered.
"I know," he said, his voice as hard and cold as his face. "I haven't been able to spend much time with you lately, and when I managed to get everything cleared for today I decided to surprise you. I didn't mean to interrupt anything," he finished with a sneer.
A sick feeling in her stomach made her swallow before she answered. "You didn't," she said briefly, lifting her chin. Suddenly she knew that this was it, that he would use this as an excuse to break their engagement, and she couldn't bear to listen to him saying things that would break her heart. It would break anyway when she left, but she didn't want to have the memory of hard words between them.
"He hadn't been here over five minutes," she said remotely, lifting her hand to cut him off when he started to speak. "He and Serena have patched up their differences, and he wanted to talk to me. She sent him over, as a matter of fact, but you're welcome to call her if you don't believe me."
His eyes sharpened, and he took a step toward her, his hand reaching out. Dione backed away. It had to be now, before he touched her. He might not love her, but she knew that he desired her, and with them, touching led inevitably to sex. That was another thing she couldn't bear, making love with him and knowing it was the last time.
"Now is as good a time as any to tell you," she said, still in that remote voice, her face an expressionless mask. "I've accepted another case, and I'll

be leaving in a few days. At least, those were my original plans, but now I think it would be best if I left tomorrow, don't you?"
His skin tightened over his cheekbones. "What are you saying?" he demanded fiercely.
"That I'm breaking our engagement," she said, fumbling with the delicate clasp at the back of her neck and finally releasing it. She took the ruby heart and held it out to him.
He didn't take it. He was staring at her, his face white. "Why?" he asked, grinding the word out through lips that barely moved.
She sighed wearily, rubbing her forehead. "Haven't you realized by now that you don't love me?"
"If you think that, why did you set a wedding date?" he rasped.
She gave him a thin smile. "You were making love to me," she said gently.
"I wasn't in my right mind. I've known all along that you didn't love me," she burst out, desperate to make him understand. She couldn't hold out much longer. "I humored you, but it's time now for it to end. You've changed these past weeks, needing me less and less."
"Humored me!" he shouted, clenching his fists. "Were you also 'humoring me' when we made love? I'll be damned if you were!"
She winced. "No. That was real… and it was a mistake. I've never been involved with a patient before, and I'll never let it happen again. It gets too… complicated."
"Lady, I don't believe you!" he said in disbelief. "You're just going to waltz out of here as if nothing ever happened, aren't you? You're going to mark me down as a mistake and forget about me."
No, he was wrong. She'd never be able to forget him. She stared at him with pain-glazed eyes, feeling as if she were shattering inside. A sickening headache pounded in her temples, and when she held the necklace out to him again her hand was trembling. "Why are you arguing?" she asked raggedly. "You should be glad. I'm letting you off the hook. Just think how miserable you'd be, married to someone you don't love."
He reached out and took the necklace, letting the tiny gold links drip over his fingers like metal tears. The sun pierced the ruby heart, casting a red shadow that danced over the white bench beside her. Savagely he shoved it into his pocket. "Then what are you waiting for?" he shouted. "Go on, get out! What do you want me to do, break down and beg you to stay?"

She swayed, then steadied herself. "No," she whispered. "I've never wanted you to beg for anything." She moved slowly past him, her legs weak and unwilling to work as they should. She would pack and go to a hotel, and try to get an earlier flight rather than waiting until her original flight was scheduled. She hadn't imagined that it would be so difficult, or that she would feel so battered. This was worse, far worse, than anything Scott had ever done to her. He had hurt her physically and mentally, but he had never been able to touch her heart. It was killing her to leave Blake, but she had to do it.

Her headache was worse; as she stumbled around the bedroom trying to gather her clothing she had to grab at the furniture several times to keep from falling to her knees. Her mind was muddied, her thoughts jumbled, and nothing made much sense except the overpowering need she had to be gone. She had to leave before she was hurt any more, because she didn't think she'd be able to live if anything else happened.

"Stop it," a low voice commanded, and a hand caught her wrist, pulling her fingers away from the lingerie that she had been tossing carelessly into her suitcase. "You can pack later, when you're feeling better. You have a headache, don't you?"

She turned her head to look at him and almost staggered when her vision swayed alarmingly. "Yes," she mumbled.

"I thought so. I watched you practically crawl up the stairs." He put his arm around her waist, a curiously impersonal touch, and led her to the bed where they had shared so many nights. "Come on, you need a nap. You surprise me; I didn't think you were the type who lived on nerves, but this is a tension headache if I've ever seen one." His fingers moved down the front of her blouse, slipping the buttons out of their holes, and he eased the garment off her.

"I'm almost never sick," she apologized. "I'm sorry." She let him unsnap her bra and toss it aside. No, it wasn't a matter of *letting* him do anything. The truth was that she didn't feel capable of struggling with him over who would remove her clothes, and she badly needed the nap he had suggested. It wasn't as if he hadn't already seen every inch of her body. He eased her down on the bed and unfastened her slacks, sliding an arm under her and lifting her so he could pull them down over her hips. Her shoes came off with the slacks; then his hands returned and made short work of the filmy panties that were her last remaining garment.

Gently he turned her on her stomach, and she sighed as he began to rub the tight muscles in her neck. "I'm returning the favor," he murmured. "Just think of all the massages you've given me. Relax and go to sleep. You're tired, too tired to do anything right now. Sleep, darling."

She did sleep, deeply and without dreaming, sedated by his strong fingers as they rubbed the aching tension from her back and shoulders. It was dark when she woke, but her headache was gone. She felt fuzzy and disoriented, and she blinked at the dark form that rose from a chair beside the bed.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, pushing her heavy hair away from her face. He turned on the lamp and sat down on the edge of the bed, surveying her with narrowed eyes, as if gauging for himself how well she was feeling.

"Thank you for taking care of me," she said awkwardly. "I'll pack now, and go to a hotel—"

"It's too late to go anywhere tonight," he interrupted. "You've slept for hours. Alberta left a plate wanning for you, if you feel like eating. I think you should try to eat something, or you'll be sick again. I didn't realize what a strain you had been under," he added thoughtfully.

She was hungry, and she sat up, holding the sheet to her. "I feel as if I could eat a cow," she said ruefully.

He chuckled softly. "I hope you'll settle for something less than a whole cow," he said, untangling a nightgown from the jumble of clothing that still littered the bed. He plucked the sheet away from her fingers and settled the nightgown over her head as impersonally as if he were dressing a child. Then he found her robe, and she obediently slid her arms into the sleeves while he held it.

"You don't have to coddle me," she said. "I feel much better. After food, I want a shower, and then I'll be fine."

"I like coddling you," he replied. "Just think of how many times you helped me to dress, how many times you coaxed me to eat, how many times you've picked me up when I lay sprawled on the floor."

He walked downstairs with her and sat beside her while she ate. She could feel his steady gaze on her, but the anger that had been there earlier was gone. Had it been only pride that made him lash out at her; did he now realize that she was right?

When she went back upstairs he was right behind her. She looked at him questioningly when he entered the bedroom with her. "Take your shower,"

he said, taking her shoulders and turning her in the direction of the bathroom. "I'll wait out here for you. I want to make sure you're okay before I go to bed."
"I'm fine," she protested.
"I'll stay," he said firmly, and that was that. Knowing that he was waiting, she hurried through her shower. When she came out of the bathroom he was sitting in the chair he'd occupied before, and he got to his feet.
"Bedtime." He smiled, pushing the robe off her shoulders. She hadn't fastened it, knowing that she would be taking it right off again, and it slipped to the floor. He leaned down and lifted her off her feet, then deposited her on the bed. She gasped and clutched at his shoulder.
"What was that for?" she asked, looking up at him.
"For this," he answered calmly, and kissed her. It was a deeply intimate kiss, his mouth opening over hers and his tongue moving in to touch hers. She dug her nails into his shoulder in surprise.
"Let me go," she said, pulling her mouth away from his.
"I'll let you go tomorrow," he murmured. "Tonight is mine."
He bent down to her again, and she rolled her head away; denied the sweet bloom of her lips, he found the sensitive slope where her neck met her shoulder and nipped at it with his teeth, making her gasp again. He dipped his hand into the bodice of her nightgown, rubbing his palm over the rich globes that had lured him.
"Blake… don't do this," she pleaded achingly.
"Why? You love me to touch your breasts," he countered.
She turned her head to look at him, and her lips were trembling. "Yes," she admitted. "But I'm leaving tomorrow. This… will only make it more difficult. I've accepted another job, and I have to go."
"I understand," he murmured, still stroking her flesh. "I'll put you on a plane tomorrow, if that's what you want, but we still have tonight together, and I want to spend it making love to you. Don't you like what we do to each other? Don't you like making me go out of my skull? You do. You make me wild, with your body like hot silk on me. One more night, darling. Let us have this last night together."
It was exactly what she hadn't wanted, to make love to him and know that she never would again, but the sensual promise he was making her with his hands and body was a heady lure. One more night, one more memory.

"All right," she whispered, beginning to unbutton his shirt. His hot flesh beckoned her, and she pressed her lips to him, feeling the curling hair under her mouth and the shiver that rippled over him. The intoxicating excitement that always seized her at his touch was taking over again, and she unbuckled his pants, helped him kick them away. He parted her legs and fit himself between them, the fever of feeling so high that no more preparation was needed, no more loving required to make her ready for him.
With a slow, smooth thrust he took her, and she adjusted her body to his weight and motion, letting the excitement well up like a cresting wave and take her away.
One more night. Then it would be finished.

Chapter Thirteen

It didn't get any better. She had thought that it would get easier, even if the wound never quite healed, but from the time Blake saw her onto the plane at Sky Harbor Airport, the hurting never peaked, then declined. It stayed with her, eating at her. If she could forget about it during the day while she worked with Kevin, who was her new patient, it returned full force at night when she went to bed and lay there alone.
Milwaukee was at the opposite end of the world from Phoenix, or seemed like it. In a matter of a few hours she had exchanged a dry desert for several feet of snow, and she couldn't seem to get warm. The Colberts were nice, friendly people, anxious to do what they could to help her with Kevin, and Kevin was a darling, but he wasn't Blake. The childish arms that hugged her so spontaneously didn't satisfy the need she felt for strong, masculine ones, nor did the wet, loving kisses that Kevin and his little sister, Amy, gave her every night make her forget the kisses that had drowned her in a sea of sexual pleasure.
She had never thought that she would miss the fights that she and Blake had had, the loud and boisterous arguments, but she did. She missed everything about him, from his early-morning grumpiness to the wicked smile that lighted his face when he was teasing her.
With foolish desperation, she hoped that the last night they'd had together would result in a baby; he hadn't taken any precautions that night, and for

almost three weeks she was able to dream, to pretend. Then she discovered that it wasn't to be, and her world turned that much darker.
When she received a large check in the mail, forwarded by Dr. Norwood, it was all she could do to keep from screaming aloud in pain when she saw his signature. She wanted to tear it up, but she couldn't. The check was for the agreed-upon amount for her services, and she needed the money. She traced her fingertip over the bold, angular script. It was just as she had known it would be; once she was away from him, she became only a part of his past. She had done what was best for him, but she hadn't known that she would have to live the rest of her life on the fine edge of agony.
With grim determination she set about rebuilding the defenses that he had torn down. She had to have them, to push the pain and memories behind, to hold the darkness at bay. Someday, she thought, looking at the wintry gray sky, she would find pleasure in living again. Someday the sun would shine again.
She had been with the Colberts exactly one month when she was called to the telephone. Frowning in perplexity, she gave Kevin his coloring book and crayons to keep him occupied until she returned, then went out to the hall to answer the phone.
"It's a man," Francine Colbert whispered, smiling at her in delight; then she left to see what had happened to make Amy suddenly bellow as if she were being scalped.
Dione put the phone to her ear. "Hello," she said cautiously.
"I'm not going to bite you," a deep, rich voice said in amusement, and she slumped against the wall as her knees threatened to buckle under her.
"Blake!" she whispered.
"You've been there a month," he said. "Has your patient fallen in love with you yet?"
She closed her eyes, fighting down the mingled pain and pleasure that made her throat threaten to close. Hearing his voice made her weak all over, and she didn't know if she wanted to laugh or cry. "Yes," she gulped. "He's madly in love with me."
"What does he look like?" he growled.
"He's a gorgeous blond, with big blue eyes, not as dark as yours. He pouts for hours if he doesn't win when we play Go Fish," she said, and wiped a stray tear from her cheek.
Blake chuckled. "He sounds like real competition. How tall is he?"

"Oh, I don't know. About as tall as your average five-year-old, I suppose," she said.
"Well, that's a relief. I suppose I can leave you alone with him for a few more months."
She almost dropped the phone and had to grab the cord before it got away from her completely. Putting it back to her ear, she heard him say, "Are you still there?"
"Yes," she said, and wiped another tear away.
"I've been doing a lot of thinking," he said casually. "You told me over and over again that I didn't love you; you explained in great detail why I couldn't love you. But one thing that you never said was that you don't love me, and it seems to me that should have been your number-one reason for calling off a wedding. Well?"
What did he want? To reassure himself that she was all right, that she wasn't pining away? She bit her lip, then said weakly, "I don't love you."
"You're lying," he snapped in return, and she could feel his temper rising. "You're so crazy about me that you're standing there crying, aren't you?"
"No," she denied, fiercely dashing the wetness from her face.
"You're lying again. I've got a meeting waiting for me, so I'll let you get back to your patient, but I'm not through with you. If you thought you could end it by getting on a plane, you have a lot to learn about me. I'll be calling you again. Dream about me, honey."
"I will not!" she said fiercely, but she said it to a dial tone, and she *was* lying anyway. She dreamed about him almost every night and woke up with her pillow damp from the tears she'd shed in her sleep.
Thoroughly rattled, she returned to Kevin, and delighted him by losing a game of Go Fish.
Over the next few days her nerves gradually settled down, and she stopped jumping every time the phone rang. A blizzard shut the city down for two days, knocking out phone service and the electricity. The electricity was restored in a matter of hours, keeping them from freezing, but the phone service waited until clear skies had returned. She was out in the snow with Kevin and Amy, building a snowman for them with their inexpert but hilarious help, when Francine called her.
"Dione, you have a call! It's your friend again. Come on in; I'll bring the children in and get them dried off."

"Awww, Mommy," Kevin protested, but Francine was already pushing his little wheelchair inside, and Amy followed obediently.
"Hello," Blake said warmly after she stammered out a hesitant greeting. "Are you pregnant?"
This time she was prepared and held on tightly to the receiver. "No. I… I thought about that, too, but everything's all right."
"Good. I didn't mean to get carried away. Serena is pregnant. She didn't waste any time when Richard came back. She was so excited at the possibility that she couldn't wait to take one of those early warning tests, or whatever you call them."
"I'm happy for her. How do you feel about being an uncle?"
"It's okay by me, but I'd rather be a father."
She cautiously leaned against the wall. "What do you mean?"
"I mean that when we get married I'm going to throw away my whole supply of—"
"We're not getting married!" she yelped, then glanced around to see if anyone had heard her. No one was in sight, so she guessed that Francine was still occupied with the children.
"Sure we are," he returned calmly. "On the first of May. You set the date yourself. Don't you remember? I was making love to you."
"I remember," she whispered. "But don't you remember? I broke the engagement. I gave your heart back to you."
"That's what you think," he said. "We're getting married if I have to drag you kicking and screaming back to Phoenix."
Again she was left listening to a dial tone.
She couldn't make any sense out of what he was doing. Sleep got harder and harder to attain, and she lay awake going over the possibilities. Why would he insist that they were getting married? Why couldn't he just let it go?
It was a week before he called her again, and Francine had an amused gleam in her eye when she handed her the phone. "It's that dishy guy again," she said as Dione lifted the receiver to her ear.
"Tell her thank you," Blake chuckled. "How are you, honey?"
"Blake, why are you calling me?" she asked in desperation.
"Why shouldn't I call you? Is it against the law for a man to talk to the woman he's going to marry?"
"I'm not going to marry you!" she said, and this time she bellowed it. Francine popped her head out of the kitchen and grinned at her.

Blake was laughing. "Sure you are. You already know all my bad habits and love me anyway; what could be better?"
"Would you listen to reason?" she yelled. "It's out of the question for me to marry you!"
"You're the one who's not listening," he countered. "You love me, and I love you. I don't know why you're so convinced that I can't love you, but you're wrong. Just think of the fun we're going to have while I show you how wrong you are."
"This is crazy," she moaned.
"No, this isn't crazy. You've got some crazy ideas, though, and you're going to get rid of them. You've convinced yourself that no one is going to love you, and you walked away from me, knowing that it was tearing me apart and half killing yourself at the same time. Your mother didn't love you, and Scott didn't love you, but they were only two people. How many people since then have loved you, and you pushed them away because you were afraid of getting hurt again? I'm not going to let you push me away, honey. Think about it."
"Some guy," Francine teased when Dione walked into the kitchen. Then she saw Dione's white face and quickly pushed a chair at her, then poured a cup of coffee. "Is something wrong?"
"Yes. No. I don't know." Dazed, she drank the coffee, then raised stunned golden eyes to the other woman. "He wants to marry me."
"So I gathered. What's so surprising about that? I imagine a lot of men have wanted to marry you."
"He won't take no for an answer," she said abstractedly.
"If he looks as great as he sounds, why would you want him to take no for an answer?" Francine asked practically. "Unless he's a bum."
"No, he's not a bum. He's… even greater than he sounds."
"Do you love him?"
Dione buried her face in her hands. "So much that I've been about to die without him."
"Then marry him!" Francine sat down beside her. "Marry him, and whatever problem is keeping you apart will be settled later. You'd be surprised how many problems people can settle when they're sleeping in the same bed every night and they wake up to the same face every morning. Don't be afraid to take the chance; every marriage is a gamble, but then so is

walking across the street. If you didn't take the chance you'd never get to the other side."
Words tumbled around in Dione's mind that night as she lay sleeplessly in bed..Blake had said that she was afraid of getting hurt again, and it was the truth. But was she so afraid of getting hurt that she had deliberately turned her back on a man who loved her?
No one had ever loved her before. No one had worried about her, held her when she cried, comforted her when she was upset…
Except Blake. He had done all those things. Even Richard had thought she was strong and confident, but Blake had seen beneath the act, had realized how vulnerable she was, how easily hurt. Blake had replaced the memories of violence with the memories of love. When she dreamed of a man's touch now it was his touch she dreamed of, and it filled her with aching need.
Blake loved her! It was incredible, but she had to believe it. She had set him free, expecting him to forget her, but it hadn't happened like that. It wasn't a case of "out of sight, out of mind." He had gone to the trouble of finding out where she was, and he had given her time to think about a life without him before he called. He hadn't given up.
As the days passed she went through her routine with Kevin with a smile on her face, humming constantly. He was so willing to do anything she asked that it was a pleasure to work with him, and she knew that soon he wouldn't need her any longer. The automobile accident that had injured him was long forgotten, and all he was concerned with now was if he would be able to play ball by the time summer came. ;
"How's your patient doing?" Blake asked the next time he called, and Dione smiled at the sound of his voice.
"He's doing great. I'm about ready to graduate him to a walker."
"That's good news, and not just for him. That means you'll be able to take a long honeymoon."
She didn't say anything, just stood there smiling. No, Blake Remington didn't give up. Any other man would have thrown up his hands in disgust, but when Blake decided that he wanted something, he went after it.
"Have you fainted?" he asked warily.
"No," she said, and burst into tears. "It's just that I love you so much, and I miss you."
He drew a long, shuddering breath. "Well, thank God," he muttered. "I was beginning to think I really would have to kidnap you. Lady, it's going to

take a lifetime of massages to make up for what you've put me through."
"I'll even sign a contract, if you want," she said, swiping at the tears.
"Oh, I want, all right. An ironclad contract. What day can I fetch you? If I know you, you have Kevin's schedule mapped out to the very day you kiss him good-bye and walk away, and I'm going to be there to meet you when you walk out the door. You're not getting out of my sight until you're Mrs. Remington."
"April twelfth," she said, laughing and crying at the same time.
"I'll be there."
He *was* there, leaning on the doorbell at nine o'clock sharp that morning, while a spring snowstorm dumped its white load on his unprotected head. When Francine opened the door he grinned at her. "I've come for Dione," Blake said. "Is she awake yet?"
Francine opened the door wider, smiling at the tall man with the slight limp who entered her house. There was a reckless air about him; he was the sort of man who didn't let the woman he loved walk away from him.
"She's trying to get everything packed, but the children are helping her and it could take a while," Francine explained. "I imagine they're both wrapped around her legs and crying."
"I understand the feeling," he muttered, and at Francine's questioning look he grinned again. "I'm one of her ex-patients," he explained.
"Take good care of her," Francine pleaded. "She's been so good to Kevin, keeping his spirits up, not letting him get bored. She's special."
"I know," he said gently.
Dione came around the turn of the stairs with two tearful children in her arms. She stopped when she saw Blake, and her entire face lighted up. "You came," she breathed, as if she hadn't dared to let herself really believe it.
"With bells on," he said, going up the steps in a graceful leap that made a mockery of the remaining limp. There was no way to get his arms around her without including the children, so he pulled all three of them to him and kissed her. Amy stuck her finger between their mouths and giggled.
Blake drew back and gave the little girl a rueful look, which she returned with wide-eyed innocence. "Are you the man who's taking Dee away?" Kevin asked tearfully, lifting his wet face from Dione's neck.
"Yes, I am," Blake replied gravely, "but I promise to take good care of her if you'll let me have her. I was her patient, too, and I need her a lot. My leg still hurts me at night, and she has to rub it."

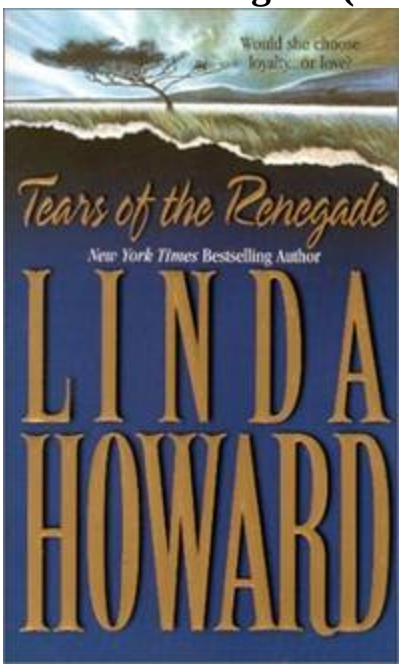
Kevin could understand that, and after a moment he nodded. "All right," he sighed. "She's real good at rubbing legs."
"Kevin, let Dione put you down," Francine directed. When both of the children were on the floor, Amy wrapped her plump little arms around Blake's leg and looked up a long, long way to his face. He looked down at her, then lifted his eyes to Dione's face. "At least two," he said. "And maybe even three, if you don't give me a daughter on your first two tries."
"I'm thirty years old, remember," she said cautiously. "Almost thirty-one."
"So? You have the body of an eighteen-year-old, only in better shape. I should know," he murmured, the hot light in his eyes making her cheeks turn pink. In a normal voice he said, "Are you packed?"
"Yes, I'll bring my suitcases down. You wait right here," she said hurriedly, turning and sprinting up the stairs. Her heart was galloping in her chest, and it wasn't from the stairs. Just seeing him again had been like getting kicked, except that it didn't hurt. She felt alive, truly alive; even her fingertips were tingling with joy. In eighteen days she would be getting married!
"Hurry it up!" he called, and she shivered with delight. Picking up her two suitcases, she ran down the stairs.
When they were in the car he sat for a long moment just looking at her. Francine and the children had said their last good-byes in the house, not coming out into the snow, so they were all alone. The snow had already covered the windows of the car, encasing them in a white cocoon.
"I have something for you," he murmured, reaching into his pocket. He withdrew the ruby heart and dangled it before her eyes. "You might as well keep it," he said as he clasped it around her neck. "It never did work right after you tried to give it back, anyway."
Tears burned her eyes as the ruby heart slid down to its resting place between her breasts. "I love you," she said unsteadily.
"I know. I had some bad moments when you first gave the heart back to me, but after I thought about it, I realized how frightened you were. I had to let you go to convince you that I loved you. Lady, that was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, letting you get on the plane without me. Learning how to walk again was child's play compared to that."
"I'll make it up to you," she whispered, going into his arms. His familiar scent teased her senses, and she inhaled it delightedly. The smell of him brought back hot, sunny days and the echo of laughter.

"Starting tonight," he threatened. "Or better yet, as soon as we can get to the hotel room I've booked for us."
"Aren't we flying back to Phoenix today?" she asked, lifting her head in surprise.
"In case you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of a snowstorm." He grinned. "All flights are grounded until it clears, which could be days and days. How would you like to spend days and days in bed with me?"
"I'll try to bear it," she sighed.
"Do you spell that b-a-r-e?" he asked, nuzzling her neck. Then, slowly, as if he had waited as long as he could, he closed his lips over hers. He kissed her for a long time, savoring the taste and feel of her, then pulled himself away with a visible effort.
"I'm able to drive now," he said unnecessarily as he put the car into gear.
"So I see."
"And I'm flying again. I tested a new engine last week—"
"Are you going to keep doing the dangerous stuff?" she interrupted.
He eyed her. "I've been thinking about that. I don't think I'll be taking as many chances as I used to. There's too much excitement going on at home for me to risk missing any of it."
She was swimming laps, the hot May desert sun beating down on her head. The exercise felt good to her body, stretching muscles that had felt cramped. She had missed the pool and the well-equipped little gym where she and Blake had played out so many of their crises. That morning she had gone to a Phoenix hospital and been hired on the spot; she would miss the intensity of a one-on-one therapeutic relationship, but the regular hours would permit her to be with Blake at night and still keep doing the work she loved.
"Hey!" a deep voice called. "Are you in training for the Olympics?"
She began treading water. "What are you doing home so early?" she asked, pushing her hair out of her eyes.
"That's a fine welcome," her husband of two weeks grumbled. He shed his coat and draped it over one of the chairs, then pulled his tie loose. Dione watched as he systematically undressed, dropping his clothes on the chair until he stood as naked as the day he was born. He came into the water in a neat, shallow dive, and reached her with a few powerful strokes of his arms.
"If you get caught like that, don't blame me," she warned.
"It's too hot for clothes," he complained. "Did you get the job?"
"Of course I got the job," she sniffed.

"Conceited." He put his hand on top of her head and ducked her, which didn't bother her at all. She was as good a swimmer under water as she was on top of it, and she kicked her graceful legs, darting away from him. He caught up with her when she reached the edge.
"You never did say why you're home so early," she said, turning to face him.
"I came home to make love to my wife," he replied. "I couldn't keep my mind on what I was doing; I kept thinking about last night," he said, and watched in fascination as her eyes grew heavy-lidded with memory.
He moved in closer to her and pressed his mouth to hers, his hand going to the back of her head and slanting her mouth across his. Their tongues met in mutual desire, and Dione quivered, letting her body float against his. Her legs twined with his and found them steady.
"You're standing," she said, lifting her mouth away.
"I know." His hand moved purposefully up her back and deftly undipped her bikini top. He pulled it away from her and tossed it out of the pool. It landed on the tiles with a sodden plop. His fingers touched her breasts, cupping them together as he leaned forward and took another kiss.
With a moan she twined her arms around his neck; then she was wrapped around him like a vine. No matter how often he made love to her, it kept getting better and better as her body learned new ways of responding to him. The cool water lapped around them, but it didn't cool their hot skin. The fires within burned too brightly to be dampened by a little water.
He lifted her out of the water until her breasts were on a level with his mouth; then he feasted on the ripe curves that thrust so beguilingly at him.
"I love you," he groaned, pulling at the ties that held the miniscule bikini bottom on her hips.
"Blake! Not here," she protested, but her body lay against his in sweet abandon. "Someone will see. Miguel… Alberta…"
"Miguel isn't here," he whispered, sliding her down the length of his body. "And no one can see what we're doing. The glare of the sun on the water takes care of that. Put your legs around my hips," he directed.
Suddenly she laughed aloud, throwing her head back and lifting her face to the hot Phoenix sun. "You're still a daredevil," she crooned, catching her breath as he took her with a long, delicious slide of skin against skin. "You love to take chances."

She clung to his shoulders, her senses dazzled, drenched in the beauty of the day. He watched her face, watched the wonderful play of emotions in her exotic eyes, watched them grow slumbrous, watched her teeth catch that full, passionate lower lip as she quivered with the desire he was carefully building in her. "Lady," he chanted. "Woman. You're all mine, aren't you?"
She laughed again, drunk with pleasure. She lifted her arms to the sun. "For as long as you want me," she promised.
"Then you'll go to your grave as my lady," he said. "And even that won't be the end of it."

Tears of the Renegade (1985)



Chapter One

It was late, already after eleven o'clock, when the broad-shouldered man appeared in the open French doors. He stood there, perfectly at ease, watching the party with a sort of secret amusement. Susan noticed him immediately, though she seemed to be the only one who did so, and she studied him with faint surprise because she'd never seen him before. She would have remembered if she had; he wasn't the sort of man that anyone forgot.

He was tall and muscular, his white dinner jacket hugging his powerful shoulders with just enough precision to proclaim exquisite tailoring, yet what set him apart wasn't the almost dissolute sophistication that sat so easily on him; it was his face. He had the bold look of a desperado, an impression heightened by the level dark brows that shadowed eyes of a pale, crystalline blue. Lodestone eyes, she thought, feeling their effect even though he wasn't looking at her. A funny little quiver danced down her spine, and her senses were suddenly heightened—the music was more vibrant, the colors more intense, the heady perfume of the early spring night stronger. Every instinct within her was abruptly awakened as she stared at the stranger with a sort of primitive recognition. Women have always known which men are dangerous, and this man radiated danger.

It was there in his eyes, the self-assurance of a man who was willing to take risks, and willing to accept the consequences. An almost weary experience had hardened his features, and Susan knew, looking at him, that he would be man no one would lightly cross. Danger rode those broad shoulders like a visible mantle. He wasn't quite... civilized. He looked like modern-day pirate, from those bold eyes to the short, neatly trimmed dark beard and moustache that hid the lines of his jaw and upper lip; but she knew that they would be strong lines. Her eyes traveled to his hair, dark and thick and vibrant, styled in a casual perfection that most men would have paid a fortune to obtain, just long enough to brush his collar in the back with a hint of curl.

At first no one seemed to notice him, which was surprising, because to Susan he stood out like a tiger in a roomful of tabbies. Then, gradually, people began to look at him, and to her further astonishment a stunned, almost hostile silence began to fall, spreading quickly over the room, a contagious pall that leaped from one person to another. Suddenly uneasy,

she looked at her brother-in-law, Preston, who was the host and almost within touching distance of the newly arrived guest. Why didn't he welcome the man? But instead Preston had gone stiff, his face pale, staring at the stranger with the same sort of frozen horror one would eye a cobra coiled at one's feet.

The tidal wave of silence had spread to include the entire huge room now, even the musicians on the raised dais falling silent. Under the glittering prisms of the chandeliers, people were turning, staring, shock rippling over their faces. A shiver of alarm went down Susan's slender back; what was going on? Who was he? Something awful was going to happen. She sensed it, saw Preston tensing for a scene, and knew that she wasn't going to let it happen. Whoever he was, he was a guest of the Blackstones, and no one was going to be rude to him, not even Preston Blackstone. Instinctively she moved, stepping into the middle of the scene, murmuring "Excuse me" to people as she slipped past them. All attention turned to her as if drawn by a magnet, for her movement was the only movement in the room. The stranger turned his gaze on her, too; he watched her, and he waited, those strange lodestone eyes narrowing as he examined the slim, graceful woman whose features were as pure and serene as a cameo, clothed in a fragile cream silk dress that swirled about her ankles as she walked. A three-strand pearl choker encircled her delicate throat; with her soft dark hair drawn up on top of her head and a few tendrils curling about her temples, she was a dream, a mirage, as illusive as angel's breath. She looked as pure as a Victorian virgin, glowingly set apart from everyone else in the room, untouched and untouchable; and, to the man who watched her approach, an irresistible challenge.

Susan was unaware of the male intent that suddenly gleamed in the depths of his pale blue eyes. She was concerned only with avoiding the nastiness that had been brewing, something she didn't understand but nevertheless wanted to prevent. If anyone had a score to settle with this man, they could do it at another time and in another place. She nodded a silent command to the band as she walked, and obediently the music began again, hesitantly at first, then gaining in volume. By that time, Susan had reached the man, and she held her hand out to him. "Hello," she said, her low, musical voice carrying effortlessly to the people who listened openly, gaping at her. "I'm Susan Blackstone; won't you dance with me?"

Her hand was taken in long, hard fingers, but there was no handshake. Instead, her hand was simply held, and a slightly rough thumb rubbed over the back of her fingers, feeling the softness, the slender bones. A level brow quirked upward over the blue eyes that were even more compelling at close range, for now she could see that the pale blue was ringed by deep midnight. Staring into those eyes, she forgot that they were simply standing there while he held her hand until he used his grip on her to pull her into his embrace as he swung her into a dance, causing the skirt of her dress to wrap about his long legs as they moved.

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At first he simply held her, his strength moving her across the dance floor with such ease that her feet barely touched down. No one else was dancing, and Susan looked at several people, her level gaze issuing a quiet, gentle command that was obeyed without exception. Slowly they were joined by other dancers, and the man looked down at the woman he held in his arms. Susan felt the strength in the hand on her lower back as the fingers slowly spread and exerted a gentle pressure that was nevertheless inexorable. She found herself closer to him, her breasts lightly brushing against his hard chest, and she suddenly felt overwarm, the heat from his body enveloping her. The simple, graceful steps he was using in the dance were abruptly difficult to follow, and she forced herself to concentrate to keep from stepping on his toes.

A quivering, spring-loaded tension began coiling in her stomach, and her hand trembled in his. He squeezed her fingers warmly and said into her ear, "Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you."

His voice was a soft, deep rumble, as she had known it would be, and again that strange little shiver rippled through her. She lifted her head and found how close he had been when one of the soft curls at her temple became entangled in his beard, then slid free. She was almost dazed when she found herself looking directly at the chiseled strength of his lips, and she wondered with raw hunger if his mouth would be firm or soft, if he would taste as heady as he looked. With an inner groan, she jerked her thoughts away from the contemplation of how he would taste, what it would be like to kiss him. It was difficult to move her gaze higher, but she managed it, then wished that she hadn't; staring into those unusual eyes was almost more than her composure could bear. Why was she reacting like a teenager?

She was an adult, and even as a teenager she had been calm, nothing like the woman who now found herself quaking inside at a mere glance.

But she was seared by that glance, which surveyed, approved, asked, expected and... knew. He was one of those rare men who knew women, and were all the more dangerous for their knowledge. She responded to the danger alarm that all women possess by lifting her head with the innate dignity that characterized her every movement, and met that bold look. She said quietly, "What an odd thing to say," and she was proud that her voice hadn't trembled.
"Is it?" His voice was even softer than before, deeper, increasingly intimate. "Then you can't know what I'm thinking."
“No,” she said, and left it at that, not picking up on the innuendo that she knew was there.
"You will," he promised, his tone nothing now but a low rasp that touched every nerve in her body. As he spoke, the arm about her waist tightened to pull her closer, not so close that she would have felt obliged to protest, but still she was suddenly, mutely aware of the rippling muscles in his thighs as his legs moved against hers. Her fingers clenched restlessly on his shoulder as she fought the abrupt urge to slide them inside his collar, to feel his bare skin and discover for herself if her fingers would be singed by the fire of him. Shocked at herself, she kept her eyes determinedly on the shoulder seam of his jacket and tried not to think of the strength she could feel in the hand that clasped hers, or in the one that pressed so lightly on the small of her back... lightly; but she had the sudden thought that if she tried to move away from him, that hand would prevent the action.

"Your shoulders look like satin," he murmured roughly; before she could guess his intentions, his head dipped and his mouth, warm and hard, touched the soft, bare curve of her shoulder. A fine madness seized her and she quivered, her eyes drifting shut. God, he was making love to her on the dance floor, and she didn't even know his name! But everything in her was responding to him, totally independent of her control; she couldn't even control her thoughts, which kept leaping ahead to more dangerous subjects, wondering how his mouth would feel if it kept sliding down her body....
"Stop that," she said, to herself as well as to him, but her voice was lacking any element of command; instead it was soft and shivery, the way she felt.

Her skin felt as if it were on fire, but voluptuous shivers almost like a chill kept tickling her spine.
"Why?" he asked, his mouth making a sleek glissade from her shoulder to the sensitive hollow just before her ear.
"People are watching," she murmured weakly, sagging against him as her body went limp from the naming delight that went off like a rocket inside her. His arm tightened about her waist to hold her up, but the intensified sensations of being pressed to him only made her that much weaker. She drew a ragged breath; locked against him as she was, there was no mistaking the blatant male arousal of his body, and she lifted stunned, drowning eyes to him. He was watching her through narrowed eyes, the intense, laser quality of his gaze burning into her. There was no embarrassment or apology in his expression; he was a man, and reacted as such. Susan found, to her dazed astonishment, that the deeply feminine center of her didn't want an apology. She wanted instead to drop her head to his shoulder and collapse into his lean, knowledgeable hands; but she was acutely aware not only of the people watching him, but also that if she followed her very feminine inclination, he was likely to respond by carrying her away like a pirate stealing a lady who had taken his fancy. No matter how he made her feel, this man was still a stranger to her.
"I don't even know who you are," she gasped quietly, her nails digging into his shoulder.
"Would knowing my name make any difference?" He blew gently on one of the tendrils that lay on her temple, watching the silky hair lift and fall. "But if it makes you feel better, sweetheart, we're keeping it in the family."
He was teasing, his teeth glistening whitely as he smiled, and Susan caught her breath, holding it for a moment before she could control her voice again. "I don't understand," she admitted, lifting her face to him.
"Take another deep breath like that, and it won't matter if you understand or not," he muttered, making her searingly aware of how her breasts had flattened against the hard planes of flesh beneath the white jacket. His diamond-faceted gaze dipped to the softness of her mouth as he explained, "I'm a Blackstone, too, though they probably don't claim me."
Susan stared at him in bewilderment. "But I don't know you. Who are you?"
Again those animal-white teeth were revealed in a wicked grin that lifted the comers of his moustache. "Haven't you heard any gossip? The term 'black sheep' was probably invented especially for me."

Still she stared at him without comprehension, the graceful line of her throat vulnerable to his hungry scrutiny as she kept her head lifted the necessary inches to look at him. "But I don't know of any black sheep. What's your name?" ...

"Cord Blackstone," he replied readily enough. "First cousin to Vance and Preston Blackstone; only son of Elias and Marjorie Blackstone; born November third, probably nine months to the day after Dad returned from his tour of duty in Europe, though I never could get Mother to admit it," he finished, that wicked, fascinating grin flashing again like a beacon on a dark night.

“But what about you, sweetheart? If you're a Blackstone, you're not a natural one. I'd remember any blood relative who looked like you. So, which of my esteemed cousins are you married to?"

"Vance," she said, an echo of pain shadowing her delicate features for a moment. It was a credit to her strength of will that she was able to say evenly, "He's dead, you know," but nothing could mask the desolation that suddenly dimmed the luminous quality of her eyes.

The hard arms about her squeezed gently. "Yes, I'd heard. I'm sorry," he said with rough simplicity. "Damn, what a waste. Vance was a good man."

"Yes, he was." There was nothing more that she could say, because she still hadn't come to terms with the senseless, unlikely accident that had taken Vance's life. Death had struck so swiftly, taken so much from her, that she had automatically protected herself by keeping people at a small but significant distance since then.

"What happened to him?" the silky voice asked, and she was a little stunned that he'd asked. Didn't he even know how Vance had died?

"He was gored by a bull," she finally replied. "In the thigh... a major artery was torn. He bled to death before we could get him to a hospital." He had died in her arms, his life seeping away from him in a red tide, yet his face had been so peaceful. He had fixed his blue eyes on her and kept them there, as if he knew that he was dying and wanted his last sight on earth to be of her face. There had been a serene, heartbreaking smile on his lips as the brilliance of his gaze slowly dimmed and faded away forever....

Her fingers tightened on Cord Blackstone's shoulder, digging in, and he held her closer. In an odd way, she felt some of the pain easing, as if he had buffered it with his big, hard body. Looking up, she saw a reflection in those pale eyes of his own harsh memories, and with a flash of intuition she

realized that he was a man who had seen violent death before, who had held someone, a friend perhaps, in his arms while death approached and conquered. He understood what she had been through. Because he understood, the burden was abruptly easier to bear.

Susan had learned, over the years, how to continue with everyday things even in the face of crippling pain. Now she forced herself away from the horror of the memory and looked around, recalling herself to her duties. She noticed that far too many people were still standing around, staring at them and whispering. She caught the bandleader's eye and gave another discreet nod, a signal for him to slide straight into another number. Then she let her eyes linger on her guests, singling them out in turn, and under the demand in her clear gaze the dance floor began to fill, the whispers to fade, and the party once more resumed its normal noise level. There wasn't a guest there who would willingly offend her, and she knew it.

"That's a neat trick," he observed huskily, having followed it from beginning to end, and his voice reflected his appreciation. "Did they teach that in the finishing school you attended?"

A little smile played over her soft mouth before she glanced up at him, allowing him to divert her.

"What makes you think I went to a finishing school?" she challenged.

His bold gaze slipped down the front of her gown to seek out and visually touch her rounded breasts.

"Because you're so obviously... finished. I can't see anything that Mother Nature left undone." His hard, warm fingers slid briefly down her back. "God, how soft your skin is," he finished on a whisper.

A faint flush colored her cheeks at the husky note of intimacy that had entered his voice, though she was pleased in a deeply feminine way that he had noticed the texture of her skin. Oh, he was dangerous, all right, and the most dangerous thing about him was that he could make a woman take a risk even knowing how dangerous he was.

After a moment when she remained silent, he prodded, "Well? Am I right or not?"

"Almost," she admitted, lifting her chin to smile at him. There was a soft, glowing quality to her smile that lit her face with gentle radiance, and his heavy-lidded eyes dropped even more in a signal that someone who knew him well would have recognized immediately. But Susan didn't know him well, and she was unaware of how close she was skating to thin ice. "I

attended Adderley's in Virginia for four months, until my mother had a stroke and I left school to care for her."
"No point in wasting any more money for them to gild the lily," he drawled, letting his eyes drift over her serene features, then down her slender, graceful throat to linger once again, with open delight, on her fragrant, silky curves. Susan felt an unexpected heat flood her body at this man's undisguised admiration; he looked as if he wanted to lean down and bury his face between her breasts, and she quivered with the surprising longing to have him do just that. He was more than dangerous; he was lethal!
She had to say something to break the heady spell that was enveloping her, and she used the most immediate topic of conversation. "When did you arrive?"
"Just this afternoon." The curl of his lips told her that he knew what she was doing, but was allowing her to get away with it. Lazily he puckered his lips and blew again at the fine tendril of dark hair that entranced him as it lay on the fragile skin of her temple, where the delicate blue veining lay just under the translucent skin. Susan felt her entire body pulsate, the warm scent of his breath affecting her as strongly as if he'd lifted his hand and caressed her. Almost blindly she looked at him, compelling herself to concentrate on what he was saying, but the movement of those chiseled lips was even more enticing than the scent of him.
"I heard that Cousin Preston was having a party," he was saying in a lazy drawl that had never lost its Southern music. "So I thought I'd honor old times by insulting him and crashing the shindig."
Susan had to smile at the incongruity of describing this elegant affair as a "shindig," especially when he himself was dressed as if he had just stepped out of a Monte Carlo casino... where he would probably be more at home than he was here. "Did you used to make a habit of crashing parties?" she murmured.
"If I thought it would annoy Preston, I did," he replied, laughing a little at the memories. "Preston and I have always been on opposite sides of the fence," he explained with a careless smile that told her how little the matter bothered him. "Vance was the only one I ever got along with, but then, he never seemed to care what kind of trouble I was in. Vance wasn't one to worship at the altar of the Blackstone name."
That was true; Vance had conformed on the surface to the demands made on him because his name was Blackstone, but Susan had always known that he

did so with a secret twinkle in his eyes. Sometimes she didn't think that her mother-in-law, Imogene, would ever forgive Vance for his mutiny against the Blackstone dynasty when he married Susan, though of course Imogene would never have been so crass as to admit it; a Blackstone didn't indulge in shrewish behavior. Then Susan felt faintly ashamed of herself, because Vance's family had treated her with respect.

Still, she felt a warm sense of comradeship with this man, because he had known Vance as she had, had realized his true nature, and she gave him a smile that sparked a glow in her own deep blue eyes. His arms tightened around her in an involuntary movement, as if be wanted to crash her against him.

"You've got the Blackstone coloring," he muttered, staring at her. "Dark hair and blue eyes, but you're so soft there's no way in hell you could be a real Blackstone. There's no hardness in you at all, is there?"

Puzzled, she stared back at him with a tiny frown puckering her brow. "What do you mean by hardness?"

"I don't think you'd understand if I told you," he replied cryptically, then added, "were you handpicked to be Vance's wife?"

"No." She smiled at the memory. "He picked me himself."

He gave a silent whistle. "Imogene will never recover from the shock," he said irreverently, and flashed that mocking grin at her again.

Despite herself, Susan felt the comers of her mouth tilting up in an answering smile. She was enjoying herself, talking to this dangerous, roguish man with the strangely compelling eyes, and she was surprised because she hadn't really enjoyed herself in such a long time... since Vance's death, in fact. There had been too many years and too many tears between her smiles, but suddenly things seemed different; she felt different inside herself. At first, she'd thought that she'd never recover from Vance's death, but five years had passed, and now she realized that she was looking forward to life again. She was enjoying being held in this man's strong arms and listening to his deep voice... and yes, she enjoyed the look in his eyes, enjoyed the sure feminine knowledge that he wanted her.

She didn't want to examine her reaction to him; she felt as if she had been dead, too, and was only now coming alive, and she wanted to revel in the change, not analyze it.

She was in danger of drowning in sensation, and she recognized the inner weakness that was overtaking her, but felt helpless to resist it. He must have

sensed, with a primal intuition that was as alarming as the aura of danger that surrounded him, that she was close to surrendering to the temptation to play with fire. He leaned down and nuzzled his mouth against the delicate shell of her ear, sending every nerve in her body into delirium. "Go outside with me," he enticed, dipping his tongue into her ear and tracing the outer curve of it with electrifying precision.

Susan's entire body reverberated with the shock of it, but his action cleared her mind of the clouds of desire that had been fogging it. Totally flustered, her cheeks suddenly pink, she stopped dead. "Mr. Blackstone!"

"Cord," he corrected, laughing openly now. "After all, we're at least kissing cousins, wouldn't you say?"

She didn't know what to say, and fortunately she was saved from forming an answer that probably wouldn't have been coherent anyway, because Preston chose that moment to intervene. She had been vaguely aware, as she circled the room in Cord's arms, that Preston had been watching every move his cousin made, but she hadn't noticed him approaching. Putting his hand on Susan's arm, he stared at his cousin with frosty blue eyes. "Has he said anything to upset you, Susan?"

Again she was thrown into a quandary. If she said yes, there would probably be a scene, and she was determined to avoid that. On the other hand, how could she say no, when it would so obviously be a lie? A spark of genius prompted her to reply with quiet dignity, "We were talking about Vance."

"I see." It was perfectly reasonable to Preston that, even after five years, Susan should be upset when speaking of her dead husband. He accepted her statement as an explanation instead of the red herring it was, and gave all of his attention to his cousin, who was standing there totally relaxed, a faintly bored smile on his lips.

"Mother is waiting in the library," Preston said stiffly. "We assume you have some reason for afflicting us with your company."

"I do." Cord agreed easily with Preston's insult, still smiling as he ignored the red flag being waved at him. He lifted one eyebrow. "Lead the way. Somehow, I don't trust you at my back."

Preston stiffened, and Susan forestalled the angry outburst she saw coming by placing her hand lightly on Cord's arm and saying, "Let's not keep Mrs. Blackstone waiting."

As she had known he would, Preston shifted his attention to her. "There's no reason for you to come along, Susan. You might as well stay here with the guests."
"I'd like to have her there." Cord had instantly contradicted his cousin, and in a manner that made Susan certain he'd spoken merely to irritate Preston. "She's family, isn't she? She might as well hear it all first hand, rather than the watered-down and doctored version that she'd get from you and Imogene."
For a moment Preston looked as if he would debate the point; then he turned abruptly and walked away. Preston was a Blackstone; he might want to punch Cord in the mouth, but he wouldn't make a public scene. Cord following him at a slight distance, his hand dropping to rest lightly on Susan's waist. He grinned down at her. "I wanted to make sure you didn't get away from me."
Susan was a grown woman, not a teenager. Moreover, she was a woman who for five years had managed large and varied business concerns with cool acumen; she was twenty-nine years old, and she told herself that she should long ago have passed out of the blushing stage. Yet this man, with the dashing air of a rake and those bold, challenging eyes, could make her blush with a mere glance. Excitement such as she had never felt before was racing through her, setting her heart pounding, and she actually felt giddy. She knew what love was like, and it wasn't this. She had loved Vance, loved him so strongly that his death had nearly destroyed her, so she realized at once that this wasn't the same emotion. This was primitive attraction, heady and feverish, and it was based entirely on sex. Vance Blackstone had been Love; Cord Blackstone meant only Lust
But recognizing it for what it was didn't lessen its impact as she walked sedately beside him, so vibrantly aware of the hand on her back that he might as well have been touching her naked body. She wasn't the type for an affair. She was a throwback to the Victorian era, as Vance had once teased her by saying. She had been lovingly but strictly brought up, and she was the lady that her mother had meant her to be, from the top of her head down to her pink toes. Susan had never even thought of rebelling, because she was by nature exactly what she was: a lady. She had known love and would never settle for less than that, not even for the heady delights offered by the black sheep of the Blackstone family.

Just before they entered the library where Imogene waited, Cord leaned down to her. "If you won't go outside with me, then I'll take you home and we can neck on the front porch like teenagers."
She flashed him an indignant glance that made him laugh softly to himself, but she was prevented from answering him because at that moment they passed through the door and she realized that he had perfectly timed his remark. He had a genius for throwing people off-balance, and he had done it again; despite herself, she felt the heat of intensified color in her face.
Imogene regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, her gray eyes sharpening for a fraction of a second as her gaze flickered from Susan to Cord, then back to Susan's flushed face. Then she controlled her expression, and the gray eyes resumed their normal cool steadiness. "Susan, do you feel well? You look flushed."
"I became a little warm during the dancing." Susan was aware that once again she was throwing out a statement that would be regarded as an answer, but was in fact only a smokescreen. If she didn't watch it, Cord Blackstone would turn her into a world-class liar before the night was out!
The tall man beside her directed her to a robin's egg blue loveseat and sprawled his graceful length beside her, earning himself a glare—which rolled right off of his toughened hide—from both Preston and Imogene. Smiling at his aunt, he drawled a greeting. "Hello, Aunt Imogene. How's the family fortune?"
He was good at waving his own red flags, Susan noticed. Imogene settled back in her chair and coolly ignored the distraction. "Why have you come back?"
"Why shouldn't I come back? This is my home, remember? I even own part of the land. I've been roaming around for quite a while now, and I'm ready to put down my roots. What better place for that than home? I thought I'd move into the cabin on Jubilee Creek."
"That shack!" Preston's voice was full of disdain.
Cord shrugged. "You can't account for tastes. I prefer shacks to mausoleums." He grinned, looking around himself at the formal furniture, the original oil paintings, the priceless vases and miniatures that adorned the shelves. Though called a library, the room actually contained few books, and all of them had been bought, Susan sometimes suspected, with an eye on the color of the dust-jackets to make certain the books harmonized with the color scheme of the room.

Preston eyed his cousin with cold, silent hatred for a moment, an expanse of time which became heavy with resentment. “How much will it cost us?”
From the comer of her eye, Susan could see the lift of that mocking eyebrow. "Cost you for what?"
“For you to leave this part of the country again.”
Cord smiled a particularly wolfish smile that should have warned Preston. "You don't have enough money, Cousin."
Imogene lifted her hand, forestalling Preston's heated reply. She had a cooler head and was better at negotiating than her son was. "Don't be foolish...or hasty," she counseled. "You *do* realize that we're prepared to offer you a substantial sum in exchange for your absence?"
"Not interested," he said lazily, still smiling.
"But a man with your...lifestyle must have debts that need settling. Then there's the fact that I have many friends who owe me for favors, and who could be counted on to make your stay unpleasant, at the least."
"Oh, I don't think so. Aunt Imogene." Cord was utterly relaxed, his long legs stretched out before him. "The first surprise in store for you is that I don't need the money. The second is that if any of your 'friends' decide to help you by making things difficult for me, I have friends of my own who I can call on, and believe me, my friends make yours look like angels."
Imogene sniffed. "I'm sure they do, considering."
For the first time Susan felt compelled to intervene. Fighting upset her; she was quiet and naturally peaceful, but with an inner strength that allowed her to throw herself into the breach. Her gentle voice immediately drew everyone's attention, though it was to her mother-in-law that she spoke. "Imogene, look at him; look at his clothes." She waved her slender hand to indicate the man lounging beside her. "He's telling the truth. He doesn't need any money. And I think that when he mentions his friends, he isn't talking about back-alley buddies."
Cord regarded her with open, if somewhat mocking, admiration. "At last, a Blackstone with perception, though of course you weren't born to the name, so maybe that explains it. She's right, Imogene, though I'm sure you don't like hearing it. I don't need the Blackstone money because I have money of my own. I plan to live in the cabin because I like my privacy, not because I can't afford any better. Now, I suggest that we manage to control our differences, because I intend to stay here. If you want to air the family dirty

laundry, then go ahead. It won't bother me; you'll be the only one to suffer from that."
Imogene gave a curious little sigh. "You've always been difficult, Cord, even when you were a child. My objection to you is based on your past actions, not on you personally. You've dragged your family through enough mud to last for four lifetimes, and I find that hard to forgive, and I find it equally as hard to trust you to behave with some degree of civility."
"It's been a long time," he said obliquely. "I've spent a lot of time in Europe, and too long in South America; it makes a man appreciate his home."
"Does it? I wonder. Forgive me if I suspect an ulterior motive, but then, your past gives me little choice. Very well, we'll call a truce...for the time being."
“A truce.” He winked at her, and to Susan's surprise, Imogene blushed. So he had that effect on every female! But he was a fool if he believed that Imogene would go along with a truce. She might appear to give in, but that was all it was: appearance. Imogene never gave in; she merely changed tactics. If she couldn't bribe or threaten him, then she would try other measures, though for the moment Susan couldn't think of anything else that could be brought to bear on the man.
He was rising to his feet, his hand under Susan's elbow, urging her up also. "You've been away from your guests long enough," he told Imogene politely. "I give you my solemn promise that I won't cause any scandals tonight, so relax and enjoy yourself." Pulling Susan along with him like a puppy, he crossed the floor to Imogene and bent down to kiss his aunt. Imogene sat perfectly still under the touch of his lips, though her color rose even higher. Then he straightened, his eyes dancing. "Come along, Susan," he commanded.
"Just a moment," Preston intervened, stepping before them. Imogene might have called a truce, but Preston hadn't. "We've agreed to no open hostilities; we haven't agreed to associate with you. Susan isn't going anywhere with you."
"Oh? I think that's up to the lady. Susan?" Cord turned to her, making his wishes known by the curl of his fingers on her arm.
Susan hesitated. She wanted to go with Cord. She wanted to laugh with him, to see the wicked twinkle in his eyes, feel the magic of being held in his arms. But she couldn't trust him, and for the first time in her life, she didn't trust herself. Because she wanted so badly to go with him, she had to

deny him. Slowly, regretfully, she shook her head. "No. I think it would be better if I didn't go with you."

His blue eyes narrowed, and suddenly they were no longer laughing, but wore the sheen of anger. He dropped his hand from her arm. "Perhaps you're right," he said coldly, and left her without another word.

The silence in the library was total, the three occupants motionless. Then Imogene sighed again. "Thank heavens you didn't go with him, dear. He's charming, I know, but beneath all of that charm, he hates this entire family. He'll do anything, *anything*, he can to harm us. You don't know him, but it's in your best interest if you avoid him." Having delivered her graceful warning, Imogene shrugged. "Ah, well, I suppose we'll have to suffer through this until he gets bored and drifts off to hunt other amusements. He was right about one thing, the wretch; I do have to get back to my guests." She rose and left the room, her mist gray gown swaying elegantly about her feet as she walked. Imogene was still a beautiful woman; she hardly looked old enough to be the mother of the man who stood beside Susan. Imogene didn't age; she endured.

After a moment, Preston took Susan's hand, his ingrained sense of courtesy taking control of him again. His confrontation with his cousin had been the only occasion when Susan could remember seeing Preston be anything but polite, even when he was disagreeing with someone. "Let's relax for a moment before we rejoin them. Would you like a drink?" he suggested.

"No, thank you." Susan allowed him to seat her on the loveseat again, and she watched as he poured himself a neat whiskey and sat down beside her, a small frown puckering his brow as he regarded the glass in his hand. Something was on his mind; she knew his mannerisms as well as she knew her own. She waited, not pushing him. She and Preston had become close since Vance's death, and she felt strongly affectionate toward him. He looked so much like Vance, so much like all the Blackstones, with his dark hair and blue eyes and lopsided smile. Preston lacked Vance's sense of humor, but he was a formidable opponent in business. He was stubborn; slower than Vance to react, but more determined when he did.

"You're a lovely woman, Susan," he said abruptly.

Startled, she stared at him. She knew she looked good tonight; she had debated over wearing the cream silk dress, for her tastes since Vance's death had been somber, but she had remembered that the medieval color of mourning had been white, not black, and only she knew when she put on

the white dress that she did so with a small but poignant remnant of grief. She had dressed for Vance tonight, wearing the pearls that he had given her, spraying herself with his favorite perfume. But for a few mad moments she had gloried in the knowledge that she looked good, not for Vance's sake, but because of the admiration she had seen in another pair of eyes, strange lodestone eyes. What would have happened if she had gone with Cord Blackstone tonight, instead of playing it safe?

Preston's eyes softened as he looked at her. "You're no match for him. If you let him, he'll use you to hurt us; then he'll leave you on the trash pile and walk away without looking back. Stay away from him; he's poison."

Susan regarded him steadily. "Preston, I'm a woman, not a child; I'm capable of making my own decisions. I can see why you wouldn't like your cousin, since he's so totally different from you. But he hasn't done anything to harm me, and I won't snub him."

He gave a rueful smile at her firm, reasonable tone. "I've heard that voice in enough board meetings over the past five years to know you've dug in your heels and won't budge without a good reason. But you don't know what he's like. You're a lady; you've never been exposed to the sort of things that are commonplace to him. He's lived the life of an alley cat, not because he had no choice, no way out, but because he preferred that type of life. He broke his mother's heart, making her so ashamed of him that he wasn't welcome in her home."

"Exactly what did he do that was so terrible?" Deliberately, she kept her tone light, not wanting Preston to see how deeply she was interested in the answer, how deeply she was disturbed by Cord Blackstone.

"What didn't he do?" Sarcasm edged Preston's answer. "Fights, drinking, women, gambling... but the final straw was the scandal when he was caught with Grant Keller's wife."

Susan choked. Grant Keller was dignity personified, and so was his wife. Preston looked at her and couldn't prevent a grin. "Not this Mrs. Keller; the former Mrs. Keller was entirely different. She was thirty-six, and Cord was twenty-one when they left town together."

"That was a long time ago," Susan pointed out. -,

"Fourteen years, but people have long memories. I saw Grant Keller's face when he recognized Cord tonight, and he looked murderous."

Susan was certain there was more to the story, but she was reluctant to pry any deeper. The old scandal in no way explained Preston's very personal

hatred for Cord. For right now, though, she was suddenly very tired and didn't want to pursue the subject. All the excitement that had lit her up while she was dancing with Cord had faded. Rising, she smoothed her skirt. "Will you take me home? I'm exhausted."

"Of course," he said immediately, as she had known he would. Preston was entirely predictable, always solicitous of her. At times, the cushion of gallantry that protected her, gave her a warm sense of security, but at other times she felt restricted. Tonight, the feeling of restriction deepened until she felt as if she were being smothered. She wanted to breathe freely, to be unobserved.

It was only a fifteen-minute drive to her home, and soon she was blessedly alone, sitting on the dark front porch in the wooden porch swing, listening to the music of a southern night. She had waited until Preston left before she came out to sit in the darkness, her right foot gently pushing her back and forth to the accompanying squeak of the chains that held the swing. A light breeze rustled through the trees and kissed her face, and she closed her eyes. As she often did, she tried to summon up Vance's face, to reassure herself with the mental picture of his violet blue eyes and lopsided grin, but to her alarm, the face that formed wasn't his. Instead she saw pale blue eyes above the short black beard of a desperado; they were the reckless eyes of a man who dared anything. A shiver ran down her spine as she recalled the touch of his warm mouth on her shoulder, and her skin tingled as if his lips were still pressed there.

Thank heavens she had had the good sense to ask Preston to bring her home instead of going with that man as he had asked. Preston was at least safe, and Cord Blackstone had probably never heard the word.

Chapter Two

The Blackstones social circle ranged in a sort of open arc from Mobile to New Orleans, with the Gulfport-Biloxi area as the center of their far-flung web of moneyed and blue-blooded acquaintances. With such a wide area and so many friends of such varied interests, Susan was amazed that the sole topic of conversation seemed to be Cord Blackstone's return. She lost count of the number of women, many of them married, who drilled her on why he was back, how long he was staying, whether he was married,

whether he had been married, and endless variations on those questions, none of which she could answer. What could she tell them? That she had danced two dances with him and gotten drunk on his smile?
She hadn't seen him since the night of his return, and she made a point of not asking about him. She told herself that it was best to leave well enough alone and let her interest in him die a natural death. All she had to do was do nothing and refuse to feed the strange attraction. It wasn't as if he were chasing her all over south Mississippi; he hadn't called, hadn't sought her out as she had half feared, half wanted him to do.
But her resolution to forget about him was stymied at every turn; even Preston seldom talked of anything except his cousin. She decided that all Cord had to do to irritate Preston was to breathe. Through Preston, she learned that Cord was working on the old cabin at Jubilee Creek, replacing the roof and the sagging old porch, putting in new windows. Preston had tried to find out where Cord had borrowed the money to repair the cabin, and found instead, to his chagrin, that there was no loan involved. Cord was paying for everything in cash, and had opened a sizable checking account at the largest bank in Biloxi. Preston and Imogene spent hours speculating on how he had acquired the money, and what his purpose was in returning to Mississippi. Susan wondered why they found it so hard to accept that he had simply returned home. As people grew older, it wasn't unusual for them to want to return to the area where they had grown up. It seemed silly to her that they attached such sinister motives to his smallest action, but then she realized that she was guilty of the same thing. She'd all but convinced herself that, if she had allowed him to drive her home that night, he would have taken her to bed over any protests she might have made... if any.
If any. That was the hard part for her to accept. Would she have made any protest, even a token one? What had happened to her? One moment her life had been as serene as a quiet pool on a lazy summer day, and she had been satisfied, except for the hollowness left by Vance's death. Then Cord Blackstone had walked in out of the night and everything had shifted, the world had been thrown out of kilter. Now, suddenly, she wanted to run away, or at least smash something... do anything, anything at all, that was totally out of character.
And it was all because of Cord. He was a man who lived by his own rules, a man who lived recklessly and dangerously, but with a vital intensity that made every other man seem insipid when compared to him. By contrast, she

was a field mouse who was comfortable only with security, yet now the very security that she had always treasured was chafing at her. The priorities that she had set for herself now seemed valueless in comparison with the wild freedom that Cord enjoyed.

She had been a quiet child, then a quiet girl, never according her parents any of the worries that most parents had concerning their children. Susan's personality was serene, naturally kind and courteous, and the old-fashioned, genteel upbringing she'd had merely reinforced those qualities. By both nature and practice she was a lady, in every sense of the word.

Her life hadn't been without pain or difficulty. Without resentment, she had left school to help care for her mother when a stroke left the older woman partially paralyzed. Another stroke later was fatal, and Susan quietly supported her father during his grief. Her father remarried within the year, with Susan's blessing, and retired to south Florida; she remained in New Orleans, which had been her father's last teaching post, and reorganized her life. She took a secretarial job and dated occasionally, but never seriously, until Vance Blackstone saw her gracing her desk at work and decided right then that she should be gracing his home. Vance hadn't swept her off her feet; he had gently gained her confidence, gradually increasing the frequency of their dates until she was seeing no one but him; then he had proposed marriage by giving her one perfect rosebud with an exquisite diamond ring nestled in the heart of it.

Imogene hadn't been thrilled that her son had selected his wife from outside the elite circle of their social group, but not even Imogene could really find fault with Susan. Susan was, as everyone phrased it, "a perfect lady". She was accepted as Vance's wife, and for three years she had been blessed with happiness. Vance was a considerate lover and husband, and he never let her forget that she was the most important thing in his life, far more important than the Blackstone empire and traditions. He demonstrated his faith in her by leaving everything to her in his will, including control of his share of the family businesses. Devastated by his sudden death, the terms of the will had meant nothing to Susan. Nothing was important to her without Vance.

But time passed, and time healed. Imogene and Preston, at first furious when they learned that she intended to oversee her share of the businesses instead of turning them over to Preston as they had expected, had gradually forgotten their anger as Susan handled herself well, both privately and publicly. She wasn't a woman on an ego trip, nor was she prone to make

irresponsible decisions. She had both feet firmly on the ground... or she *had* had, until another Blackstone had entered her life.
As the days passed, she told herself over and over how silly she was being. Why moon over a man who hadn't shown the slightest interest in her since the night they had met? He had just been trying to irritate Preston by playing up to her, that was all. But as soon as that thought registered in her mind, a memory would surface, that of a hard, aroused male body pressing against her, and she knew that Cord hadn't been playing.
She couldn't get his face out of her mind. Odd that she hadn't noticed the family resemblance, but for all the blue eyes and dark hair, nothing about Cord had seemed familiar to her. When she looked at Preston, she was always reminded strongly of Vance; Cord Blackstone resembled no one but himself, with his black brigand's beard and wicked eyes. His personality overshadowed the similarities of coloring and facial structure.
Stop thinking about him! she told herself sternly one night as she dressed to attend a party with Preston. She had been looking at herself in the mirror, checking to see if her dress fit as it should, and had suddenly found herself wondering if Cord would like the dress, if he would find her attractive in it. With rare irritation, she whirled away from the mirror. She had to get him out of her mind! It had been almost three weeks since she'd met him, and it was obvious that she was in a tizzy over nothing, because in those three weeks he'd made no effort to see her again.
It was just as well; they were totally unsuited. She was a gentle spring shower; he was thunder and lightning. She had let a simple flirtation go to her head, and it was time she realized that there was nothing to it.
Glancing out a window at the gloomy sky, she reached into the closet for a coat. The capricious weather of the Gulf states had reminded everyone that it was still only March, despite the balmy weather they had been enjoying for most of the month. The temperature would be close to freezing before she came home, so she chose the warmest coat she owned, as well as wearing a long-sleeved dress.
Preston was always exactly on time, so Susan went down a few minutes early to chat with her cook and housekeeper, Emily Ferris. "I'll be leaving in a few minutes; why don't you go home early today?" she suggested.
"I might do that." Emily looked out the window, watching the wind whip the giant oak tree at the edge of the yard. "This is the kind of day that makes

me want to wrap up in a blanket and sleep in front of a fire. Do you have a coat?" she asked sternly, looking at Susan's slender form.
Susan laughed. "Yes, I have a coat." Emily watched over her like a mother hen, but mothering came naturally to Emily, who had five children of her own. The youngest had left the nest a year ago, and since then, Susan had received the full intensity of Emily's protection. She didn't mind; Emily was as steady as a rock, and had been in Susan's employ since she had married Vance. It was in Emily's arms that Susan had wept her most violent tears after Vance's death.
"I'll leave the heat on, so the house won't be cold when you come in," Emily promised. "Where're you going tonight?"
“To the Gages”. I believe William is planning to run for governor next year, and he's lining up support and campaign contributors."
"Hummph," Emily snorted. "What does a Gage know about politics? Don't tell me that Preston's going to support him?"
Susan lifted one elegant eyebrow. "You know Preston; he's very cautious. He'll have to look at every candidate before he makes up his mind." She knew from experience that every politician in the state would be burying the Blackstones under an avalanche of invitations. Susan had tried to stay out of politics, but Imogene and Preston were heavily courted, and Preston invariably asked her to accompany him whenever he attended a party with either political overtones or undertones.
She heard the doorbell at the precise instant the clock chimed the hour, and with a smile she went to greet Preston.
He helped her with her coat, arranging the collar snugly around her throat. "It's getting really cold," he muttered. "So much for spring."
"Don't be so impatient." She smiled. "It's still only March. It's just that these last few weeks spoiled everyone, but you knew it couldn't last."
It began to rain as they drove to the Gages' house, a slow, sullen rain that turned the late afternoon into night. Preston was a careful, confident driver, and he made the thirty-mile drive in good time. Caroline Gage met them at the door. "Preston, Susan, I'm glad you could come! Would you like a drink before dinner? William's playing bartender in the den."
Despite Caroline's easy manner, Susan caught a hint of tension in the older woman's expression and wondered if Caroline wasn't enthusiastic about her husband's foray into politics. Following Preston into the den, she found the room already crowded with friends and acquaintances, the usual social

crowd. Preston was promptly hailed by William Gage, and with a smile for Susan he allowed himself to be drawn aside.
Susan refused anything to drink, since she hadn't eaten anything, and wandered around talking to her friends. She was popular with both men and women, and it took her quite a while to make a circle of the room. It was almost time for dinner and she glanced at her hostess, frowning when she saw Caroline watching the door, anxiety clearly evident on her face. Was some special guest late?
The doorbell chimed and Caroline paled, but didn't pause as she went to greet her late-arriving guests. Susan watched the door curiously, waiting to see who it was; Caroline was usually unflappable, and it must be someone really important to have her so on edge.
Her brows rose when George and Olivia Warren came into the room; the Warrens were part of the social hierarchy, but Caroline had been friends with them for years. Cheryl Warren followed them, her ash blond hair a mass of carefully disarranged curls, her svelte body outlined in a form-fitting black dress... and behind her, towering over her, his bearded face sardonic, was Cord Blackstone.
So that was why Caroline was nervous! She'd known that Cord would be with Cheryl Warren, and she was on pins and needles at having Cord and Preston in the same room.
She needn't have worried, Susan thought, glancing at Preston. He wouldn't like it, but neither would he make a scene in someone else's home. If Cord just behaved himself, the evening would go smoothly, though she was acutely aware that Cord would behave himself only if it suited his own purposes.
But, surprisingly, he was a perfect gentleman throughout the long dinner. He was politely attentive to Cheryl, a fact which made Susan's stomach knot. She tried not to look at him, and told herself wryly that she shouldn't have been surprised to see him with another woman... any other woman. He was a man who would always have a female companion. She *was* surprised, however, by the jealousy that jolted her whenever she heard Cheryl's clear laughter, or caught the dark murmur of Cord's voice under the noise of the general chatter.
Caroline had cleared the large living room for dancing, and after dinner she put a stack of easy-listening albums on the stereo, keeping the volume low so her guests could dance or talk as they wished. Susan danced a few

dances and talked with her friends, wishing that Preston would cut the evening short and take her home, but he was effectively caught in a group of men earnestly talking politics, and she knew that it would be hours before he was free. She sighed and absently watched the slow-moving couples swaying to the music, then stiffened as her gaze accidentally locked with Cord's pale, glittering eyes. Cheryl was held securely in his strong arms, but he wasn't paying any attention to her as he stared at Susan over Cheryl's bare shoulder. He didn't smile; his gaze slid down her body in a leisurely journey, then returned to her face, staring at her as if he could pierce her thoughts. She paled and looked away. Why had he done that? He'd made it plain by his silence these past three weeks that their flirtation hadn't meant anything to him; why look at her now as if he meant to drag her away to his lair? How *could* he look at her like that, when he held Cheryl in his arms?

Susan pushed her thoughts away by entering into a conversation about vacation cruises, and kept her back turned to the center of the room. It was a tactical error, but one she didn't realize until she felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck standing on end, the age-old warning of danger nearby, and she knew that Cord was behind her. She tensed, waiting for the contact that she knew was coming. His hand touched her waist at the same time that his dark, husky voice said above her head, "Dance with me."

A variation of the same tune, she thought dazedly, allowing herself to be turned and taken into his arms. *Taken*... that was the operative word. She felt taken, as if the simple closing of his arms around her had sealed her off from the rest of the world, drawn her deeply and irrevocably under his spell. She was crazy to dance so close to the flame, knowing that she would be burned, but she felt helpless to resist the temptation of his company. As his arms brought her close to his body, the virile scent of his subtle cologne, mingled with the intoxicating smell of his male flesh, went straight to her head and she all but staggered. His hand was burning through the fabric of her dress and scorching her skin; her breasts throbbed and tightened in mindless response, completely out of her control, and she closed her eyes at the powerful surge of desire. Her heart was thumping heavily in her chest, almost painfully, sending her blood zinging through her veins like electrical charges.

There seemed to be nothing to say, so she didn't try to make conversation. She simply followed his lead, intensely aware of the fluid strength of his

body, the animal grace of his movements. His warm breath was caressing her temple like the fragrant spring breezes that she loved, and without thinking she opened her eyes, lifting her misty, dreaming gaze to meet the laser intensity of his.

Something hard and frightening was in his gaze, but it was swiftly masked before she could read it. The hard planes of his face were taut, as if he were under some sort of strain. He muttered, "I've tried to stay away from you."

"You've succeeded." Confused, she wondered what he meant. *He* was the dangerous one, not she. Why should he want to stay away? She was the one who should be running for safety, and the fact that she wasn't had her almost in a panic.

"I haven't succeeded at all," he said flatly. The arm at her waist tightened until she was pressed into his body, his hard thighs sliding against her, making his desire firmly obvious. Susan pulled in a wavering breath as her fingers tightened on his shoulder. He dipped his head until his mouth was against her ear, his voice a low rumble. "I want to make love to you. You're responsible for this, sweetheart, and I'm all yours."

The words should have frightened her, but she was beyond fright, already oblivious to anything beyond this man. Her senses had narrowed, sharpened, until he was the only person in the room who was in focus. Everyone else was blurred, distant, and she danced with him in an isolated glow. She closed her eyes again at the thrill that electrified her from head to toe.

He swore softly under his breath. "You look as if I'm making love to you right now. You're driving me out of my mind, sweetheart."

He *was* making love to her, with his words, with every brush of his body against hers as they moved in time with the music. And if he was tortured, so was she. She had been utterly chaste since Vance's death, not even kissing another man, but now she felt as if Cord possessed her in the most basic sense of the word.

"Cheryl came with me, so I'll take her home," he said, placing his lips against her temple as he talked. "But we're going to have to talk. Will you be at home tomorrow afternoon?"

Dazedly, she tried to recall if she had made any plans for the next day; nothing came to mind. It didn't matter; even if she had, she would cancel them. "Yes, I'll be there." Her voice sounded odd, she noted dimly, as if she hadn't any strength.

"I have some business to take care of tomorrow, so I can't nail down an exact time when I'll be there, but I *will* be there," he promised.
"Do you know where I live?"
She could feel his lips curving in a smile. "Of course I know where you live. I made a point of finding out the day after I met you."
The song ended, and she automatically moved away from him, but his arm tightened around her waist. He grinned, his teeth flashing whitely in the darkness of his beard. "You're going to have to shield me for a few more minutes."
A delicate rise of color tinted her cheeks. "We shouldn't dance. That would only... prolong the situation."
"We'll find a comer to stand in." A twinkle danced in the glittering depths of his eyes. "We'll have to stand; I'm incapable of sitting down right now."
She felt her blush deepen, and he chuckled as he moved with her to the edge of the room. She was aware deep inside herself that her heightened color wasn't from embarrassment, but from a primal excitement. She wasn't shocked that he was aroused; she was proud!
He positioned himself with his back to everyone else, his broad shoulders effectively blocking her view of the room. His eyes roamed slowly, intently over her face, as if he were trying to read something in the serenity of her expression. "Did you come with Preston?" he asked abruptly.
"Yes." Suddenly she wanted to launch into an explanation of why she was there in Preston's company, but she left the words unsaid and let her simple reply stand on its own. Preston was her brother-in-law, and she was fond of him; she wouldn't apologize for being with him.
The magnetic power of Cord's eyes was frightening; tiny prisms of light seemed caught in them, holding her gaze captive. Her breath caught in her throat and hung there, swelling her lungs, as she waited for him to release her from his spell. "Am I horning in between you and Preston?" he finally asked in not much more than a whisper. "Are you involved with him?"
The breath that she'd been holding was released on her soft answer. "No."
A smile lifted one corner of his hard mouth. "Good. I just wanted to know if I have any competition. It wouldn't stop me, but I like to know what I'm up against."
No, he didn't have any competition—in any sense. He stood out like a cougar among sheep. The thought of him turning his single-minded attention on her was alarming, but at the same time, she already knew that

she wouldn't say the words necessary to turn him away. She knew that she should run like crazy, but her body refused to obey the dictates of common sense.

A tiny frown flickered across his brow as he stared down at her, as if he had seen something that he hadn't expected. He couldn't be wary of her, or alarmed by her femininity; he had known far too many women for there to be any mysteries left for him. Perhaps he was surprised to find himself flirting with her, because she certainly wasn't his type. Perhaps he was looking at her quiet face, her becoming but unspectacular dress and wondering if he'd temporarily lost his mind. Then the frown was gone, and he smiled faintly as he brushed her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

“Tomorrow, sweetheart.”

"Yes."

Susan both dreaded and longed for the next day to arrive, but with outward calm and practiced self-discipline, she made it through the remainder of the evening with her usual dignity, chatted normally with Preston on the drive back home, and even went through her nightly routine without missing a beat. Once she was in bed, however, lying alone in the darkened room, she couldn't keep her thoughts from swinging dizzily around Cord, picturing his saturnine face, his incredible lodestone eyes, the blade beard that was as soft as a child's hair.

He had a black magic that went to her head like the finest champagne, but how could she be so foolish as to let herself be drawn into the whirlpool of his masculine charm? She'd be sucked so far under the dark waters that she'd have no control over herself or her life; she'd be his plaything, as other women had been, toys that interested him intensely for a short while before they were discarded in favor of a new and more intriguing amusement. Could she really let herself become one of his toys? She'd known real love with Vance, a love that had endowed their physical union with a deep and satisfying richness. Having known that, how could she settle for anything less?

Her mind, her heart, the very core of her being—all said no. Her body, however, lying warm and quivering, yearning for the touch of his strong, lean hands, rebelled against the common-sense strictures of her mind. She was learning now how primitive and powerful desire could be, how disobedient the flesh could be to the demands of conscience. Her soft,

feminine body had instinctively recognized the touch of a master, a man who knew far too many ways to bring pleasure to her.
She lay awake for several long, tormented hours, but at last her quietly indomitable will won out over her fevered, longing body. She was not now, never had been, and never would be, the type to indulge in a shallow affair, no matter how physically attractive a man was. If he wanted her company for something other than sex, then she would be happy to be his friend, but the thought of sex without love was abhorrent to her. Making love with Vance had been spiritual and emotional, as well as physical, and her knowledge of the heights had left her dissatisfied with the lower peaks that could be scaled without love.
Not once, during the dark hours, did she have any doubts about the nature of the relationship that Cord wanted with her. He'd told her bluntly that he wanted to make love to her; she sensed that he was always that honest about his desires. His honesty wasn't the courageous openness of honor, but merely his lack of concern over what anyone else thought or had to say about him. He was already an outlaw; why worry about ruining his reputation further?
If only the forbidden weren't always so enticing! Her mind darted and leaped around his image, held so clearly in her memory. He was wickedly attractive; even talking to him gave her the sense of playing with fire. She had to admit that Cord had certainly captured her imagination, but it was nothing more than that, surely, except for his obvious physical charm. The ways of the wicked have always held a fascination for those who walk the bright and narrow path of morality.
But that bright and narrow path was where she belonged, where life had placed her, where she was happy. The shadows where Cord Blackstone stood weren't for her, no matter how intriguing the weary knowledge in his crystalline eyes.
She slept little, but woke feeling calm and rested. Her inner surety of self often masked such physical weaknesses as tiredness or minor illness; her features might be pale, but there was always a certain calmness that overlay any signs of strain. It was Sunday, so she dressed and drove her eight-year-old blue Audi over to Blackstone House to attend church with Imogene and Preston, as she had always done. To her relief, Preston didn't mention that Cord had been at the party the night before; he was too interested in relating to Imogene the details of William Gage's infant political career. Susan

commented little, entering the conversation only when she was addressed directly. She sat quietly through the church service, accepted Imogene's invitation .to lunch, and maintained her mood of strong reserve all through the meal. Her in-laws didn't try to draw her out of her relative quiet; they had learned to accept her occasional silences as they accepted her smiles. Susan didn't run to a comforting shoulder to unburden herself whenever something troubled her; they might never know what made her deep blue eyes so pensive, and they didn't ask.

They had just finished lunch and were moving into the den when Mrs. Robbins, the housekeeper, appeared with a visitor at her elbow. "Someone to see you, ma'am," she told Imogene, and went about her business. Mrs. Robbins had been with the Blackstones for five years, but she had evidently not heard the rumors and wild tales that had circulated about Cord Blackstone, because there hadn't been a nicker of recognition in the woman's features as she admitted him.

Susan's eyes swept over his face, and she surprised a look of irritation that drew his level brows together in a brief frown when he saw her. Then the frown was gone, and he crossed the room with his easy grace to kiss Imogene, bending down to touch his lips to her cool, ageless cheek. Once again that astonishing color pinkened Imogene's face, though her voice was as controlled as always when she spoke. "Hello, Cord. We've just finished lunch, or I'd invite you to eat with us. Would you like something to drink?"

"Thank you. Whiskey, neat." His mobile lips quirked at the iron-clad Southern manners that demanded she offer him food and drink, even when he knew that she despised him. Watching him, Susan surprised herself by reading exactly the thoughts that were only hinted at in his expression. She would have thought that Cord would be more difficult to read.

He chose one of the big, brown leather armchairs, and accepted the short, wide glass of amber liquid that Imogene extended to him, murmuring his thanks in a low voice. Totally at ease, he stretched his long legs out before him and sipped the whiskey.

The room was totally silent, except for the rhythmic ticking of the antique clock perched on the massive oak mantel. Cord seemed to be the only one who was comfortable with the silence. Preston was becoming increasingly red in the face, and Imogene fidgeted with her skirt before she caught herself and commanded her hands to lie calmly in her lap. Susan didn't fidget, but she felt as if her heart were going to braise itself against the cage

of her ribs. How could he have this effect on her by simply walking into the room? It was insane!
He was dressed with fine disregard for the capricious March weather, wearing only impeccable black slacks, creased to a razor's edge, and a thin blue silk shirt through which she could see his darkly tanned flesh and the curling black hair on his chest. Her eyes drank in the details of him, even as she tried not to look at him. For the first time, she noticed the small gold band that he wore on the little finger of his right hand, and she wondered if it was a woman's wedding band. The thought jolted her. What woman had been so important to him that he would wear her ring?
Behind her, Preston had evidently reached the end of his patience. "Did you have a reason for coming here?" he asked bluntly.
A level brow rose in mocking query. "Do you have a reason for being so suspicious?"
Preston didn't even notice the way his words had been turned back on him, but Susan did, and she lifted her head just a fraction of an inch, only a small movement, but one that signaled to people who knew her well that she wasn't pleased. Preston and Imogene knew, and Preston gave her a look that was abruptly apologetic. He had opened his mouth to apologize aloud, a concession that Susan knew didn't come easily to him, when Cord cut smoothly across him.
"Of course I have a reason for coming, and I'm glad that you're smart enough to know that you aren't going to like hearing it. I wouldn't enjoy knowing that I have an idiot for a cousin."
Cord was being deliberately argumentative, Susan realized, and her eyes narrowed just a tiny bit as she stared at him, but she didn't say anything. Again silence reigned, as Preston and Imogene seemed to stiffen, waiting. After a moment's surprise, Susan realized that both of them seemed to know what Cord was getting at, and she looked from her in-laws back to Cord's faintly amused expression. He let the quietness draw itself out until the room fairly reverberated with tension; then he negligently crossed one booted foot over the other.
With an air of idle musing, he said, "I know you've probably thought that I've spent the past few years bumming around the world, but I've been gainfully employed most of the time since I left Mississippi. I work for an oil company, as a sort of troubleshooter." His pale eyes gleamed with

amusement as he watched the parade of astonishment marching across the features of his cousin and aunt. He didn't look at Susan at all.
"I... smooth things out for them," he continued silkily. "I don't have a title; I have contacts, and methods. I'm surprisingly good at my job, because I don't take no for an answer."
Imogene was the first to recover, and she favored Cord with a polite smile. "I appreciate that you're very well suited for your job, but why are you telling us about it?"
"I just wanted you to understand my position. Look at it as honor among thieves, if you prefer. Now, let's get down to business."
"We don't have any business with you," Preston interjected.
Cord nicked an impatient glance over him. "The Blackstones own a lot of land in Alabama, southern Mississippi, and Louisiana. I inherited my share of it, so I should know. But the land that I'm interested in isn't part of my inheritance; if it was, I wouldn't be here now. I know that several oil companies have approached you in the last ten years for permission to drill in the ridges, but you've turned them all down. Newer surveys have indicated that the reserves of oil or gas in the ridges could be much larger than originally projected. I want to lease the ridges for my company."
"No," said Preston without hesitation. "Mother and Vance and I talked it over when we were first approached years ago. We don't want any drilling on Blackstone property."
"For what reason, other than a vague idea that it's too money-grubbing for a blue-blooded old Southern family like the Blackstones?"
Susan sat very still, nothing in the room escaping her attention. A cold chill was lacing itself around her body, freezing her in place. The ridges weren't exactly ridges; they were only ripples in the earth, clothed in thick stands of pine. She liked the ridges, liked the peacefulness of them, the sweet smell of pure earth and pine. But why was Cord asking Imogene and Preston about them? Didn't he know?
"It was nothing as silly as that," Imogene explained calmly. "We simply didn't feel that the chances of a significant oil find were great enough to justify disturbing the ridges. There aren't any roads into them except for that one Jeep track; trees would have to be cut, roads made. I've seen the messes that drilling sites make."
"Things have changed in the last ten years," Cord replied, carrying the glass of whiskey to his lips. "A lot more care is taken not to disturb any area, and,

as I said, it looks as if there's a lot more oil in the ridges than anyone thought at first."
Preston laughed. "Thank you for the information. We'll think about it; we might decide to allow drilling in the ridges after all. But I don't think we'll use your company."
A slow, satisfied smile began to move Cord's lips. "I think you will, cousin. Or you can face criminal charges."
Susan didn't know what he was talking about, but she knew that he had led Preston to exactly that point. He had played the scene as he had wanted it, knowing what Preston's reaction would be, and knowing all the time that he held all the aces. Cord Blackstone had a streak of ruthlessness in him, and her chill deepened.
Preston had gone pale. Of course, she thought absently. Cord wouldn't have made a statement like that without being very sure of himself. She noted that Imogene was also as white and still as a china doll, so Imogene also knew what was going on.
"What are you saying?" Preston asked hoarsely.
"My inheritance." Cord smiled lazily. "I'm a Blackstone, remember? I own stock in all the Blackstone companies. The funny thing is, I haven't been receiving my share of any of the profits. Nothing has been deposited into my accounts at any of the banks we use. I didn't have to dig very deep before I found some papers that had my signature forged on them." He took another sip of whiskey, slowly tightening the screws. He knew he had them. "I believe forgery and theft are still against the law. And we aren't talking about pin money, either, are we? You didn't think I'd ever come back, so you and Aunt Imogene have been steadily lining your own pockets with my money. Not exactly an honorable thing to do, is it?"
Imogene looked as if she would faint. Preston had been turned into stone. Cord looked at them, totally satisfied with the effect he'd had. He smiled again. "Now, about those leases."
Susan stood, her movements slow and graceful, drawing all attention to her. She felt curiously removed from them, as if she were swathed in protective layers of cotton. Somehow she wasn't surprised, or even shocked, to learn that Preston and Imogene had been taking profits that were legally Cord's. It was a stupid thing to do, as well as illegal, but they had a different view of things. To them, what belonged to one Blackstone belonged to all of them. It was a feudal outlook, but there it was. The most trouble she'd ever had

with Imogene had been when Vance died and it became known that he'd left everything to Susan, instead of returning it to the family coffers. That was the one mistake Cord had made, in assuming that Vance had left his mother and brother in control of his share. It was an uncharacteristic mistake, and one that he had made because he was a Blackstone himself, with all of their inborn arrogance.

"You're bullying the wrong people," she told Cord remotely, her low voice cutting through the layers of tension and hostility. She felt the lash of his suddenly narrowed gaze, but she didn't flinch under it. “If Preston and Imogene are guilty, then so am I, by association if not actual knowledge. But they can't get you the leases to the ridges. The ridges belong to me."

Chapter Three

She didn't remember driving home. She'd walked out, not even pausing to get her coat, but hadn't felt the cold in her detachment. The house was empty, when she got home, without any welcoming smells emanating from the kitchen, because Sunday was Emily's day off. Susan knew that she'd find something in the refrigerator already prepared, if she was hungry, but she didn't think she'd be able to eat again that day.

She changed clothes, carefully hanging the garments in the closet, then immediately took off the casual clothing she'd just put on. She needed a hot bath, something to take away the coldness that had nothing to do with her skin, but was rather a great lump inside her chest. She threw some sweet herbs into the hot water and eased into the tub, feeling the heat begin to soothe away her stress.

Why did she feel so stunned? Preston had warned her that Cord was ruthless; why hadn't she believed him? It wasn't even what he had done, as much as the way he had done it. He had a right to punish Preston and Imogene for taking what was, essentially, his birthright. If he had wanted to trade that for the leases to the ridges, that was also his right. But he had played with them, leading them step by step to the point where they would feel the shock the worst, and he had enjoyed the effect his words had had on them. There was obviously no love lost between them, but Susan didn't believe in inflicting unnecessary pain. Cord had wanted them to squirm.

When the water had cooled, she let it out and dried herself, sighing as she dressed again in the dark brown slacks and white shirt she'd chosen. The bath had helped, but she still felt that inner chill. She checked the thermostat and found that it was set at a comfortable level, but she didn't feel comfortable. She lit a fire under the logs that had already been placed in the fireplace in the den, then wandered into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee.

The fire was catching when she went back into the den, and she sat for long, increasingly peaceful moments, staring at the licking blue and orange flames. There was nothing as calming as a fire on a cold day. She thought about the needlepoint she was doing, but discarded the idea of working on it. She didn't want to sew; sewing left her mind free to wander, and she wanted to wipe the day from her mind, occupy her thoughts with something else. She got up and went over to the bookshelves, then began to run her finger across the spines of the books, considering and rejecting as she read the titles. Before she could choose a book, the doorbell chimed, then was followed promptly by a hard knock that rattled the door.

She knew instinctively who it was, but her steps didn't falter as she went to the door and opened it.

He was leaning against the door frame, his breath misting in the cold air. His blue eyes were leaping with a strange anger. "I didn't want you involved in this," he snapped.

Susan stepped back and waved him into the house. He had made some concession to the weather, after all, she noted, as he shrugged out of the lightweight jacket he wore. She took it from him and hung it neatly in the coat closet. She was calm, as if the shock of seeing his cruelty had freed her from the dizzying spell of his sensuality. Her heartbeat was slow and steady, her breathing regular.

"I've just put on a pot of coffee. Would you like some?"

His mouth thinned into a hard line. "Aren't you going to offer me whiskey, try to get me drunk so it'll be easier to handle me?"

Did he think that was why Imogene had offered him something to drink? She started to ask him, then shut her mouth, because it was possible that he was right. Imogene could have offered coffee, because there was always a fresh pot made after every meal. And neither Imogene nor Preston drank very much, beyond what was required socially.

Instead she treated his question literally. "I don't have any whiskey in the house, because I don't drink it. If you want something alcoholic, you'll have to settle for wine. Not only that, I think it would be difficult to get you drunk, and that being drunk would make you harder to handle, rather than easier."

"You're right about that; I make a mean drunk. Coffee will do fine," he said tersely, and followed her as she went into the kitchen. Without looking, she knew that he was examining her home, seeing the warmth and comfort of it, so different from the formal perfection of Blackstone House. Her rooms were large and airy, with a lot of windows; the floors were natural wood, polished to a high gloss. A profusion of plants, happy in the warmth and light, gave the rooms both color and coziness.

He watched as she took two brown earthenware mugs from the cabinet and poured the strong, hot coffee into them. "Cream or sugar?" she asked, and he shook his head, taking the cup from her.

"There's a fire lit in the den; let's go in there. I was cold when I got home," she said by way of explanation, leading the way into the other room.

She curled up in her favorite position, in a corner of the loveseat that sat directly before the fire, but he propped himself against the mantel as he drank his coffee. Again he looked at his surroundings, taking in her books, the needlepoint she'd been working on, the television and stereo system perched in place on the built-in shelves. He didn't say anything, and she wondered if he used silence as a weapon, forcing others to make the first move. But she wasn't uncomfortable, and she felt safe in her own home. She drank her coffee and watched the fire, content to wait.

He placed the mug on the mantel with a thud, and Susan looked up. "Would you like more coffee?" she offered.

"No."

The flat refusal, untempered by the added "thank you" that politeness demanded, signaled that he was ready for the silence to end. Susan mentally braced herself, then set her cup aside and said evenly, "I suppose you want to talk about leasing the ridges."

He uttered an explicit Anglo-Saxon phrase that brought her to her feet, her cheeks flaming, ready to show him the door. He reached out and caught her arm, swinging her around and hauling her up against his body in a single movement that stunned her with its swiftness. He wrapped his left arm around her waist, anchoring her to him, while he cupped her chin in his

right hand. He turned her face up, and she saw the male intent in his eyes, making her shiver.
She wasn't afraid of him, yet the excitement that was racing along her body was very like fear. The false calm she'd been enjoying had shattered at the first move he'd made, and now her heart was shifting into double time, reacting immediately to his touch. He wouldn't hurt her; she wasn't afraid of that. It was her own unwilling but powerful attraction to him that made her uneasy, that brought her hands up to press against his chest as he bent closer to her.
"Stop," she whispered, turning her head aside just in time, making his lips graze her soft cheek. His grip on her chin tightened, and he brought her mouth back around, holding her firmly, but instead of taking her lips he let his mouth wander to her ear, where his teeth nibbled sharply on the lobe. Susan caught her breath, then forgot to let it out as the warm slide of his lips went down the column of her throat and nuzzled her open collar aside, to find and press the soft, tender hollow just below her collarbone. She felt his tongue lick out and taste her flesh, and her breath rushed from her lungs.
"Cord, no," she protested frantically, alarmed by the tingling warmth that coursed through her body, spreading like wildfire from the touch of his mouth on her. Her pushing hands couldn't budge him. All she succeeded in doing was making herself deeply aware of the powerful muscles that layered his chest and shoulders, of the wild animal strength of him.
"Susan, honey, don't tell me no," he murmured insistently into the fragrant softness of her shoulder, before licking and kissing his way up her throat. Her fingers dug into his shoulder as every tiny flick of his tongue sent her nerves into twitching ecstasy. He finally lifted his head and hovered over her, their lips barely separated, their breaths mingling. "Kiss me," he demanded, his voice harsh, his eyes narrowed and intent.
Her body was quaking in his arms, her flesh fevered and aching for greater closeness with him, but her alarm equaled her physical need. The look in his pale eyes was somehow both cold and fiery, as if his body were responding to her but his actions were deliberately planned. Horrified, she realized that he knew exactly what his touch did to her, and if she didn't stop him soon, she would be beyond stopping him. He'd actually done so little, only kissing her shoulder, but she could feel the hardened readiness of his body and the tension that coiled in his muscles. He was a fire waiting to consume her, and she was afraid that she didn't know how to fight him.

"No, I can't—" she began, and that was all the chance he needed. His mouth closed on hers, and Susan melted almost instantaneously, her body telegraphing its need for him even though her mind rebelled. Her lips and teeth parted to allow the intrusion of his tongue; her hands slid up to lock around his neck, her fingers clenching in the thickness of his hair. As a first kiss, it was devastating. She was already at such a high level of awareness of him that the growing heat of the kiss was inevitable. She gave in without protest to the increasing pressure of his arms as he gathered her even closer to the heated need of his body.

The warning voice of caution was fragmented into a thousand helpless little pieces, useless against the overwhelming maleness of him. Too many sensations were attacking a body that had been innocent of sensuality for five long years, turning her thoughts into chaos, her body into a dizzying maelstrom of need.

She'd never before been so aware of a man's kiss as a forerunner to and an imitation of the act of sexual possession, but the slow penetration and withdrawal of his tongue sent shudders of pure desire reverberating through her. Mindlessly she rose on tiptoe, and he reacted to the provocation of her movement, his hands sliding down her back to curve over and cup the roundness of her buttocks, his fingers kneading her soft flesh as he lifted her still more, molding her to him so precisely that they might as well have been naked for all the protection their clothing afforded her from the secrets of his body. A moan, so low that it was almost a vibration rather than a sound, trembled in the air, and after a moment Susan realized with shock that it was coming from her throat.

No.

The denial was, at first, only a forlorn whisper in her own mind, without force, but some portion of her brain heard and understood, accepted that she couldn't allow herself to sample the lustful delights this man offered her. With the age-old wisdom of women, she knew that she couldn't offer herself casually, though he would take her casually. It would be nothing to him; a moment of pleasure, good but unimportant and swiftly forgotten. Susan, being the woman she was, would have to offer her heart before she could offer her body, and though she was dangerously attracted to him, she was still heart whole.

No! The word echoed in her mind again, stronger this time, and she tensed in his arms, oblivious now to the seduction of his mouth. The protest still

hadn't been voiced aloud, she realized, and with an effort she pulled her mouth free of his. She was suspended in his arms, her toes dangling above the floor while he cupped her hips to his in a position of intimacy, but her stiffened arms held her head and shoulders slightly away from him. She met his guttering diamond eyes evenly. "No."

His lips were red and sensuously swollen from their kiss, and she knew that hers must look the same. His dark beard had been so soft that she hadn't been aware of any prickles, and a rebellious tingle of desire made her want to nuzzle her face against that softness. To deny herself, she said again, "No."

His mouth quirked, amusement shining like a ray of sunshine across his face. "If people learn through repetition, then I have that word engraved on my brain."

Under any other circumstances she would have laughed, but her nerves were too raw to permit humor. She increased the pressure of her hands against his heavy shoulders, desperately trying to ignore the heat of his flesh searing her through the thin silk of his shirt. "Put me down. Please."

He obeyed, slowly, and his obedience was almost as provocative as his sensual attack. He let her slide with excruciating slowness down the hard length of his body, turning her release into an extended caress that touched her from her knees to her shoulders. She almost faltered, almost let her hands leave his shoulders to slide up and clasp around his neck again. Alarmed, determined, she stepped back as soon as her feet touched the floor, and with a wry smile, he let her go.

"You weren't so wary of me last night," he teased, but he watched sharply as she carefully placed herself out of his reach.

That was nothing less than the truth, so she agreed. "No, I wasn't."

"Do I look more dangerous in daylight?"

Yes, infinitely so, because now she'd seen a ruthlessness in him that she hadn't realized was there. Susan regarded him seriously, not even tempted to smile. She could try to put him off with vague excuses, but they wouldn't work with this man. He was still watching her with the deceptive laziness of a cat watching a mouse, letting it go just so far before lashing out with a paw and snatching it back. She sighed, the sound gentle in the room. "I don't think I could trust anyone who did what you did today."

He straightened from his negligent stance, his eyes narrowing. "I only went as far as I had to go. If they'd agreed to lease the ridges, the threat wouldn't

have been made."
She shook her head, sending her dark hair swirling in a soft, fragrant cloud around her face. "It was more than that. You set it up, deliberately antagonized both Imogene and Preston from the moment you walked in the door, pushing them so hard that you *knew* they wouldn't lease the ridges to you, *knew* you were going to hit them with your threats. You led them to it, and you gloated every inch of the way."
She stopped there, not voicing the other suspicion that was clouding her mind. Even without really knowing him, she felt as if she knew enough about him to realize that he seldom made mistakes; he was simply too smart, too cunning. But he had either made a mistake in not completely investigating the ownership of the ridges, or he had known all along that she was the owner, and hoped to use his threat against Imogene and Preston as a means of forcing her to sign the leases. It was common knowledge in the area how close she was to her in-laws; even an outsider could have discovered that. Cord might not have the means of threatening her personally, but he would see right away that she was vulnerable through her regard for her husband's family. And even worse than that, she had another suspicion: Was he bent on seducing her for some murky plan of revenge, or as a less than honorable means of securing the lease on the ridges? Either way, his attention to her was suddenly open to question, and she shrank from the thought.
He was still watching her with that unsettling stare. "Guilty as charged. I enjoyed every minute of making the slimy little bastard squirm."
Shaken by the relish in his tone, she winced. "It was cruel and unnecessary."
"Cruel, maybe," he drawled. "But it was damned necessary!"
"In what way? To feed your need for revenge?"
It had been a shot in the dark, but she saw immediately that it had been dead on target. The look he gave her was almost violent; then he turned and took the poker in his hand, bending down to rearrange the burning logs in the fireplace, expending his flare of anger on them. Straightening, he returned the poker to its place and stood with his head down, staring into the hypnotically dancing fire.
"I have my reasons," he said harshly.
She waited, but the moments stretched out and she saw that he wasn't going to explain himself. He saw no need to justify himself to her; the time had long passed when he needed anyone's approval of his actions.

The question had to be asked, so she braced herself and asked it. "What are you going to do about the money Preston owes you, now that you know he doesn't control the ridges?"
He gave her a hard, glinting look. "I haven't decided."
Chilled by the speculation in his eyes, Susan resumed her seat, an indefinable sadness overwhelming her. Had she really expected him to trust her? He probably trusted no one, keeping his thoughts locked behind iron barricades.
It had to be due to a streak of hidden perversity inside her that, even though she'd rejected the idea of having an affair with him, now she was hurt because she thought he might have an ulterior motive for pursuing her. If she had any brains at all, she'd not only keep the mental distance between them, she'd widen it. He'd made a pass at her, but she couldn't attach any importance to it; he probably made passes at a lot of women. If his kisses were anything, they were a subtle means of revenge. She was a Blackstone by name, and automatically included in his target area. Besmirching the reputation of Vance Blackstone's widow would be a scheme likely to appeal to Cord, if he wanted the Blackstones to squirm.
Because she couldn't stand the horror of the thought, her tone was abrupt when she spoke again. "I can't give you an answer about the ridges. I won't say no, but I can't say yes, either. I'll have an independent geological survey made, as well as gather several opinions about the ecological damage to the area, before I can reach a decision. And the decision I make will be based on the results of the surveys, not on any blackmail you may try to use."
“I don't remember asking you about the ridges,” he murmured, smiling coldly.
"That's why you're here, isn't it?"
"Is it?"
"Oh, please." She waved her hand tiredly. "I don't feel up to playing word games. I know the ridges are what you're after."
His eyes sharpened, and a certain tension invaded him, giving him a stillness that reminded her of an animal poised to attack. "I've never prostituted myself for an oil lease yet," he drawled, yet anger lay beneath his lazy tone like a dark shadow.
Susan darted a glance up at him. "We both know I'm not your usual type."
"Hell, no, you're not! I'll agree to that!" He glared at her, his lips compressed into a grim white line. "You sit there as cool as a cucumber and

accuse me of something pretty low, but you never even raise your voice, do you? Tell me, lady, is there anything that gets a rise out of you? Do you have feelings, or are you just a china doll, useless but nice to look at?"
She almost recoiled in shock, feeling the force and heat of his anger. "Yes, I feel," she whispered. "I don't want to be hurt. I don't want you to use me."
Suddenly he crouched down until his eyes were on a level with hers, and he leaned forward, so close that she pressed herself back into the cushions to relieve the sensation of being swamped by him. "I don't think you feel anything at all," he rasped. "Or rather, you're afraid of what feelings you do have. You want me, but you're too afraid of what people will say to reach out and take me, aren't you? You're too ded to the security of your network of leeches, all of you pretty, useless people who live off the work of others. You're pretty, sweetheart, but you're nothing but a bloodsucker."
His words hit her like blows, but she lifted her chin proudly. "You don't know anything about me," was all she said.
"I know enough to know that trying to get passion from you is a hopeless cause," he returned caustically. "Look, I'll be in touch about the leases, but don't save any dances for me."
She sat there for a long time after he left, wishing he would come back so she could spill out her fears and uncertainties to him, but knowing that it was for the best that he'd gone. He was right; she did want him, and she was afraid that if he knew just how weak she was, he'd play on those weaknesses and use her in any way he wanted, even as a means of revenge. If nothing else, she couldn't let that happen.
How quickly he had destroyed the peace, the even tenor of her days! She spent another night lying awake, twisting under a mantle of unhappiness. When dawn finally came, revealing a low gray sky, she wanted to do nothing more than lie in bed all day as a refuge from the thoughts that whirled around in her tired mind. But with her usual determination she forced herself out of bed; she would maintain her regular schedule if it killed her! She wasn't going to let Cord Blackstone tear her life to pieces.
She went to the offices in Biloxi every day; Preston ran everything, but since Vance's death she had become more immersed in the daily details of running a corporation with a myriad of interests, and Preston had long ago gotten in the habit of talking everything over with her. He had the training, but she was quick and knowledgeable, and had good instincts about business. After Vance's death, taking over his office had been a means of

keeping her sanity, but before long she'd found herself enjoying the work, enjoying the flood of information on which decisions were based.
She arrived early, but Preston was even earlier. Having seen his car in the parking lot, she went straight to his office, knocking softly on his door. Their mutual secretary hadn't arrived yet, and the building echoed with sounds not usually heard during the busy days.
He looked up at the interruption, and a welcoming smile eased the shadow of worry that had darkened his face. "Come on in. I've already put the coffee on."
"I could do with an extra jolt of caffeine," Susan sighed, heading straight for the coffeepot.
They sipped the hot brew in companionable silence for several minutes, then Susan put her cup down. "What are we going to do?"
He made no pretense of misunderstanding. "I went over the old books last night, trying to nail down exactly how much we owe him. It's a lot, Susan." He rubbed his forehead wearily.
"You're going to try to replace the money, aren't you?"
He nodded. "What else can I do? The hell of it is, we don't have that much ready cash right now. We've invested heavily in research that won't pay off for another couple of years, but you know that as well as I do. I'm not going to touch anything that you have an interest in; Mother and I agreed on that last night. We're going to liquidate some of our personal assets—"
"Preston Blackstone!" she scolded gently. "Did you think I wouldn't be willing to help you?"
"Of course not, honey, but it wouldn't be fair to you. Mother and I did this, and we knew that we were taking a chance. We gambled that Cord wouldn't come back until we'd been able to replace the money, and we lost." He shrugged, his blue eyes full of wry acceptance of his own mistake. "It didn't seem so wrong at the time. We didn't use the money for anything personal; every cent of it was invested back into the corporation, but I don't suppose that would make any difference in a court of law. I still forged his signature on some papers."
"Will you be able to raise enough?" He might protest, but if they couldn't cover the amount they owed Cord, then she would insist on helping them. She didn't want to do anything to jeopardize the corporation, so she agreed that its assets shouldn't be touched, but Vance had left her a lot of personal assets that could easily be liquidated, including some highly valuable

property. She also had the ridges, she realized with a sudden start. How badly did Cord want them? Badly enough to take the land in exchange for not pressing charges against Imogene and Preston? Two could play his game!

"I have an idea," she said slowly, not giving Preston time enough to answer her question. "I have something he wants; perhaps we could make a trade."

Preston was a smart man, and he knew her well; he leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes narrowing as he stared at her and sorted out the options and details in his mind. He didn't waste time on unnecessary questions. "You're talking about the ridges. You know that even if you lease the ridges to him, he can still file charges, don't you? He might swear that he wouldn't, but I don't think his word of honor is worth much. Not only that, you'd be giving in to his blackmail."

"Not quite," she said, thinking her way through the situation. "I'll have to have those surveys made, and estimate the worth of an oil lease on the ridges, but if he accepts the leases as restitution for the amount you owe him, then he doesn't have a case any longer, does he?"

Preston looked thunderstruck. "My God, you're talking about letting him have the oil leases for free? Do you have any idea what a rich field could be worth?"

"Millions, I'd imagine, or he wouldn't be so determined to have it."

"A lot more than what we owe him! He'd jump at the deal, but you'd be losing a fortune. No, there's no way I can let you do that."

"There's no way you can stop me," she reminded him, giving him a tender smile. She'd gladly give up a fortune to keep her family intact and safe. Preston had his faults, as did Imogene, but she knew that they'd never turn their backs on her, no matter what happened. They weren't easy people to know—the stiff-necked Blackstone pride and arrogance was present in abundance in both of them—but they also had a loyalty that went all the way to the bone. When she married Vance Blackstone, she had been taken into the family and guaranteed its protection. Preston had been a life-saver for her when Vance died, pushing his own grief for his brother aside to comfort her and protect her to the best of his ability. Even Imogene, whose proud head had never lowered even on the day of Vance's funeral, had helped Susan by showing her a gritty courage and determination that wouldn't falter.

Preston's frustration was evident in his eyes as he glared at her. "I don't like it when you use that soft, sweet tone of voice. That means you've dug in your heels and won't budge, doesn't it?"

A sound in the outer office alerted them to the arrival of their secretary, Beryl Murphy. Knowing that they both had a lot of paperwork to handle, Susan got to her feet and used that excuse to escape to her own office, even though she knew Preston wanted to try to talk her out of letting Cord have the ridges. Blue fire was in his gaze as he watched her leave the office, but Beryl was already approaching with the first of the day's crises, and he groaned in momentary surrender.

Susan had a stack of reports left on her desk from the Friday before, and she dutifully began reading them, but before long she'd lost the thread of meaning as her mind worried at every angle of the deal she'd be offering Cord.

She really needed to know the monetary value of the oil leases on the ridges before making a deal, but on the other hand, she didn't want to wait before approaching Cord about it. Though he could file charges immediately, she didn't think he would; he would wait, as much to worry everyone as to make up his mind. He probably had already made up his mind, she realized with a burst of panic. Should she wait, or should she tell him right away about the deal? Finally she decided to approach him immediately, before he could take any legal action. If any formal charges were ever made, there would be no way of keeping them from becoming public knowledge, and that would hurt her in-laws enormously.

The realization that she would have to see him, that day if possible, sent a chill down her spine. Just the thought of being close to him again made her blood tumble madly through her veins, whether in dread or anticipation she couldn't say. The way he had kissed her the day before was still seared into her mind, and she couldn't get the taste of his mouth from her lips, or rub from her skin the lingering sensation of the soft brush of his moustache and beard. He was a dangerous animal, but he appealed to her on a primitive level that she had never before suspected existed within herself. She wanted him, and her body's longing made every meeting with him hazardous, because she wasn't certain of her mind's ability to retain control.

But how silky his beard was! Not bristly at all, but soft and sensuous. Was the hair all over his body as soft as that? An image of his nude form sprang

into her mind, and a wave of heat washed over her, forcing her to take off the suit jacket she was still wearing.
My God, what was she thinking?
It was useless to entertain daydreams of him. Oh, he'd willingly use her sexually, but for reasons that had nothing to do with being attracted to her personally. Her feminine spirit couldn't take that, nor could her conscience allow her to so abandon her morals.
She got through the day, and somehow avoided Preston when he tried to pin her down at lunch. He didn't want her to sacrifice anything, and Imogene would also object. She'd have to stay one step ahead of both of them, and she meant to do that by seeing Cord as soon as possible. She made the necessary phone calls to get the geological survey in progress and grimly ignored the thought that now she couldn't let any ecological damage to the area matter.
By afternoon a weak sun was trying to break through the cloud layer, and a brisk wind had sprung up. Would Cord be working on the old cabin at Jubilee Creek? If he wasn't, she had no idea where to find him. She'd deliberately tried not to listen to all the gossip about him these past few weeks, and now she wished instead that she'd absorbed every word; at least then she might have an idea of where he was. She could ask Preston, but she knew what fireworks that would set off, so she decided simply to try her luck at Jubilee Creek.
She left early, because she wasn't certain of her memory of the location of the cabin. Secondary roads wound through the region like grape runners, crisscrossing each other and meandering in no particular direction, it sometimes seemed. Vance had taken her to the Jubilee Creek area a few times, early in their marriage, but that had been years ago.
Suddenly the sun brightened, as the wind pushed the clouds away, and she squinted against the sudden glare of sun on the wet highway. Reaching above the visor, she grabbed her sunglasses and quickly slid them on. Perhaps the sun was an omen; then she made a face at herself at the frivolous thought. She didn't believe in omens.
She was nervous, her stomach queasy at the thought of dealing with him, and to take her mind off of it she tried to concentrate on the passing scenery. The weather might be chilly, but there were signs of spring after all, even discounting the stubborn jonquils. Oak trees had that fuzzy look conveyed by new leaves, and patches of green grass were shooting up. In another

week, two at the most, color would be rioting over the land as shrubs and trees bloomed, and it couldn't happen soon enough for her. It was already what she counted as a late spring.

She almost missed the turn onto the narrow road that she thought was the correct one. It was only a roughly paved secondary road, without benefit of a painted centerline or graded shoulders. She slowed down, looking for the next turn, and just when she had almost decided that she'd taken the wrong road, she recognized the turn she was supposed to take. It was an unpaved lane that was really only two tracks, crowded on both sides by tall, monolithic pines and sweeping oaks that rapidly hid the secondary road from view. The lane made a long curve; then she found herself rattling across an old wooden bridge that spanned Jubilee Creek itself.

The rain had filled the broad, shallow creek, and the muddy water tumbled over the rocks and around the meandering curves as the creek snaked its way south to empty eventually into the Gulf. She could see the cabin now, a small structure dwarfed by three massive oaks behind it, capping the crest of a small rise. Even from where she was, it was evident that the porch that ran the length of the cabin was completely new, and as she drew closer she could see that the roof was also new, shingles replacing the rusted tin that had been there before.

She didn't know what kind of car he drove, but it didn't matter anyway, since there was no sign of any vehicle. Her heart sank. She slowed her own car to a stop in front of the cabin, staring at the curtainless windows in despair. Where could she find him?

She was just about to put the car in reverse when the door opened and he stepped onto the porch. Even from that distance she could see the icy glare of his eyes, and she knew that this wasn't going to be easy. She drew a deep breath to brace herself, then cut the ignition off and got out of the car.

Walking up the steps was like running a gauntlet; he leaned against the door frame and watched her in nerve-wracking silence, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked huge, she noticed; perhaps it was his clothes. He wore only a pair of faded jeans and a black T-shirt, and scuffed brown boots on his feet. The short sleeves of the T-shirt revealed his brawny forearms, sprinkled with dark hair and corded with veins that pulsed with his hot, life-giving blood. From the way the thin cotton clung to his torso, she knew that the image she'd had of his nude body had been remarkably accurate, and her

mouth went dry. He was lean and hard and muscular, and his chest looked like a wall.
His glacial eyes swept her from her neat spectator pumps to her head, where her dark hair had been swept into a simple chignon. "Slumming?" he drawled sarcastically.
She controlled the quiver that wanted to weaken her legs, and ignored his opening salvo. "I want to make a deal with you," she said firmly.
Amusement, and a savage satisfaction, glinted in his eyes. He stepped away from the door and waved her inside with an exaggerated bow. "Come inside, lady, and let's hear what you have to offer."

Chapter Four

Their steps echoed hollowly as she entered the cabin and he followed, closing the door behind them. The smell of newly cut wood struck her nostrils, and fine particles of sawdust floated through the air. Through an open door she could see a couple of sawhorses with a length of wood lying across them, and she realized that she had interrupted his work. She wanted to apologize, but the words refused to leave her thickened throat. To give herself time to recover, she looked around the empty cabin; despite the improvements, it still had an atmosphere of being old and still felt incredibly solid anyway. The new windows, large and airtight, let the light in but kept the damp chill out. An enormous fireplace, laid with logs but unlit, gave the promise of cozy fires. The open door to the right of the fireplace indicated the only other room, and except for it, she could see all of the cabin from where she stood. Beneath her feet, the floor was pine, treated and polished, then left alone to glow with its natural golden color. In spite of her nervousness she was charmed by the old cabin, as if she could feel at peace here.
He stepped past her and leaned down to strike a match and touch it to the old newspaper in the fireplace. It flamed with tongues of blue, which quickly caught the kindling, and soon the fire was licking at the big logs. "I don't feel the cold much while I'm working," he said by way of explanation. "But since you've interrupted me..."
"I'm sorry," she murmured, feeling incredibly awkward.

There was nowhere to sit, but he looked perfectly comfortable as he wedged one strong shoulder against the mantel and gave her a sardonic look. "Okay, lady, you wanted to talk turkey. Talk."
He wasn't going to give an inch. She didn't waste time pleading with him to be reasonable; she lifted her chin and plunged in. "Have you filed charges yet?"
"I haven't had time today," he responded lazily. "I've been working here."
"I...I want to make you an offer, if you'll agree not to file charges."
His ice blue eyes sharpened and raked down her slim, tense body. "Are you offering yourself?"
The thought jolted her, and she wondered what would happen if she said yes. Would he take her now, on the bare floor? But she said, "No, of course not," in a low voice that disguised her reaction.
"Pity." Nonchalantly, he surveyed her again. "That was the one offer you could have made that might interest me. It might have been fun to see if you get mussed up when you're having sex. I doubt it, though. You're probably starched all the way through."
Susan curled her fingers into her palms, and only then did she notice how cold her hands were. “I'm offering you the lease on the ridges.”
He straightened, his hard mouth curving in amusement. "Let me remind you that that was my original offer. But I've thought about it since then, and I've changed my mind. And didn't you tell me yesterday that you couldn't be blackmailed into selling me the lease?"
She stepped closer, to get nearer the fire as much as to read his eyes better. "I'm not offering to sell you the lease;
I'll *give* you the lease, as restitution for the amount owed to you by Preston and Imogene."
He laughed, throwing back his dark head on the rich sound. "Do you have any idea how much money you're talking about?"
Preston had asked her the same thing, and her answer was still the same. “More than what they owe you. I realize that; I'm asking you to accept the lease as restitution.”
He stopped laughing, and his eyes narrowed on her. "Why should you pay their debts? Why should I let them off scot-free?"
"They're my family," was all she could offer by way of explanation.
"Family, hell! They're pit vipers, sugar, and I should know better than anyone else. I don't want *you* to pay; I want *them* to pay."

"Like you said last night, you want them to squirm."
"Exactly."
"You're turning down an oil lease worth a fortune just for your petty sense of revenge?" she cried.
Anger darkened his face. "Easy there, lady," he said softly. "You're pushing me."
Susan swept an agitated hand across her brow. "You need pushing! How can you be so stubborn?" He wasn't going to agree, and desperation clawed through her stomach. "Why won't you take the lease as payment?"
He grinned, but it wasn't from amusement; his grin was one of grinding rage and grim anticipation. "Because if I accept the lease under those conditions, then I no longer have a case against them, as you well know. Did Preston talk you into this? Well, it won't work. I'll pay you for the lease, and I'll pay you well, but I won't let Preston hide behind your skirt. It's no deal."
Tears stung her eyes as he turned away from her to kick the burning logs into better position. She clutched at his arm, feeling his warm flesh, the steeliness of the muscles underneath. "Please!" she begged.
He swung around, looming over her, the red flames of the fire reflected in his pale eyes and making them glow like a devil's. "Damn you!" he spat from between his clenched teeth. "Don't you dare beg for them!"
Wildly she reached out with her other hand and grasped the fabric of his T-shirt, trying to shake him, but unable to budge him. She had to make him understand! How could he destroy his own family, his own blood? The thought was so horrible that she couldn't stand it. She had to do something, anything, to convince him how wrong and futile revenge was. "Don't do this, please!" she cried frantically. "I *am* begging you—"
"Stop it!" he ordered, his deeper, darker voice completely overriding hers. He jerked her hands off him and held her, his long fingers wrapped around her upper arms. Anger made his fingers bite into her soft flesh, and she gasped, twisting in an effort to free herself. Immediately his grip relaxed, and she jerked away. In the silence that fell between them, her breathing was swift and audible as she gulped in air, her breasts rising and falling. His eyes dropped to the soft mounds as they moved, lingered for a long, heart-stopping moment, and when he finally looked back up to her face, black fury had filled his gaze. "You begged... for *him.* Get out of here. You can

tell him that his little scheme didn't work. Go on, go back to him, and to his bed."

Susan came apart under the tension and the lash of his words. She, who never lost control, whose nature was serene and peaceful, suddenly found herself flying at him, thrusting her face up close to his and yelling, "It was *my* scheme, not his! He tried to talk me out of it! You fool! You're so wrapped up in the past, in your sick need for revenge, that you can't even see how self-destructive you are! If this is how you were fourteen years ago, no wonder you were run out of town—mmmmph!"

He had reached out, his hard hands closing on her waist, and had jerked her against him with enough force to knock the breath out of her. She threw her head back, gasping, and his mouth came down, attacking, fastening on hers, forcing her lips to part and mold themselves to his. There was nothing gentle or seductive in his kiss this time; he forced her response, his arms locking around her and holding her to him, one hand going up her back to fasten in her hair and hold her head back for him to drink as he willed from her mouth. Dazed, dizzied by his sudden sensual attack, she made on effort to wrench away from him.

He kissed her again and again, his tongue making forays that brought her onto her tiptoes, straining against him, forgetting the anger between them, forgetting the reason she was there. The feel of him, so hard and warm, so strong, was all she wanted in the world, the source of every comfort she could imagine. His kisses became deeper, longer, sweet-tart with the passion that turned their embrace into pure fire. His hand went under her jacket, sweeping up to close over her breast with a sure touch that didn't allow her to deny him the right to touch her so intimately. Her blouse was opened so roughly that she was dimly surprised when the buttons didn't fly off; then his hand was inside, sliding between her bra and the soft, satiny flesh beneath it, her nipple stabbing into his rough palm.

She whimpered into his mouth as his hand stroked and kneaded, his demanding man's touch swamping her with a sensual delight that turned her body into pure molten need. Her breasts were very sensitive, and his expertise made them harden with desire, turned the velvet nipple into a taut, throbbing point. She was throbbing everywhere, her entire body pulsating, her own hands digging into the deep valley along his spine, then pulling frantically at his T-shirt until it came free of his pants and she could slide her hands under it, running her palms up the damp, muscled expanse of his

back. He quivered under her touch, telling her without words that he was as aroused as she. He had the raw, musky smell of sweat mingled with his own potent masculinity; and she wanted to spend the rest of her life locked in his hard arms, breathing in that scent. It was mad, but oh, it was sweet.
When he released her and stepped back, she was as shocked as if a bucket of icy water had been hurled in her face. Disoriented, lost without the heat of his body, the hard security of his arms, she stared up at him with bewildered blue eyes grown so huge that they dominated her face.
He wasn't unaffected; he was breathing hard, and color was high in his face. When he looked at her open blouse and his pupils dilated, she swayed on her feet, thinking for a moment that he was going to return to her. Then he thrust a rough hand through his hair, ruffling the silky strands. “Is this Plan Two to get me to agree to your deal?”
Susan stepped back, her face losing its color. "Do you really believe that?" she choked, anguish twisting her insides.
"It seems possible enough. You don't have the guts to admit that you want me; you have to cling to your spotless, genteel reputation. But if you sacrifice yourself to me to save your family, well, then you're a noble martyr, and you get to enjoy the sin without sinning. I admit, it sounds like something out of a Victorian novel, but that's what you make me think of."
"A coward," she said painfully.
A hard smile twisted his mouth. "Exactly."
She stood poised, uncertain if she should go or try again to convince him not to press charges against her family. She badly wanted to leave; she was afraid that if he threw any more harsh words against her, her dignity and self-control would be totally destroyed and she'd begin crying, and she didn't want that. She swallowed to force control on her voice, and said quietly, "Please reconsider. How can you turn down a fortune? You know what those ridges are worth if the geologists are right, and what the lease would normally cost you."
"You're offering to save my company a fortune," he pointed out coolly. "I wouldn't get any of the money personally. What's in it for me?"
Confused, she stared at him. How stupid of her! Her great plan had been to offer him personal gain, and he had let her make a complete fool of herself before reminding her that giving the lease to him would benefit the company he worked for, not him personally. Mortified, she turned and walked quickly to the door, wanting nothing more than to leave. A deep

chuckle followed her, and as she opened the door and stepped onto the porch, he called, "But it was a good try!"
Susan kept her pace steady as she went to the car, trying not to run even though she wanted to get away from him as fast as she could. What a colossal blunder she'd made! And how he must be laughing at her! When she thought of the way she'd returned his kisses, she blushed, then turned pale. Good Lord, how could he think she was anything but cheap, after she'd virtually offered herself to him? He'd thought that she was just part of the deal, and she couldn't blame him for that; what else could he think, when she'd kissed him back so hungrily?
When she pulled into her own driveway and saw Imogene's Cadillac in front of the house, she groaned aloud. The last thing she felt like right then was facing Imogene's drilling; she wanted to take a long bath and pamper herself in an effort to soothe her ragged nerves. She knew that Preston would have called Imogene and talked to her about Susan's ploy, and now Imogene was here to discover how things had gone. Why couldn't she have waited just a few hours more?
There would be no easy way to dash Imogene's hopes, and the strain was evident in Susan's face as she entered the house and walked to the den, where she knew her mother-in-law would be waiting. The older woman rose to her feet when Susan entered, and her shrewd gray eyes examined every nuance of expression in Susan's face. "He turned you down, didn't he?" It wasn't like Imogene to give in to defeat, but now her discouragement gave a leaden cast to her eyes, dulled her voice.
He'd turned her down in more ways than one, Susan thought wearily. Her mental and physical fatigue muted her voice as she sank down in one of the chairs. "Yes."
"I knew he would." Imogene sighed and resumed her seat, her patrician face stiff with effort. "It would be too easy to let you pay; it's Preston and me that he's after."
Remembering the cool contempt in his eyes when he had looked at her, Susan couldn't agree fully with Imogene. A hard knot of pain formed in her chest; why did it have to be like that? When she remembered the intense magic of their first two meetings, she wanted to weep at the harsh words that had passed between them since then. She felt as if she had lost something precious, without ever having held it in her hands. He was a hard man, yet inexplicably she wanted to get closer to him, to get to know him,

learn his moods and his laughter as well as his anger, delve into his protected personality until she found some inner core of tenderness. When he had kissed her the first time, it had been with a tender consideration for her soft flesh. But today... Susan raised her fingers and touched her lips, still a little swollen and sensitive from his hard kisses. He hadn't been gentle today; he had been angry, and he had punished her for daring to try to protect Preston.

Suddenly she realized that Imogene had followed the telltale gesture with knowing eyes, and she blushed.

Imogene sat upright. "Susan! He's interested in you, isn't he? How perfect! Thank God," she said fervently.

Susan had expected a subtle scolding, not Imogene's almost rapturous joy. "What's perfect?" she asked in confusion.

"Don't you see? You're in a marvelous position to find out what he's planning and keep us informed; that way we can take steps to counteract anything he does. Why, you might even be able to talk him out of staying here!"

Stunned, she stared at Imogene, not quite able to believe what was being asked of her, what Imogene automatically assumed she would do, without protest. After all, she was family, and her first allegiance was to that family. It was the same sort of thinking that had allowed Imogene and Preston to use Cord's money illegally in the first place; it wasn't as much Cord's money as it was Blackstone money, and therefore available for their use.

She strove for an even tone. "He's not interested in me. If anything, I'm tarred with the same brush he's used to paint you and Preston."

Imogene waved that thought aside with a brisk movement of her hand. "Nonsense." She examined Susan critically, her gray eyes narrowed. "You're a lovely woman, though of course not his usual sort. It shouldn't be difficult for you to get around him."

"But I don't want to get around him!"

"Dear, you *must!* Don't you see that the only way we can protect ourselves is to know in advance what he's planning?"

Agitation tumbled Susan's insides with a restless hand, and she got to her feet, unable to sit still. "It's impossible," she blurted. "I'm not a...a slut. I can't sleep with him just to *spy* on him!"

Imogene looked affronted. "Of course you wouldn't, but I'm not asking that of you, Susan. All I'm asking is that you see him, talk to him, try to find out

what he's planning. I realize that it may cost you a few kisses, but surely you're willing to give that in exchange for our protection."
A few kisses! Did Imogene really know so little about her own nephew? Susan shook her head slowly, denying the idea to herself, as well as to Imogene. "A few kisses isn't what he wants," she said, her voice muffled. And even if she went to bed with him, he still wouldn't divulge any secrets to her. All he wanted from her was a good time in bed, physical release, a momentary pleasure.
Imogene didn't give up easily; there was steel in her spine, in her character. Sitting very upright, her chin lifted proudly, she said firmly, "Then it's up to you to keep him under control. You're not a teenager, to be seduced in the back seat of a car to the theme of 'but everyone does it.' You can string him along."
If Susan had been less shocked, she would have laughed aloud, but as it was she stood frozen, staring at Imogene as if she were a stranger. What her mother-in-law was telling her to do struck her as little less than prostitution, and she felt chilled by the realization that Imogene had so little regard for her feelings, her morals. She was simply supposed to do whatever was asked of her.
"No," she refused in a low voice. "I can't...! *Won't do* it."
A cold fire began snapping in Imogene's eyes. "Really? Do you care so little for me, for Preston, that you'll simply stand and watch while that wretch destroys us? We won't be in it by ourselves, you know. You'll suffer, too. If he decides to sue us for damages, he could bankrupt the company, and there would go the standard of living that you currently enjoy. People will talk about you just as they would about us; everyone will believe that you knew about the money from the beginning. You've made a big show of 'working' at the company since Vance died, so people will assume that not only did you know about it, you approved."
Susan had seen Imogene in action before, and knew that few people could stand up to her when she lashed out with her lethal tongue, when she stared at someone with those cool, hard eyes. Most people gave in to her without even a hint of resistance. Vance had had the strength to soothe her, agree with her, and calmly go about his own business in his own way, smiling at her and charming her whenever she realized that he'd ignored her directions. Preston wasn't that often at variance with her, though he was a lot warmer, a lot more human. Because she had been challenged so seldom in her life, she

didn't expect anyone to disobey her openly. The quiet determination Susan had shown in becoming Vance's wife, then in taking up the reins of his business interests at his death, should have told her that Susan wasn't like most people, but still she wasn't prepared for a refusal.

Susan stood very straight, very still, her expression calm, her dark blue eyes quiet and level. "Regardless of what anyone says, I'll know that I haven't done anything wrong, and that's what's important to me. I'll help you any way I can, except for that way. I'll sell everything I own, but I won't play the whore for you, and that's what you're asking me to do. You know as well as I do that Cord isn't a man who can be controlled by any woman."

Imogene got to her feet, her mouth tight. "I expected more loyalty from you than this. If you want to turn your back on us when we're in trouble, I can't stop you, but think very carefully about what you stand to lose."

"My self-respect," Susan said dryly.

Imogene didn't storm out of the house; she swept out, regally, in a cold rage. Susan stood at the window and watched her drive away, her chest tight with hurt and sadness because she hadn't wanted to damage the relationship she had with Imogene. Since she'd first met Vance's mother, she had carefully cultivated a closeness with the older woman, knowing how important the ties of family were to a marriage, and how much Vance had loved his mother despite her reserve. Imogene wasn't a villain, even though she was autocratic. When she loved, she loved deeply, and she'd fight to the death for those she cared about. Her blindness was her family; anything was acceptable to her if it protected her family. Until now Susan had been wrapped in that fierce blanket of protection, but now she felt that she'd been cast out as Cord had been cast out. Dues had to be paid if someone expected to benefit from that protection; conformity was expected, and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the well-being of the whole. Cord had been cast out because he hadn't conformed, because he'd left the family open to gossip. His reputation hadn't been up to par, and he'd been forced out of the closed circle.

Had he felt like this? Susan wondered, running her hands up her chilled arms. Had he felt lost, betrayed? Had he been alarmed to be without the support that he'd known since birth? No, he hadn't been alarmed, not that man; instead he would have thought with grim delight of punishing them for turning their backs on him. Wasn't that what he was doing now?

Cord. Somehow all her thoughts these days returned to him, as if he had become the center of her world. She hadn't wanted him to, but since the moment he'd walked in from the night, he had eclipsed everyone else in her every waking thought, in her dreams, had invaded even her memory, so that she constantly had the taste of his mouth on her tongue, felt the hard warmth of his hands on her flesh. *I could love him!* she thought wildly, and shuddered in half fear, half excitement. Loving him would be the most dangerous thing she'd ever done in her life, yet she felt helpless to deny the effect he had on her. If it wasn't love yet, it had nevertheless gone beyond mere desire, and she was teetering on the edge of an emotional chasm. If she fell into it, she'd be forever lost.

The emotional strain that she was under was visible on her face the next morning when she walked into the office, later than usual for her because she'd spent a restless night, then overslept when she finally did manage to fall asleep. Because she felt so frazzled, she'd attempted to disguise her emotional state by hiding behind an image that was sterner than the one she usually projected. She'd pulled her soft dark hair back into a tight knot and applied makeup carefully, hoping to divert attention from the lost expression in her eyes. The dress she had chosen was sleekly sophisticated, a black silk tunic with narrow white vertical stripes, cinched about her slender waist with a thin black belt. It wasn't a dress that she wore often, because it had always seemed too stark for her, but today it suited her mood perfectly.

She told Beryl good morning, then went straight through to her office and closed the door, hoping to submerge herself in the reports that she hadn't finished the day before, because she'd been in such a hurry to see Cord. A wasted effort, she thought with a painful catch in her breath. Resolutely she pushed away the thought of her failure and picked up the first report, only to replace it when someone knocked firmly on her door.

Without waiting for an answer, Preston let himself in and sauntered over to ease himself into the chair opposite her desk. He sprawled in it and pressed his fingers together to form a steeple, over which he peered with blue eyes alive with curiosity. "What did you say to Mother?" he asked with relish. "I haven’t seen her so angry in years."

Susan caught the grin that twitched at his mouth, and against her will she found herself smiling at him. Preston had a little bit of the devil in him at times, a puckish sense of humor that he seldom allowed to surface.

Whenever he did, it made his eyes sparkle in a manner that reminded her strongly of Vance. Now was one of those times. Despite the pressure he was under, he was being eaten alive with curiosity, wondering what Susan could possibly have said to his mother to put her in such a snit.
She wasn't certain just how much to tell him, if anything. She decided to stall. "Did Imogene tell you that Cord turned down my offer of the ridges?"
He nodded. "I'm glad, too. I know it would've been the easy way, but I don't want you to pay for something that was our fault. You know that." He gave a graceful shrug. "Mother didn't agree; she thought that it would be worth it if we stopped any trouble before it began."
Yes, head off scandal, at any cost. Deciding to tell him the truth in the hope that he would support her, she took a deep breath and braced herself. "She wanted me to see Cord—play up to him—and try to find out what he was planning so you could counteract it. I refused."
Preston's eyes had widened, then narrowed as he realized the scope of her simplified explanation. He swore softly. "Thank God for that! I don't want you around him. Mother shouldn't have suggested anything like that."
"She'd do anything to protect her family," Susan offered in Imogene's defense.
"Telling you to play up to Cord is like throwing a lamb to the wolves," he snapped. "You wouldn't have a chance. What in hell ever gave her the idea?"
A faint blush crept into Susan's cheeks, and she looked away from him. "She knows that he kissed me...."
Preston bolted upright in his chair. "He what?"
"He kissed me," she repeated steadily. Did Preston think that was something to be ashamed of?
He'd turned pale, and abruptly he surged to his feet, running his fingers through his neat hair in an uncharacteristic gesture. "I thought, the night he first showed up, that he was just playing up to you to get back at me. Is that all it is?"
Susan bit her lip; she honestly didn't know. Her body told her that Cord Blackstone's interest wasn't limited to her name, but her mind worried over the issue. A man's sexual instincts could be aroused even when he had another motive for seducing a woman, so she couldn't let herself be confused by the physical responses he'd shown. Yet, he'd responded to her from the very beginning... Just when her heart was beginning to beat faster

in faint hope, she saw herself stretching out her hand to him, and heard herself saying, "I'm Susan Blackstone..." No, he'd known from the first that she was a Blackstone, married to either Vance or Preston. Unhappily, she looked up at Preston. "I don't know," she said miserably.
He began to pace around the room. "Susan, please, don't have anything else to do with him. Don't see him at all, unless you have to. You don't have any idea of the type of man he is."
"Yes, I do," she interrupted. "He's a hard, lonely man." How could he not be lonely? He might have built an emotional wall to guard him, but he was all alone behind it.
Preston gave her a derisive, unbelieving look. "My God, how can you be so naive? You've got to stop seeing good in everyone! Some people are bad all the way through. Will you promise me not to see him again, and protect yourself before he has a chance to really hurt you?"
There was a very real chance that *he* wouldn't want to see *her,* but suddenly she knew that if by some miracle he gave her another opportunity, she'd seize it with both hands. She wanted to be with him. She wanted to kiss him, to try to discover if what she felt for him was a fleeting sexual magic, or if the seeds of real love had been sown. For five years she'd grieved for Vance, and though her love for him would never die, neither would it grow. Vance was frozen in place in her heart, but he didn't occupy all of it. There was still so much love in her to give! She wanted to love again; she wanted to marry again, and bear children. Perhaps Cord wasn't the man who would be able to touch her heart, but she already knew that she had to take the chance. If she let the opportunity pass, she'd always wonder about it, and mourn for lost chances for the rest of her days.
She looked Preston in the eye. "I can't promise that."
He swore softly, and suddenly his shoulders hunched.
"All of these years," he muttered. "First you were Vance's wife, then his widow. I've waited, knowing you weren't over Vance, that you weren't ready to become involved with anyone else. Damn it, why does it have to be Cord?" The last sentence was a harsh cry, and his chest swelled with the fury inside him. He gave Susan a look so tortured that tears welled in her eyes.
She found herself on her feet, unable to calmly sit there while he bared his deepest secret to her. "Preston... I didn't know," she whispered.

His clear blue eyes were a little shiny, too. "I know," he said, taking a shuddering breath. “I made sure I kept it from you. What else could I do? Try to steal my brother's wife?”
"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" What else was there to say? Events couldn't be altered. Perhaps, if their lives had been allowed to go on undisturbed, she might one day have come to love Preston in the way he wanted, though she rather thought that instead she would always have seen him as Vance's brother, and looking at him would always have been like looking at a slightly altered photo of Vance. But the even tenor of her life had been disrupted from the moment she'd seen Cord, and crossing that dance floor to take his hand and shield him from the scene that had been brewing had forever altered her, in ways that she hadn't yet discovered.
"I know." He turned his head away, not wanting her to see the depth of his pain. He was a man of pride and patience, and his patience had gained him nothing. All he could do now was cling to his pride. He walked to the door and left, his shoulders square, his gait steady, but still Susan knew what the effort cost him, and her vision blurred as she watched him.
Would Cord be glad that, even involuntarily, he'd managed to hurt Preston? She winced at the thought. She'd certainly never tell him that Preston had hoped for a deeper relationship. What he'd told her today would go no further; it was the least she could do for someone she loved as much as she could, even though, for him, that wasn't enough.

Chapter Five

By Friday her emotional turmoil had taken its toll on her, and the price she'd paid was evident in an even more slender waistline, and a fragility in her face that was startling. She and Imogene had made up, in a way. They had spoken to each other on the phone, never making reference to their difference of opinion, but their conversation had been stilted and brief. Imogene had simply asked her if she would be attending Audrey Gregg's Friday night fund-raising dinner for a local charity. Imogene had a prior commitment, and she wanted Susan to go, since Audrey was a very good friend. Susan had agreed, reluctant to face an evening of having to smile and pretend that everything was all right, but acknowledging her family duty. At least it wasn't formal, thank God. Audrey Gregg believed in

keeping her guests entertained; there would be dancing, a generous buffet instead of a sit-down dinner, and probably a night club act brought in from New Orleans.

Spring was tantalizing them again with marvelous weather, though only the day before it had been cold and overcast. Today the temperature had soared to eighty, and the forecasters had promised a mild night. With that in mind, Susan dressed in a floaty dress in varying shades of lavender and blue, with a wrap bodice that hugged and outlined her breasts. She was too tired and depressed to fool much with her hair, and simply brushed it back, securing it behind each ear with filigree combs. The sun was setting in a marvelous skyscape of reds and gold and purples when she drove over to Audrey's house, and the natural beauty lifted her spirits somewhat. How could she keep frowning in the face of that magnificent sunset?

The brief lifting of her spirits lasted only until she glanced over the crowd at Audrey's and saw Cord, casually sophisticated in gray flannel slacks and a blue blazer, dancing with Cheryl Warren. Cheryl again! Though Cheryl was a likable person, unexpectedly kind despite her chorus-girl looks, Susan felt an unwelcome sting of jealousy. It was just that Cheryl was so... so sexy, and so *together.* Her tall, leggy body was svelte, with a dancer's grace; her makeup was always a little dramatic, but always perfectly applied, and somehow right for her. Her ash blond hair looked wonderful—loose and sexy, tousled.

Compared to Cheryl, Susan felt nondescript. Her simple hairstyle suddenly seemed childish, her makeup humdrum, her dress the common garden variety. She scolded herself for feeling that way, because she knew the dress was becoming to her and was perfectly stylish. It was just that Cord made her feel so insecure, so unsure of herself and what she wanted. Then she had to admit to herself that she did know what she wanted: She wanted Cord. But she couldn't have him; he was all wrong for her, and he didn't want her anyway.

Suddenly Preston was at her elbow, his strong hand guiding her to the buffet. With a pang, Susan realized that normally she would have been here with Preston, but this time he hadn't even asked her. Cord had managed to drive a wedge between her and Preston, whose friendship she had depended on for so long. How pleased he would be if he only knew what he'd done!

Preston's blue eyes were worried as he looked down at her. "Relax for a minute," he advised. "You're wound up like a two-dollar watch."

"I know," she sighed, watching as he automatically filled a plate for her. He knew all her favorite foods, and he chose them without asking. When he had two laden plates in his hand, he nodded over to a group of empty chairs and they made their way across the room to claim them, with Susan stopping enroute to fetch two glasses of champagne punch.
He watched as she nibbled on a fresh, succulent Gulf shrimp. "You're lovely," he said with the blunt honesty of people who know each other well. "But you look as if you're going to fly into a million pieces, and that isn't like you."
She managed a wry smile. "I know. You don't know how I wish I could do more than catnap. At least Imogene's speaking to me again."
He grinned. "I knew she wouldn't last long. She's been so restless, it was almost funny. Honey, if it's such a strain on you, why don't you take a vacation? Forget about all of this and get away from all of us for a while."
"I can't do that now." The look she gave him was worried. "I can't leave you not knowing if...if..."
"I know." He covered her hand with his, briefly applying pressure before removing his touch. "I'm handling it, so don't worry so much. In another week to ten days, I'll have the money repaid into Cord's account."
She bit her lip. She knew that he would have had to liquidate a lot of assets to raise that much money so quickly, and she felt guilty that he hadn't allowed her to help. Perhaps she hadn't known anything about it, but she had profited by the use of the money because it had made the company stronger.
By sheer willpower, she kept her gaze from straying too often to Cord as the minutes crawled past, but still she somehow always knew where he was. He'd stopped dancing with Cheryl, and she was surprised by the number of people who engaged him in conversation, despite how wary most of them still were of him. Why was he here? She couldn't imagine that Audrey Gregg had invited him, so he had to have come with someone else, probably Cheryl. Was he seeing Cheryl often?
For a while he stood alone, off to one side, slowly sipping a glass of amber liquid, his dark face blank of any expression, his eyes hooded. He was always alone, she thought painfully. Even when someone was talking with him, he had a quality about him that set him apart, as if he were surrounded by an invisible barrier. He'd probably had to become hard and aloof to

survive, but now that very protection kept him from being close to another human being.
It was too stressful to watch him. To divert herself, she began talking to Preston, and resolutely kept her gaze away from Cord. Good friend that Preston was, he talked easily of many things, keeping her occupied. She knew that he had to be under a strain himself, even more so than she was, but he was handling it well, and his concern was all for her.
Suddenly Preston looked past her, his blue gaze sharpened and alert. "It's in the fan now," he muttered. "Grant Keller is about to tie into Cord."
Susan whirled, and gasped at the hostility of the scene. Grant Keller was a picture of aggressive, bitter hatred, standing directly in front of Cord, his fists knotted and his jaw thrust out as he spat some indistinguishable words at the younger man. His handsome, aristocratic face was twisted with hate and fury. Cord, on the other hand, looked cool and bored, but there was an iciness in his eyes that warned Susan that he was on the verge of losing his temper. His stance was relaxed, and that too was a signal. He was perfectly balanced, ready to move in any direction.
Her breath caught in her chest. He'd never before seemed so aloof, so unutterably alone, with only his natural pride and arrogance to stand with him. Her heart was stabbed with pain, and she felt as if she were choking. He was a warrior who would die rather than run, standing by his own code, loyal to his own ideals. Oh, God, couldn't they see that only pain could force a man into such isolation? He'd been hurt enough! Then, out of the corner of her eye, Susan saw Mary Keller watching her husband, with distress and a wounded look evident on her quiet face.
Suddenly Susan was angry, with a fierce swell of emotion that drove away her depression, her tiredness. That old scandal had already caused enough trouble and pain, and now another woman was about to be hurt by it. Mary Keller had to sit there and watch her husband try to start a fight over another woman, something that couldn't be pleasant. And Cord... what about Cord? His youthful love affair had caused him to be driven away from his family, and the hard life that he'd lived since then had only isolated him more. Grant Keller was the wronged husband, true, but he wasn't the only one who had suffered. It was time for it to end, and she was going to see that it did!
People who had never seen Susan Blackstone angry were startled by the look on her face as she headed across the room, and a path was cleared for

her. Her eyes were a stormy indigo, her cheeks hot with color, as she marched up to the two men and put her slender body gracefully between them. She was dwarfed by their size, but no one had any doubt that the situation had been swiftly defused. She was practically sparking with heat.
"Grant," she said with a sweetness that couldn't begin to disguise the fire in her eyes, "I'd like to talk to you, please. Alone. Now."
Surprised, he looked down at her. "What?" His tone indicated that he hadn't quite registered her presence.
Cord's hard hands clamped about her waist, and he started to move her to one side. She looked up, smiling at him over her shoulder. *"Don't... you... dare,"* she said, still sweetly. She looked back at Grant. "Grant. Outside."
To make certain that he obeyed her, she took his arm and forcefully led him out of the room, hearing the buzz of gossip begin behind her like angry bees swarming.
"Are you crazy?" she demanded in a fierce whisper when they were out of earshot, dropping the older man's arm and whirling on him in a fury. "Haven't enough people already been hurt by that old scandal? It's *over!* It can't be undone, and everyone has paid for it. Let it die!"
"I can't," he returned just as fiercely. "It's burned into my head! I walked into my own home and found my wife in bed with *him.* Do you think he was ashamed? He just glared at me, as if she were *his* wife, as if I had no right to be there!"
Yes, that sounded like Cord, able to stare down the devil himself. But she brushed all of that aside. "Maybe you have bad memories, but you're just going to have to handle them. Are you still in love with your first wife? Is that it? Do you want her back? You have Mary now, remember! Have you given her a thought? Have you thought of how she must feel right now, watching you start a fight over another woman? Why don't you just walk up and slap her in the face? I'm sure it wouldn't hurt her any worse than she's hurting right now."
He blanched, staring down at her. Perspiration broke out on his face, and he wiped his brow with a nervous hand. "My God, I hadn't thought," he stammered.
Susan poked him in the chest with her forefinger. "It's a dead issue," she said flatly. "I don't want to hear about it again. If any one... *anyone...* wants to fight Cord over something that happened fourteen years ago, they're

going to have to go over me first. Now, go back in there to your wife and try to make it up to her for what you've done!"
"Susan—" He broke off, staring at her pale, furious face as if he'd never seen her before. "I didn't mean—"
"I know," she said, relenting. "Go on now." She gave him a gentle push, and he sucked in a deep breath, obviously preparing himself to face a wife who had every right to be hurt, humiliated and angry. Susan stood where she was for a moment after he'd gone, drawing in her own deep breaths until she felt calm seep back into her body, replacing the furious rush of adrenaline that had sent her storming across the room to step between two angry men.
"That's a bad habit you've got." The deep drawl came from behind her, and she whirled, her breath catching, as Cord sauntered out of the shadows. Abruptly she shivered, no longer protected by her anger, as the cooling night air finally penetrated her consciousness. Quickly she cast a glance at the crowd of people visible through the patio doors, some of them dancing again, going about their own concerns. She had stepped in too soon for anything exciting to happen, so there wouldn't even be much gossip.
"They all know we're out here, but no one is going to intrude," he said cynically. "Not even Preston, the Boy Wonder." He touched the soft curve of her cheek with one finger, trailing it down to the graceful length of her throat. "Didn't your mother ever teach you that it's dangerous to get between two fighting animals?"
She shivered again, and when she tried to speak she found that her voice wouldn't work right; it was husky, strained. "I knew you wouldn't hurt me."
Again his finger moved, sliding with excruciating slowness over her collarbone, then stroking lightly over the sensitive hollow of her shoulder. Susan found that the touch of his finger, the hypnotic motion of it, somehow interfered with her breathing; the rhythm of her lungs was thrown off, and she was almost hyperventilating one moment, then holding her breath the next. She stared up at him, seeing his lips move as he spoke, but her attention was focused on his touch, and the words didn't make sense. She swallowed, licked her suddenly dry lips, and croaked, "I'm sorry. What—"
One comer of his mouth lifted in a strange almost-smile. "I said, you'd be a lot safer if you didn't trust me. Then you'd stay away from me, and you wouldn't get burned. I can't decide about you, honey."
"What do you mean?" Why couldn't her voice be stronger? Why couldn't she manage more than that husky whisper?

His finger moved again, making a slow trek over to her other shoulder, touching her in a way that made her heart slam excitedly. She'd never noticed her shoulders being so sensitive, but he was doing things to her that were rocketing her into desire. "I can't decide whose side you're on," he murmured, watching both his finger and the way her breasts were heaving as she struggled to regulate her breathing. "You're either the best actress I've ever seen, or you're so innocent you should be locked up to keep you safe." Suddenly his pale eyes slashed upward, his gaze colliding with hers with a force that stunned her. "Don't step in front of me again. If Grant had accidentally hit you, I'd have killed him."

She opened her mouth to say something, but whatever was in her mind was forever lost when he trailed his finger downward to her breasts, stroking her cleavage, then exploring beneath the cloth of her bodice to flick over a velvet nipple. She caught a moan before it surfaced, gasping in air. With a slow, sure touch he put his hand inside her dress, cupping her in his palm with a bold caress, as sure of himself as if they weren't standing on the patio where any of fifty people could interrupt them at any time. He looked at her face, soft, drowning in sensuality, and suddenly he wondered if she looked the same whenever Preston touched her. She was either the most sensual woman he'd ever seen, or she was fantastic at faking it. At the thought of Preston, he removed his hand, leaving her dazed and floundering. "You'd better get back inside," he muttered; then he turned and walked away, disappearing into the night shadows, leaving her more alone than she'd felt since Vance's death.

Her body burned from his touch, yet she was shaking with something like a chill. It was like a fever, she thought dimly, burning hot and cold at the same time. He *was* a fever, consuming her, and she reached the horrified realization that the way she felt about him was no longer under her control. Without wanting to, she cared too much about him. She was playing Russian roulette with her emotions, but it was far too late to stop.

She stood there in the cool night for several minutes longer, then slipped quietly inside to rejoin the party. Preston came over and touched her arm gently. "Are you all right?" he asked with tender concern, and in his eyes she saw the love that he couldn't quite hide.

She was calm enough now to give him her most reassuring smile, one that made most people feel that everything was right with the world. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Grant and Mary have gone home. What'd you say to him? He looked like he was in shock when he came in, and he went straight to Mary."
She shook her head, still smiling. "Nothing, really. I just calmed him down."
His look said he didn't quite believe her, but he kissed her forehead lightly in tribute. It was inevitable that when Susan glanced around she saw Cord standing across the room, staring at her with cold, unreadable eyes, and a sad pain bloomed in her heart. He'd never trust her, she thought, and wished that it didn't mean so much to her.
Audrey Gregg found the opportunity to thank her for averting a scene, and after that Susan made her excuses and drove herself home where she fell into bed in mental exhaustion, then got up ten minutes later to restlessly pace the house. Finally she turned on the television to watch an old Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin comedy, letting their antics clear her mind. She was engrossed in the movie, chuckling to herself, when the doorbell rang. Frowning, she glanced at the clock. It was almost midnight, the witching hour.
"Who is it?" she called through the door, tying the sash of her robe tighter.
"Cord."
She unlocked the dead-bolt and opened the door to him. He straightened from his slouch against the door frame and walked inside. Her eyes dropped to the whiskey bottle he carried in his hand. A half-empty whiskey bottle.
"Are you drunk?" she asked warily.
"On my way." He smiled at her and took a drink from the bottle. "It's hard for me to get drunk, but champagne does it to me every time. Something about my chemistry. I'm just trying to finish it off with this."
"Why do you want to get drunk?" He was walking toward the den, and she followed him automatically. If he was drunk, or even high, he was certainly handling it well. His walk was steady, his speech clear. He sat down on the couch and stretched his long legs out before him, sighing as his muscles relaxed. Susan went over to the television and switched it off in the middle of a Jerry Lewis pratfall.
She repeated her question. "Why do you want to get drunk?"
"It just seems like the thing to do. A sort of tribute to the past."
"So you lift a glass... excuse me, a bottle... to auld lang syne."
"That's right." He drank again, then set the bottle down with a thud and pinned her with his glittering eyes. “Why did you have to get between us? I wanted to hit him. My God, how I wanted to hit him!”

"Another tribute to the past?" she asked sharply.
"To Judith," he corrected, smiling a little. "Do you know what he said? He came up to me and said, ‘So the little whore didn't stay with you, either.’ I should've broken his neck on the spot."
Susan hadn't heard the name before, but she knew that Judith had been Grant's first wife, the woman caught in bed with Cord. She sat down beside him and folded her robe around her legs, waiting. Her attitude was calm, her entire attention focused on him. People often talked to her, telling her things that they'd never tell anyone else, without really understanding what it was about her that inspired such trust. Susan didn't understand it herself, unless it was that she truly listened.
He leaned his head back, and his eyelids drooped to half-mast. "She was pure fire," he said softly. "A total mismatch for Grant Keller. She had red hair and slanted green eyes, just like a cat's. She sparkled. She liked to laugh and dance and have a good time, do all of the things that Grant was too stodgy to enjoy. He wasn't the type to go skinny-dipping at night, or dance in the streets during Mardi Gras. But, as far as I know, she was entirely faithful to him." He fell silent, staring into the past.
When several moments had passed, *Susan* prompted him. "Until you."
He glanced up and gave her a wry look that held a curious overtone of pain and guilt. "Until she met me," he agreed harshly. With a deft movement he seized the bottle and tipped it to his mouth. She watched in amazed fascination as his strong throat worked, and when he set the bottle down it was empty. He looked at it savagely. "There wasn't enough."
Warily, she wondered if he would still be able to say that when his body began to absorb the alcohol he'd just consumed, if he would be able to say anything at all.
A fine sheen of perspiration had broken out on his face, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. "We'd been having an affair for almost a year before we were caught." His voice was gruff, strained. "I'd asked her over and over to divorce Grant, leave with me, but beneath all of that flash, Judith was strongly conventional. Her reputation meant a lot to her, and she adored her kids. She just couldn't break all her ties. She didn't have any choice after Grant found us together."
Susan swallowed, trying not to imagine the scene. What would it do to any of the three people involved in a triangle for a husband to walk in while his wife was in bed with her lover?

"She was crucified." He heaved himself off the couch and walked restlessly around the room, and what she saw on his face frightened her. "She didn't have a friend left; her own children wouldn't speak to her after Grant threw her out of the house. My dear Aunt Imogene was the leader in ostracizing her. Preston doesn't know that I know what *he* did, because he made certain he wasn't in the group, but he organized a sort of mob scene; a group of teenage toughs danced around Judith one afternoon in the parking lot of a grocery store and called her 'Blackstone's Whore.' It sounds almost Victorian, doesn't it? I caught one of the kids that night and...ah, *persuaded* him to tell me who'd set it up. I hunted for Preston, but he flew the coop, and I couldn't find where he'd gone."

So that was why he hated Preston so fiercely! She could understand his bitterness, but still she stared at him, troubled. Couldn't he see that revenge so often has a backlash, punishing the avenger as cruelly as his victim?

His fists were knotted whitely at his sides, his lips drawn back over his teeth. Alarmed, Susan got up and went to him, putting her soft hands over his fists. He'd removed his tie, and his shirt was open at the throat, revealing the beginning curls of hair on his chest; her eyes were on a level with those curls, and for a moment she stared at them, entranced, before she jerked her thoughts away from the dangerous direction they were taking and looked upward.

"Where is she now?" she asked, having a vision of Judith in some sleazy bar somewhere, middle-aged and despairing.

"She's dead." His voice was soft now, almost gentle, as if he had to put some distance between himself and his memories. "My wife is dead, and that bastard called her a whore!"

Susan sucked in a quiet breath, shocked at what he'd just told her. His wife! "What happened?"

"They broke her spirit." He was breathing deeply, almost desperately, but his hands had unknotted, and now his fingers were twined with hers, holding her so tightly that he hurt her. His face was pulled into a grimace of pain. "We were married as soon as her divorce was final. But she was never Judith again, never the laughing, dancing woman I'd wanted so much. I wasn't enough to replace her children, her friends, and she just faded away from me."

"She had to love you, to risk all that she did," Susan said painfully.

"Yes, she loved me. She just wasn't strong enough not to have any regrets, not to let the hurt eat away at her. She came down with pneumonia, and she didn't want to fight it. She gave up, let go. And do you want to know the hell of it?" he ground out. "I didn't love her. I couldn't love her. She'd changed, and she wasn't anything like the woman I'd loved, but I stayed with her because she'd given up so much for me. Damn it, she deserved more than that! I did my best to make sure she never knew, and I hope she died thinking that I still loved her, but the feeling was long gone by then. I'm guilty, too, in what happened to Judith. As guilty as hell!"

His eyes were dry, burning like wildfire, and Susan realized that though he wasn't able to weep for his dead wife, he was about to fly apart before her. She forcibly tugged her hands away from his death grip and cupped his face in her palms, her cool, tender hands lying along his hot flesh like a benediction. His soft beard tickled her palms, and she stroked it gently. His eyes closed at her touch.

"She was a grown woman, and she made her choice when she decided to have an affair with you," she pointed out softly. "The stress was too much for her, but I can't see that it's any more your fault than it was hers." She wanted to ease his pain, do anything to take that look of suffering off his face. My God, he'd been little more than a boy, to bear so much!

He put his hands over hers and turned his face to nuzzle his lips into her left palm, then rubbed his cheek against her hand. His pent-up breath gusted out of him on a long, soft sigh, and his eyes opened.

"You're a dangerous woman," he murmured sleepily. "I didn't intend to tell you all of that."

Looking at him, Susan saw that the whiskey was hitting him hard and fast. Cautiously, she eased him back over to the couch, and he dropped heavily onto it, sighing as he relaxed. For a moment she stood indecisively, then made up her mind; he was in no condition to drive, so he would have to spend the night there. She knelt down and began removing his shoes.

"What're you doing?" he mumbled, his eyelids drooping even more.

"Taking off your shoes. I think you'd better stay here tonight, rather than risk driving home."

A faint smile quirked his lips. "What will people say?" he mocked; then his eyes closed and he sighed again, a peculiarly peaceful sound.

Susan shrugged at his question; what people would say if anyone knew he'd spent the night here was almost beyond her imagination, yet she really

couldn't see that she had a choice. He was mentally and emotionally exhausted, as well as drunk, and if anyone chose to gossip about that, she couldn't stop them. She wouldn't risk his life for that. She completed her task and set his shoes neatly to one side, then swung his long legs up on the couch.

He grunted and adjusted his length to the supporting cushions, dangling one leg off the side and swinging the other one over the back of the couch. Sprawled in that boneless position, he went to sleep as quietly and easily as a child.

Susan shook her head, unable to repress a smile. He'd told her that he was a mean drunk. Looking at him as he slept so peacefully made her doubt that. She went upstairs to get a pillow and blanket, returning to drape the blanket over him and place the pillow under his head. He didn't rouse at all, even when she lifted his head.

Lying alone in her own bed, she was aware of a deep feeling of contentment at just knowing he was under the same roof. The warm aching of her body told her that she wanted more from him than just his presence; she wanted the completion of his lovemaking. She wanted to be everything to him, every dream he'd ever had, every wish he'd ever made. She wanted to ease him and comfort him, and make him forget his black past. Knowing that he stood too much alone to allow anyone to mean that much to him didn't lessen the way she felt. How odd it was that, when she loved again, she loved someone so different from herself!

Yet Vance had been different. Unlike Cord, Vance had conformed, at least on the surface, but she had always known that Vance could have been a hard, dangerous man if anything or anyone had threatened those he loved. Circumstances had been different for Vance than they had for Cord, and that part of his personality had never developed, but the potential had been there. With Vance she had felt utterly protected, utterly loved, because she had sensed that he would have put himself between her and anything that threatened her, without counting the cost to himself.

The way I love Cord! she thought, shocked, her eyes wide in the darkness. It stunned her to think that she could be stirred to violence, but when she thought of the anger that had surged through her that night, she knew that she'd have done anything she could have to keep Grant Keller from punching Cord. She didn't fear for Cord; he was far too capable of taking care of himself. It was simply that she couldn't bear the idea of him

suffering the least hurt. She would gladly have taken a punch on the jaw herself rather than let it land on Cord.
She fell asleep quickly and woke before her alarm clock went off. The sun coming in her window, bright and warm, told her that it was going to be another gorgeous spring day. Humming, she took a shower and put on fresh lacy underwear and chose a bright summer dress that reflected her rise in spirits. The pure white fabric, with its fragile lace trim and scattering of brightly colored spring flowers, made her feel as fresh as the new day, as full of hope. Still humming, she went downstairs and peeked into the den, where Cord still lay sprawled on the couch, sleeping heavily. He'd rolled over on his stomach, and his head was turned to the back of the couch, revealing only his tousled dark hair". Quietly she closed the door and went to the kitchen.
Emily was already there, quietly and efficiently making breakfast. When Susan entered, the older woman looked up with a smile. "Who's your guest?"
"Cord Blackstone," Susan replied, returning the smile and pouring herself a cup of fresh coffee. While the coffee cooled, she got the plates and silverware for setting the table.
"Cord Blackstone," Emily mused, her eyes softening. "My, my, it's been a long time since I've seen that boy. He even spent a few nights under my roof, when he was younger."
"He was drunk last night," Susan explained as she arranged the plates on the table, absently placing the napkins and silverware just so, moving them around by fractions of an inch until she was satisfied.
"I don't remember him as being much of a drinker, though of course that was a long time ago. I'm not saying that he couldn't put it away, but it just never seemed to affect him. My boy would be passed out, and Cord would be as steady on his feet as ever."
After pouring another cup of coffee, Susan carried it into the den and carefully placed it on the coffee table, then knelt in front of the couch. She put her hand on his blanket-covered shoulder, feeling the warmth of his flesh even through the fabric. "Cord, wake up."
She didn't have to shake him. At her touch, her voice, he rolled over, tangling himself in the blanket, and his eyelids lifted to reveal pale, glittering irises. He smiled, then yawned, stretching his arms over his head. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she replied, watching him with veiled concern. "Do you feel like having a cup of coffee?"
"Hmmmm," he said in a rumbling, early-morning voice, a noise that could have meant anything. He heaved himself into a sitting position, raking his fingers through his hair. He yawned again, then reached around her for the coffee, holding the cup to his mouth and cautiously sipping the steaming liquid. He closed his eyes as the caffeine seared its way to his stomach. "God, that's good! Do I smell bacon cooking?"
"If you think you can eat—"
He grinned, opening his eyes. "I told you, I don't have hangovers."
Susan couldn't help the laughter that bubbled out. "Yes, but you also told me that you're a mean drunk, and you weren't anything but a big pussycat! A big, *sleepy* pussycat!"
He reached out and caught her hand, his gaze on her radiant, laughing face. "It depends on my company when I'm drunk. I can be mean if I have to." He finished the coffee and set the cup down, then slid back into a reclining position, closing his eyes, her hand still held loosely in his.
She shook his shoulder with her free hand. "Don't go back to sleep! It's time for breakfast—"
Without opening his eyes he tugged on her hand, and Susan found herself on the couch with him, sprawled over him in a very undignified position. Her eyes widened to huge blue pools, and she began squirming in an effort to push her skirt down, but her efforts were hampered because her feet had somehow become tangled in the blanket and she couldn't get her legs straight.
He sucked in his breath sharply, and his hand caught in her hair, holding her still. "I'd rather have you for breakfast," he muttered huskily, his fingers exerting just enough pressure to ease her head forward slowly, an inch at a time, until he could put his mouth to hers. Susan quivered, her lips opening to his like a soft spring blossom, her mouth being filled with the coffee taste of his. Like a welcome, familiar friend, his tongue entered lazily and explored the tiny serrated edges of her teeth, the softness of her lips, the sensual curling of her tongue as it met his. His hand left her hair and moved down her back, searching out the slender curve of her spine, as slow and inexorable as the seasons.
Susan forgot about breakfast. She wound her arms around his neck, her hands clenching in his hair, meeting the open hunger of his kiss with her

own. It was so sweet and good, and it was all she could ask of life, to be in his arms. She felt his hands on her body, experienced, calm hands, as they sleeked down her sides to the graceful curve of her waist, then down to the roundness of her hips. He cupped her buttocks, grasping, filling his hands with the smooth mounds and pressing her to him. The raw sexuality of his gesture left her reeling with pleasure, unable to rein in the hot sparks of desire that were shooting through her body. She was a woman, and he knew exactly what to do with her woman's body. With a few swift movements he had her skirt up, and his hands were under the material, burrowing under the elastic waistband of her panties to brand the coolness of her buttocks with the heat of his palms.

Susan moaned aloud, and the sound was taken into his mouth. He began nibbling at her flesh, his teeth catching her lower lip, the tender curve of her jaw, the delicate lobe of her ear. Her breath was rushing in and out of her lungs, her heart racing out of control. The feel of him was driving her mad, and she wanted to sink down on him in boneless need. Now he was biting at her neck, his teeth stinging her skin; then he soothed it with tiny licks of his tongue. Her hands had made fists in his hair, pulling at the thick, vital mane mindlessly. She wanted to give him everything, every part of her, blend the softness of her body with me hardness of his.

"Two minutes!" Emily sang out from the kitchen.

Susan heard the words, but they didn't make any sense to her. Cord groaned, and his hands tightened on her buttocks in momentary denial; then he reluctantly withdrew his touch from her enticing curves. "I thought a two-minute warning was only in football," he grumbled, easing her to one side.

She sat up, dazed and aching with frustration, wondering why the narcotic of his touch had been so suddenly withdrawn from her feverish, addicted flesh. He looked at her face, so soft and vulnerable in her passion, and his jaw went rigid with the effort he had to make not to reach for her again. She was too much woman to be so prim and proper, and he was becoming increasingly fascinated by just how prim and proper she wasn't. She was forbidden fruit, and probably deceitful into the bargain, but logic had nothing to do with the way he wanted her.

Susan willed herself to be calm, forcing her shaky legs to support her when she stood, forcing her voice to a deceptive evenness. "You'll probably want to wash before eating," she murmured, and showed him the way to the downstairs bathroom. "Come through to the kitchen when you're finished."

But for all her surface serenity, it was several moments after she entered the kitchen before she had collected her thoughts. After staring blankly at the small table in the breakfast alcove, set with three places, a vase of cheerful shasta daisies in the center, she was overcome by the thought that for the first time in five years she would be sharing her breakfast with a man. And not just any man! She would be eating the first meal of the day with a man who made every other man of her acquaintance pale in comparison. A quiver of desire ran through her body again, and she blushed hotly at the thought that she would have let him take her a few moments ago, sprawled on the couch like a wanton, with Emily in the kitchen. Muttering an excuse about collecting his coffee cup, which she'd left in the den, she escaped for a few minutes of necessary solitude.

She had returned with the cup and had a refill of fresh, steaming coffee sitting by his plate when Cord paused in the doorway, assaulting her senses with his size, overpowering everything in her feminine house. He had an aura of hard vitality about him, and for a moment she could only stand and stare at him helplessly. It didn't make it any better to know that he affected every woman that way; not even Imogene was immune to him, and now Emily turned to greet him, a flush of pleasure pinkening her features. "Cord Blackstone, I swear, you're even handsomer than ever!" He searched her face for only a second, his ice blue eyes sharp; then he grinned and his white teeth flashed. "Mrs. Ferris!" Without pause, he moved across the kitchen to take her firmly in his arms and press a kiss on her flustered mouth, a warm and friendly kiss that had Susan envying Emily for even that small moment.

Emily was laughing and patting his cheek. "That beard! You look like an outlaw for sure! Sit down, sit down. I hope you still like your eggs over easy?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, his inbred Southern courtesy not allowing him to address her in any other manner. He seated Susan and Emily before taking his own chair, his long legs fitting under the table with difficulty, but Susan didn't mind the way their knees bumped. His presence at her breakfast table was as natural as if it was an ordinary occurrence, and the sun was shining for her after an absence of five years. She could feel Emily's glance on her, but she couldn't control the radiance of her smile.

She wasn't the only one who was smiling; Emily was clucking around Cord, chattering at him and fussing over him, and he was eating it up with a look

of pleasure that told Susan it had been a long time since he'd known the subtle delight of being cherished in the small, all-important ways. Susan didn't talk much, just listened to their conversation. She learned that Cord and Emily's eldest son had been inseparable companions during their teen years, and that Cord had eaten a lot of meals that Emily had cooked. Emily brought Cord up to date on Jack's life, but Susan noticed that Cord didn't divulge any information about himself. His past was a closed book; she realized that she didn't know anything about what he'd done or where he'd been since he'd left Mississippi, not even where he'd been immediately before returning.

She hated to see the meal end, but all too soon the table had been cleared and the kitchen cleaned, the last cup of coffee drunk. She walked with him to the door, her heart beating slowly, heavily. It was either bright sunlight or the darkest shadows, she realized painfully; there was no middle ground in loving him. She stopped in the middle of the foyer, her heart in her eyes as she looked at him.

Chapter Six

His eyes were hooded and unreadable as he watched her, but his hand smoothed over her shoulder as if he couldn't prevent himself from touching her, his fingers heating the cool silk of her skin before sliding upward over her throat to cup her chin and lift her face. He hadn't said a word, but he didn't need to; the burning possession of his lips told her all she needed to know. With a silent gasp, she melted against him, her hands going up to lie along his jawline, where the silkiness of his beard tickled her palms.

He lifted his mouth and simply held her close for a moment. Susan kept her hands on his face, stroking her fingers lightly over his beard, drowning in the enjoyment of being cuddled by him. His strong, warm throat beckoned, and she stood on tiptoe to press a light kiss onto the skin above his collar.

"What do you look like without a beard?" she asked dreamily, for no other reason than that her hands were on his beard and it was the first sentence that popped out.

He chuckled, a husky, male sound that rippled over her like warm water. "Like myself, I suppose. Why? Are you curious?"

"Hmmmm," she said, letting him interpret the sound as he chose. "How long have you worn a beard?"

"Just for this past winter, though I've had a moustache for several years. I was stranded for a week or so without any way of shaving, short of scraping my face with a dull knife, and I realized just how much time I wasted in scraping hair off my face when it promptly grew back, so I kept the beard." She trailed one fingertip over his bearded chin. "Do you have a cleft chin? Or a dimple?"

Suddenly he laughed, pulling away from her. "Well, see for yourself," he teased, catching her hand and pulling her after him as he started up the stairs with a swift, leaping stride. "Where's your bathroom?"

Susan laughed too, and tried to stop him. "What're you doing? You're going too fast! I'll fall!"

He turned around and scooped her up in his arms, and kissed her so hard that her lips stung. Holding her securely against his chest, he opened doors until he found her bedroom, then walked into it and let her slide to the floor. He looked around at the completely feminine room, the lace curtains, the cream satin comforter on her bed, the delicately flowered wallpaper. His

face changed, became curious, surprised. "Vance didn't sleep in here," he said. "This is a woman's room."
Susan swallowed, a little surprised at his perception. "This was our room," she admitted. "But I changed everything when he died. I couldn't sleep in here with everything the way it had been when he was alive, so I bought new furniture and had the room redone completely. Not even the carpet is the same."
"A different bed?" he asked, watching her narrowly.
Susan shivered. "Yes," she whispered. "Everything. New mattress, new sheets... everything."
"Good." The single word was a low growl of satisfaction, and his gaze was so heated that she rubbed her hands up her bare arms, feeling a little singed. He looked around and indicated a door, releasing her from his visual force field. "Is that the bathroom?"
“Yes, but why—“ “Because,” he answered maddeningly, catching her hand and pulling her with him again, into the bathroom. He began unbuttoning his shirt, opening it down to his waist, then pulling the fabric free of his pants and finishing the job. He shrugged out of the shirt and handed it to her; she took it automatically, folding it over her arm.
"You aren't going to do that," she said in disbelief, having realized what he intended.
"Why not? Do you have a fresh blade for your razor? And I'll need a pair of scissors to start off."
"There's a small pair in the drawer there," she said, pointing. "Cord, wait. I wasn't hinting for you to shave off your beard."
"It'll grow back, if you don't like my naked face," he drawled, opening the drawer and taking out the scissors. "Why don't you just sit down and enjoy the show?"
Because there was nothing else to do, she closed the lid on the toilet and sat down, her eyes wide with fascination as she watched him snip the beard as short as he could get it with the scissors. He asked again for her razor, and she indicated the left-hand side of the built-in medicine cabinet. He extracted the razor, new blades, and shaving gel from the cabinet, then deftly changed blades.
He wet his face with warm water and worked the gel into a lather, covering his face with enough foamy white soap to make him look like a wicked Santa Claus. Susan almost winced when the razor sliced into his beard and

left a smooth streak of skin in its path. Half of her was trembling with anticipation at seeing his face, but the other half of her hated to see the beard go; it had been so soft and silky, and made her skin tingle wherever it touched.

He went through the contortions that men put themselves through when shaving, arching his neck, tilting his head, and Susan sat spellbound. It was the first time she'd seen him without his shirt, and her eyes drifted down over his muscled torso. She'd known he was strong, but now she saw the layered muscles that covered him, and her mouth went dry. His broad shoulders gleamed under the light, the skin as taut and supple as a young boy's. With every movement he made the muscles in his back bunched and rippled, then relaxed, flexing in an endless ballet that riveted her attention. His spine ran in a deep hollow down the center of his back, inviting inquisitive fingers to stroke and probe.

Susan noticed that the rhythm of her breathing had been broken, and she wrenched her gaze away from his back. Determinedly she again looked in the mirror at the reflection of his face, and the complete concentration she saw there started an ache deep inside her. That frown was so completely male, and it had been so long since she'd seen it. Vance had frowned just like that. For five years her life had lacked something because she hadn't been able to sit in the bathroom and watch her man shave; a simple pleasure, but one of the lasting ones. Cord was giving her that pleasure again, as he had given her his presence at breakfast, and somehow the simple act of watching him shave was seducing her more completely than his heated kisses could have done.

Slowly her gaze dipped, and she inspected his mirrored image. His chest was covered by a tangle of black curls that looked as incredibly soft as his beard had been; she clenched her hands to prevent them from reaching out to touch him and verify the texture. His nipples were flat circles, small and dark, with tiny points in the center of them, and she wanted to put her mouth to them. The curve of his rib cage was laced by bands of muscle, and the solid wall of his abdomen rippled with power. The tiny ringlets of hair on his chest became a straight and silky line that ran down the middle of his stomach and disappeared into the waistband of his pants. He raised his arms and his torso stretched, giving her a glimpse of his taut, shallow navel, and the thin scar that began on the right side of it, angling down out of sight.

Susan almost strangled, and this time she couldn't stop her hands; they flew out, touching the scar, tracing it lightly. Now her fevered gaze roamed over him again, anxiously, and she found other marks of other battles. A small, silvered, puckered scar on his right shoulder had to be from a gunshot wound, and her spine prickled with fear for him. Another line ran from under his left breast, around under his arm, and ended below his left shoulder-blade. Obviously he hadn't always ducked in time.

Suddenly she noticed that he was very still under her hands, and she let them fall to her side, swiftly looking away from him. She was aware of his slow movements as he splashed the remnants of lather from his face and patted it dry, but she couldn't look directly at him.

"There's nothing wrong with touching me," he growled harshly, dropping his words into the sudden canyon of silence. "Why did you stop?"

She swallowed. "I was afraid you'd think I was prying. My God!" she burst out rawly. "What happened to you? All those scars..."

He gave a short, mirthless laugh. "Just a lot of hard living," he answered obliquely. "I was tossed off the lap of luxury a long time ago."

She glanced up at the harshness of his tone, and for the first time since he'd finished shaving, she saw his face. Her mouth went dry again.

She'd never before seen anyone who looked as hard and cool as he did. He'd left his moustache, thank God; she couldn't imagine his face without it. His jaw was lean and clearly cut, his chin square and impossibly stubborn. His lower lip had taken on a fullness that she hadn't noticed before, a new sensuality. He lacked the classic perfection of handsomeness, but he had the face of a warrior, a man who was willing to fight for what he wanted, a man who laughed at danger. The hard recklessness of him was more apparent now, as if he'd torn aside a veil that had hidden him from view. She'd thought that his beard had made him look like more of a desperado than he really was; now she realized that the reverse had been true. The beard had disguised the ruthlessness of his face.

He was looking down at her with mockery in his eyes, as if he had known that the beard had been a camouflage. The years and the mileage were etched on that hard, slightly battered countenance, but she wasn't repelled by it; she was drawn, like an animal from the depths of a cold night to crouch by the warmth of a fire. In a fleeting moment of despair, knowing herself lost, she realized that the more attractive the lure, the higher the risk, and she would be risking her entire way of life if she allied herself with

him. She was by nature cautious and reserved, yet as she stood looking at him in silence, she accepted that risk; for her heart, she would disregard the past and the future, and count the reward well worth the danger. With an inarticulate murmur, she lifted her arms to him.

An odd look of strain tightened his feature; then with a harsh, wordless sound, he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, lying down on the bed with her still in his arms, twisting until he was half on top of her. His left hand buried itself in her hair, holding her head still, and his mouth came down to imprint his possession on hers. She parted her lips willingly to the demanding thrust of his tongue, giving a tiny sigh of bliss as she curled herself against him, twining her arms around his neck and shoulders, pressing her breasts into the hard, warm plane of his chest. She kissed him with fire and delicacy, offering herself to him with gentle simplicity. He lifted his mouth a fraction of an inch from hers, his breath coming in fast, irregular gulps. "I think... I think I'm going to lose my head over you," be muttered. "Why couldn't you be what I'd expected?"

Before Susan could ask what he meant, before it even occurred to her to wonder at it, his mouth was on hers again, and his arms were tightening about her with a force that would have bruised her if she hadn't been boneless with need. Everything combined to overwhelm her senses. She was aware, with every pore of her body, of the warm fragrance of the new day, the slight breeze drifting in the open window, the sweet trilling of the birds as they darted about among the huge trees; then there was nothing, nothing but the touch of his hands and mouth.

He unzipped her dress, pulling it down to bare her breasts to him, and he took them hungrily, first with his knowing hands, then with the furnace of his mouth. She cried out as the strong suckling sent shock waves of primitive pleasure crashing along her nerves, and she arched into his hard frame.

The phone beside the bed began ringing, and he lifted his head, muttering a violent curse under his breath, then settled himself more fully on her, his muscular legs parting hers and making a cradle for him. Her nipples were buried in the curly hair of his chest, her hands clutching urgently at him; she wanted all the layers of clothing between them gone, but she hated to release him long enough to remove them. She twisted against him, wanting more, more...

"Susan! Telephone!"

Emily's voice wafted up the stairs, startling them as much as if a bucket of cold water had been dashed over them. Susan drew a sobbing breath, unable to answer. No, no! Why now?
"Susan?" Emily called, raising her voice in question.
She bit her lip, then managed to call out, "Yes, I'll get it. Thanks, Emily." Her voice didn't even sound like her own, but Emily must have been satisfied.
Cord rolled off of her with a sigh. "Go ahead, answer it," he said gruffly. "She'll be up here checking on you if you don't." He lifted the receiver and handed it to her, stretching the cord across his chest, then relaxing against the pillows.
Susan wet her lips, and took a deep breath to steady herself. “Hello.”
"Hello, dear," came Imogene's brisk voice. "I wanted to congratulate you on your quick thinking last night. I knew you wouldn't let us down."
Susan frowned in puzzlement, her thoughts still too fogged by desire for her to understand what Imogene was saying. How could she think when she was lying half on Cord's chest, his heady scent rising to her nostrils like an aphrodisiac. "I'm sorry, I don't understand. What do you mean?"
"Why, playing up to Cord," Imogene replied impatiently. “Remember, you have just as much to lose in this as we do. String him along and find out all you can. Last night was a brilliant move—“
Susan darted a quick, agonized look at Cord, and her blood congealed in her veins when she saw the iciness of his eyes and realized that he'd heard every word; how could he not, when she was practically on top of him? A cold, cruel smile curved his mouth as he gently took the telephone receiver from her nerveless fingers and cradled it on his shoulder. "You jumped the gun on the congratulations, Aunt Imogene," he purred with silken menace. "That was a tactical error; you should've let Susan call you when the coast was clear."
With a deliberate movement he dropped the receiver back onto the hook, then turned back to her. The smile on his face was deadly, and she could do nothing but wait, her breath halted, her heart stopped.
"My God, you're lovely," he murmured, still smiling, his eyes dropping to her bare, creamy breasts. "And so willing to give me anything I want, aren't you? No wonder you let me talk so much last night; did you think I'd spill my guts to you, tell you everything I'd planned?"

A fine trembling invaded her limbs. "No," she whispered. "You needed to talk; I was available."
She was so close to him that she could see his pupils dilate, the inner blackness expanding until only a thin circle of blue remained. “Are you available?” he drawled, deliberately covering her breast with his hand. “Are you as available for me as you are for Preston?”
She felt as if he'd kicked her, and she tried to jerk away, but he locked his other arm around her and held her to him. His fingers kneaded her soft flesh with a slow precision that frightened her, and tears stung her eyes. "I'm not available for Preston! Except as a... a friend. I'm not a sexual release valve for anyone!" She could feel her cheeks burning with mortification, and she tried to pull away again, an attempt that was useless against his effortless strength.
"Sure you're not," he crooned. "That's why you're on this bed with me. You offered yourself to me, darling, for a little fun and games. But dear Aunt Imogene, bless her nosy soul, couldn't stay off the phone, and she blew it for you. Now what are you going to do?"
"It's not like that!" she cried desperately, pleading with him to understand. "Imogene wanted me to sleep with you so I could try to find out what you're planning to do, but I refused—"
He laughed, a low, harsh sound of disbelief. "It really looks like you refused," he taunted, stroking her breast. He adjusted her squirming body to his in a way that branded her with his male heat. "For once, she had an idea that I like. We shouldn't let a little phone call interrupt us—"
"No!" She wedged her arms between them and braced her hands on his chest, pushing against him in a useless effort to create more of a space between them. It took a tremendous effort to prevent herself from bursting into tears, but she refused to give in to that weakness and blinked her eyes fiercely.
"Why not? You'd enjoy being—"
"Used?" she broke in bitterly.
"Now, darling, I wasn't going to be crude. I was going to say that you'd enjoy being with a man again, because I don't count Preston as a man. What do you say? I promise that when *I... use...you,* I won't leave you unsatisfied."
"Stop it!" she almost shouted, horrified at what had happened, at how swiftly something that had been so *right* had deteriorated into something so

ugly. "I've never had sex with Preston. Let go of me!"
He laughed and recaptured her as she almost wriggled free, his hand going to her buttocks and cupping them, pressing her into him. "Settle down," he advised, still laughing, though how he could laugh when she felt as if someone had torn her heart out was more than she could understand. "I'm not going to attack you. Though, my God, woman, if you don't stop squirming against me like that, I may change my mind!"
She stilled. After a long moment she said rawly, "Please, let me get up."
With a mocking lift of his eyebrows, he opened his arms and released her. She sat up away from him, rumbling with her dress, trying to straighten the fabric over her breasts. He got up from the bed and sauntered into the bathroom, returning with his shirt. He pulled it on and buttoned it, then unzipped his pants to tuck the shirttail in, standing nonchalantly before her. Susan sat in frozen horror, too miserable to do anything but stare numbly at him.
"Don't look so unhappy, darling," he advised in a mockery of tenderness. "I probably wouldn't have told you anything, anyway." He strolled over to where she sat on the bed and leaned down over her, his weight braced on his arms. Briefly, firmly, he kissed her, a little rough in his anger. When he straightened, a tiny fire was burning in his eyes. "Pity she couldn't have waited another half hour before she called," he said, touching her cheek with his finger. "See you around." With that nonchalant goodbye he was gone, and she sat in paralyzed agony, listening to his sure steps going down the stairs. Then there was the sound of the door, and a moment later the throaty roar of a powerful, well-tuned engine.
After a long time she managed to slide stiffly off the bed, but that was all she could force her body to do. She leaned against the wall, her eyes closed, while she tried to come to terms with what had happened. She almost hated Imogene for coming between her and Cord, even though it had been unintentional. No, if Imogene had known that Cord had been there, she wouldn't have done anything to rock the boat! She simply couldn't believe that Susan would balk at prostituting herself for the good of the Blackstones, namely Imogene herself and Preston. To her mind, if Susan had anything to do with Cord, it was based on ulterior motives.
It was particularly painful because, for a little while, he had seemed to be lowering his formidable barriers just a bit. Their kisses had been building a frail bridge of understanding between them, until Imogene's heavy touch

had shattered it. For a few hours Susan had been on the verge of an ecstasy so deep and powerful, so wide in scope, that she had difficulty in believing the richness that had hovered just beyond her fingertips.

Black despair engulfed her, a depression so deep that only Vance's death compared to it. After Vance's burial, when she had been forced to admit to herself that there was no miracle that would restore him to her, for a time it had seemed that there was nothing worthwhile left in her life. If it had been possible, she would have died quietly in her sleep during that time, so bitter and helpless had she felt at the irrevocable chasm of death. Time had healed her, time and the gentle steel of her own nature, but she hadn't regained the utter delight in being alive, capable of experiencing pleasure again, until Cord had walked into her life and touched her with his hard fingers, bringing fires that had been banked for five years back into full blaze.

It was an hour before spirit began to return to her numbed brain. She had learned at Vance's death that even the most precious life could be extinguished, and she had also learned that death was final. But she was very much alive, and so was Cord. She couldn't let him just walk away from her like that! If you truly loved someone, then you had to be willing to fight for them, and she was willing to fight the entire world if need be.

Thankfully, it wasn't necessary that she take on the world, but the one stubborn, dangerous man she had to face was bad enough. If it hadn't been so necessary to her life that she make him listen, she would never have been able to summon the courage. She could face down almost anyone, but Cord could intimidate the devil himself.

Without giving herself time to think, because if she paused, she'd stop altogether, she told Emily that she'd be gone for the rest of the day, then grabbed her purse and ran to the car. She broke the speed limit getting to the cabin, not daring to rehearse what she would say to him, but knowing that she had to make him listen.

She thundered across the old bridge over Jubilee Creek, and the car fishtailed when she slung it around the long, sweeping curve of the incline going up to the gentle rise where the cabin sat. A bright red Blazer with enormous tires was parked at the front steps, and she pulled up behind it, scattering rocks and dust. Before the wheels had stopped rolling, she had the door open and was out of the car, bounding up the steps in a very unladylike manner. She had pounded on the door twice with her fist when a piercing whistle reached her ears, and she spun around. Cord was standing

down at the creek, about a hundred yards away. He lifted his arm, beckoning her to come to him, and she was in too much of a hurry to use the steps; she jumped off the end of the porch and headed down the slope at a fast walk.

He went back to work, his powerful arms swinging a sling-blade with easy rhythm, sending showers of rioting greenery flying into the air as he sliced through a section of heavy overgrowth. Her pace slowed as she approached, and when she reached him she stood to one side, well out of the way of the slicing blade. He stopped after a moment, leaning on the handle and giving her an unreadable glance, a little smile pulling at his lips. "The honeysuckle is out of hand," he drawled, wiping his forearm across his sweaty face. "If we ever decide to conquer the world, all we have to do is ship out some cuttings of honeysuckle and kudzu, then wait a year. Everyone else would be so worn out from fighting the vines that we could just waltz in."

She smiled at the whimsy, but to Southern farmers, it wasn't that much of an exaggeration. Now that she was standing before him, she couldn't think of anything to say; for the moment, it was enough to simply be there, staring at him, drinking in the sight of his magnificent masculinity. He was glistening with sweat, his dark hair wet and stuck to his skull, and he'd twisted a white handkerchief into a band that he'd tied around his forehead to keep the sweat out of his eyes. His shirt had been discarded and was lying on the ground; his jeans were dirty. None of that mattered. He could have been wearing a tuxedo, and he wouldn't have looked any better to her.

When she didn't say anything, he tilted his head in question, a devilish gleam entering his eyes. "Did you come here for a reason?"

She swallowed, trying to conquer her voice. "Yes. I came to make you listen to me."

"I'm listening, honey, but you're not saying much."

She searched for the perfect words to use, the ones that would make him believe her, but with a sinking heart she knew that there weren't any. He was still watching her in amusement, lettering her squirm, and suddenly it was unbearable. She blurted out, "When Imogene asked me to spy on you, I refused, and she's not used to anyone telling her no. Someone must have told her what happened last night, and she assumed that I'd changed my mind. I haven't"

He laughed aloud and shook his head in amazement. "So what were you doing on that bed with me? My ego isn't so big that I'll fall for the line that

you just have the hots for me. I know your reputation, lady, and it's the straight and narrow all the way, as far as anyone knows. I have my doubts about Preston—"
"Shut up!" she cried, knotting her hands into fists. "I've told you and told you—"
"I know," he interrupted wearily. "You haven't slept with Preston."
"It's the truth!"
"He's in love with you."
Startled by his perception, she admitted, "Yes. But I didn't know until a few days ago. That doesn't change anything. I'm very fond of Preston, but I'm not in love with him; there's never been anything sexual between us."
"Okay, say there's nothing between you," he attacked sharply, changing positions. "That means there's been no one in your life, romantically speaking, since Vance died, which makes it just that much more unlikely for you to suddenly take up with me. There has to be a reason."
Susan turned pale. "There is. When I met you, I realized that I'm not dead. I've mourned Vance for five years, but he's never coming back, and I'm very much alive. You make *me feel* things again. I'm not like you; I've never been brave or adventurous, or taken a gamble on anything, but when I'm with you I feel just a little braver, a little more free. I want to be with you for *me,* not for Imogene or Preston or any amount of money."
His eyes had darkened as he listened to her, and now he stared at her for a long, taut moment, taking in the tension of her slim figure, the almost desperate earnestness in her eyes, eyes of such a dark blue that they looked like the deep Pacific. Finally he untied the handkerchief from his forehead and began using the square of cloth to wipe the rivulets of sweat from his face and arms, then rubbing it across his chest. He was silent for so long that Susan could bear it no longer, and she grabbed his arm. "It's very simple," she said desperately. "All you have to do is not tell me *anything!* Since you're forewarned, how can I possibly find out anything? How can I possibly be using you?"
He sighed, shaking his head. "Susan," he finally said, his voice so gentle that she shivered at the sound of it, "you said it yourself: We're nothing alike. I've lived a hard life, and it hasn't always been on the right side of the law. You look as if you've been carried around all of your life on a satin pillow. If you think you want pretty words and pretty flowers and hand-

holding in the moonlight, you'd better find some other man. I'm not satisfied with hand-holding."
She shivered again, and her lashes drooped to veil her eyes in a sultry, passion-laden manner. "I know," she whispered.
"Do you?" He moved closer to her, so close that the heady scent of his hot, sweaty body enveloped her, tantalizing her senses. "Do you really know what you're asking for?" His hands closed on her waist, his fingers biting into her soft flesh. "I'm not much on genteel gropings in the dark, on schedule every Saturday night. I'm a lot rawer than that, and a lot hungrier. I want to take your clothes off and taste you all over," he rasped, hauling her close to him so that their bodies touched. A fire alarm of pleasure began clanging inside her, and she let herself flow up against him like a tide rushing to shore. "I want to take your nipples in my mouth and suck them until they're hard and aching for more. I want to feel your legs wrapped around my back, and I want to go so deeply into you that I can't tell where I stop and you begin. That's what I want right now, and what I've wanted every time I've seen you. And if that's not what you want, too, you'd better run, because you're about to get it."
Susan sighed in delirium. Her body was alive, aching, throbbing, wanting to do those things he'd described, and more. She wanted to give her heart to him, and with it, the soft, burning ardor of her body. She couldn't give him the words; she sensed that he didn't want love, that he'd feel burdened if she admitted that she loved him, so she would bite the words back and instead content herself with the offering of her body.
"I'm not running," she said into the damp refuge of his neck.
"Maybe you should," he said roughly, releasing her. "But it's too late for that. You had your chance, honey. My sense of honor doesn't go that deep!" He leaned down and lifted her into his arms, his brawny back and shoulders taking her slight weight easily. He began walking up the slope with a determined stride, and when Susan dared to slant a quick look up at his face, she quivered at the fierceness of his expression. The thought of the risk she was about to take in giving herself to him made her feel faint with apprehension, and she turned her face into his warm shoulder. Only one man had made love to her in her life, and that with love, with deep tenderness. Cord didn't trust her; he would take her in lust but not in love, and she didn't know if she was strong enough to handle that. On the other hand, she knew beyond doubt that she had to try to reach him, that she had

to try to show him with the gentle offering of herself that she wasn't a treacherous or mercenary person. She had to show him what love was, because he'd never known it.

Her sheltered life had not prepared her for this, but neither had it prepared her for the reality of her husband dying in her arms, with his blood soaking through her clothing. Since Vance's death, she had held a small part of herself sealed off from the world, protected against hurt, allowing even those closest to her only the shallowest portion of her love. The seal had remained intact until she'd met Cord. He had awakened her to a deeper knowledge of herself, an awareness that she wasn't such a creature of convention as she'd always thought. She wasn't as wild as Cord, as free, nor had she ever been a gambler, but she was willing to take a chance that she could make him care for her. She *had* to take that chance. There were many things she didn't know about him, but that made no difference to the essence of her, the combined power of heart and soul and body, which had recognized him on sight as the mate of her lifetime, the one man who could mean more to her than anyone else could even begin to imagine. She had loved Vance, loved him deeply, and yet that emotion now seemed as mild when compared to the way she felt about Cord as a light spring shower compared to the thunder and fury of a towering electrical storm. She would gladly follow this man anywhere on earth that he wanted to go, because there was no physical discomfort that could rival the hell she would endure if deprived of his presence.

His long legs ate up the distance as he moved up the slope, showing no sign that her weight in his arms was hampering him in the slightest. He leaped up the steps and shouldered the cabin door open, then turned sideways to enter with her. His boot heel collided with the door and sent it slamming back to the frame. He carried her straight through to the bedroom and set her on her feet, his narrowed eyes on her pale, strained face. A cool, cynical smile touched his face as he dropped to the bed and sprawled on its surface, dragging a pillow over to crumple it into a ball which he placed behind his dark head. He crossed his booted feet and let his gaze rake over her. "All right," he drawled. "Strip."

Susan put out a hand to steady herself as she swayed. The room was dipping crazily, and a sudden roaring in her ears made her think that she might not have heard him correctly. "What?" she asked soundlessly, then swallowed and tried it again. The second time, her voice was a weak croak.

In an insultingly casual manner, he eyed her breasts. "Strip. Take your clothes off. Since you're so all-fired anxious to try me out in the sack, I'm giving you the chance. You may have been planning on a quick flip of your skirt, but what I have in mind will take longer than that."

He didn't think she'd do it. She suddenly realized that as she stood there trying to regulate her breathing. He hadn't believed anything she'd said. He probably thought that all he had to do was push her a little and she'd run crying back to Preston. What had made him so wary that he couldn't trust anyone?

Slowly, with trembling fingers, she reached behind herself and tried to grasp the zipper of her dress. She found the tiny tab, but couldn't manage to hold it. After it slipped out of her jerky fingers for the third time, she took a deep breath and let her arms drop, turning her back to him and sitting down on the edge of the bed beside him. "I can't manage my zipper," she said thinly. "Would you do it for me, please?" For a long, silent moment, he didn't move, and she felt his eyes boring into her back. Then the mattress shifted, and he touched the zipper. Slowly, like thickened molasses, the zipper moved down, and her dress loosened. When he released the tab, she stood up before she lost her nerve and turned to face him again.

His face was expressionless, his black lashes dropping to shield anything his eyes might have told her. An insidious quiver began in her legs and spread upward, turning her insides to jelly. She stepped out of her sandals and caught the straps of her sundress, dropping them off her shoulders and pulling her arms out of them. The cloth dropped to her waist, baring her breasts. She hadn't worn a bra with her little-nothing dress, and a fragrant spring breeze wafted in the open window, touching the pale brown of her small nipples and puckering them into soft, succulent buds. Though Cord hadn't moved, she sensed the tension that pervaded every muscle of his body. Still his eyes were veiled, but she felt them on her, visually touching the creamy slopes that she offered to him. Her breasts were high and firm, deliciously rounded, and she was suddenly, fiercely glad that her woman's body could entice him.

Deep inside her, welling up from the bottomless reservoir of her love, was the inborn need to belong to him. She was woman, and he was man. She was *his* woman, in any way he wanted her, if only he'd take her. There was nothing else as important to her as the time she had with him; that time might be fleeting, and she would have to carefully gamer every precious

second of it. Circumstances might separate them, or he might leave without notice, his restless spirit leading him on. He'd spent too many years wandering the dark comers of the earth to ever completely settle in one place. For whatever time she had with him, she would take each day as it came, enjoy it totally, as if that were all there was, all there would ever be. She couldn't set a limit on how much of herself she would give to him. She had to give him everything, every ounce of her love.

With precise, graceful movements she pushed the dress down over her hips and dropped it into a billowy puddle around her feet. She stepped out of it, her body completely bare to him now except for her lacy panties, letting him see her sleek, shapely legs, her flat tummy and rounded hips, the graceful curve of her waist. She stood motionless before him, letting him look all he wanted, sensing the coiling need that was beginning to throb through his body.

If time still existed, she wasn't aware of it. It could have been seconds or minutes that she stood there, waiting, hearing nothing but the cheerful songs of the birds in the trees outside the window, the drone of insects. When he didn't move, she slid her fingers inside the waistband of her panties and began sliding them down over her hips, baring the final mystery of her womanhood. Her heart was slamming so wildly in her chest that her ribs hurt. What if he didn't do anything? What if he just lay there and looked, then got up and walked out? She thought she'd die on the spot if that happened. Taking a deep, wavering breath, she pushed the panties down her thighs and dropped them to the floor.

Perhaps he hadn't meant for her to realize his reaction, but she heard the audible intake of his breath, and that gave her the courage to continue standing there before him, vulnerable in a way only another woman could understand. By offering herself this way she was exhibiting a deep, enormous trust in him as a human being, taking it on faith that even though he possessed the strength to hurt her badly, if he were cruel or careless, he would instead treat her tender flesh and heart with the care they deserved.

She stood motionless in the bright morning sun, yet she was a statue with warm, supple skin, and the coursing warmth of her life's blood gave her a faint, rosy glow. Her eyes were deep pools of midnight blue, beckoning him, enticing him to enter the world of sensuality and love that was waiting for him.

He was still stretched out on the bed, but every muscle in his body was taut, the tight fabric of his jeans doing more to outline his arousal than conceal it. Burning color had flared on his high, chiseled cheekbones, and his tongue edged along his lower lip in an unconscious move, as if he was already tasting her sweetness. Finally he began to move, sitting up in slow motion, his eyes never leaving her body, glittering hotly as he explored every inch of her with visual hunger. He reached down to take off his boots and socks, tossing them to the side, where the boots landed with muffled thuds. Then he stood, unfolding his tall frame to tower over her. All moisture left her mouth. Without her shoes, she was suddenly aware of the differences in their sizes, their strength, the very shape and texture of they bodies. He was male, powerful, and aggressive. She was completely feminine, soft and satiny, yet capable of taking all of his aggression and power and turning it into an expression of love. She hoped, oh, how she hoped!

His lean hands were pulling at his belt buckle, releasing it and stripping the belt free of his pants with one firm tug. When he moved to unsnap his jeans, Susan came to life and reached out to cover his hands with hers. "Let me," she whispered. His arms fell to his sides, and he sucked in another deep, shuddering breath.

Slowly, drawing the time and the moment out, she released the snap and slid down the zipper, her tender hands moving inside the opened garment to trace his hipbones, explore the tight little cavity of his navel, then move around to palm the hard, taut roundness of his buttocks. Gently she ran her hands down his thighs, taking the jeans with her, delighted as she realized that he wore no underwear. When the jeans were below his knees, he moved suddenly, as if his patience had abruptly worn out. He stepped out of the entangling denim and kicked it away, seizing her simultaneously and falling back on the bed with her in his arms, cradling her against his chest.

Like a willing sacrifice on his sensual altar, she entwined her arms around his muscled neck and lifted her lips to his, her body writhing against him in a slow, delicate dance. His mouth closed over hers with hard, fierce possession, and he pulled her more fully onto him, mingling his legs with hers as he mingled his breath with hers, his tongue with hers, his taste with hers. The tartness of desire lay like a heady wine on his lips, and she sipped it eagerly. She was alive, soaring, her entire existence focused on him and exulting in the intensity of her being. She trembled in his arms, her entire body quaking.

He released her mouth to slide his lips like a burning brand along the curve of her jaw, then down the soft column of her neck. As if he'd discovered a rare treasure, he pressed his face into the tender hollow of her shoulder. His tongue darted out and tasted her, and Susan shivered in blind delight, her fingers lacing into his hair and pressing him to her.

"My God," he muttered thickly, nipping at her flesh with his sharp white teeth, leaving little stinging points of sensation that stopped short of pain and instead raised her internal temperature by several degrees. “You make me crazy. Sometimes I think I'd kill to get to you, even knowing that Preston has had you."

For a moment pain so intense that it blinded her tore at her insides, and she inhaled sharply. Then she managed to push it away, accepting that she would have to prove to him that he could trust her, in all things. She moved against him in a way that wrenched a groan from his lips. With a lithe, powerful twist of his body, he rolled and placed himself above her, his muscled legs controlling hers.

With one shaking finger, he outlined the small circles of her nipples, watching as the velvet flesh puckered into succulent buds. "Sweet Susan," he breathed, and lowered his head to offer homage with his mouth. Like fire, his lips burned over the soft mounds of her breasts, and he teased the quivering slopes with his devilish tongue. Susan moaned, a sound unnoticed except perhaps by the deeper, primal instincts of the man who bent over her. Her insides were molten, her body liquid with the flow of desires that urged her relentlessly onward. He suckled strongly at her breasts, and the moans became whimpers, little sounds of pleading.

But he lingered over her, as if determined to enjoy everything about her. With hands and mouth he explored her, discovering the different textures and tastes of her body, searching out her most sensitive places with probing fingers and a curious tongue. She writhed under his touch, her hips undulating as she arched higher and higher toward the sun, her skin breathing the perfume of passion. She cried out in hoarse, mindless reaction when his hand moved with sure, heartstopping intimacy to discover the degree of her readiness, and he sucked in a deep breath. "Now," he said with fierce intent, his hand moving her thighs apart, opening her legs to him. Susan obeyed the demanding touch instantly, unable even to think of not doing so, opening herself to him like a vulnerable flower, chaining him with her trust more surely than he could chain her with his strength.

He moved over her, his eyes feverish with desire, his strong body shaking as he covered her softness with the hard power of his own frame. He slid his hands under her, cradling the satin curves of her buttocks in his palms and lifting her up to his thrust. Susan whimpered softly, wanting him so much that she was aching with it, and she arched invitingly. He took her with a powerful surge that drove him deeply into her, sheathing himself completely in the searing velvet of her flesh. The whimpers in Susan's throat caught as a shock wave thundered through her body, her chaste body that hadn't known a man's passion since Vance's death. A reflexive cry of pain slipped from her lips, and her fingers dug into his biceps, feeling them bulge with the strain as he reached desperately for control.

He hung over her, staring down at her with astonishment freezing his expression. "My God," he muttered hoarsely.

Her lips were parted, her breath moving swiftly in and out between them, as her body struggled to accept him, adjust to him. "Cord?" she gasped, asking for reassurance, a little frightened with an instinctive, feminine fear.

He held himself very still. "Do you want me to stop?" he asked. "I don't want to hurt you."

"No, no! Don't stop! Please, don't stop." The words turned into a moan as they trailed out of her mouth. She felt as if she would die if he left her now, as if a vital part of her would be torn away. But he didn't pull away; he lay motionless atop her until the tension had eased out of her body and he felt the inner relaxation, until she began to move under him with little instinctive undulations of her hips. She clung to him, her arms around his neck, her legs locked around his waist when at last he began to answer her movements with his own. He was slow and gentle, taking incredible care of her, making certain that she was with him every step of the way as he pushed his body toward satisfaction. His hands and mouth buried her conscious thought under a flurry of hot caresses that intensified the fire in her loins, pushing her out of control, past any semblance of serenity or decorum. In his arms she wasn't the quiet, demure Susan Blackstone; she was a wild thing, hot and demanding, concerned only with the riptides of pleasure that were sucking her out to sea. She clutched at him with damp, desperate hands, and her heels dug into his back, his buttocks, the backs of his thighs. He was no longer gentle, but driven by the same demons that drove her, pounding into her with a wild power that had only one goal.

"I can't get enough of you," he gritted, his teeth clenched. It was a cry that erupted without conscious thought, and he heard it but scarcely realized that he'd said it. But it was true; he couldn't get enough of her. He couldn't get deeply enough into her to satisfy the burning need that was torturing him; he wanted to blend his flesh with hers until the lines of separateness faded and he absorbed her into himself. He wanted to bury himself so deeply within her that she could never get him out, that her body, the very cells of her flesh, would always have the imprint of his possession.

While he was branding her with his touch, Susan branded him with hers. She'd never realized how incomplete she felt until this moment when she knew the shattering satisfaction of being whole. She tried with her hands, her mouth, the undulant caress of her body, to show him how much she loved him, giving him everything she had to give, declaring her love with every movement, mingling herself with him in an act of love that transcended the physical.

There, on a sun-washed bed, she gave her heart to an outlaw and found a heaven that she hadn't known existed.

In the silent aftermath of passion they lay together with their bodies slowly cooling, their pulses gradually resuming a normal rate. Time drifted past, and still they lay together, reluctant to move and break the spell, reluctant to face the moment when their flesh would no longer be joined. Her fingers threaded through the tousled softness of his dark hair, stroking gently, and he settled his full weight on her with an almost soundless sigh of contentment. Susan stared at the ceiling, so happy that she felt she might fly into a million little pieces of ecstasy. Her lips trembled abruptly, and the image of the rough, timbered ceiling blurred. She bit her lip to stifle the sob that rose in her throat and demanded voicing, but she couldn't prevent the identical tracks of moisture that ran out of the comers of her eyes and disappeared into the hair at her temples. He was relaxing into sleep and she tried to keep from disturbing him; it was silly to cry because the most wonderful thing in her life had just happened to her!

But he was a man who had stayed alive by paying attention to his senses and gut instincts, and perhaps he felt the fine degree of tension in her body. His head lifted abruptly, and he surveyed her brimming eyes with sharp attention. He levered himself up on one elbow and lifted his hand to wipe at the tears with his thumb, the callused pad rasping slightly across the sensitive skin of her temples. He was frowning, the dark, level brows

lowered over narrowed eyes that searched her delicate features so intently that she felt he could see inside her mind.
"Is it because I hurt you?" he rumbled.
Quickly she shook her head and tried to give him a smile, but the stretching of her lips wobbled out of control and vanished. "No. You didn't really hurt me. It was only at first... I wasn't expecting..." She couldn't get the words out, and she swallowed, forcing her will on her voice. "It was just so... so special." Another tear escaped her eye.
He caught that one with his lips, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to her temple and darting his tongue out to cleanse the salty liquid from her skin. "Susan," he breathed almost inaudibly, saying her name as if he could taste it, as if he savored the sound of it. "I want you again."
Golden sunlight washed the room with brightness, allowing no shadows to hide their passion, and no shadows at all on her heart. Her lips trembled again, and she reached for him, drawing him into the tenderness of her embrace. "Yes," she said simply, because she couldn't deny her heart.

Chapter Seven

There were isolated moments, during the hours that followed, when she was able to think, but for the most part she was overtaken by the unstoppable tidal wave of desire. He knew just how to touch her, how long to linger, how to bring her time and again to the heart-stopping peak of pleasure. His hard hands learned every inch of her as he taught her to accommodate his desires, and she gave herself to him without reserve. She was incapable of holding any part of her heart back, all thoughts of protection left behind in the dust of the past. She had to love him with all the strength and devotion she could, because she could give no less. He'd known too much coldness, too much pain, and she sought to heal him with the soft, searing worship of her body. He was wild, hungry, sometimes almost violent, but with her love she absorbed the bitterness from him, soothing away the loneliness of his isolation. A combination of many things had made him a loner, a man without hearth or home, who lived on the razor's edge of danger and stayed alive by his wits and his finely honed body. Without words she accepted his passion and gentled it with her unquestionable trust. She tried to show him

that he was safe with her, that he had no need for the wall that he'd built to keep himself apart from the rest of the world.

The sun was past its zenith and sliding down to the horizon when he relaxed abruptly and fell asleep, as if a light had been clicked off. Susan lay beside him and almost cried again, this time in thankfulness. He *did* trust her, at least a little, or he wouldn't have been able to sleep in her presence. She somehow had a mental image of him taking his pleasure with innumerable women, faceless and nameless; then, when they slept sated in his arms, he would slip away from them to find his solitary bed. She watched him as he slept, his powerful body sprawled across the bed, his mouth softened under the black silk of his moustache. He had long, curling lashes, like a child's, and she smiled as she tried to imagine him as a toddler, with his cheeks still showing the chubby innocence of a baby.

But the innocent child had grown into a hard, wary man whose body was laced with scars, evidence of the battles he'd fought just to stay alive. He'd told her about Judith, but other than that he'd kept his past locked away in the depths of his mind. Other men would have had tales to relate of their adventures, or at least mentioned the different cultures and lands they'd seen, but not Cord. He was a silent warrior, not given to rehashing past battles, and when he was wounded, he crawled away to lick his wounds alone.

The thought of him being hurt made her heart clench painfully. She couldn't bear it if he were ever hurt again; just knowing that he had already borne wounds was almost beyond bearing. She leaned forward in blind desperation and touched her mouth lightly, tremblingly, to the round, silvered scar on his right shoulder. His skin twitched under her touch, but he didn't awaken, and she drifted to the long, thin line that ran down under his left arm, trailing her lips along the length of the scar, with aching tenderness trying to draw from him even the memory of those wounds. She found every scar on his body, licking and kissing them as she crouched protectively over him, guarding him with her slender, delicate woman's body, healing him. She felt him quiver under her mouth and knew that he was awake, but still she roamed over his body, her gentle hands caressing him. He began to shake, his body taut and ready.

"You'd better stop," he warned hoarsely. She didn't stop, instead turning her loving attention to a scar that furrowed down the inside of his thigh, then moving on to a newer, still-angry scar that snaked down his abdomen.

He groaned aloud, his hands clenching on the sheet. She lingered, more intent now on the tension that she could feel building in him, intensifying to a crescendo, wanting to make him writhe with need as he had done to her. He endured her loving torment until he was a taut arch on the bed, then his control broke and he reached for her, a primal growl rumbling in his throat as he swept her over him, thrusting up to bury himself in the sweet comfort of her body. His movements were swift and impatient, his hands grasping her hips so tightly that tiny smudged spots would mark the placement of his fingertips for a week. He held her still for his sensual assault, rotating his hips in a manner that drove her to a fast, hard culmination, then followed her while she was still submerged in the powerful waves of satisfaction.
Afterward he cuddled her against his side, and she curled into his hard, strong body with a sigh that reflected her bone-deep exhaustion. His hand stroked over her hair, smoothing it away from her damp face. "I'm sorry I hurt you, that first time," he murmured, his thoughts turning lazily to the morning, remembering the shock he'd had at how *virginal* she'd felt. "But I'm glad as hell that Preston hasn't had you."
So he'd realized what her difficulty in accepting him had signified. She wished that he had trusted her enough to take her word in the matter, but he'd learned the hard way not to trust anyone, and it would take time for her to teach him that he didn't always have to guard his back. She ran her hand through the dark curls on his chest in an absent manner. "Since Vance—" She stopped, then continued so softly that he had to strain to hear her. "You're the only one."
She didn't look up, so she missed the expression of almost savage satisfaction that crossed his hard face. She knew only the momentary tightening of his arms before his embrace relaxed and he shifted his weight, coming up on one elbow to lean over her. His hand settled proprietarily on her soft stomach, a little gesture that said a lot. "I don't want you going anywhere else with him," he informed her in a voice so darkly menacing that she looked up at him in quick surprise.
She hesitated, wondering if she dared presume that this day of naked passion had established any sort of stable relationship between them. Very steadily she asked, “Are you offering your services as an escort if I need one?”
A guarded look came over his face, and he stroked his jaw in a restless manner, as if missing his beard. "If I'm available," he hedged.

Susan slowly extricated herself from his arms and sat up, feeling a little chilled by his answer. "And when will you be unavailable?" she queried. "When you're with Cheryl?"

Surprise pulled his brows together, but she couldn't tell if it was the thought itself that surprised him, or that she'd thought she had a right to ask the question at all. Then his face cleared, and amusement began to sparkle in his pale eyes. Very deliberately he let his gaze wander over her, noting the tumbled dark hair, the soft flush that his love-making had left on her creamy skin. Her lips were swollen and passionate-looking, and he remembered the way they'd drifted over his body. Her breasts, high and round, fuller than he'd expected, also bore a rosy glow from his caresses and ardent suckling, and as he stared at them he noticed that her pert little nipples were hardening, reaching out as if for another kiss. Swiftly he glanced at her face, and his amusement deepened when he saw the way she was blushing. How could she still blush? For hours she'd lain naked in his arms, totally unselfconscious, allowing him the complete freedom of her body, yet now it took only a slow, enjoyable visual tour of her nakedness to have her blushing like a virgin.

Then he had still another surprise as he felt the lower hardening of his body in response to her. How could he even think about sex again right now? Five minutes before, he'd thought that the day had been fantastic, the most sexually satisfying day of his life, but that he probably wouldn't be able to respond again for a week. Now his body was proving him a liar. He wanted her, again and again. The sensual pleasure he felt with her was staggering, but no sooner had his pulse calmed than he began to feel the nagging need to possess more of her. From the moment he'd seen her, he'd wanted to lie on her tight and deep, immerse himself in her tenderness. He'd never been jealous of a woman in his life, until he'd met Susan. It knocked him off-balance, the fury that filled him whenever he thought of her dancing with Preston, kissing Preston, letting him put his arms around her. He'd wanted to hurt her because it drove him crazy to think of Preston making love to her. Now he knew that she'd been chaste, yet still there was the possibility that her loyalty was to Preston. Women were hard to read, and a treacherous one was deadly. If he were smarter, he'd keep this one at a distance, at least until everything was settled and he wouldn't have to watch every word he said to her, but he couldn't force himself to say the words that would send

her away, just as he hadn't been able to resist her rather innocent striptease that morning.
Susan watched him, waiting for his answer, but his eyes had gone opaque and his face was a blank wall, his thoughts hiding behind it. She was aware that he was becoming aroused by looking at her body, so why should he suddenly lock himself away? Was it because he didn't think she had any right to question him about his relationships with other women? Well, if he thought she'd sit quietly home while he danced the night away with Cheryl Warren, he'd just have to think again! She balled her fist and thumped him on the chest.
"Answer me," she demanded, her blue eyes darkening with fire. "Will you be out with Cheryl? Or any other woman, for that matter?"
He jack-knifed to a sitting position and swung his long legs off the bed. "No," he said shortly, getting to his feet and leaning down to scoop his jeans from the floor. “I won't be with any other woman.”
Did he resent having to give her that reassurance? Suddenly she felt embarrassed at her nakedness, and she snatched up a corner of the tumbled sheet to hold it over her breasts. Until then she had felt protected by the closeness she'd shared with him, but now he was suddenly a stranger again, and her bareness seemed much more vulnerable.
He gave the sheet a derisive glance. "It's a little late to try to protect your modesty."
Susan bit her lip, wondering if it would be better simply to get up, get dressed, and leave, or if she should try to talk him out of his sudden ill-temper. Had she gotten too close to him today? Was he reacting by trying to push her away with hostility? Looking at him worriedly, she thought that he looked uncomfortable, the way a man looks when a woman is making a nuisance of herself and he doesn't know how to get rid of her. She paled at the idea.
"I'm sorry," she heard herself say in swift apology, and she scrambled off the bed, abandoning the flimsy barrier of the sheet in favor of dressing as quickly as she could. Without looking at him, she grabbed up her panties and stepped into them. "I didn't mean to push you. I realize that having sex doesn't mean anything—"
"Whoa, lady!" Scowling, he dropped his jeans to the floor and grabbed her arm, pulling her upright as she bent to retrieve her dress, then drawing her into the circle of his arms. Her soft breasts flattened against his chest, and

she quivered with enjoyment, her thoughts instantly distracted. How could she want him again? Her legs were distinctly wobbly after the day's activities anyway, and she was already feeling achy in various places, but she knew that if he wanted to tumble her back on the bed again, she would tumble gladly and worry about her aches tomorrow.

He frowned down at her. "Don't try feeding me that free-and-easy hogwash, because that isn't you, and I know it. I'm just feeling uneasy. Things are getting complicated all of a sudden." He stopped without explaining any further and cupped her face in his warm fingers. “Are you sorry it happened?”

She put her hand over his, rubbing her cheek against his palm. "No, I'm not sorry. How could I be? I...I wanted it, too." She'd started to say, "I love you," but at the last moment she'd choked the words back and substituted others that were true, but lacked the depth of what she felt. He didn't want the words, didn't want to be burdened with her emotions, and she knew it. As long as she didn't say the words aloud, he'd be able to ignore the true depth of her feeling, even though he had to know how she felt after these past hours spent in his arms, when she had given herself to him completely in a way that only a woman in love could give. He had to know, yet until the words were spoken, the knowledge didn't exist.

"I don't want you to get hurt," he muttered.

She leaned against him, wrapping her arms around him. He was warning her, letting her know that she shouldn't expect anything permanent from him. Pierced by a stiletto pain at the thought of one day watching his back as he walked away, she was also grateful for his honesty. He wasn't going to hit her with a blow from behind. And maybe, just maybe, she could change his mind. He wasn't used to being loved, and it was obvious that, even unwillingly, he felt more for her than he was comfortable with. She had a chance, and she would risk everything on that.

"Everyone gets hurt," she murmured against his warm skin. "I'm not going to worry about what might or might not happen some day in the future. I'll worry about someday when it gets here."

Someday she might have to do without him, a little bit of her dying every day of emotional starvation. But that was someday, and she had today. Today she was in his arms, and that was enough.

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Later that night, facing Imogene across the width of the kitchen, she tried desperately to hold on to the memory of what she'd shared with him. Imogene's first words to her had been of concern, but that had quickly faded when Susan told her flatly that she wasn't going to play spy. "I told him what your plan was," she confessed remotely. "Then I told him to make certain he didn't tell me anything, so he couldn't think I was with him just to whore for information."

Imogene whitened with fury. She drew herself up to her full height, her anger making her seem six feet tall, Imogene in a rage was a formidable sight, but Susan stood her ground, her soft mouth set in a grim line, giving back stare for stare.

"Susan, my God, are you a fool?" Imogene shouted. "Haven't you realized yet that we stand to lose everything?"

"No, I haven't realized it! Cord hasn't made any move at all, other than threatening to press charges if the ridges aren't leased to him. I've agreed to that, and he's waiting for the geological surveys. Stop painting him as the devil, Imogene!"

"You don't know him like I do!" Suddenly Imogene realized that she was yelling, and she drew a deep breath, visibly forcing herself back under control. "You're making a big mistake if you take him at face value. He's planning something; I *know* it. If I just had some inkling, so I'd know what to protect! You could have found out," she said bitterly. "But instead you've let him turn your head and make you forget about where your loyalty lies."

"I love him," Susan said quietly.

Imogene gaped at her, her eyes going wide. "You... what? But what about Preston? I thought—"

"I *do* love Preston, as a friend, as Vance's brother." Susan groped for the words that could explain. "But Cord... makes me feel alive again. He gives me something to live for."

"I hope you're not banking too much on that! Susan, where's your common sense? He'll willingly take you to bed, but if you expect more from him than that, you're a fool. When he gets tired of you, he'll drop you without thinking twice about it, and you'll be left to face everyone you know. You'll always be Cord's leftovers."

"If I'd gone along with your plan, I would have been, anyway," Susan pointed out. "I won't stab him in the back, even if it means I lose everything

I own, but I don't think he means to do anything else at all. I think all he wanted was the oil leases."
"You're not the only one who's involved here! You're not the only one who's at risk. Preston and I also stand to lose everything. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"
"It means a great deal to me. I simply don't think he's a threat to you."
Imogene shook her head, closing her eyes as if in disbelief at Susan's blindness. "I can't believe you're so blind where he's concerned. You love him? Well, that's just fine! Love him if you have to, but don't be fool enough to trust him!"
Susan went white. "I have to trust him. I love him too much not to. I'd trust him with my life."
"That's your decision, I suppose," Imogene snapped sarcastically. "But you're also trusting him with ours, and I don't like that at all. He must really be something in bed, to make you so willing to turn your back on the people who love you, knowing that all he'll every offer you is sex."
Susan felt as if she was staring at Imogene from a great distance, and a faint buzzing sound in her head warned her that she might faint. Dizzily, she groped for one of the kitchen chairs and almost fell into it. They were tearing her apart! The awful thing was that she could see Imogene's side of it. Imogene fully expected Cord to take some sort of revenge against her, and she was frightened, as well she should be. Imogene was lashing out, reacting to a driving need to protect her own, and in her desperation she was willing to hurt people if they got in her way.
Imogene hesitated for a moment, staring at Susan's pale, damp face as she slumped in the chair; then her face twisted, and for a moment tears brimmed in her pale gray eyes. She blinked them back fiercely, because Imogene Blackstone never wept, and moved swiftly to the sink, dampening several paper towels and taking them to Susan. She slid her arm around the young woman and gently blotted her face with the cool, wet towels. "Susan, I'm sorry," she said, her voice steady at first, then wobbling dangerously. Imogene never apologized. "My God, he's got us fighting among ourselves."
The damp coolness of the paper towels banished Susan's momentary dizziness, but it couldn't banish the ache in her heart. She wanted to run to Cord, to throw herself into his arms and let his kisses make her forget that there was an outside world. But despite the hours she'd spent in his bed, she

wasn't entitled to dump all her worries on his shoulders, even though all her worries centered around him.
She clasped her hands on the table, entwining her fingers so tightly that they turned white. "I haven't turned my back on you or Preston," she said with hard-won steadiness. "I simply can't do something that's so completely against the things I believe in. Please don't try to make me take sides, because I can't. I love all of you; I can't stab any of you in the back."
Imogene touched Susan's bent head briefly, then let her hand drop. "I only hope Cord has the same reluctance to hurt you, but I can't believe it. I don't want you to be caught in the middle, but it seems that you'll have to be, if you won't take sides. He'll smash anything that gets in his way."
"That's a chance I'll have to take," Susan whispered. She'd already accepted the risk she had to face in loving Cord; what else could she do?
The next morning she went to church as usual, but she couldn't keep her mind on the sermon. Imogene, sitting beside her, was quiet and withdrawn, not entering into conversation before the services began, her gaze fixed on the minister, but Susan felt that Imogene wasn't really concentrating on the sermon either. Preston had shadows under his eyes, and to Susan's concerned eye he seemed to have lost a little weight, though she'd seen him only two days before. The strain was telling on him, but he managed to smile and greet everyone as normal. Susan wondered if Imogene had told him anything that had been said the night before, then decided that it wasn't likely. Imogene was too reserved to cry on anyone's shoulder, even her own son's.
Susan declined Imogene's invitation to Sunday dinner and went home to prepare a light meal of a crisp salad and potato soup. The spring day was too beautiful to sit inside, so she took her needlepoint out on the patio and worked on it for a couple of hours. She was outwardly serene, but she was aware of the coiling tension inside her as she sat and listened for the sound of a car coming up her long driveway. Would Cord drive over today? The thought made her breath catch. He would take her upstairs to her bedroom, to the bed where no man had ever slept, and on the cool, pristine sheets he would blend his body with hers.
She closed her eyes as desire built in her, making her lower body feel heavy and tight, and painfully empty. Surely he would come; surely he could hear her silent call for him.

Stately, towering thunderheads began to march in from the west, and the wind developed a brisk chill, but still she sat there until the first fat raindrops began to splatter on the patio tiles. Gathering her needlework, she ran for the sliding doors and slipped inside just as the weather broke and the rain became a downpour, filling her ears with a dull roar. A sharp crack of thunder made her jump, and she hastily pulled the curtains over the glass doors, then moved around and turned on lights to dispel the fast, early dusk. It was after eight o'clock that night before she admitted that he wasn't going to come, so she locked up the house and readied herself for bed. The storm had passed, but the rain continued to fall, and she lay awake for hours listening to the hypnotic patter, wishing that he was in bed beside her, warm and virile. The big house was silent and empty around her, emptier even than it had been after Vance's death, and that was strange, because Vance had lived here, and she had memories of him in every room. But Vance was gone, and Cord's personality was too strong to fight.

Because the day was so muted and gray when she woke up in the morning, and because she felt so depressed at not having seen Cord, Susan made a determined effort to cheer herself up. She chose a dark red silk sheath for work, and belted it with a snazzy wide black belt that she'd never worn before. A short black jacket pulled the outfit together, and Susan arched an inquiring eyebrow at her own reflection in the mirror as she leaned forward to put on her earrings. The sharply stylish woman in the mirror didn't quite look like Susan Blackstone, who usually preferred more conservative garments. But then, the Susan Blackstone who had looked in that mirror the Friday before had never spent the day making love with Cord Blackstone. She was gambling for the first time in her life, and the stakes were higher than she could afford. A woman who would risk her heart, knowing from the outset that the odds in her favor weren't too good, couldn't be as staid and conventional as Susan had always thought herself to be.

She kept her cheerful demeanor in place all day long, but after she got home and had eaten the dinner Emily prepared, after Emily had gone to her own house, she waited hopefully until long after dark, but still she didn't hear anything from Cord. A chill began to tighten her muscles. If the day they had spent together had meant anything to him at all, why hadn't he made any effort to see her again? Had it just been a... a convenience for him? A casual sexual encounter that he wouldn't think of again?

She thought of driving out to Jubilee Creek, but the lateness of the hour and the steady rain dissuaded her. Surely tomorrow she'd hear from him.
But she didn't, and the hours dragged past. She called Information to see if he'd had a phone installed, but they had no listing in his name. She could no longer even keep up the pretense of being cheerful, and her face was tight with strain, an expression that was duplicated on Preston's face. Susan knew that he had extended himself to the limit, liquidating assets to replace the money in Cord's account, and she wanted to ask him if he needed help, but an intimate knowledge of Blackstone pride kept her from making the offer. He'd refuse, and even if he later changed his mind, if things became desperate enough that he would want to accept her help, he wouldn't mention it to her.
Thursday afternoon she drove out to Jubilee Creek, but there was no sign of Cord. She looked in the windows and could see no lights, no dirty dishes, no clothing strewn about. She tried both the front and back doors, and found them securely locked. The thought that he might have gone permanently made her sag against the door, and bitter tears of regret seared her lids before she forced them back; not regret for what had happened, but regret that she'd had only that one day in his arms. She should have had more! It wasn't fair to give someone a brief glimpse of heaven, then draw heavy curtains over the scene! Where Cord was concerned, she wanted it all: all of his smiles, his kisses, his company every day. She wanted to be the one to calm his anger or incite his passion. She wanted to wake up beside him every morning and look at his sleepy, beard-stubbled face, and at night she wanted to lie close against his tall, hard body.
Of course, she could just be borrowing heartache; the cabin hadn't been emptied, so she had to assume that he would be returning. It was just... Why couldn't he have let her know that he was leaving, or when he would be back? Would a phone call have been so difficult for him to make?
But those were the conditions she'd set: He wasn't to tell her anything. Her eyes widened in realization. What if his absence had something to do with Imogene and Preston? They were convinced that he was scheming against them, and though she had defended him, suddenly she was unsure. What did she know about him, other than that he was so exciting and dangerous that he made her heartbeat lurch out of rhythm every time she saw him? He was a hungry, demanding lover, but considerate in controlling his strength and handling her carefully. He danced with wild grace, and his body was

laced with the scars that a warrior collected over the years. She loved him, but she was painfully aware that he kept most of himself hidden away. If he had lived by the law of fang and claw, could she expect him to do anything other than strike back at people who had wronged him? Was she a fool to trust him? She'd always thought that a trainer who walked unarmed into a cage with a snarling tiger was extremely foolish, but she had been just as foolish. Suddenly she knew that Cord was more than capable of taking revenge; he could raise it to the level of fine art.

The next day Preston came into her office and dropped tiredly into the comfortable chair next to her desk. "Well, I've done it," he said in a voice hollow with exhaustion. "I've stretched myself to the limit, but Cord has been repaid in full."

She was overcome with sympathy for him, looking at the dark shadows under his blue eyes. "I wish you would let me help—"

"No, thanks, sugar." He managed a slow smile for her. "It wasn't your doing, so you shouldn't have to pay. Now that the debt is covered, if you don't want to lease the ridges to him, you don't have to. I've pretty well blocked any move he can make to cause trouble about the money; I've even paid him interest."

"I wish you could talk with him and settle your differences," she said wistfully. "It's not right for a family to tear itself apart like this. All of that happened so long ago; why can't you put it in the past?"

"There's too much resentment, on both sides," Preston replied. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed them elegantly at the ankle. "We never got along, for one reason or another. That thing with Judith Keller just topped it off, as far as he was concerned. And as far as I'm concerned..." He gave her a direct look. "As long as you're interested in him, I have to hate his guts."

Susan blushed, distressed at causing him any pain. "Don't feel like that, please. Don't add to the trouble. I can't stand the thought of being a bone of contention between the two of you."

"But such a sweet, lovely bone," he teased, his blue eyes lightening momentarily. He really was an extraordinarily good-looking man, she realized with some surprise, slim and elegant, with a smooth style that sometimes made him seem misplaced in this century. But Preston wasn't out of place; he was supremely suited for his occupation. He was cool, level-headed, and fair in his practices. He was also completely out of his league

in fighting Cord, because he lacked the ruthlessness that had kept Cord alive in a lot of dim back alleys.
The light had already faded out of Preston's eyes. "Do you see him often?" he finally asked, his tone gruff as he struggled to hide his emotions.
It was only the painful truth when Susan replied, "No, not often at all." In moments of mental detachment she was astonished at the way she had given herself to a man whom she didn't know that well, hadn't seen that often, and who was a direct threat to her way of life. Then the memory of the heat of his kisses would banish her detachment, and she would no longer wonder at the way she had lost herself in his arms. He wasn't a man who inspired a sedate love; he evoked the deepest, wildest passions a woman's heart was capable of feeling.
Preston sat there, a frown puckering his brow as he thought. After a moment he said, "I'd like for him to know that the money has been repaid. Will you tell him for me?"
"If I see him again," Susan agreed steadily. "I don't know where he is." The bald confession stabbed her as she realized anew how empty she felt at the thought that she might not see him again.
Preston sat upright. "Has he left town?"
"I don't know. But I haven't seen him for a week, and he's not at the cabin."
"He's either gone again, or he's making some sort of move against me," Preston muttered absently, tapping his fingertips on the top of Susan's desk. "Let me know if you hear from him." He got up and left her office, still preoccupied with the news that Cord had dropped out of sight.
After a moment Beryl appeared with an armload of correspondence to be signed, pulling Susan away from the chasm of loneliness, but inside herself she was aware that she had only stepped back, not walked away from it entirely. It was still there, cold and black in its yawning emptiness, a bleak, bottomless pit where she would fall forever, locked away from the fire of the man she loved.

Chapter Eight

Just as she turned into her driveway a swiftly moving thunderstorm swept in from the Gulf, and it threatened to drown her as she dashed the short distance from her car to the covered side patio. Emily met her at the door

with an enormous towel, having seen her drive up. Just as Susan stepped out of her soaking shoes and wound the towel around her hair, the rain stopped as swiftly as it had come, leaving only the cheerful dripping of water from the trees and the eaves of the roof. A split second later the thundercloud was gone and the sun was shining merrily on the wet landscape, making the raindrops sparkle like diamonds. Susan gave Emily a rueful look. "If I'd waited in the car for a minute, it would've been over with and I wouldn't have gotten soaked."

Emily couldn't suppress a chuckle. "If you wanted predictable weather, you'd live in Arizona. Go on upstairs and get dried off, while I finish your dinner."

Fifteen minutes later Susan was downstairs again, helping Emily put the finishing touches on the small but tasty meal she'd prepared. Emily watched her set a single place on the table, and the older woman's protective instincts were aroused. Putting her big spoon down with a thunk, she braced her hands on her hips. "I'd like to know why you've been eating alone every night, instead of letting Cord Blackstone take you out."

Susan flushed, not certain how to respond. Because it was what she feared most, she finally said, "Just because he passed out on the couch and spent the night here doesn't mean he's interested—"

"Baloney," Emily interrupted in exasperation. "I've got eyes, and I saw the way he was looking at you the next morning. You were looking back at him the same way, and don't try to deny it. Then he went upstairs with you, and it was quite a while before he came down."

"I don't know where he is," Susan admitted helplessly, staring down at the table. "He's not at the cabin. He hasn't called; he didn't even tell me he was leaving, or where he was going. For all I know, he won't be back."

"He'll be back, mark my words." Emily sniffed. "He's not used to accounting for himself to anyone, but if he had it in mind to leave for good, he'd have let you know."

"You knew him when he was a boy," Susan said, looking up at Emily with the hunger to know more about him plain in her eyes. "What was he like?"

Emily's care-worn features softened as she looked at the pleading face turned up to her. "Sit down," she urged. "I'll tell you while you're eating."

Susan obeyed, automatically eating the tiny lamb chops and steamed carrots that were one of her favorite meals. Emily sat down at the table across from her. "I loved him as a boy," she said, turning her mind back over twenty

years. "He was always ready to laugh, always up to some prank, and it seemed like he was more relaxed at my house. He never fit in with the people his parents expected to be his friends, never really fit in here at all, and that just made him wilder than he naturally was anyway, which was wild enough. He was always ahead of everyone else, stronger than anyone else his age, faster, with better grades, more girlfriends. Even the older girls in high school were after him. Everything came so easy to him, or maybe he made everything come to him; I've never seen anyone more stubborn or determined to have his way. Thinking back on it, I know that he had to be bored. Nothing challenged him. He pulled off every wild stunt he could think of, but he had a golden touch, and everything always worked smooth as silk for him. I've never seen anything like his luck."

Susan's breath caught at the image Emily had given her, of a boy growing up too fast, without any limits to guide him. He wouldn't accept any limits, she realized. He'd been propelled by the extraordinary combination of genes and circumstance that should have made him the prototypical Golden Boy, with all the comforts and privileges of wealth and class: handsome, unusually intelligent, athletic, gifted by nature with charm and grace. But his restless, seeking mind had soared beyond that, driven him to test the limits of chance. He had pushed and pushed, seeking a boundary he couldn't push beyond, until he'd gone too far and been driven away from his home. There had been dark years in Cord's life, times when he'd been close to death, when he'd been cold and hungry, but she couldn't imagine him ever being frightened. No, he'd face everything that came his way, the mocking twist of his lips daring everyone and everything to do their worst. The remaining vestiges of the Golden Boy had been obliterated by the harshness of the life he'd led. Perhaps he had money now, perhaps he lived comfortably, but it hadn't always been so, and his senses were still razor-sharp. She thought of the scars on his body and her heart twisted.

"Everyone acts as if he's a wild animal," she said painfully. "Why are they so afraid of him?"

"Because they don't understand him. Because he's not like they are. Some folks are afraid of lightning; some think it's beautiful. But everyone's cautious around it."

Yes, he was as wild and beautiful as a bolt of lightning, and as dangerous. She stared at Emily, her eyes glistening with tears. "I love him."

Emily nodded sadly. "I know, honey. I know. What are you going to do?"

"There's nothing I can do, is there? Just... love him, and hope everything works out"
A foolish hope, doomed from the start. How could it work out? It was impossible to hold a bolt of lightning.
He was gone, and every minute seemed to drag by, rasping on her nerves. An hour was a lifetime; a day, eternity. No book, no gardening, no sewing, could ease her bone-deep sense of yearning. All she could think of was Cord, overwhelming her with his reckless charm and the impact of his forceful sensuality.
If only he was with her! In his presence she wouldn't care about Preston, or Imogene, or whatever was going on. In Cord's arms, she wouldn't care about anything. She could lose herself in him, and count the loss well worth the cost in pain. She loved him simply, completely, and she had to follow only the dictates of her emotions.
She slept restlessly that night, and was jerked out of sleep a little after midnight by a boom of thunder that rattled the windows. Susan lay snugly in her warm bed, listening to the lightning crackle; then a hard, driving rain began to pound against her windows and the wind picked up. Deciding she'd better turn on the radio and get a weather report, she sat up and turned on her bedside lamp. When she did, another pounding reached her ears and she paused, a small frown touching her brow. Then it was repeated, and she jumped out of bed. Someone was trying to beat her door down.
She grabbed her robe and raced down the stairs, turning on lights as she went. "Who is it? What's wrong?" she called as she neared the door.
A deep laugh answered her. "The only thing that's wrong is that you're on that side of the door and I'm on this one."
"Cord!" Her heart jumped into her throat and she rumbled hastily with the lock, throwing the door open. He sauntered in, as wild as the night, and as dangerous. The wind had tumbled his dark hair into reckless waves, and his pale eyes were glittering. He brought the fresh scent of rain in with him, because the wind had blown a fine mist of moisture over him. He was dressed in a conservatively cut, dark business suit, but the coat was hanging open, his tie was draped around his neck, and his shirt was open to the waist. The suit couldn't disguise the desperado that he was, and her mouth went dry with longing.
Unthinkingly, she clutched at his sleeve. "Where have you been? Why haven't you called? I've been so worried—" She stopped, suddenly realizing

what she was saying, and stared up at him with eyes full of vulnerability.
"Uh-uh," he crooned softly. "No questions, remember? I'm not telling you anything, not where I was, or when I'll be going again." A savage enjoyment lit his face as another crash of thunder reverberated through the house, and his teeth flashed in a grin. "I like storms," he murmured, taking a step toward her and lacing his arm around her waist in an iron embrace. "I like making love while it rains."
Something was wrong; she couldn't quite catch her breath. She stared up at him dazedly, and she clutched his lapels for support. “I was just going to turn on the radio to get the weather report," she stammered.
He grinned again. "Thunderstorm warning, with possible high winds," he said, pulling her closer until she was pressed full against him. "Who cares?"
The gleam in his eyes was still interfering with her breathing. "When... when did you get back?" she asked, hanging suspended over his arm, her feet having somehow lost touch with the floor. "Or is that another off-limits question?"
"Tonight," he answered. "I was driving home, thinking about how dead tired I was, and how good it would feel to fall into bed. Then I thought how much better it would feel to fall into bed with you, so here I am."
"You don't look tired," she observed cautiously. He didn't. He looked as if he could rival the storm for energy. He was almost burning her with his touch.
"Second wind," he said, and kissed her. His approach was direct and without hesitation, and he kissed her for a long time. She clung to him, first to his lapels; then her clutching fingers somehow found their way to his shoulders, and finally her arms were locked around his neck. He lifted her and started up the stairs, leaving all the lights on behind him, because that was the last thing on his mind.
He set her on her feet in her bedroom and watched her with lazily hooded eyes as he stripped his tie from around his neck and tossed it carelessly over a chair. The tie was followed by his coat; then his shirt was pulled free of his pants and discarded. When he kicked off his shoes and leaned down to pull his socks off, Susan swallowed at the sight of his half-naked body, so sleek and powerful, and she untied the sash of her robe and removed the garment, folding it over the chair. She could feel his eyes on her, on the ice pink nightgown that half revealed her body.

He dropped his pants and left them lying on the floor. His only remaining garment was a pair of jogging-style shorts, dark blue silk with white edging, which did nothing to hide his arousal. A thunderbolt of excitement raced through her as he nonchalantly stepped out of his underwear and came toward her, as naked and powerfully beautiful as an ancient god.
Quickly she raised the hem of the nightgown over her head and drew it off, the silk whispering over her bare skin. His look of hunger became almost fierce as he reached for her. When he placed her on the bed, Susan reached out for the lamp and he halted her, his hard fingers closing around her wrist. "Leave it on," he instructed in a voice gone gravelly rough. "I thought of this all the time I was gone. I'm not going to miss seeing one minute of it." She couldn't help the blush that tinted her breasts and spread upward to her cheeks, and he found it fascinating. Without a word he took her in his arms. Their loveplay extended as he explored her body as thoroughly as if he'd never made love to her before, had never spent a lovely sun-drenched day sprawled across a bed with her. When she was writhing against him in frantic need, he paused for a moment to reach for his pants, and Susan realized what he was doing. Without a word, he assumed responsibility for their lovemaking. Then he turned to her and swiftly moved between her legs, sliding into her so powerfully that moans of pleasure were wrenched from both of them. His patience was at an end, and he thrust strongly, his rhythm hungry and fast. Susan wound her legs around him and absorbed the power of his thrusts with her eagerly welcoming body, so dizzy with pleasure at being in his arms again, kissing him, giving herself to him in the most intimate act between man and woman, that he couldn't leave her behind in his relentless quest for pleasure. The powerful coil that had been tightening within her was released suddenly, and her entire body throbbed with the pulsating waves that raced down her legs to curl her toes and spread upward through her torso in a splash of heat. She heard the wild cries that were ground out through his clenched teeth, felt him arch into her helplessly; then it was suddenly quiet again as the storm passed and he let himself down to lie on her in contented exhaustion.
After a moment he sighed and carefully eased himself from her, rolling over on his side. Susan touched him, her fingers gentle. "This might not have been necessary," she murmured. "I... I'm not sure I can get pregnant Vance and I never used any protection, but I never got pregnant. I'm very... erratic."

He closed his eyes and a tiny grin touched his mouth. Relaxing, he threw one arm behind his head. "Somehow, that's not very reassuring. I get the feeling that if there's any man walking this earth who could get you pregnant, I'm him. We took a big chance last week, but we'll be more careful from now on." He opened one eye a slit and pinned her with the narrow ribbon of his gaze. "Let me know if it's too late to be careful, or if we hit it lucky. As soon as you know."

"Yes," she agreed, sinking down onto the pillow and closing her eyes as contentment claimed her. It felt so natural to be in bed with him, talking about very intimate things, feeling the heat of his body so close to her. She nestled closer to him and rubbed her face against the hair of his chest, feeling the soft curls catch at her eyelashes.

He drifted into sleep with her lying against his side, but woke when the storm, forgotten in their own storm of loving, renewed itself with a snap of lightning so close that the thunder was simultaneous, and Susan sat upright in bed at the unmistakable sound of a limb splitting away from a tree and crashing to the ground. Before she had time to voice her alarm, he seized her from behind and tumbled her back to the mattress.

"Just where do you think you're going?" he growled with mock roughness.

"The trees—" she began, and just then the lights nickered and went out.

"Oh, hell," he said into the sudden darkness. Another bolt of lightning flashed to earth and the eerie blue-white light illuminated the room. He was sitting up, too. "Where's a flashlight and the radio?"

"There's a flashlight in the top drawer of the nightstand," she said, pulling the sheet up around her as the damp chill of the air reached her. "The radio is downstairs in the den."

"Battery?"

"Yes." She listened as he fumbled around in the nightstand, finally locating the flashlight and clicking it on, the beam of light dispelling the darkness. He swung his long legs out of the bed.

"I'll bring the radio up here. Sit tight."

What else could she do? She pulled her knees up and rested her chin on them, her eyes on the storm erupting right outside her windows. It was loud and magnificent, full of fury, but she mourned the damage to the enormous old trees that surrounded the house. If one of the trees came down, it could take the roof of the house off and crush the walls.

Cord came back into the room, the battery-powered radio in his hand. He had it turned to a local Biloxi station. Placing the radio on the nightstand, he clicked off the flashlight and got into bed with her, pulling her down to nestle in his arms.

In only a few moments the amused drawl of the radio announcer was filling the room. "The thunderstorm warning for the Biloxi area has been canceled. I guess those folks at the weather bureau haven't looked out their windows lately. Now, this is what I call *rain.* There aren't any reports of any serious damage, though several power outages have been reported, and there are some signs blown down. Nothing major, folks. We're in touch with the weather bureau, and if it turns serious—" ,

Cord stretched out a long arm and tamed the radio off, silencing the announcer in mid-sentence. "It's already passing," he murmured, and she noticed that the lightning was indeed less intense, the thunder growing more distant. The lights suddenly blinked back on, blinding both of them with their unexpected brilliance.

He laughed and sat up. "I was going to stay with you as long as the power was off," he said, getting out of bed and reaching for his underwear.

Bewildered, Susan sat up too, staring at him. He pulled on his underwear, then his pants, before she spoke. "Aren't you staying?"

"No." He slanted her a look that was suddenly cool and remote.

"But—it's so late, anyway. Why drive to Jubilee Creek—"

"Three reasons," he interrupted, a harsh note entering his deep voice. "One, I like to sleep alone. Two, I really need the sleep, which I wouldn't get if I stayed here with you. Three, Emily didn't turn a hair at finding me asleep on your couch, but finding me in your bed is something else entirely."

A hard, cold pain struck her in her chest, but she looked at him and saw the way he'd closed himself off, and she summoned all of her strength to give him a smile that wavered only a little. "Are you worried about your reputation?" she managed to tease. "I promise I'll take the blame for seducing you."

Her attempt at lightness worked; he smiled, and sat down on the side of the bed to cup her soft cheek in his palm. "Don't argue," he murmured. But when he was that close he could see her pain, though she was doing everything she could to hide it, and his level brows pulled together. He wasn't used to explaining himself, or talking about his past at all, but he found himself trying to explain his actions for the first time in years. The

urge to take the uncomprehending pain out of those soft blue eyes was almost overwhelming. "Susan, I don't feel comfortable sleeping with another person, not anymore. I've spent too many years guarding my back. I may doze off after making love, but I don't fall into a deep sleep. Some part of me is always alert, ready to move. I can't rest that way and I'm really tired tonight; I need some sleep. We'll go out for dinner tomorrow night... make that tonight, since it's almost morning. Seven-thirty?"
"Yes. I'll be ready."
He winked at her. "I won't mind if you aren't dressed."
As he finished dressing, Susan watched him and hugged the sheet up over her nudity. She bit her lip, trying to force her own feelings away so she could consider his. She'd sensed that he was uneasy about allowing himself to relax when anyone else was with him, and she knew that her vision of him leaving his women alone in their beds had been an accurate one. *His women.* She had joined them, that long line of women who had held him in their arms for a taste of heaven, then lain weeping in their cold beds after he had gone. Yet she wouldn't have turned him away, wouldn't have missed her own chance at heaven. If she could turn time back, she would go with him that first night she'd met him, and not waste one moment of the time she had with him.
He completed dressing and reached for his coat, then leaned down to give her a swift kiss. Susan dropped the sheet and rose up on her knees, entwining her arms around his strong neck as she lifted her mouth. He paused, looking down at her gentle mouth, already pouty from his kisses; her eyes were serene pools, with thick black lashes drooping in a drowsy, unconsciously sexy manner. She was a naked Venus in his arms, soft and warm and feminine, and his hands automatically sought her curves as he kissed her long and hard, his tongue deep within her mouth. Despite his weariness, desire hardened his body, and it was all he could do to pull away from her.
"You're going to be the death of me," he muttered, giving her a look that she couldn't read before he left the room. Susan remained on her knees until she heard the sound of the front door closing; then she sagged down on the bed, fighting the hot tears that wanted to fall. For a moment she'd sensed that he'd been tempted to stay, but only to slake the urges of his amazingly virile body, not because he trusted her, not because he felt he could sleep in her arms. She knew that she could have touched him, wriggled herself against

him, and he would have tumbled her back down to the mattress, but that wasn't what she wanted. That hot, glorious madness that seized her at his lightest touch was wonderful, but she wanted more. She wanted his love, his trust.

The tiger is a majestic beast, savagely beautiful and awesome in its power, but it's locked alone in its majesty. The beautiful tiger is solitary, hunting alone, sleeping alone. A tiger mates, and for a time is less alone, but the moments of physical joining are soon gone, and the tiger once again roams in solitude. Cord was a tiger in nature, and after mating he had gone to seek his bed apart from every other creature on earth, because he trusted no other creature.

She pounded her fist on the mattress in mute frustration. Why couldn't she have fallen in love with a man who *liked* cuddling up and falling asleep, a man who hadn't spent years of his life kicking around the globe in a lot of Godforsaken places, who did all the normal things like going to work during the week and cutting the grass on weekends? Because, she interrupted her own thoughts fiercely, a man like that wouldn't be Cord. He was wild and beautiful, and dangerous. If she had wanted a man who wasn't all of those things, she'd have fallen in love with Preston long ago.

She lay awake, her eyes on the ceiling as the hours slid past and dawn came and went. Part of her was hurt and humiliated that he had come to her for sex, then left as soon as he was satisfied, but another part of her was glad that he had come to her at all, for any reason. Certainly, if he made love to any woman, she wanted it to be herself. She wanted to believe that he felt something for her besides physical desire, but if he didn't, she would try to use that desire as a base to build on. As long as he came around at all, she still had hope.

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She was taken by surprise the next afternoon when sudden cramps signaled that their reckless day of lovemaking hadn't borne fruit; she'd been feeling listless all day, but credited that to her lack of sleep the night before. She was further surprised when she burst into tears, and it wasn't until that moment that she realized she'd been unconsciously hoping that Cord's seed had found fertile ground. She almost hated her body for being so unpredictable, so inhospitable; she wanted his child, a part of him that would be hers forever. She wouldn't use a pregnancy to chain him to her, ever, if he wanted to go, but how she would love a baby of his making! Her

arms ached at the thought of holding an infant with soft dark hair and pale blue eyes, and their emptiness haunted her.
She was pale and shadows lay heavily under her eyes when Cord arrived to take her to dinner; she told him immediately that he had no need to worry about a pregnancy, and almost winced at the relief he didn't bother to hide. Despite that, they had a pleasant dinner, and after eating they danced for a while to some slow, dreamy forties-style music. He'd taken her to a restaurant in New Orleans where she'd never been before, and she liked the place-out-of-time atmosphere. He knew that her energy level was low, and she thoroughly enjoyed the way he coddled her that evening. She drank a little more wine than she was accustomed to, and was floating slightly above the earth as he drove her home in the sleek white Jaguar that he had arrived in, though she had expected the red Blazer. The man has style, she thought dreamily, stroking her fingers over the leather of the seats. In the light of the dash his face was hard and exciting, the virile brush of his moustache outlining the precision of his upper lip. She reached out and let her fingers lightly trace his mouth, causing his brows to arch in question.
"You're so beautiful," she murmured huskily. "Feel free to admire me any time you like, madam," he invited formally, but the wicked, sensual glint in his eyes was anything but formal as he glanced at her. She was a little high, her eyes filled with dreams, and he knew that she would come willingly into his arms if he stopped the car and reached for her right then. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as his body reacted to his thoughts. He wanted her, but he knew that she didn't feel well, and he wanted her to enjoy their lovemaking as deeply as he did, not just allow her body to be used for his pleasure. He thought of how she looked in the throes of passion, and desire slammed into his gut so hard that he jerked in his seat. When this was over, when he had accomplished all that he wanted, he promised himself that he'd take her on a long vacation, maybe a cruise, and he'd make love to her as much as he liked. He'd satisfy his craving for her once and for all, sate himself on her slim, velvet body that was so surprisingly sensual. Her sensuality was so unconscious, so natural, that he sensed she wasn't even aware of it. A perfect lady, he thought, until he took her in his arms; then she turned into a hot, sweet wanton who took his breath away.
He didn't plan any further into the future than that; Cord had learned not to make long-range plans, because they inhibited his ability to react to circumstances. When some people formed plans in their minds, they locked

their thoughts on course and couldn't deviate from them, couldn't allow for unforeseen interruptions or detours. When Cord plotted his course of action, he didn't tie himself down; he always allowed for the possibility that he might have to jump to the left instead of to the right, or even retrace his steps entirely. That flexibility had kept him alive, kept him in tune with his senses. In that way, he was a creature of the moment, yet he always kept his goal in mind, and changing circumstances only meant that he would have to reach that goal by a different route. He was usually prepared for anything and everything, but when he'd returned to Biloxi he hadn't been prepared for the primitive desire he would feel for a woman who had one foot in the enemy camp and seemed determined to keep it there. To the victor belonged the spoils, and he looked at Susan with hard determination; when he had won, she would be his, and he would force all thoughts of her in-laws out of her head. He wouldn't allow her any time to think of anyone but him. The savagely possessive need he felt for her had forced him to adjust his actions, but in the end... in the end, everything would be just like he'd planned it, and Susan would be his, on his terms.

Susan sensed the control he exercised when he kissed her lightly and left her at her door; she was too tired, too sleepy from too much wine, to try to understand why he left so abruptly. She only knew that she was disappointed; she could have made a pot of coffee and they could have sat close together and watched the late news, just as she and Vance had often done....

But Cord wasn't Vance.

Susan stood in the darkened foyer and looked around at the beautiful, gracious home Vance had built for her. The light she had left on at the head of the stairs illuminated the pale walls and the elegant floor-to-ceiling windows, the imported tiles of the foyer. Her home was warm and welcoming, because it was a home that had known love, but now she stood in the darkness, surrounded by the things that Vance had given her, and all she could think of was another man. Cord filled her days, her nights, her thoughts, her dreams. His pale lodestone eyes compelled her, like the moon silently controlling the tides. She tried to visualize Vance's face, but the features refused to form themselves in her mind. He had taught her about love; his tender care had helped shape her into a warm and loving woman, but he was gone, and he had no more substance for her than that of the

drifting mist. *Vance, I really did love you,* she called out to him silently, but there was nothing there. Vance was dead, and Cord was so vitally alive. Instead of going up to bed she went into the den and turned on the lights, then walked unerringly to the precise spot in the bookshelves that held a small album, though it had been at least four years since she'd looked at it. She took down the leather-bound volume and opened it, staring at the pictures of Vance.

How young he looked! How fresh and gallant! She saw the familiar mischievous sparkle in his blue eyes, the rather crooked smile, the strong Blackstone features. She traced the lines of his face with one gentle finger, seeing the resemblance he bore to Cord. He looked much the way she imagined Cord would have before experience had worn away his youthful wonder at the world, before all his ideals had been blasted out of existence. "I loved you," she murmured to Vance's smiling face. "If you could have stayed, I'd have loved you forever."

But he hadn't, and now Cord had stolen her love like the renegade he was. Gently she replaced the album and left the room, walking slowly up the stairs to her empty bed, her mind and her senses filled with the memory of the night before when Cord had swept in with the rain, wild and damp, the air about him almost crackling with the heat of his passion. She hadn't even thought of denying him, even though he'd disappeared for a week without a word of warning. She'd simply undressed, so eager for his touch that she wouldn't have protested if he'd taken her there in the foyer.

She creamed the makeup off her face, closing her eyes slightly to combat the faint giddiness caused by the wine. How passionate he'd been the night before, and how considerate he'd been this evening. She tried to convince herself that he cared for her, but the thought kept coming back that he hadn't wasted any time getting away from her after driving her home. And the night before, he'd left after making love to her. He only wants me for sex, she silently told her reflection, and shut her eyes tightly against the words. It had to be more than that, because she wasn't sure she could keep from falling apart if it wasn't.

Chapter Nine

By the time another week had come and gone, Susan was convinced that she knew nothing about Cord. He was the most enigmatic man she'd ever met; just when she'd decided that he was only using her as a convenient sexual outlet, he confounded her by taking her out every evening, wooing her with wine and good food, and dancing with her into the wee hours of the morning. Dancing with him was special. He was the most graceful man she'd ever known, and he enjoyed dancing. Between them, rituals of dancing were both flirtation and foreplay. She could feel his powerful body moving against her, sending her senses tumbling head over heels, and the unabashed response of his body told her that he was reacting the same way. Held in his arms, she felt secure, protected, locked away in their private world. She could have dreamed her life away in his arms.

He was a gentleman in every sense of the word, tenderly solicitous of her, courting her in a manner so old-fashioned that it stunned her even though she deeply enjoyed every moment of it. He gave her the grace of a few days' privacy, then brought his abstinence to an end with hungry impatience; instead of kissing her gently good-night, as he had been doing, he picked her up and carried her to her bed. When he left several hours later she lay sprawled nude on the tangled sheets, too exhausted to get up to find a night-gown or even pull the sheet over herself. She slept with a heavenly smile on her passion-swollen mouth.

The nights that followed were just as passionate, and she should have been wilting from lack of sleep, but instead she was radiant, full of energy. She sailed through the hours at work, too immersed in her own happiness to really pay attention to Preston's growing depression, knowing that when the night came she would be in Cord's arms again.

Her happiness made the blow, when it came, just that much more cruel. She was going over a productivity report from the small electronics plant they owned when Preston appeared at her office door. Susan looked up with a ready smile, but the smile died when she saw the taut expression that had made his face a gray mask. Concern snapped her to her feet, and she went across the room to him, taking his arm. "What is it?"

He stared at her for a minute, and she silently reproached herself for not having paid more attention to him this past week. She'd known that something was bothering him, but she hadn't wanted anything to dim her happiness. Her selfishness made her writhe inside.

Wordlessly, he extended the papers in his hand. Susan took them, her brow wrinkling as she stared at them.
"What is this?"
"Read it." He moved over to a chair and lowered himself into it, his movements slow and jerky, strangely uncoordinated.
She flipped through the papers, reading slowly. Her eyes widened, and she read them over again, hoping that she hadn't understood correctly, but there was no way to misunderstand. The meaning of every word was perfectly clear. Cord had bought up an outstanding loan against the Blackstone Corporation and was calling it in. They had thirty days to pay.
Almost suffocated by the thick sense of betrayal that rose in her throat, she dropped the papers to the top of her desk and lifted her stunned gaze to Preston. She couldn't speak, though she wet her lips and tried to force her throat to form the words. How could he have done that?
"Well, now you know where he went on that mystery trip," Preston said bitterly, nodding toward the papers. "Dallas."
She braced one hand flat on the desk, trying to support herself as acid nausea rose in her throat. She conquered the moment, but she couldn't conquer the pain that threatened to bend her double. Why had he done it? Didn't he realize that this hurt her as much as it did Preston? This wasn't just Preston he was striking at; he was threatening the entire corporation, her livelihood as well as the livelihoods of thousands of workers who depended on their jobs to put food on the table. He had to know, so the only supposition she could reach was that he simply didn't care. After the week she had spent with him, the passion she'd shared with him, the brutal realization that it all meant nothing to him was like a slap in the face, and she reeled from the impact of it.
"I thought we were protected against this sort of thing." Lifelessly, Preston stared at the floor. "But he found a way, and he's bought up the loan. He's called it in. God knows where he got the money to buy it up, or even how he knew where to go—" He broke off suddenly, his blue eyes narrowing as he stared at Susan with bitter accusation.
For a moment she didn't read the expression on his face; then her eyes flared with understanding. She went even whiter than she had been. How could he so readily believe that she would betray them to Cord, after all she had done to try to convince Cord not to seek vengeance? But why not? Why

should Preston trust her? Cord didn't trust her, despite the passionate devotion she revealed every time she gave herself to him.
"How can you believe that?" she choked. "I haven't told him anything."
"Then how did he know?"
"I don't know!" she shouted, then stopped, pressing her hands against her mouth, aghast at her loss of control. "I'm sorry. I didn't tell him; I swear I didn't."
His blue eyes were suddenly sick, and he drew a deep, shaking breath. "My God, he's got us fighting each other," he said miserably, getting to his feet and coming around to her. He took her in his arms and held her tightly to him, rocking back and forth in a comforting motion. "I know you didn't tell him; you don't have a deceptive bone in your body. I'm sorry for being so stupid. I'm rattled. Susan, he's trying to bankrupt us."
The evidence lay on her desk, so she couldn't even try to deny it. She pressed her face into Preston's shoulder, vaguely aware that she was shaking. The awful thing was that, even with her knowing that Cord was capable of being so ruthless and devious, the aching, burning love she felt for him didn't diminish at all. She had known the chance she was taking in mating with that human tiger.
How long they clung together like frightened children trying to comfort each other, she didn't know. But gradually she canned, and their embrace loosened.
There were things to do, strategies to plan. "How badly will we be weakened?" she asked in a voice that was flatly calm.
Preston's arms dropped away completely, and he turned to drag a chair around so he could sit beside her at her desk. "Dangerously. He couldn't have timed it better. At the moment, our cash flow is restricted because we've invested so heavily in projects that won't begin paying for at least another year, possibly two years. You bandied the paperwork on the laser project in Palo Alto, so you know how much we've sunk in that one project alone."
She did. "Then what about our personal assets? If we liquidate, we can raise enough money to cover the loan—"
He was shaking his head to stop her, and he smiled wryly at her. "How do you think I raised the money to repay him for the money we used?"
She sat back, stunned. How neatly Cord had boxed them into a comer! He must have been planning this all along. First he had threatened to bring

charges against Preston for stealing, then he had sat back and done nothing, giving Preston time to replace the amount taken, knowing that Preston would have to stretch himself thin to cover that much at one time. He had maneuvered them like pieces on a chessboard.
Still, she cast around for a solution. "Imogene and I can cover it. We have stocks we can sell, and property in prime locations—"
"Susan, stop it," he said gently. "Mother and I were both involved in using Cord's money, and we both had to sacrifice to replace it. She's stretched as thinly as I am, and you can't handle this all on your own. You wouldn't have anything left if you did."
Susan shrugged. The thought of being penniless didn't bother her. "If we can hold on for a year, two years at the most, then the corporation would be safe. That's what matters."
"Do you really think I'd let you sell off everything Vance gave you? From the moment he married you, he worked to make certain you'd always be comfortable, no matter what happened. He cherished you, and I won't let you undo all of the things he did for you."
"If we can stay out of bankruptcy, everything can be replaced."
"Covering this loan won't guarantee that. What if he buys up another one? He's obviously got money behind him, enough money to destroy us if he wants to keep pushing. If he buys up another loan, we end up in the bankruptcy courts, even if you do sell everything you own to cover this one."
Preston's logic was irrefutable, and she went cold to the bone. "Then there's nothing we can do?"
"I don't know. We're going to have to consider everything. The damnable part of it is, he has a stake in this corporation himself, and that isn't stopping him. He'll take that loss in order to get back at me. I can't believe he went this far. I know he hates me, but this is... this is crazy!"
It was unnerving to think of someone so determined, so ruthless, that he would go against his own best interests in his quest for revenge. He was tightening the screws, pushing, enjoying tormenting Preston. He'd said that he wanted to make the other man squirm. He might have reason enough for the way he felt; she could only guess at the hellholes he'd been in since he'd been turned away by his family, though she had seen the marks they had left on his body. But no matter what the past had been, it was time the senseless hurting was ended. It had gone on long enough, tearing families apart,

creating bitter enemies of the same blood. She wanted to take Cord by the neck and shake him until he'd regained his senses, and for a moment she could almost smile at the image of herself shaking someone who was almost a foot taller than she was, and who outweighed her by about a hundred pounds.

She was exhausted when she went home that day. They had spent the hours poring over financial statements, marshalling their forces to meet this challenge. Preston was a superb corporate tactician, but she'd never before realized the extent of his subtlety and expertise. He knew exactly how much they could sacrifice without dealing themselves a mortal blow, and he'd set the wheels in motion to liquidate the assets he thought the corporation could spare.

She was late getting home, but Emily was waiting for her with a hot meal, which the older woman made certain she consumed. Somehow, Emily always knew when Susan was tired or depressed, and she would dispense an extra measure of coddling, but not all her tender concern could erase the tension from Susan's face that night. Thinking that all of her nights out with Cord might be tiring Susan out, Emily asked, "Are you going out with Cord again tonight?"

Susan started at hearing the name that had been reverberating in her thoughts. "Oh...I don't know. He said he might be over later tonight. He had to drive to New Orleans to take care of some business." She felt sick at the thought. What sort of business? Finding another nail to drive into the coffin of Blackstone Corporation?

"Well, I think you need to get more sleep then you've had this past week," Emily scolded. "You look like a dish-rag. Send him home early if he does come over."

Somehow, Susan managed a smile for the woman, grateful for her concern. "Yes, I will." She loved him, but right now she couldn't be with him. She had the feeling that if she looked over her shoulder, she'd be able to see the handle of the knife that was sticking in her back.

Perhaps he wouldn't come. She hoped he wouldn't. She was too tired, too hurt, too raw from the knowledge of his betrayal. But why kid herself? He wouldn't see it as a betrayal, because he'd never promised her anything. All he had given her was the coin of physical passion, not a hint of commitment beyond the moment.

She hoped he wouldn't come, yet she wasn't surprised later that night to hear the rumble of the red Blazer that he used for his casual driving. She'd begun to think that she was safe for the night; it was after nine o'clock, and she'd been thinking about taking her bath and going to bed. But now he was here, and she stood in the den, her heart beginning to pound in apprehension. She felt sick; her hands were cold and clammy, and she pressed them against her skirt. How could she face him? Why couldn't he have waited until tomorrow, when she might be calmer?

The doorbell rang, but still she stood rigidly in the middle of the floor, unable to force her legs to move. Cold dread rippled down her spine. Seconds ticked past, and the doorbell began an insistent peal as he jammed his finger onto it and held it there. It wasn't until he began to pound on the door with enough force to rattle it on its hinges that she managed to move, her legs shaking. She crept into the foyer and released the bolt on the door. The door crashed open under the impact of his fist, narrowly missing knocking her down. Cord loomed over her, his face dark and savage. He seized her by the arms, his fingers biting into her soft flesh. "Are you all right?" he bit out. "The lights were on, but when you didn't answer the door I thought something must be wrong. I was going to go around and break out the glass in the sliding doors—" He never finished the sentence, instead pulling her to him with one iron arm locked around her waist, his other hand cupping her chin and turning her face up to him. He bent his head and his mouth closed over hers, hard, hungrily, and for a moment she forgot everything. She was swamped by the exciting maleness of his scent, the coffee taste of his mouth. She clung to him, her fingers digging into the heavy muscles of his back as she rose on tiptoe to fit herself to him.

His desire rose swiftly, launched from the perfect condition of his superb body. Before she could think, he had lifted her off her feet and started up the stairs, after kicking the door shut. Feeling the last vestiges of control slipping away from her, Susan freed her mouth from his and gasped, "Wait! I don't—"

He caught her mouth again, his tongue plunging deep inside, stifling her desperate words as he placed her on the bed. If he had released her then, stepping back to remove his clothes, she might have had a chance, but he stayed with her. He covered her, his mouth taking hers with hard, deep kisses, while his hands delved under her skirt and peeled away her underwear. Stunned by his urgency, after a moment she forgot about the rift

between them and held tightly to his neck, her slender body arching to him as he parted her thighs and fit himself between them. He paused a moment to adjust his clothing and insure her protection, then thrust deeply into her, the impact of his body making her jerk.

She wasn't the only one taken by surprise by his urgency. Cord had been unpleasantly surprised by the desperation that had knotted his stomach when she hadn't answered the door, and he'd had a vision of her sprawled lifeless at the foot of the stairs. Or someone could have broken in on her, and raped her before killing her. That last thought had made the hair on the back of his neck lift up, and he had been snarling silently as he pounded on the door. Then it had opened and she'd stood there, pale and silent, but obviously healthy, and his desire had bloomed with his relief. He had to have her right then, bury himself in her and satisfy his body as well as his mind that she was still there, still healthy, and still his. The taste of her, the silken feel of her under his hands, the intimate clasp of her body, were all that could drive the fear from his mind. He luxuriated in his possession of her, feeling her response building and the tension in her growing tighter, and the knowledge that she wanted him, that he could satisfy her, was a pleasure as great as that he was taking from her soft flesh.

Susan heard the soft little whimpers in the back of her throat, but she was powerless to stop them, powerless to control her body. She reached blindly for satisfaction, her fingers clenched in his hair, her body arching up to meet his. He was crushing her, yet she didn't feel his weight; his heavy shoulders and chest were holding her down, yet she was soaring high and free, everything forgotten except for this moment in time. She was completely physical, yielding to his rampant masculinity and demanding that he give her all of himself.

He caught her legs, pulling them high to coil them around his back, and the whimpers turned into sharp, breathless cries. Deliberately he paced his movements, keeping her on the edge but not allowing her to go over it, not wanting the act to end. His strong hands on her hips controlled her, guided her, held her when she would have taken over the rhythm he'd set. She clenched her teeth on the agony of pleasure that boiled in her; then suddenly it was too much to be held in, and she heard the words of love that she gasped, the words that she'd always longed to say but had held inside.

A rumble in his chest and the tightening of his hands on her flesh signaled the end of his control, and he began to thrust hungrily into her. Instantly an

incredible heat exploded inside her, washing through her with ever-widening waves, making her shudder beneath him. She sank her teeth into his shoulder in an effort to control the sounds she was making, and the primitive, sensual act pushed him over the edge. Short, harsh cries tore from his throat as his satisfaction thundered through him, and he clasped her to him with a wild strength that made her gasp for breath, as if he could meld her flesh with his for all time. When he'd finished, he slowly relaxed until he lay limply on her, his body still quivering with small aftershocks. She smoothed his sweat-damp hair, her fingers gentle on his moist temple. His hot breath seared her throat, and she felt the flutter of his eyelashes against her skin as he began to doze.

But he lay there for only a moment before rousing himself and gently moving from her. He rolled heavily onto his back and lay there, one brawny forearm thrown over his eyes.

Susan lay beside him, tension and dread growing in her again now that the appetites of her body had been satisfied. She should never have let that happen, not tonight, not when she had so much on her mind. And she had told him that she loved him. He couldn't have misunderstood her; it seemed to her that the words still lingered in the air, echoing with ghostly insistence. Would he say anything, or would he just ignore what she'd said? He hadn't asked for any commitment from her any more than he'd offered one. He probably wasn't even surprised; it couldn't be the first time that a woman in his arms had cried out that she loved him.

Caught in her misery, she was only half-aware when he left the bed. The sound of running water caught her attention, and she opened her eyes to look at him through the open door of the bathroom as he stood drinking deeply from a glass of water. His strong brown throat worked as he appeased his thirst. He'd already straightened his clothing, she saw, and her hands clenched into fists. He'd be leaving now that his sexual appetite had been satisfied.

He came back and stood over her, his level dark brows lowered over eyes so pale and fierce that she almost flinched from them. "You scared the hell out of me," he said flatly. "Why didn't you answer the door?"

Restlessly, she sat up, and flushed wildly when she saw that her skirt was still tangled above her waist. Quickly she fumbled with the cloth, straightening it and pushing it down to cover her nakedness, an act that sparked a flash of fury in his eyes. But when she darted a glance up at him,

she saw only the same iron implacability that had been there before as he waited for an answer. Pushing her tumbled hair back from her face, she said in a dull tone, "You bought up a loan against us and called it in."
Silence lay thickly between them for a long moment; then he sliced it by saying harshly, "You're not involved in that."
A laugh broke from her throat, a laugh that was almost a sob, and she got quickly to her feet, leaving the bed where she had given herself to him so thoroughly. For a moment she feared her legs wouldn't hold her, but after an initial wobble she regained control of them and moved a few paces away from him. "I have to be. You know that everything is tied together. If you attack them financially, you're attacking me financially. If you bankrupt them, you bankrupt me."
"You don't have anything to worry about. I'll take care of you."
The cool arrogance of his words almost made her choke, and she whirled on him in disbelief. "Is that supposed to make it all right? You'll reduce me to a...a kept woman, and I'm supposed to be grateful?"
One dark eyebrow quirked. "I don't see your problem," he said, and added with casual cruelty, "after all, you said that you love me."
She winced, unable to believe he'd attacked her so soon, even though she'd put the weapon in his hand. Suddenly she was too close to him, and she put the width of the room between them, withdrawing from him as far as she could. She bent her head, unable to look at him and face the contemptuous knowledge that she knew must be in his eyes. "Would you... would you actually push us all into bankruptcy just to get back at Preston? Even knowing that a lot of other people are involved, that they'd lose their jobs?"
"Yes." His voice was hard, as hard as he was, and the last vestige of hope died in her. Until then there had been one small shred of faith left; she had been able to hope that he was only punishing Preston and would stop before things went too far.
"You'd be hurting yourself!" she cried. "How can you do this?" He gave a negligent shrug. "I've got other things to fall back on."
She'd begged before, with no result, but now she was reduced to doing it again. "Cord, stop this! Please! Don't push it until it's gone too far. When will you be satisfied? After you've ruined us all, then what? Will it have brought Judith back for you?"
His face turned into stone, and his eyes narrowed. Wildly, goaded by her own pain, she lashed out at him, sensing that she'd found a way to wound

him. "You're just trying to ease your own guilt about Judith, because of your part in what happened to her—"

With a growl he strode across the room, seizing her before she could dart to the side and avoid him. His hands bit into her shoulders and he shook her lightly. "Shut up about Judith! I made a mistake in telling you about her, but you'll be making an even bigger one if you ever mention her to me again. For the last time, stay out of this."

"I can't. I'm already in it." She stared up at him with eyes so huge that they eclipsed her entire face, eyes so filled with pain that any other woman would have been weeping uncontrollably. They were going to destroy each other. Cord and Preston, and she was helpless to stop it. There could be no winners in this family war, because when the bond of common blood goes bad, it causes a rift that can never be healed. She saw the chasm that was already widening between herself and Cord, and she wanted to scream out in desperate protest, but there was nothing she could do. She held herself rigidly in his painful grip, trying to control the shrieking agony that was tearing her heart apart.

His grasp on her eased, and he stroked his thumbs over the fragile ridges of her collarbones. "You're too soft for this," he murmured to himself; then he eased her back into his embrace, shifting his arms to hold her against him. She was silent, letting herself rest against him because she hadn't the strength to deny herself what she feared might be the last time he'd hold her like this. He bent his head to press his warm lips into the sensitive curve where her neck met her shoulder, and a delicious shiver ran over her body. Just like that, with only a casual caress, he was able to make her want him again. She loved him too much, too dangerously, because she could hold nothing of herself back. There was no way she could protect herself.

"Don't go back to work," he instructed softly, brushing his lips against her hair. "Stay at home, and stay out of this. Vance left you secure, and whatever happens to Preston won't affect you at all." His big hands stroked slowly over her back and shoulders, their effect on her hypnotic. "You said that you love me; if you do, you won't take his side against me."

For a moment, for a weak, delicious moment, she wanted nothing more than to do just as he said, to let his hard embrace protect her and make her forget all other considerations. Then she stiffened and slowly pushed herself away from him, her face taut and pale.

"Yes, I love you," she said quietly, because there was no use in trying to hide it from him any longer. How could she deny it, when her body told him the truth every time he touched her? "But I have to do whatever I can to stop you from bankrupting the family."
His eyes narrowed. "You're choosing him over me?"
"No. But I think you're wrong in what you're trying to do, and if you won't stop, then I have to help him fight you."
Black fury gathered in him, sparking out of his pale eyes, but he held it in. "Is it asking too much for you to trust me in this?" he rasped, watching her carefully.
"The same way you trust me?" she shot back. "You told me yourself, just a moment ago, that you're trying to bankrupt us! Is that supposed to reassure me?"
He gave a derisive snort, the fire in his eyes turning to ice. "I should've known! You spouted that garbage about loving me, *then* you asked me so sweetly to ease up on Preston. You're good in the sack, baby, the best I've had, but you don't have that kind of a hold on me."
"I know," she whispered blankly. "I've always known that. But I wasn't trying for any emotional blackmail. I think... I think you'd better go."
"I think you're right."
As he moved past her, she blinked at him with eyes suddenly blurred by a film of tears. He was going, and she knew he wouldn't be back. "Goodbye," she choked, feeling herself shatter inside.
He gave her a grim look. "It's not goodbye, not yet. You'll be seeing me around, though you'll wish you weren't." Then he was gone, lightly taking the stairs with graceful bounds. Slowly she followed him, and she reached the door in time to watch the red flare of the Blazer's tail-lights disappear as he rounded a curve. She shut the door and locked it, then methodically moved about and made certain the house was secure for the night. She even sat down and watched the late movie until it went off, then realized that she hadn't absorbed any of it. She didn't even know the name of it, or the names of the actors. She hadn't been thinking of anything, just sitting there, her mind numb. She wanted it to stay numb, because she knew that when the numbness wore off, she was going to hurt more than she could bear.
She went through the motions of going to bed; she showered and put on her nightgown, moisturized her face, neatened up her bedroom and put her

discarded clothing in the laundry basket. Then she lay in bed until dawn, her eyes open and staring at the ceiling. He was gone.

He was gone! It was a litany of pain that echoed through her endlessly, an inner accompaniment to the gray, dreary days that followed. The sun could have been shining; she simply didn't know. But she couldn't see any sunshine, and she functioned only through instinct and sheer grim determination. She'd kept going after Vance's death, and now the same steely determination kept her upright even when she wanted nothing more than to collapse in a corner of her bedroom and not ever come out again. She'd had to accept the bleak truth of Vance's death because she had seen his lifeless body, had buried him. It was worse with Cord. He was gone from her, yet he seemed to be everywhere. They met at several functions, and she had to act as if it didn't almost double her over with pain to see him. He was usually with Cheryl, of course, though she heard that he wasn't limiting himself to the other woman. She had to see him, had to listen to him say all the polite things while his icy eyes cut her, had to watch him slide his arm about Cheryl's waist, had to imagine him kissing the other woman, touching her with his hot, magic fingers, drawing her beneath him in his big bed at the cabin.

To stay sane she drove herself at work every day, working longer and longer hours, working frantically with Preston in an effort to raise enough cash to pay off the loan without seriously weakening the corporation. It was an impossible task; they both knew that if Cord chose to attack them again, they wouldn't be able to meet his demands.

Quietly, without letting Preston know, Susan sold some prime property in New Orleans that Vance had left her and added the proceeds to their cash fund. Preston would have died rather than let her sell off any of her personal property, though she knew he'd been heavily liquidating his. Sometimes, when she thought about the fact that Cord was deliberately forcing them to sell off land that had been in the family for generations, she hated him, but always that hate was mingled with love. If she hadn't loved him so much, she wouldn't have felt so betrayed by his actions, wouldn't have been so deeply angry when she saw Preston, without complaint, destitute himself personally in order to keep the corporation out of bankruptcy.

This had shaken Imogene, too, to the very basis of her foundations. Since the night she and Susan had argued so violently, she had been a little quieter, as if some of the spirit had gone out of her. Perhaps she had sensed

then that she couldn't fight Cord, that by the very act of returning he had won. Always before, Imogene had been actively involved in any corporate decisions, but now she let Preston and Susan carry the weight. For the first time she was showing her age.

At last it was done. They had enough to cover the loan, and though Susan and Preston shared a moment of relief, it wasn't without worry. They had used every ounce of spare reserve they had, and another blow would be too much. Still, the relief was strong enough that they celebrated in the French Quarter that night, in a far noisier restaurant than the one Cord had taken her to. But she was glad of the noise and distraction, and for once she ate a good meal. In the time since Cord had sauntered out of her house she'd lost several pounds that she hadn't been able to spare. It was as much overwork as depression, or so she told herself every morning when she frowningly examined herself in the mirror, noting that her clothing was too loose to fall correctly on her increasingly slender body.

On the drive home Preston startled her by apologizing. "You've broken up with Cord because of this, haven't you?"

There was no denying it, no use in concocting a lame excuse that they simply hadn't gotten along, so she simply murmured, "Yes," and let it go at that.

"I'm sorry." He cast her a frustrated glance. "I should be glad, because I didn't like you being with him, but I'm sorry that you've been hurt. I didn't want you in the middle like this."

"I made my decision. He insisted that I choose sides, and I simply couldn't watch him cost a lot of people their jobs without trying to do something about it."

"I hope he knows what he's lost," Preston said violently, and returned his attention to his driving.

Even if he knew, he wouldn't care, Susan thought dully. He certainly wasn't pining away for her; he looked better every time she saw him, his hard, dark face becoming darker as the late spring sun continued to bronze him. Had he finished clearing off the land down by the creek? Was he doing any more work on the cabin?

When he had pushed her out of his life, he had left her lost and desolate, without any emotional focus. She wondered if the rest of her life would be like this, a dull misery to be endured as she went through the motions of living.

Chapter Ten

If she had known what awaited her when she walked into the office three days later, she would never have gone. Beryl was already there and had a fragrant pot of coffee brewing. "Good morning. Beryl. Is Mr. Blackstone in yet?"

"No, not yet. Do you want a cup of coffee now?"

Susan smiled at the young woman. "I'll get it. You look like you have enough to handle right now," she teased, nodding at the stacks of paperwork that littered Beryl's desk.

Beryl nodded ruefully. "Don't I, though? Mr. Blackstone must have worked until midnight last night. He left all of this, and enough tapes on the Dictaphone to keep me typing through the weekend."

"Really? I didn't know he'd planned to come back to the office last night. He left when I did, and I can't think of anything that would have been so urgent."

She poured herself some coffee and carefully balanced the cup as she went into her office, keeping a cautious eye on the sloshing liquid. She placed the cup on her desk and walked around to pull the curtains open, letting the brilliant morning sunlight pour into the room. The day was hot already, with a sultry feel to it that had dampened the back of her neck with perspiration even before she'd left the house that morning. She was beginning to think of taking a vacation, finding a beach somewhere and doing nothing more strenuous than lying in the sun. Somehow, sweating on the beach didn't sound nearly as hot as sweating at work.

After fingering the blossoms of her favorite geranium, she went to her desk and sat down. It wasn't until then that she saw the thick manila envelope lying there with her name printed on it in big block letters. Frowning, she opened the sealed envelope and pulled out a sheaf of papers. On top was some sort of legal document, and she turned it around to read it.

Immediately she went deathly white, not having to read further than the front page to know it for what it was. Cord had bought up another loan and called it in.

My God, he was going to do it. They couldn't weather this. They couldn't pay, and the shock waves he was going to make would reverberate

throughout the corporation and the banks they were involved with. Their credit would be ruined. They simply couldn't pay this and keep operating.
Where was Preston? She wanted to run to him, wanted to hear him say that he would be able to work another little piece of magic and somehow come up with the money they needed. It was selfish of her, and she controlled the urge. He would have to know, yes, but let him have a few more hours of peace, of not knowing.
How had the envelope gotten on her desk? The office was always locked when they left, and Preston had worked late the night before....
Then she knew, and she felt sick. Preston already knew about the loan, and he'd left the envelope on her desk.
She flipped through the legal document, and behind it she found a letter to her, in Preston's handwriting. His usually elegant style was a scrawl as if the letter had been written in agitation, but the writing was unmistakably his.
She read the letter through carefully, and when she was finished she let it fall to the floor, tears searing her eyes.
If Cord had wanted only to defeat Preston, he'd won. Preston had gone. His letter was both defeated and desperate. He'd done all he could, but he couldn't fight Cord any longer. Perhaps, if he left, Cord would let up. By taking himself out of the picture, Preston hoped that Cord would cease his vengeance.
Cord had had the legal paperwork delivered to Preston at home, by special messenger, an act that chilled Susan with its calculated cruelty. Preston had then returned to the office, methodically finished all the work currently on his desk, left the letter for Susan, and disappeared.
She couldn't blame Preston for leaving; she knew that it was his last-ditch effort to save the corporation, to keep Cord from putting it under. He hoped that when Cord found that Susan was running the corporation he wouldn't call in the loan, knowing that his prime target had fled and that now he was attacking only a woman he'd previously been very interested in.
As if that would stop him! Susan thought despairingly. Then her spine stiffened. As if she would run crying to him now, asking him to have mercy on her!
She'd begged him before, for Preston's sake, for everyone's sake, and he'd turned a cold shoulder to her. She wouldn't beg him for herself now.
Susan didn't recognize the fierce anger that seized her, but she wasn't going to just give up. If she had to fight him until she didn't have a penny left,

then that's what she would do.
She picked up the telephone and quickly punched out a number. She wasn't surprised when Imogene answered herself.
"Imogene, do you know where Preston is?" she asked directly, not wasting time with polite greetings.
"No. He only told me that he was going." Imogene's voice sounded tired and a little thick, as if she'd been crying.
"Do you know why he left?"
"Yes. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen. He just wouldn't listen," she sighed. "He thinks that this is the only way he can get Cord to stop. What... what are you going to do? Are you going to see Cord?"
"No!" Susan said violently. She inhaled swiftly, searching for control and finding it. "I'm not going to tell him anything. I'm going to fight him with everything I have, and I need your help."
"Help?" Imogene echoed blankly. "What can I do?"
"You've been involved with this corporation for years. You have a lot of contacts, and you know everything that's going on even if you don't come to the office. There's too much to do on an everyday basis for me to handle it by myself and fight Cord, too. Will you come? Do you want to fight him?"
There was a long silence on the other end of the phone, and Susan waited tensely, her eyes closed. She really needed Imogene's help. She didn't fool herself that she'd be able to carry on for long by herself. The burden would break her. But Imogene hadn't been herself, and she wasn't sure what her mother-in-law would do.
"I don't want to fight him," Imogene finally said softly. "This insanity has gone on long enough. If I thought it would stop him, I'd sign everything I own over to him this minute just to bring peace to our family. I have to share in the responsibility for this mess, and I'm not proud of it. I shouldn't have turned on him; he's family and I forgot that. I regret it so much now, but regrets don't do any good."
Susan's heart sank. "You won't help?"
"I didn't say that. I'll be there as soon as I can get myself ready and make the drive. But it's not to fight him, dear. It's to help you, and to do what I can to keep the corporation out of bankruptcy. That's the only important thing now, and when it's over, I'll crawl on my hands and knees to Cord if that will satisfy him and stop this war."

The thought of proud Imogene being willing to humble herself in such a way left Susan fighting tears again. "I'll be waiting," she whispered, and hung up the phone before she embarrassed herself by sobbing into it.
If she had worked before, it was nothing compared to the way she drove herself now. She arrived in the office shortly after dawn and often remained until nine or ten in the evening. On the surface, it didn't seem possible that she would be able to meet Cord's demands, but she didn't give up. Imogene was on the phone constantly, calling in favors, trying to arrange a loan that would keep them going. But even old friends were suddenly wary of the Blackstone Corporation, for the business grapevine was remarkably sensitive, and word had filtered through that they were on shaky financial ground. Their common stock was trading hands rapidly, and in desperation Susan put some of her own stock up for sale. Preston and Imogene had already sold some of their stock in order to replace the money they'd embezzled from Cord, hoping to buy more when their cash flow had improved. But Cord had kept them on the ropes and hadn't let the pressure ease at all. At least the price of the stock was holding up, due to the brisk trading, but Susan knew that she had to take even more desperate measures. She had stock in other companies, blue-chip investments, and ruthlessly she turned them into cash. She kept it secret from Imogene, knowing that Imogene would be as horrified at the idea, as Preston had been. Imogene was holding up wonderfully, attacking the work with increased vigor, and as she settled into it she began to display a wonderful panache for the job. Susan didn't want to do anything to throw the older woman back into the mild depression that had held her in its grip lately. She knew that Imogene worried about Preston and fretted over the absence of her only living son; that burden was enough.
Every morning when Susan looked in the mirror she realized anew that she was living on her nerves, and sometimes she wondered how much longer she could keep going. The shadows under her eyes seemed to have become permanent fixtures that she carefully disguised with makeup. She always left the house now before Emily arrived, and she was too tense to prepare breakfast herself and eat it. There was always a meal left for her when she got home at night, needing only to be warmed, but more often than not Susan was too exhausted to eat it. She was existing on pots of coffee and hasty bites taken out of sandwiches, sandwiches that were seldom finished and instead left to grow stale while she worked.

The steamy weather further sapped her strength, the heat and humidity weighing her down like a smothering blanket. She couldn't sleep at night, even with the air-conditioning on, and she would lie watching the flash of heat lightning, hoping that the bursts of light meant thunderstorms and rain, but the clouds never came and each day dawned hotter than the one before. Lying on her bed in the thick, humid nights, the light cover kicked down to the foot of the bed because even a sheet was too oppressive, she thought of Cord. During the day she could resent him, hate him, fight him, but when the nights came she could no longer hold the memories at bay, and she would hug her pillow to herself, keening her pain almost soundlessly into the pillow. He had been on that bed with her, his dark head on the other pillow; he had wrapped her graceful legs around him, linking her to him with a chain of flesh while he drove deeply into her body and her heart. She wanted him so much that her entire body ached, her breasts throbbing, her thighs and loins heavy with need. She wanted just to see him, to watch his beautifully shaped mouth quirk into one of those devastatingly wicked smiles. Whenever she dozed she dreamed of him, and she would jerk herself awake with a start as she reached out for him. Sometimes the impulse to go to him was almost too strong to ignore, and in the hot, heavy nights she suffered alone.

She heard, through the grapevine of gossip that always yielded an astonishing amount of information, that Cord was gone again, and this time she didn't wonder if he'd ever come back; now she wondered what new weapon he was readying to use against her. No, not against *her* personally, but against them all in general. Though she wasn't able to pinpoint the exact date when he'd left, she knew that it was about the same time Preston had gone; it was possible that he didn't know Preston had bowed out and left the corporation in her lap. As far as all their acquaintances were concerned, Preston was on a business trip. That was the tale she and Imogene had decided to put out, rather than trigger a flood of gossip that would grow larger and wilder with every turn.

Despite everything, when the grapevine informed her that Cord had returned, she didn't feel the dread that should have overwhelmed her. For a sweet moment of insanity she was simply glad that he'd returned, that he was once more close by geographically, if not emotionally. Somehow she felt that if he was at least in Mississippi, then it wasn't all over. When it was finished for good, he'd leave for good.

If she hadn't been so tired, so desperate, pushed beyond common sense, she'd never have considered the idea. But late one afternoon she thought again of the ridges. She hadn't slept at all the night before, with her thoughts whirling around in her mind like a rabid squirrel in a cage, until she felt as if her very skull were sore from being banged from within. The air conditioner couldn't handle the heat and humidity, and her lightweight tan suit clung to her sticky skin. She'd already shed the jacket, since it was late and everyone else had already gone home, but even the thin cotton camisole top she'd worn with the suit seemed to be restricting her. A distant rumble of thunder held out the hope of rain to a parched region, but Susan had ceased believing in the thunder's promise. It had proved to be deceptive too often lately.

She had done everything she could think of, and still she hadn't managed to scrape together enough cash to pay off the loan. She'd liquidated a large portion of her stock in Blackstone Corporation, all her stock in everything else, and had disposed of all of the property Vance had accumulated for her... all of it except for the land the house stood on, and the ridges.

The ridges. The thought of them was like a jolt of electricity, straightening her in her chair. *The ridges!* With their promise of oil or natural gas, they were a gold mine, and she'd had it under her nose all the time. The money she could get from leasing them would be enough to finish covering the loan, and in her exhaustion she thought that it would be only fitting that the money from the ridges be used to defeat Cord; after all, it had been the ridges that had brought him back to Mississippi in the first place.

In the back of her mind she knew it was odd that Cord hadn't pressed her about signing the lease, but she simply couldn't follow his reasoning. She loved him, but even after weeks of agonized wondering, she couldn't understand him.

The thought of the ridges gave her a spurt of strength, rather like a marathon runner's last desperate burst of speed. She would drive out to the cabin and offer the lease to Cord, and he could take it right now or leave it. If he didn't take it, then she'd lease the land to the first oil company she could interest in it, but she was going to give him the first chance at it. She knew that her excuse was flimsy, but suddenly she had to see him. Even if he were an enemy now, she had to see him.

Without giving herself time to reconsider, she locked the office and left the building. If she thought about it, she'd begin to worry, and she'd let the

doubts change her mind. Her hands were trembling as she guided the Audi out of Biloxi. A distracted glance at the fuel gauge warned her to stop for gas, but even that small interruption in her progress was too much to tolerate. She thought she'd have enough gas to get home, and that was all she cared about at the moment. She'd worry about getting to work later.
The radio volume was low, but even the background noise was rasping on her nerves, and she snapped the radio off with a quick, irritable movement. It was so hot, and she felt so weak! A moment of dizziness alarmed her, and she turned the air-conditioning vents so the cold air was blowing right on her face. After a moment she felt better, and she urged the Audi to greater speeds.
The Blazer was parked under one of the giant oak trees that kept the fierce sun away from the front of the cabin, and the front door stood open. Susan guided the Audi to a hard stop in front of the porch, and as she opened the door to get out. Cord strolled lazily out of the cabin to lean against one of the posts that supported the porch roof. He had on boots, and jeans so old that one of the pockets was missing, and that was all. She looked up at him and her heart stopped for a moment. He'd begun to let his beard grow again, and the several days' growth of whiskers on his jaw made him look like an outlaw out of a Western. His hard, muscled torso was darkly tanned, his hair longer, and if anything, his pale eyes were even more compelling than she'd remembered. Her mouth went dry, and her legs wobbled as she went up the steps, clinging with all her strength to the rough railing.
She'd tried to imagine what his first words would be, and her imagination had supplied any number of brutal things that would wound her. She braced herself for them as his narrowed gaze went over her from head to foot.
"Come on in and have a glass of iced tea," he invited, his rough, callused hand closing on her elbow and urging her inside the cabin. "You look like you're about to melt."
Was that it? She had to swallow an almost hysterical giggle. After all her panic, he calmly invited her in for iced tea!
Somehow she found herself sitting at his table while he moved around the kitchen. "I was just about to eat," he said easily. "Nothing hot in this weather, just a ham sandwich and a tossed salad, but there's plenty for two."
She started. He wanted her to eat? "Oh, no, thank you—"
He interrupted her refusal by sliding a plate in front of her. She stared down at the ham sandwich, wondering if she could possibly swallow a bite of it,

and his hand entered her field of vision again, this time placing a chilled bowl of salad beside the plate. A napkin and cutlery were placed by her hand, and a big glass of beautiful, amber tea over ice finished her instant meal. When she lifted her stunned gaze, she saw that he'd set the same for himself, and he draped his tall frame into the chair across from her.
"Eat," he said gently. "You'll feel better after you do."
When had she last had a meal, a real meal? The days had merged into one long, steamy nightmare, and she couldn't recall her last meal. Half-eaten sandwiches, coffee, and an occasional candy bar had constituted her diet since Preston had left. She began to eat slowly, and the crisp, fresh flavor of the salad, only lightly coated with tart dressing, was suddenly the best thing she could imagine eating. She savored every bite of it, and the cold tea seemed to cool her from the inside out. Because she'd been eating so little she was unable to eat all of the sandwich, but Cord made no comment on the half left on her plate. Instead he swiftly cleared the table, placing the dishes in the sink before coming back to the table and refilling her glass with tea.
"Now," he said, dropping into his chair again, "you don't look like you're going to pass out at my feet, so I'll listen to whatever you came to say."
Susan held the frosty glass between both hands, feeling the refreshing chill on her hot palms. "I want to talk to you about the ridges," she said, but her mind wasn't on her words. She was staring at him, her eyes tracing the lines of his features as if etching them permanently on her memory.
"So talk. What about them?" He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back, bringing his booted feet up and propping them on the chair beside him.
"Do you still want to lease them?"
His lids dropped down to hood his eyes. "Get to the point, Susan."
Nervously, she took a sip of tea, then fidgeted for a moment with the glass, returning it to precisely the same spot where it had been before, making certain that it matched the ring of water that marked its position. "If you want them, then lease them now. I've decided not to wait for the report from the survey. If you don't want the lease any longer, I'm going to lease them to some other company."
"Oh, I still want them," he said softly, "but I'm not going to give you any money on them right now. You'd run all the way to Biloxi to give the money to Preston, and I'll be damned if I'll give you a penny until this is all over.

The money from the ridges is for you, to keep you in your accustomed style after Preston doesn't have a penny left." He gave her a cynical grin, one full of wry amusement at himself. "I'll keep you in silk underwear, honey."
Susan choked and jumped to her feet, her cheeks scarlet. "Then I'll lease them to someone else!"
"I don't think so," he drawled, swinging his long legs to the floor and getting to his feet, moving gracefully to put himself between her and the door. "If you think I've used every club I have against Preston already, then you're mistaken. If you lease that land to anyone else, I'll crush him, and you can bet your sweet little life on that."
Susan drew back from him, stumbling a little as she tried to circle the table without turning her back on him. She was slowed by her exhaustion, and totally unable to react when he moved suddenly, cutting her off. His hands closed on her fragile waist, and he felt the slenderness of her under his fingers. His black brows snapped together in a forbidding frown. "How much weight have you lost?" he demanded curtly, glaring down at her.
Despite the tremors that quaked through her insides, Susan held herself stiffly. "That's none of your business." Her fingers dug into his biceps as she tried to push him away, but he was as immovable as a boulder.
He held her with one arm and swept his other hand over her body, exploring her newly frail contours. He slid his hand over her hips and buttocks, her slender thighs, then up to rub gently over her breasts, making her cry out and writhe in a desperate attempt to escape him. He held her easily, his eyes blue with fury. "What in the hell has he done to you?"
Shards of pain pierced her, and she twisted suddenly, a gasping cry breaking from her lips. She managed to break his grip, and she shoved herself away from him, her face pale, her hair straggling out of its once-tidy knot. She hurt so much, and she was so desperate, that she screamed at him, "He hasn't done anything to me! You've done it; you've done it all! You're not crushing him, you're crushing *me!* He left—" Horrified at what she was saying, she stuffed her hand into her mouth to stop the mad tumble of words, her eyes huge and so dark they were almost black as she stared at him.
If he had been angry before, he exploded now. Hammering his fist on the table with a force that upset her glass of tea, he roared, "What do you mean, 'He *left?'* That damned weasel!"

"He's not a weasel!" She'd been pushed too far to be wary of his temper, to even consider the questionable wisdom of defending Preston to Cord. "He left because he hoped you'd stop when you saw that you weren't hurting him any longer! He's trying to save the corporation, save thousands of jobs—"
"You mean he thought you'd come running to me with the information that you were trying to do it all on your own, and I'd back off. Damn you, Susan, why didn't you do just that? Why have you driven yourself into the ground like this?"
"Because I think you're wrong! Preston isn't using me as a sacrificial lamb; if you'd stop hating him long enough, you might see that he's not the same person he was years ago. You can try to ease your own guilt by making him pay, but you're wrong to do it!"
"Is that why you've run yourself half to death, to show me how wrong I am?"
He was never going to listen to reason. The realization slapped her in the face, and she reeled from the force of it. "No," she whispered. "I've run myself half to death trying to keep a corporation alive. I don't sleep because I lie awake trying to think of a way to raise money, and I don't eat because I don't have the time to spare." She'd gone completely white now, her eyes blazing at him. "I've sold everything I own, except my house and the ridges, trying to stay afloat. Do you want them, too? Or maybe the keys to my car? Or how about my record collection? I've got some real golden oldies—"
"Shut up!" he thundered, reaching out a hand to catch her.
She twisted away, unable to bear his touch. "Leave me alone," she said rawly, then almost ran out of the cabin and tumbled into the Audi. Slamming the door, she savagely turned the key in the ignition and the engine caught immediately, but when she put the car in gear it gave a shuddering jerk and died. "Don't do this to me," she said through gritted teeth, turning the key again. The motor turned over but didn't catch, and in horror her eyes flew to the fuel gauge, where the needle bumped against the E. "Damn you!" she shrieked at the car. "Don't do this to me!" She began to pound on the steering wheel with both fists, screaming, "Damn! Damn! Damn!" with every impact, and tears burst from her eyes.
"Susan!" The door was wrenched open, and Cord caught her wrists, hauling her out of the car. "Susan, stop it! Settle down, honey, just settle down. Don't fly apart like this. Let me see if I can get the car started."

"You can't," she blurted, pulling her hands free to bury her face in them and weep uncontrollably. It was just too much. She, who always controlled her tears no matter how much she hurt, had dissolved into sobs because she had run out of gas. "The gas tank is empty."
He slid into the driver's seat, keeping one long leg on the outside of the car, as he turned on the ignition and checked it for himself. Sighing, he got out of the car and closed the door. "I'll drive you home."
"I don't want you to drive me home!" She turned to walk down the slope and he made a grab for her, hauling her back just as an enormous clap of thunder shook the earth. She jumped, startled, looking up at the horrendous black cloud that had suddenly taken over the sky. A brisk wind had begun blowing, but she hadn't noticed it until then. As they both looked up, the first enormous raindrops splattered them in the face with stinging force, and Cord put his arm around her, hustling her up on the porch just before the heavens split open and dropped a deluge so thunderous that they had to shout to make themselves heard.
"You can't walk home in this," he yelled, bending down to put his mouth close to her ear. "We'll wait until it lets up; then I'll take you home."
Despairingly, Susan looked at the gray curtain of rain. Already it had turned the area around the cabin into a shallow river as the water ran down the slope, rushing downward to the creek. She knew that it would splash up to her ankles, and gave in to his opinion that she couldn't walk home. But neither could she stay here, so close to him, in the cabin where they'd made love the first time. Her nerves were at the breaking point. "I want to go home!" she half screamed at him. "I'm not going to stay here! I simply won't!"
A look of savage impatience twisted his face; then he brought himself under control by sheer effort of will. He caught her arm and dragged her into the cabin, slamming the door shut in an effort to close out the roar of the rain.
"All right, all right!" he snapped. "We're going to get soaked just getting into the Blazer, you know."
"I don't care." Obdurately she stared at him, and he stared back at her in frustrated fury, but evidently he saw something in her face that made him hesitate. She had no idea how frail she looked, or how deeply the shadows of exhaustion lay under her eyes. He shoved his hand through his too-long hair, making the silky strands tumble down over his forehead.

"I'll pull the Blazer up as close to the porch as I can," he muttered. "There's a newspaper on the table in front of the fireplace; put it over your head and make a run for it. But I warn you, it's not going to do much good against this downpour." He stalked to the cabinet and pulled out a plastic trash bag, then disappeared into the bedroom. Susan remained where she stood, feeling icy chills race over her body, too dispirited to wonder what he was doing. He came out a moment later wearing one of those disreputable T-shirts that hugged his magnificent body so faithfully. He had the trash bag folded and tucked under his arm, and a battered khaki-colored baseball-style cap was jammed on his head. He looked as stormy and furious as the cloud outside. Without speaking to her, he went out on the porch, and she followed him. He didn't bother with the steps; he walked to the end of the porch nearest to the Blazer and paused a moment to stare in disgust at the pounding rain. Then he leaped off the end of the porch, and was in a dead run by the time his feet hit the ground. As depressed as she was, Susan watched him in admiration, admiring the speed and grace of his powerful strides. He looked like a line-backer closing in on a pass receiver, every movement purposeful and deadly.

A bolt of lightning, blindingly white, snapped to the ground close to the creek, and the ear-splitting crack made Susan shriek and jump back as the entire earth shook. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck lifted at the electricity that hummed through the air, and suddenly she realized how powerful this storm was, how dangerous it was to be out in it. The limbs of the giant oaks were waving back and forth as the trees bent before the onslaught. She wanted to call Cord back, but he was already in the Blazer; she heard the engine roar into life, and the headlights came on. She stumbled back into the cabin to get the newspaper he'd indicated, only to find that the storm had blotted out the lingering twilight and it was so dark inside the cabin that she had to switch on a lamp to find the newspaper. Her fingers trembled as she turned the light off again. As Cord maneuvered the Blazer up close to the porch, inching it between her car and the steps, the headlights threw twin beams of light through the open door, illuminating the wet floor where the gusting wind had blown the rain across the porch and into the house. She touched her hair and found it was damp, and her clothes were equally damp; she hadn't even noticed that she'd been getting wet.

He blew the horn, and she started. Why was she standing there in the dark? Quickly she crossed the room and struggled out onto the porch, the wind making a strong effort to push her back inside. It took all her strength to tug the door closed, and the newspaper she held over her head was blown uselessly to one side. She grabbed it with both hands and held it; without giving herself time to think, she dashed down the steps, splashing in icy water that was over her ankles. She was soaked through to her skin immediately, and she gasped at the iciness of the rain. Cord had leaned over to open the door of the Blazer for her, but when she let go of the newspaper with one hand to reach for the hand that he extended to her, the paper was promptly whisked away and the deluge struck her unprotected head. The Blazer sat so high on its huge wheels that she couldn't jump up in it, so she caught the edge of the seat in an effort to haul herself up. Cord cursed, the word drowned out by the pounding rain, and leaned over to catch her under the arms. He lifted her bodily inside, then leaned in front of her to slam the door shut.

"There're a couple of towels in the trash bag," he informed her curtly, sliding back under the steering wheel and putting the vehicle in gear.

She pulled one of the towels out and patted it over her bare arms and shoulders, then blotted her dripping hair. That was the best she could do, and she stared in dismay at the soaked seats and floorboards of the Blazer. "I'm sorry," she choked, realizing now that they should have remained at the cabin until the storm had passed.

Rain still glistened on the rock-hard planes of his face, and drops were caught like liquid diamonds in the black silk of his beard. He pulled the soggy cap from his head and dropped it on the seat between them. In silence she offered him the towel, and in silence he took it, rubbing it over his face and head with one hand as he eased down the driveway. The headlights caught the swirling, muddy waters of Jubilee Creek as they crossed the small bridge, and she was frightened at how high the water had risen in the short time it had been raining. Cord gave the water a grim look. "I hope I can get back."

He had to keep both hands on the wheel to hold the Blazer steady against the gusts of wind that pushed at it; one particularly strong gust pushed them so far to the side that the two left tires left the road and dug into the soft earth on the side. Cord wrestled them back onto the roughly paved secondary road, but they could proceed at nothing more than a crawl. The

headlights did no good against a blinding curtain of rain, and the windshield wipers, though going full speed, couldn't keep the windshield clear.
Making a sudden decision, he glanced at her and pulled the Blazer over onto the side of the road, then cut the ignition. As the engine died, the roar of the rain hitting the metal top sounded even louder. He'd turned off the headlights but left the dashlights on, and in the dim glow she turned frightened eyes on him.
"I can't see to drive," he explained. "We're going to have to wait until this blows over."
She nodded and clasped her hands tightly in her lap, staring out through the windshield. She couldn't see anything;
the darkness was absolute, the rain cutting them off from everything else, isolating them in the small sanctuary of the Blazer.
Seconds ticked past and became minutes; if anything, the rain fell harder. Cord turned on the radio, but the static was so bad that they couldn't make out what the announcer was saying, and he snapped it off again. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught her shivering, and he reached out to touch her chilled arm.
"You should have said something," he scolded, and started the motor, then flipped the heater switch to high.
The blast of warm air felt good on her feet and legs, and she slipped her icy feet out of her soggy shoes to stick her toes up close to the vent.
Silence thickened and grated on her nerves. "It's been a long time since I've seen it rain like this," she ventured, if only to break the quiet.
He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. She controlled a shiver.
“Why did you start letting your beard grow again?”
"Because I don't like to shave."
The curt sentence slapped at her, and she winced. So much for conversation. She hugged her arms around herself, for the first time thinking of the suit jacket she'd left in her car, as well as her purse. She'd been acting like a wild woman, so desperate to get away that she hadn't given a thought to anything else.
A metallic sound began to reach her ears, just barely detectable above the pounding of the rain. She sat up straighter and cast a puzzled glance in Cord's direction, to find that he was listening, too. "What is it?" "Sleet."
No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the sound of the sleet began to intensify. He turned off the motor, his eyes alert and wary.

"The thunder and lightning are farther away," Susan said hopefully, not admitting until that moment that she was a little frightened.
"Shhhh," he cautioned, his head turned slightly in a listening position. He reached out and caught her hand, his hard fingers wrapping securely around hers. Susan caught her breath and listened, too, becoming more uneasy as she realized what they were listening for. The sleet stopped, then abruptly the rain stopped, leaving behind a silence that was broken only by the dripping of water from the battered leaves of the trees.
It was the silence, the utter stillness, that was so unnerving. There was a tense, heavy waiting quality to the air, making it difficult to breathe, or perhaps she was simply too frightened to draw in a deep breath. She was clinging so hard to his hand that her nails were sinking into his flesh. "You can see to drive now," she said nervously.
He slid across the seat until he was pressed warmly against her, his body heat making a mockery of the soggy condition of his clothes. He put his arm around her shoulders in a comforting gesture and briefly pressed his lips to her temple. "We'll wait awhile," he told her mildly. "We won't be able to hear it coming if the motor is running."
Susan shivered and closed her eyes. "I know." Her every muscle was tight, her heart pumping faster. The quiet before the storm wasn't just a cliche, it was a reality. As a native of the warm southern climes where the heated Gulf bathed the region in warm moisture, triggering wild and magnificent storms whenever a cooler system from the west swept in to collide with that warm, damp blanket of air, Susan knew all too well the lethal power of the twisting tornadoes that were spawned out of the towering thunderheads. She knew all the signs, the warnings, and as a child had been drilled in school in the best way to survive a tornado. The Number One Rule: Don't get caught by one.
"If we think we hear something, get out of the truck as fast as you can," Cord instructed quietly. "There's a small ditch on the left of the road; it's probably full of water, but that's where we'll go anyway."
"Okay." Her voice was strained but calm, and she rolled down her window a little, making it easier to hear. Only the dripping of the water, splattering down on the undergrowth, reached her ears.
The first hailstone hit the windshield of the Blazer with such force that they both jumped, and Susan bit back a shriek. Cord uttered a short, sharp expletive, then anything else he might have said was drowned out as

golfball-size hail began to pound the Blazer, ripping the leaves of the trees to shreds, taking small saplings completely down. The din was incredible. Susan felt that they were on the inside of a giant drum, with some maniac beating wildly on it. She tore her hand from Cord's grip and pressed her palms over her ears.

Then it was gone, racing away, leaving the ground covered with shimmering balls of ice, a deep rumble following after it.

With a quick, hard motion Cord reached over her and shoved the door open, then used his body to force her outside. He grabbed her around the waist, keeping her from falling as her feet hit the ice and skidded out from under her. She was barefooted except for her stockings, and the ice was unbearably cold, bruising her soft feet, but she knew that she had better traction without her shoes anyway. High heels would have been more than useless, they would have been dangerous, unsafe for picking her way across a road covered with ice balls. Heedless of the pain, she ran, hearing the rumble come closer, feeling the earth begin to tremble beneath them.

They splashed into the ditch, the freezing water taking her breath. There was an eerie yellowish cast to the sky, an absurd lightening of the night sky, and she was able to see the taut lines of Cord's face. With one hand on her shoulder he forced her to lie down in the ditch, and the rushing stream of water splashed up in her face, filling her mouth with the taste of mud. She spat it out and looked up at him, her eyes burning. If she had to die, then thank God it was with him. Then he was covering her, pressing her down deeper into the foul water, putting his body between her and the fury of the storm that was thundering toward them.

Somehow, it didn't seem quite real. Inside she was terrified, but on the outside she was not only calm but oddly detached. She felt the wind buffeting their bodies, so fierce and strong that the tumbling water was blown out of the ditch to splash across the field in tandem with the gargantuan rain that had begun slashing down out of the abruptly inky sky. It had been raining hard before, but that was nothing to the way it rained then. The water that had been blown out of the ditch was instantly replaced by the downpour. Her skin was bruised and stinging in a thousand places as small stones and debris were hurled through the air, and she could hear nothing but the roar of the enormous, thundering monster as it tore across the earth. She clung to Cord, her slender arms wrapped about his head in an effort to give him as much protection as she could, and her desperate

strength was so great that he couldn't dislodge her arms to tuck her more securely under him.
A deep, bull-throated bellow of destruction assaulted her, and she screamed, a sound that went unheard in the greater scream of the storm. Cord's grip on her increased until she thought her ribs would snap under the force of it, and he pressed her harder, deeper into the ditch. She fought for breath, but couldn't drag any oxygen into her lungs, as the monster's suction pulled all the air away into its rotating, twisting maw. Her only thought was, I'm glad I'm with him.
She must have fainted, though she could never be sure. Certainly she was dazed by the storm, her senses scattered. One moment she was suffocating, feeling as if any moment the tornado would come down on them, and the next the world was strangely normal, even serene. It was still raining, but it was a normal rain, as if the violence of a moment before had belonged to another world. There was no lightning, no thunder, no hail... and no wind. Cord was still lying heavily on her, his chest heaving as he too sucked in much-needed oxygen, his arms outspread and his fingers sunk into the mud as if he would physically anchor them to the earth with his own body. They remained like that for several minutes, lying in the ditch with the rain slanting down on them, as they tried to assimilate the fact that they were not only alive, but relatively unscathed. Susan moved beneath him, turning her face into the hollow of his throat, and her fingers moved through his hair. He rolled off her and sat up, his arm behind her as he eased her into a sitting position. "Are you all right?" he demanded hoarsely.
"Yes," she said, and was surprised to find that her throat was sore, her voice so husky that she could barely form the word.
They stumbled to their feet, clinging together, and Susan heard Cord swear quietly as he peered through the darkness and the rain, searching for the Blazer. "I'll be damned," he muttered. "It's turned completely around, and pushed off the road on the other side."
Susan put her hand over her eyes to keep the rain out and was finally able to make out the black bulk of the Blazer, farther away now than it had been when they'd jumped out of it so long ago... or had it been only a few minutes ago? Cord must have eyes like an eagle, she realized, because she could tell only where the Blazer was, not what direction it was facing.
"It missed us," he said suddenly, with hoarse jubilation. "Look where it came across the road."

Following his pointing hand, she could make out a twisted, broken mass that was evidently an enormous tree, lying across the road. There was an odd, flashing illumination, so bright and blue white that it almost hurt the eyes to look at it. The falling trees had taken down the power lines with them, and now a live wire was lashing back and forth just above the ground, throwing sparks like a Fourth of July celebration. The tornado had dipped down to earth and exploded everything in its path, by passing them by no more than fifty yards.

Seeing her pick her way, limping, across the hailstones, Cord turned to her and swung her up against his chest. Susan felt as if she'd used her last reserves of strength, and she was just as glad to let him carry her; wearily, she let her head fall against his shoulder, and his arms tightened momentarily about her. He carried her to the Blazer, placing her inside it before walking around and vaulting into the seat behind the steering wheel. He turned the key in the ignition, and to her amazement the engine started immediately. He flashed her a quick grin. After the last hour it was a pleasure to have something going right. He changed gears, easing the Blazer along, the big tires churning in the mud until they gained the hail-slick surface of the road.

"We're going back to the cabin," he said, letting the truck move slowly to keep it from skidding on the ice. "I can't get you home until morning, when I can see how to pick my way around those trees and power lines that are down."

Susan didn't say anything, merely clung to the edge of the seat. She was certain the power would be off at the cabin, but he could build a fire, and the thought of being warm and dry again seemed like heaven. Her muscles were still tense, and she found she couldn't relax, her gaze fixed on the stabbing beams of the headlights as they probed through the gray curtain of rain.

They reached the crest of the gentle incline that led down to the creek, and Cord brought the Blazer to a halt. "I'm going down to check the bridge," he said, and left the truck before she could cry out that she wanted to go with him. Somehow, she didn't want him out of her sight for even a moment.

He came back in only a few minutes, his face harsh in the blinding glare of the headlights. He got back into the Blazer. "The water's over the bridge; we can't chance crossing it. We have to spend the night in the truck."

Chapter Eleven

Susan bit her lip, thinking of the fire that had been warming her in her imagination. She was silent as he shifted into reverse and turned the Blazer around, then drove a little farther back the way they'd come. Finally he pulled to the side of the road and parked.

She had been so frantic to get away from him, she thought dimly, but now she was glad that he was here, that he was all right. They had come so close to death… but what if only she had been spared? The thought of him lying dead from the brute force of the storm was unbearable.

Her shaking hand went to her dripping hair, and her fingers combed through it. The driving rain had evidently washed the mud out, but she found a few twigs that she pulled out and dropped to the floorboards. But what did it matter, anyway, if her hair was a mess? She began to laugh.

Cord's head jerked around at the sound, and he reached out to touch her shoulder. Susan covered her mouth with her hand, trying to stifle the unwilling mirth, but she couldn't. "Baby, it's all right," he murmured, sliding out from under the steering wheel and taking her in his arms. "It's over; you're all right."

The hard strength of him surrounded her, and Susan burrowed into it, her arms lacing around his waist. The strained laughter turned into choking, dry sobs, then slowly diminished as he continued to hold her, talking to her in a quiet, gentle voice, his hand stroking her head.

But her shaking didn't diminish, and finally his hand moved down over her bare shoulder and arms. "My God, you're freezing," he muttered, taking his arms from around her. He found the two towels that he'd brought when they'd dashed through the rain from the cabin to the Blazer, and wrapped one around her hair. "Get out of those wet clothes," he ordered, but in a voice so calm and matter-of-fact that she didn't balk. "There's a blanket in the back; I'll wrap you up in it." He turned the heater on high.

Susan looked at him, her eyes enormous. "You need to get out of your clothes, too; you're not impervious to cold, either."

The normal tone of her voice reassured him, and he flashed her a grin that shone against the darkness of his growing beard. "I'm warmer than you are, but I'll admit that wet jeans are damned uncomfortable." He peeled his T-

shirt off over his head and wrung the excess water out, then draped it over the steering wheel.
The sight of his bare, powerful torso agitated her, and she jerked her gaze away, beginning to unbutton the flimsy camisole top while he struggled to take off his boots in the limited space they had. Her cold fingers wouldn't cooperate, and she had managed to get out of only the camisole and the strapless bra she'd worn under it by the time Cord had completely stripped and was wiping himself down with the other towel.
When he'd finished, he came to her assistance, pushing her shaking hands aside. He dealt with her skirt, pantyhose and panties in short order; then he dried her vigorously, the rough fabric of the towel speeding her circulation and driving some of the chill away.
He reached in the back for the blanket, unfolding it and draping it across the seat. He sat in the middle of it, then scooped her up and placed her on his lap, and wrapped the rest of the blanket around both of them like a cocoon. Blessed warmth enveloped her, and Susan gave a blissful sigh, cuddling against his amazing body heat. She felt suddenly peaceful; they were completely alone and isolated from the world, at least until morning. They were naked together, rather like Adam and Eve, and for the moment she wanted nothing except that they be warm and dry. Everything else could wait until morning. For now she was in his arms, and the feel of him was heaven. The scent of his skin, of his warm masculinity, both soothed and aroused her, and she turned to press more fully into the hair-softened contours of his hard chest.
Cord held her, his hands on her satin curves, his face troubled. "I've never in my life been as scared as I was tonight," he admitted in a rumble, his words startling Susan.
She lifted her head from his shoulder, her eyes wide with astonishment. "You?" she demanded, her voice rising in disbelief. *"You* were afraid?" That didn't seem possible. He had nerves of ice, an imperviousness to danger that both alarmed and reassured her.
“I kept thinking: What if I couldn't hold on to you? What if something hit you? If anything had happened to you—“ He bit his words off, his face growing darker.
Susan was stunned. "But you were in danger, too."
He shrugged, utterly indifferent to his own fate. Perhaps that was how he faced all dangers, with complete unconcern, and perhaps that was why

death hadn't found him yet. He didn't fear it, and therefore it didn't seek him. But he had been afraid for her... Her mind stopped, almost afraid to take the thought any further. She simply pressed close to him once again, her hands clinging to his neck.

He rubbed his bristly cheek against her forehead, his hands tightening on her. "Susan."

She loved the sound of her name on his lips. With unconscious sensuality, she moved her breasts against him, the hair on his chest feeling like rough silk against her sensitive nipples. "Ummm?" she murmured bemusedly.

"I want to make love to you. Will you let me?"

The thought, the rough thread of need in his voice, made her shiver in delight. She lifted her mouth to him, simply and without reserve, and he took it with a tender fervor. He kissed her for a long time, their tongues meeting in mutual need, while his hard fingers found her breasts and stroked them until they hardened and thrust out for his touch.

He lifted his head and gave a low, shaky laugh. "Is that a yes?"

"That's a yes." Despite the weeks they'd been apart, the anger between them, she wasn't shy with him. She was his, in the purest sense, and always in his touch she had perceived his genuine pleasure, the care and concern he gave her. His passion might border on roughness in his urgency, but he never hurt her, and she knew that he never would. Her trust in his physical care of her was so great that despite the rift between them, she knew that she had nothing to fear from him. And for this moment, there was no rift, no pain or disagreement; all of that had retreated, and would arrive with the sunrise, but for now there was only the sweet fever between them.

She could have fought him, could have insisted that he preserve the distance between them, but in the aftermath of the storm, none of their reasons for argument seemed very important. She loved him; she didn't want to fight him. After what they'd just been through, she wanted only to hold him and feel his hard, warm flesh against her, reassure herself that he was unharmed. He was so infinitely precious to her that she didn't want to waste a moment of this time they had together by holding him off. She'd worried herself sick about their situation anyway, and it hadn't changed anything. Let the sunrise bring its troubles; she had the nighttime, and for now that was enough.

He was slow, and exquisitely gentle, using his kisses and the boldness of his stroking fingers to bring her to fever pitch before he stretched her out on the seat, his hard hands controlling her even when she reached for him, trying

to pull him down to her. Susan writhed in blind delight, small cries escaping from her throat, her eyes tightly closed as her head rolled slowly back and forth. He was suckling leisurely at her breasts, his tongue curling around each of her aching nipples in turn, a caress that sent bolts of ecstasy shooting through her body. She was no longer cold, but burning with a radiant glow, her body arching up to his.

Deftly he moved her, rearranging her legs, and his mouth left her breasts to trail down her stomach, his beard softly rasping her satin flesh and making her gasp at the rough pleasure. His tongue found her navel and he kissed her, paying homage to her for a long, sweet moment before moving on to a richer treasure.

A startled cry tore from her when he claimed her with his mouth, kissing her deeply, making lightning forays with his tongue that pushed her toward the edge so swiftly she couldn't breathe. Then she forgot about breathing as her fingers tangled in his damp hair; he was killing her with pleasure, stabbing her to death with his devilish tongue, and she rushed to meet her small death. He held her securely until she was calm again, lying peacefully in his arms; it was several moments before she realized he was doing nothing but holding her.

"Cord?" His name was an expression of bewilderment. "What about you?"

"I'm all right." Very gently, he tilted her face up and kissed her. "It's just that I'm unprepared; I don't have any way to protect you."

His unselfish consideration jolted her, but the ecstasy he'd just given her wasn't enough. She didn't want just simple release; she wanted him, with all his delicious masculinity, his driving power, the very essence of the man. She reached out for him, her soft hands touching his face. "I want *you,"* she said in a low voice. "Would you mind, very much, if we took the chance?"

A shudder rippled through him, and he moved swiftly to lie over her, parting her thighs and taking her, a groan of pleasure breaking from his lips. He held nothing back from her, his urgency communicating itself to her. He was shaking in a way she'd never seen before, and she tried to soothe him with her yielding softness. All too soon he was hoarsely crying out his satisfaction; then he sagged against her to rest

After only a moment they were both shifting uncomfortably. During the heat of their lovemaking, neither had noticed their awkward positions or cramped limbs, but now they seemed to be fighting a tangle of gearshift, steering wheel, and door handles, all of which were in uncomfortable

places. Cord chuckled as he tried to untangle himself from her and still manage not to maim himself.
"I think we'll be more comfortable in back; God only knows why we didn't get in back anyway."
With the back seat folded down they had considerable space, though still not enough for Cord to stretch out his long legs. He'd cut the motor, so they had to depend on the one blanket and each other for warmth, but now that Susan was dry she didn't feel the chill so much. They lay on half of the blanket, and he pulled the other half around them. Susan nestled in his arms, quietly happy. "I'm so tired," she murmured, then smothered a yawn. She didn't want to sleep, didn't want to waste any of the time they had together, but her body was demanding rest. The stress of the past weeks, the emotional tension and fear she'd experienced today, had all taken their toll. Her limbs felt as heavy as lead, and her eyelids simply would not stay open. She yawned again, her eyes slowly closing. She put her hand on his chest, where she could feel the strong, steady beating of his heart. He was so big and tough; she felt infinitely safe and protected when she was with him. "I do love you," she told him quietly, not needing anything now beyond the telling of it. She'd just wanted to say the words aloud this once, when there was peace between them. It was a gift, a simple gesture from her heart.
"I know," he whispered against her temple, and held her while she slept.
He hadn't expected to sleep at all; his senses were too raw. He had been sure that he would feel the restlessness that always seized him if there were anyone else about while he slept. But the rain kept drumming on the roof of the Blazer, and the darkness enclosed them like a cave; he was warm and dry, and his body pleasantly satisfied. She was soft in his arms, small and delicate, so completely feminine that from the moment he'd met her he'd found himself tempering his strength lest he accidentally hurt her. This afternoon, when she'd been crying and beating on her steering wheel, he'd felt as if he'd taken a punch in the chest; she simply wasn't the weepy type, yet he'd hurt her enough to make her cry, and he hadn't meant to. He'd been infuriated to hear that Preston had run off and left her to shoulder everything, that instead of Preston knuckling under and sacrificing, it had been Susan. He had to end this, as soon as he could, for Susan's sake. She was at the end of her rope, physically and emotionally.
She loved him. Once a woman's offering of love would have made him impatient, restless to be gone. He couldn't offer anything in return, and he

hadn't wanted the complications of clinging hands, teary scenes, or the incredible plots of revenge some women could concoct when they felt they'd been wronged. Judith's death had scarred him deeply, left him so wary of being wounded like that again that he'd instinctively protected himself... until Susan. She'd gotten in under his guard, and because she didn't demand anything of him, he found himself giving more.

Still, he hadn't realized, until she'd practically ordered him out of her house and out of her life, just how close she'd gotten to him. He'd felt lonely, and he was a man who treasured his solitude. His healthy body had burned for sexual release, but other women seemed unattractive in subtle ways he'd never noticed before. He didn't want other women; he wanted Susan, with her serenity like a halo around her. Susan, who became a sweet, loving wanton for him, only for him.

Now she was in his arms again, pressed against his heart, just where she belonged. He moved drowsily, seeking a more comfortable position, and she moved with him, her soft hands holding him even in her sleep. It was the most uniquely satisfying experience of his life, and a slight smile touched his hard mouth as he went to sleep.

As often happens after a storm, the next day dawned sunny and warm, but without the suffocating humidity that had been weighing down on everyone. It was as if nature were pleased by the destruction it had wrought. Cord's eyes blinked open, and for a moment he stared at the expanse of innocent, deep blue sky. The interior of the Blazer had already heated under the morning sun, and a trickle of sweat ran down his side, tickling him. He twitched, and Susan stirred, stretching. He rolled to his side and watched as she slowly came awake, her eyelashes fluttering. The blanket fell away, revealing her slender bare body, her full, pretty breasts and succulent nipples. His loins tightened, and he put his hand on her hip. "Honey, we have to leave soon," he said huskily. "Before we go...?"

Susan heard the question, the intent in his voice, and she turned to him. "Yes," she said drowsily, reaching out for him.

He took her gently, slowly, holding the world at bay while they loved each other. When it was done he leaned over her, his weight supported on one elbow, his eyes very clear and demanding. "Stay with me. Don't go back to the office. I'll take care of you, in every way."

Tears blurred her eyes, but still Susan managed a smile for him. As the salty liquid seeped from the corners of her eyes, she said shakily, "I have to go

back; I can't just turn my back and walk away from everyone who's depending on me."
"What about me? How can you turn your back on me?" His words hit her hard, and she flinched.
"I love you, but you don't *need* me. You want me, but that's entirely different. Besides, I don't think I have what it takes to be a mistress." She reached up and stroked his bearded cheek, her mouth trembling. "Please, take me home now."
Silently they dressed in their damp, incredibly wrinkled clothing, and Cord began the torturous drive, detouring time and again as their way was blocked by fallen trees or downed power lines. They passed utility crews who were hard at work, trying to get new lines up, and in some cases new poles. The sounds of chain saws split the peaceful morning air as men began cleaning up the debris. What was normally a fifteen-minute drive took well over an hour, but finally Susan was tumbling out the Blazer's door into Emily's arms. The older woman's worn face was tight with concern.
"My lands, just look at the two of you," she breathed, and tears sparkled in her eyes.
Cord managed his devilishly casual smile. "I think we look pretty good for two people who've been lying in a ditch." Actually, every muscle in his body was protesting, not only from sleeping on a hard, cramped surface, but from the beating he'd taken from the hailstones. For the first time he saw a bruise high on Susan's cheekbone, and he reached out to touch it with his thumb. She stood very still under his touch, her eyes filled with pain and longing.
Emily wiped her tears away, and hustled them both inside, bullying them shamelessly now that she knew they were safe.
"Both of you get upstairs right now and take a hot shower, and toss those filthy clothes out so I can wash them—"
"I'll be leaving in a minute," Cord interrupted her. "I've got to see if I can get to the cabin and check for damage. But if you have any coffee brewed, I'd appreciate some."
She brought him a cup and he sipped it gratefully, the hot liquid sending new life into his body. Susan stood watching him, her arms limp at her sides, wanting to do as he said and go with him, forget about everything. Without knowing that she had moved, she found herself in front of him, and without a word he set the cup aside and folded her tightly in his arms. He

kissed her roughly, almost desperately, as if he would imprint his possession on her mouth, and as Susan clung to him she felt the acid tears burning down her cheeks.
"Shhhh, shhhh," he soothed, lifting his lips at the salty taste. With his fingertips, he wiped her cheeks dry; then he framed her face between his big hands and held it turned up so he could see into her drowning eyes. "Everything will be all right. I promise."
She couldn't say anything, so he kissed her again, then released her. He gave Emily a swift hug and left, not once looking back.
Susan jammed her fist against her mouth, trying to hold back the sobs that shook her, but they burst out anyway. Emily led her upstairs and helped her undress, then took away her soiled clothing and laid out fresh garments while Susan stood under the shower and cried.
She knew there were a thousand things that needed doing, but she couldn't summon any interest in any of them. She wanted only to curl up on her bed and cry until she couldn't cry any more. It was all just too much; she couldn't fight any longer. It was a measure of her willpower that she had controlled her tears by the time she left the bathroom; she sat down and dried her hair, then applied a careful blend of makeup to hide the traces of her tears. After dressing in the casual slacks and shirt that Emily had put out for her, she went downstairs for the meal that she knew Emily would have ready. She wasn't hungry, but eating was a necessity that she'd been neglecting lately, all to no good. She wouldn't be able to keep the corporation from bankruptcy, even if she divested herself of everything she owned except her clothing, then held a yard sale to get rid of even that.
She sat on the patio all day, soaking up the sun, dozing, thinking, but her thoughts only went in circles and produced nothing. She called Imogene and explained why she wouldn't be at the office that day; she had no idea when Cord would be able to get the Audi back to her, but she found that it was the one bright spot she could see right now: She would be able to see him again when he did bring it to her.
She was probably a fool not to have taken him up on his proposition, she thought tiredly. She should just forget about tomorrow, about all the duties and obligations that she'd always served; she should go with Cord and take what love she could get from him. He cared; she knew he did. Perhaps he didn't love her, but she knew that he'd offered her more than he'd ever offered any other woman, except Judith. Poor, hurt, confused Judith, who

was now the point of all this enmity years after her death. Because everyone had failed her, because she'd died. Cord was trying to make it up to her now, to get revenge for her, and for himself, perhaps, so he could be at peace. She'd told him that she didn't have what it took to be a mistress, but what did it take, really, except a woman in love? She thought longingly of spending every night with him, of traveling around the world beside him. She'd always been a woman who was happy with her hearth and home, but for Cord she would learn to wander, and lay her head on a different pillow every night if that was what he wanted.

It was only a matter of time, anyway, before the life she knew was all over. She had failed; she couldn't pay the loan.

When Cord still hadn't brought her car back by the next morning, Susan called and asked Imogene to pick her up; there was nothing more she could do, but she would continue to handle the office and make the myriad decisions that still had to be made every day. The ship might sink, but she wouldn't make a confused mess of it. Dignity and grace in defeat, that was the ticket.

Giving herself pep talks didn't help much. She was agonizingly aware that she'd lost on both sides. She'd tried to heal the rift in the family, but instead it had grown deeper. Cord might want her, care for her, but how could he ever trust her? He'd asked her to stay with him, but instead she'd given her aid to Preston. Knowing that Cord was wrong didn't ease the hollow ache inside her.

She had to face everyone at the office, where they had all somehow heard that she'd almost been caught in a tornado. Several tornadoes had ripped through Mississippi that night, and one close to Jackson had hit a residential area, leaving two people dead, but her acquaintances and employees were only interested in the local one, which had missed all the populated areas and destroyed only trees and newly planted crops. She managed to be very casual about it, and her lack of detail soon killed their interest.

When she went home that night she found the Audi there, and disappointment speared her. Why couldn't he have brought it when he knew she would be home? But perhaps he was avoiding her. She stared at the car for a long moment before thanking Imogene for the ride.

Imogene reached over and patted her hand. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked. "Anything I can say to Cord? I know you're not happy, and I feel like it's all my fault."

"No, it's not your fault," Susan denied, managing a smile. "I made my own decisions, so I imagine I'll have to live with them."
Emily was still waiting, and she made a pretense of cleaning up the kitchen while Susan ate, but Susan had a feeling that she had caught on to Susan's habit of disposing of the food instead of eating it. As she dutifully ate the last bite, Emily nodded in satisfaction. "Cord told me to make certain you were eating. You're too thin. This business is tearing you apart, and I'm ready for it to end."
"It won't be long," Susan sighed. She hated herself for asking, but she had to know. "Did he say anything else?"
"He said he lost one of his trees, but it fell away from the cabin, and there's hail damage to the roof, but other than that everything came through the storm okay."
"That's good." It wasn't personal news, but it was better than nothing. She refrained from asking if he'd looked tired.
Emily had just left when Imogene phoned. "Susan, can you come over?" she asked, urgency filling her voice. "Preston's back, and he's found out something about Cord!"
"I'll be right there." Susan dropped the phone and ran to get her purse. Something about Cord? Her heart clenched. Had he done something illegal? Whatever it was, if there were any way, she'd protect him. No, it couldn't be anything illegal; he was far too visible, and he made no attempt to disguise his identity. It was far more likely that he'd crossed some powerful people. Preston might plan on using his knowledge against Cord, but she'd make certain that Cord knew all about his plans.
As she drove over to Blackstone House she was hardly aware of the turns she took, or the speed at which she traveled. Her heart was slamming wildly in her chest, hurting her ribs. She'd been longing for Preston to come back, but now that he had she could only fear that he'd try to hurt Cord in some way.
Preston looked surprisingly normal when he opened the door to her as she ran up the steps. He was casually attired; his tan was deeper, and he looked relaxed. He was startled when he saw her. "Good Lord, Susan, you've lost a good ten pounds. What've you been doing?"
She brushed his comment aside. "It doesn't matter. What have you found out about Cord?"

He ushered her into the den, where Imogene was waiting, and waited until she was seated before speaking. "I've been doing some detective work while I was gone," he explained. "I wanted Cord to think that I'd chickened out so he wouldn't make any attempt to cover his tracks. It worked, thank God. He must've thought he'd won without a real battle."
"I doubt that," Susan interrupted. "He didn't know until the day before yesterday that you'd gone."
He frowned. "But why? Didn't you tell him?"
Susan's eyes widened, and she sat up straight. "That's what you wanted me to do, wasn't it? You dumped all of that on me, thinking I'd run straight to him and beg for mercy. He said that was what you were doing, but I didn't believe him." She stared at him, her eyes clear and accusing, and he shifted uncomfortably.
"What else could I think?" he tried to explain gently. "Are you saying that I completely misread the situation?"
"I don't know; I haven't any idea how you read it."
He turned away from her distinctly chilly gaze. "Anyway, I went to New York. I'd noticed that the prices of our stock had remained high despite the rumors that had to be going around, so it followed that someone was buying. I suspected then, but I wanted to be certain. Cord has been buying up all the stock that came on the market. He's not pushing the company into bankruptcy; he's been pushing us into selling stock, which he's been buying. He's mounting a takeover!"
A takeover! For a moment Susan was dazed; then a spurt of admiration for Cord's nerve made her laugh. "A take-over!" she giggled, clapping her hands. "All of this for a takeover!"
"I don't see that it's so funny."
"Of course you don't! After all, *I'm* the one who's been selling stock in an effort to raise money to pay off that loan!"
Imogene went white. "Susan! Your own assets!"
Preston stared at her; then he swore quietly, and rubbed his eyes in a disbelieving manner. "Susan, we talked about that. I told you not to liquidate anything of yours."
"You also walked off and left me in a sink-or-swim situation," she pointed out. "I thought I had a company going under; I didn't know it was just corporate games! The stock isn't all that I've liquidated!"

He looked ill. "My God, you've done all that... and he had no intention of calling in that loan. He just wanted us to panic and sell enough to give him a majority. Susan, how much did you sell?"
"Nine percent."
"That still leaves you six percent. I have eleven percent, and Mother has eleven. Twenty-eight percent total. Cord has, I think, twenty-six percent. We still have a majority."
"If his takeover doesn't succeed, he may still collect on that loan," Imogene pointed out, but Preston shook his head decisively.
"No, that would be killing his own source of income. It didn't make sense from the beginning that he'd hurt himself financially just to get back at me, but I thought that maybe he did hate me that much. Then when the stock sold immediately whenever any shares went on the market, I began to think that it was something else entirely he was after."
"Why didn't you tell me?" Susan inquired. "Never mind; I know the answer to that. You didn't trust me because I was seeing Cord, and Cord didn't trust me because I was helping you."
"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I had no idea it would be this hard on you. I swear, I'll replace everything you sold."
She dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "It doesn't matter." She just wanted it over with.
Preston decided not to pursue the issue, because she was looking tired and dazed. "I drove out to see Cord as soon as I got in this afternoon," he continued. "I called a board meeting for ten in the morning, and this will be put to a vote. He'll have to take his chances on snapping up any more stock before we get to it, so he knows his game is up."
It had all been just a game. That was all she could think of that night. Just a game.
She didn't know how all of the shares had been originally divided; when she'd married Vance, she'd known only that the family had owned fifty-one percent of the stock, and the rest of it was in others' hands. Others owned chunks of shares, but with the majority in family hands it hadn't mattered. Imogene had owned fifteen percent, Preston fifteen percent, and Vance fifteen percent. Susan had inherited Vance's shares. That had left six percent of the family majority, which she had always assumed was scattered around to distant cousins. She hadn't known of Cord's existence until the day he'd

come back; he'd been gone for so long that no one talked about him. But now it was evident that he'd owned the remaining shares.
Preston and Imogene had both sold four percent of their stock in order to cover what they'd used of Cord's money; that gave Cord fourteen percent, assuming that he'd bough it, which he must have done. She'd sold nine percent, giving him twenty-three percent. If he had twenty-six percent, he'd bought some common stock as well, and possibly had acquired voting proxies from other stockholders. Preston also had voting proxies. It was all just a game of numbers, nothing else. If anything, the corporation was stronger, since Cord had essentially paid off an outstanding debt. The family now owned fifty-four percent of the stock. Everything was just fine.
Now Cord's reassurances made sense. He'd known that the company was in no danger of bankruptcy, but he hadn't trusted her enough to tell her what was going on, just as Preston hadn't trusted her enough to tell her his suspicions. She'd tried to be a mediator, and instead had become the sacrificial goat.
She was glad that the morning would bring the end of it. She was tired of games. They seemed to be fine for everyone except the goat.

Chapter Twelve

Of the five people in the boardroom the next morning, Cord looked the most relaxed. He was dressed impeccably in a summer-weight pin-stripe suit, the cut of which had a definite European flair. His growing beard gave him a raffish look that kept the suit from being *too* impeccable, but then his rampant masculinity allowed him to wear anything with elan... or wear nothing at all, her imagination whispered, conjuring up a vision of how magnificent he was in the nude.

Imogene was calm, almost remote. Preston was all business. Beryl looked as calm as ever. On the other hand, Susan felt disoriented and none of the familiar boardroom rituals or words made any sense. She darted another glance at Cord, only to find him watching her, and he gave her a slow wink. Was he that unconcerned about the outcome? Was that elaborate scheme nothing more to him than another way of irritating Preston? If so, his practical joke had been enormously successful.

She was so detached that she missed what they were saying. It wasn't until she caught a surge of anger that she was able to gather her senses and pay attention.

"This is my birthright," Cord was saying, his tone hard and his eyes cold. "It took me years to realize that, but I'm not giving it up. I decided to fight for it, and there won't be any compromising."

"That's your loss," Preston said crisply. "Shall we put it to the vote?"

"By all means."

Cord sat there, so confident, but then it wasn't in him to be any other way. He had to know that he hadn't enough to best their combined shares, but that knowledge couldn't be read in his face.

He'd been shoved out of the family circle. What was in his mind now, when victory danced before him? Thoughts of revenge? Or just a determination to be in that family once again, wanted or not? To assume responsibility for what was his, to finally settle in his home?

"I vote yes," Cord drawled easily, and Susan jerked her thoughts back. Imogene sat quietly, not looking at either Preston or Cord, but how else could she vote? She wouldn't vote against her own son. "I vote nay," she finally said.

"I vote nay," Preston followed promptly. "Susan?"

He was sure of her, Susan realized. She looked at him, and found him watching her impatiently, the gleam of victory already in his eyes. What a shark he was! He was a perfect chairman, conscientious and bold, and able to use guerrilla tactics when they were called for.

There was nothing for her to read in Cord's eyes. He simply waited. He hadn't contacted her, hadn't tried to persuade her to vote in his favor. Why should he? She'd come down solidly on Preston's side in every skirmish. No wonder he didn't trust her! He would be a good chairman, too; he'd shown his expertise in gathering enough money to mount this campaign.

"Susan!" Preston prodded impatiently.

Trust has to start somewhere, she thought painfully. Cord was so used to guarding his back that it was second nature to him now. "I vote yes," she said in a low tone, and total silence descended on the room, except for the quick rasp of Beryl's pencil across the pad as she recorded everything.

Preston looked to be in shock; he was pale, his mouth compressed to a thin line that was bracketed on each side by grooves of tension. The meeting was quickly adjourned, but only Beryl left the room. Everyone else remained in their seats; perhaps even Cord was stunned by the turn of events. Susan's motives were too murky for her to explain them even to herself, but she was aware, deep inside, of a feeling that she simply couldn't fail him now. If he had lost, he wouldn't have returned to being an absentee board member, his shares automatically voted by Preston; Cord entered a fight to win. He would have gone on and on, and the conflict would have continued to tear the family apart and drain the company. Let it end, even if she made herself an outcast with Preston and Imogene. Why not? She was tired, too tired to really care, and she was doubly bitter at being played with so callously by both Cord and Preston. She'd just been a pawn in their games, moved around according to their whims, and kept in the dark by both of them.

Imogene leaned forward, clasping her hands on the table. "Let it end," she said quietly, looking from her son to Cord and back. "We were a family once; I'd like us to be one again. I was wrong for my part in it, and if you can possibly forgive me. Cord, I'll be very grateful." The steel that was an inherent part of her personality shone clearly out of her gray eyes, and in that moment Susan knew that she'd never liked or respected her mother-in-law more.

Without waiting for an answer from Cord, Imogene turned her determined regard to Preston. "I know this will be difficult for you; you've been an outstanding chairman, and it won't be easy for you to turn over the reins. But I'm asking you to do it without bitterness, and to do whatever you can to ease the transition. Cord is family; he's as much a Blackstone as you are. I hope you're big enough to let this end now, before it totally destroys us. People have already been hurt, and others will be if this continues. Susan was the only one of us with enough sense to realize that from the beginning. If you won't stop it for yourself, then stop it for me... and for her. God knows she's paid enough for your enmity."

Susan flinched, hating to have her feelings dragged out in the open like this. She sat very still and pale, her eyes focused on her hands. Now it was up to them to either settle their differences or draw new battle lines. Either way, she'd withdrawn from combat, retreated to lick her wounds. She was simply too tired to care any longer.

Preston sat with an abstracted frown on his brow, his gaze turned inward to long ago, when he'd first become enemies with his cousin. "I always envied you," he said absently, reviewing his memories. “Everything always came so easily to you. Vance was a hard act to follow, but with you... My God, when you were around, I became invisible. Everyone watched you.”

Cord stared across the length of the table at his cousin, his dark face hard and expressionless. What he thought of Preston's admission was impossible to guess.

Giving an unbelieving little shake of his head, as if he couldn't quite take in how far their enmity had taken them, Preston straightened his shoulders and looked at Cord directly. "When I was sixteen I started dating Kelly Hartland, and I fell hard for her. You were just starting your sophomore year in college, and I suppose to a high school girl that was irresistible. You came home for a weekend, met Kelly at a party, and just like that she dropped me flat."

A startled look flared in Cord's eyes. "Kelly Hartland? A little strawberry blond cheerleader type? I can barely remember her. I dated her a couple of times, but it was nothing heavy."

“It was for me. I hated you for taking her away from me when you obviously didn't care about her. At sixteen I thought she was the love of my life. When your affair with Judith blew up in your face, I saw a way to get back at you, and I took it. I'm not proud of it, but there's no way to undo it."

Cord inhaled deeply, and even without looking at him Susan knew that the mention of Judith was lashing at him, uncovering the deep pain and guilt he felt at the way she'd been treated. Yet the bonds of common blood, weakened by years of bitterness and hatred, were reaching out again, and the two men looked at each other, seeing their common heritage in each other's face. The serrated edge of pain rasped in Cord's voice when he spoke. "Judith was my wife. We were married after we left here; she died the next year. I could've killed you for what you did to her." A crystalline sheen was suddenly in his eyes. "I'm guiltier than anyone else for what happened to her." Even now, he was bitterly angry at the way she'd died, her spirit gone, her laughter stilled.

Silence fell, and suddenly Susan couldn't bear any more. Without looking at anyone, she pushed her chair back and got to her feet, walking out swiftly before she could be called back. Her chest was aching, yet she didn't think she could cry. The time for that was past.

Her senses were dulled as she went to her office, walking past Beryl who looked up eagerly, full of questions, but Susan didn't see her. She felt chilled to the bone, so cold that she could never be warm again.

All of this had been because of women who had long ago faded into the mists of the past. There was a certain irony in her own situation; did either of them want her for herself, or merely because each thought the other wanted her?

She had barely moved away from the door after closing it when it was thrust open again, and Cord loomed behind her, so close that she felt oppressed by his size, and she moved instinctively away from him. At her action, his eyes narrowed, and he closed the door behind him.

"Why did you leave the meeting?" he asked evenly.

"I'm going home." Her legs felt wooden as she walked to her desk and retrieved her purse, tucking it under her arm. She avoided his gaze and moved to the side to step around him.

He took one stride and stood in front of her, blocking the door. "I need you here, Susan. You know it won't be easy, making the transition. Up until now only the family has been involved, but now everyone else will have to be informed and dealt with. I need your help. You can do more with a look than most people can manage with a baseball bat."

"If I hadn't thought you could handle it, I wouldn't have voted for you," she said tiredly. "Please, let me by."

"Why did you vote for me? Everyone else was as surprised as I was." He put his hand on her bare arm, the warmth of his fingers searing her, seeking a response, some sign of the quiet radiance he associated with her.
Susan couldn't give him one. She simply stared woodenly at the light gray fabric of his suit. "I'm tired; I want to go home," she repeated.
He looked at her pale, tense face, seeing the shadows around her eyes, and though all of his instincts screamed against letting her slip away now, it was obvious that she was almost at the breaking point. "I'll drive you home."
"No." Her reply was immediate, and firm.
He bit back a curse. "All right, if you don't want me to drive you home, I'm sure Imogene will—"
"I drove myself here; I can drive myself home. I'm not going to tangle with any power poles."
Forcing himself to compliance, he said, "All right. I'll come by tonight—"
"No," she interrupted, looking at him now, pain and betrayal plain for him to read in her eyes. "Not tonight."
It was a hard battle that he fought with himself, evident in the grim set of his jaw, the drumming of the pulse in his temple. "We have to talk."
"I know. Maybe later; I don't think I can handle it right now."
"When?"
She managed a shrug, but her lips were trembling. "I don't know. Maybe six or seven years."
"Hell!" he roared, his control shattered.
"I'm sorry, but that's the way I feel! Please, just leave me alone! I don't have anything else you want, anyway; you've already got my stock and my vote."
She pushed past him, ducking her head to keep from looking at him. She just watched her feet, mentally commanding them to function. She left the building, and the hot Mississippi sun burned down on her, blinding her momentarily with its brilliance. She blinked and fumbled in her purse for her sunglasses, finally extracting them and sliding them on her nose. The sun felt good on her chilled skin, she noticed dimly. She would go home and sit on the patio in the sun, and sleep if she could. That was the most ambitious plan she could make at the moment, with her mind so dulled by pain.
She drove home slowly, carefully. Emily, bless her, didn't ask any unnecessary questions. Moving like an automaton, Susan shed her dress and slip, and peeled the hot pantyhose away from her legs. The freedom

afforded her by an old pair of shorts that she usually wore only while gardening, and a plain white sleeveless blouse with the tails tied in a knot at her midriff, made her breathe easier for the first time in days. It was over. She had lost more than anyone else, but she could rest now.
She pulled a chaise longue out into the full strength of the sun and lay down, letting the heat begin the healing process in her exhausted body. Her eyelids each weighed a thousand pounds; she was unable to keep them up, and after a moment she stopped trying. She dozed in the sun, her mind blank.
Emily woke her once with an offering of iced tea, which Susan accepted gratefully. The chill was gone now, and she felt pleasantly hot, her skin damp with perspiration. She drank the tea, then turned over on her stomach and slept again. During the worst of the heat Emily came out and pulled the big patio umbrella into position to shield Susan, then went back in to finish the chores Cord had set for her.
Susan awoke late in the afternoon and wandered in to eat the light salad and stuffed tomato that Emily had prepared. Her eyes were still heavy, and she yawned in spite of everything she could do to prevent it.
"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm still so tired."
Emily patted her arm. "Why don't you go watch the evening news? Just put your feet up and relax."
"That's exactly what I've been doing for hours, Susan sighed, but it was still an outstanding idea.
It was inevitable that she'd go to sleep in front of the television. Her last memory was of a stalled low-pressure system on the weather map.
She was stiff when she woke, and she stretched leisurely, trying to ease the kinks out of her back and legs. Her lashes fluttered open, and she stared straight into Cord's eyes.
With renewed energy she sat up abruptly. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, her eyes wide, the haunted look creeping back into them.
"Waiting for you to wake up," he returned calmly. "I didn't want to startle you. Now I'm going to do exactly what I wanted to do the first time I saw you."
She pressed herself back into the comer of the couch, watching him warily as he approached and leaned over her. "What was that?"
"Throw you over my shoulder and carry you off." He gripped one of her wrists, gave a gentle tug, and to her astonishment she found herself being

hoisted over his shoulder. He settled her comfortably, one arm locked around her legs to hold her steady, while he patted her bottom with the other hand.
Dizzily she grabbed at his belt loops to anchor herself. "Put me down!" she gasped; then, as he moved deliberately around the room, switching off the television, turning off the lights, she said, "What are you doing?"
"You'll see."
It wasn't until he carried her outside into the warm, fragrant night air that she began to struggle, kicking futilely against the band of his arm. "Let me down! Where are you taking me?"
"Away," he answered simply, his boots crunching on the gravel of the drive.
In an effort to see Susan braced her arms on his back and raised herself, looking over her shoulder. His Blazer was sitting there, and he opened the door, then very gently lifted her off his shoulder and placed her on the seat.
"Emily packed your clothes," he informed her, leaning in to kiss her sweetly astonished mouth. "I've already put them in the Blazer. Everything's taken care of, and all you have to do is ride. I still have that blanket in the back, if you'd rather sleep," he finished huskily, his tone telling her how clearly he remembered the last time he had used it.
Susan sat in dazed astonishment as he shut the door and walked around to the driver's side. He was really kidnapping her, with Emily's cheerful aid! She supposed she should feel more indignant, but she still felt slow and drowsy, and it just didn't seem worth the effort to protest.
When he slid under the steering wheel, she asked quietly, "How did you know I wouldn't try to run while you went around to get in?"
"Two reasons." He started the motor and shifted into reverse, turning to look over his shoulder as they backed up. "One, you're too smart to waste what little energy you have in a useless effort." He braked, then changed to first gear and smoothly let out the clutch, his powerful legs working. "Two, you love me."
His logic was ironclad. She did love him, even though she was still trying to deal with the hurt he'd inflicted. She supposed that she could best describe her feelings as those of being ill-used, shuffled about with little regard in the high-stakes game he and Preston had been playing.
Cord slanted her a searching look. "No fervent denials?"
"No. I'm not a liar."

The simple dignity of her statement, coupled with her listlessness, shook him to the core. She loved, but without hope. He felt as if a flame that had been given into his care was flickering on the brink of extinction, and it would take tender nurturing to bring it back to full strength. His first thought, when she'd left the office earlier in the day, had been to give her time, let her rest and recover her strength, but as the day wore on he'd been seized by an urgent need to do *something*, to bring her back into the circle of his arms where she belonged. His arrangements had been hurriedly made, as he swept all obstacles and protests out of his path.

He'd thought she would sleep, but she sat very still and erect in the seat, her eyes on the highway. When he'd gone past every destination that she'd guessed, she finally asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"To the beach," he answered promptly. "You're going to do nothing but eat, sleep, and lie in the sun until you gain back the weight you've lost and lose those smudges under your eyes."

Susan pondered his answer for a moment, since they were evidently not going to the stretches of beach that she was familiar with. She sighed. "What beach?"

He laughed aloud, a rare sound. "I'll narrow it down to Florida for you. Does that help?"

She did sleep, finally, before they reached their destination. In the early hours of the morning Cord pulled the Blazer up to a darkened beach house and put his hand on her shoulder to gently shake her awake.

The house was right on the beach, and the luminescent Gulf stretched out before her as far as she could see. The white sand of the Florida panhandle looked like snow in the faint starlight. When she climbed from the Blazer, the constant wind off the Gulf lifted her hair, bringing with it the scent of the ocean mingled with the fresher scent of rain.

It was a basic Florida beach house, built of whitewashed cement blocks, with large windows and low ceilings. Following Cord as he moved through the house turning on the lights, she saw a small, cheerful kitchen in yellow and white, a glass table in an alcove, with a ceiling fan above it, and a living room with white wicker furniture; then Cord led her to a small white-painted bedroom. He brought in the single suitcase Emily had packed for her and placed it at the foot of the bed.

"Your bathroom is through there," he said, indicating a door opening off the bedroom. “I’ll be in the room straight across the hall, if you need me for

anything."
Of all the things she had considered since he'd put her in the Blazer, that she would be going to bed alone wasn't one of them, yet that was exactly what happened. He kissed her on the forehead and walked out, closing the door behind him, and she stood in the middle of the room, blinking her eyes in astonishment.
But the bed beckoned her, and she took a swift shower, then crawled naked between the sheets, too tired to see if Emily had packed a nightgown for her.
Over breakfast the next morning, a meal that he cooked before awakening her, she commented, "You know, this isn't very wise behavior for a man who's just taken control of a firm. You should be in the office."
He shrugged and liberally spread his toast with jelly. "There's wise, and then there's wise. I think I have my priorities in the right order."
Pursing her lips, Susan carefully cut her toast into thin strips. She wasn't quite certain why he'd brought her to the beach, but her questions could wait. She'd slept until she was almost dopey, and consequently she was rested for the first time in weeks. She didn't think she could handle any personal questions right then, but there were a lot of things she wanted to know.
"You had it all planned out before you came back, didn't you?"
He glanced up, his blue eyes glittering as the morning sun fell on his face. "It all depended on the first step. When I put pressure on him, he had to sell off stock and weaken himself financially in order to replace the money that he'd taken in order for any of it to work. He literally financed my takeover; the money that he replaced was used to buy up the first loan. Then, when that loan was paid, I used the money again to buy up the second loan."
His nerve and gall were truly astonishing, leaving her shaking her head in awe. "You didn't have any other money to back you?"
"Of course, I have money," he snorted. "I'm a hell of a good gambler, regardless if it's cards, dice, horses... or oil. I've lost my shirt a few times, but more often than not I come out on top."
"Oil?" she asked blankly. "You wanted to lease the ridges yourself? You weren't acting for any company?"
He shrugged, his powerful shoulders rippling under the light blue polo shirt he wore. "The ridges were a smoke-screen," he admitted. "They were a way

to put pressure on Preston; I wanted him to refuse to lease them to me, giving me an excuse to use my lever against him."
Susan remembered feeling, at the time, that he'd deliberately pushed Preston into refusing; he'd manipulated them all like a master puppeteer, and they'd danced whenever he pulled the strings. "So there's no oil in the ridges? No wonder you weren't in any hurry to sign the leases!"
"I didn't say that." He reached out and put his hand on hers. "Stop butchering that slice of toast and eat it," he commanded. "Haven't you received the geological survey you ordered?"
"No, not yet."
"Well, the part about the oil is true, or at least there's a good chance of either oil or natural gas."
She ate a piece of toast, and fiddled with another one until she looked up and saw him glaring at her. She hastily took a bite, then put the remainder on her plate. "I'm really not very hungry. I'm sorry."
"That's all right. You'll get your appetite back soon." He rose and began to clear the table; when Susan moved to help him, he stopped her with a lifted hand. "Whoa, lady. Put that plate down. You're not to do any work."
"I'm fairly certain I'm still strong enough to carry a plate," she informed him mildly.
"Sit down. I think I'm going to have to explain the rules to you."
At the mock sternness in his voice, she sat down like a naughty schoolgirl, her hands clasped on her knees. He sat down in the chair opposite her and explained the situation to her slowly and carefully. "You're here to rest. I'm here to take care of you. I'll do the cooking, the cleaning up, everything."
"How long will heaven last?" she asked, and for the first time a tiny smile lit her face, catching his eye like a ray of sunshine after a storm.
"As long as it takes," he replied quietly.
He was serious. The next few days passed leisurely, even monotonously, but after the stress of the last weeks, that was exactly what Susan needed. Time was measured only by the rising and setting of the sun. At first she slept a lot, as much from mental fatigue as any physical tiredness. She didn't occupy her thoughts with tormenting questions of "What if?"; her mind was curiously blank, as if it were just too much trouble to think about anything. She rested, she ate, she slept, all under the mostly silent guardianship that Cord offered.

She not only slept alone, she was completely undisturbed, and as she regained her strength she began to wonder about that. It was a sign of her returning vitality that she wondered about anything, but she was young and healthy, and the coddling she'd been receiving was rapidly restoring her strength. Her depression and fatigue had been feeding on each other, and with the weariness banished, the uncharacteristic depression began to lift. It was almost like rebirth, and she quietly enjoyed it, but she knew that it was also obvious to Cord that she was feeling much better, and every night she expected him to come to her bed. When he didn't, she had the panicked thought that perhaps be didn't want her any longer; then she realized that he was waiting for her to make the first move, to indicate that she was ready to resume their relationship.

Uncertainty kept her silent. She wasn't certain that it was what she wanted; she still loved him, but there was still that lingering sense of betrayal that she couldn't shake, and she knew that as long as she had doubts about him she had to hold herself aloof. Nor did she want simply to resume an affair; she wanted far more from him than that. She wanted his love, his legal commitment, and, if possible, his children.

The fifth night they were at the beach house a thunderstorm blew in from the Gulf and dumped its fury on them, rattling the windows with its booming claps of thunder. Susan awoke with a start, a cry on her lips, as for a confused moment she thought a tornado was bearing down on her. Then she realized where she was and curled up under the sheet, listening to the drumming rain against the window. She'd never been frightened of storms in the past; in fact, she rather enjoyed the display of power and grandeur, as long as it didn't escalate into a tornado. She would forever have a healthy respect for those snaking, dancing storms.

Her door opened abruptly, and Cord stepped into the room, his nakedness revealed in the flashes of lightning.

Susan stared at him, feeling the tart taste of desire on her tongue, the slow, heated coiling in her abdomen and thighs.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly. "I thought you might be nervous, after the tornado."

She sat up, pushing her tousled hair away from her face. "I'm fine. I was a little startled when it first woke me, but I'm not frightened."

"Good," he said, and started to leave the room.

"Cord, wait!" she called, not planning to say the words, but they burst out of her anyway. He hesitated and turned back to her, standing silently, waiting.
"I think it's time to talk," she ventured.
"All right." He moved his shoulders in a strange manner, as if bracing himself. "I'll go put on some pants and be back."
"No." Again she stopped him, holding her hand out to him. "There's no need, is there?"
"I didn't think so," he returned. "But I wasn't sure how you felt."
"I feel the same... Please, sit on the bed." She moved to one side and pulled the covers about her waist, sitting up in the circle of them.
He dropped down to her bed, confiscated one of her pillows and stuffed it behind his back, stretched his long legs out on the mattress and turned on the lamp. "If we're going to talk, I'm going to be comfortable, and I want to be able to see you."
She tucked her legs under her Indian-style, trying not to stare at the wonderfully masculine form sprawled in front of her. She couldn't imagine a man made any more beautifully. Every time she saw him, she only admired him the more; he seemed to improve with age. But his body was distracting her, and she forced herself to look at his face. The small, knowing, infinitely pleased smile that lurked on his lips made her flush; then she laughed a little at herself.
"I'm sorry. You have a knack for making me blush."
"I should be blushing, if I'm reading your mind correctly."
He was, and they both knew it. She quickly sought control, and found it. This was far too important for her to let herself be sidetracked. "Before I say anything else, we might as well get one thing out of the way. I love you. If you can't deal with that, if it makes you uncomfortable, then we have nothing to talk about. You might as well go back to your own room."
He didn't move an inch from his comfortable position. "I've known for some time," he said, his eyes darker than she'd ever seen them before. "I knew the first time I made love with you. If you hadn't loved me, you never would have stripped for me like that, or put yourself in my hands so completely."
"But you couldn't trust me? You left me in the dark, knowing how much I was worrying, how it tore me apart to have to fight you?" A jagged edge of pain tore into her again just at the memory, and she drew a quick breath,

fighting to keep from falling apart, but still the hurt was evident in her voice.
"In my defense, let me say that I hadn't expected you. You blindsided me, sweetheart, and I've been floundering ever since. Except for my parents, I can't say that I've ever known anyone I could trust until I met you, and so many years had passed since I'd been able to turn my back to anyone that I couldn't let myself believe it. You defended Preston so stubbornly, even though you said you loved me; how could I be sure you wouldn't run and tell him immediately if I let it slip that I wasn't trying to bankrupt the company, only to pressure him into selling enough stock for me to have the majority?"
"Don't you see?" she cried. "I defended Preston *precisely* because I thought you were trying to bankrupt him to get revenge for Judith!"
“No, I wasn't after revenge, though I wanted him to think so. I'm far too guilty myself to have any right to take revenge. But the way things were when I left... honey, you have no idea how bitter and violent it had become. I wanted to come back home, and I knew the only way I could do it was from a position of power. I didn't want to simply live in the area again; I wanted to be accepted, to be a part of what I'd had before, when I was too young and too hotheaded to appreciate it."
"And if you'd told me all of that, you thought I'd still ruin it for you?" she asked, blinking back tears.
He cupped her cheek in his palm, his fingers caressing her jaw. "Don't cry," he murmured. "I told you, I'm out of the habit of trusting people. I've spent a lot of time in dives and jungles and back alleys that—well, never mind. But, damn it, you know I never planned for you to be the one to sell! I never thought he'd dump it all on your shoulders, but he's a smart bastard, I'll say that for him. His idea almost worked. If I'd known that *you* were the one being beaten down, I'd have stopped on the spot. It was your own stubbornness in not telling me that kept things going for so long, that gave me enough time to buy the stock I needed."
"Along with my vote," she reminded him thinly.
"Yes, along with your vote." He watched her intently, reading the myriad expressions as they flitted across her lovely face. She looked incredibly sexy, he noticed, with her hair all tousled and her eyes still heavy-lidded, her skin softly flushed from sleep. The dark shadows were gone from beneath her eyes, and the soft curves of her breasts shone beneath the thin

silk of her nightgown, with her small nipples pushing against the fabric in an enticing manner that made him want to lean forward and take them into his mouth, silk and all. He felt it again, that punch in his chest, and he realized anew that she lit his life like an eternal candle, pure and white. If that serene flame ever went out he'd be doomed to darkness for the rest of his life.

"I was wrong not to trust you," he said softly. His voice went even quieter, so deep that it rumbled in his chest. "I knew that you loved me, and it was almost too much for me to believe. I was afraid to believe. My God, Susan, don't you know? Don't you have any idea what you do to people? Everywhere I turned, there were people falling all over themselves to please you, to get you to smile at them, to have your attention for just a little while. Even Imogene would fight her weight in wildcats for you! If I'd let myself believe that sweetness was all mine, then found out that it wasn't, I couldn't have handled it. I had to protect myself by not letting you get too close."

Susan stared at him, bewildered by his words. "People fall all over themselves for me? What do you mean?"

She truly didn't know, he realized, had never noticed the effect her radiant smile had on people, or the almost inevitable softening that crossed their faces whenever they talked to her. My God, he had a treasure that men would fight for, possibly kill for, and she didn't even know her own power, which he supposed was part of her elusive, but hauntingly sweet charm.

"Never mind," he told her gently. She wouldn't believe him even if he told her. "The important thing is, do you love me enough to forgive me?"

"I have to," she replied obliquely, but the truth was plain in her eyes. She had to forgive him, because when she searched down to the deepest recesses of her heart, she loved him too much not to forgive him anything.

Very tenderly, he reached out and caught her waist, drawing her out of her tangle of covers and pulling her atop him, resting her weight on his chest.

"I'm glad," he said gravely, his diamond-eyes so close that she could see her own reflection in the dilated blackness of his pupils. "Because I love you so much that I think I'd go crazy if you sent me away."

Susan's eyes widened, and her heart gave a great bound, then resumed beating with thuds that hammered against the delicate cage of her ribs. "I... what?"

"I said, I love you," he repeated, sliding his hands up her back in a slow, heated caress. She quivered, tried to speak, but her trembling lips couldn't

form the words, and instead she gave up and dropped her head to his shoulder, her hands holding tightly to him. He folded her to him, pressing her soft, deliciously feminine body against his. Sudden tears, hot and acid, burned his eyes. He'd almost lost her, almost let her love slip away from him, and the thought tormented him.

"I love you," he said again, this time whispering the words into the dark cloud of her hair. The searing tears slid down his hard, sun-browned cheeks, but he wasn't aware of them. His world had narrowed to the wonder he held in his arms, the slim, delicate body that held such sweetness and gallantry, such an endless capacity for love, that he was staggered by it. ,

Susan drew a little away from him, her heart stopping when she saw the wet tracks on his face, and in that moment she knew beyond doubt that he loved her. He was looking at her with a deep, consuming love that he made no effort to hide. The last of his bitterness was drained away in the salt of his tears, the last grief and guilt he felt for Judith. She put her cheek against his, rubbing the wetness away.

Knowing that she would never refuse him, that what they felt burning between them needed to be consummated, had to be sanctified by their union, he rolled and deftly placed her beneath him, his legs parting her thighs. He rose to his knees and lifted her nightgown, then drew it over her head. After tossing it away, he regarded her slim beauty for a moment, then let his weight down on her. He kissed her fiercely, then drew back with masculine satisfaction stamped on his bearded features. "I'm going to marry you."

Again shock reverberated through Susan, but now it was a joyous shock, as at last she began to believe what was happening to her. She looked up at him, and suddenly a smile curved her lips. Just like that; it wasn't a proposal, a question, but a statement. He was going to marry her, and she'd better not try to argue with him about it!

"Yes," she said, then caught her breath as he entered her. Her moistly yielding body accepted him without difficulty, the sweet honey of her flesh welcoming him. He moved against her, probing slowly, and he groaned aloud in pleasure.

Then he raised himself on his elbow to look down at her, his gaze burning with desire. "It might be a good idea if we get married as soon as possible," he murmured. "After the night in the Blazer, you could well be pregnant."

"I know." She slid her hands over his shoulders to his neck, and smiled up at him. "I hope so."
An answering smile touched his lips. "Just to be on the safe side, let's do it again." He kissed her again; then their bodies began to move in unison, with a passion that was wild and tender and sanity-destroying, their love binding them together with an electrically charged force field of devotion. What had begun with a dance on a crowded ballroom floor had become a sensual dance of love, sanctified by the tears of a hard man who'd had to learn how to cry.

Epilogue

Cord lay heavily on her, sweetly limp after the whirlwind of their lovemaking. Susan nibbled on his shoulder, and he put his hand in her hair to pull her head up. He began kissing her again, slow, drugging kisses that lit the fires between them again, fires that burned higher and hotter than ever after a year of marriage. Just as he began moving within her, a faint, fretful cry caught their attention, a cry that quickly escalated into an all-out bellow.
He cursed luridly as he slid off of her. "She's got the most incredible timing!" he grumbled as he stalked naked from the room, outrage evident in every line of his powerful body.
Susan pulled the sheet up over her nude body; she was cool without the heat of him next to her. A slow, gentle smile touched her lips as she envisioned the scene in the next room. Cord might grumble and grouse, but he'd melt as soon as he set eyes on his tiny daughter, who had just learned how to blow bubbles. As soon as she saw her father, she'd stop her bellowing, and her arms and legs would go into overtime as her entire body wriggled in delight. She'd treat him to her entire repertoire of accomplishments, from kicking to blowing bubbles, and he'd be lost in adoring admiration. Alison Marie was a four-month-old tyrant, and she had Cord wrapped completely around her dainty finger.
It was a good thing they'd gotten married so swiftly, because within a month it had become evident that Susan was indeed pregnant Cord had teased her before Alison had been born, insisting that if the baby were a girl, he was going to name her Storm, and if it were a boy, it had to be called Blazer.

She'd been a little worried at how he would accept fatherhood, but she'd worried over nothing. No man could have been more delighted over his child.

She prepared herself to nurse the baby, and in a moment Cord came back into the bedroom, cradling Alison in the curve of his strong arm and crooning to her as her plump little hands waved in the air, trying to catch his beard. "We're going to have to trade her in for a model that doesn't leak," he said, getting back in bed, still holding Alison, while Susan stuffed a pillow behind her back.

When she took the baby, he moved to put his arm around her, holding her so most of her weight rested on his chest. "Look at that little pig," he drawled, as the baby latched onto the milk-swollen nipple with starving ferocity. He was fascinated by everything about her, and had been from the moment he'd known of Susan's pregnancy.

Despite it being her first child, she'd breezed through the months with almost boring ease. She'd had little morning sickness, no cravings, and had carried the baby easily. Her biggest problem had been Cord, who had hounded her if she even tried to change a light bulb. She had Alison with a minimum of fuss, and Cord had been there to hold his daughter, who weighed in at a tiny five pounds and two ounces.

Now his big hand touched the small, round head, smoothing the black curls that covered it. She opened her eyes briefly, revealing pale blue irises surrounded by a ring of darker blue. She was his image, and he adored her. But the delights of her mother's breast occupied her at the moment, and she closed her eyes again, suckling vigorously.

Soon she slept again, and Susan's nipple slipped from the relaxed rosebud mouth. "I'm going to have to wean her soon," she sighed.

"Why?"

"She's starting to teethe."

He laughed softly, sprawling naked on the bed. "Dangerous, huh?"

"Extremely." She carried Alison back to the nursery, and stood for a moment holding the infinitely precious little bundle in her arms. The baby grunted as she was placed on her stomach, but a tightly curled fist brushed her mouth and she latched onto it in her sleep, sucking noisily on her knuckles.

He was waiting for her when she came back into their bedroom, and he drew her back down into his embrace. Susan curled against him, placing her

head on the broad, hairy chest. Being married to him was better than she'd dreamed, because she'd never thought that her restless renegade would have been so content.

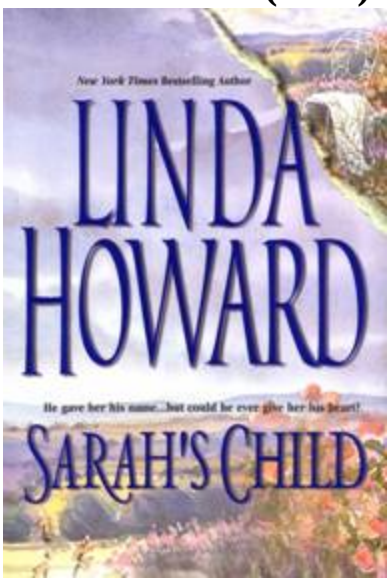
He and Preston had reached a truce, a working relationship that allowed peace between them. Preston remained as president of the company, because his experience and ability were too good to waste. Cord's own daring and verve had blended with Preston's attention to detail, and together they were creating a company that was innovative but not reckless, sure-footed but not too cautious. The challenge kept Cord fascinated, and at night he came back to her arms, which was all she'd ever asked of heaven.

He reached out and clicked off the lamp, yawning in the sudden darkness. He settled her in his arms, in their sleeping position, and she nuzzled her mouth against his flesh. Just as she'd dreamed months ago, sleeping with him every night was deeply satisfying. They talked in the darkness, sharing the things that had happened to them during the day, planning what they wanted to do together. His hand moved lazily over her soft body, then found her breasts and became more obvious in his attentions.

"Susan? Do you think she'll wake up this time?"

Susan laughed, winding her arms around his neck. Her beloved desperado, her darling renegade, still swept her away into his dark, magic world of love.

Sarah’s Child (1985)



Dear Reader,

My grandmother died in 1977. The reason this is significant is (hat, in handling the grief of losing her, I needed to know more about the stages of grief, the very nature of grief, so I could understand it better. I'm positive (here are guardian angels, because whenever I need to know more about something, no matter what the subject, I am suddenly flooded with articles and material about that subject I can pick up almost any magazine and find a pertinent article. It's weird, but I've stopped questioning it. I guess my guardian angel knows that, since I'm a writer, this is the best way to reach me, and the easiest way for me to understand something.

In the process of learning about grief and how it can affect you, a germ of an idea was born. This germ took several years to grow, but one day the thought was crystal clear in my head: what happens when a really strong man is dealt a blow so devastating that most people wouldn't be able to bear it? How does he bear the grief?

This is Rome Matthews' story; he's (he center of the book, because he's the man who lost his entire family. I remember, when the book first came out, some readers didn't like it because he had been attracted to Sarah even while his wife, to whom he was faithful, was still alive. To me, it shows more character for a man to remain faithful even though he does find another woman attractive, than it does if there had been no temptation. After all, it's always easier not to eat if you aren't hungry in the first place! Rome is a man of strong character, a man who is trying to deal with his pain and a man who finds the strength to love again.

Rome is a hero, and Sarah is the woman who was special enough, understanding enough, to pull him out of the darkness of his grief.

I hope you enjoy the book.

Chapter 1

It was the end of a long week, and Sarah knew that she should go home, but just the thought of facing the broiling late August heat was enough to keep her sitting in her chair with the air-conditioning humming pleasantly overhead. She wasn't working; she'd swiveled the chair around and spent the last fifteen minutes simply staring out the window, too relaxed to really care that it was getting late. The sun had dipped low enough that the Dallas

array of dazzling skyscrapers of glass and steel was outlined against a bronzed sky, which meant she'd missed the six o'clock news yet again. It was Friday evening; her boss, Mr. Graham, had left over an hour before. There was no reason why she shouldn't join the mass exodus on the streets below, yet she felt reluctant to go home. She'd taken such pains with her condominium; made it as homey and comfortable as she could, but lately the emptiness of it had been haunting her. She could fill it with music, rent any movie and watch it on the VCR, lose herself in reading and pretend that she was in any other country in the world, yet she would still be alone. Lately it was becoming a state of loneliness, rather than one of solitude.
Perhaps it was the weather, she thought tiredly. The summer had been hot and humid, wearing everyone down, but she knew inside that it wasn't the heat that was bothering her. It was the inevitable sensation of time slipping away, as summer died once more and became another autumn. It seemed that even in the fierce heat she could feel the chill of winter in her bones. It was more than the passing of another season: it was her own youth slipping away, inexorably draining from her grasp. The years had passed, and she'd devoted herself to her work, because there was nothing else, and now she realized that all the things she'd wanted had passed her by. She hadn't wanted riches, or material things. She'd wanted love, a husband and children, a home filled with laughter and security, the things she'd never had as a child. She'd stopped even dreaming about them, she realized, and that was the saddest thing of all. But then she'd never really had a chance: she'd fallen in love with the one man she couldn't have, and it appeared that she was one of those women who loved only once in their lifetime.
Her phone gave a muted ring, and a slight frown of puzzlement touched her brow as she reached for the receiver. Who would be calling the office at this hour?
"Sarah Harper," she said briskly.
"Sarah, this is Rome," a deep voice said by way of identification.
Her heart gave a jump and hung in her throat. She didn't need to hear his name to know who was on the other end of the line. She knew his voice as well as she knew her own, and the clipped accent that hadn't softened despite years in the south would always give him away. But she swallowed the lump, straightened her spine, and pretended this was just another business call. "Yes, Mr. Matthews?"

He made an impatient sound. “Damn it, don’t call me that! It’s all right in the office, but this… this isn’t business.”
Sarah swallowed again, but she couldn’t say anything. Had she conjured him up? Had thinking about him produced this call? After all, it had been months since he’d said anything to her other than a polite “good morning” whenever he came into the office to talk to Mr. Graham.
“Sarah?” He was really impatient now, and his rising ire was revealed in the way he barked her name.
“Yes. I’m still here,” she managed.
“I’m selling the house,” he said abruptly. “I’m boxing up Diane’s things… and the boys’… I’m going to give them all to the Salvation Army. But I found a box of things that Diane had kept from high school, stuff that the two of you did together, pictures, and I thought you’d like to go through it. If you want any of it, you can have it. If not…”
He didn’t finish the sentence, but she knew. If not, then he’d burn it. He’d take all of those memories and destroy them. She winced inside at the thought of going through the box and reliving the years she’d grown up with Diane, because the loss still hurt, but neither could she let him burn Diane’s mementos. Perhaps she couldn’t go through the box yet, but she’d keep it, and in later years she’d be able to take the things out and remember without too much pain, with only sadness and nostalgia.
“Yes,” she said hoarsely, forcing the word out. “Yes, I want it.”
“I’m about to leave now, to go to the house and finish packing. You can get the box anytime tonight.”
“I’ll be there. Thank you,” she whispered, and he hung up, leaving her with the phone still pressed to her ear and the dial tone buzzing.
Her hand was shaking as she replaced the receiver, and suddenly she noticed that she was no longer sitting. At some point during the conversation, tension had propelled her to her feet. Quickly she leaned down to get her purse from the lower drawer of the desk, then locked the desk and turned out the lights, locking the door behind her as she left.
It wasn’t only her hand that was shaking; her entire body was quivering. Talking with Rome always did that to her. Even after years of training herself not to think about him, of not allowing herself to even dream about him, just hearing his voice had the power to reduce her to jelly. Working for the same company was bad enough; she’d even transferred to a different department so she wouldn’t see him as often, but that had eventually

backfired on her: He'd been promoted steadily through the ranks and was now one of the corporate vice presidents. Her position as secretary to the senior vice president threw her constantly into contact with him; the only salvation she'd had was that his attitude toward her was strictly business, and she'd forced herself to treat him in the same manner. What else could she do, when she'd been foolish enough to fall in love with her best friend's husband?

Even though the shadowed multilevel parking deck was at least ten degrees cooler than the street, the heat still slapped her in the face as she walked quickly to her car, a late model, low-slung Datsun 280-ZX. The car was, she feared, an example of her growing tendency to collect *things* to replace the emptiness at home. All her life she'd sworn to avoid the cold hollowness of her parents' home, yet as she grew older she tried harder and harder to fill the empty places with *things.* The car was gorgeous, and it got her where she was going faster than she needed to be there; she enjoyed driving it, she liked it, but she hadn't needed it. The car she'd traded in had been a good car, and it hadn't been that old.

Rather than drive straight to the house where Rome and Diane had lived, in one of the posher Dallas neighborhoods, Sarah deliberately drove to a restaurant and wiled away an hour and a half, picking at her seafood while all of her instincts screamed at her to hurry, to see Rome as soon as she could. But some part of her was reluctant to enter the house where he'd lived with Diane, where she and Diane had laughed and played with the babies. She hadn't been inside it in two years…it had been almost two years since the accident.

When her watch told her it was eight o'clock, she paid her tab and drove slowly, carefully, to the house. Her heart was pounding again, and she felt a little sick to her stomach. Her palms were damp; she clutched the steering wheel more securely to make certain it didn't slip in her grip.

How did she look? She hadn't checked her appearance. Her lipstick had worn off surely, but she didn't bother to replace it. With one hand she felt to see if any strands of hair had escaped from the severe twist she wore while working, but it still felt reasonably tidy, so she sighed and forgot about it.

Rome's dark blue Mercedes was in the driveway, so she parked behind it and got out, walking slowly up the sidewalk to mount the five shallow steps and press her finger to the doorbell. The grass had been kept mowed, she

noticed, and the shrubbery was trimmed. The house didn't look empty, but it was. Heartbreakingly empty.

After a moment, Rome opened the door and stepped aside to let her enter. After a brief glance at him, Sarah felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. She hadn't expected him to be wearing a three-piece business suit, but somehow she'd forgotten how powerfully he was built, how impossibly virile he looked in tight jeans. He wore track shoes, no socks, an old pair of jeans, and a white T-shirt that clung to his muscled torso, and he looked absolutely beautiful to her.

He glanced down at her, taking in the trim business suit she still wore. "You haven't been home yet?" he asked.

"No. I stopped to eat dinner, but I haven't gone home." It was uncomfortably warm in the house; he'd opened some windows but hadn't turned on the central air-conditioning. She pulled off her light linen jacket and started to hang it in the closet as she'd always done when visiting Diane, then caught herself and instead simply tossed it over the stairway railing. As he led the way upstairs she loosened the collar of her white tailored silk blouse and rolled the sleeves up to her elbows.

Rome paused before the doorway to the bedroom he'd shared with Diane, and his dark eyes were shadowed, his mouth grim, as he looked at the closed door. "It's in there," he said briefly. "In the closet. I'll be in the boys' bedroom packing their things. Take your time looking through the stuff."

Sarah waited until he'd gone into the other bedroom before she slowly opened the door and entered Diane's bedroom, turning on the light and standing for a moment looking around. Everything had been left as it had been the day of the accident. The book she'd been reading was still lying on the bedside table. Her nightgown was tossed across the foot of the bed. Rome hadn't spent a night here since Diane had died.

Sarah pulled the box out of the closet and sat down on the floor to go through the contents, tears blurring her vision as she picked up the first photograph of her and Diane together. God, if it hurt her this much to lose a friend, how did Rome feel? He'd lost his wife and two sons.

She and Diane had always been best friends, all the way through school. Diane had been a human dynamo, laughing and chattering, propelling the quieter Sarah along the way. Her blue eyes had sparkled, her honey-brown curls had bounced, and she'd infected everyone who came into contact with her with the enthusiasm for life that brightened every day for her. Oh, the

plans she'd made! She was never going to marry. She was going to be a famous fashion designer and travel all over the world. Sarah's dreams had been only of a real family, one with love in it. Somewhere along the way their plans had been switched. Diane had fallen in love with a tall dark-eyed young rising executive who worked for the same company where Sarah had gotten a job, and from that moment on Sarah had known that her dream would never come true. Diane considered a glamorous career as a fashion designer well lost when she could have Rome Matthews, when she could give birth to his two adoring and adorable sons and bask in his love. Sarah quietly devoted herself to the job that was her only solace.

She'd tried not to love Rome, but she'd discovered that emotions weren't easily controlled. If she hadn't loved him before he met Diane, she might have kept her feelings from growing into anything serious, but she'd been his from the first. From the moment she'd met him, she'd known, deep inside that he would be more to her than just a colleague. It was his eyes, she thought; they were so deep and dark, eyes with a burning inner intensity. Roman Caldwell Matthews was no lightweight. He had drive and ambition, coupled with a lightning intelligence that had carried him through the ranks of middle management like a meteor. Oh, he wasn't handsome: his face had a rough-hewn, slightly battered look to it; his cheekbones were too high and sharp; his blade of a nose had been broken once; and his jaw was as solid as a piece of granite. He was a man who would reach out and grasp life, and shape it the way he wanted. He'd been friendly enough to her, but Sarah knew she was too pale and quiet to interest a man with his forceful personality.

Still, the summer when she'd invited Diane to the company picnic she hadn't expected him to take one look at Diane's vibrant beauty and claim her for his own. But it had happened, and Diane and Rome had married five months later. Three months after their first anniversary Justin had been born, and two years later Shane. Two beautiful little boys, with their mother's looks and their father's determination, and Sarah had loved them because they were Rome's children.

She'd remained as close to Diane as before, but she'd always been careful not to infringe on the time Rome spent with his family. He traveled a great deal, and Sarah limited her visits to the days he was out of town. She couldn't say just why, but she sensed that Rome disapproved of her close friendship with Diane, though to her knowledge he'd never said anything.

Perhaps it was that he simply didn't like her, though she'd never done anything to earn it. She'd tried to stay out of his way, and she'd never, never told Diane anything about how she felt. There was no point in it; it would only have distressed Diane, and hurt their friendship.

Sarah had dated, and still did, but only casually. It wouldn't have been fair to some other man to encourage a closer relationship when there was no way she'd be able to return any love offered to her. Everyone who asked, teasingly, when she was going to marry, had received the same reply: She loved her work too much to wash dirty socks for some man. It had been a lighthearted, stock answer, and it had served the purpose of protecting her vulnerable heart, but it had been a he. She'd never wanted a career, but it was all she had left, so she'd given it her best. The charade had fooled everyone but herself.

Rome had been devoted to Diane and the boys. The free-way accident, almost two years before, had almost destroyed him. It *had* destroyed the laughter in him, the fierce-burning fire in his eyes. Diane had been driving the boys to school, and a drunk weaving his way home in the early-morning traffic had crossed out of his lane and hit them head-on. If he hadn't been killed immediately, Sarah felt that Rome would have choked the man with his bare hands, he'd been so insane with grief when he'd been told. Justin had been killed on impact; Shane had died two days later. Two weeks after the accident Diane had died without ever regaining consciousness or knowing that her sons were gone. During those two weeks, Sarah had spent as much time as she could at her friend's bedside, holding the limp hand and trying to will her to live, but fearing that Diane wouldn't want to wake up from her death sleep. Rome had been a permanent fixture on the other side of the bed, holding the hand that bore his ring, his face gray and drawn, locked inside himself. Diane had been his only hope, his only remaining bit of sunshine, and her frail light had flickered and gone out, leaving him in darkness.

Gently Sarah went through all of the snapshots, seeing herself and Diane in various stages of their childhood and adolescence, mixed in with photographs of the boys as babies, toddlers, and rowdy little boys. Rome was in some of those pictures, romping with the boys, washing the car, mowing the grass, doing all of the normal things that fathers and husbands do. Sarah lingered over a picture of him lying on his back in the grass, wearing only a brief pair of denim shorts, holding Justin dangling over his

head. His strong brown arms were steady as he held the toddler up, and it was evident that the child felt secure in his father's hands. Justin had been shrieking with laughter. On the grass beside them, Shane had been trying to climb to his baby feet, and one tiny plump hand had clutched the hair on Rome's chest in an effort to pull himself up.

"See anything you want?"

The question startled her, and she jumped, dropping the picture back into the box. She realized that he was asking in general and hadn't noticed her staring at his picture with sick longing, but her shadowy green eyes were wide and wary as she scrambled to her feet, smoothing her skirt.

"Yes. I'll take the box. There are a lot of pictures in here of Diane and the boys…if you don't—"

"Take them," he said curtly, walking into the room. He stopped in the middle of the floor and stood looking around, as if he'd never been there before, but his eyes were bleak, and his mouth looked as if it would never smile again. He did sometimes smile, Sarah realized, after a fashion, but it was merely a polite movement of his lips rather than an expression of humor. Certainly the smile never reached his eyes and lit the dark fires that had once smoldered there.

He jammed his hands into his pockets, as if he had to do something to keep them from knotting into fists. His shoulders were tense, braced against the impact of memories that this room must bring to him. He'd slept in that bed with Diane, made love to her, wrestled with the boys on early Saturday mornings when they came running in to wake him up. Quickly Sarah leaned down to pick up the box, turning her gaze away from him to keep from witnessing his anguish.

The anguish was as much in her as it was in him. She loved him enough to wish Diane back for him, so he could smile again. He would always be Diane's anyway, because her death hadn't stopped his love for her. He was still grieving for her, still hurting from her loss.

"I'm finished in the boys' room," he said remotely. "Everything's packed up. I…I—" Suddenly his voice broke, and Sarah's heart broke with it. He drew a ragged breath, his chest heaving with the effort it took to control himself.

Suddenly his face twisted with rage, and he whirled to slam his fist against the dresser, rattling the bottles of perfume and cosmetics that still littered the top. "Dammit, it was such a waste!" He cursed violently, then groped

for the dresser as his body sagged under the weight of his anger and grief. He'd never known defeat until his family had been taken from him. Death was final, permanent, striking without warning and destroying the life he'd built for himself.

"In some ways, losing the boys was worse than losing Diane," he said in a muffled tone. "They were so young; they hadn't had a chance at life. They never knew what it was like to play high-school sports, or go to college, or kiss their girlfriends for the first time. They hadn't made love, or seen their own children born. They never had a chance."

Sarah clutched the box to her breast. "Justin kissed his girlfriend," she said shakily, a tiny smile breaking through in spite of the pain. "Her name was Jennifer. There were four Jennifers in his class, but he told me very firmly that his Jennifer was the pretty one.' He kissed her right on the mouth and asked her to marry him, but she got scared and ran away. He told me that he 'spected she just wasn't ready for marriage yet, but he'd keep his eye on her. That's practically verbatim," she added, laughing a little. She'd imitated Justin's way of talking, drawling and tough for a seven-year-old, and Rome's mouth twitched. He glanced at her, and suddenly his dark brown-black eyes were dancing with golden lights. He made a choking sound, then he was laughing, throwing back his dark head on the deep healthy sound.

"My God, he was a tough little nut," he chuckled. "Poor Jennifer wouldn't have had a chance."

Neither had poor Sarah. Justin had received all of his tough charm straight from his father.

Her heart jolted at his laugh, the first genuine laugh she'd heard from him in two years. He hadn't talked about the boys, or Diane, since the accident. He'd bottled up all of his memories with the pain, as if he had to keep them locked away in order for him to function on even a basic level.

She shifted, still clutching the box. "These pictures… if you ever want any of them, they're yours."

"Thanks." He shrugged his wide shoulders, as if trying to ease the tension in them. "This is rougher than I thought it would be. It's still… almost more than I can handle."

Sarah ducked her head, unable to answer or look at him without crying. This was so traumatic for her that she was beginning to doubt her ability to get through it, but she couldn't do anything to make it any harder for him. If he started to cry, she'd probably die on the spot. Part of the agony she'd felt

after the accident had been for Rome, knowing how he was suffering. She hadn't even been able to put her arms around him at any of the services; he'd held himself stiffly erect, his face utterly white and withdrawn, sealed off by his grief from everyone around him. Rome had been alone, unable to share his pain.

When she looked up again, Rome was sitting on the bed where he'd slept with Diane, her silk nightgown in his strong hands. His head was bent, and he pulled the silk through his fingers over and over again.

"Rome—" She stopped, not knowing what to say to him. What *could* she say?

"I still wake up at night and reach for her," he said in a rough tone. "This is the nightgown she wore the last night we spent together, the last time I made love to her. I can't get used to her not being there. It's an empty pain that won't go away, no matter how many women I take."

Sarah gasped, her Nile-green eyes widening and becoming shuttered; he glanced up, his eyes bitter. "Does that shock you, Sarah? That I've had other women? I was faithful to Diane for eight years, never even kissing another woman, though sometimes when I was on a trip I'd lie awake all night, wanting a woman so much that I hurt all over. But no one else would do; it had to be her. So I'd wait until I came home; then we wouldn't sleep that entire night."

Sarah's throat tightened, and she retreated from him as an unexpectedly savage pain slashed at her. She didn't want to hear this. She'd always tried not to think of him in bed with I Diane, trying not to envy her friend, eternally striving to keep jealousy from ruining their friendship. She'd succeeded while Diane was alive, but now Rome's words were tearing at her, forcing images into her head that she didn't want to see. She turned away from him, her face averted as she tried to avoid hearing his words. The bed squeaked as he left it; then suddenly his hands were gripping her arms with a hard grip, jerk-ing her around to face him. His face was white and full of rage, a muscle jerking in his temple. "What's wrong, Saint Sarah? Are you so buried in that mental convent of yours that you can't stand hearing about normal people who enjoy the sinful activity of sex?" He was snarling at her, and Sarah was frozen in his grasp, stunned by the anger that had erupted in him. Dimly she realized that he wasn't angry at her as much as he was angry at the fate that had taken his wife from him and left

him with only emptiness in his arms, but still, Rome in a temper was a man to fear.

He shook her, as if he wanted to punish her for being a warm, living woman, when Diane was forever gone. “I still can’t sleep with another woman,” he rasped in a voice harsh with pain. “I don’t mean sex. I had sex with another woman only two months after Diane died, and I hated myself for it the next morning…hell, as soon as it was finished! It felt as if I’d been unfaithful to her, and I felt so guilty that I went back to my hotel room and threw up. I didn’t even particularly enjoy it, but I did it again the next night, so I’d feel guilty again. I tried to make myself suffer, to make myself pay for being alive when she was dead. There’ve been a lot of women since then; every time I…need sex, there’s always a woman who’s willing to lie down with me. I need sex and I’ve been taking it, but I can’t sleep with them. When it’s over, I have to leave. In my mind, I’m still Diane’s husband, and I can’t sleep with any woman but her.”

Sarah felt suffocated, suspended in time by his hard grip on her arms, his hot breath on her cheek, and his enraged face so close to hers. She wrenched away from him, her hands tightened into fists. She couldn’t hear about his intimacies with another woman, with any number of other women. She gave Rome a wild, desperate look, but he didn’t notice. With a groan, he sank to his knees on the floor, burying his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook.

There wasn’t enough oxygen in the room; she gasped at it, feeling her restricted lungs strain in an effort to drag enough air into her body. Her senses whirled, as if she might faint, but she didn’t. Somehow she found herself on her knees beside him, and she put her arms around him as she had longed to do so many times. Instantly his strong arms locked around her, holding her in a grip that threatened to crack all of her ribs. He buried his face against her soft breasts and cried, harsh sobs that tore out of his body in great shudders. Sarah held him, stroking his hair, letting him cry; he was entitled to it, and he’d gone for too long without letting someone else share in his grief. Her own face was wet, but she didn’t notice the hot tears that blurred her vision. All that mattered was him, and she rocked him gently back and forth, with no words, but only her presence to shield him from the bitter loneliness that had turned his heart into a winter land of desolation.

Gradually he quieted, and he moved closer to her, his hands moving up her back. She felt the deep breaths he was taking as they expanded his chest, then the warmth of the expelled air on her breasts. Her nipples tightened in automatic, shameful response, hidden beneath her silk shirt and lacy bra, and she clenched her fingers in his hair in a movement that was beyond her control.

He lifted his head, his eyes still damp, and the darkness of his pupils had become so total that there was no brown in them at all. He stared at her, then reached out and tenderly wiped the moisture from her cheeks with his thumb. “Sarah,” he said on a whispering sigh, and touched his mouth to hers.

She went still, all breath suspended in her body, as thousands of her prayers were answered in that light touch of his lips. Her hands moved to his shoulders, the nails digging into the layers of muscle that corded his frame. It was just a simple kiss of thanks, but the bottom dropped out of her stomach and the blood rushed from her head, so intense was the pleasure that assailed her. She sank against him, her soft body melding to his from shoulder to thigh, as they knelt there on the floor. Automatically he supported her, his hard arms around the female curves of her body, holding her to him.

He drew back and looked at her again, and now the expression in his eyes had sharpened to a look of glittering awareness. He was too much of a man not to recognize her feminine response. His gaze dropped to her tremulous, generous mouth, her lips softly parted, and instinct drove him to dip his head to drink from her sweetness again. This time there was nothing light about the touch of his lips; it was a kiss that was man-hungry and fiercely demanding. She gasped, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth with masculine need and command, an intimate kiss that almost shattered her with delight, and she whimpered softly into his mouth. His arms cradled her to him, his body controlling hers as he took her down to the floor.

Her senses reeled; it was so like the few forbidden dreams she’d had that she forgot where they were, forgot everything but the man who leaned over her, his mouth hot and tasting of passion. Her digging nails telegraphed her response to him, her body warming and arching to his, seeking the intoxicating heaviness of his weight.

There was no sense of time or location, nothing but the spiraling physical need that had flamed between them, unexpected and out of control. She felt

his hands on her body, touching her breasts, dipping down beneath her skirt to rub her thighs and stroke intimately between them, wringing a wordless cry of need from her lips. No word of protest surfaced in her mind. She let him do as he wanted, mindless of everything but the delight his knowledgeable hands were bringing to her. He knew women, and his expertise made her wild. She offered her slim body for his delectation with no conscious thought of anything except how sweetly, hotly satisfying it was to be in his arms, to know his kisses and his caresses.

He surged to his feet, lifting her in his arms, her slight weight no trouble at all for his powerful muscles. In a few swift steps he was at the bed, lowering her onto it, coming down to join her with a low growl on his lips as he pulled her under him, spreading her legs with his and settling himself against her in a movement as natural and as basic as breathing.

Sarah clung to him, dizzy with the need he was arousing in her, her mouth tender and fervent under his. She'd loved him for so long, and at the moment she felt as if all of her wishes on falling stars were coming true. She was willing to let him do anything with her, and she knew what he wanted She could feel the virile hardness of his body as he pressed against her. The layers of clothing between them were too much, unbearable barriers that kept their fevered flesh apart.

Then suddenly heaven ended. He stiffened on top of her, then rolled away and sat up on the edge of the bed, bending over to drop his head in his hands. "Damn you," he said thickly, his voice full of disgust. "You're supposed to be her friend, but you're rolling with *her* husband, in *her* bed."

Dazed, Sarah sat up and straightened her clothing, pushing her hair out of her eyes. She heard the accusation in his voice and found that she couldn't get angry with him; she understood how guilty he was feeling, and how emotionally vulnerable he was after the emotional storm he'd just experienced. "I was her best friend," she said shakily.

"You're not acting like it!"

She slid off the bed, standing on wobbly legs. "We're both upset," she said to his bent head, and her voice was wobbly too. "We both went a little out of control. I loved Diane like a sister, and I miss her too." She began to retreat, unable to stand there any longer, feeling as if she'd borne all she could for one night, and her tongue was out of control, babbling without her choosing the words she'd say. "There's no need to feel guilty about it; there

wasn’t anything really sexual about it. It was just that we were both so upset __”
He shot off the bed, his face wrathful. “Nothing sexual, hell! I was between your legs! Another minute, and we’d have been having sex! What would you have called it then? Would we have been ‘comforting’ each other? My God, you wouldn’t know sex if it bit you on the leg! You’re too much of an iceberg to know anything about men, or what they want!”
Sarah spun around, her face white, her green eyes stricken. Her generous mouth trembled. “I don’t deserve that,” she whispered, and bolted for the door, flying down the stairs before he realized that she was leaving. With a roar, he started after her.
“Sarah!” he yelled furiously, reaching the front door just as she turned the ignition key and started her little red fireball of a car, jerking it into gear and reversing out of the drive with the squeal of rubber on pavement. He stood in the doorway, watching the red glow of the taillights until they disappeared around the corner; then he slammed the door shut and cursed violently for several minutes. He noticed that she’d left the jacket to her suit, and he picked it up. *Damn!* How could he have said that to her? She was right; she hadn’t deserved it. He’d lashed out at her because of his own guilt, not just over what had happened that night, but over the years he’d spent looking at her and wanting to take her to bed, even though she was Diane’s best friend.
Rome stared at the linen jacket in his hands, and his mouth tightened. Didn’t Sarah realize what a challenge she was to men? She was so cool and pale and distant, so complete unto herself. She was devoted to her career, and she made it pretty plain that she didn’t need a man for anything beyond casual companionship. It had been rumored for years that she’d been the mistress of the chairman of the board, but Diane hadn’t thought so, and he trusted Diane’s judgment. Instead Diane thought that Sarah must have had a love affair that had gone sour, but as she’d said more than once, Sarah was deep and kept a lot of things to herself.
He remembered the first time he’d wanted Sarah; it had been at his own wedding. He’d been impatient to leave with Diane, and then he’d seen Sarah, standing a little alone as she so often seemed to be, her white-blonde hair twisted up on top of her head, her pale face wearing a polite mask. Was she never hot or mussed, he had wondered. Never fidgety? He’d thought of how she’d look if he’d had her in bed with him, that pale hair tangled by the

wildness of their passion, her mouth red and swollen from his kisses, her slim body dewy with perspiration. His own body had suddenly become taut, swollen with need, and he'd had to turn away to disguise his condition. How he'd resented her, because even at his wedding to Diane, he'd been lusting after Sarah.

The years hadn't changed the situation. She was always aloof, cool to him, and she never stayed around if he came home while she was visiting Diane. He loved Diane and was faithful to her, totally satisfied with her in bed, but there always remained, in the back of his mind, the knowledge that he wanted Sarah. If she'd given him the come-on, would he have remained faithful to Diane? He wanted to think so, but he couldn't be certain; look what had happened the first time he'd kissed Sarah! He'd been ready to take her right then, on the floor, but he'd had a moment's concern for her soft skin and he'd lifted her to the bed, a break in his concentration that had eventually stopped him. But she hadn't been cool and reserved in his arms; she'd been warm and responsive, and her legs had parted for him without hesitation. Her cheeks had been flushed, and a few fine tendrils of hair had escaped then-confinement to curl enticingly around her temples.

That was how he wanted her: with that neat, aloof image of hers shattered. He'd come home early from a trip once, and she'd been in the pool with Diane and the boys. She'd been laughing and frolicking like a child herself, her long hair loosened for once and floating around her like a fairy cloud. He'd changed into his own swimsuit and gone out to join them, and as soon as he'd appeared, Sarah had stopped laughing. She'd been very casual about it, but she'd made her excuses to Diane, hauling herself out of the water, and swiftly dried off before pulling on a ragged pair of denim shorts that only accentuated her long lovely legs. The sight of her in a pale yellow bikini had so aroused him that he'd had to take a fast dive into the water, and when he surfaced, she was already walking swiftly away.

A man couldn't have asked for a better wife than Diane, or a more loving one. But as much as he loved her, as much as he still ached for her, he still wanted Sarah. It wasn't a question of love at all; the finer emotions didn't enter into it. His attraction to her was purely physical. He'd lashed out at her because, with her, sex would be more of a betrayal than it had been with those other nameless, faceless women. They'd been only bodies, without personality. But he knew Sarah, and he couldn't wipe her identity out of his mind. He wanted sex with *her;* he wanted to watch her when she went wild

beneath him, he wanted to hear her call his name during the throes of passion. And she was Diane's best friend.

Hours later Sarah curled numbly in bed, her tears finally exhausted, but she couldn't sleep. She felt battered, her insides torn apart with hurt. When the phone rang, she was tempted to ignore it, because no matter who it was, she didn't feel like talking to them. But any call at two o'clock in the morning could be an emergency, and finally she reached over to lift the receiver. When she said hello, she winced at the sound of her own voice, which was still thick with the tears she'd shed.

"Sarah, I didn't mean—"

"I don't want to talk to you," she interrupted, the sound of that deep voice shredding the fragile control she'd gained over her emotions, and she began to weep again. The soft sobs were evident in her voice despite her efforts to hide them. "I may not know anything about men, but you don't know anything about *me!* I don't want to talk to you anymore, do you hear?"

"God, you're crying." He groaned softly, a harsh, masculine sound that filled her with equal portions of pain and longing.

"I said I don't want to talk to you!"

He somehow divined her intentions and said "Don't hang up on me!" in sudden wrath, but she did anyway, then buried her face in the pillow and cried until her eyes were dry and burning.

"You don't know anything at all about me," she said aloud into the darkness.

Chapter 2

It was a good thing the next day was Saturday, because after a horrible night spent alternately crying and staring at the ceiling, Sarah slept late and rose still feeling tired, her eyes heavy-lidded, her movements slow. She forced herself to do her routine chores, then that afternoon flopped down on the sofa, too tired and uninterested to tackle anything else. She needed to shop for groceries, but simply couldn't face the hassle. A quick mental inventory of her cabinets reassured her that she wouldn't starve, at least not for a couple of days.

The doorbell rang, and she got up, answering the summons without thinking. As soon as she opened the door and looked up into Rome's dark

face, a feeling of despair settled on her shoulders. Why couldn't he have waited until Monday? She'd have recovered by then and wouldn't be at such a terrible disadvantage. She didn't even have the comfort of being properly dressed. Her long hair was loose and hanging down her back; her jeans were old, tight, and faded; and the oversize jersey she wore probably revealed the fact that she was bra-less. She fought the urge to cross her arms protectively over her chest, even when his eyes dropped to survey her from her feet, clad in blue socks, all the way up to her face, which was bare of even a trace of makeup.

"Ask me in," he commanded, his voice even deeper than usual.

She didn't extend a verbal invitation; she couldn't. Instead she stepped back and opened the door, and he moved past her into the room. He was dressed casually, in well-cut tan slacks and a blue pullover shirt, but he still made her feel like something found in the city dump. "Have a seat," she invited, finally controlling her voice enough to speak. He sat down on the sofa, and she seated herself across from him in an oversize armchair, unable to make polite chitchat, just waiting for him to break the tension by speaking.

Rome wasn't aware of any tension; he had been taken too much by surprise by her appearance, and he was having difficulty dealing with this startling new aspect of her character. He'd expected her to be dressed in heels, sleek black pants, and a silk blouse, her coldness firmly in place as a barrier between them. Instead she looked very young, very relaxed, and very sexy in those comfortable old clothes. She had the sleek, aristocratic grace of form and carriage that made it possible for her to wear anything, even an old football jersey, with casual elegance. He knew that she and Diane had been the same age, so that made her thirty-three, but there was a freshness about her bare face that took at least ten years off her age. This was how he'd often imagined seeing her, or at least a variation on the theme. The remote poise he'd expected was gone, and he realized that he had her at a disadvantage. With relish, he looked her over again, his eyes lingering on the obvious freedom of her breasts beneath the jersey, and to his surprise and intensified desire, a warm blush heated her cheeks.

"I'm sorry about last night," he said abruptly. "At least, about what I said. I'm not sorry I kissed you, or that I almost went to bed with you."

Sarah looked away, unable to meet his intense gaze. "I understand. We were both—"

“Upset. I know.” He gave her a crooked little smile as he interrupted her. “But upset or not, I kissed you the second time because I wanted to kiss you. I’d like to see you, take you out to dinner, if you can forgive me for what I said.”

Sarah wet her lips. Part of her wanted to jump at the opportunity, any opportunity, to spend time with him, but the other part of her was cautious, afraid of being hurt. “I don’t think it would be a good idea,” she finally said, choking the words out of her dry throat. “Diane…Diane would always be in my mind.”

His eyes went black as pain assailed him. “And in mine. But I can’t lie down and die with her; I have to keep living. I’m attracted to you, and I’ll tell you up front that I always have been.” He ran an agitated hand through his dark hair, disturbing the lock that usually fell over his forehead. “Hell, I don’t know,” he burst out in confusion, “but last night, for the I could talk about them. You knew them, and you understand. It’s all been dammed up inside me, and I can talk about it with you. Please, Sarah, you were Diane’s friend. Now be my friend.”

She sucked in her breath, staring painfully at him. What irony, that the man she’d loved for years should come to her begging for her friendship, because he felt he could talk to her about his dead wife. For the first time she resented Diane, resented the hold Diane had on Rome that hadn’t loosened even in death. But how could she say no to him, when he was staring at her with desperation tightening his features? How could she say no to him regardless of what he asked her? It was the raw truth that she couldn’t deny him anything.

“All right,” she whispered.

He sat there for a moment; then her words sank in and he closed his eyes in relief. What if she’d refused? In a way he couldn’t understand, it had become vital to him that she not freeze him out. She was his last link to Diane, and more than that, the night before he’d finally broken the ice that surrounded her and found that she wasn’t cold at all. He wanted to do that again. The thought of bringing her to passion interfered with his breathing and made his loins grow heavy.

To take his mind off his growing desire, he looked around the condo and was again surprised. There was no glass or chrome, only comfortable textures and soothing colors. Her furniture was all sturdy and overstuffed, inviting to a tired body. He wanted to stretch out on her sofa, which was

long enough to accommodate his long legs, and watch a baseball game on television while idly munching on freshly popped, salty popcorn, with a can of frosty beer in his hand. The room was that soothing, that comfortable. This was where she let her hair down, literally, he thought, surveying with pleasure the pale tumble of her hair. When she pulled it back into the tight, severe twist she wore at work, she subdued all hint of curl, but now he could see that her hair wasn't weed-straight. The weight of it pulled most of the curl out, but the ends had a tendency to form frothy, bouncy curls. She was so blonde, it was startling.

"I like this room," he said, his eyes on her.

Sarah looked nervously around, aware of how much of herself was revealed in the atmosphere she'd created for her private lair. Here she'd made a home that gave her the warmth and security she craved and had lacked all her life. She'd grown up in a home that had provided physical comfort, but left her out in the cold when it came to love. The house had been immaculate, and "done" to perfection by a hideously expensive interior decorator, but the coldness of it had made Sarah shiver, and she'd invented excuses, even as a child, to escape it. The coldness had reflected the hostility of the man and woman who lived there, each of them so bitter at being trapped in a loveless marriage that there had been no warmth or laughter for the child who, though innocent, had been the chain that held them together. When they finally divorced, only a few weeks after Sarah had entered college, it had been a relief for all three of them. Never close to her parents, since then Sarah had drifted even farther from them. Her mother had remarried and lived in Bermuda; her father had also remarried, moved to Seattle, and was now, at fifty-seven, the doting father of a six-year-old son.

The only example of warm home-life Sarah had known was that provided by Diane, first with Diane's parents, then with the home she'd made with Rome. Diane had had the gift of love, a warm outpouring of affection that had drawn people to her. With Diane, Sarah had laughed and teased, and done all of the normal things that a teenage girl did. But now Diane was gone. At least, Sarah thought painfully, Diane had died without ever knowing that her best friend was in love with her husband.

Suddenly she collected her manners and scrambled to her feet. "I'm sorry. Would you like something to drink?"

A cold beer, he thought. And salty popcorn. He'd bet anything he had that Sarah wasn't a beer drinker, but he could picture her curled by his side, sipping on a soft drink and delving her hand into the bowl for popcorn. She wouldn't talk during the game either, but during the commercials he'd tip her head back and kiss her slowly, tasting the salt on her lips. By the time the game ended, he'd be so wild for her, he'd take her there on the sofa, or maybe on the carpet in front of the television.

Sarah shifted uneasily, wondering why he was watching her so intently. She put a hand to her cheek, thinking that she could dash into her bedroom and do a fast cosmetic job on her face. Anything would be an improvement over nothing.

"I don't suppose you have beer?" he asked softly, not taking his eyes from her.

Despite herself, she chuckled at the question. She'd never bought beer in her life; all she knew about it was the catchy jingles on television. "No, you're out of luck. Your choice is limited to a soft drink, water, tea or milk."

His eyebrows rose at that. "No spirits?"

"I'm not much of a drinker. My metabolism can't handle it. I found out in college that I'm the world's cheapest drunk."

When she smiled, her face took on an animation that made him catch his breath. He shifted uncomfortably. *Damn!* Everything she did made him think of sex.

"I think I'll pass on a drink, unless you're inviting me to dinner?" His eyebrows rose in question.

Sarah sank back into her chair, unnerved by the speed with which he presumed on their newly formed friendship. How could she invite him to dinner? It was already late in the afternoon, and she hadn't bought groceries. The most nutritious meal she could offer him would be peanut butter sandwiches, and Rome didn't look like a peanut butter man. What did he like to eat? Frantically she tried to call to mind the type of meals Diane had prepared, but Diane had been such a total disaster as a cook that her efforts had been limited to the simple things she could prepare without too much risk, and which reflected necessity rather than anyone's preference. Sarah was an excellent cook, but there was a limit to what could be done with a partial loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter.

Finally she turned up her palms helplessly. "My cupboards aren't bare, but they're the next thing to it. I can invite you to dinner, but it will be a late

one, because I'll have to go shopping first."
Her candor delighted him, and he laughed, a genuine laugh that made his dark eyes dance with light. Sarah caught her breath. He certainly wasn't handsome, but when he laughed, Rome Matthews could charm the birds out of the trees. That dark velvet laugh made her spine tingle, and she thought of lying in bed with him in the darkness, after making love. They'd talk, and his voice would wash over her, the rumbling tones making her feel secure and protected.
"Why don't I take you out to dinner instead?" he offered, and suddenly Sarah knew that he'd planned that all along, but had decided to tease her first.
"All right," she accepted softly. "What do you have in mind?"
"Steak. If we can't find the world's biggest steak in Texas, then it can't be found. I haven't had lunch," he confessed.
Because he was so hungry, they had an early dinner. Sarah sat across from him and chewed her steak without really tasting it, her mind on Rome and every nuance of his expression, every word he uttered. She felt bemused by the turn of events; she simply couldn't believe she was eating dinner with him, making normal conversation, as if the abrupt, searing moments in his arms the night before had never happened. She'd been out to dinner hundreds of times before, but always with men who had never ruffled her layers of indifference. She wasn't indifferent at all with Rome: she felt bare, exposed, though it was an inner vulnerability that wasn't revealed by her calm expression. Her nerves were quivering, and her heartbeat was accelerated.
Still, she managed to make normal conversation, and it was inevitable that the talk should turn to their work. Sarah's boss, Mr. Graham, the senior vice president, nominally outranked Rome, but it was no secret that when Mr. Edwards, the chairman of the board, retired, Henry Graham wouldn't be the one who advanced to the chair. Rome was young, but he was a brilliant corporate strategist, and he understood every phase of the company. Sarah thought he was perfectly suited for such a high position of authority; he had the forceful personality, the intelligence, the charisma, needed to handle the job. In the years she'd known him, she'd only seen him lose his temper once while at work, and that display had sent people scurrying for cover. He had a temper, but it was usually under iron control. That made it doubly

surprising that he'd lost his temper with her the night before, with so little provocation.

At first Rome was a little stiff, as if wary of saying too much to her, but as the hours wore on he relaxed with her, leaning forward over the table in interest, his gaze fixed intently on her face. Sarah didn't generally volunteer her opinions, but she was unusually observant, and her years of concentration on her job had given her a lot of insight into the hidden mechanisms of office politics, and the capabilities and weaknesses of the people they worked with. With Rome, her usual guards were gone, wiped completely out of her consciousness. She simply responded to him on all levels, too happy just being with him to think of protecting herself. Her face, usually so remote and shuttered, became alive under the glow of his attention, and her Nile-green eyes lost their shadows to sparkle at him beguilingly.

The conversation didn't lapse when he drove her home, and they were so intent that, when he stopped the car in front of her condo, they sat in the car like teenagers reluctant to end a date, rather than going inside for coffee to finish the evening. The streetlights illuminated the interior of the car with silvery light, washing away all shades of color except for the darkness of his hair and eyes and the pale sheen of her hair. She was ethereal in the artificial moonlight projected by the streetlights, her low voice gentle in the darkness.

Rome suddenly reached out and took her hand. "I've enjoyed this. It seems like forever since I've been able to talk to a woman. I haven't had a relationship with a woman since Diane died. I don't mean sex," he explained calmly. "I'm talking about being able to be friends with a woman, to talk to her and enjoy her company, to relax with her. I think I've missed that the most. Tonight… well, it's felt good. Thank you."

Sarah turned her hand in his and squeezed his fingers lightly. "That's what friends are for."

He walked with her up to her apartment. Sarah unlocked the door and opened it, reaching inside to turn on the light before she turned to face Rome again. Her smile was gently sad, for she hated to see the night end. It had been, for all its lack of drama, one of the best times of her life. "Good night. It's been fun." More than fun. It had been heavenly.

"Good night." But he didn't leave. Instead he stood in the doorway, soberly regarding her. He lifted his hand and stroked her cheek with his forefinger,

then slid his hand around to cup her chin in his palm. He leaned toward her, and Sarah went weak with anticipation, her eyes widening as fevered delight shot through her. He was going to kiss her again. Lightly his mouth touched hers, his lips moving with tender expertise over her parted, breathless mouth. His warm taste filled her, and Sarah's lashes fluttered, then slowly closed. With a zephyr of a sigh she swayed into his arms; he needed no more encouragement than that. Locking his arms around her, he pulled her up against his chest and gradually deepened the kiss, as if he were wary of going too fast for her, giving her time to accept or reject each new move.

There was no question of her rejecting him. It wasn't in Sarah's makeup to say no to Rome in any way. She felt the heat of his body burning her through the layers of their clothing, and the warmth was a beacon that drew her closer. She wound her arms around his neck and eagerly accepted the more intimate intrusion of his tongue. A naked, wanting heat began building in her, and she wanted to be closer to him, to mold herself against him so tightly that his flesh would be hers.

His hands moved restlessly over her back, wanting to seek richer ground but restricted by the tight control he kept on himself and the situation. Sensing her safety with him, Sarah kissed him with undisguised hunger, not caring that he might look beyond the obvious explanation for her behavior and arrive at the correct conclusion that her attraction to him went beyond sex. But sex with him would be so good, she thought giddily, clinging to him. His experience was obvious in the firm but gentle way he touched her, the leisure with which he approached every caress. If he'd taken her into the bedroom right then, she'd have followed him without a murmur of protest.

But he lifted his mouth from hers, though he sighed and rested his forehead against hers for a moment before reaching up and disentangling her arms from about his neck, then setting her away from him. "Now it really is good night. I'm going to be in bad shape if this goes on much longer, so I'm stopping it here. I'll see you Monday morning, at work."

Quickly Sarah reached for her composure, drawing it about her like a garment, and she tried to disguise the raggedness of her breathing. Her body felt betrayed, but he was right: it had to stop there, or it wouldn't stop at all. "Yes. Good night," she breathed, before stepping into her apartment and quietly closing the door.

Rome went to his car, but sat in it for a long time before starting it and driving away. No, she wasn't cold at all, despite the way she looked and that ice-queen manner she used. He hadn't wanted to leave her; all his senses had been clamoring for the comfort to be found in her soft, warm body, but to his surprise, he'd found that he couldn't take her as casually as he'd taken the other women who'd been with him the last two years. She was Diane's friend, and Diane had loved her; his conscience wouldn't allow him to treat her as a sexual convenience. Besides, he really had enjoyed having dinner with her. She had a surprisingly keen sense of humor, and when she relaxed, she was really lovely, with her eyes sparkling and her soft mouth curved into a smile.

And when she kissed him, she'd kissed him as if she meant it. The unquestioning response she'd given him had almost driven him beyond the boundaries of his control. The feel of her soft hips pressing into him was enough to make him forget everything but the warm female body in his arms. Far from diminishing on closer acquaintance, the physical interest he'd felt in her for years was intensifying every time he saw her. He'd seen her long white-gold hair in a shimmering halo around her shoulders, and now he wanted to see it spread across a pillow as she lay waiting for him, her slim, graceful body bare, her mouth swollen and pouty from his kisses. A possessive surge made him grind his teeth, and he thought of the cold shower he'd have to take before he'd be able to sleep. If he'd stayed with her, he'd be relaxed and sleepy by now, all of his tensions drained out of him.

But she wasn't just any woman. He couldn't use her and then toss her aside. Apart from the fact that they had to work together, he wanted more from her than that. A one-night stand wouldn't do it with her; he wanted to unlock all her secrets, thrill time and time again to the sweet, hot way she melted against him. He thought of having an affair with her, and was surprised to suddenly find himself wondering if an affair would be enough to satisfy him. He wanted to know everything about her; he wanted to completely shatter her cool control and learn all the things that he could do to give her pleasure. He was adrift, and he needed Sarah right then more than he could comprehend, in all ways.

It was more than just physical, he realized abruptly. He could talk with her; she was intelligent, amusing, but there was the added bonus that he didn't *have* to talk to her, because she had a quality of serenity that made silence

possible. Whenever he looked into the shadows of her exotic green eyes, he had the feeling she understood everything, without words.
But she was a dedicated career woman; she'd made it pretty clear over the years that she did just fine on her own, thank you, without a man making demands on her time. She'd probably reject out of hand any hint of seriousness from him, so he had to keep it light, casual, let her become accustomed to being in his company. He had doubts, though, about his ability to keep it light whenever she turned into his arms and answered his kisses so ardently. He wanted to throw her across a bed and kiss her from her head to her feet, feast his senses on the sleek womanliness of her body. But what would she say?
Maybe she wouldn't reject an offer of an affair. She was, after all, a modern, adult woman; if her response to him was anything to go by, she was willing to have sex with him, but he knew from working with her that she kept her personal life strictly separated from her business life. That would be one strike against him, but he thought he could eventually convince her. He'd take it slowly with her, not rushing her, letting her lower all those defenses of hers. He couldn't say why, but he sensed that she was wary with him, deep inside where he couldn't see. Perhaps she was wary with all men. Diane had wondered aloud sometimes if Sarah hadn't had a married lover and been burned pretty badly by him.
There was a well-camouflaged vulnerability about her, and he wondered what fool had been stupid enough to have all that pale glory in his bed and let her slip away from him.
Sarah hadn't expected to hear from Rome again that weekend, so when she answered the phone the next afternoon and heard his voice, a thrill of pleasure sang through her. Before she could do more than say hello, however, he cut across her greeting.
"Sarah, Henry's had a heart attack, a bad one."
Shocked, Sarah almost dropped the phone, and she tightened her grip on it. Her boss hadn't seemed the sort to be struck by heart trouble. He was a small man, wiry to the point of thinness, and very active. He was an avid golfer, jogged every day, and in Sarah's memory had never indulged in any of the excesses people were warned against. He wasn't the dy-namic man that Rome was, but Sarah was fond of him. "Will he live?" she finally asked quietly, going straight to the most important question.

“It’s touch and go. His wife called me; I’m at the hospital now.” Someone in the background said something to him, and Rome said, “Hang on a minute.” He covered the receiver with his hand, reducing his words to a muffled jumble of sounds. Then he came back to her, his voice brisk. “He took some reports home with him this weekend that we’ll need Monday morning. Can you go over to his house and pick them up? The housekeeper will let you in.”

“Yes, of course,” she agreed automatically. “Which reports do you need?”

“The Sterne financial statement, and the projected growth pattern. Look, go through his briefcase and pull out whatever you think we’ll need. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“But what hospital is he in—?” Sarah began, only to be cut off by a click. Well, there wasn’t anything she could do now anyway. She’d find out more the next morning, and perhaps then there would be a more definite prognosis than “touch and go.” Distressed by her boss’s sudden illness, she quickly combed her hair, then drove over to his house. As instructed, the housekeeper let her in, and the tiny little woman told Sarah the details. Mr. Graham had seemed fine that morning, and had played nine holes of golf. After lunch, he’d complained of pains in his left arm, then abruptly collapsed.

“It can come at any time,” the housekeeper said solemnly, shaking her head. “You just never know.”

“No, you never do,” Sarah agreed.

It was the next morning, when she was called to an unusual meeting in Mr. Edwards’s office, before Sarah realized that Mr. Graham’s heart attack could drastically affect her own job. Rome was present too, his dark eyes concerned as he watched her.

Sarah darted a quick glance at him, quivering as she thought of the way he’d kissed her, then just as quickly looked away. She couldn’t meet the intensity of his gaze and keep her mind on her job, and that was distressing. No matter how much pressure she’d been under, she’d always been able to perform her duties; it was upsetting to realize that Rome could throw her off balance with just one look.

“Sarah, sit down, please,” Mr. Edwards invited, his shrewd eyes kind as he watched her. Sarah had always gotten along with Mr. Edwards, but he’d never before asked her to attend a meeting. She sat down and calmly folded her hands in her lap.

“Henry won’t be back,” Mr. Edwards said gently. “I’ve talked to his doctor personally. If he takes it easy, avoids stress, and doesn’t have another attack, he may live a number of years, but he won’t be able to work. He’s going to take an early retirement. Rome is being promoted to senior vice president.”
Again Sarah risked a quick glance at Rome, to find him still watching her with that unnerving intensity. He leaned forward in his chair and offered, “I can’t hire you as my secretary. Kali has been my secretary for years, and of course she’ll move up with me.”
That wasn’t a surprise. Sarah gave him a gentle smile that ripped through his insides, causing his fist to clench suddenly. She hadn’t expected to be his secretary; it would never have worked anyway. She simply couldn’t have worked so closely with him, every day. It had been bad enough just seeing him occasionally. “Yes, of course. Am I being fired?”
“Good lord, no!” Mr. Edwards said, startled. “No, don’t think that at all. But we wanted to give you a choice. I’m bringing a man in from Montreal to replace Rome, and his secretary doesn’t want to relocate. If you want the job, it’s yours, and he’s agreeable. If you’d rather transfer to some other department, just say so. You’ve done an outstanding job for Spencer-Nyle over the years; the choice of jobs is yours.”
Sarah thought of transferring, but she really liked the intense atmosphere of the executive offices, where decisions were made that affected thousands of people. The challenge kept her interested, and though she was in proximity to Rome, the fast pace of her work tended to keep her mind off him during the day.
“I’d like to be his secretary,” she finally answered gravely. “What’s his name?”
“Maxwell Conroy. He’s been directing our Montreal office very competently. I believe he’s English.”
“Yes,” Rome confirmed. Probably Rome had already pulled Maxwell Conroy’s personnel file from the computer and memorized every word of it.
“Good,” Mr. Edwards said heartily, rising to his feet and signaling that they were dismissed. Rome followed Sarah out the door, but didn’t return to his own office. He was close behind her as she went into her office, and he closed the door behind them. Feeling absurdly nervous, Sarah moved away from him and sought refuge behind her desk.
“I want you to know,” he murmured, leaning over the desk and bringing his face close to hers, “I want you for my secretary… badly… but my common

sense tells me that I'd never get any work done. I'd be the stereotypical boss who chases his secretary around the desk, so for the sake of the company, I suppose I'll have to keep Kali."
Sarah stared at him, losing herself in the dark wells of his eyes. "I understand," she whispered.
"Do you?" He straightened, his smile quizzical as he looked down at her. "I'm not so certain that I do. Maybe you can explain it. Will you go out to dinner with me tonight?"
She normally didn't make dates during the week, as she never knew when she would have to work late, but when Rome asked her, her usual caution flew out the window. "Yes, please." She couldn't hide the pleasure in her eyes, and he stared at her for a moment before he leaned down once again and kissed her once, hard.
"I'll pick you up at eight. How does Chinese sound?"
"Wonderful. I love Chinese."
Her hands shook after he'd gone when she tried to get through her routine paperwork. This was beginning to look like a serious relationship, and there was no way she could back off from it, no way she even wanted to. She thought of Diane, and her eyes closed briefly. She would have died in Diane's place, if she could have, but no one had been given a choice. Rome was free now, physically and legally if not emotionally, and whatever chance she had with him, Sarah meant to take it.

* * *

If he didn't have a business dinner scheduled, Rome took her out every night that week. Sarah didn't question her good fortune; she simply enjoyed every moment she had with him. Reminding herself that he'd asked only to be friends, she tried not to say anything or make any gestures that he could interpret as being flirtatious, though sometimes that hardly seemed to matter. When he kissed her good night, his light kiss would linger, as if he were inexorably drawn to the soft warmth of her mouth, and soon she'd be locked in his arms as they kissed with all the pent-up fervor of teenagers. But there was no more than that; he always drew away before any deeper intimacy developed between them, and Sarah took that to mean that he didn't intend any serious relationship to grow between them. He seemed content with things as they were; he had companionship and lively conversation from her, as well as the comfort of shared interests. She wanted more; she wanted everything he had to give, but perhaps he *was*

giving her all he had. She knew that Diane was never far from his mind, and whenever they talked about her, as they inevitably did, his expression would grow bleak.

A week after Mr. Graham's heart attack, Maxwell Conroy flew in from Montreal. He was a tall, lean Englishman with a precise British upper-class accent, a cap of golden hair, and the liveliest, most wickedly dancing blue-green eyes Sarah had ever seen. He was more than handsome; he had an ageless, aristocratic beauty to him that held women bemused, staring at him helplessly. If Sarah had been able to see anyone but Rome, she would probably have fallen in love with Maxwell Conroy on sight, but as it was, he received only her usual polite, slightly remote smile.

He wasted no time. The first time Sarah was alone with him he asked her out to dinner.

She looked up at him with startled, wide eyes. There was no way of mistaking his intentions, not with those luminous eyes so plainly telegraphing his thoughts. She bit her lip; how could she refuse him without making things difficult between them at work? She didn't want to commit herself, though, because Rome could ask her out at any time. "I don't think that would be a good idea," she finally refused, keeping her voice gentle. "We have to work together, and you know that although there aren't any actual company rules against employees dating, it's generally discouraged within the same department."

"I also know that as long as people are discreet it's generally ignored."

She drew a deep breath. "I'm seeing someone else."

"Would he mind?" Maxwell asked promptly, and Sarah gave a low chuckle. "Probably not," she admitted, her laugh fading into an echo of pain that was revealed in the way the soft green of her eyes grew misty with shadows.

"Then he's a fool," Maxwell said under his breath, his eyes on her sleek, pale knot of hair. "If you should decide to give someone else a chance, do let me know."

"Yes." For a moment, she met his warm, piercing gaze. "I will."

In all truth, she was more attracted to Maxwell than she'd been to any other man in her life, except for Rome. She'd liked Maxwell on sight, and in a curious way she felt relaxed with him, for she sensed that he recognized the boundaries she'd set and would respect them until she gave him permission to go beyond them.

That afternoon Rome and Maxwell lingered in the hallway, finishing a discussion before leaving for the day. Sarah locked up the office and murmured a good night to them as she walked past, carefully not letting her glance linger on Rome.

Maxwell turned so he could watch her walk down the hallway, his brilliant eyes narrowed with interest. Rome's dark gaze sharpened, and he too turned to watch Sarah, noting the grace with which she walked, the way her skirt moved fluidly about her lovely legs. He didn't like the way Maxwell was looking at her, like a cat lovingly surveying the canary it was about to have for lunch, and a slow curl of anger began in his stomach.

"She's a very pretty woman," he commented, probing for a response, and every nerve in his body waited for Maxwell's answer.

Maxwell shot him an incredulous look. "Pretty? She's bloody beautiful. She's so subtle, so understated, that you have to really look to see how pure and classic her face is."

Rome had seen her face glowing with pleasure, her lips swollen from his kisses and begging for more. He was proceeding at an excruciatingly slow pace, waiting for a signal from her that she was feeling the frustration of ending their evenings with only kisses. Yes, she liked his kisses, but there was still an aloofness to her that he hadn't been able to break, and no matter how torridly she kissed him, she didn't invite him further. He was beginning to feel desperate, his body aching for release. He'd been devoting his evenings to her, so there'd been no casual meeting with any other woman to relieve his sexual urges. He hadn't come up against such a mental stone wall since he'd been a randy teenager, determinedly trying to seduce his virginal girlfriend every Friday night in the backseat of his car.

But if Sarah ever lost her self-control enough to give in to passion, it would be with him. He'd be damned if he'd let Maxwell see her with that cool reserve melted into primitive heat and longing. Her desire would be his, and his alone.

"I've noticed how she looks," he said evenly, but his tone signaled a warning to the other man. Maxwell looked at him sharply, then sighed.

"So, you've beaten me to her, have you?"

"I've known her for years," Rome replied obliquely.

That elicited a snort from Maxwell. "I've known my mother's housekeeper for years too, but I don't warn men away from her."

Rome laughed, something that had become easier during this past week. Despite himself, he liked Maxwell. Max might pursue Sarah relentlessly, but he'd never be sneaky about it; he'd simply take his chances. That made no difference to Rome's determination to have her all to himself, but he relaxed, his eyes meeting Max's with complete masculine understanding.
Max shrugged with an elegant movement of his lean shoulders. "I'll be waiting in the wings, if you should fail."
"I'm reassured," Rome said sardonically.
Max smiled at him wryly. "Don't be."

Chapter 3

The cocktail party to welcome Max to the Dallas headquarters was overflowing with people anxious to be seen by and talk with the upper echelon of Spencer-Nyle. Rome, Mr. Edwards, and Max were the center of attention, as they were the triumvirate that controlled billions of dollars and thousands of jobs. Mr. Edwards, a lean, quiet man whose shrewdness and corporate savvy had kept him at the top for fifteen years, had hand-chosen his lieutenants and been well-rewarded for his trust in them. Rome was being groomed for the chairmanship, which he would certainly attain when Mr. Edwards retired. Watching the ambitious young executives swarm around him, Sarah realized that it was common knowledge, up and down the ranks, that Rome was Mr. Edwards's chosen successor. Max, on the other hand, was an unknown, but already there was an ease between him and his superiors that told everyone he was on the inside.

Tired of being pumped for information about Max, Sarah developed the strategy of staying on the move. It took a well-planned schedule to move in, take up a handful of peanuts or dip a stalk of celery into the cheese dip, then waltz on without pausing long enough to give anyone an opening. She clutched her single drink of the evening in her hand, taking tiny sips and trying to eat enough to absorb the alcohol before it could go to her head. Earlier, a quick foray into the tiny kitchen, where the caterers were frantically trying to keep pace with the appetites of the guests, had produced a small glass of milk, which she had slugged back with all the delicacy of a stevedore downing his first frosty beer after working all day in hundred-degree heat.

"You're gobbling peanuts like you've been on a starvation diet," Rome said in her ear, startling her. He took the cocktail from her hand and replaced it with a tall glass filled with a pale amber liquid and ice cubes. "There. Drink this instead. Ginger ale." He winked at her, and finished the cocktail for her.

"I've already raided the refrigerator for milk," she laughed, her eyes twinkling up at him. "Did you think I was in danger of falling on my face before the party was over?"

He regarded her somberly, noting that there was no hint of the usual sadness in her eyes that night. Whether it was the small amount of alcohol she'd drunk that made her laugh so gaily, or whether something had happened to make her happy, he didn't know, but it didn't matter. Since it was as much a

business occasion as a social one, he hadn't brought her to the party, but he fully intended to visit her when it was over. From the way she was looking at him now, she might be relaxing those invisible restraints that had kept her from responding to him more fully.

"No, you'd never do anything as disgraceful as getting drunk," he finally said in answer to her question. "You're too much the perfect secretary. You already have Max eating out of your hand."

"Max is a dear," Sarah responded warmly, looking around for his tall, graceful figure and missing the way Rome's eyes darkened to a stormy black. "I was fond of Mr. Graham, but I'll admit that I enjoy working with Max more. Max keeps things hopping."

Introducing Max into the conversation had been a mistake. Rome moved instinctively, placing himself between Sarah and the rest of the room, blocking her view of Max.

"Do you mind if I come over tonight?" he asked, but there was a harsh note in his voice that commanded rather than asked, and Sarah eyed him warily.

"If you like. I wasn't going to stay much longer anyway. Have you had dinner, or is this all you've had too?" With a wave of her hand, she indicated the colorful but unfulfilling array of dips, snacks, and fresh vegetables that she'd been raiding all evening.

Rome had a healthy appetite. "I'm starving," he admitted. "Do you want to go out for a late dinner?"

"No, I think I'd rather stay home," she said, after considering the invitation for a moment. "I have some chicken left over from yesterday; how do you feel about chicken sandwiches?"

"I'd trade all that rabbit food for just one chicken sandwich." His mood lightening, he grinned at her, and Sarah smiled in return. He was more relaxed with her now than he'd ever been before, and she was blooming under his attention. Perhaps he was beginning to think of her as something other than a friend; the hope of it made her radiant, and the glow of her face beckoned more than one glance from the other men in the room.

Suddenly Max was at Rome's elbow, his smile tender as he looked at Sarah. "You really should be by my side," he said lightly, noting how well the apricot color of her dress suited her creamy complexion. "After all, I'm still totally lost without you. Without you to point me in the right direction these last few days, I'd have made a perfect idiot of myself."

He'd already stretched his hand out for Sarah when Rome forestalled him by extending his own arm, blocking the gesture. Something hard and frightening was in his dark face as he looked at Max. "I've already warned you once," he said with soft, purring menace. "Sarah is off-limits to you."
"Rome!" Shocked, taken completely off guard, Sarah gasped his name, dismay filling her. How could he behave like this at a business function?
"She isn't wearing your ring," Max pointed out calmly, not turning a hair. "You'll have to take your chances."
White with distress at the way a casual, lighthearted conversation had turned so abruptly into barely restrained male aggression, Sarah stepped back from both of them. "Stop it!" she ordered, her voice shaking so much that it was barely above a whisper. "Don't either of you dare say another word!"
Rome's nostrils flared and he moved swiftly, his hard arm passing around Sarah's slender waist. "I'm taking Sarah home," he said deliberately, his hard fingers biting into her soft flesh. His words were loud enough to be heard, and several people turned to look at them. "She doesn't feel well. Make our excuses, Max; see you in the office."
Sarah knew that she was pale enough to give credence to his lie, and he hustled her out of the suite before anyone could approach. The arm around her waist had lifted her almost off her feet; he was effectively carrying her.
"Rome, stop it," she protested, trying to wriggle away from him and walk under her own power.
He swore softly under his breath and adjusted his grip on her, leaning down to slide his other arm under her knees and lift her completely into his arms. Sarah caught her breath as the swift motion made her head whirl dizzily, and she clutched at his shoulders. The elevators were down a long corridor, and they passed a man in a white dinner jacket who stared after them with great interest.
"You're making a scene," she whispered. "What's wrong with you?" She was too startled to even be angry, but she felt as if she were groping her way through a fog, because she failed completely to understand his motives.
He jabbed the down button with his elbow, then bent his head and kissed her with such deliberate intimacy that she curled in his arms, her mouth opening for his tongue. He could have been standing in the middle of the street for all she thought about their location. When he kissed her like that,

every thought left her head, leaving her preoccupied only with the slow burning pleasure he gave her with just a kiss.
An electric ding signaled the arrival of the elevator. Still carrying her, Rome stepped into it; they were the only occupants, and she stared at him in bewilderment. His expression was clearly revealed under the bright artificial lights, but she was still unable to decipher it.
“You can put me down now,” she ventured softly. “Were you intending to carry me through the lobby of the hotel?”
“This is Texas,” he replied with a hint of wryness. “No one would be surprised, though for form’s sake I suppose I should throw you over my shoulder.” But he let her down, though he kept his arm firmly anchored around her waist.
“What was that all about?” she asked as the doors slid open and they stepped out into the vast ultramodern lobby, overwhelming with its glass and greenery.
“It’s called staking a claim.”
She considered that in silence for a moment. She wasn’t coy, nor did she believe in dissembling; she wasn’t going to simper and pretend she didn’t understand. On an instinctive level, though, she was a little alarmed by the swiftness with which he’d moved. She darted a quick nervous glance at him, one that he intercepted and read, and his mouth tightened fractionally. Looking at him, with his hard face set in determined lines, she knew that she’d been cut from the herd the way a stallion would isolate the mare he’d chosen. The thought made her mouth go dry, and her knees feel weak. Perhaps he wasn’t a native Texan, but he knew just how to go about it. The move Max had made on her had awakened a possessive streak in Rome, and instinctively he’d snatched her away from the other man; now he was determined to finalize his possession.
“My car is here,” she said, making a motion with her hand as if to halt him.
“Forget about it.” He didn’t even glance down at her as they stepped out onto the sidewalk, where the warm night breezes fanned his face. “I’ll bring you back for it in the morning.”
“I’d feel better if I drove it home.” She spoke firmly, and he sensed her decision, realizing immediately that the car gave her a feeling of independence that she needed, after the way he’d high-handedly whisked her away from the party. He didn’t want her out of his sight for a minute, but he was afraid that if he pushed too hard, he’d run the risk of making her

retreat back behind her cool mask. He was close, too close, to breaking her reserve for him to let his impatience ruin things now. Having her was becoming an obsession with him; shattering her control was a goal that occupied more and more of his time and thoughts.

"All right," he agreed, deciding to use the time alone during the drive to her apartment to cool himself down. He was feeling violent and caged, and he needed to ease himself with the soft magic of a woman's flesh. Sarah's flesh. She was the only specific woman he'd wanted since Diane's death, and he wanted her so violently that he almost resented her for getting to him the way she had.

She was so pale and composed and sure of herself, like an ice-queen. Would she be that cool and controlled in bed, or would those shadowy green eyes blaze with animal need? He imagined her beneath him, writhing in the throes of desire he'd awakened in her, with wild cries tearing up from the depths of her slender body as he drove into her again and again and again…

He stopped his fantasy, sweat breaking out on his forehead as he watched the graceful swaying of her body as she walked away from him. He went to his own car and waited until her little red car passed him; then he pulled out behind her and followed closely on the drive to her apartment.

Sarah already had the door unlocked when he arrived, and she glanced at him warily as he entered behind her. His dark eyes still held that dangerous look, with a hunger in them that she understood but couldn't measure. She wanted him—she'd always wanted him—but at the same time she didn't want to be a one-night stand for him, a fast coupling for the purpose of easing him, forgotten as soon as it was finished. Spontaneously she tried to slow him down.

"Would you like coffee?" she invited, dropping her small purse on the sofa and moving away from him to the kitchen.

"No." His refusal was flat.

"I think I'll have something to eat, just to be on the safe side," she called over her shoulder. "How about one of those chicken sandwi—"

Without warning, he seized her from behind, his hard hands locking on her waist and pulling her back against him. His head bent, and his hot breath blew over the curve of her neck, lightly touching her sensitive skin and awakening all her nerve endings. She shivered a little, but didn't try to pull away; instead she pressed back against the virile contours of his body.

“I don’t want a sandwich,” he muttered, nipping at her neck with his teeth, then soothing the slight sting with butterfly strokes from the tip of his tongue. Sarah’s eyes closed in ecstasy, and she let her head fall back against his shoulder, baring the vulnerable curve of her throat to him.

His breathing was becoming hard and fast, rasping in her ear, and the way he moved against her buttocks vividly demonstrated his arousal. His right hand shifted from her waist, sliding boldly upward to rub and cup her breasts, his touch burning her through her dress.

“I want to break Max’s jaw when he looks at you as if he wants to do this.” There was a roughness to his voice that she hadn’t heard before, the guttural tone of fierce desire. His hands were all over her, stroking her as if to stake his claim as he’d told her he would do, and she leaned against him, her eyes closed, shaking a little as waves of pleasure assaulted her, each one stronger than the one before. With a harsh, impatient sound, he quickly tugged down the zipper of her dress and dropped the garment to her hips, then dispersed with her bra, freeing her breasts to his hands and gaze.

Sarah moaned softly as he cupped both of her breasts in his palms, kneading her soft flesh and gently pinching at her pink nipples. “You’re so beautiful,” he groaned and the rough desire in his voice made her feel beautiful. She loved the way the mounds of her breasts filled his palms, hardening and thrusting out to seek his touch.

Abruptly he turned her in his arms, holding her so tightly against him that her ribs ached, while he kissed her with blatant hunger. With his tongue, he told her what he wanted to do, and the symbolism was unmistakable. Sarah gasped under his mouth, seeking air to feed her starving lungs. “Rome… please!” But she didn’t know if she begged for mercy, or for more of the primal pleasure he was giving her. Her body was growing heavy and liquid, and a deep inner throbbing made her move restlessly against him.

“Yes,” he said against her throat, interpreting her plea as he chose. He bent her over his arm to give himself access to her tempting breasts, and she gave a thin cry when his hot mouth closed over her nipple, sucking it strongly into his mouth. Blackness swirled over her, a warm, velvet blackness that blocked out any reservations she might have had about belonging to him. She dissolved into a purely physical animal, instinctively seeking more of the pleasure he offered her. Her hands roamed his body as his had roamed hers, impatiently brushing away the layers of cloth that

separated her from his hard muscled flesh. He trembled wildly at her intimate touch and pleaded with her for more.

At some point, they dropped to the floor, the plush carpet soft under her back. Too impatient to undress her completely, he lifted her skirt out of the way and stripped her panty hose down her legs. Sarah reached for him, her expression rapt, lost in the passion he'd aroused in her, and he caught his breath sharply. "Easy, easy," he said hoarsely, not wanting it to end too quickly, and knowing he was perilously close to satisfaction. He wanted to make certain she was satisfied too; he wanted to see her face at the peak of her pleasure. He held back, twisting his body away from her inciting hands, while he stroked and petted her, bestowing fleeting, intimate caresses on her that had her arching for more.

Sarah cried out at the tension that was building in her, the sensation that was as frightening as it was pleasurable, as if she might explode into a thousand little pieces. His warm hand, his devilishly dancing fingers, were doing things to her that were destroying her control, her sense of self. "Let go, let go," he cajoled in a rough whisper against her ear, and she did, crying out unintelligible sounds of passion fulfilled, her hands clutching at him as her body writhed in the glory that consumed her.

Just as she began the downward slide into peace and relaxation, he pinned her to the floor with his weight, adjusted himself between her thighs, and thrust into her with one powerful deliberate movement. Sarah was unable to hold back the sharp single cry that tore from her throat, and her body jolted in shock. But she reached up to wind her arms around his neck, clinging to him, as she offered him the comfort of her loving body. He groaned thickly against her throat and lost all control, taking her swiftly, a little roughly, and somehow, despite her discomfort, lighting again that small spark of desire in her. It was over before that spark could grow into the inferno that would consume her; with a cry from between his clenched teeth, he reached his own pleasure.

The upheaval of her senses left Sarah dazed; she lay on the carpet after he'd rolled from her, her body feeling buffeted, shocked, and quite unlike her own. Alien sensations were still sending their wild messages to her brain, and she labored in a benumbed manner to sort out and understand them. She might have lain there and even gone to sleep if his angry, tightly controlled voice hadn't jerked her to full awareness.

"Damn it, Sarah, you could've warned me!"

Still a little disoriented, she sat up with movements that weren't quite coordinated, frowning in a faint, quizzical manner as she fumbled with her dress, pulling it up over her shoulders again and pushing at the skirt until it once again covered her legs. "I… what?" she mumbled in confusion; then she sighed in sudden weariness and lifted her hand to cover her eyes.

He swore, a basic Anglo-Saxon word that blasted against her sensitized skin, making her flinch slightly. She couldn't grasp why he was angry; was it because of Diane? She gave him a sudden haunted look that stopped him in his tracks, as if her eyes briefly lost their veil and let him see the pain that ravaged her daily. Then she looked away, and tried to gather her trembling legs beneath her to stand up.

He said something violent under his breath; then he crossed the room in three quick strides to lean down and swing her bodily into his arms, straightening without any sign of strain. "What did you expect?" he snapped, taking her to the bedroom and placing her on the bed. "Keeping me in the dark was a damned stupid thing to do!" Despite his anger, his hands were gentle as he undressed her.

Sarah lay quietly as he cared for her. Finally she'd understood the reason for his anger. Her inexperience wasn't what he'd expected. She only wanted to know if he'd been disappointed, or if he was angry because he'd been caught off balance. When he'd dressed her in a nightgown and propped her up on the pillows, he sat down on the bed beside her, the light from the single lamp throwing harsh shadows across his roughly etched face. He drew a deep breath, as if reaching for control.

A rather inappropriate hint of humor made a smile tug at her lips. She fought it, knowing that he wasn't in a humorous mood, but it spread anyway. Her soft mouth curved in a tender smile, and she teased gently, "Having sex hasn't turned me into an invalid. I could've undressed myself."

He glared at her, then saw the tenderness in her smile that invited him to share the moment with her. Realizing that he'd been treating her like someone who'd been wounded, he lost the hard edge of his temper, then found himself feeling sheepish. He fought off the feeling, keeping his expression grim. "Then you're luckier than you deserve to be. I could've hurt you, really hurt you. Damn it all, you should have told me it was your first time!"

"I'm sorry," she apologized gravely. "I didn't know the procedure."

For a moment he looked as if he would explode, pure fury burning in the dark depths of his eyes. But he was a man who controlled his temper, and he exerted that control now, refraining from even speaking until he trusted himself again. He finally thrust his hand roughly through his tousled hair, ruffling it even more. “You’re thirty-three years old. Why in *hell* would you still be a virgin?”

He sounded totally baffled, as if it were beyond his comprehension. Sarah shifted in embarrassment, fully realizing what an anachronism she was. If she’d been born even one generation earlier, she wouldn’t have been so obsolete; chastity would have been expected of her until she married. But instead she was a not-so-modern woman locked into a more progressive society. It wasn’t that she lacked the normal curiosity and desires, or that she was a prude; her deeply ingrained need for security had kept her from risking her “all,” as it were, in any relationship that would be too casual and transient to satisfy her instincts. Then she’d met Rome, and that had stopped cold any other man’s chances with her, but Rome had also been off-limits. If she couldn’t have him, she hadn’t wanted anyone else; it was that simple, and totally impossible to explain to him.

She didn’t even try to answer; she just looked at him, with the shadows once more gathering to dim the light that had been in her eyes.

Suddenly Rome quivered as if he’d been struck, staring down at her with an expression of torment on his face. What would Diane say, if she knew he’d just seduced her best friend? Pain clawed at his insides, pain and guilt, as he suddenly realized that the physical act of release he’d sought with other women, which had meant an act of physical betrayal, had been nothing compared to the way he’d just betrayed Diane with Sarah. Sarah hadn’t been just a faceless body to him. He’d been aware of her every moment; he’d wanted her for the qualities and characteristics that made her peculiarly herself. Not only that, the pleasure he’d had with her had been shattering, totally wiping out the memories that usually plagued him after sex, memories of making love with his wife, of lying in the darkness with her afterward and talking their hearts out. He hadn’t thought of Diane at all; Sarah had filled his mind and his senses, which was the greatest betrayal of all.

He had to move away from her. He surged to his feet and paced restlessly across the room, once again thrusting his fingers through his hair. Why did she have to lie there and look at him with those mysterious eyes? He

couldn’t even begin to understand her. He’d thought that if he could take her, reduce her to the common status of all the women who’d lain beneath him during the past two years, then she would lose her mystery and he’d no longer feel so obsessed by her, but that hadn’t happened. Instead she’d revealed a secret that made her even more mysterious, and now she’d retreated again into her private self, too distant for him to reach.

It was, abruptly, more than he could stand. He felt suffocated, and he glared at her in anger at the panic that was consuming him. “Hell,” he uttered in complete disgust. “Look, are you all right?”

Sarah lifted a slim eyebrow. “I’m fine.” She sounded cool and in perfect control, as usual.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” he muttered. “I’m sorry; I know I’m acting like a bastard, but I can’t—” He stopped, shaking his head in bafflement. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He was at the door before Sarah found her voice again. “There’s no need. I really am all right.”

The look he gave her was almost violent; then he was gone, and a few seconds later she heard the door slam. Immediately she got out of bed and went to lock it, then crawled back into bed, wincing as her body protested the movement.

So, already the fragile companionship that had been growing between them was shattered, by a swift, consuming act of lust. That was all it had been for him, though she’d gone into his arms with love. She knew that it was much too soon in their relationship for it to be able to support the stress of lovemak-ing. He’d taken her, and she’d seen the anger, the guilt, in his eyes when he’d looked at her. Because she was so acutely sensitive to him, she’d known that he was thinking about Diane and regretting the wanton moments on the carpet.

Sarah didn’t cry; she’d hoped, but the dream had been so brief that she hadn’t really let herself start believing in it yet. He was gone, but then she’d never had him, not in any way that counted. She hadn’t had his trust, or his love. His interest in her hadn’t made sense anyway.

What now? Could she really go on working for the same company as he did, seeing him every day? Or had she finally reached the stage where she couldn’t take any more, when she’d have to be cowardly in the interests of her own sanity? After all, she’d been brave for more years than she cared to remember, and bravery had gotten her nothing but a constant ache in her

heart and an empty apartment. She was thirty-three, after all; she was already past the prime age for marrying and having children, and the love that she'd always craved had eluded her. The total summation of her life was that she had a nice apartment, a snazzy car, and had wasted her life by loving her best friend's husband. Time, and life, were passing her by, slipping away from her outstretched arms without even pausing to look at her.

Midnight was the time for making plans for the future, when the past had proved barren. She lay there, forcing herself to be logical and deliberate, even when it hurt. In her own best interests, she'd have to find another job. She'd never get over Rome if she saw him every day. She would begin looking for a suitable job Monday morning, and she didn't think it would be that difficult; she'd made a lot of friends and contacts during her years with Spencer-Nyle, when she'd worked so hard to develop a career that she'd never really wanted. Diane had been the ambitious one, making stupendous plans that she'd chucked the instant after meeting Rome. All Sarah had ever wanted was someone to love, a husband who looked at her with devotion, children to love and raise as best she could, and a home to provide a warm haven from the rest of the world. The man who loved her wouldn't be Rome, she realized anew, and the pain struck her as strong and fresh as it had from the first.

What good would leaving Spencer-Nyle do her if she kept mooning over a man she couldn't have? It was time—past time—for her to forget about Rome and start looking for someone who would love her in return. Max's lean, intelligent face swam into her view, and she caught her breath. Max? She wouldn't use him. He deserved better than that. But the fact remained that she'd been more attracted to Max than she'd ever been to any man other than Rome. If he asked her out again, she'd accept. After all, she would be leaving the company, so there wouldn't be the dangers inherent in a boss-secretary relationship.

She could even grow to love him. Perhaps she'd never love him with the depth or fierceness that she loved Rome, but there were different types of love in the world, all of them precious. She'd no longer reject any of them.

Her brave new plans were never given a chance to work. The strident sound of the doorbell jerked her awake before seven o'clock the next morning, and she stumbled out of bed, then had to find a robe to drag on before answering the door.

Leaning against the door tiredly, stretching muscles that ached, she called cautiously, “Who is it?”
“Rome.”
Sarah stiffened against the door, suddenly alarmed. How could she get over him if he kept coming back into her life? She didn’t want to be hurt any more. She hadn’t let herself think about the way he’d taken her because she couldn’t handle that yet, couldn’t begin to accept that he’d had her, then walked away. Diane had come between them, and she always would be between them.
“Sarah,” he commanded in a low voice when she didn’t open the door. “We have to talk. Let me in.”
Biting her lip, knowing that there had to be a postmortem, she unlocked the door and opened it, stepping away as he entered the apartment. Quickly she looked at him, then averted her eyes. “Coffee?”
“Yes, and plenty of it. I haven’t slept.”
He looked it. He’d changed clothes, into jeans and a red polo shirt that looked fantastic with his olive complexion, but the lines on his face were harsher than ever, and dark circles lay under his eyes. He was somber, even grim. He followed her into the kitchen and while she put on the coffee he leaned his hip against the tall kitchen stool, one booted foot hooked on the bottom rail of the stool, the other leg stretched out before him. He watched her closely, wondering how she could look so unruffled even though it was plain he’d gotten her out of bed. Except for the thick pale tangle of her hair, she was as remote as an alabaster statue, cool and lovely to look at but not inviting to the touch.
“I want you,” he said suddenly, startling her, and her eyes widened.
“I’d planned to have you,” he continued, gauging every nuance of her expression, noting her reactions. “Last night didn’t get out of hand; I’d intended to have you from the moment I hustled you out of that party. I was going to take you, then forget about you. But it didn’t work that way,” he said softly.
Sarah stared at the coffee maker as if the slow drip of the coffee into the glass pot fascinated her. “I’d say that everything went according to plan,” she forced herself to say lightly. “I don’t have anything to compare it to, but it seems to me now that as far as seductions go it was highly successful. I didn’t even think of saying no.”

“That’s when things started to go wrong. You were a virgin, and I couldn’t forget about you. I jeopardized you by my lack of control—”
Sarah’s head jerked up, as the thought of pregnancy occurred to her for the first time. She stared at him for a long moment, counting in her head, then relaxed against the cabinet. “I should be safe from that,” she muttered. “It’s the wrong time.”
“Thank God,” he sighed, closing his eyes. “I couldn’t have stood that. I have enough on my conscience as it is.”
“I’m an adult,” she pointed out briskly, thrusting alarm away from her. “You don’t have to feel responsible for me.”
“I know I don’t have to, but I do. Diane loved you,” he said, staring at her intently. “She’d have done away with anyone who hurt you, and now I’ve done my best to hurt you. She’d want…she’d want me to take care of you,” He drew in a deep shuddering breath, his eyes glittering, his entire body taut with stress.
“Sarah, will you marry me?”

Chapter 4

Sarah stared at him. As marriage proposals went, that one was fairly insulting, so much so that for a long moment she couldn’t even react. She loved him, but this was a bit much. So he thought she’d marry him to ease his guilty conscience? Was she such a desperate case that he thought she’d jump at the chance? Worse, was he right? Trembling inside, she didn’t know if she’d have the strength to turn him down, even knowing that he’d asked her for the worst possible reason.
To give herself time, she turned to get two coffee mugs down from the cabinet, keeping her back turned to him while she concentrated on regulating her breathing, carefully easing her senses back onto an even keel. Turning one smooth ceramic mug in her fingers, she finally managed one normal word. “Why?”
Rome’s skin had an ashen hue beneath the olive tint, and she knew that it hadn’t been easy for him to ask her. How could it be, when he still waited, in his heart, for Diane?
Like any good businessman, he began by outlining the advantages of a merger. “I think we could have a good marriage. We’re both career people;

we'd each understand the pressures the other was under, the demands that cut into the time we'd normally have together. We get along better now than we ever have, and the trips I have to take would give us breathing space away from each other. I know you're used to being independent, and having time to yourself," he said cautiously, watching her in an effort to guess her reception to his proposal, but it was like searching for expressions on the smooth, cool face of a china doll. "We'd know how to stay out of each other's way."

The coffee was finished. Sarah dumped the grounds, then poured the steaming deliciously scented brew into the mugs. Handing one to him, she leaned against the counter and blew gently on the coffee to cool it. "If we need so much time apart, why bother to get married?" she finally asked. "Why not just keep on the way we've been?"

His dark face softened as he looked at the pale tumble of hair that curled itself like living arms around her shoulders. "Sarah, if you were a woman who could accept a casual affair, you wouldn't have been a virgin last night."

Shivering, Sarah reminded herself that he was a good chess player. He knew how to defend and at tack, and how to slide in under a weak argument. No, she wasn't a woman to sleep around, because she'd never been able to see any man but him. Couldn't he see the obvious? A woman who'd been a virgin for so long, despite the normal opportunities to change that condition, could have had only one reason for going without question into his arms the night before.

"It was good last night," he said softly, his words winding themselves around her heart like a vine, tugging her close to him, bending her to his will. "You felt so good that I went a little crazy, but I could still feel the way you softened inside. If I could have waited, would you have gone a little crazy for me? Was it beginning to feel good to you?"

He slid off the stool, coming closer to her, his dark velvet voice seducing her all over again. Standing before her, he drank his coffee, watching her all the while over the rim of the mug.

Sarah sipped the coffee too, holding it on her tongue so the tart taste of it could delight her taste buds. She could feel the heat climbing in her face, and she cursed her pale complexion that made even the faintest of blushes instantly apparent. "Yes, I liked it," she finally admitted jerkily.

“I’d be a good husband. Faithful, hardworking, loyal, just like Fido the Wonder Dog, or whatever the mutt’s name was.” She glanced up quickly and saw the amusement sparkling in the depths of his eyes, golden now as his mood lightened. “I like being domesticated,” he continued, his clipped accent slowing as he thought out his words. “I like the stability of it, the companionship, someone to drink coffee with on rainy mornings and cold winter nights. It’s raining now; isn’t this nice?” He cupped the ball of her shoulder in his palm, his fingers kneading the delicate joint; then he deliberately slid his hand inside the collar of her robe, his fingers gliding under the edge of her nightgown to fondle the cool sweetly swelling curves of her breasts.

Sarah held herself perfectly still, her body quivering inside from the run of pleasure. He wasn’t being fair; how could she think clearly when her body, superbly fashioned by nature to respond to the touch of the man she loved, was demanding all her attention? Intellect was a fine thing, but Rome was fast teaching her how little her mind could control her body’s natural desire.

Rome watched her closely, seeing the soft mists of passion cloud the cool directness of her eyes. Her lashes drifted down, her lids growing heavier, and her breath was coming faster between her softly parted lips. His own heartbeat was picking up speed as he felt her breasts growing warm beneath his touch, the enchanting woman smell of her rising to his nostrils and telling him, without him even thinking of it, that she was his for the taking. Before it was too late, he drew his hand back, but the need to touch her drove him to reach for her again, clasping her slim waist and pulling her to him. Her coffee sloshed dangerously close to the rim, and he rescued both of them, setting his own mug down, then taking hers and placing it beside the other one.

Then she was securely in his arms, her soft body nestled against his, adjusting herself without thought to the hard contours of his muscular frame, and that adjustment made both of them gasp.

“You see?” he muttered shakily, burying his face against the slippery silk of her hair. “We’re good together. Damned good.”

Sarah laced her arms around his back, feeling the dampness of his shirt where he’d sprinted through the rain. The fresh smell of rain and the coming autumn mingled with his own vital male scent, luring her, and she rubbed her nose into the hollow of his shoulder. What kind of marriage would she have with him, heaven or hell? Would she be content with what

he could give her, or would she slowly shrivel inside, dying because she wanted all of him and his heart would always be Diane's? At that moment, standing there in the kitchen with their arms locked around each other, she felt that she could ask nothing more of heaven, but when the daily grind of life wore her down, would she need more from him?

Slowly his big hands moved up her back, finding and stroking each separate rib and vertebra. "Say yes, baby," he cajoled huskily, the first endearment he'd ever used with her, and she melted inside, going weak. "I want you; I've always wanted you, all those years when you were giving me that delicate cold shoulder. There was no way I was going to jeopardize my marriage to Diane by going after you; I loved her too much. But I've always wanted you, and Diane isn't between us anymore. I think… I think she'd like the idea of us taking care of each other."

Her face hidden in his shoulder, Sarah closed her eyes in pain. When he spoke of Diane, every word was a sword that cut into her heart. How could she ever be strong enough to live with the knowledge that she'd never replace Diane in his affections? But even as she writhed inside in pain, Rome lifted her even more tightly against him, and his action sent all her thoughts into confusion. Gently shifting their positions, he leaned back against the cabinets and spread his legs to support Sarah's weight, pulling her intimately against him and holding her tightly to his chest.

"If I'm going to have you, then I'll have to marry you."

Catching her jaw in his fingers, he gently forced her to lift her head so he could see her face. "You're just not the type of woman who could handle anything less. I'm offering you a commitment, a legal relationship with all the rights that grants you. I'll be faithful to you; I prefer a commitment with one woman to a thousand one-night stands with women whose names I can't even remember. We know each other; we know what to expect. And we're friends; we can talk to each other about the office, about a hundred things that we have in common. We'd have a partnership that a lot of people would envy."

He had it all worked out, all the logical reasons why a marriage between them would work. Their home would be an extension of the office, with sex as the icing on the cake. She could just see them, tidily putting folders into their respective briefcases, then falling on each other with feral desire, office decorum shattered under the fierce need to blend their bodies together in the ancient ritual that ensured the survival of the species.

Abruptly his hands tightened on her, and she could feel him tensing against her body. “Before you make up your mind, there’s something you should know.” A harsh note, barely revealed, told her how much he didn’t want to say what he was thinking, but in a negotiation, the negatives were always weighed, as well as the positives, and he was treating this like a business merger.

“I don’t want children,” he said harshly. “Ever. After losing Justin and Shane, I can’t bear being around children. If you want children, then I’ll back off now, because I can’t give them to you.” Pain twisted his features; then he controlled himself, and an expression of bleak resignation settled in place. “I just can’t get over…” His voice trailed off, and she felt his shoulders draw up, as if bracing themselves under a burden that showed no signs of lifting.

Sarah swallowed, wondering how many marriage proposals were followed by a bluntly honest statement from the prospective groom on why the woman shouldn’t marry him. How many women would want to marry a man who offered companionship instead of love, a man who didn’t want a family, a man who would be gone on frequent trips? And she remembered what he’d said the night he’d packed up all the boys’ things—that he hadn’t been able to sleep in the same bed with a woman since Diane’s death. She wouldn’t even be able to share the nights with him! A woman would have to be crazy to accept such a proposal, Sarah thought. Crazy in love.

She stepped back from him and looked at his hard dark face, the face that had lived in her dreams for years. She thought only briefly of her dream of raising a houseful of children, his children, then gently told her dream goodbye. Those children lived, after all, only in her dreams, while Rome was very real, and if she turned him down now, heaven might slip forever out of her grasp. So he didn’t love her; he cared for her, respected her, enough to want to make their relationship legal. Miracles *did* sometimes happen, and as long as they lived, there was always the chance that he would grow to love her. But even if he never offered her his heart, he was offering her all that he could. She might turn him down, out of pride, but pride wouldn’t replace the living warmth of the man. Pride wouldn’t make love to her with the swift hard passion he’d shown her the night before. With a woman’s intuitive wisdom, she knew that, so long as he desired her so strongly, she had a chance of warming his wintry heart again.

“Yes,” she said calmly. “Now what?”

Her brief matter-of-fact acceptance didn't shift him off balance—his only reaction was a deep intake of breath that swelled his chest—then he pulled her against him again. "What I'd like to do is strip you naked and take you on the nearest flat surface I can find—"

Sarah interrupted, groaning. "The floor again," she protested teasingly.

"Or the table. Or the cabinet top." The powerful reaction of his body told her that, while his words were teasing, his body was serious. Sarah held her breath, wondering if her already stiff muscles could survive an amorous encounter on the hard tile of the kitchen floor. Clasped against him as she was, she couldn't see his face, or she'd have cried out at the passion etched on his features.

Rome held her tightly to him, wanting to absorb her into his flesh. The relief that had flooded through him at her casual acceptance of his proposal was so great that he'd felt almost faint; then he'd been seized by the primeval desire to finalize their bargain in the most basic way possible. He wanted to brand her as his; feel again the softness of her body beneath him. He'd planned his proposal very carefully, couching it in the most logical terms he could present, letting her know he wouldn't disrupt her carefully ordered world. The idea of marrying her had come to him during the night, and he really did feel that Diane would approve of his marrying Sarah. More than that, he liked the idea of her having his name and being in his bed every night. The fiercely possessive streak in him wanted to mark her off-limits to every other man, especially before that damned Max Conroy could work his potent charm on her. But until she'd looked at him after he'd asked her to marry him and very calmly said "Why?" he hadn't realized how desperately he needed her to say yes. Her affirmative answer, finally given, and in such an offhand manner that he was shaken by how little enthusiasm she had for the idea, had lifted a weight from him that he hadn't even known was there until it was gone and he felt his freedom from its restrictions. Lord, how he wanted her!

He rubbed his beard-roughened chin against her temple and reluctantly shifted her away from him. "We can wait," he said, wanting to embroil her in plans before she had a chance to have second thoughts. "We have to plan everything, and make arrangements."

"We have to make breakfast," she added, taking her cue from him and keeping everything light and practical. "Unless you've already eaten?"

“No, I hadn’t even thought about it. I didn’t realize I was hungry until you mentioned it, but damned if I’m not starving.”
She smiled a little, thinking that he’d just revealed that he’d been suffering from an attack of nerves, though she wasn’t going to drive herself mad trying to decide whether he’d been afraid she’d turn him down or afraid she’d accept.
“Let me comb my hair; then I’ll make the biggest breakfast you ever saw.”
“While you’re combing your hair, *I’ll* start on the biggest breakfast we ever saw,” he amended. “Do you want the works?”
She nodded, feeling happier than she ever had before, and her appetite seemed to have increased in response. Though normally a light eater, she felt hungry enough to put away a man-size breakfast. “I like my eggs over medium,” she informed him on her way out.
“I’ll expect you back before then. It doesn’t take that long to comb your hair!”
“How do you know?” she retorted smugly. “You’ve never seen me.”
His low chuckle followed her as she went to the bedroom. When the door was closed behind her, she sat down on the bed and clasped her hands on her knees, every muscle in her body quivering in delight. She couldn’t believe it. After she’d torn herself to pieces over him for years, he’d walked in the door and asked her to marry him. His reasons were logical, but that didn’t matter. To a starving woman, half a loaf was better than no bread at all. She thought of the mornings they would share, cooking breakfast together, lingering over a last cup of coffee, and her heart felt so full of happiness that she had trouble dragging oxygen into her chest A marriage opened up a whole new world of intimacy. Not just sexual intimacy, but the tiny things like sharing the bathroom mirror when they were in a rush to get ready for work, trading sections of the newspaper on Sunday mornings, having someone to rub the strain from her neck and shoulders after a hard day.
Suddenly she didn’t want to be away from him a moment longer than necessary. She splashed cold water over her face, combed her hair and pulled it back with a clasp on each side, and swiftly changed into jeans and an oversize white shirt. She rolled the sleeves up as she returned to the kitchen.
The bacon was frying when she entered the room, and she sniffed in deep appreciation. Rome was rummaging in her cabinets, and he emerged with a

box of instant pancake mix. “Pancakes *and* eggs,” he announced. “Silver-dollar pancakes.”
She shrugged and went along with him, not certain that her appetite was healthy enough for pancakes as well, but his probably was. While he was mixing the batter, she set the table, poured the orange juice, and got out the eggs.
“We’ll have to find a new apartment,” he said casually. “Neither of ours is large enough to hold all our things.”
“Ummm.” Thinking to spare him the necessity of spelling out to her that he wouldn’t be sleeping with her, she said casually, “I’d like to have a three-bedroom apartment, if we can find one at a reasonable price. It would be nice to have an extra bedroom in case anyone came to visit.”
He went curiously still, but his back was to her and she couldn’t see his expression. To let him know that she wasn’t going to dwell on the subject, she said just as casually, “I’ll have to quit my job.”
His head jerked around, his dark eyes incredulous.
“Well, I will.” She smiled at him. “I can’t work at Spencer-Nyle if I’m going to be married to you. It’s unprofessional, and I don’t think it would work very well, even if Mr. Edwards agreed.”
His jaw set grimly. “I didn’t think of that. I can’t ask you to quit your job for me. I know how much it means to you—”
“You don’t know anything,” she interrupted. “I was thinking of quitting anyway.” It was time Rome Matthews began learning a little about the woman he planned to marry, and the first lesson was to begin breaking it to him, gradually, that she wasn’t a dedicated, high-powered businesswoman who got the greatest satisfaction of her life from her job. “It’s just a job,” she said deliberately. “I like it, and I’ve done my best at it because I don’t believe in only half doing something, not because I’m devoted to it. I’d begun thinking of quitting, as I said. After last night, I didn’t see how I could go on working with you.”
He gave her a disbelieving look. “You’d quit just because we had sex?”
“I didn’t think I could keep things professional between us at work.”
“Look, I could arrange something—”
“No,” she said mildly, not giving him time to finish. “I’m not planning to sit on my rear and let you support me, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ve worked too hard to settle into a routine of soap operas, and I wouldn’t have anything else to occupy my time. I’ll get another job.”

“That’s not it,” he growled angrily. “I’m well able to support you even if you wanted to sit on your rear for three lifetimes. I just hate the thought of you giving up your job because of me.”
“It’s the only reasonable thing to do. I’m not *that* attached to it, and you’re an executive; I’m not.”
“You’ll look for another secretarial job?”
“I don’t know.” Thoughtfully she broke an egg into the skillet. “I have some money saved up; I might go into some sort of business for myself. I could open a dress shop, like every lady of leisure with money and time on her hands does.” She grinned at the thought.
He shook his head. “Whatever you want, as long as it’s what *you* really want. If you want to stay at Spencer-Nyle, I’ll throw my weight around.”
“I really think I’ll be happier out of the office routine. I’ve done it for a long time now, and I’m ready for a change.”
After a moment, he chuckled wickedly. “This is really going to drive Max crazy.”
“Rome!” Laughing helplessly at him, she shook her head. “What a fiendish thought! Did you ask me to marry you just so you could force Max to get a new secretary?”
“No, but it serves him right.”
“Don’t you like him?”
He lifted his eyebrows. “I like him a lot. He’s a hell of an executive. But liking him at work, and liking the way he looks at you are two different things.”
Sarah decided that she really owed Max a big favor if his interest had sparked the possessiveness in Rome that had resulted in last night. As she finished cooking the eggs, she stole glances at Rome, and a thrill went through her every time. They worked so well together, it could have been the hundredth breakfast they’d shared instead of the first. She only hoped that this first breakfast was an indication of how smoothly their married life would go. She wouldn’t push him, but she hoped, with every fiber of her being, that she could teach him how to love again.
Telling Max, that Monday morning, wasn’t the easiest thing she’d ever done. He was at first disbelieving, then outraged, as he realized that she was turning in her notice.
“The bloody barbarian did this deliberately,” he fumed, pacing up and down the office, so angry that his vivid eyes were glittering. Temper radiated from

him like electricity. “He knew you’d quit and leave me totally lost.”
“Thank you,” Sarah said dryly. “I can’t tell you how much it reassures me to think that Rome asked me to marry him solely to upset your routine.”
Max halted in his pacing, staring at her, and his eyes softened. “I need a good hard kick in the rear,” he finally admitted ruefully. “Ignore me, darling. My nose is out of joint because he’s already won the race, and I was left standing at the starting post. It’s so damned embarrassing.”
Sarah laughed, because the image of Max’s mooning over her was so ludicrous. He was sophisticated down to his fingertips, and every woman in the building would give her eye-teeth for a chance with him…every woman but herself. He watched her as she laughed, her face lit by the inner glow that riveted him every time he saw it. As if drawn by her gentle warmth, he moved closer to her, a little sad because that glow wasn’t for him, and she’d never grace his life as he’d so often imagined her.
“If he ever makes you unhappy, you know where I am,” he murmured, stroking her satin cheek with his forefinger. “Be careful, darling. Beneath that controlled corporate image the man’s a wolf on the prowl, and you’re just an innocent lamb. Don’t let him have you for lunch.”
Max didn’t state the obvious, that Rome didn’t love her, but she knew that the thought was in his mind. He was observant enough to know that Rome’s actions sprang from libido, not from emotion.
“You do know what you’re doing?” he worried.
“Yes, of course I do. I’ve loved him for a long time.”
“Does he know?”
She shook her head.
“Then, don’t tell him. Make him work for it; he’ll appreciate it more.” A shrewd look entered his eyes. “Why do I have a feeling that the lamb is going to get the best of the wolf?”
“I don’t know, but I hope you’re right,” she said shakily. “You don’t know how much I hope so!”
“Just remember: If it doesn’t work out, cut your losses. I’ll be here if you need me. I have a fantasy,” he mused. “It’s a very simple one. I fantasize that I take you back to England with me, marry you in the stone relic of a church where my family has shackled themselves for more generations than I can count, and get you with child. Providing heirs would be my favorite occupation.”

Sarah laughed again, blushing, and part of her wished it could have been Max. Her love would have been safe with him. But instead she'd given her heart to a man burdened by the past, a man who wanted her body and her companionship, but not the wealth of love inside her.

"May I kiss you?" he asked, sliding his hand from her cheek to cup it around her chin, lifting it so he could look her full in the face. "Just once, and I promise to never ask you again…as long as you're with Rome."

Looking into those wickedly dancing turquoise eyes, Sarah knew he didn't have a chaste good-bye kiss in mind. He wanted to kiss her with passion, with all the heat of his superb male body. She knew very well that Max wasn't in love with her, but she knew, as he did, that had things worked out differently he could have been the one she married. Only the timing of their initial meeting had prevented it. Knowing that she could have loved him if she hadn't loved Rome first and forever blinded herself to other men made her feel a little sad and a little happy at the same time. "Yes, as a good-bye kiss," she said, and rose a little on tiptoe to offer her mouth to him.

At the same moment that his mouth touched hers, Sarah heard the door open. She knew that Max heard it too, but he didn't pull away. With the devilishness of his personality, he instead drew her closer even when she stiffened reflexively against him, wrapping his arms around her and locking her tightly to the hard warmth of his body. He kissed her deeply, his tongue dancing across hers, taking his time about it and savoring the taste and feel of her. Every nerve in her body jingled, telling Sarah that it was Rome who'd entered, but she found herself totally helpless in Max's embrace; beneath that slender, elegant frame were steel muscles. At last he lifted his mouth, and she gasped for breath, hanging in his arms, and he looked straight across the room into Rome's narrowed dark eyes, a brilliant smile lighting his face. "Do you have any objections?" he asked mildly.

Rome crossed the office to them and gently took Sarah out of Max's embrace. Pulling her into the strong safety of his arms, he cradled her against him. "Not this once," he said smoothly. "Not as good-bye. But that was your one free ride, and I'm giving you that only because you've lost. If there's a next time, you'll have to pay."

"Fair enough." Max grinned and held out his hand to Rome. "Congratulations."

They shook hands, grinning like idiots, and Sarah rolled her eyes. She'd been expecting bloodshed, at the least, but instead they were the best of

buddies. Men! Who understood them?
"I'm stealing her for a long lunch hour today," Rome said. "We have a lot to do: blood tests, license, apartment-hunting. I'll be free at twelve-thirty. Can you make it by then?" he asked Sarah, glancing down at her.
Sarah had already made plans of her own, and she shook her head. "I can't. I have an appointment at one."
Max rocked back on his heels, looking extraordinarily pleased at hearing Sarah already balking at Rome's directions. Rome ran his office with ball-bearing precision, and his cold, cutting sarcasm was known throughout the far-flung divisions of the Spencer-Nyle corporation. Only Anson Edwards was above Rome's infamous bullying, but then Anson Edwards was legendary for his own scathing temper when faced with incompetence and stupidity. Max waited with pleasure for Rome's reaction to the way Sarah had refused his request.
But if he'd expected the hobnail boot to come down, he was disappointed. Rome lifted an eyebrow in silent inquiry, then said, "We'll make it tomorrow, then."
Rome had to use his iron will to keep from demanding of her just where she was going, but he remembered the arguments he'd used to convince her to marry him. They would have to respect each other's need for time alone. Sarah was still very much the aloof, rather solitary woman he'd always known her to be. She'd agreed to marry him, but only after he'd carefully pointed out the plusses for both of them. He'd have to be careful to give her the personal space she needed, the mental and physical privacy she was accustomed to. He could live with that, as long as she came willingly into his arms and gave him the hot, sweet comfort of her body, though it seemed he wasn't even going to get that the way he'd thought. She'd made it pretty plain to him that she expected her own bedroom, and he'd had to grind his teeth to keep from telling her plainly that she'd be sleeping in his bed. He hadn't wanted to sleep with any woman since Diane, until he'd held Sarah in his arms. She was so elusive. He wanted… he *needed*… the dark hours spent with her, when even the simple act of lying beside each other in slumber created bonds that would hold her to him. But not yet; he had to move so carefully with her, not panic her into backing out of the marriage.
Pushing his characteristic possessiveness aside, he walked her back to her office, and his critical eye noted that Max's kiss hadn't brought the delicate apricot tint to her face that she wore whenever *he* made love to her. Leaning

over her desk, he gave her a quick hard kiss, as much to watch that entrancing rise of color as to taste the sweetness of her mouth. “Tonight? We can go through the newspapers and mark those apartments that look suitable.”
Pleased, Sarah smiled at him. “Would seven be all right? That will give me time to have some sort of meal almost finished.”
“Forget about cooking. I’ll bring something over.”
Watching him walk out of the office, Sarah had to pinch herself to be certain she wasn’t dreaming. They were really going to be married.
He’d made love to her the night before, and the thought of it made her heart leap into her throat. If the first time had been unbridled passion, the second had been a lesson in the rewards of self-control. It had all begun so casually, while they were watching the evening news on television. During a commercial, he’d tilted her face up to kiss her, and the kiss had lingered, become many kisses. Soon she was lying naked on the sofa, and he had patiently, carefully guided her to full satisfaction, lingering at each plateau and savoring her response, making her as hungry for him as he was for her.
He’d also taken care of the protective measures, which had prompted Sarah’s call first thing that morning to her doctor, which was why she had an appointment at one o’clock.
It was two thirty when she finally got back to the office, a packet of pills in her purse and her head ringing with Dr. East-erwood’s warnings and advice. At the age of thirty-three, she was becoming almost too old for taking birth control pills to be safe. Dr. Easterwood had prescribed the lowest dosage available, with the stern warning that she wanted to see Sarah every six months, and that two years was the maximum length she’d give Sarah before an alternative method would have to be decided on.
Max came out of his office when he heard her enter, a slight frown marring his classic brow. “Are you all right? You were gone longer than I expected.”
“I’m fine. I had a doctor’s appointment, and you know how it is: you never get in at the time of your appointment.”
“Rome has already called twice,” he informed her impishly.
She worked with a smile on her face and an inner happiness that was based on the attitude Rome was exhibiting. Love or not, the way he was acting told her that he cared, and she would take whatever she could get. He wasn’t showing the often impatient possessiveness with which he’d demanded Diane’s time, but Sarah didn’t expect that he’d feel that way with

her even if he did eventually come to love her. Diane had been beautiful, vibrant, a live wire who caught everyone's attention the moment she walked through the door. Sarah felt that too often she herself resembled a white mouse more than she did anything else. Vivid makeup made her look like a clown, while sparing makeup just tended to be more of the same. She'd found a compromise, over the years, that kept her from blending completely into the background, but her coloring was so fair that she'd never be able to use the kind of dramatic makeup that would draw all eyes to her immediately. She'd like to make Rome sit up and take notice whenever she walked into a room, but somehow she felt that that role was beyond her.
That night, after they'd eaten the sweet-and-sour chicken he'd brought, they spread the newspapers on the table and went over the ads for apartments for rent, with Rome circling the ones he thought might be suitable. Sarah carefully kept herself from thumbing through the columns of houses for sale, knowing that he'd never agree to buying a house. The suburban routine would remind him too strongly of the family he'd lost, and the playing children would drive him insane.
He tapped his pen on one ad that he thought particularly likely, and Sarah leaned over to read it. Her hair, loosened from its knot, swung forward over his tanned forearm, and he went very still. Not noticing, she read the ad, pursing her lips as she considered it.
"It sounds good. Roomy enough, but it'll probably cost the Earth—" As she spoke she turned her head to look up at him. He moved swiftly, and her words were broken off with a gasp as he turned her and pulled her onto his lap, his mouth coming down to stifle the rest of what she'd been saying, cradling her on his left arm while his right hand moved boldly over her body, searching out all of the erotic places that he knew would reward him for his diligence.
Sarah made a soft sound in her throat, sinking against him. His powerful body made her feel surrounded, utterly secure, and she had the thought that she didn't need a homey, comfortable apartment to make her feel safe as long as he held her in his arms. The strength that he kept under control when he was handling her was evident in the steely sinews of his thighs, the rock hardness of his chest. She sought the warm solid contours of his flesh beneath his shirt, sliding her hands beneath the fabric to clench her fingers on him. He nibbled at her mouth, finally releasing it; then he tilted her head

back and kissed his way down her throat. “So what if it costs the Earth?” he muttered. “We’ll look at it tomorrow.”
“Hmmm,” she agreed dreamily, no longer interested in apartments.
He unbuttoned her shirt and pressed a kiss to the top swell of her breast, above the lacy edge of her bra. ‘That damned Max! He knew I was watching.“
“Yes.” She opened her eyes and smiled at him, her eyes misty with pleasure. “He’s a devil.”
“He’s lucky you weren’t kissing him back.” He returned her smile, but his tone was feral, his dark eyes narrowed. “Then I wouldn’t have been so civilized.”
As it had been, he hadn’t liked it—he hadn’t liked the idea of Max’s kisses lingering on her mouth. He wanted only his taste on her lips, so he’d kissed away Max’s touch. He kissed her again, for good measure, then reluctantly buttoned her blouse and hoisted her back to her own chair. “We’d better not push our luck,” he grunted. “I came over straight from the office, and I don’t have anything with me.”
Sarah cleared her throat. “About that…my appointment today was with a doctor. I got a prescription for birth control pills.”
He leaned back, draping his arm over the back of his chair while he looked at her searchingly, alerted by the hesitancy in her manner that she’d tried very hard not to reveal. His craggy black brows lowered. “Is it all right for you to take them?”
“She’s letting me try them, but only if I go back for regular checkups,” she admitted on a sigh. “She gave me two years, maximum, before I have to switch to something else.”
“If it’s dangerous, don’t take them.” He reached out and took her hand, tracing his thumb over the soft skin on the back of her hand. “I’ve been thinking about having surgery. It’s safe, and permanent.”
Sarah shied away from that solution. Its permanency was the one big drawback, for her. Sometime in the future Rome could change his mind about not wanting anymore children, even if this marriage with her didn’t work out. She was so acutely aware that he didn’t love her that she had to allow for the possibility of him falling in love with another woman, and perhaps that woman would want his children. Perhaps he would want her to have his children. Feeling herself shatter inside at the thought, she pulled away from him before she revealed too much about how she felt. Instead,

averting her face, she said in a stifled voice, “We can talk about that later, if the pills don’t work out.”
Puzzled, he stared at her, running the words they’d just said through his mind again and trying to decide what he’d said that had made her withdraw from him and put on that frosty face he so detested. She’d been so relaxed and natural with him lately, forgetting to guard her actions, and he’d become used to her smiles, her gentle teasing. Now she was Miss Ice-Queen again. She’d begun getting edgy when she’d first mentioned the pills. She wasn’t telling him something, and he knew it. He’d thought, when he’d first made love to her, that he’d discovered the reason for her reserve, but now he was seeing it spring up again, and he knew that Sarah had other secrets hidden behind the green shadows of her eyes. He would have liked to delve inside her mind and find out how her mind worked, why she hid so much of herself. He wanted to know her; he wanted all of her secrets laid out where he could see them. The way she withdrew from him triggered in him a primal, violent response to pursue and subdue, an instinct bequeathed from the age when men lived in caves and wore animal skins, and chose their woman by force.
“One of these days,” he said in a soft voice, deadly in its intent, “I’m going to find out what makes you tick.”
Sarah looked up at him with panic running just below the controlled surface image she presented to him. If he did, if he found out that she loved him, what would he do? Would he accept it, or would he promptly bow out of a marriage that was more than he wanted?

Chapter 5

They were married three weeks later on a Friday evening, after work, by a judge who’d agreed to perform the ceremony in his chambers. To her complete surprise, Max was one of the witnesses, and he winked at her as she and Rome took their places before the judge. About fifteen friends from work stood behind them in the small chamber, their feet shuffling about and their discreet whispering providing a rustling background to the ceremony.
Sarah had worked out her two weeks notice and had spent the last week driving herself into the ground trying to get their apartment ready and everything that they weren’t going to use either sold or put into storage.

The apartment that they'd finally taken had seemed much too expensive to Sarah, but Rome had overridden her objections to it. It was a big roomy condo, as big as a medium-size house. It had seven rooms, and a large terrace-balcony where they could barbecue and lie in the sun, and where she could put her multitude of plants. It also had a gas fireplace in the livingroom, which she suspected was what had sold Rome on the apartment. He'd looked at the fireplace with an expression of almost fiendish satisfaction, and she'd had to admit to a few shivers of anticipation herself when she thought of the coming winter and the nights they would spend in front of the flames.

The best thing about the apartment to her way of thinking was the building manager, who lived on the bottom floor. Marcie Taliferro was a thirty-two-year-old divorcee, a freelance writer as well as building manager, and she had the most fantastic fifteen-year-old son Sarah had ever seen. Derek Taliferro already stood six feet tall, and was a hard and lean hundred and seventy pounds, and not only was he shaving every other day, he really needed to, which was mind-boggling. His voice was a smooth, deep baritone, and he had inherited his father's classic Italian looks, from the dark curls on his head to his imperious Roman nose. He worked after school at a small grocery store and helped his mother around the condo, as well as being at the top of his class in school. Rome had yet to meet Derek the Wonder, as even Marcie called him, with a little awe in her voice as if she couldn't believe she'd really mothered that perfect specimen. Derek was saving his money to go to college, but from what Marcie had said, he'd still be a long way short, and unless he was lucky enough to get a scholarship, he was going to have a long, hard haul getting through college. Sarah didn't know if Rome had any strings to pull with any colleges, but if there was ever a kid who deserved a break, it was Derek Taliferro.

Marcie was a friendly, commonsense type of person; a little short, a little plump, but the plumpness was mostly muscle. She had red hair, and freckles dashed across her nose, but she lacked the temper that was usually associated with red hair. She tackled every job with a casual manner that made it seem much easier than it really was; she'd helped Sarah move their furniture in and arrange it, since Rome had left that Monday morning on a business trip and hadn't returned until Thursday night.

Sarah eyed him covertly as the judge ran through the ceremony. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, with an impeccable pale blue pinstripe shirt, a

discreet tie of navy and burgundy silk, and a burgundy silk handkerchief peeking out of his breast pocket, the splash of color looking smashing with his dark coloring. Suddenly she found it a little difficult to breathe, and her heart began racing in anticipation of the night to come. They'd found the opportunity to make love only three times, as a spate of trips had taken him away several times, and her own natural functions had displayed the world's worst timing. She wanted him, and her body felt weak and warm.

He was tense, his arm rigid where her fingers lay lightly in the crook of his elbow. His deep voice was strained, and his hand shook when he slipped the plain gold band on her finger. As soon as the ring was on, Sarah closed her fingers into a fist, as if she could anchor it to her flesh. Then he was brushing her lips with a light kiss, and it was over. He drew back, his hand locking with hers, and he gave her a smile that merely twitched at the comers of his mouth, then faded.

Everyone came up to shake their hands and congratulate them. Max was the last of all; he shook Rome's hand, then framed Sarah's face in his palms and said softly, "My word, you're lovely! Are you so happy, then?"

"Yes, of course," she whispered, and lifted her face for his kiss, his mouth barely touching hers in the lightest of caresses.

"Damn it, Max," Rome said impatiently. "Why does it seem that you kiss her more than I do?"

"Maybe I'm just smarter than you are," Max returned, grinning.

Sarah clung to Rome's hand, wondering if he thought she looked good. Several people other than Max had commented on her glowing looks, and she knew that it was due as much to the new makeup job she had as it was to her happiness. She'd gone to a hairstyling and makeup salon, and the makeup artist had showed her some new delicate translucent shades that gave her color without being too harsh. Her eyes were made up only slightly darker than usual, but that small difference was a gigantic one. Her Egyptian eyes were more exotic, her lashes feathered, while shadows and secrets lurked in the green depths. Apricot color dusted her cheekbones, and her mouth had a soft, lush quality to it. That wasn't lipstick; that was the way she felt. Beneath the pale rose silk dress she wore, her body was quivering, aching, needing him.

But not yet. Reservations had been made at a swank restaurant, and everyone went along. Lobster and champagne seemed the perfect feast, but Sarah was so nervous that she scarcely noted the snow-white meat of the

lobster or the sparkling champagne that slipped down her throat. She wasn't aware that she was getting tipsy until she turned her head to say something to Rome and the room suddenly dipped. She blinked, surprised.
For the first time that entire evening Rome grinned, his dark face lighting as his teeth flashed whitely. "Were two glasses of champagne too much for you?"
"You let me drink *two* glasses?" she asked weakly, clinging to the edge of the table. "Rome, I wasn't joking about my alcohol tolerance. I won't be able to walk out of here!"
"We were just married; everyone will think it's romantic if I carry you out," he said calmly.
"Not if I'm waving the tablecloth like a flag and singing Highland ballads at the top of my lungs," she predicted darkly. He chuckled but moved the champagne glass away from her plate and signaled the waiter. Shortly thereafter a glass of milk appeared by her side, and she sipped it gratefully. Everyone at the table groaned and predicted dire results from the mixing of champagne and milk, but Sarah knew a lifesaver when she saw one, and she wasn't about to turn it down. Even with the milk slowing the rate at which the alcohol was absorbed into her bloodstream, she knew she wouldn't be steady on her feet when they left the restaurant.
She wasn't; Rome's arm was clamped around her waist like a vise as he helped her to his car. He settled her in the seat and walked around to get behind the wheel, calling out goodbyes and acknowledgments to all the best wishes their friends were giving them. After he closed the car door, he sat for a moment, fiddling with the key ring in his hand. Finally he put the key in the ignition and turned to look at Sarah, who was lying back in the seat with her eyes half-closed and an intriguing smile on her lips. The streetlight caught her eyes, making them sparkle like moon dust. She was so soft and feminine, and her subtle perfume rose to his nostrils, tempting him to search it out all along her satiny skin. She was his wife now, a legally intimate partner… his *wife!*
He almost groaned aloud, thinking of another wedding, and Diane's radiant face as she came down the aisle to him, the hunger in the kiss he'd given her at the end of the ceremony. His wife! Diane had been his wife, and he'd never thought another woman would occupy that position, bear that title. Until the ceremony had begun, he hadn't had any doubts about this second marriage, but when the familiar, haunting words reached his ears, he'd

broken out in a cold sweat. He didn't, couldn't, regret marrying Sarah, but suddenly the memory of Diane was haunting him. Diane was gone from him now, really gone. He couldn't call her his wife now, because by the grace of the laws of Texas and the United States, and his own determination, the woman at his side was now his wife.

Sarah Matthews. He said the name in his mind, imprinting it there. Sarah Matthews, his wife. Pale, elegant Sarah, always so distant, but now she was his. He knew that no other woman should be in his mind tonight, but he couldn't stop thinking about Diane, couldn't stop comparing her to Sarah. Diane had been so much more forceful than Sarah, capable of standing up to him and arguing with him toe-to-toe, chin-to-chin, then kissing him with all the fervor of her fiery nature. She'd glowed with color, her skin taking on the gold of the sun, her head full of bright gold-brown curls, her eyes as blue as the midsummer sky. Diane had been the sun, warm, shining, while Sarah was the moon, pale and cold and aloof. Sarah… what was it about her that made her so mysterious? Her veiled, shadowy eyes? Had he ever wanted anyone before the way he wanted Sarah? Her mysteries only lured him on, making him want to solve them.

But when he walked Sarah to their new apartment, on this first night they'd both be spending there, he knew he couldn't make love to her. All week he'd been thinking about her, wanting her, feeling her soft flesh beneath him, but now he realized he simply couldn't do it. The grief that had faded to the background in the past weeks now sprang to life again, as fresh and bitter as it had ever been. He had to say good-bye to Diane.

When the door closed behind them, Sarah turned into his arms, swaying against him, her arms going around his neck. He kissed her lightly, hating the stiffness of his body; then he took her arms down and put her away from him. "Let me take a look at this place," he stalled. "I haven't seen it since you put the furniture in it; it really looks great!"

He moved through the apartment, and Sarah weaved after him, confused by the way he'd turned away from her embrace. She swayed, then leaned down and took her shoes off, feeling much steadier in her bare feet than she had tottering on three-inch heels. Rome gave his approval to the decor, then seemed to run out of words. He sighed, running his hands through his hair. Finally reaching a decision, he came back to her and put his arm around her waist again, steadying her as he took her to the door of her bedroom.

Despite his need to be alone, the fact that this room was off-limits to him

without an invitation still angered him. He opened the door and reached in to turn on the light, then put both of his hands on her shoulders.
“I’m sorry,” he said in a low, raw voice. ‘Things have really hit me hard tonight, and I can’t…I have to be alone tonight. I’m sorry,“ he said again, waiting for her reaction.
There wasn’t one. She simply looked up at him, seeming smaller than usual because she was barefoot, no expression at all now in the exotic eyes that had been sparkling only a few moments before. She said “good night” and stepped back, closing the door before he could say anything else, if indeed any other words would come to mind. He was left staring at the blank wood of the door, and he stood there, his broad shoulders slumping in defeat, painful memories winging through his mind for several long minutes before he turned and went to his own room.
He went to bed, but he couldn’t sleep. The years he’d spent with Diane ran through his mind’s eye like home movies, reacquainting him with every nuance of expression that had crossed her expressive face, the plans they’d made during her pregnancies, the bone-deep pride and adoration he’d felt when he’d taken his infant sons in his arms for the first time. Scalding tears burned the back of his eyes, but never fell. His sons. Justin. Shane.
The pain of losing them was so great that he tried never to think of them; it was something he still couldn’t handle. They’d been a part of him. He’d felt each of them growing inside Diane; he’d been there when they were born, been the first to hold them. Justin’s first wavering steps had been into his waiting arms. He remembered the two A.M. feedings, the lusty, grunting sounds as the infant mouths took the bottle. He remembered Justin’s two-year-old perplexity when a new baby entered his world and took so much of Diane’s time, but soon the toddler had become devoted to the infant Shane, and the two boys had been inseparable since then.
He remembered their laughter, their innocence, their fearless exploration of the world, and the boisterous way they’d always greeted him when he came home.
Putting them in their graves had been the hardest thing he’d ever done. Dear God, it shouldn’t have been allowed to happen. A parent should never have to bury a child.
He couldn’t think of a day when the sun had shone since then.
His head was pounding with a sudden fierce headache, and he pressed his fingertips to his temples. He wanted to scream his pain aloud, but he ground

his teeth and soon the torment abated. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and slept.

In her bedroom, lying in the empty expanse of her bed, Sarah didn't sleep. She lay very still, feeling the effects of the champagne in the way the room seemed to whirl slowly around her, but it wasn't because of the champagne that she lay so motionless. She was filled with such pain that she felt as if she would crystallize if she tried to move.

She should have known, should have realized, how the ceremony would affect him, but she hadn't until she'd seen the hell in his eyes. Rather than celebrating their marriage, he'd been regretting it, because she wasn't the one woman he loved.

Had she been a fool to think she could ever earn his love? Did he even have any more love to give, or had it all gone to the grave with Diane? There was no way of knowing, and she'd made her decision when she'd agreed to marry him. Whatever he could give, she wanted it.

Whatever it cost her, she had to keep him from seeing how she was hurt; she didn't want to add to his pain by making him feel guilty. She'd carry on as normal, as if this were the way every couple began their marriage. She didn't think he'd try to probe too deeply if she put on a nonchalant facade, but rather that he would accept it with relief. All she had to do was get through the weekend; then he would go back to work and she could begin seriously looking for work, or decide if she really wanted to start a small business for herself.

Her weary mind seized on the subject with relief, wanting something, anything, to prevent her from thinking about Rome. There were really no plans she could make concerning him; she'd just have to take each moment as it came. So she put him out of her mind and tried to decide what sort of business would hold her interest, because she wanted something that she liked as well as something to take up her time. She made a mental list of all her hobbies and interests, and several possibilities sprang to mind. She turned the ideas over and over, until at last sleep claimed her.

She woke early, the strangeness of her surroundings hav-ing prevented deep sleep. Her bedside clock told her it was six thirty. She got up and showered, then pulled on her nightgown again and a robe as well, as she didn't feel like dressing, and the early autumn temperature had taken a surprisingly sharp dip overnight. It had been so balmy the day before that she'd used the air-conditioning in her car, but now, with typical Texas unpredictability, the

weather was distinctly chilly. She went straight to the thermostat and flipped it over to HEAT, and in a moment the comforting pop and crackle of the furnace told her she'd soon have the apartment comfortable.

Though she'd put everything away, the kitchen was still a surprise to her. She had to hunt for the coffee maker; then she couldn't find the dipper that she used to measure the coffee. She opened all the drawers and searched through them, slamming them shut in increasing temper when the search failed to turn up the missing object. She simply wasn't in the mood for anything to go wrong, and she muttered dire threats to the dipper for hiding itself.

Finally she found it in the can of coffee. She closed her eyes at her own stupidity, because now she remembered putting it in the coffee can where it wouldn't get lost… She *hated* moving! She hated turning everything topsy-turvy, with nothing where she was accustomed to finding it. The refrigerator was on the opposite side of the stove from where it had been in her old apartment, and she turned in the wrong direction every time she wanted something from it. This kitchen was larger than her old one, and she rattled around in it. She felt small and lost, just as she'd felt as a child when she lay in her neat, colorless room and listened to the bitter arguments her parents had.

She knew that Rome was customarily an early riser, so she started breakfast, trying to force herself to relax and perform the familiar routine even though all her cooking utensils were in the wrong places. As soon as the coffee had finished brewing, she poured a cup and sipped it, closing her eyes and trying to will herself to calm down. She knew that, in time, she'd become accustomed to her new surroundings. It was just a matter of adjusting herself.

But what about Rome? He was the cause of at least half her nervousness, because she didn't know what to say to him, and she knew she'd have to face him soon. What could a woman say to a brand-new husband who'd spent the night alone? Perhaps she shouldn't have married him; perhaps he simply wasn't ready to form any sort of permanent relationship with another woman. Should she have turned down his proposal and hoped that he'd ask again when time had healed him? But what if he hadn't asked again? What if he'd simply shrugged and gone his way, then eventually found some other woman and married her? Sarah cringed inside at the thought. It had

been bad enough losing him to Diane. She simply couldn't have borne the idea of him being married to someone else, some stranger.

The smell of bacon frying was a universal magnet; soon Rome entered the kitchen, sniffing appreciatively. Sarah darted a glance at him, then just as quickly looked away, before their eyes met. He'd taken a shower, because his hair was damp, and he'd dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, which he'd left unbuttoned and hanging outside his pants. He wore socks but no shoes. She was so used to seeing him in more formal clothing that his casualness that morning caught at her heart, for it was such a homey, comfortable thing. He was dressed the way husbands usually dressed on lazy Saturday mornings.

"Why were you trying to tear the kitchen down?" he asked, smothering a yawn and covertly watching her with more than a little uneasiness, wondering what his reception would be that morning. What he'd done would be unforgivable for most women, and he felt like a heel. He should at least have talked with her about it.

Sarah was tense, and she felt ridiculously close to tears. "Did I wake you? I'm sorry; I didn't mean to."

"No, I was already awake."

Quickly she poured a cup of coffee for him, and he took it, moving to the small breakfast table and dropping into a chair, sprawling his long legs out before him. She *was* upset, though she didn't seem to be angry. He drank his coffee, not knowing what to say to her.

Sarah took up the bacon, then turned to the refrigerator to get out the eggs, but once again she turned in the wrong direction. She made a choked sound, then jammed her fists over her eyes to hold back the threatening tears. "Oh, damn," she said weakly. "I'm sorry, but I can't get organized. I can't *find* anything!" she burst out, her voice cracking with strain. "I… I feel so lost!"

Rome sat up, his brows drawing together at the hint of panic in her voice. She was falling to pieces because she had to cook in an unfamiliar kitchen! It wasn't artifice, and she wasn't using it as an excuse; her panic was real, and she couldn't deal with it.

Without thinking about it, just knowing that she needed comforting, he got up and went to her, wrapping her in his arms and hugging her close against him. "Hey, calm down," he advised soothingly, stroking her moonbeam hair and pressing her head to his chest. "What's all this about?"

He must think she was an absolute ninny. Sarah could feel herself trembling as he resumed his seat and pulled her onto his lap, cradling her against him as if she were a child who'd hurt herself while playing. He rubbed her back, his big hands moving slowly over her spine.

"Didn't you put everything up yourself?" he asked easily.

"Yes. That's what makes it so stupid!" She sought his warmth, her hands going inside the open shirt to clasp his ribs, and she burrowed her face against him like a cat. "It's just that everything's so turned around, and I'm not used to it. I hate for things to change!" she muttered. "You won't find me moving the furniture around every month, or even every year. I like to feel safe in my own home, not a constant stranger."

Struck by her words, he rocked her gently, wondering why he'd known her for so long without realizing that she had such a strong need for a stable base. He tried to remember if he'd ever heard anything about her home life while she'd been growing up, but he drew a blank.

She was usually so serene and competent that it was a little startling to feel her cuddle against him, seeking the safety of his arms, but he liked it. She was so delicately built, she was only a puffin his arms, soft and light, but with the warm, beguiling curves of a woman. She sighed and moved her hands up the strong muscles of his back, and he quivered in delight, and something more. Her hair spilled over his arm in a pale cascade, warm and silky, and he could smell the sweet perfume of female witchery that came from the velvet curves of her breasts. She had a scent all her own, not based on perfume but on the wondrous chemistry of her own sleek, soft skin, warmed by the coursing of her blood, and it wafted into the air with every breath that lifted her breasts like a tantalizing offering.

Desire, heavy and urgent, began tightening his body. He lifted her hair away from her neck and bent his head to trail his mouth down the slender column, taking his time, tracing the source of her female scent. "I promise not to ever move anything around," he murmured as he found the tiny betraying flutter at the base of her throat. He didn't deserve it, but she was responding to him without even commenting on his behavior of the night before; she wasn't going to reject him, or spend the day pouting and feeling hurt. She was accepting him for what he could give, and accepting him joyously, tilting her head back to allow him better access.

He took advantage of her unselfishness, his greedy mouth plundering her flesh as he bared it. Sarah clenched her fingers in his hair, gasping as he

pulled open her robe and dispensed with it, then rapidly slid down the straps of her nightgown until the silk fell away from her breasts. He bent his head and closed his hot mouth over one sensitive nipple, wringing a cry of pleasure from her.

"Do you like that?" he muttered fiercely against her, filling his hands and his mouth with velvet mounds and firm jutting nipples.

"Yes…yes." Her answer was thin and faraway, and she tried to put her arms around him, but the strap of her night-gown prevented her from moving her arms. She struggled in mute frustration against the silk bindings, trying to draw her arms out, but he held her too tightly, and he was too close, the things he was doing to her too delightful to halt.

He kissed his way back up to finally claim her mouth with deep thrusts of his tongue. Breakfast was forgotten in the heated clash of their bodies, and she wouldn't have stopped even if she had remembered the meal she'd been preparing. She couldn't touch him enough, couldn't satisfy her need to press fully against him, and she twisted on his lap, seeking to nestle her breasts, so naked and sensitive, in the crisp dark curls on his chest. He aided her, lifting her and settling her astride his lap, grasping handfuls of silk and lifting it out of the way until her naked bottom pressed against him.

"You… make… me… *crazy*!" he growled jerkily, tearing at his jeans until they opened and he could push them out of the way. Sarah moved her mouth back to his, holding the kiss as he eased inside her, his entry taking her breath.

She moaned his name, moving against him, her skin so hot that it felt like wildfire. She *was* wildfire, her slender body dancing, searing, taking him until the only sounds he could make were incoherent words of passion and need, of rising sexual desperation that held him taut in the chair, on the edge of madness. She finally worked her arms free of the nightgown and lifted them to his bronzed shoulders, clinging to him. He held back, killing himself with the effort, but he wanted to feel her delicate inner shivering, feel her ripple against him in satisfaction. When she tired, he took over the motion for her, his hard hands on her hips. Tiny mewing sounds came from her throat, sounds that he caught with his mouth, urging her onward. Waves of pure physical ecstasy began to crash upon her, and she collapsed on his chest, sobbing with joy and relief, and totally unaware of it, feeling only his body as he held her securely and took his own pleasure.

When the heated rush of her blood had subsided, Sarah lay tiredly against him, not wanting to move. She'd never thought that her marriage would be consummated on a kitchen chair, but the impatient desire with which he'd taken her was so reassuring that she didn't care. Murmuring contentedly, she closed her eyes and brushed her lips against his chest.

"Rome," she said with aching tenderness, and he stood up and carried her to bed.

Breakfast became lunch, and they eventually ate the bacon on sandwiches. She was glowing from the hours of passion they'd spent together in a tangle of arms and legs on her bed. Not even guessing at the satisfaction he felt whenever she lost herself in desire, when her face revealed her need nakedly, she simply gave herself to him and in return took a physical satisfaction that she'd never before dreamed existed. He kept such a tight rein on himself, and devoted so much time and care to bringing her pleasure, that she never realized how rare it was for a woman to find such delight while she was still so inexperienced. He lingered over her, deliberately stamping her senses and her flesh as his, using his expertise to make certain that whenever she thought of making love, she thought of him.

The day passed in a fog of sensuality, her mind dazed while her body greedily sated itself. Reality was that night, when Rome made love to her with mind-shattering intensity. Sanity returned only when he kissed her lightly on the mouth and left the bed and the room, quietly closing the door behind him as he sought his own bed to sleep alone because, Sarah knew, in his heart his only wife was Diane.

She lay willing him to return, silently begging that there not be a repeat of the night before. But the door didn't open again, and she curled up sadly, dying a little inside. He'd told her once that when the night came, he spent it alone, and she'd never reproached him with it, had even chosen their apartment with that in mind. But in the magic of the day they'd spent together, for the most part in that very bed, she'd forgotten, and now she cried silently, not wanting him to hear.

Chapter 6

Rome put his key into the lock and opened the door, stepping inside the apartment with a deep sense of relief and anticipation. This trip had seemed

to drag on unendingly, and he was deeply, utterly weary of hotel rooms and hotel food. Just stepping inside the foyer, he was instantly aware of the comfort and serenity that Sarah had brought to the apartment, a sense of being home, which was something that he'd been missing for a long time now. He couldn't say just what it was that she did, but somehow everything was more comfortable. Even though they'd only been married two weeks, he'd looked forward to the trip, feeling an uneasy need to distance himself from the soft, unseen bonds that were pulling at him. It wasn't that Sarah demanded anything; rather, she demanded nothing. But still he found himself thinking of her at odd times during the day, wanting to talk to her about some little detail of the job, or wanting to make love to her, an urge that could have embarrassing results when he was at work. It took very little to remind him of making love to her: hearing her name mentioned, or walking by Max's office. Any small detail could plunge him into the memory of how she tasted, how she felt, how she responded. She was so astonishingly sensual, he was still astounded by the contrast of her cool, quiet image and the moaning, writhing woman in his arms.

He'd wanted time away from her, but the trip had dragged on too long; what was originally to be a three-day trip had become eight, and Sarah hadn't seemed upset at all when he'd called and told her he'd be delayed. She'd simply said "All right; just let me know when you'll be home" and gone on to other subjects. He'd felt a little deflated by her lack of interest, and suddenly the trip and the myriad details he had to deal with had become tiresome. He wanted to go home.

The need to relax and be with Sarah had become so compelling that he'd pushed himself and everyone else to the breaking point, but he'd wound everything up a day earlier than he'd told Sarah to expect him, and now he looked around the quiet apartment, the sunlight streaming in the windows, a faint, tantalizing aroma, the smell of homemade apple pie, lingering on the air. He sniffed and grinned, because apple pie was his favorite.

"Sarah?" he called, dropping his briefcase and overcoat, suddenly anxious to have her in his arms again. What would she think when he hustled her off to bed? But it had been a long, frustrating eight days, and he wasn't accustomed to celibacy. He was, however, as he'd described himself to Sarah, a faithful husband, preferring domesticity and one woman to a multitude of brief tawdry encounters. Besides, he hadn't wanted any other

woman. He'd wanted Sarah, with her cool reserve and comfortable silences, and her fairy-pale hair wrapped around his arms like silken ropes.
But she didn't come running out, and a frown drew his black brows together. Impatiently he searched through the apartment, already knowing she wasn't there. Where was she? Shopping? She could be job-hunting; she'd mentioned that she had a few interesting prospects. He checked his watch. It was almost four, so she should be getting back anytime.
He unpacked, then sat down to read the newspaper. He watched the evening news. As the sun went down, the temperature dropped sharply, and he turned on the heat and sat for a long time watching the blue flicker of the fire. The October twilight was short, and soon there wasn't a hint of daylight left.
Keeping his irritation under control, Rome prepared his dinner and ate it alone, and he helped himself to a big chunk of the apple pie. As he cleaned up the kitchen a sudden black rage seized him, compounded in part by the unspeakable fear that he wouldn't name, even to himself. Diane had gone out and not returned; he wouldn't even let himself consider anything happening to Sarah.
But, damn it, *where* was she?
It was almost ten when he finally heard her unlock the door, and he got to his feet, a mixture of relief and pure fury filling him. He heard her say "Thanks, Derek. I don't know what I'd have done without you! See you tomorrow."
A deep, quiet voice said, "Anytime that you need help, Mrs. Matthews, just call me. Good night."
"Good night," Sarah echoed, and in a moment she walked into the kitchen, turning left instead of right into the living room where Rome was. At that moment she became aware of the puzzling fact that the lights were on, when everything should have been in darkness, and she stopped in her tracks. Standing where he was, Rome could see her slender back stiffen; then she whirled, and her face lit up like the Fourth of July.
"Rome!" she said, and launched herself at him.
Her open enthusiasm disarmed him, and he found himself forgetting about being angry; instead he was just glad to see her. He opened his arms to her, then at the last moment grabbed her shoulders and held her back, away from him.

“Whoa!” he commanded, laughing a little. “I’m not certain…who are you? The voice is familiar, but I’ve never seen this dirt before.”
Sarah laughed ruefully, so happy to have him home again that she wanted to whirl on her toes like a child. She wanted very much to kiss him, but she was filthy and she knew it. She looked down at her jeans, blackened down the front with grease and grime and various other stains, including one ketchup stain where she’d dropped the hotdog that she’d had for lunch in her lap. Unfortunately the grease and grime extended from her toes to her head. She’d covered her hair with a red bandana and now she carefully pulled it off; beneath it, her hair was still in a pristine knot, and the contrast was incongruous.
“I’m a mess,” she admitted. “Let me take a quick shower; then I’ll tell you all about it.”
“I can’t wait,” he said dryly, wondering what catastrophe could have turned his spotless, impeccable wife into that ragamuffin. Her shirt-sleeve was torn, he noticed. Had she been in a fight? Impossible, and there were no bruises or cuts, which also ruled out an accident.
He followed her to the bathroom. “Just tell me one thing: Have you been doing anything illegal, or has something happened to you that will require police action?”
She gave the low, husky chuckle that always started a fire low in his gut. “No, nothing like that. It’s good news!”
He watched as she stripped off her soiled clothing, her dainty nose wrinkled in distaste as she dropped each garment to the bathroom floor. Hungrily he gazed at her slender fluid curves, the body that was his, with the sweet honey nipples and pale gold curls, all his. He noticed the way she flexed her shoulders, as if they were stiff, and an unconscious sigh of weariness escaped her.
“Have you had anything to eat?” he asked.
“Nothing since lunch.”
“I’ll get something together for you while you’re showering.”
When she left the shower, feeling clean again, Sarah felt as if the warm water that had washed away the grime covering her had also washed away the last dregs of her energy. She was so tired, she could have fallen facedown on the bed and slept through the next day, but Rome was waiting for her, and she had to see him. He hadn’t even kissed her yet, and it had

been forever since she'd touched him, felt his mouth on hers. She pulled on a robe, the only garment she bothered with, and went to the kitchen.
He'd opened a can of soup and made a grilled-cheese sandwich for her, and that seemed like ambrosia. She stumbled into the chair, already reaching for the sandwich as he placed a glass of milk beside the plate.
"So, tell me your good news," he invited, turning a chair around and straddling it, propping his arms along the back. For a long moment she simply stared at him, unable to believe how good he looked to her. His thick dark hair was tousled, and his face was tired, but he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.
"I've bought a store," she said.
He rubbed his cheekbone with a finger, a little surprised at how the news made him feel. He'd told her that their respective careers gave them much-needed independence from each other, but when it came down to the nitty-gritty, he wanted Sarah's undivided attention. Reminding himself yet again not to push her, that she expected, and deserved, the right to make that decision herself, he hid his reaction and instead asked "What kind of store?"
"A combination do-it-yourselfer and handicrafts store. I bought it for a song, because the building was in ratty shape," she explained blithely. "The location is great; it's only a mile from here. But the stock is included, and most of it is handmade. Just wait until you see the pottery! The pottery wheel is in a back room, and I might try my hand at it. I did some pottery in high school. I've been killing myself trying to get it ready before you saw it," she said. "We've cleaned and painted and put up new shelving, and Derek has put in new lighting fixtures—"
"Who's this Derek?" Rome interrupted, remembering the man who'd come with her to the door.
Sarah made an exasperated sound at him. "Derek Taliferro, Marcie's son. I've mentioned him to you. He saw me to the door."
"*That* was Derek? I thought he was fourteen or fifteen."
"He is. Fifteen. Just wait until you meet him! He looks twenty, at least, and he's a great kid. I don't know what I'd have done without him. It's a school night, and he should have been at home studying, but he wouldn't leave me alone down there."
"Smart kid," Rome said, lifting his brows at her in a way that told her he didn't like the idea of her being alone in the store so late at night.

Ignoring that comment, Sarah devoted herself to her meal, demolishing it with well-mannered greed. Just as she finished, she looked up to find him watching her intently, an unreadable expression in his eyes. “You’re back a day early,” she finally said.

“I tied everything up this morning and caught the first flight home. I got in about noon, dropped by the office for an hour, and got here a little before four.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” she said softly. “I wish I’d known.”

He shrugged, and the indifferent gesture made her draw back. She’d been about to reach out for him, but now she kept her hands tightly in her lap.

“I ate half of that pie,” he said, changing the subject. “Do you want a slice?”

“No. No, I—” She stopped, a wave of exhaustion sweeping over her. She tried to fight it off, but weariness over-whelmed her, and she couldn’t keep going any longer. “I’m so tired,” she sighed, closing her eyes for a moment.

She heard the clatter of dishes as he cleared the table, and with a supreme effort she opened her eyes to give him a sleepy little smile, one that sent a surge of electricity through him. “Let’s go to bed,” she invited.

Without waiting for a second invitation, he bent and lifted her into his arms, his mouth at last finding hers in a long penetrating kiss. He knew she was tired, and he’d meant to wait, but when she’d asked him to go to bed, all of his good intentions fled. After carrying her quickly to her bedroom, he pulled back the covers and placed her on the bed, leaning down to loosen the robe and pull it away from her, baring her to his gaze.

She sighed and closed her eyes, and he stripped quickly, dropping his clothes to the floor. It took him only a moment, then he slid naked between the sheets and drew her into his arms.

She snuggled against him with a little murmur, and her bare breasts pushed against his chest. With sure, hard fingers he cupped her breast, his thumb rubbing against the small tight nipple. Aching with desire, he bent his head to kiss her, and in that moment realized she was asleep.

A low growl of frustration rose to his throat, but he lay back against the pillow, cradling her to him because he needed to feel her silken flesh in his arms; he had to hold her, if just for a while. She was exhausted, and he could wait, but every fiber of his body, every masculine instinct he possessed, wanted him to bury himself in her. There would be times when his work would demand long hours of him and he’d be too tired to make love, he reminded himself, trying not to re-sent the unseen store that had

already taken her away from him. It was just that…hell, she was so comfortable to have around! Everything was right where it should be, and organized to the nth degree. He had the whimsical thought that, give Sarah a roomful of worms and within an hour she'd have the worms crawling in formation. The humor lightened his mood, and he lay for a long time, holding her while she slept, because he began to feel drowsy and reminded himself that if he didn't get up then, he probably wouldn't, and she'd made it plain how she felt about sleeping together. Making love with him was fine, and she obviously enjoyed it, but afterward she wanted her own bed and privacy. Easing away from her, he went to his own room.

Sarah woke several hours later, uncomfortable from the glass of milk she'd drunk at such a late hour. Automatically she reached out for Rome, but her hand encountered the empty pillow and fell back listlessly. He wasn't there, and no matter how often he left her to go to his own bed, she couldn't become accustomed to it. Her body, her mind, just couldn't accept that he wasn't where he belonged.

She got up, feeling suddenly bleak, and wondering if she had any chance at all of ever winning any emotion from him other than mild affection. And lust, she reminded herself. But that wasn't an emotion—it was a physical reaction.

There was a bad taste in her mouth from the milk, so she brushed her teeth, then yawned, and stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her hair was a mess. She was too tired to worry about it right then, though, so she pushed it back and stumbled her way back to bed, where she promptly fell asleep once more.

In the gray light of dawn, she came slowly awake, stretching under slow, warm caresses that roamed over her body and touched her with familiar intimacy. There was a magnetic warmth beside her and she turned to it, her head finding the hard pillow of Rome's chest, her arms wrapping around him without thought.

"Wake up," he crooned softly in her ear, nipping at the lobe with his sharp teeth, then kissing his way along her jaw to find her mouth.

"I'm awake," she murmured, sliding her palms up his naked back and feeling the hard ripple of muscle under his warm skin.

He took her immediately. She was warm and pliable from sleep, her body rosy, and she drew in a quick breath of pleasure as he moved with slow power into her. "I can't wait; I have to have you," he muttered.

The room was considerably brighter when he lifted his head from her breasts and said on a note of astonishment. “Damned if I’m not going to be late for work.”
“You’ve been away for eight days,” she murmured, snuggling against him. “You deserve to sleep late.”
“But I haven’t been sleeping.” His wry observance brought a sleepy smile to her lips, a smile of complete physical satisfaction. During the normal course of the day, he treated her as if she were an old, comfortable house slipper: easy to have around, but nothing to get excited about. He wasn’t affectionate with her, didn’t often call her by endearments, and in fact often seemed to discourage any signs of deepening emotional intimacy between them. But in bed there were no barriers, no polite distances. In bed with him, she could forget about everything else and simply savor their closeness. The world was blotted out by the grip of his hard, strong arms and the heavy pressure of his body.
His hand stroked slowly down her side and found the curve of her hip, his fingertips feathering over the smoothness of her buttock. He’d missed more than the startling passion of her lovemaking, he realized in astonishment; he’d missed the silences that so often fell between them, comfortable silences that held no sense of strain. He could talk with her, and he could also be silent with her. There was a sense of ease that enveloped him when he was with her, as if she were a very old friend who expected nothing but his company.
“If I don’t get up,” he announced five minutes later, when his stroking hand had begun making bolder forays that were already exciting him, “Max will probably come over just to pull me out of your bed.”
“Then, I’ll help you by removing temptation,” Sarah volunteered, rolling away from his hand and carefully sitting up on the side of the bed. She’d have liked nothing better than to stay in bed with him all day, but she’d sensed that at any moment he’d have moved away from her and gotten up, and abruptly she couldn’t stand to have him leave her lying in bed one more time. The thing to do was to call a halt to it herself, to get up first and make the decision, as if she had other things to do. She stood up a little stiffly, her muscles protesting both the heavy work she’d been doing and the vigorous exercise they’d had in the last couple of hours. As she walked across the room, Rome frowned when he saw the jerkiness in her usually fluid movements.

He left the bed and went to her, putting his hand on her shoulder as she selected her underwear from the dresser. “Are you all right?” he asked a little gruffly, and she understood the meaning of his question. He was a big, strong, highly-sexed man, and he dwarfed her in bed, in every way. He usually handled her slender, fine-boned body with a great deal of care and patience, but there were times when his passions were too strong and he took her with shocking powerfulness. That morning had been one of those times.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said, and because he was still frowning, she added, “I’m sore all over from working in the store, which is where I need to be right now. You’re not the only one who’s late.”

He dropped his hand, not liking the idea of her doing heavy physical work. Some women could handle it, but Sarah was too delicate, like a fragile, translucent piece of china. He wanted to see about this store himself, decide what had to be done, and hire people to do it. If Sarah wanted to supervise, she could do that, but he didn’t want her to hurt herself. Only the knowledge that he didn’t have the right to interfere kept him from laying down his strictures; if he used the dictatorial hand on her that he used at Spencer-Nyle, she’d merely give him one of those patented iceberg looks and remind him of their bargain.

“I’d like to see the store,” he began carefully, following her into the bathroom.

She gave him a surprised look. “Of course. I’ll probably still be there this afternoon when you get off work; why don’t you come by? The name of it is Tools and Dyes, spelled with a *y*.”

“I’ve seen it,” he said thoughtfully. “I always thought it was a machine shop. Hell, that place *is* a dump!”

“Was a dump,” she corrected cheerfully, turning on the shower. When the water was warm, she stepped in and closed the door, which opened immediately. He got into the shower with her, his big body taking up most of the room and making her feel inordinately small. She looked up at him, her green eyes questioning as he took the bar of soap and rubbed up a rich lather in his hands.

“Turn around,” he ordered, and she did. He began sliding his hands over her back and shoulders, kneading her stiff, sore muscles, and she groaned aloud at the mingled pain and pleasure, her head hanging forward to allow him full access to her neck and shoulders. When she thought she couldn’t stand

it any longer, he knelt at her feet and gave the same thorough attention to her legs. She felt her muscles loosening as the pain eased, and she sighed in ecstasy. It was wonderful to have him pampering her, and not a day passed that she didn't pinch herself to make certain it wasn't a dream.

She wanted him to make love to her again, but he didn't. He was already late, and she knew that although she could probably entice him back to bed, he'd resent it should she interfere with his work.

Rome had already left when Sarah went down to her car; he'd hurried through breakfast and gone without even kissing her good-bye, an omission that totally destroyed the warmth left by their morning of passion. She reminded herself over and over that she had to accept the limits of their relationship; they were married, but he didn't love her, so she shouldn't expect him to act like a lover.

Marcie hailed her as she opened her car door, and she paused, her eyes narrowed against the bright morning sun as the other woman crossed the small brown strip of grass between the street and the building. The weather was still cool, but Marcie was in her shirt-sleeves, an abstracted frown on her face.

"Good morning," she said, and that was Marcie's total nod to conventional chitchat. She plunged right to the point. "Sarah, were you going to hire anyone to help you in the store?"

"Of course," Sarah said readily. She'd have to, just to give herself time enough to eat lunch. One person really couldn't handle things, and even in its ramshackle condition, the little store had had a fairly steady stream of customers.

"Would you consider Derek? He can only help you after school and on weekends, but I'd appreciate it. I don't like that grocery store where he's working now," Marcie said worriedly. "One of the cashiers is chasing him."

"I'd love to have Derek," Sarah said, and meant it. The boy was so strong and efficient, he could do whatever had to be done after school hours. She looked at Marcie and saw that her friend was really worried about her son. "How old is the cashier?"

Marcie grunted in disgust. "She's closer to my age than she is to Derek's!"

"Does she know that he's only fifteen? He looks so much older."

"I know, I know. Sarah, girls from his school follow him home! He takes it all for granted, but it's getting harder for me to handle. He was my baby!" she wailed. "He's still just a baby! I wasn't cut out to be the mother of a…a

Greek god! Italian god," she corrected herself, with scrupulous adherence to the facts.
"If Derek wants to work at the store, I'll thank heaven for him every night."
"He'd love to. He likes you, and he likes that sort of work. You don't know how I appreciate it!"
Sarah smiled and waved away her thanks. Derek would take a huge load off her, and she liked having him around. Despite his spectacular looks, there was a calm, capable air about him that made her feel more comfortable. The only person who gave her a greater feeling of physical security was Rome.
"Why don't you come by and see how the store's shaping up?" she invited Marcie.
"Thanks, I will. If you have time today, why don't I bring in lunch?"
"I never turn down lunch!"
She was proud of the store, she thought, as she pulled her little car into the parking area in back of the building. It sparkled under new paint, now pristine white, with crisp blue trim around the windows and on the door. The windows had been cleaned with a mixture of vinegar and lemon juice, and they literally sparkled in the morning sun. The diamond panes gave a homey air to the crowded little store, with its raw plank flooring and old-fashioned bins for the merchandise.
New shelves lined the walls, however, and the pottery took up one entire wall. Bright hues of red and blue, earth brown, and a unique salmon color, were splashed against the wall like an abstract design, because all of the pottery had been colorfully glazed. Homemade quilts were draped across a couple of ladder-back chairs, while others were neatly folded and stacked on the woven straw bottoms of the chairs. There were nails, hammers, screwdrivers, nuts and bolts, scissors, pins and needles, and scores of other small necessities, but already Sarah had ideas for expanding the selection. She would carry supplies for macrame, cross-stitching, candlewicking, and knitting, complete with patterns. Doll-making was very popular, and that could be another section; there were two more small rooms in back besides the pottery room and the tiny office, and she could turn one into a doll room, with everything necessary to make anything from a soft-sculpture doll to china dolls. Stuffed animals were another possibility. She had so many ideas, she feared she'd never have room for them all.
The small store brought her much more satisfaction than working in a large corporation ever had. She'd liked the demanding work at Spencer-Nyle, but

the corporate structure really wasn't for her; it was far too impersonal. This small, homey, and homely store was very personal, uniquely hers even in the short length of time she'd owned it. The soothing colors, the comfortable display of items, all spoke of her personal touch. She hadn't hesitated at all when she'd learned by chance that the store was for sale; some intuition inside her had recognized that this was what she'd wanted. She'd looked at the building, and at the stock and hadn't haggled. The price had been very reasonable, probably because of the condition of the building. Buying it had made a considerable dent in her savings, and the renovations had further depleted her funds, but she thought it was worth it. This was *hers*, something she'd bought herself and shaped to reflect her own personality.

The old building was drafty, and she turned on the ancient furnace, thinking that here was something else needing replacing. It was only October; what would it be like during January and February? A new roof and insulation was a necessity.

The store had been closed while she'd been cleaning and painting, and Derek had been putting in the new lighting fixtures. She'd been astonished that a boy his age would know how to do electrical wiring, but he'd explained it and made it all seem very simple. It was only after he'd done it that Sarah had gleaned from Marcie that he'd never done any wiring before; he'd simply read about it and decided to try it. As she flicked on the lights she noticed how much better the merchandise looked with the brighter, better-placed lighting. What would she have done without Derek? She wouldn't be anywhere near ready to open.

But as it was… She took a deep breath and flipped the sign on the front door for the first time from CLOSED to OPEN FOR BUSINESS. Sarah's store was officially open.

The little store had its own regular customers, who were used to dropping in and puttering around whenever someone needed a pack of finishing nails or a skein of yarn. She was never overflowing with business, but the place was seldom completely empty either. There was a slow relaxed pace about it, with people comfortably looking things over, commenting on the changes. She kept a pot of coffee on the counter, which encouraged people to come up and talk to her while they drank a free cup of coffee. She especially liked talking to old people, who had fascinating tales of making almost everything by hand in days long past.

The time passed so quickly that when she looked up to see Marcie coming in the door, she was amazed to realize it was time for lunch. Past time, she thought; it was almost one o'clock.
"Sorry, I'm late," Marcie panted. "I was just leaving when I got a call from a magazine on a proposal I'd submitted."
Sarah's eyes shone warmly. "Do they like it?"
"They do," replied Marcie promptly. "Now all I have to do is think of something to write."
Marcie was so organized, she could probably put her hands on a thousand pages of research material, so Sarah didn't take the last comment seriously. "What type of article will it be?"
"It's for one of the slicks, a women's magazine. I've been doing a lot of thinking about it." Marcie began emptying the paper bag she'd brought, putting a paper plate in front of Sarah and then filling it with fried chicken and cole slaw, with hot rolls on top of it. " 'Marriages of Convenience—Past and Present,' is what I think I'm going to call it. I know you've read something about them; at times they've been more the norm than the exception. You can call them arranged marriages. The fact is, people get married for a lot of reasons other than love. Convenience is one of the more common reasons, which is probably why they're called marriages of convenience. Two people combine their assets, support each other, rather like a business partnership, except it's a marriage and they sleep together."
Amusement made Sarah's eyes sparkle with a soft green. "You don't believe in marriages in name only?"
Marcie gave her a disbelieving look. "Do you honestly know a man who'd be content with a platonic marriage? I'm talking about a normal, healthy man."
"Usually, no, though I do think there are some situations—"
"*Unusual* situations," Marcie put in.
"All right, unusual situations—"
"I still don't think so," Marcie interrupted again with blithe unconcern. "And you don't either, because I can see the way you're biting your tongue."
Sarah laughed, because she had indeed been trying to get an argument out of Marcie, who loved to argue. "I give up. Let's get back to your article."
"I got the idea from a get-together I had with six of my old high school chums. We'd been having a good time, and the martinis had been flowing

freely, you might say. Now, these aren't unusual women, just your normal, everyday sort of female. Of the seven of us, two had gotten married because of a pregnancy, one because she'd never had many dates and thought his proposal might be the only chance she'd ever have, one admitted that she just sort of drifted into marriage because she'd gone with him for so long that everyone took it for granted that they'd get married, and one was very open about marrying her husband because of his money. She liked him, but his money was the main attraction. That's five out of seven."
"And the other two?"
"One was married because they were in love, and they still are. They're almost embarrassing, even after all these years. The other one…well, I'm the other one. I got married because I *thought* I was in love. If you could see Derek's father, you'd know why. But instead of love, it turned out to be sex, which was very good and remained good, but that just wasn't enough to hold the marriage together." For a rare pensive moment, Marcie rested her chin on her hand, thinking of her ex-husband. "Dominic and I had some good times, but in the end, we simply didn't care enough about each other. But I think I'd do it all over again, even if I knew we'd eventually divorce, because I'd want Derek."
"So, out of the seven, only one married for love?"
"Ummm. I haven't done any real deep research yet, but I've talked to some men, and I'd almost believe that even more men marry for convenience than women. Men are very straightforward in their needs, and they still have a lot of the cavemen instincts."
"Me Tarzan, you Jane?"
"In a way. They still want a fire and someone to cook the meat they bring home, bandage their wounds, do their laundry—which probably translates from curing the animal hides and making clothing—and a warm body when they need one. Simple, basic needs that haven't changed all that much in substance; only the ritual is different. They marry to fulfill those needs."
"You don't paint a very romantic picture," Sarah commented, beginning to feel chilled by Marcie's precise descriptions. The conversation was reminding her too painfully of her own marriage. Rome had married her for all those reasons, and he'd been very open with her about them. He wanted a home, a stable relationship, convenient sex. In return, he'd be a faithful, dependable husband. A marriage of convenience for him. For her, a marriage of love.

“There’s romance in it,” Marcie continued thoughtfully, nibbling on a chicken leg. “Some people learn to love each other after they’re married. Most care for each other to some degree, even if it never becomes love. Some marriages don’t last. But I’m convinced that convenience is the basis for more marriages than most of us would like to admit.”

“I wonder how many people do fall in love after they’re married?” Sarah wondered aloud, unaware of the hint of wist-fulness in her tone.

Marcie gave her a piercing look full of awareness, and a hint of pity. Sarah caught the look and knew immediately that Marcie had guessed how lukewarm Rome was in his feelings for his wife. She went pale and looked down, and Marcie put her hand on Sarah’s.

“I’m being such a pessimist,” Marcie said with false cheerfulness. “Probably men fall in love as readily as women, but they’re just too contrary to admit it.”

No, Rome admitted to loving. The trouble was, it was Diane he loved.

But again Sarah reminded herself that she’d take what she could. She couldn’t afford to be proud and turn him away because she demanded his complete devotion or nothing. The passing years had taught her that there’d be no other love for her, no other man to push Rome out of her heart.

Marcie tried to break the moment by looking around and exclaiming at the changes that had been made in the store since the last time she’d seen it. “Have you had many customers today?”

“More than I’d expected,” Sarah said, gratefully accepting the change of subject and wrenching her mind away from Rome. She looked around the small cozy store and had the painful thought that, in years to come, the store might be all she had. Age and familiarity would dilute Rome’s desire for her, and she could predict that his business trips would come more frequently and last longer. They’d achieved an easy physical intimacy and talked comfortably on a lot of subjects that never, never probed too deeply. Rome had set a limit on how close he would let her come, and he never allowed her to pass that boundary. He held her at an emotional distance, and Sarah shivered, feeling cold all over again.

Chapter 7

The small bell above the crafts shop door rang at ten minutes after five, signaling the arrival of someone else. The bell jangled all day long, surprising Sarah with its frequency, and she looked up automatically. Just as automatically, her heartbeat increased and her skin flushed as she met Rome's dark eyes across the width of the store.

She was waiting on a customer, so he didn't approach her. He lifted a straight black brow at her and began to wander through the aisles, examining the merchandise, his hands shoved into his pants pockets, his suit jacket open. He'd loosened his tie; the silk noose now allowed a good two inches of freedom about his neck. Sarah tried to help her customer, but at the same time she wanted to watch Rome; she felt nervous, and anxious for his approval, like a mother whose child was debuting in a school play. What if he made some comment of unenthusiastic praise? She didn't know how she'd take it.

The middle-aged woman finally bought several skeins of yarn and a book of afghan patterns. As she left, Derek came out of the back and approached Sarah. "I've put that dead-bolt lock on the back door and cleaned up in back. Are you closing at five thirty? If you are, I won't start painting that other room until tomorrow."

Rome was slowly approaching, still looking over the merchandise, and Sarah eyed him over Derek's shoulder. "Yes, five thirty's closing time."

"I'll follow you home, Mrs. Matthews," Derek offered, but somehow it was firmer than an offer.

"That's all right," Rome said easily, coming up behind the boy. "I'll stay with her until closing, if you want to go on home."

Derek turned, his golden brown eyes meeting Rome's darker ones. He'd seen Rome at a distance, so he knew immediately who the older man was, but they'd never been introduced. Sarah took care of that. "Rome, this is Derek Taliferro. Derek, my husband, Rome."

Rome held out his hand, man-to-man, and Derek took it with complete ease, as if he'd expected nothing else. "Sir," he said with his unshakable good manners.

"I'm glad to finally meet you," said Rome. "Sarah raves about you. From what I hear, she wouldn't have been able to open so soon without your help."

"Thank you, sir. I was happy to help, and I like working with my hands."

Evidently feeling that he'd said all that needed saying, Derek turned to Sarah. "I'll go home, then. I called Mom after I got out of school, and she told me that she's working on an article, so that probably means she's forgotten about food. I'd better stuff a sandwich down her before she gets too weak to type. I'll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Matthews."
"Fine. Be careful," she admonished.
He flashed her a brilliant smile, so bright, it was startling. "I'm always careful. I can't afford to get stopped."
When Derek had gone, Rome said suspiciously, "How is he getting home?"
"Driving," Sarah said, grinning.
"And he's just fifteen?"
She nodded. "But he never gets stopped, because he *looks* old enough to have a license. He's an extremely good driver, of course. I can't imagine him being anything else." Then she couldn't stand it any longer, and she burst out, "Well, what do you think?"
Again he lifted a sardonic eyebrow, leaning against the checkout counter. "About the store, or Derek?"
"Well…both."
"I'm surprised as hell," he said bluntly. "By both Derek and the store. I was expecting a lot of bare space, not this permanent, been-here-for-centuries feeling. The handmade stuff is really something; where do you find it?"
"People bring it here. I sell it on commission. People will pay dearly for handmade quilts and pottery."
"So I saw from the prices on those quilts," he murmured. "Derek is something else too, isn't he? Are you *sure* he's only fifteen?"
"Marcie swears he is, and she should know. He'll have a birthday next month."
"Sixteen doesn't sound that much better. The kid's a rock."
"I've hired him to help me in the afternoons and on weekends. He was working in a grocery store, but one of the cashiers was chasing him, so Marcie asked me if I'd hire him. I snapped him up."
"He's young to be working like that."
"He's saving for college. If he wasn't working here, he'd be working somewhere else, whether Marcie liked it or not. I get the feeling that once he's decided on his course of action, a stick of dynamite couldn't blow him off it."

Their conversation was interrupted when the bell jangled again, as a young mother entered with a toddler in her arms and a boy of about five right on her heels. Rome glanced at her; then he saw the two children and something congealed in his eyes. He went still, a blank mask taking all the life from his face. He moved back, and Sarah gave him a helpless glance as she walked over to offer her assistance to her new customer. The young woman smiled and expressed interest in a collection of clowns with stuffed bodies and china heads and limbs. Her mother collected clowns and was having a birthday soon. As the woman examined the selection, she put the toddler on the floor; the older boy hung over the counter, staring wide-eyed at the clowns.

It was a moment before either Sarah or the young mother noticed that the baby had strayed. “Justin, come back here!”

The baby giggled and toddled around the end of the counter, heading straight for Rome. A spear of pain had gone through Sarah at the mention of the baby’s name, and she almost cried out when she saw the chalky look on Rome’s face. He stepped aside, avoiding the baby, not even looking down at it. “I’ll wait in the car,” he said in a harsh, strained voice that didn’t sound like his, and he walked out, his back stiff. The young woman hadn’t noticed Rome’s reaction; she scooped up her errant offspring, tickling his stomach and making him laugh. “I guess I’ll just have to hold you, you big lug!”

She bought two of the clowns, and as soon as she’d left, Sarah flipped the sign to CLOSED and began locking up. Her heart was pounding heavily, and she wanted to go to Rome. Peering out the window, she saw him sitting in his car, parked just a few parking spaces down the street, staring straight ahead.

Deciding it was better to give him a few minutes alone, she finished securing the store for the night, then went out back to her own car. When she drove out of the back alley onto the street, Rome’s car nosed in behind her.

He was completely silent on the elevator going up to the apartment, his jaw set, his eyes bleak. Sarah said “Rome?” hesitantly, but he didn’t look at her or indicate that he heard her.

She waited until the door was closed behind them in the apartment; then she put her hand on his arm. “I’m sorry. I know how you feel—”

“You damned well don’t know how I feel,” he said harshly, throwing off her touch. “Let me know when dinner’s ready.”

Sarah stood in the foyer for a moment after he'd turned his back and walked off, feeling as if he'd slapped her. Moving as if in shock, she took off her coat and hung it up, then went into her bedroom to change into older clothes before starting their dinner. Her face in the mirror was pale and taut, her eyes darkened with hurt. She set her mouth and deliberately blanked her expression. She'd overstepped his boundaries and been coldly rebuffed for it. He wanted a distinct emotional distance between them, and she had to remember that.

She didn't allow herself to hide in her bedroom, though she felt a need to lick her own wounds. She went out to the kitchen and began calmly preparing the meal she'd already planned, not letting herself think about his absence from the kitchen. He usually helped, and she was accustomed to having his tall form taking up a lot of space, to talking to him while they worked.

She called him to the table, her manner carefully free of reproach or hurt. He didn't initiate any conversation, so she didn't either. When they were finished, he lingered for a moment at the table, as if searching for something to say. Not wanting him to feel uncomfortable, Sarah kept herself busy clearing the table and cleaning up the kitchen, even humming quietly to herself as she worked, though she couldn't have identified what tune she was humming. Then she said casually, "I'm going to take a shower and make an early night of it, since this is a chance to catch up on my sleep."

He didn't reply but watched her narrowly as she went to her room.

She didn't tell him good night after she'd taken her shower and put on a nightgown; there was a limit to her self-control. She simply turned out the light and went to bed, then lay curled on her side, staring at the wall, unable to fill the emptiness inside her.

Much later she was still awake, listening to him in his own room, hearing his shower running. The water stopped, and she heard no other sounds. When her door was opened, she jumped, startled, and rolled over onto her back.

He was a darker outline against the night. He pulled the covers back and bent over her, pulling the nightgown over her head and dropping it to the floor. Sarah felt his hands on her breasts and thighs; then his heavy weight came down on her and his mouth closed fiercely over hers. A shudder of

relief shook her, and she put her arms around his neck, letting him part her legs and take her.
“All of me,” he demanded harshly, as she lifted her hips up to him. “Take all of me. More. More! Yes, like that. Just like that!”
He was silent then, taking her with barely controlled violence. Sarah gave herself up without a struggle to the tumultuous responses he demanded of her, knowing that the comfort of her body was the only comfort he’d accept from her. She quickly reached her pleasure, and he slowed then, forcibly bringing himself to an easier rhythm and a lighter touch. When she began to move under him again, telling him without words that the tension was building in her once more, he unleashed his strength and drove into her with a power that took her breath and shattered her senses, sending her spi-raling over the edge of pleasure again. Never before had he taken her like that, with such raw, unbridled need, holding her so tightly that she felt crushed. But when it was over, he began moving away from her, and panic seized her.
Before she could stop herself, she reached out for him. “Please,” she whispered tightly. “Hold me, just for a little while.”
He hesitated, then stretched out on the bed and pulled her up against him, settling her head on his shoulder. Sarah clenched her fingers in the hair on his chest, as if she could hold him in place during the night. She melted against him, her soft body flowing to meet the contours of his, adjusting and fitting. Suddenly she felt herself going to sleep, as her body relaxed and a sigh of contentment escaped her.
Several minutes later she was almost asleep when she was awakened by the feel of him moving away from her, cautiously disengaging their limbs. He eased himself out of the bed, obviously trying not to awaken her, and she forced herself to lie still, her eyes closed until she heard him leave the room and close the door behind him. Then her eyes flared open, hot and bright with unshed tears. She curled into a tight little ball and thrust her hand against her mouth to stifle the sound of the sobs that couldn’t be controlled.
Over breakfast the next morning he said abruptly, “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings last night.”
Reminding herself not to overreact and blunder past his boundaries again, Sarah gave him a smile that was friendly but faintly aloof. “That’s all right,” she said, shrugging it away, then changed the subject by asking if he had any suits that needed to be cleaned.

He regarded her thoughtfully, and there was a hint of iron in the set of his jaw. Sarah braced herself for one of his patented interrogations that were the terror of Spencer-Nyle, but she reminded herself that she was no longer an employee of the company and didn't have to let him delve into her emotions. Perhaps he sensed how remote she was, for after a moment he accepted the change of subject.

As he left he said, "I have a business dinner tonight, so I'll be late getting home."

"All right," she replied calmly, not asking him where he'd be or what time she could expect him.

A frown touched his brow, and he paused. "Would you like to come along? You know him, Leland Vascoe, with Aames and Vascoe. I can call him and have him invite his wife too."

"Thanks, but I'll pass. Derek and I will be painting this afternoon, so we'll probably be working late anyway." The smile she gave him was casual, as was the kiss he leaned down and took. She sensed that he would have made the kiss deeper and longer, but she moved back, still smiling. "I'll see you tonight."

The hint of iron was stronger in his expression as he left.

Determined not to fall into the mopes, Sarah didn't let her thoughts linger on him during the day. She kept busy, and whenever the store was empty of customers she went back to the other rooms and worked on them. Derek came in as soon as school was out, with a hamburger in one hand and a large soft drink in the other.

When no one else was in the store, Derek was warmer and friendlier. He grinned at her and held up the burger. "Mom's really into that article. I'll probably have to live off these things until she gets it finished."

Sarah smiled in return. "I tell you what, Rome's working late tonight, so when we get finished here, why don't we pick up a super pizza and take it home for dinner? Maybe we can entice your mom away from the typewriter."

"Put pepperoni on the pizza, and I'll guarantee it," he said placidly.

He painted by himself until Sarah closed the store; then she put on a pair of coveralls and helped. With both of them working, it was finished by seven, and Derek went home while Sarah drove to a pizza parlor and ordered the largest pizza they made. When she drove up to the condo, Derek came out

to get the pizza, and she knew he'd been standing in the entrance, watching for her.

As they entered the ground floor apartment he and Marcie lived in, he whispered, "Watch this. Ten seconds at the most." He walked over to the closed door from behind which came the staccato clattering of typewriter keys, and he gently waved the pizza box back and forth. In a few seconds, the clattering faltered, then stopped altogether.

"Derek, you *fiend*!" Marcie shrieked, and the door was wrenched open. "Give me that pizza!"

Laughing at her, he held it out of her reach. "Come on, sit at the table and eat it like it should be eaten; then you can go back to the typewriter and I swear I won't say a word to you about eating until sometime tomorrow."

"Like breakfast, tomorrow?" asked Marcie whimsically. Then she saw Sarah. "Are you in on this plot too?"

Sarah nodded, admitting everything. "We're calling it the Pepperoni Plan."

"It works, damn it," sighed Marcie. "All right, let's pig out on pizza."

The family warmth, the unquestioning love between Marcie and her son, lured Sarah like a magnet, and she lingered in their apartment long after the pizza was gone. Her own apartment, which she'd tried so hard to make into a warm, secure haven, was painfully empty because it wasn't filled with the one thing that was most important to security: love. Marcie filled her in on how the article was developing, then excused herself and locked herself in her study again. Derek invited her to play a game of gin, but halfway through the game they began talking about blackjack, and the game was abandoned while Derek began teaching her how to be a card counter, employing the one system most likely to get a gambler invited *out* of any casino in the world. From there he went on to the different types of poker, and Sarah decided that Derek was a cardsharp as well as a wonder kid. He was sharp in reading people too, because she sensed that he knew she was at loose ends, and was devoting himself to keeping her entertained until she felt she could go to her own apartment. He was a kind boy, wise beyond his years.

At ten o'clock she said good night to Derek and went home, opening the door to rooms that were dark and chilled. Hurriedly she turned on the lights, then the heat. She hadn't been home five minutes when the door slammed shut, signaling Rome's arrival. She was in her bedroom, preparing to take a

shower, and she went to the door to greet him. They almost ran into each other, and she stepped back hastily.
“Where the hell have you been?” he barked, coming into her bedroom and standing over her like an infuriated angel of vengeance. “I’ve been ringing the phone off the hook since seven thirty, and don’t tell me you were at the damned store, because I tried there too.”
Sarah looked at him, stunned, unable to think why he was so angry. And he was angry, blazingly so. His eyes were black with fury. And he’d said “damned store.” Did that mean anything? She’d thought he approved of the idea of her having another job, but there had been disparagement in his voice and words. She wasn’t good at arguing, at countering a display of his temper with her own, as Diane would have done. Instead she withdrew into herself, erecting a mental shield against any hurt he might deal her.
“Derek and I painted until seven; then I bought a pizza and shared it with Marcie and Derek, rather than eating alone. Derek and I have been playing cards since then. Why were you trying to call me?”
Her calm, cool, remote voice seemed to inflame him even further.
“Because,” he ground out from between his clenched teeth, “Leland Vascoe brought his wife and they wanted you to join us. You didn’t have to eat with the Taliferros, if eating alone was your only problem. I’d already invited you to have dinner with me, but you had to paint some grim little back room instead. Now you tell me that you were finished by seven, and you could’ve had dinner with me anyway. Your support is overwhelming,” he said with biting sarcasm.
Sarah was very still, her delicate shoulders erect. “I didn’t know what time we’d finish painting,” she said quietly.
“Damn it, Sarah, you worked for years for the corporation, and you know the routine. I expect you to be available for these mixed business and social meetings, not puttering around in that—”
“Grim little store,” she finished for him, not flinching or looking away from him. She was beginning to feel sick inside, a cold feeling spreading through her chest. “Before we married, you said that we’d respect each other’s business responsibilities. I’m willing to attend whatever business dinners you want me to attend, and after the repairs are finished at the store, I shouldn’t have to stay late. But that isn’t the real issue, is it? You don’t want your wife to work outside the home at all, do you?”
“There’s no need for you to work,” he rapped out.

“I won’t sit here all day and twiddle my thumbs. What else is there for me to do? I can only dust so many times in one day before even that fascinating occupation becomes boring.”
“Diane wasn’t bored.”
The lethal jab was right on target, and Sarah’s eyes widened, but that was the only clue she gave as to how much that hurt. Staring bleakly at him, she said, “I’m not Diane.”
That was the whole problem, she thought, turning away from him. She couldn’t stand there and let him cut her to ribbons. Diane would have been jaw to jaw with him, and their argument by now would have deviated far from the original subject. In another two minutes they’d have been kissing and falling on the bed, which was how Diane had told her they always ended their arguments. Sarah couldn’t do that. She wasn’t Diane, but herself, lacking Diane’s fire and strength. That was the one thing Rome could never forgive her for: not being Diane.
At the bathroom door, she turned to face him again, her ex-pression a pale mask. “I’m going to take a shower and go to bed,” she said without inflection. “Good night.”
Rome’s eyes narrowed, and suddenly, chillingly, she knew she’d made a mistake by retreating. It was his aggressive male nature, as a hunter, to pursue his fleeting prey. Sarah froze, expecting him to spring across the room and capture her; it was in his eyes, in the tension in his stance. Then he visibly controlled the urge, dampening it down, though his eyes were like black marble as he stared at her. “I’ll be in later,” he finally said, his voice a deep purring threat.
Sarah took a deep breath. “No. Not tonight.”
The primitive male rose up in him again, and like a great stalking cat he crossed the floor to her, cupping her chin in his hand. “Are you refusing to go to bed with me? Be careful, babe,” he warned, still in that dangerous purr. “Don’t start a war that you can’t win. We both know I can make you beg for it.”
Sarah went even whiter, and the force of his hard fingers left reddened imprints on her jaw. “Yes,” she admitted in a stifled tone. “You can make me do anything you want, if that’s really the way you want it to be.”
He looked down at her, at her colorless face and closed expression, and something savage moved in his eyes. Then he dropped his hand to his side,

releasing her jaw. “Have it your way,” he snapped, striding out of the room and closing the door behind him.
Shaking, Sarah took a shower and went to bed, lying awake for a long time and waiting to see if he’d come to her in the later hours, as he’d done the night before, but she heard him go to his own room and this time her door remained closed. Her eyes burned rawly as she stared into the darkness. How ironic that she should have to defend her outside work, when her dream had always been of a typical, traditional family life. It should have been Diane passionately defending a woman’s right to a career: she’d never been short of arguments or opinions. Their plans had been derailed, and they had each taken the route meant for the other one. Diane was to have been the career woman, while Sarah was the housewife. Now, even more ironically, Sarah had the chance to devote herself to her husband, only to find that she had to cling to her career in order to keep some stability in her life. Rome wasn’t offering her anything more than convenience and sex, and she needed more. She needed a place where she belonged, and that belonged to her, where she felt safe. If she had Rome’s love, she knew she’d feel safe anywhere, but she didn’t have his love. She was still on the outside, wistfully peering through the window.
Rome lay awake too, his gut twisting with anger and frustration. It made him see red when she froze up on him like that! He’d wanted to apologize for the night before, when he’d hurt her by rejecting her offer of sympathy, but she’d put up that damned blank wall and refused to respond or let him make it up to her. She’d been *humming*, as if it didn’t matter to her what he did. It probably *didn’t* matter, he thought savagely. But when he’d gone to her room and made love to her, she’d taken down the barrier and turned as hot and sweet in his arms as she always did. He’d wanted to grind his flesh into hers, to make her forget about keeping him at a distance, and he’d thought he’d succeeded; then that morning, she’d been as cool and remote as ever, as if she hadn’t gone wild beneath him.
That damned store was more important to her than anything else, including him. He’d asked her to go with him, but the store came first. He’d known how devoted she was to working, and he’d proposed to her, knowing that she’d expect the same priority for her work as he expected for his. He’d agreed to give her the room she needed, and now he found it was driving him insane. Whenever she put up those frosty barriers of hers, he wanted to smash them down and take her in the most primitive way, until she couldn’t

build them again. She didn’t even care enough to argue; she simply stated her position, then turned away. The disdainful lift of that little chin had almost broken his control, but she’d made it plain that if he’d taken her to bed, it would have been rape, and he’d forced himself to leave before he sank to that. He didn’t want to hurt her—he wanted to possess her, totally and irrevocably. He wanted never to see that reserved, distant expression on her face again. And he wanted that shining eagerness that she reserved for that damned store to be for him. The challenge she represented was becoming an obsession for him, until even at work he found himself thinking of ways to break through her defenses. So far, the only way he’d found had been through sex, but that was only temporary.

He wanted her now. He was burning with need, and he moved restlessly on the bed. He waited, knowing that if he went in to her now, she’d fight, and he didn’t want to put her through that sort of experience; he wasn’t certain of his abil-ity to control himself. He didn’t want her unwilling body; he wanted her all soft and melted beneath him, clinging to him with all the silky strength of her arms and legs, her cool image shattered by the earthiness of the act. For that, he’d wait.

When Sarah got up at her usual time the next morning, she was surprised to find Rome already up, with the preparations for breakfast almost finished. She looked at him warily, but the hard-edged anger had left him, though she still sensed an indefinable tension in him that made her keep her greeting merely polite.

“Sit down,” he said, and the words were a command, not an invitation. Sarah sat down at the small table, and he served the meal, then took his place across from her.

They were almost finished eating when he spoke. “Are you going to keep the store open all day today?”

Cautiously, Sarah placed her coffee cup on the table. “Yes. Mr. Marsh, the previous owner, said that Saturday was always his biggest day. He closed for half a day on Wednesdays, and I think I’ll keep doing that too. People like a familiar schedule.”

She’d expected him to object, but instead he gave a curt nod. “I’ll go with you today. I’d like to look things over more carefully than I did before. Have you got your bookkeeping system set up yet?”

“Not completely.” Grateful that he wasn’t going to pick another argument, Sarah relaxed her guard and unconsciously leaned toward him a little, the

unusual deep green of her eyes beginning to warm. “I’ve kept a record of everything I’ve spent, and of what I’ve sold, but I haven’t had time to begin organizing it yet.”
“If you don’t have any objections, I’ll set the books up for you,” he offered. “Have you thought about buying a personal computer and putting your inventory on it? For that matter, you need your bookkeeping system on computer too. It would be a lot easier to work with.”
“I’d thought about it, but a computer will have to wait. The store needs a new roof, and I’ve got several ideas for expanding the merchandise selection. Then there’s a burglar alarm system that I want installed too. I’ve just about used up all my savings, and I need to build a little working capital.”
“You used your savings?” he snapped, his heavy dark brows drawing down, and Sarah automatically withdrew from him again, the barrier springing into place to protect her. His jaw set as he saw her change of expression, and grim determination rose in him. He wasn’t going to let her lock him out this time; he was going to go over that damned wall as if it weren’t even there, ignoring its existence.
He reached out and snared her wrist, wrapping his hard fingers around the fragile bones. “That was the wrong way to do it,” he said, releasing all the irritation he felt. “You don’t spend your capital; you use it as collateral. Borrow the money, and let your own money collect interest while you use someone else’s. The interest you pay on the loan is tax-deductible, and believe me, babe, you’ll need every tax break you can get. Don’t wait for a profit to make those improvements; borrow the money and do it *now.* If I’d been here when you bought the store, I’d have marched you down to a bank to set up a business loan.”
Sarah relaxed, her eyes widening. She could handle his criticism and advice on business matters; she even welcomed it. She’d have to be a fool not to trust his business sense.
“You’ll also need a good accountant,” he continued. “I’d volunteer to do your taxes, but I have to spend too much time away from home. If you’re going to do this, do it right.”
“All right,” she agreed mildly. “I didn’t know all that. My instinct is to pay for everything outright, so it’s legally mine and can’t be taken away from me. I’ve never been interested in the ins and outs of business finance, but if that’s the way you say it should be done, I’ll take your word for it.”

His dark eyes sharpened, and like a hawk he swooped down on the most significant thing she'd said. The morning after their wedding, when she'd come unglued because the apartment was unfamiliar to her, he'd realized that she liked everything in its place. She was, in fact, almost fanatic about it. But now this second statement alerted him to a deep-seated insecurity in her that he hadn't realized before. "Taken away from you?" he asked casually, though there was nothing casual in the way he watched her. He felt as if he were on the verge of finally getting around that barrier inside her, of knowing what went on in that reserved mind of hers. "Do you really think I'd let you go belly up if you enjoyed the store that much? You don't have to worry about bankruptcy, ever."

Sarah shivered, a movement that he felt immediately, as he was still holding her wrist. She stared at him across the cold, empty wasteland of her childhood; then her lashes dropped as she tried to push the emptiness away. "It isn't that," she vaguely explained. "I just needed to feel that it was *mine*, that I belonged… I mean, that it belonged to me."

"Do you realize I don't know anything about your family?" he asked conversationally, and she flinched, telling him without words that he was on the right track. "Where are your parents? Did you have a deprived childhood?"

Abruptly Sarah looked at him, awareness dawning in her eyes. "Are you psychoanalyzing me?" she asked in an attempt at lightness. "Don't bother. I can clear it up for you; it's no big mystery, though I really don't like to talk about it. No, I didn't have a deprived childhood, not in material things anyway. My father is a successful lawyer, and we were definitely upper-middle-class. But my parents weren't happy together, and they stayed married only because of me; when I started college and was officially launched, they promptly divorced. I've never been close to my parents. Everything was so… so *cold* at home, so polite. I guess I grew up knowing how shaky everything was and expecting it to fall apart without notice. I intended to make my own little nest, where I'd feel safe," she confessed. "And you're still doing it."

"I'm still doing it. I pull things in around me and pretend that nothing will ever change." She darted a look at him and shifted uncomfortably, aware that she'd bared a large part of herself to him. He was watching her with a look in his eyes that she took for pity, and she didn't want that. She forced herself to shrug and say lightly, "Old habits die hard, if they die at all. I

don’t easily accept any changes in my life; I have to think about things for a while and become accustomed to them, then gradually move things around. Except for the store,” she added thoughtfully. “I wanted the store immediately. It has such a permanent, homey feel to it.”
So that was what those barriers were all about, he thought. The wonder was that she’d married him at all, if she disliked changes so much. Probably she’d taken the step only because he’d assured her he wouldn’t interfere with her life, and since their marriage, he’d been trying to force himself past her reserve, while she’d been frantically trying to keep it in place. If he eased up, she’d gradually relax with him and accept his place in her life. She wasn’t cold and aloof at all, something he should have known immediately from the passionate way she responded to him in bed. She was more like a shy, wary doe, and she’d have to trust him and accept his presence before she’d let him venture close to her. Physical closeness and mental closeness were two very different things for her, and he’d have to remember that.
She wasn’t Diane. Diane’s personality had been firmly based on a loving, secure tightly knit family, and she’d had the inner self-confidence to handle his temper and dominant personality, while Sarah felt threatened by it. She was far softer, far more vulnerable, than he’d ever imagined.
She shifted, freeing her wrist from his grip and rising to her feet, smiling a bright smile that didn’t fool him in the least. “I have to hurry, or I’ll be late opening the store.”
“Go on and get ready; I’ll clean up in here.” He stood too, but halted her departure with a hard hand on her waist. “Sarah, understand one thing: An argument doesn’t mean your life is going to be torn apart. I was worried last night when I couldn’t find you, and I blew up. That’s all there was to it.”
Her eyes were bottomless pools of green, and she stood motionless under his hand. If he wanted to think that was why she’d been so upset, let him. Better that than his knowing that he could hurt her deeply just because she loved him.

Chapter 8

Their life together settled into a routine, defined by the mundane details that gave things a sense of continuity; no matter what else, there was always

laundry, and cooking, and cleaning. He did as much as she did in the housework department, when he was there, but he was often gone, and when he wasn't there, she threw herself into work, trying to fill the emptiness that came from his absence. He didn't call her every night when he was on a business trip; he always gave her the number where he could be reached if she needed him, and he invariably called her if he was delayed, or to tell her when he'd be home, but other than that she had no contact with him. She understood, though she missed hearing his voice, if nothing else. What could they say to each other every night? She couldn't tell him how much she missed him, how the time dragged while he was gone, how much she loved him, because he didn't want to know that. It was much safer not to talk to him except when necessary; she'd simply wait until he came home, and his initial sexual urgency would give her the chance to hold him, to silently give him the love that had been building up in her. She always knew what to expect from Rome when he returned from a trip; he walked through the door ready to fall on her like a starving man falling on a feast. When she let herself think about it, she admitted to herself that, while he did like her and to some extent care for her, she still hadn't replaced Diane in his heart. Their love life was fantastic: He was an experienced, virile lover, and she could never say that sex with him was routine. He often took her wherever they were at the time, not bothering to take her to the bedroom, and that more than anything told her that he still grieved for Diane. He preferred that their lovemaking be *out* of the bed. When the demands of his work forced him to come home late, after she was already in bed, then he'd come to her there, but when the act was finished, he always left. He'd hold her and pet her, waiting for her to go to sleep before he went, but she always sensed his uneasiness and had begun to feign sleep so he'd feel free to slip from her bed. When the door had closed behind him, she'd open her eyes and lie there, feeling the desolation of knowing herself unloved. Sometimes she couldn't prevent herself from crying, but for the most part she kept the tears at bay; they solved nothing, and she had a terror of him hearing her weeping in the night.

Still, there was a lot of contentment in their life together. Cool autumn became winter, and there were cozy nights in front of the fire, watching television; other times, she read while he worked. There were shared lazy breakfasts, and cold, sunny Sundays when they watched the Cowboys play

football. If he was at home, he went with her to the store every Saturday, and he and Derek became good friends.

Shortly before Christmas Sarah broached the subject of Derek's future with him. Derek was brilliant; it would be a shame if his potential was limited by lack of money. They'd become close enough that Rome caught her drift immediately.

"Do you want me to put him through college?"

"That would be nice," she admitted, giving him a sparkling smile. "But I don't think Derek would stand for it. He's very proud," she said thoughtfully. "But if you could arrange for a full scholarship from some foundation that won't limit his choice of college, I think he'd jump at that."

"You don't ask for much, do you?" Rome observed wryly. "I'll see what I can do. I think Max will have to be brought in on it; he's got some connections through his family that could be helpful."

Max had become a fairly frequent visitor, and though he never stopped teasing Rome about taking Sarah away from him, their marriage had made all the difference in the world in the way Rome reacted. He'd won, and he knew it. Max's heart wasn't broken; nor would he try in any way to undermine his friend's marriage. He frankly admired Sarah and saw no harm in letting her husband know it, and that was the extent of it.

When Rome decided to get something accomplished, he didn't wait around. The next day Max just happened to show up at the store with Rome; Sarah saw the stunned look in Max's vivid eyes when he was introduced to Derek. Derek had that effect on people. In a few moments, Max wandered over to Sarah and whispered, "Rome's lying, isn't he? Derek's twenty-five if he's a day."

"He was sixteen last month," Sarah whispered in return, smiling in amusement. "Isn't he something?"

"He's bloody impressive, is what he is. Give him wings and a sword, and he's my image of the archangel Michael. Tell him to decide which college he wants, and when the time comes, Rome and I will see to it that he gets a full scholarship."

Sarah told Marcie what Rome and Max were planning, and to her surprise, the other woman burst into tears. "You don't know what it means to both of us," she sobbed. "He's such a special kid, and it's been breaking my heart for him to have to work to save the money for college, instead of having a

good time the way he should be doing. This is the best Christmas present you could have given me!”

With the approaching Christmas season, Sarah’s business was booming—so much so that she had to hire someone full-time just to help her wait on customers. Rome was all for the idea; he hadn’t liked Sarah being there alone during the day until Derek got out of school. She hired a young neighborhood woman whose youngest child had started school that term, and who wanted out of the house. It worked out nicely. Erica would leave shortly before her children were due in from school, and Derek usually arrived within the half-hour. Having Erica there during the day also gave Sarah an opportunity to have lunch, which had been limited to grabbing a bite from a sandwich between waiting on customers, when she’d been by herself.

Three days before Christmas she arrived home to find that Rome was already there; when she reached his bedroom door, she stopped, staring at the open suitcase on his bed.

He turned from the dresser where he’d been taking out a selection of underwear and shirts. He looked at her wryly. “Emergency. We have a hell of a mess in Chicago.”

She wanted to protest, to make the traditional wife’s lament of “Why can’t someone else go?” but she bit the words back, knowing he wouldn’t appreciate the hassle. “When will you be back?” she asked, going into the room and dropping down to sit on his bed, sighing in resignation.

“I’m not hanging around up there; I’ve already booked the red-eye flight back. I should be getting in about four A.M. on the twenty-fourth.”

“Well, all right,” she grumbled, and for the first time in their marriage she pouted. He dropped a stack of shirts into the suitcase and looked at her sulky face. Her pouting lower lip gave her face an unexpected sensuality, as if she were begging to be kissed, and more. He grinned suddenly, and shoved the suitcase to one side.

Sarah was unprepared, and she gasped in surprise when he tumbled her back across the bed. He gave her a slow wicked smile as he bent over her and pushed her skirt to her waist, then calmly stripped away her underwear. She gasped again, this time with the instantaneous excitement that rose in her whenever he touched her. “Is this to tide you over?” she murmured teasingly, her eyes bright.

“Something like that.” He unzipped his pants and shoved them down, then knelt on the bed, between her relaxed thighs. “You’re my credit card; I don’t leave home without this.”

She laughed, twining her arms around his neck as he lowered his weight to her. The laughter caught in her throat at the slow delicious shock of his entry, and he heard the little intake of breath she always gave when he took her. It was music to him, and he buried his face against her neck in sudden need, pulling her legs up around his waist. “I miss you like hell when I’m gone,” he said roughly, and with his confession he began thrusting deeply into her, reconfirming their partnership with the bond of their flesh.

Sarah didn’t drive him to the airport; he preferred leaving his car there, so he’d always have ready transportation home or to the office without taking a taxi. Despite herself, tears glittered in her eyes as she kissed him good-bye at the door, and he swore softly, dropping the suitcase to take her in his arms again.

“I’ll be back for Christmas, I promise,” he said, giving her a hard kiss. “You won’t have to spend the holiday alone.”

As if she cared about the holiday! She hated for him to leave regardless of the time of year, or what holiday was coming up. She blinked back the tears and managed a shaky smile for him. “It’s all right. I’m just being silly.”

It had to happen: he called at midnight on the twenty-third. “Chicago is having a blizzard,” he said with grim sarcasm. “All flights are grounded until this mess clears.”

Sarah sat up in bed, clutching the telephone so hard that her fingers were white. “Any weather predictions?” she made herself ask with a fair amount of calm, though she’d been counting the hours until he’d be home again.

“Early afternoon. I’ll call you when I have a definite flight.”

She spent Christmas Eve moving restlessly around the apartment, adjusting ornaments on the small fragrant evergreen she’d put up for a Christmas tree, fluffing pillows and moving articles of furniture that seemed a fraction of an inch out of place. She’d worried about how Rome might feel about celebrating Christmas, when the holiday must bring painful memories for him of his two small sons and their wide-eyed excitement, their toys underfoot, the complete chaos they’d created every Christmas Day in their ecstasy over the presents they’d received. So far, she hadn’t detected any sign that he might be dreading the day, and she was keeping her fingers crossed that this would be a good holiday for him.

She couldn’t wait for him to get home; she felt more on edge than she’d ever been before while he was gone, and she knew it was because of what he’d said while he’d been making love to her that last time. “I miss you like hell when I’m gone…” It was the only indication he’d ever given her that he might dislike leaving her while he went on a business trip. She’d always assumed that he even looked forward to the trips to give himself a break away from her. But if he missed her…

She tried to caution herself against hoping too much. Rome was so virile, he could have meant merely that he missed making love to her. But what if he was missing *her*, her companionship, the things they shared? Her heart was thumping crazily in her chest at the thought. Christmas was the season of miracles, after all.

The waiting made her restless, and she thought of going down to visit Marcie, but she didn’t want to intrude during the holiday, and she was afraid she’d miss Rome’s call. She baked an apple pie for him and put clean sheets on their beds.

The phone rang, and she nearly broke her neck getting to it, tripping over her own feet. Snatching up the receiver, she said breathlessly, “Hello.”

“My flight is supposed to be leaving within the hour,” he said, his deep voice making her knees go weak even over the telephone lines. “But everything’s stacked up, so it’ll probably be later than that. I estimate I’ll be home close to midnight. Don’t wait up for me, baby. Go on to bed.”

“I…maybe,” she stammered, knowing that she’d still be awake even if he didn’t get in until midnight the next night.

He laughed, a low promising sound that made her swallow. “All right, then, stay awake. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

It was just after eleven that night when she heard his key in the lock. She jumped up from the table, where she’d been sitting nursing a cup of hot chocolate, and ran to meet him. He dropped his suitcase with a thud and caught her as she launched herself into his arms; then he kissed her, so long and hard and thoroughly that she shuddered and pressed herself against him.

His eyes glinting, he released her and rubbed his shadowed jaw with his hand. “I need a shower and a shave, in that order. I spent the night at the airport, so I’m pretty grimy. Go to bed; I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, tops.”

Sarah poured out the rest of the hot chocolate and turned out the lights, then went to her bedroom. She sat down on her bed and clasped her hands tightly

together when she noticed how they were trembling. He was home. In only a few more minutes, he'd be in here, in the bed with her, and he'd make love to her as if he'd like to devour her. Then…then what? Would he make another tantalizing confession, another small indication that his feelings for her were deepening? Or would he silently hold her until she pretended to fall asleep, then go to his own solitary bed?

She sucked in a painful breath at the thought, and suddenly she knew that she couldn't bear for him to walk away from her again after making love to her. She was on her feet before she realized what she was doing; if anyone left afterward, it would be her. That way she wouldn't have to watch his back as he left. If, when the loving was finished, he didn't make any indication that he wanted more, then she could kiss him good night and calmly leave his bed without looking back. She couldn't lie there any longer, waiting for him to break her heart by leaving.

He came out of his bathroom just as she opened his door and walked in, and he lifted a black brow at her in astonishment. "In a hurry?" he drawled, dropping the towel that he held to the floor.

Sarah looked at him, at his tall hard body, and her mouth went dry. "Yes," she whispered, pulling her nightgown over her head and dropping it to the floor also.

He walked past her and threw the covers to the foot of his bed, then extended his hand to her in silent invitation. She walked into his arms.

He told her a lot of things: he told her how much he wanted her, what he wanted to do to her, what he liked for her to do to him. His whispers were raw, elemental with need. He told her how sleek and pretty her body was, how he wanted to bury himself in her, how it felt when he took her. But he didn't tell her the one thing she needed most to hear.

When his tumultuous passion had been satisfied, he lay sprawled on the bed, stroking her back with lazy possessive-ness. Quivering inside, she knew that she had to leave now, while he was still content and drowsy, before the familiar impatience began eating at him. Lifting herself to her elbow, she kissed him quickly and whispered "Good night," then left the bed before he could react.

Rome's eyes snapped open, and he watched her scoop up her nightgown, then practically run out the door. Grim lines of tension settled around his mouth. As much as he wanted her, as crazy as he went when he was making love to her, he always dreaded when it was over because he knew she would

withdraw from him, curling away from him and pretending to go to sleep so he would leave. But at least she usually wanted to cuddle, and he could hold her in his arms a little longer; tonight, despite the wild response of her slim body when he'd made love to her, she hadn't even lingered for a moment of gentle caresses. Sometimes, when her eyes lit up at the sight of him, when she clung desperately to him in the heat of passion, he'd think that he was making progress, slowly beating down her defenses and getting to the soft, warm woman behind them. But then she'd withdraw from him again, as if she had to compensate for any gains he might have made.

Sex with her was fantastic…more than fantastic. The physical awareness, the passion between them, was so intense, it overshadowed every sensual experience he'd had before her— but it wasn't enough. It just wasn't enough. He wanted it all, everything she had to give, her body and mind and, yes, her heart.

For Christmas, she gave him a hideously expensive designer briefcase. She'd outraged the clerk at the hideously expensive department store by having the designer's insignia removed and substituting Rome's initials in its place. He laughed when she told him the tale, then casually gave her a tiny box wrapped in gold paper. Her mouth fell open when she saw the diamond stud earrings; she tried to thank him, but no words would come. Each brilliant diamond glittered with icy fire; those stones had to be a carat each, and she was stunned by the magnitude of the gift.

Smiling at her reaction, he pushed back her heavy veil of white-gold hair and removed the earrings she was wearing, then supped the studs into her ears himself. She lifted her hand to touch them. "How do they look?" she asked nervously, finding her voice at last.

"You look fantastic," he said deeply. "I want to see you naked, with your hair loose, and the diamonds in your ears."

She watched his face, watched his eyes grow heavy-lidded with desire, and her body began to warm. A delicate tint rose to her cheeks. She knew, even as he reached for her, that he was about to get what he wanted.

He surprised her by swinging her up in his arms. "Where are we going?" she asked breathlessly, having expected him to make love to her on the sofa, as he'd done several times before.

"To bed," he answered briefly, and her eyes widened.

In the quiet aftermath, he kept her beneath him in his bed, settling himself on her and keeping their bodies together. There was no way she could get

up and leave. He turned his face into the warm fragrance of her neck, feeling the heavy satisfaction of his body. He dozed, then came awake sometime later when she wiggled beneath him, seeking a more comfortable position.

“Am I too heavy for you?” he murmured, pressing his lips into the warm hollow below her ear.

“No.” Deep pleasure was in her voice, and her arms tightened around his back. He was crushing her, and she could barely breathe, but that didn’t matter. All that mattered was the warm, heavy feel of him against her, the almost tangible contentment that radiated from him. This was how she’d always wanted it to be.

Outside, the short winter twilight was deepening into dusk, bringing a growing chill to the room because he kept the heat vents in his bedroom almost closed. He reached down for the sheet and pulled it over them, settling himself on top of her again, with his head on her breasts.

Lazily he kissed her nipples and the sensitive undersides of her breasts before finding a comfortable place for his head. He covered one breast with his hand, then sighed softly and went to sleep. Sarah put her hand on his dark hair, then moved it slowly down to his strong neck and wide, powerful shoulders, feeling the hard muscles beneath his smooth, warm skin. Feeling safe and protected, wrapped in the cocoon of his body warmth, she too slept.

He woke her for a late dinner, his eyes sleepy and satisfied as he watched her try to sort out the jumbled mess he’d made of her clothes when he’d taken them off. With her wild pale tangle of hair streaming down her back and the glitter of diamonds in her ears, she looked like some primitive queen in her glorious nudity. In more barbaric times, she’d have been worshipped for the color of her hair, the incredible pale gold with streaks of almost pure white running through it. He’d often suspected her of bleaching her hair, until he’d seen her naked for the first time. His wife. The thought filled him with possessiveness, and satisfaction.

In the middle of February she caught a cold that lingered for an unreasonable length of time, her stuffy nose robbing her of sleep and making her cranky. Rome tried to get her to stay home from work and give herself a chance to get over it, but Erica had both children at home with the flu and Sarah had no one to open the store, so she had to work, though she

felt listless and achy. Rome had to take another trip, one that could stretch into two weeks, and he frowned at her pale face as he kissed her good-bye. "Take care of yourself, and stay warm. I'll call you tonight to see how you're feeling."

"I'll be fine," she reassured him, hating the congested sound of her voice. "Don't kiss me; you'll get germs!"

"I'm immune to your germs," he said, kissing her anyway. He folded her in his arms, gently rubbing her back. "Poor baby. I'd like to stay with you."

"I'd like for you to stay with me too," she grumbled, something she'd never have said if she hadn't had a cold. "Actually I feel a little better today. I'm not as tired."

"Maybe you're finally getting over it." He surveyed her critically. "It's about time. If you aren't better tomorrow, see a doctor, and that's an order."

"Yes, sir," she said smartly, earning herself a slap on the bottom.

He called that night as he'd promised. She'd closed the store early when a cold rain turned into sleet, as she hadn't wanted to get trapped by bad weather, so she'd been home long enough to spend an hour lolling in a hot tub, with the steam clearing her stuffy nose, and consequently she felt much better. Her voice was almost normal when she talked to him.

The next morning, however, she woke with a terrible pounding headache, and every joint in her body felt as if someone were beating her with a hammer. Her throat was on fire, and nausea roiled in her stomach at the very thought of food. "Great," she told her bleary reflection in the mirror. "I've got the flu."

Having the flu was the very devil. She ached all over from the fever that accompanied it, but every time she tried to take anything for her temperature, her stomach revolted. She tried drinking hot tea, but that didn't work. She tried drinking a cold soft drink, but that didn't work. She tried drinking milk, and that was awful. She made Jell-O and tried to eat that, but she was gagging after the second bite. Giving up, she made an ice pack for her head and took a lukewarm bath, lying in water that felt cool to her feverish body, with the ice pack reposing on her head.

When a sudden chill swept over her, making her shake so hard that she could barely climb from the tub, she gave up trying to deal with it and simply went to bed, pulling the covers over her while she was having a chill, and throwing them back when she was feverish. Her head was aching

so badly, she'd have sworn she'd never rest, but she fell into a deep sleep and woke only when her telephone rang.
"Sarah?" demanded Marcie anxiously. "Thank God! Derek just called me from a pay phone because the store wasn't open. He thought something must have happened to you."
"It has," Sarah croaked morosely. "I've got the flu. I'm sorry, I should've thought to call Derek this morning before he left for school."
"Don't worry about that. Let me call Derek back at the pay phone to let him know you're all right, then I'll be up to see about you."
"I'll be okay, and you might catch—" Sarah began, but Marcie had already hung up.
"I'm not going to die," she grumbled, as the knowledge that Marcie was coming up forced her to drag her weak, aching body out of bed to unlock the door. "Why does she have to see about me today? Why can't she wait until tomorrow? Maybe I'll be ready to die by then."
She walked like someone with a hangover, holding her pounding head with both hands, as if she were afraid it would fall off. The truth was the exact opposite: The way it was hurting, she *wished* her head would fall off. Every step she took was torture, with her body aching and her head throbbing. Even her eyes hurt.
She unlocked the door and crept into the kitchen, thinking about trying another bite or two of Jell-O. She opened the refrigerator door, looked at the green mass quivering wildly at her, and slammed the door again. No way could she eat something that was moving.
The door opened, and Marcie called, "Where are you?"
"I'm in here," Sarah croaked. "Honest, Marcie, you don't want this. For your own sake, leave."
"I've had my flu shot this year," replied Marcie, entering the kitchen. "Ye gods, you look awful!"
"Then, I look exactly the way I feel. I'm starving! I want something to eat, but all I have to do is look at food and I start upchucking."
"Crackers," said Marcie. "Saltines. Do you have any?"
"I don't know," Sarah moaned.
"Where would they be?"
"Up there," she replied, waving her hand at the highest cabinet.
"They would be," Marcie muttered, dragging over a chair she could stand on. She got down the box of saltines and took out a sealed pack, then

replaced the rest of them.
“We’re going to try the routine doctors give pregnant women: weak tea and soda crackers. Think you can manage it?”
“I doubt it, but I’ll try.”
Marcie hustled Sarah back to bed, dampened a washcloth in cool water and placed it over her forehead, then stuck a thermometer in her mouth. She came back several minutes later bearing a cup of tea and one lone soda cracker on a napkin. After plucking the thermometer from Sarah’s mouth, she looked at it and lifted an eyebrow. “You definitely have a fever.”
Sarah sat up and nibbled at the cracker, almost afraid to swallow even a crumb. The tea tasted good as it wet her parched throat, and for a moment she felt better. Then her stomach began to twist, and she hauled herself out of the bed. “No good,” she reported, then had to bolt.
Derek came up to see her, and she groaned aloud. “What is it with everybody? Why do you want to catch the flu? I’m contagious!”
Derek gave her a serene look. “I don’t get sick.”
Of course not. What germ or virus would dare even sit on that perfect body?
The second day Marcie wanted to call Rome, but Sarah refused to consider it. What could he do from a distance of a thousand miles? All the call would accomplish would be to distract him. Marcie was concerned because Sarah’s fever had climbed even higher and she had a wracking cough. She couldn’t eat anything the second day either. Marcie kept her sponged off with cool water, trying to keep the fever down, but Sarah grew even more listless and pale. Marcie spent the night on the floor beside Sarah’s bed, listening to the deep hollow-sounding cough, prepared to haul Sarah off to a hospital at any time.
The third night Rome called. Marcie snatched up the telephone on the first ring, because the noise hurt Sarah’s head so much.
“It’s about time you called, Rome Matthews!” she fumed, breathing fire. “Your wife is almost dead, and it’s three days before you check in!”
Rome was silent for three full seconds, then barked, “What? What’s wrong with Sarah?”
“She says it’s just the flu, but I’m afraid it’s turning into pneumonia. Her fever is high, it’s been three days since she’s had anything to eat, and she sounds like a hollow drum when she coughs. I can’t talk her into going to the doctor; she just lies there and says to give it time. Damn you, Rome, you get back here!”

“I’ll be there on the earliest flight I can catch.”
“I heard all that,” Sarah said weakly when Marcie entered her bedroom. “I do not have pneumonia. I have a dry cough.”
“Protest all you want; when Rome gets home, then you’ll do what you should, instead of lying here getting worse.”
“He’s coming back?” she asked, and even as badly as she felt, her eyes got brighter.
“Of course he’s coming back. He said he’d take the next flight out.”
Sarah felt conscience-stricken. “Oh, no! He can’t be half through all he had scheduled.”
“It’ll wait,” Marcie said grimly.
Rome wasn’t going to like being called back from a business trip, Sarah thought glumly. She was sick, but she wasn’t that sick. Still, it was more Rome’s place to tend to her than it was Marcie’s, and she knew that Marcie had other duties, as well as her freelance work to be done.
“Marcie, if you have work you need to be doing, I’ll be all right by myself,” she offered.
Marcie gave her an incredulous look. “Sure you will; you’re so weak, you can’t even get to the bathroom by yourself. Look, will you stop worrying about imposing on someone and just let yourself be taken care of? You’re not being a nuisance, and you’re really sick. No one’s going to think any less of you because you caught the flu.”
Sarah didn’t feel like listening to any logic. Her fever was rising again, making her bones and muscles ache, and she twisted restlessly on the sheets. Recognizing the signs, Marcie began to sponge her down again.
The fever made Sarah feel disoriented. Time became elastic, making a few minutes drag by like molasses in January; then all of a sudden several hours would telescope into nothing. She woke once to find Derek sitting by her bed reading, and she said, “Why aren’t you in school?”
He looked up. “Because it’s three o‘ clock on Saturday morning. I’ve made some tea; would you like to try drinking some?”
She groaned aloud, because for three days she’d been trying to drink tea, and for three days it had been coming back up. But she was so thirsty, she felt parched, and she said “Please.”
He brought what looked like an ounce of tea in a cup, and Sarah drank it.
“Is that all I’m allowed?”

“For right now. If that stays down for half an hour, I’ll give you another swallow. I’ve been reading up on influenza,” he said.
Well, that explained it. Because Derek tried it, it worked, even though Marcie had been unsuccessfully pouring tea down her for three days. Sarah’s stomach rolled several times but remained under control, and she drifted off to sleep again before Derek could dole out her second ounce of tea.
She woke again several hours later to find Rome sitting on the side of her bed, his hand on her forehead and his dark face taut with worry. “You’re going to catch it too,” she said, feeling obliged to give her standard warning, though everyone else had ignored it and she didn’t see why Rome should pay any attention to it either.
“I don’t get sick,” he murmured absently, and she made a disgusted sound. “Not you too! All you healthy people make me sick. Derek doesn’t get sick either. Marcie had her flu shot. I suppose I’m the only person in Dallas who gets sick!”
“Actually there’s a flu epidemic,” he said, noting how fretful she was. Her skin was dry and hot, her hair dull and lifeless, and dark bruised-looking shadows lay under her dulled eyes. He lifted a cup to her lips. “Drink this.” She drank it, and the cool, fresh taste was delicious. “What is it?”
“Peppermint tea. Derek made it.”
Her back was hurting so badly, she turned on her side, wincing as she searched for a comfortable position. “I’m sorry Marcie told you to come home. It’s really just the flu, instead of pneumonia like she said, and I think I’m getting over it.”
“You’re still pretty sick, and I’d rather be here.” He rubbed her back, knowing without being told that she was aching. She was soon asleep again. She slept a great deal, and she was listless and cranky when she was awake. Her fever yo-yoed up and down, and when it was at its highest point, she sank into a stupor. Rome stripped her and bathed her in cool water, and when she’d roused a little, he risked giving her aspirin to bring the fever down. For an hour or so she seemed to feel better, and she sat in a chair while he put fresh sheets on the bed. He fed her a soda cracker and more peppermint tea, and she went to sleep.
He sat up until he felt he couldn’t keep his eyes open a moment longer. He didn’t dare leave her, but he was afraid that if he slept on the floor, he might not awaken when she became restless with fever again. Without hesitating,

he took off his clothes and got into bed beside her, lying on his side with one hand touching her, so he'd know if she started tossing around.
She woke him up twice during the night, twisting around trying to ease the aching of her body. Once she went into a paroxysm of coughing, and he winced at the deep, harsh sound. No wonder Marcie had been alarmed!
"I'm all right!" she said aggressively, her thin colorless face set in mutinous lines. He put his hand on her cheek, feeling for a rise in fever, because he'd said nothing to set her off. She glared at him. "I hate being sick."
"I know," he soothed.
"You're sleeping in my bed," she accused. "You lied. You told me you couldn't sleep with a woman. I've always wanted you to sleep with me, but you never would. Why are you here now, when I don't feel like fooling around?"
Despite himself, he grinned. Lifting the cup of tea to her lips, he held it while she gulped thirstily. "Just a case of bad timing, I guess. Boy, are you going to regret talking like this when you're feeling better."
"I know," she agreed, and pouted. "But it's the truth anyway. Rome, when am I going to be well? I'm so tired of hurting all over. My legs hurt, my back hurts, my neck hurts, my head hurts, my throat hurts, my stomach hurts, my eyes hurt, and even my skin hurts! Enough is enough!"
"I don't know, honey. Maybe tomorrow. Do you want me to rub your back?"
"Yes," she agreed instantly. "And my legs. That makes me feel better."
He pulled off her nightgown and helped her to roll over on her stomach. Gently he kneaded her aching muscles, and even though she'd lost weight she hadn't needed to lose, he still found himself admiring the clean, delicate lines of her body. Her long legs were fantastic, so slim and straight and well-rounded. Her bottom was a feminine work of art, shaped just right to drive a man mad. He placed his hand on one satiny buttock, and even in her illness, she smiled a little.
"I like that. I like it when you touch me. When I'm better, will you make love to me again?"
"You can bet on it," he said under his breath. He moved up to massage her back, feeling the fragility of her ribs just under her skin.
"I've wanted you for years," she said, the words a little muffled by the pillow, but he understood them and his hands paused for a moment. "I had to be a little unfriendly to you to keep Diane from guessing."

“You did even better than that,” he said ruefully. “You kept me from guessing too. How many years have you wanted me?”
“Since I’ve known you.” She yawned, and her eyes closed.
“That makes us about even, then.”
She smiled and drifted to sleep. Rather than wake her to put her back in her nightgown, he simply pulled the covers up over them, turned off the lamp, and settled down beside her. He smiled into the darkness. He’d hate for her to be this sick very often, but she carried on some very interesting conversations when she was ill. She admitted to things that wild horses wouldn’t have been able to drag out of her if she’d been thinking clearly. He knew he wouldn’t forget them, and he hoped she wouldn’t either.

Chapter 9

She was much better the next day, with no nausea at all, and only a light fever. She slept most of the day, and when she awoke, Rome fed her chicken broth. She wrinkled her nose at him. “This is invalid food. When do I get something really hearty, like Jell-O? Or maybe a mashed-up banana?”
He shuddered at the idea. “I draw the line at mashing up bananas.”
“Okay,” she agreed easily, a smile lighting her wan face. “I’ll forget about the bananas if you let me have a bath and wash my hair.”
He started to refuse, but she’d already divined his answer and the light had faded from her face. He sighed, relenting. She was too weak to do it by herself, but he could understand how she felt. “I’ll help you after you finish this broth,” he gave in, and immediately she was smiling again.
If he’d expected any sign of discomfort from her over the things she’d said, he was disappointed. He thought she might not remember the night very clearly, because she’d been feverish and disoriented, but he wanted her to remember. To find out for certain, he murmured, “Do you remember talking to me last night?”
For the first time in days, color was in her face, but she didn’t look away from him. She lay back on the pillows and met his gaze evenly. “Yes, I remember.”
“Good” was all he said.
He ran a tubful of warm water, then carried her into the bathroom and carefully placed her in the tub. Leaning against the wall, he watched her carefully as she soaped and rinsed herself, ready to pluck her out if she showed signs of fainting. She finished her bath without incident and raised her arms to him. “I’m finished.” The natural way she reached out for him took his breath—that and the way the movement had lifted her high, rounded breasts. Taking her bodily from the water, he stood her before him and wrapped a big fluffy towel around her.
“Now my hair,” she said determinedly.
She bent over the basin and he washed her hair, but it was so long that rinsing it was difficult, and he solved the problem by stripping his clothes and getting in the shower with her. “We should have washed your hair first,” he grumbled.
“I’m sorry; I didn’t think about it,” she apologized. She looked so fragile standing there before him that he gently pulled her to him, cradling her

against his naked body. She put her arms around his waist and sighed in contentment.
“I’m glad you came home.”
“Ummm. I think you need a spanking for not calling me when you first got sick,” he muttered. “Why didn’t you?”
“I didn’t think you’d appreciate being interrupted while you were working. I knew I wasn’t dying, though Marcie was a little hard to convince.”
He hesitated, then lifted her on tiptoe so he could crush his mouth hungrily against hers, with water running in both of their faces. “You’re more important to me than work,” he growled. “You’re my wife, and I want you healthy. If you don’t call me the next time you need me, I really will spank you.”
“I’m shaking in my boots,” she teased him, and he cast a significant glance at her bare feet.
“So I see.”
He turned off the shower and quickly dried her again, before she could become chilled. Then he patiently dried her hair with a brush and a blow-dryer, turning it into living silk.
But when he tried to put her in a nightgown and return her to bed, she rebelled. “I want to wear regular clothes, and sit in a chair in the living room like a human being, and I want to read a newspaper!”
She was weaving on her feet, and she looked like a ghost, but her soft mouth was set in stubborn lines. Rome sighed, wondering why a woman who was normally unargumentative and even rather docile would turn so willful just because she had the flu. He wanted to firmly place her back in bed and make her stay there, but he also wanted to make her happy.
“We’ll compromise,” he suggested, trying to keep his voice soothing. “Put on your nightgown and a robe, because you probably won’t feel like sitting up for very long. Deal?”
Sarah was heartily tired of nightgowns, but though he was trying very hard to be reasonable, she could tell that if she refused his compromise, she was going to find herself bundled back into bed. She didn’t want that, so she gave in. His mouth was set in a grim line as he pulled a clean nightgown over her head, then helped her into her robe. He found her bedroom slippers and put them on her feet.
“I can walk,” she protested when he lifted her.

He gave her a steady look that told her not to push it. “You can walk the next time.”
She gave in and looped her arm around his neck, cuddling her face into the warmth of his neck, and she smiled a little. Being in his arms wasn’t any hardship at all.
She found that she couldn’t concentrate on a newspaper; it seemed like too much of an effort, and her hands kept shaking, so she gave up. But it was nice to be in a different room, and to sit up. Rome turned on the fireplace, and the cheerful flickering of the fire made her feel much better. He settled beside her on the sofa, quietly reading the newspaper.
After fifteen minutes, she began to feel tired and sleepy, but she didn’t want to go back to bed. She curled on her side and put her head in Rome’s lap, rubbing her cheek against him. He put his hand on her head, sliding her long hair through his fingers. “Do you want to go back to bed?”
“No, not yet. This is nice.”
It was more than nice, he thought, swallowing. He looked down at the bright head in his lap and thought of what he’d like her to be doing. He tried to control his thoughts, but with her cheek pressed against him like that, he was fighting a losing battle.
She knew it too, the little witch. She put her hand under her cheek, and he shuddered as her fingers rubbed him delicately. He caught the tiny smile that broke through her control, though she quickly straightened her lips again, and he found himself grinning.
He tossed the newspaper aside and pulled her up onto his lap. “Sarah Matthews, you’re a tease. You know damned well I’m not going to do anything until you’re a lot better, so cut it out, okay?”
“But I’ve missed you,” she said, as if that explained everything. With his arms around her, she knew everything was going to be all right. She had no worries at all when he held her. She found a comfortable place on his shoulder for her head and went to sleep.
He held her for a while, admitting to himself how much he’d missed the feel of her in his arms. Getting married had been a damned good idea. Coming home to her warmth was enough to lure any man.
She barely stirred when he finally carried her back to bed but she was awake and hungry when Marcie and Derek came to visit two hours later. They all sat in the kitchen, grouped around the tiny breakfast table, while Sarah drank a cup of broth. She demanded and got a slice of plain toast, and

her stomach delightedly embraced the first solid food she'd had in almost a week. She looked up from eating to find every-one staring at her, and she self-consciously dropped the toast. "Why is everyone looking at me?"
"I'm just glad to see you eating," Marcie said bluntly. "I thought you were dying on me!"
"I just had the flu," Sarah chided. "Haven't you ever seen anyone with flu before?"
Marcie thought, then shrugged. "No. Derek's never sick."
Sarah cast a disgusted look at Derek, who smiled gently. Derek was always gentle, as if he felt obliged to be kind to mere mortals. No, it wasn't an obligation to him—he was simply a kind person.
They didn't visit long, as Sarah tired easily. After they left, she resisted going back to bed. She went into the living room and that time managed to read the newspaper. She sat up, by sheer willpower, until the time she normally went to bed, then gratefully let Rome support her as she walked to her bedroom.
He left to turn out all the lights and check that everything was locked; she was drowsy when he came back to her room and began undressing, but she opened her eyes when he turned out the light and got into bed beside her. She was suddenly wide awake, and her heart was pounding. She was much better; she knew she didn't need anyone with her that night, and he had to know it too. He pulled her into his arms and settled her against him, with her head on his shoulder. His lips brushed her forehead in the lightest of kisses. "Good night," he murmured.
He was sleeping with her!
She was almost afraid to let herself think about it. There had been signs that he was beginning to care for her; when she tried to think back, she realized it had been some time since she'd seen the bleak moodiness on his face that had always told her he was thinking about Diane and the boys. Was time working its healing miracle? If he was finally recovering from his grief, then he would be able to start loving again, and she had the inside track!
"What's wrong?" he asked sleepily, sliding his hand up her arm. "Your heart's racing like a runaway engine. I can feel it."
"I've tired myself too much," she managed to say, pressing even closer to him. The security of his big warm body began to calm her, and she eased into sleep.

The next morning, despite her reassurances that she was much better and could safely be left by herself, he called his secretary to let her know he wouldn't be working that day. "I'm staying," he told Sarah firmly after he'd hung up the telephone. "Now, what about breakfast?"
"Anything! I'm starved!"
She ate an almost normal breakfast, and decided that food was the answer to everything. She was much stronger, able to walk without weaving, and except for a lingering headache and a cough that occasionally seized her, she felt fine.
Rome worked in the living room, spreading papers out around him, instead of working in the small study, as he usually did. Sarah knew he wanted to keep an eye on her, and the thought made her feel pleasantly warm. Being spoiled had its good points.
Around noon, she became sleepy and dozed off in the chair where she'd been reading. Rome glanced up, saw her closed eyes, and got up to carry her to bed. She woke when he began undressing her but didn't protest when he made her put on a nightgown. She was asleep again before he could pull the covers up over her.
She slept for almost four hours. She woke to use the bathroom and drink several glasses of water; she felt as if she couldn't get enough water. Still feeling drowsy, she went back to bed and had just pulled the sheet up when the door opened and Rome came in.
"I thought I heard you moving around," he said, seeing that she was awake. He came over and sat on the side of the bed, gently touching her face. There was no fever at all. She was warm, but it was the rosy warmth of sleep.
She stretched lazily, then sat up to put her arms around his shoulders, hugging him. The way she'd stretched had pulled the thin fabric of the nightgown tight across her breasts, and now he felt the soft mounds pressing against him. He caught her to him and cupped her chin, lifting her mouth for his kiss. Sarah melted against him, her lips parting to accept the play of his tongue. He kissed her several times, and each time his kiss was harder, more demanding. Gently he lowered her back to her pillow, and he went with her, his mouth still on hers. She felt his hand close warmly around her breast, and she arched to his touch. It seemed as if it had been forever since he'd made love to her; the cold she'd had prior to the flu had made her feel miserable too, and he'd left her alone. "Yes," she said against his mouth, pulling at his shirt. "Please, don't stop now."

“I wasn’t going to,” he said huskily, sitting up and removing the offending shirt. He dropped it to the floor, then stood to unfasten his pants and step out of them. Sarah watched him with wide dreamy eyes, her body already tingling in anticipation of his touch. Leaning over her, he removed her nightgown, enjoying the sight of the soft, slim body that belonged to him. He put his hands on her and stroked her silky flesh, finally cupping both her breasts and leaning down to kiss them, then sucking both nipples to hardness. Drowning in pleasure, Sarah reached for him, pulling him down to her.

When they got up later, she felt satisfied in every pore of her body, and the satisfaction was plain on her face. She was radiant, her skin glowing with the warmth generated by his caresses. As they sat across from each other at dinner, Rome felt his gaze returning again and again to her face. He’d put that look on her face, and he knew it. When Sarah looked at him like that, something moved inside him. He’d wanted to break down the barriers of her reserve, to find the heat of her passion, but he’d found much more than that. The ice-queen was gone, and in her place was a woman who glowed from his touch. Was she falling in love with him? He liked the idea of that; having the devotion of a woman like her was nothing to be taken lightly. Her love would warm the years, provide a tender, safe haven for him to come home to, a cushion against the painful memories of his past.

As she showered and got ready for bed Sarah wondered if he’d sleep with her that night. She was actually trembling, wanting him so much, wondering if the past two nights had been due to unusual circumstances. If he went back to his bedroom that night, she didn’t think she’d be able to bear it, not after having the two best nights of her life. He’d acted as if he really cared, giving her a glimpse of paradise. If the gates closed again and left her on the outside, it would be a blow she’d never recover from.

A brisk knock on the door made her jump. “Are you going to spend the night in there?” Rome asked, impatience in his voice.

She opened the door, gasping as she found him leaning against the facing, totally naked. He was awesome, so tall and muscular, with that virile field of dark curls on his chest. Her breath coming quickly, she dropped the towel that she’d wrapped around herself and reached for her nightgown, then dropped it too. “I don’t think I need a nightgown,” she said breathlessly.

“I don’t think so either.” Dark amusement lit his eyes for a moment as he held his hand out to her, but the amusement faded into something far more

intense when she walked into his arms.
They made love, then slept, and he made no move to seek his own bed. He woke after midnight and took her again, sliding deeply into her before she was really awake, enjoying the spontaneous response she gave him. He lingered over her that time, using his expertise to prolong the experience and carefully raise her to shattering heights. Sarah was totally lost in the intensifying physical sensations as he fondled her breasts and sucked them in just the way she liked, as he stroked her and touched her in ways that made her cry out. His slow, steady thrusts were driving her mad, carrying her just to the brink of satisfaction but not putting her over.
She clutched at him with damp, frantic hands, begging for release. He held her hips, not letting her speed the pace, hold-ing her to his rhythm. He kissed her deeply, then lifted his mouth just enough to command deeply, "Tell me you love me."
Her response was automatic, plucked from a deep reservoir of primitive need that she couldn't control. Without thinking about it, without even realizing the significance of what he asked and what she answered, she moaned, "Yes. I love you."
He shuddered, the soft words setting off small explosions deep inside him that signaled the swift approach of his own satisfaction. He slid his hands beneath her and lifted her to receive his deep thrusts. "Tell me again!"
"I love you… I do…love…" Her voice trailed off, and a choked cry came from her throat. Feeling the exciting gut-wrenching sensual inner convulsions that signaled her release, he groaned aloud, ground his teeth, then was totally lost in his own response.
Lying under his heavy body, Sarah came to slow awareness of what she'd said to him, and cold dread filled her. "I…about what I said…"
He lifted his head from her breasts, primal satisfaction etched on his face and in his eyes. "I wanted to know. I thought you might, but I wanted to hear you say it."
She sucked in her breath at the possessiveness of his manner. "You don't mind?" she whispered.
He stroked a bright strand of hair back from her face and lingered to trace the soft outline of her lips with his finger. "It's more than I expected when I asked you to marry me," he admitted deeply. "But I'd have to be a fool not to like it. You're a warm, loving, fantastic lady, Mrs. Matthews, and I want everything you have to give."

Hot blinding tears gathered in her eyes and slipped down her cheeks. He gently wiped them away, a little shaken by the trust and devotion she offered to him. In swiftly rising passion, and in an effort to comfort away her tears, he made love to her again.

Rome had already left for the office the next morning, and Sarah was rushing around trying to get ready so she could open the store on time, but memories of the night before kept distracting her. She'd find herself standing in the middle of the floor, staring dreamily at nothing, instead of putting on her makeup or dressing, as she should have been doing. He hadn't said that he loved her, hadn't returned the words, but a deep feminine understanding told Sarah that the wish she'd made in the deepest recesses of her heart, in the darkness of countless nights, was coming true. He cared for her, and he was growing to love her. A man didn't treat a woman with the solicitous, tender concern he'd shown if he didn't feel far more for her than a lukewarm respect and liking. The intimacy of their married life had spun a web that had drawn him to her, binding them together. She was so happy, she felt almost blinded by the sheer brilliant glory of it.

Shaking herself back to awareness once again, she dashed to the dresser to get out a bra, and happened to see her small packet of pills. "Whoa! I almost forgot," she said and took out the pack.

Abruptly she realized and dropped the pills from her suddenly nerveless hand. She'd taken the last pill the first day she'd been so sick, though she doubted it had stayed down. She'd missed six pills. Frantically she searched through the dresser drawer for the instructions she knew were in there, finally locating the folded sheet way in the back.

If more than three pills were missed, don't resume taking them. Wait until the fourth day of the next cycle, then begin taking as normal. Pregnancy was unlikely, but not impossible, so normal precautions should be taken during intercourse. Sarah read the words over again, trying to calm the wild galloping of her heart. Unlikely, but not impossible. She tried to forget the last three words, and just concentrate on the reassuring "unlikely."

She thought of how Rome would look when she told him and knew immediately that, wrong or not, this was something she couldn't tell him. She couldn't even worry him with it. The way he'd looked when that young mother had called the name Justin had broken her heart, and she still remembered the pain of the way he'd rejected her comfort. She couldn't face that again.

But she'd have to tell him. She realized with a sinking heart that there was no other way she could explain having to take other precautions. When she thought of the closeness they'd shared, the possibility that it would be shattered made her clench her fists in pain. Not now. Please, not now.
She pulled herself together, dressed, and managed to make it to the store just as Erica did, right at opening time. She didn't have time to worry about anything—soon the store was busier than it had ever been, with regular customers who'd gotten to know her over the months coming in to see how she was, as they'd heard she'd been ill. People needed yarn and patterns, odd buttons, supplies from the doll room, finishing nails and picture frames. It seemed as if all her customers had simply waited until Tools and Dyes was open again, instead of going to another store, and the thought filled Sarah with a special warmth. A small but energetic woman of at least eighty brought in an afghan made from the softest yarn, in varying shades of green, and insisted on giving it to Sarah as a gift. "To keep the chill away from you," the old woman said, her faded blue eyes twinkling.
Sarah almost cried, and hugged the old woman. She'd been making afghans and bringing them to the store to be sold on commission, and Sarah knew that the money they brought did a great deal to supplement the woman's fixed income. It said a lot that she'd spend her time and supplies on a gift.
Just before lunch Rome came in. Sarah glanced up at the bell, her eyes widening as she recognized him.
"Let's go in the office for a minute," he said gently, and Sarah called Erica to run the cash register for her.
When the door closed behind them in the tiny cubicle that she used for an office, she looked at him worriedly. "What's wrong?"
"I have to leave, to finish up everything I left in the lurch when I came home to see about you." A crooked smile touched his mouth. "I could've told you out there, but I want to kiss you too, and the way I'm going to kiss you shouldn't be done in public."
She went weak and leaned back against her desk. "Oh? How is that?" Her voice was husky, almost a purr.
An almost predatory expression crossed his face, and he reached out to lock the door. "Naked," he said.
That night, lying alone in bed and missing the warmth of him beside her more than she would have thought possible, she knew. Even then, with an

almost telepathic insight, she knew, and her hand strayed to her stomach.
“Rome, I’m so sorry,” she whispered to the empty darkness.
“It’s not unheard of,” Dr. Easterwood said quietly. Her own examination had told her all she needed to know, even without the confirmation of the tests that lay before her on her desk. “Those pills were the lowest effective dosage available; given the right timing, a pregnancy is very possible when the dosage is interrupted as yours was. In your case, pregnancy is a reality.”
Sarah was very composed. She’d had weeks to accustom herself to the idea. She didn’t know what she’d do, but she’d already accepted the reality of the small life inside her, and already she loved it. She’d loved it from the moment of its conception; how else could she feel about Rome’s child?
“You’ll be thirty-four when the child is born,” Dr. Easterwood continued. “That’s late, for a first child, but you’re healthy, and I don’t expect any complications, though of course I want to keep a very close watch on you, and I want to run certain tests on the child at various stages of its development. I’m going to set you up for a biweekly checkup, rather than once a month. The only possibility of a problem that I can foresee at this stage is that, if the child is large, you’ll probably have to have a cesarean section. Your pelvis is very narrow.”
Sarah listened, too full of other concerns now to worry about the circumstances of the child’s birth. That was months in the future, and she had a very big problem to handle in the present. How was she going to tell Rome? More important, how would he react?
Dr. Easterwood gave her enough vitamins to put a corpse well on the road to good health, then did an odd thing. She hugged Sarah and kissed her gravely on the cheek. “Good luck,” she said. “I know you’ve wanted this baby for a long time.”
Forever. She’d wanted it forever. How cruel it would be if she had to choose between Rome and this baby!
She told Rome that night. The temptation had been strong to keep it a secret for as long as she could, to put off the confrontation and steal every moment she could with him, but she knew he had a right to know. If she kept it from him, he’d rightly resent that as much or more than he’d resent her pregnancy. Telling him wasn’t easy; she tried all through dinner to say the words, only to find them sticking in her throat. After dinner he went to the study to work on some papers he’d brought home with him, and finally Sarah went into the study. Very simply, she told him.

Every vestige of color washed out of his face. “What?” he whispered.
“I’m pregnant.” She kept her voice steady, and her icy fingers were laced together in front of her to keep them from shaking.
He dropped his pen, his eyes closing. After a moment he opened them, and they were black, full of bitterness. “How could you do this to me?” he asked rawly, shoving himself away from the desk to stand with his back to her, his head bent while he rubbed his neck.
The accusation lashed her with pain, robbing her of speech. She’d known it would be a shock to him, but somehow she had never dreamed he might think she’d become pregnant deliberately, in spite of his wishes.
His wide shoulders were tense. “You knew how I felt. You knew…and you did it anyway. Is that all you married me for? To use me as a stud?” He turned, revealing a face full of pain and rage. “Damn it to hell! Sarah, I trusted you to *take the damned pills!* Why didn’t you?”
Very thinly, she said, “I had the flu. I couldn’t take anything.”
He froze. Swallowing, he looked at her paper-white face and the hell in her eyes. As he realized what he’d said and how it must have hurt her, remorse hit him with a force that almost doubled him over. She loved him. If he knew anything, he knew that, and he also knew she would never have purposely betrayed him.
He moved, reaching for her, but she stepped back, her hand coming up to ward him off. “I saw Dr. Easterwood today,” she said, her voice still thin and expressionless. “When I had the flu and couldn’t take the pills, the break in the schedule allowed for ovulation…and conception.”
She’d seen the doctor that very day, and had had the courage to tell him immediately, had loved him enough to tell him. He’d reacted by lashing out at her for something that was more his fault than hers. If he’d thought, he’d have known that she hadn’t been able to take the pills; the first day she’d felt better he’d tumbled her into bed. Had it been then, he wondered, or the other times he’d made love to her that night? Or the next day, in her tiny cramped office, with her perched on the desk, her lovely face ecstatic from his rough, hasty, and wonderfully satisfying possession? “I’m sorry,” he said gently, wishing more than anything in the world that he hadn’t hurt her.
He saw the stiff way she was holding herself, as if braced against further pain, and an odd pain squeezed his own heart. In that moment, despite his own pain and desperation, he knew he loved her, and the realization made it

vital that he ease her hurt. Slowly he reached out for her again, and this time she allowed him to take her in his arms.
He folded her against him, rubbing his hands up her slender back, trying to take away the hurt that he'd dealt her. She wasn't crying, and that worried him more than violent tears would have; if she'd been crying, she'd have had an outlet for the emotions she was holding inside. Her body was stiff in his arms, and she hadn't put her arms around him. He kept holding her, stroking her back and murmuring gently to her, until she began to relax against him. Slowly her arms crept up to his shoulders.
It took some time before he could coax her completely out of her shocked, silent condition, before he felt that she would be able to discuss the best solution to the problem. Still holding her, reassuring her with his touch, he asked, "Did you make an appointment?"
Sarah was confused, not quite understanding. "Dr. Easterwood wants me to see her twice a month."
He shook his head. "I meant an appointment for an…an abortion." Even the way he felt, it was hard to say, and he shuddered with the effort it took.
She jerked and looked at him wildly. "What?"
In that moment, he knew that she hadn't thought of the solution to the problem, hadn't even considered it, and something cold touched him. He moved away from her, his eyes black with his inner hell. "I don't want you to have this baby," he said rawly. "I don't want it. I don't want any baby, ever."
Sarah felt as if she'd received a huge blow to the chest; she tried to suck in air, and couldn't. Blindly she stared at him, afraid she'd faint; then she finally managed to pull some oxygen into her constricted chest. "Rome, it's *your* baby too! How can you want—"
"No," he interrupted, his voice harsh with pain. "I buried my children. I stood by their graves and watched the dirt cover them up. I can't go through that again. I can't accept another child, so don't…don't ask me to try. I've learned to live without them, without my boys, but no other child can ever —ever!—replace them." His face twisted with agony, and he was gasping for breath too, as if it were almost impossible for him to continue. He fought for control and gained it, though sweat had broken out on his brow from the effort. "I love you," he said, more quietly. "Sarah, I love you. That's more than I ever thought I'd have again. Loving you, having you, has given me a reason to live again, something to look forward to every day.

But another baby…no. I can't do it. Don't have the baby. If you love me, don't…don't have the baby."
She staggered, then brought herself upright only by sheer bone-crunching determination. No woman should ever have to hear this, she thought dimly. No woman should ever be faced with this decision. She loved him, and because she loved him, she had to love his child. She understood the strain he was under; she'd seen his face when he'd stood by the graves of his sons, and known that he would have lain down and died with them, if he could. But knowing, and understanding, didn't make it any easier for her.
He looked at her with pure screaming hell in his eyes, and suddenly his eyes and his cheeks were wet. "Please," he begged shakily.
Sarah bit her lip until her teeth went through flesh and brought blood. "I can't," she said.

Chapter 10

She faced him across the study, her slender body braced under a burden she wasn't certain she could carry. "I'd do anything for you that you asked," she said in a slow, careful voice. "Except that. I love you so much that I could never harm any part of you, and this baby is a part of you. I've loved you for years, not just for the past few months, since we've been married. I loved you before you married or even met Diane, and after. I loved Justin and Shane because they were yours." She shook her head a little blindly. "I don't expect I'll stop loving you, no matter what you do. If you can't, absolutely can't, accept this baby, that's your decision. But I can't destroy it."
Rome turned away, his movements slow, like an old man carrying too many years. "What now?" he asked in a leaden voice.
"It's your decision," she repeated. She couldn't believe her voice was so calm, but her back was to the wall and she knew it. "If you want to go, rather than live with me, I'll understand, and I won't stop loving you, ever. If you stay, I'll try—" Her voice broke suddenly and she stopped, breathing heavily for a moment before she could trust herself to speak again. "I'll try to keep the baby away from you, out of your way. I'll never ask you to care for it, or hold it. I swear, Rome, you'll never even have to know its name if you don't want to! For all intents and purposes, you *won't* be a father!"

“I don’t know,” he said lifelessly. “I’m sorry, but I just don’t know.”
He walked past her, and after a moment Sarah managed to control her legs enough to follow him. He paused on his way out of the apartment, his dark head bent. Without looking at her, he said, “I do love you. More than you know. I wish I’d told you before now, but…” He made a helpless motion with his hand. “Something died in me when they died. They were so little, and they always looked to me for protection. I was their daddy, and there wasn’t anything I couldn’t do, in their eyes. But when they really needed me, I couldn’t do anything to help them. All I could do…was hold them… when it was too damned late!” His mouth twisted with pain, and he rubbed his eyes, rubbed away the tears for his two little boys. “I have to go. I have to be alone for a while. I’ll be in touch, one way or the other. Take care of yourself.” At last he looked at her, and what she saw in his eyes made her clench her fists to keep from crying out.
Even after the door had closed and minutes had ticked past, Sarah stood there, staring at the blank expanse of wood, because she could do nothing else. She’d known it would be difficult, but never had she guessed his reaction would be so strong, or his pain so raw. She felt his agony like a knife cutting into her own flesh.
He’d said he loved her. How awful to have heaven offered to her with one hand and taken away with the other!
She groped her way into the living room and sat down, her entire body numb with shock, but slowly she began to come alive again. If he loved her, perhaps he’d stay. One miracle had already happened; was it so unreasonable to ask for another one? And if he stayed, perhaps in time the wound left by the loss of his sons would heal enough for him to love another child, her child. She’d keep her word though. If he stayed, she wouldn’t try to force the child on him.
Rome didn’t come home that night. Sarah lay in the bed she’d shared with him every night he’d been home since she’d had the flu, and she cried until she couldn’t cry any longer.
She got up the next morning without having slept and went to the store as usual. Erica noticed her pale face and tear-swollen eyes but discreetly didn’t mention them. Tactfully, she waited on most of the customers, while Sarah remained in the office and brought all the books up-to-date. Even that was painful, because everything reminded her of Rome. He’d set up the books,

helped her choose her computer system, worked in here every Saturday, and possibly gotten her pregnant on the very desk she sat at.
Erica wouldn't ask, but when Derek came in that afternoon and saw her, he reached out to help if he could. "What is it?" he asked. "Can I help?"
Sarah felt a surge of love for him. How any sixteen-year-old boy could be so wonderful was beyond her. For Derek, she could smile, and she did. "I'm pregnant," she said.
He drew up the one other chair in the tiny office and folded his muscular body into it. "Is that bad?"
"I think it's wonderful," she said shakily. "The problem is that Rome doesn't want it. He was married before, and he had two beautiful little boys. They were killed in a car accident almost three years ago, and he can't bear being around children since then. It's still too painful for him."
Derek's beautiful eyes were sober, and endlessly kind. "Don't give up. He won't really know how he feels until the baby is born and he can see it. Babies are pretty special, you know."
"Yes, I know. So are you," she said.
He smiled his lovely, utterly peaceful smile, and got up to do his chores.
Another night came and went without word from Rome, but that night Sarah slept, exhausted from the lack of sleep the night before and the demands pregnancy was making on her body. Fatalistically, she realized that there was nothing more she could do, that they were both bound by the people they were and the circumstances of their lives. All her life she'd wanted a stable home, a husband and children to love, and she simply couldn't give up. As long as there was a chance, she had to hope, and she had to try.
As she drove home the next night she became abruptly aware that spring had arrived. It was still brisk, but not really cold, and trees were putting out tender, budding leaves. Late last summer she'd sat in her office, seeing the passing of sum-mer as the passing of her life, fading into autumn and then winter, with no future and no love, only an empty road spi-raling down for the rest of her years. Now she knew that after winter came spring. The winter had brought love into her life; with this spring, there was new life, inside her as well as springing forth from the earth. She felt suddenly more peaceful; the sense of continuity in life itself calmed her.
Rome's car was in his parking slot.

On shaking legs, she went up to the apartment. Was he back to stay, or was he inside packing to leave? Knowing that the next few minutes were crucial to her happiness for the rest of her life, she opened the door.
A delicious, spicy odor greeted her.
Rome appeared in the kitchen doorway. He looked oddly thinner, though it had been only two days since she'd seen him, and his face was lined with strain. But he was cleanly shaven and still dressed in the trousers from one of his suits, as well as a pale blue dress shirt, and she knew he'd been going to the office as usual. "Spaghetti," he said quietly, indicating the kitchen. "If you can't eat it, I'll dump it out and we'll go somewhere for dinner."
"I can eat it," she said, her voice as quiet as his. "I haven't been sick yet."
He nodded, then leaned his shoulder against the door frame as if he were very tired. "I don't want to leave you, babe. I want to be with you, sleep with you, and look at that pretty face across the breakfast table from me. But I don't want to know about the baby," he said deliberately. "Don't talk to me about it, and don't involve me in it. I don't want anything to do with it."
Sarah nodded, too shaken to say anything other than "all right." Then she went to her bedroom to change clothes, leaving him leaning in the doorway.
Dinner was quiet, strained. She didn't ask him where he'd been, or why he'd made the decision he'd made, nor did he volunteer the information. He'd said he wanted to sleep with her, but when they went to bed, Sarah realized he'd probably meant in the rawer sense of the word, because he went to his own bedroom for the first time in a long while. She tried not to be disappointed, knowing what a shock he'd had, but she still missed him. Without him, she felt lost; the bed was far too big and cold. Moreover, pregnancy was having the curious side effect of intensifying her physical needs, as one of the booklets Dr. Easterwood had given her mentioned. She wanted Rome as her lover, not just her sleeping partner.
Two days later Max came to see her at the store. "Have lunch with me," he invited.
Sarah glanced quickly at him, in time to see the concern in his eyes before he masked it. She nodded and called to Erica that she was going to lunch.
Max took her to a small, quiet restaurant; as it was an early lunch, they were the only customers, except for a man in the back corner who was absorbed in his newspaper. They ordered their lunch; then when the waitress had left, Max gave Sarah a searching look. "Are you all right?"

“Yes, of course,” she replied, startled.
“I wanted to reassure myself. You see, Rome spent two nights in my apartment, and he was the closest thing to a basket case I’ve ever seen.”
So that was where he’d been. Sarah said “thank you” with deep open gratitude.
Max’s crooked smile would have melted stones. “Dear girl, you know I’d slay dragons for you, if only there were any left to slay. Tell me what I can do.”
“I suppose you know the entire story?”
He nodded. “As I said, Rome was in shock. I tried pouring tea down him, but he wouldn’t have any, so I switched to Scotch. I couldn’t get him drunk,” he reflected, “not even on my favorite Scotch, but he stopped looking like walking death and finally began to talk. No one had ever mentioned his background; when he told me about his first wife, and his sons, it was almost more than I could bear in a civilized manner, and I’m not known as a particularly emotional man.” For once, there was no devilish gleam in his turquoise eyes. “That was all he’d tell me the first night. He worked the next day, as normal, though *he* wasn’t normal. On my solemn oath, it was a danger to even speak to the man. The second night he told me that you’re pregnant.”
Sarah twisted her water glass around, her eyes sad. “Did he tell you—”
“Yes.” He reached out and covered her hand. “I thought he was mad, or a fool, or both. If it were my child you were carrying, I’d be intolerable with pride. But then, I haven’t had his experiences.”
“Diane was my best friend,” Sarah whispered. “I knew his babies. It was… awful.”
“He told me of your ultimatum. Love, you have to be the most courageous woman I’ve ever met. You gambled everything, didn’t you? And you won.”
“I haven’t won yet, not completely. I have a second chance, that’s all.”
“He told me that he won’t have anything to do with the child, that he isn’t interested in it. If it works out like that, and you ever need anything, call me. I’d be honored to be a surrogate father. I’ll drive you to the hospital, hold your hand during labor, whatever you want. Do you realize,” he said thoughtfully, “what I’ve just committed myself to? Rome isn’t the only fool. I suppose I can always comfort myself with the thought that he’s too bloody sharp to let any other man stand in with his wife like that.”

Sarah began to laugh, touched by his concern. “You poor dear. You were doing so well until you thought of childbirth, weren’t you?”
He grinned. “I’ve always been extremely gallant, as far as my squeamishness will allow.”
Their lunch arrived, and Sarah ate hers with a good appetite, the best she’d had in days. Max waved his fork at her. “I realize now why Rome was so determined to have exclusive rights to you. After the trauma of his past, he must have been desperate to make certain of you, to put some sort of stability back into his life. He didn’t know that you loved him, did he?”
“No, not then. He does now.”
“He loves you too. I realize that he didn’t when you got married, but he’s not an idiot, so he promptly recognized what a treasure he had. He’s still a barbarian, of course, but he’s bloody smart, and stupidity is really the only thing I can’t abide. It galls me, sometimes, to find that I like him as well as I do.”
Max was priceless, using his casual, caustic wit to cheer her up and reassure her at the same time. He was sincere in his offer of help too. She was lucky in being surrounded by friends who cared for both her and Rome. Rome might feel as if his back were to the wall and he had to fight for his marriage, but in truth people cared about him and would do anything to help. Max had reassured Sarah of Rome’s whereabouts the two nights he’d been away from her, as much to help Rome as to relieve Sarah’s mind. He didn’t want Rome’s marriage in jeopardy over an erroneous conclusion.
“You’re a marvelous man,” she told him, then had to tease, “What you need is a marvelous Texas girl to shake you out of your British reserve.”
He gave her a long mocking look. “My British reserve is tossed out the window on certain occasions, love, and for your information, I’ve found a marvelous Texas woman. I would take her home to meet the family, but she wants taming first. I’m breaking her to the saddle, I believe is how you Texans would say it.”
The idea of sophisticated Max with a fiery drawling woman was fascinating. She leaned forward, a multitude of questions bubbling to her lips, but he lifted a brow at her. “No, I do not kiss and tell,” he said gently. “Have you finished with your lunch?”
Rome came to her bed that night and made love to her very gently. She clung to him, responding to him eagerly. Afterward, when he started to

leave, she put her hand on his arm. “Please, not yet. Stay with me a while longer.”
He hesitated, then lay back down and took her in his arms. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said into the darkness, his voice rough velvet. “I want you too much; if I stay, we’ll be making love again.”
The way he’d thought of it had changed, she noticed. When they first married, he’d always avoided the phrase “making love.” She rubbed her cheek against the crisp curls on his chest, then tenderly bit his nipple. “I hope so,” she said, and there was a smile in her voice. “I’d like you to sleep with me again, for as long as you feel comfortable with me.”
He tangled his fingers in her hair and tilted her head back. “Comfortable? This is how I feel with you,” he said, taking her hand and sliding it down his body. He was as eager for her as if they hadn’t already made love. “It’s not very comfortable, but that’s the way you affect me. If you’re not physically able to spend the night the way I’d like to, then you’d better let me go.”
“I’m able,” she breathed, wiggling atop him. “I’m perfectly healthy.”
He was careful with her, restraining his power and not letting her do too much. She knew his concern was solely for her, not for the baby, but still it warmed her. In the darkness he told her he loved her, and when they finally slept, he held her clasped to his side. Pregnancy forced her to get up several times during the night; every time she returned to bed, it was to find him awake. Without a word he’d draw her back into his arms.
When she went in for her biweekly examination, Dr. Easterwood checked her thoroughly, then gave her the thumbs-up sign. “Perfect,” she pronounced. “Any morning sickness, or spotting?”
“Nothing,” Sarah reported happily.
“Good. Let’s keep it that way.”
“Why are you seeing me every two weeks?”
“Your age, and the fact that it’s your first child. I’m being overly cautious, I’m certain, but I want to deliver that baby in November. Take your vitamins, and every two hours, I want you to take a thirty-minute break, with your feet up. No exceptions.”
Taking a thirty-minute break at the store was an iffy thing, until the customers found out that she was pregnant. She told Erica what Dr. Easterwood had said, and soon, promptly at eleven o’clock in the morning, Erica or someone in the store would say, “It’s time for your rest.” The baby

was becoming a community project. Marcie got in the habit of dropping by at least once a day, Max came by at unexpected times, Erica and the customers rigidly supervised her rest, and Derek oversaw the entire operation. If she lifted anything, Derek somehow found out about it, and a gentle scolding from him had the power to make her feel as if lightning could strike her at any moment.

She was in her fourth month when Rome came home unexpectedly early one Wednesday, the day when the store was closed after lunch. She was putting new shelf paper in the cabinets, and she was working on the bottom shelves, down on her hands and knees, with her entire torso inside the cabinet. Rome looked at her, bent down to grasp her hips, and firmly drew her out. “I’m hiring someone to do the housework,” he said calmly. “Tomorrow.”

The idea amused her. “Millions of women all over the world do housework while they’re pregnant until the very day they give birth.”

“You aren’t millions of women,” he said. “If I didn’t travel so much, it would be different. I can help you while I’m here, but when I’m gone, I want to know that you aren’t climbing around on cabinets, or in them.”

She’d done it before, when she wasn’t pregnant, but she didn’t point that out to him. Having his concern based on her pregnancy was a very good sign. It wasn’t because she was awkward or clumsy, because even though she was four months pregnant, she had gained only one pound and was still wearing her normal clothes. The only visible sign of her pregnancy was the increased plumpness of her breasts, and then-added sensitivity, both of which seemed to fascinate Rome.

He leaned down and kissed her. “Promise me,” he said, and she did.

He was quieter than he had been before, at the same time both closer and more remote. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but whenever he went on a trip, he called more often to check on her. When he was home and had a business dinner, he more often than not arranged for wives to attend, so she wouldn’t be spending the evening alone. His hand was always on the small of her back when they walked, and he always held her hand while she was getting into or out of his car. But he never asked about the baby, how her latest checkup had gone, or even when it was due, though if he could count, he should have been able to figure that out.

She knew she wouldn’t have the joy of picking out baby names with him, or speculating on the fascinating subject of whether it was a boy or a girl. On

the other hand, a lot of fathers exhibited little or no interest in their offspring, then went to pieces when labor began. She still hoped. She had to hope, though she knew she had to face a lot of heartbreak in the future, not the least of which would be trying to explain to a small child that Daddy wasn't to be bothered—ever.

But she had a baby to prepare for, with or without Rome, so she quietly began preparing the third bedroom as a nursery. To make room for baby furniture she had Derek help her move several items of furniture she'd brought from her old apartment, and those she took down to the store and sold them. Mar-cie took her shopping, calling on her half-forgotten experiences as a new mother in helping Sarah select what she'd need. A baby bed was bought and installed, with a merry crib-mobile attached to it, ready to be wound up to fascinate the infant who would occupy the bed. A cradle and a rocking chair took up residence. A teddy bear appeared one afternoon, sitting smugly in the passenger seat of her car, but when Sarah looked around for Derek he'd already disappeared from sight. The teddy bear was placed in the rocking chair and promptly named Boo-Boo.

One night, searching for some papers he'd misplaced, Rome opened the door of the third bedroom and turned on the light. He froze momentarily, then quickly turned out the light and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. His face was white. He didn't open the door again.

Sarah asked Marcie to attend natural childbirth classes with her, to be her coach and partner. Marcie drew a quick breath. "Are you certain?" she asked, pleased but uneasy at the same time. "I really don't know anything about having babies. I mean, I had Derek, but he had it all organized." She blushed like a young girl. "That sounds stupid, but I swear, that's the way it seemed. I went into labor at eight o'clock in the morning, just as the doctor was making his rounds at the hospital. Derek has always been considerate. He was born at nine thirty, with no trouble and very little effort on my part, just a few pushes. He cried by himself, before the doctor could make him, then began sucking on his fist and went to sleep. That was it."

They looked at each other; then Marcie rolled her eyes and they began laughing.

Sarah did all the exercises Dr. Easterwood recommended to strengthen her back and abdominal muscles, and took her vitamins faithfully. When she was five months pregnant, Dr. Easterwood performed a relatively simple test, drawing a small amount of amniotic fluid from Sarah's womb. The

baby was pronounced perfectly normal, and the doctor then confessed that that had been her foremost concern, but everything was going along great guns.

Soon after that, Rome settled her into place one night to sleep, with her head on his shoulder and her body curved against him. He'd just made love to her, and Sarah was sleepy, her body replete. At that moment, the baby kicked, hard, the first time it had moved so vigorously. Sarah had felt small, discrete flutters for several weeks but never before an honest kick. The tiny foot thudded against her abdomen where she was pressed into Rome's side. He went rigid, then shot out of bed, stifling a curse.

He turned on the light, and Sarah stared at him, uncontrollable tears stinging her eyes. He was sweating. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. He leaned down and kissed her, stroking her hair. "I love you, but I can't take it. I'll sleep in my bedroom until after it's born."

She tried to smile, despite the tears in her eyes. "I understand. I'm sorry too."

Two days later he left on an extended trip. Sarah suspected that he'd volunteered for it, but if that were so, she supposed she couldn't blame him. Things were out of his control, and despite his efforts to ignore it, her pregnancy kept making itself obvious to him. Her figure was rounding out now, and she had to wear maternity clothes. The baby had changed his sleeping habits and his love life; no wonder he felt the need to get away.

While Rome was gone Max called her every day. She'd never been so cosseted in her life, all because of a perfectly normal pregnancy. Derek ruled her like a gentle despot at the store, and since school was out for the summer, there was no break from him. He was there when she arrived and left only when she did. The only privacy she had was when she went home at night to the perfectly clean apartment. Rome had indeed hired a housekeeper, a nice comfortable middle-aged woman who didn't at all mind receiving a nice salary for cleaning an apartment that was never really mussed anyway. Mrs. Melton knew a good deal when she saw it, and the apartment was always spotless, the laundry always done. If it hadn't been for the interest and distraction of the store, Sarah would have gone crazy.

Rome was gone for three weeks, three of the longest weeks of her life, but everyone made a herculean effort to keep her cheered up. Not everyone knew all of the circumstances—only Marcie, Derek, and Max—but all her customers fussed over her as well. If only Rome had looked forward to his

child’s birth with even a fraction of the eagerness that relative strangers revealed, she’d have been delirious with joy.
He called her at work one day to tell her briefly that he was in a meeting but would be home the next day. Sarah hung up the phone and began crying. Derek took her in his arms and led her to the office, closing the door behind them. She cried on his strong young shoulder, while he rocked her soothingly back and forth. Then he dried her eyes and seated her in her chair, pulling up the other chair to sit before her.
“Was that Rome?”
“Yes. He’ll be home tomorrow.” She gave a watery sniffle. “I was just so glad to hear his voice and know he’ll be home soon that I couldn’t handle it.”
He smiled and patted her knee. “I received the final confirmation on my scholarship yesterday,” he said, taking her mind away from Rome. “Rome and Mr. Conroy really went to bat for me, didn’t they? And all because of you.”
“I’m glad for you. You deserve the best.”
He was watching her steadily. “I’ve been reading about pregnancy and childbirth, just in case something happens and you need me, before you can get to a hospital. I think I could deliver a baby.”
There was no doubt in Sarah’s mind, if Derek had been reading up on something, he could do it. Some people would have thought he’d changed the subject, but knowing Derek, she simply waited for him to tie delivering a baby in with his scholarship.
“I’ve decided that I’m going to be a doctor,” he said, with great dignity. “An obstetrician. Watching you grow, with the baby inside you, is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen. I want to help a lot of babies into the world.”
“I can’t think of a better start a child could have,” Sarah said, touched almost to tears. No man would be a better doctor than Derek Taliferro.
“I love you, you know.” His calm golden brown eyes drifted over her face. “You’ve given me a chance I wouldn’t have had otherwise, and helped Mom too. I’m not talking man-woman love, because I’m not ready for that, but it’s still love.” He leaned over and put his palm on the swell of her stomach, a touch of love. “But if this baby is a girl, I just might wait for her. I figure your daughter would have to be something really special.”
A tender smile touched her lips, and she stroked a black curl away from his forehead. “She couldn’t have a better man waiting for her,” she whispered

and kissed his cheek.
She went home early the next night, leaving Erica and Derek to close up because she wanted to see Rome. Feeling that she'd burst into tears if he wasn't home, she almost cried anyway when she saw his car. She ran inside and fretted as the elevator made its way upward. "Rome!" she called as she unlocked the door and thrust it open. "Rome! Where are you?"
"In here," he called from his bedroom.
She ran to his room, her heart thumping wildly. He came out of the bathroom just as she skidded through the doorway, looking lean and gorgeous with his hair damp and a white towel slung around his neck. She caught a quick breath and fairly leapt across the room, only to falter midway. She gave him a helpless, confused look, then fainted for the first time not only in her pregnancy, but in her entire life.
Rome gave a startled cry and leapt for her but wasn't able to catch her before she hit the floor. Swearing beneath his breath, he lifted her in his arms and placed her on the bed, a cold sweat breaking out on him at the limpness of her body. He wet a washcloth in cold water and washed her face and hands with it, then placed it across her forehead. Her eyelids fluttered open, and she stared at him in confusion. "I fainted," she said in tones of pure astonishment.
He couldn't think of her doctor's name. "Who's your doctor?" he asked fiercely, leaning over her.
"Easterwood. But why—"
He grabbed the phone book and flipped to the *E*'s, then began running his finger down the column. "Rome," she began patiently, trying to sit up. "There's nothing wrong with me. I just fainted."
He put his hand on her chest and pushed her back onto the bed. "Don't get up again," he warned flatly, punching out the numbers on the phone. "She's not at her office; you'll get an answering service."
"Dr. Easterwood, please," he said into the phone, all the authority of a senior vice president in his tone. "This is Roman Matthews, Sarah Matthews's husband."
Against all the laws of nature as well as those governing doctors' offices, Dr. Easterwood came on the line. Sarah lay on the bed and glared at Rome, wondering if, somehow, he and Derek were related. It was disgusting.
He briefly told the doctor what had happened, then Dr. Easterwood asked a few questions, and he gave Sarah a grim look. "Yes, she made an abrupt

movement. She was *running*."
He listened for a while longer, and his expression became even grimmer. "I see. What are the dangers if she goes into premature labor and the baby is in the birth canal before a ce-sarean can be performed?"
Sarah groaned aloud, knowing now that she'd had it. All the signs were that she'd have a perfectly normal labor and birth, as the child didn't seem to be a large one, but she knew that it wouldn't make any difference to Rome. He was giving her a look that would have scorched grass.
He hung up the phone and turned to face her. "You're in a certain amount of danger by having your first child at your age," he said with scathing control. "You're at an even greater risk because of the narrowness of your pelvis. And you were *running*, damn it!" His face contorted, and he clenched his fist. "I don't want this baby at all, and certainly not at any risk to you. Why didn't you tell me? What do you think it would do to me if something happened to you because of a baby I'd—" He broke off, his chest heaving as he fought for control again.
Sarah sat up and went into his arms, holding him and trying to comfort him. "Rome, darling, I'm fine. Honestly. And don't worry, because the only possibility of my needing a C-section is if the baby is a large one, and so far, it isn't."
He shook his head, his arms closing around her. "Don't you remember how big Justin and Shane were? They both weighed over nine pounds! Shane only lacked one ounce of hitting ten pounds. The very thought of you even carrying a baby that big is…it's scary," he finished.
"Don't borrow trouble before it happens. Please. I haven't had any difficulty at all; no nausea, no swelling in my feet, no back pain. I'm in perfect health!"
He tilted her head back, hungrily examining her face, seeing the love and concern there, concern for him instead of for herself. He kissed her, then held her head to his chest. "I love you," he said shakily. "Don't let my miracle slip away from me now."
"I'm not going anywhere," she assured him. "I've waited too long for you; I'm not about to let anything happen now. Years and years and years," she said softly. "That's how long I waited for you. That's why I never married, and why everyone thought I was so devoted to my job. I wasn't interested in any other man except you."
He rubbed his chin against her temple, his eyes closing.

“I love you so much, it scares me,” he finally said, very quietly. “I loved Diane, but the pain of losing her is gone, because of you. It’s as if Diane prepared me for you, gave me the base to stand on so I could reach you. I always knew you were there, and I think I always knew that someday, when I knew how to love enough, I’d have you. If I forget to say it sometimes, remind me, because I don’t ever want *you* to forget how I feel. I can’t want this baby, but that doesn’t change the way I feel about you, and I want you to always remember that. There’s just something in me that broke when the boys died, and I don’t think it will ever heal. Another baby won’t replace them.“
No, nothing would ever replace the little boys he’d loved, and he couldn’t yet see that this new child wasn’t a replacement, but a person in its own right. That was the other miracle she prayed for, the day when he would look at his child and feel his heart mend.
If that day never came, eventually her own heart would break.

Chapter 11

"Give me your car keys,“ he said the next morning as he was leaving for work. Frowning, she got the keys from her purse and gave them to him. He took his own keys from his pocket and put them in her hand. ”Drive my car for the duration. It’s bigger, more comfortable, and will give you more protection, as well as being an automatic. You don’t need to be changing gears.“
“Well, if you insist.” She took the keys and lifted an elegant eyebrow at him. “What’s this going to do to your corporate image?”
“Send it right down the old tubes,” he said and grinned.
The Mercedes felt huge around her, and she drove with ponderous care, fearful of putting the slightest scratch on its unblemished surface. She was used to wheeling her dashing little ZX into the narrowest of parking spaces, to darting through holes in traffic that looked limited to bicycles, but there would be none of that with Rome’s car, which was precisely what he’d intended.
The summer days ended. Derek went back to school, and time seemed to slow. Sarah felt her pregnancy weighing heavily on her now, though she was still in good health and Dr. Easterwood was well satisfied with her

condition. She hadn't gained all that much weight, only ten pounds, but it was amazing how heavy ten pounds could be when they were concentrated in one spot. When Dr. Easterwood told her she'd probably gain another ten pounds before she delivered, Sarah groaned in disbelief. "I won't be able to get out of bed!" she protested. "I have to roll out on my hands and knees now! I won't be able to buckle my shoes!"

"I've heard it all before," Dr. Easterwood said, unimpressed. "Wear slip-on flats, and get your husband to help you get up."

Since Rome was sleeping in his bedroom, he was never around to see her struggles to get out of bed, and she was always careful to sit on the edge of a chair now, so she'd be able to get up without making a spectacle of herself. Relaxing tub baths were a thing of the past, and showers were the order of the day. Shaving her legs or putting on panty hose involved some incredible contortions. She sighed, looking at the tight little mound of her stomach. Ten more pounds was out of the question.

Forgetting her promise not to tell him anything about the baby, that night she groaned to Rome, "Can you believe it? Dr. Easterwood said I'd gain *ten* more pounds! I'm huge already! I won't be able to walk."

He looked at her, startled by the real distress in her voice. She was seven months pregnant, and Diane had been that big at four months. But Sarah had never been pregnant before, and he realized with amazement that he had far more experience with this than she had. He also knew of a woman's fears and discomforts as her time came nearer and her waistline kept expanding. The one thing he couldn't do was laugh, though when he looked at her swollen little stomach he wanted to absolutely roar with laughter. It *was* a small baby, he realized with relief, and a weight lifted from his shoulders.

She looked so forlorn, he was reminded of when she'd had the flu and she'd been disgusted with being ill. She couldn't take being in anything but tip-top shape, capable of handling whatever came her way. She needed comforting; she needed him, just as she had when she'd been ill.

He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her, careful not to let his arm touch her stomach; instead, he put his hand on her knees. "I think you're beautiful," he said, and she was. She was glowing, her hair lustrous, her skin radiant. He kissed her again, his hand going automatically to her full breasts.

She sighed with pleasure, her lips parting for his. Shaken by her nearness and by the softness of her in his lap, he kept kissing her while he unbuttoned her top and sought the warm satin of her flesh. Her breasts were rounded, growing to fulfill the needs of his child, filling his palm. Her nipples strained to the touch, and she clenched her hands in his hair, kissing him wildly.

"I'm going to explode," he groaned, pulling his mouth away.

Dr. Easterwood hadn't told Sarah that she had to abstain yet, but she didn't try to push Rome into making love to her. That was his decision, and she felt a little shy at the thought anyway. She was no longer slender; she'd feel awkward and not sexy enough for him.

He rebuttoned her blouse, and Sarah knew he'd made his decision. She accepted it without argument, sliding from his lap. "I'm sorry for being such a crybaby," she apologized, then suddenly realized what she'd said, and that she'd broken her promise.

He gave her an unreadable look, one that made her flinch inside. No matter how she felt, she never mentioned her problems to him again. When the baby began kicking so energetically that she couldn't sleep at night, she tolerated it in silence. She endured the growing aches and pains in her overburdened muscles, the total discomfort; though it seemed like forever, she knew that in a matter of weeks it would all be over.

On the first of October Dr. Easterwood told her to stop driving at all, and to get more rest. That was something she had to tell Rome, as that effectively put a stop to working at the store. So instead of being fussed over by Erica and Derek and a steady stream of customers, there was only Mrs. Melton to fuss over her, though Marcie did run up to see about her several times a day.

Rome began spending all his evenings at home, though Sarah knew he would normally have at least a few business dinners to attend. Max was covering for him, was all he said when she asked him about it.

Sarah found that she was too lethargic to even miss the store. She read a great deal and tried to decide on baby names, but she really couldn't concentrate on anything. She slept a lot in the afternoons, because that was when the baby seemed to sleep. At night, it did aerobic exercises.

During the nights, lying awake with only her unborn child for company, Sarah tormented herself, trying to decide if she'd made the right decision. Just the very thought of *not* having the baby was insupportable; it was Rome's child, conceived in an act of love, and even before its birth she

loved it with a deep devotion that startled her, for somehow she hadn't expected to feel such a sense of physical ownership. The child was part of her too, an extension of herself. As such, she felt it keenly when Rome rejected the child.

But the decision she'd made, even if it had been the only decision she *could* make, could blight the child's life. She knew that Rome's aversion to it wasn't one to be taken lightly, that it had been formed in the blackest days of his life. She could still feel his anguish, his deep and utter despair, and even now she cried for him when she remembered the emptiness of his eyes. She had backed him into a corner, forced him to choose between accepting the physical presence of a child he didn't want, or losing the warmth of his wife's love, which still seemed so new and fragile to him. He'd never even hoped to find love again, not after the tragedy that had left his life a wasteland; when he did love, he was both astonished and frightened by it. But when faced with a choice, he'd chosen Sarah, even at the cost of considerable emotional pain to himself.

Adoption was an alternative that kept springing to Sarah's mind, only to make everything in her writhe in rejection. There was no easy answer; no matter what she did, someone would be hurt. If she gave up her child, its loss would haunt her for the rest of her life. If the love Rome felt for her eventually died under the weight of a burden he couldn't carry, would *she* come to resent her own baby?

Ever since she'd made the decision to keep the baby, she hadn't let herself think of all those things. She'd taken each day as it came, not planning too far into the future, ignoring the problems she knew were waiting for her, because she simply couldn't handle them. All she had been able to do was live in the present, her mind and body preoccupied with the processes of life going on inside her. She'd been kept busy by the store, distracted by the constant company of other people. But now she was spending her days mostly alone, with nothing to do but think, and she was afraid.

If she lost Rome now, what would she do? She'd reached for a miracle when she married him, and found it. To have him walk away from her now would shatter her. Yet she'd risked destroying her marriage, and done it deliberately. Already he was more remote from her, and growing farther apart every day. He was kind, and solicitous of her comfort and health, but the baby prevented any real intimacy with him, and she was beginning to fear that they were merely polite strangers.

The Rome she knew was an impatient, dynamic man; he made things and people *move*. He'd overcome a horror so great that many men would have buckled under it, broken forever. That Rome wasn't the polite, carefully controlled man who came home from the office every night, asked if she felt all right, and ignored her for the rest of the evening. What if his distance was the result of indifference, and he wouldn't approach her even without the bulk of pregnancy as a barrier? Was he simply doing the polite thing and lending her his name until after the baby was born?

Sarah was thankful that the first natural childbirth class that she and Marcie attended came on a night when Rome was on an overnight business trip, so she didn't have to explain to him where she'd gone. Sarah had put off the classes, hoping against hope that Rome would decide to attend them with her, but at last, time forced her to make a decision. If she didn't attend the classes soon, the baby would come anyway. She felt shy and awkward about attending the classes so close to term, and she keenly felt Rome's absence. Marcie was a dear friend, but every other woman in the class was accompanied by her husband, and Sarah intercepted several pitying glances that came her way.

The class made her feel better in one respect: She was near term, but there were a lot of women so swollen with pregnancy that they made her little pumpkin of a stomach look hardly respectable. She patted her unborn child fondly, thinking that she liked it just the way it was.

Rome came home early the next afternoon; he came into the living room where she was sitting with her feet propped on the coffee table while she industriously tried to complete every puzzle in a crossword puzzle book. Placing his briefcase down with controlled movements, he said, "I called you last night, but you weren't here. Where were you?"

Startled, Sarah looked up at him; then her glance slid away. She'd been wishing that he weren't so remote, but somehow she'd forgotten just how disconcerting he could be when he pierced someone with those fierce dark eyes. He wasn't remote now; he was angry.

He unbuttoned his suit jacket and shrugged out of it, tossing it across the back of the sofa. Sitting down across from her, he raked his fingers through his wind-tossed dark hair. "I'm waiting," he said softly.

Sarah closed the crossword book and laid it aside. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you before, but I didn't know how to bring it up," she admitted. "Marcie

took me to the natural childbirth classes that hospitals give now; she's going to be my coach. Last night was the first class."
His mouth tightened, and again she caught the flicker of something deep in his eyes, the same unreadable something that had been there several times before. "I suppose I'm lucky you didn't ask Max," he said.
"Rome!" Shocked, a little hurt, she stared at him.
He made an abrupt movement with his hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. Damn!" he swore softly, sliding his hand to the back of his neck and rubbing the tense muscles there. "I'll be glad when this is over."
"A few more weeks," she whispered, watching him with her heart in her eyes. "What then?"
He breathed deeply, his powerful chest stretching the fabric of his shirt. There were grim lines in his face, bracketing his mouth. "Then I'll have my wife back," he said bluntly.
"I know it's been difficult for you—"
"No, you don't know. You don't have any idea." His voice grew sharp. "You made it pretty plain when you gave me your ultimatum: Put up with it, or get out. You want that baby more than you want me. I thought about it, harder than I've ever thought about anything before in my life, and I came close to leaving, but in the end I decided to take what I could get. I may come in second with you for now, but that state of affairs won't last. When that baby is out of the way, when I can touch you again, you're going to be my wife, first and foremost, before anything else. If you can't live with that, tell me now."
She sat very still, a little pale, but meeting his gaze unwaveringly. "Your wife is all I've ever wanted to be."
"I don't want the baby between us. Take care of it, yes, but when I come home at night, your time becomes mine. I want your attention, all of it, without you jumping and running every time it whimpers."
"Even if it's sick, or hurt?" Couldn't he hear his own words? Did he really expect her to ignore her own child?
He winced, as if he suddenly realized what he was asking. "No, of course not." Shaken, he looked at her. "I don't know if I can handle it. I want you, only you, the way it was before. I don't want anyone else intruding."
"We'll manage," she said softly, wanting to put her arms around him and reassure him of her love, but she knew he'd recoil from the pressure of her stomach. But something of what she was thinking must have been in her

eyes, because he got to his feet and leaned over her. For the first time in weeks he kissed her, not just a brief touch of his lips to her cheek or forehead, but a deep, intimate kiss. She met it shyly, almost afraid to respond, but he cupped her chin and kissed her again, demanding and receiving the passion that he knew she could give.

"How much longer?" he murmured, lifting his head.

"About three weeks until it's born, then…six more weeks after that."

He sighed. "It'll be the longest nine weeks of my life."

The next week another trip came up unexpectedly. He'd been curtailing his traveling, with Max often going in his place, but Max was on the East Coast already when the emergency cropped up in Los Angeles. Like a general directing his troops, Anson Edwards sent Rome to California.

When he told her, Rome saw the disappointment on her face. "It won't be a long trip," he tried to comfort her. "Three days, at the most. The baby isn't due for another two weeks, and I'll call you every night."

"I'm not worried about the baby," she said honestly. "I'll *miss* you!"

"Not for long. I'll drive everyone into the ground getting this mess cleared up," he said grimly, then stunned her by taking her in his arms, the first time he'd done that in months. Ignoring the bulk of her stomach, he kissed her with growing desire, his hand going to her full straining breasts. "I didn't know," he said in astonishment, lifting his head and staring at the ripe curves that filled his hand. "You've grown more than I'd realized."

A warm blush was on Sarah's cheeks as she leaned against him. He laughed and kissed her again, still fondling her. "I'll be back before you know it," he promised.

Late that night an ache low in her back woke Sarah, and she lay awake for a long time, but the ache faded and she sighed in relief. The baby was still, for a change, and she'd been sleeping deeply. She didn't want the baby to come while Rome was so far away; even though he wouldn't be in the labor room with her, or helping her with the delivery, she wanted to know that he was close at hand. As her time approached, she began to fret about the trauma of birth; she'd have clung to him like a frightened child if they were closer, if circumstances hadn't put a wedge between them.

The next afternoon the ache began again and laced around to her lower abdomen. It wasn't really pain, just an achy, heavy tightened feeling, but she knew. She alerted Marcie, then called Dr. Easterwood, who instructed her to check into the hospital then, rather than waiting until the contractions

were close together. Sarah's next call was to Rome's hotel in Los Angeles; he wasn't in, but she hadn't expected him to be at that time of day. She left a message that she was beginning labor and told him which hospital she would be in. As she hung up a tear rolled down her cheek. She so wanted Rome there! But she wiped it away and touched her stomach. "We're on our way," she told her baby.

Marcie came up to collect the suitcase, and Mrs. Melton hugged Sarah; then they went to the hospital. Sarah was checked in and checked over. She was in the preliminary stages of labor, and everything looked normal. All she had to do was wait.

Rome sat in the office he'd commandeered from the West Coast district manager, an array of numbers and statistics before him, but he couldn't concentrate on paperwork. He tapped his pen thoughtfully on the blotter, wishing he were at home with Sarah, rather than having to patiently sort out a mess that never should have developed in the first place.

Sarah. She was more on his mind lately than she'd ever been before, and he'd spent a lot of time over the years thinking about her. She was so determined to have that baby, and she'd dug in her heels with a stubbornness that belied her delicate, elegant appearance. He'd somehow never thought that Sarah would be the motherly type, though Justin and Shane had adored their "aunt" Sarah.

He winced as he thought their names, and their images swam before his eyes, coming between him and the papers spread out on the desk. Laughing, rowdy little boys, with Diane's bright blue eyes and golden brown hair. How he missed them! How he'd loved them, through every stage of their development from the moment he knew of Diane's pregnancies. Diane had gotten as big as a barrel with both of them, unable to struggle out of bed or even out of a chair without his help. Many times during the night when advanced pregnancy would force her to the bathroom every hour, he'd pulled guard duty, always ready to give her a supporting hand. He'd rubbed her back for her, tied her shoes for her, held her hand during labor, and supported and comforted her during delivery.

He'd done none of those things for Sarah.

He went rigid with the thought. She wasn't as big as Diane had been, of course, but he'd seen her carefully edging her weight forward on a chair so she could get up, and he hadn't helped her. He'd left her alone in her bed to cope with backaches and midnight visits to the bathroom. She hadn't asked

for help in anything, and he realized with a spear of pain that took his breath, that she hadn't asked because he'd made it plain she couldn't rely on his aid. She'd needed help, every day, but she'd never asked. She'd borne the burden of pregnancy alone, with the knowledge in her eyes that he didn't want her child.

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. Regardless of how he felt about the baby, he should have been with Sarah, helping her through the months. In a detached way, he could even understand why she was so determined to have the baby: Because she loved him, she also loved his child. Sarah didn't throw screaming fits, didn't demand anything from him; she simply waited, and loved him, never giving up on that love. There was a gentle strength in her that had enabled her to wait for him for years, loving him, yet still being a good friend, the best of friends, to Diane. She'd loved his sons and been silently at his side when he stood by their graves, thinking that there was no reason left for him to live.

She had many graces, but the sweetest grace of all was the bottomless, unending love she gave, its gentle glow bathing everyone in her acquaintance, and he was at the center of that glow. How could he have discounted its worth?

Without thinking, obeying an impulse that was undeniable for all that it remained nameless, he picked up the phone and called her. Mrs. Melton answered the phone, and a moment later he dropped the receiver back onto its cradle, his face pale.

He opened the door and barked at the secretary sitting at her desk outside, "Get me a flight to Dallas, right now. I don't care what airline, as long as it's the next one out. My wife has gone into labor."

Galvanized by both his tone of voice and the priority every woman gave to birth, the secretary got on the phone and in only a moment was demanding that a seat be found for Mr. Matthews.

Rome piled the reports into his briefcase and slammed it shut. He should have been there, damn it! She was two weeks early; was something wrong? Dr. Easterwood had warned him of the possibility of complications. He knew, personally, how narrow Sarah's pelvis was; how often had he held her hips in his hands as he made love to her, marveling at how slim and delicate she was? The baby wasn't a large one, but was it too large? If anything happened to her—

He couldn't complete the thought.

He never knew what strings the secretary pulled, or whose name she invoked, but someone was bumped off a flight leaving within the hour for Dallas, and he was on it. He didn't have time to return to his hotel and check out, or get his clothing. He gave terse instructions to the secretary to have that done, and get his suitcase shipped to him. He said "thank you" roughly, then left.

Let Anson Edwards and Spencer-Nyle wait. Sarah was more important.

Four and a half hours later, after a ground delay in Los Angeles that had seemed interminable, an inordinately slow flight, and battling the traffic from the airport to the hospital where Mrs. Melton had told him Sarah had gone, he strode up to the desk nurse on the maternity floor.

Sarah was dozing, while Marcie quietly read a magazine. Both Sarah and the baby were being closely monitored, but time was dragging and nothing was really happening, though the twinges were getting closer together. They were in a private labor room; a television was mounted on the wall, and they'd watched the evening news, then a situation comedy. She'd thought Rome would have called before then, but perhaps he was being held up at the office. After all, there was a time difference of two hours.

He came into the room and Marcie looked up, her eyes widening. She got to her feet. "Where did you come from?"

"Los Angeles," he replied, his strong mouth quirking in momentary amusement. "I caught the first flight out when Mrs. Melton told me Sarah had gone into labor."

Sarah's eyes fluttered open, and she looked at him drowsily; then abruptly she was wide awake. "Rome! You're here!"

"I'm here," he said gently, taking her hand.

"I called your hotel and left a message for you."

"I know; Mrs. Melton told me. I've also talked with Dr. Easterwood. I was in a panic, afraid something was wrong because it's two weeks too soon, but she said everything's all right."

"I'm really not in labor yet, just trying to be, but she wanted me here so she could keep an eye on me."

She was beautiful, he thought. Her white-gold hair was pulled up, away from her face, and twisted into a single long braid. Her eyes were bright and clear, a soft Nile green, and her cheeks were flushed. She wore one of the plain nightgowns she'd been wearing at home, and she looked about

fourteen, certainly not old enough to be having the infant who made a mound against the fabric. He kissed her gently.
“Since you’re here, I’m going to go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat,” Marcie said cheerfully, with the obvious intention of giving them some time alone and not being abashed about it.
But when they were alone, it was difficult to say anything. He held her hand, wishing that it was already over with, that she didn’t have to face labor and birth. He didn’t want her to be in any pain, not even the natural pain of having a child.
Finally he drew a deep breath. “I won’t go in the delivery room with you, but I’ll be waiting.”
“Just knowing that you’re here is all I need,” she said, and it was.
Her daughter was born twelve hours later, after a relatively easy labor and birth. “Oh, she’s a tiny sweetheart,” Dr. Easterwood cooed as she placed the baby in Sarah’s arms. “Look at that black hair!”
“She looks like Rome,” Marcie pronounced flatly, only her laughing, tear-filled eyes visible above the surgical mask she wore. “I swear, she’s even got black eyes.”
Sarah examined the tiny infant, who’d already stopped her outraged squalling and was lying as if tired from her ordeal, ready to go to sleep. Rome’s daughter. She couldn’t believe it. Somehow, she’d thought it would be a boy. Tears filled her eyes as she touched the damp black curls with a shaking finger. This was the most precious thing she’d ever seen.
Several hours later she woke to find Rome sitting quietly beside her bed; she’d been so sleepy when she was placed in her bed, she’d only been able to give him a smile before drifting off. She didn’t say anything but watched him as he read the newspaper. He was tired; he’d been up all night, and dark circles lay under his eyes. He needed a shave too, but he was gorgeous.
With the enthusiasm of a new mother, she wanted to ask him if he’d seen the baby, but she knew he hadn’t. By even coming to the hospital, he’d given her more than she’d expected.
“Hi,” she said softly.
He looked up, relaxing as a deep relief spread through him. Somehow, until she spoke to him, he’d been afraid to believe she was all right. He took her hand and carried it to his lips, tenderly kissing her soft palm. “Hi, yourself. How do you feel?”

She considered her state of being, moving gingerly. “Not too bad. Better than I’d expected. How do *you* feel?”
“Dead on my tail,” he said, making her laugh.
“Why don’t you go home and get some sleep? I’m not going anywhere.”
“You’d better not.” He let her convince him to go home, because he really needed to get some sleep before he fell on his face.
When the baby was brought to her to nurse, Sarah cried when the tiny rosebud mouth automatically rooted for her nipple. Her very own baby! She was thirty-four years old and had long ago given up the thought of being a mother, but now she had this minute living, breathing miracle in her arms. She stroked the downy hair that covered the small round head, then examined the incredibly small fingers, the shell of her ear. How very much like Rome she was! There was even a smooth olive tint to her skin, a hint of her father’s darkness, and her eyebrows mimicked Rome’s bold slant.
The baby opened her eyes, looked around vaguely, then closed them again, evidently content that everything was right in her world. Marcie had been right; she had Rome’s eyes too.
She named the baby Melissa Kay, and by the time she went home three days later, the name had already evolved into Missy. Rome had spent a lot of time with Sarah at the hospital, but he always stepped out when it was time for the baby to be brought in to her, and as far as she knew, he hadn’t seen it. He didn’t drive them home from the hospital—she hadn’t expected him to—and she understood that she’d have been asking too much of him if she’d tried to introduce him to his child by that method. He would have to decide for himself if he wanted to know his own daughter. Marcie drove them home, and together they placed the baby in her crib for the first time, both of them leaning over to admire the way she squirmed around until she was comfortable.
Missy was beautiful; Sarah knew that, if given the chance, she was capable of working the second miracle.

Chapter 12

Rome took Sarah to bed and held her against him for the first time in months, his arms tender. He kissed her over and over, as if he couldn’t get enough of having her in bed with him again. He was careful not to jostle

her, but he felt an almost desperate need to hold her. Sarah curled against him, wishing that the six weeks were over instead of having barely begun. Her hands sought his hard, muscular body, traveling lightly over him as she reacquainted herself with the various textures of his flesh. “I love you,” she said against his throat.

“I love you. Never again,” he said deeply. “I’ll never let you sleep away from me again.”

Sarah slept contentedly but woke at the first small cry Missy gave that signaled her hunger. Gingerly she slipped from the bed and tiptoed down to the nursery to cuddle her daughter and reassure her that she wasn’t in danger of starving. She changed the baby’s diaper, then sat down in the rocker and hummed as she nursed Missy, slowly rocking back and forth. Missy wasn’t a fussy baby, and she went to sleep immediately after her stomach was filled. Gently Sarah placed her back in the cradle, then returned to her own bed, snuggling against the warmth of Rome’s back. He didn’t move, but his eyes were open, and he stared stonily at the wall.

Sarah had worked hard before, but she’d never worked as hard or been under as much strain as she was in the following weeks. If Missy hadn’t been a good baby, it would have been impossible. During the day, after Rome left for work, Sarah spent as much time as she could with her daughter, playing with her, doing all of the things that a baby required. Mrs. Melton took care of the mounds of laundry and the cleaning, which freed Sarah for all her other duties. She tried to give Missy bottles as a supplementary feeding, but the formula made her spit up, and the pediatrician advised Sarah to feed the baby solely by breast until she was a little older; then they’d try the formula again. That meant she couldn’t leave Missy alone for any length of time, as she demanded regular feedings.

She always had Missy bathed and in bed for the night before Rome came home from work and kept her fingers crossed that the baby wouldn’t wake before it was time for her usual feeding The door to the nursery was always closed when Rome was home, and he never glanced at it, never asked about the baby. He’d told her how it would be, but until she lived the reality of it, Sarah hadn’t realized just how difficult she’d find it. She was so proud of Missy, she wanted to take her to Rome, hold her out, and say, “See what I’ve given you.” How could he fail to be as enchanted with the baby as she was? But she always reminded herself that the next step was his, that she couldn’t force him.

Other people weren't so reticent. Max came to dinner one night and insisted on going in to see the baby. Sarah cast a helpless glance at Rome's set face, then got to her feet to take Max to the nursery. Marcie and Derek were frequent visitors, and they weren't shy about talking about Missy in front of Rome. Because he couldn't close his ears, he heard in enthusiastic detail from Marcie just how beautiful his daughter was. He knew that she was growing like wildfire and that already she recognized people.

A haunted look came into his eyes. He tried not to think about the nursery or its occupant, but a painful curiosity seized him every time Sarah got up in the middle of the night and went in there. He sometimes thought of standing in the doorway and looking in, but a cold sweat would break out on him. A baby…no, he couldn't handle another baby. She wasn't Justin or Shane; she couldn't replace his sons. He couldn't take the risk.

The thought of a daughter was alien to him. He'd known only husky rough-playing little boys. He thought often of his boys, as Christmas approached, another Christmas spent without them. It was his second Christmas with Sarah, and he found that the pain was almost gone because he had her. There was still, and would always be, a haunting sense of loss, but it was bearable now. He could think of Justin and Shane, and re-member the good times, the hilarious things they'd done. Diane was farther from him; there was still love for her, but it was more of a remembered love. Sarah was his present, and he was stunned anew by the fierce passion he felt for her, eclipsing the relationship he'd had with Diane, because his capacity for love had increased so much under Sarah's gentle glow.

One night during the second week of December Sarah went into his arms as usual, her head finding its customary place on his shoulder. "I'll be going back to the store tomorrow," she said casually, her voice soft in the darkness.

Moving swiftly, he reached out and turned on the lamp, then propped himself up on one elbow and loomed over her, his brows drawn together. "Dr. Easterwood released you?" he asked sharply.

"Yes. I had my checkup today. She said I'm in perfect health." She gave him a slow, bewitching smile.

It was fascinating to watch the way desire changed his face, made it harder and more intent. "Then, why did you wear that nightgown to bed?"

"So you could take it off."

He did. He was very careful with her, slowly building her to a state of readiness before bracing himself atop her and easing himself into her body. Sarah gasped, but not with pain. It had been so long! She clung tightly to him, quivering with almost unbearable pleasure. His hands were everywhere on her newly lush figure, discovering and delighting in the fullness of her breasts, stroking her intimately. She lost her grasp on reality, carried away by delight to a different realm of consciousness where only he existed.

* * *

Wrapped warmly against the weather, Missy was taken to the store the next morning, and Sarah had to fight to get to hold her own child. She was careful not to overdo it, and they went home early, but the excursion had tired both of them. She put Missy down for her nap, then crawled sleepily into her own bed. She'd just take a short nap, she told herself.

Missy's fretful cry woke her and she started up; the growing twilight told her that she'd slept much later than she'd intended and Rome would soon be home. Missy was ravenous; there was a lot to be done, but Missy wouldn't wait. Sarah sat down in the rocking chair and put the baby to her breast.

She didn't hear Rome come in, but suddenly she felt his presence, and she looked anxiously at the door. She felt weak when she saw him standing just beyond the door, not stepping inside, but his eyes were on her and the baby in her arms. He couldn't see anything but the top of Missy's head and one tiny hand as it kneaded Sarah's breast, but a spasm of pain crossed his face. Without a word, he turned and walked away.

Sarah stared down at the baby, shaking. She'd messed up her schedule, she realized. She should have bathed her before nursing her, because now Missy was going to sleep, and she wouldn't take kindly to being roused by her bath. What would she do if Missy decided to throw a howling temper tantrum? As she grew older she was showing definite signs of her father's temper, as well as a comic determination to have everything just the way she wanted it, if an infant that young could be said to be that discriminating. But there was a certain way she liked to be held, and other small things that had to be just right to satisfy her. She would fuss indefinitely until circumstances were righted. To keep things quiet, Sarah decided to skip the bath for one night, and she changed Missy's clothes, then put her to bed, hoping she'd sleep after that long nap.

“I took a nap this afternoon and overslept,” she explained a little nervously to Rome when she came out of the nursery.
His shoulders were tense, but he didn’t say anything about Missy. Instead he picked up on the way Sarah had given herself away. “Going to the store tired you out, didn’t it?”
“Yes, and it’s so silly, because I didn’t *do* anything,” she said in exasperation, glad that the tense moment had passed.
“You’ll have to get used to it all over again, and I want you to do it gradually. Take it easy,” he ordered, and kissed her hello.
But of course, for Sarah, there was no taking it easy. She threw herself back into the routine of the store with joy, for she’d missed it more than she’d ever imagined. She was always careful to leave early enough to get Missy taken care of before Rome came home, but the infant was becoming so active that Sarah could already foresee the day when there wouldn’t be any of this putting her to bed and watching her go promptly off to sleep. Every day she was awake longer, her legs and arms waving around energetically. After a particularly exhausting day, Sarah fell deeply asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Rome lay beside her, slowly relaxing, and was almost asleep himself when he heard the baby cry. He went stiff, waiting for Sarah to wake and go to the child. He couldn’t stand hearing that cry. But Sarah was still asleep beside him; she’d worn herself out.
He knew she’d eventually hear the baby’s cry and get up to tend it, but he didn’t know if he could stand it that long. A moment later he knew that he couldn’t. He reached out to shake Sarah awake; then something stopped him. Perhaps it was her face, so peaceful as she slept; perhaps it was the nights in years past when he’d gotten up in the middle of the night to answer a sleepy cry for daddy. For whatever reason, he got out of bed and found himself standing out in the hallway.
He realized with surprise that he was shaking, and sweat was running down his spine. It’s just a baby, he told himself. Just a baby.
He stretched his hand out and opened the door, scarcely able to breathe from the band that was constricting his chest. There was a small yellow night-light plugged into an outlet close to the crib, enabling Sarah to see when she got up in the middle of the night. It also enabled Rome to see the child, who’d worked herself into a furious tantrum. Her tiny fists were clenched and jerking spasmodically, her legs were drawn up, and she was squalling for all she was worth. She was used to having her wants catered to

immediately; this unreasonable delay wasn't something she intended to tolerate.

He swallowed, slowly walking closer to the crib. She was so small, the temper she exhibited was ludicrous. A girl…what did he know about girl babies?

Shaking, he slid his big hands under the infant and lifted her, surprised at how light she was. Missy squalled a few more times, but the touch of those big hands told her she wasn't alone, and after a few hiccuping sobs she quieted.

Old skills came back to him automatically. Hurrying, without looking at her face, he changed her diaper and was about to settle her back into the crib when she made a cooing noise, and he jerked, almost dropping her. He looked at her and froze, mesmerized, as the baby looked at him with such innocent trust and acceptance that he almost screamed aloud with pain.

It wasn't fair. Sweet heaven, it wasn't fair. He'd avoided her, hadn't even held her, hadn't looked at her; he'd rejected his own child, but none of that made any difference to her. She didn't scream in fear at being in unfamiliar hands. She simply looked at her father with automatic acceptance, then began trying diligently to control a waving fist long enough to stuff it into her open, avid mouth.

Looking at her was like looking at himself, immortalized. He stared in fascination at the dark hair, the almost-black eyes. Her mouth was Sarah's, he realized, a soft, tender mouth, but the rest of her was a feminine version of himself. She'd been born from the sweet, loving times in Sarah's arms, a part of Sarah, a part of himself. He'd wanted her life destroyed before it even began.

A low, raw cry came from his lips. He lifted her again, cradling her in his arms, and he sank to his knees. Bending over his child, he cried.

Sarah jerked awake, knowing that something was different. Her hand sought Rome but found only the empty pillow, and she sat up. An odd, strangled noise came to her ears, but it didn't sound like Missy. She whispered "Rome?" but there was no answer.

Quickly getting out of bed, she reached for her robe, pulling it around her. Going to the door, she looked for any light to indicate where he might be, but there was none. Then she heard the choking noise again, and she went cold. It came from the nursery. Missy was choking!

Her hand at her throat, she flew on silent bare feet down the hall, but only a split second had passed before she realized that it wasn't Missy. She stopped, her breath ragged. Rome?

The nursery door was open, and she moved silently so she could see into the room.

Rome was on his knees on the floor, Missy in his arms. He held her cuddled to his chest, and the raw, strangled sounds came from him.

Sarah almost moaned aloud. She wanted to go to him, to wrap her arms around him and comfort him in his grief, grief for the children he'd lost, grief for the child he hadn't wanted. But this was his private moment of recognition with his daughter, and Sarah silently made her way back to bed. She lay quietly, wiping away the tears as they wet her face. It was a long time before Rome came back to bed, sliding under the covers in a careful manner. She could tell that he was simply lying there, unable to sleep, but she didn't reach out for him. He was fighting a terrible inner war, and she couldn't help him.

He didn't mention it the next day, but there was a quietness about him, a sense of peace that hadn't been there before. He left for the office, and Sarah dressed Missy for her day at the store. There was nothing she could do but carry on exactly as she had before.

Derek only had a half-day of school, and he came in after lunch. Deftly he lifted Missy from her carrier, kissing her downy cheek. With the incredible sense of timing he had, he looked at Sarah as he jiggled the baby. "Is everything going to be all right for you?" he asked.

"Yes, I really think it will be," she replied. "How did you know?"

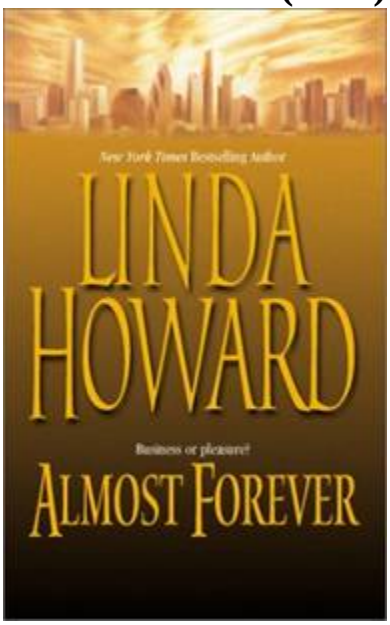
"The way you look." He smiled at her with deep tenderness. "I knew he wouldn't be able to resist her for long."

Perhaps Derek had inside information, Sarah thought, watching him as he walked around the store with Missy in his strong young arms, talking to her as if she understood every word he said, and showing her all the brightly colored items that would interest her. And perhaps she did understand him; Max had compared Derek to an archangel. He might not be an angel, but he walked with them.

Sarah didn't deviate from her routine; Missy was sound asleep when Rome came in from the office. They ate dinner as usual, talked casually; she read while he read a few reports. Then she got ready for bed, checked on Missy, and crawled gratefully into bed, yawning.

Rome came out of the bathroom, drying his broad shoulders. “Here,” he said, tossing the towel to her. “Dry my back.”
He sat on the bed and she rubbed the towel over his back, then pressed a quick kiss on his spine. Tossing the towel to the floor, he turned to push her onto the pillows. “I can’t tell you how much I love you,” he said quietly.
“Try,” she urged.
He laughed, bending down to kiss her with growing hunger. His lovemaking was incredibly sweet and intense that night; he held back, satisfying her time and again before letting himself go, then holding her tightly until she slept.
Missy woke in the early hours, wanting to be fed. Before Sarah could get out of bed, Rome threw the covers back and got to his feet. “Stay there,” he said. “I’ll bring her in here.”
In a moment he was back, with a fussing infant in his arms. As he gave her to Sarah he said, “You know, don’t you? You were awake last night.”
“Yes, I know.” All the love in the world shone out of her eyes as she looked at him.
“You should hate me,” he said roughly. “For what I wanted to do.”
“No, never. You were hurting, and you wanted to protect yourself. I understood.”
He looked at the baby as she nursed, and his hard dark face took on such a tender expression that Sarah came apart inside. Very gently he touched Missy’s cheek with one forefinger. “She’s more than I deserve. I got a second chance all the way around, didn’t I?”
No, not a second chance, a second miracle. He’d been a man dead inside, and love had brought life back to him. He’d always carry the scars that marked the people he’d loved and lost, but he could go on living now. He could laugh again, and enjoy the passing of the seasons. He could watch his child grow, delight in her shrieks of laughter, her innocence and enthusiasm, and give his love wholeheartedly to his second miracle.
He leaned over and kissed Sarah with slow deliberation, with love and passion. When Missy had been fed and was in her crib, he wanted to make love to his wife again, to show her how much he loved her. She was his first miracle, bringing him back into the sunlight.

Almost Forever (1986)



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Chapter One

Anson Edwards sat alone in his big plash office, his fingers steepled as he weighed the strengths of his two lieutenants, wondering which of the two would be best to send to Houston. His own strength was his ability to analyze quickly and accurately, yet in this instance he didn't want to make a snap decision. Sam Bronson was an enigma, a man who played his cards close to his chest; it wouldn't do to underestimate him. Instinct told Anson that an overt takeover attempt on Branson's metal alloy company would fail, that Bronson was wily enough to have hidden assets. Anson had to discover what those assets were, and their value, before he could realistically expect victory in his attempt to take Bronson Alloys under Spencer-Nyle's corporate umbrella. He knew that he could take control simply by offering much more than the company could possibly be worth, but that wasn't Anson's way. He had a responsibility to the stockholders of Spencer-Nyle, and he wasn't reckless. He would do what was necessary to take Bronson, but no more.

He could set a team of investigators on the job, but that would alert Bronson, and if Bronson were given any sort of warning he might be able to take evasive action that could drag into months. Anson didn't want this; he wanted things to be over quickly. The best bet would be one man, a man whom he could trust in any situation. He trusted both Rome Matthews and Max Conroy completely, but which man would be the best one for the job? Rome Matthews was his handpicked, personally trained successor; Rome was tough, smart, fair, and he set out to win at everything he did. But Rome had a formidable reputation. He was far too well-known in business circles, and Houston was too close to Dallas for Anson to hope that no one would know him. Rome's very presence would trigger alarm in the business community.

Max Conroy, on the other hand, wasn't that well-known. People tended not to take him as seriously as they did Rome; it was those male-model looks of his, as well as the lazy, good-humored image he projected. People just didn't expect Max to work as hard at something as Rome would. But there was steel in Max Conroy, a ruthlessness that he kept skillfully disguised. That famous affability of his was only a pose; he kept the almost fearsome intensity of his character under strict control. Those who didn't know him

were always completely fooled, expecting him to be more playboy than executive.
So it would have to be Max, who would have a better chance of quietly gathering information.
Anson picked up a file again, leafing through the pages of information about key personnel with Bronson Alloys. Nothing could be learned from Bronson himself; the man was wary, and a genius. But a chain was only as strong as its weakest link, and Anson was determined to find Branson's weak link.
He came to the photograph of Branson's secretary and paused. Bronson appeared to trust his secretary completely, though there was no hint of romance between them. Anson frowned as he studied the photograph; the woman was a pretty, dark-eyed blonde, but no great beauty. There was a reserved expression in her dark eyes. She had been married to Jeff Halsey, the heir of a wealthy Houston family, but they had divorced five years ago. She was thirty-one now and hadn't remarried. Anson checked her name: Claire Westbrook.
Thoughtfully he leaned back in his chair. Would she be vulnerable to Max's seductive charm? It remained to be seen. Then he tapped the photograph in sudden decision. Claire Westbrook just might be the weak link in Branson's chain.
Claire slipped through the double doors onto the terrace and walked to the waist-high fieldstone wall that separated the terrace from the flower garden. Resting her hands on the cool stone, she stared blindly at the garden, not seeing the masses of blooms that were highlighted by strategically placed lights. How *could* Virginia invite Jeff and Helene, knowing that Claire had accepted an invitation? She'd done it deliberately, of course; she'd been gloating at the shock that Claire hadn't been able to hide when her ex-husband arrived at the party with his beautiful, pregnant wife.
Tears burned at the back of Claire's eyes, and she blinked to control them. She thought she could have handled an accidental meeting with aplomb, but she was stunned by Virginia's deliberate cruelty. She and Virginia had never been close friends, but still, she'd never expected this. How ironic that Claire had accepted the invitation only at the urging of her sister, Martine, who thought it would do her good to get out of the apartment and socialize! So much for good intentions, Claire thought wryly, controlling the urge to cry. The episode wasn't worth crying over, and it had taught her a lesson:

never trust any of your ex-husband's old girlfriends. Evidently Virginia had never forgiven Claire for being Mrs. Jeff Halsey.
"Did the smoke and noise become too much for you, too?"
Claire whirled around, startled by the words spoken so close to her ear. She'd been certain no one else was on the terrace. Determined not to let anyone know she'd been upset, she lifted one eyebrow in casual inquiry. The man was silhouetted by the light coming through the double glass doors behind him, making it impossible to see his features, but she was certain she didn't know him. He was tall and lean, his shoulders broad beneath the impeccable cut of his white dinner jacket, and he was so close to her that she could smell the faint clean scent of his cologne.
"I apologize; I didn't intend to startle you," he said, moving to stand beside her. "I saw you come out here and thought I'd enjoy some fresh air, too. We haven't been introduced, have we? Maxwell Benedict."
"Claire Westbrook," she murmured in return. She recognized him now; they hadn't been introduced before, true, but she'd seen him when he had arrived at the party. It was impossible not to notice him. He looked like a model, with thick blond hair and vivid eyes; Claire remembered thinking that a man with a face like his should be short, just to keep the scales balanced. Instead he was tall and moved with a casual masculine grace that drew every feminine eye to him. Despite the chiseled perfection of his face, there was nothing effeminate about him; his looks were wholly masculine, and whenever he looked at a woman, his gaze was full of male appreciation. Pretty women weren't the only ones singled out for the megaton force of his charm; every woman, young or old, plain or pretty, was treated with a mixture of courtesy and appreciation that melted them, one and all, like a snowball in hot summer sunshine.
If he expected her to melt right along with the rest, she thought wryly, he was in for a disappointment. Jeff had taught her some hard lessons about handsome charming men, and she remembered every one of them. She was safe even from this man, whose charm was so potent that it was almost a visible force. He didn't even have to flirt! His spectacular looks and flashing smile stunned, his crisp-edged British accent intrigued, and the quiet baritone of his voice soothed. Claire wondered if his feelings would be hurt when she failed to be impressed.
"I thought you seemed upset when you came out here," he said suddenly, leaning against the wall with total disregard for the condition of his crisp

white evening jacket. "Is anything wrong?"
My goodness, all that and he was perceptive, too! Claire shrugged, putting lightness in her tone when she answered, "Not really. I'm just not certain how to handle an awkward situation."
"If that's the case, may I be of any assistance?"
His offer was calm, polite and coolly controlled. Claire paused, vaguely intrigued despite herself. She had expected him to be smooth and sophisticated, but that element of control she sensed in him was out of the ordinary.
"Thank you, but it isn't a major problem." All she had to do was somehow make a graceful exit without anyone noticing that she was in full retreat. It wasn't Jeff; she was long over him. But the baby that Helene carried was a reminder of a pain that she'd never gotten over, of the baby she'd lost. She'd wanted her baby so badly…
Behind them the double doors opened again, and Claire stiffened as Virginia rushed toward her, gushing false sympathy. "Claire, darling, I'm so sorry! I really had no idea Jeff and Helene would be here; Lloyd invited them, and I was as horribly surprised as you. You poor dear, are you very upset? After all, we all know how crushed you were—"
Maxwell Benedict straightened beside her, and Claire sensed his acute interest. Hot color burned in her cheeks as she broke in before Virginia could say anything more. "Really, Virginia, there's no need to apologize. I'm not upset at all." The casual coolness of her voice was utterly convincing, even though it was a complete lie. She had died a little inside when she'd heard that Helene was pregnant, and the sight of Jeff's wife, so glowingly lovely and so proudly pregnant, had twisted her heart. She was still haunted by a sense of loss; that was the one pain she couldn't seem to conquer.
Virginia hesitated, disconcerted by the total lack of concern Claire was showing. "Well, if you're certain you're all right…I had visions of you crying your heart out, all alone out here."
"But she isn't all alone," Maxwell Benedict said smoothly, and Claire started as his warm arm slid around her shoulders. Automatically she began to move away, but his fingers tightened warningly on her bare shoulder, and she forced herself to stand still. "Nor is she crying, though I'd be delighted to offer her my shoulder if she felt so inclined. Well, Claire? Do you think you want to cry?"

Part of her disliked the easy way he'd used her first name, when they had only just met, but another part of her was grateful to him for giving her this opportunity to keep her pride and not let Virginia guess that her ploy had been successful, after all, though not in the way she'd planned. Tilting her head up to him the way she'd often seen her sister Martine do when intent on charming someone, Claire gave him her most brilliant smile. "I think I'd rather dance."

"Then dance you shall, my dear. Excuse us, won't you?" he said politely to Virginia, ushering Claire past their disappointed hostess and back into the house. After the relative peace of the terrace, the party seemed that much more crowded and noisy. The alcohol fumes mingled with the cigarette smoke, stifling her, but the music from the stereo rose above the clash of conversation and laughter, and they joined the group of people who were trying to dance in the middle of the room. Space was so limited that swaying in one spot was really all that could be done. Claire started to suggest that they forget about dancing, but he clasped her hand in his and drew her to him with his other arm, and she decided to dance this one dance. He wasn't holding her close despite the press of the crowd, and again she sensed the strict control that seemed to govern his actions. Perhaps she'd misjudged him, she mused. Just because his face was as precisely sculpted as that of a Greek idol, she'd automatically assumed that he was nothing but a shallow playboy, but a playboy wouldn't have that cool control. Perhaps it was his British reserve that she sensed.

"How long have you been in the States?" she asked, necessarily moving closer to him in order to be heard.

A rather whimsical smile curved his beautiful mouth. "How could you tell I'm not a native Texan?"

She chuckled. "A lucky guess."

"Actually, I have a hybrid accent. When I go home for holidays or vacations, my family constantly complains that I talk too slowly."

He hadn't answered her original question, but she let it go. It was too noisy for conversation, anyway. She let her mind drift back to her present situation, and she considered ways of handling it that would be the least awkward for all of them* She certainly didn't want to embarrass either Jeff or Helene; they had been as victimized by Virginia's petty vengeance as Claire.

Just as the dance ended, someone called his name. Claire took advantage of his distraction to say politely, "Thank you for the dance, Mr. Benedict," and walk away, while he was effectively trapped by the woman who had demanded his attention. Her mouth quirked in wry humor. It must be hell for him to have women constantly yapping at his heels; poor man, he probably suffered terribly…when he wasn't taking full advantage of it.
Out of the corner of her eye, Claire saw Virginia watching her closely, and conducting a sotto voce conversation with another woman, who was also eyeing her with intense curiosity. Gossips! She decided at that moment to defuse the situation by confronting it head-on. With her head high and a smile on her face, Claire walked up to Jeff and Helene.
Just before she reached them, she saw Jeff stiffen and an expression of alarm cross his face; he'd noticed the glitter of her eyes and probably wondered if she were going to cause a scandal with one of the passionate scenes that he remembered so well. With determined effort Claire kept the smile pasted to her lips. She had obviously made a mistake in avoiding anything except the most casual companionship with men in the five years since their divorce; her mother and sister thought she still pined for Jeff, and evidently Jeff shared that opinion, along with Virginia and the rest of their social circle. She didn't know what to do about that now, except try to be casual and polite, to show that it really meant nothing to her at all.
"Hello," she said brightly, addressing herself mostly to Helene. "I think Virginia invited the three of us to provide the entertainment for the evening, but I'm not willing to play her game. Shall we spoil her fun?"
Helene was quick; she put a smile in place. "I'd like to spoil her face; but by all means, let's be civilized."
As other people drifted close enough to hear what they were saying, Claire launched into a gay account of a recent shopping trip when everything had gone wrong. Helene countered with her own tale of hazardous encounters while shopping, and by that time Jeff had recovered enough to contribute by asking after Claire's parents and her sister's family. It was so civilized that she wanted to laugh aloud, but at the same time strain began to tighten her throat. How long would they have to keep this up? Pride was one thing, but standing here chatting with Helene, who was even more beautiful in her pregnancy, was almost more than she could bear.
Then a warm hand touched the small of her back, and she glanced up in surprise as Max Benedict appeared at her side. "I'm sorry I was detained,"

he apologized smoothly. "Are you ready to leave, Claire?"
He made it sound as if they had other plans, and Claire was desperate enough to seize the opportunity of escape. "Yes, of course. Max, I'd like you to meet Helene and Jeff Halsey."
He took over, all suave courtesy as he murmured his name, inclined his head over Helene's hand and shook Jeffs. Claire almost laughed at the dazed look in Helene's winsome blue eyes. She might be happily married and very pregnant, but that didn't make her immune to Max Benedict's charm! Then he glanced at his watch and murmured, "We really must go, dear."
"Go" was exactly what Claire wanted to do. With an effort she kept a smile on her face as she listened to Max say all the polite things; then his hand applied a steady pressure on her back as he walked with her to the bedroom, where she'd put her small evening bag. She dug it out from under a tangle of other bags, lacy shawls, a few unglamorous raincoats and several mink jackets. He stood in the doorway waiting for her; he didn't say anything, and Claire wasn't able to read anything in his expression. Why had he rescued her? It had certainly been a deliberate action on his part, but she couldn't think of any reason why he should have made the effort. After all, they were complete strangers; the brief conversation they'd had on the terrace hadn't been enough to qualify them as even casual acquaintances. She was more than a little wary of him, and all her defenses sprang into place.
But first there was an exit to make, and getting out of there took priority over everything else right then. What better way to do it than on the arm of the most breathtaking man whom she'd ever seen? Handsome, charming men had a few uses, after all; they weren't much on permanency, but they were great for making impressions.
A curiously cynical smile touched his perfectly carved lips, as if he'd read her mind. "Shall we?" he asked, holding out his hand.
She left the party on his arm, but as soon as the door was closed behind them she stepped away from his touch. The streetlights spread their silvery light over the lawn and the tangle of cars parked in the driveway and along the street, obscuring the faint stars that blinked overhead. The spring night was warm and humid as the young season celebrated its birth with an exuberant burst of heat, determined to banish the last of the winter chill. A bird chirped shyly in a tree, then fell silent as their footsteps on the sidewalk disturbed it.

"Did the bitch set that up deliberately?" he asked in such a calm, cool voice that for a moment Claire wasn't certain she'd heard the steel in his tone. She glanced up and found his face undisturbed by any hint of temper, and decided that she'd been mistaken.
"It was awkward, but not tragic," she finally said, unwilling to share with this stranger even a hint of what it had actually cost her. She'd never been able to let anyone see what went on inside her mind; the more something hurt, the more she retreated behind a meaningless smile and blank, immovable remoteness. It was a trait that, when she'd been a child, had infuriated and frustrated her mother, who had been determined that her youngest daughter would follow in the footsteps of her other daughter, who was bright and beautiful and talented and could melt stone with her sunny laughter. But the more she tried to force Claire out of her backwardness, the more Claire had retreated, until eventually Alma Westbrook had given up.
Suddenly aware from the silence that had fallen between them that her thoughts had wandered again, Claire stopped on the sidewalk and held out her hand. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Benedict. It was nice meeting you." Her tone was polite but final, making it clear that she considered the evening at an end.
He took her hand but didn't shake it; instead his fingers clasped hers lightly, warmly, a touch that didn't demand anything. "Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night, Claire?" he asked, then added, "Please," as if he sensed the refusal that she'd been about to make.
She hesitated, vaguely disarmed by that "please," as if he didn't know that he could have the company of almost any woman he wanted, whenever he wanted. Almost. "Thank you, but no."
His eyebrow lifted slightly, and she saw the glitter of his vivid eyes. "Are you still carrying a torch for your ex-husband?"
"That's none of your business, Mr. Benedict."
"You didn't say that a moment ago. I rather thought you were relieved by my interference in something that is now none of my business," he said coolly.
Her head lifted, and she took her hand from his. "Payback time, is it? Very well. No, I'm not still in love with Jeff."
"That's good. I don't like rivals."
Claire looked at him in disbelief, then laughed. She didn't want to dignify that last statement by challenging him; what did he think she was, the

biggest fool alive? She had been, once, but not again. "Goodbye, Mr. Benedict," she said in a dismissive tone and walked to her car.
When she reached out to open the car door, she found a lean, tanned hand there before hers. He opened the door for her, and Claire murmured a quiet thank-you as she got in the car and took her keys from her bag.
He rested one arm on the roof of the car and leaned down, his turquoise eyes narrowed and as dark as the sea. "I'll call you tomorrow, Claire Westbrook," he said, as cool and confident as if she hadn't already dismissed him.
"Mr. Benedict, I've tried not to be rude, but I'm not interested."
"I'm registered," he replied, amusement twitching at his mouth, and despite herself Claire found herself staring at his lips, almost spellbound by their seductive perfection. "I've had all my shots, and I'm reasonably well mannered. I'm not wanted by any law-enforcement agency, I've never been married, and I'm kind to children. Do you require references?"
A warm laugh bubbled past her control. "Is your pedigree impressive?"
He squatted in the open door of the car, smiling at her. "Impeccable. Shall we discuss it over dinner tomorrow night?"
There was'a small, curious softening inside of her. Without allowing herself to dwell on it, she'd realized for some time that she was lonely. What harm could there be in having dinner with him? She certainly wasn't going to fall in love with him; they would talk and laugh, enjoy a nice meal, and perhaps she would make a friend.
She hesitated a long moment then gave in. "All right. Yes, thank you."
He laughed outright now, his white teeth gleaming. "Such enthusiasm! My dear, I promise I'll be on my best behavior. Where shall I pick you up, and at what time? Eight?"
They agreed on the time, and Claire gave him directions to her apartment. A moment later she was driving away, and by the time she stopped at the first traffic signal, her brow was furrowed in consternation. Why had she agreed to go out with him? She'd sworn to avoid his type like the plague, yet he'd neatly worked around her defenses and made her laugh, and she found herself liking him. He didn't seem to take himself too seriously, which would have made her run at top speed in the opposite direction. He'd also shown kindness in coming to her rescue___
He was far too dangerous to her peace of mind.

By the time she let herself into her apartment, she had decided to cancel the date, but as she closed the door and locked it, the empty silence of the rooms rushed at her, overwhelming her. She had refused to get a cat, feeling that would be the crowning symbol of her aloneness, but now she wished that she had some sort of pet, anything, to welcome her home. A cat or a dog wouldn't care if she never quite measured up to expectations; a full belly and a warm bed, someone to scratch it behind the ears, was all a pet would expect. Come to think of it, she thought tiredly, that was all humans needed. Food, shelter and affection.

Affection. She'd had the food and shelter, all the material trappings of an upper-middle-class childhood. She'd even had affection, but it had been the ab-sentminded, exasperated crumbs of the doting love that her parents had given to Martine. Claire couldn't even blame them; Martine was perfect. Some sisters might have lorded it over a shy, gawky younger sister, but Martine had always been kind and patient with Claire and even now worried about her. No matter how busy Martine was with her thriving law practice, her popular, outgoing children and her equally busy husband, she always made time to call Claire at least twice a week. Still, something inside Claire had always shriveled at her parents' obvious preference for Martine. She could remember staring at herself in a mirror as a child and wondering what was wrong with her. If she had been ugly or possessed a nasty disposition, at least then she would have been able to find some reason for not being quite good enough to please her parents. But even though she hadn't been as beautiful as Martine, she'd still been a pretty child, and she'd tried so hard to please everyone, until she'd realized that her best wasn't going to be good enough and began to withdraw. That was what was wrong with her: she simply wasn't up to par. Martine was beautiful; Claire was merely pretty. Martine was a sunny, outgoing child; Claire was prone to unexplained bouts of tears and shrank from people. Martine was talented, a marvelous pianist and an outstanding art student; Claire refused to study any sort of music and often hid herself away with a book. Martine was brilliant and ambitious; Claire was bright but didn't apply herself. Martine married a handsome, equally ambitious young lawyer, went into practice with him and had two gorgeous, happy children; Claire had married Jeff—the one time in her life she'd ever pleased her mother—but the marriage had fallen apart.

Now, from a distance of five years, Claire had a very clear view of her marriage and the reasons it had failed. Most of it had honestly been her fault. She had been so terrified of failing to live up to what she thought everyone expected of her as Mrs. Jefferson Halsey that she had dashed around trying to be the perfect social hostess, the perfect homemaker, the perfect sport and had spread herself so thin that there had been almost nothing left over for Jeff. At first he'd tolerated it; then the gulf between them had widened and his eye had begun wandering… and settled on Helene, who was beautiful, older than Claire and marvelously self-assured. Only Claire's unexpected pregnancy had prevented a divorce right then. To his credit, Jeff had been tender and kind to Claire, even though her pregnancy had been the end of his relationship with Helene. He loved Helene, but Claire was his wife and carried his child, and he refused to devastate her by asking for a divorce.

Then she had miscarried. He waited until she had recovered physically then told her that he wanted out. Their divorce had probably disappointed half of Houston in its lack of acrimony. Claire had known that it was over before she'd ever lost the baby. They divorced quietly, Jeff married Helene as soon as it was legally possible, and within a year Helene had presented him with a son. Now she was pregnant again.

Claire washed her face and brushed her teeth, then got into bed and picked up her book from the night table, trying not to think of the baby she'd lost. That was the past, as was her marriage, and really, the divorce had been the best thing that had ever happened to her. It had forced her to wake up and take a good look at herself. She had been wasting her life trying to please everyone else, rather than herself. She was going to *be* herself, and for the past five years, she had been. On the whole, she was content with the life she'd made for herself. She had a good job; she read when she liked and as much as she liked. She listened to the music she preferred. She was really closer now to Martine than she'd ever been before, because Claire no longer felt threatened by her older sister. She was even on better terms with her parents…if only her mother would stop pushing her to "find a nice young man and settle down."

Claire didn't go out a lot; she couldn't see any point in it. She wasn't inclined to settle for a lukewarm marriage based on common interests, and she wasn't the type to inspire red-hot passion. She had learned control and how to protect herself with that control. If that made her cool and

unresponsive, that was fine. Better that than to leave herself open to the devastating pain rejection brought.
That was the life she'd chosen and deliberately built for herself; why, then, had she accepted a dinner date with Max Benedict? Despite his sense of humor, he was still a playboy, and he had no place at all in her life. She should politely but firmly break their date. Claire closed her book, unable to read it, after all; Maxwell Benedict's handsome face kept swimming before the print. Her brown eyes were troubled as she turned out the lamp and pulled the sheet up to cover her. Despite all the warnings of her instincts, she knew that she wasn't going to break the date.
Max sat in his hotel room, his feet propped on the coffee table and a pot of coffee at his elbow. His brow was furrowed with an intense frown as he read one of the thick reports he'd received in the mail. One lean forefinger stroked his left eyebrow as he read; his reading speed was phenomenal, and he had almost finished. Absently he reached for the coffeepot, and the frown turned impatient as he realized that the pot was nearly empty. He replaced the pot on the tray and pushed it aside. Coffee! He'd become addicted to the stuff, another American habit that he'd acquired.
Swiftly he finished the report then tossed it aside. His eyes narrowed to slits. Anson had picked up hints that another company was after Bronson Alloys. That was a disturbing development in itself, but even more alarming were the rumors that this company had ties to Eastern Europe. If the rumors were true, then word had somehow gotten out that Bronson had developed an alloy that was lightweight and almost indestructible, superior to the alloy used for the SR-71 spy planes. So far, the alloy itself was only a rumor; nothing had been announced, and if anything had been developed, Sam Bronson was keeping it to himself. Still, the rumors were persistent.
He didn't like it. Any move by another company would force him to make his own move, perhaps before he was ready, which would increase the chance for failure. Max didn't intend to fail. He despised failure; his personality was too intense and fiercely controlled to accept anything less than total victory in whatever he attempted.
He picked up the report again and thumbed through it, but he allowed his thoughts to drift. The woman, Claire Westbrook… she wasn't quite what he'd expected. Anson had thought that she might be the weak link, and Max had coolly expected that he could charm her as effortlessly as he did every woman. It hadn't worked out that way. She was cool and calm, almost too

controlled, and unresponsive; even though she had eventually accepted his dinner invitation, Max had the impression that she'd done so for her own reasons.

His eyes narrowed. From the time he'd reached puberty, the female sex had practically been at his feet. He appreciated women, enjoyed them, desired them, but women had come easily for him. This was the first time a woman had looked at him with a cool, blank expression then turned away in total disinterest, and he didn't like it. He was both irritated and challenged, and he shouldn't feel either of those responses. This was business. He would use his charm to get the needed information without a qualm; corporate war was just that: war, despite the outward civility of three-piece suits and board meetings. But seduction had never been a part of his plan, so his unwilling attraction to her was doubly unwelcome. He couldn't afford the distraction. He had to concentrate on the job at hand, get the information in a hurry and make his move.

He knew his nature was intensely sensual, but always before, his physical needs and responses had been controlled by the power of his icy intellect. He was master of his body, not the other way around. That was part of his character; nature had given him both a towering intelligence and a sexual appetite that would have taken control of a man of lesser intellect, but he was brilliant, and his mental capacities were so intense and focused that he controlled his physical needs and never unleashed the driving power of that portion of his nature. His unwilling attraction to Claire Westbrook both angered and disconcerted him; it was totally out of place in this situation. She was pretty, but he'd had women who were far more beautiful. She hadn't responded to him or flirted or in any way indicated that she was attracted to him. The only unusual thing about her were her eyes, huge and velvety brown. There was no reason for him to be thinking about her, but he couldn't get her out of his mind.

Chapter Two

The shrilling of the telephone startled Claire out of sleep the next morning, and her soft mouth curved in a wry smile as she rolled over to lift the receiver and stop the intrusive noise. "Hello, Martine," she said, her voice husky with sleep.

There was a short pause, then Martine laughed. "I wish you wouldn't do that! How did you know?"
"I thought you might call this morning to check up on me. Yes, I went to Virginia's party, and no, I wasn't the belle of the ball."
"You're answering my questions before I ask them," Martine said in fond exasperation. "Did you enjoy yourself anyway?"
"I'm not the social type," Claire hedged, sitting up in bed and stuffing a pillow behind her back. She didn't mention meeting Max Benedict or that she was having dinner with him. Martine would ask a thousand questions and become all excited over something that was basically unimportant. Claire didn't expect the dinner date to be the beginning of a fabulous romance; Max could have any woman he chose, so he wasn't likely to settle for anything but the best. This was just a dinner date, nothing more or less, an evening out with a man who was new in town and didn't know many people. It was probably a respite for him to meet a woman who didn't chase him.
Martine sighed; experience had taught her that if Claire didn't want to talk about something then no amount of prying or badgering could change her mind. For someone so retiring and unassuming, Claire was stubborn. Because Martine loved her sister and recognized how vulnerable and sensitive Claire was, she refrained from badgering her and instead gracefully changed the subject, laughing as she recounted a horrendous piece of mischief that her eight-year-old son had gotten into that morning. They chatted for a few moments then said goodbye. Claire hung up the receiver and lay back on the pillows, her dark eyes reflective as she stared at the ceiling. Her thoughts kept going back to Max Benedict, and his features formed in her mind; she saw his eyes, vivid turquoise, but the shade of turquoise kept changing. Sometimes they were more green than blue, sometimes more blue than green, and twice she had seen a flash of something in his eyes that had startled her, but she hadn't recognized it. It was as though she'd seen a shadow in the sea that was gone in an instant and left behind only the swirling, breathtaking turquoise waters, yet reminding the observer of the dangers of the sea. Perhaps he had dangers hidden in his depths, hidden behind the beauty that nature had given him. All human beings had hidden depths, of course, but some people were deeper than others, and some very shallow, but all had their private

defenses. Did he use his appearance as a barrier, deflecting interest with his looks the way a mirror turns back the sun?

He was surprisingly controlled; perhaps some people wouldn't see that, but Claire was more sensitive than most. She recognized control because she had had to learn it. As a child, she had seethed with pent-up emotion, a wild flood of love and devotion just waiting to be given to someone who would love her for herself. She had thought Jeff was that person, and she had released the torrent of passion, driving herself to be the perfect wife for him, only to fail again. Now she no longer waited for that one person; she had been hurt, and she refused to let anyone hurt her ever again. She had locked her emotions and passions away and was more content without them.

But how would those turquoise eyes look if that cool control were banished and passion heated their depths? How would he look while making love?

Claire sat up, pushing away the disturbing mental image. It was Saturday; she had chores to do. She pulled off her nightgown and let the wisp of silk fall across the bed, and for a moment her eyes enjoyed the contrast of the pink silk lying on the white eyelet lace of the comforter. She loved pretty things. That part of her personality was carefully hidden away and protected, but it was expressed in her preference for exquisite lingerie, in the harmonious colors that she gathered around her. Her bed was white, the carpet a softly blushing peach color, and around the room were touches of rose and jade. The bath towels that she bought were thick and lush, and she enjoyed the feel of them on her skin. So many things delighted her: fresh rain on her face, or the warm sunshine; a ray of light through a jar of plum jelly; the translucent beauty of a green leaf in spring; the plush texture of carpet beneath her bare feet. Because she hung back, she saw more than the people who hurried through life.

She had slept late, so she had to hurry through the housekeeping and laundry that she did every Saturday in order to allow herself enough time to do her hair and nails. She was restless and on edge, all because of a man with vivid sea-colored eyes and sunshine in his hair, and that response was unusual enough to bring all her instinctive defenses springing into place. She would have to be on guard every moment, against herself more than Max. The weakness was hers, the same weakness that had let her believe that Jeff loved her as much as she loved him, because that was what she had wanted to believe. Jeff hadn't misled her; she'd misled herself. *Never again*.

Even so, pride wouldn't allow her to look anything but her best when she went out with Max, and she took a long time over her makeup. Her features were delicate, with high cheekbones and a wide, soft mouth; blusher brought color to those cheekbones, and lipstick made her mouth look even softer. Smudged eyeliner and smoky shadow turned her dark eyes into pools of mystery. After putting up her honey-blond hair, leaving a few tendrils curling loosely at her temples, she slipped pearl-drop earrings in her ears and stared at her reflection in the mirror. The old-fashioned hairstyle suited her, revealing the clean lines of her cheek and jaw, the slenderness of her throat, but she looked disturbingly solemn, as if secrets were hiding behind her eyes.

She was ready when the doorbell rang at exactly eight o'clock and had been ready long enough to become nervous; the peal of the doorbell made her jump. Quickly, before her nerve failed her, she opened the door. "Hello. Come in, please. Would you like a drink before we go?" Her voice was calm and polite, the voice of a hostess doing her duty without any real enthusiasm. Instinctively Claire moved a little away from him; she'd forgotten how tall he was, and she felt dwarfed.

His pleasant expression didn't waver as he held his hand out to her, palm up. "Thank you, but we haven't time. On such short notice, I had to take reservations that were somewhat earlier than I'd planned. Shall we go?" His outstretched hand was steady and unthreatening, but the gesture was a command. Claire had the distinct impression that he had noticed her withdrawal and was demanding her return. He wanted her to step within reach of his hand, his touch, perhaps even place her hand in his in a gesture of both trust and obedience.

She couldn't do it. The small confrontation took only a moment, and she ended it when she stepped away to get her bag and the waist-length silk jacket that went with her oyster-colored silk chemise. It wasn't until she turned around and found herself staring at his chest that she realized he hadn't let the moment end. She froze.

He plucked the jacket from her hands and held it up for her to slip her arms into the sleeves. "Allow me," he said in his cool, precise voice, so devoid of any real emotion that Claire wondered if her reaction had been an overreaction, that his out-held hand had been a mannerly gesture rather than a subtle command. Perhaps if she had gone out more, she wouldn't be so

wary and skittish now; Martine had probably been right in urging her to become more socially active.
She let him help her with the jacket, and he smoothed the small collar, his touch brief and light. "You look lovely, Claire, like a Victorian cameo."
"Thank you," she murmured, disarmed by the gentle, graceful compliment. Suddenly she realized that he had sensed her agitation and was trying to put her at her ease, using his almost courtly manners to reassure her, and the odd thing was that it worked. He was controlled, unemotional, and she liked that. People who acted on the urges of their emotions and glands were unreliable.
His hand was on the small of her back, resting there with a slight warm pressure, but now it didn't disturb her. She relaxed and found that she was looking forward to the evening, after all.
His choice of car further reassured her. She would have been suspicious of a flamboyant sports car, but the sedate, solidly conservative black Mercedes-Benz wasn't the car of someone who was attracted to flash and glitter. He was dressed as conservatively as a banker, too, she noticed, glancing at his gray pin-striped suit. It was wonderfully cut, and his lean, elegant frame gave the suit a look of dash and fashion that it wouldn't have possessed on any other man, but it still wasn't the peacock attire of a playboy.
Everything he did put her more at ease. He carried on a light, casual conversation that put no pressure on her; he didn't use innuendos or sly double meanings or ask any personal questions. The restaurant he'd chosen was quiet, giving the impression of privacy but not intimacy. Nothing he did was in any way meant to impress her; he was simply dining out with a woman, with no strings attached, and that was immensely reassuring.
"What sort of work do you do?" he asked casually, dipping an enormous Gulf shrimp into cocktail sauce before biting into it with frank enjoyment.
Claire watched his white even teeth sink into the pink shrimp, her pulse speeding up in spite of herself. He was just so impossibly handsome that it was difficult to refrain from simply staring at him.
"Secretarial."
"For a large company? "
"No. Bronson Alloys is small, but growing rapidly, and we have outstanding prospects. It's a publicly held company, but I work for the major stockholder and founder, Sam Bronson."

"Do you enjoy your work? Being a secretary seems to have lost all its attraction for a lot of people; the push is to be an executive, with a secretary of your own."
"Someone has to be the secretary," Claire said, smiling. "I don't have either the talents or the ambition to be an executive. What company are you with? Will you be in Houston permanently?"
"Not permanently, but I could be here for several months. I'm investigating certain properties for investment."
"Real estate?" Claire asked. "Are you a speculator?"
"Nothing so dashing. Basically what I do is make feasibility studies."
"How did you come to be transplanted from England to Texas?"
He gave a negligent shrug. "Business opportunities are more plentiful over here." Max studied her smooth, delicate face, wondering how she would look if any real warmth ever lit her dark eyes. She was more relaxed now than she had been, but there was still that lack of response from her that both irritated and intrigued him. So long as he kept the subject impersonal and made no move that could be interpreted as that of an interested male, she was relaxed, but she withdrew like a turtle into its shell at the least hint of masculine aggressiveness or sexuality. It was as if she didn't want anyone to be attracted to her or even flirt with her. The less masculine he was, the better she liked it, and the realization angered him. What he wouldn't give to force her out of that frozen nunnery she'd locked herself into, to make her acknowledge him as a man, to make her feel some sort of passion!
Claire looked away, a little rattled by the cold, unreadable expression in his eyes. For a moment his face had lost its expression of suave pleasantness and taken on the hard, determined lines of a Viking warrior. Perhaps that was the ancestry that had given him his golden hair and sea-colored eyes, rather than an Anglo-Saxon heritage.
What had she said to bring that expression to his face? It had been only a polite question; she'd been so careful not to step over the bounds she'd set for herself, saying nothing that could be construed as reflecting a personal interest in him.
"Last night," he said abruptly. "That was deliberate viciousness, wasn't it? Why?"
Claire's head jerked around, the only sign she gave that she was disturbed by the change of subject. Her dark eyes went blank. "Yes, it was deliberate, but nothing came of her efforts. It isn't important."

"I don't agree." His crisp accent bit off the words. "You were upset, though you carried it off well. Why was that little scene staged?"
She stared at him, that blank look still in her eyes, as if a wall had been erected in her mind. After a moment he realized that she wasn't going to answer him, and a powerful surge of anger shook him, made him want to grind his teeth in frustration. Why was she so damned aloof? At this rate he'd never get close enough to her to get any of the answers he needed! He wanted this damned thing over with; with business out of the way, he could concentrate on Claire and his irritating attraction to her. He had no doubt that if he were able to devote himself fully to her, he would be able to get behind those barriers to the woman. He had never yet failed to get a woman he wanted; there was no reason why Claire should be his first failure. She might be the most challenging woman of his experience, though, and the thought quickened his interest.
How could he gain her trust if she retreated every time he advanced? A small frown furrowed his brow as he studied her openly, trying to read her mind. If she retreated, then she must feel threatened by him, yet he hadn't done anything to warrant that reaction. Most women were attracted to him on sight, gravitating to him like a compass needle to the magnetic north pole, but Claire made an obvious effort to keep a certain distance from him. In a flash of insight Max realized that it was his looks that made her so wary, and his frown deepened. She had seen the playboy persona and felt threatened by it; she was probably determined not to become another one of his women. Bloody hell! She would run like a frightened rabbit if she realized that her reaction was attracting him far more surely than a blatant play for him. Max was accustomed to being pursued by women; a woman who retreated from him brought out the primitive male urge to chase fleeing prey.
She was soft, tender prey, he thought as he watched a delicate tinge of color sweep over her cheeks. She was disconcerted by the way he was staring at her, but he liked looking at her. She had a gentle, intelligent face, and he kept getting caught by those enormous dark eyes, as velvety as melted chocolate. Her coloring was exquisite, like delicate china; did she have any idea how enormously appealing her dark eyes were? Probably not. Her ex-husband's wife was a real beauty, but if he'd been given the choice between the two women, Max would unhesitatingly have chosen Claire. He'd been stunned by the courage and dignity with which she'd handled the situation

at the party the night before; how many other women would have kept their poise under those circumstances? Watching her coolly, deliberately, he knew that he wanted her.
He'd have her, too, but first he had to get past those damnable barriers.
"Talk to me," he said softly. "Don't treat me as everyone else does."
Startled, Claire looked at him, her eyes widening. What did he mean? How did everyone else treat him? "I don't understand," she finally murmured.
His eyes were green ice, with no hint of blue in them. "It's poetic justice, my dear. My face makes me a target, a sexual trophy to be nailed on the wall above the bed, figuratively speaking, of course. Most women have no interest in me other than as a stud; I could be brainless for all the concern they have in me personally. I enjoy the sex, yes; I'm a healthy man. But I also enjoy conversation, music and books, and I would damn well prefer being considered as a person as well as a warm body."
Claire was stunned, so stunned that she forgot the alarm that had been racing up and down her spine as he had stared at her with such cold ferocity.
"But I'm not—that is, I haven't been chasing you," she stammered.
"No, with you it's the opposite. You took one look at me and decided that with this face I can't possibly be anything more than a playboy, letting myself be used as a living ornament in any woman's bed."
She was aghast; that was exactly what she'd thought at first, and now she was ashamed of herself. Claire was unusually sensitive, and because she was so easily hurt she went out of her way to keep from hurting anyone else. The idea that she had so casually labeled this man as pretty but useless appalled her. She had other reasons for wanting to keep her distance from him, but he didn't know them; to him, it must seem as if she had simply written him off as being shallow and immoral, without getting to know him at all. He was angry, and he had every right to be.
"I'm sorry," she apologized in a soft, earnest voice. "It's true that I did think you were a playboy, but it's also true that I realize I'm not in your league."
He leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that? Just what is 'my league'?"
Claire dropped her eyes, unable to meet that piercingly bright stare, and found that his hands were in her line of vision. They were lean, aristocratic hands, beautifully fashioned, but strong for all that. Was the man like his hands?
"Claire," he prompted.

At last she looked up, her face composed, as usual, but her eyes revealed some of her vulnerability. "You're far more sophisticated than I, of course, and far more beautiful. I'm sure women chase you unmercifully, but the other side of the coin is the fact that you can probably have any woman you want. I really don't want to be your next target."

He didn't like her answer at all; his facial muscles didn't move, but still his displeasure was a definite chill brushing across her skin.

"Then why did you come out with me? I realize I was being a trifle persistent, but you allowed yourself to be persuaded."

"I was lonely," she said, then looked away again.

At that moment the waiter appeared with their dinner, and the interruption gave Max time to control the explosion of fury in his mind. Damn her to hell! So she accepted his invitation only because she was lonely? Evidently he rated above television, but only just! He wondered savagely if his ego could take much more.

When they were alone again, he reached across the table and caught her hand, holding her delicate fingers firmly when she automatically tried to draw away. "You aren't a target," he said tersely. "You're someone I met and liked, someone who looked at me without any hint of speculation about how well endowed I am or how bloody versatile I am in bed. Do you think I don't get lonely, too? I wanted to be able to talk to you; I want a *friend*. Sex is something that can be had whenever I take the urge."

There was color in her face again, as if she were faintly embarrassed, but suddenly there was a twinkle in her eyes. He'd seen it briefly the night before, and its reappearance caught his attention, made him realize how really lovely she was with that light dancing in her dark eyes. "Do they *really?"* she asked in a scandalized whisper.

He felt a bit disoriented, as if he'd just had a blow to the head. A moment before he'd been angry, but now he found himself completely bemused by the teasing humor of her expression. He shifted his grip on her hand and rubbed his thumb across the back of her fingers, absently savoring the feel of her soft flesh. "Ladies have become incredibly bold. It's disconcerting to meet a woman and five minutes later find her hand inside my trousers."

She laughed, and he felt himself become warm. At last he was gaining some ground with her! That was the way; she was lonely and badly needed a friend, while all her defenses were set up to deflect any romantic or seductive move. She wanted a friend, not a lover. Max didn't agree with her

choice, but he would have to go along with it for now or risk frightening her away.
"Could we be friends?" he asked gently, determined to act with restraint. Claire simply wasn't like the women he had pursued with single-minded intensity; she was softer, more sensitive, with secret dreams in her eyes.
Claire's lips still held a little smile. Friends? Was it possible to be friends with a man who was as sleek and beautiful as a cheetah? And why would he want to be friends with her? She was nothing out of the ordinary, while he was completely unordinary. Yet perhaps he really was lonely; Claire understood loneliness. She had chosen it as the safest course in life, but there were still times when she longed for someone to whom she could talk without guarding all but her shallowest layers. It wasn't that she wanted to unburden her heart; it was the simple, everyday conversation of friends that she needed so badly. She had never had that even with Martine, dearly though she loved her. Martine was so courageous and outgoing that she couldn't understand the hurts and fears of someone who lacked that courage. Nor had Claire ever been able to confide in her mother, because she had always feared and flinched from the inevitable comparison with Martine. Even when there was no comparison, fear of it had kept Claire silent.
"You could help me look for an apartment tomorrow," he suggested, drawing her back from her thoughts. "A week in a hotel is straining my tolerance."
His tone was testy, and Claire smiled at his accent, more clipped than usual. "I'd be happy to look with you. Do you have anything in mind?"
"My dear, I don't know anything about Houston; I'm totally in your hands."
"Buy a newspaper tomorrow and circle the apartments that you like best, and we'll drive around to see them. What time would you like to start?"
"As early as it's convenient for you; after all, I'm at your mercy."
She doubted that he was ever at anyone's mercy, but a light, happy feeling was swelling in her. His eyes were a warm, brilliant turquoise now, and his smile would have turned the head of a statue. She wasn't proof against his charm, and suddenly it didn't worry her.
Their food had been cooling in front of them, and they both realized it simultaneously. As they ate, Claire began to watch him with growing amazement; how could someone so lean eat so much? His manners were faultless, but nevertheless the amount he ate would have done a stevedore proud. His metabolic rate had to be high, because his movements were

characterized by an indolent grace; he didn't burn off calories with nervous energy.
She said as much, and he smiled at her. "I know. My mother used to scold me for eating too much in company. She said it made it appear as if they kept me in a dungeon on starvation rations."
"Do you have a large family?"
"There seem to be hundreds of us," he said blithely. "Aunts and uncles and cousins by the score. In the immediate family, I have one brother and three sisters, and eight assorted nieces and nephews. My father is dead, but my mother still rules us all."
"Are you the eldest?" Claire asked, fascinated by his large family.
"No, my brother is the eldest. I'm second in line. Is your family a large one?"
"No, not really. Just my parents, and my sister Martine and her family. There are cousins in Michigan and an aunt who lives in Vancouver, but the relationship isn't close."
"A large family has its advantages, but there are also times when it closely resembles a zoo. Holidays are chaos."
"Do you go home for all the holidays?"
He shrugged. "Sometimes it isn't possible, but I pop over on the odd weekend."
He made it sound as if it were only a matter of getting in a car and taking a half-hour drive, instead of "popping over" on a transatlantic flight. She was still marveling at that when he turned the conversation to her job; he asked interested questions about the sort of work done at Bronson Alloys, the market for special alloys and the uses for them. It was a fairly complicated subject, and Claire had studied intensely when she'd first gotten the job as Sam Branson's secretary, trying to understand the processes and the practical applications of Sam's metallurgical genius; she knew her ground well but had to make a special effort to keep abreast. The ease and rapidity of Max's understanding was amazing; she could talk to him as naturally as if he also worked in the field, without having to pause continually for complicated explanations.
Then they began talking about real estate, and the way Max explained it, it sounded fascinating. "You don't actually buy the real estate yourself?"
"No. I act as a consultant, investigating properties for people who are interested buyers. Not all property is suitable for investment or expansion.

There are the geological considerations, first of all; some land simply isn't stable enough to support large structures. There are other variables, of course: the depth of the water table, any bedrock, things that effect the price effectiveness of locating a building on that particular plot of ground."
"You're a geologist, too?"
"I'm a gatherer of facts. It's like putting a puzzle together, with the difference that you have no idea what the finished product will look like until it *is* finished."
They lingered over coffee, still talking, and gradually Claire realized how hungry she'd been for simple conversation, for the sharing of ideas and opinions. He was extraordinarily intelligent, but he didn't parade his mental capabilities about for anyone to admire; his intelligence was simply there, a part of him. For her part, Claire had always been unusually studious, losing herself in the varied worlds offered by books, and she was both astonished and delighted to discover that one of his favorite writers was Cameron Gregor, a wild Scotsman whose books were horribly difficult to find and who was her own favorite.
They argued fiercely for almost an hour over which book was Gregor's best; Claire forgot her reserve, leaning toward him with her eyes shining, her face lit with pleasure. After a while Max realized that he was arguing for the sheer pleasure of watching her, not because of any real difference of opinion. When passion brightened her face, she was almost incandescent; jealousy began to eat at him, because all of that fire was for *books*, and none for him.
Finally he held up both hands, laughing. "Shall we stop trying to change the other's mind and dance instead? We've totally ignored the music."
Until that moment Claire hadn't even realized that a band was playing, or that the dance floor was crowded with people swaying to the slow, bluesy tunes. A saxophone was crying pure mournful notes that almost brought tears to her eyes; it was her favorite type of music. He led her to the dance floor and took her in his arms.
They danced well together; he was tall, but her heels brought her up to a comfortable height, allowing her to nestle her head just under his chin. He knew just how to hold a woman, not so tightly that she couldn't maneuver and not so loosely that she was unable to follow his lead. Claire gave a quiet sigh of pleasure; she couldn't remember enjoying any evening more. The firm, gentle clasp of his fingers around hers told her that she was in capable

hands, and still there was the sense of control about him that reassured her. Unconsciously she breathed in the faint scent of his cologne, so quiet that it was just barely there, and beneath that was the warm, musky scent of his skin.

Somehow it felt right to be in his arms, so right that she failed to notice her reaction, the way the rhythm of her heartbeat had increased just a little. She felt pleasantly warm, even though the restaurant was cool and her shoulders bare. They laughed and talked and danced together, and she hated for the evening to have to end.

When it did end, he walked her to the door of her apartment and unlocked it for her, then returned the key to her. "Good night," he said in an oddly gentle tone.

She lifted her head and smiled at him. "Good night. I enjoyed the evening very much. Thank you."

That breathtaking, whimsical smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "I should be thanking you, my dear. I'm looking forward to tomorrow. Good night again, and sleep well." He bent and pressed a light kiss on her cheek, his mouth warm and firm; then the brief pressure was lifted. It was a kiss as passionless as that of a brother, asking nothing of her, not even response. Smiling at her, he turned and left.

Claire closed and locked the door, a smile still on her lips. She liked him; she really liked him! He was intelligent, humorous, widely traveled, and remarkably comfortable to be with. He had been a perfect gentleman toward her; after all, he'd as much as told her that he could have sex any time he wanted it, so perhaps she was a welcome change for him. She was a woman who *wasn't* after him. There was no pressure to perform, no sense of being pursued because of his startling physical beauty.

While they'd been dancing, Claire couldn't help noticing that other women had followed him with their eyes, sometimes unconsciously. It was true that some women stared at him openly, with curiosity and even hunger evident in their expressions, but even those who would never think of leaving their own escorts hadn't been able to keep from looking at him periodically. His golden good looks drew the eye like a natural magnet.

Even her own. Lying in her bed, pleasantly tired and relaxed on her silk sheets, she kept seeing his face in her mind's eye. Her memory was a loop of film spliced to run endlessly, and she replayed every changing expression she'd seen, from anger to humor and every nuance in between. His eyes

were green when he was angry, blue when he was thoughtful, and that vivid, wicked turquoise when he was laughing or teasing.
Her cheek tingled warmly where he'd kissed it, and sleepily she pressed her fingers to the spot. Sharp curiosity and a sense of regret pierced her; what would it have been like if he'd kissed her mouth, if there had been passion in his touch instead of the cool pleasantness with which he'd ended the evening? Her heart leaped at the thought, and her lips parted unconsciously. She wanted to know the taste of him.
Restlessly she turned on her side, forcing the thought away. Passion was one of the things she'd forced out of her life. Passion was dangerous; it made sane people suddenly turn into unreasonable maniacs. Passion meant a loss of control, and a loss of control ultimately led to terrible vulnerability. She was sometimes lonely, she admitted to herself, but loneliness was better than leaving herself open to the sort of devastating pain she'd barely survived once before. And she *was* afraid; that was another, more difficult thing that she admitted, lying there in the darkness. She lacked the self-confidence with which Martine faced every morning. She was afraid to let anyone get too close to her, because she might not be all they had expected, and she didn't know if she could bear the pain of rejection.
It was far better to be friends rather than lovers. Friends didn't risk as much; friendship lacked the intimacy that necessarily gave lovers the sure, deadly knowledge of where and how to inflict the most hurt when the relationship went bad.
And friendship was what Max wanted, anyway. If she threw herself at him, he would probably turn away in disgust. He didn't want passion, and she was afraid of passion. Daydreams—or nighttime fantasies—about him were a waste of time.

Chapter Three

Until she answered the telephone the next morning and heard his voice, Claire hadn't realized just how much she had been looking forward to seeing him again. Her heart gave a little leap of joy, and her eyes closed for the briefest moment as she listened to his cool, deep voice, and his clipped, exceedingly British upper-class accent that delighted her ear. "Good

morning, Claire. I've realized that we didn't set a time for me to pick you up today. What would be good for you?"
"Noon, I think. Have you seen any likely prospects in the paper?"
"I've circled three or four. Noon it is, then." It disturbed her that just the sound of his voice could affect her. She didn't want to miss him when he wasn't there, didn't want to look forward to seeing him again.
Just friends. That was all they were going to be, all they could be.
But when she dressed, she once again found herself paying far more attention to her hair and makeup than usual. She wanted to look good for him, and the realization caused a small pain deep inside her chest. There had been times before when she'd hovered anxiously before her mirror, wondering if she would come up to par, if the Halseys would approve of her, if Jeff would look at her with desire in his eyes again.
The situations weren't the same at all; at that time she'd been desperately trying to hold together a disintegrating marriage, and now she was simply going to spend the day with a friend, helping him look for an apartment. If Max made her heart beat faster, that was something she would have to ignore and never, never let him see.
Telling herself that was one thing, but schooling her features to reveal only a pleasant welcome when she opened the door to him was another thing entirely. She'd seen him in a formal white dinner jacket and in a severely conservative gray suit and had thought at the time that nothing could make him look any better, but in casual clothes he was almost breathtaking. His khaki pants, crisp and neat, outlined his lean hips and belly. The emerald green polo shirt he wore had a double impact: it revealed the surprising muscularity of his arms and torso, and intensified, darkened, the shades of green in his eyes until they were the color of some paradise lagoon. Those eyes smiled down at her, and deep inside her something stirred.
"I'm ready," she said, picking up her lemon-yellow garden hat. It matched her yellow-and-white striped sundress, which Martine had persuaded her to buy more than two years ago, insisting that the sunny color suited her. Claire had to admit that Martine's taste, as usual, was impeccable. She didn't wear the dress often, preferring more businesslike attire, but the morning was so bright and warm that nothing else had seemed suitable.
He put his hand on her bare arm, his lean fingers gently curving around her elbow. It was only a polite gesture, but Claire felt her skin tingle under his touch. An instinct of self-protection told her to move away from him, but it

was only a small voice, easily swamped by the disturbing rush of warmth generated by the light touch of his hand. Just walking beside him gave her pleasure.

He opened the car door for her, and when she was seated, he leaned down to tuck her skirt out of the way, another of his casually courteous gestures that disturbed the even rhythm of her pulse. Thank God he didn't have any romantic interest in her! If she responded to him this strongly when he was merely being polite, what would it be like if he were making an effort to charm her? With an almost helpless fear, she realized that she wouldn't stand a chance against him.

Lying on the seat between them was a newspaper, folded open to the ads for apartments for rent, and several of them had been circled. Max pointed to the first one. "This seems suitable. Are you familiar with the area?"

Claire picked up the newspaper and glanced at his choices. "Are you certain you want to look at these?" she asked doubtfully. "They're terribly expensive."

He gave her an amused glance, and Claire looked up in time to see it. She flushed suddenly; if she'd thought about it, she would have realized that he had no need to worry about money. He wasn't flashy, but the signs were there for anyone to read. He dressed well; his clothing was tailored instead of bought off the rack. All the trappings of wealth were there, from his Italian shoes to his impossibly thin Swiss wristwatch, as well as being evident in his speech and manner. Perhaps he wasn't rich, but he was certainly comfortable; companies would pay dearly for his services. She'd made a fool of herself by fretting about what he could afford to pay for an apartment.

"If I must travel so much, the people who pay me must be prepared to keep me in comfort," he said with a chuckle in his voice. "I need privacy, but enough space to entertain when it's necessary, and the apartment must be furnished, as I refuse to cart my furniture about the country."

She gave him stilted directions to the first apartment he'd circled, her cheeks still warm. He began to tell her amusing tales of the pitfalls he'd encountered when he first came to the United States, laughing at himself, and gradually Claire began to relax. She had a horror of making social gaffes, a fear that had been born in the early days of her marriage when it had seemed as if everyone was pressuring her to "live up" to her newly acquired position as Jeff Halsey's wife. As one of *the* Halseys, even by

marriage, she'd been expected to be socially perfect; even the smallest mistakes had been so terribly public that every social function had become an exercise in endurance for Claire.

But Max didn't let her retreat into her shell. He talked to her easily, without letting awkward silences fall between them. He sprinkled small questions through his conversation, compelling her to answer them and in that way contribute, until the last traces of embarrassment had faded and she was smiling naturally again. He watched her carefully, gauging her reactions. He'd be damned if he would let her draw back behind those cool, blank barriers of hers. He had to teach her to trust him, to relax in his company, or he would never be able to get any information from her. This damned takeover irritated him. He wanted it out of the way so he could concentrate on Claire and discover more about the woman behind the defenses. He was becoming obsessed with her, and that knowledge irritated him, too, but he couldn't simply shrug it away. Her cool, distant manner attracted him even while it drove him mad with frustration. She had a habit of drifting away in her thoughts, those deep brown eyes revealing secrets that he couldn't read and she wouldn't share with him. His reaction to her confused him; he wanted to make love to her until all the shadows in her eyes were gone, until she burned for him, until she lay warm and helpless beneath him, her skin dewy from the heat and violence of his possession… and he wanted to protect her, from everything and everyone except himself.

She didn't want him in either capacity, as lover or protector. She wanted him only for companionship, which was almost as exciting as warm milk.

The first address he'd marked was a group of condominiums, turning their bland identical faces to the street. They were new and expensive, but they were nothing more than brick growths on the Texas soil. Claire glanced at Max, unable to imagine him living there. He surveyed the condos; then his aristocratic brows climbed upward. "I think not," he said mildly and put the car in reverse.

Absurdly pleased that she had been right in her estimation of him, Claire picked up the paper and studied the addresses of the other apartments he'd marked, trying to place them. Houston had grown so rapidly that she wasn't certain where two of the apartments were, but one address she did recognize. "I think you'll like the next one better. It's an older building, but the apartments are very exclusive."

Once again, she was right. Max looked pleased when he saw the mellowed building with the wrought-iron gate at the entrance and the brick-paved courtyard. There was private underground parking for the tenants. Max stopped the car before the office and came around to open the door for Claire. His fingers were warm on her elbow as he helped her from the car; then his hand moved to the small of her back. Claire didn't even try to move away; she was becoming used to his touch, to his more formal European manners.

Even in his casual clothing, Max had an air of authority that commanded the attention of the apartment manager. The man bubbled over with enthusiasm, showing them about the vacant apartment, pointing out the old-fashioned charm of the oak parquet floors and the high, arched ceilings. The windows were wide and tall, flooding the apartment with light, but the rooms were rather small, and Max politely thanked the man for his time.

When they were in the car, Claire said casually, "You do believe in being comfortable, don't you?"

He laughed aloud. "I'm fond of the creature comforts, yes. Being cramped is one of the things I hate most about hotels. Does that make me horribly spoiled?"

She looked at him. The bright sun was caught in the golden cap of his hair, framing his head in a gilt halo. He was relaxed, smiling, his vivid eyes sparkling, but still there was something about him, perhaps a natural sense of arrogance bred into him by the same aristocratic ancestors who had given him that hard, lean, graceful body and sun-god face. She had no doubt that he was spoiled; probably from the day of his birth, women had been dashing about to satisfy his smallest whim. What truly surprised her was that he had the ability to laugh at himself, as if he accepted his looks and the attention they brought him but didn't take them too seriously.

He reached out and took her hand. "What are you thinking? You're looking at me, but you've drifted away."

"That you *are* incredibly spoiled but rather nice in spite of it."

He threw back his head on a shout of laughter. "Aren't you worried that such lavish compliments will go to my head?"

"No," she said serenely. A warm sense of happiness was filling her again, making the bright spring day take on an incandescent glow. She let her hand lie in his, content with the touch.

"Direct me to the next apartment on the list while I still have a healthy ego."

The third apartment was being sublet by an artist who was taking a sabbatical on a Greek island. The decor was understated and sophisticated, from the black slate tiles in the entry to the peach-colored walls and the tracks of indirect lighting overhead. The rooms were large; Claire's entire apartment would have fit easily into the enormous living room. Max wandered into the bedroom to inspect the bed, and Claire knew that he was pleased. His tastes were sophisticated, but never avant-garde. The almost spare luxury of this apartment would appeal to him.

"I'll take it," he said easily, interrupting the manager's spiel. "Are the papers ready to sign now?"

They were, but there was the matter of references; Max squeezed Claire's shoulder, smiling warmly at her. "While I take care of this, will you look about the place and decide what extras I'll need to buy, other than linens?"

"Of course," she agreed, wryly aware that now she was spoiling him, too. He had been polite and logical in his request, but the simple fact was that he'd expected her to agree to do that chore for him. If she hadn't been there, he would have done it himself, but she *was* there, and therefore available to do his bidding. Max went with the manager down to the office, and Claire took inventory of the apartment, making note of what he would need.

She was bemused by the luxury that he took for granted. Her background was in no way deprived. She was the product of an upper-middle-class upbringing, used to a certain amount of luxury herself; she had been married for almost six years to a wealthy man and had lived in the center of the lap of luxury, yet she had transplanted herself without problem into a four-room apartment that could best be described as cozy. Having refused alimony, not wanting the link of financial dependence to tie her to Jeff, she had found a job and begun living on a budget, and not once had she missed the money that had enabled her to buy anything that took her fancy. Max's income was obviously far larger than hers, but still his attitude was an aristocratic expectation that his comfort be assured.

Sometime later he found her standing in the middle of the bedroom, her shoes off, her stockinged feet sunk into the thick dove-gray carpet. Her eyes were open, but that dreamy far-away look was in them again, and he knew that she was unaware of his presence. She was motionless, the tiniest of smiles on her face as she drifted in her thoughts. He stopped, watching her, wondering what dreams pleased her so much and if she wore that same look of contentment after lovemaking, when everything was quiet and dark and

the frenzied heat had passed. Had she worn that look for her ex-husband or for another man? The sudden twist of jealousy in his gut was unwelcome and left a bitter taste in his mouth.
He crossed the room and put his hand on her arm, determined to draw her away from those dreams and back to him. "All finished with the paperwork. Are you ready to go?"
She blinked, and the dreams vanished from her eyes. "Yes. I was just enjoying the room."
He looked down at her bare feet. "Especially the carpet."
She smiled. "The colors, too. Everything blends together so nicely."
It was a mellow room, large and well lit, with the soothing gray carpet and peach walls. The bed was covered with a thick melon-colored comforter, and the melon was used again in a large ceramic urn in the corner that held an enormous philodendron. The bed was oversize, piled high with pillows; it was perfect for a tall man, and more than roomy enough for two people. He looked at the bed then at Claire as she bent down to slip on her shoes. He would have her in that bed before this was finished, he promised himself .
She gave him the list she'd made of what he would need to buy. He read it briefly then folded it and put it in his pocket. "We've certainly made short work of this; we have most of the afternoon left. Would you like to have a late lunch or an early dinner?"
She thought of inviting him home to eat dinner with her but hesitated; she had never before invited a man to eat at her apartment. The apartment was her place of privacy, and she had been reluctant to share it. But she didn't want the day to end, and somehow she didn't mind the thought of his presence in her home. "Why don't we go back to my apartment?" she offered a bit nervously. "I'll cook dinner. Do you like orange-glazed chicken?"
"I like food," he stated, glancing at her as they left the apartment and wondering at her obvious unease. Was cooking dinner for him such an ordeal? Both the invitation and the occasion were casual yet something about it bothered her. A woman with her social experience should be completely relaxed with such a simple evening, but nothing about Claire was as it should have been. He wondered if he would ever understand what went on in her mind.

The telephone began ringing as they entered her apartment, and Claire excused herself to answer it.
"Claire, guess what!" her mother said enthusiastically. Claire didn't even attempt to guess, knowing from experience that her mother wouldn't pause long enough to allow an interruption, and she was right. Alma rushed headlong into her next sentence. "Michael and Celia are being transferred to Arizona, and they've stopped to visit on the way through. They'll only be here this one night, and we're having a family cookout. How soon can you be here?"
Michael was Claire's cousin from Michigan, and Celia was his wife. Claire was fond of them both, but she had already invited Max to dinner, and she couldn't just throw him out now, even though Alma took it for granted that Claire would drop everything and rush right oven "Mother, I was just about to cook dinner—"
"Then I've called just in time! Martine and Steve are already here; I tried to call you earlier, but you were out."
Claire took a deep breath. She didn't want to tell her mother that she was entertaining, because she never did so, and Alma would immediately attach far greater significance to it than it warranted, yet she didn't see any way out of it. "I have company. I can't just rush over—"
"Company? Anyone I know?"
"No. I've invited him to dinner—"
Immediately Alma's maternal curiosity switched on. "Who?"
"A friend," Claire said, trying to evade any further questions, but knowing it was a hopeless maneuver. She looked up to see Max grinning at her, his turquoise eyes twinkling. He signaled that he had something to say, and she interrupted Alma's barrage of questions before her mother could get up speed. "Hold on just a minute, Mother. I'll be right back." She covered the mouthpiece with her hand. "My cousins have arrived from Michigan, and they'll only be here overnight, so Mother wants me to come over for a cookout," she explained.
"And you have already invited me to dinner," he finished, coming close to her and taking the phone out of her hand. "I have the perfect solution."
"Mrs. Westbrook," he said into the phone, "my name is Max Benedict. May I offer a solution and invite myself to your cookout, if it wouldn't be too much of an imposition on you? Claire really would like to see her cousins, but she has me on her hands, and she's too well mannered to withdraw her

invitation to dinner, and I'm too hungry to do the polite thing and take myself off."
Claire closed her eyes, not having to hear the other half of the conversation to know that Alma had completely melted at the sound of Max's deep, smooth voice and that seductive English accent. Part of her was amused, but another part of her went into a panic at the thought of taking Max to meet her family. Everyone in her family was outstanding in some way, and she tended to fade into the background, overshadowed by their more exuberant personalities. Max perceived her as quiet; if he saw her with her family, he would realize that mousy was a more accurate description, and suddenly she knew she couldn't bear that. Something in her would die if he compared her to Martine, then looked back at her as if wondering what had gone wrong with the family genes.
"Thank you for taking pity on me," Max was drawling. "I'll have Claire there shortly." He hung up the phone, and Claire opened her eyes to find him watching her intently, as if wondering why she was so reluctant to attend her family's impromptu outing. "Don't look so frightened," he advised, winking at her. "Perhaps I don't have on my best bib and tucker, but I'll be on my best behavior."
There was still a residue of terror in her eyes as she turned away. "It isn't you," she confessed, trying to make light of it. "Family gatherings tend to overwhelm me; I'm not at my best in a crowd." That was a massive understatement, she thought, resigning herself to the bleak hours ahead of her. "Excuse me while I change clothes and—"
"No," he said, reaching out to take her hand and effectively halting her flight. "You look wonderful as you are. You don't need to change clothes, brush your hair, or freshen your lipstick. Waiting will only make you more nervous." He watched her thoughtfully, wondering at the sudden urge he had to protect her, but there it was. There was something about her that made him want to gather her close and keep everything hard and hurtful away from her. The realization that he wasn't being completely honest with her gave him a tight feeling in his chest; what would happen when she found out who he really was? Would she withdraw completely from him, her soft, dark eyes becoming cold and remote? A chill ran down his back at the thought, and he knew he couldn't let it happen. Somehow, some way he had to engineer the takeover without alienating Claire.

His eyes were narrowed and brilliant as he watched her, and Claire felt uneasiness grow in her. He saw too much, read her too well. The realization that she was so vulnerable to him frightened her, and instinctively she withdrew behind a quiet, polite, blank wall as he led her back out to the car, his hand still clasping hers in what would have been a comforting grip if she had noticed it, but she paid no attention to his touch. Her mind was already constructing painful scenarios in which Max fell in love with Martine on sight and spent the entire afternoon staring at her with an adoring expression in his turquoise eyes. He would be in pain, too, because Martine wouldn't return the emotion. Martine was deeply in love with her husband and never seemed to be aware of her devastating effect on the male sex.
Claire automatically gave directions, and too soon Max was turning into the driveway of her parents' home. The drive was already crowded with her father's BMW and her mother's small Buick, Steve's Jeep Cherokee, and a loaded-down blue Ford station wagon with Michigan license plates. Max parked his car off to the side, under a tree. Claire stared blindly at the roomy Tudor-style house where she had grown up, almost paralyzed with dread of what was to come. Everyone would be in the large backyard, under the enormous chestnut trees; it was too early in the year for the pool to be uncovered, so the children would be running wild on the grass instead of swimming. The adults would be sitting lazily in the chairs grouped under the trees, and her father would be guarding the steaks and hamburgers slowly smoking on the grill. It would look like suburban heaven, but everything in Claire shrank from the ordeal of walking across the grass toward the small group, knowing that everyone would be avidly staring at the handsome man walking beside her, wondering why on earth he was with someone as ordinary as she, when he could obviously have any woman he wanted. Oh, God, she couldn't do it.
Max opened the car door, and Claire got out. The shouts and laughter of children at play came from the backyard, and he grinned at her. "That sounds like home. My nieces and nephews are hellions, every one of them, but there are some days when my sanity slips away and I miss their chaos. Shall we?"
His hand was warm on her backhand now she was aware of his touch, because he'd put his hand between her shoulder blades, and his fingers were resting on her bare skin, revealed by the low back of the cheery yellow-striped sundress. As they walked through the gate and came in view of her

family, seated beneath the trees just as she'd pictured them, his thumb rubbed gently across her spine, and the sensation fractured the icy dread that had gripped her stomach. She was helpless against the surge of warmth that washed through her, tightening her nipples and making her breasts feel heated and full. That small touch had thrown her completely off balance; all her defenses had been raised against the dread of having Max meet her family and compare her to them, and she'd been totally unprepared to deal with the way she responded to him despite the caution of her common sense.

Then they were surrounded by her family, and Claire heard herself making the introductions automatically. Alma was practically beaming at Max, her beautiful face aglow with enthusiasm, and Claire's father, Harmon, was both dignified and warm as he greeted his new guest. There were hugs and kisses as Claire greeted Michael and Celia, conflicting exclamations, the noise of the children as Marline's two rowdy youngsters, followed closely by Michael's two children, charged into the group to hug and kiss Claire, who was their favorite aunt. Martine, who was unbelievably gorgeous in a dazzling white knit top and white shorts that hugged her lithe figure and exhibited the golden length of her long, perfect legs, began good-naturedly trying to bring some sort of order to her children; Celia did the same, but it was several minutes before things settled down. Through it all, Claire was aware of Max standing closely beside her, smiling and chatting with that incredible charm of his that already had everyone eating out of his hand.

"Have you known Claire long?" Alma asked, smiling at Max, and Claire tensed. She should have known that Max would be grilled on his life from birth to present. It was her own fault; since her divorce from Jeff, she'd stubbornly resisted the efforts of her family to plunge her back into the social scene, so it was out of character for her to show up with a man in tow. Virginia's party had been the only party she'd attended in years, except for small family get-togethers, and Claire had no doubt that Martine and Alma had discussed at length the fact that she'd finally given in to Marine's urgings. Their curiosity over Max would be running high.

His eyelashes had drooped over his brilliant eyes, as if he were a little drowsy. "No, I haven't," he said, his tone gentle and faintly amused. Claire wondered if she were the only one who heard that amusement, and she darted a quick look at her mother. Alma was still smiling, and she wore that slightly dazed expression Claire had seen before on women's faces when

they saw Max for the first time. Suddenly Claire relaxed, no longer worried about any interrogation Max might face from her family; she sensed that he was perfectly at ease, as if he'd expected to be questioned.
"Max is new in town, and I've been showing him around," she explained.
Both Alma and Martine gave her intensely pleased looks then glanced at each other as if congratulating themselves for a job well-done in finally getting Claire out of her shell. Now that she was older, Claire often found this silent communication between her mother and sister amusing, though when she was a child it had intimidated her, making her fed left out. Her lips twitched in a smile; really, there was something comforting in knowing your family so well that you could almost read their thoughts. Martine looked back at Claire and saw her sister's amusement, and a sunny smile broke over her lovely face. "You're doing it again!" she said, laughing.
"What's that?" Steve asked, leaning toward his wife.
"Claire's reading my mind again."
"Oh, she's always done that," Alma said absently. "Harmon, dear, the steaks are on fire."
Claire's father calmly sprayed water on the flaming charcoal. "What type of work are you in, Mr. Benedict?" he asked, keeping an eagle, eye on the coals in case they flamed up again.
"Investments and real estate."
"Real estate? That's a volatile profession."
"Speculating in real estate certainly is, but I'm not in that area of the business."
"When we get settled in Arizona, I'm going to begin studying for my real estate license," Celia put in. "It's a fascinating career, and now that the children are both in school I want to get back into it. I worked in a real estate office in Michigan," she explained to Max. "I was planning to get my license then, but two babies persuaded me to put it on hold until they were older."
Martine leaned forward, her dark blue eyes sparkling as she leveled them on Max. "Do you have any children, Mr. Benedict?" she asked sweetly, and Claire closed her eyes, wavering between horror and a bubble of laughter. Martine didn't believe in tact when she was engaged in protecting her younger sister, and right now that protection took the form of digging all the information she could from Maxwell Benedict.

Max threw back his golden head and laughed, a deep, rich sound that made Claire open her eyes. "No children, and no wives, either present or past, to the despair of my mother, who thinks I'm a disobedient reprobate for not providing her with grandchildren as my brother and sisters have done. And please call me Max, if you'd like."

After that, everyone was eating out of his hand. Though she'd seen it before, Claire was still amazed at his talent for striking just the right note. His relased laughter and the fond references to his family had assured everyone that he was perfectly normal, not a con man, an ax-murderer or a heartless womanizer who would take advantage of her. Sometimes Claire thought that her family must consider her an absolute nitwit, incapable of taking care of herself, and she couldn't think what she'd ever done to deserve that opinion. She lived quietly, she worked and paid her bills, she never got into any trouble, and she handled the varied crises at work with serene aplomb, but none of that seemed to matter to her family. One and all, they seemed to think that Claire "needed looking after." Her father wasn't quite as obvious as Alma and Martine, but he still had a habit of regularly asking her if she needed any financial help.

Max lightly touched her arm, bringing her thoughts back to the laughing, chattering group, and his turquoise eyes were warm as he smiled at her. He never lost pace with the conversation swirling around them, and he promptly removed his hand, but that small touch told her that he was aware of her.

The afternoon was a revelation to Claire. Max was friendly and relaxed with her family, but he wasn't bowled over by Martine's classic golden beauty, as most men were. He was there with Claire. He sat beside Claire while they were eating at the redwood picnic table, he joined Claire in entertaining the restless children after they had been fed, and soon he was romping on the grass with all the aplomb of a man who was accustomed to being swarmed by his energetic nieces and nephews. Claire watched him playing with the children, this beautiful, elegant man who seemed to care not at all that his golden hair was tousled, or that his pants were now stained with grass. The setting sun made a gilt halo of his hair and caught the brilliant sea-colored sparkle of his eyes, and as she looked at him Claire felt her heart swell until it was almost on the point of exploding, and everything went dim for a moment.

I don't want to love him, she thought in despair, but it was already too late. How could she not love him? His laughter as he rolled on the grass, wrestling gently with the four giggling, shrieking youngsters, undermined her defenses far more quickly than any attempt at seduction would have.
She was still in a state of shock when Max drove her back to her apartment that night. It was almost ten o'clock, as everyone had been reluctant to let the day end.
"I like your family," Max said as he walked her to the door, rousing her from her thoughts.
"They liked you, too. I hope all those questions didn't make you uncomfortable."
"Not at all. I'd have been disappointed if they hadn't been interested in your well-being. They love you very much."
Startled, Claire paused with the key in her hand. Max took the key, unlocked the door and reached in to turn on the light then ushered her inside with his hand on her back. "They think I'm an idiot and can't do anything by myself," she blurted.
"That's not what I saw," Max murmured, cupping her bare shoulders in his warm hands. Claire's pulse suddenly throbbed, and she glanced down to hide the response that she couldn't control. "If you think your family is overprotective, I shudder to think how you'd react to mine. My entire family is so incredibly nosy that I sometimes think the KGB would have more finesse."
She laughed, as he'd meant her to, and the way her face lit suddenly made his loins throb. He clenched his teeth, restraining himself from grabbing her and grinding his hips against her soft curves. "Good night," he said, bending to press his lips against her forehead. "May I call you tomorrow?"
"Again? I mean, of course, but I thought you'd be tired of my company."
"Not at all. I can relax with you. If you have other plans…?"
"I don't," she said hurriedly, suddenly terrified that now he wouldn't call at all. The thought of a day without seeing him made her feel bleak. . "Then have lunch with me. Is there a restaurant close to your office?"
"Yes, just across the street. Riley's."
"Then I'll meet you there at noon." He touched her cheek briefly then left.
Claire locked the door behind him, her eyes filling with unexpected tears and her throat clogging. She was in love with him, with a man who, by his own admission, wanted only the refuge of an undemanding friendship.

What a stupid thing for her to do! She had known, by her unusual response to him, that he was a danger to her and the quiet, uncomplicated life she'd built for herself. By not making any demands at all, he'd taken far more than she would ever have offered.

Chapter Four

When Claire entered the office, she saw at once that Sam had spent the night there again. File drawers were open, the lights were on, and a pot of old coffee was scorching on the wanning pad of the coffee maker. Wrinkling her nose, she poured out the old coffee and put on a fresh pot, then set about restoring order to the office. The door of Sam's office was closed, but she knew that he would either be sprawled on the sofa or slumped over his desk. He spent a lot of nights in the office whenever he was working on a new alloy; his delight was in the development of new metals, not in the day-to-day routine of running the business he'd founded. For all that, he was a cagey businessman, and nothing escaped his attention for long.

When the coffee was finished, she poured a cup and carried it through to Sam's office. He was asleep at his desk, his head resting on his folded arms. A legal pad crowded with numbers and chemical symbols lay beside him, and five Styrofoam cups with varying levels of cold coffee was scattered around the desk. Claire set the cup of steaming coffee on the desk and crossed to the windows to open the curtains, flooding the office with light. "Sam, wake up. It's almost eight o'clock."

He woke easily, yawning and stirring at her voice. Sitting up, he yawned again and rubbed his face, eyed the fresh cup of coffee with appreciation and drank half of it. "What time did you say it is?"

"Eight."

"Almost five hours' sleep. Not bad." Five hours' sleep was really a lot for him; he often functioned on less. Sam was something of an enigma, but she was fond of him and intensely loyal; he was lean and gray haired; and his face had lines that told of hard living sometime in his fifty-two years, making her suspect that he had quite an interesting past, but he never talked about it. She knew little about him other than that his wife had died ten years before and he still mourned her, having no interest in remarrying. Her

photograph still sat on his desk, and Claire had seen Sam look at it with an expression of such pain and longing that she'd had to turn away.
"Have you been working on something new?" she asked, nodding toward the legal pad.
"I'd like to make that new alloy stronger, but so far all I've done is make it brittle. I haven't hit on the right combination yet without making it heavier, too."
The challenge was to develop a metal that was both strong and light, because the heavier a metal was, the more energy was required to move it. The advanced metal alloys had practical applications more far-reaching than simply making a long-lasting I-beam for construction; the sophisticated alloys were used in space and opened up new opportunities in land travel. After an alloy was developed, ways had to be found to produce it cheaply enough that industry could use it. When Claire had first begun working, it had seemed like a routine job to her, like working in any steel mill, but she'd soon discovered her error. The security was tight and the research fascinating.
She loved her job, and that morning she was especially grateful for it, because it took her mind away from Max and gave her some breathing space. He had occupied both her time and her thoughts since she had first met him Friday night, overwhelming her with his sleek sophistication and wry good humor, inserting himself into her life so neatly and firmly that even in her sleep she couldn't quite escape from him. Claire had slept badly the night before, waking to tell herself over and over that she didn't love him, she *couldn't* love him, but then her traitorous mind would form his image in her thoughts, and her body would react wildly, growing warm and heavy, and she was afraid. Loving him was both reckless and foolish, especially for a woman who prized the secure, even tenor of her life and never again wanted to risk the pain of loving. It was even more foolish because Max had told her from the outset that he only wanted to be friends. How awkward it would be if he guessed that she was just like all the others, mooning over him like a starstruck teenager! Goodbye friendship, goodbye Max.
Sam called her into his office late that morning to take letters, but dictated only a few. Leaning back in his chair, he steepled his fingers and peered at her over them, frowning. Claire sat quietly, waiting. Sam wasn't frowning at her; he was lost in his thoughts and probably didn't even see her. At last he

roused himself and got to his feet, groaning a little as his stiff muscles protested. "Days like this remind me of my age," he growled, rubbing his lower back.
"Sleeping at your desk reminds you of your age," Claire corrected, and he grunted in agreement.
"I heard some rumors over the weekend," he said, walking to the window to look down at the roof of his laboratory. "Nothing concrete, but in this case I tend to believe them. Some foreign interest seems to be interested in buying up some of our stock. I don't like that. I don't like it at all."
"A takeover?"
"Could be. There's no active trading in our stock, no sudden surge in demand or price, so the rumor could be groundless. Still, there is something else that makes me uneasy. Another rumor is also circulating, about the new titanium alloy I'm working with now." His lined face was taut with worry.
They stared at each other in silence, both aware of the implications. Sam had developed an alloy so superior to its predecessors in strength and lightness that the possibilities for its use were so far-ranging they were almost beyond belief, though he still wasn't satisfied with the production process. That was still in the experimental stage, and security had been especially tight on its development. By necessity the lab people knew about it, though Sam was the only one in possession of all the information; the people in production also knew about it. Information, once leaked, took on a life of its own and spread rapidly.
"This is too sensitive," Claire finally said. "The federal government wouldn't allow a foreign-held company to buy access to this alloy."
"I've always tried to stay independent," Sam mused, staring out the window again. "This research should have been classified, and I knew it all along, but I was too much of a maverick to do the sensible thing. I thought we were too small to attract notice, and I didn't want the hassle of government security clearance. It was a mistake."
"Are you going to contact the government?"
He thrust his fingers through his gray hair. "Damn, I hate to! I don't want all that going on right now, distracting me. Maybe…"
Sam was a maverick all right, with his unorthodox genius and his impatience with boundaries and restraints. Claire watched him, already knowing what his decision would be. He would wait and watch. He

wouldn't allow the alloy to fall into the wrong hands, but he was going to conduct his research in private for as long as possible.
"Any takeover attempt right now would probably fail. We have some property that has skyrocketed in value, but it hasn't been appraised in years. An offer wouldn't take that into account."
"I'll have it reappraised," Claire said, making a note.
"Tell them to rush it; I hope it'll be enough to keep us safe. I just want time to finish my research before I turn this over." He shrugged his broad shoulders, looking tired. "It was good while it lasted, but I've known for some time that we were getting too close to an important breakthrough. Damn, I hate to complicate things with bureaucratic nonsense!"
"I suspect it isn't nonsense, but you just hate for *anyone* to tell you what you have to do, bureaucrat or not."
He scowled at her, a look that Claire met with complete serenity, and a moment later the scowl faded into wry acceptance. That was one of the things she liked most about Sam. He had the ability to see the truth and accept it, even when it was something he didn't like. Whatever blows life had dealt him, he'd learned from every one of them. He was a genius, locked into his creative dreams, but he was also a cautious, scrappy street fighter. Sam would never be a nine-to-five button-down executive; paperwork and corporate decisions, as important as they were, didn't interest him, and he did them only out of duty. His ambition, his life, was in his laboratory.
Despite the distractions of the morning, Claire was always aware of the passage of time, bringing her closer and closer to lunch, when she would see Max again. At last it was time to leave, and she grabbed her purse and darted out of the office. Her flesh was burning and her heart was pounding as she crossed the street, and she took several deep breaths in an effort to calm herself. This would never do. This was a simple lunch date between friends, nothing more; she didn't dare let it appear to be anything else.
Max stood up as she wove her way through the maze of crowded tables. She was flushed from hurrying, and his eyes dropped momentarily to her mouth, parted because of her rapid breathing. Her lips were wide and soft, and his senses jolted. He wanted to taste her, not restrict himself to those chaste, monumentally unsatisfying pecks on her cheek or forehead. He wanted to strip off her clothes and *taste* her, from her head all the way down to her pink toes, with a hungry urgency that threatened to shred his self-

control. Damn her, he couldn't get her out of his mind, but he didn't dare make a move on her. She was so skittish that she would retreat from him again, and he wouldn't be able to get any information from her at all. He didn't have a lot of time, anyway, and he was hampered by not knowing exactly what he was looking for, but Anson was certain that Bronson would have hidden assets, and Anson Edwards's hunches were never wrong.

The trouble was that when he looked at Claire, it was difficult to remember that business was supposed to be his primary reason for being in Houston. The entire thing was beginning to leave a bad taste in his mouth; corporate maneuvering was one thing, but he didn't like the idea of involving Claire, of using her. Only his loyalty to Anson Edwards kept him on this particular job, and for the first time Max felt that loyalty wavering. He didn't want to waste his time searching for information; he wanted to fold Claire in his arms and hold her so tightly that there could never be any distance between them again. A sharp longing knotted his insides as she finally reached his table and he stood to welcome her, but he schooled his features to reflect only the light, casual friendliness she seemed to prefer.

"Busy morning?" he asked, leaning down to kiss her cheek before seating her. His gesture was smooth and casual. He probably kissed every woman he met, Claire told herself painfully, but that didn't stop the surge of warmth that suffused her body.

"It's a typical Monday. Everything was in perfect order when I left Friday afternoon, but over the weekend it somehow turned into chaos."

A waitress appeared with the menus, and they were silent while they made their selections. They ordered, and Max turned his attention back to her. "I moved into the apartment this morning."

"That was fast!"

"All I had to relocate was my clothing," Max pointed out, amused. "I've stocked the pantry and bought new sheets and towels—"

The waitress whisked up with their coffee, sliding the cups and saucers in front of them with practiced ease. Riley's was famous for fast service, and today the waitress was outdoing herself. They tried several times to begin a conversation, but each time they were interrupted as their coffee cups or water glasses were refilled. The restaurant was crowded and noisy, and the clatter of plates and glasses was incessant, forcing them to raise their voices in an attempt to be heard.

"Claire! And Mr. Benedict! I'm so glad to run into you here!"

Max politely got to his feet, and Claire turned to see who had addressed them. The pretty brunette beaming at them was Leigh Adkinson, a member of the Houston social stratosphere to which Claire had belonged when she'd been Mrs. Halsey. Leigh was cheerful and lacking in malice, but they had been acquaintances rather than friends, and after Claire's divorce she'd almost completely lost contact with all of the old crowd. She could count on one hand the number of times she'd talked with Leigh in the years since her divorce, but there Leigh was, smiling at her as if they were the best of friends. And how did Leigh know Max? she wondered.

"Do you remember me, Mr. Benedict? We met at Virginia's party Friday night," Leigh chattered.

"Of course I remember. Won't you join us?" He indicated an empty chair, but Leigh shook her head.

"Thank you, but I have to run. I know it's short notice, but I wanted to invite you to a dinner party I'm giving Saturday night. Actually, it begins as a dinner party at my house; then we're moving it to the Wiltshire Hotel for dancing in the ballroom. Tony's kicking off his candidacy for the governorship. Please say you'll come, both of you. I noticed at Virginia's party how well you dance together!"

Max glanced at Claire, his eyebrows uplifted. "Claire?"

She didn't know what to say. Leigh had somehow assumed that they were a couple, but that wasn't the situation at all. Perhaps Max would prefer taking someone else to the dinner party, if he wanted to attend at all.

"It isn't a fund-raising dinner," Leigh said, laughing. "It's a party for friends. You've been hiding yourself away for far too long, Claire."

Claire hated it when anyone made it sound as if she'd buried herself in deep mourning after her divorce, which wasn't what had happened at all. She stiffened, withdrawing from them, and a refusal began forming on her lips.

Max put his hand on hers, stalling her. "Thank you, we'd love to attend."

"Oh, good. We're having an early dinner, at seven. Claire knows where we live. I'll see you Saturday, then. Bye!"

Max resumed his seat, and silence fell briefly between them. "Are you angry that I accepted for both of us?" he asked, forcing her to look at him.

"I'm embarrassed. Leigh assumed that we're an item, and you were too polite to tell her the truth."

His eyebrows arched, and suddenly the languid, cosmopolitan gentleman was gone, and in his place was a man with cool, almost ruthless eyes. "Do

you really think I'd care about being polite if I didn't want to attend? I can be a bloody bastard on occasion."
Claire felt mesmerized, staring into his turquoise eyes and suddenly seeing someone else, but abruptly the ruthlessness was gone, and in its place was the familiar calm control, making her feel as if her mind and eyes were playing tricks on her.
"Why don't you want to go?" he probed.
"I don't belong to that social set any longer."
"Are you afraid you'll see your ex-husband again?"
"I'm certainly not interested in socializing with him and his wife!"
"You don't have to socialize with them," Max persisted, and Claire felt the steely purpose in him. "If they're there, simply ignore them. Divorce is too rampant nowadays for it to be practical to split friends and acquaintances into warring factions."
"I'm not at war with Jeff," Claire denied. "That isn't the issue at all."
"Then what is the issue? I'd like to take you to the dinner party and dance with you afterward. I think we'd have fun, don't you?"
"I'm monopolizing your time—"
"No, dear," he interrupted gently. "I'm monopolizing yours. I like being with you; you don't have emotional fits all over my jacket. I freely admit to being selfish, but I'm comfortable with you, and I like being comfortable."
Claire gave in, knowing that for her own emotional safety she should stay as far away from him as possible, but she simply couldn't. She wanted to be with him, see him, talk to him, even if only as a friend, and the need was too strong to be controlled.
After lunch he walked her across the street. While they had been eating, the sky had rapidly filled with dark clouds, promising a spring shower. Max glanced up at the sky. "I'll have to run to beat the rain," he said. "What time are we having dinner tonight?"
Claire turned to stare at him in disbelief. "Dinner *tonight?"* Three nights in a row?
"Unless you have other plans. I'll be the chef. After all, it'll be the first meal in my new apartment. You don't have other plans, do you?"
"No, no other plans."
"Good. Strictly casual tonight, too, so you can relax. I'll collect you at six-thirty."

"I'll drive," she said hastily. "That way you won't have to leave in the middle of cooking."
He gave her a cool, deliberate look. "I said I'll collect you. You're not driving home alone at night. My mother would disinherit me if I allowed such a thing."
Claire hesitated. She was beginning to learn how determined Max was to have things his way. He was unyielding once he'd made up his mind. Behind the pose of sophisticated indolence was pure steel, cold and unbreakable. She had glimpsed it a few times, so briefly that she had never been quite certain of what she'd seen, but she was too intuitive not to sense the strength of the man behind the image.
Max tilted her chin up with his finger, bringing his charm into play as his eyes twinkled at her. "Six-thirty?"
She glanced at her wristwatch. She was already late and didn't have time to argue over such an unimportant detail. "All right. I'll be ready."
He was an expert at getting his way, she realized some ten minutes later. If charm didn't work, he used that cold authority that appeared without warning, and vice versa, but usually the charm would be enough. How often had anyone refused him, especially a woman? Probably not in this decade, Claire thought ruefully. Even as wary as *she* was of handsome charmers, she hadn't been immune to him.
She rushed home after work, alive with anticipation. Quickly she showered and shampooed and was just beginning to blow-dry her hair when the telephone rang.
"All right, spill your guts," Martine drawled when Claire answered the phone. "I want to hear all about that gorgeous man."
When Claire thought, about it, she realized that it was nothing less than a minor miracle that Martine had curbed her curiosity for as long as she did, instead of calling Claire at work.
Claire paused, and a tiny frown pulled at her brow. What did she know about Max? That he had three sisters and a brother, was from England, and dealt in real estate. Her family already knew that much, from the adroit answers he'd given them the day before. She knew that he had expensive tastes, dressed elegantly and had impeccable manners. Other than that his life was a blank. She remembered asking him questions, but oddly enough, she couldn't remember his answers. She didn't even know how old he was.

"He's just a friend," she finally answered, because she didn't know what else to say.
"And the *Mona Lisa* is just a painting."
"In essence, yes. There's nothing between us except friendship." He'd never even kissed her, except for those sexless pecks on the cheek and forehead, and it wasn't that he didn't know how to go about it. He simply wasn't interested.
"Ummm, if you say so," Martine said, her skepticism evident. "Are you seeing him again?"
Claire sighed. "Yes, I'm seeing him again."
"Aha!"
"Don't 'aha' me. We're *friends*, without the capital *F* that Hollywood uses so meaningfully. You saw him, so I'm sure you won't have any trouble imagining how he's chased. He's tired of it, that's all, and he feels comfortahle with me because I don't chase him. I'm not after a hot romance."
On the other end of the line, Martine raised her expressive eyebrows. She readily believed that Claire wasn't after a hot romance, but she didn't for one minute believe that Max Benedict was seeing her sister merely because he was "comfortable" with her. Oh, he was probably used to being chased, all right, and every hunting instinct man possessed would have been aroused when Claire looked right through him as if he were sexless. Martine knew quite a lot about men, and one look had told her that Max was pure male, more predatory than most, smarter than most and possessed of a sexuality that burned so vividly she wondered how Claire, who was so unusually sensitive to other people, could fail to see it. But perhaps Claire was too innocent to recognize that energy for what it was; even though she'd been married to Jeff Halsey, there had always been a certain distance to her, a dreaminess that separated her from other people.
"If you're certain…"
"I'm certain, believe me."
She finally got off the phone with Martine and glanced anxiously at the clock, It was almost six. She hurriedly finished drying her hair, but she didn't have time to do anything with it except leave it loose. He'd said to dress casually, so she pulled on beige linen pants and topped them with a loose blue sweater with a deep neckline and a shawl collar. Was that too casual? Max was always so well dressed, and he had the English sense of

formality. Another look at the clock told her that she didn't have time to dither over her clothes; she still had to do her makeup.
Just as she pulled a brush through her hair one last time, the doorbell rang. It was six-thirty exactly. She picked up her bag and hurried to open the door.
"Ah, you're ready, as usual," he said, and fingered the collar of her sweater."You'll need a jacket. The rain has turned chilly."
Tiny raindrops glittered on his tweed jacket and in his golden hair as he leaned against the doorframe, waiting for Claire to get a jacket. When she rejoined him, he draped his arm over her shoulders in a friendly fashion.
"I hope you're hungry. I've outdone myself, if I do say so." His smile invited her to share his good humor, and when he hugged her into his tall body as they walked, she was content to lean against him. To be that close to him was a painful pleasure that she knew she should resist, but for the moment she simply couldn't pull away. She felt the heat of his body, the strength of the arm that lay so casually over her shoulders, and smelled the warm, clean scent of his skin. Her eyes closed briefly on the longing that welled inside her; then she pushed it away. It would do no good to pretend, even for a moment, that the way she felt could ever come to anything; all it would bring her was pain. She was destined to be Max's *buddy*, and that was all the arm around her shoulders signified.
"I hope you like seafood," he said as they entered his apartment. The gilt-edged mirror over the Queen Anne table reflected their movements as he took her jacket from her and shrugged out of his then hung both in the small coat closet in the foyer. Attracted by the mirror, Claire watched him in its reflection, noticing the grace of his movements in even that small chore.
"This is Houston; the Gulf is at our back door. It would be unpatriotic or something not to like seafood."
"Shrimp in particular?"
"I love shrimp in particular." She licked her lips.
"Would that include shrimp Creole?"
"It would. Are we having shrimp Creole?"
"We are. I got the recipe in New Orleans, so it's authentic."
"It's hard for me to imagine you puttering around in a kitchen," she said, following him into the narrow, extremely modern kitchen, where everything was built-in and at his fingertips. A delicious spicy aroma filled the air.

"I usually don't but when I develop a taste for a certain dish, I learn how to prepare it. How else could I have shrimp Creole when I'm in England for a visit? It's a certain thing my mother's cook has never prepared it. Then again, I had to learn how to do Yorkshire pudding for the same reason; different continent. The table is already set; will you help me carry all this through?"

It was difficult for her to believe that he had moved into the apartment only that morning; he seemed so at home there, and the apartment itself bore no signs of unpacking. Everything was in place, as if it had all been waiting for him, and he'd simply strolled in. The table was perfectly set, and when they were seated, Max uncorked a bottle of white wine and poured it into their glasses. The wine was crisp and clean, just what she wanted with the spicy shrimp Creole and wild rice. They were relaxed together, and Claire both ate and drank more than she usually did. The wine filled her with warmth, but pleasantly so, and after dinner they both continued to sip the wine while they cleaned up the dinner dishes.

Max didn't insist that she leave the dishes for him, and that amused her; he wasn't *that* domesticated. He saw no reason why she shouldn't help him. It was difficult for two people to maneuver in the narrow kitchen, and they were continuously bumping into each other, but even that was pleasant. The brush of his body against hers gave her such secret pleasure that a couple of times she deliberately didn't move out of his way. Such behavior was uncharacteristic of her, because it bordered on flirtatiousness, and Claire had never been a flirt. She wasn't good at it, like Martine. Martine could smile and bat her eyelashes and make teasing little innuendos, but Claire wasn't at ease with sexual games, even when they weren't meant to be taken seriously.

The wine had relaxed her even more than she had realized; as soon as they sat down in the living room, she felt her muscles begin to turn into butter, and she sighed drowsily. She took another sip of the golden wine, and Max took the glass from her hand to set it on the coffee table.

"I think you've had your limit. You're going to go to sleep on me." ,

"No, but I am tired, " she admitted, leaning her head back. "It was a busy day, even for a Monday."

"Anything unusual?" He sat down beside her, his eyes shielded by lowered lashes.

"You might say that. Sam—that's Mr. Bronson, my employer—heard a rumor that we may be the target of a takeover attempt."
"Oh?" His attention was focused on her, his body tense despite his relaxed pose. "How did he hear that?"
"Sam has remarkable sources and remarkable instincts. What bothers him the most is the possibility that a foreign company may be behind it."
His face was expressionless as he reached behind her and began kneading the muscles of her neck and shoulders, his fingers making her give a quiet *mmmm* of pleasure. "Why is that particularly disturbing?"
"Because Sam is in the process of developing an alloy that could have far-reaching possibilities, especially in space," she murmured, then heard her own words echoing in her ears, and her eyes popped open. "I can't believe I told you that," she said in horror.
"Shhh, don't worry. It won't go any further," he soothed, resuming the massaging motion. "If the production of the alloy is that important to national security, why isn't it classified? That would protect him from a takeover by a foreign company."
"Sam is a maverick; he doesn't like rules and regulations or the strict supervision he knows would come with government intervention and protection. He wants to perfect the alloy first, do all of his research and experimentation at his own speed, under his own rules. He'll go to the government, of course, if the rumor turns out to be true. He won't let the alloy go to another country."
Spencer-Nyle had been buying stock in Bronson Alloys, but very quietly, in small amounts. Anson wasn't quite ready to make his move, but if Bronson had also heard the rumor that foreign interests were backing a covert takeover, that gave it a certain credence, and Spencer-Nyle might have to step in sooner than Anson had planned. The danger was that now Bronson would be on the alert for any movement of his stock, and Claire had confirmed that Bronson worked best on his own. He wouldn't welcome a takeover by Spencer-Nyle any more than he would by a foreign interest. The company, though publicly held, was his baby, and Sam Bronson was known as a tough, gritty fighter. Max made a mental note to call Anson after taking Claire home.
He eased Claire down on the couch, stretching her out full-length on her stomach. "What're you doing?" she asked, her eyes widening.

"Just rubbing your back," he said, keeping his voice low and soothing. He used the strength of his hands to find the kinks left by tension, and silence fell between them, except for the gentle sound of Claire's sighs. Max noticed her eyelids drooping again, and a smile tugged at his chiseled lips. She was actually going to go to sleep on him; that had never happened to him before, at least not this early in the evening. Women had gone to sleep in his arms, after the loving, but Claire seemed totally unaware of his sexuality. Even when their bodies had brushed in the kitchen, while they were cleaning up, she'd given no sign that she noticed it; it was as if she didn't even know sex existed.

He looked down at her, her honey-blond hair spread out across the couch, her lips soft and relaxed, those enormous, velvet-brown eyes closed. His hands looked big against her slender back; if he put his thumbs together on her spine, his spread fingers would reach around to the sides of her breasts. He could feel the fragile cage of her ribs beneath the soft fabric of her sweater and the even softer silk of her skin. She was asleep, in more ways than one; he wanted to wake her up and take her to bed, then wake her up sexually. He wanted to make her aware of him, so that she never again looked at him with that maddening distance in her eyes. But not yet. Not quite yet. He couldn't take the chance of frightening her off until he had found out all he needed to know for that bloody damned takeover. But then…then he would move, and Claire Westbrook would find out what it was like to be a woman in his bed.

His hands trembled as he looked down at her, and for the first time he wondered what she would say when she discovered his true identity. She would be angry, of course; he couldn't imagine her *not* being angry, but he thought he could handle her anger. It was the thought that she might be hurt that disturbed him. He didn't want to hurt her in any way. He wanted to hold her, make love to her, *cherish* her, damn it! It was insupportable that he might lose the trust he had so slowly earned from her, that she would no longer give him any of her slow smiles or quiet company. He'd met no other woman like Claire, no one so gentle or remote; he never knew what she was thinking, what dreams went on behind those dark eyes. Max was extraordinarily acute where women were concerned. Only Claire eluded him, and every smile, every thought, she gave him was like a treasure, because it allowed him closer to the secret woman behind her aloof facade.

Tenderness filled him as he watched her. She really was exhausted; if he couldn't take her to his bed, then she needed to be in her own. Gently he woke her, enjoying the way she blinked her dark eyes at him in confusion; then she realized where she was, and a blush of mortification spread over her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she apologized, scrambling to her feet. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Don't worry about it; you were tired. What are friends for? I'd have let you sleep on the couch, but I thought you'd be more comfortable in your own bed." They walked to the foyer, and he held her jacket for her. He was quiet on the drive back to her apartment, and Claire was still too sleepy to be interested in talking, either. It was raining again, a slow drizzle that kept the streets wet, and the chill made her huddle deeper into her jacket.

He checked her apartment while she watched, knowing that he would get that arrogant look if she suggested that he didn't need to do it. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said, coming back to her and cupping her chin in his hand.

"Yes," she agreed softly, feeling that each hour until she saw him again would seem a year long. "Max?"

He lifted a brow at her hesitant tone, waiting.

"What I said about the alloy…"

"I know. I promise, I won't say a word about it. I understand how sensitive that information can be." It was a promise he felt safe in giving, since he had no need to discuss the alloy with anyone. Anson already knew about it. Their problem now was the possibility—no, the probability—that a foreign interest, almost certainly unfriendly, was working behind the scenes to gain that technology through a takeover using a domestic company as a front. Branson would move swiftly to protect his company from such a threat, and in doing so also protect it from other takeover attempts.

She looked so incredibly soft and sleepy, her defenses down. He tilted her chin up and bent to kiss her lightly, his mouth closing over hers before she realized he wasn't going to give her another brotherly peck on the cheek. He kept the contact light and swift, but almost immediately she stiffened and backed away from him, that damned blank look coming over her face. He dropped his hand and stepped away from her, as if he hadn't noticed anything, but a primal rage burned in his gut. Damn her, someday soon he'd make her see him as a man!

"I'll call tomorrow," he said again. "I have to investigate a few details, so I'll be busy until early afternoon, but I'll call you before you leave work."

Without waiting for her agreement, he let himself out and walked away.

Chapter Five

Claire, dear, I don't see why you're being so stubborn about this," Alma argued gently. "It's just a small party to repay some social favors, and I'd like for you to come. Your father and I would both like you to come; we don't see enough of you. Martine and Steve will be there."

Knowing it was useless, because when Alma used that gentle voice it meant that she'd dug in her heels and wasn't budging an inch, Claire tried again. "Mother, I don't like going to parties."

"Well, I don't like giving them. They're too much trouble, but I do it because it's expected and helps your father."

Which meant that Alma was doing her duty, Martine and Steve were doing their duty by showing up as the supporting cast, and Claire, as usual, was failing to come up to par, by refusing to do her part. Claire winced inside.

"You can leave early; I know you have to work tomorrow," Alma soothed, reading her victory in Claire's silence. "And bring Max Benedict with you; from the rumor flying around town, Harmon and I think we should be better acquainted with him."

"What rumor?" Claire asked, horrified.

"That things look pretty serious between you. Really, you could at least have warned me, so I wouldn't have to act as if I knew what everyone was talking about."

"But we *aren't* serious! We're just friends." Claire had repeated that statement so often that she was beginning to feel like a parrot who knew only one phrase.

"You haven't been seeing him regularly?"

Only every day, but how could she tell Alma that without it sounding as if there was a passionate romance going, when it wasn't a romance? It was… well, it was almost like a partnership. They provided each other with companionship, simple, undemanding companionship. "I've seen him, yes."

"Leigh Adkinson saw you having lunch with him on Monday; Bev Michaels saw you having dinner with him on Tuesday; Charlie Tuttle saw you with him last night in a mall, shopping. Every day! That's pretty regular, dear. Now, I'm not pushing you; let the relationship develop at its

own pace. But, really, it would be so much more comfortable if Harmon and I were better acquainted with him."
"I'll be at the party," Claire said quietly. She might as well capitulate and get it over with, because Alma wasn't about to give up.
"With Max."
"I don't know. I haven't talked to him about today. He may have a date."
"Oh, I don't think so," Alma chuckled. "Thank you, dear. We'll see you both tonight."
Claire hung up, biting her lip in consternation. What a way to begin the morning! Alma's call had come mere seconds before Claire's alarm clock had gone off. Well, her mother might be certain that Max didn't have a date, but Claire wasn't. Max was too much of a man not to have a love life, and since he didn't have that sort of relationship with Claire, nor did he seem interested in developing one, it followed that he would be seeing other women. If not tonight, then soon. A rest from strenuous pursuit was one thing, but a healthy man wouldn't let it go on too long. Max had a man's needs, and Claire had seen how women followed him with their eyes.
He couldn't have made it more obvious that he wasn't physically attracted to her; he hadn't kissed her again after that brief kiss on Monday night. As light as it had been, it had sent tingles of electricity shooting all through her body, and she had had to force herself to step away from him, to keep him from seeing how it had affected her. That one small touch and she had been ready to throw herself at him, just like all those other women. She had cried herself to sleep that night, certain she'd made a fool of herself and that he would never come near her again, but he'd called her the next day as promised and didn't seem to have noticed what had happened. Perhaps she had covered it well enough that he didn't suspect.
It didn't seem possible that it had been only a week since she'd met him. She had seen him every day, usually twice a day, when he met her for lunch, and after work, too. She sometimes felt as if she knew him better than she'd ever known anyone before, even Jeff, but at times Max was like a stranger. If she looked up quickly…she would occasionally catch him watching her with an unreadable expression in his eyes. If crossed, he could be a hard man, but he always kept himself under strict control, and it was that control that made her trust him.
She thought of not even asking him to go to her mother's party; she could go by herself, stay long enough to be polite then plead tiredness and go

home early. That would satisfy Alma. But it would also mean that Claire wouldn't see Max that day, and emptiness filled her at the thought. Before she could talk herself out of it, she pushed herself up on the pillows and punched out his number on the telephone.
It rang only once before he answered it, his voice deep and a little husky with sleep. As always, Claire's heart gave a tiny leap at hearing him speak.
"It's Claire. I'm sorry to wake you," she apologized.
"I'm not sorry you woke me," he said and yawned. "I had planned to call you as soon as I woke, anyway. Is something wrong?"
"No, nothing like that. Mother just called; she's giving a cocktail party tonight and insists that I be there."
"Am I invited?" he asked with that smooth, cool self-confidence that often amazed and disconcerted her. Max was always so certain of what he was about. It was as if he knew Alma had insisted that Claire invite him and as if he was equally aware that Claire, being herself, would find it difficult to ask him. The more he seemed to see inside her mind, the more Claire tried to keep him from doing just that. She was in love with him; he wasn't in love with her. If he knew that… he would pity her, and he would also stop seeing her.
"You don't mind?"
"I like your family. Why should I mind?"
"People are talking about us."
"I don't give a bloody damn what people say," he said calmly then yawned again. "What time is the party?"
"Seven."
"Of course. Everything starts at seven. I'm going to be a bit tight on time, darling. I have to go out of town today, and I'll be shaving it down to a whisker if I drive all the way to my apartment, then to your apartment, then to your parents' house. Would it inconvenience you terribly if I simply got ready at your apartment? It would save almost forty-five minutes in driving time."
Her heart gave that stupid little leap again at the thought of his using her bathroom to shower in and then dressing in her bedroom. "No, it wouldn't be a bother," she managed to say. "It's a good idea. What time will you be here?"
"About six. Will that give you time?"

"Yes, of course." She would have to hurry, but she thought she could make it. It usually didn't take her long to get ready, and she had time to wash her hair before going to work. That would help.
"I'll see you tonight, then."
It was a horribly busy day; Alma's phone call had set the tone for the entire day. No matter how she hurried, Claire seemed to be a step behind all day long; even routine tasks developed aggravating complications. Part of her job was to shield Sam from unnecessary interruptions, which meant that she had to handle them herself, and there were some things that simply couldn't be put off to the next day. She worked through lunch, trying not to wonder where Max was and wishing that she were with him, wherever he was.
It was midafternoon when the emergency reappraisals arrived by special delivery, and a slow smile moved across Sam's face when he read them. With a gesture of supreme satisfaction he tossed the reports on his desk and leaned back in his chair, linking his hands behind his head. "Even better than I'd hoped," he told Claire. "The real estate values have quadrupled in the past year. We're safe, and I was really beginning to sweat it. Trading has picked up in our stock, though no pattern has developed yet. Someone's definitely after this company, but they're not going to get it. Take a look at that reappraisal."
Claire read through the documents, amazed at the way the value of the land had skyrocketed. Once again Sam's instincts had been right. It was really uncanny, the way his long shots all seemed to pan out. He had bought that land as a hedge against inflation, and now the land would probably be what saved the company from an unfriendly takeover attempt, and Sam wouldn't have to entangle himself in government regulations before he was finished with his research.
Of all days, she was almost twenty minutes late leaving work. It was fifteen to six when she let herself into her apartment, and she pulled off her clothes as she dashed to the bedroom. She jumped in and out of the shower, and had just dried off and pulled on her robe when the doorbell rang. She pressed her hands to her clean face, wishing that she had at least had time to put on her makeup, but there was nothing she could do about that now.
"*I* had to work late," she stammered in explanation when she opened the door to Max. "Let me get fresh towels and the bathroom is yours."
He carried a fresh suit and shirt and a small traveling kit. A shadow of beard darkened his jaw, but his smile was relaxed. "Don't worry, we'll be on time,"

he assured her, following her into the bedroom. He placed his clothing on the bed and carried the kit into the bathroom while she got fresh towels for him. Coming back out of the bathroom, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it across the bed, then began tugging at his tie. Her breath caught in her chest, and she turned away to sit down at her dresser, picking up a brush and pulling it through her hair without having any realization of what she was doing. She tried not to watch him, but the edge of her mirror caught him, and there was no way she could look away. He pulled his shirt free of his pants then unbuttoned it and pulled it off. For all his leanness he was unexpectedly muscular, his torso roped with long, smooth muscles that rippled when he moved. Dark brown curls grew across his chest, fascinating her with the discovery that his body hair was dark instead of blond, though she should have guessed, because his brows and lashes were dark brown, creating a striking contrast with his golden hair and framing his brilliant eyes.

To her relief he didn't take his pants off, though she wouldn't have been surprised if he had. Max was probably very comfortable with being nude in front of a woman, and he had no reason to be ashamed of his body. He was beautiful, even more beautiful than she'd dreamed, his body rippling with fluid strength that was usually hidden by his clothing.

He took his fresh pants off the hanger and took them into the bathroom with him. It wasn't until she heard the shower start that Claire recalled the need to hurry. She forced herself to begin applying her makeup, but her hands were shaking and she botched her eye makeup twice before she got it right. The shower stopped, and her mind immediately supplied a picture of Max standing there naked, drying himself on her towels. Hot color surged into her cheeks. She had to stop thinking about him! She was making a nervous wreck out of herself, when she should be concentrating on getting ready.

"Bloody hell!" he muttered clearly, then raised his voice. "Claire, I forgot my razor. Do you mind if I borrow yours?"

"No, go ahead," she called back. He was shaving; she would have time to dress before he came out. Jumping up, she got out fresh underwear and pulled it on, not taking the time to savor the sensation of cool silk on her skin as she usually did. She smoothed hosiery on her legs, not daring to hurry with that task or she would put a run in the delicate fabric. Now, what to wear? She opened the closet door and hurriedly surveyed the contents; she didn't have that many dresses suitable for a cocktail party. The water

had stopped running in the bathroom; he would be out any moment. She jerked a cream-colored jersey dress off the hanger and pulled it over her head just as the bathroom door opened. Hidden in the folds of material, her face flamed red at the spectacle she was making of herself, with her head and upper torso fighting to emerge from the garment, while her lower body was exposed in only skimpy panties, a garter belt and hosiery. Turning her back on him, she tugged the dress into place and began fumbling with the back zipper.

"Allow me," he said, his voice very close. His warm hands brushed hers aside, and he efficiently pulled up the tab of the zipper then hooked the tiny hook at the top. His hands dropped. "There."

Keeping her face averted, she muttered a stiff thanks and returned to the dresser to repair the damage she'd just done to her hair. He was whistling under his breath as he finished dressing, and for a moment she envied his casual attitude, which was a measure of how accustomed he was to that type of situation. She leaned toward the mirror to apply her lipstick and saw him unzip his pants to tuck in his shirt. Her hand was shaking, and she had to take extra care with the lipstick to keep from smearing it.

Then he appeared in the mirror, standing behind her and bending down to check his hair, an abstract frown on his face. "Is everything in place?" he asked, standing back for her inspection.

She had to look at him then, and her eyes drifted over him. Again his charcoal-gray suit was ultraconservative but extremely well tailored. He knew what looked best on him; with his looks, trendy clothes would have made him too overpowering, like a neon light. The plain, unadorned clothes he chose enhanced rather than challenged his golden Viking beauty. Perhaps the lean, high-cheekboned beauty of his face had a Celtic origin, but there was something, perhaps that touch of ruthlessness that she had sometimes sensed in him, that made her think again that many generations back he might have had a Viking ancestor who had gone raiding on English shores and left behind a reminder of his visit. "No, you're perfect," she finally said, and he couldn't guess how much she meant those words.

"Let me look at you." He took her hand, drew her from the chair and turned her for his inspection. "You're just right—wait, you need earrings."

She'd forgotten them. Quickly she slipped pearl-drop earrings into her ears, and Max nodded, checking his watch. "We have just enough time to get there."

Perhaps it was just a small cocktail party, but the driveway was already choked with cars when they arrived at her parents' house. Alma and Harmon were both popular and outgoing, drawing people to them with the magnetism of their personalities. Inevitably Claire felt herself tensing as she walked up to the door with Max close beside her.

The door opened before they reached it, and Martine stood laughing at them, resplendent in an emerald-green dress that showed off her beautiful figure and made her glow with color. "I knew you'd be here," she said in triumph, hugging Claire. "Mom has been in a dither that you wouldn't come."

"I told her that I would," Claire said, reaching deep inside herself for the composure that she kept like a shield between herself and others, even her family.

"Oh, you know how she has to fret over something. Hello, Max, you're looking as beautiful as ever."

He laughed, a deep sound of true amusement. "You really must work to get over that shyness."

"That's what Steve tells me. Oh, here come the Waverlys. I haven't seen Beth in ages." She waved past them to the approaching couple.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Claire asked.

"I don't know. Ask Mom, if you can find her. She was in the den, but that was five minutes ago, so it's anyone's guess where she is now."

Max put his hand on her waist as they walked into the crowded living room, and Claire immediately felt the impact of everyone's eyes as they turned to survey the new arrivals. She knew their thoughts, knew that everyone had heard the rumors and was looking them over, trying to decide if the rumors were true.

"You did make it!" Alma beamed, sailing across the room to kiss Claire's cheek. She turned that thousand-watt smile on Max, whose mobile lips twitched into a devilish grin. Before either Alma or Claire could guess what he was about, he took Alma in his arms and kissed her lips, then did it again. Alma laughed, but she was blushing when he released her.

"Max, what are you doing?" she exclaimed.

"Kissing a pretty woman," he replied blandly, the tone of his voice belied by the wicked twinkle in his eyes. He reached out and brought Claire back into the circle of his arm. "Now Claire and I are going to find something to eat; I'm starving, and she didn't have time for dinner, either."

Claire felt frozen as she walked beside him to the kitchen, feeling the eyes boring into her back like knife blades. He'd kissed Alma twice, which meant that he'd kissed her mother more than he'd kissed her. She had stood to the side, envying the brilliant, easy charm that both Max and Alma possessed, wishing that she had the gift of laughter. Martine could do it, too, have people eating out of her hand within moments of meeting them. All her life she'd been surrounded by beautiful, charming people, but none of that magical self-assurance had rubbed off on her.

The breakfast bar in the kitchen was crowded with hors d'oeuvres and finger sandwiches, and Max raided it shamelessly, but Claire only nibbled at a sandwich. Automatically she replenished the trays as Max depleted them and finished the condiment tray that Alma had been in the middle of preparing before she had rushed off to greet her guests. Alma rushed back into the kitchen, her glowing smile bursting over her face when she saw that Claire had completed the preparations. "Bless you, dear. I completely forgot what I was doing. You always did keep your common sense; I can't count the times Harmon has told me to slow down and think before I do something, but you know how deep an impression it's made."

Claire smiled quietly at her mother, thinking that she did love her very much even though it had never been easy, growing up in the shadow of a beautiful mother and an equally beautiful sister. Both Alma and Martine were warm and outgoing people, without an ounce of maliciousness. It wasn't their fault that Claire had always felt overshadowed by them.

She picked up the heavy tray, and Max promptly relieved her of the burden. "Show me where you want it," he said firmly when Claire turned to him with her brow raised in question. "You're not to try to carry these trays yourself." He looked at Alma as she began to lift one of the trays, and the cool warning in his eyes made her drop her hands and step back.

"Masterful, isn't he?" Alma whispered to Claire as they followed Max's broad shoulders back into the living room.

"He has set ideas on what's proper," Claire said in understatement.

Max carried all the trays in, then became immersed in a conversation with Harmon, Steve and several other men. Periodically his eyes sought out Claire, wherever she was in the room, as if reassuring himself that she wasn't in need of him.

Claire sipped on a margarita and surreptitiously checked the time, wondering when they would be able to leave. The cocktail party wasn't as

bad as she'd feared, but she was tired. The pressure of the hectic day, the hectic *week*, was telling on her. Bracing herself, she tried to concentrate on the conversation around her.

Someone turned on the stereo, but since Harmon was an ardent blues fan, the selection was limited. The smoky, mournful wail of a saxophone lured several people into dancing. Claire danced with Martine's law partner, then with her father's best friend, then with an old friend from school. She was on her second margarita when it was taken from her hand, placed on the table, and Max turned her into his arms.

"You're tired, aren't you?" he asked as they swayed to the low music.

"Exhausted. If tomorrow weren't Friday, I don't think I could make it."

"Are you ready to leave?"

"More than ready. Have you seen Mother lately?"

"She's back in the kitchen, I think. The nation's dairy farmers would be in ecstasy if they could see the amount of cheese that has been consumed tonight," he said dryly.

"You ate your share, I noticed."

His mouth quirked. "I burn off the calories."

Sighing, she stepped back from his embrace. "Let's find Mother. I think we've stayed long enough to be polite."

Alma was indeed in the kitchen, dicing cheese into another heap of small squares. She looked up when they entered, and a mixture of dismay and resignation crossed her features. "Claire, you can't be leaving!" she protested. "It's still early."

"I know, but tomorrow's a working day." Claire leaned forward to kiss her mother's cheek. "I've enjoyed myself. Really."

Alma looked at Max for reinforcement. "Can't you get her to stay a little longer? She has that stubborn look, and I know she won't listen to me."

Max's arm went around Claire's waist, and he, too, bent to kiss Alma's cheek. "That isn't a stubborn look; it's a tired look," he explained easily, employing his charm as he smiled at Alma, pacifying her. "It's my fault; I've had her out every night this week, and the lack of sleep is catching up with her."

It worked, but then, Claire had never doubted him. Alma was beaming at him. "Oh, all right, take her home. You must come back with her; we haven't really had a chance to get to know you."

"Soon," he promised.

It was a silent drive back to Claire's apartment, but when she offered him coffee he came inside with her. After making the coffee and carrying the cups into the living room, they sat on the couch and sipped quietly. Claire kicked off her shoes, sighing in relief and wiggling her toes.
Max's gaze was on her slender feet, but his mind was on other matters. "What happened that you had to work late today?"
"Everything. It was just one of those days, and it didn't help that Sam was so edgy. He's almost certain there's going to be a takeover attempt, and soon; there's been increasing trading in our stock. Even though he has an ace in the hole, the waiting and wondering are nerve-racking."
"What's his ace in the hole?" Max asked, his voice sleepy, almost disinterested.
It was a new situation for Claire, actually being able to sit down and discuss her day at work with someone. She had never talked about her day before; she couldn't remember if anyone had ever asked. Small talk was a subtle sort of intimacy, letting someone into her mind by sharing the details of her life with them, and she had always instinctively kept to herself. But it was so easy to talk to Max; he listened, but he didn't make a big deal of it.
"Real estate," she said, smiling a little. His lashes lifted to reveal a lazy gleam of interest. "I thought that might interest you."
"Ummm," he said, an indistinct sound of agreement.
"Sam invested in some property that has quadrupled in value. Hie reappraisal came in today, and it was even better than he'd hoped."
"Land values can do that. They go up and down like a roller-coaster. The trick is to buy just before the price bottoms out, and sell just before it goes over the top. The value must really be astronomical to be enough to protect him against a takeover." He sat up more alertly and finished his coffee.
"I'll get you a refill," Claire said, getting up and going into the kitchen before he could refuse. She reappeared almost immediately with the pot, and Max watched her walk toward him, her slender body moving gracefully. She looked so quiet and restrained, but he knew what was beneath that ladylike dress. He'd seen the satin panties, the shockingly sexy garter belt and filmy hosiery. A garter belt, for God's sake! His body jolted with response now just as it had then, and he clenched his teeth. He'd had a difficult time keeping his mind off her underwear and his hands off her body; he kept seeing her with that dress over her head, baring her slender hips and legs to his view. The need to take her to bed was growing out of

control, fed by frustration that she was so unaware of him as a man and by anger that she would freeze up on him if he tried to change the situation. He wasn't accustomed to abstinence, and he didn't like it one damned bit.
Claire picked up the conversation where they had left off, sitting down beside him again. "I wouldn't call the land value astronomical, but we're a small enough company that it doesn't have to be. Anyone making a bid for the company is going to come short by several million dollars."
He jerked his thoughts back to what she was saying. Damn it, she was practically handing him the information he needed on a silver platter, and he couldn't keep his mind on the conversation. He wanted very much to stretch her out on the couch and lift that dress over her head again, to run his hands over her and feel the softness of her skin, but that would have to come later.
"How much was the appraisal?" he asked. He watched her closely, wondering if she would answer him. It was a bold move, asking outright for the information he needed, but she had already given him the major part of it, and the actual appraisal would only fill in the details. He kept his face carefully blank, hiding his intense interest in her answer.
"Almost fourteen million."
Damn, that *would* make a difference! "What did they do? Find oil on it?" he muttered.
She laughed. "Close."
Mingled satisfaction and relief filled him; the job was done. It hadn't taken long, and had been relatively easy. The difficult part had been restraining himself from making a move on Claire and scaring her off, but now the job was out of the way and he could concentrate on her. She could try hiding behind that shell of hers, but he was free to pursue his own interests now, and Claire was his interest. He wanted her; he had no doubt that he would have her. He was a master at seduction, and no woman had ever resisted him for long when he made the effort to charm her into his bed. But with Claire, he'd been handicapped by his professional concerns, forced to restrain himself. She was already accustomed to his company, and she had come to accept his casual touches; it wouldn't be long before she was also accepting the most intimate touches between a man and a woman.
His hunger, his *need*, for her were becoming more urgent. It wasn't just the physical need for release, though that was strong enough; he wasn't accustomed to celibacy. No, his strongest need was the primitive urge to bind her to him *now*, before she found out the truth, but he found himself

uncharacteristically hesitant, his usual self-assurance fading. What if this wasn't the right time? What if she rebuffed him? What if she retreated completely? He would have lost even her friendship, and to his surprise he wanted her friendship very much, as much as he wanted her physically. He wanted all of her, her mind as well as her body.

She smothered a yawn, and he laughed, reaching out to massage her shoulder, the light touch filling him with pleasure. "You need to be asleep. Why haven't you told me to leave?"

Claire curled up on the couch, tucking her feet under her, and sipped her coffee contentedly. It was so peaceful, sitting there together and drinking their coffee, making desultory conversation. Her heart was beating in that slow, heavy way it did whenever she was with him, and in that moment she was happy. "I'm comfortable with you," she replied, and knew that she was lying. Her nerves were alive and acutely tuned to him, her senses assailed by his nearness. She could smell him, fed his warmth, look at him, and her flesh ached to be even closer to him. How foolish she was to love too fast, too much, but it was out of her control and perhaps had been from the very beginning.

He reached out and took her hand, folding her fingers in his and rubbing his thumb over her silky skin. "Claire," he said in a quiet voice, drawing her gaze to him. Her eyes were dark pools, soft and velvety. "I want to kiss you."

He felt the way her hand jerked in his, and he tightened his grip just enough to hold her. "Do I frighten you?" he asked, amused.

Claire looked away from the laughter in his face. "I don't think it would be a good idea," she said, her voice going stiff. "We're just friends, remember, and—"

He got to his feet, laughing at her as he pulled her up and took the coffee cup from her free hand to set it down. "I'm not going to bite you," he said and kissed her.

It was a light, swift touch, exactly the way he had kissed her before. "There, did that hurt?"

His vivid eyes were dancing. He was teasing her, and she relaxed. She had thought that he meant a different kind of kiss, and she didn't dare let him kiss her deeply. She wasn't certain of her control; if he kissed her with any degree of passion, she felt that she would explode in unbridled response. He wouldn't have any doubt then about the way she felt. He was too

experienced, had been with too many women who were desperate to hold him, not to recognize the same lovesick symptoms in her. It was far better that he tease her rather than feel sorry for her.
Then he kissed her again.
It was an admirably restrained kiss, but it lingered, and he opened his lips over hers. Automatically she parted her own lips to adjust the fit. His taste filled her mouth, his lips firm and warm. Pleasure rose in her, and for a moment she almost melted against him, almost raised her arms to twine them around his neck. Then panic twisted her stomach; she didn't dare let him know, or she would never see him again! Swiftly she turned her head away, breaking the contact of their mouths.
He pressed his lips to her temple, and his strong hands rubbed up her back in a long, slow sweep. He didn't want to push her too far; just for a moment she had responded to him, and the taste of her had gone to his head like a potent wine. His body was responding strongly to her nearness; he didn't dare hug her to him the way he wanted, because there was no way he could hide his arousal. Reluctantly he let her go, and she immediately took a protective step away from him, her face set in a blank mask. Suddenly he was determined not to let her retreat, as she had done so many times before. He was a man; he wanted her to see him as one. "Why are you so uneasy whenever I touch you?" he asked, tipping her chin up with his finger so she couldn't hide her face from him; she was too good at hiding her thoughts, anyway, and he needed every little clue he could get. He wanted to be able to see her face, her eyes.
"You said you wanted to be friends," she replied stiffly.
"Friends aren't allowed to touch?"
His whimsical tone made her feel as if she were making far too much of things, and perhaps she would have been—if she hadn't felt far more for him than just friendship. But she was in love with him, and even his most casual touches tormented her with mingled pleasure and longing.
"You told me that you wanted a friendship without sex."
"Surely not. I don't believe I've taken leave of my senses." Gently he rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. "What I said was that I was tired of being pursued simply as a sexual trophy."
Claire was both astounded and alarmed. Had she so completely misread the situation? He was looking down at her with amusement, and she began to tremble. "Don't look so frightened," he soothed, moving his hand down to

stroke her bare arm. "I'm attracted to you, and I'd like very much to kiss you occasionally. Is that so alarming?"
"No," she stammered.
"Good, because I intend to continue kissing you." His lashes veiled his eyes, allowing only a thin glittering line of turquoise to show, but Claire sensed his burning triumph and satisfaction, and she became even more uneasy. It was just like those times when she had glimpsed something ruthless in him, as if he weren't what he seemed at all. It didn't help that his look of triumph was immediately gone, because it left her feeling disoriented, not knowing anything for certain.
He bent and kissed her again, then left, and Claire stood staring at the door long after it had dosed behind him. He seemed to have decided that he wanted more than simple friendship from her, and she didn't know how to protect herself. She was without any emotional defenses and so terribly vulnerable to any hurt he might give her. She loved him, but she felt that she didn't know him at all.

Chapter Six

Max placed a call to Dallas as soon as he got back to his apartment, wanting to pass along the information Claire had given him as soon as possible. He knew that Anson would take action on it first thing in the morning; by Monday, the takeover would be in motion. His job wasn't finished, of course; he would have to oversee the transfer of ownership and negotiate the endless details that were always so important to the anxious personnel of the acquired company, but the major hurdle had been cleared. Max Benedict could become Max Conroy again, and he could turn his attentions on Claire.
Claire. She was the most complex, elusive woman he'd ever known; she kept herself hidden away, not letting anyone get close enough to really know her, but that was about to change. The irritating restraint he'd placed on himself was at an end. He would take it slow with her, gradually getting her accustomed to his touch. As torturous as this past week had been, it had had a positive side in that she was already used to his company. She was relaxed with him, and despite his frustration, the undemanding companionship he'd shared with her had had its own charm. Claire wasn't a

chatterbox, and the time he spent with her had been punctuated by peaceful silences. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any other woman, and he didn't know why.

She wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever known; she was quietly pretty, with a fragile bone structure and eyes as dark as midnight pools, eyes that were full of dreams. She wasn't voluptuous; her body was almost reed slender, yet undeniably feminine. There was a softness to Claire that he found very appealing. He wanted to take her in his arms and make love to her, get behind the blank wall that she kept between herself and other people; he wanted to know her thoughts, what she felt, what dreamworld she drifted away to when those dark eyes turned shadowy and faraway.

Added to that, he liked her as a person. Max was passionately fond of women in general, but his intense sexuality sometimes got in the way of friendship; a woman was in his bed before they had a chance to know each other as people. The restraints that had been necessary in his relationship with Claire had allowed liking and friendship to grow. He liked talking to her; she was thoughtful and never malicious, and she wasn't uncomfortable with occasional silences. It would be extremely pleasant to wake up next to Claire, to spend lazy mornings with her, reading the newspaper and lingering over breakfast, talking if they felt like it and simply being silent if they didn't.

There had been only one other woman he had *liked* in the same manner, and he thought about her for a moment. Sarah Matthews, his friend Rome's wife: she was incredibly gentle, and incredibly strong. Max had been on the verge of loving her, and in fact did love her for the very special person she was, but she had made it plain from the beginning that Rome was the only man in the world for her, and the way Max felt about her had never grown into the area of intimacy. Now she and Rome were his closest friends, and their marriage was stronger than ever, more passionate than ever.

He would like to have that with Claire.

The thought jolted him. He kicked his shoes off and stretched out on the bed, staring at the ceiling. The scenario he had just imagined had a powerful charm to it, too powerful. Claire tugged at something in him. He wasn't certain that he liked what he felt, but he was completely certain that he had to do something about it. Claire Westbrook was going to be his.

The next night he took her to the symphony, which she loved, and afterward they ate at a tiny Japanese steakhouse. Claire had been nervous at first, and

because she was nervous she became quieter, more remote, but the music had helped to relax her. Max seemed just as he always had: cool and controlled, watching the world with lazy amusement. She felt safe when he was like that.

She had slept restlessly the night before, her imagination picturing again and again the way he had kissed her, what he had said, like a loop of film on a projector that ran continuously. Every time she woke it was to find her heart racing with excitement, her body warm and yearning for him. She'd had no lovers since the divorce; she had drawn so deeply into herself, trying to build strength and recover from the shattering emotional blow of losing her baby and watching her marriage disintegrate, that there had been nothing left, no passion to give to a man. But without her being aware of it, time had worked its healing process, and she was alive again. Her nature was warm, passionate, and she trembled inside with need whenever she remembered his mouth on hers.

It hadn't even been a passionate kiss, but she had wanted to lace her arms around his neck and stand on tiptoe to press herself against him. She had wanted to lose herself in him, to give him everything that she was. It was a primitive, unconquerable urge, the need to lie in his arms, to mate, an urge that was inborn. Just as strong was the need to protect herself, and the two needs were warring inside her. Claire's capacity to love was so enormous that she was instinctively wary, backing away from any threat to her emotions. Because she loved so deeply, she was acutely vulnerable to him. He had the power to hurt her so badly that she might never recover.

Hie safe thing to do would be to run, to simply stop seeing him. She had lain in her bed and turned the idea over and over in her mind, but when morning had come she had admitted to herself that she couldn't do it. She loved him, and perhaps he was coming to care for her a little. There had been something hot and a little frightening in his eyes before he'd masked his expression, an almost predatory look of hunger. A man didn't look like that if he wasn't interested. That look gave her hope.

Now she came out of her thoughts to find him watching her with: wry amusement, and color tinted her cheeks. Had he been able to tell the direction of her imaginings?

"You aren't eating at all; you're dreaming," he said, taking the fork from her hand and placing it on the mat. "Shall we go?"

On the drive home he asked quietly, "Claire, I didn't intend to make you uneasy with me. I apologize for putting you in a difficult spot. If you aren't attracted to me, I understand; we'll simply continue being friends—"
"Oh, please," she sighed, interrupting him. "Do you honestly believe I'm not attracted to you?"
He glanced sharply at her then returned his attention to his driving. "You've made it fairly obvious that you don't want me to touch you; in fact, at first you didn't want to have anything to do with me at all. I all but begged to get you to accept me as a friend."
She was silent. She couldn't tell him that she had been afraid of his charm, afraid that she would fall in love with him, because she'd done exactly that. Finally she turned her head to look at him, his perfect profile etched in silver against the darkened window, and her heart gave that funny little leap that she'd come to expect. Was he asking her to believe that dreams came true? It was hard for her to trust, to let anyone get behind the emotional barriers that protected her from hurt. She didn't think she was the type who could recover from one heartache after another, bouncing right back to take another try at true love, trusting that eventually everything would work out. Claire loved too deeply; it took her too long to recover from heartbreak. She wasn't a gambler, but she didnt see that she had much choice. She couldn't walk away from him now; her heart had known it almost from the beginning, and now she acknowledged it in her mind. She had to try again; she had to reach out or despise herself for the rest of her life. Max was worth the risk, and perhaps she might win.
"I'm very attracted to you," she finally said, her voice so soft that he wasn't certain he'd heard her. His head jerked around, his eyes narrowing, and she steadily met his gaze.
"Then why have you held me away?"
"It seemed safer," she whispered, tightly knotting her hands together in her lap.
His chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath. They were near her apartment building, and nothing more was said as he parked the car. The silence extended; then he reached out and gently drew her into his arms. She didn't see his head coming down, but she felt the warmth of his body close to her, the controlled strength of his arms wrapping around her, and then his mouth was on hers. Her head tilted back to fully accept him, and her lips parted softly, her response slow and tender. He took her mouth in

the same way, taking his time about it, not bruising her soft flesh. The way was open for his tongue, and he probed her mouth, feeling the quiver of her body at the deepening intimacy of the kiss. He held her closer, arching her to him, and another quiver ran along her body at the sweet, heated pleasure of feeling her breasts pushing against his chest. A small groan rose in his throat. With a sure, experienced motion he covered her breast with his hand. Her hands clenched his sleeves, her fingers shaking. Max lifted his mouth from hers and began nuzzling her jawline, seeking the delicate fragrance of her skin. He tasted her flesh as he went, discovering some of the soft places that had been driving him wild for a week: the small hollow below her ear; the length of her neck; the ultrasensitive hollow above her fragile collarbone. And all the time her small, firm breast nestled in his palm, the nipple already peaked, inviting a more intimate touch.

"Put your arms around me," he said, his voice one of quiet demand. He wanted to feel her clinging to him, all weak with wanting. She fit into his arms as if no other woman had ever been there; he wanted it to be the same way for her. He wanted her to hold him, feel how perfect it was, their two bodies pressed together. Slowly her fingers released his sleeves, and her arms slid upward. One twined around his neck and the other around his shoulder. A shuddering breath eased out of her.

Slowly he massaged her breast, taking care not to hurt her or to scare her by losing control and grabbing at her. His own breathing didn't sound, quite steady, and he knew that he had to stop or lose control. He wasn't accustomed to celibacy, and since he had met Claire, his only lovelife had been in his imagination. Reluctantly he eased away from her, his body on fire with a burning hunger that bordered on violence. He would have to get himself under control before he dared make loVe to her. She was so soft, so fragile; he didn't want to take the chance of hurting her, and he was very much afraid that he would.

"It's time to call a halt to this, while I still can," he admitted ruefully, his sharp, knowing gaze taking in the dazed look of passion on her face. Delight filled him that Claire wasn't a cold woman, merely a deeply reserved one, and she was finally responding to him.

His words recalled her from the warm, drifting world of physical pleasure where he had carried her, and she sat up straighter, her glance darting away from him, her hands going up to smooth her hair, as if by tidying herself she

could deny what had just happened. Max took her hand and carried it to his lips. "Don't," he whispered.
He got out of the car, walked around to open the door for her and helped her out, his hand under her elbow as she maneuvered the long skirt she'd worn to the symphony. His arm went around her waist as they entered her apartment building and remained there during the short elevator ride to her floor; some of Claire's distress at herself began to fade. His attentiveness was doing something to her, slowly making her feel more certain of herself, and it was like the first hesitant flut-terings of a butterfly's new wings.
He checked her apartment then came back to her. Hie usual lazy, good-humored smile was on his lips, but his eyes were vivid and intent as he bent down to kiss her again. "I won't stay, not tonight. I want you to be comfortable with me, and frankly, my self-control is wavering. I'll see you tomorrow night. How formal is Mrs. Adkinson's dinner party?"
Claire remembered Leigh's inclinations well. "Very."
"White dinner jacket?"
He had been wearing a white dinner jacket when she had met him exactly a week ago, and her senses gave a brief whirl as she recalled the way he had looked, with the lights caught in his golden hair like a halo, his eyes as brilliant and glowing as gemstones, the white jacket molded to his broad shoulders. She hadn't been the same person since that night.
"That would be perfect," she said. He didn't know how perfect.
He kissed her again and left, and Claire went through the motions of getting ready for bed, but her mind was drifting, floating, recalling every sensation, every moment of his kisses, his touch on her breast. Her natural human need to be touched had been suppressed for a long time by her driving need to prove to herself that she could be independent, but now her body was aching and burning as it came alive after being dormant for so long. She lay in bed, and she dreamed of him.
The gown she wore to Leigh's dinner party the next night was almost nine years old, but she had seldom worn it before, and it was one of those simple styles that couldn't be dated. It was black velvet, with only a little fullness to the skirt, and the bodice hugged her lovingly. It wasn't particularly lowcut, revealing only a hint of the beginning curve of her high breasts, but it was held up only by two thin straps, leaving her shoulders and back bare. Jet earrings dangled from her ears, and she wore no other jewelry. Her mirror told her that she had never looked better, and her fingers loved the

soft, lush feel of the velvet. All her senses seemed to be more alert, and she was achingly aware of her own body in its casings of silk and velvet. When she opened the door to Max, his pupils expanded until the black almost swallowed the sea-colored irises, and the skin seemed to become taut across his cheekbones. Tension hummed from his body.

But if he thought of reaching for her, he controlled the impulse. "You're lovely," he said, his eyes never leaving her, and she felt lovely.

Claire enjoyed the dinner party more than she had expected, even though her pleasure was dimmed by the presence of Virginia Easley. It would be a long time before she'd forget Virginia's maliciousness in inviting Claire and Jeff to the same party. Max felt Claire's slight stiffness and glanced at her in question. Then he saw Virginia, too, and his eyes narrowed, "Don't let her bother you. She isn't worth the effort."

Leigh Adkinson sailed up to greet them and hug Claire, exclaiming how glad she was to see Claire again. Max stood close to Claire, a little behind her, his presence like a solid wall of strength in case she needed him. He had met several of the other guests at Virginia's party, so people drifted over to speak to him and Claire, but most of the guests were strangers to him. For a time he and Claire merely stood still, like royalty holding court, surrounded by people who hugged and kissed Claire and told her how much they had missed her. The women would glance slyly at him, waiting for an introduction, but there was no hint of flirtation in his manner. As he had before, he made it perfectly clear that he was with Claire and had no intention of straying from her side.

Virginia came up, all smiles and dripping sweetness. "Rumors about you two are all over town," she cooed. "Why, I hear you're practically *living* together! I'm so proud that you met at my party!"

Claire's smile went brittle, and Max stepped forward, his hand touching her arm. He pinned Virginia with a narrowed, deadly look that made her smile fade, and a waiting silence descended over the guests nearest them.

"Rumors have a way of turning on those who repeat them," he said in a tone laced with contempt. He was furious, and he had no compunction about letting others see it. "Especially jealous bitches who lack both breeding and manners."

Virginia went pale, then beet red. Leigh, sensing a budding scandal, came up to hook her arms through both Max's and Claire's. "There's someone you just have to meet," she chattered gaily as she led them away. Her quick

action defused the situation, and the party resumed its normal buzz of conversation. After dutifully introducing them to someone, she darted away to make certain Virginia wasn't seated close to them at the table.
Except for that one scene, it was an enjoyable dinner. Claire found that she wasn't as upset as she would have expected; she was with Max, and that was the most important thing. When she remembered how difficult she had found dinners like this when she was married to Jeff, she wondered at the difference. She had proved to herself that she was capable of managing her own life, and somehow it no longer seemed so important if she accidentally picked up the wrong fork.
The woman on Max's other side leaned across to get Claire's attention. "Do you still play tennis? We miss you at the club, you know."
"I haven't played in years. I was never any good at it, anyway; I didn't keep my mind on the game."
"Dreaming?" Max teased.
"Exactly. My mind wanders," she admitted, laughing at herself .
"I concentrate as hard as I can, and I'm still not any good," the other woman admitted with a chuckle. Claire couldn't remember her name but had often seen her at the country club where the Halseys had belonged. The woman sipped her wine then set the glass down, but it caught the edge of her bread plate and toppled over, sending her wine splashing over Max's white jacket.
The woman blushed crimson. "Oh, Lord, I'm so sorry. Now you see why I'm not any good at tennis. I'm too clumsy!" She grabbed her napkin and began trying to blot the wine from his jacket.
"It's only a jacket," he soothed, his face calm. "And you're drinking white wine, so it won't stain. Please, don't let it upset you."
"But it's all over you!"
He took the woman's hand and kissed it. "It isn't important. Claire and I will stop by my apartment on the way to the hotel and I'll change."
His manner was so unruffled that it reassured the woman, and the meal continued without further mishap. When dinner was finished, he quietly made his excuses to Leigh, and he and Claire left.
"I always had a horror of spilling my wine on someone," she mused in the car. "It never happened, but I was always terrified that it would."
He was philosophical about it, and there was a slight smile on his lips. "I poured my wine in a lady's lap on one occasion. Her dress became transparent when wet, so it was truly memorable. Then, too, I've dandled

my nieces and nephews when they were babies, and everyone knows what complete barbarians babies are, no shame or manners at all, so in comparison wine is definitely preferable."

At his apartment, he went into the bedroom to change while Claire checked her appearance in the gilded mirror in the foyer, reapplying her lipstick and tucking a strand of hair away from her face. Max took only a moment, reappearing in a stark black evening jacket that intensified his golden beauty. Looking at him, Claire caught her breath. Dressed all in black, except for the snowy expanse of his tucked dress shirt, he was overpoweringly male. His eyes drifted over her as she returned the tube of lipstick to her tiny evening bag. "We're a matched pair," he said.

Claire glanced down at her black gown as she preceded him to the door. "Yes, we are. Perhaps it was a happy accident at that."

He paused with his hand on the door handle, giving her another appreciative look. Releasing the handle, he turned to face her, tilting her chin up with his hand. His lips brushed lightly over hers; then he lifted his head and their eyes met, hers wide and dark, his brilliant, narrowed. He kissed her again, molding her lips with gentle pressure. She responded, returning the kiss, standing quietly before him. As if he were cupping a fragile flower, he put both hands on her face, his thumbs meeting under her chin, and continued to kiss her with long, slow, leisurely kisses, their tongues meeting in play. His taste filled her mouth, and with a sigh of pleasure Claire put her hands on his shoulders.

He murmured something unintelligible, moving his hands from her face and putting his arm around her to pull her closer. With that utter assurance of his, he put his free hand on her breast, the warmth of his fingers heating her through the velvet of her gown.

She trembled, and shivery desire began to grow inside her. Lifting herself up on her toes, she pressed against him, needing to feel his hard body and the strength of his arms enfolding her. Their mouths clung together, the contact hungry, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. His hand delved inside her bodice and cupped her naked breast, his thumb rubbing over the sensitive nipple and sending heated sparks racing along her nerves. She whimpered a little, unprepared for the sudden flood of passion that swept over her flesh. Her body arched against him, and she felt his hardness, and suddenly they both exploded with need, fierce and uncontrolled.

His mouth ground into hers, his tips hot and firm, his arms straining her to him so tightly that she couldn't take a breath. Her senses spun wildly, overwhelmed by the sudden excess of pleasurable messages that were ricocheting along her nerves. She could feel his steely strength in the muscles of his shoulders, taut under her clenched fingers; he was boldly, obviously, aroused, his flesh pushing against her. An insidious weakness began to creep through her bones and muscles, and deep inside her there was heat and a burning, writhing need.

She hadn't expected this wild hunger in him, or in herself, and she was helpless to stop it. She hadn't been prepared for the intensity of his touch, or the way in which she was responding to him, as if her body had taken charge, and she could no longer control it. He moved his hands down to cup her buttocks and bring her against him in a movement so blatantly sexual that she couldn't stop the moan of pleasure that broke from her throat. She loved him, she wanted him, and nothing else mattered.

"Claire," he muttered, his breath rasping as it left his chest. The thin strap had drooped off her right shoulder, letting her bodice slip, and he brushed the strap completely down until her breast was exposed. He stared down at her naked flesh, and she felt seared by his gaze. His face was hard, taut, like that of a man on the verge of agony. She was a doll in his grasp, completely helpless against his strength, as he bent her back over his arm and arched her breast up for his mouth. He wasn't gentle now; his mouth closed hotly over her nipple, suckling at her and making her cry out.

His hand was under her skirt, smoothing over her thighs, her bottom, between her legs. A thin, wordless cry broke from her lips, but it wasn't a cry of protest. She was beyond protesting. His touch intensified the torrent of sensation inside her; she felt afire, literally molten with need, and he was wild with the need to get at her. His hard fingers closed on her panties and garter belt and jerked them down with one movement, tugging them off; then she felt the hard edge of the table behind her, and he lifted her onto it. His hand was there now, touching her intimately, stroking and rubbing and probing, doing things to her that pushed her intolerably close to the edge. She cried out again, clutching at him, so empty and aching that she couldn't stand it any longer and tears seeped out from under tightly closed lids.

"Claire," he said again, his voice no longer recognizable. It was rough, raspy, and as her name left his lips, he was tearing at his clothing. In a fever, he pushed her skirt to her waist then spread her legs and put himself

between them. For a frozen moment in time she felt the shock of his naked flesh against her, then he drove into her, and her body jolted from the impact. She ceased to exist as a person; she was only heat and need, her bare legs wrapped around his waist, her arms around his shoulders, crying out and twisting to meet his thrusts. He caught her mouth with his, and her breathing stopped, taken away by his wildfire. The pressure and aching need were building inside her, and it was more than she could stand. It was going to kill her, shatter her into a thousand tiny pieces.

"Max, stop," she moaned, tearing her mouth from his. "I can't… I can't bear it."

His teeth clenched, and an animal sound rose from his throat. "I—can't stop. Not now, not now—"

The need exploded, and she did shatter, her body heaving in his arms. He held her and surged into her and met his own shattering, blind with the unbridled fury of what had just happened between them. Claire was limp in his arms, drooping against him, her head on his shoulder. He let his own head drop, resting on the curve of her neck and shoulder, her sweet, female scent rising to his nostrils as he gulped in air. Her skin was fevered, and he felt the way she was shaking, like a leaf in a storm.

It was a long time before either of them could move, could gather enough strength to do anything except cling to each other for support. Then she began to move, trying feebly to free herself from him, to pull her bodice up and cover her naked breast. She kept her head down, her face averted, unable to face him. She couldn't believe that she had acted like an animal in heat, moaning and writhing against him, out of control and lost to every thought except the need to satisfy her body.

"Stop it!" he ordered in a fierce whisper, finally stepping back from her, but instead of being freed she found herself swept into his arms, held high against his chest. He carried her swiftly through the darkened apartment and into the bedroom, with only the small light from the foyer to show him the way. Without bothering to turn on a light even then, he laid her on the bed and stood over her as he tore out of his clothes, popping buttons from his shirt in his haste to get out of it. He was naked before she could control her quaking limbs enough to get off the bed, and by then it was too late. He bent to pull the gown off her, leaving her bare on the melon-colored satin comforter. The satin was cool on her overheated skin; then he was on her, and in her, and she was no longer aware of the coolness beneath her. He was

slower this time, the urgency gone, his body moving against her with long, slow movements that rubbed his hair-covered chest against her breasts, and she began to move with him.
She hadn't realized that such a degree of sensuality even existed, but he revealed to her a new side of her nature, the potential of her woman's body for pleasure. And he reveled in her, holding her and kissing her endlessly, taking her to the peak of pleasure, letting her rest then doing it again before it all became too much for him, and he began surging wildly as he reached for his own sweet madness.
She lay in his arms, and he smoothed the sweat-: dampened hair back from her face. He took small kisses from her lips, her cheek, her temple. "I've been going half-crazy, wanting you," he muttered rawly. "I know this was too fast, that you weren't ready for it, but I don't regret it. You're mine. Don't try to run away from me, love; stay with me tonight."
She was incapable of running from him, her strength gone, her legs like water, and at the moment she couldn't think of why she should want to run. He pulled the comforter back and put her between the sheets, resting her head on the pillow. He lay beside her, his body warm and hard, his arm draped over her waist, and exhaustion claimed them. Claire went to sleep right away, sinking into the enveloping blackness and welcoming it. She didn't want to think, didn't want to dream. She just wanted to sleep…
She woke in the darkened room and lay staring through the darkness at the blank ceiling. Max still slept beside her, his breathing deep and easy, his strong body relaxed. Until that night she hadn't realized just how strong he was, but now her body ached in ways that testified to his strength. For all his sophistication and cosmopolitan manners, he made love savagely, as if civilization hadn't touched him. Perhaps his smooth urbanity was only a veneer, and the real man was the one who had taken her with primitive urgency.
And perhaps she wasn't the woman she had always thought herself to be. If he bad been wild, so had she. If he had been hungry, so had she.
He had asked her to stay, but she didn't know if she could face him in the morning. Every instinct in her wanted to find a place that was quiet and private, where she could come to terms with this new part of herself. A lifetime of reserve hadn't prepared her for the wildness that had surged within her; it frightened her that he had such power over her. She hadn't known that this could be a part of love.

Moving slowly, her body protesting, she slid out of the bed and groped around on the floor until she found the crumpled velvet heap of her gown. At the door she paused, looking back at his barely visible form on the bed, but he still slept deeply. Tears welled in her eyes; was it wrong to leave him now? What would happen if she woke beside him in the morning light, without the shield of darkness to protect her from the possibility that he might see too much? She wanted to creep back to his side and curl up in his arms, but she turned away.

"Come back here."

His voice was low, rough with sleep. She stood there with her back to him.

"It's better that I leave now," she whispered.

"No, I won't let you," She heard the rustle of the bed as he left it; then he was behind her, his naked body hot against her back. His arms circled her waist, and the gown slipped from her fingers to the floor.

"Have I frightened you?" he asked, his mouth against her neck. "Is it because I hurt you?"

Her head moved slowly from side to side in denial. "You didn't hurt me," she said.

"I was on you like a rutting bull, love, and you're so soft." His lips moved to her shoulder and found the tender hollow there. His hot breath wafted over her skin like a caress, and she felt her breasts tighten in automatic response. "So delicate. Your skin is like silk." His hands were on her breasts now, and her head dropped back against his shoulder, her eyes closing as delight spiraled in her again.

"Come back to bed," he urged softly. "I know you're uneasy, but everything will be all right. I promise. We'll talk in the morning." Sometime during the next day he would tell her who he really was, and he was glad that this night had happened. It bound her to him, gave him an advantage in handling her. She would be angry, of course, but he didn't think it would be anything he couldn't handle.

She went to him, allowing herself to believe that it really would be all right. And a small while later, lying beneath him with the now-familiar fire burning inside her, she forgot why she had ever been uneasy.

The shrill ringing of the telephone woke her. Beside her, Max uttered an obscenity and sat up in the bed, reaching for the receiver to halt the intrusive noise. Bright sunlight filled the room, and she pulled the sheet

higher under her chin then closed her eyes again. She didn't feel quite ready to face the morning yet, and she wished the phone hadn't rung.
"It's too bloody early in the morning to be funny," Max snarled into the receiver, running his fingers through his tousled hair. He listened a moment then said, "I don't give a damn what time it is, whenever I've just woke, it's too early. What is it?"
When he hung up the phone a few minutes later, he cursed under his breath before rolling over to look at her. Claire opened her eyes and stared at him, uncertainty plain on her face.
"I have to go to Dallas," he said, putting out his hand to finger her hair. "This morning."
She swallowed and tried for a casual tone. "It must be urgent; this is Sunday."
"It is. Bloody hell, what timing! I wanted to spend the day with you. We badly need to talk about what's happening between us, and there are some other things I wanted to tell you, but now they'll have to wait."
"It can wait," she whispered.

Chapter Seven

But could it? After hurriedly taking her home, Max had left, and Claire hadn't heard from him since. She hadn't really been surprised when Sunday passed without a call; his business in Dallas must have been urgent to require him on a Sunday, but she had expected to hear from him on Monday. In such a short length of time he had insinuated himself so deeply into her life and her heart that now things didn't feel right without him. She hurried home after work on Monday, afraid that she might miss his call, but her telephone sat in silence, and the longer the silence stretched, the more she became convinced that something was wrong. She didn't know what it might be, but there was a sense of unease growing inside her. What was it that he had wanted to talk about? She knew it had to be important; his expression had been too serious, even a little grim. But it had all gone unsaid, and it shouldn't have; whatever it was, that had been the time for it, and now that time had passed.

She slept badly, too worried to rest, her awakened body reminding her of the pleasure he had given her, the things he had taught her. It was amazing that she had been married to Jeff for years without learning that she could go mad with desire, that a man's touch could turn her into pure molten need. No, not just a man. One man. Max.

Why didn't he call?

Lack of sleep left shadows under her eyes the next day, and when she looked in the mirror, the sense of impending doom intensified. She stared at the fathomless dark pools of her eyes, trying to see beyond them into the woman she was, deep into herself where she sensed these things without really knowing what they were. Had he found her lacking somehow? Had she been clumsy? Had he been appalled to find that she was just like all the others, easy to bed and easy to forget? Had he done just that, forgotten her? But he had been wild to have her, so wild that he hadn't even taken her to the bedroom, hadn't even removed their clothing. A hot blush colored her cheeks at the memory. In the foyer, of all places, like savages in evening clothes. Her reserve had been shattered, his control destroyed, and they had merged together with primitive force. It had to mean something to him. But he was so sophisticated, while in many ways she was not. Had that night been normal for him? Was it nothing to him but more of the same? There were n6 answers in the mirror.

It was after lunch when the call came at work, and Sam spent a long time in his office. When he came out, he was pale.
"I've just been notified of a takeover attempt," he said quietly.
Claire looked up at him, waiting.
"It's Spencer-Nyle, in Dallas."
It was an enormous corporation, spreading out into diverse fields, and the chairman of the board was legendary for his crafty moves. Sam and Claire looked at each other, knowing that it was really only a matter of time. Had the takeover attempt been by anyone closer to Bronson Alloys in size, they would have had a good chance to fight, but Spencer-Nyle could swallow them whole and never even strain. Sam might win the first round, because of the real estate values, but the war would go to Spencer-Nyle.
"They can't be foreign-backed," Claire said, shocked and puzzled.
"No. It seems we were being threatened on two fronts, but I didn't see it. I was too worried about keeping my research secure."
"When will they make their offer?"
"That's up to them, but I'd better use however much time we have left to strengthen our position."
"Can we possibly win?"
"Anything is possible." He grinned suddenly. "If we put up such a fight that the takeover would be more trouble than we're worth, they might pull out of it."
"Or you could find a white knight."
"White knight or hostile takeover, the end result would be the same: the company would belong to someone else. I suppose I could give in gracefully, but hell, I've always liked a good fight. Let Anson Edwards and his team of hatchetmen work to get us."
Now that the moment was actually there, Sam seemed to relish the thought of a fight. Claire wondered a moment at his mentality; he actually enjoyed conflict. But there were people who thrived on challenge; Martine was one of them. Put a mountain in front of her and she climbed it; it was as simple as that. Claire preferred to go around it; she approached a challenge head-on only when the other paths were blocked.
There was a lot to be done; the board of directors had to be notified, and proper action had to be discussed. Until a firm offer was received, they had little to go on. As the principal stockholder and chairman of the board,

Sam's opinion carried a lot of weight, but he was still answerable to the board.

The phone rang off the hook. Claire worked late and was even grateful that the pressure kept her mind off Max, at least a little. She was almost afraid to go home, afraid that he wouldn't call and she would have to spend another night with that silent telephone. At least this way she didn't know.

But eventually she had had to go home, so she put a stack of records on the stereo to fill the apartment with noise. Odd, but the silence had never bothered her before; she had welcomed it, enjoying the peace and solitude after the hectic pace of her job. Max had changed that, had turned her interests outward, and now the silence grated on her nerves. The stereo abolished the quiet outside but couldn't touch the stillness inside.

He wasn't going to call. She knew it, sensed it.

Had she been only the last warm body in a long line of warm bodies in his bed? Was that all she had been to him, a challenge, so that once she capitulated the challenge was gone? She didn't want to think that; she wanted to trust Max completely, but more and more she remembered those tiny jarring moments when she had seen the hardness beneath his perfect manners, as if the cosmopolitan gentleman were only a veneer. If that were so, then the image he projected was just that, an image, and she didn't really know him at all. Several times she had thought that, but now she was terrified that it was true.

Max brooded in his office, wishing that he could call Claire, but things were in motion now, and it would be in the best interests of both sides if he had no more contact with her until the takeover was settled. To see her now would put her in an awkward position, possibly subject her to undeserved hostility. Damn Anson for calling him back so soon, before he had a chance to talk to her and explain things! He wasn't worried about making her see reason; he was very experienced, and he knew the power of the weapon he had over her, the power of sensuality. Beneath that aloof, ladylike exterior was a woman who burned for his touch, whose own sensuality exploded out of control during his lovemaking. No, he could handle Claire's anger. What worried him was the pain and confusion she must be feeling because he had seemingly walked out of her life after that unbelievable night they had shared. He didn't want anything or anyone to hurt her, but he was very much afraid that he had, and that thought caused a tightening in his chest. Damn this bloody takeover to hell and back! It wasn't worth hurting Claire.

The senior vice president, Rome Matthews, entered his office. It was late and they were both in their shirtsleeves, and they were friends as well, so Rome didn't bother with the formality of knocking.
"You've been glaring at that file for the past hour," Rome commented. "Is something bothering you about Branson's?"
"No. We won't have any trouble," Max said, assured on that point, at least. "You've been edgy since you got back from Houston."
Max leaned back in his chair and hooked his hands behind his head. "Isn't Sarah waiting for you?"
Rome's black eyes glittered the way they did when he was on to something, and he had the determination of a bulldog. Sprawling his big frame in an office chair, he watched Max through narrowed eyes. "Well, I'll be damned," he drawled. "You're acting just like I did when Sarah used to drive me crazy. God, I love it! It's poetic justice. You, my friend, have woman trouble!"
Max scowled at him. "Funny, is it?"
"Hilarious," Rome agreed, a wolfish grin lighting his hard, dark face. "I should've guessed sooner; hell, you were in Houston a week. Something would have been seriously wrong if you *hadn't* found a woman."
"You have a perverted sense of humor," Max said without heat, but also without smiling.
"Who is she?"
"Claire Westbrook."
Because Rome had studied the file on Branson Alloys, he knew the name and knew her connection with the company. He also knew that the vital information needed for the takeover to be successful had come from her. One brow lifted. "Does she know who you are?"
"No," Max growled, and Rome gave a soundless whistle.
"You're in trouble."
"Damn it, I know that!" Max got to his feet and paced the expanse of his office, shoving his fingers through his hair. "I can handle that, but I'm worried about her. I don't want her hurt by this."
"Then call her."
Max shook his head. A call wouldn't work; he knew that. He had to be where he could hold her, soothe her with his touch, reassure her that what was between them was real.

"You're going to be back in Houston in a couple of days; Anson is really pushing this. She'll have to know then who you are."
"I intend to tell her before anyone else knows." Frowning, he stared out the darkened window at the myriad lights and angles of the Dallas skyline. He wanted to be with Claire now, lying in bed with her and stroking the intoxicating softness of her skin. He wasn't sleeping well, wanting her, tortured by his aching loins. If he had had difficulty getting her out of his mind before, it was damned impossible now.
Claire tried to eat the sandwich she had brought for lunch, but it was tasteless, and after a few bites she re-wrapped it in cellophane wrap and tossed it into the garbage can. She hadn't had much appetite, anyway. The office was empty; Sam was at lunch, as was almost everyone else. It was Friday, almost a week since she had seen Max or heard from him. A small eternity. She had stopped expecting the call, but something inside her was still marking time. Two days. Three. Four. Soon, a week. Eventually it would be a month, and perhaps someday the pain would be a little duller. The most important thing was to keep her time filled, to stay busy. She began typing a stack of tetters; correspondence had doubled this week in direct relation to the notification Spencer-Nyle had given that it was interested in Bronson Alloys. It really couldn't have happened at a better time, she told herself; it left her less time to brood.
It was amazing how happy Sam seemed to be. He was preparing for this like a football coach preparing his team for the annual game against an arch rival, with almost unconcerned enthusiasm. He was actually enjoying it! The stockholders were coming out pretty well, too; the price of the stock had shot up as soon as the news got out.
Sam had been doing some research into Spencer-Nyle in general, and Anson Edwards in particular, and had come up with an impressive array of articles on the man. His desk was littered with them when Claire carried the letters in to leave them for his signature. A business magazine lay open on his desk, folded to an article on Spencer-Nyle, and Claire curiously picked it up. A color picture of Anson Edwards was on the first page; he didn't look like a corporate shark, she thought. He was trim and nondescript, with no outstanding features, the sort of man who blended into a crowd, except for the sharp intelligence obvious in his eyes.
The article was surprisingly interesting and went into some depth. She carried the magazine back to her desk to finish reading it. Then she turned

the page, and Max's face stared up at her.
She blinked, stunned, and tears blurred her eyes. She closed her eyes, willing the tears away. Just a picture of him stirred up a whirlwind of pain and memories and aching love. If only she knew what had happened!
Opening her eyes, she looked at the picture again. There was another picture beside it of a dark man with penetrating dark eyes, and beneath both photos was the caption: "Roman Matthews, left, and Maxwell Conroy, are Anson Edward's handpicked lieutenants, and corporate America generally considers Spencer-Nyle to have the nation's best team of executives."
They had his name wrong. He was Maxwell Benedict, not Maxwell Conroy. Her hands shook as she held the magazine, her eyes skimming to find the text concerning him. There it was; she read it then reread it, and finally the truth sank in. He was Maxwell Conroy, not Benedict at all, and he had romanced her so intensely in hopes of getting information about Branson Alloys from her. Perhaps he'd even planned to snoop in her papers, but that hadn't been necessary. She had *given* him the information he needed; she had a vivid memory of herself talking to him, trusting him, never dreaming that he was a spy for another corporation! After he had what he wanted, he had left. It was that simple, and that terrible.
Slowly, painstakingly, Claire reread the entire article, some tiny part of herself hoping against hope that she had misunderstood, but the second reading was even worse, because the details she had skipped the first time only supported the facts. Maxwell Conroy was an Englishman who had emigrated first to Canada, where he had been employed at a branch of Spencer-Nyle and had swiftly climbed the corporate ladder. He had been transferred to the Dallas headquarters four years ago, gained American citizenship, and was acquiring a reputation for engineering lightning-fast takeovers, moving in and taking control before the target company could be warned and devise any sort of defense.
She felt numb all over, as if paralyzed; even her face was still, and it was an effort to blink her eyes, to swallow. Lightning-fast takeovers. He moved in; he took control; he walked away. Yes, he had done exactly that. She hadn't had a chance. He had played her like the expert he was, reeling her in so gently that she hadn't even realized she'd been hooked. She thought of her gullibility in swallowing that line he'd fed her, about how tired he was of being pursued as a sexual object, how he just wanted a friend. She had actually believed it! How had he kept from laughing in her face?

She couldn't have been much of a challenge to him, she thought, cringing inside at how stupid she'd been. She had fallen in love with him almost immediately and fell into bed with him the first time he'd made the effort. He hadn't had to make love to her, she thought painfully. She had already told him about the land reappraisal. That must have been the icing on his cake, to see how easily he could topple her into bed.

Her eyes were dry, burning, and her throat hurt. She realized that she was breathing in quick, hard rasps, and a hard chill shook her. Betrayal burned like add inside her.

The magazine had slipped from her cold, numb fingers, and she sat there in numb shock; that was how Sam found her when he came back from lunch. Her face was white and still, and she didn't seem to see him, even though she was looking straight at him as he came in the door. Sam frowned, walking toward her. "Claire?"

She didn't answer, and he squatted down in front of her, lifting her hand in his and chafing her cold fingers. "Claire, what's wrong? Has something happened?"

Her lips barely moved, and her dark eyes were black as she stared at him. "Sam, I've betrayed you."

Slowly, like someone who was old and feeble, she leaned down and picked up the magazine. With great care she leafed through it until she came to the article on Spencer-Nyle and folded the pages back to Max's photograph. "I've been seeing him," she whispered, pointing to him. "But he told me his name was Max Benedict, not Max Conroy, and he… he knows about the property."

Sam took the magazine from her, his face set, and Claire wondered if he hated her. He should; he'd probably fire her on the spot, and it was nothing less than what she deserved. She had cost him his company with her stupidity, her incredible, inexcusable stupidity.

"How did it happen?" he murmured.

She told him, sparing her pride nothing. Max had made a fool of her, and she had fallen for every word he'd said. Tears began to slide down her pale cheeks, but she didn't notice them. Sam reached out and held her hand, and when it was over he did something incredible. Gently he took her in his arms and held her head to his shoulder. His tenderness, when he should have hated her, when he should have railed at her, broke what little control she had left, and sobs began tearing from her throat. She cried for a long

time, rocked in Sam's arms, and he stroked her hair and whispered soothing words to her until at last her body stopped shaking from the force of her crying, and she raised her wet, tear-swollen face from his shoulder.
"I'll get my things and leave," she whispered, wiping her face with the heel of her hand.
"Why?" Sam demanded calmly.
"Why?" she echoed, her voice cracking. "Sam, I've lost you your company! You can't possibly want me around now; I've proved that I can't be trusted."
"Well, now, that's where you're wrong," he said, taking his handkerchief out of his pocket and offering it to her. "It's true that the property was our ace in the hole, but it's also true that if Spencer-Nyle really wants us, we don't have a prayer. They're just too big, too powerful. The best I hoped to do was make them pay more than they'd wanted to. As for trusting you—" he shrugged "—I'd say you're the most trustworthy employee I have. You made a mistake, and I think you'd walk over live coals to keep from making another."
"I don't see how you can possibly forgive me, because I'll never forgive myself." She dried her eyes then knotted the handkerchief in her hands.
"You're only human. We all make mistakes, some of them more serious than others. Examine your mistake from another point of view. Will any jobs be lost because of what you told Conroy? Probably not. Spencer-Nyle will need our expertise; they won't run in a whole new set of employees. Did your mistake affect the outcome of the takeover attempt? I don't think so. I think they have us, one way or the other, and to tell you the truth, I almost feel relieved. The only thing that's changed is the timetable." A ghost of a smile touched his hard mouth, and his eyes took on a certain faraway look. "I wish that the mistakes I've made were no more serious than that."
"He used me," she whispered.
"That's his loss," Sam said. "He'll be back, Claire; this is his baby. He'll be here, negotiating, supervising the takeover. You're going to have to see him, work with him. Can you handle that?"
Part of her said no, shrinking from the idea of seeing him again. How could she bear to look at him, knowing that he had used her, lied to her, betrayed her, and knowing deep inside that she still loved him, because love didnt die easily for her? But if she ran, where would she run to? She had to have a job, and running wouldn't change anything. She would still have to face

herself in the mirror in the morning; she would still carry inside herself the knowledge that it had all been a lie.
She should have known better. How could she ever have been blind enough to really think a man like Max would be interested in her? He would want someone sleek and sophisticated and beautiful, someone who wore experience like a luxurious mink on smooth, suntanned shoulders. Her only attraction for him had been that she gave him an inside contact in Bronson Alloys.
But she had loved him and trusted him.
She had spent the past five years slowly and painfully rebuilding her life, her sense of worth and self-respect. If she ran now, it would all be for nothing; she would be a rabbit, hiding from herself. No, not again. Never again. She would *not* let Max Benedict—no, Max *Conroy*—destroy her.
"Yes, I can handle it," she told Sam.
"Good girl," he said, patting her shoulder.
She got through the day… and the night. The night was the worst; at least during the day she was distracted by the necessity of doing her job, but at night there was nothing, and she was alone with herself. She lay awake, as she had done every night since Max had left, trying to marshal her strength for the grueling days that lay ahead. She tried to plan the future, because she knew that, despite Sam's effort to cheer her up, there would be changes made at Bronson Alloys. Sam would almost certainly leave management entirely and devote himself to his research. That would suit him; he was happier in his laboratory, anyway. Where would that leave her? Would he need a secretary then, even taking for granted that he would want her if he did? Would the new CEO want her for a secretary? Would Spencer-Nyle allow her to work in any position where she would have access to sensitive information? After all, she had already proved herself untrustworthy! All a man had to do was pay attention to her and she would tell everything she knew! She thought bitterly that they would be justified in taking that position.
Alma called over the weekend, inviting Claire and Max to dinner. Claire accepted, but calmly told Alma that she hadn't seen Max lately. It was inevitable that then Martine would call, trying to find out what had happened.
"I tried to tell you and Mother that there wasn't anything serious between us," Claire pointed out. How true that was! But her voice was even, almost

casual, and she was proud of herself.
"But he acted so…so wild about you; he hardly took his eyes off you. Did you have a fight or anything?"
"No, no fight. There was just nothing there." On his part, at least. It was just like Martine that she had hit on the crux of the entire situation: Max had been *acting*, and he was so good at it that he had fooled everyone.
Late Sunday night, just as she was finally dozing off to sleep, the telephone rang. Sleepily she propped herself on her elbow and reached for it, thinking it would be a wrong number. None of her family ever called that late, and Claire wasn't the type to think that every late-night call meant an emergency. "Hello," she sighed, pushing her tangled hair out of her face.
"Claire. Did I wake you, darling?"
She froze, horrified, that familiar deep voice with the crisp-edged accent making chills run down her body. She didn't think; she simply reacted, replacing the receiver in its cradle so gently that it didn't even click. A soft whimper rose in her throat. How dare he call her after what he'd done? Was he back in Houston? Sam had warned her that Max would be back, but she hadn't thought that he would have the arrogance to call her.
The ringing began again, and she reached out to turn on the lamp, staring at the telephone with pain and indecision etched on her face. She had to cope with him sometime, and perhaps it would be better to do it over the phone rather than in person. It was cowardly of her, but she had endured a lot of pain; she wasn't certain how much more she could take, and pride demanded that he not know how badly he'd hurt her. If she broke down in front of him, he would be able to see how horribly foolish she'd been.
"Hello," she said again, picking up the phone and making her voice brisk.
"The connection must have been bad," he said. "I know it's late, darling, but I need to see you. May I come over? We have to talk."
"Do we? I don't think so, Mr. Conroy."
"Damn it, Claire—" He stopped, realizing what she had called him. "You know," he said, his voice changing as tension edged into it.
"Yes, I know. By the way, the connection wasn't bad. I hung up on you. Goodbye, Mr. Conroy." She hung up again, as gently as before. Crashing the receiver down would be too mild to even begin to express the way she felt, so she didn't waste the effort. She turned off the lamp and made herself comfortable on her pillows again, but her former drowsiness was gone, and she lay awake, her eyes open and burning. The sound of his voice

reverberated in her mind, so deep and smooth and so well remembered that it hadn't been necessary for him to identify himself. She had known who it was, from the first word he'd said. Had he really thought he could take up where he'd left off? Yes, probably so. She had been such a pushover for him the first time that he wouldn't have foreseen any difficulty in seducing her again.

Why did she still have to love him? It would be so much easier if she could hate him, but she couldn't. She was hurt and angry and betrayed; she had trusted him, only to have that trust thrown in her face. But she didn't hate him. There wasn't a night that she didn't cry for him, that her body didn't ache with an emptiness that wouldn't go away. Well, if she couldn't hate him, she could at least protect herself by never, never letting him get close enough to hurt her again.

In his apartment, Max cursed viciously and threw the telephone across the room in a rare fit of violence. The instrument jangled crazily then lay on its side with the receiver beside it. Damn it. *Damn it*! Somehow she'd found out who he really was and probably put the worst possible connotation on it. He'd intended to tell her that night rather than walk into the offices of Bronson Alloys the next day and hit her with it cold, but at least then he would have been with her, able to hold her and love her out of her anger. Now it would be hell getting through her door again; she'd probably slam it in his face.

The telephone began a raucous beeping to signal that it had been left off the hook, and he swore again, stalking over to pick it up and crash the receiver down on the button. This damned job had been nothing but trouble. It had brought Claire into his life, but it had also been between them from the start, and now he had to get the merger negotiations out of the way before he could approach her again. He sat down, frowning at the carpet. He missed her more than he'd ever missed anyone in his life.

She looked up from the computer terminal when the office door opened, and her heart stopped. Max stood there, flanked by two men who carried bulging briefcases. His face was expressionless, his turquoise eyes guarded. There was no point in playing games, so he said bluntly, "I'd like to see Sam Branson."

Claire didn't betray her feelings by even a flicker of emotion. "Yes, Mr. Conroy," she said neutrally, as if there were nothing unusual in his presence there, as if she had never lain naked in his arms and burned with desire. She

got to her feet without another glance at him and knocked briefly on Sam's door, then entered and closed it behind her, leaving Max and his associates to wait. She came out after a moment. "Go in, please," she said, holding the door open for them.

His gaze lingered on her face for a fraction of a moment as he passed her, and there was something hard and threatening there, something that frightened her. She kept her face blank; he might have been a stranger to her. When the door closed behind them, she sat down at her desk again and clasped her shaking hands to still them. Seeing him had been like taking a knife in the chest, a sharp, brutal pain that almost doubled her over. Odd, but she'd forgotten how handsome he was, or perhaps that had been blanked out. The lean, chiseled planes of his face had stunned her anew, and underlying that was the memory of how he'd looked in the throes of passion, his hair damp with sweat, his eyes burning in his taut face. He'd braced himself above her, and the muscles in his torso had rippled with power—

Stop it! she ordered herself, biting down on her lip hard enough to bring blood. Wincing, she grabbed a tissue and blotted the tiny drop of blood away. She couldn't let herself keep thinking about him. There was no point in it, no use in tormenting herself with memories of that one night. She had a job to do, and if she concentrated on it she just might get through the day.

But the day was a nightmare. She was called in to take notes, and it was almost more than she could bear to sit so close to Max, feeling his eyes on her as she scribbled page after page. Sam was a hard-nosed negotiator, and he was determined to win everything he could. An emergency meeting of the board of directors was called, and the office hummed with activity.

Finally they went out for lunch. As soon as the office was empty, Claire collapsed into her chair, her eyes closed in relief. She hadn't known how hard it would be to see him again. He hadn't said a personal word to her, but she had been vividly, painfully aware of him.

She heard a sound at the door and hastily opened her eyes. Max stood there with his hand on the knob. "Get your bag and come with us," he said curtly. "You haven't had lunch, either."

"I brought my lunch, Mr. Conroy, but thank you for the invitation." She kept her voice even as she uttered the careful courtesy, her face a blank wall that hid her thoughts. His mouth tightened, and she knew that her answer had angered him. Without another word he turned and left the office.

It was a lie that she had brought her lunch; she put on a pot of fresh coffee and ate a pack of crackers that she found in her desk, telling herself that she had to start eating better. She wasn't going to let herself lapse into a decline like some Victorian maiden. She was going to get through this somehow.
Her first instinct was to quit her job and get as far away from Max as she could. She wanted to be safe; she wanted to get her emotions back on an even keel and forget about him, if that were possible. She even typed up a letter of resignation, but when she reread it, she knew that she couldn't do that and tore the letter into little strips. She wasn't going to let this take command of her life. She was going to continue just as she always had. She would get on with the everyday business of living; she wasn't going to run. Running and hiding was a childish reaction. It wouldn't be easy, facing Max and doing her job without letting him see how he affected her, but she really had no choice if she wanted to face herself in the mirror every morning.
She had changed a lot in the past few years, changes that hadn't been easily attained. She was more self-confident now. She would never be as bold and eager for new experiences as Martine, but she had found a quiet inner strength that she'd learned to trust. No matter what it took, or how painful it was, she was going to do her job and ignore Max Conroy as best she could.
They came back from lunch, and the negotiations resumed. Max somehow maneuvered things so that he was sitting next to her while she took notes, forcing her to concentrate on getting the notes right and not letting him know how his nearness affected her. Whenever she glanced at him, she would find his eyes on her, narrowed and intent, and she knew that he wasn't going to let the subject of their relationship drop gracefully. Shestopped looking at him even when he spoke. That was the only way she could keep her composure; to pretend that he didn't exist.
Max watched her, trying to read her expression, but her quiet face was a total blank. If she had been aloof before, she was totally unreachable now, and her distance from him made him furious. She was ignoring him, and that was the one thing he didn't intend to allow. He was hampered now by the job at hand, but it wouldn't last forever. When it was finished, he was going to smash down those damned defenses of hers and never let her build them again.

Chapter Eight

It took two long weeks for the negotiations to be hammered out; it was a hard fact for Spencer-Nyle to accept, but Sam Bronson still had a card they couldn't trump: himself. He was, in effect, the most valuable asset of Bronson Alloys. It was his genius, his instinct, his research, that produced the alloys. They were trying to buy the man as much as the company, and Sam knew it, they knew it, and they knew he knew it. To keep the man, they had to keep him happy, and keeping him happy meant making concessions. The job security of his employees was guaranteed; no one would be brushed aside in the usual house cleaning that came with a takeover. Benefits were sharply increased and raises were given, and even though the overall structure of the company would be changed, the employees would be happy because they would be very well taken care of.

Yet in the end Max still managed to work out an agreement that cost Spencer-Nyle less than what Anson had feared. He did it with cool, relentless negotiating, not giving in on anything he thought was excessive, and inch by inch working Bronson into a position they both found acceptable. He had to give Bronson credit; the man was as tough as nails, fighting as hard as he could for his company, even though the end had been inevitable from the first.

And Claire was there every day, calmly taking notes, her very presence controlling the tempers that threatened to flare. There was something about her cameo-smooth features and velvety dark eyes that made people control their anger and their language. Max watched her closely without appearing to, so hungry for just the sight of her that he couldn't stop himself. He hadn't tried to call her again; not only would she probably accuse him of trying to get information from her, but he preferred to wait until he could devote himself completely to making her see reason. Time would work in his favor to blunt the edge of her anger. He watched her closely, incessantly, trying to read the thoughts behind that smooth blank face. She had to be furious with him, but there was no hint of it in her speech or actions. She was as remotely polite with him as she would be with a stranger, as if he meant nothing to her, as if they had never made love with frantic, explosive need. After a week Max decided that he would rather have her scream curses at him—anything—than treat him with that immense indifference. He could handle anger and tears; it was her mental distance that frustrated him to the point of madness.

Claire knew that Max watched her, though she never reacted to it in any way. The only way she could function was to posh all her pain and sense of betrayal into a small part of her mind and lock them away. She didn't think about them; she didn't agonize over what might have been. She had survived the destruction of the life she'd built once before, and she was determined to do it again. The end of every day marked a small victory for her: a day that she had gotten through without breaking down. She couldn't wallow in self-pity; she had to complete the task she'd set for herself, getting through the days one at a time. She couldn't guess how long the negotiations would continue, so she didn't try to make plans or look forward to the day when Max was gone. It could be days, or weeks, or even months, if he remained to oversee the changeover to Spencer-Nyle ownership.

Sam hadn't discussed Max with her, and he acted as if he had forgotten that she had been involved with him. In actuality, there was little chance for them to talk; it seemed there was never a spare minute, and someone was always in the office. Max and his associates were going over the books, which meant they were constantly underfoot, and Sam, like Claire, guarded his words.

The final meeting was long and exhausting, the boardroom filled with stale smoke and the stench of old coffee. Tempers were frayed and voices hoarse from hours of talking. Claire took notes until her fingers cramped, and her back felt as if it were breaking in two from sitting for so long. The odors in the closed room made her stomach roll threateningly, so she hadn't been able to eat lunch when sandwiches and fresh coffee were brought in. All she wanted was to escape into the fresh air and listen to the silence. Late in the afternoon a thunderstorm hammered the city, washing the streets with a deluge of rain. Sam, with an understanding glance at Claire's pale face, got up and opened the window to let in a gust of cool, fresh, rain-sweetened air. The heavy purple clouds had completely covered the sky, and the streetlights came on as premature dusk settled over the city. With the breaking of the storm there seemed to come a break in the negotiations; everyone was tired and sleepy, and the pounding of the rain against the windows had a soporific effect. Points that had been crucial just that morning no longer seemed so important; what was important was reaching agreement, getting it over with and going home.

At last it was done, and men in rumpled shirt-sleeves wearily shrugged into their coats, shaking hands and smiling. Claire gathered her notes together;

she had a few more chores before her day was ended. Quietly she slipped from the boardroom and walked to her office; she planned to type the final agreement that night. She was exhausted, her body aching, but she wanted to finish the documents while her notes were still fresh. The contracts would be needed first thing in the morning, so it was either do them immediately or come in to work early; she elected not to put the chore off. It was much more peaceful now than it would be tomorrow morning. The building was empty, except for the weary men who had negotiated the details of the takeover; there would be no phone calls, no interruptions, no series of small crises to handle. All she had to do was finish her work and leave.

She had barely begun typing the documents on the computer terminal when the office door opened. She glanced up inquiringly, and an expressionless mask slipped over her face when she saw it was Max. Without a word she went back to work.

He strolled with indolent grace to her desk and leaned his arm on top of her computer terminal. A frown knitted his brow as he saw what she was doing. "That doesn't have to be done tonight," he said.

"I have to do it now, or come in early in the morning." She kept her gaze on her work. Why didn't he go away? His presence made her tense and started that dull ache in her heart that she had briefly forgotten.

"Let it wait." It was a crisp command, and he reached down to flick off the power switch to the terminal. The screen went blank, wiping out everything she had put into the machine. "You're exhausted, Claire, and you haven't had anything to eat today. I'm going to take you to dinner; then we're going to talk. You've put me off long enough."

She looked at him now, sitting back in her chair and raising cool eyes to his. "I can't think of anything we could talk about, Mr. Conroy. I don't have any more corporate secrets you'd be interested in."

Dark fury washed over his face. "Don't push me," he said in a voice like splintered ice. "I've let you hold me off for two weeks now, but that's at an end."

"Is it?" she asked indifferently and reached to turn on the terminal again. "Excuse me, I have work to do." She couldn't let herself respond to him, couldn't react to him in any way, or she would slide out of control. For the past two weeks she'd been holding on by a thread; it wouldn't take much to snap it.

Max turned the computer off again, punching the switch with controlled violence. His eyes were blue-green füe, burning like lasers. "You're coming with me. Get your bag—and don't turn on this bloody damned machine again," he snarled as she reached for the switch.
Claire stared straight ahead at the blank screen. "I'm not going anywhere with you."
His eyebrows lifted. "Do you want me to force you? You forget that you're an employee of Spencer-Nyle now."
"I've forgotten nothing, but my job doesn't require me to associate with you away from the office. I've gotten very particular of the company I keep." She faced him calmly, determined never to let him see the desolation inside her. Staring at him, she saw an entirely different man from the one she had thought she knew. He wasn't the epitome of a controlled, reserved, rather old-fashioned Englishman, after all. He was a fire behind mirrors that reflected the image he chose, a ruthless, determined man who let nothing stop him. His facade was that of an even-tempered and sophisticated man of the world, civilized to his fingertips, but it was a lie. He was an elegant savage, a shark cutting through opalescent seas, dazzling people with his beautiful image before he attacked.
He was very still, his eyes glittering the way they did when something displeased him. His mouth was a grim white line. "I know you're angry, but you'll still listen to me if I have to carry you to my apartment and tie you to the bed."
"I'm not angry," Claire pointed out, and she wasn't. She hurt too much to be angry. She could feel a tiny trembling beginning deep inside her as her exhaustion grew, and she knew she couldn't handle this scene right now. "As you pointed out, I'm your employee now; if you don't want me to work tonight, I won't. But I won't go anywhere with you, either. Good night, Mr. Conroy." She reached for her bag and stood, and Max lashed out, catching her arm in a grip that bruised.
"Don't call me Mr. Conroy," he said evenly.
"Why? Is that an alias, too?"
"No, and neither is Benedict; that's my middle name."
"How appropriate. Benedict Arnold was a spy, too."
"Damn you, I didn't spy," he rasped. "There were no papers gone through, no conversations taped. You *gave* me that information without any urging on my part."

Her dark eyes didn't even flicker. "You sought me out at Virginia's party because you knew I worked here."
"That's not important! Yes, I deliberately introduced myself to you. It was possible that you had some helpful information about Bronson Alloys." He shook her lightly. "What does that matter?"
"It doesn't, not at all." She glanced down at his hands, and her voice was cold. "You're hurting me."
He released her, something shadowy moving in his eyes as he watched her rub her upper arms. "That was business; it has nothing to do with us."
"How nice for you, to be able to put areas of your life in tidy little compartments and not let them touch! I'm not like that. I think that if a person is dishonorable in one thing, he will be in another."
"Don't be so damned unreasonable—"
"That was quite a blitzkrieg you put on," Claire interrupted, her voice rising as she felt her control slipping. Fiercely she groped to regain it. "Does Anson Edwards know what a prize he has in you? Has any woman ever resisted you when you turn on the heat? I fell for it completely, so you can give yourself a pat on the back. Poor man," she breathed, her eyes burning. "So handsome that women only treated you like a body without a soul, you were tired of meaningless sex and wanted someone to be a real friend. I must have the word 'fool' stamped on my forehead, because you knew just what line to feed me. You turned on the charm, forced yourself into my life and got the information you wanted, then waltzed out again, fine. I was a fool once, but don't expect me to be a fool again! I'm not really stupid; I don't have to have my face rubbed in it!" Breathing hard, she turned away, rubbing her forehead with a trembling hand. Perhaps she was stupid, at that; she hadn't learned all that much from Jeffs betrayal. It had made her cautious, but not cautious enough. In the end she'd walked back into the vicious trap of loving a handsome, charming man who could have anyone he wanted and had dreamed the fool's dream that he might love her in return.
"I didn't 'waltz out'!" he yelled, glaring down at her. Max rarely lost his temper. It was seldom necessary; he usually got what he wanted without having to put out that much effort, simply by using his charm and sensuality. But his reactions to Claire had been extreme from the beginning, and the cold contempt in her eyes triggered something fierce inside him. "I

was called back to Dallas. You should know. You were in bed with me when the call came!"
The little remaining color washed out of her face, and she gave him an uncontrolled look of such naked pain that he halted. "Claire…" he began, reaching out for her, but she recoiled from him so violently that she bumped into the edge of the desk and sent papers flying.
"*Haw* kind of you to remind me," she whispered. Her eyes were black in her paper-white face. "Get away from me."
"No. It was good between us; I want to have it again. I won't let you push me out of your life."
She was visibly shaking, and he wanted to put his hands on her to support her but didn't dare. All of a sudden her icy reserve had shattered before his eyes, leaving a woman who was almost staggering with pain. The realization struck him like a blow to the chest, taking his breath. She wasn't an aloof, controlled woman, a little unfeeling, a challenge to his male sexuality. She put a buffer between other people and herself in an effort at self-protection because she felt too much and was too easily and too deeply hurt by life. He hadn't understood her at all, casually counting on his sex appeal and charm to smooth things over as he'd always done, and so intent on getting her into bed that he'd overlooked all of the small signals she'd given him. God, what had he done to her? How deeply had he hurt her to put that look on her face?
"You don't have any choice about it," she said jerkily. "Do you really think I'd be stupid enough to trust you again? You lied to me, and you used me. It was all in a good cause, though, so that makes it all right in your eyes. The end justifies the means, right? Please, just leave me alone."
"No," he said harshly, feeling a sudden, intense twist of pain in his gut at the thought that he might have lost her forever. He couldn't accept that; he *wouldn't* accept that! For reasons he couldn't analyze, Claire had become increasingly precious to him, filling his thoughts during the day and his dreams at night. The night he'd spent with her had made him want more, a lot more.
"I'd say you're going to have to, at least for now," Sam interrupted from the doorway, his voice as cool as the look in his eyes. "Stop badgering her; she's worn out."
Max didn't move a muscle except to turn his head to look at Sam, but suddenly there was something wild about him, a fine tension in his lean,

deceptively muscled body, his eyes icy and lethal. "This doesn't concern you," he said, and he was every inch the predatory, aggressive male, with the primitive instinct to fight whenever another male approached the woman he'd marked as his.
"I'd say it does. After all, it was my company that you took, using the information Claire gave you."
Max froze, then looked sharply at Claire. "He knows?"
Dumbly she nodded.
"Claire told me right away," Sam said, leaning against the door. "As soon as she realized who you were. Her sense of honor is too strong for corporate games; she wanted to quit right then, but I talked her out of it." At Max's lifted brow, he added, "I knew she'd never let herself make that mistake again."
Claire couldn't stay and listen to them talk about her; she felt exposed and raw, her deepest secrets laid out for the world to examine and chuckle over. A small sound of distress escaped her as she walked past Max, keeping her head averted.
"Claire!" He moved swiftly, catching her arm again and pulling her to a halt. Desperately she wrenched at her arm, trying to twist it from his grip, but he caught her other arm and held her still in front of him. Biting her lip, she stared fixedly at the knot of his tie and struggled for control. Why did he have to hold her so close? She could feel his warmth, smell the exciting male muskiness of his skin. His nearness reminded her of things she would have to forget in order to survive. Her body felt the touch that had driven her to such feverish heights of pleasure and reacted wildly, independent of her control. Her nipples hardened, wanting the touch of his hands, his mouth; her legs quivered, wanting to wrap about his hips, and the emptiness in her wanted to be filled.
"Let me go," she whispered.
"You're not in any shape to drive; you haven't eaten all day, and you look as if you might faint at any moment. I'll drive you home," he insisted.
"I wouldn't go with you to a dogfight," she said, using her last ounce of defiance. His grip slackened, and she pulled free, taking the chance to walk out of the office without him. It might be the only opportunity she had, and she was too upset to tolerate any more. Another minute and she would be weeping, completing her humiliation.

Her hurried steps carried her out of the building and to the parking lot; it was still raining lightly, but gusts of wind battered her, and flashes of lightning in the low-hanging purple clouds lit the darkness with momentary brilliance. The storm intensified the darkness, making the efforts of the streetlights seem ineffective. Her heels tapped sharply on the wet pavement as she ran to her car. She reached it and stopped to unlock it and only then heard the footsteps behind her. Cold terror washed down her spine, and tales of rape and robbery flooded her mind. Grasping her keys like a weapon, she whirled to face any assailants, but there was no one close to her. On the other side of the parking lot Max walked to his car and got in, and Claire sagged with relief.

Her hands were shaking as she opened the car door and slid behind the wheel, cautiously locking the door again. What if it had been a mugger or a rapist? How many articles had she read that warned women against going to their cars alone at night? She'd been foolish to let her emotions push her into a dangerous situation, and she drew a deep breath. She had to get control of herself.

She was still shaky, and the rain made the streetlights reflect dizzyingly on the wet streets; she drove with extra care, not wanting to risk an accident. She didn't notice the car behind her until she turned down the street to her apartment building and the other car turned, too. Nervously she peered into the rearview mirror, trying to tell what kind of car it was, but the headlights were right in her eyes, and she couldn't see anything. Was she so on edge tonight that she was becoming paranoid? Quickly she found a parking place and pulled into it, deciding to wait until the other car had gone on before she got out.

But the other car slowed and pulled into the empty parking space beside her. It was a black Mercedes, and the man driving it had golden hair that gleamed like a halo in the silvery artificial glow of the streetlight.

Still shaking, Claire leaned her head on the steering wheel. He was determined to talk to her, and she was beginning to realize that he didn't give up once he'd decided to do something. How had she ever thought him civilized? He was as ruthless as any Viking, and she feared him as well as loved him because he would destroy her if she didn't find a way to keep him at a distance, to protect herself with indifference.

He tapped on the window, and she jerked her head up.

"It's raining harder," Max said, his voice muffled, through the glass. The rain beaded and ran down the windshield, emphasizing his words. "Let's go in, dear. You're going to get soaked if you wait much longer; I think a new storm is coming in."

She flinched at the endearment, amazed at how easily it rolled off his tongue. How many other women had been fooled by his glib lies?

He wasn't going to give up and go away, and she was too tired to sit out in the car indefinitely. Gathering her wavering strength, she got out of the car and carefully locked the door, then hurried up the sidewalk without looking at him.

He stretched out his arm and opened the door for her and was right beside her in the elevator. Claire clutched her keyring, keeping it ready. Damn him, why wouldn't he give up? What did it matter to him, anyway?

Catching her wrist firmly, he relieved her of the keys and opened the door, stepping inside to turn on the lights and pulling her in with him. He released her wrist to close the door, and tossed her keys onto the small table that stood by the door, her catchall table that she had found in a flea market and refinished. Fixedly she stared at the table; it wasn't a Queen Anne, like the one in his foyer. She remembered the way he had lifted her onto that elegant Queen Anne table and moved between her thighs, and for a moment she thought she really might faint, after all. Her legs felt wobbly, and there was a faraway roar in her ears. She sucked in a deep breath, hoping the extra oxygen would steady her.

"Sit down," Max said roughly, propelling her toward the couch. "You look dead white. Are you pregnant?"

Stunned, she stared helplessly at him, sinking down onto the cushions as her legs folded beneath her. "What?" she gasped.

"You haven't eaten. You're pale. You've lost weight, and cigarette smoke is making you ill." He enumerated all the things that had been haunting him since that explanation had first blasted into his mind. "Did you think I wouldn't notice that Sam opened the window for you this afternoon? Why would you tell him and not me?"

"I haven't told him anything," she protested, thrown off balance by his line of questioning. "I'm not pregnant!"

"Are you certain? Have you had your period this month?"

For the first time that night color flooded her cheeks. "That isn't any of your business!"

His face was grim as he stood over her. "I think it is. I didn't protect you that night—*any time* that night—and I don't think you're on the pill. Are you?"
Her expression was answer enough. "No, I didn't think so."
"I'm not pregnant," she repeated doggedly.
"I see. You're simply on a diet, is that it?"
"No. I'm exhausted; it's as simple as that."
"That's another symptom."
"I'm not pregnant!" she yelled, then buried her face in her hands, aghast at her loss of control.
"Are you certain?"
"Yes!"
"All right," he said with sudden calm. "I apologize for upsetting you, but I wanted to know. Now sit there while I get something for you to eat."
The last thing she wanted was something to eat; she wanted him to get out of her apartment so she could fall facedown on her bed and sleep. But she couldn't chase him out, because her legs were lead weights, and suddenly it wasn't worth the effort of setting up. She sat there staring blankly in front of her, wondering how she could have been so stupid as not to have considered the possibility of a pregnancy, but the truth was that it hadn't entered her thoughts at all. Nature had assured her that she wasn't pregnant, but she hadn't thought of it even then. It was a good thing, because she wasnt sure she could have borne the added stress. What if she had been pregnant? Would it have been all right this time? Would she have held her own baby in her arms? Max's baby, with golden hair and eyes like the sea. Suddenly pain shot through her, because it wasn't to be, and she wished it could have been.
She was so completely exhausted that to continue sitting upright was asking too much of her body. With a quiet little sigh she sank back against the cushions of the couch, her eyelashes sinking down as if pulled by a force she couldn't withstand. With the suddenness of a black curtain dropping down, she was asleep.
When Max came back into the living room with a tray loaded with a selection of sandwiches, a glass of milk for Claire and a cup of coffee for him, because he was hungry too, he was braced to receive all her hurt accusations, but he was also ready to stay there all night, if necessary, to explain his side of it and convince her that they had something special between them. Then he saw her curled against the cushions, one arm folded

in her lap and the other hanging to the side in that limp way that indicated deep sleep. Her hand was lying palm upward, her fingers curled slightly, and he stared down at the peculiar, innocent vulnerability of her open palm, so soft and pink. Memory seared him. Sometime during the night they had spent together, during one of those frantic, greedy matings, he'd taken her hand and carried it down his body, and every muscle in him had jerked in reaction to her gentle fingers closing around him. He jerked now in reaction to the memory, his body growing hard and sweat popping out on his brow. He swore soundlessly and set the tray down, bringing his surging appetite under iron control. Now wasn't the time to seduce her, assuming that he could even get her to wake up. He looked at the tray of food, then at Claire, sleeping so deeply. She needed both food and rest, but evidently her body had taken over and given sleep the highest priority. The kindest thing now would be to let her sleep, even though it meant postponing that talk once again.

Bending down, he gently slid his arms around her, one under her knees and the other around her back, and lifted her easily. Her head fell sideways against his shoulder, her gentle breath warming his flesh through his shirt, and he stood still for a moment with her clasped in his arms, his eyes almost closed as he drank in her nearness, the softness of her body in his arms and the faint, elusive sweetness of her skin. Until then he hadn't realized quite how much he'd missed her, but now the delicious agony of holding her again almost made him groan aloud. She fit into his arms in a way no other woman ever had. Max had held many soft, trembling bodies against him and beneath him, but now he couldn't recall any of the others. Only Claire. She made him feel oddly complete, and the thought disturbed him, because that meant he was incomplete without her.

He carried her into the bedroom and eased her down onto the bed. She was so soundly asleep that she didn't even murmur but lay exactly as he'd placed her. With the expertise of a man who had undressed many women, Max removed the short lightweight jacket she wore, then pulled her blouse free of the skirt. It was a thin silk blouse, and beneath it he could see the lacy edge of her camisole, reminding him of the marvelously sexy underwear she wore. Reminding him? He wiped his perspiring forehead. His problem was forgetting.

Reaching beneath her, he unbuttoned and unzipped her skirt then worked the garment down her legs. She wasn't wearing a camisole, but a full-length

slip, all silk and lace. His hands began a fine trembling as he pulfed off her shoes and set them aside. He didn't dare go any farther. Not only would she not appreciate being stripped naked, but he was suddenly afraid that his control would snap if he continued. He thought of the satin and lace garter belts she wore, and the filmy underpants, and his body flooded with heat. Bloody hell! He swore furiously, silently, forcing himself to his feet. Her penchant for sexy underwear was likely to give him a fetish.

With effortless strength he lifted her and turned the cover back, then placed her between the sheets. She looked so tired, he thought, pushing back a strand of hair from her temple. Her face was pale and strained, with dark shadows under her eyes, but it was a relief to know that it was only exhaustion instead of the strain of early pregnancy that had put those marks there. He had never before lost control like that, not only of his body, but of his mind; he had always made certain that his partner was protected and been more than willing to assume responsibility if she hadn't taken care of it herself. Then, and only then, would he unleash his sexuality, lose himself in the sensual pleasures of the flesh. But with Claire, he hadn't even thought of it. He had had only one thought, to penetrate, and had been blind to everything else. Even now he was stunned by the driving urgency he'd felt, the simple and powerful animal instinct to mate that had taken control. He didn't like the feeling. He'd always thought that the power of his mind could control the lusty appetites of his body. His icy, superlative intelligence had *always* been in control… until Claire had responded to him, and the restraints he'd been placing on himself had shattered under the violent surge of desire.

He hadn't even had the control, the consideration, to take her to bed. He had simply lifted her onto the table in the foyer, pushed her velvet skirt to her waist and thrust into her. She was such a delicate woman, as finely made as the finest porcelain, and he'd taken her with all the finesse of a conquering warrior. The only thing that kept him from being completely disgusted with himself was the memory of her response, the way she had clung to him, twisted against him, the little whimpers in her throat as she met his thrusts, the way she had cried out and the sweet inner clenching that had signaled her peak of satisfaction. Behind her distant manner was a capacity for passion that overwhelmed him and made him hunger for her. He wanted her all for himself.

Realizing that he was shaking with the need to take her again, he turned away from the bed while he still could. Where Claire was concerned, his self-control was almost negligible.

He went into the living room, wolfed down several of the sandwiches and drank the pot of coffee he'd made, not worrying about the effect of the caffeine on his system so late at night. A deep frown furrowed his brow as he considered the situation with Claire.

Until that night he hadn't doubted his ability to talk her around eventually. Never in his life had he been denied anything he really wanted; nature had given him an enormous advantage in coupling his face and body with a superior intellect. But for the first time he wasn't certain that he would win. He had seen behind Claire's shield and, for the first time, seen the vulnerability of the real woman and realized the necessity for that shield. She felt too much, loved too deeply, gave herself too completely… and betrayal would strike a crippling blow at that too-tender heart.

Whatever happened, he had to make certain that she couldn't hide from him, and he knew her well enough to realize that would be her first form of defense. She would do whatever she could to put distance between them, mentally if not physically. Time was on her side. Soon he would have to return to Dallas, and they would be separated by more than two hundred miles; he would be traveling to other cities, putting even more distance between them. He considered his options, and a plan formed in his mind. The thing to do was to take her to Dallas with him; the problem was in getting her there.

He cleaned up after himself then went into the bedroom to check on her, to assure himself that she was really all right. She was still sleeping soundly, and a healthy pink color was beginning to return to her cheeks as she rested. Thoughtfully he looked at her alarm clock, then picked it up to make certain the alarm was turned off. Let her sleep as long as she needed. He wrote a short note and propped it on the clock, then let himself out of the apartment. He had plans to make, and it wasn't too late at night to set them in motion.

A faint grin relieved the grimness of his expression as he drove through the rainy Houston night. It wouldn't hurt Rome to be jarred out of a sound sleep by a telephone call; after all, it had been Rome's call three weeks before that had pulled Max out of the bed he'd been sharing with Claire. Fate had a way of evening things out.

Chapter Nine

When Claire woke the next morning she felt rested for the first time in weeks, and she lay in drowsy relaxation, waiting for the alarm to go off. The minutes ticked by without the alarm, and finally she opened a curious eye to check the time. The first thing she noticed was that the room was very light for so early in the morning, and the second thing she noticed was that it was almost nine-thirty. "Oh, no!" She hated being late to anything, even by a few minutes, and she was more than a few minutes late. She should have been at work an hour-and-a-half ago!

She scrambled out of bed, still a little disoriented from sleeping so long, and stared down at herself in confusion. Why was she wearing a blouse and slip instead of a nightgown? Then memory flooded back, and her face heated. Max! She'd gone to sleep on the couch; Max must have put her to bed. At least he hadn't stripped her; she couldn't have borne that. It was bad enough that he'd handled her so easily while she'd been asleep, undressing her and putting her to bed as if he had every right to be so familiar with her. She would have preferred that he let her sleep on the couch.

But that explained why she had slept so late; he hadn't set her alarm. She looked at the clock then noticed the note beside it. She didn't even have to pick it up to read it; the handwriting was a series of bold slashes written with a strong hand. *Don't worry about being late. You need the rest. I'll handle it with Bronson—Max*.

She grabbed the note and crumpled it with a despairing cry. That was just what she needed, for him to "handle" it with Sam! What would he say? That he'd left her in bed, and she was so tired that he was going to let her sleep late? Sam would have to pull one of the other secretaries in to handle the office, and the reason why she was late would spread through the office like wildfire.

Her stomach rumbled, and she realized that she was both very hungry and very grungy from having slept in her clothes and makeup. She was already so late that she would gain nothing by hurrying to work. She decided to take her time; after a long shower, a shampoo and a leisurely breakfast, she would feel better. She wouldn't go to work looking thrown-together; she would be professional if it killed her.

It was almost noon when she walked into the office, but her stomach was pleasantly full, her hair washed and pulled back into an attractive chignon, and she wore her favorite dress, a navy-blue blouson with white piping. Her efforts to bolster her spirits had worked, or perhaps it was the extra sleep she'd had; for whatever reason, she felt almost calm. There was indeed another secretary at her desk, a young woman who had been with the company only a few months, and whose eyes widened with surprise when she saw Claire. "Miss Westbrook! Are you feeling better? Mr. Bronson said you fainted last night and wouldn't be working today."

Bless Sam for covering for her! Claire said calmly, "I'm feeling much better, thank you. I was very tired, nothing else."

She relieved the young woman and sent her back to her own job; when she sat down at her desk, Claire felt more normal, as if things were settling back into their rightful place. Then the door to Sam's office opened, and someone stood there watching her. It wasn't Sam; she had never felt that tingle of awareness sweep over her from Sam's gaze. Without looking at Max, she gathered her notes on the documents that needed typing.

"Leave those," he ordered, coming to stand behind her. "I'm taking you to lunch."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry. I've just had breakfast."

"Then you can watch me eat."

"Thank you, no," she repeated. "I have a lot to do—"

"This isn't personal," he interrupted. "It concerns your job."

Her hands stilled. Of course. Why hadn't she thought of that? Sam would no longer need a secretary, so she would no longer have a job. The guarantees that applied to the others could hardly be expected to apply to her. She raised shocked eyes to Max, trying to cope with the idea of being so abruptly unemployed. There were other jobs, of course. Houston was a boomtown, and she would find other work, but would she enjoy it so much and would it pay so well? Though her apartment wasn't an expensive one like Max's, it was nice and in a good section of town; if she had to take a large cut in pay, she wouldn't be able to afford it. For a terrible moment she saw herself losing not only her job but her home.

Max reached down and pulled her to her feet. His eyes were gleaming with the success he'd had in putting his plan into motion. "We'll go to Riley's; it isn't quite noon, so we should get a good table away from the crowd."

Claire was silent as they left the building and crossed the street. It was a hot spring, with the daytime temperatures already climbing into the low nineties, and though the sky was a deep, clear blue now, the forecast was for more thunderstorms in the afternoon. Even on the short walk to Riley's her navy-blue dress began to feel too warm. Worry ate at her. How much notice would she be given? Two weeks? A month? How long it would take to move Sam completely into research?

They just beat the lunch crowd at Riley's and got one of the secluded booths in the back. Claire ordered a glass of iced tea, earning a hard look from Max. "You might eat a little something; you've lost weight, and you had precious little to spare."

"I'm not hungry."

"So you said. The point is, you should eat even though you aren't hungry to gain back the weight you've lost."

Why did he keep harping about her weight? She had lost only a pound or two, and she had always bordered on thinness, anyway. She had other things to worry about. "Are you firing me?" she asked, keeping her expression blank.

His eyebrows lifted. "Why should I fire you?"

"I can think of several reasons. The most immediate is that my job is being phased out, since Sam won't need a secretary in research, and whoever takes over as CEO will probably bring his own." She met his gaze squarely, her dark eyes fathomless and a little strained, despite her efforts to keep all expression from them. "There's also the fact that this would be a good opportunity to get rid of a bad security risk."

Swift anger darkened his eyes. "You're not a bad security risk."

"I leaked confidential information. I trusted the wrong person, so I'm obviously a terrible judge of character."

"Damn it, I—" He interrupted himself, glaring at her from narrowed, brilliant eyes. "You aren't being fired," he finally continued in a clipped voice. "You're being transferred to Dallas, to Spencer-Nyle headquarters."

Stunned anew, she opened her mouth to say something then closed it when nothing came to mind. Transferred! "I can't go to Dallas!"

"Of course you can. It would be foolish of you to refuse this opportunity. You won't be executive secretary to the CEO, of course, but there will be a substantial increase in salary. Spencer-Nyle is much larger than Bronson Alloys and pays its employees well."

Panic edged into her eyes, her voice. "I won't work for you."
"You wouldn't be working for me," he snapped. "You'll be working for Spencer-Nyle."
"In what capacity? Shoved into a closet sorting paper clips, so I can never get my hands on any valuable information?"
He leaned over the table, rage turning his eyes dark green. "If you say another word about being a security risk, I'll take you over my knee wherever we happen to be, even if it's the middle of the street—or in a restaurant."
Claire sank back, warned by the look and the barely controlled ferocity in his face. How had she made the colossal mistake of thinking him civilized? He had the temperament of a rampaging savage.
"Now, if you're through with the sarcastic remarks, I'll give you your job description," he said icily.
"I haven't said I'll take the job."
"It would be foolish of you to turn it down. As you pointed out, your job at Branson Alloys will no longer be there in a short while." He named a figure that was half again as much as she was currently making. "Can you afford to turn down that much money?"
"There are other jobs in Houston. My entire family is here. If I moved to Dallas, I'd have no one."
His jaw tightened, and his eyes went even darker. "You could visit on weekends," he said.
Claire sipped at her tea, not looking at him. It *would* be foolish to turn down that much money, even though it meant moving to Dallas, but her instinct was to turn it down, anyway. If she relocated to Spencer-Nylie's headquarters she would be in Max's territory, seeing him every day, and he would have authority over her. It wasn't a decision she could make immediately, even though logic said she should jump at it.
"I'll have to think about it," she said with the quiet stubbornness that her family had learned to recognize.
"Very well. You have until Monday."
"That's just three days, counting today!"
"If you decide not to take the job, another person will have to be found," he pointed out. "Your decision can't be very complicated; you have to relocate or join the unemployment lists. Until Monday."

She saw no sign of relenting in his eyes, even though three days seemed like no time at all to her. Claire didn't hurry toward change; she liked to do things gradually, becoming used to changes by slow increments. She had lived all of her life in or near Houston, and to move to another city was like asking her to change her entire life. Things were difficult enough now without being lost in a totally new environment.

Max's prime rib was served, and he devoted himself to it for a few minutes while Claire nursed her tea and turned the idea of moving over and over in her mind. At last she pushed it away; she couldn't decide now, and she had other things she wanted to ask him.

"What did you tell Sam?"

He looked up. "Concerning what?"

"Last night. The fill-in secretary said that Sam told her I'd fainted and wouldn't be working today."

"Embellishment on his part. When he asked me this morning what the hell I was doing following and harassing you last night, I told him to mind his own bloody damn business and that it was a good thing someone made certain you got home safely because you collapsed."

"I didn't collapse."

"Really? Do you remember when I undressed you?"

She looked away, her cheeks heating. "No."

"I didn't cheat; I don't take advantage of unconscious women. When I make love to you again, you'll damned well be awake."

She had noticed that the more irritated he was, the more crisp his accent became, and he was practically biting off his words now. "If I don't go to Dallas," she whispered, getting up from the booth, "it will be because of you, because I can't stand being near you." Then she walked off before he could say anything, fleeing back across the street to the relative safety of the office.

Max watched her go, his face stiff. He hadn't thought that she would reject the job offer, but now it seemed that she might, and he was afraid that if he lost track of her now he might lose her forever. Damn it, after all the strings he had pulled, she *had* to take the job!

Rome hadn't been pleased by the late phone call the night before. "Damn it, Max, this had better be good," he'd growled. "Jed is cutting teeth and raising hell about it, and we'd just gone to sleep after getting him settled."

"Kiss Sarah good-night for me," Max had said, amused by Rome's grouchiness.
Rome told him where he could go and how he could get there, and in the background Max had heard Sarah's laughter. "This is important," he'd finally said. "Is there a job opening in the office? Any job?"
They worked so well together that Rome hadn't wasted any time asking unimportant questions, like for whom, and why. They trusted each other's instincts and plans. Rome had been silent for a moment, his steel-trap brain running through the possibilities. "Delgado in finance is being transferred to Honolulu."
"Good God, what strings did he pull to get that?"
"He understands money."
"All right, who's taking his place?"
"We've been talking about bringing Quinn Payton in from Seattle."
Max had been silent in his turn. "Why not Jean Sloss in R and D? She has a degree in business finance, and she's done a damned good job. I think she's executive material."
By that time Rome had seen a pattern in all this moving around. "Who do you suggest to replace Jean Sloss? I agree that she deserves a promotion, but she's good enough that replacing her won't be easy."
"Why not Kali? She'd love to work in R and D, and it would be a chance for her to eventually move into a managerial position. She knows the company."
"Damn it, she's *my* secretary!" Rome had roared. "Why don't you move,your own secretary?"
Max had considered that, but didn't think Claire would take the job; on second thought, being Rome's secretary would be too close and make working difficult, too. "Forget Kali, then. Caulfield, the general office manager…what's his secretary's name? Her qualifications are good, and she's ambitious. Carolyn Watford, that's it."
"I'm taking all this down. We're not in the habit of playing musical offices. Who takes Carolyn Watford's place?"
"Claire Westbrook."
After a long pause of silence Rome had said, "I'll be damned," and Max had known he didn't have to make any further explanations.
"I'll see what I can do. It won't be easy, moving this many people around on such short notice. When can I let you know?"

"Sometime before lunch tomorrow," Max had said.
"Hell!" Rome had snorted, and hung up, but he had been on the phone before ten o'clock with the all-clear. Rome Matthews was a mover and a shaker; when he decided something would be done, it was better not to stand in his way, and Anson Edwards generally gave him a free hand.
Max hadn't considered that he would have more trouble convincing Claire to move than Rome had had in shaking up an entire office, but he should have known. He had made enough mistakes in dealing with her, mistakes that had come back to haunt him, that he should have been expecting it. If he could just get her to Dallas, he would have plenty of time to convince her that he wasn't a complete bastard after all. If it took time to rebuild her trust in him, he was willing to take that time. He had hurt her, and the knowledge was eating away at him. It had been true when Claire accused him of compartmentalizing his life. He hadn't allowed for the possibility that Claire would think he had used her solely for the purpose of getting that information. Now he couldn't get her to listen to him, and he had the cold feeling inside that even if she did, she wouldn't believe him. He had destroyed her trust in him, and only now was he realizing how rare and precious that trust was.
Claire did her usual Saturday morning chores, finding comfort in the routine while she tried to get her thoughts in order and make a logical decision. She scrubbed and waxed the kitchen floor, cleaned the bathroom from top to bottom, did her laundry, and even washed the windows, trying to burn up the anger that consumed her. With a shock she realized that she was not just angry, she was furious. She was usually calm; she couldn't even remember the last time she had been truly angry, so angry that she wanted to throw something and scream at the top of her lungs. Damn him, how *dare he!* After using her as callously as he had, now he actually expected her to uproot herself and change her entire life, agree to move to another city and in doing so throw herself into continuous contact with him. He had said she wouldn't be working for him, but she would be in the same building, in the same city, and he had made it plain that he didn't consider things over between them. How had he said it? "When I make love to you again, you'll be awake." *Again*. That was the key word.
His gall made her almost incoherent with anger, and she muttered to herself as she cleaned. It was odd, but she couldn't remember being angry when Jeff had left her for Helene; she had been tired and grief-worn over the

baby, and bitterly accepting that Jeff should want someone else, but she hadn't been angry. Only Max had touched her deeply enough to find the core of passion inside her. He brought out all the emotions and feelings she had spent a lifetime controlling and protecting: love, fierce desire, even anger.

She still loved him; she didn't even try to fool herself on that score. She loved him, she burned for him, she wanted him, and the flip side of the coin was her deep anger. It was nature's decree that for every action there should be a balancing reaction, and that was also true of emotions. If she hadn't loved him so deeply, she would have been able to shrug away his betrayal and accept it as a lesson in trusting the wrong person. But because she loved him, she wanted to shake him until his teeth rattled. She wanted to scream at his arrogant assumption that she was his for the taking, and she wanted to show him just how wrong that assumption was.

She could tell him to keep his job, turn her back on him, and walk away; that would show him that he couldn't use her and expect her to fall back into his bed whenever he beckoned. That would show him that she was perfectly capable of living without him…or would it? Wouldn't it instead be admitting that he had hurt her so badly that she *couldn't* face seeing him every day? She had to admit that joining the unemployment line when she had the offer of a good job was a drastic, illogical move. He would know how much he had hurt her, and her pride demanded that she put up a good front. It was somehow essential to her self-esteem that she prevent him from knowing that his betrayal had hurt her so deeply that the wound was still bleeding.

But what other choice did she have? If she went to Dallas, she would be playing right into his hands, dancing to his tune like a marionette on a string.

Claire straightened from her dusting, her mouth set firmly and her eyes deeply thoughtful. What she had to do was not allow Max to be a factor in her decision at all; this was her job, her financial future, and she shouldn't allow anger to cloud her judgment. Even if she went to Dallas, she wouldn't *have* to dance to Max's tune; when it came down to it, she was a woman, not a marionette. The choice, and the decision, were hers.

Looking at it like that, from a logical point of view, she knew that she would take the job. Perhaps that would be the best way of putting up a good front. If she went on about her life as normal, it would seem as if Max

hadn't made such a disastrous impact on her heart, and only she would know the truth.

Once the decision was made it was as if a weight had lifted. The difficult part would be telling her family, and Claire chose to tell Martine first. That afternoon she drove out to Martine's house in the suburbs, a ritzy location that accurately reflected Martine's and Steve's dual success. Martine's house wasn't cool and picture-perfect, though. It reflected Martine's warmth and outgoing personality, as well as her joy in her children. A tricycle was parked next to the first step, and a red ball lay under a manicured shrub, but most of the cheerful tangle of toys was in the fenced backyard that surrounded the pool. Because it was a warm, sunny Saturday, Claire directed her steps toward the back. As she rounded the corner of the house, the tapping of her heels on the flagstones warned Martine of someone's presence, and she lazily opened her eyes. Just as Claire had expected, her sister was stretched out on a deck chair, lazing in the sun in a diminutive white bikini that had to make Steve choke whenever he saw it. Even wearing no makeup and with her golden blond hair pulled back in a haphazard ponytail with an ordinary rubber band, Martine was gorgeous and sexy.

"Pull up a chair," she invited lazily. "I would hug you, but I'm slimy with suntan oil."

"Where are the children?" Claire asked, sinking onto a deck chair and propping her feet up. The sun did feel good, all hot and clean, and she turned her face up to it like a flower.

"Skating party. It's Brad's best friend's birthday. It's an *all-day* skating party," Martine said gleefully. "And Steve is playing golf with a client. This may be the only day I have alone again until both children are in college, so I'm making the most of it."

"Shall I go?" Claire asked teasingly.

"Don't you dare. With our schedules, we don't see enough of each other as it is."

Claire looked down, thinking of the decision she'd made that morning. She was only now beginning to realize how close-knit her family was, without living in each other's pockets; moving away from them was going to be a wrench. "What if you saw even less of me? What if I moved to Dallas?"

Martine shot upright in the deck chair, her blue eyes wide and shocked. "What? Why would you move to Dallas? What about your job?"

"I've been offered a job in Dallas. I won't have my job here much longer, anyway."
"Why not? I thought you and Sam got along like a house on fire."
"We do, but Sam—the company has been taken over by Spencer-Nyle, a conglomerate based in Dallas."
"I've been reading about the possibility in the papers, but I had hoped it wouldn't happen. So it's final, then? When did it happen, and what does that have to do with you, anyway? They certainly aren't going to get rid of Sam; he's the brains behind Bronson Alloys. Aren't you going to stay on as his secretary?"
"The final agreement was signed yesterday." Claire looked down at her hands, surprised to see that her fingers were laced tightly together. She made a conscious effort to relax. "Sam is going completely into research, so he won't need a secretary any longer."
"That's bad; I know how much you like him. But it's also good that you've already had a job offer. What company is it?"
"Spencer-Nyle."
Marine's eyes widened. "The corporate headquarters! I'm impressed, and you must have impressed someone else, too!"
"Not really." Claire took a deep breath. This wasn't getting any easier, so she decided to just get it said. "Max Benedict's real name is Maxwell Conroy, and he's a vice president with Spencer-Nyle."
For a full five seconds Martine merely stared at Claire with a stunned expression; then hot color flooded her cheeks and she surged to her feet, her fists clenched. She seldom swore, but it was due to choice, not lack of vocabulary. She used every bit of that vocabulary now, pacing up and down and damning Max with every invective she could think of, arid inventing new combinations when she ran out of the ones she already knew. She didn't need to hear all the details to know that Claire had been hurt; Martine knew Claire well, and she was fiercely protective of her sister, as she was of everyone she loved.
When Martine showed signs of running down, Claire interrupted quietly. "It gets more complicated. I gave him confidential information that he needed for Spencer-Nyle to engineer the takeover; that was why he was down here, and that was why he was showing so much interest in me. I blurted it all out like an idiot."

"I'll tear his face off," Martine raged, beginning to pace up and down again like a caged tigress. Then she stopped, and a peculiar expression came over her face. "But you're going to Dallas with him?"
"I'm going to Dallas for the job" Claire said firmly. "It's the only logical thing I can do. I'd have to be an even bigger idiot than I already am if I deliberately chose unemployment over a good job. Pride won't keep the bills paid."
"Yes, it is the logical thing to do," Martine echoed, and sat down. She still had that peculiar expression on her face, as if she were trying to think something through and it didn't quite tally up. Then a slow smile began to crinkle the corners of her eyes. "He's transferred you so you'll be with him, that's it, isn't it? The man is in love with you!"
"Not likely," Claire said, her throat going tight. "Lies and betrayal aren't very good indicators of love. I love him, but you already knew that, didn't you? I shouldn't love him, not now, but I can't turn it on and off like a faucet. Just don't ask me to believe that he ever saw anything in me except the means to an end."
"But when I think about it, he always watched you…oh, I can't describe it," Martine mused. "As if he were so hungry for you, as if he wanted to absorb you. It gave me the shivers, watching him watch you. The *good* shivers, if you know what I mean."
Claire shook her head. "That isn't likely, either. You've seen him," she said, feeling her body tense up again. "He's beautiful; it stops my breath to look at him! Why should he be interested in me, except for the information he needed?"
"Why shouldn't he? In my book he'd be a fool if he didn't love you."
"Then a lot of men have been fools," Claire pointed out wearily.
"Fiddlesticks. You haven't *let* them love you; you never let anyone get close enough to really know you, but Max is more intelligent than most men. Why *wouldn't* he love you?" Martine asked passionately.
It was hard for Claire to say, almost impossible. Her throat tightened. "Because I'm not beautiful, like you; that seems to be what men want."
"Of course you aren't beautiful like me! You're beautiful like *yourselfl"* Martine came over to Claire and sat down on the deck chair with her, her lovely face unusually serious. "I'm flamboyant, but that isn't your style at all. Do you know what Steve once said to me? He said that he wished I were more like you, that I would think before I leaped. I punched him, of

course, and asked what else he likes about you. He said that he likes your big dark eyes—he called them 'bedroom eyes'—and I was about ready to do more than punch him! Blue-eyed blondes like me are a dime a dozen, but how many brown-eyed blondes are there? I used to die with envy, because you only had to turn those dark eyes on a man and he was ready to melt at your feet, but you never seemed to know that, and eventually he gave up."
Suddenly Martine caught her breath, her eyes widening. "Max didn't give up, did he?"
Claire was staring at her sister, unable to believe that beautiful Martine had ever found anything about her to be jealous of. Distracted, she said, "Max doesn't know those two words are ever used together." Then she realized what she had just admitted, and she flushed. She wasn't used to talking so frankly to anyone, even her sister, but she was learning some things about herself that she'd never suspected before. Was it true that she held people away from her, that she didn't let them get close enough to care? She hadn't looked at it from that angle before; she had thought that she was keeping a distance between herself and other people so *she* wouldn't care, without considering the person who was being held at arm's length.
"Max won't leave me alone; he insists that it isn't over. He was called back to Dallas," she explained steadily. "By the time he returned to Houston, I had already found out his real name and what he was doing here. He called, but I refused to go out with him again. So now I've been transferred to Dallas."
"To his own territory. Smart move," Martine commented.
"Yes. I know all that. I know how he reacts to challenges, and that's all I am to him. How many women do you suppose have ever refused him?"
Martine thought, then admitted ruefully, "You probably stand alone."
"Yes. But I have to have a job, so I'm going." Even as she said the words, Claire wondered if there had ever been anything else she could have done. "What would you do in my place?"
"I'd go," Martine admitted, and laughed. "We must be more alike than you think. I know I'd never let him think that he'd made me run!"
"Exactly." Claire's dark eyes turned almost black. "He makes me so angry I could *spit!"*
Martine raised a militant fist. "Give him hell, honey!" Seeing the anger in Claire's face made Martine want to dance around the yard. Too often Claire held her emotions in, hiding her vulnerabilities from the rest of the world.

Even when she had lost her baby, Claire had been pale and quiet; only Max had ever jostled her out of her composure. Claire might not think that Max cared for her at all, but Martine had seen Max watching her sister, and thought Claire was seriously underestimating the strength of his attraction to her. There was no doubt that he loved a challenge; he had that sort of fire in his eyes, that self-confident arrogance. But Claire didn't realize that she was an ongoing challenge, with her silences and perceptions, and the depths of her personality. If Martine read him correctly, Max would be fascinated by the complexity of Claire's character. And, damn him, if he hurt Claire again, he'd have to answer to Martine for it!

Claire felt as if she had made a momentous decision, but she was calm, even though the thought of changing her life so completely was a wrenching one. She had lived in her quiet, cozy apartment for five years, and it hurt to think of leaving, yet she knew that she had made the only logical choice. It was just that she preferred changes to come slowly, so she could adjust to them, rather than in a confusing rush.

She sat in silence that night, looking around and trying to accustom herself to the idea of a new apartment, a different city. She wasn't in the mood for either television or music, and she was too disturbed to find refuge in a book. There were plans to be made, work to be done; she had to find another apartment, get the utilities turned on, pack… say goodbye to her family. Martine already knew, but Alma would be the difficult one. It wouldn't really be goodbye, but it would be the end of easy access to her family. The distance between them would be great enough that she couldn't just get in the car and drive over whenever the whim took her.

Her doorbell rang, and she answered it without thinking. Max filled the doorway, looking down at her with a peculiarly intense glitter in his eyes. Claire tightened her hand on the doorknob, not stepping back to allow him entrance. Why couldn't he leave her alone? She needed time by herself to get accustomed to the sweeping changes she was making in her life.

The glitter in his eyes intensified as he realized that she wasn't going to invite him inside. He put his hand on hers and gently but forcefully removed it from the doorknob, then stepped forward, crowding her back into the apartment. He shut the door behind him. "Are you sitting here brooding?" he asked shortly, glancing around the silent apartment.

Claire moved away from him, her face closed. "I've been thinking, yes."

Strong habits had been established in the short time they had been together; Claire went automatically to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee, then turned to find him leaning in the doorway, still watching her in a way that made her want to check all her buttons to make certain they were fastened. She would have to brush past him to get to the living room, so she opted for retaining the relatively safe distance between them and remained where she was. "You might as well know," she said, throwing the words into the silence between them. "I've decided to take the job."
"Is that what you've been brooding about?"
"It's a major change," she replied coolly, using every ounce of self-control she possessed. "Didn't you have any doubts when you relocated from Montreal to Dallas?"
Curiosity sharpened his gaze even more. "Ah, yes, I've been meaning to ask you about that. Exactly how did you discover my last name?"
"I read a magazine article on Spencer-Nyle. It had a picture of you." x
He strolled into the kitchen, and Claire turned away to get two mugs out of the cabinet. Before she could turn around again, he was behind her, his arms braced on the cabinet on either side of her, effectively trapping her. "I had intended to tell you that morning, when we woke up," he said, tending his head to take a little nip at her ear. Claire sucked in her breath and twisted her head away, both alarmed and angered by the way his slightest touch made her pulse race. He ignored her movement of rejection and nuzzled her ear again, continuing his explanation whether she wanted to hear it or not. "But that phone call interrupted everything, and by the time I got back to Houston, you'd already found out, damn my luck!"
"It doesn't matter," she protested tightly. "What could you have said? 'By the way, dear, I'm an executive with a company that has targeted your company for takeover, and I've been using you to get information'?" She mimicked his clipped accent and saw his hands clench on the cabinet in front of her.
"No, that wasn't what I would have said." He pushed himself away from her, and Claire turned, clutching the coffee mugs to her chest, to find him staring at her with barely restrained violence in his eyes. "I wouldn't have said anything at all until you were in bed with me; trying to reason with you has turned out to be a waste of time."
"Oh?" she cried. "I think it's terribly unreasonable of you to think you could just waltz back into my life and pick up where you'd left off, after what you

did!" She slammed the mugs down onto the cabinet, then stared at them in horror. What if she'd broken them? She never lost her temper, never screamed or threw things or slammed them down, but now it seemed as if her anger was so close to the surface that Max could bring it out every time he spoke to her. She was reacting in away that was totally unlike herself. Or maybe, she thought grimly, she was simply discovering facts about herself that she'd never before suspected. Max had a talent for drawing intense reactions from her. Grimly she sought control again, taking another calming breath,"Why are you here?"

"I thought you might want to know more about the job before you made your decision," he muttered, still looking furious. He admitted to himself that he was lying. He had wanted to see her; he had no other reason.

"I appreciate the thought," Claire said, as distant as the moon. She poured coffee into both mugs and extended one to him, then took a seat at her tiny kitchen table, which was just big enough for two. Max took the chair opposite her, still scowling as he drank his coffee.

"Well?" she prompted a few minutes later, when he still hadn't said a word.

His frown deepened. "You'll be secretary to the general office manager, Theo Caulfield. The departments of payroll, insurance, general accounting, data processing, maintenance, office supplies and equipment, as well as the secretarial pool, are all under his control, though each department has its own manager. It's a demanding job."

"It sounds interesting," she said politely, but she was being truthful. A job that diverse had to be interesting, and challenging.

"You'll need to work late occasionally, but the extra hours won't be excessive. You have two weeks to get settled. I would give you a month but the office is in an uproar with a lot of transfers, and you're needed on the job." He didn't add that he was the reason the office was in an uproar. "I'll help you look for an apartment. You helped me, so I owe you a favor."

Claire's face stiffened at the mention of his apartment; it was only an expensive prop, a part of his hoax. That apartment had given him the appearance of stability and permanence. "No, thank you. I don't need your help."

His face turned dark, and he set his mug down with a thump. "Very well," he snapped, getting to his feet and hauling her up with a strong grip on her arm. "You're determined not to give an inch, not even to listen to my side of

it. Be safe, behind those walls of yours, and if you ever think of what you might be missing, think of this!"
His mouth was hot and strong. His arms crushed her against him, as if he couldn't get her close enough. His tongue went deep, reminding her.
Claire whimpered, tears burning her eyes as the wanting curled in her again, as hot and alive as it had ever been.
Max pushed her away, breathing hard. "If you think that has anything to do with business, you're a damned fool!" he said harshly and slammed out of the apartment as if he couldn't trust himself to stay a minute longer.

Chapter Ten

To her surprise, Claire was too busy during the following two weeks to feel much anxiety over her move to Dallas. Finding an apartment wasn't easy; she spent hours inspecting and rejecting, getting lost time and again in the unfamiliar city but somehow having fun doing it. Alma, once she'd gotten over the shock of one of her daughters moving out of her immediate reach, threw herself into the apartment search with all her typical zest and spent days touring Dallas with Claire, ruthlessly hunting out any potential trouble spots in an apartment. Claire let her mother go on, amused by that overflow of energy. It was odd that the older she became, the closer Claire grew to her family. At some point, their beauty and self-confidence had ceased to intimidate her. She loved them and was proud of their accomplishments.
Even Martine was dragged into the apartment hunting, and together they made a list of the most suitable locations then began narrowing the choices. Claire didn't like the ultramodern condos, despite their conveniences, and though she hadn't really considered a house, in the end it was a tiny, neat house that won over the apartments. The rent was remarkably reasonable because of its size. Getting it ready for Claire to move in became a major family project. Claire and her father repainted the rooms in white to make them seem larger, while Alma and Martine bought material and sewed curtains to fit the odd-size windows. Steve put new dead-bolt locks on the doors and locking screens on the windows, then sanded and polished the old-fashioned wooden floors. Brad and Cassie, the children, romped in the postage-stamp yard and appeared periodically with demands for sandwiches and Kool-Aid.

On the day she moved in the entire house was in chaos, with the movers carting furniture and boxes in, while she and Alma and Martine tried to put everything in some sort of order. Harmon and Steve kept out of the decision-making, simply standing by to provide muscle if needed. Claire was headfirst in a box of books when a cool voice said from the door, "Would another pair of hands be welcome?"

Claire straightened abruptly, her face still as she tried to deal with the way the sound of his voice affected her. For two weeks Max had been as polite as a stranger, and she had been tormented by a lingering sense of loss. The tumult of moving, with its mingled moments of hilarity and frustration, and her pure physical exhaustion from so much work, had buffered her somewhat from her thoughts, but there were still far too many moments when she wished she had never found out the truth about him, that the hurt and anger would all just go away. The distance between them the past two weeks had hurt, too, though she had tried to ignore it. Why had he shown up now, strolling into the middle of the overflowing mess with that indefinable grace of his?

Harmon groaned, straightening from his task. "Another strong back is just what we need! Take the other end of this table; it weighs a ton."

Max picked his way over the cluttered floor to help Harmon lift the table and put it where Claire had directed. Alma sailed out of the kitchen, and a glowing smile broke over her face when she saw Max. "Oh, hello! Did you volunteer, or were you kidnapped?" she asked, going over to hug him.

"I volunteered. You know what they say about mad dogs and Englishmen," he said, smiling as he returned Alma's hug.

Claire turned back to the box of books she'd been unpacking, a tiny frown darkening her eyes. She hadn't told Alma all the circumstances behind her move to Dallas, but neither had she thought that her family would be having any further contact with Max. Perhaps Martine had revealed some things, but Claire didn't know and didn't want to ask. Would Alma have been so friendly to Max if she had known the truth? This could be a little awkward; they knew Max as Max Benedict, but he was really Max Conroy. Should she let them continue thinking that was his name or reintro-duce him? What could she say? "Conroy is Max's real last name; he just uses Benedict as an alias occasionally." She thought that Miss Manners probably hadn't ruled on this particular situation, so she decided to say nothing.

He fit in easily with her family, joking and conversing as effortlessly as he had before. They didn't know that this congeniality was a disguise for the driving power of his true personality. She watched him, but didn't talk to him except to answer direct questions and she sensed that he was watching her, too. She'd thought that he'd given up, but now she remembered telling Martine that he wasn't even familiar with the term. He hadn't given up; he'd simply been waiting. He calmly wrote down her unlisted telephone number, copying it off the telephone, and when he looked up to find her watching him, he lifted an eyebrow in silent invitation for her to make an issue of it. Claire simply turned away to continue her chores. Attacking him now over a telephone number would make her look like an ungrateful wretch after he'd worked tirelessly most of the day, helping her get settled.

It was late when everything was put in its place, and everyone was yawning widely. Rather than attempt the long drive back to Houston that night, her family had elected to stay in a motel and drive back the next morning. Somehow Claire found herself waving goodbye to them from her new porch, with Max standing beside her as if he belonged there.

"Why did you come here?" she asked quietly, watching the taillights disappear down the street. The warm night sounds of chirping insects and the rustle of leaves in the trees from a slight breeze surrounded them, where only a moment ago there had been laughter and noisy yawns and enthusiastic cries of "Bye! Take care now. I'll call you tomorrow!"

"To help you with your things," he said, holding the screen door open for her as she reentered the house. She didn't trust his bland tone for a minute. "And to make certain that you're comfortable. Nothing more sinister than that."

"Thank you for your help."

"You're welcome. Is there any coffee left in the pot?"

"I think so, but it is probably undrinkable by now. You drink too much coffee, anyway," she said without thinking, going into the kitchen to pour out the stale coffee. He stopped her as she was beginning to make a freshpot.

"You're right; I don't need any more coffee," he said, taking the pot out of her hand and placing it in the sink. Grasping her elbow, he pulled her around to face him. "What I need is this."

His other arm went around her waist, bringing her up against him, and he bent his head. His mouth closed over hers, and the hot, heady taste of him

filled her; he kissed her with deep, greedy hunger, until a painful hunger of her own began to coil in her body. Both angered and alarmed by the desire he could arouse so effortlessly, she jerked her mouth from his and pushed against his shoulders, feeling the heavy muscles beneath her palms.
To her surprise he let her go easily, releasing her and stepping back. Satisfaction was plain in his eyes, as if he'd just proved something to himself. He must have felt her response; for a brief moment she hadn't been able to prevent herself from melting against him, her body seeking his.
"I wish you hadn't come," she whispered, her dark eyes locked on him. "Why involve yourself with my family? How do I tell them that you aren't Max Benedict, after all?"
"You don't have to tell them anything; they already know. I've explained it to your mother."
Shocked, Claire stared at him. "What?" she stammered. "Why? When did you tell her? *What* did you tell her?"
He answered readily enough. "I told her that the takeover of Bronson Alloys by my company has complicated our relationship, but that I transferred you to Dallas so we would still be together and could work out the problems."
He made it all sound so simple, as if he hadn't abandoned her as soon as he'd gotten the information he wanted! It was true that he hadn't been expecting the phone call that had forced him to return to Dallas, but it was also true that he hadn't made any attempt to contact her after that until the actual mechanics of the takeover had put him back in Houston. Now, in his typical high-handed fashion, he believed that all he had to do was move her to Dallas and the "complications" would be settled.
Her expression was so troubled, for once so easily read, with all her doubts and hurt there for him to see, that he had to fight the urge to pull her against him and shelter her in his arms. Max had never known failure with a woman he wanted; they came easily into his arms and his bed, and they had always been so easy to read. It was ironic that Claire, the one woman he couldn't easily understand, should be the woman he wanted more intensely than he'd ever dreamed he would want a woman. He couldn't tell what she was thinking; her defenses were too strong, her personality too complex. Yet every glimpse he had of the inner woman only made him hungrier to find out more about her, to get deeper into her mind. Looking at her now, with her clothes grimy from the day's labors, her hair straggling down from

its topknot, her face free of makeup and her velvety dark eyes full of pain and uncertainty, Max felt something jolt in his chest.
He was in love with her.
The realization stunned him, though now that he recognized it for what it was, he knew that the feeling had been there for some time. He had labeled it as attraction, desire, even challenge, and it was all of those, and more. Of all the women in the world, he hadn't loved any of the soft, willing beauties who had shared his bed and would have done anything for him. Instead it was a difficult, aloof, yet extraordinarily vulnerable woman who made him feel as if he would explode with joy if she smiled at him. He wanted to protect her; he wanted to discover all the hidden depths of her character; he wanted to lose himself in the unexpected and shattering passion she had to offer.
Claire moved away from him, rubbing the back of her neck tiredly and not seeing the arrested expression on his face. "How did you explain your change of name?"
It took a minute before he could gather himself and make sense of what she had asked. "I told her the truth, that I had been looking for certain information and didn't want Bronson to know my true identity."
Claire thought Alma was so charmed by Max that she would be prepared to believe anything he said. "What did she say?"
An appreciative smile quirked Max's mouth as he remembered exactly what Alma had said. That lady did have a way with words, though he could hardly tell Claire that her mother had said, "If you hurt my daughter, Max Benedict, or Conroy, or whoever you are, I'll have your guts for garters!" Claire didn't seem to realize how fiercely protective her entire family was of her.
"She understood," was all he said, watching Claire as she retreated even more, continually expanding the distance between them. She was so wary!
"I'm sure she did," Claire sighed.
Impatiently Max closed the gap between them, his quick strides carrying him to her side. Claire looked up, startled by his sudden movement, then gave a soft cry as he put his hands on her waist and lifted her up so her eyes were level with his. "Yes, your mother understood; it's a pity you don't!" he muttered, then put his mouth on hers.
There was a tiny, despairing cry deep inside her mind. How could she keep control of herself if he kept kissing her? Especially kisses like these, deep,

hungry kisses, as if he couldn't get enough of her taste. His lips released hers and slid down to her throat, nipping at her skin as they went. He held her so tightly that his hands were hurting her, and she didn't care. Her eyes closed tightly, and tears welled beneath her lashes.
"Why do you keep doing this to me?" she cried rawly. "Do you just chase anything that runs? Did it hurt your pride that I told you to leave me alone?"
He raised his head; his eyes were burning green fire. He was breathing harshly. "Is that what you think? That my ego is so enormous I can't stand for a woman to turn me down?"
"Yes, that's what I think! I'm a challenge to you, nothing more!"
"We burned each other up in bed, woman, and you think it was nothing more than gratifying my ego?" He put her on her feet, infuriated that she continually put the worst interpretation on his actions.
"You tell me! I don't know you at all! I thought you were a gentleman, but you're really a savage in a tuxedo, aren't you? Your instincts are to win, regardless of how ruthless you have to be to get what you want!"
"You know me pretty well, after all," he snapped. "I go after what I want, and I want you."
Claire shivered, alarmed by the hard expression on his face. Swearing under his breath, he took her in his arms again, holding her head against his chest, his fingers threading into her soft hair. "Don't be afraid of me, love," he whispered. "I won't hurt you. I want to take care of you."
As what? As a mistress? She shook her head blindly, the motion limited by the way he held her to his chest.
"You'll trust me again, I promise." He murmured the words against her hair, and his hands slid down to stroke her back. Claire found that her hands were clenched on his shirt and that she was clinging instead of trying to push him away. "I'll make you trust me, love. We'll get to know each other; we have the time. There will be no more masks between us."
He bent his head and kissed her again, and this time Claire's self-control wasn't strong enough to keep her from responding. Blindly she rose on tiptoe, straining against him, her mouth opening under the probing of his tongue. She kept making foolish mistakes where Max was concerned, and the latest one was the idea that she would be able to keep him at a distance. Shaking with love and pain that mingled into a tangled knot, she let the pleasure sweep through her, because there was nothing she could do to stop it. His hand was on the buttons of her shirt, and there was nothing she could

do to stop that, either; she trembled, waiting in an agony of anticipation for his touch, her body craving his heat and strength. Then his fingers were on her, sliding inside her opened shirt to cup her naked, swelling flesh, and electricity shot from her hardened nipples straight to her loins.
"I know you're tired, but I'm not a noble, self-sacrificing gentleman," he said harshly, lifting his head to look at her. "If you don't stop me now, I won't be leaving tonight at all."
She couldn't deny it, even to herself. He was giving her one last chance to reconsider. For a moment she almost pulled his head back down to her; then common sense asserted itself, and she pushed at his arms until they fell away from her. Her fingers trembled, and she couldn't look at him as she fumbled with the buttons of her shirt until at last she was covered again.
"Thank you," she said, meaning it. She felt exposed and vulnerable, because only his self-control had given her the chance to reconsider; she had had none at all, and he knew it.
He had offered, but that didn't help the frustration raging through his body. He glared down at her. "Don't thank me for being a bloody stupid fool," he said, his tone savage with temper. "I have to get out of here before I change my mind. Be ready at six-thirty tomorrow night; I'm taking you out to dinner."
"No, I don't think—"
"That's right," he interrupted, catching her chin in his hand. "Don't think, and above all, don't argue with me right now. I want you so much that I'm hurting. I'll be here at six-thirty; if you want to go out, be dressed. If not, we'll stay here. The choice is yours."
She shut her mouth. His mood was dangerous, his eyes glittering. He kissed her again, hard, then stalked out of the house.
When he was gone the house echoed strangely. She locked the doors and checked all the windows to make certain they were secure, then showered and got ready for bed. The furnishings were all familiar, and the bed was the one she had slept in for five years, yet she lay awake staring into the darkness. It wasn't the unfamil-iarity of her surroundings, but her thoughts that prevented her from sleeping. Why had he given her the chance to stop? He'd said that he wasn't noble or self-sacrificing, but then he had made a self-sacrificing offer. He could have taken her to bed, and they both knew it. He had wanted her; there hadn't been any secret in the way he had pushed

against her, letting her feel his arousal. So why had he given her that last opportunity to stop?

Pain squeezed her chest. Who was the biggest fool? Him for giving her the chance to stop, or herself for taking it? He had hurt her, and he had made her so angry that she had wanted to throw things at him, but none of that had stopped her from loving him. She wanted to cling to her anger, to use it as both a weapon and a defense against him, but she could feel it ebbing away from her and leaving her vulnerable to the truth. She loved him. No matter what happened, even if he wanted her only for a brief affair, she loved him. With that acknowledgment she felt her last defenses crumble inside her.

Nothing was working out the way she had planned. She hadn't intended to go out with Max again; she had intended to do her job and ignore him, but he hadn't given her a choice about that. He was taking over again, and with her defenses down she was helpless to do anything about it; all her intentions had gone down the drain with her anger. She could no longer make any plans or form any intentions; all she could do was face the fact that she loved him, and take each day as it came.

Claire was so nervous that she kept dropping the pins she was using to put up her hair. It was her first day on a new job, and Max was taking her out to dinner. She needed to concentrate on the job, but she kept thinking of Max. He simply wouldn't leave her head.

A pin flew from her trembling fingers again, and she muttered an impatient "damn!" as she leaned down to retrieve it. She had to calm down, or the day would be a disaster.

Finally she got her hair securely pinned, and with a frantic glance at the clock she put on the jacket that matched her gray skirt, grabbed her purse and left the house at a run. She wasn't certain how long it would take her to drive to the Spencer-Nyle building in the early morning traffic, so she had cautiously allowed an extra fifteen minutes, then used most of that picking up hair pins. What an impression it would make to be late on her first day!

But she made it with five minutes to spare, and a smiling receptionist directed her to Theo Caulfield's office on the fifth floor. A tall, dark man with a face like granite paused in passing, his dark eyes on Claire. She felt his gaze and glanced at him then quickly looked away. He was vaguely familiar, but she was certain she'd never met him. There was an almost

visible force about him, and the receptionist became obviously nervous when she realized that the man was listening.
"Are you Claire Westbrook?" he asked abruptly, moving to Claire's side.
How had he guessed, unless he was Theo Caulfied? She looked up at him, feeling dwarfed by his powerful build despite the three-inch heels she wore, and hoped that he wasn't her new boss. He couldn't be a comfortable man to work with. Because he made her nervous, too, she reacted by hiding behind her usual mask of composure.
"Yes, I am."
"I'm Rome Matthews. I'll show you to your office and introduce you to Caulfield. Good morning, Angie," he said to the receptionist as he led Claire away.
"Good morning, Mr. Matthews," the receptionist said faintly to his back.
His name was familiar, too. Claire darted another look up at that hard, almost brutally carved face and remembrance shot through her. His picture had been beside Max's in that article she'd read, when she had discovered Max's true identity. He was executive vice president and Anson Edwards's right-hand man, his chosen successor. How did he know her name, and why was he personally escorting her to her office?
Whatever his reason, he wasn't inclined to make explanations. He asked polite questions, whether she liked Dallas, had she gotten settled yet, but she could feel him watching her. His hand was on her elbow, and she was surprised by the gentleness of his touch.
"Here it is," he said, drawing her to a halt and reaching out to open a door. "You'll have your hands full, you know. Your predecessor had to be on her new job today, so you'll be training yourself."
Claire thought of running while she still could, but a man came out of the inner office on hearing their voices, and she was trapped. To her relief Theo Caulfield was an ordinary man, middle-aged and thin, without the intimidating force of Rome Matthews. He, too, seemed nervous at the other man's presence and visibly relaxed when the short introductions were performed and the executive vice president took himself off to his own office.
To her relief her duties were fairly routine, and she settled in quickly. Theo Caulfield was quiet and meticulous, but not fussy. She missed Sam, but he was far happier in his laboratory than he had ever been in an office; perhaps the takeover had been best for him, as well as for the company.

Max called her just before the day was over—the only time she had heard from him—to tell her to dress casually for dinner. Claire hurried home to her little house, afraid that he would take it as a signal that she wanted to stay in if she weren't ready when he arrived. How casual was casual? She opted to play it safe with a plain skirt and blouse and flat heels, and was waiting to open the door before he could knock.

"Where are we going?" she asked, eyeing his slacks and open-neck silk shirt.

"We're having dinner with some friends of mine," he said, drawing her to him for a quick kiss. "How did it go today? Any trouble settling in?"

"No, it wasn't difficult. It's mostly routine secretarial work."

Max asked her several questions about her day, distracting her. She was still unfamiliar with the city, so she wasn't concerned with where they were going until she noticed they were in a residential section. "Where are we?" she asked.

"We're almost there."

"Almost *where*!"

"At Rome's house. We're having dinner with him and his wife, Sarah."

"What?" Claire asked faintly. "Max, you can't just take me to someone's house when they haven't invited me!" And Rome Matthews's house, of all people! She wasn't comfortable with him; he was the most overpowering man she'd ever seen.

He looked amused. "They *have* invited you. Sarah told me that if I didn't have you with me tonight, not to come myself." There was an unmistakable note of affection in his voice. He turned into the driveway of a sprawling, Spanish-style house, and Claire tensed.

He put his hand on her back as they walked up the brick walk to the front door, and if it hadn't been for that pressure at her back, Claire would have turned around and left. He rang the bell, and in a moment Rome Matthews opened the door himself.

Claire stared, almost not recognizing the high-powered executive in the man who stood there, clad in tight-fitting jeans that molded his powerful hips and legs, and a red polo shirt. His face was infinitely more relaxed, and there was amusement in his dark eyes. Even more amazingly, he held a chubby toddler in one strong arm and a tiny elfin girl in the other. Somehow Claire hadn't imagined him as a family man, especially one with young children. Then her eyes were drawn to the two children, and she gasped.

"They're beautiful," she whispered, automatically reaching out her hands. The children both had their father's black hair and eyes and olive complexion, with the gorgeous rosy cheeks that only young children have. Two pairs of wide inquisitive dark eyes stared at her; then the baby gave a chuckle and launched himself out of his father's arms, straight into hers, his fat hands outstretched.
"Thank you," Rome said, his amusement deepening, and Claire flushed. She cuddled the little boy to her, loving the feel of his sturdy, wriggling little body. He smelled of baby powder, and she wanted to bury her face in his fat little neck.
"Here you go sweetheart," Max said, holding out his hands to the little girl, and with a giggle she, too, abandoned her father. She hugged Max around the neck and kissed his cheek; Max settled her comfortably on his arm and carried her into the house, keeping his other hand at Claire's back.
"The little tank you're holding is Jed," Rome said, reaching out to tickle his son. "The flirt around Max's neck is Missy. She's three, and Jed is almost one."
Claire was gently rubbing the baby's back, and he had nestled down against her as if he'd known her all his life. He was incredibly heavy, but his weight felt good in her arms. "You darling," she crooned to him, kissing his soft black hair.
Max looked up from the game he was playing with Missy, and his eyes flickered as he watched Claire playing with the baby.
A low laugh reached them, and Claire turned as a slim, delicate woman with white-blond hair came into the room. "I'm Sarah Matthews," the woman said warmly, and Claire looked into the most serene face she'd ever seen. Sarah Matthews was lovely and fragile, and when her husband looked at her it was with an expression in his dark eyes that made Claire want to turn away, as if she had witnessed something terribly intimate.
"Sarah, this is Claire Westbrook," Max said, his hand warm on Claire's arm.
"You have beautiful children," Claire said sincerely, and Sarah beamed with pride.
"Thank you. They're quite a handful. Your arrival has given Rome a rest," Sarah replied, slanting a teasing look at her husband. "They're always wild when he first gets home, especially Jed."
At that moment Jed was lying adoringly against Claire, and Rome laughed at his son. "He can't resist a pretty woman; he's the biggest flirt ever bom,

except for Missy."
Missy was perfectly content in Max's arms, and Claire noticed the tenderness with which he handled her, and the calm capability. She had noticed his skill with children before, soon after they had met. It had been while he was playing with Marline's children at the cookout that she had fallen in love with him. It had been that simple, that easy and that irrevocable.
"Enjoy the peace," Sarah advised, breaking into Claire's thoughts, and Jed chose that moment to lift his head from Claire's shoulder and look down at the scattered toys on the floor. With a grunt he pushed himself out of her arms. Claire gave a gasping cry and grabbed for him, and Rome did the same, leaping to snag his son out of the air. Sighing, he placed the baby on the floor. His attention completely on his toys, Jed toddled over to the red plastic truck he'd selected.
"He has no respect for gravity, and no fear of heights," Rome said wryly. "He's also as strong as a mule; there's no holding him when he decides he wants down."
"He scared me to death," Claire gasped.
"He's been scaring me since he learned to crawl," Sarah said with a chuckle. "Then he started walking when he was eight months old, and it's been even worse since. All you can do is chase after him."
It was impossible to believe that such a delicate woman had given birth to such a sturdy little boy who showed every sign of inheriting his father's size. The children resembled Sarah very little, except for Missy's delicate stature, and something in the shape of her soft mouth.
It was such a relaxed household, filled with the high-pitched giggles of happy children, that Claire forgot to be intimidated by Rome. Here he was a husband and a father, not an executive. It was evident that Max was a close friend who visited often, because the children climbed over him as enthusiastically as they did over their father, and he not only tolerated it, he seemed to enjoy it.
The children were fed and put to bed; then the adults sat down to dinner. Claire couldn't think when she had enjoyed an evening more; she didn't even shrink when Rome teased her. "I had to check you out this morning," he said, his hard mouth quirked in amusement. "Sarah was dying of curiosity."

"I was not! Max had already told me all about you," Sarah told Claire. "It was his own male curiosity Rome wanted to satisfy."
Rome shrugged lazily, smiling as he looked at his wife. Claire wondered what Max had said about her, and why he would talk about her, anyway. She glanced at him and blushed when she found him watching her intently.
It was late when Max drove her home, and Claire was sleepily curled in the corner of the seat. "I really liked them," she murmured. "I can't believe he's the same man who terrified me so this morning!"
"Sarah tames him; she's so incredibly serene."
"They're very happy together, aren't they?"
Max's voice roughened a little. "Yes. They've gone through some rough times; if they hadn't loved each other so much, they wouldn't have made it. Rome was married before and had two children, but his wife and sons were killed in an automobile accident. He was terribly scarred by it."
"I can imagine," Claire said, pain grabbing at her. She had never even held her child; it had been gone almost before she had been able to do more than dream of its existence. What would it have been like to have had two children taken from her in such a tragic way? She thought of the way Jed had nestled against her, and tears burned her eyes. "I miscarried. Right before my divorce," she whispered. "And losing the baby nearly killed me. I wanted it so badly!"
Max's head jerked around, and he stared at her in the dim, flickering glow of the streetlights they passed. An almost violent jealousy filled him because she had been pregnant, and it hadn't been with his child. He wanted her to have his baby; he wanted his children to be *her* children. She was a natural mother, so loving with children that they instinctively clung to her.
When they reached her house, he went inside with her and quietly locked the door behind him. Claire watched him, her dark eyes becoming enormous as he came to her and caught her hands in his.
"Max?" she whispered, her voice shaking.
His face was both tender and wild, and his eyes glittered. He put her hands around his neck, then drew her close to lie full against him.
"I'm going to take you to bed, love," he said gently, and a hot tide of pleasure surged through her body at his words. She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes, the time for protests gone. She loved him, and now she realized exactly what that meant; she loved him too much to preserve any distance between them.

He carried her to her bed, and this time he was slow, gentle, taking his time to kiss her and caress her, arousing her to fever pitch while he kept tight control over his own body. Then he eased inside her, and Claire cried out as he filled her. Her nails dug into his back; her hips arched wildly toward him. Max's control broke, and he gave a hoarse cry as he grasped her hips and began driving into her. That same wild, ungovernable need exploded between them, just as it had the first time. They couldn't get enough of each other, couldn't get close enough; their joining was as elemental as a storm, and as violent.

In the silent aftermath Max held her close, his hand on her stomach. It had happened again, and he couldn't regret it. This woman was his; he could never let her go. She was tender and loving, sensitive and vulnerable and easily hurt. He would gladly spend the rest of his life protecting her from those hurts, if she would only stay with him.

Claire, watched with wide, unfathomable eyes as he rose on his elbow and leaned over her. He was very male, and never more so than when he was nude, the power of his body exposed. She put her hand on the brown tangle of hair that covered his chest, stroking gently. What was he thinking? He was serious, almost stern, his sea-colored eyes narrowed to brilliant slits, and he was so beautiful that he took her breath away.

"I may have made you pregnant tonight," he said, his fingers sliding over her stomach. Claire inhaled slightly, her eyes widening. His hand slid down even farther to touch her intimately and explore her in a way that shot rockets along her nerves, making her arch and twist against his fingers. He leaned even closer, his mouth finding hers. "I want to make you pregnant," he groaned, the thought so erotic that his body was hardening again. "Claire, will you have my baby?"

Tears streaked silvery trails down her cheeks. "Yes," she whispered, reaching up to hold him with both hands as he rolled onto her. He thrust deeply into her, and they stared into each other's eyes as they made love, moving together and finding incredible magic. If she could have his child, she would never ask anything more of life. She moved under him. She felt; she loved; she experienced; and she cried.

He lay on her, still deep within her, and kissed away her tears. Incredible contentment filled him. "Claire," he said, holding her face still in his hands, "I don't think anything but marriage will do."

Chapter Eleven

Claire felt as if her heart had simply stopped beating; everything inside her went still, waiting for that moment when time would begin again. She couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't move. Then, with a little jolt, her heart resumed its function, freeing her from the temporary paralysis.

"Marry?" she asked faintly.

"My mother will be in ecstasy if you make an honest man of me," he said, tracing her lower lip with his finger. "She's quite given up on me, you know. Marry me, and have my children. I find that I want that very much. When I saw you holding Jed tonight, I thought how perfect you look with a baby in your arms, and I want it to be my baby."

There was nothing about love in his proposal, but Claire found that there didn't have to be. She could accept the fact that he didn't love her; she .would take whatever he offered her and do anything she could to make him happy with his decision. Perhaps she should have more pride than to settle for anything less than love, but pride wouldn't gain her anything except an empty bed and an empty life. Happily ever after was a fairytale, after all.

"All right," she whispered.

His shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly, and he eased away from her to lie beside her, hugging her against him. His free hand absently stroked her satiny shoulder, and his handsome face was thoughtful. "Does this mean you've forgiven me?"

She wished he hadn't asked that; it touched on a wound that hadn't healed, reminded her of pain that still lingered. She didn't want to think of the past, not now, when she had just agreed to take a step into the future, a step that terrified her with its enormity. If Max were just an ordinary man perhaps she wouldn't feel so uncertain, but Max was extraordinary in every way, and she was filled with doubts that she would ever be able to satisfy him.

"It seems I have to, doesn't it?"

"I never intended to hurt you; I wanted only to get the business part of things over with, so I could concentrate on you. I've wanted you pretty desperately from the first," he admitted wryly. "You wreck my self-control, but that's obvious, isn't it?"

Her head found the hollow of his shoulder, nestling there comfortably.

"Why is it obvious?"

He gave a short laugh. "Bloody hell, you can't believe I normally go about attacking women on a table in the foyer? You kissed me back, and I went mad. I couldn't think of anything but being inside you. It was like being picked up by a storm, unable to do anything but go along for the ride."

It had been like that for her, too, an explosion of the senses that obliterated everything else in the world except that moment, this man. The memory of that first lovemaking would make her blush for the rest of her life, because she hadn't known she was capable of such passion. Since then she had come to expect that inner burning whenever he touched her.

She sighed, suddenly so tired that she could barely keep her eyes open. Max kissed her then untangled himself from the bed and got up. Claire opened her eyes, watching him in bewilderment as he sorted out his clothing and got dressed.

"If you weren't half-asleep already, we'd make wedding plans," he said, bending over to tuck the sheet around her naked body. "But you're tired, we have to work tomorrow, and all my clothes are at my apartment, so it's best that I leave."

There would be a thousand-and-one problems to work out, some small and some not so small, but she couldn't think of them now. She was drowsy, her body satisfied, and though she was disappointed that he wouldn't be spending the night with her, she realized that it wasn't practical. He kissed her, his hand stroking over her body in blatant possessiveness.

"I hope you like big weddings," he murmured.

Her lashes fluttered. "Why?"

"Because I have hundreds of relatives who would die of terminal dudgeon if they weren't invited to my wedding."

She chuckled, snuggling deeper into the bed. Max kissed her again, so reluctant to leave her that he considered saying to hell with work and climbing back into bed with her. She was so warm and rosy and relaxed, and he knew it was from his lovemaking. There was nothing quite like the feeling of certainty that he had left her satisfied, and his emotions ran the gamut from pride to possessiveness to wonder. Under all that lay his own bone-deep satisfaction. Beneath her cool, self-possessed mask was a passionate nature; other people saw only the mask, but she burned for him with a sweet fire that left its scorch marks on his heart and branded him as hers.

She was asleep, her breathing soft and even. With one last look at her, Max quietly turned out the light and left the bedroom. Soon they would be sharing a bedroom and a name, and his ring would be oh her hand.
When she woke the next morning, Claire had the confused feeling that it had all been a dream, a wonderful, impossible dream. Had Max actually asked her to marry him, or had her imagination conjured up the fantasy? Then she moved, and the startled realization that she was naked brought back clear memories of the night before. He had made love to her; then he'd asked her to marry him, and she had agreed. Panic twisted her stomach. What if it didn't work out? What if they got married and he decided that she didn't suit him, after all? What if she failed to satisfy him, just as she had failed with Jeff? What if he already regretted asking her? Men sometimes said things in the heat of passion that they later wished had never been said.
The phone rang beside her, startling her, and she almost dropped the receiver as she grabbed it. "Yes? Hello?"
"Good morning, love," Max said, his voice warm and intimate. "I wanted to make certain you didn't oversleep. I forgot to turn on your alarm when I left last night."
Even though he couldn't see her, a deep blush covered her body, and she pulled the sheet up high under her chin. "Thank you," she said, not hearing the uncertainty in her voice.,
Max paused. "We'll go tonight to pick out the rings, shall we? Are you going to call your parents today, or wait until the weekend when you visit them?"
Claire closed her eyes on an almost painful surge of relief; he hadn't changed his mind. "I'll call them. Mother wouldn't forgive me if I kept it a secret until the weekend."
He chuckled. "It's the same with my mother. I'll call her in a moment, and she'll be on the phone for the rest of the day calling everyone in the far-flung family. How soon do you think we can manage the deed? Poor Theo. He's just gotten you, and now he'll have to find another secretary."
"Another secretary?" Claire echoed in surprise.
"Of course. You can't continue to be his secretary after we're married. We'll decide tonight on a date for the wedding, and you'll know when to turn in your notice. I'll see you at work, love; take care."
"Yes, of course," she said, still holding the receiver after he'd hung up and the dial tone was buzzing in her ear. Slowly she hung up, a frown pulling at

her brow. She was expected to give up her job when they were married? She fretted about it while she showered; on the one hand, she could see that it wouldn't work for both of them to be employed by Spencer-Nyle, and as his salary was far more than hers, it was logical that she should be the one to quit. On the other hand, she had struggled for years to establish her own independence, and it was important to her own sense of self-worth that she continue to support herself, or at least feel as if she were making a contribution to their lives. It wasn't just that Max expected her to quit Spencer-Nyle; Claire had the feeling that he expected her to quit working completely, and the thought made shivers of alarm race down her spine, What sort of life would they have together? She didn't even know if she could expect him to be faithful. Women melted around him; how could a man not be tempted when he was surrounded by constant opportunities to wander? Given that, she would be incredibly foolish to stop being self-supporting. She only hoped he would be sensible about it.

She didn't have time to call Alma that morning, but found a pay phone at lunch and sat chewing her lip, listening to the ringing on the other end of the line. At last she hung up, both relieved and disappointed that Alma wasn't at home. She didn't know how she felt about marrying Max, either; part of her was ecstatic because she loved him so much. Another part was plain terrified. What if she couldn't make him happy? He was so intelligent arid sophisticated and supremely self-confident; he made Jeff look like a lightweight, and Jeff had turned from her to someone more poised and polished.

Max was waiting in the office for her when she returned from lunch, and a warm, intimate smile touched his chiseled mouth when he saw her. "There you are, darling. I'd hoped to take you to lunch, but I couldn't get clear in time. Was your mother pleased?"

Claire glanced at Theo's office, relieved to see that he hadn't returned from lunch. "I just tried to call her, but she wasn't at home. I'll call her tonight."

He put his hands on her waist and drew her to him for a quick kiss. "My mother was all but dancing on the table," he said in amusement. "By now half of England knows."

He was in a good mood, his eyes sparkling like sunlight on the ocean, and she felt her heart give that little jolt again. Uneasily she watched the door, trying to draw back from him. "Should you be in here?" she asked, worried. "What if someone saw you kiss me?"

He actually laughed. "Is it supposed to be a secret that we're getting married? I told Rome this morning, and he's already called Sarah to let her know. Then I told Anson, who asked if I couldn't have proposed to you in Houston, rather than rearranging the entire office to empty a position for you. So you see, it's already common knowledge. The news will have gone around the office at the speed of sound."
Claire flushed, staring at him in mortification. "You *made* this job me?" And did the entire office know that he'd brought her to Dallas for himself?
"No, love, the job is a legitimate one. I simply made it available by promoting and shifting some people who, incidentally, are all thrilled with their new positions." Gently he touched her pink cheek. "You don't have any reason to feel embarrassed."
He kissed her again then reluctantly let her go. "Have you been thinking about the type of ring you would like?"
She hadn't, and surprise was plain on her face. "No, not really. I think I'd like a plain wedding band, though." The rings Jeff had given her had been encrusted with yellow diamonds, and she had never really cared for them. The stones had been so large, almost ostentatious, as if they were only what was expected of the Halseys. She had returned them to him after the divorce and never missed them.
He watched her, wondering what memories had caused the brief sadness that darkened the soft brown of her eyes. "Whatever you want," he promised, wishing that he would never see sadness on her face again. For a brief moment she had drifted away in her thoughts, leaving him behind, and he resented even a minute when she wasn't with him.
Max was at her house that night when she finally got Alma on the phone, and he lounged across from her, smiling as he listened to the conversation. Alma laughed, then she cried. Then she had to speak to Max, who assured her with quiet sincerity that he would take care of Claire. When he gave the phone back to Claire, she gave him a look of gratitude for being so understanding with Alma.
"Have you set a date?" Alma asked excitedly.
"No, we haven't had time to talk about it. How long will it take to arrange a church wedding?" Claire listened then turned to Max. "How many of your family do you think will attend?"
He shrugged. "At an offhand guess—seven hundred, give or take a hundred."

"Seven hundred?" Claire gasped, and on the other end of the line Alma gave a small shriek.
"I've mentioned that I have a large family. That also includes friends; Mother will be able to give us a list in a week or so." He motioned for the telephone, and Claire gave it to him again. "Don't panic," he said soothingly to Alma. "Perhaps it would be easier if we were married in England. How many people would we have to transport?"
Claire tried to think of how many people would be invited to her wedding; her family was small, but there were friends of the family who would have to be included. But if they were married in England, how many of them would be able to attend? And if they were married in Texas, how many of his family and friends wouldn't be able to make a transatlantic trip? Suddenly the wedding was assuming horrendous proportions.
"Accommodations aren't a problem," Max was saying soothingly, so Claire guessed that Alma was having hysterics at the thought of moving the family, lock, stock and barrel, to England. "There are plenty of spare bedrooms scattered around the family. The church? Yes, the church is large enough to handle a wedding of that size. It's an enormous old rock pile." He listened a moment, then laughed. "No, I don't care where we're married. England or Texas doesn't matter to me, so long as I get Claire and it doesn't take an eternity to do it. How long? Six weeks is my limit."
Even sitting across from him, Claire heard the loud protest that Alma was making. Max merely said patiently, "Six weeks. I'm not waiting any longer than that. Claire and I will visit this weekend, and we'll make our plans."
Claire stared at him in horror as he hung up with an air of patent satisfaction. "Six weeks?" she echoed. "It's impossible to put on a wedding for more than seven hundred people in six weeks! That takes months of planning!"
"Six weeks, or I'll carry you before a judge and do the deed. I'm being generous, at that. My inclination is to marry you this weekend, and it's damned tempting.
The only thing is, a lot of people would never forgive us."
He flashed her a brilliant smile, standing and holding his hand out to her. Claire put her hand in his, and he pulled her to her feet and into his arms, kissing her long and hard. "Don't worry. Between your mother and mine, this wedding will be perfect. Nothing would dare go wrong."

To Claire's consternation, he didn't take her to one of the small jewelry stores she'd anticipated. Instead she found herself seated in a luxurious salon while the manager brought trays of glittering jewels for her inspection. What on earth was Max thinking about? Surely he didn't think he had to compete with Jeff Halsey in the material things he could give her? Claire knew that Max was certainly not poor; his salary was far more than comfortable, but it didn't make him a millionaire. He didn't have to compete with Jeff in anything, because he had Jeff outclassed in everything.

But there the rings were, waiting for her to make a selection. "What I really want is a plain simple old-fashioned wedding band," she said, frowning slightly.

"Certainly," the manager said politely, starting to take away the tray of diamonds and emeralds and rubies.

"No, leave that," Max instructed. "We'll look these over again while you're bringing the tray of wedding bands."

Claire waited until the manager was out of hearing then turned to Max. "I prefer a wedding band, truly."

He looked amused. "Darling, we'll have our wedding bands, and don't look so surprised. Of course I intend to wear a ring. I've waited long enough to be married; I'm not going to waffle about it. But this is for your engagement ring."

"But I don't need an engagement ring."

"Strictly speaking, no one *needs* any sort of jewelry. An engagement ring is just as old-fashioned and traditional as a wedding band, a symbolic warning to other primitive and marauding males that you aren't available."

Despite her misgivings Claire couldn't keep herself from smiling in answer to the twinkle in his eyes. "Oh, is that what you're doing, warning off other primitives?"

"One never knows what caveman instincts lurk beneath a silk shirt."

Claire knew. She looked at him, and her breath caught as she remembered the wild sensuality behind his calm mask. Most people would never realize just how primitive he really was, because he disguised it so well with his lazy, good-humored manner. He was tolerant, so long as he could get his way with charm and reason, but she sensed the danger in him.

"That was supposed to be a joke," he said lightly, touching her cheek to dispel the look she was giving him. "Take another look at these rings, won't you, before the poor man gets back with that other tray."

She did look at them then shook her head. "They're too expensive."
He laughed; he actually laughed. "Love, I'm not a pauper. Far from it. I promise you that I won't have to go in debt for any of these rings. If you won't choose, I'll do it for you."
He bent over the tray, eyeing each ring carefully. "I really don't care for diamonds," Claire tried, seeing that he was determined.
"Of course not," he agreed. "They wouldn't suit you, not even with that sexy black velvet gown of yours. Pearls are for you. Try this ring." He plucked a ring from its velvet bed and slipped it on her finger.
Claire looked down at it, and a feeling of helplessness came over her. Why couldn't it have been a truly hideous ring that she would have hated on sight? Instead it was a creamy pearl, surrounded by glittering baguettes, and it looked just right on her slender hand.
"I thought so," he said in satisfaction as the manager returned with a tray of wedding bands.
Claire was silent as they left, still trying to come to terms with the changes this wedding would bring in her life, had already brought even though they weren't married yet. Max put his arm around her and held her close, as if trying to shield her from the worries that darkened her eyes.
"What is it, love?" he asked, following her into the tiny house that she liked so much, but which had turned out to be only a temporary stopping place in her life.
"There are so many problems, and I'm not certain how to deal with them."
"What sort of problems?"
"The wedding for one thing. It seems impossible, with so much to be done and the distance involved, the problems of transportation and housing and getting everything coordinated. The cake; the dresses; the tuxedos; the flowers; the receptions. Not only that, I've been divorced, and a white wedding is out of the question, if we can even have a church wedding at all."
He held up his hand, halting her tense litany. "What did you just say?" he asked politely.
She sighed, rubbing her forehead. "You know very well what I said."
"Then let me reassure you on two points, at least. One, we will be married in my family church, and no one will think anything of the fact that you've been married before. Two, you will definitely wear white."
"That's totally unsuitable."

"Let's talk it over with your mother, shall we? I think she'll agree with me."
"Of course you think that! Has any female ever *not* agreed with you?" she said with a groan,
"You, love," he teased. "Is there anything else bothering you?"
It was obvious that she wasn't getting anywhere with him. She sat down and twined her fingers together, watching him with somber dark eyes. "I've been thinking about my job. I realize that it's only reasonable that I leave the company after we're married, and I certainly haven't been there long enough to get attached to the job, but I do want to continue working somewhere."
He watched her in silence for a moment, as if trying to read her thoughts. "If that will make you happy," he finally said in a gentle tone. "I want you to be happy with our marriage, not trapped in a gilded cage."
She was wordless; he'd never suffered from self-doubt, so how could she tell him that she wasn't worried about herself being happy but rather that he wouldn't be happy with her? He sat down beside her and eased her into his arms, cradling her head against his shoulder. "Don't worry about any of that, love. Let our mothers worry about the wedding, and we'll just enjoy watching them run about. I expect we'll have our share of problems after we're married, but let's not anticipate them, hmmm? They may never materialize."
Whenever he had her in his arms, Claire felt reassured. Her hand drifted across his chest, absently stroking the hard muscles she found there. Beneath her ear his heartbeat picked up a beat in speed.
"I believe we've found another subject that needs discussing," he muttered as he tightened his arms around her. "How likely is it that you're pregnant after last night?"
She caught her breath then concentrated and counted in her mind. "It isn't likely, not right now."
His mouth nuzzled under her ear, finding the soft little hollow there and filling it with kisses. Claire caught her breath again, her eyes closing as pleasure began heating her blood. Her breasts tautened, aching for his touch, and his uncanny sense of timing told him exactly when to cup his palm over her.
"I'll be more cautious until after we're married, then, but I damned well refuse to do without you for six weeks." His mouth was at the corner of hers, his breathing mingling with hers. Blindly Claire turned her head until the contact was complete, her arms sliding around his neck.

Much later he swore softly as he got out of bed. "I'm not fond of this business of leaving you in the middle of the night," he said in sharp displeasure. "Why don't you move in with me? "
Claire drew the sheet up to cover her, a little alarmed by the thought of living with him. Of course they would live together after they were married, but she would have six weeks to get used to the idea. She had lived alone and liked it for quite some time now. The loss of privacy wouldn't be an easy thing to handle. "Where would I put my furniture?"
"Don't be logical," he said in frustration, buttoning his shirt. "Bloody hell, we do have some details to work out, don't we? Would you prefer to live in my apartment, or should we go house hunting?"
"I've never seen your apartment," she pointed out.
He shrugged. "I suppose we should begin looking for a house, as we'll need one eventually."
For the children he planned, she thought. She lay on the bed watching him dress, her body nude and still throbbing from the power of his lovemaking, and she thought of being pregnant with his children, of nursing them and watching them grow. "How many children do you want?" she whispered.
He looked down at her, seeing her soft, slim body outlined by the sheet, and the dark wells of her eyes. His hands stilled on the buttons. "Two, I think. Perhaps three. How many do you want?"
"That doesn't matter. I would be content with one, or half a dozen." No, the number wasn't important at all.
Slowly he began undoing his buttons and stripped off his shirt again. Tossing it aside, he unzipped his pants and stepped out of them. "You make me react like a teenager," he said, his eyes narrow and bright. Lowering himself onto the bed with her again, he forgot the irritation of living apart, and Claire forgot to worry. When he was making love to her, nothing else was real.
Instead of making the long drive to Houston, they flew down that Friday afternoon, and Max rented a car at the airport. It was already night, but the humid heat enveloped them like a wet blanket, and Claire sighed tiredly. It had been a hectic week, though they hadn't really done anything. But, rather than wait for the weekend, Alma had called every night about some detail that had to be discussed immediately.
She closed her eyes, wanting to rest on the drive to her parents' house. As excited as Alma was, Claire had no hope of getting to bed before midnight;

there would be endless discussions about subjects they had already discussed endlessly.
"We're here, love," Max said, touching her arm to wake her.
Claire sat up, startled that she had dozed so quickly. She started to get out of the car, then sank back against the seat. "We aren't at Mother's."
"No, we aren't," he agreed, taking her hand and urging her from the car. "You kept the apartment?"
"It seemed reasonable. I knew I would have to be coming here on business several times a year, and we'll be visiting your parents. Until the original tenant returns, I see no reason to give it up."
Claire was oddly reluctant as they went up in the elevator; she hadn't been in his apartment since the night they had first made love. Her face was burning as he opened the door and she stepped into the elegant black-tiled foyer, with the gilt-framed mirror over the lovely Queen Anne table. She had a vivid memory of her underwear lying discarded on the black tile.
Max dropped their overnighters where he stood and locked the door. His eyes were hot. "We'll go to your parents' house tomorrow."
By now Claire was intimately familiar with that look. She retreated, her heart pounding, and stopped abruptly when she came up against the table.
"Perfect," he crooned, his strong hands closing on her waist and lifting her up.
She buried her hot face against his shoulder. "Here?"
"It's my favorite memory, darling. You were so beautiful…so wild…so ready for me. I've never wanted any woman the way I want you."
"I hated myself for being so shameless," she confessed softly.
"Shameless? You were so beautiful, you took my breath."
Beautiful wasn't a word that Claire was accustomed to hearing in connection with herself, but that night, in Max's arms, she felt beautiful. She would always blush when she remembered that foyer, but thereafter it was with excitement and remembered pleasure, never again with embarrassment.
"I don't see why you shouldn't wear white," Alma said, making a note in a thick notebook she'd already half-filled with reminders, "this isn't the fifties, after all. Not white-white, of course, that's not your color, but you've always looked beautiful in a creamy golden-white."
Alma and Martine had a full head of steam going, making plans enthusiastically. It was her wedding, but Claire was the only calm one.

Since she'd arrived that morning, she had listened to the constant chatter, letting them discuss every detail to death before they remembered to ask either her or Max's opinion. Occasionally she looked at Max, and the amusement in his eyes helped her to remain rational.
"The wedding will have to be in England," Alma pronounced, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "I checked, and it's impossible to reserve a church here that's large enough to hold that many people on such short notice.
Max, are you certain there won't be any problem in getting your church?"
"I'm positive."
"Then it's England, and let your mother know. Better yet, give me her number and I'll call her; This schedule is going to be murder. Claire, you have to have your dress made here; there won't be time after we get to England. And we'll have to find one of those big garment boxes for shipping the dress over, but I suppose the dressmaker can help with that."
"I could buy a ready-made dress in England," Claire suggested.
"And take the chance of not being able to find what you want? No, that would be awful. Let's see, we'll need to be there at least three days early. Make that a week. Will that inconvenience your family, Max?"
"Not at all. There are so many of us, a few dozen more won't even be noticed. If you don't mind, I'll handle the plane reservations for the group. Do you have a list of everyone?"
Alma scurried around for her list of guests and wrote out another copy of it for Max. He glanced at it, then folded it and put it away in his pocket, not at all dismayed by the prospect of organizing the transportation of so many people to another country. Knowing what she did about executives, Claire thought that his secretary would probably inherit the burden.
"I have a few names to add to the list, but they'll be flying out from Dallas. I'll arrange for everyone to connect in New York."
Rome and Sarah would probably be attending, Claire realized. She had seen the length of the list and was surprised that so many people would travel so far to see a wedding. Even Michael and Celia were going, and she would have thought they would never want to travel again after moving from Michigan to Arizona in a station wagon.
She scarcely had time to wave at Max before she was whisked away to the fabric store to pore over pattern catalogs and bolts of cloth. From there they went to the dressmaker's, and Claire was measured for what seemed like hours. Then Alma insisted that they find the shoes to go with the gown,

since it was almost June and that led to a tooth-and-nail battle over anything connected with weddings.
By the time they returned home, Claire was exhausted. Alma and Martine were still going strong, high on adrenaline, and she wondered what kept them from collapsing. Max was waiting for her, and he looped a sheltering arm over her shoulders to hug her to him.
"Shall we leave?" he asked quietly.
She closed her eyes. "Please. I'm so tired I can't think."
Alma started to protest that Claire could spend the night with them then glanced at Max and swallowed the comment. Claire belonged with him now; he had made that plain, though there were still five weeks until the wedding. For all his golden beauty there was a strength in Max that wouldn't permit any interference between him and the woman he'd chosen.
"This is so exhausting," Claire sighed as he drove them back to the apartment. She slipped off her shoes and wiggled her toes, wondering if they would ever feel normal again. "I think digging ditches wouldn't be as tiring as shopping. I can work all day and do chores at night without feeling half as wiped out as I am now. The terrible thing is, I'll have to come back every weekend for fittings!"
"But I'll be with you," Max said. "If it gets to be too much for you, we'll leave it and go back to Dallas."
"Then everything won't get done."
"I would rather have something left undone than to have my wife collapsing of exhaustion."
His wife. More and more Claire was coming to believe that it was really so, that it was really going to happen. She looked at the pearl-and-diamond ring on her left hand then at Max. She loved him so much that it swelled within her like a tide, relentless and eternal.
When they were in bed, she curled her arm around his neck and pressed against him, sighing as her tired muscles relaxed.
Max cuddled her, loving the feel of her body in his arms, right where she belonged. As usual when he was near her or thought about her, he wanted to make love, but she was too tired. He kissed her forehead and held her until she was asleep.
"Just five more weeks, love," he whispered into the darkness. She would be his wife, and he would no longer have this unreasoning fear that she was going to slip through his fingers like mist melting away before the sun.

Chapter Twelve

Claire managed a tight smile for the airline attendant as she refused a refill of her tea. They would be landing at Heathrow within the hour; she was relieved that the long, monotonous flight was nearly at an end but she tensed inside whenever she thought of meeting Max's family. She had spoken to his mother on the telephone and felt the warmth of the older woman's greetings, but she wondered how she would get through the ordeal of actually meeting all of them. She had memorized the names of his brother and sisters, as well as that of their spouses and the swarms of children, but that was only scratching the top of the list. There were aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, grandparents, great-aunts and uncles, as well as their children and spouses. Such a large family was beyond her experience.

Alma and Harmon were sitting directly ahead of them. It was exactly a week before the wedding, and Alma had been working on her ever-present list most of the flight. Martine and Steve and the children would be flying over in three days, followed the next day by the remainder of the guests. Rome and Sarah were attending, with Missy and Jed. Sarah had suggested leaving the children with a sitter, but Claire had become inordinately fond of the two little imps and wanted them present. After all, her wedding would be swarming with children; what difference would two more make? Rome and Sarah would be bringing a young friend, Derek Taliferro, who was home from college for the summer and who spent a lot of time with the Matthews. Claire had met Derek only twice, but had liked him on sight, and that was unusual for her. She was usually far more cautious with strangers, but there was something about Derek that relaxed her. He was inordinately handsome, with curly black hair and calm golden-brown eyes that reached deep into her mind, yet his handsomeness would normally have made Claire distrust him. But the tall, muscular youth had such enormous self-possession and purpose about him, and he was so tender with the children, who adored him, that instinctively she trusted him, too. For all his lack of years Derek was more of a man than most males who were twice his age. Max and Rome treated him as an equal, and they weren't ordinary men themselves.

Claire glanced quickly at Max, wondering if he had any doubts surfacing about the wedding as it drew closer, but she could read nothing in his expression. For all the passionate hours she had spent in his arms, she still

sometimes felt as if he were a stranger to her, a handsome, aloof stranger who gave her his lust but not his thoughts. He was affable, charming, attentive, but she always felt as if he were holding something back from her. She loved deeply but had to keep her love hidden, because he didn't seem to want that sort of devotion from her. He wanted her companionship, her body beneath his in the night, but he didn't seem to want her emotions. He asked for none, and he gave none.

That was the real basis for her unease, she realized. She could have faced an army of relatives with poise if only she were certain of Max's love. All those people would be watching her, measuring her, just as she had been watched when she had married Jeff. How would she fit in with such a family, who were so far-flung and numerous, but oddly close for all that? It had never been easy for her to make friends, and his entire family all seemed to be so warm and outgoing. How could they understand her difficulty in warming up to people? Would they think her cold and unfriendly? Her hands were icy, and she clenched them together in an effort to warm them.

The No Smoking sign flashed on over their heads, and a huge knot formed in Claire's chest, making it necessary for her to breathe in swift, shallow gulps. Max didn't notice her anxiety; he was looking forward to seeing his family again, anticipation making his eyes gleam like jewels set in a golden idol's head.

Heathrow was sheer pandemonium, with the summer crowds thronging the airport. Max didn't turn a well-groomed hair at the hurly-burly; he secured a porter with a lifted finger, and just as the last of their luggage came around on the carousel, a joyous, lilting cry of "Max! *Max!'* soared above the noise. He turned and a grin split his face. "Vicky!" He held out his arms and a tall, blond woman hurled herself into them. He hugged and kissed her enthusiastically, rocking her in his arms. Then he freed one arm to reach out and pull Claire to him. "Claire, this hoyden is my youngest sister, Victoria. Vicky to those of us familiar with her unruly behavior. Vicky, Claire Westbrook."

"Who became instantly famous when she snared the infamous Maxwell Conroy," Vicky teased, then enveloped Claire in a warm hug. Claire smiled quietly, thinking that she liked this unpretentious young woman. The family resemblance was strong; Vicky was tall, with the same golden hair, but her

eyes were cerulean blue, and her face wasn't as sculptured. Still, she was a striking woman.
Introductions were made to Alma and Harmon; then Victoria led the way out of the air terminal. "How did you end up with the welcoming duties?" Max asked. His left arm was around Claire, and Victoria clung happily to his right.
"Oh, I'm not the lone delegate," Victoria said lightly. "Mother is waiting in the car; she didn't want to brave the hordes, but she couldn't wait for us to get home before she met Claire."
The knot in Claire's chest, which had subsided a bit on meeting Victoria, now rose to lodge in her throat. Max's mother! From the way he talked about her, Claire knew that he adored his mother, and it went without saying that she adored him. What woman wouldn't?
"We brought two cars, because of all the luggage," Victoria explained, smiling at Claire and her parents. "Mother will insist on Claire and Max going with her, if you don't mind. I'm really a safe driver."
"Really?" Max inquired, looking astonished.
"Of course we don't mind," Alma said.
As they approached the parking area, a man in a dark suit opened the door of a black four-door Jaguar, and a tall slender elegantly-dressed woman got out. "Max!" she called, waving her hand; then dignity was forgotten as she raced to meet him. Max laughed and left Claire and Victoria to sprint across the tarmac. He scooped the woman up in his arms and hugged her tightly.
"So much for our famous British reserve," Victoria observed humorously. "Everyone is always so happy to see Max again that we make absolute fools of ourselves, but there's no resisting him, is there?"
"None at all," Claire replied, watching him. Was that his *mother?* That lovely, too-young woman, with a sleek knot of blond hair just beginning to fade in color?
Before she could get herself under control and readjust her expectations from a gray-haired proper matron to the sleek reality, Max was walking toward her with his mother on his arm. "Mother, my future wife, Claire Westbrook. Darling, this is my mother, Lady Alicia Conroy, dowager countess of Hayden-Prescott."
Lady? *Countess*?
Claire was numb. Somehow she managed to smile and murmur something appropriate. The general enthusiasm of the all-around greetings continued

as Alma greeted Lady Alicia, with whom she had had several long telephone conversations. Max's mother was smiling and gracious and seemed genuinely delighted by the occasion. It was several minutes before all the luggage had been packed into the cars and everyone sorted out, Alma and Harmon into Victoria's blue Mercedes, and Max and Claire, with Lady Alicia, into the Jaguar, which was driven by the chauffeur, Sutton.
"Has the mob begun arriving yet?" Max asked, smiling at Lady Alicia and an answering twinkle lit her green eyes.
"Not yet. We expect another few days of relative quiet, though of course those within easy traveling time will have to come over for tea. Did you expect it to be otherwise?"
"I hoped, but no, I didn't *expect* it. Would it be possible for me to reserve any of Claire's time during the next week?"
"Highly doubtful," Lady Alicia said briskly, though the twinkle remained. "There's entirely too much to be done. There hasn't been such excitement in the family since the war ended; even Great-Aunt Eleanor will be attending, and you know she seldom gets out."
"I would be honored, but I know she isn't venturing out on my account."
"Of course not; everyone knows *you*. It's Claire they're interested in."
Claire didn't want everyone to be interested in her; she hated being an object of curiosity. She would become awkward and silent, afraid of doing anything for fear of making a mistake. What had Max done to her? It had been difficult enough to imagine facing an enormous family; why hadn't he told her that he was a member of the British aristocracy? She should have guessed; would the average Englishman have quite that degree of mixed elegance and arrogance? His accent, his insouciant sophistication, his rather formal manners, all indicated a circumstance of birth and breeding that was far from the ordinary.
"You're very quiet, love," Max said, reaching out to take one of her hands and frowning when he felt its chill. It was, after all, the middle of summer, and was an unusually warm day for London. "Suffering from jet lag?"
"I do feel…disoriented," she replied quietly.
"There's no wonder at that," Lady Alicia said. "I always need a long nap after a trip, and I've never been quite so far as the States. Don't worry, dear, there's no one descending on us today to meet you, and even if there were, I would send them away."

Lady Alicia was warm and friendly, and it was soon plain that Max had inherited his wry humor from her. On closer inspection it was possible to place her age at perhaps sixty, but it was a very young sixty. Her skin was smooth and virtually unwrinkled, except for the laugh lines at the corners of her eyes, and her hair was still thick, though fading in color. She enjoyed life and enjoyed her family; love was plain in her eyes when she looked at Max.

Claire listened to them talk, answering whenever she was asked a direct question, but for the most part she was quiet, wondering what else she should expect.

The estate was almost two hours' drive from London, but finally the Jaguar slowed, then turned left through a set of gates guarded by a thatch-roofed gatehouse. Victoria and Claire's parents followed closely behind in the Mercedes. "We're almost there," Max said. "You can just see the chimneys now. By the way, Mother, where have you put us?"

"Claire and her parents are to be with me at Prescott House," Lady Alicia said serenely. "You'll have your old room at Hayden Hill."

He didn't like that; his eyes narrowed and darkened to green, but he held his tongue. Claire was grateful that he hadn't demanded that they be given a room together; he was possessive enough and arrogant enough to do exactly that. His fingers tightened momentarily on hers, and she realized that he had sensed her feelings.

Then they rounded a curve, and Hayden Hill came into view. It wasn't a castle, but it was one of the old, enormous manor houses, with chimneys sticking into the sky like sentinels, the yellow brick mellowed with age to a dull gold color. The lawn was immaculately manicured, the hedges sculptured, the rose beds perfectly tended. This was where Max had grown to manhood, and Claire felt the gulf widening between them.

They drove past Hayden Hill down a narrow, paved lane. "My house is just down here," Lady Alicia explained. "It's the traditional dowager house, and I decided to honor tradition by moving into it when Clayton married."

"Not to mention escaping the bloody rows Clayton and Edie used to have when they were first married," Max added, his eyelids drooping.

Lady Alicia smiled at Claire. "My eldest son was very much the earl when he and Edie married," she explained placidly. "It took her the better part of a year to instruct him on the finer points of marriage."

Prescott House was less than half the size of Hayden Hill, though built in a similar style and with the same mellowed brick, but Claire soon found that it possessed eighteen rooms. Both Hayden Hill and the dowager house had been built in the late 1700s, after the original manor house had been destroyed by fire but both had been extensively modernized as time passed. Therefore, unlike many of the old manor houses, Hayden Hill and Prescott House both had efficient wiring and plumbing, while modern insulation and heating made it possible for the enormous fireplaces to be used for pleasure rather than for actual heating purposes.

There was even a fireplace in Claire's bedroom, and when she was finally alone, she ran her hand lightly, dreamily, over the polished wood of the mantel. It was a beautiful room, with white lace curtains and a matching bedspread. A rose-colored carpet covered the wooden floor. The furniture was rosewood, and the bed was an enormous four-poster, so high off the floor that she had to mount steps to crawl onto it. A private bath and wardrobe adjoined.

How could Max not have mentioned all of this? It wasn't as if it were an insignificant detail. She had worried about living up to the Halseys, and now she had fallen in love with a man who made the Halseys look like Johnny-come-latelies.

She took a quick shower, unable to stand the grime of travel a moment longer. A thick, fleecy toweling robe hung on a hook behind the door, and Claire wrapped herself in it rather than try to hunt hers out of the pile of luggage. Leaving the bathroom, she stopped short when she saw Max lounging in the reading chair. He looked up, that intent look coming into his eyes when he saw her shiny face and warm, damp body wrapped in the robe.

"My mother can have the most perverse sense of humor at times," he said, holding out his hand to her. "Come here, love, and let me hold you for a little while before I'm banished to Hayden Hill."

She put her hand in his and found herself gathered close, then perched on his lap. Sighing, Claire put her head on his shoulder and felt his arms close around her with steely strength.

"You've been quiet since we left New York," he murmured. "Is something wrong, or is it just jet lag?"

While he held her, nothing was wrong, but she couldn't spend the rest of her life in his arms. "No, there's nothing wrong."

He slipped his hand inside the robe and cupped her breast, stroking her flesh with gentle fingers. "Shall I leave you to your nap, then? Your mother and father have already gone to their room; the telephone is ringing constantly, but Mother is fending everyone off."
She clutched at his shoulders. "Don't go, Max, please. Hold me for a little while longer."
"All right, love." His voice was low. He tipped her face up and kissed her slowly, his tongue probing into her mouth, and his hand was no longer quite so gentle. "This is going to be an endlessly long week," he said, moving his lips down her throat. "I may kidnap you one afternoon and take you to a place where we can be alone."
If only he could kidnap her and take her away now. If only the wedding were behind them and they could return to Dallas.
It only got worse. Sometimes it seemed as if she never had a moment to herself, and every day there were more and more people to meet. Max's wedding was an excuse for a party every night as the celebration escalated. Alma was in her element, and Harmon was perfectly comfortable with the life of an English country gentleman. Then Martine and Steve arrived with the children, and they were exuberantly welcomed. Martine got on like wildfire with Max's outgoing sisters, Emma and Patricia and Victoria, and Prescott House rang with their chatter and laughter.
There were lunches, afternoon teas and endless visits sandwiched between appointments with the photographer, the caterer and the florist. The gowns were pressed and ready, and the tuxedos had arrived from the dry-cleaners. The most amazing thing to Claire was that no one had had to rent one. It was a gracious, cushioned life, marching to a well-ordered beat, with privileges taken for granted.
There was no time to see Max alone, but becoming acquainted with his background told her more about him than what she had learned before. He had been born superior and saw nothing unusual about his life, even though he was the family maverick. He was a Conroy of Hayden-Prescott. The earldom was a rich one, and his family estate had not been opened to tourists in an effort at survival. Max's inheritance made him independently wealthy; it was only his own restless genius and drive that sent him first to Canada then to the States to take on the challenge of high-level corporate dealings. Centuries of aristocratic breeding ran in his veins:.

She couldn't fit into his world. A man in his position needed a wife who was comfortable in society, and Claire knew that she would always prefer a far more private life. She had driven herself into the ground trying to be suitable for the Halseys and had failed. How could she possibly measure up to the standards of the Conroys of Hayden-Prescott? They were the elite, and she was a secretary from Houston, Texas.

The celebrations going on around her took on an unreal, circus quality, and she went through the motions, doing as she was told, going where she was guided, while the certainty grew inside her that it was all a mistake. Max would soon come to see how unsuitable she was, and he would be impatient. She knew all the stages well, having suffered through them before. First he would be impatient because she wasn't living up to expectations; then would come indifference, when it no longer mattered. And, finally, he would pity her. She didn't think she could bear that, to have him pity her. Isolated from him, without even the reassurance of his passion, Claire withdrew as she had always done in an effort to protect herself. Their marriage wouldn't have a firm base even under the best of circumstances, with only a lopsided love holding it together. Max's reasons for proposing to her weren't clear. Perhaps he thought she would be suitable; perhaps he was ready to begin his own family. But he hadn't proposed out of love. Even during all the times when they had made love, with passion burning so high between them that sometimes she felt she would shatter in his arms, he'd never said anything about love.

She had to call it off before it went any further. When she thought of what she was about to do, of the scandal it would cause, Claire went cold, but she couldn't see any other alternative. The marriage simply wouldn't work, and it would destroy her if one day Max despised her for her inability to be what he wanted, what he expected, what he *deserved*.

She reached that conclusion the day before the wedding, but she had no opportunity to talk to him. They were always surrounded by family, both his and hers, and Rome and Sarah had arrived to add to the crowd. The wedding rehearsal went off without a hitch. Everyone was in high spirits, laughing and joking, and the ancient enormous stone church echoed with their joy. Claire watched it all with dark, stricken eyes, wondering what they would all think of her when they knew the wedding had been called off.

Dear God, she couldn't just leave him standing at the altar. His fierce pride would never forgive her for that, and she couldn't live if he hated her.
Determined to talk to him, Claire threaded her way through the crowd and caught his sleeve. "Max?"
He smiled down at her. "Yes, love?" Then one of his cousins hailed him, and she lost his attention. Her nails bit into her palms as she stood beside him, trying to smile and act normally when she felt brittle inside, as if she would shatter at the slightest touch.
"Max, it's important!" she said desperately. "I have to talk to you!"
Max looked down at her again, and this time he saw her pale, taut face, the tension in every line of her body. He covered her hand with his, holding her fingers to his arm. "What is it? Is something wrong?"
"It's private. Can we go somewhere we can talk?" Her eyes begged him, and automatically he put his arm around her as if he could shield her from whatever was bothering her. "Yes, of course," he said, turning to walk with her to the door.
"Oh, no, you two lovebirds!" someone called. "You can't sneak out on the night before your wedding!"
Max looked over his shoulder. "Don't be ridiculous," he said, ushering Claire out the door. "Of course we can."
He led her outside into the cool English night, and the darkness folded around them as they walked down the lane toward Prescott House, leaving behind the brilliantly lit church. Their steps crunched on the loose gravel, and Max pulled her closer in an effort to keep the chill from her bare arms.
"What is it?" he asked quietly.
She stopped and closed her eyes, praying for strength to get through this.
"It's all a mistake," she said in a muffled tone.
"What is?"
If only he didn't sound so patient! Tears blurred her eyes as she looked up at him in the darkness. "This is," she said, waving her hand at the church behind them. "All of it. You, me, the wedding. I can't go through with it."
He drew in a sharp breath, and tension invaded his muscles. "Why is it a mistake? I thought everything was going along well. My family likes you, and you've given the impression that you like them."
"I do." Tears were making her voice ragged, and she wondered how long she could hold out before dissolving into sobs. "But can't you see what a mismatch we are? I told you the first time we went out together that I'm not

in the same league with you, but I didn't know how right I was! I don't fit in here! I can't be more than what I am, and I'll never be the aristocratic wife you need. Your…expectations are too high." She choked and couldn't say anything else, but perhaps it was just as well. Wordlessly she pulled off the pearl-and-diamond ring and extended it to him. He didn't take it, only stared down at it as she held it out in her shaking hand.

Claire couldn't hold back the sobs any longer. Grabbing his hand, she put the ring in it and folded his fingers over it. "It's for the best," she wept, backing away from him. "I love you too much to disappoint you the way I would."

She fled down the dark lane, too blinded by tears to be able to see where she was going, but she knew that Prescott House was down the lane, and she would eventually get there. Misery choked her; she didn't hear the running footsteps behind her. A hard hand grabbed her, swinging her around, and a small scream broke from her throat. She had a glimpse of his face, hard and furious, before he tossed her over his shoulder and started back up the lane.

"Max—wait!" she gasped, startled out of her tears. "You can't—what are you doing?"

"Taking my woman away," he snapped, his long legs eating up the distance as he strode toward the church.

People were milling around in front of the church, chatting before going on to Hayden Hill for the after-rehearsal party. When Max strode into view, there was a moment of dead silence, and Claire buried her face against his back.

"I say," his brother Clayton drawled. "Isn't there time enough for that tomorrow?"

"No, there's not," Max snapped, not even looking around. "I'm taking your car."

"So I see," Clayton said, watching as Max opened the door of a Mercedes and put Claire inside. Claire dropped her face into her hands, so miserable that embarrassment was only a small part of her woes.

Rome Matthews grinned, thinking of a time when he had carried his woman away from a party.

Standing on the steps, elegant in an oyster-white linen suit and pearls, Lady Alicia watched her son drive way with his intended bride. "Do you

suppose," she mused, "there's any point in waiting for them? No, of course not. We'll have the party without them," she decided.
Max drove for a long time, his temper crackling around him like a visible flame. Claire sat silently, her eyes burning, wondering if he were taking her any where in particular, or if he were simply driving aimlessly, but she didn't dare ask him. She had the answer to her question when he pulled into the courtyard of a small inn.
"What are we doing here?" She gasped as he got out of the car and reached in to pull her out. Roughly he put the pearl ring back qn her finger.
He didn't reply but pulled her into the inn. It was small and rustic, just the sort of inn that had lined England's roads for centuries. It was a pub on the bottom, with rooms on top. Max signed the register, paid the landlord and towed Claire after him up a narrow flight of stairs, while the landlord watched them with mild curiosity. Stopping before a door, Max unlocked it and pulled Claire inside, then turned to lock the door again.
"Now," he said, his voice almost guttural with rage. "Let's talk about this. To begin, the only standards and expectations you are measuring yourself against are your own. No one else expects or wants you to be anything other than yourself. I don't want you to be perfect; that would be bloody hell for me to try to live up to, because I'm not perfect. I don't want a china doll who never makes mistakes; I want *you*. As for that garbage about the aristocratic wife I deserve—" He broke off, his fists clenching with rage. Claire found that she had backed across the room, her eyes enormous as she stared at him. She couldn't believe the fury that burned in him; his eyes were like lasers, searing her.
He began unbuttoning his shirt with rough movements. "I'm a man, not a title, and the bloody damned title isn't mine anyway. My brother is the earl, and thank God he's healthy, with two sons to inherit before it would come to me. I don't want the title. I have American citizenship now; I have a job with a lot of damned responsibility that keeps me interested the way an earldom never would, and I have a family I love. I also have the woman I love, and I'll be bloody damned to hell and back before I let you walk out on me now." He pulled his shirt off and tossed it aside then unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants.
"If you don't want to get married, all right," he bit out, stripping naked. Claire stared at him, her mouth going dry. "We'll just live together, but don't ever think that we *won't* live together, married or not. You're the only

woman I've ever met who can drive me so wild that I lose control, and you're the only woman I've ever met whom I love so much I ache with it. I nearly ruined it in the beginning by not being completely honest with you, and you stopped trusting me. You've never trusted me again, have you? Too bloody damned bad, because I'm not letting you go. Is that clear?"
Claire swallowed, looking at him. He was so beautiful that she hurt. "Do you know how many 'bloody damns' and 'bloody hells' you've just said?" she whispered.
"What the bloody hell difference does it make?" he asked, stalking across the floor to grab her and toss her onto the bed.
She bounced and grabbed at the covers to keep from flying off. "You never told me before that you loved me." Her voice sounded strange, too high and tight.
He glared at her, reaching behind her for the zipper on her dress. "Is that an unforgivable sin? You never told me that you love me, either, until you blurted it out at the same time you said you couldn't marry me. What do you think that did to me? I've been trying for weeks to make you trust me again, wondering if you'd ever love me, and you throw it at me like that."
He pulled her dress off, and Claire put her hands on his chest, her heart pounding so hard that she could barely think. "Max, wait. Why are we here?"
"It's obvious, isn't it? I'm having my wedding night, even if you're determined not to have a wedding. I love you, and, I repeat, I'm not letting you go."
"What will everyone think?"
"I don't care." He stopped, looking down at her with burning eyes. "I love you. You're more important to me than anyone else on this earth, and I'd walk on live coals to get to you."
He had managed to strip her completely, and his gaze wandered down her slim body. He had been rough before, but his touch now was so gentle that it was almost like a whisper of wind as he parted her legs and eased into her. Claire accepted him, her body arching in pleasure, her hands clinging to him. She loved him so much that she thought she would burst with it, and it was in her eyes as he propped himself on his elbows over her.
"Let's try this again," he whispered. "I love you, Claire Westbrook, for all the things you are. You're gentle and loving, and you have dreams in your eyes that I want to share. Will you marry me?"

She would never have believed that she could soar so high. With her arms locked around his neck, straining up to put her mouth to his, Claire looked up into those brilliant sea-colored eyes and said, "Yes."

She walked down the aisle of the huge, drafty old church with her cream-colored satin gown rustling and the veil trailing behind her. Her father's arm was steady under her hand. Familiar and beloved faces turned toward her as she walked: the faces of the many people she had met this past week, all beaming at her; Sarah Matthews, pale and serene, with her children beside her; Derek Taliferro, his golden eyes wise beyond: his years, smiling as he watched her. Alma, smiling and crying at the same time and still looking lovely while she did it. Lady Alicia, her eyes brimming with pride. At the altar, waiting for her, were Martine, and Max's sisters, four heads in varying shades of blond. Rome Matthews stood beside Max, his dark eyes seeking out his wife where she sat in the pews, and a silent message passed between them. Clayton also stood there, and two of Max's cousins.

And Max. Tall, impossibly handsome, and so beloved that it hurt her to look at him. His image was blurred by the veil she wore, but he watched her, and there was a moist glitter in his eyes, like that of the sea.

Her father gave her hand to Max, who moved to stand by her side. The pearl on her hand gleamed in the golden candlelight of the many tapers that flickered throughout the church.

Max pressed her hand warmly, and she looked up at him. His eyes were steady. Hers were dark, secretive pools, but there were no more secrets between them. Turning toward the altar, they began speaking their vows.

Midnight Rainbow (1986)

Chapter One

He was getting too old for this kind of crap, Grant Sullivan thought irritably. What the hell was he doing crouched here, when he'd promised himself he'd never set foot in a jungle again? He was supposed to rescue a bubble-brained society deb, but from what he'd seen in the two days he'd had this jungle fortress under surveillance, he thought she might not *want* to be rescued. She looked as if she was having the time of her life: laughing, flirting, lying by the pool in the heat of the day. She slept late; she drank champagne on the flagstone patio. Her father was almost out of his mind with worry about her, thinking that she was suffering unspeakable torture at the hands of her captors. Instead, she was lolling around as if she were vacationing on the Riviera. She certainly wasn't being tortured. If anyone was being tortured, Grant thought with growing ire, it was he himself. Mosquitoes were biting him, flies were stinging him, sweat was running off him in rivers, and his legs were aching from sitting still for so long. He'd been eating field rations again, and he'd forgotten how much he hated field rations. The humidity made all of his old wounds ache, and he had plenty of old wounds to ache. No doubt about it: he was definitely too old.

He was thirty-eight, and he'd spent over half his life involved in some war, somewhere. He was tired, tired enough that he'd opted out the year before, wanting nothing more than to wake up in the same bed every morning. He hadn't wanted company or advice or anything, except to be left the hell alone. When he had burned out, he'd burned to the core.

He hadn't quite retreated to the mountains to live in a cave, where he wouldn't have to see or speak to another human being, but he had definitely considered it. Instead, he'd bought a run-down farm in Tennessee, just in the shadow of the mountains, and let the green mists heal him. He'd dropped out, but apparently he hadn't dropped far enough: they had still known how to find him. He supposed wearily that his reputation made it necessary for certain people to know his whereabouts at all times. Whenever a job called for jungle experience and expertise, they called for Grant Sullivan.

A movement on the patio caught his attention, and he cautiously moved a broad leaf a fraction of an inch to clear his line of vision. There she was, dressed to the nines in a frothy sundress and heels, with an enormous pair of

sunglasses shading her eyes. She carried a book and a tall glass of something that looked deliciously cool; she arranged herself artfully on one of the poolside deck chairs, and prepared to wile away the muggy afternoon. She waved to the guards who patrolled the plantation grounds and flashed them her dimpled smile.

Damn her pretty, useless little hide! Why couldn't she have stayed under Daddy's wing, instead of sashaying around the world to prove how "independent" she was? All she'd proved was that she had a remarkable talent for landing herself in hot water.

Poor dumb little twit, he thought. She probably didn't even realize that she was one of the central characters in a nasty little espionage caper that had at least three government and several other factions, all hostile, scrambling to find a missing microfilm. The only thing that had saved her life so far was that no one was sure how much she knew, or whether she knew anything at all. Had she been involved in George Persall's espionage activities, he wondered, or had she only been his mistress, his high class "secretary"? Did she know where the microfilm was, or did Luis Marcel, who had disappeared, have it? The only thing anyone knew for certain was that George Persall had had the microfilm in his possession. But he'd died of a heart attack—in *her* bedroom—and the microfilm hadn't been found. Had Persall already passed it to Luis Marcel? Marcel had dropped out of sight two days before Persall died—if he had the microfilm, he certainly-wasn't talking about it. The Americans wanted it, the Russians wanted it, the Sandinistas wanted it, and every rebel group in Central and South America wanted it. Hell, Sullivan thought, as far as he knew, even the Eskimos wanted it.

So where was the microfilm? What had George Persall done with it? If he had indeed passed it to Luis Marcel, who was his normal contact, then where was Luis? Had Luis decided to sell the microfilm to the highest bidder? That seemed unlikely. Grant knew Luis personally; they had been in some tight spots together and he trusted Luis at his back, which said a lot.

Government agents had been chasing this particular microfilm for about a month now. A high-level executive of a research firm in California had made a deal to sell the government-classified laser technology his firm had developed, technology that could place laser weaponry in space in the near future. The firm's own security people had become suspicious of the man and alerted the proper government authorities; together they had

apprehended the executive in the middle of the sale. But the two buyers had escaped, taking the microfilm with them. Then one of the buyers double-crossed his partner and took himself and the microfilm to South America to strike his own deal. Agents all over Central and South America had been alerted, and an American agent in Costa Rica had made contact with the man, setting up a "sting" to buy the microfilm. Things became completely confused at that point. The deal had gone sour, and the agent had been wounded, but he had gotten away with the microfilm. The film should have been destroyed at that point, but it hadn't been. Somehow the agent had gotten it to George Persall, who could come and go freely in Costa Rica because of his business connections. Who would have suspected George Persall of being involved in espionage? He'd always seemed just a tame businessman, albeit with a passion for gorgeous "secretaries"—a weakness any Latin man would understand. Persall had been known to only a few agents, Luis Marcel among them, and that had made him extraordinarily effective. But in this case, George had been left in the dark; the agent had been feverish from his wound and hadn't told George to destroy the film. Luis Marcel had been supposed to contact George, but instead Luis had disappeared. Then George, who had always seemed to be disgustingly healthy, had died of a heart attack… and no one knew where the microfilm was. The Americans wanted to be certain that the technology didn't fall into anyone else's hands; the Russians wanted the technology just as badly, and every revolutionary in the hemisphere wanted the microfilm in order to sell it to the highest bidder. An arsenal of weapons could be purchased, revolutions could be staged, with the amount of money that small piece of film would bring on the open market.

Manuel Turego, head of national security in Costa Rica, was a very smart man; he was a bastard, Grant thought, but a smart one. He'd promptly snatched up Ms. Priscilla Jane Hamilton Greer and carried her off to this heavily guarded inland "plantation." He'd probably told her that she was under protective custody, and she was probably stupid enough that she was very grateful to him for "protecting" her. Turego had played it cool; so far he hadn't harmed her. Evidently he knew that her father was a very wealthy, very influential man, and that it wasn't wise to enrage wealthy, influential men unless it was absolutely necessary. Turego was playing a waiting game; he was waiting for Luis Marcel to surface, waiting for the microfilm to surface, as it eventually had to. In the meantime, he had Priscilla; he could

afford to wait. Whether she knew anything or not, she was valuable to him as a negotiating tool, if nothing else.

From the moment Priscilla had disappeared, her father had been frantic. He'd been calling in political favors with a heavy hand, but he'd found that none of the favors owed to him could get Priscilla away from Turego. Until Luis was found, the American government wasn't going to lift a hand to free the young woman. The confusion about whether or not she actually knew anything, the tantalizing possibility that she *could* know the location of the microfilm, seemed to have blunted the intensity of the search for Luis. Her captivity could give him the edge he needed by attracting attention away from him.

Finally, desperate with worry and enraged by the lack of response he'd been getting from the government, James Hamilton had decided to take matters into his own hands. He'd spent a small fortune ferreting out his daughter's location, and then had been stymied by the inaccessibility of the well-guarded plantation. If he sent in enough men to take over the plantation, he realized, there was a strong possibility that his daughter would be killed in the fight. Then someone had mentioned Grant Sullivan's name.

A man as wealthy as James Hamilton could find someone who didn't want to be found, even a wary, burnt-out ex-government agent who had buried himself in the Tennessee mountains. Within twenty-four hours, Grant had been sitting across from Hamilton, in the library of a huge estate house that shouted of old money. Hamilton had made an offer that would pay off the mortgage on Grant's farm completely. All the man wanted was to have his daughter back, safe and sound. His face had been lined and taut with worry, and there had been a desperation about him that, even more than the money, made Grant reluctantly accept the job.

The difficulty of rescuing her had seemed enormous, perhaps even insurmountable; if he were able to penetrate the security of the plantation—something he didn't really doubt—getting her out would be something else entirely. Not only that, but Grant had his own personal experiences to remind him that, even if he found her, the odds were greatly against her being alive or recognizably human. He hadn't let himself think about what could have happened to her since the day she'd been kidnapped.

But getting to her had been made ridiculously easy; as soon as he left Hamilton's house, a new wrinkle had developed. Not a mile down the highway from Hamilton's estate, he'd glanced in the rearview mirror and

found a plain blue sedan on his tail. He'd lifted one eyebrow sardonically and pulled over to the shoulder of the road.
He lit a cigarette and inhaled leisurely as he waited for the two men to approach his car. "Hiya, Curtis."
Ted Curtis leaned down and peered in the open window, grinning. "Guess who wants to see you?"
"Hell," Grant swore irritably. "All right, lead the way. I don't have to drive all the way to Virginia, do I?"
"Naw, just to the next town. He's waiting in a motel."
The fact that Sabin had felt it necessary to leave headquarters at all told Grant a lot. He knew Kell Sabin from the old days; the man didn't have a nerve in his body, and ice water ran in his veins. He wasn't a comfortable man to be around, but Grant knew that the same had been said about himself. They were both men to whom no rules applied, men who had intimate knowledge of hell, who had lived and hunted in that gray jungle where no laws existed. The difference between them was that Sabin was comfortable in that cold grayness; it was his life—but Grant wanted no more of it. Things had gone too far; he had felt himself becoming less than human. He had begun to lose his sense of who he was and why he was there. Nothing seemed to matter any longer. The only time he'd felt alive was during the chase, when adrenaline pumped through his veins and fired all his senses into acute awareness. The bullet that had almost killed him had instead saved him, because it had stopped him long enough to let him begin thinking again. That was when he'd decided to get out.
Twenty-five minutes later, with his hand curled around a mug of strong, hot coffee, his booted feet propped comfortably on the genuine, wood-grained plastic coffee table that was standard issue for motels, Grant had murmured, "Well, I'm here. Talk."
Kell Sabin was an even six feet tall, an inch shorter than Grant, and the hard musculature of his frame revealed that he made it a point to stay in shape, even though he was no longer in the field. He was dark—black-haired, black-eyed, with an olive complexion—and the cold fire of his energy generated a force field around him. He was impossible to read, and was as canny as a stalking panther, but Grant trusted him. He couldn't say that he liked Sabin; Sabin wasn't a man to be friendly. Yet for twenty years their lives had been intertwined until they were virtually a part of each other. In his mind, Grant saw a red-orange flash of gunfire, and abruptly he felt the

thick, moist heat of the jungle, smelled the rotting vegetation, saw the flash of weapons being discharged… and felt, at his back, so close that each had braced his shoulders against the other, the same man who sat across from him now. Things like that stayed in a man's memory.

A dangerous man, Kell Sabin. Hostile governments would gladly have paid a fortune to get to him, but Sabin was nothing more than a shadow slipping away from the sunshine, as he directed his troops from the gray mists.

Without a flicker of expression in his black eyes, Sabin studied the man who sat across from him in a lazy sprawl—a deceptively lazy sprawl, he knew. Grant was, if anything, even leaner and harder than he had been in the field. Hibernating for a year hadn't made him go soft. There was still something wild about Grant Sullivan, something dangerous and untamed. It was in the wary, restless glitter of his amber eyes, eyes that glowed as fierce and golden as an eagle's under the dark, level brows. His dark blond hair was shaggy, curling down over his collar in back, emphasizing that he wasn't quite civilized. He was darkly tanned; the small scar on his chin wasn't very noticeable, but the thin line that slashed across his left cheekbone was silver against his bronzed skin. They weren't disfiguring scars, but reminders of battles.

If Sabin had had to pick anyone to go after Hamilton's daughter, he'd have picked this man. In the jungle Sullivan was as stealthy as a cat; he could become part of the jungle, blending into it, using it. He'd been useful in the concrete jungles, too, but it was in the green hells of the world that no one could equal him.

"Are you going after her?" Sabin finally asked in a quiet tone.

"Yeah."

"Then let me fill you in." Totally disregarding the fact that Grant no longer had security clearance, Sabin told him about the missing microfilm. He told him about George Persall, Luis Marcel, the whole deadly cat-and-mouse game, and dumb little Priscilla sitting in the middle of it. She was being used as a smokescreen for Luis, but Kell was more than a little worried about Luis. It wasn't like the man to disappear, and Costa Rica wasn't the most tranquil place on earth. Anything could have happened to him. Yet, wherever he was, he wasn't in the hands of any government or political faction, because everyone was still searching for him, and everyone except Manuel Turego and the American government was searching for Priscilla.

Not even the Costa Rican government knew that Turego had the woman; he was operating on his own.
"Persall was a dark horse," Kell admitted irritably. "He wasn't a professional. I don't even have a file on him."
If Sabin didn't have a file on him, Persall had been more than a dark horse; he'd been totally invisible. "How did this thing blow open?" Grant drawled, closing his eyes until they were little more than slits. He looked as if he were going to fall asleep, but Sabin knew differently.
"Our man was being followed. They were closing in on him. He was out of his mind with fever. He couldn't find Luis, but he remembered how to contact Persall. No one knew Persall's name, until then, or how to find him if they needed him. Our man just barely got the film to Persall before all hell broke loose. Persall got away."
"What about our man?"
"He's alive. We got him out, but not before Turego got his hands on him." Grant grunted. "So Turego knows our guy didn't tell Persall to destroy the film."
Kell looked completely disgusted. *"Everyone* knows. There's no security down there. Too many people will sell any scrap of information they can find. Turego has a leak in his organization, so by morning it was common knowledge. Also by morning, Persall had died of a heart attack, in Priscilla's room. Before we could move in, Turego took the girl."
Dark brown lashes veiled the golden glitter of Grant's eyes almost completely. He looked as if he would begin snoring at any minute. "Well? Does she know anything about the microfilm or not?"
"We don't know. My guess is that she doesn't. Persall had several hours to hide the microfilm before he went to her room."
"Why the hell couldn't she have stayed with Daddy, where she belongs?" Grant murmured.
"Hamilton has been raising hell for us to get her out of there, but they aren't really close. She's a party girl. Divorced, more interested in having a good time than in doing anything constructive. In fact, Hamilton cut her out of his will several years ago, and she's been wandering all around the globe since. She'd been with Persall for a couple of years. They weren't shy about their relationship. Persall liked to have a flashy woman on his arm, and he could afford her. He always seemed like an easygoing good time guy, well-

suited to her type. I sure as hell never figured him for a courier, especially one sharp enough to fool me."
"Why don't you go in and get the girl out?" Grant asked suddenly, and he opened his eyes, staring at Kell, his gaze cold and yellow.
"Two reasons. One, I don't think she knows anything about the film. I have to concentrate on finding the film, and I think that means finding Luis Marcel. Two, you're the best man for the job. I thought so when I… ah… arranged for you to be brought to Hamilton's attention."
So Kell was working to get the girl out, after all, but going about it in his own circuitous way. Well, staying behind the scenes was the only way he could be effective. "You won't have any trouble getting into Costa Rica," Kell said. "I've already arranged it. But if you can't get the girl out…"
Grant got to his feet, a tawny, graceful savage, silent and lethal. "I know," he said quietly. Neither of them had to say it, but both knew that a bullet in her head would be a great deal kinder than what would happen to her if Turego decided that she did know the location of the microfilm. She was being held only as a safety measure now, but if that microfilm didn't surface, she would eventually be the only remaining link to it. Then her life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel.
So now he was in Costa Rica, deep in the rain forest and too damned near the Nicaraguan border for comfort. Roaming bands of rebels, soldiers, revolutionaries and just plain terrorists made life miserable for people who just wanted to live their simple lives in peace, but none of it touched Priscilla. She might have been a tropical princess, sipping daintily at her iced drink, ignoring the jungle that ate continuously at the boundaries of the plantation and had to be cut back regularly.
Well, he'd seen enough. Tonight was the night. He knew her schedule now, knew the routine of the guards, and had already found all the trip lines. He didn't like traveling through the jungle at night, but there wasn't any choice. He had to have several hours to get her away from here before anyone realized she was missing; luckily, she always slept late, until at least ten every morning. No one would really think anything of it if she didn't appear by eleven. By then, they'd be long gone. Pablo would pick them up by helicopter at the designated clearing tomorrow morning, not long after dawn.
Grant backed slowly away from the edge of the jungle, worming himself into the thick greenery until it formed a solid curtain separating him from

the house. Only then did he rise to his feet, walking silently and with assurance, because he'd taken care of the trip lines and sensors as he'd found them. He'd been in the jungle for three days, moving cautiously around the perimeter of the plantation, carefully getting the layout of the house. He knew where the girl slept, and he knew how he was going to get in. It couldn't have been better; Turego wasn't in the house. He'd left the day before, and since he wasn't back by now, Grant knew that he wasn't coming. It was already twilight, and it wasn't safe to travel the river in the darkness. Grant knew exactly how treacherous the river was; that was why he would take the girl through the jungle. Even given its dangers, the river would be the logical route for them to take. If by some chance her departure were discovered before Pablo picked them up, the search would be concentrated along the river, at least for a while. Long enough, he hoped, for them to reach the helicopter.

He'd have to wait several more hours before he could go into the house and get the girl out. That would give everyone time to get tired, bored and sleepy. He made his way to the small clearing where he'd stashed his supplies, and carefully checked it for snakes, especially the velvety brown fer-de-lance, which liked to lie in clearings and wait for its next meal. After satisfying himself that the clearing was safe, he sat down on a fallen tree to smoke a cigarette. He took a drink of water, but he wasn't hungry. He knew that he wouldn't be until sometime tomorrow. Once the action was going down he couldn't eat; he was too keyed up, all his senses enhanced so that even the smallest sound of the jungle crashed against his eardrums like thunder. Adrenaline was already pumping through his veins, making him so high that he could understand why the Vikings had gone berserk during battle. Waiting was almost unbearable, but that was what he had to do. He checked his watch again, the illuminated dial a strange bit of civilization in a jungle that swallowed men alive, and frowned when he saw that only a little over half an hour had passed.

To give himself something to do, to calm his tightly wound nerves, he began packing methodically, arranging everything so he would know exactly where it was. He checked his weapons and his ammunition, hoping he wouldn't have to use them. What he needed more than anything, if he was to get the girl out alive, was a totally silent operation. If he had to use his carbine or the automatic pistol, he'd give away their position. He preferred a knife, which was silent and deadly.

He felt sweat trickle down his spine. God, if only the girl would have sense enough to keep her mouth shut and not start squawking when he hauled her out of there. If he had to, he'd knock her out, but that would make her dead weight to carry through vegetation that reached out to wrap around his legs like living fingers.

He realized that he was fondling his knife, his long, lean fingers sliding over the deadly blade with a lover's touch, and he shoved it into its sheath. Damn her, he thought bitterly. Because of her, he was back in the thick of things, and he could feel it taking hold of him again. The rush of danger was as addictive as any drug, and it was in his veins again, burning him, eating at him like an acid—killing him and intensifying the feeling of life all at once. Damn her, damn her to hell. All this for a spoiled, silly society brat who liked to amuse herself in various beds. Still, her round heels might have kept her alive, because Turego fancied himself quite a lover.

The night sounds of the jungle began to build around him: the screams of the howler monkeys, the rustles and chirps and coughs of the night denizens as they went about their business. Somewhere down close to the river he heard a jaguar cough, but he never minded the normal jungle sounds. He was at home here. The peculiar combination of his genes and the skills he'd learned as a boy in the swamps of south Georgia made him as much a part of the jungle as the jaguar that prowled the river's edge. Though the thick canopy blocked out all light, he didn't light a lamp or switch on a flashlight; he wanted his eyes to be perfectly adjusted to the dark when he began moving. He relied on his ears and his instincts, knowing that there was no danger close to him. The danger would come from men, not from the shy jungle animals. As long as those reassuring noises surrounded him, he knew that no men were near.

At midnight he rose and began easing along the route he'd marked in his mind, and the animals and insects were so unalarmed by his presence that the din continued without pause. The only caution he felt was that a fer-de-lance or a bushmaster might be hunting along the path he'd chosen, but that was a chance he'd have to take. He carried a long stick that he swept silently across the ground before him. When he reached the edge of the plantation he put the stick aside and crouched down to survey the grounds, making certain everything was as expected, before he moved in.

From where he crouched, he could see that the guards were at their normal posts, probably asleep, except for the one who patrolled the perimeter, and

he'd soon settle down for a nap, too. They were sloppy, he thought contemptuously. They obviously didn't expect any visitors in as remote a place as this upriver plantation. During the three days he'd spent observing them, he'd noted that they stood around talking a great deal of the time, smoking cigarettes, not keeping a close watch on anything. But they were still there, and those rifles were loaded with real bullets. One of the reasons Grant had reached the age of thirty-eight was that he had a healthy respect for weapons and what they could do to human flesh. He didn't believe in recklessness, because it cost lives. He waited. At least now he could see, for the night was clear, and the stars hung low and brilliant in the sky. He didn't mind the starlight; there were plenty of shadows that would cover his movements.

The guard at the left corner of the house hadn't moved an inch since Grant had been watching him; he was asleep. The guard walking the grounds had settled down against one of the pillars at the front of the house. The faint red glow near the guard's hand told Grant that he was smoking and if he followed his usual pattern, he'd pull his cap over his eyes after he'd finished the cigarette, and sleep through the night.

As silently as a wraith, Grant left the concealing jungle and moved onto the grounds, slipping from tree to bush, invisible in the black shadows. Soundlessly, he mounted the veranda that ran alongside the house, flattening himself against the wall and checking the scene again. It was silent and peaceful. The guards relied far too heavily on those trip lines, not realizing they could be dismantled.

Priscilla's room was toward the back. It had double sliding glass doors, which might be locked, but that didn't worry him; he had a way with locks. He eased up to the doors, put out his hand and pulled silently. The door moved easily, and his brows rose. Not locked. Thoughtful of her.

Gently, gently, a fraction of an inch at a time, he slid the door open until there was enough room for him to slip through. As soon as he was in the room he paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust again. After the starlight, the room seemed as dark as the jungle. He didn't move a muscle, but waited, poised and listening.

Soon he could see again. The room was big and airy, with cool wooden floors covered with straw mats. The bed was against the wall to his right, ghostly with the folds of mosquito netting draped around it. Through the netting he could see the rumpled covers, the small mound on the far side of

the bed. A chair, a small round table and a tall floor lamp were on this side of the bed. The shadows were deeper to his left, but he could see a door that probably opened to the bathroom. An enormous wardrobe stood against the wall. Slowly, as silently as a tiger stalking its prey, he moved around the wall, blending into the darkness near the wardrobe. Now he could see a chair on the far side of the bed, next to where she slept. A long white garment, perhaps her robe or nightgown, lay across the chair. The thought that she might be sleeping naked made his mouth quirk in a sudden grin that held no real amusement. If she did sleep naked, she'd fight like a wildcat when he woke her. Just what he needed. For both their sakes, he hoped she was clothed.

He moved closer to the bed, his eyes on the small figure. She was so still… The hair prickled on the back of his neck in warning, and without thinking he flung himself to the side, taking the blow on his shoulder instead of his neck. He rolled, and came to his feet expecting to face his assailant, but the room was still and dark again. Nothing moved, not even the woman on the bed. Grant faded back into the shadows, trying to hear the soft whisper of breathing, the rustle of clothing, anything. The silence in the room was deafening. Where was his attacker? Like Grant, he'd moved into the shadows, which were deep enough to shield several men.

Who was his assailant? What was he doing here in the woman's bedroom? Had he been sent to kill her or was he, too, trying to steal her from Turego? His opponent was probably in the black corner beside the wardrobe. Grant eased the knife out of its sheath, then pushed it in again; his hands would be as silent as the knife.

There… just for a moment, the slightest of movements, but enough to pinpoint the man's position. Grant crouched then moved forward in a blurred rush, catching the man low and flipping him. The stranger rolled as he landed and came to his feet with a lithe twist, a slim dark figure outlined against the white mosquito netting. He kicked out, and Grant dodged the blow, but he felt the breeze of the kick pass his chin. Moving in, he caught the man's arm with a numbing chop. He saw the arm fall uselessly to the man's side. Coldly, without emotion, not even breathing hard, Grant threw the slim figure to the floor and knelt with one knee on the good arm and his other knee pressed to the man's chest. Just as he raised his hand to strike the blow that would end their silent struggle, Grant became aware of something odd, something soft swelling beneath his knee. Then he understood. The

too-still form on the bed was so still because it was a mound of covers, not a human being. The girl hadn't been in bed; she'd seen him come through the sliding doors and had hidden herself in the shadows. But why hadn't she screamed? Why had she attacked, knowing that she had no chance of overpowering him? He moved his knee off her breasts and quickly slid his hand to the soft mounds to make certain his weight hadn't cut off her breath. He felt the reassuring rise of her chest, heard the soft, startled gasp as she felt his touch, and he eased a little away from her.

"It's all right," he started to whisper, but she suddenly twisted on the floor, wrenching away from him. Her knee slashed upward; he was unguarded, totally vulnerable, and her knee crashed into his groin with a force that sent agony through his whole body. Red lights danced before his eyes, and he sagged to one side, gagging at the bitter bile that rose in his throat, his hands automatically cupping his agonized flesh as he ground his teeth to contain the groan that fought for release.

She scrambled away from him, and he heard a low sob, perhaps of terror. Through pain-blurred eyes he saw her pick up something dark and bulky; then she slipped through the open glass door and was gone.

Pure fury propelled him to his feet. Damn it, she was escaping on her own. She was going to ruin the whole setup! Ignoring the pain in his loins, he started after her. He had a score to settle.

Chapter Two

Jane had just reached for her bundle of supplies when some instinct left over from her cave-dwelling ancestors told her that someone was near. There hadn't been any sound to alert her, but suddenly she was aware of another presence. The fine hairs on the back of her neck and her forearms stood up, and she had frozen, turning terrified eyes toward the double glass doors. The doors had slid open noiselessly, and she had seen the darker shadow of a man briefly outlined against the night. He was a big man, but one who moved with total silence. It was the eerie soundlessness of his movements that had frightened her more than anything, sending chills of pure terror chasing over her skin. For days now she had lived by her nerves, holding the terror at bay while she walked a tightrope, trying to lull

Turego's suspicions, yet always poised for an escape attempt. But nothing had frightened her as much as that dark shadow slipping into her room. Any faint hope that she would be rescued had died when Turego had installed her here. She had assessed the situation realistically. The only person who would try to-get her out would be her father, but it would be beyond his power. She could depend on only herself and her wits. To that end, she had flirted and flattered and downright lied, doing everything she could to convince Turego that she was both brainless and harmless. In that, she thought, she'd succeeded, but time was fast running out. When an aide had brought an urgent message to Turego the day before, Jane had eavesdropped; Luis Marcel's location had been discovered, and Turego wanted Luis, badly.

But by now Turego surely would have discovered that Luis had no knowledge of the missing microfilm, and that would leave her as the sole suspect. She had to escape, tonight, before Turego returned.

She hadn't been idle since she'd been here; she'd carefully memorized the routine of the guards, especially at night, when the terror brought on by the darkness made it impossible for her to sleep. She'd spent the nights standing at the double doors, watching the guards, clocking them, studying their habits. By keeping her mind busy, she'd been able to control the fear. When dawn would begin to lighten the sky, she had slept. She had been preparing since the first day she'd been here for the possibility that she might have to bolt into the jungle. She'd been sneaking food and supplies, hoarding them, and steeling herself for what lay ahead. Even now, only the raw fear of what awaited her at Turego's hands gave her the courage to brave the black jungle, where the night demons were waiting for her.

But none of that had been as sinister, as lethal, as the dark shape moving through her bedroom. She shrank back into the thick shadows, not even breathing in her acute terror. Oh, God, she prayed, what do I do now? Why was he there? To murder her in her bed? Was it one of the guards, tonight of all nights, come to rape her?

As he passed in front of her, moving in a slight crouch toward her bed, an odd rage suddenly filled Jane. After all she had endured, she was damned if she'd allow him to spoil her escape attempt! She'd talked herself into it, despite her horrible fear of the dark, and now he was ruining it!

Her jaw set, she clenched her fists as she'd been taught to do in her self-defense classes. She struck at the back of his neck, but suddenly he was

gone, a shadow twisting away from the blow, and her fist struck his shoulder instead. Instantly terrified again, she shrank back into the shelter of the wardrobe, straining her eyes to see him, but he'd disappeared. Had he been a wraith, a figment of her imagination? No, her fist had struck a very solid shoulder, and the faint rippling of the white curtains over the glass doors testified that the doors were indeed open. He was in the room, somewhere, but *where?* How could a man that big disappear so completely? Then, abruptly, his weight struck her in the side, bowling her over, and she barely bit off the instinctive scream that surged up from her throat. She didn't have a chance. She tried automatically to kick him in the throat, but he moved like lightning, blocking her attack. Then a hard blow to her arm numbed it all the way to her elbow, and a split second later she was thrown to the floor, a knee pressing into her chest and making it impossible to breathe.

The man raised his arm and Jane tensed, willing now to scream, but unable to make a sound. Then, suddenly, the man paused, and for some reason lifted his weight from her chest. Air rushed into her lungs, along with a dizzying sense of relief, then she felt his hand moving boldly over her breasts and realized why he'd shifted position. Both terrified and angry that this should be happening to her, she moved instinctively the split second she realized his vulnerability, and slashed upward with her knee. He sagged to the side, holding himself, and she felt an absurd sense of pity. Then she realized that he hadn't even groaned aloud. The man wasn't human! Choking back a sob of terror, she struggled to her feet and grabbed her supplies, then darted through the open door. At that point she wasn't escaping from Turego so much as from that dark, silent demon in her room. Heedlessly, she flung herself across the plantation grounds; her heart was pounding so violently that the sound of her blood pumping through her veins made a roar in her ears. Her lungs hurt, and she realized that she was holding her breath. She tried to remind herself to be quiet, but the urge to flee was too strong for caution; she stumbled over a rough section of ground and sprawled on her hands and knees. As she began scrambling to her feet, she was suddenly overwhelmed by something big and warm, smashing her back to the ground. Cold, pure terror froze her blood in her veins, but before even an instinctive scream could find voice, his hand was on the back of her neck and everything went black.

Jane regained consciousness by degrees, confused by her upside down position, the jouncing she was suffering, the discomfort of her arms. Strange noises assailed her ears, noises that she tried and failed to identify. Even when she opened her eyes she saw only blackness. It was one of the worst nightmares she'd ever had. She began kicking and struggling to wake up, to end the dream, and abruptly a sharp slap stung her bottom. "Settle down," an ill-tempered voice said from somewhere above and behind her. The voice was that of a stranger, but there was something in that laconic drawl that made her obey instantly.

Slowly things began to shift into a recognizable pattern, and her senses righted themselves. She was being carried over a man's shoulder through the jungle. Her wrists had been taped behind her, and her ankles were also secured. Another wide band of tape covered her mouth, preventing her from doing anything more than grunting or humming. She didn't feel like humming, so she used her limited voice to grunt out exactly what she thought of him, in language that would have left her elegant mother white with shock. A hard hand again made contact with the seat of her pants. "Would you shut the hell up?" he growled. "You sound like a pig grunting at the trough."

American! she thought, stunned. He was an American! He'd come to rescue her, even though he was being unnecessarily rough about it… or was he a rescuer? Chilled, she thought of all the different factions who would like to get their hands on her. Some of those factions were fully capable of hiring an American mercenary to get her, or of training one of their own to imitate an American accent and win her trust.

She didn't dare trust anyone, she realized. Not anyone. She was alone in this.

The man stopped and lifted her from his shoulder, standing her on her feet. Jane blinked her eyes, then widened them in an effort to see, but the darkness under the thick canopy was total, she couldn't see anything. The night pressed in on her, suffocating her with its thick darkness. Where was he? Had he simply dropped her here in the jungle and left her to be breakfast for a jaguar? She could sense movement around her, but no sounds that she could identify as him; the howls and chittering and squawks and rustles of the jungle filled her ears. A whimper rose in her throat, and she tried to move, to seek a tree or something to protect her back, but she'd

forgotten her bound feet and she stumbled to the ground, scratching her face on a bush.
A low obscenity came to her ears, then she was roughly grasped and hauled to her feet. "Damn it, stay put!"
So he was still there. How could he see? What was he doing? No matter who he was or what he was doing, at that moment Jane was grateful for his presence. She could not conquer her fear of darkness but the fact that she wasn't alone held the terror at bay. She gasped as he abruptly lifted her and tossed her over his shoulder again, as effortlessly as if she were a rag doll. She felt the bulk of a backpack, which hadn't been there before, but he showed no sign of strain. He moved through the stygian darkness with a peculiar sure-footedness, a lithe, powerful grace that never faltered.
Her own pack of pilfered supplies was still slung around her shoulders, the straps holding it even though it had slid down and was bumping against the back of her head. A can of something was banging against her skull; she'd probably have concussion if this macho fool didn't ease up. What did he think this was, some sort of jungle marathon? Her ribs were being bruised against his hard shoulder, and she felt various aches all over her body, probably as a result of his roughness in throwing her to the floor. Her arm ached to the bone from his blow. Even if this was a real rescue, she thought, she'd be lucky if she lived through it.
She bounced on his shoulder for what seemed like days, the pain in her cramped limbs increasing with every step he took. Nausea began to rise in her, and she took deep breaths in an effort to stave off throwing up. If she began to vomit, with her mouth taped the way it was, she could suffocate. Desperately she began to struggle, knowing only that she needed to get into an upright position.
"Easy there, Pris." Somehow he seemed to know how she was feeling. He stopped and lifted her off his shoulder, easing her onto her back on the ground. When her weight came down on her bound arms she couldn't suppress a whimper of pain. "All right," the man said. "I'm going to cut you loose now, but if you start acting up, I'll truss you up like a Christmas turkey again and leave you that way. Understand?"
She nodded wildly, wondering if he could see her in the dark. Evidently he could, because he turned her on her side and she felt a knife slicing through the tape that bound her wrists. Tears stung her eyes from the pain as he

pulled her arms around and began massaging them roughly to ease her cramped muscles.
"Your daddy sent me to get you out of here," the man drawled calmly as he began easing the tape off of her mouth. Instead of ripping the adhesive away and taking skin with it, he was careful, and Jane was torn between gratitude and indignation, since he'd taped her mouth in the first place.
Jane moved her mouth back and forth, restoring it to working condition.
"My daddy?" she asked hoarsely.
"Yeah. Okay, now, Pris, I'm going to free your legs, but if you look like you're even thinking about kicking me again, I won't be as easy with you as I was the last time." Despite his drawl, there was something menacing in his tone, and Jane didn't doubt his word.
"I wouldn't have kicked you the first time if you hadn't started pawing at me like a high school sophomore!" she hissed.
"I was checking to see if you were breathing."
"Sure you were, and taking your time about it, too."
"Gagging you was a damned good idea," he said reflectively, and Jane shut up. She had yet to see him as anything more than a shadow. She couldn't even put a name to him, but she knew enough about him to know that he would bind and gag her again without a moment's compunction.
He cut the tape from around her ankles, and again she was subjected to his rough but effective massage. In only a moment she was being pulled to her feet; she staggered momentarily before regaining her sense of balance.
"We don't have much farther to go; stay right behind me, and don't say a word."
"Wait!" Jane whispered frantically. "How can I follow you when I can't see you?"
He took her hand and carried it to his waist. "Hang on to my belt."
She did better than that. Acutely aware of the vast jungle around her, and with only his presence shielding her from the night terrors, she hooked her fingers inside the waistband of his pants in a death grip. She knotted the material so tightly that he muttered a protest, but she wasn't about to let go of him.
Maybe it didn't seem very far to him, but to Jane, being towed in his wake, stumbling over roots and vines that she couldn't see, it seemed like miles before he halted. "We'll wait here," he whispered. "I don't want to go any closer until I hear the helicopter come in."

"When will that be?" Jane whispered back, figuring that if he could talk, so could she.
"A little after dawn."
"When is dawn?"
"Half an hour."
Still clutching the waistband of his pants, she stood behind him and waited for dawn. The seconds and minutes crawled by, but they gave her the chance to realize for the first time that she'd truly escaped from Turego. She was safe and free… well almost. She was out of his clutches, she was the only one who knew what a close call she'd had. Turego would almost certainly return to the plantation this morning to find that his prisoner had escaped. For a moment she was surprised at her own lack of elation, then she realized that she wasn't out of danger yet. This man said that her father had sent him, but he hadn't given her a name or any proof. All she had was his word, and Jane was more than a little wary. Until she was actually on American soil, until she knew beyond any doubt that she was safe, she was going to follow poor George Persall's ironclad rule: when in doubt, lie.
The man shifted uncomfortably, drawing her attention. "Look, honey, do you think you could loosen up on my pants? Or are you trying to finish the job you started on me with your knee?"
Jane felt the blood rush to her cheeks, and she hastily released her hold. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize," she whispered. She stood stiffly for a moment, her arms at her sides; then panic began to rise in her. She couldn't see him in the darkness, she couldn't hear him breathing, and now that she was no longer touching him, she couldn't be certain that he hadn't left her. Was he still there? What if she was alone? The air became thick and oppressive, and she struggled to breathe, to fight down the fear that she knew was unreasonable but that no amount of reason could conquer. Even knowing its source didn't help. She simply couldn't stand the darkness. She couldn't sleep without a light; she never went into a room without first reaching in and turning on the light switch, and she always left her lights on if she knew she would be late returning home. She, who always took extraordinary precautions against being left in the dark, was standing in the middle of a jungle in darkness so complete that it was like being blind.
Her fragile control broke and she reached out wildly, clawing for him, for reassurance that he was still there. Her outstretched fingers touched fabric, and she threw herself against him, gasping in mingled panic and relief. The

next second steely fingers grasped her shirt and she was hurled through the air to land flat on her back in the smelly, rotting vegetation. Before she could move, before she could suck air back into her lungs, her hair was pulled back and she felt the suffocating pressure of his knee on her chest again. His breath was a low rasp above her, his voice little more than a snarl "Don't ever—ever—come at me from behind again."

Jane writhed, pushing at his knee. After a moment he lifted it, and eased the grip on her hair. Even being thrown over his shoulder had been better than being left alone in the darkness, and she grabbed for him again, catching him around the knees. Automatically he tried to step away from her entangling arms but she lunged for him. He uttered a startled curse, tried to regain his balance, then crashed to the ground.

He lay so still that Jane's heart plummeted. What would she do if he were hurt? She couldn't possibly carry him, but neither could she leave him lying there, injured and unable to protect himself. Feeling her way up his body, she scrambled to crouch by his shoulders. "Mister, are you all right?" she whispered, running her hands up his shoulders to his face, then searching his head for any cuts or lumps. There was an elasticized band around his head, and she followed it, her nervous fingers finding an odd type of glasses over his eyes. "Are you hurt?" she demanded again, her voice tight with fear. "Damn it, answer me!"

"Lady," the man said in a low, furious voice, "you're crazier than hell. If I was your daddy, I'd pay Turego to keep you!"

She didn't know him, but his words caused an odd little pain in her chest. She sat silently, shocked that he could hurt her feelings. She didn't know him, and he didn't know her—how could his opinion matter? But it did, somehow, and she felt strangely vulnerable.

He eased himself to a sitting position, and when she didn't say anything, he sighed. "Why did you jump me like that?" he asked in resignation.

"I'm afraid of the dark," she said with quiet dignity. "I couldn't hear you breathing, and I can't see a thing. I panicked. I'm sorry."

After a moment he said, "All right," and got to his feet. Bending down, he grasped her wrists and pulled her up to stand beside him. Jane inched a little closer to him.

"You can see because of those glasses you're wearing, can't you?" she asked.

"Yeah. There's not a lot of light, but enough that I can make out where I'm going. Infrared lenses."
A howler monkey suddenly screamed somewhere above their heads, and Jane jumped, bumping into him. "Got another pair?" she asked shakily.
She could feel him hesitate, then his arm went around her shoulders. "Nope, just these. Don't worry, Pris, I'm not going to lose you. In another five minutes or so, it'll start getting light."
"I'm all right now," she said, and she was, as long as she could touch him and know that she wasn't alone. That was the real terror: being alone in the darkness. For years she had fought a battle against the nightmare that had begun when she was nine years old, but at last she had come to accept it, and in the acceptance she'd won peace. She knew it was there, knew when to expect it and what to do to ward it off, and that knowledge gave her the ability to enjoy life again. She hadn't let the nightmare cripple her. Maybe her methods of combating it were a little unorthodox, but she had found the balance within herself and she was happy with it.
Feeling remarkably safe with that steely arm looped over her shoulders, Jane waited beside him, and in a very short time she found that she could indeed see a little better. Deep in the rain forest there was no brilliant sunrise to announce the day—the sunrise could not be seen from beneath the canopy of vegetation. Even during the hottest noon, the light that reached the jungle floor was dim, filtered through layers of greenery. She waited as the faint gray light slowly became stronger, until she could pick out more of the details of the lush foliage that surrounded her. She felt almost swamped by the plant life. She'd never been in the jungle before; her only knowledge of it came from movies and what little she'd been able to see during the trip upriver to the plantation. During her days at the plantation she'd begun to think of the jungle as a living entity, huge and green, surrounding her, waiting. She had known from the first that to escape she would have to plunge into that seemingly impenetrable green barrier, and she had spent hours staring at it.
Now she was deep within it, and it wasn't quite what she'd expected. It wasn't a thick tangle, where paths had to be cut with a machete. The jungle floor was littered with rotting vegetation, and laced with networks of vines and roots, but for all that it was surprisingly clear. Plant life that lingered near the jungle floor was doomed. To compete for the precious light it had to rise and spread out its broad leaves, to gather as much light as it could.

She stared at a fern that wasn't quite a fern; it was a tree with a buttressed root system, rising to a height of at least eight feet, only at the top it feathered into a fern.

"You can see now," he muttered suddenly, lifting his arm from her shoulders and stripping off the night vision goggles. He placed them carefully in a zippered section of his field pack.

Jane stared at him in open curiosity, wishing that the light were better so she could really see him. What she *could* see gave wing to hundreds of tiny butterflies in her stomach. It would take one brave *hombre* to meet this man in a dark alley, she thought with a frightened shiver. She couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but they glittered at her from beneath fierce, level dark brows. His face was blackened, which made those eyes all the brighter. His light colored hair was far too long, and he'd tied a strip of cloth around his head to keep the hair out of his eyes. He was clad in tiger-striped camouflage fatigues, and he wore the trappings of war. A wicked knife was stuck casually in his belt, and a pistol rode his left hip while he carried a carbine slung over his right shoulder. Her startled eyes darted back up to his face, a strong-boned face that revealed no emotion, though he had been aware of her survey.

"Loaded for bear, aren't you?" she quipped, eyeing the knife again. For some reason it looked more deadly than either of the guns.

"I don't walk into anything unprepared," he said flatly.

Well, he certainly looked prepared for anything. She eyed him again, more warily this time; he was about six feet tall, and looked like… looked like… Her mind groped for and found the phrase. It had been bandied about and almost turned into a joke, but with this man, it was deadly serious. He looked like a lean, mean, fighting machine, every hard, muscled inch of him. His shoulders looked to be a yard wide, and he'd carried her dead weight through the jungle without even a hint of strain. He'd knocked her down twice, and she realized the only reason she wasn't badly hurt was that, both times, he'd tempered his strength.

Abruptly his attention left her, and his head lifted with a quick, alert motion, like that of an eagle. His eyes narrowed as he listened. "The helicopter is coming," he told her. "Let's go."

Jane listened, but she couldn't hear anything. "Are you sure?" she asked doubtfully.

"I said let's go," he repeated impatiently, and walked away from her. It took Jane only a few seconds to realize that he was heading out, and in the jungle he would be completely hidden from view before he'd gone ten yards. She hurried to catch up to him.
"Hey, slow down!" she whispered frantically, catching at his belt.
"Move it," he said with a total lack of sympathy. "The helicopter won't wait forever; Pablo's on the quick side anyway."
"Who's Pablo?"
"The pilot."
Just then a faint vibration reached her ears. In only a moment it had intensified to the recognizable beat of a helicopter. How could he have heard it before? She knew that she had good hearing, but his senses must be almost painfully acute.
He moved swiftly, surely, as if he knew exactly where he was going. Jane concentrated on keeping up with him and avoiding the roots that tried to catch her toes, she paid little attention to their surroundings. When he climbed, she climbed; it was simple. She was mildly surprised when he stopped abruptly and she lifted her head to look around. The jungle of Costa Rica was mountainous, and they had climbed to the edge of a small cliff, looking down on a narrow, hidden valley with a natural clearing. The helicopter sat in that clearing, the blades lazily whirling.
"Better than a taxicab," Jane murmured in relief, and started past him.
His hand closed over her shoulder and jerked her back. "Be quiet," he ordered, his narrowed gaze moving restlessly, surveying the area.
"Is something wrong?"
"Shut up!"
Jane glared at him, incensed by his unnecessary rudeness, but his hand was still clamped on her shoulder in a grip that bordered on being painful. It was a warning that if she tried to leave the protective cover of the jungle before he was satisfied that everything was safe, he would stop her with real pain. She stood quietly, staring at the clearing herself, but she couldn't see anything wrong. Everything was quiet. The pilot was leaning against the outside of the helicopter, occupied with cleaning his nails; he certainly wasn't concerned with anything.
Long minutes dragged past. The pilot began to fidget, craning his neck and staring into the jungle, though anyone standing just a few feet behind the

trees would be completely hidden from view. He looked at his watch, then scanned the jungle again, his gaze moving nervously from left to right.
Jane felt the tension in the man standing beside her, tension that was echoed in the hand that held her shoulder. What was wrong? What was he looking for, and why was he waiting? He was as motionless as a jaguar lying in wait for its prey to pass beneath its tree limb.
"This sucks," he muttered abruptly, easing deeper into the jungle and dragging her with him.
Jane sputtered at the inelegant expression. "It does? Why? What's wrong?"
"Stay here." He pushed her to the ground, deep in the green-black shadow of the buttressed roots of an enormous tree.
Startled, she took a moment to realize that she'd been abandoned. He had simply melted into the jungle, so silently and swiftly that she wasn't certain which way he'd gone. She twisted around but could see nothing that indicated his direction; no swaying vines or limbs.
She wrapped her arms around her drawn-up legs and propped her chin on her knees, staring thoughtfully at the ground. A green stick with legs was dragging a large spider off to be devoured. What if he didn't come back… whoever he was. Why hadn't she asked him his name? If something happened to him, she'd like to know his name, so she could tell someone—assuming that she could manage to get out of the jungle herself. Well, she wasn't any worse off now than she had been before. She was away from Turego, and that was what counted.
Wait here, he'd said. For how long? Until lunch? Sundown? Her next birthday? Men gave such inexact instructions! Of course, this particular man seemed a little limited in the conversation department. Shut up, Stay here and Stay put seemed to be the highlights of his repertoire.
This was quite a tree he'd parked her by. The bottom of the trunk flared into buttressed roots, forming enormous wings that wrapped around her almost like arms. If she sat back against the tree, the wings would shield her completely from the view of someone approaching at any angle except head on.
The straps of her backpack were irritating her shoulders, so she slid it off and stretched, feeling remarkably lighter. She hauled the pack around and opened it, then began digging for her hairbrush. Finding this backpack had been a stroke of luck, she thought, though Turego's soldiers really should be

a little more careful with their belongings. Without it, she'd have had to wrap things up in a blanket, which would have been awkward.
Finally locating the hairbrush, she diligently worked through the mass of tangles that had accumulated in her long hair during the night. A small monkey with an indignant expression hung from a branch overhead. It scolded her throughout the operation, evidently angry that she had intruded on its territory. She waved at it.
Congratulating herself for her foresight, she pinned her hair up and pulled a black baseball cap out of the pack. She jammed the cap on and tugged the bill down low over her eyes, then shoved it back up. There wasn't any sun down here. Staring upward, she could see bright pinpoints of sun high in the trees, but only a muted green light filtered down to the floor. She'd have been better off with some of those fancy goggles that. What's-his-name had. How long had she been sitting there? Was he in trouble?
Her legs were going to sleep, so she stood and stomped around to get her blood flowing again. The longer she waited, the more uneasy she became, and she had the feeling that a time would come when she'd better be able to move fast. Jane was an instinctive creature, as sensitive to atmosphere as any finely tuned barometer. That trait had enabled her to hold Turego at bay for what seemed like an endless succession of days and nights, reading him, sidestepping him, keeping him constantly disarmed, and even charmed. Now the same instinct warned her of danger. There was some slight change in the very air that stroked her bare arms. Warily, she leaned down to pick up her backpack, slipping her arms through the straps and anchoring it this time by fastening the third strap around her middle.
The sudden thunderous burst of automatic weapon fire made her whirl, her heart jumping into her throat. Listening to the staccato blasts, she knew that several weapons were being fired, but at whom? Had her friend been detected or was this something else entirely? Was this the trouble he'd sensed that had made him shy away from the clearing? She wanted to think that he was safe, observing everything from an invisible vantage point in the jungle, but with a chill she realized that she couldn't take that for granted.
Her hands felt cold, and with a distant surprise she realized that she was trembling. What should she do? Wait, or run? What if he needed help? She realized that there was very little she could do, since she was unarmed, but she couldn't just run away if he needed help. He wasn't the most amiable

man she'd ever met, and she still didn't exactly trust him, but he was the closest thing to a friend she had here.
Ignoring the unwillingness of her feet and the icy lump of fear in her stomach, Jane left the shelter of the giant tree and began cautiously inching through the forest, back toward the clearing. There were only sporadic bursts of gunfire now, still coming from the same general direction. Suddenly she froze as the faint sound of voices filtered through the forest. In a cold panic she dove for the shelter of another large tree. What would she do if they were coming in this direction? The rough bark scratched her hands as she cautiously moved her head just enough to peer around the trunk.
A steely hand clamped over her mouth. As a scream rose in her throat, a deep, furious voice growled in her ear, "Damn it, I told you to stay put!"

Chapter Three

Jane glared at him over the hand that still covered her mouth, her fright turning into relieved anger. She didn't like this man. She didn't like him at all, and as soon as they were out of this mess, she was going to tell him about it!
He removed his hand and shoved her to the ground on her hands and knees. "Crawl!" he ordered in a harsh whisper, and pointed to their left.
Jane crawled, ignoring the scratches she incurred as she squirmed through the undergrowth, ignoring even the disgusting squishiness when she accidentally smashed something with her hand. Odd, but now that he was with her again, her panic had faded; it hadn't gone completely, but it wasn't the heart-pounding, nauseating variety, either. Whatever his faults, he knew his way around.
He was on her tail, literally, his hard shoulder against the back of her thighs, pushing her onward whenever he thought she wasn't moving fast enough. Once he halted her by the simple method of grabbing her ankle and jerking her flat, his urgent grip warning her to be quiet. She held her breath, listening to the faint rustle that betrayed the presence of someone, or something, nearby. She didn't dare turn her head, but she could detect movement with her peripheral vision. In a moment the man was close enough that she could see him plainly. He was obviously of Latin ancestry,

and he was dressed in camouflage fatigues with a cap covering his head. He held an automatic rifle at the ready before him.
In only a moment she could no longer see or hear him, but they stayed motionless in the thick tangle of ferns for long, agonizing minutes. Then her ankle was released and a hand on her hip urged her forward.
They were moving away from the soldier at a right angle. Perhaps they were going to try to get behind their pursuers, then take off in the helicopter while the soldiers were still deep in the jungle. She wanted to know where they were going, what they would do, who the soldiers were and what they wanted—but the questions had to remain bottled up inside her. Now was definitely not the time for talking, not with this man—what *was* his name? —practically shoving her through the undergrowth.
Abruptly the forest cleared somewhat, allowing small patches of sunlight to filter through. Grasping her arm, he hauled her to her feet. "Run, but be as quiet as you can," he hissed in her ear.
Great. Run, but do it quietly. She threw him a dirty look, then ran, taking off like a startled deer. The most disgusting thing was that he was right behind her, and she couldn't hear him making a sound, while her own feet seemed to pound the earth like a drum. But her body seemed cheered by the small amount of sunlight, because she felt her energy level surge despite her sleepless night. The pack on her shoulders seemed lighter, and her steps became quick and effortless as adrenaline began pumping through her veins.
The brush became thicker, and they had to slow their pace. After about fifteen minutes he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder and pulled her behind the trunk of a tree. "Rest a minute," he whispered. "The humidity will wipe you out if you aren't used to it."
Until that moment Jane hadn't noticed that she was wringing wet with sweat. She'd been too intent on saving her skin to worry about its dampness. Now, she became aware of the intense humidity of the rain forest pressing down on her, making every breath she drew lie heavily in her lungs. She wiped the moisture from her face, the salt of her perspiration stinging the small scratches on her cheeks.
He took a canteen from his pack. "Take a drink; you look like you need it."
She had a very good idea what she looked like, and she smiled wryly. She accepted the canteen and drank a little of the water, then capped it and returned it to him. "Thanks."

He looked at her quizzically. "You can have more if you want."
"I'm okay." She looked at him, seeing now that his eyes were a peculiar golden brown color, like amber. His pupils seemed piercingly black against that tawny background. He was streaked with sweat, too, but he wasn't even breathing hard. Whoever he was, whatever he was, he was damned good at this. "What's your name?" she asked him, desperately needing to call him something, as if that would give him more substance, make him more familiar.
He looked a little wary, and she sensed that he disliked giving even that much of himself away. A name was only a small thing, but it was a chink in his armor, a link to another person that he didn't want. "Sullivan," he finally said reluctantly.
"First or last?"
"Last."
"What's your first name?"
"Grant."
Grant Sullivan. She liked the name. It wasn't fancy; he wasn't fancy. He was a far cry from the sleekly sophisticated men she usually met, but the difference was exciting. He was hard and dangerous, mean when he had to be, but he wasn't vicious. The contrast between him and Turego, who was a truly vicious man, couldn't have been more clear-cut.
"Let's go," he said. "We need to put a lot more space between the hounds and the foxes."
Obediently she followed his direction, but found that her burst of adrenaline was already dissipating. She felt more exhausted now than she had before the short rest. She stumbled once, catching her booted foot in a liana vine, but he rescued her with a quick grab. She gave him a tired smile of thanks, but when she tried to step away from him he held her. He stood rigid and it frightened her. She jerked around to look at him, but his face was a cold, blank mask, and he was staring behind her. She whirled again, and looked down the barrel of a rifle.
The sweat congealed on her body. For one moment of frozen terror she expected to be shot; then the moment passed and she was still alive. She was able then to look past the barrel to the hard, dark face of the soldier who held the rifle. His black eyes were narrowed, fastened on Sullivan. He said something, but Jane was too upset to translate the Spanish.

Slowly, deliberately, Sullivan released Jane and raised his arms, clasping his hands on top of his head. "Step away from me," he said quietly.
The soldier barked an order at him. Jane's eyes widened. If she moved an inch this maniac would probably shoot her down. But Sullivan had told her to move, so she moved, her face so white that the small freckles across her nose stood out as bright dots of color. The rifle barrel jerked in her direction, and the soldier said something else. He was nervous, Jane suddenly realized. The tension was obvious in his voice, in his jerky movements. God, if his finger twitched on the trigger…! Then, just as abruptly, he aimed the rifle at Sullivan again.
Sullivan was going to do something. She could sense it. The fool! He'd get himself killed if he tried to jump this guy! She stared at the soldier's shaking hands on the rifle, and suddenly something jumped into her consciousness. He didn't have the rifle on automatic. It took her another moment to realize the implications; then she reacted without thought. Her body, trained to dance, trained in the graceful moves of self-defense, went into fluid motion. He began moving a split second later, swinging the weapon around, but by then she was close enough that her left foot sliced upward under the barrel of the gun, and the shot that he fired went into the canopy over their heads. He never got a chance at another shot.
Grant was on him then, grabbing the gun with one hand and slashing at the man's unprotected neck with the side of the other. The soldier's eyes glazed over, and he sank limply to the ground, his breathing raspy but steady.
Grant grabbed Jane's arm. "Run! That shot will bring every one of them swarming down on us!"
The urgency of his tone made it possible for her to obey, though she was rapidly depleting her reserves of energy. Her legs were leaden, and her boots weighed fifty pounds each. Burning agony slashed her thighs, but she forced herself to ignore it; sore muscles weren't nearly as permanent as being dead. Urged on by his hand at her back, she stumbled over roots and through bushes, adding to her collection of scratches. It was purely a natural defense mechanism, but her mind shut down and her body operated automatically, her feet moving, her lungs sucking desperately at the heavy, moist air. She was so tired now that she no longer felt the pain in her body.
The ground abruptly sloped out from under her feet. Her senses dulled by both terror and fatigue, she was unable to regain her balance. Grant grabbed for her, but the momentum of her body carried them both over the edge of

the hill. His arms wrapped around her, and they rolled down the steep slope. The earth and trees spun crazily, but she saw a rocky, shallow stream at the bottom of the slope and a small, hoarse cry tore from her throat. Some of those rocks were big enough to kill them and the smaller ones could cut them to pieces.

Grant swore, and tightened his grip on her until she thought her ribs would splinter under the pressure. She felt his muscles tighten, felt the desperate twist he made, and somehow he managed to get his feet and legs in front of him. Then they were sliding down in a fairly upright position, rather than rolling. He dug his heels in and their descent slowed, then stopped. "Pris?" he asked roughly, cupping her chin in his hand and turning her face so he could see it. "Are you hurt?"

"No, no," she quickly assured him, ignoring the new aches in her body. Her right arm wasn't broken, but it was badly bruised; she winced as she tried to move it. One of the straps on the backpack had broken, and the pack was hanging lopsidedly off her left shoulder. Her cap was missing.

He adjusted the rifle on his shoulder, and Jane wondered how he had managed to hold on to it. Didn't he ever drop anything, or get lost, or tired, or hungry? She hadn't even seen him take a drink of water!

"My cap came off," she said, turning to stare up the slope. The top was almost thirty yards above them and the slope steep enough that it was a miracle they hadn't crashed into the rocks at the streambed.

"I see it." He swarmed up the slope, lithe and surefooted. He snatched the cap from a broken branch and in only a moment was back beside her. Jamming the cap on her head, he said, "Can you make it up the other side?"

There was no way, she thought. Her body refused to function any longer. She looked at him and lifted her chin. "Of course."

He didn't smile, but there was a faint softening of his expression, as if he knew how desperately tired she was. "We have to keep moving," he said, taking her arm and urging her across the stream. She didn't care that her boots were getting wet; she just sloshed through the water, moving downstream while he scanned the bank for an easy place to climb up. On this side of the stream, the bank wasn't sloped; it was almost vertical and covered with what looked like an impenetrable tangle of vines and bushes. The stream created a break in the foliage that allowed more sunlight to pour down, letting the plants grow much more thickly.

"Okay, let's go up this way," he finally said, pointing. Jane lifted her head and stared at the bank, but she didn't see any break in the wild tangle.
"Let's talk about this," she hedged.
He gave an exasperated sigh. "Look, Pris, I know you're tired, but—"
Something snapped inside Jane, and she whirled on him, catching him by the shirt front and drawing back her fist. "If you call me 'Pris' just one more time, I'm going to feed you a knuckle sandwich!" she roared, unreasonably angry at his continued use of that hated name. No one, but no one, had ever been allowed to call her Priscilla, Pris, or even Cilia, more than once. This damned commando had been rubbing her face in it from the beginning. She'd kept quiet about it, figuring she owed him for kicking him in the groin, but she was tired and hungry and scared and enough was enough!
He moved so quickly that she didn't even have time to blink. His hand snaked out and caught her drawn back fist, while the fingers of his other hand laced around her wrist, removing her grip from his shirt. "Damn it, can't you keep quiet? *I* didn't name you Priscilla, your parents did, so if you don't like it take it up with them. But until then, climb!"
Jane climbed, even though she was certain at every moment that she was going to collapse on her face. Grabbing vines for hand holds, using roots and rocks and bushes and small trees, she squirmed and wiggled her way through the foliage. It was so thick that it could have been swarming with jaguars and she wouldn't have been able to see one until she stuck her hand in its mouth. She remembered that jaguars liked water, spending most of their time resting comfortably near a river or stream, and she swore vengeance on Grant Sullivan for making her do this.
Finally she scrambled over the top, and after pushing forward several yards found that the foliage had once again thinned, and walking was much easier. She adjusted the pack on her back, wincing as she found new bruises. "Are we heading for the helicopter?"
"No," he said curtly. "The helicopter is being watched."
"Who are those men?"
He shrugged. "Who knows? Sandinistas, maybe; we're only a few klicks from the Nicaraguan border. They could be any guerrilla faction. That damned Pablo sold us out."
Jane didn't waste time worrying about Pablo's duplicity; she was too tired to really care. "Where are we going?"
"South."

She ground her teeth. Getting information out of this man was like pulling teeth. "South *where?"*
"Limon, eventually. Right now, we're going due east."
Jane knew enough about Costa Rica to know what lay due east, and she didn't like what she'd just been told. Due east lay the Caribbean coast, where the rain forest became swamp land. If they were only a few kilometers from the Nicaraguan border, then Limon was roughly a hundred miles away. In her weariness, she felt it might as well have been five hundred miles. How long would it take them to walk a hundred miles? Four or five days? She didn't know if she could stand four or five days with Mr. Sunshine. She'd known him less than twelve hours, and she was already close to death.
"Why can't we just go south and forget about east?"
He jerked his head in the direction from which they'd come. "Because of them. They weren't Turego's men, but Turego will soon know that you came in this direction, and he'll be after us. He can't afford to have the government find out about his little clandestine operations. So… we go where he can't easily follow."
It made sense. She didn't like it, but it made sense. She'd never been in the Caribbean coastal region of Costa Rica, so she didn't know what to expect, but it had to be better than being Turego's prisoner. Poisonous snakes, alligators, quicksand, whatever… it was better than Turego. She'd worry about the swamp when they were actually in it. With that settled in her mind, she returned to her most pressing problem.
"When do we get to rest? And eat? And, frankly, Attila, you may have a bladder the size of New Jersey, but I've got to go!"
Again she caught that unwilling twitch of his lips, as if he'd almost grinned. "We can't stop yet, but you can eat white we walk. As for the other, go behind that tree there." He pointed, and she turned to see another of those huge, funny trees with the enormous buttressed roots. In the absence of indoor plumbing it would have to do. She plunged for its shelter.
When they started out again he gave her something hard and dark to chew on; it tasted faintly like meat, but after examining it suspiciously she decided not to question him too closely about it. It eased the empty pains in her stomach, and after washing a few bites down with cautious sips of water, she began to feel better and the rubbery feeling left her legs. He chewed a stick of it, too, which reassured her in regard to his humanity.

Still, after walking steadily for a few hours, Jane began to lose the strength that had come with her second wind. Her legs were moving clumsily, and she felt as if she were wading in knee-deep water. The temperature had risen steadily; it was well over ninety now, even in the thick shelter of the canopy. The humidity was draining her as she continued to sweat, losing water that she wasn't replacing. Just when she was about to tell him that she couldn't take another step, he turned and surveyed her with an impersonal professionalism.

"Stay here while I find some sort of shelter for us. It's going to start raining in a little while, so we might as well sit it out. You look pretty well beat, anyway."

Jane pulled her cap off and wiped her streaming face with her forearm, too tired to comment as he melted from sight. How did he know it was going to start raining? It rained almost every day, of course, so it didn't take a fortune-teller to predict rain, but she hadn't heard the thunder that usually preceded it.

He was back in only a short while, taking her arm and leading her to a small rise, where a scattering of boulders testified to Costa Rica's volcanic origin. After taking his knife from his belt, he cut small limbs and lashed them together with vines, then propped one end of his contraption up by wedging sturdier limbs under the corners. Producing a rolled up tarp from his backpack like a magician, he tied the tarp over the crude lean-to, making it waterproof. "Well, crawl in and get comfortable," he growled when Jane simply stood there, staring in astonishment at the shelter he'd constructed in just a few minutes.

Obediently she crawled in, groaning with relief as she shrugged out of her backpack and relaxed her aching muscles. Her ears caught the first distant rumble of thunder; whatever he did for a living, the man certainly knew his way around the jungle.

Grant ducked under the shelter, too, relieving his shoulders of the weight of his own backpack. He had apparently decided that while they were waiting out the rain they might as well eat, because he dug out a couple of cans of field rations.

Jane sat up straight and leaned closer, staring at the cans. "What's that?"

"Food."

"What kind of food?"

He shrugged. "I've never looked at it long enough to identify it. Take my advice: don't think about it. Just eat it."
She put her hand on his as he started to open the cans. "Wait. Why don't we save those for have-to situations?"
"This *is* a have-to situation," he grunted. "We *have* to eat."
"Yes, but we don't have to eat *that*!"
Exasperation tightened his hard features. "Honey, we either eat this, or two more cans exactly like them!"
"Oh, ye of little faith," she scoffed, dragging her own backpack closer. She began delving around in it, and in a moment produced a small packet wrapped in a purloined towel. With an air of triumph she unwrapped it to expose two badly smashed but still edible sandwiches, then returned to the backpack to dig around again. Her face flushed with success, she pulled out two cans of orange juice. "Here!" she said cheerfully, handing him one of the cans. "A peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a can of orange juice. Protein, carbohydrates and vitamin C. What more could we ask for?"
Grant took the sandwich and the pop-top can she offered him, staring at them in disbelief. He blinked once, then an amazing thing happened: he laughed. It wasn't much of a laugh. It was rather rusty sounding, but it revealed his straight white teeth and made his amber eyes crinkle at the corners. The rough texture of that laugh gave her a funny little feeling in her chest. It was obvious that he rarely laughed, that life didn't hold much humor for him, and she felt both happy that she'd made him laugh and sad that he'd had so little to laugh about. Without laughter she would never have kept her sanity, so she knew how precious it was.
Chewing on his sandwich, Grant relished the gooiness of the peanut butter and the sweetness of the jelly. So what if the bread was a little stale? The unexpected treat made such a detail unimportant. He leaned back and propped himself against his backpack, stretching his long legs out before him. The first drops of rain began to patter against the upper canopy. It would be impossible for anyone to track them through the downpour that was coming, even if those guerrillas had an Indian tracker with them, which he doubted. For the first time since he'd seen the helicopter that morning, he relaxed, his highly developed sense of danger no longer nagging him.
He finished the sandwich and poured the rest of the orange juice down his throat, then glanced over at Jane to see her daintily licking the last bit of jelly from her fingers. She looked up, caught his gaze, and gave him a

cheerful smile that made her dimples flash, then returned to the task of cleaning her fingers.

Against his will, Grant felt his body tighten with a surge of lust that surprised him with its strength. She was a charmer, all right, but not at all what he'd expected. He'd expected a spoiled, helpless, petulant debutante, and instead she had had the spirit, the pure guts, to hurl herself into the jungle with two peanut butter sandwiches and some orange juice as provisions. She'd also dressed in common-sense clothing, with good sturdy boots and green khaki pants, and a short-sleeved black blouse. Not right out of the fashion pages, but he'd had a few distracting moments crawling behind her, seeing those pants molded to her shapely bottom. He hadn't been able to prevent a deep masculine appreciation for the soft roundness of her buttocks.

She was a mass of contradictions. She was a jet-setter, so wild that her father had disinherited her, and she'd been George Persall's mistress, yet he couldn't detect any signs of hard living in her face. If anything, her face was as open and innocent as a child's, with a child's enthusiasm for life shining out of her dark brown eyes. She had a look of perpetual mischievousness on her face, yet it was a face of honest sensuality. Her long hair was so dark a brown that it was almost black, and it hung around her shoulders in snarls and tangles. She had pushed it away from her face with total unconcern. Her dark brown eyes were long and a little narrow, slanting in her high-cheekboned face in a way that made him think she might have a little Indian blood. A smattering of small freckles danced across those elegant cheekbones and the dainty bridge of her nose. Her mouth was soft and full, with the upper lip fuller than the lower one, which gave her an astonishingly sensual look. All in all, she was far from beautiful, but there was a freshness and zest about her that made all the other women he'd known suddenly seem bland.

Certainly he'd never been as intimate with any other woman's knee.

Even now, the thought of it made him angry. Part of it was chagrin that he'd left himself open to the blow; he'd been bested by a lightweight! But another part of it was an instinctive, purely male anger, sexually based. He'd watch her knee now whenever she was within striking distance. Still, the fact that she'd defended herself, and the moves she'd made, told him that she'd had professional training, and that was another contradiction. She wasn't an expert, but she knew what to do. Why would a wild, spoiled

playgirl know anything about self-defense? Some of the pieces didn't fit, and Grant was always uneasy when he sensed details that didn't jibe.
He felt pretty grim about the entire operation. Their situation right now was little short of desperate, regardless of the fact that they were, for the moment, rather secure. They had probably managed to shake the soldiers, whoever they worked for, but Turego was a different story. The microfilm wasn't the only issue now. Turego had been operating without the sanction of the government, and if Jane made it back and filed a complaint against him, the repercussions would cost him his position, and possibly his freedom.
It was Grant's responsibility to get her out, but it was no longer the simple in-and-out situation he'd planned. From the moment he'd seen Pablo leaning so negligently against the helicopter, waiting for them, he'd known that the deal had gone sour. Pablo wasn't the type to be waiting for them so casually; in all the time Grant had know him, Pablo had been tense, ready to move, always staying in the helicopter with the rotors turning. The elaborate pose of relaxation had tipped Grant off as clearly as if Pablo had hung a sign around his neck. Perhaps Pablo had been trying to warn him. There was no way he'd ever know for certain.
Now he had to get her through the jungle, out of the mountains, and south through a swamp, with Turego in hot pursuit. With luck, in a day or so, they'd find a village and be able to hitch a ride, but even that depended on how close behind Turego was.
And on top of that, he couldn't trust her. She'd disarmed that soldier far too casually, and hadn't turned a hair at anything that had happened. She was far too matter-of-fact about the whole situation. She wasn't what she seemed, and that made her dangerous.
He was wary of her, but at the same time he found that he was unable to stop watching her. She was too damned sexy, as lush and exotic as a jungle orchid. What would it be like to lie with her? Did she use the rich curves of her body to make a man forget who he was? How many men had been taken in by that fresh, open expression? Had Turego found himself off balance with her, wanting her, knowing that he could force her at any time—but being eaten alive by the challenge of trying to win her, of making her give herself freely? How else had she managed to control him? None of it added up to what she should have been, unless she played with men as some sort

of ego trip, where the more dangerous the man, the greater the thrill at controlling him.
Grant didn't want her to have that much influence over him; she wasn't worth it. No matter how beguiling the expression in her dark, slanted eyes, she simply wasn't worth it. He didn't need the sort of complication she offered; he just wanted to get her out, collect his money from her father, and get back to the solitude of the farm. Already he'd felt the jungle pulling at him, the heated, almost sexual excitement of danger. The rifle felt like an extension of his body, and the knife fit his palm as if he'd never put it down. All the old moves, the old instincts, were still there, and blackness rose in him as he wondered bitterly if he'd ever really be able to put this life behind him. The blood lust had been there in him, and perhaps he'd have killed that soldier if she hadn't kicked the rifle up when she had.
Was it part of the intoxication of battle that made him want to pull her beneath him and drive himself into her body, until he was mindless with intolerable pleasure? Part of it was, and yet part of it had been born hours ago, on the floor of her bedroom, when he'd felt the soft, velvety roundness of her breasts in his hands. Remembering that, he wanted to know what her breasts looked like, if they thrust out conically or had a full lower slope, if her nipples were small or large, pink or brown. Desire made him harden, and he reminded himself caustically that it had been a while since he'd had a woman, so it was only natural that he would be turned on. If nothing else, he should be glad of the evidence that he could still function!
She yawned, and blinked her dark eyes at him like a sleepy cat. "I'm going to take a nap," she announced, and curled up on the ground. She rested her head on her arm, closed her eyes and yawned again. He watched her, his eyes narrowed. This utter adaptability she displayed was another piece of the puzzle that didn't fit. She should have been moaning and bitching about how uncomfortable she was, rather than calmly curling up on the ground for a nap. But a nap sounded pretty damned good right now, he thought.
Grant looked around. The rain had become a full-fledged downpour, pounding through the canopy and turning the jungle floor into a river. The constant, torrential rains leeched the nutrients out of the soil, making the jungle into a contradiction, where the world's greatest variety of animal and plant life existed on some of the poorest soil. Right now the rain also made it almost impossible for them to be found. They were safe for the time being, and for the first time he allowed himself to feel the weariness in his

muscles. He might as well take a nap, too; he'd wake when the rain stopped, alerted by the total cessation of noise.
Reaching out, he shook her shoulder, and she roused to stare at him sleepily. "Get against the back of the lean-to," he ordered. "Give me a little room to stretch out, too."
She crawled around as he'd instructed and stretched out full length, sighing in ecstasy. He pushed their backpacks to one side, then lay down beside her, his big body between her and the rain. He lay on his back, one brawny arm thrown behind his head. There was no twitching around, no yawning or sighing, for him. He simply lay down, closed his eyes and went to sleep.
Jane watched him sleepily, her gaze lingering on the hawklike line of his profile, noting the scar that ran along his left cheekbone. How had he gotten it? His jaw was blurred with several days' growth of beard, and she noticed that his beard was much darker than his hair. His eyebrows and lashes were dark, too, and that made his amber eyes seem even brighter, almost as yellow as an eagle's.
The rain made her feel a little chilled after the intense heat of the day; instinctively she inched closer to the heat she could feel emanating from his body. He was so warm… and she felt so safe… safer than she'd felt since she was nine years old. With one more little sigh, she slept.
Sometime later the rain ceased abruptly, and Grant woke immediately, like a light switch being flipped on. His senses were instantly alert, wary. He started to surge to his feet, only to realize that she was lying curled against his side, with her head pillowed on his arm and her hand lying on his chest. Disbelief made him rigid. How could she have gotten that close to him without waking him? He'd always slept like a cat, alert to the smallest noise or movement—but this damned woman had practically crawled all over him and he hadn't even stirred. She must've been disappointed, he thought furiously. The fury was directed as much at himself as at her, because the incident told him how slack he had become in the past year. That slackness might cost them their lives.
He lay still, aware of the fullness of her breasts against his side. She was soft and lush, and one of her legs was thrown up over his thigh. All he had to do was roll over and he'd be between her legs. The mental image made moisture break out on his forehead. God! She'd be hot and tight, and he clenched his teeth at the heavy surge in his loins. She was no lady, but she

was all woman, and he wanted her naked and writhing beneath him with an intensity that tied his guts into knots.
He had to move, or he'd be taking her right there on the rocky ground. Disgusted at himself for letting her get to him the way she had, he eased his arm from beneath her head, then shook her shoulder. "Let's get moving," he said curtly.
She muttered something, her forehead puckering, but she didn't open her eyes, and in a moment her forehead smoothed as she lapsed back into deep sleep. Impatiently, Grant shook her again. "Hey, wake up."
She rolled over on her stomach and sighed deeply, burrowing her head against her folded arm as she sought a more comfortable position. "Come on, we've got to get going," he said, shaking her more vigorously. "Wake up!" She aimed a drowsy swat at him, as if he were a pesky fly, brushing his hand aside. Exasperated, Grant caught her shoulders and pulled her to a sitting position, shaking her once again. "Damn it, would you get up? On your feet, honey; we've got some walking to do." Her eyes finally opened, and she blinked at him groggily, but she made no move to get up.
Swearing under his breath, Grant hauled her to her feet. "Just stand over there, out of the way," he said, turning her around and starting her on her way with a swat on her bottom before he turned his attention to taking down their shelter.

Chapter Four

Jane stopped, her hand going to her bottom. Awakened now, and irritated by his light, casual slap, she turned. "You didn't have to do that!"
"Do what?" he asked with total disinterest, already busy removing the tarp from the top of the lean-to and rolling it up to replace it in his backpack.
"Hit me! A simple 'wake-up' would have sufficed!"
Grant looked at her in disbelief. "Well, pardon me all to hell," he drawled in a sarcastic tone that made her want to strangle him. "Let me start over. Excuse me, Priscilla, but nappy time is over, and we really do have to—hey! Damn it!" He ducked in time, throwing his arm up to catch the force of her fist. Swiftly he twisted his arm to lock his fingers around her wrist, then caught her other arm before she could swing at him with it. She'd exploded into fury, hurling herself at him like a cat pouncing. Her fist had hit his arm

with enough strength that she might have broken his nose if the blow had landed on target. "Woman, what in *hell* is wrong with you?"
"I told you not to call me that!" Jane raged at him, spitting the words out in her fury. She struggled wildly, trying to free her arm so she could hit him again.
Panting, Grant wrestled her to the ground and sat astride her, holding her hands above her head, and this time making damned certain that her knee wouldn't come anywhere near him. She kept wriggling and heaving, and he felt as if he were trying to hold an octopus, but finally he had her subdued. Glaring at her, he said, "You told me not to call you Pris."
"Well, don't call me Priscilla, either!" she fumed, glaring right back.
"Look, I'm not a mind reader! What am I supposed to call you?"
"Jane!" she shouted at him. "My name is Jane! *Nobody* has *ever* called me Priscilla!"
"All right! All you had to do was tell me! I'm getting damned tired of you snapping at my ankles, understand? I may hurt you before I can stop myself, so you'd better think twice before you attack again. Now, if I let you up, are you going to behave?"
Jane still glared at him, but the weight of his knees on her bruised arms was excruciating. "All right," she said sullenly, and he slowly got up, then surprised her by offering his hand to help her up. She surprised herself by taking it.
A sudden twinkle lit the dark gold of his eyes. "Jane, huh?" he asked reflectively, looking at the surrounding jungle.
She gave him a threatening look. "No 'Me Tarzan, you Jane' stuff," she warned. "I've heard it since grade school." She paused, then said grudgingly, "But it's still better than Priscilla."
He grunted in agreement and turned away to finish dismantling their shelter, and after a moment Jane began helping. He glanced at her, but said nothing. He wasn't much of a talker, she'd noticed, and he didn't improve any on closer acquaintance. But he'd risked his own life to help her, and he hadn't left her behind, even though Jane knew he could have moved a lot faster, and with a lot less risk to himself, on his own. And there was something in his eyes, an expression that was weary and cynical and a little empty, as if he'd seen far too much to have any faith or trust left. That made Jane want to put her arms around him and shield him. Lowering her head so he wouldn't be able to read her expression, she chided herself for feeling

protective of a man who was so obviously capable of handling himself. There had been a time in her own life when she had been afraid to trust anyone except her parents, and it had been a horrible, lonely time. She knew what fear was, and loneliness, and she ached for him.

All signs of their shelter obliterated, he swung his backpack up and buckled it on, then slung the rifle over his shoulder, while Jane stuffed her hair up under her cap. He leaned down to pick up her pack for her, and a look of astonishment crossed his face; then his dark brows snapped together. "What the—" he muttered. "What all do you have in this damned thing? It weighs a good twenty pounds more than my pack!"

"Whatever I thought I'd need," Jane replied, taking the pack from him and hooking her arm through the one good shoulder strap, then buckling the waist strap to secure it as well as she could.

"Like what?"

"Things," she said stubbornly. Maybe her provisions weren't exactly proper by military standards, but she'd take her peanut butter sandwiches over his canned whatever any time. She thought he would order her to dump the pack on the ground for him to sort through and decide what to keep, and she was determined not to allow it. She set her jaw and looked at him.

He put his hands on his hips and surveyed her funny, exotic face, her lower lip pouting out in a mutinous expression, her delicate jaw set. She looked ready to light into him again, and he sighed in resignation. Damned if she wasn't the stubbornest, scrappiest woman he'd ever met. "Take it off," he growled, unbuckling his own pack. "I'll carry yours, and you can carry mine."

If anything, the jaw went higher. "I'm doing okay with my own."

"Stop wasting time arguing. That extra weight will slow you down, and you're already tired. Hand it over, and I'll fix that strap before we start out."

Reluctantly she slipped the straps off and gave him the pack, ready to jump him if he showed any sign of dumping it. But he took a small folder from his own pack, opened it to extract a needle and thread, and deftly began to sew the two ends of the broken strap together.

Astounded, Jane watched his lean, calloused hands wielding the small needle with a dexterity that she had to envy. Reattaching a button was the limit of her sewing skill, and she usually managed to prick her finger doing that. "Do they teach sewing in the military now?" she asked, crowding in to get a better look.

He gave her another one of his glances of dismissal. "I'm not in the military."
"Maybe not now," she conceded. "But you were, weren't you?"
"A long time ago."
"Where did you learn how to sew?"
"I just picked it up. It comes in handy." He bit the thread off, then replaced the needle in its package. "Let's get moving; we've wasted too much time as it is."
Jane took his backpack and fell into step behind him; all she had to do was follow him. Her gaze drifted over the width of his shoulders, then eased downward. Had she ever known anyone as physically strong as this man? She didn't think so. He seemed to be immune to weariness, and he ignored the steamy humidity that drained her strength and drenched her clothes in perspiration. His long, powerful legs moved in an effortless stride, the flexing of his thigh muscles pulling the fabric of his pants tight across them. Jane found herself watching his legs and matching her own stride to his. He took a step, and she took a step automatically. It was easier that way; she could separate her mind from her body, and in doing so ignore her protesting muscles.
He stopped once and took a long drink from the canteen, then passed it to Jane without comment. Also without comment, and without wiping the mouth of the canteen, she tipped it up and drank thirstily. Why worry about drinking after him? Catching cold was the least of her concerns. After capping the canteen, she handed it back to him, and they began walking again.
There was madness to his method, or so it seemed to her. If there was a choice between two paths, he invariably chose the more difficult one. The route he took was through the roughest terrain, the thickest vegetation, up the highest, most rugged slope. Jane tore her pants sliding down a bluff, that looked like pure suicide from the top, and not much better than that from the bottom, but she followed without complaining. It wasn't that she didn't think of plenty of complaints, but that she was too tired to voice them. The benefits of her short nap had long since been dissipated. Her legs ached, her back ached, her bruised arms were so painful she could barely move them, and her eyes felt as if they were burning out of their sockets. But she didn't ask him to stop. Even if the pace killed her, she wasn't going to slow him down any more than she already had, because she had no doubt that he

could travel much faster without her. The easy movements of his long legs told her that his stamina was far greater than hers; he could probably walk all night long again without a noticeable slowing of his stride. She felt a quiet awe of that sort of strength and conditioning, something that had been completely outside her experience before she'd met him. He wasn't like other men; it was evident in his superb body, in the awesome competence with which he handled everything, in the piercing gold of his eyes.

As if alerted by her thoughts, he stopped and looked back at her, assessing her condition with that sharp gaze that missed nothing. "Can you make it for another mile or so?"

On her own, she couldn't have, but when she met his eyes she knew there was no way she'd admit to that. Her chin lifted, and she ignored the increasingly heavy ache in her legs as she said, "Yes."

A flicker of expression crossed his face so swiftly that she couldn't read it. "Let me have that pack," he growled, coming back to her and jerking the straps free of the buckles, then slipping the pack from her shoulders.

"I'm handling it okay," she protested fiercely, grabbing for the pack and wrapping both arms around it. "I haven't complained, have I?"

His level dark brows drawing together in a frown, he forcefully removed the pack from her grasp. "Use your head," he snapped. "If you collapse from exhaustion, then I'll have to carry you, too."

The logic of that silenced her. Without another word he turned and started walking again. She was better able to keep up with him without the weight of the pack, but she felt frustrated with herself for not being in better shape, for being a burden to him. Jane had fought fiercely for her independence, knowing that her very life depended on it. She'd never been one to sit and wait for someone else to do things for her. She'd charged at life head-on, relishing the challenges that came her way because they reaffirmed her acute sense of the wonder of life. She'd shared the joys, but handled the problems on her own, and it unsettled her now to have to rely on someone else.

They came to another stream, no wider than the first one they had crossed, but deeper. It might rise to her knees in places. The water rushing over the rocks sounded cool, and she thought of how heavenly it would be to refresh her sweaty body in the stream. Looking longingly at it, she stumbled over a root and reached out to catch her balance. Her palm came down hard against a tree trunk, and something squished beneath her fingers.

"Oh, yuk!" she moaned, trying to wipe the dead insect off with a leaf.
Grant stopped. "What is it?"
"I smashed a bug with my hand." The leaf didn't clean too well; a smear still stained her hand, and she looked at Grant with disgust showing plainly on her face. "Is it all right if I wash my hand in the stream?"
He looked around, his amber eyes examining both sides of the stream. "Okay. Come over here."
"I can get down here," she said. The bank was only a few feet high, and the underbrush wasn't that thick. She carefully picked her way over the roots of an enormous tree, bracing her hand against its trunk to steady herself as she started to descend to the stream.
"Watch out!" Grant said sharply, and Jane froze in her tracks, turning her head to look askance at him.
Suddenly something incredibly heavy dropped onto her shoulders, something long and thick and alive, and she gave a stifled scream as it began to coil around her body. She was more startled than frightened, thinking a big vine had fallen; then she saw the movement of a large triangular head and she gave another gasping cry. "Grant! Grant, *help me*!" Terror clutched at her throat, choking her, and she began to claw at the snake, trying to get it off. It was a calm monster, working its body around her, slowly tightening the lethal muscles that would crush her bones. It twined around her legs and she fell, rolling on the ground. Dimly she could hear Grant cursing, and she could hear her own cries of terror, but they sounded curiously distant. Everything was tumbling in a mad kaleidoscope of brown earth and green trees, of Grant's taut, furious face. He was shouting something at her, but she couldn't understand him; all she could do was struggle against the living bonds that coiled around her. She had one shoulder and arm free, but the boa was tightening itself around her rib cage, and the big head was coming toward her face, its mouth open. Jane screamed, trying to catch its head with her free hand, but the snake was crushing the breath out of her and the scream was almost soundless. A big hand, not hers, caught the snake's head, and she dimly saw a flash of silver. The snake's coils loosened about her as it turned to meet this new prey, seeking to draw Grant into its deadly embrace, too. She saw the flash of silver again, and something wet splashed into her face. Vaguely she realized that it was his knife she'd seen. He was swearing viciously as he wrestled

with the snake, mostly astride her as she writhed on the ground, struggling to free herself. "Damn it, hold still!" he roared. "You'll make me cut you!" It was impossible to be still; she was wrapped in the snake, and it was writhing with her in its coils. She was too crazed by fear to realize that the snake was in its death throes, not even when she saw Grant throw something aside and begin forcibly removing the thick coils from around her body. It wasn't until she actually felt herself coming free of the constrictor's horrible grasp that she understood it was over, that Grant had killed the snake. She stopped fighting and lay limply on the ground. Her face was utterly white except for the few freckles across her nose and cheekbones; her eyes were fixed on Grant's face.

"It's over," he said roughly, running his hands over her arms and rib cage. "How do you feel? Anything broken?"

Jane couldn't say anything; her throat was frozen, her voice totally gone. All she could do was lie there and stare at him with the remnants of terror in her dark eyes. Her lips trembled like a child's, and there was something pleading in her gaze. He automatically started to gather her into his arms, the way one would a frightened child, but before he could do more than lift his hand, she dragged her gaze away from his with a visible effort. He could see what it cost her in willpower, but somehow she found the inner strength to still the trembling of her lips, and then her chin lifted in that characteristic gesture.

"I'm all right," she managed to say. Her voice was jerky, but she said the words, and in saying them, believed it. She slowly sat up and pushed her hair away from her face. "I feel a little bruised, but there's nothing bro—" She stopped abruptly, staring at her bloody hand and arm. "I'm all bloody," she said in a bewildered tone, and her voice shook. She looked back at Grant, as if for confirmation. "I'm all bloody," she said again, extending her wildly trembling hand for him to see. "Grant, there's blood all over me!"

"It's the snake's blood," he said, thinking to reassure her, but she stared at him with uncontrolled revulsion.

"Oh, *God!"* she said in a thin, high voice, scrambling to her feet and staring down at herself. Her black blouse was wet and sticky, and big reddish splotches stained her khaki pants. Both her arms had blood smeared down them. Bile rose in her throat as she remembered the wetness that had splashed her face. She raised exploring fingers and found the horrible stickiness on her cheeks, as well as smeared in her hair.

She began to shake even harder, and tears dripped down her cheeks. "Get it off," she said, still in that high, wavering voice of utter hysteria. "I have to get it off. There's blood all over me, and it isn't mine. It's all over me; it's even in my hair… It's in my *hair!"* she sobbed, plunging for the stream. Cursing, Grant grabbed for her, but in her mad urgency to wash the blood away she jerked free of him, stumbling over the body of the snake and crashing to the ground. Before she could scramble away again, Grant pounced on her, holding her in an almost painful grip while she fought and sobbed, pleading and swearing at him all at once.

"Jane, stop it!" he said sharply. "I'll get the blood off you. Just hold still and let me get our boots off, okay?"

He had to hold her still with one arm and pull her boots off with his free hand, but by the time he started to remove his own boots she was crying so hard that she lay limply on the ground. His face was grim as he looked at her. She'd stood up to so much without turning a hair that he hadn't expected her to fall apart like this. She'd been pulling herself together until she'd seen the blood on herself, and that had evidently been more than she could bear. He jerked his boots off, then turned to her and roughly undid her pants and pulled them off. Lifting her into his arms as easily as he would have lifted a child, he climbed down the bank and waded out into the stream, disregarding the fact that his own pants were being soaked.

When the water reached the middle of his calves, he stood her in the stream and bent to begin splashing water on her legs, rubbing the blood stains from her flesh. Next, cupping water in his palms, he washed her arms and hands clean, dripping the cooling water over her and soaking her blouse. All the while he tended to her, she stood docile, with silent tears still running down her face and making tracks in the blood smeared across her cheeks.

"Everything's all right, honey," he crooned soothingly to her, coaxing her to sit down in the stream so he could wash the blood from her hair. She let him splash water on her head and face, blinking her eyes to protect them from the stinging water, but otherwise keeping her gaze fixed on his hard, intent features. He took a handkerchief from his back pocket and wet it, then gently cleaned her face. She was calmer now, no longer crying in that silent, gutwrenching way, and he helped her to her feet.

"There, you're all cleaned up," he started to say, then noticed the pink rivulets of water running down her legs. Her blouse was so bloody that he'd have to take it off to get her clean. Without hesitation, he began to unbutton

it. "Let's get this off so we can wash it," he said, keeping his voice calm and soothing. She didn't even glance down as he unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it off her shoulders, then tossed it to the bank. She kept her eyes on his face, as if he were her lifeline to sanity and to look away meant a return to madness.

Grant looked down, and his mouth went dry as he stared at her naked breasts. He'd wondered how she looked and now he knew, and it was like being punched in the stomach. Her breasts were round and a little heavier than he'd expected, tipped by small brown nipples, and he wanted to bend down and put his mouth to them, taste them. She might as well have been naked; all she had on was a pair of gossamer panties that had turned transparent in the water. He could see the dark curls of hair beneath the wisp of fabric, and be felt his loins tighten and swell. She was beautifully made, long-legged and slim-hipped, with the sleek muscles of a dancer. Her shoulders were straight, her arms slim but strong, her breasts rich; he wanted to spread her legs and take her right there, driving deeply into her body until he went out of his mind with pleasure. He couldn't remember ever wanting a woman so badly. He'd wanted sex, but that had been simply a physical pleasure, and any willing female body had been acceptable. Now he wanted Jane, the essence of her; it was her legs he wanted wrapped around him, her breasts in his hands, her mouth under his, her body sheathing him.

He jerked his gaze away from her, bending to dip the handkerchief in the water again. That was even worse; his eyes were level with the top of her thighs, and he straightened abruptly. He washed her breasts with a gentle touch, but every moment of it was torture to him, feeling her silky flesh under his fingers, watching her nipples tighten into reddened little nubs as he touched them.

"You're clean," he said hoarsely, tossing the handkerchief to the bank to join her blouse.

"Thank you," she whispered, then fresh tears glittered in her eyes, and with a little whimper she flung herself against him. Her arms went around him and clung to his back. She buried her face against his chest, feeling reassured by the steady beat of his heart and the warmth of his body. His very presence drove the fear away; with him, she was safe. She wanted to rest in his arms and forget everything.

His hands moved slowly over her bare back, his calloused palms stroking her skin as if he relished the texture of it. Her eyes slid shut, and she nestled closer to him, inhaling the distinctly male scent of his strong body. She felt oddly drunk, disoriented; she wanted to cling to him as the only steady presence in the world. Her body was awash in strange sensations, from the rushing water swirling about her feet to the faint breeze that fanned her wet, naked skin, while he was so hard and warm. An unfamiliar heat swept along her flesh in the path of his hands as they moved from her back to her shoulders. Then one hand stroked up her throat to cup her jaw, his thumb under her chin and his fingers in her hair, and he turned her face up to him. Taking his time about it, he bent and fitted his mouth to hers, slanting his head to make the contact deep and firm. His tongue moved leisurely into her mouth, touching hers and demanding a response, and Jane found herself helplessly giving him what he wanted. She'd never been kissed like that before, with such complete confidence and expertise, as if she were his for the taking, as if they had reverted to more primitive times when the dominant male had his pick of the women. Vaguely alarmed, she made a small effort to free herself from his grasp. He subdued her with gentle force and kissed her again, holding her head still for the pressure of his mouth. Once again Jane found herself opening her mouth for him, forgetting why she'd struggled to begin with. Since her divorce a lot of men had kissed her and tried to make her respond. They'd left her cold. Why should this rough… mercenary, or whatever he was, make shivers of pleasure chase over her body, when some of the most sophisticated men in the world had only bored her with their passion? His lips were warm and hard, the taste of his mouth heady, his tongue bold in its exploration, and his kisses caused an unfamiliar ache to tighten within her body.

A mindless little whimper of delight escaped her throat, the soft female sound making his arms tighten around her.

Her hands slid up to his shoulders, then locked around his neck, hanging on to him for support. She couldn't get close enough to him, though he was crushing her against him. The buttons of his shirt dug into her bare breasts, but she wasn't aware of any pain. His mouth was wild, hungry with a basic need that had flared out of control, bruising her lips with the force of his kisses, and she didn't care. Instead she gloried in it, clinging to him. Her body was suddenly alive with sensations and needs that she didn't

recognize, never having felt them before. Her skin actually ached for his touch, yet every stroke of his hard fingers made the ache intensify.
Boldly cupping her breast in his palm, he rubbed the rough pad of his thumb across her tightly puckered nipple, and Jane almost cried aloud at the surge of heat that washed through her. It had never been like this for her before; the urgency of the pure, brazen sensuality of her own body took her by surprise. She'd long ago decided that she simply wasn't a very physical person, then forgotten about it. Sex hadn't been something that interested her very much. The way Grant was making her feel completely shattered her concept of herself. She was a female animal in his arms, grinding against him, feeling and glorying in the swollen response of his body, and hurting with the emptiness deep inside her.
Time disappeared as they stood in the water, the late afternoon sun dappling them with the shifting patterns of light created by the sheltering trees. His hands freely roamed her body. She never even thought of resisting him. It was as if he had every right to her flesh, as if she were his to touch and taste. He bent her back over his arm, making her breasts jut enticingly, and his lips traveled hotly down her throat to the warm, quivering mounds. He took her nipple into his mouth and sucked strongly, and she surged against him like a wild creature, on fire and dying and wanting more.
His hand swept downward, his fingers curving between her legs to caress her through the silk of her panties. The boldness of his touch shocked her out of her sensual frenzy; automatically she stiffened in his grasp and brought her arms down from around his neck to wedge them between their bodies and push against him. A low, guttural sound rattled in his throat, and for a brief, terrified moment she thought there wouldn't be any stopping him. Then, with a curse, he thrust her away from him.
Jane staggered a little, and his hand shot out to catch her, hauling her back to face him. "Damn you, is this how you get your kicks?" he asked, infuriated. "Do you like seeing how far you can push a man?"
Her chin came up, and she swallowed. "No, that's not it at all. I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have thrown myself at you like that—"
"Damned right, you shouldn't," he interrupted savagely. He *looked* savage; his eyes were narrowed and bright with rage, his nostrils flared, and his mouth a thin, grim line. "Next time, you'd better make sure you want what you're asking for, because I'm damned sure going to give it to you. Is that clear?"

He turned and began wading to the bank, leaving her standing in the middle of the stream. Jane crossed her arms over her bare breasts, suddenly and acutely aware of her nakedness. She hadn't meant to tease him, but she'd been so frightened, and he'd been so strong and calm that it had seemed the most natural thing in the world to cling to him. Those frenzied kisses and caresses had taken her by surprise, shaken her off balance. Still, she wasn't about to have sex with a man she barely knew, especially when she didn't quite know if she liked what little she did know about him.

He reached the bank and turned to look at her. "Are you coming or not?" he snapped, so Jane waded toward him, still keeping her arms over her breasts. "Don't bother," he advised in a curt voice. "I've already seen, and touched. Why pretend to be modest?" He gestured to her blouse lying on the ground. "You might want to wash the blood out of that, since you're so squeamish about it."

Jane looked at the blood-stained blouse, and she went a little pale again, but she was under control now. "Yes, I will," she said in a low voice. "Will you… will you get my pants and boots for me, please?"

He snorted, but climbed up the bank and tossed her pants and boots down to her. Keeping her back turned to him, Jane pulled on her pants, shuddering at the blood that stained them, too, but at least they weren't soaked the way her blouse was. Her panties were wet, but there wasn't anything she could do about that now, so she ignored the clammy discomfort. When she was partially clad again, she squatted on the gravel at the edge of the stream and began trying to wash her blouse. Red clouds drifted out of the fabric, staining the water before being swept downstream. She scrubbed and scrubbed before she was satisfied, then wrung out as much water as possible and shook the blouse. As she started to put the blouse on, he said irritably, "Here," and held his shirt in front of her. "Wear this until yours gets dry."

She wanted to refuse, but she knew false pride wouldn't gain her anything. She accepted the shirt silently and put it on. It was far too big, but it was dry and warm and not too dirty, and it smelled of sweat, and the musky odor of his skin. The scent was vaguely comforting. There were rust colored stains on it, too, reminding her that he'd saved her life. She tied the tails in a knot at her waist and sat down on the gravel to put on her boots.

When she turned, she found him standing right behind her, his face still grim and angry. He helped her up the bank, then lifted their packs to his

shoulders. "We're not going much farther. Follow me, and for God's sake don't touch anything that I don't touch, or step anywhere except in my footprints. If another boa wants you, I just may let him have you, so don't push your luck."

Jane pushed her wet hair behind her ears and followed obediently, walking where he walked. For a while, she stared nervously at every tree limb they passed under, then made herself stop thinking about the snake. It was over; there was no use dwelling on it.

Instead she stared at his broad back, wondering how her father had found a man like Grant Sullivan. They obviously lived in two different worlds, so how had they met?

Then something clicked in her mind, and a chill went down her spine. *Had* they met? She couldn't imagine her father knowing anyone like Sullivan. She also knew what her own position was. Everyone wanted to get their hands on her, and she had no way of knowing whose side Grant Sullivan was on. He'd called her Priscilla, which was her first name. If her father had sent him, wouldn't he have known that she was never called Priscilla, that she'd been called Jane from birth? *He hadn't known her name!*

Before he died, George had warned her not to trust anyone. She didn't want to think that she was alone in the middle of the jungle with a man who would casually cut her throat when he had no further use for her. Still, the fact remained that she had no proof that her father had sent him. He'd simply knocked her out, put her over his shoulder and hauled her off into the jungle.

Then she realized that she had to trust this man; she had no alternative. He was all she had. It was dangerous, trusting him, but not as dangerous as trying to make it out of the jungle on her own. He had shown flashes of kindness. She felt a funny constriction in her chest as she remembered the way he'd cared for her after he'd killed the snake. Not just cared for her, kissed her—she was still shaken by the way he'd kissed her. Mercenary or not, enemy or not, he made her want him. Her mind wasn't certain about him, but her body was.

She would have found it funny, if she hadn't been so frightened.

Chapter Five

They moved directly away from the stream at a forty-five-degree angle, and it wasn't long before he stopped, looked around and unslung the packs from his shoulders. "We'll camp here."

Jane stood in silence, feeling awkward and useless, watching as he opened his pack and took out a small, rolled bundle. Under his skilled hands, the bundle was rapidly transformed into a small tent, complete with a polyethylene floor and a flap that could be zipped shut. When the tent was up he began stripping vines and limbs from the nearby trees to cover it, making it virtually invisible. He hadn't so much as glanced in her direction, but after a moment she moved to help him. He did look at her then, and allowed her to gather more limbs while he positioned them over the tent. When the job was completed, he said, "We can't risk a fire, so we'll just eat and turn in. After today, I'm ready for some sleep."

Jane was, too, but she dreaded the thought of the night to come. The light was rapidly fading, and she knew that it would soon be completely dark. She remembered the total blackness of the night before and felt a cold finger of fear trace up her backbone. Well, there was nothing she could do about it; she'd have to tough it out.

She crouched beside her pack and dug out two more cans of orange juice, tossing one to him; he caught it deftly, and eyed her pack with growing irritation. "How many more cans of this do you have in that traveling supermarket?" he asked sarcastically.

"That's it. We'll have to drink water from now on. How about a granola bar?" She handed it to him, refusing to let herself respond to the irritation in his voice. She was tired, she ached, and she was faced with a long night in total darkness. Given that, his irritation didn't seem very important. He'd get over it.

She ate her own granola bar, but was still hungry, so she rummaged for something else to eat. "Want some cheese and crackers?" she offered, dragging the items out of the depths of the pack.

She looked up to find him watching her with an expression of raw disbelief on his face. He held out his hand, and she divided the cheese and crackers between them. He looked at her again, shook his head and silently ate his share.

Jane saved a little of her orange juice, and when she finished eating she took a small bottle from the pack. Opening it, she shook a pill into the palm of her hand, glanced at Grant, then shook out another one. "Here," she said.
He looked at it, but made no move to take it. "What the hell's that?"
"It's a yeast pill."
"Why should I want to take a yeast pill?"
"So the mosquitoes and things won't bite you."
"Sure they won't."
"They won't! Look at me. I don't have any insect bites, and it's because I take yeast pills. It does something to your skin chemistry. Come on, take it. It won't hurt you."
He took the pill from her hand and held it with a pained expression on his face while she took her own, washing it down with a sip of the orange juice she'd saved. She passed the can to him, and he muttered something obscene before he tossed the pill into his mouth and slugged down the rest of the juice.
"Okay, bedtime," he said, rising to his feet. He jerked his head toward a tree. "There's your bathroom, if you want to go before we turn in."
Jane stepped behind the tree. He was crude, he was rude, he was a little cruel—and he had saved her life. She didn't know what to expect from him. No matter how rough he was, he would eventually disarm her with an unexpected act of kindness. On the other hand, when things were going smoothly between them, he would say things that stung, as if deliberately trying to start a quarrel.
He was waiting for her by the opening of the tent. "I've already put the blanket down. Crawl in."
She knelt down and crawled into the small tent. He had spread the blanket over the floor, and she sat on it. He shoved their packs inside. "Put these out of the way," he instructed. "I'm going to take a quick look around."
She shoved the packs into the far corners of the tent, then lay down on her back and stared tensely at the thin walls. The light was almost gone; only a glimmer entered through the translucent fabric. It wasn't quite as dark outside yet, but the limbs he'd used as camouflage made it darker inside. The flap parted, and he crawled in, then zipped the opening shut.
"Take your boots off and put them in the corner next to your feet."
Sitting up, she did as he said, then lay down again. Her eyes strained open so widely that they burned. Her body stiff with dread, she listened to him

stretch and yawn and make himself comfortable.
Moments later the silence became nearly as unbearable as the darkness. "A collapsible tent comes in handy, doesn't it?" she blurted nervously. "What is it made out of?"
"Nylon," he replied, yawning again. "It's nearly indestructible."
"How much does it weigh?"
"Three pounds and eight ounces."
"Is it waterproof?"
"Yes, it's waterproof."
"And bug proof?"
"Bug proof, too," he muttered.
"Do you think a jaguar could—"
"Look, *it's jaguar* proof, *mildew* proof, *fire* proof and *snake* proof. I personally guarantee you that it's proof against everything except elephants, and I don't think we're going to be stomped on by an elephant in Costa Rica! Is there any other damned thing you're worried about?" he exploded. "If not, why don't you be quiet and let me get some sleep?"
Jane lay tensely, and silence fell again. She clenched her fists in an effort to control her nervousness, listening to the growing cacophony of the jungle night. Monkeys howled and chattered; insects squeaked their calls; underbrush rustled. She was exhausted but she had no real hope of sleeping, at least not until dawn, and at dawn this devil beside her would want to start another day of marathon travel.
He was totally silent in that unnerving way of his. She couldn't even hear him breathe. The old fear began to rise in her chest, making her own breathing difficult. She might as well be alone, and that was the one thing she absolutely couldn't bear.
"Where are you from?"
He heaved a sigh. "Georgia."
That explained his drawl. She swallowed, trying to ease the constriction of her dry throat. If she could just keep him talking, then she wouldn't feel so alone. She'd know he was there.
"What part of Georgia?"
"South. Ever hear of the Okefenokee?"
"Yes. It's a swamp."
"I grew up in it. My folks own a farm just on the edge of it." It had been a normal boyhood, except for the skills he'd learned automatically in the

swamp, those skills, which had eventually changed his life by shaping him into something not quite human. He willed the memories away, pulling a mental shade down over them, isolating himself. There was no use in thinking about what had been.
"Are you an only child?"
"Why all the questions?" he snapped, edgy at revealing any information about himself.
"I'm just interested, that's all."
He paused, suddenly alert. There was something in her voice, a tone that he couldn't quite place. It was dark, so he couldn't see her face; he had to go entirely by what his ears told him. If he kept her talking, he might be able to figure it out.
"I've got a sister," he finally said reluctantly.
"I'll bet she's younger. You're so bossy, you must be an older brother."
He let the dig pass and said only, "She's four years younger."
"I'm an only child," she volunteered.
"I know."
She searched frantically for something else to say, but the darkness was making her panic. She felt herself move to grab for him, then remembered what he'd said about startling him, and about not making offers she didn't mean. She ground her teeth together and stilled her reaching hands, the effort so intense that tears actually welled in her eyes. She blinked them away. "Grant," she said in a shaking voice.
"What?" he growled.
"I don't want you to think I'm throwing myself at you again because I'm really not, but would you mind very much if I… just held your hand?" she whispered. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid of the dark, and it helps if I know I'm not alone."
He was still for a moment; then she heard his clothing rustle as he rolled onto his side. "You're really that afraid of the dark?"
Jane tried for a laugh, but the sound was so shaky that it was close to a sob. "The word'terrified' only begins to describe how afraid I am. I can't sleep in the dark. All the time I was at that wretched plantation I was awake all night long, never sleeping until dawn. But at least I could use that time to watch the guards and figure out their routine. Besides, it wasn't as totally dark there as it is here."

"If you're so all-fired scared of the dark, why were you getting ready to hit the jungle on your own?"
A dark, handsome, incredibly cruel face swam before her mind's eye. "Because even dying in the jungle would be better than Turego," she said quietly.
Grant grunted. He could understand that choice, but the fact that she had so correctly summed up the situation illustrated once again that she was more than what she seemed. Then again, perhaps she already had reason to know just how vile Turego could be. Had Turego raped her, or would it have been rape? With this woman, who knew? "Did you have sex with him?"
The blunt question made her shudder. "No. I'd been holding him off, but when he left yesterday… it *was* just yesterday, wasn't it? It seems like a year ago. Anyway, I knew that, when he came back, I wouldn't be able to stop him any longer. My time had run out."
"What makes you so certain of that?"
Jane paused, wondering just how much to tell him, wondering how much he already knew. If he was involved, he would be familiar with Luis's name; if he wasn't, the name would mean nothing to him. She wanted to tell him; she didn't want to be alone in this nightmare any longer. But she remembered George telling her once that secrecy was synonymous with security, and she quelled the need to turn into Grant's arms and tell him how afraid and alone she had been. If he wasn't involved already, he was safer not knowing anything about it. On the other hand, if he was involved, *she* might be safer if he didn't realize how deeply she was a part of things. Finally, to answer his question, she said, "I wasn't certain. I was just afraid to stay, afraid of Turego."
He grunted, and that seemed to be the end of the conversation. Jane clenched her jaw against the sudden chattering of her teeth. It was hot and steamy inside the dark tent, but chills were running up and down her body. Why didn't he say something else, anything, rather than lying there so quietly? She might as well have been alone. It was unnatural for anyone to be that soundless, that utterly controlled.
"How was Dad?"
"Why?"
"I just wondered." Was he being deliberately evasive? Why didn't he want to talk about her father? Perhaps he hadn't been hired by her father at all and

didn't want to be drawn into a conversation about someone he was supposed to have met, but hadn't.
After a measured silence, as if he had carefully considered his answer, he said, "He was worried sick about you. Surprised?"
"No, of course not," she said, startled. "I'd be surprised if he weren't."
"It doesn't surprise you that he'd pay a small fortune to get you out of Turego's hands, even though you don't get along with him?"
He was confusing her; she felt left out of the conversation, as if he were talking about someone else entirely. "What are you talking about? We get along perfectly, always have."
She couldn't see him, couldn't hear him, but suddenly there was something different about him, as if the very air had become electrically charged. A powerful sense of danger made the fine hairs on her body stand up. The danger was coming from him. Without knowing why, she shrank back from him as far as she could in the confines of the small tent, but there was no escape. With the suddenness of a snake striking, he rolled and pinned her down, forcing her hands over her head and holding them shackled there in a grip that hurt her wrists. "All right, Jane, or Priscilla, or whoever you are, we're going to talk. I'm going to ask the questions and you're going to answer them, and you'd better have the right answers or you're in trouble, sugar. Who are you?"
Had he gone mad? Jane struggled briefly against the grip on her wrists, but there was no breaking it. His weight bore down heavily on her, controlling her completely. His muscled legs clasped hers, preventing her from even kicking. "W—what…?" she stammered. "Grant, you're hurting me!"
"Answer me, damn you! Who are you?"
"Jane Greer!" Desperately, she tried to put some humor in her voice, but it wasn't a very successful effort.
"I don't like being lied to, sugar." His voice was velvety soft, and the sound of it chilled her to her marrow. Not even Turego had affected her like this; Turego was a dangerous, vicious man, but the man who held her now was the most lethal person she'd ever seen. He didn't have to reach for a weapon to kill her; he could kill her with his bare hands. She was totally helpless against him.
"I'm not lying!" she protested desperately. "I'm Priscilla Jane Hamilton Greer."

"If you were, you'd know that James Hamilton cut you out of his will several years ago. So you get along with him just perfectly, do you?"
"Yes, I do!" She strained against him, and he deliberately let her feel more of his weight, making it difficult for her to breathe. "He did it to protect me!"
For a long, silent moment in which she could hear the roaring of her blood in her ears, she waited for his reaction. His silence scraped along her nerves. Why didn't he say something? His warm breath was on her cheek, telling her how close he was to her, but she couldn't see him at all in that suffocating darkness. "That's a good one," he finally responded, and she flinched at the icy sarcasm of his tone. "Too bad I don't buy it. Try again."
"I'm telling you the truth! He did it to make me a less attractive kidnap target. It was my idea, damn it!"
"Sure it was," he crooned, and that low, silky sound made her shudder convulsively. "Come on, you can do better than that."
Jane closed her eyes, searching desperately for some way of convincing him of her identity. None came to mind, and she had no identification with her. Turego had taken her passport, so she didn't have even that. "Well, what about you?" she blurted in sudden fury. She'd taken a lot from him, endured without complaining, and now he'd frightened her half out of her mind. She'd had her back to the wall before, and had learned to strike back. "Who are you? How do I know that Dad hired you? If he did why didn't you know that no one ever calls me Priscilla? You were sloppy with your homework!"
"In case you haven't noticed, honey, I'm the one on top. *You* answer *my* questions."
"I did, and you didn't believe me," she snapped. "Sorry, but I don't have my American Express card with me. For God's sake, do I look like a terrorist? You nearly broke my arm; then you knocked me out. You've bounced me on the ground like a rubber ball, and you've got the utter gall to act like *I'm* dangerous? My goodness, you'd better search me, too, so you'll be able to sleep tonight. Who knows? I might have a bazooka strapped to my leg, since I'm such a dangerous character!" Her voice had risen furiously, and he cut her off by resting all his weight on her ribcage. When she gasped, he eased up again.
"No, you're unarmed. I've already had your clothes off, remember?" Even in the darkness, Jane blushed at the memory, thinking of the way he'd kissed her and touched her, and how his hands on her body had made her feel. He

moved slowly against her, stopping her breath this time with the suggestive intimacy of his movements. His warm breath stirred her hair as he dipped his head closer to her. "But I wouldn't want to disappoint a lady. If you want to be searched, I'll oblige you. I wouldn't mind giving you a body search."
Fuming, Jane tried again to free her hands, but finally fell back in disgust at the futile action. Raw frustration finally cleared her mind, giving her an idea, and she said harshly, "Did you go in the house when Dad hired you?"
He was still, and she sensed his sudden increase of interest. "Yes."
"Did you go in the study?"
"Yes."
"Then a hotshot like you would have noticed the portrait over the mantle. You're trained to notice things, aren't you? The portrait is of my grandmother, Dad's mother. She was painted sitting down, with a single rose on her lap. Now, you tell me what color her gown was," she challenged.
"Black," he said slowly. "And the rose was blood red."
Thick silence fell between them; then he released her hands and eased his weight from her. "All right," he said finally. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt—"
"Well, gee, thanks!" Huffily she rubbed her wrists, trying to keep her anger alive in the face of the enormous relief that filled her. Evidently her father had hired him, for otherwise how could he have seen the portrait in the study? She wanted to remain mad at him, but she knew she would forgive him because it was still dark. In spite of everything she was terribly glad he was there. Besides, she told herself cautiously, it was definitely better to stay on this man's good side.
"Don't thank me," he said tiredly. "Just be quiet and go to sleep."
Sleep! If only she could! Consciously, she knew she wasn't alone, but her subconscious mind required additional affirmation from her senses. She needed to see him, hear him, or touch him. Seeing him was out of the question; she doubted he'd leave a flashlight burning ail night, even assuming he had one. Nor would he stay awake all night talking to her. Perhaps, if she just barely touched him, he'd think it was an accident and not make a big deal out of it. Stealthily she moved her right hand until the backs of her fingers just barely brushed his hairy forearm—and immediately her wrist was seized in that bruising grip again.
"Ouch!" she yelped, and his fingers loosened.

"Okay, what is it this time?" His tone showed plainly that he was at the end of his patience.
"I just wanted to touch you," Jane admitted, too tired now to care what he thought, "so I'll know I'm not alone."
He grunted. "All right. It looks like that's the only way I'm going to get any sleep." He moved his hand, sliding his rough palm against hers, and twined their fingers together. "*Now* will you go to sleep?"
"Yes," she whispered. "Thank you."
She lay there, enormously and inexplicably comforted by the touch of that hard hand, so warm and strong. Her eyes slowly closed, and she gradually relaxed. The night terrors didn't come. He kept them firmly at bay with the strong, steady clasp of his hand around hers. Everything was going to be all right. Another wave of exhaustion swept over her, and she was asleep with the suddenness of a light turning off.
Grant woke before dawn, his senses instantly alert. He knew where he was, and he knew what time it was; his uncanny sixth sense could pinpoint the time within a few minutes. The normal night sounds of the jungle told him that they were safe, that there was no other human nearby. He knew immediately the identity of the other person in the tent with him. He knew that he couldn't move, and he even knew why: Jane was asleep on top of him.
He really didn't mind being used as a bed. She was soft and warm, and there was a female smell to her that made his nostrils flare in appreciation. The softness of her breasts against him felt good. That special, unmistakable softness never left a man's mind, hovering forever in his memory once he'd felt the fullness of a woman against him. It had been a long time since he'd slept with a woman, and he'd forgotten how good it could feel. He'd had sex—finding an available woman was no problem—but those encounters had been casual, just for the sake of the physical act. Once it was finished, he hadn't been inclined to linger. This past year, especially, he'd been disinclined to tolerate anyone else's presence. He'd spent a lot of time alone, like an injured animal licking its wounds; his mind and his soul had been filled with death. He'd spent so much time in the shadows that he didn't know if he'd ever find the sunlight again, but he'd been trying. The sweet, hot Tennessee sun had healed his body, but there was still an icy darkness in his mind.

Given that, given his acute awareness of his surroundings, even in sleep, how had Jane gotten on top of him without waking him? This was the second time she'd gotten close to him without disturbing him, and he didn't like it. A year ago, she couldn't have twitched without alerting him.

She moved then, sighing a little in her sleep. One of her arms was around his neck, her face pressed into his chest, her warm breath stirring the curls of hair in the low neckline of his undershirt. She lay on him as bonelessly as a cat, her soft body conforming to the hard contours of his. Her legs were tangled with his, her hair draped across his bare shoulder and arm. His body hardened despite his almost savage irritation with himself, and slowly his arms came up to hold her, his hands sliding over her supple back. He could have her if he wanted her. The highly specialized training he'd received had taught him how to deal excruciating pain to another human being, but a side benefit to that knowledge was that he also knew how to give pleasure. He knew all the tender, sensitive places of her body, knew how to excite nerves that she probably didn't even know she had. Beyond that, he knew how to control his own responses, how to prolong a sensual encounter until his partner had been completely satisfied.

The sure knowledge that he could have her ate at him, filling his mind with images and sensations. Within ten minutes he could have her begging him for it, and he'd be inside her, clasped by those long, sleek, dancer's legs. The only thing that stopped him was the almost childlike trust with which she slept curled on top of him. She slept as if she felt utterly safe, as if he could protect her from anything. Trust. His life had been short on trust for so many years that it startled him to find someone who could trust so easily and completely. He was uncomfortable with it, but at the same time it felt good, almost as good as her body in his arms. So he lay there staring into the darkness, holding her as she slept, the bitter blackness of his thoughts contrasting with the warm, elusive sweetness of two bodies pressed together in quiet rest.

When the first faint light began to filter through the trees, he shifted his hand to her shoulder and shook her lightly. "Jane, wake up."

She muttered something unintelligible and burrowed against him, hiding her face against his neck. He shifted gently to his side, easing her onto the blanket. Her arms still hung around his neck, and she tightened her grip as if afraid of falling. "Wait! Don't go," she said urgently, and the sound of her

own voice woke her. She opened her eyes, blinking owlishly at him. "Oh. Is it morning?"
"Yes, it's morning. Do you think you could let me up?"
Confused, she stared at him, then seemed to realize that she was still clinging around his neck. She dropped her arms as if scalded, and though the light was too dim for him to be certain, he thought that her cheeks darkened with a blush. "I'm sorry," she apologized.
He was free, yet oddly reluctant to leave the small enclosure of the tent. His left arm was still under her neck, pillowing her head. The need to touch her was overwhelming, guiding his hand under the fabric of her shirt, which was actually his. He flattened his hand against her bare stomach. His fingers and palm luxuriated in the warm silkiness of her skin, tantalized by the knowledge that even richer tactile pleasures waited both above and below where his hand now rested.
Jane felt her breathing hasten in rhythm, and her heartbeat lurched from the slow, even tempo of sleep to an almost frantic pace. "Grant?" she asked hesitantly. His hand simply rested on her stomach, but she could feel her breasts tightening in anticipation, her nipples puckering. A restless ache stirred to life inside her. It was the same empty need that she'd felt when she'd stood almost naked in his arms, in the middle of the stream, and let him touch her with a raw sensuality that she'd never before experienced. She was a little afraid of that need, and a little afraid of the man who created it with his touch, who leaned over her so intently.
Her only sexual experience had been with her husband. The lack of success in that area of their marriage had severely limited what she knew, leaving her almost completely unawakened, even disinterested. Chris had given her no useful standard, for there was no comparison at all between her ex-husband—a kind, cheerful man, slender and only a few inches taller than she was—and this big, rough, muscular warrior. Chris was totally civilized; Grant wasn't civilized at all. If he took her, would he control his fearsome strength, or would he dominate her completely? Perhaps that was what frightened her most of all, because the greatest struggle of her life had been for independence: for freedom from fear, and from the over protectiveness of her parents. She'd fought so hard and so long for control of her life that it was scary now to realize that she was totally at Grant's mercy. None of the training she'd had in self-defense was of any use against him; she had no defense at all. All she could do was trust him.

"Don't be afraid," he said evenly. "I'm not a rapist."
"I know." A killer, perhaps, but not a rapist. "I trust you," she whispered, and laid her hand against his stubbled jaw.
He gave a small, cynical laugh. "Don't trust me too much, honey. I want you pretty badly, and waking up with you in my arms is straining my good intentions to the limit." But he turned his head and pressed a quick kiss into the tender palm of the hand that caressed his cheek. "Come on, let's get moving. I feel like a sitting duck in this tent, now that it's daylight."
He heaved himself into a sitting position and reached for his boots, tugging them on and lacing them up with quick, expert movements. Jane was slower to sit up, her entire body protesting. She yawned and shoved her tangled hair back from her face, then put on her own boots. Grant had already left the tent by the time she finished, and she crawled after him. Once on her feet, she stretched her aching muscles, then touched her toes several times to limber up. While she was doing that, Grant swiftly dismantled the tent. He accomplished that in so short a time that she could only blink at him in amazement. In only a moment the tent was once more folded into an impossibly small bundle and stored in his backpack, with the thin blanket rolled up beside it.
"Any more goodies in that bottomless pack of yours?" he asked. "If not, we eat field rations."
"That yukky stuff you have?"
"That's right."
"Well, let's see. I know I don't have any more orange juice—" She opened the pack and peered into it, then thrust her hand into its depths. "Ah! Two more granola bars. Do you mind if I have the one with coconut? I'm not that crazy about raisins."
"Sure," he agreed lazily. "After all, they're yours."
She gave him an irritated glance. "They're *ours.* Wait—here's a can of…" She pulled the can out and read the label, then grinned triumphantly. "Smoked salmon! And some crackers. Please take a seat, sir, and we'll have breakfast."
He obediently sat, then took his knife from his belt and reached for the can of salmon. Jane drew it back, her brows lifted haughtily. "I'll have you know that this is a high class eating establishment. We do not open our cans with knives!"
"We don't? What do we use, our teeth?"

She lifted her chin at him and searched in the backpack again, finally extracting a can opener. "Listen," she said, giving the opener to him, "when I escape, I do it in style."
Taking the opener, he began to open the can of salmon. "So I see. How did you manage to get all of this stuff? I can just see you putting in an order with Turego, collecting what you wanted for an escape."
Jane chuckled, a rich, husky sound that made him lift his dark gold head from his task. Those piercing yellow eyes lit on her face, watching her as if examining a treasure. She was busy fishing crackers out of the backpack, so she missed the fleeting expression. "It was almost like that. I kept getting these 'cravings,' though I seldom mentioned them to Turego. I'd just have a word with the cook, and he generally came up with what I wanted. I raided the kitchen or the soldiers' quarters for a little something almost every night."
"Like that pack?" he queried, eyeing the object in question.
She patted it fondly. "Nice one, isn't it?"
He didn't reply, but there was a faint crinkling at the corners of his eyes, as if he were thinking of smiling. They ate the salmon and crackers in companionable silence, with the food washed down by water from Grant's canteen. He ate his granola bar, but Jane decided to save hers for later. Squatting beside the pack, she took her brush and restored order to her tangled mane of hair, then cleaned her face and hands with a premoistened towelette. "Would you like one?" she asked Grant politely, offering him one of the small packets.
He had been watching her with a stunned sort of amazement, but he took the packet from her hand and tore it open. The small, wet paper had a crisp smell to it, and he felt fresher, cooler, after cleaning his face with it. To his surprise, some of the face black he'd put on before going in after Jane had remained on his skin; he'd probably looked like a devil out of hell, with those streaks on his face.
A familiar sound caught his attention and he turned to look at Jane. A tube of toothpaste lay on the ground beside her, and she was industriously brushing her teeth. As he watched, she spat out the toothpaste, then took a small bottle and tilted it to her mouth, swishing the liquid around, then spitting it out, too. His stunned gaze identified the bottle. For five whole seconds he could only gape at her; then he sat back and began to laugh helplessly. Jane was rinsing her mouth with Perrier water.

Chapter Six

Jane pouted for a moment, but it was so good to hear him laugh that after a few seconds she sat back on her heels and simply watched him, smiling a little herself. When he laughed that harsh, scarred face became younger, even beautiful, as the shadows left his eyes. Something caught in her chest, something that hurt and made a curious melting feeling. She wanted to go over and hold him, to make sure that the shadows never touched him again. She scoffed at herself for her absurd sense of protectiveness. If anyone could take care of himself, it was Grant Sullivan. Nor would he welcome any gesture of caring; he'd probably take it as a sexual invitation.

To hide the way she felt, she put her things back into her pack, then turned to eye him questioningly. "Unless you want to use the toothpaste?" she offered.

He was still chuckling. "Thanks, honey, but I have tooth powder and I'll use the water in the canteen. God! Perrier water!"

"Well, I had to have water, but I wasn't able to snitch a canteen," she explained reasonably. "Believe me, I'd much rather have had a canteen. I had to wrap all the bottles in cloth so they wouldn't clink against each other or break."

It seemed completely logical to her, but it set him off again. He sat with his shoulders hunched and shaking, holding his head between his hands and laughing until tears streamed down his face. After he had stopped, he brushed his own teeth, but he kept making little choking noises that told Jane he was still finding the situation extremely funny. She was lighthearted, happy that she had made him laugh.

She felt her blouse and found it stiff, but dry. "You can have your shirt back," she told him, turning her back to take it off. "Thanks for the loan."

"Is yours dry?"

"Completely." She pulled his shirt off and dropped it on her backpack, and hurriedly began to put her blouse on. She had one arm in a sleeve when he swore violently. She jumped, startled, and looked over her shoulder at him. His face was grim as he strode rapidly over to her. His expression had been bright with laughter only a moment before, but now he looked like a thundercloud. "What happened to your arm?" he snapped, catching her

elbow and holding her bruised arm out for his inspection. "Why didn't you tell me you'd hurt yourself?"
Jane tried to grab the blouse and hold it over her bare breasts with her free arm, feeling horribly vulnerable and exposed. She had been trying for a nonchalant manner while changing, but her fragile poise was shattered by his closeness and his utter disregard for her modesty. Her cheeks reddened, and in self-defense she looked down at her badly bruised arm.
"Stop being so modest," he growled irritably when she fumbled with the blouse. "I told you, I've already seen you without any clothes." That was embarrassingly true, but it didn't help. She stood very still, her face burning, while he gently examined her arm.
"That's a hell of a bruise, honey. How does your arm feel?"
"It hurts, but I can use it," she said stiffly.
"How did it happen?"
"In a variety of ways," she said, trying to hide her embarrassment behind a bright manner. "This bruise right here is where you hit me on the arm after sneaking into my bedroom and scaring me half to death. The big, multicolored one is from falling down that bluff yesterday morning. This little interesting welt is where a limb swung back and caught me—"
"Okay, I get the idea." He thrust his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry I bruised you, but I didn't know who you were. I'd say we were more than even on that score, anyway, after that kick you gave me."
Jane's dark chocolate eyes widened with remorse. "I didn't mean to, not really. It was just a reflex. I'd done it before I thought. Are you okay? I mean, I didn't do any permanent damage, did I?"
A small, unwilling grin tugged at his lips as he remembered the torment of arousal he'd been enduring on her account. "No, everything's in working order," he assured her. His gaze dropped to where she clutched her blouse to her chest, and his clear amber eyes darkened to a color like melted gold. "Couldn't you tell that when we were standing in the stream kissing?"
Jane looked down automatically, then jerked her gaze back up in consternation when she realized where she was looking. "Oh," she said blankly.
Grant slowly shook his head, staring at her. She was a constant paradox, an unpredictable blend of innocence and contrariness, of surprising prudery and amazing boldness. In no way was she what he'd expected. He was beginning to enjoy every moment he spent with her, but acknowledging that

made him wary. It was his responsibility to get her out of Costa Rica, but he would compromise his own effectiveness if he allowed himself to become involved with her. Worrying over her could cloud his judgment. But, damn, how much could a man stand? He wanted her, and the wanting increased with every moment. In some curious way he felt lighter, happier. She certainly kept him on his toes! He was either laughing at her or contemplating beating her, but he was never bored or impatient in her company. Funny, but he couldn't remember ever laughing with a woman before. Laughter, especially during the past few years, had been in short supply in his life.

A chattering monkey caught his attention, and he looked up. The spots of sunlight darting through the shifting layers of trees reminded him that they were losing traveling time. "Get your blouse on," he said tersely, swinging away from her to sling his backpack on. He buckled it into place, then swung her pack onto his right shoulder. The rifle was slung over his left shoulder. By that time, Jane had jerked her blouse on and buttoned it up. Rather than stuffing it in her pants, she tied the tails in a knot at her waist as she had with Grant's shirt. He was already starting off through the jungle.

"Grant! Wait!" she called to his back, hurrying after him.

"You'll have to stay with me," he said unfeelingly, not slackening his pace.

Well, did he think she couldn't? Jane fumed, panting along in his path. She'd show him! And he could darn well act macho and carry both packs if he wanted; she wasn't going to offer to help! But he wasn't acting macho, she realized, and that deflated some of her indignation. He actually was that strong and indefatigable.

Compared to the harrowing day before, the hours passed quietly, without sight of another human being. She followed right on his heels, never complaining about the punishing pace he set, though the heat and humidity were even worse than the day before, if that were possible. There wasn't any hint of a breeze under the thick, smothering canopy. The air was still and heavy, steamy with an almost palpable thickness. She perspired freely, soaking her clothes and making her long for a real bath. That dousing in the stream the day before had felt refreshing, but didn't really qualify as bathing. Her nose wrinkled. She probably smelled like a goat.

Well, so what, she told herself. If she did, then so did he. In the jungle it was probably required to sweat.

They stopped about midmorning for a break, and Jane tiredly accepted the canteen from him. "Do you have any salt tablets?" she asked. "I think I need one."
"You don't need salt, honey, you need water. Drink up."
She drank, then passed the canteen back to him. "It's nearly empty. Let's pour the Perrier into it and chuck the empty bottles."
He nodded, and they were able to discard three bottles. As he got ready to start out again, Jane asked, "Why are you in such a hurry? Do you think we're being followed?"
"Not followed," he said tersely. "But they're looking for us, and the slower we move, the better chance they have of finding us."
"In this?" Jane joked, waving her hand to indicate the enclosing forest. It was difficult to see ten feet in any direction.
"We can't stay in here forever. Don't underrate Turego; he can mobilize a small army to search for us. The minute we show our faces, he'll know it."
"Something should be done about him," Jane said strongly. "Surely he's not operating with the sanction of the government?"
"No. Extortion and terrorism are his own little sidelines. We've known about him, of course, and occasionally fed him what we wanted him to know."
"We?" Jane asked casually.
His face was immediately shuttered, as cold and blank as a wall. "A figure of speech." Mentally, he swore at himself for being so careless. She was too sharp to miss anything. Before she could ask any more questions, he began walking again. He didn't want to talk about his past, about what he had been. He wanted to forget it all, even in his dreams.
About noon they stopped to eat, and this time they had to resort to the field rations. After a quick glance at what she was eating, Jane didn't look at it at all, just put it in her mouth and swallowed without allowing herself to taste it too much. It wasn't really that bad; it was just so awfully bland. They each drank a bottle of Perrier, and Jane insisted that they take another yeast pill.
A roll of thunder announced the daily downpour, so Grant quickly found them shelter under a rocky outcropping. The opening was partially blocked by bushes, making it a snug little haven.
They sat watching the deluge for a few minutes; then Grant stretched out his long legs, leaning back to prop himself on his elbow. "Explain this business of how your father disinherited you as a form of protection."

Jane watched a small brown spider pick its way across the ground. "It's very simple," she said absently. "I wouldn't live with around-the-clock protection the way he wanted, so the next best thing was to remove the incentive for any kidnappers."
"That sounds a little paranoid, seeing kidnappers behind every tree."
"Yes," she agreed, still watching the spider. It finally minced into a crevice in the rock, out of sight, and she sighed. "He is paranoid about it, because he's afraid that next tune he wouldn't get me back alive again."
"Again?" Grant asked sharply, seizing on the implication of her words. "You've been kidnapped before?"
She nodded. "When I was nine years old."
She made no other comment and he sensed that she wasn't going to elaborate, if given a choice. He wasn't going to allow her that choice. He wanted to know more about her, learn what went on in that unconventional brain. It was new to him, this overwhelming curiosity about a woman; it was almost a compulsion. Despite his relaxed position, tension had tightened his muscles. She was being very matter-of-fact about it, but instinct told him that the kidnapping had played a large part in the formation of the woman she was now. He was on the verge of discovering the hidden layers of her psyche.
"What happened?" he probed, keeping his voice casual.
"Two men kidnapped me after school, took me to an abandoned house and locked me in a closet until Dad paid the ransom."
The explanation was so brief as to be ridiculous; how could something as traumatic as a kidnapping be condensed into one sentence? She was staring at the rain now, her expression pensive and withdrawn.
Grant knew too much about the tactics of kidnappers, the means they used to force anxious relatives into paying the required ransom. Looking at her delicate profile, with the lush provocativeness of her mouth, he felt something savage well up in him at the thought that she might have been abused.
"Did they rape you?" He was no longer concerned about maintaining a casual pose. The harshness of his tone made her glance at him, vague surprise in her exotically slanted eyes.
"No, they didn't do anything like that," she assured him. "They just left me in that closet… alone. It was dark."

And to this day she was afraid of the dark, of being alone in it. So that was the basis for her fear. "Tell me about it," he urged softly.
She shrugged. "There isn't a lot more to tell. I don't know how long I was in the closet. There were no other houses close by, so no one heard me scream. The two men just left me there and went to some other location to negotiate with my parents. After awhile I became convinced that they were never coming back, that I was going to die there in that dark closet, and that no one would ever know what had happened to me."
"Your father paid the ransom?"
"Yes. Dad's not stupid, though. He knew that he wasn't likely to get me back alive if he just trusted the kidnappers, so he brought the police in on it. It's lucky he did. When the kidnappers came back for me, I overheard them making their plans. They were just going to kill me and dump my body somewhere, because I'd seen them and could identify them." She bent her head, studying the ground with great concentration, as if to somehow divorce herself from what she was telling him. "But there were police sharpshooters surrounding the house. When the two men realized that they were trapped, they decided to use me as a hostage. One of them grabbed my arm and held his pistol to my head, forcing me to walk in front of them when they left the house. They were going to take me with them, until it was safe to kill me."
Jane shrugged, then took a deep breath. "I didn't plan it, I swear. I don't remember if I tripped, or just fainted for a second. Anyway, I fell, and the guy had to let go of me or be jerked off balance. For a second the pistol wasn't pointed at me, and the policemen fired. They killed both men. The… the man who had held me was shot in the chest and the head, and he fell over on me. His blood splattered all over me, on my face, my hair…" Her voice trailed away.
For a moment there was something naked in her face, the stark terror and revulsion she'd felt as a child; then, as he had seen her do when he'd rescued her from the snake, she gathered herself together. He watched as she defeated the fear, pushed the shadows away. She smoothed her expression and even managed a glint of humor in her eyes as she turned to look at him. "Okay, it's your turn. Tell me something that happened to you."
Once he'd felt nothing much at all; he'd accepted the chilled, shadowed brutality of his life without thought. He still didn't flinch from the memories. They were part of him, as ingrained in his flesh and blood, in his

very being, as the color of his eyes and the shape of his body. But when he looked into the uncommon innocence of Jane's eyes, he knew that he couldn't brutalize her mind with even the mildest tale of the life he'd known. Somehow she had kept a part of herself as pure and crystalline as a mountain stream, a part of childhood forever unsullied. Nothing that had happened to her had touched the inner woman, except to increase the courage and gallantry that he'd seen twice now in her determined efforts to pull herself together and face forward again.

"I don't have anything to tell," he said mildly.

"Oh, sure!" she hooted, shifting herself on the ground until she was sitting facing him, her legs folded in a boneless sort of knot that made him blink. She rested her chin in her palm and surveyed him, so big and controlled and capable. If this man had led a normal life, she'd eat her boots, she told herself, then quickly glanced down at the boots in question. Right now they had something green and squishy on them. Yuk. They'd have to be cleaned before even a goat would eat them. She returned her dark gaze to Grant and studied him with the seriousness of a scientist bent over a microscope. His scarred face was hard, a study of planes and angles, of bronzed skin pulled tautly over the fierce sculpture of his bones. His eyes were those of an eagle, or a lion; she couldn't quite decide which. The clear amber color was brighter, paler, than topaz, almost like a yellow diamond, and like an eagle's, the eyes saw everything. They were guarded, expressionless; they hid an almost unbearable burden of experience and weary cynicism.

"Are you an agent?" she asked, probing curiously. Somehow, in those few moments, she had discarded the idea that he was a mercenary. Same field she thought, but a different division.

His mouth quirked. "No."

"Okay, let's try it from another angle. *Were* you an agent?"

"What sort of agent?"

"Stop evading my questions! The cloak-and-dagger sort of agent. You know, the men in overcoats who have forty sets of identification."

"No. Your imagination is running wild. I'm too easily identifiable to be any good undercover."

That was true. He stood out like a warrior at a tea party. Something went quiet within her, and she knew. "Are you retired?"

He was quiet for so long that she thought he wasn't going to answer her. He seemed to be thinking of something else entirely. Then he said flatly, "Yeah,

I'm retired. For a year now."
His set, blank face hurt her, on the inside. "You were a… weapon, weren't you?"
There was a terrible clarity in his eyes as he slowly shifted his gaze to her. "Yes," he said harshly. "I was a weapon."
They had aimed him, fired him, and watched him destroy. He would be matchless, she realized. Before she'd even known him, when she'd seen him gliding into her darkened bedroom like a shadow, she'd realized how lethal he could be. And there was something else, something she could see now. He had retired himself, turned his back and walked away from that grim, shadowed life. Certainly his superiors wouldn't have wanted to lose his talents.
She reached out and placed her hand on his, her fingers slim and soft, curling around the awesome strength of his. Her hand was much smaller made with a delicacy that he could crush with a careless movement of his fingers, but implicit in her touch was the trust that he wouldn't turn that strength against her. A deep breath swelled the muscled planes of his chest. He wanted to take her right then, in the dirt. He wanted to stretch her out and pull her clothes off, bury himself in her. He wanted more of her touch, all of her touch, inside and out. But the need for her satiny female flesh was a compulsion that he couldn't satisfy with a quick possession, and there wasn't time for more. The rain was slowing and would stop entirely at any moment. There was a vague feeling marching up and down his spine that told him they couldn't afford to linger any longer.
But it was time she knew. He removed his hand from hers, lifting it to cup her chin. His thumb rubbed lightly over her lips. "Soon," he said, his voice guttural with need, "you're going to lie down for me. Before I take you back to your daddy, I'm going to have you, and the way I feel now, I figure it's going to take a long time before I'm finished with you."
Jane sat frozen, her eyes those of a startled woodland animal. She couldn't even protest, because the harsh desire in his voice flooded her mind and her skin with memories. The day before, standing in the stream, he'd kissed her and touched her with such raw sexuality that, for the first time in her life, she'd felt the coiling, writhing tension of desire in herself. For the first time she'd wanted a man, and she'd been shocked by the unfamiliarity of her own body. Now he was doing it to her again, but this time he was using words. He'd stated his intentions bluntly, and images began forming in her mind of

the two of them lying twined together, of his naked, magnificent body surging against her.
He watched the shifting expressions that flitted across her face. She looked surprised, even a little shocked, but she wasn't angry. He'd have understood anger, or even amusement; that blank astonishment puzzled him. It was as if no man had ever told her that he wanted her. Well, she'd get used to the idea.
The rain had stopped, and he picked up the packs and the rifle, settling them on his shoulders. Jane followed him without a word when he stepped out from beneath the rocky outcropping into the already increasing heat. Steam rose in wavering clouds from the forest floor, immediately wrapping them in a stifling, humid blanket.
She was silent for the rest of the afternoon, lost in her thoughts. He stopped at a stream, much smaller than the one they'd seen the day before, and glanced at her. "Care for a bath? You can't soak, but you can splash."
Her eyes lit up, and for the first time that afternoon a smile danced on her full lips. He didn't need an answer to know how she felt about the idea. Grinning, he searched out a small bar of soap from his pack and held it out to her. "I'll keep watch, then you can do the same for me. I'll be up there."
Jane looked up the steep bank that he'd indicated. That was the best vantage point around; he'd have a clear view of the stream and the surrounding area. She started to ask if he was going to watch her, too, but bit back the question. As he'd already pointed out, it was too late for modesty. Besides, she felt infinitely safer knowing that he'd be close by.
He went up the bank as sure-footedly as a cat, and Jane turned to face the stream. It was only about seven feet wide, and wasn't much more than ankle-deep. Still, it looked like heaven. She hunted her lone change of underwear out of her pack, then sat down to pull off her boots. Glancing nervously over her shoulder to where Grant sat, she saw that he was in profile to her, but she knew that he would keep her in his peripheral vision. She resolutely undid her pants and stepped out of them. Nothing was going to keep her from having her bath… except maybe another snake, or a jaguar, she amended.
Naked, she gingerly picked her way over the stony bottom to a large flat rock and sat down in the few inches of water. It was deliciously cool, having run down from a higher altitude, but even tepid water would have felt good on her over-heated skin. She splashed it on her face and head until

her hair was soaked. Gradually she felt the sweaty stickiness leave her hair, until the strands were once more silky beneath her fingers. Then she took the small bar of soap out from under her leg, where she'd put it for safekeeping, and rubbed it over her body. The small luxury made her feel like a new woman, and a sense of peace crept into her. It was only a simple pleasure, to bathe in a clear, cool stream, but added to it was her sense of nakedness, of being totally without restrictions. She knew that he was there, knew that he was watching her, and felt her breasts grow tight.

What would it be like if he came down from that bank and splashed into the water with her? If he took the blanket from his pack and laid her down on it? She closed her eyes, shivering in reaction, thinking of his hard body pressing down on her, thrusting into her. It had been so many years, and the few experiences she'd had with Chris hadn't taught her that she could be a creature of wanting, but with Grant she wasn't the same woman.

Her heart beat heavily in her breast as she rinsed herself by cupping water in her palms and pouring it over her. Standing up, she twisted the water out of her hair, then waded out. She was trembling as she pulled on her clean underwear, then dressed distastefully in her stained pants and shirt. "I'm finished," she called, lacing up her boots.

He appeared soundlessly beside her. "Sit in the same place where I sat," he instructed, placing the rifle in her hands. "Do you know how to use this?"

The weapon was heavy, but her slim hands looked capable as she handled it. "Yes. I'm a fairly good shot." A wry smile curved her lips. "With paper targets and clay pigeons, anyway."

"That's good enough." He began unbuttoning his shirt, and she stood there in a daze, her eyes on his hands. He paused. "Are you going to guard me from down here?"

She blushed. "No. Sorry." Quickly she turned and scrambled up the bank, then took a seat in the exact spot where he'd sat. She could see both banks, but at the same time there was a fair amount of cover that she could use if the need arose. He'd probably picked this out as the best vantage point without even thinking about it, just automatically sifting through the choices and arriving at the correct one. He might be retired, but his training was ingrained.

A movement, a flash of bronze, detected out of the corner of her eye, told her that he was wading into the stream. She shifted her gaze a fraction so she wouldn't be able to see him at all, but just the knowledge that he was as

naked as she had been kept her heart pounding erratically. She swallowed, then licked her lips, forcing herself to concentrate on the surrounding jungle, but the compulsion to look at him continued.
She heard splashing and pictured him standing there like a savage, bare and completely at home.
She closed her eyes, but the image remained before her. Slowly, totally unable to control herself, she opened her eyes and turned her head to look at him. It was only a small movement, a fraction of an inch, until she was able to see him, but that wasn't enough. Stolen glances weren't enough. She wanted to study every inch of him, drink in the sight of his powerful body. Shifting around, she looked fully at him, and froze. He was beautiful, so beautiful that she forgot to breathe. Without being handsome, he had the raw power and grace of a predator, all the terrible beauty of a hunter. He was bronzed all over, his tan a deep, even brown. Unlike her, he didn't keep his back turned in case she looked; he had a complete disregard for modesty. He was taking a bath; she could look or not look, as she wished. His skin was sleek and shiny with water, and the droplets caught in the hair on his chest glittered like captured diamonds. His body hair was dark, despite the sun-streaked blondness of his head. It shadowed his chest, ran in a thin line down his flat, muscled stomach, and bloomed again at the juncture of his legs. His legs were as solid as tree trunks, long and roped with muscle; every movement he made set off ripples beneath his skin. It was like watching a painting by one of the old masters come to life.
He soaped himself all over, then squatted in the water to rinse in the same manner she had, cupping his palms to scoop up the water. When he was rinsed clean, he stood and looked up at her, probably to check on her, and met her gaze head on. Jane couldn't look away, couldn't pretend that she hadn't been staring at him with an almost painful appreciation. He stood very still in the stream, watching her as she watched him, letting her take in every detail of his body. Under her searching gaze, his body began to stir, harden, growing to full, heavy arousal.
"Jane," he said softly, but still she heard him. She was so attuned to him, so painfully sensitive to every move and sound he made, that she would have heard him if he'd whispered. "Do you want to come down here?"
Yes. Oh, God, yes, more than she'd ever wanted anything. But she was still a little afraid of her own feelings, so she held back. This was a part of herself that she didn't know, wasn't certain she could control.

"I can't," she replied, just as softly. "Not yet."
"Then turn around, honey, while you still have a choice."
She quivered, almost unable to make the required movement, but at last her muscles responded and she turned away from him, listening as he waded out of the water. In less than a minute he appeared noiselessly at her side and took the rifle from her hands. He had both packs with him. Typically, he made no further comment on what had just happened. "We'll get away from the water and set up camp. It'll be night pretty soon."
Night. Long hours in the dark tent, lying next to him. Jane followed him, and when he stopped she helped him do the work they had done the night before, setting up the tent and hiding it. She didn't protest at the cold field rations, but ate without really tasting anything. Soon she was crawling into the tent and taking off her boots, waiting for him to join her.
When he did, they lay quietly side by side, watching as the remaining light dimmed, then abruptly vanished.
Tension hummed through her, making her muscles tight. The darkness pressed in on her, an unseen monster that sucked her breath away. No list of compulsive questions leaped to her lips tonight; she felt oddly timid, and it had been years since she'd allowed herself to be timid about anything. She no longer knew herself.
"Are you afraid of me?" he asked, his voice gentle.
Just the sound of his voice enabled her to relax a little. "No," she whispered.
"Then come here and let me keep the dark away from you."
She felt his hand on her arm, urging her closer, then she was enfolded in arms so strong that nothing could ever make her afraid while they held her. He cradled her against his side, tucking her head into the hollow of his shoulder. With a touch so light that it could have been the brush of a butterfly's wings, he kissed the top of her head. "Good night, honey," he whispered.
"Good night," she said in return.
Long after he was asleep, Jane lay in his arms with her eyes open, though she could see nothing. Her heart was pounding in her chest with a slow, heavy rhythm, and her insides felt jittery. It wasn't fear that kept her awake, but a churning emotion that shifted everything inside her. She knew exactly what was wrong with her. For the first time in too many years, everything was right with her.

She'd learned to live her life with a shortage of trust. No matter that she'd learned to enjoy herself and her freedom; there had always been that residual caution that kept her from letting a man get too close. Until now she'd never been strongly enough attracted to a man for the attraction to conquer the caution—Until now. Until Grant. And now the attraction had become something much stronger. The truth stunned her, yet she had to accept it: she loved him. She hadn't expected it, though for two days she had felt it tugging at her. He was harsh and controlled, bad-tempered, and his sense of humor was severely underdeveloped, but he had gently washed the snake's blood from her, held her hand during the night, and had gone out of his way to make their trek easier for her. He wanted her, but he hadn't taken her because she wasn't ready. She was afraid of the dark, so he held her in his arms. Loving him was at once the easiest and most difficult thing she'd ever done.

Chapter Seven

Once again he awoke to find her cuddled on top of him, but this tune it didn't bother him that he had slept peacefully through the night. Sliding his hands up her back, he accepted that his normally keen instincts weren't alarmed by her because there was absolutely no danger in her except perhaps the danger of her driving him crazy. She managed to do that with every little sway of her behind. Reveling in the touch of her all along his body, he moved his hands down, feeling her slenderness, the small ribs, the delicate spine, the enticing little hollow at the small of her back, then the full, soft mounds of her buttocks. He cupped his palms over them, kneading her with his fingers. She muttered and shifted against him, brushing at a lock of hair that had fallen into her face. Her eyelashes fluttered, then closed completely once more.

He smiled, enjoying the way she woke up. She did it by slow degrees, moaning and grousing while still more asleep than awake, frowning and pouting, and moving against him as if trying to sink herself deeper into him so she wouldn't have to wake up at all. Then her eyes opened, and she blinked several times, and as quickly as that the pout faded from her lips and she gave him a slow smile that would have melted stone.

"Good morning," she said, and yawned. She stretched, then abruptly froze in place. Her head came up, and she stared at him in stupefaction. "I'm on top of you," she said blankly.
"Again," he confirmed.
"Again?"
"You slept on top of me the night before last, too. Evidently my holding you while you sleep isn't enough; you think you have to hold me down."
She slithered off him, sitting up in the tent and straightening her twisted, wrinkled clothing. Color burned in her face. "I'm sorry. I know it can't have been very comfortable for you."
"Don't apologize. I've enjoyed it," he drawled. "If you really want to make it up to me, though, we'll reverse positions tonight."
Her breath caught and she stared at him in the dim light, her eyes soft and melting. Yes. Everything in her agreed. She wanted to belong to him; she wanted to know everything about his body and let him know everything about hers. She wanted to tell him, but she didn't know how to put it into words. A crooked smile crossed his face; then he sat up and reached for his boots, thrusting his feet into them and lacing them up. Evidently he took her silence for a refusal, because he dropped the subject and began the task of breaking camp.
"We have enough food for one more meal," he said as they finished eating. "Then I'll have to start hunting."
She didn't like that idea. Hunting meant that he'd leave her alone for long stretches of time. "I don't mind a vegetarian diet," she said hopefully.
"Maybe it won't come to that. We've been gradually working our way out of the mountains, and unless I miss my guess we're close to the edge of the forest. We'll probably see fields and roads today. But we're going to avoid people until I'm certain it's safe, okay?"
She nodded in agreement.
Just as he'd predicted, at midmorning they came abruptly to the end of the jungle. They stood high on a steep cliff, and stretched out below them was a valley with cultivated fields, a small network of roads, and a cozy village situated at the southern end. Jane blinked at the suddenly brilliant sunlight. It was like stepping out of one century into another. The valley looked neat and prosperous, reminding her that Costa Rica was the most highly developed country in Central America, despite the thick tangle of virgin ram forest at her back.

"Oh," she breathed. "Wouldn't it be nice to sleep in a bed again?"
He grunted an absent reply, his narrowed eyes sweeping the valley for any sign of abnormal activity. Jane stood beside him, waiting for him to make his decision.
It was made for them. Abruptly he grabbed her arm and jerked her back into the sheltering foliage, dragging her to the ground behind a huge bush just as a helicopter suddenly roared over their heads. It was flying close to the ground, following the tree line; she had only a glimpse of it before it was gone, hidden by the trees. It was a gun-ship, and had camouflage paint.
"Did you see any markings?" she asked sharply, her nails digging into his skin.
"No. There weren't any." He rubbed his stubbled jaw. "There's no way of telling who it belonged to, but we can't take any chances. Now we know that we can't just walk across the valley. We'll work our way down, and try to find more cover."
If anything, the terrain was even more difficult now. They were at the edge of a volcanic mountain range, and the land had been carved with a violent hand. It seemed to be either straight up, or straight down. Their pace was agonizingly slow as they worked their way down rocky bluffs and up steep gorges. When they stopped to eat, they had covered less than one-fourth the length of the valley, and Jane's legs ached as they hadn't since the wild run through the jungle the first day.
Right on schedule, just as they finished eating, they heard the boom of thunder. Grant looked around for shelter, considering every outcropping of rock. Then he pointed. "I think that's a cave up there. If it is we'll be in high cotton."
"What?" Jane asked, frowning.
"Sitting pretty," he explained. "Luxurious accommodations, in comparison to what we've had."
"Unless it's already occupied."
"That's why you're going to wait down here while I check it out." He moved up the fern covered wall of the gorge, using bushes and vines and any other toehold he could find. The gorge itself was narrow and steep, enclosing them on all four sides. Its shape gave a curious clarity to the calls of the innumerable birds that flitted among the trees like living Christmas decorations, all decked out in their iridescent plumage. Directly overhead

was a streak of sky, but it consisted of rolling black clouds instead of the clear blue that she'd seen only moments before.
Grant reached the cave, then immediately turned and waved to her. "Come on up; it's clear! Can you make it?"
"Have I failed yet?" she quipped, starting the climb, but she'd had to force the humor. The desolation had been growing in her since they'd seen the valley. Knowing that they were so close to civilization made her realize that their time together was limited. While they had been in the forest, the only two people locked in a more primitive time, she'd had no sense of time running out. Now she couldn't ignore the fact that soon, in a few days or less, their time together would end. She felt as if she'd already wasted so much time, as if the golden sand had been trickling through her fingers and she'd only just realized what she held. She felt panic-stricken at the thought of discovering love only to lose it, because there wasn't enough time to let it grow.
He reached his hand down and caught hers, effortlessly lifting her the last few feet. "Make yourself comfortable; we could be here a while. This looks like the granddaddy of all storms."
Jane surveyed their shelter. It wasn't really a cave; it was little more than an indentation in the face of the rock, about eight feet deep. It had a steeply slanting ceiling that soared to ten or eleven feet at the opening of the cave, but was only about five feet high at the back. The floor was rocky, and one big rock, as large as a love seat and shaped like a peanut, lay close to the mouth of the cave. But it was dry, and because of its shallowness it wasn't dark, so Jane wasn't inclined to find fault with it.
Given Grant's eerie sense of timing, she wasn't surprised to hear the first enormous raindrops begin filtering through the trees just as he spread out the tarp at the back of the cave. He placed it behind the big rock, using its bulk to shelter them. She sat down on the tarp and drew her legs up, wrapping her arms around them and resting her chin on her knees, listening to the sound of the rain as it increased in volume.
Soon it was a din and the solid sheets of water that obscured their vision heightened the impression that they were under a waterfall. She could hear the crack of lightning, feel the earth beneath her shake from the enormous claps of thunder. It was dark now, as the rain blotted out what light came through the thick canopy. She could barely see Grant, who was standing just

inside the mouth of the cave with his shoulder propped against the wall, occasionally puffing on a cigarette.
Chills raced over her body as the rain cooled the air. Hugging her legs even tighter for warmth, Jane stared through the dimness at the broad, powerful shoulders outlined against the gray curtain of rain. He wasn't an easy man to get to know. His personality was as shadowy as the jungle, yet just the sight of that muscular back made her feel safe and protected. She knew that he stood between her and any danger. He had already risked his life for her on more than one occasion, and was as matter-of-fact about it as if being shot at were an everyday occurrence. Perhaps it was for him, but Jane didn't take it so lightly.
He finished his cigarette and field-stripped it. Jane doubted that anyone would track them here through the rain, but it was second nature to him to be cautious. He went back to his calm perusal of the storm, standing guard while she rested.
Something shifted inside her and coiled painfully in her chest. He was so alone. He was a hard, lonely man, but everything about him drew her like a magnet, pulling at her heart and body.
Her eyes clouded as she watched him. "When this was over he'd walk away from her as if these days in the jungle had never existed. This was all routine for him. What she could have of him, all that she could ever have of him, was the present, too few days before this was over. And that just wasn't enough.
She was cold now, chilled to her bones. The unceasing, impenetrable curtain of rain carried a damp coldness with it, and her own spirits chilled her from the inside. Instinctively, like a sinuous cat seeking heat, she uncoiled from the tarp and went up to him, gravitating to his certain warmth and comfort. Silently she slid her arms around his taut waist and pressed her face into the marvelous heat of his chest. Glancing down at her, he lifted an eyebrow in mild inquiry. "I'm cold," she muttered, leaning her head on him and staring pensively at the rain.
He looped his arm around her shoulder, holding her closer to him and sharing his warmth with her. A shiver ran over her; he rubbed his free hand up her bare arm, feeling the coolness of her skin. Of its own accord his hand continued upward, stroking her satiny jaw, smoothing the dark tangle of hair away from her face. She was in a melancholy mood, this funny little

cat, staring at the rain as if it would never stop, her eyes shadowed and that full, passionate mouth sad.
Cupping her chin in his hand, he tilted her face up so he could study her quiet expression. A small smile curved the corners of his hard mouth. "What's wrong, honey? Rain making you feel blue?" Before she could answer, he bent his head and kissed her, using his own cure.
Jane's hands went to his shoulders, clinging to him for support. His mouth was hard and demanding and oh so sweet. The taste of him, the feel of him, was just what she wanted. Her teeth parted, allowing the slow probing of his tongue. Deep inside her, fire began to curl, and she curled too, twining against him in an unconscious movement that he read immediately.
Lifting his mouth from hers just a little, he muttered, "Honey, this feels like an offer to me."
Her dark eyes were a little dazed as she looked up at him. "I think it is," she whispered.
He dropped his arms to her waist and wrapped them around her, lifting her off her feet, bringing her level with him. She wound her arms around his neck and kissed him fervently, lost in the taste and feel of his mouth, not even aware he'd moved until he set her down to stand on the tarp. The dimness at the back of the cave hid any expression that was in his eyes, but she could feel his intent amber gaze on her as he began calmly unbuttoning her shirt. Jane's mouth went dry, but her own shaking fingers moved to his chest and began opening his shirt in turn.
When both garments were hanging open, he shrugged out of his and tossed it on the tarp, never taking his eyes from her. Tugging his undershirt free of his pants, he caught the bottom of it and peeled it off over his head. He tossed it aside, too, completely baring his broad, hairy chest. As it had the day before, the sight of his half-naked body mesmerized her. Her chest hurt; breathing was incredibly difficult. Then his hard, hot fingers were inside her shirt, on her breasts, molding them to fit his palms. The contrast of his heated hands on her cool skin made her gasp in shocked pleasure. Closing her eyes, she leaned into his hands, rubbing her nipples against his calloused palms. His chest lifted on a deep, shuddering breath.
She could feel the sexual tension emanating from him in waves. Like no other man she'd known, he made her acutely aware of his sexuality, and equally aware of her own body and its uses. Between her legs, an empty

throb began to torment her, and she instinctively pressed her thighs together in an effort to ease the ache.
As slight as it was, he felt her movement. One of his hands left her breast and drifted downward, over her stomach and hips to her tightly clenched thighs. "That won't help," he murmured. "You'll have to open your legs, not close them." His fingers rubbed insistently at her and pleasure exploded along her nerves. A low moan escaped from her lips; then she swayed toward him. She felt her legs parting, allowing him access to her tender body. He explored her through her pants, creating such shock waves of physical pleasure that her knees finally buckled and she fell against him, her bare breasts flattening against the raspy, hair-covered expanse of his chest. Quickly he set her down on the tarp and knelt over her, unzipping her pants and pulling them down her legs, his hands rough and urgent. He had to pause to remove her boots, but in only moments she was naked except for the shirt that still hung around her shoulders. The damp air made her shiver, and she reached for him. "I'm cold," she complained softly. "Get me warm." She offered herself to him so openly and honestly that he wanted to thrust into her immediately, but he also wanted more. He'd had her nearly naked in his arms before. In the stream, that wisp of wet silk had offered no protection, but he hadn't had the time to explore her as he'd wanted. Her body was still a mystery to him; he wanted to touch every inch of her, taste her and enjoy the varying textures of her skin.
Jane's eyes were wide and shadowed as he knelt over her, holding himself away from her outstretched arms. "Not just yet, honey," he said in a low, gravelly voice. "Let me look at you first." Gently be caught her wrists and pressed them down to the tarp above her head, making her round, pretty breasts arch as if they begged for his mouth. Anchoring her wrists with one hand, he slid his free hand to those tempting, gently quivering mounds.
A small, gasping sound escaped from Jane's throat. Why was he holding her hands like that? It made her feel incredibly helpless and exposed, spread out for his delectation, yet she also felt unutterably safe. She could sense him savoring her with his eyes, watching intently as her nipples puckered in response to the rasp of his fingertips. He was so close to her that she could feel the heat of his body, smell the hot, musky maleness of his skin. She arched, trying to turn her body into that warmth and scent, but he forced her flat again.

Then his mouth was on her, sliding up the slope of her breast and closing hotly on her nipple. He sucked strongly at her, making waves of burning pleasure sweep from her breast to her loins. Jane whimpered, then bit her lip to hold back the sound. She hadn't known, had never realized, what a man's mouth on her breasts could do to her. She was on fire, her skin burning with an acute sensitivity that was both ecstatic and unbearable. She squirmed, clenching her legs together, trying to control the ache that threatened to master her.

His mouth went to her other breast, the rasp of his tongue on her nipple intensifying an already unbearable sensation. He swept his hand down to her thighs, his touch demanding that she open herself to him. Her muscles slowly relaxed for him, and he spread her legs gently. His fingers combed through the dark curls that had so enticed him before, making her body jerk in anticipation; then he covered her with his palm and thoroughly explored the soft, vulnerable flesh between her legs. Beneath his touch, Jane began to tremble wildly. "Grant," she moaned, her voice a shaking, helpless plea.

"Easy," he soothed, blowing his warm breath across her flesh. He wanted her so badly that he felt he would explode, but at the same time he couldn't get enough of touching her, of watching her arch higher and higher as he aroused her. He was drunk on her flesh, and still trying to satiate himself. He took her nipple in his mouth and began sucking again, wringing another cry from her.

Between her legs a finger suddenly penetrated, searching out the depths of her readiness, and shock waves battered her body. Something went wild inside her, and she could no longer hold her body still. It writhed and bucked against his hand, and his mouth was turning her breasts into pure flame. Then his thumb brushed insistently over her straining, aching flesh, and she exploded in his arms, blind with the colossal upheaval of her senses, crying out unconsciously. Nothing had ever prepared her for this, for the total, mind-shattering pleasure of her own body.

When it was over, she lay sprawled limply on the tarp. He undid his pants and shoved them off, his eyes glittering and wild. Jane's eyes slowly opened and she stared up at him dazedly. Grasping her legs, he lifted them high and spread them; then he braced himself over her and slowly sank his flesh into hers.

Jane's hands clenched on the tarp, and she bit her lips to keep from crying out as her body was inexorably stretched and filled. He paused, his big body

shuddering, allowing her the time to accept him. Then suddenly it was she who couldn't bear any distance at all between them, and she surged upward, taking all of him, reaching up her arms to pull him close.

She never noticed the tears that ran in silvered streaks down her temples, but Grant gently wiped them away with his rough thumbs. Supporting his weight on his arms, sliding his entire body over her in a subtle caress, he began moving with slow, measured strokes. He was so close to the edge that he could feel the feathery sensation along his spine, but he wanted to make it last. He wanted to entice her again to that satisfying explosion, watch her go crazy in his arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a raw, husky tone, catching another tear with his tongue as it left the corner of her eye. If he were hurting her, he wouldn't prolong the loving, though he felt it would tear him apart to stop.

"Yes, I'm fine," she breathed, stroking her hands up the moving, surging muscles of his back. Fine… What a word for the wild magnificence of belonging to him. She'd never dreamed it could feel like this. It was as if she'd found a half of herself that she hadn't even known was missing. She'd never dreamed that *she* could feel like this. Her fingers clutched mindlessly at his back as his long, slow movements began to heat her body.

He felt her response and fiercely buried his mouth against the sensitive little hollow between her throat and collarbone, biting her just enough to let her feel his teeth, then licking where he'd bitten. She whimpered, that soft, uncontrollable little sound that drove him crazy, and he lost control. He began driving into her with increasing power, pulling her legs higher around him so he could have more of her, all of her, deeper and harder, hearing her little cries and going still crazier. There was no longer any sense of time, or of danger, only the feel of the woman beneath him and around him. While he was in her arms he could no longer feel the dark, icy edges of the shadows in his mind and soul.

In the aftermath, like that after a storm of unbelievable violence, they lay in exhausted silence, each reluctant to speak for fear it would shatter the fragile peace. His massive shoulders crushed her, making it difficult for her to breathe, but she would gladly have spent the rest of her life lying there. Her fingers slowly stroked the sweat-darkened gold of his hair, threading through the heavy, live silk. Their bodies were reluctant to leave each other, too. He hadn't withdrawn from her; instead, after easing his weight down onto her, he'd nestled closer and now seemed to be lightly dozing.

Perhaps it had happened too quickly between them, but she couldn't regret it. She was fiercely happy that she'd given herself to him. She'd never been in love before, never wanted to explore the physical mysteries of a man and a woman. She'd even convinced herself that she just wasn't a physical person, and had decided to enjoy her solitary life. Now her entire concept of herself had been changed, and it was as if she'd discovered a treasure within herself. After the kidnapping she had withdrawn from people, except for the trusted precious few who she had loved before: her parents, Chris, a couple of other friends. And even though she had married Chris, she had remained essentially alone, emotionally withdrawn. Perhaps that was why their marriage had failed, because she hadn't been willing to let him come close enough to be a real husband. Oh, they had been physically intimate, but she had been unresponsive, and eventually he had stopped bothering her. That was exactly what it had been for her: a bother. Chris had deserved better. He was her best friend, but only a friend, not a lover. He was much better off with the warm, responsive, adoring woman he'd married after their divorce. She was too honest with herself to even pretend that any blame for their failed marriage belonged to Chris. It had been entirely her fault, and she knew it. She'd thought it was a lack in herself. Now she realized that she did have the warm, passionate instincts of a woman in love—because she was in love for the first time. She hadn't been able to respond to Chris, simply because she hadn't loved him as a woman should love the man she marries. She was twenty-nine. She wasn't going to pretend to a shyness she didn't feel for the sake of appearance. She loved the man who lay in her arms, and she was going to enjoy to the fullest whatever time she had with him. She hoped to have a lifetime; but if fate weren't that kind, she would not let timidity cheat her out of one minute of the time they did have. Her life had been almost snuffed out twenty years ago, before it had really begun. She knew that life and time were too precious to waste.

Perhaps it didn't mean to Grant what it did to her, to be able to hold and love like this. She knew intuitively that his life had been much harder than hers, that he'd seen things that had changed him, that had stolen the laughter from his eyes. His experiences had hardened him, had left him extraordinarily cautious. But even if he were only taking the shallowest form of comfort from her, that of sexual release, she loved him enough to give him whatever he needed from her, without question. Jane loved as she did everything else, completely and courageously.

He stirred, lifting his weight onto his forearms and staring down at her. His golden eyes were shadowed, but there was something in them that made her heart beat faster, for he was looking at her the way a man looks at the woman who belongs to him. "I've got to be too heavy for you."
"Yes, but I don't care." Jane tightened her arms about his neck and tried to pull him back down, but his strength was so much greater than hers that she couldn't budge him.
He gave her a swift, hard kiss. "It's stopped raining. We have to go."
"Why can't we stay the night here? Aren't we safe?"
He didn't answer, just gently disengaged their bodies and sat up, reaching for his clothes, and that was answer enough. She sighed, but sat up to reach for her own clothes. The sigh became a wince as she became aware of the various aches she'd acquired by making love on the ground.
She could have sworn that he wasn't looking at her, but his awareness of his surroundings was awesome. His head jerked around, and a slight frown pulled his dark brows together. "Did I hurt you?" he asked abruptly.
"No, I'm all right." He didn't look convinced by her reassurance. When they descended the steep slope to the floor of the gorge, he kept himself positioned directly in front of her. He carried her down the last twenty feet, hoisting her over his shoulder despite her startled, then indignant, protests. It was a waste of time for her to protest, though; he simply ignored her. When he put her down silently and started walking, she had no choice but to follow.
Twice that afternoon they heard a helicopter, and both times he pulled her into the thickest cover, waiting until the sound had completely faded away before emerging. The grim line of his mouth told her that he didn't consider it just a coincidence. They were being hunted, and only the dense cover of the forest kept them from being caught. Jane's nerves twisted at the thought of leaving that cover; She wasn't afraid for just herself now, but for Grant, too. He put himself in jeopardy just by being with her. Turego wanted her alive, but Grant was of no use to him at all.
If it came to a choice between Grant's life and giving Turego what he wanted, Jane knew that she would give in. She'd have to take her chances with Turego, though it would be impossible now to catch him off guard the way she had the first time. He knew now that she wasn't a rich man's flirtatious, charming plaything. She'd made a fool of him, and he wouldn't forget.

Grant stepped over a large fallen tree and turned back to catch her around the waist and lift her over it with that effortless strength of his. Pausing, he pushed her tangled hair back from her face, his touch surprisingly gentle. She knew how lethal those hands could be. "You're too quiet," he muttered. "It makes me think you're up to something, and that makes me nervous."
"I was just thinking," she defended herself.
"That's what I was afraid of."
"If Turego catches us…"
"He won't," Grant said flatly. Staring down at her, he saw more now than just an appealing, sloe-eyed woman. He knew her now, knew her courage and strength, her secret fears and her sunny nature. He also knew her temper, which could flare or fade in an instant. Sabin's advice had been to kill her quickly rather than let Turego get his hands on her; Grant had seen enough death to accept that as a realistic option at the time. But that was before he had known her, tasted her and felt the silky texture of her skin, watched her go wild beneath him. Things had changed now. He had changed—in ways that he neither welcomed nor trusted, but had to acknowledge. Jane had become important to him. He couldn't allow that, but for the time being he had to accept it. Until she was safe, she could be his, but no longer. There wasn't any room in his life for permanency, for roots, because he still wasn't certain that he'd ever live in the sunshine again. Like Sabin, he'd been in the shadows too long. There were still dark spots on his soul that were revealed in the lack of emotion in his eyes. There was still the terrible, calm acceptance of things that were too terrible to be accepted.
If things had gone as originally planned, they would have gotten on that helicopter and she would be safely home by now. He would never have really known her; he would have delivered her to her father and walked away. But instead, they had been forced to spend days with only each other for company. They had slept side by side, eaten together, shared moments of danger and of humor. Perhaps the laughter was the more intimate, to him; he'd known danger many times with many people, but humor was rare in his life. She had made him laugh, and in doing so had captured a part of him.
Damn her for being the woman she was, for being lively and good-natured and desirable, when he'd expected a spoiled, sulky bitch. Damn her for making men want her, for making *him* want her. For the first time in his life

he felt a savage jealousy swelling in his heart. He knew that he would have to leave her, but until then he wanted her to be his and only his. Remembering the feel of her body under his, he knew that he would have to have her again. His golden eyes narrowed at the feeling of intense possessiveness that gripped him. An expression of controlled violence crossed his face, an expression that the people who knew him had learned to avoid provoking. Grant Sullivan was dangerous enough in the normal way of things; angered, he was deadly. She was his now, and her life was being threatened. He'd lost too much already; his youth, his laughter, his trust in others, even part of his own humanity. He couldn't afford to lose anything else. He was a desperate man trying to recapture his soul. He needed to find again even a small part of the boy from Georgia who had walked barefoot in the warm dirt of plowed fields, who had learned survival in the mysterious depths of the great swamp. What Vietnam had begun, the years of working in intelligence and operations had almost completed, coming close to destroying him as a man.

Jane and her screwball brand of gallantry were the source of the only warmth he'd felt in years.

He reached out and caught her by the nape of her neck, his strong fingers halting her. Surprised, she turned an inquiring glance at him, and the small smile that had begun forming on her lips faded at the fierce expression he couldn't hide.

"Grant? Is something wrong?"

Without thinking, he used the grip he had on her neck to pull her to him, and kissed her full lips, still faintly swollen from the lovemaking they'd shared in the cave. He took his time about it, kissing her with slow, deep movements of his tongue. With a small sound of pleasure she wound her arms around his neck and lifted herself on tiptoe to press more fully against him. He felt the soft juncture of her thighs and ground himself against her, his body jolting with desire at the way she automatically adjusted herself to his hardness.

She was his, as she'd never belonged to any other man.

Her safety hinged on how swiftly he could get her out of the country, for he sensed Turego closing in on them. That man would never give up, not while the microfilm was still missing. There was no way in hell, Grant vowed, that he would allow Turego ever to touch Jane again. Lifting his mouth

from hers, he muttered in a harsh tone, "You're mine now. I'll take care of you."
Jane rested her head against his chest. "I know," she whispered.

Chapter Eight

1 hat night changed forever the way Jane thought of the darkness. The fear of being alone in the dark would probably always remain with her, but when Grant reached out for her, it stopped being an enemy to be held at bay. It became instead a warm blanket of safety that wrapped around them, isolating them from the world. She felt his hands on her and forgot about the night.
He kissed her until she was clinging to him, begging him wordlessly for release from the need he'd created in her. Then he gently stripped her and himself, then rolled to his back, lifting her astride him. "I hurt you this morning," he said, his voice low and rough. "You control it this time; take only as much as you're comfortable with."
Comfort didn't matter; making love with him was a primitive glory, and she couldn't place any limits on it. She lost control, moving wildly on him, and her uninhibited delight snapped the thin thread of control he was trying to maintain. He made a rough sound deep in his throat and clasped her to him, rolling once again until she was beneath him. The wildly soaring pleasure they gave each other wiped her mind clear of everything but him and the love that swelled inside of her. There was no darkness. With his passion, with the driving need of his body, he took her out of the darkness. When she fell asleep in his arms, it was without once having thought of the impenetrable darkness that surrounded them."
The next morning, as always, she awoke slowly, moving and murmuring to herself, snuggling against the wonderfully warm, hard body beneath her, knowing even in her sleep that it was Grant's. His hands moved down her back to cup and knead her buttocks, awakening her fully. Then he shifted gently onto his side, holding her in his arms and depositing her on her back. Her eyes fluttered open, but it was still dark, so she closed them again and turned to press her face against his neck.
"It's almost dawn, honey," he said against her hair, but he couldn't force himself to stop touching her, to sit up and put on his clothing. His hands

slipped over her bare, silky skin, discovering anew all the places he'd touched and kissed during the night. Her response still overwhelmed him. She was so open and generous, wanting him and offering herself with a simplicity that took his breath away.
She groaned, and he eased her into a sitting position, then reached out to unzip the flap of the tent and let in a faint glimmer of light. "Are you awake?"
"No," she grumbled, leaning against him and yawning.
"We have to go."
"I know." Muttering something under her breath, she found what she presumed to be her shirt and began trying to untangle it. There was too much cloth, so she stopped in frustration and handed it to him. "I think this is yours. It's too big to be mine."
He took the shirt, and Jane scrambled around until she found her own under the blanket they'd been lying on. "Can't you steal a truck or something?" she asked, not wanting even to think about another day of walking.
He didn't laugh, but she could almost feel the way the corners of his lips twitched. "That's against the law, you know."
"Stop laughing at me! You've had a lot of specialized training, haven't you? Don't you know how to hot-wire an ignition?"
He sighed. "I guess I can hot-wire anything we'd be likely to find, but stealing a vehicle would be like advertising our position to Turego."
"How far can we be from Limon? Surely we could get there before Turego would be able to search every village between here and there?"
"It'd be too risky, honey. Our safest bet is still to cut across to the east coast swamps, then work our way down the coast. We can't be tracked in the swamp." He paused. "I'll have to go into the village for food but you're going to stay hidden in the trees."
Jane drew back. "Like hell."
"Damn it, don't you realize that it's too dangerous for you to show your face?"
"What about *your* face? At least I have dark hair and eyes like everyone else. Don't forget, that soldier saw you, and your pilot friend no doubt told them all about you, so they know we're together. That long blond mane of yours is pretty unusual around here."
He ran his hand through his shaggy hair, faintly surprised at how long it was. "It can't be helped."

She folded her arms stubbornly. "You're not going anywhere without me."
Silence lay between them for a moment. She was beginning to think she'd won a surprisingly easy victory when he spoke, and the even, almost mild tone of his voice made chills go up her spine, because it was the most implacable voice she'd ever heard. "You'll do what I say, or I'll tie and gag you and leave you here in the tent."
Now it was her turn to fall silent. The intimacy that had been forged between them had made her forget that he was a warrior first, and her lover second. Despite the gentle passion with which he made love to her, he was still the same man who had knocked her out and thrown her over his shoulder, carrying her away into the jungle. She hadn't held a grudge against him for that, after the reception she'd given him, but this was something else entirely. She felt as if he were forcibly reminding her of the original basis of their relationship, making her acknowledge that their physical intimacy had not made her an equal in his eyes. It was as if he'd used her body, since she had so willingly offered it, but saw no reason to let that give her any influence over him.
Jane turned away from him, fumbling with her shirt and finally getting it straight. She wouldn't let him see any hint of hurt in her eyes; she'd known that the love she felt was completely one-sided.
His hand shot out and pulled the shirt away from her. Startled, she looked at him. "I have to get dressed. You said we need to—"
"I know what I said," he growled, easing her down onto the blanket. The lure of her soft body, the knowledge that he'd hurt her and her characteristic chin-up attempt to keep him from seeing it, all made it impossible for him to remember the importance of moving on. The core of ice deep inside his chest kept him from whispering to her how much she meant to him. The remoteness bred into him by years of living on the edge of death hadn't yet been overcome; perhaps it never would be. It was still vital to him to keep some small significant part of himself sealed away, aloof and cold. Still, he couldn't let her draw away from him with that carefully blank expression on her face. She was his, and it was time she came to terms with the fact.
Putting his hands on her thighs, he spread them apart and mounted her. Jane caught her breath, her hands going up to grab at his back. He slowly pushed into her, filling her with a powerful movement that had her body arching on the blanket.

He went deep inside her, holding her tightly to him. Her inner tightness made him almost groan aloud as wild shivers of pleasure ran up his spine. Shoving his hand into her hair, he turned her head until her mouth was under his, then kissed her with a violence that only hinted at the inferno inside him. She responded to him immediately. Her mouth molded to his and her body rose to meet his thrusts in increasingly ecstatic undulations. He wanted to immerse himself in her, go deeper and deeper until they were bonded together, their flesh fused. He held her beneath him, their bodies locked together in total intimacy. He reveled in the waves of intensifying pleasure that made them clutch at each other, straining together in an effort to reach the peak of their passion. When he was inside her, he no longer felt the need to isolate himself. She was taking a part of him that he hadn't meant to offer, but he couldn't stop it. It was as if he'd gotten on a roller coaster and there was no way to get off until it reached the end of the line. He'd just have to go along for the ride, and he meant to wring every moment of pleasure he could from the short time that he had her all to himself.

Jane clung to his shoulders, driven out of her senses by the pounding of his body. He seemed to have lost all control; he was wild, almost violent, his flesh so heated that his skin burned her palms. She was caught up in the depth of his passion, writhing against him and begging for more. Then, abruptly, her pleasure crested, and he ground his mouth against hers to catch her mindless cries. Her hot flare of ecstasy caught him in its explosion, and he began shuddering as the final shock waves jolted through his body. Now it was she who held him, and when it was over he collapsed on her, his eyes closed and his chest heaving, his body glistening with sweat.

Her fingers gently touched the shaggy, dark gold threads of his hair, pushing them away from his forehead. She didn't know what had triggered his sudden, violent possession, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that, despite everything, he needed her in a basic way that he didn't welcome, but couldn't deny. That wasn't what she wanted, but it was a start. Slowly she trailed her hand down his back, feeling the powerful muscles that lay under his supple bronzed skin. The muscles twitched then relaxed under her touch, and he grew heavier as the tension left him.

"Now we *really* have to go," he murmured against her breast.

"Ummm." She didn't want to stir; her limbs were heavy, totally relaxed. She could happily have lain there for the rest of the day, dozing with him and

waking to make love again. She knew that the peace wouldn't last; in a moment he stirred and eased their bodies apart.
They dressed in silence, except for the rustling of their clothing, until she began lacing her boots on her feet. He reached out and tilted her chin then, his thumb rubbing over her bottom lip. "Promise me," he demanded, making her look at him. "Tell me that you're going to do what I say, without an argument. Don't make me tie you up."
Was he asking for obedience, or trust? Jane hesitated, then went with her instincts. "All right," she whispered. "I promise."
His pupils dilated, and his thumb probed at the corner of her lips. "I'll take care of you," he said, and it was more than a promise.
They took down the tent; then Jane got out the meager supply of remaining food. She emptied the last of the Perrier into his canteen, disposed of the bottles, and broke in two the granola bar that she'd been saving. That and a small can of grapefruit was their breakfast, and the last of their food.
The morning was almost gone, and the heat and humidity had risen to almost unbearable levels, when Grant stopped and looked around. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "We're almost even with the village. Stay here, and I'll be back in an hour or so."
"How long is 'or so'?" she asked politely, but the sound of her teeth snapping together made him grin.
"Until I get back." He took the pistol out of its holster and extended it to her. "I take it you know how to use this, too?"
Jane took the weapon from his hand, a grim expression on her mouth. "Yes. After I was kidnapped, Dad insisted that I learn how to protect myself. That included a course in firearms, as well as self-defense classes." Her slim hand handled the gun with respect, and reluctant expertise. "I've never seen one quite like this. What is it?"
"A Bren 10 millimeter," he grunted.
Her eyebrows lifted. "Isn't it still considered experimental?"
He shrugged. "By some people. I've used it for a while; it does what I want." He watched her for a moment, then a frown drew his brows together. "Could you use it, if you had to?"
"I don't know." A smile wobbled on her mouth. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."
He touched her hair, hoping fervently that she never had to find the answer to his question. He didn't want anything ever to dim the gaiety of her smile.

Bending, he kissed her roughly, thoroughly, then without a word blended into the forest in that silent, unnerving way of his. Jane stared at the gun in her hand for a long moment, then walked over to a fallen tree and carefully inspected it for animal life before sitting down.

She couldn't relax. Her nerves were jumpy, and though she didn't jerk around at every raucous bird call or chattering monkey, or even the alarming rustles in the underbrush, her senses were acutely, painfully attuned to the noises. She had become used to having Grant close by, his mere presence making her feel protected. Without him, she felt vulnerable and more alone than she had ever felt before.

Fear ate at her, but it was fear for Grant, not herself. She had walked into this with her eyes open, accepting the danger as the price to be paid, but Grant was involved solely because of her. If anything happened to him, she knew she wouldn't be able to bear it, and she was afraid. How could he expect to walk calmly into a small village and not be noticed. Everything about him drew attention, from his stature to his shaggy blond hair and those wild, golden eyes. She *knew* how single-mindedly Turego would search for her, and since Grant had been seen with her, his life was on the line now just as much as hers.

By now Turego must know that she had the microfilm. He'd be both furious and desperate; furious because she'd played him for a fool, and desperate because she could destroy his government career. Jane twisted her fingers together, her dark eyes intent. She thought of destroying the microfilm, to ensure that it would never fall into the hands of Turego or any hostile group or government—but she didn't know what was on it, only that it was supremely important. She didn't want to destroy information that her own country might need. Not only that, but she might need it as a negotiating tool. George had taught her well, steeped her in his cautious, quicksilver tactics, the tactics that had made him so shadowy that few people had known of his existence. If she had her back to the wall, she would use every advantage she had, do whatever she had to—but she hoped it wouldn't come to that kind of desperation. The best scenario would be that Grant would be able to smuggle her out of the country. Once she was safe in the States, she'd make contact and turn the microfilm over to the people who should have it. Then she could concentrate on chasing Grant until he realized that he couldn't live without her. The worst scenario she could imagine would be

for something to happen to Grant. Everything in her shied away even from the thought.
He'd been hurt too much already. He was a rough, hardened warrior, but he bore scars, invisible ones inside as well as the ones that scored his body. He'd retired, trying to pull himself away, but the wasteland mirrored in his eyes told her that he still lived partially in the shadows, where sunlight and warmth couldn't penetrate.
A fierce protectiveness welled up inside her. She was strong; she'd already lived through so much, overcome a childhood horror that could have crippled her emotionally. She hadn't allowed that to clip her wings, had learned instead to soar even higher, reveling in her freedom. But she wasn't strong enough to survive a world without Grant. She had to know that he was alive and well, or there would be no more sunshine for her. If anyone dared harm him…
Perspiration curled the hair at her temples and trickled between her breasts. Sighing, she wondered how long she had been waiting. She wiped her face and twisted her hair into a knot on top of her head to relieve herself of its hot weight on the back of her neck. It was so hot! The air was steamy, lying on her skin like a wet, warm blanket, making it difficult to breathe. It had to rain soon; it was nearing the time of day when the storms usually came.
She watched a line of ants for a time, then tried to amuse herself by counting the different types of birds that flitted and chirped in the leafy terraces above her head. The jungle teemed with life, and she'd come to learn that, with caution, it was safe to walk through it—not that she wanted to try it without Grant. The knowledge and the experience were his. But she was no longer certain that death awaited her behind every bush. The animal life that flourished in the green depths was generally shy, and skittered away from the approach of man. It was true that the most dangerous animal in the jungle was man himself.
Well over an hour had passed, and a sense of unease was prickling her spine. She sat very still, her green and black clothing mingling well with the surrounding foliage, her senses alert.
She saw nothing, heard nothing out of the ordinary, but the prickling sensation along her spine increased. Jane sat still for a moment longer, then gave in to the screaming of her instincts. Danger was near, very near.
Slowly she moved, taking care not to rustle even a leaf, and crawled behind the shelter of the fallen tree's roots. They were draped in vines and bushes

that had sprung to life already, feeding off the death of the great plant. The heaviness of the pistol she held reminded her that Grant had had a reason for leaving it with her.

A flash of movement caught her attention, but she turned only her eyes to study it. It was several long seconds before she saw it again, a bit of tanned skin and a green shape that was not plant or animal, but a cap. The man was moving slowly, cautiously, making little noise. He carried a rifle, and he was headed in the general direction of the village.

Jane's heart thudded in her breast. Grant could well meet him face to face, but Grant might be surprised, while this man, this guerrilla, was expecting to find him. Jane didn't doubt that normally Grant would be the victor, but if he were overtaken from behind he could be shot before he had a chance to act.

The distinctive beating of helicopter blades assaulted the air, still distant, but signaling the intensified search. Jane waited while the noise of the helicopter faded, hoping that its presence had alerted Grant. Surely it had; he was far too wary not to be on guard. For that, if nothing else, she was grateful for the presence of the helicopters.

She had to find Grant before he came face to face with one of the guerrillas and before they found her. This lone man wouldn't be the only one searching for her.

She had learned a lot from Grant these past few days, absorbing the silent manner in which he walked, his instinctive use of the best shelter available. She slid into the jungle, moving slowly, keeping low, and always staying behind and to the side of the silent stalker. Terror fluttered in her chest, almost choking her, but she reminded herself that she had no choice.

A thorny vine caught her hair, jerking it painfully, and tears sprang to her eyes as she bit her lip to stifle a reflexive cry of pain. Trembling, she freed her hair from the vine. Oh, God, where was Grant? Had he been caught already?

Her knees trembled so badly that she could no longer walk at a crouch. She sank to her hands and knees and began crawling, as Grant had taught her, keeping the thickest foliage between herself and the man, awkwardly clutching the pistol in her hand as she moved.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, signaling the approach of the daily rains. She both dreaded and prayed for the rain. It would drown out all sound and

reduce visibility to a few feet, increasing her chances for escape—but it would also make it almost impossible for Grant to find her.

A faint crackle in the brush behind her alerted her, but she whirled a split second too late. Before she could bring the pistol around, the man was upon her, knocking the gun from her grip and twisting her arm up behind her, then pushing her face into the ground. She gasped, her breath almost cut off by the pressure of his knee on her back. The moist, decaying vegetation that littered the forest floor was ground into her mouth. Twisting her head to one side, Jane spat out the dirt. She tried to wrench her arm free; he cursed and twisted her arm higher behind her back, wringing an involuntary cry of pain from her.

Someone shouted in the distance, and the man answered, but Jane's ears were roaring and she couldn't understand what they said. Then he roughly searched her, slapping his free hand over her body and making her face turn red with fury. When he was satisfied that she carried no other weapons, he released her arm and flipped her onto her back.

She started to surge to her feet, but he swung his rifle around so close that the long, glinting barrel was only a few inches from her face. She glanced at it, then lifted her eyes to glare at her captor. Perhaps she could catch him off guard. "Who are you?" she demanded in a good imitation of a furious, insulted woman, and swatted the barrel away as if it were an insect. His flat, dark eyes briefly registered surprise, then wariness. Jane scrambled to her feet and thrust her face up close to his, letting him see her narrowed, angry eyes. Using all the Spanish she knew, she proceeded to tell him what she thought of him. For good measure she added all the ethnic invective she'd learned in college, silently wondering at the meaning of everything she was calling the soldier, who looked more stunned by the moment.

She poked him repeatedly in the chest with her finger, advancing toward him, and he actually fell back a few paces. Then the other soldier, the one she'd spotted before, joined them, and the man pulled himself together.

"Be quiet!" he shouted.

"I won't be quiet!" Jane shouted in return, but the other soldier grabbed her arms and tied her wrists. Incensed, Jane kicked out behind her, catching him on the shin with her boot. He gave a startled cry of pain, then whirled her around and drew his fist back, but at the last moment stayed his blow. Turego probably had given orders that she wasn't to be hurt, at least until he'd gotten the information he wanted from her.

Shaking her tangled hair away from her eyes, Jane glared at her captors. "What do you want? Who are you?"
They ignored her, and pushed her roughly ahead of them. With her arms tied behind her, her balance was off, and she stumbled over a tangled vine. She couldn't catch herself, and pitched forward with a small cry.
Instinctively one of the soldiers grabbed for her. Trying to make it look accidental, she flung out one of her legs and tangled it through his, sending him crashing into a bush. She landed with a jolt on a knotted root, which momentarily stunned her and made her ears ring.
He came out of nowhere. One moment he wasn't there; the next he was in the midst of them. Three quick blows with the side of his hand to the first soldier's face and neck had the man crumpling like a broken doll. The soldier who Jane had tripped yelled and tried to swing his rifle around, but Grant lashed out with his boot, catching the man on the chin. There was a sickening thud; the man's head jerked back, and he went limp.
Grant wasn't even breathing hard, but his face was set and coldly furious as he hauled Jane to her feet and roughly turned her around. His knife sliced easily through the bonds around her wrists. "Why didn't you stay where I left you?" he grated. "If I hadn't heard you yelling—"
She didn't want to think about that. "I did stay," she protested. "Until those two almost walked over me. I was trying to hide, and to find you before you ran straight into them!"
He gave her an impatient glance. "I would've handled them." He grabbed her wrist and began dragging her after him. Jane started to defend herself, then sighed. Since he so obviously *had* handled them, what could she say? She concentrated instead on keeping her feet under her and dodging the limbs and thorny vines that swung at her.
"Where are we going?"
"Be quiet."
There was a loud crack, and Grant knocked her to the ground, covering her with his body. Winded, at first Jane thought that the thunder of the approaching storm had startled him; then her heart convulsed in her chest as she realized what the noise had been. Someone was shooting at them! The two soldiers hadn't been the only ones nearby. Her eyes widened to dark pools; they were shooting at Grant, not at her! They would have orders to take her alive. Panic tightened her throat, and she clutched at him.
"Grant! Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he grunted, slipping his right arm around her and crawling with her behind the shelter of a large mahogany tree, dragging her like a predator carrying off its prey. "What happened to the Bren?"
"He knocked it out of my hand… over there." She waved her hand to indicate the general area where she'd lost the gun. Grant glanced around, measuring the shelter available to him and swearing as he decided it was too much of a risk.
"I'm sorry," Jane said, her dark eyes full of guilt.
"Forget it." He unslung the rifle from his shoulder, his motions sure and swift as he handled the weapon. Jane hugged the ground, watching as he darted a quick look around the huge tree trunk. There was a glitter in his amber eyes that made her feel a little in awe of him; at this moment he was the quintessential warrior, superbly trained and toned, coolly assessing the situation and determining what steps to take.
Another shot zinged through the trees, sending bark flying only inches from Grant's face. He jerked back, then swiped at a thin line of blood that trickled down from his cheekbone, where a splinter had caught him.
"Stay low," he ordered, his tone flat and hard. "Crawl on your belly through those bushes right behind us, and keep going no matter what. We've got to get out of here."
She'd gone white at the sight of the blood ribboning down his face, but she didn't say anything. Controlling the shaking of her legs and arms, she got down on her stomach and obeyed, snaking her way into the emergent shrubs. She could feel him right behind her, directing her with his hand on her leg. He was deliberately keeping himself between her and the direction from which the shots had come, and the realization made her heart squeeze painfully.
Thunder rumbled, so close now that the earth shuddered from the shock waves. Grant glanced up. "Come on, rain," he muttered. "Come on."
It began a few minutes later, filtering through the leaves with a dripping sound, then rapidly intensifying to the thunderous deluge that she'd come to expect. They were soaked to the skin immediately, as if they'd been tossed into a waterfall. Grant shoved her ahead of him, heedless now of any noise they made, because the roar of the rain obliterated everything else. They covered about a hundred yards on their hands and knees, then he pulled her upright and brought his mouth close to her ear. "Run!" he yelled, barely making himself heard over the din of the pummeling rain.

Jane didn't know how she could run but she did. Her legs were trembling, she was dizzy and disoriented, but somehow her feet moved as Grant pulled her through the forest at breakneck speed. Her vision was blurred; she could see only a confused jumble of green, and the rain, always the rain. She had no idea where they were going, but trusted Grant's instincts to guide them. Suddenly they broke free of the jungle's edge, where man had cut back the foliage in an attempt to bring civilization to a small part of the tropical rain forest. Staggering across fields turned into a quagmire by the rain, Jane was held upright only by Grant's unbreakable grip on her wrist. She fell to her knees once and he dragged her for a few feet before he noticed. Without a word he scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder, carrying her as effortlessly as ever, showing no trace of the exhaustion she felt.

She closed her eyes and hung on, already dizzy and now becoming nauseated as her stomach was jolted by his hard shoulder. Their surroundings had become a nightmare of endless gray water slapping at them, wrapping them in a curtain that obliterated sight and sound. Terror lay in her stomach in a cold, soggy lump, triggered by the sight of the blood on Grant's face. She couldn't bear it if anything happened to him, she simply couldn't___

He lifted her from his shoulder, propping her against something hard and cold. Jane's fingers spread against the support, and dimly she recognized the texture of metal. Then he wrenched open the door of the ancient pickup truck and picked her up to thrust her into the shelter of the cab. With a lithe twist of his body he slid under the wheel, then slammed the door.

"Jane," he bit out, grabbing her shoulder in a tight grip and shaking her. "Are you all right? Are you hit?"

She was sobbing, but her eyes were dry. She stretched out a trembling hand to touch the red streak that ran down his rain-wet face. "You're hurt," she whispered; he couldn't hear her over the thunder of the rain pounding on the metal top of the old truck, but he read her lips and gathered her in his arms, pressing hard, swift kisses to her dripping hair.

"It's just a scratch, honey," he reassured her. "What about you? Are you okay?"

She managed a nod, clinging to him, feeling the incredible warmth of his body despite the soggy condition of his clothes. He held her for a moment, then pulled her arms from around his neck and put her on the other side of

the truck. "Sit tight while I get this thing going. We've got to get out of here before the rain stops and everyone comes out."
He bent down and reached under the dash of the truck, pulling some wires loose.
"What are you doing?" Jane asked numbly.
"Hot-wiring this old crate," he replied, and gave her a quick grin. "Pay close attention, since you've been so insistent that I do this. You may want to steal a truck someday."
"You can't see to drive in this," she said, still in that helpless, numb tone of voice, so unlike her usual cheerful matter-of-fact manner. A frown drew his brows together, but he couldn't stop to cradle her in his arms and reassure her that everything was going to be all right. He wasn't too sure of that himself; all hell had broken loose, reminding him how much he disliked being shot at—and now Jane was a target as well. He hated this whole set-up so much that a certain deadly look had come into his eyes, the look that had become legend in the jungles and rice paddies of Southeast Asia.
"I can see well enough to get us out of here."
He put two wires together, and the engine coughed and turned over, but didn't start. Swearing under his breath, he tried it again, and the second time the engine caught. He put the old truck in gear and let up on the clutch. They lurched into motion with the old vehicle groaning and protesting. The rain on the windshield was so heavy that the feeble wipers were almost useless, but Grant seemed to know where he was going.
Looking around, Jane saw a surprisingly large number of buildings through the rain, and several streets seemed to branch away from the one they were on. The village was a prosperous one, with most of the trappings of civilization, and it looked somehow incongruous existing so close to the jungle.
"Where are we going?" she asked.
"South, honey. To Limon, or at least as far as this crate will carry us down the road."

Chapter Nine

Limon. The name sounded like heaven, and as she clung to the tattered seat of the old truck, the city seemed just as far away. Her dark eyes were wide

and vulnerable as she stared at the streaming windshield, trying to see the road. Grant gave her a quick look, all he could safely spare when driving took so much of his attention. Keeping his voice calm, he said, "Jane, scoot as far into the corner as you can. Get your head away from the back window. Do you understand?"
"Yes." She obeyed, shrinking into the corner. The old truck had a small window in back and smaller windows on each side, leaving deep pockets of protection in the corners. A broken spring dug into the back of her leg, making her shift her weight. The upholstery on this side of the seat was almost nonexistent, consisting mostly of miscellaneous pieces of cloth covering some of the springs. Grant was sitting on a grimy patch of burlap. Looking down, she saw a large hole in the floorboard beside the door.
"This thing has character," she commented, regaining a small portion of her composure.
"Yeah, all of it bad." The truck skewed sideways on a sea of mud, and Grant gave all his attention to steering the thing in a straight line again.
"How can you tell where we're going?"
"I can't. I'm guessing." A devilish grin twisted his lips, a sign of the adrenaline that was racing through his system. It was a physical high, an acute sensitivity brought on by pitting his wits and his skills against the enemy. If it hadn't been for the danger to Jane, he might even have enjoyed this game of cat and mouse. He risked another quick glance at her, relaxing a little as he saw that she was calmer now, gathering herself together and mastering her fear. The fear was still there, but she was in control.
"You'd better be a good guesser," she gasped as the truck lurched sickeningly to the side. "If you drive us off a cliff, I swear I'll never forgive you!"
He grinned again and shifted his weight uncomfortably. He leaned forward over the wheel. "Can you get these packs off? They're in the way. And keep down!"
She slithered across the seat and unbuckled the backpacks, pulling them away from him so he could lean back. How could she have forgotten her pack? Stricken that she'd been so utterly reckless with it, she drew the buckles through the belt loops of her pants and fastened the straps.
He wasn't paying any attention to her now, but was frowning at the dash. He rapped at a gauge with his knuckle. "Damn it!"
Jane groaned. "Don't tell me. We're almost out of gas!"

"I don't know. The damned gauge doesn't work. We could have a full tank, or it could quit on us at any time."
She looked around. The rain wasn't as torrential as it had been, though it was still heavy. The forest pressed closely on both sides of the road, and the village was out of sight behind them. The road wasn't paved, and the truck kept jouncing over the uneven surface, forcing her to cling to the seat to stay in it—but it was a road and the truck was still running along it. Even if it quit that minute, they were still better off than they had been only a short while before. At least they weren't being shot at now. With any luck Turego would think they were still afoot and continue searching close by, at least for a while. Every moment was precious now, putting distance between them and their pursuers.
Half an hour later the rain stopped, and the temperature immediately began to climb. Jane rolled down the window on her side of the truck, searching for any coolness she could find. "Does this thing have a radio?" she asked.
He snorted. "What do you want to listen to, the top forty? No, it doesn't have a radio."
"There's no need to get snippy," she sniffed.
Grant wondered if he'd ever been accused of being "snippy" before. He'd been called a lot of things, but never that; Jane had a unique way of looking at things. If they *had* met up with a jaguar, she probably would have called it a "nice kitty"! The familiar urge rose in him, making him want to either throttle her or make love to her. His somber expression lightened as he considered which would give him the most pleasure.
The truck brushed against a bush that was encroaching on the narrow road. Jane ducked barely in time to avoid being slapped in the face by the branches that sprang through the open window, showering them with the raindrops that had been clinging to the leaves.
"Roll that window up," he ordered, concern making his voice sharp. Jane obeyed and sat back in the corner again. Already she could feel perspiration beading on her face, and she wiped her sleeve across her forehead. Her hand touched her hair, and she pushed the heavy mass away from her face, appalled at the tangled ringlets she found. What she wouldn't give for a bath! A real bath, with hot water and soap and shampoo, not a rinsing in a rocky stream. And clean clothes! She thought of the hairbrush in her pack, but she didn't have the energy to reach for it right now.

Well, there was no sense in wasting her time wishing for something she couldn't have. There were more important issues at hand. "Did you get any food?"
"In my pack."
She grabbed the pack and opened it, pulling out a towel-wrapped bundle of bread and cheese. That was all there was, but she wasn't in the mood to quibble about the limited menu. Food was food. Right now, even field rations would have been good.
Leaning over, she took his knife from his belt and swiftly sliced the bread and cheese. In less than a minute, she'd made two thick cheese sandwiches and returned the knife to its sheath. "Can you hold the sandwich and drive, or do you want me to feed you?"
"I can manage." It was awkward, wrestling with the steering wheel and holding the sandwich at the same time, but she would have to slide closer to him to feed him, and that would expose her head in the back window. The road behind them was still empty, but he wasn't going to take any chances with her welfare.
"I could lie down with my head in your lap and feed you," she suggested softly, and her dark eyes were sleepy and tender.
He jerked slightly, his entire body tensing. "Honey, if you put your head in my lap, I might drive this crate up a tree. You'd better stay where you are."
Was it only yesterday that he'd taken her so completely in that cave? He'd made her his, possessed her and changed her, until she found it difficult to remember what it had been like before she'd known him. The focus of her entire life had shifted, redirected itself onto him.
What she was feeling was plainly revealed in her eyes, in her expressive face. A quick glance at her had him swallowing to relieve an abruptly dry throat, and his hands clenched on the wheel. He wanted her, immediately; he wanted to stop the truck and pull her astride him, then bury himself in her inner heat. The taste and scent of her lingered in his mind, and his body still felt the silk of her skin beneath his. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to get enough of her to satisfy him in the short time they had remaining, but he was going to try, and the trying would probably drive him crazy with pleasure.
They wolfed down the sandwiches, then Jane passed him the canteen. The Perrier was flat, but it was still wet, and he gulped it thirstily. When he gave the canteen back to her, she found herself gulping, too, in an effort to

replenish the moisture her body was losing in perspiration. It was so hot in the truck! Somehow, even trekking through the jungle hadn't seemed this hot, though there hadn't been even a hint of breeze beneath the canopy. The metal shell of the truck made her feel canned, like a boiled shrimp. She forced herself to stop drinking before she emptied the canteen, and capped it again.

Ten minutes later the truck began sputtering and coughing; then the engine stopped altogether, and Grant coasted to a stop, as far to one side of the narrow road as he could get. "It lasted almost two hours," he said, opening the door and getting out.

Jane scrambled across the truck and got out on his side, since he'd parked so close to the edge that her door was blocked by a tree. "How far do you think we got?"

"Thirty miles or so." He wound a lock of her hair around his forefinger and smiled down at her. "Feel up to a walk?"

"A nice afternoon stroll? Sure, why not?"

He lowered his head and took a hard kiss from her mouth. Before she could respond he'd drawn away and pushed her off the road and into the shelter of the forest again. He returned to the truck, and she looked back to see him obliterating their footprints; then he leaped easily up the low bank and came to her side. "There's another village down the road a few more miles; I hoped we'd make it so we could buy more gas, but—" He broke off and shrugged at the change of plans. "We'll follow the road and try to get to the village by nightfall, unless they get too close to us. If they do, we'll have to go back into the interior."

"We're not going to the swamp?"

"We can't," he explained gently. "There's too much open ground to cover, now that they know we're in the area."

A bleak expression came and went in her eyes so fast that he wasn't certain he'd seen it. "It's my fault. If I'd just hidden from them, instead of trying to find you…"

"It's done. Don't worry about it. We just have to adjust our plans, and the plan now is to get to Limon as fast as we can, any way we can."

"You're going to steal another truck?"

"I'll do whatever has to be done."

Yes, he would. That knowledge was what made her feel so safe with him; he was infinitely capable, in many different areas. Even wearily following

him through the overgrown tangle of greenery made her happy, because she was with him. She didn't let herself think of the fact that they would soon part, that he'd casually kiss her goodbye and walk away, as if she were nothing more than another job finished. She'd deal with that when it happened; she wasn't going to borrow trouble. She had to devote her energies now to getting out of Costa Rica, or at least to some trustworthy authorities, where Grant wouldn't be in danger of being shot while trying to protect her. When she'd seen the blood on his face, some vital part inside of her had frozen knowing that she couldn't survive if anything happened to him. Even though she'd been able to see that he wasn't badly hurt, the realization of his vulnerability had frightened her. As strong as he was, as vital and dangerous, he was a man, and therefore mortal.

They heard only one vehicle on the road, and it was moving toward the village where they'd stolen the truck. The sun edged downward, and the dim light in the forest began to fade. Right before the darkness became total, they came to the edge of a field, and down the road about half a mile they could see the other village spread out. It was really more of a small town than a village; there were bright electric lights, and cars and trucks were parked on the streets. After days spent in the jungle, it looked like a booming metropolis, a cornerstone of civilization.

"We'll stay here until it's completely dark, then go into town," Grant decided, dropping to the ground and stretching out flat on his back. Jane stared at the twinkling lights of the town, torn between a vague uneasiness and an eagerness to take advantage of the comforts a town offered. She wanted a bath, and to sleep in a bed, but after so much time spent alone with Grant, the thought of once more being surrounded by other people made her wary. She couldn't relax the way Grant did, so she remained on her feet, her face tense and her hands clenched. "You might as well rest, instead of twitching like a nervous cat."

"I am nervous. Are we going on to Limon tonight?"

"Depends on what we find when we get into town." She glared down at him in sudden irritation. He was a master at avoiding straight answers. It was so dark that she couldn't make out his features; he was only a black form on the ground, but she was certain that he was aware of her anger, and that the corner of his mouth was turning up in that almost-smile of his. She was too tired to find much humor in it, though, so she walked away from him a few

paces and sat down, leaning her head on her drawn-up knees and closing her eyes.
There wasn't even a whisper of sound to warn her, but suddenly he was behind her, his strong hands massaging the tight muscles of her shoulders and neck. "Would you like to sleep in a real bed tonight?" he murmured in her ear.
"And take a real bath. And eat real food. Yes, I'd like that," she said, unaware of how wistful her tone was.
"A town this size probably has a hotel of some sort, but we can't risk going there, not looking the way we do. I'll try to find someone who takes in boarders and won't ask many questions."
Taking her hand, he pulled her to her feet and draped his arm over her shoulder. "Let's go, then. A bed sounds good to me, too."
Walking across the field, ever closer to the beckoning lights, Jane became more conscious of how she looked, and she pushed her fingers through her tangled hair. She knew that her clothes were filthy, and that her face was probably dirty. "No one is going to let us in," she predicted.
"Money has a way of making people look past the dirt."
She glanced up at him in surprise. "You have money?"
"A good Boy Scout is always prepared."
In the distance, the peculiarly mournful wail of a train whistle floated into the air, reinforcing the fact that they'd left the isolation of the rain forest behind. Oddly, Jane felt almost nakedly vulnerable, and she moved closer to Grant. "This is stupid, but I'm scared," she whispered.
"It's just a mild form of culture shock. You'll feel better when you're in a tub of hot water."
They kept to the fringes of the town, in the shadows. It appeared to be a bustling little community. Some of the streets were paved, and the main thoroughfare was lined with prosperous looking stores. People walked and laughed and chatted, and from somewhere came the unmistakable sound of a jukebox, another element of civilization that jarred her nerves. The universally-known red and white sign of a soft drink swung over a sidewalk, making her feel as if she had emerged from a time warp. This was definitely culture shock.
Keeping her pushed behind him, Grant stopped and carried on a quiet conversation with a rheumy-eyed old man who seemed reluctant to be bothered. Finally Grant thanked him and walked away, still keeping a firm

grip on Jane's arm. "His sister-in-law's first cousin's daughter takes in boarders," he told her, and Jane swallowed a gasp of laughter.
"Do you know where his sister-in-law's first cousin's daughter lives?"
"Sure. Down this street, turn left, then right, follow the alley until it dead ends in a courtyard."
"If you say so."
Of course he found the boarding house easily, and Jane leaned against the white adobe wall that surrounded the courtyard while he rang the bell and talked with the small, plump woman who answered the door. She seemed reluctant to admit such exceedingly grimy guests. Grant passed her a wad of bills and explained that he and his wife had been doing field research for an American pharmaceutical company, but their vehicle had broken down, forcing them to walk in from their camp. Whether it was the money or the tale of woe that swayed Señora Trejos, her face softened and she opened the grill, letting them in.
Seeing the tautness of Jane's face, Señora Trejos softened even more. "Poor lamb," she cooed, ignoring Jane's dirty state and putting her plump arm around the young woman's sagging shoulders. "You are exhausted, no? I have a nice cool bedroom with a soft bed for you and the *senor,* and I will bring you something good to eat. You will feel better then?"
Jane couldn't help smiling into the woman's kind dark eyes. "That sounds wonderful, all of it," she managed in her less-than-fluent Spanish. "But most of all, I need a bath. Would that be possible?"
"But of course!" Señora Trejos beamed with pride. "Santos and I, we have the water heated by the tank. He brings the fuel for the heating from San Jose."
Chatting away, she led them inside her comfortable house, with cool tiles on the floors and soothing white walls. "The upstairs rooms are taken," she said apologetically. "I have only the one room below the stairs, but it is nice and cool, and closer to the conveniences."
"Thank you, Señora Trejos," Grant said. "The downstairs room will more than make us happy."
It did. It was small, with bare floors and plain white walls, and there was no furniture except for the wood framed double bed, a cane chair by the lone, gracefully arched window, and a small wooden washstand that held a pitcher and bowl. Jane gazed at the bed with undisguised longing. It looked so cool and comfortable, with fat fluffy pillows.

Grant thanked Señora Trejos again; then she went off to prepare them something to eat, and they were alone. Jane glanced at him and found that he was watching her steadily. Somehow, being alone with him in a bedroom felt different from being alone with him in a jungle. There, their seclusion had been accepted. Here there was the sensation of closing out the world, of coming together in greater intimacy.

"You take the first turn at the bath," he finally said. "Just don't go to sleep in the tub."

Jane didn't waste time protesting. She searched the lower floor, following her nose, until she found Señora Trejos happily puttering about the kitchen. "Pardon, *señora,"* she said haltingly. She didn't know all the words needed to explain her shortage of a robe or anything to wear after taking a bath, but Señora Trejos caught on immediately. A few minutes later Jane had a plain white nightgown thrust into her hands and was shown to the *senora's* prized bathroom.

The bathroom had cracked tile and a deep, old-fashioned tub with curved claw feet, but when she turned on the water it gushed out in a hot flood. Sighing in satisfaction, Jane quickly unbuckled the backpack from her belt and set it out of the way, then stripped off her clothes and got into the tub, unwilling to wait until it was full. The heat seeped into her sore muscles and a moan of pleasure escaped her. She would have liked to soak in the tub for hours, but Grant was waiting for his own bath, so she didn't allow herself to lean against the high back and relax. Quickly she washed away the layers of grime, unable to believe how good it felt to be clean again. Then she washed her hair, sighing in relief as the strands came unmatted and once again slipped through her fingers like wet silk.

Hurrying, she wrapped her hair in a towel and got her safety razor out of the backpack. Sitting on the edge of the tub, she shaved her legs and under her arms, then smoothed moisturizer into her skin. A smile kept tugging at her mouth as she thought of spending the night in Grant's arms again. She was going to be clean and sweet-smelling, her skin silky. After all, it wasn't going to be easy to win a warrior's love, and she was going to use all the weapons at her disposal.

She brushed her teeth, then combed out her wet hair and pulled the white nightgown over her head, hoping that she wouldn't meet any of Señora Trejos's other boarders on the short trip back to her room. The *señora* had told her to leave her clothes on the bathroom floor, that she would see that

they were washed, so Jane got the backpack and hurried down the hall to the room where Grant waited.
He had closed the shutters over the arched window and was leaning with one shoulder propped against the wall, declining to sit in the single chair. He looked up at her entrance, and the inky pupils at the center of his golden irises expanded until there was only a thin ring of amber circling the black. Jane paused, dropping the pack beside the bed, feeling abruptly shy, despite the tempestuous lovemaking she'd shared with this man. He looked at her as if he were about to pounce on her, and she found herself crossing her arms over her breasts, aware that her nakedness was fully apparent beneath the thin nightgown. She cleared her throat, her mouth suddenly dry. "The bathroom is all yours."
He straightened slowly, not taking his eyes from her. "Why don't you go on to bed?"
"I'd rather wait for you," she whispered.
"I'll wake you up when I come to bed." The intensity of his gaze promised her that she wasn't going to sleep alone that night.
"My hair… I have to dry my hair."
He nodded and left the room, and Jane sat down on the chair weakly, shaking inside from the way he'd looked at her. Bending over, she rubbed her hair briskly, then began to brush it dry. It was so thick and long that it was still damp when Grant came back into the room and stood silently, watching her as she sat bent over, her slender arms curving as she drew the brush through the dark mass. She sat up, tossing her head to fling her hair back over her shoulders, and for a moment they simply stared at each other. They had made love before, but now sensual awareness was zinging between them like an electric current. Without even touching each other, they were both becoming aroused, their heartbeats quickening, their skin growing hot.
He had shaved, probably using the razor she'd left in the bathroom. It was the first time she'd seen him without several days' growth of beard, and the clean, hard lines of his scarred face made her breath catch. He was naked except for a towel knotted around his lean waist, and as she watched he pulled the towel free and dropped it to the floor. Reaching behind him, he locked the door. "Are you ready for bed?"
"My hair… isn't quite dry."

"Leave it," he said, coming toward her. The brush dropped to the floor as he caught her hand and pulled her up. Instantly she was in his arms, lifted off her feet by his fierce embrace. Their mouths met hungrily, and her fingers tangled in his water-darkened hair, holding him to her. His mouth was fresh and hot, his tongue thrusting deep into her mouth in a kiss that made her whimper as currents of desire sizzled her nerves.

He was hard against her, his manhood pushing against her softness, his hands kneading her hips and rubbing her over him. Jane pulled her mouth free, gasping, and dropped her head to his broad shoulder. She couldn't contain the wild pleasure he was evoking, as if her body were out of control, already reaching for the peak that his arousal promised. She'd been quite content to live celibately for years, the passion in her unawakened until she met Grant. He was as wild and beautiful and free as the majestic jaguars that melted silently through the tangled green jungle. The wildness in him demanded a response, and she was helpless to restrain it. He didn't have to patiently build her passion; one kiss and she trembled against him, empty and aching and ready for him, her breasts swollen and painful, her body growing wet and soft.

"Let's get this thing off you," he whispered, pulling at the nightgown and easing it up. Reluctantly she released him, and he pulled the gown over her head, dropping it over the chair; then she was back in his arms, and he carried her to the bed.

Their naked bodies moved together, and there was no more waiting. He surged into her, and she cried out a little from the delicious shock of it. Catching the small cry with his mouth, he lifted her legs and placed them around his waist, then began to move more deeply into her.

It was like the night before. She gave no thought to anything but the man with shoulders so broad that they blocked out the light. The bed was soft beneath them, the sheets cool and smooth, and the rhythmic creak of the springs in time with his movements was accompanied by the singing of insects outside the window. Time meant nothing. There was only his mouth on hers, his hands on her body, the slow thrusts that went deep inside her and touched off a wildfire of sensation, until they strained together in frenzied pleasure and the sheets were no longer cool, but warm from their damp, heated flesh.

Then it was quiet again, and he lay heavily on her, drawing in deep breaths while her hands moved over his powerful back. Her lips trembled with the

words of love that she wanted to give him, but she held them back. All her instincts told her that he wouldn't want to know, and she didn't want to do anything to spoil their time together.

Perhaps he had given her something anyway, if not his love, something at least as infinitely precious. As her sensitive fingertips explored the deep valley of his spine, she wondered if he had given her his baby. A tremor of pleasure rippled down her body, and she held him closer, hoping that her body would be receptive to his seed.

He stirred, reaching out to turn off the lamp, and in the darkness he moved to lie beside her. She curled against his side, her head on his shoulder, and after a moment he gave a low chuckle.

"Why don't you just save time and get on top of me now?" he suggested, scooping her up and settling her on his chest.

Jane gave a sigh of deep satisfaction, stretching out on him and looping her arm around his neck. With her face pressed against his throat she was comfortable and safe, as if she'd found a sheltering harbor. "I love you," she said silently, moving her lips without sound against his throat.

They woke with the bright early morning sun coming through the slats of the shutters. Leaving Jane stretching and grousing on the bed, Grant got up and opened the shutters, letting the rosy light pour into the room. When he turned, he saw the way the light glowed on her warm-toned skin, turning her nipples to apricot, catching the glossy lights in her dark hair. Her face was flushed, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

Suddenly his body throbbed, and he couldn't bear to be separated from her by even the width of the small room. He went back to the bed and pulled her under him, then watched the way her face changed as he slowly eased into her, watched the radiance that lit her. Something swelled in his chest, making it difficult for him to breathe, and as he lost himself in the soft depths of her body he had one last, glaringly clear thought: she'd gotten too close to him, and letting her go was going to be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

He dressed, pulling on the freshly washed clothes that one of Señora Trejos's daughters had brought, along with a tray of fruit, bread and cheese. Jane flushed wildly when she realized that Señora Trejos must have brought a tray to them the night before, then discreetly left when she heard the sounds they had been making. A quick glance at Grant told her that he'd had

the same thought, because the corner of his mouth was twitching in amusement.
The *señora* had also sent along a soft white off-the-shoulder blouse, and Jane donned it with pleasure, more than glad to discard her tattered black shirt. After selecting a piece of orange from the tray, she bit into the juicy fruit as she watched him pull his dark green undershirt over his head.
"You're going to be pretty noticeable in those camouflage fatigues," she said, poking a bit of the orange into his mouth.
"I know." He quickly kissed her orange-sticky lips. "Put the shirt in your pack and be ready to go when I get back."
"Get back? Where are you going?"
"I'm going to try to get some sort of transport. It won't be as easy this time."
"We could take the train," she pointed out.
"The rifle would be a mite conspicuous, honey."
"Why can't I go with you?"
"Because you're safer here."
"The last time you left me, I got into trouble," she felt obliged to remind him.
He didn't appreciate the reminder. He scowled down at her as he reached for a spear of melon. "If you'll just keep your little butt where I tell you to, you'll be fine."
"I'm fine when I'm with you."
"Damn it, stop arguing with me!"
"I'm not arguing. *I'm* pointing out some obvious facts! *You're* the one who's arguing!"
His eyes were yellow fire. He bent down until they were almost nose to nose, his control under severe stress. His teeth were clenched together as he said, evenly spacing the words out, "If you make it home without having the worst spanking of your life, it'll be a miracle."
"I've never had a spanking in my life," she protested.
"It shows!"
She flounced into the chair and pouted. Grant's hands clenched; then he reached for her and pulled her out of the chair, hauling her up to him for a deep, hard kiss. "Be good, for a change," he said, aware that he was almost pleading with her. "I'll be back in an hour—"
"Or so!" she finished in unison with him. "All right, I'll wait! But I don't like it!"

He left before he completely lost his temper with her, and Jane munched on more of the fruit, terribly grateful for something fresh to eat. Deciding that he'd meant only for her to stay in the house, not in the room, she first got everything ready for them to leave, as he'd instructed, then sought out the *señora* and had a pleasant chat with her. The woman was bustling around the kitchen preparing food for her boarders, while two of her daughters diligently cleaned the house and did a mountain of laundry. Jane had her arms deep in a bowl of dough when Grant returned.

He'd gone first to their room, and when he found her in the kitchen there was a flicker of intense relief in his eyes before he masked it. Jane sensed his presence and looked up, smiling. "Is everything arranged?"

"Yes. Are you ready?"

"Just as soon as I wash my hands."

She hugged the *señora* and thanked her, while Grant leaned in the doorway and watched her. Did she charm everyone so effortlessly? The *señora* was beaming at her, wishing her a safe journey and inviting her back. There would always be a room for the lovely young *señora* and her husband in the Trejos house!

They collected their packs, and Grant slung the rifle over his shoulder. They risked attracting attention because of it, but he didn't dare leave it behind. With any luck they would be on a plane out of Costa Rica by nightfall, but until they were actually on their way he couldn't let his guard down. The close call the day before had been proof of that. Turego wasn't giving up; he stood to lose too much.

Out in the alley, Jane glanced up at him. "What exactly did you arrange?"

"A farmer is going into Limon, and he's giving us a ride."

After the adventure of the last several days that seemed almost boringly tame, but Jane was happy to be bored. A nice, quiet ride, that was the ticket. How good it would be not to feel hunted!

As they neared the end of the alley, a man stepped suddenly in front of them. Grant reacted immediately, shoving Jane aside, but before he could swing the rifle around there was a pistol in his face, and several more men stepped into the alley, all of them armed, all of them with their weapons pointed at Grant. Jane stopped breathing, her eyes wide with horror. Then she recognized the man in the middle, and her heart stopped. Was Grant going to die now, because of her?

She couldn't bear it. She had to do something, anything.

"Manuel!" she cried, filling her voice with joy. She ran to him and flung her arms around him. "I'm so glad you found me!"

Chapter Ten

It was a nightmare. Grant hadn't taken his narrowed gaze off her, and the hatred that glittered in his eyes made her stomach knot, but there was no way she could reassure him. She was acting for all she was worth, clinging to Turego and babbling her head off, telling him how frightened she'd been and how this madman had knocked her out and stolen her away from the plantation, all the while clinging to Turego's shirt as if she couldn't bear to release him. She had no clear idea of what she was going to do, only that somehow she had to stay unfettered so she could help Grant, and to do that she had to win Turego's trust and soothe his wounded vanity.

The entire situation was balanced on a knife edge; things could go in either direction. Wariness was in Turego's dark eyes, as well as a certain amount of cruel satisfaction in having cornered his prey. He wanted to make her suffer for having eluded him, she knew, yet for the moment she was safe from any real harm, because he still wanted the microfilm. It was Grant whose life was threatened, and it would take only a word from Turego for those men to kill him where he stood. Grant had to know it, yet there wasn't even a flicker of fear in his expression, only the cold, consuming hatred of his glare as he stared at Jane. Perhaps it was that, in the end, that eased Turego's suspicions somewhat. He would never relax his guard around her again, but Jane could only worry about one thing at a time. Right now, she had to protect Grant in any way she could.

Turego's arm stole around her waist, pulling her tightly against him. He bent his head and kissed her, a deeply intimate kiss that Jane had to steel herself not to resist in any way, even though she shuddered at having to endure the touch and taste of him. She knew what he was doing; he was illustrating his power, his control, and using her as a weapon against Grant. When he lifted his head, a cruel little smile was on his handsome mouth.

"I have you now, *chiquita*," he reassured her in a smooth tone. "You are quite safe. This… madman, as you called him, will not bother you again, I promise. I am impressed," be continued mockingly, inclining his head toward Grant. "I have heard of you, *señor.* Surely there can be only one with the yellow eyes and scarred face, who melts through jungles like a silent cat. You are a legend, but it was thought that you were dead. It has been a long time since anything was heard of you."

Grant was silent, his attention now on Turego, ignoring Jane as if she no longer existed. Not a muscle moved; it was as if he'd turned to stone. He wasn't even breathing. His utter stillness was unnerving, yet there was also the impression of great strength under control, a wild animal waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Even though he was only one against many, the others were like jackals surrounding a mighty tiger; the men who held their weapons trained on him were visibly nervous.

"Perhaps it would be interesting to know who now pays you for your services. And there are others who would like very much to have an opportunity to question you, yes? Tie him, and put him in the truck," Turego ordered, still keeping his arm around Jane. She forced herself not to watch as Grant was roughly bound and dragged over to a two ton military-type truck, with a canvas top stretched over the back. Instead she gave Turego her most dazzling smile and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I've been so frightened," she whispered.

"Of course you have, *chiquita.* Is that why you resisted my men when they found you in the forest yesterday?"

She might have known he was too sharp to simply believe her! She let her eyes widen incredulously. "Those were *your* men? Well, why didn't they say so? They were shoving me around, and I was afraid they wanted to… to attack me. I had managed to slip away from that crazy man; I'd have made it, too, if it hadn't been for all the noise your men made! They led him right to me!" Her voice quivered with indignation.

"It is over; I will take care of you now." He led her to the truck and assisted her into the cab, then climbed in beside her and gave terse instructions to the driver.

That was exactly what she was afraid of, being taken care of by Turego, but for the moment she had to play up to him and somehow convince him that she was totally innocent of her escape from under the noses of his guards. He hadn't gotten where he was by being a gullible idiot; though she'd successfully fooled him the first time, the second time would be much more difficult.

"Where are we going?" she asked innocently, leaning against him. "Back to the plantation? Did you bring any of my clothes with you? *He* brought me this blouse this morning," she said, plucking at the soft white fabric, "but I'd really like to have my own clothes."

"I have been so worried about you that I did not think of your clothes, I confess," Turego lied smoothly. His hard arm was around her shoulders, and Jane smiled up at him. He was unnaturally handsome, with perfect features that would have done better on a statue than a man, though perhaps Turego wasn't quite human. He didn't show his age; he looked to be in his twenties, though Jane knew that he was in his early forties. Emotion hadn't changed his face; he had no wrinkles, no attractive crinkles at the corners of his eyes, no signs that time or life had touched him. His only weakness was his vanity; he knew he could force himself on Jane at any time, but he wanted to seduce her into giving herself willingly to him. She would be another feather in his cap; then, once he had the microfilm, he could dispose of her without regret.

She had only the microfilm to protect her, and only herself to protect Grant. Her mind raced, trying to think of some way she could free him from his bonds, get some sort of weapon to him. All he needed was a small advantage.

"Who *is* he? You seem to know him."

"He hasn't introduced himself? But you have spent several days alone with him, my heart. Surely you know his name."

Again she had to make a split second decision. Was Grant's real name commonly known? Was Grant his real name, anyway? She couldn't take the chance. "He told me that his name is Joe Tyson. Isn't that his real name?" she asked in an incredulous voice, sitting up to turn the full force of her brown eyes on him, blinking as if in astonishment.

Oddly, Turego hesitated. "That may be what he calls himself now. If he is who I think he is, he was once known as the Tiger."

He was uneasy! Grant was tied, and there were ten guns on him, but still Turego was made uneasy by his presence! Did that slight hesitation mean that Turego wasn't certain of Grant's real name and didn't want to reveal his lack of knowledge—or was the uncertainty of a greater scope?

Was he not entirely certain that Grant was the Tiger? Turego wouldn't want to make himself look foolish by claiming to have captured the Tiger, only to have his prisoner turn out to be someone much less interesting.

Tiger. She could see how he had gained the name, and the reputation. With his amber eyes and deadly grace, the comparison had been inevitable. But he was a man, too, and she'd slept in his arms. He'd held her during the long hours of darkness, keeping the night demons away from her, and he'd

shown her a part of herself that she hadn't known existed. Because of Grant, she felt like a whole person, capable of love and passion, a warm, giving woman. Though she could see what he had been, the way she saw him now was colored by love. He was a man, not a supernatural creature who melted through the dark, tangled jungles of the world. He could bleed, and hurt. He could laugh, that deep, rusty laugh that caught at her heart. After Grant, she felt contaminated just by sitting next to Turego.

She gave a tinkling laugh. "That sounds so cloak-and-daggerish! Do you mean he's a spy?"

"No, of course not. Nothing so romantic. He is really just a mercenary, hiring himself out to anyone for any sort of dirty job."

"Like kidnapping me? Why would he do that? I mean, no one is going to pay any ransom for me! My father doesn't even speak to me, and I certainly don't have any money of my own!"

"Perhaps something else was wanted from you," he suggested.

"But I don't have anything!" She managed to fill her face and voice with bewilderment, and Turego smiled down at her.

"Perhaps you have it and are not aware of it."

"What? Do you know?"

"In time, love, we shall find out."

"No one tells me anything!" she wailed, and lapsed into a pout. She allowed herself to hold the pout for about thirty seconds, then roused to demand of him again, like an impatient child, "Where are we going?"

"Just down this street, love."

They were on the very fringes of the town, and a dilapidated tin warehouse sat at the end of the street. It was in sad shape, its walls sagging, the tin roof curled up in several places, sections of it missing altogether in others. A scarred blue door hung crookedly on its hinges. The warehouse was their destination, and when the truck stopped beside the blue door and Turego helped Jane from the cab, she saw why. There were few people about, and those who were in the vicinity quickly turned their eyes away and scurried off.

Grant was hauled out of the back of the truck and shoved toward the door; he stumbled and barely caught his balance before he would have crashed headlong against the building. Someone chuckled, and when Grant straightened to turn his unnerving stare on his captors, Jane saw that a thin trickle of blood had dried at the corner of his mouth. His lip was split and

puffy. Her heart lurched, and her breath caught. Someone had hit him while he had his hands tied behind his back! Right behind her first sick reaction came fury, raw and powerful, surging through her like a tidal wave. She shook with the effort it took to disguise it before she turned to Turego again. "What are we going to do here?"

"I just want to ask a few questions of our friend. Nothing important."

She was firmly escorted into the building, and she gasped as the heat hit her in the face like a blow. The tin building was a furnace, heating the air until it was almost impossible to breathe. Perspiration immediately beaded on her skin, and she felt dizzy, unable to drag in enough oxygen to satisfy her need.

Evidently Turego had been using the warehouse as a sort of base, because there was equipment scattered around. Leaving Grant under guard, Turego led Jane to the back of the building, where several small rooms connected with each other, probably the former offices. It was just as hot there, but a small window was opened and let in a measure of fresh air. The room he took her to was filthy, piled with musty smelling papers and netted with cobwebs. An old wooden desk, missing a leg, listed drunkenly to one side, and there was the unmistakable stench of rodents. Jane wrinkled her nose fastidiously. "Ugh!" she said in completely honest disgust.

"I apologize for the room," Turego said smoothly, bestowing one of his toothpaste-ad smiles on her. "Hopefully, we won't be here long. Alfonso will stay with you while I question our friend about his activities, and who hired him to abduct you."

What he meant was that she was also under guard. Jane didn't protest, not wanting to arouse his suspicions even more, but her skin crawled. She was very much afraid of the form his "questioning" would take. She had to think of something fast! But nothing came to mind, and Turego tilted her chin up to kiss her again. "I won't be long," he murmured. "Alfonso, watch her carefully. I would be very upset if someone stole her from me again."

Jane thought she recognized Alfonso as one of the guards who had been at the plantation. When Turego had gone, closing the door behind him, Jane gave Alfonso a slow glance from under lowered lashes and essayed a tentative smile. He was fairly young and good-looking. He had probably been warned against her, but still he couldn't help responding to her smile.

"You were a guard at the plantation?" she asked in Spanish.

He gave a reluctant nod.

"I thought I recognized you. I never forget a good-looking man," she said with more enthusiasm than precision, her pronunciation mangled just enough to bring a hint of amusement to Alfonso's face. She wondered if he knew what Turego was up to, or if he had been told some fabrication about protecting her.

Whatever he had been told, he wasn't inclined toward conversation. Jane poked around the room, looking for anything to use as a weapon, but trying not to be obvious about it. She kept straining her ears for any sound from the warehouse, her nerves jumping. What was Turego doing? If he harmed Grant…

How long had it been? Five minutes? Ten? Or less than that? She had no idea, but suddenly she couldn't stand it any longer, and she went to the door. Alfonso stretched his arm in front of her, barring her way.

"I want to see Turego," she said impatiently. "It's too hot to wait in here."

"You must stay here."

"Well, I won't! Don't be such a stuffed shirt, Alfonso; he won't mind. You can come with me, if you can't let me out of your sight."

She ducked under his arm and had the door open before he could stop her. With a muffled oath he came after her, but Jane darted through the door and the connecting offices. Just as she entered the main warehouse she heard the sickening thud of a fist against flesh, and the blood drained from her face. Two men held Grant between them, holding him up by his bound arms, while another stood before him, rubbing his fist. Turego stood to the side, a small, inhuman smile on his lips. Grant's head sagged forward on his chest, and drops of blood spotted the floor at his feet.

"This silence will gain you nothing but more pain, my friend," Turego said softly. "Tell me who hired you. That is all I want to know, for now."

Grant said nothing, and one of the men holding him grabbed a fistful of hair, jerking his head up. Just before Alfonso took her arm, Jane saw Grant's face, and she jerked free, driven by a wild strength.

"Turego!" she cried shrilly, drawing everyone's attention to her. Turego's brows snapped together over his nose. "What are you doing here? Alfonso, take her back!"

"No!" she yelled, pushing Alfonso away. "It's too hot back there, and I won't stay! Really, this is too much! I've had a miserable time in that jungle, and I thought when you rescued me that I'd be comfortable again, but no,

you drag me to this miserable dump and leave me in that grungy little room. I insist that you take me to a hotel!"
"Jane, Jane, you don't understand these things," Turego said, coming up to her and taking her arm. "Just a few moments more and he will tell me what I want to know. Aren't you interested in knowing who hired him?" He turned her away, leading her back to the offices again. "Please be patient, love."
Jane subsided, letting herself be led docilely away. She risked a quick glance back at Grant and his captors, and saw that they were waiting for Turego's return before resuming the beating. He was sagging limply in their grasp, unable even to stand erect.
"You are to stay here," Turego said sternly when they reached the office again. "Promise me, yes?"
"I promise," Jane said, turning toward him with a smile on her face; he never saw the blow coming. She caught him under the nose with the bridge of her hand, snapping his head back and making blood spurt. Before he could yell with pain or surprise, she slammed her elbow into his solar plexus and he doubled over with an agonized grunt. As if in a well-choreographed ballet, she brought her knee up under his unprotected chin, and Turego collapsed like a stuffed doll. Jane cast a quick thought of thanks to her father for insisting that she take all of those self-defense classes, then bent down and quickly jerked the pistol from Turego's holster.
Just as she started through the doorway again, a shot reverberated through the tin building, and she froze in horror. "No," she moaned, then launched herself toward the sound.
When Jane had hurled herself into Turego's arms, Grant had been seized by a fury so consuming that a mist of red had fallen over his vision, but he'd been trained to control himself, and that control had held, even though he had been on the edge of madness. Then the mist had cleared, and cold contempt had taken its place. Hell, what had he expected? Jane was a survivor, adept at keeping her feet. First she had charmed Turego, then Grant had stolen her from Turego and she'd charmed him as effortlessly as she had put Turego under her spell. Now Turego was back, and since he had the upper hand, it was a case of So long, Sullivan. He even felt a sort of bitter admiration for the way she had so quickly and accurately summed up the situation, then known exactly the tone to set to begin bringing Turego back to heel.

Still, the sense of betrayal was staggering, and nothing would have pleased him at that moment as much as to get his hands on her. Damn her for being a lying, treacherous little bitch! He should have known, should have suspected that her patented look of wide-eyed innocence was nothing but a well-rehearsed act.

The old instincts, only partially shelved, suddenly returned in full force. Forget about the bitch. He had to look out for himself first, then see to her. She was curling in Turego's arms like a cat, while Grant knew that his own future was nonexistent unless he did some fast thinking.

Part of the thinking was done for him when Turego put two and two together and came up with an accurate guess about Grant's identity. A year had been far too short a time for people in the business to even begin forgetting him. After he'd disappeared, his absence had probably made his reputation grow to legendary proportions. Well, let Turego think that he was after the missing microfilm, too; Grant felt no compunction about using Jane in any way he could. She'd not only used him, she'd had him dancing to her tune like a puppet on a fancy little string. If he hadn't agreed to bring her out of Costa Rica, he would have wished the joy of her on Turego, and gotten himself out any way he could. But he'd taken the job, so he had to finish it—if he came out of this alive. When he got his hands on her again she'd find that there would be no more kid glove treatment.

Turego was curious. With his hands tied behind his back, supported between two of the hired goons, Grant found out just how curious.

"Who hired you? Or are you an independent now?"

"Naw, I'm still a Protestant," Grant said, smiling smoothly. At a nod from Turego, a fist crashed into his face, splitting his lip and filling his mouth with blood. The next blow was into his midsection, and he'd have jacknifed if it hadn't been for the cruel support of his twisted arms.

"Really, I don't have the time for this," Turego murmured. "You are the one known as the Tiger; you aren't a man who works for nothing."

"Sure I am; I'm a walking charity."

The fist landed on his cheekbone, snapping his head back. This guy was a real boxer; he placed his blows with precision. The face a couple of times, then the ribs and kidneys. Pain sliced through Grant until his stomach heaved. He gasped, his vision blurred even though his mind was still clear, and he deliberately let all his weight fall on his two supporters, his knees buckling.

Then he heard Jane's voice, petulant and demanding, as he'd never heard it before, followed by Turego's smooth reassurances. The men's attention wasn't on him; he sensed its absence, like a wild animal acutely sensitive to every nuance. He sagged even more, deliberately putting stress on the bonds around his wrists, and fierce satisfaction welled in him as he felt them slip on his right hand.

He had powerful hands, hands that could destroy. He used that power against the cord that bound him, extending his hand to the fullest and stretching the cord, then relaxing and letting the cord slip even lower. Twice he did that, and the cord dropped around his fingers in loose coils.

Looking about through slitted eyes, he saw that no one was paying much attention to him, not even the boxer, who was absently rubbing his knuckles and waiting for Turego to return from wherever he'd gone. Jane was nowhere in sight, either. Now was the time.

The two men holding him were off guard; he threw them away from him like discarded toys. For a split second everyone was disconcerted, and that split second was all he needed. He grabbed a rifle and kicked its butt up under the chin of the soldier he'd taken it from, sending him staggering backward. He whirled, lashing out with his feet and the stock of the rifle.

The soldiers really didn't have much of a chance; they didn't have a fraction of the training he'd had, or the years of experience. They didn't know how to react to an attacker who struck and whirled away before anyone could move. Only one managed to get his rifle up, and he fired wildly, the bullet zinging far over Grant's head. That soldier was the last one standing; Grant took him out with almost contemptuous ease. Then he hesitated only the barest moment as he waited for movement from any of them, but there was none. His gaze moved to the door at the far end of the warehouse, and a cold, twisted smile touched his bruised and bloody lips. He went after Jane.

She'd never known such terror; even her fear of the dark was nothing compared to the way she felt now. She couldn't move fast enough; her feet felt as if they were slogging through syrup. Oh, God, what if they'd killed him? The thought was too horrible to be borne, yet it swelled in her chest until she couldn't breathe. No, she thought, no, no, *no!*

She burst through the door, the pistol in her hand, half-crazed with fear and ready to fight for her man, for her very life. She saw a confused scene of sprawled men and her mind reeled, unable to comprehend why so many were lying there. Hadn't there been only one shot?

Then an arm snaked around her neck, jerking her back and locking under her chin. Another arm reached out, and long fingers clamped around the hand that held the pistol, removing it from her grip.
"Funny thing, sweetheart, but I feel safer when you're unarmed," a low voice hissed in her ear.
At the sound of that voice, Jane's eyes closed, and two tears squeezed out from under the lids. "Grant," she whispered.
"Afraid so. You can tell me how glad you are to see me later; right now we're moving."
He released his arm lock about her neck, but when she tried to turn to face him, he caught her right arm and pulled it up behind her back, not so high that she was in pain, but high enough that she would be if he moved it even a fraction of an inch higher. "Move!" he barked, thrusting her forward, and Jane stumbled under the force of the motion, wrenching her arm and emitting an involuntary cry.
"You're hurting me," she whimpered, still dazed and trying to understand. "Grant, wait!"
"Cut the crap," he advised, kicking open the door and shoving her out into the searing white sunlight. The transport truck was sitting there, and he didn't hesitate. "Get in. We're going for a ride."
He opened the door and half-lifted, half-threw Jane into the truck, sending her sprawling on the seat. She cried out, her soft cry knifing through him, but he told himself not to be a fool; she didn't need anyone to look after her. Like a cat, she always landed on her feet.
Jane scrambled to a sitting position, her dark eyes full of tears as she stared at his battered, bloody face in both pain and horror. She wanted to reassure him, tell him that it had all been an act, a desperate gamble to save both their lives, but he didn't seem inclined to listen. Surely he wouldn't so easily forget everything they'd shared, everything they'd been to each other! Still, she couldn't give up. She'd lifted her hand to reach out for him when a movement in the door beyond them caught her eye, and she screamed a warning.
"Grant!"
He whirled, and as he did Turego lifted the rifle he held and fired. The explosive crack of sound split the air, but still Jane heard, felt, sensed the grunt of pain that Grant gave as he dropped to one knee and lifted the pistol. Turego lunged to one side, looking for cover, but the pistol spat fire, and a

small red flower bloomed high on Turego's right shoulder, sending him tumbling back through the door.
Jane heard someone screaming, but the sound was high and far away. She lunged through the open door of the truck, falling to her hands and knees on the hot, rocky ground. Grant was on his knees, leaning against the running board of the truck, his right hand clamped over his upper left arm, and bright red blood was dripping through his fingers. He looked up at her, his golden eyes bright and burning with the fire of battle, fierce even in his swollen and discolored face.
She went a little mad then. She grabbed him by his undershirt and hauled him to his feet, using a strength she'd had no idea she possessed. "Get in the truck!" she screamed, pushing him in the door. "Damn it, get in the truck! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"
He winced as the side of the seat smashed into his bruised ribs; Jane was shoving at him and screaming like a banshee, tears streaming down her face. "Would you shut up!" he yelled, painfully pulling himself inside.
"Don't you tell me to shut up!" she screamed, pushing him until he moved over. She slapped the tears from her cheeks and climbed into the truck herself. "Get out of the way so I can get this thing started! Are there any keys? Where are the keys? Oh, damn!" She dove headfirst under the steering wheel, feeling under the dash and pulling wires out frantically.
"What're you doing?" Grant groaned, his mind reeling with pain.
"I'm hot-wiring the truck!" she sobbed.
"You're tearing the damned wiring out!" If she was trying to disable their only transportation, she was doing a good job of it. He started to yank her out from under the steering wheel when suddenly she bounced out on her own, jamming the clutch in and touching two wires together. The motor roared into life, and Jane slammed the door on her side, shoved the truck into gear and let out on the clutch. The truck lurched forward violently, throwing Grant against the door.
"Put it in low gear!" he yelled, pulling himself into a sitting position and getting a tighter grip on the seat.
"I don't know where the low gear is! I just took what I could find!"
Swearing, he reached for the gear shift, the pain in his wounded arm like a hot knife as he closed his hand over the knob. There was nothing he could do about the pain, so he ignored it. "Put the clutch in," he ordered. "I'll change gears. Jane, put the damned clutch in!"

"Stop yelling at me!" she screamed, jamming in the clutch. Grant put the truck in the proper gear and she let out on the clutch; this time the truck moved more smoothly. She put her foot on the gas pedal, shoving it to the floor, and slung the heavy truck around a corner, sending its rear wheels sliding on the gravel.
"Turn right," Grant directed, and she took the next right.
The truck was lunging under her heavy urging, its transmission groaning as she kept her foot down on the gas pedal.
"Change gears!"
"Change them yourself!"
"Put in the clutch!"
She put in the clutch, and he geared up. "When I ten you, put in the clutch, and I'll change the gears, understand?"
She was still crying, swiping at her face at irregular intervals. Grant said, "Turn left," and she swung the truck in a turn that sent a pickup dodging to the side of the road to avoid them.
The road took them out of town, but they were only a couple of miles out when Grant said tersely, "Pull over." Jane didn't question him; she pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the truck.
"Okay, get out." Again she obeyed without question, jumping out and standing there awkwardly as he eased himself to the ground. His left arm was streaked with blood, but from the look on his face Jane knew that he wasn't about to stop. He shoved the pistol into his belt and slung the rifle over his shoulder. "Let's go."
"Where are we going?"
"Back into town. Your boyfriend won't expect us to double back on him. You can stop crying," he added cruelly. "I didn't kill him."
"He's not my boyfriend!" Jane spat, whirling on him.
"Sure looked like it from where I was."
"I was trying to catch him off guard! One of us had to stay free!"
"Save it," he advised, his tone bored. "I bought your act once, but it won't sell again. Now, are you going to walk?"
She decided that there was no use trying to reason with him now. When he'd calmed down enough to listen, when she'd calmed down enough to make a coherent explanation, then they'd get this settled. As she turned away from him, she looked in the open door of the truck and caught a glimpse of something shoved in the far corner of the floor. Her backpack! She crawled

up in the truck and leaned far over to drag the pack out from under the seat; in the excitement, it had been totally overlooked and forgotten.
"Leave the damned thing!" Grant snapped.
"I need it," she snapped in return. She buckled it to her belt-loop again.
He drew the pistol out of his belt and Jane swallowed, her eyes growing enormous. Calmly he shot out one of the front tires of the truck, then stuck the pistol back into his belt.
"Why did you do that?" she whispered, swallowing again.
"So it'll look as if we were forced to abandon the truck."
He caught her upper arm in a tight grip and pulled her off the road. Whenever he heard an engine he forced her to the ground and they lay still until the sound had faded. Her blouse, so white and pretty only an hour or so before, became streaked with mud and torn in places where the thorns caught it. She gave it a brief glance, then forgot about it.
"When will Turego be after us again?" she panted.
"Soon. Impatient already?"
Grinding her teeth together, she ignored him. In twenty more minutes they approached the edge of the town again, and he circled it widely. She wanted to ask him what he was looking for, but after the way he'd just bitten her head off, she kept silent. She wanted to sit down to wash his bruised face, and bandage the wound in his arm, but she could do none of those things. He didn't want anything from her now.
Still, what else could she have done? There was no way she could have known he was going to be able to escape. She'd had to use the best plan she had at the time.
Finally they slipped into a ramshackle shed behind an equally ramshackle house and collapsed on the ground in the relatively cool interior. Grant winced as he inadvertently strained his left arm, but when Jane started toward him, he gave her a cold glare that stopped her in her tracks. She sank back to the ground and rested her forehead on her drawn up knees. "What are we going to do now?"
"We're getting out of the country, any way we can," he said flatly. "Your daddy hired me to bring you home, and that's what I'm going to do. The sooner I turn you over to him, the better."

Chapter Eleven

After that Jane sat quietly, keeping her forehead down on her knees and closing her eyes. A cold desolation was growing inside her, filling her, thrusting aside anxiety and fear. What if she could never convince him that she hadn't betrayed him? With the life he'd led, it was probably something that he'd had to guard against constantly, so he wasn't even surprised by betrayal. She would try again to reason with him, of course; until he actually left her, she wouldn't stop trying. But… what if he wouldn't listen? What would she do then? Somehow she just couldn't imagine her future without Grant. The emotional distance between them now was agonizing, but she could still lift her head and see him, take comfort in his physical proximity. What would she do if he weren't there at all?

The heat and humidity began building, negating the coolness of the shade offered by the old, open-sided shed, and in the distance thunder rumbled as it announced the approach of the daily rain. A door creaked loudly, and soon a stooped old woman, moving slowly, came around the side of the house to a small pen where pigs had been grunting occasionally as they lay in the mud and tried to escape the heat. Grant watched her, his eyes alert, not a muscle moving. There wasn't any real danger that she would see them; weeds and bushes grew out of control, over waist-high, between the house and the shed, with only a faint little-used path leading to the shed. The pigs squealed in loud enthusiasm when the old woman fed them, and after chatting fondly to them for a moment she laboriously made her way back into the shack.

Jane hadn't moved a muscle, not opening her eyes even when the pigs had begun celebrating the arrival of food. Grant looked at her, a faint puzzlement creeping into the coldness of his eyes. It was unlike her to sit so quietly and not investigate the noise. She knew it was the pigs, of course, but she hadn't looked up to see what was making them squeal so loudly, or even when the old woman had begun talking to them. She was normally as curious as a cat, poking her nose into everything whether it concerned her or not. It was difficult to tell, the way she had her head down, but he thought that she was pale; the few freckles he could see stood out plainly. An image flashed into his mind of Turego bending his head to press his mouth to Jane's, and the way Jane had stood so quiescently to accept that kiss. Rage curled inside him again, and his fists knotted. Damn her! How could she have let that slime touch her? .

The thunder moved closer, cracking loudly, and the air carried the scent of rain. Wind began to swirl, darting through the shed and bringing with it welcome coolness. The air was alive, almost shining with the electrical energy it carried. The small creatures began to take shelter, birds winging back and forth in an effort to find the most secure perch to wait out the storm.

During the rain would be a good time to leave, as everyone else would take shelter until it was over, but his body ached from the beating he'd received, and his left arm was still sullenly oozing blood. They were in no immediate danger here, so he was content to rest. Night would be an even better time to move.

The rain started, going from a sprinkle to a deluge in less than a minute. The ground wasn't able to soak up that enormous amount of water, and a small stream began to trickle through the shed. Grant got up, stifling a groan as his stiff body protested, and found a seat on top of a half-rotten vegetable crate. It gave a little, but held his weight. Jane still hadn't moved. She didn't look up until the moisture began to dampen the seat of her pants; then her head lifted and she realized that a river was beginning to flow around her. She didn't look at Grant, though she moved away from the water, shifting to the side. She sat with her back to him and resumed her earlier posture, with her knees drawn up, her arms locked around her legs, and her head bent down to rest on her knees.

Grant knew how to wait; patience was second nature to him. He could hold a position all day long, if necessary, ignoring physical discomfort as if it didn't exist. But the silence and lack of motion in the shed began to grate on his nerves, because it wasn't what he'd learned to expect from Jane. Was she planning something?

Eventually the rain stopped, and the steamy heat began to build again. "Are we going to sit here all day?" Jane finally asked fretfully, breaking her long silence.

"Might as well. I don't have anything better to do. Do you?"

She didn't answer that, or ask any more questions, realizing that he wasn't in the mood to tell her anything. She was so hungry that she was sick, but there wasn't any food in her pack, and she wasn't about to complain to him. She dropped her head back to her knees and tried to seek refuge in a nap; at least then she could forget how miserable she was.

She actually managed to sleep, and he woke her at twilight, shaking her shoulder. "Let's go," he said, pulling her to her feet. Jane's heart stopped because just for that moment his touch was strong but gentle, and she had the crazy hope that he'd cooled down and come to his senses white she was napping. But then he dropped her arm and stepped away from her, his face hard, and the hope died.

She followed him like a toy on a string, right in his footsteps, stopping when he stopped, always the same distance behind him. He went boldly into the center of town, walking down the streets as if no one at all was looking for him, let alone a small army. Several people looked at them oddly, but no one stopped them. Jane supposed they did look strange: a tall blond man with a bruised, swollen face and a rifle carried easily in one hand, followed by a woman with wild tangled hair, dirty clothes and a backpack buckled to her belt and swinging against her legs as she walked. Well, everything seemed strange to her, too. She felt as if they'd gotten lost in a video game, with crazy neon images flashing at her. After a moment she realized that the images were real; a street sign advertising a cantina flashed its message in neon pink and blue.

What was he doing? They were attracting so much notice that Turego would have to hear of it if he asked any questions at all. For all Grant knew, Turego could have the local law enforcement looking for them under trumped-up charges; Turego certainly had enough authority to mobilize any number of people in the search. It was as if Grant *wanted* Turego to find them.

He turned down a side street and paused outside a small, dimly lit cantina. "Stay close to me, and keep your mouth shut," he ordered tersely, and entered.

It was hot and smoky in the small bar, and the strong odor of alcohol mixed with sweat permeated the air. Except for the waitress, a harried looking girl, and two sultry prostitutes, there were no other women there. Several men eyed Jane, speculation in their dark eyes, but then they looked at Grant and turned back to their drinks, evidently deciding that she wasn't worth the trouble.

Grant found them space at a small table at the back, deep in the shadows. After a while the waitress made it over to them, and without asking Jane her preference, Grant ordered two tequilas.

Jane stopped the waitress. "Wait—do you have lime juice?" At the young woman's nod, she heaved a sigh of relief. "A glass of lime juice, instead of the tequila, please."
Grant lit a cigarette, cupping his hands around the flame. "Are you on the wagon or something?"
"I don't drink on an empty stomach."
"We'll get something to eat later. This place doesn't run to food."
She waited until their drinks were in front of them before saying anything else to him. "Isn't it dangerous for us to be here? Any of Turego's men could have seen us walking down the street."
His eyes were narrow slits as he stared at her through the blue smoke of his cigarette. "Why should that worry you? Don't you think he'd welcome you back with open arms?"
Jane leaned forward, her own eyes narrowed. "Listen to me. I had to buy time, and I did it the only way I could think of. I'm sorry I didn't have time to explain it to you beforehand, but I don't think Turego would have let me call 'time out' and huddle with you! If he'd tied me up, too, there would have been no way I could help you!"
"Thanks, honey, but I can do without your sort of help," he drawled, touching his left eye, which was puffy and red.
Anger seared her; she was innocent, and she was tired of being treated like Benedict Arnold. She thought of pouring the lime juice in his lap, but her stomach growled and revenge took a distant second place to putting something in her empty stomach, even if it was just fruit juice. She sat back in her chair and sipped, wanting to make the juice last as long as possible.
The minutes crawled by, and Jane began to feel a twitch between her shoulder blades. Every second they sat there increased the danger, gave Turego a better chance of finding them. The abandoned truck wouldn't fool him for long.
A man slipped into the chair beside her and Jane jumped, her heart flying into her throat. He gave her only a cursory glance before turning his attention to Grant. He was a nondescript character, his clothing worn, his face covered by a couple of days' growth of beard, and his smell of stale alcohol made Jane wrinkle her nose. But then he said a few words to Grant, so quietly that she couldn't understand them, and it all clicked into place. Grant had advertised their presence not because he wanted Turego to find them, but because he wanted someone else to find them. It had been a

gamble, but it had paid off. He was no longer in the business, but he was known, and he'd trusted his reputation to pull in a contact. This man was probably just a peripheral character, but he would have his uses.
"I need transport," Grant said. "Within the hour. Can you manage it?"
"*Si*," the man said, slowly nodding his head for emphasis.
"Good. Have it sitting behind the Blue Pelican exactly one hour from now. Put the keys under the right seat, get out, and walk away."
The man nodded again. "Good luck, amigo."
That hard, lopsided smile curved Grant's lips. "Thanks. I could use some about now."
The man blended in with the crowd, then was gone. Jane slowly twirled the glass of juice between her palms, keeping her eyes on the table. "Now that you've made your contact, shouldn't we get out of here?"
Grant lifted the tequila to his mouth, his strong throat working as he swallowed the sharp tasting liquid. "We'll wait a while longer."
No, it wouldn't do to follow the other man too closely. George had always told her how important it was to make contact without seeming to. The man had taken a chance by walking up to them so openly, but then, Grant had taken a chance by making himself so available. It had probably been clear that the situation was desperate, though Grant looked as if he was thinking about nothing more important than going to sleep. He was sprawled in his chair, his eyes half-closed, and if Jane hadn't noticed that he kept his left hand on the rifle. She would have thought that he was totally relaxed.
"Do you suppose we could find a bathroom?" she asked, keeping her tone light.
"In here? I doubt it."
"Anywhere."
"Okay. Are you finished with that?" He downed the rest of his tequila, and Jane did the same with her lime juice. Her skin was crawling again; she felt that tingling on the back of her neck, and it intensified as she stood up.
They threaded their way through the tangle of feet and tables and chairs to the door, and as soon as they stepped outside Jane said, "I think we were being watched."
"I know we were. That's why we're going in the opposite direction of the Blue Pelican."
"What on earth is the Blue Pelican? How do you know so much about this town? Have you been here before?"

"No, but I keep my eyes open. The Blue Pelican is the first cantina we passed."

Now she remembered. It was the cantina with the flashing neon sign, the one that had given her such an intense feeling of unreality.

They were walking down the small side street into a yawning cave of darkness. The street wasn't paved, and there were no sidewalks, no street lights, not even one of the incongruous neon signs to lend its garish light. The ground was uneven beneath her boots, and the sour smell of old garbage surrounded her. Jane didn't think; her hand shot out, and she grabbed Grant's belt.

He hesitated, then resumed walking without saying anything. Jane swallowed, belatedly realizing that she could have found herself sailing over his shoulder again, as she had the first time she'd grabbed him from behind. What would she do if she no longer had him to cling to in the dark? Stand around wringing her hands? She'd already come a long way from the child who had sat in a terrified stupor for days, and perhaps it was time for one step more. Slowly, deliberately, Jane released her grip on his belt and let her arm drop to her side.

He stopped and looked around at her, darkness shrouding his features. "I don't mind you holding on to my belt."

She remained silent, feeling his reluctant curiosity, but unable to give him any explanation. All her milestones had been inner ones, attained only by wrenching effort, and this wasn't something she could easily talk about. Not even the frighteningly expensive child psychologist to whom her parents had taken her had been able to draw her out about the kidnapping. Everyone knew about the nightmares she'd had, and her abrupt, unreasonable fear of the dark, but she'd never told anyone the details of her experience. Not her parents, not even Chris, and he'd been her best friend long before he'd been her husband. In all the years since the kidnapping, she'd told only one person, trusted only one person enough. Now there was a distance between them that she'd tried to bridge, but he kept pushing her away. No matter how she wanted to throw herself into his arms, she had to stand alone, because soon she might have no choice in the matter.

The fear of being alone in the dark was nothing compared to the fear that she might be alone for the rest of her life.

He wove a crazy path through the town, crisscrossing, backtracking, changing their route so many times that Jane completely lost her sense of

direction. She chugged along doggedly, staying right on his heels. He stopped once, and stood guard while Jane sneaked in the back of the local version of a greasy spoon. The plumbing was pre-World War II, the lighting was a single dim bulb hanging from the ceiling, and the carcass of an enormous cockroach lay on its back in the corner, but she wasn't in the mood to quibble. At least the plumbing worked, and when she turned on the water in the cracked basin a thin, lukewarm stream came out. She washed her hands and, bending over, splashed water on her face. There was no towel, so she wiped her hands on her pants and left her face to dry naturally. When she tiptoed out of the building, Grant stepped from the shadows where he had concealed himself and took her arm. They weren't far from the Blue Pelican, as it turned out; when they turned the corner, she could see the blue and pink sign flashing. But Grant didn't walk straight to it; he circled the entire area, sometimes standing motionless for long minutes while he waited, and watched.

At last they approached the old Ford station wagon that was parked behind the cantina, but even then he was cautious. He raised the hood and used his cigarette lighter to examine the motor. Jane didn't ask what he was looking for, because she had the chilling idea that she knew. He closed the hood as quietly as possible, evidently reassured.

"Get in, and get the keys out from under the seat."

She opened the door. The dome light didn't come on, but that was to be expected. Doing a little checking on her own, she peered over the back of the seat, holding her breath in case there was actually someone there. But the floorboard was empty, and her breath hissed out of her lungs in relief. Leaning over, she swept her hand under the seat, searching for the keys. The other door opened, and the car swayed under Grant's weight. "Hurry," he snapped.

"I can't find the keys!" Her scrabbling fingers found a lot of dirt, a few screws, a scrap of paper, but no keys. "Maybe this isn't the right car!"

"It'll have to do. Check again."

She got down on the floor and reached as far under the seat as she could, sweeping her hands back and forth. "Nothing. Try under yours."

He leaned down, extending his arm to search under his seat. Swearing softly, he pulled out a single key wired to a small length of wood. Muttering under his breath about damned people not being able to follow simple instructions, he put the key in the ignition and started the car.

Despite its age, the engine was quiet and smooth. Grant shifted into gear and backed out of the alley. He didn't turn on the headlights until they were well away from the Blue Pelican and the well-lit main street.
Jane leaned back in the musty smelling seat, unable to believe that at last they seemed to be well on their way. So much had happened since that morning that she'd lost her sense of time. It couldn't be late; it was probably about ten o'clock, if that. She watched the road for a while, hypnotized by the way it unwound just ahead of the reach of their headlights, tired but unable to sleep. "Are we still going to Limon?"
"Why? Is that what you told your lover?"
Jane sat very still, clenching her teeth against the anger that shook her. All right, she'd try one more time. "He isn't my lover, and I didn't tell him anything. All I was trying to do was to stay untied until I could catch one of them off guard and get his gun." She spat the words out evenly, but her chest was heaving as she tried to control her anger. "Just how do you think I got the pistol that you took away from me?"
She felt that was a point that he couldn't ignore, but he did, shrugging it away. "Look, you don't have to keep making explanations," he said in a bored tone. "I'm not interested—"
"Stop the car!" she shouted, enraged.
"Don't start pitching one of your fits," he warned, slanting her a hard look.
Jane dived for the steering wheel, too angry to care if she caused them to crash. He pushed her off with one hand, cursing, but Jane ducked under his arm and caught the wheel, wrenching it violently toward her. Grant hit the brake, fighting to keep the car under control with one hand while he held Jane off with the other. She caught the wheel again and pulled it, and the car jolted violently as it hit the shoulder of the road.
Grant let go of her and wrestled with the car as it slewed back and forth on the narrow road. He braked sharply, finally bringing the car to a complete halt so he could give his full attention to Jane, but even before the car had completely stopped she threw the door open and jumped out. "I'll get myself out of Costa Rica!" she yelled, slamming the door.
He got out of the car. "Jane, come back here," he warned as she started walking off.
"I'm not going another mile with you, not another *inch*!"
"You're going if I have to hog-tie you," he said, coming after her, his stride measured.

She didn't stop. "That's your remedy for everything, isn't it?" she sneered.
Without warning, he sprinted. He moved so fast that Jane didn't have time to run. She gave a startled cry, twisting away as he reached her; his outstretched hand caught her blouse and Jane jerked as he stopped her. It was doubly infuriating to find herself so easily caught, and with a fresh burst of rage she threw herself away from him, twisting and doubling her lithe body, trying to break his grip. He caught her wildly flailing arm and pinned it to her side. "Damn, woman, why do you have to do everything the hard way?" he panted.
"Let… go!" she shouted, but he wrapped his arms around her, holding her arms pinned down. She kicked and shrieked, but he was too strong; there was nothing she could do as he carried her back to the car.
But he had to release her with one arm so he could open the car door, and when he did she twisted violently, at the same time lifting her feet. The combination of the twist and the sudden addition of weight broke his grip, and she slid under his arm. He grabbed for her again, his fingers hooking in the low neckline of the blouse. The fabric parted under the strain, tearing away from her shoulders.
Tears spurted from Jane's eyes as she scrambled to cover her breasts, holding the ruined cloth over them. "Now look what you've done!" Turning away from him, she burst into sobs, her shoulders shaking.
The raw, hard sobs that tore from her throat were so violent that he dropped his outstretched arms. Wearily he rubbed his face. Why couldn't she cry with sedate little sniffles, instead of these sobs that sounded as if she had been beaten? Despite everything that had happened, he wanted to take her in his arms and hold her head to his chest, stroke her dark hair and whisper that everything was going to be all right.
She whirled on him, wiping her face with one hand and clutching the ruined blouse to her breasts with the other. "Think about a few things!" she said hoarsely. "Think about how I got that pistol. And think about Turego. Remember when he came up behind you with the rifle, and I warned you? Did you notice, before you shot him, that his face was bloody? Do you remember the way his nose was bleeding? Do you think it was the altitude that made his nose bleed? You big, stupid, boneheaded *jackass!"* she bellowed, so beside herself with fury that she was shaking her fist under his nose. "Damn it, can't you tell that I love you?"

Grant was as still as stone, not a muscle moving in his face, but he felt winded, as if he'd just taken a huge blow in the chest. Everything hit him at once, and he staggered under the weight of it. She was right. Turego's face had been bloody, but he hadn't thought anything about it at the time. He'd been so damned angry and jealous that he hadn't been thinking at all, only reacting to what had looked like betrayal. Not only had she done some quick thinking to avoid being tied up, she'd charged to his rescue as soon as she could, and when he remembered the way she'd looked when she came through that door, so white and wild—Turego's goons were probably lucky that he'd gotten free first. *She loved him!* He stared down at her, at the small fist that was waving dangerously close to his nose. She was utterly magnificent, her hair a wild tangle around her shoulders, her face filled with a temper that burned out of control, yelling at him like some banshee. She clutched that ridiculous scrap of cloth to her breasts with the hand that wasn't threatening his profile. Indomitable. Courageous. Maddening. And so damned desirable that he was suddenly shaking with need.

He caught her fist and jerked her to him, holding her to him so tightly that she gasped, his face buried against her hair.

She was still struggling against him, beating at his back with her fists and crying again. "Let me go! Please, just let me go."

"I can't," he whispered, and caught her chin, turning her face up to him. Fiercely he ground his mouth down on hers and, like a cornered cat, she tried to bite him. He jerked his head back, laughing, a wild joy running through him. The torn blouse had fallen away, and her naked breasts were flattened against him, their soft fullness reminding him of how good it felt when she wasn't fighting him. He kissed her again, roughly, and cupped her breast in his palm, rubbing his thumb over the velvet nipple and making it tighten.

Jane whimpered under the onslaught of his mouth, but her temper had worn itself out, and she softened against him, suddenly aware that she'd gotten through to him. She wanted to hold on to her anger, but she couldn't hold a grudge. All she could do was kiss him back, her arms sliding up to lock around his neck. His hand burned her breast, his thumb exciting her acutely sensitive skin and beginning to tighten the coil of desire deep in her loins. He had no need to hold her still for his kisses now, so he put his other hand on her bottom and urged her against him, demonstrating graphically that she wasn't the only one affected.

He lifted his mouth from hers, pressing his lips to her forehead. "I swear, that temper of yours is something," he whispered. "Do you forgive me?"
That was a silly question; what was she supposed to say, considering that she was hanging around his neck like a Christmas ornament? "No," she said, rubbing her face into the hollow of his throat, seeking his warm, heady male scent. "I'm going to save this to throw up at you the next time we have a fight." She wanted to say "for the rest of our lives," but though his arms were hard around her, he hadn't yet said that he loved her. She wasn't going to dig for the words, knowing that he might not be able to say them and mean it.
"You will, too," he said, and laughed. Reluctantly his arms loosened, and he reached up, removing her arms from his neck. "I'd like to stay like this, but we need to get to Limon." He looked down at her breasts, and a taut look came over his battered face. "When this is over with, I'm going to take you to a hotel and keep you in bed until neither of us can walk."
They got back in the car, and Jane removed the remnants of the blouse, stuffing it in the backpack and pulling on Grant's camouflage shirt that she'd put in the pack that morning. It would have wrapped around her twice, and the shoulder seams hung almost to her elbows. She rolled the sleeves up as far as they would go, then gathered the long tails and tied them at her waist. Definitely not high fashion, she thought, but she was covered.
The Ford rolled into Limon in the early hours of the morning, and though the streets were nearly deserted, it was obvious that the port was a well-populated city of medium size. Jane's hands clenched on the car seat. Were they safe, then? Had Turego been fooled by the abandoned truck?
"What now?"
"Now I try to get in touch with someone who can get us out tonight. I don't want to wait until morning."
So he thought Turego's men were too close for safety. Was it never going to end? She wished they had remained in the jungle, hidden so deeply in the rain forest that no one would ever have found them.
Evidently Grant had been in Limon before; he negotiated the streets with ease. He drove to the train station, and Jane gave him a puzzled look. "Are we going to take the train?"
"No, but there's a telephone here. Come on."
Limon wasn't an isolated jungle village, or even a tiny town at the edge of the forest; it was a city, with all of the rules of a city. He had to leave the

rifle in the back of the station wagon, but he stuck the pistol into his boot. Even without his being obviously armed, Jane thought there was no chance at all of them going anywhere without being noticed. They both looked as if they'd come fresh from a battle, which, in effect, they had. The ticket agent eyed them with sharp curiosity, but Grant ignored him, heading straight for a telephone. He called someone named Angel, and his voice was sharp as he demanded a number. Hanging up, he fed more coins into the slot, then dialed another number.

"Who are you calling?" Jane whispered.

"An old friend."

The old friend's name was Vincente, and intense satisfaction was on Grant's face when he hung up. "They're pulling us out of here. In another hour we'll be home free."

"Who's'they'?" Jane asked.

"Don't ask too many questions."

She scowled at him, then something else took her attention. "While we're here, could we clean up a little? You look awful."

There was a public bathroom—empty, she was thankful to see—and Grant washed his face while Jane brushed her hair out and quickly pulled it back into a loose braid. Then she wet a towel and painstakingly cleaned the wound on Grant's arm; the bullet hadn't penetrated, but the graze was deep and ugly. After washing it with a strong smelling soap, she produced a small first-aid kit from her backpack.

"One of these days I'm going to see what all's in that thing," Grant growled.

Jane uncapped a small bottle of alcohol and poured it on the graze. He caught a sharp breath, and said something extremely explicit. "Don't be such a baby," Jane scolded. "You didn't make this much fuss when you were shot."

She smeared an antibiotic cream on the wound, then wrapped gauze snugly around his arm and tied the ends together. After replacing the kit, she made certain the pack was still securely buckled to her belt-loop.

Grant opened the door, then abruptly stepped back and closed it again. Jane had been right behind him, and the impact of their bodies made her stagger. He caught her arm, keeping her from falling. "Turego and a few of his men just came into the station." He looked around, his eyes narrowed and alert. "We'll go out a window."

Her heart pounding, Jane stared in dismay at the row of small, high windows that lined the restroom. They were well over her head. "I can't get up there."
"Sure you can." Grant bent down and grasped her around the knees, lifting her until she could reach the windows. "Open one, and go through it. Quick! We only have a minute."
"But how will you get up—"
"I'll make it! Jane, get through that window!"
She twisted the handle and shoved the window open. Without giving herself time to think about how high above the ground on the other side it might be, she grasped the bottom edge of the frame and hauled herself through, jumping into the darkness and hoping she didn't kill herself on a railroad tie or something. She landed on her hands and knees in loose gravel, and she had to bite back a cry of pain as the gravel cut her palms. Quickly she scrambled out of the way, and a moment later Grant landed beside her.
"Are you all right?" he asked, hauling her to her feet.
"I think so. No broken bones," she reported breathlessly.
He started running along the side of the building, dragging her behind him. They heard a shot behind them, but didn't slow down or look back. Jane stumbled and was saved from falling only by his grip on her hand. "Can't we go back for the Ford?" she wailed.
"No. We'll have to get there on foot."
"Get where?"
"To the pick up point."
"How far is that?"
"Not too far."
"Give it to me in yards and miles!" she demanded He dodged down a street and pulled her into the deep shadows of an alley. He was laughing. "Maybe a mile," he said, and kissed her, his mouth hard and hungry, his tongue finding hers. He hugged her fiercely.
"Whatever you did to Turego, honey, he looks like hell."
"I think I broke his nose," she admitted.
He laughed again. "I think you did, too. It's swollen all over his face. He won't forget you for a long time!"
"Never, if I have anything to do with it. We're going to tell the government about that man," she vowed.
"Later, honey. Right now, we're getting out of here."

Chapter Twelve

A helicopter came in low and fast, and settled lightly on its runners, looking like a giant mosquito. Grant and Jane ran across the small field, bent low against the wind whipped up by the rotors, which the pilot hadn't cut. Behind them people were pouring out of their houses to see what the uproar was about. Jane began to giggle, lightheaded with the triumph of the moment; by the time Grant boosted her into the helicopter, she was laughing so hard she was crying. They'd done it! Turego couldn't catch them now. They would be out of the country before he could mobilize his own helicopters to search for them, and he wouldn't dare pursue them across the border.

Grant flashed her a grin, telling her that he understood her idiotic laughter. He shouted, "Buckle up!" at her, then levered himself into the seat beside the pilot and gave him the thumbs-up sign. The pilot nodded, grinned, and the helicopter rose into the night. Grant put on the headset that would allow him to talk to the pilot, but there wasn't one in the back. Jane gave up trying to hear what they were saying and gripped the sides of her seat, staring out through the open sides of the helicopter. The night air swirled around her, and the world stretched out beyond the small craft. It was the first time she'd ever been in a helicopter, and it was a totally different sensation from being in a jet. She felt adrift in the velvet darkness, and she wished that it wasn't night, so she could see the land below.

The flight didn't take long, but when they set down, Jane recognized the airport and reached up to grab Grant's shoulder. "We're in San Jose!" she yelled, anxiety filling her voice. This was where it had all begun. Turego had plenty of men in the capitol!

Grant took off the headset. The pilot cut the rotors, and the noise began to decrease. They shook hands, and the pilot said, "Nice to see you again! Word filtered down that you were in the area, and that we should give you any assistance you asked for. Good luck. You'd better run. You have just enough time to get on that flight."

They jumped to the asphalt and began running toward the terminal. "What flight is that?" Jane panted.

"The flight to Mexico City that's leaving in about five minutes."

Mexico City! That sounded more like it! The thought lent her strength.
The terminal was almost deserted at that time of night, because the flight for Mexico City had already boarded. The ticket clerk stared at them as they approached, reminding Jane once again of how they looked. "Grant Sullivan and Jane Greer," Grant said tersely. "You're holding our tickets."
The clerk had regained his composure. "Yes, sir, and the plane," he returned in perfect English, handing over two ticket folders. "Ernesto will take you directly aboard."
Ernesto was an airport guard, and he led the way, running. Grant held Jane's hand to make certain she kept up with them. She had a fleeting thought about the pistol stuck in his boot, but they bypassed all checkpoints. Grant certainly had connections, she thought admiringly.
The jet was indeed waiting, and the smiling stewardess welcomed them aboard as calmly as if there was nothing unusual about them. Jane wanted to giggle again; maybe they didn't look as outlandish as she felt they did. After all, camouflage clothing was all the rage in the States. So what if Grant was sporting an almost black eye, a puffy lip and a bandage on his arm? Maybe they looked like journalists who had had a rough time in the field.
As soon as they were seated, the plane began rolling. As they buckled their seat belts, Grant and Jane exchanged glances. It was well and truly over now, but they still had some time together. The next stop was Mexico City, an enormous international city with shops, restaurants… and hotels. Her body longed for a bed, but even deeper than her weariness ran the tingling awareness that Grant would be in that bed with her. He lifted the armrest between their seats and pulled her over so her head nestled into the hollow of his shoulder. "Soon," he murmured against her temple. "In a couple of hours we'll be in Mexico. Home free."
"I'm going to call Dad as soon as we get there, so he and Mom will stop worrying." Jane sighed. "Do you have anyone to call? Does your family know where you were?"
His eyes took on that remote look. "No, they don't know anything about what I do. I'm not close to my family, not anymore."
That was sad, but Jane supposed that when someone was in the business Grant had been in, it was safer for his family not to be close to him. She turned her face into his neck and closed her eyes, holding tightly to him in an effort to let him know that he wasn't alone anymore. Had his nights been

spent like hers, lying awake in bed, so achingly alone that every nerve in her body cried out against it?

She slept, and Grant did, too, exhaustion finally sweeping over him as he allowed his bruised body to relax. With her in his arms, it was easy to find the necessary relaxation. She nestled against him as trustingly as a child, but he could never forget that she was a woman, as fierce and elemental as wind or fire. She could have been the spoiled debutante he'd expected. It was what *she should* have been, and no one would have thought the less of her for being the product of her environment—no one expected her to be any more than that. But she'd risen above that, and above the crippling trauma of her childhood, to become a woman of strength and humor and passion. She was a woman in whose arms a wary, battered, burnt-out warrior could sleep.

The sky was turning pearl pink with dawn when they landed in Mexico City. The terminal was teeming with people scurrying to catch early flights, a multitude of languages and accents assailing the air. Grant hailed a cab, which took them on a hair-raising ride through traffic that made every moment an exercise in survival—or it would have been hair-raising if Jane had had the energy to care. After what she'd been through, the Mexico City traffic looked mundane.

The city was beautiful at dawn, with its wide avenues and fragrant trees; and the white of the buildings glowed rosily in the early morning sun. The sky was already a deep blue bowl overhead, and the air carried that velvet feel that only the warmer climes achieved. Despite the odor of exhaust fumes she could smell the sweetness of orange blossoms, and Grant was warm beside her, his strong leg pressed against hers.

The desk clerk in the pristine white, high-rise hotel was reluctant to give them a room without a reservation. His black eyes kept wandering to Grant's bruised face as he rattled off excuses *in* rapid-fire Spanish. Grant shrugged, reached into his pocket and peeled off a couple of bills from a roll. The clerk suddenly smiled; that changed everything. Grant signed them in, and the clerk slid a key across the desk. After taking a few steps, Grant turned back. "By the way," he said easily, "I don't want any interruptions. If anyone calls or asks, we aren't here. *Comprende?* I'm dead tired, and I get irritable if I'm jerked out of a sound sleep."

His voice was full of silky, lazy menace, and the clerk nodded rapidly.

With Grant's arm draped across her shoulders, they walked over to the bank of elevators. He punched the button for the nineteenth floor, and the doors slid silently shut. Jane said dazedly, "We're safe."
"Having trouble believing it?"
"I'm going to get that man. He's not going to get off scot-free!"
"He won't," Grant drawled. "He'll be taken care of, through channels."
"I don't want 'channels' to take care of him! I want to do it myself!"
He smiled down at her. "You're a bloodthirsty little wench, aren't you? I almost think you enjoyed this."
"Only parts of it," she replied, giving him a slow smile.
Their room was spacious, with a terrace for sunning, a separate sitting area with a dining table and a stunningly modern bath. Jane poked her head into it and withdrew with a beatific smile on her face. "All the modern conveniences," she crowed.
Grant was studying the in-house registry for room service. Picking up the phone, he ordered two enormous breakfasts, and Jane's mouth watered at the thought. It had been almost twenty-four hours since they'd eaten.
While they were waiting for their food, she began the process of making a phone call to Connecticut. It took about five minutes for the call to go through, and Jane sat with the receiver gripped tightly in her hand, taut with the need to hear her parents' voices.
"Mom? Mom, it's Jane! I'm all right—don't cry, I can't talk to you if you're crying," Jane said, and wiped away a few tears herself. "Put Dad on the line so I can tell him what's going on. We'll blubber together just as soon as I get home, I promise." She waited a few moments, smiling mistily at Grant, her dark eyes liquid.
"Jane? Is it really you?" Her father's voice boomed across the line.
"Yes, it really is. I'm in Mexico City. Grant got me out; we just flew in a few minutes ago."
Her father made a choked sound, and Jane realized that he was crying, too, but he controlled himself. "Well, what now?" he demanded. "When are you going to be here? Where are you going from there?"
"I don't know," she said, lifting her brows at Grant and taking the receiver from her ear. "Where are we going next?"
He took the phone from her. "This is Sullivan. We'll probably be here for a couple of days, getting some paperwork straightened out. We came in here without being checked for passports, but I'll have to make some calls before

we can get into the States. Yes, we're okay. I'll let you know as soon as I find out something."
When he hung up, he turned to find Jane surveying him with pursed lips. "How *did* we get here without being checked for passports?"
"A few people turned their heads, that's all. They knew we were coming through. I'll report our passports as being lost, and get duplicates from the American Embassy. No big deal."
"How did you manage to set all that up so quickly? I know this wasn't the original plan."
"No, but we had some inside help." Sabin had been as good as his word, Grant reflected. All the old contacts had been there, and they had all been notified to give him whatever he needed.
"Your… former business associates?" Jane hazarded a guess.
"The less you know, the better. You pick up on this too damned quickly. Like hot-wiring that truck. Had you ever done it before?"
"No, but I watched you do it the first time," she explained, her eyes full of innocence.
He grunted. "Don't waste your time giving me that wide-eyed look."
A tap on the door and a singsong voice announced that room service had arrived in record time. Grant checked through the fish-eye viewer, then unbolted the door and let the young boy in. The aroma of hot coffee filled the room, and Jane's mouth started watering. She hovered over the boy as he set the food out on the table.
"Look at this," she crooned. "Fresh oranges and melon. Toast. Apricot Danish. Eggs. Butter. Real coffee!"
"You're drooling," Grant teased, giving the boy a generous tip, but he was just as ravenous, and between them they destroyed the array of food. Every crumb was gone and the pot of coffee was empty before they looked at each other and smiled.
"I feel almost human again," Jane sighed. "Now for a hot shower!"
She began unlacing her boots, pulling them off and sighing in relief as she wiggled her toes. Glancing at him, she saw that he was watching her with that lopsided smile that she loved so much. Her heart kicked into time and a half rhythm. "Aren't you going to shower with me?" she asked innocently, sauntering into the bathroom.
She was already under the deliciously warm spray of water, her head tilted up so it hit her directly in the face, when the shower door slid open and he

joined her. She turned, wiping the moisture from her eyes, a smile ready on her lips, but the smile faded when she saw the mottled bruises on his ribcage and abdomen. "Oh, Grant," she whispered, reaching out to run her fingers lightly over the dark, ugly splotches. "I'm so sorry."

He gave her a quizzical look. He was sore and stiff, but nothing was broken and the bruises would fade. He'd suffered much worse than this, many times. Of course, if Turego had been able to carry the beating as far as he'd wanted, Grant knew that he probably would have died of internal injuries. But it hadn't happened, so he didn't worry about it. He caught her chin, turning her face up to him. "We're both covered with bruises, honey, in case you haven't noticed. I'm okay." He covered her mouth with his, tasting her sweetness with his tongue, easing her against him.

Their wet, naked bodies created a marvelous friction against each other, heating them, tightening the coil of desire. The rather boring process of soaping and rinsing became a lingering series of strokes, her hands slipping over the muscles and intriguing hardness of his body, his finding the soft curves and slopes of hers, the enticing depths. He lifted her off her feet and bent her back over his arm, kissing her breasts and sucking at her nipples until they were hard and reddened, tasting the freshness of newly soaped skin and the sweetness of her flesh that no soap could ever disguise. Jane writhed against him, her legs twining with his, and heat fogged his mind as he thrust himself against the juncture of her thighs.

She wanted him, wanted him, wanted him. Her body ached and burned. The bed was suddenly too far away. Her legs parted, lifting to wrap around his waist, and with a hoarse cry he pinned her to the wall. She shuddered as he drove into her, going as deep as he could with a single, powerful thrust, as if any distance at all between them was far too much. Digging his fingers into her hair, he pulled her head back and kissed her, his mouth wild and rough, the kiss deep, his tongue twining with hers, the water beating down on them. The power of his thrusts made her consciousness dim, but she clung to him, whimpering, begging him not to stop. He couldn't have stopped, couldn't even have slowed, his body demanding release inside her. The red mists that clouded his mind blocked out everything but the hot ecstasy of the way her body sheathed him, so softly, so tightly.

She cried out again and again as the almost unbearable waves of pleasure crashed over her. She clung tightly to his shoulders, trembling and shivering, the velvet clasp of her body driving him to the edge. He poured

himself into her, heaving against her, feeling that he was dying a little, and yet so intensely alive that he almost screamed from the conflict.
They barely made it to the bed. Drying off had taken all their energy, and Jane was so weak she could barely walk. Grant was shaking in every muscle of his big body. They rumbled onto the bed, not caring that their wet hair soaked the pillows.
Grant reached out for her. "Crawl up here," he rumbled, hauling her on top of him. Blissfully, her eyes closing, she made herself comfortable on the hard expanse of his chest. He adjusted her legs, parting them, and her lashes fluttered open as he eased into her. A purr of pleasure escaped her lips, but she was so sleepy, so tired… "Now we can sleep," he said, his lips moving on her hair.
The room was hot when they awoke, the Mexican sun broiling through the closed curtains. Their skin was stuck together with perspiration and made a wet, sucking noise as Grant lifted her off him. He got up and turned the air-conditioning on full blast, and stood for a moment with the cold air hitting his naked body. Then he came back to the bed and turned her onto her back.
They scarcely left the bed that day. They made love, napped and woke to make love again. She couldn't get enough of him, nor he, it seemed, of her. There was no sense of urgency now to their lovemaking, only a deep reluctance to be parted from each other. He taught her the unlimited reaches of her own sensuality, tasting her all over, making love to her with his mouth until she was shivering and shuddering with pleasure, mindless, helpless. She told him that she loved him. She couldn't keep the words unsaid, not now, when she'd already told him anyway and soon the world would intrude on them again.
Night came, and finally they left the room. Walking hand in hand in the warm Mexican night, they sought out some shops that were open late. Jane bought a pink sundress that made her tanned skin look like honey, a pair of sandals and new underwear. Grant wasn't much on shopping, so she blithely picked out jeans, loafers and a white polo shirt for him. "You might as well change," she instructed, pushing him toward the dressing room. "We're going out to eat tonight."
There wasn't any talking her out of it, either. It wasn't until he was seated across from her in a dimly lit restaurant with a bottle of wine between them that he realized this was the first time in years that he'd been with a woman in a strictly social setting. They had nothing to do but eat and talk, sip the

wine, and think about what they were going to do when they got back to the hotel. Even after he'd retired, he'd kept to himself on the farm, sometimes going for weeks without seeing another human being. When the need for supplies had forced him to go into town, he'd gone straight there and back, a lot of times without speaking to anyone. He hadn't been able to stand anyone else around him. But now he was relaxed, not even thinking about the strangers surrounding him, accepting their presence but not noticing them, because his mind and his senses were on Jane.

She was radiant, incandescent with energy. Her dark eyes shone; her tanned skin glowed; her laughter sparkled. Her breasts thrust against the bodice of the sundress, her nipples puckered by the coolness of the restaurant, and desire began to stir inside him again. They didn't have much more time together; soon they would be back in the States, and his job would be finished. It was too soon, far too soon. He hadn't had his fill yet of the taste of her, the wild sweetness of her body beneath him, or the way her laughter somehow eased all the knots of tension inside him.

They went back to the hotel, and back to bed. He made love to her furiously, trying to sate himself, trying to hoard enough memories to hold him during the long, empty years ahead. Being alone was a habit deeply ingrained in him; he wanted her, but couldn't see taking her back to the farm with him, and there was no way he could fit into her world. She liked having people around her, while he was more comfortable with a wall at his back. She was outgoing, while he was controlled, secretive.

She knew, too, that it was almost over. Lying on his chest, with the darkness wrapped around them like a blanket, she talked. It was a gift that she gave him, the tales of her childhood, where she'd gone to school, her food and music preferences, what she liked to read. Because she talked, he found it easier to return the favor, his voice low and rusty as he told her about the white-haired young boy he'd been, his skin burned dark by the hot, south Georgia summers, running wild in the swamp. He'd learned to hunt and fish almost as soon as he'd learned how to walk. He told her about playing football during high school, chasing after the cheerleaders, getting drunk and raising hell, then trying to sneak into the house so his mother wouldn't catch him.

Her fingers played in the hair on his chest, aware that silence had fallen because he'd reached the point in his story where his life had changed. There were no more easy tales of growing up.

"Then what happened?" she whispered.
His chest rose and fell. "Vietnam happened. I was drafted when I was eighteen. I was too damned good at sneaking through jungles, so that's where they put me. I went home, once, for R & R, but the folks were just the same as always, while I was nothing like what I had been. We couldn't even talk to each other. So I went back."
"And stayed?"
"Yeah. I stayed." His voice was flat.
"How did you get into the secret agent business, or whatever you call it?"
"Covert activities. High risk missions. The war ended, and I came home, but there was nothing for me to do. What was I going to do, work in a grocery store, when I'd been trained to such an edge that people would be taking their lives in their hands to walk up to me and ask the price of eggs? I guess I'd have settled down eventually, but I didn't want to hang around to find out. I was embarrassing the folks, and I was a stranger to them anyway. When an old colleague contacted me, I took him up on his offer."
"But you're retired now. Did you go back to Georgia?"
"Just for a few days, to let them know where I'd be. I couldn't settle there; too many people knew me, and I wanted to be left alone. So I bought a farm close to the mountains in Tennessee, and I've been hibernating there ever since. Until your dad hired me to fetch you home."
"Have you ever married? Been engaged?"
"No," he said, and kissed her. "That's enough questions. Go to sleep."
"Grant?"
"Hmmm?"
"Do you think he's really given up?"
"Who?"
"Turego."
Amusement laced his voice. "Honey, I promise you, he'll be taken care of. Don't worry about it. Now that you're safe and sound, steps can be taken to neutralize him."
"You're using some ominous sounding phrases. What do'taken care of' and 'neutralize' mean?"
"That he's going to be spending some time in those gracious Central American jails that everyone hears so much about. Go to sleep."
She obeyed, her lips curved in a contented smile, his arms securely around her.

* * * * *

Someone had pulled strings again. It could have been her father, or the mysterious "friend" of Grant's who kept arranging things, or possibly Grant had intimidated someone at the embassy. However it happened, the next afternoon they had passports. They could have taken the next flight to Dallas, but instead they spent another night together, making love in that king-size bed, the door securely bolted. She didn't want to leave. As long as they were still in Mexico City, she could pretend that it wasn't over, that the job wasn't finished. But her parents were waiting for her, and Grant had his own life to go back to. She had to find another job, as well as take care of the little chore that had gotten her into so much trouble to begin with. There was no way they could stay in Mexico.

Still, tears burned the back of her eyes when they boarded the jet that would take them to Dallas. She knew that Grant had booked separate flights for them from Dallas; she was going on to New York, and he was flying to Knoxville. Their goodbyes would be said in the vast, busy Dallas-Ft. Worth airport, and she couldn't stand it. If she didn't get a tight hold on herself she'd be squalling like a baby, and he wouldn't want that. If he wanted more of her than what he'd already had, he'd have asked her, because she'd made it more than obvious that she was willing to give him whatever he wanted. But he hadn't asked, so he didn't want her. She'd known that this time would come, and she'd accepted it, taken the risk, grabbed for what happiness she could get. Pay up time had come.

She controlled her tears. She read the airline magazine; and was even able to comprehend what she was reading. For a while she held his hand, but she released it when the in-flight meal was served. She ordered a gin and tonic, gulped it down, then ordered another.

Grant eyed her narrowly, but she gave him a bright, glittering smile, determined not to let him see that she was shattering on the inside.

Too soon, far too soon, they landed at Dallas and filed out of the plane through the portable tunnel. Jane clutched the dirty, battered backpack, for the first time realizing that his boots and fatigues were in it along with her clothing. "I need your address," she chattered brightly, nervously. "To mail your clothes to you. Unless you want to buy a bag in the airport shop, that is. We have plenty of time before our flights."

He checked his watch. "You have twenty-eight minutes, so we'd better find your gate. Do you have your ticket?"

"Yes, it's right here. What about your clothes?"
"I'll be in touch with your father. Don't worry about it."
Yes, of course; there was the matter of payment for dragging her out of Costa Rica. His face was hard and expressionless, his amber eyes cool. She held out her hand, not noticing how it was shaking. "Well, goodbye, then. It's—" She broke off. What could she say? *It's been nice meeting you?* She swallowed. "It's been fun."
He looked down at her extended hand, then back up at her, disbelief edging into the coolness of his eyes. He said slowly, "The hell you say," caught her hand, and jerked her into his arms. His mouth was hot, covering hers, his tongue curling slowly into her mouth as if they weren't surrounded by curiously gawking people. She clung to him, shaking.
He set her away from him. His jaw was clenched. "Go on. Your folks are waiting for you. I'll be in touch in a few days." The last slipped out; he'd intended this to be the final break, but her dark eyes were so lost and full of pain, and she'd kissed him so hungrily, that he couldn't stop the words. One more time, then. He'd give himself one more time with her.
She nodded, drawing herself up. She wasn't going to break down and cry all over him. He almost wished she would cry, because then he'd have an excuse to hold her again. But she was stronger than that. "Goodbye," she said, then turned and walked away from him.
She barely saw where she was going; people blurred in her vision, and she stubbornly blinked her eyes to keep the tears back. Well, she was alone again. He'd said he'd be in touch, but she knew he wouldn't. It was over. She had to accept that and be grateful for the time she'd had. It had been obvious from the first that Grant Sullivan wasn't a man to be tied down.
Someone touched her arm, the touch warm and strong, a man's touch. She stopped, wild hope springing into her breast, but when she turned she found that it wasn't Grant who had stopped her. The man had dark hair and eyes, and his skin was dark, his features strongly Latin. "Jane Greer?" he asked politely.
She nodded, wondering how he'd known her name and recognized her. His grip tightened on her arm. "Would you please come with me," he said, and though his voice remained polite, it was an order, not a question.
Alarm skittered through her, jerking her out of her misery. She smiled at the man and swung the backpack by its straps, catching him on the side of the

head with it and sending him staggering. From the solid'thunk' it made, she knew Grant's boots had hit him.
"Grant!" she screamed, her voice slicing through the bustle of thousands of people. *"Grant!"*
The man caught himself and lunged for her. Jane began running back in the direction she'd come from, dodging around people. Up ahead she saw Grant coming through the crowd like a running back, shoving people out of his path. The man caught up with her, catching her arm; then Grant was there. People were screaming and scattering, and the airport guards were running toward them. Grant sent the man sprawling, then grabbed Jane's arm and ran for the nearest exit, ducking past the milling crowds and ignoring the shouts to stop.
"What the hell's going on?" he roared, jerking her out into the bright Texas sunlight. The humid heat settled over them.
"I don't know! That man just came up to me and asked if my name was Jane Greer; then he caught my arm and told me to come with him, so I hit him in the head with the backpack and started screaming."
"Makes perfect sense to me," he muttered, flagging a cab and putting her in it, then crawling in beside her.
"Where to, folks?" the cab driver asked.
"Downtown."
"Any particular place downtown?"
"I'll tell you where to stop."
The driver shrugged. As they pulled away from the curb there seemed to be a lot of people spilling out of the terminal, but Jane didn't look back. She was still shaking. "It can't be Turego again, can it?"
Grant shrugged. "It's possible, if he has enough money. I'm going to make a phone call."
She'd thought she was safe, that they were both safe. After the two peaceful days spent in Mexico, the sudden fear seemed that much sharper and more acrid. She couldn't stop trembling.
They didn't go all the way into Dallas. Grant instructed the driver to drop them at a shopping mall. "Why a shopping mall?" Jane asked, looking around.
"There are telephones here, and it's safer than standing in a phone booth on the side of a street." He put his arm around her and hugged her briefly to him. "Don't look so worried, honey."

They went inside and found a bank of pay telephones, but it was a busy day and all the lines were in use. They waited while a teenager argued extensively with her mother about how late she could stay out that night, but at last she hung up and stormed away, evidently having lost the argument. Grant stepped in and commandeered the telephone before anyone else could reach it. Standing close by him, Jane watched as he dropped in the coins, punched in a number, then dropped in more coins. He leaned casually against the fieldstone nook that housed the telephone, listening to the rings on the other end.

"Sullivan," he finally drawled when the phone was answered. "She was nearly grabbed in DFW." He listened a moment; then his eyes flicked to Jane. "Okay, I got it. We'll be there. By the way, that was a dumb move. She could've killed the guy." He hung up, and his lips twitched.

"Well?" Jane demanded.

"You just belted an agent."

"An agent? You mean, one of your friend's men?"

"Yeah. We're taking a little detour. You're going to be debriefed. It was left up to some other people to pick you up, and they decided to pick you up after we'd parted company, since I'm no longer in the business and this doesn't officially concern me. Sabin will pin their ears back."

"Sabin? Is he your friend?"

He was smiling down at her. "He's the one." He stroked her cheekbone very gently with the backs of his fingers. "And that's a name you're going to forget, honey. Why don't you call your parents and let them know that you won't be in tonight? It'll be tomorrow; you can call them again when we know something definite."

"Are you going, too?"

"I wouldn't miss it." He grinned a little wolfishly, already anticipating Kell's reaction to Jane.

"But where are we going?"

"Virginia, but don't tell your parents that. Just tell them that you missed your flight."

She reached for the phone, then stopped. "Your friend must be pretty important."

"He's got some power," Grant understated.

So, they must know about the microfilm. Jane punched in her credit card number. She'd be glad to get the whole thing over with, and at least Grant

was going to be with her one more day. Just one more day! It was a reprieve, but she didn't know if she'd have the strength for another goodbye.

Chapter Thirteen

The "Virginia countryside around the place was quiet and serene, the trees green, the flowering shrubs well-tended. It looked rather like her father's Connecticut estate. Everyone was polite, and several people greeted Grant, but Jane noticed that even the ones who spoke to him did so hesitantly, as if they were a little wary of him.

Kell's office was right where it had always been, and the door still had no name on it. The agent who had escorted them knocked quietly. "Sullivan is here, sir."

"Send them in."

The first thing Jane noticed was the old-fashioned charm of the room. The ceilings were high; the mantel was surely the original one that had been built with the house over a hundred years before. Tall glass doors behind the big desk let in the late afternoon sun. They also placed the man behind the desk in silhouette, while anyone who came in the door was spotlighted by the blazing sun, something George had told her about. He rose to his feet as they entered, a tall man, maybe not quite as tall as Grant, but lean and hard with a whipcord toughness that wasn't maintained by sitting behind a desk. He stepped forward to greet them. "You look like hell, Sullivan," he said, and the two men shook hands; then he turned his eyes on her, and for the first time Jane felt his power. His eyes were so black that there was no light in them at all; they absorbed light, drawing it into the depths of the irises. His hair was thick and black, his complexion dark, and there was an intense energy about him that seared her.

"Ms. Greer," he said, holding out his hand.

"Mr. Sabin," she returned, calmly shaking his hand.

"I have a very embarrassed agent in Dallas."

"He shouldn't be," Grant drawled behind her. "She let him off easy."

"Grant's boots were in the pack," Jane explained. "That's what stunned him so badly when I hit him in the head."

There was the first hint in Sabin's eyes that Jane wasn't quite what he'd expected. Grant stood behind her, his arms calmly folded, and waited.

Sabin examined her open expression, the catlike slant of her dark eyes, the light dusting of freckles across her cheekbones. Then he quickly glanced at Grant, who was planted like the Rock of Gibraltar behind her. He could question her, but he had the feeling that Grant wouldn't let her be harassed in any way. It wasn't like Sullivan to get involved, but he was out of the business now, so the old rules didn't apply. She wasn't a great beauty, but there was a lively charm about her that almost made Sabin want to smile. Maybe she'd gotten close to Sullivan. Sabin didn't trust that openness, however, because he knew more about her now than he had in the beginning.

"Ms. Greer," he began slowly, "did you know that George Persall was—"

"Yes, I did," Jane interrupted cheerfully. "I helped him sometimes, but not often, because he liked to use different methods every time. I believe this is what you want." She opened the backpack and began digging in it. "I know it's in here. There!" She produced the small roll of film, placing it on his desk.

Both men looked thunderstruck. "You've just been carrying it around?" Sabin asked in disbelief.

"Well, I didn't have a chance to hide it. Sometimes I put it in my pocket. That way Turego could search my room all he wanted and he'd never find anything. All of you spy types try to make everything too complicated. George always told me to keep it simple."

Grant began to chuckle. He couldn't help it; it was funny. "Jane, why didn't you tell me you had the microfilm?"

"I thought it would be safer for you if you didn't know about it."

Again Sabin looked thunderstruck, as if he couldn't believe anyone would actually feel the need to protect Grant Sullivan. As Kell was normally the most impassive of men, Grant knew that Jane had tilted him off balance, just as she did everyone she met. Sabin coughed to cover his reaction.

"Ms. Greer," he asked cautiously, "do you know what's on the film?"

"No. Neither did George."

Grant was laughing again. "Go ahead," he told Sabin. "Tell her about the film. Or, better yet, show her. She'll enjoy it."

Sabin shook his head, then picked up the film and pulled it out, unwinding it. Grant produced his cigarette lighter, leaned forward, and set the end of the film on fire. The three watched as the flames slowly ate up the length of celluloid until it burned close to Sabin's fingers and he dropped it into a

large ashtray. "The film," Sabin explained, "was a copy of something we don't want anyone else to know. All we wanted was for it to be destroyed before anyone saw it."

With the stench of burning plastic in her nostrils, Jane silently watched the last of the film curl and crumble. All they'd wanted was for it to be destroyed, and she'd hauled it through a jungle and across half a continent—just to hand it over and watch it burn. Her lips twitched; she was afraid of making a scene, so she tried to control the urge. But it was irresistible; it rolled upward, and a giggle escaped. She turned, looking at Grant, and between them flashed the memory of everything they'd been through. She giggled again, then they were both laughing, Jane hanging on to his shirt because she was laughing so hard her knees had gone limp.

"I fell down a cliff," she gasped. "We stole a truck… shot another truck…! broke Turego's nose… all to watch *it burn!"*

Grant went into another spasm of laughter, holding his sore ribs and bending double. Sabin watched them clinging to each other and laughing uproariously. Curiosity seized him. "Why did you shoot a truck?" he asked; then suddenly he was laughing, too.

An agent paused outside the door, his head tilted, listening. No, it was impossible. Sabin never laughed.

They lay in bed in a hotel in the middle of Washington, D.C., pleasantly tired. They had made love as soon as the door was locked behind them, falling on the bed and removing only the necessary clothing. But that had been hours before, and now they were completely nude, slipping gradually into sleep.

Grant's hand moved up and down her back in a lazy pattern. "Just how involved were you in Persall's activities?"

"Not very," she murmured. "Oh, I knew about them. I had to know, so I could cover for him if I had to. And he sometimes used me as a courier, but not very often. Still, he talked to me a lot, telling me things. He was a strange, lonely man."

"Was he your lover?"

She lifted her head from his chest, surprised. "George? Of course not!"

"Why 'of course not'? He was a man, wasn't he? And he was in your bedroom when he died."

She paused. "George had a problem, a medical one. He wasn't capable of being anyone's lover."

"So that part of the report was wrong, too."
"Deliberately. He used me as a sort of shield."
He put his hand in her hair and held her for his kiss. "I'm glad. He was too old for you."
Jane watched him with wise, dark eyes. "Even if he hadn't been, I wasn't interested. You might as well know, you're the only lover I've ever had. Until I met you, I'd never… wanted anyone."
"And when you met me…?" he murmured.
"I wanted." She lowered her head and kissed him, wrapping her arms around him, slithering her body over his until she felt his hardening response.
"I wanted, too," he said, his words a mere breath over her skin.
"I love you." The words were a cry of pain, launched by desperation, because she knew this was definitely the last time unless she took the chance. "Will you marry me?"
"Jane, don't."
"Don't what? Tell you that I love you? Or ask you to marry me?" She sat up, moving her legs astride him, and shook her dark hair back behind her shoulders.
"We can't live together," he explained, his eyes turning dark gold. "I can't give you what you need, and you'd be miserable."
"I'll be miserable anyway," she said reasonably, striving for a light tone. "I'd rather be miserable with you than miserable without you."
"I'm a loner. Marriage is a partnership, and I'd rather go it alone. Face it, honey. We're good together in bed, but that's all there is."
"Maybe for you. I love you." Despite herself, she couldn't keep the echo of pain out of her voice.
"Do you? We were under a lot of stress. It's human nature to turn to each other. I'd have been surprised if we hadn't made love."
"Please, spare me your combat psychology! I'm not a child, or stupid! I know when I love someone, and damn it, I love you! You don't have to like it, but don't try to talk me out of it!"
"All right." He lay on his back, looking up into her angry eyes. "Do you want me to get another room?"
"No. This is our last night together, and we're going to spend it *together*."
"Even if we're fighting?"
"Why not?" she dared.

"I don't want to fight," he said, lunging up and twisting. Jane found herself on her back, blinking up at him in astonishment. Slowly he entered her, pushing her legs high. She closed her eyes, excitement spiraling through her. He was right; the time was far better spent making love.

She didn't try again to convince him that they had a future together. She knew from experience just how hard-headed he was; he'd have to figure it out for himself. So she spent her time loving him, trying to make certain that he never forgot her, that no other woman could begin to give him the pleasure that she did. This would be her goodbye.

Late in the night she leaned over him. "You're afraid," she accused softly. "You've seen so much that you're afraid to let yourself love anyone, because you know how easily a world can be wrecked."

His voice was tired. "Jane, let it be."

"All right. That's my last word, except for this: if you decide to take a chance, come get me."

She crept out of bed early the next morning and left him sleeping. She knew that he was too light a sleeper not to have awakened some time during the shower she took, or while she was dressing, but he didn't roll over or in any way indicate that he was awake, so she preserved the pretence between them. Without even kissing him, she slipped out the door. After all, they'd already said their goodbyes.

At the sound of the door closing Grant rolled over in the bed, his eyes bleak as he stared at the empty room.

Jane and her parents fell into each other's arms, laughing and crying and hugging each other exuberantly. Her return called for a family celebration that lasted hours, so it was late that night before she and her father had any time alone. Jane had few secrets from her father; he was too shrewd, too realistic. By silent, instinctive agreement, they kept from her mother the things that would upset her, but Jane was like her father in that she had an inner toughness.

She told him how the entire situation in Costa Rica had come about, and even told him about the trek through the rain forest. Because he was shrewd, he picked up on the nuances in her voice when she mentioned Grant.

"You're in love with Sullivan, aren't you?"

She nodded, sipping her glass of wine. "You met him. What did you think about him?" The answer was important to her, because she trusted her

father's judgment of character.
"I thought him unusual. There's something in his eyes that's almost scary. But I trusted him with my daughter's life, if that tells you what you want to know, and I'd do so again."
"Would you mind having him in the family?"
"I'd welcome him with open arms. I think he could keep you in one place," James said grumpily.
"Well, I asked him to marry me, but he turned me down. I'm going to give him a while to stew over it; then I'm going to fight dirty."
Her father grinned, the quick, cheerful grin that his daughter had inherited. "What are you planning?"
"I'm going to chase that man like he's never been chased before. I think I'll stay here for a week or two; then I'm going to Europe."
"But he's not in Europe!"
"I know. I'll chase him from a distance. The idea is for him to know how much he misses me, and he'll miss me a lot more when he finds out how far away I am."
"But how is he going to find out?"
"I'll arrange that somehow. And even if it doesn't work, a trip to Europe is never a waste!"
It was odd how much he missed her. She'd never been to the farm, but sometimes it seemed haunted by her. He'd think he heard her say something and turn to find no one there. At night… God, the nights were awful! He couldn't sleep, missing her soft weight sprawled on top of him.
He tried to lose himself in hard physical work. Chores piled up fast on a farm, and he'd been gone for two weeks.
With the money he'd been paid for finding Jane, he was able to free the farm from debt and still have plenty left over, so he could have hired someone to do the work for him. But the work had been therapy for him when he'd first come here, still weak from his wounds, and so tightly drawn that a pine cone dropping from a tree in the night had been enough to send him diving from the bed, reaching for his knife.
So he labored in the sun, doing the backbreaking work of digging new holes for the fence posts, putting up new sections of fencing, patching and painting the barn. He reroofed the house, worked on the old tractor that had come with the farm; and thought about doing more planting the next spring. All he'd planted so far was a few vegetables for himself, but if he was going

to own a farm, he might as well farm it. A man wouldn't get rich at it, not on this scale, but he knew how to do it. Working the earth gave him a measure of peace, as if it put him in contact with the boy he'd once been, before war had changed his life.

In the distance loomed the mountains, the great, misty mountains where the ghosts of the Cherokee still walked. The vast slopes were uninhabited now, but then, only a few hardy souls other than the Cherokee had ever called the mountains home. Jane would like the mountains. They were older, wreathed in silvery veils, once the mightiest mountain range on earth, but worn down by more years than people could imagine. There were places in those mountains where time stood still.

The mountains, and the earth, had healed him, and the process had been so gradual that he hadn't realized he was healed until now. Perhaps the final healing had come when Jane had shown him how to laugh again.

He had told her to let it be, and she had. She had left in the quiet morning, without a word, because he'd told her to go. She loved him; he knew that. He'd pretended that it was something else, the pressure of stress that had brought them together, but even then he'd known better, and so had she. Well, hell! He missed her so badly that he hurt, and if this wasn't love, then he hoped he never loved anyone, because he didn't think he could stand it. He couldn't get her out of his mind, and her absence was an empty ache that he couldn't fill, couldn't ease.

She'd been right; he was afraid to take the chance, afraid to leave himself open to more hurt. But he was hurting anyway. He'd be a fool if he let her get away.

But first there were old rifts to try to heal.

He loved his parents, and he knew they loved him, but they were simple people, living close to the earth, and he'd turned into someone they didn't recognize. His sister was a pretty, blond woman, content with her job at the local library, her quiet husband, and her three children. It had been a couple of years since he'd even seen his nephew and two nieces. When he'd stopped by the year before to tell his parents that he'd retired and had bought a farm in Tennessee, they'd all been so uncomfortable that he'd stayed for only a few hours, and had left without seeing Rae, or the kids.

So he drove down to Georgia, and stood on the weathered old porch, knocking on the door of the house where he'd grown up. His mother came to the door, wiping her hands on her apron. It was close to noon; as always,

as it had been from the time he could remember, she was cooking lunch for his father. But they didn't call it lunch in this part of the country; the noon meal was dinner, and the evening meal was supper.

Surprise lit her honey-brown eyes, the eyes that were so like his, only darker. "Why, son, this is a surprise. What on earth are you knocking for? Why didn't you just come in?"

"I didn't want to get shot," he said honestly.

"Now, you know I don't let your daddy keep a gun in the house. The only gun is that old shotgun, out in the barn. What makes you say a thing like that?" Turning, she went back to the kitchen, and he followed. Everything in the old frame house was familiar, as familiar to him as his own face.

He settled his weight in one of the straight chairs that were grouped around the kitchen table. This was the table he'd eaten at as a boy. "Mama," he said slowly, "I've been shot at so much that I guess I think that's the normal way of things."

She was still for a moment, her head bent; then she resumed making her biscuits. "I know, son. We've always known. But we didn't know how to reach you, how to bring you back to us again. You was still a boy when you left, but you came back a man, and we didn't know how to talk to you."

"There wasn't any talking to me. I was still too raw, too wild. But the farm that I bought, up in Tennessee… it's helped."

He didn't have to elaborate, and he knew it. Grace Sullivan had the simple wisdom of people who lived close to the land. She was a farm girl, had never pretended to be anything else, and he loved her because of it.

"Will you stay for dinner?"

"I'd like to stay for a couple of days, if I won't be messing up any plans."

"Grant Sullivan, you know your daddy and I don't have any *plans* to go off gallivanting anywhere."

She sounded just like she had when he had been five years old and had managed to get his clothes dirty as fast as she could put them on him. He remembered how she'd looked then, her hair dark, her face smooth and young, her honey-gold eyes sparkling at him.

He laughed, because everything was getting better, and his mother glanced at him in surprise. It had been twenty years since she'd heard her son laugh.

"That's good," he said cheerfully. "Because it'll take me at least that long to tell you about the woman I'm going to marry."

"What!" She whirled on him, laughing, too. "You're pulling my leg! Are you really going to get married? Tell me about her!"
"Mama, you'll love her," he said. "She's nuts."
He'd never thought that finding her would be so hard. Somehow he'd thought that it would be as simple as calling her father and getting her address from him, but he should have known. With Jane, nothing was ever as it should be.
To begin with, it took him three days to get in touch with her father. Evidently her parents had been out of town, and the housekeeper either hadn't known where Jane was, or she'd been instructed not to give out any information. Considering Jane's circumstances, he thought it was probably the latter. So he cooled his heels for three days until he was finally able to speak to her father, but that wasn't much better.
"She's in Europe," James explained easily enough. "She stayed here for about a week, then took off again."
Grant felt like cursing. "Where in Europe?"
"I don't really know. She was vague about it. You know Jane."
He was afraid that he did. "Has she called?"
"Yes, a couple of times."
"Mr. Hamilton, I need to talk to her. When she calls again, would you find out where she is and tell her to stay put until I get in touch?"
"That could be a couple of weeks. Jane doesn't call regularly. But if it's urgent, you may know someone who knows exactly where she is. She did mention that she's talked to a friend of yours… let's see, what was his name?"
"Sabin," Grant supplied, grinding his teeth in rage.
"Yes, that's it. Sabin. Why don't you give him a call? It may save you a lot of time."
Grant didn't want to call Kell; he wanted to see him face to face and strangle him. Damn him! If he'd recruited Jane into that gray network…! He was wasting time and money chasing over the country after her, and his temper was short when he reached Virginia. He didn't have the clearance to go in, so he called Kell directly. "Sullivan. Clear me through. I'll be there in five minutes."
"Grant—"
Grant hung up, not wanting to hear it over the phone.
Ten minutes later he was leaning over Kell's desk. "Where is she?"

"Monte Carlo."
"Damn it!" he yelled, pounding his fist on the desk. "How could you drag her into this?"
"I didn't drag her," Kell said coolly, his dark eyes watchful. *"She* called *me*. She said she'd noticed something funny and thought I might like to know. She was right; I was highly interested."
"How could she call you? Your number isn't exactly listed."
"I asked her the same thing. It seems she was standing beside you when you called me from Dallas."
Grant swore, rubbing his eyes. "I should have known. I should have been expecting it after she hot-wired that truck. She watched me do it, just once, then did it herself the next time."
"If it's any consolation, she didn't get it exactly right. She remembered the numbers, but not the right order. She told me I was the fifth call she'd placed."
"Oh, hell. What kind of situation is she in?"
"A pretty explosive one. She's stumbled across a high rolling counterfeiter. He has some high quality plates of the pound, the franc and several denominations of our currency. He's setting up the deal now. Some of our comrades are very interested."
"I can imagine. Just what does she think she can do?"
"She's going to try to steal the plates."
Grant went white. "And you were going to let her?"
"Damn it, Grant!" Kell exploded. "It's not a matter of letting her and you know it! The problem is stopping her without tipping the guy off and sending him so deep underground we can't find him. I've got agents tiptoeing all around her, but the guy thinks he's in love with her, and his buyer has watchdogs sniffing around, and we simply can't snatch her without blowing the whole thing sky high!"
"All right, all right. I'll get her out of it."
"How?" Kell demanded.
"I'll get the plates myself, then jerk her out of there and make damned certain she never calls you again!"
"I would deeply appreciate it," Kell said. "What are you going to do with her?"
"Marry her."

Something lightened in Kell's dark face, and he leaned back in his chair, looping his hands behind his head. "Well, I'll be damned. Do you know what you're getting into? That woman doesn't think like most people."
That was a polite way of saying it, but Kell wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. Within moments of meeting her, Grant had realized that Jane was just a little unorthodox. But he loved her, and she couldn't get into too much trouble on the farm.
"Yeah, I know. By the way, you're invited to the wedding."
Jane smiled at Felix, her eyes twinkling at him. He was such a funny little guy; she really liked him, despite the fact that he was a counterfeiter and was planning to do something that could really damage her country. He was slightly built, with shy eyes and a faint stutter. He loved to gamble, but had atrocious luck; that is, he'd had atrocious luck until Jane had started sitting beside him. Since then he'd been winning regularly, and he was now devoted to her.
Despite everything she was having fun in Monte Carlo. Grant was being slow coming around, but she hadn't been bored. If she had trouble sleeping, if she sometimes woke to find her cheeks wet, that was something she had to accept. She missed him. It was as if part of herself were gone. Without him there was no one she could trust, no one in whose arms she could rest. It was a dangerous tightrope she was walking, and the excitement of it helped keep her from settling into depression. The only thing was, how much longer was it going to last? If she saw that Felix was finally going to make up his mind who to sell to, she would be forced to do something—fast—before the plates got into the wrong hands.
Felix was winning again, as he had every night since he'd met Jane. The elegant casino was buzzing, and the chandeliers rivaled in brilliance the diamonds that were roped about necks and dripping from ears. The men in their formal evening wear, the women in their gowns and jewels, casually wagering fortunes on the roll of the dice or the turn of a card, all created an atmosphere that was unequaled anywhere in the world. Jane fit into it easily, slim and graceful in her black silk gown, her shoulders and back bare. Jet earrings dangled to her shoulders, and her hair was piled on top of her head in a careless, becoming twist. She wore no necklace, no bracelets, only the earrings that touched the glowing gold of her skin.
Across the table Bruno was watching them closely. He was becoming impatient with Felix's dithering, and his impatience was likely to force her

hand.
Well, why not? She'd really waited as long as she could. If Grant had been interested, he'd have shown up before now.
She stood and bent down to kiss Felix on the forehead. "I'm going back to the hotel," she said, smiling at him. "I have a headache."
He looked up, dismayed. "Are you really ill?"
"It's just a headache. I was on the beach too long today. You don't have to leave; stay and enjoy your game."
He began to look panicky, and she winked at him. "Why don't you see if you can win now without me? Who knows, it may not be me at all."
He brightened, the poor little man, and turned back to his game with renewed fervor. Jane left the casino and hurried back to the hotel, going straight to her room. She always allowed for being followed, because she sensed that she always was. Bruno was a very suspicious man. Swiftly she stripped off her gown, and she was reaching into the closet for a dark pair of pants and a shirt when a hand closed over her mouth and a muscular arm clamped around her waist.
"Don't scream," a low, faintly raspy voice said in her ear, and her heart jumped. The hand left her mouth, and Jane turned in his arms, burying her face against his neck, breathing in the delicious, familiar male scent of him.
"What are you doing here?" she breathed.
"What do you think I'm doing here?" he asked irritably, but his hands were sliding over her nearly-naked body, reacquainting himself with her flesh.
"When I get you home, I just may give you that spanking I've threatened you with a couple of times. I get you away from Turego, and as soon as my back is turned you plunge right back into trouble."
"I'm not in trouble," she snapped.
"You couldn't prove it by me. Get dressed. We're getting out of here."
"I can't! There are some counterfeit plates that I've got to get. My room is being watched, so I was going to climb out the window and work my way around to Felix's room. I have a pretty good idea where he's hidden them."
"And you say you're not in trouble."
"I'm not! But really, Grant, we've got to get those plates."
"I've already got them."
She blinked, her brown eyes owlish. "You do? But… how? I mean, how did you know—never mind. Kell told you, didn't he? Well, where did Felix have them hidden?"

She was enjoying this. He sighed. "Where do you think he had them?"
"In the ceiling. I think he pushed up a square of the ceiling and hid the plates in there. It's really the only good hiding place in the room, and he isn't the type to put them in a safety deposit box in a bank, which is where I'd have put them."
"No, you wouldn't," he said, annoyed. "You'd have put them in the ceiling, just like he did."
She grinned. "I was right!"
"Yes, you were right." And he probably never should have told her. Turning her around, he gave her a pat on the bottom. "Start packing. Your little friend is probably the nervous sort who checks his hidey-hole every night before he goes to bed, and we want to be long gone before he does."
She dragged down her suitcases and started throwing clothes into them. He watched her, sweat popping out on his brow. She looked even better than he remembered, her breasts ripe and round, her legs long and shapely. He hadn't even kissed her. He caught her arm, swinging her around and catching her close to him. "I've missed you," he said, and lowered his mouth to hers.
Her response was instantaneous. She rose on tiptoe, moving against him, her arms coiled around his neck and her fingers deep in his hair. He'd had a haircut, and the dark blond strands slipped through her fingers to fall back in place, shaped perfectly to his head. "I've missed you, too," she whispered when he released her mouth.
His breathing was ragged as he reluctantly let her go. "We'll finish this when we have more time. Jane, would you please put on some clothes?"
She obeyed without question, pulling on green silk trousers and a matching green tunic. "Where are we going?"
"Right now? We're driving to the beach and turning the plates over to an agent. Then we're going to catch a flight to Paris, London and New York."
"Unless, of course, Bruno is waiting just outside the door, and instead we end up sailing across the Mediterranean."
"Bruno isn't waiting outside the door. Would you hurry?"
"I'm finished."
He picked up the suitcases and they went downstairs, where he checked her out. It all went like clockwork. There was no sign of Bruno, or any of the men she had dubbed "Bruno's goons." They turned the plates over to the promised agent and drove to the airport. Jane's heart was thudding with a

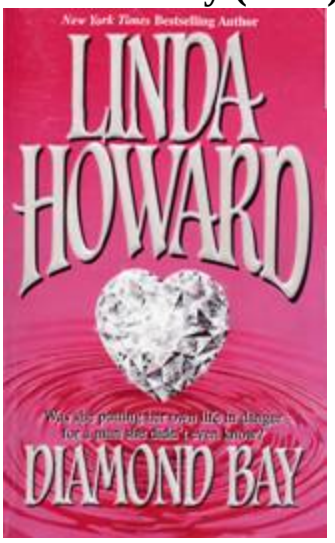
slow, strong, powerful beat as Grant slipped into the seat beside her and buckled himself in. "You know, you never did actually tell me what you're doing here. You're retired, remember? You're not supposed to be doing things like this."
"Don't play innocent," he advised, giving her a look from molten gold eyes. "I saw your fine hand in this from the beginning. It worked. I came after you. I love you; I'm taking you to Tennessee; and we're going to be married. But you'd better remember that I'm on to your tricks now, and I know you're too slick for your own good. Did I leave anything out?"
"No," Jane said, settling back in her seat. "I think you have everything covered."

Epilogue

He lay on his back in the bed, his arms around Jane. Her dark hair was spread across his shoulder, and he stroked her head, her back, the rounded curve of her buttocks. "I couldn't sleep without you," he murmured. "I got used to you using me as a bed."
She was silent, but he knew that she wasn't asleep. They were tired, but too wound up to sleep. Once they'd arrived in Paris, going on to London and New York hadn't seemed that important. Instead they'd checked into a hotel, and the loving had been even better than before, the sensations sharpened by the time they'd spent apart.
"What would I have done if you hadn't come after me?" she whispered, and the desolation of the lonely days without him was in her voice.
"You knew I'd come."
"I hoped. I wasn't certain."
"You can be certain from now on," he said, rolling over and pinning her beneath him. "I love you. I hope you can be happy in Tennessee, because I really don't think I can live in a city, not now. That's been worrying me."
A slow smile touched her lips. "Haven't you learned by now that I'm not addicted to cities, either? I can be happy anywhere; if you're there with me. Besides, I think the country will be a good place for the kids to grow up."
"We haven't talked about that, have we? I'd like to have kids, but if you want to wait a while, I'm willing."

She traced the outline of his mouth with her fingertip. "It's a little too late now to think about waiting. If you wanted to wait, you should have stayed away from me in the jungle. And in Mexico City. And in D.C."
He swallowed, staring at her. "Are you telling me what I think you're telling me?"
"I think I am. I'm not certain yet, but all the signs are there. Do you mind?"
"Mind? God, no!"
The thick emotion in his voice warmed her all over, and she put her arms around him, closing her eyes and hugging him closely. She no longer minded the dark, because Grant was there.

Diamond Bay (1987)



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Chapter One

The clean golden sun still burned its heat into his flesh, all along his bare chest and long legs, even though it was near sundown. The lengthening rays threw dancing sparkles onto the tips of the waves, mesmerizing him as he stared at them. No, it wasn't the glittering water that mesmerized him, it was the fact that he had nothing more important to do than simply stare at it. He'd forgotten how peace sounded, how it *felt.* For a long, wonderful month of pure solitude he could relax and be only a man. He would fish when he felt like it, or cruise the warm, hypnotic waters of the Gulf if he felt restless. The water drew him on endlessly. Here it was midnight blue; there it was brilliant turquoise; over there it was a pale, shimmering green. He had money for fuel and provisions, and only two people in the world knew where he was or how to reach him. At the end of the month's vacation he would return to the gray world he'd chosen and lose himself in the shadows, but for now he could lie in the sun, and that was all he wanted. Kell Sabin was tired, tired of the endless struggle, the secrecy and maneuvering, the danger and deception of his job. It was a vitally important job, but for this month he would let someone else do it. This month was his; he could almost understand what had lured Grant Sullivan, his old friend and the best agent he'd ever had, to the quiet mystery of the Tennessee mountains. Sabin had been a top agent himself, a legend prowling the Golden Triangle and, later, the Middle East and South America, all the hot spots of the world. Now he was a department chief, the shadowy figure behind a group of crack agents who followed his directions and his training. Little was known about him; the security surrounding him was almost absolute. Sabin preferred it that way; he was a loner, a dark man who faced the hard realities of life with both cynicism and acceptance. He knew the drawbacks and dangers of his chosen career, he knew it could be dirty and vicious, but he was a realist and he had accepted all that when he took the job.

Still, it got to him sometimes, and he had to get away from it, live for a little while like a normal citizen. His private escape valve was his custom-made cabin cruiser. His vacations, like everything else about him, were highly guarded secrets, but the days and nights at sea were what kept him human, the only times when he could relax and think, when he could lie naked in

the sun and reestablish his link with his own humanity, or watch the stars at night and regain his perspective.

A white gull soared overhead, giving its plaintive cry. Idly he watched it, free and graceful, framed against the cloudless blue bowl of the sky. The sea breeze brushed lightly over his naked skin, and pleasure brought a rare smile to his dark eyes. There was a streak of untamed savage in him that he had to keep under tight control, but out here, with only the sun and the wind and the water, he could let that part of himself surface. The restrictions of clothing seemed almost sacrilegious out here, and he resented having to dress whenever he went into a port for fuel, or whenever another boat pulled up beside him for a chat, as people were wont to do down here.

The sun had moved lower, dipping its golden edge into the water, when he heard the sound of another motor. He turned his head to watch the cabin cruiser, a little larger than his own, cut leisurely through the waves. That was the only way to get around out here: leisurely. The warmer the clime, the slower the time. Sabin kept his gaze on the boat, admiring the graceful lines and the smooth, powerful sound of the motor. He liked boats, and he liked the sea. His own boat was a prized possession, and a closely guarded secret. No one knew it belonged to him; it was registered to an insurance salesman in New Orleans who had no knowledge at all of Kell Sabin. Even the name of the boat, *Wanda,* had no meaning. Sabin knew no one named Wanda; it was simply a name that he'd chosen. But *Wanda* was completely his, with secrets and surprises of her own. Anyone who really knew him wouldn't have expected anything else, but only one man in the world had ever known the man behind the mask, and Grant Sullivan gave away no secrets.

The sound of the other boat's motor changed as it slowed and turned in his direction. Sabin swore irritably, looking around for the faded denim cutoffs he usually kept on deck for such situations. A voice drifted to him over the water, and he looked at the other boat again. A woman was standing at the forward rail, waving her arm back and forth over her head in a manner that held no urgency, so he guessed they were just looking for a chat and weren't having any sort of trouble. The afternoon sunlight glinted on her red hair, turning it into fire, and for a moment Sabin stared at it, his attention caught by that unusual, glowing shade of red.

A frown put furrows in his brow as he quickly stepped into his cutoffs and zipped them. The boat was still too far away for him to see her face, but that

red hair had aggravated some hidden little memory that was trying to surface. He stared at her as the other boat idled toward him, his black eyes glittering with intensity. There was something about that hair….

Suddenly every instinct in Sabin shrilled an alarm and he hit the deck, not questioning that spine-tingling uneasiness; it had saved his life too many times for him to hesitate. He spread his fingers on the warm wood of the deck, acknowledging that he could be making a fool of himself, but he'd rather be a live fool than a dead wise man. The sound of the other motor dropped off, as if it had slowed even more, and Sabin made another decision. Still on his stomach, with the scent of polish in his nostrils and the scrape of wood on his bare flesh, he snaked his way over to a storage compartment.

He never went anywhere without some means of self-defense. The rifle that he pulled out of the storage compartment was powerful and accurate, though he knew it would be a temporary deterrent at best. If his instincts were wrong, then he would have no use for it at all; if his instincts were right, they would have far more firepower than this rifle, because they would have prepared for this.

Swearing under his breath, Sabin checked that the rifle was on full automatic fire and crawled back over to the rail. Coolly choosing his cover, he let the barrel of the rifle be seen, and he eased his head around just enough to let him see the other boat. It was still closing on him, less than a hundred yards away.

"That's close enough!" he yelled, not knowing if his voice would carry clearly enough to be understood over the noise of the motor. But that didn't matter, as long as they could tell he was yelling something.

The boat slowed, barely moving through the water now, seventy-five yards away. Suddenly it seemed to be swarming with people, and none of them looked like the ordinary Gulf fishermen or leisure boaters, because every one of them was armed, even the red-haired woman. Sabin scanned them quickly, his extraordinary eyesight picking up details of shape and size. He was able to identify the types of weapons without having to think about it, he was so familiar with them. It was the people he watched, and his eyes darted back to one man. Even at that distance, and even though he stood a little behind everyone else, there was something familiar about him, just as there was something familiar about the woman.

There was no doubt now, and icy, deadly calm settled over him, just as it always did in combat situations. He didn't waste time worrying about how badly outnumbered he was; instead he began weighing and discarding options, each decision made in the flash of a second.

A flat CRACK! split the twilight – the sound of rifle fire over open water. He caught the faint, warm percussion of the bullet as it split the air over his head and splintered the wood of the cabin behind him. With a motion as smooth as oiled silk Sabin took aim and fired, then pulled his head down, all in one continuous flow. He didn't need the involuntary sharp cry that pierced the air to tell him that he hadn't missed; Sabin would have been both surprised and furious if he *had*.

"Sabin!" The amplified voice echoed tinnily across the water. "You know you don't have a chance! Make it easy on yourself."

The accent was very good, but it wasn't quite American. The offer was only what he'd expected. His best chance was to outrun them; *Wanda's* speed was just one of her unusual features. But to outrun them, he had to get to the controls up top, which meant exposing himself to their fire during the climb up the ladder.

Sabin weighed the situation and accepted that he had perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of reaching the top, maybe less, depending on how surprised they were by his move. On the other hand, he had no chance at all if he simply sat there and tried to hold them off with one rifle. He had a lot of ammunition, but they would have more. Moving was a risk he had to take, so he didn't waste time worrying about his diminishing chances. He took a deep breath, held it, then exhaled slowly, coiling his steely body in preparation. He needed to get as high up the ladder with the first jump as he could. Gripping the rifle firmly, he took another breath and leaped. His finger pressed the trigger as he moved, the automatic fire making the weapon buck in his hand and forcing everyone on the other boat to take cover. His outstretched right hand caught the top rung of the ladder, and his bare feet barely touched before launching him higher. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the white bursts even as he swung himself over the top and two red-hot sledgehammers slammed into his body. Only sheer momentum and determination carried him onto the deck, and kept him from falling to the lower one. Black mist almost obscured his vision, and the sound of his own breathing was loud in his ears.

He'd dropped the rifle. "Goddammit." *He'd dropped the rifle!* he thought furiously. He took a deep breath, forcing the black mist away, and summoned the strength to turn his head. The rifle still lay there, clutched in his left hand, but he couldn't feel it. The left side of his body was washed with his own blood, almost black in the dwindling light. His chest heaving with his rapid breathing, Sabin reached across with his right hand and got the rifle. The feel of it in his hand made things a little better, but not much. Sweat broke out and ran off him in rivers, mixing with his blood. He had to do something, or they'd be on him.

His left arm and leg wouldn't obey the commands of his brain, so he ignored them, dragging himself over to the side using only his right arm and leg. Bracing the rifle against his right shoulder, he fired at the other boat again, letting them know he was still alive and dangerous so they wouldn't come rushing in.

Glancing down, he took stock of his injuries. A bullet had gone through the outside muscle of his left thigh, another through his left shoulder; each was serious enough on its own. After the first burning impact his shoulder and arm had gone numb, useless, and his leg wouldn't support his weight, but he knew from experience that the numbness would soon begin to fade, and with the pain he would regain some use of his wounded muscles, if he could afford to wait that long.

He risked another look and saw that the other boat was circling behind him. The upper deck was open at the rear, and they would have a clear shot at him.

"Sabin! We know you're hurt! Don't make us kill you!"

No, they would much rather have him alive, for "questioning," but he knew they wouldn't take any chances. They would kill him if they had to, rather than let him escape.

Grinding his teeth, Sabin dragged himself over to the controls and reached up to turn the key in the ignition. The powerful engine coughed into life. He couldn't see where he was going, but that didn't matter, even if he rammed the other cruiser. Panting, he slumped back to the deck, trying to gather his strength; he had to reach the throttle, and he had only a few moments left. Hot pain was spreading over his entire left side, but his arm and leg were beginning to respond now, so he figured that was a fair trade. He ignored the growing pain and levered himself up on his right arm, forcing his left arm to move, to reach, until his bloody fingers touched the throttle and

shoved it into forward gear. The cruiser began sliding through the water with slowly increasing speed, and he heard the shouts from the other boat. "That's it, girl," he panted, encouraging the boat. "Let's go, let's go." He stretched again, every muscle in his body shaking from the effort, and managed to reach far enough to push the throttle wide open. The boat leaped beneath him, responding to the surge of power with a deep-throated roar.

At full speed he had to see where he was going. He was taking another chance, but those chances were getting better with every foot of distance he put between himself and the other boat. A grunt of pain exploded from his throat as he hauled himself to his feet, and salty sweat stung his eyes; he had to keep most of his weight on his right leg, but the left one didn't buckle beneath him, which was all he asked. He glanced over his shoulder at the other cruiser. He was rapidly pulling away from them, even though they were giving chase.

There was a figure on the top deck of the other boat, and he was settling a bulky pipe onto his shoulder.

Sabin didn't even have to think to know what it was; he'd seen rocket launchers too many times not to recognize them on sight. Only a second before the flash, and barely two seconds before the rocket exploded his boat, Sabin went over the right side, into the turquoise water of the Gulf. He went deep, as deep as he could, but he had very little time, and the percussion rolled him through the water like a child's toy. Pain seared his wounded muscles and everything went black again; it was for only a second or two, but it was enough to completely disorient him. He was choking, and he didn't know where the surface was. The water wasn't turquoise now, it was black, and it was pressing down on him.

The years of training saved him. Sabin had never panicked, and now wasn't the time to start. He stopped fighting the water and forced himself to relax, and his natural buoyancy began carrying him to the surface. Once he could tell which direction was up, he began swimming as well as he could, though he could barely move his left arm and leg. His lungs were burning when he finally bobbed to the surface and gulped the warm, salt-scented air.

Wanda was burning, sending black smoke billowing into a pearlescent sky that held only the last few moments of light. Darkness had already spread over the earth and sea, and he seized it as his only available cover. The other boat was circling the *Wanda,* playing its spotlight over the burning

wreckage and the surrounding ocean; he could feel the water vibrating with the power of the engines. Unless they found his body – or as much of it as they could realistically expect to remain – they would search for him; they'd have to. They couldn't afford to do anything else. His priority remained the same: he had to put as much distance as he could between himself and them.

Clumsily he rolled to his back and began a one-sided backstroke, not stopping until he was well away from the glare of the burning boat. His chances weren't good; he was at least two miles from shore, probably closer to three. He was weak from loss of blood, and he could barely move his left arm and leg. Added to that were the chances that the predators of the sea would be drawn to him by his wounds before he got anywhere close to land. He gave a low, cynical laugh, and choked as a wave hit him in the face. He was caught between the human sharks and the sharks of the sea, and damned if it really made any difference which one got him, but they would both have to work for it. He didn't intend to make it easy for them. He took a deep breath and floated while he struggled out of his shorts, but his twisting efforts made him sink, and he had to fight his way back to the surface. He held the garment in his teeth while he considered the best tactics to use. The denim was old, thin, almost threadbare; he should be able to tear it. The problem was in staying afloat while he did it. He would have to use his left arm and leg, or he'd never be able to manage it.

He had no choice; he had to do what was necessary, despite the pain.

He thought he might pass out again when he began treading water, but the moment passed, though the pain didn't lessen. Grimly he chewed on the edge of the shorts, trying to get a tear started in the fabric. He forced the pain out of his mind as his teeth shredded the threads, and he hastily tore the garment up to the waistband, where the reinforced fabric and double-stitching stopped his progress. He began tearing again, until he had four loose strips of cloth attached to the waistband; then he began chewing along the waistband. The first strip came loose, and he held it in his fist while he freed the second strip.

He rolled to his back and floated, groaning as his wounded leg relaxed. Quickly he knotted the two strips together to get enough length to wrap around his leg. Then he tied the makeshift tourniquet around his thigh, making certain that the cloth covered both the entrance and exit wounds. He

pulled it as tightly as he could without cutting off circulation, but he had to put pressure on the wounds to stop them from bleeding.
His shoulder was going to be more difficult. He bit and pulled until he tore the other two strips from the waistband, then knotted them together. How was he going to position this makeshift bandage? He didn't even know if he had an exit wound in his back, or if the bullet was still in his shoulder. Slowly, awkwardly, he moved his right hand and felt his back, but his water-puckered fingers could find only smooth skin, which meant that the bullet was still in him. The wound was high on his shoulder, and bandaging it would be almost impossible with the materials he had.
Even tied together, the two strips weren't enough. He began chewing again, tore off two more strips, then tied them to the other two. The best he could manage was to sling the strip over his back, bring it around under his armpit and tie it in a tight loop over his shoulder. Then he folded the remnant of his cutoffs into a pad and slipped it under the loop, positioning it over the wound. It was a clumsy bandage at best, but his head was swimming, and deadly lethargy was creeping into his limbs. Grimly Sabin pushed both sensations away, staring fixedly at the stars in an effort to orient himself. He wasn't going to give up; he could float, and he could manage to swim for short periods of time. It might take a while, but unless a shark got him, he was damned well going to make it to shore. He rolled onto his back and rested for a few minutes before he began the slow, agonizing process of swimming to shore.

It was a hot night, even for mid-July in central Florida. Rachel Jones had automatically adjusted her habits to the weather, taking it easy, either doing her chores early in the morning or putting them off until late afternoon. She had been up at sunrise, hoeing the weeds out of her small vegetable garden, feeding the geese, washing her car. When the temperature soared into the nineties she moved inside and put a load of clothes in the washer, then settled down for a few hours of research and planning for the journalism course she had agreed to teach at night in Gainesville when the fall quarter began. With the ceiling fan whirring serenely overhead, her dark hair pinned on top of her head, and wearing only a tank top and an old pair of shorts, Rachel was comfortable despite the heat. A glass of iced tea sat constantly beside her elbow, and she sipped at it as she read.

The geese honked peacefully as they waddled from one section of grass to the other, herded by Ebenezer Duck, the cantankerous old leader. Once there was an uproar when Ebenezer and Joe, the dog, got into a dispute over which one had the right to the patch of cool green grass beneath the oleander shrub. Rachel went to the screen door and shouted at her rambunctious pets to be quiet, and that was the most exciting event of the day. That was the way most of her days went during the summer. Things picked up during the fall, when the tourist season began and her two souvenir shops in Treasure Island and Tarpon Springs began doing a lively trade. With the journalism course her days would be even busier than usual, but the summers were a time for relaxing. She worked intermittently on her third book, feeling no great pressure to finish it, since her deadline wasn't until Christmas and she was well ahead of schedule. Rachel's energy was deceptive, because she managed to accomplish so much without ever seeming to hurry.

She was at home here, her roots deep in the sandy soil. The house she lived in had been her grandfather's, and the land had been in the family for a hundred and fifty years. The house had been remodeled in the fifties and no longer resembled the original frame structure. When Rachel had moved in she had renovated the inside, but the place still gave her a sense of permanency. She knew the house and the land surrounding it as well as she knew her own face in the mirror. Probably better, because Rachel wasn't given to staring at herself. She knew the tall pine thicket in front of her and the rolling grassland at her back, every hill and tree and bush. A path wound through the pines and down to the beach where the Gulf waters rolled in. The beach was undeveloped here, partly because of the unusual roughness of the shore, partly because the beachfront property was owned by people who had had it for generations and weren't inclined to see condominiums and motels rise in their faces. This was prime cattle country; Rachel's property was almost surrounded by a huge ranch, owned by John Rafferty, and Rafferty was as reluctant as she to sell any land for development.

The beach was Rachel's special haven, a place for walking and thinking and finding peace in the relentless, eternal surge of the water. It was called Diamond Bay because of the way the light splintered on the waves as they crashed over the underwater boulders that lined the mouth of the little bay. The water shimmied and glittered like thousands of diamonds as it rolled to

shore. Her grandfather had taught her to swim in Diamond Bay; sometimes it seemed as if her life had begun in the turquoise water.

Certainly the bay had been the center of the golden days of her childhood, when a visit to Gramps's had been the most fun a young Rachel could imagine. Then her mother died when Rachel was twelve, and the bay became her permanent home. There was something about the ocean that had eased the sharpness of her grief and taught her acceptance. She'd had Gramps, too, and even now the thought of him brought a smile to her face. What a wonderful old man he'd been! He had never been too busy or too embarrassed to answer the sometimes awkward questions an adolescent girl could ask, and had given her the freedom to test her wings while still keeping her solidly grounded in common sense. He had died the year she'd finished college, but even death had met him on his own terms. He had been tired and ill and ready to die, and he'd done it with such humor and acceptance that Rachel had even felt a sort of peace at his going. She had grieved, yes, but the grief had been tempered by the knowledge that it was what he had wanted.

The old house had stood empty then, while Rachel pursued her career as an investigative reporter in Miami. She had met and married B. B. Jones, and life had been good. B.B. had been more than a husband, he had been a friend, and they had thought they had the world on a string. Then B.B.'s violent death had ended that dream and left Rachel a widow at the age of twenty-five. She quit her job and returned here to the bay, once again finding solace in the unending sea. She had been crippled emotionally, but time and the peaceful life had healed her. Still, she felt no urge to return to the fast-paced life she'd led before. This was home, and she was happy with what she was doing now. The two souvenir stores provided an adequate living, and she supplemented her income by writing an occasional article as well as the adventure books that had done so surprisingly well.

This summer was almost exactly like all the other summers she had ever spent at Diamond Bay, except it was hotter. The heat and humidity were almost stifling, and some days she felt like doing nothing more strenuous than lying in the hammock and fanning herself. Sundown brought some relief, but even that was relative. The night brought a light breeze from the Gulf to cool her heated skin, but it was still too hot to sleep. She had already taken a cool shower, and now she sat on the front porch swing in the dark, lazily keeping the swing moving with occasional movements of her foot.

The chains squeaked in time with the chirping of crickets and the croaking of frogs; Joe lay on the porch in front of the screen door, dozing and dreaming his doggy dreams. Rachel closed her eyes, enjoying the breeze on her face and thinking of what she would do the next day: pretty much what she had done today, and the day before, but she didn't mind the repetition. She had enjoyed the old days of excitement, filled with the peculiar seductive power of danger, yet now she also enjoyed the peace of her present life.

Even though she wore only panties and a man's oversize white shirt, with the sleeves rolled up and first three buttons open, she could still feel small beads of sweat forming between her breasts. The heat made her restless, and finally she got to her feet. "I'm going for a walk," she told the dog, who flicked an ear at her but didn't open his eyes.

Rachel hadn't really expected him to join her; Joe wasn't a friendly dog, not even with her. He was independent and antisocial, backing away from an outstretched hand with his hackles raised and teeth showing. She thought he must have been mistreated before he'd shown up in her yard a few years before, but they had formed a truce. She fed him, and he filled the role of guard dog. He still wouldn't allow her to pet him, but he would come instantly to her side if a stranger drove up, and stand there glaring at the intruder until he either decided there was no danger, or the stranger left. If Rachel worked in her garden, Joe was usually close by. It was a partnership based on mutual respect, and both were satisfied with it.

He really had it easy, Rachel thought as she cut across the yard and took the path that wound down through the tall pines to the beach. He wasn't often called on as a guard; few people came to her house, except for the postman. She was at the dead end of an unpaved road that cut through Rafferty's property and hers was the only house. John Rafferty was her only neighbor, and he wasn't the type to drop in for a chat. Honey Mayfield, the local veterinarian, sometimes came by after a call at the Rafferty ranch, and they had developed a rather close friendship, but other than that Rachel was pretty much left alone, which was one reason she felt comfortable roaming around at night wearing only her underwear and a shirt.

The path sloped down a very gradual incline through the pine thicket. The stars were bright and heavy in the sky, and Rachel had walked the path since childhood, so she didn't bother with a flashlight. Even in the pines she could still see well enough to find her way. It was a quarter of a mile from

the house to the beach, an easy walk. She liked walking the beach at night; it was her favorite time to listen to the ocean's power, when the waves were black except for their pearly foam tops. It was also low tide, and Rachel preferred the beach at low tide. It was at low tide that the ocean pulled back to reveal the treasures it had brought in to leave on the sand, like a love offering. She had collected a lot of sea treasures at low tide, and never ceased marveling at the wonders the turquoise Gulf brought to her feet.

It was a beautiful night, moonless and cloudless, and the stars were brighter than she had seen them in years, their light refracted on the waves like countless diamonds. Diamond Bay. It had been well named. The beach was narrow and uneven, with clumps of weeds growing along the edge, and the mouth of the bay was lined with jagged rocks that were especially dangerous at low tide, but for all its imperfections the bay created magic with its combination of light and water. She could stand and watch the glittering water for hours, spellbound by the power and beauty of the ocean. The gritty sand cooled her bare feet, and she dug her toes deeper. The breeze gusted momentarily, lifting her hair away from her face, and Rachel inhaled the clean salt air. There was only herself and the ocean.

The breeze changed directions, flirting with her, blowing strands of hair across her face. She put up her hand to push her hair out of her eyes and paused in midmotion, her eyebrows drawing together fractionally as she stared at the water. She could have sworn she'd seen something. Just for a moment there had been a flash of movement, but now her straining eyes picked up nothing but the rhythmic surge of the waves. Perhaps it had been only a fish, or a large piece of driftwood. She wanted to find a really good piece for a flower arrangement, so she walked to the edge of the waves, pushing her hair back so it wouldn't obscure her vision.

There it was again, bobbing in the water! She took an eager step forward, wetting her feet in the foamy surf. Then the dark object moved again and took on a funny shape. The sheen of the silvery starlight made it look just like an arm, flailing weakly forward, like a tired swimmer struggling for coordination. A muscled arm, at that, and the dark bulk beside it could be a head.

Realization burst, and Rachel's entire body tingled with electricity. She was in the water before she realized it, surging through the waves toward the struggling man. The water impeded her progress, the waves pushing her back with increasing strength; the tide was just beginning to come back in.

The man sank from view, and a hoarse cry burst from her throat. Wildly she splashed toward him, the water up to her breasts now, the waves crashing into her face. Where was he? The black water gave no hint of his location. She reached the spot where she had last seen him, but her frantically searching hands came up empty.

The waves would wash him toward the beach. She turned and staggered back toward shore and saw him again for a moment before his head disappeared beneath the water once more. She struck out, swimming strongly, and two seconds later her hand closed on thick hair. Fiercely she jerked his head above the water, but he was limp, his eyes closed. "Don't you die on me!" she ordered between clenched teeth, catching him under the shoulders and towing him in. Twice the incoming tide knocked her feet out from under her, and each time she thought she would drown before she could struggle free of the man's confining weight.

Then she was in water to her knees, and he sagged limply. She tugged until he was mostly out of the water, then fell on her hands and knees in the sand, coughing and gasping. Every muscle trembling with reaction, she crawled over to him.

Chapter Two

He was naked. Her mind barely registered that fact before it was pushed aside by more urgent matters. She was still gasping for air herself, but she forced herself to hold her breath while she put her hand on his chest to detect a heartbeat, or the up and down movement of breathing. He was still, too still. She could find no hint of life in him, and his skin was so cool….
Of course it was cool! She brought herself up sharply, shaking her head to clear it of the cobwebs of fatigue. He'd been in the water for God only knew how long, but he'd been swimming, however weakly, the first time she'd seen him, and she was letting precious seconds tick past when she should be acting.
It took every ounce of strength she had to roll him onto his stomach, because he wasn't a small man, and the bright starlight revealed that he was solid muscle. Panting, she straddled him and began the rhythmic push-pull action that would stimulate his lungs. That was another thing her grandfather had taught her, and taught her well. Her arms and hands were strong from the gardening and swimming she did, and she worked on the man until she was rewarded by a choking cough and a stream of water gushing out of his mouth.
"There you go," she breathed, not ceasing her efforts. He went into a paroxysm of coughing, his body heaving beneath her; then he groaned hoarsely and shuddered before going limp.
Rachel quickly rolled him onto his back again, bending anxiously over him. His breathing was audible now. It was too rapid and too ragged, but he was definitely breathing. His eyes were closed, and his head rolled to the side when she shook him. He was unconscious.
She sank back on her heels, shivering as the ocean breeze went right through the wet shirt she wore, and stared at the dark head that rested on the sand. Only then did she notice the clumsy binding around his shoulder. She reached to pull it away, thinking that perhaps it was the remnants of the shirt he'd been wearing when he suffered whatever accident had cast him into the ocean. But the wet fabric beneath her fingers was denim, too heavy for a shirt in this weather, and it had been tied into a knot. She pulled at it again, and part of the fabric came away. It had been folded into a pad and shoved under the knot, and high on his shoulder was a wound, a round,

obscene mouth where there shouldn't have been one, showing black in the colorless light.
Rachel stared at the wound, her mind jolting with realization. He'd been shot! She'd seen too many gunshot wounds not to recognize one, even in the pale light of the stars that reduced everything to silvery gleam and black shadows. Her head whipped around and she stared out to sea, straining her eyes to see the telltale pinpoint of light that would warn of a boat, but there was nothing. All her senses were alert, her nerves tingling, and she was instantly wary. People didn't get shot without reason, and it was logical to assume that whoever had shot him the first time would be willing to do so again.
He had to have help, but there was no way she could throw him over her shoulder and carry him up to the house. She stood, scanning the dark sea again to make certain she hadn't missed anything, but the expanse of water was empty. She would have to leave him here, at least for as long as it would take her to run up to the house and back.
Once the decision was made Rachel didn't vacillate. Bending, she grasped the man under his shoulders and dug her heels into the sand, grunting with the effort as she pulled him far enough out of the water that the incoming tide wouldn't lap around him before she could get back. Even in the depths of unconsciousness he felt the pain she caused him by tugging on his wounded shoulder and gave a low, hoarse moan. Rachel winced and felt her eyes burn momentarily, but it was something she had to do. When she judged that he was far enough up the beach she let his shoulders down on the sand as easily as she could, muttering a breathless apology to him even though she knew he couldn't hear her. "I'll be right back," she assured him, touching his wet face briefly. Then she ran.
Normally the path up the beach and through the stand of, pines seemed like a fairly short one, but tonight it stretched endlessly ahead of her. She ran, not caring about stubbing her bare toes on exposed roots, heedless of the small branches that caught at her shirt. One such limb was strong enough to catch her shirt, halting her flight in mid-step. Rachel threw her entire weight against the fabric, too frantic to pause to untangle it. With a sodden ripping sound the shirt tore, and she was free to resume her wild plunge up the slope.
The welcoming lights of her small house were a beacon in the night, the house an oasis of safety and familiarity, but something had gone very

wrong, and she couldn't shut herself inside its refuge. The life of the man on the beach depended on her.

Joe had heard her coming. He stood on the edge of the porch with his hackles raised and a low, rumbling growl issuing from his throat. She could see him silhouetted by the porch light as she sprinted across the yard, but she didn't have time to calm him down. If he bit her, he bit her. She would worry about that later. But Joe didn't even glance at her as she bounded up the steps and slammed the screen door back on its hinges. He remained on guard, facing the pines and the beach, every muscle quivering as he placed himself between Rachel and whatever had sent her flying through the night.

Rachel grabbed the phone, trying to control her breathing so she would be able to talk coherently. Her hands were shaking as she fumbled through the telephone book, looking for an ambulance listing, or a rescue squad – maybe the sheriffs department. Anyone! She dropped the book and swore violently, leaning down to grab it again. Rescue squad – they would have paramedics, and the man needed medical attention more than he needed a police report made out on him.

She found the number and was punching it out, when suddenly her hand froze, and she stared at the phone. A police report. She didn't know why, couldn't logically explain it to herself right then, but abruptly she knew she had to keep this quiet, at least for now. The instincts she had developed during her years as an investigative reporter were sending off steady warning signals, and she obeyed them now as she had obeyed them then. She slammed the receiver back onto its hook, shaking as she stood there and tried to force her thoughts into order.

No police. Not now. The man on the beach was helpless, no threat to her or anyone else. He would have no chance at all if this was more than a simple shooting, an argument that had gotten out of hand. He might be a drug-runner. A terrorist. Anything. But, dear God, he might not be any of those, and she was the only chance he had.

Even as she dragged a quilt from the top of her bedroom closet and bolted from the house again, with Joe right on her heels, jumbled scenes from her past kept skittering through her mind. Scenes of things that weren't quite right, where the glossy surface was accepted and neatly filed away, the real story forever hidden from view. There were other worlds beyond the normal, everyday life that most people lived, layers of danger and deceit and treachery that were never even suspected. Rachel knew about those

layers. They had taken B.B.'s life. The man on the beach might be victim or villain, but if he was a villain she would have time to turn him in to the authorities long before he could recover from his wound; on the other hand, if he was a victim, the only time he had was what she could give him.
He was lying just as she'd left him, the tide swirling just inches from his feet. Gasping, Rachel fell to her knees in the sand beside him and put her hand on his chest, shuddering with relief when she felt the steady up and down movement that told her he was still alive. Joe stood beside her, his head lowered and his ears laid back as a low, continuous growl came from his throat, his eyes never leaving the man.
"It's all right, Joe," she said, automatically giving the dog a reassuring pat, and for once he didn't shy away from her touch. She spread the quilt on the sand, then knelt once again to brace her hands against the man's limp body. She rolled him onto the quilt. This time he didn't make a sound, and she was grateful he couldn't feel the pain she had to cause him.
It took her a few minutes to get him positioned; then she had to rest. She stared uneasily at the sea again, but it was still empty. There was no one out there, though it wasn't unusual to see the night lights of passing boats. Joe brushed against her legs, growling again, and she gathered her strength. Then she leaned down, gathered the two corners of the quilt nearest the man's head and dug her heels into the sand. She grunted with the strain; even with her entire weight thrown into the effort, it was all she could do to drag him a few feet. God, he was heavy!
Maybe when she got him off the beach and onto the slippery pine needles it would be easier. If it got much harder she wouldn't be able to budge him at all. She'd known it would be difficult, but she hadn't realized it would be almost beyond her physical capabilities. She was strong and healthy, and his life depended on her. Surely she could drag him up to her house, even if she had to do it an inch at a time!
That was almost what it amounted to. Even when she managed to get him off the beach, although the pine needles were slippery and the quilt slid over them more easily, her path was uphill. The incline wasn't steep, and she normally walked it easily, but it might as well have been vertical for the effort it took her to drag a two-hundred-pound man up it. She couldn't sustain her forward progress for any length of time at all. She lunged and lurched, falling to her knees several times. Her lungs were pumping and wheezing like bellows, and her entire body was one big ache before she had

him halfway up the slope. She stopped for a moment and leaned against a pine, fighting the inevitable nausea of overexertion. If it hadn't been for the tree supporting her, she might not have been able to stand at all, because her legs and arms were trembling wildly.

An owl hooted somewhere close by, and the crickets chirped on undisturbed; the events of the night meant nothing to them. Joe hadn't left her side, and every time she stopped to rest he crowded against her legs, which was totally unlike him. But he wasn't pressing against her for protection; rather, he was protecting her, putting himself between her and the man. Rachel took a deep breath and steeled herself for another effort, patting Joe on the side and saying, "Good boy, good boy."

She reached down to take hold of the quilt again, and Joe did something extraordinary; he caught the edge of the quilt between his teeth and growled. Rachel stared at him, wondering if he'd taken it in his head to prevent her from dragging it any farther. Cautiously she braced her shaky legs, then leaned back and pulled with every ounce of strength left in her. Still growling, Joe braced his legs and pulled, too, and with his strength added to hers the quilt slid forward several feet.

Rachel stopped in amazement, staring at the dog. "Good boy," she said again. "Good boy!" Had it been a fluke, or would he do it again? He was a big, strong dog; Honey Mayfield had estimated that he weighed almost eighty pounds. If he could be coaxed into pulling with her, she could have the man up the slope in no time.

"Okay," she whispered, taking a better grip on the quilt. "Let's see if you'll do it one more time." She pulled, and Joe pulled, that low growl still rumbling in his throat, as if he disapproved of what she was doing, but would help her if she was determined to do it.

It was much easier with the dog's help, and soon they were out of the pine thicket, with only the dirt road and the small yard to cross before they reached the house. Rachel straightened and stared at the house, wondering how she would ever get him up the two steps to the porch. Well, she'd gotten him this far; she'd get him in the house, one way or another. Bending, she began tugging again.

He hadn't made a sound since that one groan on the beach, not even when they pulled him across exposed roots or the loose rocks on the dirt road. Rachel let the quilt drop and bent over him again, crouching on the cool, damp grass beside him. He was still breathing; after what she'd put him

through, she didn't suppose she could ask for anything more. She stared at the two steps again, a frown puckering her forehead. She needed a conveyor belt to get him up those steps. A growing sense of urgency gnawed at her. Not only did he need attention, but the sooner she got him hidden inside, the better. She was isolated out here at Diamond Bay, so chance visitors weren't likely, but anyone who came looking for the man wouldn't be a chance visitor. Until he was conscious, until she knew more about what was going on, she had to hide him.

The only way she had of getting him up the steps was to catch him under the arms and pull him up them, just as she'd pulled him out of the sea. Joe couldn't help now. She would have to lift the man's head, shoulders and chest – the heaviest part of his body.

She'd gotten her wind back, and sitting there in the grass wasn't going to get anything accomplished. But she was so tired, as if her legs and arms were weighted down with lead; they were sluggish, and she staggered a little when she climbed to her feet. Gently she wrapped the quilt around the man, then positioned herself behind him and slid her hands under his shoulders. Straining, fighting for every bit of leverage, she raised him to a half-sitting position, then quickly propped him up on her legs. He started to fall over, and with a cry Rachel caught him around the chest, looping her arms tightly and locking her hands together. His head fell forward, as limply as a newborn's. Joe worried at her side, growling when he couldn't find a place to catch hold of the quilt.

"It's all right," she panted. "I've got to do it this way now." She wondered if she was talking to the dog or the man. Either was ridiculous, but both seemed important.

The steps were at her back. Keeping her legs under her and her hands tightly locked around the man's chest, Rachel thrust herself backward; her bottom landed on the first step with a jarring thud, and the edge of the top step scraped a raw strip down her back, but she'd managed to lift the man a little. Hot pain seared her back and legs from the strain she was putting on her muscles. "Oh, God," she whispered, "I can't collapse now. In a little while I'll rest, but not now."

Grinding her teeth, she got her feet under her again, using the stronger muscles of her thighs rather than her more vulnerable back muscles. Once more she lunged up and back, pushing with her legs, hauling the man up with her. She was sitting on the top step now, and tears of pain and effort

were stinging her eyes. The man's torso was on the steps, his legs still out in the yard, but if she could get his upper body on the porch the rest would be easy. She had to do the agonizing maneuver one more time.
She didn't know how she did it, where she found the strength. She gathered, lunged, pushed. Suddenly her feet went out from under her and she fell heavily on her back on the wooden porch, the man lying on her legs. Stunned, she lay there for a moment, staring up at the yellow porch light with the tiny bugs swarming around it. She could feel her heart pounding wildly inside her rib cage, hear the wheezing sobs as she tried to suck enough oxygen into her lungs to meet the demand being made by overworked muscles. His weight was crushing her legs. But she was lying full-length on the porch, so if he was lying on her legs, that meant she'd done it. She'd gotten him up the steps!
Groaning, crying, she pushed herself into a sitting position, though she thought the planks beneath her made a wonderful bed. It took her a moment to struggle from beneath his confining weight, and then it was more than she could do to stand. She crawled to the screen door and propped it open, then scrambled back to the man. Just a few more feet. Inside the front door, angle to the right, then into her bedroom. Twenty, thirty feet. That was it, all she would ask of herself.
The original method of catching the edge of the quilt and pulling it seemed like a good idea, and Joe was willing to lend his strength again, but Rachel had precious little strength herself, and the dog had to do most of the work. Slowly, laboriously, they inched the man across the porch. She and Joe couldn't get through the door at the same time, so she went first and knelt to reach for a new grip on the quilt. Growling, his husky body braced, Joe pulled back with all his strength, and man and quilt came through the door. It seemed like a good idea to keep on going while they had him moving; she angled him toward her bedroom, and a scant minute later he was lying on the floor beside her bed. Joe released the quilt as soon as she did and immediately backed away from her, his hackles raised as he reacted to the unfamiliar confines of a house.
Rachel didn't try to pet him now; she'd already asked so much of him, trespassed so far past the set boundaries, that any further overtures would simply be too much. "This way," she said, struggling to her feet and leading him back to the front door. He darted past her, anxious for his freedom again, and disappeared into the darkness beyond the porchlight. Slowly she

released the screen door and closed it, slapping at a gnat that had entered the house.

Methodically, her steps slow and faltering, she locked the front and back doors and pulled the curtains over the windows. Her bedroom had old-fashioned Venetian blinds, and she closed them. That done, the house as secure as she could make it, she stared down at the naked man sprawled on her bedroom floor. He needed medical attention, skilled medical attention, but she didn't dare call a doctor. They were required to report all gunshot wounds to the police.

There was really only one person who could help her now, one person she trusted to keep a secret. Going to the kitchen, Rachel dialed Honey Mayfield, keeping her fingers crossed that some emergency hadn't already called Honey out. The telephone was picked up on the third ring, and a distinctly drowsy voice said, "This is Mayfield."

"Honey, this is Rachel. Can you come out?"

"Now?" Honey yawned. "Has something happened to Joe?"

"No, the animals are fine. But…can you bring your bag? And put it in a grocery sack or something, so no one can see it."

All traces of drowsiness had left Honey's voice. "Is this a joke?"

"No. Hurry."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Two receivers were hung up simultaneously, and Rachel went back to the bedroom, where she crouched beside the man. He was still unconscious, and the handling he had received should have been enough to wake the dead, unless he had lost so much blood that he was in deep shock and near death himself. Sharp, piercing anxiety seized her, and she touched his face with trembling hands, as if she could pass the essence of life to him with her touch. He was warmer now than he had been, and he was breathing with slow, heavy movements of his chest. The wound on his shoulder was sullenly oozing blood, and sand clung to him, even matting his hair, which was still dripping seawater. She tried to brush some of the sand out of his hair and felt something sticky beneath her fingers. Frowning, she looked at the watery redness that stained her hand; then awareness dawned. He had a head injury, as well! And she had dragged him up that slope, then literally manhandled him up the steps and onto the porch! The wonder was that she hadn't killed him!

Her heart pounding, she ran to the kitchen and filled her biggest plastic mixing bowl with warm water, then returned to the bedroom to sit on the floor beside him. As gently as possible, she washed as much blood and sand out of his hair as she could, feeling the thick strands come unmatted between her fingers. Her fingertips found a swelling lump on the right side of his head, just past the hairline at his temple, and she pushed the hair aside to reveal a jagged tear in the skin. Not a gunshot wound, though. It was as if he'd hit his head, or been hit with something. But why was he unconscious now? He had been swimming when she'd first seen him, so he'd been conscious then, coming in on the surge of the tide. He hadn't lost consciousness until he was already inside the mouth of Diamond Bay.

She pressed the cloth to the lump, trying to clean sand out of the cut. Had he hit his head on one of the huge, jagged rocks that lined the mouth of the bay? At low tide they were just under the surface of the water and difficult to avoid unless you knew exactly where they were placed. Knowing what she did about the bay, Rachel decided that that was exactly what had happened, and she bit her lip at the thought of dragging the man around the way she had when he was probably suffering from a concussion. What if her imagination was running wild with her, and she caused the man's death with her fears and hesitation? A concussion was serious, and so was a gunshot wound. Oh, God, was she doing the right thing? Had he been shot by accident and fallen overboard at night, then lost his bearings from pain and confusion? Was someone frantically searching for him right now?

She stared blindly down at him, her hand moving to touch his shoulder as if in apology, her fingers stroking lightly over his warm, darkly tanned skin. What a fool she was! The best thing she could do for this man would be to call the rescue squad immediately and hope that she hadn't done any additional damage to him with her rough handling. She started to get to her feet, to forget her crazy fancies and do the sensible thing, when she realized that she had been staring at his legs, and that the left one had a knotted strip of denim tied around it. Denim. He'd had denim tied around his shoulder, too. Her spine tingled warily, and she left her position by his head to crawl down to his leg, already afraid of what she would find. She couldn't untie the knot; it was pulled too tightly, and the water had only tightened it.

She got a pair of scissors out of her sewing basket and neatly sliced the fabric. The scissors slipped from her suddenly nerveless fingers as she stared down at his thigh, at the ugly wound in the outer muscle. He'd been

shot in the leg, too. She examined his leg almost clinically; there were both entry and exit wounds, so at least the bullet wasn't still inside him. He hadn't been so lucky with his shoulder.

No one was shot *twice* by accident. Someone had deliberately tried to kill him.

"I won't let it happen!" she said fiercely, the sound of her own voice startling her. She didn't know the man who lay on the floor, unmoving and unresponsive, but she crouched over him with all the protectiveness of a lioness for a helpless cub. Until she knew what was going on, no one was going to get a chance to hurt this man.

Her hands gentle, she began washing him as best she could. His nudity didn't embarrass her, under the circumstances she felt it would be silly to flinch from his bare flesh. He was wounded, helpless; had she walked up on him sunbathing in the nude, that would have been a different kettle of fish entirely, but he needed her now, and she wasn't about to let modesty prevent her from helping him.

She heard the sound of a car coming down her road and got hastily to her feet. That should be Honey, and though Joe normally wasn't as hostile to women as he was to men, after the unusual events of the night he might be on edge and take it out on the vet. Rachel unlocked the front door and opened it, stepping out on the front porch. She couldn't see Joe, but a low growl issued from beneath the oleander shrub, and she spoke quietly to him as Honey's car turned into the driveway.

Honey got out and reached into the back seat for two grocery sacks, which she clutched to her as she started across the yard. "Thanks for waiting up," she said clearly. "Aunt Audrey wants you to look at these quilting squares for your shops."

"Come on in," Rachel invited, holding open the screen door. Joe growled again as Honey walked up the steps, but remained beneath the oleander.

Honey sat the two grocery sacks on the floor and watched as Rachel carefully locked the front door again. "What's going on?" she demanded, planting her strong, freckled fists on her hips. "Why am I disguising my bag as quilting squares?"

"In here," Rachel said, leading the way to her bedroom. He still wasn't moving, except for the regular motion of his chest as he breathed. "He's been shot," she said, going down on her knees beside him.

The healthy color washed out of Honey's face, leaving her freckles as bright spots on her nose and cheekbones. "My God, what's going on here? Who is he? Have you called the sheriff? Who shot him?"
"I don't know, to answer three of those questions," Rachel said tensely, not looking at Honey. She kept her eyes trained on the man's face, willing him to open his eyes, wishing he could give her the answers to the questions Honey had asked. "And I'm not going to call the sheriff."
"What do you mean, you're not going to call?" Honey fairly shouted, shaken out of her usual calm capability by the sight of a naked man on Rachel's bedroom floor. "Did *you* shoot him?"
"Of course not! He washed up on the beach!"
"All the more reason to call the sheriff!"
"I *can't*! Rachel lifted her head, her eyes fierce and strangely calm. "I can't risk his life that way."
"Have you lost your sense of reason? He needs a doctor, and the sheriff needs to investigate why he was shot! He could be an escaped felon, or a drug runner. Anything!"
"I know that." Rachel drew a deep breath. "But the shape he's in, I don't think I'm taking that much of a risk. He's helpless. And if things aren't that…cut and dried…he wouldn't stand a chance in a hospital where someone could get to him."
Honey put her hand to her head. "I don't understand what you're talking about," she said wearily. "What do you mean, 'cut and dried'? And why do you think someone would try to get to him? To finish the job they started?"
"Yes."
"Then it's a job for the sheriff!"
"Listen," Rachel said insistently. "When I was a reporter, I saw some things that were…strange. I was on the scene one night when a body was found. The man had been shot in the back of the head. The sheriff of that county did his report, the body was taken in for identification, but when the one-paragraph report appeared in the newspaper two days later it said that he had died of *natural causes!* In a way, I suppose it is natural to die of a bullet in the brain, but it made me curious, and I poked around a little, looking for the file. The file had disappeared. The coroner's office had no record of a man who had been shot in the head. Finally the word filtered down to me to stop snooping, that certain people in government had taken care of the matter and wanted it dropped."

"This doesn't make any sense," Honey muttered.
"The man was an agent!"
"What sort of agent? DEA? FBI? What?"
"You're on the right track, but go deeper."
"A spy? You're saying he was a spy?"
"He was an agent. I don't know for which side, but the entire thing was hushed up and doctored out of existence. After that I started noticing other things that weren't quite what they seemed. I've seen too much to simply assume that this man will be safe if I turn him over to the authorities!"
"You think *he's* an agent?" Honey stared down at him, her brown eyes wide.
Rachel willed herself to answer calmly. "I think there's a chance of it, and I think we'd be risking his life to turn him over to the sheriff. It would be a matter of public record then, and anyone hunting for him would be able to find him."
"He could still be a drug runner. You could be risking your life by protecting him."
"That's a possibility," Rachel admitted. "But he's wounded, and I'm not. He doesn't have any chance at all, except what I can give him. If the DEA has busted up a drug ring there'll be something about it on the scanner, or in the newspaper. If he's an escaped felon it'll be on the news. He's not in any condition to hurt anyone, so I'm safe."
"And if a drug deal has gone sour, and some other unsavory characters are after him? You wouldn't be safe then, from either him or the others."
"That's a chance I'll have to take," Rachel said quietly, her gray eyes level as she met Honey's worried gaze. "I know all the possibilities, and I know the risks. I may be seeing shadows where there aren't any, but think how terrible it would be for him if I'm right."
Honey drew a deep breath and tried again. "It just isn't likely that a wounded spy would wash up on your beach. Things like that don't happen to normal people, and you're still within the bounds of normalcy, even if you are a little eccentric."
Rachel couldn't believe what she was hearing, from Honey of all people, who was usually the most logical person in the state. The night's events were rattling everyone. "It isn't likely that a wounded man would wash up on my beach period, regardless of his occupation! But he did! He's here, and he needs help. I've done what I can, but he needs medical attention. He still has a bullet in his shoulder. Honey, please!"

If possible, Honey went even whiter. "You want *me* to take care of him? He needs a doctor! I'm a veterinarian!"
"I can't call a doctor! Doctors are required to report all gunshot wounds to the police. You can do it. No vital organs are involved. It's his shoulder and his leg, and I think he has a concussion. Please."
Honey glanced down at the naked man and bit her lip. "How did you get him up here?"
"Joe and I pulled him, on this quilt."
"If he has a severe concussion he may need surgery."
"I know. I'll handle that if it's necessary. I'll think of something."
They were both silent for a few minutes, looking down at the man who lay so still and helpless at their feet. "All right," Honey finally said, her voice soft. "I'll do what I can. Let's get him up on the bed."
That was as difficult as getting him up from the beach had been. Because Honey was larger and stronger, she got him under the shoulders, while Rachel slid one arm under his hips and the other under his thighs. As Rachel had noted before, he was a big man, and roped with muscles, which meant that he weighed more for his size than a less muscular man would have. He was also deadweight, and they had to be careful of his injuries.
"Good God," Honey panted. "How did you manage to get him up that slope and into the house, even with Joe's help?"
"I had to do it," Rachel said, because that was the only explanation she had.
Finally they got him on the bed, and Rachel slumped to the floor, totally exhausted by the night's efforts. Honey bent over the man, her freckled face intent as she examined him.

Chapter Three

It was three o'clock in the morning. Honey had left half an hour before, and Rachel had held her weariness at bay long enough to take another much needed shower and wash the salt out of her hair. The heat of the day had finally abated enough that the air was comfortable, but soon it would be sunrise, and the heat would begin to build once more. She needed to sleep now, while she could, but her hair was wet. Sighing, she propped herself against the vanity and turned on the blow-dryer.

The man was still asleep, or unconscious. He was definitely concussed, but Honey hadn't thought it was severe, or that he was in a coma; rather, she'd decided that his continued unconsciousness was due to a combination of fatigue, loss of blood, shock and the blow to his head. She had taken the bullet out of his shoulder, stitched and bandaged his wounds and given him a tetanus injection and an antibiotic; then she and Rachel had cleaned him up, changed the bedding and made him as comfortable as they could. Once she had decided to help, Honey had become her usual capable, unflustered self, for which Rachel would be eternally grateful. Rachel felt that she'd strained herself to the limits physically, yet from somewhere she'd found the strength to help Honey during the nerve-racking operation to remove the bullet from the man's shoulder, then repair the damage done to his body.

Her hair dry, she put on the clean shirt she had brought into the bathroom with her. The face in the mirror didn't look like her own, and she stared at it curiously, noting the colorless skin and the mauve shadows under eyes dark with fatigue. She was punch-drunk from weariness, and she knew it. It was time to go to bed. The only problem was: where?

The man was in her bed, the only bed in the house. She didn't have a regular-sized couch, only two matching love seats. There was always the possibility of making a pallet on the floor, but she was so tired that even the thought of the effort involved was almost beyond her. Leaving the bathroom, she stared at her neat bed with its snowy white sheets, and at the man who lay so quietly between those sheets.

She needed to sleep, and she needed to be close to him so she could hear him if he awoke. She was a thirty-year-old widow, not a trembling ingenue; the most sensible thing to do would be to crawl into bed beside him so she could rest. After staring at him for just a moment longer she made her decision and turned out the lights, then went around to the other side of the

bed and slipped carefully between the sheets, trying not to jostle him. She couldn't prevent a low moan as her tired muscles finally relaxed, and she turned on her side to put her hand on his arm, so she would wake up if he became restless. Then she slept.

It was hot when she awoke, and she was drenched in sweat. Alarm flared briefly when she opened her eyes and saw the dark masculine face on the pillow next to hers; then she remembered and rose on her elbow to look at him. Despite the heat he wasn't sweating, and his breathing seemed a little too fast. Quick concern rose in her, she sat up and put her hand on his face, feeling the heat there. He moved his head restlessly, away from her touch. He was feverish, which wasn't unexpected.

Quickly Rachel got out of bed, noticing that it was past noon. No wonder the house was so hot! She opened windows and turned on the ceiling fans to get some of the hot air out of the house before she turned on the air conditioner to cool things even more. She didn't use it that much, but her patient needed to be cooled down.

She had to take care of him before anything could be done. She dissolved two aspirin in a teaspoon of water, then gently lifted his head, trying not to jar him. "Open your mouth," she crooned, as if he were a baby. "Swallow this for me. Then I'll let you rest." His head lay heavily against her shoulder, his black eyelashes still resting on his cheeks. His hair was thick and silky beneath her fingers, and warm, reminding her of his fever. She put the spoon against his mouth, noting the clear-cut line of his lips; the spoon pressed down on his bottom lip, opening it just a little. "Come on," she whispered. "Open your mouth."

How many levels of consciousness were there? Did he hear her voice? Make sense of the words? Or was it just the low, tender tone that got through to him? Was it her touch? The warm, sleepy scent of her flesh? Something reached him. He tried to turn toward her, his head nuzzling against her shoulder, and his mouth opened a little. Her heart pounded in her chest as she coaxed him to swallow, hoping that he wouldn't choke. It worked so well that she managed to get three more teaspoons of water down him before he lapsed back into deeper unconsciousness.

She wet a washcloth in cold water, folded it and placed it across his brow, then turned the sheet back until it was low across his hips and began

sponging him down with the cold water. Slowly, almost mechanically, she drew the wet cloth over his chest and shoulders and down his powerful arms, then to his lean, hard belly, where the hair on his chest narrowed to a thin, silky line. Rachel drew a deep breath, aware of the slight trembling in her body. He was beautiful. She had never seen a more beautiful man.

She hadn't let herself think about it the night before, when it had been important to get help for him and tend to his wounds, but she had realized even then how attractive he was. His features were even and well formed, his nose thin and straight above the mouth she had just touched. That mouth was firm and strong, with a finely chiseled upper lip that hinted of determination and perhaps even ruthlessness, while his lower lip curved with disturbing sensuality. His chin was square, his jaw firm and darkened with a stubble of black beard. His hair was like thick black silk, the color of coal and without any blue shininess to it. His skin was darkened with an allover tan, a deep, olive-bronze hue.

He was very muscular, without having the off-putting bulk of a body-builder. His were the muscles of hard work and physical exercise, the muscles of a man trained for both strength and speed. Rachel picked up one of his hands, cradling it between both of hers. His hands were long fingered and lean, the strength in them apparent even though he was completely limp. His nails were short and well tended. Lightly she felt the calluses on his palm and fingertips; and she felt something else, as well: the hardness of his flesh on the outside edge of his hand. Her breath became shorter, and wariness prickled along her spine again. Cradling his hand against her cheek, she reached out tentatively and touched the scar on his flat belly, a curving, silvery line that almost glowed against the darkness of his tan. It went across his stomach and around his right side, curving down out of view. That wasn't a surgical scar. She went cold, visualizing the terrible ferocity and viciousness of a knife fight. He must have whirled away from the blade, leaving it to slice his side and back.

A man with a scar like that, and with those tell-tale calluses on his hands, wasn't an ordinary man working an ordinary job. No ordinary man could have swum to shore wounded the way he was; that had required incredible strength and determination. How far had he swum? She hadn't been able to see any lights at sea, she remembered. She looked at his hard, lean face and shivered at the thought of the mental toughness hidden behind his closed eyelids. Yet for all his toughness, he was helpless now; his survival

depended on her. She had made the decision to hide him, so it was up to her to nurse and protect him as best she could. Her instincts told her that she had made the right decision, but the uneasiness wouldn't leave her until she had some hard facts to back up her intuition.

The aspirin and sponging had lowered his fever, and he seemed to be sleeping deeply, though she wondered how to tell the difference between sleep and unconsciousness. Honey had promised to come by again that day and check him, to make certain the concussion wasn't worse than she had first thought. There was nothing else Rachel could do, except go about her normal business.

She brushed her teeth and combed her hair, then changed into khaki shorts and a sleeveless white cotton shirt. She started to change in her bedroom, as she normally did, then cast a quick glance at the sleeping man in her bed. Feeling foolish, she went into the bathroom and closed the door. B.B. had been dead for five years, and she wasn't used to having a man around, especially a stranger.

She closed the windows and turned on the air conditioning, then stepped outside. Ebenezer Duck and his band of waddling followers rushed up to her, with Ebenezer squawking his displeasure at having to wait so long for the grain she usually scattered first thing in the morning. Ebenezer was the grouchiest goose living, she was sure, but there was a certain majesty about him, so big and fat and white, and she liked his eccentricities. Joe came around the back corner of the house and stood watching as she fed the geese, keeping his distance from them as he always did. Rachel poured Joe's food in his bowl and filled his water dish with fresh water, then stepped away. He never approached while she was still near his food.

She gathered the ripe tomatoes from her small garden and checked the bean vines; the green beans would need gathering in another day or so. By that time her stomach was rumbling emptily, and she realized that it was hours past her normal breakfast time. Her entire schedule was shot, and there didn't seem to be much point in trying to regain it. How could she concentrate on writing when all her senses were attuned to the man in the bedroom?

She went inside and checked on him, but he hadn't moved. She freshened the wet cloth and replaced it on his brow, then turned her attention to her growling stomach. It was so hot that anything cooked seemed too heavy, so she settled for a sandwich of cold cuts and slices from one of the fresh

tomatoes she had just picked. With a glass of iced tea in one hand and her sandwich in the other, she turned on the radio and sat down next to it to listen to the news. There was nothing unusual: the standard political maneuverings, both local and national; a house fire; a trial of local interest, followed by the weather, which promised more of the same. None of that offered even a glimmer of an explanation for the presence and condition of the man in her bedroom.

Switching to the scanner, she listened for almost an hour, but again there was nothing. It was a quiet day, the heat inducing most people to stay inside. There was nothing about any searches or drug busts. When she heard a car coming to a stop in front of her house she turned off the scanner and got up to look out the window. Honey was just getting out of her car, carrying still another grocery sack.

"How's he doing?" she asked as soon as they were inside.

"He still hasn't moved. He was feverish when I woke up, so I managed to get two aspirin and a little bit of water down him. Then I sponged him off."

Honey went into the bedroom and carefully checked his pupil responses, then examined her handiwork on his shoulder and thigh and rebandaged the wounds. "I bought a new thermometer for this," she muttered, shaking it down and putting it in his mouth. "I didn't have one for humans."

Rachel had been hovering worriedly. "How does he look?"

"His pupil responses are better, and the wounds look clean, but he's a long way from being out of the woods. He's going to be a sick man for several days. Actually, the longer he stays quiet like this, the better it is for him. He's resting his head and not putting any stress on his shoulder or leg."

"What about his fever?"

Honey counted his pulse, then took the thermometer out of his mouth and read it.

"A hundred and two. Not critical, but like I said, he's going to be very sick for a while. Give him aspirin every four hours and get as much water down him as you can. Keep sponging him off with cool water to keep him comfortable. I'll be back tomorrow, but I can't come too often or it'll look suspicious."

Rachel managed a tight smile. "Are you sure your imagination isn't running away with you, too?"

Honey shrugged. "I listened to the radio and read the newspaper. There wasn't anything to account for this guy. Maybe you're rubbing off on me,

but all I can think is that only two scenarios are left. One is that he's an agent, and the other is that he's a drug runner hiding from his own people."
Looking down at him, at his tousled black hair, Rachel shook her head. "I don't think he's a drug runner."
"Why not? Do they have identifying tattoos, or something?"
She didn't tell Honey about his hands. "I'm probably just trying to reassure myself that I've done the right thing."
"For what it's worth, I think you have. Last night I didn't, but today I've thought about it, and I struck up a chat with a deputy this morning. He didn't mention anything unusual. If your guy is involved with drugs you'll have time to find out before he's in any shape to be dangerous. So, I guess you were right."
There was still another possibility, one that Rachel had thought of but had no intention of mentioning to Honey. What if he was an agent…for someone else? A drug runner, an agent – neither of those was very savory, considering what she had learned about both occupations while she'd been a reporter. Rachel had been a very good reporter, an ace, digging for the facts even in the face of danger. She knew, far more than Honey did, just how dangerous it was to hide this man, but there was something in her that was incapable of simply washing her hands of responsibility and turning him over to the sheriff, then letting events take their course. She had become responsible for him the second she had seen him feebly swimming in the Gulf, and turning him over to someone else wouldn't change that fact. As long as there was a possibility, however remote, that he was deserving of her protection, she had to offer it. It was a risk she had to take.
"How much longer will it be before he wakes up?" she murmured.
Honey hesitated. "I don't know. I'm a veterinarian, remember? With the fever, the loss of blood, the knock on his head…I just don't know. He should be hooked up to an IV, getting fluids. His pulse is weak and fast, he probably needs some blood and he's shocky, but he's coming out of it. He may wake up at any time, or it may be tomorrow. When he does wake up he may be disoriented, which isn't surprising. Don't let him get excited, and whatever you do, don't let him get up."
Rachel looked at him, at his powerfully muscled torso, and wondered if there was any way on earth she could prevent him from doing anything he set his mind on doing. Honey was taking gauze and tape out of her bag, "Change his bandages tomorrow morning. I won't be back until tomorrow

night, unless you think he's getting worse and call me, and in that case you'd be better off calling a doctor."
Rachel managed a taut smile. "Thanks. I know this hasn't been easy for you to handle."
"At least you brought some excitement into the summer. I've got to go now, or Rafferty will tear a strip off me for keeping him waiting."
"Tell John I said hello," Rachel said as they stepped onto the porch.
"Depends on his mood." Honey grinned, her eyes lighting with the pleasurable prospect of battle. She and John Rafferty had been warring ever since Honey had set up practice in the area; Rafferty had made plain his opinion that a woman wasn't strong enough to handle the job, and Honey had set out to prove him wrong. Their relationship had long since evolved into mutual respect and a continuous wrangle that they both enjoyed. Since Honey had a long-standing engagement to an overseas engineer, with plans to marry during the winter when he returned to the States, she was also safe from Rafferty's legendary torn-catting, because one thing Rafferty didn't do was poach.
Joe stood just at the corner of the house, muscles tight as he warily watched Honey get in her car and drive off. Ordinarily Rachel would have spoken soothingly to him, but today she, too, was tense and wary. "Guard," she said softly, not knowing if he would understand the command. "That's a good boy. Guard the house."
She managed to work for a couple of hours on her manuscript, but she couldn't really concentrate on what she was doing when she kept listening for any sound from the bedroom. Every few minutes she went in to check on him, but each time he was lying just as he had been the time before. She tried several times to get him to drink something, but his head would loll against her shoulder whenever she lifted him, and he didn't respond at all. Late in the afternoon his fever began to rise again, and Rachel abandoned all attempts to write. Somehow she had to rouse him enough to give him more aspirin.
The fever seemed worse this time. His skin burned to the touch, and his face was flushed with hectic color. Rachel talked to him as she lifted his head, crooning and cajoling. With her free hand she stroked his chest and arms, trying to rouse him, and her efforts were rewarded when he suddenly groaned sharply and turned his face against her neck.

The sound and motion, from someone who had been still and silent, startled her. Her heart jumped wildly, and she was unable to move for a moment, simply holding him and feeling the scrape of his growing beard against her neck. It was an oddly erotic sensation, and her body quickened in remembrance. A hot flush colored her cheeks; what was she doing, reacting like that to the unconscious touch of a sick man? Granted, it had been a long time for her, but she'd never considered herself love starved, so hungry for the touch of a man that the most inadvertent contact could turn her on.
She reached for the teaspoon with the dissolved aspirin in it and held it to his mouth, touching his lips with the spoon as she had before. Restlessly he turned his head away, and Rachel followed the movement with the spoon. "No you don't," she crooned. "You aren't getting away. Open your mouth and take this. It'll make you feel better."
A frown puckered his straight black brows and he fretted, evading the spoon once more. Persistently Rachel tried again, and this time she got the bitter aspirin into his mouth. He swallowed, and while he was cooperating she spoonfed him several ounces of iced tea before he began to sink back into a stupor. Following the routine she had begun that morning, she patiently sponged him down with cool water until the aspirin began to work and the fever subsided again, allowing him to rest.
His response, fretful as it had been, gave her hope that he would soon be waking up, but that hope died during the long night. His fever soared at intervals until she could give him more aspirin and bring it under control again. What rest she got that night came in brief snatches, because she spent most of the time bending over him, patiently wiping him with a cold wet cloth to keep him as cool as she could, and doing all of the other things that were necessary for a bedridden patient.
Toward dawn he groaned again and tried to turn onto his side. Guessing that his muscles were aching from lying in one position for so long, Rachel helped him to roll onto his right side, then took advantage of the new position and sponged his back with cold water. He quieted almost immediately, his breathing becoming deep and even. Her eyes burning and her muscles sore, Rachel continued to rub his back until she was convinced that he was at last resting, then crept into bed herself. She was so tired….
She stared at his muscled back, wondering if she dared go to sleep and how she could possibly stay awake a moment longer. Her eyelids drooped

heavily, and she immediately fell asleep, instinct moving her closer to his warm back.

It was still early when she awoke; the clock told her that she had slept a little over two hours. He was lying on his back again, and had kicked the cover into a twisted heap around his left leg. Disturbed that his movements hadn't awakened her, Rachel got out of bed and went around to straighten the sheet and pull it back over him, trying not to jar his left leg. Her gaze drifted over his naked body and hastily she jerked her eyes away, flushing again. What on earth was wrong with her? She knew what naked men looked like, and it wasn't even as if this were the first time she'd seen him. She had been nursing him for almost two days now; she'd bathed him and helped sew him up. Still, she couldn't stop the warm feeling that swelled inside every time she looked at him. It's just lust, she told herself firmly. Plain, old-fashioned lust. I'm a normal woman, and he's a good-looking man. It's normal to admire his body, so I've got to stop acting like a giggly teenager!

She pulled the sheet up to his chest, then coaxed him into taking more aspirin. Why hadn't he awoken by now? Was the concussion more severe than Honey had thought? Yet his condition didn't seem to be getting worse, and in fact he was a little more responsive than he had been; it was easier to get him to take the aspirin and liquids now, but she wanted him to open his eyes, to talk to her. Until then she couldn't be assured that she hadn't harmed him by making the decision to keep him hidden.

Hidden from whom? her subconscious jeered. No one had been looking for him. The jitters she had been suffering from seemed foolish on this bright, cloudless morning.

While he was quiet she fed the animals and worked in the garden, gathering the green beans and the few tomatoes that had ripened overnight. There were a few yellow squash ready to be picked, and she decided to make a squash casserole for dinner. She weeded the garden and around the shrubs, and by that time the heat had become stifling. Even the usual breeze from the Gulf was missing, and the air lay hot and heavy. She thought longingly of a swim, but didn't dare leave her patient unattended for that long.

When she checked on him again she found the sheet once again kicked down, and he was moving a little, his head turning fretfully. It wasn't time for more aspirin, but he was hot; she got a bowl of cold water and sat on the

bed beside him, slowly sponging him with the cold water until he was cool and resting again. When she eased off the bed she glanced down at him and wondered if she would be wasting her time to cover him up. It was simply too hot for him, as feverish as he was, even though she'd left the air conditioning on and the house felt cool to her. Carefully she untangled the sheet from around his feet, her touch light and fleeting; then she paused and her hands returned to his feet. He had nice feet, lean and tanned, masculine and well tended, like his hands. He also had the same tough calluses on the outside ridges of his feet that he had on his hands. He was a trained warrior. Tears burned her eyes as she pulled the sheet up to his waist and left it there, deciding to compromise. She had no reason to cry; he'd chosen his life and wouldn't appreciate her sympathy. The people who lived on the edge of danger did so because that was what they wanted; she had lived there herself, and she knew that she had freely chosen to accept the perils that came her way. B.B. had accepted the danger of his job, counting it as the price to be paid for something he thought was worth doing. What neither of them had counted on was that it would be *her* job that would cost him his life.

By the time Honey came that night Rachel had long since controlled herself, and a fragrant squash casserole greeted Honey's nose when she came in the door. "Umm, that smells good," she breathed. "How's our patient?"

Rachel shook her head. "Not much change. He's moving around a little, fretting, when the fever gets high, but he hasn't woken up yet."

She had just twitched the sheet up over him again a few moments before, so he was covered when Honey went in to check on him. "He's doing good," Honey murmured after looking at his wounds and checking his eyes. "Let him sleep. It's just what he needs."

"It's been so long," Rachel murmured.

"He went through a lot. The body has a way of taking over and getting what it needs."

It didn't take much to get Honey to stay for dinner. The casserole, fresh peas and sliced tomatoes did a lot of convincing by themselves. "This is a lot better than the hamburger I'd planned on," Honey said, waving her fork for emphasis. "I think our boy is out of danger, so I wasn't going to come by tomorrow, but if you're cooking again I can always change my mind."

It felt good to laugh, after the tension of the past two days. Rachel's eyes sparkled. "This is the first meal I've cooked since it got so hot. I've been living on fruit and cereal and salad, anything to keep from turning on the stove. But since I've been running the air conditioning to keep him comfortable, tonight cooking didn't seem so bad."

After they'd cleaned the kitchen Honey checked her watch. "It's not too late. I think I'll stop by Rafferty's and check on one of his mares that's due to foal. It may save a trip back out as soon as I get home. Thanks for feeding me."

"Anytime. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

Honey regarded her for a moment, her freckled face serious. "You'd have managed, wouldn't you? You're one of those people who do what has to be done, without fussing about it. That guy in there owes you a lot."

Rachel didn't know if he would see it that way or not. When she came out of the bathroom after showering she watched him intently, willing him to open his eyes and speak to her, to give her some hint of the man behind those closed lids. Every hour that passed increased the mystery that surrounded him. Who was he? Who had shot him, and why? Why was there nothing being mentioned in the news media that could apply to him? An abandoned boat found floating in the Gulf or washed up on shore would have made the news. A missing person's report would have been in the newspaper. A drug bust, a prison escape, anything, but there had been nothing that would explain why he had washed in with the tide.

She got into bed beside him, hoping for at least a few hours of sleep. He was resting better, she thought, the fever not climbing quite as high as it had at first. Her fingers closed over his arm, and she slept.

The shaking of the bed awoke her, startling her out of a sound sleep. She sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding. He was moving restlessly, trying to kick the cover away from him with only his right leg, and finally he succeeded in getting most of it off him. His skin was hot, and he was breathing too heavily. A glance at the clock told her that it was well past the time he should have had more aspirin.

She turned on the lamp beside the bed and went into the bathroom to get the aspirin and fresh water. He swallowed without fuss this time, and Rachel got him to drink almost a full glass of water. She eased his head down onto the pillow again, her fingers slow to move from his hair.

Daydreaming again! She jerked herself sharply away from the dangerous direction those daydreams were taking. He needed to be cooled down, and she was standing there fantasizing about him. Disgusted with herself, she wet a washcloth and bent over him, slowly wiping his torso with the cool cloth.

A hand touched her breast. She froze, her eyes widening. Her nightgown was loose and sleeveless, with a scooped neckline that had fallen well away from her body when she bent over him. His right hand moved slowly inside the neckline, and he brushed the backs of his lean, strong fingers insistently over her nipple, back and forth, until the small bud of flesh tightened and Rachel had to close her eyes at the sharp, unexpected pleasure. Then his hand moved lower, so slowly that her breath halted in her chest, stroking over the velvet underside of her breast. "Pretty," he murmured, his voice deep, the single word slurred.

The word echoed sharply in Rachel's mind, and her head jerked around, her eyes opening. He was awake! For a moment she stared into half-opened eyes that were so black it was as if light drowned in them; then his lashes slowly dropped and he was asleep again, his hand falling away from her breast.

She was so shaken that she could barely move. Her flesh still burned from his touch, and that instant when she had stared into his eyes was a moment that was frozen in time, so imprinted on her memory that she felt branded by his glance. Black eyes, blacker than night, without any hint of brown. They had been hazy with fever and pain, but he had seen something he liked and reached out for it. Looking down, she saw that the gaping neckline of the loose, comfortable cotton shift left her breasts completely exposed to his view, and his touch; she had unwittingly invited both. Her hands trembled as she automatically continued wiping him down with the cool cloth. Her senses were reeling, her mind scrambling to adjust to the fact that he had been awake, that he had spoken, even if it had been only one word. Somehow during the long two days when he had lain motionless, even though she had longed for him to wake, she had stopped expecting him to. She had taken care of him as totally as one would an infant, and now she was as startled as if an infant had suddenly spoken. But he was no infant; he was a man. Ail man, if the frank appreciation in that single slurred word was any measurement. "Pretty," he'd said, and her cheeks heated.

Then the implications of that single word hit her, and she jerked upright. He was American! If he'd been anything else the first word *he* spoke, when he was only half-conscious and burning with fever, would have been in his native language. But that one word had been in English, and the accent, though slurred, had definitely been American. Part of the slur could have come from a natural accent, a southern or western drawl.

American. She wondered at the heritage that had given him his dark coloring, Italian or Arabic, Hungarian or American Indian, maybe even Black Irish? Spanish? Tartar? The high, chiseled cheekbones and thin, hawk-bridged nose could have come from any of those bloodlines, but he was definitely from the huge American melting pot.

Her heart was still hammering in her chest with excitement. Even after she had emptied the bowl of water, turned out the lamp and crawled into bed beside him, she was quivering and unable to sleep. He had opened his eyes and spoken to her, had moved voluntarily. He was recovering! A burden lifted from her shoulders with the knowledge.

She turned on her side and looked at him, barely able to see the outline of his profile in the darkness of the room, but every pore in her skin sensed his nearness. He was warm and alive, and an odd mixture of pain and ecstasy swelled inside her, because somehow he had become important to her, so important that the tenor of her existence had been irrevocably altered. Even when he left, as practicality told her he must, she would never be the same again. Diamond Bay had given him to her, a strange gift from the turquoise waters. She reached out and trailed her fingers lightly down his muscled arm, then withdrew her touch, because the feel of his skin made her heart lurch again. He had come from the sea, but it was she who had suffered the sea change.

Chapter Four

"He's dead, I'm telling you."
A slim man, with graying brown hair and a narrow, intense face that belied the self-imposed calmness and control of his manner, gave the speaker a look of contemptuous amusement. "Do you think we can afford to assume that, Ellis? We have found nothing – I repeat, nothing – to assure us of his death."
Tod Ellis narrowed his eyes. "There's no way he could've survived. That boat went up like a fuel tank."
An elegant red-haired woman had been silently listening to the two, and now she leaned forward to put out a cigarette. "And the report from one of the men that he saw something, or someone, go over the side?"
Ellis flushed angrily. These two had deferred to him when it came to setting up the ambush, but now they were treating him like a rank amateur. He didn't like it; he was far from an amateur, and they had damned well needed him when they were after Sabin. The plan hadn't worked out exactly as they'd wanted, but Sabin hadn't escaped, and that was the most important thing. If they had thought it would be easy to capture him, then they were fools, at best. "Even if he got into the water," he said patiently, "he was wounded. We saw him get hit. We were miles out. There's no way he could have gotten to shore. He either drowned, or a shark got him. Why take the chance on drawing attention to ourselves by searching for him?"
The other man's pale blue eyes looked beyond Ellis, into the past. "Ah, but this is Sabin we're talking about, not some ordinary man. How many times has he slipped away from us? Too many for me to trust that it was so easy to kill him. We found no remains on the boat, and if, as you say, he either drowned or was attacked by sharks, there still would have been *some* evidence. We've patrolled these waters for two days without finding anything. The logical thing to do is to move our search to shore."
"We'll be exposing ourselves if we do."
The woman smiled. "Not if we do it right. We must simply be discreet. Our biggest danger is the possibility that he was picked up by another boat and taken to a hospital. If he's had the opportunity to talk to someone, to make some calls, we won't be able to get near him. First we must find him, though. I agree with Charles. Too much is at stake for us to simply assume that he's dead."

Ellis's face was grim. "Do you have any idea how large an area we'll have to cover?"
Charles drew a map of Florida closer. "Our position was here," he said, marking the spot with an X. "Given the distance and the tides, which I've already checked, I think we should concentrate our efforts in this area." He drew a long oval on the map and tapped it with his pen. "Noelle, check all the hospitals in the area, and also the police blotters, to find if anyone has been treated for a gunshot wound. While you're doing that we'll be searching every inch of the coastline." He leaned back in his chair and surveyed Ellis with his arctic gaze. "Can you contact your people and find out without arousing suspicions if he's called anyone?"
Ellis shrugged. "I have a reliable contact."
"Then make it. We may have waited too long as it is."
He would make the call, Ellis thought, but he was sure it would be a waste of time. Sabin was dead; these people persisted in acting as if he were some sort of superman who could disappear into thin air, then miraculously reappear. Okay, so he'd had a reputation when he was in the field; that had been years ago. He would have lost his edge since then, sitting around at a dull desk job the way he'd been doing. No, Sabin was dead; Ellis was certain of it.

Rachel sat on the front porch swing, a newspaper spread across her lap and heaped with green beans. A dishpan sat on the swing beside her, and she systematically broke the tips off the beans and peeled the string off them, then broke the pods into inch-long sections, which she dropped into the dishpan. She didn't like stringing green beans, but she liked to eat them, so it was a necessary evil. She kept the swing gently swaying and listened to a portable radio set on the windowsill. She was listening to an FM country station, but the volume was turned low because she didn't want to disturb her patient, who was sleeping peacefully.
She had spent the morning expecting him to finally wake up for good, but instead he was still alternating between periods of deep sleep, when the aspirin and sponging got his fever down, and restlessness, when his temperature soared. He hadn't opened his eyes or spoken again, though once he had groaned and held his shoulder with his right hand until Rachel loosened his grip and held his hand, soothing him with soft murmurs of reassurance.

Joe eased up from his position under the oleander bush, a rumble forming in his throat. Rachel glanced at him, then swept her gaze around the yard and toward the road, to the left, but could see nothing. It wasn't like Joe to pay any attention to squirrels or rabbits. "What is it?" she asked, unable to keep the tightness of apprehension out of her voice, and Joe responded to her tone by moving to stand directly in front of the steps. The rumble was a full-fledged growl now, and he was staring toward the pine thicket, toward the slope that led down to Diamond Bay.

Two men were coming out of the thicket.

Rachel continued to string and snap the beans as if she were totally unconcerned, but she felt every muscle in her body tense. She stared at them, openly, deciding that that would be the normal thing to do. They were dressed casually, in lightweight cotton canvas pants and pullover shirts, with loose cotton jackets. Rachel eyed the jackets. The temperature was ninety-nine degrees and it wasn't quite noon yet, so it promised to get hotter. Jackets were anything but practical – unless they were needed to hide shoulder holsters.

As the men crossed the road and approached the house Joe's growls became snarls, and he crouched, the hair along his neck lifted. The men halted, and Rachel caught the movement one man made beneath his jacket before he halted himself. "Sorry about that," she called, leisurely putting aside the beans and getting to her feet. "Joe doesn't like strangers in general, and men in particular. He won't even let the neighbor in the yard. Guess some man abused him once. Are you lost, or has your boat quit on you?" As she talked she came down the steps and laid a calming hand on Joe's back, feeling the way he shifted a little away from her.

"Neither. We're looking for someone." The man who answered her was tall and good-looking, with sandy brown hair and an open, college-boy smile that flashed whitely in his tanned face. He glanced down at Joe. "Uh, do you want to get a better hold on the dog?"

"He'll be all right, as long as you don't come any nearer to the house." Rachel hoped that was true. Giving Joe another pat, she walked past him and approached the men. "I don't think it's me he's protecting as much as his territory. Now what was it you said?"

The other man was shorter, slimmer and darker than Mr. All-American College Boy. "FBI," he said briskly, flashing a badge in front of her nose.

"I'm Agent Lowell. This is Agent Ellis. We're looking for a man we think might be in this area."
Rachel wrinkled her forehead, praying she wasn't overdoing it. "An escaped convict?"
Agent Ellis's gaze had been appreciatively measuring Rachel's long, bare legs, but now his eyes lifted to her face. "No, but prison is where we're trying to put him. We think he may have come ashore somewhere in this area."
"Haven't seen any strangers around here, but I'll keep a sharp watch. What does he look like?"
"Six feet tall, maybe a little taller. Black hair, black eyes."
"Seminole?"
Both men looked startled. "No, he's not an Indian," Agent Lowell finally said. "But he's dark, sort of Indian-looking."
"Do you have a picture of him?"
A quick look passed between the two men. "No."
"Is he dangerous? I mean, a murderer, or anything like that?" A lump had formed in her chest and was rising toward her throat. What would she do if they told her he was a murderer? How could she bear it?
Again that look, as if they weren't sure what to tell her. "He should be considered armed and dangerous. If you see anything at all suspicious give us a call at this number." Agent Lowell scribbled a telephone number on a piece of paper and gave it to Rachel, who glanced at it before folding it and putting it in her pocket.
"I'll do that," she said. "Thank you for coming by."
They started to leave; then Agent Lowell paused and turned back to her, his eyes narrowed. "There are some strange marks on the beach down there, as if something has been dragged. Do you know anything about them?"
Rachel's blood froze in her veins. Fool! she told herself numbly. She should have gone down to the beach and obliterated all those marks. At least the tide would have washed away any blood and other signs that had been left where he had fallen. Deliberately she wrinkled her forehead, giving herself time to think, then let her face clear. "Oh, you must mean where I collect shells and driftwood. I pile them all on a tarp and haul it up here. That way I can get it all up the slope with just one trip."
"What do you do with them? The shells and driftwood."

She didn't like the way Agent Lowell was looking at her, as if he didn't believe a word she said. "I sell them," she said, and it was the truth. "I own two souvenir shops."
"I see." He smiled at her. "Well, good luck in your shell hunting." They turned to leave again.
"Do you need a lift?" she asked, raising her voice. "You look hot now, and it's going to get hotter."
Both of them looked up at the blistering sun in the cloudless blue bowl of the sky; their faces were shiny with perspiration. "We came by boat," Agent Ellis said. "We're going to check along the beach some more. Thanks, anyway."
"Anytime. Oh, watch out if you go north. It gets swampy."
"Thanks again."
She watched them disappear into the pines and down the slope, and chills prickled her skin despite the heat. Slowly she returned to the porch and sat down on the swing, automatically returning to the task of breaking the beans. Everything they had said swirled in her mind, and she tried to sort it all out, to get her thoughts in order again. FBI? It was possible, but they had flashed their badges so swiftly she hadn't been able to examine them. They knew what he looked like, but they didn't have any photographs of him; she thought it would be reasonable that the FBI would have some likeness, even if it was just a drawing of someone they were trying to find. And they had sidestepped the question when she asked what he had done, as if they hadn't anticipated that and didn't know how to answer. They had said he should be considered armed and dangerous, but instead he was naked and helpless. Didn't they know he'd been shot? Why hadn't they said something about that?
But what if she were harboring a criminal? That had always been one of the possibilities, though she had discounted it. Now it swarmed back into her mind, and she felt sick.
The beans were finished. She took the pan into the house and set it in the sink, then returned to gather up the paper with the strings and broken ends on it. As she carried it to the kitchen to stuff it in the trash can she cast an apprehensive look at her open bedroom door. She could just see the head of the bed and his black hair on the pillow… her pillow. When he woke up again, and she looked into those night-black eyes, would she be looking into the eyes of a criminal? A killer?

Swiftly she washed her hands and flipped through the telephone book, then punched the number. It rang only once before a harried male voice said, "Sheriffs Department."
"Andy Phelps, please."
"Just a minute."
There was another ring, but this time the answer was absentminded, as if the person had other things on his mind. "Phelps."
"Andy, this is Rachel."
Immediately his voice warmed. "Hi, honey. Everything okay?"
"Fine. Hot, but fine. How are Trish and the kids?"
"The kids are doing okay, but Trish is praying for school to start."
She laughed, sympathizing with Andy's wife. Their boys carried rowdiness to new heights. "Listen, two guys just stopped by the house. They walked up from the beach."
His voice sharpened. "They give you any trouble?"
"No, nothing like that. They said they were FBI, but I didn't get a good look at their badges. They're looking for some man. Are they legitimate? Has your department been notified of anything? I may be paranoid, but I'm out here at the end of the road, and Rafferty's miles away. After B.B…." Her voice trailed away with the sudden pain of the memory. It had been five years, but there were still times when the loss and regret seared her, when the emptiness got to her.
Like no one else on earth, Andy understood. He had worked with B.B. in the DEA. The memory roughened his tone. "I know. You can't be too careful, honey. Look, we've had orders come down to cooperate with some guys who are looking for a man. It's all hush-hush. They're not the local FBI people. I doubt that they're FBI at all, but orders are orders."
Rachel's hand tightened on the receiver. "And an agency is an agency?"
"Yeah, something like that. Keep quiet about it, but keep your eyes open. I'm not real comfortable with the feel of this."
He wasn't the only one. "I will. Thanks."
"Sure thing. Listen, why don't you come to dinner some night soon? It's been a while since we've seen you."
"Thanks, I'd love to. Have Trish call me."
They hung up, and Rachel drew a deep breath. If Andy didn't think the men were FBI, that was good enough for her. Going into the bedroom, she stood beside the bed and watched the man sleep, his deep chest slowly rising and

falling. She had kept the blinds closed since the night she had brought him into the house, so the room was dim and cool, but a thin ray of sunlight crept between two of the slats and slanted across his stomach, making that long, thin scar glow. Whoever he was, whatever he was involved in, he wasn't a common criminal.

They played lethal games, the men and women who peopled the shadowy world of intelligence and counterintelligence. They lived their lives balanced on the razor's edge of death; they were hard and cold, intense but casual. They weren't like other people, the people who worked at the same job every day and went home to their houses, to their families. Was he one of those for whom a normal life was impossible? She was almost certain of it now. But what was going on, and who could she trust? Someone had shot him. Either he had escaped, or he had been dumped in the ocean to drown. Were those two men hunting for him to protect him, or to finish off the job? Did he possess some highly sensitive information, something critical to defense?

She trailed her fingers over his hand, which was lying limply on top of the sheet. His skin was hot and dry; fever still burned inside him as his body tried to mend itself. She had been able to spoon enough sweetened tea and water into him to keep him from becoming dehydrated, but he had to begin eating soon, or she would be forced to take him to a hospital. This was the third day; he had to have nourishment.

Her brow furrowed. If he could swallow tea, he could swallow soup. She should have thought of that before!

Briskly she went into the kitchen and opened a can of chicken noodle soup, ran it through the blender until it was liquified, then put it on the stove to simmer. "Sorry it isn't homemade," she muttered to the man in the bedroom. "But I don't have any chicken in the freezer. Besides, this is easier."

She watched him closely, checking on him every few minutes; when he began to stir restlessly, moving his head back and forth on the pillow and kicking at the sheet, she prepared a tray for his first "meal," such as it was. It didn't take her long, less than five minutes. She carried the tray into the bedroom and almost dropped it when he suddenly heaved himself up on his right elbow, staring at her with those piercing, fever-bright black eyes. Rachel's entire body tensed as desperation flooded her. If he fell off the bed she wouldn't be able to get him back on it without help. He was weaving back and forth on his precarious prop, still staring at her with burning

intensity. She plunked the tray down on the floor where she stood, sloshing some of the soup over the side of the bowl, then darted to the side of the bed to catch him. Gently, supporting his head and trying not to jostle his shoulder, she put her arm around his back and eased his head onto her shoulder, bracing herself against his weight. "Lie down," she said in the calm, soothing tone she always used for him. "You can't get up yet."

A frown laced his black eyebrows together, and he resisted her efforts. "It's time for the party," he muttered, his words still drunkenly slurred.

He was awake, but certainly not lucid, drifting in a fever-induced dream world. "No, the party hasn't started yet," she reassured him, catching his right elbow and pulling it forward so he wouldn't be able to prop himself up on it.

His weight fell heavily on her supporting arm as she lowered him back onto the pillow. "You have time for a nap." He lay there, breathing heavily, his brow still furrowed as he stared at her. His gaze didn't flicker as she retrieved the tray from the floor and placed it on the bedside table; his attention was locked on her, as if he were trying to make sense of things, to fight his way out of the mists that clouded his mind. She talked quietly to him as she propped him up on her extra pillows; she didn't know if he understood what she was saying, but her voice and touch seemed to calm him. Sitting on the side of the bed, she began to feed him, talking to him all the while. He was docile, opening his mouth whenever she put the spoon to his lips, but soon his eyelids began to droop as he tired. Quickly she gave him aspirin, elated at how easy it had been to feed him.

As she supported his head and pulled the extra pillows from behind him so he could lie flat again, she had an idea. It was worth a try. "What's your name?"

He frowned, his head jerking restlessly. "Whose?" he asked, his deep voice full of confusion.

Rachel remained bent over him, her hand under his head. Her heart was beating faster. Maybe she could begin getting some answers! "Yours. What's your name?"

"Mine?" The questions were making him fretful, agitated. He stared hard at her as he tried to concentrate, his gaze slipping over her face, then moving lower.

She tried again. "Yes, yours. What's your name?"

"Mine?" He drew a deep breath, then said it again. "Mine." The second time it was a statement, not a question. Slowly he moved, lifting both hands, wincing at the pain in his shoulder. He molded his hands over her breasts, cupping them warmly in his palms and rubbing her nipples with his thumbs. "Mine," he said again, stating what he plainly considered to be his ownership.

For a moment, just for a moment, Rachel was helpless against the unexpected pleasure burning her flesh at his touch. She was frozen in place, her nerve endings going wild, her body flooding with warmth as his thumbs turned her nipples into hardened nubs. Then reality returned with a thud, and she jerked away from him, bolting off the bed. Exasperation at him – and anger at herself – filled her. "That's what you think," she snapped at him. "These are mine, not yours!"

His eyelids drooped sleepily. She stood there glaring down at him. Evidently the only things on his mind were partying and sex! "Damn it, you have a one-track mind!" she angrily accused, half under her breath.

His eyelashes fluttered open, and he looked at her again. "Yes," he said clearly, then closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Rachel stood beside the bed with clenched fists, torn between laughing and swatting him. It was doubtful that he had understood anything she'd said; that last provocative word could have been in answer to her accusation, or to some question that existed only in his own foggy consciousness. Now he was sleeping heavily again, totally relaxed and oblivious to the upheaval he had left behind.

Shaking her head, she picked up the tray and quietly left the room. Her insides were still quivering with mingled indignation and desire. It was an uncomfortable combination, uncomfortable because she wasn't one to delude herself, and she couldn't deny that she was attracted to him more powerfully than she could ever have imagined. Touching him was a compulsion; her hands wanted to linger on his warm skin. His voice made her shiver deep inside, and one look from those black eyes made her feel electrified. And his touch…his touch! Twice now he had put his hands on her, and each time she had turned molten with uncontrollable pleasure.

It was insane to feel so intensely about a man she didn't know, but no amount of self-lecturing could change her response. Their lives had become linked from the moment she had dragged him out of the surf; in assuming responsibility for his safety, she had committed herself to him on a level

that went so deep she was only now beginning to realize its reaches. And he had become hers, as if that act of mercy had created a marriage of their lives, binding them together regardless of their wishes or wants.

Though he was a stranger she already knew a lot about him. She knew that he was hard and fast and well trained; he would have to be, to survive in the world he had chosen. He also possessed a tough-mindedness that was awesome in its intensity, a steely determination that had kept him swimming in the night-dark ocean with two bullet wounds in his body, when a lesser man would have drowned almost immediately. She knew that he was important to the people who were hunting him, though she didn't know if they wanted to protect him or kill him. She knew that he didn't snore and that he had an extremely healthy libido, despite his physical incapacitation. He was still when he slept, except when his bones and muscles ached from his flaring fever; that stillness had bothered her at first, until she realized that it was natural to him.

He also answered no questions, even in his delirium, not even one as elemental as his name. It could be the fever-induced confusion, but it was also more than possible that his training was so deeply ingrained in his subconscious that even illness or drugs couldn't override it.

Soon, tomorrow or the next day, or perhaps even during the coming night, he would wake up and be in full possession of his senses. He would require clothing, and answers to his questions. She wondered what those questions would be, and thought of her own questions, though she was beginning to wonder if he would provide any answers. She couldn't prepare for what he might or might not say, because she felt it would be useless to try to predict his actions. Clothing, however, was a problem she could do something about. She had nothing there that would fit him; though she often wore men's shirts she had bought them specifically for herself, and they would be far too small for him. She hadn't kept any of B.B.'s clothing, though that would have been useless in any case, as B.B. had weighed a good thirty pounds less than this man.

Mentally she made a list of the things he would need. She didn't like leaving him alone for the length of time it would take her to drive to the nearest discount store, but it was either that or ask Honey to do the shopping and bring the things out. She considered that. It was tempting, but the arrival of the two men that morning made her reluctant to involve Honey any deeper in the situation. It should be safe to leave him alone for an hour. She would

do her shopping early the next morning, which would give those men time to move out of the immediate area.
She carefully locked the house when she left, and told Joe to stand guard. Her patient was sleeping quietly; she had just gotten him settled, so he should sleep for several hours. Her gun-metal Regal ate up the miles as she pushed her speed as fast as she could, anxiety gnawing at her. It should be all right to leave him alone, but she wouldn't breathe easy until she was back home and could see that for herself.
Though it had just opened for the morning, the local K mart was already swarming with customers who had all decided to do their shopping before the worst heat of the day was upon them. Rachel got a shopping cart and maneuvered it through the crowded aisles, dodging the darting preschoolers who had managed to escape their mothers and were headed, one and all, for the toy department. She steered around browsers, idled behind a frail white-haired woman who walked with a cane, then spotted a clear aisle and broke to the right.
A package of underwear, a few pairs of socks and a pair of jogging shoes, size ten, went into the cart. She had measured his feet that morning, so she was fairly certain the shoes would fit. Two button-up shirts and a cotton terry pullover shirt were piled on top of the shoes. She was uncertain of what size pants to get, but finally selected a pair of jeans, a pair of black denim cutoffs in case the jeans were too uncomfortable on his leg and a pair of khaki chinos. She was ready to head for the checkout counter when a tingle ran up her spine, and her head lifted. Glancing around, she saw a man casually examining some sale items, and the tingle became a fullfledged chill. It was Agent Lowell.
Without breaking stride, she diverted her path to the women's section. The men's clothes, though androgynous enough that they couldn't be recognized as men's unless the sizes were examined, would be a dead giveaway under close scrutiny. Unfortunately Agent Lowell was exactly the type to subject everything to just such an examination. The undershorts, socks and shoes, beneath the pants and shirts, could have no logical explanation.
Ruthlessly she went through the underwear section. Several pairs of panties, all lace and satin, were thrown on top of the pile. A frothy confection of a bra and a matching half-slip were added; she hoped she could trust in the normal male's aversion to handling female lingerie in a public place to keep Agent Lowell from examining the contents of her shopping cart. Out of the

corner of her eye she saw him casually moving closer, pausing every so often to examine certain items with absent interest. He was good; he slid through the crowds without attracting notice. He tracked, while giving no appearance of being a hunter.
A grim look entered Rachel's eyes. He would have to be determined indeed to get to the bottom of her cart. Wheeling around, she headed for the drug-and-health section. Intimate female items, some of which she never used but chose now for their conspicuous packaging, were thrown into the cart. If he dared reach for anything she would accuse him of being a pervert in a voice loud enough to bring every store security guard at a run.
He was closing in again. Rachel chose her moment, then turned her cart and all but rammed it into his knee.
"Oh, my goodness, I'm sorry!" she gasped in apology. "I didn't see you – oh," she said again, startled recognition in her voice. "Ag – " She stopped, looked around, then lowered her voice to little more than a whisper. "Agent Lowell."
It was an Academy Award-winning performance, but it might have been wasted on Agent Lowell, who was preoccupied with rubbing his knee. He straightened, a look of pain still in his eyes. "Hello again, Ms….I don't believe I got your name yesterday."
"Jones," she said, holding out her hand. "Rachel Jones."
His hand was hard, but his palm was a little moist. Agent Lowell wasn't quite as relaxed as he appeared.
"You're out early," he commented.
"With the heat the way it is, it's best to either get out early or wait until after sundown. You really should wear a hat if you're going to be walking around today the way you were yesterday." His face was already sunburned, so her advice was too late.
His expressionless eyes drifted down to the contents of the cart, then jerked back up abruptly. Rachel felt a moment's grim satisfaction at her choices.
His presence could be pure coincidence, or it could be deliberate, but he was automatically curious; it was part of his job. She sensed that he had been less disarmed by her studied nonchalance and innocence than the other agent had been.
"You, uh, may have to float a loan to pay for all that," he said after a slight pause.

She ruefully examined the cart. "You may be right. Every time I go off on a trip it seems as if I never have what I need."
His eyes sharpened with interest. "You're going on a trip?"
"In a couple of weeks. I'm doing some research on the Keys, and it always helps to see an area firsthand."
"Research?"
She shrugged. "I dabble in several things. I have my souvenir shops. I do a little writing, teach a few night courses. It keeps me from getting bored with myself." Looking at the checkout counters, where the lines were growing, she said blithely, "I'd better get in line before everyone in the store gets ahead of me. Oh – did you find anything yesterday?"
His face was a blank mask, though his eyes were once again peering at her cart. "No, nothing. It may have been a false lead."
"Well, good luck. Remember to get a cap or something while you're here."
"Sure. Thanks."
She joined one of the lines at the row of checkout counters and selected a magazine to flip through while she waited, gradually nudging the cart forward. He had moved to the side and was looking at paperback books. Damn, would he never leave? When it came her time, she unloaded the cart and tried to keep her body between Lowell and the counter. The clerk picked up the package of undershorts and held them in front of her while she punched in the code number on the computerized cash register. Rachel shifted to that side, and when the clerk set the package down she pushed a shirt over it. Lowell was moving closer.
"One-forty-six eighteen," the clerk said, reaching for a large bag.
Rachel checked her wallet, inwardly grimacing. She seldom carried that much cash, and this was no exception. Disgruntled, she plunked down a plastic credit card and the clerk ran it through the imprinting machine, then called to get an okay on the amount. Lowell had walked around to the front of the store and was coming down in front of the checkout counters. Rachel grabbed the bag the clerk had laid on the counter and began shoving her purchases into it.
"Sign here," the clerk said, pushing the credit slip toward her. Rachel scribbled her name and a moment later the bag was stapled shut. She loaded it in the cart and began wheeling it out of the store.
"Need any help?" Lowell asked, falling into step beside her.
"No, rolling it in the cart is easier than carrying it. Thanks, anyway."

The humid heat settled on them like a suffocating blanket as soon as they left the cool confines of the store, and Rachel squinted her eyes against the almost painful brightness. After opening the trunk of the car she dumped the bag in and slammed the lid shut, agonizingly aware of Lowell's acute interest.

She pushed the cart to a buggy-return stand, then walked back to the car. "Goodbye," she said casually.

He was still watching as she drove out of the lot. Rachel wiped the perspiration off her face, aware that her heart was thudding in a panicky rhythm. She was out of practice for this! She only hoped he hadn't been too suspicious.

Chapter Five

The dreams were still so vivid that it was several minutes before he realized he was awake, but awareness did not necessarily bring understanding. He lay quietly, looking around the cool, dim, unfamiliar room and groping for any details in his mind that would give him a hint of what was going on and where he was. There seemed to be no connection between his only memories and this silent room. But were they memories, or dreams? He had dreamed of a woman, a warm and pliant woman, with eyes as clear and gray as a highland lake under cloudy skies, her hands tender as she caressed him, her velvety breasts swelling against his palms. His fingers twitched on the sheets; the dream was so real he almost ached to feel her under his hands.

Still, that had been only a dream, and he had to deal with reality. He lay there until certain things began to return, and he knew that *they* weren't dreams. The attack on his boat; the endless, agonizing swim in the dark, driven on by his own sheer inability to give up. Then, after that… nothing. Not even a glimmer of what had happened.

Where was he? Had he been captured? They would give almost anything, risk almost anything, to take him alive.

He moved cautiously, his mouth setting grimly at the amount of effort it took. There was pain in his left shoulder and lacing through his left thigh, and he had a dull headache, but both his leg and arm obeyed his mental command to move. Awkwardly using his right hand, he threw the sheet back and struggled to a sitting position. Dizziness assailed him, but he gripped the side of the bed until the feeling subsided, then he took stock once again. A pristine bandage was wrapped around his thigh, thickly padded over the wounds. The same treatment had been given to his shoulder; gauze had been wrapped around it, then anchored around his chest. He was totally naked, but that didn't bother him. His first priority was to establish his mobility; his second was to find out where the hell he was.

He stood, the wounded muscle in his thigh quivering in outrage at being forced into motion. He wavered, but didn't fall, merely stood there until the room stopped swaying and his leg was steady under him. Despite the coolness of the room a fine sheen of sweat began to form on his body. There was no sound except for the gentle whir of a ceiling fan that hung over the bed and the distant mechanized sound of an air conditioner. He

listened intently, but could detect nothing else. Keeping his right hand braced against the bed, he took a step toward the window, grinding his teeth together at the searing pain in his leg. The closed slats of the old-fashioned blinds drew him. Reaching the window, he used one finger to lift a slat and peer through the crack. A yard, a vegetable garden. Nothing unusual, but nothing in sight, either, human or animal.

An open door was in front of him, revealing a bathroom. Slowly he moved to the doorway, his black eyes taking note of the items on the vanity. Hair spray, lotions, cosmetics. A woman's bathroom, then. Perhaps the red-haired woman who had been on the boat? Everything was neat, impeccably clean, and there was a certain spare luxury to both the bath and bedroom, as if everything had been chosen for maximum comfort while still leaving a lot of what was simply bare space. The next door over was a closet. He pushed racks aside and checked sizes. Again, everything was for a woman, or a small, very slender man of undecided sexuality. The clothes ranged from remarkably ragged to sleekly sophisticated. A disguise?

Cautiously he opened the next door slightly, putting his eye to the small crack to make certain there was no one out there. The small hallway was empty, as was the room he could see beyond it. He eased the door open, balancing himself with a hand on the frame. Nothing. No one. He was alone, and that made no sense at all.

Damn, he was weak, and so thirsty that the fires of hell seemed to be in his throat. Limping badly, occasionally staggering, he made his way through the empty living room. A small, sunlit alcove was next, and the glaring sun streaming through the windows made him blink as his eyes adjusted to the sudden excess of light. Next was a kitchen, small and sunny and extremely modern. A colorful array of fresh vegetables lay on a counter, and there was a bowl of fresh fruit sitting on the center work island.

Cotton lined his mouth and throat. He groped toward the sink, then opened cabinet doors until he found the glasses. Turning on the cool tap water, he filled a glass and turned it up, pouring the water into his mouth so thirstily that some of it spilled down his chest. With that first terrible urgency satisfied, he drank another glass of water and this time managed to get it all in his mouth.

How long had he been here? The blanks in his memory made him furious. He was vulnerable, uncertain of where he was or what had happened, and vulnerability was one thing he couldn't afford. But he was starving, too. The

bowl of fresh fruit beckoned, and he wolfed down a banana, then half an apple. Abruptly he was too full to eat another bite, so he tossed both the banana skin and the half-eaten apple into the trash.
Okay, he could get around. Slowly, but he wasn't helpless. His next priority was to find some means of self-defense. The most available weapon was a knife, and he examined the kitchen knives before choosing the one with the sharpest, strongest blade. With that in his hand he began a slow, methodical search of the house, but there were no other weapons of any sort to be found.
The outside doors all had extremely strong dead-bolt locks on them. They weren't fancy, but they would damned sure slow down anyone trying to get in. He looked at them, trying to remember if he had ever seen any locks exactly like them, and decided that he hadn't. They were locked, but what sense did it make to put the locks on the inside, where he could get to them? He turned the lock, and it opened with a smooth, almost silent movement. Warily he reached for the knob and opened the door a little, again checking through the crack to see if anyone was in view. The door was heavy, too heavy to be an ordinary door. He opened it a little more, running his fingers along the edge. Steel reinforced, he guessed.
It was a snug little prison, but the locks were on the wrong side of the doors, and there were no wardens.
He opened the door completely, looking out through a screen door at a neat little yard, a tall pine thicket and a flock of fat white and gray geese searching for insects in the grass. The heat coming through the screen door was thick and heavy, hitting him like a blow. A dog appeared as if by magic from beneath a bush, leaping up onto the porch and staring at him with unblinking eyes as its ears went back and snarls twisted the canine muzzle. Dispassionately he examined the dog, weighing his chances. A trained attack dog, German shepherd, weighing eighty or ninety pounds. In his weakened condition he didn't have a chance against a dog like that, even with a knife in his hand. He was effectively caged, after all.
His leg would barely support his weight. He was naked, weak, and didn't know where he was. The odds weren't in his favor, but he was alive and filled with a cold, controlled rage. Now he also had the advantage of surprise, because whoever had brought him here wouldn't be expecting him to be up and armed. He closed the door and locked it again, then watched

the dog through the window until it left the porch and resumed its position beneath the bush.
He had to wait.

An enormous, purplish-black thunderhead was looming in the sky when Rachel turned into the driveway. She eyed it, wondering if it would dump its load of rain out at sea or hold it until it was over land. The rain would be torrential, and the temperature would drop sharply, but as soon as the cloud had passed the heat would rise again, and the rain would evaporate in a suffocating cloud of steam. Ebenezer Duck and his flock scattered, honking irritably, as she pulled the car under the shade of the oak tree where they had been lazily pecking at the grass. Joe lifted his head to look at her, then returned to his snooze. Everything was calm, just as it had been when she'd left. Only then did she feel an easing of the tight constriction in her chest. She got the bag out of the trunk, unaware of the sharp black eyes that followed her every move. Holding the bag in one arm and the keys in the other hand, she climbed the steps to the porch, paused to shove her sunglasses on top of her head, then held the screen door open with her hip while she unlocked the door and pushed it open. The air-conditioned coolness was such a shocking contrast to the searing heat outside that goose bumps rose on her flesh, and she shivered. Taking deep breaths, she dropped the bag and her purse on one of the love seats and went to check on her patient.
Just as her hand touched the doorknob a hard arm circled her throat and she was jerked backward, her neck arched unnaturally. A brightly gleaming knife was held in front of her face. She had been too stunned to react, but now sheer terror flooded her as her gaze locked on the knife. How had they gotten in? Had they already killed him? The anguish that rose in her was wild and ferocious, consuming her.
"Don't fight and I won't hurt you," a deep voice murmured in her ear. "I want some answers, but I won't take any chances. If you make a wrong move – " He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't have to. How calm the voice was, as cool and unemotional as stone. It made her blood congeal. The arm under her chin was choking her, and she automatically raised both hands, clutching at him. The knife moved menacingly closer. "No, none of that," he whispered, his mouth close to her ear. Rachel shrank from the knife, her head digging into his shoulder, her body crowding frantically

against his in an attempt to put distance between herself and that shining blade. Every detail of his body was imprinted against her, and suddenly her dazed senses realized what she was feeling. He was naked! And if he were naked, then it had to be…

Sharp, piercing relief, as painful in its own way as the fear and anguish had been, made her muscles suddenly tremble as the tension left them. Her hands relaxed on his forearm.

"That's better," the low voice growled. "Who are you?"

"Rachel Jones," she said, her voice breathless because of the pressure he was putting on her throat.

"Where am I?"

"In my house. I pulled you out of the surf and brought you here." She could feel him hesitate, though perhaps it was simply that he was growing weaker. His strength was astonishing under the circumstances, but he had been very ill, and his stamina must be wavering. "Please," she whispered. "You shouldn't be out of bed."

That was the truth, Sabin thought grimly. He was exhausted, as if he'd run a marathon; his legs felt as if they would give out on him at any moment. He didn't know her, and he couldn't trust her; he had only this one chance, and a wrong guess could cost him his life, but he didn't have much choice. Damn, he was weak! Slowly he relaxed his right arm from around her throat and let his left hand, the one holding the knife, drop to his side. His shoulder throbbed, and he doubted that he would be able to lift his arm again.

Rather than jerking away from him, she turned cautiously, as if afraid of startling him into an attack, and wedged her shoulder under his right arm, while her arms went around him and supported him. "Lean on me before you fall," she said, her voice still a little breathless. "It would be a mess if you tore all those stitches out."

He didn't have much choice except to drape his arm over her slender shoulders and lean heavily on her. If he didn't either sit down or lie down – soon – he was going to fall, and he knew it. Slowly she helped him into the bedroom, supporting him as he virtually collapsed onto the edge of the bed, then holding his head in the crook of her left arm as she lowered him into a supine position while she reached around him with her other hand to arrange the pillow. Sabin drew a deep breath, his senses automatically reacting to her warm female scent and the softness of her breast against his

cheek. He had only to turn his head to press his mouth against her nipple, and the image teased at him with a curious urgency.
He lay with his eyes closed, breathing rapidly in exhaustion, while she lifted his legs onto the bed and pulled the sheet up to his waist. "There," she said softly. "You can rest now." She stroked her hand over his chest, as she had done so many times in the past few days, an action that had become automatic because it seemed to calm his restlessness. He was much cooler; the fever had finally lost its grip on him. The knife was still clutched in his left hand, and she reached to take it, but his fingers tightened at her touch, and his eyes flew open, his gaze black and fierce.
Rachel kept her hand on the knife, levelly meeting his eyes. "Why do you need it?" she asked. "If I meant you any harm I've had a lot of opportunities to do something about it before now."
Her eyes were gray, completely so, without any hint of blue. They were almost charcoal in color, but warm, and with an utter clarity that made them seem fathomless. He felt a shock of recognition. The eyes, and the woman, had filled his recent dreams with a tender eroticism that made his loins tighten. But… were they dreams? The woman wasn't a dream. She was real, warm and firm of flesh, and her hands had moved over him with the ease of familiarity. She didn't act like a guard, but he couldn't afford to take the chance. If he relinquished the knife he might not be able to get it back. "I'll keep it," he said.
Rachel hesitated, wondering if she should press the issue, but there was something in his quiet, flat tone that made her decide to let it go. Even though he was weak and barely able to get around on his own, there was something about him that told her he couldn't be pushed. He was a dangerous man, this stranger sleeping in her bed. She moved her hand from his.
"All right. Are you hungry?"
"No. I ate a banana and an apple."
"How long have you been awake?"
He hadn't checked a clock, but he didn't need a clock to give him a sense of time. "Almost an hour." His gaze hadn't wavered from her. Rachel felt as if he could see through her, as if he were probing her mind.
"You woke up a couple of times before, but you were still feverish and talking nonsense."
"What kind of nonsense?" he asked sharply.

Rachel regarded him calmly. "No state secrets or anything like that. You thought you were going to a party."
Was there a double meaning to that crack about state secrets? Did she know anything, or had that just been a coincidence? Sabin wanted to question her, but he hardly had the upper hand at the moment, and his exhaustion was changing into acute sleepiness. As if she knew, she touched his face, her fingers cool and light. "Go to sleep," she said. "I'll still be here when you wake up."
It was, ridiculously, the reassurance he needed to let him relax into sleep. Quietly Rachel left the room and went to the kitchen, where she leaned weakly against the work island. Her legs were shaking, her insides quivering like gelatin, in reaction to all that had happened to her already… and it wasn't even noon yet! Nor did she have any of the answers she had promised herself she would get as soon as he woke up; rather than asking questions, she had been answering his. She hadn't been prepared for the intensity of his gaze, so piercing that it was difficult to meet his eyes for any length of time. Warlock's eyes… She certainly hadn't been prepared for having a knife held to her throat! And she had been helpless, unable to do anything against a strength that was far superior to hers, even though he was undoubtedly weak from his wounds and illness.
The terror that had held her in its icy grip for those few moments had been worse than she had ever imagined. She had been frightened before, but not to that degree. She was still shaking in reaction, and her eyes burned with tears that she refused to let fall. Now wasn't the time for tears; she had to get herself under control. He might sleep for half a day, or he might wake up in an hour, but she was going to be in complete command of herself whenever he woke. He would also need feeding, she thought, seizing gratefully on something practical to do. Banana and apple notwithstanding, his system would probably demand frequent feedings until he had recovered.
Her movements jerky, she set beef tips simmering for beef stew and began dicing potatoes, carrots and celery. Maybe the meal would be ready by the time he awoke; if not, he could settle for soup and a sandwich. When everything was in the pot she darted out to the vegetable garden and gathered the ripe tomatoes, then ignored the heat and began pulling up weeds. It wasn't until she finally fell to her knees on a wave of dizziness that she realized how erratically she had been behaving, spurred on by the

overdose of adrenaline her system had absorbed that morning. It was insanity to work out in the broiling sun, especially without a hat!
She went inside and washed her face with cold water; she felt calmer now, though her hands were still trembling slightly. There was nothing to do but wait: wait until the stew was ready; wait until he woke up; wait until she got some answers… wait.
It was a tribute to her self-possession and concentration that she was actually able to do some research for the course she would be teaching in the fall. Like a manuscript, the course would require pacing and plotting to hold the students' interest, to make them stretch. Yet even though she was deeply involved in her reading and notes, she was so attuned to him that she heard the slight rustle made by the bedcovers when he moved, and she knew he was awake. Checking her watch, she saw that he had slept for a little over three hours; the stew would be ready, if he was hungry.
He was sitting up, yawning and rubbing his bearded face, when she entered the bedroom. Instantly she felt his attention settle on her like a beam of pure energy, tingling on her skin.
"Are you hungry now? You've slept for three hours."
He considered that, then gave a brief nod. "Yes. I need a bathroom, a shower and a shave first, though."
"Sorry, the shower is out while you still have stitches," she said, hurrying to his side as he threw back the sheet and eased his feet to the floor, wincing in pain and holding his left thigh. Rachel put a supporting arm around him until he was steady on his feet. "I'll put a new blade in my razor for you, though." Sensing that he preferred to get across the room on his own power, she let her arm drop and watched anxiously as he took each painful step. He was a loner; he wasn't accustomed to aid and didn't welcome it, though he had to know that he simply wasn't capable of some things right now. He would let her help him only when it was necessary. Still, she felt compelled to ask. "Shall I shave you, or do you think you're steady enough to do it yourself?"
He paused at the door to the bathroom and glanced over his shoulder at her. "I'll do it."
She nodded and started toward him. "I'll just put the new blade – "
"I'll find them," he said quietly, stopping her before she could reach him.
Rachel accepted her dismissal, turning instead toward the other door.

It hurt to have him reject her help after the days he had been totally helpless and dependent on her for everything, after the nights she had spent leaning over him, sponging him down to keep him cool, and especially after the mental strain she had endured. As she set the table she tried to deal with that hurt, to push it away. After all, she was even more of a stranger to him than he was to her, and it was only natural that he would try to regain control of himself as soon as possible. To a man like him, control would be vital. She had to stop hovering over him like a mother hen.

It was easy to tell herself that, but when at last she heard the water cut off in the bathroom she hesitated for only a moment before giving in to the compulsion to check on him. He was standing in the middle of the bedroom floor, looking around as if considering his options. A towel was knotted low on his lean hips, and contrary to logic it made him seem even more naked than when he had been completely unclothed. Rachel's pulse leaped. Even with the stark contrast of the white bandages on his leg and shoulder, he still seemed immensely powerful, and so male that she felt her mouth go dry. He had shaved, and the clean line of his jaw made her fingers twitch with the urge to stroke it – another gesture he wouldn't appreciate.

"Is there anything I could wear, or do I just go around naked?" he finally asked, when Rachel made no move either to approach him or to speak.

She groaned as she remembered and hit the heel of her palm against her forehead. "I have something for you to wear. That's where I was this morning, picking up some things you would need." The shopping bag still lay where she had dropped it in the living room; she grabbed it and carried it into the bedroom, where she deposited it on the bed.

He opened the bag and a curious expression crossed his face; then he pulled out a lacy pair of panties and held them up to examine them before Rachel could explain. "Size five," he commented, and looked at her as though measuring her for the fit. The scrap of lace and nylon dangled from one finger. "Nice, but I don't think they'll fit me."

"They weren't meant to," Rachel said calmly, still tingling from the once-over he'd given her. "They were camouflage, that's all. Anything you find in there that you don't ordinarily use, put back in the bag." She refused to be embarrassed, since she had only done what had seemed necessary. The "camouflage" had been darned expensive, too! Leaving him to dress in whatever he chose, she returned to the kitchen and popped buttered fresh

bread into the oven, then ladled up the stew and poured tea into tall glasses full of ice.
"I need help with the shirt."
She hadn't heard him approach, and she whirled, startled by both his nearness and what he'd said. He was standing right behind her, clad in the black denim cutoffs and holding the terry-cloth pullover in his hand. His chest filled her vision, tautly powerful muscles covered with black, curling hair and the white bulk of the bandage wrapped around his left shoulder. How long had he struggled with the shirt before admitting that he couldn't manage it by himself? She was astonished that he hadn't simply exchanged it for one that buttoned, so he wouldn't have to ask for her help.
"Sit down so I can reach you better," she said, taking the shirt from his hand. He held the corner of the cabinets for support as he slowly limped to the table in the dining alcove and eased himself down onto one of the chairs. Rachel carefully worked the shirt up his arm, a look of intent concentration on her face as she tried not to jostle his shoulder. When she had it in place she said, "Put your other arm in the sleeve while I keep it from pulling on your shoulder."
Without a word he did as she directed, and together they pulled the shirt over his head. Rachel tugged it into place, much as a mother would dress a toddler, but the man sitting motionless under her ministrations was no child in any sense she could imagine. She didn't linger over the chore, well aware of his dislike for having to rely on her aid. Briskly she got the bread out of the oven and put it in the napkin-lined breadbasket, then placed the basket on the table and took her own chair. "Are you left-handed or right-handed?" she asked, not looking at him, even though she could feel the burning energy of his gaze on her face. "Ambidextrous. Why?"
"The spoon could be difficult for you to handle if you were left-handed," she replied, nodding at the stew. "Would you like bread?"
"Please."
He was very good at one-word sentences, she thought as she put the bread on his plate. Actually, she should have thought of asking him if he could handle the razor, too, but his clean-shaven face said that he evidently could. They ate in silence for a few moments, and he really did justice to the stew. She hadn't expected his appetite to be so good so early in his recovery. The bowl was nearly empty when he put his spoon down and pinned her with the ebony fire of his eyes. "Tell me what's going on."

It was a demand that Rachel didn't feel like meeting. Carefully she put her own spoon down. "I think it's my turn to ask a few questions. Who are you? What's your name?"
He didn't like the counterdemand. She sensed his displeasure, though his expression didn't flicker. The hesitation lasted for barely a second, but she noticed it and had the immediate impression that he wasn't going to answer. Then he drawled, "Call me, 'Joe'."
"I can't do that," she replied. "'Joe' is what I call the dog, because he wouldn't tell me his name, either. Make up another one." Driven by the electric surge of tension in the air she began clearing off the table, moving swiftly and automatically. He watched her for a moment, then said quietly, "Sit down."
Rachel didn't pause. "Why? Do I have to be sitting down to listen to more lies?"
"Rachel, sit down." He didn't raise his voice, didn't change the calm, dead-level inflection of his tone, but suddenly it was a command. She stared at him for a moment, then lifted her chin and returned to her chair. When she merely waited in silence, looking at him, he gave a little sigh.
"I appreciate your help, but the less you know, the better it is for you."
Rachel had always hated it when anyone presumed to know what was best for her and what wasn't. "I see. Was I not supposed to notice that you had two bullet holes in you, when I pulled you out of the surf? Was I supposed to turn my head when two men pretending to be FBI agents came looking for you, and just turn you over to them? Was it supposed to pass my notice that you held a knife to my throat this morning? I'm a little curious, I admit! I've nursed you for four days, and I really would like to know your name, if that isn't too much to ask!"
One level black brow lifted at her sarcasm. "It could be."
"All right, forget it. Play your little games. You don't answer my questions and I won't answer yours. Deal?"
He watched her for a little longer, and Rachel kept her gaze level, not backing down an inch. "My name is Sabin," he finally said, the words slowly drawn out of him, as if he begrudged every syllable.
She absorbed the name's sound, her mind lingering over the feel and form of it. "And the rest of it?"
"Is it important?"
"No. But I'd like to know, anyway."

He paused only a fraction of a second. "Kell Sabin."
She held out her hand. "Glad to meet you, Kell Sabin."
Slowly he took her hand, his callused palm sliding against her softer one and his hard, warm fingers wrapping around hers. "Thank you for taking care of me. I've been here four days?"
"This is the fourth day."
"Fill me in on what's happened."
He had the manner of a man accustomed to command; rather than requesting, he ordered, and it was clear that he expected his orders to be obeyed. Rachel pulled her hand from his, disturbed by his warm touch and the shivery way it affected her. Clasping her fingers together to dispel the tingling in them, she rested her hands on the table. "I pulled you out of the water and brought you here. I think you hit your head on one of the rocks that line the mouth of the bay. You had a concussion and were in shock. The bullet was still in your shoulder."
He frowned. "I know. Did you take it out?"
"Not me. I called the vet."
At least something could startle him, though the expression was quickly gone. "A veterinarian?"
"I had to do something, and a doctor has to report all gunshot wounds."
He eyed her thoughtfully. "You didn't want it reported?"
"I thought *you* might not want it reported."
"You thought right. What happened then?"
"I took care of you. You were out of it for two days. Then you started waking up, but the fever had you out of your head. You didn't know what was going on."
"And the FBI agents?"
"They weren't FBI. I checked."
"What did they look like?"
Rachel began to feel as if she were being interrogated. "The one who calls himself Lowell is thin, dark, about five foot ten, early forties. The other one, Ellis, is tall, good-looking in a toothpaste-ad sort of way, sandy-brown hair, blue eyes."
"Ellis," he said, as if to himself.
"I played dumb. It seemed the safest thing to do until you woke up. Are they friends of yours?"
"No."

Silence fell between them. Rachel studied her hands, waiting for another question. When none came she tried one of her own. "Should I have called the police?"
"It would have been safer for you if you had."
"I took a calculated risk. I figured the odds were more in my favor than yours." She took a deep breath. "I'm a civilian, but I used to be an investigative reporter. I saw some things in those days that didn't add up, and I did a little digging, found out some things before I was warned not to go any deeper. You could have been a drug runner or an escaped convict, but there wasn't any hint of anything like that on the scanner. You could also have been an agent. You had been shot twice. You were unconscious and couldn't protect yourself or tell me anything. If… people…were hunting you, you wouldn't have had a chance in a hospital."
His lashes had dropped, shielding his expression. "You've got quite an imagination."
"Haven't I," she agreed mildly.
He leaned back in his chair, wincing a little as he tried to get his shoulder comfortable. "Who else knows I'm here, other than the vet?"
"No one."
"Then how did you get me up here? Or did the vet help you? You're not Superwoman."
"I put you on a quilt and dragged you up here, with help from the dog. Maybe he thought it was a game." Her gray eyes darkened as she thought of the Herculean effort she had made to get him inside the house. "When Honey got here, we lifted you onto the bed."
"Honey?"
"The vet. Honey Mayfield."
Sabin watched her quiet face, wondering at what she wasn't saying. How far had she dragged him? How had she gotten him up the steps to the porch? He had carried wounded men out of battle, so he knew how difficult it was, even with his strength and training. He outweighed her by at least eighty pounds; there was no way she could have lifted him. She could be lying about not having anyone else help her, but there wasn't any reason for her to do so; all he could do was read between the lines. Almost anyone would have called the police immediately on finding a man unconscious on their beach, but she hadn't. Few people would ever have considered the options and circumstances that had occurred to her. People just didn't think about

such things. It wasn't a part of their normal lives; it only happened in movies and books and therefore wasn't real. What life had she led that would make her so cautious, so aware of something that should have been beyond her experience?

They both heard the approaching car at the same time. Instantly she was out of her chair, her hand on his shoulder. "Go to the bedroom and close the door," she said evenly, not noticing the way his eyebrows lifted at her order. She went to the window and looked out; then the tension visibly left her body.

"It's Honey. Everything's okay. I guess she stayed away as long as her curiosity would let her."

Chapter Six

"How's the headache?" the veterinarian asked, peering into his eyes. She was a big, strong-boned woman with a friendly, freckled face and a light touch. Sabin decided that he liked her; she had a good bedside manner.
"Hanging in there," he grunted.
"Help me get his shirt off," she said to Rachel, and the two women gently and efficiently stripped him. He was glad that he'd chosen to wear the cutoffs, or they would have had his pants off, too. He didn't have any modesty to worry about, but it still disconcerted him to be handled like a Barbie doll. He dispassionately observed the purpled, puckered skin around the stitches in his leg, wondering about the extent of the muscle damage. It was essential that he be able to do more than hobble, and soon. The damage to his shoulder, with its complex system of muscle and tendons, was likely to be more permanent, but mobility was his greatest concern at the moment. Once he had decided what course of action to take he would need to move fast.
Fresh bandages were applied, and he was put back inside his shirt. "I'll be back in a couple of days to take out the stitches," Honey said, repacking her bag. It struck Sabin that not once had she asked his name or any other question that didn't deal with his physical well-being. Either she was remarkably incurious or she had decided that the less she knew, the better. It was a view that he wished Rachel shared. Sabin had always made it a rule not to involve innocent citizens; his work was too dangerous, and though he knew the risks of his job and accepted them, there was really no way Rachel could comprehend the extent of the risk she was taking in helping him.
Rachel went out with Honey, and Sabin hobbled to the door to watch as they stood by Honey's car, talking in low voices. The dog, Joe, took up a position at the foot of the steps, a low growl working in his throat as he turned first to watch Sabin at the door, then back to Rachel, as if he couldn't decide where to place his attention. His foremost instinct was to guard Rachel, but those same instincts couldn't allow him to ignore Sabin's alien presence at the door.
Honey got in the car and drove off, and after a final wave Rachel walked back to the porch. "Calm down," she admonished the dog softly, daring to give him a swift touch on the neck. His growl intensified, and she looked up to see Sabin coming out on the porch.

"Don't come too close to him," she warned. "He doesn't like men."
Sabin regarded the dog with remote curiosity. "Where did you get him? He's a trained attack dog."
Astonished, Rachel looked down at Joe, standing so close by her leg. "He just wandered up one day, all skinny and beat-up. We reached an understanding. I feed him, and he stays around. He's not an attack dog."
"Joe," Sabin said sharply. "Heel."
She felt the animal quiver as if he'd been struck, and blood-chilling snarls worked up from his throat as he stared at the man, every muscle in his big body quivering as if he longed to launch himself at his enemy but was chained to Rachel's side. Before she thought of the danger she went down on one knee and put her arm around his neck, talking softly to him in reassurance. "It's allright," she crooned. "He won't hurt you, I promise. Everything's all right."
When Joe was calmer Rachel went up on the porch and deliberately stroked Sabin's arm, letting the dog see her. Sabin watched Joe, unafraid of the dog, but not pushing him, either. He needed to have Joe accept him, at least enough to let him leave the house without attacking.
"He was probably abused by his owner," he said. "You're lucky he didn't have you for breakfast the first time you walked out of the house."
"I think you're wrong. It's a possibility that he was a guard dog, but I don't think he was trained to attack. You owe him a lot. If it hadn't been for him, I couldn't have gotten you up from the beach." Suddenly she realized that her hand was still on his arm, slowly moving up and down, and she let her arm fall to her side. "Are you ready to go back inside? You must be tired by now."
"In a minute." He slowly surveyed the pine thicket to the right and the road that curved away to the left, committing distances and details to memory for future use. "How far are we from a main road?"
"About five or six miles, I guess. This is a private road. It joins the road from Rafferty's ranch before it runs into U.S. 19."
"Which way is the beach?"
She pointed to the pine thicket. "Down through the pines."
"Do you have a boat?"
Rachel looked at him, her gray eyes very clear. "No. The only means of escape are on foot or driving."

The faintest smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "I wasn't going to steal your car."
"Weren't you? I still don't know what's going on, why you were shot, or even if you're a good guy."
"With those doubts, why haven't you called the police?" he returned, his voice cool. "I obviously wasn't wearing a white hat when you found me."
He was going to stonewall it to the end, the ultimate professional, alone and unemotional. Rachel accepted that she wasn't entitled to full knowledge of his situation, even though she had saved his life, but she would very much like to know that she had done the right thing. Though she had acted on her instincts, the uncertainty was gnawing at her. Had she saved a rogue agent? An enemy of her country? What would she do if it turned out to be that way? The worst part of it was the undeniable and growing attraction she felt for him, even against her own better judgment.
He didn't say anything else, and she didn't respond to his provoking mention of his lack of clothing when she'd found him. She glanced at Joe and turned to open the screen door. "I'm getting out of this heat. You can take your chances with Joe if you want to stay out here."
Sabin followed her inside, measuring the unyielding straightness of her back. She was angry, but she was also disturbed. He would have liked to reassure her, but the hard truth was that the less she knew, the safer she was. He had no way of protecting her in his present condition and circumstances. The fact that she was protecting him, willingly endangering herself even though her guesses ranged uncomfortably close to the truth, did something unwanted to his insides. Hell, he thought in disgust at himself, everything about her did something to his insides. He was already familiar with the scent of her flesh and the tender, startlingly intimate touch of her hands. His body still felt the press of hers against him, making him want to reach out and pull her back. He had never needed another human being's closeness, except for the physical closeness required for sex. He eyed her bare, slender legs and softly rounded buttocks; the sexual urge was there, all right, and damned strong, considering his general physical condition. The dangerous part of it was that the thought of lying in the darkness with her and simply holding her was at least as attractive as the thought of taking her.
He leaned in the doorway and watched as she efficiently finished cleaning the dishes. There was a brisk, economical grace to her movements, even while she was doing such a mundane task. Everything was organized and

logical. She wasn't a fussy woman. Even her clothing was plain and unadorned, though her beige shorts and simple blue cotton shirt didn't need any adornment other than the soft feminine curves beneath them. Again he was aware of the tantalizing image of those curves, just as if he knew how she looked naked, had already had his hands on her.

"Why are you staring?" she asked without looking at him. She had been as aware of his gaze as she would have been of his touch.

"Sorry." He didn't explain, but, then, he doubted that she would really want to know. "I'm going back to bed. Will you help me with the shirt?"

"Of course." She wiped her hands on a towel and went ahead of him to the bedroom. "Let me change the sheets first."

Fatigue pulled at him as he leaned against the dresser to ease the strain of his weight on his left leg. His shoulder and leg throbbed, but the pain was to be expected, so he ignored it. The real problem was his lack of strength; he wouldn't be able to protect Rachel or himself if anything happened. Did he dare remain here while he healed? His brooding gaze remained fixed on her as she put fresh linens on the bed, his available options running through his mind. Those options were severely limited. He had no money, no identification, and he didn't dare call to be picked up, because he had no idea of the extent to which the agency had been compromised, or who he could trust. He wasn't in any shape to do anything anyway; he had to recuperate, so it might as well be here. The small house had its advantages: the dog outside was a damned good defense; the locks were strong; he had food and medical care.

There was also Rachel.

Looking at her was easy; it could become an uncontrollable habit. She was slim and healthy-looking, with a honeyed tan that made her skin look luscious. Her hair was thick and straight and shiny, a dark ash-brown so completely lacking in any warm highlights that it almost had a silvery sheen. It went well with her wide, clear, lake-gray eyes. She wasn't tall, less than medium height, but she carried herself so straight that she gave the impression of being a tall woman. And she was soft, with rounded breasts that nestled into his palms….

Damn! The image was so real, so strong, that it kept creeping back. If it was only a fever-induced dream, it was the most realistic he had ever known. But if it had really happened, when and how? He had been unconscious most of the time, and out of his head with fever even when he'd been

awake. Yet he kept reliving the sensation of her hands on him, stroking gently, with the open intimacy of lovers, and he had either had his hands on her or his imagination had lurched into overdrive.
She plumped the pillows and turned to him. "Do you want to sleep in your shorts?"
For an answer he unsnapped the cutoffs and let them drop, then sat down on the bed so she could work the shirt off his shoulder. The warm, faintly floral scent of her enveloped him as she leaned close, and he instinctively turned his head toward it, his mouth and nose pressing into her shoulder. She hesitated, then quickly freed him from the shirt and moved away from his touch. The moist warmth of his breath had heated her skin through the fabric of her shirt and played havoc with the even rhythm of her heartbeat. Trying not to let him see how his nearness had affected her, she neatly folded the shirt and placed it on a chair, then picked up his cutoffs and placed them on top of the shirt. When she looked at him again he was lying on his back, his right leg bent at the knee and raised, his right arm resting across his stomach. His white briefs contrasted sharply with his bronzed skin, reminding her that he didn't have any tan lines on his body. She groaned inwardly. Why did she have to think about that now?
"Do you want the sheet over you?"
"No, the fan feels good." He lifted his right hand from his stomach and held it out to her. "Sit here for a minute."
Her mind told her that it wasn't a good idea. She sat down, anyway, just as she had done so many times since he'd been in her bed, her body angled to face him and her hip against his side. He draped his arm over her thighs, his hand cradling the curve of her hip as if to keep her nestled against him. His fingers, curving around to her buttock, began to move caressingly, and her heart started pounding again. She looked up to meet his eyes and was unable to look away, caught by the mesmerizing black fire.
"I can't give you all the answers you want," he murmured. "I don't know them myself. Even if I tell you I'm a good guy, you'd still only have my word for it, and why would I cut my own throat by telling you anything else?"
"Don't play devil's advocate," she said sharply, wishing she could find the will to break away from the seductive power of his gaze and touch. "Let's deal in facts. You were shot. Who shot you?"
"I was ambushed, set up by one of my own men – Tod Ellis."

"Bogus-FBI-agent Ellis?"
"The same, from the description you gave."
"Then make a call and turn him in."
"It isn't as simple as that. I'm on a month's vacation from the agency. Only two men knew my location, both of them my superiors."
Rachel sat very still. "One of them betrayed you, but you don't know which one."
"Perhaps both of them."
"Can't you contact someone higher up?"
Something cold and furious flashed in his eyes. "Sweetheart, you can't get much higher. I'm not even certain I can get through. Either one of them has the power to declare me an outlaw, and calling from here would endanger you."
Rachel felt the icy power of his rage and shivered inside, thankful that she wasn't the one who had crossed him. The look in his eyes was in direct contrast to the touch of his fingertips on her hip. How could his touch remain so gentle, while the wrath of hell glittered in his eyes?
"What are you going to do?"
His fingers trailed down her hip to her thigh and rubbed across the hem of her shorts, then gently glided beneath it. "Recuperate. I can't do a damned thing right now, including dress myself. The problem is that I'm putting you in danger just by being here."
She couldn't control her breathing, or her pulse rate. Heat was building inside her, destroying her ability to think and leaving her to operate purely on her senses. She knew she should move his hand, but the rasp of his rough fingertips on her thigh was so pleasurable that all she could do was sit there, quivering slightly like a leaf in a soft spring breeze. Did he normally treat women as if they were his to touch as he wished, or had he picked up on her uncontrollable responses to him? She thought she had disguised them well, kept them to herself, but perhaps his job had made his senses and intuitions more acute. Desperately she made herself move, putting her hand on top of his to prevent it from moving any higher.
"You didn't put me in danger," she said, her voice a little hoarse. "I made the decision without your help."
Despite her controlling hand, his fingers moved higher and found the edge of her panties. "I have a question that's been driving me crazy," he admitted

in a low voice. He moved his hand again, delving beneath the elastic leg of her panties and curving his fingers over the cool bareness of her buttock. A whimper escaped her before she bit her lip, controlling the wild little sound. How could he do this to her with just his touch? "Stop," she whispered. "You have to stop."
"Have we been sleeping together?"
Her breasts had tightened painfully, begging for that touch to be transferred to them, for him to claim them as he had before. His question destroyed what little concentration she had left. "This… there's only this one bed. I don't have a couch, only the love seats – "
"So we've been in the same bed for four days," he interrupted, stopping a flow of words that she had felt edging toward incoherency. His eyes were glittering again, but this time with a different fire, and she couldn't look away. "You've been taking care of me."
She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Yes."
"All alone?"
"Yes."
"You've been feeding me."
"Yes."
"Bathing me."
"Yes. Your fever – I had to sponge you with cool water to keep it down."
"You did everything that had to be done, took care of me like a baby."
She didn't know what to say, what to do. His hand was still on her, his palm warm and hard against the softness of her flesh.
"You touched me," he said. "All over."
She swallowed. "It was necessary."
"I remember your hands on me. I liked it, but when I woke up this morning I thought it was a dream."
"You did dream," she said.
"Have I seen you naked?"
"No!"
"Then how do I know what your breasts look like? How they feel in my hands? It wasn't all a dream, Rachel. Was it?"
A hot, wild blush colored her face, giving him an answer even before she spoke. Her voice was stifled, and she looked away from him, her embarrassment at last freeing her from his gaze. "Twice, when you woke up, you… uh…grabbed me."

"Helped myself to the goodies?"
"Something like that."
"And I saw you?"
She made a helpless gesture toward her neck. "My nightgown drooped when I bent over you. The neckline was hanging open…."
"Was I rough?"
"No," she whispered.
"Did you like it?"
This had to stop, right now, though she had a feeling that it was already too late, that she should never have sat down on the bed. "Move your hand," she said, trying desperately to put some strength into her voice. "Let me go."
He obeyed without hesitation, triumph stamped on his hard, dark face. She shot up from the bed, her face on fire. What an utter fool she had made of herself! He probably wouldn't be able to sleep for laughing at her. She was at the door before he spoke, his voice momentarily freezing her to the spot.
"Rachel."
She didn't want to turn, didn't want to look at him, but the way he said her name was a command that pulled at her like a magnet. Lying down didn't diminish his power; being wounded didn't diminish it. He was a man born to dominate, and he did it effortlessly, with the sheer strength of his will.
"If I could, I'd come after you. You wouldn't get away."
Her voice was as quiet as his, rising only slightly above the whir of the ceiling fan in the cool, dim room. "I might," she said, and closed the door gently behind her as she left the room.
She wanted to cry, but she didn't, because crying never solved anything. She hurt inside, and she felt restless. Lust. She had identified it almost immediately, had properly labeled the source of her undeniable and, evidently, uncontrollable attraction to him. She could have handled it if it had remained merely lust, for lust was a human appetite, the perfectly normal reaction of one sex to another. She could have acknowledged it, then ignored it. What she couldn't ignore was the growing emotional impact he had on her. She had sat there on the bed and let him fondle her, not because she was physically attracted to him, though God knew that was the truth, but because he had rapidly become far too important to her.
Rachel's refuge was work; it had saved her when B.B. died, and she sought it instinctively now. Her study was small and cluttered with both her work and memorabilia: books, magazines, clipped articles and family

photographs crowded together on every available space. It was comfortable for her; it was here that she immersed herself in her interests, and despite the clutter she knew where everything was. It wasn't until her eyes fell on her favorite picture of B.B. that she realized she wasn't going to find the comfort she sought in this room. There couldn't be any hiding from herself; she had to face it, and face it now.

Slowly her fingers traced B.B.'s smiling face. He had been best friend, husband and lover, a man whose cheerful manner had hidden a strong character and firm sense of responsibility. They had had so much fun together! There were still times when she missed him so much that she thought she would never get over the sense of loss, even though she knew that wasn't what B.B. would have wanted. He would have wanted her to enjoy her life, to love again with all the passion she was capable of, to have children, to pursue her career, to have everything. She wanted that, too, but somehow she had never been able to imagine having it without B.B. and he was gone.

They had both known and accepted the risks of their jobs. They had even talked about them, holding hands in the night and discussing the danger they faced, as if by bringing it out in the open they could hold it at bay. Her job as an investigative reporter had made it inevitable that she would step on toes, and Rachel was very good at anything she chose to do. B.B.'s job with the Drug Enforcement Administration was inherently dangerous. Perhaps B.B. had had a premonition. His hand strong around hers in the darkness, he had once said, "Honey, if anything ever happens to me, remember that I know the possibilities and I'm willing to take the risks. I think it's a job worth doing, and I'm going to do my best at it, the same way you won't back down from a story that's getting too hot for comfort. Accidents happen to people who never take any risks at all. Playing it safe isn't a guarantee. Who knows? With the noses you put out of joint, your job may turn out to be more dangerous than mine."

Prophetic words. Within the year B.B. was dead. An investigation Rachel was making into a politician's background had turned up a connection with illegal drugs. She didn't have any proof, but her questions must have been making the politician itchy. One morning she had been late to catch a flight to Jacksonville and her car had been low on gas. B.B. had tossed her the keys to his. "Drive mine," he'd said. "I have plenty of time to get gas on the way to work. See you tonight, honey."

But he hadn't. Ten minutes after her flight left the ground B.B. started her car and a bomb wired to the ignition killed him instantly.
Haunted by grief, she had finished the investigation, and now the politician was serving a life sentence without parole for both his drug dealings and his part in B.B.'s death. Then she had given up investigative reporting and returned to Diamond Bay to try to find again some sense of life for herself. Peace, hard won but finally hers, had let her find pleasure in work again, and in the quiet tenor of life here on the bay. She had contentment, peace and pleasure, but hadn't come close to loving again; she hadn't even been tempted. She hadn't wanted to date, hadn't wanted a man's kiss, or touch, or company.
Until now. Her forefinger gently touched the glass that covered B.B.'s crooked grin. It was incredibly painful and difficult to fall in love. What an apt phrase it was! "Falling in love." She was definitely falling, unable to stop her whirling, headlong plunge, even though she wasn't certain she was ready for it. She felt like a fool. After all, what did she know about Kell Sabin? Enough for her emotions to go wildly out of control, that was for certain! She had somehow started loving him from the first, her intuition sensing that he would be important to her. Why else had she fought so desperately to hide him, to protect him? Would she have taken the risk of caring for any other stranger? It would be romantic of her to assume that it was predestination; another explanation was an ancient one, that a life belonged to the one who saved it. Was it a primitive predilection, a sort of bonding forged by danger?
At that point in her thoughts Rachel gave a wry laugh at herself. What difference did it make? She could sit there all night thinking of plausible and implausible explanations, but they wouldn't change a thing. She was, regardless of will and logic, already half in love with the man, and it was getting worse.
He was trying to seduce her. Oh, he wasn't in any physical shape for it, but given his superb conditioning and strength he would probably recover much faster than an ordinary person. Part of her shivered in excitement at the thought of making love with him, but another part, more cautious, warned her not to let herself become that involved with him. To do so would be to take an even larger risk than hiding him and nursing him back to health had been. She wasn't afraid of the physical risk, but the emotional price she might have to pay for loving such a man could be crippling.

She took a deep breath. She couldn't limit her emotions and responses to carefully measured dollops, like following a recipe. Her nature wasn't that controlled and unemotional. All she could do was accept the fact that she loved him, or was growing to love him, and deal with it from there.
B.B.'s photographed gaze looked back at her. It wasn't a betrayal to love someone else; he would want her to love again.
It was wrenching to accept the idea; Rachel didn't love lightly. When she gave herself it was with all the passion of her emotions, which wasn't an easy or casual way to love. The man in her bed wouldn't welcome her devotion; it didn't take a crystal ball to tell that he was one of those men who combined icy unemotionalism with fiery sensuality. He lived for the danger of his job, and it was a job that didn't encourage emotional ties. He could take her with raw, hungry passion, then calmly walk away and return to the life he had chosen.
Wryly she looked around the study; she wasn't going to be able to work, after all. Her emotions were too turbulent to allow her to sink into either planning her class or working on her manuscript. She had gotten her hero into a sticky situation, but could it be any stickier than the one she found herself in? Actually, she could use some practical advice. A smile suddenly lit her face. She had an expert in her bedroom; why not use his knowledge while he was there? If nothing else, it would help occupy his time. To occupy her time, she could finish weeding the garden now that it was late afternoon and the sun's ferocious heat had abated somewhat. She might as well do something practical.
The twilight was rapidly fading and she had almost finished her chore, when she heard the simultaneous creak of the screen door at the back steps and Joe's explosive, furious spring from his position at the end of the row where she was working. Rachel screamed Joe's name as she jumped to her feet, knowing that she'd never be able to reach the dog in time to stop him.
Sabin didn't retreat. Joe hesitated when Rachel screamed at him, his attention momentarily split, and Sabin used the interval to ease himself down into a sitting position on the steps. It left him vulnerable, but it also took him out of a threatening position. Joe stopped four feet away, his face contorted, the fur on his neck raised as he crouched.
"Stay back," Sabin said evenly as Rachel approached from the side, trying to put herself between Sabin and the dog. She was far too willing to use herself as a shield; he didn't think the dog would intentionally hurt her, but

if the dog attacked and Rachel tried to protect him… He had to reach an understanding with Joe, and it might as well be now.
Rachel stopped as he'd directed, but she spoke softly to the dog, trying to calm him. If he attacked she wasn't strong enough to wrestle him off of Sabin. What was he thinking of, coming out like that, when he knew Joe didn't like men?
"Joe, heel," Sabin said firmly.
Just as it had earlier, the command sent Joe into a paroxysm of rage. She edged closer, ready to leap if Joe made any move to attack. Sabin gave her a warning glance.
"Joe, heel." He repeated the command over and over, always in a quiet, level voice, and Joe made a lunge that brought his sharp teeth within inches of Sabin's bare foot. Rachel gasped and threw herself at the dog, wrapping her arms around his neck. He was quivering in every muscle of his body. He ignored her, his attention locked on the man.
"Turn him loose and back away," Sabin instructed.
"Why don't you just go back in the house while I hold him?"
"Because I'm a prisoner as long as he doesn't accept me. I may need to leave in a hurry, and I don't want to have to worry about the dog."
Rachel crouched by Joe, her fingers buried in his fur and gently rubbing. Already Sabin was planning to leave, but, then, she had known how it would be. Slowly she released the dog and stepped back. "Joe, heel," Sabin said again.
Rachel held her breath, waiting for another violent reaction. She could see Joe shake, and his ears went back. Sabin repeated the command. For a moment the dog quivered on the verge of attack, then, abruptly, he went to Sabin's side and took up the heeling position.
"Sit," Sabin said, and Joe sat.
"Good boy, good boy." Stiffly he moved his left arm to pat the dog's head. For a moment Joe's ears went back and he snarled softly, but he made no move to bite. Rachel slowly released her pentup breath, relief making her legs wobble.
Sabin slanted her a quick glance from his midnight eyes. "Now you come sit beside me."
"Just like the dog?" she quipped, sinking gratefully onto the step beside him. At her action Joe sprang up and moved to stand in front of them, his ears going back again.

Sabin put his right arm around her shoulders and hugged her against his bare chest, carefully watching the dog. Joe didn't like it at all; a growl began rumbling in his chest.
"He's jealous," Sabin observed.
"Or he thinks you might hurt me." His arm around her was interfering with her breathing, and to take her mind off it she held her hand out to Joe. "It's all right. Come here, boy. Gome on."
Warily Joe came closer. He sniffed at Rachel's outstretched hand, then Sabin's knee. After a moment he dropped to the ground at their feet and put his head on his paws.
"It's a shame someone abused him. He's an intelligent, expensive animal, and he isn't old. He's about five."
"That's what Honey thinks."
"Have you always had a penchant for taking in strays?" he asked, and she knew he wasn't just talking about Joe.
"Only the interesting ones." She could hear the tightness creeping into her voice and wondered if he could hear it, too, if he could guess what caused it. His right hand was lightly rubbing her bare arm, an innocent touch if it hadn't been for the warm pleasure it gave her. A flash of lightning in the darkening sky made her look up, glad for an interruption.
"It looks like there's a chance of rain. A thunderhead passed right over us this morning and didn't leave a drop." Right on cue, thunder rumbled and a few fat drops of rain splashed down on them. "We'd better go in the house."
Sabin let her help him to his feet, but he negotiated the steps on his own. Joe got up and took shelter under the car. Just as Rachel latched the screen door thunder cracked deafeningly directly overhead, and the heavens opened to release a deluge of rain. The temperature plummeted while they stood there, the rain fresh and cool, and the wind blew a fine mist through the screen door. Laughing, Rachel shut the wooden door and locked it, then turned to find herself in Sabin's arms.
He didn't say anything. He simply closed his fist in her hair and held her head back, and his mouth came down on hers. Her world shuddered, then tilted off-balance. She stood there, her hands on his bare chest, and let him have her mouth as he pleased, unable to do anything except give him what he wanted. His mouth was hard, as she had known it would be. Hungry, as she had known it would be. He kissed her with the slow, hot skill of

experience, his tongue on hers, the roughness of his faint beard scraping her softer skin.
The exquisite pleasure stunned her, and she jerked her mouth from his, her eyes wide as she stared up at him.
His fist tightened in her hair. "Are you afraid of me?" he asked roughly.
"No," she whispered.
"Then why did you pull away?"
She couldn't do anything but give him the truth, staring up at him in the growing darkness while the storm raged over their heads. "Because it was too much."
There was a storm in his black eyes, glittering and snapping with hot fire.
"No," he said. "It wasn't enough."

Chapter Seven

Tension was coiling tightly inside Rachel; it had been increasing as the night wore on. He hadn't kissed her again, hadn't touched her again, but he had watched her, and in some ways that was worse. The power of his gaze was like a physical touch, stroking and burning. She couldn't make small talk to lessen the tension, because every time she looked up at him, he was watching her. They ate; then she turned on the television for diversion. Unfortunately the programs weren't very diverting, and he watched her, instead, so she turned the set off again. "Do you want something to read?" she finally asked in desperation.

He shook his head. "I'm too tired, and this damned headache is worse. I think I'll go back to bed."

He did look tired, but that wasn't surprising. He had been on his feet a lot, considering that he had just recovered full consciousness that morning. She was tired, too, the events of the day having sapped her energy. "Let me take a shower first. Then I'll help you get settled," she said, and he nodded in agreement.

She hurried through her shower and pulled on her most modest nightgown, then belted a light robe around her. He was waiting in the bedroom when she left the bath, and the rest of the house was dark. "That was fast," he said, smiling faintly. "I didn't know a woman could get out of a bathroom in less than half an hour."

"Chauvinist," she said mildly in reply, wondering if his smiles ever reached his eyes.

He unfastened the cutoffs and let them drop, then stepped out of them and limped into the bathroom. "I'll wash what I can reach, then call you to do the rest, all right?"

"Yes," she said, her throat tightening at the thought of feeling his body under her hands again. It wasn't as if she hadn't washed him before, but he was awake now, and he had kissed her. It was her own response to him that was making her nervous, not worrying over anything he might do. He was still too much of an invalid to make any serious advances.

There was no need for her to sleep with him now; it would be easier on both of them if she didn't make a big deal out of it and simply made a pallet before he came out of the bathroom. Thinking that, she took a couple of

quilts from the top of the closet and unfolded them on the floor, then dragged a pillow from the bed and tossed it down. She wouldn't need a cover; her robe would be enough.
After twenty minutes he opened the door. "I'm ready for the reinforcements."
He wore only a towel knotted around his lean waist, and he was literally weaving on his feet. Rachel looked at him closely, concern driving away her nervousness. He was pale, the skin stretched tautly over his high cheekbones, but his lips were very red. "I think you're feverish again," she said, laying her hand against his cheek. He was too warm, but the fever wasn't nearly as high as it had been before. Quickly she lowered the lid on the toilet and helped him to sit down, then gave him two aspirin and a glass of water before she finished washing his torso, working as fast as she could. The sooner he was in bed, the better. She should have been looking for the fever to flare again after the way he'd pushed himself that day.
"Sorry about this," he muttered as she dried him. "I didn't intend to give out on you this way."
"You're not Superman," Rachel told him briskly. "Come on, let's get you in bed."
She helped him to stand, and he said, "Wait." Removing his right arm from around her shoulders, he tugged the towel loose from his waist and draped it over one of the towel racks. Totally and unconcernedly nude, he put his arm back around her shoulders and leaned on her heavily as she helped him walk to the bed. Rachel didn't know if she should laugh or get huffy with him, but in the end she decided to ignore his lack of clothing. It wasn't as if she hadn't seen him before, and if it didn't bother him, it shouldn't bother her.
Even though he was feverish and exhausted, nothing escaped his notice. He saw the pallet at the foot of the bed, and his dark, level brows lowered as his eyes narrowed. "What's that?"
"My bed."
He looked at it, then at her. His voice was quiet. "Get that damned thing up from there and get in bed with me, where you belong."
She gave him a long, cool look. "You're presuming a lot on the basis of one kiss. You're a lot better now. I won't need to get up with you during the night, so I don't need to sleep with you."

"After sleeping with me that many times, why stop now? God knows it can't be modesty at this stage, and sex is out of the question. Any pass I made would be false advertising, and you know it."
She didn't want to laugh, didn't want him to know that his logic seemed very… logical. It wasn't the thought of what he might do that made her wary of sleeping with him now, but rather the knowledge of what it would mean to her to lie beside him in the night, to feel his weight and warmth in the bed next to her. She'd gotten used to sleeping alone, and it was painful to rediscover the subtle but powerful pleasure of sharing the dark hours with a man.
He put his hand on her throat, his callused thumb rubbing the sensitive tendons running down to her shoulder and making her shiver. "There's another reason why I want you to sleep with me."
She didn't know if she wanted to hear it. That cold, lethal expression was in his eyes again, the look of a man for whom there were no illusions, who had seen the worst and not been surprised. "I'll be right there, at the foot of the bed," she whispered.
"No. I want you at hand, so I'll know exactly where you are at all times. If I have to use the knife I want to make certain you don't accidentally get in the way."
She turned her head and looked at the knife, still lying there on the table beside the bed. "No one can break in without waking us."
"I'm not taking that chance. Get in the bed. Or we'll both sleep on the floor."
He meant it, and with a sigh she gave in; there was no use in both of them being uncomfortable. "All right. Let me get my pillow."
His hand dropped to his side, and Rachel retrieved her pillow, tossing it into place on the bed. Gingerly he eased between the sheets, and a low groan escaped him as he lay back, putting strain on his shoulder. She turned out the light and got into bed on the opposite side, pulling the sheet up over both of them and curling up in her usual position, just as if they had done this for years, but the casual pose was completely superficial. She was tightly knotted inside; his caution was catching. She doubted that he really expected the men who were hunting him to break into the house in the middle of the night, but he prepared himself, anyway.
The old house settled around them with comfortable squeaks and groans; in the evening silence she could hear the crickets chirping outside the window, but the familiar noises didn't reassure her. Her thoughts roamed restlessly,

trying to piece her snippets of information into a coherent picture. He was on vacation, but he'd been ambushed? Why were they trying to get rid of him? Had he learned something they wanted suppressed? She wanted to ask him, but his quiet, even breathing told her that he had already gone to sleep, worn out from the day.

Without thinking, she reached out and put her hand on his arm. It was a purely automatic gesture, left over from the nights she had needed to be aware of his every movement.

There was no warning, only the lightning-fast strike of his right hand as his hard fingers clamped around her wrist with a force that bruised and twisted. Rachel cried out, in fear as much as pain, every nerve in her jolted by his attack. The hand that held her wrist slackened a little, and he muttered, "Rachel?"

"You're hurting me!" The involuntary protest was wrung from her, and he released her completely, sitting up in the bed and swearing softly under his breath.

Rachel rubbed her bruised wrist, staring up at the faint outline of his body against the darkness. "I think the pallet would be safer," she finally said, trying for lightness. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to touch you. It just… happened."

His voice was rough. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. My wrist is bruised, that's all."

He tried to turn toward her, but his injured shoulder stopped him, and he swore again, halting the movement.

"Climb over on this side, so I can sleep on my right side and hold you."

"I don't need holding, thank you." She was still feeling a little shaken by the way he'd reacted, as violently and swiftly as a snake striking. "You must have a hard time keeping bed partners."

"You're the only woman I've slept with, in the literal sense, in years," he snapped. "Now do you want to take your chances on startling me again, or are you going to crawl over here?"

She got out of bed and walked around to the other side, and he slid over enough to make room for her. Without a word she lay down, turned her back to him and pulled the sheet up to cover them. In equal silence he positioned himself against her like a spoon, his thighs against the backs of hers, her bottom snuggling his loins, her back against his hard, broad chest His right arm went under her head, and his left one curved around her waist,

anchoring her in place. Rachel closed her eyes, branded by his heat and wondering how much of it was fever. She'd forgotten how it felt to lie like this with a man, to feel his strength wrapped around her like a blanket.
"What if I bang against your shoulder or leg?" she whispered.
"It'll hurt like hell," he replied dryly, his breath stirring her hair. "Go to sleep. Don't worry about it."
How could she not worry about hurting him, when she would rather die than cause him pain? She nestled her head into the pillow, feeling the iron hard strength of his arm beneath it; her hand slid beneath the pillow and lightly closed over his wrist, a touch that she had to have now. "Good night," she said, sinking into his warmth and letting drowsiness take over.
Sabin lay there, feeling her softness in his arms, the female sweetness of her scent in his nostrils and the remembered taste of her on his tongue. It felt too good, and that made him wary. It had been years since he'd actually *slept* with anyone; he had trained to such a fine, sharp edge that he hadn't been able to tolerate anyone close to him while he slept, including his ex-wife. Even while he'd been married he had still been essentially alone, both mentally and physically. It was odd that he could feel so comfortable now, with Rachel sleeping in his arms, as if he didn't need to be distant with her. He was innately cautious and solitary, on guard with everyone, including his own men; that trait had saved his life more than once. Maybe it was because he was already subconsciously accustomed to sleeping with her, to touching her and being touched by her, though that light touch on his arm had startled him into a violent reaction before he could catch himself.
For whatever reason, it felt good to hold her, to kiss her. She was a remarkably dangerous woman, because she tempted him in ways he'd never been tempted before. He thought of having sex with her. Every muscle in his body tightened, and he began to harden. Too bad he wasn't able to roll her onto her back and do all the things to her he wanted to do, but that would have to wait. He would have her, but he'd have to be very careful that it didn't become anything more than a good time. He couldn't afford to let it be anything else, for both of them.

Rachel woke slowly, so completely comfortable she was loath to open her eyes and start the day. She was normally an early riser, wide-awake as soon as her feet hit the floor, and she really liked the morning. But on this particular morning she had burrowed deeply into her pillow, her body warm

and relaxed, and she was aware of having slept better than she had in years. But where was Kell? She was immediately aware that he wasn't in the bed; her eyes popped open, and she was out of bed before the thought was even completed. The bathroom door was open, so he wasn't in there. "Kell?" she called, hurrying out of the bedroom.

"Out here."

The answering call came from the back, and she almost ran to the rear door, which was standing open. He was sitting on the steps, wearing only the denim shorts, and Joe was lying on the grass at his feet. Ebenezer Duck and his faithful flock were waddling around the backyard, peacefully hunting insects. The rain the night before had left everything so fresh it almost hurt to look at it, and now the sun lit a dark-blue sky that didn't have a cloud in sight It was a remarkably peaceful morning, warm and sweet.

"How did you get out of bed without waking me?"

Bracing his hand on the step, he pushed himself to a standing position; she noticed that he seemed to be moving more easily than he had the day before. He faced her through the screen. "You were tired after taking care of me for four days."

"You're getting around better."

"I feel stronger, and my head isn't hurting." He opened the screen door and hesitated for a moment, his black eyes swiftly running down her body. It was all she could do to keep from folding her arms across her chest, but she knew that the gown she'd chosen didn't reveal anything, so the gesture would have been futile. She probably looked a mess, with her hair uncombed, but she'd seen him at his worst, so she wasn't going to worry about that, either.

"I'm too used to playing mother hen," she said, laughing a little. "When you weren't in the bed I panicked. But since you're all right, I'll go get dressed and make breakfast."

"Don't get dressed on my account," he drawled, a comment she ignored as she walked away. Kell watched until she was out of sight, then slowly made his way back up the steps and inside. He latched the screen door behind him. She didn't play games by wearing slinky nightgowns and then pretending to be embarrassed by what was revealed, but she didn't have to. With that pink flowered nightgown and her tousled hair, she looked warm and sleepy and so damned soft a man could sink into her. That was exactly what he'd wanted to do when he awoke to find that her nightgown had

ridden up during the night and he was pressed against her bare thighs, with only the thin nylon of her panties keeping him from her. He'd become so aroused that he'd had to get out of bed, to remove himself from the temptation of her body. He swore impatiently at his own physical disability, because it kept him from taking her the way he wanted to take her, hard and fast and deep.

In only a few minutes she came back into the kitchen, her hair brushed out and pulled up on each side of her head with a wine-red butterfly clip. She was still barefoot, and she wore denim shorts so old that they were almost white, along with an oversize maroon jersey with the tail knotted at her waist. Her tanned face was completely free of makeup. She was comfortable with herself, he realized. She could probably stop traffic when she did deck herself out in silk and jewels, but she would do so only when she felt like it, not for someone else's benefit. She was self-assured, and Kell liked that; he was so dominant that it took a strong woman not to be completely overpowered by him, not to shrink from him both in bed and out.

Working with an economy of motion, she put on the coffee and started the bacon frying. Until those twin aromas started filling the air he hadn't been aware of how hungry he was, but abruptly his mouth began watering. She put biscuits in the oven, whipped four eggs for scrambling, then peeled and sliced a cantaloupe. Her clear gray eyes turned toward him. "This would be easier if I had my best knife."

Sabin seldom laughed or was even amused, but the dry, chiding tone of her voice made him want to smile. He leaned against the work island to take the weight off his injured leg, unwilling to argue. He needed a means of self-defense, even if it was just a kitchen knife. Both logic and instinct insisted on it. "Do you have any sort of gun around here?"

Rachel deftly turned the bacon. "I have a .22 rifle under the bed, and a .357 loaded with ratshot in the glove compartment of the car."

Swift irritation rose in him; why hadn't she said anything about them the day before? Then she gave him another of those long, level looks, and he knew she was just waiting for him to say something. Why should she give a gun to a man who had held a knife on her? "What if I'd needed them during the night?"

"I don't have any shells for the .357 other than ratshot, so I discounted it," she replied calmly. "The .22 was within reach, and I not only know how to

use it, I have two good arms as opposed to your one." She felt safe at Diamond Bay, but common sense dictated that she have some means of protection; she was a woman who lived alone, without close neighbors. Both the weapons she had were for what her grandfather had called "varmints," though anyone looking down the barrel of the .357 wouldn't know that it was loaded with ratshot. She had chosen both for self-protection, not for killing.

He paused, his black eyes narrowed. "Why tell me now?"

"One, because you told me who you are. Two, because you asked. Three, even without the knife, you weren't unarmed. Handicapped, but not helpless."

"What do you mean?"

She looked down at his hard, brown bare feet. "The calluses on the outside edges of your feet, and on your hands. Not many people have them. You work out barefoot, don't you?"

When he spoke his voice was quiet and silky, and it raised a chill along her spine. "You notice a lot, honey."

She nodded in agreement. "Yes."

"Most people wouldn't think anything about calluses."

Just for a moment Rachel hesitated, her gaze turned inward, before she resumed setting the table and checking the food. "My husband took extra training. He had calluses on his hands, too."

Something tightened inside him, twisting, and his fingers slowly curled. He darted a quick glance at her slim, tanned, ringless hands. "You're divorced?"

"No. I'm a widow."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded again and began dishing up the eggs and bacon, then checked the biscuits in the oven. They were just right, golden brown on top, and she quickly turned them out into the breadbasket. "It's been a long time," she finally said. "Five years." Then her voice changed and became brisk again. "Wash up before the biscuits get cold."

She was, he reflected a few minutes later, a damned good cook. The eggs were fluffy, the bacon crisp, the biscuits light, the coffee just strong enough. Homemade pear preserves dripped golden juice over the biscuits, and the yellow cantaloupe was ripe and sweet. There was nothing fancy about it, but it all fit together, and even the colors were harmonious. It was simply another facet of her competent nature. Just as he was savoring his third

biscuit she said serenely, "Don't expect this every day. Some mornings I have cereal and fruit for breakfast. I'm just trying to build up your strength." Her manner hid the satisfaction she felt in watching this coldly controlled man eat with such obvious enjoyment.

He leaned back in his chair, taking his time as he examined the twinkle in her eyes and the smile that was barely hidden by the coffee cup she held in her elegant hands. She was teasing him, and he couldn't remember the last time anyone had actually dared to tease him. Probably back in high school, some giddy, giggling teenage girl trying out her newfound powers of seduction and daring to use them on the boy even the teachers considered "dangerous." He'd never actually done anything to make them think that; it had simply been the way he looked at them, with that cold, level gaze as black as a night in hell. Rachel dared to tease him because she was certain of herself, and because of that certainty she met him as an equal. She wasn't afraid of him, despite what she knew, or had guessed.

In time. He'd have her, sooner or later.

"You're going about it the right way," he said, finally responding to her teasing statement. Rachel wondered if he did it deliberately, waiting so long before answering. He could either be thinking about what he wanted to say, or those long pauses could be designed to tilt the other person a little off-balance. Everything he did was so controlled that she didn't think it was a habit; it was a deliberate tactic.

There could be a double meaning to his words, but Rachel chose to take them at face value. "If that's a bribe to keep me cooking like this, it won't work. It's too hot to eat a big meal three times a day. More coffee?"

"Please."

As she poured the coffee she asked, "How long are you planning to stay?"

He waited until she had set the pot back on its warming pad and returned to her seat before he answered. "Until I get over this, and can walk and use my shoulder again. Unless you want me gone, and then it's up to you when you throw me out."

Well, that was plain enough, Rachel thought. He'd stay while he was recuperating, but that was it. "Do you have any idea what you're going to do?"

He leaned his forearms on the table. "Get well. That's the first item on the list. I have to find out how deeply we've been compromised. There's still one man I can call when I need him, but I'll wait until I've recovered before

I do anything. One man alone won't stand much of a chance. I have three weeks left of my vacation. Three weeks that they'll have to keep this quiet, unless my body just 'happens' to wash up somewhere. Without my body they're stalled. They can't make any moves to replace me until I'm officially dead, or missing."
"What happens if you don't turn up at work in three weeks?"
"My file will be erased from all records. Codes will be changed, agents reassigned, and I will officially cease to exist."
"Presumed dead?"
"Dead, captured, or turned."
Three weeks. At the most she would have three weeks with him. The time seemed so pitifully short, but she wasn't going to ruin it by moaning and sulking because things weren't turning out just the way she wanted. She had learned the hard way that "forever" could be heartbreakingly brief. If these three weeks were to be all she had with him, then she would smile and take care of him, even argue with him if she felt like it, help him in any way she could… cherish him… then wave goodbye to this dark warrior and keep her tears for herself, after he had gone. It didn't give her much comfort to know that women had probably been doing that exact thing for centuries.
He was thinking, his lashes lowered over his eyes while he stared into his coffee cup. "I want you to make another shopping trip."
"Sure," Rachel said easily. "I meant to ask you if the pants were the right size."
"Everything's the right size. You have a good eye. No, I want you to get hollowpoint ammunition for that .357, a good supply of it. The same for the rifle. You'll be reimbursed."
Being reimbursed was the last of Rachel's worries, and she felt a flare of resentment that he'd even mentioned it. "Are you sure you don't want me to buy a couple of deer rifles while I'm at it? Or a .44 Magnum?"
To her surprise he took her sarcasm seriously. "No. I don't want you on record as having purchased any *type* of weapon since the date I disappeared."
That startled her, and she leaned back. "You mean records of this sort that are likely to be checked?"
"For anyone in this area."
Rachel looked at him for a long, long time, her gray eyes drifting over the hard planes of his face and the closed expression in his eyes, eyes that were

older than time. At last she whispered, "Who are you, that anyone would go to such lengths to kill you?"
"They'd rather take me alive," he replied dryly. "It's my job to make certain that never happens."
"Why you?"
One corner of his mouth quirked upward in what passed for a smile, though it was totally humorless. "Because I'm the best at what I do."
It wasn't much of an answer, but then he was good at answering questions without giving any information. The details that he'd told her had been carefully considered, chosen to exact the response from her that he wanted. It wasn't necessary; Rachel knew that she would do whatever she could to help him.
She drained the last of her coffee and stood up. "I have chores to do before it gets too hot; the dishes can wait until later. Do you want to come outside with me, or stay in here and rest?"
"I need to move around," he said, getting up and following her outside. He slowly limped around the yard, taking in every detail, while Rachel fed Joe and the geese, then set to work gathering the ripe vegetables from the garden. When he tired, Kell sat down on the back steps and watched her work, his eyes narrowed against the sun.
Rachel Jones had a comfortable way about her that made him feel relaxed. Her life was peaceful, her small house cozy, and that hot Southern sun burned down on his skin…. Everything here was seductive, in one way or another. The meals she cooked and shared with him brought up stray thoughts of what it would be like to have breakfast with her every day, and those thoughts were more dangerous to him than any weapon.
He'd tried to have a normal private life once, but it hadn't worked out. Marriage hadn't brought the intimacy he'd expected; the sex had been good, and regular, but after the act was finished he'd still been solitary, set apart by nature and circumstance from the rest of the world. He'd been fond of his wife, as far as it went, but that was it. She hadn't been able to scale the barriers to reach the inside man; maybe she'd never even realized he existed. Certainly she either hadn't realized or hadn't wanted to face the true nature of his job. Marilyn Sabin had looked on her husband as merely one of the thousands of men who held civil service desk jobs in Washington, D.C. He went to work in the mornings and he returned – usually – at night. She was busy with her own growing law practice and often had to work late

hours, so she understood. She was a fastidious woman, so Kell's cool, distant character had suited her perfectly, and she'd never made any effort to see beyond the surface to the complicated man beneath.

Kell turned his face up to the sun, feeling everything in him loosen up and slow down. Marilyn… it had been years since he'd even thought of her, an illustration of how shallowly she had touched him. The divorce hadn't elicited any response from him other than a shrug; hell, she would have been crazy to have stayed with him after what happened.

The attempt on his life had been clumsy, not well planned or well executed at all. He and Marilyn had been out to dinner, one of the few times in their married life that they had been out together socially, and never to one of the ritzy in places that Marilyn loved so dearly. Kell had seen the sniper as soon as they left the restaurant and acted immediately, shoving Marilyn down and rolling for cover himself. His action had saved Marilyn's life, because she had kept walking and ended up between Kell and the sniper, who had fired almost simultaneously with Kell's shove, wounding Marilyn in the right arm.

That night had forever changed the way Marilyn viewed her husband, and she hadn't liked the new view at all. She'd seen the cool way he had tracked and cornered his assailant, seen the short, vicious fight that left the other man unconscious on the ground, heard the biting authority in Kell's voice as he gave orders to the men who arrived shortly and took over. One of those men took her to a hospital, where she was treated and kept overnight, while Kell spent the night piecing together how the sniper had learned where he would be that evening. The answer, obviously, had been Marilyn. She saw no reason to be secretive about her movements or the fact that she would be dining with her husband that night, or where; she'd truly had no idea how dangerous and highly classified her husband's job was, nor had she been interested in learning.

By the time Kell collected her at the hospital the next day their marriage was over in every way except legally. The first words Marilyn had said to him, very calmly, were that she wanted a divorce. She didn't know what it was he did, didn't want to know, but she wasn't going to risk her own life being married to him while he did it. It might have piqued her vanity a bit when Kell agreed so easily, but he'd been doing some thinking during the night, too, and had reached basically the same conclusion, though for different reasons.

Kell didn't blame her for getting a divorce; it had been the wise thing to do. The close call had shaken him, because it had illustrated how easily he could be reached through the very person who was supposed to be closest to him. It had been a mistake for him even to attempt to have a normal private life, considering who he was and what he did. Other men could manage it, but other men weren't Kell Sabin, whose particular talents put him on the leading edge of danger. If there was any one man in intelligence whom other agencies wanted to take out of commission, it was Kell Sabin. Because he was a target, anyone close to him was automatically a target, too.

It had taught him a lesson. He had never again let anyone get close enough to him that they could be used against him, or hurt in an effort to get to him. He had chosen his life, because he was both a realist and a patriot, and he was willing to pay whatever price he had to, but he was determined to never again involve an innocent, a civilian, one of the very people whose lives and freedom he was sworn to protect.

He'd never been tempted to marry again, or even to take a mistress. Sex was casual, never on a regular basis with the same woman, and he always carefully limited the number of times he saw anyone in particular. It had worked out well.

Until Rachel. She tempted him. Damn, how she tempted him! She was nothing like Marilyn; she was comfortable and casual, where Marilyn had been fastidious and chic. She knew – somehow, she *knew* – too much about his way of life in general, while Marilyn hadn't realized even a fraction that much about him in the years they were married.

But it simply wouldn't work. He couldn't allow it to work. He watched Rachel as she worked in her small garden, content with her chores. Sex with her would be hot and long, writhing on that bed with her, and she wouldn't worry if he mussed her hair or smeared her makeup. To protect her, he had to make certain that sex was all it ever was. When he walked out of her life it would be for good, and for her own good. He owed her too much to risk any harm coming to her.

She straightened from her bent position and stretched, reaching her arms high in the air; the movement thrust her breasts upward against the thin fabric of her shirt. Then she picked up her basket and picked her way across the rows of vegetables toward him; Joe left his position at the end of the row and followed her to find shade under the back steps. There was a smile

on Rachel's face as she approached Kell, her gray eyes warm and clear, her slim body moving gracefully. He watched her approach, aware of her in every cell of his body. No, there was no way he'd endanger her by staying any longer than was necessary; the real danger was that he was so hungry for her that he might be tempted to see her again, something he couldn't let happen.

Chapter Eight

The next few days were slow, hot and peaceful. Now that Kell was on the mend and didn't require her constant attention Rachel resumed her normal work schedule; she finished planning her course and began working on her manuscript again, as well as tending the garden and doing all the other small chores that never seemed to end. She got the requested hollowpoint bullets for Kell, and the .357 was never far from his hand. If they were inside he sometimes placed it on the table in the bedroom, but usually he kept it stuck into his waistband at the small of his back, instantly accessible.
Honey came to take the stitches out of his wounds and professed to be amazed at how well he had healed. "Your metabolic rate must be something else," she said admiringly. "Of course, I did a terrific job on you. The muscle in your leg was a mess, but I did some repair work, and I think you're going to come out of this without even a limp."
"You did a helluva job, doc," he drawled, smiling at her.
"I know," Honey returned cheerfully. "You were just plain lucky on your shoulder. You may lose some of your rotation ability, but not much, I don't think. Take it easy on both the leg and shoulder for another week or so, but you can start working the stiffness out if you're careful."
He had already been working the stiffness out; Rachel had seen him exercising his shoulder and arm carefully, as though testing the limits of the stitches. He hadn't put any weight on either his leg or shoulder, but he had been doing exercises to ease his movements, and as a result his limp was much better, no worse than if he'd had a sprained ankle.
Honey hadn't even blinked when he removed the pistol from his waistband and placed it on the table while he took off his khaki pants and blue cotton shirt. Wearing only his briefs, he'd sat at the table and observed expressionlessly while she removed the stitches and Rachel leaned over to watch. Then he put his clothes back on and returned the heavy pistol to its accustomed place at the small of his back.
"Stay for lunch," Rachel invited. "Tuna salad and fresh tomatoes, light and cool."
Honey made it a practice never to refuse one of Rachel's invitations. "Done. I've been craving a fresh tomato."
"Southerners serve tomatoes with almost everything," Kell observed.

"That's because almost everything tastes better with a tomato," Honey defended. She was from Georgia, and passionately fond of tomatoes.
"Love apples," Rachel said absently. "Tomatoes, that is. Though I don't know why they were called that, since most people thought they were poisonous because they're a member of the nightshade family, like belladonna."
Honey chuckled. "Oh, ho! You've been reading up on old poisons, haven't you? Is someone in one of your books going to kick the bucket from an overdose of belladonna?"
"Of course not. I don't write whodunits." Not at all perturbed by Honey's teasing, Rachel glanced at Kell as she set the table. "You're not a Southerner, are you? You have a drawl, but it isn't Southern."
"Most of it comes from spending a lot of time with a man from Georgia. We were in Vietnam together. I was born in Nevada."
That was probably the limit of the personal information he would give about himself, so Rachel didn't ask any more questions. They ate the simple meal, with Kell sitting between the two women, and though he ate well as always and kept up with the conversation, she noticed that he sat where he could watch both the window and the door. It was habit with him; he did it at every meal, even though he knew no one could approach the house without Joe giving warning.
As Honey was leaving she smiled at Kell and held out her hand. "If I don't see you again, goodbye."
He took her hand. "Thanks, doc. Goodbye." Rachel noticed that he made no pretense about staying.
Honey eyed him consideringly. "I'm literally bursting with questions, but I think I'm going to follow my own good advice and not ask them. I don't want to know. But be careful, you hear?"
He gave his crooked half smile. "Sure thing."
She winked at him. "If anyone asks, I don't know a thing."
"You're a smart woman, doc. After I'm gone Rachel can fill you in on the details."
"Maybe. But maybe I'll just make up my own answers. That way I can get as wild and romantic as I want but still play it safe."
Probably Honey's outlook *was* the best, Rachel thought after she and Kell were alone. Honey allowed herself to be wild and romantic in her fantasies, but in real life she opted for safety. Honey would never do anything as risky

as falling in love with a man like Kell Sabin. She would clean the kitchen, just as Rachel was doing, and forget about the rest. Rachel turned and found him watching her in that steady, unnerving way of his. Her chin lifted. "What is it?"

For answer he walked up to her and cupped her chin in his hand, then bent and covered her mouth with his. Surprise held Rachel motionless for a moment; he hadn't kissed her after that first time, though she sometimes thought there was a touch of possessiveness in the way he held her at night. She hadn't betrayed the pleasure she felt in sleeping in his arms, but there was no way she could hide the heavy surge of desire that made her respond to his mouth, her lips parting at the pressure of his, her hands sliding up the hard, warm wall of his chest. His tongue curled against hers, and she made a sound deep in her throat, her breasts and loins tightening as if he had touched them.

Slowly Kell moved forward, backing her up until she was jammed against the cabinets. Rachel freed her mouth and gasped, "What brought this on?" His mouth moved down to the curve of her jaw and explored the soft skin below her ear. "Must be all those love apples you've been feeding me," he murmured. "Stop turning your head away. Kiss me. Open your mouth." She did, her hands clenching his shirt, and he took her mouth in a long, deep, minddrugging way that went on forever and had her standing on tiptoe to press against him. His hands slid down to her buttocks and cupped them, lifting her into even more intimate contact.

The kiss stripped away all pretense and left them clinging together in open passion, hungry for each other, straining to get even closer. Their passion had been building for days, feeding on the memory of intimate touches between them that normally would have come after the first questing kisses, but they had been thrown together in circumstances that had gotten the order mixed. She had seen and touched his hard, beautiful body while caring for him and soothing him. He had felt her in his hands and gotten used to the particular sweet scent of her even before he'd known her name. He had slept with her in his arms for four nights now, and their bodies had grown accustomed to each other. Nature had circumvented all the natural barriers that people threw up to protect their sense of privacy, forcing the two of them together in a hothouse atmosphere forged by circumstance.

The force of what she was feeling frightened her a little, and again she tore her mouth away from his, hiding her face in the warm curve of his throat.

She had to slow this down before she went out of control. "You're a fast man," she gulped, trying to steady her voice.
He moved his hands from her buttocks to slide them up her back, holding her tightly. His mouth nuzzled her ear, and his voice was warm and dark. "Not as fast as I wanted to be."
Uncontrollable shivers were vibrating through her entire body, and her nipples were so tight that they ached. He held her even more tightly, crushing her breasts against his hard, muscle-layered body and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head, but the tender caress didn't last long against his hungry need for more. He dug his fingers into her hair and tilted her head back, his mouth once again taking hers, his tongue moving in the rhythm of making love. Rachel's entire body jolted when his other hand covered her breast, sliding inside her blouse to cup her warmly in his paim so he could rasp his callused thumb over her hardened nipple, simultaneously soothing the ache and creating a deeper one.
"I want to be inside you," he murmured, lifting his head to watch the way her nipple rolled under his thumb. "I've been going crazy, wanting you. Will you let me have you for the time we have left together?"
God, he was honest, and she had to swallow hard to keep from crying out at the pain. Even now, with their bodies fevered with need, he didn't make sweet promises he had no intention of keeping. He would be leaving; the best they could have would be temporary. Still, it would be so simple if she could just forget about the future and go with him now into her bedroom, but his honesty reminded her that she had to think about the future and the day when he would leave her.
Slowly she pushed against him, and he moved back, giving her the space she needed. With a shaking hand she pushed her hair back from her face. "It isn't something that's easy for me," she tried to explain, her voice shaking just like her hand. "I've never had a lover… only my husband."
His eyes were sharp, watchful, and he waited.
She made a helpless gesture. His honesty deserved her own. "I… care about you."
"No," he said sharply, deliberately. "Don't let it happen."
"Is it something I'm supposed to turn off, like a water faucet?" Rachel faced him, her gaze level.
"Yes. This is sex, nothing else. Don't fool yourself into thinking there can be anything more, because even if there were, there'd still be no future in it."

"Oh, I know that." She gave a tight little laugh and turned to look out the window over the sink. "When you walk out of here, that's when it ends." She wanted him to deny it, but again that brutal honesty destroyed her hopes.

"That's it. That's the way it has to be."

It would be useless to argue with him on that point; she had known all along that he was solitary, a lone wolf. "It's that way for you, but I don't have that sort of emotional control. I think I love you – oh, damn, why try to hedge my bets?" Her voice was filled with helpless frustration. "I started loving you the minute I dragged you out of the ocean! It doesn't make sense, does it? But it won't stop just because you leave."

He watched her, accurately reading the tension in her slender back, the tightness of her hands. What had it cost her to confess that? She was the most direct woman he'd ever known, with no use for games or subterfuge. She was the only woman in all these years that he regretted leaving; just the thought of it twisted his guts, but he could handle that a lot easier than the knowledge that keeping her with him would jeopardize her life. She was too fine for him to carelessly endanger her for his own enjoyment.

He put his hands on her shoulders, kneading the tension from them. "I won't pressure you," he murmured. "You have to do what's best for you, but if you decide you want me, I'm here."

Decide she wanted him? She ached with wanting him! But he was giving her the space to decide for herself, rather than seducing her into bed as he knew he easily could; she had no illusions about her self-control where he was concerned. She put her hand on his, and their fingers entwined.

There was a thump as Joe left the shade under the steps and tore around the side of the house, and Kell's hand stiffened under hers, his head snapping around. Rachel went still, then shook herself and moved swiftly to the front door. She didn't have to tell him to stay out of sight; she knew that if she looked around he would already be hidden from view, moving silently through the house.

She opened the door and stepped out onto the front porch, and only then did she remember that Kell had partially unbuttoned her blouse. She rebuttoned it swiftly, looking around for whatever had set Joe off. Then she heard the car approaching down the private road; it wouldn't be Honey, since she had just left, and on the rare times Rafferty visited he rode his horse over rather than driving.

The car that pulled to a stop in front of the house was a pale-blue Ford, a government car. Joe was crouched facing it, snarling, his ears back. "Steady, steady," Rachel murmured to him, trying to see who was in the car, but the sun was glaring on the window and blocked her vision. Then the car door opened and a tall man got out, but he remained in the open door, looking at her over the top of the vehicle. Agent Ellis, his jacket off and dark sunglasses shading his eyes.

"Oh, hello," Rachel called. "Nice to see you again." The Southern ritual of greeting had its advantages, giving her time to gather her thoughts. Why was he here again? Had Kell been seen when he'd been outside? They had been careful, trusting Joe to warn them if anyone was near, but someone with binoculars might have seen him.

Tod Ellis gave her his bright college smile. "It's nice to see you again, Ms. Jones. I thought I'd check in with you, make sure everything's okay."

It was a pretty weak excuse for driving miles out of his way. Rachel stepped around Joe and walked out to the car in an effort to keep Ellis from looking toward the house. It wasn't likely that Kell would let himself be seen, but she didn't want to take any chances. "Yes, everything's okay," she said cheerfully, going around the car and standing at the door so he had to turn his back to the house in order to face her. "Hot, but okay. Did you ever find that man you were hunting?"

"No, not a trace. You haven't seen anything?"

"Not even at a distance, and Joe always lets me know if anyone's around."

The mention of the dog made Ellis jerk his head around for a quick look as if to check Joe's location; the dog was still standing in the middle of the yard, his eyes locked on the intruder, low growls still rumbling in his chest. Ellis cleared his throat, then turned back to Rachel. "It's a good thing you've got him, living way out here by yourself. You can't be too careful."

She laughed. "Well, actually you can. Look at Howard Hughes. But I feel safe with Joe guarding the place."

She couldn't be certain, because of the dark glasses shading his eyes, but she thought he kept looking at her legs and breasts. Alarm skittered through her, and she had to fight down the urge to check her buttons; had she buttoned the blouse straight? If not, it was too late now, and he had no reason to think she had been in the house, kissing the very man he was hunting.

Then abruptly he laughed, too, and took off his sunglasses, dangling them from his fingers. "I didn't come out here, to check on you." He leaned his forearm on top of the open car door, his posture relaxed and confident. With his clean-cut good looks he was accustomed to approval from women. "I came to ask you out to dinner. I know you don't know me, but my credentials are respectable. What do you say?"

Rachel didn't have to fake her confusion; it was real. She had no idea how she should answer him. If she went out with him it would go a long way toward convincing him she knew nothing about Kell, but on the other hand, it might encourage Agent Ellis to come around again, and she didn't want that. Why were they still here, anyway? Why hadn't they moved farther down the coast in their search for Kell?

"Why, I don't know," she replied, stammering a little. "When?"

"Tonight, if you don't have other plans."

God, this was making her paranoid! If they had seen Kell, then this could be a ploy to get her out of the house so there would be no witnesses. If not, she might make him suspicious if *she* acted too suspicious. All this second-guessing could drive her crazy. Finally she went on her instincts. Agent Ellis hadn't tried to hide his male admiration for her the first time they'd met, so she was going to take his invitation at face value. If nothing else, she might be able to get some information from him.

"I think I'd like that," she finally said. "What did you have in mind? I'm not much of a party person."

He gave her his boyish grin again. "You're safe. I'm not into the punk scene, either. I'm too squeamish to stick safety pins through my cheeks. What I had in mind was a quiet restaurant and a good, thick steak."

And a roll in bed afterward? He'd be disappointed. "You're on," Rachel said. "What time?"

"Say, eight o'clock? It'll be sundown by then and cooling off, I hope."

She laughed. "I would say you get used to it, but all you do is learn to cope with it. The humidity is what gets you. All right, eight o'clock it is. I'll be ready."

He gave her a little salute and folded himself back under the steering wheel. Rachel walked back into the yard so she wouldn't get covered with dust when he drove off, and watched until the blue Ford was out of sight.

Kell was waiting for her inside, his eyes narrow and cold. "What did he want?"

"To ask me out to dinner," she replied slowly. "I didn't know what to say. Going out with him might keep him from being suspicious, or he could be asking me out just to get me out of the house. Maybe they've seen you. Maybe they just want to search."
"They haven't seen me," he said. "Or I wouldn't still be alive. What excuse did you give him?"
"I accepted."
Rachel had known he wouldn't be pleased, but she hadn't expected the reaction she got. His head snapped around, and his eyes burned with black fire, his usual cool remoteness shattered. "Hell, no, you're not. Get that idea out of your head, lady."
"It's too late. It might really make him suspicious if I made some weak excuse now."
He shoved his hands into his pants pockets, and in petrified fascination Rachel watched them ball into fists. "He's a murderer and a traitor. I've been doing a lot of thinking since I recognized him before they blew up my boat, tying together some details about things that went wrong when they shouldn't have, and Tod Ellis is connected in some little way to every one of those plans. You're not going out with him."
Rachel didn't back down. "Yes," she said. "I am. If nothing else, *I* may be able to pick up some information that will help you – "
She broke off with a gasp; he had jerked his hands out of his pockets and reached for her so rapidly that she hadn't had time to move back. His hard fingers closed on her shoulders in a grip that bruised, and he shook her slightly, his face hard and set with rage.
"Damn you," he whispered, the words barely audible as he pushed them between his clenched teeth. "When will you learn that this isn't something for amateurs to play with? You're in way over your head, and you don't have the sense to realize it! You aren't still in college playing a game of Assassination, sugar. Get that through your skull! Damn it," he swore again, releasing her shoulders and running his hand through his hair. "You've been lucky so far that you haven't blundered around and really screwed things up, but how long do you expect that luck to last? You're dealing with a cold-blooded professional!"
Rachel stepped back from him, putting her hand up to rub her aching shoulder. Something inside her had gone very still at his attack; that

stillness was reflected on her face. "Which one?" she finally asked quietly. "Tod Ellis… or you?"

She turned and walked away from him, going into the bathroom and closing the door; it was the one place in the house where he wouldn't follow. She sat down on the rim of the tub, shaking; she had wondered occasionally what it would be like if he slipped the tight rein of his control, but she hadn't wanted to find out like that. She had wanted him to lose control when he kissed her, touched her. Wanted him to shake with need and desire and bury his face against her. She hadn't wanted him to lose control in anger, hadn't wanted to hear what he really thought of her efforts to help. She had been terrified all along of doing something wrong that might jeopardize him; she had agonized over every decision, and he had dismissed her from the start as a bumbling amateur. She knew she didn't have his knowledge or expertise, but she had done the best she could.

It was doubly painful after the way he had kissed her and touched her, but now she remembered that even then he had retained his steely control. It had been she who trembled and yearned, not him. He hadn't even lied to her; he'd told her plainly that it was nothing more to him than casual sex.

Taking a deep breath, Rachel gathered herself together. Since she was in the bathroom she might as well shower now; that would give her straight, heavy hair time to dry naturally and she wouldn't have to do anything to it except give it lift and curve with the curling iron. She might be going out with Tod Ellis with all the enthusiasm of attending an execution, but she wouldn't let him think that she looked on it as anything other than a real date, and that meant taking pains with her appearance.

She stripped off and got in the shower, briskly shampooing her hair and bathing, not allowing herself the luxury of brooding. Selfpity wouldn't accomplish anything except wasting time, time that would be better spent considering how to conduct herself that night, how to be friendly without being encouraging. The last thing she wanted was for Ellis to ask her out again! If he did, she'd have to make up some excuse. She'd told Agent Lowell she was making a trip to the Keys; it had been pure fabrication, but perhaps she could use the lie as an excuse for packing, planning and so on.

She turned off the water and dragged a towel off the top of the shower door, then wrapped it around her head. Just as she started to slide the door open and step out of the tub she caught sight of Kell's blurred image through the

frosted door, and she jerked her hand back from the door as if it had burned her.
"Get out of here," she breathed sharply, snatching the towel off her head and wrapping it around her body, instead. The frosted surface of the doors gave her some protection, but if she could see him, he could see just as much of her. Knowing that he had watched her bathe made her feel terribly vulnerable. How long had he been there?
She saw his hand reaching out, and she moved back against the shower wall as he slid the door open on its track. "You didn't answer when I called you," he said curtly. "I wanted to make certain you were okay."
Rachel lifted her chin. "That's not much of an excuse. As soon as you saw I was taking a shower, you should have left."
His eyes raked over her, from her wet, tangled hair to her glistening shoulders and down to her slim, bare legs, which had rivulets of water running down them. The towel covered her from breast to thigh, but it would take only a tug to bare her completely, and his black, searching eyes had a way of making her feel even more exposed than she was.
"I'm sorry," he said abruptly, finally lifting his gaze to her face. "I didn't intend to imply that you haven't been a help."
"You didn't imply any such thing," Rachel returned, her voice sharp. "You came right out and said it." She felt both insulted and hurt, and she wasn't in the mood to forgive him. After what he had said, he had a lot of nerve to stand there eyeing her the way he was doing!
Suddenly he moved, hooking his right arm around her waist and lifting her out of the tub. Rachel gasped, clutching at him for balance. "Watch out! Your shoulder – "
He stood her on the fuzzy bath mat, his face hard and unreadable as he looked down at her, his right arm still locked around her waist. "I don't want you going out with him," he finally rasped. "Damn it, Rachel, I don't want you taking any risks on my account!"
The towel was slipping, and Rachel grabbed for the ends to anchor it more securely. "Why can't you give me any credit for being an adult, able to accept responsibility for my own actions?" she cried. "You told me Tod Ellis is a traitor, and I believe you. Don't you think I have a moral responsibility to do what I can to stop him and to help you? I think the situation is critical enough to warrant the risk! It's my decision, not yours."
"You never should have been involved."

"Why not? You said yourself that you'll have to have help. You've sent other people into dangerous situations, haven't you?"
"They were trained agents," he snapped, goaded. "And, damn it to hell, I never lay awake at night burning to make love to any of them."
She fell silent, her eyes wide as they searched his. His expression gave away nothing but anger and a faintly startled look, as if he hadn't meant to say that. The arm around her waist had her arched against him, though she had wedged her arm between their bodies in an effort to hold the towel. Only her toes touched the mat. Her thighs were inside his slightly spread legs, his growing hardness nestled against the soft mound at the top of her thighs.
They said nothing, both of them very aware of what was happening. Their chests expanded and fell rapidly as their breathing quickened, and Rachel's knees grew weak as she felt him grow stronger and bolder.
"I'd kill him before I let him touch you," he muttered, the words wrenched from him.
She shuddered at the thought. "*I* wouldn't let him. Never." Staring up at him, she shuddered again, as if she'd been struck between the eyes. Tod Ellis had made her realize anew how much danger stalked Kell's heels. She wasn't guaranteed three weeks with him; she wasn't guaranteed tomorrow, or even tonight. For men such as Kell Sabin there was no tomorrow, only the present; it was the brutal truth that he could be killed, that tragedy and terror could strike without warning. She had already learned that lesson once; how could she have been so stupid as to forget? She had wanted things to be perfect, wanted him to feel as she felt, but life was never perfect. It had to be taken as it was, or it passed by without a second glance. All she had with Kell was right now, the eternal present, because the past is always gone and the future never comes.
His hands were flexing on her flesh, his fingers kneading her as if he were barely able to restrain himself from doing more. His face was rock hard as he stared down at her, his voice raw when he spoke. "I let you back away in the kitchen. By God, I don't think I can do it again. Not now."
Rachel's breath left her lungs at the look in his midnight eyes, the hard, almost cruel look of savage arousal. The skin was pulled tight over his high, prominent cheekbones, and his jaw and mouth were set. Her heart gave a sudden leap as she realized that he meant exactly what he'd said, and fear and excitement rushed through her veins in a dizzying mixture. Control was

impossible for him now, and the primitive force of his hunger was burning in his eyes.
Her hands trembled on his chest as her entire body began quivering in reaction to the fiercely male intent that was plain on his face, the look of a predator who had scented female. Heat. Heat was rising in her body, melting her insides, turning them liquid. His hand at her back clenched the towel and pulled it free from the tuck at her bosom. It dropped to the floor in a damp heap. Naked, Rachel stood in his grasp, shaking and yearning and gasping for breath that wouldn't seem to go deep enough.
He looked down at her, and a low rumbling sound started in his chest, working up to the back of his throat. Rachel's thighs turned to water, and she swayed, her throat tight, her heart pounding. Slowly he lifted his hand and touched her breasts, high and round, soft, with small, tight brown nipples, filling his palm with her to discover anew the warm, velvety texture of her flesh. Then, just as slowly, his hand drifted downward, smoothing over the sleek delta of her stomach and the slope of her lower abdomen, his fingers at last sliding into the dark curls of her womanhood. She hung there, shaking wildly and unable to move, paralyzed by the hot river of pleasure that followed his questing touch. One finger made a bolder foray. Her body jerked wildly, and she whimpered as he touched and teased and explored.
His gaze lifted from the gut-wrenching contrast of his hard, sinewy hand cupping the soft, exquisitely female mound and drifted back up to her pretty breasts, then to her face. Her eyes were half closed, glazed with desire; her lips were moist and parted, her breath rushing in and out in gasps. She was a woman on the verge of complete satisfaction, and her look of sweet carnality exploded the slim hold he still had on himself. With a wild, deep sound he bent and hoisted her over his right shoulder, the blood pounding so wildly in his ears that he didn't hear her startled cry.
He made it to the bed in five long steps and dropped her across it, following her down, spreading her thighs and kneeling between them before she had recovered. Rachel reached for him, almost sobbing with need. He tore off his shirt and tossed it to the floor, then jerked at his pants until they were open, and he lowered himself onto her.
Her body arched in shock as he thrust into her, and she cried out at both the moment of pinching discomfort and the jolt to her senses and flesh as he filled her. He was… oh…

"Take it all," he groaned, demanded, pleaded. He hung over her, his face shiny with sweat, his expression at once tortured and ecstatic. "All of me. Please." His voice was hoarse with need. "Let yourself relax – yes. Like that. *More.* Please. Rachel. Rachel! You're mine you're mine you're mine…."

The rawly primitive chant washed over her, and she cried out again as he moved in and out of her, powerfully, their bodies writhing together. It had never been like this for her, so painfully intense that it was unbearable. She had never loved like this, knowing that the breath would still in her lungs and her heart stop beating in her chest if anything ever happened to him. If this was all he wanted of her, then she would give herself to him freely and fervently, branding him with the sweet burning of her own passion.

He rolled his hips against her with a heavy surge, and it was abruptly too much for her to bear, making her senses crest and shatter. She gasped and cried out, writhing beneath him in a shimmer of pure heat that went on and on until it caught him, too. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe, could only feel. She felt the heavy pounding of his thrusts as he drove himself into her, then the convulsive heaving of his body in her arms. His hoarse wild cries filled her ears, then became rough moans. Slowly he stilled, became silent. His body relaxed, and his heavy weight bore down on her, but she cradled him gladly, her hands still clutching his back.

Concern began to nudge her as sanity returned, bringing remembrance of the way he had lifted her onto his shoulder and the unrestrained wildness of his lovemaking. His head lay on her shoulder, and she twined her fingers into his coal-black hair, managing only a husky murmur as she said, "Kell? Your shoulder…are you okay?"

He levered himself onto his right elbow and looked down at her. Her clear gray eyes were dark with concern – for him, after he'd taken her with all the care and finesse of a bull in rut! There were her soft, trembling lips, but he hadn't kissed them, nor had he caressed her pretty breasts and sucked them as he'd done in his dreams. Love was in those eyes, love so pure and shining that it knotted his insides with pain and shattered a wall somewhere deep in his mind and soul, leaving him vulnerable in a way he'd never been before. Now he knew what hell was. Hell was seeing heaven, bright and tender, but being on the outside of the gates, unable to enter them without risking the destruction of what you most treasured.

Chapter Nine

"Just who is this woman Ellis has gone so mad over?" Charles asked calmly, his pale-blue eyes never wavering as he watched Lowell. As always, Charles's manner was detached, but Lowell knew that he missed nothing.

"She lives in a little house close to the beach. Deserted area, nothing around for miles. We questioned her when we first started looking for Sabin."

"And?" The voice was almost gentle.

Lowell shrugged. "And nothing. She hadn't seen anything."

"She must be out of the ordinary to capture Ellis's attention."

After considering it a minute Lowell shook his head. "She's good-looking, but that's all. Nothing fancy. No makeup. Outdoorsy type. But Ellis hasn't stopped talking about her."

"It seems our friend Ellis doesn't have his mind completely on the job at hand." The comment was deceptively casual.

Again Lowell shrugged. "He thinks Sabin died when the boat blew up, so he's not putting a lot of effort into hunting him."

"What do *you* think?"

"It's a possibility. We haven't found any trace of him. He was wounded. Even if by a miracle he'd made it to shore, he'd have needed help."

Charles nodded, his eyes thoughtful as he waved Lowell away. He had worked with Lowell for many years now and knew him as a steady and competent, if uninspired, agent. He had to be competent to have survived. Lowell was no more convinced of Sabin's survival than Ellis was, and Charles wondered if he had allowed Sabin's reputation to override his own common sense. Common sense would certainly seem to indicate that Sabin had died in the explosion or immediately thereafter, drowning in the warm turquoise waters to become food for the denizens of the sea. No one should have survived that, but Sabin… Sabin was one of a kind, except for that blond devil with the golden eyes, who had disappeared and was rumored to be dead, despite the disquieting talk that had floated out of Costa Rica the year before. Sabin was more shadow than substance, instinctively cunning and damnably lucky. No, not lucky, Charles corrected himself. Skilled. To call Sabin "lucky" was to underestimate him, a fatal mistake too many of his colleagues had made.

"Noelle, come here," he called, barely raising his voice, but he didn't need to. Noelle was never far from him. It gave him pleasure to look at her, not because she was extraordinarily beautiful, though she was, but because he enjoyed the incongruity of such lethal skill housed in such a lovely woman. Her job was twofold: to protect Charles and to kill Sabin.

Noelle came into the room, walking with the grace of a model, her eyes sleepy and soft. "Yes?"

He waved his thin, elegant hand to indicate a chair. "Sit, please. I have been discussing Sabin with Lowell."

She sat, crossing her legs to best display them. The gestures that attracted unsuspecting males came naturally to her; she had studied and practiced too long for them to be anything else by now. She smiled. "Ah, Agent Lowell. Sturdy, dependable, if a little shortsighted."

"Like Ellis, he seems to think we're wasting our time in searching for Sabin."

She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, then blew smoke through her shapely lips. "It doesn't matter what they think, does it? Only what you think."

"I wonder if I am bestowing superhuman powers on Sabin, if I'm so wary of him that I can't accept his death," Charles mused.

Her sleepy eyes blinked. "Until we have proof of his death we can't afford to assume otherwise. It's been eight days. If he somehow survived, he would now be recovered enough to start moving around, which should increase our chances of finding him. The most logical thing would be to intensify our search, rather than slacken it."

Yes, that was indeed logical; on the other hand, if Sabin had survived the explosion and somehow made it to shore, something that seemed impossible, why hadn't he contacted his headquarters for aid? Ellis' s contact in Washington was completely certain that Sabin hadn't attempted to get in touch with anyone. That simple fact had convinced almost everyone that Sabin was dead… yet Charles couldn't convince himself. It was sheer instinct that prompted him to keep his men searching, waiting, poised to strike. He could not believe that it had been so easy to kill Sabin, not after all these years when attempt after attempt had failed. It was impossible to have too much respect for his capabilities. Sabin was out there, somewhere. Charles could feel it.

He was abruptly brisk. "You're right, of course," he told Noelle. "We will intensify the search, re-cover every inch of ground. Somehow, somewhere,

we have missed him."

Sabin prowled the house, his savage mood reflected on his face. He'd done some hard things in his life, but none of them had been as difficult as having to watch Rachel get ready to go out with Tod Ellis. It went against every instinct he had, but nothing he'd said could change her mind, and he was helpless, handcuffed by circumstance. He couldn't afford to do anything that would focus attention on her; it would merely increase the danger she was in. If he'd been ready to move he would have gone that night rather than expose her to Ellis, but again he was stymied. He wasn't ready to move, and to move before he was prepared could mean the difference between success and failure, with his country's security at stake. He'd been trained for half his lifetime to put his country first, even at the cost of his own life. Sabin could have sacrificed himself without hesitation or even regret if it had been necessary, but the simple, terrible truth was that he couldn't sacrifice Rachel.

He had to do whatever he could to keep her safe, even if it meant swallowing his pride and possessive instincts. She was safe enough with Ellis as long as he had no reason to suspect her of anything. To jerk her out of the house and take her away before Ellis arrived to pick her up, as Kell had badly wanted to do, *would* arouse the man's suspicions. Kell knew the agent, knew that he was damned good at his job…too good, or he'd never have been able to hide his other activities for so long. He also had a good-sized ego; if Rachel stood him up it would make him furious, and he wouldn't let it pass. He would be back.

Patience, the ability to wait even in the face of great urgency, was one of Sabin's greatest gifts. He knew how to wait, how to pick his moment for optimum success, how to ignore danger and concentrate solely on timing. He could literally disappear into his surroundings, waiting, so much a part of the earth that the wild creatures had ignored him and the Vietcong had at times passed within touching distance of him without ever seeing him. His ability to wait was enhanced by his instinctive knowledge of when patience was useless; then he exploded into action. He explained it to himself as a well-developed sense of timing. Yes, he knew how to wait… but waiting for Rachel to come home was driving him crazy. He wanted her back safe in his arms, in bed. Damn, how he wanted her in bed!

He didn't turn on any lights in the house; he didn't think it likely that the house was being watched, but he couldn't take the chance. Rachel and Ellis might return early, and a lit house could trigger Ellis's suspicions. Instead he moved silently through the darkness, unable to sit still despite the ache in his shoulder and leg. His shoulder had been giving him hell since the afternoon, and he absently massaged it A humorless smile quirked his lips. He hadn't felt a thing while he'd been making love to Rachel; his senses had been centered completely on her and the unbearable ecstasy of their bodies linked together. But since then the shoulder had been painfully reminding him that he was a long way from being healed; he'd been lucky he hadn't torn it open again.

Abruptly he swore and limped through the kitchen to the back door, so agitated that he couldn't remain inside the confines of the house any longer. As soon as Kell opened the back door he sensed Joe leaving his stakeout under the oleander bush, silently moving through the shadows, and he softly called to the dog in reassurance. Kell no longer feared being attacked; Joe had warily accepted his residency, but Kell didn't trust him enough to refrain from identifying himself before going down the back steps. Automatically keeping himself in the shadows, Kell circled the house and investigated the pines, assuring himself that the house wasn't under surveillance. Joe padded along about ten feet behind him, stopping when Kell stopped and advancing when Kell moved on.

A new moon was just rising, a thin sickle of light on the horizon. Sabin looked up at the clear sky, so clear, like Rachel's eyes, that infinity seemed within his reach.

His heart twisted again, and his hand clenched into a fist. He whispered a curse into the night. She was too gallant, too strong, for her own good; why couldn't she play it safe and let him take all the risks? Didn't she know what it would do to him if anything happened to her?

No, how could she know? He'd never told her, and he never would, not at the expense of her safety. He'd protect her if it killed him. His mouth twisted wryly; it probably *would* kill him, not physically, but deep inside where he'd never let anyone touch him… until Rachel had slipped past all his defenses and seared herself into his mind and soul.

Of course, there was always the possibility that he wouldn't get out of this alive, anyway, but he didn't dwell on that. He had thought a lot in the past few days, considering and discarding options. His plans were made. Now he

was waiting: waiting for his wounds to heal more completely; waiting until he was physically ready; waiting for Ellis and his pals to make some little mistake; waiting until he sensed the time was right… waiting. When the time came he would call Sullivan, and the plan would be put into action. He would rather have Sullivan with him than any ten other men. No one would ever be expecting the two of them to be working together again.

No, his only uncertainty was because of Rachel. He knew what he had to do to protect her, but for the first time in his life he dreaded it. Letting her go was one thing; living without her was another.

He stood there in the night and cursed whatever it was that made him different from other men: the extraordinary skill and cunning, the acute eyesight and athletic body, the extreme coordination between mind and muscle that, all combined, made him a hunter and a warrior. When his emotional aloofness was added to that it had made him a natural for the job he held, the perfect, emotionless soldier in the cold gray shadows. He couldn't remember ever being any different. He hadn't been a noisy, laughing child; he'd been silent and solitary, holding himself aloof even from his parents. He'd always been alone deep inside himself and had never wanted it any other way; perhaps he'd known, even as a child, how much it would hurt to love. There. He'd let the words form in his thoughts, and even that was so painful that he flinched. He was too intense ever to love casually, lightly, to play the game of romance over and over. His emotional distance had been a defense, but Rachel had shattered it, and it hurt. God, how it hurt.

Rachel sat across from Tod Ellis, smiling and chatting and forcing herself to eat her seafood as if she enjoyed it, but it chilled her every time he gave her that toothpaste-ad smile. She knew what that smile concealed. She knew that he had tried to kill Kell; he was a liar, a murderer and a traitor. It took all her strength to continue acting as if she were having a pleasant time, but nothing could keep her thoughts from slipping back to Kell.

She had wanted nothing more than to continue lying in his arms that afternoon, her body limp and throbbing from his rough, fast, but intensely satisfying possession. She had forgotten what it was like… or perhaps it had never been like that before. Being married to B.B. had been warm and fun and loving. Being Sabin's woman would be like burning alive every time he touched her, going soft, hot and moist at his glance, his lightest touch. He

wasn't easygoing and cheerful. He was a hard, intense man, the force of his personality radiating from him. He wasn't playful; she'd never heard him laugh, or even seen his rare smiles reach his eyes. But he had reached for her with such desperate, driving need that everything in her had responded immediately, and she had been ready for him, wanting him.

No, Kell wasn't a comfortable man to be around, or an easy man to love, but she didn't waste time railing against fate. She loved him, and accepted him for what he was. She looked at Tod Ellis and her eyes narrowed a little, because Kell was a lion surrounded by jackals, and this man was one of the jackals.

She put down her fork and gave him a bright smile. "How much longer will you be around here, do you think? Or are you permanently assigned to this area?"

"No, I move around a lot," he said, responding to her direct attention by flashing his smile once again. "I never know when I'll be reassigned."

"Is this sort of a special assignment?"

"It's more of a wild-goose chase. We've been wasting our time. Still, if we hadn't been searching the beach I never would have met you."

He'd been throwing out lines like that since he'd picked her up, and Rachel had been determinedly skirting them. He evidently thought he was a modern day Don Juan, and probably a lot of women found him attractive and charming, but, then, they didn't know what Rachel did about him.

"Oh, I'm certain you aren't hurting for casual dates," she said in an offhand manner.

He reached across the table and put his hand on hers. "Maybe I don't consider this a casual date."

Rachel smiled and removed her hand to pick up her wineglass. "I don't see how you could consider it anything else, considering you may be reassigned at any time. Even if you aren't, I'll be leaving on vacation soon and probably won't be back for the rest of the summer."

He didn't like that; it put a small dent in his ego that she wasn't willing to hang around for as long as he was there. "Where are you going?"

"The Keys. I'm going to stay with a friend and do some research in the area. I was planning to stay there until I have to come back to teach a night course in Gainesville when the fall quarter starts."

Anyone else would have asked her about the course she was teaching; Ellis scowled at her and said, "Is your friend male or female?"

Just for a moment she entertained the appealing idea of telling him to take a long walk off a short pier, but it wasn't her plan to antagonize him, not yet. She still wanted to get some information out of him if she could. So instead she gave him a cool look that told him he'd gone too far and said calmly, "A woman, an old college friend."

He wasn't stupid. Arrogant and conceited, but not stupid. He grimaced in a way that was meant to be charming, but left her cold. "Sorry. I overstepped myself, didn't I? It's just that – well, from the moment I saw you, I was really attracted, and I want to get to know you better."

"There doesn't seem to be much point in it," Rachel pointed out. "You would be leaving soon, anyway, even if I hadn't planned my vacation."

He looked as if he'd like to refute that, but he'd told her himself that he moved around a lot. "We may be around for another couple of weeks," he said sulkily.

"Tying up loose ends?"

"Yeah, you know how it is. Paperwork."

"Is it just you and Agent Lowell?"

He hesitated, habit too deeply ingrained in him to make it easy for him to talk in any detail about his work. Rachel held her breath, wondering if his ego would prompt him to try to make up for the ground he had lost by being too personal. After all, it was inherently flattering when someone asked about your work. It was a way of getting better acquainted, of asking innocent questions that still denoted interest. She was interested, all right, but not in Ellis.

"There are nine of us actively investigating," he finally said. "We were all chosen especially for this job."

Because they were unscrupulous? She gave him a wide-eyed, ego-stroking look. "It must be really big to have that many men working on it."

"As I said, we're the active investigators. We can call on about twenty other men for backup if necessary."

She looked suitably impressed. "But you think it's a dead end?"

"We haven't turned up anything, but the top man isn't satisfied yet. You know how it is. People behind a desk think they know more than the men in the field."

She sympathized with him and even made up a few tales to reciprocate, edging the conversation away from his work. If she probed too directly and too often it could rouse his suspicions. Talking to him made her feel unclean

and anxious to get away from him, as far away as she could. The knowledge that he would try to kiss her, probably even try to talk her into bed, filled her with sick horror. There was no way she could tolerate his mouth on hers even for a moment. Even if he wasn't a total snake, which he was, she couldn't have kissed him; she was Kell Sabin's woman, a fact that had nothing to do with will or determination. It simply *was*.

She forced herself to chat for another hour, smiling at the appropriate moments and forcing down the increasing urge to gag. He was almost more than she could tolerate. Only the thought that Kell could use any information she got out of Ellis gave her the will to stay. When their dishes had finally been cleared away and they were taking their time over coffee, she put out another feeler. "Where are you staying? This isn't a tourist area, and motel rooms can be hard to find."

"We're actually spread out down the coast," he explained. "Lowell and I are sharing a room at this dinky little motel, Harran's."

"I know where it is," she said, nodding.

"We've been living off fast food since we got here. It's a relief to get a decent meal for a change."

"I imagine so." She pushed her coffee cup back and looked around the restaurant, hoping he'd get the message that she was ready to go. The sketchy details she'd gotten would have to be enough; she simply couldn't sit there with him any longer and pretend that she liked him. She wanted to go home and lock the door behind her, closing Tod Ellis and his cohorts out of her life. Kell was there, waiting for her, and she wanted to be with him, even though she was uneasy about his mood. He had been coldly silent when she left, his rage barely controlled. He had wanted her to play it safe and let all the risk fall on him, but Rachel could quit breathing more easily than she could stand by without doing anything while he was in danger. He wasn't used to his commands being ignored, and he didn't like it one little bit.

For his own reasons Ellis wasn't loath to leave a little early. Rachel imagined that he thought the remainder of the evening would be spent in a more physical manner. He would be disappointed.

She didn't talk much on the way home, both reluctant to have any more to do with Ellis than necessary and because her thoughts were increasingly taken with Kell, though he'd never been far from her mind all evening. Her heartbeat suddenly lurched and her blood skittered through her veins,

making her feel flushed and dizzy. The fierce lovemaking they'd shared that afternoon should have clarified their relationship, even if only on that basic level, but it hadn't. Kell had looked at her so oddly afterward, as if she wasn't what he'd expected. Despite his anger with her when she refused to do what he told her, on some deep level he had seemed even more self-contained than ever. He was a difficult, unusual man, but she was so acutely sensitive to him that every faint nuance of his expression, which most people wouldn't notice at all, seemed to shout at her. Why had he looked at her like that, then withdrawn? Why did she feel farther from him now than she had before they had lain locked together in writhing heat?

Ellis turned onto the private road that ended at her house and a few minutes later pulled the car to a stop in front. The house was dark, but she hadn't really expected it to be any other way. Kell wouldn't advertise his presence by turning on lights.

They got out of the car, and as Ellis came around to her side they heard that low snarl. Joe, bless him, didn't miss anything.

Ellis visibly jerked, the sudden alarm starkly etched on his face in the ghastly light from the car's open door. He stopped in his tracks. "Where is he?" he muttered.

Rachel looked around but couldn't see the dog. He was black and tan, with the classic markings of a German shepherd, so his darkness made it difficult to see him. The snarls placed him slightly to her left, close to Ellis, but she still couldn't make him out.

Quickly she seized the opportunity. "Look, you stand still while I walk into the yard. He's behind you, so don't move any closer to him. When I'm out of the way, get in the car on this side and he probably won't bother you."

"That dog's vicious. You should have him chained," Ellis snapped, but he didn't argue with her instructions. He stood absolutely still while Rachel walked up into the yard, then sidled toward the open door on the passenger side of the car.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, hoping he couldn't hear the insincerity in her voice. "I didn't think. Still, he's good protection. He's never yet let a stranger walk into the yard."

Joe moved then, the movement betraying his position. Snarling steadily, he planted himself between Rachel and Ellis.

She wanted to laugh. There was no chance of even a good night kiss now, and from the look on Ellis's face he wanted nothing more than to be inside

the car, with solid steel between him and the dog. Hastily he slid inside and slammed the door, then rolled the window down partway.
"I'll call you, okay?"
She made herself hesitate, rather than shouting out the "No!" she wanted to voice. "I'll be busy getting ready for my vacation. I have some work I have to finish before I leave. I really won't have much free time."
Now that he was safe from the dog his cockiness was returning. "You have to eat, don't you? I'll call you for lunch or something."
She planned on being busy, but she could handle him over the telephone. She didn't want him showing up here unannounced, but that wasn't likely as long as Joe was in residence.
She stood in the yard, watching the taillights as he drove off, then said, "Good boy," to Joe with obvious approval in her voice. Turning toward the house, she wondered why Kell didn't turn on a light for her now that Ellis was out of sight. She started to walk up to the porch but hadn't taken a full step, when a hard arm passed around her waist and jerked her backward.
"Have fun?" a low, angry voice whispered in her ear.
"Kell." She relaxed against him, pleasure flooding warmly through her at even this touch, despite his anger.
"Did he touch you? Kiss you?"
She had expected questioning, but not primarily about that. Kell's voice was rough, almost savage.
"You know he didn't," she replied steadily. "After all, you were out here watching."
"What about before?"
"No. Not at all. I couldn't stand the thought."
A great shudder passed through his body, an extraordinary response in a man as controlled as he normally was, but when he spoke his voice was level again. "Let's go inside."
He locked up while she went into the bedroom to put away her purse and slip out of her shoes; then he joined her in the bedroom. His black eyes were expressionless as he watched her slip the earrings out of her pierced lobes and put the jewelry away in a velvet-lined box. He'd been right; she slipped into stylish sophistication as easily as she puttered barefoot in the garden, and she was gut-wrenchingly sexy in either case.
His silent, unwavering stare was making her uneasy. "I did get some information," she finally offered, taking a nightgown from the dresser and

darting a quick look at him. He looked… furious, somehow, though his face was rock hard and his eyes expressionless. His arms were folded across his bare chest; he wore only his jeans and running shoes, and he looked formidable.

He didn't ask, but she condensed it for him, anyway. "There are nine of them actively searching for you, but Ellis let it slip that they have a backup of about twenty more if needed. They're scattered, looking up and down the coast. Ellis and Lowell are staying at Harran's Motel. He thinks you're dead and that they're wasting his time, but the head man on the operation won't give up."

That would be the mysterious "Charles." Sabin had known who had to be behind things from the moment he had recognized the red-haired woman, Noelle, on the boat. He had known it would be only a matter of time until they locked horns again. Charles was the head of an international terrorist organization that had been growing bolder and more challenging, while at the same time Charles himself had kept at a safe distance, protected by a web of technicalities and politics. Now he had come out into the open, to get Sabin. But he'd made one big mistake: his first attempt hadn't succeeded, and now Sabin knew that his own organization had been infiltrated. Charles couldn't afford to stop the search until Sabin was found, dead or alive.

When Kell didn't ask any questions Rachel shrugged and went into the bathroom to take off her makeup and change into her nightgown. His silence was unnerving; he probably used it as a weapon, to shake people off-balance and put them on the defensive. Well, she wasn't one of his minions; she was a woman who loved him.

Five minutes later she left the bathroom, her clothing draped over her arm. Sabin was sitting on the side of the bed, taking off his shoes. He kept his eyes on her while she hung her things in the closet, not looking away even when he stood to unzip his jeans.

"The nightgown is a waste of time," he drawled. "You might as well pull it off and put it back in that drawer."

Startled, Rachel looked around at him. He was standing by the bed, his hands on the fly of his jeans, and he was watching her with the concentrated attention with which a cat watches a mouse. The air around her suddenly sizzled with tension, and her throat went dry, forcing her to swallow. Slowly he slid down the zipper on his jeans, the denim spreading open in a vee to

reveal bronzed skin and the vertical line of downy hair that arrowed down his lower abdomen into the thicker growth of hair just visible in his opened pants. The thick bulge beneath the denim clearly demonstrated his intention. Her body leaped into immediate response, her heart beating faster and her breath racing in and out of her lungs. It had been like that from the beginning, and she had no more control over it now than she'd had then. He wanted her; that was more than obvious. But he didn't *want* to want her, and the knowledge hurt.

She swallowed again, pushing the closet door shut and leaning against it. "It's silly," she said, trying for a wry tone but failing miserably. Her voice was taut and shaking. "After this afternoon you'd think I'd be more comfortable about going to bed with you, but I'm not. I don't know what… what we have, if anything. I thought it would be clearer, but it isn't. What do you want from me?" She made a brief, dismissive gesture. "Other than sex."

Silently Kell swore. He was so good at holding people away from him that now, when he desperately wanted Rachel as close as he could get her for what time they had left, she still thought he was pushing her away. They had so little time together that the thought of not grabbing for every moment with her was unbearable, and he didn't know how to make her see that. Perhaps it was better if she didn't see it; perhaps it would be easier for her if she never knew how tempted he was to forget all his rules and priorities. But he had to have her, had to stockpile memories against the empty days in the future when she wouldn't be there. Even now she wasn't playing games, wasn't trying to hide behind lies to protect her pride. She was so honest that she deserved at least a fraction of the same honesty from him, no matter how it hurt. But the pain wasn't only hers.

He looked at her and said, "Everything. That's what I want. But I can't have it."

She quivered, and tears welled in her eyes. "You know you can have anything you want. All you have to do is reach out and take it."

Slowly he walked up to her and put his hand on her shoulder, sliding his fingers under the strap of her nightgown and stroking his rough fingertips over her warm, satiny skin. "At the risk of your life?" he asked in a low voice. "No. I couldn't live with that."

"You make it sound like a concrete fact that anyone close to you is a target. Other agents – "

"Other agents aren't me," he interrupted quietly, his black eyes level on hers. "There are several renegade governments and terrorist groups that have a bounty on my head. Do you think I'd ask any woman to share that sort of life with me?"
She managed to smile through her tears. "Don't try to tell me you live like a monk. I know there have been women – "
"No one close. No one special. No one who could be used or threatened in an attempt to get at me. I've tried it, honey. I was married, years ago before it got as bad as it is now. She was wounded in an attempt on my life. Being a smart woman, she got the hell away from me as fast as she could."
Not so smart, Rachel thought. She knew that she never would have let that drive her away from him. Her throat was so tight that she was almost choking on her words as she stared up at him, the tears finally overflowing and rolling down her cheeks. "It would be worth it, to be with you," she whispered. "I'd take the chance."
"No," he said, shaking his head. "I won't let you. *I* won't take the chance, not with your life." With one thumb he rubbed away the tears tracking her face.
"Isn't that my decision to make?"
He moved both his hands up to cup her face, sliding his fingers into her thick straight hair and tilting her face closer to his. "Not when you don't have any real idea of the danger involved. You pulled a little stint as an investigative reporter, and you notice more than is good for you, but you're as innocent as a baby when it comes to knowing what my work is really like. There *are* agents who live fairly normal lives, but I'm not one of them. I'm one of a very small minority. My existence isn't even admitted publicly."
She had gone pale, her face very still. "I know more about the risks involved than you think."
"No. You know the movie versions, the cleaned up, romanticized, glamorized crap."
Rachel suddenly jerked her head away from his touch, her hands clenched into fists. "You think so?" she rasped, her voice rough with pain. "My husband was killed by a car bomb meant for me. There was nothing cleaned up, romanticized, or glamorous about that. He died in my place! Ask me what I know about someone else paying the price for a risk I chose to take!"
Tears began falling again, and she dashed them away, glaring fiercely at

him. "Damn you, Kell Sabin! Do you think I *want* to love you? But at least I'm willing to take the chance, rather than run away from it the way you do!"

Chapter Ten

She was crying, and it was like taking a punch in the gut to watch her. Rachel simply wasn't a weepy person, and she was trying hard not to cry, but the tears kept rolling down her face as she faced him, and she kept angrily dashing them away. Slowly Kell reached out and brushed her hair away from her damp face, then eased her into his arms and pressed her head against his uninjured shoulder. "Whatever happens, I can't risk you," he said in a low, tortured voice.

Hearing the finality in his voice, she knew that there was no convincing him otherwise. He would go, and when he did it would be forever. Desperately she clung to him, inhaling deeply to draw the scent of him into her body, her hands trying to memorize the way it felt to touch him. All she had was this.

He tilted her chin up and bent his head then slanted his mouth over hers, the pressure hard and hungry, even a little angry, because they had so little time when forever wouldn't suffice. She sighed and opened her mouth to his probing tongue, her fingers flexing on his muscular back, and as always there was that strong, immediate response to him that tightened her breasts and sent twinges of pleasure through her loins. He sensed it, cupping her bottom in his rough hands and lifting her into grinding contact with his own throbbing flesh while his mouth continued to take hers.

He wanted to wipe out the pain he'd seen in her eyes; he wanted to savor her, take his time with her, as he'd been unable to do that afternoon. Sabin couldn't remember ever before losing control like that, not even when he'd been a young boy on the prowl, driven by a rapacious sexuality. But with Rachel his responses were so extreme that he'd exploded only moments after entering her; she had reached her peak, too, but he knew that he'd rushed her, hurt her with his too-powerful penetration. She was so tight that accommodating him hadn't been easy for her. He wasn't going to let it be that way again; he was going to take his time with her, until she was truly ready for him and trembling on the brink.

She was trembling in his arms, the salty taste of her tears on his tongue. Silently he led her to the bed, leaving the light on because he wanted to see every nuance of her expression while he made love to her. He paused to push his jeans off, and Rachel watched him, her hands automatically lifting to her nightgown.

Quickly he stayed them. "No, leave your gown on for now." Perhaps it would be easier for him if he couldn't see her stretched out naked and waiting for him. He was caught in his own delicious dilemma, wanting to watch her as he made love to her, as he made her ready to receive him, yet knowing that the sight of her naked body would push him closer to the edge than he wanted to be right now. Just thinking about her was torture enough. His loins were heavy and throbbing, his all-too-accurate memory reminding him just how it had felt to be sheathed inside her.

"Why?" Rachel asked huskily when they were lying on the bed and he was leaning over her with an expression on his face that would have frightened her if she hadn't trusted him completely.

He smoothed his hand over her breasts, the motion deliberately slow as the thin cotton slid across her nipples, bringing them to tingling prominence.

"Why the gown?" he clarified. It was hard to talk when her breath kept catching.

"Yes."

"Because I'm inciting myself to riot."

No, it was she who was being incited, tantalized. Everywhere his lightly trailing fingers went they left behind a delicious tingle as her aroused nerve endings pleaded for more. Sometimes he merely brushed her with his fingertips, while at others he stroked her with the flat of his palm, the contact almost hard. And he kissed her: her mouth, her ears, the line of her jaw, the arch of her throat, the exquisitely tender hollow above her collarbones. Finally her breasts knew the warm, moist pressure of his mouth and the probing of his tongue. It was all the more maddening because he didn't remove her gown; even when his mouth closed hotly on her extended nipple and sucked at it with a strength that made her cry out, it was with the thin barrier of cotton between his mouth and her flesh. In frustration she tried to unbutton the two buttons that closed the top of the gown, to give him access to her bareness, but he stopped her and captured her hands, pinning them to the pillow above her head and anchoring them there with his strong right hand.

"Kell!" she protested, writhing to escape, but he was incredibly strong, despite his half-healed wounds, and she couldn't wrest herself free. "You've got a cruel streak in you!"

"No," he murmured against her breast, licking her nippie through the wet fabric. "I only want to make you feel good. Don't you like this?"

There was no way she could deny it; he could easily read the signs of arousal in her body. "Yes," she admitted, panting. "But I want to touch you, too. Let me – "
"Umm, not yet. You make me feel too much like a teenager, ready to go off like a Fourth of July rocket. I'm going to make it good for you this time."
"It was good before," she said, and moaned as his left hand trailed down to the juncture of her thighs, rubbing delicately. Rachel's breath caught, and her hips lifted blindly to his hand.
"I was too rough, too fast. I hurt you."
She couldn't deny it, but the discomfort hadn't been unexpected, and pleasure had swiftly followed. She started to tell him that, but the words were strangled in her throat. The gown had been pushed between her legs by his exploring hand, stretched tightly across her femininity. With one finger he probed the soft cleft, found and stroked her most sensitive flesh. Rachel's body jolted with pleasure, and a low whimper came from her throat.
His touch was firm but tender, with just the right amount of pressure. Slowly her head rolled back and forth on the pillow between the frame of her arms, and her back arched. If he had tantalized her before, this was torture, the sweetest torture imaginable. Hot coils wound inside her, heat spreading throughout her body until she was flushed and damp. Her breasts were so tight that they ached. Kell knew exactly when she couldn't stand it any longer and bent to suck strongly at her nubbed flesh, wringing another soft, wild sound from her throat.
Then his hand was on her bare thigh, under the nightgown, and the relief of feeling skin on skin was so intense that she jerked again.
"Easy," he breathed, and she held herself as still as she could while his warm, hard hand slowly moved upward, stroking her thigh. Her legs were parted already, in aching need, and she strained toward him.
His palm barely brushed her, then moved to her other thigh and stroked until she thought she would go mad. "You just wait!" she both threatened and promised, hissing the words through her tightly clenched teeth.
He laughed aloud, a low, rough sound of masculine triumph. Dimly she realized that it was the first time she'd heard him laugh. "I'm looking forward to it," he said, his voice strained. He was hot and damp, too, his eyes glittering with barely controlled passion, his face taut, with hectic color on his cheekbones and his lips. "Are you ready, love? Let me see." He

touched her, and then the light, teasing touches ceased completely. He parted her soft flesh and slid two long fingers into her. Rachel gave a thin, high cry, her hips heaving as she trembled on the verge of ecstasy.
"Not yet," he breathed. "Not yet. Hold on, honey. I'm not going to let you go just yet. Not until I'm inside you."
His low, rough words washed over her shaking, twisting body. Crying a little, tormented by those long, probing fingers as he brought her to moist readiness, she tried again to free her hands, and this time he let them go.
"Now," he crooned, pulling the nightgown up. Rachel lifted herself up to aid in the removal of the frustrating garment, pulling it over her head herself and throwing it across the room. Kell's face tightened even more as he stared down at her naked body, at her flushed, glowing skin. Briefly his eyes closed, and he ground his teeth together as a heavy surge in his loins threatened his self-control.
Carefully he rolled to his back, favoring his shoulder, and guided her astride him. "Slow and easy," he muttered, his eyes glittering like black fire as he positioned himself for her. "Let's go easy, a little at a time."
"I love you," Rachel whispered achingly, closing her eyes at the probing of his flesh against her. She braced her hands on his chest, her fingers flexing in the mat of curly hair, and slid onto him. He made a guttural sound and arched beneath her, his hands clenching on the sheet. "I love you," she said again, and another low animal sound came from him as his control shattered and he grabbed for her hips, grinding her in a rotating motion against him.
"Rachel," he groaned, shaking. His body was taut and straining beneath her. She moved on him, rising, sliding, falling. Now it was her turn, and she did a primeval dance of passion, slowing whenever it seemed that her motions would take either of them past the point of no return. She was no longer so painfully empty; she was filled with him, an intense satisfaction in itself. Time became elastic, expanded, then disappeared altogether. She forgot everything but Kell, and she gave herself to him in a way she'd never known would be possible. He had become irrevocably hers when she pulled him from the surf, and she was irrevocably his, perhaps by the same power. For as long as she lived, she would be his.
She was crying again, but this time she was oblivious to the tears raining down her face. "I love you," she choked, then abruptly she crested, surging against him while her soft inner quivering made the world explode, then fade away and there were only the two of them, straining together, until he

cried out hoarsely and heaved beneath her. Later, as she slept in his arms, he lay awake staring into the night, and though his face was as blank as usual, there was a look of desperation in his eyes.

"Let's drive into town," he said the next morning after breakfast.
She drew a deep breath, her hands stilling for a moment before she resumed washing the last plate. She handed it to him to dry, feeling the dread rising in her chest to choke her. "Why?"
"I need to make a phone call. I'm not going to do it from here."
Her throat was so tight she could scarcely speak. "You're going to call the man you think you can trust?"
"I *know I* can trust him," Kell replied briefly. "I'm staking my life on it."
Even more than that, he was staking Rachel's life. Yes, he trusted Sullivan completely.
"I thought you were going to wait until you had recuperated." When she turned to look at him, her eyes were shadowed with a stark pain that twisted the knife inside him once more.
"I was, until Ellis came around again. It'll take Sullivan a few days to check out some things for me and get things organized. I don't want to push it any longer than that."
"Sullivan? That's the man?"
"Yes."
"But you just got your stitches out yesterday," she protested urgently, lacing her fingers together to keep from wringing her hands. "You're still weak, and you can't–" She bit her lip, halting her own desperate flow of words. Arguing wouldn't change his mind. And how could she tell him he was too weak, when he had made love to her twice during the night and woken her that morning when he slid into her again? She was both stiff and sore, and every step she took reminded her of his strength and endurance. He wasn't at his own personal peak of strength, but even so, he was probably stronger than most men.
She closed her eyes, hating her own weakness for trying to hold on to him when she'd known from the first that she couldn't. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "Of course you can. We'll go now, if you want."
Kell watched her silently; if there was any one moment that revealed the strength of the woman, it was now, and it only made the leaving harder. He didn't want to call Sullivan; he didn't want to hurry the day when this would

have to end. He wanted to stretch time to its utmost limits, to spend the hot, lazy days lying on the beach with her, getting to know every minute facet of her personality and making love to her whenever they wanted. And the nights…those long, warm, fragrant nights, spent tangled together on the damp, twisted sheets. Yes, that was what he wanted. Only the sure knowledge that she was in increasing danger could force him to make that call to Sullivan. His instinct told him that time was running out.

He was silent so long that Rachel opened her eyes and found him looking at her with that intent way of his. "What I want," he said deliberately, "is to make love again."

That was all it took, just that look of his and the words, and she felt herself growing warm and moist as her body automatically tightened, but she knew that she wouldn't be able to comfortably accept him. She looked at him with poignant regret. "I don't think I can."

He touched her cheek, his hard, rough fingers stroking the contours of her face with incredible tenderness. "I'm sorry. I should have realized."

She gave him a smile that wasn't as steady as she wished. "Let me change clothes and brush my hair, and we'll leave."

Because she wasn't the type to linger in front of a mirror, they were on their way in five minutes. Sabin was alert, his dark eyes noting every detail of the countryside and examining every car they met. Rachel found herself watching the rearview mirror in case they were being followed.

"I need a phone booth off the main drag. I don't want to be seen by six hundred people on their way to buy groceries." The words were terse, his attention on the traffic.

Obediently she searched out a phone booth next to a service station on the edge of town and parked the car next to it. Kell opened the door, then shut it again without getting out. He turned to her with a smile of real amusement on his lips. "I don't have any money."

His smile relieved the tension inside her, and she chuckled as she reached for her purse. "You could use my credit card number."

"No. If anyone checked it could lead them to Sullivan."

He took the handful of change she gave him and went into the phone booth, closing the door behind him. Rachel watched as he fed coins into the slot, then looked around to see if anyone else was watching him, but the only other person in sight was the man at the service station, and he was sitting

in a chair in the front office, leaning back against the wall with the front legs of the chair off the ground while he read a newspaper.
Kell was back in only a few minutes, and Rachel started the car as he slid onto the seat and slammed the door. "That didn't take long," she said.
"Sullivan doesn't waste words."
"He'll come?"
"Yeah." Suddenly he smiled again, that rare, true smile. "His biggest problem is getting out of the house without his wife following him."
The humor, on that particular subject, was unexpected. "She doesn't understand about his job?"
He snorted. "It isn't his job – he's a farmer. And it'll make Jane madder than hell that he didn't take her with him."
"Farmer!"
"He retired from the agency a couple of years ago."
"Was his wife an agent, too?"
"No, thank God," he said with real feeling.
"Don't you like her?"
"It's impossible not to like her. I'm just glad Sullivan has her under control on that farm."
Rachel gave him a dubious glance. "Is he any good? How old is he, anyway?"
"He's my age. He retired himself. The government would have been glad to keep him another twenty years, but he got out."
"And he's good?"
Kell's dark eyebrows lifted. "He's the best agent I ever had. We trained together in Nam."
That reassured her; even more than her dread at his leaving, she feared the danger he would have to face. Not a hint of it would ever surface in any newspaper, but there would be a small war in the nation's capital. Kell wouldn't rest until his section was clean again, even at the cost of his own life. The knowledge ate at her. If she could, if he would let her, she would go with him and do whatever she could to protect him.
"Stop at a drugstore," he instructed, swiveling in his seat to check behind them.
"What do you want at a drugstore?" She looked at him again and found him watching her with faint amusement.
"Birth control. Or haven't you realized what a chance we've been taking?"

"Yes, I'd realized," she admitted in a low voice.
"You weren't going to say anything or do anything about it?"
Her hands tightened on the steering wheel until the knuckles were white, and she concentrated on the traffic. "No."
Just that one, calmly uttered word had the power to jerk his head up, and she felt his gaze burning on her. "I don't want to get you pregnant. I can't stay, Rachel. You'd be alone, with a baby to raise."
She braked for a red light and turned her head to meet his gaze. "It would be worth it, to have your baby."
His jaw tightened, and he swore under his breath. Damn, he was hard again just at the thought of getting her pregnant, of her bearing his child and nursing it at her pretty breasts. He wanted to. He wanted to take her with him and go home to her every night, but he couldn't turn his back on his job and his country. Security was critical, now more than ever, and his services were invaluable. It was something he had to do; endangering Rachel was something he couldn't do.
Her gray eyes were dark with mingled love and pain. "I won't make it easy for you to leave me," she whispered. "I won't hide what I feel and wave you off with a smile."
His profile was hard and unreadable as he turned back to watch the road; he didn't answer, and when the light changed to green again she drove carefully to the nearest drugstore. Without speaking, she took a twenty from her purse and handed it to him.
His hand clenched on the crisp bill, and he looked like murder. "It's either this or abstinence."
She drew a deep breath. "Then I suppose you'd better go in, hadn't you?"
No, she wasn't making it any easier; she was making it so difficult that it was tearing him apart. Damn it, he'd give her a baby every year if things were different, he thought savagely as he went into the drugstore and made his purchase. Maybe he was too late; maybe she was already pregnant. Only the naive or the careless could discount the possibility.
He left the cash register and had started for the door, when Rachel came through it, her face strained, her eyes wide and urgent. Without hesitation he turned and walked several aisles over to intently examine a high stack of insulated beverage coolers. Rachel walked past, to the cosmetic department. Sabin waited, and a moment later the door opened again. He caught a glimpse of sandy hair and ducked his own head down, automatically

reaching behind his back for the pistol, but his waistband was empty. The pistol was in the car. His eyes narrowed, and a cold, deadly look settled over his features; moving silently, he began trailing Ellis.
Rachel had seen the blue Ford driving down the street and had known immediately that it was Ellis; her only thought had been to warn Kell before he walked out of the drugstore and let Ellis see him. If Ellis had been following them it was already too late, but she was fairly certain that wasn't the case. This was just an unhappy coincidence; it had to be. She had pretended not to see him, getting out of the car and walking into the drugstore as if she'd just driven up herself. She had heard a car door close behind her just as she went inside, and she knew Ellis would be there in a few seconds. Kell had taken one look at her face and detoured; now all she had to do was get rid of Ellis, even if she had to get back in the car and drive away without Kell. She could circle back to pick him up.
"I thought it was you. Didn't you hear me call?" Ellis asked behind her as she surveyed the array of lipsticks.
She jerked around, pretending that he'd startled her. "Tod! You scared me!" she gasped, holding a hand to her chest.
"Sorry. I thought you knew I was behind you."
He seemed to be thinking a lot this morning; she hoped it didn't strain him too much. She gave him an abstracted smile. "I've got so much on my mind I'm just walking around in a daze. I'm trying to get everything together for my trip, but I left my shopping list at home, and it's driving me crazy trying to remember everything."
He looked at the display, his easy grin flashing. "I guess lipstick is essential."
"No, but lip balm is, and I thought it would be here." Condescending mongrel! She wondered how he'd look if she told him to shove off. The problem with someone with an enormous ego was that any slight sent them around the bend, hell-bent on revenge. Still, she couldn't keep the tartness out of her voice, and he looked at her in surprise.
"Is something wrong?"
"I've got a vicious headache," she muttered. She caught sight of Kell, moving just behind Ellis; his face was set, his eyes narrowed and cold, and he moved like a stalking panther. What was he doing? He was supposed to stay out of sight until she got rid of Ellis, not attack the man! All the color drained from her face as Ellis peered at her.

"You do look sick," he finally admitted.
"I think it was too much wine last night." She turned on her heel and marched down the aisle, away from Kell. Damn the man! If he wanted to jump Ellis, he'd have to chase him down to do it! She didn't stop until she got to the insect repellent section; she grabbed a bottle and scowled as she read the directions on the back.
Ellis was still right behind her. "Do you think you'd feel like going out tonight?"
Rachel ground her teeth in frustration. She couldn't believe he was that thick-skinned. It was an effort to take a deep breath and answer calmly. "I don't think so, Tod, but thanks for asking. I really feel rotten."
"Sure, I understand. I'll call you in a day or so."
From somewhere she dredged up enough control for a wan smile. "Yes, do that. Maybe I'll feel better then, unless this is some sort of virus."
Like most people, he backed off a little at the mention of anything contagious. "I'll let you get back to your shopping, but you really should go home and take it easy."
"That's good advice. I just might do that." *Would he never leave?*
But still he lingered, chatting, being so obviously charming that she wanted to gag. Then she saw Kell again, silently working his way around behind Ellis, his eyes never wavering from his prey. Desperately she grabbed her stomach and said clearly, "I think I may throw up."
It was really amazing how fast Ellis retreated, looking at her warily. "You'd better go home," he said. "I'll call you later." The last words were said as he went out the door. She waited until he got in the Ford and drove off before she turned to look at Kell as he walked up to her.
"Stay in here," she said curtly. "I'll drive around the block to make certain he's gone."
She walked off before he could say anything. She was seething, and driving around the block would give her time to cool down. It made her furious that he would take that sort of risk right now, when he wasn't a hundred percent physically fit. When she was in the car she leaned her head on the steering wheel for a moment, shaking. What if Ellis had seen Kell go into the drugstore and had just been playing it cool, making sure it was Kell so he could report back to his superiors? She didn't think so, unless Ellis was much more cunning than she'd given him credit for, but even the possibility was horrifying.

Shaking, she started the car and circled the block, looking up and down all the streets for a blue Ford parked anywhere. She didn't just have to look for Ellis; she had to look for Lowell, too, and she had no idea what he might be driving. And how many other men were in this area now?
Returning to the drugstore, she pulled up close to the door and Kell came out, sliding into the car beside her. "See anyone?"
"No, but I don't know what kind of cars the others might have." She pulled into traffic, heading in the opposite direction from the one Ellis had taken. That wasn't where she wanted to go, but she could always cut back.
"He didn't see me," Kell said quietly, hoping to ease some of the tension evident in her face.
"How do you know? He could have decided to report you and wait for backup, catch you out later rather than trying something in the middle of a crowded drugstore."
"Relax, honey. He's not that smart. He'd try to take me himself."
"If he's so stupid, why did you hire him?" Rachel shot back.
He looked thoughtful. "I didn't. Someone else 'acquired' him."
Rachel glanced at him. "One of the two men who knew where you were?"
"That's right," he said grimly.
"That narrows it down for you, doesn't it?"
"I wish it did, but I can't afford to take that for granted. Until I know for certain, both of them are suspects."
It made sense; if he had to err, it would be on the side of caution. He couldn't afford even one mistake.
"Why were you trailing him like that? Why didn't you just stay out of sight until I'd gotten rid of him?" she demanded, her knuckles showing white again.
"If he had seen me, it could have been his plan to grab you for bait, to draw me out. I wasn't going to let that happen." The quiet, calm way he said it made Rachel shiver, as if the air had suddenly turned cold.
"But you aren't up to something like that yet! Your leg could give out on you, and your shoulder is so stiff you can barely move it. What if you'd torn everything open again?"
"It didn't happen. Anyway, I didn't anticipate a fight, just one good crack at him."
His male arrogance made her want to scream; instead she ground her teeth together. "It didn't occur to you that something could have gone wrong?"

"Sure, but if he'd grabbed you, I wouldn't have had any choice, so I wanted to be in position."
And he was willing to do whatever was necessary, despite his stiff shoulder and lame leg. He was one of a rare breed, able to see the cost and still be willing to pay it, though he would do everything he could to tip the scales the other way.
She was still pale, her eyes shadowed, and he reached over to slide his hand down her thigh. "It's all right," he said gently. "Nothing happened."
"But it could have. Your shoulder – "
"Forget my damned shoulder, and my leg. I know how far I can push them, and I don't go into anything unless I think I can win."
She was silent for the remainder of the drive, until she parked the car under the tree. "I think I'll go for a swim," she said tightly. "Want to come along?"
"Yes."
Joe came up to her car door as always, his dark eyes trained on her even though he remained just out of touching distance, and he walked beside her as she went up the steps to the porch. He accepted Kell, but if the two of them were outside he was never far from Rachel. He was one warrior who was content to stay, she thought wistfully, then resolutely pushed away the creeping self-pity. Life would go on, even if it was without Kell. It hurt to think about it, and she didn't want to, but she knew that she would survive somehow, though her life had been irrevocably changed by the time she had spent with him, quiet days punctuated by moments of sheer terror.
She changed into her sleek black bathing suit and Kell put on his denim shorts, and after grabbing a couple of towels, they walked through the pines down to the beach. Joe followed them and lay down in the scant shade of a clump of sea oats. Rachel dropped the towels on the sand and pointed out to the bay, where the water was rising and breaking over the submerged rocks. "See the line where the water breaks? That's where the rocks are. I'm pretty sure you hit your head on one of them that night. The tide was just starting to come in, so the water was low." She pointed again. "I dragged you out here."
Kell looked at the beach, then turned and stared up the slope, where the pines were standing tall and straight, a thicket of wooden sentinels. She had somehow dragged him up that slope and gotten him into the house, a feat that he couldn't imagine when he looked at her slender body. "You damn near killed yourself getting me up there, didn't you?" he asked quietly.

She didn't want to think about that night, or what it had cost her physically. Part of it had already been blocked from her brain; she remembered that she'd been in pain, but the exact nature of the pain escaped her. Perhaps adrenaline was responsible for both her strength that night and the selective amnesia that followed. She looked at him for a long moment, then turned and walked into the sea. He watched until the water reached her knees, then pulled the pistol out of his waistband and carefully laid it on a towel, covering it with the other to keep the blowing sand out of it. Then he dropped his shorts and walked naked into the water after her. Rachel was a strong swimmer, having spent most of her life living on the Gulf, but Kell stayed even with her despite his stiff shoulder. At first, when she realized he was in the water, she had started to protest that he shouldn't get his wounds wet, but she swallowed the words. After all, he had swum with open wounds, and the exercise would be good therapy. They swam in the bay for half an hour before he decided that he'd had enough, and Rachel returned to the beach with him. It wasn't until the water reached his waist that she realized he was nude, and the familiar quiver shook her insides as she watched him wade out of the water. He was so lean and hard and perfect, darkly tanned and roped with muscle, even his tight buttocks. She watched as he moved the pistol and lay down on one of the towels, his glistening body offered to the sun.

She left the water, too, bending over to wring out her hair. When she straightened again she found him watching her. "Take off the bathing suit," he said softly.

She looked out to sea, but there were no boats in sight. Then she looked at him again, lying there like a bronzed, naked statue, except that she'd never seen a statue in a state of arousal. Slowly she reached up for the straps on her shoulders and drew them down, and immediately she felt the heat of the hot sun kissing her wet breasts. A slight breeze suddenly kicked up, whispering across her nipples and making them pucker. Sabin's breath caught in his chest, and he held his hand out to her. "Come here."

She pushed the bathing suit down and off, then walked to the towels. He sat up and reached for her, drawing her down beside him and stretching her out. Amusement was twinkling in his dark eyes as he looked down at her. "Guess what I forgot to bring."

She began to laugh, the sound pure and deep in this world where only the two of them existed.

"Ah, well, you're too sore for that, anyway," he murmured sliding his hand over her breasts and bringing her nipples to tingling awareness. "I'll just have to… improvise "

He leaned over her, his shoulders so broad that they blocked out the sun, and his mouth burned on hers, then down on her body.

He was very good with improvisations. He lingered over her as if she were a willing, sun-kissed sacrifice offered up for his delectation, until her body finally arched to his rapacious mouth and she cried out in intolerable pleasure, her cry rising to the white inferno of the sun.

Chapter Eleven

Rachel didn't let herself think about time, though she knew they had only a few more days at the most, however long it took this Sullivan to make his arrangements and travel down to meet Kell. She lived completely in the present, reveling in his company whatever they were doing. He began helping her gather the vegetables from the garden, and he worked some with Joe, gaining more of the dog's trust and showing Rachel how highly trained Joe was. After the first swim they also spent a lot of time down at the bay; they swam every morning and again in the afternoon, after the worst of the heat was over. It was marvelous therapy, and every day he got stronger, his shoulder more flexible and his limp improving. He also did other exercises, continually working to bring his body back up to par, and she could only watch in amazement. She was athletic and strong herself, but her endurance was nothing compared to his. He was often in pain; she sensed it, even though he never said anything, but he ignored it as if it weren't there. Ten days after she'd found him he was gingerly jogging around the house, his thigh tightly wrapped to brace the injured muscle. After a moment of anger Rachel joined him and jogged along beside him, ready to catch him if his leg gave out and he fell. It wouldn't have done any good to yell at him, because it was important for him to be able to meet whatever demands might be placed on him when he left.

And whatever they did, they talked. He was reticent about himself, both naturally and as a result of his training, but he did have a lot of fascinating inside details about the political and economic considerations of governments around the world. He probably also knew more than anyone would want him to know about military forces and capabilities, but he didn't talk about those. Rachel learned as much about him from his omissions as she did from the subjects he would talk about.

No matter what they did, whether weeding the garden, jogging around the house, cooking a meal or arguing politics, desire ran between them like an invisible current, linking them together in a state of heightened awareness. Her senses were filled with him; she knew his taste, his smell, his touch, every nuance of his deep voice. Because he was normally so expressionless she watched him closely for each small movement of his brows or twitch of his lips. Even though he was relaxed with her and smiled more often, sometimes teasing her, his laughter was rare, and therefore doubly

treasured, the occasions pressed into her memory. Their desire couldn't be quenched by lovemaking, because it was more than a physical need. She immersed herself in him, knowing that she had only the present.
Still, physical desire couldn't be denied. Rachel had never been so thoroughly enjoyed before, even in the early days of marriage. Kell had a strong sexual appetite, and the more he made love to her, the more they both wanted it again. He was exquisitely careful with her until she became more accustomed to him, his lovemaking both sophisticated and earthy. There were times when they lingered, savoring each sensation like sexual gourmets until the tension was so strong that they exploded together. There were also the times when their loving was fast and hard, when there was no foreplay because their need to be together was too urgent.
The third day after he'd called Sullivan, Kell made love to her with barely controlled violence, and she knew that he was thinking this might be the last day they had together. She clung to him, her arms tight around his neck when he lay on her in heavy, damp exhaustion. A lump lodged in her throat, and she squeezed her eyes tightly shut in an effort to deny the march of time. She couldn't bear to let him go.
"Take rne with you," she said thickly, unable to let it lie, to simply let him walk away from her. Rachel was too much of a fighter to let him go without trying to change his mind.
He stiffened, then withdrew from her to lie on his back beside her, his forearm thrown up to cover his eyes. The ceiling fan whirred overhead, wafting a cool breeze across their overheated skin and making her feel a little chilled without the heat of his body pressed over her. She opened her eyes to stare at him, her gaze burning with desperation.
"No," he finally said, and left it at that, the single word filled with a finality that almost broke her heart.
"Something could be worked out," she pressed. "At worst we could see each other occasionally. I'm mobile. I can work anywhere–"
"Rachel," he interrupted tiredly. "No. Leave it." He took his forearm down from his eyes and looked at her. Though his expression changed very little, she could tell that he was annoyed by her persistence.
She was too desperate to stop. "How can I leave it? I love you! This isn't a game I'm playing, that I can just pick up my marbles and go home when I get tired of it!"

"Damn it, I'm not playing games, either!" he roared, bolting upright in the bed and seizing her arm to shake her, finally goaded past his limits. His eyes were hot and narrowed, his teeth clenched. "You could be killed because of me! Didn't it teach you anything when your husband died?"
She went pale, staring at him. "I could be killed driving into town," she finally said shakily. "Would that make me any less dead? Would you grieve any less?" Suddenly she stopped, wrenching her arm free and rubbing it where his fingers had bitten into her flesh. She was so white that her eyes burned darkly in her colorless face. Finally she said with an attempt at lightness, "Or would you grieve at all? I'm being rather presumptuous, aren't I? Maybe I'm the only one involved here. If so, just forget everything I've said."
Silence stretched between them as they faced each other on the bed; her face was strained, his grim. He wasn't going to say anything. Rachel inhaled sharply at the pain squeezing her insides. Well, she'd asked for it. She'd pushed him, fighting to change his mind, to get a commitment from him, and she had lost… everything. She had thought that he cared for her, loved her, even though he'd never said anything about love. She had put it down to his natural reticence. Now she had to face the unpleasant truth that it was his brutal honesty that had kept him from saying he loved her. He wouldn't spout pretty words that he didn't mean just to soothe her feelings. He liked her. She was a reasonably attractive woman, and she was convenient; he was highly sexed. The reason for his attentions was obvious, and she'd made a complete fool of herself.
The worst of it was that even facing the hard, unpalatable reality didn't stop her from loving him. That was another reality, and she couldn't wish it away.
"Sorry," she mumbled, scrambling off the bed and reaching for her clothes, suddenly embarrassed by her nudity. It was different now.
Sabin watched her, every muscle coiled tightly. The look on her face ate at him, the abrupt embarrassment, the sudden extinguishing of the light in her eyes as she fumbled with her clothing in an attempt to cover herself. He could let her go. She might get over him more easily if she thought he had just used her sexually, without returning any of her emotion. Emotion made Sabin uneasy; he wasn't accustomed to it. But damned if he could stand that look on her face! Maybe he couldn't give her much, but he couldn't leave with her thinking she'd been nothing more than a sexual convenience.

Rachel was out of the room before he could catch her, and then he heard the screen door slam. Going to the door, he saw her disappearing into the pines with Joe right beside her, as usual. He cursed steadily as he jerked on his pants and started after her. She wasn't going to be inclined to listen to him now, but listen she would even if he had to hold her down.

When Rachel reached the beach she kept walking, wondering how she was going to find the courage to go back to the house and act as if everything were normal, as if she weren't a shriveled knot of pain inside. Still, it was probably only for one more day; she could manage that. She could endure it for twenty-four hours. Part of her was glad that it could be measured in hours; then she could forget about a stiff upper lip and cry until the tears were all gone. But the rest of her screamed silently at the thought of not seeing him again, no matter what he felt – or didn't feel – for her.

A pastel pink shell was half-hidden by a clump of seaweed, and she paused to push the seaweed aside with her foot, hoping to find something beautiful to lighten her heart.

But the shell was broken, most of it gone, and she kept walking. Joe left her side, trotting up the beach to do his own exploring; he had been changed by Kell's arrival, too, for the first time allowing a man to touch him and learning to accept someone other than Rachel. She watched the dog, wondering if he would miss Kell, too.

A warm hand closed on her shoulder, bringing her to a halt. Even without looking around she knew it was Kell; she knew his touch, the rasp of his roughened fingertips. She felt him at her back, tall and warm, so intense that her skin tingled whenever he was near. All she had to do was turn around and her head would fit right into the hollow of his shoulder, her body would fit into his arms, but he wouldn't allow her to fit into his life. She didn't want to treat him to tears and hysterics, and she was very much afraid she would if she turned around, so she kept her back to him.

"This isn't easy for me, either," he said roughly.

"I'm sorry," she broke in, wanting to make a quick end to it. "I didn't mean to start a scene, or put you on the spot. Just forget it, if you can."

His hand tightened on her shoulder, and he turned her around, sliding his other hand into her hair and tilting her face up so he could see her eyes.

"Don't you see that it couldn't work between us? I can't leave my job. What I do… it's hard and it's ugly, but it's necessary."

"I haven't asked you to give up your job," she said, her face proud.

"It's not the damn job I'm worried about!" he shouted, his dark face furious. "It's you! God, it would tear my guts out if anything happened to you! I love you." He paused, took a deep breath, and continued more quietly. "I've never said that to anyone before, and I shouldn't be saying it now, because there's no use in it."

The wind whipped her hair around her face as she stared up at him, her gray eyes fathomless. Slowly his fist loosened in her hair and he moved his hand down to her neck, rubbing his thumb over the fluttering pulse at the base of her throat. Rachel swallowed. "We could try it for a little while," she whispered, but he shook his head.

"I want to know that you're safe. I *have to* know that, or I can't function the way I should. I can't make a mistake, because if I did it could mean that people died, good men and women. And if you were kidnapped–" He stopped, his face almost savage. "I'd sell my soul to keep you safe."

Rachel felt herself shattering on the inside. "No, it can't be like that. No negotiation–"

"I love you," he said harshly. "I've never loved anyone before in my life, not my parents, any of my relatives, or even my wife. I've always been alone, different from everyone else. The only friend I've ever had is Sullivan, and he's as much of a lobo as I am. Do you really think I could sacrifice you? Sweet hell, woman, you're my one chance in a lifetime–" He broke off, a muscle in his jaw twitching as he stared at her. "And I don't dare take it," he finished quietly.

She understood, and she wished she didn't. Because he loved her, he didn't trust himself not to betray his country if she were kidnapped and used as a weapon against him. He wasn't like people who had loved before and would love again; he was too remote, too chillingly alone. For whatever reason, whatever particular chemistry and circumstance, he loved her, and it was the only time in his life he would ever love a woman. Living with him would make her vulnerable to attack; merely loving her would make him vulnerable, because for a man such as he, love was something both wonderful and terrible.

He took her hand, and they walked silently back to the house. It was time for lunch; Rachel went into the kitchen with the intention of trying to busy herself cooking so she wouldn't be able to think. Kell leaned against the cabinets and watched her, his black eyes burning her flesh. Suddenly he reached out and caught her hand, removing the pot from her grasp and

setting it back on the countertop. "Now," he said gutturally, pulling her toward the bedroom.

He stripped down her shorts but didn't take the time to remove her shirt; nor did he take the time to shed his pants, merely opening them and shoving them down. They didn't make it to the bed. He took her on the floor, so desperate to be inside her, to sheathe himself in her and eliminate all distance between them, that he couldn't wait. Rachel clung to him as he pounded into her, every inch of her flesh, every cell, branded by his possession. And even then they both knew it wouldn't be enough.

Late that afternoon she walked out to the garden to gather a few fresh peppers to add to the spaghetti sauce she was cooking. Kell was taking a shower, and Joe, oddly, was nowhere in sight. She started to call him, but decided that he must be asleep under the oleander bush, taking refuge from the heat. The temperature had to be pushing a hundred, and the humidity was high, prime conditions for a thunderstorm. With her hand full of peppers she crossed the small backyard to the house. Later she could never decide where he came from; there had been no one in sight, and no place for him to hide. But as she went up the back steps he was suddenly there behind her, his hand clamping over her mouth and jerking her head back. His other arm went around her in almost exactly the same movement Kell had used when he had jumped her from behind, but instead of a knife this man carried a gun clutched in his fist; it glinted in the sun with a dull blue sheen. "Don't make a sound and I won't hurt you," the man murmured in her ear, his voice easy on consonants and pure liquid on the vowels. "I'm looking for a man. He's supposed to be in this house."

She clawed at his hand, trying to scream a warning even though Kell might still be in the shower and wouldn't be able to hear her. But what if Kell did hear her? He could be shot trying to help her. The thought paralyzed her, and she sagged against the man, struggling to organize her mind and think of something she could do. "Shhh, that's right," the man said in that low, soft voice that made chills run over her body. "Open the door now, and we'll go in nice and easy."

She didn't have any choice but to open the screen door. If he had wanted to kill her he already would have, but he could still easily knock her unconscious, and the end result would be the same: she would be unable to help Kell if the opportunity arose. The man pushed her up the back steps

with his big body, holding her so securely against him that she couldn't struggle. She stared at the gun in his hand. If he tried to shoot Kell, she could hit his arm, throw off his aim. Where was Kell? She tried to listen for the shower, but her thundering heartbeat made a roaring in her ears that blotted out sound. Was he dressing? Had he heard the back door close? Even if he had, would he think anything of it? They relied on Joe to let them know if anyone was close by. Hard on the heels of that thought came another one, and pain welled in her again. Had he killed Joe? Was that why the dog hadn't come around the house when she went out to the garden?
Then Kell walked out of the bedroom, wearing only his jeans and carrying his shirt in his hand. He stopped, his face very still as he looked first at the man holding her, then at her terrified eyes above the hand clamped over her mouth. "You're scaring her to death," he said in a cool, controlled tone.
The hand over her mouth loosened, but the man didn't completely release her. "Is she yours?"
"She's mine."
Then the big man let her go, gently setting her away from him. "You didn't tell me anything about a woman, so I wasn't taking any chances," he said to Kell, and Rachel realized who he was.
She held herself very still, fighting for control and taking slow, deep breaths until she thought she could speak without her voice trembling. "You must be Sullivan," she said with admirable calm as she gradually relaxed her clenched hands.
"Yes, ma'am."
She didn't know what she'd expected, but it wasn't this. He and Kell were so much alike that it staggered her. It wasn't the way he looked, but they both had the same stillness about them, the same aura of power. He had sun-streaked, shaggy hair, and his eyes were as piercing and golden as an eagle's. A scar cut across his left cheekbone, testimony to some past battle. He was a warrior, lean and hard and dangerous… like Kell.
While she had been looking at him, he'd been giving her the same treatment, studying her while she struggled for control. One corner of his mouth kicked up in an almost-smile. "Sorry for scaring you, ma'am. I admire your self-control. Jane would've kicked me in the shins."
"She probably did," Kell commented, his tone still cool, but now with an undercurrent of amusement.

Sullivan's dark brows snapped down over his golden eyes. "No," he said dryly. "That wasn't where she kicked me."
That sounded like a fascinating story, but though Kell still looked amused, he didn't pursue it. "This is Rachel Jones," he said, holding out his hand to her in a quiet command. "She dragged me out of the ocean."
"Glad to meet you." Sullivan's drawl was soft and raspy as he watched Rachel immediately go to Kell in response to his outstretched hand.
"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Sullivan… I think."
Kell gave her a brief, comforting touch, then began pulling on his shirt; it was an action that still caused him some difficulty, as his shoulder was stiff and sore. Sullivan looked at the tender, red, newly formed scar tissue where the bullet had torn into Rell's shoulder. "How much damage?"
"I've lost some flexibility, but there's still some swelling. Part of it may return as the swelling goes down."
"Did you get it anywhere else?"
"Left thigh."
"Will it hold up?"
"It'll have to. I've been jogging, loosening it up."
Sullivan grunted. Rachel sensed the man's reluctance to talk freely in front of her, the same ingrained caution that characterized Kell. "Are you hungry, Mr. Sullivan? We're having spaghetti."
That wild-animal gaze turned on her. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you." The soft slurring of his drawl and the grave courtesy of his manners made such a contrast to the fierceness of his eyes that she felt off-balance. Why hadn't Kell warned her?
"I'll finish while you two talk, then. I must have dropped the peppers when you grabbed me," she said. She started toward the door, then turned back, distress in her eyes. "Mr. Sullivan?"
He and Kell were walking into the living room, and Sullivan stopped, looking back at her. "Ma'am?"
"My dog," she said, a faint trembling in her voice. "He's always there when I go outside. Why didn't he – "
Understanding was in those wild golden eyes. "He's all right. I've got him tied up in that pine thicket. Had a helluva time outsmarting him. That's a nice animal."
Relief made her weak. "I'll go untie him, then. You didn't…hurt him in any way?"

"No, ma'am. He's about a hundred yards down, just to the left of that little trail."
She ran down the trail, her heart thudding; Joe was right where Sullivan had said he would be, tied securely to a tall pine, and the dog was furious. He even snarled at Rachel, but she talked softly to him and approached him at a slow, measured pace, calming him before she knelt beside him to untie the rope around his neck. Even then she kept talking, giving him small, quick pats, and the snarls diminished in his throat. Finally he accepted a hug from her, and for the first time gave her a welcoming lick. A lump rose in her throat. "Come on, let's go home," she said, getting to her feet.
She collected the peppers from where she had dropped them on the back steps and left Joe prowling around the house. She washed her hands and began preparing the sauce, listening to the quiet rumble of the men's voices from the living room. Now that she had met Sullivan she understood Kell's confidence in him. He was… incredible. And Kell was even more so. Seeing them together made her realize anew the caliber of the man she loved, and she reeled under the shock of that realization.
It was almost an hour before she called them to the table, and the sun was a fierce red ball low on the horizon, a reminder that now her time with Kell was truly running out. Or was it already gone? Would they be leaving soon? Deliberately, to get her mind off her fears, she kept the conversation going. It was remarkably difficult, with both men being the way they were, until finally she hit on the right subject. "Kell told me that you're married, Mr. Sullivan."
He nodded, a curious lightening of his expression making him seem less formidable. "Jane is my wife." He said it as if everyone knew Jane.
"Do you have any children?"
There was no mistaking the look of intense pride that came over the hard, scarred face. "Twin sons. They're six months old."
For some reason Kell was looking amused again. "I didn't know twins ran in your family, Grant."
"They don't," Sullivan growled. "Or in Jane's, either. Even the damn doctor didn't know. She took everybody by surprise."
"That's not unusual," Kell said, and they looked at each other, grinning.
"The hell of it is, she went into labor two weeks early, in the middle of a snowstorm. All the roads were closed, and I couldn't get her to a hospital. I had to deliver them." For a moment there was a look of desperation in his

eyes, and a faint sheen of perspiration broke out on his forehead. "Twins," he said faintly. "Damn. I told her not to ever do that to me again, but you know Jane."
Kell laughed out loud, his rare deep laugh making pleasure shimmer through Rachel. "Next time she'll probably have triplets."
Sullivan glared at him. "Don't even think it," he muttered.
Rachel lifted a forkful of spaghetti to her mouth. "I don't think it's Jane's fault that she had twins, or that it snowed."
"Logically, no," Sullivan admitted. "But logic flies out the window when Jane walks in the door."
"How did you meet her?"
"I kidnapped her," he said offhandedly, leaving Rachel gasping, because he offered no other explanation.
"How did you get away from her?" Kell asked, provoking another glare.
"It wasn't easy, but she couldn't leave the kids." Sullivan leaned back in his chair, an unholy light entering his eyes. "You're going to have to go back with me to explain."
Kell looked alarmed, then resigned; finally he grinned. "All right. I want to see you with these babies."
"They're already crawling. You have to watch where you step," the proud father said, grinning in return. "Their names are Dane and Daniel, but beats the hell out of me which one is which. Jane said we can let them decide when they get older."
That was it. The three of them looked at one another, and Rachel gulped helplessly. Kell made a rough choking sound. In a perfectly choreographed move three forks were laid down on the table and three people held their heads and laughed until they hurt.

Charles read the hastily gathered intelligence report on Rachel, frowning as he rubbed his forehead with one thin finger. According to both Agents Lowell and Ellis, Rachel Jones was a good-looking but otherwise ordinary woman, even though Ellis was enamored of her. Ellis was enamored of women in general, so that wasn't unusual. The problem was that the report painted her as anything but ordinary. She was a well educated, well traveled, multitalented woman, but again the problem went even deeper than that. She had been an investigative reporter of extraordinary talent, nerve and perseverance, which meant that she was more knowledgeable

than the ordinary person about things that were usually kept from public knowledge. According to her record she had been very successful in her field. Her husband had been murdered by a car bomb meant for her when she began investigating a powerful politician's connection with illegal drugs; rather than backing down, as many people would have done, this Rachel Jones had kept after the politician and not only proved that he was involved with drug smuggling and dealing, she had proved that he was behind her husband's death. The politician was now serving a life sentence in prison.

This wasn't the rather unsophisticated woman Lowell and Ellis had described. What particularly troubled Charles was why she had projected such an image; she had to have a reason, but what was it? Why had she wanted to deceive them? For amusement, or had there been a more serious motivation?

Charles wasn't surprised that she had lied; in his experience most people lied. In his profession it was necessary to lie. What he didn't like was not knowing *why,* because the why of something was the heart of it.

Sabin had disappeared, possibly dead, though Charles couldn't convince himself of that. No trace of him had been found, not by Charles's men, a fishing trawler, a pleasure boater, or any law enforcement agency. Even though Sabin's boat had exploded there should have been some identifiably human remains – if Sabin had been on the boat. The only explanation was that he had gone overboard and swum for shore. It almost defied belief to think that he could actually have made it in his wounded condition, but this was Sabin, not some ordinary man. He *had* made it to shore, but where? Why hadn't he surfaced yet? No one had found a wounded man; no unaccounted for gunshot wounds had been reported to the police; he hadn't been admitted to any of the hospitals in the area. He had simply disappeared into thin air.

So, on the one hand he had Sabin, who had vanished. The only possibility was that someone was hiding him, but there were no clues. On the other hand, there was this Rachel Jones, who, like Sabin, was not ordinary. Her house was in the prime search area, the area where Sabin would have most likely made it to shore. Neither Lowell nor Ellis thought she had anything to hide, but they didn't know everything about her. She had projected a false image; she was more familiar than could have been suspected with undercover agents and tactics. But what reason could she have for acting

like less than what she was… unless she had something to hide? More to the point, did she have *someone* to hide?
"Noelle," he said softly. "I want to talk to Lowell and Ellis. Immediately. Find them."
An hour later both men were sitting across from him. Charles folded his hands and smiled absently at them. "Gentlemen, I want to discuss this Rachel Jones. I want to know everything you can remember about her."
Ellis and Lowell exchanged looks; then Ellis shrugged. "She's a good-looking woman–"
"No, I am not interested in her looks. I want to know what she has said and done. When you searched the beach in her area and went up to her house, did you go inside?"
"No," Lowell replied.
"Why not?"
"She's got this damned big guard dog who hates men. He won't let a man in the yard," Ellis explained.
"Even when you took her out to dinner?"
Ellis looked discomfited, as if he disliked admitting that a dog had scared him off. "She came out to the car. When I took her home the dog was there waiting, ready to take my leg off if I moved in the wrong direction."
"So no one has been inside her house."
"No," they both admitted.
"She denied any knowledge of seeing a man, a stranger?"
"There's no way Sabin could have gotten anywhere near that house without the dog having him for breakfast," Ellis said impatiently, and Lowell nodded in agreement.
Charles tapped his fingertips together. "Even if she took him into the house herself? What if she found him? She could have tied the dog up, then gone back for Sabin. Isn't this possible?"
"Sure, it's possible," Lowell said, frowning. "But we didn't find any sign of Sabin making it to shore, not even a footprint. The only thing we noticed was where she dragged shells up from the beach on a tarp–" He stopped, his eyes meeting Charles's.
"You fools!" Charles hissed. "Something had been dragged up from the beach and you didn't check it out?"
They looked uncomfortable. "She said it was shells," Ellis muttered. "I noticed that she did have some shells on the windowsills."

"She didn't act like she had anything to hide," Lowell put in, trying to gloss things over. "I ran into her the next day while she was shopping. She stopped to talk, about the heat and things like that…"
"What did she buy? Did you look in her cart?"
"Ah, underwear and, uh, women's things. When she checked out I saw a pair of jogging shoes. I noticed them because–" Suddenly he went a sickly shade.
"Because?" Charles prompted dryly.
"Because they looked too big for her."
Charles glared at them, his eyes cold and deadly. "So. She dragged something up from the beach, something you didn't investigate. Neither of you has been inside the house. She was buying shoes that were too big for her, possibly men's shoes. If Sabin has been under our noses all this time and he's escaped due to your bungling, I personally promise you that your future won't be pleasant! Noelle!" he called.
She appeared immediately in the door. "Yes, Charles?"
"Call everyone in. We may have found Sabin."
Both Lowell and Ellis looked sick, and both fervently hoped that this time they *didn't* find Sabin.
"What if you're wrong?" Ellis asked.
"Then the woman may be frightened and upset, but nothing more. If she doesn't know anything, if she hasn't helped Sabin, then we have no reason to harm her."
But Charles smiled when he said it, his eyes cold, and Ellis couldn't believe him.

The sun had set, and twilight had brought out a loud chorus of frogs and crickets. Ebenezer Duck and his flock waddled around the yard, reaping the late afternoon harvest of insects, and Joe lay on the porch. Kell and Sullivan were now at the table, drawing diagrams and discussing plans; Rachel tried to work on the manuscript, but her mind kept wandering. Kell would be leaving soon, and dull misery throbbed inside her.
The flock of geese suddenly scattered, honking wildly, and Joe gave a single bark before he lunged off the porch. Kell and Sullivan acted as one, ducking away from the table and running soundlessly, on the balls of their feet, to the living room windows. Rachel bolted out of her office, her face pale, though she tried to be calm.

"It's probably just Honey," she said, going to the front door.
"Honey?" Sullivan asked.
"The veterinarian."
A white sedan pulled up in front, and a woman got out. Sullivan peered out the window and all the color washed out of his face. Resting his head on the wall, he swore quietly and at length. "It's Jane," he groaned.
"Hell," Kell muttered.
Rachel opened the door to dart out and catch Joe, who was planted in the middle of the yard. But before Rachel could get out the door, Jane had walked around the car and into the yard. "Nice doggie," she said cheerfully, patting Joe on the head as she passed.
Sullivan and Kell came out on the porch behind Rachel. Jane put her hands on her hips and glared at her husband. "Since you wouldn't bring me with you, I decided to follow you!"

Chapter Twelve

Rachel liked Jane Sullivan on sight. Anyone who calmly petted Joe, then faced Grant Sullivan's fury without blinking an eye, was someone Rachel would like to know. The two women introduced themselves, while Sullivan stood with his arms folded across his chest, his golden eyes shooting fire as he watched his wife from beneath lowered brows. "How did you find me?" he rasped, his voice low and almost soundless. "I made sure I didn't leave a trail."

Jane sniffed at him. "You didn't, so I did the logical thing and went where you weren't, and found you." Turning her back on him, she welcomed Kell with an enthusiastic hug. "I knew it had to be you. No one else could have dragged him away. Are you in trouble?"

"A little," Kell said, his black eyes filled with amusement.

"I thought so. I came to help."

"I'll be damned," Grant snapped.

Jane gave him a cool look. "Yes, you may be. Sneaking out and leaving me with the babies – "

"Where *are* they?"

"With your mother. She thinks I'm doing her a favor. Anyway, that's what took me so long to get here. I had to take the twins to her. Then I had to figure out what you'd do if you were trying to keep anyone from knowing where you were."

"I'm going to turn you over my knee," he said, and he looked as if the thought gave him immense satisfaction. "You're not getting out of it this time."

"You can't," she said smugly. "I'm pregnant again."

Rachel had been enjoying the spectacle of Grant Sullivan driven to frustration by his pretty, darkeyed wife, but now she felt almost sorry for him. He went pale.

"You can't be."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Kell put in, enjoying this turn of events as much as Rachel.

"The twins are just six months old," Grant croaked.

"I know that!" Jane replied, her face indignant. "I was there, remember?"

"We weren't going to have any more for a while."

"The thunderstorm," she said succinctly, and Grant closed his eyes. He was really white by now, and Rachel was moved to pity.
"Let's go inside, where it's cooler," she suggested, opening the screen door. She and Kell went inside, but no one followed them. Rachel peeked out the door; Jane was wrapped in her husband's muscular arms, and his blond head was bent down to her dark one.
Oddly, that sight added a little more to Rachel's inner pain. "They made it," she whispered.
Kell's arms slid around her waist, and he pulled her back against him. "He isn't in it now, remember? He was retired before they ever met."
Rachel wanted to ask why he couldn't retire, as well, but kept herself from voicing the question. What had been right for Grant Sullivan wasn't right for Kell Sabin; Kell was one of a kind. Instead she asked, "When do you leave?" She should have been proud that her voice was so steady, but pride didn't mean anything to her at this stage. She would have begged him on her knees if she thought it would work, but his dedication was more than lip service.
He was silent for a moment, and she knew she wouldn't like the answer, even though she was expecting it. "Tomorrow morning."
So she had one more night, unless he and Sullivan planned to spend most of it working out the details of their objective.
"We're turning in early," he said, touching her hair, and she twisted in his arms to meet his midnight eyes. His face was remote, but he wanted her; she could tell it by his touch, by something fleeting in his expression. Oh, God, how could she ever stand to watch him leave and know that she'd never see him again?
Jane and Grant came inside, and Jane's face was radiant. Her eyes widened with delight when she saw Rachel in Kell's arms, but something in their expressions kept her from saying anything. Jane was nothing if not intuitive. "Grant won't tell me what's going on," she announced, and crossed her arms stubbornly. "I'm going to follow you until I find out."
Kell's black brows lifted. "And if I do tell you?"
Jane considered that, looking from Kell to Grant, then back to Kell. "You want to negotiate, don't you? You want me to go back home."
"You *are* going back home," Grant said quietly, steel in his voice. "If Sabin wants to fill you in, that's up to him, but this new baby gives me twice the

reason to make sure you're safe on the farm, instead of risking your neck chasing after me."
There was a glint in Jane's eyes that made Rachel think Sullivan would have a fight on his hands, but Kell forestalled that by saying, "All right, I think you deserve to know what's happened, since Grant's involved in it now. Let's sit down, and I'll fill you in."
"On a 'need to know' basis," Jane guessed accurately, and Kell gave her his humorless smile.
"Yes. You know there are always details that can't be discussed, but I can tell you most of it."
They sat around the table, and Kell sketched in the main points of what had happened, the implications and why he needed Grant. When he had finished Jane looked at both the men for a long time, then slowly nodded. "You have to do it." Then she leaned forward, planted both hands on the table and bent an uncompromising look on Sabin, who met it squarely. "But let me tell you, Kell Sabin, that if anything happens to Grant, I'll come after you. I didn't go through all that trouble to get him for anything to happen to him now."
Kell didn't respond, but Rachel knew what he was thinking. If anything happened it wasn't likely that he would survive, either. She didn't know how she knew what was in his mind, but she did. Her senses were locked on Kell, and his slightest gesture or change of tone registered on her nerves with the force of an earthquake on the most sensitive seismograph.
Grant stood up, drawing Jane up to stand beside him. "It's time we got some sleep, since we're leaving so early in the morning. And you're going home," he said to his wife. "Give me your word."
Now that she knew what was involved, Jane didn't argue. "All right. I'll go home after I pick up the twins. What I want to know is when I can expect you back."
Grant glanced at Kell. "Three days?"
Kell nodded.
Rachel got to her feet. In three days it would be over, one way or the other, but for her it would end in the morning. In the meantime she had to make sleeping arrangements for the Sullivans, and she was almost grateful to have something that would occupy her time, if not her mind.
She apologized to Jane for the lack of an extra bed, but it didn't seem to bother Jane at all. "Don't worry about us," Jane soothed. "I've slept with

Grant in tents, caves and sheds, so a nice living room floor isn't any hardship to us."
With Jane's help Rachel gathered quilts and extra pillows for a pallet, taking them from the top of her closet and stacking them on Jane's arms. Jane eyed her shrewdly. "You're in love with Kell, aren't you?"
"Yes." Rachel said the one word steadily, not even thinking of denying it. It was a fact, as much a part of her as her gray eyes.
"He's a hard, unusual man, but top quality steel has to be hard to be top quality. It won't be easy. I know. Look at the man I chose."
They looked at each other, two women with a world of knowledge in their eyes. For good or ill, the men they loved were different from other men, and they would never have the security most women could expect.
"When he leaves tomorrow, it's over," Rachel said, her throat tight. "He won't be back."
"He *wants* it to be over," Jane clarified, her brown eyes unusually somber. "But don't say that he won't be back. Grant didn't want to marry me. He said it wouldn't work, that our lives were too different and I'd never fit into his world. Sound familiar?"
"Oh, yes." Her eyes and voice were bleak.
"I had to let him go, but in the end he came after me."
"Grant was already retired. Kell won't retire, and the job is the problem."
"It's a big problem, but not insurmountable. Loving someone is hard for men like Grant and Kell to accept. They've always been alone."

Yes, Kell had always been alone, and he was determined to keep it that way. Knowing and understanding his reasons didn't make living with them any easier. She left Jane and Grant to bed down in the living room, and Kell followed her into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. She stood in the middle of the room with her hands tightly clenched, her eyes shadowed as she watched him.
"We should have left tonight," he said quietly. "But I wanted one more night with you."
She wouldn't let herself cry, not tonight. No matter what happened she would wait until tomorrow, until he was gone. He turned out the light and came to her in the darkened room, his rough hands closing on her shoulders and pulling her against him. His mouth was hard, hungry, almost hurting her as he kissed her with savage need. His tongue probed at hers,

demanding a response that was slow in coming, because the pain was so great inside her. He kept on kissing her, sliding his hands over her back and hips, cradling her against the warmth of his body, until finally she began to relax and yield to him.

"Rachel," he whispered, unbuttoning her shirt to find her naked breasts and cup them in his warm palms. Slowly he circled her nipples with his thumbs and enticed them to hardness; the warmth, the tightening sense of excitement and anticipation began to intensify inside her. Her body knew him and responded, growing heavy and moist, readying her for him because she knew he wouldn't leave her unsatisfied. He slid the shirt off her shoulders, pinning her arms to her sides with the fabric while he lifted her, arching her over his arm and thrusting her breasts up to him. Deliberately he put his mouth over her nipple and sucked at her, the strong motion drawing hot tingles from her sensitive flesh. She made a faint, gasping sound of pleasure as the sensations swept from her breasts into her lower abdomen, where desire was pulling at her.

Her head swam, and she had the sudden sensation of falling, which made her clutch at his waist. It wasn't until she felt the coolness of the bed beneath her that she realized he had been lowering her to its surface. Her shirt was caught beneath her, with the sleeves trapped and twisted midway between her elbows and wrists, effectively pinning her arms while her upper torso lay bare for his marauding lips and tongue to savor. He looked down at her with a tortured, hungry expression in his eyes, then bent and buried his face between her breasts, his hands squeezing them together around his face as if he wanted to lose himself in the scent and feel of her satiny flesh.

She moaned as her body throbbed in need, and tried futilely to wrest her arms free. "Kell." Her voice was high, strained. "Let me get my arms out."

He lifted his head and appraised the situation. "Not yet," he murmured. "Just lie there and let me love you until you're ready for me."

She made a rough sound of frustration, trying to roll to one side so she could free herself, but Kell subdued her, his hard hands holding her flat on her back. "I *am* ready," she insisted before his mouth came down on hers and stifled any further protests.

When he raised his head again it was with hot satisfaction stamped on his taut features. "Not like you will be." Then he bent to her breasts again, not stopping until they were wet and gleaming from his mouth and her nipples

were red and achingly tight. Gently he bit the undercurve of her breast, using his teeth just enough to let her feel them but not enough to bring pain. "Let's get you out of these." The strain was evident in his voice, too, as he tugged at the fastening of her shorts. It came free, and the zipper rasped quietly as he slid it down. His hand went inside the opened shorts, burrowing under her panties to find the warm, moist, aching flesh he sought. "Ah," he said in quiet satisfaction as his fingers explored her and found her ready, indeed. "You liked that, didn't you?"

"Yes." All she could do was whimper the word.

"You'll like it better when I'm inside you," he promised huskily, and slid her panties and shorts down her hips and thighs, but not off. He left them just above her knees, and her legs were trapped as effectively as her arms. Slowly he ran his hand over her, from her breasts down over her flat belly, to linger at her naked loins.

She writhed under his probing fingers, her heart thundering in her chest and interfering with the rhythm of her breathing. "Don't you even *think* it," she cried, her hands clutching at the sheet beneath her. He was looking at her in a way that told her he liked holding her helpless while he teased her and enjoyed her body. He was more than a little uncivilized, his instincts swift and primeval.

He gave a low, rough laugh. "All right, love. You don't have to wait any longer. I'll give you what you want." Swiftly he stripped her, even of the shirt that bound her arms, and took off his own clothes, then settled his weight onto her. Rachel accepted him with a sigh of painful relief, her arms wrapping around him as he spread her legs and entered her. She reached her peak quickly, convulsing in his arms, and slowly he built her to pleasure again. He couldn't get enough of her that night, returning to her over and over, as if time slowed when they were locked together in love.

It was shortly before dawn when she woke up for the last time, lying on her side with her back to him, snuggled into the warm curve of his chest and thighs, just as they had slept every night since he'd regained consciousness. This was the last time he would hold her like this, and she lay very still, not wanting to wake him.

But he was already awake. His hand moved slowly over her breasts, then down to her thighs. He raised her leg, draping it over his thigh, and slid into her from behind. His hand flattened against her stomach to brace her as he began moving in and out of her. "One last time," he murmured into her hair.

Dear God, it was the last time, and he didn't think he could stand it. If he had ever been happy in his life it had been during these too short days with Rachel. This would be the last time her soft body would sheathe his hardness, the last time her breasts would fill his hands, the last time he would ever see the misty look of passion in her lake-gray eyes. She trembled beneath his hands, biting her lips to keep from crying out as the pleasure built within her. When the time came he clasped her to him, holding himself deep within her while she turned her face into the pillow to stifle the sounds she made, then he thrust deep and hard and shuddered with his own release.

The room was growing light now, the sky glowing with the pink pearl of approaching sunrise. He sat up in the bed and looked down at her, her body damp and glowing like the sky. Perhaps this last time had been a mistake, because he hadn't taken his usual precautions, but he couldn't regret it. He couldn't have tolerated any separation of their bodies.

Rachel lay exhausted on the pillows, watching him with her heart in her eyes. Her body still throbbed from his lovemaking, and her pulse was only gradually slowing. "You may never come back," she whispered. "But I'll wait here for you, anyway."

Only the slight jerking of a muscle beside his mouth revealed his reaction. He shook his head. "No, don't waste your life. Find someone else, get married and have a houseful of kids."

Somehow she managed a smile. "Don't be a fool," she told him with aching tenderness. "As if there could be anyone else after you."

They were ready to leave, and Rachel was so stiff inside that she thought she would shatter if anyone touched her. She knew there would be no goodbye kisses, no final words to burn into her memory. He would simply leave, and it would be finished. He wasn't even taking the pistol with him, which would give him an excuse to contact her again to return it. The pistol was registered to her; he didn't want anything that could be traced back to her in case things didn't go as planned.

Sullivan had hidden his rental car somewhere down the road; Jane was going to drive them to it, then return to their farm. Rachel would be left alone in a house that echoed with emptiness, and she was already trying to think of ways to fill the time. She would work in the garden, mow the lawn, wash the car, maybe even go swimming. Later she would go out to eat, see

a movie, anything to postpone coming back. Perhaps by then she would be so tired she would be able to sleep, though she didn't hold out much hope for that. Still, she'd get by, because she had no choice.
"I'll let you know," Jane whispered, hugging Rachel.
Rachel's eyes burned. "Thank you."
Grant opened the door and walked out onto the porch, which brought Joe to his feet, and snarls filled the air. Calmly Grant surveyed the dog. "Well, hell," he said mildly.
Jane snorted. "Are you afraid of that dog? He's as sweet as can be."
Kell followed them onto the porch. "Joe, sit," he commanded.
There was the peculiar, high-pitched CRACK! of a rifle being fired and the wood exploded on the post not two inches from Kell's head. Kell turned and dove for the open door just as Rachel leaped for him, and he knocked her sprawling. Almost simultaneously Grant literally threw Jane through the door as another shot exploded, then he covered her with his body.
"Are you all right?" Kell asked through clenched teeth, anxiously looking Rachel over even as he lashed out with one foot and kicked the door shut.
She'd banged her head on the floor, but it wasn't anything serious. Her face white, she clutched at him. "Yes, I'm f-f-fine," she stammered.
He rolled to his feet, crouching to stay below the windows. "You and Jane lie down in the hall," he ordered tersely, getting the pistol from the bedroom where he'd left it.
Grant had helped Jane to a sitting position, brushing her hair out of her face and giving her a swift kiss before he pushed her toward Rachel. "Go on, move," he snapped, drawing his own pistol from his belt.
There was another shot, and the window closest to Grant shattered, raining shards of glass all over him. He cursed luridly.
Rachel stared at them, trying to gather her thoughts. They were armed only with pistols, while whoever was shooting at them had a rifle, stacking the deck against Kell and Grant. A rifle had the advantage of accuracy over a greater distance, allowing their assailant to shoot from outside the range of the pistols. Her .22 rifle didn't have much power, but it did have a greater range and accuracy than the pistols, and she crawled into the bedroom to get it, as well as what ammunition she had. Thank God Kell had told her to buy those shells!
"Here," she said, crawling back into the living room and sliding the rifle toward Kell. He glanced around, his fist closing over the weapon. Grant

was moving through the house, checking to make certain no one was coming up on them from behind.
"Thanks," Kell said briefly. "Get back in the hall, honey."
Jane was crouched there, staring at her husband with an odd fury in her chocolate eyes. "They shot at you," she growled.
"Yep," he confirmed.
She was fuming like a volcano about to blow, muttering to herself as she dragged the nylon overnighter she'd brought to her, unzipping it and throwing clothing and makeup to one side. "I'm not putting up with this," she said furiously. "Damn it, they shot at him!" She produced a pistol and shoved it into Rachel's hand, then dug back into the bag. She dragged a small case out of it, about the size of a violin case, and threw it at Grant. "Here! I don't know how to put the thing together!"
He opened the case and glared at Jane even as he began snapping the rifle together with swift, practiced movements. "Where the hell did you get this?"
"Never mind!" she barked, tossing a clip of ammunition to him. He fielded it one-handed and snapped it into place. Kell glanced over his shoulder. "Got any C-4 or grenades in there?"
"No," Jane said regretfully. "I didn't have time to get everything I wanted."
Rachel crawled to the side window, cautiously lifting her head to peek out.
Kell swore. "Get down," he snapped. "Stay out of this. Get back in the hall, where it's safer."
She was pale, but calm. "There are only two of you, and four sides to the house. You need us."
Jane grabbed Grant's discarded pistol. "She's right. You need us."
Kell's face was set like granite. This was exactly what he'd wanted most to avoid, one of his worst fears coming true. Rachel's life was being threatened because of him. Damn! Why hadn't he left last night, as he should have? He'd let sexual desire override his common sense, and now she was in danger.
"Sabin!" The voice came from the pine thicket.
He didn't answer, but his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the thicket, trying to find the speaker. He wasn't going to answer and reveal his position; let them find out the hard way.
"Come on, Sabin, don't make it any harder than it has to be!" the voice continued. "If you surrender, I give you my word none of the others will be

harmed!"
"Who is that joker?" Grant grunted.
"Charles Dubois, alias Charles Lloyd, alias Kurt Schmidt, alias several other names," Kell murmured.
The names meant nothing to Rachel, but Sullivan's brows lifted. "So he finally decided to come after you himself." He looked around. "We're not in a good position. He's got men all around the house. There aren't that many of them, but we're hemmed in. I checked the phone – it's dead."
Kell didn't have to be told that their situation wasn't good. If Dubois used the rockets on the house, as he had on the boat, they were all as good as dead. But then again, he was trying to take Kell alive. Alive, he was worth a lot of money to a lot of people who would pay anything to get their hands on him.
He tried to think, but the cold fact was that there was no way out of the house. Even if they waited until nightfall and tried to sneak out, there was little available cover to use except for the bushes, which were right against the house. Away from the house, it was open for a good distance in all directions. That meant it would be difficult for anyone to catch them unawares, but it also meant the same thing in reverse. Even if he walked out and surrendered, it wouldn't save the others. There was no way Dubois would let any witnesses live. He knew it, and Sullivan knew it; he could only hope Rachel and Jane didn't realize quite how hopeless the situation really was.
A glance at Rachel dispelled that idea. She knew, all right. That had been the problem from the first; she was too aware, with no veil of ignorance to shield her. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her head on his shoulder, assure her that it would be all right, but with those clear, level gray eyes on him, he couldn't lie to her, even to give her momentary comfort. He never wanted any lies between them.
There was a shot from the bedroom, and all the color washed out of Grant's face, but before he could move Jane called him. "Grant! Is the kneecap where I'm supposed to shoot these people?"
If anything, he went even whiter, swearing long and low.
"Well, it doesn't matter," she added philosophically. "I missed, anyway. But I hit his gun, if that counts."
"Sabin!" the man yelled again. "You are testing my patience! This cannot go on much longer. It would be such a pity if the woman was harmed."

"Woman," instead of "women." Then Kell realized that Rachel hadn't gone out on the porch; they had seen Jane and thought she was Rachel. They were both slim and had dark hair, though Jane was taller and her hair was a little longer, but at a distance no one would have noticed.
It didn't give him much of an advantage, but it might help that Dubois would be underestimating the number of armed people.
"Sabin!"
"I'm thinking!" Kell yelled, keeping his head away from the window.
"Time is a luxury you can't afford, my friend. You know you can't win. Why not make it easy on yourself? The woman will go free, I promise you!"
Dubois's promises weren't worth the air it took to make them, and Kell knew it. Time. Somehow he had to buy a little time. He didn't know what he was going to do, but every extra second gave chance an opportunity to step in. Timing was always critical, and if he could stall Dubois it might throw the man off in some way.
"What about my other friend?" he yelled.
"Of course," Dubois lied smoothly. "I have no quarrel with him."
Grant's lips twisted back in a feral grin. "Sure. There's no way he didn't recognize me."
What a coup it would be for Dubois to capture both Sabin and the Tiger, the big tawny warrior with the wild, golden eyes who had ranged the jungle with Sabin and later been his prime agent. Each was legendary in his own right; together they had been incredible, so attuned that they acted as one man. Sullivan had had a run-in with some of Dubois's men a few years back; no, Dubois wouldn't have forgotten that, considering how Sullivan had made a fool of him.
A movement in the trees suddenly caught Kell's attention, and his black eyes narrowed. "See if you can get him to say something else," he told Grant, sliding the barrel of the .22 just a fraction of an inch outside the broken window and keeping his eyes fixed on the spot in the trees.
"Come on, Dubois," Grant yelled. "Don't play games. I know you recognized me."
Kell's finger tightened slightly on the trigger as silence reigned; was Dubois really surprised to find out they knew who he was? It was true that he had always operated from the background rather than risk his own safety, but Kell had been after him for years now, ever since Dubois had begun selling his services as a terrorist.

"So it *is* you, Tiger."
There it was again, that slight movement. Kell sighted down the barrel and gently squeezed the trigger. The report of the rifle echoed in the small house, drowning out any cry of pain, but Kell knew he hadn't missed. He also didn't know if he'd hit Dubois or someone else.
A hail of bullets tore into the house, shattering all the windows and gouging long splinters out of the walls and window frames, but the steel reinforced doors held. "Guess he didn't like that," Kell muttered.
Grant had ducked to the floor, and now his head came up. "You know, I never liked that nickname worth a damn," he drawled, then swung his rifle up. It was an automatic, and he fired it in the three-shot bursts of a well-trained soldier, making good use of his firepower without wasting his ammunition. Pistol shots came from both the bedroom and Rachel's office; then all hell broke loose again. They were tearing the house up, and cold fear filled him, because Rachel was caught in this barrage.
"Rachel!" he yelled. "Are you all right?"
"I'm okay," she answered, and her calm voice made him ache.
"Jane!" Grant yelled. No answer. "Jane," he yelled again, his face gray as he started for the bedroom.
"I'm busy!"
Grant looked as if he might explode, and despite everything Kell found himself grinning. Better Grant than him. Still, Jane's life was in jeopardy, too, and the thought of anything happening to her was almost as hard to bear as the thought of anyone hurting Rachel.
There was another lull, and Grant pulled out his empty clip and slapped another one into place.
"Sabin, my patience is at an end," Dubois called, and Kell grimaced. Damn, it hadn't been Dubois he'd hit.
"You haven't made the right offer yet," he yelled in return. Anything to buy time.
Jane crawled out of the bedroom, her hair all mussed and her eyes big. "I think the cavalry is coming," she said.
The two men ignored her, but Rachel scrambled to her side. "What?" she asked.
"Men on horseback," Jane said, waving her hand toward the bedroom. "I saw them, coming from that way."

Rachel felt like crying or laughing, but she couldn't make up her mind which. "It's Rafferty," she said, and now she had their attention. "My neighbor. He must have heard the shots."
Grant crouched low and ran through the kitchen to the back, where he could see. "How many?" Kell asked.
"Twenty or so," Grant said. "Damn, they're riding right into automatic fire. Start shooting and draw Dubois's fire!"
They did. Rachel crept up to a window, held the heavy pistol out it and fired until it was empty, then reloaded with shaking hands before emptying it again. Kell was making judicious use of the .22, and Jane was revealing remarkable skill herself. Had they given Rafferty enough time to get behind Dubois and his men? If they kept shooting, they might hit their rescuers.
"Hold it," Kell ordered. They lay flat on the floor with their heads covered while the walls were shredded by bullets. The light fixture crashed to the floor, sending glass flying. Grant cursed, and they looked over to see blood streaming down his face from a cut on his cheek. Jane gave a thin, high cry and made a move toward him, despite the continuing gunfire; Kell grabbed her and wrestled her to the floor.
"I'm all right," Grant yelled. "It's just a little cut."
"Stay close to the floor," Kell told Jane, then let her go, knowing that she'd fight him like a wildcat if he tried to keep her from Grant.
Then, suddenly, it was quiet except for a few scattered shots, and they were abruptly halted, too. Rachel lay on the floor, hardly daring to breathe, the acrid smell of burned gunpowder filling her nostrils and even her mouth. Kell put his hand on her arm, his black eyes drifting over her pale features as if he would burn her into his memory.
"Hey!" a deep voice roared. "Rachel, are you in there?"
Her lips trembled, and tears suddenly blurred her eyes. "It's Rafferty," she whispered, then lifted her head to call, "John! Is it all right?"
"Depends," the answer came. "These bastards here don't think it's all right."
Kell slowly climbed to his feet and pulled Rachel to hers. "He sounds like my kind of man."
Rachel felt like the survivor of a shipwreck as she walked out on the porch with Kell supporting her. Grant and Jane followed, with Jane dabbing at the cut on Grant's cheek, crying a little as she fussed at him. Without the arm around her waist, Rachel was sure she wouldn't have been able to stand.

She gave a ghostly cry when she saw three of the geese lying in the yard, blood on the white of their feathers, but there was no way she could make a sound when she saw Joe lying on his side at the edge of the porch. Kell turned her into his arms, pressing her face into his shoulder.

Big John Rafferty, armed with a hunting rifle and surrounded by his men, who were likewise armed, herded about fifteen men before him. Rafferty's eyes were fierce and narrow under his dark brows as he prodded a slim, gray-haired man before him. "We heard the shooting and came to see what was going on," John drawled. "I don't like riffraff shooting at my neighbor."

Charles Dubois was white with rage, his eyes fastened on Sabin. Beside him was Noelle, her beautiful eyes full of boredom.

"It isn't over, Sabin," Dubois hissed, and Kell gently put Rachel aside, handing her over to Grant. Kell had business to attend to, and explaining it to the law, then keeping it quiet would take some doing.

"It's over as far as you're concerned," he said briefly.

Beside Charles, Noelle smiled her slow, sleepy smile, then suddenly wrenched free; because she was a woman, the cowhand behind her hadn't been holding her securely. And, somehow, she had a gun in her hand, a small, ugly revolver.

Rachel saw it, and everything moved in slow motion. With a cry she tore free of Grant's arm, hurling herself toward Kell. A man grabbed for Noelle's arm, and the pistol exploded just as Rachel hit Kell, knocking him away. She cried out again at the burning pain in her side; then there was only blackness filling the world.

Chapter Thirteen

Sabin leaned against the wall in the hospital waiting room, his nostrils filled with the sharp smell of antiseptic and his dark face cold and remote, even though there was screaming hell in his eyes. Behind him were Jane and Grant, waiting with him. Jane was huddled over, her expressive face pale and full of misery; Grant prowled the confines of the room like some great cat.

No matter how he tried, Kell couldn't get the picture of Rachel, lying on the ground awash in her own blood, out of his mind. She had looked so small and fragile, her eyes closed and her face paper white, crumpled like a child's discarded doll, one slender hand lying palm up. He'd fallen to his knees beside her, oblivious to the scuffle and shots going on behind him, and a low, rough sound had exploded from his chest. Her name had echoed in his mind, but he hadn't been able to voice it.

Then, incredibly, her eyes had opened. She was dazed and in pain, but those clear, clear eyes had fastened on him as if he were her lifeline, and her trembling lips had fashioned his name. It wasn't until then that he'd realized she was alive. Seeing her take the bullet meant for him had been a nightmare come true, and he still hadn't recovered. He didn't expect ever to recover.

Yet he had managed to rip her clothing away from the ugly wound in her side and apply rough first aid, with Jane kneeling beside him and helping. Grant had taken over with the others, doing what was necessary, making certain that no hint of what had happened was leaked.

Dubois was dead, Noelle critically wounded and not expected to survive. Ironically, it had been Tod Ellis who had shot them. During the ensuing scuffle after Noelle had shot Rachel, Ellis had pulled free and grabbed a rifle. His motives were murky. Perhaps he had wanted to get rid of Dubois so no one would know the extent to which Ellis had helped him; perhaps, in the end, he hadn't been able to stomach what he'd done. Or perhaps it had been because of Rachel. Sabin could identify with that last reason; he could gladly have killed Dubois and that treacherous bitch with his bare hands for what they'd done to Rachel.

Honey Mayfield had been fetched to take care of Joe, and she thought he would make it. Rachel would need something, someone to hold on to, even

if it was just a dog. Her house had been so badly damaged that it would take weeks to restore it; her pets had been shot, her life turned upside down, she herself wounded, and the man she loved was the cause of it all. Cold, piercing agony filled his chest. He'd nearly cost her her life, when he would have died himself rather than have her suffer this. He'd known the danger, yet he'd stayed, unable to tear himself away from her. This once he'd let his heart overrule his mind, and it had almost killed her. Never again. God in heaven, never again.

He would stay only until she was out of surgery and he knew she would be all right; there was no way he could leave until he knew, until he'd seen her again and touched her. But then he and Grant would have to leave. The situation was critical; he had to get to Washington before the news of this leaked back and the traitor, or traitors, could cover their tracks.

"Jane," he said quietly, not turning around. "Will you stay?"

"Of course," she responded without hesitation. "You know you didn't have to ask."

It had been all he could do to get the local authorities to cooperate; if it hadn't been for one of the deputies, a man named Phelps, who knew Rachel, the whole thing would have blown sky-high. But Phelps had known what to do, and he'd done some long, hard talking to get the lid put on this. Rafferty had guaranteed the silence of his men, and Kell doubted that there was a one of them who would dare cross Rafferty.

The surgeon entered the waiting room, his lined face tired. "Mr. Jones?" Kell had identified himself as Rachel's husband and signed the release forms for her to be treated to speed things up. Legality be damned. Every minute had meant the loss of more blood for her. He straightened away from the wall, his entire body taut. "Yes?"

"Your wife is doing fine. She's in recovery now. The bullet nicked her right kidney. She lost a lot of blood, but we got some back in her, and her condition is stabilizing. I had doubts about saving the kidney, but there was less damage than I'd anticipated. Barring complications, I don't see any reason she won't be home in about a week."

The relief was so great that all he could do was croak, "When can I see her?"

"Probably in about an hour. I'm going to keep her in ICU overnight, but it's just precautionary. I don't think that kidney's going to start bleeding again,

but if it does, I want her there. I'll have a nurse come for you when they get her moved."
Kell nodded and shook the doctor's hand; then he stood rigidly, unable to relax even now. Jane came to stand beside him, slipping her hand into his bigger one and squeezing it comfortingly. "Don't tear yourself apart over this."
"It was my fault."
"Really? When were you put in charge of the world? I must have missed the headlines."
He sighed wearily. "Not now."
"Why not now? If you don't snap out of this you're not going to be in any shape to do what needs doing."
She was right, of course. Jane might not get where she was going by the same route the rest of the world would take, but in the end she was usually right on the money.
When at last they let him see Rachel, he was braced for the shock; he'd seen too many wounded people not to know that the paraphernalia of hospitals often made it seem worse. He knew about the machines that would be hooked up to her, monitoring her vital signs, and he knew there would be tubes running into her body. But nothing could have prepared him for the blow of walking into the room – and then she opened her eyes and looked at him.
Incredibly, a weak smile spread over her bloodless lips, and she tried to hold out her hand to him, but her arm was anchored to the bed with tape, while an IV needle fed a clear liquid into her vein. For a moment Kell was frozen in place, and his eyes closed on the burning sensation that filled them. It was almost more than he could do to walk around the bed and lift her other hand to his cheek.
"It… isn't that bad," she managed, her voice almost soundless. "I heard… the doctor… say so."
God, *she* was trying to reassure *him!* He choked, rubbing her hand against his temple. He'd have given his own life to have spared her this, and he was the cause of it. "I love you," he muttered hoarsely.
"I know," she whispered, and went to sleep. Sabin hung over her bed for several more minutes, memorizing every line of her face for the last time. Then he straightened, and his face settled into its usual hard, blank mask.

Walking briskly from the room and down the hall to where Grant and Jane waited, he said tersely, "Let's go."

Rachel walked the beach as she did every afternoon, her eyes on the sand as she automatically looked for shells. Joe roamed in front of her, periodically coming back as if to check on her, then going off on his own pursuits again. For weeks after she'd collected him from Honey, Joe had been almost paranoid about letting her out of his sight, but that stage had long passed. For Joe, it was as if the events of the summer had never happened.

It was early in December, and she wore a light jacket to protect her from the cool wind. The fall quarter at the college in Gainesville was finished except for the final exams, but she had enough to keep her busy. She'd worked like a Trojan in the months since July, finishing her manuscript well ahead of schedule and immediately diving into another one. There had been the class to teach, and the increasing number of tourists after the slow days of broiling summer heat had kept the two souvenir shops doing a booming business, which meant she had to drive down at least twice a week, sometimes three times.

The scar on her right side was the only reminder of what had happened in July. That, and her memories. The house had been repaired, new Sheetrock hung and painted because the damage had been too great to simply plaster over. The windows had new frames, and she had a new light fixture in the living room, as well as new furniture and new carpeting, because she'd given up hope of ever getting the glass out of the old. The house looked normal, not as if anything had ever happened that had taken weeks to repair. Her recovery had been uneventful, and relatively short.

Within a month she had been going about her normal activities, trying to salvage some of the vegetables in the garden, which had become overgrown from neglect. Still, the pain from her wound had given her some idea of what Kell had gone through exercising his leg and shoulder to regain his mobility, and it staggered her.

She hadn't heard from him, not a word. Jane had stayed with her until she was released from the hospital, and had relayed the information that things had gone well in Washington. Rachel didn't know if Jane knew more but wasn't saying, or if that was all she'd been told. Probably the latter. Then Jane had left, too, to collect the twins and rejoin Grant at the farm. By now she would be round with pregnancy. For a time Rachel had thought she

might be pregnant, too, from that last time Kell had taken her, but it had turned out to be a false alarm. Her system had simply gone awry from shock.

She didn't even have that. She had nothing but her memories, and they never left her alone.

She had survived, but it was only that: survival. She had gotten through each day without finding any joy in it, though she hadn't expected joy. At best, she would eventually find peace. Maybe.

It was as if part of her had been torn away. Losing B.B. had been terrible, but this was worse. She had been young then, and perhaps she hadn't been as capable of loving as deeply as she was now. Grief had matured her, had given her the depth of feeling with which she loved Kell. There wasn't a minute of the day that she didn't miss him, that she didn't live with pain because he wasn't there. She couldn't even find out about him from Jane; no information was available on Kell Sabin, ever. He had returned to his gray world of shadows and been swallowed up by them, as if he'd never been. Something could happen to him and she would never know.

That was the worst, the not knowing. He was there, but unreachable. Sometimes she wondered if she'd dreamed it, that he'd come to her in the hospital and bent over her with his heart in his eyes as she'd never seen him before and whispered that he loved her. When she had awoken again she had expected to see him, because how could a man look like that and then walk away? But he had done exactly that. He'd been gone.

Sometimes she almost hated him. Oh, she knew all his reasons, but when she thought about it, they just didn't seem good enough. What gave him the right to make decisions for her? He was so damn arrogant, so certain that he knew best, that she could have shaken him until his teeth rattled.

The fact was that she had recovered from her wound, but she wasn't recovering from losing Kell. It ate at her day and night, taking away her joy in living and extinguishing the light in her eyes.

She wasn't pining away – she was too proud to let herself do that – but she was merely existing in limbo, without plans or anticipation. Walking the beach, staring out at the incoming waves, Rachel faced the fact that she had to do something. She had two options: she could try to reach Kell, or she could do nothing. To simply give up, to do nothing, went against her grain. He had had time to change his mind and come back, if he'd been going to,

so she had to accept that he wasn't going to do it… not without incentive. If he wouldn't come to her, she'd go to him.
Just making that decision made her feel better than she had in months, more alive. She called to Joe, then turned and walked briskly up the beach toward her house.
She had no idea how to reach him, but she had to start somewhere, so she called telephone information to get the number of the agency in Virginia. That was easy enough, though she doubted it would be that simple to get put through to Kell. She called, but the operator who answered the phone denied that anyone by that name worked there. There was no listing for him. Rachel insisted on leaving a message, anyway. If he just knew she had called, perhaps he'd call back. Maybe curiosity wouldn't let him ignore the message.
But days went by and he didn't call, so Rachel tried again and received the same answer. There was no record of a Kell Sabin. She began contacting all the people she had done business with years ago when she was a reporter, asking for advice on how to get through to someone protected by the secrecy of the intelligence network. She sent messages to him through five different people, but had no way of knowing if any of them actually reached him. She continued to call, hoping that eventually the operator would get so frustrated that she'd hand the message on to someone.
For a month she tried. Christmas came and went, as well as the New Year celebrations, but the focus of her life was on somehow contacting Kell. It took a month for her to admit that either there was no way of getting a message to him, or he'd gotten them and still hadn't called.
To give up again, after trying so hard, hurt almost more than she could bear. For a while she'd had hope; now she had nothing.
She hadn't let herself cry much; it had seemed pointless, and she had really tried to pick herself up and keep going. But that night Rachel cried as she hadn't cried in months, lying alone in the bed she'd shared with him, aching with loneliness. She had offered him everything she had and was, and he'd walked away. The long night hours crawled by, and she lay there with her eyes wide and burning, staring at the darkness.
When the phone rang the next morning she still hadn't slept, and her voice was dull when she answered.
"Rachel?" Jane asked hesitantly. "Is that you?"
With an effort Rachel roused herself. "Yes. Hello, Jane, how are you?"

"Round," Jane said, summing it up in one word. "Do you feel like coming up for a visit? I warn you, I have ulterior motives. You can chase the boys while I sit with my feet up."
Rachel didn't know how she could bear to see Jane and Grant so happy together, surrounded by their children, but it would have been small of her to refuse. "Yes, of course," she forced herself to reply.
Jane was silent, and too late Rachel remembered that nothing got by Jane. And being Jane, she went right to the heart of the matter. "It's Kell, isn't it?"
Rachel's hand tightened on the receiver, and she closed her eyes at the pain of just hearing his name spoken. So many people had denied his existence that it stunned her for Jane to bring up the subject. She tried to speak, but her voice broke; then suddenly she was weeping again. "I've tried to call him," she said brokenly. "I can't get through. No one will even admit that they know him. Even if they're giving him my messages, he hasn't called."
"I thought he'd give in before now," Jane mused.
By that time Rachel had gotten herself under control again, and she apologized to Jane for crying all over her. She bit her lip, promising herself that it wouldn't happen again. She had to accept his loss and stop mourning.
"Look maybe I can do something," Jane said. "I'll have to work on Grant. Talk to you later."
Rachel hung up the phone, but she didn't let herself dwell on what Jane had said. She couldn't. If she got her hopes up again only to have them dashed, it would destroy her.

Jane went in search of Grant, and found him in the barn, working on the tractor. It was cold, but despite the chill he was working in only his shirt sleeves, and they were rolled up to his elbows. Two chubby little boys with white-blond hair and amber eyes, snugly bundled against the chill, played at his feet. Grant had started taking them out with him, now that she was so big with pregnancy that it was hard for her to chase after two rambunctious toddlers.
When he saw her he straightened, a wrench in his hand. Swiftly his gaze went over her, and despite her bulk a certain gleam entered his eyes.
"How do I get in touch with Kell?" she asked, getting right to the point.
Grant looked wary. "Why do you want to get in touch with Kell?"
"For Rachel."

Consideringly, Grant eyed his wife. Kell had had his private phone number changed soon after he'd returned home, and Grant had made certain Jane hadn't discovered it since then. It was too dangerous for her to know things like that; she had a positive genius for attracting trouble.
"What about Rachel?"
"I just talked to her. She was crying, and you know Rachel never cries."
Grant looked at her in silence, thinking. Not many women would have done what Rachel had. She and Jane weren't ordinary women, and though they went about things differently, it was the basic truth that they were both strong women. Then he looked down at the little boys playing happily in the hay, crawling over his feet. Slowly a grin cracked his hard face. Kell was a good man; he deserved some of this happiness.
"All right," he said, putting the wrench aside and leaning down to scoop the twins into his arms. "Let's go into the house. I'll put the call through. There's no way in hell I'm letting you get his number."
Jane stuck her tongue out at him, but followed him to the house with a big grin on her face.
Grant didn't take any chances; he made her wait in the next room while he made the call. When he heard the line ringing he called her, and she raced in to grab the receiver from his hand. It took three more rings before the phone was picked up on the other end and a deep voice said, "Sabin."
"Kell," she said cheerfully. "This is Jane."
There was dead silence for a moment, and she stepped into the breach. "It's about Rachel."
"Rachel?" His voice was guarded.
"Rachel Jones," Jane said, rubbing it in. "Don't you remember her? She's the woman in Florida–"
"Damn it, you know I remember. Is something wrong?"
"You need to go see her."
He sighed. "Look, Jane, I know you mean well, but there's no point in talking about it. I did what I had to do."
"You need to go see her," Jane repeated.
Something in her voice got through to him, and she heard the sudden sharpness that edged into his tone. "Why? Is something wrong?"
"She's been trying to get in touch with you," Jane said evasively.
"I know. I got the messages."
"Then why haven't you called her?"

"I have my reasons."
He was the most stubborn, noncommittal man she'd ever met, except for Grant Sullivan; they were two of a kind. Still, even stone could be worn away by dripping water, so she didn't give up. "You should have called her."
"It wouldn't do any good," he said sharply.
"If you say so," Jane returned just as sharply. "But at least Grant married me when he found out I was pregnant!" Then she slammed the phone down with a satisfying bang, and a pleased smile spread over her face.

Kell paced his office, running his hand through his black hair. Rachel was pregnant, carrying his baby. He counted the months; she would be six months along, so why had she waited so long before trying to contact him? Had something gone wrong? Was she sick? In danger of losing the child? Was something wrong with the baby?
The worry ate at him; it was even worse than what he'd gone through every day since he'd left her in the hospital. The want and need hadn't lessened; if anything, they had grown stronger. But every time the temptation to call her began undermining his common sense, his memory would dredge up the picture of her lying on the yard with her blood soaking her clothing, and he knew he couldn't live if his very presence put her in that sort of danger again. He loved her more than he'd known a human being could love; he'd never loved before, but when he'd fallen, he'd gone over hard. It pervaded his bone and tissue; he was never allowed to forget even for a moment. When he slept it was with the memory of holding her in his arms, but more often he lay awake, his body hard and aching for her softness to surround him.
He couldn't sleep; his appetite had suffered; his temper was shot to hell. He couldn't even have sex with other women, because the simple fact was that other women didn't even tempt him enough to arouse him. When he closed his eyes at night he saw Rachel, with her straight dark hair and clear, lake-gray eyes, and he tasted her on his tongue. He remembered her directness, her honesty, and the games played by women who tried to attract him did nothing other than turn him off.
She was going to have his baby.
The messages he'd been getting had been driving him crazy, and a dozen times he'd reached for the telephone. The messages had all been the same, short and simple. *"Call me. Rachel."* God, how he'd wanted to, just to hear

her voice again, but now those messages took on more meaning. Had she just wanted to let him know that he was going to be a father, or was it more urgent than that? *Was something wrong?*

He reached for the telephone and actually dialed the number, but slammed the receiver down before her phone could begin ringing. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He wanted to see her, to make certain that everything was all right. He wanted to see her, just once, heavy and rounded with his child, even if he was never given anything else in this life.

It was raining the next day when he drove down the narrow private road that led toward the beach and Rachel's house. The sky was low and gray, sullenly pouring rain as if it would never stop. The temperature was in the forties, but that seemed almost warm after the twenties he had left behind in Virginia, and the weather report on the radio had promised clear skies and a warming trend for the next day.

He had arranged for a flight to Jacksonville, then caught a commuter plane to Gainesville, where he rented a car. It was the first time he'd ever walked out of the office like that, but after what had happened last summer, no one questioned him. It wouldn't have done much good if they had; once Sabin decided to move, he moved.

He stopped the car in front of the house and got out, ducking against the rain. Joe was braced in front of the steps, snarling, and it was so much like before that a tight smile tugged at Rell's mouth. "Joe, heel," he said. The dog's ears perked forward at that voice and the command, and with a small bark he bounded toward Kell, his tail actually wagging.

"That's quite a greeting," Kell murmured, leaning down to rub the dog's head. "I just hope Rachel is as glad to see me." After he'd ignored all of her messages she might well slam the door in his face. Despite the chill he felt himself starting to sweat, and his heart was slamming against his ribs. He was so close to her; she was just on the other side of that door, and he was shaking with anticipation, his loins hardening. Damn, that was just what he needed.

He was getting soaked, so he sprinted across the yard and leaped onto the porch with one bound, disdaining the steps. He knocked on the frame of the screen door, then impatiently did it again, harder.

"Just a minute."

He closed his eyes at her voice, then heard her footsteps approaching the door, and opened them again, not wanting to miss even a second of looking

at her. She opened the door, and they faced each other silently through the screen. Her lips moved, but no sound emerged. He tried to see her through the screen, but there were no lights on in the living room, and the dim, gray day didn't help much. All he could really see was the pale oval of her face.
"May I come in?" he finally asked quietly.
Without a word she pushed the screen door open and moved back for him to enter. He stepped inside, closed the wooden door behind him and reached to flip the light switch, flooding the room with light. She stood before him, small and fragile and very slim. She was wearing tight jeans and a baggy black sweatshirt; her hair was longer and pulled back from her face on each side with two big tortoiseshell clips. She was pale, her face strained.
"You're not pregnant," he said in a tight voice. Had she lost the baby?
She swallowed, then shook her head. "No. I'd hoped I would be, but it didn't happen."
Her voice, so low and well remembered, made him shudder inside with pleasure, but her words brought him up short. "You haven't been pregnant?"
Now she looked confused. "No."
His fists knotted. He didn't know which was worse, the realization that Jane had lied to him, or disappointment that Rachel wasn't pregnant, after all.
"Jane told me you were pregnant," he ground out, then abruptly remembered her exact words, and a bark of laughter burst out even through his anger. "Hell, no, she didn't. What she said was 'At least Grant married me when he found out I was pregnant!'" he told her, mimicking Jane. "Then she hung up on me. She's so slick that I didn't catch it until now."
Rachel had been watching him, not even blinking as she drank in his appearance. He was thinner, harder, that black fire of his even more intense.
"You came because you thought I was pregnant?"
"Yes."
"Why bother now?" she asked, and bit her lip to stop it from trembling.
Well, he'd asked for that. He looked at her again. She had lost weight, and her eyes were listless. It startled him, hit him hard. She didn't look like a happy woman, and all he'd ever wanted was for her to be safe and happy.
"How are you?" he asked, concern deepening his voice to a rumble.
She shrugged. "Well enough, I suppose."
"Does your side bother you?"
"No, not at all." She turned away, going toward the kitchen. "Would you like a cup of hot chocolate? I was just going to make some."

He took off his coat and tossed it over a chair before following her. It gave him an overpowering sense of deja vu to lean against the cabinets and watch her fiddle with pots and measuring cups. Abruptly she stopped and bent her head down to rest it against the refrigerator door.
"It's killing me without you," she said in a muffled voice. "I try, but I just don't care anymore. One day with you is worth more to me than a lifetime without you."
His fists clenched again. "Do you think it's easy for me?" His voice rasped the air like a rusty file. "Don't you remember what happened?"
"I know what can happen!" she screamed, whirling on him. "But I'm an adult, Kell Sabin! The risk is mine to take if I think it's worth it! I accept that every time I get in my car and drive to town. A lot more people are killed on the highways every year than by terrorists or assassins. Why *don't* you forbid me to drive, if you really want to protect me?"
His eyes burned on her, but he didn't say anything, and his remote silence goaded her. "I can live with the risks you take in your job," she continued. "I don't like it, but that's your decision to make. If you can't give me the same right, then why are you here?"
Still he stared at her, frowning. The hunger for her was growing in him, like an obsession. He wanted her, more than he wanted his next breath. He could either live with her, or live without her, and the past six months had shown him just how poor the quality of life was without her. The flat, unvarnished truth was that life wasn't worth living if he couldn't have her. Once he accepted that, his thoughts moved ahead. He'd have to take steps to make *certain* she was safe; he'd have to make changes and adjust, something he hadn't done before. It was odd how simple it looked all of a sudden, just because he admitted to himself that he had to have her. God bless Jane for getting his attention and giving him an excuse for coming down; she had known that once he saw Rachel again he wouldn't be able to leave.
He faced Rachel across the kitchen. "Can you really take it, the risks I take and the times I'll be gone when you won't know where I am or when to expect me?"
"I already have," she said, lifting her chin. "What I need to know is that you'll come back to me when you can."
Still he watched her, his eyes narrow and piercing. "Then we might as well get married, because God knows I've been a wreck without you."
She looked stunned; then she blinked. "Is that a proposal?"

"No. It was basically an order."
Slowly tears filled her gray eyes, making them glitter like diamonds, and a smile began to brighten her face. "All right," she said simply.
He did what he'd been hungering to do; he crossed the floor to her and took her in his arms, his mouth fastening hungrily on hers while his hands rediscovered the sleek curves of her body. Without another word he lifted her and carried her into the bedroom, tossing her across the bed just as he'd done the first time he'd made love to her. Swiftly he pulled her jeans down and off, then shoved the sweatshirt up to reveal her pretty round breasts. "I can't take it slow," he whispered, jerking his pants open.
She didn't need for him to take it slow. She needed *him,* and she held her arms out to him. He spread her thighs and mounted her, controlling himself just long enough to slow his entry so he wouldn't hurt her, and with a low cry of pleasure Rachel took him into her body.

They lay in bed the rest of the day, making love and talking, but mostly just holding each other and reveling in the other's nearness. "What happened when you got back to Washington?" she asked sometime during the afternoon.
He lay on his back with one muscular arm thrown above his head, drowsy after making love, but his eyes opened at her question. "I can't tell you too much," he warned. "I won't ever be able to talk a lot about my work."
"I know."
"Tod Ellis talked, and that helped. Grant and I set a trap, and one of my superiors walked into it. That's about all I can tell you."
"Were there others in your department?"
"Two others."
"They almost had you," she said, shuddering at the thought.
"They would have had me, if it hadn't been for you." He turned his head on the pillow and looked at her; the glow was back in her eyes, the glow that only he could produce. He never wanted to see that light go out. He reached out to touch her cheek. "I was disappointed that you weren't pregnant," he said softly.
She laughed. "I may be after today."
"Just in case," he murmured, rolling onto her.
She caught her breath. "Yes, by all means, just in case."

Epilogue

They sat on the porch of the big farmhouse where Grant and Jane lived, enjoying the warmth of the late summer sunshine. Kell was leaning back in his chair, his booted feet propped on the railing, and Grant was sprawled in a position of total relaxation. Both men looked sleepy after the heavy meal they had just eaten, but nevertheless two pairs of alert eyes monitored the children playing in the yard while Rachel and Jane were in the house. Presently the two women joined their husbands on the porch, sitting down in big rockers.

Kell straightened abruptly as Jamie, who was no more than a toddler, fell down in the yard, but before he could open his mouth the four little boys crowded around her, and Dane – or Daniel? – helped her up, brushing the dirt from her chubby little legs. The five children looked unusual together, with the three Sullivan boys almost white haired, they were so blond, while both Brian and Jamie were dark, with black hair and eyes. Jamie was the queen of that particular crowd, ruling everyone with her big eyes and dimples. She was going to be small, while Brian had his father's build.

The children ran shrieking toward the barn, with Dane and Daniel each holding one of Jamie's hands, and Brian and Craig behind them. The four adults watched them go. "Can you believe," Kell said thoughtfully, "that we're in our forties and have five preschoolers between us?"

"Speak for yourself," Rachel returned. "Jane and I are still young."

Kell looked at her and grinned. He still didn't have any gray in his hair, and neither did Grant. They were both hard and lean, and more content with their lives than they had ever been before.

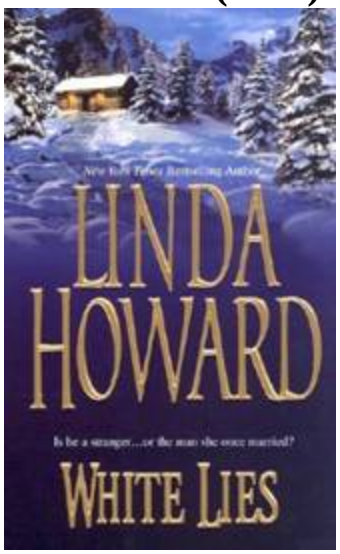
It had all worked out rather well. Married to Rachel, and quickly aware that there was indeed a baby on the way, Kell had accepted a promotion and was no longer such a prime target. He was still in a position to use his knowledge and expertise, but at much less risk to himself. It had been a trade-off, but one that was worth it. He glanced over at Rachel. Oh, yes, it had definitely been worth it.

"You never did tell me," Jane said idly, rocking in her chair as if she hadn't a care in the world. "Did you forgive me for lying to you about Rachel being pregnant?"

Grant chuckled, and Kell stretched out even more, closing his eyes. "It wasn't much of a lie," Kell said peacefully. "She was before the next day

was out. By the way, how did you get my number?"
"I called you for her," Grant confessed, putting his booted feet up on the railing, too. "I thought some of the good life was just what you needed."
Rachel's eyes met Kell's, and they smiled at each other. It was nice to have such good friends.

White Lies (1988)



Chapter One

In ranking the worst days of her life, this one probably wasn't number one, but it was definitely in the top three.

Jay Granger had held her temper all day, rigidly controlling herself until her head was throbbing and her stomach burning. Not even during the jolting ride in a succession of crowded buses had she allowed her control to crack. All day long she had forced herself to stay calm despite the pent-up frustration and rage that filled her, and now she felt as if she couldn't relax her own mental restraints. She just wanted to be alone.

So she silently endured having her toes stepped on, her ribs relocated by careless elbows, and her nostrils assailed by close-packed humanity. It began to rain just before she got off the last bus, a slow, cold rain that had chilled her to the bone by the time she walked the two blocks to her apartment building. Naturally she didn't have an umbrella with her; it was supposed to have been a sunny day. The clouds hadn't cleared all day long.

But at last she reached her apartment, where she was safe from curious eyes, either sympathetic or jeering. She was alone, blessedly alone. A sigh of relief broke from her lips as she started to close the door; then her control cracked and she slammed the door with every ounce of strength in her arm. It crashed against the frame with a resounding thud, but the small act of

violence didn't release her tension. Trashing her entire office building might help, or choking Farrell Word-law, but both those actions were denied her. When she thought of the way she had worked for the past five years, the fourteen- and sixteen-hour days, the work she had brought home on the weekends, she wanted to scream. She wanted to throw something. Yes; she definitely wanted to choke Farrell Wordlaw. But that wasn't *appropriate* behavior for a professional woman, a chic and sophisticated executive in a prestigious investment-banking firm. On the other hand, it was entirely appropriate for someone who had just joined the ranks of the unemployed. *Damn them.*

For five years she had dedicated herself to her job, ruthlessly stifling those parts of her personality that didn't fit the image. At first it had been mostly because she needed the job and the money, but Jay was too intense to do anything by half measures. Soon she had become caught up in the teeming rat race—the constant striving for success, for new triumphs, bigger and better deals—and that world had been her life for five years. Today she had been kicked out of it.

It wasn't that she hadn't been successful; she had. Maybe too successful. Some people hadn't liked dealing with her because she was a woman. Realizing that, Jay had tried to be as straightforward and aggressive as any man, to reassure her clients that she would take care of them as well as a man could. To that end she had changed her habits of speech, her wardrobe, never let even a hint of a tear sparkle in her eyes, never giggled, and learned how to drink Scotch, though she had never learned to enjoy it. She had paid for such rigid control with headaches and a constant burning in her stomach, but nevertheless she had thrown herself into the role because, for all its stresses, she had enjoyed the challenge. It was an exciting job, with the lure of a fast trip up the corporate ladder, and for the time being, she had been willing to pay the price.

Well, it was over, by decree of Farrell Wordlaw. He was very sorry, but her style just wasn't "compatible" with the image Wordlaw, Wilson & Trusler wanted to project. He deeply appreciated her efforts, et cetera, et cetera, and would certainly give her a glowing reference, as well as two weeks' notice to get her affairs in order. None of that changed the truth, and she knew it as well as he. She was being pushed out to make room for Duncan Wordlaw, Farrell's son, who had joined the firm the year before and whose performance always ranked second, behind Jay's. She was showing up the

senior partner's son, so she had to go. Instead of the promotion she'd been expecting, she'd been handed a pink slip.
She was furious, with no way to express it. It would give her the greatest satisfaction to walk out now and leave Wordlaw scrambling to handle her pending work, but the cold, hard fact was that she needed her salary for those two weeks. If she didn't find another well-paying job immediately, she would lose her apartment.
She had lived within her means, but as her salary had gone up so had her standard of living, and she had very little in savings. She certainly hadn't expected to lose her job because Duncan Wordlaw was an underachiever! Whenever Steve had lost a job, he'd just shrugged and laughed, telling her not to sweat it, he'd find another. And he always had, too. Jobs hadn't been that important to Steve; neither had security. Jay gave a tight Tittle laugh as she opened a bottle of antacid tablets and shook two of them into her hand. Steve! She hadn't thought about him in years. One thing was certain, she would never be as uncaring about unemployment as he had been. She liked knowing where her next meal was coming from; Steve liked excitement. He'd needed the hot flow of adrenaline more than he'd needed her, and finally that had ended their marriage.
But at least Steve would never be this strung out on nerves, she thought as she chewed the chalky tablets and waited for them to ease the burning in her stomach. Steve would have snapped his fingers at Farrell Word-law and told him what he could do with his two weeks' notice, then walked out whistling. Maybe Steve's attitude was irresponsible, but he would never let a mere job get the best of him.
Well, that was Steve's personality, not hers. He'd been fun, but in the end their differences had been greater than the attraction between them. They had parted on a friendly basis, though she'd been exasperated, as well. Steve would never grow up.
Why was she thinking of him now? Was it because she associated unemployment with his name? She began to laugh, realizing she'd done exactly that. Still chuckling, she ran water into a glass and lifted it in a toast. "To the good times," she said. They'd had a lot of good times, laughing and playing like the two healthy young animals they'd been, but it hadn't lasted. Then she forgot about him as worry surged into her mind again. She had to find another job immediately, a well-paying job, but she didn't trust Farrell to give her a glowing recommendation. He might praise her to the skies in

writing, but then he would spread the word around the New York investment-banking community that she didn't "fit in." Maybe she should try something else. But her experience was in investment banking, and she didn't have the financial reserves to train for another field.

With a sudden feeling of panic, she realized that she was thirty years old and had no idea what she was going to do with her life. She didn't want to spend the rest of it making deals while living on her nerves and an endless supply of antacid tablets, spending all her free time resting in an effort to build up her flagging energy. In reacting against Steve's let-tomorrow-take-care-of-itself-while-I-have-fun-today philosophy, she had gone to the opposite extreme and cut fun out of her life.

She had opened the refrigerator door and was looking at her supply of frozen microwave dinners with an expression of distaste when the doorman buzzed. Deciding to forget about dinner, something she'd done too often lately, she depressed the switch. "Yes, Dennis?"

"Mr. Payne and Mr. McCoy are here to see you, Ms. Granger," Dennis said smoothly. "From the FBI."

"What?" Jay asked, startled, sure she'd misunderstood.

Dennis repeated the message, but the words remained the same.

She was totally dumbfounded. "Send them up," she said, because she didn't know what else to do. FBI? What on earth? Unless slamming your apartment door was somehow against federal law, the worst she could be accused of was tearing the tags off her mattress and pillows. Well, why not? This was a perfectly rotten end to a perfectly rotten day.

The doorbell rang a moment later, and she hurried to open the door, her face still a picture of confusion. The rather nondescript, modestly suited men who stood there both presented badges and identification for her inspection.

"I'm Frank Payne," the older of the two men said. "This is Gilbert McCoy. We'd like to talk to you, if we may."

Jay gestured them into the apartment. "I'm at a total loss," she confessed. "Please sit down. Would you like coffee?"

A look of relief passed over Frank Payne's pleasant face. "Please," he said with heartfelt sincerity. "It's been a long day."

Jay went into the kitchen and hurriedly put on a pot of coffee; then, to be on the safe side, she chewed two more antacid tablets. Finally she took a deep breath and walked out to where the two men were comfortably ensconced

on her soft, chic, gray-blue sofa. "What have I done?" she asked, only half-joking.
Both men smiled. "Nothing," McCoy assured her, grinning. "We just want to talk to you about a former acquaintance."
She sank down in the matching gray-blue chair, sighing in relief. The burning in her stomach subsided a little. "Which former acquaintance?" Maybe they were after Farrell Wordlaw; maybe there was justice in the world, after all.
Frank Payne took a small notebook out of his inner coat pocket and opened it, evidently consulting his notes. "Are you Janet Jean Granger, formerly married to Steve Crossfield?"
"Yes." So this had something to do with Steve. She should have known. Still, she was amazed, as if she'd somehow conjured up these two men just by thinking of Steve earlier, something she almost never did. He was so far removed from her life now that she couldn't even form a clear picture in her mind of how he'd looked. But what had he gotten himself into, with his driving need for excitement?
"Does your ex-husband have any relatives? Anyone who might be close to him?"
Slowly Jay shook her head. "Steve is an orphan. He was raised in a series of foster homes, and as far as I know, he didn't stay in touch with any of his foster parents. As for any close friends—" she shrugged "—I haven't seen or heard from him since our divorce five years ago, so I don't have any idea who his friends might be."
Payne frowned, rubbing the deep lines between his brows. "Would you remember the name of a dentist he used while you were married, or perhaps a doctor?"
Jay shook her head, staring at him. "No. Steve was disgustingly healthy."
The two men looked at each other, frowning. McCoy said quietly, "Damn, this isn't going to be easy. We're running into one dead end after another."
Payne's face was deeply lined with fatigue, and something else. He looked back at Jay, his eyes worried. "Do you think that coffee's ready yet, Ms. Granger?"
"It should be. I'll be right back." Without knowing why, Jay felt shaken as she went into the kitchen and began putting cups, cream and sugar on a tray. The coffee had finished brewing, and she transferred the pot to the tray, but then just stood there, staring down at the wafting steam. Steve had to be in

serious trouble, really serious, and she regretted it even though there was nothing she could do. It had been inevitable, though. He'd always been chasing after adventure, and unfortunately adventure often went hand in hand with trouble. It had been only a matter of time before the odds caught up with him.

She carried the tray into the living room and placed it on the low table in front of the sofa, her brow furrowed into a worried frown. "What has Steve done?"

"Nothing illegal, that we know of," Payne said hastily. "It's just that he was involved in a... sensitive situation."

Steve hadn't done anything illegal, but the FBI was investigating him? Jay's frown deepened as she poured three cups of coffee. "What sort of sensitive situation?"

Payne looked at her with a troubled expression, and suddenly she noticed that he had very nice eyes, clear and strangely sympathetic. Gentle eyes. Not at all the kind of eyes she would have expected an FBI agent to possess.

He cleared his throat. "Very sensitive. We don't even know why he was there. But we need, very badly, to find someone who can make a positive identification of him."

Jay went white, the ramifications of that quiet, sinister statement burning in her mind. Steve was dead. Even though the love she'd felt for him had long since faded away, she knew a piercing grief for what had been. He'd been so much fun, always laughing, his brown eyes lit with devilish merriment. It was as if part of her own childhood had died, to know that his laughter had been stilled. "He's dead," she said dully, staring at the cup in her hand as it began to shake, sloshing the coffee back and forth.

Payne quickly reached out and took the cup from her, placing it on the tray. "We don't know," he said, his face even more troubled. "There was an explosion; one man survived. We think it's Crossfield, but we aren't certain, and it's critical that we know. I can't explain more than that."

It had been a long, terrible day, and it wasn't getting any better. She put her shaking hands to her temples and pressed hard, trying to make sense of what he'd told her. "Wasn't there any identification on him?"

"No," Payne said.

"Then why do you think it's Steve?"

"We know he was there. Part of his driver's license was found."

"Why can't you just look at nun and tell who he is?" she cried. "Why can't you identify the others and find out who he is by process of elimination?"
McCoy looked away. Payne's gentle eyes darkened. "There wasn't enough left to identify. Nothing."
She didn't want to hear any more, didn't want to know any of the details, though she could guess at the horrible carnage. She was suddenly cold, as if her blood had stopped pumping. "Steve?" she asked faintly.
"The man who survived is in critical condition, but the doctors are what they call 'cautiously optimistic.' He has a chance. Two days ago, they were certain he wouldn't last through the night."
"Why is it so important that you know right now who he is? If he lives, you can ask him. If he dies—" She halted abruptly. She couldn't say the words, but she thought them. If he died, it wouldn't matter. There would be no survivors, and they would close their files.
"I can't tell you anything except that we need to know who this man is. We need to know who died, so certain steps can be taken. Ms. Granger, I can tell you that my agency isn't directly involved in the situation. We're merely cooperating with others, because this concerns national security."
Suddenly Jay knew what they wanted from her. They would have been glad if she could have helped them locate any dental or medical records on Steve, but that wasn't their prune objective. They wanted her to go with them, to personally identify the injured man as Steve.
In a dull voice she asked, "Can't they tell if this man matches the general description of any of their own people? Surely they have measurements, fingerprints, that sort of thing?"
She was looking down, so she didn't see the quick wariness in Payne's eyes. He cleared his throat again. "Your husband—ex-husband—and our man are... were.. .the same general size. Fingerprints aren't possible; his hands are burned. But you know more about nun than anyone else we can find. There might be something about him that you recognize, some little birthmark or scar that you remember."
It still confused her; she couldn't understand why they wouldn't be able to recognize their own man, unless he was so horribly mutilated... Shivering, she didn't let herself complete the thought, didn't let the picture form in her mind. What if it was Steve? She didn't hate him, had never hated him. He was a rascal, but he'd never been cruel or meanhearted; even after she had stopped loving him, she had still been fond of him, in an exasperated way.

"You want me to go with you," she said, making it a statement instead of a question.
"Please," Payne replied quietly.
She didn't want to, but he had made it seem like her patriotic duty. "All right. I'll get my coat. Where is he?"
Payne cleared his throat again and Jay tensed. She'd already learned that he did that whenever he had to tell her something awkward or unpleasant.
"He's at Bethesda Naval Hospital in D.C. You'll need to pack a small suitcase. We have a private jet waiting for us at Kennedy."
Things were moving too fast for her to understand; she felt as if all she could do was follow the path of least resistance. Too much had happened today. First she had been fired, a brutal blow in itself, and now this. The security she had worked so hard to attain for herself had vanished in a few short minutes in Farrell Wordlaw's office, leaving her spuming helplessly, unable to get her feet back on the ground. Her life had been so quiet for the past five years; how could all this have happened so quickly?
Numbly she packed two dresses that traveled well, then collected her cosmetics from the bathroom. As she shoved what she needed into a small zippered plastic bag, she was stunned by her own reflection in the mirror. She looked so white and strained, and thin. Unhealthily thin. Her eyes were hollow and her cheekbones too prominent, the result of working long hours and living on antacid tablets. As soon as she returned to the city she would have to begin looking for another job, as well as working out her notice, which would mean more skipped meals.
Then she felt ashamed of herself. Why was she worrying about a job when Steve—or someone—was lying in a hospital bed fighting for his life? Steve had always told her that she worried too much about work, that she couldn't enjoy today because she was always worried about tomorrow. Maybe he was right.
Steve! Sudden tears blurred her eyes as she stuffed the cosmetic bag into her small overnighter. She hoped he would be all right.
At the last moment she remembered to pack fresh underwear. She was rattled, oddly disorganized, but finally she zipped the case and got her purse. "I'm ready," she said as she stepped out of the bedroom. •
Gratefully she saw that one of the men had carried the coffee things into the kitchen. McCoy took the case from her hand, and she got her coat from the closet; Payne silently helped her into it. She looked around to make certain

all the lights were off; then the three of them stepped into the hallway, and she locked the door behind her, wondering why she felt as if she would never be back.

* * *

She slept on the plane. She hadn't meant to, but almost as soon as they were airborne and she relaxed in the comfortable leather seat, her eyelids became too heavy to keep open. She didn't feel Payne spread a light blanket over her.

Payne sat across from her, watching her broodingly. He wasn't quite comfortable with what he was doing, dragging an innocent woman into this mess. Not even McCoy knew how much of a mess it was, how complicated it had become; as far as the other man knew, the situation was exactly the way he'd outlined it to Jay Granger: a simple matter of identification. Only a handful of people knew that it was more; maybe only two others besides himself. Maybe only one other, but that one carried a lot of power. When he wanted something done, it was done. Payne had known him for years, but had never managed to be comfortable in his presence.

She looked tired and oddly frail. She was too thin. She was about five-six, but he doubted she weighed much over a hundred pounds, and something about her made him think such thinness wasn't normal for her. He wondered if she was strong enough to be used as a shield.

She was probably very pretty when she was rested, and when she had some meat on her bones. Her hair was nice, a kind of honey brown, as thick and sleek as an otter's coat, and her eyes were dark blue. But now she just looked tired. It hadn't been an easy day for her.

Still, she had asked some questions that had made him uncomfortable. If she hadn't been so tired and upset she might have pinned him down on some things he didn't want to discuss, asked questions in front of McCoy that he didn't want raised. It was essential to the plan that everything be taken at face value. There could be no doubt at all.

* * *

The flight from New York to Bethesda was a short one, but the nap refreshed her, gave her back a sense of balance. The only thing was, the more alert she felt, the more unreal this entire situation seemed. She checked her watch as Payne and McCoy escorted her off the private jet when they landed at Washington National and into a government car waiting on the tarmac for them, and was startled to see that it was only nine

o'clock. Only a few hours had passed, yet her life had been turned upside down.
"Why Bethesda?" she murmured to Payne as the car purred down the street, a few flakes of snow drifting down like flower petals on a light breeze. She stared at the snowflakes, wondering absently if an early-winter snowstorm would keep her from getting home. "Why not a civilian hospital?"
"Security." Payne's quiet voice barely reached her ears. "Don't worry. The best trauma experts were called in to work on him, civilian and military. We're doing the best we can for your husband."
"Ex-husband," Jay said faintly.
"Yes. Sorry."
As they turned onto Wisconsin Avenue, which would eventually take them to the Naval Medical Center, the snow became a little heavier. Payne was glad she hadn't asked any more questions about why the man was in a military hospital instead of, say, Georgetown University Hospital. Of course, he'd told her the truth, as far as it went. Security *was* the reason he was at Bethesda. It just wasn't the only reason. He watched the snow swirling down and wondered if all the loose threads could possibly be woven into a believable whole.
When they reached the medical center, only Payne got out of the car with her; McCoy nodded briefly in farewell and drove away. Snowflakes quickly silvered their hair as Payne took her elbow and hurried her inside, where the welcome warmth just as quickly melted the lacy flakes. No one paid them any attention as they took an elevator upward.
When the elevator doors opened, they stepped out into a quiet corridor.
"This is the ICU floor," Payne said. "His room is this way."
They turned to the left, where double doors were guarded by two stern young men in uniform, both of whom wore pistols. Payne must have been known on sight, for one of the guards quickly opened a door for them.
"Thank you," Payne said courteously as they passed.
The unit was deserted, except for the nurses who monitored all the life-support systems and continually checked on the patients, but still Jay sensed a quiet hum that pervaded every corner of the unit—the sound of the machines that kept the patients alive or aided in their recovery. For the first time it struck her that Steve must be hooked up to one or more of those machines, unable to move, and her steps faltered. It was just so hard to take in.

Payne's hand remained under her elbow, unobtrusively providing her with support. He stopped before a door and turned to her, his clear gray eyes full of concern. "I want to prepare you a little. He's badly injured. His skull was fractured, and the bones in his face were crushed. He's breathing through a trach tube. Don't expect him to look like the man you remember." He waited a moment, watching her, but she didn't say anything, and finally he opened the door.

Jay stepped into the room, and for a split second both her heart and lungs seemed to stop functioning. Then her heart lurched into rhythm again, and she drew a deep, painful breath. Tears sprang to her eyes as she stared at the inert form on the white hospital bed, and his name trembled soundlessly on her lips. It didn't seem possible that this... *this* could be Steve.

The man on the bed was almost literally a mummy. Both legs were broken and encased in pristine plaster casts, supported by a network of pulleys and slings. His hands were wrapped in bandages that extended almost to his elbows. His head and face were swathed in gauze, with extra thick pads over his eyes; only his lips, chin and jaw were visible, and they were swollen and discolored. His breath whistled faintly but regularly from the tube in his throat, and various other tubes ran into his body. Monitors overhead recorded every detail of his bodily functions. And he was still. He was so still.

Her throat was so dry that speaking was painful. "How can I possibly identify him?" she asked rawly. "You *knew* I couldn't. You knew how he looks!"

Payne was watching her with sympathy. "I'm sorry, I know it's a shock. But we need for you to try. You were married to Steve Crossfield. You know him better than any other person on earth. Maybe there's some little detail you remember, a scar or a mole, a birthmark. Anything. Take your time and look at him. I'll be just outside."

He went out and closed the door behind him, leaving her alone in the room with that motionless figure and the quiet beeping of the monitors, the weak whistle of his breathing. Her hands knotted into fists, and tears blurred her eyes again. Whether this man was Steve or not, a pity so acute it was painful filled her.

Somehow her feet carried her closer to the bed. She carefully avoided the tubes and wires while never looking away from his face—or as much of his face as she could see. Steve? Was this really Steve?

She knew what Payne wanted. He hadn't actually spelled it out, but he hadn't needed to. He wanted her to lift the sheet away and study this man while he lay there unconscious and helpless, naked except for the bandages over his wounds. He thought she would have a wife's intimate knowledge of her husband's body, but five years is a long time. She could remember Steve's grin, and the devilish sparkle in his chocolaty brown eyes, but other details had long since faded from her mind.

It wouldn't matter to this man if she stripped back the sheet and looked at him. He was unconscious; he might well die, even now, with all these miracle machines hooked up to his body. He would never know. And as Payne would say, she would be doing her country a service if she could somehow identify this man as Steve Crossfield, or as definitely not.

She couldn't stop looking at him. He was so badly hurt. How could anyone be injured this critically and still live? If he were granted a lucid moment, right now, would he even want to live? Would he be able to walk again? Use his hands? See? Think? Or would he take stock of his injuries and tell the doctors, "Thanks, guys, but I think I'll take my chances at the Pearly Gates."

But perhaps he had a tremendous will to live. Perhaps that was what had kept him alive this long, an unconscious, deep-seated will to *be*. Fierce determination could move mountains.

Hesitantly she stretched out her hand and touched his right arm, just above the bandages that covered his burns. His skin was hot to the touch, and she jerked her fingers back in surprise. Somehow she had thought he would be cold. This intense heat was another sign of how brightly life still burned inside him, despite his stillness. Slowly her hand returned to his arm, lightly resting on the smooth skin just below the inside of his elbow, taking care not to disturb the IV needle that dripped a clear liquid into a vein.

He was warm. He was alive.

Her heart was pounding in her chest, some intense emotion welling up in her until she thought she would burst from the effort of trying to control it. It staggered her to think of what he had been through, yet he was still fighting, defying the odds, his spirit too fierce and proud to just let go. If she could have, she would have suffered the pain in his place.

And his body had been invaded enough. Needles pierced his veins; wire and electrodes picked up and broadcast his every heartbeat. As if he didn't have enough wounds already, the doctors had made more to insert drainage tubes

in his chest and side, and there were other tubes, as well. Every day a host of strangers looked at him and treated him as if he were nothing but a slab of meat, all to save his life.
But she wouldn't invade his privacy, not in this manner. Modesty might not mean anything to him, but it was still his choice to make.
All her attention was focused on him; nothing else in the world existed in this moment except the man lying so still in the hospital bed. Was this Steve? Would she feel some sense of familiarity, despite the disfiguring swelling and the bandages that swathed bun? She tried to remember.
Had Steve been this muscular? Had his arms been this thick, his chest this deep? He could have changed, gained weight, done a lot of physical work that would have developed his shoulders and arms more, so she couldn't go by that. Men got heavier in the chest as they matured.
His chest had been shaved. She looked at the dark stubble of body hair. Steve had had chest hair, though not a lot of it.
His beard? She looked at his jaw, what she could see of it, but his face was so swollen that she couldn't find anything familiar. Even his lips were swollen.
Something wet trickled down her cheek, and in surprise she dashed her hand across her face. She hadn't even realized she was crying.
Payne reentered the room and silently offered her his handkerchief. When she had wiped her face he led her away from the bedside, his arm warm and comforting around her waist, letting her lean on him. "I'm sorry," he finally offered. "I know it isn't easy."
She shook her head, feeling like a fool for breaking down like that, especially in light of what she had to tell him. "I don't know. I'm sorry, but I can't tell if he's Steve, or not. I just... can't."
"Do you think he could be?" Payne asked insistently.
Jay rubbed her temples. "I suppose so. I can't tell. There are so many bandages—"
"I understand. I know how difficult it is. But I need something to tell my superiors. Was your husband that tall? Was there anything at all familiar about him?"
If he understood, why did he keep pushing? Her headache was getting worse by the second. "I just don't know!" she cried. "I guess Steve is that tall, but it's hard to tell when he's lying down. Steve has dark hair and brown eyes, but I can't even tell that much about this man!"

Payne looked down at her. "It's on his medical sheet," he said quietly. "Brown hair and brown eyes."
For a moment the import of that didn't register; then her eyes widened. She hadn't felt any sense of recognition for the man at all, but she was still dazed by the storm of emotion he had caused in her: pity, yes, but also awe, that he was still alive and fighting, and an almost staggering respect for the determination and sheer guts he must have.
Very faintly, her face white, she said, "Then he must be Steve, mustn't he?"
A flash of relief crossed Payne's face, then was gone before she could be certain it was there. He nodded. "I'll notify our people that you've verified his identity. He's Steve Crossfield."

Chapter Two

When Jay awoke the next morning she lay very still in the bed, staring around the unfamiliar hotel room and trying to orient herself. The events of the previous day were mostly a blur, except for the crystal-clear memory she had of the injured man in the hospital. Steve. That man was Steve.
She should have recognized him. Even though it had been five years, she had once loved him. Something about him should have been familiar, despite the disfiguring bruises and swelling. An odd feeling of guilt assailed her, though she knew it was ridiculous, but it was as if she had let bun down somehow, reduced nun to the level of being too unimportant in her life for her to remember how he looked.
Grimacing, Jay got out of bed. There she went again, letting things matter too much to her. Steve had constantly told her to lighten up, and his tone had sometimes been full of impatience. That was another area where they had been incompatible. She was too intense, too involved with everyday life and the world around her, while Steve had skated blithely on the surface.
She was free to return to New York that morning, but she was reluctant to do so. It was only Saturday; there was no hurry as long as she returned in time to go to work Monday morning. She didn't want to sit in her apartment all weekend long and brood about being unemployed, and she wanted to see Steve again. That seemed to be what Payne wanted, too. He hadn't mentioned making arrangements for her return to New York.

She had been so exhausted that for once she had slept deeply, and as a result the shadows beneath her eyes weren't as dark as they usually were. She stared into the bathroom mirror, wondering if being fired might have been a blessing in disguise. The way she had been pushing herself had been hard on her health, burning away weight she couldn't afford to lose, drawing the skin tightly over her facial bones so that she looked both haggard and emaciated, especially without makeup. She made a face at herself in the mirror. She'd never been a beauty and never would be, but she had once been pretty. Her dark blue eyes and swath of sleek, heavy, golden-honey-brown hair were her best features, though the rest of her face could be described as ordinary.

What would Steve say if he could see her now? Would he be disappointed, and bluntly say so?

Why couldn't she get him out of her mind? It was natural to be concerned about him, to feel sharp sympathy because of his terrible injuries, but she couldn't stop herself from wondering what he would think, what he would say, about her. Not the Steve he had been before, that charming but unreliable will-o'-the-wisp, but the man he was now: harder, stronger, with the fierce will to survive that had kept him alive in the face of overwhelming odds. What would that man think of her? Would he still want her?

The thought made her face flame, and she jerked away from the mirror to turn on the shower. She must be going mad! He was an invalid. Even now, it wasn't by any means certain that he would survive, despite his fighting nature. And even if he did, he might not function as well as he had before. The surgery to save his sight might not have worked; they wouldn't know until the bandages came off. He might have brain damage. He might not be able to walk, talk or feed himself.

Helplessly she felt hot tears begin to slide down her cheeks again. Why should she cry for him now? Why couldn't she stop crying for him? Every tune she thought of him she started crying, which was ridiculous, when she hadn't even been able to recognize him.

Payne was calling for her at ten, so she forced herself to stop crying and get ready. She managed that with plenty of time to spare, then found, surprisingly, that she was hungry. She usually didn't eat breakfast, sustaining herself with an endless supply of coffee until lunch, when her

stomach would be burning and she wouldn't be able to eat much. But already the strain of her job was fading away, and she wanted food.
She ordered breakfast from room service and received it in a startlingly short length of time. Falling on the tray like a famine victim, she devoured the omelet and toast in record time; when Payne knocked on her door, she had been finished for almost half an hour.
Without seeming to, Payne studied her face with sharp eyes that noted and analyzed every detail. She'd been crying. This was really getting to her, and though that was exactly what they wanted, he still regretted that she had to be hurt. She also looked immeasurably better this morning, with a bit of color in her face. Her marvelous eyes were bigger and brighter than he had remembered, but part of that was the result of her tears. He only hoped she wouldn't have to shed too many more.
"I've already called to check on his condition," he reported, taking her arm. "Good news. His vital signs are improving. He's still unconscious, but his brain waves are increasing in activity and the doctors are more optimistic than they've been. He's really done better than anyone expected."
She didn't point out that they had expected him to die, so anything was better than that. She didn't want to think about how close he had come to dying. In some way she didn't understand, Steve had become too important to her during those minutes when she had stood beside his bed and touched his arm.
The big white naval hospital was much busier that morning than it had been the night before, and two different guards stood at the doors to the ICU wing where Steve's room was located. Again they seemed to know Payne on sight. Jay wondered how many times he had been here to see Steve, and why he would have felt it necessary to be there at all. As he had that morning, he could have checked on Steve's condition by phone. Whatever Steve had gotten himself into must be extremely important, and Payne wanted to be on hand the instant he recovered consciousness, if ever.
Payne left her to enter the room on her own, saying he wanted to talk to someone. Jay nodded absently, her attention already focused on Steve. She pushed open the door and walked in, leaving Payne standing in the hall practically in midsentence. A wry, faintly regretful smile touched his mouth as he looked at the closed door; then he turned and walked briskly down the hall.

Jay stared at the man in the bed. Steve. Now that she was seeing him again, it was a little hard to accept that he was Steve. She had known Steve as vibrant, burning with energy; he was so still now that it threw her off balance.

He was still in the same position he'd been in the night before; the machines were still quietly humming and beeping, and fluids were still being fed into his veins through needles. The strong scent of hospital antiseptic burned her nose, and suddenly she wondered if, in some corner of his mind, he was aware of the smell. Could he hear people talking, though he was unable to respond?

She walked to the bed and touched his arm as she had the night before. The heat of his skin tingled against her fingertips despite the coolness of the controlled temperature. The mummylike expanse of bandages robbed him of individuality, and his lips were so swollen they looked more like caricatures than the lips of the man she had once kissed, loved, married, fought with and finally divorced. Only the hot bare skin of his arm made him real to her.

Did he feel anything? Was he aware of her touch?

"Steve?" she whispered, her voice trembling. It felt so funny to talk to a motionless mummy, knowing that he was probably so deep in his coma that he was unaware of everything, and that even if by some miracle he could hear her, he wouldn't be able to respond. But even knowing all that, something inside compelled her to try. "I.. .it's Jay." Sometimes he'd called her Jaybird, and when he'd really wanted to aggravate her he'd called her Janet Jean. Her nickname had evolved when she'd been a very young child. Her parents had called her Janet Jean, but her elder brother, Wilson, had shortened it to J. J., which had naturally become Jay. By the time she'd started school, her name was, irrevocably, Jay.

"You've been hurt," she told Steve, still stroking his arm. "But you're going to be all right. Your legs have been broken, and they're both in casts. That's why you can't move them. They have a tube in your throat, helping you to breathe, and that's why you can't talk. You can't see because you have bandages over your eyes. Don't worry about anything. They're taking good care of you here."

Was it a lie that he was going to be all right? Yet she didn't know what else to tell him. If he could hear her, she had to reassure him, not give him something else to worry about.

Clearing her throat, she began telling him about the past five years, what she'd been doing since the divorce. She even told him about being fired, and how badly she'd wanted to punch Farrell Wordlaw right in the nose. How badly she still wanted to punch him in the nose.

The voice was calm and infinitely tender. He didn't understand the words, because unconsciousness still wrapped his mind in layers of blackness, but he heard the voice, felt it, like something warm touching his skin. It made him feel less alone, that tiny, dim contact.
Something hard and vital in him focused on the contact, yearning toward it, forcing him upward out of the blackness, even though he sensed the fanged monsters that waited for him, waiting to tear at his flesh with hot knives and brutal teeth. He would have to endure that before he could reach the voice, and he was very weak. He might not make it. Yet the voice reached out to him, pulling at him like a magnet, lifting him out of the deep senselessness that had held him.

"I remember the doll I got for Christmas when I was four years old," Jay said, talking automatically now. Her voice was low and dreamy. "She was soft and floppy, like a real baby, and she had curly brown hair and big brown eyes, with inch-long lashes that closed when I laid her down. I named her Chrissy, for my very best friend in the world. I lugged that doll around until she was so ragged she looked like a miniature bag lady. I slept with her, I put her on the chair beside me when I ate, and I rode miles around and around the house on my tricycle with her on the seat in front of me. Then I began to grow up, and I lost interest in Chrissy. I put her on the shelf with my other dolls and forgot about her. But the first time I saw you, Steve, I thought, 'He's got Chrissy eyes.' That's what I used to call brown eyes when I was little and didn't know my colors. You have Chrissy eyes."
His breathing seemed to be slower, deeper. She couldn't be certain, but she thought there was a different rhythm to the rise and fall of his chest. The sound of his breathing whistled in and out through the tube in his throat. Her fingers gently rubbed his arm, maintaining the small contact even though something inside her actually hurt from touching his skin.
"I almost told you a couple of times that you have Chrissy eyes, but I didn't think you'd like it." She laughed, the sound warm in the room filled with impersonal, humming machines. "You were always so protective of your

macho image. A devil-may-care adventurer shouldn't have Chrissy eyes, should he?"
Suddenly his arm twitched, and the movement so startled her that she jerked her hand away, her face pale. Except for breathing, it was the first time he'd moved, even though she knew it was probably an involuntary muscle spasm. Her eyes flew to his face but there was nothing to see there. Bandages covered the upper two-thirds of his head, and his bruised lips were immobile. Slowly she reached out and touched his arm again, but he lay still under her touch, and after a moment she resumed talking to him, rambling on as she dragged up childhood memories.
Frank Payne silently opened the door and stopped in his tracks, listening to her low murmurings. She still stood by the bed; hell, she probably hadn't moved an inch from the man's side, and she had been in here—he checked his watch—almost three hours. If she had been the guy's wife, he could have understood it, but she was his ex-wife, and she was the one who had ended the marriage. Yet there she stood, her attention locked on him as if she were *willing* him to get better.
"How about some coffee?" he asked softly, not wanting to startle her, but her head jerked around anyway, her eyes wide.
Then she smiled. "That sounds good." She walked away from the bed, then stopped and looked back, a frown knitting her brows together. "I hate to leave him alone. If he understands anything at all, it must be awful to just lie there, trapped and hurting and not knowing why, thinking he's all alone."
"He doesn't know anything," Payne assured her, wishing it was different. "He's in a coma, and right now it's better that he stays in it."
"Yes," Jay agreed, knowing he was right. If Steve were conscious now, he would be in terrible pain.

That first faint glimmer of awareness had faded; the warm voice had gone away and left him without direction. Without that to guide him, he sank back into the blackness, into nothingness.

Frank lingered over the bad cafeteria food and the surprisingly good coffee. It wasn't great coffee; it truly wasn't even good coffee, but it was better than he'd expected. The next batch might not be as good, so he wanted to enjoy this one as long as he could. Not only that, he didn't know exactly how to bring up the subject he'd been skating around all during lunch, but he had to

do it. The Man had made it plain: Jay Granger had to stay. He didn't want her to identify the patient and leave; he wanted her to become emotionally involved, at least enough to stay. And what the Man wanted, he got.
Frank had sighed. "What if she falls in love with him? Hell, you know what he's like. He has women crawling all over him. They can't resist him."
"She may be hurt," the Man had conceded, though the steel never left his voice. "But his life is on the line, and our options are limited. For whatever reason, Steve Crossfield was there when it went down. We know it, and they know it. We don't have a list of possibilities to choose from. Crossfield is the *only* choice."
He hadn't needed to say more. Since Crossfield was the only choice, his ex-wife was also the only choice by reason of being the only person who could identify him.
"Did McCoy buy it?" the Man had asked abruptly.
"The whole nine yards." Then Frank's voice had sharpened. "You don't think Gilbert McCoy is—"
The Man interrupted. "No. I know he isn't. But McCoy's a damned sharp agent. If he bought it, that means we're doing a good job of making things look the way we want."
"What happens if she's with him when he wakes up?"
"It doesn't matter. The doctors say he'll be too confused and disoriented to make sense. They're monitoring him, and they'll let us know when they start bringing him out of it. We can't keep her out of his room with-' out it looking suspicious, but watch it. If he starts making sense, get her out of the room fast, until we can talk to him. But there's not too much danger of that happening."
"You're stirring that coffee to death." Jay's voice broke in on his thoughts, and he looked up at her, then down at the coffee. He'd been stirring it so long that it had cooled. He grimaced at the waste of not-bad coffee.
"I've been trying to think of how to ask something of you," he admitted.
Jay gave him a puzzled look. "There's only one way. Just ask."
"All right." He took a deep breath. "Don't go back to New York tomorrow. Will you stay here with Steve? He needs you. He's going to need you even more."
The words hit her hard. Steve had never needed her. She had been too intense, wanting more from him, from their relationship, than he had in him to give. He'd always wanted a slight distance between them, mentally and

emotionally, claiming that she "smothered" him. She remembered the time he'd shouted those words at her; then she thought of the man lying so still in the hospital bed, and again she felt that unnerving sense of unreality.
Slowly she shook her head. "Steve is a loner. You should know that from the information you have on him. He doesn't need me now, won't need me when he wakes up, and probably won't like the idea of anyone taking care of him, least of all his ex-wife."
"He'll be very confused when he wakes up. You'll be a lifeline to him, the only face he knows, someone he can trust, someone who'll reassure him. He's in a drug-induced coma... the doctors can tell you more about it than I can. But they've said he'll be very confused and agitated, maybe even delirious. It'll help if someone he knows is there."
Practicality made her shake her head again. "I'm sorry, Mr. Payne. I don't think he'd want me there, but I wouldn't stay anyway, if I could. I was fired from my job yesterday. I have two weeks' notice to work out. I can't afford not to work those two weeks, and I have to find another job."
He whistled through his teeth. "You had a bitch of a day, didn't you?"
She had to laugh, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, "That's a good description of it, yes." The longer she knew Frank Payne, the more she liked him. There was nothing outstanding about him: he was of medium height, medium weight, with graying brown hair and clear gray eyes. His face was pleasant, but not memorable. Yet there was a steadiness in him that she sensed and trusted.
He looked thoughtful. "It's possible we can do something about your situation. Let me check into it before you book a flight back. Would you like a chance to tell your boss to go take a flying leap?"
Jay gave him a very sweet smile, and this time he was the one who laughed.
It wasn't until later that she realized the request meant they were certain Steve would live. She was back in Steve's room, standing by his bed, and she gently squeezed his arm as relief filled her. "You're going to make it," she whispered. It was almost sundown, and she had spent most of the day standing beside his bed. Several times a nurse or an orderly had requested that she step outside, but except for that and the time she had spent with Frank at lunch, she had been with Steve. She had talked until her throat was dry, talked until she couldn't think of anything else to say and silence had fallen again, but even then she had kept her hand on his arm. Maybe he knew she was there.

A nurse came in and gave Jay a curious look but didn't ask her to leave the room. Instead she checked the monitors and made notes on a pad. "It's odd," she murmured. "But maybe not. Somehow I think our boy knows when you're here. His heartbeat is stronger and his respiration rate settles down if you're here with him. When you left for lunch his vital signs deteriorated, then picked back up when you returned. I've noticed the same thing happen every time we've asked you to leave the room. Major Lunning is going to be interested in these charts."

Jay stared at the nurse, then at Steve. "He *knows* I'm here?"

"Not consciously," the nurse said hastily. "He isn't going to wake up and talk to you, not with the barbiturate dose he's getting. But who knows what he senses? You've been talking to him all day, haven't you? Part of it must be getting through, on some level. You must be really important to him, for him to respond to you like this."

The nurse left the room. Stunned, Jay looked back at Steve. Even if he somehow sensed her presence, why would it affect him like that? Yet she couldn't ignore the nurse's theory, because she had noticed herself that the rhythm of his breathing had changed. It was almost impossible for her to believe, because Steve had never needed her in any way. He had enjoyed her for a time, but something in him had kept her at a small but significant distance. Because he couldn't return love of any depth, he hadn't allowed himself to accept a deep love. All Steve had ever wanted was a superficial sort of relationship, a light, playful love that could end with no regrets. Theirs had ended in just that way, and she had seldom thought of him after they had parted. Why should she be important to him now?

Then she gave a low laugh as understanding came to her. Steve wasn't responding to her, he was responding to a touch and a voice meant for him personally, rather than the impartial, automatic touches and words of the healers surrounding him. Anyone else would have done just as well. Frank Payne could have stood there and talked to him with the same result.

She said as much an hour later, when Major Lunning studied the charts and stroked his jaw, occasionally glancing at her with a thoughtful expression. Frank stood to one side, careful to keep his face blank, but his sharp gaze didn't miss anything.

Major Limning was one of the top military doctors, a man devoted to both healing and the military. He wasn't stationed at Bethesda, but he hadn't questioned the orders that had gotten him up in the middle of the night and

brought him there. He and several other doctors had been given the task of saving this man's life. At the time they hadn't even known his name. Now there was a name on his chart, but they still had no inkling why he was so important to the powers that be. It didn't make any difference; Major Lunning would use whatever weapon or procedure he could find to help his patient. Right now, one of those weapons was this too-thin young woman with dark blue eyes and a full, passionate-looking mouth.

"I don't think we can ignore the pattern, Ms. Granger," the Major said frankly. "It's your voice he responds to, not mine, not Mr. Payne's, not any of the nurses'. Mr. Crossfield isn't in a deep coma. He's breathing on his own and still has reflexes. It isn't unreasonable to think that he can hear you. He may not understand and he certainly can't respond, but it's entirely possible that he hears."

"But I understood that his coma is drug-induced," Jay protested. "When people are drugged, aren't they totally unconscious?"

"There are different levels of consciousness. Let me explain his injuries more completely. He has simple fractures of both legs, nothing that will prevent him from walking normally. He has second-degree burns on his hands and arms, but the worst of the bums are on his palms and fingers, as if he grabbed a hot pipe, or perhaps put his hands up to shield his face. His spleen was ruptured, and we removed it. One lung was punctured and collapsed. But the worst of his injuries were to his head and face. His skull was fractured, and his facial bones were simply shattered.

"We performed surgery immediately to repair the damage, but to control the swelling of the brain and prevent further damage, we have to administer large doses of barbiturates. That keeps him in a coma. Now, the deeper the coma, the less the brain functions. In a deep coma the patient may not even be able to breathe for himself. The level of the coma depends in part on the patient's tolerance for the drugs, which varies from person to person. Mr. Crossfield's tolerance seems to be a bit higher than usual, so his coma isn't as deep as it could be. We haven't increased the dosage, because it hasn't been necessary. In time we'll gradually decrease the dosage and bring him out of the coma. He's going to make it on his own, but I'll tell you frankly, he definitely does better when you're with him. There's still a lot we don't know about the mind and how it affects the body, but we know it does."

"Are you saying he'll get well faster if I'm here?"

The Major grinned. "That's it in a nutshell."

Jay felt tired and confused, as if she'd spent hours in a house of mirrors trying to find her way out but instead finding only one deceitful reflection after another. It wasn't just these people, all insisting that she stay; part of it was inside. Something happened when she touched Steve, something she didn't understand. She certainly hadn't felt it before, even when they'd been married. It was as if he were more than he had been, somehow different in ways she sensed but couldn't define.

She wished they hadn't put this responsibility on her. She didn't want to stay. This strange feeling she had for Steve made her feel threatened. If she left now, it wouldn't have a chance to develop. But if she stayed... She hadn't been devastated by their divorce, five years earlier, because their love had never grown, never gone any deeper. In the end it had simply faded away. But Steve was different now; he'd changed in those five years, into a man whose power she could feel even when he was unconscious. If she fell in love with him again, she might never get over it.

But if she left, she would feel guilty because she hadn't helped him.

She needed to find another job. She had to get back to New York and begin doing something to keep her life from disintegrating. But she was tired of the frantic pushing and maneuvering, the constant dealing. She didn't want to go, but she was afraid to stay.

Frank saw the tension in her face, felt it vibrating through her. "Let's walk down to the lounge," he said, stepping forward to take her arm. "You need a break. See you later, Major."

Major Lunning nodded. "Try to talk her into staying. This guy really needs her."

Out in the hall, Jay murmured, "I hate it when people talk around me, as if I'm not there. I'm tired of being maneuvered." She was thinking of her job when she said that, but Frank gave her a sharp look.

"I don't mean to put you in a difficult position," he said diplomatically. "It's just that we badly need to talk to your husband... sorry, ex-husband. I keep forgetting. At any rate, we're willing to do whatever is possible to aid in his recovery,"

Jay put her hands in her pockets, slowing her steps as she considered something. "Is Steve going to be arrested because of what he was doing, whatever it was?"

Frank didn't have any hesitation on that score. "No," he said with absolute certainty. The man was going to get nothing but the best medicine and best

protection his country could provide him; Frank only wished he could tell Jay why, but that wasn't possible. "We think he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, an innocent bystander, if you will. But given his background, we think it likely he would have picked up on the situation. It's even possible he was trying to help when everything blew up in his face."
"Literally."
"Yes, unfortunately. Anything he can remember will help us."
They reached the lounge and he opened the door so she could precede him. They were alone, thank heavens. He went over to the coffee machine and fed coins into it. "Coffee?"
"No, thank you," Jay replied tiredly as she sat down. Her stomach was blessedly calm, and she didn't want to upset it now with the noxious brew that usually came from those machines. She hadn't noticed before how tired she was, but now fatigue was washing over her in great waves that made her feel giddy.
Frank sat down opposite her, cradling the Styrofoam cup in his hands. "I talked to my superior, explained your situation," he began. "Would you stay if you didn't have to worry about finding another job?"
She let her eyelids droop as she rubbed her forehead in an effort to force herself to concentrate on what he'd said. She couldn't remember ever having been as tired as she was now, as if all energy had drained from her. Even her mind felt numb. All day long she had focused so fiercely on Steve that everything else had blurred, and now that she had let herself relax, exhaustion had crashed in on her, a deep lassitude that was mental as well as physical.
"I don't understand," she murmured. "I have to work at a job to make money. And even if you've somehow lined one up for me, I can't work and stay here, too."
"Staying here would be your job," Frank explained, wishing he didn't have to push her. She looked as if it were all she could do to sit erect. But maybe she would be more easily convinced now, with fatigue dulling her mind. "We'll take care of your apartment and living expenses. It's that important to us."
Her eyelids lifted and she stared at him incredulously. "You'd *pay* me to stay here?"
"Yes."

"But I don't want money to stay with him! I want to' help him, don't you understand that?"
"But you can't, because of your financial position," Frank said, nodding. "What we're offering to do is take care of that for you. If you were independently wealthy, would you hesitate to stay?"
"Of course not! I'll do whatever I can to help him, but the idea of taking money for it is ugly."
"We aren't paying you to stay with him, we're paying you so you *can* stay with him. Do you see the difference?"
She had to be going mad, because she did see the difference between the two halves of the hair he had just split. And his eyes were so kind that she instinctively trusted him, even though she sensed a lot going on that she didn't understand.
"We'll get an apartment for you close by, so you can spend more time with him," Frank continued, his voice soothing and reasonable. "We'll also keep your New York apartment for you, so you'll have that to go back to. If you give me the word now, we can have a place here ready for you to move into on Monday."
There had to be arguments she could use, but she couldn't think of any. Frank was sweeping all obstacles out of the way; it would make her feel mean and petty if she refused to do what he wanted, when he had gone to so much trouble and they—whoever they were—so badly wanted her to remain.
"I'll have to go home," she said helplessly. "To New York, that is. I need more clothes, and I'll have to quit my job." Suddenly she laughed. "If it's possible to quit a job you've already been fired from."
"I'll make the travel arrangements for you."
"How long do you think I'll be here?" She was estimating a two- or three-week stay, but she wanted to be certain. She would have to do something about her mail and utilities.
Frank's gaze was level. "A couple of months, at least. Maybe longer."
"Months!"
"He'll have to have therapy."
"But he'll be conscious then. I thought you only wanted me to stay until the worst was over!"
He cleared his throat. "We'd like you to stay until he's dismissed from the hospital, at least." He had been trying to break the idea to her gradually, first

by just getting her here, then convincing her that Steve needed her, then talking her into staying for the duration. He only hoped it would work.
"But why?"
"He'll need you. He'll be in pain. I haven't told you before, but he needs more surgery on his eyes. It will probably be six to eight weeks before he'll get the bandages off his eyes for good. He's going to be confused, in pain, and they'll put him through more pain in therapy. To top it all off, he won't be able to see. Jay, you're going to be his lifeline."
She sat there numbly, staring at him. It looked as if, after all this time and now that it was too late, Steve was going to need her more than either of them had ever thought.

Chapter Three

It felt strange to be back in New York. Jay had flown back on Sunday afternoon and had spent the hours packing her clothes and other personal possessions, but even her apartment had felt strange, as if she no longer belonged there. She packed automatically, her mind on the hospital room in Bethesda. How was he doing? She had spent the morning with him, constantly talking and stroking his arm, yet she felt frantic at spending such a long time away from him.

On Monday morning she dressed for work for the last time, and was conscious of a deep sense of relief. Until it had been lifted, she hadn't been aware what a burden that job had been, how desperately she had been driving herself to compete. Competition was a fine thing, but not at the expense of her health, though part of it could be blamed on her own intensity. She had channeled all her temper, interests and energy into that job, leaving nothing as an escape valve. She was lucky she hadn't developed an ulcer, rather than the less severe stress symptoms of a nervous stomach, constant headaches and disturbed sleep.

When she reached her office in the high-rise office building that housed many such firms, she scrounged around until she located a cardboard box, then swiftly cleaned out her desk, depositing all her personal items in the carton. There weren't many: a tube of lipstick, an extra pair of panty hose, a small pack of tissues, an expensive gold ballpoint pen, two small prints from the wall. She had just finished and was reaching for the phone to call Farrell Wordlaw to request a meeting when the intercom buzzed.

"Mr. Clements with EchoSystems on line three, Ms. Granger. "

Jay depressed the button. "Please transfer all my calls to Duncan Wordlaw."

"Yes, Ms. Granger."

Taking a deep breath, Jay dialed Farrell on the interoffice line. Two minutes later she walked purposefully into his office.

He smiled benignly at her, as if he hadn't cut4ier off at the knees three days before. "You're looking well, Jay," he said smoothly. "Is something on your mind?"

"Not much," she replied. "I just wanted to let you know that I won't be able to work out the two weeks' notice you gave me. I came in this morning to clean out my desk, and I left instructions for all my calls to be transferred to Duncan."

It gave her a measure of satisfaction to see him blanch. "That's very unprofessional!" he snapped, surging to his feet. "We were counting on you to tie up the loose ends—"
"And train Duncan how to do my job," she interrupted, her voice ironic.
His tone was threatening. "Under these circumstances, I don't see how I can give you the positive recommendation I had planned. You won't work again in investment banking, not without a favorable reference."
Her dark blue eyes were steady and cold as she stared at him. "I don't plan to work in investment banking, thank you."
From that he decided she must already have another job, which took away the leverage he had been planning to use on her. Jay watched him, practically seeing the wheels turning as he considered his options. She was really leaving them in the lurch, and it was his fault, because he had fired her. "Well, perhaps I was too hasty," he said, forcing his voice to show warm paternalism. "It will certainly leave a black eye on this firm, and on you, if the matters on your desk aren't handled properly. Perhaps if I add two weeks' salary as severance pay, you'll reconsider leaving us so precipitately?"
She was supposed to fall back in line when he waved the magic carrot of money in front of her nose. "Thank you, but no," she declined. "It isn't possible. I won't be in town."
Panic began to edge into his face. If the deals she had been handling fell through, it would cost the firm millions of dollars in fees. "But you can't do that! Where will you be?"
Already Jay could imagine panicky phone calls from Duncan. She gave Farrell a cool smile. "Bethesda Naval Hospital, but I won't be accepting any calls."
He looked absolutely stunned. "The...the naval hospital?" he croaked.
"It's a family emergency," she explained as she walked out the door.
When she was outside again with the small cardboard box tucked under her arm, she laughed out loud from the sheer joy of being unemployed, of being able to put that look of panic in Farrell Wordlaw's eyes. It was almost as good as if she had been able to strangle him. And now she was free to return to Steve, drawn by the powerful compulsion to be with him that she could neither understand nor resist.
She had come up on a commuter flight, but because of the amount of luggage and personal furnishings she was taking back to D.C., Frank had

arranged for her to take a charter flight back, and she was pleasantly surprised when he met her at the airport. "I didn't know you were going to be here!" she exclaimed.
He couldn't help smiling at her. Her eyes were sparkling like the ocean, and the lines of tension were gone from her face. She looked as if she had thoroughly enjoyed walking out of her job, and he said as much.
"It was...satisfying," she admitted, smiling at him. "How is Steve today?"
Frank shrugged. "Not as well as he was before you left." It was damned strange, but it was true. His pulse was weaker and faster, his breathing shallow and ragged. Even though he was unconscious, the man needed Jay.
Her eyes darkened with worry and she bit her lip. The urge to get back to Steve grew more intense, like invisible chains pulling at her.
But first she had to get settled in the apartment Frank had gotten for her, something that took up too much time and ate at her patience. The apartment was about half the size of her place in New York, really only two rooms—the living room and bedroom. The kitchen was a cubbyhole in a corner, and there was a crowded little alcove for dining. But the apartment was comfortable, especially since she planned to spend most of her time at the hospital, anyway. This was simply a place to sleep and have a few meals.
"I've arranged for you to have a car," Frank said as he carried in the last case. He grinned at her surprised look. "This isn't New York. You'll need a way to get around." He produced the keys from his pocket and dropped them on the table. "You can come and go at the hospital as you like. You have clearance to see Steve at any hour. I won't be around all the time, the way I have been, but whenever I'm gone another agent will be on hand."
"Are you going to the hospital with me now?"
"Now?" he asked, looking surprised in turn. "Aren't you going to unpack?"
"I can unpack later tonight. I'd rather see Steve now."
"All right." Privately he thought the plan was working a little too well, but that couldn't be helped. "Why don't you follow me in your car, so you can get used to the streets and learn the way to the hospital? Uh...you do drive, don't you?"
Smiling, she nodded. "I've only lived in New York for the past five years. Everywhere else I've lived, I needed a car. But I warn you, I haven't driven very much in that time, so give me a chance to get used to it again."

Actually, driving a car was a lot like riding a bicycle: once you had learned, the skill wasn't forgotten. After taking a moment to familiarize herself with the instrumentation, Jay followed Frank's car without difficulty. She had always been a steady, deliberate driver; Steve had been the daredevil, driving too fast, taking chances.

It wasn't until she stepped into his hospital room and approached the bed that she felt a knot of tension deep inside begin to loosen. She stared down at his bandaged head, with only his bruised, swollen lips and jaw visible, and her heart slammed painfully against her ribs. With infinite care she laid her fingers on his arm and began talking.

"I'm here. I had to go back to New York yesterday to pack my things and quit my job. Remind me to tell you about that someday. Anyway, I'm going to be staying here with you until you're better."

The voice was back. Slowly it penetrated the black layers that shrouded his mind, forming a tiny link with his consciousness. He still didn't understand the words, but he wasn't aware that he didn't understand. The voice simply was, like light where before there had been nothing. Sometimes the voice was calm and sometimes it rippled with amusement. He wasn't aware of the amusement, only of the change in tone.

He wanted more. He needed to get closer to the sound, and he began trying to fight his way out of the dark fog in his mind. But every time he tried, a vicious, burning pain that permeated his entire body began gnawing at him, and he would withdraw, back into the protecting blackness. Then the voice would lure him out again, until the beast attacked once more and he had to retreat.

* * *

His arm twitched the way it had once before, and again the movement startled Jay into jerking her hand away. She stopped talking and stared at him. Then, with only a slight pause, she replaced her hand on his arm and resumed what she had been saying. Her heart was pounding. It had to be an involuntary twitching of muscles forced into one position for too long. He couldn't be trying to respond, because the barbiturates they were feeding him literally shut down most of his brain functions. Most, but not all, Major Lunning had said. If Steve was aware of her, could he be trying to communicate?

"Are you awake?" she asked softly. "Can you twitch your arm again?"

His arm was motionless under her fingers, and with a sigh she again took up her rambling discourse. For a moment the feeling had been so strong that she had been convinced he was awake, despite everything they had told her.
She was back at the hospital the next morning before the sun was little more than a graying of the eastern sky. She hadn't slept well, partly because of the unfamiliar surroundings, but she couldn't place all the blame on being in a strange apartment. She had lain awake in the darkness, her mind churning as she tried to analyze and diminish her absurd conviction that, for a moment, Steve had actually been trying to reach out to her in the only way he could. But, for all her analyzing, logic meant nothing whenever she remembered the feeling that had burned through her.
Stop it! she scoffed at herself as she rode the elevator up to the ICU. Her imagination was running away with her, fueled by her own characteristic tendency to totally immerse herself in her interests. She had never been one of those cool, aloof people who could dole out their emotions in careful measure, though she had nearly wrecked her health by trying to be that way. Because she so badly wanted Steve to recover, she was imagining responses where there were none.
His room was bright with lights, despite the hour, since light or darkness hardly mattered to him in his condition. She supposed the nurses left the lights on for convenience. She closed the door, enclosing them in a private cocoon, then walked to his bed. She touched his arm. "I'm here," she said softly.
He drew a deep breath, his chest shuddering slightly.
It hit her hard, jerking at her like a rope that had suddenly been pulled taut. That deep sense of mutual awareness stretching between them, a communication that went beyond logic, beyond speech, was there again, stronger this time. He knew she was there. Somehow he recognized her. And he was fighting to reach her.
"Can you hear me?" she whispered shakily, her eyes locked on him. "Or do you somehow sense my touch? Is that what it is? Can you feel it when I touch your arm? You must be scared and confused, because you don't know what happened and you're trying to reach out, but you can't seem to make anything work. You're going to be all right, I promise you, but it's going to take time."
The voice. Something in it drew him, despite the pain that waited to claw him whenever he left the darkness. He feared the pain, but he wanted the

warmth of the voice more. He wanted to be closer to it... to her. At some point too dim for him to remember or even comprehend, he had realized it was a woman's voice. It held tenderness and the only hint of security in the black swirling emptiness of his mind and world. He knew very little, but he knew that voice; some primal instinct in him recognized it and yearned for it, giving him the strength to fight the pain and the darkness. He wanted her to know he was there.

His arm twitched, the movement somehow too slow to be an involuntary spasm of cramped muscles. This time Jay didn't jerk her hand away. Instead she rubbed her fingertips over his skin, while her eyes fastened on his face. "Steve? Did you mean to jerk your arm? Can you do it again?"

Odd. Some of the words made sense. Others made no sense at all. But she was there, closer, the voice clearer. He could see only darkness, as if the world had never been, but she was much nearer now. Pain racked his body, great waves of it that made sweat bead on his skin, but he didn't want to let go after getting this far, didn't want to fall back down into the black void. His arm? Yes. She wanted him to move his arm. He didn 't know if he could. It hurt so damned bad he didn 't know if he could hold on, if he could try anymore. Would she go away if he didn't move his arm? He couldn't bear being left alone again, where everything was so cold and dark and empty, not after getting this close to her warmth.

He tried to scream, and couldn't. The pain was incredible, tearing him apart like a wild animal with fangs and claws, ripping at him.

He moved his arm.

* * *

The movement was barely there, a twitch so light she would have missed it if her hand hadn't been on his arm. He had broken out in a sweat, his chest and shoulders glistening under the bright fluorescent lights. Her heart was pounding as she leaned closer to him, her gaze riveted on his lips. "Steve, can you hear me? It's Jay. You can't talk because you have a tube in your throat. But I'm right here. I won't leave you."

Slowly his bruised lips parted, as if he were trying to form words that refused to take shape. Jay hung over him, breathing suspended, her chest aching, as he struggled to force his lips and tongue through the motions of speech. She felt the force of both his desperation and dogged determination as, against all logic, he fought pain and drugs to be able to say one word. It

was as if he *couldn't* give up, no matter what it cost him. Something in him wouldn't let him give up.
Again he tried, his swollen, discolored lips moving in agonized deliberation. His tongue moved, doing its part to shape the word that would remain soundless:
"Hurt."
The pain in her chest became acute, and abruptly she gulped in deep breaths of air. She didn't feel the tears sliding down her cheeks. Gently she patted his arm. "I'll be right back. They'll give you something so you won't hurt any longer. I'm only leaving you for a minute, and I promise I'll be back."
She flew to the door and jerked it open, stumbling into the hall. She must have been there a lot longer than it seemed, because the third shift had gone home and the first shift was back on duty. Frank and Major Lun-ning were standing at the nurses' station, talking in low, urgent voices that didn't carry; both men looked up as she ran toward them, and a sort of disbelieving horror filled Frank's eyes.
"He's awake!" she choked. "He said that he hurts. Please, you have to give him something—"
They bolted past her, practically shoving her to the side. Frank said, "This wasn't supposed to happen," in a voice so hard she wasn't certain it was his. But it had to be, even though the words didn't make any sense. What wasn't supposed to happen? Steve wasn't supposed to wake up? Had they lied to her? Had they expected him to die after all? No, that couldn't be it, or Frank wouldn't have gone to so much trouble to get her to stay.
Nurses were scurrying into Steve's room, but when Jay tried to enter she was firmly escorted back into the hallway. She stood outside, listening to the muted furor of voices inside, chewing on her bottom lip and wiping the slow-welling tears from her cheeks. She should be in there. Steve needed her.
Inside the room, Frank watched as Major Lunning swiftly checked Steve's vital signs and brain-wave activity. "No doubt about it," the major confirmed absently as he worked. "He's coming out of it."
"He's on barbiturates, for God's sake!" Frank protested. "How can he come out of it until you lessen the dosage?"
"He's fighting it off. He's got one hell of a constitution, and that woman out there in the hall has a strong effect on him. Adrenaline is a powerful stimulant. Enough of it, and people perform superhuman feats of strength

and endurance. His blood pressure is up and his cardiac output has increased, all signs of adrenaline stimulation."
"Are you going to increase the dosage?"
"No. The coma was to keep his brain from swelling and causing more damage. I was almost ready to begin bringing him out of it anyway. He's just moved up the timetable a little. We'll have to keep him on drugs for the pain, but he won't be in a coma. He'll be able to wake up."
"Jay thought he said that he hurt. Can he feel pain, as drugged as he is?"
"If he was conscious enough to communicate, he was conscious enough to feel pain."
"Can he understand what we're saying?"
"It's possible. I'd say he definitely hears us. Understanding is something else entirely."
"How long will it be before we can question him?"
Major Lunning gave him a severe look. "Not until the swelling in his face and throat subside enough for me to remove the trach tube. I'd say another week. And don't expect him to be a fount of information. He may never remember what happened to him, and even if he eventually does, it could be months in the future."
"Is there any danger that he might reveal some classified information to Jay?" Frank didn't want to say too much. Major Lunning knew that Steve was a very important patient, but he didn't know any of the details.
"It isn't likely. He'll be too dazed and confused, maybe even delirious, and at any rate, he still isn't able to talk. I promise you, you'll be the first to see him when we take the trach tube out."
Frank stared at the still form on the bed; he had been unconscious for so long, it was hard to accept that he could hear or feel, that he had even made an attempt to communicate. But knowing what he knew about the man, Frank realized he should have been prepared for something like this. The man never gave up, never stopped fighting, even when the odds were so strong against him that anyone else would have walked away, and because of that he had survived in many instances when others wouldn't, just as he had this time. Most people never saw past the easy grin to that enormous, fearsome determination.
"What's the likelihood of permanent brain damage?" he asked quietly, remembering that Steve could hear, and there was no way of telling how much he could understand.

Major Lunning sighed. "I don't know. He received excellent, immediate care, and that counts for a lot. It may be so minimal that you won't be able to tell the difference, but I wouldn't put my money on anything right now. I simply can't tell. The fact that he woke up and responded to Ms. Granger is totally out of the expected range. He leapfrogged over several stages of recovery. I've never seen anything like it before. Normally the stages are stupor, where it would take vigorous stimulation to rouse him at all, then delirium and extreme agitation, as if the electrical processes of his brain had gone wild. Then he would become quieter, but he'd be very confused. In the next stage he would be like an automaton. He'd be able to answer questions, but unable to perform any but the simplest physical tasks. The higher brain functions return gradually."
"And the stage he's at now?"
"He was able to communicate, as if he were in the automaton stage, but I think he's lapsed back now. It must have taken a tremendous effort for him to do that much."
"As you cut down on the barbiturates, he'll be able to communicate more?"
"Perhaps. This one incident may not be repeated. He may revert to the more classical stages of recovery."
Exasperated, Frank said, "Is there anything you're certain of?"
Major Lunning gave him a long, level look. "Yes. I'm certain that his recovery depends on Ms. Granger. Keep her around. He'll need her."
"Is it safe for her to be with him while you bring him off the drugs?"
"I insist on it. She may keep him calm. I sure as hell don't want him thrashing around with that tube in his chest. Will she be able to take it?"
Frank lifted his brows. "She's stronger than she looks." And Jay was oddly devoted to Steve in a way that he hadn't expected and could not quite understand. It was as if something pulled her to him, but there wasn't any basis for that kind of attraction. Maybe later, when he was awake—his effect on women had always had his superiors shaking their heads in disbelief. But he was little more than a mummy now, unable to use the charm for which he was famous, so it had to be something else.
He had to let the Man know what had happened.
Suddenly the door was shoved open and Jay entered, giving them a hard, bright look that dared them to throw her out again. "I'm staying," she said flatly, moving to Steve's side and putting her hand on his arm. Her chin lifted stubbornly. "He needs me, and I'm going to be here."

Major Lunning looked from her to Steve, then at Frank. "She's staying," he said mildly, then consulted the file in his hand. "Okay, I'm going to begin decreasing the barbiturates now, to completely bring him out of the coma. It will take from twenty-four to thirty-six hours, and I don't know how he's going to react, so I want him under full-time observation." He glanced up at Jay. "Ms. Granger—may I call you Jay?"
"Please," she murmured.
"A nurse will be in here with him most of the time until he's completely off the drugs. His reaction may be unpredictable. If anything happens, it's important that you move away from the bed and not hinder anything we have to do. Do you understand?"
"Yes."
"Can I trust you not to faint and get in the way?"
"Yes."
"All right. I'll hold you to that." His stern military gaze measured her, and he must have been reassured by what he saw, because he gave an abrupt nod of approval. "It won't be easy, but I think you'll hold up."
Jay turned her attention back to Steve, dismissing everyone else in the room as if they no longer existed. She couldn't help it. He crowded everyone else out of her consciousness, flattening them into one-dimensional cartoon characters. Nothing mattered except him, and since his agonized attempt to talk to her, the feeling was even stronger than before. It shattered her and terrified her, because it was so far outside her previous experience, but she couldn't fight it. It was so strange; Steve was exerting far more power over her now than he ever had before, when he'd had full use of his senses and body, and his full range of charm. He was motionless and, for the most part, insensate, but something deep and primal pulled her to him. Just being in the same room with him made her heart settle into a stronger rhythm, heating her flesh as her blood raced through her veins, energizing her.
"I'm back," she murmured, touching his arm. "You can go to sleep now. Don't worry, don't fight the pain...just let it go. I'm here with you, and I won't leave. I'll watch over you, and I'll be here when you wake up again."
Slowly his breathing settled into an easier rhythm and his pulse rate dropped. His blood pressure lowered. Air hissed from the tube in his throat in what would have been a faint sigh had the tube not been in place. Jay stood by his bed, her fingers lightly stroking his arm as he slept.

Where are you? He came awake, screaming silently as he clawed his way through the shrouding darkness and pain into an even greater horror. The pain was like being eaten alive, but he could bear that because despite its force, it was secondary to the horrible emptiness. God, was he buried alive? He couldn't move, couldn't see, couldn't make a sound, as if his body had died but his mind had remained alive. Terrified, he tried again to scream and couldn't.

Where was he? What had happened?

He didn't know. God help him, he didn't know!

"I'm here," the voice crooned soothingly. "I know you're frightened and don't understand, but I'm here. I'll stay with you."

The voice. It was familiar. It had been in his dreams. No, not dreams. Something deeper than that. It was in his guts, his bones, his cells, his genes, his chromosomes. It was part of him, and he focused on it with an intense, almost painful recognition. Yet it was oddly alien, connected to nothing his conscious mind could produce.

"The doctors say you're probably very confused," the voice continued. It was a calm, tender voice, with a slightly husky catch in it, as if she had been crying. She. Yes. It was definitely a woman. He had a vague memory of that voice calling to him, pulling him out of a strange, suffocating darkness. She began reciting a litany of injuries, and he listened to her voice with fierce concentration, only gradually realizing that she was talking about him. He was injured. Not dead, not buried alive.

The tidal wave of relief exhausted him.

She was still there the next time he surfaced, and this time the initial terror was of shorter duration. Fractionally more alert, he decided she was hoarse rather than teary.

She was always there. He had no concept of time, only of pain and darkness, but gradually he became aware that there were two darknesses. One was in his mind, paralyzing his thoughts, but he could fight it. Slowly that darkness was becoming less. Then there was the other darkness, the absence of light, the inability to see. Again he would have panicked if she hadn't been there. Over and over she explained, as if she knew he would only gradually comprehend her words. He wasn't blind; there were bandages over his eyes, but he wasn't blind. His legs were broken, but he would walk again. His hands were burned, but he would use them again.

There was a tube in his throat to help him breathe; soon the tube would be removed and he would talk again.
He believed her. He didn't know her, but he trusted her.
He tried to think, but words boomeranged around in his head until he couldn't make sense of them. He didn't know... There was so much he didn't know. He didn't know anything. But he couldn't catch the words and arrange them in proper order so he'd know what it was he didn't know. It just didn't make sense, and he was too tired to fight.
Finally he woke to find that his thoughts were clearer, the confusion different, because the words made sense even though nothing else did. She was there. He could feel her hand on his arm, could hear her slightly hoarse voice. Did she stay with him all the time? How long had it been? It seemed forever, and it nagged at him, because he felt as if he should know exactly. There was so much he wanted to know, and he couldn't ask. Frustration ate at him, and his arm flexed beneath her fingers. God, what would happen to him if she left? She was the one link he had to the world outside the prison of his own body, his link to sanity, the only window in his world of darkness. And suddenly the need to know coalesced inside him into a single thought, a single word: *Who?*
His lips formed the word and gave birth to it in silence. Yes, that was the word he'd wanted. Everything he wanted to know was summed up in that one small word.
Jay gently laid her fingers over his swollen lips. "Don't try to talk," she whispered. "Let's use a spelling system. I'll recite the alphabet, and whenever I get to the letter you want, twitch your arm. I'll do the alphabet over and over until we've spelled out whatever you want to say. Can you do that? One twitch for yes, two twitches for no."
She was exhausted; it had been two days since the first time he had woken up, and she had been with him for most of that time. She had talked until her voice was almost gone, her words giving him a bridge out of his coma into reality. She knew when he was awake, sensed that he was terrified, felt his struggle to understand what had happened. But this was the first time his lips had moved, and she was so tired she hadn't been able to grasp what he'd been trying to say. The alphabet game was the only way she could think of for them to communicate, but she didn't know if he'd be able to concentrate enough for it to work.
His arm twitched. Just once.

She drew a deep breath, forcing her exhaustion away. "All right. Here we go. A... B...C...D..."
She began to give up hope as she slowly ran through the alphabet and his arm lay motionless under her hand. It had been a long shot, anyway. Major Lunning had said it could be days before Steve's mind would -be clear enough for him to really understand what was going on around him. Then she said "W," and his arm twitched.
She stopped. "W?"
His arm twitched. Once, for "Yes."
Joy shot through her. "Okay, W is the first letter. Let's go for the second one. A... B..."
His arm twitched on the H.
And again on the O.
He stopped there.
Jay was astounded. "*Who?* Is that it? You want to know who I am?"
His arm twitched. *Yes.*
He didn't know; he really didn't know. She couldn't remember if she had mentioned who she was, except when she had first begun talking to him. Had she thought he would remember her voice after not seeing her for five years?
"I'm Jay," she said gently. "Your ex-wife."

Chapter Four

He was very still. Jay had the impression that she could feel him withdrawing, though he didn't move a muscle. A surprisingly sharp pain bloomed inside, and she chided herself for it. What had she expected? He couldn't get up and hug her, he couldn't speak, and he was probably exhausted. She knew all that, yet she still had the feeling that he was pulling back from her. Did he resent being so dependent on her? Steve had always been aloof in a curious sort of way, holding people away from him. Or maybe he resented the fact that she was here with him now, rather than some impersonal nurse. After all, a certain degree of independence remained when the service was detached, done because it was a job. Personal service carried a price that couldn't be paid in dollars, and Steve wouldn't like that.

She schooled her voice to a calmness she didn't feel. "Do you have any more questions?"
Two twitches. *No.*
She had been pushed away so many times that she recognized it now, even as subtle and unspoken as the message was. It hurt. She closed her eyes, fighting for the control that would let her speak again. It was a moment before she managed it. "Do you want me to stay in here with you?"
He was still for a long moment. Then his arm twitched. And twitched again. *No.*
"All right. I won't bother you again." Her control was shot, her voice thin and taut. She didn't wait to see if he made any response, but turned and walked out. She felt almost sick. Even now, it was an effort to walk out and leave him alone. She wanted to stay with him, protect him, fight for him. God, she would even take his pain on herself if she could. But he didn't want her. He didn't need her. She had been right all along in thinking that he wouldn't appreciate her efforts on his behalf, but the pull she thought she had felt between them had been so strong that she had ignored her own good sense and let Frank talk her into staying.
Well, at least she should let Frank know that her sojourn here was over, and that she would be leaving. Her problems hadn't changed; she still had to find a new job. Digging a coin out of her purse, she found a pay phone and called the number Frank had given her. He hadn't spent as much time at the hospital these past two days as he had before; in fact, he hadn't been there at all that day.
He answered promptly, and hearing his calm voice helped. "This is Jay. I wanted you to know that my job is over. Steve doesn't want me to stay with him anymore."
"What?" He sounded startled. "How do you know?"
"He told me."
"How in blue blazes did he do that? He can't talk, and he can't write. Major Lunning said he should still be pretty confused, anyway."
"He's a lot better this morning. We worked out a system," she explained tiredly. "I recite the alphabet, and he signals with his arm when I get to the letter he wants. He can spell out words and answer questions. One twitch means 'Yes' and two twitches means 'No.'"
"Have you told Major Lunning?" Frank asked sharply.

"No, I haven't seen him. I just wanted to let you know that Steve doesn't want me with him."
"Have Lunning paged. I want to talk to him. Now."
For such a pleasant man, Frank could be commanding when he chose, Jay thought as she went to the nurses' station and requested that Major Lunning be paged. It was five minutes before he appeared, looking tired and rumpled, and dressed in surgicals. He listened to Jay, then, without a word, walked to the pay phone and talked quietly to Frank. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but when he hung up he called a nurse and went directly into Steve's room.
Jay waited in the hallway, struggling to handle her feelings. Though she knew Steve and had expected this, it still hurt. It hurt more now than it had when they had divorced. She felt oddly.. .betrayed, and bereft, as if she had lost part of herself, and she hadn't felt that way before. She hadn't felt so strongly connected to him before. Well, this was just another classic example of her own intensity leading her to read things into a situation that simply weren't there. Would she ever learn?
Major Lunning was in Steve's room a long time, and a phalanx of nurses came and went. Within half an hour Frank arrived, his face taut and set. He squeezed Jay's arm comfortingly as he went past, but he didn't stop to talk. He, too, disappeared into Steve's room, as if something dreadfully important were going on in there.
Jay moved to the visitors' lounge, sitting quietly with her hands folded in her lap while she tried to plan what she should do next. Return to New York, obviously, and get a job. But the idea of hurling herself back into the business world left her cold. She didn't want to go back. She didn't want to leave Steve. Even now, she didn't want to leave him.
Almost an hour later Frank found her in the lounge. He looked at her sharply before going to the coffee machine and buying two cups. Jay looked up and managed a smile for him as he approached. "Do I really look as if I need that?" she asked wryly, nodding toward the coffee.
He extended a cup toward her. "I know. It tastes worse than it looks. Drink it anyway. If you don't need it now, you will in a minute."
She took the cup and sipped the hot liquid, grimacing at the taste. It was a mystery how anyone could take simple water and coffee and make them taste so horrible. "Why will I need it in a minute? It's over, isn't it? Steve

told me to go away. It's obvious that he doesn't want me here, so my presence will only upset him and slow his recovery."
"It isn't over," Frank said» looking down at his own coffee, and his flat tone made Jay look at him sharply. He looked haggard, with worry etching new lines into his face.
A cold chill ran down her spine and she sat up straight. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Has he relapsed?"
"No."
"Then what's wrong?"
"He doesn't remember," Frank said simply. "Anything. He has amnesia."
Frank had been right; she did need the coffee. She drank that cup, then got another one. Her head was reeling, and she felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. "What else can go wrong?" she asked, talking mostly to herself, but Frank knew what she meant.
He sighed. They hadn't counted on this. They had needed him awake, able to talk, able to understand what needed to be done. This latest development had thrown a monkey wrench into the whole plan. He didn't even know who he was! How could he protect himself if he didn't know who he had to be on guard against? He couldn't recognize friends or enemies.
"He's been asking for you," Frank said, taking her hand. She started, already rising to her feet, but he tugged on her hand and she sank back into her chair. "We've been asking him a lot of questions," he continued. "We used your system, though it takes a while. When you told him you were his ex-wife, it confused him, scared him. He couldn't remember you, and he didn't know what to do. Remember, he's still easily confused. It's hard for him to concentrate, though he's getting better fast."
"Are you certain he's asking for me?" Jay asked, her heart pounding. Out of everything he had said, her emotions had centered on his first sentence.
"Yes. He spelled out your name over and over."
The instinct to go to him was so strong it was almost painful. She forced herself to sit still, to understand more. "He has total amnesia? He doesn't remember anything?"
"He doesn't even know his own name." Frank sighed again, a heavy sound. "He doesn't remember anything about the explosion or why he was there. Nothing. A total blank. Damn it!" The last expressed his helpless frustration.
"What does Major Lunning think?"

"He said total amnesia is extremely rare. More often it's a sort of spot amnesia that blocks out the accident itself and anything that happened a short while before it. With the head trauma Steve suffered, amnesia wasn't that unexpected, but this..." He made a helpless gesture.
She tried to think of what she had read about amnesia, but all that came to mind was the dramatic use often made of it on soap operas. Invariably the amnesiac recovered his full memory during a highly dramatic moment, just in time to prevent a murder or keep from being murdered himself. It was good melodrama, but that was all it was.
"Will he regain his memory?"
"Probably. Part of it, at least. There's no way to be certain. It might start coming back almost immediately, or it could take months before he begins remembering anything. Major Lunning said that his memory will come back in bits and pieces, usually the oldest memories first."
Might. Probably. Could. Usually. What it all added up to was that they simply didn't know. In the meantime Steve lay in his bed, unable to talk, unable to see, unable to move. All he could do was hear and think.
What would it be like to be so cut adrift from everything familiar, even himself? He had no point of reference for anything. The thought of the inner terror he must be feeling squeezed her heart.
"Are you still willing to stay?" Frank asked, his clear eyes filled with concern. "Knowing that it might take months or even years?"
"Years?" she echoed faintly. "But you only wanted me to stay until the surgery on his eyes was completed."
"We didn't know then that he wouldn't remember anything. Major Lunning said that being around familiar things and people would help stimulate his memory, give him a feeling of stability."
"You want me to stay until he regains his memory," Jay stated, putting it into words. The idea frightened her. The longer she stayed with Steve, the more strongly she reacted to him. What would happen to her if she fell in love with him far more deeply than she had the first time, only to lose him again when he returned to his footloose life? She was afraid that she already cared too much to simply walk away. How could she walk away when he needed her?
"He needs you," Frank said, echoing her thoughts. "He's asking for you. He responds to you so strongly that he keeps confounding Major Lunning's

predictions. And we need you, Jay. We need you to help him in any way you can, because we need to know what he knows."
"If sentiment won't get me, try patriotism?" she asked tiredly, leaning her head back against the padded orange vinyl chair. "It wasn't necessary. I won't leave him. I don't know what's going to happen, or how we'll handle it if he doesn't get his memory back soon, but I won't leave him."
She got up and walked out, and Frank sat there for a moment staring at the cup still in his hands. From what she'd just said, he knew that Jay sensed she was being manipulated, but she was willing to let them do it because Steve was so important to her. He had to talk to the Man about this latest development, and he wondered what would happen. They had counted on Steve's willing participation, on his talents and skills. Now they had to let him walk out on the streets as helpless as a baby because he couldn't recognize the dangers, or take the risk of telling him things that could set back his recovery. Major Lunning had been adamant that upsetting him would be the worst thing they could do. He needed quiet and tranquillity, a stable emotional base; his memory would return faster under those conditions. No matter what decision the Man reached, Steve was at risk. And if Steve was at risk, so was Jay.
It was hard for Jay to enter Steve's room after the emotional battering she had taken. She needed time to get herself under control, but she felt the pull between them again; it was growing so strong she no longer had to be in the room with him, touching him. He needed her right now, far more than she needed time. She opened the door and felt his attention center on her, though not even his head moved. It was as if he were holding his breath.
"I'm back," she said quietly, walking to his bed and putting her hand on his arm. "It seems I can't stay away."
His arm twitched urgently, several times, and she got the message. "All right," she said, and began reciting the alphabet.
Sorry.
What could she say? Deny that she'd been upset? He would know better. He felt the pull just as she did, because he was on the other end of that invisible rope. He turned his face slightly toward her, his bruised lips parted as he waited for her answer.
"It's all right," she said. "I didn't realize what a shock I had just given you."
Yes.

It was odd how much expression he could put in a single motion, but she felt his wryness and sensed that he was still shocked. Shocked, but in control. His control was astounding.
She began spelling again.
Afraid.
The admission hit her hard; it was something the old Steve never would have admitted, but the man he had become was so much stronger that he could admit it and lose nothing of his strength. "I know, but I'll stay with you as long as you want me," she promised.
What happened? He made it a question by a slight upward movement of his arm.
Keeping her voice calm, Jay told him about the explosion but didn't give him any of the details. Let him think that he'd simply been in an accident.
Eyes?
So he hadn't understood everything she'd told him before and needed reassuring. "You'll have more surgery on your eyes, but the prognosis is good. You'll see again, I promise."
Paralyzed?
"No! You've broken both legs and they're in casts. That's why you can't move them."
Toes.
"Your toes?" she asked in bewilderment. "They're still there."
His lips moved in a very slight, painful smile. *Touch them.*
She bit her lip. "Okay." He wanted her to touch his toes so he'd know he still had feeling in them, as a reassurance that he wasn't paralyzed. She walked to the foot of the bed and firmly folded her hands over his bare toes, letting his cool flesh absorb the heat from her palms. Then she returned to his side and touched his arm. "Did you feel that?"
Yes. Again he gave that painful fraction of a smile.
"Anything else?"
Hands.
"They're burned, and in bandages, but they're not third-degree burns. Your hands will be fine."
Chest. Hurts.
"You have a collapsed lung, and a tube in your chest. Don't do any tossing around."
Funny.

She laughed. "I didn't know anyone could be silent and sarcastic at the same time."
Throat.
"You have a trach tube because you weren't breathing well."
Face broken?
She sighed. He wanted to know, not be protected. "Yes, some bones in your face were broken. You aren't disfigured, but the swelling made it hard for you to breathe. As soon as the swelling goes down, they'll take the trach tube out."
Lift the sheet and check my—
"I will not!" she said indignantly, halting her spelling when she realized where his words were heading. Then she had to laugh because he actually managed to look impatient. "Everything is still there, believe me."
Functional?
"You'll have to find that out on your own!"
Prissy.
"I'm not prissy, and you behave or I'll have a nurse change your tube. Then you'll find out the hard way what you want to know." As soon as she said the words she felt herself blushing, and it didn't help that he was smiling again. She hadn't meant to sound the way she had.
The effort of concentrating for so long had tired him, and after a minute he spelled *Sleep.*
"I didn't mean to tire you out," she murmured. "Go to sleep."
Stay?
"Yes, I'm staying. I won't go back to my apartment without telling you." Her throat felt thick at his need for reassurance, and she stood by the bed with her hand on his arm until his breathing changed into the deep, steady rhythm of sleep.
Even then she was reluctant to take her hand away, and she stood beside him for a long time. A smile kept curving her lips. His personality was so strong that it came through despite his limited means of communication. He wanted the truth about his condition, not vague promises or medical double-talk. He might not know his name, but that hadn't changed the man he was. He was strong, much stronger than he had been before. Whatever had happened to him in the past five years had tempered him, like steel subjected to the hottest fires. He was harder, stronger, tougher, his willpower so fierce it was like an energy field emanating from him. Oh, he

had been a charming rascal before, devilishly reckless and daring, with a glint in his eye that had turned many feminine heads. But now he was... dangerous.

The word startled her, but when she examined it, she realized that it described exactly the man he had become. He was a dangerous man. She didn't feel threatened by him, but danger didn't necessarily constitute a threat. He was dangerous because of his steely, implacable will; when this man decided to do something, it wasn't safe to get in his way. At some time in the past five years, something had drastically changed him and she wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was. It must have been something cataclysmic, something awful, to have so focused his character and determination. It was as if he had been stripped down to the bare essentials of human existence, forced to discard all his personality traits that weren't necessary to survival and adopt new ones that were. What was left was hard and pure, unbreakable and curiously resilient. This was a man who wouldn't admit defeat; he didn't know what it was.

Her heart was beating heavily as she stood looking down at him, her attention so focused on him that they might have been the only two people in the world. He awed her, and he attracted her so strongly that she jerked her hand away from his arm as soon as the thought formed. Dear God! She would be a fool to let herself get caught in that trap again. Even more now than before, Steve was essentially alone, his personality so honed that he was complete unto himself. She had walked away relatively unscathed before, but what would happen to her this time if she let herself care too much? She felt scared, not only because she was teetering on the edge of heartbreak, but because she was even daring to think of getting too close to him. It was like watching a panther in a cage, standing outside the bars and knowing you were safe, but feeling the danger that was barely restrained. Making love with him before had been... fun, passionate in a playful way. What would it be like now? Was the playfulness gone? She thought it must be. His lovemaking would be intense and elemental now, as he was, like getting caught up in a storm.

She became aware that she could barely breathe, and she forced herself to walk away from his bed. She didn't want him to mean that much to her. And she was very much afraid that he already did.

"What do we do?" Frank asked quietly, his clear eyes meeting shuttered black ones.

"We play out the hand," the Man answered just as quietly. "We have to. If we do anything out of the ordinary now, it could tip someone off, and he isn't able to recognize his enemies."
"Any luck in tracing Piggot?"
"We lost him in Beirut, but we know he hooked up with his old pals. He'll surface again, and we'll be waiting."
"We just have to keep our guy alive until we can neutralize Piggot," Frank said, his tone turning glum.
"We'll do it. One way or the other, we have to keep Piggot's cutthroats from getting their hands on him."
"When he gets his memory back, he isn't going to like what we've done."
A brief smile touched the Man's hard mouth. "He'll raise mortal hell, won't he? But I'm not taking any chance with the protected-witness program until he's able to look out for himself, and maybe not even then. It's been penetrated before, and could be again. Everything hinges on getting Piggot."
"You ever wish you were back in the field, so you could hunt him yourself?"
The Man leaned back, hooking his hands behind his head. "No. I've gotten domesticated. I like going home at night to Rachel and the kids. I like not having to watch my back."
Frank nodded, thinking of the time when the Man's back had been a target for every hit man and terrorist in the business. He was safe now, out of the mainstream ... as far as was generally known. A very small group of people knew otherwise. The Man officially didn't exist; even the people who followed his orders didn't know the orders came from him. He was buried so deeply in the bowels of bureaucracy, protected by so many twists and turns, that there was no way to connect him to the job he actually did. The President knew about him, but Frank doubted the vice president did, or any department secretary, the Chiefs of Staff or the head of the agency that employed him. Whoever was President next might not know about him. The Man decided for himself whom he could trust; Frank was one of those people. And so was the man in Bethesda Naval Hospital.
Two days later, they took the tube out of Steve's chest because his collapsed lung had healed and reinflated. When they let Jay into his room again she hung over the side of his bed, stroking his arm and shoulder until his

breathing settled down and the fine mist of perspiration on his body began to dry.
"It's over, it's over," she murmured.
He moved his arm, a signal that he wanted to spell, and she began reciting the alphabet.
Not fun.
"No," she agreed.
More tubes?
"There's one in your stomach, for feeding you." She felt his muscles tense as if in anticipation of the pain he knew would come, and he spelled out a terse expletive. Her hand moved over his chest in sympathy, feeling the coarseness of his hair as it grew out, and avoiding the wound where the tube had entered his body.
He took a deep breath and forced himself to slowly relax. *Raise head.*
It took her a few seconds to figure that one out. He must be incredibly sore from lying flat for so long, unable to shift his legs or lift his arms. The only time his arms were moved was when the bandages were changed. She pressed the control that raised the head of the bed, lifting him only an inch or so at a time, keeping her hand on his arm so he could signal her when he wanted her to stop. He took several more deep breaths as his weight shifted to his hips and lower back, then moved his arm to halt her. His lips moved in silent curse, his muscles tightening against the pain, but after a moment he adjusted and began to relax again.
Jay watched him, her deep blue eyes mirroring the pain he felt, but he was improving daily, and seeing the improvements filled her with heady joy. The swelling in his face was subsiding; his lips were almost normal again, though dark bruises still stained his jaw and throat.
She could almost feel his impatience. He wanted to talk, he wanted to see, he wanted to walk, to be able to shift his own weight in the bed. He was imprisoned in his body and he didn't like it. She thought it must be close to hell to be cut off from his own identity as he was, as well as being so completely constrained by his injuries. But he wasn't giving in; he asked more questions every day, trying to fill the void of memories by making new ones, maybe hoping that some magic word would take him back to himself. Jay talked to him even when he didn't ask questions, idle conversation that, she hoped, gave him basic information and perspective.

Even if it just filled the silence, that was something. If he didn't want her to talk he would tell her.
A movement of his arm alerted her, and she began the alphabet.
When married?
She caught her breath. It was the first personal question he'd asked her, the first time he'd wanted to know about their past relationship. "We were married for three years," she managed to say calmly. "We divorced five years ago."
Why?
"It wasn't a hostile divorce," she mused. "Or a hostile marriage. I guess we simply wanted different things out of life. We .grew apart, and finally the divorce seemed more like a formality than any wrenching change in our lives."
What did you want?
Now that was a twenty-thousand-dollar question. What did she want? She had been certain of her life up until the Friday when she had been fired and Franlc Payne had brought Steve back into her life. Now she wasn't certain at all; too many changes had happened all at once, jolting her life onto a different track entirely. She looked at Steve and felt him waiting patiently for her answer.
"Stability, I guess. I wanted to settle down more than you did. We had fun together, but we weren't really suited to each other."
Children?
The thought startled her. Oddly, when they had been married, she hadn't been in any hurry to start a family. "No, no children." She hadn't been able to visualize having Steve's children. Now... oh God, now the idea shook her to the bones.
Remarried?
"No, I've never remarried. I don't think you have, either. When Frank notified me of your accident, he asked if you had any other relatives or close friends, so you must have stayed single."
He'd been listening closely, but his interest suddenly sharpened. She could feel it, like a touch against her skin. *No family?*
"No. Your parents are dead, and if you had any relatives, I never knew about them." She skated around telling him that he'd been orphaned at an early age and raised in foster homes. Not having a family seemed to disturb

him, though he'd never given any indication that it bothered him while they had been married.
He lay very still and the line of his mouth was grim. She sensed there was a lot he wanted to ask her, but the very complexity of his questions stymied him. To get his mind off the questions he couldn't ask and the answers he wouldn't like, she began to tell him about how they had met, and slowly his mouth relaxed.
"...and since it was our first date, I was a little stiff. More than a little stiff, if you want the truth. First dates are torment, aren't they? It had been raining off and on all day, and water was standing in the streets. We walked out to your car, and a passing truck hit this huge puddle just as we reached the curb. We were both drenched, from the head down. And we stood there laughing at each other like complete fools. I don't even want to think what I looked like, but you had muddy water dripping off your nose."
His lips were twitching, as if it hurt him to smile but he couldn't stop the movement. *What did we do?*
She chuckled. "There wasn't a lot we could do, looking the way we did. We went back to my apartment, and while our clothes were washing we watched television and talked. We never did make it to the party we'd been going to. One date led to another, and five months later we were married."
He asked one question after another, like a child listening to fairy tales and wanting more. Knowing that he was reaching for the part of himself that was lost due to the blankness of his memory, she tirelessly recounted places they had gone and the things they'd done, people they had known, hoping that some little detail would provide the spark needed to bring it all back. Her voice began to grow hoarse, and finally he managed a small shake of his head.
Sorry.
She pressed his arms, understanding. "Don't worry," she said softly. "It will all come back. It will just take time."
But the days passed and still his memory didn't return—not even a glimmer of a link to the past. She could feel his intense concentration on every word she uttered, as if he were willing himself to remember. Even now, his control was phenomenal; he never allowed himself to become frustrated or lose his temper. He just kept trying, keeping his feelings under control as if he sensed that any emotional upheaval could set his recovery back. Total

recovery was his aim, and he worked toward it with a single-minded concentration that never wavered.
Frank was there the day they took the trach tube from Steve's throat, and he waited in the hall with Jay, holding her hand. She looked at him questioningly, but he merely shook his head. Several minutes later a hoarse cry of pain from Steve's room made her jerk, and Frank's hand tightened on hers. "You can't go in there," he said softly. "They're removing his stomach tube, too."
The cry had been Steve's; the first sound he'd made had been one of pain. She began to tremble, every instinct she had screaming at her to go to him, but Frank held her still. There were no other sounds from the room, and finally the door opened and the doctors and nurses exited. Major Lunning was last, and he paused to talk to Jay.
"He's all right," he said, smiling a little at her tense face. "He's breathing just fine, and talking. I won't tell you what his first words were. But I want to warn you that his speaking voice won't be the way you remember it; his larynx was damaged, and his voice will always sound hoarse. It will improve some, but he'll never sound the way he did before."
"I'd like to talk to him now," Frank said, looking down at Jay, and she understood that there were things he wanted to tell Steve, even though Steve didn't remember what had happened.
"Good luck," Major Lunning said, smiling wryly at Frank. "He doesn't want you, he wants Jay, and he was pretty autocratic about it."
Knowing just how autocratic he could be, Frank wasn't surprised. But he still needed to ask Steve some questions, and if this was his lucky day, the questions just might trigger some return of memory. Patting Jay's hand again, he went into Steve's room and firmly closed the door behind him.
Less than a minute later, he opened the door and looked at Jay, his expression both frustrated and amused. "He wants you, and he isn't cooperating until he gets you."
"Did you think I would?" a raspy voice demanded behind him. "Jay, come here."
She began trembling again at the sound of that rough, deep voice, so much rougher and deeper than she remembered. It was almost gravelly, and it was wonderful. Her knees felt rubbery as she crossed the room to him, but she wasn't aware of actually walking. She was just there, somehow, clinging to

the railing of his bed in an effort to hold herself upright. "I'm here," she whispered.
He was silent a moment; then he said, "I want a drink of water."
She almost laughed aloud, because it was such a mundane request that could have been made of anyone, but then she saw the tension in his jaw and lips and realized that, again, he was checking out his condition, and he wanted her with him. She turned to the small Styrofoam pitcher that was kept full of crushed ice, which she used to keep his lips moist. The ice had melted enough that she was able to pour the glass half full of water. She stuck a straw into it and held it to his lips.
Gingerly he sucked the liquid into his mouth and held it for a moment, as if letting it soak into his membranes. Then, slowly, he swallowed, and after a minute he relaxed. "Thank God," he muttered hoarsely. "My throat still feels swollen. I wasn't sure I could swallow, and I sure as hell didn't want that damned tube back."
Behind Jay, Frank turned a smothered laugh into a cough.
"Anything else?" she asked.
"Yes. Kiss me."

Chapter Five

When she opened the door to Steve's room the next morning, he turned his head on the pillow and said, "Jay." His voice was harsh, almost guttural, and she wondered if he'd just awakened.
She paused, her attention caught as she stared at his bandaged eyes. "How did you know?" The nurses were in and out, so how could he have guessed her identity?
"I don't know," he said slowly. "Maybe your smell, or just the feel of you in the room. Maybe I recognize the rhythm of your walk."
"My smell?" she asked blankly. "I'm not using perfume, so if you smell me from that distance something's wrong!"
His lips curved in a smile. "It's a fresh, faintly sweet smell. I like it. Do I get a good-morning kiss?"
Her heart gave a giant leap, just as it had the day before when he'd demanded that she kiss him. She had given him a light, tender kiss, barely brushing her lips against his, while Frank, in the background, had pretended

to be invisible; but it had taken her pulse a good ten minutes to settle down afterward. Now, even while her mind shouted at her to be cautious, she crossed the room to him and bent down to give him another light kiss, letting her lips linger for only a second. But when she started to draw away, he increased the pressure, his mouth molding itself to hers, and her heart slammed wildly against her rib cage as excitement shot through her.
"You taste like coffee," she managed to say when she finally forced herself to stand upright again, breaking the contact.
His lips had been slightly parted, with a disturbing sensuality, but at her words they took on a smug line. "They wanted me to drink tea or apple juice—" he made it sound like hemlock "—but I talked them into letting me have coffee."
"Oh?" she asked dryly. "How? By refusing to drink anything until you had your coffee?"
"It worked," he said, not sounding at all repentant. She could imagine how helpless the nurses were against his relentless will.
Despite the fact that she no longer needed to communicate with him in their old way, her hand went to his arm in habit, and she was so used to the contact that she didn't notice it. "How are you feeling?" she asked, then winced at the triteness of the question, but she was still rattled from the effects of his kiss.
"Like hell."
"Oh."
"How long have I been here?"
To her surprise, she had to stop and count the days. She had become so involved with him that time had ceased to mean anything, and it was difficult to recall. "Three weeks."
"Then I have three more weeks in these casts?"
"I think so, yes."
"All right." He said it as if giving his permission, and she felt that he would give them three weeks and not one day longer, or he would take the casts off himself. He lifted his left arm. "I'm minus a couple of needles today. They took the IVs out about an hour ago."
"I hadn't even noticed!" she exclaimed, smiling a little at the note of pride in his ruined voice. She wondered if she would ever get used to its harshness, but at the same time tiny shivers went down her spine every time she heard it.

"And I refused the pain medication. I want my head clear. There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask before, but it took so much time and effort, and my brain was so foggy from the drugs, that it was just too much trouble. Now I want to know what's going on. Where am I? I've heard you call the doctor Major, so I know I'm in a military hospital. The question is, why?"
"You're in Bethesda," she said.
"A naval hospital?" Astonishment roughened his voice even more.
"Frank said you were brought here for security reasons. There are guards posted at every entrance to this wing. And this was a central location for all the surgeons they pulled in for you."
"Major Lunning isn't navy," he said sharply.
"No." It was astonishing that he could lose the most basic of memories, those of himself, yet retain the knowledge that Bethesda was a naval hospital and that major wasn't a navy rank. She watched the stillness of his mouth as he studied the implications of what she had just told him.
"Then someone with a lot of influence wanted me here. Langley, probably."
"Who?"
"Company headquarters, baby. CIA." She felt a chill of dread as he continued, "Maybe the White House, but Langley is the most likely bet. What about Frank Payne?"
"He's FBI. I trust him," she said steadily.
"Damn, this is getting deep," he muttered. "All these different departments and military branches coordinating just isn't normal. What's going on? Tell me about the explosion."
"Didn't Frank tell you?"
"I didn't ask for or volunteer any information. I didn't know him."
Yes, that was like Steve. He had always held back, watching cautiously, though she had already married him before she began noticing that particular trait. He used his charm like a shield, so that most people would have described him as outgoing and spontaneous, when in fact he was just the opposite. He had held people away, not trusting them and not allowing anyone close to him, but they never noticed, because he was such an actor. Now she sensed that the shield was gone. People could take him as he was or leave him; he didn't care. It was a hard attitude, but she found that she liked it better. It was real, without pretense or subterfuge. And for the first time, he was letting her get close to him. He needed her, trusted her.

Perhaps it was only because of the extenuating circumstances, but it was happening, and it stunned her.
"Jay?" he prompted.
"I don't know exactly what happened," she explained. "I don't know why you were there. They don't know either."
"Who is 'they'?"
"Frank. The FBI."
"And whoever else he's working for," he added dryly. "Go on."
"Frank told me that you weren't doing anything illegal that they know of. Perhaps you were only an innocent bystander, but you have a reputation for sniffing out trouble, and they think you might know something about what happened to their operation. They had set up a sting, or whatever you want to call it, but someone had planted a bomb at the meeting site. You were the only survivor."
"What kind of sting?"
"I don't know. All Frank has said is that it involved national security."
"And they're afraid their guy's cover was blown, but they don't know, because the players on the other side were disintegrated, too," he said, as if to himself. "It could have been a double double-cross, and the bomb was meant for the others. Damn! No wonder they want me to get my memory back! But all that doesn't explain one thing. Why are you involved?"
"They brought me here to identify you," she said, absently stroking his arm as she had for so many hours.
"Identify me? Didn't they know?"
"Not for certain. Part of your driver's license was found, but they still weren't certain if you were... you, or their agent. Apparently you and the agent were about the same height and weight, and your hands were burned, so they weren't able to get your fingerprints for identification." She paused as something nagged at her memory, but she couldn't bring the elusive detail into focus. For a moment it was close; then Steve's next question splintered her concentration.
"Why did they ask you? Wasn't there anyone else who could identify me? Or did we stay close after our divorce?"
"No, we didn't. It was the first tune I'd seen you in five years. You've always been pretty much a loner. You weren't the type for bosom buddies. And you don't have any family, so that left me."

He moved restlessly, his mouth drawing into a hard line as he uttered a brief, explicit curse. "I'm trying to get a handle on this," he said tersely. "And I keep running into this damned blank wall. Some of what you tell me seems so familiar, and I think, yeah, that's me. Then part of it is as if you're telling me about some stranger, and I wonder if I really know. Hell, how can I know?" he finished with raw frustration.
Her fingers glided over his arm, giving him what comfort she could. She didn't waste her breath mouthing platitudes because she sensed they would only make him furious. As it was, he had already used up his small store of energy with the questions he had asked her, and he lay there in silence for several minutes, his chest rising and falling too quickly. Finally the rhythm of his breathing slowed, and he muttered, "I'm tired."
"You've pushed yourself too far. It's only been three weeks, you know."
"Jay."
"What?"
"Stay with me."
"I will. You know I will."
"It's... strange. I can't even picture your face in my mind, but part of me knows you. Maybe biblical knowledge goes deeper than mere memory."
His harsh voice gave rough edges to the words, but Jay felt as if an electrical charge had hit her body, making her skin tingle. Her mind filled with images, but not those of memory; her imagination manufactured new ones—of this man with his harder soul and ruined voice, bending over her, taking her in his arms, moving between her legs in a more complete possession than she had ever known before. Her own breath shortened as her breasts grew tight and achy, and her insides turned liquid. Another tingle jolted her, making her feel as if she were on the verge of physical ecstasy, and merely from his words, his voice. The violence of her response shocked her, scared her, and she jerked away from his bed before she could control the motion.
"Jay?" He was concerned, even a little alarmed, as he felt her move away from him.
"Go to sleep," she managed to say, her voice almost under control. "You need the rest. I'll be here when you wake up."
He lifted his bandaged hand. "How about holding my hand?"
"I can't do that. It would hurt you."

"It would blend in with all the other pain," he said groggily. He was losing strength rapidly. "Just touch me until I go to sleep, all right?"
Jay felt his request go straight through her heart. That he should ask anything of her still staggered her, but his need to be touched was almost more than she could bear. She stepped back to the bed, folding her hand over his arm. At the first touch she felt him begin to relax, and within two minutes he was asleep.
She stepped outside, feeling the need to escape, though she wasn't certain exactly what she was escaping from. It was Steve, and yet it was something else, something inside her that was growing more and more powerful. It scared her; she didn't want it, yet she was helpless to stop it. She had never responded to him like that before, not even in the first wild, heady days of their marriage. It's just the situation, she told herself, trying to find comfort in the thought. It was just her tendency to throw herself wholly into something, concentrating on it too intensely, that made her feel like this. But comfort eluded her and despair welled in her heart, because analyzing her emotions didn't change them. God help her, she was falling in love with him again, with even less reason than she'd had the first time. For most of the past three weeks he'd been little more than a mummy, incapable of movement or speech, yet she had felt drawn to him, tied to him; and loving him now was much more dangerous than it had been before. He was a different, stronger, harder man. Even when he'd been unconscious, she had felt his fierce inner power, and her need to know what had happened to him to cause that change was so strong it almost hurt.
A nurse, the one who had first noticed Steve's unconscious reaction to Jay's presence, stopped beside her. "How is he? He refused his pain medication this morning."
"He's asleep now. He tires very easily."
The nurse nodded, her bright blue eyes meeting Jay's darker ones. "He has the most incredible constitution I've ever seen. He's still in a great deal of pain, but he just seems to ignore it. Normally it would be at least another week before we began tapering off the pain medication." Admiration filled her voice. "Did the coffee upset his stomach?"
Jay had to laugh. "No. He was rather smug about it."
"He was certainly determined to get that coffee. Maybe we can start him on a soft diet tomorrow, so he can begin regaining his strength."
"Do you know when he'll be transferred out of intensive care?"

"I really don't know. Major Lunning will have to make that decision." The nurse smiled as she took her leave, returning to the central station.

Jay walked to the visitors' lounge to buy a soft drink, and she took advantage of the room's emptiness to give herself some much-needed privacy. She was filled with a vague uneasiness, and she couldn't pinpoint the reason. Or reasons, she thought. Part of it was Steve, of course, and her own unruly emotional response to him. She didn't want to love him again, but she didn't know how to fight it, only that she had to. She could not love him again. It was too risky. She knew that, fiercely told herself over and over that she wouldn't allow it to happen, even as she acknowledged that it might already be too late.

The other part of her uneasiness was also tied to Steve, but she wasn't certain why. That aggravating sense of having missed something kept nagging at her, something that she should have seen but hadn't. Perhaps Steve sensed it too, judging by all the questions he'd asked; he didn't quite trust Frank, though she supposed that was to be expected, given Steve's situation. But Jay knew that she would trust Frank with her life, and with Steve's. So why did she keep feeling that she should know more than she did? Was Steve in danger because of what he had witnessed? Had Steve actually been involved in the deal? She would have had to be naive not to realize that the vast majority of the facts had been kept from her, but she didn't expect Frank to spout out everything he knew. No, it wasn't that. It was something that she should have seen, something that was obvious, and she'd missed it entirely. It was some little detail that didn't fit, and until she could pinpoint what it was, she wouldn't be able to get rid of that nagging uneasiness.

Steve was taken out of intensive care two days later and moved to a private room, and the navy guards shifted location. The new room had a television, something the ICU room had lacked, and Steve insisted on listening to every news program he could, as if he were searching for clues that would tie all the missing pieces together for him again. The problem was that he seemed to be interested in all the world situations and could discuss the politics of others nations as easily as domestic issues. That disturbed Jay; Steve had never been particularly political, and the depth of his current knowledge revealed that he had become deeply involved. Given that, it became more likely that he had also been more involved in the situation that had nearly killed him than perhaps even Frank knew. Or perhaps Frank did

know, after all. He had had several long, private conversations with Steve, but Steve remained guarded. Only with Jay did he lose his wariness.
His various injuries kept him bed-bound much longer than he should have been, but he wasn't able to negotiate with crutches due to his burned hands. His physical inactivity ate at him, eroding his patience and good humor. He quickly decided which television shows he liked, discarding all game shows and soap operas, but even the ones he liked lacked something, since so much of the action was visual. Merely being able to listen frustrated him, and soon he wanted the set on only for the news. Jay did everything she could think of to entertain him; he liked it when she read the newspaper to him, but for the most part he just wanted to talk.
"Tell me what you look like," he said one morning.
The demand flustered her. It was oddly embarrassing to be asked to describe oneself. "Well, I have brown hair," she began hesitantly.
"What shade of brown? Reddish? Gold?"
"Gold, I guess, but on the dark side. Honey-colored."
"Is it long?"
"No. It's almost to my shoulders, and very straight."
"What color are your eyes?"
"Blue."
"Come on," he chided after a minute when she didn't add anything. "How tall are you?"
"Medium. Five-six."
"How tall am I? Did we fit together well?"
The thought made her throat tighten. "You're six feet, and yes, we did dance well together."
He turned his bandaged eyes toward her. "I wasn't talking about dancing, but so what? When I get out of these casts, let's go dancing again. Maybe I haven't forgotten how."
She didn't know if she could stand being in his arms again, not with her responses running wild every time she heard his harsh, cracked voice. But he was waiting for her to answer, so she said lightly, "It's a date."
He lifted his hands. "The bandages come off tomorrow. Next week I have the final surgery on my eyes. The casts come off in two weeks. Give me a month to build up my strength. By then the bandages should be off my eyes, and we'll do the town."

"You're only giving yourself a month to get your strength back? Isn't that a little ambitious?"
"I've done it before," he said, then went very still. Jay held her breath as she watched him, but after a minute he swore softly. "Damn it, I know things, but I can't remember them. I know what foods I like, I know the name of every head of state of every nation mentioned in the news, I can even recalj what they look like, but I don't know my own face. I know who won the last World Series, but not where I was when it was played. I know the smell of the canals in Venice, but I can't remember ever being there." He paused a minute, then said very quietly, "Sometimes I want to take this place apart with my bare hands."
"Major Lunning told you what to expect," Jay said, still shaken by what he'd said. How deeply had he involved himself in the gray world Frank had hinted at? She was very much afraid that Steve was no longer an adventurer, but a player. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. He said your memory would probably come back in dribbles."
A slow grin touched his lips, deepening the lines that bracketed his mouth and drawing her helpless, fascinated gaze. His lips seemed firmer, fuller, as if they were still slightly swollen, or perhaps it was because his face was thinner and older. "Sorry," he said. "I'll have to watch that."
His wry humor, especially when he had good reason to occasionally feel sorry for himself, only reminded her again of his hard inner strength and was one more blow against the shaky guard she had set up around her heart. She had to laugh at him, just as she had years before, but there was a difference now. Before, Steve had used humor as a wall to hide behind; now the wall was gone, and she could see the real man.
She was with him the next morning when the bandages came off his burned hands for good. She had been in there before when the bandages were changed, so she had seen the raw blisters on his palms and fingers when they had looked much worse than they did now. Patches of reddened skin were still visible all the way to his elbows, but his hands had caught the worst of it. Now that the danger of infection was past, the new, tender skin would heal faster without the bandages, but his hands would be too painful for him to use them much for a while.
When she compared how he looked now to the way he had looked the first time she had seen him, hooked to all those machines and monitors, with so many tubes running into his body, it seemed nothing short of a miracle. It

had been only four weeks, but he had been little more than a vegetable then, and now he exerted the force of his personality over everyone who entered his room, even the doctors. His face had been swollen and bruised before; now the hard line of his jaw and the precise cut of his lips fascinated her. She knew that plastic surgeons had rebuilt his shattered face, and she wondered about the changes she would see when the bandages were completely gone and she was able to truly see him for the first time. His jaw was a little different, a little squarer, leaner, but that was to be expected, since he had lost so much weight after he'd been injured. His beard seemed darker, because he was so pale. She was very well acquainted with his jaw and beard, since she had to shave him every morning. The nurses had done it until he became conscious and made it known he wanted Jay to shave him, and no one else.

He no longer had a thick swath of gauze wrapped around his skull. There was a big, jagged white scar that ran diagonally from the top of his head, at a point directly above his right ear, to the back and left of his skull, but his hair was already longer than that of the average military recruit in boot camp, and it was beginning to cover the scar. The new hair was dark and glossy, having never been exposed to the sun. His eyes were still covered with bandages, but though the gauze pads and wrapping were much smaller now than they had been before, the upper bridge of his nose and the curve of his cheekbones were still covered. The bandages tantalized her; she wanted to see his new face, to judge for herself how well the plastic surgeon had done his job. She wanted to be able to apply his identity to his face, to look into his dark eyes and see all the things she'd looked for in their marriage and hadn't been able to find.

"Your hands are tender," the doctor who'd been caring for Steve's burns said as he cut away the last of the bandages and signaled for a nurse to clean them. "Be careful with them until all this new skin has toughened. They're stiff right now, but use them, exercise them. You don't have any tendon or ligament damage, so in time you'll have full use of them again."

Slowly, painfully, Steve flexed his fingers, wincing as he did so. He waited until the doctor and nurses had left the room, then said, "Jay?"

"I'm here."

"How do they look?"

"Red," she answered honestly.

He flexed them again, then cautiously rubbed the fingers of his right hand over his left one, then reversed the procedure. "It feels strange," he said, smiling a little. "They're damned tender, like he said, but the skin feels as smooth as a baby's butt. I don't have any calluses now." The smile faded abruptly, replaced with a frown. "I had callused hands." Again he explored his hands, as if trying to find something familiar in the touch, slowly rubbing his fingertips together.

She laughed softly. "One summer, you played so much sandlot baseball that your hands were as tough as leather. You had calluses on your calluses."

He still looked thoughtful; then his mood changed and he said, "Come sit by me, on the bed."

Curious, she did as he said, sitting facing him. The head of his bed had been raised to an upright position, so he was sitting erect and they were on the same level. Abruptly she noticed how much she had to look up at him. His bare shoulders and chest, despite the weight he had lost, still dwarfed her, and again she wondered what sort of work he had done that had developed his torso to that degree.

Tentatively he reached out, and his hand touched her hair. Realizing why he had wanted her to sit there, she remained still while his fingers sifted through the strands. He didn't say anything. He lifted his other hand, and his palms cupped her face, his fingers gliding lightly over her forehead and brow, down the bridge of her nose, over her lips and jaw and chin before sliding down the length of her throat.

Her breath had stopped, but she hadn't noticed. Slowly he laced his fingers around her neck as if measuring it, then traced the hollows of her collarbones out to her shoulders. "You're too thin," he murmured, cupping the balls of her shoulders in his palms. "Don't you eat enough?"

"Actually, I've gained a little weight," she whispered, beginning to shake at his warm touch.

Calmly, deliberately, he moved his hands down to her breasts and molded his fingers over them. Jay inhaled sharply, and he said, "Easy, easy," as he stroked the soft mounds.

"Steve, no." But her eyes were closing as warm pleasure built in her, her blood beating slowly and powerfully through her veins. His thumbs rubbed over her nipples and she quivered, her breasts beginning to tighten.

"You're so soft." His voice roughened even more. "God, how I've wanted to touch you. Come here, sweetheart."

He ignored the pain in his hands as he pulled her against him, and he wrapped his arms around her as he had dreamed of doing so many times since her voice had charmed him out of the darkness. He felt her slenderness, her softness, her warmth, and the gut-wrenching pleasure of her breasts flattening against the hard planes of his chest. He smelled the sweetness of her skin, felt the thick silk of her hair, and with a harsh, muffled sound of want, of need, he sought her mouth.

He already knew her mouth. He would beg, cajole, insist until she would give him a kiss in the morning and again at night before she left. He knew it was wide and full and soft, and that her lips trembled each time she kissed him. Now he slanted his mouth to cover hers, pressing hard until her lips parted and gave him the entrance he sought. He could feel her shaking in his arms as he moved his tongue into her mouth and tasted her sweetness. Damn, how had he been fool enough to let her get away from him five years before? Not being able to remember making love to her made him furious because he wanted to know what she liked, how it felt to be inside her, if they had been as good together as every instinct he possessed told them they would be. She belonged to him; he knew it, felt it, as if they were tied together. He deepened the kiss, forcing her to respond to him the way he knew she could, the way he knew she wanted to. Finally she shivered convulsively, and her tongue met his as her arms crept up around his neck. He shouldn't be this strong, Jay thought dimly, not after all he's been through. But his arms were hard, and so tight around her that her ribs were being squeezed. Steve had never been this aggressive before; he certainly hadn't been a passive man, but now he was kissing her with naked demand, forcing their relationship into an intimacy that frightened her. He wanted her more than he ever had during their marriage, but now his attention was intensely focused on her because of the circumstances.

"We shouldn't do this," she managed to say, turning her head aside to free her mouth from the hungry pressure of his. She brought her hands down and pushed lightly at his shoulders.

"Why not?" he murmured, taking advantage of the vulnerability of her throat with slow kisses. His tongue touched the sensitive hollow below her ear, and her hands tightened on his shoulders as wonderful little ripples of pleasure radiated over her skin. His lack of sight didn't hinder him; he knew his way around a woman's body. Instinct went deeper than memory.

Both conscience and her sense of self-protection made Jay push at his shoulders again, and this time he slowly released her. "We can't let ourselves get involved again," she said in a low voice.
"We're both free," he pointed out.
"As far as we know. Steve, you could have met someone in the past five years who you really care about. Someone could be waiting for you to come home. Until you get your memory back, you can't be certain that you're free. And... and I think we should be cautious about jumping back into a relationship without knowing more than we do."
"No one's waiting for me," he said with harsh certainty.
Her movements were jerky with agitation as she slid off the bed and walked to the window. The morning sky was a leaden color, and snow flurries were drifting aimlessly on the light wind. "You can't know that," she insisted, and turned back to look at him.
His face was turned toward her even though he couldn't see her, and the hard line of his mouth told her he was angry. The sheet was around his waist, baring his broad shoulders and chest, as he had disdained both pajamas and a hospital gown, though he had finally consented to wear the pajama bottoms with the legs cut off and the seams slit so they would fit over the casts on his legs. He was thin, pale and weak from what he'd been through, but somehow the impression he gave was one of power. Nor was he all that weak, not if the strength she had just felt in him was any measure. He must have been incredibly strong before the accident. Those five years when she hadn't seen him were becoming even more of a mystery.
"So you've stayed here with me all this time just because you have a Florence Nightingale complex?" he asked sharply. It was the first time she had refused him anything, and he didn't like it at all. If he could have walked, he would have come after her, sightless or not, weak or not, even though he was still in pain most of the time. None of that would have stopped him, and for the first time she was grateful for his broken legs.
"I never hated you," she tried to explain, knowing that she owed him at least the effort. "I don't think we were all that deeply in love, certainly not enough to make our marriage work. Frank asked me to stay because he thought you would need me, given your condition. Even Major Lunning said it would help if you were around someone familiar, someone you knew before the accident. So... I stayed."

"Don't give me that crap." Her attempt to explain had made him even more furious, and it was a type of anger she hadn't seen before. He was very still and controlled, his guttural voice little more than a whisper. Chills ran up her spine because she could feel his temper like both ice and fire, lashing out at her even though he hadn't moved. "Do you think that because I can't see, I couldn't tell you were turned on just now? Try again, sweetheart."
Jay began to get angry at the harsh demand in his voice. "All right, if you want the truth, here it is. I don't trust you. You were always too restless to settle down and try to build a life together. You were always leaving on another of your 'adventures,' looking for something I couldn't give you. Well, I don't want to go through that again. I don't want to get involved with you again. You want me now, and you may need me a little, but what happens when you're well? Another pat on the head and a kiss on the cheek while I get to watch you ride off into the sunset? Thanks, but no thanks. I have more sense now than I did before."
"Is that why you start shaking every time I touch you? You want to get involved again, all right, but you're afraid."
"I said I don't trust you. I didn't say I was afraid of you. Why should I trust you? You were still looking for trouble when that explosion almost killed you!"
Abruptly she realized that she was all but yelling at him, while his voice hadn't risen at all. She turned and walked out, then leaned against the wall outside his door until both the temper and the shaking subsided. She felt sick, not because of their argument, but because he was right. She was afraid. She was terrified. And it was too late to do anything about it, because she was in love with him again, despite all her warnings and lectures to herself against it. She didn't know him anymore. He had changed; he was harder, rougher; far more dangerous. He was still a leaver, probably far more involved in the situation than Frank had wanted her to know.
But it didn't make any difference. She had loved him before when it had gone against her better judgement, and she loved him now when it made even less sense. God help her, she had left herself wide open for a lot of pain, and there was nothing she could do.

Chapter Six

Steve lay quietly, forcing the lingering cloudiness of anesthesia from his mind. He was instinctively still, like an animal in the jungle, until he was aware enough to know what was going on. A man could lose his life by moving before he knew where his enemies were. If they thought he was dead, he gained the advantage of surprise by lying still and not letting them know he was still alive until he could recover enough to make his move. He tried to open his eyes, but something covered them. They had him blindfolded. But that didn't make sense; why blindfold someone they thought was dead?

He listened, trying to locate his captors. The usual jungle sounds were absent, and gradually he realized that he was too cold to be in a jungle. The smell was all wrong, too; it was a sharp, medicinal odor, like disinfectant. This place smelted like a hospital.

The realization was like a curtain going up, and abruptly he knew where he was and what had happened, and at the same time the hazy recollection of the steamy jungle swiftly faded. The final surgery on his eyes was over, and he was in Recovery. "Jay!" It took an incredible amount of effort to call for her, and his voice sounded strange, even worse than usual, so deep and hoarse it was almost like an animal's cry. " Jay!"

"Everything's all right, Mr. Crossfield," a calm voice said soothingly. "You've had your surgery, and everything is just fine. Lie still, and we'll have you back in your room in a few minutes."

It wasn't Jay's voice. It was a nice voice, but it wasn't what he wanted. His throat was dry; he swallowed, and winced a little because his throat was so raw and sore. That's right; they'd had a tube down it. "Where's Jay?" he croaked, like a frog.

"Is Jay your wife, Mr. Crossfield?"

"Yes." Ex-wife, if they wanted to get technical. He didn't care about the labels. Jay was his.

"She's probably waiting for you in your room."

"Take me there."

"Let's wait a few more minutes—"

"Now." The single word was guttural, the steely command naked. He didn't try to dress it up in polite phrases, because it was all he could do to say a few words at a time. He was still groggy, but he fixed his thoughts on Jay

with single-minded determination. He began groping for the rail on the side of the bed.
"Mr. Crossfield, wait! You're going to pull the IV out of your arm!"
"Good," he muttered.
"Calm down, we're going to take you to your room. Just lie still while I get an orderly."
A minute later he felt the bed begin to move. It was a curiously relaxing movement, and he began to go to sleep again but forced himself to stay alert. He couldn't afford to relax until Jay was with him; there was damned little he knew about who he was or what was going on, but Jay was the one constant in his life, the one person he trusted. She had been there from the beginning, as far back as his memory reached, and further.
"Here we are," the nurse said cheerfully. "He couldn't wait to get back to his room, Mrs. Crossfield. He was asking for you and kicking up a fuss."
"I'm here, Steve," Jay said, and he thought she sounded anxious. He noticed that she didn't correct the nurse about her name, and fierce satisfaction filled him. The name didn't mean much to him, but it was a name he'd once shared with Jay, one of the links that bound her to him.
He was lifted onto his bed, and he could feel them fussing around him for a few more minutes. It was getting harder to stay awake. "Jay!"
"I'm here."
He reached out with his left hand toward her voice, and her slim, cool fingers touched him. Her hand felt so small and fragile in his.
"The doctor said everything went perfectly," she said, her voice somewhere above him in the darkness. "You'll get the bandages off for good in about two weeks."
"Then I'm outta here," he murmured. His hand tightened around hers, and he gave in to the lingering effects of the anesthesia.
When he woke again, it was without the initial confusion, but he was still groggy. Impatiently he forced his mind out of lethargy, and it was so habitual now to ignore the pain in his mending body that he truthfully didn't even notice it. At some unknown point in his life he had learned that the human body could be forced to superhuman feats if the brain knew how to ignore pain. Evidently he had learned that lesson so well that it was second nature to him now.
Now that he was more awake, he didn't have to call for Jay to know she was in the room. He could hear her breathing, hear the pages of a magazine

turning as she sat by the bed. He could smell the faint, sweet scent of her skin, a scent that identified her immediately to him whenever she entered the room. Then there was that other awareness, the physical awareness that was like an electrical charge, making his skin tingle with pleasure and excitement at her closeness, or even at the mere thought of her.

He hadn't kissed her since their argument the week before, but he was only biding his time. She had been upset, and he didn't want that, didn't want to push her. Maybe he hadn't been much of a prize before, but she still felt something for him, or she wouldn't be here now, and when the time came he would capitalize on those feelings. She was his; he knew it with a bone-deep sense of possession that overrode everything else.

He wanted her. The strength of his sexual need for her surprised him, given his current physical condition, but the stirring in his loins every time she touched him was proof that certain instincts were stronger than pain. Every day the pain was a little less, and every day he wanted her a little more. It was basic. Whenever two people were attracted to each other, the urge to mate became overwhelming; it was nature's way of propagating the species. Intense physical desire and hot, frequent lovemaking reinforced the bond between two people. They became a couple, because back in the human species' first primitive days, it took two people to provide care for their helpless young. In current times one parent could raise a child quite well, and modern medicine had made it possible for a woman not to become pregnant if she didn't want to, but the old instincts were still there. The sexual drive was still there, a man's need to make love to his woman and make certain she knew she was his. He understood the basis of the biological need programmed into his genes, but understanding didn't lessen its power.

Amnesia was a curious thing. When he examined it unemotionally, he was interested in its oddities. He had lost all conscious knowledge of whatever had happened to him before he'd come out of the coma, but a lot of unconscious knowledge evidently hadn't been affected. He could remember different World Series and Super Bowls, and how Niagara Falls looked. That wasn't important. Interesting, but not important.

Equally interesting, and far more important, were the things he knew about both obscure Third World nations and major powers without remembering how he came by the knowledge. He couldn't bring his own face to mind, but somehow that didn't negate what he knew was fact. He knew the desert, the

hot, dry heat and blood-sizzling sun. He also knew the jungle, the stifling heat and humidity, the insects and reptiles, the leeches, the shrieking birds, the stench of rotting vegetation.

Taking those bits and pieces of himself that he could recognize, he was able to piece together part of the puzzle. The jungle part was easy. Jay had told him that he was thirty-seven; he was just the right age to have been in Vietnam during the height of the war in the late sixties. The rest of it, all added together, could have only one logical explanation: he was far more involved in the situation than Jay had been told.

He had wondered if scopolamine or Pentothal would be successful on an amnesia victim, or if the amnesia effectively sealed off his memories even from the powerful drugs available today. If what he might know was important enough for him to warrant this kind of red-carpet treatment, then it would have been worth Frank Payne's effort to at least have tried the drugs. They hadn't tried, and that told him something else: Payne knew Steve had been indoctrinated to resist any chemical prying into his brain. Therefore he must be a trained field operative.

Jay didn't know. She really thought he had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. She had said that when they had been married, he had constantly been taking off on one "adventure" after another, so he must have kept her in the dark and just let her think that he was footloose, rather than worrying her with the knowledge of just how dangerous his work was, and that the odds were even he wouldn't return from any given trip.

He had fitted that many pieces of the puzzle together, but there were still a lot of little things that didn't make sense to him. He had noticed, as soon as the bandages were taken off his hands, that his fingertips were oddly smooth. It wasn't the smoothness of scar tissue; his hands were so sensitive, with their new, healing skin, that he could tell the difference between the burned areas and his fingertips. He was positive his fingertips hadn't been burned; rather, his fingerprints had been altered or removed altogether, probably the latter. Recently, too, most likely here in this hospital. The question was: Why? Who were they hiding his identity from? They knew who he was, and he was evidently on good terms with them, or they wouldn't have gone to such extraordinary lengths to save his life. Jay knew who he was. Was someone out there hunting for him? And, if so, was Jay in danger simply because she was with him?

Too many questions, and he didn't know the answers to any of them. He could ask Payne, but he wasn't certain he'd get a straight answer from the man. Payne was hiding something. Steve didn't know what it was, but he could hear a fault note of guilt in the man's voice, especially when he spoke to Jay. What had they gotten Jay involved in?

He heard the door to his room open and he lay motionless, wanting to know the identity of his visitor without them knowing he was awake. He had noticed that cautiousness in himself before; it fit in with what he had deduced.

"Is he awake yet?"

It was Frank Payne's quiet voice, and that special note was there again, the guilt and the... affection. Yeah, that's what it was. Payne liked Jay and worried about her, but he was still using her. It made Steve feel even less inclined to cooperate. It made him mad, to think they could be putting Jay in any danger.

"He went to sleep as soon as they got him in bed, and he hasn't stirred since. Have you talked to the doctor?"

"No, not yet. How did it go?"

"Wonderfully. The doctor doesn't think there's any permanent damage. He has to lie as quietly as possible for a few days, and his eyes may be sensitive to bright light after the bandages come off, but he probably won't even need glasses."

"That's good. He should be leaving here in another couple of weeks, if everything goes all right."

"It's hard to think of not coming here every day," Jay mused. "It won't seem normal. What happens when he's released?"

"I need to talk to him about that," Payne answered. "It can wait a few days, until he's more active."

Steve could hear the worry in Jay's voice and wondered at it. Did she know something, after all? Why else would she worry about what happened to him when he left the hospital? He had news for her, though; wherever she went, that was where he intended to go, and Frank Payne could take those ideas of his and become real friendly with them.

Two more weeks of biding his time. He didn't know if he could do it. It was hard to force himself to exercise the patience he needed to allow his body to heal, and there were still weeks of rehabilitation ahead before he regained his full strength. He'd have to push himself harder than the therapists would,

but he could sense his own limits, and he knew they were more elastic than the therapists could guess. It was just one more piece of the puzzle.
He decided to let himself "wake up" and began shifting restlessly. The IV needle tugged at his hand. "Jay?" he called in a groggy tone, then cleared his throat and tried again. "Jay?" He never quite got used to hearing his own voice the way it was now, so harsh and strained, gravelly in texture.
Another little oddity. He couldn't remember his own voice, but he knew this one wasn't right.
"I'm here." Her cool fingers touched his arm.
How many times had he heard those two words, and how many times had they provided him with a link to consciousness? They seemed embedded in his mind, as if they were his one memory. Hell, they probably were. He reached for her with his free hand. "Thirsty."
He heard the sound of water pouring; then a straw touched his lips and he gratefully sucked the cold liquid into his dry mouth and down his raw throat. She took the straw away after only a couple of swallows. "Not too much at first," she said in that calm way of hers. "The anesthesia may make you sick."
He moved his hand and felt the needle tugging at it again. Swift irritation filled him. "Get a nurse to take this damned needle out."
"You need glucose after surgery to keep from going into shock," she argued. "And it probably has an antibiotic in it—"
"Then they can give me pills," he rasped. "I don't like being restricted like this." It was bad enough that his legs were still in casts; he'd had enough of having to lie still to last him a lifetime.
She was silent for a moment, and he could sense her understanding. Sometimes it was as if they didn't need words, as if there were a link between them that transcended the verbal. She knew exactly how frustrated it made him to have to lie in bed day after day; it was not only boring, it went against every survival instinct he possessed. "All right," she finally said, her cool fingers drifting against his arm. "I'll get a nurse."
He listened as she left the room, then lay quietly, waiting to see if Frank Payne would identify himself. It was a subtle game; he didn't even know why he was playing it. But Payne was hiding something, and Steve didn't trust him. He'd do anything he could to gain an edge, even if it was something so trivial as pretending to sleep while he eavesdropped. He hadn't even learned anything, other than that Payne had "plans" for him.

"Are you in any pain?" Frank asked.
Steve cautiously turned his head. "Frank?" Another part of the game, pretending he didn't recognize the other man's voice.
"Yes."
"No, not much pain. Groggy." That much was true; the anesthesia made him feel limp and sleepy. But he could force himself to mental alertness, and that was the important part. He would rather be in pain than be so doped up he didn't know what was going on around him. The barbiturate coma had been a nightmare of darkness, of nothingness, which he didn't want to experience again, even in a mild form. Even amnesia was better than that total lack of self.
"That's the last of it. No more surgery, no more tubes, no more needles. When the casts come off your legs, you can start getting back to your old shape." Frank had a quiet voice, and there was often a note of familiarity in it, as if they had known each other well.
His words touched a chord of recognition in Steve; his old shape hadn't been bulky muscles, but rather speed and stamina, a steely core of strength that kept him going when other men would have collapsed.
"Is Jay in any danger?" he asked, cutting through the cautious maneuvering to what was most important to him.
"Because of what you may have seen?"
"Yes."
"We don't anticipate any danger," Frank replied, his voice cautious. "You are important to us only because we need to know exactly what happened, and you might provide us with some answers."
Steve smiled wryly. "Yeah, I know. Important enough to cut through red tape and coordinate two, maybe three, separate agencies, as well as pulling in people from different branches of the service and from the private sector. I'm just an innocent bystander, aren't I? Jay may buy that, but I don't. So cut the crap and give me a yes or no answer. Is Jay in any danger?"
"No," Frank said firmly, and after a second Steve gave a fractional nod, all he could manage. Regardless of what Frank was hiding, he was still fond of Jay and protective of her. Jay was safe enough. Steve could deal with the rest later; Jay was what mattered now.
His legs were thin and weak after having been encased in plaster for six weeks; he ran his hands down them, getting himself accustomed to their peculiar lightness. He could move them, but his movements were jerky and

uncontrolled. For the past couple of days he had been sitting in a wheelchair or in the bedside chair, letting his body adjust to movement and different postures. His hands had healed enough that he had been able to stand, using a walker for support, for a few minutes each day. His store of knowledge was increasing all the time. He now knew that even when he was bent forward to hold the walker, he was several inches taller than Jay. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her against him, to feel her soft body adjust to his size as he bent his head to kiss her. He'd been holding off, taking it slow, but now that was at an end.

Jay watched him massage his thighs and calves, his long fingers kneading the muscles with sure strokes. He was scheduled for a session in physical therapy that afternoon, but he wasn't waiting for someone else to do the work for him. He had been like a coiled spring since the surgery on his eyes: tense, waiting, but under iron control. It had been a month and a half since the explosion, and perhaps lesser people would still have been lying in bed and taking pills for the pain, but Steve had been pushing himself from the moment he'd regained consciousness. His hands had to be tender, but he used them and never winced. His ribs and legs had to hurt, but he didn't let that stop him. He never complained of a headache, though Major Lunning had told Jay he would probably have headaches for several months.

She glanced at her watch. He'd been massaging his legs for half an hour. "I think that's enough," she said firmly. "Don't you want to go back to bed?"

He straightened up in the wheelchair and his teeth flashed in a grin. "Baby, I'm so tired of that bed, the only way you could get me back in it would be if you crawled in there with me."

He looked so wickedly masculine that she felt herself weakening even as she tried to warn herself against his charm. He wasn't above using his appeal as a wounded warrior to get to her, blast his hide. She couldn't even look at him without getting wobbly kneed, and sometimes the way she felt about him welled up in her like a flood tide, pleasure and pain so sharply mingled that she would almost moan aloud. Every day he was stronger; every day he conquered new territory, exerted his will over another aspect of his life. It was both amazing and frightening to watch him and to realize the extent of his willpower as he dealt with his situation. He was so fiercely controlled and determined that it was almost inhuman, but at the same time he let her see how very human he was; he depended on her now more than

she had ever imagined possible, and the vulnerability he revealed to her was all the more shattering because she knew how rare it was.
"Get the walker for me," he ordered now, turning his bandaged eyes toward her expectantly, as if waiting for her to protest.
Jay pursed her lips, looking at him, then shrugged and placed the walker in front of him. If he suffered a setback, it would be his own fault for refusing to accept his limitations. "All right," she said calmly. "Go ahead and fall. Break your legs again, crack your head open again and spend a few more months in here. I'm sure that will thrill the nurses."
He chuckled at her acerbity, a reaction that was becoming more frequent as he healed. He regarded it as a measure of his recovery; while he had been ill and helpless, she hadn't refused him anything. He liked finding this bite to her personality. A passive woman wouldn't suit him at all, but Jay suited him in every way, at all times.
"I won't fall," he assured her, levering himself into an upright position. He had to support most of his weight on his arms, but his feet moved when he told them to. Jerkily, true, but on command.
"And heee's offf aaand *stumbling*!" Jay cried in dry imitation of a racetrack announcer, her irritation plain.
He gave a shout of laughter and did stumble, but caught himself with the walker. "You're supposed to guide me, not make fun of me."
"I refuse to help you push yourself too hard. If you fall, it will be your own fault."
A crooked smile twisted his lips and her heart speeded up at the roguish charm it gave his face. "Ah, baby," he cajoled. "I'm not pushing too hard, I promise. I know how much I can do. Come on, guide me down the hall."
"No," she said firmly.
Two minutes later she was walking slowly by his side as he maneuvered the walker, and his reluctant legs, down the hall. At the end of the corridor, the Navy guard watched alertly, examining everyone and everything. It was like that every time Steve left his room, though he didn't realize he was guarded so closely. Jay felt a chill as her eyes met those of the guard and he nodded politely; no matter how calm everything seemed, the guards' presence reminded her that Steve had been involved in something highly dangerous. Wouldn't his amnesia put him in even more danger? He didn't even know he was being threatened or by wtipm. No wonder those guards were necessary!

But realizing just how necessary they were terrified her. This was all part of the large gray area Frank hadn't explained, but she knew it was there.
"This is far enough," Steve said, and cautiously turned around. He turned exactly 180 degrees and took two steps before stopping, his head turning back to her. "Jay?"
"Sorry." Hastily she moved to his side. How had he known how far to turn? Why wasn't he more uncertain of his movements? He walked slowly, still supporting most of his weight on his arms and hands, but he seemed deliberate and sure. He was slowed by his injuries but not thwarted. He wouldn't let himself give in; he didn't look on his injuries as something to be recovered from, but rather as something to be conquered. He would handle this on his own terms, and win, because he wouldn't accept anything less.
She saw even more of his determination in the following days as he sweated through physical therapy. The therapist tried to restrain him but Steve insisted on setting his own pace. He swam laps, guiding himself by Jay's voice, and walked endlessly on a treadmill. By the third day of therapy he had discarded the walker permanently and replaced it with Jay. Grinning as he put his arm around her shoulder, he explained that at least she'd cushion him if he fell.
He had gained weight rapidly since the tube had been taken out of his throat, and now he regained his strength just as rapidly. Jay felt as if she could see a difference in him from one day to the next. Except for the bandages over his eyes, he seemed almost normal, but she knew every scar hidden by the comfortable sweats Frank had brought him to wear. His hands were still pink from the burns, and his ruined voice would never be much better. Nor was his memory showing any sign of returning. There were no flashes of memory or glimmers of recognition. It was as if he had been born when he had fought his way out of unconsciousness to respond to her voice, and nothing existed before that.
Sometimes, watching him as he exercised with that frightening relentlessness of his, she caught herself hoping that his memory *wouldn't* return, and then guilt would eat at her. But he depended on her so much now, and if he began to remember, the closeness between them would fade. Even as she tried to protect herself from that closeness, she treasured every moment and wanted more. She was caught on the horns of her own dilemma and couldn't decide how to get free. She could protect herself and

walk away, or she could grab for whatever she could get, but she couldn't decide to do either. All she could do was wait, and watch over him with increasing fierceness.

The day the bandages were supposed to come off his eyes, he got up at dawn and prowled restlessly around the hospital room. Jay had gotten there early, feeling as anxious as he did, but she forced herself to sit still. Finally he turned on the television and listened intently to the morning news, a frown knitting his brow.

"Why the hell doesn't that damn doctor hurry up?" he muttered.

Jay looked at her watch. "It's still early. You haven't even had breakfast yet."

He swore under his breath and raked his fingers through his hair. It was still shorter than was fashionable, but long enough to cover the scar that bisected his skull, and it was dark and shiny, undulled by sunlight, and beginning to show a hint of waviness. He prowled some more, then stopped by the window and drummed his fingers on the sill. "It's a sunny day, isn't it?"

Jay looked out the window at the blue sky. "Yes, and not too cold, but the weather forecast says we could have some snow by the weekend."

"What's the date?"

"January 29."

His fingers continued to tap against the sill. "Where are we going?"

Jay felt blank. "Going?"

"When they release me. Where are we going?"

She felt a shock like a slap in the face as she realized he would be released from the hospital within a few hours if everything was all right with his eyes. The apartment Frank had rented for her was tiny, only one bedroom, but that wasn't what alarmed her. What if Frank intended to whisk Steve away from her? Granted, he had once said something about her staying with Steve until his memory returned, but it hadn't been mentioned since. Was that still his plan? If so, where did he intend for Steve to live?

"I don't know where we'll go," she replied faintly. "They may want to send you somewhere...." Her voice trailed off into miserable silence.

"Too damn bad if they do." He turned from the window, and there was something lethal in his movement, a predator's grace and power. She stared at him, silhouetted against the bright window, and her throat contracted. He was so much harder than he had been that it almost frightened her, but at the same tune, everything about him excited her. She loved him so much that it hurt, deep inside her chest, and it was getting worse.

A nurse brought in his breakfast tray, then winked at Jay. "I noticed you were here early, so I had an extra tray sent up. I won't tell if you won't." She brought in another breakfast tray, smiling as Jay thanked her. "This is the big day," the nurse said cheerfully. "Call this a sort of precelebration meal."
Steve grinned. "Are you that anxious to get rid of me?"
"You've been an absolute angel. We're going to miss those buns of yours, but hey, easy come, easy go."
A slow flush reddened Steve's cheeks, and the nurse laughed heartily as she left the room. Jay snickered as she unwrapped his silverware and arranged everything on the tray as he was accustomed to finding it.
"Bring your gorgeous buns over here and eat your breakfast," she ordered, still snickering.
"If you like them, get a good view," he invited, turning around and lifting his arms so she did indeed have an excellent view of his tight, muscular buttocks. "I'll even let you touch."
"Thank you, but food wins out over your backside. Aren't you hungry?"
"Starved."
They made short work of the meal, and soon he was again prowling about the small room, his restlessness making it seem even smaller. His impatience was a palpable force, bristling around him. He had spent too many weeks flat on his back, totally helpless and blind, unable even to feed himself. Now he had his mobility back, and in an unknown number of minutes he'd know if his sight had been restored. The doctor was certain of the surgery's success, but until the bandages were off and he could actually see, Steve wouldn't let himself believe it. It was the waiting and the lack of certainty that ate at him. He wanted to see. He wanted to know what Jay looked like; he wanted to be able to put a face to the voice. If he never saw anything else, he needed to see her face, if only for a moment. Every cell in his body knew her, could sense her presence; but even though she had described herself to him, he needed to have her face in his mind. The rest of his vanished memory didn't haunt him nearly as much as the knowledge of Jay that he'd lost, and the most piercing of all was that he couldn't remember her face. It was as if he'd lost a part of himself.
His head came up like a wary animal's as he heard the door open, and the eye surgeon laughed. "I half expected you to have taken the bandages off yourself."
"I didn't want to steal your thunder," Steve said. He was standing very still.

Jay was just as still, tension coiling in her as she watched the surgeon, a nurse, Major Lunning and Frank all enter the room. Frank was carrying a bag with the name of a local department store on it, and he placed it on the bed. Without asking, Jay knew it contained street clothes for Steve, and she was vaguely grateful to Frank for thinking of it, because she hadn't.

"Sit down here, with your back to the window," the surgeon said, directing Steve to a chair. When Steve was seated, the doctor took a pair of scissors, cut through the gauze and tape at Steve's temple and carefully removed the outer bandage in order not to disturb the pads over his eyes or let the tape pull at his skin. "Tilt your head back a little," he instructed.

Jay's nails were digging into her palms and her chest hurt. For the first tune she was seeing his face without bandages; even the relatively small swathe of gauze that had anchored the pads to his eyes had covered his temples and eyebrows, as well as his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose. He had been a handsome man, but he wasn't handsome any longer. His nose wasn't quite straight, and they had made the bridge a little higher than it had been before the explosion. His cheekbones looked more prominent. All in all, his face had more angles than it had before; the battering he'd taken was evident.

Slowly the doctor removed the gauze pads, then wiped Steve's eyes with some sort of solution. Steve's lids looked a little bruised and his eyes were deeper set than before.

"Pull the curtains," the doctor said quietly, and the nurse pulled them across the window, darkening the room. Then he turned on the dim light over the bed.

"All right, now you can open your eyes. Slowly. Let them get accustomed to the light. Then blink until they focus."

Steve opened his eyes to mere slits and blinked. He tried it again.

"Damn, that light's bright," he said. Then he opened his eyes completely, blinked until they were focused and turned his head toward Jay.

She sat frozen in place and her breath stopped. It was like looking into an eagle's eyes, meeting the fierce gaze of a raptor, a high-soaring predator. They were the eyes of the man she loved so much she ached with it, and terror chilled her blood. She remembered velvety, chocolate-brown eyes, but these eyes were a dark yellowish brown, glittering like amber crystal. An eagle's eyes.

He was the man she loved, but she didn't know who he was, only who he wasn't.
He wasn't Steve Crossfield.

Chapter Seven

His heart almost stopped in his chest. Jay. The face to go with the name and the voice, the gentle touch, the sweet and elusive scent. Her description of herself had been accurate, yet it was far from reality. The reality of Jay was a heavy mane of honey-brown hair, eyes of deep-ocean blue and a wide, soft, vulnerable mouth. God, her mouth. It was red and full, as luscious as a ripe plum. It was the most passionate mouth he'd ever seen, and thinking of kissing it, of having those lips touch his body, made a hard ache settle in his loins. She was immobile, her face colorless except for the deep pools of her eyes and that wonderful, exotic mouth. She stared at him as if mesmerized, unable to look away.
"How does everything look?" the surgeon asked. "Do you see halos of light, or are the edges fuzzy?"
He ignored the doctor and stood, his gaze never wavering from Jay. He would never get enough of looking at her. Four steps took him to her, and her eyes widened even more in her utterly white face as she stared up at him. He tried to make his hands gentle as he caught her arms and pulled her to her feet, but anticipation and arousal were riding him hard, and he knew his fingers bit into her soft flesh. She made an incoherent sound; then his mouth covered hers and the erotic feel of her full lips made him want to groan. He wanted to be alone with her. She was shaking in his arms, her hands clutching the front of his shirt as she leaned against him as if afraid she might fall.
"Well, your sense of direction is good," Frank said wryly, and Steve lifted his head from Jay's, though he kept her tight against him, her head pressed into his shoulder. She was still trembling violently.
"I'd say his priorities are in order, too," Major Lunning put in, grinning as he looked at his patient with a deep sense of satisfaction. It hadn't been too many weeks since he'd had serious doubts that Steve would live. To see him now, like this, was almost miraculous. Not that he was fully recovered. He

still hadn't regained his full strength, nor had his memory shown any signs of returning. But he was alive, and well on the road to good health.
"I can see everything just fine," Steve said, his voice raspier than usual as he looked around the hospital room that had been home to him for more days than he cared to remember. Even it looked good. He'd disciplined himself to picture everything in his mind, to form a sense of spatial relations so that he always knew where he was in the room, and his mental picture had been remarkably correct. The colors were oddly shocking, though; he hadn't pictured colors, only physical presences.
The surgeon cleared his throat. "Ah... if you could sit down for a moment, Mr. Crossfield?"
Steve released Jay, and she shakily sat down, gripping the arms of the chair so tightly that her knuckles were white. They were wrong! He wasn't Steve Cross-field! Shock had kept her mute, but as she watched the surgeon examine Steve—no, *not* Steve!—control returned and she opened her mouth to tell him what a horrible mistake had been made.
Then Frank moved, tilting his head to watch the surgeon, and the movement caught her attention. Ice spread in her veins, freezing her brain again, but one thought still formed: if she told them that she'd made a mistake, that this man wasn't her ex-husband, they would have no use for her. He would be whisked away, and she would never see him again.
She began to shiver convulsively. She loved him. She didn't know who he was but she loved him, and she couldn't give him up. She needed to think this through, but she couldn't right now. She needed to be alone, away from watching eyes, so she could deal with the shock of realizing that Steve... dear God, Steve was dead! And this man in his place was a stranger.
She stood so abruptly that her chair tilted back on two legs before clattering forward again. Five startled faces turned to her as she edged toward the door like a prisoner trying to escape. "I... I just need some coffee," she gasped in a strained voice. She darted out the door, ignoring Steve's hoarse call.
He wasn't Steve. He wasn't Steve. The simple fact was devastating, rocking her to the core.
She ran down the hall to the visitors' lounge and huddled on one of the uncomfortable seats. She felt both cold and numb, and faintly sick, as if she were on the verge of throwing up.

Who was he? Taking deep breaths, she tried to think coherently. He wasn't Steve, so he had to be the American agent Frank had been so concerned about. That meant he had been deeply embroiled in the situation, the one man in the world who knew what had happened, if only he regained his memory. Could he be in danger if anyone—perhaps the person or persons who had set off the explosion that had already almost killed him—knew he was still alive? Until he recovered his memory, he couldn't recognize his enemies; his best protection now was the false identity he wore. She couldn't put him in more danger, nor could she give him up.

It was wrong to pretend he was someone he wasn't. By keeping this secret she was betraying Frank, whom she liked, but most of all she was betraying Steve... *damn*, she hated calling him that, but what else could she call him? She had to continue thinking of him as Steve. She was betraying him by putting him in a life that wasn't his, perhaps even hindering his complete recovery. He would never forgive her when he knew, if he ever regained his memory. He would know she had lied to bun, that she had forced him to live a lie by putting him in her ex-husband's place. But she couldn't put him at risk. She just couldn't. She loved him too much. No matter what it cost her, she had to lie to protect him.

"Jay."

It was *his* voice, the raw, gravelly voice that haunted her at night in the sweetest of dreams. Numbly she turned her head and looked at him, still so shocked that she couldn't guard her expression. She loved him. Loving Steve, with his need for excitement that she couldn't give him, had been bad enough; what had she done, letting herself love this man whose life consisted of danger? She had walked off an emotional cliff and was now in a free fall, unable to help herself.

He filled the doorway of the lounge. Now that she knew, she saw the differences. He was a little taller than Steve had been, broader of shoulder and deeper of chest, more muscular. His jaw was squarer, his lips fuller. She should have known just by his mouth, the shape of which hadn't been changed by surgery. A funny kind of pain filled her as she realized that she didn't know what he had looked like before. Had his cheekbones been that high and prominent, his eyes that deep set, his nose slightly off center? His face was battered and rough now, but had it been drastically changed?

"What's wrong, baby?" he asked in a low tone, squatting down in front of her and taking her hands in his. His thick, level brows descended in a frown

as he felt the iciness of her fingers.
She swallowed, and fine tremors shook her body. Even hunkered down, he was on a level with her. The sense of power, of danger, about him was overwhelming. It had been partially disguised while his eyes had been bandaged, but now, with his fierce will glittering in those yellow-brown eyes, she felt the full force of his personality.
"I'm all right," she managed to say. "It just got to me all of a sudden. I've been so worried."
He released her hands and slid his palms up her arms. "I wanted to see you so badly I didn't have time to worry," he murmured. The stroking of his big hands warmed her arms, and she felt the heat of his legs as they pressed against hers. "You told me about your blue eyes, but you didn't tell me about your mouth."
He was looking at her mouth. She felt her lips begin to tremble. "What about my mouth?"
"How erotic it is," he said under his breath, and leaned forward. This time his kiss was hard, seeking, forcing her to give way under his onslaught and open her lips for his tongue. Pleasure shuddered through her muscles even though a dim alarm began to sound. While he had been recovering and needed her support so badly, he had been supplicant, asking for her kisses and the intimacy of her touch. Now he wasn't asking, and she realized that he had been holding back all along. He wanted her, and he was coming after her with the full intention of getting what he wanted.
He stood, his strong grip drawing her up, too, without breaking contact with her mouth. He kissed her with the forceful intimacy of a man who intends to take his woman to bed, loosening the reins of control, demanding more. Jay clung to his shoulders, her senses swimming at the hard pressure of his body against hers. He moved his hips, seeking the cradle of hers, and groaned harshly in his throat when his swollen flesh found the warm notch at the apex of her thighs. She would have groaned, too, if she'd had the breath. A wild, hot madness was swirling through her veins, tempting her to forget everything in the demanding urge to satisfy the longings he'd aroused.
A man and woman entered the lounge; the man walked past without more than a sidelong look, but the woman stopped and blushed before looking away and hurrying past. Steve lifted his head, his hands loosening as a crooked smile quirked his mouth. "I think we need to go home," he said.

She panicked all over again. Home? Were they expecting her to take him to the small one-bedroom apartment she'd been using for the past two months? Or would they take him away from her after all, to finish recuperating in some unknown place?

They left the lounge to find Frank leaning patiently against the wall, waiting for them. He straightened and smiled, but his eyes were sympathetic as he looked at Jay. "Feeling better now?"

She took a deep breath. "I don't know. Tell me what's going to happen, then I'll tell you how I feel."

Steve put his arm around her waist. "Don't worry, sweetheart. They're not sending me anywhere without you. Are you, Frank?" He asked the question mildly, but there was steel underlying his tone, and his yellow-brown eyes narrowed.

Frank looked back at him with wry humor. "It never even crossed my mind. Let's step back into your room and we'll talk."

When they were once again behind a closed door, Frank walked over to the window, opened the curtains and looked out, blinking a little at the brightness of the winter sun. "First, you have to let the surgeon finish his examination of your eyes," he said, and glanced back at Steve. "And you'll need a follow-up exam next week, but I'll arrange that."

Steve made an impatient gesture, one that Frank read perfectly. He held up both hands, palms out in a delaying motion. "I'm getting to that. We'd like to keep you safe, but accessible to us. If you agree, we plan to move you to a safe house in Colorado."

Jay's head spun, and she sat down abruptly. Colorado? Her life had been turned upside down in the past two months, so the thought of such a drastic change shouldn't have stunned her, but it did. How could she go off to Colorado? Then she looked at Steve and knew she would go anywhere if it meant she could be with him. It was ironic. When she had been married, the most important thing in her life had been to establish some sort of stability on which to build her relationship with Steve, and the marriage hadn't survived. Now she had to pretend this man was Steve, but she was willing to walk away from everything and everyone she knew just to be with him. Painful sadness filled her, because this pointed out so clearly that she hadn't truly loved the real Steve Crossfield, though she had wanted to. He had held her away, walked his path alone and died alone without anyone ever really being close to him.

"Denver?" Steve guessed.
"No. The closest town is forty miles from the cabin by road, about fifteen air miles. It's a quiet, peaceful place, with no one to put any pressure on you."
"It's really nice of you folks to do all of this, just for the chance to talk to me when I get my memory back," he drawled, watching Frank with a hard gleam in his eyes.
Frank laughed, thinking that some things never changed. Even without his memory, he was so sharp he'd already put part of the puzzle together. "Why don't you go to the apartment and start packing?" Frank suggested to Jay, then lifted his brows in question. "If you want to go, that is."
"She's going," Steve said flatly, crossing his arms as he leaned against the bed. "Or I don't go."
Because she desperately needed the chance to be alone and think, Jay said yes. She slipped from the room without looking at either man, afraid they would see the terror in her eyes.
Steve regarded Frank in silence for a moment before growling, "You told me there wasn't any danger. Why the safe house?"
"So far as we know, you aren't in any danger—"
"Look, you can cut the crap," he interrupted. "I was an agent. I know all of this—" he gestured at the hospital surrounding him "—wasn't done out of the goodness of the government's heart. I know those guards aren't out there for decoration. I also know you wouldn't go to the expense of hiding me away in a safe house unless there was some threat to me, and unless you very badly need some information I may have."
Frank looked interested. "How did you know the guards were there?"
"I heard them," Steve replied shortly.
Now what? Frank looked at the man who had been his friend for over a decade and wondered how much to tell him. Not all of it, for damned certain. Until the Man nailed Piggot, the masquerade had to continue because it was Steve's best protection against any more attacks on his life. He knew too much for them to leave anything about his security to chance, and for the masquerade to be complete, it had to include Jay. The Man didn't take chances with his agents, or his friends, and Steve was both.
"You're right," Frank said. "You're an agent. A very highly trained agent, and we think the information you got on your last assignment is critical."
"Why the safe house?" Steve asked again, not letting up.

"Because the guy who tried to blow you to kingdom come went underground and hasn't surfaced yet. Until we get him, we want to make certain you're safe."
Like a burst of lightning, fury turned his eyes to yellow. "And you dragged Jay into this?"
Frank watched him warily, knowing how fast he could move. "Piggot doesn't know anyone survived the explosion. We just don't want to take any chances with you."
The yellow eyes flickered at the mention of Piggot's name. "Piggot. What's his first name?"
"Geoffrey."
Again there was that flicker in Steve's eyes and Frank watched closely, wondering if the mention of Piggot's name would trigger any real memory. But if it did, Steve kept it to himself. "I want to see the file you have on him," he said.
"I'll see if I can get clearance."
"But don't expect it, right? I'm a security risk now."
"That's the way it's played."
"Yeah. Now tell me why you had to bring Jay into the game. She doesn't know I'm an agent, does she?"
"No. We brought her in to identify you. It's as simple as that. And once she was here... you responded to her voice so strongly that the doctors decided it would help you to have her around. So she stayed." That was the truth, as far as it went. Frank just hoped Steve wouldn't ask too many more questions. He'd told him about all he could without clearance from the Man.
Steve rubbed his jaw as he mentally cataloged what Frank had told him. If he'd felt his presence was endangering Jay, he would have walked away from her that minute, but he felt Frank's sincerity. The other man thought they were safe enough. The deciding factor was the thought of living in an isolated house with Jay, just the two of them. He would have another chance. He would learn again what pleased her, and what made her angry. They would have another first time together. After he got all his strength and stamina back, they would lie in bed on cold, snowy mornings and make love until their bodies were damp with sweat even in the chilled air, and she would give him all the fiercely passionate love he could sense inside her. She presented a calm, controlled facade to the world, but perhaps because he hadn't been able to see her and had been forced to rely on his other

faculties, he'd sensed the depth of her emotions behind that cool control. Maybe he'd been fool enough to let her slip away from him before, but not again.
"Okay," he said, exhaling slowly. "So we go to this safe house. What kind of security and communications does it have?"
"Bulletproof windows, reinforced steel doors. The cabin is isolated, built on a high meadow. There aren't any roads going up there, so a four-wheel-drive vehicle will be made available to you. The cabin has its own generator, so there aren't any public utility records. You're connected to a satellite-dish antenna for communication and entertainment, with both computer and radio-sending capabilities."
Steve's expression was remote as he concentrated, considering the angles. "Are there any active security systems, or just the passive precautions?"
"Just the passive."
"Why not thermal or motion sensors?"
"To begin with, this cabin is so safe it isn't even on file. And there's a lot of wildlife in the area, which would constantly trigger the alarms. We could set up a perimeter of thermal sensors and program the system to sound the alarm only at a large heat source, but a deer would still set it off."
"How inaccessible is this place?"
"There's just one track leading to it, and I'm being kind by calling it a track. It winds from the cabin across the meadow and down a mountain before it hits a dirt road, then it's twenty more miles before the dirt road runs into a paved secondary road."
"Then a laser across the track would alert us to most visitors, while almost eliminating alarms triggered by wildlife, by covering only a thin strip of the track."
Frank grinned. "You know, don't you, that a bunny is going to hop through that light beam and set off the alarm? All right, I'll have a laser alarm system set up. Do you want an audible or visual alarm?"
"Audible, but a quiet one. And I want a portable beeper to carry with me when we have to leave the house."
"For someone with amnesia, you sure remember a lot," Frank murmured as he took a small pad from his inside coat pocket and began making notes.
"I remember the names of the heads of state of just about every country in the world, too," Steve replied. "I've had a lot of time to play mind games

with myself, putting together pieces of the puzzle by cataloging a lot of the things related to my job."
"Your job meant a lot to you. It does that, sometimes, takes over so much that the personal side of life kind of fades away."
"Has it done that for you? "
"It did once, a long time ago. Not now."
"How did you get involved in this? You're FBI, and this sure as hell isn't a Bureau operation."
"You're right about that. A lot of strings were pulled, but there are a few people with the power to manage it."
"Very few. So I'm CIA?"
Frank smiled. "No," he said calmly. "Not exactly."
"What the hell does that mean, 'not exactly'? I'm either CIA or I'm not. There's a shortage of alternatives."
"You're affiliated. That's all I can say, other than to assure you that you're perfectly legal. When you recover your memory you'll know why I can't say more."
"All right." Steve shrugged his acceptance. It didn't really matter. Until he regained his memory, the knowledge wouldn't do him any good.
Frank indicated the bag he had brought in with him. "I brought street clothes for you to change into, but first let me get the surgeon in here to finish your exam. After that, I guess you'll be released."
"I'll need more clothes before we go to Colorado. By the way, where did I live?"
"You have an apartment in Maryland. I've arranged for your clothes to be packed and carried to the plane, but they won't fit until you've gained back the weight you've lost. You'll need new clothes until then."
Steve grinned, feeling suddenly light-spirited. "Jay and I will both need new clothes. The snow in Colorado is probably ass-deep to a giraffe."
Frank threw back his head and laughed.
Jay sat on the bed in the cramped apartment she'd been using for the past two months. Her heart was pounding and chills kept racing up and down her spine.
The implications, and complications, of the situation terrified her.
Now she knew what it was that had been bothering her off and on for two months; what she had never been able to put her finger on before. When she had been brought here and asked to identify the man in the bed, she hadn't

been able to positively say he was Steve Crossfield. Then Frank had said that the man had brown eyes, and she had based her identification on that, because Steve had had dark, velvety eyes, "Chrissy eyes." Probably to a man, or on a vital statistics sheet, brown eyes were simply brown eyes. They didn't allow for chocolate brown, hazel brown or fierce yellow-brown. But Frank had known that the man had brown eyes!

She pressed her hands to her temples and closed her eyes. Frank must have known the color of his own agent's eyes, and he had known that Steve's eyes were brown, so it followed that Frank had also realized she couldn't base her identification simply on eye color, yet he had led her to do exactly that. She realized now that he had gently maneuvered her into declaring the man to be Steve Crossfield. He must have known there was at least a fifty-percent chance that the man wasn't Steve, so why had he done it?

The only answer she could come up with, and the one that terrified her, was that Frank had known all along that the man was the American agent and not Steve. He had taken Steve's identity and given it to the man, and given the tale substance by having Steve Crossfield's ex-wife confirm the identity, then maneuvered her into a bedside vigil that would have convinced anyone.

So Steve, the real Steve, was dead, and the agent had been given his identity for... protection?

It all fit. The plastic surgery on his face to alter his appearance; the bandaged hands to prevent fingerprints being taken. Had they done surgery to alter his fingerprints, too? Horrible thought: had they also deliberately damaged his larynx to change his voice? No, surely not. She couldn't believe that. All the doctors had fought so hard for his life, and Frank had been so anxious. No wonder. The man was probably Frank's friend!

But was the amnesia real? Or was the man faking it so he wouldn't have to "remember" any of the details of their supposed life together? Amnesia would be a convenient excuse.

She had to believe the amnesia was real, or she would go mad. She had to believe that "Steve" was as much in the dark as she was, maybe even more so. And Frank had been sincerely distressed when Major Lunning had told them about the amnesia.

So that left her back at the beginning. If she told Frank she knew Steve wasn't really Steve, the game would be up and they would have no more use

for her. She was a screen, useful only to provide incontrovertible proof that the man who had survived the explosion was Steve Crossfield.
So she had to go along with the deception and continue pretending he was Steve, because she loved him. She had fallen in love with him before she even knew what he looked like; she had loved his relentless will, his refusal to give in to pain, to stop fighting. She loved the uncomplaining way he went about recovery and rehabilitation. Except for occasional frustration at his lack of memory, he hadn't let anything get him down. She had fallen in love with the man while he was stripped down to his basic character, without any of the camouflaging layers added by society.
She couldn't give him up now. Yet neither could she take him as hers; she was as caught in the web of circumstance as he was. He trusted her, but she was being forced to lie to him about something as basic as his identity. She knew the man, but she still knew nothing about his life. Dear God, what if he were married?
No, he couldn't be. Whatever game they were playing, they wouldn't tell a woman that she was now a widow, then give her husband another identity. Jay simply couldn't believe that of Frank. But there could still be a woman in Steve's life, someone he cared for, someone who cared for him, even though they weren't married. Was there such a woman waiting for him now, weeping because he'd been gone for so long, and she was terrified that he would never come back?
Jay felt sick; her only choices were twin prongs of the devil's pitchfork, and either would be pure torment. She could either tell him the truth and lose him, very possibly throwing him into danger, or she could lie to him and protect him. For the first time in her life she loved someone with the full force of her nature, with nothing held back, and her emotions propelled her toward the only choice she could make. Because she loved him, she could do nothing but protect him, no matter what the cost to herself.
Finally she got up and threw her clothing haphazardly into suitcases, not caring about wrinkles. Two months ago she had stepped into a hall of mirrors, and she had no way of knowing if the reflections she saw were accurate or a carefully constructed illusion. She thought of her chic apartment in New York and how much she had worried about losing it when she'd lost her job, but she couldn't think now why it had seemed so important to her. Her entire life had been thrown off kilter, and now it rotated on a different axis. Steve was the center of her life, not an apartment

or a job, or the security she had fought so hard to win. After years of struggle she was throwing it all away just to be with him, and she had no regrets or moments of longing for that life. She loved him. Steve, yet not Steve. His name, but another man. Whoever he was, whatever he was, she loved him.

She found a box and dumped into it the few personal articles such as books and pictures that she'd brought to Washington. It had taken her less than an hour to get ready to leave forever.

As she went back and forth, loading things into the car, she looked around carefully, wondering if any of the people she could see supposedly going about their own business were in reality watching her. Maybe she was getting paranoid, but too much had happened for her to take anything for granted, even the appearance of normalcy. That very morning she had looked into fierce, golden eyes and realized that everything that had happened during the past two months had been a lie. The blinders of trust had been stripped from her eyes, making her wary.

Suddenly she felt a driving need to be with him again; uncertainty made her desperate for him. He was no longer a patient in need of her care and attention, but a man who, in spite of his memory loss, would be more surefooted than she was in this world of shifting reality. The instincts and reactions she had wondered about were now explained, as was the scope of his knowledge of world politics. He had lost his identity, but his training had remained with him.

He and Frank were lounging in the hospital room, patiently waiting for her. Jay barely managed a greeting for them; her eyes were on Steve. He had changed into khaki pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled back over his forearms. Even as lean as he was, he still gave the impression of power. His shoulders and chest strained at the cotton shirt. With the bandages gone from his eyes, he had shed the last semblance of being in need of care. He looked her over from head to foot and his eyes narrowed in a look of sexual intent as old as time. Jay felt it like a touch, stroking over her body, and she felt both warm and alarmed.

He got to his feet with lazy grace and came to her side, sliding his arm around her waist in a possessive gesture. "That was fast. You must not have packed much."

"It wasn't actually packing," she explained ruefully. "It was more like wadding and stuffing."

"You didn't have to be in such a hurry. I wasn't going anywhere without you," he drawled.
"Both of you have to go shopping, anyway," Frank added. "I didn't think of it, but Steve pointed out that neither of you has clothes suited to a Colorado winter."
Jay looked at Frank, at his clear, calm eyes and friendly face. He'd been a rock for her to lean on these past two months, smoothing the way for her, doing what he could to make her comfortable, and all the time he'd been lying to her. Even knowing that, she simply couldn't believe he'd done it for any reason other than to protect Steve, and because of that she forgave him completely. She was willing to do the same thing, so how could she hold it against him?
"There's no point in shopping here," Steve said. "Or even in Denver. If we go to a city, we'll have to get what some department-store buyer thinks is stylish for a winter vacation. We'll stop at some small-town general store and buy what the locals buy, but not at the town closest to the cabin. Maybe one about a hundred miles from it."
Frank nodded at that impeccable logic, as well as the ring of command in Steve's raspy voice. He was taking over the show, but then, they hadn't expected anything else; amnesia didn't change basic character traits, and Steve was an expert at logistics. He knew what to do and how to get it done.
Jay didn't exhibit any surprise at the precautions. Her deep blue eyes were calm. Having made her decision, she was ready for whatever happened.
"Will we need any sort of weapon?" she asked. "After all, we'll be pretty isolated." She had the urbanite's distaste for guns and violence, but the thought of living on a remote mountain put things in a different light. There were times when guns were practical.
Steve looked down at her, and his arm tightened around her. He'd already discussed weapons with Frank. "A rifle wouldn't be a bad idea."
"You'll have to show me how to shoot. I've never handled a gun."
Frank checked the time. "I'll make a call and we'll get started. By the time we get to the airport, the plane will be ready."
"Which airport are we using?"
"National. We'll be flying in to Colorado Springs, then driving the rest of the way." Satisfied with the way things had turned out, Frank went to make his call. Actually he had to make two calls: one to the airport to have the plane readied, and another to the Man to bring him up-to-date.

Chapter Eight

After a series of small delays, it was midafternoon before the private jet actually took off from Washington National Airport, and the sun was already low in the pale winter sky. There was no way they could make it to the cabin that night, so Frank had already made arrangements for them to stay overnight in Colorado Springs. Jay sat by a window, her muscles tense as she looked down at the monochromatic scenery without really seeing it. She had the sensation of stepping out of one life and into another, with no bridge by which to return. She hadn't even told her family where she was going; though they weren't a close-knit group, they did usually know everyone's location. She hadn't seen any of them at Christmas because she had remained at the hospital with Steve, and now it was as if a tie had been severed.

Steve sat beside her, his long legs stretched out as he lounged in the comfortable seat and pored over several current news magazines. He was totally absorbed, as if he'd been starved for the written word. Abruptly he snorted and tossed his magazine aside. "I'd forgotten how slanted news coverage can be," he muttered, then gave a short laugh at his own phrasing. "Along with everything else."

His wry tone splintered her distracted mood and she chuckled. Smiling, he turned his head to watch her, rubbing his eyes to focus them. "Unless my vision settles down, I may need glasses to read."

"Are your eyes bothering you?" she asked, concerned. He'd worn sunglasses since leaving the hospital, but had taken them off when they had boarded the plane.

"They're tired, and the light is still too bright. It's a little hard to focus on close objects, but the surgeon told me that might clear up in a few days."

"Might?"

"There's a fifty-percent chance I'll need reading glasses." He reached over and took her hand, rubbing his thumb over her palm. "Will you still love me if I have to wear glasses?"

Her breath caught and she looked away. Silence thickened between them. Then he squeezed her hand and whispered roughly, "All right, I won't push. Not right now. We'll have time to get everything settled."

So he intended to push later, when they were alone in the cabin. She wondered exactly what he wanted from her: an emotional commitment, or just the physical enjoyment of her body? After all, it had been at least two months since he'd had sex. Then she wondered who had been the last woman to lie in bed with him, and jealousy seared her, mingled with pain. Did that woman mean anything to nun? Was she waiting for him, crying herself to sleep at night because he didn't call?

They spent the night at a motel in Colorado Springs. Jay was surprised to find there was only a light dusting of snow on the ground, instead of the several feet she had expected, but random flakes were swirling softly out of the black sky with the promise of more snow by morning. The cold pierced her coat, and she shivered as she turned the collar up around her ears. She would be glad to get something more suitable to wear.

Steve was tired from his first day out of the hospital, and she was exhausted, too; it had been a hard day for both of them. She lay down across the bed in her room and dozed while Frank went to get hamburgers for dinner. They ate in Frank's room, and she excused herself immediately afterward. All she wanted was to relax and gather her thoughts. To that end she took a long, hot shower, letting the water beat the tension out of her muscles, but it was still hard to think coherently. The risk she was taking frightened her, yet she knew she couldn't go back. Couldn't—and wouldn't. She tied the belt of her robe securely and opened the bathroom door, then froze. Steve was stretched out on her bed, his arms behind his head as he stared at the television. The picture was on, but the sound was off. She looked at him, then at the door to her room, her brows puckered in confusion. "I thought I locked the door."

"You did. I picked the lock."

She didn't move any closer. "A little something you remembered?"

He looked at her, then swung his legs off the bed and sat up. "No, I didn't remember it. I just knew how to do it."

Good Lord, what other suspicious talents did he have? He looked lean and dangerous, his battered face hard, his yellow eyes narrow and gleaming; he was probably capable of things that would give her nightmares, but she didn't fear him. She loved him too much; she had loved him from the moment she had first touched his arm and felt his will to live burning in him. But her nerves jangled as he stood and took the few steps he needed to reach her. He was so close now that she had to look up to see his face; she

could feel the heat emanating from his body, smell the warm, musky male scent of his skin.
He cupped her cheek in his palm, his thumb rubbing lightly over the shadows fatigue had smudged under her eyes, making their blueness seem even deeper. She was pale and jittery, her body trembling. She had taken care of him for months, spending all day, every day, at his bedside, willing him to live and pulling him out of the darkness. She had filled his whole life to the point that even the shock of having amnesia paled in comparison. She had gotten him through hell. Now the strain was telling on her, and he was the stronger one. He could feel the tension in her, vibrating like a string at the point of breaking. He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her forward until her body rested against his. His other hand moved from her cheek into her heavy brown hair, exerting just enough pressure to bring her head against his shoulder.
"I don't think this is a good idea," she whispered, the sound muffled in his shut.
"It *feels* like a damned good idea," he muttered. Every muscle in his body was tightening, his loins growing heavy with desire. God, he wanted her. His hands moved over her slender body. "Jay," he whispered roughly, and bent his head to hers.
The hot, needful pressure of his mouth made her dizzy. The stroking of his tongue against hers made her tighten inside with pleasure so piercing it was almost unbearable. Her hands lifted to the back of his neck, clinging as all strength washed out of her legs. She barely noticed as he turned with her still in his arms and forced her backward until the bed nudged against the backs of her knees. She lost her sense of balance, but his arms supported her as she fell back, and then his hard weight came down on top of her.
She had forgotten how the pressure of a man's body felt, and she inhaled sharply as quick response flooded her veins. The wide expanse of his chest flattened her breasts, and the swollen ridge of his manhood pushed against her feminine mound, his thighs controlling the restless movement of her legs. He kissed her again and again, barely letting her catch her breath before his mouth returned to take it away once more. Feverishly they strained together, wanting more. He pulled at the belt of her robe until the knot gave and the fabric parted, exposing the thinner fabric of her nightgown. He made a rough sound of frustration at this additional barrier, but for the moment he was too impatient to deal with it. His hand closed

over her breast, kneading the soft flesh, his thumb making circles on her nipple until it tightened into a nub.
She whimpered softly into his mouth. "We can't," she cried, desperation and desire tearing her apart.
"The hell we can't," he rasped, taking her hand and moving it down his body to where his flesh strained at the fabric of his pants. Her fingers jerked at the contact; then a spasm of pain crossed her pale face, and her hand lingered involuntarily, exploring the dimensions of his arousal. He caught his breath. "Jay, baby, don't stop me now!"
She was stunned at how quickly passion had exploded between them; one kiss and they were falling on the bed. Her lips trembled as she stared up at him. She didn't even know his name! Tears burned her eyes and she blinked them away.
He groaned at the liquid sheen welling in her eyes and kissed her again with rough passion. "Don't cry. I know this is fast, but everything's going to be okay. We'll get married as soon as we can, and this time we'll make a go of it."
Shocked, she swallowed convulsively and barely managed to speak. "Married? Are you serious?"
"As serious as a heart attack, baby," he said, and grinned roguishly.
The tears burned again, and again she forced them back. Misery filled her. She wanted nothing more than to marry him, but she couldn't. She would be marrying him under false pretenses, pretending he was someone he wasn't. Such a marriage probably wouldn't even be legal. "We can't," she whispered, and a tear rolled out the corner of her eye before she could catch it.
He rubbed the wetness from her temple with his thumb. "Why can't we?" he asked with rough tenderness. "We did it before. We should be able to do better this time around, with our prior experience."
"What if you've remarried?" She gulped back a sob as she frantically thought up excuses. "Even if you haven't, what if there's someone else? Until you get your memory back, we won't *know*!"
He froze above her; then, with a sigh, he rolled off her to lie on his back, staring at the ceiling. He swore with a precise, Anglo-Saxon explicitness that was all the more jarring for the control in his voice. "All right," he finally said. "We'll get Frank to check it out. Hell, Jay, he's already checked it out! Isn't that why they had to get you to identify me?"

Too late she saw the trap, and saw also that he wasn't going to give up; with his usual steamroller determination, he was flattening the obstacles in his path. "You could still have some... someone who loves you, someone waiting for you."
"I can't promise you I don't," he said, turning his head to watch her with his predatory golden eyes. "But that's not a legal deterrent. I won't let you get away from me because some unknown woman somewhere may be in love with me."
"Until you get your memory back, you can't know that you aren't in love with someone else!"
"I *know*," he snapped, propping himself up on his elbow and leaning over her. "You keep coming up with excuses, but the real reason is that you're afraid of me, aren't you? Why? Damn it, I know you love me, so what's the problem?"
He was so arrogantly sure of her devotion that her own temper flared, but only for a moment. It was true. She had revealed it in a thousand different ways. She admitted shakily, "I do love you." There was nothing to be gained from denying it, and actually saying it aloud held its own painful sweetness.
His face softened and he put his free hand on her breasts, gently cupping them. "Then why shouldn't we get married?"
It was hard to concentrate with his palm burning her flesh through the thin cotton of her gown, and her body quickened again. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her, and denying him was the hardest thing she'd ever done, but she had no choice. Until his memory returned, she was in limbo. She couldn't take advantage of him now by marrying him under false pretenses.
"Well?" he demanded impatiently.
"I love you," she said again. Her lips trembled. "Ask me again when your memory has returned, and I'll say yes. Until then, until we're both certain it's what you want, I... I just can't."
His face hardened. "Damn it, Jay, I know what I want."
"We've been thrown together because of the circumstances! We don't know each other under normal conditions. You're not the same man I married—" how true that was! "—and I'm not the same woman. We need time! When your memory returns—"

"That's not guaranteed," he interrupted, his voice harsh with frustration. "What if my memory never returns? What if there's permanent brain damage? Then what? Are you still going to be saying no this time next year? Five years from now?"
"I don't think you have brain damage," she said shakily. "You recovered your speech and motor functions too easily."
"That's beside the damned point!" He was furious. Before she could move, he rolled onto her and pinned her hands to the bed. He was so close that she could see the yellow flecks in his irises, his curling black lashes, and a tiny scar in his left eyebrow she hadn't noticed before. He took a deep breath and slowly relaxed, the anger fading from him as he moved against the softness of her body, letting her feel his hardness. "I won't wait forever," he said in soft warning. "I'm going to have you. If not now, then later."
Then he rolled off her and was gone, moving with a peculiar silent grace that had become far more evident since the bandages had been removed from his eyes. There had been signs of it before, manifested in the superb control he had over his movements, but now it was striking. He didn't just move, he flowed, his muscles rippling with liquid power. Jay lay quietly on the bed, her body burning from frustration and the lingering sensation of contact with his, her eyes on the door he had closed behind him.
Who was he? Terror washed over her again, but it was terror for him. He was an agent, obviously, but not just any agent. He had clearly had extensive training; he was valuable enough that the government was willing to spend a fortune protecting him, as well as setting up this elaborate charade with her as an unsuspecting partner. If it hadn't been for his eyes, she might never have suspected a thing. But if he was that valuable to his own government, then logic told her he was of at least equal value to his enemies. All things were in proportion; whatever lengths had been taken to protect him, his enemies would be willing to go to equal lengths to find and destroy him.
As each new part of him was revealed, the stakes seemed to get higher. Now she knew that he was skilled at clandestine forced entry. She had picked up some of the lingo at Bethesda; what had she heard it called? Light entry? No, soft entry. They called it a soft entry. Going in hard was an attack with weapons. Maybe the lock on the motel door wasn't the sturdiest model available, but she knew that picking it was beyond the average

citizen. A good burglar wouldn't have any trouble with it, though... or a good agent.
And the way he moved. He was as controlled and graceful as a dancer, but a dancer's moves were poetic, while Steve's were evocative of silent danger.
His mind. No detail escaped him. He was trained to notice and use everything. Already Frank was deferring to htm, another sign of his importance.
And he was in danger. Perhaps not immediate danger, but she knew it was there waiting for him.
The phone rang at two in the morning in Frank's room, and he muttered a sleepy curse as he fumbled for the receiver. It was second nature to him not to turn on a light, which could alert any outside observers that he was awake. Nor did he have to ask who it was, because only one man knew where they were.
"Yes," he said, and yawned.
"Piggot surfaced," the Man said. "East Berlin. We couldn't get to him in time, but we did find out that he's learned there was a survivor of the explosion and has made inquiries."
"Did the cover hold?"
"If Piggot asked at all, there has to be some doubt. Make certain your trail is covered. I don't want anyone other than the two of us to know where they are. How is he doing?"
"Better than I would have, if this had been my first day out of the hospital in two months. He's stronger than I expected. One other thing: I never would have believed it, but I think he's falling in love with her. It isn't just that he's been dependent on her, I think he's really serious."
"Good God," the Man said, startled. He laughed. "Well, it happens to the best of us. I have the final medical report on him here. His brain damage, if any, is minimal. He's a walking miracle, especially the speed of his recovery. He should regain his full memory but it may take a trigger of some sort to release it. We may have to bring his family in, or take him home, but not until we find Piggot. Until then, he stays hidden."
"The day we get Piggot, we tell him—and Jay— what's going on?"
The Man sighed. He sounded tired. "I hope he's recovered his memory by then. Damn it, we need to know what happened over there, and what he found out. But with his memory or without it, he has to stay there until we get Piggot. He has to be Steve Crossfield."

Steve woke early and lay in bed, feeling the fatigue that still weighted his body, as well as the sexual frustration that had been plaguing him for several weeks. He had tried, but even the rigorous exercise he'd been taking hadn't rebuilt his strength to the point he would have liked. Yesterday had exhausted him. He grinned sourly, thinking that it had probably been a good thing Jay had turned him down, because there was a good chance he would have collapsed on her in the middle of making love. Damn it.

He didn't intend to let her refusal stand in his way, but his lack of strength was something else. He had to get back in shape. It wasn't just that he was dissatisfied with his lack of strength and his physical limitations; he had a nagging feeling that he needed to be in top shape just in case... *what*? He didn't know what he expected to happen, but he had an uneasy feeling. If anything came up, he had to be in shape to protect Jay and handle the situation.

After getting out of bed, he first took the pistol that had been on the bedside table and placed it on the floor, within easy reach. Then he dropped down and began doing push-ups, counting silently. Thirty was his limit. Already panting, he rolled over and hooked his feet under the bed, his hands behind his head, and did sit-ups. The new scars on his abdomen throbbed at the strain he was putting on them, and sweat broke out on his brow. He had to stop at seventeen. Swearing in disgust, he looked down at his body. He was in pitiful shape. Before, he'd been able to do a hundred push-ups and sit-ups without even breathing hard— He went still, waiting for the half memory to become full-blown, waiting for the mental door to open, but nothing happened. Just for a second he'd had a glimpse of what his life had been before; then the door had closed again. The doctor had told him not to try to force it, but that blank door taunted him. There was something he needed to know, and rage built inside him because he couldn't force his way past the block.

Suddenly he heard footsteps outside the room, and he rolled, grabbing the pistol as he did so. Stretched out prone on the carpet, he aimed the pistol at the door and waited. The footsteps halted and a grumpy voice said, "June, come *on*. We need to get an early start and you've wasted enough time."

"Will the town be gone if we get there at four instead of three?" an equally grumpy female voice returned.

Steve let out his breath and climbed to his feet, staring at the pistol in his hand. It fit his palm as if he'd been born holding it. It was a Browning

automatic, high caliber, and loaded with hollow-tip bullets that would make a hell of a hole going in and an even bigger one coming out. Frank had given it to him at the hospital while they were waiting for Jay to return and had told him to keep it on him, just as a precaution. When Steve had reached to take it, it was as if part of him had slipped back into focus. He hadn't realized how unusual it had been not to be armed, until the pistol was in his hand.

His reactions just now said a lot about the type of life he'd been living; it had been second nature for him to place the pistol within reach even while exercising, and second nature to regard those approaching footsteps as a possible danger. Maybe Jay had been smart to divorce him the first time. Maybe he wasn't doing her a favor by forcing his way back into her life, considering the dangers of *his*.

The pistol in his hand was a fine piece of hardware, but it couldn't compare to the feel of Jay's body. If he had to choose between Jay and his work, the job had just lost. He'd been a damned fool the first time, but he wasn't going to foul up this second chance. Whoever he worked for would just have to reassign him, bring him in, or he'd get out completely. No more clandestine meetings, no more assassins after him. Hell, it was time he settled down and let the Young Turks have their chance. He was thirty-seven, long past the age when most other men had wives and families.

But he wouldn't tell him until his memory returned, he thought cynically as he showered. Until then, he couldn't afford to totally trust anyone, except Jay.

* * *

They bought boots, socks and insulated underwear in Colorado Springs, jeans and flannel shirts in another town, hats and shearling coats in another. Jay also bought a thick down jacket with a hood, and a supply of long flannel gowns. The two vehicles Frank had obtained were four-wheel-drive Jeeps with snow tires, so they made good time, even though the snow became deeper the farther west they went.

Frank drove the lead Jeep, with Steve and Jay in the one behind. Jay had never driven a stick shift before, so the driving was left up to Steve. At first Jay worried about his legs, but he didn't seem to have any difficulty with the clutching and braking, so after a time she stopped worrying and began paying attention to the magnificent scenery as they drove west on U.S. 24. The sky, which had been clear, gradually became leaden with clouds, and

occasional snowflakes began to drift down. The weather didn't worsen beyond that, and they continued to make good time even after they turned off onto a state highway. Then they left the state highway for a secondary road with much less traffic and a lot more snow, necessitating a slower speed. After that Frank took a dirt road that wound through the mountains for what seemed like hours, and finally he made another turnoff. Jay could see no discernible road or even a trail; they were simply driving up a mountain by the route of least resistance.

"I wonder if he knows where he's going," she muttered, clinging to the seat as the Jeep jolted to one side.

"He knows. Frank's a good agent," Steve returned absently, downshifting to climb a particularly steep rise. Once they reached the top, they seemed to be in a high, wide meadow that stretched and dipped for miles in front of them. They drove along the edge of the tree line until the meadow abruptly ended, and then they descended sharply down the side of the mountain. Next they climbed up another mountain, where there was a stretch of track barely wide enough to accommodate the Jeeps. On one side was the rock face, and on the other, nothing but an increasing distance to the bottom. Then they crested that mountain, too, and reached another rolling meadow. As the sun dipped behind the western peaks, Steve squinted his eyes at the tree line to their left. "That must be the cabin."

"Where?" Jay asked, sitting up eagerly. Just the thought of being able to get out of the Jeep and stretch her legs was pure heaven,

"In that stand of pines, just to the left."

Then she saw it and sighed in relief. It was just an ordinary cabin, but it was as welcome as a luxury hotel. It was tucked just under the trees, visible only from the front. Because it was built on a slope, the front was higher than the back; there were six wooden steps leading up to a porch that ran all the way across. Built onto the cabin at the back was a lean-to for the Jeeps, and thirty yards to the rear was a shed.

They parked under the lean-to and stiffly got out, arching their backs to stretch aching muscles. The air was so cold and crisp that it almost hurt to inhale, but the setting sun was painting the snowy peaks and ridges in shades of red, gold and purple, and Jay stood motionless, entranced, until Steve nudged her into motion.

It took several trips to carry everything in; then Frank took Steve to the shed to show him how the generator worked. Evidently someone had already

been up to turn it on, because the electric lights worked and the refrigerator was humming. Jay checked the small pantry and refrigerator, and found them fully stocked with canned goods and frozen meats.
She gave herself a short tour of the cabin. Next to the kitchen was a small utility-mudroom with a modern washer and dryer. There was no dining room, only a round wooden table and four chairs in one corner of the kitchen. The living room was comfortably furnished in sturdy Early American, with brown corduroy upholstery. A brown-and-blue hooked rug covered the wooden floor, and one wall was almost entirely taken up by an enormous rock fireplace. There were two bedrooms of equal size, connected by the cabin's lone bathroom. Jay stared at the connecting door, her heart beating a little faster at the thought of sharing a bathroom with him. She knew the intimacy of damp towels hanging side by side, toiletries becoming jumbled together, a shared tube of toothpaste. His whiskers would be in the sink, his razor on the side. The small details of living together were at least as seductive as physical intimacies, meshing their lives at every moment of the day.
The back door slammed, and Steve called, "Where are you?" His rough voice was even raspier than usual from breathing the cold air.
"Exploring," she replied, leaving the bathroom and crossing to the bedroom door. "Any objections if I take the front bedroom? It has the best view."
A fire had already been laid in the fireplace. He bent down and struck a match on the hearth, then held it to the paper and kindling under the logs, not answering until he'd straightened. "Let me look at them."
Vaguely surprised, Jay stepped aside and let him enter. He examined the location of the windows and their locks, opened the closet and looked at it, then stepped into the adjoining bath.
"It's a connecting bath," she pointed out.
He grunted and opened the door into the second bedroom. The windows in both rooms were on the side walls, but because the rear of the cabin was closer to the ground than the front was, the windows in the second bedroom were more accessible from the outside. "All right," he said, checking the locks on his windows, too. "But I want it understood that if you hear anything at all during the night, you wake me. Okay?"
"Yes," she said, her throat constricting. All this was second nature to him. He must think there was some danger, too, despite all the precautions Frank

had taken. She had wanted to think they were safe here, but perhaps they weren't. The best thing she could do was not argue with him.
He glanced at her, and his rough face softened a bit. "Sorry. I guess I'm overreacting to a strange situation. I didn't mean to scare you." Because the tension didn't fade from her eyes, he walked over to her, cupped her face in his hands, then kissed her. Her wonderfully full, lush, exotic mouth opened for him and his tongue teased at hers. Jay put her hands on his shoulders and luxuriated in the heat of his body against her. The cabin wasn't icy, but it was far from warm.
He held her against him for a moment, then reluctantly let her go. "Let's see what this place has in the way of grub. If I don't eat soon, I'm going to fall down." He wasn't exaggerating, she realized. She could feel a faint tremor in his muscles, a sign of the enormous strain he'd put on his body that day. Casually she put her arm around his waist as they walked back to the living room. "I've already checked the food. We can have almost anything our hearts desire, as long as our hearts desire plain cuisine. If you want lobster or truffles, you're out of luck."
"I'd settle for a can of soup," he said tiredly, and groaned as he sank down into one of the comfortable chairs. He stretched his legs out, absently rubbing his thighs.
"We can do better than that," Frank said as he brought in an armload of wood, having caught Steve's last comment. He stacked the wood on the hearth and dusted his hands. "I think. I'm not much of a cook." He looked hopefully at Jay, and she laughed.
"I'll see what I can do. I'm a real whiz with microwave dinners, but I didn't see a microwave oven, so I'm a little lost."
She was too tired to do much, but it didn't take a tot of effort to open two large cans of beef stew and heat them, or to brown buttered rolls in the gas oven. They were almost silent as they ate, and after Frank had helped her clean up the few dishes, they all took turns in the shower. By eight o'clock they were asleep, Jay and Steve in their respective bedrooms and Frank rolled in a blanket on the couch.
They rose early the next morning, and after a hearty breakfast Frank and Steve walked around in the snow. The gas stove and hot-water heater operated on butane gas, and the large tank had been filled; it shouldn't need refilling until spring. The fuel tank for the generator would need replenishing, but all Steve had to do was contact Frank by computer, and

fuel would be brought in by helicopter. They didn't want a delivery to the cabin by any commercial business or utility, and, at any rate, the cabin was too difficult for an ordinary fuel truck to reach. It was a complicated setup, but it was meant to be an ultrasafe lodging, unlisted in any files. All in all, the place was stocked for a long-term stay, though Frank couldn't help wishing Steve would recover his memory soon and put an end to all this, or that Piggot would be caught.

"The nearest town is Black Bull, population one hundred thirty-three," Frank said. "Go down to the dirt road and turn right, and you'll eventually get there. It has a general store for basic food and supplies. If you want anything fancier, you'll have to find a larger town, but keep a low profile. You should have enough cash to last a couple of months, but let me know if you need more."

Steve looked out over the white meadow. The air was so clear, the early-morning sun so bright on the spotless snow, that it hurt his eyes. The cold burned his lungs. The land was so damned big and empty that it gave him an eerie feeling, but at the same time he was almost content. He was impatient for Frank to leave so he would finally be alone, completely alone, with Jay.

"You're safe here," Frank added. "The Man uses it sometimes." He glanced up at the cabin. "I wouldn't have brought Jay here if it wasn't safe. She's a civilian, so take good care of her, pal."

A tingle, a heightened awareness, had seized Steve when Frank mentioned the Man. It wasn't a sense of danger but a sort of excitement. The memory was there, but blocked from his consciousness by the lingering effects of the explosion. The Man was another piece of the puzzle.

He shook Frank's hand, and their eyes met in the comradeship of men who have been in danger together. "You probably won't see me again until this is over, but I'll be in touch," Frank said. "I'd better get moving. It's supposed to start snowing again this afternoon."

They went inside and Frank got his gear, then told Jay goodbye. She hugged him, her eyes suspiciously bright. Frank had been her rock for two months, and she would miss him. He had also been a buffer between her and Steve; when he left, there would be only the two of them.

She glanced at Steve, to find him watching her intently. His pale brown eyes were glowing, yellower than they had moments before, like those of a raptor that had sighted its prey.

Chapter Nine

Jay had expected Steve to pounce on her, but to her relief he seemed to have other things on his mind. For the next week he spent the daylight hours prowling around the cabin and shed and exploring their high meadow, as tense and wary as a cat in unfamiliar surroundings. The hours passed tromping through the snow tired him, and as often as not he would go to sleep soon after eating dinner. Jay worried, until she realized that it was a natural part of his recovery. The rehabilitation he'd had in the hospital had given him a start, but he was still a long way from full strength, and the many hours of walking served two purposes: to acquaint him with his new territory, and to rebuild his stamina. It was the end of the week before he began to relax, but every day he still walked a perimeter around the cabin, watching, checking for any intrusion.

They seemed so isolated that she couldn't understand his caution, but she supposed it was ingrained in him. Watching him gave her an even greater insight into the man he was. He was so superbly suited to his occupation! He knew what to do by instinct, without needing to rely on memory.

When he was stronger, he began chopping wood to keep a good supply for the fireplace. They used the hearth for most of their heat, to conserve fuel. The cabin was so snugly built and insulated that it held heat well, and a good fire was sufficient to keep the entire place comfortable. At first his hands were sore and blistered, despite the gloves he wore, but gradually they toughened. After a while he added jogging to his activities, but he didn't jog in the meadow, where it was clear. He ran through the trees, up and down the hills, deliberately picking the roughest path, and every day his legs were a little stronger, his breathing a little easier, so he would push himself further.

Jay loved those first days in the cabin, high in the vast, silent meadow. Sometimes the only sound was that of the wind stirring the trees. Having been accustomed her entire life to the bustle of cities, the space and silence made her feel as if she'd been reborn in a new world. The last remnants of tension from her old life relaxed and faded away. She was alone in the mountains with the man she loved, and they were safe.

He began teaching her how to drive a stick shift. To Jay, it was fun, bouncing in the Jeep over the meadow. To Steve, it was a precaution,

against the possibility that something could happen to him and Jay would have to do the driving. It might come down to a matter of saving her life.
There was a heavy snow the third week they were there. Jay woke early to a world where every sound had been muffled. She got up to peek out the window at the deep drifts of new snow, then tumbled back into her warm bed and fell instantly asleep again. When she woke the second time it was almost ten, and she felt wonderfully rested, as well as starving.
She dressed hurriedly and brushed her hair, wondering why the cabin was so silent. Where was Steve? She looked into his room, but it was empty. There was a pot of coffee in the kitchen, and she drank a cup while standing at the window, searching the tree line for some sign of him. Nothing.
Curious, she finished the coffee and returned to her room to stamp her feet into warm boots; then she put on her shearling coat and pulled a thick knit cap over her hair. It was unusual for Steve to go out without telling her where he would be and how long he'd be gone. She wondered what he was doing, and why he hadn't woken her. Could he have hurt himself?
Anxious now, she went down the back steps. "Steve?" she called softly, a little afraid to raise her voice. The meadow was so silent, and for the first time its isolation felt threatening, instead of safe. Was there someone else out there?
His footprints were plainly visible in the new snow. He'd evidently made several trips to the woodpile to replenish the supply in the house, because there was a worn trail between them; then he'd walked up the slope into the forest. Jay dug her gloves out of her coat pocket and put them on, and wished she'd wrapped a scarf around her nose and mouth. It was so cold that the air felt brittle. She turned the collar of the coat up around her neck and began following Steve's trail, carefully stepping in his tracks because that was easier than breaking through the snow herself.
The snow wasn't as deep under the trees, making the walking easier, but Jay kept to the prints Steve had made. The thickly-growing evergreens, their branches weighted down with snow, blanketed noise and muffled it out of existence. She could barely hear herself breathe or the snow crunching under her boots. She wanted to call Steve's name again but somehow didn't dare, as if it would be sacrilege in this silent white, black and green cathedral.
If anything, she tried to be even quieter, picking her way from tree to tree, trying to become part of the forest. Then, suddenly, she lost Steve's tracks.

She stood under the drooping limbs of a spruce and looked around, but there were no more tracks to follow. It was as if he'd vanished. It was impossible to walk in the snow without leaving tracks! But there were no tracks under the trees. She looked up, wondering if he'd climbed a tree and was sitting there laughing at her. Nothing.

Common sense told her that he'd played some sort of trick, but his tracks would have to pick up somewhere. She thought a minute, then began walking in a slow, constantly enlarging circle. She would have to cross his path somewhere.

Fifteen minutes later, she was angry. Damn him! He was playing games with her, unfair games, considering his training. She was getting cold, and she was already starving. Let him play Daniel Boone; she was going back to the cabin to cook breakfast—for *one*!

Just to be perverse, she backtracked as cautiously as she'd come; maybe she could leave him in here, sneaking around and hiding from her while she was already back at the cabin, snug and warm and eating a hot breakfast. He'd show up after a while, all innocence, and he could damn well cook his own breakfast! Show-off!

She crept back toward the cabin, sidling as close to the tree trunks as she could, stopping often to listen for any betraying sound before moving to the next tree, and looking in all directions before moving again. Her indignation grew, and she began to think what she could do in the way of revenge, but most of her ideas seemed both petty and paltry. What she really wanted to do was hit him. Hard. Twice.

She had just begun to creep around a tree when the skin on the back of her neck prickled and she froze, her heart leaping in fear at the ancient warning of danger. She couldn't hear or see anything, but she could feel someone, or some*thing*, close by. Were there wolves in the mountains? Or bears?

Motionless except for her eyes, she looked around for something to use as a weapon, and finally she saw the outline of a sturdy-looking stick, buried under the snow. A fraction of an inch at a time, she bent to reach for the stick, her senses raw and screaming.

Something hard and heavy hit her in the middle of the back, and another blow numbed her forearm. She was knocked facedown in the snow, her lungs straining for air, her arm useless. She couldn't even scream. She was jerked roughly onto her back, and there was a flash of shiny metal as a knife was laid against her throat.

Stunned, terrified, unable to breathe, she stared up into narrowed, deadly eyes as yellow as an eagle's.
His eyes widened as he recognized her, then narrowed again with rage. He jabbed the wicked-looking knife back into its scabbard and took his knee off her chest. "Damn it, woman, I could've killed you!" he roared, his voice like rusty metal. "What in hell are you doing?"
Jay could only gasp and writhe on the ground, wondering if she might die from lack of air. Her entire chest was burning and her vision was wavering. Steve jerked her to a sitting position and whacked her on the back several times, hard enough to hurt, but at least the air rushed back into her body. She almost choked as her lungs expanded again, and tears sprang to her eyes. She gagged and coughed, and Steve patted her on the back but his tone was hard: "You'll be all right. It's less than you deserve, and a hell of a lot less than what could have happened."
She didn't plan it. She saw the stick out of the corner of her eye, the one she'd been reaching for when he'd hit her, and the next thing she knew it was in her hand. Red mist fogged her vision as she swung at him with all the strength her fury had given her. He dodged under the first blow, cursing, and leaped back to escape the second one. She moved to the left, trying to back him against a tree so he wouldn't be able to escape so easily, and swung again. He tried to grab the stick, and she caught him on the wrist with a solid *thunk*! then wound up for another blow. Cursing again, he bent low and rushed her. She hit him on the back with the stick just as his shoulder jammed into her stomach with enough force to knock her sprawling again.
"Damn it!" he yelled, kneeling astride her and pinning her wrists to the ground. "Settle down! Damn it, Jay! What in hell's wrong with you?"
She twisted and bucked beneath him, trying to throw him off. He tightened his knees on her sides, forestalling that effort, and his hands bit into her wrists so tightly there was no way she could free them. Finally she stopped struggling and glared impotently at him, her eyes like blue fire. "Get off me!"
"So you can brain me with that damn stick? Fat chance!"
She took a deep, shuddering breath and forced her voice to a relatively calm tone. "I won't hit you with the stick."
"Damn straight you won't," he grunted, releasing her hand to grab the stick and hurl it away from them. Jay used her free hand to wipe the snow out of

her face, and slowly Steve eased his weight off her chest. She sat up and pulled the knit cap off her head to shake it free of snow.
Kneeling on one knee beside her, Steve brushed off her back. "Now suppose you explain just what you thought you were doing," he snapped.
Fury burst in her again and she swung at him. He jerked his head back in time to escape her fist, but the wet cap she held in her hand swiped his face with enough force to sting. Like a stroke of lightning she was flat on her back again. From between gritted teeth he said, "One more time and you'll eat standing up for a month!"
She blazed back at him: "You just try it! When I woke up and couldn't find you, I was worried you might be hurt, so I came looking for you. Then you started showing off with your Super Spy tricks, not letting me find you, until I got fed up and started back to the cabin. *Then* you knocked me down and pulled a knife on me, *and* yelled at me! You deserved to get hit with a stick! "
He glared down at her, taking in her tumbled hair and fierce blue eyes, and the stubborn set of those luscious lips. He swore under his breath and thrust his fingers into the honey-brown strands, holding her still while he ground his mouth against hers. His kiss was half angry and half starving. He was suddenly wild to feel her lips, to put his tongue inside her mouth and taste her. She kicked at him, and he moved swiftly, kneeing her legs apart and settling himself between them, his weight crushing her into the snow.
Jay groaned, and his tongue thrust into her mouth. Suddenly she felt on fire, as her fury turned into a different, white-hot passion. Her hands were in his hair, digging into his scalp as she returned his kiss as fiercely as he gave it. His hips rubbed against her in primal rhythm, thrusting as if to deny the sturdy denim between them, and her blood felt like lava.
Roughly he opened her thick coat and shoved the edges aside, his hands covering her breasts, but still she was protected from him by her shirt and bra, and the contact wasn't enough. He jerked at her shirt, popping three of the buttons off to be lost in the snow, and opened it, too. The cold air rushed at her and she cried out, but the sound was caught in his mouth. Her bra had a front hook; he handled it easily and peeled the thin cups away from her white, swollen breasts. Her nipples were hard and tight from the cold, stabbing into his palms when he put his hands over them.
He lifted his head. "Let me inside you," he rasped. "Now." The need was riding him hard, just the way he wanted to ride her. He put his hot mouth

over a pouting nipple and sucked strongly at it, rolling it around with his tongue and listening to the incoherent sounds of pleasure she made.
Jay thought she might die from wanting him, even though he had scared her and hurt her; even though he'd made her angrier than she could ever remember feeling at another human being. He'd loosed the passion that had always been in her nature, torn it out of her control. Her hands were shaking, her entire body was shaking, and she wanted more.
He lifted his mouth from her breast, and the shock of the cold air on her wet flesh was so painful she whimpered. Their eyes met, hers wide and dazed with the sudden passion, his narrow and burning, and she knew what he wanted, knew he was silently waiting for her permission. She knew that if she made the slightest sign of acquiescence he would take her there, in the cold and snow, and her entire body throbbed with the need to let him do just that. She started to whisper his name; then terror washed over her like freezing water and she stared up at his hard face as he waited for her answer. *She didn't know his name*! She could call him Steve, but he wasn't Steve. His face wasn't Steve's. She knew him and loved him, but he was a stranger.
He found his answer in the sudden rigidity of her body beneath him. He swore viciously as he got to his feet, one hand rubbing the back of his neck as if that could relieve his physical tension. Jay fumbled with her shirt, trying to draw the edges together, but the buttons were gone and her hands were shaking too badly, so finally she just fastened her coat and got to her feet. She had been burning up only moments before, but now she was freezing. She was covered with snow. She shook it out of her hair and dusted it off her jeans and coat as best she could, then retrieved her knit cap, but it had snow on it both inside and out, and would be worse than wearing nothing at all. Without a word, unable to look at him, she started toward the cabin.
He caught her roughly by the shoulder and swung her around. "Tell me why, damn it," he rasped.
Jay swallowed. She hadn't meant to stop him, and she couldn't explain the dreadful fear she lived with every moment, every day. "I've told you before," she finally managed. "They're good reasons." A single tear tracked down her cheek and formed frozen salt crystals before it reached her chin.
His face changed, some of the angry frustration leaving him, and he wiped at the tear with his gloved hand. "Are they? Your reasons don't make much

sense to me. It's natural to want each other. How much longer do you think I can live like a monk? How much longer can you live like a nun? That's not my calling, baby, and damn it all to hell and back in a little red wagon, it's not as if it'll be the first time!"

She thought she would scream. She wanted to cry and she wanted to laugh, but neither would make sense. She wanted to tell him the truth, but the biggest fear she had was of losing him. So finally she did tell him the truth, or at least part of it. "It *will* be the first time," she croaked, strangling on the words. "This time. And it scares me."

She walked away again, and he let her go. She was shaking with cold by the time she got back to the cabin, and she took a long hot shower, then dressed in dry clothing. The smell of fresh coffee came from the kitchen, and she followed her nose to find him frying bacon and whipping eggs in a bowl. He had changed clothes, too, and she faltered under both his physical impact and a sudden realization. He was tall and muscular, as powerful as a puma, his shoulders and chest straining the seams of his shirt. In the weeks they had been there he'd gained weight and muscle, and his hair had grown enough that now it was a trifle long. He looked uncivilized and dangerous, and so utterly male that she quivered instinctively. He was no longer a patient. He had recovered both his health and his strength. She had followed him because she had been worried, but in her mind he had still been a wounded warrior. Now she knew that he wasn't. Her subconscious had recognized it earlier, when she had fought him. She never would have done that before.

He looked up at her, Ms gaze assessing. "I made fresh coffee. Drink a cup. You still look a little shaky. Does the thought of making it with me scare you that much?"

"You scare me." She couldn't stop the words. "Who you are. What you are."

An icy motionlessness seized him as he realized that she had guessed. "You said I was using Super Spy tricks."

"Yes," she whispered, and decided she did need that cup of coffee. She poured it and watched the steam rise for a moment before sipping. Why had she said that? She hadn't meant to. She was in agony, afraid that it would trigger his memory and he would leave, and equally afraid that he might never get his memory back. She was caught, trapped, because she couldn't call him hers until he regained his memory and chose her. If he would. He might just walk away, to his real life.

"I didn't think you knew," he said flatly.
Her head jerked up. "Do you mean you did?"
"There had to be more to it than the possibility that I had seen something before the explosion. The government doesn't work that way. I guessed, and Frank confirmed it."
"What did he say?" Her voice was thin.
His smile was equally thin, and a little savage. "That's about it. He can't tell me more because of the circumstances. I'm a security risk right now. How did you guess?"
"The same. There just had to be more to it."
"Is what I am the real reason you turned me down?"
"No," she whispered, an aching, needing expression in her eyes as she watched him. How could loving a man hurt so much? But it did, when the man was this one.
His entire body was taut, his mouth twisted. His voice was harsh. "Stop looking at me like that. It's all I can do to keep myself from pulling your pants off and laying you down on that table, and that isn't the way I want to take you. Not this time. So stop looking at me i as if you'd melt if I touched you."
But I would, she thought, though she turned her eyes away. His words made her feel hot and shivery, thinking of the act he'd described, the scene forming in her mind. It would be raw and hot, and purely sexual. If he touched her, they would burn each other up.
He spent most of the day outside, but the tension between them didn't ease; it hung there, as thick and heavy as fog. When darkness finally drove him inside, his eyes burned her every time he looked at her. Instincts she hadn't known she possessed pulled her toward him, despite the reasons her mind presented for not letting their relationship progress. She lay alone in her bed that night, aching with the need to go to him and spend the long, dark hours in his arms. He was right; what did her reasons matter? It was already too late. She already loved him, for good or bad. That was the real danger, and it had been too late for a long time now. Keeping herself from him wouldn't lessen the pain if the worst happened and she lost him.
But she didn't go to him. Things often seemed different in daylight than when lying alone in the darkness, but caution wasn't what kept her in her own bed. Circumstances were hard enough; she had to call him by a name that wasn't his own, had to pretend he was someone else, but she wanted to

be able to see his eyes when they made love. More than anything she wanted to know his real name, to be able to call him by it in her heart; failing that, she wanted to see his eyes, for they were his own.
A chinook blew in during the night, chasing away the weather system that had covered them with new snow. Mother Nature must have chuckled to herself as she promptly began melting the high white drifts with her hot winds, teasing them with a hint of a spring that was still over a month away. The melting snow dripped from the trees with a sound like rain, and there were crashes in the night as limbs dropped their white burdens.
The rise in temperature made Jay even more restless, and she was up at dawn. She could barely believe what she saw when she looked out. The hot wind had turned their winter wonderland into a wet, brown meadow dotted with shrinking patches of snow. The melting snow still dripped off the roof, and the heated air made her feel as if her skin would explode. How could it have happened so fast?
"A chinook," Steve said behind her, and she whirled, her heart jumping. She hadn't heard him approach, but he moved like a cat. He looked so ill-tempered that she almost stepped back. His eyes were hard and frosty, and a day's growth of beard darkened his jaw. He glanced, from ner to the window. "Enjoy it while you can. It'll feel like spring while we have it, and then it'll be gone, and the snow will come back."
They ate breakfast in silence, and he left the cabin immediately afterward. Later on in the morning, Jay heard the solid bite of the ax into wood, and she peeked out at him from the kitchen window. He had taken off his coat and was working in his shirt sleeves, which were rolled up over his forearms. Incredibly, sweat had left dark stains under his arms and down the center of his back. Was it that warm?
She walked out onto the front porch and lifted her face to the warm, sweet wind. It was incredible! Her skin tingled. The temperature was at least forty degrees higher than the day before, and the sun burned down from a cloudless blue sky. Suddenly her jeans and flannel shirt were much too heavy, and her skin began to glisten with moisture.
Like a child made giddy by spring, she hurried to her bedroom and stripped off her heavy, restricting clothes. She couldn't stand them another minute. She wanted to feel the air on her bare arms; she wanted to feel fresh and free, like the chinook. So what if winter could come back at any time? Right now, it was spring!

She pulled her favorite sundress from the closet and slipped it on over her head. It was white cotton, sleeveless, with a scoop neck, and far too flimsy for the temperature, which was probably only in the fifties, but it suited her mood perfectly. Some things were just meant for celebrating; this chinook was one of them.

She hummed as she began the preparations for lunch; it was a while before she noticed that Steve was no longer at the woodpile. If he'd gone off just at lunch-time, she would eat alone and he could do without! She still hadn't quite forgiven him for the day before.

Then she heard a slight noise from out front, and she removed the soup from the stove before walking to the front door. He'd pulled the Jeep around and was washing it. It was such a domestic scene that it lured her onto the porch, and she sat down on the top step to watch him.

He glanced up at her, and his eyes flickered over the dress. "Pushing it a little, aren't you?"

"I'm comfortable," she said, and she was. The crisp air was both chilly and warm, and the sun beating down on her was a delicious sensation. He'd given in to the rising temperature, too, by unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it out of his jeans.

She watched as he alternately scrubbed and rinsed, each time having to stop washing to take up the hose and spray the soap off the Jeep. Finally she went down to pick up the hose from where he'd dropped it. "You wash, I'll rinse."

He grunted. "Do you expect the same deal with the dishes?"

"Sounds fair to me. After all, I'm doing the cooking."

"Yeah, but I'm having to eat all that food so it won't goto waste."

She gave him an awful look. "Poor baby. I'll see what I can do to take that burden off you."

"Just like a woman. Tease her a little bit and she turns nasty. Some people just can't take a joke."

Jay turned the hose on the section of Jeep he'd just washed, but he didn't have time to step back, and the water hit the Jeep full blast, spraying back into his face and onto his clothes. He leaped back, swearing. "Damn it, watch what you're doing!"

"Some people just can't take a joke," Jay said sweetly, and turned the hose on him.

He yelled from the shock of the cold water hitting him and started toward her, holding his hands up to deflect the stream from his face. Jay chortled and darted around the Jeep, then got him again when he looked around at her.
He pushed his wet hair back and his light brown eyes took on that unholy yellow gleam. "You're going to get it now," he said, beginning to grin, and with one bound leaped onto the hood of the Jeep. Jay shrieked and ran to the rear, but the hose caught on the tires as she dragged it after her. She tugged frantically as Steve jumped lightly to the ground. He laughed in a way that made her scream again, and she threw the hose down as she ran for safety.
He grabbed the hose and reversed direction, running back around the front of the Jeep, to free it. He met Jay almost head-on.
"Wait," she said, laughing and begging at the same time as she held up her hand. "It's lunchtime. I came out to tell you. The soup's ready—" A blast of water hit her in the face.
The water was almost unbearably cold. She screamed and tried to run for safety, but he was there every time she turned, and the water soaked her from head to foot. Finally her only means of defense was attack, so she ran straight at him. He was laughing like a maniac, a sound that ceased abruptly when she twisted the nozzle up so the water hit him right in the mouth.
They wrestled for control of the nozzle, both of them laughing and yelling as the icy water sprayed all over them.
"Truce, truce!" she yelled, backing away. There was no way she could have gotten any wetter, but then, neither could he. She felt a sense of satisfaction that it had turned out so evenly.
"Are you giving up?" he demanded.
She hooted. "What's to give up? We're both half drowned."
He thought about that and nodded. Then he walked over to the spigot to turn it off and began coiling the hose. "You fight dirty. I like that in a woman."
"That's right, butter me up. You just want to make certain I don't stop cooking."
"The situation being what it is, I'll take anything from you I can get."
Abruptly the humor was gone from the moment. He dropped the hose and straightened, his face hard as he looked at her.

Jay felt her breath catch. He had never been more beautiful to her than he was at that moment, soaking wet, his hair plastered to his skull, badly in need of a shave, and his eyes glittering with masculine intent. Slowly he let his gaze move over her face, then down her body, taking his time as he traced the outline of her form.

Then she realized that he could see more than the outline. The white cotton dress was almost transparent, plastered to her body the way it was. She couldn't stop herself from looking down. Her nipples were hard and erect, plainly visible under the wet cotton, and the fabric was molded to her hips and thighs. With the sun shining through the material, she might as well have been naked for all the protection the dress gave her.

She looked back up at him and froze in place at the look on his face. He was staring at her with such savage male hunger that her heart leaped, making the blood surge through her veins. Her legs trembled as she felt herself begin to grow warm and moist in response, and she inhaled sharply.

His head jerked up. For another moment he was motionless. Her lips were parted slightly, trembling. Her eyes looked heavy. Her nipples were hard little circles plainly visible through the wet dress, her arms limp at her sides as she let him look. He shuddered, and his control snapped.

She couldn't move. He walked toward her without taking his gaze from her, without seeing or hearing anything else, a primal male animal intent on mating. He was breathing hard and deep, his nostrils flaring. Water dripped off him as he moved. She waited, shaking with need and fear, because he was out of control and she knew it. It was an exhilarating terror, freezing her but at the same time filling her with an anticipation so acute she was almost in pain.

Then his hands were on her, and she moaned aloud from the sudden release of tension.

She didn't have time to respond. She had expected to be swept up in his arms and carried to bed, but he had gone far beyond paying attention to niceties. Nothing mattered to him but to have her, right then. He bore her down to the cold, wet earth, which, despite the chi-nook, still held the long freeze of winter. Jay cried out at the iciness against her back, involuntarily arching upward to escape it. Steve's hard hands pressed her back, and he covered her, his weight pinning her down. He jerked at her dress, pulling the skirt to her waist. "Spread your legs," he said gutturally, though he was already kneeing her thighs apart.

Excitement speared through her. "Yes," she whispered, her hands digging into his shoulders. She wanted him so much that she didn't care where they were or how urgent he was. There would be time for seduction later, as well as worry. Right now there was only this quick, primitive mating.

There was no foreplay, no leisurely petting or stroking. For months there had been too much between them while the final intimacy had been denied, and suddenly the walls were down. He disposed of her panties by the simple means of tearing them apart, then unfastened his pants and shoved them down only as far as was necessary. He pushed her legs wider apart and lowered himself onto her.

She made a little sound of pain as he tried to enter her and couldn't. He swiftly adjusted his position and pushed again, this time sliding deep into her. Shock reverberated through her body as she tried to adjust to his girth, and this time she groaned.

He braced himself on his elbows, and Jay looked up at him dazedly. His yellowish eyes were fierce, his face hard and intent, his neck corded as he drove into her. She arched up to accept him, her heart almost exploding with love. This was what she had wanted, to see his face, to see his eagle-fierce eyes, to imprint his image on her mind and heart even as he imprinted his touch on her body. With the icy earth beneath her and the pure blue sky above, with the bright sun on his face, they were as pure and primitive as their surroundings. No matter what his name or what he did, he was her love, her man.

This was for him. She lifted her hips to meet his thrusts, her flesh quivering under his pounding force. He groaned unintelligibly and slid his arms beneath her to lift her up even more, as if he could grind their bodies so tightly together that they would mesh, then convulsed in release.

She held him tightly, her legs around his hips, her arms about his shoulders as he heaved into her, groaning and shivering. "I love you," she said over and over again, though her lips moved soundlessly and only the warm winds heard her. She closed her eyes, feeling that warm wind on her cheek and his heavy weight both on her and in her, and knew that no matter what happened when he regained his memory, this hard, fast possession had made her his in a way that could never be shattered.

Chapter Ten

They lay together, motionless, the only movement that of the wind stirring their hair, the only sound that of the trees rustling together, sighing. Jay felt dazed by what had just happened, her senses buffeted as if she had just weathered a storm. She was totally incapable of action.

Then he braced his hands and lifted his weight off her, staring down at her with an expression so fierce that she almost cringed from it, without knowing why. He swore, his voice low and gravelly, as he disengaged their bodies and shifted to a kneeling position. Uncertainty paralyzed her as her sluggish mind began trying to grasp the reason for his anger.

He pulled his pants up but didn't bother fastening them; instead he tugged her up and into his arms, lifting her from the ground and rising to his feet with a lithe grace that belied the strength necessary to do it. He climbed the steps and strode into the house without saying a word, then carried her into the bathroom. After carefully standing her on the rug, he bent to turn on the water, then straightened and turned back to her. Her dress was unfastened and gently pulled over her head, leaving her naked and shivering from both chill and reaction. She stood docilely, her arms limp at her sides, her eyes wide and dazed and a little frightened as she watched him. What was *wrong*?

He hurriedly stripped, then lifted her into the tub and stepped in beside her, pulling the shower door closed. Jay moved back, a little bemused by how much room he took up, and watched the rippling muscles in his back as he adjusted the water, then turned on the shower. Warm water blasted out of the shower head, immediately filling the small area with steam. Steve pulled her under the water and held her there even when she gasped a protest, because the water was stinging her cold skin.

"No, you need to get warm," he said roughly, rubbing his hands up and down her arms and shoulders. "Turn around and let me wash your hair."

Numbly she did so, realizing that they must have gotten mud all over them. His hands were gentle as he lathered and rinsed her hair, then washed her all over. She began to feel very warm from the combination of water and the stroking of his soapy hands, first over her breasts and abdomen, then her legs and buttocks, and finally between her legs. Her breathing began to hasten as heat built in her.

His touch slowed, and a spasm twitched his tight facial muscles. Her breathing halted altogether as he probed tantalizingly at the entrance to her

body, his fingertips barely stroking, one finger barely entering. She caught at his shoulders, her nails digging into his sleek, wet skin. Her breasts were tight and aching as she hung there in an agony of anticipation, waiting for that small invasion, wanting so much more. She felt him hardening against her hip, and a great shudder of pleasure shook her.

He muttered something, but the sound was so rough she couldn't understand it; then she was in his arms, and his mouth was bruising hers. She yielded to his urgency, sliding her hands to the back of his neck. Their water-slick bodies rubbed together, his abrasive chest hair rasping at her nipples, his muscled stomach rippling against the softness of hers, his hardness pushing at her. "Yes," she whimpered.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, the words rough and frantic and urgent. He slid his mouth down her throat, biting at the sensitive arch, licking the small hollow at the base, where her pulse throbbed visibly. "I didn't mean to be that rough."

So that was why he was angry, not at her, but at himself. But even that wasn't enough to keep him from having her again. She could feel the hunger in his big, powerful body, and again his loss of control thrilled her in a deeply primitive way. She had been married, but Steve had always kept his cool, kept part of himself securely locked away from her, and the passionate part of her had been hurt, because she'd needed more. The man in her arms now was savage in his hunger, driven out of control by his need for her, and his wildness matched the fierce passion of her own nature. All her life she had needed this answering intensity to balance her; without it, she had withdrawn behind a shell of rigid control, and only now was she being freed.

She clung to him like a vine, her wet body undulating against him. "I love you," she groaned, because that was the only thing she could say, the one outstanding truth in the maze of lies and subterfuges.

He lifted his mouth from her throat, his face so close to hers that his burning gaze was all she could see. "I hurt you," he growled.

She couldn't deny it. "Yes," she said, and fitted her mouth to his, her tongue delicately probing. His arms tightened so convulsively that she couldn't breathe, but breathing didn't matter. Kissing him mattered. Loving him mattered.

But finally he did find some remnant of control, enough to allow him to turn off the water and haul her out of the tub. She never released her hold on

his neck as he swept her up and carried her, both of them dripping wet, to his bed. She didn't care about the sheets. All she cared about was his hot mouth on her breasts, the rasp of his slightly roughened fingertips on her silky skin, and finally his powerful invasion of her body. It was still such a shock to her senses that she cried out, instinctively trying to close her thighs. But her legs tightened on his muscled thighs and the movement only drew him deeper.

He ground his teeth together, trying to force himself to stillness when every instinct told him to move. The need was so urgent that it smothered everything else in the world except the woman he held in his arms, the woman whose slim body clasped him so tightly and pushed him to the edge of insanity. But for her sake he managed to hold still until she was more comfortable with him. Lying propped on his elbows so his weight wouldn't crush her, he looked down at her and shuddered with pleasure at the intense, absorbed look on her face as she lifted her hips slightly, tentatively, to accept all of him. A deep groan tore from his chest. He knew he'd been too rough and urgent to allow her time to enjoy it before, but this time she was with him.

Her lips parted slightly in a smile so female it took his breath away, and her deep blue eyes beckoned him, dared him. Once again her hips lifted. "What are you waiting for?" she breathed.

"For you," he answered, and even as he lost himself in the mindless ecstasy of making love to her, the truth of that remained. He'd waited for her forever.

He was a light sleeper, so much so that even in the heavy-limbed aftermath he was disturbed by the damp sheets, a discomfort they hadn't noticed before. Jay lay in his arms, exhausted and deeply asleep; he didn't want to disturb her, but neither did he want her to become chilled from the wetness. He eased from the bed and lifted her light weight in his arms, then carried her into the other bedroom to place her on the dry bed. She made a disgruntled noise as he jostled her, then relaxed again, and her breathing evened out as he stroked her back. He joined her on the bed, and she snuggled closer, into his hard, possessive embrace.

The way he felt about her was so intense it edged into pain. Even without his memory, he knew no other woman had ever shattered his control as she did. He'd never desired another woman so intensely, never would have waited as long as he'd waited for her. She overshadowed every other

concern. Because of her, he hadn't dwelled on his loss of memory, beyond a peculiar irritation and a certain detached interest in the curiosities of what he had retained. His past life didn't matter, because Jay was here in the present. They were linked in a way that went beyond memory.

A slight frown creased his brow as he held her, his rough hand sliding from the curve of her hip to the warmly resilient mound of her breast. Of all the knowledge he'd kept, why wasn't any of it of Jay? Those were the memories he resented losing. He wanted to remember every minute he'd spent with her, and he wanted to remember why he'd let her slip away from him. He wanted to remember their wedding, the first time he'd made love to her, and the total lack of those memories ate at him. She was the core of his life; why hadn't *something* been familiar? Why hadn't he felt some deep-seated recognition of the silkiness of her skin, the rounded curves of her high breasts or the rose-brown of her small nipples? Why hadn't there been some sense of familiarity in the tight sheath of her body as he entered her?

But everything had been new.

She moved slightly against him, and he stilled his stroking hand, content to simply hold her. They would be married as soon as he could talk her into it, and now he had a very powerful weapon at his disposal:

The scene exploded in his mind. There was a laughing bride and a groom looking excited, proud, wary and impatient all at once. The groom shook his head, beaming, and the bride hugged him tightly. "You made it!" she said exultantly. "I knew you would!"

An older woman and man hugged him just as tightly. "I'm glad you're back, son," the man said, and the woman cried a little even as she smiled at him, the smile full of love. Then there was a rush of other people to shake his hand and hug him and clap him on the back, and the scene dissolved in a confusion of voices.

He lay rigidly, his jaw clenched with the effort required not to jackknife out of bed. Where in hell had *that* memory come from? The man had called him "son," but that could as easily have been a title of affection as one denoting a relationship. He didn't have a family, so they must have been close friends, but Jay had said he'd always been a loner. Who were they? Did they worry about him? Did Jay know anything about them?

Hell, was it even something that had really happened, or a scene from a movie he'd watched?

Movie. Just thinking the word triggered another flashback, but this one was complete with rolling credits. It was a television special on Afghanistan. Then it became another movie, starring a widely acclaimed actor. It was a good movie. Then, in slow motion, the scene shifted. He was standing on a rooftop with the same actor when the man pulled a .45 automatic and pointed it at him. Serious business, a .45. It could have a major impact on a man's future. But the guy was too close, and too rattled. Steve saw himself lash out with his foot, sending the gun flying. The actor staggered back and tripped, fell over the low wall and screamed as he dropped the full seven stories to the ground.

Steve stared at the bedroom ceiling, feeling sweat run down his ribs. Was that another movie? Of all the things he could remember, why a series of films? And why were they so realistic, as if he had stepped into the action? He'd have to ask the doctor about that, but at least it was a sign his memory was returning, just as they'd told him it probably would. He needed to make the trip anyway, to have his eyes checked; it was a real strain to read, and the strain hadn't lessened. He definitely needed glasses. Glasses...

An elderly man smiled benignly at him and removed his glasses, placing them on the desk. "Congratulations, Mr. Stone," he said.

He stifled a curse as the scene faded. This was weird; why would that old guy call him "Mr. Stone" unless he'd been using an assumed name? Yeah, that made sense, unless it was just another scene out of another movie. It could just be something he'd watched rather than something that had actually happened.

Jay stirred in his arms and abruptly woke, lifting her head to stare at him in alarm. "What's wrong?"

She had sensed his tension, just as she had from the beginning. He managed a smile and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers, a different kind of tension taking over his muscles. "Nothing," he assured her. She looked sleepy and sensual, her eyes heavy-lidded, her luscious mouth swollen from contact with his firmer lips.

She looked around. "We're in my room," she said in bewilderment.

"Mmm. The sheets on my bed were wet, so I brought you in here."

Warm color tinted her cheeks as she thought of how the sheets had gotten so wet, but her smile was both secret and content. She lifted her hand and touched his face, much as he had touched hers; her dark blue eyes drifted over his features with aching tenderness, examining each line and plane,

feeding the need in her heart. She was unaware of her expression, but he saw it, and his chest constricted. He wanted to say, "Don't love me like that," but he didn't, because it was essential to him that she love him exactly like that.
He cleared his throat. "We have a choice."
"We do? Of course we do. Of what?"
"We can get up and eat the lunch you were cooking—" he broke off to lift his head and look at the clock "—three hours ago, or we can try to wreck this bed, too."
She considered it. "I think we'd better have lunch, or I won't have the energy to help you wreck the bed."
"Good thinking." He hugged her, reluctant to get up despite his own hunger, and found his hands stroking down her sides in sensual enjoyment. Then he paused and moved his hand around to her stomach. "Unless you want to get married this weekend, we'd better do something about birth control."
Jay's heart felt as if it had abruptly swollen so large that it filled her entire chest. For a few glorious hours she'd forgotten how hemmed in she was by this tortuous maze of deception. She wanted nothing more than to simply say "Yes, let's get married," but she didn't dare. Not until he knew who he was—and she knew who he was—and he still said he wanted to marry her. So she ignored the first part of his statement and merely answered the second. "We don't have to worry about birth control. I'm on the Pill. My doctor put me on it seven months ago, because my periods had gotten so erratic."
His eyes narrowed a little and his hand lay heavier on her stomach. "Is something wrong?"
"No. It was just stress from my job. I could probably do without them now." Then she smiled and turned her face into his shoulder. "Except for a sudden development."
He grunted. "Sudden, hell. I've been hard for two months. But we could still get married this weekend."
She cased out of his embrace and got up, her face troubled as she put on fresh underwear and got a sweater from the closet, pulling it over her head. He watched her from the bed. His voice was very soft and raspy when he spoke. "I want an answer."
Harried, she pushed her tangled hair out of her eyes. "Steve—" She stopped, almost cringing at the necessity of calling him by that name. Now more

than ever, she wanted, needed, to know her lover's name. "I can't marry you until you've gotten your memory back."
He threw the sheet back and stood, magnificently naked. Jay's pulse rate skittered as she looked at him. All the miles he'd run and the wood he'd chopped had corded his body with muscles. He didn't look as if he'd ever been injured, except for his scars. Her heart settled into a slow, heavy beat. She had cradled his weight, taken his pounding invasion, returned his fire with her own. As tender as she felt now in different parts of her body, she could still feel herself grow warm and liquid as she looked at him.
"What difference does my memory make?" he snapped, and she jerked her gaze upward, realizing that he was angry. "No other woman has a claim on me, and you know it, so don't bring up that crap again. Why should we wait?"
"I want you to be certain," she said, her voice troubled.
"Damn it, I am certain!"
"How can you be, when you don't know what's happened? I just don't want you to regret marrying me when everything comes back to you." She tried a smile, and it only wobbled a little. "We're together, and we have time. That will have to be enough for now."
Steve forced himself to be content with that, and in many ways it was enough. They lived together in the truest sense of the word, as partners, friends and lovers. It was a week before the snows came again, and in that week they explored every inch of their high meadow. He showed her the laser-beam sensor he'd installed across the trail and demonstrated how to operate both the radio and the computer. It was a relief not to have to hide from her how deeply he'd been involved in espionage, though she got a little huffy with him because all the equipment had been hidden from her in the shed and only now had he gotten around to telling her about it.
He liked making her lose her temper. It was exciting, in a primitive way, to watch those blue eyes narrow like a cat's. It was the final sign that he'd tormented her into attack. The day he'd thought she was an intruder and tracked her in the snow, then tackled her, her rage had startled him, caught him off balance, but it had excited him. Most people who knew Jay would never think she was capable of that kind of anger, or that she would physically fight anyone. It told him a lot about her, about the passionate, volatile side of her personality and about what it took to bring it out. Probably very few people could make her angry, but because she loved him,

he could. And after he'd provoked her to anger, he liked to wrestle with her and love her out of her temper.
Physically she delighted him. She was still too thin, though she ate well, but he liked to watch her trim hips and rounded buttocks in her tight jeans too much to complain. Her skin was satiny, her breasts high and round, her exotic mouth full and pouty; no matter how she dressed, she turned him on because he knew what lay under those clothes. He also knew that all he had to do was reach for her and she'd turn into his arms, warm and willing. That kind of response enchanted him; there was something so new about it, as if he'd never known it before.
Then one morning they got up to find that it had snowed again during the night, and it continued snowing all during the day, not hard, just a continuous veil of flakes sifting down over the meadow. Except for trips outside to bring in more firewood, Jay and Steve spent the day in the cabin, watching old movies. That was an extra benefit of the satellite dish; they could always find something interesting to watch on television, if they were in the mood. It was perfectly suited to a lazy day when they had nothing better to do than to lie around and watch the fat snowflakes drifting down.
Just before dark, Steve left to check the area, something he always did. While he was gone Jay began cooking dinner, humming as she did so, because she was so contented. This was paradise. She knew it couldn't last; when his memory returned, even if he still wanted to marry her, their lives would change. They would leave here, find another home. She would have to find another job. Other things would take up their time. This was time set aside, out of the real world, but she meant to enjoy every minute of it.
Briefly a dark thought intruded: This could be all she had. Perhaps it was. If so, these days were all the more precious.
Steve entered through the back door, slapping snow off his shoulders and shaking it out of his hair before taking off his thick coat. "Nothing but rabbit tracks." He looked thoughtful. "Do you like rabbit?"
Jay turned from the cheese she was grating for the spaghetti. "If you shoot the Easter Bunny..." she began in a threatening tone.
"It was just a question," he said, and grabbed her for a kiss, then rubbed his cold, beard-roughened cheek against hers. "You smell good. Like onion and garlic and tomato sauce." Actually, she smelled like herself, that sweet, warm, womanly scent he associated with her and no one else. He buried his

cold nose against her neck and inhaled it, feeling the familiar tension growing in his loins.
"You won't get any points for telling me I smell like onions and garlic," she said, returning to her chore even though he kept his arms looped around her waist.
"Even if I tell you how crazy I am about onions and garlic?"
"Humph. You're like all men. You'll say anything when you're hungry."
Chuckling, he released her to set the table and begin buttering the rolls.
"How would you like to take a trip?"
"I'd love to see Hawaii."
"I was thinking more in terms of Colorado Springs. Or maybe Denver."
"I've *been* to Colorado Springs," she said, then looked at him curiously over her shoulder. "Why are we going to Colorado Springs?"
"I'm assuming Frank doesn't want us returning to Washington, even briefly, so he'll fly the doctor out to check my eyes. That means, logically, either Colorado Springs or Denver, and I'm betting Colorado Springs. I'm also betting he doesn't want the doctor to know the location of the cabin, so that means we go to him."
She had known he would have to have his eyes checked again, but just talking about it brought the real world intruding into their private paradise. It would feel strange even seeing other people, much less talking to them. But reading strained his eyes, and enough time had passed for them to realize his sight wasn't going to improve. She thought of how he would look in glasses, and a warm feeling began spreading in her stomach. Sexy. She gave him a smile. "Yeah, I think I'd like to make a trip. I've been eating my own cooking for a long time now."
"I'll get in touch with Frank after dinner." He could have done it then, but filling his stomach was more important. Jay made great spaghetti, and getting in touch with Frank could be time-consuming. First things first.
After the dinner dishes had been cleaned and Steve was in the shed contacting Frank, Jay stretched out on the rug in front of the fire, for the first time thinking about the chic little apartment in New York that Frank had been keeping for her. It contrasted sharply with the rustic comfort of the cabin, but she much preferred the cabin. She would hate to leave it; it would be beautiful here during the summer, but she wondered how much longer they would be here. Surely Steve's memory would return before then, and even if it didn't, how much longer would it be before Frank told him the

truth? They couldn't let him live another man's life forever. Or could they? Had that been the plan? Did they somehow know he'd never get his memory back?

The mirrors kept reflecting back different answers, different facets to the puzzle, different solutions. And none of them fit.

"Are you asleep?" he asked softly.

She gasped and rolled over, her heart jumping. "I didn't hear you come in. You didn't make any noise." He always moved silently, like a cat, but she should have heard the back door. She'd been so deep in thought that the sounds hadn't registered.

"The better to sneak up on you, my dear," he growled in his best big-bad-wolf voice. He joined her on the rug, sinking his hands into her hair as he angled her mouth up toward his. He kissed her slowly, deeply, taking his tune and using his tongue. Her breathing altered, and her eyes grew heavy lidded. Desire was a heavy warmth inside her, slowly expanding until it completely filled her.

They weren't in any hurry. It felt too good to lie there in the warmth of the crackling fire and savor their kisses. But eventually the heat was too much, and she moaned as he unbuttoned her flannel shirt, parting the edges to press his lips to the swollen curves of her breasts. He lay on top of her, his heavy legs controlling hers even though she twisted restlessly. She wanted more. Moaning again, her voice sharp with need, she turned until her nipple brushed against his mouth. Lazily he extended his tongue and licked it, then clamped his mouth over it and sucked strongly, giving her what she needed.

The firelight burnished her hair with golden lights and her skin with a rosy glow as he unfastened her jeans and pulled them off. Her mouth was red and moist, glistening with the sheen of his kisses. Abruptly he couldn't wait any longer and jerked his own clothes off. The flannel shirt still hung around her shoulders, but even that was too much. He pulled it away from her and knelt between her legs, draping her thighs over his as he bent forward to enter her, fusing their bodies as surely as their lives were fused.

They lay together for a long time afterward, too content to move. He put another log on the fire and pulled on his jeans, then put his own shirt around her to stave off any chill. She sat in the circle of his arms, her head on his shoulder, wishing nothing would ever happen to disturb this happiness.

He watched the waving yellow flames, his rough chin rubbing back and forth against her hair. "Do you want kids?" he asked absently.

The question startled her enough that she lifted her head from his shoulder. "I... think I do." she replied. "I've never really thought about it, because it just didn't seem like an option, but now..." Her voice trailed off.
"Before, we didn't have much of a marriage. I don't want it to be like that again. I want to come home every night, live a normal life." He tightened his arms around her. "I'd like to have a couple of kids, but that's a mutual decision. I didn't know how you felt about it."
"I like kids," she said softly, but guilt assailed her. They hadn't had any kind of a marriage before! He was feeling guilty for another man's acts.
"Yeah, I like them, too." He smiled, still watching the fire. "I get a kick out of watching Amy—"
Jay jerked away from him, her eyes wide with something like panic in them. "Who's Amy?"
Steve's face was hard, his mouth grim. "I don't know," he muttered. "I feel as if I just ran into a brick wall. The words just slipped out, then *bam*! I hit the wall and there's nothing."
Jay felt sick. Had she been so wrong in trusting that Frank wouldn't have set this up if Steve had been married? Was he a father as well as a husband?
Steve was watching her and sensed the direction of her thoughts, if not the content. "No, I'm not married and I don't have any kids," he said sharply, pulling her back to him. "It's probably just a friend's little girl. Do you know anyone with a little girl named Amy?"
She shook her head, not looking at him. The terror was back; she felt stiff with it. Was his memory returning? When it did, would he leave? Paradise could end at any time.
Steve lay awake long after they had gone to bed that night. Jay slept in his arms, as she had every night since the chinook blew, her hair streaming over his left shoulder and her warm breath sighing against his neck. Her bare, silky body was pressed all along his left side, and her slender arm was draped across his chest. She had looked so panicked for a second when he'd mentioned Amy's name, whoever Amy was. He held her closer, trying to erase that panic even from her sleep.
This would probably happen a lot, a casual remark triggering flashes of memory. He hoped they wouldn't all scare her so much. Was she truly afraid he wouldn't want her when his memory returned? God, couldn't she feel how much he loved her? It went beyond memory. It was in his bones, buried in the very depths of his existence.

Amy. *Amy.*
The name flashed through his mind like fire and suddenly he saw a little girl with glossy dark hair, giggling as she shoved a chubby, dimpled fist into her mouth. *Amy.*
His heart began pounding. His memory had actually supplied a face to go with the name. He didn't know who she was, but he knew her name, and now her face. The mental picture faded, but he concentrated and found he could recall it, just like a real memory. Just as he'd told Jay, she must be a friend's daughter, someone he'd met since their divorce.
He relaxed, pleased that the memory had solidified. His seAttal satisfaction made his body feel heavy and boneless, and his chest began to rise and fall in the deeper rhythm of sleep.
"*Unca Luke, Unca Luke!*"
The childish voices echoed in his head and the movie began to unwind in his mind. Two kids. Two boys, tearing across a green lawn, jumping and shrieking "Unca Luke" at the tops of their lungs as they ran.
Another scene. Northern Ireland. Belfast. He recognized it even as a tingle of dread ran up his spine. Two little boys played in the street, then suddenly looked up, hesitated and ran.
Flash. One of the first two little boys looked up with a wobbly lower lip and tears in his eyes and said, "Please, Unca Dan."
Flash. Dan Rather stacked papers at his newsdesk while the credits rolled.
Flash. A bumper sticker on a station wagon said, I'd Rather Be at Disney World.
Mickey Mouse dancing... Flash... a mouse crawling through the garbage in an alley... Flash... a grenade sailing in slow motion through the air and hitting a garbage can with a loud thump; then a louder thump and the can goes sailing... Flash... a white sailboat with sassy red-and-white striped sails tacking closer to shore and a tanned young man waves... Flash flash flash...
The scenes ripped through his consciousness, and they were truly only flashes, following each other like pages of a book being flipped through in front of his eyes.
He was sweating again. Damn, these free-association memories were hell. What did they mean? Had they truly happened? He wouldn't mind them if he could tell which ones were real and which ones were just something he'd seen on television or in a movie, or maybe even imagined from a scene in a book. Okay, some of them were obvious, like the one of Dan Rather with

the credits rolling across his face. But he'd watched network news many times since the bandages had come off his eyes, so that could even be a recent memory.

But... Uncle Luke. Uncle Dan. Something about those kids, and those names, seemed very real, just as Amy was real.

He eased out of bed, being very careful not to wake Jay, and walked into the living room where he stood for a long time in front of the banked fire, watching the embers glow. Full memory was close, and he knew it. It was as if all he had to do was turn a corner and everything would be there; but turning that mental corner wasn't as easy as it sounded. He had become a different man in the months since the explosion; he was trying to connect two separate people and merge them into one.

He had been absently rubbing his fingertips with his thumb. When he noticed what he was doing, he lifted his hand to look at it. The calluses were back, courtesy of chopping wood, but his fingertips were still smooth. How much of him was left, or had his identity been erased as surely as his fingerprints had been? When he looked in the mirror, how much of it was Steve Cross-field and how much of it was courtesy of the reconstructive surgery? His face was changed, his voice was changed, his fingerprints gone.

He was new. He had been born out of the darkness, brought to life by Jay's voice calling him toward the light.

Regardless of what he did or didn't remember, he still had Jay. She was a part of him that surgery couldn't change.

The room had taken on a chill as the fire died, and finally he felt the coldness on his naked body. He returned to the bedroom and slipped under the quilt, feeling Jay's body warmth wrap around him. She murmured something, moving closer to him in her sleep, seeking her usual position. Instantly desire fired through him, as urgent as if it hadn't been slaked only an hour or so before. "Jay," he said, his voice low and dark, and he pulled her beneath him. She woke and reached for him, her hands sliding around his neck, and in the darkness they loved each other until he had no room for memories other than those they made together.

Chapter Eleven

They left the cabin early the next morning so they could rendezvous with Frank at Colorado Springs that afternoon. Jay felt a wrench at leaving the cabin; it had been their private world for so long that, away from it, she felt exposed. Only the thought that they would be returning the next day gave her the courage to leave it at all. She knew that eventually she would have to leave it forever, but she wasn't ready to face that day right now. She wanted more time with the man she loved.

She intended to ask Frank the name of the American agent who had been "killed." He might not tell her, but she had to ask. Even if she couldn't say it aloud, she needed to know, she had to put a name to her love. She looked at him as he skillfully handled the Jeep, holding it steady even on the snow, and her heart swelled. He was big and rough-looking, not handsome at all with his rearranged features, but just one glance from those fierce yellowish eyes had the power to make her dizzy with delight. How could they ever have thought they could pass this man off as Steve Crossfield?

Their subterfuge was riddled with holes, but she hadn't seen them until she had been too deeply in love with him to care. They had relied on shock and urgency to keep her from asking the pointed questions to which they would have had no answers, such as why they didn't use blood type or their own agent's dental records to determine the identity of the patient. She had known at the tune that Frank was hiding something from her, but she had been too concerned over "Steve" to think it was anything more than protecting the details of a classified mission. The truth was that she had been misled so easily because she had wanted to be; after the first tune she had seen him lying in the hospital, so desperately wounded but still fighting with that grim determination of his that burned through unconsciousness, she had wanted nothing more than to be by his side and help him fight.

They were to stay at a different motel than the one they'd been in before, because Frank didn't want to take the chance the desk clerk might recognize them. They even used different names. When they got there, Frank had already arrived, and he'd made reservations for them under the names of Michael Carter and Faye Wheeler. Separate rooms. Steve looked distinctly displeased, but placed Jay's overnighter in her room without comment and went along to his own room. The eye specialist checked Steve's eyes immediately; then he was taken to an optometrist to be fitted for glasses, which would be ready for him the next morning. Jay remained behind,

wondering what strings Frank had pulled and whose arms he had twisted to get everything done so fast.
They returned a little after dark, and Steve came immediately to Jay's room. "Hi, baby," he said, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. Before she could answer he was kissing her, his hands tight on her arms, his mouth hard and searching.
She shivered with excitement, crowding closer to his body as she dug her fingers into his cold hair. He smelled like wind and snow, and his skin was cold, but his tongue was warm and probing. Finally he lifted his head, a very male look of satisfaction stamped on his hard face. He rubbed his thumb across her lips, which were reddened from contact with his.
"Sweetheart, I may freeze my naked butt off sneaking into your room tonight, but I'm not sleeping alone."
"I have a suggestion," she purred. "Let's hear it."
"Leave your clothes on until you get here." He laughed and kissed her again. Her mouth was driving him crazy; it had the most erotic effect on him. Kissing her was more arousing than actually making love had been with other women—and just for a moment, before they faded away, some of those other women were in his mind.
"The doctor is already on his way back to Washington. Frank is staying until the morning, so it's the three of us again. Are you hungry? Frank's stomach is still on Washington time."
"Actually, I am a little hungry. We don't keep late hours ourselves, you know." He looked at the bed. "I know."
Jay hoped to have the chance to ask Frank about the agent's name; she couldn't take the risk of asking him in Steve's presence, because the sound of his own name might trigger his memory, and she couldn't face the possibility of that. She wanted him to remember, but she wanted it to be when they were alone in their high meadow. If the chance to talk to Frank didn't present itself, she could always call him after they'd retired to their individual rooms for the night, provided Steve didn't come straight to hers, but she didn't think he would. He'd probably take a shower first, and put on fresh clothes. She sighed, weary of having to second-guess and predict; she wasn't cut out for this business.
Steve noted the sigh, and the faint desperation in her eyes. She hadn't said anything, but that look had been there since he'd had that first flash of memory the day before. It puzzled him; he couldn't think of any reason why

Jay should dread his returning memory. Because it puzzled him and because there was no logical reason, he couldn't let it go. It wasn't in his makeup. When something bothered him, he worried at it until it made sense. He never quit, never let go. His sister had often said he was at least half bulldog — Sister?

He was quiet as the three of them ate dinner at an Italian restaurant. Part of him enjoyed the spicy food, and part of him was actively involved in the easy conversation around the table, but another part of him examined the sliver of memory from every angle. If he had a sister, why had he told Jay he was an orphan? Why hadn't Frank had a record of any relatives? That was the screwy part. He could accept that he might have told Jay a different version of his life, because he didn't know what the circumstances had been at the time, but it was impossible that Frank hadn't had a list of next of kin. That was assuming he was remembering "real" things.

A sister. His logic told him it was impossible. His guts told him his logic could take a flyer. A sister. Amy. *Unca Luke! Unca Luke!* The childish voices reverberated in his head even as he laughed at something Frank said. *Unca Dan.* Unca Luke. Unca Luke Unca Luke... Luke... Luke...

"Are you all right?" Jay asked, her eyes dark with concern as she put her hand lightly on his wrist. She could feel tension emanating from him and was vaguely startled that Frank hadn't seemed to notice anything unusual.

The pounding left his head as he looked at her and smiled. He'd gladly count his past well lost as long as he could have Jay. The sensory umbilical cord linking them was as acutely sensitive as the strings on a precisely tuned Stradivarius. "It's just a headache," he said. "The drive was a strain on my eyes." Both statements were true, though the second wasn't the cause of the first. Also, there hadn't been that much strain. His problem was the precise, close-up focusing needed for reading; his distance vision was as sharp as ever, which was better than twenty-twenty. He had the vision of a jet pilot.

Jay returned to her conversation with Frank, but she was as aware of Steve's fading tension as she had been of the fact that he'd been as taut as a guide wire. Had something happened that afternoon that he hadn't told her? A feeling of dread almost overwhelmed her, and she wanted badly to be back at the cabin.

When they returned to the motel, she noted with relief that Steve went to his own room rather than stopping to talk with Frank or immediately following

her to hers. She darted to the phone and dialed Frank's room. He answered on the first ring.
"It's Jay." She identified herself.
"Is something wrong?" He was immediately alert.
"No, everything's okay. It's just that something's been bothering me, but I didn't want to ask you in front of Steve."
In his room, Frank tensed. Had they failed to cover all bases? "Is it about Steve?"
"Well, no, not really. The agent who died... what was his name? It's been on my mind a lot lately, that he died and I never even heard his name."
"There's no reason you should have. You'd never met him."
"I know," she said softly. "I just wanted to know something about him. It could have been Steve. Now that he's dead, there's no reason to keep his name secret, is there?"
Frank thought. He could give her a fictitious name, but he decided to tell her at least that much of the truth. She'd know his name eventually, and it might help if she could simply think a mistake had been made. It would give her a small fact she could focus on for reference. "His name was Lucas Stone."
"Lucas Stone." Her voice was very soft as she repeated the name. "Was he married? Did he have a family?"
"No, he wasn't married." He deliberately didn't answer her second question.
"Thanks for telling me. It's bothered me that I didn't know." He'd never know how much, she thought as she quietly replaced the receiver. Lucas Stone. She repeated the name over and over in her mind, applying it to a battered face and feeling her heart begin to pound. Lucas Stone. Yes.
Only then did she realize what a mistake she'd made. If it had been difficult before to refer to him as Steve, it would be almost impossible now. Steve had been a stolen name, but one she'd used because there had been no alternative. What if the name Lucas slipped out?
She sat on the bed for a long time while she mentally flailed against the hall of mirrors that trapped her with its false reflections. The things she didn't know bound her as securely as the things she knew, until she was afraid to trust her own instincts. She wasn't made for deception; she was straightforward, which was one reason why she hadn't fitted into the world of investment banking, a world that required a certain measure of "slickery," that balance of slickness and trickery.

Finally, too tired to open any more blank doors, she took a shower and got ready for bed. When she came out of the bathroom, Lucas—Stevel she reminded herself frantically—was stretched out on the bed, already partially undressed.
She looked at the locked door. "Haven't we done this before?"
He rolled to his feet and caught her arms, pulling her to him. "With one difference. A big difference."
He smelled of soap and shaving cream, and the underlying muskiness of man. She clung to him, pressing her face into his neck to inhale that special scent. What would she do if he left her? It would be a life without color, forever incomplete. Slowly she ran her hands over his broad chest, rubbing her ringers through the crisp, curly hair and feeling the warmth of his skin, then the iron layer of muscles beneath. He was so hard that her fingers barely made an impression. Bemused, she pressed experimentally on his upper arm, watching as her fingernails turned white from the pressure but had noticeably little effect on him.
"What are you doing?" he asked curiously.
"Seeing how hard you are."
"Honey, that's not the right place."
Her face was bright with laughter as she swiftly looked up at him. "I think I know all your other places."
"Is that so? There are places, and then there are places. Some places need a lot more attention than others." As he spoke he began moving her toward the bed. He was already aroused, his hardness pressing against her. Jay moved her hand down to cover the ridge beneath his jeans.
"Is this one of the places in need of attention?"
"A lot of attention," he assured her as he levered them both onto the bed. He felt her legs move, her hips lifting to cradle him, and all amusement faded out of his eyes, leaving them fierce and narrow. It was a look that made Jay shudder in exquisite anticipation.
She looked up at him, her face soft and shining as his hands began moving tenderly on her body. "I love you," she said, and her heart echoed, *Lucas.*
It was different the next morning, as if the world had altered during the night, but he couldn't quite put his finger on the difference. It was an oddly familiar feeling, as if he were more at home with himself. Jay was in his arms, her sleek, golden-brown hair lying tangled on his shoulder. If they had been in the cabin he would have got up to rebuild the fire, then returned

to bed for some early-morning loving. Instead he had to go to his own room to shave and dress. That damn Frank. He'd booked separate rooms knowing they needed only one. But Jay wasn't like all the other women; Jay was special, and maybe this was Frank's tribute to her specialness.

Other women. The thought nagged at him after he left Jay and returned to his own room in the biting cold of dawn. His memory was returning, not in one big, melodramatic rush, like a light switch being turned on, but in unconnected bits and pieces. Faces and names were surfacing. Instead of feeling elated, however, he was aware of a growing sense of caution. He hadn't told Frank his memory was coming back; he'd wait until it had truly returned and he'd had time to consider the situation. Wariness was second nature to him, just as he automatically checked his room to make certain no one had entered it in his absence.

He showered and shaved, but as he shaved he found himself staring at his face in the mirror, trying to find his past in the reflection. How could he recognize himself when his face had been changed? What had he looked like before? He wondered if Jay had a picture of him; it would be an old one, if she'd kept any at all. But women tended to keep mementos and their divorce hadn't been a bitter one, so maybe she hadn't destroyed whatever pictures she'd had. Maybe seeing one would give him a link to the past.

Hell, why should it? He stared at himself in disgust. He hadn't recognized Jay or Frank; why should he recognize his old face? The face he knew was the face he could see now, and it wouldn't win any prizes. He looked as if he'd played too many football games without a helmet.

Still, the sensation lingered that he was on the brink of... something. It was there, just beyond his reach.

It nagged at him in little ways, like the ease with which he slipped his shoulder holster on, and the familiarity of the gun in his hand as he checked it, then slid it into place. The ease and familiarity had been there before, but now they were somehow different, as if the link between past and present were returning. Soon. It would happen soon.

The day was uneventful, but the feeling of anticipation didn't leave him. They all met to eat breakfast; then he and Frank drove to the optical lab and picked up his glasses. On the way back he asked, "Have you found this Piggot guy yet?"

"Not yet. He surfaced a month ago, but he went underground again before we could get to him."

"Is he good?"
Frank hesitated. "Damn good. One of the best. His psychological profile says he's a psychopath, but very controlled, very professional. His jobs are a matter of pride to him. That's why he wants you. You screwed him up the way no one else ever had. You spoiled his job, killed his 'employees' and managed to hit him hard enough that he had to go underground for months to recover."
"I may have hit him hard, but it wasn't hard enough," Steve said remotely.
"Do you have a picture of him?"
"Not with me. There's only one. We got him with a telescopic lens, and it's grainy. He's about five-ten, a hundred and forty-five pounds, blond, forty-two years old. His left earlobe is missing, also courtesy of you. His reputation suffered."
"Yeah, well, some days I'm a little cranky." That was vintage Lucas Stone. Frank felt the shock of it like a slap, but he kept his hands steady on the wheel. "Is your memory coming back?"
"Not yet," Steve lied. He could see Geoffrey Pig-got, whiplash thin, malignant, cold. Another face to go with a name.
He was very quiet on the drive back to the cabin. Jay glanced at him, but sunglasses hid his eyes, and she could read nothing in his expression. She still sensed the tension in him, just as she had the night before, during dinner. "Do you have another headache?" she finally asked.
"No." Then he softened the bluntness of his answer by reaching over to rub the backs of his fingers against her jaw. "I feel okay."
"Did Frank say anything that's bothering you?"
Briefly he considered the disadvantages of letting someone get so close to you that they could read your moods, but then he counted that battle well lost in Jay's case, because as far as he was concerned, she couldn't get close enough to suit him. And he hadn't *let* her get close; it had simply happened.
"No. He told me a few things about the guy who tried to make me into beef stew—"
"Oh, gross!" she said, slapping his hand away, and he laughed at her.
"I was just thinking about him, that's all."
After a moment she curled up in the seat and rested her head against the back. "I'll be glad to get home."
He was in total agreement with that. They had been alone together for so long that this trip had almost brought on culture shock. Neon lights and

traffic were a definite jolt to a system that was used to fir trees, snow and a deep, deep silence. Right now he would welcome a trip to civilization only if he and Jay were getting blood tests and a marriage license.

Blood tests.

Suddenly he felt alert, just as he'd felt a thousand times before when his life hung in the balance. Adrenaline spurted into his veins, and his heart began racing, but not as fast as his brain. A blood test. Damn it, it didn't fit. Why had they needed Jay to identify him when they had all the means at hand? He was their agent. Granted, his fingerprints were gone, he'd been unconscious and his voice damaged, but they still had his blood type and dental records. It should have been easy enough to establish his identity. It followed, then, that they hadn't needed Jay at all, but had definitely wanted her for some reason.

He went over what Jay had told him. They had wanted her to identity him because they couldn't make a positive ID, and they'd needed to know if their agent had bought the farm, because Steve and this other guy had been caught in the explosion and one of them was dead. That meant there must have been two agents on location, but it wouldn't have changed the fact that Frank had the means at hand to identify both of them. Supposedly he and this other agent had physically resembled each other, about the same height and weight, and with the same coloring. There still wasn't any problem with identification, even if he stretched coincidence and allowed that they both might have had the same blood type. That still left dental records.

Damn, he felt like a fool. Why hadn't he seen this before? They had wanted Jay in this for some reason, but identification hadn't been it. What kind of scheme was Frank running?

Think. He had to think. He felt as if he were trying to put a puzzle together without all the pieces, so no matter how he moved things around they still didn't fit. If he could just remember, damn it!

Why would Frank lie to Jay? Why concoct the story that he and the other agent so closely resembled each other? Why insist that he needed her at all? Why did they need Jay?

Voices tumbled in on him. *"Congratulations, Mr. Stone"... "I'm glad you're back, son"... "Unca Luke! Unca Luke!"* Stone... son... Unca Luke... son... Luke... Stone...

Luke Stone.

His hands jerked on the steering wheel. He felt as if he'd been hit in the chest. Luke Stone. Lucas Stone. *Damn Frank Payne to hell! His name was Lucas Stone!*

As soon as he'd turned that mental corner, all the memories came rushing at him in a confusing flood, filling his mind with so much clatter that he could barely drive. He didn't dare stop, didn't dare let Jay know what he was feeling. He felt... God, he didn't know how he felt. Battered. His head hurt, but at the same time he was aware of an enormous sense of relief. He had his identity back, his sense of self. Finally he knew himself.

He was Lucas Stone. He had a family and friends, a past.

But he wasn't Jay's ex-husband. He wasn't Steve Crossfield. He wasn't the man she thought she was in love with.

So that was why she'd been brought in. There had been only one agent at the explosion, and he was that man. Steve Crossfield must have been there for some reason, and he had died there. Lucas tried to form his memories of the meeting, but they were blurred, fragmented. They would probably never come back. But he did remember seeing a tall, lean man walking up the street, his outline reflected on the wet pavement under the streetlight. That could have been Steve Cross-field. He didn't remember anything after that, though now he was remembering making contact, setting up the meeting with Minyard, going to the meeting site. He'd looked up, seen the man...then nothing. Everything after that was a blank, until Jay's voice had pulled him out of the darkness.

His cover had been blown, obviously. Piggot was after him; that was the reason for the charade. Pulling Jay in, duping her into thinking he was her ex-husband, having him positively identified as Steve Crossfield, was the best cover the Man could concoct for him until they could neutralize Piggot. The Man never underestimated his enemies, and Piggot was, as Frank had said, very good. The extent of the Man's deception also told Lucas that the Man suspected there was a mole in his ranks and hadn't trusted regular channels.

So they'd "buried" him, and he'd awakened to another name, another face, another life, even another man's wife.

No, damn it! Savagery filled him, and his knuckles turned white as he automatically negotiated the icy patches on the road. Maybe he wasn't Steve Crossfield, but Jay was his. *His*. Lucas Stone's woman.

Silently and at length, he cursed the Man and Frank for everything he could think of, ranging back over several generations of their ancestors. Not Frank so much, because he could see the Man's fine hand in this. Nobody had a mind as intricate as Kell Sabin's; that was how he'd gotten to be the Man. They had probably—no, almost certainly—saved his life, assuming there was a mole passing information to Pig-got, but they weren't the ones who had to tell Jay he wasn't her ex-husband. They didn't have to tell her that the man she loved was dead and she'd been sleeping with a stranger.

What would she say? More important, what would she do?

He couldn't lose her. He could stand anything except that. He expected, and could handle, shock, anger, even fear, but he couldn't stand it if she looked at him with hate in those deep blue eyes. He couldn't let her walk away from him.

Immediately he began examining the situation from all angles, looking for a solution, but even as he looked, he knew there wasn't one. He couldn't marry her using Crossfield's name, because such a marriage wouldn't be legal, and besides, he'd be damned if he'd let her carry another man's name. He would have to tell her.

His family probably thought he was dead, and there was no way he could let them know he wasn't without jeopardizing them. If his cover was blown, his family would be at risk if Piggot ever found out he hadn't died as planned. The way things stood now, he'd have a hard time convincing his family of his identity anyway; he neither looked nor sounded the same. His hands were tied until Piggot was caught; then he supposed Sabin would arrange for his family to be notified that a "mistake" had been made in identification, and due to extenuating and unusual circumstances, et cetera, the error had only now been corrected. The Man probably already had the telegram composed in his mind, letter-perfect.

His family would be taken care of; they would be glad to get him back despite the way he looked, or the fact that his voice was ruined.

Jay was the victim. They'd used her as the ultimate cover. How in hell could she ever forgive that?

Jay dozed, finally awakening as they turned onto the track to the meadow. "We're home," she murmured, pushing her hair back. She turned her head to smile at him. "At last."

He was tense again, surveying every detail of the track. There was new snow on the ground, filling the tire tracks they had made the day before and

also obliterating any other trail that could have been made after they'd left. All his training was coming into play, and Lucas Stone didn't take chances. Unnecessary chances, that was. There had been more times than one when he'd laid his life on the line, but only because he'd had no other choice. Taking chances with Jay's life, however, was something else.

As usual, Jay picked up on his tension and fell silent, a worried frown puckering her brow.

The snow surrounding the cabin was pristine, but when Lucas parked the Jeep he put a detaining hand on Jay's arm. "Stay here until I check the cabin," he said tersely, drawing a pistol from beneath his jacket and getting out without looking at her. His eyes were never still, darting from window to window, examining every inch of ground, looking for the betraying flutter of a curtain.

Jay was frozen in place. This man, moving like a cat toward the back door, was the man she loved, and he was a predator, a hunter. He was innately cautious, as graceful as the wind as he flattened his back against the wall and eased his left hand toward the doorknob, while the pistol was held ready in his right. Soundlessly he opened the door and disappeared within. Two minutes later he stood in the back door again, relaxed. "Come on in," he said, and walked back to the Jeep to get their bags.

It irritated her that he'd frightened her for nothing; it reminded her of the morning when he'd tracked her in the snow. "Don't do that to me," she snapped as she threw open the door and slid out. The snow crunched under her boots.

"Do what?"

"Scare me like that."

"Scaring you is a hell of a lot better than walking into an ambush," he replied evenly.

"How could anyone know we're up here, and why should anyone care?"

"Frank thinks someone would care, or they wouldn't have taken the trouble to hide us."

She climbed the steps and knocked the snow off her boots before entering the cabin. It was cold but not icy, because they had left the backup heat system on. She took the bags from him and carried them into the bedroom to begin unpacking while he built a fire.

Lucas watched the yellow flames lick at the logs he'd placed on the grate, slowly catching and engulfing the wood. He couldn't tell her, not yet. This

might be the only time he'd ever have with her, an indefinite period of grace while Sabin's men hunted Piggot. He'd use that time to bind her to him so tightly that he could hold her even after she found out his real name, and that Steve Crossfield was dead. She had told him she loved him, but it was Steve Crossfield she'd been saying the words to, and, oddly, it had been Steve Cross-field hearing them. He was Lucas Stone, and he wanted her for himself.

His need was fast and urgent, like a fire low in his belly. He walked into the bedroom and watched her for a moment as she bent over to remove her boots and socks. She was as slim as a reed, her skin silky soft. He caught her around the waist and tumbled her on the bed, immediately following her down to pin her to the mattress with his weight.

She laughed, her blue eyes no longer filled with irritation. "The caveman approach must be fashionable this year," she teased.

He couldn't smile in return. He wanted her too badly, needed to hear her say the words to him, not to a ghost. The yellow glitter was in his eyes as he stripped her and surveyed her nakedness. Her nipples were puckered from the chilly air, her breasts standing up round and firm. He circled them with his hands and lifted the tight nipples to his mouth, sucking at each of them in turn. She gasped, and her back arched. Her responsiveness did it to him every time, shattered his control and made him as hot and eager for her as a teenager. He could barely tolerate taking his hands off her long enough to hastily tear at his own clothing and throw it to the side.

"Tell me you love me," he said as he adjusted her slim legs around his hips and began entering her.

Jay squirmed voluptuously, rubbing her breasts against the hairy planes of his chest. "I love you." Her hands dug into his back as she felt the muscles ripple. "I love you." Slowly he pushed and slowly she accepted him, her pleasure already rising to an urgent pitch. Her body was so attuned to him that when he began the rhythmic thrust and withdrawal of love-making her sensual tension swiftly reached a crescendo. He held her until her shudders stilled, then found the rhythm anew.

"Again," he whispered.

She wanted to cry out his name, but couldn't. She couldn't call him Steve now, and she didn't dare call him Lucas. She had to bite her lips to keep his name unsaid, and a moan rose in her throat. He controlled her, his slow,

deep thrusts taking her only so high and refusing to let her go any higher. She was on fire, her nerve endings exploding with pleasure.
"Tell me you love me." His voice was gravelly, the strain apparent on his face as he kept his movements agonizingly slow.
"I love you."
"Again."
"I love you."
He wanted to hear his name, but that was denied him. Sometime in the future, when this was all over, he promised himself that he would have her as he was having her now, and she would scream his name. He had to be content with knowing it himself, and with the way her eyes locked with his as she whispered the words over and over again, until his control broke and sweet madness claimed them both.
He couldn't get enough of her, ever, and knowing that he might lose her was intolerable. Physical bonds were the most basic, and instinctively he used them to strengthen the link between them. He would make himself a part of her until his name no longer mattered.
Two nights later, Frank had just gotten into bed when the telephone rang. With a sigh, he reached for it. "Payne."
"Piggot's in Mexico City," the Man said.
Forgetting about the good night's sleep he'd been anticipating, Frank sat up, instantly alert.
"Do you have a man on him?"
"Not at the moment. He's gone to ground again. It's about to unravel, and this move tells me who snipped the thread. I'll take care of that little detail, but you get Luke out of there. The cabin's location has been leaked."
"How much do you want me to tell him?"
"All of it. It doesn't matter now. It'll go down within the next twenty-four hours. Just see that they're safe." Then Kell Sabin hung up, wondering if he'd cut it too fine and endangered a friend, as well as an innocent woman.

Chapter Twelve

At the first beep from the palm-size pager lying on the bedside table, Lucas was on his feet and reaching for his pants. The tone told him it was the communications beeper, not the alarm caused by the laser beam being

broken, but the very fact that Frank was contacting him in the middle of the night was alarm enough. Jay roused and reached for the lamp, but Lucas stopped her.
"No lights."
"What's going on?" She was very still now.
"I'm going out to the shed. That's the communications beeper. Frank's trying to get in touch with us."
"Then why not turn on a light?"
"He wouldn't contact us in the middle of the night unless it was an emergency. It might be too late. Piggot could already be close by, and a light would warn him."
"Piggot?"
"The guy who tried to make me into beef stew, remember?"
"I'll go with you." In a flash she was out of the bed and fumbling with her clothes in the dark. Lucas started to stop her, not wanting her to leave the safety of the cabin, but if Piggot had found them, the cabin wouldn't be safe. A hand-held rocket launcher in the hands of an expert, which Piggot was, could turn the cabin into a shattered inferno in seconds.
He stamped his feet into his boots and grabbed the pistol out of the holster, which he always kept at hand. As he left the room he lifted his jacket from the hook beside the door, then shrugged into it as he raced through the dark cabin to the back door. Jay was right behind him; she had on her jeans and his flannel shirt, her bare feet shoved into boots.
They slipped across the snow to the shed, staying in the shadows as much as possible. The ramshackle shed was a revelation; Jay had been stunned the first time Lucas had shown her what lay below its surface. He moved a bale of hay aside and revealed a small trapdoor, just wide enough to allow his shoulders through, then pressed a button on the pager that released the electronic lock. The trapdoor silently swung open. A narrow ladder extended downward, illuminated only by tiny red lights beside each step. Lucas urged her down, then he followed and closed the door, once more sealing the underground communications chamber. Only then did he switch on the lights.
The chamber was small, no more than six by eight, and crammed with equipment. There were a computer and display terminal, a modem hookup and a printer against the end wall, and an elaborate radio system on the right. That left about two and a half feet of room on the left for

maneuvering, and part of that was taken up by a chair. Lucas took the chair and flipped switches on the radio. "On air."
"Get packed. Piggot has been spotted in Mexico City, and we have word the location of the cabin is no longer secure." Frank's voice filled the small chamber eerily, without the tinny sound radios normally produced, testifying to the quality of the set.
"How much time do we have?"
"The Man estimated four hours; less if Piggot has already put accomplices in the area."
"His usual method is to move people in, but keep them at a distance until he arrives. He likes to orchestrate things himself." Lucas's voice was remote, his mind racing.
Silence filled the chamber, then Frank asked quietly, "Luke?"
"Yeah," Lucas said, aware of Jay's sudden movement behind him, followed by absolute stillness. He hadn't wanted to tell her like this, but all hell would be coming down in a hurry. Four hours wasn't a lot of time, and no matter what happened, he wanted her to know his name. For four hours she would know whose woman she was.
"When?"
"A couple of days ago. Any chance of intercepting Piggot before he gets here?" That would be the best-case scenario.
"Slim. Nailing him there would be our best bet. We don't know where he is, but we know where he's going."
"He won't go through customs, so that means he's in a small plane and will land at a private airstrip, one close by. Do you have a record of them?"
"We're pulling them out of the computer now. We'll have men at all of them."
"Where's a safe place for me to stash Jay?"
Frank said urgently, "Luke, you're out of it. Don't set yourself up as bait for the trap. Get in the Jeep and drive, and call me in five hours."
"Piggot's my mess, I'll clean it up," Lucas said, still in that cool, remote tone. "If I'd taken care of him last year, this wouldn't be happening now."
"What about Jay?"
"I'll get her out of it. But I'm coming back for Piggot."
Realizing the futility of arguing with him across two-thirds of the continent, Frank said. "Okay. Contact Veasey, at this frequency, and scramble." He recited the frequency numbers only once.

"Roger," Lucas said, and flipped the switch that cut them off. Then he shoved the chair back and stood, turning to face Jay.
Her entire body felt numb as she stared at him. He knew. His memory had returned. Her time of grace had ended, the mirrors had shattered, the charade was over. The violence that had brought him into her life was about to take him out of it again.
With the return of his memory, he was truly Lucas Stone again. It was there in his eyes, in the yellow gaze of the predator. His face was hard. "I'm not Steve Crossfield," he said bluntly. "My name is Lucas Stone. Your ex-husband is dead."
She was white, frozen. "I know," she whispered.
Of all the things he'd expected her to say, that wasn't one of them. It stunned him, confused him, and irrationally angered him. He'd agonized for days over how to tell her, and she already knew? "How long have you known?" he snapped.
Even her lips felt numb. "Quite a while."
He caught her arm, his long fingers digging into her flesh. "How long is 'quite a while'?"
She tried to think. She had been caught in a web of lies for so long that it was difficult to remember. "You... you were still in the hospital."
Scenarios flashed through his mind. He'd been trained to think deviously, to keep hammering at something until it made sense, and he didn't like any of the situations that came to mind. He'd assumed from the beginning that she was an innocent blind, used by Sabin and Frank Payne to shield him, but it was more likely that she'd been hired to do the job. White-hot fury began to build in him, and he clamped down on his temper with iron control. "Why didn't you tell me?" God, for a while he'd thought he was going crazy, with all those damn memories coming back and none of them connected with the things she had told him. He might have gotten his memory back sooner if he'd had one solid fact to build on instead of the fairy tales she'd woven.
He was hurting her; his grip would leave bruises on her arm. She pulled at it uselessly, gasping as he only tightened his fingers. "I was afraid to!"
"Afraid of what?"
"I thought Frank would send me away if he knew I'd discovered you weren't Steve! Lucas, please, you're hurting me!" At last she could say his name, even though it was in pain, and her heart savored the sound.

His, grip eased, but he caught her other arm, too, and held her firmly. "So Frank didn't hire you to say I was Steve Crossfield?"
"N-no," she stuttered. "I believed you were, at first."
"What changed your mind?"
"Your eyes. When I saw your eyes, I knew."
The memory of that was crystal clear. When the doctor had cut the bandages away from his eyes and he'd looked at Jay for the first time, she had gone as white as she was now. That was odd, because he knew Sabin would never have overlooked a detail as basic as the color of his eyes.
"Your husband didn't have brown eyes?"
"Ex-husband," she whispered. "Yes, he had brown eyes, but his were dark brown. Yours are yellowish brown."
So his eyes were a different shade of brown than her husband's had been; it was almost laughable that Sabin's carefully constructed scam could have fallen apart over something as small as that. But she hadn't told them that they had the wrong man, which would have been the reasonable thing to do. She hadn't even told him, not then and not during the weeks when they'd been up here alone. Angry frustration made his voice as rough as gravel.
"Why didn't you tell me? Didn't you think I'd be a little interested in who I really am?"
"I couldn't take the chance. I was afraid—" she began, pleading for understanding.
"Yeah, that's right, you were afraid the gravy train would end. Frank was paying you to stay with me, wasn't he? You were with me every day, so there was no way you could hold down a job."
"No! It isn't like that—"
"Then what is it like? Are you independently wealthy?"
"Lucas, please. No, I'm not wealthy—"
"Then how did you live during the months I was in the hospital?"
"Frank picked up the tab," she said in raw frustration. "Would you please listen to me?"
"I'm listening, honey. You just told me that Frank paid you to stay with me."
"He made it possible for me to stay with you! I'd lost my job—" Too late, she heard the words and knew how he would take them.
His eyes were yellow slits, his mouth a grim line of rage. "So you jumped at the chance for a cushy job. All you had to do was sit beside me every day and anything you wanted was given to you, while Frank paid your bills.

This explains why you wouldn't marry me, doesn't it? You were happy to accept your 'salary,' but marrying a stranger was a little bit too much, wasn't it? Not to mention the fact that the marriage wouldn't have been legal. You saved yourself some sticky trouble by dragging up all those excuses."
"They weren't excuses. For all I knew you could have had someone who cared for you—"
"I do!" he yelled, his neck cording. "My family! They think I'm dead!"
Jay groped for control, managing to steady her voice. "I couldn't marry you until you'd gotten your memory back and knew for certain you wanted to marry me. I couldn't take advantage of you like that."
"That's a convenient scruple. It actually makes you look noble, doesn't it? Too bad. If you wanted the gravy train to keep running, you should have married me while you had the chance and just kept pretending I was Crossfield. Then, when I got my memory back, you could have been the poor victim and maybe I would have stayed with you out of guilt."
She shrank away from him, her eyes going blank. Somehow, during the long months she had spent with him, she had come to believe he loved her, though he had never said the words. He'd been so possessive, so tender and passionate. But now his memory had returned, and he couldn't have made it plainer that his absorption with her had ended. He didn't need her any longer, and he certainly wasn't going to renew his offer of marriage. It was over, and they weren't even going to part friends. The worst had happened; she had lied to him, kept his identity from him, and he would never forgive her for it. He thought she had done it just because the government had been willing to support her for as long as the charade had lasted.
He released her suddenly, as if he couldn't stand to touch her any longer, and she staggered back. Catching her balance, she turned toward the ladder. "Open the door," she said dully.
He clenched his fists, not ready to break off the argument. He didn't have all the answers he wanted, not by a long shot. But her movement recalled the need for urgency; he had to get her out of there before Piggot found them. The last thing he wanted was for Jay to be caught in the middle of a firefight.
"I'll go first," he said, and shouldered past her. He signaled the door open and climbed the ladder, the pistol ready in his hand. As soon as his head was above ground he looked cautiously in all directions, then climbed out and knelt on one knee by the hole to help Jay out. "All right, come on."

She didn't look at him as she crawled out, nor did she accept the hand he extended. He closed the trapdoor, then replaced the bale of hay over it. She started to just walk out of the shed, but he grabbed her and held her back. "Watch it!" he said in a furious whisper. "We go back the same way we came. Stay in the shadows." He led the way, and Jay followed him without a word.

He still wouldn't allow a light on in the cabin, so Jay stumbled to the bedroom and gathered a few clothes in the dark. He came into the bedroom as she took off his shirt to put on her own clothes, and after a moment of frozen embarrassment, she awkwardly turned her back while she struggled with her bra. Her hands were clumsy, and in the dark she couldn't manage to straighten the straps. Despairing of getting it on, she finally dropped it on the bed and simply pulled her sweater over her head.

Lucas watched her. Her pale breasts had gleamed in the fault light coming through the window, and in spite of his anger, his sense of betrayal and the need for haste, he wanted to go to her and pull her against him. Only a few hours before he had held her breasts in his hands and pushed them up to his avid mouth. He had made love to her until the building anticipation had bordered on agony, and they had writhed together on that bed. She had told him she loved him, over and over, and now she turned her back as if she had to hide her body from him.

It hit him hard, shook him. There was more to it than she'd told him, more than the mercenary motives he'd thrown at her. He needed to know what it was, but he didn't have time. Damn it. If only she didn't look so beaten and remote, as if she had withdrawn inside herself. He had to fight the urge to take her in his arms and kiss that look away. Hell, what did it matter why she had done it? Maybe money had been the reason at first, but he was damned certain it wasn't the reason now, or at least not all of it. Even if it had been, he thought ruthlessly, he wouldn't let her go. He'd get this settled between them as soon as he'd taken care of Piggot, but right now the most important thing was to make certain Jay was safe.

"Hurry," he urged roughly.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and jerked her boots off, quickly put on a pair of thick socks and put the boots on again. Then she got her purse and shearling jacket and said, "I'm ready."

He didn't see the need for her to get anything else, as they would come back to the cabin and pack after he'd taken care of Piggot, and he was pleased

that she didn't insist on wasting time. Jay was a good partner, even though she was out of her depth.
He had to find a safe place to leave her. He doubted that Black Bull, the closest town, had a motel, but he didn't have the time to go any farther than that. He drove the Jeep at breakneck speed across the meadow, especially considering that he didn't dare risk turning on the headlights. But he had taken the possibility that he might have to do this into consideration and had walked the meadow over and over, mentally tracing the route he would take, estimating his fastest safe speed, noting all the rocks and ruts in his path. He edged so close to the tree line that branches scraped the side of the Jeep.
"I can't see," Jay said, her voice strained.
"I can." He couldn't see much, but it was enough. He had good night vision.
She held on to the door as they jolted across a hump, rattling her teeth. He'd have to turn on the headlights when they went down the mountainside, she thought; the track was only wide enough for the Jeep, with a steep drop on one side and vertical mountain on the other. Even in daylight she hardly dared to breathe until they had safely negotiated it. But when they made the turn that took them onto the track, he kept both hands on the wheel. The darkness in front of them was absolute.
Jay closed her eyes. Her own heartbeat was thundering in her ears so loudly that she couldn't hear anything else. There was nothing she could do. He had decided not to turn on the lights, to risk the drive in the dark, and nothing she could say would change his mind. His arrogant confidence in his own ability was both maddening and awesome; she would rather have walked down the mountain in ten feet of snow than risked this hair-raising drive, but he had simply decided to do it, and now he was.
She couldn't estimate how long the drive took. It seemed like hours, and finally her nerves couldn't bear the tension, and numbness settled in. She even opened her eyes. It didn't matter. If they went over the side, they would go whether her eyes were open or closed.
But then they were down and bumping across the second meadow.
Suddenly he slammed on the brakes, swearing viciously. Jay saw what he saw: a set of headlights playing along the edge of the meadow in front of them. They were still safely out of range of the light, but she knew as well as he did what it meant. Piggot's men were drawing close, closing the net to wait for Piggot's arrival.

Lucas put the Jeep in reverse and backed the way he had come, keeping the Jeep at the tree line. When he reached the rear edge of the meadow he turned, taking the Jeep up the north edge. They were off the track now, and the snow tires dug in deep, spewing snow back behind them.
"Are we going around this way?"
"No. We won't be able to make it. The snow's too deep." He pulled the Jeep under some trees and got out. "Stay here," he ordered, and disappeared back toward the track.
Jay swiveled in her seat, straining her eyes to see what he was doing. She could barely make out his form, black against the snow; an instant later he was out of sight.
He was back in less than two minutes. He vaulted into the Jeep and slammed the door, then rolled the window down. "Listen," he hissed.
"What did you do?"
"I wiped out our tracks. There was only one vehicle. If it goes past us, we'll get back on the track and make it to the highway yet."
They listened. The sound of the other motor came plainly through the night air. The vehicle was moving slowly, the engine toiling in low gear as it cautiously made its way up the slick, snowy, unfamiliar track. The headlights stabbed the darkness, coming almost straight toward them.
"Don't worry," Lucas breathed. "They can't see us from the track. If they just don't notice where we turned and if they keep on going, we'll be okay."
Two ifs. Two big ifs. Jay's nails were digging into her palms. The headlights were close enough that their reflected light illuminated the interior of the Jeep, and for the first time she noticed that Lucas had on his thick shearling jacket, but no shirt. The odd detail struck her, and she wondered if she might be edging toward hysteria.
"Keep going," he said under his breath. "Keep going."
For a moment it seemed as if the other vehicle slowed, and the lights seemed to be coming over the slight rise straight toward them. Then they turned, and the noise of the engine slowly moved away.
She let out her breath. Lucas started the engine, knowing the sound wouldn't be heard over that of the other motor. He put the Jeep in gear and turned it around, praying they were hidden well enough that the red glow of the brake lights wouldn't reveal their position. But at least they were behind the other vehicle now. If he had to, he could make a run for the road. As

rough as the track was, the chance that they would be hit by gunfire from a pursuing vehicle was small.
The Jeep lurched through the snow, and then they were on the track again. No other headlights disturbed the darkness, and they could just catch glimpses of light playing through the trees as the other vehicle moved slowly up the treacherous mountainside track.
Jay sat silently, even when they reached the road and Lucas finally turned on the headlights. She was numb again.
They reached Black Bull at two in the morning. The local populace of one hundred and thirty-three souls were all in bed. There wasn't even an all-night convenience store, and the one gas station closed at ten at night, according to the sign in the window. A county sheriffs car was parked at the side of the gas station.
Lucas stopped the Jeep. "Can you drive this well enough to get out of here?" he asked brusquely.
She looked at the gearshift, but not at him. "Yes."
"Then drive until you hit the next town big enough to have a motel. Stop there and call Frank. He'll arrange for you to be picked up. Do you have his number?"
So this was it. It was over. "No."
"Give me a pen. I'll write it down for you."
Jay fumbled in her purse and found a pen, but she didn't have even a scrap of paper for him to write the number on. Finally he grasped her hand and turned it palm up, then wrote the number on her palm.
"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice strained but even.
"I'm taking that county car right there and radioing Veasey. Then we're going to catch Piggot and end this once and for all."
She stared out the windshield, her hand clenched tightly as if to keep the number from fading off her palm. "Be careful," she managed to say, the admonishment trite but heartfelt. She wondered if Frank would even tell her the outcome, if she would ever know what happened to Lucas.
"He ambushed me once. It won't happen again." Lucas got out of the Jeep and strode over to the county car. It was locked, but that wasn't much of a deterrent. He had the door open in less than ten seconds. He looked at the Jeep, staring at Jay through the windshield. Her face was ghostly white. He wanted nothing more than to jerk her into his arms and kiss her so hard that they both forgot about this mess, but if he kissed her now, he might not be

able to stop, and he had to take care of Piggot. It was just that he wanted her so badly, wanted to use the bond of the flesh to make certain she knew she was his. A sense of incompletion gnawed at him because they hadn't thrashed out the situation between them, but it would have to wait. Maybe it was better this way. In a few hours he wouldn't have to worry about Piggot any longer, and his temper would have cooled. He would be able to think clearly and not react as if she'd betrayed him. He didn't understand her reasons yet, but underneath everything, he knew she loved him.

Instead of climbing over into the driver's seat, Jay opened the door and got out to walk around. She paused in front of the Jeep, her slim body starkly outlined by the glare of the headlights. "It was the only way I could think of to protect you," she said, then got into the Jeep and put it in gear.

Lucas watched the taillights as she pulled out of the gas station and onto the highway. He felt stunned. Protect him? He was so used to being out in the cold, on his own by choice, that the idea of anyone protecting him was alien. What had she thought she could do?

She could keep the charade intact. She had been right; Frank would have quickly and quietly hustled her away if she'd told him there had been a mistake, that he, Lucas, wasn't her ex-husband. She didn't have his skill with weapons or in fighting, but that hadn't stopped her from literally setting herself up as his bodyguard. The charade had depended on her, so she had kept quiet, and shielded him with her presence.

Because she loved him. He swore aloud, his breath crystallizing in the frigid night air. His damned training had tripped him up, making him look for betrayal where there hadn't been any, making him question her motives and automatically assuming the worst. He had only to look to himself to understand why she hadn't said anything. Hadn't he kept quiet these past two days because he'd been afraid of losing her if she knew the truth? He loved her too much to accept even the possibility of losing her, until Piggot had forced his hand.

Swearing again, he folded his length into the county car and began the process of hot-wiring the starter.

* * *

Dawn threw rosy fingers of light across the snow, a sight Lucas has seen many times since coming to the mountains, but the scene wasn't peaceful this particular morning. The meadow was crowded with men and vehicles, the pristine snow trampled and criss-crossed by both feet and tires. Here

and there the white was marred by reddish-brown stains. A helicopter sat off to the left, its blades slowly twirling in the breeze.
Ten guns snapped toward him as he stepped out from the trees, then were lifted as the men holding them recognized him. He walked steadily toward them, his own pistol held in his blood-stained hand down at his side. The stench of cordite burned his nostrils in the cold air, and a gray haze lay over the meadow, resisting the efforts of the breeze to disperse it.
There was a tall, black-haired man standing next to the helicopter, surveying the scene with grim, narrowed eyes. Lucas walked straight to him. "You took a chance, setting us up in your own cabin," he snapped.
Kell Sabin looked around the meadow. "It was a calculated risk. I had to do it to find the mole. Once the location of the cabin was leaked, I knew who it was, because access to that information is very controlled." He shrugged. "I can find another vacation spot."
"The mole blew my cover?"
"Yeah. Until then, I had no idea he was there." Sabin's voice was icy, his eyes like cold black fire.
"So why the masquerade? Why drag Jay into it?"
"To keep Piggot from finding out you were alive. Your cover was blown. He knew about your family, and he's been willing in the past to use someone's family to get to them. I was trying to buy time, to keep everyone safe until Piggot surfaced and we could get to him."
Sabin looked up at the trees behind the cabin. "I assume he won't be bothering us again."
"Or anyone else."
"That was your last job. You're out of it."
"Damn straight," Lucas agreed. "I've got better things to do, like get married and start a family."
Suddenly Sabin grinned, and the coldness left his eyes. Few people saw Sabin like that, only the ones who could call themselves his friends. "The bigger they are," he jibed, and left the rest of the old saw unsaid. "Have you told her yet?"
"She already knew. She figured it out while I was still in the hospital."
Sabin frowned. "What? She didn't say anything. How did she know?"
"My eyes. They're a different shade of brown than Crossfield's."
"Hell. A little thing like that. And she still went along with it?"
"I think she figured out that the whole thing was to protect me."

"Women," Sabin said softly, thinking of his own wife, who had fought like a tigress to save his life when he'd been a stranger to her. It didn't surprise him that Jay Granger had put herself on the line to protect Lucas.
Lucas rubbed his jaw. "She doesn't even mind this ugly mug."
"The surgeons did what they could. Your face was smashed." Then Sabin grinned again. "You were too pretty anyway."
The two men stood and watched the mopping up process, their faces becoming grim again at the loss of life. Three men were dead, counting Piggot, and four more were in custody. "I'll notify your family that you're alive," Sabin finally said. "I'm sorry they had to go through this, but with Piggot on the loose, it was safer for you, and all of them, as well, if the charade was played out. It's over now. Collect Jay from wherever you've stashed her, and we'll get the two of you out of here."
Lucas looked at him, and slowly the blood drained out of his face. "She hasn't called Frank?" he asked hoarsely.
Sabin went still. "No. Where is she?"
"She was supposed to drive to the next town, check into a motel and call Frank. Damn it to hell!" Lucas turned and ran for the shed, with Sabin right beside him. Suddenly he felt cold all over. There was a possibility Piggot could have gotten to Jay before coming here, as well as the slightly less terrifying possibility that she could have had an accident. God in heaven, where was she?

After leaving Lucas, Jay simply drove, automatically following the highway signs picked out by the headlight beams, and eventually wound up on U.S. 24, the highway that they had taken to Colorado Springs. She turned in the opposite direction. She didn't pay any attention to the tune; she just kept driving. U.S. 24 took her through Leadville, and finally she connected with I-70. She took a right, toward Denver.
The sun came up, shining right into her eyes. She was nearly out of gas. She got off at the next exit and had the tank filled.
It would be over by now.
Exhaustion pulled at her, but she couldn't stop. If she ever stopped, she would have to think, and right now she couldn't bear it. She checked her money. She didn't have much—a little over sixty dollars—but she had her credit cards. That would get her back to New York, to the only home she had left, the only refuge.

I-70 went straight to Stapleton International Airport in Denver. Jay parked the Jeep and entered the terminal, carefully noting where she had parked so she could tell Frank where to retrieve his vehicle. She bought her ticket first, and was lucky enough to get on a flight leaving within the hour. Then she found a pay phone and called Frank.

He answered in the middle of the first ring. "Frank, it's Jay." She identified herself in a numb monotone. "Is it over?"

"Where the hell are you?" he screamed.

"Denver."

"Denver! What are you doing there? You were supposed to call me hours ago! Luke is tearing the damned place up, and we have every cop in Colorado prowling the highways looking for you."

Her heart lightened, the terrible dread lifting from it. "He's all right? He isn't hurt?"

"He's fine. He took a little nick on the arm, but nothing a Band-Aid won't cover. Look, exactly where are you? I'll have you picked up—"

"Is it over?" she asked insistently. "Is it really over?"

"Piggot? Yeah, it's over. Luke got him. Tell me where you are and—"

"I'm glad." Her legs wouldn't support her much longer; she sagged against the wall. "Take... take care of him."

"My God, don't hang up!" Frank yelled, the words shrieking in her ear. "Where are you?"

"Don't worry," she managed to say. "I can get home by myself." Totally forgetting the Jeep, she hung up the phone, then went into the ladies' rest room and splashed cold water on her face. As she pulled a brush through her hair she noticed the pallor of her cheeks and the dark circles under her eyes. "You guys sure know how to show a lady a good time," she murmured to her reflection, drawing several startled glances her way.

Yogi Berra had said, "It ain't over till it's over," but this was very definitely over. Jay couldn't sleep on the flight, despite the utter exhaustion weighing down her body. Nor could she eat, though her stomach was empty. She managed to drink a cola, but nothing more. After the solitude of the meadow, New York's J.F.K. airport was bedlam. She wanted to shrink against a wall and scream at all the scurrying people to go away. Instead she got on a bus, and an hour and a half later she let herself into her apartment. She hadn't seen it in months; it was no longer home. It had been well taken care of in her absence, as Frank had promised, but it was as empty as she

was. She didn't even have any clothes with her. She laughed hollowly; clothes were the least of her worries. Frank would make certain they were shipped to her.
But there were sheets to go on the bed, and towels for the bathroom. She took a warm shower, then even summoned the strength to make up the bed. The afternoon sun was going down as she stretched out naked between the clean sheets. Automatically she turned, searching for Lucas's warmth, but he wasn't there. It was over, and he didn't want her. Acid tears stung her eyes as her heavy eyelids closed, and then she slept.
"Janet Jean. Janet Jean, wake up,"
The intruding voice pulled her toward consciousness. She didn't want to wake up. So long as she slept, she didn't have to face life without Lucas. But it sounded like his voice, and she frowned.
"Janet Jean. Jay. Wake up, baby." A hard, warm hand shook her bare shoulder.
Slowly she opened her eyes. It was Lucas, sitting on the edge of her bed, scowling at her. Those yellow eyes looked almost murderous, though his tone had been as gentle as his ruined voice would allow. He looked like hell; he badly needed a shave, his hair was uncombed, and a bloodstained bandage was wrapped around his left forearm. But at least he had on a shirt now, and his clothes were clean.
"I know I locked the door." Sleep still muddled her mind, but she knew she'd locked the door. In New York, one wasn't careless about locking the door.
He shrugged. "Big deal. Come on, sweetheart, go to the bathroom and splash some cold water on your face so you can focus your eyes. I'll make coffee."
What was he doing here? She couldn't think of any reason, and though part of her rejoiced at seeing him, no matter why, another part of her cringed at having to say goodbye to him again. She might not be able to stand it this time. At least before, she had been numb.
"What time is it?"
"Almost nine."
"It can't be. It's still daylight."
"Nine in the morning," he explained patiently. "Come on, get up." He lifted her to a sitting position, and the covers fell to her waist, exposing her bare

body. Quickly Jay grabbed the sheet and pulled it over her breasts; she couldn't meet his eyes as a flush chased the pallor from her face.
His face was expressionless as he got to his feet and unbuttoned his shirt. "Here, put this on. I packed your clothes and brought them with me, but they're all tumbled together in the suitcases."
She took his shut, still warm from his body, and pulled it around her. Without another word she got up and went into the bathroom, firmly closing the door behind her. She started to lock it, but decided not to waste her tune. Locks weren't much good against him.
Five minutes later she felt much more alert, having followed his advice and splashed cold water on her face. She was very thirsty, after having gone so long without anything to drink, so she drank several cups of water. She would have felt more secure if she'd had on something more than just his shirt, but it almost swallowed her. His scent was on the fabric. She lifted it to her face and inhaled deeply, then let it drop and left the security of the bathroom.
He was lying on the bed. She stopped in her tracks. "I thought you were going to make coffee."
"You don't have any." He got to his feet, put his hands on her shoulders and shook her. "Damn you," he said in a shaking voice. "I went through hell when I found out you hadn't called Frank. Why did you run? Why did you come back here?"
Her hair had fallen over her face. "I didn't have anyplace else to go," she said, and her voice cracked.
He yanked her into his arms, reaching up behind her back to lock his fist in her hair and hold her head back. "Did you really think I'd let you get away from me that easily?" he all but snarled.
"Was what I did so bad?" she pleaded. "I didn't know any other way to protect you! When I saw your eyes, I knew you had to be the agent Frank had told me had been killed, and I knew he'd gone to an awful lot of trouble to hide you, so you had to be in danger. You had amnesia. You didn't even know who was after you! Keeping the lie going was the only way I had of keeping you safe!"
The yellowish eyes glittered. "Why should you care?"
"Because I was in love with you! Or did you think that was a lie, too?"
His touch gentled. "No," he said quietly. "I think I've always known you loved me, right from the start."

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "The first time I touched you," she whispered, "I felt how warm you were, and how hard you were fighting to stay alive. I started loving you then."
"Then why did you run?"
He was relentless, but then, she had always known that. "Because it was over. You didn't want me. I'd been terrified of what you would do when you found out. I was afraid you'd send me away, and you did. So I left."
"I only wanted you away from the danger, damn it! I didn't intend for you to go two thousand miles!" He picked her up and dropped her on the bed, then followed her down. "No excuses this time. We're going to get married as soon as we can legally do it."
She was as stunned as she had been the first time he'd mentioned marriage. "W-what?" she stammered.
"You told me to ask you again when I'd regained my memory. Well, I have. We're getting married."
All she could say was, "That's not asking, that's telling."
"It'll do." He began unbuttoning his shirt, uncovering her breasts.
"Is it because you think you owe me—"
His head jerked up, those eyes fierce and wild. "I love you so much I'm out of my head with it."
She was stunned again. "You never said. I thought— but then you made me leave..."
"I didn't think I could have made it any plainer how I felt," he growled.
Very simply she said, "Do you need the words?"
That stopped him. "I need the words very much."
"So do I."
He bent his head and kissed her, his hand stroking her bare body beneath the shirt. His muscled legs moved against hers, and she felt his hardness against her thigh. "I love you, Jay Granger."
The sun was exploding inside her, lighting her eyes. "I love you, Lucas Stone."
At last she could speak his name with love.

Epilogue

"Is Piggot really dead?"

"He's really dead." Lucas watched her face carefully across the breakfast table. He had gone out and bought the necessary groceries, and they had both eaten as if they were starved, which they had been. He hadn't been interested in food before, either. Finding Jay and getting her back where she belonged had been far more important. "I finished the job." The truth wasn't pretty, but she had a right to know that about the man she was going to marry.

She sipped at the hot coffee, then lifted those incredible dark blue eyes to his. "I'm glad he's dead," she said fiercely. "He tried to kill you."

"And came damn close to succeeding."

She shuddered, thinking of the days when his life had hung in the balance, and he reached for her hand. "Hey, sweetheart. It's over. That part is really over. This part—" he squeezed her hand "—is just getting started—if you're sure you can stand looking at this face over the breakfast table."

The smile broke over her face like sunshine. "Well, you're not good-looking, but you sure are sexy."

With a growl he grabbed for her, dragging her around the table and onto his lap. Her arms went around him even as he tilted her face up for his kiss.

"By the way, I'm not an agent."

She jerked back, startled. "What?"

"Not any longer. I'm officially retired, as of yesterday. Sabin took me out of it. Once my cover was blown, there was no way I could go back without endangering my family. I've really been out of it since the explosion, but Sabin didn't make it official until Piggot was caught."

"Then I guess we'll both have to hunt for a job." He was retired! She felt like chanting hosannas. She wouldn't have to worry every time he walked out the door that she'd never see him again.

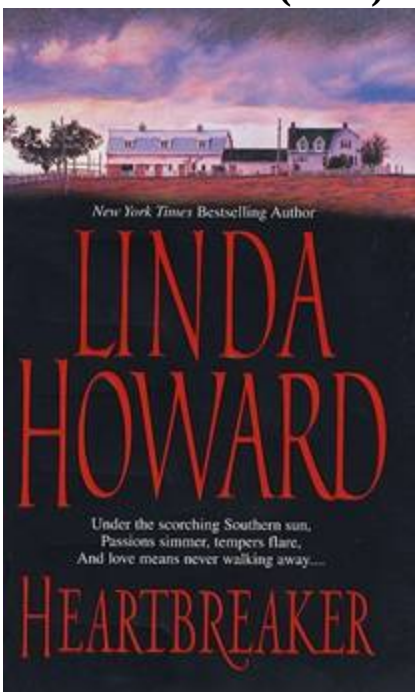
He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. "I already have a job, baby. I'm a businessman, in partnership with my brother in an engineering firm. I traveled all over the world. It was a good cover for the work I was doing for Sabin. Speaking of my brother, by now Sabin will have gotten the news to them that a mistake was made in identifying the victims of the explosion and I'm still alive. This is going to be a bad shock to them, especially my parents."

"You mean a good shock."

"It'll be a shock, of whatever nature. Given the changes in my face and voice, they may have trouble adjusting."

"And you're bringing a strange woman into the family," she said, concern darkening her eyes.
"Oh, that. Don't worry about that. Mom has been after me for years to settle down. It wasn't an option I had before, but that's changed." He gave her a raffish grin. "I'd already decided to retire, anyway, so I could spend my time keeping you satisfied."
He certainly did that. Jay put her head on his shoulder, absorbing his warmth and nearness. His arms tightened. "I love you," he said steadily.
"I love you, Lucas Stone." She would never tire of saying it, and he would never tire of hearing it.
He stood up with her in his arms. "Let's go make a phone call. I want to talk to my folks and let them know they're getting a daughter-in-law."
They did make the phone call, but not right away. First he kissed her, and when he lifted his head the expression in his eyes had intensified. He carried her into the bedroom, and then the mirror on the wall reflected the true image of two people entwined as they loved each other.

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Chapter One

She found the paper while she was sorting through the personal things in her father's desk. Michelle Cabot unfolded the single sheet with casual curiosity, just as she had unfolded dozens of others, but she had

read only a paragraph when her spine slowly straightened and a tremor began in her fingers. Stunned, she began again, her eyes widening with sick horror at what she read.

Anybody but him. Dear God, anybody but him!

She owed John Rafferty one hundred thousand dollars.

Plus interest, of course. At what percent? She couldn't read any further to find out; instead she dropped the paper onto the littered surface of the desk and sank back in her father's battered old leather chair, her eyes closing against the nausea caused by shock, dread and the particularly sickening feeling of dying hope. She had already been on her knees; this unsuspected debt had smashed her flat.

Why did it have to be John Rafferty? Why not some impersonal bank? The end result would be the same, of course, but the humiliation would be absent. The thought of facing him made her shrivel deep inside, where she protected the tender part of herself. If Rafferty ever even suspected that that tenderness existed, she was lost. A dead duck…or a sitting one, if it made any difference. A gone goose. A cooked goose. Whatever simile she used, it fit.

Her hands were still shaking when she picked up the paper to read it again and work out the details of the

financial agreement. John Rafferty had made a personal loan of one hundred thousand dollars to her father, Langley Cabot, at an interest rate two percent lower than the market rate…and the loan had been due four months ago. She felt even sicker. She knew it hadn't been repaid, because she'd gone over every detail of her father's books in an effort to salvage something from the financial disaster he'd been floundering in when he'd died. She had ruthlessly liquidated almost everything to pay the outstanding debts, everything except this ranch, which had been her father's dream and had somehow come to represent a refuge to her. She hadn't liked Florida ten years ago, when her father had sold their home and moved her from their well-ordered, monied existence in Connecticut to the heat and humidity of a cattle ranch in central Florida, but that had been a decade ago, and things changed. People changed, time changed…and time changed people. The ranch didn't represent love or a dream to her; it was, simply, all she had left. Life had seemed so complicated once, but it was remarkable how simple things were when it came down to a matter of survival.

Even now it was hard to just give up and let the inevitable happen. She had known from the beginning that it would be almost impossible for her to keep the ranch and put it back on a paying basis, but she'd been driven to at

least *try*. She wouldn't have been able to live with herself if she'd taken the easy way out and let the ranch go.

Now she would have to sell the ranch after all, or at least the cattle; there was no other way she could repay that hundred thousand dollars. The wonder was that Rafferty hadn't already demanded repayment. But if she sold the cattle, what good was the ranch? She'd been depending on the cattle sales to keep her going, and without that income she'd have to sell the ranch anyway.

It was so hard to think of letting the ranch go; she had almost begun to hope that she might be able to hold on to it. She'd been afraid to hope, had tried not to, but still, that little glimmer of optimism had begun growing. Now she'd failed at this, just as she'd failed at everything else in her life: as daughter, wife, and now rancher. Even if Rafferty gave her an extension on the loan, something she didn't expect to happen, she had no real expectation of being able to pay it off when it came due again. The naked truth was that she had no expectations at all; she was merely hanging on.

Well, she wouldn't gain anything by putting it off. She had to talk to Rafferty, so it might as well be now. The clock on the wall said it wasn't quite nine-thirty; Rafferty would still be up. She looked up his

number and dialed it, and the usual reaction set in. Even before the first ring sounded, her fingers were locked so tightly around the receiver that her knuckles were white, and her heart had lurched into a fast, heavy pounding that made her feel as if she'd been running. Tension knotted her stomach. Oh, damn! She wouldn't even be able to talk coherently if she didn't get a grip on herself!

The telephone was answered on the sixth ring, and by then Michelle had braced herself for the ordeal of talking to him. When the housekeeper said, "Rafferty residence," Michelle's voice was perfectly cool and even when she asked to speak to Rafferty.

"I'm sorry, he isn't in. May I take a message?"

It was almost like a reprieve, if it hadn't been for the knowledge that now she'd have to do it all over again. "Please have him call Michelle Cabot," she said, and gave the housekeeper her number. Then she asked, "Do you expect him back soon?"

There was only a slight hesitation before the housekeeper said, "No, I think he'll be quite late, but I'll give him your message first thing in the morning."

"Thank you," Michelle murmured, and hung up. She should have expected him to be out. Rafferty was famous, or perhaps notorious was a better word, for his sexual appetite and escapades. If he'd quieted

down over the years, it was only in his hell-raising. According to the gossip she'd heard from time to time, his libido was alive and well; a look from those hard, dark eyes still made a woman's pulse go wild, and he looked at a lot of women, but Michelle wasn't one of them. Hostility had exploded between them at their first meeting, ten years before, and at best their relationship was an armed standoff. Her father had been a buffer between them, but now he was dead, and she expected the worst. Rafferty didn't do things by half measures.

There was nothing she could do about the loan that night, and she'd lost her taste for sorting through the remainder of her father's papers, so she decided to turn in. She took a quick shower; her sore muscles would have liked a longer one, but she was doing everything she could to keep her electricity bill down, and since she got her water from a well, and the water was pumped by an electric pump, small luxuries had to go to make way for the more important ones, like eating.

But as tired as she was, when she was lying in bed she couldn't go to sleep. The thought of talking to Rafferty filled her mind again, and once more her heartbeat speeded up. She tried to take deep, slow breaths. It had always been like this, and it was even

worse when she had to see him face to face. If only he wasn't so big! But he was six feet three inches and about two hundred pounds of muscled masculinity; he was good at dwarfing other people. Whenever he was close, Michelle felt threatened in some basic way, and even thinking of him made her feel suffocated. No other man in the world made her react the way he did; no one else could make her so angry, so wary—or so excited in a strange, primitive way.

It had been that way from the beginning, from the moment she'd met him ten years before. She had been eighteen then, as spoiled as he'd accused her of being, and as haughty as only a teenager standing on her dignity could be. His reputation had preceded him, and Michelle had been determined to show him that *she* couldn't be lumped with all the women who panted after him. As if he would have been interested in a teenager! she thought wryly, twisting on the bed in search of comfort. What a child she'd been! A silly, spoiled, frightened child.

Because John Rafferty *had* frightened her, even though he'd all but ignored her. Or rather, her own reaction had frightened her. He'd been twenty-six, a *man*, as opposed to the boys she was used to, and a man who had already turned a smallish central Florida cattle ranch into a growing, thriving empire by his own force of will and years of backbreaking work. Her first sight of him, towering over her father while the two men talked cattle, had scared her half to death. Even now she could recall her sudden breathlessness, as if she'd been punched in the stomach.

They'd been standing beside Rafferty's horse, and he'd had one arm draped across the saddle while his other hand was propped negligently on his hip. He'd been six feet and three inches of sheer power, all hard muscle and intensity, dominating even the big animal with his will. She'd already heard about him; men

laughed and called him a "stud" in admiring tones, and women called him the same thing, but always in excited, half-fearful whispers. A woman might be given the benefit of the doubt after going out with him once, but if she went out with him twice it was accepted that she had been to bed with him. At the time Michelle hadn't even considered that his reputation was probably exaggerated. Now that she was older, she still didn't consider it. There was just something about the way Rafferty looked that made a woman believe all the tales about him.

But even his reputation hadn't prepared her for the real man, for the force and energy that radiated from him. Life burned hotter and brighter in some people, and John Rafferty was one of them. He was a dark fire, dominating his surroundings with his height and powerful build, dominating people with his forceful, even ruthless, personality.

Michelle had sucked in her breath at the sight of him, the sun glinting off his coal-black hair, his dark eyes narrowed under prominent black brows, a neat black mustache shadowing the firm line of his upper lip. He'd been darkly tanned, as he always was from hours of working outside in all seasons; even as she'd watched, a trickle of sweat had run down his temple to curve over his high, bronzed cheekbone before

tacking down his cheek to finally drip off his square jaw. Patches of sweat had darkened his blue work shirt under his arms and on his chest and back. But even sweat and dirt couldn't detract from the aura of a powerful, intensely sexual male animal; perhaps they had even added to it. The hand on his hip had drawn her gaze downward to his hips and long legs, and the faded tight jeans had outlined his body so faithfully that her mouth had gone dry. Her heart had stopped beating for a moment, then lurched into a heavy rhythm that made her entire body throb. She'd been eighteen, too young to handle what she felt, too young to handle the man, and her own reaction had frightened her. Because of that, she'd been at her snooty best when she'd walked up to her father to be introduced.

They'd gotten off on the wrong foot and had been there ever since. She was probably the only woman in the world at odds with Rafferty, and she wasn't certain, even now, that she wanted it to be any different. Somehow she felt safer knowing that he disliked her; at least he wouldn't be turning that formidable charm of his on her. In that respect, hostility brought with it a certain amount of protection.

A shiver ran over her body as she lay in bed thinking about both him and what she'd admitted only to herself: she was no more immune to Rafferty than the legion of women who had already succumbed. She was safe only as long as he didn't realize how vulnerable she was to his potent masculinity. He would delight in taking advantage of his power over her, making her pay for all the cutting remarks she'd made to him over the years, and for all the other things he disliked about her. To protect herself, she had to hold him at bay with hostility; it was rather ironic that now she needed his goodwill in order to survive financially…

She had almost forgotten how to laugh except for the social sounds that passed for laughter but held no humor, or how to smile except for the false mask of cheerfulness that kept pity away, but in the darkness and privacy of her bedroom she felt a wry grin curving her mouth. If she had to depend on Rafferty's goodwill for survival, she might as well go out to the pasture, dig a hole and pull the dirt in over herself to save him the time and trouble.

The next morning she loitered around the house waiting for him to call for as long as she could, but she had chores to do, and the cattle wouldn't wait. Finally she gave up and trudged out to the barn, her

mind already absorbed with the hundred and one problems the ranch presented every day. She had several fields of hay that needed to be cut and baled, but she'd been forced to sell the tractor and hay baler; the only way she could get the hay cut would be to offer someone part of the hay if they'd do the cutting and baling for her. She backed the pickup truck into the barn and climbed into the hayloft, counting the bales she had left. The supply was dwindling; she'd have to do something soon.

There was no way she could lift the heavy bales, but she'd developed her own system for handling them. She had parked the truck just under the door to the hayloft, so all she had to do was push the bales to the open door and tip them through to land in the truck bed. Pushing the hay wasn't easy; they were supposed to be hundred-pound bales, which meant that she outweighed them by maybe seventeen pounds…if she hadn't lost weight, which she suspected she had, and if the bales weighed only a hundred pounds, which she suspected they didn't. Their weight varied, but some of them were so heavy she could barely move them an inch at a time.

She drove the truck across the pasture to where the cattle grazed; heads lifted, dark brown eyes surveyed the familiar truck, and the entire herd began ambling

toward her. Michelle stopped the truck and climbed in back. Tossing the bales out was impossible, so she cut the twine there in the back of the truck and loosened the hay with the pitchfork she had brought along, then pitched the hay out in big clumps. She got back in the truck, drove a piece down the pasture, and stopped to repeat the procedure. She did it until the back of the pickup was empty, and by the time she was finished her shoulders were aching so badly the muscles felt as if they were on fire. If the herd hadn't been badly diminished in numbers from what it had been, she couldn't have handled it. But if the herd were larger, she reminded herself, she'd be able to afford help. When she remembered the number of people who used to work on the ranch, the number needed to keep it going properly, a wave of hopelessness hit her. Logic told her there was no way she could do it all herself.

But what did logic have to do with cold reality? She had to do it herself because she had no one else. Sometimes she thought that was the one thing life seemed determined to teach her: that she could depend only on herself, that there was no one she could trust, no one she could rely on, no one strong enough to stand behind her and hold her up when she needed to rest. There had been times when she'd felt

a crushing sense of loneliness, especially since her father had died, but there was also a certain perverse comfort in knowing she could rely on no one but herself. She expected nothing of other people, therefore she wasn't disappointed by any failure on their part to live up to her expectations. She simply accepted facts as they were, without any pretty dressing up, did what she had to do, and went on from there. At least she was free now, and no longer dreaded waking up each day.

She trudged around the ranch doing the chores, putting her mind in neutral gear and simply letting her body go through the motions. It was easier that way; she could pay attention to her aches and bruises when all the chores were finished, but the best way to get them done was to ignore the protests of her muscles and the nicks and bruises she acquired. None of her old friends would ever have believed that Michelle Cabot was capable of turning her dainty hands to rough, physical chores. Sometimes it amused her to imagine what their reactions would be, another mind game that she played with herself to pass the time. Michelle Cabot had always been ready for a party, or shopping, or a trip to St. Moritz, or a cruise on someone's yacht. Michelle Cabot had always been laughing, making wisecracks with the best of them; she'd looked perfectly *right* with a glass of champagne in her hand and diamonds in her ears. The ultimate Golden Girl, that was her.

Well, the ultimate Golden Girl had cattle to feed, hay to cut, fences that needed repair, and that was only the tip of the iceberg. She needed to dip the cattle, but that was something else she hadn't figured out how to manage by herself. There was branding, castrating, breeding… When she allowed herself to think of everything that needed doing, she was swamped by

hopelessness, so she usually didn't dwell on it. She just took each day as it came, slogging along, doing what she could. It was survival, and she'd become good at it.
By ten o'clock that night, when Rafferty hadn't called, Michelle braced herself and called him again. Again the housekeeper answered; Michelle stifled a sigh, wondering if Rafferty ever spent a night at home. "This is Michelle Cabot. I'd like to speak to Rafferty, please. Is he home?"
"Yes, he's down at the barn. I'll switch your call to him."
So he had a telephone in the barn. For a moment she thought enviously of the operation he had as she listened to the clicks the receiver made in her ear. Thinking about his ranch took her mind off her suddenly galloping pulse and stifled breathing.
"Rafferty." His deep, impatient voice barked the word in her ear, and she jumped, her hand tightening on the receiver as her eyes closed.
"This is Michelle Cabot." She kept her tone as remote as possible as she identified herself. "I'd like to talk to,you, if you have the time."
"Right now I'm damned short of time. I've got a mare in foal, so spit it out and make it fast."

"It'll take more time than that. I'd like to make an appointment, then. Would it be convenient for me to come over tomorrow morning?"
He laughed, a short, humorless bark. "This is a working ranch, sugar, not a social event. I don't have time for you tomorrow morning. Time's up."
"Then when?"
He muttered an impatient curse. "Look, I don't have time for you *now*. I'll drop by tomorrow afternoon on my way to town. About six." He hung up before she could agree or disagree, but as she hung up, too, she thought ruefully that he was calling the shots, so it didn't really matter if she liked the time or not. At least she had the telephone call behind her now, and there were almost twenty hours in which to brace herself for actually seeing him. She would stop work tomorrow in time to shower and wash her hair, and she'd do the whole routine with makeup and perfume, wear her white linen trousers and white silk shirt. Looking at her, Rafferty would never suspect that she was anything other than what he'd always thought her to be, pampered and useless.
It was late in the afternoon, the broiling sun had pushed the temperature to a hundred degrees, and the cattle were skittish. Rafferty was hot, sweaty, dusty and ill-tempered, and so were his men. They'd spent too much time chasing after strays instead of getting the branding and inoculating done, and now the deep, threatening rumble of thunder signaled a summer thunderstorm. The men speeded up their work, wanting to get finished before the storm hit.
Dust rose in the air as the anxious bawling increased in volume and the stench of burning hide intensified. Rafferty worked with the men, not disdaining any of the dirty jobs. It was *his* ranch, his life. Ranching was hard, dirty work, but he'd made it profitable when others had gone under, and he'd done it with his own sweat and steely determination. His mother had left rather than tolerate the life; of course, the ranch had been much smaller back then, not like the empire he'd built. His father, and the ranch, hadn't been able to support her in the style she'd wanted. Rafferty sometimes got a grim satisfaction from the knowledge that now his mother

regretted having been so hasty to desert her husband and son so long ago. He didn't hate her; he didn't waste that much effort on her. He just didn't have much use for her, or for any of the rich, spoiled, bored, *useless* people she considered her friends.

Nev Luther straightened from the last calf, wiping his sweaty face on his shirt sleeve, then glancing at the sun and the soaring black cloud bank of the approaching storm. "Well, that's it," he grunted. "We'd better get loaded up before that thing hits." Then he glanced at his boss. "Ain't you supposed to see that Cabot gal today?"

Nev had been in the barn with Rafferty when he'd talked to Michelle, so he'd overheard the conversation. After a quick look at his watch, Rafferty swore aloud. He'd forgotten about her, and he wasn't grateful to Nev for reminding him. There were few people walking the earth who irritated him as much as Michelle Cabot.

"Damn it, I guess I'd better go," he said reluctantly. He knew what she wanted. It had surprised him that she had called at all, rather than continuing to ignore the debt. She was probably going to whine about how little money she had left and tell him that she couldn't *possibly* scrape up that amount. Just thinking about her made him want to grab her and shake her, hard. Or better yet, take a belt to her backside. She was exactly what he disliked most: a spoiled, selfish parasite who'd never done a day's work in her life. Her father had bankrupted himself paying for her pleasure jaunts, but Langley Cabot had always been a bit of a fool where his beloved only child had been concerned. Nothing had been too good for darling little Michelle, nothing at all.

Too bad that darling Michelle was a spoiled brat. Damn, she irritated him! She'd irritated him from the first moment he'd seen her, prissing up to where her father had stood talking to him, with her haughty nose in the air as if she'd smelled something bad. Well, maybe she had. Sweat, the product of physical work, was an alien odor to her. She'd looked at him the way she would have looked at a worm, then dismissed him as unimportant and turned her back to him while she coaxed and wheedled something out of her father with that charming Golden Girl act of hers.

"Say, boss, if you don't want to see that fancy little thing, I'd be happy to fill in for you," Nev offered, grinning.

"It's tempting," Rafferty said sourly, checking his watch again. He could go home and clean up, but it would make him late. He wasn't that far from the

Cabot ranch now, and he wasn't in the mood to drive all the way back to his house, shower, and then make the drive again just so he wouldn't offend her dainty nose. She could put up with him as he was, dirt, sweat and all; after all, she was the one begging for favors. The mood he was in, he just might call in that debt, knowing good and well she couldn't pay it. He wondered with sardonic amusement if she would offer to pay it in another way. It would serve her right if he played along; it would make her squirm with distaste to think of letting him have her pampered body. After all, he was rough and dirty and worked for a living.

As he strode over to his truck and slid his long length under the steering wheel, he couldn't keep the image from forming in his mind: the image of Michelle Cabot lying beneath him, her slim body naked, her pale gold hair spread out over his pillow as he moved in and out of her. He felt his loins become heavy and full in response to the provocative image, and he swore under his breath. Damn her, and damn himself. He'd spent years watching her, brooding, wanting her and at the same time wanting to teach her in whatever way it took not to be such a spoiled, selfish snob.

Other people hadn't seen her that way; she could be charming when she chose, and she'd chosen to work that charm on the local people, maybe just to amuse herself with their gullibility. The ranchers and farmers in the area were a friendly group, rewarding themselves for their endless hard work with informal get-togethers, parties and barbecues almost every weekend, and Michelle had had them all eating out of her hand. They didn't see the side of her that she'd revealed to him; she was always laughing, dancing… but never with him. She would dance with every other man there, but never with him. He'd watched her, all right, and because he was a healthy male with a healthy libido he hadn't been able to stop himself from responding physically to her lithe, curved body and sparkling smile, even though it made him angry that he responded to her in any way. He didn't want to want her, but just looking at her made him hungry.

Other men had watched her with hungry eyes, too, including Mike Webster. Rafferty didn't think he'd ever forgive her for what she'd done to Mike, whose marriage had been shaky even before Michelle had burst onto the scene with her flirtatious manner and sparkling laughter. Mike hadn't been any match for her; he'd fallen hard and fast, and the Webster marriage had splintered beyond repair. Then Michelle had flitted on to fresher prey, and Mike had been left with nothing but a ruined life. The young rancher had

lost everything he'd worked for, forced to sell his ranch because of the divorce settlement. He was just one more man Michelle had ruined with her selfishness, as she'd ruined her father. Even when Langley was deep in financial trouble he'd kept providing money for Michelle's expensive life-style. Her father had been going under, but she'd still insisted on buying her silks and jewels, and skiing vacations in St. Moritz. It would take a rich man to afford Michelle Cabot, and a strong one.

The thought of being the one who provided her with those things, and the one who had certain rights over her because of it, teased his mind with disturbing persistence. No matter how angry, irritated or disgusted he felt toward her, he couldn't control his physical response to her. There was something about her that made him want to reach out and take her. She looked, sounded and smelled expensive; he wanted to know if she tasted expensive, too, if her skin was as silky as it looked. He wanted to bury his hands in her sunlit hair, taste her wide, soft mouth, and trace his fingertips across the chiseled perfection of her cheekbones, inhale the gut-tightening fragrance of her skin. He'd smelled her the day they'd first met, the perfume in her hair and on her skin, and the sweetness of her flesh beneath it. She was expensive all right, too expensive for Mike Webster, and for the poor sap she'd married and then left, certainly too expensive for her father.

Rafferty wanted to lose himself in all that richness. It was a pure, primitive male instinct, the reaction of the male to a ready female. Maybe Michelle was a tease, but she gave out all the right signals to bring the men running, like bees to the sweetest flower.

Right now Michelle was between supporters, but he knew it wouldn't be long before she had another man lined up. Why shouldn't he be that man? He was tired of wanting her and watching her turn her snooty little nose up at him. She wouldn't be able to wrap him around her finger as she was used to doing, but that would be the price she had to pay for her expensive tastes.

Rafferty narrowed his eyes against the rain that began to splat against the windshield, thinking about the satisfaction of having Michelle dependent on him for everything she ate and wore. It was a hard, primitive satisfaction. He would use her to satisfy his burning physical hunger for her, but he wouldn't let her get close enough to cloud his mind and judgment.

He'd never paid for a woman before, never been a sugar daddy, but if that was what it took to get Michelle Cabot, he'd do it. He'd never wanted another woman the way he wanted her, so he guessed it evened out.

The threatening storm suddenly broke, sending a sheet of rain sluicing down the windshield to obscure his vision despite the wipers' best efforts. Gusts of wind shoved at the truck, making him fight to hold it steady on the road. Visibility was so bad that he almost missed the turn to the Cabot ranch even though he knew these roads as well as he knew his own face.

His features were dark with ill-temper when he drove up to the Cabot house, and his disgust increased as he looked around. Even through the rain, he could tell the place had gone to hell. The yard was full of weeds, the barn and stables had the forlorn look of emptiness and neglect, and the pastures that had once been dotted with prime Brahman cattle were empty now. The little society queen's kingdom had dissolved around her.

Though he'd pulled the truck up close to the house, it was raining so hard that he was drenched to the skin by the time he sprinted to the porch. He slapped his straw hat against his leg to get most of the water off it, but didn't replace it on his head. He raised his hand to knock, but the door opened before he had a chance. Michelle stood there looking at him with the familiar disdain in her cool, green eyes. She hesitated for just a moment, as if reluctant to let him drip water on the carpet; then she pushed the screen door open and said, "Come in." He imagined it ate at her guts to have to be nice to him because she owed him a hundred thousand dollars.

He walked past her, noting the way she moved back so he wouldn't brush against her. Just wait, he thought savagely. Soon he'd do more than just *brush* against her, and he'd make damned certain she liked it. She might turn her nose up at him now, but things would be different when she was naked under him, her legs wrapped around his waist while she writhed in ecstasy. He didn't just want the use of her body; he wanted her to want him in return, to feel as hungry and obsessed as he did. It would be poetic justice, after all the men she'd used. He almost wanted her to say something snide, so he'd have a reason to put his hands on her, even in anger. He wanted to touch her, no matter what the reason; he wanted to feel her warm and soft in his hands; he wanted to make her respond to him.

But she didn't cut at him with her tongue as she usually did. Instead she said, "Let's go into Dad's office," and led the way down the hall with her perfume drifting behind her to tease him. She looked

untouchable in crisp white slacks and a white silk shirt that flowed lovingly over her curvy form, but he itched to touch her anyway. Her sunny pale-gold hair was pulled back and held at the nape of her neck with a wide gold clip.

Her fastidious perfection was in direct contrast to his own rough appearance, and he wondered what she'd do if he touched her, if he pulled her against him and got her silk shirt wet and stained. He was dirty and sweaty and smelled of cattle and horses, and now he was wet into the bargain; no, there was no way she'd accept his touch.

"Please sit down," she said, waving her hand at one of the leather chairs in the office. "I imagine you know why I called."

His expression became even more sardonic. "I imagine I do."

"I found the loan paper when I was going through Daddy's desk the night before last. I don't want you to think that I'm trying to weasel out of paying it, but I don't have the money right now—"

"Don't waste my time," he advised, interrupting.

She stared up at him. He hadn't taken the chair she'd offered; he was standing too close, towering over her, and the look in his black eyes made her shiver.

"What?"

"This song and dance; don't waste my time doing the whole bit. I know what you're going to offer, and I'm willing. I've been wanting to get in your pants for a long time, honey; just don't make the mistake of thinking a few quickies will make us even, because they won't. I believe in getting my money's worth."

Chapter Two

Shock froze her in place and leeched the color from her upturned face until it was as pale as ivory. She felt disoriented; for a moment his words refused to make sense, rotating in her mind like so many unconnected pieces of a puzzle. He was looming over her, his height and muscularity making her feel as insignificant as always, while the heat and scent of his body overwhelmed her senses, confusing her. He was too close! Then the words realigned themselves, and their meaning slapped her in the face. Panic and fury took the place of shock. Without thinking she drew back from him and snapped, "You must be joking!"

It was the wrong thing to say. She knew it as soon as she'd said it. Now wasn't the time to insult him, not

when she needed his cooperation if she wanted to have a prayer of keeping the ranch going, but both pride and habit made her lash back at him. She could feel her stomach tighten even as she lifted her chin to give him a haughty stare, waiting for the reaction that was sure to come after the inadvertent challenge she'd thrown in his teeth. It wasn't safe to challenge Rafferty at all, and now she'd done it in the most elemental way possible.

His face was hard and still, his eyes narrowed and burning as he watched her. Michelle could feel the iron control he exerted to keep himself from moving. "Do I look like I'm joking?" he asked in a soft, dangerous tone. "You've always had some poor sucker supporting you; why shouldn't it be my turn? You can't lead me around by the nose the way you have every other man, but the way I see it, you can't afford to be too choosy right now."

"What would *you* know about being choosy?" She went even whiter, retreating from him a few more steps; she could almost feel his impact on her skin, and he hadn't even moved. He'd had so many women that she didn't even want to think about it, because thinking about it made her hurt deep inside. Had those other women felt this helpless, this overwhelmed by his heat and sexuality? She couldn't control her inborn instincts and responses; she had always sensed her own weakness where he was concerned, and that was what frightened her, what had kept her fighting him all these years. She simply couldn't face being used by him as casually as a stallion would service a mare; it would mean too much to her, and too little to him.

"Don't pull away from me," he said, his voice going even softer, deeper, stroking her senses like dark velvet. It was the voice he would use in the night, she thought dazedly, her mind filled with the image of him covering a woman with his lean, powerful body while he murmured rawly sexual things in her ear. John wouldn't be a subtle lover; he would be strong and elemental, overwhelming a woman's senses. Wildly she blanked the image from her mind, turning her head away so she couldn't see him.

Rage lashed at him when she turned away as if she couldn't bear the sight of him; she couldn't have made it any plainer that she couldn't bear the idea of sleeping with him, either. With three long strides he circled the desk and caught her upper arms in his lean, sinewy hands, pulling her hard against him. Even in his fury he realized that this was the first time he'd touched her, felt her softness and the fragility of her bones. His hands completely encircled her arms, and his fingers wanted to linger, to stroke. Hunger rose again, pushing aside some of the anger.

"Don't turn your nose up at me like some Ice Princess," he ordered roughly. "Your little kingdom has gone to hell, honey, in case you haven't noticed. Those fancy playmates of yours don't know you from

Adam's house-cat now that you can't afford to play. They sure haven't offered to help, have they?"
Michelle pushed against his chest, but it was like trying to move a wall. "I haven't asked them to help!" she cried, goaded. "I haven't asked anyone for help, least of all *you!"*
"Why not me?" He shook her lightly, his eyes narrowed and fierce. "I can afford you, honey."
"I'm not for sale!" She tried to pull back, but the effort was useless; though he wasn't holding her tightly enough to hurt, she was helpless against his steely strength.
"I'm not interested in buying," he murmured as he dipped his head. "Only in renting you for a while." Michelle made an inarticulate sound of protest and tried to turn her head away, but he simply closed his fist in her hair and held her still for his mouth. Just for a moment she saw his black eyes, burning with hunger, then his mouth was on hers, and she quivered in his arms like a frightened animal. Her eyelashes fluttered shut and she sank against him. For years she'd wondered about his mouth, his taste, if his lips would be firm or soft, if his mustache would scratch. Pleasure exploded in her like a fireball, flooding her with heat. Now she knew. Now she knew the warm, heady taste of his mouth, the firm fullness of his lips, the soft prickle of his mustache, the sure way his tongue moved into her mouth as if it were his right to be so intimate. Somehow her arms were around his shoulders, her nails digging through the wet fabric of his shirt to the hard muscle beneath. Somehow she was arched against him, his arms locked tight as he held her and took her mouth so deeply, over and over again. She didn't feel the moisture from his clothing seeping into hers; she felt only his heat and hardness, and dimly she knew that if she didn't stop soon, *he* wouldn't stop at all.
She didn't want to stop. Already she was coming apart inside, because she wanted nothing more than to simply lie against him and feel his hands on her. She'd known it would be like this, and she'd known she couldn't let it happen, couldn't let him get close to her. The feeling was so powerful that it frightened her. *He* frightened her. He would demand too much from her,

take so much that there wouldn't be anything left when he moved on. She'd always known instinctively that she couldn't handle him.

It took every bit of inner strength she had to turn her face away from his mouth, to put her hands on his shoulders and push. She knew she wasn't strong enough to move him; when he released her and moved back a scant few inches, she was bitterly aware that it was by his own choice, not hers. He was watching her, waiting for her decision.

Silence filled the room with a thick presence as she struggled to regain her composure under his unwavering gaze. She could feel the situation slipping out of control. For ten years she had carefully cultivated the hostility between them, terrified of letting him discover that just looking at him turned her bones to water. She'd seen too many of his women with stars in their eyes while he gave them his attention, focusing his intense sexual instincts on them, but all too soon he'd moved on to someone else, and the stars had always turned into hunger and pain and emptiness. Now he was looking at her with that penetrating attention, just what she'd always tried to avoid. She hadn't wanted him to notice her as a woman; she hadn't wanted to join the ranks of all those other women he'd used and left. She had enough trouble now, without adding a

broken heart, and John Rafferty was a walking heartache. Her back was already to the wall; she couldn't bear anything else, either emotionally or financially.

But his gaze burned her with black fire, sliding slowly over her body as if measuring her breasts for the way they would fit his hands, her hips for the way his would adjust against them, her legs for the way they would wrap around him in the throes of pleasure. He'd never looked at her in that way before, and it shook her down to her marrow. Pure sexual speculation was in his eyes. In his mind he was already inside her, tasting her, feeling her, giving her pleasure. It was a look few women could resist, one of unashamed sexuality, carnal experience and an arrogant confidence that a woman would be ultimately satisfied in his arms. He wanted her; he intended to have her.

And she couldn't let it happen. She'd been wrapped in a silken prison her entire life, stifled first by her father's idealistic adoration, then by Roger Beckman's obsessive jealousy. For the first time in her life she was alone, responsible for herself and finding some sense of worth in the responsibility. Fail or succeed, she needed to do this herself, not run to some man for help. She looked at John with a blank expression; he

wanted her, but he didn't like or even respect her, and she wouldn't like or respect herself if she let herself become the parasite he expected her to be.
Slowly, as if her muscles ached, she eased away from him and sat down at the desk, tilting her golden head down so he couldn't see her face. Again, pride and habit came to her aid; her voice was calm and cool when she spoke. "As I said, I don't have the money to repay you right now, and I realize the debt is already delinquent. The solution depends on you—"
"I've already made my offer," he interrupted, his eyes narrowing at her coolness. He hitched one hip up on the desk beside her, his muscled thigh brushing against her arm. Michelle swallowed to alleviate the sudden dryness of her mouth, trying not to look at those powerful, denim-covered muscles. Then he leaned down, propping his bronzed forearm on his thigh, and that was worse, because it brought his torso closer, forcing her to lean back in the chair. "All you have to do is go ahead and accept it, instead of wasting time pretending you didn't like it when I touched you."
Michelle continued doggedly. "If you want repayment immediately, I'll have to sell the cattle to raise the money, and I'd like to avoid that. I'm counting on the sale of the cattle to keep the ranch

going. What I have in mind is to sell some of the land to raise the money, but of course that will take longer. I can't even promise to have the money in six months; it just depends on how fast I can find a buyer." She held her breath, waiting for his response. Selling part of the land was the only plan she'd been able to devise, but it all depended on his cooperation.
Slowly he straightened, his dark brows drawing together as he stared down at her. "Whoa, honey, let's backtrack a little. What do you mean, 'keep the ranch going'? The ranch is already dead."
"No, it isn't," she denied, stubbornness creeping into her tone. "I still have some cattle left."
"Where?" His disbelief was evident.
"In the south pasture. The fence on the east side needs repair, and I haven't—" She faltered at the growing anger in his dark face. Why should it matter to him? Their land joined mostly on the north; his cattle weren't in any danger of straying.
"Let's backtrack a little further," he said tightly. "Who's supposed to be working this herd?"
So that was it. He didn't believe her, because he knew there were no cowhands working here any longer.
"I'm working the herd," she threw back at him, her face closed and proud. He couldn't have made it any

plainer that he didn't consider her either capable or willing when it came to ranch work.
He looked her up and down, his brows lifting as he surveyed her. She knew exactly what he saw, because she'd deliberately created the image. He saw mauve-lacquered toenails, white high-heeled sandals, crisp white linen pants and the white silk shirt, damp now, from contact with his wet clothes. Suddenly Michelle realized that she was damp all along the front, and hectic color rose to burn along her cheekbones, but she lifted her chin just that much higher. Let him look, damn him.
"Nice," he drawled. "Let me see your hands."
Instinctively her hands curled into fists and she glared at him. "Why?"
He moved like a striking rattler, catching her wrist and holding her clenched hand in front of him. She pulled back, twisting in an effort to escape him, but he merely tightened his grip and pried her fingers open, then turned her palm to the light. His face was still and expressionless as he looked down at her hand for a long minute; then he caught her other hand and examined it, too. His grip gentled, and he traced his fingertips over the scratches and half-healed blisters, the forming calluses.

Michelle sat with her lips pressed together in a grim line, her face deliberately blank. She wasn't ashamed of her hands; work inevitably left its mark on human flesh, and she'd found something healing in the hard physical demands the ranch made on her. But no matter how honorable those marks, when John looked at them it was as if he'd stripped her naked and looked at her, as if he'd exposed something private. She didn't want him to know so much about her; she didn't want that intense interest turned on her. She didn't want pity from anyone, but she especially didn't want him to soften toward her.
Then his gaze lifted, those midnight eyes examining every inch of her proud, closed expression, and every instinct in her shrilled an alarm. Too late! Perhaps it had been too late from the moment he'd stepped onto the porch. From the beginning she'd sensed the tension in him, the barely controlled anticipation that she had mistaken for his usual hostility. Rafferty wasn't used to waiting for any woman he wanted, and she'd held him off for ten years. The only time she'd been truly safe from him had been during her brief marriage, when the distance between Philadelphia and central Florida had been more than hundreds of miles; it had been the distance between two totally different life-styles, in both form and substance. But

now she was back within reach, and this time she was vulnerable. She was broke, she was alone, and she owed him a hundred thousand dollars. He probably expected it to be easy.

"You didn't have to do it alone," he finally said, his deep voice somehow deeper and quieter. He still held her hands, and his rough thumbs still moved gently, caressingly, over her palms, as he stood and drew her to her feet. She realized that at no time had he hurt her; he'd held her against her will, but he hadn't hurt her. His touch was gentle, but she knew without even trying that she wouldn't be able to pull away from him until he voluntarily let her go.

Her only defense was still the light mockery she'd used against him from the beginning. She gave him a bright, careless smile. "Of course I did. As you so charmingly pointed out, I'm not exactly being trampled by all my friends rushing to my rescue, am I?"

His upper lip curled with contempt for those "friends." He'd never had any patience with the bored and idle rich. "You could've come to me."

Again she gave him that smile, knowing he hated it. "But it would take so *long* to work off a hundred-thousand-dollar debt in that fashion, wouldn't it? You know how I hate being bored. A really good prostitute makes—what? —a hundred dollars a throw? Even if you were up to three times a day, it would still take about a year—"

Swift, dark fury burned in his eyes, and he finally released her hands, but only to move his grip to her shoulders. He held her still while he raked his gaze down her body again. "Three times a day?" he asked with that deceptive softness, looking at her breasts and hips. "Yeah, I'm up to it. But you forgot about interest, honey. I charge a lot of interest."

She quivered in his hands, wanting to close her eyes against that look. She'd taunted him rashly, and he'd turned her words back on her. Yes, he was capable of it. His sexual drive was so fierce that he practically burned with it, attracting women like helpless moths. Desperately she dredged up the control to keep smiling, and managed a little shrug despite his hands on her shoulders. "Thanks anyway, but I prefer shoveling manure."

If he'd lost control of his temper then she would have breathed easier, knowing that she still had the upper hand, by however slim a margin. If she could push him away with insults, she'd be safe. But though his hands tightened a little on her shoulders, he kept a tight rein on his temper.

"Don't push too hard, honey," he advised quietly. "It wouldn't take much for me to show you right now what you really like. You'd be better off telling me

just how in hell you think you're going to keep this ranch alive by yourself."
For a moment her eyes were clear and bottomless, filled with a desperation he wasn't quite certain he'd seen. Her skin was tight over her chiseled cheekbones; then the familiar cool mockery and defiance were back, her eyes mossy and opaque, her lips curling a little in the way that made him want to shake her. "The ranch is my problem," she said, dismissing the offer of aid implicit in his words. She knew the price he'd demand for his help. "The only way it concerns you is in how you want the debt repaid."
Finally he released her shoulders and propped himself against the desk again, stretching his long legs and crossing his booted feet at the ankle. "A hundred thousand is a lot of money. It wasn't easy to come up with that much cash."
She didn't need to be told that. John might be a millionaire in assets, but a rancher's money is tied up in land and stock, with the profits constantly being plowed back into the ranch. Cash simply wasn't available for wasting on frivolities. Her jaw tightened. "When do you want your money?" she demanded. "Now or later?"

His dark brows lifted. "Considering the circumstances, you should be trying to sweeten me up instead of snapping at me. Why haven't you just put the ranch and cattle up for sale? You can't run the place anyway, and at least then you'd have money to live on until you find another meal ticket."

"I *can* run it," she flared, turning pale. She had to; it was all she had.

"No way, honey."

"*Don't call me honey*!" The ragged fury of her own voice startled her. He called every woman "honey." It was a careless endearment that meant nothing, because so many other women had heard it from him. She couldn't stand to think of him lying in the dark with another woman, his voice lazy and dark as they talked and he called her "honey."

He caught her chin in his big, rough hand, turning her face up to his while his thumb rubbed over her lower lip. "I'll call you whatever I want…*honey*, and you'll keep your mouth shut, because you owe me a lot of money that you can't repay. I'm going to think awhile about that debt and what we're going to do about it. Until I decide, why don't you think about this?"

Too late she tried to draw her head back, but he still held her chin, and his warm mouth settled over hers before she could jerk free. Her eyes closed as she tried to ignore the surge of pleasure in her mid-section, tried to ignore the way his lips moved over hers and his tongue probed for entrance. If anything, this was worse than before, because now he was kissing her with a slow assurance that beguiled even as he demanded. She tried to turn her head away, but he forestalled the movement, spreading his legs and pulling her inside the cradle of his iron-muscled

thighs. Michelle began shaking. Her hands flattened against his chest, but she could feel his heartbeat pulsing strongly against her palm, feel the accelerated rhythm of it, and she wanted to sink herself into him. Slowly he wedged her head back against his shoulder, his fingers woven into her hair as he held her. There was no way she could turn her head away from him now, and slowly she began to give way to his will. Her mouth opened beneath his, accepting the slow thrust of his tongue as he penetrated her in that small way and filled her with his taste.

He kissed her with shattering absorption, as if he couldn't get enough of her. Even the dim thought that he must have practised his technique with hundreds of women didn't lessen its power. She was utterly wrapped around by him, overwhelmed by his touch and scent and taste, her body tingling and aching with both pleasure and the need to have more of him. She wanted him; she'd always wanted him. He'd been an obsession with her from the moment she had seen him, and she'd spent most of the past ten years running from the power of that obsession, only to wind up practically at his mercy anyway—if he had any mercy.

He lifted his head in slow motion, his dark eyes heavy lidded, his mouth moist from kissing her.

Blatant satisfaction was written across his hard face as he surveyed her. She was lying limply against him, her face dazed with pure want, her lips red and swollen. Very gently he put her away from him, holding her with his hands on her waist until she was steady on her feet; then he got to his own feet.
As always when he towered over her, Michelle automatically retreated a step. Frantically she searched for control, for something to say to him to deny the response she'd just given him, but what could she say that he'd believe? She couldn't have been more obvious! But then, neither could he. It was useless to try to regain lost ground, and she wasn't going to waste time trying. All she could do was try to put a halt to things now.
Her face was pale as she faced him, her hands twisted together in a tight knot. "I won't sleep with you to pay that debt, no matter what you decide. Did you come here tonight expecting to whisk me straight up to bed, assuming that I'd choose to turn whore for you?"
He eyed her sharply. "The thought crossed my mind. I was willing."
"Well, I'm not!" Breath rushed swiftly in and out of her lungs as she tried to control the outrage that

burned in her at the insult. She had to control it; she couldn't afford to fall apart now.
"I'm glad, because I've changed my mind," he said lazily.
"Gosh, that's big of you!" she snapped.
"You'll go to bed with me, all right, but it won't be because of any money you owe me. When the time comes, you'll spread your legs for me because you want me just the way I want you."
The way he was looking at her made her shiver, and the image his rough words provoked shot through her brain like lightning. He would use her up and toss her away, just as he had all those other women, if she let him get too close to her. "Thanks, but no thanks. I've never gone in for group sex, and that's what it would be like with you!"
She wanted to make him angry, but instead he cupped her knotted-up hands in his palm and lightly rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "Don't worry, I can guarantee there'll just be the two of us between the sheets. Settle down and get used to the idea. I'll be back out tomorrow to look over the ranch and see what needs to be done—"
"No," she interrupted fiercely, jerking her hands from his grip. "The ranch is mine. I can handle it on my own."

"Honey, you've never even handled a checkbook on your own. Don't worry about it; I'll take care of everything."
His amused dismissal set her teeth on edge, more because of her own fear that he was right than anything else. "I don't want you to take care of everything!"
"You don't know what you want," he replied, leaning down to kiss her briefly on the mouth. "I'll see you tomorrow."
Just like that he turned and walked out of the room, and after a moment Michelle realized he was leaving. She ran after him and reached the front door in time to see him sprinting through the downpour to his truck.
He didn't take her seriously. Well, why should he? Michelle thought bitterly. No one else ever had, either. She leaned on the doorframe and watched him drive away; her shaky legs needed the extra support. Why now? For years she'd kept him at a distance with her carefully manufactured hostility, but all of a sudden her protective barrier had shattered. Like a predator, he'd sensed her vulnerability and moved in for the kill.
Quietly she closed the door, shutting out the sound of rain. The silent house enclosed her, an empty

reminder of the shambles of her life.
Her jaw clenched as she ground her teeth together, but she didn't cry. Her eyes remained dry. She couldn't afford to waste her time or strength indulging in useless tears. Somehow she had to hold on to the ranch, repay that debt, and hold off John Rafferty…
The last would be the hardest of all, because she'd be fighting against herself. She didn't want to hold him off; she wanted to creep into his iron-muscled arms and feel them close around her. She wanted to feed her hunger for him, touch him as she'd never allowed herself to do, immerse herself in the man. Guilt arose in her throat, almost choking her. She'd married another man wanting John, loving John, *obsessed* with John; somehow Roger, her ex-husband, had sensed it, and his jealousy had turned their marriage into a nightmare.
Her mind burned with the memories, and to distract herself she walked briskly into the kitchen and prepared dinner for one; in this case, a bowl of cornflakes in milk. It was also what she'd had for breakfast, but her nerves were too raw to permit any serious cooking. She was actually able to eat half of the bowlful of cereal before she suddenly dropped the spoon and buried her face in her hands.
All her life she'd been a princess, the darling, pampered apple of her parents' eyes, born to them when they were both nearing forty and had given up hope of ever having children. Her mother had been a gentle, vague person who had passed straight from

her father's keeping into that of her husband, and thought that a woman's role in life was to provide a comfortable, loving home for her husband, who supported her. It wasn't an unusual outlook for her generation, and Michelle didn't fault her mother for it. Langley Cabot had protected and spoiled both his wife and his daughter; that was the way life was supposed to be, and it was a source of pride to him that he supported them very well indeed. When her mother died, Michelle had become the recipient of all that protective devotion. Langley had wanted her to have the best of everything; he had wanted her to be happy, and to his way of thinking he had failed as a father and provider if she weren't.

In those days Michelle had been content to let her father shower her with gifts and luxuries. Her life had been humming along just as she had always expected, until the day Langley had turned her world upside down by selling the Connecticut house where she'd grown up, and moved her down to a cattle ranch in central Florida, not far from the Gulf coast. For the first time in her life, Langley had been unmoved by her pleas. The cattle ranch was his dream come true, the answer to some deeply buried need in him that had been hidden under silk shirts, pin-striped suits and business appointments. Because

he'd wanted it so badly, he had ignored Michelle's tears and tantrums and jovially assured her that before long she'd have new friends and would love the ranch as much as he did.

In that, he was partially right. She made new friends, gradually became accustomed to the heat, and even enjoyed life on a working cattle ranch. Langley had completely remodeled the old ranch house when he'd bought it, to ensure that his beloved daughter wasn't deprived in any way of the comfort she was accustomed to. So she'd adjusted, and even gone out of her way to assure him of her contentment. He deserved his dream, and she had felt ashamed that she'd tried to talk him out of it. He did so much to make her happy, the least she could do was return as much of the effort as she could.

Then she'd met John Rafferty. She couldn't believe that she'd spent ten years running from him, but it was true. She'd hated him and feared him and loved him all at once, with a teenager's wildly passionate obsession, but she had always seen one thing very clearly: he was more than she could handle. She had never daydreamed of being the one woman who could tame the rake; she was far too vulnerable to him, and he was too strong. He might take her and use her, but she wasn't woman enough to hold him.

She was spoiled and pampered; he didn't even like her. In self-defense, she had devoted herself to making him dislike her even more to make certain he never made a move on her.

She had gone to an exclusive women's college back east, and after graduation had spent a couple of weeks with a friend who lived in Philadelphia. During that visit she'd met Roger Beckman, scion of one of the oldest and richest families in town. He was tall and black haired, and he even had a trim mustache. His resemblance to John was slight, except for those points, and Michelle couldn't say that she had consciously married Roger because he reminded her of John, but she was very much afraid that subconsciously she had done exactly that.

Roger was a lot of fun. He had a lazy manner about him, his eyes wrinkled at the edges from smiling so much, and he loved organized crazy games, like scavenger hunts. In his company Michelle could forget about John and simply have fun. She was genuinely fond of Roger, and came to love him as much as she would ever love any man who wasn't John Rafferty. The best thing she could do was forget about John, put him behind her, and get on with her life. After all, there had never been anything between them except her own fantasies, and Roger absolutely

adored her. So she had married him, to the delight of both her father and his parents.
It was a mistake that had almost cost her her life.
At first everything had been fine. Then Roger had begun to show signs of jealousy whenever Michelle was friendly to another man. Had he sensed that she didn't love him as she should? That he owned only the most superficial part of her heart? Guilt ate at her even now, because Roger's jealousy hadn't been groundless. He hadn't been able to find the true target, so he'd lashed out whenever she smiled at any man, danced with any man.
The scenes had gotten worse, and one night he'd actually slapped her during a screaming fight after a party; she'd made the mistake of speaking to the same man twice while they raided the buffet table.
Shocked, her face burning, Michelle had stared at her husband's twisted features and realized that his jealousy had driven him out of control. For the first time, she was afraid of him.
His action had shocked Roger, too, and he'd buried his face in her lap, clinging to her as he wept and begged her forgiveness. He'd sworn never to hurt her again; he'd said he would rather cut off his own hands than hurt her. Shaken to the core, Michelle did what

thousands of women did when their husbands turned on them: she forgave him.

But it wasn't the last time. Instead, it got worse. Michelle had been too ashamed and shocked to tell anyone, but finally she couldn't take any more and pressed charges against him. To her horror, his parents quietly bought off everyone involved, and Michelle was left without a legal leg to stand on, all evidence destroyed. Come hell or high water, the Beckmans would protect their son.

Finally she tried to leave him, but she had gotten no further than Baltimore before he caught up with her, his face livid with rage. It was then that Michelle realized he wasn't quite sane; his jealousy had pushed him over the edge. Holding her arm in a grip that left bruises for two weeks, he made the threat that kept her with him for the next two years: if she left him again, he'd have her father killed.

She hadn't doubted him, nor did she doubt that he'd get away with it; he was too well protected by his family's money and prestige, by a network of old family friends in the law business. So she'd stayed, terrified that he might kill her in one of his rages, but not daring to leave. No matter what, she had to protect her father.

But finally she found a way to escape. Roger had beaten her with a belt one night. But his parents had been in Europe on vacation, and by the time they found out about the incident it was too late to use their influence. Michelle had crept out of the house, gone to a hospital where her bruises and lacerations were treated and recorded, and she'd gotten copies of the records. Those records had bought her a divorce. The princess would carry the scars to her grave.

Chapter Three

The telephone rang as Michelle was nursing her second cup of coffee, watching the sun come up and preparing herself for another day of chores that seemed to take more and more out of her. Dark circles lay under her heavy-lidded eyes, testimony to hours of twisting restlessly in bed while her mind insisted on replaying every word John had said, every sensation his mouth and hands had evoked. His reputation was well earned, she had thought bitterly in the early hours. Lady-killer. His touch was burningly tender, but he was hell on his women anyway.

She didn't want to answer the phone, but she knew John well enough to know he never gave up once he set his mind on something. He'd be back, and she knew it. If that was him on the telephone, he'd come over if she didn't answer. She didn't feel up to dealing with him in person, so she picked up the receiver and muttered a hello.

"Michelle, darling."

She went white, her fingers tightening on the receiver. Had she conjured him up by thinking about him the night before? She tried *not* to think of him, to keep him locked in the past, but sometimes the nightmare memories surfaced, and she felt again the terror of being so alone and helpless, with no one she could trust to come to her aid, not even her father.

"Roger," she said faintly. There was no doubt. No one but her ex-husband said her name in that caressing tone, as if he adored her.

His voice was low, thick. "I need you, darling. Come back to me, please. I'm begging. I promise I'll never hurt you again. I'll treat you like a princess—"

"No," she gasped, groping for a chair to support her shaking legs. Cold horror made her feel sick. How could he even suggest that she come back?

"Don't say that, please," he groaned. "Michelle, Mother and Dad are dead. I need you now more than ever. I thought you'd come for their funeral last week, but you stayed away, and I can't stand it any longer. If

you'll just come back I swear everything will be different—"
"We're divorced," she broke in, her voice thin with strain. Cold sweat trickled down her spine.
"We can be remarried. Please, darling—"
"No!" The thought of being remarried to him filled her with so much revulsion that she couldn't even be polite. Fiercely she struggled for control. "I'm sorry about your parents; I didn't know. What happened?"
"Plane crash." Pain still lingered in his hoarse voice. "They were flying up to the lake and got caught in a storm."
"I'm sorry," she said again, but even if she'd known in time to attend the funeral, she never would have gone. She would never willingly be in Roger's presence again.
He was silent a moment, and she could almost see him rub the back of his neck in the unconscious nervous gesture she'd seen so many times. "Michelle, I still love you. Nothing's any good for me without you. I swear, it won't be the same as it was; I'll never hurt you again. I was just so damned jealous, and I know now I didn't have any reason."
But he did! she thought, squeezing her eyes shut as guilt seeped in to mix with the raw terror evoked by simply hearing his voice. Not physically, but had there been any day during the past ten years when she hadn't thought of John Rafferty? When part of her hadn't been locked away from Roger and

every other man because they weren't the heartbfeaker who'd stolen her heart?

"Roger, don't," she whispered. "It's over. I'll never come back. All I want to do now is work this ranch and make a living for myself."

He made a disgusted sound. "You shouldn't be working that dinky little ranch! You're used to much better than that. I can give you anything you want."

"No," she said softly. "You can't. I'm going to hang up now. Goodbye, and please don't call me again."

Very gently she replaced the receiver, then stood by the phone with her face buried in her hands. She couldn't stop trembling, her mind and body reeling with the ramifications of what he'd told her. His parents were dead, and she had been counting on them to control him. That was the deal she'd made with them; if they would keep Roger away from her, she wouldn't release the photos and medical report to the press, who would have a field day with the scandal. Imagine, a Beckman of Philadelphia nothing but a common wife-beater! That evidence had kept her father safe from Roger's insane threats, too, and now he was forever beyond Roger's reach. She had lived in hell to protect her father, knowing that Roger was capable of doing exactly what he'd threatened, and knowing after the first incident that his parents

would make certain Roger was protected, no matter what.

She had honestly liked her in-laws until then, but her affection had died an irrevocable death when they had bought Roger out of trouble the first time he'd really hurt her. She had known their weakness then, and she had forced herself to wait. There was no one to help her; she had only herself. Once she had been desperate enough to mention it to her father, but he'd become so upset that she hadn't pushed it, and in only a moment he'd convinced himself that she'd been exaggerating. Marriage was always an adjustment, and Michelle was spoiled, highly strung. Probably it was just an argument over some minor thing, and the young couple would work things out.

The cold feeling of aloneness had spread through her, but she hadn't stopped loving him. He loved her, she knew he did, but he saw her as more of a doll than a human being. His perfect, loving darling. He couldn't accept such ugliness in her life. She had to be happy, or it would mean he'd failed her in some basic way as a father, protector and provider. For his own sake, he had to believe she was happy. That was his weakness, so she had to be strong for both of them. She had to protect him, and she had to protect herself.

There was no way she would ever go back to Roger. She had dealt with the nightmares and put them behind her; she had picked up the pieces of her life and gone on, not letting the memories turn her into a frightened shell. But the memories, and the fear, were still there, and all it took was hearing Roger's voice to make her break out in a cold sweat.

The old feeling of vulnerability and isolation swept over her, making her feel sick.

She jerked around, wrenching herself from the spell, and dashed what was left of her coffee down the drain. The best thing was to be active, to busy herself with whatever came to hand. That was the way she'd handled it when she had finally managed to get away from Roger, globe-trotting for two years because her father had thought that would take her mind off the divorce, and she had let the constant travel distract her. Now she had real work to do, work that left her exhausted and aching but was somehow healing, because it was the first worthwhile work she'd ever done.

It had been eating at him all morning.

He'd been in a bad mood from the moment he'd gotten out of bed, his body aching with frustration, as if he were some randy teenager with raging hormones. He was a long way from being a teenager,

but his hormones were giving him hell, and he knew exactly why. He hadn't been able to sleep for remembering the way she'd felt against him, the sweetness of her taste and the silky softness of her body. And she wanted him, too; he was too experienced to be mistaken about something like that. But he'd pushed too hard, driven by ten years of having an itch he couldn't scratch, and she'd balked. He'd put her in the position of paying him with her body, and she hadn't liked that. What woman would? Even the ones who were willing usually wanted a pretty face put on it, and Michelle was haughtier than most.

But she hadn't looked haughty the day before. His frown grew darker. She had tried, but the old snooty coldness was missing. She was dead broke and had nowhere to turn. Perhaps she was scared, wondering what she was going to do without the cushion of money that had always protected her. She was practically helpless, having no job skills or talents other than social graces, which weren't worth a hell of a lot on the market. She was all alone on that ranch, without the people to work it.

He made a rough sound and pulled his horse's head around. "I'll be back later," he told Nev, nudging the horse's flanks with his boot heels.

Nev watched him ride away. "Good riddance," he muttered. Whatever was chewing on the boss had put him in the worst mood Nev had ever seen; it would be a relief to work without him.

John's horse covered the distance with long, easy strides; it was big and strong, seventeen hands high, and inclined to be a bit stubborn, but they had fought that battle a long time ago. Now the animal accepted the mastery of the iron-muscled legs and strong, steady hands of his rider. The big horse liked a good run, and he settled into a fast, smooth rhythm as they cut across pastures, his pounding hooves sending clods of dirt flying.

The more John thought about it the less he liked it. She'd been trying to work that ranch by herself. It didn't fit in with what he knew of Michelle, but her fragile hands bore the marks. He had nothing but contempt for someone who disdained good honest work and expected someone else to do it for them, but something deep and primitive inside him was infuriated at the idea of Michelle even trying to manage the backbreaking chores around the ranch. Damn it, why hadn't she asked for help? Work was one thing, but no one expected her to turn into a cowhand. She wasn't strong enough; he'd held her in his arms, felt the delicacy of her bones, the

greyhound slenderness of her build. She didn't need to be working cattle any more than an expensive thoroughbred should be used to plow a field. She could get hurt, and it might be days before anyone found her. He'd always been disgusted with Langley for spoiling and protecting her, and with Michelle for just sitting back and accepting it as her due, but suddenly he knew just how Langley had felt. He gave a disgusted snort at himself, making the horse flick his ears back curiously at the sound, but the hard fact was that he didn't like the idea of Michelle's trying to work that ranch. It was a man's work, and more than one man, at that.

Well, he'd take care of all that for her, whether she liked it or not. He had the feeling she wouldn't, but she'd come around. She was too used to being taken care of, and, as he'd told her, now it was his turn. Yesterday had changed everything. He'd felt her response to him, felt the way her mouth had softened and shaped itself to his. She wanted him, too, and the knowledge only increased his determination to have her. She had tried to keep him from seeing it; that acid tongue of hers would have made him lose his temper if he hadn't seen the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. It was so unusual that he'd almost wanted to bring back the haughtiness that aggravated him so

much… Almost, but not quite. She was vulnerable now, vulnerable to him. She might not like it, but she needed him. It was an advantage he intended to use.
There was no answer at the door when he got to the ranch house, and the old truck was missing from its customary parking place in the barn. John put his fists on his hips and looked around, frowning. She had probably driven into town, though it was hard to think that Michelle Cabot was willing to let herself be seen in that kind of vehicle. It was her only means of transportation, though, so she didn't have much choice.
Maybe it was better that she was gone; he could check around the ranch without her spitting and hissing at him like an enraged cat, and he'd look at those cattle in the south pasture. He wanted to know just how many head she was running, and how they looked. She couldn't possibly handle a big herd by herself, but for her sake he hoped they were in good shape, so she could get a fair price for them. He'd handle it himself, make certain she didn't get rooked. The cattle business wasn't a good one for beginners.
He swung into the saddle again. First he checked the east pasture, where she had said the fence was down. Whole sections of it would have to be replaced, and he made mental notes of how much fencing it would

take. The entire ranch was run-down, but fencing was critical; it came first. Lush green grass covered the east pasture; the cattle should be in it right now. The south pasture was probably overgrazed, and the cattle would show it, unless the herd was small enough that the south pasture could provide for its needs.

It was a couple of hours before he made it to the south pasture. He reined in the horse as he topped a small rise that gave him a good view. The frown snapped into place again, and he thumbed his hat onto the back of his head. The cattle he could see scattered over the big pasture didn't constitute a big herd, but made for far more than the small one he'd envisioned.

The pasture was badly overgrazed, but scattered clumps of hay testified to Michelle's efforts to feed her herd. Slow-rising anger began to churn in him as he thought of her wrestling with heavy bales of hay; some of them probably weighed more than she did. Then he saw her, and in a flash the anger rose to boiling point. The old truck was parked in a clump of trees, which was why he hadn't noticed it right off, and she was down there struggling to repair a section of fencing by herself. Putting up fencing was a two-man job; one person couldn't hold the barbed wire securely enough, and there was always the danger of

the wire backlashing. The little fool! If the wire got wrapped around her, she wouldn't be able to get out of it without help, and those barbs could really rip a person up. The thought of her lying tangled and bleeding in a coil of barbed wire made him both sick and furious.

He kept the horse at an easy walk down the long slope to where she was working, deliberately giving himself time to get control of his temper. She looked up and saw him, and even from the distance that still separated them he could see her stiffen. Then she turned back to the task of hammering a staple into the fence post, her jerky movements betraying her displeasure at his presence.

He dismounted with a fluid, easy motion, never taking his gaze from her as he tied the reins to a low-hanging tree branch. Without a word he pulled the strand of wire to the next post and held it taut while Michelle, equally silent, pounded in another staple to hold it. Like him, she had on short leather work gloves, but her gloves were an old pair of men's gloves that had been left behind and were far too big for her, making it difficult for her to pick up the staples, so she had pulled off the left glove. She could handle the staples then, but the wire had already nicked her unprotected flesh several times. He saw

the angry red scratches; some of which were deep enough for blood to well, and he wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled.
"Don't you have any better sense than to try to put up fencing on your own?" he rasped, pulling another strand tight.
She hammered in the staple, her expression closed. "It has to be done. I'm doing it."
"Not anymore, you aren't."
His flat statement made her straighten, her hand closing tightly around the hammer. "You want the payment right away," she said tonelessly, her eyes sliding to the cattle. She was a little pale, and tension pulled the skin tight across her high cheekbones.
"If that's what I have to do." He pried the hammer from her grip, then bent to pick up the sack of staples. He walked over to the truck, then reached in the open window and dropped them onto the floorboard. Then he lifted the roll of barbed wire onto the truck bed. "That'll hold until I can get my men out here to do it right. Let's go."
It was a good thing he'd taken the hammer away from her. Her hands balled into fists. "I don't want your men out here doing it right! This is still my land, and I'm not willing to pay the price you want for your help."

"I'm not giving you a choice." He took her arm, and no matter how she tried she couldn't jerk free of those long, strong fingers as he dragged her over to the truck, opened the door and lifted her onto the seat. He released her then, slamming the door and stepping back.

"Drive carefully, honey. I'll be right behind you."

She had to drive carefully; the pasture was too rough for breakneck speed, even if the old relic had been capable of it. She knew he was easily able to keep up with her on his horse, though she didn't check the rearview mirror even once. She didn't want to see him, didn't want to think about selling the cattle to pay her debt. That would be the end of the ranch, because she'd been relying on that money to keep the ranch going.

She'd hoped he wouldn't come back today, though it had been a fragile hope at best. After talking to Roger that morning, all she wanted was to be left alone. She needed time by herself to regain her control, to push all the ugly memories away again, but John hadn't given her that time. He wanted her, and like any predator he'd sensed her vulnerability and was going to take advantage of it.

She wanted to just keep driving, to turn the old truck down the driveway, hit the road and keep on going.

She didn't want to stop and deal with John, not now. The urge to run was so strong that she almost did it, but a glance at the fuel gauge made her mouth twist wryly. If she ran, she'd have to do it on foot, either that or steal John's horse.

She parked the truck in the barn, and as she slid off the high seat John walked the horse inside, ducking his head a little to miss the top of the doorframe. "I'm going to cool the horse and give him some water,' ' he said briefly."Go on in the house. I'll be there in a minute."

Was postponing the bad news for a few minutes supposed to make her feel better? Instead of going straight to the house, she walked down to the end of the driveway and collected the mail. Once the mailbox had been stuffed almost every day with magazines, catalogs, newspapers, letters from friends, business papers, but now all that came was junk mail and bills. It was odd how the mail reflected a person's solvency, as if no one in the world wanted to communicate with someone who was broke. Except for past-due bills, of course. Then the communications became serious. A familiar envelope took her attention, and a feeling of dread welled in her as she trudged up to the house. The electric bill was past due; she'd already had one late notice, and

here was another one. She had to come up with the money fast, or the power would be disconnected. Even knowing what it was, she opened the envelope anyway and scanned the notice. She had ten days to bring her account up to date. She checked the date of the notice; it had taken three days to reach her. She had seven days left. .

But why worry about the electricity if she wouldn't have a ranch? Tiredness swept over her as she entered the cool, dim house and simply stood for a moment, luxuriating in the relief of being out of the broiling sun. She shoved the bills and junk mail into the same drawer of the entry table where she had put the original bill and the first late notice; she never forgot about them, but at least she could put them out of sight.

She was in the kitchen, having a drink of water, when she heard the screen door slam, then the sharp sound of boot heels on the oak parquet flooring as he came down the hallway. She kept drinking, though she was acutely aware of his progress through the house. He paused to look into the den, then the study. The slow, deliberate sound of those boots as he came closer made her shiver in reaction. She could see him in her mind's eye; he had a walk that any drugstore cowboy would kill for: that loose, long-legged, slim-hipped

saunter, tight buttocks moving up and down. It was a walk that came naturally to hell-raisers and heartbreakers, and Rafferty was both.
She knew the exact moment when he entered the kitchen, though her back was to him. Her skin suddenly tingled, as if the air had become charged, and the house no longer seemed so cool.
"Let me see your hand." He was so close behind her that she couldn't turn without pressing against him, so she remained where she was. He took her left hand in his and lifted it.
"They're just scratches," she muttered.
She was right, but admitting it didn't diminish his anger. She shouldn't have any scratches at all; she shouldn't be trying to repair fencing. Her hand lay in his bigger, harder one like a pale, fragile bird, too tired to take flight, and suddenly he knew that the image was exactly right. She was tired.
He reached around her to turn on the water, then thoroughly soaped and rinsed her hand. Michelle hurriedly set the water glass aside, before it slipped from her trembling fingers, then stood motionless, with her head bowed. He was very warm against her back; she fek completely surrounded by him, with his arms around her while he washed her hand with the gentleness a mother would use to wash an infant.

That gentleness staggered her senses, and she kept her head bent precisely to prevent herself from letting it drop back against his shoulder to let him support her.

The soap was rinsed off her hand now, but still he held it under the running water, his fingers lightly stroking. She quivered, trying to deny the sensuality of his touch. He was just washing her hand! The water was warm, but his hand was warmer, the rough calluses rasping against her flesh as he stroked her with a lover's touch. His thumb traced circles on her sensitive palm, and Michelle felt her entire body tighten. Her pulse leaped, flooding her with warmth.

"Don't," she said thickly, trying unsuccessfully to pull free.

He turned off the water with his right hand, then moved it to her stomach and spread his fingers wide, pressing her back against his body. His hand was wet; she felt the dampness seeping through her shirt in front, and the searing heat of him at her back. The smell of horse and man rose from that seductive heat. Everything about the man was a come-on, luring women to him.

"Turn around and kiss me," he said, his voice low, daring her to do it.

She shook her head and remained silent, her head bent.
He didn't push it, though they both knew that if he had, she wouldn't have been able to resist him. Instead he dried her hand, then led her to the downstairs bathroom and made her sit on the lid of the toilet while he thoroughly cleaned the scratches with antiseptic. Michelle didn't flinch from the stinging; what did a few scratches matter, when she was going to lose the ranch? She had no other home, no other place she wanted to be. After being virtually imprisoned in that plush penthouse in Philadelphia, she needed the feeling of space around her. The thought of living in a city again made her feel stifled and panicky, and she would have to live in some city somewhere to get a job, since she didn't even have a car to commute. The old truck in the barn wouldn't hold up to a long drive on a daily basis.
John watched her face closely; she was distracted about something, or she would never have let him tend her hand the way he had. After all, it was something she could easily have done herself, and he'd done it merely to have an excuse to touch her. He wanted to know what she was thinking, why she insisted on working this ranch when it had to be

obvious even to her that it was more than she could handle. It simply wasn't in character for her.
"When do you want the money?" she asked dully.
His mouth tightened as he straightened and pulled her to her feet. "Money isn't what I want," he replied.
Her eyes flashed with green fire as she looked at him. "I'm not turning myself into a whore, even for you! Did you think I'd jump at the chance to sleep with you? Your reputation must be going to your *head…stud*."
He knew people called him that, but when Michelle said it, the word dripped with disdain. He'd always hated that particular tone, so icy and superior, and it made him see red now. He bent down until his face was level with hers, their noses almost touching, and his black eyes were so fiery that she could see gold sparks in them. "When we're in bed, honey, you can decide for yourself about my reputation."
"I'm not going to bed with you," she said through clenched teeth, spacing the words out like dropping stones into water.
"The hell you're not. But it won't be for this damned ranch." Straightening to his full height again, he caught her arm. "Let's get that business settled right now, so it'll be out of the way and you can't keep throwing it in my face."
"You're the one who put it on that basis," she shot back as they returned to the kitchen. He dropped several ice cubes in a glass and filled it with water,

then draped his big frame on one of the chairs. She watched his muscular throat working as he drained the glass, and a weak, shivery feeling swept over her. Swiftly she looked away, cursing her own powerful physical response to the mere sight of him.

"I made a mistake," he said tersely, putting the glass down with a thump. "Money has nothing to do with it. We've been circling each other from the day we met, sniffing and fighting like cats in heat. It's time we did something about it. As for the debt, I've decided what I want. Deed that land you were going to sell over to me instead, and we'll be even."

It was just like him to divide her attention like that, so she didn't know how to react or what to say. Part of her wanted to scream at him for being so smugly certain she would sleep with him, and part of her was flooded with relief that the debt had been settled so easily. He could have ruined her by insisting on cash, but he hadn't. He wasn't getting a bad deal, by any means; it was good, rich pastureland he was obtaining, and he knew it.

It was a reprieve, one she hadn't expected, and she didn't know how to deal with it, so she simply sat and stared at him. He waited, but when she didn't say anything he leaned back in his chair, his hard face

becoming even more determined. "There's a catch," he drawled.
The high feeling of relief plummeted, leaving her sick and empty. "Let me guess," she said bitterly, shoving her chair back and standing. So it had all come down to the same thing after all.
His mouth twisted wryly in self-derision. "You're way off, honey. The catch is that you let me help you. My men will do the hard labor from now on, and if I even hear of you trying to put up fencing again, you'll be sitting on a pillow for a month."
"If your men do my work, I'll still be in debt to you."
"I don't consider it a debt; I call it helping a neighbor."
"I call it a move to keep me obligated!"
"Call it what you like, but that's the deal. You're one woman, not ten men; you're not strong enough to take care of the livestock and keep the ranch up, and you don't have the money to afford help. You're mighty short on options, so stop kicking. It's your fault, anyway. If you hadn't liked to ski so much, you wouldn't be in this position."
She drew back, her green eyes locked on him. Her face was pale. "What do you mean?"
John got to his feet, watching her with the old look that said he didn't much like her. "I mean that part of

the reason your daddy borrowed the money from me was so he could afford to send you to St. Moritz with your friends last year. He was trying to hold his head above water, but that didn't matter to you as much as living in style, did it?"

She had been pale before, but now she was deathly white. She stared at him as if he'd slapped her, and too late he saw the shattered look in her eyes. Swiftly he rounded the table, reaching for her, but she shrank away from him, folding in on herself like a wounded animal. How ironic that she should now be struggling to repay a debt made to finance a trip she hadn't wanted! All she'd wanted had been time alone in a quiet place, a chance to lick her wounds and finish recovering from a brutal marriage, but her father had thought resuming a life of trips and shopping with her friends would be better, and she'd gone along with him because it had made him happy.

"I didn't even want to go," she said numbly, and to her horror tears began welling in her eyes. She didn't want to cry; she hadn't cried in years, except once when her father died, and she especially didn't want to cry in front of Rafferty. But she was tired and off balance, disturbed by the phone call from Roger that morning, and this just seemed like the last straw. The hot tears slipped silently down her cheeks.

"God, don't," he muttered, wrapping his arms around her and holding her to him, her face pressed against his chest. It was like a knife in him to see those tears on her face, because in all the time he'd known her, he'd never before seen her cry. Michelle Cabot had faced life with either a laugh or a sharp retort, but never with tears. He found he preferred an acid tongue to this soundless weeping.
For just a moment she leaned against him, letting him support her with his hard strength. It was too tempting; when his arms were around her, she wanted to forget everything and shut the world out, as long as he was holding her. That kind of need frightened her, and she stiffened in his arms, then pulled free. She swiped her palms over her cheeks, wiping away the dampness, and stubbornly blinked back the remaining tears.
His voice was quiet. "I thought you knew."
She threw him an incredulous look before turning away. What an opinion he had of her! She didn't mind his thinking she was spoiled; her father had spoiled her, but mostly because he'd enjoyed doing it so much. Evidently John not only considered her a common whore, but a stupid one to boot.
"Well, I didn't. And whether I knew or not doesn't change anything. I still owe you the money."

"We'll see my lawyer tomorrow and have the deed drawn up, and that'll take care of the damned debt. I'll be here at nine sharp, so be ready. A crew of men will be here in the morning to take care of the fencing and get the hay out to the herd."

He wasn't going to give in on that, and he was right; it *was* too much for her, at least right now. She couldn't do it all simply because it was too much for one person to do. After she fattened up the beef cattle and sold them off, she'd have some capital to work with and might be able to hire someone part-time.

"All right. But keep a record of how much I owe you. When I get this place back on its feet, I'll repay every penny." Her chin was high as she turned to face him, her green eyes remote and proud. This didn't solve all her problems, but at least the cattle would be cared for. She still had to get the money to pay the bills, but that problem was hers alone.

"Whatever you say, honey," he drawled, putting his hands on her waist.

She only had time for an indrawn breath before his mouth was on hers, as warm and hard as she remembered, his taste as heady as she remembered. His hands tightened on her waist and drew her to him; then his arms were around her, and the kiss deepened, his tongue sliding into her mouth. Hunger flared, fanned into instant life at his touch. She had

always known that once she touched him, she wouldn't be able to get enough of him.
She softened, her body molding itself to him as she instinctively tried to get close enough to him to feed that burning hunger. She was weak where he was concerned, just as all women were. Her arms were clinging around his neck, and in the end it was he who broke the kiss and gently set her away from him.
"I have work to get back to," he growled, but his eyes were hot and held dark promises. "Be ready tomorrow."
"Yes," she whispered.

Chapter Four

Two pickup trucks came up the drive not long after sunrise, loaded with fencing supplies and five of John's men. Michelle offered them all a cup of fresh coffee, which they politely refused, just as they refused her offer to show them around the ranch. John had probably given them orders that she wasn't to do anything, and they were taking it seriously. People didn't disobey Rafferty's orders if they wanted to continue working for him, so she didn't insist, but

for the first time in weeks she found herself with nothing to do.

She tried to think what she'd done with herself before, but years of her life were a blank. What *had* she done? How could she fill the hours now, if working on her own ranch was denied her?

John drove up shortly before nine, but she had been ready for more than an hour and stepped out on the porch to meet him. He stopped on the steps, his dark eyes running over her in heated approval. "Nice," he murmured just loud enough for her to hear. She looked the way she should always look, cool and elegant in a pale yellow silk surplice dress, fastened only by two white buttons at the waist. The shoulders were lightly padded, emphasizing the slimness of her body, and a white enamel peacock was pinned to her lapel. Her sunshine hair was sleeked back into a demure twist; oversized sunglasses shielded her eyes. He caught the tantalizing fragrance of some softly bewitching perfume, and his body began to heat. She was aristocratic and expensive from her head to her daintily shod feet; even her underwear would be silk, and he wanted to strip every stitch of it away from her, then stretch her out naked on his bed. Yes, this was exactly the way she should look.

Michelle tucked her white clutch under her arm and walked with him to the car, immensely grateful for the sunglasses covering her eyes. John was a

hardworking rancher, but when the occasion demanded he could dress as well as any Philadelphia lawyer. Any clothing looked good on his broad-shouldered, slim-hipped frame, but the severe gray suit he wore seemed to heighten his masculinity instead of restraining it All hint of waviness had been brushed from his black hair. Instead of his usual pickup truck he was driving a dark gray two-seater Mercedes, a sleek beauty that made her think of the Porsche she had sold to raise money after her father had died.

"You said your men were going to help me," she said expressionlessly as he turned the car onto the highway several minutes later. "You didn't say they were going to take over."

He'd put on sunglasses, too, because the morning sun was glaring, and the dark lenses hid the probing look he directed at her stiff profile. "They're going to do the heavy work."

"After the fencing is repaired and the cattle are moved to the east pasture, I can handle tilings from there."

"What about dipping, castrating, branding, all the things that should've been done in the spring? You can't handle that. You don't have any horses, any

men, and you sure as hell can't rope and throw a young bull from that old truck you've got."
Her slender hands clenched in her lap. Why did he have to be so right? She couldn't do any of those things, but neither could she be content as a useless ornament. "I know I can't do those things by myself, but I can help."
"I'll think about it," he answered noncommittally, but he knew there was no way in hell he'd let her. What could she do? It was hard, dirty, smelly, bloody work. The only thing she was physically strong enough to do was brand calves, and he didn't think she could stomach the smell or the frantic struggles of the terrified little animals.
"It's my ranch," she reminded him, ice in her tone. "Either I help, or the deal's off."
John didn't say anything. There was no point in arguing. He simply wasn't going to let her do it, and that was that. He'd handle her when the time came, but he didn't expect much of a fight. When she saw what was involved, she wouldn't want any part of it. Besides, she couldn't possibly like the hard work she'd been doing; he figured she was just too proud to back down now.
It was a long drive to Tampa, and half an hour passed without a word between them. Finally she said, "You

used to make fun of my expensive little cars."
He knew she was referring to the sleek Mercedes, and he grunted. Personally, he preferred his pickup. When it came down to it, he was a cattle rancher and not much else, but he was damned good at what he did, and his tastes weren't expensive. "Funny thing about bankers," he said by way of explanation. "If they think you don't need the money all that badly, they're eager to loan it to you. Image counts. This thing is part of the image."
"And the members of your rotating harem prefer it, too, I bet," she gibed. "Going out on the town lacks something when you do it in a pickup."
"I don't know about that. Ever done it in a pickup?" he asked softly, and even through the dark glasses she could feel the impact of his glance.
"I'm sure *you* have."
"Not since I was fifteen." He chuckled, ignoring the biting coldness of her comment. "But a pickup never was your style, was it?"
"No," she murmured, leaning her head back. Some of her dates had driven fancy sports cars, some had driven souped-up Fords and Chevys, but it hadn't made any difference what they'd driven, because she hadn't made out with any of them. They had been nice boys, most of them, but none of them had been

John Rafferty, so it hadn't mattered. He was the only man she'd ever wanted. Perhaps if she'd been older when she'd met him, or if she'd been secure enough in her own sexuality, things might have been different. What would have happened if she hadn't initiated those long years of hostility in an effort to protect herself from an attraction too strong for her to handle? What if she'd tried to get him interested in her, instead of warding him off?

Nothing, she thought tiredly. John wouldn't have wasted his time with a naive eighteen-year-old. Maybe later, when she'd graduated from college, the situation might have changed, but instead of coming home after graduation she had gone to Philadelphia… and met Roger.

They were out of the lawyer's office by noon; it hadn't been a long meeting. The land would be surveyed, the deed drawn up, and John's ranch would increase by quite a bit, while hers would shrink, but she was grateful that he'd come up with that solution. At least now she still had a chance.

His hand curled warmly around her elbow as they walked out to the car. "Let's have lunch. I'm too hungry to wait until we get home."

She was hungry, too, and the searing heat made her feel lethargic. She murmured in agreement as she

fumbled for her sunglasses, missing the satisfied smile that briefly curled his mouth. John opened the car door and held it as she got in, his eyes lingering on the length of silken leg exposed by the movement. She promptly restored her skirt to its proper position and crossed her legs as she settled in the seat, giving him a questioning glance when he continued to stand in the open door. "Is something wrong?"
"No." He closed the door and walked around the car. Not unless she counted the way looking at her made him so hot that a deep ache settled in his loins. She couldn't move without making him think of making love to her. When she crossed her legs, he thought of uncrossing them. When she pulled her skirt down, he thought of pulling it up. When she leaned back the movement thrust her breasts against her lapels, and he wanted to tear the dress open. Damn, what a dress! It wrapped her modestly, but the silk kissed every soft curve just the way he wanted to do, and all morning long it had been teasing at him that the damned thing was fastened with only those two buttons. Two buttons! He had to have her, he thought savagely. He couldn't wait much longer. He'd already waited ten years, and his patience had ended. It was time.

The restaurant he took her to was a posh favorite of the city's business community, but he didn't worry about needing a reservation. The maitre d' knew him, as did most of the people in the room, by sight and reputation if not personally. They were led across the crowded room to a select table by the window.
Michelle had noted the way so many people had watched them. "Well, this is one," she said dryly.
He looked up from the menu. "One what?"
"I've been seen in public with you once. Gossip has it that any woman seen with you twice is automatically assumed to be sleeping with you."
His mustache twitched as he frowned in annoyance. "Gossip has a way of being exaggerated."
"Usually, yes."
"And in this case?"
"You tell me."
He put the menu aside, his eyes never leaving her. "No matter what gossip says, you won't have to worry about being just another member of a harem. While we're together, you'll be the only woman in my bed."
Her hands shook, and Michelle quickly put her menu on the table to hide that betraying quiver. "You're assuming a lot," she said lightly in an effort to counteract the heat she could feel radiating from him.

"I'm not assuming anything. I'm planning on it." His voice was flat, filled with masculine certainty. He had reason to be certain; how many women had ever refused him? He projected a sense of overwhelming virility that was at least as seductive as the most expert technique, and from what she'd heard, he had that, too. Just looking at him made a woman wonder, made her begin dreaming about what it would be like to be in bed with him.

"Michelle, darling!"

Michelle couldn't stop herself from flinching at that particular phrase, even though it was spoken in a lilting female voice rather than a man's deeper tones. Quickly she looked around, grateful for the interruption despite the endearment she hated; when she recognized the speaker, gratefulness turned to mere politeness, but her face was so schooled that the approaching woman didn't catch the faint nuances of expression.

"Hello, Bitsy, how are you?" she asked politely as John got to his feet. "This is John Rafferty, my neighbor. John, this is Bitsy Sumner, from Palm Beach. We went to college together."

Bitsy's eyes gleamed as she looked at John, and she held her hand out to him. "I'm so glad to meet you, Mr. Rafferty."

Michelle knew Bitsy wouldn't pick it up, but she saw the dark amusement in John's eyes as he gently took the woman's faultlessly manicured and bejeweled hand in his. Naturally he'd seen the way Bitsy was looking at *him*. It was a look he'd probably been getting since puberty.

"Mrs. Sumner," he murmured, noting the diamond-studded wedding band on her left hand. "Would you like to join us?"

"Only for a moment," Bitsy sighed, slipping into the chair he held out "My husband and I are here with some business associates and their wives. He says it's good business to socialize with them occasionally, so we flew in this morning. Michelle, dear, I haven't seen you in so long! What are you doing on this side of the state?"

"I live north of here," Michelle replied.

"You must come visit. Someone mentioned just the other day that it had been forever since we'd seen you! We had the most fantastic party at Howard Cassa's villa last month; you should have come."

"I have too much work to do, but thank you for the invitation." She managed to smile at Bitsy, but she understood that Bitsy hadn't been inviting her to visit them personally; it was just something that people said, and probably her old acquaintances were curious about why she had left their circle.

Bitsy shrugged elegantly. "Oh, work, schmurk. Let someone else take care of it for a month or so. You

need to have some fun! Come to town, and bring Mr. Rafferty with you." Bitsy's gaze slid back to John, and that unconsciously hungry look crawled into her eyes again. "You'd enjoy it, Mr. Rafferty, I promise. Everyone needs a break from work occasionally, don't you think?"

His brows lifted. "Occasionally."

"What sort of business are you in?"

"Cattle. My ranch adjoins Michelle's."

"Oh, a *rancher!"*

Michelle could tell by Bitsy's fatuous smile that the other woman was lost in the romantic images of cowboys and horses that so many people associated with ranching, ignoring or simply not imagining the backbreaking hard work that went in to building a successful ranch. Or maybe it was the rancher instead of the ranch that made Bitsy look so enraptured. She was looking at John as if she could eat him alive. Michelle put her hands in her lap to hide them because she had to clench her fists in order to resist slapping Bitsy so hard she'd never even think of looking at John Rafferty again.

Fortunately good manners drove Bitsy back to her own table after a few moments. John watched her sway through the tangle of tables, then looked at Michelle with amusement in his eyes. "Who in hell would call a grown woman *Bitsy?* "

It was hard not to share his amusement. "I think her real name is Elizabeth, so Bitsy is fairly reasonable as a nickname. Of course, she was the ultimate preppy in college, so it fits."

"I thought it might be an indication of her brain power," he said caustically; then the waiter approached to take their orders, and John turned his attention to the menu.

Michelle could only be grateful that Bitsy hadn't been able to remain with them. The woman was one of the worst gossips she'd ever met, and she didn't feel up to hearing the latest dirt on every acquaintance they had in common. Bitsy's particular circle of friends were rootless and a little savage in their pursuit of entertainment, and Michelle had always made an effort to keep her distance from them. It hadn't always been possible, but at least she had never been drawn into the center of the crowd.

After lunch John asked if she would mind waiting while he contacted one of his business associates. She started to protest, then remembered that his men were taking care of the cattle today; she had no reason to hurry back, and, in truth, she could use the day off. The physical strain had been telling on her. Besides, this was the most time she'd ever spent in his company, and she was loathe to see the day end.

They weren't arguing, and if she ignored his arrogant certainty that they were going to sleep together, the day had really been rather calm. "I don't have to be back at any certain time," she said, willing to let him decide when they would return.

As it happened, it was after dark before they left Tampa. John's meeting had taken up more time than he'd expected, but Michelle hadn't been bored, because he hadn't left her sitting in the reception area. He'd taken her into the meeting with him, and it had been so interesting that she hadn't been aware of the hours slipping past. It was almost six when they finished, and by then John was hungry again; it was another two hours before they were actually on their way.

Michelle sat beside him, relaxed and a little drowsy. John had stayed with coffee, because he was driving, but she'd had two glasses of wine with her meal, and her bones felt mellow. The car was dark, illuminated only by the dash lights, which gave a satanic cast to his hard-planed face, and the traffic on U.S. 19 was light. She snuggled down into the seat, making a comment only when John said something that required an answer.

Soon they ran into a steady rain, and the rhythmic motion of the windshield wipers added to her

drowsiness. The windows began to fog, so John turned the air conditioning higher. Michelle sat up, hugging her arms as the cooler air banished her drowsiness. Her silk dress didn't offer much warmth. He glanced at her, then pulled to the side of the road.
"Why are we stopping?"
"Because you're cold." He shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped it around her, enveloping her in the transferred heat and the smell of his body. "We're almost two hours from home, so why don't you take a nap? That wine's getting to you, isn't it?"
"Mmmm." The sound of agreement was distinctly drowsy. John touched her cheek gently, watching as her eyelids closed, as if her lashes were too heavy for her to hold them open a moment longer. Let her sleep, he thought. She'd be recovered from the wine by the time they got home. His loins tightened. He wanted her awake and responsive when he took her to bed. There was no way he was going to sleep alone tonight. All day long he'd been fighting the need to touch her, to feel her lying against him. For ten years she'd been in his mind, and he wanted her. As difficult and spoiled as she was, he wanted her. Now he understood what made men want to pamper her, probably from the day she'd been placed in her cradle. He'd just taken his place in line, and for his

reward he'd have her in his bed, her slim, silky body open for his pleasure. He knew she wanted him; she was resisting him for some reason he couldn't decipher, perhaps only a woman's instinctive hesitance.

Michelle usually didn't sleep well. Her slumber was frequently disturbed by dreams, and she hadn't been able to nap with even her father anywhere nearby. Her subconscious refused to relax if any man was in the vicinity. Roger had once attacked her in the middle of the night, when she'd been soundly asleep, and the trauma of being jerked from a deep, peaceful sleep into a nightmare of violence had in some ways been worse than the pain. Now, just before she slept, she realized with faint surprise that the old uneasiness wasn't there tonight. Perhaps the time had come to heal that particular hurt, too, or perhaps it was that she felt so unutterably safe with John. His coat warmed her; his nearness surrounded her. He had touched her in passion and in anger, but his touch had never brought pain. He tempered his great strength to handle a woman's softness, and she slept, secure in the instinctive knowledge that she was safe.

His deep, dark-velvet voice woke her. "We're home, honey. Put your arms around my neck."

She opened her eyes to see him leaning in the open door of the car, and she gave him a sleepy smile. "I slept all the way, didn't I?"
"Like a baby." He brushed her mouth with his, a brief, warm caress; then his arms slid behind her neck and under her thighs. She gasped as he lifted her, grabbing him around the neck as he'd instructed. It was still raining, but his coat kept most of the dampness from her as he closed the car door and carried her swiftly through the darkness.
"I'm awake now; I could've walked," she protested, her heart beginning a slow, heavy thumping as she responded to his nearness. He carried her so easily, leaping up the steps to the porch as if she weighed no more than a child.
"I know," he murmured, lifting her a little so he could bury his face in the curve of her neck. Gently he nuzzled her jaw, drinking in the sweet, warm fragrance of her skin. "Mmmm, you smell good. Are you clear from the wine yet?"
The caress was so tender that it completely failed to alarm her. Rather, she felt coddled, and the feeling of utter safety persisted. He shifted her in his arms to open the door, then turned sideways to carry her through. Had he thought she was drunk? "I was just sleepy, not tipsy," she clarified.

"Good," he whispered, pushing the door closed and blocking out the sound of die light rain, enveloping them in the dark silence of the house. She couldn't see anything, but he was warm and solid against her, and it didn't matter that she couldn't see. Then his mouth was on hers, greedy and demanding, convincing her lips to open and accept the shape of his, accept the inward thrust of his tongue. He kissed her with burning male hunger, as if he wanted to draw all the sweetness and breath out of her to make it his own, as if the need was riding him so hard that he couldn't get close enough. She couldn't help responding to that need, clinging to him and kissing him back with a sudden wildness, because the very rawness of his male hunger called out to everything in her that was female and ignited her own fires.
He hit the light switch with his elbow, throwing on the foyer light and illuminating the stairs to the right. He lifted his mouth briefly, and she stared up at him in the dim light, her senses jolting at the hard, grim expression on his face, the way his skin had tightened across his cheekbones. "I'm staying here tonight," he muttered harshly, starting up the stairs with her still in his arms. "This has been put off long enough."
He wasn't going to stop; she could see it in his face. She didn't want him to stop. Every pore in her body

cried out for him, drowning out the small voice of caution that warned against getting involved with a heartbreaker like John Rafferty. Maybe it had been a useless struggle anyway; it had always been between them, this burning hunger that now flared out of control.

His mouth caught hers again as he carried her up the stairs, his muscle-corded arms holding her weight easily. Michelle yielded to the kiss, sinking against him. Her blood was singing through her veins, heating her, making her breasts harden with the need for his touch. An empty ache made her whimper, because it was an ache that only he could fill.

He'd been in the house a lot over the years, so the location of her room was no mystery to him. He carried her inside and laid her on the bed, following her down to press her into the mattress with his full weight. Michelle almost cried out from the intense pleasure of feeling him cover her with his body. His arm stretched over her head, and he snapped on one of the bedside lamps; he looked at her, and his black eyes filled with masculine satisfaction as he saw the glaze of passion in her slumberous eyes, the trembling of her pouty, kiss-stung lips.

Slowly, deliberately, he levered his knee between hers and spread her legs, then settled his hips into the

cradle formed by her thighs. She inhaled sharply as she felt his hardness through the layers of their clothing. Their eyes met, and she knew he'd known before the day even began that he would end it in her bed. He was tired of waiting, and he was going to have her. He'd been patient all day, gentling her by letting her get accustomed to his presence, but now his patience was at an end, and he knew she had no resistance left to offer him. All she had was need.
"You're mine." He stated his possession baldly, his voice rough and low. He raised his weight on one elbow, and with his free hand unbuttoned the two buttons at her waist, spreading the dress open with the deliberate air of a man unwrapping a gift he'd wanted for a long time. The silk caught at her hips, pinned by his own weight. He lifted his hips and pushed the edges of the dress open, baring her legs, then re-settled himself against her.
He felt as if his entire body would explode as he looked at her. She had worn neither bra nor slip; the silk dress was lined, biding from him all day the fact that the only things she had on beneath that wisp of fabric were her panty hose and a minute scrap of lace masquerading as panties. If he'd known that her breasts were bare under her dress, there was no way he could have kept himself from pulling those lapels

apart and touching, tasting, nor could he stop himself now. Her breasts were high and round, the skin satiny, her coral-colored nipples small and already tightly beaded. With a rough sound he bent his head and sucked strongly at her, drawing her nipple into his mouth and molding his lips to that creamy, satiny flesh. He cupped her other breast in his hand, gently kneading it and rubbing the nipple with his thumb. A high, gasping cry tore from her throat, and she arched against his mouth, her hands digging into his dark hair to press his head into her. Her breasts were so firm they were almost hard, and the firmness excited him even more. He had to taste the other one, surround himself with the sweet headiness of her scent and skin.

Slowly Michelle twisted beneath him, plucking now at the back of his shirt in an effort to get rid of the fabric between them. She needed to feel the heat and power of his bare skin under her hands, against her body, but his mouth on her breasts was driving her mad with pleasure, and she couldn't control herself enough to strip the shirt away. Every stroke of his tongue sent wildfire running along her nerves, from her nipples to her loins, and she was helpless to do anything but feel.

Then he left her, rising up on his knees to tear at his shirt and throw it aside. His shoes, socks, pants and underwear followed, flung blindly away from the bed, and he knelt naked between her spread thighs. He stripped her panty hose and panties away, leaving her open and vulnerable to his penetration.

For the first time, she felt fear. It had been so long for her, and sex hadn't been good in her marriage anyway. John leaned over her, spreading her legs further, and she felt the first shock of his naked flesh as he positioned himself for entry. He was so big, his muscled body dominating her smaller, softer one completely. She knew from harsh experience how helpless a woman was against a man's much greater strength; John was stronger than most, bigger than most, and he was intent on the sexual act as males have been from the beginning of time. He was quintessentially male, the sum and substance of masculine aggression and sexuality. Panic welled in her, and her slim, delicate hand pressed against him, her fingers sliding into the curling dark hair that covered his chest The black edges of fear were coming closer.

Her voice was thready, begging for reassurance. "John? Don't hurt me, please."

He froze, braced over her on the threshold of entry. Her warm, sweet body beckoned him, moistly ready for him, but her eyes were pleading. Did she expect pain? Good God, who could have hurt her? The seeds of fury formed deep in his mind, shunted aside for now by the screaming urges of his body. For now, he had to have her. "No, baby," he said gently, his dark voice so warm with tenderness that the fear in her eyes faded. "I won't hurt you."

He slid one arm under her, leaning on that elbow and raising her so her nipples were buried in the hair on his chest. Again he heard that small intake of breath from her, an unconscious sound of pleasure. Their eyes locked, hers misty and soft, his like black fire, as he tightened his buttocks and very slowly, very carefully, began to enter her.

Michelle shuddered as great ripples of pleasure washed through her, and her legs climbed his to wrap around his hips. A soft, wild cry tore from her throat, and she shoved her hand against her mouth to stifle the sound. Still his black eyes burned down at her. "No," he whispered. "Take your hand away. I want to hear you, baby. Let me hear how good it feels to you."

Still there was that slow, burning push deep into her, her flesh quivering as she tried to accommodate him.

Panic seized her again. "Stop! John, please, no more! You're… I can't…"
"Shh, shh," he soothed, kissing her mouth, her eyes, nibbling at the velvety lobes of her ears. "It's okay, baby, don't worry. I won't hurt you." He continued soothing her with kisses and soft murmurs, and though every instinct in him screamed to bury himself in her to the hilt, he clamped down on those urges with iron control. There was no way he was going to hurt her, not with the fear he'd seen in the misty green depths of her eyes. She was so delicate and silky, and so tight around him that he could feel the gentle pulsations of adjustment. His eyes closed as pure pleasure shuddered through him.
She was aroused, but not enough. He set about exciting her with all the sensual skill he possessed, holding her mouth with deep kisses while his hands gently stroked her, and he began moving slowly inside her. So slow, holding himself back, keeping his strokes shallow even though every movement wrung new degrees of ecstasy from him. He wanted her mindless with need.
Michelle felt her control slipping away by degrees, and she didn't care. Control didn't matter, nothing mattered but the heat that was consuming her body and mind, building until all sense of self was gone

and she was nothing but a female body, twisting and surging beneath the overpowering male. A powerful tension had her in its grip, tightening, combining with the heat as it swept her inexorably along. She was burning alive, writhing helplessly, wild little pleading sobs welling up and escaping. John took them into his own mouth, then put his hand between their bodies, stroking her. She trembled for a moment on the crest of a great wave; then she was submerged in exploding sensation. He held her safely, her heaving body locked in his arms while he thrust deeply, giving her all the pleasure he could.

When it was over she was limp and sobbing, drenched with both her sweat and his. "I didn't know," she said brokenly, and tears tracked down her face. He murmured to her, holding her tightly for a moment, but he was deep inside her now, and he couldn't hold back any longer. Sliding his hands beneath her hips, he lifted her up to receive his deep, powerful thrusts.

Now it was she who held him, cradling him in her body and with her arms tight around him; he cried out, a deep, hoarse sound, blind and insensible to everything but the great, flooding force of his pleasure.

It was quiet for a long time afterward. John lay on top of her, so sated and relaxed that he couldn't tolerate the idea of moving, of separating his flesh from hers. It wasn't until she stirred, gasping a little for breath, that he raised himself on his elbows and looked down at her.

Intense satisfaction, mingled with both gentleness and a certain male arrogance, was written on his face as he leaned above her. He smoothed her tangled hair back from her face, stroking her cheeks with his fingers. She looked pale and exhausted, but it was the sensuous exhaustion of a woman who has been thoroughly satisfied by her lover. He traced the shape of her elegant cheekbones with his lips, his tongue dipping out to sneak tastes that sent little ripples of arousal through him again.

Then he lifted his head again, curiosity burning in his eyes. "You've never enjoyed it before, have you?"

A quick flush burned her cheeks, and she turned her head on the pillow, staring fixedly at the lamp. "I suppose that does wonders for your ego."

She was withdrawing from him, and that was the last thing he wanted. He decided to drop the subject for the time being, but there were still a lot of questions that he intended to have answered. Right now she was in his arms, warm and weak from his love-

making, just the way he was going to keep her until she became used to his possession and accepted it as fact.
She was his now.
He'd take care of her, even spoil her. Why not? She was made to be pampered and indulged, at least up to a point. She'd been putting up a good fight to work this ranch, and he liked her guts, but she wasn't cut out for that type of life. Once she realized that she didn't have to fight anymore, that he was going to take care of her, she'd settle down and accept it as the natural order of things.
He didn't have money to waste on fancy trips, or to drape her in jewels, but he could keep her in comfort and security. Not only that, he could guarantee that the sheets on their bed would stay hot. Even now, so soon after having her, he felt the hunger and need returning.
Without a word he began again, drawing her down with him into a dark whirlpool of desire and satisfaction. Michelle's eyes drifted shut, her body arching in his arms. She had known instinctively, years ago, that it would be like this, that even her identity would be swamped with the force of his passion. In his arms she lost herself and became only his woman.

Chapter Five

Michelle woke early, just as the first gray light of dawn was creeping into the room. The little sleep she'd gotten had been deep and dreamless for a change, but she was used to sleeping alone; the unaccustomed presence of a man in her bed had finally nudged her awake. A stricken look edged into her eyes as she looked over at him, sprawled on his stomach with one arm curled under the pillow and the other arm draped across her naked body.
How easy she'd been for him. The knowledge ate at her as she gingerly slipped from the bed, taking care not to wake him. He might sleep for hours yet; he certainly hadn't had much sleep during the night. Her legs trembled as she stood, the soreness in her thighs and deep in her body providing yet another reminder of the past night, as if she needed any further confirmation of her memory. Four times. He'd taken her four times, and each time it had seemed as if the pleasure intensified. Even now she couldn't believe how her body had responded to him, soaring wildly out of her control. But he'd controlled himself,

and her, holding her to the rhythm he set in order to prolong their lovemaking.Now she knew that all the talk about him hadn’t been exaggerated;both his virility and his skill had been if anything, underrated. Somehow she had to come to terms with the unpleasant fact that she had allowed herself to become the latest of his one-night stands. The hardest fact to face wasn't that she'd been so easily seduced, but her own piercing regret that such ecstasy wouldn't last. Oh, he might come back…but he wouldn't stay. In time he'd become bored with her and turn his predatory gaze on some other woman just as he always had before.

And she'd go on loving him, just as she had before. Quietly she got clean underwear from the dresser and her bathrobe from the adjoining bath, but she went to the bathroom down the hall to take a shower. She didn't want the sound of running water to awaken him. Right now she needed time to herself, time to gather her composure before she faced him again. She didn't know what to say, how to act

The stinging hot water eased some of the soreness from her muscles, though a remaining ache reminded her of John's strength with every step she took. After showering she went down to the kitchen and started brewing a fresh pot of coffee. She was leaning

against the cabinets, watching the dark brew drip into the pot, when the sound of motors caught her attention. Turning to look out the window, she saw the two pickup trucks from John's ranch pull into the yard. The same men who had been there the day before got out; one noticed John's car parked in front of the house and poked his buddy in the ribs, pointing. Even from that distance Michelle could hear the muffled male laughter, and she didn't need any help imagining their comments. The boss had scored again. It would be all over the county within twenty-four hours. In the manner of men everywhere, they were both proud and slightly envious of their boss' sexual escapades, and they'd tell the tale over and over again.

Numbly she turned back to watch the coffee dripping; when it finished, she filled a big mug, then wrapped her cold fingers around the mug to warm them. It had to be nerves making her hands so cold. Quietly she went upstairs to look into her bedroom, wondering if he would still be sleeping.

He wasn't, though evidently he'd awoken only seconds before. He propped himself up on one elbow and ran his hand through his tousled black hair, narrowing his eyes as he returned her steady gaze. Her heart lurched painfully. He looked like a ruffian,

with his hair tousled, his jaw darkened by the overnight growth of beard, his bare torso brown and roped with the steely muscles that were never found on a businessman. She didn't know what she'd hoped to see in his expression: desire, possibly, even affection. But whatever she'd wanted to see wasn't there. Instead his face was as hard as always, measuring her with that narrowed gaze that made her feel like squirming. She could feel him waiting for her to move, to say something.

Her legs were jerky, but she managed not to spill the coffee as she walked into the room. Her voice was only slightly strained. "Congratulations. All the gossip doesn't give you due credit. My, my, you're really something when you decide to score; I didn't even think of saying no. Now you can go home and put another notch in your bedpost."

His eyes narrowed even more. He sat up, ignoring the way the sheet fell below his waist, and held out his hand for the coffee mug. When she gave it to him, he turned it and drank from the place where she'd been sipping, then returned it to her, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Sit down."

She flinched a little at his hard, raspy, early-morning voice. He saw the small movement and reached out

to take her wrist, making coffee lap alarmingly close to the rim of the mug. Gently but inexorably he drew her down to sit facing him on the edge of the bed. He kept his hand on her wrist, his callused thumb rubbing over the fine bones and delicate tracery of veins. "Just for the record, I don't notch bedposts. Is that what's got your back up this morning?"

She gave a small defensive shrug, not meeting his eyes.

She'd withdrawn from him again; his face was grim as he watched her, trying to read her expression. He remembered the fear in her last night, and he wondered who'd put it there. White-hot embers of rage began to flicker to life at the thought of some bastard abusing her in bed, hurting her. Women were vulnerable when they made love, and Michelle especially wouldn't have the strength to protect herself. He had to get her to talk, or she'd close up on him completely. "It had been a long time for you, hadn't it?"

Again she gave that little shrug, as if hiding behind the movement. Again he probed, watching her face. "You didn't enjoy sex before." He made it a statement, not a question.

Finally her eyes darted to his, wary and resentful. "What do you want, a recommendation? You know

that was the first time I'd…enjoyed it."
"Why didn't you like it before?"
"Maybe I just needed to go to bed with a stud," she said flippantly.
"Hell, don't give me that," he snapped, disgusted. "Who hurt you? Who made you afraid of sex?"
"I'm not afraid," she denied, disturbed by the idea that she might have let Roger warp her to such an extent. "It was just…well, it had been so long, and you're a big man…" Her voice trailed off, and abruptly she flushed, her gaze sliding away from him.
He watched her thoughtfully; considering what he'd learned about her last night and this morning, it was nothing short of a miracle that she hadn't knocked his proposal and half his teeth down his throat when he'd suggested she become his mistress as payment of the debt. It also made him wonder if her part in the breakup of Mike Webster's marriage hadn't been blown out of all proportion; after all, a woman who didn't enjoy making love wasn't likely to be fast and easy.
It was pure possessiveness, but he was glad no other man had pleased her the way he had; it gave him a hold on her, a means of keeping her by his side. He would use any weapon he had, because during the night he had realized that there was no way he could let her go. She could be haughty, bad-tempered and stubborn; she could too easily be spoiled and accept it as her due, though he'd be damned if he hadn't almost decided it *was* her due. She was proud and difficult, trying to build a stone wall around herself to

keep him at a distance, like a princess holding herself aloof from the peasants, but he couldn't get enough of her. When they were making love, it wasn't the princess and the peasant any longer; they were a man and his woman, writhing and straining together, moaninig with ectasy. He’d never been so hungry for a woman before, so hot that he’d felt nothing and no one could have kept him away from her.

She seemed to think last night had been a casual thing on his part, that sunrise had somehow ended it. She was in for a surprise. Now that she'd given herself to him, he wasn't going to let her go. He'd learned how to fight for and keep what was his, but his single-minded striving over the years to build the ranch into one of the biggest cattle ranches in Florida was nothing compared to the intense possessiveness he felt for Michelle.

Finally he released her wrist, and she stood immediately, moving away from him. She sipped at the coffee she still held, and her eyes went to the window. "Your men got a big kick out of seeing your car still here this morning. I didn't realize they'd be back, since they put up the fencing yesterday."

Indifferent to his nakedness, he threw the sheet back and got out of bed. "They didn't finish. They'll do the rest of the job today, then move the herd to the east pasture tomorrow." He waited, then said evenly, "It bothers you that they know?"

"Being snickered about over a beer bothers me. It polishes up your image a little more, but all I'll be is

the most recent in a long line of one-nighters for you."
"Well, everyone will know differently When you move in with me, won't they?" he asked arrogantly, walking into the bathroom. "How long will it take you to pack?"
Stunned, Michelle whirled to stare at him, but he'd already disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of the shower came on. Move in with him? If there was any limit to his gall, she hadn't seen it yet! She sat down on the edge of the bed, watching the bathroom door and waiting for him to emerge as she fought the uneasy feeling of sliding further and further down a precipitous slope. Control of her own life was slipping from her hands, and she didn't know if she could stop it. It wasn't just that John was so domineering, though he was; the problem was that, despite how much she wished it were different, she was weak where he was concerned. She wanted to be able to simply walk into his arms and let them lock around her, to rest against him and let him handle everything. She was so tired, physically and mentally. But if she let him take over completely, what would happen when he became bored with her? She would be right back where she'd started, but with a broken heart added to her problems.

The shower stopped running. An image of him formed in her mind, powerfully muscled, naked, dripping wet. Drying himself with her towels. Filling her bathroom with his male scent and presence. He wouldn't look diminished or foolish in her very feminine rose-and-white bathroom, nor would it bother him that he'd bathed with perfumed soap. He was so intensely masculine that female surroundings merely accentuated that masculinity.

She began to tremble, thinking of the things he'd done during the night, the way he'd made her feel. She hadn't known her body could take over like that, that she could revel in being possessed, and despite the outdated notion that a man could physically "possess" a woman, that was what had happened. She felt it, instinctively and deeply, the sensation sinking into her bones.

He sauntered from the bathroom wearing only a towel hitched low on his hips, the thick velvety fabric contrasting whitely with the bronzed darkness of his abdomen. His hair and mustache still gleamed wetly; a few drops of moisture glistened on his wide shoulders and in the curls that darkened his broad chest. Her mouth went dry. His body hair followed the tree of life pattern, with the tufts under his arms and curls across his chest, then the narrowing line

that ran down his abdomen before spreading again at his groin. He was as superbly built as a triathlete, and she actually ached to touch him, to run her palms all over him.
He gave her a hard, level look. "Stop stalling and get packed."
"I'm not going." She tried to sound strong about it; if her voice lacked the volume she'd wanted, at least it was even.
"You'll be embarrassed if you don't have anything on besides that robe when I carry you into my house," he warned quietly.
"John—" She stopped, then made a frustrated motion with her hand. "I don't want to get involved with you."
"It's a little late to worry about that now," he pointed out.
"I know," she whispered. "Last night shouldn't have happened."
"Damn it to hell, woman, it should've happened a long time ago." Irritated, he dropped the towel to the floor and picked up his briefs. "Moving in with me is the only sensible thing to do. I normally work twelve hours a day, sometimes more. Sometimes I'm up all night Then there's the paperwork to do in the evenings; hell, you know what it takes to run a ranch.

When would I get over to see you? Once a week? I'll be damned if I'll settle for an occasional quickie."
"What about *my* ranch? Who'll take care of it while I make myself convenient to you whenever you get the urge?"
He gave a short bark of laughter. "Baby, if you lay down every time I got the urge, you'd spend the next year on your back. I get hard every time I look at you."
Involuntarily her eyes dropped down his body, and a wave of heat washed over her when she saw the proof of his words swelling against the white fabric of his underwear. She jerked her gaze away, swallowing to relieve the dry tightness of her throat
"I have to take care of my ranch," she repeated stubbornly, as if they were magic words that would keep him at bay.
He pulled on his pants, impatience deepening the lines that bracketed his mouth. "I'll take care of both ranches. Face facts, Michelle. You need help. You can't do it on your own."
"Maybe not, but I need to try. Don't you understand?" Desperation edged into her tone. "I've never had a job, never done anything to support myself, but I'm trying to learn. You're stepping right into Dad's shoes and taking over, handling everything yourself, but what happens to me when you get bored and move on

to the next woman? I still won't know how to support myself!"

John paused in the act of zipping his pants, glaring at her. Damn it, what did she think he'd do, toss her out the door with a casual, "It's been fun, but I'm tired of you now?" He'd make certain she was on her feet, that the ranch was functioning on a profitable basis, if the day ever came when he looked at her and *didn't* want her. He couldn't imagine it. The desire for her consumed him like white-burning fire, sometimes banked, but never extinguished, heating his body and mind. He'd wanted her when she was eighteen and too young to handle him, and he wanted her now.

He controlled his anger and merely said, "I'll take care of you."

She gave him a tight little smile. "Sure." In her experience, people looked after themselves. Roger's parents had protected him to keep his slipping sanity from casting scandal on *their* family name. Her own father, as loving as he'd been, had ignored her plea for help because he didn't like to think his daughter was unhappy; it was more comfortable for him to decide she'd been exaggerating. The complaint she'd filed had disappeared because some judge had thought it would be advantageous to make friends with the powerful Beckmans. Roger's housekeeper had looked the other way because she liked her cushy well-paid job. Michelle didn't blame them, but she'd learned not to expect help, or to trust her life to others.

John snatched his shirt from the floor, his face dark with fury. "Do you want a written agreement?"

Tiredly she rubbed her forehead. He wasn't used to anyone refusing to obey him whenever he barked out an order. If she said yes, she would be confirming what he'd thought of her in the beginning, that her body could be bought. Maybe he even wanted her to say yes; then she'd be firmly under his control,

bought and paid for. But all she said was, "No, that isn't what I want."
"Then what, damn it?"
Just his love. To spend the rest of her life with him. That was all.
She might as well wish for the moon.
"I want to do it on my own."
The harshness faded from his face. "You can't."
Knowledge gave the words a finality that lashed at her.
"I can try."
The hell of it was, he had to respect the need to try, even though nature and logic said she wouldn't succeed. She wasn't physically strong enough to do what had to be done, and she didn't have the financial resources; she'd started out in a hole so deep that she'd been doomed to fail from the beginning. She would wear herself to the bone, maybe even get hurt, but in the end it would come full circle and she would need someone to take care of her. All he could do was wait, try to watch out for her, and be there to step in when everything caved in around her. By then she'd be glad to lean on a strong shoulder, to take the place in life she'd been born to occupy.
But he wasn't going to step back and let her pretend nothing had happened between them the night before.

She was his now, and she had to understand that before he left. The knowledge had to be burned into her flesh the way it was burned into his, and maybe it would take a lesson in broad daylight for her to believe it. He dropped his shirt and slowly unzipped his pants, watching her. When he left, he'd leave his touch on her body and his taste in her mouth, and she'd feel him, taste him, think of him every time she climbed into this bed without him.

Her green eyes widened, and color bloomed on her cheekbones. Nervously she glanced at the bed, then back at him.

His heart began slamming heavily against his rib cage. He wanted to feel the firmness of her breasts in his hands again, feel her nipples harden in his mouth. She whispered his name as he dropped his pants and came toward her, putting his hands on her waist, which was so slender that he felt he might break her in two if he wasn't careful.

As he bent toward her, Michelle's head fell back as if it were too heavy for her neck to support He instantly took advantage of her vulnerable throat, his mouth burning a path down its length. She had wanted to deny the force of what had happened, but her body was responding feverishly to him, straining against him in search of the mindless ecstasy he'd given her

before. She no longer had the protection of ignorance. He was addictive, and she'd already become hooked. As he took her down to the bed, covering her with his heated nakedness, she didn't even think of denying him, or herself.

Are you on the pill?

No.

Damn. Then, *How long until your next period*?

Soon. Don't worry. The timing isn't right.

Famous last words. You'd better get a prescription.

I can't take the pill. I've tried; it makes me throw up all day long. Just like being pregnant.

Then we'll do something else. Do you want to take care of it, or do you want me to?

The remembered conversation kept replaying in her mind; he couldn't have made it plainer that he considered the relationship to be an ongoing one. He had been so matter-of-fact that it hadn't registered on her until later, but now she realized her acquiescent "I will" had acknowledged and accepted his right to make love to her. It hadn't hit her until he'd kissed her and had driven away that his eyes had been gleaming with satisfaction that had nothing to do with being physically sated.

She had some paperwork to do and forced herself to concentrate on it, but that only brought more problems to mind. The stack of unpaid bills was growing, and she didn't know how much longer she could hold her creditors off. They needed their money, too. She needed to fatten the cattle before selling them, but she didn't have the money for grain. Over and over she tried to estimate how much feed would cost, balanced against how much extra she could expect from the sale of heavier cattle. An experienced

rancher would have known, but all she had to go on were the records her father had kept, and she didn't know how accurate they were. Her father had been wildly enthusiastic about his ranch, but he'd relied on his foreman's advice to run it.
She could ask John, but he'd use it as another chance to tell her that she couldn't do it on her own.
The telephone rang, and she answered it absently.
"Michelle, darling."
The hot rush of nausea hit her stomach, and she jabbed the button, disconnecting the call. Her hands were shaking as she replaced the receiver. Why wouldn't he leave her alone? It had been two years! Surely he'd had time to get over his sick obsession; surely his parents had gotten him some sort of treatment!
The telephone rang again, the shrill tone filling her ears over and over. She counted the rings in a kind of frozen agony, wondering when he'd give up, or if her nerves would give out first What if he just let it keep ringing? She'd have to leave the house or go screaming mad. On the eighteenth ring, she answered.
"Darling, don't hang up on me again, please," Roger whispered. "I love you so much. I have to talk to you or go crazy."
They were the words of a lover, but she was shaking with cold. Roger was already crazy. How many times had he whispered love words to her only moments after a burst of rage, when she was stiff with terror, her body already aching from a blow? But then he'd be sorry that he'd hurt her, and he'd tell her over and over how much he loved her and couldn't live without her.
Her lips were so stiff that she could barely form the words. "Please leave me alone. I don't want to talk to you."
"You don't mean that. You know I love you. No one has ever loved you as much as I do."
"I'm sorry," she managed.
"Why are you sorry?"
"I'm not going to talk to you, Roger. I'm going to hang up."
"Why can't you talk? Is someone there with you?"
Her hand froze, unable to remove the receiver from her ear and drop it onto its cradle. Like a rabbit numbed by a snake's hypnotic stare, she waited without breathing for what she knew was coming.

"Michelle! Is someone there with you?"
"No," she whispered. "I'm alone."
"You're lying! That's why you won't talk to me. Your lover is there with you, listening to every word you're saying."
Helplessly she listened to the rage building in his voice, knowing nothing she said would stop it, but unable to keep herself from trying. "I promise you, I'm alone."
To her surprise he fell silent, though she could hear his quickened breath over the wire as clearly as if he were standing next to her. "All right, I'll believe you. If you'll come back to me, I'll believe you."
"I can't—"
"There's someone else, isn't there? I always knew there was. I couldn't catch you, but I always knew!"
"No. There's no one. I'm here all alone, working in Dad's study." She spoke quickly, closing her eyes at the lie. It was the literal truth, that she was alone, but it was still a lie. There had always been someone else deep in her heart, buried at the back of her mind.
Suddenly his voice was shaking. "I couldn't stand it if you loved someone else, darling. I just couldn't. Swear to me that you're alone."
"I swear it." Desperation cut at her. "I'm completely alone, I swear!"
"I love you," Roger whispered, and hung up.
Wildly she ran for the bathroom, where she retched until she was empty and her stomach muscles ached from heaving. She couldn't take this again; she would have the phone number changed, keep it unlisted. Leaning against the basin, she wiped her face with a wet cloth and stared at her bloodless reflection in the mirror. She didn't have the money to pay for having her number changed and taken off the listing.
A shaky bubble of laughter escaped her trembling lips. The way things were going, the phone service would be disconnected soon because she couldn't pay her bill. That would certainly take care of the problem; Roger couldn't call if she didn't have a telephone. Maybe being broke had some advantages after all.
She didn't know what she'd do if Roger came down here personally to take her back to Philadelphia where she "belonged." If she'd ever "belonged" any one place, it was here, because John was here. Maybe she couldn't go to the symphony, or go skiing in Switzerland, or shopping in Paris. It didn't matter

now and hadn't mattered then. All those things were nice, but unimportant. Paying bills was important. Taking care of the cattle was important.
Roger was capable of anything. Part of him was so civilized that it was truly difficult to believe he could be violent People who'd known him all his life thought he was one of the nicest men walking the face of the earth. And he could be, but there was another part of him that flew into insanely jealous rages.
If he came down here, if she had to see him again…if he touched her in even the smallest way…she knew she couldn't handle it
The last time had been the worst
His parents had been in Europe. Roger had accepted an invitation for them to attend a dinner party with a few of his business associates and clients. Michelle had been extremely careful all during the evening not to say or do anything that could be considered flirtatious, but it hadn't been enough. On the way home, Roger had started the familiar catechism:
She'd smiled a lot at Mr. So-and-So; had he propositioned her? He had, hadn't he? Why didn't she just admit it? He'd seen the looks passing between them.
By the time they'd arrived home, Michelle had been braced to run, if necessary, but Roger had settled down in the den to brood. She'd gone to bed, so worn out from mingled tension and relief that she'd drifted to sleep almost immediately.
Then, suddenly, the light had gone on and he'd been there, his face twisted with rage as he yelled at her. Terrified, screaming, stunned by being jerked from a sound sleep, she'd fought him when he jerked her half off the bed and began tearing at her nightgown, but she'd been helpless against him. He'd stripped the gown away and begun lashing at her with his belt, the buckle biting into her flesh again and again.
By the time he'd quit, she had been covered with raw welts and a multitude of small, bleeding cuts from the buckle, and she'd screamed so much she could no longer make a sound. Her eyes had been almost swollen shut from crying. She could still remember the silence as he'd stood there by the bed, breathing hard as he looked down at her. Then he'd fallen on his knees, burying his face in her tangled hair. "I love you so much," he'd said.
That night, while he'd slept, she had crept out and taken a cab to a hospital emergency room. Two years had passed, but the small white scars were still visible on her back, buttocks and upper thighs. They would fade with time,

becoming impossible to see, but the scar left on her mind by the sheer terror of that night hadn't faded at all. The demons she feared all wore Roger's face.

But now she couldn't ran from him; she had no other place to go, no other place where she wanted to be. She was legally free of him now, and there was nothing he could do to make her return. Legally she could stop him from calling her. He was harassing her; she could get a court order prohibiting him from contacting her in any way.

But she wouldn't, unless he forced her to it. She opened her eyes and stared at herself again. Oh, it was classic. A counselor at the hospital had even talked with her about it. She didn't want anyone to know her husband had abused her; it would be humiliating, as if it were somehow her fault. She didn't want people to pity her, she didn't want them to talk about her, and she especially didn't want John to know. It was too ugly, and she felt ashamed.

Suddenly she felt the walls closing in on her, stifling her. She had to get out and *do* something, or she might begin crying, and she didn't want that to happen. If she started crying now, she wouldn't be able to stop.

She got in the old truck and drove around the pastures, looking at the new sections of fence John's men had put up. They had finished and returned to their regular chores. Tomorrow they'd ride over on horseback and move the herd to this pasture with its high, thick growth of grass. The cattle could get their fill without walking so much, and they'd gain weight. As she neared the house again she noticed how high the grass and weeds had gotten in the yard. It was so bad she might need to move the herd to the yard to graze instead of to the pasture. Yard work had come in a poor second to all the other things that had

needed doing, but now, thanks to John, she had both the time and energy to do something about it.
She got out the lawnmower and pushed it up and down the yard, struggling to force it through the high grass. Little green mounds piled up in neat rows behind her. When that was finished, she took a knife from the kitchen and hacked down the weeds that had grown up next to the house. The physical activity acted like a sedative, blunting the edge of fear and finally abolishing it altogether. She didn't have any reason to be afraid; Roger wasn't going to do anything.
Subconsciously she dreaded going to bed that night, wondering if she would spend the night dozing, only to jerk awake every few moments, her heart pounding with fear as she waited for her particular demon to leap screaming out of the darkness and drag her out of bed. She didn't want to let Roger have that kind of power over her, but memories of that night still nagged at the edges of her mind. Someday she would be free of him. She swore it; she promised it to herself.
When she finally went reluctantly up the stairs and paused in the doorway to her delicately feminine room, she was overcome by a wave of memories that made her shake. She hadn't expected this reaction;

she'd been thinking of Roger, but it was John who dominated this room. Roger had never set foot in here. John had slept sprawled in that bed. John had showered in that bathroom. The room was filled with his presence.

She had lain beneath him on that bed, twisting and straining with a pleasure so intense that she'd been mindless with it. She remembered the taut, savage look on his face, the gentleness of his hands as he restrained his strength which could too easily bruise a woman's soft skin. Her body tingled as she remembered the way he'd touched her, the places he'd touched her.

Then she realized that John had given her more than pleasure. She hadn't been aware of fearing men, but on some deep level of her mind, she had. In the two years since her divorce she hadn't been out on a date, and she'd managed to disguise the truth from herself by being part of a crowd that included men. Because she'd laughed with them, skied and swam with them—as long as it was a group activity, but never *alone* with a man—she'd been able to tell herself that Roger hadn't warped her so badly after all. She was strong; she could put all that behind her and not blame all men for what one man had done.

She hadn't blamed them, but she'd feared their strength. Though she'd never gone into a panic if a man touched her casually, she hadn't liked it and had always retreated.

Perhaps it would have been that way with John, too, if her long obsession with him hadn't predisposed her

to accept his touch. But she'd yearned for him for so long, like a child crying for the moon, that her hunger had overcome her instinctive reluctance.

And he'd been tender, careful, generous in the giving of pleasure. In the future his passion might become rougher, but a bond of physical trust had been forged during the night that would never be broken.

Not once was her sleep disturbed by nightmares of Roger. Even in sleep, she felt John's arms around her.

Chapter Six

She had half expected John to be among the men who rode over the next morning to move the cattle to the east pasture, and a sharp pang of disappointment went through her as she realized he hadn't come. Then enthusiasm overrode her disappointment as she ran out to meet them. She'd never been in on an actual "cattle drive," short as it was, and was as excited as a child, her face glowing when she skidded to a stop in front of the mounted men.

"I want to help," she announced; green eyes sparkling in the early morning sun. The respite from the hard physical work she'd been doing made her feel like doing cartwheels on the lawn. She hadn't realized how tired she'd been until she'd had the opportunity to rest, but now she was bubbling over with energy.

Nev Luther, John's lanky and laconic foreman, looked down at her with consternation written across his weathered face. The boss had been explicit in his instructions that Michelle was not to be allowed to work in any way, which was a damned odd position for him to take. Nev couldn't remember the boss ever wanting anyone *not* to work. But orders were orders, and folks who valued their hides didn't ignore the boss's orders.

Not that he'd expected any trouble doing what he'd been told. Somehow he just hadn't pictured fancy Michelle Cabot doing any ranch work, let alone jumping up and down with joy at the prospect. Now

what was he going to do? He cleared his throat, reluctant to do anything that would wipe the glowing smile off her face, but even more reluctant to get in trouble with Rafferty.
Inspiration struck, and he looked around. "You got a horse?" He knew she didn't, so he figured that was a detail she couldn't get around.
Her bright face dimmed, then lit again. "I'll drive the truck," she said, and raced toward the barn.
Thunderstruck, Nev watched her go, and the men with him muttered warning comments.
Now what? He couldn't haul her out of the truck and order her to stay here. He didn't think she would take orders too well, and he also had the distinct idea the boss was feeling kinda possessive about her. Nev worked with animals, so he tended to put his thoughts in animal terms. One stallion didn't allow another near his mare, and the possessive mating instinct was still alive and well in humans. Nope, he wasn't going to manhandle that woman and have Rafferty take his head off for touching her. Given the choice, he'd rather have the boss mad about his orders not being followed than in a rage because someone had touched his woman, maybe upset her and made her cry.
The stray thought that she might cry decided him in a hurry. Like most men who didn't have a lot of contact

with women, he went into a panic at the thought of tears. Rafferty could just go to hell. As far as Nev was concerned, Michelle could do whatever she wanted.

Having the burden of doing everything lifted off her shoulders made all the difference in the world. Michelle enjoyed the sunshine, the lowing of the cattle as they protested the movement, the tight-knit way the cowboys and their horses worked together. She bumped along the pasture in the old truck, which wasn't much good for rounding up strays but could keep the herd nudging forward. The only problem was, riding—or driving—drag was the dustiest place to be.

It wasn't long before one of the cowboys gallantly offered to drive the truck and give her a break from the dust. She took his horse without a qualm. She loved riding; at first it had been the only thing about ranch life that she'd enjoyed. She quickly found that riding a horse for pleasure was a lot different from riding a trained cutting horse. The horse didn't wait for her to tell it what to do. When a cow broke for freedom, the horse broke with it, and Michelle had to learn to go with the movement She soon got the hang of it though, and before long she was almost hoping a

stray would bolt, just for the joy of riding the quick-moving finimal.
Nev swore long and eloquently under his breath when he saw the big gray coming across the pasture. Damn, the fat was in the fire now.
John was eyeing the truck with muted anger as he rode up, but there was no way the broad-shouldered figure in it was Michelle. Disbelieving, his black gaze swept the riders and lighted unerringly on the wand-slim rider with sunny hair tumbling below a hat. He reined in when he reached Nev, his jaw set as he looked at his foreman. "Well?" he asked in a dead-level voice.
Nev scratched his jaw, turning his head to watch Michelle snatch her hat off her head and wave it at a rambunctious calf. "I tried," he mumbled. He glanced back to meet John's narrowed gaze. Damned if eyes as black as hell couldn't look cold. "Hell, boss, it's her truck and her land. What was I supposed to do? Tie her down?"
"She's not in the truck," John pointed out.
"Well, it was so dusty back there that…ah, *hell! "*
Nev gave up trying to explain himself in disgust and spurred to head off a stray. John let him go, picking his way over to Michelle. He would take it up with Nev later, though already his anger was fading. She

wasn't doing anything dangerous, even if he didn't like seeing her covered with dust.
She smiled at him when he rode up, a smile of such pure pleasure that his brows pulled together in a little frown. It was the first time he'd seen that smile since she'd been back, but until now he hadn't realized it had been missing. She looked happy. Faced with a smile like that, no wonder Nev had caved in and let her do what she wanted.
"Having fun?" he asked wryly.
"Yes, I am." Her look dared him to make something of it.
"I had a call from the lawyer this morning. He'll have everything ready for us to sign the day after tomorrow."
"That's good." Her ranch would shrink by a sizable hunk of acreage, but at least it would be clear of any large debt.
He watched her for a minute, leaning his forearms on the saddle horn. "Want to ride back to the house with me?"
"For a quickie?" she asked tartly, her green eyes beginning to spit fire at him.
His gaze drifted to her breasts. "I was thinking more of a slowie."

"So your men would have even more to gossip about?"
He drew a deep, irritated breath. "I suppose you want me to sneak over in the dead of night. We're not teenagers, damn it"
"No, we're not," she agreed. Then she said abruptly, "I'm not pregnant."
He didn't know if he should feel relieved, or irritated that this news meant it would be several days before she'd let him make love to her again. He wanted to curse, already feeling frustrated. Instead he said, "At least we didn't have to wait a couple of weeks, wondering."
"No, we didn't" She had known that the timing made it unlikely she'd conceive, but she'd still felt a small pang of regret that morning. Common sense aside, there was a deeply primitive part of her that wondered what woman wouldn't want to have his baby. He was so intensely masculine that he made other men pale in comparison, like a blooded stallion matched against scrub stock.
The gray shifted restively beneath him, and John controlled the big animal with his legs. "Actually, I don't have time, even for a quickie. I came to give Nev some instructions, then stop by the house to let you know where I'll be. I have to fly to Miami this

afternoon, and I may not be back for a couple of days. If I'm not, drive to Tampa by yourself and sign those papers, and I'll detour on my way back to sign them."

Michelle twisted in the saddle to look at the battered, rusting old truck bouncing along behind the cattle. There was no way she would trust that relic to take her any place she couldn't get back from on foot. "I think I'll wait until you're back."

"Use the Mercedes. Just call the ranch and Nev will have a couple of men bring it over. I wouldn't trust that piece of junk you've been driving to get you to the grocery store and back."

It could have been a gesture between friends, a neighborly loan of a car, even something a lover might do, but Michelle sensed that John intended it to mean more than that. He was maneuvering her into his home as his mistress, and if she accepted the loan of the car, she would be just that much more dependent on him. Yet she was almost cornered into accepting because she had no other way of getting to Tampa, and her own sense of duty insisted that she sign those papers as soon as possible, to clear the debt

He was waiting for her answer, and finally she couldn't hesitate any longer. "All right." Her

surrender was quiet, almost inaudible.
He hadn't realized how tense he'd been until his muscles relaxed. The thought that she might try driving to Tampa in that old wreck had been worrying him since he'd gotten the call from Miami. His mother had gotten herself into financial hot water again, and, distasteful as it was to him, he wouldn't let her starve. No matter what, she was his mother. Loyalty went bone deep with him, a lot deeper than aggravation.
He'd even thought of taking Michelle with him, just to have her near. But Miami was too close to Palm Beach; too many of her old friends were there, bored, and just looking for some lark to spice up their lives. It was possible that some jerk with more money than brains would make an offer she couldn't refuse. He had to credit her with trying to make a go of the place, but she wasn't cut out for the life and must be getting tired of working so hard and getting nowhere. If someone offered to pay her fare, she might turn her back and walk away, back to the jet-set life-style she knew so well. No matter how sum the chance of it happening, any chance at all was too much for him. No way would he risk losing her now.
For the first time in his life he felt insecure about a woman. She wanted him, but was it enough to keep

her with him? For the first time in his life, it was important. The hunger he felt for her was so deep that he wouldn't be satisfied until she was living under his roof and sleeping in his bed, where he could take care of her and pamper her as much as he wanted.
Yes, she wanted him. He could please her in bed; he could take care of her. But she didn't want him as much as he wanted her. She kept resisting him, trying to keep a distance between them even now, after they'd shared a night and a bed, and a joining that still shook him with its power. It seemed as if every time he tried to bring her closer, she backed away a little more.
He reached out and touched her cheek, stroking his fingertips across her skin and feeling the patrician bone structure that gave her face such an angular, haughty look. "Miss me while I'm gone," he said, his tone making it a command.
A small wry smile tugged at the corners of her wide mouth. "Okay."
"Damn it," he said mildly. "You're not going to boost my ego, are you?"
"Does it need it?"
"Where you're concerned, yeah."
"That's a little hard to believe. Is missing someone a two-way street, or will you be too busy in Miami to

bother?"
"I'll be busy, but I'll bother anyway."
"Be careful." She couldn't stop the words. They were the caring words that always went before a trip, a magic incantation to keep a loved one safe. The thought of not seeing him made her feel cold and empty. Miss him? He had no idea how much, that the missing was a razor, already slashing at her insides. He wanted to kiss her, but not with his men watching. Instead he nodded an acknowledgment and turned his horse away to rejoin Nev. The two men rode together for a time, and Michelle could see Nev give an occasional nod as he listened to John's instructions. Then John was gone, kicking the gray into a long ground-eating stride that quickly took horse and rider out of sight.
Despite the small, lost feeling she couldn't shake, Michelle didn't allow herself to brood over the next several days. There was too much going on, and even though John's men had taken over the ranching chores, there were still other chores that, being cowboys, they didn't see. If it didn't concern cattle or horses, then it didn't concern them. Now Michelle found other chores to occupy her time. She painted the porch, put up a new post for the mailbox and spent as much time as she could with the men.

The ranch seemed like a ranch again, with all the activity, dust, smells and curses filling the air. The cattle were dipped, the calves branded, the young bulls clipped. Once Michelle would have wrinkled her nose in distaste, but now she saw the activity as new signs of life, both in the ranch and in herself.
On the second day Nev drove the Mercedes over while one of the other men brought an extra horse for Nev to ride. Michelle couldn't quite look the man in the eye as she took the keys from him, but he didn't seem to see anything unusual about her driving John's car.
After driving the pickup truck for so long, the power and responsiveness of the Mercedes felt odd. She was painfully cautious on the long drive to Tampa. It was hard to imagine that she'd ever been blase about the expensive, sporty cars she'd driven over the years, but she could remember her carelessness with the white Porsche her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. The amount of money represented by the small white machine hadn't made any impression on her.
Everything was relative. Then, the money spent for the Porsche hadn't been much. If she had that much now, she would feel rich.

She signed the papers at the lawyer's office, then immediately made the drive back, not wanting to have the Mercedes out longer than necessary.
The rest of the week was calm, though she wished John would call to let her know when he would be back. The two days had stretched into five, and she couldn't stop the tormenting doubts that popped up in unguarded moments. Was he with another woman? Even though he was down there on business, she knew all too well how women flocked to him, and he wouldn't be working twenty-four hours a day. He hadn't made any commitments to her; he was free to take other women out if he wanted. No matter how often she repeated those words to herself, they still hurt.
But if John didn't call, at least Roger didn't, either. For a while she'd been afraid he would begin calling regularly, but the reassuring silence continued. Maybe something or someone else had taken his attention. Maybe his business concerns were taking all his time. Whatever it was, Michelle was profoundly grateful.
The men didn't come over on Friday morning. The cattle were grazing peacefully in the east pasture; all the fencing had been repaired; everything had been taken care of. Michelle put a load of clothing in the

washer, then spent the morning cutting the grass again. She was soaked with sweat when she went inside at noon to make a sandwich for lunch.
It was oddly silent in the house, or maybe it was just silent in comparison to the roar of the lawn-mower. She needed water. Breathing hard, she turned on the faucet to let the water get cold while she got a glass from the cabinet, but only a trickle of water ran out, then stopped altogether. Frowning, Michelle turned the faucet off, then on again. Nothing happened. She tried the hot water. Nothing.
Groaning, she leaned against the sink. That was just what she needed, for the water pump to break down.
It took only a few seconds for the silence of the house to connect with the lack of water, and she slowly straightened. Reluctantly she reached for the light switch and flicked it on. Nothing.
The electricity had been cut off.
That was why it was so quiet The refrigerator wasn't humming; the clocks weren't ticking; the ceiling fan was still.
Breathing raggedly, she sank into a chair. She had forgotten the last notice. She had put it in a drawer and forgotten it, distracted by John and the sudden activity around the ranch. Not that any excuse was worth a hill of beans, she reminded herself. Not that

she'd had the money to pay the bill even if she had remembered it.
She had to be practical. People had lived for thousands of years without electricity, so she could, too. Cooking was out; the range top, built-in oven and microwave were all electric, but she wasn't the world's best cook anyway, so that wasn't critical. She could eat without cooking. The refrigerator was empty except for milk and some odds and ends. Thinking about the milk reminded her how thirsty she was, so she poured a glass of the cold milk and swiftly returned the carton to the refrigerator.
There was a kerosene lamp and a supply of candles in the pantry, so she would have light. The most critical item was water. She had to have water to drink and bathe. At least the cattle could drink from the shallow creek that snaked across the east pasture, so she wouldn't have to worry about them.
There was an old well about a hundred yards behind the house, but she didn't know if it had gone dry or simply been covered when the other well had been drilled. Even if the well was still good, how would she get the water up? There was a rope in the barn, but she didn't have a bucket
She did have seventeen dollars, though, the last of her cash. If the well had water in it, she'd coax the

old truck down to the hardware store and buy a water bucket.
She got a rope from the barn, a pan from the kitchen and trudged the hundred yards to the old well.
It was almost overgrown with weeds and vines that she had to clear away while keeping an uneasy eye out for snakes. Then she tugged the heavy wooden cover to the side and dropped the pan into the well, letting the rope slip lightly through her hands. It wasn't a deep well; in only a second or two there was a distinct splash, and she began hauling the pan back up. When she got it to the top, a half cup of clear water was still in the pan despite the banging it had received, and Michelle sighed with relief. Now all she had to do was get the bucket.
By the time dusk fell, she was convinced that the pioneers had all been as muscular as the Incredible Hulk; every muscle in her body ached. She had drawn a bucket of water and walked the distance back to the house so many times she didn't want to think about it The electricity had been cut off while the washer had been in the middle of its cycle, so she had to rinse the clothes out by hand and hang them to dry. She had to have water to drink. She had to have water to bathe. She had to have water to flush the

toilet Modern conveniences were damned inconvenient without electricity.

But at least she was too tired to stay up long and waste the candles. She set a candle in a saucer on the bedside table, with matches alongside in case she woke up during the night. She was asleep almost as soon as she stretched out between the sheets.

The next morning she ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for breakfast, then cleaned out the refrigerator, so she wouldn't have to smell spoiled food. The house was oddly oppressive, as if the life had gone out of it, so she spent most of the day outdoors, watching the cattle graze, and thinking.

She would have to sell the beef cattle now, rather than wait to fatten them on grain. She wouldn't get as much for them, but she had to have money *now*. It had been foolish of her to let things go this far. Pride had kept her from asking for John's advice and help in arranging the sale; now she had to ask him. He would know who to contact and how to transport the cattle. The money would keep her going, allow her to care for the remainder of the herd until spring, when she would have more beef ready to sell. Pride was one thing, but she had carried it to the point of stupidity.

Still, if this had happened ten days earlier she wouldn't even have considered asking John's advice. She had been so completely isolated from human trust that any overture would have made her back away, rather than entice her closer. But John hadn't let her back away; he'd come after her, taken care of things over her protests, and very gently, thoroughly

seduced her. A seed of trust had been sown that was timidly growing, though it frightened her to think of relying on someone else, even for good advice.
It was sultry that night, the air thick with humidity. The heat added by the candles and kerosene lamp made it unbearable inside, and though she bathed in the cool water she had hauled from the well, she immediately felt sticky again. It was too early and too hot to sleep, so finally she went out on the porch in search of a breeze.
She curled up in a wicker chair padded with overstuffed cushions, sighing in relief as a breath of wind fanned her face. The night sounds of crickets and frogs surrounded her with a hypnotic lullaby, and before long her eyelids were drooping. She never quite dozed, but sank into a peaceful lethargy where time passed unnoticed. It might have been two hours or half an hour later when she was disturbed by the sound of a motor and the crunching of tires on gravel; headlights flashed into her eyes just as she opened them, making her flinch and turn her face from the blinding light Then the lights were killed and the motor silenced. She sat up straighter, her heart beginning to pound as a tall, broad-shouldered man got out of the truck and slammed the door. The starlight wasn't bright, but she didn't need light to

identify him when every cell in her body tingled with awareness.
Despite his boots, he didn't make a lot of noise as he came up the steps. "John," she murmured, her voice only a low whisper of sound, but he felt the vibration and turned toward her chair.
She was completely awake now, and becoming indignant. "Why didn't you call? I waited to hear from you—"
"I don't like telephones," he muttered as he walked toward her. That was only part of the reason. Talking to her on the telephone would only have made him want her more, and his nights had been pure hell as it was.
"That isn't much of an excuse."
"It'll do," he drawled. "What are you doing out here? The house is so dark I thought you must have gone to bed early."
Which wouldn't have stopped him from waking her, she thought wryly. "It's too hot to sleep."
He grunted in agreement, bending down to slide his arms under her legs and shoulders. Startled, Michelle grabbed his neck with both arms as he lifted her, then took her place in the chair and settled her on his lap.
An almost painful sense of relief filled her as his nearness eased tension she hadn't even been aware of

feeling. She was surrounded by his strength and warmth, and the subtle male scent of his skin reaffirmed the sense of homecoming, of tightness. Bonelessly she melted against him, lifting her mouth to his.

The kiss was long and hot, his lips almost bruising hers in his need, but she didn't mind, because her own need was just as urgent. His hands slipped under the light nightgown that was all she wore, finding her soft and naked, and a shudder wracked his body.

He muttered a soft curse. "Sweet hell, woman, you were sitting out here practically naked."

"No one else is around to see." She said the words against his throat, her lips moving over his hard flesh and finding the vibrant hollow where his pulse throbbed.

Heat and desire wrapped around them, sugar-sweet and mindless. From the moment he touched her, she'd wanted only to lie down with him and sink into the textures and sensations of lovemaking. She twisted in his arms, trying to press her breasts fully against him and whimpering a protest as he prevented her from moving.

"This won't work," he said, securing his hold on her and getting to his feet with her still in his arms. "We'd

better find a bed, because this chair won't hold up to what I have in mind."
He carried her inside, and as he had done before, he flipped the switch for the light in the entry, so he would be able to see while going up the stairs. He paused when the light didn't come on. "You've got a blown bulb."
Tension invaded her body again. "The power's off."
He gave a low laugh. "Well, hell. Do you have a flashlight? The last thing I want to do right now is trip on the stairs and break our necks."
"There's a kerosene lamp on the table." She wriggled in his arms, and he slowly let her slide to the floor, reluctant to let her go even for a moment. She fumbled for the matches and struck one, the bright glow guiding her hands as she removed the glass chimney and held the flame to the wick. It caught, and the light grew when she put the chimney back in place.
John took the lamp in his left hand, folding her close to his side with his other arm as they started up the stairs. "Have you called the power company to report it?"
She had to laugh. "They know."
"How long will it take them to get it back on?"

Well, he might as well know now. Sighing, she admitted, "The electricity's been cut off. I couldn't pay the bill."
He stopped, his brows drawing together in increasing temper as he turned. "Damn it to hell! How long has it been off?"
"Since yesterday morning."
He exhaled through his clenched teeth, making a hissing sound. "You've been here without water and lights for a day and a half? Of all the damned stubborn stunts… Why in hell didn't you give the bill to me?" He yelled the last few words at her, his eyes snapping black fury in the yellow light from the lamp.
"I don't want you paying my bills!" she snapped, pulling away from him.
"Well, that's just tough!" Swearing under his breath, he caught her hand and pulled her up the stairs, then into her bedroom. He set the lamp on the bedside table and crossed to the closet, opened the doors and began pulling her suitcases from the top shelf.
"What are you doing?" she cried, wrenching the suitcase from him.
He lifted another case down. "Packing your things," he replied shortly. "If you don't want to help, just sit on the bed and stay out of the way."

"Stop it!" She tried to prevent him from taking an armful of clothes from the closet, but he merely sidestepped her and tossed the clothes onto the bed, then returned to the closet for another armful.
"You're going with me," he said, his voice steely. "This is Saturday; it'll be Monday before I can take care of the bill. There's no way in hell I'm going to leave you here. God Almighty, you don't even have water!"
Michelle pushed her hair from her eyes. "I have water. I've been drawing it from the old well."
He began swearing again and turned from the closet to the dresser. Before she could say anything her underwear was added to the growing pile on the bed.
"I can't stay with you," she said desperately, knowing events were already far out of her control. "You know how it'll look! I can manage another couple of days __"
"I don't give a damn how it looks!" he snapped. "And just so you understand me, I'm going to give it to you in plain English. You're going with me now, and you won't be coming back. This isn't a two-day visit. I'm tired of worrying about you out here all by yourself; this is the last straw. You're too damned proud to tell me when you need help, so I'm going to take over

and handle everything, the way I should have in the beginning."
Michelle shivered, staring at him. It was true that she shrank from the gossip she knew would run through the county like wildfire, but that wasn't the main reason for her reluctance. Living with him would destroy the last fragile buffers she had retained against being overwhelmed by him in every respect. She wouldn't be able to keep any emotional distance as a safety precaution, just as physical distance would be impossible. She would be in his home, in his bed, eating his food, totally dependent on him.
It frightened her so much that she found herself backing away from him, as if by increasing the distance between them she could weaken his force and fury. "I've been getting by without you," she whispered.
"Is this what you call 'getting by'?" he shouted, slinging the contents of another drawer onto the bed. "You were working yourself half to death, and you're damned lucky you weren't hurt trying to do a two-man job! You don't have any money. You don't have a safe car to drive. You probably don't have enough to eat—and now you don't have electricity."
"I know what I don't have!"

"Well, I'll tell you something else you don't have: a choice. You're going. Now get dressed."
She stood against the wall on the other side of the room, very still and straight. When she didn't move his head jerked up, but something about her made his mouth soften. She looked defiant and stubborn, but her eyes were frightened, and she looked so frail it was like a punch in the gut, staggering him.
He crossed the room with quick strides and hauled her into his arms, folding her against him as if he couldn't tolerate another minute of not touching her. He buried his face in her hair, wanting to sweep her up and keep her from ever being frightened again. "I won't let you do it," he muttered in a raspy voice. "You're trying to keep me at a distance, and I'll be damned if I'll let you do it. Does it matter so much if people know about us? Are you ashamed because I'm not a member of your jet set?"
She gave a shaky laugh, her fingers digging into his back. "Of course not *I'm* not one of the jet set." How could any woman ever be ashamed of him?
His lips brushed her forehead, leaving warmth behind. "Then what is it?"
She bit her lip, her mind whirling with images of the past and fears of the future. "The summer I was nineteen…you called me a parasite." She had never forgotten the words or the deep hurt they'd caused,

and an echo of it was in her low, drifting voice. "You were right."
"Wrong," he whispered, winding his fingers through the strands of her bright hair. "A parasite doesn't give anything, it only takes. I didn't understand, or maybe I was jealous because I wanted it all. I have it all now, and I won't give it up. I've waited ten years for you, baby; I'm not going to settle for half measures now."
He tilted her head back, and his mouth closed warmly, hungrily, over hers, overwhelming any further protests. With a little sigh Michelle gave in, going up on her tiptoes to press herself against him. Regrets could wait; if this were all she would have of heaven, she was going to grab it with both hands. He would probably decide that she'd given in so she could have an easier life, but maybe that was safer than for him to know she was head over heels in love with him.
She slipped out of his arms and quietly changed into jeans and a silk tunic, then set about restoring order out of the chaos he'd made of her clothes. Traveling had taught her to be a fast, efficient packer. As she finished each case, he carried it out to the truck. Finally only her makeup and toiletries were left.

"We'll come back tomorrow for anything else you want," he promised, holding the lamp for the last trip down the stairs. When she stepped outside he extinguished the lamp and placed it on the table, then followed her and locked the door behind him.
"What will your housekeeper think?" she blurted nervously as she got in the truck. It hurt to be leaving her home. She had hidden herself away here, sinking deep roots into the ranch. She had found peace and healing in the hard work.
"That I should have called to let her know when I'd be home," he said, laughing as relief and anticipation filled him. "I came here straight from the airport. My bag is in back with yours." He couldn't wait to get home, to see Michelle's clothing hanging next to his in the closet, to have her toiletries in his bathroom, to sleep with her every night in his bed. He'd never before wanted to live with a woman, but with Michelle it felt necessary. There was no way he would ever feel content with less than everything she had to give.

Chapter Seven

It was midmorning when Michelle woke, and she lay there for a moment alone in the big bed, trying to adjust to the change. She was in John's house, in his bed. He had gotten up hours ago, before dawn, and left her with a kiss on the forehead and an order to catch up on her sleep. She stretched, becoming aware of both her nakedness and the ache in her muscles. She didn't want to move, didn't want to leave the comforting cocoon of sheets and pillows that carried John's scent. The memory of shattering pleasure made her body tingle, and she moved restlessly. He hadn't slept much, hadn't let her sleep until he'd finally left the bed to go about his normal day's work. If only he had taken her with him. She felt awkward with Edie, the housekeeper. What must she be thinking? They had met only briefly, because John had ushered Michelle upstairs with blatantly indecent haste, but her impression had been of height, dignity and cool control. The housekeeper wouldn't say anything if she disapproved, but then , she wouldn't have to; Michelle would know.

Finally she got out of bed and showered, smiling wryly to herself as she realized she wouldn't have to skimp on hot water. Central air-conditioning kept the house comfortably cool, which was another comfort she had given up in an effort to reduce the bills. No

matter what her mental state, she would be physically comfortable here. It struck her as odd that she'd never been to John's house before; she'd had no idea what to expect. Perhaps another old ranch house like hers, though her father had remodeled and modernized it completely on the inside before they had moved in, and it was in fact as luxurious as the home she had been used to. But John's house was Spanish in style, and was only eight years old. The cool adobe-colored brick and high ceilings kept the heat at bay, and a colorful array of houseplants brought freshness to the air. She'd been surprised at the greenery, then decided that the plants were Edie's doing. The U-shaped house wrapped around a pool landscaped to the point that it resembled a jungle lagoon more than a pool, and every room had a view of the pool and patio.

She had been surprised at the luxury. John was a long way from poor, but the house had cost a lot of money that he would normally have plowed back into the ranch. She had expected something more utilitarian, but at the same time it was very much his *home*. His presence permeated it, and everything was arranged for his comfort.

Finally she forced herself to stop hesitating and go downstairs; if Edie intended to be hostile, she might as well know now.

The layout of the house was simple, and she found the kitchen without any problem. All she had to do was follow her nose to the coffee. As she entered,

Edie looked around, her face expressionless, and Michelle's heart sank. Then the housekeeper planted her hands on her hips and said calmly, "I told John it was about damned time he got a woman in this house."

Relief flooded through Michelle, because something in her would have shriveled if Edie had looked at her with contempt She was much more sensitive to what other people thought now than she had been when she was younger and had the natural arrogance of youth. Life had defeated that arrogance and taught her not to expect roses.

Faint color rushed to her cheeks. "John didn't make much of an effort to introduce us last night. I'm Michelle Cabot."

"Edie Ward. Are you ready for breakfast? I'm the cook, too."

"I'll wait until lunch, thank you. Does John come back for lunch?" It embarrassed her to have to ask.

"If he's working close by. How about coffee?"

"I can get it," Michelle said quickly. "Where are the cups?"

Edie opened the cabinet to the left of the sink and got down a cup, handing it to Michelle. "It'll be nice to have company here during the day," she said. "These damn cowhands aren't much for talking."

Whatever Michelle had expected, Edie didn't conform. She had to be fifty; though her hair was still dark, there was something about her that made her look her age. She was tall and broad shouldered, with the erect carriage of a Mother Superior and the same sort of unflappable dignity, but she also had the wise, slightly weary eyes of someone who has been around the block a few times too many. Her quiet acceptance made Michelle relax; Edie didn't pass judgments.
But for all the easing of tension, Edie quietly and firmly discouraged Michelle from helping with any of the household chores. "Raffe rty would have both our heads," she said. "Housework is what he pays me to do, and around here we try not to rile him."
So Michelle wandered around the house, poking her head into every room and wondering how long she would be able to stand the boredom and emptiness. Working the ranch by herself had been so hard that she had sometimes wanted nothing more than to collapse where she stood, but there had always been a purpose to the hours. She liked ranching. It wasn't easy, but it suited her far better than the dual roles of ornament and mistress. This lack of purpose made her uneasy. She had hoped living with John would mean doing things with him, sharing the work and the worries with him…just as married couples did.

She sucked in her breath at the thought; she was in his—still *his*—bedroom at the time, standing in front of the open closet staring at his clothes, as if the sight of his personal possessions would bring him closer. Slowly she reached out and fingered a shirt sleeve. Her clothes were in the closet beside his, but she didn't belong. This was his house, his bedroom, his closet, and she was merely another possession, to be enjoyed in bed but forgotten at sunrise. Wryly she admitted that it was better than nothing; no matter what the cost to her pride, she would stay here as long as he wanted her, because she was so sick with love for him that she'd take anything she could get. But what she wanted, what she really wanted more than anything in her life, was to have his love as well as his desire. She wanted to marry him, to be his partner, his friend as well as his lover, to belong here as much as he did.

Part of her was startled that she could think of marriage again, even with John. Roger had destroyed her trust, her optimism about life; at least, she'd thought he had. Trust had already bloomed again, a fragile phoenix poking its head up from the ashes. For the first time she recognized her own resilience; she had been altered by the terror and shame of her marriage, but not destroyed. She was healing, and most of it was because of John. She had loved him for so long that her love seemed like the only continuous thread of her life, always there, somehow giving her something to hold on to even when she'd thought it didn't matter.

At last restlessness drove her from the house. She was reluctant to even ask questions, not wanting to interfere with anyone's work, but she decided to walk around and look at everything. There was a world of

difference between John's ranch and hers. Here everything was neat and well-maintained, with fresh paint on the barns and fences, the machinery humming. Healthy, spirited horses pranced in the corral or grazed in the pasture. The supply shed was in better shape than her barn. Her ranch had once looked like this, and determination filled her that it would again.

Who was looking after her cattle? She hadn't asked John, not that she'd been given a chance to ask him anything. He'd had her in bed so fast that she hadn't had time to think; then he'd left while she was still dozing.

By the time John came home at dusk, Michelle was so on edge mat she could feel her muscles twitching with tension. As soon as he came in from the kitchen his eyes swept the room, and hard satisfaction crossed his face when he saw her. All day long he'd been fighting the urge to come back to the house, picturing her here, under his roof at last Even when he'd built the house, eight years before, he'd wondered what *she* would think of it, if she'd like it, how she would look in these rooms. It wasn't a grand mansion like those in Palm Beach, but it had been custom built to his specifications for comfort, beauty and a certain level of luxury.

She looked as fresh and perfect as early-morning sunshine, while he was covered with sweat and dust, his jaw dark with a day's growth of beard. If he touched her now, he'd leave dirty prints on her creamy white dress, and he had to touch her soon or go crazy. "Come on up with me," he growled, his

boots ringing on the flagstone floor as he went to the stairs.
Michelle followed him at a slower pace, wondering if he already regretted bringing her here. He hadn't kissed her, or even smiled.
He was stripping off his shirt by the time she entered the bedroom, and he carelessly dropped the dirty, sweat-stained garment on the carpet She shivered in response at the sight of his broad, hair-covered chest and powerful shoulders, her pulse throbbing as she remembered how it felt when he moved over her and slowly let her take his weight, nestling her breasts into that curly hair.
"What've you been doing today?" he asked as he went into the bathroom.
"Nothing," Michelle answered with rueful truthfulness, shaking away the sensual lethargy that had been stealing over her.
Splashing sounds came from the bathroom, and when he reappeared a few minutes later his face was clean of the dust that had covered it before. Damp strands of black hair curled at his temples. He looked at her, and an impatient scowl darkened his face. Bending down,he pried his boots off, then began unbuckling his belt

Her heart began pounding again. He was going to take her to bed right now, and she wouldn't have a chance to talk to him if she didn't do it before he reached for her. Nervously she picked up his dirty boots to put them in the closet, wondering how to start. "Wait," she blurted. "I need to talk to you."
He didn't see any reason to wait. "So talk," he said, unzipping his jeans and pushing them down his thighs.
She inhaled deeply. "I've been bored with nothing to do all day—"
John straightened, his eyes hardening as she broke off. Hell, he should have expected it. When you acquired something expensive, you had to pay for its upkeep. "All right," he said in an even tone. "I'll give you the keys to the Mercedes, and tomorrow I'll open a checking account for you."
She froze as the meaning of his words seared through her, and all the color washed out of her face. No. There was no way she'd let him turn her into a pet, a chirpy sexual toy, content with a fancy car and charge accounts. Fury rose in her like an inexorable wave, rushing up and bursting out of control. Fiercely she hurled the boots at him; startled, he dodged the first one, but the second one hit him in the chest. "What the hell—"

"No!" she shouted, her eyes like green fire in a face gone curiously pale. She was standing rigidly, her fists clenched at her sides. "I don't want your money or your damned car! I want to take care of my cattle and my ranch, not be left here every day like some *fancy…sex doll*, waiting for you to get home and play with me!"

He kicked his jeans away, leaving him clad only in his briefs. His own temper was rising, but he clamped it under control. That control was evident in his quiet, level voice. "I don't think of you as a sex doll. What brought that on?"

She was white and shaking. "You brought me straight up here and started undressing."

His brows rose. "Because I was dirty from head to foot. I couldn't even kiss you without getting you dirty, and I didn't want to ruin your dress."

Her lips trembled as she looked down at the dress. "It's just a dress," she said, turning away. "It'll wash. And I'd rather be dirty myself than just left here every day with nothing to do."

"We've been over this before, and it's settled." He walked up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, gently squeezing. "You can't handle the work; you'd only hurt yourself. Some women can do it, but you're not strong enough. Look at your wrist," he said, sliding his hand down her arm and grasping her wrist to lift it. "Your bones are too little."

Somehow she found herself leaning against him, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder. "Stop trying to make me feel so useless!" she cried desperately. "At least let me go with you. I can chase strays—"
He turned her in his arms, crushing her against him and cutting off her words. "God, baby," he muttered. "I'm trying to protect you, not make you feel useless. It made me sick when I saw you putting up that fence, knowing what could happen if the wire lashed back on you. You could be thrown, or gored—"
"So could you."
"Not as easily. Admit it; strength counts out there. I want you safe."
It was a battle they'd already fought more times than she could remember, and nothing budged him. But she couldn't give up, because she couldn't stand many more days like today had been. "Could you stand it if you had nothing to do? If you had to just stand around and watch everybody else? Edie won't even let me help!"
"She'd damned well better not."
"See what I mean? Am I supposed to just sit all day?"
"All right, you've made your point," he said in a low voice. He'd thought she'd enjoy living a life of leisure again, but instead she'd been wound to the breaking

point He rubbed her back soothingly, and gradually she relaxed against him, her arms sliding up to hook around his neck. He'd have to find something to keep her occupied, but right now he was at a loss. It was hard to think when she was lying against him like warm silk, her firm breasts pushing into him and the sweet scent of woman rising to his nostrils. She hadn't been far from his mind all day, the thought of her pulling at him like a magnet. No matter how often he took her, the need came back even stronger than before.

Reluctantly he moved her a few inches away from him. "Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes, and I need a shower. I smell like a horse."

The hot, earthy scents of sweat, sun, leather and man didn't offend her. She found herself drawn back to him; she pressed her face into his chest, her tongue flicking out to lick daintily at his hot skin. He shuddered, all thoughts of a shower gone from his mind. Sliding his fingers into the shiny, pale gold curtain of her hair, he turned her face up and took the kiss he'd been wanting for hours.

She couldn't limit her response to him; whenever he reached for her, she was instantly his, melting into him, opening her mouth for him, ready to give as little or as much as he wanted to take. Loving him

went beyond the boundaries she had known before, taking her into emotional and physical territory that was new to her. It was his control, not hers, that prevented him from tumbling her onto the bed right then. "Shower," he muttered, lifting his head. His voice was strained. "Then dinner. Then I have to do some paperwork, damn it, and it can't wait."

Michelle sensed that he expected her to object and demand his company, but more than anyone she understood about chores that couldn't be postponed. She drew back from his arms, giving him a smile. "I'm starving, so hurry up with your shower." An idea was forming in the back of her mind, one she needed to explore.

She was oddly relaxed during dinner; it somehow seemed natural to be here with him, as if the world had suddenly settled into the natural order of things. The awkwardness of the morning was gone, perhaps because of John's presence. Edie ate with them, an informality that Michelle liked. It also gave her a chance to think, because Edie's comments filled the silence and made it less apparent.

After dinner, John gave Michelle a quick kiss and a pat on Ae bottom. "I'll finish as fast as I can. Can you entertain yourself for a while?"

Swift irritation made up her mind for her. "I'm coming with you."
He sighed, looking down at her. "Baby, I won't get any work done at all if you're in there with me."
She gave him a withering look. "You're the biggest chauvinist walking, John Rafferty. You're going to work, all right, because you're going to show me what you're doing, and then I'm taking over your bookwork."
He looked suddenly wary. "I'm not a chauvinist."
He didn't want her touching his books, either. He might as well have said it out loud, because she read his thoughts in his expression. "You can either give me something to do, or I'm going back to my house right now," she said flatly, facing him with her hands on her hips.
"Just what do you know about keeping books?"
"I minored in business administration." Let him chew on that for a while. Since he obviously wasn't going to willingly let her in his office, she stepped around him and walked down the hall without him.
"Michelle, damn it," he muttered irritably, following her.
"Just what's wrong with my doing the books?" she demanded, taking a seat at the big desk.

"I didn't bring you here to work. I want to take care of you."
"Am I going to get hurt in here? Is a pencil too heavy for me to lift?"
He scowled down at her, itching to lift her out of her chair. But her green eyes were glittering at him, and her chin had that stubborn tilt to it, showing she was ready to fight. If he pushed her, she really might go back to that dark, empty house. He could keep her here by force, but he didn't want it that way. He wanted her sweet and willing, not clawing at him like a wildcat Hell, at least this was safer than riding herd. He'd double-check the books at night.
"All right," he growled.
Her green eyes mocked him. "You're so gracious."
"You're full of sass tonight," he mused, sitting down."Maybe I should have made love to you before dinner after all, worked some of that out"
"Like I said, the world's biggest chauvinist" She gave him her haughty look, the one that had always made him see red before. She was beginning to enjoy baiting him.
His face darkened but he controlled himself, reaching for the pile of invoices, receipts and notes. "Pay attention, and don't screw this up," he snapped.

"Taxes are bad enough without an amateur bookkeeper fouling up the records."
"I've been doing the books since Dad died," she snapped in return.
"From the looks of the place, honey, that's not much of a recommendation."
Her face froze, and she looked away from him, making him swear under his breath. Without another word she jerked the papers from him and began sorting them, then put them in order by dates. He settled back in his big chair, his face brooding as he watched her enter the figures swiftly and neatly in the ledger, then run the columns through the adding machine twice to make certain they were correct
When she was finished, she pushed the ledger across the desk. "Check it so you'll be satisfied I didn't make any mistakes."
He did, thoroughly. Finally he closed the ledger and said, "All right."
Her eyes narrowed. "Is that all you have to say? No wonder you've never been married, if you think women don't have the brains to add two and two!"
"I've been married," he said sharply.
The information stunned her, because she'd never heard anyone mention his being married, nor was marriage something she readily associated with John

Rafferty. Then hot jealousy seared her at the thought of some other woman living with him, sharing his name and his bed, having the right to touch him.
"Who…when?" she stammered. "A long time ago. I'd just turned nineteen, and I had more hormones than sense. God only knows why she married me. It only took her four months to decide ranch lifee wasn't for her, that she wanted money to spend and a husband who didn't work twenty hours a day."
His voice was flat, his eyes filled with contempt.
Michelle felt cold. "Why didn't anyone ever mention it?" she whispered. "I've known you for ten years, but I didn't know you'd been married."
He shrugged. "We got divorced seven years before you moved down here, so it wasn't exactly the hottest news in the county. It didn't last long enough for folks to get to know her, anyway. I worked too much to do any socializing. If she married me thinking a rancher's wife would live in the lap of luxury, she changed her mind in a hurry."
"Where is she now?" Michelle fervently hoped the woman didn't still live in the area.
"I don't know, and I don't care. I heard she married some old rich guy as soon as our divorce was final. It didn't matter to me then, and it doesn't matter now."

It was beyond her how any woman could choose another man, no matter how rich, over John. She would live in a hut and eat rattlesnake meat if it meant staying with him. But she was beginning to understand why he was so contemptuous of the jet-setters, the idle rich, why he'd made so many caustic remarks to her in the past about letting others support her instead of working to support herself.

Considering that, it was even more confusing that now he didn't want her doing anything at all, as if he wanted to make her totally dependent on him.

He was watching her from beneath hooded lids, wondering what she was thinking. She'd been shocked to learn he'd been married before. It had been so long ago that he never thought about it, and he wouldn't even have mentioned it if her crack about marriage hadn't reminded him. It had happened in another lifetime, to a nineteen-year-old boy busting his guts to make a go of the rundown little ranch he'd inherited. Sometimes he couldn't even remember her name, and it had been years since he'd been able to remember what she looked like. He wouldn't recognize her if they met face to face.

It was odd, because even though he hadn't seen Michelle during the years of her marriage, he'd never forgotten her face, the way she moved, the way

sunlight looked in her hair. He knew every line of her striking, but too angular face, all high cheekbones, stubborn chin and wide, soft mouth. She had put her mouth to his chest and tasted his salty, sweaty skin, her tongue licking at him. She looked so cool and untouchable now in that spotless white dress, but when he made love to her she turned into liquid heat. He thought of the way her legs wrapped around his waist, and he began to harden as desire heated his body. He leaned back in his chair, shifting restlessly. Michelle had turned back to the stack of papers on his desk, not wanting to pry any further. She didn't want to know any more about his ex-wife, and she especially didn't want him to take the opportunity to ask about her failed marriage. It would be safer to get back to business; she needed to talk to him about selling her beef cattle, anyway.

"I need your advice on something. I wanted to fatten the cattle up for sale this year, but I need operating capital, so I think I should sell them now. Who do I contact, and how is transportation arranged?"

Right at mat moment he didn't give a damn about any cattle. She had crossed her legs, and her skirt had slid up a little, drawing his eyes. He wanted to slide it up more, crumple it around her waist and completely bare her legs. His jeans were under considerable

strain, and he had to force himself to answer. "Let the cattle fatten; you'll get a lot more money for them. I'll keep the ranch going until then."
She turned her head with a quick, impatient movement, sending her hair swirling, but whatever she had been about to say died when their eyes met and she read his expression. "Let's go upstairs," he murmured.
It was almost frightening to have that intense sexuality focused on her, but she was helpless to resist him. She found herself standing, shivering as he put his hand on her back and ushered her upstairs. Walking beside him made her feel vulnerable; sometimes his size overwhelmed her, and this was one of those times. He was so tall and powerful, his shoulders so broad, that when she lay beneath him in bed he blocked out the light. Only his own control and tenderness protected her.
He locked the bedroom door behind them, then stood behind her and slowly began unzipping her dress. He felt her shivering. "Don't be afraid, baby. Or is it excitement?"
"Yes," she whispered as he slid his hands inside the open dress and around to cup her bare breasts, molding his fingers over her. She could feel her nipples throb against his palms, and with a little

whimper she leaned back against him, trying to sink herself into his hardness and warmth. It felt so good when he touched her.
"Both?" he murmured. "Why are you afraid?"
Her eyes were closed, her breath coming in shallow gulps as he rubbed her nipples to hard little points of fire. "The way you make me feel," she gasped, her head rolling on his shoulder.
"You make me feel the same." His voice was slow and guttural as the hot pressure built in him. "Hot, like I'll explode if I don't get inside you. Then you're so soft and tight around me that I know I'm going to explode anyway."
The words made love to her, turning her shivers into shudders. Her legs were liquid, unable to support her; if it hadn't been for John's muscular body behind her, she would have fallen. She whispered his name, the single word vibrant with longing.
His warm breath puffed around her ear as he nuzzled the lobe. "You're so sexy, baby. This dress has been driving me crazy. I wanted to pull up your skirt…like this…" His hands had left her breasts and gone down to her hips, and now her skirt rose along her thighs as he gathered the material in his fists. Then it was at her waist, and his hands were beneath it, his fingers spread over her bare stomach. "I thought about

sliding my hands under your panties…like this. Pulling them down…like this."

She moaned as he slipped her panties down her hips and over her buttocks, overcome by a sense of voluptuous helplessness and exposure. Somehow being only partially undressed made her feel even more naked and vulnerable. His long fingers went between her legs, and she quivered like a wild thing as he stroked and probed, slowly building her tension and pleasure to the breaking point.

"You're so sweet and soft," he whispered. "Are you ready for me?"

She tried to answer, but all she could do was gasp. She was on fire, her entire body throbbing, and still he held her against him, his fingers slowly thrusting into her, when he knew she wanted him and was ready for him. He *knew* it. He was too experienced not to know, but he persisted in that sweet torment as he savored the feel of her.

She felt as sexy as he told her she was; her own sensuality was unfolding like a tender flower under his hands and his low, rough voice. Each time he made love to her, she found a little more self-assurance in her own capacity for giving and receiving pleasure. He was strongly, frankly sexual, so experienced that she wanted to slap him every time she thought about it, but she had discovered that she could satisfy him. Sometimes he trembled with hunger when he touched her; this man, whose raw virility gave him sensual power over any woman he wanted, trembled with the need for *her*. She was twenty-eight years old, and only now, in John's hands, was she discovering her power and pleasure as a woman.

Finally she couldn't take any more and whirled away from his hands, her eyes fierce as she stripped off her dress and reached for him, tearing at his clothes. He

laughed deeply, but the sound was of excitement rather than humor, and helped her. Naked, already entwined, they fell together to the bed. He took her with a slow, strong thrust, for the first time not having to enter her by careful degrees, and the inferno roared out of control.

Michelle bounced out of bed before he did the next morning, her face glowing. "You don't have to get up," he rumbled in his hoarse, early-morning voice. "Why don't you sleep late?" Actually he liked the thought of her dozing in his bed, rosily naked and exhausted after a night of making love.

She pushed her pale, tousled hair out of her eyes, momentarily riveted by his nudity as he got out of bed. "I'm going with you today," she said, and dashed to beat him to the bathroom.

He joined her in the shower a few minutes later, his black eyes narrowed after her announcement She waited for him to tell her that she couldn't go, but instead he muttered, "I guess it's okay, if it'll make you happy."

It did. She had decided that John was such an over-protective chauvinist that he would cheerfully keep her wrapped in cotton, so reasoning with him was out of the question. She knew what she could do; she would do it. It was that simple.

Over the next three weeks a deep happiness began forming inside her. She had taken over the paperwork completely, working on it three days out of the week, which gave John more free time at night than he'd ever had before. He gave up checking her work, because he never found an error. On the other days she rode with him, content with his company, and he discovered that he liked having her nearby. There were times when he was so hot, dirty and aggravated that he'd be turning the air blue with savage curses, then he'd look up and catch her smiling at him, and his aggravation would fade away. What did a contrary steer matter when she looked at him that way? She never seemed to mind the dust and heat, or the smells. It wasn't what he'd expected, and sometimes it bothered him. It was as if she were hiding here, burying herself in this self-contained world. The Michelle he'd known before had been a laughing, teasing, social creature, enjoying parties and dancing. This Michelle seldom laughed, though she was so generous with her smiles that it took him a while to notice. One of those smiles made him and all his men a little giddy, but he could remember her sparkling laughter, and he wondered where it had gone.

But it was still so new, having her to himself, that he wasn't anxious to share her with others. They spent the nights tangled together in heated passion, and instead of abating, the hunger only intensified. He spent the days in constant, low-level arousal, and sometimes all he had to do was look at her and he'd be so hard he'd have to find some way of disguising it.

One morning Michelle remained at the house to work in the office; she was alone because Edie had gone grocery shopping. The telephone rang off the hook that morning, interrupting her time and again. "

She was already irritated with it when it jangled yet again and made her stop what she was doing to answer it "Rafferty residence."

No one answered, though she could hear slow, deep breathing, as though whoever was on the other end was deliberately controlling his breath. It wasn't a "breather," though; the sound wasn't obscenely exaggerated.

"Hello," she said. "Can you hear me?"

A quiet click sounded in her ear, as if whoever had been calling had put down the receiver with slow, controlled caution, much as he'd been breathing.

He. For some reason she had no doubt it was a man. Common sense said it could be some bored teenager playing a prank, or simply a wrong number, but a sudden chill swept over her.

A sense of menace had filled the silence on the line. For the first time in three weeks she felt isolated and somehow threatened, though there was no tangible reason for it. Hie chills wouldn't stop running up and down her spine, and suddenly she had to get out of the house, into the hot sunshine. She had to see John, just be able to look at him and hear his deep voice roaring curses, or crooning gently to a horse or a frightened calf. She needed his heat to dispel the coldness of a menace she couldn't define.

Two days later there was another phone call and again, by chance, she answered the phone. "Hello," she said. "Rafferty residence."

Silence.

Her hand began shaking. She strained her ears and heard that quiet, even breathing, then the click as the phone was hung up, and a moment later the dial tone began buzzing in her ear. She felt sick and cold, without knowing why. What was going on? Who was doing this to her?

Chapter Eight

Michelle paced the bedroom like a nervous cat, her silky hair swirling around her head as she moved. "I don't feel like going," she blurted. "Why didn't you ask me before you told Addie we'd be there?"
"Because you'd have come up with one excuse after another why you couldn't go, just like you're doing now," he answered calmly. He'd been watching her pace back and forth, her eyes glittering, her usually sinuous movements jerky with agitation. It had been almost a month since he'd moved her to the ranch, and she had yet to stir beyond the boundaries of his property, except to visit her own. He'd given her the keys to the Mercedes and free use of it, but to his knowledge she'd never taken it out. She hadn't been shopping, though he'd made certain she had money. He had received the usual invitations to the neighborhood Saturday night barbecues that had become a county tradition, but she'd always found some excuse not to attend.
He'd wondered fleetingly if she were ashamed of having come down in the world, embarrassed because he didn't measure up financially or in terms of sophistication with the men she'd known before, but he'd dismissed the notion almost before it formed. It wasn't that. He'd come to know her better than that. She came into his arms at night too eagerly, too

hungrily, to harbor any feelings that he was socially inferior. A lot of his ideas about her had been wrong. She didn't look down on work, never had. She had simply been sheltered from it her entire life. She was willing to work. Damn it, she insisted on it! He had to watch her to keep her from trying her hand at bull-dogging. He was as bad as her father had ever been, willing to do just about anything to keep her happy. Maybe she was embarrassed because they were living together. This was a rural section, where mores and morality changed slowly. Their arrangement wouldn't so much as raise an eyebrow in Miami or any other large city, but they weren't in a large city. John was too self-assured and arrogant to worry about gossip; he thought of Michelle simply as his woman, with all the fierce possessiveness implied by the term. She was his. He'd held her beneath him and made her his, and the bond was reinforced every time he took her.

Whatever her reason for hiding on the ranch, it was time for it to end. If she were trying to hide their relationship, he wasn't going to let her get away with it any longer. She had to become accustomed to being his woman. He sensed that she was still hiding something of herself from him, carefully preserving a certain distance between them, and it enraged him. It

wasn't a physical distance. Sweet Lord, no. She was liquid fire in his arms. The distance was mental; there were times when she was silent and withdrawn, the sparkle gone from her eyes, but whenever he asked her what was wrong she would stonewall, and no amount of probing would induce her to tell him what she'd been thinking.

He was determined to destroy whatever it was that pulled her away from him; he wanted all of her, mind and body. He wanted to hear her laugh, to make her lose her temper as he'd used to do, to hear the haughtiness and petulance in her voice. It was all a part of her, the part she wasn't giving him now, and he wanted it. Damn it, was she tiptoeing around him because she thought she *owed* him?

She hadn't stopped pacing. Now she sat down on the bed and stared at him, her lips set. "I don't want to go."

"I thought you liked Addie." He pulled off his boots and stood to shrug out of his shirt.

"I do," Michelle said.

"Then why don't you want to go to her party? Have you even seen her since you've been back?"

"No, but Dad had just died, and I wasn't in the mood to socialize! Then there was so much work to be done…"

"You don't have that excuse now."

She glared at him. "I decided you were a bully when I was eighteen years old, and nothing you've done over the years has changed my opinion!"

He couldn't stop the grin that spread over his face as he stripped off his jeans. She was something when she got on her high horse. Going over to the bed, he sat beside her and rubbed her back. "Just relax," he soothed. "You know everyone who'll be there, and it's as informal as it always was. You used to have fun at these things, didn't you? They haven't changed."
Michelle let him coax her into lying against his shoulder. She would sound crazy if she told him that she didn't feel safe away from the ranch. He'd want to know why, and what could she tell him? That she'd had two phone calls and the other person wouldn't say anything, just quietly hung up? That happened to people all the time when someone had dialed a wrong number. But she couldn't shake the feeling that something menacing was waiting out there for her if she left the sanctuary of the ranch, where John Rafferty ruled supreme. She sighed, turning her face into his throat. She was overreacting to a simple wrong number; she'd felt safe enough all the time she'd been alone at her house. This was just another little emotional legacy from her marriage.
She gave in. "All right, I'll go. What time does it start?"
"In about two hours." He kissed her slowly, feeling the tension drain out of her, but he could still sense a

certain distance in her, as if her mind were on something else, and frustration rose in him. He couldn't pinpoint it, but he knew it was there.
Michelle slipped from his arms, shaking her head as she stood. "You gave me just enough time to get ready, didn't you?"
"We could share a shower," he invited, dropping his last garment at his feet. He stretched, his powerful torso rippling with muscle, and Michelle couldn't take her eyes off him. "I don't mind being late if you don't."
She swallowed. "Thanks, but you go ahead." She was nervous about this party. Even aside from the spooky feeling those phone calls had given her, she wasn't certain how she felt about going. She didn't know how much the ranching crowd knew of her circumstances, but she certainly didn't want anyone pitying her, or making knowing remarks about her position in John's house. On the other hand, she remember anyone as being malicious, and she had always liked Addie Layfield and her husband, Steve. This would be a family oriented group, ranging in age from Frank and Yetta Campbell, in their seventies, to the young children of several families. People would sit around and talk, eat barbecue and drink beer, the children and some of the adults would

swim, and the thing would break up of its own accord at about ten o'clock.
John was waiting for her when she came out of the bathroom after showering and dressing. She had opted for cool and comfortable, sleeking her wet hair straight back and twisting it into a knot, which she'd pinned at her nape, and she wore a minimum of makeup. She had on an oversize white cotton T-shirt, with the tail tied in a knot on one hip, and loose white cotton drawstring pants. Her sandals consisted of soles and two straps each. On someone else the same ensemble might have looked sloppy, but on Michelle it looked chic. He decided she could wear a feed sack and make it look good.
"Don't forget your swimsuit," he said, remembering that she had always gone swimming at these parties. She'd loved the water.
Michelle looked away, pretending to check her purse for something. "I'm not swimming tonight."
"Why not?"
"I just don't feel like it."
Her voice had that flat, expressionless sound he'd come to hate, the same tone she used whenever he tried to probe into the reason she sometimes became so quiet and distant. He looked at her sharply, and his brows drew together. He couldn't remember Michelle

ever "not feeling" like swimming. Her father had put in a pool for her the first year they'd been in Florida, and she had often spent the entire day lolling in the water. After she'd married, the pool had gone unused and had finally been emptied. He didn't think it had ever been filled again, and now it was badly in need of repairs before it would be usable.

But she'd been with him almost a month, and he didn't think she'd been in his pool even once. He glanced out at the balcony; he could just see a corner of the pool, blue and glittering in the late afternoon sun. He didn't have much time for swimming, but he'd insisted, eight years ago, on having the big pool and its luxurious landscaping. For her. Damn it, this whole place was for her: the big house, the comforts, that pool, even the damn Mercedes. He'd built it for her, not admitting it to himself then because he couldn't. Why wasn't she using the pool?

Michelle could feel his sharpened gaze on her as they left the room, but he didn't say anything and, relieved, she realized he was going to let it go. Maybe he just accepted that she didn't feel like swimming. If he only knew how much she wanted to swim, how she'd longed for the feel of cool water on her overheated skin, but she just couldn't bring

herself to put on a bathing suit, even in the privacy of his house.

She knew that the little white scars were hardly visible now, but she still shrank from the possibility that someone might notice them. She still felt that they were glaringly obvious, even though the mirror told her differently. It had become such a habit to hide them that she couldn't stop. She didn't dress or undress in front of John if she could help it, and if she couldn't, she always remained facing him, so he wouldn't see her back. It was such a reversal of modesty that he hadn't even noticed her reluctance to be nude in front of him. At night, in bed, it didn't matter. If the lights were on, they were dim, and John had other things on his mind. Still she insisted on wearing a nightgown to bed. It might be off most of the night, but it would be on when she got out of bed in the mornings. Everything in her shrank from having to explain those scars.

The party was just as she had expected, with a lot of food, a lot of talk, a lot of laughter. Addie had once been one of Michelle's best friends, and she was still the warm, talkative person she'd been before. She'd put on a little weight, courtesy of two children, but her pretty face still glowed with good humor. Steve, her husband, sometimes managed to put his own two

cents into a conversation by the simple means of putting his hand over her mouth. Addie laughed more than anyone whenever he resorted to that tactic.
"It's an old joke between us," she told Michelle as they put together tacos for the children. "When we were dating, he'd do that so he could kiss me. Holy cow, you look good! Something must be agreeing with you, and I'd say that 'something' is about six-foot-three of pure hunk. God, I used to swoon whenever he spoke to me! Remember? You'd sniff and say he didn't do anything for you. Liar, liar, pants on fire." Addie chanted the childish verse, her eyes sparkling with mirth, and Michelle couldn't help laughing with her.
On the other side of the pool, John's head swiveled at the sound, and he froze, stunned by the way her face lit as she joked with Addie. He felt the hardening in his loins and swore silently to himself, jerking his attention back to the talk of cattle and shifting his position to make his arousal less obvious. Why didn't she laugh like that more often?
Despite Michelle's reservations, she enjoyed the party. She'd missed the relaxed gatherings, so different from the sophisticated dinner parties, yacht parties, divorce parties, fund-raising dinners, etcetera, that had made up the social life John thought she'd

enjoyed so much, but had only tolerated. She liked the shrieks of the children as they cannonballed into the pool, splashing any unwary adult in the vicinity, and she liked it that no one got angry over being wet. Probably it felt good in the sweltering heat, which had abated only a little.

True to most of the parties she'd attended, the men tended to group together and the women did the same, with the men talking cattle and weather, and the women talking about people. But the groups were fluid, flowing together and intermingling, and by the time the children had worn down, all the adults were sitting together. John had touched her arm briefly when he sat down beside her, a small, possessive gesture that made her tingle. She tried not to stare at him like an infatuated idiot, but she felt as if everyone there could tell how warm she was getting. Her cheeks flushed, and she darted a glance at him to find him watching her with blatant need.

"Let's go home," he said in a low voice.

"So soon?" Addie protested, but at that moment they all heard the distant rumble of thunder.

As ranchers, they all searched the night sky for signs of a storm that would break the heat, if only for a little while, and fill the slow-moving rivers and

streams. Out to the west, over the Gulf, lightning shimmered in a bank of black clouds.
Frank Campbell said, "We sure could use a good rain. Haven't had one in about a month now."
It had stormed the day John had come over to her ranch for the first time, Michelle remembered, and again the night they'd driven back from Tampa…the first time he'd made love to her. His eyes glittered, and she knew he was thinking the same thing.
Wind suddenly kicked up from the west, bringing with it the cool smell of rain and salt, the excitement of a storm. Everyone began gathering up children and food, cleaning up the patio before the rain hit Soon people were calling out goodbyes and piling into pickup trucks and cars.
"Glad you went?" John asked as he turned onto the highway.
Michelle was watching the lacy patterns the lightning made as it forked across the sky. "Yes, I had fun."
She moved closer against him, seeking his warmth. He held the truck steady against the gusts of wind buffeting it, feeling her breast brush his arm every time he moved. He inhaled sharply at his inevitable response.
"What's wrong?" she asked sleepily.

For answer he took her hand and pressed it to the straining fabric of his jeans. She made a soft sound, and her slender fingers outlined the hard ridge beneath the fabric as her body automatically curled toward him. He felt his jeans open; then her hand slid inside the parted fabric and closed over him, her palm soft and warm. He groaned aloud, his body jerking as he tried to keep his attention on the road. It was the sweetest torture he could imagine, and he ground his teeth as her hand moved further down to gently cup him for a moment before returning to stroke him to the edge of madness.

He wanted her, and he wanted her now. Jerking the steering wheel, he pulled the truck onto the side of the road just as fat raindrops began splattering the windshield. "Why are we stopping?" Michelle murmured.

He killed the lights and reached for her, muttering a graphic explanation.

"John! We're on the highway! Anyone could pass by and see us!"

"It's dark and raining," he said roughly, untying the drawstring at her waist and pulling her pants down. "No one can see in."

She'd been enjoying teasing him, exciting him, exciting herself with the feel of his hardness in her

hand, but she'd thought he would wait until they got home. She should have known better. He didn't care if they were in a bedroom or not; his appetites were strong and immediate. She went weak under the onslaught of his mouth and hands, no longer caring about anything else. The rain was a thunderous din, streaming over the windows of the truck as if they were sitting under a waterfall. She could barely hear the rawly sexual things he was saying to her as he slid to the middle of the seat and lifted her over him. She cried out at his penetration, her body arching in his hands, and the world spun away in a whirlwind of sensations.

Later, after the rain had let up, she was limp in his arms as he carried her inside the house. Her hands slid around his neck as he bent to place her gently on the bed, and obeying that light pressure he stretched out on the bed with her. She was exhausted, sated, her body still throbbing with the remnants of pleasure. He kissed her deeply, rubbing his hand over her breasts and stomach. "Do you want me to undress you?" he murmured.

She nuzzled his throat. "No, I'll do it…in a minute. I don't feel like moving right now."

His big hand paused on her stomach, then slipped lower. "We didn't use anything."

"It's okay," she assured him softly. The timing was wrong. She had just finished her cycle, which was one reason he'd exploded out of control.
He rubbed his lips over hers in warm, quick kisses. "I'm sorry, baby. I was so damned ready for you, I thought I was going to go off like a teenager."
"It's okay," she said again. She loved him so much she trembled with it. Sometimes it was all she could do to keep from telling him, from crying the words aloud, but she was terrified that if she did he'd start putting distance between them, wary of too many entanglements. It had to end sometime, but she wanted it to last every possible second.
Nothing terrible had happened to her because she'd gone to the party; in fact, the trip home had been wonderful. For days afterward, she shivered with delight whenever she thought about it. There hadn't been any other out of the ordinary phone calls, and gradually she relaxed, convinced that there had been nothing to them. She was still far more content remaining on the ranch man she was either socializing or shopping, but at John's urging she began using the Mercedes to run small errands and occasionally visit her friends on those days when she wasn't riding with him or working on the books. She drove over to her house several times to check on

things, but the silence depressed her. John had had the electricity turned back on, though he hadn't mentioned it to her, but she didn't say anything about moving back in. She couldn't leave him, not now; she was so helplessly, hopelessly in love with him that she knew she'd stay with him until he told her to leave.

One Monday afternoon she'd been on an errand for John, and on the return trip she detoured by her house to check things again. She walked through the huge rooms, making certain no pipes had sprung a leak or anything else needed repair. It was odd; she hadn't been away that long, but the house felt less and less like her home. It was hard to remember how it had been before John Rafferty had come storming into her life again; his presence was so intense it blocked out lesser details. Her troubled dreams had almost disappeared, and even when she had one, she would wake to find him beside her in the night, strong and warm. It was becoming easier to trust, to accept that she wasn't alone to face whatever happened.

It was growing late, and the shadows lengthened in the house; she carefully locked the door behind her and walked out to the car. Abruptly she shivered, as if something cold had touched her. She looked around, but everything was normal. Birds sang in the trees;

insects hummed. But for a moment she'd felt it again, that sense of menace. It was odd.
Logic told her there was nothing to it, but when she was in the car she locked the doors. She laughed a little at herself. First a couple of phone calls had seemed spooky, and now she was "feeling" things in the air.
Because there was so little traffic on the secondary roads between her ranch and John's, she didn't use the rearview mirrors very much. The car was on her rear bumper before she noticed it, and even then she got only a glimpse before it swung to the left to pass. The road was narrow, and she edged to the right to give the other car more room. It pulled even with her, and she gave it a cursory glance just as it suddenly swerved toward her.
"Watch it!" she yelled, jerking the steering wheel to the right, but mere was a loud grinding sound as metal rubbed against metal. The Mercedes, smaller than the other car, was pushed violently to the right Michelle slammed on the brakes as she felt the two right wheels catch in the sandy soil of the shoulder, pulling the car even harder to that side.
She wrestled with the steering wheel, too scared even to swear at the other driver. The other car shot past, and somehow she managed to jerk the Mercedes back

onto the road. Shaking, she braked to a stop and leaned her head on the steering wheel, then sat upright as she heard tires squealing. The other car had gone down the road, but now had made a violent U-turn and was coming back. She only hoped whoever it was had insurance.

The car was a big, blue full-size Chevrolet. She could tell that a man was driving, because the silhouette was so large. It was only a silhouette, because he had something black pulled over his head, like a ski mask.

The coldness was back. She acted instinctively, jamming her foot onto the gas pedal, and the sporty little Mercedes leaped forward. The Chevrolet swerved toward her again, and she swung wildly to the side. She almost missed it… almost. The Chevrolet clipped her rear bumper, and the smaller, lighter car spun in a nauseating circle before sliding off the road, across the wide sandy shoulder, and scraping against an enormous pine before it bogged down in the soft dirt and weeds.

She heard herself screaming, but the hard jolt that stopped the car stopped her screams, too. Dazed, her head lolled against the broken side window for a moment before terror drove the fogginess away. She groped for the handle, but couldn't budge the door.

The pine tree blocked it. She tried to scramble across the seat to the other door, and only then realized she was still buckled into her seat Fumbling, looking around wildly for the Chevrolet, she released the buckle and threw herself to the other side of the car. She pushed the door open and tumbled out in the same motion, her breath wheezing in and out of her lungs.

Numbly she crouched by the fender and tried to listen, but she could hear nothing over her tortuous breathing and the thunder of her heart. Old habits took over, and she used a trick she'd often used before to calm herself after one of Roger's insane rages, taking a deep breath and holding it. The maneuver slowed her heartbeat almost immediately, and the roar faded out of her ears.

She couldn't hear anything. Oh, God, had he stopped? Cautiously she peered over the car, but she couldn't see the blue Chevrolet

Slowly she realized it had gone. He hadn't stopped. She stumbled to the road and looked in both directions, but the road was empty.

She couldn't believe it had happened. He had deliberately run her off the road, not once, but twice. If the small Mercedes had hit one of the huge pines that thickly lined the road head-on, she could easily

have been killed. Whoever the man was, he must have figured the heavier Chevrolet could muscle her off the road without any great risk to himself.

He'd tried to kill her.

It was five minutes before another car came down the road; it was blue, and for a horrible moment she panicked, thinking the Chevrolet was returning, but as it came closer she could tell this car was much older and wasn't even a Chevrolet. She stumbled to the middle of the road, waving her arms to flag it down.

All she could think of was John. She wanted John. She wanted him to hold her close and shut the terror away with his strength and possessiveness. Her voice shook as she leaned in the window and told the young boy, "Please—call John Rafferty. Tell him I've been…I've had an accident. Tell him I'm all right."

"Sure, lady," the boy said. "What's your name?"

"Michelle," she said. "My name's Michelle."

The boy looked at the car lodged against the pine. "You need a wrecker, too. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I'm not hurt. Just hurry, please."

"Sure thing."

Either John called the sheriffs department or the boy had, because John and a county sheriffs car arrived

from opposite directions almost simultaneously. It hadn't been much more than ten minutes since the boy had stopped, but in that short length of time it had grown considerably darker. John threw his door open as the truck ground to a stop and was out of the vehicle before it had settled back on its wheels, striding toward her. She couldn't move toward him; she was shaking too violently. Beneath his mustache his lips were a thin, grim line.

He walked all the way around her, checking her from head to foot. Only when he didn't see any blood on her did he haul her against his chest, his arms so tight they almost crushed her. He buried his hand in her hair and bent his head down until his jaw rested on her temple. "Are you really all right?" he muttered hoarsely.

Her arms locked around his waist in a death grip. "I was wearing my seat belt," she whispered. A single tear slid unnoticed down her cheek.

"God, when I got that phone call—" He broke off, because there was no way he could describe the stark terror he'd felt despite the kid's assurance that she was okay. He'd had to see her for himself, hold her, before he could really let himself believe she wasn't harmed. If he'd seen blood on her, he would have

gone berserk. Only now was his heartbeat settling down, and he looked over her head at the car.
The deputy approached them, clipboard in hand. "Can you answer a few questions, ma'am?"
John's arms dropped from around her, but he remained right beside her as she answered the usual questions about name, age and driver's license number. When the deputy asked her how it had happened, she began shaking again.
"A…a car ran me off the road," she stammered. "A blue Chevrolet"
The deputy looked up, his eyes abruptly interested as a routine accident investigation became something more. "Ran you off the road? How?"
"He sideswiped me." Fiercely she clenched her fingers together in an effort to still their trembling. "He pushed me off the road."
"He didn't just come too close, and you panicked and ran off the road?" John asked, his brows drawing together.
"No! He pushed me off the road. I slammed on my brakes and he went on past, then turned around and came back."
"He came back? Did you get his name?" The deputy made a notation on his pad. Leaving the scene of an accident was a crime.

"No, he didn't stop. He…he tried to ram me. He hit my bumper, and I spun off the road, then into that pine tree."

John jerked his head at the deputy and they walked over to the car, bending down to inspect the damage. They talked together in low voices; Michelle couldn't make out what they were saying, but she didn't move closer. She stood by the road, listening to the peaceful sounds of the deepening Florida twilight It was all so out of place. How could the crickets be chirping so happily when someone had just tried to commit murder? She felt dazed, as if none of this were real. But the damaged car was real. The blue Chevrolet had been real, as had the man wearing the black ski mask.

The two men walked back toward her. John looked at her sharply; her face was deathly white, even in the growing gloom, and she was shaking. She looked terrified. The Mercedes *was* an expensive car; did she expect him to tear a strip off her hide because she'd wrecked it? She'd never had to worry about things like that before, never had to be accountable for anything. If she'd banged a fender, it hadn't been important; her father had simply had the car repaired, or bought her a new one. Hell, he wasn't happy that she'd wrecked the damn car, but he wasn't a fanatic about cars, no matter how much they cost. It would have been different if she'd ruined a good horse. He was just thankful she wasn't hurt

"It's all right," he said, trying to soothe her as he took her arm and walked her to the truck. "I have insurance on it. You're okay, and that's what matters. Just calm down. I'll take you home as soon as the

deputy's finished with his report and the wrecker gets here."
Frantically she clutched his arm. "But what about—"
He kissed her and rubbed her shoulder. "I said it's all right, baby. I'm not mad. You don't have to make excuses."
Frozen, Michelle sat in the truck and watched as he walked back to the deputy. He didn't believe her; neither of them believed her. It was just like before, when no one would believe handsome, charming Roger Beckman was capable of hitting his wife, because it was obvious he adored her. It was just too unbelievable. Even her father had thought she was exaggerating.
She was so cold, even though the temperature was still in the nineties. She had begun to trust, to accept that John stood behind her, as unmoving as a block of granite, his strength available whenever she needed him. For the first time she hadn't felt alone. He'd been there, ready to shoulder her burdens. But suddenly it was just like before, and she was cold and alone again. Her father had given her everything materially, but had been too weak to face an ugly truth. Roger had showered her with gifts, pampering her extravagantly to make up for the bruises and terror. John had given her a place to live, food to eat, mind-

shattering physical pleasure…but now he, too, was turning away from a horribly real threat. It was too much effort to believe such a tale. Why would anyone try to kill her?

She didn't know, but someone had. The phone calls… the phone calls were somehow connected. They'd given her the same feeling she'd had just before she got in the car, the same sense of menace. God, had he been watching her at her house? Had he been waiting for her? He could be anywhere. He knew her, but she didn't know him, and she was alone again. She'd always been alone, but she hadn't known it. For a while she'd trusted, hoped, and the contrast with that warm feeling of security made cold reality just that much more piercing.

The wrecker arrived with its yellow lights flashing and backed up to the Mercedes. Michelle watched with detached interest as the car was hauled away from the pine, She didn't even wince at the amount of damage that had been done to the left side. John thought she'd made up a wild tale to keep from having to accept blame for wrecking the car. He didn't believe her. The deputy didn't believe her. There should be blue paint on the car, but evidently the scrapes left by the big pine had obscured it. Maybe dirt covered it. Maybe it was too dark for

them to see. For whatever reason, they didn't believe her.
She was utterly silent as John drove home. Edie came to the door, watching anxiously, then hurried forward as Michelle slid out of the truck.
"Are you all right? John left here like a bat out of hell, didn't stop to tell us anything except you'd had an accident"
"I'm fine," Michelle murmured. "I just need a bath. I'm freezing."
Frowning, John touched her arm. It was icy, despite the heat. She wasn't hurt, but she'd had a shock.
"Make some coffee," he instructed Edie as he turned Michelle toward the stairs. "I'll give her a bath."
Slowly Michelle pulled away from him. Her face was calm. "No, I'll do it. I'm all right. Just give me a few minutes by myself."
After a hot but brief shower, she went downstairs and drank coffee, and even managed to eat a few bites of the meal Edie had put back when John tore out of the house.
In bed that night, for the first time she couldn't respond to him. He needed her almost desperately, to reassure himself once again that she was truly all right He needed to strengthen the bond between them, to draw her even closer with ties as old as time.

But though he was gentle and stroked her for a long time, she remained tense under his hands. She was still too quiet, somehow distant from him.
Finally he just held her, stroking her hair until she slept and her soft body relaxed against him. But he lay awake for hours, his body burning, his eyes open. God, how close he'd come to losing her!

Chapter Nine

John listened impatiently, his hard, dark face angry, his black eyes narrowed. Finally he said, "It hasn't been three months since I straightened all that out. How the hell did you manage to get everything in a mess this fast?"
Michelle looked up from the figures she was posting in, curious to learn the identity of his caller. He hadn't said much more than hello before he'd begun getting angry. Finally he said, "All right I'll be down tomorrow. And if you're out partying when I get there, the way you were last time, I'll turn around and come home. I don't have time to cool my heels while you're playing." He hung up the phone and muttered a graphic expletive.

"Who was it?" Michelle asked.
"Mother." A wealth of irritation was in the single word.
She was stunned. "*Your* mother?"
He looked at her for a moment; then his mustache twitched a little as he almost smiled. "You don't have to sound so shocked. I got here by the normal method."
"But you've never mentioned… I guess I assumed she was dead, like your father."
"She cut out a long time ago. Ranching wasn't good enough for her; she liked the bright lights of Miami and the money of Palm Beach, so she walked out one fine day and never came back."
"How old were you?"
"Six or seven, something like that. Funny, I don't remember being too upset when she left, or missing her very much. Mostly I remember how she used to complain because the house was small and old, and because there was never much money. I was with Dad every minute I wasn't in school, but I was never close to Mother."
She felt as she had when she'd discovered he had been married. He kept throwing out little tidbits about himself, then dismissing these vital points of his life as if they hadn't affected him much at all. Maybe they hadn't. John was a hard man, made so by a lifetime of backbreaking work and the combination of arrogance and steely determination in his personality. But how could a child not be affected when his mother walked away? How

could a young man, little more than a boy, not be affected when his new wife walked out rather than work by his side? To this day John would do anything to help someone who was *trying*, but he wouldn't lift a finger to aid anyone who sat around waiting for help. All his employees were loyal to him down to their last drop of blood. If they hadn't been, they wouldn't still be on his ranch.

"When you went to Miami before, it was to see your mother?"

"Yeah. She makes a mess of her finances at least twice a year and expects me to drop everything, fly down there and straighten it out."

"Which you do."

He shrugged. "We may not be close, but she's still my mother."

"Call me this time," she said distinctly, giving him a hard look that underlined her words.

He grunted, looking irritated, then gave her a wink as he turned to call the airlines. Michelle listened as he booked a flight to Miami for the next morning. Then he glanced at her and said "Wait a minute" into the receiver before putting his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Want to come with me?" he asked her.

Panic flared in her eyes before she controlled it and shook her head. "No thanks. I need to catch up on the paperwork."

It was a flimsy excuse, as the accumulated work wouldn't take more than a day, but though John gave her a long, level look, he didn't argue with her.

Instead he moved his fingers from the mouthpiece and said, "Just one. That's right. No, not round trip. I don't know what day I'll be coming back. Yeah, thanks."

He scribbled his flight number and time on a notepad as he took the phone from his ear and hung up. Since the accident, Michelle hadn't left the ranch at all, for any reason. He'd picked up the newly repaired Mercedes three days ago, but it hadn't been moved from the garage since. Accidents sometimes made people nervous about driving again, but he sensed that something more was bothering her.

She'd begun totalling the figures she had posted in the ledger. His eyes drifted over her, drinking in her serious, absorbed expression and the way she chewed her bottom lip when she was working. She'd taken over his office so completely that he sometimes had to ask *her* questions about what was going on. He wasn't certain he liked having part of the ranch out of his direct control, but he was damn certain he liked the extra time he had at night.

That thought made him realize he'd be spending the next few nights alone, and he scowled. Once he would have found female companionship in Miami, but now he was distinctly uninterested in any other woman. He wanted Michelle and no one else. No other woman had ever fit in his arms as well as she did, or given him the pleasure she gave just by being there. He liked to tease her until she lost her temper and lashed back at him, just for the joy of watching

her get snooty. An even greater joy was taking her to bed and loving her out of her snooty moods. Thanks to his mother, it was a joy he'd have to do without for a few days. He didn't like it worth a damn.

Suddenly he realized it wasn't just the sex. He didn't want to leave her, because she was upset about something. He wanted to hold her and make everything right for her, but she wouldn't tell him about it. He felt uneasy. She insisted nothing was wrong, but he knew better. He just didn't know what it was. A couple of times he'd caught her staring out the window with an expression that was almost… terrified. He had to be wrong, because she had no reason to be scared. And of what?

It had all started with the accident. He'd been trying to reassure her that he wasn't angry about the car, but instead she'd drawn away from him as if he'd slapped her, and he couldn't bridge the distance between them. For just an instant she'd looked shocked, even hurt, then she'd withdrawn in some subtle way he couldn't describe, but felt. The withdrawal wasn't physical; except for the night of the accident, she was as sweet and wild in his arms as she'd ever been. But he wanted all of her, mind and body, and the accident had only made his wanting more intense by taunting

him with the knowledge of how quickly she could be taken away.

He reached out and touched his fingertips to her cheekbone, needing to touch her even in so small a way. Her eyes cut up to him with a flash of green, their gazes catching, locking. Without a word she closed the ledger and stood. She didn't look back as she walked out of the room with the fluid grace he'd always admired and sometimes hated because he couldn't have the body that produced it. But now he could, and as he followed her from the room he was already unbuttoning his shirt. His booted feet were deliberately placed on the stairs, his attention on the bedroom at the top and the woman inside it.

Sometimes, when the days were hot and slow and the sun was a disc of blinding white, Michelle would feel that it had all been a vivid nightmare and hadn't really happened at all. The phone calls had meant nothing. The danger she'd sensed was merely the product of an overactive imagination. The man in the ski mask hadn't tried to kill her. The accident hadn't been a murder attempt disguised to look like an accident. None of that had happened at all. It was only a dream, while reality was Edie humming as she did housework, the stamping and snorting of the horses, the placid cattle grazing in the pastures,

John's daily phone calls from Miami that charted his impatience to be back home.

But it hadn't been a dream. John didn't believe her, but his nearness had nevertheless kept the terror at bay and given her a small pocket of safety. She felt secure here on the ranch, ringed by the wall of his authority, surrounded by his people. Without him beside her in the night, her feeling of safety weakened. She was sleeping badly, and during the days she pushed herself as relentlessly as she had when she'd been working her own ranch alone, trying to exhaust her body so she could sleep.

Nev Luther had received his instructions, as usual, but again he was faced with the dilemma of how to carry them out. If Michelle wanted to do something, how was he supposed to stop her? Call the boss in Miami and tattle? Nev didn't doubt for a minute the boss would spit nails and strip hide if he saw Michelle doing the work she was doing, but she didn't *ask* if she could do it, she simply did it. Not much he could do about that. Besides, she seemed to need the work to occupy her mind. She was quieter than usual, probably missing the boss. The thought made Nev smile. He approved of the current arrangement, and would approve even more if it turned out to be permanent.

After four days of doing as much as she could, Michelle was finally exhausted enough that she thought she could sleep, but she put off going to bed. If she were wrong, she'd spend more hours lying tense and sleepless, or shaking in the aftermath of a dream. She forced herself to stay awake and catch up on the paperwork, the endless stream of orders and

invoices that chronicled the prosperity of the ranch. It could have waited, but she wanted everything to be in order when John came home. The thought brought a smile to her strained face; he'd be home tomorrow. His afternoon call had done more to ease her mind than anything. Just one more night to get through without him, then he'd be beside her again in the darkness.

She finished at ten, then climbed the stairs and changed into one of the light cotton shifts she slept in. The night was hot and muggy, too hot for her to tolerate even a sheet over her, but she was tired enough that the heat didn't keep her awake. She turned on her side, almost groaning aloud as her muscles relaxed, and was instantly asleep.

It was almost two in the morning when John silently let himself into the house. He'd planned to take an 8:00 a.m. flight, but after talking to Michelle he'd paced restlessly, impatient with the hours between them. He had to hold her close, feel her slender, too fragile body in his arms before he could be certain she was all right. The worry was even more maddening because he didn't know its cause.

Finally he couldn't stand it He'd called the airport and gotten a seat on the last flight out that night, then thrown his few clothes into his bag and kissed his

mother's forehead. "Take it easy on that damned checkbook," he'd growled, looking down at the elegant, shallow and still pretty woman who had given birth to him.

The black eyes he'd inherited looked back at him, and one corner of her crimson lips lifted in the same one-sided smile that often quirked his mouth. "You haven't told me anything, but I've heard rumors even down here," she'd said smoothly. "Is it true you've got Langley Cabot's daughter living with you? Really, John, he lost everything he owned."

He'd been too intent on getting back to Michelle to feel more than a spark of anger. ' 'Not everything."

"Then it's true? She's living with you?"

"Yes."

She had given him a long, steady look. Since he'd been nineteen he'd had a lot of women, but none of them had lived with him, even briefly, and despite the distance between them, or perhaps because of it, she knew her son well. No one took advantage of him. If Michelle Cabot was in his house, it was because he wanted her there, not due to any seductive maneuvers on her part.

As John climbed the stairs in the dark, silent house, his heart began the slow, heavy rhythm of anticipation. He wouldn't wake her, but he couldn't

wait to lie beside her again, just to feel the soft warmth of her body and smell the sweetness of her skin. He was tired; he could use a few hours' sleep. But in the morning… Her skin would be rosy from sleep, and she'd stretch drowsily with that feline grace of hers. He would take her then.

Noiselessly he entered the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. She was small and still in the bed, not stirring at his presence. He set his bag down and went into the bathroom. When he came out a few minutes later he left the bathroom light on so he could see while he undressed.

He looked at the bed again, and every muscle in his body tightened. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He couldn't have torn his eyes away even if a tornado had hit the house at that moment.

She was lying half on her stomach, with all the covers shoved down to the foot of the bed. Her right leg was stretched out straight, her left one drawn up toward the middle of the mattress. She was wearing one of those flimsy cotton shifts she liked, and during the night it had worked its way up to her buttocks. She was exposed to him. His burning gaze slowly, agonizingly moved over the bare curves of her buttocks from beneath the thin cotton garment, to the soft, silky female cleft and folds he loved to touch.

He shuddered convulsively, grinding his teeth to hold back the deep, primal sound rumbling in his chest. He'd gotten so hard, so fast, that his entire body ached and throbbed. She was sound asleep, her breath coming in a deep, slow rhythm. His own breath was billowing in and out of his lungs; sweat was pouring out of him, his muscles shaking like a stallion scenting a mare ready for mounting. Without taking his eyes from her he began unbuttoning his shirt. He had to have her; he couldn't wait. She was moist and vulnerable, warm and female, and…his. He was coming apart just looking at her, his control shredded, his loins surging wildly.

He left his clothes on the bedroom floor and bent over her, forcing his hands to gentleness as he turned her onto her back. She made a small sound that wasn't quite a sigh and adjusted her position, but didn't awaken. His need was so urgent that he didn't take the time to wake her; he pulled the shift to her waist, spread her thighs and positioned himself between them. With his last remnant of control he eased into her, a low, rough groan bursting from his throat as her hot, moist flesh tightly sheathed him. She whimpered a little, her body arching in his hands, and her arms lifted to twine around his neck. "I love you," she moaned, still more asleep than

awake. Her words went through him like lightning, his body jerking in response. Oh God, he didn't even know if she said it to him or to some dream, but everything in him shattered. He wanted to hear the words again, and he wanted her awake, her eyes looking into his when she said them, so he'd know who was in her mind. Desperately he sank deeper into her, trying to absorb her body into his so irrevocably that nothing could separate them.
"Michelle," he whispered in taut agony, burying his open mouth against her warm throat.
Michelle lifted, arching toward him again as her mind swam upward out of a sleep so deep it had bordered on unconsciousness. But even asleep she had known his touch, her body reacting immediately to him, opening for him, welcoming him. She didn't question his presence; he was there, and that was all that mattered. A great burst of love so intense that she almost cried out reduced everything else to insignificance. She was on fire, her senses reeling, her flesh shivering under the slamming thrusts of his loins. She felt him deep inside her, touching her, and she screamed into his mouth like a wild creature as sharp ecstasy detonated her nerves. He locked her to him with iron-muscled thighs and arms, holding her as she strained madly beneath him, and the feel of her

soft internal shudders milking him sent him blasting into his own hot, sweet insanity.
He couldn't let her go. Even when it was over, he couldn't let her go. He began thrusting again, needing even more of her to satisfy the hunger that went so deep he didn't think it would ever be satisfied.
She was crying a little, her luminous green eyes wet as she clung to him. She said his name in a raw, shaking voice. He hadn't let her slide down to a calm plateau but kept her body tense with desire. He was slow and tender now, gentling her into ecstasy instead of hurling her into it, but the culmination was no less shattering.
It was almost dawn before she curled up in his arms, both of them exhausted. Just before she went to sleep she said in mild surprise, "You came home early."
His arms tightened around her. "I couldn't stand another night away from you." It was the bald, frightening truth. He would have made it back even if he'd had to walk.
No one bothered them the next morning, and they slept until long after the sun began pouring brightly into the room. Nev Luther, seeing John's truck parked in its normal location, came to the house to ask him a question, but Edie dared the foreman to disturb them

with such a fierce expression on her face that he decided the question wasn't important after all.
John woke shortly after one, disturbed by the heat of the sunlight streaming directly onto the bed. His temples and mustache were already damp with sweat, and he badly needed a cool shower to drive away the sluggishness of heat and exhaustion. He left the bed quietly, taking care not to wake Michelle, though a purely male smile touched his hard lips as he saw her shift lying in the middle of the floor. He didn't even remember pulling it off her, much less throwing it. Nothing had mattered but loving her.
He stood under the shower, feeling utterly sated but somehow uneasy. He kept remembering the sound of her voice when she said "I love you" and it was driving him crazy. Had she been dreaming, or had she known it was him? She'd never said it before, and she hadn't said it again. The uncertainty knifed at him. It had felt so right, but then, they had always fitted together in bed so perfectly that his memories of other women were destroyed. Out of bed… There was always that small distance he couldn't bridge, that part of herself that she wouldn't let him know. Did she love someone else? Was it one of her old crowd? A tanned, sophisticated jet-setter who was out of her reach now that she didn't have money? The

thought tormented him, because he knew it was possible to love someone even when they were far away and years passed between meetings. He knew, because he'd loved Michelle that way.

His face was drawn as he cut the water off with a savage movement. *Love*. God, he'd loved her for years, and lied to himself about it by burying it under hostility, then labeling it as lust, want, need, anything to keep from admitting he was as vulnerable as a naked baby when it came to her. He was hard as nails, a sexual outlaw who casually used and left women, but he'd only prowled from woman to woman so restlessly because none of them had been able to satisfy his hunger. None of them had been the one woman he wanted, the one woman he loved. Now he had her physically, but not mentally, not emotionally, and he was scared spitless. His hands were trembling as he rubbed a towel over his body. Somehow he had to make her love him. He'd use any means necessary to keep her with him, loving her and taking care of her until no one existed in her mind except him, and every part of her became his to cherish.

Would she run if he told her he loved her? If he said the words, would she be uncomfortable around him? He remembered how he'd felt whenever some woman had tried to cling to him, whimpering that she loved him, begging him to stay. He'd felt embarrassment, impatience, pity. Pity! He couldn't take it if Michelle pitied him.

He'd never felt uncertain before. He was arrogant, impatient, determined, and he was used to men jumping when he barked out an order. It was unsettling to discover that he couldn't control either his emotions or Michelle's. He'd read before that love

made strong men weak, but he hadn't understood it until now. Weak? Hell, he was terrified!
Naked, he returned to the bedroom and pulled on underwear and jeans. She was a magnet, drawing his eyes to her time and again. Lord, she was something to look at, with that pale gold hair gleaming in the bright sunlight, her bare flesh glowing. She lay on her stomach with her arms under the pillow, giving him a view of her supple back, firmly rounded buttocks and long, sleek legs. He admired her graceful lines and feminine curves, the need growing in him to touch her. Was she going to sleep all day?
He crossed to the bed and sat down on the side, stroking his hand over her bare shoulder. "Wake up, lazybones. It's almost two o'clock."
She yawned, snuggling deeper into the pillow. "So?" Her mouth curved into a smile as she refused to open her eyes.
He chuckled. "So get up. I can't even get dressed when you're lying here like this. My attention keeps wander—" He broke off, frowning at the small white scar marring the satiny shoulder under his fingers. She was lying naked under the bright rays of the afternoon sun, or he might not have noticed. Then he saw another one, and he touched it, too. His gaze moved, finding more of them marring the perfection

of her skin. They were all down her back, even on her bottom and the backs of her upper thighs. His fingers touched all of them, moving slowly from scar to scar. She was rigid under his hands, not moving or looking at him, not even breathing.

Stunned, he tried to think of what could have made those small, crescent-shaped marks. Accidental cuts, by broken glass for instance, wouldn't all have been the same size and shape. The cuts hadn't been deep; the scarring was too faint, with no raised ridges. That was why he hadn't felt them, though he'd touched every inch of her body. But if they weren't accidental, that meant they had to be deliberate.

His indrawn breath hissed roughly through his teeth. He swore, his voice so quiet and controlled that the explicitly obscene words shattered the air more effectively than if he'd roared. Then he rolled her over, his hands hard on her shoulders, and said only three words. "Who did it?"

Michelle was white, frozen by the look on his face. He looked deadly, his eyes cold and ferocious. He lifted her by the shoulders until she was almost nose to nose with him, and he repeated his question, the words evenly spaced, almost soundless. "Who did it?"

Her lips trembled as she looked helplessly at him. She couldn't talk about it; she just couldn't "I don't… It's noth—"

"*Who did it*?" he yelled, his neck corded with rage.

She closed her eyes, burning tears seeping from beneath her lids. Despair and shame ate at her, but she knew he wouldn't let her go until she answered. Her lips were trembling so hard she could barely talk. "John, please!"

"Who?"

Crumpling, she gave in, turning her face away. "Roger Beckman. My ex-husband." It was hard to say the words; she thought they would choke her. John was swearing again, softly, endlessly. Michelle struggled briefly as he swept her up and sat down in a chair, holding her cradled on his lap, but it was a futile effort, so she abandoned it. Just saying Roger's name had made her feel unclean. She wanted to hide, to scrub herself over and over to be rid of the taint, but John wouldn't let her go. He held her naked on his lap, not saying a word after he'd stopped cursing until he noticed her shivering. The sun was hot, but her skin was cold. He stretched until he could reach the corner of the sheet, then jerked until it came free of the bed, and wrapped it around her.

He held her tight and rocked her, his hands stroking up and down her back. She'd been beaten. The knowledge kept ricocheting inside his skull, and he shook with a black rage he'd never known before. If he'd been able to get his hands on that slimy bastard right then, he'd have killed him with his bare hands and enjoyed every minute of it. He thought of Michelle cowering in fear and pain, her delicate body shuddering under the blows, and red mist colored his vision. No wonder she'd asked him not to hurt her the first time he'd made love to her! After her experience with men, it was something of a miracle that she'd responded at all.

He crooned to her, his rough cheek pressed against her sunny hair, his hard arms locked around her. He didn't know what he said, and neither did she, but the sound of his voice was enough. The gentleness came through, washing over her and warming her on the inside just as the heat of his body warmed her cold skin. Even after her shivering stopped he simply held her, waiting, letting her feel his closeness.

Finally she shifted a little, silently asking him to let her go. He did, reluctantly, his eyes never leaving her white face as she walked into the bathroom and shut the door. He started to go into the bathroom after her, alarmed by her silence and lack of color; his hand

was on the doorknob when he reined himself under control. She needed to be alone right now. He heard the sound of the shower, and waited with unprecedented patience until she came out She was still pale, but not as completely colorless as she'd been. The shower had taken the remaining chill from her skin, and she was wrapped in the terry-cloth robe she kept hanging on the back of the bathroom door.
"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.
"Yes." Her voice was muted.
"We have to talk about it."
"Not now." The look she gave him was shattered. "I can't. Not now."
"All right, baby. Later."
Later was that night, lying in his arms again, with the darkness like a shield around them. He'd made love to her, very gently and for a long time, easing her into rapture. In the lengthening silence afterward she felt his determination to know all the answers, and though she dreaded it, in the darkness she felt able to give them to him. When it came down to it, he didn't even have to ask. She simply started talking.
"He was jealous," she whispered. "Insane with it. I couldn't talk to a man at a party, no matter how ugly or happily married; I couldn't smile at a waiter. The smallest things triggered his rages. At first he'd just

scream, accusing me of cheating on him, of loving someone else, and he'd ask me over and over who it was until I couldn't stand it anymore. Then he began slapping me. He was always sorry afterward. He'd tell me how much he loved me, swear he'd never do it again. But of course he did."

John had gone rigid, his muscles shaking with the rage she felt building in him again. In the darkness she stroked his face, giving him what comfort she could and never wondering at the illogic of it.

"I filed charges against him once; his parents bought him out of it and made it plain I wasn't to do such a thing again. Then I tried leaving him, but he found me and carried me back. He…he said he'd have Dad killed if I ever tried to leave him again."

"You believed him?" John asked harshly, the first words he'd spoken. She didn't flinch from the harshness, knowing it wasn't for her.

"Oh, yes, I believed him." She managed a sad little laugh. "I still do. His family has enough money that he could have it done and it would never be traced back to him."

"But you left him anyway."

"Not until I found a way to control him."

"How?"

She began trembling a little, and her voice wavered out of control. "The…the scars on my back. When he did that, his parents were in Europe; they weren't there to have files destroyed and witnesses bribed until it was too late. I already had a copy of everything, enough to press charges against him. I bought my divorce with it, and I made his parents promise to keep him away from me or I'd use what I had. They were very conscious of their position and family prestige."

"Screw their prestige," he said flatly, trying very hard to keep his rage under control.

"It's academic now; they're dead."

He didn't think it was much of a loss. People who cared more about their family prestige than about a young woman being brutally beaten and terrorized didn't amount to much in his opinion.

Silence stretched, and he realized she wasn't going to add anything else. If he let her, she'd leave it at that highly condensed and edited version, but he needed to know more. It hurt him in ways he'd never thought he could be hurt, but it was vital to him that he know all he could about her, or he would never be able to close the distance between them. He wanted to know where she went in her mind and why she wouldn't let

him follow, what she was thinking, what had happened in the two years since her divorce.
He touched her back, caressing her with his fingertips. "Is this why you wouldn't go swimming?"
She stirred against his shoulder, her voice like gossamer wings in the darkness. "Yes. I know the scars aren't bad; they've faded a lot But in my mind they're still like they were… I was so scared someone would see them and ask how I got them."
"That's why you always put your nightgown back on after we'd made love."
She was silent, but he felt her nod.
"Why didn't you want *me* to know? I'm not exactly some stranger walking down the street."
No, he was her heart and her heartbreaker, the only man she'd ever loved, and therefore more important to her than anyone else in the world. She hadn't wanted him to know the ugliness that had been in her life.
"I felt dirty," she whispered. "Ashamed."
"Good God!" he exploded, raising up on his elbow to lean over her. "Why? It wasn't your fault. You were the victim, not the villain."
"I know, but sometimes knowledge doesn't help. The feelings were still there."

He kissed her, long and slow and hot, loving her with his tongue and letting her know how much he desired her. He kissed her until she responded, lifting her arms up to his neck and giving him her tongue in return. Then he settled onto the pillow again, cradling her head on his shoulder. She was nude; he had gently but firmly refused to let her put on a gown. That secret wasn't between them any longer, and she was glad. She loved the feel of his warm, hard-muscled body against her bare skin.

He was still brooding, unable to leave it alone. She felt his tension and slowly ran her hand over his chest, feeling the curly hair and small round nipples with their tiny center points. "Relax," she murmured, kissing his shoulder. "It's over."

"You said his parents controlled him, but they're dead. Has he bothered you since?"

She shivered, remembering the phone calls she'd had from Roger. "He called me a couple of times, at the house. I haven't seen him. I hope I never have to see him again." The last sentence was full of desperate sincerity.

"At the house? Your house? How long ago?"

"Before you brought me here."

"I'd like to meet him," John said quietly, menacingly.

"I hope you never do. He's…not sane."

They lay together, the warm, humid night wrapped around them, and she began to feel sleepy. Then he touched her again, and she felt the raw anger in him, the savage need to know. "What did he use?"
She flinched away from him. Swearing softly, he caught her close. "Tell me."
"There's no point in it."
"I want to know."
"You already know." Tears stung her eyes. "It isn't original."
"A belt."
Her breath caught in her throat. "He…he wrapped the leather end around his hand."
John actually snarled, his big body jerking. He thought of a belt buckle cutting into her soft skin, and it made him sick. It made him murderous. More than ever, he wanted to get his hands on Roger Beckman.
He felt her hands on him, clinging. "Please," she whispered. "Let's go to sleep."
He wanted to know one more thing, something that struck him as odd. "Why didn't you tell your dad? He had a lot of contacts; he could have done something. You didn't have to try to protect him."
Her laugh was soft and faintly bitter, not really a laugh at all. "I did tell him. He didn't believe me. It

was easier for him to think I'd made it all up than to admit my life had gone so wrong."
She didn't tell him that she'd never loved Roger, that her life had gone wrong because she'd married one man while loving another.

Chapter Ten

"Telephone, Michelle!" Edie called from the kitchen. Michelle had just come in, and she was on her way upstairs to shower; she detoured into the office to take the call there. Her mind was on her cattle; they were in prime condition, and John had arranged the sale. She would soon be leaving the ranks of the officially broke and entering those of the merely needy. John had scowled when she'd told him that.
"Hello," she said absently.
Silence.
The familiar chill went down her spine. "Hello!" she almost yelled, her fingers turning white from pressure.
"Michelle."
Her name was almost whispered, but she heard it, recognized it. "No," she said, swallowing convulsively. "Don't call me again."

"How could you do this to me?"

"Leave me alone!" she screamed, and slammed the phone down. Her legs were shaking, and she leaned on the desk, gulping in air. She was frightened. How had Roger found her here? Dear God, what would John do if he found out Roger was bothering her? He'd be furious… More than furious. He'd be murderous. But what if Roger called again and John answered? Would Roger ask for her, or would he remain silent?

The initial silence haunted her, reminding her of the other phone calls she had received. She'd had the same horrible feeling from all of them. Then she knew: Roger had made those other phone calls. She couldn't begin to guess why he hadn't spoken, but suddenly she had no doubt about who her caller had been. Why hadn't she realized it before? He had the resources to track her down, and he was sick and obsessive enough to do so. He knew where she was, knew she was intimately involved with another man. She felt nauseated, thinking of his jealous rages. He was entirely capable of coming down here to snatch her away from the man he would consider his rival and take her back "where she belonged."

More than two years, and she still wasn't free of him.

She thought about getting an injunction against him for harassment, but John would have to know, because the telephone was his. She didn't want him to know; his reaction could be too violent, and she didn't want him to get in any trouble.
She wasn't given the option of keeping it from him. He opened the door to the office, a questioning look on his face as he stepped inside; Edie must have told him Michelle had a call, and that was unusual enough to make him curious. Michelle didn't have time to compose her face. He stopped, eyeing her sharply. She knew she looked pale and distraught. She watched as his eyes went slowly, inevitably, to the telephone. He never missed a detail, damn him; it was almost impossible to hide anything from him. She could have done it if she'd had time to deal with the shock, but now all she could do was stand frozen in her tracks. Why couldn't he have remained in the stable five minutes longer? She would have been in the shower; she would have had time to think of something.
"That was him, wasn't it?" he asked flatly.
Her hand crept toward her throat as she stared at him like a rabbit in a snare. John crossed the room with swift strides, catching her shoulders in his big warm hands.

"What did he say? Did he threaten you?"
Numbly she shook her head. "No. He didn't threaten me. It wasn't what he said; it's just that I can't stand hearing—" Her voice broke, and she tried to turn away, afraid to push her self-control any further.
John caught her more firmly to him, tucking her in the crook of one arm as he picked up the receiver. "What's his number?" he snapped.
Frantically Michelle tried to take the phone from him. "No, don't! That won't solve anything!"
His face grim, he evaded her efforts and pinned her arms to her sides. "He's good at terrorizing a woman, but it's time he knows there's someone else he'll have to deal with if he ever calls you again. Do you still remember his number or not? I can get it, but it'll be easier if you give it to me."
"It's unlisted," she said, stalling.
He gave her a long, level look. "I can get it," he repeated.
She didn't doubt that he could. When he decided to do something, he did it, and lesser people had better get out of his way. Defeated, she gave him the number and watched as he punched the buttons.
As close to him as she was, she could hear the ringing on the other end of the line, then a faint voice as someone answered. "Get Roger Beckman on the

line," he ordered in the hard voice that no one disobeyed.
His brows snapped together in a scowl as he listened, then he said "Thanks" and hung up. Still frowning, he held her to him for a minute before telling her, "The housekeeper said he's on vacation in the south of France, and she doesn't know when he'll be back."
"But I just talked to him!" she said, startled. "He wasn't in France!"
John let her go and walked around to sit behind the desk, the frown turning abstracted. "Go on and take a shower," he said quietly. "I'll be up in a few minutes."
Michelle drew back, feeling cold all over again. Didn't he believe her? She knew Roger wasn't in the south of France; that call certainly hadn't been an overseas call. The connection had been too good, as clear as a local call. No, of course he didn't believe her, just as he hadn't believed her about the blue Chevrolet. She walked away, her back rigid and her eyes burning. Roger wasn't in France, even if the housekeeper had said he was, but why was he trying to keep his location a secret?
After Michelle left, John sat in the study, pictures running through his mind, and he didn't like any of them. He saw Michelle's face, so white and pinched, her eyes terrified; he saw the small white scars on her

back, remembered the sick look she got when she talked about her ex-husband. She'd worn the same look just now. Something wasn't right. He'd see Roger Beckman in hell before he let the man anywhere near Michelle again.

He needed information, and he was willing to use any means available to him to get it. Michelle meant more to him than anything else in the world.

Something had happened the summer before at his neighbor's house over on Diamond Bay, and his neighbor, Rachel Jones, had been shot. John had seen pure hell then, in the black eyes of the man who had held Rachel's wounded body in his arms. The man had looked as if the pain Rachel had been enduring had been ripping his soul out. At the time John hadn't truly understood the depths of the man's agony; at the time he'd still been hiding the truth of his own vulnerability from himself. Rachel had married her black-eyed warrior this past winter. Now John understood the man's anguish, because now he had Michelle, and his own life would be worthless without her.

He'd like to have Rachel's husband, Sabin, with him now, as well as the big blond man who had been helping them. Those two men had something wild about them, the look of predators, but they would

understand his need to protect Michelle. They would gladly have helped him hunt Beckman down like the animal he was.
He frowned. They weren't here, but Andy Phelps was, and Phelps had been involved with that mess at Diamond Bay last summer. He looked up a number and punched the buttons, feeling the anger build in him as he thought of Michelle's terrified face. "Andy Phelps, please."
When the sheriffs deputy answered, John said, "Andy, this is Rafferty. Can you do some quiet investigating?"
Andy was a former D.E.A. agent, and, besides that, he had a few contacts it wasn't safe to know too much about. He said quietly, "What's up?"
John outlined the situation, then waited while Andy thought of the possibilities.
"Okay, Michelle says the guy calling her is her ex-husband, but his housekeeper says he's out of the country, right?"
"Yeah."
"Is she sure it's her ex?"
"Yes. And she said he wasn't in France."
"You don't have a lot to go on. You'd have to prove he was the one doing the calling before you could get

an injunction, and it sounds as if he's got a good alibi."
"Can you find out if he's really out of the country? I don't think he is, but why would he pretend, unless he's trying to cover his tracks for some reason?"
"You're a suspicious man, Rafferty."
"I have reason to be," John said in a cold, even tone. "I've seen the marks he left on Michelle. I don't want him anywhere near her."
Andy's voice changed as he digested that information, anger and disgust entering his tone. "Like that, huh? Do you think he's in the area?"
"He's certainly not at his home, and we know he isn't in France. He's calling Michelle, scaring her to death. I'd say it's a possibility."
"I'll start checking. There are a few favors I can call in. You might put a tape on your phone, so if he calls back you'll have proof."
"There's something else," John said, rubbing his forehead. "Michelle had an accident a few weeks ago. She said someone ran her off the road, a guy in a blue Chevrolet. I didn't believe her, damn it, and neither did the deputy. No one saw anything, and we didn't find any paint on the car, so I thought someone might have gotten a little close to her and she

panicked. But she said he turned around, came back and tried to hit her again."
"That's not your usual someone-ran-me-off-the-road tale," Andy said sharply. "Has she said anything else?"
"No. She hasn't talked about it at all."
"You're thinking it could be her ex-husband."
"I don't know. It might not have anything at all to do with the phone calls, but I don't want to take the chance."
"Okay, I'll check around. Keep an eye on her, and hook a tape recorder up to the phone."
John hung up and sat there for a long time, silently using every curse word he knew. Keeping an eye on her would be easy; she hadn't been off the ranch since the accident, hadn't even gone to check her own house. Now he knew why, and he damned himself and Roger Beckman with equal ferocity. If he'd only paid attention the night of the accident, they might have been able to track down the Chevrolet, but so much time had passed now that he doubted it would ever be found. At least Michelle hadn't connected Beckman with the accident, and John didn't intend to mention the possibility to her. She was scared enough as it was.

It infuriated him that he couldn't do anything except wait for Andy to get back to him. Even then, it might be a dead end. But if Beckman was anywhere in the area, John intended to pay him a visit and make damned certain he never contacted Michelle again.
Michelle bolted upright in bed, her eyes wide and her face chalky. Beside her, John stirred restlessly and reached for her, but didn't awaken. She lay back down, taking comfort in his nearness, but both her mind and her heart were racing.
It was Roger.
Roger had been driving the blue Chevrolet. Roger had tried to kill her. He wasn't in France at all, but here in Florida, biding his time and waiting to catch her out alone. She remembered the feeling she had had before the accident, as if someone were watching her with vile malice, the same feeling the phone calls had given her. She should have tied it all together before.
He'd found out about John. Michelle even knew how he'd found out. Bitsy Sumner, the woman she and John had met in Tampa when they'd gone down to have the deed drawn up, was the worst gossip in Palm Beach. It wouldn't have taken long for the news to work its way up to Philadelphia that Michelle Cabot was very snuggly with an absolute *hunk*, a gorgeous, macho rancher with bedroom eyes that made Bitsy feel so *warm*. Michelle could almost hear Bitsy on the telephone, embroidering her tale and laughing wickedly as she speculated about the sexy rancher.

Roger had probably convinced himself that Michelle would come back to him; she could still hear him whispering how much he loved her, that he'd make it up to her and show her how good it could be between them. He would have gone into a jealous rage when he found out about John. At last he had known who the other man was, confirming the suspicions he'd had all along.

His mind must have snapped completely. She remembered what he'd said the last time he had called: "How could you do this to me?"

She felt trapped, panicked by the thought that he was out there somewhere, patiently waiting to catch her alone. She couldn't go to the police; she had no evidence, only her intuition, and people weren't arrested on intuition. Besides, she didn't put a lot of faith in the police. Roger's parents had bought them off in Philadelphia, and now Roger controlled all those enormous assets. He had unlimited funds at his disposal; who knew what he could buy? He might even have hired someone, in which case she had no idea who to be on guard against.

Finally she managed to go to sleep, but the knowledge that Roger was nearby ate at her during the next few days, disturbing her rest and stealing her

appetite away. Despite the people around her, she felt horribly alone.

She wanted to talk to John about it, but bitter experience made her remain silent. How could she talk to him when he didn't believe her about the phone calls or the accident? He had hooked a tape recorder up to the telephone, but he hadn't discussed it with her, and she hadn't asked any questions. She didn't want to know about it if he were only humoring her. Things had become stilted between them since the last time Roger had called, and she felt even less able to approach him than she had before. Only in bed were things the same; she had begun to fear that he was tiring of her, but he didn't seem tired of her in bed.

His lovemaking was still as hungry and frequent as before.

Abruptly, on a hot, sunny morning, she couldn't stand it any longer. She had been pushed so far that she had reached her limit Even a rabbit will turn and fight when it's cornered. She was tired of it all, so tired that she sometimes felt she was dragging herself through water. Damn Roger! What did she have to do to get him out of her life? There had to be something. She couldn't spend the rest of her days peering around every corner, too terrified to even go to a grocery

store. It made her angry when she thought how she had let him confine her as surely as if he'd locked her in a prison, and beginning today she was going to do something about it.

She still had the file that had won her a divorce; now that his parents were dead the file didn't mean as much, but it still meant something. It was documented proof that Roger had attacked her once before. If he would only call again, she would have his call on tape, and perhaps she could get him to say something damaging. This was Florida, not Philadelphia; that much money would always be influential, but down here he wouldn't have the network of old family friends to protect him.

But the file was in the safe at her house, and she wanted it in her possession, at John's. She didn't feel secure leaving it in an empty house, even though she kept the door locked. The house could easily be broken into, and the safe was a normal household one; she doubted whether it would prove to be all that secure if anyone truly wanted to open it. If Roger somehow got the file, she'd have no proof at all. Those photographs and records couldn't be replaced.

Making up her mind, she told Edie she was going riding and ran out to the stables. It was a pleasant ride across the pastures to her ranch, but she didn't enjoy

it as she normally would have, because of the knot of tension forming in her stomach. Roger had seen her the last time she'd been there, and she couldn't forget the terror she'd felt when she'd seen the blue Chevrolet bearing down on her.

She approached the house from the rear, looking around uneasily as she slid off the horse, but everything was normal. The birds in the trees were singing. Quickly she checked all the doors and windows, but they all seemed tight, with no signs of forced entry. Only then did she enter the house and hurry to the office to open the safe. She removed the manila envelope and checked the contents, breathing a sigh of relief that everything was undisturbed, then slid the envelope inside her shirt and re-locked the safe.

The house had been closed up for a long time; the air was hot and stuffy. She felt dizzy as she stood up, and her stomach moved queasily. She hurried outside to the back porch, leaning against the wall and gulping-fresh air into her lungs until her head cleared and her stomach settled. Her nerves were shot. She didn't know how much longer she could stand it, but she had to wait. He would call again; she knew it. Until then, there was precious little she could do.

Everything was still calm, quiet. The horse nickered a welcome at her as she mounted and turned toward home.

The stableman came out to meet her as she rode up, relief plain on his face. "Thank God you're back," he said feelingly. "The boss is raising pure hell—excuse me, ma'am. Anyway, he's been tearing the place up looking for you. I'll get word to him that you're back."

"Why is he looking for me?" she asked, bewildered. She had told Edie that she was going riding.

"I don't know, ma'am." He took the horse's reins from her hands as she slid to the ground.

Michelle went into the house and sought out Edie. "What has John in such an uproar?" she asked.

Edie lifted her eyebrows. "I didn't get close enough to ask."

"Didn't you tell him I'd gone riding?"

"Yep. That's when he really blew up."

She thought something might have come up and he couldn't find the paperwork he needed on it, but when she checked the office everything looked just as it had when she'd left that morning. Taking the manila envelope from inside her shirt, she locked it inside John's safe, and only then did she feel better. She *was* safe here, surrounded by John's people.

A few minutes later she heard his truck come up the drive, and judging from its speed, his temper hadn't settled any. More curious than alarmed, she walked

out to meet him as the truck skidded to a stop, the tires throwing up a spray of sand and gravel. John thrust the door open and got out, his rifle clutched in his hand. His face was tight, and black fire burned in his eyes as he strode toward her. "Where in hell have you been?" he roared.
Michelle looked at the rifle. "I was out riding."
He didn't stop when he reached her, but caught her arm and hauled her inside the house. "Out riding where, damn it? I've had everyone combing the place for you."
"I went over to the house." She was beginning to get a little angry herself at his manner, though she still didn't know what had set him off. She lifted her nose and gave him a cool look. "I didn't realize I had to ask permission to go to my own house."
"Well, honey bunch, you have to do exactly that," he snapped, replacing the rifle in the gun cabinet. "I don't want you going anywhere without asking me first."
"I don't believe I'm your prisoner," she said icily.
"Prisoner, hell!" He whirled on her, unable to forget the raw panic that had filled him when he hadn't been able to find her. Until he knew what was going on and where Roger Beckman was, he'd like to have her locked up in the bedroom for safekeeping. One look

at her outraged face, however, told him that he'd gone about it all wrong, and she was digging her heels in.
"I thought something had happened to you," he said more quietly.
"So you went tearing around the ranch looking for something to shoot?" she asked incredulously.
"No. I went tearing around the ranch looking for you, and I carried the rifle in case you were in any danger."
She balled her hands into fists, wanting to slap him. He wouldn't believe her about a real danger, but he was worried that she might sprain an ankle or take a tumble off a horse. "What danger could I possibly be in?" she snapped. "I'm sure there's not a snake on the ranch that would dare bite anything without your permission!"
His expression became rueful as he stared down at her. He lifted his hand and tucked a loose strand of sun-streaked hair behind her ear, but she still glared at him like some outraged queen. He liked her temper a lot better than the distant manner he'd been getting from her lately. "You're pretty when you're mad," he teased, knowing how that would get her.
For a moment she looked ready to spit. Then suddenly she sputtered, "You jackass," and began laughing.

He chuckled. No one could say "jackass" quite like Michelle, all hoity-toity and precise. He loved it. She could call him a jackass any time she wanted. Before she could stop laughing, he put his arms around her and hauled her against him, covering her mouth with his and slowly sliding his tongue between her lips. Her laughter stopped abruptly, her hands coming up to clutch his bulging biceps, and her tongue met his.
"You worried the hell out of me," he murmured when he lifted his mouth.
"Not all of it, I noticed," she purred, making him grin.
"But I wasn't kidding. I want to know whenever you go somewhere, and I don't want you going over to your place alone. It's been empty for quite a while, and a bum could start hanging around."
"What would a bum be doing this far out?" she asked.
"What would a bum be doing anywhere? Crime isn't restricted to cities. Please. For my peace of mind?"
It was so unusual for John Rafferty to plead for anything that she could only stare at him. It struck her that even though he'd said please, he still expected that she would do exactly as he'd said. In fact, she was only being perverse because he'd been his usual autocratic, arrogant self and made her

angry. It suited her perfectly to be cautious, for the time being.
The dizziness and nausea she'd felt at the house must have been the beginning symptoms of some sort of bug, because she felt terrible the next day. She spent most of the day in bed, too tired and sick to worry about anything else. Every time she raised her head, the awful dizziness brought on another attack of nausea. She just wanted to be left alone.
She felt marginally better the next morning, and managed to keep something in her stomach. John held her in his arms, worried about her listlessness.
"If you aren't a lot better tomorrow, I'm taking you to a doctor," he said firmly.
"It's just a virus," she sighed. "A doctor can't do anything."
"You could get something to settle your stomach."
"I feel better today. What if you catch it?"
"Then you can wait on me hand and foot until I'm better," he said, chuckling at her expression of horror. He wasn't worried about catching it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even had a cold.
She was much better the next day, and though she still didn't feel like riding around the ranch, she did spend the morning in the office, feeding information into the computer and catching up on the books. It

would be easier if they had a bookkeeping program for the computer; she made a note to ask John about it.
Roger still hadn't called.
She balled her fist. She knew he was somewhere close by! How could she get him to come out of hiding? She could never live a normal life as long as she was afraid to leave the ranch by herself.
But perhaps that was what she would have to do. Obviously Roger had some way of watching the ranch; she simply couldn't believe the blue Chevrolet had been a coincidence, unconnected to Roger. He'd caught her off guard that time, but now she'd be looking for him. She had to draw him out.
When John came to the house for lunch, she had twisted her hair up and put on a bit of makeup, and she knew she looked a lot better. "I thought I'd go to town for a few things," she said casually. "Is there anything you need?"
His head jerked up. She hadn't driven at all since the accident, and now here she was acting as nonchalant about driving as if the accident had never happened at all. Before he had worried that she was so reluctant to go anywhere, but now he wanted her to stay close.
"What things?" he asked sharply. "Where exactly are you going?"

Her brows lifted at his tone. "Shampoo, hair conditioner, things like that."
"All right." He made an impatient gesture. "Where are you going? What time will you be back?"
"Really, you missed your calling. You should have been a prison guard."
"Just tell me."
Because she didn't want him to deny her the use of the car, she said in a bored voice, "The drugstore, probably. I'll be back by three."
He looked hard at her, then sighed and thrust his fingers through his thick black hair. "Just be careful."
She got up from the table.' 'Don't worry. If I wreck the car again, I'll pay for the damages with the money from the cattle sale."
He swore as he watched her stalk away. Damn, what could he do now? Follow her? He slammed into the office and called Andy Phelps to find out if he had any information on Roger Beckman yet. All Andy had come up with was that no one by the name of Roger Beckman had been on a flight to France in the last month, but he might not have gone there directly. It took time to check everything.
"I'll keep trying, buddy. That's all I can do."
"Thanks. Maybe I'm worried over nothing, but maybe I'm not."

"Yeah, I know. Why take chances? I'll call when I get something."

John hung up, torn by the need to do something, anything. Maybe he should tell Michelle of his suspicions, explain why he didn't want her wandering around by herself. But as Andy had pointed out, he really had nothing to go on, and he didn't want to upset her needlessly. She'd had enough worry in her life. If he had his way, nothing would ever worry her again.

Michelle drove to town and made her purchases, steeling herself every time a car drew near. But nothing happened; she didn't see anything suspicious, not even at the spot where the Chevrolet had forced her off the road. Fiercely she told herself that she wasn't paranoid, she hadn't imagined it all, Roger was there, somewhere. She simply had to find him. But she wasn't brave at all, and she was shaking with nerves by the time she got back to the ranch. She barely made it upstairs to the bathroom before her stomach rebelled and she retched miserably.

She tried it again the next day. And the next. Nothing happened, except that John was in the foulest mood she could imagine. He never came right out and forbade her to go anywhere, but he made it plain he didn't like it. If she hadn't been desperate, she would

have thrown the car keys in his face and told him what he could do with them.
Roger had been watching her at her house that day. Could it be that he was watching that road instead of the one leading to town? He wouldn't have seen her when she'd gone over to get the file from the safe because she had ridden in from the back rather than using the road. John had told her not to go to her house alone, but she wouldn't have to go to the house. All she had to do was drive by on the road… and if Roger was there, he would follow her.

Chapter Eleven

She had to be crazy; she knew that. The last thing she wanted was to see Roger, yet here she was trying to find him, even though she suspected he was trying to kill her. No, she wanted to find him *because* of that. She certainly didn't want to die, but she wanted this to be over. Only then could she lead a normal life.

She wanted that life to be with John, but she had never fooled herself that their relationship was permanent, and the mood he was in these days could herald the end of it. Nothing she did seemed to please him, except when they were in bed, but perhaps that was just a reflection of his intense sex drive and any woman would have done.

Her nerves were so raw that she couldn't even think of eating the morning she planned to go to the house, and she paced restlessly, waiting until she saw John get in his pickup and drive across the pastures. She hadn't wanted him to know she was going anywhere; he asked too many questions, and it was hard to hide anything from him. She would only be gone half an hour, anyway, because when it came down to it, she didn't have the courage to leave herself hanging out as bait. All she could manage was one quick drive by; then she would come home.

She listened to the radio in an effort to calm her nerves as she drove slowly down the narrow gravel

road. It came as a shock that the third hurricane of the season, Hurricane Carl, had formed in the Atlantic and was meandering toward Cuba. She had completely missed the first two storms. She hadn't even noticed that summer had slid into early autumn, because the weather was still so hot and humid, perfect hurricane weather.

Though she carefully searched both sides of the road for any sign of a car tucked away under the trees, she didn't see anything. The morning was calm and lazy. No one else was on the road. Frustrated, she turned around to drive back to the house.

A sudden wave of nausea hit her, and she had to halt the car. She opened the door and leaned out, her stomach heaving even though it was empty and nothing came out. When the spasm stopped she leaned against the steering wheel, weak and perspiring. This had hung on far too long to be a virus.

She lay there against the steering wheel for a long time, too weak to drive and too sick to care. A faint breeze wafted into the open door, cooling her hot face, and just as lightly the truth eased into her mind. If this was a virus, it was the nine-month variety.

She let her head fall back against the seat, and a smile played around her pale lips. Pregnant. Of course. She

even knew when it had happened: the night John had come home from Miami. He had been making love to her when she woke up, and neither of them had thought of taking precautions. She had been so on edge she hadn't noticed that she was late.
John's baby. It had been growing inside her for almost five weeks. Her hand drifted down to her stomach, a sense of utter contentment filling her despite the miserable way she felt. She knew the problems this would cause, but for the moment those problems were distant, unimportant compared to the bunding joy she felt.
She began to laugh, thinking of how sick she'd been. She remembered reading in some magazine that women who had morning sickness were less likely to miscarry than women who didn't; if that were true, this baby was as secure as Fort Knox. She still felt like death wanned over, but now she was happy to feel that way.
"A baby," she whispered, thinking of a tiny, sweet-smelling bundle with a mop of thick black hair and melting black eyes, though she realized any child of John Rafferty's would likely be a hellion.
But she couldn't continue sitting in the car, which was parked more on the road than off. Shakily, hoping the nausea would hold off until she could get

home, she put the car in gear and drove back to the ranch with painstaking caution. Now that she knew what was wrong, she knew what to do to settle her stomach. And she needed to make an appointment with a doctor.

Sure enough, her stomach quieted after she ate a meal of dry toast and weak tea. Then she began to think about the problems.

Telling John was the first problem and, to Michelle, the biggest She had no idea how he would react, but she had to face the probability that he would not be as thrilled as she was. She feared he was getting tired of her anyway; if so, he'd see the baby as a burden, tying him to a woman he no longer wanted.

She lay on the bed, trying to sort out her tangled thoughts and emotions. John had a right to know about his child, and, like it or not, he had a responsibility to it. On the other hand, she couldn't use the baby to hold him if he wanted to be free. Bleak despair filled her whenever she tried to think of a future without John, but she loved him enough to let him go. Since their first day together she had been subconsciously preparing for the time when he would tell her that he didn't want her any longer. That much was clear in her mind.

But what if he decided that they should marry because of the baby? John took his responsibilities seriously, even to the point of taking a wife he didn't want for the sake of his child. She could be a coward and grab for anything he offered, on the basis that the crumbs of affection that came her way would be better than nothing, or she could somehow find the courage to deny herself the very thing she wanted most. Tears filled her eyes, the tears that came so easily these days. She sniffled and wiped them away. She couldn't decide anything; her emotions were see-sawing wildly between elation and depression. She didn't know how John would react, so any plans she made were a waste of time. This was something they would have to work out together.

She heard someone ride up, followed by raised, excited voices outside, but cowboys were always coming and going at the ranch, and she didn't mink anything of it until Edie called upstairs, "Michelle? Someone's hurt. The boys are bringing him in—My God, it's the boss!" She yelled the last few words and Michelle shot off the bed. Afterward she never remembered running down the stairs; all she could remember was Edie catching her at the front door as Nev and another man helped John down from a horse.

John was holding a towel to his face, and blood covered his hands and arms, and soaked his shirt. Michelle's face twisted, and a thin cry burst from her throat. Edie was a big, strong woman, but somehow Michelle tore free of her clutching arms and got to John. He shrugged away from Nev and caught Michelle with his free arm, hugging her to him. "I'm all right," he said gruffly. "It looks worse than it is."
"You'd better get to a doc, boss," Nev warned. "Some of those cuts need stitches."
"I will. Get on back to the men and take care of things." John gave Nev a warning look over Michelle's head, and though one eye was covered with the bloody towel, Nev got the message. He glanced quickly at Michelle, then nodded.
"What happened?" Michelle cried frantically as she helped John into the kitchen. His arm was heavy around her shoulders, which told her more than anything that he was hurt worse than he wanted her to know. He sank onto one of the kitchen chairs.
"I lost control of the truck and ran into a tree," he muttered. "My face hit the steering wheel."
She put her hand on the towel to keep it in place, feeling him wince even under her light touch, and lifted his hand.away. She could see thin shards of glass shining in the black depths of his hair.

"Let me see," she coaxed, and eased the towel away from his face.
She had to bite her lip to keep from moaning. His left eye was already swollen shut, and the skin on his cheekbone was broken open in a jagged wound. His cheekbone and brow ridge were already purple and turning darker as they swelled almost visibly, huge knots distorting his face. A long cut slanted across his forehead, and he was bleeding from a dozen other smaller cuts. She took a deep breath and schooled her voice to evenness. "Edie, crush some ice to go on his eye. Maybe we can keep the swelling from getting any worse. I'll get my purse and the car keys."
"Wait a minute," John ordered. "I want to clean up a little; I've got blood and glass all over me."
"That isn't important—"
"I'm not hurt that badly," he interrupted. "Help me out of this shirt."
When he used that tone of voice, he couldn't be budged. Michelle unbuttoned the shirt and helped him out of it, noticing that he moved with extreme caution. When the shirt was off, she saw the big red welt across his ribs and knew why he was moving so carefully. In a few hours he would be too sore to move at all. Easing out of the chair, he went to the sink and washed off the blood that stained his hands

and arms, then stood patiently while Michelle took a wet cloth and gently cleaned his chest and throat, even his back. His hair was matted with blood on the left side, but she didn't want to try washing his head until he'd seen a doctor.

She ran upstairs to get a clean shirt for him and helped him put it on. Edie had crushed a good amount of ice and folded it into a clean towel to make a cold pad. John winced as Michelle carefully placed the ice over his eye, but he didn't argue about holding it in place.

Her face was tense as she drove him to the local emergency care clinic. He was hurt. It staggered her, because somehow she had never imagined John as being vulnerable to anything. He was as unyielding as granite, somehow seeming impervious to fatigue, illness or injury. His battered, bloody face was testimony that he was all too human, though, being John, he wasn't giving in to his injuries. He was still in control.

He was whisked into a treatment room at the clinic, where a doctor carefully cleaned the wounds and stitched the cut on his forehead. The other cuts weren't severe enough to need stitches, though they were all cleaned and bandaged. Then the doctor spent a long time examining the swelling around John's left

eye. "I'm going to have you admitted to a hospital in Tampa so an eye specialist can take a look at this," he told John.
"I don't have time for a lot of poking," John snapped, sitting up on the table.
"It's your sight," the doctor said evenly. "You took a hell of a blow, hard enough to fracture your cheekbone. Of course, if you're too busy to save your eyesight—"
"He'll go," Michelle interrupted.
John looked at her with one furious black eye, but she glared back at him just as ferociously. There was something oddly magnificent about her, a difference he couldn't describe because it was so subtle. But even as pale and strained as she was, she looked good. She always looked good to him, and he'd be able to see her a lot better with two eyes than just one.
He thought fast, then growled, "All right." Let her think what she wanted about why he was giving in; the hard truth was that he didn't want her anywhere near the ranch right now. If he went to Tampa, he could insist that she stay with him, which would keep her out of harm's way while Andy Phelps tracked down whoever had shot out his windshield. What had been a suspicion was now a certainty as far as John

was concerned; Beckman's threat went far beyond harassing telephone calls. Beckman had tried to make it look like an accident when he had run Michelle off the road, but now he had gone beyond that; a bullet wasn't accidental.

Thank God Michelle hadn't been with him as she usually was. At first he'd thought the bullet was intended for him, but now he wasn't so certain. The bullet had been too far to the right. Damn it, if only he hadn't lost control of the truck when the windshield shattered! He'd jerked the wheel instinctively, and the truck had started sliding on the dewy grass, hitting a big oak head-on. The impact had thrown, him forward, and his cheekbone had hit the steering wheel with such force that he'd been unconscious for a few minutes. By the time he'd recovered consciousness and his head had cleared, there had been no point in sending any of his men to investigate where the shot had come from. Beckman would have been long gone, and they would only have destroyed any signs he might have left. Andy Phelps could take over now.

"I'll arrange for an ambulance," the doctor said, turning to leave the room.

"No ambulance. Michelle can take me down there."

The doctor sighed. "Mr. Rafferty, you have a concussion; you should be lying down. And in case of damage to your eye, you shouldn't strain, bend over, or be jostled. An ambulance is the safest way to get you to Tampa."
John scowled as much as he could, but the left side of his face was so swollen that he couldn't make the muscles obey. No way was he going to let Michelle drive around by herself in the Mercedes; the car would instantly identify her to Beckman. If he had to go to Tampa, she was going to be beside him every second. "Only if Michelle rides in the ambulance with me."
"I'll be right behind," she said. "No, wait. I need to go back home first, to pick up some clothes for both of us."
"No. Doc, give me an hour. I'll have clothes brought out to us and arrange for the car to be driven back to the house." To Michelle he said, "You either ride with me, or I don't go at all."
Michelle stared at him in frustration, but she sensed he wasn't going to back down on this. He'd given in surprisingly easy about going to the hospital, only to turn oddly stubborn about keeping her beside him. If someone drove the car back to the ranch, they would be stranded in Tampa, so it didn't make sense. This

entire episode seemed strange, but she didn't know just why and didn't have time to figure it out. If she had to ride in an ambulance to get John to Tampa, she'd do it. She was still so scared and shocked by his accident that she would do anything to have him well again.

He took her acquiescence for granted, telling her what he wanted and instructing her to have Nev bring the clothes, along with another man to drive the car home. Mentally she threw her hands up and left the room to make the phone call. John waited a few seconds after the door had closed behind her, then said, "Doc, is there another phone I can use?"

"Not in here, and you shouldn't be walking around. You shouldn't even be sitting up. If the call is so urgent it won't wait, let your wife make it for you."

"I don't want her to know about it." He didn't bother to correct the doctor's assumption that Michelle was his wife. The good doctor was a little premature, that was all. "Do me a favor. Call the sheriffs department, tell Andy Phelps where I am and that I need to talk to him. Don't speak to anyone except Phelps."

The doctor's eyes sharpened, and he looked at the big man for a moment Anyone else would have been flat on his back. Rafferty should have been, but his system must be like iron. He was still steady, and

giving orders with a steely authority that made it almost impossible not to do as he said.
"All right, I'll make the call if you'll lie down. You're risking your eyesight, Mr. Rafferty. Think about being blind in that eye for the rest of your life."
John's lips drew back in a feral grin that lifted the corners of his mustache. "Then the damage has probably already been done, doctor." Losing the sight in his left eye didn't matter much when stacked against Michelle's life. Nothing was more important than keeping her safe.
"Not necessarily. You may not even have any damage to your eye, but with a blow that forceful it's better to have it checked. You may have what's called a blowout fracture, where the shock is transmitted to the wall of the orbital bone, the eye socket. The bone is thin, and it gives under the pressure, taking it away from the eyeball itself. A blowout fracture can save your eyesight, but if you have one you'll need surgery to repair it. Or you can have nerve damage, a dislocated lens, or a detached retina. I'm not an eye specialist, so I can't say. All I can tell you is to stay as quiet as possible or you can do even greater damage."
Impatiently John lay down, putting his hands behind his head, which was throbbing. He ignored the pain, just as he ignored the numbness of his face. Whatever

damage had been done, was done. So he'd broken his cheekbone and maybe shattered his eye socket; he could live with a battered face or with just one good eye, but he couldn't live without Michelle.
He went over the incident again and again in his mind, trying to pull details out of his subconscious. In that split second before the bullet had shattered the windshield, had he seen a flash that might pinpoint Beckman's location? Had Beckman been walking? Not likely. The ranch was too big for a man to cover on foot. Nor was it likely he would have been on horseback; riding horses were harder to come by than cars, which could easily be rented. Going on the assumption that Beckman had been driving, what route could he have taken that would have kept him out of sight?
Andy Phelps arrived just moments before Nev. For Michelle's benefit, the deputy joked about John messing up his pretty face, then waited while John gave Nev detailed instructions. Nev nodded, asking few questions. Then John glanced at Michelle. "Why don't you check the things Nev brought; if you need anything else, he can bring it to Tampa."
Michelle hesitated for a fraction of a second, feeling both vaguely alarmed and in the way. John wanted her out of the room for some reason. She looked at

the tall, quiet deputy, then back at John, before quietly leaving the room with Nev. Something was wrong; she knew it.

Even Nev was acting strangely, not quite looking her in the eye. Something had happened that no one wanted her to know, and it involved John.

He had given in too easily about going to the hospital, though the threat of losing his eyesight was certainly enough to give even John pause; then he had been so illogical about the car. John was never illogical. Nev was uneasy about something, and now John wanted to talk privately to a deputy. She was suddenly certain the deputy wasn't there just because he'd heard a friend was hurt.

Too many things didn't fit. Even the fact that John had had an accident at all didn't fit. He'd been driving across rough pastures since boyhood, long before he'd been old enough to have a driver's license. He was also one of the surest drivers she had ever seen, with quick reflexes and eagle-eyed attention to every other driver on the road. It just didn't make sense that he would lose control of his truck and hit a tree. It was too unlikely, too pat, too identical to her own accident.

Roger.

What a fool she had been! She had considered him as a danger only to herself, not to John. She should have expected his insane jealousy to spill over onto the man he thought had taken her away from him. While she had been trying to draw him out, he had been stalking John. Fiercely her hands knotted into fists. Roger wouldn't stand a chance against John in an open fight, but he would sneak around like the coward he was, never taking the chance of a face-to-face confrontation.

She looked down at the two canyons Edie had packed for them and put her hand to her head. "I feel a little sick, Nev," she whispered. "Excuse me, I have to get to the restroom."

Nev looked around, worry etched on his face. "Do you want me to get a nurse? You do look kinda green."

"No, I'll be all right." She managed a weak smile as she lied, "I never have been able to stand the sight of blood, and it just caught up with me."

She patted his arm and went around the partition to the public restrooms, but didn't enter. Instead she waited a moment, sneaking peeks around the edge of the partition; as soon as Nev turned to sit down while waiting for her, she darted across the open space to the corridor where the examining rooms were. The

door to John's room was closed, but not far enough for the latch to catch. When she cautiously nudged it, the door opened a crack. It was on the left side of the room, so John wouldn't be able to see it. Phelps should be on John's right side, facing him; with luck, he wouldn't notice the slight movement of the door, either.

Their voices filtered through the crack.

"—think the bullet came from a little rise just to the left of me," John said. "Nev can show you."

"Is there any chance the bullet could be in the upholstery?"

"Probably not. The trajectory wasn't angled enough."

"Maybe I can find the cartridge. I'm coming up with a big zero from the airlines, but I have another angle I can check. If he flew in, he'd have come in at Tampa, which means he'd have gotten his rental car at the airport. If I can get a match on his description, we'll have his license plate number."

"A blue Chevrolet. That should narrow it down," John said grimly.

"I don't even want to think about how many blue Chevrolets there are in this state. It was a good idea to keep Michelle with you in Tampa; it'll give me a few days to get a lead on this guy. I can get a buddy

in Tampa to put surveillance on the hospital, if you think you'll need it."
"He won't be able to find her if the doctor here keeps quiet and if my file is a little hard to find."
"I can arrange that." Andy chuckled.
Michelle didn't wait to hear more. Quietly she walked back down the corridor and rejoined Nev. He was reading a magazine and didn't look up until she sat down beside him. "Feeling better?" he asked sympathetically.
She gave some answer, and it must have made sense, because it satisfied him. She sat rigidly in the chair, more than a little stunned. What she had overheard had verified her suspicion that Roger was behind John's "accident," but it was hard for her to take in the rest of it. John not only believed her about the phone calls, he had tied them in to the blue Chevrolet and had been quietly trying to track Roger down. That explained why he had suddenly become so insistent that she tell him exactly where she was going and how long she would be there, why he didn't want her going anywhere at all. He had been trying to protect, her, while she had been trying to bait Roger into the open.
She hadn't told him what she was doing because she hadn't thought he would believe her; she had learned

well the bitter lesson that she could depend only on herself, perhaps learned it too well. Right from the beginning John had helped her, sometimes against her will. He had stepped in and taken over the ranch chores that were too much for her; he was literally carrying her ranch until she could rebuild it into a profitable enterprise. He had given her love, comfort, care and concern, and now a child, but still she hadn't trusted him. He hadn't been tiring of her; he'd been under considerable strain to protect her.

Being John, he hadn't told her of his suspicions or what he was doing because he hadn't wanted to "worry" her. It was just like him. That protective, possessive streak of his was bone deep and body wide, defying logical argument. There were few things or people in his life that he cared about, but when he did care, he went full measure. He had claimed her as his, and what was his, he kept.

Deputy Phelps stopped by to chat; Michelle decided to give him an opportunity to talk to Nev, and she walked back to John's room. The ambulance had just arrived, so she knew they would be leaving soon. When the door opened, he rolled his head until he could see her with his right eye. "Is everything okay?"

She had to grit her teeth against the rage that filled her when she saw his battered, discolored face. It made her want to destroy Roger in any way she could. The primitive, protective anger filled her, pumping into every cell in her body. It took every bit of control she had to calmly walk over to him as if she weren't in a killing rage and take his hand. "If you're all right, then I don't care what Edie packed or didn't pack."

"I'll be all right" His deep voice was confident. He might or might not lose the sight in his eye, but he'd be all right. John Rafferty was made of the purest, hardest steel.

She sat beside him in the ambulance and held his hand all the way to Tampa, her eyes seldom leaving his face. Perhaps he dozed; perhaps it was simply less painful if he kept his right eye closed, too. For whatever reason, little was said during the long ride. It wasn't until they reached the hospital that he opened his eye and looked at her, frowning when he saw how drawn she looked. She needed the bed rest more than he did; if it hadn't been for his damned eye, and the opportunity to keep Michelle away from the ranch, he would already have been back at work. He should have gotten her away when he'd first suspected Beckman was behind her accident, but he'd

been too reluctant to let her out of his sight. He wasn't certain about her or how much she needed him, so he'd kept her close at hand. But the way she had looked when she saw he was hurt…a woman didn't look like that unless she cared. He didn't know how much she cared, but for now he was content with the fact that she did. He had her now, and he wasn't inclined to let go. As soon as this business with Beckman was settled, he'd marry her so fast she wouldn't know what was happening.

Michelle went through the process of having him admitted to the hospital while he was whisked off, with three—*three*!—nurses right beside him. Even as battered as he was, he exuded a masculinity that drew women like a magnet

She didn't see him again for three hours. Fretting, she wandered the halls until a bout of nausea drove her to find the cafeteria, where she slowly munched on stale crackers. Her stomach gradually settled. John would probably be here for at least two days, maybe longer; how could she hide her condition from him when she would be with him practically every hour of the day? Nothing escaped his attention for long, whether he had one good eye or two. Breeding wasn't anything new to him; it was his business. Cows calved; mares foaled. On the ranch, everything mated and reproduced. It wouldn't take long for him to discard

the virus tale she'd told him and come up with the real reason for her upset stomach.
What would he say if she told him? She closed her eyes, her heart pounding wildly at the thought. He deserved to know. She wanted him to know; she wanted to share every moment of this pregnancy with him. But what if it drove him to do something foolish, knowing that Roger not only threatened her but their child as well?
She forced herself to think clearly. They were safe here in the hospital; this was bought time. He wouldn't leave the hospital when staying here meant that she was also protected. She suspected that was the only reason he'd agreed to come at all. He was giving Deputy Phelps time to find Roger, if he could. But what if Phelps hadn't found Roger by the time John left the hospital? What evidence did they have against him, anyway? He had had time to have any damage to the Chevrolet repaired, and no one had seen him shoot at John. He hadn't threatened her during any of those phone calls. He hadn't had to; she knew him, and that was enough.
She couldn't run, not any longer. She had run for two years, fleeing emotionally long after she had stopped physically running. John had brought her alive with his fierce, white-hot passion, forcing her out of her

protective reserve. She couldn't leave him, especially now that she carried his child. She had to face Roger, face all the old nightmares and conquer them, or she would never be rid of this crippling fear. She could fight him, something she had always been too terrified to do before. She could fight him for John, for their baby, and she could damn well fight him for herself.

Finally she went back to the room that had been assigned to John to wait. It was thirty minutes more before he was wheeled into the room and transferred very carefully to the bed. When the door closed behind the orderlies he said, from between clenched teeth, "If anyone else comes through that door to do anything to me, I'm going to throw them out the window." Gingerly he eased into a more upright position against the pillow, then punched the button that raised the head of the bed.

She ignored his bad temper. "Have you seen the eye specialist yet?"

"Three of them. Come here."

There was no misreading that low demanding voice or the glint in his right eye as he looked at her. He held his hand out to her and said again, "Come here."

"John Patrick Rafferty, you aren't in any shape to begin carrying on like that."

"Aren't I?"
She refused to look at his lap. "You shouldn't be jostled."
"I don't want to be jostled. I just want a kiss." He gave her a slow, wicked grin despite the swelling in his face. "The spirit's willing, but the body's tired as hell."
She bent to kiss him, loving his lips gently with her own. When she tried to lift her head he thrust his fingers into her hair and held her down while his mouth molded to hers, his tongue making teasing little forays to touch hers. He gave a sigh of pleasure and let her up, but shifted his hand to her bottom to hold her beside him. "What've you been doing while I've been lying in cold halls in between bouts of being stuck, prodded, x-rayed and prodded some more?"
"Oh, I've been really entertained. You don't realize what an art mopping is until you've seen a master do it. There's also a four-star cafeteria here, specializing in the best stale crackers I've ever eaten." She grinned, thinking he'd never realize the truth of that last statement.
He returned the grin, thinking that once he would have accused her of being spoiled. He knew better now, because he'd been trying his damnedest to spoil

her, and she persisted in being satisfied with far less than he would gladly have given her any day of the week. Her tastes didn't run to caviar or mink, and she'd been content to drive that old truck of hers instead of a Porsche. She liked silk and had beautiful clothes, but she was equally content wearing a cotton shirt and jeans. It wasn't easy to spoil a woman who was happy with whatever she had.

"Arrange to have a bed moved in here for you," he ordered. "Unless you want to sleep up here with me?"

"I don't think the nurses would allow that."

"Is there a lock on the door?"

She laughed. "No. You're out of luck."

His hand moved over her bottom, the slow, intimate touch of a lover. "We need to talk. Will it bother you if I lose this eye?"

Until then she hadn't realized that he might lose the eye as well as his sight. She sucked in a shocked breath, reaching blindly for his hand. He continued to watch her steadily, and slowly she relaxed, knowing what was important.

"It would bother me for your sake, but as for me… You can be one-eyed, totally blind, crippled, whatever, and I'll still love you."

There. She'd said it. She hadn't meant to, but the words had come so naturally that even if she could

take them back, she wouldn't.
His right eye was blazing black fire at her. She had never seen anyone else with eyes as dark as his, night-black eyes that had haunted her from the first time she'd met him. She looked down at him and managed a tiny smile that was only a little hesitant as she waited for him to speak.
"Say that again."
She didn't pretend not to know what he meant, but she had to take another deep breath. Her heart was pounding. "I love you. I'm not saying that to try to trap you into anything. It's just the way I feel, and I don't expect you to—"
He put his fingers over her mouth. "It's about damn time," he said.

Chapter Twelve

"You're very lucky, Mr. Rafferty," Dr. Norris said, looking over his glasses. "Your cheekbone seems to have absorbed most of the impact. It's fractured, of course, but the orbital bone is intact. Nor does there seem to be any damage to the eye itself, or any loss of sight. In other words, you have a hell of a shiner."

Michelle drew a deep breath of relief, squeezing John's hand. He winked at her with his right eye, then drawled, "So I've spent four days in a hospital because I have a black eye?"
Dr. Norris grinned. "Call it a vacation."
"Well, vacation's over, and I'm checking out of the resort."
"Just take it easy for the next few days. Remember that you have stitches in your head, your cheekbone is fractured, and you had a mild concussion."
"I'll keep an eye on him," Michelle said with a note of warning in her voice, looking at John very hard. He was probably planning to get on a horse as soon as he got home.
When they were alone again John put his hands behind his head, watching her with a distinct glitter in his eyes. After four days the swelling around his eye had subsided enough that he could open it a tiny slit, enough for him to see with it again. His face was still a mess, discolored in varying shades of black and purple, with a hint of green creeping in, but none of that mattered beside the fact that his eye was all right.
"This has been a long four days," he murmured. "When we get home, I'm taking you straight to bed."
Her blood started running wild through her veins again, and she wondered briefly if she would always

have this uncontrolled response to him. She'd been completely vulnerable to him from the start, and her reaction now was even stronger. Her body was changing as his baby grew within her, invisible changes as yet, but her skin seemed to be more sensitive, more responsive to his lightest touch. Her breasts throbbed slightly, aching for the feel of his hands and mouth.

She had decided not to tell him about the baby just yet, especially not while his eyesight was still in doubt, and had been at pains during the past four days to keep her uneasy stomach under control. She munched on crackers almost constantly, and had stopped drinking coffee because it made the nausea worse.

She could still see the hard satisfaction that had filled his face when she'd told him she loved him, but he hadn't returned the words. For a horrible moment she'd wondered if he was gloating, but he'd kissed her so hard and hungrily that she had dismissed the notion even though she'd felt a lingering pain. That night, after the lights were out and she was lying on the cot that had been brought in, he had said, "Michelle."

His voice was low, and he hadn't moved. She'd lifted her head to stare through the darkness at him. "Yes?"

"I love you," he had said quietly.
Tremors shook her, and tears leaped to her eyes, but they were happy tears. "I'm glad," she had managed to say.
He'd laughed in the darkness. "You little tease, just wait until I get my hands on you again."
"I can't wait."
Now he was all right, and they were going home. She called Nev to come pick them up, then hung up the phone with hands that had become damp. She wiped them on her slacks and lifted her chin. "Have you heard if Deputy Phelps has found a lead on Roger yet?"
John had been dressing, but at her words his head snapped around and his good eye narrowed on her. Slowly he zipped his jeans and fastened them, then walked around the bed to tower over her threateningly. Michelle's gaze didn't waver, nor did she lower her chin, even though she abruptly felt very small and helpless.
He didn't say anything, but simply waited, his mouth a hard line beneath his mustache. "I eavesdropped," she said calmly. "I had already made the connection between the phone calls and the guy who forced me off the road, but how did you tie everything together?"

"Just an uneasy feeling and a lot of suspicions," he said. "After that last call, I wanted to make certain I knew where he was. There were too many loose ends, and Andy couldn't find him on any airline's overseas passenger list. The harder Beckman was to find, the more suspicious it looked."
"You didn't believe me at first, about the blue Chevrolet."
He sighed. "No, I didn't. Not at first. I'm sorry. It was hard for me to face the fact that anyone would want to hurt you. But something was bothering you. You didn't want to drive, you didn't want to leave the ranch at all, but you wouldn't talk about it. That's when I began to realize you were scared."
Her green eyes went dark. "Terrified is a better word," she whispered, looking out the window.
"Have you heard from Phelps?"
"No. He wouldn't call here unless he'd found Beckman."
She shivered, the strained look coming back into her face. "He tried to kill you. I should have known, I should have done something."
"What could you have done?" he asked roughly. "If you'd been with me that day, the bullet would have hit you, instead of just shattering the windshield."

"He's so jealous he's insane." Thinking of Roger made her feel sick, and she pressed her hand to her stomach. "He's truly insane. He probably went wild when I moved in with you. The first couple of phone calls, he didn't say anything at all. Maybe he had just been calling to see if I answered the phone at your house. He couldn't stand for me to even talk to any other man, and when he found out that you and I—" She broke off, a fine sheen of perspiration on her face.

Gently John pulled her to him, pressing her head against his shoulder while he soothingly stroked her hair. "I wonder how he found out."

"Bitsy Sumner," Michelle said shakily.

"The airhead we met in the restaurant?"

"That airhead is the biggest gossip I know."

"If he's that far off his rocker, he probably thinks he's finally found the 'other man' after all these years." She jumped, then gave a tight little laugh. "He has."

"What?" His voice was startled.

She eased away from him and pushed her hair back from her face with a nervous gesture. "It's always been you," she said in a low voice, looking anywhere except at him. "I couldn't love him the way I should have, and somehow he…seemed to know it."

He put his hand on her chin and forced her head around. "You acted like you hated me, damn it."
"I had to have some protection from you." Her green eyes regarded him with a little bitterness. "You had women falling all over you, women with a lot more experience, and who were a lot prettier. I was only eighteen, and you scared me to death. People called you 'Stud!' I knew I couldn't handle a man like you, even if you'd ever looked at me twice."
"I looked," he said harshly. "More than twice. But you turned your nose up at me as if you didn't like my smell, so I left you alone, even though I wanted you so much my guts were tied in knots. I built that house for you, because you were used to a lot better than the old house I was living in. I built the swimming pool because you liked to swim. Then you married some fancy-pants rich guy, damn you, and I felt like tearing the place down stone by stone."
Her lips trembled. "If I couldn't have you, it didn't matter who I married."
"You could have had me."
"As a temporary bed partner? I was so young I thought I had to have it all or nothing. I wanted forever after, for better or worse, and your track record isn't that of a marrying man. Now…" She

shrugged, then managed a faint smile. "Now all that doesn't matter."
Hard anger crossed his face, then he said, "That's what you think," and covered her mouth with his. She opened her lips to him, letting him take all he wanted. The time was long past when she could deny him anything, any part of herself. Even their kisses had been restrained for the past four days, and the hunger was so strong in him that it overwhelmed his anger, he kissed her as if he wanted to devour her, his strong hands kneading her flesh with barely controlled ferocity, and she reveled in it. She didn't fear his strength or his roughness, because they sprang from passion and aroused an answering need inside her. Her nails dug into his bare shoulders as her head fell back, baring her throat for his mouth. His hips moved rhythmically, rubbing the hard ridge of his manhood against her as his self-control slipped. Only the knowledge that a nurse could interrupt them at any moment gave him the strength to finally ease away from her, his breath coming hard and fast. The way he felt now was too private, too intense, for him to allow even the chance of anyone walking in on them.
"Nev had better hurry," he said roughly, unable to resist one more kiss. Her lips were pouty and swollen from his kisses, her eyes half-closed and drugged

with desire; that look aroused him even more, because he had put it there.
Michelle slipped out of the bedroom, her clothes in her hand. She didn't want to take a chance on waking John by dressing in the bedroom; he had been sleeping heavily since the accident, but she didn't want to push her luck. She had to find Roger. He had missed killing John once; he might not miss the second time. And she knew John; if he made even a pretense of following the doctor's order to take it easy, she'd be surprised. No, he would be working as normal, out in the open and vulnerable.
He had talked to Deputy Phelps the night before, but all Andy had come up with was that a blue Chevrolet had been rented to a man generally matching Roger's physical description, and calling himself Edward Walsh. The familiar cold chill had gone down Michelle's spine. "Edward is Roger's middle name," she had whispered. "Walsh was his mother's maiden name." John had stared at her for a long moment before relaying the information to Andy.
She wouldn't allow Roger another opportunity to hurt John. Oddly, she wasn't afraid for herself. She had already been through so much at Roger's hands that she simply couldn't be afraid any longer, but she was

deathly afraid for John, and for this new life she carried. She couldn't let this go on.
Lying awake in the darkness, she had suddenly known how to find him. She didn't know exactly where he was, but she knew the general vicinity; all she had to do was bait the trap, and he would walk into it. The only problem was that she was the bait, and she would be in the trap with him.
She left a note for John on the kitchen table and ate a cracker to settle her stomach. To be on the safe side, she carried a pack of crackers with her as she slipped silently out the back door. If her hunch was right, she should be fairly safe until someone could get there. Her hand strayed to her stomach. She had to be right.
The Mercedes started with one turn of the ignition key, its engine smooth and quiet. She put it in gear and eased it down the driveway without putting on the lights, hoping she wouldn't wake Edie or any of the men.
Her ranch was quiet, the old house sitting silent and abandoned under the canopy of big oak trees. She unlocked the door and let herself in, her ears straining to hear every noise in the darkness. It would be dawn within half an hour; she didn't have much time to bait the trap and lure Roger in before Edie would find the note on the table and wake John.

Her hand shook as she flipped on the light in the foyer. The interior of the house jumped into focus, light and shadow rearranging themselves into things she knew as well as she knew her own face. Methodically she walked around, turning on the lights in the living room, then moving into her father's office, then the dining room, then the kitchen. She pulled the curtains back from the windows to let the lights shine through like beacons, which she meant them to be.

She turned on the lights in the laundry room, and in the small downstairs apartment used by the housekeeper a long time ago, when there had been a housekeeper. She went upstairs and turned on the lights in her bedroom, where John had taken her for the first time and made it impossible for her to ever be anything but his. Every light went on, both upstairs and downstairs, piercing the predawn darkness. Then she sat down on the bottom step of the stairs and waited. Soon someone would come. It might be John, in which case he would be furious, but she suspected it would be Roger.

The seconds slipped past, becoming minutes. Just as the sky began to take on the first gray tinge of daylight, the door opened and he walked in.

She hadn't heard a car, which meant she had been right in thinking he was close by. Nor had she heard his steps as he crossed the porch. She had no warning until he walked through the door, but, oddly, she wasn't startled. She had known he would be there.
"Hello, Roger," she said calmly. She had to remain calm.
He had put on a little weight in the two years since she had seen him, and his hair was a tad thinner, but other than that he looked the same. Even his eyes still looked the same, too sincere and slightly mad. The sincerity masked the fact that his mind had slipped, not far enough that he couldn't still function in society, but enough that he could conceive of murder and be perfectly logical about it, as if it were the only thing to do.
He carried a pistol in his right hand, but he held it loosely by the side of his leg. "Michelle," he said, a little confused by her manner, as if she were greeting a guest. "You're looking well." It was a comment dictated by a lifetime of having the importance of good manners drilled into him.
She nodded gravely. "Thank you. Would you like a cup of coffee?" She didn't know if there was any coffee in the house, and even if there were, it would be horribly stale, but the longer she could keep him

off balance, the better. If Edie wasn't in the kitchen now, she would be in a few minutes, and she would wake John. Michelle hoped John would call Andy, but he might not take the time. She figured he would be here in fifteen minutes. Surely she could handle Roger for fifteen minutes. She thought the brightly lit house would alert John that something was wrong, so he wouldn't come bursting in, startling Roger into shooting. It was a chance, but so far the chances she had taken had paid off.

Roger was staring at her with a feverish glitter in his eyes, as if he couldn't look at her enough. Her question startled him again. "Coffee?"

"Yes. I think I'd like a cup, wouldn't you?" The very thought of coffee made her stomach roll, but making it would take time. And Roger was very civilized; he would see nothing wrong with sharing a cup of coffee with her.

"Why, yes. That would be nice, thank you."

She smiled at him as she got up from the stairs. "Why don't you chat with me while the coffee's brewing? I'm certain we have a lot of gossip to catch up on. I only hope I have coffee; I may have forgotten to buy any. It's been so hot this summer, hasn't it? I've become an iced-tea fanatic."

"Yes, it's been very hot," he agreed, following her into the kitchen. "I thought I might spend some time at the chalet in Colorado. It should be pleasant this time of year."

She found a half-empty pack of coffee in the cabinet; it was probably so stale it would be undrinkable, but she carefully filled the pot with water and poured it into the coffeemaker, then measured out the coffee into the paper filter. Her coffeemaker was slow; it took almost ten minutes to make a pot. The perking, hissing sounds it made were very soothing.

"Please sit down," she invited, indicating the chairs at the kitchen table.

Slowly he took a chair, then placed the pistol on the table. Michelle didn't let herself look at it as she turned to take two mugs from the cabinet. Then she sat down and took another cracker from the pack she had brought with her; she had left it on the table earlier, when she was going around the house turning on all the lights. Her stomach was rolling again, perhaps from tension as much as the effects of pregnancy.

"Would you like a cracker?" she asked politely.

He was watching her again, his eyes both sad and wild. "I love you," he whispered. "How could you leave me when I need you so much? I wanted you to come back to me. Everything would have been all right. I promised

you it would be all right. Why did you move in with that brute rancher? *Why did you have to cheat on me like that*?"

Michelle jumped at the sudden lash of fury in his voice. His remarkably pleasant face was twisting in the hideous way she remembered in her nightmares. Her heart began thudding against her ribs so painfully that she thought she might be sick after all, but somehow she managed to say with creditable surprise,

"But, Roger, the electricity had been disconnected. You didn't expect me to live here without lights or water, did you?"

Again he looked confused by the unexpected change of subject, but only momentarily. He shook his head. "You can't lie to me anymore, darling. You're still living with him. I just don't understand. I offered you so much more: all the luxury you could want, jewelry, shopping trips in Paris, but instead you ran away from me to live with a sweaty rancher who smells of cows."

She couldn't stop the coldness that spread over her when he called her "darling." She swallowed, trying to force back the panic welling in her. If she panicked, she wouldn't be able to control him. How many minutes did she have left? Seven? Eight?

"I wasn't certain you wanted me back," she managed to say, though her mouth was so dry she could barely form the words.

Slowly he shook his head. "You had to know. You just didn't want to come back. You *like* what that sweaty rancher can give you, when you could have lived like a queen. Michelle, darling, it's so sick for you to let someone like him touch you, but you enjoy it, don't you? It's *unnaturall"*

She knew all the signs. He was working himself into a frenzy, the rage and jealousy building in him until he lashed out violently. How could even Roger miss seeing why she would prefer John's strong, clean masculinity and earthy passions to his own twisted parody of love? How much longer would it be? Six minutes?

"I called your house," she lied, desperately trying to defuse his temper. "Your housekeeper said you were in France. I wanted you to come get me. I wanted to come back to you."

He looked startled, the rage draining abruptly from his face as if it had never been. He didn't even look like the same man. "You…you wanted…"

She nodded, noting that he seemed to have forgotten about the pistol. "I missed you. We had so much fun together, didn't we?" It was sad, but in the beginning they *had* had fun. Roger had been full of laughter and gentle teasing, and she had hoped he could make her forget about John.

Some of that fun was suddenly echoed in his eyes, in the smile that touched his mouth. "I thought you were the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen," he said

softly. "Your hair is so bright and soft, and when you smiled at me, I felt ten feet tall. I would have given you the world. I would have killed for you." Still smiling, his hand moved toward the pistol.
Five minutes?
The ghost of the man he had been faded, and suddenly pity moved her. It wasn't until that moment that she understood Roger was truly ill; something in his mind had gone very wrong, and she didn't think all the psychiatrists or drugs in the world would be able to help him.
"We were so young," she murmured, wishing things could have been different for the laughing young man she had known. Little of him remained now, only moments of remembered fun to lighten his eyes. "Do you remember June Bailey, the little redhead who fell out of Wes Conlan's boat? We were all trying to help her back in, and somehow we all wound up in the water except for Toni. She didn't know a thing about sailing, so there she was on the boat, screaming, and we were swimming like mad, trying to catch up to her."
Four minutes.
He laughed, his mind sliding back to those sunny, goofy days.

"I think the coffee's about finished," she murmured, getting up. Carefully she poured two cups and carried them back to the table. "I hope you can drink it. I'm not much of a coffee-maker." That was better than telling him the coffee was stale because she had been living with John.

He was still smiling, but his eyes were sad. As she watched, a sheen of tears began to brighten his eyes, and he picked up the pistol. "I do love you so much," he said. "You never should have let that man touch you." Slowly the barrel came around toward her.

A lot of things happened simultaneously. The back door exploded inward, propelled by a kick that took it off the hinges. Roger jerked toward the sound and the pistol fired, the shot deafening in the confines of the house. She screamed and ducked as two other men leaped from the inside doorway, the biggest one taking Roger down with a tackle that sent him crashing into the table. Curses and shouts filled the air, along with the sound of wood splintering; then another shot assaulted her ears and strengthened the stench of cordite. She was screaming John's name over and over, knowing he was the one rolling across the floor with Roger as they both struggled for the gun. Then suddenly the pistol skidded across the

floor and John was straddling Roger as he drove his fist into the other man's face.
The sickening thudding made her scream again, and she kicked a shattered chair out of her way, scrambling for the two men. Andy Phelps and another deputy reached them at the same time, grabbing John and trying to wrestle him away, but his face was a mask of killing fury at the man who had tried to murder his woman. He slung their hands away with a roar. Sobbing, Michelle threw her arms around his neck from behind, her shaking body against his back. "John, don't, please," she begged, weeping so hard that the words were almost unintelligible. "He's very sick."
He froze, her words reaching him as no one else's could. Slowly he let his fists drop and got to his feet, hauling her against him and holding her so tightly that she could barely breathe. But breathing wasn't important right then; nothing was as important as holding him and having him hold her, his head bent down to hers as he whispered a choked mixture of curses and love words.
The deputies had pulled Roger to his feet and cuffed his hands behind his back, while the pistol was put in a plastic bag and sealed. Roger's nose and mouth were bloody, and he was dazed, looking at them as if

he didn't know who they were, or where he was. Perhaps he didn't.
John held Michelle's head pressed to his chest as he watched the deputies take Beckman out. God, how could she have been so cool, sitting across the kitchen table from that maniac and calmly serving him coffee? The man made John's blood run cold. But she was safe in his arms now, the most precious part of his world. She had said a lot about his tomcatting reputation and the women in his checkered past; she had even called him a heartbreaker. But she was the true heartbreaker, with her sunlight hair and summer-green eyes, a golden woman who he never would have forgotten, even if she'd never come back into his life. Beckman had been obsessed with her, had gone mad when he lost her, and for the first time John thought he might understand. He wouldn't have a life, either, if he lost Michelle.
"I lost twenty years off my life when I found that note," he growled into her hair.
She clung to him, not loosening her grip. "You got here faster than I'd expected," she gasped, still crying a little. "Edie must've gotten up early."
"No, I got up early. You weren't in bed with me, so I started hunting you. As it was, we barely got here in

time. Edie would have been too late."
Andy Phelps sighed, looking around the wrecked kitchen. Then he found another cup in the cabinet and poured himself some coffee. He made a face as he sipped it. "This stuff is rank. It tastes just like what we get at work. Anyway, I think I have my pajama bottoms on under my pants. When John called I took the time to dress, but I don't think I took the time to undress first."
They both looked at him. He still looked a little sleepy, and he certainly wasn't in uniform. He had on jeans, a T-shirt, and running shoes with no socks. He could have worn an ape suit for all she cared.
"I need both of you to make statements," he said. "But I don't think this will ever come to trial. From what I saw, he won't be judged mentally competent."
"No," Michelle agreed huskily. "He isn't."
"Do we have to make the statements right now?" John asked. "I want to take Michelle home for a while."
Andy looked at both of them. Michelle was utterly white, and John looked the worse for wear, too. He had to still be feeling the effects of hitting a steering wheel with his face. "No, go on. Come in sometime this afternoon."

John nodded and walked Michelle out of the house. He'd commandeered Nev's truck, and now he led her to it. Someone else could get the car later.
It was a short, silent drive back to the ranch. She climbed numbly out of the truck, unable to believe it was all over. John swung her up in his arms and carried her into the house, his hard arms tight around her. Without a word to anyone, even Edie, who watched them with lifted brows, he took her straight upstairs to their bedroom and kicked the door shut behind him.
He placed her on the bed as if she might shatter, then suddenly snatched her up against him again. "I could kill you for scaring me like that," he muttered, even though he knew he'd never be able to hurt her. She must have known it, too, because she cuddled closer against him.
"We're getting married right away," he ordered in a voice made harsh with need. "I heard part of what he said, and maybe he's right that I can't give you all the luxuries you deserve, but I swear to God I'll try to make you happy. I love you too much to let you go."
"I've never said anything about going," Michelle protested. Married? He wanted to get married? Abruptly she lifted her head and gave him a glowing smile, one that almost stopped his breathing.

"You never said anything about staying, either."
"How could I? This is your house. It was up to you."
"Good manners be damned," he snapped. "I was going crazy, wondering if you were happy."
"Happy? I've been sick with it. You've given me something that doesn't have a price on it." She lifted her nose at him. "I've heard that mingling red blood with blue makes very healthy babies."
He looked down at her with hungry fire in his eyes. "Well, I hope you like babies, honey, because I plan on about four."
"I like them very much," she said as she touched her stomach. "Even though this is making me feel really ghastly."
For a moment he looked puzzled, then his gaze drifted downward. His expression changed to one of stunned surprise, and he actually paled a little.
"You're pregnant?"
"Yes. Since the night you came back from your last trip to Miami."
His right brow lifted as he remembered that night; the left side of his face was still too swollen for him to be able to move it much. Then a slow grin began to widen his mouth, lifting the corners of his mustache.
"I was careless one time too many," he said with visible satisfaction.

She laughed. "Yes, you were. Were you trying to be?"
"Who knows?" he asked, shrugging. "Maybe. God knows I like the idea. How about you?"
She reached for him, and he pulled her onto his lap, holding her in his arms and loving the feel of her. She rubbed her face against his chest. "All I've ever wanted is for you to love me. I don't need all that expensive stuff; I like working on the ranch, and I want to build my own ranch up again, even after we're married. Having your baby is…just more of heaven."
He laid his cheek on her golden hair, thinking of the terror he'd felt when he'd read her note. But now she was safe, she was his, and he would never let her go. She'd never seen any man as married as he planned to be. He'd spend the rest of his life trying to pamper her, and she'd continue to calmly ignore his orders whenever the mood took her, just as she did now. It would be a long, peaceful life, anchored in hard work and happily shrieking kids.
It would be good.
Their wedding day dawned clear and sunny, though the day before Michelle had resigned herself to having the wedding inside. But Hurricane Carl, after days of meandering around like a lost bee, had finally decided to head west and the clouds had vanished,

leaving behind a pure, deep blue sky unmarred by even a wisp of cloud.

Michelle couldn't stop smiling as she dressed. If there were any truth in the superstition that it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride on their wedding day, she and John were in for a miserable life, but somehow she just couldn't believe it He had not only refused to let her sleep in another room the night before, he'd lost his temper over the subject. She was damn well going to sleep with him where she belonged, and that was that. Tradition could just go to hell as far as he was concerned, if it meant they had to sleep apart. She had noticed that he hadn't willingly let her out of his sight since the morning they had caught Roger, so she understood.

His rather calm acceptance of his impending fatherhood had been a false calm, one shock too many after a nerve-wracking morning. The reality of it had hit him during the night, and Michelle had awakened to find herself clutched tightly to his chest, his face buried in her hair and his muscled body shaking, while he muttered over and over, "A baby. My God, a baby." His hand had been stroking her stomach as if he couldn't quite imagine his child growing inside her slim body. It had become even more real to him the next morning when even

crackers couldn't keep her stomach settled, and he had held her while she was sick.
Some mornings weren't bad at all, while some were wretched. This morning John had put a cracker in her mouth before she was awake enough to even open her eyes, so she had lain in his arms with her eyes closed, chewing on her "breakfast." When it became evident that this was going to be a good morning, the bridegroom had made love to the bride, tenderly, thoroughly, and at length.
They were even dressing together for their wedding. She watched as he fastened his cuff links, his hard mouth curved in a very male, very satisfied way. He had found her lace teddy and garter belt extremely erotic, so much so that now they risked being late to their own wedding.
"I need help with my zipper when you've finished with that," she said.
He looked up, and a slow smile touched his lips, then lit his black eyes. "You look good enough to eat."
She couldn't help laughing. "Does this mean we'll have to reschedule the wedding for tomorrow?"
The smile became a grin. "No, we'll make this one."
He finished his cuff links. "Turn around."
She turned, and his warm fingers touched her bare back, making her catch her breath and shiver in an

echo of delight. He kissed her exposed nape, holding her as the shiver became a sensuous undulation. He wouldn't have traded being with her on this particular morning for all the tradition in the world.
Her dress was a pale, icy yellow, as was the garden hat she had chosen to wear. The color brought out the bright sunniness of her hair and made her glow, though maybe it wasn't responsible for the color in her cheeks or the sparkle in her eyes. That could be due to early pregnancy, or to heated lovemaking. Or maybe it was sheer happiness.
He worked the zipper up without snagging any of the delicate fabric, then bent to straighten and smooth her skirt. He shrugged into his jacket as she applied lipstick and carefully set the hat on her head. The yellow streamers flowed gracefully down her back.
"Are we ready?" she asked, and for the first time he heard a hint of nervousness in her voice.
"We're ready," he said firmly, taking her hand. Their friends were all waiting on the patio; even his mother had flown up from Miami, a gesture that had surprised him but, on reflection, was appreciated. Without the shadow of Roger Beckman hanging over her, Michelle had flowered in just these few days. Until she had made the effort to confront Roger, to do something about him once and for all, she hadn't

realized the burden she'd been carrying around with her. Those black memories had stifled her spirit, made her wary and defensive, unwilling to give too much of herself. But she had faced him, and in doing so she had faced the past. She wasn't helpless any longer, a victim of threats and violence.

Poor Roger. She couldn't help feeling pity for him, even though he had made her life hell. At her insistence, John and Andy had arranged for Roger to have medical tests immediately, and it hadn't taken the doctors long to make a diagnosis. Roger had a slow but relentlessly degenerative brain disease. He would never be any better, and would slowly become worse until he finally died an early death, no longer knowing anyone or anything. She couldn't help feeling grief for him, because at one time he'd been a good, kind young man. She wished there were some help for him, but the doctors didn't hold out any hope.

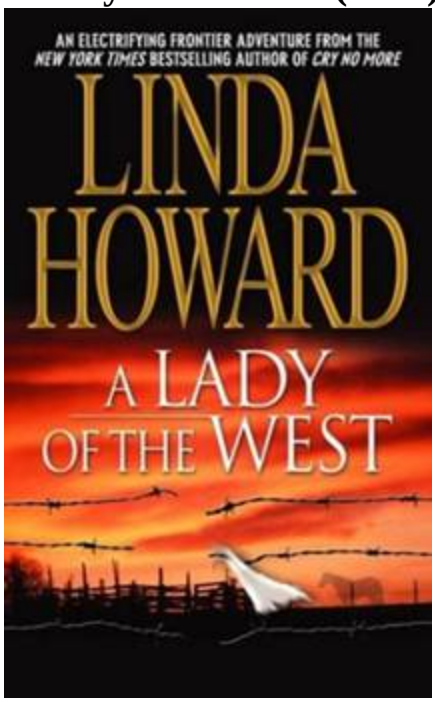
John put his arm around her, seeing the shadows that had come into her eyes. He didn't share her sympathy for Beckman, though perhaps in time he would be able to forget the moment when that pistol had swung toward her. Maybe in a few centuries.

He tilted her head up and kissed her, taking care not to smear her lipstick. "I love you," he murmured.

The sun came back out in her eyes. "I love you, too." He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "Let's go get married."

Together they walked down the stairs and out to the patio, where their friends waited and the sun shone down brightly, as if to apologize for the threat of a storm the day before. Michelle looked at the tall man by her side; she wasn't naive enough to think there wouldn't be storms in their future, because John's arrogance would always make her dig in her heels, but she found herself looking forward to the battles they would have. The worst was behind them, and if the future held rough weather and sudden squalls… well, what future didn't? If she could handle John, she could handle anything.

A Lady of the West (1990)



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This book is a work of historical fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents relating to non-historical figures are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance of such non-historical incidents, places or figures to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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Dedicated to two wonderful friends,
Catherine Coulter and Iris Johansen, for a lot of intangibles,
such as support, encouragement, laughter, and memories.
Thank God for Houston, Texas, February 1985.

A man in a passion rides a wild horse.
—Benjamin Franklin
Beware the fury of a patient man.
—John Dryden

PROLOGUE

The land itself was extraordinarily beautiful, which was perhaps why the earliest humans to settle on the continent chose to live there. Twenty-five thousand years later, give or take a century, it would be called New Mexico,

a name that failed utterly to suggest the magic of the pristine alpine forests in the north that were dotted with cold, crystal clear lakes, and graduated to rolling grasslands and solitary mountain cones. The air was so clear it soothed both the eyes and the brain, and the sunset skies were always filled with color.

The first people to live in New Mexico were what the white man would later call Indians, and they flourished for thousands of years in the beautiful land. But when the Spaniards came with their armored warriors, steel lances, and fierce horses to unearth the gold buried in the rich land, they claimed the earth itself for their faraway king. As a reward to the intrepid settlers, the Spanish kings gave them land grants, pieces of paper that declared ownership of the wild land they attempted to tame.

One of these early Spanish settlers was Francisco Peralta, a tall, quiet man with fierce green eyes. He marked out the boundaries of what he would call his, and defended it with his blood. He built an adobe house and sent to Spain for the gently born woman who had agreed to be his wife.

They had only one child, a son. But what a son he was! Juan Peralta extended the boundaries of his father's land, he mined gold and silver, raised horses and cattle, and so became wealthy. In his turn he took a bride from Spain, a woman who fought beside him during Indian raids and who bore him three children, a son and two daughters. For his family, Juan Peralta built a new house, far grander than his father's. His was a harmonious design with arched doorways, cool white walls, and dark earthen tile floors. Fragrant flowers bloomed in the courtyard.

Juan's son, named Francisco after his grandfather, worked even more wealth out of the rancho. But his delicate wife died only six months after the birth of their first child, a daughter. The grieving husband never remarried and cherished his daughter, Elena, as the most precious thing in his life.

By that time, 1831, Americans were wandering all over the West, spreading out from Texas. Most of them were trappers and mountain men, some adventurers. There weren't many at first, but more and more of them came, hard, restless men who were careless of the great beauty of the land. The Peraltas looked down on these crude Americans, and Francisco forbade Elena to speak to any of them.

But one of the Americans, Duncan Sarratt, didn't care a snap of his fingers about Francisco's edicts. When he saw dainty Elena Peralta, he fell in love. Worse, Elena fell in love with him, too. Francisco raged, he threatened, he

tried to intimidate both his daughter and the American. But he had given Elena too many years of loving indulgence for her to take his threats seriously. She would have her American.

So she did, and they married with Francisco's reluctant permission. Not being a stupid man, however, he quickly saw that Duncan Sarratt was, perhaps, just what Elena had needed to protect her inheritance. The green-eyed American was a man who knew how to fight and how to protect his own.

Francisco didn't live long enough to see his grandchildren born. He died the next year, 1832, and Duncan Sarratt became ruler of the Peralta lands. He grew into such an absolute ruler that he became known as "King" Sarratt. It followed, as easily as night follows day, that the high valley became known as Sarratt's Kingdom.

The heirs to the kingdom were born: a son, Jacob, and two years later another son, Benjamin.

The boys grew up in the elegant adobe house built by their great-grandfather. They played games on the cool dark tiles, dangled by their hands from the courtyard balconies, wrestled and fought like two tiger cubs, and learned to love every inch of the kingdom that would be theirs.

But in 1845 the Americans fought a war with Mexico. It didn't touch the Sarratts much at first, as far north as they were. But one result of the war was that Mexico ceded to the United States that great and lovely land the Americans designated as the New Mexico Territory. With a whisk of a pen, the Sarratts were living on American soil.

The United States didn't recognize the laws and grants of the government it had replaced. The old Spanish landowners had been living on their granted land for a hundred years or more, but suddenly their homes were legally up for grabs. They could retain their land by filing on it, but most of them didn't know that. Duncan Sarratt, living in relative isolation in his huge valley kingdom, didn't know it. It didn't make much difference; anyone trying to take Sarratt's Kingdom away from him would have to fight to the death to do it.

The sound of gunfire woke the boy. He rolled from his bed and reached for his pants; the year was 1846, and at thirteen he had been doing a man's work on the ranch for the better part of two years. Whatever the trouble was, he didn't intend to hide from it under the bed like a kid.

He heard people running, and shouts echoed in the house as well as outside in the courtyard. He could hear his father's voice yelling orders. The boy stamped his feet into his boots and ran out into the hallway, tucking his nightshirt into his pants as he went. He collided with his younger brother, who had just bolted from his own room. He steadied the younger boy, who asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." He started down the hall with his brother at his heels.

They heard an explosion of gunfire downstairs, inside the house. There was a moment's silence, and then more shots followed, thundering, echoing through the high-ceilinged rooms. The boys automatically ducked to the side.

"Duncan!" Their mother, Elena, bolted from the bedroom she shared with their father. Raw terror was in her voice as she called out to her husband, who was downstairs. She stared at her sons, then grabbed them to her. "Stay here," she commanded.

At thirteen the boy was already taller than his mother. "I'm going to help him," he told her, and turned toward the stairs.

"No!" She seized his arm. "Stay here! I order you to. Take care of your brother. I'm going downstairs to your father. I'll find out what's going on and come back to tell you. Promise me! Promise me you'll stay here!"

"I can take care of myself." Her younger son thrust out his jaw. He was as fierce as his brother. She stared at him for a second, trailing her hand down his face.

"Stay here," she whispered, and ran.

They had never disobeyed a direct order from their mother. They stood in the hallway, anxious because they didn't know what was happening and furious because they wanted to be a part of it. The booming sound of pistol shots and the crack of rifle fire vibrated through the big house. There were shouts and curses from below, footsteps running, glass shattering.

Then a scream splintered through the noise. It rose to a shriek, then fractured into a raw, deep wail. It was their mother.

The older boy bolted for the staircase, but an abrupt sense of caution kept him from hurtling down the steps. He threw himself to the floor, and eased his head around the railing so he could see what was going on.

A man lay sprawled in the entrance foyer, only the top part of his body visible from where the boy lay. Even though half the face was gone, the boy could tell it was his father. An icy feeling of disbelief began spreading

through his body. His mother had thrown herself on her husband's body and was still wailing in that awful way. As the boy watched, a man reached down and grabbed his mother's arm, dragging her away from the body. As he did so, the lamplight fell across his face. The boy froze. It was Frank McLain, one of his father's men.

"Get the kids, too." McLain's voice was low, but the boy heard him. "Make sure they're dead."

Elena shrieked and threw herself at him, her nails scoring his face. McLain cursed, then drew back his fist and hit her on the side of the head, knocking her to the floor. "Get the boys," he said again, and bent to the woman.

The boy scrambled backward and grabbed his brother. "Run!" he hissed.

The house was their home; they knew every inch of it. Knowing that their rooms would be the first places searched, they went instead to the corner back bed-room, the guest room, which had a small balcony over the inner courtyard.

"I'll go first," the older one whispered, and swung his legs over the side of the balcony. He gripped the black iron railing and eased down until he was hanging above the ground, then let go. It was only about a six-foot drop, one they had made many times in their rowdy games. He landed as lightly as a cat and immediately blended into the dark cover of the shrubbery that grew close against the walls. There was a quiet thump, and his brother joined him.

"What's going on?" the younger boy whispered.

"Pa's dead. It was McLain who did it. He's got Mother."

There was still sporadic gunfire, as people loyal to Duncan Sarratt and the Peralta family tried to fight. The boys crept around the wall, staying in the shadows. Their rifles were in the study, where they put them each day after carefully cleaning them. They had to get them. The inner ice was still spreading through the older boy; he kept seeing his father sprawled on the dark floor, with half of his face missing.

Their mother's screams grated through the cold night air.

They crawled in through the kitchen door. Inside, their mother's screams were louder, hurting their ears. She was still in the foyer, and they could hear thickly muttered curses, too.

The boy knew, and he went even colder. He was thirteen, and he knew. He rose to his feet, moving as silently as a young panther. He saw a gleam of

steel on the kitchen table, and his hand automatically closed on the long-bladed kitchen knife.
The screams were only moans now, and growing weaker. When the boy walked into the foyer, he saw McLain rising to his knees between Elena's legs, pulling out of her body. His pants were open and lowered over his buttocks, his shrinking penis glistening wetly. His pistol was still in his hand. With a faint smile, he put the barrel to the woman's head and pulled the trigger.
An inhuman howl clogged the boy's throat, but he was ice clear through now. He threw the knife, his aim sure, practiced through many hours of play. McLain saw only a movement in the shadows, and he dodged to one side, just enough that the blade went through his shoulder instead of his heart. He bellowed for help and struggled to his feet just as the boy's weight hit him, knocking him back to the floor. The jarring impact made him scream in pain, and the cold floor scraped his bare ass. The boy jerked the knife free, and the bloody blade slashed downward, toward the man's exposed privates. McLain screamed and tried to roll away. The movement of his body deflected the knife enough that it gouged a shallow slit in his upper thigh. With a feral snarl, the boy withdrew the blade and tried again, this time with a low, sideways movement of his arm. The knife gleamed both silver and scarlet, then McLain knew hot, burning, choking agony as the steel sliced into his ball sac.
He shrieked, mad with pain and fear. He rolled and tried to kick, but his legs were tangled in his lowered pants. He'd never known terror before, but now it congealed his blood. He couldn't stop screaming as he tried to evade that slashing knife. In the flickering light he could catch only glimpses of the boy's face, and it was wild.
"I'll cut your goddamn cock off and feed it to you," the boy whispered savagely, and McLain heard him even over the shrill hysteria of his own screams.
A shot deafened them, and the boy was slammed sideways. The knife clattered to the floor, but the boy wasn't down. He scrambled awkwardly toward the kitchen, and the other boy, the younger one, darted forward to help him.
"Kill them!" McLain shrieked, clutching his bleeding balls with both hands. "Kill those little bastards!" He rolled on the floor, his britches still around his knees, and hatred for that Sarratt whelp swelled in his throat until he

nearly choked. He whimpered, too terrified to move his hands and see what kind of damage the knife had done, but blood was dripping from between his fingers, and he realized he could bleed to death. Still whimpering, shaking, he lifted one bloody hand and moaned aloud. His penis was still there, but the left side of his sac was a mangled mess. He didn't know if he'd lost his left testicle or not.

God damn him, the bastard had nearly castrated him! He'd wipe the face of the earth clean of Sarratts, he'd skin that boy and leave him for the buzzards. But even as he thought of all the things he wanted to do, McLain knew he'd never forget the choking terror and pain, the humiliation of rolling on the floor, his britches down, while that knife darted and slashed.

The boys lay in the small cave they'd discovered five years before, on the northern edge of Sarratt's Kingdom. The pain rolled through the older boy, shaking him, making him grind his teeth together in an effort to stifle his moans. His brother lay still, too still, beside him. The older boy whimpered from the effort it took him to lift his arm and put his hand on his brother's chest, to feel the rise and fall of his breathing.

"Don't die," he whispered into the cold darkness, though he knew the younger boy was unconscious. "Don't die. Not yet. We've got to kill McLain."

His younger brother had taken a bullet high in his left side. The older boy didn't know how they had managed to escape, but like wounded animals they had crawled away into the darkness. He himself had two wounds, one in his right thigh, another through the fleshy part of his waist. Blood drenched his shirt and pants, and he could feel himself weakening, his head becoming light from the pain and blood loss.

Dimly he realized they might die here.

"No," he said, and touched his brother's still form again. "No matter what, we have to get McLain. No matter what. I swear it."

CHAPTER ONE

Major Frank McLain stepped into the sun and watched the buggy approach, his eyes narrowed with anticipation.

She was finally here.

Fierce, gloating satisfaction filled him. He'd never been good enough before, but now a damned Waverly would be his wife. Her mother was even a Creighton—Margaret Creighton—and the girl had the Creighton looks herself, all pale, calm elegance, and aristocratic bones.

Victoria Waverly. Before the war her family would have spit on him. Now she was marrying him because he had money and all they had were empty bellies and impeccable bloodlines. The war and the hunger it had created were the world's greatest equalizers. The Waverlys and the Creightons hadn't blinked twice at marrying their daughter to him in exchange for a more comfortable life.

He could barely wait. He'd wrenched this land from the Sarratts with blood and death and pure guts, and made it his; he now owned more land than any plantation owner in the South ever had, made his name one to be reckoned with in the territory, ran more cattle and employed more men than anyone else around, and still something had been lacking. He'd never gotten what he'd wanted more than anything else in his life, and that was a lady at his table, a true aristocrat to share his name. There had never been any hope of it before, but after the war he'd gone back to Augusta, back to the town where he'd grown up as poor and despised white trash. He'd searched there for the perfect woman of his dreams, and he'd found Victoria. His heart beat faster just thinking about her. He had waited four months for her to arrive, and now she was here. They would be married that night.

One of the men standing behind him shifted to get a better look. "Who's that in the buggy with her?"

"Her little sister and her cousin, Emma Gann, came with her," McLain answered. He didn't mind that Victoria had brought some family with her. He kind of liked the idea of haying them under his roof. Men from all over the territory would probably come to court them. White women were still a rarity, and true ladies were as precious as gold. He had a pleasant moment's thought of the alliances he could forge with advantageous marriages for the two young women. By God, he'd build an empire that would make the Sarratts look like two-bit dirt farmers. Twenty years had passed since he'd killed the last of them and taken the land, but he still hated the name. Duncan Sarratt had always looked at him as if he were trash, and that bitch Elena had acted as if he'd dirtied the air she had to breathe. But he'd gotten both of them, made them pay, and now he lived in the Sarratt house. No,

goddamn it, it was his house, just as it was his land. There were no Sarratts anymore. He'd made sure of it.

The half dozen men standing behind him were, in a way, just as eager for the buggy to roll to a stop. Oh, there were some white whores in Santa Fe if they wanted to ride that far, but all of the women on the ranch or anywhere nearby were Mexican. The few white women in Santa Fe who weren't whores were the wives of soldiers, or the odd rancher's wife. These women coming in now were supposed to be good women, but only the Major's wife would be off-limits. Hell, they all knew him. If he wanted to plow his wife's sister, he'd do it and not think twice. So they watched the approaching buggy with hot eyes, wondering what the women would look like, not that it mattered.

Will Garnet spat on the ground. "The Major is acting like a fool over this woman," he muttered. "Ain't no split-tail born worth this much fuss."

The few men who heard him agreed, but didn't say anything. Only two men on the spread were immune to the Major's rage, and Garnet was one of them. He was in his early forties, with dark hair graying at the temples, and he had been with the Major from the first. He was the foreman and did pretty much as he wanted, with the Major's blessing. They all walked lightly around him, except the man standing a little away from their group, his posture relaxed and his eyes cold under the brim of his hat. Jake Roper had only been on the ranch a few months, but he, too, seemed immune to the Major's anger.

They had all been hired as cowpunchers or wranglers, but it was a fact that some of them had been hired more for their handiness with a sidearm than for their bulldogging ability. A man who had made his fortune the way McLain had needed to keep an eye out for his enemies. Not only that, but a spread as big as his was vulnerable to rustling and lightning raids by the Comanche. So McLain had built his own private army of gunmen, and Jake Roper was the fastest. Even the other gunhands tended to steer clear of him. Garnet might have a mean streak in him a mile wide, but Roper was ice clear through. Garnet might back-stab a man, but Roper would squash out a life with as little thought as if he'd stepped on a bug.

Roper himself had little interest in the women. The Major was making a fool out of himself, but it didn't bother Roper. He gave his boss a sidelong glance, but all his contempt was hidden behind his cold eyes. This fancy, high-nosed Southern lady wasn't so special, not if she was marrying

McLain. He had a good idea what she was in for. But she'd chosen to come here; she could damn well make the best of it.
When the buggy reached the front of the house, it stopped and McLain stepped forward. He lifted his arms to help one of the women down. "Victoria!"
She stood, but instead of allowing McLain to lift her from the buggy, she placed a gloved hand on his forearm and stepped down. "Major," she said calmly, and lifted back the veil from her bonnet.
Roper's first impression of her face was that it looked like it belonged to a bloodless porcelain doll, very correct and passionless. Yep, a lady, all right, all the way down to her lace drawers—and God forbid any man should see them. Her hair was light brown, what he could see of it, and her voice had been low. That was a blessing; shrill, screeching women disgusted him.
The next woman to alight, also with a gentle hand on McLain's forearm, was a bit on the plain side, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. But Roper thought she had a sweet smile. He eyed her consideringly. He figured this was the cousin.
The next one didn't wait for assistance, but jumped to the ground with a small gurgle of delight. She tugged her bonnet off, and whirled it by its strings. "Oh, everything's beautiful," she breathed, looking around with wide eyes.
Standing beside Roper, Garnet stiffened and swore under his breath. She was a young girl rather than a woman, but she was stunningly beautiful. Her hair was a golden blond mass, and she had big, dark blue eyes. Roper figured a girl like that was going to cause a lot of trouble among the men on the ranch. The little sister was just too pretty to leave her alone.
"Garnet! Roper!"
Both of them stepped forward, faces blank. The Major was beaming like an idiot as he turned toward them. "Victoria, my dear, these are my two right hands. Will Garnet is my foreman and Jake Roper makes sure we're all safe here. Boys, say howdy to my intended, Miss Victoria Waverly."

Victoria 's eyes showed nothing as she gracefully held out a slim gloved hand to the foreman. "Mr. Garnet," she murmured.
"Ma'am." His hand enclosed hers, and he looked her up and down in a way that made her draw back nervously. She met his gaze and was made even more uneasy by his eyes, which were flat and expressionless, like a snake's.

She withdrew her fingers as quickly as possible, resisting an urge to wipe them on her skirt. Instead, she turned to the other man. "Mr. Roper."
She looked up at him and froze. His hat was pulled down low over his eyes, but she could still see them glittering coldly at her. He slowly, deliberately lowered his gaze to her breasts and stared at them for what seemed an eternity to her, before raising his eyes to meet hers again with contempt.
Roper ignored her outstretched hand and merely lifted the brim of his hat.
Victoria dropped her arm and turned away, her discomfort intensified. If Garnet's manner was offensive, this man was frightening. His face was still, yet he had looked at her with such obvious disrespect that it shook her. No one, not even the Yankee soldiers, had ever looked at her like that.
It took all her self-control to appear calm as she turned to the man she had come three-quarters of the way across the continent to marry. "If you don't mind, Major, we'd like to freshen up now. The dust is terrible."
"Of course, of course. Carmita! Show Miss Victoria and the girls where they can wash." His voice was harsh when he spoke to the servants, and Victoria gave him a quick glance. She had been raised to never be rude to a servant. But the short, round, middle-aged woman who answered the Major's summons wore an expression of perpetual good nature.
"Please, this way," she said with a warm smile.

Victoria turned to find her cousin, Emma, close behind her, but her sister Celia had wandered off toward the corrals. Victoria called to her, and as the girl skipped back, her face aglow with delight, Victoria didn't miss the way most of the men were looking at Celia. Men everywhere looked at Celia with pleasure, but this was different. They watched the girl the way a cat might watch a mouse.

Victoria ushered Celia into the house ahead of her, wondering desperately if she had done the right thing in bringing the girl with her. At least in Augusta she wouldn't have had to deal with these threatening strangers.
Emma fell into step with Victoria, and her cousin's fine dark eyes mirrored her own uneasy impressions. "Those men…" Emma murmured.
"Yes," Victoria said.
The huge house was Spanish in style, the walls made of thick, whitewashed adobe. Coolness enveloped them as they stepped inside, and Victoria's spirits lifted as she looked around. The walls were clean and white, the

spacious rooms were enlivened with colorful rugs. On the second floor Carmita led them past the first door on the right but opened the second, and beckoned Victoria forward. "Your room, señorita," she said.

Victoria was pleased by what she saw. The floor was of dark wood, and a curtained, four-poster bed was set against the left wall. On the right was an enormous armoire. There was a washstand bearing a simple white pitcher and bowl, and a mirrored dressing table for her toilette. Under the window was a chaise longue, and across it was folded a cream-colored blanket. "It's lovely," she said, drawing a huge smile from Carmita.
Celia whirled around the room, sending her skirts flying. "A room of your own!" she crowed. She and Victoria had shared a room for as long as she could remember, and this was an unimaginable luxury to her. "And Emma and I will have rooms of our own, too, won't we?"

Victoria looked at Carmita, who nodded. "Yes, of course," she told her sister as she smoothed a golden strand of hair from Celia's face. No, there was no way she could have left her in Augusta with their parents, who were bitter and joyless after the death of their only son in the war. Celia needed laughter and sunshine, and she gave it back in abundance. But she was a fragile, vulnerable girl. Like a hothouse bloom, she needed careful nurturing to flourish.
"May we see my room next? Please, may we?"
Her enthusiasm was contagious, and Victoria found herself laughing with the others as they trooped down the hallway. "How many rooms are there in the house, Carmita?" she asked.
"Fifteen, señorita. Eight downstairs, seven upstairs."
"You are the housekeeper?"
"Si. There is also Lola, the cook, and my daughter, Juana, who helps me in the house."

Victoria had caught a glimpse of a black-haired young woman when they arrived. "Was it Juana I saw at the stables?"
Carmita's face hardened. "No, señorita. That was Angelina Garcia. Juana does not go to the stables."
"What does Angelina do?"

Carmita only shrugged, and didn't explain. Victoria made a mental note to ask again about this Angelina.

The rooms assigned to Emma and Celia were identical, square and plain, but possessing simple charm. Celia bounced on each double bed in turn, ecstatic at their good fortune, and even Emma's eyes held a fragile hope that things were looking better at last. Victoria tried to muster some of that same sense of optimism, but instead her heart could manage only the slow, heavy beat of dread. She had to marry Frank McLain, and only desperation had brought her to this pass. He had been outwardly kind, but she doubted she would ever be able to make herself feel comfortable with him.

At the thought of marrying him, a shudder shook her. He was barrel-chested and thick-necked, like a bull, though he wasn't very tall; the combination made him appear brutish. Victoria felt suffocated at the idea of sharing a room with him.

She had brought Emma and Celia with her thinking that at least they would have food and clothing enough to be secure. The war had reduced them, quite literally, to starvation, and the Major had seemed their only hope. But after meeting those men—Garnet and Roper—and seeing the others standing back with their awful interest in Celia, she had to doubt her wisdom in taking her cousin and sister from Augusta.

Roper had stared at her with contempt in his cold eyes. She shivered and decided she would stay far away from the man. She was glad he hadn't taken her hand when she'd offered it; she was glad he hadn't touched her. Yet she wondered why he had looked at her like that, as if she were trash. Never in her twenty-one years had anyone done that; she was a Waverly, her mother was a Creighton, and both families could trace their roots back several centuries to English nobility. Before the war, they had been at the top of the social pyramid. Before the war…

Before the war, she reminded herself, a lot of things had been different. She straightened her shoulders. She had lost the privileged way of life she had been born to, the luxuries, the comfort and protection of wealth. She had gone from having it all to having nothing, but she had coped. She had kept her head high even when she was hungry, even when her dresses were threadbare and she shivered with cold, when her only pair of shoes had holes in the bottom. Dresses and shoes had never been the sum of her existence, so she had never mourned for the loss of them.

What the war had done was shatter her family, taking a cousin here, an uncle there. Emma's fiance had been killed the first winter, and the echo of sadness had never left her eyes. Emma's mother, Victoria's mother's sister, had died in '63. Her cousin had come to live with the Waverlys. Then Victoria's adored older brother, Robert, had been killed in the Wilderness campaign. After that she had also lost her parents. They still lived, after a fashion, but their hearts had died.

Victoria had always known that Robert was the magic one, the center of the family, but she'd never been jealous of him, because she had dearly loved him, too. She and Celia had been loved, or at least she had thought they had been. But with Robert's death, her parents had grieved until there was nothing left to give their daughters.
She thought of the home she'd left, of her parents locked in bitterness for what was lost, and knew that she couldn't have left sixteen-year-old Celia there alone. Celia was different and sometimes others grew impatient with her. All of her life Victoria had stepped between Celia and trouble, and she wasn't going to stop now.
Carmita interrupted Victoria's thoughts as they left Emma's room by saying, "The Major, he said the wedding would be tonight. You have your dress, yes? I will get the wrinkles out."
Tonight! A chill ran through Victoria. "Tonight? Are you certain?"
The housekeeper looked puzzled. "Of course. He has sent for the padre. He told me this himself, this morning."

Victoria said nothing more but went with Carmita back to her room, where the trunks had been delivered. With Emma's assistance, they sorted through everything until they found the dress (paid for with the Major's money) that Victoria had brought to be married in. Carmita took it off to be steamed.
Silently Victoria began putting her clothes away in the armoire. Emma joined her, efficiently folding and hanging.
After a moment Emma said, "You know, you don't have to go through with it. We can always go back home."

Victoria leaned against the armoire. "How can we? Do you truly think the Major would pay our way back? No, I agreed to the bargain, and I'll keep it."

Emma paused in the folding of a delicate lawn nightgown, which had also been purchased with the Major's money. All of their clothing was new and had come from him, even their underwear. Emma's eyes were worried. "Have we made a mistake in coming here?"
"I hope not. I pray not. But those men downstairs… the way they looked at Celia—"
"Yes. I saw."

Victoria walked to the window. The land was beautiful, incredibly so, but alien to everything she had known. She had expected a calm, peaceful ranch, and instead she sensed an undercurrent of violence she couldn't explain. "I feel uneasy," she murmured. "Those men are so threatening. That sounds silly, doesn't it? But I didn't expect them to be armed."
"The territory is still a dangerous place. I expect most men are armed."
"Yes, of course. It's just so different from home. The Yankee soldiers were armed, but that was expected."
"And they didn't look like the gunslingers we've heard so much about."
"Or read about in that dreadful dime novel Celia bought in Texas."
The two young women looked at each other and smiled, remembering the lurid descriptions that had had Celia wide-eyed. Emma's common sense calmed her, but Victoria couldn't entirely dismiss her own uneasiness. A faint blush rose to her cheeks as she returned to the chore of unpacking, and she darted a quick glance at Emma. Her cousin was two years older than she, and had been engaged. Perhaps she was in possession of more information than Victoria was.
"I wonder if he will sleep in here?"
Emma looked around. "It doesn't seem likely. If he intended for you to share a room, wouldn't he have put you in the room he already occupies?"
Relief almost made Victoria's knees go limp. "Yes, I should have thought of that."
"Perhaps that door connects with his room." Emma pointed.

Victoria walked to it and twisted the knob. It opened into another bedroom, obviously occupied. She quickly shut it again. "I'd thought it was to the privy."
At least now she knew they definitely wouldn't share a room, thank God. But that wasn't all that worried her. She busied herself hanging the sensible

skirts and shirtwaist blouses she'd insisted on having for everyday wear.
"Do you know what will happen tonight?" she asked in a low voice. "Afterward—when we're alone."
Emma's hands stilled, and she bit her lip. "Not really. Didn't Aunt Margaret tell you before we left?"
"No, except to say that I must do my duty. That's all very well, if I only knew what my 'duty' was. I feel so stupid! I should have asked. You were engaged; what did Aunt Helen tell you?"
"I suppose she thought she would wait until right before the wedding, for she never told me anything. The things I heard in school—"
"Yes, I know. I imagine I heard the same things, but I can't believe they are true. The only thing I really know is that married people may sleep in the same bed." And have babies. She barely contained a shudder at the thought. She didn't want to have the Major's children; she couldn't even bear for him to share her room.
Emma bit her lip again and thought of Jon, her fiance. After they had become engaged, he had often kissed her in what she knew must be an improper manner, but it had been so wonderful she had gloried in it rather than rebuking him as she ought. He had held her tightly and touched her breasts. He had used his tongue while kissing her, though at first she'd been shocked. And when he'd held her so tightly against him, she had felt a hardness in his trousers, and she had instinctively known that it pertained to what happened between a man and his wife, that mysterious, fearsome unknown they'd whispered about so avidly in school.
Jon. The long years since his death had eased the brutal grief, but not the yearning. She had loved him, but more than that he had begun awakening her physical senses in a way that left her feeling her aloneness even more keenly than she would have. Still, she knew that she would rather be alone than be the one who married Major McLain.

Victoria was truly the only family Emma had left, for she had never been close to her aunt and uncle, and Celia, though happy and lovable, would never be able to share the memories of growing up together as she and Victoria did, or the responsibilities of adulthood. She clenched her fist and looked at her cousin, who had agreed to marry Major McLain in order to protect her family. For all her air of fragility there was steel in Victoria , and fierce determination. Emma knew more than anyone that it was Victoria

who had somehow managed to keep them all fed these past two horrible years when no Southerner had had enough food, Victoria who had bartered and economized, who had spent hours laboriously tending a small vegetable garden in the backyard. Now her cousin needed information, and no matter how embarrassing the discussion was, Emma decided to give it to her.
She cleared her throat. "Jon—used to touch my breasts."

Victoria was very still, her eyes wide and troubled. She tried to imagine the Major touching her there, and shrank from the idea.
"And he used to get hard. His—his privates would get hard." Emma looked down at her clasped hands and couldn't look up again. "I think a husband does something between a woman's legs with his privates, and that's what makes a baby."

Victoria felt as if she couldn't breathe. Dear God, did she have to let the Major rub his privates against hers? He would have to lift up her nightgown, and he would have to be unclothed… Nausea made the bade of her throat burn, and she swallowed. The horrible image of his thick, brutally strong hands on her breasts, pulling up her gown, made her whirl away and clench her fists.
Emma stared at her hands. "Of course, Jon never did anything to dishonor me," she murmured. "But I wish he had. I liked it when he kissed me, and touched me. I wish he had done the rest of it, too, and perhaps I would have had his child."
They had been so strictly raised that for Emma even to think such a thing was scandalous, but Victoria couldn't feel shocked. Emma and Jon had been in love, and for them to do that even unblessed by marriage seemed far less obscene than the proposal that she do the same thing with the Major inside the marital bonds. With that realization, she felt the truth of Emma's aloneness and moved to touch her cousin's shoulder.
"I won't feel as frightened now, knowing. Thank you." She made her voice firm.
Emma gave her a little smile. "I don't know that much. Most of it is guessing. I suppose we should have asked."
"Much good it would have done us. Can you imagine Mother saying even as much as you have?"

Emma hesitated. "Will you tell me?" She blushed. "I mean, when you know for certain."
Respectable women never talked of such things, but Victoria nodded. She didn't feel daring, only desperate. She and Emma would have to bolster each other and work together to protect Celia, who saw good in everyone and therefore knew neither danger nor caution.

Victoria looked around the room. It was pleasing in its simple colors, larger and airier than she was accustomed to, as were all the rooms in the house. Tonight she would become a wife and would no longer be Victoria Waverly, but Mrs. Frank McLain. Someday she might be a mother. This, it seemed, was to be her role in life, and her duty was to fill it impeccably.
She had been raised to be first a perfect lady and then a perfect wife, an ornament on a man's arm and a capable mistress of his house. In her world women were gentle and graceful, charming and concerned only with a woman's activities. A wife always deferred to her husband. She would try to be the lady she had been raised to be, try to always be gracious and proper. She knew nothing else she could do; there was no backing out, so she might as well make the best of it. Many women had married men they didn't love and led fulfilled lives; Victoria was certain she could do the same.
But when she thought of the coming night, she couldn't stop shivering.
Will Garnet couldn't get the little blonde out of his mind. Her glowing face was perfect, and he bet her breasts would be nice and round, instead of drooping like Angelina's. Hell, Angelina would lie down for any two-bit saddle tramp who had the price, so there wasn't anything special about her. Now, that little blonde… she was a virgin for sure, she had that look about her. Garnet wanted to be the first. He wanted to see that beautiful little face when she got it for the first time; he bet she'd like it, after she got used to it some. Not like her cold stick of a sister. The boss wouldn't be getting anything in his bed except a poker.
Garnet cast a sidelong glance at Roper, who was sitting at the table in the bunkhouse. He didn't have much use for the man, and he knew the feeling was likewise, but they would both be at the wedding. Boss's orders, just to make certain no trouble interrupted the ceremony. Garnet grunted and spoke to the gunhand. "The boss's woman ain't much, is she? But, damn, that little sister sure makes up for her."
Roper was cleaning and oiling his big .44s, and never looked up.

Familiar anger rose in Garnet. If Roper wasn't so damned fast with those guns, he'd have kicked his ass a long time ago. But nobody pushed Roper, not even the Major. If it had just been that, a bullet in the back would have taken care of him. The thing was, any back-shooter would have to make damn certain Roper was dead, and most of the men thought Roper wouldn't go down that easy. He'd only been on the ranch a few months, and they still didn't know much about him, other than he was damn good with horses, snake-quick with a gun, and as cold-blooded and deadly as a rattler. It was in his eyes, those cold, clear, emotionless eyes.

Roper never let his guard down. Even now, while he was cleaning his .44s, he only unloaded one at the time. Nor were they his only weapons; a big Bowie knife, all fourteen inches of it, rode in a scabbard at his left kidney, and another knife, this one thin and balanced for throwing, was in his right boot. Those were the only ones Garnet knew about; he figured the gunslick had at least one more hidden somewhere on his body.

But what really made the men wary of Roper was the way he'd killed Charlie Guest a couple of months back. Guest had always had more mouth than sense and was a bad-tempered bully on his good days, so Garnet really didn't give a damn that Roper had killed him. It was the way he'd done it. Guest had taken a dislike to Roper and started mouthing off at him, and got even madder when the gunhand had ignored him the way he was doing Garnet now. Then Guest had made the mistake of going for his gun. He'd never made it. Before he could even clear leather, Roper had been on him, moving so lightning fast that Garnet still wasn't quite sure what had happened.

Roper had dropped Guest to the bunkhouse floor and planted a knee in his back. He'd hooked his left arm around Guest's neck and pushed on the man's head with his right hand. They'd all heard Guest's neck pop like a chicken's. Without even breaking a sweat, Roper had left the dead man lying on the floor and gone back to what he'd been doing like he'd never been interrupted.

The dead silence in the bunkhouse had been broken when one of the cowpunchers blurted, "Why didn't you shoot him?"

Roper hadn't looked up. "He wasn't worth a bullet."

The Major liked having a man like Roper in his employ; he felt it gave him a certain stature. Garnet didn't like the way the Major was depending more

and more on the gunslick, but was helpless to do anything about it. Nobody on the ranch was going to take him on after what he'd done to Guest.
Goaded by his silence, Garnet snapped, "That little blonde's mine."
Roper flicked a glance at him. "Fine."
Somehow, the indifference stung Garnet. Nothing touched Roper. The man wasn't human; he didn't even use Angelina's services. Garnet had begun to think something was wrong with Roper in that way until they'd gone into Santa Fe and Roper had holed up with a woman the entire three days they'd been there. The fool woman had watched him leave with a dreamy look in her eyes.
Just under his breath Garnet said, "One of these days, gunslick, I'll get you under my sights."
Roper lifted his head and smiled in a way that didn't change the expression in his eyes at all. "Any time."

CHAPTER TWO

Victoria's dress was white, long-sleeved and high-necked, and had one of the new slim skirts she had seen the Yankee ladies in Augusta wearing. Celia oohed and ahhed over it, when she wasn't whirling around in her own new blue dress.
Emma brushed out Victoria's waist-length hair, skillfully wound and secured it up on her head, and pulled several strands loose at the temple to soften the look. Emma's calm face helped. Victoria's hands were steady as she affixed a tiny spray of seed pearls in her hair. "How does this look?" she asked.
"It looks wonderful!" Celia was full of admiration. She adored Victoria and was happy that she looked so pretty in her new dress. Celia didn't begin to understand what this wedding meant to her sister. Victoria tried to pretend the occasion was as happy as her sister believed it to be.
"It does look wonderful," Emma said more quietly. Her dress was also blue, a shade that went extremely well with her pale skin. Her mass of dark hair had been wound into a smooth coil on the back of her head. Her eyes met her cousin's in the mirror, and Victoria managed a small, reassuring smile.

Carmita knocked and put her head in the door, smiling broadly as she took in the three young women. "The Major is ready, señorita. You look very pretty!"

Victoria rose to her feet. "Thank you." She managed a smile for Carmita, also. Just before they left the room, she took one more look around it. She would not be a Waverly the next time she stepped through this door. A white silk and lace nightgown lay across the bed, and she quickly looked past it.

The men were gathered in what she assumed was a parlor. She saw McLain, the priest, Father Sebastian, and the two men she had met that afternoon, Garnet and Roper. Victoria quickly walked to the Major's side, not letting her gaze touch either of the two hands as she gave them a polite nod. Roper stood a little in her way, but he didn't move, and she had to go around him to keep her skirts from brushing his legs. She could almost feel the scorn in his eyes as he watched her.

The Major was beaming as he took her hand and tucked it in the crook of his elbow. "You look beautiful," he said heartily. "I sure am getting my money's worth." She controlled a flinch.

To the priest McLain said, "Get on with it."

The wedding ceremony was brief, too brief for Victoria's peace of mind. In only a couple of minutes they were man and wife. McLain turned her to face him and pressed his wet mouth on hers. Victoria kept her lips firmly together and her mind blank as she willed herself not to shudder. She drew back as quickly as possible and turned away, meeting Roper's eyes as she did so. For the first time she noticed he wasn't wearing his hat, and she could clearly see his face. His eyes were clear and cold, his expression so contemptuous she almost stepped back. Why did he hate her so much?

The thought made her lift her chin as imperiously as any Creighton or Waverly had ever done; this man was a common thug, a hired gun. She gave him back stare for stare.

Roper's lips twitched into a humorless little smile, and he gave her a brief nod, as if in recognition of her nerve. Still, it wasn't until he turned away that she felt herself released.

The Major rubbed his hand down her arm, accidentally letting his fingers touch her hip. Victoria started, but forced herself to smile at her new husband. It was just that she was so nervous, she told herself, and she didn't

really know him. Once she had a chance to relax, everything would be all right.
"What did you think of your bedroom, girl? Right nice, ain't it?" The Major's tone was somehow leering, but he seemed anxious for her approval.
"It was lovely," she replied, glad she could be honest. "I'm sure I'll be very comfortable. The chaise especially is a nice touch."
He squeezed her hip again. This time, however, she was looking at him and saw the glitter in his dark eyes when he did so. Now she knew it wasn't accidental. Such a public caress shocked her, and the look in his eyes frightened her a little.
"Later," he said with a wink, "you'll like the bedroom even more."
She couldn't reply. The thought of the coming night was almost enough to paralyze her, if she let herself dwell on it. So she forced it from her mind and somehow got through the evening.
It was a strangely silent gathering, with only the Major talking and everyone else answering him in monosyllables. Emma, bless her, kept Celia close to her side. Victoria tried to smile at the appropriate times and contribute some polite conversation over the dinner Lola served, but she was too tense to do more than go through the motions of being a gracious hostess.
McLain kept touching her. Victoria noticed Garner kept watching Celia. And Roper, whose eyes made her shiver, kept watching her, but now his expression was unreadable.
She wished desperately that she had never agreed to marry McLain. She thought hers was the most dismal wedding supper she'd ever attended, and felt a small spurt of amusement because she was the most dismal person attending it. The amusement quickly died, however, when McLain stroked her arm with the gloating possessiveness that made her feel sick. She felt as if he were flaunting her before the two other men.
For a moment her distress was so powerful that she had to look away, and found herself staring at Roper again. His cold eyes met hers, then flickered to McLain. When he looked back to her, she was mortified to see a faint understanding. That he should know she was dreading the night, and what McLain would do to her, was unbearable.
She went white, then red, then white again. She wanted to run from the table, and clenched her hands tightly together. She had never before had any idea that a man might be imagining her with her nightgown pulled up, but

she was certain Roper was thinking just that. Every ounce of modesty she possessed was outraged.
The only thing to do, of course, was to pretend not to notice him. It was rather like closing one's eyes and pretending to be invisible, but it was better than nothing.
Roper watched the color build and recede in her face, and realized the cause; he even felt faint pity. She wasn't a cold and passionless doll, after all. She was frightened—justifiably so, though she couldn't know that. McLain had a reputation for being rough and hasty with women. Nor was he particular in his choices, though this time, it seemed, he'd gotten himself a lady. Bad luck for the lady.
Roper realized he didn't like the idea of McLain rutting on her. It made him furious with himself, but there it was. McLain wouldn't appreciate her pale delicacy, nor would he take the time to give her pleasure. She was too fine for the bastard. She had guts. Damn few men had ever stared at him like that, challenging him with a look. People usually didn't want to look at his face, for some reason; they would only glance at him, and quickly look away. But this pale, slender woman had stood as steadfast as a rock and matched him look for look. She had acted as if she were a queen and he the lowest of her subjects. The thought of it caused a spurt of anger that surprised him. Roper seldom let himself feel any emotion, and he especially didn't want to feel any for McLain's wife.
But there it was. Anger. Respect. Desire. God, yes, desire. He shouldn't feel any of it, he couldn't afford to feel any of it. He'd have to do something about her, sooner or later, and he didn't need his mind clouded by all these unwanted thoughts and emotions. He couldn't let himself soften at all, not now.
Deliberately he looked at the little sister. She was undeniably lovely, and the expression in her dark blue eyes was both sweet and happy, though there was an elusive quality about her he didn't understand. Maybe she was simpleminded. Not stupid, just simple. She was just a beautiful child.
But looking for a distraction didn't help. He turned back to McLain's wife, and the images of hate rose up again in his mind, though he kept his face carefully blank. McLain, murdering his father. McLain, raping his mother and then putting a bullet in her brain. McLain, stealing the land that had been in his mother's family for over a hundred years. McLain, sending the young killer, Garnet, out to hunt down and kill two boys, and damn near

succeeding. McLain, living in the cool, gracious house where Roper had been born, back when this whole valley had been called Sarratt's Kingdom. Jacob Roper Sarratt had returned. He'd come to kill McLain and take back the valley. Until today, that was all he wanted.
Now he wanted McLain's wife, too.

Victoria sat propped against the pillows, clad in her long-sleeved, high-necked white nightgown. She was cold, deathly cold, all the way down to her bones, but she couldn't shiver. Her body felt heavy, incapable of even that tiny movement. Her heart was beating in a slow, ponderous rhythm that threatened to choke her.
Emma had wanted her to leave her hair down, but Victoria had insisted on braiding it as usual, explaining that the tangles were horrendous if she left it loose. The truth was, Victoria didn't want to look too attractive to the Major. It was a small defense, but one she felt would help her in spirit if not in fact.
The bedcurtains were drawn back and tied to the four posters. The room was illuminated by three candles set in the graceful silver candelabra on the dresser, and Victoria wondered why the room was lit with candles instead of an oil lamp, which gave off more light. There had been lamps downstairs. She would ask Carmita tomorrow.
Tonight, though, perhaps it was best that the room wasn't brightly lit. Perhaps she should even snuff the candles. She considered it, and was about to throw the covers back when the connecting door opened and the Major entered her room.
She froze. He was wearing a dark robe, but below the hem his legs were hairy and bare. His bull neck and thick shoulders looked even more odd in contrast to the spindly size of his calves.
But it was his face that most terrified her. He wore such an open expression of gloating anticipation that she wanted to die. Dear God, what was he going to do to her?
He walked to the side of the bed and removed his robe, exposing a white nightshirt that came down to his knees.
"Well, girl, are you ready?" Again, his voice had that leering tone.
She managed to make an assenting noise, but it was a lie. She would never be ready.
"Lie down, then. Did you expect to do it sitting up?" He laughed.

She could barely move, but managed to shift her position so that she was lying flat on the mattress. He got into the bed beside her and leaned up on one elbow. Victoria's muscles tightened even more. He had brown eyes, she noticed. His heavy jaw was darkened by a shadow of beard, and she could smell a sweet, cloying scent about him. Lying this close to him, she was overwhelmed by the mixture of cologne and sweat, so much so that she had to struggle to prevent herself from gagging. Desperately she tried to remind herself that he seemed clean enough, he was just a rather heavy man and naturally sweated.

He bent and pressed his mouth to hers. She could feel the clammy sweat on his upper lip. Revolted, she tried to press her head deeper into the pillow to escape him.

Oddly, the kiss seemed to excite him. He began breathing faster, and his beefy hands jerked at her nightgown. Victoria clenched her fists and tried to prepare for the exposure. At least they were still under the sheet.

But when the nightgown was about her waist he kicked the thin sheet away and rose up on his knees. Victoria closed her eyes, so humiliated she could barely think. He was looking at her there, something she couldn't remember anyone ever doing before. It was shocking enough that he should see her bare legs, but for him actually to look at her triangle of hair was horrible.

The sound of his heavy breathing was the only noise in the room. He put his hand on her bare leg and she jumped. "Feels good, does it?" he panted. "Just wait, there's more."

She couldn't bear more. It couldn't get worse than this. He pulled her legs apart, and nausea churned her stomach. Dear God, he was actually looking between her legs. In all her nightmares she had never imagined this.

He shifted so that he was kneeling between her spread legs. She felt him touching her there, rubbing his fingers over her, and suddenly he pushed one thick finger into her. Her eyes flew open and she went rigid as pain tore through her body. She was dry, and his rough finger felt like sandpaper as it ripped apart the delicate tissues of her hymen. The pain and the idea of what he was doing were finally too much, and she dug her heels into the bed in taut rejection of that horrible penetration, her muscles locked.

With his other hand he had pulled up his nightshirt and was rubbing and pulling at an ugly, veined thing. Victoria looked at him in horror as she suddenly realized what he was going to do. She hadn't thought she could get any stiffer, but she could feel her muscles pulling even tighter, her body

going as rigid as a board. He was cursing for some reason as the ugly little sausage rolled limply in his hand.
Abruptly he let himself down and pushed it against her, and Victoria gagged.
McLain barely noticed her stiffness. It was what he expected; she was a lady, not a whore like Angelina. It was his own unresponsive flesh that held his attention, infuriating him. Dammit, he'd never had this trouble before! Despite his wound, he'd always been able to hump any woman he could get beneath him. But now his organ remained flaccid, no matter how vigorously he pulled at it. Frantically he pushed it against her, hoping that the feel of her would get him hard. He grew more panicked and furious with every passing second as nothing happened.
And then he realized she was lying frozen beneath him, just like that Sarratt bitch Elena had done. The demon that had tormented him for twenty years, that lurked inside him always waiting for a chance to leap out, smiled evilly. Once again out of the recesses of his mind came the hellish memory of pulling out of Elena and the shining knife abruptly slashing at him. He remembered the terror, the sick helplessness he'd felt with his pants around his knees as he rolled on the floor, trying to escape that darting knife. And once again he felt the sharp pain and horror of steel cutting into him.
He jerked away from Victoria, cursing and limp. Furious, humiliated, but above all else lost again in that remembered horror, he left the bed and stamped into his own room, slamming the door behind him.
For a long time Victoria lay as he had left her, with her nightgown up around her waist and her body rigid. The only sound she could hear was her own rough, sobbing breaths. When she did move, it was to shove her fist against her mouth to stifle the hysterical sounds that welled in her throat. She couldn't bear it. If this was what being married entailed, she simply couldn't bear it. The wrenching loss of modesty, the pain… how could any woman ever endure this? She felt shattered by the intrusion into her body, and terrified because she knew he hadn't finished it, though she didn't know why. She only knew he had been trying to put that—thing—into her as he had put his finger. She had never dreamed her very body would be penetrated, never dreamed such things were possible or that men's bodies were so different from women's.
Slowly, her movements stiff and jerky, she slid from the bed. She wanted to wash and she had to blow out the candles. She wanted to hide in the dark

and pretend this had never happened, but she knew she couldn't. Her hands were shaking as she wet a soft flannel in the cool water and drew her nightgown up again. She pressed the wet cloth between her legs to soothe the ache and was startled to find it came away stained with blood.

She stood with her head bowed for a long time, trembling. If this was what her life was to be like, she must somehow find the strength to endure it. For Emma and Celia, she had to endure it. For her parents. This was the sort of bargain women had made for centuries, and she would find the strength to keep her end of it.

Knowing that she was only one of many was little comfort, because she was appallingly alone. She couldn't retreat and say, "No, I don't like this, I'm going home." She couldn't run to Emma and sob out her fears like a child. There wasn't even the security of her home, of familiar rooms and streets, familiar people. This huge, elegantly simple hacienda, so alien from her home in Augusta, was where she would live for the rest of her life. She hoped that in time it would become home. But now she knew she had no hope at all that she would ever become accustomed to the Major.

At length she blew out the candles and felt her way across the dark room, to crawl between the sheets and lie for long hours, shivering and trying to muster her courage. She did eventually find some measure of control. If it wasn't courage, perhaps it would do.

She got up early, having only dozed fitfully, and dressed in one of the simple skirts and shirtwaist blouses she had brought. After pinning up her braids, she slipped quietly from the room. She didn't want to wake the Major. She hoped to find Carmita in the kitchen. Victoria had an urgent question that had been tormenting her all night, and Carmita would know the answer. It would be difficult to voice such a question, but she was learning that difficult didn't mean impossible.

As it happened, Carmita, Lola, and Juana were all in the kitchen, gossipping cozily. The friendly chatter of rapid Spanish halted when they noticed Victoria in the doorway.

"Señora," Carmita said, smiling broadly. They were all smiling at her. Belatedly Victoria realized they expected a blushing bride. She did blush, though not from happiness.

She said, "Please, Carmita, may I talk with you for a moment?" Despite her efforts at control some of her despair must have shown for Carmita stopped smiling and rapidly came to her side.

They walked out into the courtyard, so pretty with its multitude of yellow roses. Victoria pretended to look at the roses, fingering some of the velvet petals. She said, low, "If my questions embarrass you, please don't feel you have to answer. It's just—I don't have anyone I can ask, except for you."
Carmita looked puzzled. "Of course, señora."
Victoria flushed again. "Carmita… when a man—that is, what does a man—how are babies made?" She was beet red by the time she finished, and felt utterly helpless.
Carmita gaped at her. Victoria hurriedly turned away, but Carmita laughed and put her motherly arms around the tense young woman. Her brown eyes were warm. "No one thought to tell you the way of things? Poor señora! Yes, sit down, and I will tell you about men and babies."
She did, very succinctly, and Victoria heaved an inner sigh of relief. It was as she had thought, the man did enter a woman's body and there emptied himself of his seed, which sometimes resulted in a baby, though not, Carmita said with heartfelt thanks, every time. The Major had not done that to her, so she would not be having his baby. At least, not yet. She didn't know what had gone wrong last night, and she knew he could return to her bed at any time. They had a lifetime together for him to consummate the marriage. But for today, at least, she was safe.
Another question occurred to her, and she said diffidently, "How does a woman know if she is to have a baby?" She knew they didn't have to wait until they grew big, because she had known several women who had announced their expectancy long before there had been obvious evidence.
Carmita patted her arm. "Your monthly bleeding won't come, señora."
Victoria considered that. Her monthly cycle was so regular she always knew to the day when to expect the onset. It appeared she would have a reliable means of telling, if the worst happened.
"You will also cry a lot, and sleep a lot, and feel so sick that no food stays down," Carmita continued cheerfully. "When you do feel like eating, you will want strange things that, of course, Lola will not have, and someone will have to go to Santa Fe to buy it. That's the way of it. When I carried my Juana, I felt as if I had to have oranges, every day. Señora, I don't like oranges, but every day I ate them, five and six a day. Then Juana was born, and I didn't like oranges anymore."
Victoria sat in the courtyard after Carmita had returned to the kitchen, enjoying the early-morning coolness and the bright sun, calming her

frazzled nerves. She had survived the night, as horrible as it had been, and the new day was fresh and sunny. If the coming night brought a repeat of the horror, well, she would survive that, too.

She thought about the things Carmita had told her and wondered why well-bred young women were kept so abysmally ignorant of such basic facts. She would far rather have known what was going to happen, as unpleasant as it had been, than to have suffered in the dread of the unknown, which had made it just that much worse. Her mother had known what she would face, yet had left her in ignorance. Victoria found that hard to forgive.

She would tell Emma. Not about the Major's failure, but the true facts of what men did to women in the marriage bed. She would tell her how babies were made and how a woman knew if she were pregnant. And later, if Celia were ever to think of getting married, Victoria would tell her, also.

She thought of the way Garnet watched Celia, and bit her lower lip. Now she knew what he wanted, and she was more determined than ever to keep Celia away from him.

Roper. He, too, had known what the Major would do to her.

Stunned, she realized that every man knew all of this, that only women were kept ignorant. This was what men did to fast women, to prostitutes. The realization put a different slant on every memory she had. The dances and socials and picnics she had attended had all been a part of the ritual leading up to the marriage bed, and bared bodies, and all of her young beaus had known what would happen. How many of them had looked at her and imagined her with her nightgown rucked up to her waist?

In retrospect she felt very indignant. The system of carefully perpetuated ignorance seemed to her rather like throwing lambs to wolves. She had been prepared for the indignity but not the total loss of modesty or the pain. She thought she would not have been so blindly terrified if she'd had a realistic idea of what to expect. But now, she thought with a wave of depression, she fully knew what her marriage to the Major would be like.

Roper paused by the gate to the courtyard, his attention caught by the young woman sitting so still, with her hands folded in her lap. The bright morning sun glinted on her hair, picking up the gold in it. He realized that her hair was dark blond, not the brown it had appeared before.

She sat staring at nothing, motionless. He knew she couldn't have had a wonderful night, yet her pale face revealed none of it. She might have been

a statue, except for the way the light breeze played in the loose tendrils of hair at her temples.
His mother had sometimes sat in the courtyard, when she could find a spare minute in her busy days. Elena had been warm and vibrant, always ready to laugh with her sons and husband. The young woman who sat there now was cool and controlled, with a face as blank as marble.
He felt faintly contemptuous of her for marrying McLain. He felt disgusted with himself for wanting a woman McLain had touched. But the sight of her made his chest tighten, and blood rushed to his loins. He knew her stillness masked her pain and fear, and he admired it. He wanted her for that cool control. He wanted to shatter it with warm passion, he wanted her naked and vibrant and alive with need for him, he wanted her to claw at his back and arch her hips against him. He wanted to snatch her up and take her far away from here, because she was so out of place around men like McLain and Garnet, even himself. Their lives were stained with blood and violence, and it would inevitably touch her. He didn't see how he could prevent it.
He had stared at her too long; she turned her head, sensing his presence, and their eyes met across the courtyard. Without haste, every movement graceful, she rose from the bench and returned to the house. Roper clenched his fists at being dismissed by her, but too much was at stake for him to lose control now. His time would come.
The Major came to her room again that night. Victoria made no sign of protest, but lay with her arms at her sides. Again, McLain expected her to behave no differently.
He was desperately afraid of another failure, of again losing himself to those terrors of the past. McLain crouched between her opened legs and frantically tried to beat life into his unresponsive sex. The more afraid and humiliated he felt, the harder he tried, and nothing happened. All the while she lay there like a damned statue, reminding him of Elena, as if the woman had risen from the dead to torment and punish him.
He swore and rolled off of the bed and returned, trembling, to his own room. Cold sweat trickled down his face and barrel chest. The damn bitch had emasculated him, finished the job that Elena and her bastard had started!
His worst nightmare had become reality. God, he'd wanted her for so long, all of his life. Not her in particular, but someone like her, a lady to show the world he was someone important. She was perfect; a woman of impeccable

bloodlines, manners, and breeding. She made Elena and that damned Sarratt look like white trash. She was finally his, and he couldn't take her.
He laughed soundlessly, a little insanely. He had his lady, all right, but he couldn't do a thing about it.
He thought of her white-skinned, perfect body and broke out in a sweat again at the thought of touching her and finding his manhood limp and useless.
In a thousand nights during the past twenty years he had awakened to hear himself whimpering, and found his hands cupped protectively over his privates. A thousand nightmares had been filled with a scarlet-stained knife and a boy's hate-twisted face. In his dreams he couldn't escape and the knife finished its job. The reality had been bad enough; he'd walked spraddle-legged for weeks and his left testicle was drawn and withered. He'd lived in hell until he had recovered enough to find out if he was still capable of humping a woman, though he never let anyone know how desperate he'd been. After finding out that he was still capable, he took to bragging that he was more man with only one ball than most men were with two. But bragging hadn't kept the nightmares away.
But that wasn't true anymore. His greatest fear had been realized. He couldn't get an erection.
She was so dainty and pristine, so untouchable. Frank McLain sat in the darkness of his room and tried to work things out in his mind, find some sort of explanation for the humiliating failure of his flesh. Goddammit, he'd never had any trouble humping a woman before, once he'd recovered from the knife wound. Only this one.
So it had to be her fault. It wasn't him; it was something about her. Maybe ladies weren't for screwing. He had his lady for ruling over his house, his lady to dress in fancy gowns and show off in Santa Fe. With her culture and background, there was no limit to how high he could rise in the territory. That was why he'd married her. Hell, he didn't care if he got any brats on her, he didn't give a damn about leaving all of this to some snot-nosed kid who probably wouldn't have half of his own strength. This was his, won with his guns and brains and guts. He was undisputed king in this part of the territory, and now he had his queen. He had what he wanted. Let her keep her knees locked; women like her were made to be treated like dolls, cosseted and protected, showcased in all their finery and jewels.

That was what was wrong. He just hadn't understood before. He'd take care of her like she was royalty given into his protection, untouchable and untouched. When he wanted to hump somebody, he'd go to the kind of women he was comfortable with, women who squirmed and squealed and liked it.

Like Angelina Garcia. She was just a whore, but she liked it any way a man could give it to her. McLain thought of the times he'd plowed her himself and to his enormous relief felt his manhood begin to stir.

Yeah, that was what it had been all along. There wasn't anything wrong with him, it had been his wife.

He jerked off his nightshirt and hurriedly dressed. He had to have a woman, a real woman.

Angelina had a room in the small building where the houseservants once lived, back when the damn Sarratts had kept enough servants to button up their britches. Most of the building was used for storage now; Carmita, Lola, and Juana used two rooms just off the kitchen. Angelina wasn't much on keeping her room neat; it was always strewn with clothing and food, and stank of sex. She was greedy; she wanted several men a day, and if they didn't come to her she went to them. She was flamboyantly beautiful, with a lush body, long black hair, and flashing dark eyes. As he hurried across the dark ground, McLain thought of what he was going to do to her and grew fully hard.

He could barely wait. A thin line of light showed beneath her door. He pushed it open and Angelina turned her head sharply at the intrusion. She was naked, lying under a patched, yellow sheet, and she wasn't alone. One of the cowpunchers lay naked and groggy beside her.

Angelina was at first astonished to see him; after all, he'd only gotten married the night before. Then a slow, self-satisfied smile curled her lips.

"Get out," McLain said to the cowboy.

The man stumbled to his feet and awkwardly got into his britches and boots. He too was astounded that the Major was there. The tale would be all over the ranch by morning.

Angelina lolled against her pillows, letting the sheet fall to the side so that her large breasts were revealed. "So," she said in a purring voice. "Your grand lady can't satisfy you?" It wouldn't take much, as she knew from experience. The Major was too fast, but she always praised him as if he were the biggest and best stud she'd ever had. Angelina was shrewd enough

to know she had a good thing here, and the best way to keep it was to butter up the boss.
McLain grunted as he unbuttoned his pants. "She couldn't even get it hard," he muttered, and from that, and his haste, Angelina understood exactly what had happened. She wanted to laugh, but knew she had too much to lose if she shared the joke with others, even later. She stifled her smile and instead stretched out her arms toward him.
"She must be a cold fish, then," she purred.
McLain freed his erection and lowered himself. "Bend over," he panted, already near climax at the thought. "I want to do it that way."

CHAPTER THREE

The dull, endless chores of domesticity had a settling effect, Victoria mused. It had been a week since her marriage, a week in which she had thrown herself into the duties of running the household in an effort to make herself too busy to think. She admitted that the larger portion of her growing serenity was due to the Major's continued absence from her bedroom, but mending had its own soporific effect. She stifled a yawn.
Emma chuckled. "Here we are, about to doze in the sun like two doddering old tabbies." She took two more tiny stitches, then smothered her own yawn.
"It's so pleasant here," Victoria said. She was coming to appreciate more and more both the weather and the landscape of her new home. It was June; the sun could be quite hot at noon, but the air was dry. The result was wonderful, after the humidity of the South. The nights were chilly and crisp, perfect for snuggling under blankets.
"Especially here, in the courtyard. I don't believe I care if this hem is mended." Emma replaced the skirt in her basket, looking enormously satisfied with the decision. She yawned again. "But I do believe a nap is necessary."
"Siesta must be contagious."
"It seems to be. Not that they're totally foreign to us. Remember when we used to take naps before evening dances?"
"A long time ago." Victoria looked down the past five years.
"Yes." They said no more about the days past. Neither of them liked to discuss it. The changes brought by war had been too violent, the difference in their lives too complete. Too many people had died.
Emma got to her feet and Victoria did also, her brows knit as she realized she hadn't seen her sister in at least an hour. "I think I'll look for Celia," she said. "She didn't tell me where she was going."
"And wherever Celia is, Mr. Garnet will be close by," Emma said grimly.
Victoria wondered how Garnet attended to his job when he seemed to spend so much of his day lurking around Celia. He hadn't made any untoward moves, but his constant hovering made Victoria uneasy. If she found him near Celia again, she would inform the Major of his foreman's behavior, although she grimly suspected he was fully aware of it.

"Shall I come with you?" Emma asked.
It was tempting to accept her offer. Victoria often felt as if she needed support, and she knew Emma would stand unflinchingly by her side to face anything. But Emma, for all her willingness, was sensitive enough that conflict could upset her to the point of nausea. So Victoria smiled and shook her head. "No. She'll be in the stable, as usual. I'll just tell her we need help with the mending."
"If only she understood," Emma said.
"If she did, she wouldn't be Celia."
Rather than go through the house, Victoria left the courtyard by the rear gate. The ranch buildings were spread in a semicircle about the house, with the smithy to the right, the springhouse far in the rear, a couple of storage buildings, and two bunkhouses, the stable, an enormous barn, and various corrals extending to the left. It was almost a hundred yards to the stable; by the time she reached it, she wished she had put on a bonnet. The sun was deceptively hot on her bare head.
The stable, in contrast, was cool and dark, and redolent with the earthy scents of horses, oiled leather, and hay. Temporarily blind, she stood for a moment just inside the door, letting her eyes readjust to the dim light. When she could see again she quickly spied Celia at the far end of the barn. Celia had climbed halfway up the door of a huge corner stall and was leaning over it with her hand outheld.
Victoria recognized the horse. It was Rubio, the Major's prize stallion. He had boasted about the horse at length, taking delight in the tales of its kicks and bites as if they were admirable. The stallion had killed the Mexican who had been taking care of him the year before. Seeing Celia like that, so close to the big animal, made Victoria's heart stop. She took a step forward but didn't call out, not wanting to startle the horse. .
A man came through the open doors at the other end, a black silhouette painted against the bright sunshine. Even without seeing his features, Victoria recognized Garnet. She hurried her step.
Rubio neighed warningly as Garnet approached. The horse withdrew to the back of the stall, stamping his feet and snorting.
Celia turned to the man and said, "You've scared him! He was just about to take this sugar from my hand."
Garnet hadn't seen Victoria even though she was no more than twenty feet away when he put his hand on Celia's leg, then slid it up to her hip. "Let me

help you down."
Celia laughed, a silvery sound. "I can get down by myself."
Angered almost beyond control, Victoria still managed to keep her voice even. "Of course you can. Let's go back to the house; I need help with the mending."
Always amenable, Celia gathered her skirts and jumped to the hay-strewn floor. "I forgot about the mending," she said apologetically. "I was just talking to Rubio." She turned back to the stall. "Isn't he beautiful?"
He was beautiful, and savage. He was a big horse, superbly muscled, dark red in color. Victoria would have been as enthralled as Celia if it hadn't been for his eyes; they held not just spirit, but a viciousness that chilled her. The horse was a killer, but Celia saw only beauty.
"Yes, he's beautiful," Victoria agreed. "Why don't you run ahead and wash your hands before we start the mending?"
"All right." Celia happily left the barn, humming to herself.
Victoria turned back to Garnet, and inwardly braced herself against the hostility in his expression. She kept her voice cool. "Mr. Garnet, I shall tell you this only once: stay away from my sister. Don't touch her again."
He sneered and took a step toward her. "Or you'll do what?"
"I'll tell Mr. McLain you've been neglecting your duties and pestering Celia."
Garnet laughed, a brutal sound. His eyes were dark pits. "Now, that really scares me. He'll tell you to mind your own business, Miz McLain. I run this ranch, and the Major knows it. He can't get along without me."
"I can." The emotionless voice came from the open double doors behind Garnet. "I can get along without you just fine, Garnet. In fact, I like the idea."
Garnet whirled, and a spasm of hate twisted his features. If he had been angry before, now he was furious. "This is none of your business, Roper."
"It is if I make it my business." He hadn't moved from the doorway. With the light behind him it was impossible to see his face, but Victoria found that it wasn't necessary; his voice, flat and cold as it was, stated his intent. "Leave the girl alone."
"So you can have her?"
"No. I don't want her. But you're not going to have her, either."
Garnet's right hand moved, but Roper moved faster. The big revolver was in his hand before Garnet touched the butt of his. Victoria hadn't even seen

Roper's hand move. Garnet froze, and even in the coolness of th& stable a sheen of sweat covered his face.
"Pass the word," Roper said flatly. "Everyone leaves the girl alone."
Just for a second Garnet froze, unwilling to retreat. Watching him, Victoria saw the exact moment when he realized he didn't have any choice, if he wanted to live. He turned and stalked off. Victoria quietly exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She forced herself to look at Roper as he stepped farther into the stable, though she wanted to flee like Garnet.
"Thank you."
He said, "You made an enemy."
Wryly, she answered, "So did you."
He watched the way the small amusement tilted the corners of her lips upward. "That was nothing new between me and Garnet. One of us will kill the other before it's over."
"So you did it just to annoy him?" For some reason that angered her. She thought of leaving, but didn't. She didn't even step back when Roper walked so close by her that his legs brushed her skirt.
"What difference does it make, as long as it keeps him away from your simpleminded sister?"
Her fists knotted. "She's not?" she hissed. "Celia reads and writes; she's as intelligent as most. She's just… different." Temper burned in her cheeks. "Don't you dare call her simpleminded."
"Different, how?"
How, indeed? How did you explain a near adult who still had the innocence and glee of a child without using the label of simplicity? Celia was as fey and otherwordly as a wood nymph. It was as if she was so sensitive to everything that she had to block out the darkness of life in order to survive, leaving her with only sunlight. Victoria sought for the words. "She… doesn't see ugliness, or evil. She expects everyone to be as open and good-natured as she is."
He snorted as he swung a saddle down from the railing. "That's worse than simplemindedness. That's plain stupid, and out here it'll get you killed." He towered over her, and as Victoria refused to step back in retreat she was forced to tilt her head back to look at him. Their eyes met and a strange little frisson of fear raced down her spine. His eyes glittered under the low brim of his hat, and she saw that they were a clear, dark hazel green. He was so close to her that she could see the black specks in his irises, so close that

she could smell the sweat on his skin, and feel the heat emanating from him. Her skirts were brushing his dusty boots, and she didn't care. She felt paralyzed as she stared up at him, held immobile by a strange, frightening excitement that knotted her stomach and set her heart to pounding. All of her life she had associated the scents of shaving soap and cologne with men, very civilized smells that she had thought pleasant and nothing more. Yet now the hot, primal smell of Roper's sweaty skin was making her weak, making her think she might have to have support just to stand.

He shouldn't be that close to her. She knew it, yet she couldn't retreat.

"Get on back to the house," he said. His lips barely moved. "You don't belong out here."

She didn't know if he meant the stable or the entire territory, but she suspected he meant the latter. She squared her shoulders and said, "Thank you again, Mr. Roper." She left with as much dignity as she could summon. Had he sensed her shameful, illogical response to his closeness? He angered her and frightened her, but something about him touched a primitive part of her that she hadn't known existed, a part that she knew she must suppress.

She shaded her eyes with her hand as she emerged into the bright sunlight again, and paused when a flash of color caught her attention. To her left lounged a voluptuous young woman, with a thick mass of black hair spilling down her back. She had large dark eyes, lush red lips, and she was brazenly displaying the deep cleft of her full breasts under a white blouse worn off her shoulders. She obviously wore no petticoats beneath her skirt. The young woman met her gaze insolently, her dark eyes raking down Victoria's neatly coiled hair, starched long-sleeved, high-necked shirtwaist, and prim blue skirt.

This was the woman Victoria had seen on her arrival, whom she had taken for Carmita's daughter. What had Carmita said was her name? Victoria had an excellent memory for names, and she produced it after only a short moment. The woman was Angelina Garcia, a remarkably lovely name for a woman whose own beauty was as vivid as that of an overblown rose.

Since she obviously didn't work in the house, Victoria assumed that she must be married to one of the men. She wondered where they lived. She approached the young woman with a smile, determined to be friendly even though Angelina's manner wasn't welcoming.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Victoria Wav—McLain." She wondered if she would ever be accustomed to her married name.

The woman regarded Victoria for a moment longer in sullen silence, then tossed back her long black hair. "I'm Angelina."
"I saw you the day I arrived. I apologize for not speaking to you before now. Which one of the men is your husband?"
Angelina laughed, a sound of deep satisfaction. "None of them. Why should I marry?"
Not married? That was confusing… unless she lived with someone without benefit of marriage? Victoria felt her cheeks heat at her mistake. The poor girl, what an unstable, humiliating existence. But Angelina didn't act humiliated; she seemed positively gloating. Her eyes were alive with it.
In that instant Victoria knew she should walk away and return to the house where she was insulated from these people who were so very different from her. A lady would never dream of talking with a woman of ill-repute, which Angelina obviously was or she would never live with a man not her husband. Nor would a lady have confronted one of her husband's employees in the stables, as she had just done. But perhaps she was less of a lady than she'd thought, because she didn't walk away from Angelina.
Instead she said, "You have a man?" It was an inelegant question, but she didn't know how else to phrase it.
Angelina laughed again, a gloating sound that grated. "I have many men. All of them are my men. They all come to me—including your husband." Again the laugh, and the dark eyes glittered with spite. "He came back to me the night after your wedding! We all thought that was very interesting, no?"
White-faced, Victoria at last turned and walked away, but it was too late. The woman had scored her victory. Humiliation blinded her, and she didn't see the man until she walked into him. His hard hands grasped her shoulders to steady her, holding her soft body so close to him that her breasts were against his ridged abdomen.
It was Roper, leading his horse across the yard. She was too distressed to realize he could easily have avoided her and instead had deliberately put himself in front of her. She backed up, not looking at him. "I beg your pardon," she said tonelessly.
Roper glanced to where Angelina still lounged against the wall, smirking her triumph, and guessed what had happened. The shock was plain on Victoria's white face.

He felt an unaccustomed impulse to comfort. "Don't pay any attention to Angelina," he said. "She's a vicious little bitch." He wanted to put his arm around her, feel the softness of her against him again. God, she had smelled so clean and sweet. A fire smoldered low in his belly, swelling his groin.
If anything, Victoria went even whiter, but she lifted her head with a proud motion and stepped away from him. "Thank you, Mr. Roper," she said steadily. "I'm quite all right."
He watched her walk away again, then went over to Angelina. She straightened, her red lips assuming a seductive smile. It was wasted on Roper; Angelina had been trying to get him into bed with her since he'd come to the ranch, but he wasn't interested. Angelina couldn't believe any man could be unresponsive to her beauty, and Roper had resisted her longer than any man she'd ever wanted. But it was not, she thought, because he didn't want her. He was jealous of all the others who enjoyed her favors, she was certain. He was just being difficult. She didn't mind; it made him more attractive in her eyes, and she was certain that sooner or later he'd come to her. His difficultness would make his surrender that much sweeter.
She thrust her breasts out for him, but he didn't even glance down. His cold eyes never left hers. "What did you say to her?"
"The fancy lady?" Angelina shrugged and pouted. "Nothing. I don't like women. I like men." She tried another smile on him.
Neither his expression nor his tone changed as he repeated, "What did you say to her?"
Many men before her had felt afraid when Roper spoke like that. Angelina felt a chill and straightened with a jerk. "I told her that the Major came to me the night after her wedding," she replied sullenly, then insisted, "It was the truth! You know that."
He did know it. Everyone on the ranch knew it and had snickered about it, joking that the Major's high-nosed lady must have near frozen him to death, and Angelina had had to thaw him out. Roper had been glad that McLain hadn't found any pleasure in his wife's bed, glad that she hadn't clung to him in ecstasy. He was sure Victoria hadn't been spared her husband's attentions, but he'd been relieved to think that, though the Major would occasionally bed Victoria out of duty, Angelina would still bear the brunt of McLain's perversions.
But what had it done to Victoria to discover that her husband had deserted her for a whore's bed one day after their wedding, and that everyone on the

ranch knew it? She was a proud woman, and while she couldn't care about McLain, his actions must have wounded her all the same. No woman would like being the butt of raunchy jokes and sniggers, but for a woman like Victoria…

To Angelina he said, "McLain's mighty proud of his wife."

She spat on the ground. "If he cared about her, he wouldn't have come to me." She started to say that McLain hadn't been able to do it to his wife, but caution stilled her tongue. No man liked for it to be known that he'd failed so intimately; McLain would likely have her killed if she told.

"She's his wife, like Rubio's his stallion. What do you think he'd do if you let his stallion go, or if his wife left because of you?"

Angelina blinked her great dark eyes, for the first time realizing that her gloating triumph hadn't been very smart. She wasn't intelligent, but she was cunning in her self-interest. She remembered how the Major had bragged for months about the real Southern lady coming to marry him, and shivered, thinking of how brutal the Major could be at times, when it seemed as if he enjoyed sex more if he could hurt her in some way. She knew he liked to hurt her, and she didn't want to provide him with any excuses to do so.

Her lips trembled, and she moved closer to Roper. "Will she tell him?"

He was unmoved by her distress, for he'd noticed that she took advantage of her nearness to rub her breasts against his arm. "She might," he said to make her worry about it, and mounted his horse before she could rub anything else against him.

Roper shook his head at himself as he rode off. He was a hard man; he'd seen his father murdered, his mother raped and killed when he'd been only thirteen years old. Roper had killed his first man when he'd been fourteen, when the man had tried to rob the two boys of their pitiful store of food. For twenty years the brothers had worked for their revenge, biding their time, gathering money and making plans. Nothing had been allowed to stand in their way. Nothing had mattered but putting Frank McLain in the ground and reclaiming their heritage. Roper kept his nose out of other people's business and expected them to keep theirs out of his. That was why it was so out of character for him to interfere, and he'd done it twice in a matter of minutes, all for the same woman. What did he care if Garnet got in the little sister's bloomers? He'd never have interfered if Victoria hadn't tried to face Garnet down, but she had, and he hadn't been able to stand by and let

Garnet abuse her. He was the one man on the ranch Garnet wouldn't stand up to, but now he'd have to watch his back every minute.
All for a woman. He'd had women since he was fifteen, but they were always casual encounters that had never meant more to him than the temporary easing of his sexual needs. He loved women, though he'd never been in love; he loved their softness, the sweet musky scent of their skin, their lighter voices and smaller bodies, the clinging of their hands around his strong neck and the way their legs locked around his hips, their soft cries as he gave them pleasure. He always tried to please his woman, no matter how casual the bedding; it was a reflection of his own strong, sure sexuality that he enjoyed the act more when the pleasure was mutual.
But of all those women, he'd never wanted one the way he wanted Victoria. It was more than physical, though God knew that was strong enough and getting stronger. He wanted to see her smile. He wanted to protect her. He didn't know what made her different, but she was. She was also forbidden to him. She was a lady, and the wife of his enemy. He had blood on his hands, and would have more: the blood of her husband.
He found that it didn't matter. He thought of the way she'd lifted her chin with evident pride even though she had just been slapped in the face with her husband's infidelity. He thought of the way she protected her sister, and of the way she looked him full in the face when so few people did. She was alone and vulnerable, trapped in an unhappy marriage, but she had courage. Damn it, why didn't she go back to Augusta where she belonged? Maybe if she was out of his sight, he wouldn't think about her, and she couldn't threaten his plans.
Victoria went straight to her room and sat on the chaise, forcing herself to take slow, deep breaths to calm herself. She had never before felt so angry and humiliated. Gradually she realized that she was angry because of the humiliation, not because she had learned that her husband had been unfaithful. She didn't care that the Major had gone to another woman; in fact, she was grateful, if it would continue to keep him away from her.
But the public nature of his betrayal upset her deeply. He had gone to that—that whore—barely twenty-four hours after their wedding, and everyone on the ranch knew it. She wouldn't have believed Angelina's word, but she'd seen the truth in Roper's usually impassive eyes.
The house staff knew, of course. The ranch was a small world in itself, so insular that everyone knew what everyone else was doing. No wonder

Carmita had been so solicitous this past week.
She was Victoria Madelyn Marie Waverly; her mother was a Creighton. She had learned that lineage and tradition counted for little without money behind it, but pride had been bred into her as surely as the aristocratic bones of her face. Her husband had offended her in a way that no woman could forgive, exposing her to public humiliation. She also had to live with the galling knowledge that she had no means of recourse. Her husband did not love her, did not desire her, so she had no power in his life. She could threaten to expose his impotence, but it wasn't in her nature to publicly humiliate him. So she could only sit and let the realization creep into her that she could do nothing. She would have to continue as if she didn't know anything about it and therefore force everyone else to ignore it, too, at least in her presence.
But she was still outraged at Angelina's presence on the ranch. Though now she understood the whispers she'd heard as a girl about men who had kept fancy women on the side, she knew that the mistresses and the wives were always kept well separated. Again, she would have to ignore it, for if she tried to force Angelina to leave, everyone would know that she was aware of her husband's infidelities and would think she was acting out of jealousy. To be thought jealous of her husband and that whore was unbearable, and so she would let things remain as they were.
A soft tap on her door distracted her, and Celia poked her head in. "I thought we were going to do the mending." There was no accusation in her voice, only puzzlement.
Victoria forcefully composed herself and patted the chaise. "Come sit with me for a moment." As difficult as it might prove to be, she knew she had to try to make Celia understand why she must stay away from Garnet, from any man who tried to touch her. Given the realities of the world they now lived in, Victoria knew this was a duty that could not wait.
Celia happily sat down beside her sister. She had something on her mind she wanted to ask her sister. She had complete faith in Victoria. She loved and trusted Emma, too, but it was her sister who had washed and bandaged her skinned knees, who had patiently answered all of her questions, soothed her after bad dreams, and returned her love unstintingly. She twirled a strand of her blond hair and mustered her courage. "Do you think the Major would let me ride Rubio? I so want to!"

Victoria was startled, and worried, because Celia often acted on her desires. "I don't think he would, darling. Rubio is a stallion, and stallions aren't used for pleasure riding. They're too strong-willed and dangerous."
"Mr. Roper rides him. I've seen him." Awe and envy mingled in Celia's tones.
Something deep in Victoria tingled at the mention of his name. "I'm sure he just rides Rubio to exercise him. And Mr. Roper is a man, sweetheart. He is much larger and stronger than you are."
Celia thought a minute, admitting the truth of that. But she wanted to ride Rubio so much that she couldn't let it go. "I'm a good rider, aren't I?"
"It's been a long time since any of us were on a horse." Another change wrought by war; all of the horses had been taken by the armies. "I suspect we're all sadly out of shape and practice, and you were just barely off of ponies when we lost the horses."
Celia looked so forlorn that Victoria hugged her and stroked her bright hair. "Would you like it if I asked the Major for horses we could use for pleasure riding? It would be good for us to get some exercise. Emma and I used to ride for hours." A faint wistful note crept into her own voice, and Celia immediately forgot her own disappointment as she rushed to give her own sort of comfort to Victoria.
Comfort took the form of a cheerful smile and a rush of enthusiasm. "Could you? I'd like that so much!"
"Then I'll ask the Major tonight." Victoria paused, trying to gather her thoughts. She still had to explain Garnet to Celia. She took a deep breath. "Sweetheart, I want to explain something very important to you."
Celia nodded, her expression becoming serious.
"Mr. Garnet—" She paused again, frowning a little. "Mr. Garnet is an evil man. He would like very much to hurt you. You must be careful. Don't let him touch you or catch you alone."
"Hurt me? How?" Celia still didn't look alarmed, merely interested.
Victoria had been afraid that Celia wouldn't take the warning at face value, but would want details. Finding the words was more difficult than she'd imagined. "There are—things—that a man can do to a woman that will hurt her."
Celia nodded. "Hitting hurts," she said.
"Yes, it does. And he might hit you, to make you do these other things that would hurt you even worse."

"What things?"
There was no way out of it. She inhaled deeply again. "He would pull up your skirt and touch you on—on your privates."
Celia jerked upright, her young face indignant. "I'll be damned!" she said. She'd heard one of the cow-punchers say that, and liked it. All of the best words were forbidden, it seemed, so she said them only in her head, but that one had slipped out in her surprise.
Victoria almost laughed. She knew she should scold, but she was too relieved at Celia's vehement reaction. "Yes," she said. "Exactly."
Celia was still huffy. "I'll hit him if he even speaks to me again," she declared.
"You must try your best not to be alone with him. And please be cautious with the other men, too. I don't trust some of them." It was an odd feeling, but some of the Major's employees seemed to be just what they were, cowhands, while others seemed—meaner, and somehow disassociated with ranch work.
"Mr. Roper?"
Again Victoria felt that funny little jolt, and an even funnier feeling spread behind it. "No," she said slowly. "I think you'd be very safe with Mr. Roper. He even warned Mr. Garnet to leave you alone."
Celia gave a decisive nod. "I like Mr. Roper."
Victoria hugged her sister again, feeling much better now that she knew Celia understood at least part of the danger. It was odd how safe she felt in telling Celia that Roper wouldn't harm her, would in fact protect her, when she herself didn't feel that safe with him. Her heart had begun pounding again. She remembered the hot smell of him, the hardness of his body when she had collided with him, the way his hands had held her. She felt weak and strangely warm. She would take her own advice and avoid him as much as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Major was in a good mood that night, and Victoria didn't betray by either word or manner that she had talked with Angelina. Instead, she

listened to him talking expansively over dinner. She nodded and smiled at all the right places.
She waited patiently, and when the right time finally presented itself in a small pause, she said, "I've been thinking how much I'd love to start riding again. All of us would. Do you think you could select some nice mounts for us? You have some lovely horses, and I know you would make good choices. Though not, of course, if you need the horses for ranch work." Her face revealed none of her thoughts as she gave him a small smile, one that managed to be reserved despite its surface warmth. He wasn't sensitive enough to tell the difference and beamed at her compliment to his equine knowledge.
"Of course, my dear." He patted her hand. "I should have thought of it myself." He'd tell Roper to pick out three mounts suitable for ladies. No one on the ranch knew horses better than Roper.
Emma's quiet face had its own glow at the thought of riding again, and Celia all but bounced in her chair. "When I've practiced and I'm really good, may I ride Rubio?" she asked.
He laughed at her foolishness. "You'll never be strong enough to control Rubio," he said, boasting of the horse's strength. "You just stay with the quiet nags, and let the men handle Rubio."
Just as quickly as that the brightness was gone from her small face, but she didn't argue. Celia seldom argued about anything. She looked down at her plate and pretended to concentrate on her food.
For once Victoria was glad the Major was so heavy-handed, because she was terrified Celia would take it into her head to try to ride the stallion. She picked up her spoon again and thanked him for the use of the horses, then made a commonplace remark to Emma, who had been trained in the same social graces and immediately picked up the conversation.
McLain looked around him at the three genteel, pretty-mannered women, and swelled with pride.
Victoria knocked on Celia's door, but no one answered. Worried because her sister hadn't recovered her spirits all evening, she opened the door and looked in, expecting to find the girl soundly asleep. Her heart sank when she saw the empty bed. Quickly she crossed to Emma's room, hoping that Celia was visiting with their cousin. Her knock brought only a nightgown-clad Emma to the door.

"No, I haven't seen her. I thought she was in bed," Emma said in reply to Victoria's anxious query. "I'll get dressed."
Celia had a lifetime habit, when upset, of finding a hidey-hole and burrowing into it. The refuge had never been in her own bedroom, but always in a smaller, tighter place, as if she needed the security of closeness. In the past Victoria had never been alarmed, but they were no longer in their old home.
Emma reappeared in little more than a minute wearing a plain skirt and shirtwaist, with a shawl knotted around her shoulders and her hair haphazardly pinned. "Do you remember the time the two of you were visiting us, when we found her in the chicken coop?"
Celia had been all of three at the time, and brokenhearted because she had been scolded. At other times she had been found in the storm cellar, a closet, under a bed, or a buggy, burrowed in hay (again, when they were visiting Emma), and once, when she was small, under a washtub. After an hour or two she would emerge sunny-tempered again, so they had ceased to look for her unless she was actually wanted for something.
They swiftly searched the house and found nothing. Victoria even poked her head into the Major's room; he had gone out after dinner, so she knew he wasn't in there. Neither was Celia. Carmita and Lola were sitting around the kitchen table and Lola said that she hadn't seen the señorita since dinner.
"Perhaps she is talking to the… the—" Lola stopped, frowning as she tried to think of the English word she wanted.
"The man who sells things from his wagon," Carmita said.
"A tinker?" Victoria asked.
They both smiled at her. "Si," Carmita said, relieved. "The tinker."
"I didn't know a tinker was here."
"He arrived just before dark, señora. He and his daughter. They are spending the night."
Victoria and Emma looked at each other. A tinker, being new to Celia, might attract her like a cat to catnip. "Where is the tinker's wagon?" Emma asked.
"Next to the bunkhouse, señorita."
The bunkhouse, where the men slept. Victoria hurried out the door. It was unthinkable that any of them would attack Celia, yet at the same time she thought Garnet capable of anything. Unbidden the thought intruded of asking Roper for help, and she flinched from the idea as if it had stung her.

Emma kept pace beside her and they both slowed as they neared the bunkhouse, with the hulking shadow of the tinker's wagon beside it. Through the small window they could see the men sitting around a couple of small tables, or lying on their narrow cots. Nothing unusual seemed to be going on. Victoria was even more reassured to see Garnet playing cards at one of the tables. There was no one at all around the tinker's wagon.
"Let's separate," she said, keeping her voice low so the men wouldn't hear. "I'll look in the stables and barn."
"We didn't look in the courtyard; I'll go there, and check the blacksmith shed on the way." Briskly Emma set on her way, and Victoria turned in the other direction.
Now that she was alone, the darkness seemed oppressive. Her heart began to beat faster as she quietly approached the long stables and entered. Most of the stalls' occupants were dozing, though a couple of horses put their heads over the top rails and whickered at her. She patted their velvet noses as she passed by, reassuring them. It was too dark inside for her to see much more than their large dark shapes, but all of the stalls were occupied and there was nowhere else in the long, low building for Celia to find a nook. No, the barn was far more likely. The barn was also where Rubio was stabled, away from most of the other horses because of his tendency to fight.
She opened the barn door just enough to slip through, and this time her way was lighted by a single oil lamp hanging on a post at the far end, close to Rubio's stall. The stallion, though, was quiet. Victoria could hear him making small rustling sounds as he shifted his feet.
She also heard another sound, the words indistinguishable but the timbre soft and definitely female.
If Celia were in the stall with Rubio…
On no account must she startle the horse. She lifted her skirts to keep them from dragging on the straw and quietly slipped nearer to the small pool of light.
She heard a groan and more rustles. Then a man's voice, unmistakably deep. The woman again, this time sounding as if she were in pain.
A chill coursed through her entire body. Celia?
She went closer, and the rustling noises were louder. She was still in the black shadows when she realized they weren't coming from Rubio's stall, but from the opposite side of the barn, where there was a small, unused box

stall. The edges of lamplight were just spilling through the open rails, and she edged still closer, her heart in her throat because she was afraid it was Celia. Yet she didn't rush forward, and when she was close enough to see into the box, she was glad she hadn't.

The first glance told her that the woman in the straw wasn't Celia; she had a mass of dark hair. Nor was it Angelina. She didn't know the woman. She felt relief, then shock as she realized exactly what she was seeing. Such were her own experiences with sex that she almost screamed, thinking the woman was being raped. Then another firestorm of recognition went through her, and she had to jam her fist against her mouth to keep from making an outcry anyway. She saw two things simultaneously. First, the woman, far from being raped, was clinging to the man and encouraging him with whimpering, pleading words in Spanish. And, second, the man was Jake Roper.

The knowledge was like a blow to the chest. Air left her lungs in a rush, and she could only hang there, unable to move or breathe. The most incredible, unreasonable hurt filled her, and she tried to turn away, to leave quietly. She didn't want to see this, couldn't bear it—

But her legs still wouldn't work. Her muscles were frozen, and she could only stare helplessly, taking in details she didn't want to see.

The woman was naked except for her skirt, which was twisted around her waist. Victoria could tell that much, even though the shadows cast by the single lamp covered the lower halves of their bodies. Roper's shirt was off, revealing a powerfully muscled torso that glistened with sweat as he moved over his partner, the muscles tightening and flexing with his movements. The woman was clinging to his broad shoulders, her head thrown back and her eyes closed. Victoria stared at Roper's face, which she could see better than the woman's. It was tense and concentrated with fierce sensuality.

The woman gave a low cry and thrashed wildly for a minute, locking Roper within the grip of her arms. He held her firmly and began moving even faster. Moments later a deep groan of pleasure sounded in his throat.

A sheen of tears blurred Victoria's vision, and she bit her lip to hold back a sob. The small pain in some way released her, and she took a step backward.

Like an animal scenting danger, Roper's head came up, and he stared right at her.

It was only a second, yet it lasted an eternity. His face was dripping with sweat, the skin still pulled taut in the immediate aftermath of orgasm, his eyes fierce and his hand already on the heavy pistol that lay next to him in the straw. Victoria stood with her fist held to her mouth, her eyes wide and glittering with tears. She knew that he saw her, even in the shadows. She knew she couldn't stand there another minute, pierced by that strange pain. Her limbs stiff, she forced herself to step more deeply into the shadows, one step at a time, until she could no longer see them. Finally she was able to turn and hurry from the barn, no longer caring about silence, wanting only to get away.

Infuriated, strangely shaken, Roper lifted himself from the woman and hitched his pants back up. She was still lying on the straw, her lush breasts glistening with sweat. Those breasts had excited him just a short time ago, but now all he wanted was to get away from her, and she deserved better than that. Damn it, he couldn't even remember her name. She'd made it plain, from the moment the tinker's wagon had pulled in, that she was interested in him. He'd taken her at her word. It was just a little diddling, not meaning anything to either of them except for the physical relief.

But Victoria had seen them. He thought grimly that the sex she'd had with the Major was probably starched and restrained, done in the dark with her nightgown pulled up only as much as was necessary. She had probably never dreamed of such things as nearly naked bodies rolling in the hay, sweating and straining toward completion.

Thinking of what she'd seen made him feel ashamed. He tried to push the unfamiliar emotion away, but it stubbornly refused to go. Damn, he wished it hadn't happened, wished Victoria hadn't had that stricken look in her eyes, wished that he could go after her and explain that it didn't mean anything. He wondered if she would understand that, or if she'd even care. But she'd looked at him as if he'd hurt her in some way she barely understood, and he was powerless to comfort her.

The woman—what was her name? something like Florence—was languorously sitting up, her face still dreamy. Not Florence… Florida? Fiorina, that was it. She stretched, lifting her arms to better frame her heavy breasts with their dark brown nipples, and eyed him with a kittenish sort of sensuality that made him feel hemmed in. He ignored her unspoken invitation for even further dallying and stuffed his shirttail into his pants.

"You'd better get on back to the wagon before your father misses you," he said in a flat tone.
She pouted, but began cleaning herself. "He is already drunk and asleep."
"He might wake up."
"Even if he did, he wouldn't care."
Roper strongly suspected that her "father" wasn't related to her at all, but it meant nothing to him one way or another. People got by as best they could. When she had dressed, he assisted her to her feet, gave her a kiss, patted her on her round bottom, then sent her on her way. As soon as she was out of sight, a black frown settled on his face.
Damn it to hell!
Victoria ran to the house, panting and near tears. Just before she reached it, Emma came to meet her.
"I found her," Emma reported, her tone amused. "She wasn't in a hidey-hole at all, she was in the courtyard counting stars."
Victoria forcibly regained control of herself and blinked the stupid tears away. Why on earth was she crying? It had been something of a shock, of course, seeing that, but nothing tragic. She wrenched her mind back to Celia, and received another shock when she realized that she'd forgotten her. It wasn't like her at all to be less than conscientious, and the lapse bothered her almost as much as what she had seen.
She took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself, gratefully aware that Emma would think her state of upset due to Celia. "Sometimes," she managed to say in a painfully even tone of voice, "I'd like to shake her."
Emma chuckled, and hooked her arm through Victoria's. "If you did, you'd spend the next month making it up to her, so there's no point in it," she said cheerfully. "Celia is Celia."
Victoria knew that. Celia never changed, thank God. But when she sought the sanctuary of her room a little later, Victoria stared at her own pale, oval face and wondered why the changes inside hadn't shown themselves on the outside. She still looked much as she had at the age of sixteen, but now she had known war and hunger, desperation, a loss of dreams, and the ugliness of a man's sexuality. For a moment, thinking of the horrible touch of the Major's hands, she felt nauseated again. Then another picture intruded, and the nausea changed to a moan of pain.
Jake Roper. His body rippling with muscles in the dim light and his hard face taut with pleasure. That woman's hands clinging to his shoulders, her

head thrown back in ecstasy. For all the violence and power of their coupling, there had been a gentleness in the way he'd handled the woman.
Victoria buried her head in her hands. God, she was so foolish! Roper was nothing but a hired killer, she had had a few moments conversation with him, had briefly felt his body against hers in an accidental collision, and she was jealous—jealous! But not of him, she fiercely told herself. Never of him! She, a Waverly and a Creighton, was jealous of a tinker's daughter for the pleasure in her life. That wasn't much better, but she could bear that thought easier than the other.
She heard the Major moving about in his room, and she froze in dread that the connecting door would open. When the seconds passed and the door remained closed, she slowly relaxed and began to get ready for bed.
But when she was lying between the cool sheets, she couldn't sleep. She couldn't get the picture of Roper out of her mind; every time she closed her eyes, she saw his muscled body surging rhythmically. So that was exactly what went on between men and women. That was what the Major had tried to do to her. Knowing the basics hadn't enabled her to picture the scene in her mind, but now she could.
Her heartbeat was slow and heavy. Her body felt weighted down, and hot. She wondered how she would feel if it were Roper in the next room, Roper who opened the connecting door. She would lie there in bed waiting for him, and her body would feel as it did now, heavy and waiting. Again she saw him with that woman, but the picture changed and she was the woman clinging to him.
She turned onto her side, aghast at what she had been thinking. A lady never even thought such things about her husband; to think them about another man was scandalous. But her body ached, and she pressed her thighs tightly together in an effort to find relief from the shameful feeling. Her eyes burned with tears again. Damn Jake Roper!
Jake Roper damned himself. He lay in his bunk listening to the snores of the sleeping men around him and stared at the ceiling. He had made two serious mistakes, and now he had to deal with them. First, he should never have allowed Victoria Waverly to marry McLain. He could easily have had her kidnapped on the way and held her until he'd finished his business with the Major, but hindsight was as useless as it was clear. Or he could have killed McLain before Victoria arrived, and solved a lot of problems. Instead he

had chosen to wait for his moment, to stay true to the plan he and Ben had decided on. Now it was too late to keep Victoria out of it.

His second mistake was in letting her get under his skin.

It wasn't as if she'd even tried. She wasn't a flirt; she was as straitlaced as a nun. She'd probably slap his face if he tried to kiss her. He grinned a little as he thought about it, though the grin was wry because he knew he was going to try it very soon. After what she had seen that night, he'd be lucky if she didn't claw him like a wildcat.

First chance he got, he was going to send a telegram to Ben and tell him to gather the rest of the men and head toward the ranch. But it could be a few weeks before he could get to Santa Fe and another month to six weeks before Ben could get here. Say, two months. Two months left until the culmination of twenty years of planning. The broad valley, once known as Sarratt's Kingdom and now simply as Kingdom Valley, would be Sarratt property once again, returned to its rightful owners—

—if he could convince Victoria to marry him. Force her, if necessary.

Damn it, he should have prevented the wedding, but he hadn't realized the implications until it was too late. With McLain dead, the kingdom would belong to his widow, Victoria. The only way to bring it back under Sarratt ownership was to marry her, as a woman's property became her husband's. So Jake would have to marry her.

It was amazing that one young woman could, with her mere presence, wreck twenty years of planning. Not that those plans hadn't changed a lot over the years anyway. As boys, their dreams of revenge had been wholesale destruction of McLain and all his men, of everyone living on the ranch. But as they had grown older, the plan had changed. There were no doubt innocent people living on the ranch, people who had had no part in McLain's treachery, people who had begun working there only after the slaughter and had no idea what had happened. For all their grim focus on revenge, the Sarratts weren't murderers. Killing McLain and his men was one thing, more like killing rabid dogs than taking a human life. But years had passed and there had to be new people hired, servants, women, maybe even children. An attack like the one McLain had used wasn't feasible to them any longer.

Twenty years. They had drifted for twenty years, not aimlessly, though it might have looked that way. Anywhere they could find work, they had taken it and begun saving their money dollar by hard-earned dollar. They

had dug in mines, hired out their guns, worked as ordinary cowhands. Jake had trained horses, Ben had gambled, using their own particular skills. They knew they would need money to implement their evolving plan.

So twenty years had passed. He was thirty-three now, not a thirteen-year-old boy wild with grief and rage. The rage still burned, but it was under control. An eye for an eye… he didn't want McLain's eyes, he wanted his blood for his father's blood, his mother's blood. The bastard was living in the Sarratt house, sleeping in Duncan Sarratt's bedroom, walking daily across the tiled foyer where he had raped and killed Elena. It ate at Jake, seeing McLain walk into that house every night. Only his iron control kept him from getting out of bed and walking across to the house right now. It would be so easy; he could climb the stairs, go into the bedroom, and lay his gun barrel against McLain's temple. A little squeeze of the finger, and it would be over. But it would probably be over for him, too, and that wasn't his plan. He and Ben were going to own the valley again, so it had to be legal. Not only that, he was reluctant to see Victoria in bed with McLain; the very thought made him angry, and sick.

The plan they had settled on was for Jake to hire on at the ranch, find out how many men were left from the original bunch that had attacked them, and who they were. While he was doing that, Ben would be hiring good men they could trust, men who were standing ready to assume their new jobs. When Jake had arrived and seen the situation, he knew they'd have to replace a good two-thirds of the hired hands. The hired guns would go; Jake had no use for them. He didn't expect any of them to interfere, as they had no real loyalty to McLain. He also figured about half of the regular cowpunchers would drift away, for their own reasons. Some wouldn't like working for the Sarratts; some would be afraid too much attention would be turned on the ranch, and they would want to remain unknown. Jake didn't question a man's motives; he had some things in his background that couldn't stand too much light on them, either.

So Ben had men standing ready to take up the jobs that would be left vacant, and Jake had identified the men who had taken part in the raid. Charlie Guest had been one of them, and Jake had enjoyed killing him. He'd deliberately done it in a manner that was sure to make the others wary of him. That left five: McLain, Garnet, Jake Quinzy, Wendell Wallace, and Emmett Pledger. Wendell was going on seventy and was almost blind, so Jake discounted him as a threat. Garnet was a back-shooter. Quinzy

wouldn't turn a hair at much, but neither would he put his life on the line for McLain or Garnet. Quinzy looked out for himself first. Pledger, on the other hand, was mad-dog mean and cold-blooded into the bargain, willing to kill for the pleasure of it.

When McLain had murdered the Sarratts and stolen the ranch, the only form of law had been the United States Army, which had more than had its hands full with the Navaho and the Mexican Army. Law had existed only in the immediate vicinity of the army, and then only army law. General Kearny hadn't concerned himself with the small, bloody wars being fought all over the vast new territory for control of huge tracts of land. McLain was as smart as he was murderous; first he'd killed the Sarratts, then legally filed on the land.

It was supposed to have been just as simple for the Sarratts. Kill McLain and take over the land. He'd had no heirs; the land would have reverted to the government and been available for filing. This time it would be the Sarratts doing the filing.

It would even be legal. There was no law against killing a man in a fair fight. Jake allowed himself his own cold smile when he thought of it. With his own men in place to protect him from a bullet in the back, he'd face them one by one in a gunfight. Until the end of the war there had been no such thing as a quick draw, but with thousands of ex-soldiers pouring westward it was a skill that had quickly developed within the past year. Hell, McLain's holster still had a flap on it. Jake had cut the flap off of his and practiced for hours to develop both speed and accuracy. McLain wouldn't stand a chance. The only one who came close to him in speed was Quinzy, but he tended to hurry his shot and often missed the first time. Pledger was more accurate, but slow. Garnet was respectable in both speed and accuracy, but Jake was faster and he knew it. He should be able to take them all without trouble. If not, Ben would finish the job.

Only now the ranch would belong to Victoria.

He wondered what he'd have done if McLain's chosen wife had been ugly or ill-tempered or a whiny idiot. He couldn't kill an innocent woman, but he didn't think he could force himself to marry a woman like that, either. Victoria, on the other hand, was just right to be the mistress of Sarratt's Kingdom. He hated to admit it, but McLain had chosen well. She was a lady, she had courage, and she didn't simper.

Marriage wasn't such a bad idea. He'd never considered it before, but once he and Ben had the kingdom back, it would be time to settle down anyway. Jake figured Victoria would do for him, circumstances being what they were.

Victoria sat upright with a jerk, clutching the sheet to her chin while her body went cold. The Major stood in the open door, outlined by the light coming from his room. Dear God, she couldn't bear it again…

"I been thinking," he announced, his words slurred, and with horror she realized he was drunk. She could smell the stench of alcohol from across the room.

" 'Bout them horses you and the other gals want. Ain't no horses on the ranch fittin' for ladies, they're all work horses 'cept for Rubio. We'll go into Santa Fe to buy some fancy ridin' horses, and maybe find some of them fancy saddles ladies use. That's what we'll do, we'll go to Santa Fe, and let all those bastards get an eyeful of my womenfolk."

He laughed and lurched farther into the room. "They'll be so jealous they can't stand it," he predicted, and seemed to take great pleasure from the thought. "Yessir, when they find out you three ladies are up here, I'll have men from all over the territory sniffin' around. Not no trash, mind you, but men who mean something, and they'll all be beggin' to court them other two gals, especially that fancy little sister of yourn—yours," he corrected himself, and laughed again. "We'll leave in the morning. I can't wait to see their tongues hangin' out like hound dogs in a pack."

He took another step toward her, and suddenly she knew that she'd do anything, even run screaming from the house, to prevent him touching her again.

"If we're leaving in the morning, we'll have to get up early," she said, fear making her voice sharp. "We need all the sleep we can get. I'll see you tomorrow, Major, bright and early."

He stopped, weaving back and forth on his feet. She waited, holding her breath. Then he said, "We need sleep. Good thinkin', sugar. You ladies need to rest a lot, you ain't used to life on a ranch, or on a trail, either."

"Good night," she said, and lay back down, tucking the sheet around her. Then she bit her lip and called, "Major?" as he turned to go. "I—thank you for the horses. It's very generous of you."

"Nothin's too good for my wife," he said with heavy self-satisfaction.

It wasn't until he'd left the room and closed the door behind him that she relaxed. She didn't know if he had intended to try again to bed her, but just having him that close had been almost more than she could bear. If he had actually tried to do to her what she had seen Roper doing to that woman—
The remembered image flashed in her mind again, tormenting her. Damn him! Why should she care what he did? "I don't," she whispered into the darkness, and knew that she lied. God help her, she did care. She was horrified by the admittance. She was married; Jake Roper and every other man, except her husband, was forbidden to her. There were only two classes of women, good women and bad women. For a woman to consort with any man except her husband, in any way except socially, was for her to cross the line between good and bad. For her even to think of Jake Roper in such a manner was sinful.
But propriety had given her a husband she despised, and sin or not she couldn't rid her mind of the insidious weakness of thought that brought to the fore, again and again, Jake's form and narrowed, glittering green eyes. She hated him. He made her lust, and she hated him for it. Lust was an ugly, shameful thing, but she was beginning to know its power. It made her feel hot and restless, her body heavy and aching; it kept her from sleep and tore at her conscience. Because she couldn't handle it any other way, she took her desperation and formed it into resentment against the man who had, without even trying, brought her to this pass. How he would laugh, in that sneering way, if he knew!
After leaving Victoria, McLain stood in his bedroom, swaying a little as he thought. He'd been drinking, so maybe that was why he'd had the thought that this time he'd be able to get hard if he tried it with her again. He shuddered, remembering the two times he had tried. By God, no way he'd risk that again.
But he needed a woman, something to keep him from going to sleep and having that damn nightmare again. It was coming more and more often lately, robbing him of sleep and wearing him down.
Angelina. He snickered at the thought of having to kick another cowhand out of her room. Hell, what did he care? He liked the idea of making another man crawl off of her so he could crawl on. Showed 'em who was boss.
He quietly left his bedroom, taking exaggerated care that he didn't slam the door. The house was dark and he held onto the banister to keep from

stumbling over his own rather unsteady feet. Just as he reached the bottom step he saw a flash of white out of the corner of his eye, and terror chilled him. He could feel his scalp prickling as his hair lifted. Sarratt was back! The flashing knife—maybe it was a ghost—

Then the white moved again and he saw that it was a woman in a nightgown, moving past the doorway of the dining room, walking toward the kitchen. His terror changed immediately to anger against whoever had scared him like that, and Angelina was forgotten as he walked toward the dining room.

"Who's there?" he snapped. By God, he'd teach her to wander around like that at night, scaring him. It was one of those Mex women, probably Carmita; she was always poking her nose in every cranny of the house.

The woman was already in the kitchen. She came back to the doorway just as he entered the dining room. "Señor?" she asked in a timid voice.

Now that they were in the same room, he could see her well enough to identify her. It was Juana, the young one. Her long dark hair was streaming down her back. The plain white nightgown was long-sleeved and high-necked, but his eyes narrowed as he looked her over.

He'd been intending to give her hell, but abruptly changed his mind. "What're you up to, gal?" he asked in a smooth tone as he approached. "Walking around in the dark like this."

Juana took a step back. "I'm sorry, señor," she blurted. Her dark eyes looked huge in the faint light. "I was going back to my room."

"What were you doin'?" he demanded. "Maybe slippin' out to meet some cowhand?"

She vigorously shook her head. "No, señor. I—I carried a book back to your study. I read them, sometimes. I apologize, señor, I won't get one again without your permission."

"Forget the damn books," he said, his tone becoming thicker. He put his hand in her hair, twisting the heavy dark locks around his wrist. "You can read all the books you want if you'll be nice to me."

Juana tried to draw back. "Señor?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"You know what I mean." He jerked her to him and ground his mouth over hers. Terrified, Juana raised her fists and began to pound at him, but her efforts were useless. He had the strength of a bull.

He laughed soundlessly at her as he clamped his hand over her mouth and forced her down to the floor. "If you scream, I'll throw you and your nosy

mother off the ranch." He grunted as he unbuttoned his britches and jerked up her nightgown. Juana tried to hit him again, and he balled up his fist and hit her in the head. She whimpered with pain.
He kneed her legs apart and thrust into her. She bucked once, then lay still. She was dry, but he kinda liked that; made her feel tighter. He'd wanted to do this for a long time; he thought of the Mexican servants as belonging to him anyway. Now the pleasure was doubled for him because he was so relieved to find he still had the power and virility to force a woman, even if he couldn't force his wife.
When he was finished, McLain climbed off and nudged Juana with his boot. "You say anything about this, gal, and you'll regret it." Feeling satisfied that his threat would keep her in line, he returned upstairs and fell into bed. Angelina could wait.
Whimpering, Juana curled into a ball. The pain in her lower body was so bad she could barely move, and her head was throbbing. It was over an hour before she could get up, and then she walked like an old woman, bent over and hobbling. At night, she noticed, blood looked black.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jake looked both left and right as he left the telegraph office, but saw no one he knew. As capital of the territory, Santa Fe was bursting at the seams and no one paid any attention to one more dusty cowhand. The streets were crowded with bonneted women, men in blue army uniforms, prosperous merchants in their tailored suits, rough ranchers, shopkeepers, saloon bartenders, politicians, children darting and playing, and untold numbers of dusty cowhands. He was hidden in their swarming midst.
He settled his hat lower on his forehead to shade his eyes and began walking up the street. It was past noon, when McLain had told Victoria they would look at a string of horses. The Major had asked Roper to help in the selection, and he was looking forward to the excuse to stand close to Victoria and watch her evade his eyes. She hadn't looked at him square in the face since the night she'd caught him with Fiorina. Right from the first she had met him stare for stare, bolder than most men, but now she tried not

to even acknowledge his presense. He was going to have to do something about that.
About twenty horses were milling about in two adjoining corrals. Celia was perched on the railing with her bonnet dangling down her back by its strings, and enthusiastically pointing out the horses she liked. From what he could tell, she had narrowed her favorites down to about half of the herd. Victoria and Emma were standing a little back from the fence, watching the horses and occasionally asking questions of the beefy man standing beside them, who evidently owned the herd. McLain was leaning on the railing with Garnet beside him. Several more McLain men were close by.
Emma pointed. "I like that one," she said decisively, and McLain signaled that her choice be separated from the herd.
Jake looked the horse over. It was a stocky, strong-looking gray gelding with calm eyes, and it didn't fidget when it was cut from the herd. For a lady's mount, it was a good choice. When the Major noticed he'd arrived and caught his eye, Jake nodded his approval.
Celia squealed, and Jake saw Victoria give her sister a loving, amused look. "This one!" Celia called, pointing to a showy chestnut with cream-colored mane and tail.
The beefy man transferred his chew of tobacco from one cheek to the other. "He's not real well-mannered, miss," he said gruffly.
Jake walked up beside Celia and rested his arms on the top railing while he looked over the horses. "What you want," he said in a quiet voice, "is a horse with good strong legs and one that don't look like it'll shy every time a rabbit crosses its trail." The girl loved horses, but from what he'd seen she hadn't had much experience with them. She was attracted to the fancy-colored animals regardless of their temperament, but what she needed more than anything was a horse with a placid disposition.
He pointed out a dark brown horse with one white stocking. "Now, look at that horse," he said. "It's got good strong shoulders and legs, and a deep chest. That means it's got good lungs. That horse could carry you all day and all night without getting tired." It was also as calm as the horse Emma had selected.
Celia tilted her head a little to the side as she studied the animal. "He isn't very pretty," she said.
"It's a mare," Jake corrected. He looked at the beefy man. "How about bringing that dark brown mare with the stocking up so the lady can meet

her."
A simple rope bridle was fashioned on the mare's nose, and she willingly walked over to snuffle at Celia's shoes and skirts before nuzzling at her hand. Celia giggled, a sound like liquid sunlight, and stroked the mare's neck.
"She's dusty, but a good brushing will make her shine," Jake said.
The mare blew through her nose, sounding as if she agreed, and Celia was won. She turned a beaming smile on Jake. "I want this one," Celia said, still patting her new friend's neck.
Jake glanced at Victoria and caught her watching him. For the first time she didn't jerk her eyes away as if she couldn't bear to see him. Pushing it, Jake walked up to her and tipped his hat. "Mrs. McLain. Miss Emma."
Victoria was a little pale, but she met his gaze. "Thank you," she said in a low voice, nodding toward Celia.
"No thanks needed, ma'am. Do you need any help picking out your own horse, or have you already made up your mind?"
Victoria had, but she looked blindly at the horses again. He was standing so close that she could feel his warmth at her shoulder.
"Let Roper pick one out for you," McLain said. "He knows his horses."
"I already know which one I want. The tall mare with the blaze. The dark chestnut." She felt stifled by Roper's nearness and stepped forward until she reached the railing.
To her dismay Jake moved forward, too, under the guise of looking for the mare. His left shoulder crowded her and immediately he put his left hand on her waist. "Steady, ma'am," he said, as if she had stumbled.
He took his time removing his hand. He was standing between her and the Major, blocking her from McLain's view with his own body. Victoria shuddered and stepped sideways. Her skin burned where he had touched her.
The beefy man transferred his chew again, eyeing the mare in question. "I don't know, ma'am. She's only about half broke to the saddle, and tends to be a touch headstrong."
Jake looked at the mare and his eyes narrowed with interest. No doubt about it, that was a damn fine horse. She was big for a mare, as big as most stallions, and she had fire in her eyes. She was strongly built, but her lines suggested speed, too.
He rubbed his jaw. "How old is she?"

"Three. Ain't never been bred."
"Too wild looking," McLain announced. "I don't want my wife risking her neck on some half-wild nag."
Victoria pressed her lips together and looked away. Jake realized she wouldn't argue with McLain, just as he realized she badly wanted the mare. He rubbed his jaw again and motioned with his head for McLain to walk a little bit away with him.
"That mare is a fine-looking piece of horseflesh. Just look at her. Tall and strong, and full of piss and vinegar. Think of the foals you'd get by putting Rubio on her."
McLain thought and looked at the mare again. His eyes gleamed. "That's an idea, Roper. I'll buy her, but pick out some other nag for Victoria."
"Why not give this one to her? She's in love with the horse. She'd think a whole lot more of this one than any other horse here, and be more appreciative."
"You heard the man, the damn horse ain't good broke."
"Hell, that's no problem. I can have her settled down in a couple of weeks. All of them will need work with a sidesaddle anyway, before they'll be fit to ride."
McLain pursed his lips, watching the mare toss her head. Roper was right; that was a fine-looking animal. He almost rubbed his hands together in glee as he thought of the quality of foals she'd drop. He was going to buy that horse, but putting Victoria on her was something else.
"I don't know," he said. "Victoria's a lady, not a Mexican wench who'll throw her leg over a donkey. She might not be able to handle a horse like that."
Jake's eyes gleamed and he turned his head so McLain couldn't see. "Let me work with Mrs. McLain, and I'll have her the best damned horsewoman in the territory. Buy her one of those fancy riding habits like the women wear back East, and people all over will talk about her and that mare."
If there was anything that swayed McLain, it was the idea of someone else envying him. He laughed heartily and said, "By God, that would be a picture, wouldn't it? All right, Roper, you teach that mare some manners and my wife how to ride."
He'd said it loud enough for Victoria to hear, and she blanched. My God, what had Roper said to him? She already knew how to ride! There was no need for Roper to give her any lessons. But she didn't say anything, because

the most important thing was that the Major was going to buy the mare. She had been fond of the horse she had regularly rode before the war, but something about this magnificent animal tugged at her. The mare was as fierce and arrogant as any stallion, not flashy, but confident in her own strength and speed. She had heart, and Victoria wanted to share in her freedom. When they got back to the ranch she would make it plain that she didn't need any riding lessons.

She was still exhausted from the bone-crushing journey, as they had only arrived in Santa Fe the day before. Moreover, they had been invited to a party at the governor's house that night. She needed both to rest and to escape from Roper's company. "It's getting late, Major. We need to return to the hotel to get dressed for the party."

The Major checked his watch and scowled. "Damn. I need to see someone this afternoon. Roper, escort the ladies back to the hotel. Garnet, you come with me."

She inhaled to voice a protest, then let her breath out with rueful acceptance. For whatever reason, fate was conspiring against her in her efforts to avoid Roper. All she could do was be so gracious that no one would suspect how his presence disturbed her.

His eyes gleamed dark green as he took her elbow in his right hand and Emma's in his left, as if he knew of her discomfort and enjoyed it. Celia danced along behind, beside, and in front of them, her bright presence masking Victoria's silence. Emma made the usual small talk, leading Victoria to wonder if no one but Roper saw her agitation. Did she hide it so well, even from Emma?

The hotel was three stories tall, and the Major had booked their rooms on the top floor so they wouldn't be bothered by the coming and going of the other guests. Emma and Celia shared a room next door to Victoria's room, and beyond that was the Major's. Victoria was devoutly thankful that there was no connecting door. She had slept better in the hotel room than she had since the day she'd been married.

Emma and Celia entered their room first, and Victoria firmly disengaged her arm from Roper's grip.

"Thank you for your escort, Mr. Roper," she said in polite dismissal as she retrieved her door key from her bag.

"You're very welcome, Mrs. McLain," he replied in solemn tones. He took the key from her and opened the door, then put his hand on her back and

forcefully ushered her inside.
Victoria whirled to see him shutting the door and locking it again, from the inside. Her heart lurched as she faced him. "Please leave, now, and I won't say anything about this."
He took off his hat and ran his hand through his dark hair. "About what, Mrs. McLain?" he asked softly.
"About—this. Forcing your way into my room."
"Have I touched you? Insulted you? Kissed you?"
Her heartbeat was even faster now. Her palms were damp, and she put her hands behind her back. "No," she whispered. Something occurred to her, and she lifted her chin. "You're doing this for revenge, aren't you? Because I—I accidentally intruded the other night in the barn. I apologize, Mr. Roper. It was completely unintentional."
A corner of his mouth kicked up in a little smile. "You sure got an eyeful, didn't you? But you must have liked what you saw, because you didn't leave, you stood there until the end."
She blushed painfully, and he gave a low laugh. How could she explain that she'd been frozen, unable to move? She couldn't tell him how pain had lanced through her or how fiercely jealous she had been.
"I've got a deal to offer you," he said, watching her intently. "I won't say anything around the ranch about you watching me with Fiorina if you'll give me that kiss you're so terrified I'll take." He knew the risk he was running by being in her room, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to have her to himself for just a few minutes. Let her start getting used to the idea that there was something between them, and accustom her to his lovemaking.
Now she went pale, and for a minute she felt as if she might faint. "You—you want me to kiss you?"
"Yes, ma'am, I do. I've never had a lady kiss me before. I want to know if you taste any different, if your lips are softer." He looked as if he were wickedly enjoying her agitation. "I want a long, slow, mouth to mouth kiss."
"I'm married!"
He shrugged. "So?"
So, indeed? She looked at him wildly. Did all men feel that way about the marriage vows? Her husband had broken his easily enough. Kissing Roper wouldn't be infidelity in act, but it would be in spirit. She thought of the distasteful way the Major had put his mouth on hers, but the thought of

kissing Roper like that wasn't distasteful at all. It was deeply, primitively exciting and it frightened her because she should never even think such a thing, let alone act on it.
"I can't," she whispered.
He smiled again, and she shivered. "Oh, I think you can," he murmured, slowly advancing. "Just think of what the men would say if they knew you had watched. They'd get a real hoorah out of it, and they'd laugh every time they saw you."
She backed up a step. "Mr. Roper—"
"Jake."
"You don't know what you're asking of me. I—"
"I think I do." He moved again, his hand shooting out to catch her arm and prevent her from retreating further. "I'm asking you to kiss me the way a woman kisses a man. Nothing else. Just a kiss."
She couldn't believe how hot his hands were. If he were that warm all over, what would it feel like if he—She jerked her thoughts to a standstill, appalled at herself. She stared up at him.
"That's all?" she whispered. "Just a kiss."
"That's all."
"It's blackmail."
"Yes."
It was sinful and she knew it, but sin has been sweet from the beginning of time. The temptation to taste him was so powerful she was shaking with it, and it was forbidden. She was a respectable married lady; she should cleave only unto her husband—
—who cleaved unto any cheap slut who would have him.
She felt paralyzed, mesmerized. His eyes were glittering down at her, so close that she could see the tiny golden striations around the black iris, blending into forest green tinged with blue. She could feel his breath on her face and knew that, sin or not, she was going to let him kiss her.
His left hand slid around the small of her back and urged her closer. Immediately Victoria's hands flew up to clutch his biceps in faint alarm and protest, but she said nothing. The swell of his muscles under her palms left her unwillingly beguiled and weaker than she wanted to be.
He pulled her closer, inch by inch, until their bodies touched. Victoria inhaled a quick breath, shattering inside at the powerful intimacy of this simple contact. He was so warm and hard, his muscled body supporting

hers; he held her so close that she could feel the buttons of his shirt digging into her breast, the buckle of his gunbelt cutting into her abdomen, and his strong thighs rubbing against hers through the fabric of her skirt and petticoats.
Her heart was slamming painfully against her rib cage as she waited, then he bent his head. His mouth, warm and firm, touched hers for a moment, then lifted. Was that all? She felt faint with relief that it had been as uncomplicated as that, though still very improper.
He frowned down at her. "Not like that."
"Like what?"
"That wasn't the kind of kiss I want."
She stared at him. "What other kind is there?"
He looked momentarily startled, then his eyes narrowed. It was possible, he realized. Women like her thought they should endure rather than participate. McLain certainly wasn't a man to make her realize she should enjoy it. Roper was going to enjoy making this aspect of her education about life in the West his responsibility.
He cupped her jaw in his right hand. "Open your mouth this time," he ordered.
She looked aghast. "Open my—"
He quickly took advantage of the opportunity and covered her parted lips with his own. She made a quick sound of panic in her throat and tried to jerk away from him, but he locked his arm around her waist.
Victoria stared up at him with wide, frightened eyes. She sensed violence in him, as if he wanted more from her and was determined to get it. He had said just a kiss; had she been a fool to believe it would stop at that? She pushed against his arms in a futile effort at escape.
His right hand tightened on her jaw and his hard fingers exerted heavy pressure on her chin. Against her will, she felt her clenched teeth part and suddenly his tongue was inside her mouth. Shocked, astounded, she froze, and in that moment of immobility she became aware of his mouth moving over hers, of the warm stroke of his tongue inside her mouth. A strange heat began moving through her body, weakening her so that she had to cling to his arms to even stand upright. Both the heat and the weakness were insidious, creeping through her to undermine both her determination to keep this under control and her certainty that she could. In his embrace, with his mouth on hers, she was certain of nothing but the growing upheaval of her

senses. This pleasure was wicked, and increasingly seductive. Her eyes drifted shut.
She had expected to give him one kiss, but that wasn't what happened. His mouth returned to hers over and over again, and both of his arms were around her now, crushing her to him. If she had ever had control of this situation, it was gone now.
He could have done anything with her, and she would have been helpless to stop him. Only the abrupt intrusion of someone pounding on the door made him swiftly release her and step back.
Victoria swayed, and panic shot through her as she realized someone had caught Roper in her room with her. She went white. If it was the Major—
She couldn't finish the thought, because it was too horrible to contemplate.
Roper moved swiftly to the door, his right hand on his pistol butt.
"Wait!" Victoria said in an agonized whisper.
He gave her a brief glance. "It's next door," he said sharply. "Some drunk is trying to get into your sister's room." He opened the door and stepped into the hall.
Victoria flew to the doorway just as Roper said, "You planning on beating that door down, Pledger?"
Victoria recognized the man, though she'd never spoken with him. He'd been surly all the way to Santa Fe, and the other men hadn't associated with him much. His eyes had the mean look of a vicious dog, and she had unconsciously avoided him. Too late she realized the mistake she was making in letting him see her with Roper.
He turned on Roper with a snarl, but when his gaze lit on Victoria his lips twisted into a nasty smile. "I do declare," he mocked. "Playing patty-cake with the boss's wife? Bet he'd be real interested to know that, wouldn't you say?"
Jake considered the situation, and his eyes narrowed. It couldn't be much better, just him and Pledger facing each other. He could kill the bastard now just as well as later. Now that he'd sent the telegram to Ben and his brother was on his way, there was really no reason to wait. In fact, there was no way he could let Pledger walk away, not after he'd seen Jake come out of Victoria's room.
Smiling a little, Jake moved closer to the man. "Why don't you go to the saloon and hire a whore to scratch your itch," he suggested softly. "Leave the ladies alone."

Pledger hooted. "Just like you did, Roper? I've always wanted me some of that refined stuff. You just go back to diddlin' the boss's wife, and I'll try out that purty little sister, and neither of us will say nothin' about the other. How about that, pard?" He sneered and spat on the floor at Roper's feet.
Roper was smiling. Victoria saw it only from the side, just a small curl of the lips, but it chilled her. She stood in the doorway, watching with a sort of horrified fascination.
Jake's walk was easy and relaxed, so relaxed that Pledger didn't react until it was too late. "Stop right there," he said, and moved his hand toward his gun butt. Just as the last word left his mouth Jake kicked him between the legs, holding back just enough on the kick that Pledger wasn't felled. As it was, he sagged to the side, gagging as he grabbed his crotch.
Pledger straightened painfully, his eyes wild in a white face. "You son of a bitch," he said, and grabbed for his gun.
He had just cleared leather when Jake's first slug punched a hole in his chest and slammed him backward against the wall. Reflex jerked Pledger's finger on the trigger and for the second time the narrow hall shuddered from the thunder of gunfire. Pledger's bullet went through the floor and lodged in a wall on the second story.
His eyes, already glazing, were full of hate as he slid sideways to the floor. Jake held him in his sights, hammer already cocked back again. If Pledger so much as twitched, the second slug would be between his eyes. No way was he going to live to say as much as a single word to anyone.
But Pledger's last breath sighed out of him as his pants stained with the release of his bladder. Jake eased the hammer down on his gun.
Emma and Celia had been too frightened to open their door before, but the sound of gunfire followed by that immense silence stirred Emma to action. She jerked the door open and stared in confusion at Roper, then down at Pledger. "Oh, God," she said.
Celia's frightened face poked out beside her, and the girl's beautiful eyes rounded with shock when she saw Pledger's body.
Jake turned his head and looked at Victoria, who was still frozen in the doorway. Their eyes met, his hard and green, hers almost gray with shock. In that moment she was more frightened of him than she had been of Pledger.
They had no time to say anything. Booted feet were running up the stairs, and a crowd of men erupted upward into the narrow hall. Jake punched out

the empty shell and replaced it, then returned the pistol to its holster. He looked remarkably unconcerned as people crowded around, overlapping questions with comments.
One man nudged Pledger's boot with his own. "Ugly son of a bitch. Who was he?" Then he noticed the three women standing there and swallowed. "Beg yer pardon, ladies."
None of the women seemed to have noticed. Victoria was still staring at Jake, her face white. Jake reached out and took Emma by the arm, bending down to talk low in her ear. "Take Mrs. McLain back into her room. She saw the whole thing, and she looks a mite shocked."
Emma looked swiftly at Victoria, then back to Jake and nodded. "Help me with Victoria," she said to Celia. Victoria found herself taken in hand and ushered back into her room, the door firmly closed on the ugly scene in the hallway.
She sat down and folded her hands in her lap, holding herself inside. She felt numb. A man had just been killed in front of her, and despite all she had seen during the war, nothing had been as brutal as that. Jake had been so… casual about it, as if the taking of a life was nothing to him. And the smile on his face still made her shiver in reaction.
Celia sank down onto the floor and put her head in Victoria's lap. The girl was shocked and silent.
Automatically Victoria smoothed the bright blond hair, as she had been doing since Celia's childhood. Emma sat down on the bed, as quiet as Victoria.
"Did you hear what he said?" Victoria asked.
"Some." Enough, Emma thought, to know that Jake Roper had been in this room with Victoria. Enough to know that Roper had had to kill Pledger to keep him silent. Not that she thought for one minute that Victoria had betrayed her marriage vows; for one thing, there hadn't been time, and for another, Victoria was too inherently honorable.
But Jake had in fact been in here alone with her, and Emma had accurately pegged the Major as a mean, violent, petty man who would, she was afraid, judge Victoria by his own standards—which was to say, none at all. For Victoria's sake, Emma was prepared to back whatever story Jake offered.
Fifteen minutes later the Major and Garnet arrived, having been fetched from a saloon by a breathless youngster with the news that there'd been a shooting at the hotel and the Major's wife was involved. The boy hadn't

known anything other than that garbled message. They had both been on their way upstairs with a couple of the saloon's soiled doves, and the Major was in a foul mood from the interruption.
"That's two of our men you've killed, Roper," Garnet said, eyeing the tall, muscular man before him with suspicion.
Jake shrugged. "He went for his gun first. A man braces me, I don't ask if he's serious or just funning."
"You say he drew first." Garnet's eyes were alive with hate.
McLain looked from one hired gun to the other, his eyes wary. He had remained alive because he was shrewd if not intelligent, and Garnet's suspicious attitude alerted him. Fights were common among a bunch of men, but Roper was killing men with whom he was supposed to be working. It did make a man stop and wonder.
"Garnet's got a point," McLain said, eyeing Roper closely. "There any witnesses?"
"Mrs. McLain saw the whole thing." Jake sounded bored. "Ask her."
"I'll do that." McLain stomped to Victoria's door and slammed his heavy fist on it. "Victoria!"
Emma snatched it open, and the three men entered. Celia rose from the floor and Victoria got to her feet, too. She was still pale, and she didn't look at Jake.
"Roper says Pledger drew on him first. Is that so?" McLain growled.
Victoria clenched her cold hands in her skirts. "Mr. Pledger went for his weapon first, yes."
"What I want to know is what you and Pledger were doing up here," Garnet said.
Suspicion darkened the Major's face. Steeling herself, Victoria lifted her chin. "Mr. Roper walked us back to the hotel, at the Major's request."
"I'd seen them to their rooms and gone back down to the lobby when I saw Pledger slip in, like he was trying to be sneaky." Jake took a tobacco pouch out of his pocket and leisurely rolled a cigarette. "I followed him, found him up here trying to break into Miss Emma and Miss Celia's room. Don't guess I have to tell you why. I tried to get him to go back downstairs with me, but he refused and went for his gun."
"You saw this?" McLain asked, cutting his eyes to Victoria.
"Yes." She agreed to the lie with her own. She didn't look at Jake.

McLain looked at Emma. "Is that true? Was Pledger trying to get into your room?"
At least Emma didn't need to lie. "He was beating on the door and saying… ugly things. We were afraid to open it."
Jake lounged back against the doorjamb, his eyes narrowed to sleepy slits as he surveyed the others. "I did what I had to do to protect the women. That's what you wanted, isn't it, Major?"
"Of course," McLain snapped.
"Then what's the problem?"
"I'll tell you what the problem is," Garnet said, stepping closer. "The problem is you killing two of our oldest hands. Pledger and Charlie Guest had been with the ranch for years."
Jake smiled. It was the same expression Victoria had seen just before he'd killed Pledger. "I could always make it three," he suggested in a silky tone.
"That's enough damn killing!" McLain yelled. "Back off, Garnet. It riles me to lose Pledger, but I sure as hell don't want my two best men killing each other over him."
"Sure, boss." Garnet stepped back, but his expression remained hate-filled. Jake wasn't surprised that Garnet had backed off so easily; face-to-face wasn't his style.
McLain put on his best smile. "The party tonight will be just the thing to make you ladies forget about this," he said. "The governor can't wait to meet you, since word's out that I have the three prettiest women in the territory. Every man in Santa Fe will be trying to dance with you tonight."
Victoria seized desperately on that excuse. "My goodness, I'd forgotten about the party! We'll have to hurry. Run along, gentlemen—" She made little shooing gestures with her hands. "Oh, Major, could you have the hotel send up hot water to both rooms?"
"Of course, my dear." He patted her on the cheek. "Dress up in your fanciest dress—give these yokels something to gawk at."
When the three women were alone again, Victoria visibly sagged. "I don't know if I can bear even the thought of a party," she said in a stifled voice. "Dear God." But she forced herself to straighten and took deep breaths to compose herself. "I suppose we'll have to go and make the best of it. Celia, dear, are you all right?"
"Yes." Celia looked unusually grave, but her dark blue eyes were steady. "Jake had to kill him, to protect us. I'm not sorry."

Victoria felt sick. Yes, Jake had killed to protect, but had he done it for Emma and Celia, or to conceal his own indiscretion with Victoria?
There was a hardness in him that terrified her, yet she was inexplicably drawn to him. Try as she might to avoid him, fate kept twisting their lives together, forcing them to share sordid secrets that created an unwilling intimacy between them, and now they were sharing lies.
Yet she had stood in his arms and let him kiss her in a way so improper and shattering that she could scarcely bear to think about it. She was another man's wife! To do what she had done had been betrayal, but at the time she had gloried in it. She had enjoyed the scent and taste of him, the feel of his strongly muscled body against her, thrilled to the power of his arms.
She had even dreamed of him. And that was, perhaps, an even greater betrayal.

CHAPTER SIX

Victoria excused herself and sought out the ladies' convenience, needing to get away just for a moment from the chatter and social smiles, and from the unexpectedly harrowing nearness of blue uniforms. It was silly, because the war had been over for a year, and in the meantime she had certainly become used to the sight of blue uniforms on the streets of Augusta. But never before had she been required to meet Union soldiers socially. She had no hate for them and wasn't bitter, as so many Southerners were, but when the first Union officer had bowed over her hand, she had felt afraid, as if they were still foes. The soldiers certainly did nothing to calm her already frayed nerves.
She had used rigid control to survive the evening. She hadn't allowed herself to think of the gaping hole in Pledger's chest, the ugliness of death, the boneless sprawl. Nor had she let herself remember the vile things he had said or the chilling way Jake had smiled. Most of all, she had blocked from her mind the hot, endless moments she had spent in his arms. It shouldn't have happened and must never happen again. She had to forget it forever.
The hallway was deserted, and though two lamps illuminated it for the benefit of the guests, the light seemed dim, absorbed by the rich but rather dark patterns of the wallpaper and carpeting. She longingly thought of the

simple white walls and clear, uncluttered lines of the hacienda. If she enjoyed her marriage half as much as she did that house, she would have been very happy indeed.
The convenience was at the back of the house. As she passed an open doorway, it was filled with a dark, massive figure. She was startled but not frightened, merely thinking it another guest. An arm stretched out of the shadows and grabbed her, jerked her into the room, and only then did she become alarmed. She inhaled jerkily to scream, and the man clapped his hand over her mouth.
"Damn it, don't scream," he muttered.
The simple recognition of his voice twanged at her nerves. She jerked her head away from his hand. "What are you doing? You shouldn't be in here! How did you get in?"
"I'm here because the Major doesn't go anywhere without backup. I've been walking around outside, keeping an eye on things. This door was open, and I could see in through the window. From the parade of ladies going up and down the hall, it didn't take much brain to figure out where they were going."
"So you sneaked in the back door?"
"Crawled in the window."
"And grabbed the first woman who came by?" She was incensed and thought she might still scream. He hadn't let go of her, his fingers were still hooked around her waist, and the way he was holding her so close made her uneasy.
"No, I waited for you." He let go of her and walked to the open door, which he eased shut without even a click. "I wanted to talk to you."
Without the light coming from the hallway, the room at first seemed totally dark. She moved closer to the windows, both to put some distance between them and to see better. She lifted her chin. "What do we have to talk about?"
"Pledger."
She flinched a little at the name. "You killed him. What more is there to say?"
"Plenty. Don't let your high-nosed conscience push you into confessing. Pledger was dirt. He murdered and raped, and enjoyed it."
"Like you enjoyed killing him?"
He was silent a moment, then gave a low, harsh laugh as he moved toward her, into the light from the windows. "Yeah, I enjoyed it. I felt like I was

doing a good deed."
Victoria clenched her hands. "You killed him to keep him from telling the Major that you were in my room. You shouldn't have been in there at all; it's my fault a man is dead, and I lied to hide why he was shot."
"Not much else you could do."
"Is a life, even his, so cheap? What could have happened if you hadn't shot him, if he had told? You'd have been fired and the Major would have been angry with me, but that would have been his right—"
"Wake up," he snapped, still keeping his voice low. "This isn't about a job! McLain would have told Garnet to get rid of me, and he wouldn't mean just throw me off of the ranch. But even if he didn't kill me, if he just fired me, where would that leave you? Where would it leave your little sister?"
"Celia?" Victoria stared up at him, trying to see his features in the faint light.
"If I'm gone, who'll keep Garnet away from the girl?"
She hadn't thought of that. She felt dizzy, as if she had almost walked off a cliff and seen it just in time. Good or bad, and for his own reasons, Jake Roper was the only protection Celia had—or, come to that, she herself had. He had killed to protect them. But why?
She didn't delude herself that he cared anything about her; how could he? He didn't know her. True, he had kissed her, but she was learning that didn't necessarily mean anything to a man.
Whatever she saw in his cold green eyes, she was certain it wasn't tenderness. His reasons for protecting them were his own. She felt as if she were being used, but she couldn't see how. She had no power, no influence for him to hope to exploit.
She inhaled. "I won't say anything," she said, her tone stifled.
"Just make sure you don't. What about your cousin? Did she hear what was said?"
"I think so, but Emma would never say anything."
"And Celia?"
"She won't tell, either."
"Can you trust her?"
Her anger was immediate, but she tamped it down. He didn't know Celia, couldn't understand that her peculiar characteristics in no way indicated an un-trustworthiness. But perhaps her anger was because all her emotions

were so close to the surface tonight. Because of that, she restrained her immediate retort and instead merely replied, "Yes."
"Make sure she understands."
"She already does, Mr. Roper." She said it through her teeth, her control slipping a bit.
"Jake."
She stepped back. "I think not. This afternoon was a mistake, one that won't be repeated. It would be best if we—"
"It won't, huh?" He almost laughed, but instead took her by the shoulders and pulled her to him. He wrapped his arms around her, forcing her into full contact with him from knee to breast. "Do you think I wanted to be attracted to you? I didn't, and I don't like it, but that's the way it is, and I'll be damned if I let you treat me like I'm invisible."
Uselessly she shoved against his chest, then turned her head to the side as his mouth lowered. He caught her chin and was bending to her again when there was a faint scratching at the door, and Emma said in a low voice, "Victoria?"
Jake released her as Emma opened the door and slipped inside, swiftly closing it again.
Victoria drew herself up, sharply aware of what Emma must be thinking. Emma carefully navigated the dark room until she was standing before them. "You had been gone too long, so I came looking for you," she said in her quiet voice. "I heard your voices when I passed the door. We'll go back in together, and no one will think anything of it." To Jake she said, "I didn't have the opportunity earlier to thank you for what you did, Mr. Roper. I'm deeply grateful."
Tears stung Victoria's eyes. Dear Emma. Her love and loyalty, her support, never wavered.
"No thanks are necessary," Jake said.
"Perhaps not, but then you weren't on the other side of that door." Emma put her hand on Victoria's arm. "Give us time to get back to the party before you leave."
Amused, he said, "I'll go out the same way I came in, through the window."
"Be careful, Mr. Roper. And thank you again, whether or not you think my gratitude is deserved."
They left together and when they were in the hall, Victoria gave a low, shaky laugh. "I still need to use the convenience."

"Of course."
Emma didn't say anything else until they were returning to the party. Then she whispered, "Be careful."
Victoria shuddered. "I hope the situation never arises again," she said, and hoped that Emma understood she had no intention of becoming embroiled in an unsavory relationship with Jake Roper. He frightened her, even though she felt this sordid physical attraction for him. He made love as casually as he wiped his boots, and he killed the same way.
She ignored the sudden chill she felt and pasted a bright smile on her face as she and Emma rejoined the party.
That goddamn Roper was up to something.
Garnet didn't know what it was, but he felt more and more uneasy as he thought about Pledger. He lay in his bed in the hotel, his booted feet crossed carelessly on the white bedspread, smoking in the dark while he thought about it. Pledger had been a mean son of a bitch, but he hadn't been stupid, and the fact was it was plain stupid to draw on Roper. Yet Pledger had done that very thing and earned himself a pine coffin. Roper's explanation had made sense right up to the part where Pledger drew on him.
It had been an easy life on the hacienda, but maybe it was time to be thinking about changing things. There was trouble in the air that he couldn't identify, but he could feel it. Maybe the Major was losing his grip on things. Maybe it was time for a stronger hand.
He smiled, a cold little smile. Yeah, maybe that was it. The Major was so damn impressed with Roper's gun that he wouldn't hear of getting rid of him, so maybe the thing to do was get rid of the Major. That would put Roper put of a job, neat and simple. Garnet would be rid of him without trying to get the drop on the son of a bitch. Once Roper left, the little corn-haired gal would be all his; her high-falutin' sister wouldn't be able to do a damn thing about it.
Hell, no, that wouldn't work. Roper was too friendly with the Major's wife. Kill the Major, and Roper would be the one who stayed to comfort the grieving widow and her pretty sister.
The solution was pretty simple. It didn't take him longer than a second of consideration to settle on it. All he had to do was kill the Major's wife as well as the Major. He'd have to figure out some way to do it so no one could put the blame on him, but it could be done. On a ranch the size of the kingdom, there would be plenty of opportunities. The bitch had helped him

by getting this bee in her bonnet about riding. There would be lots of times when she'd be all by herself, with no one else within sight or earshot. Garnet was a fair shot with a rifle; it would be no trouble at all to put a bullet in her head. Then the Major, and after that it would all be his.
Garnet lay in the darkness, so satisfied with his plan that he could almost taste it, so impatient to feel the little yeller-haired gal beneath him that he had to reach down and rub his aching loins. The best part of his plan was that he wouldn't have to do nothing about Roper—he could just fire him!
Garnet was like a great many people in that he used himself as the measure by which to judge others, which was what had kept him alive for so long. He automatically expected the worst of someone, and because of that he was extraordinarily wary. Trust was alien to him. He believed himself to be safe with the Major only because he knew too much and had made the Major dependent on him, which was the only smart thing to do. Garnet's one weakness was that he was blind to the possibility of someone else's greater sense of purpose. If it were Garnet who lost his job, he would pack his saddlebags and leave, so he expected Roper to do the same. It never occurred to him that Jake might be so enraged by the death of the Major's wife that he'd stay, because Garnet himself would never risk his life for a woman, especially a dead one. Nor did he know that Roper had another, more compelling reason for remaining on the Kingdom Ranch.
So he lay in bed and planned, so hungry for the power that was within his grasp that he couldn't sleep. He kept rubbing slowly at his crotch, thinking of both the ranch and Celia Waverly, until they became intertwined in his mind. He could have easily left his room and found a whore, but a strange hot compulsion kept him in bed. He didn't want to stick it in some gaudy, cheap-smelling whore; he wanted to stick it in Celia, and nothing else would satisfy him.
The return trip to the ranch was just as arduous as the journey to Santa Fe had been. They spent most of it in the bone-racking buggy, lurching over rocks and into holes, and choking on dust kicked up by the riders in front. The only comfort was late in the day, when they stopped to make camp. The heat began to cool, the dust settled, and they could stretch their legs. While the simple meals were being prepared, Jake worked with the three new horses and Victoria's gaze was often lured in that direction. She told herself it was just to watch the animals, but Jake's deep voice drifted on the quiet

air like velvet, instructing, soothing, praising. Against her will, it worked the same spell on her as it did on the horses.
Celia's dark brown mare was the fastest to pick up on the proper behavior for a horse wearing a sidesaddle, a fact which pleased the girl and made her even prouder of her mount. She named the mare Gypsy, a name that was considerably flashier than its bearer, and lavished the animal with attention. Jake figured the mare would be ready to ride by the time they reached the ranch, but didn't say anything to Celia because he knew she would immediately start demanding to ride out by herself. It was better if she didn't know until the others could go with her.
The gray gelding Emma had chosen didn't present many problems, either, but Victoria's mare was another story. The beefy man had lied; she wasn't even half-broken to the saddle. What's more, she didn't like it. She tried to bite him every time he put the saddle on her back; she blew up to keep him from tightening the cinch (a trick she abandoned after he kneed her the first few times she did it); and she wasn't above a well-placed kick. He didn't even try mounting her; he figured that was going to be a real battle and didn't want to start it until he had her in a corral where she couldn't run away if she managed to throw him. When he didn't have the saddle on her she was as affectionate and playful as a child, but the saddle just plain made her mad. She plain made him mad, too, but he told himself ruefully that it was his own fault for volunteering to train the horses. He'd get her gentled for Victoria if it killed him, and he thought it just might.
Victoria herself was acting as if he were made of thin air, looking right through him. He let it pass, because he had plenty of time once they got back to the ranch. Much as she tried to deny it, she liked the way he touched her. So he watched her with hooded eyes and bided his time.
They arrived at the ranch late the following morning. The Major strode into the house yelling for Carmita, leaving the women to get down from the buggy unaided. Jake swung down from his horse and reached the buggy in time to help Emma. Celia, of course, had already jumped down and raced off. Emma smiled at him and murmured a thank-you. Jake turned back to reach for Victoria, and his eyes locked with hers for a second before she looked away. But he'd seen enough to read her reluctance to let him touch her. He smiled grimly and grasped her around the waist, rather than simply giving her his hand to help her balance. Swinging her to the ground, he said, "Ma'am," politely, and touched his hat.

"Thank you, Mr. Roper." Her voice sounded a bit strained.
"I'll be working with the mare tomorrow morning, ma'am, and you need to be there."
She'd gotten only two steps away; she stopped and turned back. "Why is that?"
"If I do all the work with her, ma'am, she's going to think she's my horse. Don't reckon you want that, do you?"
Victoria stared at him. Common sense told her that all she required was a good horse for riding; what difference would it make if the mare was fonder of Jake than of her? Then anger roiled in her, not lessened at all by the knowledge that she was reacting exactly as he wanted. It was her horse and she didn't want just a mount; she wanted the mare to give her the equine version of friendship. It would forever eat at her if the horse went more willingly to Roper than to her, and if that was small of her, then so be it.
She looked away. "What time?" She kept her voice calm, as if it didn't matter.
"Ten. That'll give you time to sleep late, get rested up."
He knew she was tired. The knowledge softened something inside her, something that she couldn't allow to soften. She tried not to let his casual solicitude touch her, but it did. For whatever reason, Jake was protective of her and she was forced to acknowledge that it did matter. She wanted to go into his arms and let her head rest on his shoulder, just for a moment.
Her face was flushed as she walked into the house, but thankfully that could be put down to the hot sun. Emma was standing in the entrance foyer removing her bonnet and gloves. From the back of the house came the Major's muffled shouts as he discovered something that displeased him. Celia ran down the stairs with a quick drumming of her heels and would have dashed past had Emma not stepped in front of her.
"Goodness, where are you off to in such a hurry?" Victoria asked as she began removing her own bonnet.
"To the stables. Jake said he'd teach me how to curry Gypsy."
Emma's mouth curved in amusement. "Don't you think you should change out of that dress into something more suitable?"
Celia shrugged. "A dress is a dress."
"There are old dresses and new dresses; old dresses are better for currying horses."

Celia looked down at her dress, then said, "All right," and darted back up the stairs.
Victoria laughed. "She'll never appreciate the difference."
"She missed so much, didn't she?" Emma mused. "The parties, the dances, the flirting. Can't you just see how all the boys would be clustered around her?"
The smile faded from Victoria's face as she placed her bonnet and gloves on the table. "What will happen to her, I wonder? She's so trusting. I want her to find someone wonderful to love, a man who's gentle and will cherish her as much as she deserves." She continued in a low voice. "I worry, because I haven't seen a man like that out here."
Emma said, "For any of us." She had loved Jon, and grieved for him, but her man had been dead a long time now and she was still young. She, too, wanted to find love, marry, and have a family. She admitted to herself that she'd come out here with high hopes, for Victoria's marriage had signaled an end to hunger and poverty, and she had dreamed… vague, romantic dreams of handsome cowboys, virile, adventurous men who had taken on this wild country and won. Instead, they were isolated on the ranch, which seemed to hide a layer of ugliness and hatred beneath the beauty. With few exceptions, the men were hostile and leering.
Nor was Victoria's situation better, if anything, it was worse. Emma shuddered at the thought of being married to the Major, of having to submit to him in bed if he chose to visit her. The idea would have been unthinkable if they'd still been back in Augusta, but now Emma wouldn't think one whit less of Victoria if she took what comfort she could from Jake Roper. He was a man, not a loathsome slug like the Major. He was too much man for Emma's taste, but Victoria was stronger than she, perhaps even strong enough for someone like Roper.
McLain stomped to the front of the house. Both women moved out of his path, and he passed them without a word, his face dark with a scowl as he climbed the stairs. Neither of them dared ask him what was wrong.
McLain slammed the door to his bedroom and kicked a chair across the room. He'd asked about Angelina's whereabouts first thing, and Lola, with a smug look, had told him that Angelina had gone off with one of the hands that morning and wasn't back yet. He was enraged; not only was she not there when he wanted her, but he knew damn sure the cowhand wouldn't be

doing any of the work he was supposed to be doing. The goddamn whore! He'd teach her a lesson when he got his hands on her.

There was nothing he could do about it now, however, and that made him even angrier. Maybe that girl Juana… naw, hell, he'd had her once, and she hadn't been any better than his fist. Not as good, because she'd just lain there and sniffled. He didn't even consider taking his wife to bed; his mind shied away from that possibility to the extent that the thought never formed. He was bothered enough with his haunting fears of the Sarratts; in fact, his nightmares and jumpiness seemed to be getting worse lately, as if the ghosts were closing in for the kill. He sure as hell didn't need his stiff lady wife reminding him of Elena. The sound of Victoria entering the adjoining bedroom unnerved him to the extent that he left his room as quickly as he'd entered it.

He stood in the hallway, red-faced with anger and looking for a scapegoat. The cheerful sound of humming at first made him even angrier, and then he noticed that it was coming from Celia's room, where the door had been left slightly ajar. Now there was a beauty, prettier even than Angelina. And she wasn't as all-fired proper and straitlaced as her sister. She just might like having a man if she tried it. The more the Major thought about it, the more he liked it. Celia was a Waverly, too, after all; she just wasn't a lady in the same way that her sister was. He knew Victoria would be busy for at least five minutes changing out of her traveling clothes. He balanced caution and temptation by tiptoeing down the hall until he could see through the narrow crack between door and jamb.

Celia was in her petticoats and chemise, still humming as she selected one of her older dresses from the armoir and slipped it on over her head. It had the advantage of buttoning down the front, which was why she had chosen it, and she bent her head to the task.

McLain watched her, struck by the golden creaminess of her bare shoulders and arms. She had nice big tits, too, with the dark centers plain under the thin cotton chemise. The sunlight streaming through the window illuminated her hair, and he had the uncharacteristically fanciful thought that she looked like an angel. God, she was a beauty! And a little hoyden, not like Victoria at all. Certainly nothing like Elena. The ache in his loins had intensified while he stood watching her, and he thought about what it would be like to have her. He'd have to keep it secret from Victoria, but he thought he knew a way to accomplish that.

He glanced furtively down the hall, then back at Celia. She was nearly finished dressing, so he slipped away as carefully as he had approached. His heart was pounding with anticipation.

He went downstairs to the library and took an opened bottle of bourbon from the desk drawer. There was a glass in the drawer, too, but he ignored it and tipped the bottle to his mouth. The liquor burned down his throat, a pleasant warmth that matched the one in his gut. By God, here was something to look forward to! He drank once more in celebration of his own cleverness. The only thing was, he'd have to make sure Victoria didn't find out. She was high-nosed enough that she'd pack up and leave if she found out he was diddling her little sister, and the humiliation would be unbearable after all the strutting and bragging he'd done in Santa Fe about his patrician wife. He could always lie about it, of course, but there were so many people on the ranch that someone would blab and the truth would get out.

But he was confident he could bed Celia all he wanted, and the girl would never tell. She was a simpleminded little idiot. All he had to do was threaten her somehow… He mused about it for a minute, trying to think of something that would scare her. Finally his face split into a grin. That was it, by God! He'd tell Celia that if she ever told, he'd hurt Victoria. He thought about saying he'd kill Victoria, but thought that might be pushing too hard. The girl might panic. The beauty of the plan was that it was a lie, but she was so simple she'd believe anything he told her.

He'd have plenty of time to put his plan into action, too. Buying those horses for the women had been a stroke of genius. Since they didn't know their way around, they wouldn't go far by themselves, but he could always tell Roper to go with them, give him orders to show them the ranch or take them to someplace far enough away that he knew they'd be gone a couple of hours. From what he'd gathered, Celia didn't ride well enough to make that kind of trip, so she'd have to stay behind. Then she'd be his.

If that didn't work, he'd manage something else. Bribe her with a promise to ride Rubio, maybe, and get her away from the house. He was in a fever of anticipation, thinking of it. Celia wasn't a whore like Angelina; she'd be all tight and fresh…

He squirmed in the chair and took another swig of bourbon. Roper would have to hurry up and get those damn horses trained.

Another sip emptied the bottle. With a disgusted curse, he shoved the empty bottle across the top of the desk, dislodging some papers, and a silver glint caught his eye.
He froze, his insides clenching. When he finally managed to move, his hand was shaking. With a jerk he pushed the papers completely to the side, uncovering what he'd only glimpsed.
A knife. The blade was sharpened to a razor edge.
It wasn't his. He hadn't left it there.
His eyes darted left and right. He was afraid to move, afraid to look behind him. He strained his ears for any sound that would indicate someone was in the room with him. And then his mind went over the edge.
Sarratt!
The bastard boys weren't dead, or their ghosts had come back to get him. He had to watch out for them now.
He didn't pick up the knife. He couldn't. His thighs clenched together protectively.
Maybe he wouldn't understand what the knife meant. Juana stared at the closed door, her eyes burning with hate. It didn't matter if he knew; she knew, and she meant it. If he ever touched her again, she would kill him. The hate had festered inside her since the night he had raped her, and she hadn't forgotten. She would never forget.
"Why did your sister marry McLain?"
Jake hadn't meant to ask the question, and he was furious with himself for letting it slip out. But it had been nagging at him; he needed to know. Celia looked at him over Gypsy's back as she continued to stroke the curry brush over the horse's shoulder and sides.
For a moment there was a very old look in her dark blue eyes. "So we wouldn't be hungry," she said after a moment.
Of all the answers he might have anticipated, that wasn't one of them. He narrowed his eyes at the girl. "Hungry?"
"We didn't have any food or money. The Major said he'd give a lot of money to Mama and Papa if Victoria would marry him. So she did."
The simple explanation hit Jake hard. Victoria had practically been sold; she hadn't married McLain to help herself, but to help her family.
He didn't ask anything else, and Celia brushed in silence for several minutes before she looked at him again and asked, "When can I start riding Gypsy?"
"In another week, about."

"Why so long?"
"I want to make certain she understands how she's supposed to act when her rider is sitting sidesaddle."
"Why do I have to have a sidesaddle? Why can't I have a saddle like yours?"
"Because ladies don't ride astride." He personally thought sidesaddles were stupid and dangerous, but if he told her that then he'd have to explain why she had to use one anyway and he didn't want to get involved in that kind of discussion with her.
If he'd known Celia better, he'd have realized that she didn't drop a subject until she understood it.
"Why don't ladies ride astride?"
He pulled his hat lower over his eyes. "Because their skirts would be pulled up and show their legs."
"Then why don't women just wear pants like men do?"
"Because that would show their legs, too."
Her head popped up over Gypsy's back. "No more than it shows men's legs," she said indignantly. "How are women's legs different from men's legs?"
Jake reflected on how easy it was to get backed into a corner. He thought of a lot of answers he could give her, but settled on a literal one. "They're prettier."
Her head bent as she evidently surveyed her own legs, hidden though they were by her blue skirt. "But if they're prettier, why hide them?" she asked, now totally perplexed. "It seems to me that men should wear skirts to hide their legs if they're ugly, and women should wear pants."
His lips twitched again, but he controlled his laughter. "Men have to do a lot of heavy work," he pointed out. "They couldn't do it if they were hampered by skirts, now could they? Can you imagine the Major wearing a dress and branding steers? He'd catch his petticoat on fire."
Celia giggled. Another thought occurred and she narrowed her eyes at him, which made her look like a ferocious kitten. "Women wear skirts while they're cooking."
"Men are clumsier than women. Women can manage skirts; men would get their big feet tangled in all that cloth and fall down."
"Sometimes I do, too. That's why I think I should wear pants."

He surrendered, and did the only thing a man could do. "Why don't you ask Victoria about it?"
Celia sighed regretfully. "No, she'd never let me."
She returned to brushing Gypsy, and Jake watched her with a little smile. She was delightful; he could see why Victoria was so fierce in protecting her. He could even see why she had let herself be married off to McLain; after all, she didn't know what kind of bastard the man was, and she'd done the best she could to provide for her family. Privately Jake thought that their father must be a weak, lily-livered son of a bitch to sell his daughter to a man twice her age, but that didn't make his daughter any less a lady.
Celia and Emma would become Jake's responsibility when he married Victoria. He realized that he'd probably have a lot more of this kind of conversation with Celia and didn't know whether to laugh or groan. At least he could always send her to Victoria when the topic got too much for him to handle. Maybe he could get her to ask Ben some of her questions. It had been a long time since he'd seen his brother discomfited; he looked forward to it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Victoria patted the mare's neck and murmured to her. The horse liked all the attention and kept nudging Victoria with her head to encourage her to continue.
"What are you going to name her?" Jake asked as he worked the bridle on over the mare's head and eased a light bit into her mouth. She didn't mind either the bridle or the bit, and mouthed the metal without any trouble. It wasn't until he put the saddle on her that she began acting up. He wondered what in hell she'd do when he climbed on her back.
"I don't know." She had thought about it, because they had always named their animals, but she hadn't been able to think of a name that seemed suitable for the mare.
"Name her something that means ill-tempered, vicious, and contrary," Jake muttered.
Victoria couldn't help the sudden smile that lit her face. "She's none of those things!"

"Just wait until she takes a nip out of your leg." He looked down at her bright expression and felt his loins tighten. One way or another, this damn horse was a godsend, forcing Victoria to spend a lot of time with him. He intended to use every minute of that time making her aware of him. Lady or not, she was a woman beneath those clothes, and she liked it when he touched her.

"You'd better step out of the way, or you might get that nip now," he warned. He waited until Victoria moved away before settling the saddle on the mare's back. The horse whipped her head around, but he was too fast and her teeth snapped on air.

Victoria laughed, and the sound clutched at Jake's chest.

"You might think it's funny, but you're not riding her until I can get her broken of all her bad habits," he said. The mare sidestepped away as he tried to tighten the cinches, and he cursed her luridly, not bothering to apologize to Victoria for his language. She'd probably hear a lot worse by the time her precious horse was fit to be ridden.

"Why aren't you putting a sidesaddle on her?" she asked.

"Because I've got to ride her, and there's no way in hell I'm going to try it with one of those things."

Victoria laughed again. It was funny, watching the mare shift away from him; if a horse could have expressions, then the mare was definitely enjoying what she was doing. Jake just kept at the task until he had the cinches as tight as he wanted. He called the mare names that Victoria had never heard mentioned in polite company, but he was never rough with her. When he finished he patted her neck, and contrarily she turned her head to nuzzle his chest.

"You damn contrary cayuse," Jake murmured, then took the reins in his hand and said to Victoria, "Climb up on the fence. I'm going to try riding her, and I don't think she's going to like it."

Victoria complied as the men who happened to be nearby all wandered over to prop their arms on the fence and call encouragement, insults, or advice to Jake.

"You won't last ten seconds, Roper."

"Stay in the saddle—"

"Give that hoss a ride—"

"Show these jackasses how it's done—Pardon me, ma'am."

"Hope you like dirt, Roper, 'cause you're about to get a mouthful of it."

"I don't doubt that none," Jake replied, grinning at the razing. "It wouldn't be the first time." He set his hat firmly on his head and fit his left boot into the stirrup, then swung into the saddle with one easy motion.
For a second the mare stood stock still, as if she couldn't believe there was actually someone on her back. Then she exploded into motion, first up on the back legs, then twisting and coming down with her head low. She bucked and jumped and corkscrewed, and tried to brush him off against the fence. The men were yelling, and clouds of dust enveloped them.
The mare twisted again and came down hard, her hindquarters lifting. Jake came off over her head and landed with a thump. The men laughed and shouted suggestions. He heard Victoria laugh, and the sound rippled through him on a wave of pleasure even though he was spitting dirt out of his mouth. Jake eased into a sitting position. The mare had settled down as soon as his weight had left the saddle, and ambled over to nudge him.
"You goddamn scrub," he said softly as he climbed to his feet. "You've got to learn how to behave, so the lady can ride you. You won't get me off this time; I'm gonna ride you until you're so tired you can't jump, and then I'm going to teach you some manners."
He took up the reins again and was back in the saddle before the mare knew what he was doing.
She had tired a little from her first effort at unseating him, but she wasn't ready to admit defeat. With fire in her eyes, the mare sunfished and corkscrewed; she tried everything, but the man on her back didn't fly off. She ran straight for the fence and swerved only at the last second, and one of the men jerked Victoria backward off the fence, out of harm's way.
"Sorry, ma'am," he said, never taking his eyes off the man and horse.
"That's quite all right. Thank you."
"Yes, ma'am."
The mare tried several more times to brush him off, then just began running around and around the corral. Her speed didn't slow. "I'm taking her over!" Jake yelled, and pulled her head around until she was headed directly for the fence. Her powerful hindquarters bunched, she lifted, and was clear with plenty of room to spare. Jake's hat flew off, but he stayed in the saddle. He bent down low over the horse's neck. When she got that temper worked off, her training could start. Letting her run was the best thing he could do. At this point it was the only thing.
"Guess we'll have to build the fence higher," one man commented.

Victoria watched man and horse receding in the distance. "When will they be back?" she wondered aloud.
"When that hoss tires out, I reckon."
She looked at the man who had spoken. He was the same one who had jerked her off the fence when the mare had veered in her direction. She felt embarrassed that she didn't know his name and felt that she should thank him again for his action. She held out her hand. "I'm indebted to you, Mister —?"
"Quinzy," the man said. He looked at her hand, then wiped his own on his pants before taking hers. "Jake Quinzy, ma'am."
"Thank you, Mr. Quinzy, for acting so swiftly. I was taken off guard and couldn't have moved out of the way on my own."
He pulled his hat down lower over his eyes. "It was my pleasure, ma'am."
Like so many of the other men, Jake Quinzy wore his holster tied low on his thigh. His face was weathered to the texture of old leather, with myriad lines radiating around his eyes, and there was a touch of gray in his sideburns, but he was as lean and muscled as any of the young men. His eyes, a curious grayish-brown, were emotionless as he studied her from under the brim of his hat.
How was she supposed to act with men like this? She had no idea what type of life he had led, what kind of man he was. Yet he was still standing there and the countless hours of having good manners drilled into her compelled her to make conversation.
"I admit, I feel rather jealous of Mr. Roper," she said with a smile. "I had hoped to be the first to ride the mare."
"It's best someone else works the kinks out of her," Quinzy replied. "You might get hurt if she threw you."
"My goodness, I've been thrown before!" She laughed, remembering some of the spills she'd taken and the bruises suffered. "Everyone who rides has parted company with his saddle, I imagine."
"Yes, ma'am, I reckon that's so."
Quinzy had chores to do, but he remained standing beside Mrs. McLain, letting her lead him in small talk. He seldom had a chance to talk to a woman like her. She fascinated him; she was as tidy as a Sunday-school teacher and a sweet smell lingered in the air around her. Her skin was pale and smooth, and she had been soft under his hands when he'd put them on her waist to pull her down from the fence. She was so different from him

that he felt like a great, rough, clumsy bear in comparison. Garnet called her a high-nosed, hoity-toity bitch, but Quincy thought she was calm and dignified. He decided Mrs. McLain was one thing he didn't need to be taking Garnet's advice about.

The mare ran like the wind. Her powerful muscles bunched and expanded as her hooves pounded the earth. Jake settled into the rhythm, his legs holding her, his hand trying to coax her to respond, but she ignored him and he finally decided to let her run until she couldn't.

Her stamina was amazing. He was a big man, but she acted as if she didn't feel his weight at all. Long after most horses would have been exhausted, her long legs still worked effortlessly. He sensed that she was no longer running from temper, but from the sheer joy of running, and admiration for her filled him. God, what a horse! She was a fit mate for Rubio, as outstanding a mare as he was a stallion. The foals they would get from her would leave all other horses in their dust.

On the other hand, the Major might have been right, as much as he hated to admit it. She might be too much horse for Victoria to handle. She was as strong as most stallions, though Rubio had her beat when it came to sheer power.

Gradually she began slowing, first to a canter, then a walk. He patted her neck, his admiration plain in his voice as he praised her. She wasn't even blown; she was tired, but her gait was still steady, and she tossed her head in a show of spirit.

"That's a good girl. God, you can run! Are you ready to head back home now?" She stopped and he let her rest for a minute, but he didn't dismount. She was just contrary enough to take off without him. When her breathing had slowed, he squeezed her with his legs and lifted the reins. She snorted, shook her head, and ignored him.

Jake swore softly and nudged her with his heels. She tried to bite him. It looked like he had a long day ahead of him.

It was two hours later when they returned to the ranch. By then she was responding to some of his signals, but ignoring others. He kept his temper under control and his hands light on the reins. Despite all the problems she'd given him, she was a magnificent animal. She still had enough energy left to prance as they approached the corral, to demonstrate that he was on her back only because she allowed it.

Victoria was nowhere in sight, but she'd evidently left orders that she be called as soon as he returned because she walked up while he was still unsaddling the mare. She'd changed out of her riding habit into a dark blue skirt with a high-necked shirtwaist blouse that had a hint of lace at the throat and sleeves. She looked as cool as the winter snows, while he was hot and dusty and had a headache from being out in the sun so long without his hat.

"How did she do?" she asked, stroking the mare's nose.

"It was a draw," he muttered. "I won on some things, she won on others."

He was as sweaty as the horse and his face was streaked with dirt. He was exactly the rough type of man that she'd always avoided, but she didn't return to the house as she knew she should. Instead she watched him take care of the horse, and the sight of his strong, tanned hands and forearms, bared by his rolled-up sleeves, fascinated her.

"I've thought of a name for her," she said, because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I've thought of a few myself," Jake grunted.

"Sophie."

He grunted again, a sound that didn't express either approval or disapproval.

"Sophie it is, then."

"I didn't want to name her some common name like Princess or Duchess, or a mythological name. Just Sophie." She stopped, a little tense because she wanted him to like her choice.

"It'll do." He led the horse into a stall and fetched a bucket of water for her, then fed her. He slapped her darkly gleaming rump, and she shifted sideways just enough to jostle him.

Victoria laughed and he looked up, a half-smile twisting his lips. "I heard you laughing when she tossed me."

She didn't look guilty. Her eyes twinkled at him. "It was funny. She looked so proud of herself."

He closed the stall door and propped his arms on top of it. He was so close to her that she could smell his sweat and feel the heat of his body. Before she could put some protective distance between them, he reached out and brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheekbone. "I didn't mind," he said softly. "I like hearing you laugh." She didn't laugh enough, he realized. He wanted to gather her close and protect her, give her a world where she could laugh more.

His touch confused her. She looked away and searched for some way to change the subject. Sophie was the most obvious excuse available, so she said, "Can she run?"
"Can she run," he repeated softly, awe in his voice. "She's so fast and strong that maybe it isn't a good idea for you to ride her."
Victoria stiffened. "I'm a very good rider, and she's my horse."
"She's headstrong and stubborn, and so strong that if she decided to bolt you wouldn't be able to hold her."
"I repeat, she's my horse and I'll ride her."
"Come to think of it, you do have a lot in common with her," he said, his gaze intense as he looked at her. "She's proud, contrary, and kicks up a fuss about a man riding her, but she'll like it once she gets used to it and settles down some."
Victoria turned white and fell back a step from the look in those hard, level green eyes. There was no mistaking his meaning and no mistaking the way he was looking at her. "No," she whispered. "Don't say that." She lifted her skirts to leave, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her closer to him.
"Running away won't make it any less true."
"Mr. Roper, please let go of me."
"Jake," he said. "Don't call me Mr. Roper like I've never kissed you and you haven't kissed me back. And maybe I don't want to let go of you. Maybe I want another kiss."
"Hush!" She looked around desperately, terrified that someone would see or hear them. For God's sake, why was he doing this? Any number of people could walk in. He'd killed Pledger to keep the man from telling that he'd seen Jake coming out of her room, and now he was deliberately jeopardizing that same secret.
"No one's around." He smiled a little grimly and released her. "Don't look so scared. You're not going to have to scream 'rape' to protect your reputation. I'm not going to throw you into a stall and flip your skirts up, even though the idea is mighty pleasing, Miz McLain."
"Jake, please." He might think her proud, but she would beg if necessary. "I'm not that sort of woman. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression—"
"The impression I got is that you're a woman who doesn't know how much pleasure your body can give you—"
"Pleasure!" she said in a stifled tone of disgust.

He was pleased at this confirmation that she didn't enjoy her marital duties with McLain. It still grated at him that she slept with the bastard at all, but he couldn't stand the thought of her enjoying it.
"Yeah, pleasure." His voice was rough and low. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that having me inside you would be the same as having McLain."
The color washed into her face as she remembered the shameful dreams and fantasies she'd had about him, and she felt as mortified as if he'd been able to read her mind.
She began backing away. "This isn't right," she whispered. "We can't—"
"That's right, run away. Like I said, that won't change anything. I'll see you in the morning. Ten o'clock."
She hurried back to the house, her face burning. She'd tell the Major that she wanted someone else to train the horse. But what excuse could she give for wanting Jake replaced? She couldn't do anything that might result in him being fired; he was the only protection she could provide for Celia. There was nothing she could do. She was caught in a spider web of circumstance, and she couldn't tear free without endangering Celia.
So she was there at ten the next morning, her face carefully composed and blank. Jake was already mounted on Sophie and was patiently walking her around the corral, teaching her the commands every well-mannered horse should know. Except for giving Victoria a piercing look when she first walked up, he ignored her and concentrated on the mare.
The sun was hot, and a trickle of perspiration made an itching path down her spine. She rubbed the back of her neck, which was beginning to prickle despite the floppy-brimmed hat she'd borrowed from Car-mita that morning. Why did he want her out here if he was going to do all the work with the horse?
"Did you have any trouble with her this morning?" she finally asked.
"A little. She wanted to jump the fence and run like she did yesterday. But she didn't try to bite me when I saddled her, so we're making progress."
"How long will it be before I can ride her?"
"Depends."
"On what?"
"On how she acts, and how fast she learns."
"Mr. Roper, it's very hot out here. I have better things to do than just stand in the sun letting dust settle on me."

He reined Sophie in and stared at her. "All right. Let's change saddles on her and you can start doing some of the work. But I don't want to hear any squalling if she throws you."
Victoria's heart leaped at the thought of getting to ride her beautiful horse, and she smiled at him. "I don't 'squall' when I'm thrown."
"Then let's see how good you are."
He led Sophie to the stable and unsaddled her, throwing the saddle on his own horse. He nodded toward the tack room. "Your saddle is in there. Get to work."
If he thought she wouldn't know how to go about saddling a horse, he'd soon find out differently. Victoria found one of the new side saddles the Major had bought in Santa Fe and a saddle blanket, both of which she carried to where Sophie was restlessly shifting about.
"Watch her teeth," Jake warned.
Victoria patted Sophie and talked to her before positioning the blanket on her back. The mare turned her head and watched every move. When Victoria lifted the saddle, the horse shifted but didn't move out of reach. She allowed the saddle to be put on her back and finally turned her head away as if bored while Victoria tightened the cinches.
Jake had already finished saddling his own horse, a big gelding, and he came over to boost Victoria into the sidesaddle. She waited for him to cup his hands for her to step into, but instead he clasped her around the waist and effortlessly lifted her. Startled, Victoria grabbed his shoulders for balance, her fingers digging into his heavy muscles. He plopped her in her seat and held her there, narrowly watching Sophie for any signs of rebellion.
Victoria steadied herself with a deep breath and hooked her right knee around the pommel while she found the stirrup with her left boot. Sophie glanced around, curious at this much lighter weight and strange seat, but she seemed to accept them.
Jake swung into his saddle. "She has a real tender mouth, so keep a light touch on the reins. All she needs is a nudge with your heel, but don't kick her. That riles her up."
Victoria obeyed, and found that she had to give Sophie only the smallest hint of direction with the reins. They walked out of the stable into the hot sun and halted in the yard when the Major hailed them.

"Fine-looking horse," he enthused as he approached. "Yep, she'll give us some fine foals when we breed her."
Victoria stiffened. This was the first she'd heard about breeding Sophie. Eventually, yes, she wanted a foal from the mare, but Sophie was still young and there was plenty of time. She wanted to be able to enjoy her new mount first. "I don't want Sophie bred yet," she said firmly.
The Major didn't even look at her. He was still examining Sophie, beaming over her. He slapped the horse's neck a little too hard and the mare took exception to it by dancing away. Jake's hand shot out to aid Victoria in controlling the animal, and Victoria murmured softly to settle the horse down.
The Major put his hands on his hips. "You were right, Roper. The foals we'll get from her will show up alt the other horses in the territory," he said, as if Victoria had never spoken at all. Her lips tightened, but a wife didn't argue with her husband in public. There would be time later.
"She's strong and fast," Jake agreed noncommittally.
Still McLain stood there, his eyes narrowed and sort of glittery. "Uh—where are you going on your ride?"
"I thought we'd head toward the river, then circle around to the north a little."
McLain nodded. "How long you think you'll be gone?"
Jake's face was impassive, the way it always was when he was talking with McLain. It was the only way he could keep his hatred from showing. "Maybe a couple of hours."
"Take your time, take your time. There's a lot of ranch to see." He finally stepped back, but not before slapping Sophie's neck again. The horse neighed in protest and reared a little. Again Jake reached out protectively to aid Victoria, this time to catch her in case she came off the saddle. But Victoria remained firmly seated and settled Sophie down nicely herself. By the time the horse was quiet, McLain was striding back toward the house without even a glance in their direction.
The bastard. Jake's face was grim as he watched him leave.
They walked the horses across the yard, then kicked them into an easy canter. Jake watched both Victoria and Sophie, but the former was indeed a good horsewoman and the latter seemed inclined to behave. He relaxed and let himself begin to enjoy the ride. It was a beautiful summer day, and the

woman he planned to make his own was beside him. Things like that could go to a man's head.
The river was about a mile from the house, a broad, shallow ribbon that glittered and gulped. "Why wasn't the house built closer to the river?" she asked. She thought it would have been the sensible thing, to be close to a water supply. There was a small creek that ran just behind the house, but it would disappear in dry weather.
"See how shallow it is? It floods every spring from the runoff." He pointed to the north, on his left. "See that stand of cotton woods on the riverbank? The river is about waist deep there. That's where we take our baths, in the summer, anyway."
The men bathed in the river? She felt ashamed of her ignorance, for she had assumed that they had bathtubs for their convenience. If she had thought, she would have realized that it would have been a never-ending job to haul and heat enough water for as many men as worked on the ranch.
"How many men are there?"
"A little over a hundred."
"That many? I wouldn't have guessed."
"Only about half of us are at the hacienda at any given time. The others are out at line shacks or on the ranch. The ranch is over half a million acres."
She was astounded by the size. No one had bothered to tell her before, and she was too shy to ask, in case it sounded like avarice on her part. But she had trusted Jake enough, and what he'd told her boggled her imagination. The thought of being surrounded by so much space frightened her, but she also felt a sense of exhilaration. She looked back in the direction from which they'd come, but the hacienda was hidden from view by both a thick stand of trees and the lay of the land. Except for Jake, she was alone, more alone than she could ever remember being before. There was the sun and the earth, the river, the wind, the magnificent horse beneath her, and it felt wonderful. She couldn't wait until she could begin riding on her own, and said as much.
He snorted. "Woman, use your common sense! You can't go riding out here alone, not ever."
She started to snap that she'd do whatever she pleased, but her common sense did indeed assert itself as she realized he knew much more about this wild, beautiful land than she did. So she said calmly, "Why?"

"The hacienda has been here for a long time, but that doesn't mean the land is civilized. If you get tossed off out here and your horse runs away, it means a helluva lot more than walking a half-mile to a neighbor's house. There aren't any neighbors. There are bears, mountain lion, and snakes to watch out for. Not only that, there are occasional Indian raids on the cattle, though it isn't as bad now that the Navaho are on the reservation. They'd steal your cattle while you were looking at them. There are drifters wandering through, and some of our own men aren't fine, upstanding citizens, in case you haven't noticed. It wouldn't do for you to be caught out here on your own."

"When will you have Emma's and Celia's horses trained? Then I'll be able to ride with them."

"Celia's horse has been ready, but I haven't told her because she'd be hell-bent and determined to take off on her own." They shared a look of complete understanding, and Jake smiled ruefully. "She's already been pestering me to let her ride astride like a man."

Victoria looked horrified. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her her skirts would get in the way, and she'd have to ask you for permission anyway." His eyes were bright with amusement.

"Thank you very much," she said tartly, but couldn't help smiling. "What about Emma's horse?"

"Miss Emma's gelding won't be any trouble, either. It was just this lady I was worried about."

"She's behaving perfectly."

"So she is. It makes me nervous."

Victoria threw back her head and laughed, exposing her white throat and dislodging the hat; it dangled down her back, suspended by the cords from her neck. Still chuckling, she reached back to retrieve it.

Jake couldn't stop looking at her; she was so bright and happy, the way she should be. He felt that odd clenching in his chest again, then it eased into a throb.

He reined in and dismounted. She stopped laughing and looked at him in surprise as he came around and lifted her from the saddle. She grabbed at his shoulders, trying to stiffen her arms and hold herself away from him, but he let her slide down his body until her boots touched the ground. Her habit skirt caught on the buckle of his gunbelt, exposing her white petticoat. Her

face flamed and she tried to jerk backward, but his hands were still on her waist and he pulled her against him as he bent his head.
He wasn't rough with her. His mouth was warm, the intrusion of his tongue slow and sweet. Victoria trembled, but she had experienced his kiss before and the temptation to know it again was too powerful. Her arms went around his neck and she welcomed the penetration of her mouth with shy, uncertain movements of her tongue against his. He shuddered, his arms tightening around her, and wonder filled her that she could make this man, dangerous as he was, feel the same hot, uncontrollable pleasure he aroused in her.
He stroked his hands up her back, and she arched into him like a cat. Jake quickly took advantage of the instinctive offering of her body and closed his hand over her breast. Victoria jerked, her eyes flying open. No one had ever touched her there; she tried to tear away from him, but he easily controlled the motion and continued his gentle caress.
"Stop!" she whispered. His hand burned her breast even through the layers of clothing, eliciting a shameful tightening in her nipple. She knew she shouldn't let him do this, knew she should never enjoy it, but she did. The hot pleasure intensified and a soft moan caught in her throat.
He reached up and removed his hat, then let it drop in the dust beside them. The sun glinted on the green in his narrowed eyes. "Why do you want me to stop?" he asked, his voice low and rough. His breathing was fast, his body taut.
"It isn't right." The excuse sounded feeble even to her own ears, but it was the excuse that had been drummed into her since the day she had gone to long skirts and left childhood behind. She had never before imagined that it would be so weak against the impulses of her own body.
Jake's expression didn't change as he stared down at her. "It doesn't get any righter, sweetheart." The truth in his own words struck him. He had held a lot of women, but none had felt as perfect in his arms as she did; none of them had made him feel at home. It was amazing how he could feel both so comfortable and so aroused at the same time.
"We have to stop." She knew she should withdraw her arms from around his neck and push him away, but there was something so primitively satisfying in standing there in the bright sun, in his arms, feeling the heat of his body and inhaling the scent of his skin, that she couldn't bring herself to step away.

"In a minute." His voice had roughened again, and her heart jumped as he bent toward her. Her strength was washed out on the tide of warmth that filled her, and her head fell back. He trailed biting kisses down her exposed throat, then back up to her mouth. He touched her other breast, and the same tingling assailed her again. A heavy ache began forming deep in her lower body; she squirmed unconsciously, her hips writhing against his, and he made a rough sound as he dropped his arm to circle her hips and grind her into him, rubbing the hard ridge of his manhood against her soft mound.
It had been nasty with the Major. With Jake, she wanted only to cling, blindly seeking more of this fevered pleasure. Her hands slid up into his sun-warmed hair, and she pressed her palms against his head to hold it down where she could take more of his kisses. His taste was heady, a mixture of coffee and tobacco, and his breath filled her, a mingling no less intimate than that of his tongue probing hers.
Sophie shifted impatiently, bumping into them. Jake raised his head. "You sorry jackass," he said hoarsely.
Victoria was breathing in fast gulps. She stepped back, her hands pressed to her face. In another minute she would have been lying down in the dust for him. That sure knowledge was so at odds with the way she had always thought of herself that she felt devastated; she had to admit to her own weakness now. She wanted Jake Roper in a carnal way she could no longer deny. She had been savagely jealous when she'd seen him making love with the tinker's daughter; just the thought of him made her heart beat faster while his presence pitched her to a state of intense awareness that was almost painful.
Dear God. She loved him.
She had always thought the state of love required long acquaintance with someone, a sure knowledge of personality and a basis of friendship. Now she knew that it could be forged from a base of lust, that liking wasn't necessary and that long-held standards crumpled before it.
His hair was tousled, his lips swollen, and his expression hard as he still dealt with his own arousal. He leaned slowly down to pick up his hat, as if every movement had to be careful. After he adjusted it on his head, he said, "I'll be damned if I apologize."
"No," she agreed in a whisper.
"It won't be the last time." He reached out and trailed one finger down her pale cheek. "You're gonna be my woman, but it won't be in the dirt, with the

sun burning this pretty white skin. We'll be in bed, Victoria, with the door locked, and we won't have to worry about anyone interrupting."
The years of her mother's training shouted at her to deny his arrogant assumption that she was his for the taking, but she couldn't. She couldn't lie to herself, couldn't hide behind strictures that no longer held sway out here in this rough, wild land. She wanted him; she wouldn't pretend otherwise, even though it wouldn't, couldn't, happen.
She moaned inwardly and managed to whisper, "I can't. I'm married."
"Married!" He hissed the word. "You're married to a whoring, murdering bastard. How do you think he got this hacienda? Do you think he paid for it? He murdered the family it belonged to, the Sarratts; he raped Elena Sarratt before he put a bullet in her head. That's the man you want to be faithful to, the man who was in a whore's bed the day after you married him."
His words were like blows. Nausea twisted her stomach and she stumbled to her knees, bent over from the waist, gagging and heaving.
His face grim, Jake got his canteen and tugged his handkerchief free from his throat, then poured water over it. After capping the canteen, he knelt beside Victoria and gently wiped her face. She took the handkerchief and pressed it to her cheeks, trying to deal with the sickness that still roiled in her at the thought of such a man touching her. "How do you know about that family—the Sarratts?" she finally asked in a muffled voice.
"Word gets around." He held the canteen out to her. "Take a drink of water."
She swished water around in her mouth before spitting it out on the ground, then drank. She should be mortified, vomiting and spitting in front of a man, but somehow that seemed a petty concern after what Jake had just told her. She lifted her head and stared at him with shadowed eyes. "I can't stay here," she said flatly. "I'll get Emma and Celia and leave. I can't stay in the same house with him."
Jake cursed at the idea of her leaving. "No," he said.
She clutched his arm. "But I can't stay."
"You have to stay. I'm here, Victoria. I'll take care of you."
"What can you do? You're not in that house with him, you don't have to take your meals with him and look at his face, listen to him—"
"It won't be for much longer," he said. He hadn't wanted to tell her that much, but she had reacted more strongly than he'd anticipated to the truth about her husband.

Her dazed eyes focused on him. "What do you mean?"
"I mean that I've heard some rumors, and that's all I can tell you. Trust me, Victoria. Stay. I'll take care of you."
His green eyes burned into hers. For a moment she was as frightened of him as she was sickened at the thought of the Major; there was something hard in his eyes, as if he would stop at nothing to get his way. Yet he was the man she loved, dangerous as he was. If she left, she might never see him again. Pain clenched her heart at the thought.
"All right," she whispered. "I'll stay."

CHAPTER EIGHT

She could barely look at the Major that night at the dinner table. The food was tasteless in her mouth. She couldn't stop thinking what Jake had told her about her husband raping and killing that poor woman. She was cold with revulsion, her thought processes slowed by the grisly images that occupied her mind as plainly as if she'd actually seen it happen.
She took a sip of water. "This is an old house. Who owned it before you?" As soon as she heard the words she was appalled at herself. Why had she said that? Shock was making her stupid.
McLain stiffened and his ruddy face turned a curious gray color. "Why do you ask? Who's been talkin' about it?"
The only thing she could do now was pretend casual curiosity. She was aware of Emma's sharpened interest, but didn't dare look at her cousin. "No one. I was just wondering about the house. How old is it?"
He looked around the room with furtive eyes, as if assuring himself there was no one lurking in the shadows. "I don't know. You sure no one said anything about it?"
"Yes, I'm sure. It's Spanish missionary architecture, isn't it? It's lovely, and it must be at least two hundred years old. Don't you know?"
McLain took one more quick look around the room. No one had been talking about it; hell, there wasn't anyone left alive who knew about it except for Garnet, Quinzy, and Wallace, now that Roper had given Pledger his entry into hell. She was only asking because the house was old; Southern aristocrats like her put a lot of stock in old things.
"It's about that, I guess," he muttered, and wiped his forehead with his napkin.
"What was the name of the family who owned it before?"
"I don't remember." He said it too quickly.
Juana had entered with Lola to clear the table and heard Victoria's question. She shot the Major a hate-filled look and said, "Sarratt, señor. The family's name was Sarratt."
He bolted to his feet, his face flushing with rage. "Don't mention that name to me, you goddamn bitch!" he roared, sweeping his plate to the floor with a quick motion of his thick arm. "Get out! I'll kill you! Goddamn it, I'll teach you to meddle in things that're none of your goddamn business—"

Juana ducked as he reached for her, but he grabbed her arm and slapped her across the face with all his considerable strength. Lola shrank back, her fists crammed against her mouth to keep her wails stuffed inside. Juana was screaming and would have fallen from the force of the blow if he hadn't been holding her by the arm. Celia shrieked, her face white, and Emma was rising to her feet.

Icy rage exploded in Victoria. She could gladly have struck her husband down in that moment had she the means at hand. She lunged forward as he lifted his arm to strike Juana again and caught him by the wrist, her fury giving her sufficient strength to thwart him.

"Mr. McLain!" Her voice was cold and ferocious. Her blue eyes looked almost colorless as she stared at him, like ice pools around tiny pinpoints of black.

For a moment she thought he would strike her, too, he was so enraged at being balked in his intention to punish Juana. He turned on her with a snarl, but she stood her ground, her face white and her jaw set.

He froze, staring at her as the red color drained from his face. Slowly he let his arm drop.

"How dare you." She had to push the words through her clenched teeth; they were scarcely more than a hiss. "Those are neither the words nor acts of a gentleman. You have shamed and embarrassed me." Instinctively, she settled on the attack that would hit him at his most vulnerable point, his pretensions of respectability. Puny though it was, it was the only weapon she had against him.

He reddened again and darted a look at Emma and Celia, who were both staring at him in horror. Damn! The way the girl was looking at him now, she wasn't likely to let him get close enough to touch her, much less bed her. And Victoria was staring at him as if he'd just crawled out from under a rock, her patrician nose pinched in disgust.

It was all that Mex bitch's fault, throwing up the Sarratts to him, making him lose control. If he'd ever been able to find the hole that snot-nosed Sarratt whelp had crawled into when he died, he'd have spit on the carcass. But maybe he wasn't dead… He thought of the knife in his library again, which reminded him of that flashing knife and the boy's hate-filled eyes. He felt as if his skin were swelling, as if he might burst. He looked at the silently accusing women, and their stares were like more knives, flashing in

the darkness. He whirled and stormed from the room, walking so quickly he was nearly running.
Juana's sobs were quiet but they echoed in the silence left by McLain's exit. Victoria put her arms around the girl. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry."
Juana sobbed brokenly.
"Are you hurt?" Victoria asked.
The question affected Juana strangely. She gulped her sobs, raised her bloodshot eyes to meet Victoria's concerned gaze and said in an unsteady voice, "He'll hurt you."
"No, he will not." Victoria straightened, her blue eyes fierce. Things had changed; she wouldn't tolerate that monster's presence in her bedroom if he did happen to try… that again. She would scream the house down, she would vomit if he dared touch her. She would leave, take her family and leave in the morning.
But Jake had said to stay. He'd said he would take care of her. He had said it might not be for much longer.
What had he meant? That he was making plans himself to take them away from here?
The thought terrified her, but she knew she would take the chance. Running away with another man would brand her forever no matter what the circumstances were or the fact that her husband was a murderer. She would be ostracized from polite society, and the thought of it made her go cold, but what did that mean out here? Not as much as the thought of Jake. He frightened her, he infuriated her, but he made her feel so alive that she ached with the force of her own blood coursing through her body. To be with him without the benefit of marriage would cast her soul into mortal danger; to be without him would condemn her to death in life. He had become more important to her than her own life, and that, more than anything else, was what frightened her.
She calmed Lola; Juana herself had become rigidly dry-eyed and held herself away from comfort. "The Major won't do anything," Victoria assured them. She hoped she wasn't lying. Here was another responsibility; she would have to make certain they didn't suffer for her actions. She wondered how Jake would feel about having an instant household of six women, and smiled wryly. Whatever his plans, she was sure he wasn't prepared for that.

"Return to your duties," she said soothingly, patting Juana's shoulder. "I promise he won't do anything, and if he tries, scream for me."
Lola put her arms around Juana, who stiffly allowed the embrace. The red imprint of McLain's hand was turning into a dark bruise on Juana's face. Lola led her into the kitchen.
Celia's face was shuttered, she who was the most open of people. "I'm going to bed," she murmured, and fled the room.
Emma turned to look after the girl in astonishment and started to follow her, then stopped and turned back to Victoria. "Come up to my room," she said. "We can talk there."
Upstairs, they both seated themselves on the bed to talk as they had been doing since they were children. "Why did that happen?" Emma asked, going straight to the heart of the matter.
Victoria clenched her fists as she remembered what Jake had said; now she knew beyond any possible doubt that every horrible word of it was true. "Jake told me that the Major stole this ranch from the Sarratt family, by killing all of them. He said that the Major raped the woman—I don't remember her name—and then shot her in the head."
Emma turned white at Victoria's even-toned statements. "If it's true—" she gasped. "My God, you actually asked him about the Sarratts—"
"I wanted to see how he'd react." Her eyes burned. "My husband is a murderer, a rapist, and a thief. It was true, everything Jake said."
"What are we going to do?" Emma got up and began to pace the room. "We can't stay here, but how are we going to leave? I doubt Major McLain would lend us the money and use of his buggy. We'll have to think up some reason for going to Santa Fe again, and we'll leave from there, somehow."
"I can't leave. Not yet."
Emma gaped at her. "Why? You said yourself, he's a rapist and a murderer! How can you stay?"
"Jake—Jake asked me to stay."
"Ah." With that one syllable Emma signaled her understanding of everything. She paused, thinking through their situation. When she finally spoke, it was to say softly, "Victoria, you know I'll give you my support in any way you need it. You've always been the strong one, the one who somehow kept us all fed when there was no food. We might not even be alive today if you hadn't had the courage to sacrifice your happiness to

marry the Major. But how can we stay? Why doesn't Jake simply leave with us?"
"I don't know." Anguished, Victoria stared at her cousin. "Perhaps he's planning to take us away; he only asked me to stay and said that it wouldn't be for long."
"Do you trust him?"
"Do I have any choice? He's the only protection we have." She could have trusted him if she thought he was doing it out of regard for her or even out of a sense of right and wrong, but she still had the uneasy feeling that he was doing it for his own reasons, and that they had nothing to do with justice or herself at all.
McLain was sweating profusely, his eyeballs moving swiftly back and forth beneath his closed lids. In his dreams he had just withdrawn from Elena's limp body when a hideous figure leaped at him from the black shadows in a corner of the room. It was the Sarratt whelp, with a wolf's head and glowing yellow eyes; instead of hands he had long, white, curving claws. He swiped at the Major's exposed genitals with those claws again and again, and in his dream McLain was screaming and rolling all over the room, but his body lay heavy and still in the bed, with only his hands twitching. The boy was tearing at his throat with dripping fangs, and the yellow eyes were glaring at him so close that McLain could see his own reflection in them. The claws finally reached his groin, and he screamed madly as his manhood was torn from his body—
He came awake with a jerk, his eyes flying open as he stared in terror around the dark room, expecting the hellish figure to leap on him from the corners. The shadows were expanding, pressing down on the bed. He couldn't move. He could only lie there, sweating, waiting for his own horrible death. His heart raced and the stench of his fear-sweat filled the room. The silence was unbroken by anything except his own labored breathing.
He was still after him. The bastard hadn't died. He was still out there, with his flashing knife, waiting for his chance, waiting to catch him alone, waiting…
Finally McLain summoned enough courage to stumble from the bed and light a candle. The frail, solitary flame illuminated only himself and cast the remainder of the room into even deeper shadows. He needed more candles,

more light. An oil lamp—yes, that was what he needed. A couple of oil lamps.
His hands shaking, he found three more candles and lit them, putting them around the room to diminish the shadows. He wanted more, but he couldn't make himself open his bedroom door to go downstairs and get them. What if the Sarratt whelp was waiting, crouched, on the other side of the door? He'd just wait until daylight and make sure he had lamps in here before another night fell. If he just had enough light, there wouldn't be any shadows for the whelp to hide in and he would be safe.
Jake patted Sophie's rump as he walked behind her to let her know he was there, but he was still ready to leap out of the way of a well-placed kick. He didn't trust her manners that far. He noticed that she was showing signs of coming into season, and he decided not to ride his own horse on today's outing with Victoria. It would be safer if he rode another mare, for both Victoria and himself.
"You got that damn mare settled down yet?" McLain asked, walking up behind him.
Jake glanced at the man, noting his red-rimmed eyes and unshaven jaws. He looked as if he'd been drunk all night. The cold hatred that lived inside Jake hardened more, as it did every time he looked at McLain. "She'll do," he said. He didn't add that he doubted she would ever be docile; Sophie's spirit would always burn too hot for that. She would always be contrary and arrogant, and love to run. "She's coming in heat."
McLain grunted. "Try her out with another stallion tomorrow morning. If she's ready, put Rubio with her."
Jake gave a short nod. McLain shifted his feet. "You taking Victoria for a ride this morning?"
"I don't know." Every muscle tensed. He didn't want to talk about Victoria with McLain. He hated hearing her name come from the man's filthy mouth, hated knowing that she bore the McLain name.
"Show her around the ranch," McLain said abruptly. His eyes were glittering.
Jake shrugged. "Sure." McLain's insistence was a bit strange, but it was too convenient for Jake to worry about it.
"I'll send her out. Why don't you show her North Rock? She'd like that."
"The Rock's about a two-hour ride."

"You said she's a good rider; she can make it." McLain turned and hurried to the house. Jake's eyes narrowed as he watched him leave. This was strange. It was almost as if McLain were throwing Victoria at him, but for what reason?

Maybe that episode in Santa Fe with Pledger had made him suspicious; maybe McLain thought he could catch Jake being too familiar with his wife, and give him a reason to put a bullet through his head. No one would say a word about it; a man had a right to protect his family. The whole idea sounded just like something Garnet would think up.

Jake saddled Sophie and another mare; in less than half an hour Victoria appeared wearing her riding habit. She looked pale, but bright spots of color burned in her cheeks. She didn't look at him as he lifted her into the saddle.

"Where are we going?" she asked once they were away from the house.

"No place in particular. Just riding." The last place he was going was to North Rock.

"I didn't want to ride today."

He eyed her consideringly. She seemed more upset now than she had the day before. Damn her lady's conscience; whenever she had time to think, it undid whatever progress he'd made with her. Anger, still close to the surface after his meeting with McLain, roiled inside him. He'd be damned if he'd let her back away from him again. "Because of what happened between us yesterday?" he asked in a hard voice.

"Nothing happened!" She bit her lip, ashamed of her swift disclaimer because it wasn't true. Hiding from what she felt wouldn't make it go away.

"The hell it didn't, lady," he snapped, reining the mare he was riding closer to Sophie.

She finally cast him a quick, desperate glance. His green eyes were glittering dangerously under the shadow from his hat brim. "I know," she said, and swallowed. "I'm sorry. It's just—" She swallowed again. "I asked him last night who owned the ranch before him. He wouldn't answer, and when Juana said the Sarratts had owned it he became violent and hit her." The words were jerky, her voice strained. "It's true, what you said, or he wouldn't have acted like that. I can't stand being here, living in the same house with him. How much longer will it be, Jake? Are you going to take us away from here? I'll go anywhere you want if we can just leave."

She stopped her tumbling flow of words, waiting for him to tell her that they would leave soon. But he was glaring at her and the silence was filled

only by the sound of the horses' hooves and breathing, the jingling of bits and creak of leather. She floundered in a sea of agonized embarrassment. Had she so completely misread him? Had he not meant, after all, that he'd take them away?
"Don't mention the Sarratts to him again." Jake's voice was as hard and dry as an empty riverbed.
Victoria went even whiter. She lifted her reins and nudged Sophie with her heel, urging her to greater speed. With Sophie, it didn't take much urging. She leaped forward as if propelled by a spring, and Victoria was glad of the mare's excess of spirit. She wanted nothing more than to get away from Jake Roper, from having to look into his face and see her own stupidity.
Jake cursed and spurred his horse after her. If the mare he was riding hadn't been a quarterhorse bred for speed over the short distance, he wouldn't have overtaken her as quickly as he did. When he drew even with Victoria, he leaned over and snatched the reins from her hands, easing Sophie to a slower pace.
"Don't try that again," he snapped, angered by the risk she had just taken. She didn't know the speed of which Sophie was capable, or how headstrong the mare was.
"Or you'll do what?" she shouted, shoving at his arm. "Let go!"
He gritted his teeth. "Victoria, settle down," he said with sorely strained patience, trying to hold on to his temper.
Even through his anger, he was a little amazed at her defiance. From the first, she had dared him when even armed men walked softly around him. The lady might be straitlaced, but she wasn't a coward.
She dropped her hand and turned her face away from him. "I apologize." Dear heaven, how many times was she going to have to apologize to him today? As mortifying as it was, she might as well face it. "I misinterpreted your words yesterday. I thought you meant that we—" She stumbled to a halt, unable to find a phrase that left her any dignity.
All he could see was the pale curve of her cheek. "You didn't misinterpret a goddamn thing," he said low.
The look she gave him was so uneasy that he wanted to take her in his arms right then, but they were still too close to the house. He'd be a fool to take that kind of a risk, especially now with Ben on the way. If he just remained patient, he'd have both her and the ranch, but the strain was so intense that

his powerful hands were knotted into fists. "Let's get farther from the house," he muttered. "I know a place we can go."
Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs, but she followed him. He was as much an enigma to her now as he had been the first day she'd met him, and she was terrified that she was putting not just her life but also Emma's and Celia's in his hands. He was a gunfighter, a man who made a living by dispensing death. She couldn't read his thoughts, couldn't feel that she knew him as anything other than unpredictable. But she would rather be with him and in danger than live a safe life without him.
They rode without speaking at an easy pace for half an hour. They were in a lovely, narrow valley, carpeted in yellow snakeweed. A crown of aspens stood on top of the hill, waving gently in a breeze they couldn't feel down in the valley. Jake led them toward the aspens.
When they were among the trees, he reined in and dismounted. "No one can see us in here," he said, reaching up to clasp her waist and lift her down. He didn't add that the high ground made it hard for anyone to approach unseen, either; no point in scaring her when his suspicions might be unfounded. His first urge, feeling her slim body in his hands, was to pull her close and take his fill of her. Her faint, sweet scent teased him. His loins hardened and grew heavy to the point where he almost didn't care that now wasn't the time or the place. It wouldn't take long to flip up her skirt if that was all he wanted, but he wanted more than a few minutes of rutting. He wanted all of her, he wanted to drown himself in her sweetness, wanted it too much to risk ruining his plans by pressing her too hard.
He carefully tied Sophie's reins to a tree limb, though he trusted his own mount to remain with just a ground tie, letting the reins drag on the ground. Victoria still avoided looking at him, at least until he reached out and took her hand, carrying it to his mouth for a brief kiss. Then she gave him a brief glance full of distress, and he wondered what she was thinking. He'd never before met a woman who had such a multitude of prickly morals, like a cactus. She was still living in a fantasy world ruled by courtly manners; what did it take to open her eyes and make her realize that life in the West was rough and the only rule was to stay alive by any means necessary?
"Let's sit down," he suggested, and with his boot scraped together a mound of pine needles. She sank down on the pile, carefully arranging her skirt to cover her low, dainty boots. He sprawled beside her and propped himself on his left side so his right hand and arm were free.

"I'm making some plans," he said after a minute. "I'll get you away from McLain, but it'll take a little time."
She picked up a stick and drew it through the dirt. "What about Emma and Celia?"
"Them, too." No problem at all, he thought. Of course, she didn't know that his plans were to replace McLain, not to leave.
"How long will it be?" she whispered. "I can't bear it much longer."
"I don't know exactly. You'll have to be patient until it's time." It was almost intolerable, letting her walk into that house as McLain's wife, and if it was that bad for him, how must Victoria feel? But she had to for now. He'd make it up to her afterward, when the ranch belonged to him and Ben again.
She turned her head away from him, wondering how he could ask that of her if he felt even half as strongly about her as she did about him. The hard answer to that question, she was afraid, was that he didn't. Pain squeezed her insides, but she kept her eyes dry and her chin steady; whining wouldn't do any good. If he didn't love her, then he didn't love her. At least he wanted her enough to be with her, which gave her the chance of eventually winning his love.
Jake caught her chin in his gloved fingers and turned her face toward him. "Don't pout," he said with a hard edge in his tone. "I'm doing what I can and you'll just have to be patient."
"I'm not pouting," she said.
"Then stop turning your head away from me."
She looked at him directly then, blue eyes steady under her level dark brows. "I don't know anything about you, or understand anything. I think I'm entitled to a certain amount of worry."
His mouth tightened. "I don't rightly see how you can say that after yesterday. There's something between us, Victoria. Whether you 'understand' it or not. Why the hell else would I put myself out to help you?"
"I don't know. That's what worries me." She saw a flicker of expression in the dark green of his eyes, but it was gone before she could read it. "You keep so much of yourself hidden, no one can get to know you. I feel as if I'm putting myself in your hands without knowing anything about you."
"You know I want you."
Her blue eyes looked bruised. "Yes," she said. "I know that."

He wanted to feel her skin and he impatiently pulled off his gloves, then touched her face again. His fingers delved into her hair, while his thumb stroked the velvety texture of her cheek. The sunlight filtering through the trees dappled her hair; he trailed a strand through his fingers, picking out shades ranging from palest gold to auburn to light brown. Her skin looked almost translucent, while her eyes were shadowed with secrets he couldn't fathom. A surge of lust heated him so fully that he broke out in a sweat. God, he had to have just a little of her, a taste, a feel, or he'd explode.
"Don't worry about anything," he muttered, hooking his hands under her arms and pulling her toward him. "I'll take care of you. Just trust me, and don't say anything to anyone." His mouth closed over hers, and Victoria found that while he was holding her, at least, she didn't worry about anything at all.
Celia heard someone coming and quickly scrambled into her hiding place in the loft, afraid that it was Garnet trying to catch her alone as Victoria had warned her he might. She was as agile and silent as a cat as she stretched out to press her eye to a crack in the floor.
It wasn't Garnet, she saw; it was the Major, slowly walking the length of the barn and peering in all the stalls. "Celia," he softly called, his tone cajoling. "Are you in here? I've got something I want to show you."
She didn't move, except for closing her eyes to blot him out of her sight. She could barely stand to look at him anymore; there was something about him that she found repulsive, though she couldn't have explained exactly what it was. It was as if there was a dark cloud surrounding him, a darkness of evil. At first she had tried to like him, for Victoria's sake. But she'd failed and now it was all she could do to tolerate even being in the same room with him.
"Celia," he called again. "Come here, girl. Let me show you something."
A cold chill ran over her body. She didn't move as she watched him leave the barn, his head swiveling as he looked for her. She would stay hidden until Victoria returned.
The Major had said they were riding to North Rock, but Garnet was a fair hand at tracking and from what he saw they weren't even heading in the same direction as the Rock. He followed carefully, making certain he didn't chance upon them before he knew it. They had ridden into a valley and he hesitated to follow them there; they would be able to see him from any vantage point. Taking the chance that they would return the same way, he

picked his spot, hiding his horse below a small crest and choosing a huge clump of boulders the size of a small house as his own hiding spot.
He kicked a few small pebbles out of his way and sat down. With his rifle resting in a small notch in the rock, his hat tilted to keep the hot sun out of his eyes, he waited.
Sophie shied restlessly when Jake settled Victoria in the saddle, and he briefly considered putting her on his own mare instead. But after her little sideways dance Sophie settled down. "Keep a good grip on the reins," he said as he swung into his own saddle. "She's flighty today."
Victoria leaned down to pat the satiny neck. "She seems all right."
"She's coming in heat."
Victoria blushed. "Oh," she said faintly.
Jake led the way out of the trees, bending low to avoid limbs and keeping a sharp eye on Sophie to make sure she didn't try to brush Victoria off. Sophie mouthed the bit impatiently, not liking it that the other mare was in front of her. Without waiting for Victoria's instruction, she lengthened her stride until she was half a neck in front and plunged out of the treeline with every intention of taking the run that had been denied her.
Victoria held the reins steady, pulling back enough to let Sophie know she wanted her to slow down but not enough to hurt her soft mouth. The mare snorted, shaking her head at the pressure. Jake kneed his mare up beside her. "Can you hold her?"
"Yes. She wants to run. Why don't we let them have some fun?"
Remembering how Sophie could run, he shook his head. "This horse can't keep up with her. Just hold her in; we'll let her run one day when I'm riding my stallion."
Several things happened simultaneously. Sophie, impatient with the restraint, reared a little and twisted away from Jake's mare. Victoria was slung to the side, but managed to retain both her seat and the reins. Jake cursed and leaned forward to grab her bridle as a sharp crack split the air ahead and just to the right of them.
Victoria barely registered a swift buzzing sound when Jake lunged from his horse, his momentum taking him clear across Sophie and knocking Victoria to the ground with him. She landed on her back and for a moment saw nothing but black and scarlet spots. Just as her vision began clearing, Jake grabbed her and jerked her roughly across the ground to a clump of bushes.
"Stay here," he snapped.

She hadn't any choice; she couldn't manage to move with any coordination. In a daze she watched him run for his horse and jerk the rifle from its scabbard. Then, bent low, he ran back to her.
"Are you all right?" he asked, not looking at her. He was scanning the rest of the valley.
"Yes," she managed to say, though she wasn't certain. She noticed the red stain on the light blue of his shirt, and shock propelled her to a sitting position. He'd been shot! Someone was shooting at them.
"Let me see your arm," she said, scrabbling for the handkerchief in her skirt pocket.
He didn't look around. "It's all right, just a burn. It didn't go in."
"Let me see," she repeated stubbornly, getting to her knees and reaching for him.
He pushed her down and gave her a brief, cold glare. "Stay down. He could still be watching."
Victoria set her mouth and hooked her fingers in his belt, then tugged. He lost his balance and sat down beside her. "Damn it—"
"He might shoot you again! You're a larger target than I am."
Jake's eyes were like splintered ice. "He wasn't shooting at me. If that damn horse hadn't shied, you'd be dead."
She stared blankly at him. Why would anyone want to shoot her? "Someone was probably hunting." That had to be it; she couldn't imagine, couldn't let herself think that it was anything else.
He grunted. "Any hunter who's that piss-poor of a shot is going to die from hunger. There's no way two people mounted on horses look like a couple of deer or anything else but what they are." He pulled his pistol from the holster and handed it to her. "Do you know how to shoot?"
She had handled single-shot dueling pistols; during the war it had seemed wise to know something about weapons. She closed her hand around the worn handle and lifted the heavy weapon. "Some," she whispered.
"Then shoot anybody you see, except me," he instructed. Then he was gone, slipping around the clump of bushes and out of sight.
She sat immobile, alert to every small sound. His mare was peacefully cropping grass a short distance away, but she couldn't see or hear Sophie. Birds called, insects hummed, and a light wind sifted through her hair. It was almost an hour before she heard him call, "It's clear." She scrambled up to see him walking toward her, leading Sophie.

"Whoever it was is gone," he said. "He shot from those big rocks. Must have waited for a while, from the signs. Just one man, and his tracks head straight toward the river." Tracking would still be possible, if he had the time, but he didn't. He had to get Victoria back to the ranch. He'd look around afterward, but by then whoever had done it would have had plenty of time to wipe out his tracks.

She insisted on checking the seeping burn on his upper arm and tied her handkerchief around it. Her cheeks were pale but she hadn't screamed or gotten hysterical even when he'd knocked her out of the saddle. Her hair was straggling half down her back, she was dusty from head to boot, and her skirt was torn. She didn't look much like a lady now, but the steel in her backbone was unbowed. He didn't know who had tried to kill her, but he was damn sure going to find out. Then there'd be one bastard less on this earth.

CHAPTER NINE

Jake walked into the dining room while they were ting dinner. He didn't look around, because he hated to see this house and know that McLain lived in it. He looked straight at Victoria, his face grim, and knew by her expression that she hadn't said anything about what had happened. He didn't know why, but it wasn't his concern.

"Somebody shot at Mrs. McLain today," he announced abruptly to McLain, who had looked up in surprise at his entrance. "If her horse hadn't shied she'd have been killed."

McLain's face turned dark red. "Shot at her! There ain't nobody on the ranch who'd shoot at my wife."

"I found where he waited. Somebody tried to kill her. No mistake."

Celia was very still in her chair, her gaze unreadable but riveted on McLain. "It was the Sarratts," she said in a small, clear voice.

McLain jerked, then swiped his plate to the floor with a motion of his thick forearm. He half-rose to his feet, his eyes bulging from his head as he glared down the table at the girl. "It ain't the goddamn Sarratts!" he bellowed. "They're dead, all of them!" His voice was both fierce and desperate, too, as if he didn't believe his own words. He slammed his fist

down on the table, making their plates and glasses jump and rattle. "That goddamn Duncan Sarratt and his bitch of a wife, they're both dead, and their two half-Mex whelps with them! They're dead, I tell you!"
Jake controlled the urge to put his pistol to the man's head right now and be done with it. Hate blinded him to the Major's obvious fear. The strength it took to control his rage left Jake so raw he could barely speak. "I don't want the women out riding until I find whoever it was. I went out this afternoon and trailed him as far as the river, but it got dark before I could find where he left the water. I'll try again tomorrow."
"Find him," McLain said, breathing heavily to control his rage. "And kill the son of a bitch."
Jake nodded at the women and left as abruptly as he'd entered.
McLain was still blowing air like a bull, his bloodshot eyes fastened on nothing. Victoria quietly excused herself and hustled Celia out of the room. When they were out of earshot, she grabbed her sister's arm. "Why did you say that?" she whispered fiercely. "You saw how he got last night when Juana mentioned their name!"
Celia looked up, her expression raw. "I hate him. I wanted to see him afraid, like he was last night. I hate him!" She tore loose and ran up the stairs to her room, where she slammed the door.
Emma was standing behind Victoria when she turned around; her cousin's face was white and drawn. She was shaking. She looked at Victoria with something close to terror in her fine eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked in a taut voice. "My God, someone tried to kill you!"
"And failed, though Jake was wounded in the arm. I didn't want to worry you." Nor had she wanted to talk about it. Beneath her surface calm, she felt frightened and vulnerable. Something was going to happen and she didn't understand what or why; she only sensed the increasing instability of their lives.
"We have to leave here," Emma said.
"I can't!" Victoria started to speak again, then motioned with her head for Emma to follow her. She didn't want to take a chance on anyone overhearing them talk. They went to Emma's room and firmly closed the door. Victoria walked to the window. "We went over this last night. I can't leave without Jake."
Emma sat down on the bed and clasped her hands. "Do you love him?"

It sounded as shocking now as it had the first time she'd said it to herself. She was a married lady, a Waverly from Augusta; he was a hired gun, a man who killed without a flicker of emotion. It was still shattering to realize how little any of those things mattered. "Yes."
"Does he love you?"
"He—he wants me."
It was hard to evade Emma. "But does he love you?"
"No." The admission filled her with pain. She had seen lust in his eyes, but not love.
"Then how can you afford to risk your life to stay near him?"
"Would you have left Jon?" Victoria asked in a choked voice. "Even if you had known that he didn't feel the same way about you as you felt about him, could you have left him?"
Emma's lips trembled and she stared down at her hands. "No," she finally said. "No, I couldn't."
"Then you know why I'm staying. You and Celia can leave, go back to Augusta."
"I won't leave you, either. And you know there's nothing for us back in Augusta."
And maybe nothing here, in this wild, hard, beautiful land, except death at the hand of someone who had some reason for wanting her dead. Out here, it seemed, that reason didn't have to make much sense.
"If something happens to me, I want your promise that you'll take Celia and leave immediately."
Emma stared at her, white-faced. "Don't let anything happen," she whispered in reply.
After leaving Emma's room, Victoria tapped on Celia's door. She found her sister sitting quietly by the window, staring out at the courtyard. She didn't look up and smile as she usually did.
Victoria put her hand on Celia's shoulder, wondering what had happened to take the happiness from her eyes and leave behind that strange remoteness. "Is anything wrong?" she asked in a gentle tone.
A shiver racked Celia's slender body. "He was calling me," she whispered. "Like you'd call a cat. It scared me and I hid in the loft. I watched him through a crack in the floor, sneaking around, looking in all the stalls and calling my name. I hate him. I wish the Sarratts would kill him."
Victoria's throat was tight with fear. "Who?" she asked. "Garnet?"

Celia looked up at her, dark blue eyes fierce with mingled fear and hatred. "No. The Major."
Victoria lay awake that night, too tense to sleep. She simply couldn't keep her eyes closed. She stared at the ceiling, wondering if she was making the right decision in staying, if she had any right to subject Emma and Celia to such danger. But did she have any choice? Lying there sleepless, she swore an oath: if the Major touched Celia or hurt her in any way, she'd kill him herself.
The connecting door opened, and her entire body went cold. She turned her head to look at the thick-set figure swaying in the doorway. Dear God, no…
"Is he in here?" McLain asked, slurring the words. The stench of whiskey emanated from him.
She wet her lips and eased into a sitting position. What did he mean? Had someone seen Jake kissing her? She stared at him, tensing her muscles to jump up and run if he came any closer. "Who?"
"Sarratt. That damn basserd. Is he in here?"
She could barely understand his words. "No." Her throat was tight. "No one is in here. You can see."
"He's trying to kill me, an' he'll kill you, too, jus' to get even with me. Nothin' a Sarratt would like better than to get his hands on my woman." He sounded almost boastful as he swayed back and forth, a willow in an invisible wind.
"The Sarratts are all dead. You said so."
He laughed, a strange, cackling laugh. "Yeah, but mebbe not. Mebbe not. Never could find the boys' bodies. Did you know that? Never did find their bodies. If Sarratt's back, he'll kill us all in our beds, especially you. That's jus' where he'd like to find you. Yep, in a bed. He'd enjoy plowin' you and listenin' to you scream, just the way his mama screamed… You sure he's not in here?"
Her throat was dry; she had to swallow before answering. "I'm certain."
"He won't be able to sneak up on me," McLain muttered as he backed into his own room. "I'm keeping a sharp eye out for him, and the lamps lit. Yeah, lots of lamps… no shadows." The door closed on his mutterings.
He had gone mad. Victoria stared at the door. She couldn't believe that he had a conscience, but his murderous past was coming back to him, twisting his mind. Even knowing he was insane she couldn't stop a chill; if it were true that one of the Sarratt sons had survived, she could understand that he

would stop at nothing to wreak his vengeance on McLain, to destroy him and his family as he had destroyed the Sarratt family.
Someone had shot at her today. If it hadn't been for Jake… if Sophie hadn't acted up at just that moment…
Was someone trying to kill her as vengeance against McLain? She could easily imagine him having enemies.
He'd never found the boys' bodies.
If one of the Sarratts had survived, would he hate McLain enough to destroy an entire family, as McLain had done? Hate enough to deliberately set out to kill McLain's wife?
She shivered, because she knew the answer was yes.
The next morning Jake put Rubio in the pen with Sophie. The big red stallion squealed as he caught the mare's scent, and shoved his nose at her hind quarters. His erection was already jutting out from his body. Sophie danced nervously away, though she had stood still not half an hour ago while another stallion sniffed at her. Jake cussed her contrariness, but in a rueful, accepting tone. He'd already hobbled her front feet, so she wasn't going anywhere.
Rubio squealed again, this time angrily, and nipped the recalcitrant mare to teach her who was boss. Sophie's head whipped around and she nipped back, enraged. Rubio tried to mount her and she jerked away, neighing with fright. Had she been a wild horse she'd have been running across the hills in an effort to save her maidenhead, and the stallion would have run her down. Hobbled in the pen, though, Sophie didn't have much chance.
Rubio reared again and caught her arched neck with his teeth as he penetrated. Sophie screamed, shuddering under the stallion's weight and impact, but now she stood still for him as her instincts dictated.
Victoria heard the mare scream and concern puckered her brow. She put aside her sewing and walked to a window, but the angle was wrong and she wasn't able to see anything. Curious as to what was causing the uproar, wondering if Sophie was getting the best of Jake again, she went out on the patio and looked toward the barn.
Rubio was out of his stall and was attacking Sophie. Sheer panic shot through her and without thinking she began running toward the pen. She had always known that horse was a killer; something inside her went cold every time she saw him—

Then she saw Jake watching calmly, and a few of the other hands standing around. She saw Rubio biting Sophie's neck, saw the lunging thrusts of his hindquarters, and stopped as if she had hit a wall. Dear God! They were mating! Her beautiful, spirited mare was being mated to that vicious killer. It revolted her as much as the thought of McLain climbing into her own bed.

"Stop it!" She hadn't meant to yell, but the words burst out of her.

Jake turned his head. Victoria was standing halfway between the house and the stable, her eyes wide with horror. She began running toward him. Some of the men were standing around to lend aid if needed, and he scowled as he realized he didn't want Victoria watching the horses mate, with the men watching her. He left the pen and strode toward her, catching her arms when she tried to bolt past.

"Stop him!" she gasped, trying to pull free of his grip. "Get him off her!"

He shook her a little, swinging her around so his body blocked her view of the horses. "I can't stop it. What's wrong with you?"

Her face was white, her eyes huge as she stared up at him. "I didn't want her bred," she said in a strangled tone. "You knew that. Not now. Especially not to him!"

Her missishness irritated him; it was common sense to put the best stallion on the best mare to get the best foals. His hands were rough as he turned her around and began forcing her back toward the house. "Did you think we'd breed her to some scrub?"

His fingers were biting into her arms; he was almost dragging her in his haste to get her inside, out of the sight of the other men. Some deeply possessive instinct was outraged that they had seen her witnessing a sexual act, even one between two animals. He didn't stop until they were on the patio. "Get back in the house. You shouldn't have come out here."

His total lack of understanding was like a slap in the face. She didn't expect sympathy, but she did expect at least an acknowledgment that she had a right to feel as she did. She pulled away from him and turned her head from the sights and sounds of the two horses mating. "I thought she was my horse," she said in a small, clear voice. "I didn't give permission for her to be bred."

"I suggested breeding her to Rubio before the Major ever bought her," Jake said impatiently. "That's the only reason he bought her, not to give you a pleasure mount. I talked him into letting me train her for you; otherwise

you'd be riding something like Emma's gelding. We decided yesterday to put Rubio in with her. This isn't hurting her, and you'll have a fine foal out of her."
"No, I won't." Her eyes were clear and stark as she stared at him. "The Major will have a fine foal from her." Her back was rigid as she turned away from him to go into the house.
He clamped his hand on her shoulder and jerked her back around to face him, angered by the way she'd turned her back on him. "Stop acting like a fool. This isn't your precious South; we can't afford to let a good animal go to waste. Did you really think she was bought only for you to ride?"
Victoria lifted her chin, pride keeping her hurt from her face. She wouldn't have been so upset if it had been any stallion other than Rubio, but he'd scoffed at her objections to the horse. Her voice expressionless, she said, "I suppose I did. After all, Emma's gelding hasn't been used for ranch work, nor has Celia's mare."
"They aren't the same quality as Sophie." He tamped down his impatience and tried to get her to see reason. There was just no sense in this kind of behavior. "Like I said, this isn't hurting her. When I've found whoever shot at you yesterday and it's safe again, we can go riding just like before."
Her expression didn't flicker. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Roper," she said, and once again turned to enter the house. "I don't have a horse."
So it was Mr. Roper again, was it? Anger burned in his gut as he stalked back to the corral. The horses were finished, but none of the men would approach Rubio and Sophie was acting up whenever one of them got close to her. The unfamiliar situation had made her nervous, and a nervous Sophie was a biting Sophie.
Still fuming, he put Rubio back in his stall, patting the muscled red neck and telling the stallion what a good job he'd done. Rubio snorted, his ears back a little. Jake didn't turn his back on the horse as he left the stall and shut the door. If the foal's temperament was a mixture of sire and dam, he thought dourly, they might as well shoot it when it was born because no one would ever be able to ride it.
Sophie moved awkwardly away from him, lifting her hobbled feet high as if trying to step out of the rope. She had blood on her neck where Rubio had bitten her; it was black against her dark chestnut coat. Damn him, the stallion was always rough on a mare. Jake murmured soothingly to Sophie until she finally stood still and let him approach. He patted and stroked her,

watching the wild look fade from her eyes. When he bent down to remove the hobble, she butted him affectionately with her head.
Damn it, was everything female just naturally contrary? He wanted to give Victoria a good shaking. She'd acted as if she would never be able to ride Sophie again and had taken it out on him.
Patience. He just had to have patience. But it was hard, and getting harder.
During the days that followed, Victoria didn't leave the house. Neither did Celia nor Emma. The three women passed the time with the mundane chores of everyday life, giving each other strained, silent looks but carrying on with an outward air of calm. What else could they do? Hysteria wouldn't solve anything.
Celia remained close to her sister and cousin, instinctively seeking the safety of their company. She could barely remain in the same room with the Major long enough to take her meals.
McLain looked increasingly awful as the days passed. His eyes seemed permanently red and swollen, his face haggard and unshaven. Victoria doubted that he was bathing, because a persistent sour smell clung to him. She could hear him at night, pacing on the other side of the door and muttering to himself, and the sound made her shiver. He was mad. She couldn't manage to feel any pity for him; this punishment seemed all too fitting to his crimes. But she did fear what could happen when he made the final descent and reality no longer had any meaning for him. He could convince himself that one of the Sarratt boys was in a room with them, and start shooting. Or, even worse, he might decide that she was the Sarratt woman, the one he had raped and murdered, and reenact his deed. She would rather be killed outright than endure his touch.
She didn't know how much longer she could bear it. The days were spent close to the house, making certain Celia was always watched, unable to ride out as she longed to do. The nights were also spent watching the connecting door, listening to the Major's increasingly crazy mutters and bursts of laughter. The very air was full of menace and she was helpless to escape it, because it was outside as well as in. No matter which way she turned, there was danger.
Narrow-eyed, Garnet watched McLain. The damn fool was going crazy, talking to himself about the Sarratts coming back to kill them all. Things hadn't worked out as he'd planned. He'd missed his shot with the woman, and since then she hadn't been riding at all. Damn Roper, too, while he was

at it. Garnet had sweated until he'd been able to reshod his horse, knowing Roper had looked real good at the hoofprints leading away from the failed ambush. Now he couldn't get a shot at the woman, and McLain was getting the men all stirred up with his howling about Sarratts coming back from the grave to get them.

Maybe he should do what he'd originally planned and just kill the Major. At least it would shut him up. Only problem was he couldn't do that until he'd found some way to get rid of Roper. Garnet never allowed himself to think that he was actually afraid of Roper, he thought of it as caution, because the man was cat-quick with a gun and as mean as a wounded grizzly. Will Garnet prided himself on not being afraid of no man walking, but he also prided himself on being smart enough to know there were some people you just didn't mess with. Roper was one of them.

Jake Quinzy halted beside him, also watching the Major reel back toward the house. Quinzy spat in the dust before he spoke. "Major's gettin' spooky. I been here a long time, but I been thinkin' maybe it's time to be movin' on."

Garnet sneered. "That crazy talk about the Sarratts scare you?"

Quinzy spat again. "Don't reckon." His eyes were cold slits. "Don't reckon I like workin' for no crazy man, neither."

Garnet didn't like telling anyone his plans, but he needed Quinzy's gun. "The Major might not be around much longer."

Quinzy grunted and rolled that around in his mind. "You thinkin' of takin' over?"

"Don't see why not, do you?"

"No skin off me." He paused. "Unless you plannin' on hurtin' Miz McLain. Guess I'd have to part with you on that."

Startled, Garnet looked at him. He couldn't remember Quinzy balking at anything before. But now wasn't the time to buck him on it. Instead he said, "I got plans for the little sister, not Miz Roper. Good plans." He laughed.

Quinzy chuckled, too. "Yep, she is right purty, ain't she? Reckon the fuzz a-tween her legs is as yeller as her head?"

Just thinking about it made Garnet start breathing faster. That was something else he was mad about; he hadn't seen Celia leave the house in days. The women were holed up inside like Injuns were attacking or something.

"When you plannin' on makin' your move?" Quinzy asked.

"Don't know." Now he wished he hadn't said anything, because if he didn't do something it would make him look like a coward. On the other hand, he couldn't do anything until he could get at the Major's wife.
So all he could do was wait it out.
A lone, dusty rider approached the ranch late one afternoon, slumping in the saddle with fatigue. Angelina Garcia was the first to see him and her eyes brightened at the thought of having a new man, but she didn't move from her languid slump against the barn wall.
The next one to see the rider was one of the gunhands. He nudged Garnet, pointed out the stranger to him. Garnet looked without much interest; it was just another down-at-the-heel wrangler, one of the thousands who had poured west after the end of the war, drifting and looking for work.
Jake watched the man ride in and made no effort to speak or attract his attention. Time enough for that later. What the hell was he doing, riding in here like this? If anyone noticed their resemblance, people would get suspicious. But when the rider turned his head, Jake stifled a grin as he saw that the man had grown a short, dark beard. Smart.
Work was what the man asked about, and Garnet considered it. He didn't have to ask the Major every time he hired a cowpuncher because they tended to drift out as often as they drifted in. But, as dirty and tired as he was, this man didn't have the look of a cowpuncher. Maybe it was his eyes, cool and guarded; maybe he just looked a mite too comfortable with the iron strapped to his hip, the handle worn smooth with use. If he guessed right, this was a gunnie, maybe on the run. They could always use another gun, but the Major liked to look them over himself. Of course, the Major had been acting so loony lately, Garnet would be surprised if he could talk sense.
To hell with the Major. What he liked wouldn't make a difference much longer, anyway. "Yeah, find a place to bunk down," Garnet said. "You any good with that piece you're wearin'?"
"I'm alive," the man said flatly as he swung down from the saddle.
"How're you called?"
"Tanner." He offered just the one name, and Garnet didn't ask if it was the front or the back one. Hell, it probably wasn't his real name, anyhow.
Tanner took care of his weary horse before seeking any sort of comfort for himself. He watered and fed the animal, brushed the dust from its coat, and

put it in an empty stall. Slinging his saddle onto his broad shoulder, he went in search of the bunkhouse.
Like all of the buildings except the wooden barn, the bunkhouse was made of thick adobe, so it was cool in the summer. Regardless of that, weather permitting, a lot of the men preferred to sleep outside rolled in their blankets. Tanner had his choice of empty bunks. They didn't look too dirty, and he didn't much care. He was so tired he thought he'd probably be able to sleep standing up. Figuring there wasn't anything he could do or find out that wouldn't wait until morning, he pulled off his boots, slid his .44 under the thin pillow, and went to sleep. He didn't feel the lumps in the mattress.
It was a little after midnight when he woke, feeling human again. Not wanting to disturb the men nearby—including Garnet, he saw—he silently slid the .44 back into his holster. Patting his pockets for the makings of a cigarette, he carefully rolled, licked, and lit it with a straw he'd stuck into the stove. He then picked up his boots and tiptoed out like a man who just wanted a smoke in the middle of the night. Outside, he pulled on his boots and started wandering around, smoking and looking at the stars. It was a moonless night, but that made the stars just that much brighter. It was the kind of night when sound carried for long distances.
He walked to the corral and leaned against the fence while he finished the cigarette. Only then did he go into the stable to check on his horse, which was dozing comfortably. Still wandering, he next visited the barn.
"About time you woke up," a low voice said, and he turned to look at his brother.
"Anyone around?" Ben asked in an equally low voice.
"No." Jake had waited through the long hours to make certain no one entered the barn. Still, he and Ben walked deeper into the building, away from the doors. Rubio snorted and stamped a hoof, a signal that he didn't like being awakened.
"What the hell's going on?" Ben felt he was entitled to the ill-temper in his voice. "Your telegram said to get here as fast as possible, that things had changed. I started rounding up the men we've hired, then left the rest of it to Lonny with orders for him to get them here pronto, and I lit out. I damn near rode my horse into the ground, then I get here and everything seems quiet. I figured they'd found out who you are." He didn't say that he had halfway expected to find his brother dead, but both of them knew the

consequences if anyone found out who they were before their men got there to back them up.
"The Major has got himself a wife."
"So?"
"So when he dies, she inherits."
Ben was silent as he absorbed what this meant to their plans. "Shit," he said.
"Yeah. She's a lady, young enough to be his daughter. Her cousin and little sister live here now, too."
"So what're we going to do? We can't kill an innocent woman."
"No, but a widow can remarry."
Again Ben was silent, thinking it through. "You'd marry her?"
"Can you think of any other way?"
"No, but there's another side to it, too. Will she marry you?"
"Yes," Jake said. Victoria was still pouting over that damn horse, but he'd held her in his arms and felt the strength of her response often enough to know he could make her do whatever he wanted.
"There's going to be some shooting when we take the ranch," Ben pointed out. "There's a chance the women might be hurt."
"Not if I can help it. When we have some backup, I'm going to call McLain out, make him face me. If I go up against him while you and the men watch the others, there shouldn't be any wild shooting."
"Hold it right there." Ben moved around to face his brother. "You're not going up against him alone."
"It makes sense."
"The hell it does. This is my fight, too, and I'm going to have it, not stand around while you take all the risks."
In the darkness Jake couldn't see Ben's face, but he didn't have to. There was no way he could keep Ben out of the fight. "All right. How long will it be before the men get here?"
"A few days, maybe a week. Lonny will push 'em hard."
A week at the most. Everything in Jake tightened at the thought of it finally ending. He wanted McLain dead so much it hurt. He wouldn't even let him be buried on Sarratt land. A week, then the land would be theirs again—and Victoria would be his.
"McLain's going loony," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He was tired, but every nerve in his body had been jumping since he'd seen Ben ride up.

"There's no way of telling what he'll do. He's started running around and babbling about the Sarratts coming back—"
Ben stiffened. "Well, hell, he's right, but how did he know?"
"He doesn't. That's just it. Every time something happens, he starts slobbering and muttering about the Sarratts getting him. If a steer dies, he thinks it's been poisoned. If he hears a shot, he thinks it was fired at him."
"Looks like the bastard's sins are coming home to roost, after all."
"The point is when we move we'll have to move fast. We'll have to come in at night quiet and slow. Most of the men are out with the herds at any one time, so we'll only have to deal with about a third of them here at the house. We'll take the bunkhouse first, and we'll have to do it without any shooting. When those men are taken care of, we can get the house. McLain sleeps in the big front bedroom." It had been their parents' bedroom. "We'll go in quiet and bring him out." Victoria would be in the bedroom, too, he thought. He didn't want to see her in bed with McLain, but he'd do whatever he had to do, even if it meant killing McLain in front of her.
Ben nodded. "We can't take a chance on anyone seeing our men, then. I'll leave in a couple of days to meet them. But once I leave, I won't be able to just wander back in without making Garnet suspicious. I'll hold the men at Parson's Pass. We can't move without knowing if you're ready or not, so you'll have to come tell us."
Jake didn't like the idea of leaving the ranch even for the four days it would take to get to Parson's Pass and back, but there was no other way. The women would just have to do what they'd been doing anyway and stay inside the house.
"This is the one and only meeting we can have," he said. "It's too risky; someone might see us together. From now on you don't know me."
Ben yawned. "Never saw you before in my life, feller," he said as he walked away.

CHAPTER TEN

"Who's that?" McLain asked suspiciously, looking at the new gunhand.
"Says his name's Tanner."
"Where's he from?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask." Garnet moved a step away from McLain; the man stank of sour whiskey.
McLain's eyes were even redder than usual, the pupils contracted to tiny points. "Get rid of him. I don't want any strangers around here. He might be one of Sarratt's spies."
"Don't be so goddamn stupid," Garnet snapped, abruptly out of patience. "We killed the little bastards, remember? I put lead in both of them."
Once McLain would have turned on him like a rabid wolf for talking back, but now he only wagged his head. "We never found their bodies. We looked, but we didn't find them."
"They're dead, I'm telling you! Shot up the way they were, no food or water, no way of getting to a doctor, there's no way they could have lived. You're worrying about damn ghosts and it's spooking the men."
McLain peered at him with owlish concern. "If they died, why didn't we ever see any buzzards? The buzzards would've found 'em even if we couldn't."
"They're dead, "Garnet hissed. "It was twenty years ago. You think they wouldn't have been back long before this if they'd been alive?"
There was no logic that could penetrate McLain's feverish certainty. "They waited until I got married. Don't you see? They want to kill my wife, the way I killed theirs."
"You didn't kill their wives, you killed their mama." Garnet thought he would explode with frustration. The idiot couldn't even think straight!
"But they can't kill my mama, so they're going after my wife!" McLain shook his head at Garnet's lack of understanding. "They're doing it because she's mine, see? But they won't get me; I'm keeping a lookout for them, every night, waiting. The bastards are gonna try sneaking up on me, but they'll be the ones surprised because I'm waiting for them."
"Jesus." Garnet looked at the man and shook his head, seeing the futility of arguing. He'd worked for McLain all these years because the Major had been even dirtier and sneakier and more brutal than he was himself, but now all he saw was a loony, stinking old man. McLain's deterioration had happened quick, but Garnet felt neither sympathy nor loyalty for him. While McLain had been strong, Garnet had run with him. Now that he was weak, Garnet planned to destroy him with no more compunction than he would squash an insect.

"Why don't you go back in the house and let me worry about the men," he told McLain. "I'm the foreman, ain't I?"
McLain gave a hollow chuckle. "Yeah, but I'm the boss and don't you forget it." He peered at Garnet with rheumy eyes. "You think I'm crazy, but you should be watching for them, too. They're after you just the same as they are me. You're the one shot their daddy."
Nodding at the indisputable truth of what he'd just said, McLain shambled back toward the house. He was tired, so tired from all the nights of keeping watch, but every time he slept he saw that damn little bastard coming at him with that knife. He didn't dare even lie down in his bed anymore, but sat up in a straight chair so that if he nodded off he'd fall and wake himself up. He didn't get much sleep that way, but neither did he dream.
Disgusted, Garnet turned his back on McLain's retreating figure. "Hey, Tanner!"
Ben walked up. "Yeah?"
"The old man's got a bee in his bonnet about you. Stay out of his sight."
"Sure." Ben started to walk off.
"Wait a minute."
Ben stopped and again said, "Yeah?"
"You done any work with that gun?"
"What kind of work?"
"Don't play dumb with me. You know what kind of work. You ever killed anybody for pay?"
Ben took a drag off his cigarette. "I reckon I've faced a few for my own reasons, but not for nobody else."
"You willing to hire out?"
"Depends."
"On what? How much money?"
"Nope. On who'll be on the other end of my barrel. There's some men it just don't pay to rile."
"You yeller?" Garnet sneered, hoping to goad him.
"Nope. Just careful. Are you just making conversation or have you got somebody in mind?"
Rather than answer directly, Garnet said, "What do you think of Roper?"
Ben bared his teeth around the cigarette. "Like I said, some men it don't pay to rile."
"You don't think you could take him?"

"Let's just say I'm not sure enough of it to risk my life on a fight that ain't mine." Ben walked off, careful to keep his cold rage from showing on his face. The son of a bitch wanted him to kill his own brother! But why? He didn't dare let himself be seen talking to Jake, to maybe find out a reason. All he could do was worry and feel his anger grow. If Garnet kept asking, sooner or later he'd find somebody willing to go up against Jake. Likely as not, it would be a back-shooter, and that worried Ben.

Twenty years they'd waited, and now the waiting crawled on his skin like ants. For the first time in twenty years he was home, standing on Sarratt ground, looking at the house where he'd been born and where his parents had been murdered. By God, nothing was going to stop them now, not Garnet or anybody else on this ranch, not even the woman inside that house who ultimately held the ownership of the kingdom in her hands. She would marry Jake because they wouldn't allow her any other course of action.

Ben wondered what she was like. He hadn't even asked Jake her name. He didn't think much of her, though, marrying a man like McLain. He'd watched the house as much as he could without being obvious, but he hadn't seen any woman who could possibly have been her. Three Mexican women, two middle-aged and one young, had come and gone from the house; they were obviously servants. Another young Mexican woman who apparently slept out back of the bunkhouse had hung around all morning eyeing him like a buzzard waiting for a steer to die. He'd heard her name was Angelina and she was lustily beautiful, but Ben was too edgy to be interested in the sex she was clearly offering him.

In fact, there was no point in hanging around. He'd made contact with Jake, satisfied himself that his brother was all right, and they'd planned where and when to meet. He might as well saddle up and ride out, give himself a little extra time to intercept Lonny and make certain their men didn't blunder too close to the ranch and alert McLain. Just as soon as he managed to get word to Jake that Garnet was looking to hire someone to gun him down, he'd leave.

He walked around after supper, just wandering and smoking like he had the night before. Jake was nowhere in sight, but he hadn't expected him to be. He just waited, put out his cigarette, and wandered some more. When he paused under a big cottonwood tree, Jake murmured, "Here I am."

The shadows under the tree hid them from view, especially since Jake was squatting with his back to the trunk. It was another moonless night and

some clouds had drifted in to blot out the stars, making the night dark enough. Ben leaned back against the trunk, too, lifting one leg to plant his boot against the wood. "Garnet tried to hire me to kill you," he said, making certain his voice was too low to carry.
Jake grunted. "I've been watching my back since the day I got here."
"Why is he after you?"
"He's got a bad itch for the little sister and I won't let him scratch it."
Ben grunted. He couldn't see getting that worked up over one particular woman, but he had seen it happen to too many men for him to be surprised.
"I guess I'll take myself on out of here tomorrow, then. We'll wait for you."
"I'll be there."
"Keep watching your back."
"Yeah."
Ben rode out early next morning, without saying anything to anybody. He hadn't done any work to speak of, so he didn't ask for any pay. He just saddled up and left.
Jake didn't watch his brother ride out or say anything when Ben's departure was commented on later.
In two days he planned to follow him. Before he left, however, he had to see Victoria and tell her to stay in the house and make certain Emma and Celia did, too. But how the hell was he going to talk to her when she hadn't poked her nose outside in days?
He saw Emma the next day, late in the afternoon when she had stepped into the courtyard for a moment. He beckoned to her and she walked to the gate.
"How's Victoria?" he asked abruptly.
"Tired." Emma's face showed signs of strain, too.
"Why haven't any of you been outside?"
"It's safer inside." She gave him a wry smile, one that quickly faded. "You haven't found whoever shot at Victoria?"
"No. There's no sign. Is that why she's staying inside?"
"That, and to watch Celia."
"Why does Celia need watching? Any more than usual, that is."
Emma's eyes were black as she looked up at him. "The Major tried to get her alone in the barn." Once she would have been mortified at having to say such a thing to a man, but they had all changed in the short while they had been in the territory.

Jake cursed under his breath and didn't apologize. "I'm leaving in the morning," he said. "All of you stay in the house, away from Garnet—"
"Hey, Roper!"
Jake looked around to see Garnet walking toward them, looking suspicious. He nodded to Emma and walked away, leaving her biting her lip.
When Jake joined him Garnet jerked his head toward Emma, who was returning to the house. "Don't tell me you're gettin' sweet on her! But I guess she'd be the most grateful of the bunch, wouldn't she?"
Jake kept his face expressionless and didn't answer.
When there was no response, Garnet scowled. "What're you doing up here at the house?"
"Why're you asking?"
Dull red colored Garnet's face. "Because I'm the goddamn foreman, that's why, and everything on this ranch is my business!"
"Do tell." Jake walked away, his senses attuned to the man behind him, his skin crawling as he waited for the slightest sign that Garnet was reaching for leather. He was tense, ready to throw himself to the side and come up with his own hand filled with iron, but Garnet didn't move.
Emma kept her torment to herself all night. He was leaving. How on earth was she supposed to tell Victoria? It would break her heart, but she'd have to be told so she would know that they no longer had Jake's protection.
She was so angry on Victoria's behalf that she couldn't sleep and lay awake for hours. How could he leave after the things he'd said to Victoria, and the way he'd kissed her? Emma had instinctively trusted him and now she felt doubly betrayed, but knew that Victoria would feel even worse because she loved him.
Still, she couldn't stop herself from hoping that she had misunderstood him somehow, that his words had meant something else. That had to be it. She consoled herself with that thought and was finally exhausted enough to sleep.
Emma woke early and dressed without paying attention to what she was putting on. She would go down to the bunkhouse and ask Jake exactly what he'd meant. She hurried out of the house, not letting herself think how improper it was for her to go alone to the bunkhouse. But the hands always began work with the dawn and she didn't think anyone would still be abed.
The early morning air was cold, but warming rapidly as the sun came over the horizon. Emma hugged her arms to herself and increased her pace.

When she reached the bunkhouse she knocked on the closed door, but couldn't hear any noise from inside. She knocked again just to be safe, then eased the door open. The big, dreary, low-ceilinged room was empty, though the floor and every surface was covered with the paraphernalia of the working cowhand. She turned, uncertain of what to do next, and walked swiftly to the stable in the hope that someone would still be about.
She was lucky. She found a lone Mexican, whose name she didn't know, idly pitching hay into an empty stall. She prayed that he spoke English.
"Do you know where Roper is?" she asked.
The man looked up, his round brown face blank.
"Roper?" she asked again. "Have you seen him?"
"Si," the man said.
"Do you know where he is?"
"He left, señorita. Early."
"Did he say where he was going? When he'd be back?"
The Mexican shook his head. "He quit, seflorita. He left and took his gear with him."
Emma swallowed, feeling sick. It was true, then. "Thank you," she said, and walked back to the house.
Victoria, too, was an early riser. Knowing there was nothing to be gained by putting it off, Emma went directly to her cousin's room and knocked. Victoria opened the door with an anxious look as she shoved her last hairpin into place.
"What's wrong?" She knew something had to be wrong, or Emma would have waited for her to appear downstairs. "Has something happened to Celia?"
"No." Emma stepped inside the room and put her hands over Victoria's, holding them and forcing her to stand still. "Jake has left."
The words were simple enough, but they didn't make sense. Victoria frowned, wondering what Emma was trying to tell her. "Has he found out who shot at us the other day?"
"No." Emma closed her eyes briefly. "Victoria, he's gone. He packed his gear and left. One of the Mexicans said he quit and rode out this morning."
It was like an invisible punch to the chest. Victoria stared at Emma and listened to her own heart laboring to beat. Her face was white. "He… left?"
"Yes."
Odd, how the very air felt dead, how it sounded dead, muffling the words.

Emma put an arm around her to brace her and somehow she found herself sitting down.
"I know we haven't left the house much lately, but now we'll have to be doubly careful," Emma said, trying to turn her mind to the most pressing matters. "None of us should dare set foot outside."
"No, of course not," Victoria murmured. "Not with Garnet…"
Not with Garnet uncontrolled, now. Only Jake had kept him in line. But Jake was gone.
Gone!
The light had gone out of the sunny morning. Victoria sat there for a long time, helpless to do anything more than absorb the combined battering of grief and betrayal, the emptiness of knowing herself not only unloved but unimportant to the point that he hadn't even told her he was leaving. He had meant everything to her, and she had been nothing to him.
He had said, "Trust me," and she had. She had remained and had endangered both Celia and Emma with her foolishness. They would have to pay the price and live like caged animals, just to survive.
It was all the more painful because he was the only man she had ever loved. The war had interrupted what would have been her courting years in Augusta, so she had never even had a chance to fall in love before. But she also knew that her reserve was so strong that it was likely those young men would never have gotten past that inner wall to the passion inside, as Jake had. She had risked everything for him, both socially and emotionally, and he had ridden away as easily as if she had been a whore like Angelina.
Emma had left her alone to deal with her agony in private, for which Victoria was pathetically grateful. What was pride? It couldn't put food on the table or clothes on her back; it couldn't protect the people she loved. Yet she clung to it as her last defense. No matter what it cost her, when she went downstairs she would show no hint of her agony on her face.
Perhaps sometime in the future she would take out her pain and examine it, but perhaps not. For now she had to deal with their survival because Jake's departure had endangered them all. They could remain within the protection of the house, but their safety even then was dubious. For the first time she regretted the Major's precipitous decline, for at least he might have made Garnet wary of breaching the sanctuary of the house.
She had seen the hate in Garnet's eyes when he looked at her, and the lust when he'd looked at Celia. There was nothing now to stop him from taking

her sister, he would shoot Victoria down without compunction, should she try to stop him. She knew she would have to try, as would Emma. They would both fight like tigers for those they loved.
They would have to protect themselves until they could leave. And that would have to be soon. She quailed inside at the thought of venturing into the territory alone, but the alternative was unbearable. They would have to start planning immediately.
At last she stood and took a deep breath. Sitting in her room wouldn't bring him back. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw a slim young woman with a somber face, but she satisfied herself that she didn't look as if she were going into a decline. With her back straight and her chin up, she went downstairs.
It was almost lunchtime. She hadn't realized how long she had been sitting dazed in her room. When Lola served the meal, Victoria forced herself to eat. Personal loss didn't break the heart so much as affect the stomach, she realized, but heartache sounded much more romantic than stomachache.
There were only the three of them at the table, the Major having failed to return to the house. He had become so erratic that no one was surprised, or concerned. When they had finished eating, Victoria folded her napkin and looked at Emma. "We'll have to leave."
Emma nodded. "As soon as possible."
"Where will we go?" Celia's face was pinched. It said a lot that she didn't ask why or when, but only where.
"We'll have to go to Santa Fe so we can make arrangements to travel home. And there are soldiers there, so we'll have protection from them in case… in case we're followed."
Practical Emma began listing the things they would need. "We'll have to have horses and food, blankets, extra clothing."
"Guns and ammunition," Victoria said, grimly determined not to be caught helpless. She had learned a hard lesson in depending entirely on someone else for protection.
"How will we get the horses?"
"We'll have to leave at night, as quietly as we can."
"Tonight?"
"We'll try."
They spent the rest of the day secretly packing those few sturdy items of clothing they would take with them. Celia discarded her pretty new gowns

without a qualm, taking her cue from Victoria and Emma. There was too much to do to fret about dresses.
Emma placed herself in charge of rounding up the cooking utensils and food they would take along. They would need only one coffeepot and one skillet, which she managed to filch from the kitchen. She made quick periodic raids, each time taking some small item such as coffee, sugar, flour, onions, tortillas, potatoes, beans, a sharp knife, three spoons.
Victoria slipped into the library intending to get the Major's guns, but stopped abruptly when she saw him sitting at the desk. He looked up, his eyes so bloodshot they reminded her of the pictures she had seen in church of Satan's eyes. He had made an attempt at shaving that morning, at least, but had missed several patches. Still, he got to his feet and said heartily, "Did you want a book, my dear?" in a ghastly echo of his former pompous manner.
"Yes, I thought I'd read for a while this afternoon," she said. She controlled her disappointment.
"Take what you like." He waved his hand. "Didn't think there was much here that would interest a lady, though."
She pretended an interest in the few books that lined the shelves, but she didn't even see the titles.
Behind her, McLain began to chuckle. Victoria darted a look at him and found him staring at her with gleeful malice. "Yep, you're a real lady. I got what I paid for. You're so starched and proper I'll bet even your drawers are stiff."
Victoria whirled and started for the door, but McLain kept laughing. "But them stiff drawers won't do you no good when Sarratt gets his hands on you. You thought you were too good for me, didn't you, you little bitch?" His breathing quickened as mirth faded and his malicious resentment came to the fore. "You didn't want me humpin' you, but what you want won't make a damn to Sarratt, he'll just shove it in no matter how hard you fight. But it ain't ladylike to fight, is it? No, you'd just poker up and lie there as stiff as a dead person… just like a woman who'd been shot in the head…"
She bolted, closing the door on the vile stream of words that continued even without an audience to hear them. Her heart pounding, she ran up the stairs to her room. He was mad! But even knowing that didn't prevent the chill of fear that he was right. They had never found the bodies. Someone had shot

at her. It was possible that one of the Sarratt boys had survived and returned twenty years later.
It took her a minute before she calmed enough to realize that it didn't matter. She would be leaving soon, with Emma and Celia, so it didn't matter if McLain was right. He would be the only one here.
She needed those guns, but she didn't get them that night. McLain sat in the room all night talking to himself and occasionally laughing, the bright lamps keeping the knife-wielding shadows away.
The next day Garnet came to the house and smiled like a wolf when he saw her. "How's that pretty sister of yours?" he asked, smirking because he knew he held the upper hand now.
Victoria looked through him and walked away without answering, but she was terrified.
She didn't have an opportunity to get the guns that day, either.
Before they went to bed, Emma hissed, "Maybe we should just forget about the guns and leave."
"We can't. You know what it's like out there."
The two young women stared at each other, at the stark mask of desperation and fear each wore. The task of getting to Santa Fe by themselves seemed almost impossible, yet they were driven to try it. Without any means of self-protection, it would almost certainly be suicide.
She couldn't get the guns on the third day, either.
On the fourth day a hot wind began blowing from the southwest, off the desert, eating at everyone. The men quarreled and three fights broke out, Lola and Carmita snapped at each other, Celia hid all day long, and the red stallion, Rubio, killed the Mexican Emma had spoken to the day Jake left. The unfortunate man had become careless while putting the stallion back in his stall after laying down fresh hay. He turned his back just for a moment and the big animal attacked with his lethal iron-shod hooves, turning on the man with burning hate shining in his eyes. He reared again and again, the sharp metal cutting into the soft, twitching body, a thousand pounds of hate unleashed in destruction. The Mexican was unrecognizable when the stallion finally calmed enough for the other men to get a couple of ropes on him and lead him from the stall so they could get to the victim.
McLain snorted when he was told. "Damn stupid fool, he shoulda been more careful," he grunted.

But on the fourth day Victoria got the guns. Because she didn't know if they'd be able to leave that night, she didn't want the absence of their guns to be noticed. She took only one rifle, because McLain kept them lined up in the racks right behind him; one might not be noticed but three definitely would. To match the ammunition, she took one of the bullets out of the rifle and measured it against others until she found the right ones. She then hurriedly shoved the sack of ammunition into her pocket.

To her dismay she could find only one pistol. It didn't seem as large as the one Jake had given her the day someone had shot at her. As soon as the thought of Jake entered her mind she pushed it out, because she had found that was the only way she could survive. She repeated her search for matching ammunition and hurriedly left the room with the two weapons clutched in her arms, almost panicked lest someone should come in and catch her.

But they couldn't leave that night. Perhaps because of the wind, that hot, irritating wind, or perhaps because they were unsettled by Rubio's attack on the Mexican, several of the men roamed about restlessly all night. Victoria and Emma sat up in their darkened rooms until dawn, but always there seemed to be a small amount of activity around the barn and stable. There was no way they could leave without someone seeing them.

Late in the afternoon on the fifth day a cowhand rode in hard and fast, pulling his horse up so sharply that dirt and rocks were thrown in a cloud behind him. "Riders," he gasped, sliding from the saddle. "A damn big bunch of 'em, coming this way from Parson's Pass."

McLain went white. "Sarratt," he said in a hoarse voice, and ran for the house.

Garnet swore sharply. "You goddamn stupid fool!" he yelled at the fleeing man, but he didn't waste any more time on the Major. He turned back to the rider. "How many?"

"I don' know, boss. Twenty or thirty, at least." The rider didn't tell Garnet that he could neither read nor count, but merely used numbers he'd heard other cowhands use when referring to a large group. There were, in fact, sixty-three men heading toward the ranch.

Garnet thought about it. He doubted that the encroaching men were after the cattle; rustlers worked in smaller groups. But a force of twenty or thirty men crossing someone else's range wasn't exactly an act of friendship. On the

other hand, he had enough men to handle a group that size. He didn't think for a minute that they might just be passing through.
But he didn't want to gather his men and ride out to meet them. For one thing, they might see him before he saw them. For another, the ranch buildings offered protection. Let them come to him. After all, they didn't know they'd been spotted. He had the advantage right where he was.
McLain burst into the library and jerked the rifles down from the rack, and made certain all of them were loaded. He didn't notice that one of them was missing. Muttering to himself, he carried them all up to his room.
He met Victoria on the stairs and laughed when he saw her. "He's coming, Sarratt's coming," he chortled. "A rider spotted him. Now you'll find out what it's like, you high-nosed bitch, and he'll make you wish you hadn't looked down on me like I was dirt." He brushed on past her and slammed into his bedroom.
Victoria hurried to the front door. Surely he was simply raving again. But outside she saw men hurrying about and her stomach clenched. "What's happening?" she called out to one man.
"Riders comin', ma'am." He pointed toward the south, toward Santa Fe. "From that way."
She withdrew and tried to reassure herself that just because riders were coming didn't mean any of those riders was a Sarratt. But against her will McLain had infected her with his terror.
She ran up the stairs and found Emma in her room. "We have to leave," she said. "Now, right now. Riders are coming. This might be our last chance."
Emma jumped up and got the pilfered foodstuffs from their hiding place under her bed. Victoria went along to Celia's room, hoping wildly that the girl was there instead of in some hiding place as she had been the day before. Her prayers were answered when she found her sister at her window, where she'd been standing watching the activity outside. "Why is everyone in such a hurry?" she asked.
"Riders are coming," Victoria said in a low voice. "We're leaving. Right now. Are you ready?"
Celia nodded, put an old hat on her head, tied a shawl around her shoulders, and fetched her own small bundle of things from beneath the bed.
Just in the short time that had passed since the rider had come in, dusk had fallen. The women made their way to the barn where their horses were stabled. Victoria carried the rifle, its barrel pointing down-ward and hidden

within the folds of her skirt. The pistol was in Emma's pocket. Men were still moving around, but none of them seemed to notice the three women who walked purposefully across the grounds.
If anyone tried to stop them now, Victoria decided, she would shoot.
They saddled their horses. Sophie nickered eagerly at the weight of the saddle; she hadn't been out in days. Emma's gelding was similarly eager and even Celia's calm Gypsy danced a bit in anticipation.
They mounted while still in the barn, then spurred their horses forward, ducking their heads to clear the door. As soon as they were outside, Victoria wheeled Sophie to the left and plunged into the darkness, closely followed by the other two.
"Who's that?" someone shouted.
Quinzy, who had sharp eyesight, said in disbelief, "It's the women."
Garnet cursed, then said, "Let 'em go. Hell, they'll just get lost. We can find them later, when we've taken care of these bastards."
Victoria reined in to a walk as soon as they were away from the immediate vicinity of the ranch buildings, both because she couldn't see well in the dark and because she needed to think. If the riders were coming from the south, she didn't dare go in that direction or she'd ride straight into them. But Santa Fe, their ultimate destination, lay to the south. To the east and north, she knew, were the Comanche. To the west lay hard, unforgiving land. But they would have to go west, at least far enough for it to be safe to turn south later.
The Mexican scout, Luis, said in a soft voice, "They have seen us."
Jake swore softly and Ben spit. "Then we ride," Jake said. "Now. But we take it slow. Everybody wrap their bits and spurs, I don't want any jingling to give us away. When we get closer, we'll tie rags over the horses' hooves."
He looked up at the stars, then swung into his saddle. A savage anticipation welled in him. Tonight. It would be over tonight. McLain would be dead, and Victoria would be his.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The darkness and the strangeness of the land forced the women to keep to a walk when every instinct demanded that they hurry. If there was to be a

moon it had not yet risen, and the hot, unsettling wind sent clouds scudding overhead and blocking out most of the starlight. The horses, sensing the nervousness of their riders, were skittish. It took all of Victoria's skill to keep Sophie under control and at the same time try to pick their way through the darkness. Though they could discern large obstacles well enough, the night obscured those small holes and ruts in the earth that could cause a horse to fall, maybe break a leg or even kill its rider.

Every sound seemed alien, magnified on the night air. Celia stifled a shriek when a hunting owl swooped overhead, then said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," so pitifully that tears stung Victoria's eyes.

She had never before sworn in her life, but she was so enraged at what this had done to Celia that the thought rang in her mind: "Goddamn them, goddamn them all!" She didn't mean it as a blasphemy but as a curse. All of them—McLain, Garnet, all of the gun-men at the ranch who had looked at them as if they were nothing but sides of beef, even Jake, for he had left them to face this on their own—she cursed all of them.

Celia would never be the same again. Her light-hearted innocence was gone and could not be recovered. When she looked at men now it wasn't with childlike faith that they would protect her, it was with full knowledge that there was evil in the world and the very ones she had always thought were her champions were instead those who would harm her.

Celia should have, in a few years, fallen in love with a strong, gentle man, married him, raised a family with him, and died at a very old age having known nothing but devotion from her husband. It was a dream of perfection which Victoria realized few women achieved, but it was the life Celia should have had. It wouldn't happen now. She had seen the ugliness the human spirit was capable of, and it had changed her.

War hadn't touched her, but the bitter, violent atmosphere of the West and Kingdom Valley had.

Sophie stumbled and quickly recovered herself. Victoria leaned forward to pat the satiny neck and murmur encouragement.

"Should we go on or wait until daylight?" Emma asked.

They couldn't have gone far, having been restrained to a walk most of the time, but Victoria felt as if they were a million miles from civilization. She started to say she thought it would be all right to wait until morning when the sharp retort of gunfire rolled through the night air.

It wasn't just one shot. It was a multitude of them, the sharp cracks of pistols, the deeper thunder of rifles, and it went on and on.
They all three looked back in the direction of the ranch, though there was nothing to see.
Emma spoke first. "It sounds like a war."
"It is. The ranch is under attack."
"But who?"
Victoria could barely speak, her throat was so tight "The Major said it was Sarratt."
"It can't be. Why would someone wait twenty years for revenge?" Emma tried to sound soothing, but her own throat was tightening.
"Because the Major waited that long to get married," she answered, and swung Sophie's head around. She was so terribly frightened, but she had to stay in control. If it was Sarratt, would he bother coming after them? He wouldn't even know where they'd gone unless some of the men talked, if anyone was left alive to talk.
The Major had infected her with his maggot of fear; she could no longer convince herself that it was all just in his mind.
"We'll have to keep going," she said. "For as long as we can. The farther we are from the ranch come morning, the safer we'll be."
They didn't hit the ranch like a bunch of cowboys hoorahing a town, riding in fast and loud, shooting up the place. They left their horses back a piece and went in silently, on foot. Since it was going to be close fighting they all tied their handkerchiefs around their left arm for identification, so they wouldn't start shooting each other. It would identify them to McLain's men, too, but that couldn't be helped.
It started when one of the ranch hands stepped around the end of the barn and came face to face with one of the Sarratt men. The ranchhand reached for his gun and the Sarratt man's big Sharps rifle slug took most of the man's chest with it when it exited his back.
Jake and Ben fought their way side by side toward the house. It was hard to tell, but Jake didn't think any shots were being fired at them from inside the house and that gave him hope that the women weren't in immediate danger. His attention was centered on McLain, on finding him and killing him. It had to be; he couldn't afford to worry about Victoria until he'd taken care of McLain.

Someone shot at them with a rifle from the barn loft, the bullet zinging so close to Jake's head that he felt the heat from it and dived to the side. He looked around, saw Luis, and yelled, "Get that bastard in the loft!"
Luis grinned, his white teeth visible in the dark, and started his snaking run toward the barn.
All around them men were dead, wounded, or dying, and still the gunfire split the night from all directions.
"Where's Garnet?" Ben muttered.
"In a hole somewhere. He won't take any risks."
Wendell Wallace rose up from behind the hitching post where he'd been hugging the ground and drew a bead on Jake. Ben fired and Wendell fell back, his finger tightening convulsively on the trigger and firing a shot uselessly into the air.
Jake cautiously approached him, his .44 ready. When he reached Wendell, he saw that the man was breathing laboriously, with a frothing black liquid bubbling out of his chest.
Wendell looked at him and said, "Roper! Jesus Christ, why'd you do that?"
"My last name isn't Roper. It's Sarratt."
Wendell blinked, trying to focus on Jake's face. "Jesus Christ," he said again. "I thought we'd kilt you."
"No, but we've killed you. You're lung-shot, Wendell."
Wendell tried to take a deep breath, and the sound rattled in his throat. "Guess so." His voice was so weak it was almost soundless. "I'll be damned. Reckon I'm gonna die, then."
"Yep."
"Better'n gut-shot, anyways," he said, and his eyes became fixed in death.
Ben looked down at him. "That was Wendell Wallace?"
"Yeah."
"I remember him. He taught me how to whittle. Then he threw in with McLain and tried to kill us."
"Yeah," Jake said again.
They rushed the front door together, entering in a low crouch, hammers cocked and their fingers on the triggers. Nothing happened, no one moved. The lamps still burned serenely.
Ben's face was rigid. It was the first time he'd been inside his home in twenty years. He looked at the tiled floor where his mother had died.

They methodically searched the first floor, and found Carmita, Juana, and Lola huddled together in the kitchen. Carmita gasped when she saw Jake. He didn't have time for explanations or reassurances. "Where's McLain?" Carmita's eyes were huge. "I don't know, señor." She swallowed. "He was in the library."

They stood one on each side of the library door, and Jake tried the knob. It was locked. He motioned to Ben, then stepped back, raised his foot, and kicked in the door. Ben went in first, diving through, rolling and coming up, but nothing else in the room moved. It was empty.

"Goddamn it, where is he?" Ben asked, frustrated.

"Like Garnet, looking for a hole." Abruptly Jake looked up and his entire face tightened. What if McLain was upstairs, using the women as cover? He ran up the stairs with Ben right behind. He took the rooms on the right, Ben checked the ones on the left. They were all empty.

Damn him, what had he done with the women? Certain now that McLain had them, he swore that he would carve the bastard up alive if he'd even so much as bruised Victoria.

"Check the courtyard." It was the last place he could think of for McLain to hide without having to leave the shelter of the house and face the firestorm of bullets outside.

Ben nodded. "I'll go around the house and come in the back gate."

Jake waited in the kitchen to give Ben time to work his way around. The three servants were still crouched on the floor, huddled together for comfort. "What is happening, Señor Jake?" Carmita asked.

"We're taking back our ranch," he replied without looking at her, pistol in his hand as he eased the door open. "My brother and I."

Lola raised her head, her face strained. "Sarratt," she whispered as Jake slipped out the door.

Rectangles of light from the window splashed across the courtyard, illuminating some spots, leaving darker shadows in others. Jake could just make out Ben sliding along the wall, gun in hand.

"Major?" Jake called softly.

Hearing, Ben went motionless.

"Major?"

For a long minute there was no sound and Jake took another silent step around a bench, the very bench where Victoria had sat the day after she had married McLain.

"Roper?"
The whisper came from his right, close to the rain barrel. Every nerve in Jake's body tightened.
"Yeah."
"They said you'd gone."
"I came back."
Slowly McLain stood up from behind the barrel. The light from a window fell across his face, starkly etching the physical signs of his mental deterioration. He giggled. "I told 'im, but he didn't believe me. Sarratt's back, isn't he?"
Jake stared in disgust at the ruin before him. "Yeah, McLain. I'm back."
McLain giggled again. "No, not you. Sarratt. You're back, but so's he."
"I'm Sarratt."
"No, you're Roper. You've got to find him and kill him for me. You've got to __"
Jake moved another step forward, also stepping into the light. It hit him from the side, delineating the sharp planes of his brow, jaw, and cheekbones, making dark pools of his eyes. To McLain's fevered brain his face looked like a skeleton's head, a dead man come back to haunt him. McLain moaned, shrinking back from him, and the sound swiftly escalated into a shriek. "You're dead!" he screamed. "You came back, but you're still dead. Get away, damn you! I need a lamp! Someone bring me a goddamn lamp!"
Jake felt his guts twist and a bitter taste filled his mouth. The man was a raving lunatic. The moment of revenge he'd waited twenty years for had finally come, the gun was in his hand, but the target was still eluding him, snatched away by madness. He wanted McLain as he had been twenty years before, not this slobbering fool.
Without warning, McLain jerked his hand up, the pistol trembling in his grip. Frozen in bitter disappointment Jake was caught off guard, and even though his pistol was already in his hand he had a split second of recognition that he wasn't going to be in time. Then a shot boomed from behind him, followed closely by another. McLain jerked from the impact of the two bullets, rising almost on tiptoe, the pistol dropping from his hand. He stared at Jake with virulent hatred.
"Die again, you son of a bitch, this time I'll kill you and make certain you stay—" He raised his empty hand, unaware that the pistol no longer filled it,

and pantomimed the motion of firing. A look of utmost astonishment crossed his face, then it went blank and he died on his feet. He flopped, rag-doll loose, across the rain barrel.

Jake whirled, his eyes blazing, to confront whoever had snatched away his vengeance, whoever it was who had saved his life.

Juana stood with one of the Major's pistols held at arm's length, both of her hands clasped around the butt. Her face was expressionless as she stared at McLain's body. Then her lips twisted; she spat at the dead man and whispered, "Good."

Ben walked up, and he and Jake stood shoulder to shoulder looking at the dead man. Jake was aware of an absurd sense of regret. It was over, the driving force that had dominated their lives for twenty years, but instead of the wrenching battle he had needed and anticipated, he had faced a man diminished by insanity, and the final act of vengeance had been Juana's. In a way McLain had still won, for even though he lay dead at their feet he had robbed them of satisfaction by being less than he had been.

It left a hard core of bitterness, this unexpected defeat.

There was still gunfire outside the walls, but it was more sporadic now. It reminded Jake that it wasn't finished, not until Garnet's body lay at their feet, too.

And where in the hell was Victoria?

He and Ben stepped back into the house. Juana followed them, her face as blank as a sleepwalker's although silent tears tracked down her face. "Dios," she murmured. "Dios."

From the way she was acting, Jake guessed at what McLain had put Juana through. He figured her need for vengeance might have been as great as his own and tried not to begrudge her. He bent down and lifted Carmita and Lola to their feet, assuring him that they wouldn't be hurt. "Where is the señora?" he asked. "And her sister and cousin?"

Carmita shook her head, looking frightened. "I don't know. They aren't upstairs?"

"No."

Carmita clasped her hands. "Madre de Dios! If they were outside—"

She didn't have to finish the sentence. He turned on his heel and left the house. If they'd been caught outside, stray bullets could easily have hit any or all of them. It had been a firestorm of flying lead.

It was all over now. Those of McLain's men still left alive were coming out of their various hiding places with their hands high and empty. Jake and Ben searched the area, turning bodies over with their boots, kicking pistols away from outstretched hands. There was no sign of Garnet, or of the three women.

A cold sensation was freezing Jake's insides as he looked around at the vast, dark land. Had Garnet taken them? If he had, Jake knew he would never see Victoria alive again, because she wouldn't sit meekly while Garnet raped her sister. She would fight him and he'd put a bullet in her brain without a second thought. Despair congealed in a hard knot in his stomach at the thought.

He turned back to the small group of men huddled together and picked one out. He thumbed back the hammer, knowing everyone heard the small click, and pointed it at the man's head. "You, Shandy. Where's Garnet?"

Sweat began pouring down the man's face, despite the chilly night. "I seen him ride out, Roper. I swear to God I did."

"When?"

"'Bout the time you went in the house. Him and a coupla others."

"Which direction?"

Shandy lifted a shaking hand and pointed east.

"Did he have the women with him?"

By now Shandy was shaking so hard his teeth were clattering together. "No, I swear he didn't."

Jake's finger tightened imperceptibly on the trigger. "I think you're lying to me, Shandy. The women aren't here. Garnet had to take them."

Shandy began wagging his head back and forth. "I swear, I swear," he babbled.

"He ain't lyin', Roper," someone else in the group said quickly. "I seen the women leave before the shootin' ever started. They lit out from the barn, ridin' west, in the opposite direction from Garnet."

Jake turned to Luis. "Get me a lantern." He lowered the hammer back into position, but looked Shandy right in the eye. "If you're lying to me, you won't see sunrise."

He, Ben, and Luis walked to the barn. Sophie was gone, as well as Emma's and Celia's mounts. The men used the lantern to examine the dirt floor of the barn, but too many people had been through it in the last half hour for him to be able to tell anything for certain. They walked outside, where he

picked up Sophie's track with ease. He followed it for thirty yards, reading the sign.
"Just three horses," Ben said.
"Carrying light weights," Luis added.
Jake straightened, an incredible rage rushing in to displace despair. "The goddamn little fool, I told her to stay in the house." Now she had taken Emma and Celia out there, when none of them had the slightest idea how to survive or even find their way. Worse, Garnet was out there, too. Though he had headed in the opposite direction, he could have seen the women leave and veered around once he was safely away.
Ben rubbed a weary hand over his face. "We can't track them in the dark, Jake."
"I know." Even if he followed them with a lantern to pick out the tracks, a light would be visible for a long way at night. Not knowing who he was, the women would evade him; meanwhile Garnet could pick out his location. Every muscle in Jake was drawn tight, but there was nothing he could do. They'd have to wait until dawn before starting the search, even though that would give Garnet more time, too.
He was furious and his temper grew worse the longer he thought about it. If she had done what he'd told her, they would be safe right now instead of wandering alone in the wilderness. He only hoped she'd have sense enough to find shelter for the night.
"We've still got a lot of work to do," Ben said, interrupting his dark thoughts. "Like you said, this was only about a third of McLain's men. We might have some fighting still ahead of us, especially if Garnet joins up with them."
Jake grunted. "I don't look for him to do that. Garnet won't fight if he thinks it's anywhere dose to an even match, and we pretty much evened it up tonight. But, yeah, some of the other gunnies might make a stand."
Ben put a hand on Jake's shoulder. "We'll find them tomorrow," he said, but he, too, wondered. A lot could happen to three women alone on the land.
Victoria was forced to call a halt for the night. Though her instincts told her to keep going, Celia was unused to riding very far even at a walk. Long before midnight the girl was in a great deal of pain, though she didn't whine about it. It wasn't until they stopped to relieve themselves that Victoria realized what Celia had been enduring, because she burst into tears as she slid to the ground.

"We'll have to rest," Emma said. "She can't go any farther." She rubbed her own bottom, wincing a little. "I think I'm going to be sore, too."
Victoria looked around trying to find some sort of shelter, but there was still no moon to aid her. All she could see was the black masses where trees grew. Well, at least the trees would shield them. She put her arm around Celia's shoulders. "Can you walk just a little way, up to those trees?" she asked, pointing to the right.
Celia nodded, fighting her tears. "Yes. I'm sorry. I know we should keep riding."
"So we should, but we're all tired and so are the horses. If we don't let them rest, they won't do us any good tomorrow."
They trudged slowly up the rock-scattered hill to the treeline and found a grouping of boulders that blocked off most of the wind. Victoria and Emma unsaddled the horses and gave them water, then tied them where they could graze. When they returned, Celia had arranged their blankets and divided up three small portions of food.
Victoria sank down on a blanket and gratefully accepted the bread and cheese, which she washed down with water. Now that she was sitting she realized how tired she was. Exhaustion washed over her; she barely tasted the food, but didn't dare sleep.
Fighting off the urge to lie down, she rested the rifle across her legs. "I'll watch while you two get some sleep."
Celia stretched out, groaning, and was asleep in only a moment. Emma came over to sit beside Victoria. "Do you really think it was Sarratt?" she asked, keeping her tone low to avoid disturbing Celia. "How could it be after all these years?"
Victoria sighed. "I don't know. It was just that the Major was so sure, and he was so frightened. He sat up nights watching for them, did you know? He didn't sleep. I'd hear him all night long, sitting in there talking to himself, and sometimes he'd come in my room and tell me what they would do to me —"
She broke off and Emma swiftly hugged her. "I know I shouldn't say it, but the Major is mad. You know that, don't you?"
"Oh, yes, I know."
"Then why would you believe anything he said?"
"Because he is mad, not stupid." Victoria stared out at the night. "Because someone shot at me. Because I couldn't think of any other reason—"

"Don't you think the Major has made more enemies than just the Sarratts?" Emma asked with the sweet voice of reason. "It could be anyone."
Victoria couldn't prevent a low chuckle. "Does it really matter? An enemy is an enemy."
"You're right, of course. It doesn't make any difference who shot at you, the intent remains the same."
"How comforting!"
They laughed quietly together for a minute, then Emma sobered. "How long do you think it will take us to get to Santa Fe?"
"I don't know. Surely we can travel faster than before, when we rode in the wagon."
"Unless we get lost."
"We'll turn south in the morning. We'll meet up with someone on the way, and we'll ask directions."
"Do we dare?"
Victoria touched the rifle. "I'm willing to use this."
They were silent for a while, listening to the wind in the trees. Emma said, "The Major could come after us, you know. Or send Garnet. Whatever the trouble was at the ranch tonight, it's possible they handled it."
That had occurred to Victoria, and she had decided she would not take Celia and Emma back to that ranch. "I'll do whatever's necessary." It was so hard to say that she shuddered, then quickly masked her reaction by saying, "I'm becoming chilly. Why don't you try to sleep, rather than keeping me company? I'll be fine."
"Will you wake me in a couple of hours? You need to sleep, too."
"Yes, of course."
Victoria thought of a lot of things, sitting alone in the darkness. She wondered what had happened at the ranch, because as Emma had said, it could have been anyone. She wondered if she should contact the authorities in Santa Fe to get help, and if anyone would respond even if she did ask them.
She worried about Celia. She should never have brought her out West. Now she could only hope that her little sister would eventually forget some of the awful things and learn to trust men again.
Jake… Her thoughts eventually, inevitably turned to him, and she almost whimpered aloud from the pain. Why had he left without a word after all that had passed between them? She remembered the way he'd kissed her,

the times she had even allowed him to fondle her breasts. Was that why he'd left, because she had demeaned herself to him by allowing him those intimacies?

Did the why really matter? He had left, and she had to face the bitter reality that he hadn't returned her feelings at all. He had wanted to bed her, nothing more.

She meant to wake Emma, she really did, but she sat for so long with her harsh thoughts, and she was so tired, that she didn't notice when her eyes drifted shut.

"Victoria, wake up. It's after dawn." Emma shook her until Victoria sat up, yawning.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"I meant to. I fell asleep." Alarmed, Victoria scrambled to her feet. She drew a little breath of relief when she saw that everything appeared normal. Emma and Celia had managed to build a small fire, and Celia was rather competently cooking potatoes and bacon. Coffee was bubbling in the kettle. The sun was already shining, but the morning was still crisp and cool. She sought privacy to attend to her needs, then returned to freshen her face and hands with a dampened handkerchief.

They were all inordinately hungry and devoured the simple meal. Celia vigorously rubbed her abused rear when she stood.

"Will you be able to ride?" Victoria asked, concerned. Her own muscles were twinging, so she could imagine how Celia felt.

"Yes," Celia said, then added darkly, "but I won't like it."

Victoria laughed, but Emma grabbed her arm, cutting her off as she pointed to the east and said, "Look."

Victoria squinted her eyes, then saw the riders. They were silhouetted on top of a ridge by the huge red morning sun. She couldn't tell exactly how many there were.

Cold fear seized her. She whirled and kicked dirt on the fire. "Quick, saddle the horses!"

Distances were deceiving out on the land. The riders had looked so close only because the sun had been behind them; they were at least several miles away and couldn't have seen the women. Unless smoke from the campfire had given them away…

Sophie chose that morning to be frisky, dancing away as Victoria struggled to get the saddle on her back. "Stop it!" she said sharply, fighting her panic.

If Sophie sensed her fear, she'd never get her saddled.
They climbed on rocks to mount. Emma jumped down from her gelding and raced toward the fire. "I am not leaving the frying pan behind," she said. "It's the only pan we have."
Luckily, the frying pan had cooled enough that she didn't burn her hand when she snatched it up. She ran back to the rocks, and Victoria took the pan and stored it in her saddlebag while Emma remounted.
They didn't dare turn south now; that direction would insure that the riders cross their trail. Victoria put her back to the sun and kicked Sophie into a run.
Celia hung on with grim determination and her little mare tried valiantly to maintain pace with their larger mounts. Still Victoria and Emma had to rein in their horses to permit Celia to stay with them. Victoria cast several anxious looks over her shoulder, but the riders had descended from the top of the ridge and were lost from sight. She prayed that they weren't from the ranch at all, but were merely passing through and wouldn't pay any attention to their trail.
They gained the top of a crest and Victoria reined in, turning Sophie so she could watch the direction from which they'd come.
"Why are you stopping?" Emma cried, wheeling her own mount around.
"I want to see where they are. They might not be after us."
They waited, straining their eyes for sight of the riders. It was their ears that picked it up first, the distant rumble that sounded like thunder, though the sky was clear. Victoria waited, her mouth dry.
The riders topped another ridge, and her heart almost stopped. They were much closer than she'd feared, riding hard, and straight at them.
"Dear God. Run!"
She tried to think, but her brain felt numb. She knew it had to be either Sarratt or Garnet. Either meant death.
Celia was riding with her jaw set, though her face was pale. Victoria held back Sophie's long strides and positioned her on one side of Celia's mount, while Emma took up the other side. Better if Celia had taken another horse from the stable, but they hadn't thought of it. Now placid but slow Gypsy might well mean the difference between them getting away or being caught.
The landscape was changing, becoming gradually more dry and barren as the trees gave way to rock and shrub. A slight breeze picked up the fine dirt and blew it in their faces, covering them with grit. Victoria looked over her

shoulder again, and again the riders were closer than they'd been before. She didn't recognize any of the men, but now she could see that they had pulled up their neckerchiefs to cover their faces against the grit. Their covered faces, even at a distance, were menacing.
She tightened her reins as they plunged headlong down a slope. Celia cried out and almost came off over Gypsy's head, but at the last minute Victoria reached out and grabbed Celia's skirt, hauling her back into the saddle. They slid and plunged to the bottom, and Victoria cried, "Stop!"
They reined in the horses. Poor Gypsy was almost blown, but Emma's gelding and Sophie were still strong. Victoria jumped down. "Quickly, Celia, change horses with me!"
"I can't ride Sophie!" Celia cried, appalled, though she obediently slid to the ground.
"You'll have to. I'm a better rider, I can get more out of Gypsy than you can. You take the rifle," she said swiftly to Emma. "Give me the pistol."
Emma, too, obeyed, but her face twisted. "What are you doing?"
"We have to split up." Victoria boosted Celia into Sophie's saddle, then she scrambled atop Gypsy. "Take Celia and ride east."
"East!"
"Yes, due east, along the base of this ridge. There's more shelter that way, and perhaps they'll follow me instead of you. Sophie is a strong horse, she'll keep going a long time."
"I can't leave you!" Emma shouted.
"You have to! You have to take care of Celia!"
"Then you go with her! I'll lead them away."
Victoria gave her a stark look. "It's me they want," she said. "It isn't Garnet; I know Garnet's horse. So it has to be Sarratt—or—or someone else who hates the Major. Now, for the love of God, hurry!" Without waiting, without allowing herself to look back, she touched her heels to poor Gypsy and rode west.
She had no hope of being able to outdistance the riders indefinitely; she only hoped to give Emma and Celia a chance to escape. Perhaps, even if Sarratt caught them, he wouldn't harm them. After all, they weren't McLains.
She rode as she'd never ridden before in her life, pushing the tired horse deeper into the barren, rocky land. It wasn't desert, but there were no trees,

no crystal-clear rivers, no ripe meadow grasses. The sun rose high, burning her back through the thin fabric of her shirtwaist. Her arms and legs ached. Gypsy stumbled. Victoria agonized, yet she knew she'd have to give the horse a rest or risk it dying under her. She stopped and dismounted, and walked Gypsy for as long as she dared before giving the animal a small drink of water. When the horse stopped blowing so strenuously, Victoria remounted and started her flight again, but at a slower pace. The mare simply couldn't manage more.

Victoria's throat was dry and caked with dust, but she didn't dare drink any of the water herself; she might need it for Gypsy. A wave of dizziness swept her, but she grimly concentrated on her balance.

Looking behind again, she blinked in confusion. She could see only one rider, steadily gaining on her—or was it a mirage? Where were the others? Her heart stopped in sickening realization. Her ruse had failed; he'd sent the others after Emma and Celia, but was coming after her himself, as inexorable as the sun. This was Sarratt. She knew it was Sarratt.

She kicked Gypsy, but felt no responding increase in speed.

They were nearing a huge outcropping of bare red stone when Gypsy began staggering. Victoria looked behind again and saw that he was only a few minutes behind. Her horse wouldn't go any farther. She reined in and jumped to the ground, then ran into the rocks. Her boots slipped as she scrambled higher and higher, searching for a cave or a notch where she could hide. The pistol was heavy in her pocket. Dear God, if she had to she'd use it. He was alone; just one shot was all she'd need if she aimed carefully enough.

She risked a quick look around a rock. He was below her, dismounting from his horse with a powerful grace that frightened her, yet seemed dizzyingly familiar. The lower half of his face was still hidden by the neckerchief. He lifted his head and scanned the rocks, and she jerked back out of sight.

The hot rock was scorching her hands. She stared up at the relentless sun, glowing in a sky unmarred by clouds, and wondered if this would be the last time she would see it. She was more frightened than she had ever been in her life.

"Goddamn it, stop wasting my time and come out of there." The voice was muffled by the cloth covering his mouth, but the rage in it was plain. Evidently he didn't think he had anything to fear from her. Victoria felt as if she had enough fear for the two of them, but somehow she steadied herself.

She might lose, but not without a fight.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She fumbled for the pistol with shaking hands and for a frozen moment stared bemused at the glint of sunlight along the steel-blue barrel. What a strangely beautiful object, this instrument of death; it was so perfectly suited to its purpose. The only chance she had was to use it.

She held her breath, listening. When she heard a slight scraping below and to her left, she used both hands to pull the hammer back. She took two quick, deep breaths to steady herself, then she eased her head around the rock.

She saw him as he changed position, climbing to another section of rock. Her heart leaped and she fired wildly at him. The bullet chipped a little section of rock close to his head, sending the splinter flying. He dived for cover among the rocks, and she couldn't see him any longer, but she knew she hadn't hit him.

He would work his way in the direction from which the shot had been fired, and this time he knew she was armed. Victoria scrambled higher, scraping her palms on the hot rocks. A lizard stared at her with beady eyes, then darted into the protection of a cool, dark crack. She wished she could crawl in after it.

Maybe, while he was climbing up, she could work her way down. If she could sneak around him and get back down to the horses, she could take both of the horses and leave him stranded.

She sprawled out on her stomach and, keeping a weather eye on the rocks below her for any movement, began squirming backward. The rocks tore her skirt and scraped even more skin off her palms, but she barely noticed. She thought she might make it. The horses were in sight and she was beginning to let herself hope. Then she heard the slight scrape from behind, her only warning before rough hands grabbed her around the waist and jerked her upright, startling her so much that she couldn't even scream. The man gripped her arm so roughly that her hand went numb, and he easily relieved her of the pistol. Despairing, Victoria stared up at the handkerchief-covered face of the man who was determined to kill her.

"You damn little fool," he said with quiet menace, tugging the handkerchief down around his neck. "Who are you trying harder to kill—me, yourself, or your horse?"
Victoria gaped up at him. The scorching sun was beating down on her bare head, and she thought perhaps she was hallucinating. But he was still holding her wrist painfully and his green eyes glittered at her from under the black brim of his hat. She hadn't thought she'd ever see those green eyes again… "Jake?" she whispered incredulously. "I didn't know it was you—I thought—I thought you were Sarratt."
His expression was shuttered as he looked down at her, and a long moment of silence stretched between them, so long that she felt a chill of apprehension. His eyes were grim and cold.
"I am," he said.
He dragged her down from the rocks. "Sit down, and don't move even an inch. I'm going to take care of the horses. If you move, you'll regret it." He spoke in a very even tone. She didn't doubt him.
She sat in the dust and watched as he unsaddled the horses, then walked both of them around for a while. The horse he'd been riding was unfamiliar to her, a detail that made her bite her lip. If he'd been riding his own horse, she would have recognized it. Would she have still run from him? If she hadn't, would it have been a mistake? He was Sarratt, he'd said, and she still didn't know what he wanted with her.
Gypsy was so tired she could barely walk. Jake—if that really was his first name—gave some of their precious water to the horses and tethered them where they could get at the few succulent plants that grew in the shade of the outcropping.
Victoria felt shattered, even more so than when Emma had told her he'd left. It was a curious difference, but then she had hurt from the loss, the betrayal of her trust. Now she was terrified that the betrayal went much deeper than that. It wasn't simply that he didn't return her regard, but that he might have used her in the broader scope of revenge. Had he simply been hoping to satisfy some of his thirst for vengeance by cuckolding the Major? What was he going to do with her now? She tried to think of what to say to him, but her mind was blank, perhaps blessedly so. All she could do was sit and watch.
Jake himself was so angry he could barely speak. Not only had she disobeyed his order to stay in the house, but she'd led the others into danger.

She had run their horses into the ground and shot at him. That alone made him so angry he didn't want to approach her again until he was more in control of himself. She looked exhausted, and dazed. It was a while before he calmed down enough to walk over to her, canteen in hand. She had to be as thirsty as he was.

She didn't look up at his approach, even when he was standing right before her with his legs braced, dusty boots nudging hers. She braced herself, but nothing happened; he continued to loom silently over her, dominating her without saying a word.

Finally she broke the silence. "It was you who attacked the ranch last night, wasn't it?"

Jake opened the canteen and shoved it into her hands. "Yes. My brother and I brought our men in and took back the ranch." He paused, watching her carefully as he said, "McLain is dead."

Victoria failed to react in any way because she still felt so numb. She tipped the canteen back and drank. It was refreshing, even though the water was warm.

Jake took the canteen away and drank from it himself. He recapped it and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, watching her all the while. "I said, your husband is dead."

She didn't look at him. "I heard you."

"Don't you care?"

"I don't mourn him, but I can't—I can't be glad anyone is dead," she replied. "Juana killed him. He'd raped her."

Victoria flinched, and wondered if she had just lied. Perhaps she was glad that the Major was dead. He'd been a vile man. Would any living punishment have been enough?

"Ben and I control the ranch now."

A ghost of interest stirred in her, and she lifted her head. She hadn't truly understood what he'd said before. "So yofcr brother survived, too," she said in a blank little voice. "I'm glad." She looked at the horses, a slight frown knitting her forehead, and asked the question she really didn't want to hear the answer to. "Where are the others?"

"I sent them after Emma and Celia."

"They—" She swallowed, and tried again. "They won't hurt them, will they?"

"Not if they don't try something stupid. Like shooting."

Victoria shivered, because Emma probably would shoot.
Jake rested his boot on the rock beside her and propped his arms on his raised knee. "Why'd you change horses with Celia?"
"Gypsy couldn't keep up. I thought Celia would have a better chance of getting away if she were riding Sophie."
He didn't say anything else, just stood there watching her. She looked at the ground; she felt so bleak inside it was almost unbearable. If anything happened to Emma or Celia, she would never forgive herself—assuming, of course, that Jake didn't kill her. But if he had been going to do so, she reasoned, he would already have done it.
She raised her head again. "What are you going to do with me?"
He smiled, not a particularly pleasant smile. Make love to you until neither of us can walk, he thought with a savage mixture of anger and need, born out of his worry and fear for her. The violent compulsion to mate was inborn, and he wouldn't be able to relax until she was well and truly his, until he felt her safe in his arms. For now, however, he still didn't dare touch her. Instead he said aloud, "Take you back to the ranch. After the horses rest."
She was afraid to ask any more questions.
There were four of them. Emma saw that much when she cast a desperate look over her shoulder. Celia was faring badly on Sophie. The horse seemed to be taking pity on her inept rider and was striding as smoothly as silk, but without reaching for the great depths of speed her steely muscles possessed. As a result, the four riders were rapidly gaining on them. Emma recognized her choices with agonized clarity. She could stay with Celia or she could save herself, but she couldn't do both. For Emma, there was really no choice involved. She held the gelding so that it matched strides with Sophie and awkwardly wrestled the rifle around. Riding sidesaddle wasn't the best position for firing a rifle and her first shot went wide.
Ben cursed and bent low over his horse's neck, asking the animal for more speed. It was tired, but with the other horses' hindquarters in sight it surged forward. Luis, beside him, did the same. Ben went for the wildcat who was shooting at them, Luis for the girl who was barely staying in the saddle.
It wasn't that easy. The dark-haired one shot again and this time the shot came uncomfortably close. The other girl somehow clung to the saddle and the big mare she was riding increased its speed. Ben angled his horse so that he came up on the right side of the one with the rifle, effectively taking

himself out of her line of fire. His horse surged rhythmically beneath him, hooves pounding, lungs blowing; he pulled even with the gelding's hindquarters and his horse stretched out even more, driven by the need to get out in front. Inch by inch he drew even with the gelding.
From the corner of his eye Ben saw Luis reach out to grab the big mare's bridle. The little blonde screamed and began tearing at his hand, and the brunette tried to swing the rifle like a club, evidently not trusting her marksmanship enough to shoot with Luis so close to the girl.
Ben leaned out of the saddle and caught her around the waist, dragging her backward off of the horse as he reined in his own mount.
Emma arched and kicked, frantically trying to loosen his grip, but all she succeeded in doing was dropping the rifle. She reached backward, clawing for his face, his hair, any part of him that she could reach. Dangling in the air as she was, anchored only by his arm around her waist, she wasn't having much success, and in desperation she began hammering her heels against his leg and the horse's ribs. The animal snorted and plunged, and she heard the man curse as they both came off the horse, landing with a thump in the dust.
Emma kept kicking and tried to roll free. The man grabbed her foot and hauled her back, and when she kicked at him again he rolled on top of her, flattening her beneath his weight. He was cursing in a continuous if breathless stream, the words puffing out against her ear. He controlled her kicking legs with his muscled thighs and caught her flailing fists, then anchored her wrists to the ground above her head.
"Leave her alone! Get off of her!"
Ben lifted his head and saw the little blonde flying toward him, but Luis caught her from behind and held her, locking his hands around her wrists and then crossing his arms in front of her so that her arms were folded up and she couldn't twist or jerk free. Knowing that he didn't have to worry about her, Ben was free to give all of his attention to the squirming hellcat beneath him.
Emma rebelled completely against the heavy weight holding her down, arching and twisting, tossing her head in an effort to hit him in the face. She was too terrified to think straight, but she couldn't just surrender; it went against every instinct.
The man didn't try to hit her or hurt her in any way. He just held her and let her wear herself out struggling. But it had been a while since Ben had had a

woman, and the soft, definitely female body squirming beneath him caught his attention. Blood pooled in his groin, and he began to swell and harden. Instinctively, he shifted his legs so that they were lying inside hers; when she arched again the movement thrust his erection solidly against her soft mound.

Emma shivered and went still, her brown eyes enormous in her pale, dusty face. She stared up at the hard face of the man lying on top of her, shocked at what she could feel happening to his body. She had never felt a man's weight before, and now that their battle had abruptly changed to a sexual one, she was frightened into stillness.

Though she knew there were others standing just a few feet away, in a strange way she felt they were utterly alone. She smelled his sweat, and his quick, hard breathing feathered her face. She knew hers must be doing the same thing to him, in a subtle exchange of their very breath.

She noticed his eyes were hazel, his eyelashes and brows black. He moved again in a slight shift of position that brought him even more snugly against her.

From a great distance she heard Celia sobbing. Emma rolled her head to the side, and the sight of the girl locked in another man's arms shattered the strange sensuality that had enthralled her. Hectic color rushed to her face. "Please," she said in a stifled tone. "Let me up."

Ben propped up on an elbow, still keeping her arms pinned to the dirt with his other hand. "Am I going to have to wrestle you down again?" he panted.

"No."

He got to his feet and dragged her up until she was standing. Emma held out her arms, and with a small understanding smile Luis released Celia, who flew into her cousin's comforting embrace. The girl was terrified and sobbing in harsh, choking sounds.

Ben picked up his hat from the ground and slapped it against his pants, sending clouds of dust flying. He felt breathless, and though his erection had subsided there was still an uncomfortable tightness in his loins.

Emma stroked Celia's tangled hair and looked over her head at the men surrounding them. "What are you going to do with us?" she asked, instinctively looking at the man who had held her down as the leader.

"Take you back to the ranch," he said.

Emma ducked her head, hiding her alarm as she continued to soothe Celia. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to collapse, but pride

held her erect, unable to show weakness to an enemy.
Ben looked up at the sun, estimating the time. "We'll have to rest the horses for a while before we head back. We won't make it to the ranch tonight, but we should meet up with Jake on his way back with Mrs. McLain."
Emma's head jerked up. "Jake?" she asked, her heart beginning to pound. Had Jake Roper come to their aid after all? But she was afraid to hope, because Jake was such a common name. Until then Emma had been determined not to say anything about Victoria in the hope that she had gotten away.
"Jacob Sarratt," Ben said. "My brother. I'm Ben Sarratt."
She stared at him, white-faced, because Victoria had been right after all. "The—the Major?"
Ben walked over to snare Sophie's reins and gave Emma a dismissive look over his shoulder. "Dead," he said.
It was late in the afternoon when they saw two riders approaching. Ben grunted in satisfaction, glad that Jake had recovered the missing widow without any trouble. His plan to get legal possession of the ranch by marrying her would have been worthless if he hadn't been able to find her. Ben watched them ride up, more than a little curious about this woman Jake was willing to marry.
Emma finally recognized Victoria and stumbled forward with a cry, but she froze in her tracks when she also recognized the man riding beside her cousin. She shot a disbelieving look at Ben, then another at Jake. Jake Roper was Jake Sarratt? Understanding dawned. My God, he'd been playing them all for fools from the beginning!
When they reined in at the camp Victoria didn't wait for anyone to help her down. Unhooking her leg from the pommel, she jumped and stumbled, but recovered herself before Jake could reach out to catch her.
"Emma? Celia?"
Hearing the hoarse anxiety, Emma hurried forward. "We're both all right. Celia's stiff and sore, but we haven't been hurt. Are—are you—"
"Tired," Victoria said, her shoulders slumping. She allowed herself the weakness only for a moment. Lifting her chin, she said, "I suppose you know?"
"About the Major? Yes."
"And about the Sarratts?" Victoria's face was expressionless.
"Yes."

There was nothing else to say. They were all safe, at least for the moment. What lay ahead, they couldn't even guess.

Victoria sat quietly with Emma beside her. One of the men—the one they called Wylie—began preparing the evening meal. Victoria stirred enough to offer their provisions.

Jake was ominously silent, and Ben watched Victoria closely. She didn't know that he was admiring her quiet, dignified manner and the look of pride on her dusty face. He was even admiring the fact that she was obviously the cause of Jake's black mood, because no woman before had ever been able to get past Jake's wall of reserve.

They ate at sunset and turned in shortly afterward. Victoria was too tired even to argue when Jake dumped his bedroll beside her blanket, though she did wonder what the men thought. She decided that she was too tired to care and, curling up on her side, was asleep before Jake got his boots off.

When they reached the hacienda the next day, Victoria still didn't know what Jake intended to do with them. If he'd been planning to kill them, surely he would have done it and left their bodies out in the rocks. Instead he'd brought them back, to Carmita, who came running from the hacienda with glad cries and outstretched arms.

There were signs of the recent battle everywhere, from the multitude of new faces to the chips in the adobe walls. Several windows had been broken and holes peppered the black wood of the front door. Still, there were some things that were unchanged. Carmita was still motherly in her concern, and Angelina Garcia still lounged around.

The women trooped tiredly upstairs, with Carmita fussing around them while Lola and Juana began heating the massive quantities of water needed for them all to have a bath. Celia could barely climb the stairs, she was so sore; they decided she should have the first bath for the relief the hot water would give her muscles. Carmita also addressed the problem with a liberal application of liniment, despite Celia's blushing reluctance to bare her legs and backside.

The house was teeming with activity, and if there was one thing Victoria knew how to do it was run a household. She seized on the work to keep herself from screaming out her fears and uncertainties, because she still didn't know what was going to happen and was afraid to ask. The Major's room had been cleaned out as if he'd never been; even the furniture had vanished.

It was disorienting to open the connecting door between their bedrooms and look at the emptiness of bare walls and floor. Her husband was unmourned, and every trace of him had also gone. It seemed as if no one wanted to say anything about it. She wondered if McLain had been shot down in that very room. She backed into her own room and quietly closed the door.

When it came time for her own bath, she locked both doors and lolled in the hot water for a long time, soaking out the grit that felt embedded in her skin. She washed her hair, sighing with relief at the sense of being clean again, and leisurely brushed it dry. Eventually, however, she ran out of excuses to linger and was forced to dress and go downstairs for dinner.

The meal was a strange affair. Celia ate in her room, and the four people who sat down at the table were all silent for their own reasons. Emma, usually as self-assured as a Mother Superior, was pale and looked only at Victoria the few times she raised her eyes from her plate. Jake wasn't scowling, but his expression was dark nonetheless. He and Ben made no effort at conversation, but ate steadily. Victoria's own stomach was knotted in a mass of nerves and she only tasted a few bites.

Immediately afterward, the two men went into the library and shut the door. Once they were gone, Emma came to life. "I'm going to my room," she said with heartfelt relief. "I'll have to read a couple of hours before I get sleepy, but at least I'll be able to relax."

Victoria nodded, equally relieved. "That sounds like a very sensible plan. I have some mending to do that will take an hour or so."

Very much in accord, they ascended the stairs together. Victoria sewed on loose buttons and mended torn hems, the mundane chore giving her back a portion of her lost reality. Many things on the surface looked as they had before, but the content had changed. Uncertainty was nerve-racking, she decided as she bit off the thread the last time and packed her sewing box away. The Major and Garnet were both gone, but her life was even more tenuous than it had been before.

At least she felt calm enough to sleep. She lifted her skirt to remove her shoes and stockings, then walked barefoot to the dresser to take the pins from her hair.

Her arms were raised, removing the last pin, when the hallway door to her bedroom opened and Jake stepped inside. Victoria went white. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

For answer, he calmly turned the key in the lock and pocketed it. While she watched, horrified, he strolled to the connecting door and repeated the action. As casually as if he undressed in front of her every day, he then removed his boots and shirt. His naked torso was strongly muscled, with lean, hard bands delineating his ribs and stomach. She stared at him, mesmerized. A strange, warm sensation jolted her, and she jerked her gaze upward.

She stood frozen, her eyes huge as she searched his face. It was as expressionless as the day she'd met him, and she realized that this, then, was the final part of his revenge. She had been a complete fool about him; worse, even now she still loved him. It was a passion that twisted inside her, an ache intertwined with fear; she had never before known that a loved one could be simultaneously cherished and dreaded, but then she had never before loved someone who wanted only to wreak his vengeance on her.

"Come here," he said calmly.

Her heart thudded and for a moment pure fear pushed her to obey. Then her back stiffened and she put up her chin. "You think I should aid you in my violation? No. I will not."

He shrugged and a hard smile touched his lips. "It makes no difference to the outcome," he said, approaching to stand directly in front of her. "Neither will your next decision, but I'll give you a choice anyway. Take off your clothes, or I'll take them off for you, and I don't care about buttons or seams. It's your choice," he repeated, "but your clothes won't survive if I have to do it."

She looked directly up into his glittering green eyes, trying to read them, but his expression was closed to her. "Is there nothing I can say that will convince you to leave me alone?"

"No. I decided to have you practically from the first time I set eyes on you, and that hasn't changed. You can try to change my mind, though, if you insist."

She decided not to, because she was afraid she would descend to begging, and her desperate pride rebelled against that.

"You can even scream, if you want," he pointed out. "That won't do any good, either. It'll upset Emma and Celia, but they won't be able to help you. So what's your decision? Are you going to undress?" He lifted one brow at her, and hating her own cowardice, she lifted trembling hands to the buttons on her plain white shirtwaist. It seemed there was nothing else she could do.

She had never undressed in front of a man before, never dreamed that she would have to perform such an act. She unbuttoned the front, then fumbled with the buttons to the tight cuffs until he said impatiently, "Get it off."
The button at the waistband of her skirt eluded her, and with a muffled curse he pushed her hands away and unfastened the garment himself. It drooped around her hips, but was held up by the bulk of her petticoats. She removed the freed shirtwaist and dropped it on the chair.
"Now the skirt," he directed.
A fine shaking seized her legs as she lifted the skirt off over her head and placed it, too, on the chair. Now she stood before him in petticoats and shift, acutely aware of her bare shoulders and arms, and the fact that her nipples were visible through the soft, thin cotton.
He was only a foot away, so close she could feel the heat of his body. She tried to back away, but came up flush against the dresser.
His hard mouth twisted in wry acknowledgment of her action. "The petticoat," he prompted.
She untied the tapes and pulled the first one off over her head. He stared down in frustration at the almost identical garment that had been beneath the first. She hurried to release it, then closed her eyes in mortification as she let it drop to pool around her feet. Now she was clad in only drawers and shift, and hot color rushed into her pale face. Even on those two horrible nights when the Major had tried to consummate their marriage, he hadn't insisted on watching her remove her clothing. But this wasn't the Major, it was Jake. Paralyzed, she stared at his broad chest and naked, heavily muscled shoulders, the smooth skin gleaming in the mellow lamplight. Curly dark hair covered his chest, punctuated by two small, tight brown nipples. Oddly, she had never before thought about a man having nipples, and seeing his made her even more acutely aware of his half-naked state.
Jake stiffened against a surge of lust as he looked at her round breasts pushing against the thin cotton covering them. God, she was pretty, slim and ivory-skinned, delectably curved in all the right places. "Now the shift." The words were a little hoarse.
She turned white again and automatically crossed her arms over her chest. "No, I won't." But her voice shook, and Jake was almost at the limit of his control. He reached out and roughly jerked the garment up and over her head, forgetting about it even as he tossed it aside. His mind was on

Victoria, on the pale, full globes of her breasts and the delicacy of her small, pinkish-brown nipples. He had wanted to punish her a little bit because of the worry and torment she had caused him by running off, but his patience and need for revenge had run out. More than anything, he now just wanted her naked and willing in his arms.

Victoria cringed as her breasts were bared. Not even the Major had ever insisted on seeing her naked bosom. She tried to cross her arms over her chest again, but Jake caught her wrists and held her arms down at her side as he leisurely looked her over.

"Don't hide from me." Heat was rising in him, swelling his loins with an intensity that made him shake, now that he was so close to having her. He'd never before known this kind of hunger, this overwhelming urge to have this particular woman and no other. "I'm going to see every inch of you before I'm finished."

"Why are you doing this to me?" she burst out, tears stinging her eyes. She blinked them back, not wanting him to see her cry. "What have I done to you?"

"You've got it all wrong," he said, his voice even hoarser than before. "I'm not looking for punishment. I want you, and you want me. It's time we did something about it." He released one of her wrists and put his hand on her waist, smoothing his palm up her rib cage, savoring the softness of her skin under his fingers. "You're going to enjoy it as much as I do."

She stared incredulously at him. "You're mad!"

Her disbelieving outburst told him a lot. He smiled and slid both arms around her, pulling her tight against him. "You'll see, sweetheart. I'm not McLain. I'm going to love you until we both go crazy."

Out of the confused, combined vortex of fear, shock, embarrassment, and outrage, only one coherent protest formed, and the words were a moan of despair. "But you—you shouldn't see me like this!"

"Why not?" he murmured, bending his head to nuzzle her ear. "You're so pretty and soft. We're both going to be naked before too much longer, and if you like to look at me half as much as I like looking at you, we may never put on clothes again."

She trembled at the very idea of lying naked with him; the thought was so foreign to her upbringing that her mind felt numb, unable to form the picture. She was pathetically grateful that at least she was still wearing her

drawers, though she was afraid the garment wouldn't remain on her much longer.
"Kiss me," he said in a cajoling tone, but she couldn't. He cupped her chin and turned her face up to him. "Kiss me," he said again, whispering, and covered her mouth with his.
Victoria hung in his brawny arms, her toes barely brushing the floor. His mouth smothered hers, and she felt dizzy. Despite herself, she had to cling to his heavy shoulders. The raspy sensation of his hairy chest against her sensitive nipples almost took her breath. When she gasped for air, his tongue moved into her mouth, taking the deeply intimate kiss from her, penetrating her in that small way to help prepare her for the other. Despite her fear, his taste was warmly familiar, the scent of his heated skin so exquisitely tantalizing that she wanted to turn her face into his shoulder and inhale it more deeply.
A warm, heavy feeling was growing in her body, making her feel drugged. She pulled her mouth away but her head fell back, exposing her throat to his mouth. "That's right, honey," he murmured, sliding one hand down to her bottom and lifting her against the hard bulge at his loins.
She gasped again and moaned an incoherent little protest. He couldn't be doing this to her, she couldn't be feeling this way, as if she wanted him to continue kissing her, as if she wanted him to do more. It was a strange, hot madness, that she should want him to do the very thing she had found so repulsive when the Major had tried it. Her shock at her own lack of propriety made her squirm, an action that tore a groan from deep down in his throat.
He held her to him with one arm around her bottom, and with his other hand he pulled at the tapes that tied her drawers at the waist. When they loosened he closed his fist in the soft material and tugged it downward, baring first her buttocks, then her mound and thighs. Victoria gave a strangled cry and arched against the steel band of his arm, but he merely tightened it and lifted her higher, so the drawers fell to her feet, and then to the floor.
He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. For the first time Victoria actively fought him, trying frantically to get away. She felt painfully exposed, so much at the mercy of his much greater strength and rampant sexuality that she lost control.
She kicked and hit at him, trying to pull free and throw herself off the bed. He subdued her easily, catching her hands and pinning them over her head,

controlling her legs with his powerful ones.
"Easy now," he said soothingly, his breath warm against her face. "Don't be afraid, honey, you have no reason to be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you." His voice was low and reassuring, and he bent his head to brush his mouth across the tender joint of her neck and shoulder.
The hot touch of his mouth on her bare skin made her jump, and with an incoherent cry she strained upward again. He held her down, wondering why she was so frightened. Surely she knew he wasn't going to hurt her. But maybe her experiences with the Major had been even more unpleasant than he'd thought, maybe she truly expected the worst of him. His body was screaming for him to take off his pants and enter her now, but relief wasn't all he wanted. Victoria was so much a lady, but she was also a woman of passion and he wanted her to give him that passion. He wanted her to cling to him, her body arching to receive him rather than trying to throw him off; he wanted to feel the soft internal clenching of her release.
"Victoria. Look at me, honey. Stop fighting and look at me."
"Get off of me," she cried in a stifled voice.
"No, I won't get off." He shifted control of her wrists to one hand, and with the other caught her chin and turned her head toward him. Her eyes were wet with tears, he saw, but she hadn't allowed them to fall. He kissed her temple in appreciation of her pride, then moved his lips to her cheek. "You don't have to be afraid," he repeated softly, and brushed a kiss at the corner of her mouth.
"Don't do this, please don't do this to me." The words burst out, and she was dimly appalled to realize she was begging. She'd sworn she wouldn't do that, but the stark reality of being stripped naked had also stripped her of pride. She would grovel if it would stop him from hurting and humiliating her this way. "I'll leave, I promise I will. We'll leave in the morning if you want—"
"Now, why would I want that?" he murmured, the corners of his mouth kicking up in amusement. He leaned over her and lightly rubbed his chest against her nipples.
The contact, light as it was, rasped across her delicate flesh. She inhaled with a quick, shallow gasp, her concentration splintered. Her nipples were burning, tightening. He did it again, this time increasing the pressure a little, and the traitorous warmth in her began to blur the edges of her fear.

He kissed her, opening his mouth over hers. He probed her mouth with his tongue, kissing her in the slow, sure, purposeful manner of a man who knows he isn't going to stop at kisses. She made a muffled sound of protest but he kept on until her lips softened, until he felt some of the tension ease out of her muscles and she began to respond to him.
She didn't want to respond; she tried to fight it, only to find herself undermined by her own emotions. When everything was said and done, she loved him. Even knowing he didn't love her, that his taking of her was part of his hatred for the Major, she couldn't stop the warm tide of feeling when he touched her. She couldn't stop herself from welcoming his small invasion with her own tongue and drawing his taste deep inside.
He stroked his hand in one slow motion from her chin to her throat, and downward to cover her breast. She jerked in shock, alarmed by the first feel of a man's hand on her bare breast. His palm burned her, and the tightening sensation in her breasts intensified. He gently kneaded, then rubbed his thumb around and over the nipple in a circular motion that made her moan aloud. She tried to jerk her mouth free of his, but Jake deepened the kiss, holding her while he transferred his attentions to her other breast.
She began to tremble, but no longer from fear.
He finally lifted his head and looked down at the soft, pale mounds of her breasts, at the tightly beaded nipples. His sinewy, darkly tanned fingers were a rough contrast against her delicate skin. "You're so damn pretty," he said, and bent his head to her breasts.
His mouth closed hotly over her nipple. Victoria cried out, the sound strangled in her throat. Pure sensation jolted her and she arched again, but was still held pinned by his controlling hand and legs. She had never imagined he would use his mouth on her in that way, never anticipated the searing wet heat, or the prickling pressure as he sucked strongly, his cheeks flexing with the movement. His tongue flicked and rolled around her nipple, and she began burning, the heat twisting downward to pool between her legs. She whimpered, aware of the shameful undulation of her hips but unable to do anything to stop it.
"That's right, honey," he whispered. "Let me feel you move." He shifted his mouth to her other breast, awash in her taste, giddy with the sweet scent of her breasts and the feel of her nipples. She gave another little cry, the sound making him shiver with need.
He slid his hand down her belly and pushed it between her legs.

She jerked wildly, shock overcoming pleasure. "No," she cried, shaking. "Dear God, no!" Her hips bucked as she tried to dislodge him.
Jake caught her mouth with his, silencing her protest with long, deep kisses. She strained against him, but he kept kissing her until that storm of resistance, too, had passed. When she was limp and shaking, he lifted his mouth.
"You feel so good, sweetheart. Open your legs for me, let me touch you."
"No, it isn't right, you shouldn't do that—" She remembered the pain when the Major had shoved his fingers so roughly into her, and she shrank from the memory.
"Yes, it is right," he interrupted in a low, warm tone. His eyes were intensely green, burning, and—tender. "I want to touch you, I want to feel how soft and wet you are."
She shuddered. "You won't hurt me?" She wanted his touch. Her body was aching shamelessly for him, but the remembrance of her wedding night kept her from obeying.
His face tightened. "No, I won't hurt you," he promised, and wished bitterly that McLain could come back to life so he could kill him again for daring to hurt this woman. "Open your legs, Victoria."
She did, finally, her thighs relaxing enough to allow him to move his fingers. He did so gently, parting the lips of her sex and opening her to his caresses. Victoria shuddered again, acutely aware of the embarrassing moistness she knew he could feel as he lightly stroked her. But this wasn't like what the Major had done, she thought dazedly. He wasn't hurting her; he was rubbing her, exploring the sensitive folds with tender fingers, and he was breathing hard as if touching her there excited him beyond bearing.
"You're going to like this," he said, and brushed his thumb across the small nub at the top of her sex. An exquisite pleasure, so intense it was almost painful, shot through her body. She moaned, unaware that her legs opened wider as she arched against his hand.
He continued using his thumb, drinking in the small sounds she made, loving the way her hips were moving. The scent of her body was hotter, more intoxicating. There was fever in her now, the fever he had craved from the time he had met her, burning high to match his. Soon, very soon, she would be his. She was wet, he thought wet enough, but to make certain he slowly slipped one finger inside her.

Victoria stiffened when she felt her body penetrated, dazedly bracing herself for the pain, but instead the heavy, burning ache inside her intensified. No, it wasn't an ache, it was intolerable pleasure. She didn't know, didn't care. Her entire body was throbbing. She turned her head against his shoulder as he began moving his finger in and out, the motion enticing her hips into an undulating movement she couldn't control.

Jake groaned aloud. She was so small and tight he knew he'd have difficulty entering her, no matter how ready she was. She was so wet, trembling on the verge of satisfaction, that there was no point in delaying any longer. Now, finally, he released her hands, but Victoria didn't think of fighting. It was too late for that. Fire was burning through her, her breasts were aching and there was a deep throb between her legs that she didn't know how to handle. Her body felt heavy and limp, curiously disobedient. She watched him without comprehension as he got up and stood beside the bed, his hands working at his waistline. Only gradually did she understand that he was unbuttoning his pants, and then only a fraction of a second before he pushed them down and off.

The lamplight was too bright to be merciful. A return to fear jolted her from her sensual daze, and she rose up on one elbow with one hand lifted as if to ward him off. He was plainly revealed, his strongly muscled body nude, his thick erection rising from the dark curls at his groin. She stared at him in terror. The Major hadn't looked anything like that. There was no way she could accept him inside her, he was too big, he would tear her apart—

"No," she said hoarsely, belatedly trying to twist away.

Jake hauled her back and mounted her, prying her clenched thighs apart and settling himself between them. Fear exploded within her, out of control, as his rigid shaft probed at the soft folds between her legs.

"I can't," she moaned, thrashing her head from side to side. "Jake, please!"

"No, everything's all right," he soothed. "There won't be a problem, you'll see. It'll slide in so slick and easy you won't be hurt at all. Just relax, sweetheart."

He knew she must be terrified because of what the Major had done to her, but he also knew that because the Major had done it and he didn't now have to break her hymen, she wouldn't be forced to endure that pain. No, he intended to make certain that this time would be all pleasure for her.

He kissed her deeply, and in despair she felt the rise of heat in her again, and the coiling tension that only he could relieve. With a sob she admitted

defeat and lifted her hips against him, silently asking for his penetration.
"Please," she whispered.
"All right, darling," he murmured against her throat.
There was no way she could relax, no way she could be casual about what was happening to her now. He was going to do what he wanted to her no matter what she did, but accepting the inevitable didn't help. She was swept along willy-nilly, with no control even over her own body, which begged for his conquest. Her breath burst out of her in a shuddering sigh as he let all of his weight down on her and reached down between her legs, holding her open with one hand while the other guided his manhood. She flinched as he made contact again, his flesh smooth and hot.
"Jake—"
"Easy, easy," he whispered, and nudged the broad tip into her, following with a steady, relentless pressure that forced him past the restrictive tightness of her opening. Victoria pushed convulsively at his waist in an effort to repel the burning invasion of her body.
Hot tears slipped down her cheeks, at last uncontrolled. He caught her hands and moved them, pinning them again to the pillow, then continued squeezing into her, inch by slow inch, until he was in her to the hilt.
"Oh, God," he groaned, fighting the waves of pleasure that swept over him. She was so tight that he almost couldn't bear it. To give himself time he held himself still, embedded deeply inside her, and began again the exquisite task of bringing her to pleasure.
"It's all right, sweetheart," he said, kissing her over and over. His penetration had been so difficult, he wondered for an instant about the Major. But he dismissed the thought; he hadn't felt the telltale resistance of delicate skin when he'd entered her. Still, she was crying and it wrenched at his guts. He wiped her tears away and began to slowly move his hips in the way that would bring her the ultimate ease.
She lay limply, her gaze fastened on his hard, intent face, accepting the penetration and retreat of his manhood in dazed muteness. When she had imagined this act of ultimate intimacy, she had thought of it in terms of pain and revulsion, unable to comprehend why men seemed to want it so. Now, as her breath caught, she began to understand what, beyond duty, prompted a woman to submit to the act. It wasn't submission as much as participation, although her body was only now beginning to learn that. The heavy thrust

and drag of his maleness was bringing the heat within her to full flame again and concentrating it in her loins.
It began slowly because both her senses and flesh were still shocked by his invasion, but it was inexorable. The twinges of pleasure became sharper, and as her senses recovered they focused on her own body, bringing it alive in ways she had never anticipated. She smelled the clean sweat that made his body gleam, the musky maleness of his skin, even the new and exciting scents of their lovemaking. She felt his heat, enveloping her. She felt his hardness, the strength of his muscled arms enfolding her, the scrub-board flatness of his belly rubbing against her with each thrust, the powerful thighs that kept her own thighs parted, the hardness of his loins that pressed into her body with each recoil of his hips.
Her hands moved, slowly and without her awareness, to his shoulders; they were hot and smooth under her palms.
Her legs lifted and twined sensuously around his hips and thighs.
Her back arched, tilting her pelvis to receive him more fully.
And it grew in her, that heat.
Afterward, she never had any idea of how long they strained together, or when the heat shattered the last of her control. She clung to him, gasping at his strong hands on her breasts, crying out wordlessly when her hips lifted to meet him. His hair was plastered to his skull with sweat; her hands clenched in it, holding him to her. He groaned, too, with the inward thrusts that were driving them into their frenzy. She was liquid fire in his arms; her body burned him, and enchanted him. He took the full measure of her response and gave her his, caught and shattered in a way he had never been before.
And the heat became too much.
She clawed at his back, crying again, frantic for release from the incredible tension in her body. She was shuddering, lifting, straining toward him. He drove into her with a heavy rhythm that rattled the bed on its frame. She moaned, knowing that if she didn't find relief, she would shatter, her heart would burst. And then she discovered that the shattering was the relief. Her loins clenched convulsively around his manhood, then her senses exploded in great waves that lifted her entire body off the bed.
He caught her hips and pushed deeper into her, thrusting hard. He went taut and reared back, his powerful body arching like a bow as his climax shook

him. A hoarse cry burst from his throat and together they died the little death that was a death of self, and an exaltation of life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She awoke slowly, feeling a physical soreness and a certain malaise of spirit as she had to face the morning. She would have preferred it to remain night forever, for then she could simply lie in bed with him and push reality away. She was alone in the bed, for which she was grateful. Despite the heated carnality they had shared during the night, she didn't think she'd have been able to blithely crawl naked from the bed in full daylight with him looking on. Nor did she now; she stretched cautiously beneath the twisted, wrinkled sheet. Though her thighs protested and her breasts and lips felt swollen and tender, the only real soreness seemed to be between her legs and to her relief even that wasn't severe.

Her depression wasn't brought on by her physical complaints, which were minor, but by her uncertainty that had, perversely, been increased by his lovemaking. Before, the situation had been that she loved him but wasn't loved in return. A simple, if painful, reality.

She still loved him. If she hadn't done so, she could have resisted him, but she had long ago admitted that she loved the rough, hard-eyed gunman. No matter if he called himself Roper or Sarratt, no matter if he'd sworn vengeance on everything and everyone bearing the McLain name, she loved him. She couldn't love by half-measures, holding back in self-protection; nor could she stop loving him just because he'd lied to her and betrayed her trust. Whether or not he wanted it, he had both her heart and her loyalty. The sense of honor that had kept her with McLain even when she despised him would keep her heart with Jake Sarratt forever. So she had lain beneath him in the night, shocked by the intimacies he'd insisted on, burning with the pleasure he'd given her, and she had become, irrevocably, Jake Sarratt's woman.

She had given him everything, her body and her honor, her pride. What deepened the shadows in her eyes was the inner certainty that he didn't cherish the gift. He had enjoyed her body, but she remembered with sharp

pain that he had also enjoyed the body of the woman she'd seen him making love to in the barn.

The bright sunshine pouring in the window mocked her, but after another moment of lying in bed she answered the mockery by rising. Even though she was alone, her head was high and her back straight as she washed the evidence of the night from her body and methodically dressed herself in her usual modest shirtwaist and plain skirt. After she had picked up her scattered garments from the floor, she sat down at the dresser to put up her hair. It was a moment she had been postponing, because she dreaded looking at herself this morning, afraid the night's sensuality would show on her face.

To her relief, she looked much as she always did, although a little paler. Her face was grave and serene, and if there was a depth of new knowledge in her eyes, that at least was to be expected.

Facing herself in the mirror had been difficult; facing Jake would take every bit of backbone she possessed.

Jake brooded in the library, a cup of Lola's strong hot coffee in his hands. The night had not left him untouched, either. He'd known he wanted Victoria; he'd even admitted to being obsessed by her. What he hadn't known was how strong the obsession was or that now, after taking her, he'd want her even more.

All of his plans had seemed so simple, but now he was caught. Victoria was a temptation he couldn't resist, a complication he couldn't solve. He and Ben had the ranch back, the land that was theirs by birthright but not by law. McLain was dead; though Garnet had survived, it was enough that he was gone. Jake wasn't inclined to go chasing after him. If Garnet ever crossed his path again, he would kill him, but for now at least Jake was satisfied. Almost.

What was he going to do about Victoria? She threatened him in a way no one else ever had, because she threatened him emotionally. Last night had shown him his own frightening vulnerability to her. He was terrified of his weakness for her, of how close and raw she made his emotions. The only way Jake knew to deal with this kind of threat was to flee, to protect himself by being rid of her, but he couldn't do that without losing the ranch.

She had been McLain's wife; he should be disgusted at the thought of touching her, but the truth was that he ached to have her again and again. She was so fine that McLain's ugliness hadn't been able to coarsen her. The

night they had just shared hadn't diluted the intensity of his desire; it had increased it.
He desperately wanted to fight that desire, to keep himself heartwhole. He could send her away, but the thought of some other man marrying her made him grind his teeth in rage. And with her went the legal ownership of the ranch. He was caught in her woman's web like some stupid insect, and damn if he liked that idea.
He couldn't let her go, so there was no sense in even toying with the idea. He and Ben had control of the ranch, but they didn't have ownership. Unless he married Victoria. Then it would be his, and he would deed half of it to Ben.
He could keep the ranch, or he could protect himself by letting Victoria go. He and Ben had been born in this house; the thought of coming back to it, reclaiming it, had been the driving force of their lives. He'd fought for it, killed for it, won it back, but still it legally belonged to someone else. He could try to close himself off emotionally, try to protect himself with the wall of ice that had served him so well until now. But physically and legally, he and Victoria were to be man and wife. He really had no choice.
Ben walked in, sipping his own cup of coffee. He sprawled in a chair close to Jake's and eyed his brother with sharp awareness, both of where he had spent the night and of what was on his mind now.
"She's a fine woman," Ben said.
Jake looked up. "I know."
"And a real lady. I'm not too sure about that cousin of hers, but Victoria is a lady through and through."
Amusement lightened Jake's frown for a minute, and he grinned at his brother. "Emma? She's even more proper than Victoria. What did you do to her to get her stirred up?"
"Me?" Ben snapped. "She shot at me, damn it, and tried to knock my brains out with the rifle!"
Jake shrugged. "Victoria took a shot at me, too."
"She fought like a wildcat," Ben said, remembering the way Emma had felt beneath him, the way she had gone still when she'd felt his hardness pushing against her. He shifted restlessly and changed the subject.
"Do your plans still stand?"
"What choice do I have?"

"We both know the choices." Ben knew Jake would never harm Victoria, but he wanted to jolt his brother out of his brooding, so he said, "Victoria owns the ranch now. You can marry her, or you can kill her."

Victoria had come downstairs just after Ben had entered the library, and stood outside the door trying to work up enough courage to greet them. Jake had seen her as no one else had, touched her as no one else had. The memory would be in his eyes when he looked at her, and knowledge would be in Ben's because the things that a man did to a woman were something that all men knew, and did. She hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but in her hesitation to enter the room she had. And what she'd heard had drained all the blood from her face.

So that was why he'd been trying to seduce her. From the beginning he'd planned to make her fall in love with him so she would be willing to marry him and give him legal ownership of the ranch. She supposed she could only be relieved that he'd considered that option at all rather than simply killing her outright, as he'd killed McLain. It appeared he hadn't yet made up his mind about her fate, though, and the knowledge stiffened her spine. She stepped into the library, her entrance making both men look around at her. She was still white, but composed. "I couldn't help overhearing," she said in a tone that was calm, if a bit strained. She clenched her hands together to prevent their trembling and forced herself to meet Jake's narrowed green eyes. "Which should I prepare myself for, a wedding or a funeral?"

Jake scowled; he still didn't like the idea that she had so much power over his emotions, but the fact was that she did. Here she was as calm and cool as a nun, all starched and buttoned, as if she hadn't dug her nails into his back and all but screamed with pleasure while he held her convulsing body still for his thrusts. The memory burned through him and made him grow hard. Kill her? He couldn't even form the thought in his mind. And how could she think it, especially after last night? Angered, he glared at her, his eyes icy green.

"The wedding," he said abruptly. "I've sent one of the men after Father Sebastian. He'll marry us this afternoon."

"Thank you," she whispered, and left the room.

At least there was no pretense between them, she thought with a bitter smile. He hadn't tried to lie to her and dupe her with romance. He hadn't

even bothered asking her if she would marry him, but then, why should he have? She could marry him or die.
She sought out Emma, whom she found in the courtyard enjoying both the sun and their freedom from the yoke of constant fear. If for nothing else, Victoria felt gratitude to the Sarratts for getting them out of that.
"Jake is marrying me this afternoon," she said baldly, not knowing how else to state it.
Emma's mouth and eyes went round. "This afternoon?" she squeaked. Then she blushed and said, "Well, yes, of course, after last night—"
Victoria flinched. "You knew?" She was mortified.
Emma flushed even redder. "Not last night. But this morning… um, I saw him leaving your bedroom, carrying his shirt."
Victoria sank down on a bench and looked at her hands, struggling with her embarrassment. It was foolish, really, after all they had been through. Even though Emma didn't know the shocking things Jake had done to her or the way she had responded, Victoria knew very well and couldn't prevent herself from thinking of them.
Emma sat down beside her and hugged her. "Please don't be embarrassed," she said. "You'll be married this afternoon, so I don't think it's so scandalous to have anticipated your wedding vows by less than twenty-four hours. Unless… unless it was awful?"
"No, it isn't that." She paused, then said, "He doesn't love me." Victoria sighed and watched a rose blossom swaying in the slight breeze. "Now that the Major is dead, the ranch is legally mine. The only way Jake can get it is to either marry me or kill me. I'm terribly grateful that he's chosen marriage."
Emma stiffened, shocked. "Then you can't marry him."
"Pride would say so, wouldn't it? But I like living. And he'd have to kill you and Celia, too, so don't be so hasty saying I should refuse his decision." She found that there was, after all, some amusement to be had. She smiled at Emma. "And it wasn't awful at all."
Emma blushed and looked away, but a smile tugged at her lips, too. "So it isn't that the act is awful, but sometimes the man is."
"Exactly. One's modesty is useless and it's painfully intimate, but not awful." She took a deep breath. "The opposite, in fact."
Emma shivered, but not from a chill. She couldn't stop thinking about the suspended moment when Ben Sarratt had lain on top of her, his heavy

arousal obvious. She had given him the cold shoulder since then because his frank arrogance irritated her, but all she had to do was let her concentration slip and she felt the imprint of his body again, lying all along hers, pressing her down.

They sat together, each of them thinking of a different Sarratt. At length Victoria's empty stomach prompted her to the kitchen, since she had slept so late she had missed breakfast. There was work to be done, now that two men had moved into the house, and she had dawdled long enough.

The Major had always been out most of the day, until the end when his mind had gone; in fact, practically the only contact they had had with him was at mealtimes. It wasn't that way with Jake and Ben. Their presence was very much felt in the house; they were in and out all day, filling the rooms with their deep voices, the stomp of their boots on the tile floors, bringing the scents of horses and tobacco with them. Victoria managed to avoid Jake, but cornered Ben long enough to get him to point out to her which gear was his and which was Jake's. When she had it separated, she dithered about what to do with Jake's clothes. Should she put them in her room or in the adjoining room? Perhaps he planned on taking that room for himself, since he'd obviously given orders that it be cleaned out. It would have been simple enough to ask him, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. After all that had passed between them, now she didn't feel comfortable approaching him.

Jake noticed that his soon-to-be wife was avoiding him to the point that she didn't even look in his direction, and he grew more and more irritated as the day wore on. If she thought he would put up with this she was going to be sorely surprised. It was bad enough that she had gotten under his skin the way he had, but he was damned if he was going to let her sulk every time she didn't like something he did, especially when she was wrong. He was still angry that she'd thought he would kill her to get the ranch; more than angry, because that meant she put him in the same category with McLain. He felt wronged. But most of all, he still felt threatened, and he was glad of any excuse to feel angry, to hold himself at a distance from her. Damn her for the effect she had on him! All he had to do was see her and his heart started beating faster, he lost his concentration, and all he wanted was to take her to bed again. He thought of the night and his entire body shuddered with pleasure. It wasn't just that it had been good; it had been unique. Shattering. He had never before been so lost in a woman, so focused on her

to the extent that the world outside that bed had vanished. There was a lot he'd intended to get cleared between them last night, but none of it had been discussed. He'd seen her standing there, he'd known that she was his for the taking, and he'd taken her. Nothing else had been important.

Jake and Ben, along with the foreman, Lonny, were discussing how they were going to handle the problem of the few remaining McLain men who were still out with the distant herds when Emma tapped politely on the open door and put her head into the room. She looked only at Jake, studiously avoiding the challenging, hooded examination Ben was giving her.

"Where do you want the wedding to take place, Jake? Victoria says it doesn't matter." That was a lie because Emma hadn't asked Victoria, but it was a small barb intended to sting. Emma hadn't forgiven him for his deception, and she wasn't above giving some back.

Jake scowled, just as irritated as Emma had meant him to be.

"In the parlor? That's where she married the Major." Emma smiled as she pushed the barb deeper.

Jake's face went rigid. "No," he said after a minute, his voice so flat and calm it took a good ear to hear the savagery in it. "The courtyard."

Emma smiled again and withdrew. Lonny stared at the closed door with a strangely satisfied smile on his face. "Thoroughbreds," he announced. "Yep, them women are thoroughbreds. It'll be nice, settlin' down with women around. They tend to make men act better than normal, don't they?"

"What would you know about it?" Ben asked with a snort of disbelief at hearing such a sentiment from their foreman, who was as tough and wiry as they came.

"Hell, I been around women!" Lonny snapped. "I reckon I know the difference atween ladies and whores, and these are ladies. They'll make you two watch your manners, iffen you got any."

Ben began chortling and after a minute Jake relaxed enough to laugh, too. Lonny was a veteran of more wars, shoot-outs, and brawls than the two of them combined. Their friendship with him had begun over five years before when they had hauled him, dead drunk, out of a burning whorehouse. For him to lecture them on the difference between ladies and whores was almost more than they could stand.

Father Sebastian arrived sooner than Victoria had anticipated, and she wasn't ready. Even given the circumstances of the marriage, she didn't intend to get married in the clothes she'd been working in all day. On her

first wedding day she had brooded; on her second she didn't have time to do more than quickly freshen up and don one of her good dresses. On the first she had been terrified. She felt a lot of things on the second: sadness, because he didn't love her and was marrying her only for the ranch; innate fear, for her husband would still be very much a stranger to her despite their lovemaking, and he was a hard, rough man who had lived by his gun; relief, that he wanted her at all, that she would have a chance with him; excitement, very definitely. He would be her husband. Even if he never saw her as anything but a necessary nuisance, she would share his life, his name, and his bed, and she would bear his children.

There were other differences in this wedding, too. The people surrounding her seemed excited, even happy. Celia was still suffering from the effects of riding and was not as lively as before, but the look of strain was easing from her eyes and her merry laughter rang out several times. Emma was a whirlwind overseeing the rush and bustle of preparing for the hasty marriage, but her eyes were bright. Carmita chattered nonstop; Lola was singing in the kitchen; even Juana hummed as she rushed back and forth on errands. Men were in and out, bellowing, cursing, asking the pardon of any female within hearing distance for their cursing, cursing some more as soon as they forgot themselves, some of the bolder ones flirting with anyone wearing a skirt.

Only the bride and groom seemed less than ecstatic, though to be honest the men were interested only because of the chance for a party. Jake was tense, and therefore ill-tempered. Victoria was acutely sensitive to the reasons he was marrying her and became more and more nervous as the minutes passed. When she dashed down the stairs to the ceremony that would make her Mrs. Jacob Sarratt, she was shaking so hard she could barely hold her skirts up to keep from tripping over them.

"This way!" Emma said excitedly, hurrying her through the house. "Everyone's waiting."

Victoria hadn't asked and had vaguely assumed that the wedding would take place in the parlor because it was the most formal room in the house. But Emma led her into the courtyard. Relief swept through her. The late afternoon sun bathed the courtyard in a mellow, golden light; the open space was crowded with, she supposed, everyone who worked for them now, men and women alike. The men far outnumbered the women, of course, and shifted back and forth on restless feet, awkwardly turning their

hats in their hands. The women had decorated the courtyard as best they could with bright Mexican lamps, even though the sun was still shining, and colorful streamers that Carmita or Lola had saved from some long-ago festival.

Father Sebastian beamed at her as she stepped to Jake's side. A bit hysterically, Victoria wondered if he didn't find it strange that he should be performing another wedding ceremony for her so soon after the first. She had become a wife, a widow, and now a wife again with disorienting speed. If she had been at home, she would have worn black for at least a year and been secluded within her family. It would have been unthinkable for her even to consider another engagement for a year and a half, and here she was now remarrying only three days after her husband's death.

She fought back the urge to giggle, and jumped when she felt Jake take her hand. She looked at him with huge, startled eyes and was shocked back to reality by the cold green glitter of his. But his hand was warm, and when he felt how she was shaking he gently squeezed her fingers. The action steadied her, reminding her that, for all the violence and danger of this man, he had chosen to protect her.

She could remember little of her first wedding ceremony, but this one was crystal clear and she knew it would be engraved on her memory. Most of the guests were armed, but Victoria couldn't fault that when the groom was, too. The sun shone, the birds sang, men cleared their throats, the priest performed the ceremony, and she and Jake made the appropriate responses. All the while, her hand was clasped in his hard, strong one.

There were no rings, but she didn't feel the lack. She had removed the Major's ring on the ride back to the ranch, after she had learned he was dead, and dropped it in the dust.

Jake was also intensely aware of his surroundings, but even more so of the woman beside him. Now that she was becoming legally his, he was struck by the realization that by the laws of God and man he was now her protector; he had sworn to keep her from danger, to keep her warm, to never let her know hunger, to provide for her and any children they might have. He now stood between her and the harshness of life. Yet she was still afraid, because he could feel her shaking and her delicate hand was cold. Didn't she trust him to protect her? Then he realized that it was himself that she feared. How could she? But the fact that she did told him she was marrying him only because she thought he would kill her if she didn't.

The woman needed to learn some lessons about the man she was marrying. Then the priest was blessing them, and it was done. There was a flurry of handshakes, hugs, and congratulations, and Carmita threw her arms around Jake's neck and gave him an enthusiastic kiss on the lips, then was mortified at her own behavior. "Welcome back, Señor Jake," she stuttered, and fled.
One of the Mexican cowhands produced a guitar and began strumming it. As the sun went down, the liquor was brought out. Whiskey and tequila ran down the male throats. A few of them grabbed the women and began whirling them around the courtyard, stomping in an enthusiastic fashion that had little to do with an actual dance, but a great deal to do with their high spirits.
Jake kept Victoria at his side. As darkness blotted out the sky the bright Mexican lanterns cast their magic over the courtyard and the laughter ringing out eased Jake's tension.
Without a word he put his arm around Victoria's waist and eased her against him, moving her into the slow shuffle that was all he knew how to do. She gave him a quick, startled look, then relaxed in his arms. Her head dropped onto his shoulder and she sighed, but he thought it was a sigh of contentment, or at least relief.
She felt so delicate in his arms. Her bones were as slender as a child's, her shoulders straight but still only a little more than half as broad as his. Her head tucked neatly under his chin, and the sweet, faint perfume of her hair elusively teased him. Her breasts were soft against him; he remembered how round they were, how pale and delicately veined, and how he had rubbed his face against them. Her slender thighs moved gracefully against his as they swayed together in dance; last night they had clasped around his buttocks in eager passion.
He had been half-aroused all day, unable to keep his thoughts from returning time and again to the night before. Now his erection pushed painfully against his pants, and he stifled a groan as he unobtrusively moved her in a hidden caress against his swollen groin. She looked up at him, and he saw her swallow. Her blue eyes were shadowed, but she made no protest, and after a moment she returned her head to his shoulder.
Ben leaned against one of the posts, watching Jake dance with his new wife. He liked Victoria, but then he should have known that Jake never would have planned to marry her if she'd been a shrill, condescending sort. He

didn't know what they would have done, but marrying her would have been out.
He looked around the courtyard and caught sight of Emma dancing with Lonny, of all people. Ben would have sworn that Lonny had never even seen a dance before, but there he was, whirling and stomping and having the time of his life. Emma was laughing. Ben stiffened, his eyes narrowing as he stared at her. She wouldn't even look at him, but she'd dance with every clumsy cowhand who asked her.
Lola brought out refreshments, doughnuts and some squares of plain cake. The men swooped down on the doughnuts, which they called "bear sign," with yells of delight, and the dancing momentarily stopped. When it started again, Ben noticed that Emma laughingly declined all invitations in favor of some much needed rest. She found a seat on a bench at the opposite side of the courtyard from where he stood and contentedly watched the others dance. Most of the men were dancing with each other since there were so few women, but it made no difference to the mood of celebration.
Ben made his way around the courtyard and came up behind Emma. She didn't know he was there until he propped his boot on the bench beside her, and leaned forward to rest his arm on his raised knee. "How long are you going to run away from me because of what happened?" he asked in a cool, hard voice.
Emma didn't look at him. "Nothing happened, Mr. Sarratt." Her voice was as cool as his.
"The hell it didn't. You got me hard, and we both enjoyed it."
She hitched her shawl higher on her arms, but still didn't look at him. "I think, Mr. Sarratt, that you must be used to a different type of female. I'm not responsible for your—your body, and neither do I enjoy being treated like a slut who would welcome your rubbing."
Ben's voice got even harder. "What I think, Miss Gann, is that your personality would be a lot sweeter if you had more rubbing."
Though Emma knew it was dangerous even to continue this wildly improper conversation, let alone make it even more personal, she couldn't prevent herself from sneering, "From you? You flatter yourself."
Ben straightened, a little shocked, then stepped over the bench to stand in front of her. Without a word he caught her wrist and pulled her to her feet, then dragged her out of the courtyard. Emma cried out a protest, but there was so much noise that no one noticed. When they were outside he whirled

her around and flattened her against the wall, holding her there with both hands clasping her rib cage. Only a few inches separated them; he smelled hot and faintly sweaty, and she trembled with primitive response.
Out here it was dark, although light and music and gaiety were just on the other side of the wall. A peculiar bubble of silence surrounded them, broken only by the raspy sound of his breathing.
He bent his head. Emma pushed her hands against his chest and said sharply, "Don't you dare!" but her protest was useless. His mouth covered hers, and when she tried to turn her head away he shifted his hold on her so that her head was anchored against his shoulder, his hand clenched in her hair to hold her still. The hard pressure of his mouth bruised her soft lips. Desperately she bit him, her teeth sinking into his lower lip. He cursed and jerked his head away, and wiped at the blood that smeared his mouth.
"Do that again and I'll blister your bare ass," he snarled.
Emma found that she couldn't free herself from his tight grip. She threw her head back as she faced him defiantly. "You were hurting me! Was I supposed to do nothing?"
He paused, then said, "I guess not." He lifted his fingers to her lips and lightly rubbed them. Even in the faint light spilling over the wall he could see that they were already getting puffy. "I didn't mean to hurt you."
She could barely breathe, though she struggled to draw air into her constricted lungs. She wished he would release her, wished she couldn't feel his hard body pressing against her from breast to knee. She pushed against his chest again and found that the effort still had no effect.
He was still looking at her mouth. "We have to do something about this," he said under his breath.
"No, we don't," she quickly replied.
He gave a soft laugh. "That's what you think, girl." Then he kissed her again, claiming her lips with hunger, but no longer with violence. He moved his tongue into her mouth, penetrating deeply and drinking her taste. Emma jerked in his arms, then the tension abruptly drained out of her body and she sank against him.
A fine, heady madness welled up in her, born of the increasing pleasure she felt at his invasive kisses. She wound her arms around his neck and forgot about the protests she should make, forgot that no man could possibly respect a woman who let him kiss her like this unless they were engaged. Nor did she protest when he slid his hand to her bottom and arched her

forward, nestling his hardness in the notch of her legs as he had done the day he'd wrestled her to the ground. Instead she whimpered, her head falling back to rest against the wall, and her legs parted even more in an instinctive yielding. Ben instantly took advantage, his hips moving in the slow grind and thrust of sex. He put his hand on her breast, kneading the soft mound through the barrier of her clothes. He felt her tremble, felt her legs give way, and caught her weight against him.

He kissed her jaw and the soft hollow below her ear, his mouth hot and wet. "Have you had a man before?" he asked roughly, praying that the answer would be yes.

But she dazedly shook her head. "No," she whispered.

He swore mentally for a long time, using every curse word he'd ever heard and coming up with a few new combinations. Damn, why couldn't she have done it just once before? As soon as he had the thought, his mind rebelled against it with angry possessiveness. He didn't want to think of another man sliding inside her, even though that would leave his conscience clear to do the same.

There were only two kinds of women: good women and bad ones. A good woman let no man except her husband enjoy her favors, but all it took was one slip to turn her into a loose woman. A good woman was both respected and protected; if a man ever forced himself on a good woman, he could expect himself to be hanged as soon as he was caught. That was the way it was, and Ben would have gladly helped hang the bastard who forced any woman, good or bad.

But other folks didn't see it like that; if Emma went to bed with him, she would automatically be stepping over the line that divided respectable women from the unrespectable ones.

The barrier was so black and white, so absolute, that Ben took a deep breath and stepped back. If he'd been thinking marriage it would be different, but Ben wasn't inclined to marriage. He wanted Emma, but the decision had to be hers because the risk would be hers, and he refused to seduce her into it.

"Then it's your choice, Emma," he said. The words were low and harsh; he could barely make his throat work. "We can go upstairs to my bedroom, right now, or we can stop. If you decide you want to go upstairs with me, I want it understood up front that I'm not a marrying man."

That was certainly honest, painfully so. Emma stared at him, bereft by the sudden loss of his touch, the pulse throbbing wildly at the base of her throat.

In truth, her entire body was throbbing, hungry for more.
She hadn't thought of marriage, either. She had thought of nothing except first, the anger that had filled her, which she realized now was her protective response to the instincts he triggered in her, and then the wild urge to give in to those instincts. Marriage? No, that wasn't what she wanted, she barely knew the man. This was only the second time she had spoken to him. And the second time she had felt him lying against her with heavy arousal.
But his words were a slap of reality, showing her what she had been about to do. She could lie with him, but for no reason other than lust. And when she rose up from that bed, she would no longer be a respectable woman. If she ever married, and she hoped she did, she would have to explain to her husband why she wasn't virtuous. The only other alternative would be to go completely away from her family and anyone who knew her and begin a new life as a "widow," which would explain her lack of chastity.
She had so much to lose and so very little to gain. A few moments of pleasure, weighed against a lifetime of respectability. If she had loved him it would be different, but she didn't even have that.
With the inborn dignity with which she faced every hardship, Emma braced herself and gave him his answer. "Nor is marriage what I'm looking for. Thank you for giving me this choice."
Ben smiled crookedly at her. "What's the answer?" he asked, though he already knew.
"No," she replied, and walked away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At nine o'clock Victoria excused herself and went up to her bedroom. She didn't know how soon he would follow, so she scurried like a madwoman to undress, wash, and cover herself decently in a nightgown. He had taken everything she had and she needed to regain part of herself, some small bit of modesty. She was only twenty-one and had twice been taken to wife, once for what she represented and now for what she owned, but not yet for love, for herself. She felt a need for whatever small defenses she could muster.

She was glad she hurried because the nightgown had barely settled into place around her feet when Jake opened the door and walked in. He eyed the nightgown. "That was fast."

She didn't answer, because it was obvious to him how she had hurried.

He stripped his shirt off over his head and dropped it on a chair, then bent down to untie the leather thongs from around his thighs. She watched as he removed his guns and realized that he hadn't worn them the night before. He had come to her unarmed, and she wondered if he had done so to prevent her from trying to grab one of his weapons and shoot him.

His powerful brown torso rippled with muscles as he poured fresh water in the washbasin and bent down to splash it on his face. Victoria watched him, feeling her body already beginning to throb and come alive for him, and he hadn't even touched her. Her gaze slid over him, loving the hard strength of his body. He had several scars, she noticed, some of them so old they were nothing more than white lines, some of them still new enough to be red. She ached to touch them, to feel his heated skin beneath her hands.

He toweled his face and shoulders dry, watching her as she watched him. "Go ahead and take your hair down," he instructed, and she lifted her arms to obey.

Her hair reached her hips in silky waves when it was down. When she had all of the pins out, she went to the dresser and pulled her hair over one shoulder to brush it. Jake sat down to remove his boots and socks, but didn't take his eyes off of her.

"Good," he said softly. "Now take the nightgown off."

She moistened her lips. "I always sleep in a nightgown."

"No. You used to sleep in a nightgown. You don't now." He stood and began unbuttoning his pants. She watched without blinking as he shed his clothes, her gaze locked on his loins. He was heavy and aroused. By the time he was naked, she still hadn't moved.
He kept his voice soft. "Victoria. The gown."
She shivered, looking up at the determination in his eyes. The gown would come off, one way or the other. Slowly she reached down for the hem and began lifting it, revealing first her ankles, then her calves, her knees, the smooth columns of her thighs. He was as mesmerized as she had been watching him. The rising hem lifted higher, revealing the triangular patch of light brown curls covering her mound, then the gentle curve of her belly, the small indentation of her navel, the dip of her waist.
She stopped, her hands visibly shaking as she stared at him.
"Do you want me to do it for you?" he whispered, and she gave a small, jerky nod. He went to her and put his hands on her hips, but didn't immediately remove the nightgown. Instead he pulled her to him, and took her mouth with his. The kiss was slow and drugging. She dropped the hem and put her hands on his shoulders, letting the fabric drape over his arms and hands as he stroked her buttocks.
She was totally pliant when he finally lifted the garment off and carried her to the bed. His naked body was hot as he lay over her and covered her body with kisses. He tasted and nipped and licked, bringing both of her nipples to tight wet peaks. He tasted the underside of her arm, the curve of her waist, her belly just above her pubic curls. He rolled her onto her stomach despite her choked protests, and kissed her calves, the backs of her knees, up the back of her thigh, then gently sank his teeth into one rounded buttock, not enough to cause pain but to let her feel a slight sting. Then he worked up her spine, licking and kissing, sucking her flesh up against his teeth, and by the time he returned his attention to her buttocks she was writhing on the sheets, moaning with pleasure. One soft, fragrant location drew him to another, and he lingered over her like a bee over nectar, trying to sate himself on the taste and feel and scent of her.
He turned her onto her back again, noting the glazed look in her eyes and the flush on her breasts, the way her thighs naturally fell apart to welcome him. He took advantage of the invitation to bend and kiss her, his tongue making a brief foray that had her arching off the bed, and he saw the shock that wiped the sensual daze off her face. Before she could do anything more

than sputter incoherently, though, he mounted her and stopped the protests with his own mouth as he carefully entered her.
It was a bit easier than before, but Victoria still flinched from the stretching as he squeezed inward. She couldn't decide if it was painful or so pleasurable that it bordered on pain. It didn't matter; her body was already so vibrant with yearning that it lifted, without conscious thought on her part, to his possession. He stroked her hair back from her face and kissed her, holding her until he had completed the penetration.
Victoria clung to him, wondering wildly if it would always be like this when he touched her. He did things to her that she had never heard of or imagined, and wouldn't have believed if anyone had told her. She was out of control, the gentility that was so much a part of her was forgotten in the tide of sensuality.
"God, sweetheart, you're so tight." He moved slightly and groaned aloud at the sensation. "Like a glove. Feel how tight you are around me."
She was panting, and her groan echoed his as he moved again. She dug her nails into his shoulders, her hips rotating as she asked, begged, for the relief she knew he could give her.
It was going too fast, but Jake couldn't slow it down. Her response drove him mad. He began thrusting into her in a hammering rhythm, rougher than he meant to be, but her hips thrust back at him with every motion in a frenzy that matched his. It happened fast, and hard, convulsing her in his arms and emptying him of both seed and strength. The satisfaction was shattering. Again.
Her body felt heavy and lifeless, so supremely sated that she didn't want to move. When Jake slowly withdrew from her she gave a wordless murmur of protest, but he rolled onto his side and pulled her into his arms, cradling her head on his shoulder. She opened her heavy eyelids for a moment; the lamp was still burning, but she was too tired to care.
He smoothed his hand down her body, slowly stroking her from shoulder to hip, reveling in her skin texture, in her graceful curves, everything about her. She drifted into a dream world brought on by exhaustion and pleasure, trying not to think, wanting not to think, even as the words escaped her lips: "If I hadn't married you, would I be dead by now?"
He went still. Desperately Victoria wished the words unsaid, because if it were true she didn't want to know it. He had married her, and even if it was to gain ownership of the ranch, she was still his wife. He had made love to

her with care for her own pleasure. She hadn't intended to stir up the ashes and make trouble, yet now she had.
He heaved himself up so that he stared down at her. "I'll tell you this just once, then I never want it brought up again. I don't intend to have that thrown in my face whenever you start pouting over something. You were never in any danger from me. Understood?"
She was surprised by the anger she felt. "I'm not supposed to question your motives?" she snapped, trying to bolt upright. He tightened his arms around her to prevent the movement. "You lied to me from the beginning, you went off and left me to deal with Garnet on my own—"
"I told Emma—ah, shit!" he snarled, falling back on the bed in disgust as he realized what had happened. Garnet had interrupted him while he'd been talking to Emma, and he'd never finished his explanation. Victoria had thought he had simply deserted her. No wonder she'd taken the other two and fled! "Garnet interrupted me before I could tell Emma when I'd be back. I didn't abandon you, I had to go meet Ben. I'm sorry for that, but it can't be helped." He paused and gave her another hard look. "Now, did you understand what I said? I don't want to hear anything else about killing."
"I heard Ben say—" she began raggedly, and he held up a warning hand to stop her.
So he hadn't planned to kill her. That was nice to know, but what she really needed to hear was that he had married her because he loved her, not because it was the only way he could get the ranch. Her throat hurt with the strain of holding back the words, but she wouldn't beg. "Yes, I understand," she finally said. "You planned this from the beginning?" She swept her hand in a gesture that meant everything: the ranch, McLain… herself… everything he had done, even making love to her the night before. Had he thought that she would go more docilely to the wedding if he had already taken her to bed? If so, he had perhaps been right. She didn't want to believe that his passion had been calculated, but she couldn't deny that she felt irrevocably bound to him.
"Pretty much." He saw no reason not to tell her. "I was thirteen and Ben was eleven when McLain killed our parents and took the ranch. He thought he'd killed us, but we hid, and somehow lived. Ben was shot up worse than I was, and I thought he was going to die, too. We planned this for twenty years, working, saving money, practicing for hours and days and years with

guns so we'd be good enough to take it back. Nothing was going to stand in our way."
"And nothing did." She added softly, "I do understand. The ranch is more important to you than anything else."
She waited, hoping he would deny it, that he would kiss her in that quick, fierce way of his and tell her that she was more important to him than any ranch. But he didn't, and she closed her eyes. It was a moment before she trusted her voice enough to speak again. "What would you have done if I hadn't agreed to marry you?"
He shrugged. "It didn't happen. No need to worry about it."
A cold wave swept over her, making her shiver. He misinterpreted the cause and pulled her closer, stroking his hand up her side.
"Cold?"
"No." Not on the outside. Inside, she felt frostbitten, but the words she needed still remained unsaid.
"I'll get you warm."
She heard the heat in his deep voice and her heart immediately began beating faster. Her body, it seemed, had already learned to anticipate the pleasure of his possession. She tilted her head back against his shoulder and gave him a pleading look.
"Jake…"
He didn't answer. He caught her thigh and pulled her leg over his hips, then angled inward. This time he entered easily, but her breath still caught in her lungs at the shock of penetration. The muscles in her entire lower body tightened and clamped down in eager anticipation, holding him, shaping themselves around him. She had no power to do anything else but cling to him.
Later, content, he lay on his stomach and went to sleep. Victoria stared up at the ceiling, the ashes of her very personal defeat bitter in her mouth.
The next day Luis entered the barn and caught sight of a bit of cloth as someone darted into an empty stall. He paused, waiting until his eyesight had completely adjusted to the relative dimness of the barn. Whoever it was had been near the stallion, Rubio, who was a fine-looking horse but also one of the meanest ones Luis had ever seen. Jake had big plans for that horse; he wouldn't take it kindly if anyone was foolin' with it.
Luis bent down and stuck a length of straw into each of his spurs to keep them from jingling. He silently pulled iron and eased down the center of the

barn, cat-light on the balls of his feet.
He heard a sound, only the slightest of rustles, and moved toward it. His thumb eased the hammer back. He looked between the slats of the gate and stopped, puzzled. What was that patch of material? It looked like a skirt. With a sigh he returned pistol to holster and walked forward to prop his arms on the top of the gate.
"Miss Waverly," he said politely. "Do you need help with something?"
The girl had been holding herself painfully still; he could see it in the taut lines of her body. Some game she was playing? But she jumped when he spoke, and the face she turned toward him was stark with fear.
"No," she said, scrambling to her feet. Bits of hay clung to her skirt. She stood in the middle of the stall, and the fear didn't leave her face. She was like a cornered fawn poised for flight.
Luis, though only twenty-two, had been earning his way with his gun for a long time. He was as lethal as a diamondback rattler, as too many men had found out to their cost. He couldn't remember, ever, any softness or love in his life, but in his early childhood there must have been a loving mother, one who had cradled her infant to her breast and crooned sweet songs to him, because Luis loved women. He loved the way they looked, smelled, tasted, walked, sounded, felt. Young or old, whore or spinster, slim or plump, from giggly schoolgirls to bawdy saloon girls to starchy matrons, he reserved for them, one and all, his sweetest smile and most liquid voice. He was used to all of them responding to him, even if it was only an involuntary softening of the eyes.
So why was this incredibly beautiful young girl staring at him in terror?
It piqued him. It hurt his ego. It softened his heart, because he didn't want her to be frightened of anyone or anything. Women, to Luis, were put on earth to be enjoyed and cherished. He wanted to put his arms around the girl and swear to her that everything would be all right, that he, Luis, would protect her with his life.
Instead he smiled, exerting his considerable charm, and held himself very still. "Were you looking at the horse, chica? He's beautiful, isn't he?"
Her eyes were dark blue, like the deep depths of the ocean. Luis had been to California and had seen that wonderful color. His entire body tingled in reaction to her beauty. But still she stared blankly at him, not responding to the warm reassurance in his voice and smile.

Luis moved back a step, giving her more room. "My name is Luis. Luis Fronteras." He had no idea what his real last name was, but had chosen, when he was still a child, the name of the village where he lived in the streets.
Her eyes flickered a little.
"It was very brave of you to try to escape across such land," he continued soothingly. "Three women alone, and at night! I admired you very much. I wished to tell you that you were safe now, that we wanted only to protect you, not harm you."
"I wasn't brave," Celia finally said in a thin little voice. "I was terrified. Victoria is the brave one."
Ah, the older sister, Jake's new wife. She was indeed formidable, with her haughty chin and cool blue eyes.
"Yes, she is very brave," he said with real admiration. "Where were you going?"
"We wanted to go south toward Santa Fe, but we knew riders were coming in from the south so we couldn't. Victoria said that there are Indians to the east, so we went west and were going to turn south in the morning, when we were well away from the ranch."
A plan, Luis thought, that could well have worked if they had been more used to the land. He nodded his head and reached out to open the stall door, sweeping it wide and standing back to give her plenty of room. "And the other pretty lady, the one with the beautiful brown eyes—she is your cousin?"
He knew well enough she was, but he wanted to keep her talking.
Celia nodded, taking a couple of steps toward the open gate but halting before she got too close to him. "Emma. She came to live with us in Augusta several years ago, during the war. Uncle Rufus and Aunt Helen had died, and Emma's fiancé was killed in the war, and she had nowhere to go. Emma is brave, too."
"All three of you are very brave."
She shook her head. "I'm not brave at all. I was so scared and all I wanted to do was hide. Victoria and Emma said we must leave, so that Garnet and the Major couldn't… couldn't hurt me."
The blind look was back in her eyes and with a spurt of anger Luis understood. It was inevitable, really. She was so beautiful, how could any man look at her and not want her? Like everyone else in the territory, Luis

had known McLain and Garnet by reputation, and he could guess what they must have put this beautiful child through.
Luis left his post by the gate, carefully walking off and showing her that he didn't intend to corner her. He paused in front of Rubio's stall, and the big stallion's ears went back as he watched the man. Luis was too smart to lean on the gate within reach of the stallion's teeth and hooves, but he couldn't help admiring the animal. "You magnificent bastard," he crooned in liquid Spanish, "you're not good for anything but the mares, eh? You're too mean to ride, but what a life you have! Nothing to do but eating, sleeping, and romancing the ladies."
Celia crept out of the empty stall and stood watching him, still half-poised for flight. Luis gave her a flashing smile. "I have never before seen a horse as beautiful as this one."
She nodded and at last her own smile broke out.
Luis caught his breath, struck dumb. She looked like an angel.
"He's wonderful," she breathed. "I bring him things to eat, and now he lets me pat him on the neck."
He was alarmed that she would get so close to the animal, but he didn't scold her. Any hint of anger would send her flying.
"My name is Celia," she offered.
He already knew that, but he nodded as if she had given him a gift.
"I have a mare, Gypsy. Jake helped me choose her. She's really smart, but when ya'll were chasing us, Victoria made me swap horses with her because her horse is faster than mine and she wanted Emma and me to get away."
"Yes, a very brave lady, your sister."
"I'm glad that she married Jake. I like him, but he really should have told us his real name."
"He had his reasons, chica."
"I know." She sighed, and the bright light faded out of her face. "The Major was a horrible man. He killed their mother and father, did you know?"
"Yes, I know."
"Before I knew Jake was really Jake Sarratt, I used to pray that the Sarratts would come back and kill the Major. I know it's a sin," she whispered, "but I hated him."
"It's not a sin to hate evil."
"I hope not. I have to go," she said, suddenly taking fright again. With a swish of skirts she ran away. Luis watched her disappear out the front of the

barn, her slender figure briefly silhouetted against the bright opening before she was gone from view. She was sweet and fey, and he wanted her.
The days after Victoria's wedding passed slowly. They had lived on edge for so long that the abrupt calm made them all feel as if the bright summer days dawdled along. Time didn't tick, it oozed. They were all relieved.
Celia began to giggle again, and the musical sound made them all smile. She dogged Jake's boot heels whenever he left the house, and although she was still shy with Ben, someone began playing practical jokes on him. Victoria strongly suspected Celia, because her sister had always had a penchant for that type of thing, but Ben knew it was Celia. He had seen her sneaking out of his room once, but he continued to pretend ignorance. She got such joy of it that he often exaggerated his mishaps, just to watch her try to act innocent while she was struggling with laughter.
But with Emma, Ben was held at a distance by a careful silence. She pretended he didn't exist, and he allowed her to do so. It wasn't easy, since they lived in the same house, but Emma's self-possession was such that it was possible. He wasn't sure how, but she could speak to him and still treat him as if he weren't there. It made him angry but he accepted it, because he knew the reason for it.
The days were busy. Despite their expectations of the worst, there hadn't been any trouble with the men who had been out with the herds. Some left with quick looks over their shoulders, some stayed. Jake and his men worked long, hard hours getting an accurate count of the herd and altering the brands on cattle and horses alike. Jake and Ben were often out of the house from dawn until long after dark. They would return tired and caked with grime, smelling of horses and sweat. To make it easier for them to wash they rigged up a contraption behind the bunkhouse: a small enclosure with two buckets of water balanced overhead and a rope tied to each bucket. Most of the men got in the habit of stripping, tipping some of the water over their heads, then soaping up and using the remainder of the water to rinse. Whoever used the water had to refill the buckets. At the end of each long hot day, there was always a line waiting to use the contraption, though a lot of the men still used the river if they were inclined to bathe. For some of them, that wasn't very often.
For Victoria, the slow summer days were filled with a deep sense of unreality. During the day she did what wives had always done; she mended, she made certain the meals were on time, and took care of the myriad and

endless details of making a home. That was the way she had always expected her life to go, and the routine was as familiar to her as her own face.

At night, however, things changed. When Jake came up the stairs each night and entered her bedroom—their bedroom now—and closed the door behind him, nothing was as she had ever imagined her life to be. She spent the hours in a sensual daze, locked in his arms. She lost her privacy to dress or undress alone and had to accustom herself to his tall body in her bed. He touched her however and whenever he liked, and he liked it often. There wasn't an inch of her skin left unexplored. She drowned in the sensuality of the nights, her mind overwhelmed by the demands of the flesh, both his and her own. Sometimes when she awoke in the bright morning sunlight she was appalled at the carnal excesses of the night before and would swear that she would never let herself behave so mindlessly again. But her intentions never lasted past his first kiss, the first touch of his hard body against hers. The more influence he exerted over her at night, the harder she tried to shore up her defenses during the day. If he had ever said those simple words, I love you, she would have abandoned herself totally to him, but the words he whispered to her were of lust. So every morning she tried desperately to isolate her heart from him, to wall up part of herself where he couldn't find her. It was pure self-defense, the need to keep a kernel of her being whole and untouched, a foundation on which she could rely if the rest of her life fell apart.

"A kitten!"

Celia's face was bright with joy as she scooped the tiny animal out of Luis's lean brown hands. She cuddled the ball of fluff to her cheek and the kitten gave a squeaky meow. "Oh, Luis, where did you find it?"

"In the tack room. Its mother must have died."

"Will it be all right?" she asked anxiously. "Is it old enough to eat on its own?"

He shrugged. "There's only one way to find out."

Together they trooped up to the house, where Celia begged Lola for a saucer of warm milk, which she placed on the sun-warmed flagstones of the courtyard. The kitten sniffed daintily before lowering its pink nose and beginning to lap.

Celia smiled. "It's old enough."

"It seems so." Luis watched her crouched there on the flagstones, her face intent on the kitten. She was so full of delight he wanted to snatch her to her feet and kiss her.
She looked up at him. "Where are you going to keep it? What have you named it?"
"I'm not keeping it anywhere. I brought it to you."
"You mean it's mine?" she breathed.
"If you want it."
"Of course I want it! I've never had a pet before." She lightly rubbed the kitten behind the ears and it arched up to her hand, but didn't lift its head from the milk.
"Lola said you'd found a kitten," Victoria said, stepping out into the courtyard. To Luis's surprise, she crouched down in a position identical to Celia's and stroked the kitten. "It's so pretty and soft."
"Luis found it. He said I can have it."
Victoria smiled. "What will you name it?"
"I don't know, I've never had a kitten before. What are some cat names?"
"Tiger?" Victoria suggested, then looked doubtfully at the kitten. She and Celia laughed together.
"What would you name it, Luis?" Celia asked.
He shrugged and sank down on his haunches to join the women. "I've never had a pet, either."
Victoria smiled at the slim young man, wondering if he felt a kinship with the little animal since he was so catlike himself. She liked him, even though she could look at him and see danger clinging to his broad shoulders like a cloak. But Luis's smile was always warm and gentle; he was never coarse around Celia, and he seemed to have appointed himself sort of a bodyguard for the girl. Victoria was glad and hoped Celia might lose some of her fearfulness around men. In general the men around her now teased her and watched over her, but never threatened her or gave her sidelong glances.
"First, is it a male or a female?" Victoria asked practically.
Again Luis shrugged, which piqued Celia's interest. "How do you tell?"
"You pick it up and look," Luis replied.
She did, holding the kitten on its back. The three of them solemnly studied its belly.
After a moment Celia said, "What are we looking at?"
"I don't know," Victoria admitted, laughter brimming in her eyes.

"Luis?"
He put his hand over his mouth and pretended to be considering the matter, but at last he was forced to admit, "It looks like a furry belly."
"That's what I thought, too," Victoria said.
Celia began to giggle, then they were all laughing. At the sound of booted steps, they looked up. Celia lifted the kitten. "Luis has given me a kitten," she explained to Jake. "We want to name it, but we can't tell if it's a boy or a girl."
Jake's face relaxed into a grin, and Victoria felt her heart turn over. He leaned down and took the kitten, his big, lean hand gentle as he held it up and looked. "It's a torn," he said, and put it down in Celia's lap.
"How can you tell?"
He wasn't about to get into one of those discussions with her, so he tousled her hair and said, "Practice. There were always a lot of cats around when Ben and I were young."
"Show me how to tell."
Victoria was watching with glee, waiting to see how he got out of that. Luis had turned his head to hide his grin.
"You'd need a male and a female side by side, so I could show you the difference."
"I suppose." She sighed with disappointment. "At least now we know to name it a male name."
"Call it Tom," he suggested. "That's a name, and it's a tomcat, so it fits."
"Tom." After a minute's deliberation she nodded, and returned the kitten to its saucer of milk.
Jake held out his hand, and Victoria placed hers in it for him to draw her to her feet. He guided her inside with his hand on the small of her back.
When they were out of earshot, she asked, "Can we trust Luis with Celia?"
"As much as anyone. She's too beautiful to expect the young bucks not to notice her, but he won't force himself on her, if that's what you're asking."
"It is, I suppose. It's just that she's so innocent. I don't want something awful to happen to her."
His green eyes gleamed. "Awful?" he asked in a deep voice.
Victoria blinked at him, realizing abruptly that he was escorting her up the stairs. She blushed hotly. "What are you doing?" she demanded in a fierce whisper.
"Taking you to bed."

"Jake, it's the middle of the day!"
"I know. What about it?"
"Everyone will know what we're doing."
"Do you think they don't know what we're doing when we go to bed every night?"
"People go to sleep at night. It's obvious we wouldn't be sleeping if we went to bed now!"
The pressure of his hand was inexorable. "We're married. It's legal." He was determined to break through her defenses, one way or another. He didn't know why, but she kept building barriers between them. When he came back to the ranch house every night, he always found an invisible wall between them, locking him out of her thoughts. Every night he would smash it down, but she would busily rebuild it during the day. He had come back to the house specifically to make love to her now, to see if he could destroy the barrier once and for all. He wanted all of her, every little bit of her, with the greediness of someone dying of thirst; he felt as if he'd been given a glass of water but told he could drink only half of it.
He locked them in the bedroom and stripped both her and himself. As he placed her on the bed, he saw the despair in her eyes. Despair filled his own heart. Why did she feel she had to resist him? Then she closed her eyes and twined her arms around his neck. For him, as well as for her, the why ceased to matter.
They came together in a rush of heated flesh, straining toward each other, already desperate with passion. The rest of the world was shut out during their lovemaking, but afterward, when she was trying to sort out her clothes, he saw the reserve in her eyes and knew he had failed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Long after Jake had returned to work, he remained lost in thought. Victoria was his wife, but he couldn't say that she belonged to him. The knowledge ate at him. What was it that caused her to keep him that small, careful distance from her? Did she regret their marriage?
Her inner reserve hid secrets from him; he could sense their presence, even though he couldn't get inside her mind and read them. She was hiding

something from him, and he was at a loss to know what it was. For the first time in his life a woman had gotten inside his emotional walls, stinging him to resentment by making him vulnerable, and doubling the resentment because he couldn't get to her as she had gotten to him. What was it? What was she hiding? Was it something about her marriage to the Major? Was there some lingering evidence of what he had done to her? It wasn't something she had done, he didn't think, but rather something that had happened to her.

The possibilities made him go cold. He was afraid to even ask her what was wrong, afraid he wouldn't be able to bear the answer. Every time he thought of her in the Major's bed he was filled with a bitter anger. He hadn't been able to bear seeing McLain's personal possessions and he'd had them all thrown out, but he couldn't throw out McLain's wife. She was his wife now —or was she? Was part of her mind still caught in a dark pit of memories? Was it more than that, something she couldn't deny or ignore?

There had been real fear in her eyes the first time he'd made love to her, but he brushed it aside thinking it was merely a result of the situation. He'd thought he'd won when she turned all sweet and hot in his arms. Surely she knew by now she had nothing to fear from him?

But it wasn't fear of him. It was something else, something that tormented her, and instead of coming to him for comfort she was locking it inside. Maybe she thought he wouldn't understand, maybe she thought he would blame her for whatever it was.

What had the Major done to her?

If he pushed her, she simply withdrew further. He had to teach her to trust him, and the only way to do that was to show her over and over how much he wanted her. As their intimacy deepened, so would her trust, and one day he would breach that wall in her mind. Whatever it was, he thought, he'd hold her and keep her safe and love her again. It wouldn't matter what it was, as long as he knew. He could fight dragons for her, but not ghosts.

Emma spent much of her time during those quiet summer days out riding. Their hasty flight had shown her how necessary it was to be in good physical shape in this country. Victoria rode out with her most days, and sometimes Celia would join them. On this particular day, however, she'd gone out alone because Celia had been off somewhere with her kitten and Victoria had been writing a difficult letter to her parents, informing them of McLain's death and her subsequent remarriage. They would be profoundly

shocked no matter how she told them and she had been wrestling with it all morning.
Emma unsaddled her gelding. When she turned around to sling the saddle over the fence, she collided with a hard wall of flesh. She said, "Uummph!" and staggered back under the impact. Ben's hands shot out to break her fall. He steadied her, his hazel eyes intent as he looked her over. She was acutely aware of how disheveled she was; her hair was straggling down, she had gotten dirt on her white shirtwaist, and she suspected her face was dusty. A flush of embarrassment burned her cheeks.
Ben took the saddle from her hands and placed it on the rail. He took his time about it. She was usually so starched, but today she looked wonderfully tousled with her hair curling damply about her face. When he turned back to her she was still standing with her arms limp at her side, but now her face was tense. She felt it, too; he wished she didn't, because a one-sided attraction was much easier to resist than one that was mutual.
"Were you riding alone?" he finally asked, needing to break the silence between them.
She nodded. "I couldn't find Celia, and Victoria was busy."
"I don't like it. Don't do it again."
Another flush heated Emma's face, but this one was from anger. "You don't have the right to tell me what to do."
His brows drew together and he took a step closer. "Don't fight me," he said softly. "I said that for a reason. It's too dangerous for a woman alone, even when you're on our land."
She bit her lip, wishing her reactions weren't so swift and so close to the surface with him. "You're right, of course. I don't know why I snapped at you."
"Now you're lying, because we both know why." He reached out and trailed his finger across her collar-bone, the light, delicate touch making both of them shudder. "You can always change your mind, you know."
She swallowed, her pale throat working. "And then what?"
"Then we can stop avoiding each other. We have an itch we need to scratch because it isn't going to go away until we do. Then we can sleep at night, instead of lying awake."
Emma whirled, turning her back to him. "Thank you very much," she said in a stifled tone. "I don't think I should waste my time on a man who thinks I'm no more important than a mosquito bite."

Ben put his hands on her waist and carefully drew her back until she was pressed against him, fitting her bottom into the cradle of his thighs. He rubbed his hips against her in a slow, circular rhythm. "I've never wanted to do this to a mosquito," he murmured, and bent his head to kiss the side of her neck.

She shuddered, and her head fell back against his shoulder. Her hands reached back convulsively and clamped on his thighs. His hot mouth raised chills wherever it touched, chills that raced over her and caused her lower body to quicken. "Oh, God," she whispered in despair. How could it be like this?

Ben smoothed his hands up her front until they closed over her breasts. He groaned aloud feeling the way they filled his palms. He wanted her naked, he wanted to lie naked with her. His hands were almost rough as he turned her around, his mouth hard and hungry as it closed over hers. Emma arched into his embrace, her arms twining around his neck. She was burning up, and the only thing that could give her ease was his bare skin against hers. She was wanton and knew she should be ashamed, but she wasn't.

Ben dragged his mouth from hers and pressed it to her eyelids, cheeks, and mouth with quick, hard, desperate kisses. "Lie down with me," he coaxed in a ragged voice. "I need you bad, Emma girl."

She could barely think. She was dizzy, clinging to his broad shoulders because her legs felt so wobbly. Lie down with him. She wanted to, she needed to…

"Where?" she asked. Dimly she noticed that her voice sounded as drugged as she felt.

Ben shuddered, and he actually took a step to push her toward an empty stall before he realized he couldn't just tumble her in the hay, right here and now. It was broad daylight. Men were constantly coming and going in the barn; it was a miracle that someone hadn't already interrupted them. He sure as hell didn't want some cowhand gaping at Emma's smooth white body. She was his, and no one else was going to see her.

It took every ounce of his control to drag his hands away from her breasts and cup them around her face. He kissed her again, fiercely. "Come to my room tonight," he said.

Her big brown eyes were dazed, and she licked her lips as if tasting him. Anguish stole into her gaze, along with reality. "I can't," she whispered.

He ground his teeth together. She had to leave this second, or he'd forget what few good intentions he had. While he still could, he released her and sent her on her way with a small push. She went without looking back, stumbling a little as if her legs didn't work right. Ben leaned his head against the top rail of the stall, breathing hard. It was five minutes before he straightened and left the barn, his face taut and pale.

In the loft Celia rolled over onto her back and stared at the dust motes floating above her head. Her eyes were both troubled and curious. Ben had been doing some bad things to Emma, but she hadn't seemed to mind. He'd done the sort of things that Victoria had warned Celia that Garnet and the Major wanted to do to her; thinking of them touching her like that made her feel sick to her stomach. But watching Ben do them to Emma hadn't made her sick; she had felt funny, sort of shaky and excited. Emma hadn't looked sick, either.

Maybe those things were bad only when bad people did them. She felt confused, but was also aware of a calm certainty growing in her. What she had just seen hadn't been wrong. It was new and a bit frightening, but not wrong.

The kitten pounced on her stomach, and absently Celia rubbed its little body. She lay in the dusty loft, staring at the sunbeams, and took the first step into womanhood.

Luis found her late that afternoon over a mile from the house, sitting under a tree and teasing the kitten with a leaf. She looked up and smiled when he rode up, but didn't speak. He swung down from the horse and let the reins trail on the ground. "Your sister is looking for you," he said, sitting down beside her. "Why did you walk so far?"

"I didn't intend to. I was thinking and ended up here. But it's pretty and peaceful here, don't you think?"

Luis studied the endless land around them; it housed so many dangers he never thought of it as peaceful. It was wild, big, but never peaceful. At this moment, however, it was empty and clear of any visible dangers, so he said, "Yes."

Celia lifted the leaf over the kitten's head. It reared up and batted with its tiny paws. She seemed content just to sit and play with the kitten.

Luis said, "We need to go back."

She sighed. "I suppose so." But she didn't get up. She hesitated. "If I—Luis, will you tell me something?"

"If I can, chica."
She turned her head and looked at him. Her face was pale, her dark blue eyes grave. "What men do to women—is it always bad?"
At her words he felt breathless, as if someone had hit him in the stomach. He didn't want to talk about this with her. She was so beautiful. Until now her youth had protected her from him; he had thought of her essentially as a child, despite the ripe swelling of her body. The look in her eyes now, however, was not that of a child.
He inhaled, long and deep. "No," he murmured. "It's bad only if the woman doesn't want to do it, if the man forces her. If they're in love, then it's a beautiful, loving thing for them to do."
She nodded and turned her attention back to the kitten. It rolled onto its back, grabbing at the leaf with all four feet.
"And it makes babies," she said.
"Yes. Sometimes. Not every time."
"I've been afraid of it, afraid someone—a man—would try to do that to me. Garnet wanted to, and so did the Major. They tried to catch me alone, and the thought of them touching me made me sick." It was easier talking to him if she kept her eyes on the kitten. But she could feel his attention on her; it was like the intensity of sunshine. "I thought it was bad. But it was bad only because of them, wasn't it? It isn't bad by itself."
"That's right." His voice was very grave and gentle. "It's people who make it bad. It's like this gun I wear. By itself it's nothing. But when someone holds it, it can be good, it can protect, it can feed—or it can murder. What it does depends on the person who holds it."
The kitten had tired of the leaf and spied Luis's spurs. Flattening itself on its belly, it crept forward in a slow, comical stalking motion. When it was close enough it pounced, batting at the star and making it twirl.
"I don't know anything about men, about their bodies. It seems frightening because I don't know exactly what they look like, or how they do it."
Luis concentrated very hard on the kitten. He knew what she was going to say before she said it, but he prayed that she wouldn't, because he didn't know what he would do if she did—
"May I see you, please?" she whispered. "I want to know. I don't want to be afraid anymore."
His heart stopped, and he closed his eyes. "Chica, no."

"Why?" Then abruptly her face flushed and she turned away. "I thought—because we're friends—but it's bad, isn't it? What I asked of you."
"No, not bad," he croaked. He, who was always at ease with women, who always knew the right thing to say and how to touch them, was at a loss and shaking with tension. "It's just—chica, this thing that men and women do, this lovemaking—I would like to do it with you. You're very beautiful and sweet, and I want you very much. But you should learn these things with someone you love, not with—"
"But I want it to be you, Luis," she said softly. "You're beautiful, too, and you make me feel safe, and warm inside. I want to see you, and touch you, and learn how you're made."
He was simultaneously numb and in pain. She wasn't asking for sex, only for knowledge. She wanted to examine his body. He didn't know how he could say no, when he thought he would die for the pleasure of her hand on him.
He slowly unbuckled his gunbelt. The kitten played around his boots, but he no longer noticed it. Celia moved closer, until she was on her knees beside him. The afternoon sunlight dappled her face and hair, washing her in a golden light. He could barely breathe. Dimly he noticed that she was breathing in soft pants, too.
He unbuckled his other belt and began unfastening his pants. He didn't wear a full union suit, preferring two separate pieces so he could remove the top during the summer when it got hot. He thought of all the times he'd so casually undressed in front of a woman. This time his heart was pounding as he peeled his garments off his hips and down to his thighs.
A slight breeze wafted over his naked flesh. Celia's lips parted and an expression of wonder lit her face. Very gently she reached out and touched him with one finger.
His manhood began to stir. He'd prayed it wouldn't happen, knowing it would. Her warm little palm closed around him.
She gave a soft murmur of delight as he grew to full tumescence in her hand. "You're so beautiful," she said low. "I didn't know it would look like this, or feel so hard and soft all at the same time."
He closed his eyes, groaning with exquisite pain. "Celia, chica. You have to stop—now."
She didn't stop caressing him. "But I don't want to stop."

When his eyes flew open, she smiled at him, a warm, slow, very female smile. "I want to know everything, and I want you to teach me."

It was raining. Victoria thought the weather suited her mood, though she would have preferred the drama of thunder and lightning to this gray, steady drip, drip, drip. The night before, lying in Jake's arms, she had thought she would die from the sharp ecstasy, but today in the gray light she wondered how much more of herself she could lose before there was nothing left. She had been drowning, mindless with sensation and love, her last frail defenses wavering, when she had opened her eyes and seen him watching her with shrewd calculation. He had been gauging her response to him, deliberately taking her higher and higher while feeling none of the giddiness himself. It had been like a dash of cold water, and she had turned her face away from him.

She hadn't expected him to react with such violence, but he had jerked her head back around to face him. His eyes had been green with rage, his neck corded. But his rage had broken his control and he had begun driving into her, hammering his body into hers. Afterward, he had gripped her chin and said in a cold, hard voice, "Don't you ever turn away from me like that again." He forced her to lie close to him all night.

What was it he wanted of her? Why had he been watching her like that? Her lips trembled before she could control them.

He already had the ranch. As her husband, he legally owned everything that had once been hers. He had already deeded half of the land to Ben. She didn't resent him for that; the land was really theirs, after all. But what else did she have that he wanted? He didn't need her at all now; if he wanted to, he could easily be rid of her.

But she had also felt his passion; despite his roughness the night before, she'd felt it in him even then. He had been as much at the mercy of his body as she was to hers. If she truly believed that he could kill her after the nights she had spent in his arms, then she might as well put the gun in his hand because just the belief itself would be the death of her hope, her love. No, he wouldn't kill her. But neither did he love her, and that knowledge was behind all her fears and wild imaginings. Her body was safe with him; her heart was in mortal danger. It took all of her self-control to protect it and keep it hidden from him.

She sighed as she opened the door to Celia's bedroom, dragging her mind back to the matter at hand, which was finding her sister. She had had the

embroidery hoop last, and Victoria couldn't find it.
It had been almost dark the day before when Luis had ridden up with Celia behind him. He'd found her under a tree over a mile away, he'd said, playing with the kitten. Now she had disappeared again, but surely she wasn't walking in the rain.
She went to the kitchen. "Has anyone seen Celia?"
Lola shook her head. Juana said, "I think she went to the barn. She took the kitten so he could play."
Victoria sighed. At least now she didn't have to worry about Celia's safety when she was out like that. She didn't want to find the embroidery hoop bad enough to get wet running down to the barn. She'd just keep looking for it in the house.
She began methodically searching every room and was on her hands and knees looking under the desk in the library when Jake came in. She glanced quickly away, feeling uneasy after the strange violence that had erupted between them.
He tossed his wet hat onto a chair and ran his hands through his hair. "What're you looking for?"
"The embroidery hoop."
"Under my desk?" he asked incredulously.
"Celia had it last."
He understood and reached out to help her as she got to her feet. Victoria would have drawn away, but his fingers tightened on her arm. He closed his hands on her waist to hold her. His voice was low. "Are you all right?"
She knew what he was asking and somberly studied him in the dim light. He smelled of fresh air and dampness, she noticed, but his body heat burned through his rain-spattered clothes. "A little sore, but that's all. You… didn't hurt me."
"I'm sorry. You made me angry and I lost control."
If it got much darker, they would need to light the lamps. The rain pattered on and cool air blew in through the open window. She could feel her own pulse beating through her body. "I'm fine," she whispered. "It doesn't matter."
He drew her forward just a fraction of an inch, but he'd been standing so close already that the movement brushed her breasts against his shirt. She slowly inhaled, feeling her breasts tighten and swell. "I'll make it up to you," he said against her temple.

Her throat was tight, and her eyelids heavy. "You know… you know that there's no need." She had climaxed before he had, and he had groaned aloud at her inner contractions. Even in anger, he had been able to make her respond to him.
He pressed his mouth against her temple, his lips hot on the delicate skin. He covered her breast with his hand. "I think there is."
Her hand was on his shoulder, his powerful muscles firm under her palm. Without thinking she flexed her fingers, her nails biting through the damp cloth of his shirt.
"Jake." Her voice was low. "We can't. The door—not here."
Slowly he released her, his green eyes glittering in the dim gray room. He stepped backward until he reached the door, and with careful restraint shut and locked it. Then he began unbuckling his gunbelt.
Her lower body felt heavy. She watched him disarm himself, then looked around at the library. There were chairs, very comfortable leather chairs, but no nice long sofa where they could lie down. She ought not to let him do this—a lady never would—but they were locked in a shadowy world, surrounded by the smell and sound of rain, and her body was quickening.
He reached for her, his hands sliding up her back to clench in her hair, his mouth coming down over hers in a deep kiss that filled her with his breath and taste.
He lowered her to the floor, and she didn't even notice that the dark wood was hard against her back. She felt his hands opening the buttons of her dress and sliding it off her shoulders. The soft straps of her chemise followed. Her pale bare breasts felt the wash of cool air, then his wet mouth seared her nipple and she moaned.
"You taste sweet… and cool." He gave the heat of his mouth to her breast, and the nipple puckered against his tongue. He signed in deep, almost painful satisfaction, sucking in a rhythm that pinned the tight nub between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.
Victoria moved beneath him, her legs shifting, her hips reaching for his. Her nails were digging into his shoulders, a primitive signal of passion that made his manhood surge against the restraint of his pants. He tugged at the buttons to free himself.
Her senses were so heightened that she could feel her own pulse as the warm blood pumped through her body. She smelled the hot musk of his arousal and shifted to aid him as he fought through the bunched layers of

skirt and petticoats to find her legs. She wore the common, convenient open-crotch drawers, and his fingers went straight to the open seam, sliding into her soft folds. His touch burned like a brand, and she made an incoherent sound that could have been a plea.

He shifted his weight on top of her, opening her legs wider with his own thighs. The motion caught the fabric of her drawers and pulled them to the side, blocking his entry. He reached down, hooked his strong fingers in the opening, and ripped the garment from front to back. Victoria gasped, but didn't protest; she wanted him too much. She reached for him, needing the hot slide of his flesh into hers. She could feel him probing and lifted her hips in silent invitation, but he held back, cupping her chin in his hand and turning her face so he could look at her.

She knew that her soul was in her eyes, and desperately she closed them. It was the same act that had so enraged him the night before, but she couldn't help it. He would plainly see the aching tenderness of her heart, the silent yearning for more than he wanted to offer, and that was more than she could bear.

Jake looked down at her face, cameo pale in the gray, rain-washed light, and his chest tightened as he watched her close him out. Last night he had lashed out in anger, hurting her, but he wouldn't do that again. He murmured a soft reassurance, and slid his arms under her to protect her from the hard floor, as he slowly penetrated. The sensation made both of them catch their breaths, and against her will her eyes flew open.

His face was very close, his breath mingling with hers as he made a small movement that lodged him deeper. "All right?" he asked in a soft, guttural tone.

"Yes." The word was barely audible.

The reassurance was all he needed, and he pushed inward until she had accepted his full length. He watched every nuance of her expression, hungrily soaking in her response. Maybe she didn't trust him, but she wanted him. She was his wife; he was entitled to make love to her as often as he wished, strengthening the sensual bonds and seducing her into trust. Some day when he made love to her, he'd see only passion in her eyes, not the shadowed secrets that lurked there now.

He shuddered as a wave of pleasure washed through him. Not yet, God, not yet. He tightened his arms around her and rolled onto his back, taking her with him in a tangle of skirts and legs. She looked deliciously wanton with

her breasts exposed and her dress rucked up to her waist, her eyes dazed with passion. He put his hands on her hips and guided her motion. He could feel her thighs trembling as they clasped his body, and she bit her lips to hold back a moan, lest anyone hear them.
The floor scrubbed at his shoulder blades, and would be doing the same thing to her knees. Her skirt and petticoats were bunched up, hindering her movement, blocking his view. Their big, comfortable bed upstairs was much better, but there was no way he could wait long enough now for them to get there. He lifted her off himself and got up.
"Jake!" She looked at him, her eyes dazed and bewildered.
"Easy, honey. I'll take care of you." He hoisted her onto the edge of the desk and pushed her skirts up again, then moved forward between her thighs. His entry this time was rougher, but she was ready for him and felt only relief. His thrusts were harder and faster, his mouth hungry over hers. Victoria cried out, the sound muffled. He was burning her alive and she loved it, loved him. Her body was screaming for release. How swiftly she had changed from the prudish young woman who had been horrified when he had seen her bare breasts! Now she would guide his hands or mouth to her breasts when she needed his touch; now she no longer even thought of putting on a nightgown, but crawled naked into his arms. He no longer had to coax her body into surrendering to every new sensation; she was eager for the hot, blinding pleasure of his penetration.
"God… I wish… we were… naked," he said with clenched teeth, his shoulders rigid with tension. He was panting, the speed and rhythm of his strokes approaching frenzy. She cried out, convulsing, and again he caught the sound with his mouth, holding her as she heaved in his arms and her soft internal muscles milked at his erection. He soared to the edge, and held back only because he wanted to feel every one of those small contractions. Even then, the timing was so close that she had barely gone limp in his arms when his back arched and he shook violently, spewing his seed into her. What had begun with slow, dreamy sensuality ended with raw lust, and he felt drained. But he wanted more. He always wanted more. He slumped over her, and began kissing her again.
She moaned, her limbs heavy with exhaustion. He was getting hard inside her again, and she didn't know if she could summon enough energy to respond. Every nerve was tingling, her heart pounding. How could he push

her like this? Always before he'd held her in his arms and let her rest before taking her again. This time he wasn't even pausing.
He loomed over her, his hands curving under her arms and over her shoulders to keep her from sliding on the desktop. His hips hammered and recoiled and hammered again, his shaft reaching deep inside her to her womb. She stared up at him, glassy-eyed; his face was so hard and intent that he looked brutal. His eyes were narrow and molten, the color a deep, hot green. Sweat ran down his face and matted his hair.
The edges of reality blurred and swirled. She heard a high, keening sound and knew it was hers, and he'd made no effort to muffle it.
She was burning, her flesh damp in the cool room. Her body shuddered under the impact of his thrusts. She tried to struggle up, but he pinned her down with his powerful hands. Her inner tension was already unbearable and getting worse. She began to fight him, sobbing with frustration. He controlled her, pushing her higher, his attention focused on her so intently that he was aware of nothing else in the world.
"Tell me," he rasped, wanting those damned shadows out of her eyes, wanting nothing hidden between them.
She was drowning, losing herself. The gray mists were crowding in, her defenses crumbling. The final victory was his, after all. "I love you," she whispered, and a small part of her was stricken even as her flesh shuddered at the climax of pleasure.
Jake crouched over her in writhing orgasm, his mind shattering. She loved him? Elation swelled in him; until that moment he hadn't realized how much he had wanted, needed, for her to love him. But the secrets were still there, because even as she had said the words he'd seen the sadness in her eyes.
Victoria heard both the echo of what she'd said, and the silence of what he didn't say.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She counted again, then a third time, ticking the days off on her fingers to make certain. She had waited each day for the beginning of her monthly time, dreading it because Jake would have to know; husband or not, she

didn't know how to broach such a subject with him. But the day when it should have begun had passed without sign, and a sort of incredulous certainty had begun to grow in her. She was never late, not even by a day. Now, a week later, she had no doubt as to the cause of her body's failure to remain on schedule: she was pregnant.

She wasn't surprised, really, though she hadn't thought it would happen so soon. They had been married barely three weeks. But he'd made love to her every night, at least twice a night, and sometimes during the day, too. One of those times had borne fruit.

A baby. Victoria smoothed her hand down over her flat abdomen, then looked at her own reflection in the mirror. Outwardly, nothing was different. Inwardly, everything was changing. She was both frightened and elated. She carried Jake's child.

He didn't love her, but his child would.

The young woman in the mirror, sitting half-dressed in her petticoats and chemise with her long hair streaming over her shoulders and down her back, had an eerily serene expression on her pale face. Her eyes were calm, although darkened by her introspective mood. Victoria didn't feel calm at all; she felt shaky. She wanted both to cry and laugh. She wanted Jake's arms around her, now, in this moment when she first admitted and faced the fact that his baby was forming inside her. She wanted his strength and his passion. She wanted to lie with him on the white sheets and take him inside her in the act that had created this new life.

Her breasts throbbed, and she put her hands over them. Her eyes closed, and her lips parted. For the first time she didn't regret blurting out that she loved him.

He'd said he would be out all day. She would have to wait through the long hours until he returned home before she could tell him. Should she tell him right away, or wait until they were in bed together?

She would wait and see what his mood was, she decided, as wives had for thousands of years. If he was tired and irritable, she'd wait until after he'd eaten dinner and rested.

As it happened, Jake and Ben got back to the house earlier than expected that afternoon. The sun was a hot red ball low on the horizon and Victoria was helping in the kitchen when she heard the ringing of their boots on the tile floor. She stopped what she was doing, her heart going wild with

excitement. She felt a little dizzy and smiled to herself; was it because of the child or the father?
"Victoria," Jake called.
"I'm in the kitchen." She wiped her hands and hurried out to meet him. Both he and Ben were extremely dusty, their faces caked with mud where their sweat had run. She looked down in dismay at the clumps of dirt they had tracked onto the clean tile. They followed the direction of her gaze, then gave each other amused glances. They weren't accustomed to having to watch where they walked, but in the past three weeks they had been forced to adjust to the realities of living with three genteel women. Even Celia was growing up and becoming amazingly sedate, for Celia.
"We'll bathe outside," Jake said, trying not to smile. "Get us some clean clothes so we won't have to track mud upstairs."
"Certainly," Victoria agreed, giving their boots another appalled look before she went upstairs.
"I thought we were going to have a hot bath," Ben said.
"I haven't lived this long by being stupid," Jake replied, and Ben laughed at them both. They'd killed at an early age and lived the past twenty years by the law of the gun, but here they were, not daring to take another step because of the mud on their boots.
Victoria returned with clothing for both of them, as well as fresh towels and a thick bar of soap. "Supper should be ready by the time you're both clean," she said as she gave them their bundles.
There was already a line of men waiting to use the shower contraption. Cursing and mumbling under their breaths, they resaddled their horses and rode to the river, which was faster than waiting their turn. They stripped and waded into the water, catching their breaths at the chill.
Ben brought it up again. "We could have been having a hot bath."
"We could have been having a war, too." Jake whistled as he soaped himself. "Why didn't you tell her to have some water heated up?"
"She's your wife. It wasn't my place."
Jake grinned. As much as he would have preferred a hot bath, too, he didn't like upsetting Victoria. Like Ben had said, she was his wife. It gave him a pleasant feeling of possessiveness and of belonging. In the days since she'd told him she loved him he'd been treating her with a gentleness he'd never before imagined himself capable of. She hadn't said it again and the sadness was still in her eyes, but knowing that she loved him softened the hard inner

core that had formed the day he'd seen his mother raped and killed. He was even more patient with her maddening reserve and withdrawals, knowing that she loved him.

Ben dunked his dark head, then came up blowing. He rubbed the water out of his face. "Ladies sure are a lot of trouble compared to whores," he muttered.

"But they make life more comfortable."

"Comfortable? Comfortable? We're freezing our asses off in the river instead of taking a bath in a warm tub the way we'd planned because you didn't want to upset your wife by tracking mud upstairs, and you call it comfortable? You've lost your mind."

"We have clean clothes, good food, and fresh sheets on our real beds every night; they smell sweet instead of like cheap perfume and stale whiskey, and they wait on us hand and foot. When was the last time you had to fill your own plate at dinner?"

"We have to watch what we say," Ben pointed out.

"As soon as we lose a button, it's sewn back on." Jake's green eyes glinted with wicked amusement. "Your problem is Emma."

"Ah, goddamn," Ben said in disgust. "That's another thing that's wrong with ladies. A whore rolls over easy, but a lady thinks the world will end if she lets a man in her bed."

"A whore lets any man who has the price get between her legs. Is that what you think Emma should do?"

Ben snarled in bad temper and splashed out of the river to stand on the bank. He rubbed a towel over his muscled body, his hazel eyes stormy. Finally he said, "No, I don't want her to do that."

Jake followed him, the crystal clear water sluicing down his body. He knew how frustrated Ben was feeling, because he remembered how he'd felt every time he had crashed against Victoria's rigid ideas of what was proper and what wasn't. Ladies were far more complicated than whores. A lady demanded more from a man than he wanted to give, but what they offered in return was a whole new way of life. They offered physical comfort, a warm sense of security, a sweet body in the bed all night, every night. Marriage was a high price to pay to get all that, but it was worth it. Even without the ranch he would have married Victoria, he thought, and looked up at the lavender twilight sky with a sense of shock.

After a minute he looked at his brother. "You could marry her," he said.

Ben pulled on his pants. "I'm not a marrying man, Jake. That hasn't changed."
"Then if it's just fucking you want, go to Angelina."
"I don't want Angelina," Ben replied curtly. "Hell, she's been had so many ways she can't tell the difference anymore."
"Exactly."
Ben scowled at him, then finished dressing without saying anything else. He wanted Emma, but not enough to offer marriage and that looked like the only way he'd ever get her. In a way it had been easier when he and Jake had just been drifting around, rootless, planning nothing but killing McLain and taking their ranch back. Well, now they had the ranch and there was no more riding out whenever they got tired of a place. They had a home and responsibilities. Ben wasn't sure he liked the sensation. It wasn't the ranch or the work of it; getting the ranch back had eased something inside him. It was the domesticity that was irritating him, the feeling of being hemmed in by rules. He wanted Emma, but he couldn't have her because of all those damned rules that governed respectable people. Ben realized that he wasn't quite respectable and never would be, any more than Jake would ever be just a rancher. They had lived too many years by the law of the gun. Under the surface the old instincts still ran strong. He just didn't know what to do with them any more.
Supper was ready by the time they got back to the house, and Victoria forced herself to be patient. Another couple of hours wouldn't make any difference; she would find the privacy she needed when they went to bed. She tried to imagine what he would say, how he would react, and found that she couldn't. They had never discussed having children. She felt a twinge of fear and gave him a guarded look, only to look away quickly again when she found him watching her.
She couldn't read him at all. He'd had too many years hiding his thoughts behind his hard face and expressionless eyes. She could see only what he allowed her to see. Sometimes she thought that open enmity would be less nerve-racking than passion from a man she loved but didn't know.
It was still early when he got up from the table and held his hand out to her. She felt the color rush to her face as she allowed him to help her up, and she didn't look at anyone as they walked out of the room. "Good night," Jake said, and Ben, Emma, and Celia each replied as his heavy hand on her waist ushered her up the stairs.

Emma watched them leave and bit her lip at the longing welling up in her. It wasn't just physical need that tormented her, but the need for what Victoria had found with Jake, the belonging expressed in the way he put his arm around her to escort her to their room. She wanted to feel that closeness, the partnership of marriage and a shared life. She turned her head and looked at Ben, at the hard, chiseled features.

He met her gaze and lifted his eyebrows in silent invitation. All she had to do to accept was to get up and walk upstairs. He would surely follow. Heat ran through her, and if he'd been offering more than a night or two, if it had been for forever, she would have gone and forgotten about marriage and propriety. But Ben wanted no claim on him, legal or otherwise. Her chest ached with the pain of having to deny both him and herself. She turned her head away and didn't move from her chair.

"Jake, there's something I need to tell you."

Her tone was troubled and Jake froze, his hands on the tiny buttons that marched down her back. He sensed that whatever it was she had been hiding, she finally trusted him enough to tell him about it, and suddenly he didn't want to know. She loved him; that was enough. He didn't want to hear about anything McLain might have done to her. McLain was dead, damn his soul. How could he hurt them now?

"I don't want to know," he said quietly, and pulled the pins from her hair to let it stream down over his hands in a warm flood.

She whirled to face him. She was pale, her eyes as huge as they had been the night he'd first come to her. "You have to know." She managed a shaky smile, one that faded as quickly as it had formed. "It isn't something I can hide or that will go away."

His stomach knotted. Suddenly Jake saw hell opening up at his feet. A flash of intuition told him what it was, and it made him sick. So that was why she had been so sad and withdrawn, why she had watched him so anxiously at times, why he'd sensed she was hiding something from him. God, why hadn't he thought of this? And how was he supposed to stand it? He couldn't.

Victoria began shaking as she met his hard gaze. "I'm pregnant," she said before she lost the courage to tell him. "I'm having your baby."

The bottom dropped out of his stomach and he stared at her, unable to believe what he'd heard her say. He felt empty, as if his heart and lungs and guts had all been torn out. And then in a rush he was filled with a bitter rage

even stronger than what he had felt twenty years before, when he had watched his mother die.

Victoria's betrayal cut at him like a knife in the gut. How could she have said that, how could she have the gall to expect to pass McLain's child off as his? Did she think he was stupid? That he didn't know McLain had used her as his wife? She hadn't been a virgin the first time Jake had had her, and that was only three weeks ago. If she were pregnant now, the child could only be McLain's. Did she think he didn't know that? It was bad enough that she was carrying that son of a bitch's whelp, but if she thought he would let the little bastard have the Sarratt name, the name of the family its father had murdered—

Black fog clouded the edges of his vision. A dull roaring filled his ears. He saw her pale face, the soft lips that had just voiced a lie so monstrous he couldn't believe it, and without planning, without knowing he was going to do it, he struck her.

The full force of his arm was behind the blow. If he had used his fist instead of his open hand, it would have broken her jaw. Victoria saw it coming, had a split second of comprehension, but that wasn't enough to give her time to move. His hand crashed into her face, slamming her around and to the side. She thudded against the wall and slid to the floor like a broken doll.

He stood over her, his fists clenched and his eyes like green ice. The fires of hell would look like his eyes, she thought dazedly, seeing him through a fog. He was going to kill her, and she was still too numb to protect herself.

"Goddamn you," he said in a hoarse, violent tone. "There's no way in hell I'll let McLain's bastard have my name."

She let her eyes close as she gave in to the grayness rising in her. She wanted to let that blank world claim her; it would be much easier than facing what had just happened. Then comprehension of his words sank in, and she forced her eyes to open again.

She wet her lips and tasted blood. Her tongue felt thick and unwieldy, her lips puffy and numb. It was difficult to form the words but desperation drove her; how could he have drawn such a horrible misconclusion? No matter how hurt she was, she couldn't let him think that, ever. She tried to push herself into a sitting position. "No," she croaked. "Not his baby. Yours."

The rage flared up hotly, but he didn't move or speak. He'd never struck a woman before and part of his brain was horrified at what he'd done; when

she had slammed into the wall he'd known an instant of sheer terror that he might have killed her. But how could she keep saying it was his baby? If she was far enough along to know she was pregnant, then it had to be McLain's.

He leaned down and jerked her to her feet. The pain made her gasp and try to pull away from him. He realized he was far from being in control and dropped his hands. She began to crumple and he grabbed her.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself, straightening her spine with the characteristic motion that wrenched at him. Carefully she stepped back out of his grasp.

He found his own control, but it in no way lessened his rage; it was in his eyes, in the rigid muscles of his face, in the harsh menace of his voice. "I'm not a fool, Victoria. I can count, and there's no way you could know yet if the baby were mine. We've only been married three weeks, not three months."

She was still so dazed that she couldn't formulate the words to tell him, couldn't explain that her menses were a week late and she'd never been late before, not even by a day, couldn't think of all the ways to convince him that the baby was his. The numbness was rapidly leaving her face and behind it came pain.

Her cheek was burning like fire. Blood from her split lip dripped down her chin and she wiped it away, then stared in confusion at the red smear on her fingers.

"How far along are you? God, I knew you were hiding something," he said harshly, shaking his head at his own stupidity. "I just never thought you'd try to pass McLain's bastard off as mine." Abruptly his eyes narrowed as suspicion crossed his face. "Or did you plan it all along? Maybe that's why you didn't kick up a fuss about marrying me. Too bad you weren't smart enough to keep this news to yourself for another month or so; I probably would have believed it was mine, then, at least until it came early. Or are you so far along you were afraid you'd begin showing before another month was up? That's it, isn't it?"

She could only wag her head back and forth, dumb with shock and disbelief at what had happened, what he was saying.

Jake watched her, waiting for an explanation or a denial. He felt caught in a nightmare, once again living through the destruction of his safe and comfortable life, and he desperately needed for her to give him some

explanation that would help him understand what she had done. But she just stood there, the imprint of his hand turning from white to red to purple as the bruising on her face began to show, and her bloody lower lip puffing up. The visual evidence of the damage he'd done made his stomach suddenly twist with nausea.

But still she stood silent and frail. Her hair was straggling across her face and shoulders, her dress hanging half off. Despite himself, he reached out to push her hair away from her face. She flinched from his hand and he let it drop to his side. The heaviness of defeat was beginning to drag at his rage, sapping it away, but there was no way he could let her do what she'd planned.

"It can't live here," he said. "No brat of McLain's is going to be raised on this ranch or bear my name. When it's born, I'll send it back East somewhere. You've got until it's born to decide if you're going to stay here or go with it."

Except for the imprint of his hand, her face was paper white. She shuddered and tried to pull herself together. "You're wrong," she whispered. The words sounded mushy because of her thickened lip, and moving her jaw sent pain shooting along her skull. "You're the father."

"Don't lie to me!" he roared, the anger rushing back. "There's no way you could know you're pregnant if the baby were mine."

She twisted her hands together, racked with pain, at a loss as to how to make him believe her. "I—I'm not certain yet! It's just that… I think I am. My m-monthly time is late, and I've never been late before."

His eyes were like ice. "You're backtracking, and it isn't working. What you said was, 'I'm pregnant, I'm having your baby.' You sounded pretty certain to me, so don't try to change your mind now."

"But it couldn't be the Major's baby!" she cried. "We didn't… he couldn't—" She couldn't finish for the tears clogging her throat.

He stared at her incredulously for a moment, his eyes so cold she felt a chill run down her spine. "McLain humped every woman who'd stand still for him and some who didn't. You can't pretend he wasn't more than capable of doing the same to you. And if he 'couldn't,' why the hell weren't you a virgin the first time I made love to you? Maybe you didn't know a man can tell the difference, but we can. Don't tell me that he 'couldn't,' damn you."

The chill grew colder, and she felt as if the blood would congeal in her veins. She'd told him the truth and he didn't believe her, moreover, there

was nothing she could say to change his mind. There was no proof she was even pregnant; she just knew she was.
And she certainly knew the child wasn't the Major's, but how could she convince Jake of that now? She felt the death knell of her hopes in the heavy beat of her heart against her rib cage; if he had ever known her at all, if he had ever felt anything for her, he would realize she could never betray him in such a despicable manner. But now, in the most awful way, she'd learned once and for all that he had never even come close to loving her.
Her ears were ringing, her face burning. Shock and pain numbed her; she stared at him as if she didn't recognize him, her eyes shadowed pools in a bloodless face. She moved back from him another step. "Count the days," she finally said in a dull, even tone. "From the night you first came to me until this baby is born, count them, damn you! Then tell me if you still think it came early. I've been yours for three weeks now. You say I couldn't possibly know if I was carrying a child unless I was a couple of months along, so you think this baby must be the Major's. But I can tell, and I do know. I've known that I've been with child for one week, not four! So you count the days, and you wait and see if this baby comes in less than nine full months. But, while you're waiting, while you watch the sixth, and seventh, and eighth months go by, remember this: Even if it has your face so that you can't deny it, I'll take it away from you, because you don't have anything except hate to give to a child!"
She pulled her sagging dress up over her shoulders and lifted her skirts, sweeping by him just as she had in the beginning, as if she would be contaminated if she touched him. His jaw set, Jake watched her walk from the room. He wanted to go after her, to shake her and vent his rage at her for harboring McLain's child in her body; her flesh that belonged to him, damn it! But there had been something in her eyes, a mixture of hurt and rage that gave him pause. Victoria had cursed at him; he'd never heard her swear before, never seen her so distraught. Uncertainty gnawed at him. Could she have been telling the truth?
No. McLain had been capable, all right.
But, somehow, Victoria had always seemed so innocent. The night he had first taken her, she'd been unmistakably shocked by the things he'd wanted to do, the things he'd done. All right, so she hadn't liked it with the Major; he could understand that. But there was no way he could believe McLain

hadn't slept with her. The Major had been a lot of things, but impotent wasn't one of them.

Victoria went into one of the spare bedrooms and carefully locked the door, not because she thought Jake would try to enter but to insure that no one else did. What would she say if Emma or Celia came in? She was too shattered even to try to explain.

There was no linen on the bed, no fresh cool water in which to soak a cloth to press to her burning cheek. But at least there was a lamp, which she lit. She felt as if she might vomit, but a quick search of the room yielded neither basin nor chamberpot. She sank onto the bare mattress, her teeth clenched together to hold back the surge of nausea. The pressure made her jaw ache, and she probed that side of her face with cautious fingers. Her cheek was puffy and sore, but she didn't think anything was broken.

She tried to think, tried to sort out her rioting emotions, but no order presented itself. Jake didn't believe the baby was his. He had struck her. Moreover, he actually thought her capable of that sort of betrayal.

This would unavoidably affect everyone else in the house, like waves rippling out from a stone tossed into a lake. She regretted that, both for their discomfort and her own humiliation. Still, she knew there was nothing she could do to hide their estrangement.

She thought of packing in the morning and leaving immediately, and a harsh, bitter little laugh erupted into the silence. She was still in exactly the same situation she had been in as the Major's wife; she had no money of her own, and no way of leaving without Jake's permission and help. But while she had desperately yearned to be away from the Major, she didn't want to run now. She wanted to stay.

It grew slowly, a hard, bright little kernel of anger, as she realized she had meant every word she had said to Jake. She had asked why he had deliberately lied to her about his identity, but she hadn't really berated him for it. She had accepted it, accommodated him in marriage to give him back the ranch that had been stolen from him, given herself heart and soul to him. He had taken all of this and returned only hate. His hatred for the Major was all-consuming; even now, after the man was dead and buried, it still colored everything Jake thought and did.

No, she wouldn't make it easy for him by running away. She wanted to be right under his nose so he could see every inch she grew as her belly expanded with his child. She wanted him to count the days, and sweat. She

wanted remorse to eat him alive, the same way his precious hatred had consumed him. Let him sleep with guilt as he had slept with vengeance and mistrust.

If she hadn't loved him so much, she would never have felt so betrayed by his lack of trust in her word, in her very integrity. He wasn't the only one who craved vengeance. She realized that she might not feel the same way in a few days, but right now she wanted to hurt him as he had hurt her. She couldn't take her revenge with a bullet, but he wouldn't walk away unscathed. She swore it.

The next morning after he'd left the house, she went into their bedroom and moved her things to the spare room. She made up the bed, carried in both chamberpot and washbasin, made certain the lamp was filled and that there was a supply of fresh candles if she needed them.

The injured side of her face was more stiff than actually painful. Her cut lip and the knot on the side of her head where she had slammed into the wall were more painful than her face.

Emma opened the door as she sat on the floor, putting her underwear away in a dresser drawer. "Victoria, what on earth are you doing?"

"Moving my things into this room," she replied calmly.

"So I see, but why?"

Victoria turned to look at Emma, inadvertently revealing the bruised side of her face. Emma gasped and rushed forward. "Your face! What happened?"

"I fell," Victoria said flatly.

Concern darkened Emma's eyes, then her gaze narrowed as she put two and two together.

"I don't want the household upset," Victoria said, her voice steady. "As far as everyone is concerned, I slipped and fell and hit my face."

"Yes, of course," Emma agreed blankly.

"Jake and I have quarreled."

Emma thought Victoria was understating that obvious fact. "Is there anything I can do?"

Victoria looked down at the soft cotton chemises folded in her lap and didn't answer the question. Instead she said, "I'm going to have a baby."

Emma gasped. "But that's wonderful!"

"I thought so, yes."

"Jake… doesn't?"

"He doesn't think he's the father. He accused me of trying to pass the Major's child off as his."
"Dear God." Emma sank down beside Victoria. It was so ridiculous she found it hard to believe. "Didn't you tell him that the Major couldn't… do that?"
"Yes. He didn't believe me about that, either. We both know that the Major still visited Angelina, and evidently he was incapable only with me." Thank God, she mentally added.
"But why would he assume that the baby isn't his?" Emma was horrified at Jake's conclusion.
"Because we've only been married for three weeks. He says I couldn't possibly know I'm pregnant in such a short time if it were his. You know how regular my monthlies have always been," she said bitterly. "I'm a week late. What else could it be? I was so excited that I wanted him to know right away, so I told him. It's always been so convenient, knowing exactly what day my time of the month would start, but now I wish I had been so irregular that it would have been two months before I noticed!"
Emma put her hand on Victoria's arm. "I'm sorry," she said helplessly. "I don't know what to say."
"There's nothing left to be said." Jake had said it all.
"Perhaps if I talked to him—"
"No." She managed a smile and hugged Emma. "I know you're willing and I appreciate it, but he won't believe you, either."
"We won't know unless I try," Emma said gently.
"Even if he changes his mind, it won't change the fact that he thought me capable of such a despicable trick."
"But I want to do something!"
"You can. Try not to let this upset Celia too much, and carry on just as you normally would have. We have to live in this house; I don't want to embroil everyone in our argument."
"Do you think that's possible?"
Victoria managed a tired smile. "Probably not, but I'm going to try."
Jake hadn't chased after Victoria the night before because he'd still been so enraged himself. He'd slept very little, lying on top of the bed without even bothering to remove his boots, and was up before dawn. He pushed himself hard all day, doing the most physical work he could find, hoping to tire himself so much that it would take the edge off his anger. When he finally

rode toward home, every muscle in him was protesting. He welcomed the discomfort.

He didn't see Victoria downstairs, though Emma was whisking about making certain the table was set for supper. Things looked normal enough, though he knew they weren't. He slowly climbed the stairs to their bedroom, his heart thudding in his chest. He'd have to apologize to her for hitting her, it had been tormenting him all day. It would never happen again, but he knew he would have to work hard to earn her trust again so that she could believe that. He opened the door, braced for his first sight of her since their fight, but the room was empty.

The reprieve left him feeling a little flat. He tossed his hat aside and stripped off his dirty shirt, then poured water into the basin and leaned over to wash his face. As he straightened, he realized that the room seemed different, not just empty.

His spine slowly stiffened as he looked around. His gaze lit on the dressing table, and he examined its bare surface. With two quick strides he reached the armoire and flung the doors open. His clothes remained, but there was only an empty space where Victoria's dresses had hung. He searched the dresser where she had kept her underwear, and wasn't surprised to find them gone. Now he knew why the room had seemed so empty; it wasn't missing just Victoria herself, but every sign of her occupancy. She had moved out of their bedroom.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Will Garnet had run fast, but he hadn't run far. He didn't go to Santa Fe; it was too likely he'd eventually run into one of the Sarratts, damn their black souls to hell. He'd gone to Albuquerque with the handful of men who had run with him, and hunkered down there to think things over.

All in all, he didn't much like his position. He could keep on drifting, change his name, and that didn't matter much to him if he thought the Sarratts would let the matter drop. Hell, they had their damned ranch back, didn't they? But he'd met up with Floyd Hibbs in one of the saloons; Floyd had been out in one of the upper ranges when all the fighting had gone on, but he hadn't much liked the way things had changed and had packed up his

gear and left. What really worried Garnet was that Floyd said Jake Roper and Jacob Sarratt were one and the same, and that his brother was one mean-lookin' son of a bitch, too.

So, both of the Sarratts had lived, and the older one had been right under his nose for months. He'd always known there was a reason why he didn't like the bastard. The Major was dead, and damned if Roper—Sarratt—hadn't married McLain's high-nosed widow. Garnet remembered Jake Sarratt's cold green eyes, and he didn't think there was a snowball's chance in hell that he and his brother wouldn't be coming after him.

He could run, but he didn't think they would give up until they got him. He had put lead in both of them, something they weren't likely to let pass.

It didn't set right with him, letting Sarratt hunt him like he was a rabbit. So the thing to do was something they wouldn't expect.

He still wanted that little gal, Celia, more now than before. He dreamed about her at night, dreamed how close he'd been to getting her. He'd about been ready to put a bullet in McLain himself when the Sarratts had rode in, and if he'd just done it a day sooner, nothing would have kept him from having her.

He still wanted that ranch, too. It should've been his. McLain hadn't done nothing but shoot the Sarratt woman after humping her; it had been he, Garnet, who had put a bullet in Duncan Sarratt's head, and who'd shot up the two boys. The little bastards should've died. Hell, McLain had been right all along when he'd been yapping about not finding the bodies, that the Sarratts were coming back. He'd been crazy, but he'd been right.

Garnet thoujght about it a lot. He didn't want to rush into nothing; he wanted everything planned out real careful. But he wanted that ranch, and more than anything he wanted the girl. If he could get together enough men, he just might consider turning the table on the Sarratts one last time.

The situation between them had stretched into two miserable weeks before Jake sought her out. "Don't you think this has gone on long enough?" he asked curtly.

She didn't look up from the button she was sewing on to one of his shirts. "What has?"

"This situation."

"Actually, no. I expect it to go on for some months."

He clenched his teeth. He'd set his mind to apologize several times, but she always froze him out. Whenever he came near her, that patrician little nose

would go in the air and she would leave the room. If she had to speak to him, she did it in tones so frosty that no one was left in doubt that the boss wasn't on good terms with his missus. And it went without saying that she never looked at him anymore.
His temper was frayed from the strain. He'd been infuriated when she had moved out of their bedroom, but at the time he'd decided it was better if they slept apart. His own rage had still been too close to the surface. But he was in control now and decided they should make the best of the situation. It would be easier on everyone in the house if they declared a truce.
"I want you to move back into our bedroom."
"Thank you, no."
With that cool dismissal she put the shirt in her sewing basket and got to her feet. Knowing that she was about to leave him talking to an empty room, Jake grabbed her arms.
"You're staying right here until I'm finished," he snapped.
She didn't bother to struggle. "You're hurting my arms."
He eased the pressure, but didn't release her. This close he could see the velvety texture of her skin, reminding him of the swelling and bruising that had so recently faded from her face. Every time he'd looked at her, the knowledge that he'd struck her that hard had burned like acid in his soul. "I won't ever hit you again, Victoria," he said in a low voice. "I give you my word."
She didn't respond; she was like stone, staring straight ahead. Her faint sweet scent teased him. He fought the urge to lean down and press his face to her neck in pursuit of that elusive fragrance. He began to grow hard but wasn't surprised. Hell, not even knowing that she was carrying McLain's brat could stop him from burning for her. He didn't know how far along she was, but her waist was still slender and she still walked with that provocative grace that drew him like a lodestone. That walk might turn into a pregnant waddle soon, but for now it made his heart pound.
He wanted her back in his bed, while there was still time. After the baby became obvious, it would drive him crazy to lie beside her and know it wasn't his, to be reminded every time he looked at her that she had belonged to McLain. Damn the bastard, even from the grave he had reached out to destroy his life.
"Did you hear me?" he asked.

Victoria looked straight ahead. "Yes, I heard you. Believing you is something entirely different."
His hands clenched again. "I give you my word."
"I put as much faith in your word as you do in mine."
Jake released her, dropping his hands as if she had burned him. He was fed up with the situation. It was time for it to end. "Move back into our bedroom. Tonight."
"No."
"I'll do it for you if I have to."
"Are you going to kick down my door?" she asked without interest. "Drag me screaming into your room? Because you'll have to do that, Jake. I won't walk back into that room as if nothing has happened."
"I'm not asking you to pretend nothing happened. I'd give a year of my life if I hadn't hit you, and ten years if you weren't carrying that little bastard—"
She slapped him, the sound sharp in the room. It happened before she realized she was going to do it. She had never felt such blind rage before and she had put all of her strength into the blow. Part of her was aghast that she had done such a thing, but another more primitive part was dismayed that she had done so little damage. The blow whipped his head around, but he remained solidly on his feet.
She was looking him in the eye now, as he'd wanted, but he didn't see any love and forgiveness in her face. She was white and trembling with anger, her eyes like blue fire. She went up on tiptoe to thrust her face close to his. "Don't you ever call my baby a bastard again." The words were even and said through clenched teeth. She looked ready to kill him, or die trying.
Desire hit him in the gut. He'd seen Victoria bravely facing down Garnet, gentle with Celia, wild and passionate as he made love to her, an icy queen disdaining even to look at him, but this was new, this was a tigress ready to claw him to pieces. His erection pushed painfully against his pants as lust fogged his brain. He was reaching for her, everything forgotten but the burning urge to mate, when she suddenly turned even whiter and stepped back.
She clapped her hand over her mouth and swallowed convulsively. Astonishment wiped the rage from her face. She swallowed once more, then turned and ran.
She prayed she would make it to the privacy of her bedroom and not disgrace herself by vomiting on the stairs. Cold sweat broke out on her, and

she staggered a bit on the steps. She should have gone outside; even if someone saw her it would have been better than the mess she was about to make…

She made it to her bedroom, and the basin. Her insides felt as if they were coming up. She heard someone shouting, but she was heaving so convulsively that her ears were roaring. It had hit her with the force of a train, following immediately on the heels of that incredible, blinding anger, and she hadn't been prepared for either.

There was a strong arm around her waist and a hand on her forehead; without them she would have fallen. She was dimly aware of others rushing into the bedroom, of sympathetic murmurs. She sagged and was caught up in Jake's powerful arms. She knew it was him, knew it was he who had held her upright over the basin, but right now she didn't care.

"Put her on the bed, Señor Jake," Carmita instructed.

He did as Carmita put a cloth into Emma's hand. Victoria became aware of someone washing her face with a wonderfully cold, wet cloth. She saw it was Emma and was so relieved she murmured, "I've never been so sick before."

Emma murmured words of comfort as Carmita moved toward the door. "Keep washing her face, señorita, while I get her something to eat."

Jake stared at the housekeeper as if she had lost her mind. "She doesn't need anything to eat," he told her. "She's sick."

Carmita patted his arm. "She is sick with the baby," she explained as she left to go to the kitchen. "It will settle her stomach to have something in it. Trust me, I know."

Sick with the baby. He stared at his wife, lying limp and pale in the bed she didn't want to share with him. He knew women were nauseated when they were pregnant, but from the information he'd heard tossed around in saloons it came real early in the pregnancy. Victoria should have felt it well before now, but she had sounded frightened by what had just happened to her. And if she'd been vomiting for the past month or so, he hadn't known.

He went to the bed where Emma was slowly wiping Victoria's face with the cloth. Victoria's breathing was slower now, but she was still deathly pale and her eyes were closed. "Shouldn't she be getting over this by now?" he asked, his tone rougher than he'd intended.

Emma didn't look up. "It's just beginning."

He stepped back. Either Emma was lying or Victoria had duped her, too. Once he would never have believed Victoria capable of such deception, but then he would never have believed her capable of the killing rage he'd seen in her eyes just a short while ago, either. He couldn't understand why she was so fiercely protective of the baby she carried, since she had hated its father; he felt as betrayed by that as he did by the fact that she had tried to give it his name. But a mother of any species was ten times more dangerous when protecting her young than a hungry male ever was. He had underestimated the strength of that instinct in Victoria. When he looked at it like that he could almost forgive her.

Carmita rushed back into the room with a plain tortilla and a cup of water. She sat on the bed and tore off a small portion of the tortilla which she pushed between Victoria's lips, despite her weak protest.

"You must eat it, señora. It will settle your stomach, you'll see."

Victoria didn't much care; she was beyond caring. But she chewed the flat-tasting tortilla and swallowed. To her vague surprise her stomach didn't revolt. Carmita fed her half of the tortilla, then gave her a small sip of water.

"That's enough for now, señora. Rest and soon you'll feel much better."

Victoria willingly closed her eyes. She heard rustles of clothing and retreating footsteps, then the door closed and she inhaled once, deeply, and slept.

It was a short nap, but when she woke half an hour later she felt so well that it was hard to believe she'd been so violently ill less than an hour before. She lay still for a moment just to be sure, but her stomach was blissfully steady. She opened her eyes, sat up, and found Jake watching her.

She was shocked to realize he'd been sitting there the whole time. She saw a faint red mark on his tanned cheek. It was the only remaining evidence of her slap, and it astonished her anew. She'd never before in her life struck another human being.

"Why are you here?" she asked, sliding off the bed. With Jake anywhere close by, lying on a bed was risky.

"I wanted to make certain you're all right."

"I feel fine." She walked to the mirror and began repairing the damage done to her hair.

He came up behind her, dwarfing her reflection. "Come back to our room, Victoria."

She could feel the force of his will like an iron hand pressing down on her. He fully expected her to obey him; after all, his will had prevailed in everything from the very first. He had the power to enforce his orders and was willing to do whatever was necessary. She had been trained to believe it was a wife's duty to obey her husband; if the issue had been anything less important, she knew she would have given in without a struggle. But she couldn't give in on this. She gave her head a slow shake. "No."

He put his hands on her waist and drew her back against him. His head dipped and he pressed his mouth to her hair. "You need someone to look after you if you get sick during the night."

The heat from his body made her weak. What he offered weakened her, all the more so because it would have been so right for her baby's father to lie beside her during the nights and hold her while she was ill. But she couldn't go back into his arms knowing he hated the life growing in her, knowing that he wanted her back only for the sexual pleasure she could give him. It would be impossible for him to deny that charge, she thought, since she could feel his hard length against her buttocks.

It would have been so easy to let herself relax, to lie back against him and let his strength support her. Because it was so easy, she didn't dare let herself do it for a minute. She straightened and returned her attention to the task of pinning up her hair. "If I need anyone, I'll call Emma."

"Why disturb Emma when you could be in bed with me?"

"Why be in bed with you when I could disturb Emma?"

Anger darkened his face and drew his brows down. "I've tried to reason with you, but now I'm telling you. Put your things back in our bedroom and your ass back in our bed tonight, or I'll do it even if I have to carry you over my shoulder for the entire household to see."

"Maybe if you're violent enough you'll be able to make me lose the baby." Her hissed words stunned him. For the first time he realized that if he did move her back into their bedroom he really would have to use force to do it. Until now he'd imagined that their estrangement had continued due to his own grievances, that when his anger calmed enough for him to tell her to return, she would do it. He'd expected her to balk, expected recriminations, expected to have to give her his sincere apology for having struck her and his equally sincere promise that it would never happen again, but he'd also fully expected to have her back in his bed that very night.

But now he saw that while he might be ready to end their estrangement, she wasn't. She wasn't about to forgive him. She was angry at him, and he had his stinging cheek to prove it. If his cheek was still burning, how had her face felt after his blow? Her slap had snapped his head around, but his had knocked her off her feet. A woman was helpless against a man, and he knew it. He'd never felt anything but contempt for a man who raised his hand to a woman, and now his contempt was turned on himself.
"No," he said in a tight, strained voice. "I won't do anything to hurt you or the baby."
"Then you'll leave us alone."
"Jesus." He was suddenly tired, as if he'd put in a long day branding calves. Victoria was as unbending as steel, and he didn't know what else he could say. He'd sworn he wouldn't hurt her, but it hadn't made any difference. Maybe he hadn't given her enough time, maybe her pregnancy was making her irrational. He didn't know what it was, but he was wary of pushing her too far.
"All right, I'll leave you alone. When you decide you're ready to sleep with me again, all you have to do is open the door and crawl into bed. But don't wait too long. I might find some other woman who's willing to do what you won't."
She waited until he got to the door, then said, "Like the Major?"
He froze for a moment, his back stiffening, then left the room without a word.
Victoria dragged through the days. The symptoms of early pregnancy were upon her with a vengeance. Some mornings she was so sick that nothing seemed to settle her stomach. Even on the days when she thought the nausea would be mild, it took only a stray odor to send her stumbling for a basin or chamberpot. Her bladder seemed to be permanently and uncomfortably full; her sleep was so disturbed by her frequent trips to the chamberpot that she was dull and sleepy during the day. Most of all, her emotions were rioting. She cried easily, and lecturing herself had no effect on the endless tears.
The household was divided into those who knew and those who didn't. Carmita, Lola, Juana, and Celia knew only that Victoria was pregnant and were full of cheerful planning and advice on childbirth, child-rearing, and names. They knew Jake and Victoria had quarreled, but didn't begin to suspect the extent of it.

Emma and Ben were the only other people who knew the circumstances behind Victoria's move to a separate bedroom. Ben was scrupulously polite to her, but there was a chill in his eyes. Emma didn't rebuke Jake by either word or deed, but she was cold to Ben because she felt he didn't have any right to pass judgment on Victoria.

The only censure Jake felt was from Victoria, and he endured it. What else could he do? She was too sick for him to press the issue, and as the days became weeks his biting anger changed to concern. Rather than gaining weight, she had lost several pounds. Her waist was reed-slender and her dresses were becoming loose. Her complexion was alternately pale, gray, and greenish, and there were permanent dark circles under her eyes.

She should be showing her pregnancy by now, if everything were normal. He lay awake at night, tormented by the worry that something had gone wrong. Why wasn't the sickness going away as he'd heard it should well before now? He wasn't concerned for the baby, but about the possibility that he might lose Victoria, too. He began remaining close to the house as much as he could, so he would be on hand if she became seriously ill. God, if she would only stop vomiting so much. Almost nothing stayed down.

But being so ill hadn't changed her hostility toward him. It was in her eyes every time she looked at him, in the way she carefully kept out of his reach and answered him only in a one-syllable monotone, if possible.

She hadn't forgiven him. He was the one wronged, but she hadn't forgiven him. For the first time he began to wonder if she really would leave after the baby was born, and how he would handle it if she chose McLain's child over him. The only alternative, though, was to let her raise the child here on his ranch, and that he couldn't do.

"Victoria and Jake aren't happy," Celia told Luis, lying in his arms beneath a tree. They were in the middle of a copse, hidden from view by anyone who might happen by. They had become adept at finding places to make love, and Celia mildly enjoyed the intrigue. These past weeks had been the happiest of her life, as if all the pieces had finally come together and she was what she had been meant to be. Making love with Luis was so natural and perfect that she didn't give a thought to the rules and restrictions Victoria had taught her. Celia was by nature a complete sensualist, and she had taken to lovemaking with guilt-free enthusiasm.

"No one is happy all the time," he said lazily. They were lying naked on a blanket, and he was sated from their loving.

"But they aren't happy at all now. Victoria looks so ill; I'm worried about her. And she won't speak to Jake at all unless he speaks to her first."
"They've just had a quarrel, that's all. They'll make up."
"It's been weeks now, and they haven't made up."
Luis acknowledged that Jake had certainly been in a bad mood for a long time now. He hadn't wondered at the reason, having more or less assumed it had something to do with Victoria being pregnant. Pregnant women could be hell to live with, he knew. And with Victoria being so ill Jake obviously hadn't been finding any pleasure in bed, which in Luis's opinion was enough to make any man bad-tempered.
Celia propped up on an elbow, her golden hair spilling to the side and covering his shoulder. Her dark blue eyes were sad. "I don't think Jake wants the baby."
"Why do you say that, chica? Most men are proud when their wives become pregnant."
"He doesn't like to talk about the baby. He doesn't seem excited about it at all, and a lot of times he'll get up and walk out of the room if we start talking about it."
It sounded to Luis as if there was very serious trouble with the boss's marriage, but there was nothing he could do about it. The delicate beauty of Celia's breasts drew him, and he circled one nipple with his forefinger, fascinated by the contrast between his brown skin and the milky fairness of hers. She stopped talking and drew in a breath, as he had known she would, her eyes getting darker and her lashes lowering.
"Perhaps they aren't happy, but I am," he said in the slower, deeper tones of arousal.
She smiled, the calm, confident smile of a woman that was new to her. She stroked her hand down his sleek, powerful body and closed it around his erection. "Yes, you look happy," she said as she bent to kiss him, but the real happiness was in herself.
He was so beautiful he took her breath away. She lived every day for the time when they would slip away and she would be in his arms again. Loving him was so wonderful she couldn't associate what they did together with what the Major and Garnet had wanted to do with her. Celia didn't dream of Luis in terms of marriage and babies, ideas that were alien to her because she had always lived only for the moment. She dreamed of him as he was now, naked and reaching for her, his dark eyes hot with passion.

Victoria was having a good day, finally, so Emma took advantage of it and slipped out to the stables. She quickly saddled her horse and rode out, desperate to get out of the house for just a little while. If all women got as sick as Victoria had with this baby, she didn't understand how a woman could bear to have more than one. If it went on much longer, Victoria would be dangerously weak.

The gelding had been feeling pent-up, too; she gave him his head and he stretched out in a full gallop. The rush of air cleared the cobwebs from her mind. She lost some of her hairpins and her hair came tumbling down, but she didn't care. For just an hour she was free.

Over the thunder of her own horse's hooves, she didn't hear the other horse coming up behind her until a bobbing head stretched out past her knee and a gloved hand reached in front to take her reins. Startled, she swung her riding crop before she saw who it was, and Ben flung up his arm to keep the whip from landing across his face.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yelled, pulling both horses to a stop.

Emma was stricken at what she had nearly done. "I'm sorry," she said, her cheeks losing their color. "I didn't know who it was. Why did you grab my reins?"

"I thought the horse was out of control."

She shook her head. "No, I was just letting him run. He's been as cooped up as I have." She gave him a quick glance. "It seems we both were mistaken, weren't we?"

Ben ignored that. "I told you not to ride alone."

She sat in the saddle and looked at him with an expression that calmly denied him the right to tell her what to do. She was too tired to fight, but she simply wasn't going to sit in the house like a child if she wanted to ride.

He sighed and kneed his horse away from hers. "If you want to ride, then let's ride."

She did, joyfully. She was surprised to see it was late summer; the grasses were getting brittle and had a hint of yellow to them. They had arrived in the spring, but she didn't really remember much about it; the strain of surviving those weeks with the Major had taken all of her attention. It had been June, hot and dusty, when they had tried to escape. Now it was late in August, with only a few short weeks left before the first frost. She had missed the summer. It was disorienting.

She let the gelding run until he slowed of his own accord, blowing and tossing his head with joy. She patted his steaming neck as Ben reined in to keep pace with her.
She looked around at the broad meadow, with the craggy peaks bordering it to the north, and the tall grasses waving in the slight breeze. You could see for miles and she was amazed at the beauty of the land.
The horses slowed, then halted completely, lowering their heads to crop at the grass.
Ben removed his hat and wiped his sweaty forehead on his sleeve. His dark hair was damp, too, and his face was dusty. His hazel eyes were clear and penetrating. He said quietly, "Emma girl, are you ever going to come to me?"
A pang went through her. If he had tried to seduce her she thought she could have resisted him more easily, but it was incredibly hard to deny this simple invitation. "I want to," she said, the truth somehow easy to accept and admit out here in this high, empty meadow. "But how can I?"
"Easily. All you have to do is open my door. Or hold out your hand to me right now. That's all. I'll do the rest."
He saw the flicker of fear on her face and was puzzled. "I won't hurt you," he said in husky promise. "I won't lie and say the first time won't be hard for you, but I'll take care of you. I'll make certain you enjoy it, too. You don't need to be afraid of me."
"I'm not afraid, not of you," she quickly denied. Her brown eyes were as velvety as a doe's.
"Then what are you afraid of?"
She looked away from him, her eyes going to the mountains and the blue sky beyond. "All of it, I think. The act itself. It isn't the same for a woman as it is for a man. From what I can tell, for a man it's a few minutes of pleasure, forgotten as soon as he gets up, without meaning to him until the next time he wants to do it. For a woman…"
"For a woman it's a huge step. It's trusting a man not to hurt her. It's taking a chance of pregnancy, which will ruin her life and the life of her child if she isn't married, and could kill her even if she is married. It isn't just taking a man into her body, it's taking him into her life, because the same act that means nothing to him can affect her for the rest of her days."
"It doesn't matter that much to whores."

"Is that what you want me to be? A whore? They do it for money, with any man who has the money. It's sad. They're sad."
He said harshly, "I don't want you to be a whore." He didn't want emptiness in Emma's eyes when he made love to her, he wanted to see wonder, and blind pleasure, and trust. He wanted her to see only him. "I wouldn't abandon you if I made you pregnant. I'm here to stay. Look at Jake; he didn't abandon Victoria, and it's not even his baby."
Emma rounded on him so fiercely he drew back, wary that she might use her riding crop on him after all. "Jake's a fool," she snapped. "Of course it's his baby."
He didn't take kindly to having Jake called names, and his eyes narrowed. "She told him just a mite too soon, don't you think?"
"She knew right away." Emma wasn't about to get into a discussion of how Victoria had known so quickly, but she wasn't finished. "It couldn't be the Major's child, because he didn't… do that to her."
"Yeah," Ben said cynically. "She tried to convince Jake of that. But why would any man not make love to his wife? Victoria's a good-looking woman."
She was flushed with anger. "He tried, but couldn't."
"Why couldn't he? It's common knowledge that he could with Angelina."
"I don't know why he couldn't with Victoria. He tried the first two nights they were married, but couldn't do it. He left her alone after that."
"How do you know? Were you in their bedroom watching?"
"She told me the next morning," Emma answered. "I know most women don't talk about things like that, but Victoria and I are very close. We've been together all of our lives. She was so frightened on their wedding night because she didn't know what was going to happen. She married him only because we were all starving and he said he'd give money to her parents if she'd marry him."
Emma's words were strong and certain. Ben frowned, thinking. What if Jake was wrong?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"You interested?" Garnet asked the man sitting across from him. The surface of the saloon table between them was pocked and gouged, and it carried myriad sticky rings where overflowing glasses had been set. The other man's face was almost as pocked and gouged as the table.
Bullfrog Espy took a long, slow drink of beer before adding another wet ring to the table. His eyes were the color of dingy water, and there was a cold, lifeless quality to them. "How many men you reckon it'll take?" he finally asked in a light, high-pitched voice that could have been a woman's. His voice had earned him his nick-name "Bullfrog" because nobody in their right mind would call a man his size and temperament "Squeaky."
"Fifty, or thereabouts."
"That's a lot of men. Ain't fifty men I know that I'd trust."
Garnet shrugged. He didn't trust anyone. "It don't matter if we can trust 'em, just as long as they're willing to use a gun."
"And you ain't interested in the ranch?"
"You can have the damn ranch. It's the girl I want."
"Mebbe I'll want her too. It's been a while since I had a white girl."
"She's not the only white woman. Her sister and cousin are there, too. They're young, good-looking women. But I want this one."
Bullfrog didn't fidget aimlessly the way most men did, and his stillness got on Garnet's nerves. But he was fast with a gun and didn't mind killing. Some folks even said he enjoyed it. "Jake Roper, huh? He's a fast son of a bitch. I seen him in El Paso one year."
Garnet smiled, a slow movement of his mouth that didn't ease the cold ruthlessness of his eyes. "Don't matter how fast a man is if you're behind him."
Bullfrog lifted the glass again. "That's true," he said.
The sunlight streaked across the tiles in the foyer, nothing like the night when the shadowed nightmare had taken place. But when the heavy front door opened and the shadow of someone's head and torso spilled across the tiles, something flashed in Jake's head. It was exactly as it had been the night he'd looked down and seen his father's body sprawled on the floor. Blood drummed in his temples. He stood frozen just outside the library door, his face twisting as the hot tide of hate consumed him. There, to the left of the stairs, was where his mother had lain with her face bruised and distorted by McLain's fist, where he had raped her while her husband's body lay only a few feet away. Her blood and brains had pooled on those tiles.

God damn McLain's soul to roast in hell! If he even had a soul.
He and Ben had watched him die, but they hadn't won. McLain still lived within these walls, within the home he'd fouled with his presence. His flesh and blood still lived in Victoria's body. The sight of her now, as she cast the shadow that had awakened Jake's memories, enraged him all the more.
She had been feeling well enough lately to get out of the house; the vomiting was gradually easing. Autumn was coming, and coming soon. It was September, and the aspens were golden.
She closed the door and stood still for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the light in the house. There was no movement to attract her attention, no sound, but suddenly the hair on the back of her neck raised up as a sense of menace chilled her. She jerked her head around and saw Jake.
His face was a twisted mask of hate, his eyes like green coals.
In that split second of recognition, she was terrified. He looked as if he wanted to tear her apart with his bare hands. Without thought, obeying some wild instinct, she ran.
Jake started, pulling his mind from the past as she bolted up the stairs. He started moving toward the steps, his warning call sharp. "Victoria! Watch the steps!"
By some miracle she didn't stumble. When the wave of dizziness hit her, she managed to grasp the banister with both hands and hold herself upright. Her vision wavered, then began to fade. She could hear him coming up the stairs at a run, his boots thudding, and she tried to haul herself up another step, but her legs were too heavy and wouldn't obey. With a dull sense of alarm and astonishment, she felt her body begin to sag and could do nothing to stop it.
Then steely arms were around her, arms that she remembered sometimes in her dreams that left tears on her face when she awoke. As the darkness became absolute, she wondered why he had caught her.
Jake swung her limp body up in his arms, sweat breaking out on his face at how close she had come to falling. She was in a dead faint, her head lolling back over his arm. He opened his mouth to yell for Emma or Carmita, but shut it as quickly as the impulse came. Victoria was his wife; he'd take care of her. He'd seen enough unconscious men to know how to handle a simple faint.
She didn't feel any heavier now than she had three months before. Just the feel of her in his arms struck him with a sharp, nostalgic pleasure, piercing

and bittersweet. It shouldn't have been so long since he had held her; the chasm between them shouldn't have been so wide and deep and unbridgeable.

He started to carry her into their—his—bedroom, but changed his mind and went into hers; she would be less alarmed when she woke up if she wasn't in his bed. She showed no signs of reviving even when he placed her on the bed, and with growing concern he unfastened her skirt, then the light blue shirtwaist that was buttoned high under her chin.

He could feel the warmth of her soft skin, and the parting edges of the blouse revealed the pulse beating gently at the base of her throat. His own pulse began to throb.

"Victoria, wake up," he murmured, stroking the hair back from her face.

She still didn't stir. He lifted her skirt enough to remove her shoes, then took the pillow from beneath her head and slid it under her feet, slim and delicate in her white cotton stockings. His pulse beat faster.

She was his; her body was his. He put his hand on her stomach, searching for evidence of the life that had torn their marriage apart. Her belly was smooth and as flat as ever.

His brows snapped together. How far along did a woman have to be before her pregnancy began showing? The way he figured it, she should be more than four months along, certainly enough to be showing. But then, some women didn't get as big as others; he'd seen some who looked huge and some who didn't look very big the day they delivered. Maybe her clothing was disguising her shape.

He tossed her skirt up, his hand delving beneath the froth of petticoats, finding her cotton-covered thighs and sliding upward to her belly. She was warm and flat.

Her eyelids fluttered and struggled open. "Jake?" she murmured.

He leaned over her. "You fainted, but you're all right," he said in a low voice.

"I thought you were going to kill me." The words were a little slurred as she struggled to push the last remnants of unconsciousness away. She blinked her eyes and focused on his face. She saw no sign now of the intense hatred that had sent her running for her life, and in confusion she wondered if she'd been imagining things.

"No. Not ever." Jake's heart began beating heavily as he watched her. Her lips were soft and trembling slightly. Her wall of hostility was down; she

was weak and disoriented. Before she could resurrect her anger he bent and covered her mouth with his, a muffled sound of pleasure coming from deep in his throat.

He used the pressure of his mouth to open her lips and slipped his tongue into her. A dizzying surge of delight went through him as he felt her arms lift and slide around his neck. He gathered her to him, deepening the kiss. She had wanted him for so long, craved him for so long, that her whirling senses fastened on what he was doing. The taste of his mouth kept her from dying of thirst, his hands fed her in other ways. She moaned at the feel of his rough palm on her sensitive breasts, sliding inside both blouse and chemise and cupping the naked globes, then lifting them free of their cloth restraints. He left her mouth, his lips sliding down her throat and chest to close over one extended nipple.

The feeling was so electrifying that she almost shot off the bed. Her breasts were so tender that she could barely tolerate the pressure of her clothing, and his hot mouth fastening on her nipple was a maddening mixture of pain and pleasure.

She couldn't bear it. Tears sprang to her eyes and she pushed against his shoulders. "You're hurting me," she choked.

He lifted his head, his green eyes dark with passion. "Hurting you?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Yes… my breasts are sore. The baby—"

He drew back. The evidence of the child growing within her was here, in the larger swell of her breasts, the darkening of the nipples, the increased delicate blue veining running just under the creamy satin skin.

She scrambled off the bed on the other side and stood with her back to him as she restored chemise, shirtwaist, and skirt to their proper positions.

"Thank you for catching me," she said in a tight voice.

He remembered what she'd said when she had first regained consciousness; she had thought he was going to kill her, and she had run from him in terror. God, what had they done to each other?

"I didn't mean to scare you." His own voice was gruff. "Be careful from now on going up or down the stairs."

"Yes. I will."

She was too slender. He watched her for several days, trying to handle his uneasiness. He counted the days just as she had told him to do, and tried to figure how far along she would have to have been before she knew she was

pregnant. A month? Two months? He just didn't know, but he thought surely she would have been showing by now. On the other hand, if he had gotten her pregnant immediately, she would only be in her third month. And that would explain why she still wasn't showing.
The thought of it made him sweat as he remembered the things he'd said and done. Doubt, once admitted, gnawed at him.
He sought out Carmita and found her alone. Carefully he watched her reaction as he said, "I'm worried about the señora, Carmita. She's so thin. Shouldn't she be bigger by now? Is something wrong with the baby?"
Carmita beamed at him, shaking her head and making clucking noises. "You new fathers, you worry about everything! The señora has lost weight, she has been so sick, but the morning sickness is beginning now to go away."
"But her stomach—it's flat."
"It's just her third month, Señor Jake. It will probably be at least another month before the baby is big enough to begin showing."
Her third month. The pit of his stomach was cold. Jake counted the days again, but the numbers hadn't changed. If she were just three months along, that would mean that he—damn it, it just wasn't likely! That meant she would have known right away. She had been hiding something from him from the beginning; what else could it have been if not her pregnancy? And that absurd story about McLain not being able to have sex was a plain lie.
He sweated over it for a while, then decided to put his mind to rest about one part of it, at least. It was likely he wouldn't know the truth until the baby was born. But he went to Angelina Garcia's room behind the bunkhouse.
He realized that he hadn't seen her in a while, and he wondered if she had left. He would have run her off himself a long time ago, but Victoria hadn't mentioned it and Jake felt vaguely sorry for the woman, so he hadn't pursued it. How would she leave? Walk? So far as he knew, she owned nothing except her clothes.
But when he knocked he heard scrabbling behind the door and eventually it opened to reveal Angelina, her hair hanging uncombed down her back, her eyes puffy with sleep. He ran his eyes down her opulent figure, and almost stumbled backward in shock. Angelina was visibly, undeniably pregnant.
The pregnancy hadn't changed her natural bent. "Well, if it isn't the patron," she purred. "I knew you'd come to see me sooner or later."

He looked quizzically at her. In a mild tone he asked, "Why would you think that?"
She threw back her head and laughed. "Because of what I can do for you, why else?"
"Whose baby is it?"
She shrugged. "How would I know? Soon I will be too big for anyone to be interested, but right now there are several who like it. Men." She shrugged again, as if to say she would never understand their tastes.
"McLain used to visit you a lot, didn't he?"
A tiny, self-satisfied smile curved her lips. "He couldn't stay away from me. He came to me the night after his marriage. He thought he was a great lover, but he had nothing, I barely knew he was inside me."
"Then he never had any trouble having sex with you?" Jake's voice was expressionless.
Angelina laughed in his face. "No man has trouble with me, not even the Major. He couldn't get it hard with the seüora because she was so cold—"
Abruptly she remembered that the señora was now Jake's wife and she halted, her face turning sullen.
Jake felt as if someone had punched him. He had difficulty sucking in enough air to talk. "How do you know he couldn't?"
"He told me," she muttered. "I didn't tell anyone else because I knew he would have me thrown off the ranch, if he didn't kill me." She refused to say anything else. But she'd told Jake enough.
His face pale, Jake walked back to the house. Victoria had been telling the truth. It was his baby she carried, not McLain's. God, the things he'd said! He remembered the cold fire in her eyes, and for the first time understood the real violence behind it.
She had said that she would take the baby and leave; he'd been so angry at the time that he hadn't taken the threat seriously. Now that he knew the truth he realized just how furious she had a right to be, and a cold fear grew in him that she really might do it. He would lose both Victoria and his baby.
His baby! She really had been that innocent about sex. He was the only man who had ever made love to her. And she was so angry even after all these weeks she hadn't thawed a bit, hadn't even begun to forgive him. Hell, why should she? Up until now he had still been insisting that the baby wasn't his!

He had to apologize, make it up to her somehow—but when he remembered the coldness of her face whenever she looked at him, he felt his stomach muscles tighten. He never would have thought that sweet Victoria could stay that angry for so long, but she had. Well hell, why not? He'd insulted her, slapped her, threatened her, and she was as proud as she was sweet. It wasn't just aristocratic breeding that kept her spine so straight; it was pure steel.

There was no point in putting it off. The quicker he apologized and got things straight between them, the better off they all would be. He looked for Victoria all over the house, and finally found her in the courtyard where the walls protected her from any autumn breeze that might chill her. She was taking advantage of the bright sun to stitch a tiny gown. The sight of that delicate garment in her hands made his throat tighten.

When she looked up at him, her eyes were carefully blank. "Yes?"

He squatted down in front of her, trying to think of the words he needed. He was painfully aware that these next few minutes might be the most important of his life. Finally it just seemed best to say it right out.

"Victoria—I was wrong. I'm sorry. I should have believed you. I know the baby's mine."

"Really?" she replied coolly after a moment of silence when his heart almost didn't beat. She bit off a thread. "How do you know that now, when you were equally certain a couple of months ago that it wasn't?"

Damn, she wasn't going to give an inch, and he couldn't blame her. She deserved her revenge. He looked at her delicate white skin, flushed with the sun's warmth and returning good health. Her breasts strained at her bodice, and he was suddenly consumed by a deep need to see just exactly how much this child of his had changed her body.

"I know I acted like a bastard—"

"Yes," she agreed, then returned to the question she'd asked. "What made you change your mind about the baby?"

"You haven't grown any—"

"The Major died only two days before you took me."

He got to his feet, furious that after all this she would throw McLain in his face when she knew damned good and well that bastard hadn't touched her, and now he knew it, too. Women were the most contrary creatures on earth; after the way she'd cried and begged him to believe her, now she was trying to convince him that the baby wasn't his after all! His hands knotted into

fists. "Damn it, I know McLain didn't sleep with you!" he said. "Angelina told me that he couldn't—"
Victoria's head snapped up, and too late he saw the error that anger had led him to make. Her voice was frosty when she spoke. "Am I supposed to be happy that you'll take the word of a whore before you'll take mine? That you've been discussing me with that whore? You can take your apology and go to hell with it, Jake Sarratt!"
She surged to her feet, stuffing her sewing into the basket. Red spots of color decorated her cheeks.
"Calm down," he said, moving to catch her elbow in case she got dizzy. "You might faint if you move too fast."
"Whether or not I faint is my business, Mr. Sarratt. I'm none of your concern and my baby is none of your concern."
His eyes narrowed. Victoria had always pushed him further than anyone else dared, like a child who played with a tiger and never quite realized the danger it was in until it was too late. He watched her sail into the house, her haughty nose high, and the bright sun dimmed as he realized the truth in a paralyzing instant.
He loved her. He hadn't at first, but there had always been that strong sexual attraction drawing him to her. If he hadn't loved her, thinking she was pregnant with McLain's child wouldn't have hit him so hard. Had it been any other woman, he would have shrugged, sent her to Santa Fe, and he would have gone on with his life. Had it been any other woman, he wouldn't have been married to her to begin with.
But Victoria… he couldn't bear the thought of living without her. Now that he knew how much she meant to him, he panicked at the thought of losing her. He couldn't let it happen. He'd stop her from leaving even if he had to keep her prisoner in the house until he could make it up to her and she forgave him. He had already wasted three months with his stupidity. Three damn months!
But not one more day.
He strode quickly into the house after her, boot heels ringing on the tiles. His face was set in hard lines.
She had paused in the dining room to speak to Emma. Carmita was doing something at the table; he didn't pay any attention to what. He crossed the room, intent on Victoria. She looked up and saw him; a startled expression flitted across her face, followed swiftly by wariness, then naked fear. She

dropped her sewing bag and took a step back. Emma's mouth opened with surprise, then she too got a good look at Jake's face and instinctively got out of his way.
He reached Victoria and bent, catching her behind the knees and back and swinging her off her feet. She gave a little cry of panic and struck at him, but he jerked his head to the side. Before she could try again, he shifted her in his arms and smothered her mouth with his. The kiss was deep and rough and hungry; he felt as if he could never get enough of her mouth, of the feel of her in his arms.
She pulled her head away, twisting it to the side so he couldn't kiss her again. She pushed at his chest. "Put me down!" She sounded frantic.
"I'll put you down," he said with hushed violence. "In my bed, where you belong and where you'll damn well stay." Leaving a gaping Emma and Cannita behind, he carried her up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She made no allowances for the possibility that he might drop her; she kicked and fought and arched her back, trying to squirm from his grip, but his strength was too overpowering. He simply crushed her tighter against his chest. He reached his bedroom and carried her inside, kicking the door shut behind him with a resounding thud.
She tried to bite him, fighting him as desperate pride had not allowed her to do the first time he had overpowered her in this room. "No you don't," he grunted, dumping her on the bed and throwing himself down beside her. He captured her hands in one of his and held them high over her head. "Calm down," he said sharply. "This can't be doing the baby any good."
Her hair was coming loose with her struggles, straggling across her shoulders. Her face was flushed and her blue eyes were almost throwing off sparks she was so angry. "What the hell do you care?"
"Such language," he mocked, wrestling her down when she almost succeeded in throwing herself off the side of the bed. When he had her secured, with her legs pinned by his and her arms once more anchored over her head, he used his free hand to search around her waist until he found the fastening of her skirt and opened it. The tapes of her petticoats didn't present much of a problem. He began shoving the garments down over her hips and thighs.
She made an explosive sound of rage and once again tried to sink her teeth into the muscled arm that stretched over her head, holding both of her arms

captive. He laughed and jerked it out of reach of her teeth without even loosening his grip. His green eyes were very bright.
"Why don't you go to your precious whore?" she shouted.
"Because I'd rather be with you," he replied, not allowing her to make him angry. He buried his head in the soft curve between her neck and shoulder, inhaling her wonderfully sweet scent. It had haunted his nights, when he would wake up from erotic dreams and reach across the bed to gather her close, only to find it empty.
"I don't want to be with you," she said from between clenched teeth.
"You will," he promised, stroking his hand over her belly and breasts. "Remember the first time? You didn't want to be with me then, either, but you changed your mind. Haven't you missed me at all, sweetheart? Here? And here?" His wandering hand first touched her tender breasts, but lightly, so as not to cause her any discomfort, then down to her thighs. They were clamped together, but he still managed to slide one finger between them and find the open slit of her drawers. Inside was hot, damp flesh, and a shudder rocked him as he gently explored.
"No." The word was strangled. She turned her head to the side, away from him. "Please."
"You know I'll please you," he murmured, removing his finger to shove her skirt and petticoats completely off. Without their concealing bulk, her slender body was clearly outlined by the form-fitting shirtwaist blouse, shift, and the thin cotton drawers that clung to her thighs. She had very pretty legs, slim and well-formed. Her white stockings were held in place by plain white garters. He'd seen black lace garters and sheer silk stockings that hadn't excited him nearly as much.
Using the toe of his boot, he scraped her soft, flat-heeled slippers off of her feet and kicked them from the bed. "Don't want you getting the bedcovers dirty."
She didn't take kindly to the gentle teasing. "You've still got your boots on, you jackass!" She was seething, steam practically rising from her. He laughed low, inordinately amused at his very proper wife cursing at him.
"I'll take them off if you want me to," he offered.
"No!"
"Damn, you're a hard woman to please. Guess you're lucky that I'm a hard man."

She had no doubt what he meant, and if she had had one of her arms free she would have slapped him again. She was tiring rapidly, she hadn't recovered her strength from the long weeks of almost constant nausea. Devoutly, and without result, she prayed for one of the sickening bouts now. She gathered her fading strength for one last desperate attempt at escape, tensing her muscles and surging wildly. He controlled her without effort, and Victoria was forced to the galling knowledge that there was nothing she could do. Hot, bitter tears slid down her cheeks, and she turned her head away as her body went limp.

"Don't cry, honey." Like the predator he was, he sensed her capitulation, and his voice was low and comforting. He released her arms, knowing she no longer had the strength to fight. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you, but it's over now. Let me make it up to you. It's been a long time since we've done this; haven't you missed it? Don't you remember how good I made you feel?"

She drew a deep, shuddering breath, fighting for control. "I remember everything you made me feel." Her voice was thick with tears.

He knew what she meant. He paused, his face tightening as the guilt over the pain he'd caused her almost overwhelmed him. Then he wiped the tears from her cheeks with his callused thumb. "Then hate me for it, but by God it won't make any difference. You're my wife, and your place is here with me."

She was tired, her muscles shaking. It was useless to fight him. She closed her eyes.

He rolled her to the side and unbuttoned her shirtwaist, then pulled it down her arms and tossed it aside. The shift went next, and she lay with her arms motionless, making no effort to cover her breasts.

The differences in them excited him. They were larger, firmer, readying themselves even now for the milk that would feed his baby. Her little nipples had darkened and seemed distended. He paused to remove his boots and shirt, his eyes never leaving her breasts. Without touching her anywhere else, he leaned over and lightly circled a pouting nipple with his tongue.

She gasped, her body arching. The touch of his hot tongue burned, and the heat gathered and pooled in her lower body. Her breasts became almost unbearably tight, just from that light touch. They were so sensitive that she almost burst into tears again, unable to decide if this was ecstasy or agony.

His breath washed over her wet flesh, making it tingle even more. He moved to the other nipple and subjected it to the same light, exquisitely

gentle washing by his tongue. She trembled, fighting the blinding heat. Her hands gripped the sheet beneath her, twisting. No, no, she cried silently, he had to stop, she couldn't bear it—

With acute attention to her tender state, he sucked the nipple into his mouth and applied the lightest pressure.

A strangled sob tore from her throat, no longer in protest. Her hips lifted. His hand went between her legs, and this time they parted easily. He rubbed lightly at her soft, exposed flesh, then slipped his finger into her. His memory of her tightness had tormented him, but he was amazed anew at how small her passage was. Sweat glistened on his naked torso.

"Do you remember, the time in the study?" he murmured, kissing her neck. "We were in too much of a hurry to take your drawers off, and I tore them so I could get at you better."

She moaned, her body twisting on his impaling finger. She opened her eyes but the lids were heavy, and her lashes fluttered. "Jake."

The sound of his name, uttered in that thick, helpless, wanting tone, made his heart leap. She was his. She was no longer fighting, no longer even thinking. Her hips lifted again.

He kissed her mouth, his tongue plunging deep. It was too late again to pull off her drawers. He tore the seam open, sliding down to explore the secrets revealed. Her woman's flesh was deep pink and glistening; he pressed his mouth to her in a deep, avid kiss, needing her taste, needing all of her secrets. She screamed, the sound muffled by the pillow she pulled over her face, and her cotton-clad thighs tightened convulsively around his head. He prised them open again, and held them wide. His tongue darted and dipped and circled, and continued as he felt the deep shudders begin. Her heels dug into the bed, both of her hands clenched in his hair, and she cried out again.

When it was over, her legs fell weakly open. She lay with her eyes closed and her breasts shining with a fine mist of perspiration, her chest heaving up and down as she fought for breath. He tore at the tapes holding the ruined garment about her waist, and stripped it away, then attacked his own belt and pants. Naked, he mounted her, and her eyes flared open at his slow, inexorable penetration.

She had almost forgotten the overpowering sensation of fullness. Her body had been preoccupied with its own gravidity, but he had brought lust surging back. He grunted as he squeezed inward, the sound changing to a groan as he stopped. "Is it hurting you?"

Her hands were hot. She gripped his sweat-slick shoulders and twined her legs around his buttocks. "No. Don't stop. Don't stop, Jake, please—"
He gave a strained laugh, a sound of satisfaction rather than mirth. "No, I won't stop. God."
He didn't drive into her; he was too acutely aware of her pregnancy. He rigidly controlled his thrusting to a certain depth and rhythm, but it was enough. She convulsed again, greedily lifting her hips and taking the inches he had denied her. His senses exploded, and with a tight sound of defeat he gave her what she wanted as his loins pulsed and emptied.
Her white-stockinged legs remained locked around him. Her defeat, on this level at least, was shatteringly complete.
His breathing had steadied, his heart was once again beating normally instead of trying to burst out of his chest. Victoria, lying limp and unmoving at his side, seemed to be dozing. The sweat had dried on their bodies, and as he watched, the first faint chill roughened the skin of her upper arm. He heaved himself up and grasped the sheet, pulling it over them and tucking it around her shoulder. Her blue eyes flickered open, then she sighed and let them close again.
She seemed content to lie there, so close beside him. But he realized she was essentially alone. Before, she had lain in his arms, her head pillowed on his shoulder and her delicate hand sleepily stroking his chest. There was none of that mute intimacy now, no gentle touching, no lying tangled together and inhaling the other's scent. He hadn't known before what had made those drowsy hours after lovemaking so special, but now he did. The difference now told him that he may have won the battle, but he'd far from won the war. He wanted her willing touch, not this silent distance that told him she had been defeated, but not won.
Winning her back would take time, but he knew how to be patient. He'd been patient for twenty years, planning his revenge on McLain. He was willing to spend another twenty years teaching Victoria that she could love and trust him, if she would only allow him that much time.
He turned onto his side and pulled her into his arms, cradling her there whether she wanted to be or not. Closeness worked its own magic, and the sort of physical ecstasy they had just shared forged a bond he knew she couldn't easily ignore. He would use what weapons he had, because he dared not lose her.
"Tell me about it," he invited softly, nuzzling the fine hair at her temple.

"About what?" she asked in a cool, even little voice. Her eyes were still closed.
"About McLain."
The last thing Victoria wanted to do was discuss McLain; she was exhausted and wanted only to sleep. Even if she had been wide awake, however, she wouldn't have wanted to discuss the subject with Jake. He had forced her to a capitulation that deeply scoured her pride. What with her other grievances against him, she wasn't feeling very obliging.
She bit her lip, wishing that he would just go away. It was obvious that he had no intention of moving, however, so she said, "No."
"I need to know," he murmured, kissing the fragile hollow right below her temple.
Her eyes opened. "You need to know!" Her voice trembled with suppressed emotion. Her pregnancy had brought all of her emotions alarmingly close to the surface. "Tell me why I should care what you need! I needed my husband's support, and trust, and care; did you care about my needs?"
"I'm sorry, love. I'll do anything I can to make it up to you." He was completely sincere, and perhaps it was in his low voice because she gave him a quick, sharp look.
"How can you make up for something like that?" she asked, and closed her eyes with a weariness that was both physical and mental. "I can't think how it would be possible."
"Let me try anyway. We're married; we're having a baby." He smoothed his big hand down over her warm belly, wishing that he hadn't already wasted three months. "What does it feel like?" Painful curiosity leaked into the words. "Can you tell anything yet?"
She gave a wry laugh. "Oh, yes, I've been able to tell a great deal. I've been deathly ill, so nauseated I could barely lift my head from the pillow. The smell of food is disgusting. I have an almost constant urge to… to wet," she said, stammering with embarrassment that she had said such a thing, but it had tumbled out without thought. "There is a sense of pressure, here." She laid her hand low on her belly. "I can scarcely bear for my clothes to touch my breasts, and I get dizzy if I try to move quickly. I cry several times a day, for no reason. I'm so tired I can scarcely get through the days, yet I can't sleep at night. I've really been enjoying myself."
He smothered a chuckle and planted another kiss, this one on her mouth instead of her temple. "When is it due?"

"Late in March." She found she couldn't deny him this knowledge about his child, now that he was asking.
His stroking hand smoothed over her belly, then down between her legs. She gasped, stiffening as his fingers leisurely parted and stroked. She would never have believed she could respond so soon after such explosive lovemaking, but her loins tightened.
"You feel wonderful, so warm and wet and tight. I want you so much I just couldn't understand how McLain didn't." His voice was muffled against her throat.
Victoria caught her breath, dazedly aware of the truth in his husky tone. He simply didn't understand it. She didn't know why McLain had been as he was, either, only how it had been.
"He tried," she whispered. "Twice. But he couldn't get hard, the way you do. It made him angry and he hurt me, but it still wouldn't work. After those first two times, he never tried again."
Jake closed his eyes, fighting the pain her words brought him. "How did he hurt you, love?"
She didn't notice the endearment. More and more of her attention was focusing on what he was doing. One long finger slipped into her and she moaned aloud. "He did… what you're doing now. But he hurt me, and there was blood. It was awful; I hated it, and I hated him. But when you do it… ah! Yes. Yes. It feels so good."
He leaned over her, increasing the brush of his thumb over her tiny nub. His heart squeezed as he thought how it must have been for her, a virgin ignorant of everything sexual, with a brute like McLain. Now he knew why she hadn't bled when he'd made love to her the first time. He didn't regret for himself the loss of that small membrane, only that she had been hurt and frightened.
He was the only man who had ever made love to her, the only man she had taken into her arms and her body. The knowledge flooded him with possessive pleasure. Whether she wanted it or not, she was irrevocably his. He would never let her leave him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jake had Carmita move Victoria's things back into his room. If he had thought Victoria would do so he was disappointed, but he knew well enough that their situation had improved to nothing more than a truce. She didn't again try to fight him physically, but her manner was reserved, her eyes still cool, and he knew he wasn't forgiven. It was enough, for now, that she was back where she belonged.

The next day Ben asked, "What happened?"

Jake tersely explained.

Ben shook his head. "Damn. I don't understand women. Whatever you expect, they'll do the exact damn opposite, even when you expect the opposite from what you first thought anyway."

Jake grinned in sympathy. Ben had gotten exactly nowhere with Emma. "Are you giving up?"

"Might as well. Yeah, I guess I am. Saloon girls are a lot simpler than ladies. I'm going to take a trip into Santa Fe before winter gets here, and have myself a good time."

Garnet had moved back toward Santa Fe, lying low and watching his back. Nothing was going to happen very soon, anyway. Winter was coming on fast, and spring would be a better time for what he planned. He had parted company with Bullfrog several weeks back; the other man was going to try to round up some of his old cronies in time to meet up again around the end of February. Garnet felt better with Bullfrog gone; he hadn't trusted the bastard not to put a bullet in his own back and carry on with Garnet's plan by himself.

He always sat close to the back door of a saloon, because you never knew when a quick exit might be needed. He was at just such a table when a tall, dark-haired man sauntered in and headed toward the bar. The well-worn pistol tied low on the man's thigh bespoke his ease with the heavy weapon, as did the easy, self-confident walk. It wasn't a strut; only hot-tempered kids looking to make a reputation felt the need for that, or for cutting notches in their guns. This man walked like he knew he could handle whatever got in his way. He had a presence about him that was strangely familiar.

Garnet peered at the stranger's face and a cold chill ran down his spine. For a minute there the man had looked like Jake Sarratt, but then Garnet saw

that it wasn't. The resemblance, though, was strong. It was damn eerie.
A dark-haired saloon girl with a painted face and tired eyes perked up a little as she ran her experienced eyes down the stranger's tall form. She sashayed up to him, batting her eyelids and letting her hand trail down his thigh. He looked down at her and grinned, then nodded.
They turned away to go up the narrow stairs. Garnet quickly ducked his head so that his hat hid most of his face. He heard the stranger say, "What's your name, sugar?"
The voice was familiar, too, but not real familiar. It was like he'd seen the man once or twice, but hadn't gotten to know him. Damn if he didn't look like Jake Sarratt, though. Garnet kept his head down. It could be the other one, the brother. Wild elation shot through him. God, what a chance this would be! Give him five minutes to get started humping, then when he was going at it hard, kick the door in and put a bullet in the bastard before he knew what hit him. The only thing that kept Garnet in his chair was that he didn't know if Jake Sarratt was anywhere around.
Where had he seen the man before?
Then it came to him, and he turned pale. He'd had a beard when Garnet had met him, but there was no doubt it was the same man. It was Tanner, the gunslick who had ridden in late one afternoon and hired on, but only stayed a day or so before leaving as quietly as he'd come. But his name wasn't Tanner; it was Sarratt, and he would know Garnet on sight.
Garnet gave the room a good look, but didn't see anyone he knew. That didn't mean anything. The Sarratts had hired a lot of new men. There could be any number of Sarratt men in here right now, surrounding him.
There was no way he was going to go up those stairs. There'd be another time, and a better chance.
Being careful not to catch anyone's eye, he got up from the table and slipped out the back door. When he was in the sour-smelling alley he started running, slipped and almost fell, but caught himself at the last moment with his hands. His left hand was in something foul-smelling and squishy. Garnet cursed viciously as he got up and scraped the sticky crap off his hand the best he could, rubbing it against the rough side of the building. That was just one more grievance he had against the goddamn Sarratts.
He waited until he was a piece down the street before washing his hand in a horse trough, then he hurried to the crib where he was sleeping. It wasn't anything more than a lean-to built against a stable, and the walls were made

of unfinished planks nailed across some logs. The cracks were big enough to shoot through, and it had started getting damn cold at night. He'd have to find something better soon.
He was sharing the crib with Quinzy, who was already rolled up in his blanket and snoring his head off. Garnet nudged him with his boot.
"Quinzy! Wake up. One of the damn Sarratts is in town, maybe both of them."
Quinzy came awake without any of the mumbling and wiping his eyes that most men did. He sat up. "Is it Jake?"
"I didn't see Jake. It's the brother, I don't remember his front name. He's the son of a bitch who rode in calling hisself Tanner, and left right after that. Guess he came to talk to Jake about something. Goddamn bastards were planning it right under our noses!"
Quinzy was silent. This latest plan of Garnet's was stupid, but there was no talking sense to him. He had it in his mind that the little gal was his, and that he had a right to the ranch. Damned if Garnet hadn't gone as loony, in his way, as McLain had. Quinzy had drifted along with Garnet out of habit, but it looked like the time had come to part.
"Don't look like I'll be riding back to the kingdom with you, Garnet," Quinzy said. "Heard tell the land up along the Snake is mighty pretty and mighty lonesome, a good place for me to lay low for a spell. Reckon I'll do that. Twenty years ago I was game to take on the Sarratts, or anybody else come to that, but I'm twenty years older and twenty years slower. It's time for me to think about retiring."
"I hate to hear you're not going with me, Quinzy," Garnet said. "We been together a long time, but a man's got to do what a man's got to do."
"Glad you're being understanding about it, and all. I'll ride out early in the morning, before anybody gets a good look at me. Don't know if any of the Sarratt men know who I am, but iffen they don't I'd like to keep it that way."
Quinzy rolled back up in his blankets and listened to Garnet doing the same. After a while Quinzy began to snore again. He never heard the quiet snicking of a hammer being pulled back. If there was a fraction of a second after the trigger was pulled that he heard the explosion of the shot, it was too tiny a slice of time for it to do him any good. Garnet's bullet plowed into the back of Quinzy's head, splattering a big portion of the front of it across the wall.

Garnet rolled up his blankets and got his gear. There wasn't much chance of a single shot in this part of town being investigated, but it was best to clear out anyway. He looked down at the body. "Like I said, a man's got to do what a man's got to do," he said in an undertone. "If you ain't with me, you're against me."

It snowed early that year, a light dusting that barely covered the ground but gave hint of the coldness to come. That morning when Victoria left the bed to look out the window at the layer of white, she felt the child move for the first time. She went very still, her hand pressed to her lower abdomen as she waited for it to come again.

Jake looked up from stamping his feet into his boots, noticing her stillness. "What's wrong?"

"The baby moved," she replied in a low tone.

He came over to stand beside her. She had donned a shift but nothing else, and he felt a surge of lust as he looked at her. She lifted her hand and his replaced it on her belly, while his other arm circled her and pulled her against his body. They stood motionless and finally it came again, a flutter so faint that Jake barely felt it. He caught his breath, his heart pounding at this evidence of life. Until now, the baby had been defined by symptoms, most of them unpleasant for Victoria. But this was different; this was life.

She let herself lean against him, knowing it would do no good to try to put distance between them. He made love to her whenever he wanted, just as he had before, with a searing sensuality that became more intense with time, rather than weakening. There was no part of her body that was sacred from his touch, and pregnancy seemed to have made her that much more responsive. Even her skin felt sensitized. Sometimes she felt she would drown in sensuality, but the loving playfulness that she had found with him before their fight didn't return.

Instead she resented his physical power over her, because he wielded it without love. Even after all that had happened, she still loved him; he would not have been able to hurt her so deeply if she hadn't. He cared for her, she thought, but she was carrying his child, so why wouldn't he feel some concern? And he enjoyed sleeping with her, that was plain enough. But not one word of love ever crossed those hard, chiseled lips.

She bitterly resented his lack of faith in her. It still rankled every day that he could believe her capable of such betrayal. His accusation had sprung from the legacy of hate he still carried around with him; even though McLain

was dead, the hatred in Jake hadn't dissipated. Sometimes Victoria could almost feel McLain still in the house, with the ghosts of Jake's parents, keeping the hatred alive.

It would be best if she took the child and left. She didn't want it to grow up surrounded by hatred; she wanted it to grow up happy, in a house without shadows. The idea of leaving teased her mind every day, but the difficulty of it defeated her. How could she leave? Where could she go? Moreover, neither Emma nor Celia would want to leave. Emma might watch Ben with great sad eyes whenever he wasn't looking, but the ranch had become her cousin's home. She wouldn't want to leave it or Ben, even if he had apparently lost interest.

Celia was growing up, rapidly leaving her helter-skelter ways behind. She was calmer, more dignified, more thoughtful. Her hair was usually neat now, her dress tidy, and she walked instead of skipping. She still spent a lot of time crooning to Rubio and trying to make friends with the great stallion, but she no longer seemed so obsessed by it. No, Celia wouldn't want to leave.

Jake turned her in his arms, his hand sliding up to cup her breasts. Victoria looked up at him, her eyes grave. He looked back at her with his intention plain. He'd just finished dressing, but the clothes came off as easily as they went on. He led her back to the bed, and it was another hour before they left the room.

The winter months came with a vengeance, with more bitter cold than snow, though there was enough of both. Victoria grew increasingly rounder, her pregnancy immediately apparent to anyone who took the time to look. Her mood changed, becoming both calmer and a bit dreamy as she was increasingly preoccupied by the changes in her body. Everything was out of her control. At least the last of the morning sickness had gone and physically she felt wonderful, though she still tired easily.

She would have thought that her increasing bulk would dampen Jake's carnal desires, but not so. He handled her with increasing care and made love to her in various positions that put none of his weight on her body, but he seemed to find her as desirable as ever. If she had thought about it she would have been reassured, but it never occurred to her to wonder if other men remained as attentive to their wives during pregnancy.

In the middle of December, Angelina gave birth. The woman had been in hard labor for over an hour before any of the men paid heed to the cries they

heard coming from her small, cluttered room. Both Carmita and Lola were reluctant to attend the woman. Despite her own distaste, Victoria felt that she had to do something for her. Perhaps it was her own pregnancy that made her feel more deeply for Angelina's plight. For whatever reason, she wrapped herself in her warmest shawl and trudged across the yard to the far buildings. Carmita threw up her hands and followed.

Angelina turned her head on the soiled pillow as Victoria entered. Her teeth drew back in what was meant to be her usual insolent smile, but it became more of a grimace. "So! You want to see how it will be when it's your turn?"

The lack of cleanliness in the room was appalling. There was a small fireplace but the fire had burned down and Angelina hadn't been able to replenish it, so the room was decidedly chill. Despite that, sweat beaded on Angelina's grayish face as she suddenly contorted in another pain.

"Quickly, rebuild the fire," Victoria instructed. She wasn't herself too certain what to do, but warmth and cleanliness seemed a good place to start. With Carmita, she managed to get clean linens on the bed, though the mattress beneath was grimy. Carmita was the experienced one and took over with Victoria's blessing. The soiled negligee Angelina had been wearing was removed and replaced by one of Carmita's own, as hers were voluminous enough to fit over Angelina's swollen breasts.

The woman strained in labor all afternoon and into the night. Her lovely dark eyes sank back into her head and her lips were raw and bleeding from the scrape of her teeth.

Jake knocked on the door and tugged Victoria outside when she opened it. He pulled her within the folds of the heavy sheepskin coat he wore, wrapping her inside his own warmth. "Let Carmita handle it," he growled. "You don't need to be out here."

The wind bit through her skirts, and her breath fogged the air. "If it were me I would want all of the help anyone could give." She leaned against his muscled body, and his child moved strongly within her. "I think she's going to die," she whispered, strangely desolate. It wasn't just that she would be enduring childbirth herself in a few months, but that Angelina was so alone and would die so unloved.

If Angelina was truly going to die, Jake didn't want Victoria in there watching it. He tried to bully her back into the house, but she refused to budge. He was on the verge of physically carrying her when she lifted her

wan face and said, "How can I expect anyone to help me if I'm not willing to help when I can?"
"Your situation is different. You have family—"
"Angelina doesn't. She has no one." She lifted her fingers to his lips, the first time she had touched him voluntarily outside of bed since the day she had told him she was pregnant. The light touch seared him all the way to his soul, and he trembled. He caught her hand and turned her palm against his cheek, cold and beard-rough.
"Shall I send Emma to help?" he asked in a hoarse voice. He could barely speak.
"No." Victoria's smile was wry. "She isn't married. It wouldn't do at all. But perhaps—if Lola will come. Ask, but don't order her. It should be her decision."
He let her go back inside the dingy little room with its coppery odor of hot, fresh blood and wished that she had just a little less the lady of the manor's ingrained sense of responsibility.
Lola did come, along with the news that she had prepared a light meal for them and left it in the kitchen; she would stay while they ate. Carmita took herself off for a hasty meal, but Victoria didn't feel that she could endure food right then. She was tired, and her stomach was a little queasy.
Angelina had been lying with her eyes closed for over an hour. She didn't open them now, but she said in a surprisingly strong voice, "You might as well eat. I would if I could."
"I'm not hungry," Victoria replied, sponging the woman's face. The time between contractions was short. For a while they had been almost constant, but nothing had happened and now they were spaced a bit further apart.
It was the last time Angelina spoke. Close to midnight she was delivered of a fat little girl with a crop of thick black curls like her mother's and the cord wrapped around her blue neck. Victoria wrapped the small body in a towel, her heart breaking.
They couldn't stem the flow of blood and Angelina was too weak to fight. She was unconscious and never knew that her daughter had died while trying to be born. A few hours later she too died.
Carmita and Lola took charge of cleaning the bodies for burial and refused to allow Victoria to help. She was sent back to the house, her body weighed down with weariness. Her own child was merrily kicking her ribs, letting her know that it was doing well.

To her surprise, Jake was sitting in the kitchen hunched over a cup of coffee that was no longer steaming. He looked up when she entered.
"They both died." Victoria's voice was colorless.
Jake got up and held her in his arms. As he carried her to their room, she clutched his shirt and wept, her tears hot against his shoulder.
Neither life nor nature paused. Work on the ranch went on, and Victoria's girth continued to increase. Though she knew she would get much larger before it was finished, her shifting center of gravity made her feel constantly off-balance. Stroking her belly now during the baby's more acrobatic movements, she could discern a foot from an elbow, a hand from a knee.
"Jesus," Jake said one night, amazed at the force with which a tiny foot had thudded against his hand. "This feels like two wildcats in a sack fighting to get out."
"Thank you, how reassuring."
He grinned and continued stroking his hand lazily over her belly. "Do you think it could be two?"
"No. I've counted one head, two feet, two knees, two elbows, and two hands. In whatever position, there's only one baby."
He was relieved. The thought of her in labor with one child was scary enough.
Late in January Celia filched an apple from the storeroom and carried it out to Rubio. It was a beautiful morning, cold and crisp. A few inches of snow covered the ground, but the sky was cloudless. Her blood was singing through her veins; perhaps, just perhaps, Luis would be able to join her in her secret place in the loft. It was harder to find privacy now that winter kept the men close to the house. When spring came, she thought, she and Luis would ride out to a private place and spend the entire day making love.
Rubio was prancing around in the largest corral, snorting and shaking his head as he enjoyed his exercise. Dual trails of steam blew from his wide-open nostrils. He cavorted like a colt, and his red hide gleamed like polished mahogany in the bright sun.
Celia climbed on the fence, content just to watch him. He was seldom playful, so she didn't try to coax him to her to take the apple. In time he would work out his kinks, then he would come over to her for his treat. It had been weeks since he had tried to snap at her and he no longer shied when she patted his sleek, muscular neck.

He was beautiful, she thought, beautiful in much the same way that Luis was. They were both magnificent animals, dangerous and simple in their instincts.
Luis. Celia shivered. Just the forming of his name in her mind made her go soft and warm inside, the way she felt when they were making love. Her breasts tingled, and she thought of his mouth sucking at them. Luis.
Her grip on the apple loosened and it fell to the ground. She knelt and reached for it through the fence, but it was a good foot beyond her fingertips. Rubio was on the far side of the corral, his proud head lifted high. She was safe enough, she thought, and climbed over the fence.
Even inside the house they heard the piercing screams of an enraged horse. There were shouts and the sound of men running. There was another scream, only one, but this one was different. It went through Victoria's heart.
She ran. Emma tried to catch her. "Victoria, no!" Emma had a hard grip on her arm, but Victoria thrust her aside with violent strength. She didn't notice her unwieldy body as her feet flew over the snow.
"Celia!" she screamed. There was no answer.
In the corral a knot of men on horseback had thrown several ropes over Rubio's head and were fighting him to a standstill. Jake was one of the men. He dismounted and ran to a small crumpled heap on the ground. As he went down on one knee, he saw Victoria flying toward them, her face a white mask.
"Ben, grab her!" he yelled.
Ben ran, intercepting her before she could reach the corral. He held her by wrapping his arms around her from behind, locking them under her breasts. She kicked and heaved, but his iron strength held her.
"Let me go!" she shrieked, trying to claw his face. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Celia. Celia!"
Jake shifted his body so that he was between Victoria and Celia, but she could see the blue of her shawl, matted now with mud. The tan of her skirt. The white tumble of petticoats. A small shoe, lying by itself in the snow. A silky blond lock, stirring in the wind. And a lot of red. Celia hadn't been wearing anything red.
"Get a blanket," Jake called sharply over his shoulder, and someone ran to do his bidding.

Victoria twisted, still trying to tear herself free. Ben was talking to her, trying to calm her down, but his words didn't make any sense. Emma was standing rooted to their left, her hands pressed over her mouth as if to hold her own screams inside. Her eyes were black in her colorless face.
The blanket was brought and Jake wrapped it around the small bundle. Luis rode up and a stark look tightened his lean face. Without a word he swung down and climbed through the fence.
As Jake started to lift Celia, Luis said, "I'll take her." His voice was tight. "You see to your woman and I'll see to mine."
Jake gave him a sharp look, seeing what was etched in Luis's eyes. He looked back down at the small, still girl and touched her bloody cheek with gentle fingers. Then Jake left Celia to the man who had loved her, and walked to Victoria.
She was no longer fighting Ben, but stood motionless in his grip with her eyes the only spot of color in her face. She didn't even have a shawl.
Ben released her and she stood alone, her body rigid. She searched Jake's eyes for any sign of hope and found none. Still, she had to ask, had to hear it said. "Is she alive?"
Jake wanted to sweep her up and carry her inside, have her warm and cosseted in bed before he told her what he had to tell her, but she was waiting, holding herself tight inside, and he knew she wouldn't leave until she knew.
"No," he said.
Victoria swayed and he reached for her, but in the next instant she drew herself up straight, her chin high. "Bring her inside, please," she said in a brittle but controlled voice, as if she would shatter if she let her control slip at all. "She'll need… she'll need washing."
Luis carried Celia inside, his face rigid as the wind blew her hair over his arm and teased his cheek with it. Victoria and Emma were behind him, their shoulders back despite their sudden haggardness. Jake and Ben followed, both of them watching the slender, unbending spines ahead. Jake wanted to take Victoria in his arms and give her what comfort he could, but held back. Comfort now would soften her, and she needed all the strength she could muster.
Carmita and Lola were sobbing softly into their aprons, while Juana had her hand stuffed into her mouth. "We'll need water, please," Victoria said softly as she directed Luis upstairs.

He placed Celia on her bed and knelt beside it, slowly wrapping a bright tendril of hair around his finger. The blanket covered her face, but her hair was free. "I love you," he said to the motionless girl, but there was no answer, and his heart was dying inside him.
Victoria put her hand on his shoulder. She hadn't known, but now she realized that she should have guessed. Celia had changed in the past months, since meeting Luis. "She loved you, too. You made her happy."
He swallowed and carried her hair to his face. It still smelled like Celia. "We were lovers," he said thickly. "It never felt wrong."
"It wasn't wrong." It went against everything they had ever been taught, but it wasn't wrong. Victoria was struck by how much their lives had changed, how much she had changed, since coming to this wild land. When she had first stepped down on territory soil, her life had been ruled by what society designated as proper or improper, but propriety no longer mattered to her when measured against love.
Love had changed Celia from a child into a woman. She had been content, no longer running from flower to flower as if in search of enough beauty and happiness to satisfy her need for it. She had found it in Luis.
Still sobbing, Carmita brought the water, but as she put it down she said, "I will wash the señorita, if you like."
"Thank you, but Emma and I will do it," Victoria said gently. It was the last thing they would be able to do for Celia.
Jake came up and took Luis away with him. Ben was overseeing the building of a coffin and having a new grave dug. Gently Victoria and Emma cut away Celia's torn clothing and began washing the mud and blood from her pale body. Rubio's sharp hooves had opened numerous deep cuts, but they were mostly on her back; she must have cowered with her arms over her head in a futile effort to protect herself. The back of her skull was flat and soft where the killing blow had landed, but her face was unmarked except for a small scrape on her forehead. They washed her hair and brushed it dry. Her eyes were closed like a child's in sleep, her long lashes resting on marble-white cheeks. Looking at Celia lying on the bed as they dressed her in her favorite clothes, Victoria thought that she looked as though she would wake if only they shook her, but the essence of Celia was gone.
Victoria didn't sleep that night. Jake insisted that she go to bed, and she did, but lay in his arms with her eyes open and burning. She had cried, but the

tears hadn't brought a sense of release and now they wouldn't come at all. The pain clenched at her heart, sharp and unending. She had never been able to imagine life without Celia. Her sister had been as bright as the sun, and without her everything now had altered, become darker.
Her baby moved, and Victoria touched it. "She was looking forward to the baby so much. Now she'll never see it."
Jake hadn't slept either. He was too aware of Victoria's suffering, and his own sense of loss was acute. There would be no more conversations about riding astride or determining the sex of kittens, no more small shocks every time she opened her mouth, no more searches for items she had left in bizarre places.
He held Victoria close; he hadn't released her all night long and didn't intend to. "If it's a girl, would you like to name her Celia?"
Victoria's voice almost cracked. "I couldn't. Not yet."
An hour later she said, "She looked pretty, didn't she?"
"Like an angel."
"We'll have to take care of her kitten."
Dawn was a miracle of colors, gold and red and pink streaking across a lightening blue sky. Celia would have been entranced. Victoria looked at the sky and thought of all the dawns that would be less appreciated now, without Celia there to watch them. She got up and dressed. She had no black dresses for mourning, but out here it didn't seem as important as it had in Augusta. Grief was in her heart, not her clothes.
She twisted her hair into a careless knot, and Jake fastened her dress for her. She looked out the window again and said, "I want that horse destroyed."
Jake knew the need for revenge, knew how it could burn and fester. His hands tightened on her shoulders. "He's a dumb animal, Victoria. We had warned her time and again to be careful around him."
"He's a killer. He trampled one of the Mexican hands after you'd left that time, did you know? He should have been shot then."
The plans Jake had made for Rubio's get would never come to pass if he put the stallion down. Sophie was with foal, but he'd planned on buying other mares good enough to mate with the stallion. He wanted to produce a whole line of big, strong, fast horses. His heart ached, but destroying the animal wouldn't bring Celia back, wouldn't accomplish anything except Rubio's death and with it his outstanding blend of speed and strength. Victoria had

been irrational about the stallion from the beginning, so Jake didn't expect her to make a rational decision now.
Still, it might become necessary to put him down. If no one could work with him without fearing for their lives, there would be no choice. Jake wanted to wait and see before he did something irrevocable.
"I won't order him shot," he said, and watched her face become even more withdrawn. He whirled her around to face him. "Not yet. I'm not saying I won't, I'm just saying that I'm going to think about it before I do something that can't be undone."
"Celia can't be brought back. Is that damn horse worth more than she was?"
"No, damn it, but killing him won't bring her back, either."
"It'll accomplish one thing, at least."
"What?"
"I won't have to look at the barn and know he's in there, safe and warm and well-fed, while my sister is in her grave."
They buried Celia with the sun shining brightly on her coffin, making the pale new wood gleam with a golden hue that almost matched her hair.

CHAPTER TWENTY

They all retired early that night, too dispirited even to try and talk. Emma watched Jake lead Victoria into their bedroom, his arm around her waist both possessive and tender, and the door closed to lock them in their private world where no one else could enter. Ben walked past her with a quiet good night and went into his own bedroom.
Emma carefully closed her own door, went about the nightly ritual of washing and getting into her nightgown, and then was totally unable to get into bed. She sat in a chair with her hands folded in her lap, rocking back and forth in a silent paroxysm of grief.
Death came so suddenly and it was so final, so indiscriminate. In a short time it had taken a nameless infant, an unloved whore, and a girl whose smile had made hearts break. They were promised nothing, any of them, not another year, another week, or even another day. Babies were born and every day of their lives after that was a risk. People could hide from life, but not from death.

Celia had lived life as if it were the greatest joy. She had reveled in its beauty and ignored the ugliness unless forced to look upon it. She had tried to hide from that part of life, but in the end it had found her.
In the end all they had was the moment, the everlasting now. One could plan for the future, one could try, but nothing was guaranteed.
Victoria was with her husband and their child was growing in her body. Celia had reached out with eager hands to embrace her love. But she, Emma, had turned away from the love that had beckoned her. Oh, she had had very good reasons and perhaps the love wasn't what she would have wished, but it had been offered and she had denied it.
How would she feel if Ben didn't survive the night?
A mighty hand squeezed her chest and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. He might never return the devotion she felt for him, but that wouldn't make it one whit weaker. She had turned him away, and he hadn't asked in months now. She was alone, by her own will.
She got to her feet and blew out the lamp. Sitting here brooding wouldn't accomplish anything. She needed to get some sleep.
But she could not get into that bed. She paused, staring at its pale expanse in the darkness. A cold, empty bed, just as she was cold and empty.
She bolted out the door and down the hall. She jerked Ben's door open without pausing to think, her eyes wide and desperate, and came to an abrupt halt when he whirled around with his gun in his-hand. The hammer was pulled back, his finger on the trigger. She looked down the unwavering barrel, dead level with her head.
Ben aimed the gun toward the ceiling and slowly let the hammer back down. "Don't ever do that again."
"No. I won't."
He wore only his pants, and the dark hair around his forehead was damp from his washing. Emma stared at the broad expanse of his chest, muscled and covered with dark hair, and felt her knees go weak.
"What do you want?"
"I want—" She stopped, her throat tightening. Her fingers dug into the wood of the doorframe. "Ben—"
He faced her, waiting.
"I want you to hold me," she whispered, one hand blindly reaching out for him. "Don't let me be alone tonight. God, I don't want to die without knowing what it's like to lie with you."

He sighed as he caught her hand, his rough fingers closing warmly, reassuringly around it. He'd given up hope that she would come to him, though he'd never quite been able to lose the dream. He had ceased to pressure her during the past few months, not because he'd wanted her less but because what he was offering wasn't fair to her. He still found the thought of marriage distasteful, and that was what a woman like Emma should have.

But his newly developed scruples didn't extend to turning her down if she came to his room wearing nothing but a thin nightgown, begging him to hold her.

Desire was already pumping through him, and he looked at her through narrowed, burning eyes. "You know that holding you won't be all I'll do, don't you? There's no way I can lie down with you and not be inside you, Emma girl."

"Yes, I know." She straightened her shoulders, though her soft, wide lips were trembling. "It's what I want, too."

He pulled her inside and closed the door. She was shaking as he gently freed her hair from its nighttime braid and spread it over her shoulders like a dark cloak. He lifted her hands and placed them on his shoulders, then bent and covered her mouth with his. Emma's eyelids fluttered shut, and she sank against him, against his wonderful heat and strength. Now that she had taken the step, she felt a deep calm underlying her sexual arousal, as if things had finally fallen into their rightful place.

He caught the hem of her nightgown and lifted it up and off. She trembled even more, and her hands made slight movements as if to shield herself, then she let them lie trustingly on his shoulders while he looked down at her slender white body. Ben felt breathless. She was so finely made that he felt coarse and clumsy, likely to hurt her with the lust that burned through him. He put his hand over one breast, marveling at the silky warmth of her and the contrast of his tanned, callused hand against the alabaster globe, then he lifted it and bent down to take the nipple in his mouth.

Incredible heat washed over her, more intense than anything he had taught her before. His taste and scent were achingly familiar; she recognized him by the primitive signs with which women have always recognized their mates. When he placed her on his bed, she went willingly.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"I'll show you," he murmured in reply, kissing her neck and ear and then her mouth. He was achingly erect, throbbing with the need to enter her, but this first time control was crucial. "You taste sweet, Emma girl."

Emma moaned as he moved down to her breasts and began sucking at her nipples with a power that sent fire running through her veins. Time swirled and disappeared. His hands and mouth were all over her body, tasting her, feeling her. She received a jolt when he touched her between her legs, though the hot tide of pleasure quickly drowned her surprise. There was another jolt when he slid one long finger into her, testing both her response and the strength of her maidenhead. She winced away from the slight burning, but he rubbed his thumb across and around the sensitive nub at the top of her sex and with a whimper she returned, her hips rotating in search of more.

"Please." She clutched at him with wet hands. "Ben!"

He heeded her cry and stripped out of his pants, then spread her legs apart. He stopped to steady his breathing and regain his control. "It'll hurt just this once," he said roughly.

She lifted herself against the shaft that probed between her folds. "I know," she murmured as he let his weight down on her and settled his hips in the cradle of her thighs.

He entered her with care, pushing forward with slow pressure. She gasped, and her nails dug into his shoulders. Her body was opening for him, stretching painfully. She thought it was unbearable, but found that it wasn't. Her maidenhead gave way and he went deep inside her while tears burned her eyes. He lay very still, but she could feel his length throbbing as she tried to accustom herself to his penetration.

Then he withdrew, and she stared at him with dark, questioning eyes. He managed a tight smile. "No, it isn't finished. I'm just getting started, sugar, but I'm going to make certain you enjoy this as much as I will." Then he bent to her, applying mouth and fingers to the enjoyable task, and soon she was on fire. Just as she arched in her first convulsive climax, Ben thrust deeply into her, and there was no pain, only the intoxicating passion of their two bodies joined.

Two nights later Victoria slipped out of bed. Her eyes were burning from tears and lack of sleep, yet still she couldn't manage to do more than doze off occasionally. Every time she did, she woke with the sound of a single scream in her ears, and dreaded hearing it again.

It was after midnight now. Jake slept heavily, exhausted from the work he still had to do and his own lack of sleep since Celia's death. She didn't light a candle, knowing that it would wake him. His responses were still very much those of a gunslick, becoming instantly alert at the slightest noise or the light from a single candle. This was the first time she had managed to get out of bed in the middle of the night without waking him, which meant that she had awakened him a lot during her pregnancy.

She couldn't accept losing Celia, she just couldn't. Her older brother had been killed during the war and she had grieved, but it had been different somehow. He had been a grown man, and he had chosen to fight. Celia had been on the verge of blooming into full womanhood, a promise that would forever now go unfulfilled; she had not chosen to be stomped to death by a killer horse. Dear God, how she missed her!

And Rubio still stamped about in his roomy stall, healthy and vicious. It was just a matter of time until he killed again.

Unless she stopped it.

She didn't bother with stockings, but put on her slippers. Her shawl was hanging over the back of a chair, and she wrapped it around her head and shoulders. Jake's holsters were also slung over a chair, one sitting next to his side of the bed so he could reach them in a hurry. She tiptoed over and gingerly slid one of the heavy weapons free of the leather.

It weighted down her arm as she slipped from the room and down the stairs. She would barely be able to hold it steady if she needed it. She hoped she wouldn't.

The cold air blasted her in the face as she tugged the door open. New snow was falling, fat, fluffy snow-flakes silently drifting down to cover everything in white. How Celia would have enjoyed it.

The walk to the barn seemed longer than it ever had before. The falling snow combined with darkness confused her depth perception and she stumbled several times. Already her feet and legs were freezing. It would be warmer in the barn with the body heat given off by the animals. Sophie was in there, her barrel swelling with Rubio's foal. And Gypsy, Celia's calm, gentle Gypsy. Several of the other mares had been bred to the stallion, but not Gypsy, and Victoria was violently glad.

She had to struggle to open the barn door, and a horse nickered in curiosity. The blackness seemed absolute. She left the door open, pushing it wide, then swinging the other door open, too. She knew that there was a lantern

hanging just inside the right door and fumbled around until she found it and managed to get it lit. The warm yellow glow dispelled the darkness.
Sophie put her head over the top of the stall, and down at the far end of the barn Victoria could see the stallion's well-formed head, showing as a dark shadow rather than the red she knew it to be. How much better it would have been if the double doors at that end of the barn had opened into a free pasture rather than a series of corrals and pens, but they did, which meant she would have to drive the stallion back the entire length of the barn.
She knew she couldn't shoot the horse. As much as she hated him, she couldn't put the gun to his head and pull the trigger. Jake was right; he was a dumb animal. She could have shot him in self-defense or to defend anyone from an immediate attack, but not otherwise.
"You're safe from me," she whispered as she approached his stall, "as long as you don't start in my direction. Do you hear me, horse? Then I will kill you."
His ears went back and he watched her with unconcealed hostility. He began stamping, one hoof thudding down repeatedly. In her stall Sophie whinnied and kicked out, sensing the stallion's agitation.
Victoria gripped the pistol in her right hand and used both thumbs to pull the hammer back and cock it. She had to be ready in case he did charge at her. Then she unlatched the stall door and pulled it open, backing up with it, keeping the sturdy wood between her and the horse at all times.
He screamed and backed farther into the stall. "Get out," she hissed. She never wanted to see the stallion again. She had thought about it and in her exhaustion arrived at the truth: she couldn't live on this ranch if Rubio remained. The hate would fester, and every time she saw him she would remember that he'd killed her sister.
He reared, screaming shrilly again. "Go on, get out!" Victoria yelled. She grabbed a length of bridle from the wall, swinging it over the stall at him. "Get out!"
He bolted out of the stall and down the center of the barn, but halted midway, hooves stamping. His ears were still back and he reared, turning to face her. Victoria braced the gun on top of the stall door. "Come on, then," she whispered.
He screamed and ran for freedom, hooves thundering in the night. Other horses all over the ranch were awake now, kicking and whinnying. Lights were appearing as candles and lamps were lit, men were spilling out of the

bunkhouse pulling on their pants and stomping their feet into boots. Victoria was half-frozen and wobbling with exhaustion as she left the barn after extinguishing the lantern. It was all she could do to push the double doors together again and fasten them.

Jake was running toward her with Ben right behind him. Both of them were armed, pistols in hand. When he saw her with his other pistol in her hand, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What did you do?" he yelled.

"I let him go," she said simply, and handed Jake his pistol.

He shoved it into the empty holster. "You what?" Equal amounts of rage and incredulousness were in his voice.

"I let him go. I couldn't live here with him safe and sound in the barn and Celia in a grave. You'll have to make do with the foals he's already sired."

He swore violently, then shut up when he looked down at her. She was as white as her nightgown and shivering with cold; she had only a shawl thrown around her to protect her from the weather. She swayed, and he picked her up. "All right, darling," he said in a far gentler tone. "All right."

He carried her back to the house and put her to bed. For the first time since Celia's death, she went soundly to sleep.

March came, bringing hints of spring that lasted just long enough to make them all start hoping. Victoria was awkward and slow-moving, unable to get up out of a chair by herself. She hadn't recovered her spirits, but was able to smile a little when Jake teased her. Her bulk had its own dampening effect on her moods; her back ached constantly now and she was unable to find a comfortable position for sleeping. The baby had settled so low that she found it difficult even to walk. If only this pregnancy would end! She found herself even looking forward to labor, for it would mean an end to this constant physical wretchedness.

Jake had never particularly considered himself a family man, despite the fact that he was now married and increasingly in love with his wife. It was with some surprise that he realized he was staying close to the house these days, just in case. He rubbed her back for her every night, and helped her out of bed for her numerous nightly visits to the chamberpot. The size of her belly alarmed him, for he knew how slender her hips were. Angelina had died in childbirth; he was terrified that the same might happen to Victoria.

The last of March came and went. Everyone watched her like a hawk. The third of April, it began snowing again and Victoria felt like screaming with frustration. Would spring and this baby never get here?

She couldn't sleep that night; she was more restless than usual, and the sheets kept tangling about her legs.

Jake rubbed her back, but it didn't help. She got up to wash her face with cool water, and he got up with her. Since the night she had sneaked out to the barn and let Rubio go, she hadn't been able to stir without disturbing him. Neither of them bothered to light a candle; the snowfall filled the room with a pale, unearthly light and she was able to see quite well though everything was without color.

Suddenly Jake stiffened. She sensed his alertness and looked at him. He was staring out the window. She looked out the window, too, but could see nothing. "Get dressed," he said sharply, and reached for his pants. "Don't light any candles or lamps." He had barely buttoned his pants before he was out the door, buckling his guns around his lean waist.

He called down the hallway, "Ben. Riders."

Ben sat up in bed at the first sound of Jake's voice, disturbing Emma who had been sleeping on his arm. "Get up, honey," he said in a quiet, level voice. "We have trouble."

He was already up and pulling on his pants before she pushed the hair out of her eyes, but his urgency was contagious. She grabbed her nightgown and pulled it on over her head, shivering as the chill struck her bare body. "Who is it?"

"Doesn't matter."

Victoria would need her. Emma dashed out of the room ahead of Ben, who was putting on his boots, and ran to her own room, which had been largely unoccupied these past couple of months. She didn't know what had kept her from completely moving in with Ben, because certainly no one had been censorious of their relationship. In fact, in the sadness following Celia's death, they had all pulled closer together, and Emma's happiness had seemed to cheer Victoria.

Victoria had never been more aware of her ungainly bulk than she was now, when she was trying to hurry. Jake was back in the bedroom a heartbeat after calling to Ben, putting on his boots, shrugging into a shirt but not taking the time to button it. He grabbed his heavy coat on the way out the

door a second time. Over his shoulder he said, "Damn it, Victoria, get dressed!"
She was trying. She didn't bother to remove her nightgown, but pulled on one of her loose dresses over it. Emma came in, dressed herself, as Victoria was struggling to put on her stockings and shoes. "I'll do it," Emma whispered, going down on her knees and rolling the stockings up Victoria's legs. "What's happening?"
"I don't know. Jake saw something and told Ben there were riders."
They listened, but couldn't hear anything. When they went downstairs they found that the men had roused the rest of the household, and the three other women were standing in their nightgowns in a terrified knot. Jake tossed Ben a rifle, then gave Victoria and Emma an assessing glance. "Both of you get a rifle and find a place where you have plenty of cover but can see to shoot. I'm going down to the bunkhouse to wake up the men."
"I'm going down to the bunkhouse," Ben corrected, and both of them thought of Victoria, heavily pregnant. It was better that Jake stay with her. Before he slipped out the door, Ben put his hand behind Emma's neck and pulled her to him for a quick, hard kiss. It wasn't until he was gone that she realized he had kissed her good-bye, just in case.
"What's happening?" Victoria asked calmly.
"I saw a light where there shouldn't have been one. Someone lit a cigarette, probably."
"What makes you think it was more than one man?"
"Experience." He shoved a handful of shells in each pocket and pushed the box toward them. "Fill up your pockets. Carmita, can any of you shoot?"
"Yes, Señor Jake," she said. "I can, and so can Juana."
"And I," Lola said.
"Good. All of you, get a rifle. It may be nothing, but by God if it's something we'll be ready for them."
"Indians?" Juana posed timidly.
"No. Indians would never have made that light."
White men. Raiders.
Emma watched the door by which Ben had left, willing him to come back through it.
The first shot made them all jump, except for Jake. He ran toward the front of the house and broke out a window with the stock of his rifle. "Find cover!" he yelled.

They scrambled for positions. "Coming in!" Ben yelled from outside, and the door burst open. He came in low, running, and was followed by five other men. "Thought you could use some extra guns in here," he said. Luis was one of them, his lean, dark face more alive than it had been in two months.

The women went upstairs, their hearts pounding as they chose windows. Following Jake's example, Victoria smashed the glass out with her rifle and cold air poured in. "At least I won't go to sleep," she mumbled.

The barrage of shooting opened all at once, and it seemed like it came from all directions. The house echoed with shots and the sharp smell of cordite burned her nostrils. She peered out the window, searching for a target. She could see dark shapes moving around and chose the ones on horseback; their men wouldn't be mounted, she reasoned.

A man on foot raised his head from behind a bush and aimed at the house. Victoria carefully aimed and pulled the trigger. The man fell back in a boneless sprawl.

She had killed a man. It left her surprisingly unmoved. Later, perhaps, would be time for reaction.

There were more shots from the upper floor now, and the others began picking their targets. Victoria shot at a man on horseback, but missed.

A cry of pain came from one of the bedrooms. Victoria started, but didn't dare leave her post. "Emma?" she called.

"I'm fine! Carmita? Lola? Juana?"

Everyone answered except Lola. Victoria heard a low moan.

Just then an orange glow flickered across the white ground. A man galloped toward the house, a blazing torch in his right hand. Terror struck Victoria's heart. They were trying to burn the house! She shot the man in the face and he tumbled backward off the horse, the torch flying from his hand and sputtering out in the snow.

Bullets struck the adobe walls and shattered what little glass was left in the window. Shards rained down on her ducked head. When she lifted it again, she saw another man carrying a flaming torch die before he could throw it at the house.

The adobe walls would be difficult to burn, she thought, as would the clay tile roof, but what if a torch came through one of the glassless windows?

She fired and reloaded, fired and reloaded, for what seemed like hours. Her entire body felt squeezed by a great fist. Terror ate at her, because she didn't

know if Jake was still alive or if a bullet had found him.
Emma ran into the room, bent low. "Lola's dead, and Juana has been wounded, but not bad. She's still shooting."
"What about Jake? And Ben?"
"I heard Jake downstairs. I don't know about Ben." Agony was in Emma's voice. Victoria squeezed her hand.
"Who is doing this?" Victoria moaned. Every muscle in her was aching. She didn't know how much longer she could stay on her feet.
"I don't know. It should be dawn soon. At least then we'll be able to see."
Dawn. Had that much time passed? It had seemed like forever, but at the same time she would have measured it in minutes instead of hours.
She caught the acrid smell of smoke.
"Get water!" she yelled. "Fire! Get water!" She grabbed the pitcher of water from the table and ran out into the hallway. Pale smoke was drifting up the stairs. She ran down them, bending over as far as she could. Someone rose up in front of her, a face from hell. It was Jake, his face blackened with gunsmoke.
"Get down!" he yelled.
"The house is on fire!"
He cursed and swung around. None of them had noticed the smoke, but now they could see it coming from the kitchen. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to the floor. "Stay here, do you hear me? Stay here! I'm going to get the others. We'll have to get out of here!"
How could they? They would run into a hail of bullets outside. But as Jake had said, they had to get out. They couldn't fight the fire and the raiders at the same time.
The smoke was getting thicker. She began ripping squares out of her skirt and soaking them in water from the pitcher she had grabbed. Ben crawled up beside her, grinning like a fiend. She hit him in the face with a sodden piece of material. "Tie that over your nose and mouth," she said. Her throat was burning, and she obeyed her own instructions.
"Is Emma all right?" Ben grunted.
"Yes. Jake has gone up to get them. Lola's dead."
Ben called the five other men together, and they pulled back from their positions as Jake came down the stairs with the three women. Victoria gave them all wet squares to cover their faces. Jake hunkered down beside her as he tied the cloth over his mouth and nose.

"We'll go out through the courtyard," he said, his voice muffled. "It's the only way that'll give us any protection. I'll go out first, then another man, then the women. The rest of you come after the women and cover them."
Luis said, "We have to get word to Lonny, or our own men are liable to shoot us."
"We don't have time. Go, now!"
Jake dragged Victoria to her feet and down the hall to one of the courtyard entrances. "We'll take you to the smithy," he said. "It's closest."
The smithy was just a three-sided shed, equipped with the basic blacksmith tools, but it had the advantage of being directly behind the house. They would have some shelter there, but not much.
Jake went out first. He saw a muzzle flash as someone fired, the bullet singing close by his head with the sound of an angry hornet. He fired but must have missed because he saw a shadow dodging to the side. He fired at the shadow, and this time was rewarded by a howl of pain that swiftly disintegrated into silence.
Behind him he could hear Victoria breathing in hard, quick gasps as the smoke got thicker. Then he heard Luis, who came out after him, his dark eyes flashing in the light of the flames that were beginning to flicker through the roof. "Get your wife," he said to Jake. "I'll guard you."
Jake put his arm around Victoria's back and ran. She tried to stay up with him but stumbled, and he held her up with the sheer force of his arm, keeping himself between her and the most likely line of fire. "I can make it, just watch your back!" she gasped.
"Don't talk, just run!"
The men behind them were firing steadily, snapping off shots at anyone who moved. From the bunkhouse and stable came a furious volley, as someone spotted the women trying to flee the house and laid down covering fire so they could reach safety. Bullets zinged overhead, but they ran and ducked and weaved, never giving anyone a steady target.
Jake made it to the smithy with Victoria and placed her on the ground at the back of the shed. He was already turning around to leave her as he said, "Stay down. Don't raise your head for anything." Then he took up position beside Luis, picking his shots and snapping them off, firing for effect rather than cover.
Emma tumbled into the smithy in a tangle of skirts, but she quickly got to her hands and knees and crawled to Victoria, swearing as the cloth tangled

her legs again. Illogically, Victoria laughed at hearing those sort of words leaving Emma's proper mouth. Emma looked up and grinned. Most of her dark hair had come loose from its braid, and her pale skin was smeared with soot and gunpowder. "Well," she said, "there's no point in worrying about manners right now."

"I agree." Victoria laughed again, a bit disoriented. They had both killed tonight, so why worry about propriety?

Carmita and Juana scrambled in after them. Juana was bleeding from a cut high on her shoulder where a splinter of glass had sliced through the air. She sank down on the ground, still clutching a rifle in her hand.

Ben's left leg was suddenly knocked out from under him, and he went down as abruptly as if he had been tripped. Emma made a high, thin sound and despite Jake's shouted warning darted out of the shelter.

Ben was already rolling over, trying to get his good leg under him, when Emma slid into the snow beside him. She grabbed his collar and began dragging him, screaming and crying and swearing all at the same time. He was swearing, too, yelling at Emma to let go of him and get the hell back into the smithy, but she refused. Her strength amazed him. Though he far outweighed her, she dug her heels in and pulled and there was nothing he could do to stop her, no way he could break her grip. She dragged him into the smithy and immediately began tearing his pants leg open so she could see the wound.

"How is he?" Jake barked.

"I'll live," Ben replied for himself, though it wasn't by any means certain. The bullet had punched completely through his thigh. Still, if he didn't bleed to death and if he didn't get gangrene, he would be all right.

"Sarratt! Goddamn you, Sarratt, where are you?"

Jake's head came up, and an unholy look crossed his face, a cold glitter coming into his eyes. "Garnet," he hissed. A small smile of anticipation touched his lips, and he snaked a run across the yard. Now he knew who to hunt; it was what he'd been waiting for. This time Garnet wasn't going to get away.

Dawn was slowly turning the sky a pale gray. It was snowing again, the swirling flakes cutting down on visibility. Crimson and yellow light from the burning house illuminated the area in a strange, flickering glow. Victoria turned her head and looked at the house; the fire in the kitchen had burned through to the second floor. She could see flames breaking through the roof

and licking out of the broken windows. It was dying, the old, graceful house that had seen both love and savage betrayal, birth and death. She hadn't been able to bring herself to pack away Celia's clothes, but now she wouldn't have to; the flames were destroying every memento, leaving only her own memories.

The fist tightened on her body. She lay panting, watching the flames, and when she could speak again she said, "The baby will be here soon."

Carmita gasped, too overwhelmed by the night's events to comprehend how she could deal with this, too. Emma looked up from where she was applying pressure to Ben's wounds to stop the bleeding, her face tight with strain. "Your pains have started?"

Victoria inhaled sharply, her fingers digging into the dirt. "Hours ago."

Garnet was desperate and losing control. It wasn't supposed to have been like this! It should have happened the way it had the first time, with them riding in and catching everyone off guard or asleep. Instead, those bastards had been awake and waiting for them. It didn't make sense, and it made him afraid. Only the thought of finally getting his hands on Celia kept him from running. This would be his last chance, because he knew that if he failed, Sarratt would hunt him down like a mad dog.

"Sarratt!" he bellowed. "Sarratt!" Even as he yelled, he changed position, working his way around toward the barn. If he could just draw Jake out, to hell with a fair fight. No way was he going to face Jake. Just one shot was all he'd need, a quick bullet in the head or back, and no more Sarratt. Someone had already gotten the brother. The kingdom would be his, and Celia would be his. He'd have to take care of Bullfrog in the same way he took care of Sarratt, but that didn't trouble him any.

Jake didn't answer. He remained where he was, watching. He saw someone quickly sidle into the corral. The light was too uncertain for him to recognize the man by anything other than instinct. Garnet was heading toward the barn, where he would have cover when Jake showed himself.

Jake didn't intend to show himself. On his belly he wormed his way from bush to tree to well-house, then to the bunkhouse. Bodies were sprawled all over the yard, dark, boneless heaps. A lot of men had died that night. He wasn't going to be one of them, but Garnet damn sure was.

"We need heat," Emma said calmly. "Can someone fire up the forge, please? And we need light."

Luis began stoking coal into the forge. "Heat, yes, but there's no lantern. It will be daylight soon."
Victoria didn't care about either heat or light. Every instinct, every sense, was focused inward. She was in the grip of a force that wouldn't be denied, a great squeezing force wrapped around her body and dragging her down. Even though she had witnessed Angelina's labor, she hadn't imagined it would be this bad. It was grinding agony, tearing her pelvis apart and forcing air from her lungs, and it went on and on with only spare moments of relief between the waves.
Ben lay next to the anvil, listening to Victoria's stifled groans. "Take my shirt," he instructed, keeping his voice steady with effort. "Twist it, and wrap it tight around a stick, then set it on fire. It'll give you a few minutes of light."
"All right," Emma said after pausing to consider the idea. "But not just yet. We'll need it more in a little while than we do right now."
Garnet worked his way around to the back of the barn and opened the door just enough to slip in. Fingers of light were beginning to show through the cracks as dawn progressed. He didn't have much time left. He ran to the front of the barn and opened those doors a crack, not enough for anyone to notice that they were open but enough for him to see and shoot. Now all he had to do was wait. Sarratt should be working his way toward the spot where Garnet had been when he'd yelled.
Garnet grinned. Just a few minutes. A few more minutes, and he'd have everything he'd ever wanted.
"Looking for me?"
The words were accompanied by the unmistakable click of a pistol being cocked. Garnet froze, sweat popping out on his brow despite the cold. He didn't dare turn around. Terror ripped through him as he realized that he was going to die. He had shot others with no more feeling than he'd have burst a melon, but the thought of his own death was paralyzing.
"You might as well turn around," Jake said softly. "I'm going to kill you either way. At least if you turn you'll have a chance to get a shot off at me, too."
The gun trembled in Garnet's hand. He'd die as soon as he turned, but he believed Sarratt when he said he'd kill him anyway.
"You should've kept going," Jake murmured. "As far and as fast from the kingdom as you could get."

"You'd have hunted me down," Garnet gasped. "And the girl—I wanted the girl."
Celia. Beautiful little Celia. Jake's mouth tightened with pain. "You'll never have her now," he said.
Garnet threw himself to the side, turning and firing as he did. Jake was prepared for that and had positioned himself behind a bale of hay. Only his head and gun were exposed. He was calm as he fired, the first bullet hitting Garnet in the stomach, the second in the chest. Garnet crashed against the wall, his finger tightening reflexively on the trigger and getting off a shot that went through the ceiling before the heavy gun dropped from his hand. Jake kicked the gun out of reach, just in case. The only way he'd trust Garnet was dead.
Garnet's eyes were open, his throat working convulsively as he tried to breathe. Red foam bubbled out of his mouth. Jake watched as his chest heaved up and down a few times, then stopped completely. Garnet's eyes glazed over.
There had been a lot of death on this ranch. Jake sighed, suddenly tired of it, but he automatically reloaded his pistol. It was quiet outside, he realized. Maybe it was over. He had to get back to Victoria.
"Boss? You all right?"
It was Lonny. Jake called, "Yeah."
"You better get back to the smithy. Luis says the baby's coming."
Jake had been frightened before; he'd been anxious, worried, tense; but now he felt pure terror. Victoria couldn't give birth like this, lying in a cold smithy, without blankets or anything. He ran, not even noticing the gun still in his hand.
Ben was propped up against the anvil now, shirtless, but someone had given him a coat. He was pale, but a quick glance reassured Jake that the bleeding had stopped. The forge was going full blast, giving off great waves of heat that fought off the chill in the open shed. Luis lighted a lantern and handed it to the back of the shed, which had been partitioned off by several skirts that were hung over a rope strung from side to side. Jake brushed past the skirts and knelt on the ground beside his wife.
Emma, Carmita, and Juana were all in their nightgowns, having sacrificed the clothing they had hurriedly donned over their nightwear for the makeshift curtain. Victoria's nightgown was rucked up to her waist, her knees bent and raised. Jake knelt beside her, his heart in his throat as he

stroked her damp hair back from her face with dirty, trembling fingers. Her eyes were closed, her face paper white as she breathed in quick, jerky pants. Carmita glanced up at him, her dark eyes worried. "Soon, Seüor Jake. I can see the head."

Victoria's eyes opened. They were glazed, but fastened on him like a talisman. She reached up over her head, and Jake caught her hand in his. "Hold on, love," he whispered. He was frozen with fear. He had brought her to this, endangered her life, reduced her to giving birth in the dirt like an animal, his sweet lady Victoria. He should never have married her, he should have sent her back East, where she could have had the sort of life she'd been born for, a life of comfort and gentility.

Her hand clamped down on his, and her teeth clenched. A low, raw sound built up in her throat, then erupted in an animal scream of pain, followed by another, and another. Her entire body was convulsing, bearing down, and her shoulders left the ground.

With a gush of blood and water, a slippery little body slid out into Carmita's waiting hands. The baby looked purplish and another sort of agony punched Jake in the chest as he stared wordlessly at the silent infant. Then Carmita thumped it on the back and a tiny, choking cry erupted that began building into a wail. She turned the baby, and Jake saw that it was a boy. Tightly clenched little hands jerked as his son expressed his upset at this unfamiliar new world.

Unbelievably, Victoria laughed, a tired, weak sound. "Well, he definitely resembles you," she said.

Jake looked at her in bewilderment, wondering how she could see any resemblance to anyone in the squalling, red, wrinkled scrap, still covered with the blood of his birth. Maybe in the dark hair, but it was wet and might not be so dark when it was dry.

She pulled him down to her, her eyes alight with mischief. Putting her lips against his ear, she whispered, "He's very definitely a male."

Then Jake understood what she meant. He looked at the naked baby and for the first time in his life, a blush reddened his cheeks.

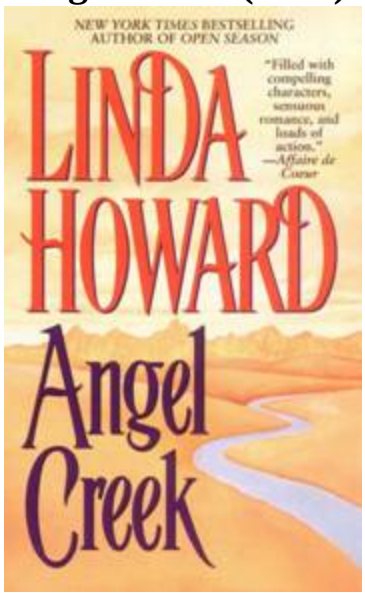
She held out her arms for the baby. "Let me have him. He must be cold."

Carmita cut and tied the cord. The baby was quickly wrapped in someone else's shirt (everyone seemed to be giving up their clothing for the occasion) and placed in Victoria's arms. The baby stopped crying, slowly blinking his unfocused eyes as he responded to the warmth of being held by his mother.

Jake put his arms around both of them, resting his grimy cheek against Victoria's hair. "I love you," he said hoarsely. She was all that was good and strong and gentle in his life. Her hold on him had shattered the core of hatred that he had fed off of for so long.
Victoria tilted her head back, her shadowed blue eyes meeting his green ones. "I love you, too," she replied simply.
"I meant to give you better than this. We don't even have a house to live in now."
"I don't care." She was tired and leaned more heavily against him. "I'm glad the house burned. There was too much hatred locked in it, too much death. I didn't want all of that for him." She looked at her son and gently touched his downy cheek with a finger. He turned his head toward the touch, his rosebud mouth working.
"I can start over," Jake promised. "I'll build another house for you, if you'll stay with me. God, honey, don't leave me. You might as well shoot me if you're going to leave, because I love you so much I won't be any good without you."
He'd never before told her he loved her, never before looked at her with that expression in his eyes, so desperate and haunted and… and afraid. She couldn't imagine Jake Sarratt being afraid of anything, but it was there in his eyes that no longer looked cold to her at all.
It changed everything, his love. The hate was gone, and with it her reason for ever leaving.
"All right," she said, reaching tiredly for his hand. "You build your own kingdom and forget about the past, about that other Sarratt's Kingdom. It's really gone now, and we can start fresh."
Emma knelt beside Ben to check his leg. He grinned at her. "Do I have a niece or a nephew?"
"Nephew." She looked down, her face getting hot as she fumbled with his bandage. "And maybe a son of your own," she mumbled.
"What?" He stared at her in shock. "What?" he asked louder, sitting up straight.
"Hush!" she hissed at him.
He grabbed her arms, holding her still. "Are you sure?" he asked.
"It's possible. I'm not certain yet." She was just a little late, and her system had never been as reliable as Victoria's. But the possibility was there. She had spent too many nights in Ben's bed for her to think otherwise.

He began laughing and pulled her down for a hard kiss. "Emma girl, I haven't been able to think straight since I met you, and things aren't getting any better. I think we'd better get married, don't you?"
"Because I might be—?"
"No, because we love each other and we'll probably have a houseful of kids, so it would make things simpler if we were married."
Emma's dark eyes began to glow. "Ben Sarratt, I do love you."
"That's a yes?"
She nodded. "That's a yes."
Jake sat on the ground, holding Victoria propped in his arms. Unbelievably, she was sleeping and so was the baby. He looked at his son, all red and wrinkled and completely helpless, dependent on him for protection and food and everything else in life. He had to think about the future now, and his future was Victoria and the baby, as well as other babies that might come. The morning carried the stink of smoke and gunpowder, but the snow had stopped and the sun was trying to break through and shine on the new layer of white. There was something else new, something inside him, new and good. The future loomed before him, and he felt good about it.
He had Victoria, their baby was fat and healthy, and together they could build a life of their own without the taint of the past. The territory would see a new Sarratt's Kingdom, the one he and Ben would build, but this one would be as fresh as the snow that lay on the high valley.

Angel Creek (1991)



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Chapter 1

Lucas Cochran had been back in town for almost a month, but it still amazed him how much the little town of Prosper had lived up to its name. It would never be anything more than a small town, but it was neat and bustling. A man could tell a lot about a place just by looking at the people on the streets, and by that standard Prosper was quiet, steady, and—well—prosperous. A boomtown might be more exciting than a town like Prosper, and people could make a lot of money in such places, but mining towns tended to die as soon as the ore played out.

Prosper, on the other hand, had started out as a single building serving triple duty as general store, bar, and livery for the few settlers around. Lucas could remember when the site Prosper now occupied had been nothing but bare ground and the only white men for miles had been on the Double C. The gold rush in 1858 had changed all that, bringing thousands of men into the Colorado mountains in search of instant wealth; no gold had been found around Prosper, but a few people had seen the land and stayed, starting small ranches. More people had meant a larger demand for goods. The lone general store/bar/livery soon had another building standing beside it, and the tiny settlement that would one day become Prosper, Colorado, was born.

Lucas had seen a lot of boomtowns, not just in Colorado, and they were all very similar in their frenzied pace, as muddy streets swarmed with miners and those looking to separate the miners from their gold: gamblers, saloon owners, whores, and claim-jumpers. He was glad that Prosper hadn't been blessed—or cursed, depending on your point of view—by either gold or silver. Being what it was, it would still be there when most of the boomtowns were nothing but weathered skeletons.

It was a sturdy little town, a good place to raise a family, as evidenced by the three hundred and twenty-eight souls who lived there. All of the businesses were located on the long center street, around which nine streets of residences had arranged themselves. Most of the houses were small and simple, but some of the people, like banker Wilson Millican, had already possessed money before settling in Prosper. Their houses wouldn't have looked out of place in Denver or even in the larger cities back East.

Prosper had only one saloon and no whorehouses, though it was well known among the men in town (and the women, although the men didn't know it) that the two saloon girls would take care of any extra itches they happened to have, for a price. There was a church on the north end of town, and a school for the youngsters. Prosper had a bank, two hotels, three restaurants (counting the two in the hotels), a general store, two livery stables, a dry goods store, a barber shop, a cobbler, a blacksmith, and even a hat shop for the ladies. The stage came through once a week.

The entire town was there only because the Cochran family had carved the big Double C spread out of nothing, fighting the Comanche and Arapaho, paying for the land with Cochran blood. Lucas had been the first Cochran born there, and now he was the only one left; he had buried his two brothers and his mother back during the Indian wars, and his father had died the month before. Other ranchers had moved in, but the Cochrans had been the first, and had bought the security the town now enjoyed with Cochran lives. Everyone who had been in town for long knew that Prosper's backbone wasn't the long center street, but the line of graves in the family burial plot on the Double C.

Lucas's bootheels thudded on the sidewalk as he walked toward the general store. A cold wind had sprung up that had the smell of snow on it, and he looked at the sky. Low gray clouds were building over the mountains, signaling yet another delay to spring. Warmer weather should arrive any day, but those low clouds said not quite yet. He passed a woman with her

shawl pulled tight around her shoulders and tipped his hat to her. "Looks like more snow, Mrs. Padgett."
Beatrice Padgett gave him a friendly smile. "It does that, Mr. Cochran."
He entered the general store and nodded to Mr. Winches, the proprietor. Winches had done right well in the ten years Lucas had been gone, enough to hire himself a clerk who took care of most of the stocking. "Hosea," Lucas said by way of greeting.
"How do, Lucas? It's turning a mite cold out there, ain't it?"
"It'll snow by morning. The snowpacks can use it, but I'm ready for spring myself."
"Ain't we all? You need anything in particular?"
"Just some gun oil."
"Down the left, toward the back."
"Thanks."
Lucas went down the aisle Hosea had indicated, almost bumping into a farm woman who was fingering the harnesses. He muttered an absentminded apology and continued without more than a glance. Farming was hard on a woman, making her look old before her time. Besides, he had just spotted a familiar blond head over by the sacks of flour, and a sense of satisfaction filled him. Olivia Millican was just the type he would want when he got around to getting married: well-bred, with a pleasant disposition, and pretty enough for him to look forward to bedding her for the rest of his life. He had plans for the Double C, and the ruthless ambition to put those plans into effect.
There were two other young women standing with Olivia, so he didn't approach, just contented himself with a tip of his hat when her eyes strayed his way. To her credit she didn't giggle, though the two with her did. Instead she gave him a grave nod of acknowledgment, and if the color in her cheeks heightened a bit, it just made her prettier.
He paid for the gun oil and left, not getting the door shut good behind him before a muffled flurry of squeals and giggles broke out, though again Olivia didn't contribute.
"He danced with you twice!"
"What did he say?"
"I was so excited when he asked me, I almost fainted dead away!"
"Does he dance well? I swear I had butterflies in my stomach just at the thought of having his arm around my waist! It's just as well he didn't ask

me, because I'd have made a fool of myself, but at the same time I admit I was powerfully jealous of you, Olivia."

Dee Swann glanced at the knot of three young women, two of whom were taking turns gabbing without allowing Olivia a chance to answer. Olivia was blushing a little but nevertheless maintaining her composure. They stood off to the side in the general store and were making an effort to keep their voices down, but their excitement had caught Dee's attention. It took only a moment of eavesdropping to discern that the gossip was, as usual, about some man, in this case Lucas Cochran. She continued to listen as she selected a new bridle. The stiff leather straps slipped through her fingers as she searched for the one that was most pliable.

"He was very gentlemanly," Olivia said in an even tone. The banker's daughter was seldom ruffled. Dee looked up again with amusement sparkling in her eyes at Olivia's unwavering good manners, and their gazes met across the aisles in silent communication. Olivia understood Dee's mirth as plainly as if she had laughed aloud, just as she understood why Dee not only didn't join them but preferred that Olivia not even acknowledge her presence beyond a polite nod. Dee jealously guarded her privacy, and Olivia respected her old friend enough not to try to include her in a discussion that wouldn't interest her and might actually irritate her.

Even as small as Prosper was, there was a definite social structure. Dee wouldn't normally have been welcome in the circles in which Olivia moved, and she had long ago made certain her friend understood she didn't want to be made an exception to the rule. Dee was totally disinterested in such socializing. Her penchant for privacy was so strong that though everyone knew they were acquainted, since they had attended the local school together, only the two of them knew how close their friendship really was. Dee never visited Olivia; it was always Olivia who rode out, alone, to Dee's small cabin, but it was an arrangement that suited both of them. Not only was Dee's privacy protected, but Olivia in turn felt a certain freedom, a sense of relief in knowing herself unobserved and unjudged at least for a few hours by anyone other than Dee, who was the least judgmental person Olivia had ever met. Only with Dee could she truly be herself. This wasn't to say that she was in reality anything less than a lady, but merely that she enjoyed being able to say whatever she thought. In their shared glance was Olivia's promise to ride out soon and tell Dee all that had happened since

they had last seen each other, which had been over a month ago due to the late winter weather.

Having made her selection, Dee took the bridle and her other purchases up to the counter where Hosea Winches waited. He painstakingly tallied her selections on the ledger page that bore her name at the top, then subtracted the total from the amount of credit remaining from the year before. There was only a small amount left, she saw, reading the figures upside down, but it would last her until her crops came in this summer.

Mr. Winches turned the ledger around for her to double-check his arithemetic. While she ran a finger down his columns he eyed the group of young women still standing at the back of the store. Bursts of stifled laughter, high-pitched with excitement, made him snort. "Sounds like a fox got in the chicken house, what with all that squawking," he mumbled.

Dee nodded her satisfaction with his totals and turned the ledger back to its original position, then gathered up her purchases. "Thank you, Mr. Winches."

He shook his head absently. "Be thankful you're more levelheaded than some," he said. "You'd think they ain't never seen a man before."

Dee looked back at the others, then at Mr. Winches again, and they both shrugged their shoulders. So what if Lucas Cochran was back in town after a ten-year absence? It didn't mean anything to either of them.

She had recognized Cochran when he had bumped her in the store aisle, of course, but she hadn't spoken because recognizing someone wasn't the same as knowing him, and she doubted that he had recognized her. After all, he had left Prosper shortly after her folks had settled in the area. She had been a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl, while he had been eight years older, a grown man. They had never even met. She knew his face, but she didn't know the man or much about him.

Dee made it a practice to mind her own business and expected others to do the same, but even so she had been aware of what was going on at the Double C. It was the biggest ranch in the area, so everyone paid some attention. Ellery Cochran, Lucas's father, had died a few weeks before. Dee hadn't known the man personally, only enough to put a name to his face whenever their paths crossed in town. She hadn't thought anything unusual of his passing; death was common, and he'd died peacefully, which was about as much as a body could ask for.

The matter was of only mild interest to her, on the level of hearing that a neighbor had a new baby. She had never had any dealings with Ellery, so she didn't expect to have any with his son. She had already forgotten about the Cochrans by the time she stepped out into the icy wind. She tugged her father's old coat more snugly around her and jammed his too-big hat down around her ears, ducking her head to keep the wind off her face as she walked hurriedly to the wagon and climbed up onto the plank seat.

It began snowing late that afternoon, but the swirling of the silent white flakes was one of her favorite sights and filled her with contentment, rather than restlessness at yet another delay of spring. Dee loved the changing seasons, each with its own magic and beauty, and she lived close enough to the land to become immersed in the inexorable rhythm of nature. Her animals were snug in the barn, her chores finished for the day, and she was safe in the cabin with a brisk fire snapping cheerfully, warming her on the outside, while a cup of coffee wanned her on the inside. She had nothing more pressing to do than sit with her feet stretched toward the fire and read one of the precious few books she had obtained over the winter. Winter was her time of rest; she was too busy during the other three seasons to have either the time or the energy for much reading.

But the book soon dropped to her lap, and she leaned her head against the high back of the rocking chair, her eyes focused inward as she planned her garden. The corn had done so well last year that it might be a good thing to plant more of it. Corn was never a waste; what the townspeople didn't buy, she could always use as feed for the horse. But extra corn would mean that she would have to cut back on some other vegetable, and she couldn't decide if that would be wise. By careful planning and experimentation she knew to the square yard how much she could tend, and tend well, by herself. She didn't intend to expand at the expense of the quality of her vegetables. Nor did she want to hire a young boy to help her. It was selfish of her, perhaps, but the greatest pleasure she got from her garden, other than the primitive satisfaction of making things grow, was her complete independence. She stood alone and reveled in it.

At first it had frightened her when she had found herself, at the age of eighteen, totally alone in life. When Dee was sixteen, only a couple of years after they had settled in the narrow, fertile valley just outside Prosper, Colorado, her mother, a schoolteacher, had died, leaving her daughter a legacy of books, an appreciation of the benefits of hard work, and a level

head. Barely two more years had passed before her father, George Swann, had managed to get himself kicked in the head by a mule, and he died in his bed the next day without regaining consciousness.

The silence, the emptiness had haunted her. Her solitude, her vulnerability had frightened her. A woman alone was a woman without protection. Dee had dug her father's grave herself and buried him, not wanting anyone to know she was all alone on the homestead. When she had to go into Prosper for supplies she turned aside friendly queries about her father, saying only that he couldn't leave the ranch just then, and she comforted her conscience with the knowledge that she hadn't lied, even if she hadn't told the exact truth.

George had died early in the winter, and during the long, cold months Dee had grieved and pondered her situation. She owned this fertile little valley now; it was too small to support a large-scale ranching operation, but too large for her to work herself. On the other hand, the soil was lush, fed by crystal-clear Angel Creek as it poured out of Prosper Canyon and ran right down the middle of the valley. She could never remember deciding on any exact day what she was going to do with the rest of her life; she had just done what she had to as each day presented itself.

First and foremost had been the necessity of learning how to protect herself. With dogged determination each day she set out her father's weapons: a Colt .36 handgun, an old Sharps rifle, and a shiny, year-old double-barreled shotgun. The handgun was rusty with disuse, as George hadn't gotten it out of the holster where it had been hanging on a peg since they'd settled on Angel Creek. He hadn't been any good with a handgun, he'd often joked; just give him a shotgun, so all he had to do was aim in the general direction of something.

Dee had felt much the same way, but she cleaned and oiled all three of the weapons, something she had often seen her father do, and practiced loading and unloading each weapon in turn, hour after hour, until she could do it automatically, without thinking. Only then did she begin practicing with targets. She began with the handgun, because she thought it would be the easiest, and immediately she saw why George hadn't much liked it. Over any distance at all it just wasn't accurate enough to count on. She experimented until she knew the distance from which she could reasonably expect to hit within the circle of the target she'd painted on a big tree trunk. With the rifle it was much easier to hit what she aimed at, and from a much

greater distance. But, like her father, she liked the shotgun best. A man up to no good might reason she wouldn't be able to hit him with a pistol, or even a rifle, and take his chances, but no man with a brain between his ears was going to figure she was likely to miss with a shotgun.

She didn't waste her time trying to build up any speed with the pistol; that was for fast draws, gunslicks looking to make a reputation, and wasn't what she needed. Accuracy was her goal, and she worked on it day after day until she felt satisfied that she was competent enough to defend herself with whichever weapon was at hand. She would never be more than competent, but as competency was what she wanted, that was enough.

The garden was something that had seemed necessary, too. She and her mother had always planted a garden and worked long hours every summer canning the vegetables for use during the winter. Dee liked working in the garden, liked the rhythm of it and the way she could actually see the fruits of her labor. Losing both of her parents so close together had stunned her with the realization that human life was temporary, and she had needed something permanent to get her through the desolation of grief. She had found it in the land, for it continued, and the seasons marched on. A garden was a productive thing, returning a bounty for the most elemental care. It eased her grief to see life coming out of the ground, and the physical labor provided its own kind of relief. The land had given her a reason to live and thus had given her life.

By early spring it was known in town that George Swann had died during the winter, and she had had to weather the storm of questions. People with no more than a nodding acquaintance would ask her outright what her plans were, if she had any folks to take her in, when she'd be going back East. She had cousins in Virginia, where she'd been born, but no one close, even if she had been inclined to go back, which she wasn't. Nor did she consider it anyone's business except her own. The townfolk's nosiness had been almost intolerable for her, for she had always been a private person, and that part of her personality had grown stronger during the past months. Those same people were scandalized when she'd made it plain she had no intention of leaving the homestead. She was only a girl, not yet even nineteen years old, and in the opinion of the townsfolk she had no business living out there all by herself. A respectable woman wouldn't do such a thing.

Some of the young cowhands from the area ranches, as well as others who hadn't the excuse of youth, thought she might be pining for what a man

could give her and took it upon themselves to relieve her loneliness. They found their way, singly and sometimes in pairs, to her cabin during the summer nights. With the shotgun in hand Dee had seen to it that they had even more quickly found their way off her property, and gradually the word had gotten around that the Swann girl wasn't interested. A few of them had had to have their britches dusted with shot before they saw the light, but once they realized that she wasn't shy about pulling the trigger they hadn't come back. At least not in the guise of generous swains.

That first spring she had, by habit, planted a garden meant to provide enough for two, as that was what she had planted before, and the crops had been on the verge of bearing before she realized she would have a large surplus. She began taking what she couldn't use into town to sell it off her wagon. But that meant that she had to stay in town all day long herself, so finally she arranged with Mr. Winches that he would buy her vegetables, sometimes for cash and sometimes for credit on his books, and resell them in his general store. It was an arrangement that worked out for both of them, as Dee was able to spend more time in the garden and Mr. Winches could sell the vegetables to the townspeople—the ones who didn't have their own small garden plots—for a neat little profit.

The next year, this time deliberately, Dee planted a huge garden and soon found that she couldn't properly take care of it. The weeds outstripped her efforts to destroy them, and the vegetables suffered. Still, she made a nice profit through Mr. Winches and put up more than enough to feed herself over the winter.

The next spring, as Dee planted her third garden, a new rancher moved into the area south of Prosper. Kyle Bellamy was young, only in his late twenties, and too handsome for his own good. Dee had disliked him on sight; he was overly aggressive, riding roughshod over other people's conversations and opinions. He intended to build a great ranch and made no secret of it as he began acquiring land, though he was careful to avoid stepping on Ellery Cochran's toes.

Bellamy decided that he needed another good water source for his growing empire, and he offered to buy the Angel Creek valley from Dee. She had almost laughed aloud at the ridiculously low offer but managed to decline politely.

His next offer was much higher. Her refusal remained polite.

The third offer was even higher, and he was clearly angry when he made it. He warned her that he wasn't going to go any higher, and Dee decided that he didn't quite understand her position.
"Mr. Bellamy, it isn't the money. I don't want to sell to anyone, for any price. I don't want to leave here; this is my home."
In Bellamy's experience, he could buy anything he wanted; it was just a question of how much he was willing to spend to get it. It came as a shock to him to read the truth in Dee's steady green eyes. No matter how much he offered, she wasn't going to sell.
But he wanted that land.
His next offer was for marriage. Dee would have been amused if it hadn't been for the abrupt shock of realization that she was as disinclined to marry anyone as she was to sell her land. Whenever she had thought of the future she had always vaguely assumed that she would someday get married and have children, so she herself was surprised to learn that that wasn't what she wanted at all. Her two and a half years of complete independence had taught her how entirely suited she was to solitude and being her own mistress, answerable to no one but herself. In a split second her view of life was shattered and rearranged, as if she had been looking at herself through a distorted mirror that had abruptly righted itself, leaving her staring frankly at the real woman rather than the false image.
So instead of laughing, she looked up at Kyle Bellamy with an oddly remote expression and said, "Thank you, Mr. Bellamy, but I don't intend ever to marry."
It was after her refusal that some of the cowhands began to think it would be fun to ride through her vegetable garden, firing their pistols into the air to frighten the animals, laughing and shouting to themselves. If they expected her to be hiding under her bed, they soon found out, as had her erstwhile swains, how dangerous it was to underestimate her. That vegetable garden was her livelihood, and she protected it with her booming double-barreled shotgun. She never doubted that most of the cowhands were from Bellamy's ranch, but more and more small ranches were springing up, bringing in strangers who had to be taught to leave the Swann woman alone. During the growing season she learned to sleep with one eye open and the shotgun at hand, to ward off the occasional band of hoorahing cowboys who saw nothing wrong with harassing a nester. She got along just fine except for that, and she felt she could handle the hoorahing. If they ever

became more than a nuisance, if she felt threatened herself, she'd start doing more than dusting them with buckshot.
It was six years since her father had died. Dee looked around the small cabin and was satisfied with what she saw, with her life. She had everything she needed and a few small luxuries besides; she had a slowly growing nest egg in the bank, credit at Mr. Winches's store, and a fertile little valley in which to grow her vegetables every year. There were two cows in the barn for milk, and a bull to make certain that she always had a yearling to provide beef. Eventually the bull and cows would be replaced by those yearlings, and life would go on. She had one horse, a sturdy animal who pulled the plow and the wagon and occasionally bore her on his back. A small flock of chickens kept her in eggs and provided a change from beef. It was all hers, and she had done it all herself.
When a woman married, whatever she owned automatically became her husband's property, subject to his will rather than hers, just as the woman herself did. Dee saw no reason ever to give up control of herself and her land. If that meant she would be an old maid, well, there were worse things in life. She was truly independent, as few women were, working her own land and supporting herself. The people in Prosper might think she was a little odd, but she was respected as a hard worker and an honest businesswoman. She was satisfied with that.

Chapter 2

The trees on the Double C were finally showing new growth, a sure sign of spring. Despite the lingering chill in the air, borne on the winds sweeping down from the mountains that still wore their white winter caps, Lucas Cochran could smell the indefinable fragrance of new life, fresh and green. He had spent ten long years away from the land he loved, and now that he was back he felt as if he couldn't get enough of it, as if a part of himself that had been lost was now restored.
He had been born on this land in a mud dugout only a scant five months after his father had brought his small family west from Tennessee and settled on the broad valley that became the center of the Double C. He sometimes wondered at the courage it had taken for his mother to come out there with one baby just barely a year old and another one on the way, to

leave her comfortable house and live in a hole in the ground, and all of that a time when they were the only whites for hundreds of square miles. Those early days had been the safest, however, because the Indians hadn't yet been alarmed by the strange people moving into their territory.

Looking back, he thought that probably the '49 gold rush in California had been the beginning of the real hostilities between Indian and white. Thousands of people had poured west, and after the gold rush had ended few of them had gone home. The number of white men wandering west of the Mississippi so increased, and the tension between the two peoples had naturally increased as well. Then the Colorado Territory had had its own gold rush in '58, and the second big increase in the population of whites had pushed the situation into open warfare.

By then the Double C had grown to its present size and employed almost a hundred men, and the mud dugout had long since given way to a rough-hewn cabin. Ellery Cochran was in the process of building a big, ambitious house for his wife and family. Lucas had been fourteen that year, already pushing six feet in height and with a man's strength from a lifetime of hard work. His older brother Matthew had been almost sixteen, with all the wild impetuosity of any young male on the verge of adulthood. The two boys had been inseparable all their lives, with Matt's cheerfulness balancing Lucas's darker nature, and Lucas's levelheadedness reining in the worst of Matt's adventurousness.

The youngest Cochran, Jonah, was six years younger than Lucas and had always been excluded from the close relationship between the two older boys, not from any maliciousness on their part, but because of the simple, unbridgeable distance of age. The closeness in their ages meant that Matt and Lucas had been together from babyhood, had always had each other as a playmate, had slept together under the same blanket. Those were things that Jonah could never share, and he was largely left to his own devices. He was a quiet, withdrawn boy, always standing on the fringes and watching his two older brothers but seldom included in their rough activities. It was odd, Lucas often thought, that as close as he had been to Matt, it was Jonah's thin, solemn face that had remained clearest in his memory.

The Indians had attacked the ranch house one day while most of the men were out on the range, something they had evidently known. Matt and Lucas had been there only by chance, having ridden in early only because Matt's horse had thrown a shoe, and where one went, so did the other. Alice,

their mother, had insisted that they eat lunch before riding back out. They had been sitting at the table with her and Jonah when they had heard the first shouts.

The Indians hadn't had any firearms, but they had outnumbered the few defenders by five to one, and it took time to reload the muzzle-loaders the Cochrans possessed. The speed of the attack, an Indian specialty, was dizzying. All Lucas could remember was a blur of noise and motion, the explosions of gunpowder in his ear, the panic as he tried to reload while keeping an eye on the Indians. He and Matt and Alice had each taken up a position at a window, and he remembered Alice's sudden scream when she had seen eight-year-old Jonah standing at an unguarded window, bravely sighting down the barrel of a pistol so heavy it took both hands for him to hold it. Lucas, the closest, had tackled his baby brother and stuffed him behind an overturned table with orders to stay there. Then he had turned back just as the front door was kicked in and Matt met an Indian warrior in a chest-to-chest clash, muscles straining, hands locked together. The Indian had held a club in one hand, a glittering knife in the other. Lucas grabbed up the pistol Jonah had dropped and whirled on one knee, trying for a clear shot, when Matt went down under the warrior's greater weight and the long knife buried itself in his chest. Lucas had shot then, his aim true, but too late for Matt.

The attack was over as fast as it had started, perhaps because the Indians had known the men out on the range, alerted by the gunfire, would be riding hell for leather for the ranch house. The entire fight had lasted less than five minutes.

Losing Matt had left Lucas like a wounded animal, unable to find comfort. His parents had comforted each other over the loss of their firstborn; Jonah, accustomed to being alone, had pulled even deeper inside himself. Lucas was the one who had been cast adrift, for he had always had Matt, and now his entire world had changed. He had truly grown up that year, for he had seen death, and he had killed, and without Matt to buffer those experiences the hard edges of his character had grown even harder.

The Civil War had started in 1861, and the army had pulled out of Colorado Territory to fight it, in effect leaving the citizens of the Territory on their own to face the increasing Indian attacks. Only the few settled towns were safe; Prosper by then had been big enough to protect itself, but the wagon trains and outlying ranches had to defend themselves as best they could.

The Double C was an armed camp, but then it had to be to survive. Alice Cochran hadn't survived, but not because of the Indians; a cold had turned into pneumonia during the winter of '63, and within a week of first taking sick she was put in her grave. The second mainstay of Lucas's life was gone.

The Indian wars were even worse in 1864. In November of that year Colonel John Chivington led his Third Colorado troops against a group of Indians at Sand Creek and massacred hundreds of women and children, causing an explosion of violence that spread from Canada to Mexico, uniting the Plains tribes in the fury of revenge. Troops began returning after the end of the Civil War in '65, but the Territory was already locked in its own war.

Even with all the danger, settlers had poured west. Prosper had quickly become a busy little town, even hiring a schoolteacher, which was a sure sign of civilization. A community had to have a school as a means of attracting new settlers. Boulder had built the first schoolhouse in '60, but the people of Prosper were proud of the fact that it only took them five more years to get one, too. Lucas and Matt had been taught at home by their mother, but Jonah's schooling had been cut short by her death. For the first time in his life Jonah began attending a school at the age of fifteen, riding into Prosper every day.

Jonah never said much; he just watched. As Lucas had grown older he had regretted the lack of closeness between himself and his remaining brother, but Jonah didn't seem to want that kind of relationship. The boy lived within himself, keeping his dreams and thoughts private. Sometimes Lucas wondered what went on behind the boy's somber blue eyes, so like his own in color. He never found out.

Jonah's horse brought him home from school one afternoon. The boy clung to the saddle, an arrow all the way through his chest. Lucas had been the first to reach him, and a look of acute embarrassment had crossed Jonah's white face as he had fallen off the saddle into his brother's arms. He had looked up at Lucas, and for the first time his blue eyes weren't somber, but lit with a kind of fierce love, a joy. "I wish…" he had said, but what he wished had gone unsaid because he died on the next breath.

Lucas had knelt on the ground, rocking his brother in his arms. What had he wished, this young boy who hadn't had time to live much? Had his wish been something simple, a wish that it would stop hurting? Or had he wished

for a girl's kiss, for his own future, for the pleasures that he hadn't yet been able to taste? Lucas didn't know; he only knew that in the last instant before death Jonah's eyes had held more life than ever before.

The Double C had soaked up Cochran blood as well as Indian blood. Cochrans lay buried in its soil. And now Lucas was the only Cochran left. His dreams centered around the Double C, just as they always had. That was what had led to the rift with his father. Maybe if Jonah hadn't died Lucas wouldn't have felt so raw, so violent, but that was a big maybe, and he'd never let himself fret about it. The simple fact was that a ranch could have only one boss, and the two remaining Cochrans had butted heads time and again. Ellery had been content with what he had, while Lucas had wanted to enlarge.

The Double C had, after all, belonged to Ellery, so Lucas had been the one to go. Father and son had made their peace, but both knew two stallions just couldn't live in the same pasture. They regretted the break but accepted that, for both of them, it was better that Lucas lead his own life away from the Double C. They had written and even visited a couple of times in Denver, but Lucas hadn't returned to the ranch until Ellery's death.

He hadn't spent those ten years living in the lap of luxury. He had supported himself in various ways: as a cowhand, gambling, even as a lawman for a while. He knew ranch work inside out, and he was handy with a gun, but that alone hadn't kept him alive. A cool head, sharp eyes, and iron determination had served him well. Luke Cochran wasn't a man to mess with; he didn't let anything stand in his way when he wanted something. If the cost was high—well, he was willing to pay it if he wanted something bad enough. There wasn't much that could stop a man who was willing to pay the price, in blood or money, to get what he wanted, and he knew it.

But with Ellery's death the Double C had become his. It was already profitable, but he meant to make it even more so. Colorado was on the brink of statehood, which would open up a gold mine of opportunities to a man smart enough and tough enough to take them. He hadn't spent all of those ten years working at rough jobs; for the past two he had been in Denver, working with the territorial governor to secure statehood, learning how power worked, instantly seeing the vast applications of it. He had been part of the convention that had met in Denver the previous December to draft a constitution, and it was due to be voted on in July.

The value of statehood to the Double C was almost incalculable. With statehood would come settlers; with settlers would come the railroads. The railroads would make it infinitely easier for him to get his beef to market, and his profits would soar. He wanted the Double C to be the biggest and the best. It was all he had left now; the soil embraced his family in death even as it had sustained them in life. And as the Double C became richer he would work within the lines of contact he had already established in Denver. The two would feed each other: The Double C would make more money, and he would have more influence in Denver; the more influence he had in Denver, the more he could sway decisions that would affect the Double C, thus making it even richer.

He wasn't ambitious for the political aspect of it, but he needed to make certain the ranch would continue to prosper. He was willing to pay the price. The ten years out on his own had taught him some hard lessons, finishing the process of hardening that had begun in boyhood. Those lessons would come in handy now that he had an empire to build.

An empire needed heirs.

He wasn't in any real hurry to tie himself down, but he hadn't been back long before Olivia Millican, banker Wilson Millican's daughter, had caught his eye. She was pretty and cool and refined, socially adept and always well-mannered. She would be a perfect wife. A woman like her had to be courted, and Lucas was willing to do it. He liked her; he figured they would get along better than most. In another year or so she'd make him a fine wife. But this year he'd be busy putting his plans into action.

There were so many things that he wanted to do. One of them was improving the herd, bringing in new bulls, trying new crossbreeds to produce a hardier steer without losing any quality in the meat. He also wanted to try different grasses for grazing, rather than letting the herd graze on whatever happened to be growing.

And he wanted to expand. Not too much right away; he didn't want to start off by overextending himself. But after producing a better herd he wanted to produce one that was bigger as well, and that meant more land for grazing, more water. He well knew the value of a good source of water; it could mean the difference between life and death for a herd. Many a rancher had gone under when the water dried up.

Building the ranch up would give him the solid base he needed to fulfill the rest of his ambitions. It was the first step, the most necessary step.

He had a good water source now, a small, lazily moving river that wound around the ranch. It had never gone dry that he could remember, but there had been a couple of summers when it had slowed to little more than a trickle. It had always rained before the situation became dire, but someday the rain might not come in time. Rainfall wasn't heavy in Colorado anyway; most of the water came from the snowcaps. A good year depended more on the winter snows than the summer rains, and it hadn't snowed much this past winter. A smart rancher always had more than one water source, just in case. Some streams would continue to run while others dried up.

One of the things he'd argued about with Ellery was the need for another good water source, Angel Creek specifically. Angel Creek and the river on the Double C came from the same source, a larger stream that divided in two and flowed down opposite sides of the mountain. But at the point of division the bed of Angel Creek lay lower than the other riverbed. Thus what runoff there was from the mountain during the dry weather would flow into Angel Creek, leaving the other dry until the water level in the stream rose enough to overflow into the higher riverbed.

Lucas had wanted to claim the narrow Angel Creek valley just for its water, but Ellery had refused, saying that the Double C had enough water to take care of its own, and anyway, Angel Creek was on the other side of the mountain with no good way to herd the cattle across it. They'd have to be moved around the mountain, and that was too much trouble. Besides, the valley was too small to support a large herd. Lucas had disagreed with his father's reasoning.

Angel Creek. Lucas narrowed his eyes, remembering how lush the valley was. Maybe it would be Cochran land after all.

He sought out his foreman. "Toby, didn't someone settle on Angel Creek some years back?"

William Tobias, who had been ranch foreman as far back as Lucas could remember, grunted an affirma-tive. "Yep. Nester by the name of Swann." A slight curl to his lip indicated how much he disliked even saying the word "nester."

Lucas grunted back, a scowl settling on his face. Like all cattlemen, he didn't care for nesters or the fences they put up on what had been open range. But maybe the nester on Angel Creek would consider selling. From what he'd seen of nesters, though, they were as hardheaded as mules.

Maybe this one would have more sense. It was worth a ride over to Angel Creek, at least, because he'd never know unless he asked.
A man on horseback could pick his way through any of the narrow passes, though trying to move a herd over them would have been stupid. Lucas eyed the sun and calculated that he had plenty of time before nightfall to ride over there and back, so there wasn't any point in waiting.
He wasn't optimistic about talking the nester into selling, and it put him in an irritable mood. If Ellery had listened to him, Angel Creek would already be his. Or he could have claimed it for his own before the settlers had started moving in if he hadn't been too young and hotheaded to plan ahead. Looking back and realizing what he should have done was just a waste of time.
The little homestead surprised him as he rode down the broad slope toward the farm buildings. There were only two cows and a bull, but they were fat and healthy. A lone horse in the corral looked sleek and well cared for, even if it wasn't a prime specimen of horseflesh. Chickens pecked contentedly at the ground, scarcely paying him any attention when he rode up and dismounted, tying the reins to a post while he looked around with interest. The small cabin, though roughly built, was neat and sturdy, as were the barn and fences. In the back was a plot for a large vegetable garden, the ground recently broken in preparation for spring planting, though it was still a bit early. He couldn't see anything out of place or untended, and his slim hope that the nester would sell disappeared. If the place had been rundown he would have had a chance, but this homestead was prospering. There was no need for the man to go anywhere else.
The cabin door opened, and a slim young woman stepped out onto the porch, a shotgun in her hands. Her face was calm but alert, and Lucas saw that her finger was on the trigger.
"State your business, mister."
A shotgun made him wary at any time, but he was doubly edgy facing one in the hands of a woman. If she got excited, she might accidently kill either him or his horse, or both. He tamped down a quick rise of anger and made his voice low and soothing. "I don't mean you any harm, ma'am. You can put that shotgun down."
The shotgun didn't waver. The twin barrels looked enormous. "I'll make my own judgment about that," she replied calmly. "Too many cowboys think it's funny to trample my garden."

"You don't have a garden yet," he pointed out.
"But I do have livestock to run off, so I'll keep this gun right where it is until you answer my question."
He could see the green of her eyes even in the shadow of the porch where she stood. There was no fear or uncertainty in her gaze, nor any hostility, come to that, only a certain purposefulness. A little bit of admiration tinged his anger. The nester was one lucky man to have a wife with this sort of gumption, he thought. Lucas was abruptly certain that she would hit whatever she aimed at. He was careful not to make any sudden moves as he reached up and took off his hat. "I'm Lucas Cochran from the Double C. I came over to make your husband's acquaintance, Mrs. Swann, and talk a little business with him."
She gave him a cool, level look. "George Swann was my father, not my husband. He died six years ago."
He was beginning to get irritated at being held at bay. "Then maybe I could talk to your husband. Or your brother. Whoever owns the place."
"I don't have a husband or a brother. I'm Dee Swann. This is my land."
His interest sharpened. He looked around the tidy little place again, wondering who helped her do the work. Maybe there were other women on the place, but even that would be unheard of; women simply didn't work a homestead on their own. If their men died, they went to live with relatives somewhere. He listened but didn't hear any voices or movement inside the cabin. "Are you alone here?"
She smiled, her expression as cool as her eyes, challenging him. "No. I have this shotgun."
"You can put it down," he said sharply, his irritation now plain. "I just came by to get acquainted, not to do you any harm."
She looked him over carefully, and he had the feeling it wasn't what he'd said that reassured her, but rather her own private assessment of him as a man that prompted her to lower the muzzle of the shotgun toward the floor and nod at him. "It's dinnertime," she said. "I eat early. You're welcome to join me, if you'd like."
He wasn't hungry, but he seized the opportunity and followed her into the cabin. It was only two rooms and a loft, but it was as neat inside as out. The kitchen was on the left; what he assumed to be her bedroom was on the right. There was a comfortable chair pulled over next to the fireplace with an oil lamp on a small table beside it, and to his surprise a book lay open on

the table. He looked around, noting some rough, handmade shelves lined with books. She wasn't illiterate, then.
She had gone straight to the wood stove and was ladling steaming soup into two big bowls. Lucas took his hat off and sat down at the sturdy table just as she placed the bowl in front of him. A plate of biscuits was already on the table, as well as a pot of coffee. The soup was thick with vegetables and tender pieces of beef. Lucas found himself going at it as if he hadn't had anything all day.
Dee Swann sat across from him, eating as composedly as if she were alone. Lucas watched her, studying her face. She intrigued him. She didn't flirt with him the way he was used to women doing, or even seem to be aware that he was a man beyond the simple fact of identification. She was straightforward in her speech and actions, but he thought that calmness just might be a cover for the heat underneath. It was in her eyes, long and green, with banked fires in them.
At first glance she was plain, but closer examination made him realize it was an impression created by her utilitarian clothing and severe hairstyle; her black hair was pulled back and twisted into a tight knot at her nape. She had an exotic sort of attractiveness, with high cheekbones and a wide, soft mouth, but they weren't the kind of looks that were blatantly fetching. The heat of sexual arousal began to build in his loins and belly as he watched her eat, dipping daintily into the soup without any indication that she even remembered he was there.
"Don't you have any other family?" he asked abruptly, determined to make her pay attention to him.
She shrugged and put down her spoon. "I have cousins, but no one close."
"Wouldn't they take you in?"
Those green eyes studied him for a long time before she deigned to answer. "I suppose they would have, if I'd asked. I preferred to stay here."
"Why? It has to be lonesome for you, as well as dangerous."
"I have the shotgun," she reminded him. "And no, I'm not lonesome. I like it out here."
"I suppose you have plenty of men friends." How could she not have? A young, attractive woman, alone at that, would attract all sorts of attention.
She laughed. It wasn't a maidenly giggle, but the full-throated sound of a woman who knew how to enjoy herself. "Not since they learned I know

how to hit what I aim at. After I peppered a few, the others decided to leave me alone."
"Why did you do that? You might have been married by now." Her laughter made the heat intensify. Whatever her reason, he was glad she hadn't married, because he'd always made it a point to stay away from other men's wives even when the wives in question were willing.
"Oh, I've had some marriage proposals, Mr. Cochran. Three, I think. I'm not married because I don't want to be. I don't plan on ever getting married."
In his experience, all women wanted to get married. He sipped his coffee and eyed her over the rim of the cup. "If you got married, you'd have a man to do the work around here."
"I can handle the work just fine. And if I got married, it wouldn't be my land any longer, it would be his. I'd rather be my own woman."
They were sitting alone in her cozy cabin eating food she had prepared. The conversation had without effort become far more personal than it ever should have been on first meeting. An aura of intimacy wrapped them, making him think of reaching out for her and drawing her onto his knee, the way he would if she were his woman. It was a fantasy, though, because her composed green gaze invited nothing more than conversation. It irritated him, because he was used to women paying him more attention than that. Even Olivia, with her perfect manners and composure, responded to him in the way he expected.
It was probably the last thing Dee Swann intended, but her disinterest provoked the opposite reaction in him. Lucas had always enjoyed a challenge, and she was certainly that; any woman who used a shotgun to discourage suitors was bound to keep him on his toes. Maybe she didn't need a man to work her land, but a woman sure needed a man to take care of her other needs. It was fine with him that she didn't want to get married, because she wasn't the type of woman he would ever select to be his wife. Dee would, however, he thought, make a fine bed partner.
Lucas had gotten out of a lot of tight situations by using his head, and he was too smart to let any of his thoughts show. He knew that if he even hinted at anything sexual between them right now she'd have that shotgun pointed at him faster than he could blink. Let her get used to him first, accept him as a friend, then they'd become really close friends. So he kept his face blank as he turned the conversation to his original reason for being there.

"You've gotten by okay because so far all you've had to deal with are a few liquored-up cowhands with nothing more than hoorahing on their minds. But let a man come up on you without all the yelling and shooting to warn you, and he'd be on you before you could get to your shotgun. Or a bunch of them could decide to get even with you; there's no way you could guard both doors and every window. It's dangerous for you out here," he said persuasively. "With the money you could get for this land you could set yourself up in town in any kind of business you wanted, and you'd be safe. Think about it. I'm willing to give you more than a fair price."
"I don't have to think about it," she said. "I don't want to sell. This is my home; I like it here. I tend my garden and sell vegetables in town and get along just fine. If I'd wanted to sell, I could have sold to Mr. Bellamy a long time ago."
He frowned. "Bellamy's offered to buy you out?"
"Several times."
"You should have taken his offer. You're a woman alone." He didn't like the idea of Bellamy owning Angel Creek, but he was serious about the potential danger she was in. A good-looking woman living by herself like this was just asking for trouble from any no-good passing through.
But Dee only shrugged, dismissing his warnings. "So? I'd be alone no matter where I went, so I might as well stay here."
"You'd have other people close by if you lived in town, in case you needed help. You'd be safe instead of working yourself half to death out here."
"And just what would I do in town?" she demanded, getting to her feet and placing her empty bowl in the big wash bowl. "How would I earn a living? The town doesn't need another dress shop, or another hat shop, or another general store, and the money from selling the land wouldn't last forever. There's nothing I could do except maybe take one of the rooms over the saloon, and somehow I don't think I'd be a success at that."
Luke was jolted at the thought of her working as a, whore. No, he couldn't see it either. She was too proud and independent. A man didn't want a challenge when he went to a whorehouse; he wanted simple, unthinking relief. He pictured her taking her clothes off, her eyes flashing green heat in a dim room, and his blood started pounding through his body. Mounting this filly would take a strong man, but it would be worth it when he was locked deep inside her, feeling her heat, riding her hard and fast. Only a strong man would be able to handle her, keep her satisfied.

He was a strong man, and he liked a challenge. His earlier thoughts hardened into determination. He was going to teach Dee Swann that she needed a man for one thing, at least.

But because he was smart, he didn't say anything on the subject or push her anymore to sell her land. He thanked her politely for the meal, offered his aid if she ever needed it, tipped his hat, and left like a gentleman. He didn't feel the least bit gentlemanly, though, as he rode back toward the cut over the mountain. He felt tense and alive, his senses alert, his loins stirring with anticipation. No, there was nothing gentlemanly about his thoughts or his intentions; in both he was purely male, scenting female and wanting her. The only thing was, the female didn't know yet that she was being pursued, so she wasn't even running.

Dee went to the door and watched him ride away. She felt strangely disturbed and too warm; she loosened the top buttons of her blouse to let the cooling air waft over her throat. So that was Lucas Cochran. That brief glimpse of him in the general store hadn't prepared her for a face-to-face meeting. She hadn't realized that he was quite so tall, or so strongly built, or that his iron will gleamed so plainly in his blue eyes. Lucas Cochran was used to getting what he wanted, and he hadn't liked it at all that she had turned down his offer for the land.

She would bet all the money she had that he would be back.

Chapter 3

Olivia Millican had spent her entire life being the perfect daughter and the perfect lady. It wasn't difficult; she was by nature both kind and composed. Sometimes she felt guilty that she had had such an easy, privileged life when she could see how so many other people had to struggle to have even a fraction of the luxuries to which she was accustomed, but she was also intelligent enough to see that neither was it her fault. Her father had worked hard to make his bank successful; any child of his would have had the same comfortable life. She tried to do what she could to help with the few small charities around town, and she tried never to be mean or rude. Her rules of conduct were simple, and she truly tried to adhere to them.

All she had ever wanted was to fall in love with a good man and have him love her in return, marry her, and give her his children. When she was

younger she had never thought that it was such an unreasonable thing to expect from life; heaven knew it seemed an easy enough thing for most of her friends. She still didn't see that it was anything but an ordinary wish, yet somehow it had never happened.

She was twenty-five now, virtually an old maid, though there again her father's money was shielding her. A poor woman of twenty-five would have been an old maid; a wealthy woman of twenty-five was still "a good catch." Yet somehow, though there were good men in town, she had never loved any of them, and none of them had ever seemed to be wildly in love with her, and now just about all of those her age were married to someone else. Except Lucas Cochran.

His name ran through her mind as she worked with her mother on the fine embroidery of a linen tablecloth, and she shivered a little. It wasn't that she disliked him; he was handsome in a hard sort of way, wealthy, intelligent, well-mannered, and certainly eligible. It wasn't her imagination that he had singled her out in some small way every time they had met since his return to town, for other people had remarked on it. He danced well and treated her with respect. Her feminine instincts also told her that after they had known each other a respectable length of time he would ask her to marry him. She was very much afraid that, because she was twenty-five and this would likely be her last chance at marriage and a family, she would say yes. But Lucas Cochran didn't love her. Despite all of the little attentions he paid her, despite the faintly possessive expression in his blue eyes whenever he looked at her, as if she already belonged to him, she knew that she aroused none of the passionate emotion in him that she had always longed for from the man she would marry.

And he was a hard man, hard in a way that her father, who had a forceful personality himself, couldn't even begin to match. Lucas Cochran would never allow anyone to stand between him and anything he wanted. Olivia knew herself to be no more a match for him than her father was; far less, in fact. Oh, he would protect her as his wife, give her children, but she would never matter any more to him than any other woman he might have chosen to fill the position. She could expect consideration but not caring, physical attention but never love, protection but not devotion.

But if she refused him, she would likely die without ever marrying and having her own family, and her woman's heart cried out for children.

"I've changed my mind about visiting Patience," Honora Millican said in her soft voice.
Olivia looked up, startled. Her mother had been looking forward to visiting her sister in San Francisco in the summer, and Olivia couldn't think of anything that would have changed her mind. Truth to tell, she'd been as eager for the trip as her mother. They seldom saw Aunt Patience. It had been almost five years since their last visit, and other than visiting her favorite relative she had also been eager to visit the glorious shops in San Francisco again. "But we've been planning it for over a year now!"
"I know, dear, but I really don't think we should leave town for several months just now." Honora smiled sweetly at her daughter, the smile that Olivia had inherited.
Olivia was both confused and disappointed. "Why ever not?"
"With the attention Mr. Cochran has been paying you? It wouldn't do to be gone so long and let some other young woman gain his attention."
Olivia bent her head over the embroidery to hide her expression, which she knew must reveal the leap of panic she felt. Had she also been hoping against hope that this time she would meet someone special in San Francisco? "You talk as if it's a foregone conclusion that he intends to propose," she said, though she thought it was herself.
Honora said placidly, "Of course he does. Why, everyone can see it in the way he looks at you."
"He isn't in love with me," Olivia said, raising troubled eyes to her mother. But Honora didn't look in the least disturbed. "I admit Mr. Cochran isn't one to wear his heart on his sleeve. But why else would he pay such attention to you?"
"Because I'm the banker's daughter," she replied. "I'm presentable, and I was schooled back East."
Honora put down her needle and frowned, her interest now wholly engaged. "That's a remarkably cynical outlook, dear. What makes you think Mr. Cochran isn't interested in you for yourself? You're a beautiful young woman, even if I do say so myself." Olivia bit her lip, knowing that she didn't have any solid reasons she could put forth for her statement, only intuition. She didn't want to cause Honora any worry. Her mother tended to fret to excess if any ill wind of health or humours blew on the two people she loved most in the world, her husband and daughter. It was both a source

of security, knowing herself so well loved, and a sense of responsibility that she should do whatever she could to keep Honora from being upset.
So she made herself smile at her mother and say, "All the same, I'm not certain it wouldn't do Mr. Cochran some good to think about me meeting so many good-looking men in San Francisco."
Honora's face cleared, and she began to chuckle. "I see. You don't want him to feel too sure of himself. Wonderful idea! But all the same, I don't think we should go off for the entire summer this early in the relationship."
Olivia stifled a sigh. She had hoped that Honora would think it such a good idea that the decision not to go to San Francisco would be reconsidered. Now she knew that she would have to tell her mother all of her fears and uncertainties in order to change her mind, and Olivia wasn't willing to do that. For one thing, she wasn't certain that she wasn't simply being foolish, fretting over "love." No other young woman in town would hesitate a minute if given the opportunity to marry Lucas Cochran—well, except for Dee, but Dee was different. Another reason was that Olivia was a naturally reserved person, respectful of the privacy of others simply because she needed it so much herself. Not even to her mother could she reveal her inner fears, because Honora would then find it necessary to confide in Olivia's father and perhaps even in certain of her friends in town; in short, it would soon become common knowledge.
Both of her parents would become so upset and make such a fuss that she simply couldn't face it. She was their only child, having been born after Honora had miscarried twice, and they had showered her with all of the devotion that should have been shared with a houseful of children. They wanted only the best for her; nothing else, in their eyes, was good enough. She would do anything to keep them from knowing how unhappy she was. So she bent her head over the embroidery and said nothing else on the subject, pushing her unhappiness to the back of her mind as she listened to Honora's placid chatter about the upcoming social. Prosper had a rather active social life for a town its size, with various small parties and entertainments arranged throughout the year. Late each spring the women of the town put on a large picnic and dance, and everyone in the area was invited. The women in town took turns organizing the affair, and this spring was Honora's turn. The older woman was in her element, planning and organizing, delegating, double-checking and triple-checking each detail. For weeks her conversation had consisted of how well or ill things were going,

and today was no exception. Olivia listened patiently, offering advice whenever asked but for the most part providing only an audience, which was really all Honora wanted.

As often as not, when Honora began reviewing her plans and accomplishments she eventually remembered some little detail that had to be taken care of immediately, and that day was no exception. She abruptly dropped the embroidery hoop to her lap and said, "Oh, dear."

The moment of crisis was so predictable that Olivia smiled with gentle amusement even as she asked, "Is something wrong?"

"I completely forgot to arrange with Beatrice Padgett for us to use her punch set! I can't believe it slipped my mind like that."

"I'm sure she takes it for granted that her punch set will be needed," Olivia comforted. "After all, she's the only person in town who owns over three hundred punch cups."

"Still, it would be terribly rude not to ask her, just to assume that her possessions are available for our use. I'll write her a note right now," Honora said, putting the hoop aside and rising to cross to her writing desk. "Do you have a moment to spare to take it to her, dear? I simply have too much to do this afternoon, though I'd love to visit with Beatrice, but you know how she talks. It's practically impossible to get away from her once she gets started."

"Of course," Olivia said, gladly putting her own embroidery hoop aside. She was very good at needlework, but that didn't mean she enjoyed it. "I think I'll go for a ride while I'm out." She wanted to be alone for a while; maybe a brisk ride would banish her melancholy, which lingered as a hollow feeling deep inside despite her efforts to push it away. Or maybe she would visit Dee. As soon as she had the thought she realized that was exactly what she needed. Dee's implacable logic always went straight to the heart of a matter, and she always said exactly what she thought. Olivia needed that kind of clear thinking right now. She went upstairs to change into her riding habit while Honora set about writing. By the time she came back down the stairs Honora was folding the note.

"There," she said, tucking the paper into Olivia's pocket. "Take your time, dear, and do tell Beatrice that I'm sorry I couldn't come myself, but I promise to visit her soon to go over all the plans for the social."

The Millicans kept their two horses in the livery, so Olivia walked first to the Padgett house, which took only five minutes. But it was the truth that

Beatrice Padgett liked to talk, and it was over an hour before Olivia was able to leave. Beatrice insisted that she come in for tea to the point that continued refusal would have been embarrassing, so Olivia found herself once again sitting and listening, with nothing more required of her than an occasional nod or comment.

It was an enjoyable hour, though, because Beatrice was a genuinely likable woman, friendly and without malice. Olivia had often thought that Beatrice and Ezekiel Padgett were something of a mismatch. Beatrice, in her late forties, still retained enough beauty for one to see that she had once been quite something. She was a warm woman given to hugs and pats, freely affectionate and exuding a soft, rather voluptuous sensuality. Ezekiel, on the other hand, was tall and dour, seldom smiling, his face too rawboned for handsomeness. Olivia had wondered how they could live together in any sort of harmony, though she had once seen Ezekiel look down at his wife's face when he thought them unobserved, and his expression had softened almost to tenderness.

So love did grow even in unlikely marriages, perhaps had been there from the beginning, at least on Beatrice's part, for why else would such an affectionate woman have married such a dour man? It was plain to anyone why Ezekiel would have married Beatrice, even without love, so Olivia didn't consider that.

Perhaps she was foolish to worry about marrying Lucas. Maybe they would grow to love each other as much as Beatrice and Ezekiel did, as much as her own parents did.

But no matter how she tried, she simply couldn't imagine such a look on Lucas's face as she had seen on Ezekiel's.

Dee looked out the window when she heard someone riding up and smiled when she saw it was Olivia. It had been too long since they'd had a chance to chat, but now that the weather was better Olivia would come to visit more often. She poured two cups of coffee and walked out on the porch to greet her friend.

Olivia dismounted and took the coffee with a smile of thanks as they sat down on the porch. "I thought winter was never going to end," she sighed. "I've wanted to come out several times, but the weather never cooperated."

"From what I heard in Winches's store, Lucas Cochran's courting you."

That was Dee, going right to the point. Olivia's tension eased a little. It was a relief to talk to Dee because there were no social inanities with her, no

need for a polite social mask or worry that Dee might be shocked at anything she said. Not that she was likely to say anything shocking, Olivia admitted ruefully to herself. It was just that it was nice to know one could.
"It seems so," she said.
"Seems? He either is or he isn't."
"Well, he hasn't actually said anything. It's just that he's paid attention to me."
"Enough attention for people to start talking about a wedding?"
"Yes," Olivia admitted, unable to hide the misery in her eyes.
"Do you love him?"
"No."
"Then don't marry him," Dee said with a finality that suggested the matter was closed.
"But what if he's my last chance?" Olivia asked softly.
"For what?"
"To get married."
Dee sipped her coffee. "Do you really think you'll never meet anyone else?"
"It isn't that. It's just that no one has ever fallen in love with me, and maybe no one ever will. If I can't have love, I'd still like to have a family. He truly may be my last chance."
"Well, I'm probably not the best person to come to for advice," Dee said, and she chuckled. "After all, I've already turned down three men. He came out here the other day, by the way. Cochran, that is. He wanted to buy Angel Creek."
The thought of that was interesting. Lucas was accustomed to having things his way. Olivia could just imagine what he'd thought when he'd met Dee, who could be as intractable as a rock wall when she chose.
"What did you think of him?"
Dee grinned. "That he'd make a dangerous enemy.
And that no one tells him 'no' very often. He doesn't take it well."
"And you enjoyed telling him."
"Of course I did." Mischief gleamed in her green eyes as she glanced at Olivia. "He could use taking down a peg or two."
"I don't think he'll give up," Olivia warned.
"No, he won't."
Dee looked as if she positively relished the thought of thwarting Lucas, and not for the first time Olivia wished she could be more like her friend. Dee

wasn't intimidated by Lucas, or by anyone. There was a kind of inner strength to her, a surety that most people didn't have. Olivia didn't feel certain of anything, with her longing to have a family at odds with her fear of marrying someone she didn't love. She couldn't imagine Dee ever feeling that kind of uncertainty. Dee would simply make up her mind one way or the other, and that would be that.

"I think Lucas would ride roughshod over me if I married him," Olivia said, and she bit her lip.

Dee thought about it, then nodded. "Probably."

That blunt assessment startled Olivia into a spurt of laughter. "You didn't have to agree!"

"Oh, you aren't weak," Dee explained, smiling a little. "It's just that you're too gentle to fight him when he needs to be fought. But cheer up. Maybe you'll meet someone in San Francisco you really want to marry."

"Mother's canceled the trip. She didn't think it would be smart to leave Lucas for such a long time while he's showing so much interest. Of course, Lucas may not have any plans to marry at all, and I could be worrying over nothing." The thought popped into her head that Dee would make Lucas a much better wife than she herself would, and she almost blurted it out but stopped herself in time. Dee would look at her as if she were crazy if she said such a thing.

But it was true. In both temperament and character Dee was a fair match for Lucas; both of them were so strong that they would completely overshadow anyone who wasn't just as strong. The only thing was, Dee wasn't the least interested in getting married.

Nevertheless, the idea lingered.

On the way home Olivia detoured by the bank to tell her father hello. Just as she stepped up on the sidewalk the door to the bank opened, and Kyle Bellamy came out, flanked by two of his men. He removed his hat as soon as he saw her. "Miss Millican, how are you today?" "Fine, thank you, Mr. Bellamy. And you?" "Couldn't be better." He looked down at her, giving her his self-confident smile. No doubt about it, Kyle Bellamy was a good-looking man, and he knew it. His dark hair was thick and curly, his eyes light brown beneath black brows, his smile white and straight. Moreover, he was tall and muscular, and his ranch, though nowhere near the size of the Double C, was prosperous and growing. For all that, something about the man made her uneasy.

He made no move to continue on his way, and Olivia's innate good manners came to the fore. "I hope you're making plans to attend the spring social. It won't be long," she said.
"I wouldn't miss it." He gave her his white, wolfish grin. "Especially if you're going to be there."
"Just about everyone in town will be there," Olivia replied, neatly sidestepping his comment, which was personal enough to make her feel uncomfortable.
"I'll look forward to claiming a dance with you." He tipped his hat again and stepped past her, followed by both of his men.
As the second hired hand passed he, too, tipped his hat, surprising Olivia into darting a quick look at his face. She had only a fast impression of black hair, darkly tanned skin, and black eyes warm with admiration before he was past her, but the impact was strong enough to freeze her in her tracks, a little stunned.
Surely she had mistaken his expression. After all, her glance had been so quick. No, surely the man hadn't looked at her with tenderness, the way Ezekiel looked at Beatrice. How could he, when he didn't even know her? But the fact remained that his look, imagined or not, had made her heart beat a little faster and her skin feel a little warm.
She entered the bank, smiling politely and returning the greetings of those who spoke to her on her way into her father's office. Wilson Millican rose on her entrance, beaming his welcome. "Your mother's had you running another errand, at a guess," he said, and he laughed as their gazes met in perfect understanding. "She's enjoying this as much as if she were sixteen again and this was her first party."
"She'll swear she never wants to be involved in the planning again, but by the time next February rolls around she'll be fretting to get started." They chatted for a few minutes, with Olivia telling him about her visit with Beatrice. She didn't want to take up too much of his time, so she kept her visit short. She was rising to her feet when her curiosity got the better of her, and she said, "I stopped outside to talk with Mr. Bellamy for a few moments. Who were those two men with him?"
"Two of his cowhands, Pierce and Fronteras, though from the looks of them I'd say they were handier with a pistol than a rope."
"Gunmen?" she asked, startled. "Why would he need gunmen?"

"Now, I didn't say they were gunmen. I said they looked like they'd be handy with their pistols, and maybe they are, but then a good many men around here are good hands with a firearm. As far as I know, Bellamy's cowhands are just that, cowhands." He patted her arm in reassurance, though he wasn't too certain of his own words, especially when they concerned the two men that had been with Bellamy. One thing was certain, though, and that was that he wouldn't want either of those two men anywhere near Olivia. She was too fine a person to associate with that type of man. None of the ranch hands caused any trouble in town other than the normal drinking and fighting sometimes, but as a father he couldn't be too careful of his daughter's well-being.

"Which one was which?" Olivia asked, still driven by her curiosity.

"What?"

"Which man was Pierce, and which was Fronteras?"

"Pierce has been with Bellamy for a couple of years now. He's a quiet man, never says much. The dark, Mexican-looking man is Fronteras. Guess he is Mexican at that, though he's tall for one. Must be mostly Spanish."

He was a Mexican. She felt a little surprised at herself for not having realized that at a glance, though he was tall, as her father had noted. Then she was even more surprised by her own curiosity about a man whom she had never even met, because passing on the sidewalk certainly didn't constitute an introduction. It wasn't her usual behavior, but then she was upset by her increasing sensation of being caught in a trap. She didn't know what she could do to escape, or even if she wanted to escape. All she knew was that she felt on the verge of panic.

"A man could do worse than marrying a banker's daughter," Kyle Bellamy mused. "Especially one who looks like Olivia Millican."

Pierce grunted in reply. Luis Fronteras didn't say anything.

"She's his only child. When he dies she'll get everything. Or rather her husband will."

"I heard Cochran was courting her," Fronteras murmured.

Kyle shrugged his shoulders. "That doesn't mean I can't pay attention to the lady, too."

He sipped his whiskey, thinking about Olivia Millican. Why not? He had as much chance with her as anyone else, maybe more. Women had always seemed to like him. He liked a bit more spunk in his women than Olivia seemed to have, but she was pretty and rich, and in Kyle's experience

money made up for a lot of shortcomings. He was doing all right with money right now, but he had learned the hard way not to count on everything staying all right. Having Wilson Millican's money would make his life a whole lot more comfortable. He'd start his own courting of Olivia and give Cochran something to think about.

He was on his second whiskey, savoring both the biting, smoky taste of the liquor and his mental image of marrying Olivia Millican, when Tillie sauntered over to him. He leaned back against the bar and enjoyed the sight, because Tillie had a walk that could make a man's privates stand at attention even if he had a lot more than two whiskeys in him.

Tillie was something, all right. He'd met her for the first time about ten years back, in New Orleans. She'd been all of fifteen then, he guessed, remembering how fresh and wild she'd looked. He grinned, thinking that he was probably the only person in town who knew that her name was Mathilde. He called her that sometimes, when they were in bed together, always earning a long warning look from those heavy-lidded eyes of hers. It was all right with him if she chose to be Tillie the saloon girl; he just didn't want her to forget that he knew where she came from.

Of course, she knew more about him than anyone else, too, but he didn't worry about it. Tillie had never tried to use the information to get money out of him. She was oddly accepting of her life in a two-bit saloon in a small town, her rich brown eyes full of a half-weary, half-accepting worldliness. A man never felt as if Tillie was judging him; she simply took him as he was and expected nothing else.

A lot of the men in Prosper, including the married ones, had found their way into Tillie's embrace. She was generous even when her time was paid for, giving at least the appearance of affection and sometimes even her passion.

Kyle never expected anything less than full participation from her and never let her give less. Sometimes she wanted to hold back from him, but he'd known her a long time, knew exactly how to make her squirm and buck beneath him, and in the end she would always give him what he wanted.

She looked more like twenty than twenty-five, he thought, admiring her creamy skin and dark mahogany hair. She was still slim, still supple, her breasts full and upright.

She leaned against the bar, her mouth voluptuous with invitation. "Kyle," she murmured in greeting.

He didn't need much encouragement. His name in that soft drawl was enough. He set his glass down and took her arm. "Upstairs."
She blinked at him in mocking surprise. "Well, hello to you, too. Nice day, isn't it?"
He ignored her light sarcasm and continued propelling her toward the stairs. He gave an abrupt flick of his hand to Pierce and Fronteras, letting them know that he'd be a while and they could do whatever they wanted.
Luis Fronteras watched Bellamy disappear up the stairs with his arm around Tillie's waist before returning his attention to the beer in front of him. Pierce sat down at a table with him, silently nursing his own beer. That was normal for Pierce, who seldom said more than three words in a row.
Luis was irritated by the small pang of jealousy he'd felt watching Bellamy and Tillie go upstairs together.
Not because of Tillie, though God knows she was a head-turning woman, but just because of the simple fact there was a bond between the two of them, even if it was comprised mainly of plain sex. It had been a long time since he had felt kinship of any sort with anyone. Ten years, in fact. Ten years of drifting, of occasionally relieving his sexual urges with a willing woman but never giving her any more of himself than the use of his body. At first he had needed the mental and emotional solitude, then it had become habit, and now it felt impossible to change even though he sometimes wanted more. More… what?
More women? He could have a woman anytime he wanted. Luis had a gift for pleasing women, and he knew it. Mainly it was that he liked everything about women, even their tempers and jealousies and plain contrariness, and what woman could resist being so frankly appreciated? To Luis it was simple: He was a man, therefore he loved the ladies. They were the most delicious creatures he could imagine. Women had flocked to him from the time his voice first began to deepen.
But he wasn't interested in a multitude of women. Right now he was interested in one woman: the blonde Bellamy had spoken to outside the bank. Miss Millican, the banker's daughter. Olivia. He had liked her quiet composure and pretty face as well as the shape of her bosom beneath the prim cut of her riding habit.
He hadn't liked the idea of Bellamy courting her, using her just to get his hands on her father's money. A woman deserved more than that, especially one who looked as sweet as Olivia. It wouldn't bother Bellamy at all to use

her, but Luis had unerring instincts when it came to women, and something told him that such callousness would destroy her.

There was already sadness in those pretty blue eyes. He had caught only a glimpse of it, but it had been there. Something was making her unhappy. Bellamy would only make her even more unhappy.

He'd like to kiss those sad shadows out of her eyes, hold her and pet her and tell her how very lovely she was. A woman always needed to know that she was appreciated.

He smiled cynically to himself. He was a drifter and a Mexican, too handy with a gun for his own good. She was the banker's daughter, and it looked like she would have her choice between the two richest ranchers in the area. There wasn't much chance Miss Olivia Millican would ever even know his name, let alone let him hold her.

Chapter 4

Somehow Dee wasn't surprised to see Lucas Cochran riding toward her three days later. It was still early in the morning; she was outside with a pan of chicken feed, scattering it to the clucking fowl grouped around her skirts.
"Mr. Cochran," she said in greeting when he was close enough to hear her.
He didn't dismount but leaned down to prop his forearm on the saddle horn as he watched her strew the feed. "Good morning," he said. "I was on my way into town and thought I'd ride over to check on you."
Her eyes were bright in the strong morning sun, and greener than any he'd ever seen before. "I don't remember saying anything that would give you the impression I needed to be checked on, Mr. Cochran," she said with more than a little sharpness. She had painstakingly taught herself how to be independent and resented his implication that she wasn't capable of taking care of herself.
"Call me Lucas," he said. "Or Luke."
"Why?"
"Because I'd like for us to be friends."
"Not likely."
He grinned, enjoying her starchiness. It was refreshing to be around a woman who didn't cater to him and defer to his every opinion. "Why not? Looks to me like we could both use a friend."
"I like being alone," she replied, tilting the pan upside down and slapping it lightly on the sides to knock loose the last few grains of feed. She crossed to the small back stoop and hung the pan on a nail driven into the wall. Lucas walked his horse behind her as she strode swiftly to the barn, her skirts kicking up with each step. She wore only one petticoat, he decided, eyeing the brisk sway of that blue skirt. And a thin one at that.
He ducked his head down to enter the barn, automatically closing his eyes for a second so they could adjust to the dimness, and watched as she efficiently ladled feed to the single horse and two cows.
She was damn good at ignoring him, he saw, and he began to get a little irate at her manner. Then he remembered that it was her farm, and she hadn't invited him. His horse stamped a hoof restively as she fetched a stool and positioned a milk bucket under one of the cows. Lucas sighed and dismounted, looping his reins over a rail. The other cow needed milking, too. "Got another bucket?" he asked.

Streams of milk were already hissing into the bucket in time with the motions of her hands as she turned her head to him. Those green eyes had a dangerous look to them now. "I don't need any help."
"I can see that." His irritation was growing, and it echoed in his voice. "But did you ever think about accepting an offer of help, not because you couldn't handle it just fine yourself but because the chore would get done faster with two people working at it instead of just one?"
She considered that, then gave a brief nod. "All right. There's another clean bucket in the tack room there, to the right. But I don't have another stool. You'll have to squat."
He fetched the bucket and patted the cow on her fat sides, letting her know he was there before he slid the bucket under her. He squatted down and wrapped his strong fingers around the long teats, then pulled with the rhythmic motion that, once learned, was never forgotten. Hot milk splashed into the bucket. His mouth moved in a wry grin as he thought how glad he was none of his men could see him now.
"Have you always been such a hedgehog?" he asked in a tone of casual interest.
"I reckon," she replied in the same manner, and he grinned again.
"Any particular reason for it?"
"Men."
He snorted. "Yeah, we can be real bastards."
He wasn't certain, but he thought he heard a chuckle. "I wouldn't dream of disagreeing."
"Those lovesick swains of yours must have been persistent," he said, hazarding a guess.
"Some of them. But it wasn't love they had on their minds, and we both know it. It seems like men just naturally see a woman alone as fair game."
There wasn't another woman in town who would have said that to him, but then he had already realized at their first meeting that Dee was blunt in her speech and frank in her opinions. He felt a slow burn of anger at the thought of other men trying to seduce her, or maybe even just catch her alone when they wouldn't bother with pretense of seduction. The knowledge that he was determined to seduce her himself didn't moderate his temper. For one thing, he didn't intend to dishonor her; no one but the two of them would ever know what went on between them. He wasn't a raw kid who felt the need to boast about his women in order to impress others with his masculinity. For

another thing, damn if he didn't respect her for what she had accomplished out there. It had taken a lot of hard work, but she hadn't flinched from it, rather had risen to the challenge and gloried in it. The pristine condition of the farm was a true measure of her fierce spirit.
His voice was tight with that possessive anger when he said, "If anyone else bothers you, let me know."
"I appreciate the offer, but it's something I have to take care of for myself. You might not always be around; they have to know I can defend myself, that I don't need to rely on anyone else."
Her logic was unassailable, but he didn't like it. "I can make certain they never come back."
"The shotgun tends to be persuasive," she said with humor in her voice. "There's nothing like buckshot in his backside to make a man reconsider an idea. Besides, I'm not sure I can afford to have you as a protector."
He didn't pause in his milking, but his brows drew together and his head came up. "Why not?" he demanded sharply.
"Folks would think we were sleeping together." When he didn't reply to that, Dee continued to explain. "The men around here pretty much leave me alone now because I've convinced them I don't want any man. But if they thought I'd let one man in my bed, then they would think I was available, and they'd take even less kindly to being turned down than they did before. It would get nasty, and I'd probably have to kill some of them."
His strong hands had emptied the cow's udder, and he lifted the bucket away, rising to his feet just as Dee finished milking. Her cheeks were flushed with her exertions as she slid the bucket away and stood, stretching her back. Lucas leaned down, picked up the other bucket, and walked out of the barn toward the house, leaving her to follow. Her brows rose at the way he made himself so at home on her place. It was obvious he was used to being the boss. Then she shrugged; he was being helpful, so it would be petty of her to complain that he was too self-confident about it.
He waited on the back stoop for her to open the door. "What do you do with this much milk?"
"Most of it goes back to the animals in their feed," she admitted. "I churn it for butter, drink some of it, use it in cooking."
"One cow would do."
"With two cows I get two calves a year that are butchered as yearlings. You had some of the beef in the soup you ate the other day. And this way, if one

of the cows dies, I still have milk." She wrestled the churn out and tied the straining cloth over it. "I don't guess one cow more or less matters much to you."
"Not when I have a couple thousand heads of beef on the range." He tipped one of the buckets and slowly poured the milk through the straining cloth, then emptied the other bucket.
Dee picked up the coffeepot and shook it. "There's more coffee left. Would you like a cup?"
Lucas was too smart to push her this early in their acquaintance, but being around her was fraying his patience, and he decided not to linger. "Not today. I need to get on to town, then back to the ranch. Thanks for the offer, though."
"You're welcome," she replied gravely. "And thank you for your help. I promise not to tell anyone you milked my cow."
He looked sharply at her, and though her expression was bland he could see a gleam of laughter in her eyes. "You'd better not."
She actually smiled then, and his body responded immediately. Damn, she was something when she smiled!
She walked out on the porch with him and leaned against a post while he returned to the barn, then walked out leading his horse. She watched him mount, noting the play of muscles in his arms and shoulders and the way his pants pulled tight on his buttocks and thighs. The brim of his hat shadowed his face, but she could still see the intense blue of his eyes.
"See you," he said, and he rode off without looking back.
She tried, but she couldn't stop thinking about him as she went about the rest of her morning chores. She knew plain enough why he'd come over the first time, since he'd been honest about wanting to buy the land, but why had he ridden so far out of his way this morning? At first she had been expecting him to make a grab for her, but he hadn't said or done anything the least suggestive, and she admitted to herself that she was just a tad disappointed.
Not that she would have let him kiss her. After all, the man was intending to marry Olivia. But Olivia didn't want him. Dee knew how much her friend wanted to fall in love and have a family, that she was worried she would never have the chance. And Olivia wasn't even certain Lucas had any intentions of marrying her. After meeting him the second time Dee was certain that he wasn't the man for her gentle friend.

It had been nothing less than the truth that she couldn't afford for anyone to think she was available, and it was likewise true that she wasn't interested in marrying anyone. None of that, however, negated a third truth: She was human, and she was a woman. She had liked talking to him this morning, liked his company. He talked to her as an equal, giving her a subtle but delicious sense of freedom because she didn't have to censor her words or behavior for him. Most men would have strongly disapproved of the things she had said, but Lucas had seemed to enjoy the frankness of their conversation. And despite herself she had responded to him as a woman, her skin growing warmer, her breath coming quicker. If he had reached for her, would she truly have pushed him away? She was honest enough with herself to admit that the temptation was there.

She was a bit embarrassed by her own duplicity. No matter that she had told him she wasn't interested in men, no matter that she told herself she neither needed nor wanted his admiration of her as a woman; she was very much aware of him as a man, and it hurt her ego a bit that he didn't seem the least bit attracted to her. Then again, why should he? He was Lucas Cochran; he could have any single woman in town, and probably quite a few of the married ones. He was not only very good-looking, he was almost overwhelmingly male, tough and strong and sure of himself, mentally as well as physically. She could read plainly in his eyes that he could be ruthless, and that a person had to be either reckless or a fool to stand in his way.

She, on the other hand, wasn't anything special. She saw it in her mirror every morning when she washed her face. She was a woman who worked hard, and who was more inclined to spend any extra money on books than to buy clothes or luxuries for herself. There was nothing refined or delicate about her, though she did suppose she was fairly intelligent and better educated than most, the latter point due to her mother having been a teacher and instilling a love of books in her early in life. They were two characteristics that equipped her well to manage her own life but made her particularly ill-suited to be content under anyone else's rule.

There was nothing in her for a man like Cochran to desire, and it was foolish of her to wish it were different.

Lucas never deliberately sought out Olivia except at social functions where they would have met anyway, for he saw no reason to solidify any relationship between them when it would be at least a year before he had

any real time to devote to courting and marriage. Nor did he ever feel any great need for her company; she was pretty and pleasant, but she didn't fire his senses. As he rode into town that morning after leaving Dee, however, he not only made no effort to see Olivia, he was downright reluctant to meet her even by accident.

He liked Olivia; she was sweet and kind, a true lady. He could even imagine taking a great deal of pleasure in bedding her. What he couldn't imagine, however, was ever feeling aroused to the point of madness with her. When he thought of heated sex, of sweat and twisted sheets and fingernails digging into his back while he reveled in a female body beneath him, that body was Dee's, the face was Dee's, and it was long black hair that lay tangled on his pillow. Dee would never docilely accept him; she would fight against his domination, her hips thrusting back at him. She would claw and twist and fiercely seize her own pleasure. And afterward, lying exhausted, she would watch him with those enigmatic green eyes, daring him to take her again.

He couldn't even think of Olivia with those images of Dee burning in his mind. He wanted her with an urgency that surprised him. He had desired women before, some passionately, but the mere thought of a woman had never made him feel as if he were on fire. And he hadn't even so much as touched her hand yet! But he would, and soon. He couldn't wait months to have her, or even very many weeks.

He gritted his teeth against a hard surge of arousal. The way he felt now, the time remaining to Dee's chastity could be measured in days, and even that was too long. He wanted her now; he was as hard and fractious as a stallion ready to mount a mare in heat.

Instinctively he knew that Dee was a virgin, even though she had lived alone for five years. Her innocence both hindered and helped. She would not immediately recognize the seriousness of his seduction and wouldn't know how to control her responses to him, which certainly gave him an advantage. But her innocence also meant he would have to restrain himself, to make certain she had been pleasured even before he entered her, and his control was already under a great deal of strain. Once he had her naked in his arms he would be near madness with the need to penetrate and find his ease within her. If he lost control and gave her only pain, she would fight like a wildcat the next time he tried to touch her.

No, no one in his right mind would ever categorize Dee as docile. She was a wildfire, while Olivia was as cool and contained as a mountain lake.
He stopped in at the saloon even though it was earlier than he liked to drink; maybe a beer would dull the ache in his groin. At that hour the saloon was almost empty, with only one other customer, who sat slumped sipping a whiskey with his back to the batwing doors as if the light hurt his eyes. Lucas recognized the signs of a hangover and left the man alone.
The bartender was polishing glasses, not paying any attention to him after serving him a beer. The two saloon girls were playing cards together in a half-bored, half-lazy fashion, spending more time talking than playing. After a while Tillie, the red-haired one, got up and sauntered over to Lucas. Though his senses were too focused on black hair and green eyes for him to react to Tillie's lush beauty, he admired the sensuousness of her walk. She didn't just walk; she swayed, she glided, she undulated. It was a movement so completely female that even the man with the hangover followed her with his bloodshot eyes.
"Good morning," she drawled, sitting down at his table. Her accent was distinctly Southern, lazy and soft-sounding. She tilted her head at the other man. "He's got a reason for drinking, but you don't look like you're having a hard morning."
He was having a hard morning, all right, in one sense of the word. "Just passing the time."
"Or maybe you came in here for another reason." Now her voice was even softer, slower, more inviting.
"I'm not in the mood for a woman," he said abruptly.
Tillie gave a warm laugh, sitting back in her chair. "Oh, I think you are, sugar, but I'm not the woman, and that's exactly what your problem is. You've got that angry, hot-and-bothered look that a man gets when a woman doesn't lie down for him the minute he thinks he wants her."
"A man never gets that look around you, does he?" Lucas countered.
"Not often, sugar, not often. Well, if you're not in here to drink, and you don't want to go upstairs, why don't you join Verna and me in a poker game? We get bored just playing each other."
But he wasn't interested in a card game either, and he shook his head. Tillie sighed sympathetically. "Then there's nothing I can do for you, Mr. Cochran, other than wish you luck."

"I don't need luck," he growled, getting up from the table. "What I need is patience."
Tillie's soft laughter followed him out of the saloon.
Olivia lingered in the dry goods store until she saw Lucas exit the saloon and head back in the direction of the Double C. It was cowardly of her to hide from him when he had never been anything but polite, but the possibility of meeting him in the street with innumerable eyes looking on had made her feel slightly ill. She wouldn't have been able to say a coherent word to the man, what with wondering about the whispering and conjecturing going on behind all the storefront doors. Nor had he looked to be in a particularly good mood. Even from a distance she had been able to see the dark scowl on his face. If Lucas was overwhelming when he was in a good mood, how much more intimidating would he be in a temper? She didn't want to find out.

Chapter 5

Maybe if Dee hadn't been so tired it wouldn't have happened, but she had spent the morning replowing the garden, breaking up the huge clods of dirt into smoother soil, suitable for planting. The first few days of garden work were always the hardest on her, for her muscles had grown softer over the comparatively lax winter months. So when she climbed into the barn loft to fork down more hay for the livestock perhaps she wasn't as alert as she normally would have been, and maybe her reflexes weren't as fast. For whatever reason she didn't see the cat, and she stepped on its paw. The cat squalled; startled by the noise, Dee lurched backwards and misjudged her step. She hurtled out of the loft to land flat on her back on the ground, her head hitting with a soft thud.
For a long, agonizing moment that seemed like an eternity she couldn't draw air into her lungs, and she lay as if paralyzed, stunned with pain, her sight growing dim. Then her insides decided to work properly, and she inhaled greedily despite her aching rib cage.
It was another several moments before she felt able to take stock of herself. Her arms and legs moved without undue pain, and her sore ribs felt more bruised than broken. Her head was throbbing dully. If the ground hadn't

been covered with a thin cushion of straw, she had no doubt she would be in much worse shape than she was.
The cat leapt out of the loft and meowed at her in rebuke, then disappeared around the corner.
She staggered to her feet and managed to finish feeding the animals, but when she went back to the house she could barely climb the steps. Cooking seemed too much of a bother, so she didn't. She merely cleaned herself up with a sponge bath and gingerly brushed out her hair. Her head ached too much for her to be able to tolerate the tight braid she usually put her hair in for sleeping; she winced at the thought. It was all she could do to pull on her nightgown and crawl into bed.
She didn't sleep well because every time she moved in her sleep her aching muscles protested and woke her up; but when dawn came, and she opened her eyes for good, she was relieved to find that the headache was gone. She would have been in a fine mess if she had sustained a concussion, but thankfully that didn't seem to be the case.
Still, when she tried to get out of bed she sank back with a stifled cry as a sharp pain laced around her ribs.
She lay there panting for a few minutes before gathering herself and trying again. The second attempt was no more successful than the first.
She was loath to try again, but she knew she couldn't simply lie in bed all day. For one thing, she had natural needs that had to be attended to.
The third time she didn't try to sit up but rather rolled off the bed and landed on her knees, which probably added to her collection of bruises. She leaned against the side of the bed with her eyes closed, trying to summon the strength and determination to stand. Fortunately, getting to her feet was less painful than sitting up had been, but the effort still made her turn pale.
She managed to take care of her more urgent needs and gulp down several dippersful of water, for she was very thirsty, but the simple act of removing her nightgown defeated her. She could not raise her arms to lift it over her head. Even if she could, she wasn't at all certain she would be able to dress herself properly.
But the animals needed caring for, and it wasn't their fault she had been so stupid and clumsy as to fall out of the loft.
She had been lucky that in the six years she had been alone she had never before been ill or hurt. Knowing that she had no one else to rely on, she had always been extremely careful, even to the point of holding a nail with a

long pair of tongs rather than risking hitting herself on the hand with a hammer. She had done everything she could think of to make her surroundings and her habits safe, but none of her precautions had kept her from stepping on that cat.

Even if she managed to get down the steps and wore her nightgown to the barn, how would she feed the animals? She couldn't lift her arms, much less heavy buckets of feed.

She was so furious at herself for having been careless that she could barely think. It didn't help that each movement brought a renewed onslaught of pain.

Her legs were stiff and sore, but she rather thought that was from the unaccustomed exertion of plowing. Her back, however, seemed to be one massive bruise from shoulders to hips, and her ribs ached with every breath she took. She tried to sit and found that she couldn't. She considered simply falling onto the bed, but the thought of what she would have to endure when she tried to get up again kept her from doing that. Standing seemed to be her only recourse.

But the spring morning was chilly, and she was growing cold standing there barefoot, wearing nothing but a nightgown. The coals in the fireplace would catch if she could place a fresh log on them, but that, too, was beyond her. It looked as if she would have to go back to bed to keep warm, regardless of the pain it would cost her to get up.

When she heard the drumming of hoofbeats her first thought was that she had to get the shotgun, and she moved too quickly. The resulting pain shut off her breath, and she froze with a stifled moan.

"Dee!"

The shout made her almost weak with relief. It was Lucas. She would swallow her pride and ask him to take care of the animals today; surely by tomorrow she would be able to do it herself. Painfully she moved to the window just in time to see Lucas heading toward the barn to look for her.

"Lucas," she called, but he didn't hear her.

She went to the door, holding her breath against the jarring of each step, then stared in frustration at the bar she had automatically dropped across the door when she had come in the night before. She tried to lift her arms but found that even if she forced herself to bear the pain there was a point beyond which her muscles simply wouldn't work. That point, unfortunately, came before she could get the bar raised out of the braces.

"Dee? Where are you?"
He came out of the barn and headed toward the back of the house. Panting, Dee bent her knees and wedged her shoulder under one end of the bar, then straightened. The heavy bar bore down onto her sore flesh like an axe cutting into her, but she couldn't think of any other way of getting the door open, so she ground her teeth together and ignored the tears of pain that burned her eyes. The bar slid out and hit the floor with a thunderous clatter. Lucas heard the noise and paused, then turned back toward the house, certain that the sound had come from there. Caution made him put his hand on the butt of his pistol.
She managed to pull the door open and stood wavering with one hand gripping the frame for support. "Lucas," she called. "I'm in front."
He came around the side of the cabin and took the steps with two long strides, dropping his hand from his pistol when he saw her. "Why didn't you answer?" he asked in irritation, then he stopped as he got a good look at her. She was swaying slightly as she stood in the doorway, while her right hand, held down at her side, clutched the frame so tightly her fingers were bloodless. She was barefoot and wore only a plain white nightgown, long-sleeved and high-necked, as demure as a nun's habit except for the fact that he could see the darkness of her nipples beneath the cloth. Her heavy mane of hair was loose and tousled, hanging down her back in a black tide. At first glance she seemed perfectly all right, and his body was already responding to her improper attire, but almost immediately he realized that her face was white and that she was holding herself stiff and motionless.
"What's wrong?" he asked, reaching for her because she looked as if she would collapse at his feet. Alarm made his tone rough.
"No, don't touch me!" she cried in panic, shrinking away from his hand. The movement brought more pain, and though she bit her lips to keep from crying out, a moan sounded low in her throat. When she had control of herself again she said, "I fell out of the barn loft. I'm too sore to do anything."
"Come back inside and let me shut the door," he said. He didn't make the mistake of trying to help her, even though she could barely move. He suppressed a strong urge to yell at her because if she didn't insist on living by herself and doing a man's work she wouldn't be hurt, but that would wait. He entered behind her and closed the door, then crossed to the

fireplace and quickly added a couple of logs, using the poker to stir up the coals.
"When did you fall?" he asked curtly, turning back to her.
"Late yesterday afternoon."
At least she hadn't been lying helpless for days. It had been a week since he had seen her, so she could easily have been injured all of that time.
He tossed his hat aside and knelt on one knee beside her. "This will hurt, but I'm going to check for any broken bones. Just stand there as still as you can so I can get it over with."
"I don't think there's anything broken," she protested. "But I'd be grateful if you'd take care of the animals today. I'm just bruised, so I'll be able to take care of them tomorrow after I get the soreness worked out."
"Don't worry about the animals. And I'll see for myself if any bones are broken or not."
His mutter was rough, his face grim. He had decided what he was going to do, and she knew she wasn't in any shape to stop him. Dee clenched her fists as he put his hands under her nightgown and ran them up her legs as briskly and efficiently as if she had been a horse. His probing fingers were necessarily less than gentle, and she sucked in her breath as her sore muscles protested. He looked up, blue eyes narrowed, at her intake of breath.
"My legs are just sore from work," she gasped in explanation.
His hands went higher, to her thighs. The hem of her nightgown bunched over his arms. His touch was hot, his callus-roughened palms and fingers hard on her silky skin. She was acutely aware of her nakedness beneath the thin cotton, and of the heat of his big body as he crouched so close to her that her thigh was practically nestled into the curve of his broad shoul-der, and his face was almost against her belly. "Stop," she whispered.
He looked up, and she saw that he was enraged. His eyes looked like blue fire. "Stop, hell," he snapped. "You can forget about your modesty, because this damn nightgown is going to have to come off."
"No."
He rose to his feet with savage grace. "That's what you think."
She lifted her chin in a stubborn movement. "I can't take it off. I've tried, but I can't raise my arms."
He glared down at her, then abruptly pulled his knife from his belt. She couldn't move fast enough even to begin to evade him. He grasped a fistful

of cloth in the front of the gown, pulled it out from her body, inserted the knife point, and sliced upward. The garment gaped open.
Dee made a futile effort to grab the edges together again, but in her present condition she was no match for him. He simply brushed her hands aside, then pulled the nightgown off of her shoulders and down her arms. The material caught for a moment on the curve of her hips, then slid downward of its own accord to pool around her feet.
Panic and humiliation combined to engulf her in an enormous flood. A strange gray mist obscured her vision, and her ears began to ring.
"Goddammit, don't faint," Lucas barked, putting his hands on her waist to catch her in case she did. "Take a deep breath. Breathe, goddammit!"
She did, because pride refused to allow her to faint like a ninny. The sickening gray mist faded, and she focused on his face, set in lines of pure rage. A strange sort of relief spread through her, because his anger gave her something to concentrate on.
"Don't swear at me, you bastard! You cut my clothes off of me!"
His hard fingers clenched her waist as he fought the urge to shake her. Only the knowledge that she really would faint if he did kept him under control. Damn her, didn't she know when to quit fighting? She was hurt, and someone had to take care of her because she couldn't do it herself.
But color had rushed back into her white face, and that curious panic was gone from her eyes, which had darkened to emerald with her anger. Despite his own temper he almost grinned, because if she were well enough to be angry she probably wasn't hurt too seriously. Besides, Dee's anger was exhilarating, intensifying her color and reassuring him of her strength. If he had cut a nightgown off of any other woman he knew, he'd have been faced with screaming hysterics. But Dee had sworn back at him and matched his anger with her own even though she was as helpless as a kitten.
"Shut up and let me see what other damage you've done to yourself," he said, thrusting his face close to hers.
Dee swayed on her feet, painfully aware of her bareness as the cool air brushed over her skin, but she couldn't fight him, couldn't run from him, couldn't even manage to wrap herself in a blanket. She loathed being helpless, but reality made her admit that she was. He was looking her over good, and she moved her hands in an automatic attempt to shield herself. A flush pinkened her torso and face.

"For God's sake, I've seen naked women before," he snapped, putting his hands on her rib cage and forcing his attention to the tracing of each rib, probing for breaks.
"I don't care what you've seen," she snapped back, carefully not looking at him. If she didn't watch him examining her, she might be able to preserve some small mental distance. "I've never been naked in front of a man before."
"I'll pull off my own clothes if it'll make you feel better."
"Lucas!"
"Dee!" he mocked in the same tone of voice, then he brushed her hair back over her shoulders. The thick mane had veiled her breasts, which were now revealed to be high and creamy, conical in shape, lushly rounded and tipped by small pink nipples. His stomach muscles contracted, and a rush of blood to his groin made his shaft thicken. Damn, she was pretty, all slim and firm and rounded in exactly the right places. He grimly tightened his control, but his nostrils flared at the sweet warm scent of her, and his fingers ached to slide into the notch between her legs. If she hadn't been hurt…
He fought for sanity. If she hadn't been hurt, she wouldn't be standing naked under his hands now. She would be outside doing her chores, encased in clothing, her wild tumble of hair sternly twisted into a knot. But she was hurt, and he had to remember that.
Her collarbones were straight, without any telltale lumps to signal breaks, and she didn't flinch at his firm touch even though he carefully watched her face for any sign of pain. He felt her neck and told her to turn her head from side to side, which she did with some care but no great difficulty. Then he walked around behind her, gathered the great mass of hair which fell to her hips, and looped it over her shoulder.
He swore softly between his teeth.
"I figure I'm bruised," Dee said, staring into the fire. "I landed on my back."
Her shoulders appeared to have taken the brunt of the fall, because a great black and purple welt stretched from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. Her lower back was also bruised, the discoloration extending down to the twin dimples of her buttocks.
Gently he checked her ribs and found them sore but not broken, as was the case with her arms. All things considered, she was lucky to have escaped with such minor injuries.

He began thinking of all the things that needed to be done. "I'll fix you some breakfast," he said. "Do you want to go back to bed or sit here by the fire?"
She turned her head and gave him a baleful look. "I can't sit around like this."
"I don't object. The scenery looks good from my view, except for the strange colors." He lightly patted her bottom, taking care not to touch her bruises.
She moved jerkily, painfully away from him, and he was briefly ashamed of himself for teasing her when she couldn't fight back. He went into the bedroom and pulled a blanket off the bed—a double bed, he noted—then returned to her and folded it snugly around her. She hugged it to her with a look of intense gratefulness and relief, and he realized how difficult it had been for her to be unclothed in front of him. He wanted to kiss her and tell her that it would be all right, that soon she would be accustomed to him, but it was never good tactics to let your adversary know your plans in advance.
He helped her to the big, well upholstered chair before the fire, but sitting down was something she had to do at her own rate. When at last she was as comfortable as she could get he turned his attention to the wood stove. Cooking was something he had learned by necessity, and he was competent with the basics. He put on a pot of coffee, deftly made a pan of biscuits, and sliced bacon to put on to fry. After satisfying himself that the stove wasn't too hot, he went outside and gathered enough eggs for breakfast. He had eaten some biscuits and cold beef before riding over, but now his stomach was demanding more.
When he returned to the house Dee was still in exactly the same position she'd been in before he'd gone outside. The blanket had slipped away from her bare feet. He went over and knelt down to cover them, wrapping them more securely in the folds.
"Thank you," she said. Her frustration with herself was plain in her eyes.
He patted her knee. He knew how being sick or hurt grated on the nerves. The few times in his life that he had been confined to bed, even as a child, he had raised such hell that everyone around him had breathed a sigh of relief when he began to mend.
He finished breakfast, put everything on the table, and returned to her chair. "I'm going to pick you up." he said. "I'll put my arm around the middle of your back, where you aren't so sore."

"I have to get dressed," she said irritably. "I can't eat with this blanket wrapped around me."
He slipped his arms around her, one across her back and the other under her thighs, and lifted her easily. His muscled back and arms barely felt the strain. "I'll take care of the blanket. Don't worry."
By the time he had her settled her cheeks were hot again, because by necessity the repositioning of the blanket had caused her breasts to be exposed. When he finished she was wrapped in a roughly fashioned toga, with her right arm and shoulder completely bare. She found that if she moved carefully, she could feed herself by moving her arm only from the elbow down. It was movement from the shoulder that was excruciating.
"Do you have a bathtub?" he asked, taking generous portions for himself.
"I use a washtub."
The washtub would have to do, Lucas thought. It wouldn't be as comfortable for her as a bathtub that she could recline in, but he would manage.
As soon as they had finished eating he redeposited Dee in her chair before the fire, then cleaned up the dishes and hauled in buckets of water to begin heating on the stove. "I'm going to feed the animals while the water's getting hot," he said, and he left the cabin.
Dee tried to find a more comfortable position. Tears of frustration prickled her eyelids, and angrily she blinked them back. She refused to let herself bawl like a baby despite her predicament.
Only part of it was because of the pain and helplessness, which was galling enough. Her nakedness in front of Lucas was more distressing to her, assaulting her modesty and adding to her sense of vulnerability. It would have been bad enough with any man, but when Lucas looked at her she felt as if he were stroking her in all of her private places.
It was an hour later when he returned to the house. He replenished the fire, then dragged the big washtub inside and positioned it in front of the fireplace. Dee watched as he carried in more water and began filling the tub, then dumped in the hot water until steam was rising.
"All right, in you get," he said, rolling up his sleeves.
She clutched the blanket tight with her fist, gazing longingly at the steaming tub. A long hot soak would be heaven for her sore muscles, just what she needed, but her nerves had been stretched almost to the limit by her nudity before him that morning. "I think I can manage on my own," she said. It

would hurt, but she would bear the pain for the pleasure of that wonderful hot water.
For an answer Lucas tugged the blanket free and pushed it aside.
"Damn you," she said between clenched teeth as he lifted her.
"For once, would you just shut up and let me help you?" Her stubborn independence made him angry all over again, but he handled her carefully as he knelt and lowered her into the water. She sucked in her breath at the heat of it but made no more protest. Her common sense told her that at this point it would be a wasted effort.
He left her sitting in the water while he found two strips of toweling. He folded them and placed one on the edge of the tub behind her head. "Lie back and let your head rest on this," he ordered. "Get your shoulders underwater."
Gingerly she did as he said, wincing at each movement. He placed the other towel across the rim at her feet and lifted her legs out of the water, resting them across the towel. Then he brought more hot water and slowly poured it in until the water level rose almost to the edge.
Dee closed her eyes against the picture she knew she must make, lying there in the clear water, completely nude like a wanton.
The sight of her was making it difficult for Lucas either to move or to sit, with his hardened shaft cramped beneath his pants as it was. Her breasts bobbed gently in the water, making him think about sliding an arm under her back and lifting her up so that he could take those sweet nipples in his mouth.
Though her eyes were closed and he couldn't read her expression, he knew that the redness of her cheeks wasn't due entirely to the heat of the water. He ran his fingers through the length of hair hanging down the side of the tub to pool on the floor. "Don't be embarrassed," he murmured. "You're too pretty to be ashamed of being naked."
Dee swallowed but didn't open her eyes. "You shouldn't see me like this."
"Even though you're hurt? Don't be silly. If I were shot in the leg, do you think you wouldn't have to take my pants off so you could tend to me?" He continued to gently stroke her hair. "You're just damn lucky I came by today. What would you have done on your own? What about the animals?"
"I don't know," she admitted, then honesty prodded her. "I'm grateful to you, truly, but this is—it's scandalous."

"If anyone knew about it," he agreed. "But it's between us, and no one else is going to know. I suppose I could have gone into town and tried to get some woman to come out here and take care of you, but I'm strong enough to pick you up without hurting you. And I like looking at you," he admitted quietly. "If you weren't hurt, I'd be trying to get between your legs." He paused. "Are you afraid I might force you while you're helpless?"
She did open her eyes then, her look somber and searching. "No. You wouldn't force me. You aren't that type of man."
His mouth twisted wryly. "Sweetheart, don't put it to the test when you're in good shape again. I'm so hard right now my guts are hurting."
No man had ever talked to her like that before, but she had seen the animals mating and knew what he meant. And when it came down to it, she felt more comfortable with his bluntness than if he had pretended to scruples she couldn't trust.
He kept her in the tub for almost an hour, dipping out water when it cooled and replacing it with hot water fresh from the stove. Her skin was red and wrinkled when he finally lifted her out and stood her, dripping, on the rug. She found that some of the soreness had eased, and she could move her arms a bit more. He dried her with one of the towels, his hands moving over her bare body with excruciating attention. Then he carried her back to the bed and placed her face down on it.
Dee bit her lip and kept her cries locked inside while he firmly rubbed a strong-smelling liniment on her aching muscles. The resulting heat was almost worse than the original pain, but again she held back her protests. Sweat beaded Lucas's forehead when he was finished. He asked, "Do you have any of your pa's shirts left?" He had had almost all he could endure. If he didn't get her covered up, he might end up on that bed with her despite his best intentions. Her soft round buttocks, creamy white and perfect, would feel wonderful against his lower belly, or cupped in his big hands.
"No, I got rid of all of his things."
Damn. He stood and pulled his own shirt free of his pants, then unbuttoned it. Like most shirts, it only buttoned halfway down, and he pulled it off over his head. "You should be able to get into this," he said, straightening the garment and placing it on the bed before helping her to her feet again. Then he knelt and held the shirt for her to step into, and he worked it up her hips. The position brought his face very close to her soft body, and his breathing grew quicker.

He guided her arms into the sleeves and eased the cloth into place. The shirt engulfed her, hanging almost to her knees, the sleeves dangling past her hands. He buttoned it, then rolled the sleeves back until her hands emerged.
"There, you're decent again," he said with a strained look on his face.
Not quite, since her lower legs were still bare, but she was painfully grateful to him for the covering. The shirt was warm from his body and carried his scent. She felt surrounded by him, and the sensation was remarkably pleasant.
She found herself staring at his chest. It was broad and muscled and hairy, the dark curls crisp-looking against his tanned skin. He evidently spent a good bit of time working without his shirt. "How will you explain going home without your shirt?" she whispered, not raising her eyes.
"I don't reckon I have to explain," he drawled. He was the boss. He could wear a shirt or not, as he damn well pleased.
She was still looking at his bare torso with helpless fascination. "Look at me," he said, putting a finger under her chin and tilting it upward. Her lashes swept open, and those deep green eyes fastened on him. He moved closer, bent down, and closed his mouth over hers, forcing her lips to part and using his tongue. He didn't trust himself and quickly released her, stepping away from the enticement of her firm body beneath the thin shirt, but the kiss was enough to make her eyes go dark with shock.
"You're safe for now," he said. "But when you're healed, things will change. I'll be coming after you, and it won't take me long to get you."

Chapter 6

Dee felt much better the next day, though still not able to lift her arms more than a few inches. Lucas showed up again shortly past dawn, and they went through the same routine, with him cooking for her and taking care of her chores. Afterward he insisted that she soak in hot water again, and this time was far more embarrassing than it had been before. She wasn't in as much pain and therefore was even more acutely aware of her nakedness. So was Lucas. She could see it in his clenched jaw and the sweat glistening on his brow.
She had lain awake a good bit of the night, going over and over what he had said. As accustomed as she was to defending her virtue with a shotgun, it

had still rattled her to find that Lucas had the same intentions as all those others who had come slipping around. What made him far more dangerous to her was the fact that knowing it didn't rouse her to contemptuous anger, as was the case with the others, but rather made her heart beat a little faster. It frightened her to admit that she wanted Lucas to want her, but it was the truth.

So what was she going to do about it? Let a man into her life after fighting so hard to achieve independence? Have an affair with him, when it would destroy her respectability if anyone found out about it? Betray Olivia?

Nor could she ignore the possibility that what he really wanted was Angel Creek. He no doubt planned to exploit her vulnerability to him to convince her to sell out. After all, buying the land had been the reason he had first sought her out.

What she knew about sex was only what she had seen in the barnyard, when the bull mounted one of the cows. She knew what happened but had had no idea of the fierce physical attraction between a man and a woman until Lucas had come riding up. His kiss, as brief and hard as it had been, had shown her that there was a great deal more to mating than she had suspected. She had foolishly thought she would be able to keep him from kissing her, but she had not only let him, she had wanted more. She had felt the burn of physical desire for the first time, and it tormented her, for her body had felt out of her control.

If Lucas wanted the land, he also wanted her. She wasn't so naive that she didn't realize the significance of the bulge in the crotch of his pants, even if he hadn't so bluntly admitted his intentions. It weakened her to know that the torment was mutual.

After he had dried her and clothed her in another of his shirts, brought specifically for that purpose, he silently put her back in bed and left the cabin, his boot heels thudding on the porch. When he returned half an hour later he was back in control of himself, but his blue eyes still held signs of his bad temper.

"I don't think you should come by tomorrow," Dee said, pulling the sheet to her chin. "I'm much better today, and the soreness will leave faster if I work it out."

"Trying to get rid of me?" he asked. "It won't work."

She turned her face away from him. "What about Olivia?" she asked quietly. "She's my friend."

She couldn't see him, but she could feel his fierce gaze fasten on her. He didn't show surprise at her words. He just said, "What about her?"
"The talk is that you're going to marry her."
"I'd thought about it," he admitted, his temper fraying. Did she think he would be there if he had committed himself to another woman? "But not lately. We certainly as hell don't have any sort of understanding between us. I'm a free man."
She plucked at the sheet, still not looking at him. "It would probably be better if you didn't come by tomorrow anyway."
"If you weren't such a damn idiot, you wouldn't need for me to come by," he growled, glad that she had provided him with an excuse to release his temper. Being around her, with her either naked or only partly clothed, had strained his control to the limit. He felt half-mad with the need to have her.
"I know," she said, readily accepting the blame, which only made him angrier. "I try to be so careful, but that time I wasn't."
"You shouldn't be pitching down hay in the beginning!" he yelled. "You shouldn't be working this farm by yourself! Why can't you move to town and be a normal woman, instead of trying to prove that you can make it all on your own when it's pure insanity that you'd even want to?"
Dee looked at him then, her eyes narrowing in a dangerous, catlike way. It wasn't in her to simply take his attack in silence, so she didn't. "What I want to know is why you think it's any of your business," she said in an even tone. "I appreciate your help, but that doesn't give you the right to tell me how to live."
"You know what gives me the right." He walked over to stand by the bed, glaring down at her. "You know it's going to end only one way."
"I believe that's still my decision."
"When the time comes, you're going to lie down and open your legs for me," he said savagely. "Don't try to fool yourself."
She tried to lift herself up on an elbow, but her shoulders and arms were still too sore, and she fell back with a stifled moan. This further evidence of her own physical helplessness, however, didn't mean that she thought he was right. "Then I see only one solution: Don't come back here, because you aren't welcome."
"Are you going to use the shotgun on me?" he taunted, leaning down so close that she could see the glittering depths of his eyes. "Then take your best shot, sweetheart, because I'll be back."

She lashed out in retaliation. "You overestimate your charm. I'd always wonder what you really wanted, me or Angel Creek."
"Both, sweetheart," he said, and he crashed his mouth down onto hers. It was a rough kiss, and she tried to bite him, but he jerked his head back, then returned to kiss her even harder. His fingers clamped on her chin and held it down so he could enter her mouth with his tongue. Dee clawed at his arms, but with her limited range of movement it was a wasted effort. He held her down and ruthlessly kissed her until she felt the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. He tasted it, too, and the pressure eased. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and stroked it with his tongue, soothing the hurt.
He unbuttoned the shirt she wore and opened it, baring her breasts. Her breath caught in her throat as his hard, warm hand closed over one of the soft mounds.
"This is what it would be like between us," he muttered. "Hot and wild. Think about it, damn you." His thumb rubbed her nipple into a tight peak, and her entire body clenched from the pleasure and pain of it. He cupped both breasts, holding them high and together, and buried his face against them. His hot breath washed over her, then he took one nipple between his teeth, drawing it into his mouth with a strong sucking motion. Incredible heat shot through her, and she whimpered, her hips writhing a little.
As if that were a signal he released her breast and stood, his face dark and taut with both anger and physical need. "I can make you go wild," he said. "Remember that when you think about using the shotgun on me."
He walked out, leaving her lying on the bed with her shirt unbuttoned and spread open, her bare breasts heaving with the violence of the response he had stirred in her. A moment later she heard him ride away. "Damn you," she whispered, and she would have shouted it if she thought he might hear her. She was shaking with anger—or was it from the empty torment he had aroused in her body? Perhaps it was both, though the whys didn't really matter.
She had never before been vulnerable to a man, but she was to him. That was the most frightening thing she had ever faced in her life, far more frightening than being left alone to fend for herself. She had never doubted her ability to survive, but she was terrified of what Lucas could do to her. Losing first one parent and then the other had shaken her to the core. She had been afraid, so horribly afraid, but she had had to go on. She had been forced to recognize, with brutal swiftness, how fragile life was, how easily

it could be taken. She had pulled deep inside herself, unwilling to trust her emotions to anyone else because she simply couldn't bear any more pain and couldn't take the risk of losing someone else she loved. Devoting herself to the garden had saved her sanity, given her a sense of life again, because the earth was so giving. It, at least, was eternal. It would be there long after she herself had died. She could trust the warm soil, the cycles of the seasons, the renewal of life each spring. Except for Olivia, she hadn't even been tempted to let anyone close to her again.

And now Lucas was shattering her mental wall of remoteness. He could destroy not only the life she had built for herself but her very self-respect. If she let him mean too much to her, he could reduce her to someone she would despise, without will or spirit, willing to do anything to keep him happy. Wanting him hadn't blinded her to his nature; Lucas was strong and arrogant, ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted. He wanted her, and he wouldn't listen to any of her refusals. It wasn't that she feared he would force her, for his own ego wouldn't let him do that, but rather that she would lose her own will to tell him no.

He had demonstrated to her very aptly how weak she could be when he wanted to make love to her. And he hadn't even done that much—kissed her, and touched and kissed her breast—but she had been on the verge of pleading with him for more. It was humiliating to realize he could handle her so easily.

Though anger had motivated her to tell him not to come back, now that she had calmed down she realized it was only common sense, and the best thing for her. The question, though, was if Lucas would obey.

She had her answer early the next morning when she heard hoofbeats approaching. She looked at the shotgun but admitted that it was a futile threat, right now at least. Though she had managed to dress herself in a fashion, she still wasn't capable of lifting the heavy weapon and firing it with any sort of aim.

Without knocking he opened the front door, which had been left unbarred for the past two days. Dee turned from the stove to look at him, a stinging rebuke on her lips that she forced herself to swallow; after all, the door had been left unbarred for that precise reason.

It gave her no small measure of satisfaction to see his black eyebrows snap downward in a scowl when he saw her standing at the stove turning bacon with a fork.

"You shouldn't be doing that."
"I told you, I'm feeling better. I can manage this."
"But not putting on your shoes," he observed, looking down at her bare feet. She had tried but hadn't been able to bend down far enough to pull on her stockings or shoes. It was also true that she still wore his shirt, but it served well enough as a blouse. She had struggled until she had donned her underdrawers, a petticoat, and her skirt and tucked the shirt in. After two days of being bare or almost so, the heavy clothes had given her a certain sense of comfort.
He tossed a small package on the table. She looked at it, then lifted her brows inquiringly at him. "It's a nightgown. To replace the one I cut off of you."
She was glad that he had thought of it, for she only owned two. "I'll wash your shirts and return them."
"No hurry." He was watching her so intensely that she began to feel uncomfortable and had to resist the urge to check if all of her buttons were buttoned. But he only reached out to take the fork from her hand and said, "Sit. I'll finish this."
Lucas was very aware of the short pause before she did as he said, and he didn't relax until she was safely sitting down. He had ridden up to the cabin with every nerve alert, waiting for a shotgun blast at any second. He had pushed her too hard and too far the day before, and he knew it. With most women—hell, any other woman—he would have expected nothing more than a temper tantrum at worst, and more likely tears or sulking. But Dee was likely to do just as she said and greet him with buckshot. Which was, he thought grimly, just what he deserved for having been so stupid. He had been thinking with his gonads, not his brain. Just because he had been hot and hard and frustrated he'd let his temper get the best of him.
After breakfast he knelt and slipped plain white stockings on her feet, smoothing them up her legs and tying the garters just above her knees. After the past two days such a service didn't even bring a blush to her face. Then he laced her into her sturdy work shoes, and his face became grim again as he thought of the dainty cloth slippers she could wear if she didn't insist on working like a horse. This time, however, he had sense enough to keep his mouth shut.
He took her outside to walk around, her first trip past the cabin door since the morning after she had fallen. She insisted on inspecting the garden plot

she had plowed, and she told him what she planned to plant. "Corn, of course, and peas. I had good luck selling squash last year, so I'll add another row of it this time. Here I'll make the beds for the onions and carrots, and a few pepper plants. And I think I'll try potatoes this year. Mr. Winches always has them, but I imagine he pays a pretty penny having them shipped in."

Her eyes were shining as she looked at the plot of raw earth; she saw green food-bearing plants, plants that fed her through the winter and gave her a means of living. Lucas looked at the same earth and thought of the work she would have to do, first planting, then the daily battle with weeds and insects, and finally the harvesting days, when she would have to work the hardest, for she would not only be doing her normal chores but working in the kitchen to put up in canning jars the vegetables she would need over the winter. A farm woman didn't have it easy at the best of times; a farm woman on her own was likely to work herself into an early grave. Unless she had sense enough to sell out.

Dee was strong, her slim body lithe and well muscled, but eventually the work would get to be too much for her. Lucas looked down at her, with her hip-length hair flowing down her back and her exotic face lifted to the morning sun, and he swore to himself right then that he would get her off the farm before it killed her or made her old before her time. He'd have to fight her every inch of the way, but that would keep him on his toes.

Before he thought, he bent his head and kissed her, his hands on her waist to pull her close against him. Her green eyes widened with surprise, then slowly fluttered shut as her mouth opened gently for him. Her lips were soft and full, the lower one still slightly swollen from his roughness the day before. He treated her with more care now, keeping the pressure light even though his tongue probed sensually. This time she tilted her head and met his advance with first a hesitant touch, then a tender searching with her own tongue that made his senses reel. His hands tightened momentarily on her waist, then he slid one arm behind her while his other hand moved up to close surely over her breast.

Immediately she tried to pull away, a protest sounding in her throat. Lucas held her, his long fingers kneading the rich flesh, rubbing at her sensitive nipple. "I'm not going to do more than this," he muttered as his mouth moved roughly down her throat. "Just relax and let me make you feel good."

He made her feel too good, Dee thought in despair, and it all happened too fast. One kiss, one touch, and she wanted him to do everything. She even wanted to open her legs to that hard length she could feel pressed against her belly, and that would never do, because it would be such an enormous error to give Lucas that sort of hold over her.

She couldn't push at him, but she found enough strength, enough sanity, to turn her head away and say, "No, Lucas. No. I don't want you to do this."

"Liar," he said, but he raised his head. His lips were shiny from kissing her, the set of them a little cruel. She was totally at his mercy and she knew it, but she wasn't certain he had any mercy. If he chose to continue making love to her, she would not only give in, she would join in, even beg him if necessary.

"I'm not lying," she insisted before he could kiss her again. Honesty impelled her to add, "I didn't say that I don't want you. I said that I don't want you to treat me like this."

"Even in that, you're lying." But he slowly let her go, and that was what she had intended.

She felt as if all of her clothes were awry; it was disturbing to look down and find that nothing was disturbed after all. All of the turbulence had been inside.

"You wouldn't do this if I were anyone else." Her voice was low as she made the charge. "You wouldn't treat Olivia like this." She remembered the day she had first seen him since his return, how civil he had been to Olivia and the giggling young women grouped around her. He would never handle any of them the way he had been touching her.

Lucas's gaze sharpened. "Like a woman, you mean? Maybe you're right. But don't accuse me of treating you like a whore, damn you, because we both know different."

"A whore is what people would call me."

"How would anyone know? What's between us is private."

There was nothing more to be said, it seemed. She turned to go back to the house, and he fell into step beside her, his strong hands helping her up the steps when her back muscles protested. He kissed her again, then left her to attend to the chores.

She was alone that night when, more out of curiosity than for any practical reason, she opened the package that contained the nightgown, as she was still confined to sleeping in his shirt. The garment that was revealed had

nothing in common with her practical white sleepwear, not even intent, for surely this wasn't meant to be worn in bed, merely to bed, where a lover's eager hands would remove it.
She trailed her fingertips over the sheer silk, noting the exquisite workmanship. The part of her that appreciated the luxuries of life marveled at the beauty of it, and at how well the pale, shimmering pink would complement her coloring, but the practical part of her was furious with him for depriving her of something she had needed, and trying to replace it with this highly impractical gown. Of course there was no mistaking his intention—that she would wear the gown for him.
He would have made her less angry, she thought, if he had bought two gowns, one to replace the gown he had destroyed and this bit of froth for his own amusement. Let him think what he liked, but she truly needed another warm nightgown.
She said as much to him the next day, starchily adding that she might as well continue wearing his shirts, which at least had sleeves. He grinned at her, a devilish glint in his blue eyes. "I like you in either one," he said.
It was two more days before she was well enough to dress herself completely and do the chores, albeit with much less dexterity and speed than normal. The last day, having made a deliberate effort to be up and about early, she was already milking one of the cows when Lucas arrived. He said nothing, merely helped her finish with the milking, then carried the milk inside for her. Both of his shirts had been washed and neatly ironed and were folded on the table for him.
He went outside and came back in with another package. "Just to keep you warm when I can't," he said, grinning as he tossed it to her.
She opened the package, half afraid this choice would be even more inappropriate than the other. But the soft white cotton gown was all she could have asked for, long-sleeved and high-necked. The bosom was set with tiny tucks, and the buttons extended down almost to the waist. She would be able to step into it, she realized, and she gave him a truly warm smile for his consideration. Her shoulders and arms still protested if she pulled anything on over her head.
"I wonder what Mrs. Worley thinks about you buying so many nightgowns," she mused, trying to picture that stern lady's face when Lucas purchased the silk confection. Come to think of it, where had he bought the silk nightgown? She couldn't think of any merchant in Prosper who carried

such goods. He would have had to special order it from the East, or from San Francisco, and certainly he hadn't had enough time for that.
"Mrs. Worley doesn't think anything about it," he replied maddeningly. "The cotton gown was my mother's."
He didn't say where he had gotten the silk, she noticed.
He had been ignoring his own work to attend to her, and now that she was on her feet again he would have to spend the next several days seeing to business. "I won't be able to check on you for a while," he warned. "For God's sake, be careful."
"I am careful. After all, that's the first accident I've had."
"And it could have been your last, if it had broken your neck."
"What? And deprive you of a reason to complain?" she said sweetly. "I'd never do that."
"The spring picnic and dance is next week," he said, thinking ahead and ignoring her jab. It was such a busy time at the ranch, with all the spring branding and castrating to be done, that the picnic would probably be the next time he'd see her. "If I don't get by before then, I'll see you there."
"I doubt it," she said. "I don't go to the spring dances."
He stopped and gave her one of those grim looks of his. "Why not?"
"Why should I?"
"To socialize with your neighbors."
"If I did that, someone"—meaning some man—"would assume that I wanted to be friendlier than I have been in the past. It seems easier not to encourage anyone."
"You could spend your time with the women."
She laughed out loud at that. "What poor woman wants me to monopolize her time? People go to have fun with their friends, or to flirt, and I don't qualify for either. Besides, this is a busy time for me, and I really can't afford to waste an entire day doing nothing, especially since I've lost so much time this past week."
He scowled down at her, angered that she allowed herself so little in life. He had been looking forward to dancing with her, to feeling her long, strong legs brushing against his. In the hurlyburly of the day, no one would be paying any attention to them. "I want you to go," he said. "Put on your best dress and for once forget about the damn farm."
"No," she said. No more excuses, no reasons, just no.

Lucas didn't take rejection well. "If you aren't at the picnic," he said, "I'll come looking for you."

Chapter 7

The day of the picnic dawned with perfect weather, the sun rising in a glorious display of cream and gold on the snow-capped peaks of the far mountains. Olivia was awake to see it, for it seemed there were a hundred last-minute details that needed to be seen to. That was always the case, but in the past she had enjoyed the excitement of preparation; this year it was all she could do to present a serene face to her parents and friends. She dreaded the day, without having any one solid reason for doing so. Perhaps, she thought, it was that she had given up hope. Always before the future had loomed before her with its great golden promise, but in the past months she had lost her faith in that promise.

It wasn't that a proposal from Lucas seemed imminent; in fact, in the last few weeks she had begun to wonder if she had only been imagining his intentions.

In some indefinable way she no longer felt that intense will focused on her. It was silly, because when they had met, which was seldom, he had been exactly the same: courteous, protective, occasionally even flirting a little, but taking care not to overwhelm her.

Though she couldn't help feeling relieved, she was saddened almost beyond bearing at the very real possibility that she would never have her own family. She could just picture herself ten, even twenty years in the future, quietly sitting beside Honora with their heads bent over tiny embroidery stitches, while her hair grayed and wrinkles appeared at her eyes and throat, and her body lost its firmness. Her parents would be sad, too, because there would be no grandchildren for them to cherish.

It was as if her life had slipped by while she wasn't looking, and now she was left with empty hands. And empty arms, she thought, mourning the tiny babies she had wanted but seemed destined never to have.

So she went through the motions, sheer determination keeping a smile pasted on her face, and by midmorning the Millican carriage had joined a parade of buggies, wagons, carts, people on horseback, and a great many

even walking, all making their way to the large meadow just outside of town where the picnic was always held.
It was a truly perfect spot, with enough trees to provide shade for those who sought it, yet plenty of open space for the youngsters to play. A good many people were already there, and by lunch all but a few people from within a fifty-mile radius would be wan-dering over the meadow, with nothing more serious on their minds than seeing friends and enjoying the picnic, an entire day with nothing to do.
Except the women always had plenty to do, Olivia thought. There was the food to be seen to, the children to be watched, games to be organized. The men, of CQurse, stood about in groups talking and laughing or perhaps organizing their own contests of strength or skill. An impromptu horse race wasn't unknown. The women soothed the normal array of wounds and tempers from both children and men, until sometimes Olivia wondered if there was much difference between the two groups.
Practically the first person she saw was Lucas, his tall, powerful form easily spotted in the crowd. He was wearing brown pants and a white silk shirt, his brown hat shading his eyes from the bright morning sun, and he caught her attention more easily than those men who had dressed in their best suits. As he approached she noticed how his dark hair curled down over his collar.
He reached them with a murmured greeting and began helping to unload the small mountain of food they had brought in the carriage.
She wondered uncertainly if she had been wrong about his intentions after all and thought she would go mad with this seesawing back and forth. All of it was in her own mind, of course, so she had no one but herself to blame. Was he interested or not? If he was, did she want him to be, or not? If he asked, which would be worse, to accept or to refuse?
When all of the food was safely arranged on a quilt spread beneath one of the trees Lucas tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "Do you want to walk around and see everyone?" he asked.
She could scarcely refuse with her mother beaming at them, and she tried to make herself relax as they strolled slowly about.
When he returned her to the same spot an hour later it was without anything personal having been said between them. To her relief, he had treated her as an undemanding friend.
Lucas truly liked Olivia, but during the long walk his attention had kept slipping to the knots of people they passed, and he'd been aware that he was

looking for a small, queenly head with a wealth of black hair, or a woman who moved with a long, free-swinging stride that made her skirts kick up in a way that definitely wasn't ladylike. He was sure all of those excuses she had given for not attending had been just that—excuses—and he fully expected her to be there. What woman could resist the chance to flirt and have fun?

"Have you seen Dee Swann?" he asked Olivia absently, still surveying the constantly moving throng of people.

Olivia lifted her brows a little at the casual way he said Dee's name, and her eyes sparkled with quickly veiled interest. "No, I haven't. I doubt she'll be here. She never comes."

"I told her to come. I mean, I think she needs to get away from that farm… I heard she fell out of the loft and hurt herself week before last."

"Oh, no," Olivia cried. "How bad was she hurt?"

Lucas didn't stop to think that Olivia sounded more distressed than such news would merit from a casual acquaintance. "Heard she was bruised up pretty bad. But she's back in fighting form now."

Olivia's interest heightened. Even though she was worried about Dee, she realized how uncomfortable Lucas was, as if he'd accidentally said more than he should have. Indeed, from whom would he have heard that Dee was injured? Olivia knew perfectly well how isolated Dee was. It was obvious to her that if Lucas knew her friend was injured, it was because he had seen her himself, visited her, maybe even tended to her. She remembered the stray thought she had had about how well Lucas and Dee would suit. Perhaps…

"She should be here," he said again, and he was scowling.

Lucas didn't accept that Dee really wasn't going to show up until lunchtime. He kept expecting to spot her in the mingling crowd until finally he realized that she wouldn't be with a crowd of people even if she did attend the picnic; she would be on the outskirts watching, her deep green eyes as enigmatic as a cat's. He couldn't imagine her enjoying a cozy gossip or giggling with a group of girls.

On the other hand, he wouldn't have been the least surprised if she had come sauntering up at the last minute, knowing he'd been getting angrier and angrier with every passing second, wearing her most arrogant expression and daring him to say anything.

But finally he realized that she wouldn't be there, and his anger continued to build in him. He kept it tightly controlled and forced himself to act as if he enjoyed the food he ate, when in truth he hardly knew what he put in his mouth. Damn her, why hadn't she come? He knew now that she wouldn't attend the dance either.

He also knew he wasn't going to let her ignore him.

Dee was nearby, for she had broken the hoe handle and had driven the wagon into town to purchase a new one, only to find the general store closed for the day.

She felt like a fool. Of course the Winches family, like everyone else, was at the picnic.

She shouldn't have expected anything else. The streets were deserted. Everyone in town seized the opportunity to relax and enjoy the day.

It would mean another trip to town to replace the hoe handle, but there was no help for it, and she was too practical to stand around fretting. Weeds could be pulled up by hand as well as chopped down by hoe. So she turned the wagon around and headed back home. The only other people in town, she noticed, were the two saloon girls, who of course weren't welcome at the town's social events. Both of the women sat outside on the sidewalk, something they would never have done if the town hadn't been temporarily deserted.

One of them, the redhead named Tillie, waved to her, and Dee waved back. "Good day," she said.

What must their lives be like? Dee wondered. They had to be painfully lonely, though they were almost never alone. Her own situation was the opposite, for she was often alone and enjoyed it.

"May I walk with you?"

An air of heavy content had settled over the crowd as the huge quantities of food mingled with the afternoon heat to make everyone drowsy. More than a few were actually dozing on the quilts brought from home. Olivia had been strolling aimlessly about, smiling at friends but not stopping to talk. Lucas had left soon after eating, and since then Kyle Bellamy seemed to have been everywhere she turned. He had been very polite, but she just couldn't warm to the man. His eyes were too bold, and he was too persistent. She had finally been driven to keep walking, for if she stopped he soon appeared at her side.

She was startled by the soft, deep voice behind her and turned to find the Mexican, Fronteras, watching her with a smile in his black eyes.
She hesitated, remembering that he worked for Bellamy, and that she didn't know him.
"Of course, if you don't want to, I understand," he said.
She was stricken as she realized he expected his invitation to be refused because he was a Mexican. Her sympathetic heart squeezed a little, and she found herself saying, "Of course I'll walk with you." At least Kyle wasn't likely to catch her as long as she kept moving.
He fell into step with her. For once her impeccable manners seemed to desert her, and she could find nothing to say. They had walked for perhaps a minute when he said, "My name is Luis Fronteras."
"I'm Olivia Millican." Silence fell again. Finally in desperation she blurted, "Are you Mexican?" Immediately color flooded her face. Of all the things she could have said, why had she said that? She wanted to bite her own tongue.
"I was born in Mexico," he said with a lazy smile, not the least bothered by the question. "I suppose that makes me Mexican, though I haven't been there since I was a child."
Indeed, he spoke just like everyone else she knew, without a trace of an accent. "Have you lived in the area for long?" She wouldn't necessarily have met him even if he had, for the banker's daughter didn't move in the same social circles as a cowhand.
"Do you mean in Colorado itself, or here around Prosper?"
"Both," she said, interested. It sounded as if he had traveled a great deal, and she had always wondered about how it would be to live a nomadic life.
"I've wandered through Colorado several times over the years. I spent several years down in New Mexico Territory, and some time up in Montana and further west, around the Snake River." He looked thoughtful. "I've been to California a time or two, so with all the crisscrossing I guess I've been in about every part of the country west of the Missouri."
"You can't have spent very long in any one place." He was tall, as tall as Lucas, she noted. It made her feel small to walk beside him, and protected. She darted a look at the big revolver in the holster tied down to his right thigh. He wore the weapon casually, as if he was never without it. Was he more of a gunman after all, rather than a cowhand?

"I've drifted a bit." For a while he had thought New Mexico would be his home, but that dream had died under a stallion's murderous hooves. He had been so empty after burying Celia, as if part of him had gone into the grave with her. After a long time he had realized that he still lived, but it wasn't the same. Life had a way of going on regardless; he didn't know when the mourning had ceased, only that it had. He remembered Celia now as a bright smile and almost piercing sweetness, but he couldn't quite form her features in his mind. Ten years had passed, and in those ten years he had traveled a lot of ground, held a lot of other women in his arms.

"I've often thought I'd like to travel," Olivia said, looking up at the sun through the shifting pattern of leaves overhead as light breezes stirred the limbs. "To not see the sun set in the same place two days in a row."

She could scarcely have said anything more unexpected. Luis looked down at the delicate oval face and tried to imagine her going days, weeks without bathing, with a thick layer of dirt and grime coating that white skin, and found it utterly ridiculous. And who would ever expect her to sleep rolled in a blanket on the ground?

"You wouldn't like it," he stated positively. "Insects, dirt, bad food, not enough water, and never able to get a sound sleep. That's what it's like to live on the trail."

Her lips moved into a smile. "Ah, but there are other ways to travel. Imagine going by train from city to city, letting the rails rock you to sleep at night. Perhaps I wouldn't want to do it forever, but I would like to try it."

There was a little of the adventuress in that ladylike soul, he thought with appreciation. He'd like to travel the country by train with her. They would have a sleeping compartment, and at night he would enter her and let the train rock them to completion, rather than to sleep.

Some children were chasing a ball, shrieking with laughter as they shoved and slipped across the field. Luis stopped, his hand on her arm, until the children tumbled safely by, then slowly they resumed their walk.

Olivia felt oddly at ease with him, and she couldn't really say why, because they had only just met and hadn't really talked of anything, but there was something about him that made her relax. Perhaps it was the small things, the way he adjusted his long stride to match hers, or the care he had taken not to let the children collide with her, but she felt safe. Of course, most men were courteous in those ways, but with this man it felt like more than mere courtesy, as if it were his very nature to protect her.

"Do you have family nearby?" she asked.
"I don't have any family at all, or at least none that I remember. I guess that's why I've drifted the way I have."
"And you've never been married?" She immediately said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't pry."
"I don't mind answering. I was planning on marriage once, but she died. That was ten years ago."
"Do you still love her?" Why couldn't she control her unruly tongue? She had no business at all asking him such personal questions, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. She felt her face heat at her rudeness, but he treated the question as easily as if it were about the weather.
"In a way." Thoughtfully he continued, "Celia was a wonderful person, truly worth loving, and I still love the person she was. But I'm not still in love with her, if you understand the difference."
"Yes, I do." Olivia was astonished at the relief she felt.
They came to a small stream and walked along it until they reached a log that had been placed across it. Olivia looked back at the picnic, blinking in surprise at how far they were from the others. Only a few people were visible from where they were, most of the townsfolk hidden by trees and brush and the curve of the meadow.
"Perhaps we should go back," she said a little nervously.
Luis stepped up on the log and held his hand out to her. "And perhaps we shouldn't. The explorers would have taken forever if they had never ventured out of the sight of the crowd."
She bit her lip, then cautiously placed her hand in his and let him help her up onto the log. She couldn't believe she was doing this. Olivia Millican had never done anything as outrageous as wandering off with a strange man; but then, she thought a little rebelliously, Olivia Millican had always longed to travel. Perhaps it was time to start paying attention to the secret Olivia. After all, she felt perfectly safe with Luis.
The log rolled unsteadily as they made their way across it, but fortunately they needed only a few steps to cross, and then Luis was clasping her waist in his strong hands and lifting her the rest of the way. She felt as if they had crossed a huge obstacle to their explorations, rather than a small stream. She didn't think she had ever been in this area before.
They walked beneath the trees, and Luis pointed out different kinds of birds to her. She was enthralled, for she had lived all of her life in towns, and the

limit ill of her knowledge about birds was that she could tell a robin from a crow. Behind them the sounds of the picnic faded completely away, and she could hear only the birds and the wind rustling in the trees, their quiet steps, and their voices. He was holding her hand, his strong fingers wrapped securely around hers, the heat and roughness strangely reassuring. She ought not to let him hold her hand, she thought, but she didn't do anything to stop him. They should return to the picnic. She said nothing.

They were as alone as if miles from town, wandering deeper and deeper into the forest. She wondered if her parents were worried but knew they would simply think she was with friends.

The rich smell of the forest satisfied something deep inside her. The contentment shone out of her face as she looked up at him with a luminous smile, and without thought Luis reacted to that sweet femininity, pulling her into his arms and bending to her mouth.

Instinctively he kept the contact light, feeling the softness of her lips and letting her respond at her own rate. Olivia did so by degrees, beguiled by the tenderness of the touch and the hard warmth of his body. Her forearms, which had been resting on his chest while she subconsciously decided if she should push him away or not, slid up, and her hands laced around his neck as her body made its own decision. It felt so good to be held by him like that, so she snuggled closer. His taste was intriguing, so she instinctively parted her lips to taste him more, and that was all the encouragement Luis needed. He put his hand on the back of her head and held her while he deepened the kiss, first gliding his tongue over her lips, then slipping it inside when she didn't protest. He felt the little start of surprise she gave, but it was followed immediately by sweet yielding.

Olivia was dizzy from the pleasure of kissing him. She had been kissed a few times before—she was, after all, twenty-five years old—but no one else had ever kissed her with an open mouth, inviting her to part her own lips. She shivered with delight at the sensation of his tongue first touching lightly, then moving deep inside her mouth. She jerked at the unexpected invasion, expecting it to be awful, but the swift rise of intense, heated pleasure instead had her pressing closer to him.

"You're so sweet," Luis murmured against her mouth as he slanted his head and returned for more of those hungry, invading kisses.

She had never felt passion before, never suspected that any man could make her feel that way. She had never before let any man hold her fully against

him, her breasts crushed into his chest. It felt wonderful, she thought dimly. Her breasts ached, and that hard pressure seemed to ease them. Another ache was growing in her, deep in her belly, and she couldn't understand it or find ease for it.

He raised his head, staring down into her dazed blue eyes. His own eyes were hot with need. He was breathing hard, but so was she, her soft breasts heaving. Luis recognized all the signs of an aroused woman, but he also plainly saw the innocent bewilderment behind the passion.

He hadn't brought her out here for this, he told himself. He had watched her for a long time, noticed how she kept trying to evade Bellamy, and had impulsively asked her to walk with him. But now they were alone, and he hadn't been able to resist that sweet mouth.

He could have her now. He could lower her to the moss-covered ground and have her skirt up before she fully comprehended what she was doing. As inexperienced as she was, she wouldn't have an inkling how to control her own desires. But a hasty seduction would likely be the only time he would ever have her, he knew women well enough to know that afterward she would go to any lengths to avoid him. That wasn't what he wanted. She was so sweet he wanted to lose himself in her time and again, and the only way to do that was to be patient and truly win her.

He realized all of that but couldn't bring himself to let her go without tasting even more of her. He began kissing her again, tightening his arms around her and positioning his hardness against her soft mound. He felt the gasp she gave, took it into his mouth, and kissed her beyond her alarm. Slowly he sank down to his knees, taking her with him.

Boldly he put his hand on her breast, squeezing it through the cloth, but that wasn't enough. He wanted to feel her warm, naked flesh. Olivia arched away from the touch, her eyes flying open.

"Don't be frightened," he crooned, lulling her with more kisses, stroking her breast and ribs.

"You—you shouldn't do that."

"This is part of making love. Does it feel good?" Some women found it painful rather than pleasurable, so he was always careful to ask.

"Y-yes," she stammered. "But that isn't the point."

"What is the point, then?" He continued kneading her breast, and he found her tight little nipple with his thumb. She gasped again as he rubbed it, and hot color tinted her cheeks.

"That—that we shouldn't be doing this." She closed her eyes, involuntarily concentrating on the wonderful sensations.
"Do you want me to stop?"
"No," she moaned. Then her nails dug into his shoulders. "Yes. We have to."
"Not quite yet," he whispered, and he slipped his hand inside her bodice. Olivia gave a pleasured cry at the searing heat of his palm on her naked breast. Her nipple was very hard, thrusting eagerly forward. Swiftly he opened her dress so that both breasts were bare, then bent her back over his arm and took one of the succulent little buds into his mouth, circling it with his tongue before pulling at it with a hard sucking motion.
She shook and shuddered, straining against him, soft little cries coming from her open mouth. The ache low in her body had grown beyond her control, and she writhed with it, her hips moving, asking for something she couldn't identify. Luis felt the movement and knew exactly what she needed, but now wasn't the time. He forced himself to be content with teaching her just part of the pleasure he could give her.
Her breasts were small and milky white, the nipples pink and delicate. She quivered every time he rubbed them, luring him to complete what he had started. It took all of his willpower to resist, to bring her down gently by pulling the edges of her dress together again and holding her close, kissing her and murmuring to her, telling her how much he wanted her and how he ached, knowing it would make her feel better if she knew that he wasn't unaffected by this.
Still, her pale face flamed with embarrassment when her senses returned. She pushed his hands away and began fumbling with her dress, trying to restore it to decency.
"Don't be ashamed," he said. "You're beautiful."
"How can I not be ashamed?" she asked in a strangled voice. "You're a stranger, and I've let you—" She broke off, unable to put into words the depth of her disgrace.
"We aren't strangers now," he said in a quiet voice. "Olivia, look at me, darling."
She shook her head, so he caught her chin and firmly tilted it upward. "Do you think I can't respect you or I wouldn't have touched you like that?"
The distress in her eyes was his answer. He leaned forward and gently kissed her. "I touched you, darling, because I want you so much I couldn't help myself. I stopped because I do respect you and want to see you again."

She surged to her feet, her face red. "Oh, no!" she cried involuntarily.
He caught her hands when she would have run from him. "Because you think this will happen again?"
Olivia could barely stand still, so great was her distress. Tears swam in her eyes. "We must never—"
"Don't expect me to stay away from you, because I can't. And I'll kiss you again every chance I get.
Eventually we'll make love, Olivia—yes, we will," he said sternly when she began shaking her head. "Forget that I'm just a drifter and you're the banker's daughter, and remember how it felt with my mouth on you, because it will be much better than that, darling. Much better."

Chapter 8

Dee was drawing a bucket of water when Lucas rode up that afternoon. Her heart slammed against her breastbone at the sight of him; it had been over a week since she had seen him, and it was alarming how much she had missed his high-handedness. The battles with him made her feel more alive than she ever had before because she could be herself while she was fighting him, and nothing she said would shock him.
He swung down from the horse and looped the reins around the rail. "I told you I'd come after you," he said grimly, walking toward her.
Dee hefted the bucket of water with a warning glint in her eyes. "And I told you I wouldn't go to the picnic. I have my reasons, and I'm not going to ruin things just to satisfy one of your whims."
His eyes glittered with an unholy blue light, and he kept on coming. "I've been wet before," he said.
Maybe the water wasn't much of a deterrent, but the bucket was heavy. Dee swung it at his head, soaking both of them as the water sloshed out. He ducked, and she quickly shifted position, drawing back for another swing.
"You leave me alone," she warned.
"There's no way in hell," he retorted, and he grabbed for her.
Dee ducked, and the wooden bucket caught him on the shoulder. He stopped, swearing while he rubbed the place she had hit. Those blue eyes narrowed on her. "You'd better knock me out this time," he said, and he lunged.

She took him at his word and tried her best to knock him in the head, but this time he didn't let the heavy bucket stop him. It banged against his back as he dived under her swing, and before she could dodge away he jammed his broad shoulder into her midsection, then lifted her. He straightened with her dangling over his shoulder and strode purposefully toward the house.
Furiously she discovered that she was helpless in that position. Her kicking legs were anchored by his left arm, and the only target she had for her fists were his legs and buttocks. Since it was the only thing she could do, she bit him.
He roared with mingled pain and rage and slapped her bottom with all his strength, which was considerable. Dee cried out at the burning impact, then tried to bite him again. He twisted, dumping her off of his shoulder onto the back stoop, then immediately grabbed the back of her collar and used it to drag her into the house.
As soon as he released her she jumped to her feet and sprang at him. "You little bitch," he said admiringly, and he laughed as he evaded her fists, taking hold of her arms and instead forcing her back against the wall.
Dee fought with the intent to win, and that meant using whatever means she could. She was severely hampered by the way he held her arms, so she resorted to kicking, trying for his crotch. His laughter stopped abruptly when her foot landed on his thigh, far too close for comfort, and he solved the problem by crushing her up against the wall with his body.
"Now fight me," he panted.
She tried, twisting and heaving, but with the wall behind her and his heavy body pressing her from the front she had no room to do anything more. She kicked, and he used the moment of motion to force his legs inside hers. With another quick move he had her lifted off her feet, his muscled thighs holding hers apart while he ground his pelvis against her.
She stopped fighting, because it was useless and would only increase the heavy pressure of his erection between her legs. She leaned her head back against the wall, panting. "Damn you, let me go."
Instead he lifted her higher and hungrily closed his mouth over her breast. The wet heat penetrated her layers of clothing, and she felt her nipple tighten, pebbling under the onslaught of his tongue. Desire mingled sharply with anger until she wondered if they weren't the same thing after all.
He released her arms so he could pull at her blouse, and without that support her weight dragged downward, pressing her even harder against his

groin. A heavy surge of pure need shook her, making her cry out, and she clenched her hands in his hair rather than using her new freedom to fight him off. Her blouse ripped under his savage hands, then his fingers locked in the top of her shift and jerked, subjecting it to the same fate. He cupped her naked breasts in his hands and pushed them together, his beard scraping her soft skin as he sucked at first one breast and then the other.

She twisted, crying out again. Lucas drank in the sound, roughly kissing her while he continued massaging her breasts. There was no stopping this time; he had to have her, had to satisfy the burning, untamed hunger in both of them. He worked his hand under her skirt and untied her drawers, dragging them down over her buttocks.

Dee stilled as she felt her underwear slipping down; her head turned away, and her eyes closed. She had been totally naked in front of him before but had not felt so bare as she did now, so vulnerable. He moved back a little from her and let her legs come together, and the cotton drawers slithered down her legs to pool around her ankles. "Step out of them," he whispered, and mindlessly she did.

The heavy weight of his body returned to lie against her, holding her to the wall. His hands were still under her skirt, on her naked flesh, kneading her buttocks and stroking her thighs, and finally covering her mound.

She held her breath, not even daring to breathe in her agony of anticipation and need. His hand moved slowly, one long finger sliding down into the slit of her soft folds. The lash of pleasure was almost cruel, and so strong that she bucked in his arms. He held her, that one finger moving mercilessly back and forth. He sank it a little way into her, and she almost screamed from the shock, yet her legs opened wider to allow him to do whatever he wanted. She squirmed, her nails digging into his shoulders as his wet finger returned to find the small nub at the top of her sex and roll it back and forth, this time shattering her control and making her scream.

"God, you're beautiful," he muttered, watching her skin flush with desire. She was unutterably wild and glorious, with her head tilted back and her bare breasts heaving from the force of her breathing. She had blazed up like wildfire, burning beyond her control, just as he had known she would.

She was wet silk between her legs, so soft and hot he thought he might explode just touching her. He held her securely and eased his finger into her again, probing deeper, using his thumb to rub her and keep her hot so she wouldn't object to his penetration. She jerked, whimpering, and her internal

muscles tightened on his finger to hold it so snugly he almost groaned aloud, thinking how tight she would be on his shaft. He couldn't enter her very far before he met the surprisingly firm resistance of her maidenhead, and he knew that this initial act wouldn't be very easy for either of them. His hand had brought her close to orgasm, and she squirmed wildly against him, seeking release from the terrible, exquisite tension. "Easy, easy," Lucas whispered against her mouth as he pushed his thigh between her legs, shoving it high and hard against her.

The heat of her burned him even through his pants. "Let me show you how."

He put both hands on her hips and began rocking her against his thigh. She shuddered and moaned and couldn't stop, the low gasping sounds growing louder as the aching need intensified. The hard thigh between her legs both eased the ache and made it worse, so that she didn't know what to do. She began sobbing and beat at him with her fists, but he merely pushed her higher so that her toes were off the ground and she forked his leg. His hard hands kept her hips moving in that maddening rhythm, and she couldn't take it any longer, she couldn't, until it felt as if every muscle in her lower body clamped down and convulsed and her senses exploded in a storm of sensation. The great waves of ecstasy washed over her one after the other and finally passed to leave her as weak as a kitten, barely coherent and limp in his hands.

Lucas lowered her to the floor and stretched her out, his face hard with his own passion as he tore his pants open. If he took the time to carry her into the bedroom she might recover enough to begin fighting him again, and he had to be inside of her or go mad. Nothing was easy with Dee, and certainly not her denouement; having tested the strength of her maidenhead, he knew it would hurt her, and Dee didn't take kindly to being hurt.

He shoved her skirt to her waist and spread her legs, then settled between them. She made a low sound deep in her throat, and her slim legs came up to clasp his hips. Lucas set his mouth on hers, feeling the sleepy parting of her lips and the slow glide of her arms around his neck. He drank in the sweetness of her response even as he reached down and guided his shaft to the small, soft opening and pushed inside. He did it with a strong, even stroke, not pausing at the internal resistance but not being rough with her either. He could almost feel the shock reverberate through her body as it absorbed his penetration, the virginal walls tightening about him as if to

prevent him from going deeper, and it felt even better than he had imagined. She was hot and wet and impossibly tight, the sensation racing along his nerves.

Then she screamed. It was a sound of mingled pain and fury, and just what he had expected. Some women would lie docile beneath a dominating man, but not Dee. She exploded into movement, her entire body heaving and bucking in an effort to dislodge him from inside her. Everything about it maddened her: the burning pain as he forced his way into her, his weight as he held her down, the very penetration of her body. She couldn't accept it; she mindlessly struggled against that domination, against the invasion of herself.

Lucas held her down with all of his weight and the iron strength of his arms and legs, letting her fight it out until she became accustomed to his length inside her. Her fierce struggle moved her on him almost as if he were thrusting, and he ground his teeth as he held himself as still as possible. Sweat sheened his skin as he waited for her to tire, for the pain to lessen, for her to begin to feel the pleasure of a man's fullness stretching her and probing deep. She was naturally voluptuous, and he had already shown her the heights of physical enjoyment; she wouldn't be able to deny herself for long. He hoped.

That point came gradually. She was already tired from both their previous struggle and her climax; he could feel her muscles relax, against her will, for she would almost immediately tighten them for renewed rejection, but the pauses between struggles grew longer until the struggles finally ceased. She lay still beneath him, breathing hard, her eyes closed against the naked triumph in his.

He kissed her forehead and smoothed the tangle of hair back from her face. "Is it still hurting?" he murmured against her temple.

She moved restlessly, and her hands settled on his sides as if she couldn't decide whether to embrace him or push him away. "Yes. I don't like it." Then honesty compelled her to add, "But it doesn't hurt as much as it did at first."

"Just lie still for a little longer, sweetheart. If it still hurts then, I'll stop."

She was silent, and her breath continued to slow. Lucas shifted against her, luxuriating in the feel of her enveloping him. Sweat trickled down his back. "Damn you, you knew it would be like this, didn't you?" Experimentally she flexed her inner muscles around the burning shaft that had invaded her,

relaxing a bit when it didn't result in pain.
Lucas tensed and groaned. "Jesus. Sweetheart, please, don't move."
"You're crushing me," she said in a low voice. "Couldn't you at least have put me on the bed?"
"We'll get to the bed," he promised, brushing her lips with his. For now, he thought, the floor was just fine.
She opened her eyes. Her gaze was solemn and questioning. "What you made me feel before—doing this will make me feel the same?"
"If I do it right. If you want me enough."
She gave a little laugh and lifted her knees alongside his hips. "Oh, I want you."
"Enough?"
She knew what he was asking, and her somber green eyes met his intense blue ones. "Yes. Enough."
He moved slowly, thrusting inward until his entire length stretched her. Dee gasped, her body arching upward, and just as slowly he withdrew. "You don't want me to stop?" he asked, just to make sure.
Her hands clutched at his sides. "No." Her voice sounded strangled. "Oh, no."
"I don't know if I can hold back long enough to satisfy you this time," he said with grim honesty as he began moving in a strong rhythm.
For answer she locked her strong legs around his hips and lifted herself up to him, offering her body, as generous as he had been in first taking care of her. That was all it took. He began moving into her with a powerful rhythm, and she accepted him, welcomed him. With a stifled shout he went rigid, then shuddered violently and convulsed with the force of his seed spurting from his body.
An hour later they lay naked in the bed, exhausted and almost asleep. Scarcely had they recovered from the first lovemaking than he had grown erect once again, and that time he had carried her to the bed and finished stripping their clothes off. She had found that making love could be a slow tangle of bodies, hot and languorous, that carried them to the same conclusion.
He had drawn it out, building her arousal so high that when the crest finally broke she had been wild with it, so that she had inevitably carried him to the same heights. He had made love to his share of women, but none of them had ever engrossed him the way Dee did. He was fascinated by the changes

passion wrought in her body, from the hardening of her nipples to the moistening of her sweet little female channel. She was a she-cat in bed as well as out, giving just as fiercely as she took. He had known making love to her would be a challenge, but he hadn't known it would be both tiring and exhilarating, like riding and conquering a tidal wave until it subsided into gentle breakers on a beach.

He felt a cold twinge of panic as he lay there. Making love to anyone else after having had Dee would be like giving up the bite of whiskey for the sedative effects of heated milk. Because he didn't want to think she had ruined him for anyone else he willed the idea and the panic away, but it kept returning.

There was no way he could be satisfied with Olivia now. Before meeting Dee he had been certain in his mind that Olivia was the wife he wanted, a gently bred woman who knew how to hostess a large dinner, who would be at ease with politicians and millionaires. He had planned to acquire her just as he had planned to acquire more land, but in one short afternoon those plans had been turned to ashes. Thank God he had held back and hadn't actually asked Olivia to marry him; she deserved a lot more than a husband who couldn't get another woman out of his mind.

He thought of Denver and the political maze he would have to negotiate to build the power base necessary to influence decisions the way he wanted. There would be receptions and dinners, endless maneuvering taking place with the socializing. He was willing to do that to build the Double C into an empire, maybe to pave the way for one of his own sons to be governor, but he had pictured Olivia at his side during the endless social functions, her cool, polished manner perfect for the situation.

Now when he brought up the image he found that the woman didn't have a face. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't imagine Dee there. He couldn't see her catering to the comfort of a self-important politician; she would be more likely to skewer him with that rapier tongue of hers. No, she didn't fit in at all with the life he had planned for himself, even supposing she would be willing to try, which she wasn't. She had made it plenty clear that she liked her life the way it was, thank you, without anyone to tell her what to do. Sometimes—hell, most of the time—he wanted to grab her and shake some sense into her, but at the same time he grudgingly gave her the respect she deserved. It took a strong-willed woman to accomplish what she had, and she wasn't likely to submit that will to any man's.

So where did that leave him? Right where he was, he thought, and he didn't like the idea. He had learned not to make assumptions where Dee was concerned. Just because he had made love to her twice didn't mean she would regard him as her lover, that she wouldn't fight him next time. And even if she didn't put up a fight about that, she would still resist with every stubborn inch of her against allowing him into any part of her life beyond that.

But for now she was sleeping in his arms, and he was exhausted from a physical satisfaction that went bone deep. He held her closer, made utterly content by the feel of her warm, sleek body lying naked against him, and he drifted off to sleep himself.

The sun was going down when Dee woke. For a moment she was totally disoriented, without any sense of what time or what day it was. She never slept during the day, but from the angle of the sun she knew it wasn't dawn. She was too groggy to make sense of it until she woke up enough to realize that she wasn't alone in the bed. That in itself was startling, for she had never before shared her bed with anyone, but then full reality hit her with stunning force. She was in bed with Lucas, and they were both naked because he had made love to her.

She didn't feel ashamed; her nature was too elemental for her not to be aware of the naturalness of the act. But she did feel a strong need to retrench her position, to reestablish herself as an individual after the mindless giving of her body. It was as if he had taken over control of her when he thrust his thick shaft inside her. She had fought against the natural domination of it even as her traitorous flesh had begun shivering with delight around him.

She shifted cautiously, feeling the unaccustomed soreness in her thighs and loins, and the movement made her aware of the stickiness between her legs. Another wave of reality hit her full in the face. Twice Lucas had emptied his seed deep inside her. He might have made her pregnant.

As women had done for thousands of years, she counted the days until her next monthly flow. It would be over two weeks until she knew, two weeks of fear and worry, because her life would be impossible if she were to have a baby.

Lucas pulled her closer and lazily cupped her breast, his big hand possessive. She hadn't realized he was awake until he did so, and she

quickly looked up but immediately lowered her gaze from the hard, gleaming triumph in his eyes.
"What are you thinking?" he asked, his voice a deep, lazy rumble against her hair.
"That we can't do this anymore." She looked up at him again, her expression a little haunted.
That look on her face stilled his automatic rise of anger. "Why not, sweetheart? You liked it, didn't you?" He stroked her hair back from her face.
"You know I did," she said steadily. "But now I might have a baby."
He paused, a slight frown gathering his brows. A baby. In the savage delight of possession he hadn't given a thought to the possible consequences.
"When will you know?"
"About two weeks. A little more."
He stroked her breast, enthralled by the satiny texture of it. She was his now, damn it, and he wasn't going to give her up. "There are ways to keep you from getting pregnant."
"I know," she said tartly. "All I have to do is stay away from you."
He smiled and kissed her, his mouth rough on hers. "Other than that. I'll get a sponge for you."
She was instantly curious. "What do you mean? How can a sponge keep me from having a baby?"
"I don't know how it works, I just know it does. It's just a little sponge, and you soak it in vinegar and put it up inside you."
Her cheeks flamed, and she jerked upright, away from his exploring hands. He laughed and grabbed for her, wrestling her back down on the bed. She wasn't fighting in earnest, only huffy and embarrassed by the notion, and he grinned as he subdued her.
"How did you learn about anything like that?" she snapped, glaring at him. "It's a whore's trick, isn't it?"
"I imagine whores would know about it, but other women use it, too." He didn't answer her question about how he knew about it. He'd had some wild times in New Orleans and other places, but she didn't need to know about them.
Dee turned her head away from him because she knew full well he had learned about such a thing from other women. Part of her was relieved that there was a solution, but part of her, like a child, wanted to retreat to the

way things had been before this afternoon, when she had been unaware of the way her body could respond to his, before she had felt his hard length plunging into her. Things had changed, and she couldn't change them back. The question, of course, was if she really wanted to change them. She felt as if she had leapt headlong over a cliff in the dark. It was frightening, taking her to places she hadn't known before. If she truly wished the changes undone she would have to wish Lucas out of her life, wish he had never ridden up to her door, and she couldn't do that. As infuriating as he was, as determined to have his way, he made her feel more than she had ever imagined possible.

She was very much afraid she had fallen in love with him.

Chapter 9

Olivia had to force herself to attend the dance that night. Lucas was absent, and she knew people were whispering about it, but his absence was the only bit of relief she could find. Because of their strange talk about Dee, Olivia suspected he had gone out to the farm. She mentally crossed her fingers, for if Dee were ever to marry it would have to be to a man like Lucas, someone as strong as she was. Dee would totally cow most men; she could never be happy with someone who didn't match her in strength. Olivia wondered if perhaps she was wishing away her own last chance to be married, but at least she wouldn't be faced with the nerve-racking decision of whether or not to accept Lucas if he proposed. Now it looked as if he wouldn't, and she was glad.

But Lucas wasn't her real concern. All she could think about was what had happened in the woods. She didn't know how she had gotten through the day. Her nerves felt so frayed she thought she would scream if she had to smile at one more person. She couldn't look her mother in the face. Honora had raised her to be a good, decent woman, yet at the first opportunity she had let a strange man lead her into the woods and take liberties with her. Not just kisses; she had once supposed a kiss to be a daring thing, but now she knew the respectful pecks on the lips she had received before had been as chaste as a brother's. She had not only accepted Luis's tongue into her mouth, she had delighted in it, actually participated. No wonder he had thought he could touch her breasts! He must suppose her to be as immoral as the saloon girls, for she certainly hadn't conducted herself as a lady ought.

She could barely attend to any of the conversation around her, so she became even quieter than usual, her face pale with distress. Everyone was having such a good time that no one noticed, except for Luis, standing on the edge of the crowd, watching her.

It so unnerved her that when Kyle Bellamy approached and asked her to dance Olivia had placed her hand in his before she realized what she was doing.

His hand on her waist drew her closer to him than she wished to be; after this afternoon she was acutely aware of a man's body. She wondered with sudden horror if Luis had bragged to his boss about his success with her. Would that be why Kyle assumed he could hold her so close?

She stiffened in his arms. "Mr. Bellamy, please."
"I'll please you in any way I can."
She couldn't decide if the remark was suggestive or merely flirtatious, and at the moment she didn't care. "You're holding me far too close."
He immediately loosened his grip and let her move back. "I apologize," he murmured, but his smile made her suspect he wasn't sorry at all.
Kyle danced well, his movements strong and sure. Under any other circumstances she might have put aside her instinctive uneasiness about him and enjoyed the dance, but tonight it was impossible. She could only pray it would be over soon.
"Would you like to walk outside with me?" he asked. "It's a pleasant night, and the air is stuffy in here. I confess I've been wanting a chance to talk to you, to get to know you better."
"Thank you for the offer, Mr. Bellamy, but I'm tired from this afternoon and would rather sit in here."
"Then perhaps I may sit with you?"
She didn't know what to say. She couldn't be rude to the man, but she had no desire at all for his company.
"I plan to go home soon," she said, desperately improvising.
"Then may I sit with you until then?"
God, he was persistent! What else could she do but say yes?
When they were sitting down he kept brushing his leg against hers, and Olivia twisted a bit to the side to prevent the contact.
"I'd like to call on you tomorrow," he told her.
Her guilty conscience made her feel certain now that Luis had told him, and he obviously expected to enjoy the same liberties! She could think of only one excuse, and she hastily used it. "I don't think that would be proper, Mr. Bellamy. I have an—an unspoken agreement with Mr. Cochran. I'm sure you understand."
"If it's unspoken, then I assume you're still a free woman," Kyle said boldly. "And I don't see Cochran here tonight."
"No. He—he had business elsewhere."
"A man who would desert a lovely woman like you doesn't deserve her."
Luis watched the byplay from across the room and could easily imagine the conversation he couldn't hear. He didn't like the way Bellamy was leaning so close to Olivia, and from the frozen expression on her face she didn't care for it either but didn't know how to stop him.

Olivia glanced in his direction and froze. She couldn't help looking his way, and every time she did she found him watching her. Her distress grew, because she imagined his black eyes held disdain. After all, what else could he think after the way she had behaved?

What Luis was thinking was that he should have known she would suffer under a massive load of guilt, and he ached to comfort her. Poor darling, she really had no idea about the physical side of life. Olivia had been raised too conventionally and was herself too ladylike by nature for it to be any other way. She didn't even know how to rid herself of Bellamy's unwanted attentions.

Luis looked around, and his gaze settled on two of the Bar B's ranch hands, men he knew to be hot-tempered. They were almost always contesting each other in one thing or another, and tonight was no exception. The object of their competition tonight was a pretty little farm girl whose face was flushed with pleasure at so much male attention.

Luis eased his way through the crowd. Both men held drinks in their hands, supposedly punch, but he knew the drink was well laced with whiskey. In the jostling crowd it was easy to reach out and bump one man's arm enough to make him spill the contents of the cup all over the farm girl's best dress. He quickly moved back out of the way, blending into the crowd and listening to the growing sounds of altercation he left behind him. The man who had spilled his punch was accusing the other of deliberately pushing his arm. The disagreement erupted into a full-scale fistfight before he could make his way back across the room.

Kyle scowled with annoyance when he saw that the combatants were two of his own men. He said something to Olivia and left his seat, swiftly crossing the room. It wouldn't do his standing in the community any good if his men were so rowdy, and Luis knew that Bellamy was very proud of his respectability.

Luis looked at Olivia's pinched expression and silently berated himself. He had almost pushed too hard that afternoon, so now she was remembering her shame rather than the pleasure of his kisses. It would take all of his charm to repair the damage.

He made his way through the crowd toward her. She saw him before he could reach her and immediately spun away, retreating from him.

She was afraid of him! Luis was thunderstruck at the realization. No woman had ever before feared him, so why did it have to be this particular woman

who ran from him, this woman whom he wanted as he had never before wanted anyone?
Her action angered him. He was a man, instinctive and possessive, and he intended to claim Olivia as his without examining the whys and wherefores of it. He increased his pace and caught up with her before she could reach the safety of her mother's side, stopping her by the simple means of putting his boot down on her skirts. She jerked to a halt and threw him a pleading look over her shoulder, but she had the choice of either staying where she was or having her skirt torn off.
"Dance with me," he said, only for her ears. "Please."
"No!" She gasped the refusal. She was so distraught that she couldn't be in his arms again without somehow betraying herself.
"Then walk outside with me."
"No!" This time the refusal was tinged with horror. Another invitation to do something improper! How could he ask her to walk with him again, after what had happened that afternoon? But that was probably the reason he asked, she thought bitterly. He expected to find her as easy again.
Luis put his strong hand on her arm and turned her. "Go outside, Olivia. Now."
She hadn't heard that hard, commanding tone from him before, and it silenced her. Numbly she let him guide her out of the meeting hall where they always held the annual dance, and down the steps.
The cool air washed over her hot face as he led her across the street and into the shadow of a huge tree.
She could still hear the music and the laughter, the cacophony of conversation from a multitude of throats at once, but it was all muted and far away now, overlain by the sounds of the night.
"What do you want?" she whispered almost fearfully. She tried to free her arm, but he tightened his grip.
"I want you to stop looking as if you expect to be stoned to death," he retorted angrily.
Olivia's spine stiffened at his tone. She wasn't given to temper, but that didn't mean she wouldn't stand up for herself if she felt under unjust attack.
"I'll look any way I please," she retorted, embarrassed that the best she could think of was such a childish reply. She was at a disadvantage, having had little experience with arguing.

Apparently he noticed it, too, for his grasp eased, and a faint smile teased the corners of his mouth. "Remind me someday to teach you how to fight," he said. "What you should have said was something that would make me feel guilty, too."
She bit her lip, immediately reminded of her own lack of decorum. "Why should I?" she asked, the words troubled. "What happened was my fault. I never should have gone with you."
"Ah, darling." He laughed softly and enfolded her hand, carrying it to his mouth. He delicately licked one of her knuckles, and she trembled. "Don't take all the blame on yourself when my shoulders are so much broader. I at least knew what I was doing."
"I'm not a child, Mr. Fronteras." She was irritated that he evidently thought her so stupid she hadn't been aware of the inappropriateness of going off alone with him. "Of course I knew what I was doing."
He still looked amused. "Did you? I don't think so. If you'd had any experience at all, you wouldn't be so upset now. Has anyone else ever kissed you?"
She knotted her fists. "Of course," she said indignantly.
"Really? How?" He sounded skeptical. "Closed-mouth pecks that didn't even give you a taste?"
Abruptly she realized the absurdity of what she was doing, trying to convince him of experience she didn't have when she had been worried that he would think exactly that of her. She jammed her fingers against her mouth to stifle her laughter, and Luis grinned, too.
"That's better," he said. He gently caressed her cheek. "What happened today is what happens between two people who are attracted to each other. It isn't shameful, though it certainly should always be private. Do you think your friends haven't felt a man's touch on their breasts? I assure you that most of them have."
"Most of my friends are married," she pointed out. "I assume that married people are—are more free with each other," she finished carefully. She could feel her face heating at his bluntness.
"Some more than others," Luis drawled, thinking of the poor souls who probably did no more than ruck up their nightshirts and finish within five minutes. Poor men? Poor ladies! "But you can bet that they made love at least a little even before they married."
"I don't think so," she said, disconcerted at the idea.

A couple of cowboys left the meeting hall just then, their joking voices loud in the still night air. Luis put his arm around her waist and drew her to the other side of the tree, out of their sight. She felt the rough bark against her back and leaned thankfully against the sturdy support.
"Of course they did. It's so enjoyable, after all."
She was finding it difficult to keep the point of the argument in mind.
"Enjoyable or not, Mr. Fronteras—"
"Luis."
"—I should never have allowed you such liberties today, and I'm ashamed of myself for such behavior."
"Moralistic little darling," he said tenderly.
"I am not your darling! Please don't call me that."
"But you are. You just haven't admitted it yet."
She took a deep breath, trying to compose herself and reorder her thoughts.
"Our relationship is far too casual for me to permit such incidences between us, and I won't allow it to happen again—"
He put both hands on the tree, bridging her rib cage and effectively hemming her in. "Don't," he said quietly, interrupting her. "Don't make statements you'll then feel obliged to live up to."
"But I must," she replied just as quietly.
Luis drew a deep breath. He couldn't allow her to turn him away. It wasn't just the protectiveness she stirred in him, or the desire, it was the overwhelming need to have her for himself. He couldn't just seduce her; Olivia would consider herself "ruined" and would never marry, just to keep her sordid secret. She was sweet and honorable and deserved better.
He felt as if he were only slowly beginning to understand his own mind, but suddenly he knew what he wanted. He wanted Olivia, and he would do whatever it took to get her.
He leaned close to her. "No, there's no need. My intentions are honorable. There's nothing to fight against, unless you dislike me so much that you only want me to go away, and I don't think that's the case. Even if it were, I wouldn't go," he finished with iron determination.
Her breath caught. She tilted her head back against the tree, looking up at his lean face revealed by the moonlight spilling down through the gently shifting leaves. She was so stunned that she groped to order her thoughts. It was almost impossible to comprehend. He wanted to marry her? That surely was what he meant by "honorable intentions." Yet how could he? He

was a drifter, by his own admission. He had no home. Though she had dreamed of travel, there had always been an image of home in the back of her mind, the center to which she returned. "Home" wasn't her parents' house in those dreams, but a warm, welcoming home she had made with the man she loved. They would have children, so of course there had to be a home. How could she even consider marrying a man who couldn't provide that?

"Nothing to say?" he asked with a wry smile. "You don't love me yet, Olivia Millican, but you will. I won't give up until you do."

Then he leaned down and began kissing her, and her breath caught all over again, for if his kisses had been thrilling that afternoon, they were even more so now that she knew what to expect. She had the brief thought that she should resist, but she ignored it. She didn't want to resist, she didn't want to think about what she should or shouldn't do; she wanted to enjoy, to seize this moment of pure pleasure.

She found that having once traveled a road, it's difficult to keep your feet from turning down it again. His bold hand searched her breasts, burning her with his heat, and she couldn't find the inclination to refuse him. Instead her own hands stroked up his muscled back, kneading the hard flesh with delight as she learned the differences between his body and hers. She found his black hair thick and silky as she ran her fingers along the nape of his neck. He shivered a little, and her heart leapt at the knowledge that her touch excited him.

A thick groan broke from his throat, and he eased away from her, his breath coming loud and heavy. "Go back inside," he said, "or we'll do more than kiss, and this isn't the place for it. Tomorrow is Sunday, so I won't be working. Will you go for a ride with me?"

She couldn't think. What would she tell her parents? They wouldn't approve of her riding with anyone they knew nothing about, much less a Mexican drifter.

He seemed to realize all of that without her saying a word, and he smiled bitterly. "Of course not," he said, answering the question for her. "I understand. I should have thought before asking you such a question."

"Luis," she said hesitantly, "it isn't—" But it so obviously was that she broke off in midsentence.

"It is. But when you love me, it won't matter." He kissed her again, lingeringly, then caught her shoul-ders and turned her back toward the

meeting hall, toward music and lights and laughter. "Go on, go back, before your pretty dress gets all mussed up. But if you decide to go riding tomorrow, try the north road. I'll be riding there myself around two o'clock." He gave her a little push, and her steps carried her automatically back to the meeting hall. She stepped inside and was engulfed in warm air and noise. She was still dazed and couldn't concentrate, but the crushing burden of guilt seemed to have fallen away. She didn't know what to think. It seemed as if in a matter of a few hours the course of her entire life had been re-routed, and she didn't know where she was going.

How odd that she had felt despair at the thought of a marriage proposal from Lucas, who could give her everything in the way of material wealth, yet the thought of marrying Luis, who could give her nothing but adventure, made her feel shivery and excited, even frightened, but never despairing. Luis was right in saying that she didn't love him, for she barely knew him and was too cautious to plunge headlong into anything—wasn't she? Yet she hadn't denied him, hadn't turned him down flat as she was sure she should have. Instead she had let him kiss her and fondle her, after swearing to herself that it would never happen again. And she couldn't get his proposal out of her mind.

He hadn't actually proposed; he had just said that his intentions were honorable, a curiously formal phrase from a drifter.

She saw Kyle Bellamy making his way toward her, and she quickly reached Honora, who was flushed with pride at how well everything had gone during "her" year.

"I'm going to go home, Mother," she said quietly.

Instantly Honora blinked and frowned, switching her attention from the dance to her only chick. Olivia could almost feel the motherly concern being focused on her.

"Are you feeling ill, darling?"

"I have a headache, and the noise is making it worse." It was the most time-worn excuse in the world, but Olivia wasn't accustomed to lying to her mother and couldn't think of anything more original.

"I'll get your father to walk you home." But right before leaving in search of Wilson Honora gave her daughter such a look of sympathetic concern that Olivia sighed, knowing her mother was thinking the same thing everyone else was. It would be all over town tomorrow that she and Lucas had had a

fight, or something else that would explain why he wasn't at the dance and she was leaving early with a headache.
She would have to tell her parents that she had mistaken Lucas's intentions, that he was after all only a good friend. They would be disappointed, but she couldn't let them continue to look on Lucas as her suitor. Not tonight, though. She had far too much on her mind.
Wilson dutifully walked her home, and Olivia went straight upstairs to bed. She lay in the darkness and thought of all that had happened that day. She remembered the way Luis's mouth had closed over her tender breast, and she blushed, clasping her hands over the suddenly throbbing mounds. She should never have let him—
But she had.
She shouldn't go riding tomorrow, she thought. Whatever she did, she shouldn't go anywhere near the north road. She told herself that and knew she wouldn't listen to her own advice.

Chapter 10

The town was still quiet from the picnic and dance the day before when Lucas rode in the next afternoon. Church was already out, and people had gone to their homes to rest off the aftereffects. It being a Sunday, when few men could justify stopping by the saloon for a drink, the establishment was occupied only by a few cowhands who had no duties for the day.
Both of the saloon girls were sitting and talking with the drinkers, as that encouraged them to drink more. Tillie looked up and smiled her slow smile at Lucas, and he gave a little jerk of his head. Her eyebrows rose, then she murmured a few words to the cowboy whose table she had been gracing and excused herself.
When she had sashayed close enough Lucas said softly, "Let's go upstairs."
Tillie looked amused. "You still have woman trouble?"
"Upstairs," he repeated, not wanting to say anything where they could be overheard.
She walked in front of him, leading him up the narrow stairs. Lucas could feel eyes boring into his back and smiled wryly. If they only knew why he was there!

Tillie's room was small, most of the space taken up by the double bed, though there was a washbasin and a dresser crammed into one of the corners. It was surprisingly clean and sweet-smelling.
She sat down on the bed and crossed her elegant legs. "Do you want anything special?" she asked in that slow, warm voice, and despite himself Lucas couldn't help thinking that her "special" might be almost enough to kill a man.
"A favor," he said.
She laughed aloud. "Somehow I knew my luck wasn't running true today. Well, maybe another time. What can I do for you?"
"Do you have any of the little sponges that keep women from conceiving?"
Those enormous brown eyes twinkled at him, and he grinned back, at ease with the request. Tillie wouldn't ask questions and wouldn't gossip, and her amusement was without malice.
She got up and sauntered over to the dresser. "So your woman troubles are over. You didn't strike me as the kind of man who would let it go on too long anyway, so I'm not surprised." She hummed a little as she opened a door and extracted a handpainted ceramic box. "How many do you need?"
It was his turn to laugh. "I don't know. How many do I need? Isn't one enough?"
She giggled, a sound rich and musical. "Here, take three. You know—just in case."
He snorted as she put the three small round sponges in his hand, but the smile still played around his hard mouth.
"Just soak one in vinegar," she instructed. "I suppose you know what to do with it, because it's a sure bet your lucky woman doesn't."
Lucas shook his head in amusement at the thought of the fight he would probably have getting Dee to use these. Then again, he was always surprised by the battles she chose to fight and the ones she ignored, so it was possible she wouldn't say anything at all.
Tillie's dark eyes were suddenly serious. "You take care of that woman, Lucas Cochran," she said sternly. "It wouldn't do at all for folks to find out about you and her, not after all the trouble she's had from some of the men around here."
Lucas's head jerked up, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Tillie held up a placating hand. "Word won't get out from me," she said.

"How did you know?" His voice was silky smooth and deadly. "Did anyone see us?"
"Relax, no one knows but me. I just happen to know who wasn't at the picnic yesterday, and word got around about how you left early. She came into town yesterday morning, to the general store, but it was closed. I was sitting outside and saw her. She waved at me. I've seen her before, and she's never been snooty. She's a straightforward woman, with more grit than just about any two men put together."
"She does have grit," Lucas said.
"There's been lots of talk about you and the banker's daughter," Tillie said. She looked him up and down, then shook her head. "I never could see it. You need someone meaner than that, a woman who can stand up to you without blinking an eye."
Lucas smiled. "Tillie," he said, "you know too damn much about people."
"I've had a lot of time to study them."
He put the little sponges in his pocket. "How much do I owe you?"
"They're on the house. Next time I order some from New Orleans, I'll let you know so you can get a supply."
He leaned down and kissed that exquisite mouth, lazily taking his time about it because she was so damn beautiful. When he straightened she blinked and said, "My, my. I haven't been kissed like that since Charles Dupre—never mind. Are you sure the sponges are all you want?"
He cupped her chin and kissed her again. "I'm sure," he said. "I need to save my strength."
She gave a wonderful, lusty laugh. "I guess you do. This is going to just destroy my reputation, us up here laughing like jackasses and you going back downstairs within five minutes."
He grinned at her as he opened the door. "No, it'll be my reputation that's ruined if I couldn't last more than five minutes."
She fluttered her lashes at him as she passed by. "If I ever got my hands on you, you might not."
Lucas was in a good mood as he rode back to the Double C. The sponges in his pocket provoked a big temptation to swing east and visit Dee, but he resisted it. She would be too sore for making love again, and he wasn't all that certain of his self-control.
Thunder rumbled in the distance, underscoring his decision to go home. He looked upward but saw only deep blue sky. The storm clouds must still be

beyond the horizon, he thought. They needed a good rain, since the snowpacks on the mountains weren't as deep as they should have been, but he sure hoped he got to the ranch before the storm arrived.
Luis looked upward at the same rumble of thunder. Olivia kept her attention on the ground before her as her mare carefully picked her way over some rough ground. "I hope it rains and settles the dust," she said.
He hoped it rained for more basic reasons. It had been too long since they had had even a brief spring shower, and the water holes were getting a little low, especially since it was just May. But as much as the rain was needed, he hoped it held off for another couple of hours. He didn't want his time with Olivia cut short.
She had been distinctly nervous when he had ridden up beside her, so he had restricted himself to conversation and the quiet enjoyment of her company. She had slowly relaxed, and now the strain was gone from her face. As much as he wanted to hold her again, he wanted more for her to feel at ease with him. It was time for her to get to know him better. Besides, there were some things he wanted to know about her, too.
"Is there an understanding between you and Lucas Cochran?" he asked quietly, watching her face.
"No," she replied. "He's never spoken of marriage, and neither have I, though everyone just assumed that he would."
"Don't you want him to? He's a powerful man, and from what I hear he's going to be even bigger than he is now."
"I like Lucas, but he's just a friend." How good it felt to be able to say that! From the way he had acted the day before, she was certain he was fascinated with Dee. "If he had asked me, I don't know what I would have said."
"Because he's rich?"
"No. I know I've been raised with luxuries, but I don't think I've ever expected them as my due. But I'm twenty-five, and I'm afraid that if I don't marry soon, I never will, and then I'll never have my own family."
"I'm thirty-two," he said. "I've begun to think that I want to have a family, too."
She gave him a quick look and blushed.
"Why haven't you married before?" He quietly soothed his horse when the animal shied as a blossom blew in front of it. "I know you must have had offers."

"No. No one ever asked. Somehow I just never fell in love with anyone, and evidently no one fell in love with me either."
"I was serious about what I said. About my intentions."
"I know," she whispered. She sighed. "Why have you drifted?"
"It's always seemed the natural thing to do." He looked up at the sky again, but it was still clear. He wondered if he could explain it so she would understand. "I've always been good with a gun. I've never hired it out, but when a man is fast with a six-iron it tends to make most people uneasy around him. And sooner or later someone thinks he's faster and wants to prove it. No town wants to have a fast gun settle down there, because it draws other guns. For a while I worked for the Sarratt brothers down in New Mexico, and I could have stayed there, but then Celia died, and so did my reason for staying.
"After a while, moving on seems like the natural thing to do. It has its own lure, to see what's beyond that mountain range, then the next one, then the next one. Always a new place and new faces, and sometimes nothing but a huge empty world with me right in the middle of it, just me and the horse and the sky. I've gone weeks without seeing another human being. And sometimes, when I'm in a town, I miss that."
"But you hired on with Mr. Bellamy. Do you intend to stay?"
"I hired on to rest from the trail for a while and earn some money doing it. I've been here almost two months now, and so far I'm content. I like the town. It's the kind of quiet, sturdy town I like."
She noticed that he hadn't answered her question but didn't feel that she had the right to press him further. What would it take to induce him to settle down? she wondered. Marriage? He hadn't said so, and she would be foolish to assume that such was his intention, perhaps almost as foolish as she would be to consider marrying him at all.
But he fascinated her in a way no one else had ever done. She glanced at his dark, lean face, admiring his wonderfully chiseled features. There was an obvious aura of danger about him, but she never felt threatened. Instead, when his warm, dark gaze touched her, she felt infinitely admired and… safe, as if he would forever stand between her and anything that would harm her.
Thunder rumbled again, closer this time. He looked regretful. "We'd better turn back."

Common sense agreed with him, but she felt like shaking her fist at the sky. Why couldn't the rain have held off just another hour or so? The storm might even bypass them completely, but they couldn't depend on that.
Smiling at the disappointment on her face, Luis reined his horse closer to hers and leaned over to kiss her lingeringly. Her lips parted for him without hesitation, so sweetly that it was all he could do to break away. He might not have if his horse hadn't sidestepped nervously, away from such close contact with her mount.
One kiss would have to be enough, he thought, or they would likely get caught by the storm anyway. They reined the horses around and started back.
"I don't know when I'll get back to town," he said after a while, "but I'll see you when I do."
She started to ask him how he would contact her but kept silent when she realized how insulting the question would be, for it would imply that he wasn't good enough simply to come to her house and ask to see her. Yet weren't they going out of their way not to let anyone see them together precisely because they both knew her parents would object?
She should tell them, she thought, and let them know that she… what? Was considering marrying
Luis? Without knowing where or how they would live? Honora would make herself ill with worry. Her parents were indulgent rather than dictatorial, so she didn't fear they would forbid her to see Luis; she was twenty-five, not a giddy seventeen-year-old to be locked in her room. But it would upset them, and she didn't want that.
So it seemed as if she could either have them upset or continue to sneak around as if she were doing something wrong, and neither choice appealed to her. The only solution was to stop seeing Luis entirely, which she discarded at once as unacceptable. In one short day he had shattered the pall of gray desolation that had shrouded her for so long, and she felt wondrously alive, her heart pounding with excitement whenever she was with him.
She had always done exactly as a lady ought, living contentedly within the boundaries of convention. This was the only time she had ever stepped outside those boundaries, and she found it exhilarating. If she was condemned for it, then she would simply have to deal with it, for she found

that the need for his company was as compelling for her as drifting had been for him.

Dee looked up when she heard the patter of rain on the tin roof, the sound quickly increasing to a soporific drumming that drowned out all other sounds. With the rain came a chill, but she didn't want to light a fire, so she got a quilt from the bed and sat down in her big chair with it wrapped around her. The warmth of the quilt comforted her.

She had been reading, but the book no longer interested her. She laid her head back and closed her eyes, letting the rain-induced drowsiness wash over her.

Lucas hadn't been back today. She had been jittery all day long, expecting him to come riding up with that intense look in his eyes that she now knew to be desire. He was arrogant enough to expect her to lie down with him whenever he wanted her, but she hadn't made up her mind about the situation.

She loved him. Since she had unwillingly admitted to herself the source of her agitation whenever she was around him, she had analyzed the situation from every angle and accepted that there was no easy solution to it. By loving him she had made herself vulnerable, and she would eventually be hurt by it. He didn't love her, which was the only thing that would have made him equally vulnerable and kept their relationship balanced. Loving him hadn't blinded her to the truth: Lucas was a hard man, one who was ruthless in getting his own way. He wanted her physically, he even cared for her to some extent, but that wasn't at all the same thing as love.

It would be better for her if she stopped the relationship cold, but she didn't know if she could. Lucas wouldn't give up without a fight, and she doubted her own ability to resist him. She wanted him with a deep, primitive strength that frightened her, knowing as she did that it was beyond her control.

There was always the chance that her feelings would lessen over time, as she grew to know him better, but she didn't think so. His character would always challenge her, both infuriating and invigorating, but never boring. She had always been protected from love because she had never met a man whose will was as strong as hers until Lucas. He would fight and laugh and love with her, and she would fall more and more in love with him.

Despite his assurance that there were ways to prevent conception, she knew that she would be at risk every time she made love with him. Bearing an

illegitimate child, no matter how beloved, would destroy her standing with the townfolk. She cherished the respect she received now because only she knew how hard she had worked to earn it. Some people might not like her, and probably most of them thought her odd, but no one could say that she wasn't respected.

So she had to consider the possibility of pregnancy, and she ached deep inside in a way she never had before. She was intensely female, vital, and earthy, and thinking about his children shattered her old self-contentment and made her aware that there was something else that she needed in life, something so much a part of herself that she wondered a little numbly how she hadn't known this truth about herself long before this. She wanted children, wanted to feel them growing inside her, wanted to hold greedy little mouths to her breast, wanted to watch them grow and prosper and someday bring their own children to her to be rocked. She wanted Lucas's children.

Perhaps if she became pregnant, he would want her to marry him.

She shied away from the thought as soon as it occurred. She didn't want to be married, not even to Lucas. A woman became a man's property as soon as she became his wife. Dee wasn't afraid that Lucas would ever mistreat her, but she couldn't bear the thought of losing the independence, the acknowledgement of herself as someone to be dealt with, that she had worked so hard to establish. Her land would become his without his having to pay one cent for it.

Thinking about it, she decided that he would be certain to want to marry her if she became pregnant, because Lucas would want his child, would in fact do whatever was necessary to make certain the baby bore his name. And she thought him capable of marrying her in order to get Angel Creek. She couldn't bear it either way, because she wanted to be loved for herself, wanted for herself, not because of a child inside of her or the land she owned.

She sat wrapped in the quilt long after the rain had stopped, long after the sun had gone down, her eyes open and somber as she looked at the various choices she could make. All of them would bring her pain, and because she loved him she would accept that pain in order to have whatever time with him she had been allotted.

Chapter 11

The rain the day before hadn't been enough to raise the levels in the streams or watering holes, but the fresh spring grass was vibrantly green and abundant, and the air was washed clean of dust. Lucas was tired and sore after a day of branding calves, but whenever he lifted his head and looked around him he felt a deep sense of peace. All of the land that he saw in every direction was his, and he had never wanted to be anywhere else than right there. He loved it with every particle of his being, and he wouldn't hesitate to kill to protect his home, as he had done before, or to die in the effort. He was willing to spill both blood and sweat on the ground to make it prosper.

When the last calf of the day was branded and had been released to run bawling back to its mother Lucas stood and stretched, turning from side to side to work the kinks out of his back. He eyed the sun; it was only an hour until sundown, not enough time for him to get back to the house and change out of his filthy clothes, then get over the narrow pass leading down to Angel Creek before dark. He could go the long way around, taking the road to Prosper and then cutting back toward the mountains, but the ride alone would take him over two hours, and it was possible someone would see him riding toward Dee's place. He wasn't going to have people whispering about her behind her back, so that option was out. But he needed her with a deep, burning ache that had grown worse as the day passed and wouldn't get any better until he was with her again, sliding deep into her silky body, feeling her wrap those strong, graceful legs around him. He looked again at the sun, thinking of taking his chances over the pass, then finally realized that it would be stupid to try. He would have to get through another night without her.

He had spent only the one afternoon with her, yet he craved her with the ferocity that drove the addicts in the San Francisco opium dens to their pipes. Losing his brother Matt had been hard, and since then he had been essentially alone in spirit because he had taught himself to need no one, to be complete unto himself; but now he had to deal with a nagging sense of incompletion, as if he had left part of himself down at Angel Creek. The notion was ridiculous, and he scoffed silently at himself. No one could mean that much to anyone else. It was just that Dee wasn't like other women he had known, and her differences were what intrigued him. He

wanted her, that was all. It was a challenge to get past all of those thorns to the wild-honey sweetness of her.
He wondered with disgust when he had taken up lying to himself.
Thunder boomed, and he looked at the sky for the third time. His foreman, William Tobias, evidently thought he was looking for signs of rain and said, "I don't think that one's going to come our way. Sounds like it's headed for the mountains." The gangly sun-dried man leaned over to spit. "Sure do wish we'd get a hard spell of rain. We ain't dry, but I'd like to have more water in those holes before summer gets here."
Lucas thought of the pure, never-ending water of Angel Creek and felt the old irritation with his father rise up within him. That land should have belonged to the Double C for a long time, but due to his father's lack of judgment it was now in the hands of a stubborn woman who was likely to work herself to death rather than listen to reason.
But if his father had bought Angel Creek all those years ago, Dee's father wouldn't have settled there, and he would never have met Dee. Lucas frowned, trying to balance the pleasure of owning Angel Creek against the excitement of making love to Dee. The frown changed to a wry smile. Angel Creek wasn't going anywhere; he'd get it eventually. Maybe he was just as glad that it had been unsettled when George Swann had brought his family west.
He and the foreman stood watching the storm clouds low on the horizon as they drifted away toward the mountains. The late afternoon thunderstorms were a frequent occurrence during spring and early summer, so both men expected they would get their share of rain.
Resigned now to the fact that he wouldn't get over to Dee's after all, Lucas mounted his horse and started back toward the house. If he knew Dee, she had probably decided that he intended to visit only when he needed sex and would have the shotgun in her hands the next time he showed his face.
He realized that he was grinning as he rode home. Damn if getting her wouldn't be worth a load of buckshot in his ass!
Dee stepped outside the next morning just as dawn was turning the sky a glowing, translucent pink. She had reached for the feed pan as soon as she had stepped onto the stoop, but now she withdrew her hand without touching it, her eyes on that wonderful sky arching above her, around her, surrounding her with the glow.

The peace of the morning enfolded her. She turned away from the chores that awaited her and walked silently toward the meadow, her senses drinking in the colors and fragrances of the new day.

The long meadow was filled with graceful spring grass, the morning dew covering it with diamond glitter. A profusion of wildflowers spread before her eyes as far as she could see, a riot of blues and pinks and purples dotted with cheerful yellows and the occasional cluster of crimson clover, the dark red clover heads nodding as if they had to entice the industrious bees who found their sweet scent irresistible. She wandered among them, the dew wetting her faded skirt to the knee, but she didn't notice and wouldn't have cared if she had. Some days were magic and were to be savored. The chores would always be there; this dawn was fleeting and would never be duplicated.

The sky overhead gradually changed from pearly pink to opalescent and finally to a great, shining golden bowl as the sun finally emerged and bathed the meadow in radiance. Birds sang almost deliriously, and the silver rush of water in the creek sounded like a thousand bells.

She walked down to the creek and watched the crystal water dance over the stones. Her blood sang through her veins, and her heart was full. This was her home, and it was paradise.

"Dee."

She heard her name, though it hadn't been loudly spoken, and turned to look at him. Lucas stood some twenty feet away, his glittering eyes narrowed with some unnamed emotion, his face hard and intent. He was perfectly still, his big, muscled body locked in place; he never took his gaze off her, and the force of his lust hit her like a massive wave. Her body reacted automatically to his presence, immediately growing warm and heavy, her skin abruptly becoming too sensitive for the touch of her clothing. Her breasts swelled and ached, and her loins tightened.

She looked like a primitive goddess, and Lucas could hardly catch his breath. She stood next to the creek, surrounded by wildflowers, and the exotic face turned toward him was as serene and dreamy as the dawn itself. He had never seen her like that before, all defenses down, simply a woman exalted by the dawn. His whole body expanded until he felt as if his skin would burst, and he was dizzy with the rush of his blood. His sex throbbed violently, and he knew he had to be inside of her.

He never remembered crossing the ground between them, only that she didn't move, and then she was within his grasp, her body firm and rich, her mouth inexplicably shy beneath the savagery of his. He carried her down, crushing her into the wildflowers, and shoved her skirt to her waist. The barrier of her drawers maddened him, and he stripped them away with rough hands, her pale thighs naked and vulnerable in the morning sun. He was so swollen with need that he cursed under his breath at the difficulty of unbuttoning his pants. Then he was free. He opened her soft folds with one hand, revealing the small opening, and with his other hand he guided himself to her. He looked down at the broad head of his sex poised against the delicate opening, and his testicles tightened painfully. He thrust into her, groaning aloud with the shattering relief of her tight, silky wet channel clasping his aching length and soothing him with both pleasure and the promise of more.

Dee accepted his heavy weight with slender arms wrapped around those powerful shoulders, accepted the fierce drive of his loins slamming into her, accepted his masculinity and lust and welcomed all of it. She felt almost unbearably stretched and possessed, but there was a bright glory to it, and she reveled in it. Her head rolled slowly back and forth in the dew-fresh grass as her entire body gave itself over to him.

She climaxed abruptly, the sensation exploding in her loins and making her legs tremble around him. Her cries lifted into the crystal air, and her back arched as he reared back on his knees with a guttural roar. His own climax swiftly followed, his head thrown back and his neck corded with the force of his convulsions. He gripped her slender hips and held her tightly locked onto him until the last spasms had eased, until he was emptied of his fever.

Afterward he was silent, and so was she, as he got to his feet and rebuttoned his pants. He bent and picked up her discarded drawers, then lifted her into his arms and carried her back to the cabin. She let her head rest on his shoulder, her eyes closed. There still didn't seem to be anything to say.

Lucas was shaken by the power of the surge of lust that had overtaken him. He had taken her without preliminaries, without gentling her body into arousal, but he hadn't been able to hold back. At that moment nothing had existed in the world but the two of them and his maddened need to have her. By rights, he thought, she should be trying to get to her shotgun rather than lying so still and quiet in his arms.

He sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and cradled her on his lap, his hands stroking her soothingly as if he could give her the consideration now that he hadn't been capable of earlier. Dee sighed with gentle pleasure, her nose turned against him so she could inhale the clean, warm scent of his body.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, his voice rough-edged.

She stirred a little, then settled in his embrace once more. "No." His intrusion into her body had been shocking, but there hadn't been pain, only primitive joy.

She didn't seem angry, either, but lay in his arms with the sensuous lassitude of a thoroughly loved woman. Of all the reactions he had expected, this voluptuous yielding hadn't been one of them, and it was all the more beguiling because he was taken by surprise. This was one reaction he didn't think he would ever tire of.

"I brought the sponges," he said wryly, his mouth quirking with an ironic smile. He hadn't even given a thought to them, and in any case he couldn't have restrained himself.

She opened her eyes and gave him a heavy-lidded stare. "Did you think they would do a lot of good in your pocket?" she asked. Then she sat up with curiosity on her face. "What do they look like?"

He maneuvered her and stretched out his leg so he could get his hand in his pocket, and he withdrew the small sponges. She looked at them lying in his callused palm, picked one up, and squeezed it between her fingers, then gave it back to him. "They're just regular sponges," she said, visibly disappointed. He grinned a little, knowing that she had been expecting something far more exotic and frankly wicked.

"I know. I expect it's the vinegar that does the job."

"Well, it's too late now."

"But it won't be the next time."

She gave him another of those green, heavy-lidded looks. "Unless you come at me again like the bull on one of the cows."

"Since the next time isn't very far in the future, I think I can promise that," he said.

"I have to do the chores."

"I'll help."

They were back in bed within the hour, their naked bodies twining with the steadily building tension. The small vinegar-soaked sponge sat in a dish

next to the bed. When neither of them could wait a minute longer he showed her how to insert the sponge, his long fingers reaching deep inside her and almost carrying her to completion without him. They made love until they were both exhausted, and Lucas pulled the sheet up over them just before he dozed off, his arms wrapped protectively around her slender form. He was contented all the way to his bones.

When they woke up he wanted to make love to her again. He was startled when she tried to squirm away from him. "I don't want to," she said fretfully.

"Damn if you aren't the most contrary woman I've ever seen," he muttered. "Why don't you want to?"

She shrugged, her mouth sulky. "I just don't want you holding me down again right now."

He ran his hand through his hair. God, why had he been surprised? The wonder was that she hadn't done something about it before now, but of course she was too inexperienced to know.

"Then you get on top," he said.

Interest sparked in those green eyes. He could see she was intrigued by the idea of controlling their lovemaking, and therefore controlling him. He wanted to laugh out loud but thought she might change her mind if he did. Personally, he loved lying on his back and letting a woman ride him, and his imagination went wild as he pictured Dee's rich breasts swaying over him.

"I don't know how," she said.

His hands were persuasive as they moved over her, enticing her closer. "I'll show you," he said. Just thinking about it had already made him hard and ready.

She loved it, too. By the time she settled astride him, sinking down to envelop his shaft, his hands were locked on the headboard above him as he strained to control himself. He was gasping, his eyes closed from the pleasure she had wrought. She had seduced him that time, her mouth tender on his mouth and chest, her breasts brushing against his stomach and loins as she swayed over him. He thought of other things he would teach her, but right now he had all he could handle. Of course she loved it; she was enthralled by having him at her mercy, if he could call it that. It was more like torment, delicious, searing torment.

Dee moved slowly, rhythmically, her eyes closing as her own hunger built. This was pure ecstasy, she thought, and she knew that she would never

regret these moments no matter what happened. It wasn't the physical pleasure that was so precious, but the link between them that was forged by that pleasure. She felt herself dissolving and cried out, unaware that he had reached his peak just ahead of her; then she fell forward onto his chest in exhaustion.

By the time he left late that afternoon she knew that for her, at least, the link between them would never be broken.

Chapter 12

June came in hot and dry. It was particularly frustrating because almost every afternoon thunder would echo from the mountains, and dark clouds would tantalize them with the possibility of rain; but the clouds would slide away, and if they ever released their moisture, it happened on the far side of the mountains, and Prosper got none of the runoff.

Each day dawned as hot and clear as the one preceding it, and Lucas began to worry, even though the Double C still had good water. There was no telling how long a dry spell would last, and it wasn't just the water holes that were drying up; the grass was getting dry and brittle, with no new growth to replace the grazed areas. The cattle were having to graze farther each day, then returning to the creeks and water holes for water. They were daily growing leaner, and each day they had to cover even more ground. He didn't like it, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Admitting that didn't sweeten his temper.

After going without Dee for two weeks he rode over to Angel Creek one day, leaving a lot of work undone because another minute without her was one minute too long. He was restless and irritable, not just because of his sexual needs but because he couldn't get her out of his mind. No woman had ever invaded his thoughts like that, getting in the way of his work, interfering with his sleep. His desire for her hadn't cooled; he wanted her more than ever, his hunger all the more intense because it had to be hidden, even from his own men. If the men ever wondered where he went, they never asked. He suspected they all assumed he was seeing Olivia, and of course they would never make joking remarks about a lady the way they would if the woman was less than respectable. It enraged him that anyone

would consider Dee less deserving of respect than Olivia, but he couldn't say anything without making Dee a target, so he had to keep his mouth shut.
Dee was sitting on the front porch placidly rocking when he rode up, and she made no effort to get up to welcome him. She was probably mad at him, he thought with a sigh, but then he decided that she wasn't. If Dee had been angry, she would have let him know it. It was more likely that she was just taking it easy in the shade.
He put the horse in the barn where it was cooler, and as he walked back to the house he noticed how green everything was, when everywhere else the grass was turning brown and the tree leaves were limp.
Angel Creek was a lush oasis in comparison. He stopped and looked around. Her garden was thriving, and as far as he could see up the valley the meadow grasses were green and resilient. He could hear the quiet rush of the water in the creek, the sweet, cold, crystal-clear mountain water that fed this little valley and made it thrive.
The valley wasn't big enough to support all of his cattle, but if he owned it, then it would be a safeguard against drought. Enough cattle could survive there to keep him from being wiped out. Indeed, keeping some cattle there would even help those heads left on the Double C, because they would get what grass and water there was to be had.
Dee was still rocking when he stepped up on the porch and sat down beside her. Her eyes were closed, but her foot maintained the slow, steady movement of the chair.
"I'll give you five thousand dollars for Angel Creek," he said.
Those inscrutable green eyes opened and regarded him for a moment before her thick black lashes swept down again. "It isn't for sale."
"Damn it," he said irritably. "That's twice what it's worth."
"Must not be," she reasoned. "Since you offered five thousand, then it's worth five thousand."
"Seven thousand."
"It isn't for sale."
"Would you be sensible about this?"
"I am being sensible," she insisted. "This is my home. I don't want to sell it."
"Ten thousand."
"Stop it."

"What are you going to do when you're too old to work the land? This is hard work, and you won't be able to keep doing it. You're young and strong now, but what about ten years from now?"
"I'll let you know in ten years," she retorted.
"Name any kind of business you'd like to have, and I'll set you up in it. You're not going to get that kind of offer from anyone else."
She stopped rocking and opened her eyes. Lucas watched her intently, his pulse speeding up now that he had finally aggravated her out of her cool demeanor. It was like deliberately prodding a tigress to attack, but he was tired of that blank refusal even to discuss selling Angel Creek. He might not win, but she'd at least listen to him.
"That's not as interesting as the offer Kyle Bellamy made," she said with soft mockery.
He felt a spurt of anger. He could just imagine what Bellamy's offer had been. When he'd first met Dee he hadn't liked it that Bellamy was also interested in buying the land, but now he disliked even more the thought that the man had wanted Dee.
"I can just imagine the offer he made," he said sarcastically.
"I doubt it." She gave him a smile so sweet he was instantly wary. "He asked me to marry him."
This time Lucas didn't feel a spurt of anger, he felt a huge rush of it, so hot that his entire body seemed to expand and burn. His pupils constricted to tiny black points. "Not if I can help it," he said in a voice so flat and toneless she wasn't certain he'd said anything at all.
"It was my decision, not yours. I turned him down, of course."
"When was he here?" Murder was still in his eyes.
She shrugged. "Before you ever came back to town."
Some of the anger faded as he realized that it wasn't a recent event. But if Bellamy ever came back to Angel Creek, it had better be to say good-bye.
"I don't want him here again," he said flatly, just in case she was in any doubt.
"I didn't invite him in the first place." She added thoughtfully, "I didn't invite you, either. Isn't it strange? The poor men who could have used a homestead just wanted me for sex; you and Bellamy have plenty of land, but you want more. I'd have to say that Bellamy wants it more than you do, since he offered marriage."

Lucas tensed, every instinct alert. "Is that what it would take?" he asked, carefully feeling his way. He felt as if he were treading through quicksand, where one misstep would be a disaster. He realized that he was holding his breath, waiting for her answer.
Dee didn't look at him, but out across her land. "Getting married would be even worse than selling out," she said. "I'd lose both my land and my independence. Of the two, selling it would at least let me stay independent."
Sharp disappointment thudded in his chest. Until he felt the force of it he hadn't realized how much he had wanted her to say yes, that she would be interested in a marriage proposal from him. Shock froze him in his chair. He had known since the first time he'd made love to her that she had ruined his plans to marry Olivia, that he couldn't marry Olivia while he still wanted Dee so fiercely. He couldn't imagine Dee consenting to be the mistress of a married man, nor would it be fair to Olivia. And Dee had made her opinion of marriage plain the first time they'd met. Until now he hadn't really thought of marriage to her because she didn't fit in with his plans; he had been prepared to marry her as a necessity if she should become pregnant, but the subject had never come up between them, and it had just been speculation on his part that she would marry him even then. Now he had brought it out into the open, and her refusal had hit him squarely between the eyes. He wanted Dee as his wife, and not because she would fit into his plans. If anything, she would make things harder.
But with her he could laugh and fight and not have to worry about hurting her feelings if he snapped at her. Dee would give back as good as she got. And in bed she was wild and natural, giving him complete freedom of her body without embarrassment and exploring him in the same manner. He would find some way to make her fit into the mold he wanted.
He'd marry her in a minute if she'd have him, but Dee didn't want to marry anyone. Marriage would make her feel caged, and she couldn't tolerate that.
"Then take the money," he said, not looking at her because he was afraid she would read too much in his eyes. "It's enough to invest, so you'll always have enough to live on. That way you'd still be independent, and you wouldn't have to work yourself to death on the land. Hell, you could even buy more land, if that was what you wanted."
"But it wouldn't be Angel Creek," she said softly. "I love it here. I fell in love with it the first day I saw it." And it had given her a reason to live. In exchange for its healing bounty she was its caretaker, its guardian.

Sometimes she felt a superstitious fear that she was like a plant that would die if uprooted from the soil of this small valley.
And she would never love any man as much as she loved this damn place, he thought savagely. He would rather have had Kyle Bellamy as a rival than Angel Creek, because he could fight Bellamy, but how could he fight the land? He remembered the look of dreamy ecstasy on her face the morning he had come to her in the dawn and found her out in the meadow, and sharp jealousy pierced him as he realized it had been for the land, for the wash of golden sunlight, for the crystal flow of water, and not for him.
The hell of it was, he loved the Double C just as fiercely. He couldn't condemn her when they were so much alike. That was why he was so relaxed with her, because she matched him strength for strength. But damn it, it wasn't like he'd be asking her to move to another country.
He stood up and held out his hand to her. "Let's go inside," he said abruptly. He needed her. God, how he needed her.
But she didn't take his hand, just gave him another of those cat looks. "If you rode all the way over here just for that, you'll have to be disappointed. I'm having my monthly."
He was disappointed but felt no inclination to leave. Even if he couldn't make love to her, he needed her in other ways. He kept his hand extended. "Then come sit on my lap and drive me crazy," he said.
Her face brightened with interest, and she put her hand in his. She was always willing to drive him crazy.
But as it happened they spent more time talking than snuggling. He had been serious about her sitting on his lap, so that's what she did, both of them in the big chair in front of the fire. He told her about his breeding plans for his herd, about his expansion ideas, how he planned to use the politicians in Denver to further his ambitions. The citizens of Colorado were supposed to vote to ratify the state constitution on the first of July, and it would then go to the federal government for a vote to admit them to the Union. He told her what statehood would mean, and she sat up to frown at him.
"I don't know if I want crowds of people coming out to settle. I like it the way it is now."
"It's progress, honey. With more people we'll get more businesses, and more railroads. Railroads are the key. Colorado can't be completely civilized without them."
"What difference does it make?"

"Money," he said simply. "You can't do anything without money."
"But I don't want things to change." She nestled her head back on his shoulder and said pensively, "I don't like change."
"Everything changes." He combed his fingers through her long hair and pressed a kiss to her temple. She turned her face into his throat, and he held her tighter, as if he could protect her from the changes that were inevitable for them both.
It had become customary for Olivia to go riding every Sunday afternoon. Sometimes she would return without seeing Luis, her disappointment carefully hidden behind her calm demeanor. But most of the time he would join her at some point. She seldom saw him at any other time, for his duties on the ranch kept him busy. The days between those stolen Sunday afternoons crept by at a snail's pace, while the few hours she spent with him were gone almost before she knew it. She was so obsessed with seeing him that she even neglected to ride out to see Dee and felt guilty because she had so much to tell her.
She couldn't seem to think of anything other than Luis. Her heart would begin hammering as soon as he appeared at her side, making her feel as if she would suffocate in the heat. She had already ceased wearing the fitted jacket of her riding habit, but convention insisted that she keep her blouse firmly buttoned all the way up to her throat and the sleeve cuffs fastened at her wrist. The unusually warm weather was uncomfortable, and her physical reaction to Luis made it seem even worse.
She would often look at the open throat of Luis's shirt and envy men the freedom of their clothing, but it wasn't long before the smooth brown skin visible in that open neckline would distract her from the details of clothing, and the heat would intensify.
Luis saw the way her gaze would linger on his open shirt and the flush that would soon climb to her cheeks. Though she didn't realize it, she was becoming more accustomed to the physical desire between them, and as each Sunday passed without anything more than kisses she was becoming hungrier. She was innocent, but she was a woman, with a woman's needs. The day would come, and soon, when her desire and curiosity would grow too strong, and she would reach out for him. He only hoped it would be soon, for the frustration was killing him. He had never waited so long for a woman before, but then no other woman had been Olivia.

As June progressed the heat became even more oppressive, and riding during the afternoon was almost unbearable for both riders and animals. On a Sunday afternoon toward the end of the month Luis found a spot of intense shade under a stand of big trees and reined in his horse, dismounting with the fluid, catlike grace she found so fascinating.

"Let the horses rest," he said, reaching up for her. "We'll start back when it cools down some."

Olivia was more than glad to rest in the shade. She patted her face with her handkerchief and sat down under a tree while Luis gave the horses a little water, then tied them with long lines so they could graze. That done, he sat down beside her and placed his hat on the ground, then wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Do you want some water?" he asked.

She laughed, amused that he had taken care of the horses before offering any water to her. "Is there any left?"

"I brought a full canteen." He plucked a blade of grass and tickled her nose with it. "Always take care of your animals first. They'll keep you alive."

"Since we're less than an hour from town, I think we'll make it before we run out of water," she said gravely, then she laughed again.

He looked up at the blue bowl overhead, and the searing white sun. "If it doesn't rain soon, the water situation could really get desperate. The creeks on the Bar B are almost dry, and I imagine the other ranches are in the same shape."

"I hadn't realized things were that bad," she said, ashamed that she hadn't thought of it. "Are the wells going dry, too?"

"So far, no, but they could."

All of the ranchers, big and small, kept their money in her father's bank. If they went broke, then the merchants would lose money, too. She had always imagined the bank as permanent, but in a flash she saw that it depended on the solvency of the people who used it, which could never be guaranteed. Prosper itself had seemed invulnerable to the vagaries of boomtowns, as firmly rooted as any of the cities back East, yet could it survive if a drought destroyed the ranches? People couldn't stay if there wasn't any way to make a living. Shops and stores would close, neighbors would move away, and Prosper would die.

Everything people built was so fragile, at the mercy of weather or disease or just plain bad luck, and survival was no more than a matter of chance.

She looked up at the sun with both fear and worry in her eyes. Luis was sorry he had mentioned the growing dry spell, for there was nothing that could be done. He was a fatalist; life had taught him to accept what couldn't be changed, and he had learned early that either you survived or you didn't. If a drought destroyed Prosper, then he would roll up his bedroll and saddle his horse, and when he left he would take Olivia with him. Life was too short to fret over changes. He could be just as happy with her sitting at a campfire as he could in a house with a roof over his head.

But she was already fretting about the people she knew who would be hurt by a drought, and he wanted to pull her head down to his shoulder and protect her from those worries. Instead he stretched out on the ground and pillowed his head on her lap, nestling down on the softness of her thighs. The pressure of his head made her lower body tighten in reaction to his nearness. Olivia held her breath, almost overcome by the sensation flooding her. Her breasts began to throb and swell, yet at the same time she felt oddly protective toward him. Tentatively she touched his damp black hair, then smoothed it away from his forehead. He sighed as if in relief. Once she had touched him there seemed to be no reason why she shouldn't continue, so she began tracing the lines of his face with her fingertips,

His eyes were closed. "Umm, you smell good," he murmured, turning his face toward her. With his head on her lap he could smell the warm, female scents of her body, and he was growing hard.

Olivia smiled, thinking of the perfume she had applied that morning, glad that he liked it. She had even dabbed a bit between her breasts, feeling wicked as she did so. She wondered what he would do if she leaned forward so that her breasts were closer to his face. Would he nuzzle against her in search of the elusive sweet scent?

But she didn't dare, and regretfully she wished that ladies didn't always have to be retiring and genteel, to let the men take the lead. For that matter, ladies weren't even supposed to think of such things!

She looked down and saw that he was watching her and smiling, and she realized that she had heaved a sigh. "It's so hot," she said quickly, by way of explanation.

"Yes, it is. Why don't you unbutton your collar and roll your cuffs back?"

If she did, her immaculate starched blouse would be decidedly rumpled when she returned home, but she was feeling stifled, and baring her arms would bring a small measure of relief. She ignored the first part of his

suggestion and briskly unfastened her cuffs, turning them back several times so her forearms were bared.
"That's good," he said, then he lifted his hand to the buttons at her throat. She stilled, her blue eyes darkening as his strong, lean hand slowly released each tiny button in turn. Her collar loosened, and fresh air seeped in to cool her heated skin. His hand moved down past her collarbone. "That's enough," she said, trying to sound casual.
"Is it?" He didn't stop but unbuttoned the next one, then the next. And the next. The weight of his hand was lying between her breasts now, brushing them with every movement. His eyes held a hooded, sleepy sensuality. His mouth looked full, his lips slightly parted as if he waited for a delicious treat.
The beginning swells of her breasts were exposed, then the lacy edging of her shift. Slowly his fingers moved downward all the way to her waist, leaving her blouse gaping open in their wake. She sat very still, hardly even daring to breathe.
He shifted more onto his side, facing her. Slowly he pulled her blouse free of her waistband, then spread it open. Her lovely breasts were covered only by the thin cotton shift, her nipples clearly peaked beneath it. He traced both of them with a light fingertip, loving the delicacy of her, then moved closer and lifted his head just a bit to close his lips firmly around one of them.
Olivia bit her lip, her eyes closing at the feel of his mouth clamping down on her nipple. His mouth was hot and wet, and his tongue curled around the tip, stroking it through the damp cotton. Then he began to suck, and the rhythmic pulling started a fire that ran straight to her loins.
They were utterly silent. She heard the horses stamping nearby, the chomping of their big teeth on the grass. A small breeze rustled the leaves overhead, and insects droned lazily in the heat. He suckled her with a complete lack of urgency, not caressing her in any other way.
Until Luis, she hadn't known that a man would ever want to put his mouth on her breasts. She had thought of suckling babies but never imagined that such a maternal act could, with a man, be so erotic. The strong mouth working at her breast couldn't be mistaken for an infant's sweetness, nor could the rasp of his beard-roughened cheek against her soft skin. The secret flesh between her legs was throbbing in rhythm with the pull of his mouth, and she leaned helplessly forward to give him better access.

He responded by taking her deeper into his mouth.
Her shift was so wet now that it might as well not have been there, but suddenly it was maddening. Frantically she shrugged her shoulders, letting the straps fall down her arms.
"Be still," he whispered around her nipple.
"No—wait. Here." She whispered, too, lifting her hand to push the loosened shift down over one breast, baring it. She guided the nipple back to his mouth and whimpered softly at the exquisite pleasure of his lips on her nakedness. She cradled his head in her arms and held him to her, suffused with warmth and desire.
Her body delighted in the sensations it was feeling, both subtle and intense. When he finally sat up away from her she made a low sound of regret, but he hushed her with a finger on her lips. "You'll like this, too." And he pulled off his shirt, revealing a broad, muscled chest with a diamond of soft, curly black hair stretching from nipple to nipple.
Olivia reached out to circle her fingertips around the tiny points, marveling at how different they were from hers. They hardened instantly, and she looked up in surprise to see a taut expression of enjoyment on his face.
"They aren't so different after all," she murmured, stroking them again.
He put his hands over hers and guided them over his chest. "No, not so different. I love it when you touch me. I want to feel your hands on my bare skin. It feels the same to me as it does to you when I touch you."
His hands left hers, but she didn't move them. She liked it too much, liked the feel of his muscled body under her fingers. She slid them along his rib cage and let them lie there for a minute, enjoying the way his chest expanded and contracted with each breath. His stomach muscles were hard and flat, but the skin on his belly was silky smooth, indicating his vulnerability. Back at his chest again she felt the strong, steady pounding of his heart. His shoulders were wide and sleek and hard, the skin gleaming like satin in the sunlight. He was beautiful. Without thinking Olivia touched her lips to the tender skin just beside the shoulder joint, her tongue lightly tasting the faint saltiness of perspiration. Luis shuddered, and his hands closed hard on her waist, drawing her against him.
Incredibly, she had forgotten that her blouse was open and one breast bare. The warm, hard pressure of his chest against her brought a sharp cry from her, and slowly he turned her from side to side, rubbing her breasts on his hard body.

"Luis. Luis!"
"What is it, love?" he asked softly. "Do you want more?"
She dug her fingernails into his upper arms, gasping with the delight of it. "Yes," she said. "Please."
He laughed a little at her impeccable manners even when they were both so aroused it was all he could do to keep from taking her completely. Only his acute instinct about women held him back, for though he could easily seduce her, she wouldn't yet give herself to him out of love. And it was love he wanted from her, not the knowledge that he was skilled enough as a lover to make her body ready before her mind was. When she was truly ready she would let him know. Until then he was prepared to suffer excruciating torment in order for her to discover how much sheer enjoyment she could have with him.
He removed her blouse and let it drop to the ground, then slid the straps of her chemise all the way down and drew her arms free. The soft cotton draped around her waist, leaving her upper torso completely bare. She was blushing a little, her porcelain skin glowing. Shifting to his knees and drawing her up, too, he put his arms around her so that their bodies were together from shoulder to knee and began kissing her. He could feel her shiver with delight as her soft breasts flattened against the hard plains of his chest, feel the instinctive, startled recoil of her hips away from him as soon as she felt his arousal, but then shyly she returned. Her hips sought his, undulating gently as she instinctively searched for the most comfortable position, which was of course the most intimate. He groaned deep in his throat as she finally settled with her soft mound cradling his hardness, her legs parted slightly to make room for him. He thought that she might very well kill him with her own innocent brand of seduction.
"I want to lie naked with you," he murmured. "Every night, love. When you marry me I'll teach you everything a man and a woman can do together, and you'll enjoy every minute of it."
Olivia buried her face against his chest. He hadn't phrased it as a question, thereby relieving her of the necessity of answering. But he had said it so positively, as if he had no doubts she would marry him. Did she have any doubts? She didn't know. She was frightened of the sort of life he might expect her to lead, wandering about the country, but at the same time the thought of it excited her. She didn't know if she loved him, but she did know she could barely exist through the week, that she felt truly alive only

on the one afternoon a week when she was with him. And she very much wanted him to show her everything about lovemaking.
Since meeting Luis she no longer had any doubts about the bond between Beatrice and Ezekiel Padgett. It was the sweet, hot bond of the flesh, the shared delights when they were together in bed. And would she, Olivia, ever settle for anything less now that she sensed what awaited her?
"I think I love you," she said, lifting her face to his. "But I'm not certain. The thought of marrying you frightens me almost as much as the thought of not marrying you. Would we go away from here? Would I have to leave my family?"
"Almost certainly," he replied, not lying to her. His heart was pounding as he realized how close he was to having what he wanted. Her lovely face was troubled as she thought of leaving the secure home she had known all her life. "We would have wonderful adventures together, making love beneath the stars, or taking a train wherever it might happen to go. And we would have babies, love, and a home where they could grow up safe and secure. Do you think your parents would like to keep their grandchildren occasionally while we take to the trail for a while?"
She laughed shakily, her mind whirling with the images he had described, but she couldn't answer the question about her parents. They would be horrified at the thought of their beloved only offspring marrying a drifter. They both wanted so much for her and would be terribly hurt and disappointed. They loved her, and she didn't think they would reject her no matter whom she married, but tears swam in her eyes at the thought of causing them pain. Still, she couldn't go on forever as she had been these past weeks, and neither could Luis.
She looked up at him with tear-wet eyes that held both pain and a promise. "I'll give you my answer soon," she whispered.
Dee walked out on the porch and held out a glass of cool lemonade to Olivia, who sat on the very edge of the rocking chair, keeping it tilted forward on the rockers. She studied Olivia's face, thinking that she had never before seen her friend as edgy as she was now.
"What's wrong?" she asked.
Olivia sipped her drink, then rolled the glass back and forth in her hands. She watched the motion of her own fingers as if fascinated. "I think I'm in love," she blurted. She drew a deep, shaky breath. "With Luis Fronteras. And I'm scared."

"Luis Fronteras?" Dee asked blankly. "Who's he?"
"He works for Kyle Bellamy. He's a Mexican. A drifter."
Dee gave a low whistle of astonishment and slowly took her own seat. This was like a queen taking up with a commoner.
"He wants me to marry him," Olivia continued.
"Are you going to?"
The look Olivia gave her was agonized. "I can't bear the thought of not seeing him again. But it will hurt my parents so, and I don't want that either. I don't know what to do."
Dee wasn't sure what advice to give her. She knew how important family was to Olivia, and she also knew how impossible it was to stay away from the man you loved, even when your common sense told you to.
"What is he like?"
"Gentle," Olivia said, then she frowned. "But I think he can be dangerous, too. It's just that he's always gentle with me, even when he's—" She broke off, and her face turned pink.
"Aroused?" Dee suggested helpfully, grinning when Olivia's flush deepened.
"Is Lucas gentle when he's aroused?" Olivia retorted with spirit. "And don't tell me you don't know, because I won't believe you. At the picnic he couldn't stop looking for you, and he left right after lunch and never came back. I've thought right from the beginning that he'd be perfect for you," she finished smugly.
"Perfect?" Dee said in disbelief. "He's overbearing and arrogant, and he—" She broke off, because she couldn't lie to either herself or Olivia. "I love him," she finished flatly. "Damn it."
Olivia threw herself back in the rocking chair with a whoop of laughter, sloshing the lemonade over the rim of the glass. "I knew it, I knew it! Well? Has he asked you to marry him?"
"He asked if marriage would be the price for Angel Creek. Not exactly the same thing." Dee managed a crooked smile. "The fact that I love him doesn't mean that he loves me."
"Well, he does," Olivia replied. "If you could have seen him at the picnic! He kept trying not to let it slip that he'd been seeing you, but he couldn't talk about anything else."
Dee went still. "He told other people about me?"

"No, he was just talking to me," Olivia reassured her. "He came here after he left the picnic, didn't he?"
"Yes."
Olivia cleared her throat, good manners wrestling with her curiosity. Curiosity won. "Does he… I mean, has he tried to… you know?"
"Make love to me?" Dee clarified in her blunt way.
Olivia flushed again but nodded.
"He's a man."
Dee evidently felt that her bald statement was explanation enough. Olivia decided to agree with her. "Do you like it when he touches you?" she asked in a rush. "I mean when he touches your…" She stopped, appalled at what she had been about to say. What if Dee hadn't permitted Lucas such intimacies? With her question she had practically admitted that she and Luis…
"Stop blushing," Dee ordered, though her own cheeks were growing warm. "He has, then. Well? Did you like it?"
Confused, Dee wondered just what Olivia was asking and what part of the body she was thinking about. Caresses, or the actual sexual act? Then she shrugged, because the answer was the same regardless of the question.
"Yes," she said.
Olivia closed her eyes on a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad," she said. "I thought I was wicked, even though Luis said everyone…"She stopped herself again and opened her eyes. She had never before had such an opportunity, and she felt giddy with the freedom. "Does he take your blouse off when he touches you there?"
Dee was beginning to feel harassed. "Yes."
"Has he ever taken the top of your shift down? So that he can see your—er—breasts?"
"Yes."
Though her face was bright red, Olivia wasn't about to stop. "Has he ever kissed you there? Like a baby, I mean, only different. Well, maybe it's the same—"
Dee erupted from her chair. "For God's sake!" she yelled, goaded beyond endurance. "If you must know, he's stripped me naked and done everything there is to do! And I enjoyed every minute of it!" She struggled with herself for control and took a deep breath. In a more moderate voice she said,

"Maybe not every minute. It hurt the first time, but it was worth it. Though I do like it better when I'm on top."
Olivia's mouth moved, but no sound emerged. Her eyes were so huge they eclipsed her face. She shut her mouth.
They stared at each other in silence. Dee's lips twitched first. She gulped, then bent double as she shrieked with laughter. Olivia pressed her hand to her mouth in an effort to stifle the unladylike sounds that were bubbling up, but it was a useless effort. She guffawed. That was the only word for it. The lemonade spilled in her lap.
When the hysterical fit of laughter had subsided into giggles they wiped their streaming eyes and struggled for composure. "Come inside and sponge your skirt," Dee said, her voice still shaky with mirth.
Olivia stood and followed her into the cabin. "Don't try to change the subject," she warned, and her shoulders began shaking again. "I want to know all about it. If you think I'm going to let a chance like this go by, you're crazy!"
"Ask Luis," Dee replied maddeningly, and it set them both off again.

Chapter 13

Kyle Bellamy kicked at the dry creek bed, then looked up at the cloudless sky. It hadn't rained in six weeks. It might not rain for another six weeks. They didn't normally get that much rain anyway, but then they didn't usually need it because of the runoff from the snowcaps. But there hadn't been as much snow during the past winter, and now they weren't getting even the normal amount of rain. Who knew how long it would last? Droughts sometimes lasted for years, turning what had been fertile into wasteland. He'd never thought it would happen here, but hell, no one ever settled where they thought there'd be a drought. He felt an almost sickening sense of panic. He had sworn that he'd make something of himself, something respectable, and he'd been close enough to taste it. Now the damn weather was turning it into dust, literally. The weather! Of all the ways he could have been done in, of all the things that could have caught up with him, it was the weather that would bring him to his knees.
There was only one creek left running now on the Bar B. When it dried up his cattle would die. Without the cattle he wouldn't have the ranch, wouldn't

have the money to restock, because he'd just spent all of his capital to add to the herd. Damn, why hadn't he waited? But he'd wanted the ranch to expand, and now he was in danger of losing everything. He wouldn't be able to pay his men's wages, would end up as nothing… again.

God, he'd been so close. He had thought the years when he'd had to steal food to survive were finished. He had buried his memories of the little boy who lived in the streets of New Orleans and was sold into prostitution at the age of ten. He never let himself think about the man he had killed when he was just twelve, to escape the horror. He had thought he'd never again have to cheat or lie. All he'd wanted was to be like respectable folks everywhere, to be welcomed into people's homes and treated like someone who counted. He'd had that in Prosper. Only Tillie had known him when he had lived with scum, had lived like scum, and she would never tell. He and Tillie were alike, two misfits whose backgrounds couldn't bear close scrutiny—for different reasons—but he had chosen the path of respectability, and Tillie had chosen to be as unrespectable as a woman could get.

He had planned to marry, have kids, do all the normal, respectable things and wallow in the doing of them, for that was what he had never before had. His dream had come true for a while, yet now he could see it slipping away from him. Even his plans for Olivia Millican didn't seem to be going anywhere. He called on her, paid all sorts of attention to her, but she still remained maddeningly indifferent to him. Damn it, the banker's money would have made all the difference to him.

Now, unless it rained soon, all of his plans were going to be just like the ground he walked on: dust.

He had racked his brain trying to think of ways to beat the drought. He had thought of building long troughs and filling barrels with water from the well, then hauling the water out to the troughs. But he had too many cattle; they would go mad at the scent of water and trample one another trying to get to it, knocking the troughs over. He couldn't dump the water into the water holes, because the ground was so dry it would just soak it up. Hell, he probably didn't even have enough water in the well to fill more than a couple of barrels anyway. The water table had to be low, too.

Why had he bought more cattle? If the herd was smaller, there would be more graze and water to go around.

Maybe he could sell off part of the herd. They were too thin; he'd lose money if he did, but not as much as he'd lose if they all died. But he was

afraid they wouldn't survive the cattle drive to a railhead, either.
He wasn't the only one who was hurting. People in town were getting by fine and would be all right as long as their wells held out. But the other ranchers were all in the same fix he was in; the only creek still running that he knew of was Angel Creek, and he didn't guess it had ever gone dry.
It could have been his. It should have been his. He'd never thought the Swann woman would be so stubborn about selling, but she wouldn't even talk about it. He'd even asked her to marry him when it had become obvious she wasn't about to sell, but she'd turned that down, too. The only time in his life he'd asked any woman to marry him, and she hadn't even hesitated before refusing. The funny thing was, by then the land hadn't been his only reason for asking. Dee Swann was a damn fine-looking woman, with those witch-green eyes, and she was respected in town. Maybe not well liked, but they sure respected her. And she was tough enough that she didn't give a damn if they liked her or not.
She was sitting in that rich little valley with all of that water, not doing anything but raising that garden of hers and letting all the rest of the land lie fallow. It was wonderful grazing, the vegetation fed by the creek even when there wasn't any rain, and it was going to waste.
After she had refused to marry him he had followed the creek out of the valley, thinking that maybe he could divert it toward his land. To his surprise the creek bed had veered sharply to the east and dissipated at the foot of the mountains, seeping underground through porous rock to emerge again only God knew where. It came from the mountains and went back to the mountains, detouring only through that little valley and creating some of the best land he had ever seen.
The Bar B had been good land—not as good as Angel Creek, but good ranch land. In the four years he'd been there the rain had come regularly and the water holes had stayed fresh. He'd always worried more about the winters than about the summers, afraid a blizzard would wipe him out, but instead there hadn't been enough snow this past year, and the runoff hadn't been sufficient. Now one rainless summer was destroying a lifetime of dreams.
He mounted his horse, his handsome face drawn as he looked around. Everything still looked green, but it was deceptive. The vegetation was dry and brittle, making a faint crackling sound whenever a breeze stirred. He would have railed at fate if it would have done any good, but he had learned

while still a boy in the muddy streets that the only help to be had was what he could provide for himself. Cursing, as well as praying, was a waste of breath.

There was only one person he could talk to about it, only one person who would understand what it meant to him. Not even the other ranchers could know how hard this hit him. Since it was still early afternoon he counted on the saloon being almost empty, and when he got there he found it was. Tillie wasn't in sight, though, and he scowled at the thought that she might be with a customer. Verna, the other saloon girl, was propped against the bar chatting with the bartender. She straightened when she saw Kyle walk in.

"Is Tillie upstairs?" he asked, ignoring the look of disappointment on Verna's face. He imagined she heard that question too often. It couldn't be easy for her, being essentially in competition with Tillie for what business Prosper could provide. Knowing Tillie, though, she probably often sent men Verna's way.

"She went over to the hat shop," Verna replied.

Kyle got a shot glass of whiskey from the bartender and sat down to wait, but he wasn't a patient man, and it quickly got on his nerves. Hell, what did he care if the townspeople saw him walking with Tillie? He was going to lose the ranch, so what did his carefully cultivated respectability matter? When it came down to it, he'd been born a gutter rat and would die one, no matter how hard he tried to change things.

When he found her Tillie was just leaving the shop, a hatbox held in her hands like an offering. She never gave any indication in public that she knew him, and now she started past him without even glancing in his direction. Kyle stopped her, taking the hatbox from her hands and tucking it under his arm. "I'll walk you back to the saloon."

She lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "You shouldn't be seen with me like this. None of the mamas will want you courting their daughters."

"I don't give a damn," he said under his breath.

She began strolling down the sidewalk. "After all the work you've done to make a place for yourself here?"

He didn't want to talk about it on the street. His emotions were too raw, his disappointment too strong.

Not many people were out stirring around in the heat, but he saw heads swiveling to watch his progress down the street with Tillie. It would be all over town by nightfall that Kyle Bellamy had been parading around town

with one of the saloon girls, as brassy as if he didn't know any better. And he simply didn't care. What he cared about was his ranch, and the lack of rain. Let them pass judgment if they wanted. He was sick and tired of the whole charade, pretending to be a gentleman when he didn't have a genteel bone in his body.

The saloon was blessedly cool after the harsh glare of the sun. The bartender didn't pay them any mind as they started up the stairs. Verna watched them go with a hint of envy in her expression.

When they were in her room Tillie sat down before her mirrored vanity and slowly began removing hat pins from the delicate froth of velvet and veiling that had been perched on her head. She never visited any of the shops while dressed in the immodest, brightly colored dresses she wore in the saloon. The dress she had on was as demure as any of the dresses the good wives of the town wore to church, but it had probably cost considerably more. Tillie's taste in clothes ran toward the expensive. The bronze fabric was wonderfully flattering to her complexion. He reached out and fingered her sleeve, thinking that her love of good clothes was probably the last remnant of her former life.

"Open that hatbox for me," she said. Her rich brown eyes held a mixture of excitement and satisfaction. Tillie adored hats.

Kyle obeyed, taking the top off and lifting out a small bit of fur and velvet. The hat was a dark burgundy color, the fur was black, and a dashing little black plume curled around the edge. The half veil was attached to the hat with twin cascades of dark red rhinestones. It looked ridiculous in his big hand, but Tillie set it on her head and angled it over one eye, and it was immediately transformed into a masterpiece.

"Miss Wesner does such good work," she purred, turning her head from side to side in sublime satisfac-tion. "I designed the hat, and she made it exactly as I described it."

"And now you have to have a gown made to match it."

"Of course." She met his eyes in the mirror and gave him a slow smile. She must have seen something in his face, because the smile faded and she briskly removed the hat, swiveling to face him. "What's wrong?"

"The drought," he said simply. "I'm losing the ranch."

She was silent. She knew what drought meant, knew that nature was both fickle and merciless.

"I only have one creek still running, and it's low," he said. "When it dries up the cattle will start dying. I tried, but I've lost."
"You've started over before. Do it again."
"Why bother? I'm beginning to think I should have stayed with the cards. At least then I could do something about a run of bad luck."
Tillie shook her head. "You'd have gotten killed. You're a good cheat, but you aren't that good. I could always spot you."
He pinched her chin. "Only because you're so damn good at it yourself, darlin'."
Tillie shrugged, saying nothing. Kyle examined her exquisite face, searching for some sign of the life she had led in either her skin or her expression, but she looked as serene as a nun. She hadn't changed much at all from the days of her girlhood in New Orleans. "Why don't you go back?" he asked suddenly. "You could do it. No one would have to know."
She didn't move but subtly withdrew anyway, her expression going blank. "Why would I want to go back?"
"Your family is one of the richest in Louisiana. Why would you want to live like this, in one room over a saloon, when you can have a mansion?"
"I couldn't tolerate it when I was a girl," she said gently. "The rules, the restrictions, being treated like a brainless doll. I've been on my own a long time now, making my own decisions, good or bad. How could I go back, even if my father would allow me in the house, knowing that at best it would be just the same? At worst, he would keep me locked up so I couldn't damage the family reputation any more than I already have."
"Does your family know where you are?"
"No. They think I'm dead. I arranged it that way."
"Then your father could be dead by now, and you wouldn't know about it."
"I occasionally get news from New Orleans. He was still alive six months ago. I don't wish him dead," she said, smiling at Kyle. "He's my father. He isn't a wicked man, just very strict, and I couldn't live like that. It's best this way. But why are we talking about me when we should be discussing your plans?"
"I don't have any. I tried, and I lost."
"It isn't like you to give up," she chided.
"I've never wanted anything this much before. I can't imagine working up any interest in anything else."

She touched his cheek in sympathy, her slim fingers cool on his skin. "It could rain tomorrow. Or the day after. And I have money. I can always stake you to get you going again."
He shook his head. "You'll probably need it. If the ranches go under, so will this town. You'll have to set yourself up somewhere else."
"Things haven't gotten that bad yet. I always hope for the best."
"But prepare for the worst." Over the years he had run into her in different places, and at varying degrees of prosperity. He had seen her ragged and hungry, but even then she had always been planning, never wasting what little money she had. They had even thrown in together for a while, living off his winnings at cards, always ready to dodge out of town if anyone spotted his light touch with the pasteboards. They had huddled together under one thin blanket on frigid nights during the worst of their luck and spent three whole days and nights making love in a soft hotel bed once when they had hit a lucky streak.
Then they had gone their separate ways, for some reason he no longer remembered. Likely she had just had her own plans, and he had had his. He hadn't seen her again until they had both wound up, by sheer coincidence, in Prosper. But maybe it wasn't such a big coincidence, for they had both been looking for the same thing: a quiet, steady little town. They had both worked boomtowns and knew it was no way to live. Boomtowns were too violent. Security was better.
"If you change your mind about the money," she said, "all you have to do is ask."
"I know."
He felt a surge of desire for her. He never tired of making love to Tillie. They had known each other for so long, made love so often, that they were entirely comfortable together. He knew just how to touch her and did so, reaching out to fondle her breast with the exact degree of pressure that she liked. She inhaled sharply, her eyes darkening. "Well," she said. "I see your spirits have revived."
He took her hand and placed it on the front of his pants. "That isn't a spirit, but it sure has revived."
"Darling," she purred, "it's never been dead."
They undressed leisurely, pausing often for kisses and unhurried caresses. She started to go down on her knees and take him into her mouth, but he stopped her because, despite his slow pace, he felt that would be more than

he could stand, and he wanted it to last longer than that. He put her on the bed and made love to her, using the advantage of his intimate knowledge of her to take her to the peak twice before he allowed himself release.
Afterward, as they lay quietly together, he felt a small measure of contentment. He might lose the ranch, but after all, he still had Tillie. She had always been there when he needed her. He only hoped he had been as good a friend to her as she had been to him.

Chapter 14

Kyle was drunk even though it was only early afternoon. He seldom allowed himself the excess because men who drank too much often said too much, and he wanted to keep his past life just that, in the past. But there were some occasions that seemed to call for drink, and watching his ranch die qualified as one of them.
Besides, he didn't have anything else to do, unless he wanted to ride out and look at the land drying up. If he wanted to see water, he'd have to ride all the way over to Angel Creek.
Now that was an idea, he mused. Maybe if he offered the Swann woman even more than he had before, she'd accept this time. Not that he had the money, but she didn't know that. All he needed was her signature on a bill of sale. He'd start moving his cattle in and worry about the money later. Like the old saying went, possession was nine tenths of the law.
That was what he'd do. He'd offer her so much money she'd have to be stupid to turn it down.
He wasn't so drunk that he couldn't ride, and soon he was on his horse. At least he was doing something, and that was a relief. It was the helpless waiting that drove him crazy, but patience never had been his long suit.
Entering the Angel Creek valley was like traveling to a different part of the country. Where the ground was cracking with dryness on the Bar B and the pastures were turning brown, here the earth was softened by the underground moisture, and the meadow grasses grew tall. It even felt cooler. He reined in, thinking in confusion that it couldn't actually be cooler, but then he decided that it really was. He frowned until the slight breeze on his face told the story. The valley acted like a funnel to the breezes coming

down from the mountains, sweeping the cooler air downward. It was still hot, but not as hot as it was everywhere else.
The Swann woman came out on the porch when she heard his horse, and she had that damn shotgun in her hands, just the way she had the other times he'd talked to her. She'd never threatened him with it, but he'd never been able to forget it was there, either.
She stood as proud as any of the high-nosed New Orleans ladies of his youth, even though she worked the soil like a man and her clothes were plain and old. Hell, Tillie dressed better than she did. But her head was held high on her slender neck, and those witch-green eyes were rock steady. "Mr. Bellamy," was all she said in greeting.
He didn't dismount. He just leaned forward, resting his arms on his saddle horn. "I'll double my last offer for this place."
She arched her brows, and he saw the gleam of amusement in her eyes. "Your last offer was marriage. Are you saying you'll marry me twice?"
He wasn't in the mood for sarcasm. "I need this land. I need the water. My cattle are going to die if they don't have water, and you have just about the only good creek for a hundred miles or more."
Dee sighed and looked at the cloudless blue sky. Why couldn't it rain? "I'm sorry, Mr. Bellamy, but I won't sell to you." She did feel sorry for him; she felt sorry for every rancher, big and small, and every farmer. But she couldn't take care of them all, couldn't parcel out the water that ran through her land.
Kyle reined his horse around and rode away without another word. He was so angry he couldn't speak anyway. Damn her! She just wouldn't listen to reason. She was using only a little more than an acre of the land and letting the rest of it go to waste, but still she hung on to every inch as if it would kill her to let it go. For the sake of her pissant vegetable garden his cattle were going to die.
No, by God, they weren't.
He was almost sober by the time he got back home, but his anger hadn't abated, and neither had his savage determination.
One of the cowhands was coming out of the barn. "Get Pierce!" Kyle yelled. "And Fronteras!"
The two men were out on the range, so it was late when they finally trudged up to the house where he waited. "We start rounding up the cattle tomorrow," Kyle said. His voice was abrupt and still angry.

Pierce slowly nodded, as if he had to consider the idea before giving it his approval.
Luis was curious. "Where are we taking them?"
"Into the Angel Creek valley."
Pierce said, "That Swann woman's place?"
"I talked to her today," Kyle replied, knowing that they would assume she had given him permission to graze his cattle on her land.
Pierce nodded again. "Valley's small. You want all of the cattle?"
"Yes." The cattle would quickly overgraze, but at least they would have water. His mind was made up. No matter what Dee Swann said or did, his cattle were going into that valley.
Rounding up the cattle wasn't easy. They didn't want to leave what little water they had and tended to stray every chance they got. Everyone on the Bar B worked all the daylight hours the next day and got up before dawn on the second day to start again. The men felt as if they'd grown to their saddles.
It was late morning of the third day before they began moving the herd, and they reached the mouth of the little valley in the middle of the afternoon.
Dee had gotten up early that morning to weed the garden before the heat got bad. She couldn't remember it ever being so hot before, and the plants were beginning to show it. They were growing, but she was afraid the crops were going to be stunted, burned by the sun.
The ranchers had to be in bad shape. She hadn't been into town for the past few weeks, but the last time she had gone everyone had been talking about how dry it was, and how it was hurting the grazing. Kyle Bellamy had been desperate when he'd ridden out to try to buy her land, and sympathy stirred in her as she remembered his face.
She wondered how Lucas was doing. She had seen him only once since the time he had tried to talk her into selling out; it had been just after the vote to ratify the constitution, and he had been jubilant over that, but tired from work and worried about the lack of water. She had wanted to assure him that everything would be all right, but the words would have been useless. How could she assure rain?
If the drought continued and his cattle died, would he ever forgive her?
She straightened and looked at the sun, already feeling its heat though it was still early in the morning. Her chest felt tight. She had no control over the weather, but she did have Angel Creek.

Lucas wanted her land. Like Kyle Bellamy, he had even offered marriage in an effort to obtain it. Every day since then she had lived with the knowledge that he hadn't wanted her for herself, but for the land. It lay cold and heavy in her breast, and time only seemed to make it grow heavier. It didn't help that she had realized the basis of his attraction to her right from the beginning, because like a fool she had fallen in love with him anyway. She couldn't even let herself attach any importance to their lovemaking, for Lucas was undeniably lusty by nature, and she thought any willing woman would have sufficed for his needs.

Sometimes she thought about riding up to the Double C and telling him that she had changed her mind, that she was willing to marry him if he was still interested. She would play the scene through in her mind right up to the part where he accepted; then her pride would reject the idea, and she knew she would hate herself if she did it. She had always planned to live alone, enjoyed living alone. She still did enjoy her life, but for the first time she wanted more.

She wanted Lucas. It wasn't just physical, though she yearned for the smell and touch of him, for the release given by his driving possession. She wanted more. She had never had an entire night with him, only a few stolen hours. She had never faced a dawn after sheltering the dark hours in his arms, or watched him shave. She wanted years of thunderous arguments; living with a man like Lucas would keep her on her toes. He would ride roughshod over a woman who didn't stand up to him. It was a kind of strength she had never before seen in a man; she was used to doing the intimidating. Lucas not only matched her, he gave her an unspoken compliment by not holding himself back as if she were a frail flower who would collapse under the storm of his temper.

If he married her in order to get Angel Creek, she would have those years she coveted, but she wouldn't have his love, and she wouldn't have self-respect.

Yet she loved him, and he needed her. Rather, he needed her land.

She looked at her garden. The plants were strong and green, just beginning to bear fruit with the long summer weeks of ripening ahead. Despite the lack of rain they were flourishing, fed by the creek that kept the rich soil moist.

Perhaps Lucas could move some of his cattle into the valley. A fence could be built around the cabin and garden to protect them. He couldn't bring the

cattle over the pass, but it would only take a couple of days to bring a herd around the base of the mountain. She saw no reason why he wouldn't agree to the plan; the cattle could even winter there.

If necessary, if he refused to accept the favor, she would sell Angel Creek to him. It would be like selling part of her heart, but she couldn't stand by and let his cattle die when she had the means of preventing it.

Accepting that was a blow that made her eyes sting as she looked around at her home. Saying that she loved it only scratched the surface. Over the years as she had worked the soil, coaxed life out of it, she had found a contentment that went deeper than love. It wasn't just the satisfaction of making things grow, it was everything about Angel Creek, the utter perfection of it. Her soul had taken root there, sinking deep into the earth. She could live in other places, but none would ever be like this, where she so completely, overwhelmingly fit.

Yet for Lucas she would give it up.

He had such big dreams, such towering ambitions. He'd achieve them, too, if the Double C survived this drought. Colorado was on the verge of statehood, and he was on the verge of putting his plans into action. He deserved the chance to do it. Men like Lucas were different from other men; he was a leader, a man who got things done.

She had never been to the Double C, never been up to the narrow pass Lucas used to enter the valley. Except for her trips into town she hadn't strayed from

Angel Creek since the day her family had first settled on it. Even if she had been familiar with the way to the Double C she wouldn't have gone, for the mere fact that she had visited Lucas Cochran would be so out of character for her that immediately her relationship with him would have been suspected. Regardless of that, she would go to the ranch and tell him her decision.

After all, it was the way she lived that had necessitated secrecy, for anything less than a spotless reputation would have endangered her. A woman alone couldn't take too many precautions. But if she lived in town, she wouldn't have to be so careful. She and Lucas could be discreet about the extent of their intimacy, but they wouldn't have to conceal their relationship entirely. That was assuming, of course, that they would even have a relationship after Lucas had gotten what he wanted from her, namely Angel Creek.

It was afternoon, and the sun was searing when she finished her chores and went inside to wash off in cool water. Now that she had faced what she had to do in order to live with herself she was restless, filled with impatience to get it over with. Maybe Lucas would accept her offer to graze his cattle in the valley, and she wouldn't have to uproot herself. If he insisted on buying the land, she wanted to get it over and done with, like a dose of bitter medicine.

After washing she changed into clean clothes and stood for a minute looking around. The next couple of hours would decide if she lived here or not, and for a moment the idea of leaving was so hard to bear that she let her head drop forward as she fought tears.

Then a sound made her lift her head, listening. That sounded like cattle bawling. And thunder; she thought she heard thunder. Hope rising, she went to the window and bent to look out. Not a cloud in sight. The bull and both cows were placidly grazing, but she still heard cattle bawling, or something that sounded like it.

She stepped out on the porch, her head tilted to the side as she listened curiously. Her gaze settled on a cloud of dust that was rising above the trees, and she stared at it blankly for a moment before an expression of horror crossed her face. She darted back inside, got the shotgun, and crammed her pockets full of extra shells.

The first of the cattle came into view. Knowing she didn't have a moment to waste, she put the shotgun to her shoulder and fired just over their heads, hoping to spook them the other way.

The cattle milled around in confusion, excited by the smell of water but nervous at the boom of the shotgun. She shot the other barrel and quickly reloaded, her heart pounding so hard in her chest that she felt sick. If the cattle got into the garden, they would destroy it.

"Put the shotgun down," Kyle Bellamy yelled. He rode toward her, a rifle in his hands. "The cattle are going through here."

"Not on my land," she replied fiercely. The valley was narrow, and the cabin was close to the mouth of it; he'd have to herd the cattle right between the cabin and the barn, and the unprotected garden was right behind the cabin. What the cattle didn't trample, they'd eat.

The herd hadn't turned. She fired again, and this time she aimed low enough to hit the cattle. At that distance the buckshot stung without doing a lot of damage, and the cattle bawled in panic, turning sharply away from both the

noise and the pain. The leading edge of the herd turned back into the others. She shot a fourth time, and they began bolting.
A rifle cracked, and the wood behind her splintered.
She dodged back into the cabin and slammed the door, hurriedly ramming shells into the shotgun as she did so. With a quick swing of the barrel she knocked the glass out of the window and shot again.
Cursing with every breath, Kyle shot back. "Get the cattle!" he yelled at his men. "Goddammit, turn them around."
Some of the men were already trying. Others had drawn their pistols at the sound of gunfire. They all knew about the Swann woman, knew she tended to greet people with a shotgun. She'd even peppered a few men who'd tried to keep company with her, the bad-tempered bitch. She shouldn't treat people like that. If the boss was intending to give her a taste of her own medicine, that was fine with them. Sporadically at first, then with increasing regularity, they began shooting at the cabin.
Luis reined his horse off to the side, his lean, dark face taut with anger and his hand on his pistol butt. He didn't know what the hell had gotten into Bellamy, but he didn't intend to make war on a lone woman.
He was good with a pistol, but not good enough to take on twenty men in a blood lust. For a split second he considered killing Bellamy, then realized that wouldn't stop it. He didn't have a lot of time to get help before the sons of bitches either killed the woman or overran her cabin and raped her; he'd seen enough blood lust to know that it wouldn't make any difference to them which it was.
The cattle were stampeding wildly, panicked by the gunfire, maddened by the smell of water. A thick cloud of dust billowed over everything, cutting visibility. Luis went with the cattle, yelling to agitate them even more, then finally broke free to turn his horse toward Prosper.
He rode the animal hard even in the heat, and it was white with lather by the time he reined it to a halt in front of the marshal's office. He jumped down, his booted feet thudding on the sidewalk as he shoved the door open. The office was empty.
The most logical place to look was the saloon. If the marshal wasn't there, someone would likely know his whereabouts.
But the marshal was nowhere in sight when he entered the saloon. "Where's Marshal Cobb?" he asked of anyone in the saloon.
"Don't rightly know," a man said. Luis recognized him as a shopkeeper.

"I thought I heard he's visitin' his daughter up Denver way for a few days," another said. "You got trouble?"
"Bellamy's trying to run his cattle into the Swann woman's valley," Luis said curtly. "There's shooting going on, and it'll be either a raping or a killing if it isn't stopped."
Everyone in the saloon was silent. Luis looked around at the men, but none of them were jumping to help. "Since the marshal's gone, are any of you willing to help that woman?"
Eyes shifted away. For the most part the men in the saloon at that time of day were townsfolk, merchants and clerks. They hadn't cleaned their weapons in years. If a bunch of rowdy cowhands had gone wild, they weren't going to stick their noses into it, at least as long as it stayed out of town. It wasn't like Dee Swann was a friend or anything; she always kept to herself.
Ranchers would have had weapons handy and been willing to help, but there weren't any ranchers in the saloon. They were too busy during the day doing what they could to keep their cattle alive. Luis turned away in disgust, his dark eyes going cold.
"Wait," Tillie said, hurrying toward him. She stepped out on the sidewalk, her hand on his arm. She looked pale. "Lucas Cochran on the Double C will help."
"She doesn't have that kind of time," Luis said harshly.
Tillie's brown eyes were huge and anguished. "Then you go back and help her, and I'll ride to the Double C."
Luis gave a brief nod, already turning away. "You'd better hurry."
He cut overland, pushing his tired horse hard and coming in from the side. He could still hear gunfire, which meant that the woman was holding her own. Despite his grimness his mouth twisted in a grin. She must be a real hellcat. A woman like that deserved all the help she could get.
He left his horse and worked his way the last hundred yards on foot, choosing a thick stand of trees for cover. Bellamy and his men had pretty well settled in their own cover and were taking their time squeezing off shots at the cabin. Some kept trying to work their way around and catch her from behind, but the cabin was in a large clear area, and there wasn't a lot of cover for them to use. The woman was a good shot. She was using a rifle now and was moving from window to window.

Luis considered his strategy. He didn't care about keeping either his identity or his position hidden; his only objective was to help the Swann woman prevent them from overrunning her cabin, or maybe turning the cattle back onto her land. It might even help if Bellamy's men knew he was helping her; though he had lived a calm life in Colorado, his skill with a pistol was well known. It might make some of them reconsider if they knew he was waiting for them.

Time was both their ally and their enemy. If he and the woman could hold off long enough, the Double C men would be able to get there. If aid didn't arrive by nightfall, then Bellamy's men would be able to reach the cabin undetected.

With that in mind, he cooly began choosing his targets. His purpose wasn't to keep them pinned down, but to rebalance the odds in his favor as much as he could. If a man was dead or severely wounded, then you didn't have to worry about him even in the dark. His mouth moved into a thin, cold smile. Hell, he'd spent enough time in Colorado anyway.

Tillie didn't take the time to change into riding clothes or to ask permission to borrow the nearest horse. By the time Luis was galloping out of town in one direction she was galloping in the other. Her garish short skirt made it possible for her to ride astride, though her legs were bared from the knee down. She glimpsed several shocked faces as she raced out of town but didn't spare a thought for the picture she made.

Her heart was pounding as hard as the horse's hooves on the packed earth. Oh, Kyle! she thought. Why had he done it? She would have lent him the money; no one would ever have known, and he could have kept his ranch, kept his dream of being a prosperous, respected rancher. Now he had attacked Dee Swann, and the townspeople would never forget, never accept him. It didn't matter that he had done it out of desperation; he would be condemned. And if Lucas Cochran didn't get there before Dee was raped or murdered, Kyle would be hanged.

The saddle leather rubbed raw patches on the insides of her tender thighs, but she didn't dare slow down, not when every minute counted. It would take Lucas a long time to get to Angel Creek anyway, maybe too long. At least Dee had Fronteras helping her now—unless they were both killed.

The horse began to tire. Panic welled up in her, but she refrained from kicking the poor beast. If she killed it by running it too hard in this heat, she would never reach the Double C in time. But the urge to hurry beat within

her like bird wings until her head echoed with the refrain, Hurry, before it's too late. Too late for Dee, too late for Kyle… too late for herself.
Then she saw the ranch buildings. The Double C ranch house was two-storied, with a white-columned porch wrapped all the way around it. She didn't pull on the reins until she reached it, and the exhausted horse stumbled clumsily.
"Lucas!" she screamed even as she slid from the saddle. "Lucas!" She ran up on the porch and pounded on the door with her fist.
"Here! Tillie, I'm over here."
She turned and saw him striding up from the barn, his long legs eating up the distance. She ran down the steps and sprinted across the yard toward him, screaming the entire way. "You've got to get down to Angel Creek! They've gone crazy, they're shooting at her, trying to take the land—"
She reached him, and he grabbed her arms to halt her. His blue eyes had turned to ice. If hell had been cold, it would have looked like his eyes.
"Who is it?" His fingers bit into her soft arms. She gasped for breath, and he roughly shook her. "Damn it, who is it?"
"It's Kyle," she said, still gulping air. "Kyle Bellamy. He's desperate—the Bar B's water is almost gone."
Lucas turned, roaring for everyone to get their rifles and saddle up. Every man within hearing ran to obey. Lucas sprinted for his own mount. Tillie ran after him, her red taffeta skirts kicking up and showing her petticoats.
"Luis Fronteras is helping her," she yelled. "He rode into town and sent me after you, then he went back."
Lucas gave a brief nod to show that he'd heard. The tight sense of panic in his chest eased a little as he realized Dee wasn't facing Bellamy and his men all alone.
He swung into the saddle, and Tillie grabbed his leg. "Don't kill Kyle," she begged frantically. "God, Lucas, please don't kill him. I love him. Please, please don't kill him, promise me."
Lucas looked down at her, that icy look still in his eyes. "I can't make any promises," he said. If Bellamy had harmed Dee, he wouldn't see another sunrise.
Lucas put spurs to his horse, riding hard for the pass that would get him to Angel Creek faster than any other way. Tillie stood in the yard and watched the men ride out, and tears slowly tracked down her dusty face.

Chapter 15

Dee crouched beneath one of the front windows. She had discarded the shotgun in favor of the rifle, for accuracy, but she was running out of shells. She had prepared for a lot of things, but never for a siege, and that's what this was.

At least they hadn't turned the cattle. Maybe the men hadn't tried but had turned their attention to her. After all, if she were dead, then they could move the cattle in without trouble.

She didn't know how long it had been going on because one of the shots had hit her clock, and she had no idea what time it was. Late afternoon. The sun was red and low in the sky. Come dark, they would approach the cabin, and she wouldn't be able to cover all the windows. She had already blocked the bedroom door so that even if anyone crawled through the bedroom window he wouldn't be able to come up behind her without her knowledge.

She gripped the rifle as she carefully watched for someone to make a careless move and show himself. The wood stock was slippery, and she wiped her hand on her skirt, but it didn't seem to help. She looked down and saw that it wasn't sweat on her hand, but blood. Some of the flying glass had cut her arm.

She was tired, deathly tired, but she didn't dare rest for even a minute. She was thirsty but couldn't even cross the room for a drink of water.

There. A slight movement, a hint of blue. Dee carefully sighted down the barrel and squeezed the trigger, not even hearing the sharp crack as the rifle fired. She saw a brief commotion of movement and knew she'd hit someone.

Immediately another volley of shots struck the little cabin, gouging out long splinters of wood, ricocheting off the wood stove. She flattened herself on the floor as a bullet zinged across the room, gaining herself more cuts from the shattered glass that covered the floor. There wasn't a piece of glass left in any of the windows.

Quickly she sat up, swinging the rifle around. One man darted from cover, and she fired, sending him diving back. Damn, she'd missed him.

It would be dark soon. She had to do something, but there was nothing she could do. If she fired without seeing a target, she would waste her bullets, but if she simply waited, they would win anyway.

She wiped her bloody hands on her skirt again. God, she was bleeding all over from cuts. Her clothes were soaked.
She didn't care. She was thinking with an awful clarity. Those men were in a blood lust, and if they didn't kill her outright, they would each take a turn raping her. And she knew she would rather die. They would not violate her body, the flesh that she had shared only with Lucas—not while she drew breath. Her instinct was to fight, and she supposed it was too late now to start going against her instincts. If she had to die, she intended to take as many of those bastards with her as she could.
She scrambled to her knees, put the rifle to her shoulder, and began firing. The rifle was a repeater, so she shot until it was empty, then hastily reloaded and began firing again. Return fire tore into the cabin.
The window frame splintered, and she fell back with a stifled scream. Her left shoulder burned like fire, and she glanced down to see a long, thin sliver of wood protruding from it. She tried to pull it out, but her fingers were too slippery to hold it. Since there was nothing she could do, she put it and the pain out of her mind.
Luis had attracted a lot of attention once Bellamy and his men had noticed they were being fired on from two positions. He had been hit twice—once a shallow burn on his left bicep that he had ignored, the second time in his right side. The wound hadn't hit any internal organs, but it had bled like a son of a bitch. He had pulled off his bandanna, pressed it over the long gouge, and resumed firing, but soon the blood was streaming down his hip and leg.
He had to have more pressure on the wound. He transferred the pistol to his left hand and pressed his right elbow hard against his side. A wave of dizziness made him shake his head in an effort to clear his vision. If Cochran didn't get there at once, it would be too late. The woman was still shooting, but it would be dark soon, and he was losing too much blood to be able to help her.
Lucas split up his men, sending some of them to circle around behind Bellamy while he and the rest of them approached unseen down the slope, keeping the barn between them and the line of fire. Because of the large clearing around the cabin none of Bellamy's men had been able to work around to the side, and Dee was concentrating all of her fire to the front, where they were using the trees as cover. The surge of relief he felt when he

heard her firing steadily made him feel weak. They were in time. Damn, what a woman!
He had to wait until his men who had flanked Bellamy had made their move, then his group began firing from the side. Bellamy didn't have a chance under the savage crossfire of the Double C men. Lucas realized that Dee was still shooting; she didn't know what was happening and was likely to kill some of his own men if she wasn't stopped. "I'm going into the cabin," he yelled. "Keep their heads down."
He ran toward the back stoop under the protection of a hail of bullets, but someone spied him anyway, and a bullet kicked up dust just in front of him. With all the lead flying it wasn't healthy for a man to stand and politely knock at a door; Dee would probably cut him in half with the shotgun anyway before she knew who he was. He leapt up on the back stoop and hit the door at a dead run, driving his muscled shoulder into it and sending it crashing back against the wall. Dee was at one of the front windows, and she scrabbled clumsily around, screaming as she fired the rifle. His heart clenched in pure terror when he saw her covered in blood, but he didn't pause for even a second. He dived to the floor, rolling to the side and coming up to lunge for her. She was still screaming as she swung the rifle at his head.
"Dee!" he yelled, grabbing her. "Goddammit, it's me, Lucas!" He wrested the rifle out of her bloody hands and tossed it aside, then wrapped his arms around her.
She shrieked, trying to throw herself backward even as she pounded at his face with her fists. Her eyes were wild, the pupils shrunk to tiny pinpoints.
"Dee!" he roared again, just trying to hold her still. She was hurt—God, she was hurt, and he didn't want to cause her any more pain, but he had to calm her down. He wrestled her down to the glass-covered floor, pinning her with his heavy weight. "Dee," he repeated, saying her name over and over. "Look at me. It's all right. I'm here, and I'll take care of you. Look at me."
Slowly she stilled, more from exhaustion than comprehension. She was quivering from head to foot, but at least she had quit fighting him. Her wild eyes were fastened on his face as if she were trying to make sense of what was happening. He kept talking to her, his voice low and soothing, and finally she blinked as understanding dawned. "Lucas," she murmured.
He was there. He was really there. She was conscious of relief, not so much because she was safe but because she could rest now. She was tired, so very,

very tired, and oddly cold. The pain that she had held at bay for so long finally caught up with her as she let her tired muscles relax. She heard herself make a strange moaning sound, and her body loosened into total limpness. Her head lolled on the plank flooring.

Lucas could barely breathe. She was drenched in blood, her clothing soaked, even her hair matted with it. For the first time he noticed a long sliver of wood stuck in her shoulder, and he felt sick. As gently as he could he released her and got to his feet. He kicked the furniture she had piled against the bedroom door away and jerked a blanket from the bed, shaking it to make certain it didn't have glass on it, too, then replacing it. Returning to the other room, he lifted Dee as carefully as possible and carried her to the bed.

He looked around for a lamp, but they had all been broken. He examined her as thoroughly as possible in the dim light, his heart pounding as he looked for gunshot wounds. A bullet had creased her left hipbone, and she had that wicked splinter in her shoulder, but all of her other wounds were cuts from the broken glass. She was covered with them—small cuts on her scalp and face, her neck and shoulders and arms. Taken separately, her wounds were not serious, but there were so many of them that she had lost a dangerous amount of blood. Her lips looked blue, and beneath the blood her skin had a chilling translucent quality to it.

He heard his own voice swearing low and savagely as he tried to halt the bleeding, but he wasn't aware of what he was saying. Such minor wounds, and she might yet die.

He heard booted feet crunching on the broken glass, and William Tobias appeared in the doorway. "She all right, boss?"

"No. She's lost a lot of blood. Get the wagon hitched up. We've got to get her into town."

"That Mexican, Fronteras, caught a couple of bullets. He's lost a right smart amount of blood, too, but I reckon he'll be all right. About five of the Bar B men need burying, some more need patching up. There was about thirty of the bastards after her. We hurt 'em the most, I reckon."

Lucas nodded, not taking his attention from Dee. "Hurry up with that wagon."

William left to see to it.

Lucas started to remove the long splinter from her shoulder but decided to leave it. Blood was oozing around it, but if he pulled it out the wound might

start bleeding heavily, and she didn't need to lose any more blood than she already had. He carefully wrapped the blanket around her and lifted her. William pulled the wagon right up to the porch just as Lucas stepped outside with his burden. His men were standing around with their weapons trained on the Bar B men, the look on their faces saying that they wished someone would try to get away. The wounded were sprawled on the ground; the dead had been left where they lay.

"Where's Fronteras?" Lucas asked as he gently placed Dee on the wagon bed. She didn't move.

"Here."

"Put him on the wagon, too."

Two of his men lifted one of the wounded and laid him on the wagon. Lucas saw the Mexican's dark eyes open. "Is she all right?" he asked huskily.

"She's hurt," Lucas replied, his voice tight. "Fronteras, you have a place on my ranch for the rest of your life if you want it."

Luis managed a semblance of a smile, then his eyes closed again.

"Will, get them to the doc. I'll be along in a few minutes." Lucas stepped back. William nodded and slapped the reins against the horse's back.

Slowly Lucas turned his head to look at the Bar B men. Killing rage was bubbling in his veins, and it was cold, ice cold. Kyle Bellamy stood with his men, his head down and his arms hanging loose at his sides.

Lucas wasn't aware of moving, but suddenly Bellamy's shirt was knotted in his big fist. The man looked up, and Lucas's powerful right arm cocked back, then drove his iron-hard fist into Bellamy's face.

He had never before taken joy in fighting, but he felt savage satisfaction every time his fists thudded into Bellamy. He beat the man to the ground, then pulled him up and beat him some more. He kept seeing Dee's blood-soaked body, and he hit Bellamy even harder, feeling ribs crack as he drove his fists into the man's sides and midsection. Bellamy made no effort to fight back, merely raising his arms to try to block some of the blows. That didn't incline Lucas toward mercy.

Finally Bellamy pitched forward and lay still, and one of the Double C men caught Lucas's arm as he started for him again. "No point in it, boss," the man said. "He can't feel a thing."

Lucas halted and stared down at the motionless man at his feet. His face was unrecognizable, but Lucas didn't feel the satisfaction of vengeance. His rage was so deep that even killing Bellamy wouldn't ease it.

He hadn't promised Tillie that he wouldn't kill Bellamy, but he owed her. If she hadn't ridden her heart out to reach him, Dee would have died alone in her cabin. He let his hands drop.
"What do we do with them?" one of the men asked.
Lucas growled. There wasn't any use in taking them into town; they hadn't broken any of the laws within the marshal's jurisdiction. Unless he was willing to string them all up right now there was nothing to be done. "Let them go," he said.
He looked at the Bar B men, and his voice was almost a snarl when he said, "Get off this land, you bastards, and take your scum with you. If any of you ever feel brave enough to attack a lone woman again, I swear to God I'll make you think hell is paradise compared to what I'll do to you before you die. Is that clear?"
The Bar B men answered with sullen mutters. Lucas went to his horse and mounted. If he didn't leave, he was likely to kill them all anyway.
It was full dark, and the moon hadn't yet risen, but the light from the countless stars was enough to let him see the road. He rode as fast as he dared and caught up with the wagon just before it got to town.
Doc Pendergrass and his wife, Etta, swiftly went to work on Dee. Luis Fronteras had been put in another room, and he was deemed less critical since he was still conscious and Dee wasn't. Lucas was pushed from the room as soon as he had placed Dee on the table, and he paced back and forth like a caged animal.
Tillie slipped in the door. Though the saloon would be busy now that it was night, she was wearing a dark green dress with long sleeves and a high neckline rather than the short, gaudy outfit she wore when working. Her face was very pale, but her expression was calm. "Did you get there in time?" she asked.
Lucas took off his hat and ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah. I hope. She's cut up pretty bad from the glass where they shot the windows out, and she's lost a lot of blood."
"But they didn't—"
"No. She was still holding them off when we got there."
He hadn't realized how taut she had been until he saw her subtly relax. Her enormous brown eyes never left his face. "Kyle?" she whispered.
"I beat the hell out of him."
She flinched, then controlled herself again. "Thank you, Lucas."

He shook his head. "No. She'd be dead now if it hadn't been for you."
"And Luis Fronteras. Is he all right?"
"He's hurt, but he'll make it."
She stood with her head bent for a minute, then sighed and straightened. She squeezed his arm in a gentle caress before she left.
It was over an hour before Doc Pendergrass came out, and he firmly shut the door behind him when Lucas started forward. "I got all the bleeding stopped," Doc said. "Etta's cleaning her up now."
"Is she conscious?"
"Not really. She roused up a little a couple of times but drifted out again. Sleep's the best thing for her right now. I'll tell you more after I take care of Fronteras."
Lucas sat down with his elbows propped on his knees and his head hanging forward. He needed to see her, to reassure himself that she was all right.
It didn't take the doctor as long with Luis as it had with Dee. He was out again in fifteen minutes. "Stitched up and sleeping," Doc said tiredly. "He'll be all right, probably up and around in a couple of days."
"What about Dee?" Lucas asked in a hard voice.
Doc sighed and rubbed his eyes. He was a slim, good-looking man in his early forties, but right now weariness made him look ten years older. "There were a lot of cuts. She's had a bad shock to her system. She's going to be a very sick woman for several days, feverish and weak."
"I want to take her to the ranch. Is it safe to move her?"
Doc looked up in surprise, then comprehension showed in his face. Like everyone else in town, he had thought Lucas connected with Olivia Millican. Lucas Cochran and Dee Swann… well, well. "No," he finally answered. "Not for a couple of days, maybe longer. It'd be better for her to stay here with Etta to look after her anyway."
Lucas's face was hard. "When she's well enough to travel I'm taking her to the ranch." There was a part of him that wouldn't relax until he had her safe under his roof. Until the day he died he would never forget how he had felt when he had first seen her soaked in her own blood.

Chapter 16

Luis was hurt. Olivia didn't hear about what had happened until the next morning, when Beatrice Padgett visited and was relating, in shocked tones, the events of the day before to Honora. "… and one of Mr. Bellamy's men, a Mr. Fronteras—I believe he must be a Mexican—decided to help Dee hold them off, and he was shot, too."

Olivia made a muffled sound of shock. Honora and Beatrice looked toward her, and Honora quickly got to her feet at the sight of her daughter's white face. "Sit down, dear," she said, urging Olivia toward a chair. "It's horrible, isn't it?"

But Olivia pulled back, her eyes full of anguish. "Where—where is he?" she gasped. "Mr. Fronteras. Where is he?"

"Why, at Dr. Pendergrass's, of course. Mr. Cochran took both him and Dee to the doctor's to be tended," Beatrice answered. "That saloon girl, the one called Tillie, fetched Mr. Cochran to help. Isn't that the strangest thing? I wonder why she rode all the way out to the Double C."

Olivia whirled and ran from the house, ignoring Honora's alarmed cry. Luis! Beatrice hadn't said how seriously he was hurt, but it must be bad if he was still at the doctor's. For the first time in her life Olivia forgot about decorum and dignity; she snatched her skirts up and ran, her heart thudding in a sick panic. It was three blocks to Dr. Pendergrass's office. She darted around people on the sidewalks when she could and shoved past them otherwise. By the time she reached the office her hair was falling down and she was gasping for breath, but she had never cared less for her appearance. She shoved the door open and stumbled inside. The first person she saw was Etta Pendergrass. "Where is he?"

Etta immediately assumed that there was an emergency. "I'll get him, dear. He's just in here checking Mr. Fronteras—"

Olivia bolted past her into the room she had indicated. Dr. Pendergrass looked up at her precipitous entrance and leapt to the same conclusion his wife had. "What's happened, Olivia?" Surely only a serious accident or illness concerning one of her parents could prompt Olivia into such uncharacteristic actions.

But Olivia didn't answer. Her hands flew to her mouth as she stared at Luis, lying on his left side, his upper torso bare. A large white bandage was located at his waist. Tears swam in her eyes, blurring her vision.

"Luis?" she whispered, her voice begging. Let him be all right, she prayed silently. Please let him be all right.

He shifted gingerly onto his back, his dark eyes narrowing at her white face. "Would you let me speak to Miss Millican in private?" he asked the doctor in a tone that commanded rather than requested.
Dr. Pendergrass arched his brows a little and said, "Of course." He left the room, closing the door behind him.
Luis held out his hand, and Olivia ran to him. She touched his face, his chest, his shoulders, whispering incoherently while tears slid down her cheeks. Holding his left hand to the bandage on his side, he struggled to a sitting position. "I'm all right," he soothed, pulling her close to him and kissing her hair. "It's just a flesh wound. I'm stiff and weak, but it isn't serious."
"I just heard," she stammered, clinging to him. "I'd have been here last night if I'd known. Why didn't you have someone send for me? Why?"
Using his thumb, he wiped her cheeks. "And let everyone know?" he asked gently.
She struggled to control her breathing. "Well, they know now," she blurted. "I ran through town like a madwoman."
He was silent a minute while his hand rubbed her back in comfort. "I could think of something as an excuse if you want."
Olivia stilled with her head on his shoulder. He wasn't going to take advantage of the situation to force the issue. He had said it was her decision, and he was standing by that. But could she go back to pretending she didn't care about him? Just hearing that he'd been hurt had stripped away the last film of doubt from her mind. Why was she dithering when she felt that way about him? She had never been a silly person, but she had certainly been acting silly the past couple of months. Her greatest dream had come true, and she had been afraid to accept it because Luis Fronteras wasn't a landed gentleman. She was worse than silly; she was a snob.
Slowly she lifted her head, her damp blue eyes locking with his dark ones. A soft smile trembled on her lips. "No, I don't want you to lie for me," she said in as steady a voice as she could muster. "What I want is to marry you, Luis Fronteras."
His dark eyes were piercing, and he held her chin so that she couldn't look away. "Are you sure? Make very certain, Olivia, because once you say yes I won't let you go no matter what happens. I'm not a gentleman. I keep what's mine, and I'll fight as dirty as I have to to keep it."

She framed his face with her hands and leaned forward to kiss him. "Yes," she said. A smile broke like the sun coming up, bathing her face in radiance. "Yes. Yes yes yes yes yes. How many times do I have to say it before it's official?"
His dark brows arched, and he locked her in his arms. "It's official," he said. "We'll get married as soon as possible."
"Mother will want me to be married in the church. It'll take at least a month to get everything arranged."
"A month!" he growled. Then he warned, "Don't be surprised if your parents refuse to have anything to do with me."
She felt sad at the possibility but faced it. "If they do, that's their loss."
Nothing would stop her from marrying Luis. Somehow it no longer mattered that she didn't know how they would live, or even where. She would be with him, and that was all that mattered. She loved him. It was a simple truth, and she wondered why it had taken her so long to recognize it. She had learned in a few horrible moments that morning how swiftly fate could step in and perhaps take him away forever. Before another minute passed she wanted to give him the gift of her love. She said it simply. "I love you."
His pupils flared until his eyes were black and bottomless. "And I love you. We may not live in a big house, but I'll take very good care of you."
"I'm sure you will." A blush rosied her cheeks, but her gaze remained steady. "In all the ways that matter."
He had the most devilish grin she had ever seen, and the power of it almost made her heart stop. "Yes, darling, in that way, too."
He had to kiss her, and it was even more potent than it had been before, because now she felt no need to draw back. She gave him all of her response and the complete freedom of her body. It was only his stifled groan when he moved too abruptly that made them realize where they were and draw back.
Her concern, which had abated when she had seen that he wasn't mortally wounded, returned full force. Now that she had calmed down she could see how drawn and pale he was, and the dark circles beneath his eyes. "Lie back down," she urged, pressing his shoulder with her hand.
He obeyed because he was as weak as a kitten.
Olivia settled the pillow under his head and drew the blanket up to his chest, then sat down beside him with his hand clasped in hers. She couldn't

bear to be separated from him just yet. "What happened?" she asked. "Who shot you?"
"In that kind of gunfight it doesn't matter. So many people were shooting there's no way to know."
"But what happened? Why did it happen?"
"Bellamy decided to drive his cattle onto Dee Swann's property. The Bar B doesn't have much water left, and I guess he was desperate. Desperate people do stupid things." Luis sighed tiredly. "I thought she'd given him permission, but she hadn't, and she shot to spook the cattle, turn them around. Bellamy seemed to go mad. He started shooting at her, and some of the men joined in."
"And you helped her. Do you even know her?" She was filled with admiration for what he had done.
"No, but she was a woman alone, and it was her land. She was in the right." He decided that it might not be smart to tell his future wife that he had a deep and lasting fondness for women in general, and there was no way he could stand by and let a woman be terrorized. Not that Dee Swann had seemed frightened, he reflected with admiration. She had faced Bellamy like an Amazon.
"Dee's a wonderful friend," Olivia said softly. "Thank you for saving her life. I heard some of the men in town wouldn't try to help her, I think probably because she keeps to herself and doesn't seem to need anyone, but that's just an act. I'm glad you were there when she did need someone's help. I only wish you hadn't been hurt."
"I didn't do it by myself. If Tillie hadn't gone after Cochran, and he hadn't got there as fast as he did, Dee and I would both be dead."
Olivia stroked his hand, loving the strength in his lean fingers. "I'll ride out to help her get the cabin straightened up."
Luis's face tightened. "She isn't at the cabin. She's right here. Doc says she's cut up pretty bad and lost too much blood. He's been up with her all night, and now fever is setting in. He's worried about her."
Olivia turned white and jumped to her feet. She hadn't even asked if Dee was hurt! Her mind had emptied of everything but Luis when she'd heard he had been shot. "Oh, my God," she said, and tears slipped down her cheeks. Luis reached out a steadying hand, but she whispered, "I have to go to her." She ran from the room.

Her friend lay silent and motionless except for the faint rise and fall of her chest. The only color in her face was from the livid cuts that marred her skin. Dee had always been so vital that Olivia almost didn't recognize her lying so still. She had never imagined anything could bring Dee down.
Etta was sitting by the bed, keeping a cold cloth on Dee's forehead. Olivia could see the worry plain in her eyes.
"Has she been awake?" Olivia asked, agonized.
Etta shook her head. "She hasn't stirred since Lucas brought her in last night."
Olivia swiped at her wet cheeks. "You must be so tired you can hardly sit up," she said. "I'll sit with her while you rest."
Tillie rode out to the Bar B. Though there was activity around the ranch house, there was a strangely abandoned feel to it. All of the men looked exhausted, even those who hadn't taken part in the fight, for they had been chasing the scattered cattle for most of the night.
"Where's Mr. Bellamy?" she asked one of them.
"In the house, ma'am."
She knocked, but no one answered, and after knocking a second time she opened the door. "Kyle?"
There was no answer. She walked through the downstairs and found it deserted, then went upstairs. Kyle's bedroom was on the left. She tapped on the door, which was ajar, then stepped inside.
He lay on the bed, fully clothed except for his boots. His shirt bore reddish-brown stains. She walked over and stood beside the bed, looking down at him. Compassion turned her eyes black. He had tried to clean his face, for a stained cloth lay on the floor, but dried blood still caked one of his nostrils and was splotched in his hair and on his neck.
His poor face was so swollen and misshappen she could barely recognize him. Both eyes were blackened and puffy, his nose was broken, and huge knots distorted his cheekbones and jaw.
"Kyle," she said softly.
He shifted a little and groaned. One of his eyes opened a slit.
"I'll get some water and clean you up," she murmured, bending over him so he could see her without turning his head.
He sighed, then muttered, "Ribs." His mouth was so swollen that the word sounded mushy.
"Your ribs are hurt?"

"Yeah."
She touched his arm. "I'll be right back."
She got what she needed from downstairs and returned to his bedroom with her supplies. He didn't look as if he had moved an inch.
She took a pair of scissors and deftly cut his shirt off of him, then probed his ribs. His midsection was mottled with black and purple bruises, testimony to the power of Lucas Cochran's fists. As gently as possible she probed his ribs, searching for breaks. He cried out when she touched a certain place, but she couldn't feel anything out of place and decided they were only cracked.
"Your ribs need to be wrapped," she said. "Kyle, darling, you'll have to sit up. I know it hurts, but I can't do anything with you lying down."
She gently coaxed him into a sitting position, supporting him as much as she was able, but Kyle was a big man, and she didn't have enough strength to give him much aid. When he was sitting unsteadily on the side of the bed she wrapped a wide band of cloth around him, pulling it tight. He groaned but then gave a sigh of relief as the tight wrapping supported his ribs and kept them from moving.
While he was sitting up she washed his face, taking care to use only the lightest touch, then cleaned the blood from his hair and neck.
"Thirsty," he mumbled.
She got him some water. He took a cautious sip and rinsed it around in his mouth, then spat it out into the bowl, turning the water inside an even darker red. Then he slowly drank the rest of the water.
"If you can stand up, I'll undress you," she said, but he couldn't. She helped him to lie down and struggled until she had wrestled the rest of his clothing off, then covered his nude body with a sheet. "Sleep," she said. "I'll stay here with you."
She was as good as her word. She held his hand while he slept, and every time she looked at his face her eyes blurred with tears. She knew she had done the right thing, but that didn't make it easy.
She loved him so much, had loved him for years. He thought it was only coincidence that they had both settled in the same area, but she had found out where he was and left her luxurious house in Denver, where she had been the pampered mistress of a very wealthy man, without a backward look.

He had wanted respectability so much. She knew how he had grown up and knew how he had wanted to put all of that behind him. Kyle wasn't a bad man, though he could easily have been, considering what his life had been like. It was just that the ranch and what it represented had come to mean so much to him; he had lost all perspective when it had been threatened, and now he had destroyed the reputation he had worked so hard to build.
But he was alive, and that was all that mattered to her.
It was late that night before he woke again, and she supported him while he used the chamber pot. He asked for more water but didn't want anything to eat. He went back to sleep.
By morning he was more alert, and Tillie fed him some bread softened in milk. When he indicated he didn't want any more she knew she couldn't put if off any longer.
She had learned to face everything in life without flinching, especially the hardest parts, so now she didn't look away from him. "I couldn't let you kill Dee Swann," she said. "People may never forgive you for what you did, but if she had been killed or raped, you'd have hanged. I'm the one who got Lucas Cochran to stop you."
His left eye was swollen completely shut, and his right eye would open only a slit. Carefully he looked up at her, his gaze devoid of anger. He just looked empty. "I had to do it," he said, the words indistinct. "The water… but it didn't work. I didn't mean to hurt her. But I lost. I lost it all."
"No," she said fiercely. "You haven't lost it all. You're still alive, and that's what matters most. Even if this ranch turns to dust, you'll be able to start again. Maybe not here, but there are other places. I have money, and you've always been able to win at the card table. We'll get by."
"We?" he asked. His one good eye didn't move from her.
"Yes, we. We make a good team."
Almost imperceptibly he nodded.

Chapter 17

Lucas stood beside Dee's bed, looking down at her. Despite her fever her face was deathly pale.
"Has she woke up?" he asked Etta, and his voice was harsh.

The doctor's wife gave him a concerned look and shook her head. "But that isn't surprising. She's very sick, and rest is the best thing for her." She dipped a cloth in cool water, wrung it out, and placed it across Dee's forehead. Dee never stirred.

Lucas wearily rubbed his eyes. It had been almost two full days, and she still hadn't so much as opened her eyes or said a word. After losing so much blood how could she have any strength to fight the fever?

Beneath the nightgown Etta had clothed her in Dee's shoulder was covered by a bulky bandage. He suspected that the shoulder wound was the main source of the fever, but Doc said that he'd cleaned it good and that it was no more inflamed than any of the cuts. It was just that all together her wounds had been a tremendous shock to her system. Added to that, she had exhausted herself trying to fight off the Bar B men. Recovery would take time.

But she was so damn still. Even when she had fallen out of the loft she had still been full of spirit despite the fact that she could barely move. Dee was a fighter, but how could she fight when she wasn't conscious? He was so used to her strength and fierceness that this utter helplessness, this complete absence of her fire made him sick with fear.

In his mind she had always been formidable as both foe and lover. It was a shock to look at her now and realize that she was both smaller and more fragile than he'd ever imagined. He'd always thought of her as a tall woman, even though he knew he could look down on the top of her head; it was the impression that she gave, the way she carried herself, the arrogant tilt of her head, her towering pride—all of these combined made him see her as larger than she truly was. She was of only medium height, if that, and her bones were as slender as a child's. He was stunned at how frail she looked.

He was full of rage at what had happened to her, a rage that burned far deeper and hotter than the anger he'd felt when she had fallen out of the loft. None of it would have happened if she lived like other women. On a rational basis he knew that it wasn't her fault, that accidents happened, that she wasn't to blame for Kyle Bellamy's murderous stupidity. But for as long as she lived out at Angel Creek things like this would happen, her fault or not. The land invited greed with its very perfection, and there would always be someone who thought he could take it away from her. And being herself, Dee would always fight rather than try to protect herself by running.

It was the water that made the Angel Creek valley what it was, and water that was the cause of all this.
He stared down at her, lying there as still as death. If he didn't do something to stop it, the next time really might kill her.
He nodded to Etta and strode out, his face set in lines of grim determination. The root of it all was the water. Without it the valley would lose its value. Dee wouldn't have any reason for clinging to it, and she would have to live a more reasonable way. There wouldn't be a reason for anyone to shoot at her, or for her to work like a man.
He rode back to the Double C and told William to get ten of the men and some shovels and be ready to ride in fifteen minutes. Then he went to the storeroom and got a couple of sticks of dynamite, in case they were needed. He already knew how the creek forked up in the mountains, sending most of the water down the east side of the range and into the valley. It had been years since he'd been up there, but he could see in his mind just how the creek beds split. With any luck he'd be able to take away the one thing that made Dee's land so valuable.
God, she'd be mad, but there wouldn't be anything she could do about it. Since it would be his fault that the land had lost its value he would give her the same amount he'd already offered her, and she wouldn't have any choice but to take it and move to town. Eventually she would cool down, and then he'd start courting her again, out in the open this time. He figured by Christmas he'd have her talked around to marrying him, because she couldn't deny the fire between them any more than he could. They'd make love and babies and probably fight like two wildcats tangled up in a pillowcase, and they'd enjoy every minute of it.
They found the gap in the mountain where Angel Creek forked and the lower creek bed cut to the east. "Just look at that water," William said, shaking his head. "Straight from the snowcaps."
Lucas walked the bank, examining the fork. Up there it was big enough to be called a river, and it still flowed strong and clear, deep enough that there was some overflow into the fork that ran down onto his property, though it had been greatly reduced. If he could dig the western creek bed lower at the fork, then the water would divert onto the western side of the mountain.
He pulled off his boots and waded out into the western fork, catching his breath at the icy water. He dug his toes into the soft silt and cursed because just under the thin layer of silt was bedrock. He moved up and down the

fork and found the same thing. There was no way they were going to dig through rock, and the dynamite fuse wouldn't burn under water.
He waded out again and stood looking at the water, thinking. The only way to blow that bedrock was to dry out the western fork.
He got a shovel and hefted it in his gloved hand. "Start digging," he told the men. "Pile dirt here at the fork and divert all the water to the east."
"Boss, that'll dry up our water completely," William said, looking at him as if he'd lost all of his senses.
"Temporarily," Lucas said. "When it's dry I'm going to blow the bedrock and lower the creek bed."
William turned back to the river and studied it, then a grin spread across his weathered face. "You're gonna turn that water our way."
"I sure am."
"Dee Swann ain't gonna like it worth a damn."
"I'll handle Dee Swann," Lucas said.
It took them three days. They dug up shovelfuls of dirt and packed the west fork, closing it off. The river swung happily eastward, emptying all of its crystal water into the Angel Creek valley. When the west fork was dry Lucas drilled holes in the bedrock and set the dynamite in it, then strung a long fuse and lit it. He and the men ran like hell for as far as they could before the dynamite blew with a thunderous explosion that shook the ground beneath their feet.
The explosion destroyed the earth dam they had built, and the river split once more, water tumbling down both sides of the mountain. The majority of the flow now went down the west side.
"Close off the east fork," he said. "I want a dam packed so solid that not even a trickle goes down the east side of the mountain. We'll seal it off with clay."
The force of the water would erode the dam, and he'd have to have it repaired regularly, but that would be a small price to pay for peace of mind. At least he'd be able to sleep at night without worrying about Dee's safety.
By late afternoon of the third day the eastern fork was blocked.
Despite his exhaustion he had been riding into town every night to see Dee. Olivia and Etta had been taking turns sitting with her, and the worry etched on Olivia's face made him break out in a cold sweat every time he thought about it. The night before Dee had awakened briefly for the second time, but the fever still hadn't broken. Four days of a high fever had taken a

visible toll on her body, wasting away flesh she hadn't needed to lose. She had recognized him, whispered his name. Lucas had held her hand and talked to her, but she had slipped back into sleep almost immediately. Olivia had touched his shoulder in comfort. "She'll be all right," she said, her voice breaking a little. "She has to be."

He was bone tired, but he couldn't let a day go by without seeing her, whether she knew he was there or not. It was as much for himself as for her that he went into town that night. Every time he saw her he was convinced anew that he had done the right thing, the only thing that would protect her. He didn't delude himself that she would take it well when she found out what he'd done, but by God, he'd never again have to see her lying so deathly still.

This time, however, Olivia looked up with a smile when he entered. She held a finger to her lips and motioned him back out of the room, following him and carefully closing the door behind her. "The fever broke," she said, beaming. "She ate a little bit of soup, then went back to sleep."

Relief washed through him like a flood. He was still exhausted, but he felt a hundred pounds lighter, as if lead weights had dropped from his shoulders. "Did she talk?"

"She asked for water, but if you mean did she carry on a conversation, the answer is no. She's still very sick, Lucas, and weak. She won't get over this in a couple of days. Dr. Pendergrass says it will be three or four weeks before she'll be strong enough to look after herself."

He didn't even have to think about it. He knew exactly what he wanted. "I'm taking her to the Double C tomorrow."

Olivia gaped at him. "You can't do that!"

"Yes, I can. It'll be quieter there than it is here, with people going in and out."

"But she's a woman!"

He lifted his eyebrows at her. "Believe me, I noticed."

"But that's why she can't stay with you."

"She almost died. She's sure not in any shape for what you're thinking," Lucas said bluntly, bringing a blush to Olivia's cheeks. "I'll take care of her, get her back on her feet. And I'm not asking permission, Olivia, I'm telling you what I'm going to do."

Olivia took a deep breath and tried again. "You don't have any women out there on that ranch. Who's going to bathe her, change her clothes? I've

already talked with Mother about taking her home with me. Surely you can see that she can't possibly go out to the ranch." Her voice softened. "She's my best friend, Lucas. I know how much she means to you. I'll take good care of her, I promise."
He looked at her sharply. "Dee told me you two were friends, but—"
"Best friends," Olivia repeated. "I feel a bit smug because I thought from the beginning that the two of you were perfectly suited for each other."
Lucas cleared his throat. "I think I owe you an apology, Olivia. I know nothing was ever said between us, but I gave you and everyone else the impression that I intended—"
She put her hand on his sleeve. "No apology is needed. I like you very much as a friend, but I never wanted anything more. You didn't either, really. Besides, I'm very much in love with someone else."
"Do tell." He lifted his eyebrows. "Who's the lucky man?"
"Luis Fronteras."
"Hell!" he said in surprise, then he apologized. "Sorry. He's doing all right, isn't he? I've had so much on my mind I haven't asked."
"He's staying at Lindfor's Hotel now. He's almost recovered."
He gave an approving nod; he couldn't fault Olivia's selection, even if Fronteras wasn't the type of man he'd ever thought would appeal to her. A hard look came into his eyes. "Some folks might have something to say about him, whether it's their business or not. I owe him a debt I won't ever be able to repay, so if you need my help in anything, all you have to do is get in touch."
"Thank you, Lucas." She rose up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I'll remember that. And I'll take good care of Dee for you."
His face changed, his eyes glittering stubbornly. "I know you would, but I haven't changed my mind. I'm taking her with me."
"You have to consider her reputation," Olivia said in exasperation. "People will talk."
His smile was chilling. "If they're smart, they won't."
"Well, they will. You can't take care of her like that."
Her reasoning gave him pause. He'd intended to do those intimate things for Dee himself, but letting the entire town know was something else. He adjusted his plans but didn't change his mind. "I know you'd take care of her, but I want her with me. I'll hire a woman to help. Sid Acray's oldest girl would be glad of the money." Not only did he want Dee close by, but if she

was at the ranch he could control who saw her. That way she wouldn't hear about what he'd done to Angel Creek from anyone else but him, when he decided it was a good time to tell her.
Olivia saw from the expression in those hard blue eyes that he wasn't going to be swayed. He wanted Dee Swann on the Double C, and that's where she'd be. Well, she had wished for Lucas and Dee to get together, and she had gotten her wish. Even with Sid Acray's daughter for a chaperon the townfolk would be scandalized if they didn't get married.
She gave him a stern look. "Do you plan on marrying her?"
"Just as soon as I can talk her around. But don't tell her," he cautioned. "Maybe I can surprise her into saying yes if she hasn't had time to think about it." They smiled at each other in perfect accord.
Lucas was back the next morning with a buckboard, the wagon bed padded with quilts. Etta Pendergrass was severely aggravated with her husband for not telling Lucas that Dee was too sick to be moved, but he refused to lie just because his wife was shocked by what she considered a scandalous idea. Dee was very ill, but she would recover just as fast at the Double C as she would in town. Besides, he wasn't fool enough to try to stop Lucas Cochran when he'd made up his mind to do something.
Dee was awake when Lucas entered the room, her eyes dull but aware. "Lucas," she whispered.
He wanted to snatch her up and crush her to his chest, but she was so very frail that he restrained himself. Instead he picked up her hand and stroked her fingers. "I'm taking you home with me," he said.
She nodded and managed a little smile. He wrapped her in one of the quilts he had brought and carried her out to the buckboard. A small knot of people gathered on the sidewalk, murmuring among themselves. The Acray girl, Betsy, climbed into the back to watch over Dee on the trip back to the ranch.
Doc Pendergrass, Etta, and Olivia followed him out. "Just make sure she eats and doesn't try to do too much too soon," Doc told him. "She won't feel like getting out of bed for another week or so at least, but rest is the best thing for her."
"Betsy will take good care of her," Lucas said, mindful of the people listening. He was filled with satisfaction. The circumstances weren't what he would have liked, and there were some bad storms ahead, but for now Dee would be right where he wanted her—under his roof.

He handled the buckboard carefully on the trip to the ranch, taking twice as long as it would to ride it on a horse, but he tried not to jostle Dee in case her shoulder was more painful than he realized. It was nerve-racking trying to see every rough spot in the road, listening for even a change in her breathing. When at last the ranch house came in sight he heaved a relieved sigh.

He reined in the horse at the porch and stepped over the seat into the wagon bed, going down on one knee beside Dee. "Run inside and turn back the covers on the bed," he told Betsy. "Her bedroom is upstairs, the second door on the right."

Betsy jumped down and scurried to do his bidding. She was only seventeen and thoroughly intimidated by Lucas, though he'd tried to put her at ease. But there was something about him that made some women nervous, so he put it out of his mind.

Dee was awake, though there was still that disturbing lack of expression in her eyes. It was as if she saw and understood but just couldn't muster the strength to care about anything. "Tell me if I hurt you," he said as he slid her on the quilts to the edge of the wagon bed so he could lift her without jostling her any more than necessary. He jumped down and gathered her in his arms, holding her close against his chest. He had carried her before and knew how much lighter she was now. His heart gave a big thud as a remnant of fear lashed him. The loss of blood had come so close to killing her that he didn't think he'd ever recover.

Betsy was standing beside the bed when he carried Dee in. He placed his precious burden down and unwrapped her from the quilt, then settled the covers over her. "Do you want anything to eat?" he asked. "Or to drink?"

"Water," she said.

Lucas glanced at Betsy, who scurried to the water pitcher sitting nearby. "Whatever you want, just tell Betsy," he said, stroking her cheek. "Sleep as much as you want. All you have to do now is get well."

He dropped his hand and turned to leave, but she said, "Lucas," and he turned back.

"The cattle," she whispered. "My garden—"

Even now she was worried about that damn garden! He controlled his spurt of anger to give her the assurance she needed. "They didn't get in it. You stampeded them all the way back to the Bar B."

A slight smile spread over her colorless lips. Betsy brought the glass of water, and he moved so she could support Dee's head and let her sip. By the time Dee signaled that she had had enough and Betsy let her head rest on the pillow again Dee's eyes were closing with fatigue. Lucas quietly left the room.

He would have only a few weeks until she regained her strength and he'd have to tell her about the water. He meant to make the most of his period of grace to strengthen the bonds between them while he could. As soon as she was well enough to do without Betsy she would be all his.

It was the custom in the Millican family to spend the evening together after dinner, reading or sewing or just talking. Even when Olivia was a little girl she had been included in that intimate time, her parents always making her feel that her childish contributions to the conversation were as important as theirs. After losing their other children Wilson and Honora had doubly appreciated the preciousness of their daughter and had devoted themselves to making her life as perfect as they possibly could. The harmony of those after-dinner hours had always been a part of her life that Olivia loved, and she feared that she was about to ruin it. Luis had offered to be with her when she told them, but she had declined. If there was any unpleasantness, she didn't want him to hear it. It was ridiculous to protect him, but part of her reasoning was based on diplomacy. It would be easier for him to get along with her parents at a later date if there weren't any memories of harsh words between them.

Strangely enough, there didn't seem to be any gossip. Honora and Beatrice had both been discreet about her behavior when she had learned Luis had been hurt. Etta and Dr. Pendergrass had evidently not said anything either about the way she had flown to Luis's bedside. Olivia almost wished there had been gossip so she wouldn't have to introduce the subject so abruptly. There didn't seem to be any other way to do it, however, so she took a deep breath and said, "Mother, Papa, I have something to tell you." Her mother turned to look at her expectantly, and Wilson put his paper down. "I've fallen in love, and I'm going to be married."

Their eyes rounded with surprise, then Honora clapped her hands and jumped up. "That's wonderful," she cried, laughing excitedly. "I just knew Mr. Cochran would propose, though I did wonder when—"

"Mother, no," Olivia interrupted. "It isn't Lucas."

Both their faces had been wreathed in smiles, but now their expressions went blank with surprise. "Not Lucas?" Wilson asked with a perplexed frown. "But he's the only one who's been courting you, except for Bellamy, and of course you'd never have anything to do with him. Everyone in town thought—"
"Everyone but the two people involved," Olivia replied gently. "Lucas is a friend, but we've never been in love."
"But if it isn't Mr. Cochran, then who is it?" Honora recovered from her surprise and was fairly quivering with curiosity.
"Luis Fronteras."
Again their faces went blank. Honora sank into her chair. "Who?" she asked in bewilderment. The name was familiar, but she couldn't place it. And it sounded… foreign.
"Luis Fronteras. He worked for Mr. Bellamy. He's the man who helped Dee until the Double C men could get there."
"A gunman?" Wilson was incredulous. "You say you're going to marry a Mexican gunman? Olivia, that's ridiculous. Why, you don't even know him."
"A Mexican!" Honora's eyes rounded with shock.
"On the contrary, I know him well." Olivia met their gazes. "I've been riding with him every Sunday. And I love him."
Wilson folded his paper and tossed it aside. "That's impossible. You have absolutely nothing in common with a man like that. Why, he'll never settle down and provide you with a home."
"Perhaps where I live won't be like this," Olivia admitted. "But this isn't an impulsive decision. I've thought about it for a couple of months. I could marry a man who could give me a big house and a lot of clothes, but I wouldn't be one tenth as happy with him as I would be in a tent with Luis. I want to have a family with him, and I trust him to take care of me and our children. What does it matter if he isn't rich?"
"You'll find it matters a great deal when you have to do without." Wilson shook his head. "We've always done our best to shelter you, so you don't have any real idea of the kind of life you're proposing to lead. Darling, you deserve much more than he can give you. You couldn't survive."
"Of course I can. Don't you see, he loves me. And I love him. That's what I need, what I've always wanted more than anything else. Not to marry a rich man, but to marry a man I love."

"Absolutely not," Wilson said sternly. "I forbid it. You're just infatuated with him and have no idea what you're talking about. I realize he's a romantic sort of figure, especially after the way he helped Dee, but you need stability to have a good marriage, not a gun sharp who'll always be looking over his shoulder."
"Oh, Papa," Olivia said sadly. "I'm not asking your permission. I love you and Mother very much, and I want you to be at my wedding, but I'll have it whether you're there or not. I know you're concerned for my safety, and everything you've mentioned has made me think, too. But Luis is more than all those things you've said. He's a good, honorable man. Look at the way he risked his own life to help Dee, to use your own example! None of the fine, upstanding citizens in the saloon could find it in their hearts to give help when he asked for it, but you wouldn't be kicking up such a fuss if I wanted to marry any of them. Please don't turn against Luis because he isn't the type of man you've always thought I would marry. He's exactly the type of man who will make me happy, and I want you to be happy for me."
"You want too much." Wilson's face and voice were both stiff. Honora was quietly weeping.
"I'm sorry you feel that way, but it won't change my mind."

Chapter 18

Olivia lay sleepless long after the house was silent that night. The grandfather clock downstairs chimed midnight, but she was wide awake. She had hated the scene with her parents, hated their unhappiness, but it hadn't changed her mind. She had never been as certain of anything in her life as she was of Luis.
At first the scraping noise didn't register, as accustomed as she was to the tree limbs outside her window brushing against the glass. Then she realized that the sound was that of her window being raised, and she leapt from the bed with a scream lodged in her throat.
"Don't run," Luis said in a low voice. "It's just me."
"Just you!" Her knees shook, then buckled a little. She grabbed for the bedpost. "Are you trying to frighten me to death? Don't ever do that again!" But even in her fright she kept her voice to a fierce whisper.

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am. I hope this is the only time I ever have to climb through your bedroom window."
She was much struck by that fact. "Yes, what are you doing climbing trees so soon after being shot? What if you opened the wound again?"
"I didn't. It was just a little wound, after all. I feel fine." He put his hand on the back of her head and kissed her. "I couldn't wait until morning to find out if I have to wait a month for a fancy church wedding, or if we can do it a lot faster."
She put her hands on his biceps, drawing strength from the hard warmth of his body. "We can get married as soon as you want," she said, and despite herself there was sadness in her voice.
He kissed her again, his mouth tender. "I'm sorry, darling. I know you wanted them to be happy."
"Yes, I did. But I found that I'm selfish enough to want my own happiness, too." With a little sigh she went into his arms; feeling them fold around her was like coming home. As he gathered her close she abruptly realized how thin the barrier of her nightgown was, allowing her to feel the heavy buckle of his gun belt and the extra cartridges shoved in the little loops, even the buttons on his pants. The last was so evident because of the heavy bulge behind them.
Once she would have been mortified had a man held her so close she could feel his body, but Luis had spent months accustoming her to his touch, teaching her the pleasure of physical love. A thrill went through her at the knowledge that he desired her, and without thought she moved her hips against him.
He slipped one hand down to her buttocks and urged her closer, bending his knees a little to bring them together. She sighed at the adjustment of their bodies.
Luis angled his head to fit his mouth on hers. Now. The time was now. She had made her choice, and he wasn't going to wait even one more night before making her his. Perhaps a gentleman would wait until they were married, but he wasn't a gentleman—he was a man who wanted his woman. The marriage rites were for society; the most basic vows would be sealed with their bodies.
She was no longer frightened by his kisses, or by his hands on her body. She shivered with delight whenever he touched her breasts. He led her through those things he had already taught her, feeling the delicious tension

beginning to tighten her muscles. He unbuttoned her nightgown and slid his hand inside to stroke her satiny breasts, and she gave a soft moan as her nipples tightened.
He stepped back and unbuckled his gun belt, letting it drop to a chair. Then he pulled off his shirt.
Olivia moved to him, fascinated by the faint gleam of light on his smooth skin. It was too dark to see his expression, but she discovered that she didn't need light; she knew him* knew his wide shoulders and hard chest, his muscular abdomen. The bandage at his waist was a small splotch of white, and seeing it made her ache anew. She kissed him, brushing her lips across his chest to find his little nipples. "I love you," she whispered, her breath warm on his skin.
He tilted her head up and settled his mouth on hers, his tongue slowly entering and teasing. His hands swept across her shoulders, and the nightgown dropped to her waist, held up by the curve of her hips. Before she could do more than draw a quick breath he pushed it past her buttocks, and it dropped to the floor around her feet.
She stood frozen, her frightened eyes lifting to his face, and now she wished that she had light so she could see him. No, she didn't. She was naked, and if she could see him, he could also see her. She realized that he could see her very well, the paleness of her skin visible even in the darkness.
Her bareness was shocking. Her hands fluttered downward to shield her sex, and with inexorable gentleness he caught her wrists and moved her hands to her sides. "Have I ever hurt you?" he asked with his lips at her temple.
She began to tremble. "No," she whispered.
"I'm going to make love to you tonight. You're going to be completely mine. Do you know what's going to happen?"
She tried to think, tried to prod her stunned mind into coherency. "I… not really."
"Have you ever seen animals mating?"
"N-no. I mean yes. I saw a pair of dogs once." And she had been painfully fascinated before the impropriety of what she'd been doing had occurred to her, and she had rushed away in embarrassment.
Luis smiled against her hair. His innocent darling. "The concept is roughly the same," he said, soothing her with light caresses on her back and hips. "You've felt how I get hard when I'm with you. To make love I put my shaft

inside you, here." And he moved his stroking hand to the front of her tightly clenched thighs, sliding one finger into the soft folds.
She jerked wildly, and he caught her to him with one strong arm. "Stop that," she moaned. "You mustn't." Her trembling had increased, and she felt weak, the muscles in her legs shaking and threatening to go limp. She couldn't believe that he was touching her between her legs, or that it was causing a violent firestorm to race along her nerves. She felt unbearably heated, her skin so sensitive that his touch almost made her cry out. Only the dim knowledge that she had to be quiet kept her from screaming aloud at this painful ecstasy. He had aroused her before, given her pleasure that had left her aching for more, but nothing had been like this. It was as if before he had given her only water to taste, and now he was giving her full-bodied wine. There was simply no comparison.
"Let's lie down, love," he coaxed, kissing her again. She stood rigid, and he persuasively rubbed his finger on the tiny nub between her legs, keeping his touch feather-light because she was so new to it all. She trembled again, and he felt the strength go out of her legs. He lifted her onto the bed and quickly removed his boots and pants. His entire body was aching with anticipation as he lay down with her.
She felt dazed by what was happening. He was seducing her, and she was helpless to stop it. She didn't want to stop it. But she felt as if she were on a runaway train that was going faster and faster, totally out of control, and she couldn't jump off.
She felt his hard length jutting against her hip, and without thought she reached down to move it. As soon as her fingers closed around that alien flesh she jerked her hand away. Luis moaned, his hips arching a little.
"Touch me," he murmured roughly, his breath coming fast. "Please. I've wanted to feel you holding me—"
She hesitated, for it seemed impossibly bold and wicked. But so had everything else he had taught her, and she loved it all. Shyly she folded her fingers around him again, and in the next moment she was fascinated by the feel of him, hardness covered by silky smooth skin. She felt the first faint edging of fear, for she didn't see how he could possibly enter her as he had said.
He moved over her, levering her thighs apart with his.
It took all of her self-control to lie still. Her hands twisted in the sheet.

He sensed her distress and soothed it with low whispers of reassurance and kisses that lingered. He fondled her breasts and kissed them, and soon the tension eased out of her muscles. Her legs relaxed so that they were no longer clamped on his. His talented fingers searched out the softness between her thighs, and the petals opened like a flower blooming. She made a soft sound, and her head rolled on the pillow.

He stroked her to passion, entering her with his fingers while using his thumb to keep her aroused. She arched and twisted, her body instinctively seeking his. He rubbed her to the very edge of completion, then removed his hand and guided his manhood to her opening.

Again she went still, though her chest was heaving. He leaned closer, letting her cradle his weight. The force of it pushed him a little way into her.

She closed her eyes, her entire body trying to draw back from him. He was inside her just enough for pain to threaten, and what she felt warned her that it would be true pain, not just discomfort. "It hurts," she whispered.

"I know, darling. But it's just this first time."

She lay beneath him, feeling the pressure as he eased deeper into her. She could feel her inner channel opening and painfully stretching to admit him. She felt a deeper stretching, and he was hurting her, the pain hot as her maidenhead tore to let him forge deep into her body.

He held himself still to let the pain abate. His shoulder was wet with her tears, and he set about soothing her even though his manhood was throbbing painfully. The soft clasp of her inner muscles was maddening, luring him toward a satisfaction he couldn't let himself have just yet.

The only true way to soothe her was to take her to the peak he denied himself, to show her the ultimate pleasure that was the reward for enduring this initial pain. His own climax would have to wait, for nothing was so important as giving her ease. He slipped his hand between their bodies and found her soft nub again, coaxing it from its protective folds with a whisper-light touch, luring Olivia back into passion. He pleasured her with hard-won patience, not trying to take her swiftly to climax but instead letting the pleasure build so that she felt first a gentle relaxing of her muscles, then the slow return of arousal. Only when her hips began to lift against his hand and initiate the movements of lovemaking did he increase the pressure and speed of his stroking fingers.

Olivia had been bitterly disappointed by the pain of his penetration even though Dee had said that the first time hurt. All of her previous lessons in

sensuality had been full of heated pleasure, and despite her fear she had trusted him to make this final surrender as completely enjoyable as all the rest of it. Instead there had been pain, and the harsh shock of having her body invaded. But his experienced touch was bringing back pleasure so fast and so strong that it swept over her in waves. She surged beneath him, trying to take him deeper into her because somehow that had become part of the ecstasy; she locked her legs around his and writhed in increasing passion. Luis groaned aloud at the movement of her body on his length, trying to hold back, trying not to thrust hard and deep when every fiber in him needed to.

She cried out, and he put his hand over her mouth. She stiffened and shuddered, and he felt the soft internal shivers that heralded the onslaught of her peak. He couldn't stop himself then; he began to thrust, and in only a few seconds he followed her into mindless pleasure. The force of it emptied him and left him unable to move, sprawled heavily on top of her.

She moved her hand slowly down his back, luxuriating in the feel of his strong muscles. She felt dazed and dreamy. So there was pleasure after all, a pleasure so intense that she had thought she might die of it. She didn't regret that he hadn't waited until they were married, only that he hadn't completely seduced her before. This new intimacy was overwhelming in both the pleasure it afforded and the bond it had forged. She felt more utterly his than she had ever thought she would feel with a man, and more possessive of him than she had known was possible. She loved him, but this bond of their bodies was more primeval than that.

After a long while he stirred, lifting himself from her body. "I have to go," he said sleepily, "or I'll still be here in the morning, and that would have your father looking for a shotgun. I'll come for you at about ten. Will that give you time to pack?"

So it would be that soon. He had claimed her and saw no reason to wait even a couple of days for their marriage.

"Yes," she said, and she kissed him. "Where will we stay? Or will we be leaving town immediately?"

He didn't hear any hesitation in her voice, only curiosity. She truly didn't care where they stayed. Suddenly he felt like laughing out loud, exulting in the fate that had given her to him. "We'll stay in the hotel for a while until we decide what to do."

"So I won't need to pack all of my clothes right now?"

He grinned. "Well, I guess I can safely say that you won't need any nightgowns."
No, she wouldn't. She smiled as she watched him dress. She would have Luis to keep her warm. It was the most delicious future she had ever imagined.
She was calm when she went downstairs to breakfast the next morning. "Luis is coming for me at ten," she said. "We'll be married this afternoon."
Tears welled in Honora's eyes, and she hastily blotted them away. "There's no need to be so hasty, dear. Won't you think this over for a little while longer?"
Olivia put her arms around her mother. "I have thought it over. I love him, and that isn't going to change. The only reason to wait would be if you and Papa wanted to give me a wedding."
Wilson sighed heavily and got up from the table. "You can't expect us to celebrate your marriage to a man like Fronteras."
"I wish you would, but no, I didn't expect it."
He bent his head, staring unhappily at the floor. Most of his objection was based on how unsuitable Fronteras was for Olivia, but part of it was an unwillingness to lose his daughter. He would have missed her at any time, but the parting would have been easier if he had been assured he was giving her safekeeping into reliable hands. Olivia deserved better than a life of insecurity.
She had always been the perfect daughter, adorable as a child, sweet and loving. She had never shown any wildness, had instead been precociously responsible and levelheaded. He knew doting parents never thought anyone good enough for their children, but it was painfully obvious that Olivia was marrying far beneath herself.
She was his only child, the light of his life. She would inherit his money. Was that why Fronteras was marrying her? Did he expect to be supported by his father-in-law? Olivia certainly deserved better than that. But she tended to see the best in people, and it wouldn't occur to her to be suspicious of Fronteras's motives. Wilson hadn't accumulated his wealth by being a fool. He knew a lot of men who had married because of money; he didn't want that to happen to Olivia.
He hadn't wanted to meet the man at all, but now he decided to delay his departure to the bank; he had a few things he wanted to say to Luis Fronteras.

Luis arrived promptly at ten, driving a buggy he had rented from the livery stable. Olivia, watching eagerly for him, felt her heart swell when she saw that he hadn't made any effort to impress; he wore his customary pants and shirt, a bandanna knotted at his neck, his gun belt buckled low on his lean waist and tied to his thigh. He looked exactly like what he was, and she loved him for not trying to put on a false front. Luis didn't need to impress anyone.

She opened the door and stood waiting for him, her face radiant with happiness. Luis smiled as he walked toward her, his dark eyes alight. The memory of their lovemaking shimmered between them, and Olivia's breath caught.

"I'm ready," she said, indicating the two cases behind her.

As Luis bent to pick them up Wilson opened the door of his study and cleared his throat. "I'd like to speak to you, if I may."

Honora came down the stairs, wringing her hands at the sight of the cases. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

Luis straightened, his dark face calm. "Of course."

Wilson stood aside and indicated his study. "In private."

"Papa," Olivia said, her tone alarmed.

"Hush. This is between us."

"No, it isn't!" she cried, stepping forward. "I'm involved, too."

Luis touched her arm, smiling down at her. "It'll be all right," he softly assured her. Then he walked into the study, and Wilson closed the door behind them.

He turned to face the banker. Perhaps Olivia had expected to leave without this confrontation, but Luis had known better. The man was concerned about his daughter; hell, Luis wouldn't have thought much of him if he hadn't been. If he could settle any worries, he was willing to try—it would make Olivia happier, and he would do anything to accomplish that.

Wilson drew himself up. "I'll give you five thousand dollars to leave here and never see my daughter again."

Luis's eyes narrowed, and a dangerous gleam entered them. "No" was all he said.

"If you think that marriage to my daughter will make you rich—"

"Stop right there. Don't even say it." His dark eyes were cold with anger. "I'm marrying Olivia because I love her. If you're worried about your

money, then keep it. I don't want it or need it." Without another word he walked past the banker and left the room.
The sight of his face made Olivia's heart skip a beat, and she rushed to him, catching his arms in a grip so tight her nails dug into his flesh. "Luis?" she whispered, frightened.
His expression softened as he looked down at her. "Don't worry," he said. "We can leave now."
Behind them they could hear the study door open again. Honora took a quick step forward as if she could keep them from walking out the door. Then she stopped, her anguished gaze locked on the man who was taking her beloved daughter away. Luis glanced up at her, his usual warmth toward women entering his eyes. He could understand Honora's distress and would willingly have done anything he could to alleviate it, except for leaving Olivia behind.
He crossed to the stairs and took Honora's hand. "I promise you I'll take good care of her," he said.
Even through her pain Honora responded to him, her fingers tightening around his; she clung to him as if for comfort. "But where will you live?" she wailed.
He shrugged. "Wherever Olivia wants," he said simply. "But wherever we are, I promise we'll bring the grandbabies to see you once a year, without fail."
Grandbabies! Honora's mouth opened and closed without making a sound. Her chest swelled with emotion. Grandbabies! Her own beloved Olivia's children.
And this man loved Olivia, truly loved her. Honora had been so worried, but now she could see it in those deep eyes. Well, of course, she thought suddenly. How could anyone not love Olivia? He might not be a stalwart pillar of the community, but he was a strong man, and sometimes that was better security than an uneventful life. More than anything she wanted Olivia to be happy, and, looking at this man, she was suddenly certain that he would make that happen.
"Do you think you could wait for me to arrange a wedding?" she asked.
"Honora!" Wilson said, shocked.
Luis gave her a devilish grin, one that made Honora's heart beat a little faster. "I'd rather not," he said. "But I'd be honored if you would stand up with us this afternoon."

"I… why, yes," she said, flustered. She gave Wilson a beseeching look. "Of course we'll be there. I wouldn't miss Olivia's wedding for anything."
"Honora!" Wilson said again.
She turned toward her husband. She seldom gainsaid him in anything, but what did men know about other men? It took a woman to know what another woman needed. "Don't 'Honora' me! Can't you see that he loves her?"
"Of course he does," Olivia said confidently. She smiled at her parents, her eyes shiny with tears. "What more could you want for me?"
Only the moon, Wilson thought, his chest painfully tight. But more than anything he didn't want to lose his beloved daughter, didn't want her to feel unwelcome in his home. Olivia had always been levelheaded, so why didn't he trust her judgment? It looked like the only thing he could do. His own eyes felt suspiciously moist, and he cleared his throat. "You're right. You have what's important. We'll be at your wedding, darling. Like your mother said, we wouldn't miss it for anything."
He and Luis shook hands, and though the look he gave Luis was hard, there was understanding between them. Honora began crying again, but this time her tears were much happier. Though she would miss Olivia dreadfully, she had always looked forward to this day.
And, of course, she always cried at weddings.

Chapter 19

Dee got carefully out of bed and walked to the window. Sometimes she felt a dreadful sense of unreality and needed that view to reinforce in her mind where she was. There was a large block of time she couldn't remember, her last vivid memory was of crouching on the floor of the cabin and holding the rifle to her shoulder. After that there were only snippets of impressions until about a week ago, when she had awakened one morning and felt truly awake, though horribly weak, and the contrast between her last memory and her present situation was so sharp as to make her feel lost.
She hadn't asked questions, so she still didn't know exactly what had happened. She needed to know, but the need wasn't urgent. She would find out later, when she felt stronger. It was as if the immense weakness of her body had sapped her mind's energy, too; she didn't want to talk, didn't want

company, she wanted only to sleep. She emerged briefly from the cocoon of sleep whenever the demands of her body grew too great, and as soon as the problem was solved—be it thirst or hunger or a need for the chamber pot—she drifted off to sleep again.

The periods of sleep were growing shorter, however, and for a few days she had been moving around the room with Betsy Acray's support. This was the first time she had gotten out of bed by herself, and though her legs were wobbly she was pleased that they supported her. It was a small milestone. If she had been presented with the task of walking down the stairs, she couldn't have done it, but as she felt not the slightest desire to go downstairs she didn't care.

She was in Lucas's house. She wasn't certain how she had come to be there. He visited her at least twice a day, in the morning and again at night. When he asked her a question she made an effort to answer, but the effort was apparent, and the answers were monosyllabic, so he didn't try to carry on a conversation. Sometimes when he looked at her she could see volcanic rage in his eyes and she wondered what was wrong, but the rage didn't seem to be directed at her, so she didn't feel it was worth the effort to find out.

It was the first time she had ever seen the Double C, and the contrast between the way Lucas lived and her own home was sharp. She had seen only this one room, but as it was a guest room the rest of the house was probably even grander. The bed was an immense four-poster, the linen sheets so smooth they felt like silk. The wood floor had been sanded to a satin finish and then polished, and a thick rug covered it to cushion her feet. There was an enormous wardrobe, a chaise longue upholstered in silk, a graceful cherrywood desk and chair, and a mirrored dressing table with a small bench. A big, comfortably upholstered chair had also been brought in for Betsy.

She had never felt inferior before, but Lucas's house made her feel that way. He would be at ease with women who wore silk dresses and perfume and jewels, while she milked cows and plowed and got dirt under her nails. He must have wanted Angel Creek very much to have been willing to marry her to get it. What would he have done after the wedding? Bought her a house in some city and sent her away so she wouldn't embarrass him?

She felt ashamed of herself for even thinking that. Lucas had been kind, taking her into his home while she recovered. He had never said or done anything that indicated he thought he was better than she; it was her own

depression that brought the thoughts to mind. But seeing the Double C—as much of it as she could see from her window—and this room had made her realize how wide the gulf was between them.
"Oh!" Betsy said sharply from the doorway. "Miss Dee, you got up by yourself!"
Dee turned from the window. Betsy was carrying a tray with her noon meal, which meant that she had slept several hours after eating a few bites for breakfast.
"I'm going to get fat," she mused. "All I'm doing is sleeping and eating."
It was the first unnecessary thing she had said in the time Betsy had been taking care of her, and the girl threw Dee a startled glance as she hurried to deposit the tray on the desk and lend a supporting arm. "Miss Dee, you need to eat all you can. You're as thin as a stick."
Well, that was comforting, Dee thought wryly. Betsy was leading her toward the bed, and she rebelled. The bed was wonderful for sleep, but she had had enough of both sleep and that bed.
"I want to sit up and eat," she said. "The desk will do just fine."
Betsy looked worried, but Dee refused all attempts to change her mind. By the time they had crossed the room to the desk she felt as if she had run ten miles; her legs were trembling as she sank down onto the chair. Still, it was an accomplishment, and she would have to push herself if she ever expected to regain her strength.
Her meal was simple, a bowl of broth and a biscuit. She wondered why people thought that starving a sick person would help her get well. She was even more disgusted when she realized she couldn't eat all of it.
Still, it was time to make a change. "Who does the cooking here?"
Betsy still hadn't adjusted to a patient who was talking after two weeks of almost total silence. Her eyes were huge as she said, "His name's Orris, ma'am."
"Tell Orris that I appreciate his trouble, and that for dinner tonight I'd like to try just a little meat and potatoes in the broth. I won't be able to eat much, but it's time to start trying."
"Yes, ma'am," Betsy said.
"And are there any books in the house?"
"I don't know, ma'am. I ain't looked around." She had been too terrified of Mr. Cochran to risk his ire if he'd found her snooping around his house.

"Well, ask Orris or someone else. I'd like to have something to read, and I don't care what it is."
"Yes, ma'am."
"Are any of my clothes here?"
"No, ma'am."
"Then tell Lucas to get them. I'm tired of nightgowns."
Betsy's eyes rounded with horror at the thought of telling Mr. Cochran to do anything. Dee said, "Never mind. I'll probably see him as soon as you will, so I'll tell him myself."
Betsy slumped with relief. "Yes, ma'am." It had been a lot easier when Miss Dee hadn't done anything but sleep.
Dee's brief foray had exhausted her, but at least she still felt awake. She would have liked to continue sitting in the chair, but common sense told her it would be best to go back to bed before she toppled over. As she settled back down she looked toward the window. The sun was bright and hot, and she needed that brightness. After the dark weeks the sun told her that she was well and truly on the mend.
When Lucas came in to see her that night his eyes glittered with satisfaction. "I heard you've been sitting in the chair today."
She put aside the book she'd been reading. It was dull, but better than looking at the walls. She went straight to her request. "I need some of my own clothes. Would you get them from the cabin, or send someone else for them?"
He sat down in the chair and stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankle. "There's plenty of time for that."
She gave him a long warning look. "I don't intend to do anything more than sit in this room. I'm just sick of nightclothes. I can sit in regular clothes as well as I can sit in this." She tugged at the nightgown's long sleeve.
"Why go to all of the effort to change clothes when you're still spending so much time in bed?"
"Are you going to get the clothes or not?"
"No."
"Then get out and leave me alone," she snapped.
He threw back his head with a roar of laughter. Relief poured through him like sweet water, as delicious as when her fever had broken. These two weeks of withdrawn silence had been pure torment, because the frail woman lying so quietly in bed hadn't been the Dee he knew. This was his

Dee, tart and headstrong, and he was going to love every minute of the next few weeks, with her totally in his control.
He got up and leaned over her, bracing his hands on either side of her hips. "You can't make me," he said. His eyes were alight with mirth.
Those green eyes narrowed dangerously. "Not right now, no."
"Not ever. When I've cared to fight with you I've won every time. No matter how much you dislike it, I'm stronger than you. Arid this is my land; what I say goes. You'll get your clothes only when I think you're strong enough to need them."
"I won't ever get that strong," she said sweetly, "if I don't eat."
He straightened with a scowl. She was herself again, all right. She was just contrary enough to refuse to eat, and her health was too precarious for that.
"All right," he growled. "I'll get your damn clothes. But I want your word that you won't try to go downstairs by yourself."
She gave him an impatient look. "I've already said I didn't intend to leave this room. I'm not stupid. The only way I could get down the stairs would be if I fell down them."
"That's exactly what worries me."
"Then you're worrying for nothing."
He glared at her, aware that she hadn't exactly promised anything, but equally aware that if he pushed her she would only get more obstinate, and they would end up in a battle of wills. If she showed good sense in what she tried to do, he'd let her set her own pace, and the only way to find out was to let her do it.
"What kind of shape is the cabin in?" she asked.
He wished she hadn't asked until she was stronger, but there was no use in trying to evade the question. "All of the windows are broken, the back door is splintered, a lot of things inside were shattered or are full of holes."
Her lips tightened. "The bastards. Have you checked to make certain Bellamy didn't run his cattle back in there?"
"He hasn't," Lucas said with certainty. There wouldn't be any point in it now, with Angel Creek dry, but Dee didn't have to know that yet. He wasn't going to tell her until he had to; he intended to use the next weeks to spoil her rotten and bind her to him.
"Will you check on it for me?"
The anxiety in her voice made him feel guilty. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Of course."

He was so delighted that she was talking again that he was reluctant to leave her. He sat on the bed, talking and teasing, trying to make her eyes flash angrily again, until Betsy came in and gave him a shocked look. He sighed, chafing under the necessity of observing at least a semblance of propriety. He'd be glad when Dee was well enough to do without Betsy so he could send the girl home.

Dee set herself to recovering her strength, carefully pushing herself more and more every day. Lucas brought her some of her own clothes the next day, and though they looked out of place in the luxury of the bedroom she felt relieved to be wearing something other than a nightgown. It made her feel she was truly on the road to recovery. She hadn't bed to Lucas about her intentions; she kept to her room, slowly walking back and forth, forcing herself to stay up for longer periods each time. As she became more active her appetite returned, and her face no longer looked so pale and drawn.

Lucas began to devote more time to keeping her entertained, knowing that boredom would drive her to test her limits faster than anything else. He brought a big selection of books upstairs for her, and at night he taught her how to play poker. To his delight she already knew how to play chess, no doubt one of the benefits of having a schoolteacher for a mother. Playing with her kept him alert. Her philosophy in chess was the same as it was in life: She was aggressive and determined. The trouble was, he could never predict which battles she would choose to fight or when she would simply use defensive strategies. They were so evenly matched that more often than not the games ended in a draw.

She had been at the Double C for three weeks when she descended the stairs for the first time, to eat a real meal at a real table. Lucas kept his arm firmly around her and his attention focused on each step, ready to catch her if she should falter. She gave him a cool look that said she wouldn't let herself be so weak and walked steadily to the table with her head held as arrogantly as any ancient queen's.

The occasion signaled that Betsy's usefulness had come to an end, and he wasn't sorry to see it. He suspected that she hadn't been much use the past week anyway, that Dee had been riding roughshod over her. Little Betsy was helpless against Dee's iron determination, and ridiculously worshipful. Every time she opened her mouth it was "yes, ma'am" until the two words ran together into one. If she decided to emulate her new heroine when she

returned home, poor old Sid Acray would have the devil's own time controlling his newly headstrong daughter.
So Betsy was sent home the next morning, with Lucas's sincere gratitude for her help and generous wages in her purse. She cried as she hugged Dee and left with tearful admonitions to "be careful!" wafting back to them. Lucas chuckled as he watched the buckboard disappear down the lane with Betsy still waving. Then he turned to take Dee's arm and walk with her back into the house. "Well, sweetheart, you're on your own today, so try not to get into any trouble. Orris is in the kitchen if you need any help, and I'll be back this afternoon."
She sighed. "I have to admit I've been looking forward to the solitude. I'm not used to having someone hover over me twenty-four hours a day."
He looked down at her and smiled as he felt the familiar tug of desire in his groin. Tonight he was going to do something about it. She still looked so frail that a good puff of wind would knock her off her feet, but she was stronger than she looked. She was regaining her weight, and translucent color glowed in her cheeks and lips. He had searched through his mother's old clothes and found a few light day dresses that were so plain they hadn't had any particular fashion to date them; Betsy, who had proved able with a needle, had hemmed and tucked until the dresses fit Dee, who was wearing one of them today. The flimsy, pale yellow lawn cloth suited her, as did the way she had caught her heavy tresses high on the back of her head, baring the delicate nape of her neck. As soon as they were inside he bent and pressed his mouth to that innocently sensuous groove, and he felt the shiver that ran through her.
Her clothes weren't all he'd fetched from the cabin. The little sponges lay in a box in his bedroom.
Dee felt his arms close around her and caught her breath in painful relief. She hadn't realized how much she had missed being held, how alone she had felt. She had quickly become accustomed to his touch, to feeling his hard body warm against her, and the lack of physical contact had depressed her. He hadn't even held her or kissed her during all the time she had been at his ranch except for passionless pecks on the forehead, and she hadn't cared for those at all. Lucas's nature wasn't passionless, and neither was hers.
She turned into his embrace, letting her head rest in the hollow of his shoulder. "Tired?" he asked, rubbing his hand over her back.
"I'm always tired. I just try to ignore it."

He lifted her in his arms and carried her upstairs, where he deposited her on the chaise longue and arranged a pillow behind her head. "Don't ignore it. Rest when you need to. You'll get your strength back faster that way."
"I don't have a lot of time," she said. "It's been a month. The garden will be overgrown with weeds, and everything will be getting ripe in a week or so. I have to get strong enough to work."
He stroked her cheek, then let his hand drift downward until it covered her breast. "Get strong enough for this first," he said.
Her heavy black lashes drooped. "You can do all of the work."
"I intend to." He leaned forward and kissed her, his mouth slow and hot, his hand heavy on her breast as he leisurely kneaded her. "But I'd like for you to be awake."
She laughed, then sighed at the deliciousness of his touch. "I think I can manage that."
He left her with a wink, and she closed her eyes, letting herself drift. With the night to look forward to, she had no intention of exhausting herself during the day.
* * *
Lucas rode over the pass to Angel Creek that day. His own land had revived with the rush of water, renewing enough of the grazing so that the cattle would survive; they were leaner than he liked, but they were not starving to death or dropping dead from dehydration. The change in Dee's valley was painful. It was still green, but the vegetation was brittle. The sight of her cabin made his jaw clench. It had been such a tidy, sturdy little place, and now it was almost destroyed. The walls and roof still stood, but the wreckage of the windows and the contents testified to the amount of firepower that had been directed at her. It was a miracle that she had survived. If she had been any less of a woman, she wouldn't have. It was as simple as that. She had seen to her own survival by teaching herself how to shoot, and by being smart enough to stay behind cover.
He walked out back to the garden and stood looking at it for a long time. The plants that had been so lush and promised such a rich bounty of crops had shriveled in the dry heat. Dee had worked so hard, and it had come to nothing, by his own hand. The creek bed was completely dry, and the valley was strangely silent. It had been perfect, and he had deliberately destroyed it. He would do it again, for it was the only way he could force Dee into a

safer life. That didn't mean he didn't regret the change. Angel Creek had been special. Now it was nothing.

He had had Dee's livestock taken to the Double C, except for the chickens, which could survive on their own. They had already disappeared, lured out of the valley in search of insects and water. The valley was abandoned, and the cabin showed signs that squirrels and other small critters had begun nesting inside. He looked in the barn and found spare lumber and nails, so he boarded up all the windows and reset the back door in its frame. Dee would be upset enough without finding the cabin taken over by animals. The valley bothered him. He was glad to get back to the ranch, which was alive and busy.

Chapter 20

Lucas came into her bedroom that night as she was brushing out her hair. He took the brush from her hand and pulled it through the long strands, easing out the tangles until it streamed down her back like black silk.

She watched him in the mirror, her heartbeat settling into a heavy thud. He was shirtless, and the muscles in his torso flexed with every movement. He was so intensely masculine that even performing that very feminine chore for her didn't detract from his virility, but then only a man as self-confident as Lucas would have been so completely comfortable performing it anyway.

She wore the filmy pink gown he had brought her when she had fallen out of the loft. The thin straps barely hung on her shoulders, and the low-cut bodice lay loosely on her breasts, inviting a man's hand to slip inside. The fabric was just transparent enough to torment with what it didn't reveal, though she knew her nipples were plainly visible through the cloth.

Lucas's attention was focused on the mirror, and she watched the way his face changed, hardened, as he looked at her breasts. "It's been a long time," he murmured. Though the time could be measured in weeks, it had still been too long. He was beginning to think that even a day without her would be too long. He put the brush down and placed his hands on her shoulders, his rough fingers gliding over her smooth skin. He paused as he felt her thinness, the frailty of her collarbones.

Dee knew what he was thinking and let her head drop back against his abdomen. Their eyes met in the mirror. "This is the second time you've taken care of me," she said.

"And I hope the last."

She smiled, remembering how difficult it had been for her to accept his help that first time. But she had learned that she could trust his strength, and that had made this time of convalescence easier. If it had been anyone but Lucas caring for her, she would have forced herself to return to Angel Creek long before she was well enough. But he had said he would look after it for her, and she trusted him with her life as well as her valley.

She caught his hands and carried them to her breasts, closing her eyes in pleasure at the contact. "I won't break," she said huskily.

He picked her up and sat down in the big upholstered chair with her on his lap, her legs draped over the chair arm and her back supported by his left arm.

"I don't have much control," he admitted, his voice a little thick. "If I lie down with you, I won't have any."
"Do you need it?" she asked. She gave him a slow smile. "You could always make it up to me an hour from now."
He laughed roughly. "I'm trying not to tire you out too much. I'm not going to make love to you all night long."
"Pity," she said.
"Yes, isn't it?" Slowly he brushed his mouth against hers, lightly touching his tongue to her lips. She slid her hand around his neck and moved closer, firming the contact. He obliged, slanting his head and deepening the pressure, gliding his tongue inward to meet hers. It had been so long that the onslaught of sensation was a little overwhelming, a little frightening, as if it were all new again.
Knowing that she was his, that he had the complete freedom of her body, went to his head faster than whiskey. He had meant to take his time, but the thin silk barrier over her breasts was intolerable, and he pulled the straps down her arms with two quick movements. She gasped a little as the bodice drooped to her waist, then she freed her arms from the straps and leaned back against his arm, offering him unobstructed sight and touch. He took advantage of both, cupping a soft mound in his palm and lifting it slightly as his thumb rasped over the nipple, making it tighten and stand erect. He pinched it lightly, enjoying the firm resilience.
"Lucas."
"What?" The word was absently spoken.
"I don't need a lot of attention."
He looked up and noticed the color in her cheeks, the way her breathing had hastened. "It's been a long time for me, too," she said, strain evident in her voice.
He held her gaze and slid his hand up her thigh, pushing the gown high and baring her legs. When he reached the notch between her legs he expertly slipped his fingers in, sliding them along the soft folds. Dee's body jerked, and she let her legs fall open. "Don't close your eyes," he whispered when he saw her lashes start to droop. "Keep them open. Look at me."
She blinked, trying to focus, but her expression was dazed. He touched her soft opening and lightly circled it with his fingertips. She couldn't help it; her head fell back over his arm as her entire body tightened, the heated sensation coiling through her. He let her lie back with her head dangling

backwards and removed the support of his left arm, leaving her lying across his lap like a sacrifice.
She felt helpless lying like that, totally at his mercy. She was bare except for the nightgown twisted around her waist, and totally boneless, unable to sit up even if she had wanted to. He pushed her legs further apart, and cool air washed over her sensitive flesh, telling her how exposed she was to his gaze. She heard a low, throbbing moan and knew it was hers.
"Are you ready for me?" he whispered, and he slid one big finger into her. She arched and cried out, the hot tension radiating from her loins in waves. He moved his finger in and out, stimulating her almost beyond sanity, making her writhe on his lap in helpless, mounting ecstasy.
She was like fire, out of control and rapidly escalat-ing toward climax. "Not yet," he said urgently, sitting her up and turning her so that she faced him, sitting astride his lap with her legs spread. He tore at the buttons of his pants. "Not yet. I want to be inside you, sweetheart, I want to feel you come."
"Hurry," she moaned, her hips undulating in search of the hot pleasure he had taught her.
He grunted as he freed his swollen organ and held it braced for her, his other hand on her buttocks bringing her forward, sliding her onto his shaft. She almost screamed at his hard, fierce heat penetrating deep into her. His big hands closed on her hips, and he moved her up, down, up again. The second downward stroke was all she required, and she was lost, submerged in the shimmering wave of sensation that caught her and tossed her in its upheaval, sending her inner sheath into spasms and making her soft muscles clamp down on him. He threw back his head with a harsh groan, fighting his response, but it was too late for him, too. He heaved upward, his fingers bit into the soft flesh of her hips as he ground her down onto his manhood, penetrating as deep into her as he could go, and his hot seed erupted with a force that convulsed him.
They calmed slowly, small aftershocks of sensation erupting along their nerve endings and prolonging the pleasure. Fatigue settled on Dee like a heavy blanket, and she slumped forward, her face buried against his throat, unable to move.
Lucas held her cradled in his arms. He felt pretty damn weak himself. He rubbed her back, luxuriating in the aftermath of release. "Dee? Honey, are you all right?"

She made a noise, but nothing that resembled words.
He gripped her arms, holding her back a little from his chest. She was utterly boneless. "Dee? Damn it, answer me."
"Leave me alone," she mumbled.
He eased her back down onto his chest, stroking her hair away from her face. "Do you want to go to bed now?"
"Mmm."
He smiled and closed his eyes. God, it felt good to hold her, to feel her safe and warm in his arms. It felt good to thrust into her and let go of his control, to feel the deep linking.
He shifted her in his arms so she was lying sideways again and awkwardly pulled up his pants with one hand while he supported her with the other. She looked blissfully asleep and didn't stir even when he got to his feet. He placed her on the bed, removed the nightgown, shed his own clothing, put out the lamp, and got into bed beside her. He settled her against him, feeling the contentment now that she was where she belonged. If he had his way, she'd never spend another night away from him.
He normally woke before dawn, and the next day was no exception. He was achingly hard. Dee stirred against him, and he mounted her, sliding into her with a total lack of haste.
This time it was slow, almost leisurely. She responded drowsily, and he tried not to make any great demands on her. The demands of her own body, however, eventually dispelled her lassitude, and she began moving under him with increasing urgency. The morning sun, already hot, was rising over the mountains by the time they relaxed, mutually replete.
Realization of what he had done hit him like a poleax. He propped himself up on his elbow, his hand going to her belly. "Damn it, we didn't use the sponges."
Her eyes opened, and they looked at each other in silence. He didn't say, "If you get pregnant, we'll get married," because she didn't respond well to ultimatums, and that's essentially what the statement would be. What he said was, "If we had a kid it would have to be a pure hell-raiser," and a slow grin spread across his face as he contemplated the idea.
"Don't look like that," she grumped.
"Like what?"
"Like the idea tickles you."
"It does. Just think what a fighter a son of ours would be."

"It would serve you right if you only had girls," she announced, "and every one of them was just like you. Just think of all the young men prowling around."
The idea was mind-boggling. He fervently hoped he never had any daughters, because he didn't think his heart could bear up under the strain, especially if they were anything like their mother. Dee didn't know it yet, Lucas thought to himself, but she was going to be the one having his kids.
Two days later they had visitors at the Double C. Dee was sitting on the porch, and Lucas, who had made a point to stay close by since she had truly begun recovering, was in the barn. He walked up to the house when he saw a pair of riders approach.
Dee got to her feet and walked to the steps. One of the riders was Olivia. Betsy had been full of the gossip about Olivia marrying a Mexican gunman who just happened to be the very same man who had risked his life to help Dee during the fight with the Bar B men, of which he had been one. All of that had confused Dee, because she hadn't known anyone was helping. It certainly explained why she had been able to hold them off for so long, however. And she had never even met the man whom Olivia loved.
But she was about to meet him, for the man riding with Olivia was tall and lean and darkly handsome, and the way he wore his gun said that he was very proficient with it. She looked at him curiously and felt a little shy.
"Oh, Dee, you're looking so well," Olivia said warmly as she slid from her horse. With a small sense of shock Dee realized that Olivia had been riding astride, something she would never have suspected her of doing. It was something that she herself did all the time, but Olivia was different.
"I feel fine," Dee said, smiling as she went down the steps. "I don't have my full strength back, but every day I'm a little stronger."
They hugged each other, aware as they did so that their lives had changed over the course of this summer and would never again be the same. Olivia's eyes misted over, and Dee bit her lip to keep her control.
Luis dismounted and stood beside Olivia, his dark eyes surveying Dee with obvious approval. She felt herself blushing a little and was surprised at herself. There was something in that very male look, which was in no way insulting, that made her soften. "This is my husband," Olivia said with pride. "Luis Fronteras. Luis, this is Dee Swann, my best friend."
Dee held out her hand, but instead of shaking it Luis folded her fingers tenderly in his and carried them to his lips. "Miss Swann, you were amazing

with that shotgun. It was something to see."
Her hand still tingled where he had kissed it. She looked down at it in amazement, then back up to Luis. "I owe you my life," she said simply. "Thank you."
"Thank Mr. Cochran," Luis said, nodding toward Lucas, who was striding toward them. "If he hadn't arrived when he had, I think we would both be dead."
Lucas shook Luis's hand and kissed Olivia's cheek. "Congratulations," he said to Luis. "You have a wonderful woman for a wife."
"I think so," Luis said peacefully.
"Come inside and have something cool to drink," Dee invited. "It's too hot to stand around out here."
Lucas put his hand on Dee's elbow as she went up the steps. She was feeling the effects of the heat far more than anyone else, which indicated how far she was from complete recovery.
There was iced tea to drink, for Orris had been making it for Dee. Lucas and Luis each took a glass, and their eyes met ruefully, but they didn't say anything. Dee and Olivia, of course, saw nothing unusual in drinking tea.
"I wanted to see for myself that you were recovering," Olivia said to Dee, "and to tell you and Lucas good-bye. Luis and I are leaving tomorrow."
"Where are you going?" Dee asked. "Will I ever see you again?"
"Of course you will! We won't be gone forever. We're going to go to St. Louis and take a train ride." A look of ecstasy came into Olivia's blue eyes. "We're going to go as far as the tracks will take us. It's something I've always wanted to do."
Dee thought about it. She had always thought of traveling as what you had to do to get to a definite destination; she had never considered traveling just for the sake of traveling. If that was Olivia's dream, she could scarcely have picked a better husband for herself. She wished them all the happiness in the world.
Lucas and Luis were talking quietly, and without being able to hear what was said Dee knew they were discussing what had happened at Angel Creek. Their faces were too serious for it to be otherwise.
"Bellamy hasn't been seen in town," Luis said. "Opinion is pretty strong against him." He eyed Lucas. "I heard you beat the hell out of him."
"I tried hard enough," Lucas replied grimly.
"Tillie has been staying out at the Bar B with him, taking care of him."

"She loves him," Lucas said. "I don't understand it myself, but she does."
"Yet she still rode out here to get you to stop him."
"And she was crying the whole time. She begged me not to kill him. I guess I would have if it hadn't been for her. If Dee had died, I'd have killed him anyway."
"Is Dee truly all right?"
Lucas glanced over at her. "Stronger every day. She'll want to go back to Angel Creek pretty soon."
Luis grimaced. He knew what Lucas had done, because he'd heard rumors and had ridden out to Angel Creek himself to see if they were true. He hadn't told Olivia, knowing that she would be very upset on Dee's behalf. His dark eyes were grave. "I don't envy you, my friend, when she finds out."
Lucas grinned. "It'll be interesting for a while, but she'll eventually see reason."
"If she loves it so much," Luis said, "she may be too hurt to see anything but the pain. You took a big risk."
"And I'd do it again," Lucas said quietly. "I'd sow every acre of it with salt if that was the only way I could keep her safe."

Chapter 21

Dee woke up and stretched lazily, deliciously aware of Lucas next to her in the bed. They had slept together every night for over two weeks, and she had cherished every moment of it because she knew it couldn't last. She lay in the early-morning darkness and faced the knowledge that the time had come for her to go home. She was fully recovered; there was no need to stay and every reason for her to leave. She had so much work to do that she didn't know if she would be able to handle it, but she had to get started or lose her entire garden. Vegetables wouldn't wait indefinitely without spoiling.
Lucas stirred and reached for her, tucking her in close against him. "I'm going home today," she said quietly.
He stiffened beside her, then got up and lit the lamp. His beard-roughened face looked harsh in the mellow light. "Why?"

"Because it's my home. I can't stay here forever. People are already talking, not without good reason."
"You could marry me."
She looked both rueful and sad. "You don't have to offer. Kyle Bellamy's sense of timing couldn't have been worse. I had just decided to let you graze your cattle in the valley, to get you through the drought. From what I've seen, though, you're still in good condition. You don't need Angel Creek."
"You don't either," he said roughly, stricken by her offer. Damn her generosity; she made him feel doubly guilty. "If you hadn't lived out there, none of that would have happened."
"It doesn't matter now. I just wanted you to know that you don't have to marry me to have access to the valley."
"Marry me anyway." His eyes were fierce. "You know it isn't just Angel Creek I want."
"I know." She thought of his ambitious plans, his fine house, and knew that she was out of place. "You want the Double C to be an empire. I can't be part of that, Lucas. I couldn't bear it in Denver, not even temporarily. I would make you miserable. People would ridicule you because of me. I'm not very good in social situations," she said with a wry smile that did nothing to ease his expression. She tried another way to make him understand. "When—when my parents died I was terrified. All of a sudden I had no one, and I thought I might die, too, because I had no reason not to. But I had the land. Somehow, living there, making things grow—it helped. It isn't just that I love it, but that I need it. Angel Creek valley doesn't belong to me nearly as much as I belong to it."
"Damn the valley!" His outburst was violent. He thrust his fingers through his dark hair, wishing it could have been put off for another week. "There's nothing out there now. I diverted the creek."
Dee blinked at him, not certain she understood. "What?"
"I diverted the creek. Angel Creek is dry now. Your valley isn't worth a hill of beans without water."
Dee got out of bed, her face blank with shock, her mind reeling from the enormity of what he'd done. She reached for her clothes.
"I'd do it again," he said harshly. "I would have eventually done it anyway, to keep the ranch going. Come hell or high water, I'll do what I have to do to protect the Double C. But that damn valley was going to get you killed,

and you're too stubborn to admit it. Without it you'll be safe, you can sleep without having to keep one eye open. I did what was necessary."
She didn't look at him as she finished dressing. She spoke slowly, still feeling numb from the shock. "Then you should understand that I'll do whatever's necessary to keep my garden."
He lost control of his temper in the face of her obstinacy. "Forget the damn garden!" he yelled. "You don't need it. I'll give you the money you would have earned from it."
She straightened and faced him. Her eyes were terrible in their glittering clarity. "Keep your money, Cochran. I told you the day I met you that I wouldn't make a good whore, and nothing's changed."
It was worse than a nightmare, because she could wake up from a nightmare. She had imagined the garden overrun with weeds, the vegetables overripe. She could have salvaged something from that, put by enough to get her through the winter even if there wasn't enough to sell at the general store.
What she saw was the complete opposite of the overripe bounty she had expected. The vegetables had literally withered on the vine, seared by the heat, deprived of the water that had nourished the earth. The ears of corn hadn't filled out. When she examined the stunted ears she felt only a few dried kernels beneath the husks.
Angel Creek was dry, and the valley was turning brown. She walked out into the meadow, the one that had been full of wildflowers that glorious dawn when Lucas had made love to her lying on the soft meadow grasses. There were no flowers now, no sweet, rich scents to delight her.
Without the rushing whisper of water the valley was eerily quiet. She walked up the creek bed. She could see it was dry, but somehow she had to verify it. How could she mourn unless she truly understood the depth of what had happened there?
And Lucas had done this to her, deliberately destroyed her home.
She wanted to feel the energizing rush of anger, clean and hard, but this went beyond anger. She felt numb, as if a part of her had ceased to live.
She went back to the cabin and stared at the boarded-over windows. That would also be Lucas's doing, she guessed. She supposed she should be glad he had made the effort.
The cabin was in ruins, but remembering the barrage of bullets that had assaulted it, she hadn't expected anything else. She had been prepared for

that. It was the death of the valley that shook her to the base of her soul. Work had always soothed her, so it was a good thing she was facing such a mammoth chore. She hardly knew where to begin in the cabin. So much had been damaged, and little of it could be salvaged. She swept out all of the broken glass, then drew up a bucket of water and spent an hour on her knees trying to scrub the bloodstains from the floor.

It took an hour before it registered. Water. She sat back on her heels and looked at the water bucket. The well was still good.

Hope ran wild, making her giddy. Dropping the scrub brush, she dashed out to the garden and walked down the rows, examining each plant.

The corn was totally lost; it was too dependent on water during the growing stages. But what about the beans and tomatoes, the onions and squash? Some of the plants had been sturdier than the others and still had life in them.

She ran back to the well and dropped the windlass, listening for the life-giving splash as it hit water.

All of her determination centered on the well. It took more strength than she had ever realized to draw up a bucket of water, and she was trembling after she had done it three times. Three buckets of water, at half a bucketful to each plant that looked as if it had a chance at survival, equaled only six plants. The intensely dry heat seemed to suck it out of the ground almost as fast as she poured it on, but she was careful to pour at the base of the plants so the root systems could get as much as possible.

The sun was too hot. She paused and looked up at it, wiping her face on her sleeve. It was wasting water to pour it out in this kind of heat. Nighttime would be better; the plants would get more of it that way, and she would be able to work more comfortably in the cooler hours.

With that decision made she returned to the cabin and the work there. The results were discouraging. There was so little left that didn't have a bullet hole in it, even the pots and pans. Her iron skillet had survived, of course, but other than that she found only two pots that were usable. Even her biscuit pan was a casualty, and the coffeepot had so many holes in it that it resembled a sieve.

But no matter how useless it seemed she didn't let herself stop. If she stopped, she would think about Lucas, and she would break. She would sit down and howl like a lost child. If she could just stay busy and numb, she would be all right.

She had become soft during the past weeks. When the night finally cooled it was all she could do to force herself to move instead of collapsing in bed, as her body kept insisting she do. Everything was too dry for her to risk carrying a lamp out to the garden, so she worked by starlight.
She found that after a while she became so numb that she no longer felt her exhaustion. She hauled up bucket after bucket of water and trudged to the garden to empty it on what seemed like endless rows of plants.
It was some time after midnight when she realized she had been standing at the well in a stupor, holding an empty bucket in her hand. She didn't know how long she had been standing there.
Her legs felt as if they had lead weights attached, and her hands had no feeling. She was so tired she couldn't lift her feet. She went back to the cabin, fell facedown on the bed, and didn't stir until noon.
That first day set the pattern for the days that followed. She tried to sleep as much as possible during the day, and at night she hauled water to the garden. She didn't think about it, didn't try to assess her progress, she just did it. She knew that if she ever stopped she would have no hope left.
Eight days after she had left, Lucas rode over to Angel Creek. It was late in the afternoon, but cooler than it had been in weeks. He figured eight days had been long enough for her to stew; now they could have a thunderous fight and clear the air.
Every day he had resisted the urge to check on her, to ride out there and see if he could talk sense into her. Damn, he missed her. He hadn't had nearly enough time with her. It would take a lifetime to satisfy him.
The first thing he saw when he rode up was Dee carrying a bucket of water out to the garden and carefully pouring it around the plants.
Anger seared him. That damn garden! He should have pulled the plants up by the roots and burned them. Why couldn't she see how useless it was?
He strode to meet her as she walked back to the well. She would have gone past him without even glancing at him, and his temper erupted. He jerked the bucket out of her hand and hurled it across the yard. "What in hell are you trying to do?" he yelled. "Kill yourself?"
She pulled her shoulders up very straight. "Thanks to you," she said softly, "I'm having to water my garden by hand."
"Goddammit, Dee, it's too late!" He grabbed her arm and dragged her over to the garden. "Look at it!" he raged. "Open your eyes and look at it! You're

pouring water on dying plants! Even if you could get some of them to bloom again, winter will be here before they can bear."
"If I don't have a garden, then I don't eat," she said. She tugged free of his grip and walked over to pick up the bucket.
He followed her and kicked it away from her outstretched hand. "Don't pick it up," he said with clenched teeth. She had been almost back to normal when she had left him, now she was noticeably thinner, and dark circles lined her eyes. Her face was pallid and drawn. "You've lost," he said. He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her. "Damn it, you've lost! It's over with. There's nothing left out here worth having. Get your clothes, and I'll take you home."
She jerked away from him. "This is my home."
"This is nothing!" he roared.
"Then I'm nothing!" she suddenly shrieked at him.
He tried to regain his control, but his voice was iron hard when he spoke. "You have two choices. You can take the money I offered you for the land and live in town, or you can marry me."
She was taking deep breaths, searching for her own control. Carefully she said, "Why would you want to buy worthless land? I don't want your conscience money, and I won't take charity."
"Then we're getting married."
"Those are your choices, not mine." Her hands were knotted into fists. "If I won't take your money to ease your conscience, you can bet I won't marry you for the same reason. My choice is to stay on my land, in my own home."
"Damn it, you'll starve out here."
"My choice, Cochran."
They faced each other like gunfighters. In the silence that stretched between them they heard a deep rumble, and a cool wind played with her skirt. Lucas lifted his head, a frozen expression on his face. He sniffed, catching the unmistakable scent of dust and rain.
Dee looked up at the bank of dark clouds advancing toward them. The sky had been clear for so long that she stared at them in stupefaction. Rain clouds. Those were actually rain clouds.
They saw it coming, a misty gray wall sweeping down the slope. Within a minute it had reached them, slapping at them with scattered raindrops so big

that they stung when they hit and made little dust rings fly up from the earth.
Lucas took her arm and propelled her up on the porch; they reached it just as the rain became a deluge. Thunder boomed so loud that the ground shook.
They stood in silence on the porch and watched the rain blow in sheets. It became apparent that it wasn't going to be a brief summer thunderstorm as the rain settled down to a hard, steady downpour.
He had seen it before and knew it for what it was. It was a drought-buster, the signal of a change in the weather, and just in time, too. None of the surrounding ranches had gone under, but another week would have seen cattle dying. Everyone had survived the drought.
Everyone but Dee.
The hard rain would replenish the ground water and refill the wells. It would save ranches and herds, bring grass springing back to life. Runoff from the mountain would fill Angel Creek again, but it would only be temporary. The valley would revive, but it would be too late for her, too late for the garden. When it was all said and done, everyone had made it through the drought except her.
She turned and walked into the cabin, quietly closing the door behind her. She hadn't cried before, but now she did. She had kept herself under strict control, forcing herself to work automatically instead of thinking, but she could no longer keep the thoughts at bay.
Lucas could not have chosen anything designed to hurt her more. She had fought so hard for her independence, had carefully carved out a life for herself that she had loved, and he had destroyed it. If it had been Kyle Bellamy, she could have understood it; she could have been angry and hostile, she would have done what she could to prevent it, but she wouldn't have been so totally stunned by betrayal. It wouldn't have devastated her emotions if she hadn't loved Lucas, but she did. Even now she loved him. And he had demonstrated more clearly than she could ever have imagined that she meant nothing to him at all.
Lucas stood outside the door and listened to her crying, the sound mixing with that of the rain until sometimes they were indistinguishable, or perhaps they were the same.
He had never imagined Dee crying. He had never imagined that the sound of it would tear at his soul and leave it ravaged.

He had never imagined that he could hurt her, and now he knew just how stupidly arrogant he had been.

Chapter 22

Lucas remembered what Luis had said: If Dee loved Angel Creek so much, she would be too hurt to see beyond the pain. He had known she loved it, but he had disregarded her feelings, assuming that he knew what was best for her. The truth was, he had done what was best for himself, not only in securing water for the ranch but in trying to manipulate Dee so that she had no choice but to marry him. Not once had he considered that losing Angel Creek would break her heart, though he should have; he loved the Double C in the same way. He loved it so much that he would never, ever forgive anyone responsible for destroying it.

But he had done exactly that to the woman he loved.

He had been so arrogant that he had blithely assumed living on the Double C would more than compensate her for losing Angel Creek. He had assumed that she would merely be angry, and that he would eventually be able to wear her down.

He should have remembered her deep, fierce passions, and the way she had looked that morning when he'd found her in the meadow, her face so radiant it had hurt him to look at her. He had discounted the strength of her love and made the worst mistake of his life. How could he convince her that he loved her after he had deliberately smashed the very foundation of her life?

Everyone was jubilant about the rain, almost giddy as they watched water holes refill and streams begin to run. Even the Bar B had managed to get by. Lucas felt savage as he watched it rain again the next day, and the next. It had all been for nothing, everything that Dee had endured. Bellamy had attacked her for nothing. He, Lucas, had destroyed Angel Creek valley for nothing. Fate and nature had mocked them by sending the rain just in time for the ranchers, but far too late for one woman.

He had her bull and two cows returned to her, and he bought some chickens to replace the ones that had left when he'd diverted the creek. He didn't take them himself because he didn't think she would be glad to see him under any circumstances just then, and maybe never.

Dee forced herself to go through the motions of living. She was too stubborn to let herself give up, but she did everything automatically, without hope or purpose. As Lucas had so caustically pointed out to her, she had been wasting her time pouring water on dying plants. None of them had recovered enough to bear.

No matter how she looked at it, she was in a hopeless situation. She still had some of last year's bounty that she had canned, but not enough to last through the winter, unless she could live on milk and eggs. She didn't have enough money to repair the cabin and buy food, too, but she wouldn't be able to stay in the cabin through the winter without repairing it. If she repaired the cabin, she would starve. Every alternative she explored brought her to a blank wall.

Unless she could find a job, she didn't know how she could live through the winter. And even if she did, what about next year? Could she manage a large garden without Angel Creek to nourish it, relying only on what rain came? Perhaps, though it would inevitably mean watering by hand again. A lot of families got by like that. But families were just that, families. By definition there were at least two people to share the work. Though she was strong, she knew her limitations. If she tried to grow a garden as large as she normally did, she would wear herself down trying to tend it, and exhaustion led to clumsiness, which led to accidents.

She could grow just enough for herself and manage to eat. But there wouldn't be any money for repairs, or for clothes. Not that she had that many clothes now, she thought, picturing her utilitarian garments, but she had always been able to replace them as they had worn out.

If she found work, she could survive, but it wouldn't be much more than that. She wouldn't be able to garden, wouldn't have the time.

She had loved it so. The rich scent of the earth in the mornings, the cool, silky feel of the dew, the tangible rewards of harvest, the almost blissful satisfaction of seeing the life and bounty that, with her care, the earth had given so generously. There had been a sublime rhythm to the seasons. She had followed nature's timing, renewing in the spring, flourishing in the summer, harvesting, then lying dormant through the long winters. No matter what she did now, it seemed she had lost that, the very thing she had most loved.

But people all over the world faced shattering disappointments, even tragedies, and went on with their lives. Time was inexorable. She had to

either cope or give up. She knew how to do the first, but not the second.
The first person she went to see about a job was Mr. Winches at the general store. He peered sharply at her. "What's that?"
"A job," she replied calmly. "It doesn't matter what. I can do your books, put up stock, sweep the floor."
"I can do all that myself," he grumped.
"Yes, I know."
He was still staring at her. He chewed on his lip. "Sorry about what happened to your place. Guess that's why you're here."
"Yes."
He sighed. "Wish I could help you, but the plain fact is it would be stupid for me to pay anyone to do what I can do myself. The store just ain't big enough to call for it."
"I understand," she said. "Thank you."
She didn't even feel disappointment, because it was exactly what she had expected. If she did get a job, no one would be more surprised than she would.
She tried the dry goods store, but Mrs. Worley was just managing to support herself. An employee was out of the question. It was the same situation at the hat shop.
She walked up and down the streets, going into every business. The bank didn't need any more clerks. The two restaurants were family-owned, and hiring anyone to help meant a family member would be left with nothing to do. Likewise at the two hotels. It was a fact of life. In a family-run business the jobs went to family. She had known the situation before she began asking, but she asked anyway on the off chance that someone might be laid up and unable to work.
The one seamstress in town didn't need any help. Most women did their own sewing; there just weren't enough people in Prosper who paid to have their sewing done.
Dee even asked about cleaning houses, and Mr. Winches let her put a notice up in his store. No one contacted her. The people who could afford to have someone do their cleaning already had someone to do it.
What she had told Lucas when she had first met him was the literal truth: The only job for her in Prosper was in one of the rooms over the saloon. The one asset she had had—the land—was worthless now. She might be able to give it away, but no one was interested in buying it. She knew that

Lucas would give her his guilt money in exchange for the deed, but it would be nothing more than disguised charity, because he certainly didn't need it. He had plenty of water—the sweetest, clearest water imaginable, inexhaustible. He had the Angel Creek water.

It wasn't called Angel Creek over on that side of the mountains. She didn't know if it even had a name. It wouldn't have the same character over there, for the Double C was wide grazing land, and the effects of the water would be muted. In her narrow little valley it had been miraculous, creating a small paradise. That was why it had been called Angel Creek. She had never thought of it as just a cut in the ground with water running through it; Angel Creek had been alive, with its own personality, its mystery, a full partner in the bounty her garden had produced. She grieved for it as if a person had died.

If there was anything she had it was pride, yet as the days passed she was forced to the realization that she might yet have to swallow that pride and accept Lucas's money. There was nothing for her there, but she would be able to start again somewhere else.

Lucas! She still couldn't let herself think about him. The pain was still too fresh, too enormous. She lived every day with the knowledge of it, but she didn't take it out and examine it, or try to understand it. It was simply there. As long as she could ignore it she could function, but if she ever let it out it would destroy her.

Her body, whose rhythms were as inexorable as the seasons, told her that she didn't carry his child.

She should have been relieved.

Yet, against all logic, she had hoped. A baby now would be a disaster for her, but still she had hoped. Those two unprotected times with him had been her last chances to conceive. She no longer cared about her reputation, if any of it was left; she would have loved his baby with all of the fierceness of her nature, just as she loved him. She wouldn't hurt so much if she didn't love.

It took Dee a moment to recognize the woman who rode up to her cabin. She wore a stylish riding habit and an impossibly chic little hat with a plume curling around the brim and sat gracefully sidesaddle. But the dark red hair was the same, and the liquid brown eyes. It was Tillie, the saloon girl who had ridden to the Double C for help. Dee supposed she owed her

life as much to Tillie as she did to Luis Fronteras or Lucas. They had all played their parts.
The two women faced each other. "Good morning," Dee said quietly. "Would you like to come inside?"
Tillie dismounted and walked up on the porch. It was the first time in ten years that she had been invited into a respectable home. The cabin was humble and severely damaged, but not many people would have asked her inside or even greeted her civilly.
"Thank you for what you did."
Tillie gave a little smile. "It was only partially for you. I couldn't let Kyle destroy himself that way."
"I heard you're living on the Bar B now."
"Yes. We're getting married. But we may not stay in this area. I don't imagine folks will ever forget what happened, or forgive him. It's lucky both of us are good at starting over. And thank you. You could have stirred people up against him even more, but you didn't."
"There didn't seem to be much point in it. Lucas almost killed him." Colorado was a state now, she realized, but statehood hadn't changed the way folks handled things. If there was a dispute, people settled it without bringing the law into it. Kyle had received more punishment than the blows from Lucas's fists; he was virtually an outcast, his reputation destroyed.
Looking around the cabin, Tillie said, "You'll be starting over, too. I came to offer you some reparation for the damage. I know I can't make up to you for what happened to your place, but it will help you get by. Starting over.
Dee's heart thumped. How could she start over? "Kyle didn't cause this," she said. "Oh, he's the cause of the damage to the cabin, but Lucas Cochran is the one who ruined this valley."
"He wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for Kyle," Tillie said gently. "It was a hard decision, and a hard thing to do, but then Lucas is a hard man. He knew that as long as you had Angel Creek there would be someone trying to take it away from you, and you'd always be in danger. So he took away the only reason anyone would have for wanting the valley. He did it to protect you."
A look of utter desolation came into Dee's eyes. "I would rather have taken the risk."
"Lucas couldn't have risked it. He loves you too much."

Dee said slowly, "When I walk outside, what I see doesn't look like an act of love."
"I know. Like I said, it was a hard thing to do. It was hard for me to ask Lucas to help you that day, knowing that Kyle might be killed because of me. Not many people would have seen that as an act of love, but it was. I would have done anything to have stopped him, even if he had hated me for it."
"I don't hate Lucas," Dee said, and it was the truth.
"But can you forgive him?"
"No. Not now. Maybe not ever. I just feel empty, like a huge part of me is gone. But it isn't a matter of forgiveness, it's a matter of living. Right now I'm not very interested."
Tillie had seen that look before in other women's eyes, even in her own eyes on occasion. It was the look of someone who had nothing to lose. That kind of bleakness went deep, and if the person ever recovered, she was different, changed in ways that were hard to understand.
"I brought the money with me," Tillie said briskly, changing the subject.
"I don't want Kyle's money."
"It isn't his, it's mine."
Dee looked at her in surprise. "All the more reason not to take it. You shouldn't have to pay; you aren't responsible for any of this. If anything, I owe you for saving my life."
"But Kyle's debts are mine," Tillie insisted. She smiled wryly. "It's part of loving someone."
"Thank you, but no." She might eventually have conquered her pride and accepted Kyle's money, she thought, because this was partially his fault, but it was out of the question to take money from Tillie.
Tillie hesitated. "I hear you've been looking for work in town."
"Yes, but there isn't any."
"Then take the money. I can afford it, and you need it."
Dee thought about the money and starting over, but it wasn't money she needed; it was water. She went still, staring at Tillie as if she had never seen her before. What was wrong with her brain? Anything that had been done could be undone. A creek that had been diverted once could be diverted again.
She must have been in a stupor from shock, from the pain of Lucas's betrayal. It was the only excuse she had for sitting there instead of doing

something about the situation. She had never been one to sit and rail at fate; she rolled up her sleeves and took matters into her own hands.
She felt alive for the first time since Lucas had told her what he'd done, the old glitter returning to her eyes.
Watching her closely, Tillie said, "What? What is it? Do you have an idea?"
"I do. And there's something you can do to help me."
"Anything. I'm at your disposal."
A slow smile broke over Dee's face. "Can you get me some dynamite?"
Always interested in an adventure, Tillie went with her when Dee followed the creek bed up into the mountains to the source. It wasn't an easy trip by any means; Dee was certain there had to be an easier way, but she didn't know what it was.
They both wore pants, which was a good thing because several times they had to proceed on foot, leading their horses. They climbed and skirted and detoured, sometimes losing sight of the creek bed and having to work their way back to it. But when they reached the fork it was unmistakable. The earthen dam curved across the east fork, sending all of that beautiful water down onto Double C land.
Dee stared at the structure that had killed her farm. If Lucas had needed the water to survive, she would have built the dam herself, a handful of mud at the time. She had been willing to sell the valley to him. But damn if she would let him destroy something so beautiful, something that she loved so much, just because he thought he knew what was right for her better than she did!
"Have you ever used dynamite?" Tillie asked.
"No."
"Oh, my God."
"Don't worry. I asked in town. The blacksmith used to do some mining and showed me how it's done."
"Do you just light the fuse and throw it on the dam?"
"No. I'm going to plant it on the east side of the dam, at the bottom of it. That way, when it blows, it'll lower the creek bed, too." She understood very well the dynamics of what Lucas had done, and she was going to do the same thing.
It took her a while, using a knife, to gouge out two holes in the hardened clay. She wedged the sticks of dynamite in and stretched out the long fuses. She had taken the precaution of burning lengths of fuse so she could time

how long it took to burn a foot, and she estimated how long the fuse would have to be to give her time to get safely away from the blast.
"You'd better start on down the mountain," she said to Tillie. "I'll give you five minutes before I light the fuses."
"I'd like to watch," Tillie said. "I came this far. I want to see you do it. I'll leave when you do."
They looked at each other and grinned.
Dee lit the fuses.
They ran for their horses, swung into the saddle, and rode for all they were worth. Dee silently counted the seconds.
Lucas was walking along the creek bank, looking at the water rushing along, oblivious to the battles that had been fought over it. It was deeper than he'd ever seen it before, in some places deep enough to swim.
He wondered if it was worth it.
Dee had been going from door to door in town, asking for work rather than coming to him. The irony of it was that he was the one person who couldn't deny her anything, and she would rather die than ask him.
He had hoped, despite everything, that she would come to him, that she would cool down enough to realize that he'd done it to protect her. But it wasn't a matter of temper, it was a matter of a hurt so deep that she was still reeling from it.
And it was pride. There had never been a prouder creature born than Dee Swann. That didn't make it easy to love her, but if she had been less proud, less fierce, she wouldn't have been the same person, and he wouldn't have loved her to distraction. If she hadn't been so strong, she wouldn't have been able to match him in strength of will, and he couldn't have loved her otherwise. She was exactly what he needed, a true mate.
But he had struck hard at that pride, and at the independence that was such a large part of it. Dee would not forgive him for Angel Creek; she couldn't do that and remain the same person. He had expected—demanded—that she be less than the person she was. She had to have the freedom of independence; it fed something within her, was part and parcel of the spirit that made her so strong. How had she put it? Angel Creek didn't belong to her as much as she belonged to it.
If he forced her to come to him, to surrender her pride, it would kill something within her.

The only chance he had was to give it back to her, that independence and pride. She would never come to him except as an independent woman with her dignity intact. She would always insist on maintaining that independence, on keeping some part of herself separate. How could he blame her for that when he was the same? He would never subordinate himself to anyone else, and neither would she. She might be his partner, but never his dependent. He had never wanted it otherwise, but it had taken losing her to make him realize it.

He looked at the water again. Precious stuff, but not as precious to him as Dee.

She had turned down his marriage proposal even after he'd told her it wasn't because of Angel Creek. At the time he'd been so angry that he hadn't thought about it, but suddenly it hit him. Even if he somehow made it up to her for Angel Creek, she still wouldn't marry him. He had told her all about his plans, how he intended to make the Double C an empire by using his money to influence political decisions. He had talked about the social functions in Denver, the balls and receptions he and his wife would have to attend because deals had a way of being made in social settings. He had been thinking of Dee at his side, had actually been arrogant enough to think he could make her over into a proper little socialite.

But Dee couldn't live that way, and she knew it. It wasn't just that she wouldn't enjoy the life; she had to be outside, free, unfettered by the suffocating rows of buildings and the unending rules of society. Had he truly been so blind that he had imagined she would fit in just because that was what he wanted? She had never asked him to change. How could he have been so stupid as to expect it of her?

He thought about all of his plans, his ambitions, and he weighed them on a mental scale. He had wanted influence only because of the Double C.

But hell, he was already rich. And Dee would bring much more to the ranch than his ambitions ever could. She would bring herself, her spirit, the children they would have.

He had to choose, and with blinding clarity he knew that there was no choice at all. He would take Dee over any amount of power or influence he could ever hope to build. He would sign the Double C over to her completely if that was what it would take to get her back. He wanted her as his partner for life.

His partner.

He blinked, astonished at the idea that had come to him. It just might work. It was the only thing he'd thought of so far that would even begin to make it up to her.
He heard the boom, low and rumbling, that came from the mountains. He looked up, expecting to see clouds, but the sky was clear. He didn't know where the thunder had come from.
Thunder, hell! Abruptly he realized exactly what it was. His mouth fell open, and he stared at the mountains. Then, helplessly, he began to laugh. He should have expected that she would do something about the situation. That big boom was a signal that she was back in fighting form.
It was the next day when Dee heard a horse being ridden right up to the cabin. She looked out and saw Lucas swinging down from the saddle. She had expected him the day before and wondered what had taken him so long. She picked up the shotgun and walked out on the porch. "What do you want?" she asked without preamble.
He stopped with his boot on the first step, warily eyeing the shotgun. "Now, Dee. If you were going to use that, you should have done it the first time I saw you. It's been too late ever since then."
She smiled. "It's never too late to correct a mistake."
"Exactly." He jerked his head toward the sound of running water, where Angel Creek once again flowed clear and deep. "Who set the charges for you?"
She jerked her chin up. "I didn't need anyone to do it for me. I did it myself."
Lucas stared at her, aghast. His heart almost stopped as he thought of the danger she had been in. Damn it, didn't she know how unstable dynamite was? He hadn't even considered that she had done it herself, though now that he thought about it he realized that he should have expected it. When had Dee ever asked anyone to do anything for her?
"Are you crazy?" he yelled, his face flushing with anger. "You could have been killed!"
She gave him a scornful look. "I suppose you think I didn't know what I was doing."
"Did you?" he shot back.
She lifted her eyebrows at him. "Evidently," she drawled. "I'm still here."
He felt like banging his head against the wall in frustration, and then suddenly he laughed, because he hoped she would be driving him crazy like

that for the rest of his life. Maybe he was already crazy, because he could swear he'd seen a glint of amusement in those witch-green eyes. She loved making him lose control.
"Tillie helped me," she volunteered.
"Tillie!" He took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead with an agitated motion. "Jesus." But it made sense. Tillie would do it because she would feel obligated to atone for Kyle's sins. In this instance, Lucas knew that his own transgression had been much greater than Kyle's, even though he had done it out of love.
Dee gave him a challenging look. "If you build another dam, I'll just blow that one up, too."
"I don't intend to build another dam," he said irritably. "Hell, I should have blown that one up myself. I just didn't think of it in time."
Startled, Dee stared at him. "Why would you do that?"
"Because I was wrong." He gave her a level look, their gazes locking. "Because I didn't have any right to build it in the first place. Because I'd do anything to get you back."
She had never seen his eyes so blue, so determined. Her heart began thumping in her chest, but she didn't dare let him see it.
He moved up one step, and she brought the shotgun up. "Stay right there," she warned.
He didn't even look at the shotgun. "Will you marry me?" he asked.
Involuntarily she glanced toward the creek.
"No, not because of that damn water," he snapped. "Keep this valley. I don't need it. What I need is you. I'll have papers drawn up so that the valley remains yours, and I'll sign the Double C over to you. Just marry me."
Dee was astounded by the offer. Her arms went limp, letting the shotgun waver and the barrel point downward. Before she could take another breath Lucas was on the porch, cautiously removing it from her hands and setting it aside.
"What did you say?" she asked dazedly.
"I said Angel Creek will stay your personal property, yours to do with as you see fit without any say-so from me. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. And I'll give you my ranch. I'll give you whatever you want if you'll just say yes."
She had never imagined he would say anything so astounding. He simply couldn't mean what he was saying. "But… why?"

He drew a deep breath; it was damn hard to put himself on the line, staking everything he had and his future happiness against her answer. "Because I need you, sweetheart. I need a wife who'll knock me in the head when I try to ride roughshod over her, and you're the only one who has ever dared. I've lost count now of how many times I've asked you to marry me, but let's get one thing straight right now: I've never asked you because of this valley or the water. I asked you because I love you. Is that clear?"
She couldn't think of anything to say. She gaped at him, her mind as blank as a chalkboard that had been wiped clean.
"I said, is that clear?" he barked.
"You can't want me," she blurted.
"Why the hell can't I?"
"Because… because I'm not what you want," she sputtered. "You're going to spend a lot of time in Denver, and I couldn't live like that. People would make fun of me. I wouldn't fit—"
"No, you wouldn't," he agreed maddeningly. "To hell with Denver. I'd rather have you."
"I can't ask you to give up—"
"Goddammit, you aren't asking me to give up anything!" he roared, at the end of his patience. "I know what I want. Now answer my damn question!"
She blinked and tried to gather her scattered thoughts. "I don't want the Double C," she said. "I wouldn't marry you because you offered me land."
Lucas threw his hat on the porch and considered stomping it. Instead he seized her arms and shook her. "Then forget the damn land," he said, his teeth clenched tight. "Just say you'll marry me."
It began unfurling slowly, a bloom of joy swelling inside her chest, and she tried to contain it. If she didn't, she'd be in danger of bursting. He meant it. Incredible as it was, he meant it. He would never offer to part with an inch of his beloved Double C unless he thought it was the only way he could convince her to marry him, yet he had offered to give her the entire ranch. He loved her, and the hot look in those blue eyes told her that he didn't feel even a tinge of regret for giving up his ambitions. He had made up his mind, and when Lucas Cochran made up his mind about something no one could change it.
"All right," she said.
He shook her again. "All right, what?"
She began to laugh. "Yes," she said.

"Yes, what?" God, she would make him a raving maniac before the year was out.
She gave him a smile of blinding sweetness. "Yes, I love you, too. Yes, I'll marry you. But not because of the Double C or any other reason, except that I love you. Was there anything else?"
Lucas hauled her against his chest, his arms so tight that her ribs were constricted. He closed his eyes as tears burned. He had gambled his entire life on this and had been in terror that she would refuse him. "God, you're stubborn."
"I know," she said placidly, the words muffled because her face was against his chest. "As stubborn as you."
"I meant it about Angel Creek. It stays yours. You need it, sweetheart. I didn't understand before." He kissed her hair. "As new owner of the Double C, you're one of the richest women in the state."
She lifted her head and gave him a blinding smile. "No," she said.
"Of course you are. I know how much the ranch is worth, damn it."
"I don't want the Double C."
"A deal's a deal."
"Not until I say 'I do' it isn't. I won't take the Double C. You need it just the way I need Angel Creek." Her hands crept up his back. "This doesn't have to be a surrender, you know. Why can't it be a partnership?"
"Hell, I don't care," he said impatiently. "Just as long as you marry me."
She felt surprisingly peaceful. "It doesn't matter whose name is on the papers as long as I can still come here," she said, and with a start she realized that it was true. Angel Creek was hers even if the title had Lucas's name on it. She trusted him, and because she did she wouldn't have to fight to maintain her independence. The respect he gave her as a person was a measure of her true independence, and that was all she'd ever wanted. Marrying him couldn't change that at all.
"That's what I realized about the Double C," he admitted. "The name didn't matter. Having you mattered, and the land would still be there. But we'll do it however you want," he said, tilting her face up for a hard kiss. "It can be your legacy to our kids, if you want."
Her entire body rippled with pleasure at the thought of the hours of lovemaking that would be necessary to get those kids. Lucas absorbed the movement, his own body responding.

"We'll fight a lot," he said, thinking of it with anticipation. He could barely wait.
"That's almost certain."
"And make love when the fighting's over."
She drew back to give him a long, green look. "That remains to be seen."
"No," he said, lifting her in his arms. "It doesn't." He strode down the steps and over to the creek bank, where the crystal water of Angel Creek swirled and glittered just as it had before, but with a certain giddiness to it, as if it were glad to be back. With a deep shout of laughter he tossed her into the water, then jumped in himself. It was cold, but they didn't care. Shrieking with laughter like a child, Dee jumped on his back and forced him underwater again, and they grappled together until the laughter died and something else came into his deep blue eyes.
He pulled her up on the bank and covered her there, shoving her skirt up and stripping her wet drawers away, then unbuttoning his pants and tugging them down only as far as was necessary, because he couldn't wait a minute longer. He linked them with a hard, single thrust, groaning as the tight heat of her body enveloped him. This was nothing less than paradise.
Dee's legs embraced him, then loosened. She pushed at his shoulder, and he rolled, taking her with him. She sat up and pushed her wet hair out of her eyes, and he caught his breath at the look of ecstasy on her face. It was the same exalted expression he'd seen there one dawn, and he had put it there. With the bright sky behind her and her eyes as green as emeralds, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and she was his.
"We're getting married tomorrow," he said.
She leaned forward to kiss him, her mouth tender. "Whatever you say, darling," she purred.
He wasn't fooled for a minute.

Epilogue

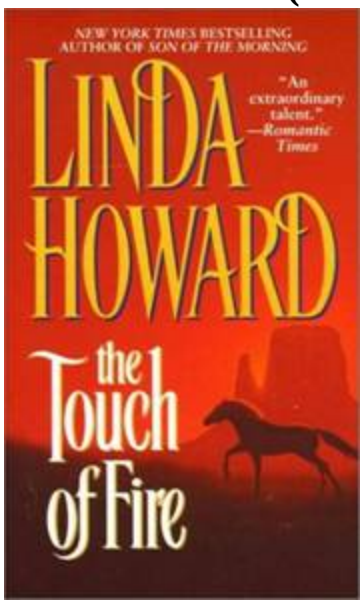
Kyle and Tillie Bellamy eventually sold the Bar B and moved back east. Dee received one letter from Tillie saying that they were happy and were considering a move to New Orleans. She never heard from Tillie again.
Luis and Olivia Fronteras traveled for two years, then to her parents' delight returned to Prosper and bought land just west of the Bar B. Though Wilson

Millican was never certain just how his son-in-law supported Olivia, they always seemed to have money and he didn't think he should inquire too closely. Olivia was happier than he'd ever seen her, and that was all he asked. He never would have imagined his sedate daughter as having a streak of adventure in her, but he had to admit it suited her. Then, in swift procession, Olivia presented her husband with three daughters. She couldn't have made him happier, because Luis was always delighted to be surrounded by females.

Lucas and Dee Cochran had five children. Three boys came first, hell-raisers just like he had predicted. The next two were girls, and by the time the oldest one was a year old Lucas was worrying. His baby girls were so much like their mother that he knew he wouldn't draw an easy breath for the rest of his life.

He and Dee fought and yelled and made up. The house rang with noise and passion. He wouldn't have had it any other way.

The Touch of Fire (1992)



POCKET STAR BOOKS
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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Printed in the U.S.A.
Dedicated to my niece,
Brandwyn Robinson, whom I've loved from the minute she was born

CHAPTER 1

1871, Arizona Territory

Someone had been on his back trail for most of the day. He had seen a telltale flash of light in the distance when he had stopped for grub around noon, just a tiny bright flicker that had lasted only a split second, but that had been enough to alert him. Maybe it had been the sun glinting off a buckle or a shiny spur. Whoever was back there had been just a little careless, and now they had lost the advantage of surprise.

Rafe McCay hadn't panicked; he had continued to ride as if he had nowhere in particular to go and all the time in the world to get there. It would be getting dark soon, and he decided he'd better find out who was tracking him before he made camp for the night. Besides, according to his calculations the tracker should be exposed on that long tree-line trail just about now.

McCay got the field glass out of his saddlebag and stepped into the shadow of a big pine, making certain that no reflection could give him away, too. He trained the glass on the trail where he estimated the tracker would be and soon spotted the man: one rider on a dark brown horse with a right front

stocking. The man was holding the horse to a walk and leaning over to examine the trail as they went. McCay had come that way himself an hour or so before.

Something about the rider was familiar. McCay kept the glass trained on the distant figure, trying to trigger his memory, but he couldn't get a good look at the man's face. Maybe it was the way he sat in the saddle, or maybe even the horse itself that gave McCay a gnawing sense that somewhere down the line he'd seen or met this particular man, and that he hadn't liked what he'd learned. But he just couldn't bring the man's name to mind. The rig on the horse wasn't unusual, and there was nothing about the man's clothes that was out of the ordinary, except maybe for his flat-crowned black hat trimmed with silver conchas—

Trahern.

McCay's breath hissed through his teeth.

The bounty on his head must have gotten pretty big, to attract someone like Trahern. Trahern's reputation was that he was a good tracker, a damn good shot, and that he never stopped, never gave up.

Four years of being hunted kept McCay from doing anything hasty or foolish. He had both time and surprise on his side, as well as experience. Trahern didn't know it, but the hunted had just become the hunter.

On the chance that Trahern might have a field glass, too, McCay remounted and rode deeper into the trees before circling back to the right, putting a small rise between him and his pursuer. If there was one thing the war had taught him, it was always to know the lay of the land, and he automatically chose courses that gave him, whenever possible, both cover and escape routes. He could cover his tracks and lose the bounty hunter here in the timber, but there was another thing the war had taught him: never leave an enemy on your back trail. If he didn't deal with it now, he'd have to deal with it later, when the circumstances might not be in his favor. Trahern had signed his own death warrant by trying to collect this particular bounty. McCay had long since lost any scruples about killing the men who came after him; it was a matter of his life or theirs, and he was damn tired of running.

When he had doubled back a mile, he left his horse concealed behind a rocky outcropping and made his way on foot to where he could see his original trail. By his calculations, the bounty hunter should be along within half an hour. McCay carried his rifle in a scabbard slung across his back. It

was a repeater that he'd had for a couple of years now. It was plenty accurate for the distance, which was about sixty yards. He chose his cover, a big pine with a two-foot-high rock at the base of it, and settled into position to wait.

But the minutes ticked by, and Trahern didn't appear. McCay lay motionless and listened to the sounds around him. Birds were calling, undisturbed, having become accustomed to him since he hadn't moved for so long. Had something made Trahern suspicious? McCay couldn't think of anything he'd done. Maybe Trahern had just stopped to rest, cautiously putting more distance between himself and his quarry until he was ready to make his move. That was Trahern's way: biding his time until things suited him. McCay liked to operate that way himself. A lot of men had gotten themselves killed by taking the fight forward when the odds were against them.

Colonel Mosby had always said that Rafe McCay was the best he'd ever seen in ambush because he had patience and endurance. McCay could withstand discomfort, hunger, pain and boredom, divorcing his mind from it and concentrating instead on the job at hand. The growing darkness, however, opened up other possibilities. Trahern could have stopped and made camp for the night rather than try to follow a trail in the failing light. He might think it would be easier to spot a cook fire and just be lying back there biding his time; but Trahern was smart enough to know that a man on the run made do a lot of times with a cold camp, and only a damn fool slept by a fire anyway. A man stayed alive by building a small fire to cook, then putting it out and moving to another location to bed down.

McCay's own choices now were to stay right where he was and pick Trahern off whenever he did come down the trail, backtrack a bit more and try to find Trahern at his own camp, or use the darkness to put even more distance between them.

His horse whickered softly down by the rocks, and McCay swore violently to himself. He heard an answering whinny immediately, and the second call was right behind him. McCay reacted instantly, rolling and bringing the barrel of the rifle around. Trahern was about twenty yards behind and to his left, and it was a toss-up which of them was the most surprised. Trahern had cleared leather, but he was looking in the wrong direction, down toward McCay's horse. McCay's movement brought him swinging around, and

McCay got off the first shot, but Trahern was already dodging to the side and the slug missed. Trahera's shot went wild.
The crest of the ridge was right behind McCay and he simply rolled over it, getting a mouthful of dirt and pine needles in the process, but that was better than taking a bullet. He spat the dirt out and got to his feet, bending low to keep the ridge line between him and Trahern. Silently he moved to his right, working his way back toward his horse.
He wasn't in a good mood. Damn it, what was Trahern doing wandering away from the trail like that? The bounty hunter hadn't been expecting anything, or he wouldn't have been so surprised at finding his prey right under his nose. Well, hell, sometimes even the best traps didn't work, but now Trahern was right on him and he'd lost the advantage of surprise.
He gained the shelter of another big pine and went down on one knee behind it, holding himself still and quiet while he listened. He was in a mess and he knew it. All Trahern had to do was settle down where he could watch McCay's horse, and McCay was trapped, too. His only chance was to spot Trahern before Trahern spotted him, and a lot of men had died trying to do that very thing.
Then a humorless smile lifted the corners of his hard mouth. There were only a few minutes of light left. If Trahern wanted to see who could snake around better in the dark, McCay was happy to oblige him.
He closed his eyes and let his ears catch every sound without the distraction of sight to dilute the message. He noticed a gradual increase in the chirping of insects and tree frogs, as the nighttime denizens went about their business. When he opened his eyes again, about ten minutes later, his sight had already adjusted to the darkness and he could easily make out the outlines of trees and bushes.
McCay slipped pine needles through his spurs to keep them from jingling and replaced the rifle in the scabbard on his back; the long gun would be too awkward to hold while crawling around in the dark. He removed his revolver from the holster, then eased down onto his belly and snake-crawled toward the cover of a clump of bushes.
The iciness of the ground beneath him reminded him that winter hadn't completely released its grip on the land yet. During the comparative warmth of the day he had taken off his coat and tied it to the back of his saddle. Now that the sun had set, the temperature was plunging.

He'd been cold before, and the pungent smell of pine needles reminded him that he'd crawled on his belly more than once, too. Back in '63, he'd completely circled a Yankee patrol on his belly, moving not three feet behind one guard, then returned to Mosby and reported the patrol's strength and the placement of the guards. He'd also snaked through the mud one rainy November night with a bullet in his leg and the Yankees beating the bushes for him. Only the fact that he'd been so thoroughly coated with mud had enabled him to escape capture that time.

It took him half an hour to ease back to the crest of the ridge and slide over it as sinuously as a snake going into a river. There he paused once again, letting his eyes go unfocused while he examined the surrounding trees for a shape that didn't belong, his ears listening for the stamp of a hoof or a horse's snuffle. If Trahern was as smart as he was supposed to be, he'd have moved the horses, but maybe he'd been too wary to show himself like that. How long could Trahern stay alert, all his senses straining? The effort exhausted most men if they weren't used to it. McCay was so used to it that he didn't even have to think about it anymore. The past four years hadn't been much different from the war, except that he was alone now, and he wasn't liberating payrolls, arms, or horseflesh from Union soldiers. And if he was caught now, he wouldn't be released in a prisoner exchange; he'd never make it to any sort of lawman alive. The bounty on his head, dead or alive, guaranteed that.

He let well over an hour lapse before, moving one muscle at a time, an inch at a time, he began working his way closer to the rocky outcropping where he'd left his horse, stopping every few feet to listen. It was slow going; it took over half an hour to cover fifty feet, and he estimated he had at least a hundred yards to go. Finally he caught the faint scrape of a horseshoe on rock as an animal shifted its weight, and the deep, sighing sound of a sleeping horse. He couldn't see either his horse or Trahern's, but the direction of the sounds told him that his horse was still where he'd left it. Trahern must have decided not to take the risk of exposing himself long enough to move the animals.

The question now was, where was Trahern? Somewhere with a clear view of McCay's horse. Somewhere that afforded cover for himself. And was he still alert, or had his senses dulled from the strain? Was he getting sleepy? McCay calculated that it had been about five hours since Trahern had walked up on him, which would make it only about ten o'clock. Trahern

was too good to let himself relax his guard this soon. The early morning hours were when the senses dulled and defenses tumbled, when the eyelids were lined with grit and weighed about forty pounds each, when the mind was numb with exhaustion.

But wouldn't Trahern, knowing that McCay would know this, expect him to wait? Wouldn't Trahern feel fairly safe in snatching an hour or so of sleep now, reasoning that any try for the horse would come right before dawn? Or that startling a dozing horse would make enough racket to awaken him?

McCay grinned, feeling the recklessness flood through him. Hell, he might as well stand up and walk right up to the horse. The odds were the same no matter what he did. When it looked as if he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't, he'd learned that the most reckless choice was the one with the best chance of succeeding.

He worked his way closer to the outcropping that sheltered the horse, then waited until the shifting sounds told him that the animal had awakened. He waited a few more minutes, then rose silently to his feet and walked up to the big bay, who caught his scent and affectionately butted him with his head. McCay rubbed the velvety soft nose, then gathered the reins and as quietly as possible swung up into the saddle. His blood was racing through his veins the way it always did at times like this, and he had to clench his teeth to keep from venting his tension in a bloodcurdling yell. The horse quivered under him, sensing his savage enjoyment of the risk he was taking.

It took iron self-control to turn the horse and calmly walk it away, but the ground was too uneven to risk even a trot. Now was the most dangerous time, when Trahern was most likely to be awakened—

He heard the snick of a hammer being thumbed back and instantly bent low over the horse's neck as he reined it sharply to the right and kicked its flanks. He felt the sharp burning in his left side a split second before he heard the shot. The muzzle flash pinpointed Trahern's position, and McCay had drawn and fired before Trahern could get another shot off. Then the big horse bolted, encouraged by another thud from McCay's bootheel, and the darkness swallowed them. He could hear Trahern's curses even over the thunder of his horse's hooves.

Concern for both their necks made him rein in the horse before they'd gone a quarter of a mile. His side was burning like hell, and wetness was seeping down the side of his pants. His horse at a walk, McCay pulled off his glove with his teeth and felt around, finding two holes in his shirt and

corresponding holes in his body where the bullet had entered and exited. He yanked his bandanna from around his neck and wadded it up inside his shirt, using his elbow to keep it pressed to the wounds.

Damn, he was cold! A convulsive shudder started in his boots and rolled all the way up his body, shaking him like a wet dog and nearly making him pass out from the pain. He put his glove back on and untied his coat from the bedroll, then shrugged into the heavy fleece-lined garment. The shivers continued, and the wetness spread down his left leg. The son of a bitch hadn't hit anything vital, but he was losing a lot of blood.

The guessing game started again. Trahern would probably expect him to ride hard and fast, putting as much distance between them as he could manage by sunrise. McCay figured he'd gone about a mile when he walked the horse into a thick stand of pines and dismounted. He gave the animal a handful of feed and some water, patted his neck in appreciation of his steadiness, and untied the bedroll. He had to get the bleeding stopped, and get warm, or Trahern was going to find him lying unconscious on the trail. Keeping the canteen of water beside him, he wrapped up in the blanket and settled down on the thick layer of pine needles, lying on his left side so his weight would put pressure on the back wound while he pressed the heel of his hand over the exit wound in front. The position made him grunt with pain, but he figured the discomfort was better than bleeding to death. Sleeping was out of the question. Even if the pain would let him, he didn't dare let himself relax.

He hadn't eaten since noon, but he wasn't hungry. He drank a little water every now and then and watched the glimmer of the stars through the heavy tree cover overhead. He listened for any sounds of pursuit, though he didn't really expect Trahern to come after him so soon. The night held only natural sounds.

Gradually he began to warm, and the hot pain in his side subsided to a dull throb. His shirt was stiffening, which meant the flow of fresh blood had stopped. It was harder now to stay awake, but he refused to give in to his growing lethargy. There would be time for sleep later, after he'd killed Trahern.

It wasn't quite dawn when he eased to his feet. A wave of dizziness threatened to topple him and he braced his hand on a tree to support himself. Damn, he must have lost more blood than he'd thought; he hadn't expected to be this weak. When he was steady, he went to the horse with a

soothing murmur and got some beef jerky from his saddlebag, knowing that food and water would steady him faster than anything. He forced himself to eat, then quietly led the horse back the way they had come. It hadn't worked the first time, but it should the second. Trahern would be intent on following the blood trail.

He had been in position only a few minutes when he saw Trahern slipping up the hollow, handgun in his fist. McCay cursed silently, for the fact that Trahera was on foot meant that he was wary. The bounty hunter either had a sixth sense for danger or he was the luckiest son of a bitch McCay had ever seen.

He steadied the rifle, but Trahera used his cover well, never exposing all of himself at the same time. Rafe caught only a shoulder, part of a leg, the flat crown of that distinctive hat; he didn't have a clear shot at any time. Well, if a wounding shot was all that was offered, he'd take it. At the very least it would slow Trahern down, even the odds between them.

The next target that Trahern offered was a sliver of pants leg. A cold smile touched McCay's face as he sighted down the barrel. His hands were rock steady as he gently squeezed the trigger. Trahern's scream of pain was almost simultaneous with the sharp report of the rifle, both sounds muted by the trees.

McCay withdrew and pulled himself into the saddle, the movement more difficult than he had expected. His side began to burn again, and a damp feeling spread. Damn it, he'd opened his wounds. But now Trahern was wounded, too, and it would take him a long time to get back to his own horse, giving McCay a good head start that he couldn't afford to waste. He'd see to the wounds later.

Annis Theodora Parker calmly brewed a mild valerian tea, all the while keeping a weather eye on her patient. Eda Couey looked like a big, competent country girl, the sort you'd expect to give birth as easily as any woman could wish, but she was having trouble and was beginning to panic. Annis, known from childhood as Annie, knew that both Eda and the baby would fare a lot better if Eda was calmer.

She carried the hot tea to the bedside and held Eda's head so she could sip. "It'll help the pain," she quietly assured the girl. Eda was only seventeen, and this was her first. The valerian wouldn't really ease the pain, but it would calm the girl so she could help get her child into the world.

Eda quieted as the sedative began to work, but her face was still paper white and her eyes sunken as the labor pains continued. According to Walter Couey, Eda's husband, the girl had already been in labor for two days before he'd given in to her pleas for help and fetched Annie to their one-room lean-to shack. He'd grumbled that he hadn't been able to get any sleep with all the carryin' on, and Annie had controlled a strong urge to slap him.

The baby was turned breech, and the birth wasn't going to be easy. Annie silently prayed for the infant's survival, for sometimes the cord would get pinched during a breech birth and the baby would die in the birth canal. And she wondered if, even should it survive being born, it would live to see its first birthday. The conditions in the miserable lean-to were appalling, and Walter Couey was a mean, stupid man who would never provide anything better. He was in his forties, and Annie suspected that Eda wasn't really his wife but only an illiterate farm girl sold into virtual slavery to relieve her family of one more mouth to feed. Walter was an unsuccessful miner, even here at Silver Mesa where men were finding the precious metal in thick veins; mining was hard work and Walter wasn't inclined to work hard at anything. She couldn't allow herself to think that it would be a blessing if the baby did die, but she felt pity for both mother and child.

Eda moaned as her belly tightened again with a massive contraction. "Push," Annie commanded in a low tone. She could see a smooth moon of flesh crowning: the baby's buttocks. "Push!"

A guttural scream tore from Eda's throat as she bore down with all of her strength, her shoulders lifting off the pallet. Annie put her hands on the hugely swollen belly and added her strength to Eda's.

It was now or never. If Eda couldn't deliver the infant, both mother and child would die. Labor would continue, but Eda would grow progressively weaker.

The tiny buttocks protruded from Eda's body. Quickly, Annie tried to grasp them, but they were too slippery. She worked her fingers inside the stretched opening and caught the baby's legs. "Push!" she said again.

But Eda was falling back, almost paralyzed with pain. Annie waited for the next contraction, which followed within seconds, then used the natural force of Eda's internal muscles to aid her as she literally pulled the infant's lower body from the mother. It was a boy. She inserted the fingers of one hand again to keep Eda's muscles from clamping down, and with the other hand

steadily pulled the baby the rest of the way out. It lay limply between Eda's thighs. Both Eda and the baby were still and quiet.
Annie picked up the little scrap, supporting it facedown on her forearm while she thumped it on the back. The tiny chest heaved, and the baby set up a mewling squall as air flooded its lungs for the first time. "There you go," Annie crooned, and turned the baby over to make certain its mouth and throat were clear. Normally she would have done that first, but getting the child to breathe had seemed more important. The little fellow jerked his legs and arms as he wailed, and a tired smile wreathed Annie's face. He sounded stronger with every squall.
The cord had stopped pulsing, so she tied it off close to his belly and clipped it, then quickly wrapped him in a blanket to protect him from the chill. After placing him next to Eda's warmth, she turned her attention to the girl, who was only half conscious.
"Here's your baby, Eda," Annie said. "It's a boy, and he looks healthy. Just listen to him cry! Both of you came through it fine. In a minute the afterbirth will come, and then I'll get you cleaned up and comfortable."
Eda's pale lips moved in silent acknowledgment, but she was too exhausted to gather the baby to her.
The afterbirth came quickly, and Annie was relieved that there was no unusually heavy bleeding. A hemorrhage now would kill the girl, for she had no reserves of strength. She cleaned Eda and restored the mean little lean-to to rights, then picked up the fretting infant, as his mother was too weak to see to him, and crooned as she rocked him in her arms. He quieted, and his fuzzy little head turned toward her.
She roused Eda and helped the girl cradle her child as she unbuttoned Eda's nightgown and guided the baby's rosebud mouth to his mother's exposed breast. For a moment he didn't seem to know what to do with the nipple brushing his lips, then instinct took over and he eagerly began sucking on it. Eda jumped, and gave a breathless little "oh!"
Annie stood back and watched those first magical moments of discovery as the young mother, exhausted as she was, looked in wonder at her child. Tiredly she put on her coat and picked up her bag. "I'll be by tomorrow to check on you."
Eda looked up, her white, weary face lit with a glowing smile. "Thankee, Doc. Me and the baby wouldn'a made it without you."

Annie returned the smile, but she could barely wait to get outside into the fresh air, cold as it might be. It was late in the afternoon, with less than an hour of light left, and she had been with Eda all day without a bite to eat. Her back and legs ached, and she was tired. Still, the successful birth gave her an immense feeling of satisfaction.

The Coueys' lean-to was at the opposite end of Silver Mesa from the tiny two-room shack that served Annie as both office and living quarters. She treated patients in the front room, and lived in the back one. As she trudged through the mud of Silver Mesa's one winding "street," miners called out rough greetings to her. This late in the day, they were leaving their claims and crowding into Silver Mesa to fill up on raw whiskey and lose their hard-earned money to gamblers and fancy women. Silver Mesa was a boomtown, without any sort of law or social amenities, unless you counted the five saloons located in tents. Some enterprising merchants had built rough plank buildings to house their wares, but wooden structures were few and far between. Annie felt lucky to have one of them for her medical practice, and in turn the inhabitants of Silver Mesa felt lucky to have any sort of a doctor at all, even a woman.

She had been here for six—no, it was eight— months now, after failing to establish a practice in either her native Philadelphia or Denver. She had learned the bitter fact that, no matter how good a doctor she was, no one was going to come to her if there was a male doctor within a hundred miles. In Silver Mesa, there wasn't. Even so, it had taken a while for people to come to her, though like boom-towns everywhere Silver Mesa was a violent place to live. Men were always getting shot, cut, or beaten, breaking bones or crushing various limbs. The trickle of patients had slowly turned into a steady stream, until now she sometimes didn't have time to sit down from daylight to dark.

It was what she had always wanted, what she had worked years for, but every time someone called her "Doc" or she heard someone say "Doc Parker" she was filled with sadness, for she wanted to look around for her father and he would never again be there. Frederick Parker had been a wonderful man and a wonderful doctor. He had let Annie help him in little ways from the time she had been only a child, and he encouraged her interest in medicine, teaching her what he could and sending her to school when he had nothing left to teach her. He had given her his support during the hard years of earning her medical degree, for it seemed as if no one

other than the two of them had wanted a woman to be learning anything at all about medicine. She had not only been shunned by her fellow medical students—they had actively tried to hinder her. But her father had taught her how to keep her sense of humor and her commitment, and he had been as excited as she when she had left to come west and find a place that needed a doctor even if she was a woman.

She had been in Denver less than a month when a letter arrived from their pastor, regretfully relaying the news that her father had passed away. He had seemed healthy enough, though he had been complaining that he wasn't a young man any longer and was beginning to feel his age. But on a quiet Sunday, just after enjoying a good meal, he had suddenly clutched his chest and died. The pastor didn't believe he had suffered.

Annie had grieved silently and alone, for there was no one to whom she could talk, no one who would understand. When she had ventured bravely out into the world she had still felt his presence in Philadelphia as an anchor to which she could return, but now she had been cast adrift. By letter she had arranged for the house to be sold and the personal possessions she wished to keep stored at an aunt's house.

She wished she could tell him all about Silver Mesa, how rough and dirty and vital it was, with humanity teeming in the mud street and fortunes being made every day. He would envy her the drama of her practice, for Annie saw everything from bullet wounds to colds to birthings.

The late-winter twilight was deepening as she opened her door and reached for the flint that always rested on a table just inside the door; she struck it and lit a thin strip of twisted paper, which she then used to light the lamp. Sighing with weariness, she put her bag on the table and rolled her shoulders to ease the kinks out of them. She had bought a horse when she'd arrived in Silver Mesa, for she frequently had to travel a fair distance to her patients, and she needed to see to the animal before it got any darker. She kept it in a small corral behind the shack, with a ramshackle three-sided shed for its shelter. She decided to go around the shack rather than through it, for she didn't want to track mud through her home.

Just as she turned to go a shadow in the far corner of the room moved, and Annie jumped, pressing her hand to her chest. She peered at the shadow and made out the form of a man. "Yes? May I help you?"

"I came to see the doctor."

She frowned, for if he was from Silver Mesa then he knew he was seeing the doctor. Apparently he was a stranger and was expecting a man. She lifted the lamp, trying to see him better. His voice had been deep and raspy, little more than a whisper, but with a slow, southern rhythm to the words.
"I'm Dr. Parker," she said, moving closer. "How may I help you?"
"You're a woman," the deep voice said.
"Yes, I am." She was close enough now to see fever-bright eyes and smell the particular too-sweet odor of infection. The man was propped in the corner, as if he had feared he wouldn't be able to rise again if he'd sat down in a chair. She placed the lamp on a table and turned it up so the mellow light reached into the far corners of the little room. "Where are you hurt?"
"My left side."
She went to his right side and braced her shoulder under his armpit, sliding her arm around his back to give added support. His heat shocked her, and for a moment she felt almost frightened. "Let's get you to the examining table."
He tensed under her touch. His dark hat shielded his expression but she felt the look he gave her. "I don't need help," he said, and demonstrated it by walking steadily, if a bit slowly, to the examining table.
Annie fetched the lamp and lit a second one, then pulled the curtain that shielded the examining table should anyone else enter the room looking for medical attention. The man removed his hat, revealing thick, uncombed black hair that needed trimming, then gingerly shrugged out of his heavy shearling coat.
Annie took both hat and coat and set them aside, all the while minutely examining the man. She couldn't see any blood or other sign of injury, yet he was obviously sick and in pain. "Take off your shirt," she said. "Do you need any help?"
He looked at her with hooded eyes, then shook his head and unbuttoned his shirt as far as it would go. He pulled the fabric loose from his pants and shucked it off over his head.
A dingy strip of cloth had been tightly wound around his waist, and it was stained a yellowish, rusty color on the left side. Annie picked up a pair of scissors and neatly sliced the bandage, letting it fall to the floor. There were two wounds in the fleshy part just above his waistline, one in front and one in back. Red streaks surrounded the back wound, though both were oozing bloody pus.

A bullet wound, unless she missed her guess. She had seen enough here in Silver Mesa to give her a wide experience with them.
She realized that she hadn't removed her own coat and promptly did so, her mind on her patient. "Lie down on your right side," she instructed as she turned to her instrument tray and got out what she needed. He hesitated, and she lifted her brows inquiringly.
Silently, he leaned over to untie the thong that strapped his holster to his thigh, sweat breaking out on his face at the effort. Next he unbuckled the gun belt and placed it at the head of the examining table, within easy reach of his hand. He sat on the table, then stretched out to lie as she had instructed, on his right side and facing her. His muscles seemed to relax involuntarily as he felt the soft cushion of the mattress Annie had placed over the hard table so her patients would be more comfortable, then he shivered and tightened again.
Annie got a clean sheet and spread it over his bare torso. "That'll keep you warm while I heat some water."
She had banked the fire before leaving early that morning, and the coals glowed red when she stirred them with a poker. She added kindling and more wood, then fetched water and poured it into two iron pots that hung on a hook over the fire. The little room quickly heated as the fire grew. She placed her instruments in one of the pots to boil, then scrubbed her hands with strong soap. The tiredness that had weighed on her limbs during the trudge back from Eda's was forgotten as she considered the best treatment for her new patient.
She noticed that her hands were shaking a little, and she stopped to draw a deep breath. Normally her thoughts would be totally concentrated on the task at hand, but something about this man unsettled her. Maybe it was his pale eyes, as colorless as frost and as watchful as a wolfs. Or maybe it was his heat. Intellectually she knew it had to be fever, but the intense heat of his tall, muscular body seemed to wrap around her like a blanket every time she got close to him. Whatever the reason, her stomach had clenched into a tight knot when he'd pulled off his shirt and bared his powerful torso. Annie was accustomed to seeing men in various stages of undress, but never before had she been so acutely aware of a man's body, of the maleness that threatened her own femaleness on a very primitive level. The curly black hair on his broad, muscled chest had strongly reminded her that man's basic nature was animalistic.

Yet he had done nothing, said nothing, that was threatening. All of it was in her own mind, perhaps a product of her fatigue. The man was wounded and had come to her for help.
She stepped back behind the curtain. "I'll mix you some laudanum to ease the pain."
He pinned her with that pale, icy gaze. "No."
She hesitated. "The treatment will be painful, Mister—?"
He ignored the raised inflection that invited him to tell her his name. "I don't want any laudanum. You have any whiskey?"
"Yes."
"That'll do."
"It won't be enough, unless you drink yourself to unconsciousness, in which case it will be easier to simply take the laudanum."
"I don't want to be unconscious. Just give me a drink."
Annie got the whiskey and poured a good measure in the glass. "Have you eaten?" she asked when she returned.
"Not lately." He took the glass and carefully tilted it, then knocked the drink back with two strong swallows. He gasped and shuddered at the bite of it.
She got a basin of water and set it beside the bed, then took the glass from his hand. "I'm going to wash the wounds while the water's heating." She removed the sheet and studied the situation. The wounds were so close to his waistline that his pants presented a problem. "Can you open your pants, please? I need more room around the wounds."
For a moment he didn't move, then slowly he unbuckled his belt and began opening the buttons on his pants. When the task was completed, Annie pulled the waistband down and away, baring the sleek skin of his hip. "Lift up a little." He did, and she slid a towel under him, then folded another towel and tucked it in and over the open garment to keep it from getting wet. She tried not to notice his exposed lower abdomen, with the silky line of hair arrowing downward, but she was acutely, embarrassingly aware of this man's partial nudity. This wasn't at all the way a doctor was supposed to feel—she'd certainly never felt this way before!—and she mentally scolded herself.
He watched while she wet a cloth and soaped it, then gently applied it to the infected wounds. He drew in his breath with a hiss.
"I'm sorry," she murmured, though she didn't pause in her task. "I know it hurts, but it has to be cleaned."

Rafe McCay didn't answer; he just continued to watch her. It wasn't so much the pain that had startled him into that quick intake of breath as it was the low throb of energy that seemed to leap from her flesh to his every time she touched him. It was almost like the way the air felt charged right before a lightning strike. He'd felt it even through his clothes when she had put her arm around him to help him to the table, and it was that much stronger on his bare skin.

Maybe the fever was getting to him, or maybe he'd just been without a woman for too long. For whatever reason, every time the good doctor touched him, he got hard.

CHAPTER 2

When she touched them, the wounds began to bleed sullenly. "When did this happen?" she asked, keeping her touch as gentle as possible.
"Ten days ago."
"That's a long time for wounds to remain open."
"Yeah." He hadn't been able to rest long enough to let his flesh begin healing, not with Trahern on his trail like a goddamned bulldog. The wounds had reopened every time he'd swung into the saddle. He felt grim satisfaction in knowing that Trahern hadn't been able to give his leg the rest it needed, either.
The whiskey was making his head swim and he closed his eyes, but he found himself concentrating even more on every touch of the woman's soft hands. Dr. Parker. Dr. A. T. Parker, according to the crudely lettered sign out front of the little shack. He'd never heard of a woman doctor before. His first impression had been that she wasn't much to look at: too thin, with the worn, weary look women often got out here. Then she had walked up to him and he'd seen the softness of her brown eyes, the sweetly untidy mess of streaked blond hair caught back in a haphazard knot, with escaped tendrils feathering all around her face. She had touched him and he'd felt the hot magic of her hands. Those hands! They made him feel relaxed and tense all at once. Hell, he was drunk; that was the only explanation.
"First I'm going to apply compresses of hot salty water," she explained in her cool, light voice. "They'll have to be almost scalding, so it won't be comfortable."
He didn't open his eyes. "Just get to it." He thought Trahern was at least a day behind him, but every minute he lay here was a minute Trahern gained.
Annie opened her tin of sea salt and dumped a handful in one of the pots, then used a pair of forceps to dunk a cloth in the boiling water. She held it dripping over the pot for a minute, tested the temperature with the soft skin of her forearm, then placed the steaming cloth against the entrance wound in his back.
He went rigid and his breath hissed inward between clenched teeth, but he voiced no protest. Annie found herself sympathetically patting his shoulder with her left hand while she held the hot cloth to him with the forceps in her right.

When the cloth cooled she placed it back in the boiling water. "I'm going to alternate sides," she said. "The salt helps stop infection."
"Get it over with," he growled. "Do both sides at once."
She bit her lip, then decided that she might as well. Even as sick as he was, he had an amazing tolerance for pain. She fetched another cloth and another pair of forceps, and for the next half hour applied the hot saltwater compresses, until the skin around the wounds had turned dark red and the ragged edges of the wounds themselves were white. Through it all he lay perfectly still with his eyes closed.
Then she took a pair of surgical scissors, pulled his skin tight, and quickly trimmed the white dead flesh away. The wounds bled freshly now, though the blood was still streaked with yellow. She applied pressure with her fingers around each wound, forcing out pus and old blood; a few tiny fragments of cloth emerged, as well as a thin sliver of lead from the bullet She talked quietly all through the procedure, explaining what she was doing even though she wasn't certain he was conscious.
She washed the wounds with a tincture of marigold to stop the bleeding, then applied oil she had extracted from fresh thyme to prevent further infection. "Tomorrow I'll start using plantain bandages, but for tonight I'm going to put chickweed poultices on both wounds to draw out any pieces of your shirt that I've missed."
"I won't be here tomorrow," he said, making her jump. They were the first words he'd spoken since she had started her procedure. She had hoped that he'd fainted, had been almost certain that he had. How could he have borne that pain without sound or movement?
"You can't leave," she said gently. "I don't think you understand how serious your condition is. You'll die from the poison if those wounds remain infected."
"I walked in here, lady, so I can't be that sick."
She pursed her lips. "Yes, you walked in, and you can probably walk out, even though you're so sick a lot of other men in your condition would be flat on their backs. But in a day or so you won't even be able to crawl, much less walk. In another week, you'll probably be dead. On the other hand, if you'll give me three days, I'll have you almost well."
His pale eyes opened. He saw the earnest expression in those soft dark eyes, and felt the ache of fever all through his body. Hell, she was probably right. Even though she was a woman, she seemed to be a damn fine doctor. But

Trahern was still on his back trail and he wasn't in any shape to fight the bounty hunter.
Maybe Trahern was just as sick as he was, but maybe not, and Rafe wasn't going to play those odds unless he had to.
He needed the few days of rest and care that the doc offered, but he didn't dare take them. Not here. If he could get higher into the mountains…
"Make your poultice," he instructed.
His low, raspy voice made her shiver. She silently went to work, picking fresh chickweed from the pots of herbs she carefully nurtured and crushing the leaves, which she then applied to the wounds. She placed damp pads over the crushed leaves and secured the poultices by binding them tightly in place. He sat up during this last part and aided her by holding the pads while she wrapped the strip of cloth around his middle.
He reached for his shirt and pulled it on over his head. Distressed, Annie caught his arm. "Don't go," she pleaded. "I don't know why you think you must, but it's very dangerous for you."
He removed the blood-soaked towels that she had tucked into his pants and slid off the examining table, ignoring her hand on his arm as if it weren't even there. Annie let her arm drop to her side, feeling helpless and angry. How could he risk his life like this, after she had worked so hard to help him? Why had he even come to her for help, if he wasn't going to do what she suggested?
Rafe tucked in his shirt and calmly buttoned his pants, then fastened his belt. With the same unhurried movements he buckled on his gun belt and retied the thong around his muscled thigh.
As he shrugged into his coat Annie rushed into desperate speech. "If I give you some plantain leaves will you at least try to keep them on the wounds? The bandage needs to stay fresh—"
"Bring what you need," he said.
She blinked in confusion. "What?"
"Get your coat. You're going with me."
"I can't do that. I have patients here who need me, too, and—"
He drew the big pistol and pointed it at her. She broke off, too stunned to continue, and in the silence she clearly heard the snick as he thumbed back the hammer. "I said get your coat," he said softly.
His pale eyes were unreadable, his raspy voice implacable as he issued instructions, and the heavy revolver in his hand never wavered. In numb

disbelief Annie put on her coat, gathered a supply of food, and packed her medical instruments and various herbs into her black leather bag. That frosty gaze watched every move she made.
"That'll do." He took the bag of food from her and motioned with his head. "Out back. Take the lamp with you."
She realized that he must have explored her house while he'd been waiting for her, and anger seared through her. Her private quarters weren't much, just the one back room, but it was hers and she fiercely resented his intrusion. But with the barrel of his revolver pressed into the middle of her back, it seemed ridiculous to take umbrage at the invasion of her privacy. She went out the back door with him right behind her.
"Saddle your horse."
"I haven't fed him yet," she said. She knew it was a stupid protest, but somehow it didn't seem fair to expect the horse to carry her without having been fed.
"I don't want to keep repeating my orders," he warned. His voice had dropped to a whisper, making the words even more menacing.
She hung the lamp on a nail. A big bay, still saddled, stood patiently next to her mount.
"Hurry it up."
She saddled her horse with her usual brisk movements, then the man motioned her back. "Stand over there, out in the clear."
She bit her lip as she moved to obey. She had had the half-formed plan of ducking behind her horse and slipping out of the shed while he mounted, but he had foreseen that possibility. By making her stand out in the open, he had taken away her protective cover.
Keeping his eyes and revolver on her, he led the bay into the open and stepped into the saddle. If Annie hadn't been watching him so closely, she wouldn't have noticed his slight difficulty as pain hampered his motions. He stowed the bag of food in his saddlebag.
"Get on your horse now, honey, and don't get any stupid ideas. Just do what I tell you, and you'll be all right."
Annie looked around, unable to quite make herself believe that he could really kidnap her like this. It had been such a normal day, up until he had pointed his pistol at her. If she let him force her into riding out with him, would she ever be seen alive again? Even if she managed to escape, she had grave doubts about her own ability to survive in the wilderness on her own,

for she had seen too much to have any naive confidence that returning to Silver Mesa would be nothing more than a simple ride. Life anywhere outside the dubious protection of a town was harrowing.
"Get on the goddamn horse." Violence and an end to his patience were starkly evident in the harsh tone of the words. Annie climbed into the saddle, hampered by her skirts, but she knew it would be useless to protest, or to ask for an opportunity to change into more practical clothing.
She had always appreciated her position at the edge of town, convenient yet private, and isolated from the noise of drunken miners as they sampled the wares of the saloons and whorehouses well into the early morning hours. Now, however, she would have given anything for the appearance of even one drunken miner. She could yell her head off and no one was likely to hear her.
"Blow out the lamp," he said, and she leaned down from the saddle to do so. The sudden absence of light was blinding, though a thin sliver of the new moon was rising.
He released his own reins and held out his gloved hand, the one that wasn't holding the pistol. The big bay didn't move, a product of good training and the control of the powerful legs wrapped around his barrel. "Give me your reins."
Again, she had no choice but to obey him. She handed him the reins and he pulled them over her horse's head, looping them around his saddle horn so her mount would have no choice but to follow him. "Don't get any ideas about jumping out of the saddle," he warned. "You won't get away, and it'll make me damn mad." His low, menacing voice made chills go down her back. "You don't want to do that."
He kept the horses to a sedate walk until they were well away from Silver Mesa, then nudged the bay into an easy canter. Annie wrapped both hands around her saddle horn and hung on. Within minutes she was wishing that she had thought to get her own gloves, for the cold night air was biting. Her face and hands were stinging already.
Now that her eyes had adjusted she could see well enough, and she realized that he was riding west, higher into the mountains. It would be even colder up there; she had seen snowcaps crowning the high peaks even in the middle of July.
"Where are we going?" she asked, striving to keep her voice level.
"Up," he said.

"Why? And why are you forcing me to go with you?"
"You're the one said I needed a doctor," he replied flatly. "You're a doctor. Now shut up."
She did, but it took all of her self-control to keep from lapsing into hysterics. Though she had never considered herself the hysterical type, this situation made her feel as if she might indulge in a well-justified loss of control. In Philadelphia, people who needed doctors did not kidnap them. And it wasn't just the situation that made her afraid, it was the man himself. From the moment those cold, colorless eyes had met hers she had been very aware that this man was dangerous, the same way a cougar was dangerous. He could lash out and kill as swiftly and as casually. She had devoted her life to the care of others, to preserving life, and he was the direct antithesis of the principles she held dear. Yet her hands had trembled as she touched him, not only because of the fear, but because his strong male body had made her feel weak inside. Remembering that made her feel ashamed. As a doctor, she should have remained aloof.
By the time an hour had passed her feet were growing numb, and her fingers felt as if they would break off if she flexed them. Her legs and back were aching, and she had begun to shiver constantly. She stared at the dark shape of the man riding just in front of her and wondered how he could possibly remain in the saddle. Considering his blood loss, the fever, and the infection, he should have been flat on his back a long time ago. Such endurance and strength were intimidating, for she would have to pit herself against them in order to escape.
He had said she would be all right, but how could she believe him? She was totally at his mercy, and so far he hadn't given her any reason to believe that even a small portion of that quality was in his character. He could rape her, kill her, do anything he wanted with her, and likely her body would never even be found. Every step that the horses made carried her deeper into danger, and increased the unlikelihood that she would be able to make it back to Silver Mesa even if she managed to escape.
"P-please, can't we stop for the night and build a f-fire?" she blurted, and was startled to hear her own voice. The words seemed to have come of their own volition.
"No." Just that one word, flat and implacable.
"P-please," she said again, and was aghast to realize she was begging. "I'm so c-c-cold."

He turned his head and looked at her. She couldn't see his features under the brim of his hat, only the faint gleam of his eyes. "We can't stop yet."
"Then w-when?"
"When I say."
But he didn't say, not during those endlessly long, increasingly cold hours. The horses' breath rose in clouds of steam. The pace had necessarily slowed to a walk as the way became increasingly steep, and several times he had to unloop her reins and hold them in his hand, leading her horse directly behind him in single file. Annie tried to estimate the passage of time, but found that physical misery distorted all perception of it. She would force herself to wait until she had thought an hour had passed, then look at the moon, only to find that it had barely moved since the last time she had looked.
Her feet were so cold that every movement of her toes was agony. Her legs quivered with exertion, for caution forced her to use them to stay in the saddle since her hands were largely useless. Her throat and lungs felt raw from the cold, and each breath rasped the delicate tissues. She turned up the collar of her coat and tried to draw her head down within its protection so the air she breathed would be warmer, but the coat kept gaping open and she didn't dare turn loose of the saddle horn to hold it together.
In silent desperation she fastened her eyes on the broad back in front of her. If he could keep going, sick and wounded as he was, then she could, too. But dogged pride, she found, helped for only so long before sheer physical misery overwhelmed it. Damn him, why didn't he stop?
Rafe had divorced his mind from his physical discomfort, focusing all of his concentration on putting distance between himself and Trahern. The bounty hunter would be able to track him to Silver Mesa; Rafe had discovered a bent nail on the bay's right front shoe that would have left marks like signposts to a good tracker, which Trahern was. The first thing he'd done in Silver Mesa was find the blacksmith and have the bay reshod. He didn't care if Trahern discovered that, for it wouldn't make any difference; there wouldn't be any way to tell which of the myriad tracks around the smithy belonged to the bay, assuming any of the bay's tracks were left by the time Trahern got to Silver Mesa, and that was highly unlikely. It was impossible to track someone through a busy town, because tracks were constantly being smeared and overlaid with new ones.

At first Trahern would ride a wide circle around the town, looking for that telltale bent nail. When he didn't find it, he'd go into Silver Mesa and start asking questions, but he'd hit a dead end at the smithy. Rafe had rode directly out of town after having the bay reshod, back in the direction from which he'd entered. Then he had left the bay tethered and reentered the town on foot, taking care not to bring attention to himself. During the war he'd learned that the easiest way to disguise yourself was by mingling with a crowd. In a boomtown like Silver Mesa, no one paid any mind to one more stranger, especially one who didn't make eye contact or speak to anyone.
He had intended only to get bandages and carbolic wash for disinfectant, and his purpose for doing so anonymously was to keep Trahern from knowing how sick he felt. An enemy could take any small scrap of information and use it to his advantage. But caution had made him check out the entire town first, looking for alternate ways of escape if it should become necessary, and he'd seen the roughly lettered sign of Dr. A. T. Parker.
He had watched for a while, considering the risk. The doctor didn't seem to be in; a few people had knocked on the door, then gone away when the knocks went unanswered.
He had begun shivering while he watched from concealment, and this further evidence of his rising fever had decided the issue for him. He had gone back for the bay and put it in the shed with what had to have been the doctor's horse, indicating that the sawbones was somewhere in town. The doctor's office was set off by itself, a good hundred yards from the next building, and a stand of trees shielded the horse shed from view, so he felt safe in waiting there. From what he had observed, it was customary for folks to knock on the door rather than just go inside, which struck him as odd but suited his purposes. When he entered, he found that the sawbones evidently lived in the back room, which was explanation enough for the strange formality of knocking on the door of a doctor's office. Maybe the doc was a tad fussy, but Rafe allowed folks their foibles.
The neat little surgery and back room had enforced his impression of fastidiousness. There were no personal belongings left strewn around, other than a serviceable hairbrush and some books; the narrow cot was neatly made, the single dish and cup washed and dried. He hadn't looked through the physician's clothes—if he had he would have known that she was

female, or at least that a female was living in the back room, maybe to take care of the doctor's needs.
There were orderly rows of small pots in all the windowsills, with a variety of plants growing in them. The air had smelled both fresh and spicy. An apothecary's cabinet had been stocked with herbs either dried or powdered, and gauze bags filled with other plants had been hung in the coolest, darkest corner. Each bag and drawer had been clearly labeled in block printing.
Waves of dizziness had kept rolling over him and at length he had had to sit down. He thought about just taking what he needed from the doctor's supplies and leaving without anyone being the wiser, but it felt so damn good just to rest that he kept telling himself he'd sit there for just a few minutes longer.
That unusual lassitude, more than anything, was what had finally convinced him to stay and see the doctor.
Every time footsteps had sounded on the porch he had eased into a corner, but after the knock went unanswered the would-be patients had gone away. The last time, however, there hadn't been a knock; the door had opened and a thin, tired-looking woman had entered, carrying a huge black bag.
Now she was riding behind him, grimly hanging on to the saddle, her face white and pinched with cold. He knew she had to be frightened, but there was no way he could convince her he didn't mean her any harm, so he didn't try. In a few days, maybe a week, when he was well, he'd take her back to Silver Mesa. Trahern would already have left, having lost the trail with no way of picking it up again until he got news of Rafe's whereabouts. Rafe intended to make certain that didn't happen for a while. He'd change his name again, maybe get a different horse, though he hated to get rid of the bay.
Forcing her to go with him wasn't so great a risk; with her horse gone, folks would just think that she was out treating someone. Maybe they'd get curious when she didn't show up in a day or so, but there was nothing in the cabin to give alarm, no sign of struggle or violence. Since she hadn't left her black bag behind, people would logically assume that she was merely attending to some distant patient.
In the meantime, he could do with a few days' rest. He could feel the fever burning through him, feel the burning ache in his side, though the quality of that ache seemed to be changing as the burn became more of a drawing

sensation. She had been right about his condition; only sheer determination had kept him going, was keeping him going now.
There was an old trapper's sod hut up here somewhere; he'd seen it a few years back, before Silver Mesa had even existed. It was damn hard to find; he only hoped he remembered its location closely enough to pinpoint it. The old geezer had partially dug out a bank and buried the back half of the hut in it, and the foliage grew so thick around it that a man had to practically walk into it before he saw it.
The hut was abandoned, or had been when he'd seen it. It wouldn't be in good shape, but it would give him a place out of the weather. At least the damn thing had a fireplace, and the trees above it would disperse the smoke so any fire he lit wouldn't be noticeable.
His head ached, and his thighbones felt as if someone was pounding them with a dull ax, sure signs of a rising fever. He had to find that hut soon or he wouldn't make it. Glancing at the moon's position, he figured it to be about one in the morning; they'd been riding for about seven hours, which by his calculation should put them close to the hut. He looked around, forcing himself to concentrate, but it was damn hard to recognize landmarks in the moonlight. There had been a huge pine, blasted by lightning, but it had probably decayed by now.
Half an hour later he realized that he wasn't going to find the hut, at least not in the dark and in his present condition. The horses were exhausted, and the doc looked as if she were going to fall out of the saddle. Reluctantly, but recognizing the necessity for it, he looked around for a sheltered spot and chose a narrow little hollow between two huge boulders. He reined the bay to a stop.
Annie was so numb that for a moment she didn't realize they had stopped. When the lack of motion finally made sense, she lifted her head to see that the man had already dismounted and was standing beside her. "Get down."
She tried, but her legs were so stiff they wouldn't work. With a small, desperate cry she simply turned loose and pitched herself down from the horse's back. She landed on the cold, hard ground with a thud that rattled every bone in her body, and tears of pain started into her eyes. She blinked them back, but she couldn't stifle a low moan as she forced herself into a sitting position.
He walked the horses away from her without saying a word, and she didn't know if she should feel grateful or indignant. She was too tired, too cold, to

feel much, even gratitude that they had stopped.
She sat where she was, unable to stand or to work up much interest in doing so. She could hear him murmuring to the horses, the sound barely audible above the rustle of tree limbs in the cold wind. Then she listened to his footsteps drawing near, and even through her own physical wretchedness she noticed that his steps were uneven. He stopped right behind her.
"I can't help you," he said in a low, harsh voice. "If you can't stand, you'll have to crawl over here to these rocks. The best I can do is get us out of the wind and cover us with a blanket."
"No fire?" Her breath caught with a pang of sorrow so sharp it hurt. She had been imagining a fire all during the long, miserable hours, longing for the heat and light as if it were a lover, and now he was denying it to her.
"No. Come on, Doc, get your ass over to the rocks."
She managed. It wasn't elegant, or graceful. She crawled a few feet, then got to her knees, and finally to her feet. After a few tottering steps her legs gave way beneath her and she had to grit her teeth against the pain in her feet, but she managed to repeat the process. He walked carefully beside her, his very precision reminding her that his own strength was almost gone. She was glad that he hadn't been unscathed by the ordeal.
"All right. Here. Now scrape a big pile of these pine needles together."
She wavered back and forth as she stared at him, seeing nothing more than a big dark form standing close beside her. But she dropped back to her knees and clumsily did as he said, her frozen fingers blessedly numb to the scrapes and prickles she knew she must be getting.
"That'll do." A soft bundle dropped onto the ground beside her. "Now spread this blanket out on the needles."
She obeyed, again without comment.
"Take off your coat and lie down."
The very thought of removing her coat and exposing herself to even greater chill almost made her revolt, but at the last moment common sense told her he must mean to use their coats for cover. She began shaking convulsively as she shed the heavy garment, but he was doing the same, so she lay down in silence.
He eased down beside her, positioning himself so she was at his right side. His long legs touched hers and Annie started to scoot away, but he stopped her, his hand closing on her arm with a hard grip that made her wonder if he

was truly as exhausted as he had seemed. "Get closer. We'll have to share our heat, and the blankets."
It was nothing but the stark truth. She inched closer, until she could feel the heat of his body even through their cold clothing, and the lure of the promise of comfort pulled her even closer, so that she was huddled against his side.
Moving with the care that indicated pain, he twitched the other half of the blanket they were lying on over them, then spread a second blanket on top of that. He arranged her coat over their feet, and his coat over their torsos. Finally he lay back and slipped his right arm under her head. A shudder wracked his big body from head to foot.
The fire of his fever radiated through the layers of clothing, and as she moved even closer she wondered if he would survive the night, lying on the cold ground as he was. True, the pine needles and blanket kept some of the chill of the earth away, but in his weakened condition he might die anyway. Her hand moved to his chest and then upward, searching for his neck. She found his pulse and was relieved somewhat by the strength of the throbbing beneath her cold fingers, though it was too fast.
"I'm not going to die on you, Doc." There was faint but unmistakable amusement in his voice, overlaid with fatigue.
She wanted to make some reply, but the effort was beyond her. Her eyelids would not stay open. Her feet were tingling painfully, but not even that seemed to matter. Fever or not, the heat of his body was saving her, and her mind was too tired to object to the highly improper sleeping arrangement. All she could do was slide her hand down until it rested over his heart; then, reassured by the steady beat, she felt unconsciousness sweep over her like a black tide, wiping out everything.

CHAPTER 3

Rafe came awake with a rush of panic, though only the leap of his pulse betrayed him; his muscles didn't even twitch. He didn't usually sleep so soundly, especially under these circumstances, and he was silently cursing himself even as he took stock of his surroundings. The birds were chittering without alarm, and he could hear the horses munching on some bit of

greenery they'd found. Everything was secure, then, despite his lack of alertness.

The doc still lay against his right side, her head pillowed on his shoulder and her face pressed to his shirt. Glancing down, he could see that her soft blond hair had slipped from its pins and was tousled all over her head. Her skirt was tangled around both her legs and his, and he could feel the enticing softness of breast and hip and thigh. He slowly drew a deep breath, trying not to wake her. Her right hand was lying on his chest, but it might as well have been on his crotch, for the warm weight of it was making his morning erection grow that much harder. The pleasure of it spread through his body like warm honey. So he hadn't imagined the strange, tingling energy in her hands when she had touched him; he felt it now, tightening his nipples, even through his clothing and even though she was asleep.

The temptation was strong to lie there and enjoy the touch, or even to move her hand down to his loins so he could feel that strange heated energy on his shaft and balls, but he liked for his sexual pleasure to be mutual, and more than that they needed to find the trapper's hut. He closed his hand around hers and lifted it to his lips, then gently replaced it on his chest and shook her awake.

Her brown eyes opened drowsily, then her lashes fluttered back down. Dark brown doe eyes, he thought, having seen them for the first time in good light. He shook her again. "Wake up, Doc. We can't stay here."

This time her eyes opened wide and she sat bolt upright in their nest of blankets and coats, looking around in panic. He saw on her face the exact moment when she remembered the night before, saw the fear and desperation as she realized it hadn't been a dream. Then she got control of herself, and twisted around to face him. "You have to take me back."

"Not yet. Maybe in a few days." He got to his feet with some difficulty, though the sleep had done him good and he felt a little stronger. Still, as he moved his body reminded him that he needed far more than just a few hours of rest. "There's a hut close by; I couldn't find it in the dark, but we'll stay there until my side is healed."

She looked up at him, brown eyes wide with apprehension. Dark shadows still lay under her eyes, bruising the translucent skin and making her look frail. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but instead he said, "Roll up the blankets."

Annie moved to obey him and winced at the pain in her stiff, sore muscles. She wasn't accustomed to such long hours of hard riding, especially when she had been forced to use her legs to stay on the horse. Her thigh muscles trembled with the effort as she squatted to roll the blankets.
He had walked a few feet away, just enough that he was shielded by the rock but could still see her. She heard a splattering sound, like water running, and looked up in curiosity before she realized what he was doing. His pale gaze met hers without a flicker of expression, but she jerked her head down as a fiery blush burned her cheeks. Her medical training noted that at least the fever hadn't impaired his kidneys.
He came back to her side and said, "Now you. Don't try to get out of my sight. I want to see your head at all times." To make certain she didn't try to run, he unholstered his pistol.
She was appalled that he expected her to perform such a function with him standing there listening, and started to refuse, but her bladder insisted that she couldn't wait. Her face felt scorching hot as she sidled around the rock, watching where she was putting her feet.
"That's far enough."
She battled with the restrictions of her clothing, trying to reach under her skirt and petticoat to undo the tapes of her drawers without revealing either herself or her underclothing, just in case he was looking. Then she realized that of course he was looking, for how else could he know if she was in sight or not. If only she had worn drawers with an open crotch, but in fact she seldom did, for she never knew when she would be riding and she didn't care to have her bare inner thighs rubbed raw.
At last she got her clothing arranged so she could relieve herself, and she tried to do so quietly, but was forced to accept the indelicacy of nature. What did it matter anyway, when he was as likely to kill her as not? Logic made her admit that he wouldn't be going to such lengths unless he had some reason for not wanting to be seen, which meant that he was an outlaw. He'd have to be a fool to take her back to Silver Mesa as he'd promised. And she'd have to be a fool to save his life. To save herself, she should let his condition deteriorate, or maybe even use her medical knowledge to hasten it.
Her mind reeled under the enormity of her own thoughts. She had been trained her entire life to save people, not to kill them, but killing this man was exactly what she was contemplating.

"How long are you going to squat there with your skirts hiked up?"
She stood up so suddenly that she stumbled, hampered by both the drawers twisted around her knees and her stiff muscles. The harsh intrusion of his voice had been like a dash of cold water in the face, wresting her away from her thoughts and back to reality. Her face was paper white as she turned and stared at him across the big rock.
Heavy eyelids shielded the expression in his pale eyes as he studied her, wondering what had made her turn so white and given those soft brown eyes such a stark look. Hell, she was a doctor, she shouldn't be that shocked or embarrassed by something everybody did. He could remember a time when he never would have said such a thing to a woman, but the last ten bloody years had so completely altered him from the man he had once been that the memory was a mere wisp, an echo, and he couldn't even feel regret for the change. He was what he was.
After a frozen moment she bent down to adjust her underwear, but when she straightened from the task her face still had that strangely shattered look. She came back around the rock toward him, and he held out his gloved hand to her, palm up, his fingers open.
For a moment Annie stared without recognition at the small objects in his hand, then her own hands flew to her hair and found it completely unanchored, tumbling around her shoulders and down her back.
He must have found the bone hairpins scattered on the ground.
Hastily she gathered her hair and twisted it into an untidy knot, picking the hairpins from his hand one at a time to secure the heavy mass. He was silent, watching her slender, feminine hands perform their chore, her fingers lifting each hairpin in turn from his leather-gloved palm with all the delicacy of a small bird selecting seeds. The movements were so essentially female that they made him ache deep inside. It had been too damn long since he'd had a woman, since he'd been able to luxuriate in soft flesh and sweet smell, to just look at a woman and enjoy the gracefulness of small motions that they all had, even the coarsest slattern. A woman should never let a man watch her at her toilette, he thought with sudden savagery, unless she was willing to take him into her body and let him ease the sexual hunger the sight of her at her private rituals aroused.
Then the lust seemed to drain out of him with a return of that bone-deep weariness. "Let's go," he said abruptly. If he stood there much longer, he wouldn't have the energy to find the old trapper's hut.

"Can't we eat?" Despite her best effort, there was a pleading note in her voice. She was weak with hunger and knew he had to be in much worse shape, though she couldn't tell it from his hard, expressionless face.
"When we get to the hut. It won't take long."
It took him an hour to find it, and it took her a moment longer than that to realize he had, for the mean little structure was so overgrown it was barely recognizable as being man-made. She could have cried with disappointment. She had expected a cabin, or even a rough shack, but not this! From what she could see through the bushes and vines growing around and over it, the "hut" was nothing more than some crudely stacked rocks and a few half-rotten timbers.
"Get down."
Annie flashed him an angry glance. She was getting tired of those tersely worded commands. She was hungry and frightened, and she ached in every muscle of her body. But she obeyed him, and then automatically started forward to help him when he painfully dismounted. She checked the movement, and knotted her hands into fists as she watched.
"There's a lean-to for the horses."
She looked around in disbelief. She didn't see anything that remotely resembled a lean-to.
"Over here," he said, correctly reading her face. He led the bay off to the left and Annie followed with her mount, to find that he was right. There was a lean-to, constructed using the trees and slant of the earth as part of the structure; there was room for both horses, but just barely. Both ends of the lean-to were open, though the far end was partially blocked by a crudely made water trough and more bushes. A wooden pail hung from a broken tree limb that had been driven into the earthen wall. He took it down and examined it, and for a moment satisfaction registered on his drawn face.
"There's a stream running just on the other side of the hut. Unsaddle the horses, then take this bucket and fetch water for them."
Annie stared at him in disbelief. She was weak with hunger and so tired she could barely walk. "But what about us?"
"The horses get taken care of first. Our lives depend on them." His voice was implacable. "I'd do it, but other than standing here, the only thing I'm capable of right now is shooting you if you try to run."
Without another word Annie set about the work, though her muscles trembled with strain. She dumped her medical bag, the sack containing the

food, both saddles, and his saddlebags on the ground. Then she grabbed up the bucket and he directed her to the stream, which was only about twenty yards from the hut on the other side but running diagonally away from the structure rather than beside it. It was only about a foot deep, less in some places and more in others. He followed her to the stream and back to the lean-to, silent and not quite steady on his feet but grimly watchful. She made two more trips to the stream, with him behind her every step of the way, before he deemed the water trough to be full enough. Both horses drank greedily.

"There's a bag of grain in my left saddlebag. Give them both a double handful. They'll have to be on short rations for a while."

That chore accomplished, he instructed her to haul their belongings into the hut. The door was a primitive affair of thin saplings tied together with a mixture of twine and vine, with two leather hinges. Cautiously she pulled it open, and had to bite back a cry of dismay. There didn't seem to be any windows, but the light spilling through the open door revealed an interior draped in cobwebs, coated with dirt, and inhabited by a variety of insects and small animals.

"There are rats," she said in horror. "And spiders, and probably snakes." She whirled and faced him. "I'm not going in there."

Just for a moment, amusement played around his mouth and softened its hard lines. "If there are rats, you can bet there aren't any snakes. Snakes eat rats."

"This place is filthy."

"It has a fireplace," he said wearily. "And four walls to keep out the cold. If you don't like the way it looks, then clean it up."

She started to tell him that he could clean it up himself, but one look at his pale, drawn face stopped the words. Guilt gnawed at her insides. How could she have let herself even think about letting him die? She was a doctor, and even though he was likely to kill her when her usefulness was at an end, she would do her best to heal him. Appalled at her earlier thoughts, which were such a betrayal of both her father and herself, of her entire life, she swore that she wouldn't let him die.

But when she looked around the filthy little hut, the magnitude of the chore that faced her was so great that she let her head drop in sheer hopelessness. She took a deep breath, then gathered her strength and straightened her shoulders. First things first. She picked up a sturdy stick from the ground

and gingerly stepped inside the hut. The stick did double duty in tearing down the cobwebs and in raking out the various nests she found. A squirrel scampered out, and a family of mice scurried for the four corners. Grimly she searched them out with her stick. She poked the stick up the chimney, dislodging old birds' nests and alarming some new occupant just out of reach. If there were more nests up there, a fire in the fireplace would encourage a swift evacuation.

After her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, she saw that the hut had a window on each side, the openings covered with flaps of rough boards that could be pushed up and braced open with a stick. She opened both of them, letting in an amount of light that seemed positively cheery after the gloom, though the interior of the hut looked even dirtier now that she could see it properly.

There was no furniture except for a table as roughly made as everything else, and it had two legs broken off. It lay drunkenly in a corner. The best that could be said of the hut, other than that it had a fireplace and four walls, as he had already pointed out, was that the floor was wooden. There were cracks between the boards, but at least they wouldn't be sleeping on the ground.

She carried buckets of water from the stream and sluiced the interior, since the water could drain off through the cracks in the floor and it was the fastest way to achieve a bare minimum of cleanliness. While the floor was drying, she gathered firewood and kindling, dumping both by the fireplace. Through it all, he never let her out of his sight, though she had no idea how he was remaining on his feet. He looked even more colorless every time she glanced at him.

But finally the hut was clean enough that she didn't cringe at the idea of sleeping inside it, and the other inhabitants seemed to have been routed. While she still had the strength, she dragged the saddles and their supplies inside, and made one more trip to the stream, to fill both the bucket and his canteen.

Only then did she wave him inside. Every muscle in her body was trembling and her knees were unsteady, but at least she could now sit down. She did so, on the newly clean floor, and rested her head on her updrawn knees.

The scrape of his boots on the wood made her reluctantly lift her head. He was just standing there, his eyes heavy-lidded with fever and his big body

wavering slightly. She forced herself to move again, crawling over to the saddles and retrieving one of the blankets, which she folded double and spread out on the floor. "Here," she said, her voice husky with fatigue. "Lie down."

He didn't lie down so much as drop down. Annie grabbed at him to keep him from pitching over, and his weight nearly knocked her down. "Sorry," he grunted, and lay in the position in which he'd landed, breathing heavily. She touched his face and throat, and found that his fever was, if anything, even higher. She began unbuckling his gun belt and his hard fingers closed over hers, holding them painfully tight for a minute before he said, "I'll do it." As he had before, when he removed the gun belt he placed it close to his head. She eyed the big weapon and shivered at its cold deadliness.

"Don't even think about going for it," he warned softly, and swiftly she looked up to meet his gaze. Fevered or not, he was still very much in possession of his faculties. It would be easier for her to get away if he were delirious, but she had sworn to help him if she could and that meant she couldn't leave him even if he did slide into unconsciousness. Until he was recovering, she was bound here.

"I wasn't," she said, but his eyes remained wary and she knew he didn't believe her. She wasn't inclined to argue with him over her trustworthiness, not when she was weak, hungry, and so tired it was all she could do to sit upright. And she still had to see to him before she could begin taking care of herself.

"Let's get your shirt off, and your boots, so you'll be more comfortable," she said in a practical tone, and moved to suit actions to words.

Again his hand came up to stop her. "No," he said, and for the first time she heard a fretful note in his voice. "It's too cold to take off my shirt."

Of course the exertion of cleaning out the hut had made her warm, and she had long since shed her coat, but the sun had warmed the day nicely and the air felt pleasant. She could feel him shivering under her fingers. "It isn't cold; you have a fever."

"Don't you have something in that bag of yours to bring the fever down?"

"I'll brew some willow-bark tea after I've seen to your wounds. That will make you more comfortable."

His head turned restlessly. "Brew it now. I'm so damn cold I feel like my bones are frozen."

She sighed, for she wasn't accustomed to her patients directing their treatment, but the order in which she did things really didn't make any difference and she could make a pot of coffee, too. She covered him with the other blanket and began laying a fire, kindling and rich pine chips on bottom, the larger pieces of wood on top.
"Don't build a big fire," he muttered. "Too much smoke. I have some matches in my saddlebag. Right side, wrapped in oilskin."
She found the matches and struck one on the stone hearth, turning her head away from the acrid smell of phosphorus. The pine chips caught after only a second or two. She bent over and gently blew the flames until she was satisfied that they were spreading nicely, then sat back and opened her big medical bag. It looked more like a traveling salesman's case than a doctor's bag, but she liked to have a supply of various herbs and ointments available whenever she was treating a patient, for she couldn't depend on finding what she needed in the wild. She got out the willow bark, neatly bundled in a gauze bag, and the small pot that she used for making tea.
He lay on his back, huddled under the blanket, and watched her with half-closed eyes as she poured a small amount of water from the canteen into the little pot, then set it on the fire to boil. While it was heating, she took a square of gauze, measured a bit of the willow bark into it, added a pinch of thyme and cinnamon, and tied the four corners of the gauze together to form a small, porous pouch, which she placed in the water. Finally, as a sweetener, she opened a jar and added a bit of honey.
"What was all of that?" he asked.
"Willow bark, cinnamon, honey, and thyme."
"Whatever you give me, you'll have to taste it first."
The insult made her back go rigid, but she didn't argue with him. The willow-bark tea wouldn't hurt her, and if he thought she was capable of poisoning him—well, there wasn't anything she could do about that. Her conscience was still smarting her over the horrible thought she had had that morning, and maybe he had picked up on it.
"If you slipped any laudanum into it, you'll go to sleep too," he added.
At least he was only accusing her of drugging him, not of trying to kill him! She lifted a small brown bottle from her bag and held it up for him to see. "This is the laudanum. It's almost full, if you'd like to check the level of it occasionally. Or maybe you'd feel better if you kept it." She held it out to

him and he stared at her silently, his pale eyes boring into her as if he could read her mind, and perhaps he could.
Rafe stared at her, trying to decide if he could trust her. He wanted to, especially when he looked into those soft brown eyes, but he hadn't stayed alive these past four years by trusting anyone. Without a word he reached out and took the brown bottle from her, setting it on the floor beside his holster.
She turned aside without comment, but he sensed that he'd hurt her.
She unpacked the food stores, arranging them on the floor so she could see what they had. She was so hungry that nausea threatened to make her retch, and she wondered if she would be able to eat anything after all.
He had brought a coffeepot. She filled it with water and added the coffee grounds, making it stronger than she usually did because she thought she would probably need it. Then she turned back to the food, her hands shaking as she tried to decide what to prepare. There were potatoes, bacon, beans, onions, a small sack each of meal and flour, salt, canned peaches, and bread, rice, cheese, and sugar from her stores. She had been running low on food and had planned to restock, but the arrival of Eda's baby had forestalled her.
She was too hungry to cook anything. She broke off some bread and cheese, then halved the pieces and offered them to her patient.
He shook his head. "I'm not hungry."
"Eat," she insisted, and put the bread and cheese in his hand. "You need to keep your strength up. Try just a bite or two at first, and stop if you feel sick." The bread and cheese weren't the best thing for a sick man, but it was food and it was ready to eat now. She would make some soup for him later, when she had rested and was feeling stronger herself. She set the canteen by his hand so he could have water, then she fell on her own meager fare with barely restrained ferocity.
He ate only one bite of the cheese, but all of the bread, and he almost emptied the canteen. By the time they had finished the willow-bark tea had boiled, and Annie used a rag to lift it from the fire, then set it aside to cool.
"Why didn't you give me something for fever last night?" he asked suddenly, eyes and voice hard again.
"Fever isn't necessarily a bad thing," she explained. "It seems to help the body fight infection. You know that cauterizing a wound stops infection, so it stands to reason that the heat from a fever works in the same way. It's

only when it goes on too long, or gets too high, that it's dangerous, because it weakens the body dreadfully."
He was still shivering, even covered by the blanket and with the fire going right beside him. Driven by an urge she didn't understand, she reached out and smoothed his dark hair away from his forehead. She had never seen a tougher, more dangerous man, but even so he needed care that she could provide.
"What's your name?" She had asked him before and he hadn't answered, but as isolated as they were now surely he couldn't have any reason for remaining nameless. She almost smiled at the incongruity of not knowing his name, when she had slept in his arms.
Rafe thought about giving her a fictitious name, but decided that it wasn't necessary. He would use another name after he carried her back to Silver Mesa, and there wouldn't be any connection. "McCay. Rafferty McCay. What's yours, Doc?"
"Annis," she said, and gave him a faint, soft smile. "But I've always been called Annie."
He grunted. "I've always been called Rafe. Makes me wonder why folks don't name their kids what they intend to call them." Her smile widened and he watched it, unwillingly fascinated by the movement of her lips. Her hand still lingered on his hair, fingers lightly combing through the strands at temple and forehead, and he almost sighed aloud with pleasure at that warm, tingling touch. His headache eased more with each brushing contact. But then she moved away, and he had to restrain the urge to grab her and hold her hands to his chest. She'd probably think he had lost his mind if he did, but he felt better when she was touching him, and God knew he needed something. He felt like hell.
Annie poured the willow-bark tea into a battered tin cup and dutifully tasted it so he could see that she hadn't poisoned him. He struggled up on his elbow and took the cup, drinking the tea with four strong gulps and shuddering only a little from the bitterness. "It's not as bad as some medicine I've tasted," he commented, lying back with a stifled groan.
"The honey and cinnamon made it taste better. Both of them are good for you too. Just rest and let the tea work, while I make some soup. Liquids will be easier for you to digest for a while."
She was feeling better herself, now that she had food in her, though she was still inordinately tired. The hard work had loosened her muscles, at least for

the moment. She sat on the floor beside him and peeled a few potatoes, then chopped them into fine pieces, and did the same with a small onion. There wasn't a pot big enough, so she used his skillet, adding water and salt and a bit of flour for thickening, and soon the fragrant mixture was bubbling. The fire had burned down enough that it wasn't in danger of scorching, so after adding a bit more water to make sure, she turned her attention back to her patient.

"Feeling a bit better?" she asked, placing the back of her hand against his face.

"Some." The deep ache in his thighbones had eased, as well as his headache. He felt tired and limp and a little drowsy, but warmer and—better. "Keep a pot of that stuff brewed up."

"It does better fresh," she said, though she smiled again. She folded back the blanket. "Now let's get you comfortable and see how your side is looking."

Maybe she had put something in that drink after all, because he lay there and let her undress him, stripping him of shirt and boots and even his pants, leaving him clad only in his socks and long flannel underwear, which was so soft it didn't do much of a job in disguising the outline of his loins. At her direction he eased onto his right side and she rolled his underwear down until it barely covered him. He swore under his breath as he felt his male flesh stir. Damn it, this was why women shouldn't be doctors. How was a man supposed to keep himself from getting hard with a woman's soft hands touching him all over? He watched her face, but she seemed oblivious to his lengthening erection. He reached down and twitched the blanket across his hips to hide his involuntary response.

Annie snipped through the tight cloth binding the poultice to the wounds, her attention totally absorbed by what she was doing. Carefully she eased the pads away, making a satisfied noise in her throat as she saw that the angry red color around the wounds had lessened. The pads were stained with yellow and brown; she cast them aside and leaned over to closely examine the torn flesh. There was a spot of dull metallic gleam close to the surface of the front wound, and she made another sound of satisfaction as she reached for her tweezers. Carefully she grasped the sliver of metal and drew it out. "Another piece of lead," she announced. "You're lucky you haven't already died of blood poisoning."

"So you've already told me."

"And I meant it, too." She continued with her inspection, but didn't find any other bullet fragments. The wounds looked clean. To be certain she cleaned them again with carbolic, then carefully set two sutures in each wound to close the worst of the tears but still leave them open so they could drain. He barely quivered when the needle bit into the soft flesh of his side, though a faint sheen of sweat broke out on his body. She noted the sweat, for it indicated that his fever was breaking as well as the extent of his pain.
She moistened some plantain leaves and placed them on his side, then put bandages on top of that. He gave a low murmur of relief as the soothing, healing leaves began to work their magic. "That feels good."
"I know." She drew the blanket up to his shoulders. "All you have to do now is lie there and rest, and let your body heal. Sleep if you want; I'm not going anywhere."
"I can't take that chance," he replied harshly.
She gave a small humorless laugh. "You'd wake up if I tried to take the blanket, and I'd freeze to death at night without it. I don't even know where I am. Believe me, I'm not going to leave here without you."
"Then let's just say I'll keep you from temptation." He couldn't afford to trust her, or to relax his guard for even a minute. She said she didn't know where she was, but how did he know if she was telling the truth or not?
"Suit yourself." She checked the soup and added more water, then settled down on the floor. She had no idea of the time. After noon, surely. It had taken her a long time to clean the hut. She stared out the open door at the long shadows cast by the trees. Why, it was late in the afternoon. "Don't the horses need more feed?" If he expected her to carry it to them, it would have to be soon, because after dark she wasn't venturing past that door.
"Yeah." His voice was weary. "Give them a little more grain." With an effort he sat up and reached for his pistol, drawing it out of the holster. Wrapped in the blanket, he struggled to his feet.
Annie was surprised by the surge of anger that shook her. It wasn't just his refusal to trust her, for she supposed she couldn't blame him for that, but because he wouldn't let himself rest. He needed to be lying down, sleeping, not following her every step. "Don't bother coming all the way out to the lean-to," she snapped. "Just stand out here in front, and you can shoot me in the back if I try to make a run for it."
For the first time, a flash of temper flared in his pale eyes. His cold control had been what had frightened her the most before, but now she wished she

hadn't let her own rare anger flare, if this was what it had called up. Anger should be hot, but this man's eyes went even colder, until she felt the chill even across the width of the hut. And still he didn't lose control. He merely said, "I can shoot anything else that might be out there too," as he thumbed back the hammer and motioned for her to exit ahead of him.

She hadn't thought of that. If he was her kidnapper and an inherent danger to her, he was also her protector, for he knew how to live in these mountains, while she would have frozen to death the first night without him. He was also her only hope of getting back to Silver Mesa. On the other hand, she hadn't considered the possibility of facing danger just by stepping through the door of the hut. She hoped it was still too early in the year, and too cold, for snakes and bears to be active, but she simply didn't know. It wasn't something she had worried about in Philadelphia. She wouldn't even have known that bears hibernated if a miner hadn't mentioned it in the rambling monologue he'd been delivering to take his mind off the broken bone Annie had been setting.

Without a word she walked briskly to the lean-to, where the horses nickered at her arrival and immediately began chomping on the grain she gave them. She hauled two more buckets of water from the stream and poured them in the trough, settled the saddle blankets over the two broad backs to help keep them warm during the night, and after a pat on each nose trudged wearily back to the hut. He was still standing just in front of the door, as he had been while she performed the chores, and at her approach he stepped aside so she could enter.

"Close the door and cover the windows," he said quietly. "It'll get cold fast now, with the sun going down."

She did as he said, though it enclosed them in a cave of darkness eased only by the small lick of flame in the fireplace. She wished for a stout bar to place across the door, but there wasn't one, though there were wooden brackets to testify that there had been at one time. McCay was easing back down onto the blanket. Annie went to the fireplace and removed the skillet of potato soup. The potatoes had cooked to mush; the soup was a little too thick, but she added water and took care of that problem. Satisfied, she poured his cup full and handed it to him.

He sipped it with the total lack of enthusiasm that told her he still had no appetite, but he did say, "That was good," when he had finished.

She ate her share right out of the skillet, smiling inwardly at how shocked all of her old acquaintances back in Philadelphia would be at her manners. But there was only one cup, one tin plate, one skillet, and one spoon, so she imagined she and her patient/captor would be doing a lot of sharing in the next few days. She cleaned the skillet, cup, and spoon afterwards, then brewed him another dose of willow-bark tea. She tasted it without comment, and he drank it down.

They both had to make a trip outside before turning in for the night, and the experience was just as humiliating for her as it had been the first time.

Her face was still red when they reentered the hut, but all of her color fled when he pointed the pistol at her and said in that flat, calm voice, "Take off your clothes."

CHAPTER 4

She stared at him in disbelief, her eyes huge. A dull roaring dimmed her hearing and for a moment she wondered if she might faint, but that escape was denied her. The barrel of the pistol looked enormous, and it was pointing right at her. Above it, his eyes were remote.

"No."

She whispered the word, because her throat was so tight she could barely speak. Several confused, fragmented thoughts skittered through her mind. He couldn't be thinking—no, surely he knew he wasn't in any shape to—he wouldn't shoot her, he needed her to take care of him—

"Don't make it any rougher on yourself than it has to be," he advised. "I don't want to have to hurt you. Just take them off and lie down."

Her hands knotted into fists. "No!" she repeated fiercely. "I won't let you do this to me."

He looked at her white face and tense body, poised as if she would flee into the night, and amusement quirked his mouth. "Honey, you must think I'm a lot stronger than I feel," he drawled. "There's no way in hell I could do what you're thinking."

She didn't relax. "Then why do you want me to take off my clothes?"

"Because I won't be able to stay awake much longer, and I don't want you sneaking out while I'm sleeping. I don't figure you'll leave without your clothes."

"I wasn't going to try to run," she assured him desperately.
"It would be dangerous for you to try to make it on your own, and that's a fact," he said. "So I'll just make sure the temptation doesn't get to be too much for you."
She couldn't even imagine taking her clothes off in front of him; her mind shied away from the idea. "Can't you tie me or something? You have a rope."
He sighed. "It's obvious you don't know how damn uncomfortable it is to be tied up. You wouldn't be able to rest like that."
"I don't care, I'd rather—"
"Annie. Take your clothes off. Now."
The warning was plain in his voice. She began to tremble, but she shook her head obstinately. "No."
"The only alternative is for me to shoot you. I don't want to do that."
"You won't kill me," she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt.
"Not yet, anyway. You still need me."
"I didn't say anything about killing you. I'm damn good with a pistol, and I can put a bullet anywhere I want it to go. Which do you prefer, in the leg or shoulder?"
He wouldn't do it. She told herself that he wouldn't do it, that he needed her healthy so she could take care of him, but there was no hesitation at all in his face, and his hand was rock steady as he lifted the pistol.
She turned her back on him and began unbuttoning her blouse with trembling fingers.
Firelight gleamed on her satin smooth shoulders as she removed her blouse and let it drop to the floor. Her head was bent forward, revealing the delicate furrow of the nape of her neck. Rafe felt a sudden urge to press his mouth to it, to wrap his arms around her and shelter her against him. He had had to drive her to the limit of her endurance all day long, just as he had done the night before, even though she was hollow-eyed with fatigue. And she had managed, somehow finding sufficient strength in her thin body to do the things he had demanded of her. She had fought down her natural fear of him and done her best to make him well, and he repaid her by humiliating her and terrorizing her, but he didn't dare relax his guard. He had to make certain she didn't try to run, for her sake as well as his.
She removed her sturdy half boots, then, still keeping her back turned to him, lifted the front of her skirt and fumbled with the tapes that tied her

petticoat around her waist. It dropped around her feet in a froth of white, and she stepped out of it.
She was trembling visibly, even in the dim light. "Go on," he said softly. He regretted that she was so frightened, but he'd be lying to himself if he tried to deny being interested in seeing her skirt drop as well. Hell, he was more than interested, he was already hard, his erection thrusting against the flimsy covering of his longhandles. Only the blanket wrapped around him kept her from seeing his condition, if she had happened to turn around. He wondered briefly just how sick he would have to get before his cock got the message that he wasn't capable; sicker than he was now, that was for sure, and he felt like hell.
She unbuttoned the waistband of her skirt and the garment fell to the floor. She was still covered, still wearing her stockings, knee-length drawers, and shift, but the shape of her body was revealed. Rafe inhaled deeply, fighting the sudden restriction in his chest. His loins began to throb. She wasn't thin so much as dainty, with slender, delicate bones and a sweet curve to her hips and thighs that made him break into a sweat.
She stood rigidly, as if incapable of continuing. He could let her stop now; she wasn't going to run off anywhere dressed in only her stockings and underwear.
"The stockings."
She bent down and untied the garters above her knees, then removed the white cotton stockings. Her bare toes curled on the plank floor.
"Now your drawers." He heard the hoarseness of his voice, and wondered if she noticed it too. Damn, he didn't have to take it this far, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. He wanted to see her, wanted to feel her lying naked in his arms even though he wasn't well enough to do anything about it. He wondered if that strange hot tingle was restricted to her hands, or if he would feel it all over if he lay on top of her. Would it be more intense inside of her? The thought of feeling that unique sensation on his shaft almost made him groan aloud.
She was shaking like a leaf now, all over, from head to foot. Her shift came down to mid-thigh, but still… She felt utterly exposed and vulnerable as she stepped out of her drawers. The rush of cool air on her bare buttocks was shocking, and even though she knew her bottom was covered by the shift she couldn't stop herself from reaching back to make sure. Her one remaining garment was too thin for her to feel reassured.

He wanted that shift off. God, he wanted her naked. The sleek line of her legs almost drove him to madness, but he wanted to see the curve and cleft of her bottom, the sweet fullness of her breasts, the pouty folds of her sex. He wanted to be well so he could thrust into her, spend hours between her legs and feel her release deep inside, shivering around his hardness. He wanted to make love to her every way he'd ever done it before, and try everything he'd ever heard of.

He wanted to taste her, to drive her crazy with his mouth and fingers and body. He was shaking with lust.

And she was shaking with fear.

He couldn't make her remove the shift, couldn't terrorize her any more than he already had. He dragged the blanket from around himself and draped it over her shoulders, wrapping her snugly in it. She clutched it with pitiful desperation, her head still bent forward so he couldn't see her face. Rafe ran gentle fingers through her hair, searching out all of the pins and releasing the soft, fine mass to tumble over his hands and swing forward to hide even more of her face. He pulled it back over her shoulders, where it reached almost to her waist.

Wincing against the pull in his side, he bent down and added more wood to the fire, then gathered her discarded garments, except for her petticoat, and placed them under the blanket he had been lying on, putting a bit more padding between them and the hard floor and making it damn certain she couldn't get to them without waking him up. He added his own clothing as a safeguard. Her petticoat he rolled into a pillow, and placed it at one end of the blanket.

"Lie down," he said gently, and in mortified silence she moved to obey. She would have lain down still wrapped in the blanket, but he caught it and pulled it from her nerveless fingers. She froze, then realized that they would have to share the blanket, just as they had done the night before. She sank to her knees and held her shift close to her body as she stretched out on their crude bed, but she still felt painfully exposed. She turned on her right side, with her back to him.

He lay down beside her and also turned onto his right side. He drew the blanket up over them, then settled his left arm over her waist. The heavy weight of it made her feel pinioned. She could feel him all against her back, the hair on his naked chest brushing against her shoulder blades. He pulled her closer, nestling her buttocks to his loins, cradling her thighs to his.

Annie's breath came in quick, shallow gasps. She could feel his… his manhood, covered only by the thin flannel of his longhandles, pushing against her bottom. Her shift might as well have not existed, for all the protection it offered. Had it ridden up, leaving her totally uncovered? She almost cried out, but she didn't dare reach down to find out.

"Shhh," he murmured against her hair. "Don't be afraid. Go to sleep."

"How—how can I?" she choked.

"Just close your eyes and relax. You've worked hard today; you need to sleep."

Even closing her eyes was out of the question. She was too aware of his partial nudity, too aware of her own bareness. She had always slept swathed in voluminous nightgowns, feeling the comforting, protective folds wrapped around her legs.

"Just so you'll know," he said softly, still so close that his lips moved her hair, "The pistol is in my right hand. Don't try to take it away from me, or I might kill you before I'm awake enough to know who you are. And the rifle isn't loaded; I took the shells out of it while you were taking care of the horses." He hadn't, because he never deliberately left himself unarmed, but she wouldn't know that. Poor little thing, she hardly knew anything at all about surviving outside a town, or even inside one. When he had looked through her cabin, he had noticed that there weren't any weapons at all, unless he considered her scalpels weapons. Silver Mesa was a boomtown, filled with rough, money-hungry, whiskey-soaked men, yet she hadn't owned the most basic means of protection. It was a thousand wonders that she hadn't been attacked and raped her first week in town.

She felt so sweet and soft in his arms. Automatically he pulled her closer and tucked his sock-clad feet under her much smaller bare ones to share his heat with her. She was trying to hold herself still, probably to keep from stirring him up even more than he was; since she was a doctor, he wryly figured that she knew what it was she was feeling pressed against her butt. But she couldn't stop the little tremors that kept shaking her, and it wasn't the cold that was making her shake. Right now, they were plenty warm. She was still terrified, and he was at a loss to know how to calm her down.

He didn't figure he'd be able to stay awake much longer, and he wanted her settled before he drifted off. She had to be tired too; if he could just get her mind off the situation, her body would take over and she'd go to sleep.

"Where're you from?" he murmured, keeping his voice low and calm. Just about everybody out West was from somewhere else.
Another shiver ran through her, but she answered, "Philadelphia."
"I've never been to Philadelphia. New York and Boston, but never Philadelphia. How long have you been out here?"
"I—I've been in Silver Mesa for eight months."
"And before that?"
"Denver. I spent a year in Denver."
"Why in hell did you leave Denver for Silver Mesa? At least Denver's a proper town."
"Denver didn't need any more doctors," she replied. "Silver Mesa did." She didn't feel like going into the particulars, because people's attitude had hurt, cutting her deeper than she would have thought possible.
Good. Her voice sounded calmer now. Rafe stifled a yawn. Gently he pushed her hair away from her ear and nestled closer, then tucked the blanket more securely over her shoulder. "No telling how long Silver Mesa will last," he said, letting his voice drop to nothing more than a rustle of sound. "Boomtowns die out as fast as they grow up. When the silver plays out, the miners will pull up stakes and move on, and so will everyone else."
The thought of starting all over again was depressing, even though her existence in Silver Mesa lacked any sort of luxury or even comforts. At least she was doing what she wanted to do more than anything else, which was practice medicine. Sometimes she was so frustrated that she wanted to scream. She knew so much, could do so much, if people would only come to her in time. So often they elected not to come at all, because she was a woman, and so they died.
But she would face the question of her future when—and if—the ore in Silver Mesa played out. She had no guarantees that she would ever even see Silver Mesa again. She should worry about that instead, but it was so difficult to form a coherent thought. For the first time in this long day, she was able to let her tired body rest. She knew she shouldn't. A tiny frisson of alarm ran through her, but it quickly faded and she didn't move. She knew she should open her eyes— when had they closed? She was warm, so warm, and her limbs felt heavy and lax. She might as well have been wrapped in a cocoon, so encompassed was she by his heat. Cocoon… yes, one consisting of the blanket and his arms, his legs, his very body. She

could barely move, but she didn't have the energy to, anyway. For a brief lucid moment she was aware that she was going to sleep, and then she had. Rafe felt the complete relaxation of her body and indulged in self-satisfaction. She had been so tired that she had dropped off as soon as he'd made her forget about being afraid. Now she could get some much-needed rest, and so could he, though he perversely wanted to stay awake as long as he could so he could enjoy the feel of her in his arms. A woman's body was a pure miracle of nature, the closest a man could get to heaven on earth, and it had been too damn long since he'd had the luxury of holding a woman all snuggled up to him, toasty warm, comfortable, and fairly safe. He curved his hand over her belly, and drifted to sleep with a strange sense of contentment.

He was already up when Annie woke the next morning; it was the sound he made rebuilding the fire that roused her. She scrambled to her feet in a surge of panic, then hastily grabbed the blanket to cover herself. He turned, his enigmatic eyes measuring her, and she tensed without knowing why.

"You can get dressed," he finally said. "So will I. I'll try to help you with the chores today."

She paused, but the instinct to heal was too strong. Carefully holding the blanket with one hand, she reached out the other to lay it on his unshaven cheek, a slight frown furrowing her brow as she considered his condition. He still felt too warm to her. She picked up his hand and pressed her fingers to his thick wrist, feeling his pulse, which was a little too fast and a little too shallow. "No, not today," she replied. "You need at least one more day of rest and medication before you try to do even light chores."

"Just lying around will make me even weaker."

The dismissive note in his voice made her bristle. She straightened her shoulders and gave him a stern look. "Why did you bring me here? I'm the doctor, not you. Dress if you like, it won't hurt anything, but—"

"I'll have to find some graze for the horses today," he interrupted. "And I need to set some traps, unless you want to live on potatoes and beans."

"We can do without more food for a while yet," she said stubbornly.

"Maybe we can, but the horses can't." While he was speaking, he eased down to a bending position and got his clothes from under the blanket they'd been lying on. Just as carefully he stepped into his pants and pulled them up over his hips.

Annie bit her lip, but came to the conclusion she would have to dress in front of him, just as she had undressed. Quickly, she grabbed her skirt, and after some frustrated wrestling with the blanket let it drop and jerked the garment on in exactly the same motion he had used to don his pants. She felt better once her legs were covered, but the cold air washing over her arms and shoulders was a sharp reminder that she was still far from decently clad. For the sake of modesty she put on her blouse and buttoned it before picking up her petticoat and drawers. Her clothes were sadly wrinkled, but she was so glad to have them back that she could have cried.
He pulled on his shirt but didn't attempt putting his boots on by himself; instead he walked to the door and opened it, letting in the bright, crisp early-morning sun. Annie blinked at the sudden brightness, turning away until her eyes became accustomed to it. Cold air rushed in, making her shiver. "It's supposed to be spring," she said plaintively.
"It'll probably snow up here a couple more times before the weather takes any notice of the calendar," he said, looking at the sky through the trees. It was utterly clear, meaning the weather wasn't likely to get very warm anytime soon. The temperature was comfortable enough during the day, but the nights were freezing.
While his back was turned, Annie pulled on her underwear and petticoat, then sat down to put on her stockings. Rafe looked around to find her skirts up around her knees, and his gaze lingered on the trim turn of her calves and ankles.
She wrinkled her nose at putting on clothes she had already worn for two days; both she and her garments needed a good washing, as did his, but just how she was going to accomplish such a thing baffled her. She could heat water for them to wash off with, but she couldn't see both of them sitting around naked, wrapped in only a blanket, while their clothes dried. Still, something would have to be contrived; her father had always held that cleanliness was as important to a patient's survival as any skill or knowledge a doctor possessed, and people did seem to recover better in clean surroundings.
"I wish you had thought to bring the lamp," she commented, hugging her arms. "Then we could see in here without opening the door and freezing ourselves."
"I have some candles in my saddlebags, but we're better off saving them in case the weather turns so bad we can't open the door."

She moved closer to the fire and briskly rubbed her hands together to warm them, then finger-combed her hair and pinned it up. As she put on the coffee and began making their meager breakfast, Rafe came back into the room and sat down on the blanket.
She glanced at him. "Are you hungry?"
"Not much."
"You'll know when you're really getting better, because you'll get your appetite back."
He watched her put the bacon on to fry, then stir up a batch of dough to make pan biscuits. She had a brisk, economical way of doing things that he liked, not wasting time or motion but retaining her instinctive grace. She had twisted her hair up into that knot again, he noticed. He wished she could have left it down, but long hair was dangerous over a cook fire. At least he could look forward to taking it down again when they bedded down for the night, feeling it spill over his hands. Maybe tonight she wouldn't be so frightened, not that he blamed her. Hell, a woman would have to be stupid not to feel at least a little scared in these circumstances.
"Our clothes need washing," she said crisply, not looking at him as she expertly spooned the dough into the pan. "And we both need a bath. I don't know how we'll accomplish it, but it's going to be done. I refuse to be filthy."
There had been a lot of times when he'd been a lot gamier than he was now, but women had a different set of standards for things like that. "Fine with me," he said. "I have some clean clothes in my saddlebags. I wish I'd thought to tell you to pack extra clothes, too, but I had other things on my mind." Like fighting to remain conscious; like evading Trahern and staying alive; like the fire in her hands that had both startled and aroused him. "You can wear one of my shirts, but there's no way my pants will fit you."
"Thank you," she murmured. Color mounted in her face as she bent over the fire. Pants! Her legs would be indecently outlined— She broke off her automatic thought at the realization that he had already seen more than just the outline of her legs. And she would gladly wear his pants in order to wash her own clothing. Priorities had a way of rearranging themselves when convention came head to head with necessity.
He ate enough breakfast that she was satisfied, not having expected him to eat anything at all. She brewed more willow-bark tea and he drank it without question, then lay back and let her examine his wounds. There was

great improvement over the day before, and she told him so as she soaked more plantain leaves for a fresh bandage.
"So I'm going to live," he commented.
"Well, at least you won't die from these wounds. You'll feel much better tomorrow. I want you to eat as much as you can today, but be careful not to make yourself sick."
"Yes, ma'am." He could have sighed with pure bliss at the feel of her hands as she bandaged him.
He got completely dressed afterward, though the stitches in his side pulled when he put on his boots. Annie cleaned up after their meal, and turned to find him standing there wearing his coat and gun belt, and carrying his rifle.
"Get your coat," he said. "We have to get those horses fed."
She didn't like the idea of him walking so far but refrained from wasting her breath in useless argument. He was determined not to let her out of his sight, and unless he lapsed into unconsciousness there really wasn't anything she could do about it. She got her coat without a word, and preceded him out of the cabin.
The horses were restless after having been confined in such a small space, and the big bay jostled Rafe when he led him out of the shed. Rafe's face turned white. Annie hurried to take both lead ropes from him. "I'll lead them," she said. "Don't do anything but walk. Or better still, why don't we ride the horses?"
He shook his head. "We won't be going far." To tell the truth, though he could do it if he had to, he'd just as soon not swing into the saddle yet.
He found suitable graze about half a mile away: a small, sunny meadow not fifty yards across, protected from the cold wind by the curve of the mountain rising to the north. The horses eagerly bent their heads to the winter grass while Rafe and Annie sat down and let the sun warm them. It wasn't long before both of them were taking off their coats, and a hint of color reappeared in his face.
They didn't talk much. She bent her head against her raised knees and closed her eyes, lulled by the delicious heat and the steady chomping of the horses. It was such a quiet, peaceful morning that she could have easily gone back to sleep. There were no sounds but those of nature, the rustle of wind high in the trees, the calls of birds, the horses leisurely cropping the grass. Silver Mesa was never this quiet—there always seemed to be someone in the street, and the saloons never seemed to close. She hadn't

noticed the noise that much, because she was accustomed to city noises, but now she realized just how discordant those sounds were.
He shifted position, and she realized he had done so several times. She opened her eyes. "Uncomfortable?"
"Some."
"Then lie down. It's what you should be doing, anyway."
"I'm okay."
Again she refrained from useless arguing. Instead she asked, "How long are you going to let them graze? I still have a lot to do."
He looked at the sun, then at the horses. Annie's gelding had stopped grazing and was standing placidly, its head lifted and ears perked in interested attention at the sound of their voices. The bay was still grazing, but in a more desultory manner, as his appetite was satisfied. Rafe wished he could leave the horses out, but he couldn't take the chance of being caught so far away from them. Maybe tomorrow he'd feel strong enough to rig up a rough corral so they could move around rather than being cooped up in the shed. It wouldn't take much, some bushes and rope, to at least give them walking-around room.
"We might as well head back now," he finally said, though he was content to just sit in the sun. Walking reminded him of just how weak he truly was.
Annie got the horses and led them back. After she took them to the stream and let them drink their fill, they went docilely back into the shed.
The logistics of bathing almost defeated her, since there wasn't a basin or pitcher, only the one bucket for hauling water, and it was far too cold to bathe in the stream. She made do by cleaning out the coffeepot and cook pot, then putting water on to heat in both of them. When the water was boiling, she added it to the cold water in the bucket.
"You first," she told him. "I'll be right outside the door—"
"No, you won't," he interrupted, his pale eyes narrowing. "You'll be in here where I can keep an eye on you. Sit down with your back to me if you don't want to watch."
His inflexibility distressed her, but she had already learned that she couldn't change his mind, so she didn't try. Without another word, she sat down with her back to him and rested her head on her drawn-up knees just as she had out in the meadow. She heard him undress, then the splashing of the water as he washed. After about five minutes she heard him begin dressing again, and finally he said, "I have my pants on; you can turn around now."

She scrambled to her feet and turned around. He hadn't put on a shirt yet, though a clean one was lying on the blanket. She tried not to stare at his broad, hairy chest; she had seen many bare chests without suffering any effect other than curiosity, so why did her heartbeat react so wildly to the sight of his? It was broad and muscled and dark-haired, but still only a chest, even though it had felt as solid as rock when he had held her against it during the night. "Hold the mirror so I can shave," he directed, and only then did she notice that he had laid out his razor and a small mirror.

She stepped closer and held the mirror while he soaped his face, then carefully scraped away the dark whiskers that covered his face. She couldn't prevent herself from watching him with helpless fascination. His black beard had been at least a week old when she had first met him, so she was anxious to see him clean shaven. He did some interesting contortions with his face that she remembered her own father doing, and a gentle smile touched her mouth. It comforted her to find the small similarity between her beloved father and this dangerous stranger who had her at his mercy, assuming he possessed any.

When he had finished, the revealed structure of his face made her breath catch in her chest, and she quickly turned away to hide her expression. Contrary to her expectations, the beard had actually softened him. Clean-shaven, he looked even more predatory, with his pale eyes gleaming like ice from beneath the strong ridge of black brows. His nose was high-bridged and straight, his mouth set in a hard line and bracketed on each side by a thin furrow. His jaw looked like granite, and his chin was strong and stubborn, with just a hint of a cleft that his beard had hidden until then. It was a face without a hint of softness or trust, wearing the remote expression of a man who had seen and caused so much death that it no longer touched him. In the brief moment before she had turned away she had seen bitterness in the set of his mouth, a bitterness so entrenched that it might never be erased and so intense that it had hurt her to see it. What could have happened to make a man look like that, as if he believed in nothing, trusted no one, and had nothing left of any value to himself except, perhaps, his own life—and that was only a "perhaps."

Yet he was still only a man, for all his dangerous-ness. He was tired and ill, and despite the things he had done that had terrified her, he had not only not hurt her, he had seen to her comfort and safety to the best of his ability. She didn't forget that it was to his advantage to keep her safe, or that any

discomfort she suffered was purely his fault, but at the same time he hadn't been as cruel or brutal as she had feared, or as many other men would have been. He had done and said things that had terrified her, but never from sheer cruelty; it was oddly reassuring that he always had a reason for doing what he did. She was beginning to feel that she could take him at his word: when he was recovered, he would take her back, unharmed, to Silver Mesa. On the other hand, if she tried to escape from him, she was equally certain that he would stop her in any way he could, including shooting her out of the saddle.

"All right, it's your turn now."

She turned around and saw that he was completely dressed, including his gun belt. His dirty clothes lay in a pile on the floor, and he had laid out a second clean shirt for her use.

She stared at the shirt, caught in a dilemma. "Which do I wash first, myself or the clothes?"

"The clothes," he answered. "That way they'll have more time to dry."

"And what do I wear while I'm washing them?" she asked drily. "If I put on your shirt now, it'll get wet."

He shrugged. "What you do depends on how bad you want clean clothes."

She understood what he meant, and snatched up his clothes and the bar of soap without another word. She wasn't in a very good mood as she marched to the stream and knelt down on the bank. He followed, and settled down about five yards away with the rifle resting across his lap. She set to work with grim determination, for the water was icy and her hands were numb in only a few minutes.

She had wrung out his shirt and hung it over a bush to dry, and was scrubbing his pants, before she spoke. "It's too cold for snakes. And bears, too, I presume. What are you guarding me from? Wolves? Mountain lions?"

"I've seen bear out this early," he replied. "A healthy wolf isn't going to bother with you, but an injured one might. Same thing with mountain lions. You'd be in more danger if a man wandered through and stumbled on you."

She bent over and dunked his pants in the stream, watching the soap rinse away in a pale cloud. "I don't understand men," she said. "I don't understand why so many of them are so senselessly cruel, how they can abuse a woman, child, or animal without giving it a thought but get killing mad if anyone accuses them of cheating at cards. That isn't honor, that's—I don't know what it is. Stupidity, I guess."

He didn't answer. His restless eyes continued to skim their surroundings. Annie struggled to wring the water out of the heavy garment, but her hands were cold and clumsy. He got up and took the pants from her, his strong hands effortlessly twisting the water out of the material. He shook them out and spread them over another bush, then took his seat again.
She doused his underwear, then began soaping them.
"Some people are just naturally bad," he said. "Men and women. They're born mean and they die mean. Others kind of drift into it, a little at a time. And sometimes they're pushed."
She kept her head down, her attention on her chore. "What kind are you?"
He thought about it. Finally he said, "I don't reckon it matters."
It certainly didn't matter to him. He had been pushed, but the way it had happened had ceased to mean anything. He had lost everything he had believed in and fought for, lost his family, seen the reason for it all turn bitter and crumble into dust, had been hounded across the country, but finally the reasons hadn't counted for anything, only the reality. The reality was that he was constantly on the move, watching his back trail; he trusted no one, and he was willing to kill whoever came after him. Beyond that, there was nothing.

CHAPTER 5

Washing her own clothes was so much trouble that accomplishing the task was a testament to her considerable determination. Keeping her back to him, she sat down and removed her stockings, then untied the tapes of her petticoat and drawers. When she stood, both garments slid down her legs and she stepped out of them. She refused to look at him to see if he had noticed; of course he had. The blasted man didn't miss anything. Her cheeks were hot as she knelt again on the bank and began scrubbing her unmentionables. Irritated, she wished some of the heat in her face would transfer itself to her hands. How could water be this cold and still run?
To wash her shift and blouse, she had to return to the cabin and change into his shirt. He remained outside, for which she was painfully grateful, but she still felt wretchedly exposed with the window coverings propped open and the chilly air washing over her bare breasts. She jerked his shirt on over her

head as quickly as possible, and sighed in relief at the comfort of the soft wool covering her.
The shirt was so huge on her that she was startled into a soft laugh. She buttoned every button, but the neck was still so loose that it exposed her collarbones. The hem hung to her knees, and the sleeves flapped a good six inches past her fingers. She began briskly rolling them up and laughed again, for when she rolled them up to her elbow there was practically no sleeve left, as the shoulder seam drooped down almost that far. "Do you have an extra belt?" she called. "There's so much material here it'll get in my way."
He appeared in the doorway as soon as she spoke, and she shivered as she realized he had been leaning against the cabin, just out of sight. He had been only a few feet away when she had been half nude. Had he looked? She didn't want to know.
He cut a few feet of rope and she tied it around her slim waist, then snatched up her remaining clothes and marched back to the stream, where she finished her laundry. Then she had to haul more water back to the cabin and begin heating it for her own bath. She was so exhausted that she wondered if it had been worth it, but she couldn't have endured another day without washing.
She also couldn't endure bathing with the windows and door open, wondering if he were watching her. Not only that, it was too chilly, though it hadn't seemed to bother him much when he had bathed. She closed the windows and built up the fire, then faced him defiantly. "I'm not bathing with an open door."
"Fine with me."
Her cheeks got hot again. "Or with you in here."
"Don't you trust me to keep my back turned?"
Distress darkened her soft brown eyes. Rafe reached out and cupped her chin, feeling her silky texture of her flesh. "I don't turn my back on anyone," he said.
She swallowed. "Please."
He held her gaze while his thumb brushed lightly over the tender section beneath her chin. Annie felt herself begin to tremble, for he was standing far too close to her and she could feel the heat and tension of his big body. The bright, terrible clarity of his eyes made her want to shut her own to escape, but she was caught in paralyzed fascination and couldn't. This close,

she could see that his eyes were gray, like winter rain, without any softening blue tinge. Black and white specks gave his irises the impression of crystalline depth. Search as she might, she could find no compassion in that clear, cold gaze.

He dropped his hand and stepped back. "I'll be outside," he said, and she nearly sagged with relief. He watched the play of expression across her face before adding, "Take off your skirt and I'll wash it for you."

She hesitated, her longing for clean clothes battling with modesty. She couldn't wear only his shirt for the length of time it would take her clothing to dry, but maybe she could fasten one of the blankets around her. Quickly, before she lost her courage, she turned her back on him and unfastened her skirt, grateful that he was such a large man and his shirt was so enveloping.

Silently he took the skirt and left the cabin, closing the door behind him. As he walked down to the stream he pictured her bathing, and he was acutely aware of her nakedness just on the other side of that door. Fever burned through him again, but it was the heat of desire rather than illness. He wanted to touch more than just her face. He wanted to lie down with her and feel her soft body in his arms as he had during the night, and he didn't want to see fear in her eyes. He wanted to see her slim thighs open for him, welcome him into their embrace.

That was what he wanted. What he needed to do was to get through the next few days, building his strength, then take her back to Silver Mesa as he'd promised and quietly disappear. He needed to keep his mind on what he was doing, rather than speculate on how she would look naked. A woman was a woman. They differed in size and color, just like men, but the basics were the same.

And the basics had been driving men mad since the beginning of time.

He laughed a little at himself as he washed her skirt, but there was no humor in the sound. She wasn't just like every other woman, and it was useless to try to convince himself that she was. Her hands held a strange, heated ecstasy that he couldn't forget, and he craved every little touch she gave him. He even felt some of it when he touched her, for no other woman's skin had ever felt so supple and silky to him. It had taken all of his willpower to release her and roll out of the blankets that morning, and he'd be a damn fool if he thought the temptation wasn't going to get worse with every passing hour. He'd be a double-damn fool if he let the temptation make him forget about Trahern.

He wrung out her skirt, then glanced at the sky. The sun had slid behind the mountains, and the air was already getting colder, so there wasn't any point in hanging the skirt over a bush to dry. Instead he gathered up their still-damp clothing and went back to the cabin. He could hear water splashing.
"Haven't you finished yet?" he called.
"No, not yet."
He leaned against the cabin wall for support and pondered the mystery of why women took so much longer to bathe than men did, when they were smaller and had less to wash.
It was another fifteen minutes before she opened the door, her face glowing with warmth and the brisk application of soap and water. She had washed her hair, probably first thing, for the fire had already partially dried it. She wore his shirt and had wrapped one of the blankets around her like a toga.
"There," she said, sighing in tired satisfaction. "I feel much better now. I'll fetch fresh water for the horses, then start supper. Are you hungry?"
He was, a little, though he wouldn't have minded if she had sat down to rest for a while. Except for when they had been sitting in the little meadow while the horses had grazed, she had been working from the moment her eyes had opened that morning. No wonder there wasn't any extra flesh on her narrow frame.
The blanket made it awkward for her to fetch water, but she refused to let him help and he wasn't certain enough of his strength to insist. All he could do was follow as she trudged back and forth, his frustration wearing his temper thin. None of what he felt was revealed in his face or actions, however, for she would be the only one to suffer if he released his anger, and none of it was her fault. Rather than whine, whimper, or complain, any of which would have been reasonable reactions from any woman who had been forced into such a situation, she had squared her shoulders and done what she could to make their circumstances easier.
But at last all of the chores were taken care of, and they could go into the cabin and close the door against the cold. Annie allowed herself perhaps thirty seconds of rest before she plunged into the preparations for supper. She was limited by their scanty provisions, but cooked some beans and bacon and made another batch of pan biscuits. She was gratified when Rafe ate with the first enthusiasm for food he had shown, a good indication of his improving physical condition. Afterward she put her hand on his forehead, and smiled at the slight dampness she found. "Your fever has broken," she

said, placing her other hand against his cheek for confirmation. "You're sweating. How do you feel?"
"A lot better." He almost regretted his improvement, for that would mean she no longer had a reason to touch him. Odd, but the quality of energy from her hands had changed now that he wasn't so ill; rather than that hot, sharp tingle, the sensation was like a warm caress spreading all over his body, flooding him with pleasure so intense he almost shuddered from it.
Her smile lit up her face. "I told you I could make you well."
"You're a good doctor," he said, and her expression became so radiant that it took his breath.
"Yes, I am," she agreed without either conceit or false modesty. Her words were a simple acceptance of fact. "It's all I've ever wanted to be."
Humming, she walked to the door and stepped outside. Rafe cursed under his breath and got to his feet, his hand on the butt of his pistol as he strode after her. Annie all but collided with him as she came back in, two twigs in her hand. Her eyes widened when she saw the cold anger in his eyes. "I was just getting some toothbrush twigs," she said, holding them out for him to see. "I'm sorry. I forgot."
"Don't forget," he said sharply, grasping her arm and pulling her out of the doorway so he could close the door. She flushed and the radiance died out of her face, making him regret the edge to his voice.
She poured out some salt to clean their teeth with, and Rafe lounged back with the twig in his mouth. Her fastidiousness reminded him of times when he had taken such niceties for granted, when he had been accustomed to daily shaves and washings and had always worn clean clothes. He had taken for granted the availability of shaving soap, soda tooth powder, and fine milled soap for bathing. He had worn expensive cologne and danced many a waltz with bright-eyed young ladies. But that was a long time ago, before the war, a whole lifetime ago. He couldn't feel any kinship with the young man he had been then; he had the memories, but it was as if they were of an acquaintance rather than himself.
Annie got up and rummaged in her medical bag, taking out two small pieces of what looked like bark.
She popped one in her mouth and held the other out to him. "Here. Cinnamon."
He took the piece of bark and sniffed it; cinnamon, just as she'd said. He chewed it slowly, enjoying the taste. He could remember those long-ago

young ladies chewing cinnamon or peppermint pastilles to freshen their breath, and could remember tasting that freshness in kisses.
Maybe it was the memories, or maybe it was simply because he wanted it so much. He said, "Now that our breath is kissing fresh, it'd be a shame to waste it."
She jerked her head around, her eyes wide, and Rafe slid his hand around the back of her neck, under her hair. She stiffened against the pressure that brought her head closer to his.
"No," she blurted, panicked.
"Hush. It's just a kiss, honey. Don't be afraid."
His low, drawling voice washed over her, making her go weak inside. She tried to shake her head, but his hand on her neck prevented the movement. Annie strained backward, her gaze fastened on his mouth as it came closer and closer. No, oh no, she couldn't let him kiss her, she couldn't let herself feel his mouth, not when her heart misbehaved so at the very sight of him. The temptation was too sweet, too piercing. She had felt her weakness where he was concerned on the night she had met him, and even when she had been terrified for her life she had also been aware of the dangerous attraction she felt for him. She had begun to think herself safe, for he hadn't made any sexual move toward her, not even the night before when she had slept all but naked in his arms, but now she saw the danger she was in. If she wanted to return to Silver Mesa heart-whole, she should resist, she should turn her head aside, she should scratch and claw—
Too late.
His mouth settled on hers with the slow, sure pressure of experience, cutting off her quick gasp of protest, while his hand held her still for his tasting. Annie had been kissed before, but not like this, not with a lazily deepening intimacy that paid no attention to the useless pushing of her hands. The strong movement of his mouth opened her lips, and helplessly she felt her body quicken as a warm tide surged through her. Her hands stopped pushing and abruptly clenched his shirt. Under his guidance her mouth opened and he slanted his head to deepen the contact and take better advantage of the opportunity. His tongue moved into her mouth and Annie quivered at the shocking intrusion.
She hadn't known men kissed like this, hadn't expected him to use his tongue; she had seen a lot during medical school and in her practice as a doctor, but she hadn't known that the slow stroking of his tongue inside her

mouth would make her feel weak and hot, or that her breasts would tighten and ache. She wanted him to go on kissing her like this, she wanted to press herself close against him in an effort to ease the throb in her breasts, and feel his hard arms around her. Her inexperience made her helpless against him, unable to handle her own desires or anticipate what he might do.
Rare forced himself to release the nape of her neck and slowly withdraw his lips. He wanted to keep on kissing her; hell, he wanted to do a lot more than that! But the twinge of pain in his left side every time he moved, as well as the lingering weakness in his legs, reminded him that he wasn't in the best shape for making love. It was just as well his body had its limitations, because he'd be a fool to let this situation become complicated by sex. Returning her unharmed was one thing, but like the old saying went, hell held no fury like that of a woman who thought she'd been taken lightly and then discarded. She was less likely to tell anyone about him if she didn't feel like a scorned lover. As he eased away from her, he hoped like hell that he could take his own good advice.
She looked pale and dazed. She didn't glance at him, but instead stared fixedly at the fire. He saw her slender throat move as she swallowed.
"It was just a kiss," he murmured, moved by an impulse to comfort her, since she seemed to need it. He scowled as he had an unwelcome thought. Though she had seemed to respond to him, it was possible she was afraid he would assault her. She had opened her mouth for him, but he couldn't say that she had returned the kiss. It infuriated him to think that maybe he'd been the only one feeling that buildup of heat and tension inside, but the possibility was there. "I'm not going to attack you."
Annie struggled to compose herself. If he thought her reaction was caused by fear, that was much better than him knowing she had wanted him to continue what he'd been doing. She looked down at her hands, but couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind felt sluggish, and her heart was still racing.
Rafe sighed and sought a more comfortable position, dragging his saddle over to lean against. It looked like he needed to get her settled down as he had the night before. "What made you want to be a doctor? It's not the usual thing for a woman."
That was the one subject guaranteed to bring her out of herself. She gave him a quick look, grateful for something to talk about. "That's certainly been impressed on me time and again!"

"I can imagine. What made you do it?"
"My father was a doctor, so I grew up around medicine. I can't remember when I wasn't fascinated by it."
"Most doctors' little girls play with dolls, not medicine."
"I suppose. Papa said it really started when I fell out of a barn loft when I was five. He was terrified that the fall had killed me; he said that I wasn't breathing, and that he couldn't find a pulse. He beat on my chest with his fist and started my heart again, or at least that's what he always told me; now that I'm older, I think I was probably only stunned. Anyway, I was very taken with the idea that he had started my heart, and from then on all I talked about was being a doctor."
"Do you remember the fall?"
"Not really." She gazed at the fire, raptly watching the small yellow tongues of flame tipped with palest blue as they wavered back and forth. "What I remember is more like a dream about falling, rather than a real fall. In the dream I had fallen, but I got up by myself, and there was a lot of light and people coming to get me. I don't remember what Papa says happened. I was only five, after all. What do you remember from when you were five?"
"Getting my ass tanned for letting chickens in the house," he said bluntly.
Annie hid a smile at the image. She wasn't shocked by his language, for after working in a boomtown for so many months, she thought there was very little that she hadn't already heard. "How many chickens?"
"Enough, I guess. I couldn't count very well at that age, but it seemed like a lot of them."
"Did you have any brothers and sisters?"
"One brother. He died during the war. How about you?"
"No, I was an only child. My mother died when I was two, so I don't remember her at all, and Papa never remarried."
"Was he happy that you wanted to be a doctor too?"
Annie had often wondered that very thing. "I don't know. I think he was proud, but worried at the same time. I didn't understand why until I entered medical school."
"Was it difficult?"
"Just getting into school was difficult! I wanted to attend Harvard, but they wouldn't accept me because I'm a woman. I finally attended medical school in Geneva, New York, where Elizabeth Blackwell got her degree."
"Who's Elizabeth Blackwell?"

"The first woman doctor in America. She got her degree in '49, but little had changed in the years since. The instructors ignored me and the other students harassed me. They accused me to my face of being nothing more than a loose woman, since any decent woman wouldn't want to see what I'd be seeing. They told me that I should get married, if anyone would have me after that, and have babies as women were supposed to do. I should leave medicine to people who were smart enough to understand it, namely men. I studied alone and ate every meal alone, and I stayed."

He looked at her thin, delicate face, outlined by the glow of the fire, and could see fierce stubbornness in the set of her soft mouth. Yes, she would have stayed, even in the face of violent opposition. He didn't understand the fervor that drove her to work herself to the bone in the name of medicine, but her instructors and fellow students had certainly underestimated it. She was the only female doctor he'd ever seen, but during the war a lot of sick and wounded men would have died if it hadn't been for the women volunteering to work in the hospitals and take care of them. It was damn certain those women had seen a lot of naked men, too, and no one thought any less of them for it. More, in fact.

"Don't you want to get married and have babies? Seems to me like you could do that and still be a doctor."

She gave him a quick smile, then shyly returned her gaze to the fire. "I've never really thought about getting married. All of my time has been taken up with being a doctor, with learning everything I can learn about it. I wanted to go to England and study with Dr. Lister, but we couldn't afford it, so I've had to learn any way I could."

Rafe had heard of Dr. Lister, the famous English surgeon who had revolutionized his profession by using antiseptic methods, greatly reducing the number of deaths by infection. Rafe had seen too much battlefield surgery not to realize the importance of Dr. Lister's methods, and his own recent bout with an infected wound had impressed him with the seriousness of it.

"Well, what about now? You've learned how to be a fine doctor. Are you going to be looking for a husband now?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not many men would be willing to have a doctor for a wife, and besides, I'm too old. I'll be thirty my next birthday, so that makes me an old maid, and men would rather have someone younger."

He gave a short laugh. "Since I'm thirty-four, twenty-nine doesn't seem so old to me." He hadn't been able to guess her age, and he was a little surprised that she had revealed it so easily, since in his experience women tended to evade the issue after they reached their twenties. Annie often looked tired and worn, with good reason, which made her seem older than she was, but at the same time her skin was as soft and smooth as a baby's and her round breasts stood upright like a young girl's. The thought of her breasts made him shift uncomfortably as his groin tightened. He'd only seen them through her shift, and he felt cheated because he hadn't felt them in his hands, hadn't seen the color of her nipples or tasted their sweetness.

"Have you ever been married?" she asked, jerking his attention back to their conversation.

"No. Never even came close." He'd been twenty-four, and just beginning to think of the security and closeness of marriage, when the war had started. The following four years of guerrilla fighting with Mosby had hardened him, and after his father had died during the winter of'64, he'd had no family left and so had drifted after the end of the war. Maybe he'd have settled down, though, if he hadn't run into Tench Tilghman in New York in '67. Poor Tench, he hadn't realized the terrible secret he'd been guarding, and it had cost him his life, but at least he'd died without knowing how they had been betrayed.

Blackness welled in him at the memory and he struggled to quell it rather than inflict the ugliness of his mood on Annie. "Let's go to sleep," he muttered, suddenly impatient to have his arms around her again, even if it was in sleep. Maybe the peculiar sweetness of her touch would lighten his dark spirit. He stood up and began banking the fire.

Annie was startled by his brusqueness, for she had been enjoying their conversation, but she obediently got to her feet. Then she remembered that she had been using one of their blankets as a dress and would now have to give it up. She froze, her pleading gaze fastened on him.

When he turned around he accurately read her expression. "I'm going to have to tie you tonight," he said as gently as he could.

She clutched the blanket to her. "Tie me?" she echoed.

He jerked his head at their damp clothing, spread out over the floor of the cabin to finish drying. "I'm not going to sleep on a pile of wet clothes. Since I can't keep the clothes away from you, I'll have to keep you away from the clothes."

She had suggested the night before that he tie her rather than make her remove her clothes, but now it seemed that she was to be both tied and largely naked. It wasn't the idea of being bound that disturbed her as much as the realization that she had to surrender the blanket. Granted, she was still wearing his shirt, and it covered more than her shift had the night before, but she was very aware of her bareness beneath it.

He untied the piece of rope she had been using to secure the blanket around her waist, and it began supping to the floor. She grabbed it, then clenched her teeth and let it drop. The faster he got her tied, the sooner she could lie down and pull the concealing blanket over her. This humiliating exposure would be over with faster if she didn't protest.

Rafe unrolled the sleeves of the shirt until the cuffs covered her wrists, to protect her soft skin from the abrasive rope. She stood motionless, her dark eyes huge as she stared straight ahead. He pulled her hands together and looped the rope around each wrist separately, then tied a quick, efficient knot in the middle. He tested both the knot and the tightness of the rope before he let her hands drop. Automatically, she pulled at the binding to discover the strength of it herself. The rope was snug rather than uncomfortably tight, without any give in the knot.

Quickly Rafe pulled off his boots and gun belt and straightened out the blankets. "Lie down."

It was awkward with her hands tied in front of her, but not impossible. She knelt on the blanket, maneuvered to a sitting position, and managed to lie down on her side. Horrified, she felt the hem of the shirt slip upward with her movement and she made a panicked effort to pull it down behind, but her arms were so restricted that she couldn't. She felt a draft of cool air on her bare bottom. Dear God, was she totally exposed? She started to lift her head to see, but at that moment Rafe dropped to the floor beside her and spread the other blanket over them. His big body pressed close to her back and his arm settled around her waist.

"I know it's uncomfortable," he said in her ear, his voice low. "You might sleep better on your back, if lying on your side puts too much pressure on your arms."

"I'm all right," she lied, staring into the darkness. Her arms were already hurting, and she knew he'd made it as easy on her as he could.

Rafe inhaled the fresh sweet scent of her hair and skin, and a sense of well-being began to edge out his black mood. He snuggled her closer and slipped

his right arm under her head. Her narrow body felt soft and wonderfully female against him, especially her rounded little bottom. He wondered if she knew the shirt had slipped up so much when she had lain down that he'd caught a glimpse of curved white buttocks. His shaft was painfully rigid, restrained as it was by his pants, but it was a good pain, the best.

Within five minutes she was subtly shifting her shoulders, trying to ease them. The second time Rafe felt her move against him, he slipped his left hand around her hip and deftly rolled her onto her back. "Stubborn."

She took a deep breath and let her shoulders relax. "Thank you for not tying me up last night," she murmured. "I hadn't realized." How strange that forcing her to take off her clothing, which had so terrified her, had in fact been an act of mercy.

"It isn't anything you'd have had any reason to know."

"But you have."

"I've been in a few tight spots. Tied others up, too, during the war."

"Did you fight for the North or the South?" There was no mistaking his southern drawl, but that didn't necessarily indicate which side he'd fought on, as the war had split states, towns and families.

"For the South, I guess, though it came down, really, to fighting for Virginia. That was my home."

"What outfit were you with?"

"I was in the cavalry." That was explanation enough, he thought, though it fell far short of describing what the companies under Mosby's command had been and done. For a relatively small group, they had tied up a hugely disproportionate number of Union troops dedicated to tracking them down, thwarting them at the least, capturing them if possible. The Union troops had failed. Mosby and his men had eluded capture time and again.

He listened to the rhythm of her breathing slow as she relaxed and sleep edged closer. She turned her head toward him. "Good night," she murmured.

Desire slammed into his gut and he cursed his wounds, cursed the situation that made her fear him. She had said a simple good night, and he had imagined her saying it after he'd worn her out with some hard loving. Everything she said and did reminded him of sex. It would be a pure miracle if he managed to keep his hands off her for another couple of days. Right now, he'd say it was an impossibility.

"Kiss me good night." His voice was raspy with need and he felt her muscles tighten again in alarm.
"We—we shouldn't do that."
"Considering how bad I want to strip you naked, a kiss isn't much to ask for."
She quivered at his rough tone. Beside her, he was as tense as she, though for a different reason. Heat emanated from him in waves, enveloping her, but it wasn't the heat of fever. She sought reassurance, though she didn't know why she should believe a man who had kidnapped her. "A kiss is all you want?"
"Hell, no, a kiss isn't all I want!" he snapped. "But it's what I'll settle for, if you're not ready to let me between your legs."
Shock reverberated through her, making her dizzy. "I'm not a whore, Mr. McCay!"
"Fucking doesn't make a woman a whore," he replied crudely, frustration eroding his control. "Taking money for it does."
The word battered at her. She had heard it muttered as an aside once when she had been summoned to care for one of the prostitutes who had been treated roughly—assaulted would be a better description— but had never imagined that any man would say such a thing directly to her. She flinched from the crudity, and her heart began to slam against her rib cage. Men didn't talk that way to women they respected; did that mean he intended to —
He slipped his hand onto her stomach, under her bound hands. The heat of it burned her, and her breath began coming in small pants. His fingers flexed a little, then began a delicate massaging motion. "Calm down, I'm not going to rape you."
She said on a gasp, "Then why are you saying such awful things?"
"Awful?" He considered her reaction and the possible causes. Since she was a doctor he hadn't expected her to be so missish about something he regarded as natural between men and women, and damn wonderful at that. He'd long since lost any inclination he might have had as a "gentleman" to shield women from any knowledge of sex. Her reaction made him think she either had been mistreated by some man or she was a virgin, and the best way to find out was to ask. He hoped she was virgin, because the idea of anyone mistreating her like that suddenly made him killing mad. "Are you a virgin?"

"What?" Her voice went high and almost soundless with shock.
"A virgin." Gently he rubbed her belly. "Annie, honey, has anyone ever—"
"I know what it means!" she interrupted, afraid of what he might say. "Of course I'm still a—ah— virgin."
"There's no 'of course' to it, honey. You're twenty-nine, not a silly sixteen-year-old with the dew still on. Very few women go through life without a man getting in bed with them, and a fair number aren't married at the time."
She had seen enough in her years as a doctor to admit the truth of that, but that didn't change her own situation. "I can't say about other women, but I've certainly never done—that."
"Have you ever wanted to?"
Desperately she tried to turn away from him, but his hand pressed heavily on her stomach, keeping her where she was. Lacking any other means of evasion, she turned her head away. "No. Not really."
"Not really," he repeated. "What does that mean? You either have or you haven't."
It was becoming difficult to breathe; the air seemed heavy and heated, laden with the musky scent of his skin. She was no good at dissembling, so finally she stopped trying to evade his shocking, persistent questions. "I'm a doctor. I know the facts of how people perform sexual union, and I know what men look like without their clothing, so of course I've thought about the process."
"I've thought about the process, too," he said roughly. "That's about all I've thought about since the first time I saw you. It's been bell; I was so sick I could barely stand up, but that didn't stop me from wanting to lift your skirt. My common sense tells me to leave you alone, to just take you back to Silver Mesa in a couple of days the way I said I would, but right now I'd give ten years of my life to have you under me. I've been hard for two solid days, Annie girl."
It was a bittersweet comfort to realize that he had felt some of the same helpless fascination she'd experienced since first meeting him. Touching him, even in healing, was a deep and glowing pleasure. And when he had kissed her earlier, she had thought her heart would burst. She wanted to know more. She wanted to turn into his arms and let him do the things about which she had only speculated with mild curiosity. Nothing of what she felt now was mild. Her skin felt hot and sensitive, and a low, deep throb tormented the secret places of her body. Her lack of clothing made the

throbbing worse than if she had been encased in fabric, for she was tantalized by the knowledge that all he would have to do was slide the shirt up a few inches…
Yes, she wanted him. But to give in to him, and to her own baser yearnings, would be the worst mistake of her life. He was an outlaw, and would soon disappear from her life; she would have to be a total fool to give herself to him and run the risk of bearing an illegitimate child, as well as the damage it would do her emotionally.
She steadied her voice, and took the route of common sense. "It would be a mistake for me to accept your advances. I think we both know that."
"Oh, I know it," he muttered. "I just don't like it worth a damn."
"That's the way it has to be."
"Then kiss me good night, honey. That's all I'm asking."
Hesitantly she turned her head, and he took her mouth in a slow, strong motion that opened her lips and left her vulnerable to the penetration of his tongue. If a kiss was all he was allowed, then he intended to make the most of it. He tforced his domination on her mouth with hard, deep kisses, using his tongue in the most blatant imitation of copulation, until her bound hands came up and twisted and she was clinging to his shirt while soft little whimpers sounded in her throat. He kissed her until his entire body was throbbing with the need to empty his seed inside of her, until her mouth was swollen and tears seeped from beneath her lashes.
He wiped the moisture away with his thumb, savagely restraining himself. "Go to sleep, honey," he whispered in a hoarse voice.
Annie half stifled a moan. She closed her eyes, but it was a long time before her yearning flesh let her sleep.

CHAPTER 6

He wasn't there when she woke up the next morning, and Annie panicked at the thought that he might have abandoned her there in the mountains. Her hands were unbound and that frightened her even more, for why would he have untied her unless he had planned on leaving? Still half asleep, with her hair hanging in her eyes, she stumbled to her feet and jerked the door open, then ran outside. Cold air swirled around her bare legs and rocks and twigs bruised her feet. "Rafe!"

He stepped out from the horse shed, the water bucket in one hand and the raised pistol in the other. "What is it?" he asked sharply, as his pale eyes raked over her.
She halted her headlong plunge, suddenly aware of her half-naked state and the iciness of the ground beneath her bare feet. "I thought you'd left," she said in a strained tone.
His eyes turned frosty as he stared at her, his hard face expressionless. Finally he said, "Go back inside."
She knew she should do as he said, but concern made her hesitate. "How do you feel? I don't think you should be hauling water yet."
"I said to get inside." His voice was dead level, but it carried the sharpness of a whiplash. She turned and carefully picked her way back inside, wincing as the rough ground hurt the tender soles of her feet.
She propped open one of the windows so she'd be able to see, then examined her clothing. It was stiff and wrinkled, but dry and—best of all—clean. She hurriedly dressed, shivering with cold. The chill seemed worse than it had the morning before, but maybe that was because she'd been outside with only a shirt between her and the good Lord, and Rafe hadn't built up the fire before he'd gone out.
After she had finger-combed her hair and pinned it up, she built up the fire and began cooking breakfast, but her movements were automatic. She couldn't stop thinking about Rafe, disjointed thoughts that leapt from subject to subject. He had looked much better this morning, without fever dulling his eyes and leaving his face drawn. It was probably too soon for him to be doing any physical work, but how was she supposed to stop him? She just hoped he didn't tear out the stitches in his side.
How had he gotten out of the cabin without waking her? Of course, it had taken her a long time to fall asleep and she'd been very tired, but she usually wasn't that hard to waken. He had lain awake for a long time, too; he hadn't tossed and turned, but she had been very aware of the tension in his arms and body as he'd held her. It would have taken only a single word or gesture of invitation from her and he would have been on top of her.
Several times she had been tempted to throw caution to the winds and say that word, and shame rose in her as she admitted to herself how close she had come to surrendering her chastity to an outlaw. She couldn't even comfort herself that she had resisted temptation because of her high moral standards, to preserve her reputation and self-respect; it was pure cowardice

that had kept her from giving herself to him. She had been afraid. Part of it had been a simple fear of the unknown, and part of it had been fear that he would hurt her, emotionally as well as physically. She had treated women who had been damaged by men who were too careless or too rough, and she knew that the first time was painful for women anyway, but she had ached with lust and might have given in had it only been that. She wanted to know what it was like, to lie under a man and cradle his hard weight, to accept his body into hers.

But her deepest fear was that she was far too vulnerable to him, that by taking her body he would breach the inner walls that guarded her heart, and against all of her own self-advice and common sense she would care too much for him, and that would deal her a wound that wouldn't heal as easily as flesh did. How could she let herself care for him? He was an outlaw, a killer. Even now, she had no doubt that, if she tried to escape, he would shoot her. It was odd, perhaps, but she also trusted him to keep his word and return her unharmed in a few days if she didn't try to escape.

Annie had always thought of herself as a morally upright person, capable of knowing right from wrong and choosing the correct course. For her, morality had nothing to do with judgment and everything to do with compassion. But what did it say about her that she could so clearly see the violence in Rafe McCay and had still been strongly attracted to him from the beginning? He was cold and frighteningly controlled, and as dangerous as a hunting cougar, yet his kisses made her tremble and yearn for more. A little voice in her whispered that she could give herself to him, then return to Silver Mesa without anyone knowing that she had had an outlaw lover, and she was terrified she would yield to temptation.

The door opened but she kept her eyes and her attention focused on what she was cooking. Rafe set the bucket down beside the hearth. Annie glanced at it and saw that it was full of water. From experience, she knew just how heavy that bucket was, and she couldn't stop the concern she felt

Reluctantly she asked again, "How do you feel?"

"Hungry." He closed the door and dropped to the blanket. "Almost normal. Just like you said."

She gave him a quick glance. His tone had been even, without any of his former sharpness, but she knew that his voice would reveal only what he wanted it to. "I didn't say you would be almost normal. I said you'd feel better."

"And I do. Even after taking care of the horses, I'm not as weak now as I was yesterday. But the stitches are itching."
That was a good sign, an indication of healing, but she hadn't expected it so soon. Evidently he was a fast healer, as well as having the inhuman stamina he had revealed on their nightmare ride to the cabin.
"Then you're almost well." She looked at him, her eyes somber and a little pleading. "Will you take me back to Silver Mesa today?"
"No."
That single word was implacable. Annie's shoulders drooped a little. It would have been for the best, removing her from the dangerous temptation of his company, but she didn't try to argue with him. He had his own reasons for what he did and she had yet to be able to sway him from his decisions. He would return her to Silver Mesa when he wanted to, and not before.
Rafe watched her with hooded eyes as she poured a cup of coffee and handed it to him. He sipped the strong brew, enjoying the feel of it warming his insides and adding to the heat he already felt just from looking at her. She was uneasy around him this morning, in a way she hadn't been before even when she had been so terrified he was going to kill her. She was sexually aware of him now, and as skittish as a young mare being cornered by a stallion for the first time. Tension stretched between them like a tightly strung wire.
She was all buttoned up in her own clothes this morning, hiding behind a barricade of cloth and naively trusting that modesty would hold him at bay. He smiled into the cup as he tilted it to his mouth. Women never seemed to realize the strength of the enthrallment that drew men to them, the enchantment of soft skin and soft curves, the bone-deep, gut-wrenching need that drove men to penetrate them and get the closest to heaven a man was likely to get on this earth. Women also didn't realize the strength of their own desires, that their own bodies undermined their defenses. Annie sure as hell didn't realize it, or she wouldn't take such comfort in the useless barrier of clothing. Did she think that if he couldn't see bare skin, he wouldn't desire her?
His common sense had been pushed aside by a physical hunger so great it had become a torment. He would have her. Returning her to Silver Mesa without having sated himself on her was beyond him now. He could barely restrain himself from reaching out for her this instant. His life had been

nothing but death and bitterness for so long that the sweet heat of her was as irresistible to him as water to a thirsty man in a desert.
Only the knowledge that he would have plenty of time for seduction, and that there was work that had to be done that day, kept him from pulling her down on the blankets. The weather had turned noticeably colder, and low, dull clouds had closed in on the mountains, snow clouds if he'd ever seen them. He would probably have time to take her back to Silver Mesa before the snow began, if he were so inclined, but he wasn't. The snow tended to be deep this high in the mountains, and the early-spring storms could be some of the worst; they might be confined to the cabin for days, even a couple of weeks. Annie wouldn't be able to hold out against him, or her own body, for that long.
But today he had to lay in a supply of firewood, a lot of it, as well as set some traps to supply them with food. He could easily hunt with the rifle, but the sound of gunfire could draw attention, and he didn't want anyone to know there were people up here. He'd have to do something about the horses, too. They couldn't be cooped up in that tiny shed, without room to move around, for days on end. He'd have to hobble them and let them graze while he came back and worked on the shed. He didn't like being so far away from the horses, in case they needed to leave in a hurry, but the animals needed to graze and he only had today, and maybe part of tomorrow, to get prepared. He decided not to tell Annie that he thought it was going to snow, because the idea of being snowed in with him might make her panic.
His hunger was wolf-sharp, and he could barely wait for the bacon and biscuits to finish cooking. Annie refilled the cup and he set it between them so they could share it. Neither of them talked during the simple meal. Rafe ate with a voracious appetite, savoring every bite of the sweet honey and hot bread.
Afterward he pulled off his shirt so she could check his wounds, and he used the opportunity to cautiously scratch the itching skin around the stitches. Annie slapped his hand away. "Stop that. You'll get the stitches irritated."
"That sounds fair. They're irritating the hell out of me."
"You're healing faster because of them, so don't complain." The wounds had closed and were healing well, with very little redness. She suspected she

would be able to remove the stitches in another day or so, rather than wait the week to ten days it usually required.
She dabbed apple cider around the stitches to keep them from itching, then placed a thick pad over the wounds and bound it in place.
He was standing with his arms raised, and he frowned down at his side. "Why did you make the bandage so much thicker today?"
She neatly tied off the cloth and he lowered his arms. "To protect the wounds."
"From what?" He pulled his shirt back on over his head and tucked it into his pants.
"From you, mostly," she replied as she restored order to her medical bag.
He grunted and shrugged into his coat, then got his small hatchet out of his saddlebags.
Annie glanced at the sharp blade. "You don't need to cut firewood; there's still plenty to be picked up off the ground."
"It's not for firewood. I'm going to enlarge the horse shed." He hooked the scabbard for the rifle over his head and slid the weapon into it so it lay on his back. "Put on your coat. It's colder today, and you'll need it."
Silently she obeyed. Things went easier if she just did as he said, even though she didn't see any need in doing so much work on the shed when they would be there only a day or two. She tried to convince herself that he would take her back to Silver Mesa that soon, especially since he was doing so well. Just a few more days, and then temptation would be removed and she would be home, safe and sound, and still chaste. Surely she could remain firm for that long; after all, Penelope had guarded her chastity against zealous suitors for twenty years, waiting for Odysseus' return.
They walked the restless horses back up to the clearing, where Rafe fashioned hobbles for them and turned them loose to graze. On the walk back to the cabin, they both gathered loose firewood and stacked it just outside the door.
Next she helped him to make some simple snares, her interest caught by the procedure. With only twine and the limber sticks that he cut with the hatchet, he fashioned several different kinds. He let her make the last one under his direction. She had deft hands, but found that trying any new skill involved a certain amount of awkwardness. He was patient with her, though he insisted that she keep redoing the snare until he was satisfied with it. Her cheeks glowed with both accomplishment and cold when she was finished.

She watched his long, muscled legs make easy work of the steep slopes as they returned to the cabin, and thought that it was beginning to feel normal to be trudging along behind him with nothing around them but the vast mountains and the silence. They were so isolated that they might as well be the only two people on earth, a man and his woman. Her stomach clenched at the thought and she hastily rejected it, because if she ever let herself think that she was his woman, she was lost. He would sense it, the way he seemed to know everything, and turn to look at her with his pale, fierce eyes. He would see her mental surrender written on her face, and he would take her, perhaps even right here on the cold forest floor.

To keep herself from wavering, she made herself think of the various crimes he could have committed. She felt a little pang of despair as she realized she had no trouble at all thinking of him as a criminal; he was hard and cold, emotionless, and even though he had treated her better than she had expected and feared, she wasn't able to delude herself about his nature. Even now he was as alert as a wild animal, his head constantly turning as he examined every detail and sought the source of every little sound.

"What did you do?" she asked, unable to stop herself even though the knowledge would be a permanent worry to her.

"When?" he murmured, halting as he studied a bird that had taken flight. After a moment he relaxed and began moving again.

"What are you wanted for?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder, cold danger glinting in his eyes. "What difference does it make?"

"Did you rob someone?" she persisted.

"I'll steal if I have to, but that isn't why I'm wanted."

His tone was flat and casual. Annie shivered, and she reached out to catch his gloved hand. "Then why?"

He stopped and looked down at her. A humorless quirk tugged at his mouth. "Murder," he said.

Her throat went dry, and she dropped his hand. Oh, she had known it from the beginning, recognized his capacity for violence, but hearing him say it as casually as he would have pointed out an interesting bird made her heart almost stop. She swallowed, and forced herself to ask, "Did you do it?"

He seemed surprised by the question. His eyebrows lifted briefly. "Not the one I'm accused of." No, he hadn't killed poor Tench, but he'd killed plenty

of the ones who had come after him, so he guessed it didn't matter at this point.
His phrasing didn't go unnoticed. She turned and walked past him, and he fell into step behind her.
She walked almost blindly. She was a doctor, not a judge. She wasn't supposed to ask the whys and wherefores when someone was ill or hurt, she wasn't supposed to weigh their worth as human beings before giving them the benefit of her skill and knowledge. She was simply supposed to heal, to the best of her ability. But this was the first time she had had to face the fact that she had saved the life of an admitted killer, and her nerves twisted with anguish. How many more people would die because this man had lived? He might have lived anyway, without her help, but she would never know that. And yet… and yet even if she had known, that first night, could she have refused him treatment? In all conscience, no. Her oath as a physician bound her to do what she could, in all circumstances, to heal.
But even without the oath, she couldn't have let him die. Not once she had touched him, trembled from his animal magnetism, felt his low, raspy voice weave a sensuous spell around her. Why try to lie to herself? Even though she had been truly terrified those first two nights, lying in his arms had made her entire body heat with instinctive pleasure.
Come the night, she would be lying in his arms again.
She shivered and pulled her coat tightly around her. Maybe it was better that she knew him for what he was. It would give her the strength to resist him. But even now, as she thought of the coming night, her breasts started aching and heat built in her loins, and she knew shame.
The hard work necessary to enlarge the horse shed came as a relief, for she was able to concentrate on the simple physical labor. He knocked the lean-to down and put the wood, which had been planed and roughly finished, aside to be reused, then began cutting down saplings and securing them on top of each other. He braced them against the bank and the standing trees and notched them so they would interlock. At his direction, she began mixing mud to daub between the saplings and seal the rough walls against the wind. She did so with a fastidiousness that made him hide a grin; getting her hands dirty was unavoidable, but she took care that her clean clothes didn't suffer.
He more than doubled the length of the original shelter. He dragged the water trough into the middle so each horse had equal access to it, then used

two saplings as rails to equally divide the space. Annie saw him stop and rub his side occasionally after he had exerted himself, but he looked like he was massaging a sore muscle rather than suffering sharp pain.
When they had first begun she had assumed it would take them all day, if not part of the next day, to finish the project, but within four hours he was using the original wood to build a door and frame. She filled in the cracks with mud, with him helping finish this final touch, then she stepped back to look at the fruit of their efforts. It was rough and not very appealing, but functional. She hoped the horses appreciated their new quarters.
She checked the sun after they had washed their hands in the icy stream. "I need to put the beans and rice on to cook now. Those beans didn't get quite done enough last night."
He was sweating despite the cold, and she guessed he would welcome a rest. He had to be feeling the effects of doing hard physical work so soon after being as ill as he had been. He went inside with her and dropped down onto the blankets with a sigh. Within minutes, though, he was frowning as he poked a callused finger into the wide cracks in the floor.
"What's wrong?" she asked, looking up from the meal preparations and seeing the scowl.
"You can feel the cold coming through these cracks."
She leaned over and held her hand over the floor. Sure enough, there was a distinct chill. "Why worry about it now? We've managed so far, and you can't put down another floor."
"Because it's gotten colder already, and my guess is it's going to get worse. We won't be able to stay warm enough to sleep." He got to his feet and started toward the door.
Annie looked at him in surprise. "Where are you going?"
"To cut some more saplings."
He had to go only about ten feet, and she listened to the sound of wood being chopped. He returned shortly with four saplings, two over six feet long and two only about half that length. He made a rectangular frame with them, lashing the ends together. Then he carried in big armloads of pine needles and spread them inside the frame to create a soft, thick barrier between them and the floor. The frame kept the pine needles together. He spread one of the blankets over the frame, then stretched out on his roughly made bed to test its comfort. "Better than the floor," he announced.

She wondered what else he intended to do that day. She found out when he insisted on gathering more firewood. "But why do we have to do it now?" she protested.
"I told you, it's getting colder. We'll need the extra firewood."
"Why can't we get it as we need it?"
"Why make extra trips out into the cold when we can already have the wood at hand?" he retorted.
She was tired, and getting snappish. "We won't be here long enough to use all of this."
"I've been in the mountains before, and I know what I'm talking about. Do as you're told."
She did, but with ill grace. She had worked harder during the past three days than she ever had before, so she wouldn't have minded resting a bit. Even before she had met him, she had been exhausted from delivering Eda's baby. And she hadn't slept well the night before, which was all his fault. She had an even temper and was seldom fretful, but fatigue was eroding her normal good humor.
Finally they had collected enough firewood to satisfy him, but even then there was no rest. They had to walk up to the clearing to collect the horses. When they reached the clearing it was empty, and Annie's heart plunged.
"They're gone!"
"They won't be far. That's why I hobbled them."
It took him perhaps ten minutes to locate them; they had smelled water and picked their way down to a stream, probably the same one that ran so close by the cabin. The horses' morning restlessness had been worked off by the day's leisurely grazing, and they didn't resist his hand on their halters. Annie took charge of her gelding and silently they led the animals back.
Even then he wouldn't let her rest. He wanted to check all of his snares before nightfall, and he made her walk with him. He defied everything she knew about human strength and stamina; he should have been exhausted by noon, but instead he had worked a full day that would have worn out even a healthy man.
The snares were empty, but he didn't seem surprised or disappointed. It was twilight as they returned to the cabin, and the failing light combined with Annie's tiredness to make her stumble a little on a protruding root. She caught herself and wasn't in any danger of falling, but Rafe's hand shot out and gripped her upper arm with a strength that startled her into crying out.

"Are you all right?" He caught her other arm and steadied her in front of him.
She took a deep breath. "I'm fine. You startled me when you grabbed my arm."
"I didn't want you to fall. If you broke an ankle, you'd find out right quick I'm not as good a doctor as you are."
"I'm fine," she repeated. "Just tired."
He didn't release her, but kept a steadying hand on her arm the rest of the way. She wished he wouldn't touch her. The touch of that hard, powerful hand was too hot, its warmth too penetrating. It undermined her rational resolve to keep a distance between them. But of course he hadn't made any such decision, so he wasn't acknowledging the shield of indifference she kept trying to erect.
He closed up the cabin for the night while she finished their supper. It was a relief to finally be able to sit down, even if it was on a rough wooden floor with cold air seeping through the cracks. She cooked a slice of bacon and crumbled it in with the beans and rice for flavoring, then added a bit of onion. The tantalizing aroma filled the small room, and Rafe sat forward with an avid glint in his eyes as she spooned it out for him. Annie was so tired that she didn't eat much, which was just as well, because Rafe finished every bite.
She still had one thing she wanted to do before she collapsed for the night. After their dishes were cleaned, she picked up the second blanket and looked around, trying to decide how best to arrange it.
"What are you doing?"
"Trying to figure out how to hang this blanket."
"Why?"
"Because I want to wash off."
"Then do it."
"Not in front of you."
He gave her a hard look, then without another protest he took the blanket from her hand. He was tall enough to reach the ceiling beams, and easily snagged two corners of the blanket on the rough wood, curtaining off a small section of the room. Annie took the water bucket behind it and removed her blouse. After a moment's hesitation, she slid the straps of her shift down her arms and let it fall to her waist. Carefully she washed as best she could, keeping a weather eye on the curtain, but he made no move to

interrupt her privacy. When she was dressed again she emerged from behind the blanket with a quiet thank-you.
He took the bucket from her hand. "You might want to go back behind that blanket. I've sweated like a horse today, and could use a wash myself."
She whisked herself behind the blanket almost without pausing. Rafe's eyes gleamed as he removed his shirt. The fact that he had worked hard wasn't the only reason he wanted to wash. Had he been alone he wouldn't have bothered, but they would be turning in soon, and a woman as dainty about her personal habits as Annie would more likely welcome a man who didn't stink of sweat. He tossed his dirty shirt aside, then as an afterthought stripped completely naked. Thanks to Annie, he had clean clothes to put on. He squatted by the bucket and washed, then put on clean socks, underwear, and pants, but decided to leave off his shirt.
He reached up and unhooked the blanket, and in the dim firelight Annie blinked at him like a sleepy owl. He surveyed her sharply and realized that she was almost asleep on her feet. He had been making seduction plans, but in all of them he had counted on her being awake. Frustration rose in him as he realized he was going to have to wait.
Doctor that she was, she checked the snugness of the bandage around his waist. "Did it bother you much today?"
"Just a bit sore. That stuff you put on it helped the itching."
"Apple cider," she said, and yawned.
He hesitated, then reached out and began unpinning her hair. "You're almost asleep where you stand, honey. Let's get your clothes off so you can get some sleep."
She was so tired that she actually stood there like a docile child until he began unbuttoning her blouse. Then her eyes widened as she realized what he was doing and she jerked back, her hands flying protectively to pull the edges of cloth together.
"Take them off," he said, his tone and words implacable. "Down to your shift."
Even though she knew it was useless, she still couldn't stop the single, desperate word. "Please."
"No. Come on, now. The sooner you get undressed, the sooner you can go to sleep."
It was even more difficult to give up the protection of her clothing than it had been the first time, because now she realized how truly vulnerable she

was. She knew she could resist him; it would be difficult, but she could do it. But how did she resist herself? She thought of fighting, then discarded that idea as useless, for he was a great deal stronger than she and the struggle would only result iff torn clothing—hers. She thought of asking him for his word that he wouldn't touch her, but knew that that too would be a useless effort. He would only look at her with that unyielding gaze and refuse.

He took a step toward her, and Annie quickly turned her back. He caught her shoulders and she gasped, "I'll do it."

"Then get it done."

She bent her head and obeyed. He stood right behind her and took each item of clothing from her shaking hands, except for her shoes and stockings. She thought she would burn up, with the heat of the fire in front of her and the heat of his body behind. She stood with her back to him, staring blindly into the fire, while he spread her clothes under the blanket. Then he took her hand and gently guided her to the bed he had made for them.

CHAPTER 7

Rafe stirred and drowsily snuggled her closer. Her soft bottom nestled against his loins, bringing him fully erect. The discomfort awakened him enough for his eyes to slowly open. An automatic glance at the fire told him that he couldn't have been asleep long, half an hour at the most. He sighed and inhaled the sweet warm scent of her skin. As soon as she had realized he didn't intend to force himself on her, she had relaxed and gone almost immediately to sleep. She lay curled in his arms as limply as a child, with his bigger, stronger body curved to shield and warm her.

Still half asleep, he put his hand under her shift, on her hip, and slowly stroked upward. God, how smooth and soft she was. He slipped his hand around to her belly and pressed backward, and she muttered a little in her sleep as she shifted her buttocks to a more comfortable position against the ridge of his shaft.

His pants were in the way. He unbuttoned them and shoved them down, along with his underwear, and took a deep breath of relief at the exquisite freedom. He rolled his hips against her again, shuddering at the pleasure of her naked flesh touching his. He'd never before wanted any woman this

intensely, until it was all he thought about, until the smallest touch from her made his male flesh rise hard and urgent. Sweet Annie. She should have let him die, but she hadn't. There wasn't any meanness in her, just that special, magical heat that she refused to share with him. She was still a little afraid of him; she didn't know how good he could make it for her, and he would, he knew the sensual capability of her body much better than she did. He imagined her inner tightness and warmth, and how her little sheath would clench and shiver around him in climax, and he almost moaned aloud.

He was sweating, and his heart was pounding. His erection throbbed. "Annie." His voice was low and strained. He moved his hand across her bare belly to grip the curve of her hip. "Turn over, sweetheart."

Her eyes half opened and she murmured sleepily but turned in his arms, urged on by his hand. He reached down and lifted her right thigh over his hip, opening the notch of her legs and bringing her full against him. He pressed his sex boldly against the soft folds thus exposed to him, and sought her mouth with his.

The pleasure was overwhelming. Annie almost drowned beneath it, sleep-dulled reason slipping away from her. He was touching her between her legs, touching her with something thick and hot and smooth, and he was kissing her so deeply she could hardly breathe. The shift slipped downward from her shoulder and his hand closed over her breast, cupping and kneading, his rough thumb rasping across her tender nipple and setting it on fire. Blindly she caught at his shoulders, her fingers digging into the sleek, heavy muscles. He angled his hips inward, and the thick shaft between her legs pressed urgently against her. It was his penis, she thought dimly, her mind drugged with both sleep and pleasure, but surely it was too big. She hadn't expected it to be that big. He pulled her leg higher and suddenly the pressure was more intense and instinctively she tried to draw back. He halted the movement, his hard hand clenching on her bare buttock, and he groaned aloud. "Annie!"

Her soft flesh was yielding to that dominant pressure and her eyes flew open as real pain threatened. She convulsed, fighting and twisting, sobbing with the abrupt and terrifying realization of what was really happening. Rafe tried to catch her thrashing legs and Annie threw herself from the crude bed, landing on her hands and knees beside it. Her shift was hanging off her shoulder, baring one breast, and the hem of it was twisted around her

waist. Frantically she tugged at it, trying to cover her hips and breast. Dry sobs shook her as she stared at him. She didn't dare take her eyes off him.
"God damn it!" Rafe rolled onto his back with a gutteral curse, his hands clenched as he tried to control both his loins and the almost unbearable need to have her back in his arms. His naked shaft thrust into the air, so painfully swollen he thought he might explode at any second. And there was Annie, on her hands and knees on the rough planks, her hair falling in her face and her entire body shaking with sobs, but her eyes were dry, and she was staring at his loins with unconcealed terror and confusion.
Gingerly he pulled up his pants and with some difficulty got to his feet. Annie whimpered and shifted away from him. Swearing again, the curses almost soundless as he forced them between his clenched teeth, he leaned down and grabbed up both his gun belt and rifle. He could barely stand to glance at her cowering, shaking form. "Put on your clothes," he barked, and slammed violently out of the cabin.
The cold bit into his overheated flesh. He was half naked, without shirt or boots, and steam rose off of his chest. He welcomed the cold, needing ease from the fever that burned him alive, far worse than the fever from his wounds had been.
He leaned against a tree in the darkness, the cold, rough bark scraping his back. Dear God, had he nearly raped her? He had awakened already aroused, and she had been soft and nearly naked in his arms, and he hadn't had any other thought in his mind except taking her. She had responded at first, he knew she had; he'd felt her hands clutching him, felt the answering pressure of her hips, but something had frightened her and she had panicked. For one savage moment he hadn't cared that she was frightened, that she had begun fighting him; he had been on the verge of penetration and blind instinct had been driving him. He'd never forced a woman in his life, but he'd come damn close to it with Annie.
He didn't dare go back in there. Not like this, not with lust raging through him like a ruthless fever, demanding release. He couldn't lie beside her and not take her.
He swore long and inventively, the vicious stream of words slicing through the blackness. The cold was like a knife on his bare flesh; he'd freeze to death out here.
He knew what he had to do but he didn't like it. He jerked his pants open and closed his fist around his straining shaft. His eyes closed, and his

shoulders ground against the bark of the tree. Curses jerked from between his tightly ground teeth, but finally he found, if not pleasure, at least a definite relief, and a necessary one before he could go back inside.
The cold was rapidly becoming unbearable. He straightened away from the tree and went back to the cabin. His face was unreadable as he closed the door with icy control.
Annie stood rigidly by the fireplace. She was still barefoot, though she had gratefully obeyed his last order and scrambled into her clothing so hastily she had torn one of the tapes on her petticoat. She tried to control her breathing, but it shuddered in and out of her lungs.
She clutched his big knife in her right hand.
Rafe saw it immediately, and something flared in his pale eyes. He moved across the cabin like an attacking panther, Annie cried out and lifted the knife, but she had barely begun to move when he caught her wrist and twisted it, and the heavy weapon clattered across the floor.
He didn't release her wrist and didn't retrieve the knife. He just stared down at her, seeing the panic in her wide dark eyes.
"You're safe," he said harshly. "I'm not a rapist. Do you understand me? I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe."
She didn't answer. He let her go and grabbed up his shirt, pulling it on over his head. He was shivering, and even the relative warmth of the cabin wasn't enough. He added more wood to the fire, making it blaze brightly, then caught her wrist and pulled her down to sit beside him on the floor. His face was grim. "We're going to talk about it."
She shook her head in a quick negative movement, then glanced away.
"We have to, or neither one of us will be able to sleep tonight."
Her gaze strayed toward the rumpled bed, then darted away. "No."
He didn't know if she was agreeing with his assessment or rejecting the very thought of lying down with him again.
Deliberately he released her and braced himself on his right hand, drawing his left knee up and letting his wrist dangle over it. He could sense her acute attention to every move he made, even though she wasn't looking directly at him, and she let herself relax a little as his casual posture reassured her.
"I had dozed off," he said, keeping his voice low and even. "When I woke up I was hard, and half asleep. I just reached out and pulled you to me without thinking. Then by the time I woke up, I wasn't thinking about anything except getting inside of you. I was on the edge. Do you understand

what I'm saying?" he demanded, putting his finger under her chin and forcing her to look at him. "I was almost ready to climax. I was that hungry for you, sweetheart."
She didn't want to hear his endearments, but the gentleness in that last word almost undid her. The expression in his gray eyes was piercing, turbulent.
"I won't rape you," he continued. "Things wouldn't have gone as far as they did if I'd been good awake. But you were responding to me, damn it. Look at me!" His voice cracked like a whip as her eyes shifted uneasily away. She swallowed and returned her gaze to meet his.
"You wanted me too, Annie. It wasn't all on my part."
Honesty was a burdensome thing, she found, a goad that wouldn't let her take refuge behind lies. It would be better if she could keep such knowledge to herself, but he deserved the truth. "Yes," she admitted raggedly. "I wanted you."
An expression of combined bewilderment and frustration crossed his face. "Then what happened? What scared you?"
She bit her lip and looked away, and this time he permitted it. She struggled with how much to tell him and how to phrase it. Her thoughts were shattered by the enormity of what she had just admitted to him, and the power of the weapon it gave him. Had he been a little slower, a little more careful—had he been awake—he would likely have accomplished her seduction, and now he had to know that was all that was required for success, for she had confessed her vulnerability.
"What happened?" he prompted.
"It hurt."
His face softened and a little smile curled his mouth. "I'm sorry," he murmured, reaching out to brush her hair back from her face. He smoothed the strand over her shoulder, his touch lingering, caressing. "I know it's your first time, honey. I should have been more careful."
"I think it would have to hurt under any circumstances." She bent her head on her drawn-up knees. "I treated one of the prostitutes in Silver Mesa once. She had been brutalized by one of her customers. I couldn't help remembering."
It occurred to Rafe that an inexperienced woman whose exposure to sex had been limited to the seamier, rougher aspects of it could be excused for being wary of the act. "It wouldn't be like that. I won't lie to you and tell you it won't hurt, because it probably will, but any man who would deliberately

tear a woman apart like that is a bastard and should be shot. I'll take it easy with you," he promised. With a shiver she realized that to him the outcome wasn't in any doubt. He had taken note of the weakness she had exposed and doubtless planned to take full advantage of it. If he got her back on that bed… She couldn't allow it to happen.

"Please," she said. "Just take me back to Silver Mesa without doing that. Take me back untouched. I have to live with myself. If you have any mercy at all—"

"I don't," he interrupted. "You won't wake up branded. For a little while we'll be as close as two people can get, and I swear I'll make it good for you. Then I'll get out of your life and you'll go on as before."

"And what if I ever want to get married?" she challenged. "I know it's unlikely, but it isn't impossible. What would I tell my husband?"

Rafe's hand fisted with a deep-burning rage at the thought of some other man having the right to touch her, make love to her. "Tell him you rode horses astride," he said roughly.

She blushed, her face turning fiery red. "I do. But I won't lie to the man I've married. I'd have to tell him that I'd given myself to a killer."

The words hovered between them, as sharp-edged as a razor. Rafe's face went cold, and he got to his feet. "Get in the bed. I'm not going to stay awake all night because you're a coward."

Annie regretted her last sentence, but arousing his anger had been the only defense she could find. Her virginal fear hadn't been any protection at all, against either him or herself; he had known it, and had been slowly wearing her down. Only her shock, combined with the threat of pain, had enabled her to fend off his seduction the first time. When he had returned to the cabin she had been in despair that she would give in to him when next he touched her, he had mistaken the cause and labeled it fear, but she could still feel the throbbing need he had aroused deep inside her, and she knew better.

At her hesitation, he leaned down and grabbed her arm, then hauled her to her feet. Quickly she put up her hands to ward him off. "At least let me keep on my clothes! Please, Rafe. Don't make me take them off."

He wanted to shake her and tell her that a pair of cotton drawers wouldn't protect her from him if he decided to take her. But maybe his unruly loins would behave better if she was encased in cloth, if he couldn't feel her soft skin against him. "Lie down," he snapped.

Gratefully she crawled between the blankets, and curled up on her side away from him.

Rafe lay down and stared at the shadowed ceiling. She thought of him as a killer. A lot of other people did too, and there was a huge price on his head. Hell, yes, he'd killed; he'd long ago lost count of how many men had fallen from lead he'd put into them, way before he'd started running for his life, but that had been war. The men he'd killed since then had all been after him, and when given the choice between the other man's life and his own the other man had always come up a distant second.

He wasn't an upstanding citizen, the type a woman could dream about marrying and settling down with. Since he'd been on the run he had lied, stolen, and killed, and would do so again if necessary. His future looked pretty damn grim, even if he did manage to stay ahead of the law. He had kidnapped Annie and dragged her up here into these mountains, scaring her half to death. Looking at it like that, why would any woman want to bed down with him? Why should it sting so bad that she had hurled the word "killer" in his face?

Because it was Annie. Because he wanted her with every bone, every ounce of blood in his body.

Annie lay awake too, long after the fire had burned down, long after she had finally felt his tense body relax and his breathing deepen with sleep. She stared into the darkness with dry, burning eyes.

She had to get away. She had thought she could resist him, and protect herself, for another few days, but now she knew that even one more day would be too long. The only safeguard around her heart now was the fact that she hadn't fully belonged to him; once he took her, the heated intimacy would erode even that feeble shield. She didn't want to love him. She wanted to pick up the threads of her life where they had fallen, and find everything unchanged.

But if he took away that last tiny protection, nothing would be the same. She would go back to Silver Mesa, and she would spend long days trying to heal the sick and wounded, but inside she would be nothing but raw pain. She would never see him again, never know if he was safe and unharmed, or if the law had finally caught up with him and he had ended his life on a gallows with a noose around his neck. He might lie dead of a bullet wound, unburied and unmourned, while she spent her life waiting to hear from him, eagerly looking at every tired and dirty stranger who rode into town before

turning away in disappointment when it wasn't him. It would never be him, and she wouldn't know it.
If she stayed, if she succumbed to the weakness, the fever of desire in her, she might bear his child. She would have to leave Silver Mesa, find some other place where she could practice medicine, and she would have to pretend to be a widow so her child, his child, wouldn't bear the stigma of illegitimacy. Even if Rafe did survive and come looking for her, he wouldn't find her because she would have left town and changed her name.
She had thrown all sorts of excuses at him, all except the real one, that she didn't want to love him. She was afraid to love him. He had been more right than he knew when he had called her a coward.
So she had to leave. She was too terrified to sleep, for if she dared close her eyes she wouldn't awaken until it was too late, and she wouldn't have another chance to get away.
She made herself wait, to minimize the length of time she would have to travel in the cold and darkness. She would try to leave about half an hour before dawn, when Rafe should be sleeping the soundest.
She tried not to let herself think of the dangers, for she didn't know how to get back to Silver Mesa. Had she been less desperate, she would never even have considered leaving on her own. All she knew was that he had headed west out of Silver Mesa, so she would go east. Should she get lost, and she knew she would, all she had to do was keep traveling east and she would eventually get out of the mountains. She would have to travel without a weapon, and would have to leave her big medical bag behind; the thought of it wrung her heart, but she accepted its loss. The instruments and medicines and herbs it carried could be replaced.
She caught herself dozing and forced her eyes to open.
How long had it been? She had lost all sense of time. She panicked, then realized that she would have to leave now or take the risk of staying too long. It might be the middle of the night rather than close to dawn, but she had to take the chance.
With excruciating care she inched away from him, pausing for a long time between each movement. He slept on, undisturbed. It seemed to take an hour, but was probably only about fifteen minutes before she had maneuvered herself off the pine-needle bed and crouched on the floor. The chill went through her bare feet. Dismayed at the delay, she nevertheless took the time to crawl over to the fireplace and feel around in the dark until

she found her shoes and stockings. It wouldn't do her any good to lose her toes to frostbite.
She only hoped it would soon be daylight and grow warmer, for she didn't dare get her coat. It was lying close by his head, and his rifle was lying across it. There was no way she could get it without awakening him.
The most difficult part was getting the door open. She eased to her feet and groped for the roughly whittled handle.
Her chest was so tight with anxiety that she could barely breathe. She closed her eyes and prayed as she pulled the door open with agonizing care, cold sweat dripping down her spine as she waited in terror for a scrape, a creak, a noise that would bring him up from the blankets with that big pistol in his hand.
The cold air rushing in was bitter and stung her eyes. Dear God, she hadn't expected it to be this bad.
Finally she had the door open enough that she could squeeze through, and then she faced the equally difficult task of closing it without disturbing him. A freezing wind blew through the trees, rattling the naked limbs like the bones of a skeleton, but except for that the night was utterly silent.
She almost sobbed aloud with relief when the door finally rested in its frame again. There was a faint lightening of the sky overhead that made her think she had estimated the time right, after all, and dawn was only a few moments away.
Picking her way in the dark so she wouldn't stumble, she made it to the horse shed. She was already shuddering convulsively with the cold by the time she opened the door. Her gelding, roused from a doze, recognized her scent and blew a soft welcome that wakened Rafe's bay stallion. Both animals turned toward her with curious snorts.
It was warmer in the horse shed, almost comfortable with the heat given off by their great bodies. Too late she remembered that her saddle, like Rafe's, was in the cabin, and tears stung her eyes as she leaned her head against the gelding's side. It didn't matter. She tried to tell herself that it truly didn't matter, that she rode well enough to make it bareback. Under normal circumstances she wouldn't have had any trouble, but these circumstances were far from normal. It was cold and dark, and she didn't know where she was going.
At least he'd left the saddle blankets on the animals to help them ward off the cold. Going strictly by feel, and murmuring softly to the gelding to keep

it calm, she slipped the bridle and bit in place. He took the bit easily and stood still under her soothing hands. As quietly as possible she led the gelding out of the shed and closed the door behind her. The stallion blew a protest at losing his companion.
She paused in indecision. Should she mount the horse now or lead him until there was enough light to see? She would feel safer on his back, but horses didn't see all that well in the dark and often depended on the rider to know where they were going. She would be totally lost if the gelding stumbled and came up lame, so she decided to lead him.
The cold was almost paralyzing. She leaned closer to the animal's heat as she led him slowly away from the cabin.
A hard arm swept around her waist and lifted her off her feet. Annie screamed; the sound was high and shrill and was abruptly smothered by a big hand covering her mouth. The gelding shied, startled by her scream, and the reins in her hand were suddenly tugged hard. The hand left her mouth to grab at the bridle, pulling the horse down and calming him. "You goddamned little fool," Rafe said in a low, harsh voice.
After returning the horse to the shed, he carried her into the cabin as if she were a sack of flour slung under his arm and roughly deposited her on the blankets. Swearing steadily under his breath, he stirred up the fire and threw wood on. Annie couldn't stop shaking. She huddled on the blankets, her arms wrapped around her torso and her teeth chattering.
Suddenly his control broke. He flung a stick of wood across the cabin and wheeled on her. "What's wrong with you?" he roared. "Would you rather die than have me inside you? It'd be different if you didn't want me, but you do. Tell me you don't want me, by God, and I'll leave you alone. Do you hear me? Tell me you don't want me!"
She couldn't. She flinched from his rage, but she was too numb with despair to manage a lie. All she could do was helplessly shake her head, and shiver.
He stood over her huddled body, his tall frame blotting out the fire. His broad chest was heaving like a blacksmith's bellows. With a violence born of frustration he pulled off his coat and threw it, too. Annie noticed that he was completely dressed, which meant that he had been aware she had gone from the moment she had crept out the door, otherwise he wouldn't have had time to have dressed. She hadn't had a chance to escape.
"It's the middle of the night and you didn't even take a coat." His voice was harsh with restrained violence. "You'd have been dead within a couple of

hours."
She lifted her head. Her eyes were dark pools of despair. "Isn't it nearly dawn?"
"Hell, no, it isn't dawn! It's about two in the morning. It doesn't make any difference what time it is, daylight or dark, you'd have died out there. Can't you tell how much colder it is? It's going to snow, probably by morning. You'd never have made it out of the mountains."
She thought of being alone out there for hours, unable to see, getting colder by the minute. As short a time as she had been outside, she still felt frozen to the bone. She probably wouldn't have lived even until morning.
Rafe squatted down in front of her and she had to fight the urge to draw back. His pale eyes were savage in expression. His voice dropped until it was an almost soundless rasp. "Were you so afraid I'd rape you that you'd rather die?"
Shock rippled down her spine. He had saved her life. She stared at him as if she had never seen him before, her eyes searching out each detail of his face. It was a hard, uncompromising face, the face of a man who had nothing to lose, a man who lacked everything that by her standards was needed to make life worthwhile. He had no home, no friends, nothing good or warm or secure. If she had frozen to death it would have been less trouble for him, more food for him, yet he had come after her, and it wasn't because he had feared she would make it back to Silver Mesa and tell someone—who?—where he was. He had known she wouldn't make it. He had brought her back because he didn't want her to die.
In that silent instant she felt her last fragile defense crumble into dust. Hesitantly she reached out and placed her cold hand on his face. His beard rasped against her sensitive palm. "No," she whispered. "I was afraid that you wouldn't have to."
The expression in his eyes changed, became more intent, as he registered her meaning.
"It was a losing battle against myself," she continued. "I've always thought of myself as a virtuous woman, with standards and ideals, but how can I be virtuous if I feel such shocking things?"
"How could you be a woman," he countered, "if you didn't?"
She looked at him with a tiny smile on her lips. That was the heart of the matter, she supposed. She had devoted her entire life to being a doctor, to the exclusion of everything else, including the normal female roles of wife

and mother. Despite the arguments she had used earlier, she doubted she would ever marry, for she would never give up her work and she doubted any man would want a wife who was a doctor. Now she was finding, to her astonishment, that her body had desires of its own, very womanly desires. She took a deep breath to steady herself. If she took the forbidden step she would have turned a corner in her life, and there would be no going back. The truth was there had been no going back from the moment she had felt her resistance dissolve. She faced the truth that she was already half in love with him, for good or ill. Perhaps she loved him completely; she was inexperienced in these matters and couldn't say for certain exactly what she was feeling, only that she wanted to be a woman, his woman.

"Rafe," she said in a small, scared voice, "would you please make love to me?"

CHAPTER 8

She could see his pupils expand until the black nearly eclipsed the pale crystal irises. His mouth tightened and for a moment she thought he was going to refuse. Then he put his hands on her shoulders and gently forced her to lie down on the tangled blankets. Her heart was pounding so forcefully against her ribs that she found it difficult to breathe. Even though she had given him permission, indeed, had asked him to do this, she found that it wasn't easy to relinquish the control over and privacy of her body. Moreover, from the size of his sexual organ as she had seen it earlier, she expected the denouement to be uncomfortable at the least. She didn't think she could gladly embrace pain.

Rafe saw the tension in her white face, but he wasn't capable of doing anything to relieve it. From the moment she had spoken his attention had focused on possessing her. He was painfully hard, his loins heavy and tight. If it hadn't been for the earlier episode outside he thought he would probably climax even before entering her, and even so his sexual control, so customary that he took it for granted, felt almost nonexistent.

He forced himself to concentrate on not ripping her clothes off, and that was all he was capable of doing. Just one thing at a time. If he tried to do more, it would shatter the precarious control he maintained on his body. He focused in turn on each button on her blouse, the waistband of her skirt, the tapes of her petticoat.

By the time he had stripped her down to her drawers and white cotton stockings, his hands were shaking and it was all he could do to keep from groaning out loud. He removed the drawers and did make a low, animal sound. Her narrow body was soft and white, her breasts so pretty and round he almost couldn't stand it, her slim thighs curving upward in sleek columns to a neat little patch of light brown hair. He stood up and threw off his own clothing, his eyes never leaving the apex of her tightly clenched legs.

Even though she had asked him for this he knew she had to be frightened, never having done it before, but he couldn't find either the words or the patience to reassure her. He pried her knees apart and mounted her, using his muscled thighs to force her legs wide open. She gave a thin, startled cry as his shaft butted hard against her tender cleft.

Rafe felt her trembling beneath him. It cost him pain, effort, and sweat to refrain from shoving himself into her, but he held on. He touched her chin,

and her fearful dark gaze met his. "It's going to hurt," he said grimly.
"I know." Her voice was a mere thread of sound.
"I won't be able to stop."
She knew that, could feel the straining desperation of his body, see it in his eyes. "I… I don't want you to."
He was lost, drowning, as the last shred of control unraveled. The wonderful, heated energy of her was pouring into him all along their naked bodies and he couldn't think, couldn't talk. He thought he heard her say, "Rafe?" but there was a roaring in his ears that was growing louder and almost blocked out everything else, and he wasn't certain she had spoken. He was gripped by the primitive need to possess, to brand her as his with the seal of flesh. He couldn't wait a second longer. He reached between her legs and opened the soft folds, then guided the head of his shaft to the exposed little opening and pushed inward, squeezing himself inside. He was aware of the resistance of her small virginal channel as he stretched it, felt the fragile barrier of her maidenhead as it gave way beneath his onslaught, then he was lodged deep inside her and the ecstasy was as strong and strangely wonderful as he had known it would be, a tingling heat that spread throughout his genitals like wildfire and made him feel as if he would explode, before traveling on to every nerve ending in his body.
He slid his hands under her buttocks and lifted her up as he began thrusting. He clenched his teeth at the difficulty of it, for she was very tight, her flesh resisting him. Oh, damn, damn, it was over too soon, but he couldn't stop it. His lower spine prickled and his testicles tightened almost unbearably, and with a gutteral cry he arched back as his seed erupted into her in an explosive climax that left him hollowed out and empty, sprawled on top of her without the strength to move.
Maybe he immediately drifted into an exhausted doze, or maybe he was dazed, but reality lost its sharp edge. He was acutely aware of Annie, of the female scent, texture, and shape of her soft body beneath him, while everything else around him lost its focus and meaning. Eventually he realized that he was crushing her, that the small, jerky movements of her chest meant she was struggling to breathe, and he managed to ease his weight onto his elbows. Sweat ran into his eyes, stinging them, and he became aware then of the burning wood snapping in the fireplace, of the heat on his naked skin. He became aware, also, of her desperate silence and the stark pain mirrored in her eyes as she stared, unblinking, at the ceiling.

He didn't have to be a mind reader to know that he had hurt her, and that she would resist going through the experience again. Regretfully he eased out of her body with a comforting murmur which she appeared not to hear. Since she had been a virgin, she had no idea of the pleasure the act could give, but thank God he was far more experienced and knew how to both reassure her and give her the delight she deserved.

He washed himself, a pang hitting his heart when he saw her blood on his flesh. Damn, why couldn't he have controlled himself better? He'd never been that aroused before, so frenzied that he couldn't stop. It embarrassed him, and at the same time the excitement of it made his heart thunder in his chest. He was already impatient to take her again, to feel the ecstasy of her heat tingling all through him. He wet the cloth again and went back to go down on one knee beside her.

Annie had flinched when he had withdrawn from her; part of her had simply been grateful that it was over, but part of her wanted to scream and beat him with her fists. She felt battered and too weak to move. The private area between her legs throbbed, and she ached inside. She didn't want him to ever touch her again.

Had the promise of physical pleasure been nothing more than a chimera designed by nature to draw women into the mating process? She felt cheated and ashamed. She didn't think she would ever forget the shock of nakedness, both hers and his, or the way her entire body had jolted when she had felt his shaft pressing inexorably into her. The pain had been acute, jabbing deep within; the sense of invasion had been almost unbearable. Yet she hadn't tried to push him away, because he had said he might do this; some dim sense of honor had made her endure in silence, with her teeth clenched against the pain and her hands gripping the blanket.

She felt his hands on her legs and instinctively closed them together, protecting herself from another invasion.

"I'm just going to clean you up, honey," he said in a soothing tone. "C'mon, darlin', let me take care of you."

She bit her lip, oddly disturbed by some other note she could hear in his voice. The "darlin'" had been more pronouncedly southern than his usual accent, and underlaid with a possessiveness that hadn't been there before. His strong hands were opening her legs and she tried to bolt upright, flushing with shame at her exposure. She saw the streaks of blood and

semen on her thighs and thought she would die of mortification. "I'll do it," she said hoarsely, reaching for the cloth.
He caught her shoulders and forced her down on the blankets. "Lie still. This is one case, Doc, that I know more about than you do."
She closed her eyes, resigned to having to endure yet again. He spread her legs and gently but thoroughly washed between them. "Do you have any slippery-elm ointment?"
Her eyes sprang open as she realized he had opened her medical bag and was rummaging through it. "What?"
"Slippery-elm ointment. We used it during the war," he said.
She had to struggle to keep from slapping his hands away from her precious bag. "In the dark blue jar, in the bottom of the bag, right corner."
He brought out the small jar, opened it, and sniffed. "That's it." He dipped his finger into it and came out with a liberal amount. Before she knew what he was about he slid his hand between her legs and his finger slipped into her sore passageway, eased by the slickness of the ointment. Her body jerked and she grabbed his wrist with both hands, trying to force his hand away from her body. Her face burned with embarrassment.
"Easy," he murmured, ignoring her ineffectual struggles. He put his other arm around her and held her against him while his finger worked deep in her tender body. "Stop fighting, honey; you know this'll make you real better."
She did, but she didn't want his attention, or his concern. She wanted to nurse her bitter anger. Annie had never felt petty before, but she did now and was loath to relinquish her grudge.
Finally he withdrew his hand and once more eased her down and drew the blanket up over her. She drew a shaky breath at the relief of having her nakedness shielded, and closed her eyes rather than watch him as he moved around the cabin. Why didn't he put on some clothes? she wondered violently, and thought about putting on her own clothing. Only the idea of leaving the protection of the blanket to do it kept her where she was.
She stiffened when he got under the blanket with her but left her protest unspoken. The only alternative to sharing their body heat was for each to take a blanket and roll up in it, which wasn't as efficient. Remembering how cold it had been outside, she knew that the cabin was going to be much colder than usual in the morning and they would need all the heat they could muster. That didn't, however, mean that she liked it.

Rafe put his arm under her head and rolled her into his embrace. She resisted, her hands pushing against him. He nuzzled his lips against her hair. "Would you like to slap me?"
She swallowed hard. "Yes."
"Would you feel better if you did?"
She thought about it, and finally said, "No. I just want you to leave me alone."
The despair in her voice made his heart catch a little, even though he knew the remedy. "It won't hurt like that again, darlin'."
She didn't answer, and with sudden intuition he knew she was thinking that she wouldn't take the chance, that as far as she was concerned her first time had been her last. Very gently, because gentleness was what she needed now, he cupped her chin and turned her face up, and his kiss on her mouth was as light as a breeze.
"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I should have gone a lot slower, but I lost control." He should have had plenty of control, but almost from the first he had known that making love to Annie wouldn't be like having any other woman. She was unique, and so was his response to her. There wasn't any way he could explain it to her without sounding crazy, because he would swear she didn't know about or would understand the strange, heated ecstasy of her touch. When he had entered her, the sensation had been so intense that he had thought his entire body would explode. Just the memory of it now was enough to make his loins tighten with beginning arousal.
"So did I," she replied dully. "I lost control of my common sense."
"Annie, darlin'," he began, then paused, for he couldn't think of any words that would comfort her. She had been both hurt and disappointed; he couldn't demonstrate to her just yet that it wouldn't be painful again, but it was time to take care of that disappointment rather than try to soothe her first.
He kissed her again, keeping the contact warm and gentle. She didn't open her mouth to him, but he hadn't expected her to yet and he wasn't ready to force her response. He kissed her again and again, not just on the lips but on her cheeks, her temples, her eyes, the tender underside of her chin. He whispered how pretty he thought she was, how he loved to take her hair down, how soft and silky her skin was. Despite herself she listened, and he felt some of the tension ease out of her body.

Very gently he slid his hand over her breast, kneading with a slow, hypnotic motion. She tensed again, but he kept up the tender, distracting kisses and lover's whispers until she softened against him once more. Only then did he rasp his callused thumb over and around her exquisitely sensitive little nipple, feeling it instantly tighten and thrust upward. She shivered, then went very still in his arms. Was it fear, he wondered, or was she feeling the first lash of arousal? He fondled the satiny mound, then slid his hand to her other breast and caressed it to the same ripe turgidity. Annie was still holding herself almost motionless, but he was so attuned to her that he heard her breathing change to swift, shallow little gasps.

Now he set his mouth on hers with sensual determination, and after a moment's hesitation she yielded, her lips softly parting and allowing him entry. He took it with discretion; rather than simply thrusting his tongue inside her mouth he used light caressing strokes that gradually penetrated until he was taking her mouth with the deep, arousing kisses that both of them needed. His own breathing grew ragged but he firmly clamped down on his response. No matter what it cost him, this time was purely hers. He was abruptly terrified that if he wasn't able to show her the pleasure she might turn away from him forever, and he didn't think he could bear it.

The changes in her body were small but delicious. He felt the increased pliancy of her flesh, the way her skin grew warmer and more moist. Her heart was beating a light tattoo that throbbed against his palm as he continued to stroke her breasts. Her nipples felt like ripe berries rolling between his fingers, and suddenly he was overwhelmed by the need to taste her, to draw her nipple deep into his mouth. He had taken her, but he hadn't made love to her, and he wanted all of the intimacies there could be between a man and his woman. And she was his, he thought fiercely. Every soft inch of her.

Her arms curled around his shoulders, and her fingers stroked his neck before sliding into his hair. Heat flowed through him and his shaft hardened into a full erection. If her hesitant response had that kind of effect on him, he wondered if he'd be able to survive if she were fully aroused. He couldn't think of a better way to die.

He arched her back across his arm and trailed his kisses down her throat. He paused to feel the wild flutter of her pulse in the small hollow at the base, pressing his tongue against the translucent skin. From there his mouth followed the fragile arch of her collarbone, which led him to the sensitive

joining of shoulder and neck. He heard the low, vibrant murmur she made and a thrill ran over his skin, roughening it.
He couldn't deny the temptation any longer. He tossed the blanket back and bent his head to her breast, circling her nipple with his tongue, making it tightly bud, before drawing it into his mouth with a strong, uncomplicated suckling. The taste of her was intoxicating, as hot and sweet as wild honey, and she was crying out, sharp, breathless sounds of pleasure. Her slender body twisted against him, and he slid his hand between her legs.
Annie cried out again, a sound of helpless desire. A small voice of reason wailed in despair, but the inner protest was useless against the whirlpool of desire he had set spinning inside her, drawing her further and further into the dark vortex. She felt on fire, her entire body flushed, her breasts aching from his gentle torture. It was torture, she was sure of it, for why else would he be driving her, under the fierce lash of increasing pleasure, to the point of madness where she begged him to take her again in an act that had given her only pain and remorse? The worst of it was that she had no defense, no weapons with which to fight him. He had lulled her with gentle kisses, tamed her to accept his touch on her breast, and then used the pleasures of her own body against her. She had dimly realized it when he had begun kissing her with those deep, drugging, violently possessive kisses, but already it had been too late for her. When his mouth had closed on her breast in that shocking way she hadn't been able to resist, had even reveled in the heated intimacy of it.
He was touching her private flesh now in a way he hadn't done before, slowly circling his rough fingertip around the small nub at the top of her sex, and she would have screamed if she'd had enough breath. Wildfire leaped through her as her entire being seemed to focus in that single spot. She could feel her legs stretching indecently wide, feel the tiny nubbin throb and strain as if begging for each touch. It was agony, and his finger circled maddeningly, both easing the tension and making it worse. Then he pressed his thumb down on her, almost roughly, while with a butterfly touch of his middle finger he rimmed the soft, sore entrance to her body. She flinched, but felt her hips begin to slowly rock, and she couldn't stop the motion or the wild sounds coming from her throat. It was too much, with his mouth on her breast and his hand between her legs and a river of heated sensation flooding through her.

Then his mouth left her breast and slid slowly, maddeningly down her belly. His hand shifted to her thigh and opened her legs even more, and before she even had an inkling about his intentions his mouth was hot on her exposed female flesh. She went rigid from an unbearable surge of pleasure, her mind emptied of thought or reason, or even shock. He put his hand under her buttocks and lifted her up to give himself better access, and his tongue swirled and licked and stabbed her with fire.

She heard herself sobbing. She felt his warm hair brush against her thighs in a silky caress. She felt the rough texture of the blanket beneath her, the heat from the fireplace dancing on her bare skin. She still tasted his lips. She existed only through her senses, a purely physical being, and he controlled her.

She was dying. She felt her consciousness fading until the only awareness left to her was of his ravaging mouth, lips and teeth and tongue killing her with such sweet torment. Her entire body clenched unbearably, the tension coiling tighter and tighter, the heat engulfing her. She couldn't breathe, and her heart was pounding so fast it was sure to explode. A high, thin cry pierced the silence, a cry for mercy, but he had none. Deliberately he pushed one of his big fingers into her, and the nerve endings in her painfully sensitive opening rioted at the sensation of being invaded. The hot coil of tension pulled even tighter and abruptly snapped. She heard herself screaming, but those hoarse cries didn't sound like her voice. Great waves of sensation flooded through her, wiping out everything in their path and totally consuming her. He held her surging body down and his mouth pressed hard to her, and gradually the tidal waves subsided into gently swirling eddies that caught her unawares with an occasional throb of pleasure.

She was too limp, too exhausted to move. Her eyelashes lay heavily on her cheeks, and she couldn't lift them. Her heartbeat slowed and her thought processes resumed, but they were oddly chaotic.

She didn't know what to think. What he had just done to her, given to her, had been outside her realm of imagination. She had known the basic facts of sex, of penetration and his release of semen, but she hadn't realized any of… this existed, or was even possible. The things he had done, the way she had felt… Had that been the way he had felt, when he had been thrusting inside her and had suddenly stiffened and given that deep, gutteral cry? He

had lain atop her afterward as if he had been utterly exhausted, as if he had no energy to move.
He lay down beside her and took her in his arms, then pulled the blanket over them. Her head was nestled on his shoulder, their naked bodies pressed intimately together. His muscled thigh pushed between hers and she sighed as the movement forced her quivering muscles to relax from their vain effort to hold herself from him.
His mouth brushed her temple, and his big hand stroked her back and buttocks. "Go to sleep, darlin'," he murmured, and she did.

CHAPTER 9

He rolled out of the blankets and Annie lifted her heavy eyelids, desperately needing a few more hours of sleep for, after all, she had been awake most of the night. "Is it morning?" she asked, hoping that it wasn't. Without his warmth beside her, the cold crept through the blanket and made her shiver.
"Yeah."
She wondered how he could tell, when it was as dark as night inside the cabin with the door closed and the window coverings down. She could barely make out the outline of his form in the dull glow of the coals in the fireplace. For a moment she wondered why the coals hadn't been banked, then memory crashed through her and she not only remembered why the fire had been rebuilt during the night, she remembered why she hadn't been able to get much sleep. Rafe's tall body was totally naked, as was hers. She huddled under the blanket, feeling the stiffness in her thighs and the tenderness between her legs. She remembered everything he had done to her, and the blinding upheaval of her senses, and she wished she could remain hidden beneath the blanket for the rest of her life. How could she possibly carry on as normal, when every time she looked at him she would remember the shattering intimacy of the night? He had seen her naked and exposed his own body to her, he had penetrated her, suckled at her breast and—dear God —he had put his mouth on her in the most shocking way possible. She didn't think she could face him at all.
He added wood to the fire, and as the flames leaped up she was able to see him more clearly. She hurriedly closed her eyes, but not before the image of his naked, muscular frame was imprinted on her consciousness.

"C'mon, honey, get up."
"In a minute. It's too cold right now."
She heard the rustle of his clothing as he dressed, then silence for a moment. Her skin prickled with unease, and she quickly opened her eyes. She didn't know what she had expected to see, but it certainly wasn't Rafe holding her shift close to the fire, warming it. He turned both sides to the growing flames, chasing the chill from the fabric, then crushed it in his hands to hold the heat as he thrust it under the blanket. The toasty warm cloth felt heavenly against her skin. She stared at him, a little stunned, a little breathless, as he picked up her drawers to perform the courtesy again. She struggled into her shift with the blanket still shielding her, but her mind was no longer on the embarrassment of facing him, or even being nude in front of him. He slid the warm drawers under the blanket and immediately turned to her blouse, his expression absorbed as he held it out to the flames. Her heart surged painfully, and she almost burst into tears as she pulled on her undergarment. She had known terror at his hands, but he had also shown a rough sort of concern for her well-being. He had possessed her, hurt her, then cared for her afterward and taken her into the dark whirlpool of passion. Despite everything she had been half in love with him, but no longer. The unselfconscious care he took in warming her clothes for her took her unawares, and forever changed something fundamental in her. She felt the inner shifting and settling, and stared at him with dazed, stricken eyes, fully recognizing the moment for what it was. She loved him, irrevocably, and in doing so had undergone a sea change that had in a few seconds completely altered her life.
"Here you go." He brought the warmed blouse to her and she sat up, slipping her arms into the sleeves as he held it for her. He rubbed her arms and shoulders, then brushed her tangled hair out of her face. "I'm going to get a bucket of fresh water while you finish dressing."
He put on his coat and picked up the bucket. A frigid blast of air rushed in when he opened the door and Annie hugged the blanket around her, shivering. She couldn't believe how cold it was. If Rafe hadn't caught her last night, she would already be dead. The thought of it made her shiver even more.
She donned the rest of her clothes and was painstakingly working the tangles out of her hair when Rafe reentered with another freezing rush of

air. "Is it snowing?" she asked. She hadn't looked out either time he had opened the door, preferring to hide her face from the cold.
"Not yet, but it's as cold as a witch's tit." He squatted down and began making a pot of coffee.
She wondered how he could be so matter of fact after the night they had just spent, then a pang hit her as she realized he had made love to other women and none of that was new to him. She made herself face the fact that making love with her didn't necessarily mean he returned her feelings.
Suddenly he turned and hauled her into his arms, opening his coat and wrapping her inside the warmth with him. "Don't ever try to run from me again," he said fiercely, his raspy voice low.
She put her arms around his waist, taking care not to put pressure on his wounds. "No," she said in agreement, the words muffled against his chest.
He brushed his mouth over her hair. The thought that she might have been caught out in that bitter cold, without even a coat, made him want to simultaneously spank her and crush her against him. God, he'd come so close to losing her.
Her hands were gently wandering over his back, leaving a trail of glowing heat behind. His manhood stirred, and with faint disbelief he wondered if her effect on him would ever lessen or if her touch would always induce an immediate sexual reaction.
He cuddled her closer. "Are you all right?"
She knew what he was asking and her face heated. "I'm fine," she said gruffly.
He tilted her head back, his pale gray eyes sternly searching the dark liquid depths of hers. "You're not sore?"
Her blush deepened. "A little. Not as much as I'd expected." Of course, his treatment with the slippery-elm salve had done a lot to lessen her discomfort. The memory of how he had administered it to her made her squirm.
His thoughts were running with hers. "I should have seen to you before you got dressed." His voice deepened. "Do you need more salve?"
"No!"
"I think you do. Let me see."
"Rafe!" she wailed, her face so hot she thought it would catch fire.
A slow smile curved his mouth and wrinkled his eyes at her reaction to his teasing. "I'm going to look at you a lot, honey. If I hadn't been worried that

you'd be too sore, I'd have been on top of you before you were good awake this morning."
Her heart thumped in her chest and she stared up at him with wide eyes. Did she want him to do it again? Those things he had done to her afterward had been so marvelous she didn't know if she could survive another onslaught, but she was wary of the actual sex act. What if the next time was just as painful?
He frowned at her expression. "You did know," he said deliberately, "that last night wouldn't be the only time." His tone of voice made it a statement rather than a question.
She bit her lip. "Yes, I knew." The hard fact was that, if he wanted her, she would oblige and trust that it would grow easier. There was no going back, no returning to virginity, and despite everything she didn't want to. She was still dealing with the shock of realizing that she loved him, but she did love him and that meant giving herself to him.
He bent his head and kissed her, and his big hand covered her breast with unhesitating possessiveness. "I'm going to see to the horses and check the traps while you cook breakfast." He kissed her again and released her, setting his hat on his head as he turned toward the door.
"Wait!" Annie stared at him. Despite the way he had worked the day before, and the way he had made love to her, he had been very ill only a couple of days earlier. She didn't know that she wanted him to check the traps by himself.
He paused, giving her a questioning look.
She suddenly felt foolish, though she didn't know why. "Don't you want a cup of coffee first?"
He glanced at the fireplace. "It isn't ready."
"It will be soon. You need something hot inside you before you go out again. Wait until after breakfast and I'll go with you."
"Your coat isn't heavy enough for staying out in this kind of weather for that long."
"Wait until after breakfast anyway."
"Why? I can have it all taken care of by the time you've finished cooking."
She said in a rush, "Because I don't want you to check the traps by yourself."
He looked startled. "Why not?"

She put her hands on her hips, suddenly irritated with him beyond all reason. "Three days ago you were burning up with fever and could barely walk, that's why! I don't think you've recovered enough to tramp all over the mountains. What if you fall, or become too weak to get back?"
He grinned and grabbed her, kissing her hard. "That was three days ago," he said. "I'm fine now. You healed me."
He released her and left the cabin before she could stop him again. Probably she didn't know how true his statement was. Oh, her skill at doctoring had helped, what with her poultices and herb teas, the stitches and bandages and fussing concern, but she had healed him with the heat of her touch. He had felt the force of it moving through his body that first night. He didn't understand it, didn't know how to ask her about it, but he had no doubt that she could have healed him even without her store of knowledge.
He watered and fed the horses, then with a weather eye on the low, gray clouds he began checking the various snares he had arranged. A rabbit was in the third one, and he felt a surge of relief. A nice pot of rabbit stew would stretch out their meager food supplies. He still felt that snow was coming; it might be only a couple of inches, but it could be a couple of feet, keeping them inside at least while the snow was falling, and that could last several days. He thought of being stranded in the cabin with Annie and found himself smiling like an idiot. If their food situation was okay, he wouldn't mind that at all.
He knocked the rabbit in the head and reset the snare, then hurriedly checked the remainder of the traps, but the rabbit was the only yield. He chose a spot well away from the cabin to skin and dress the animal, then carried the carcass to the creek to wash it and remove the blood from his hands. Figuring breakfast should be just about ready, he gladly returned to the warmth of the cabin.
Annie whirled anxiously when he opened the door, but her expression relaxed when she saw that he was okay. Her gaze moved to the carcass in his hand. "Oh, good, you got a… whatever it is."
"Rabbit."
He shed his jacket and hat and gratefully took the cup of hot coffee she poured for him, sipping it while she cooked and dished up their simple breakfast. They sat down on the floor to eat and he put his hand on the nape of her neck, holding her for a hard, hungry kiss. When he released her she was pink and a little flustered. He wondered wryly how he had held off for

as long as he had, because he sure as hell couldn't keep his hands off her now.
They ate, and then Rafe helped her clean their few dishes. When he started out for more water he paused with the door open, despite the frigid air, and said, "Come look at the snow."
Hugging her arms against the cold, she went to stand beside him. Huge white flakes were swirling noiselessly downward. The forest was as silent as a cathedral. In the short time it had taken them to eat, the ground had become covered with white and still the snow drifted down in a ghostly dance. He put his arm around her and she let her head rest on his chest.
"You knew all day yesterday that it was going to snow," she said. "That's why you insisted on gathering so much wood and making the horses more comfortable."
She felt his steely muscles tense. "Yes."
"You're recovered enough, and had enough time. You could have taken me back to Silver Mesa."
Again he said, "Yes."
"Why didn't you?"
He was silent for a while, and they both watched the snow. Finally he spoke. "I couldn't let you go just yet." Then he took the bucket and walked through the snow to the creek.
Annie quickly shut the door and stood close to the fire, rubbing warmth back into her arms. / couldn't let you go just yet. She felt both sad and exhilarated, for by his words he still planned to return her to her home and ride away, just as she had feared would happen. And yet… no one else had ever thought she was special, except for her father, and he had naturally been prejudiced. When she had looked in the mirror she had seen a rather thin woman, past the first blush of youth, with tired but pleasant features. Her coloring was unremarkable, though sometimes she had been startled to see that her eyes could appear almost black, and dominate her face. She had certainly never before stirred anyone to passion.
But Rafe had looked at her with passion right from the beginning. She had felt it herself, though she had been too ignorant of the subject to recognize it for what it was. Rafe had known, though, and that was what had given his crystalline eyes such a dangerous glitter. He had wanted her then and he wanted her now with the same savage hunger, though he was restraining himself out of consideration for her.

By the time he returned from the creek she had busied herself cutting up the rabbit for stew. As a precaution he strung the rope from the cabin to the horse shed so he would be able to take care of the animals should the wind pick up and turn the silent snow into a blizzard. Then he brought in more wood. Since the cold prevented them from opening the window coverings it was dark in the cabin; the fire was the only illumination. Because of that, and because the bitter weather made the cabin colder than usual, he disregarded his normal caution and kept the fire high. No one was likely to brave the weather to investigate a curl of smoke even should one be visible in the white curtain of snow, which wasn't likely.

Annie added potatoes and onions to the stew, then opened her black bag and threw in pinches of various herbs. She had always found it convenient that so many of the cooking herbs, such as sage, rosemary, and tarragon, also had healing properties.

Rafe was carefully cleaning his weapons and checking his ammunition by the light of the fire, but nothing truly escaped his attention. He gave her proof of that when he asked, "How did you learn so much about plants? I doubt they taught it to you in medical school."

"Well, no. A lot of it is general knowledge, of course, and has been used for centuries in Europe. But some of the European plants can't be found here, so I had to find out which American plants were also useful. Old country people are the best ones to talk to, for they've had to do their own doctoring and they know what works and what doesn't."

"What got you so interested in it?"

She smiled. "I'm interested in anything that helps people get well," she said simply.

"Where do you get them?"

"Fields, flower gardens." She shrugged. "Some I grow myself, like mint and rosemary and thyme. Plantains are really just common weeds, but I can't get them out here. What I have left is what I brought with me from home. Aloe seems to work almost like plantains, but you need a fresh plant. I have several back in Silver Mesa."

She put the stew on to simmer and then looked fretfully around the dark cabin. "I don't know how long I'll be able to stand staying in the dark all day long. Now I know why people pay a fortune to have glass shipped out here."

"I have some candles," he reminded her.

She sighed. "But what if it snows for days? I doubt you have that many candles."
"No, just a few."
"Then we'd better save them."
He thought of all the various means of providing light he'd seen over the years. Oil lamps were best, of course, but they didn't have one. There were also pine-tar torches, but they smoked like a son of a bitch. The dimness didn't bother him, as it wasn't complete, but he'd learned both patience and endurance and his nerves were like iron. Annie, however, had probably never spent a day without sunlight, and it would understandably wear on her nerves.
Carefully, he put his weapons aside. "Maybe," he said, watching her with acute attention, "you need to find something about the dark to appreciate."
A quick reply sprang to her lips but died unsaid as she saw his pale eyes glittering in the firelight. She swallowed and her eyes widened, then she was in his arms and he was laying her down on their pine needle bed.
She trembled and eyed him uncertainly. Rafe kissed her, leaning over her with her head cradled on his arm. "It won't hurt, darlin'," he said in that deep, slow, southern tone she recognized as his lovemaking voice. "You'll see."
In the end, all she could do was trust him and give him the response he insisted on. She was helpless to do otherwise. The night before he had shown her the pleasure her body was capable of knowing, and the need to find it again sprang up strong and hot under his kisses. He wooed her again with light touches of his mouth that gradually deepened, with firm caresses through her clothing that soon made her impatient with the barriers between his skin and hers. He didn't strip her all at once, but would remove one garment and then return to his patient kisses and stroking. It seemed forever before he finally slid his hand inside her shift and cupped her bare breast, and she gave a quick, sharp sigh of relief.
His hard mouth curved into a smile, but it was one of purely male satisfaction rather than amusement. "You like that, don't you?"
She moved her legs restlessly, and her head turned toward him. "Yes."
He tugged the strap down off her shoulder and the shift drooped, baring her. He thought he'd never seen more delectable breasts, firm and round and proudly upright. They weren't big, but they filled his hand nicely. Her nipples looked like dark pink berries, flushed and extended from his touch.

He bent his head and leisurely suckled her, determinedly ignoring his thrusting erection in order to seduce her with her own pleasure.
Her hands plucked at his shirt in frustration and he paused long enough to hook it off over his head.
The heat and power of his naked chest pressed down on her, and her breasts tightened at the contact. Fire was burning through her, the same fire he had ignited before, and she moved urgently against him in search of relief.
Some time later she became aware that his hands were under her skirt, releasing the tapes of her undergarment, and she lifted her hips to aid him in removing it. Her thighs opened eagerly to his touch.
It was light at first, no more than a gentle rubbing, but soon his fingers sought out and concentrated on the most sensitive spot. That awful, wonderful tension began building in her, and she whimpered.
Then his fingers slid into her and she cried out, her hips lifting from the bed. She felt the wetness between her legs and didn't care. Rafe forced her head back with a kiss so hard and deep it bruised her lips, and she didn't care about that either. She clutched his bare, damp shoulders and moved against him.
Stifling a curse of agonized arousal, Rafe unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down. He spread her legs wider and slid his hips into the cradle, gritting his teeth against the surge of heat through his loins as he touched her. Annie went still, fear edging into her desire. He positioned the thick head of his shaft against her and then held her head framed between his hands, their gazes locked as he slowly, inexorably pushed into her.
Her pupils expanded until her eyes were enormous black pools, and she sucked in a deep breath. Dimly she realized that it wasn't painful as it had been before, but the sense of invasion, of being stretched, was almost unbearable. Her flesh was still tender and a little raw, and the nerve endings screamed a protest as his thick length forced her open. Her loins clenched around him in a futile effort to halt the alien intrusion and he groaned aloud, sagging weakly against her.
And still he pushed, sheathing himself to the hilt. She felt him deep inside, touching the entrance to her womb, and wild pleasure exploded through her. He began thrusting, slowly at first, then with increasing speed and power. Her inner muscles clung to him, slick and hot.
She couldn't bear it. It was too much, too frightening. She tried to slide backward away from him, but he hooked his hands under her shoulders and

held her.
"Don't fight it," he crooned, his breath hot against her temple. "It's too good to fight. Is it hurting?"
She would have sobbed if she had had the breath. All she could do was say, "No," on a hard gasp.
His hips recoiled and advanced, thrusting him deep within her. Her own hips were rocking back and forth and she couldn't control them. Desperately she began fighting, and Rafe caught her arms. "It's all right," he soothed. "You're almost there." He moved higher on her, so that with each thrust and withdrawal the base of his shaft rubbed against her. "Lift up against me, honey," he commanded with a deep groan.
She didn't. She couldn't. She felt as if she were fighting for her life as she desperately tried to shrink from him, pressing her hips down hard against the blanket. The force he was arousing in her was so strong she didn't dare let it explode. She heard herself sobbing now, harsh sounds that burned in her throat.
His hair was dripping wet with sweat, and his face was stark with the effort his control was costing him. He slid his hands under her buttocks, pushing his fingers into the soft cleft to grip her hard. She screamed in shock and her hips jerked upward, away from the startling touch. Sensation jolted through her and she felt her sanity sliding away as the dark whirlpool grabbed her again, flinging her up and then pulling her down, drowning her. He was still gripping her buttocks, working her up and down in rhythm with his thrusts, then his hoarse groans mingled with her cries as his big body convulsed against her.
Afterward he held her head and kissed her as if he couldn't get enough of her, kisses as deep and hard as if their passion hadn't just been expended. Tears seeped from beneath her lashes, but they weren't tears of pain. She didn't know why she was crying. Exhaustion, perhaps, or maybe it was a natural reaction to having survived a cataclysmic upheaval of her senses that had shaken her to her marrow. Why hadn't she died? Why hadn't her heart exploded from the strain, why hadn't the heat boiled her blood in her veins? She felt as if all of that had happened, as if she should be no more than ashes in his arms. So it hadn't been a chimera after all, but a force that welded them together with chains she would never be able to break.
He wiped the tears away with his thumbs. "Look at me, darhn'," he urged. "Open your eyes."

She did, staring at him through a shimmering veil of moisture.
"Did I hurt you again? Is that why you're crying?"
"No," she managed to whisper. "You didn't hurt me. It's just… too much. I don't know how I lived through it."
He rested his forehead on hers. "I know," he murmured. What happened every time he touched her was outside his experience too, and out of his control.

CHAPTER 10

They spent most of the day lying entwined on their rough bed. They both slept, feeling the effects of the long night just passed and the exhaustion of their lovemaking. Annie got up once to sleepily check the stew and add more water, and to replenish the fire. By the time she returned to the blankets, Rafe was awake and aroused by her seminudity. The remainder of their clothes were shed, and he made love to her with a slow, lingering power that was no less shattering than before. It was afternoon when they woke again, and the chill of the air made them shiver.
"I need to check on the horses," he said regretfully, and put on his clothes. He'd have liked nothing better than to spend a few more days lying naked with her. He only wished they had a proper bed, with thick covers to keep them warm. Funny, he'd never before missed the creature comforts.
Annie dressed too. She felt boneless, and incredibly languid. She had forgotten about the snow until he opened the door and a landscape of white greeted them along with a rush of frigid air. A pale, unearthly light filled the cabin. It was still snowing, and during the hours they had spent making love over half a foot had accumulated, covering the forest floor and draping the trees in an icy white mantle.
It was only a few minutes before he returned, stamping snow from his boots and brushing it off his hat and coat. Annie handed him a cup of the coffee left over from breakfast, strong and bitter by now, but he drank it without even a grimace.
"How are the horses?"
"Restless, but they'll be fine."
She stirred the stew; it was ready to eat, the rabbit tender after simmering all day, but she wasn't hungry. She desperately needed some fresh air to

clear her head, but as Rafe had pointed out, her coat wasn't heavy enough for this type of weather. After a few moments she decided it didn't matter.
Rafe watched her put on her coat. "Where're you going?"
"I'm going to step out for a few minutes. I need some fresh air."
He began pulling his own coat back on.
She gave him a surprised look. "You don't have to go with me. I'm just going to stand outside the door. Stay in and get warm."
"I'm warm enough." He leaned down, picked up one of the blankets, and wrapped it around her Indian style, pulling one of the folds up to protect her head. Then he stepped out into the eerie white world with her and held her firmly in his arms.
It was so cold that it hurt to breathe, but the icy air cleared her head. She nestled securely against Rafe's big body and in silence watched the snow fall. It was almost twilight, and the weak winter sunlight that had penetrated the thick layer of clouds had waned. The ghostly illumination came more from the snow than from the sun. The tree trunks were stark black sentinels. She had never known it to be so quiet; there were no insects buzzing, no birds calling, not even the rustle of bare tree limbs. They were so isolated that they might as well have been the only two living creatures on earth, for the blanket of snow so muffled sound that she couldn't even hear the horses. The cold cut through her skirt and petticoat and seeped up through the soles of her shoes, but still she clung to him and endlessly drank in the cruel, beautiful splendor surrounding them. Somehow it gave her a base of reality, as if the dark, heated intimacy of the cabin were a dream that existed only in her emotions. Too much had happened in too little time, turning her life upside down. How long had it been? It felt like a lifetime, but it had only been four—or was it five?— days since she had delivered Eda's baby and trudged wearily back to her cabin to find a wounded stranger waiting for her.
She shivered and Rafe said, "That's enough. Come on back inside now, it's getting dark anyway."
The comparative warmth of the cabin enfolded them, though it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. She felt more awake now, the cobwebs gone from her brain. She made fresh coffee, and when it was ready they ate the stew, delighting in the change of menu.
The trouble with being cooped up, she decided, was that there was nothing to do. The first few days she had worn herself out working and had been

ready to go to sleep not long after sundown. But having spent most of the day in bed, now she wasn't tired. Had she been at home she would have worked with her herbs, drying some, mixing others. Or she could have read, or written to her old friends in Philadelphia. Here, there were no books and no light to read them by even if there had been. She had no sewing, no cleaning to do. Considering all he had done the past two days, she couldn't pretend that Rafe needed her medical help any longer. It felt very odd, having nothing to do, and she said as much out loud.

Rafe understood how quickly cabin fever could affect some people, and though his inclination was to take her to bed he accepted that even with liberal applications of the slippery-elm salve she would be too sore for the long hours of repeated lovemaking that he wanted. "I've got a pack of cards in my saddlebags," he suggested instead. "Do you know how to play poker?"

"No, of course not," she said automatically, but he saw the quick flare of interest in her brown eyes. "You'd really show me how?"

"Why not?"

"Well, some men wouldn't."

"I'm not some men." He tried to remember if there had been a time when he would have been shocked by a poker-playing lady, but those days wouldn't come to mind. Their ashes were far too cold.

His deck of cards was dog-eared and stained; Annie eyed them as if they were the symbol of everything dangerous and forbidden. He positioned their saddles in front of the fire to give them something to lean against, which would be more comfortable than sitting tailor fashion, and explained the suits and hands to her. She caught on quickly, though she didn't have enough experience to be able to figure the odds on filling a hand. He moved on to blackjack, which was better suited to being played with just two people, and the game interested her enough that they played for a couple of hours.

Finally the game palled, and Rafe suggested going to bed. He was amused to see the quick look of alarm she gave him. "It's all right," he said. "I know you're sore; we'll wait until tomorrow."

She blushed, and he wondered how she still could.

He gave her his shirt to wear to bed, not because he didn't want her naked—he did—but because it would keep her arms and shoulders warm and would be more comfortable than her high-necked blouse. She slid under the

blanket and into his arms with a shy sweetness that made him sigh with regret.
Neither of them was really sleepy, but he was content—almost—to just lie there with her. Idly he picked up her hand and carried her fingers to his lips. The heat made his mouth tingle.
She nestled her head more securely on his shoulder. She would have loved to live only in the moment, but unfortunately that wasn't possible. Though she loved him, there was no way to forget that they had no future together, that perhaps he had no future at all. Her heart squeezed painfully at the thought of a bullet extinguishing the hot vitality in his powerful body, of him lying cold and still and forever gone from her.
"This man they think you killed," she said hesitantly, knowing he wouldn't like her bringing up the subject. "Do you know who did it?"
He was still for a fraction of a second, then he touched her fingers to his lips again. "Yeah."
"Isn't there any way you can prove it?"
He'd tried, back when he had been so angry that he'd wanted to make them all pay, and nearly lost his life, only to realize that all of the proof pointed to him. He knew who had killed Tench, or at least who had arranged it, but there was no way in hell to prove that his finger hadn't pulled the trigger. He didn't tell her that, though, just said, "No," in a soft tone and held her hand to his face.
"I can't accept that," she said in a low, fierce voice. "There has to be a way. What happened? Tell me about it."
"No," he said again. "The less you know the safer you'll be. They're not after me because of what I did, honey. They're after me because of what I know, and they'll kill anyone they think I've told." That was one reason he'd finally given up trying to exonerate himself; after two people who had tried to help him had turned up dead, Rafe had stopped trying. The only people who were likely to believe him were his friends, and he couldn't get his friends killed. Besides, what the hell did it matter anyway? He'd had his illusions destroyed, but other people had a right to theirs. Sometimes it was the only comfort they had.
"But what can be that dangerous?" she argued, lifting her head from his shoulder.
"This. I won't risk your life by telling you."

"Then you should have thought of that before dragging me up here. If anyone finds out, won't it be assumed that you talked to me?"
"No one in town saw me at your place," he assured her.
She tried another tack. "Someone is hunting you, aren't they? Right now, I mean."
"A bounty hunter named Trahern. A lot of other people too, but Trahern's the one I'm most concerned about right now."
"Will he be able to track you to Silver Mesa?"
"I figure he's already done that, but I had my horse reshod there and there's no way he could have picked up the trail."
"Does he know you were wounded?"
"I reckon. He's the one who put lead in me."
"Then won't he think to check if there's a doctor in town?"
"He might, because I got lead in him, too. But as far as he knows I wasn't hurt that bad, and it had been ten days since he'd shot me, after all, so he probably figured I was okay." He moved her hand back to his lips. "And from what you said, you rode out a lot to see sick folks, so no one would think it was unusual that you were gone."
That was certainly true enough. She had even thought the same thing herself. She smiled as she saw a flaw in his logic. "If no one will know I've been with you, then how can it be dangerous for me if you tell me anything? I'm certainly not going to run around Silver Mesa blabbing about it."
"Just in case," he said gently. "I won't take the chance."
She sighed in frustration, but sensed how implacable he was. That seemed to be one of his main characteristics: when he made up his mind, he didn't relent. He made a mule seem reasonable.
"What did you do before the war?"
The question startled him, because he had to think about it for a moment. "Studied law."
"What?" Of all the things he could have said, nothing would have surprised her more. He seemed so naturally dangerous, everything about him. perfectly bred to be the predator he was, that she couldn't imagine him dressed in a suit and pontificating before a judge and jury.
"I didn't say I was any good at it. My father was a judge and for a while it seemed like the thing to do." Mqsby had been a lawyer, and the two of them had whiled away many an hour arguing obscure points of law. At the same time, Rafe knew he'd never have been interested enough in the law to have

been a success at it. He had simply absorbed a lot of it by being his father's son. Absently he carried Annie's hand down to his chest and brushed her fingers over his nipple. That sharp, sweet tingle made it tighten immediately.

With interest Annie felt his hard, flat nipple pucker just the way hers did, and she wondered if he enjoyed the sensation. He moved her hand to his other nipple and it reacted the same as the other. He brushed her fingers back and forth over his chest in a slow, absent motion.

She sighed. "I can't imagine you as a lawyer."

"I can't either. When the war started, I found out I was much better at something else."

"What was that?"

"Fighting," he said simply. "I was a damn good soldier."

Yes, he would be. "You said you were in the cavalry?"

"In the First Virginia, with Jeb Stuart, for a while. Until '63."

"What happened then?"

"I joined the Rangers."

The word puzzled her for a moment, for the only context she could put it in was the Texas Rangers, and of course that wouldn't be right. She had heard the word "rangers" bandied about during the war, but it had been over for six years and she couldn't bring the memory into focus. "What rangers?"

"Mosby's Rangers."

Shock reverberated through her. Mosby! His reputation had been legendary, and the gossip about him had been frightening. Even as absorbed as she had been in medical school, she had heard about Mosby and his devil rangers. They hadn't fought like normal soldiers; they had been masters at deceit, at hit-and-run fighting that had made it almost impossible to capture them. She hadn't been able to picture Rafe as a staid lawyer, but it was so terribly easy to see him as a guerrilla fighter.

"What did you do after the war?"

He shrugged. "Drifted. My father and brother had both died during the war, and I didn't have any other family." He shut out the surge of bitterness and concentrated instead on the erotic thrill of Annie's hand as he brushed her fingertips back and forth over his nipples in lazy caresses. His nipples were so tight and throbbing that he could barely stand it. She had never touched him intimately, and he closed his eyes as he imagined her hand closing around his shaft. God! He'd probably go mad with frustration.

"If you could, would you go back?"
He thought about it. Back East it was just too civilized, and he'd lived too long observing no rules except his own, grown too used to the vast expanses around him. He had reverted to the wild, and had no desire to be tamed again. "No," he finally said. "There's nothing for me there. What about you? Do you miss the big cities?"
"Not exactly. I miss the convenience of a regular town, but being able to practice medicine is really what's important to me, and I couldn't do it back East."
The temptation was killing him. He said, "There's something else you couldn't do back East."
She looked intrigued. "Oh? What?"
"This." He moved her hand under the blanket and folded her fingers around his manhood. A wild electricity shot through him, the pang so strong that he drew in his breath with a sharp hiss and his entire body tensed.
Annie had gone very still. He could barely feel her breathing.
She was both shocked and enthralled. The thick length surged in her hand; to her delight, she could feel it actually increasing in size. After she got over her shock, she realized that it felt marvelous, so hot and strong and pulsing with independent life, so hard under the smooth skin. She explored the thick bulbous tip, then bailed her fingers downward to his loose, heavy testicles. She cupped them, enjoying the soft, cool feel of them in her palm. They tightened almost immediately, drawing up toward his body. Her fascination made her forget that she should be shocked.
Rafe arched on the blanket, his blood pounding through his veins. He could barely think. He should have resisted temptation, he should have known that the hot thrill of her touch would be unbearable on his genitals. His vision clouded with a dark mist as his climax surged ever closer to eruption. With a harsh sound he jerked away from her. "Stop!"
The violence of his desire caught her by surprise, then the knowledge of her own feminine power flooded through her. She looked up at him, a very female smile touching her lips. She smoothed her hands up his torso, and he quivered like a stallion. "Make love to me," she invited in a soft murmur, and that was all the invitation he needed. He shot up from the blankets and was mounting her all in one motion. Annie lifted her hips for his possessive inward thrust, accepting him with a wince at the discomfort but a great inner joy at the pleasure she knew she was giving him. He pumped deep

inside her and shuddered as his seed emptied with a great rush that left him lying limply atop her.
Desperately he sucked air into his heaving lungs. God, it had to ease up soon or he was going to kill himself making love to her. He'd thought that the intensity of it would fade to manageable levels, but so far it hadn't. Every time the desire had been just as urgent, riding him hard.
The danger was that he would let his lust for her cloud his thinking. Hell, he'd already done that. He should have returned her to Silver Mesa and gotten as far away from the place as he could, but instead he had deliberately delayed until they were snowed in. He'd planned her seduction well, but in the feeding of his sexual hunger he had himself been seduced. He couldn't think beyond the next few days, secluded with her in this warm, dark cabin, greedily taking all of her special heat for himself.
The days passed in a sensual blur. Sometimes it seemed to Annie that they spent more time naked than clothed; even during the day they were often entwined on the blankets, having just made love or about to make love again. Day and night blended for her, and sometimes when she woke from a doze she wasn't certain which it was. She became so accustomed to his penetration that it felt more normal than being apart from him.
When she thought of the future she was terrified, so she blocked it out. There was only now, these dark, sensual days together. On the day she watched him ride away from her—on that day, she promised herself, she would start thinking of the future again, of the long, endless trickle of time without him.
For now she let herself be submerged by the physical. She'd never dreamed lovemaking could be so intense, so intoxicating. He made love to her in all the ways a man could use a woman, guiding her to pleasures undreamed of, completing his stamp of possession. The voluptuousness of it enthralled her, and her sexual self-confidence bloomed.
It was a shock to get up on the eighth day of the snow to the sound of dripping water and realize the snow was melting. She had become so accustomed to the bitter cold that when the temperature surged above freezing it felt almost balmy, and indeed the first unmistakable signs of spring began to appear while snow still covered the ground. Over the next several days the little creek swelled with runoff, and Rafe took the horses to the small hidden meadow to let them work out their fidgets from being

cooped up for so long and to paw the snow aside to find the tender green shoots of new grass.
She knew they would soon have to leave, indeed could already have left, though the melting snow did make travel hazardous. She sensed that Rafe was using it as an excuse, but she didn't mind. Every minute she could spend with him was infinitely precious because there were so few of them left.
He had taken the horses to graze one morning and she was using the opportunity to heat water for washing. He had given her his spare pistol as a precaution while he was gone, even though he was only a few minutes away, and she kept it in her skirt pocket on her trips back and forth to the creek. The weapon was heavy and dragged at her skirt, irritating her, but common sense kept her from leaving it at the cabin. Bears were emerging from their winter dens, hungry and irritable; Rafe had said a bear wasn't likely to bother her, but she wasn't about to take any chances. She might not be able to hit what she shot at, but at least the sound would bring Rafe at a run.
On her second trip back from the creek she was watching where she stepped, for the melting snow had left the ground muddy and slippery. A horse whickered and she looked up, startled, at the strange man sitting his horse in front of the cabin. The bucket of water slipped from her hand as panic shot through her.
"I beg your pardon, ma'am," the man said. "I didn't mean to scare you."
She couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind had gone blank, her lips were numb.
He eased back into his saddle. "I saw your smoke," he offered. "Didn't know anybody had settled in up here, and thought it might be a camp."
Who was he? Just a drifter, or someone who would be a threat to Rafe? He didn't seem to be threatening, in fact was being careful not to make any moves that she could call aggressive, but the shock of an intruder on their private world had her reeling. Where was Rafe? Oh God, don't let him come back now!
"I don't mean you no harm," the man said. His eyes were calm, his voice almost gentle. "Is your man around?"
She didn't know what to say. If she said yes, then he would know she wasn't alone. If she said no, who knew what he would do? Annie had treated too many wounds over the years to automatically believe in the goodness of her

fellow man. Some of her fellow men had no goodness in them at all. But he wasn't likely to believe she was living up here in the mountains by herself anyway, so finally she nodded.
"Reckon I could speak with him? If you'd just point me in his direction, I'll stop botherin' you and let you go on about your work."
Another quandary; did she dare let him approach Rafe without warning? Rafe was likely to shoot first and ask questions later, which could result in an innocent man's death, but on the other hand if this man wasn't so innocent she could be risking Rafe's life. Her mind sped. "He'll be back shortly," she finally said, the first words she had spoken. "Would you like to have a cup of coffee while you wait?"
The stranger smiled. "Yes ma'am, I surely would." He stepped down from his horse and waited for her to approach. She picked up the empty bucket and carefully held it so it hid her sagging pocket. If she could just get the man inside, then Rafe would see his horse and know to be cautious, and with the pistol hidden in her pocket she could make certain Rafe wasn't in any danger.
The man left his rifle in its scabbard on the saddle, but she noticed that he wore a big pistol strapped low on his hip, the holster tied around his thigh just as Rafe wore his. That wasn't uncommon, but it did make her even more wary. He had a slight limp, but didn't seem to be in any pain or hampered by it very much.
She led the way into the cabin and set the bucket down by the fireplace, then poured the man a cup of their breakfast coffee. He removed his flat-brimmed black hat and thanked her in a polite voice for the coffee.
The window coverings were open, letting the sunlight in along with the brisk fresh air, and he looked around interestedly as he sipped the coffee. His gaze lingered on the rough-framed pine-needle bed that took up most of the left side of the cabin and Annie felt her face heat, but he didn't say anything. He took in the neatness of the mean little cabin, the total lack of furniture, the two saddles on the floor, and drew his own conclusions.
"Guess you were lucky to find the cabin when you did," he said. "Before the snow came."
He thought they were travelers who had been stranded by the snow. Relief flooded through her but before she could agree with him his gaze lit on her big black medical bag and his eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown. Her bag! Annie gave it an agonized glance. It didn't look like anything but

what it was; doctors all over the country carried similar ones. It wasn't the usual piece of luggage for either homesteaders or travelers.
"You must be that doctor," he said slowly. "The one from Silver Mesa who's been missing for a couple of weeks. I'd never heard tell of no female doctor before, but I guess they weren't lying."
Annie wanted to tell him that it was her husband who was the doctor, it was the most logical thing to say, and the most believable, but she had always been a horrible liar and now she couldn't manage it at all. Her mouth was too dry, and her heart was thundering in her chest.
He looked at her, and her white face and wide, panicked eyes would have made him suspicious even if he hadn't already been. He looked back at the saddles, stared hard at them, and suddenly the big revolver was in his hand and pointed straight at her.
"That's McCay's rig," he snapped. The friendly tone was gone; his voice was heavy and menacing now. "I must have hit him worse than I thought if he needed a doctor. Where is he?"
She couldn't send him up to the meadow. "H-hunting," she stammered.
"On horseback? Or on foot?"
"O-on foot. The horses are g-grazing." Her voice wavered out of control. The barrel of the pistol was huge and black, unwavering.
"When's he due back? C'mon, lady, don't make me hurt you! When's he gonna be back?"
"I don't know!" She wet her lips. "When he gets something, I suppose."
"How long has he been gone?"
She panicked again, because she had no idea what to say. "An h-hour?" she said, making it a question. "I don't know. I've been heating water to wash clothes and I haven't been paying attention—"
"Yeah, yeah," he interrupted impatiently. "All right. I haven't heard any shots."
"He—he has some traps out, too. If there's anything in one of them he wouldn't have to shoot anything."
The man looked around, his sharp gaze roaming over the cabin and looking out the open door at his horse tethered in plain sight. He jerked his head toward the door. "Outside, lady. I've got to get my horse put up. If he shows up while we're out there, I'd advise you to hit the ground, because lead's gonna be flyin'. And don't try to scream or nothin' to warn him. I don't want

to hurt you, but I aim to get McCay any way I can. Ten thousand's a lot of money."
Ten thousand; dear God. No wonder he was on the run. For that kind of money, every bounty hunter in the country must be looking for him.
The man kept the pistol trained on her as she walked woodenly to the empty horse shed, where he put his horse in one of the stalls. This was the bounty hunter who had been chasing Rafe, the one who had shot him, but she couldn't remember what Rafe had said his name was. Her mind felt frozen with fear, unable to think or plan. In all her bleak imaginings of the future, she had never dreamed she would see Rafe gunned down in front of her. It was a nightmare too horrible to contemplate, yet it was going to happen unless she could think of something to stop it. All she could do, however, was try to hold her skirt in such a way as to disguise the weight of the pistol in her pocket.
The pistol was her only chance, but she didn't know how to seize the opportunity; she had no delusions about being able to draw it, cock the hammer, and actually hit what she fired at, especially since the man was watching her so closely. She would have to do it when his attention was elsewhere, and that meant when Rafe was approaching. She wouldn't have to actually hit him; just firing the gun would splinter his attention and warn Rafe, so Rafe would have a chance. She didn't dare think about what chance she would have.
The man directed her back into the cabin, and Annie stood rigidly beside the fireplace with her back to the wall.
He let down both of the window coverings, preventing Rafe from seeing inside the cabin should he approach from the side. Rafe would have to come in the door, and he would be perfectly outlined against the brilliant light reflected off the melting snow. He would be blinded, unable to see into the dimness of the cabin, while the bounty hunter waiting for him would have a perfect shot. Rafe wouldn't have a chance.
Unless he noticed that the window coverings were down; he would wonder about that, knowing how Annie disliked sitting in the dark cabin. And he might notice the hoofprints out front. Rafe was as wary and alert as a wild animal, never taking chances. She thought he would notice those things. But what could he do? Come in firing blindly? The smartest thing would be for him to silently retreat to the horses and get away while he could. She closed her eyes and began praying that he would do that, for if she could just

believe he was alive and safe somewhere she'd be able to bear never seeing him again. What she couldn't bear was to see him killed.
"What's your name?" she asked shakily.
The man gave her a hard look. "Trahern. Not that it matters. You just stand there where he can see you when he comes in."
She was the goat to bait the tiger into the trap. Trahern was standing to the left, lost in the shadows. Her eyes had adjusted and she could see him just fine, but Rafe wouldn't see him at all.
She started to say something else but Trahern motioned her into silence. She stood frozen with fear, her eyes huge and despairing, her gaze fixed on the open door as they listened for Rafe's approach. Minutes ticked by, and her locked knees began to shake. The trembling traveled upward until she was quaking as if she had palsy. The silence made her want to scream.
One second there was nothing there, and the next she could see him. She was too petrified even to scream a warning, but none was needed. Rafe held a finger to his lips. He was just barely in her field of vision through the open door, some thirty feet away from the cabin. Annie felt pinned to the wall and totally exposed by the stream of light coming through the doorway. She sensed Trahern watching her, so she couldn't even roll her eyes in his direction. Her heart was pounding so hard it was jarring the material of her blouse, and her hands felt both sweaty and ice-cold. Her lungs felt restricted and it hurt to breathe.
Then Rafe was gone again, vanishing from her sight as if he'd been a ghost. Her hand was hidden in the folds of her skirt. She began inching it toward her pocket, and her wet hand closed over the huge butt of the pistol. She put her thumb on the hammer to test how difficult it would be to cock it; to her horror, she couldn't budge it. She would need both hands just to cock the damn thing! An odd rage seared through her. Damn Rafe! Why hadn't he given her a weapon she could handle?
She rolled her head against the wall and looked at Trahern. He must have sensed something; his attention was riveted on the doorway.
Trahern thumbed back the hammer of his gun, the small click rasping on her nerves like an explosion.
She could see Rafe again, sliding silently toward the open door. His own pistol was in his hand, ready to fire, but the advantage of surprise wouldn't be enough. Trahern would be able to see him perfectly, while he would have to guess at Trahern's location.

Trahern moved slightly, all of his instincts alert. Like a wolf he sensed that his prey was near. He would fire as soon as Rafe appeared. And Rafe would die in front of her, the light in those fierce eyes fading away to blankness. From the corner of her eye she saw Rafe move, attacking like a panther in a smooth, silent explosion of power and speed. She began screaming, but her throat locked and no sound came out. Trahern's hand came up and so did hers. Her hand never left her pocket. Somehow she fired through the material of her skirt.

CHAPTER 11

Explosions of gunfire rocked the tiny room, deafening her. Smoke filled the air and the stench of cordite burned her nostrils. She stood frozen, the pistol still clutched in her hand, the barrel protruding from the burnt, tattered remains of her pocket. Rafe was there somehow, she didn't know how. She couldn't remember seeing him come through the door. Someone was screaming.

Rafe was yelling something, but she didn't know what. She could barely hear him over the ringing in her ears. He slapped her leg and hip and she began sobbing, trying to push him away. It took her a moment to realize that her skirt was on fire.

Then, with a jolt, splintered reality settled into place again.

Rafe crossed the room to kick the pistol away from Trahern's outstretched hand, and the screaming ebbed to moans. On trembling legs Annie managed to move a few steps and then stood frozen again, staring at the man lying crumpled on the floor.

Blood soaked his lower abdomen, turning his shirt and pants black in the shadowed depths of the room.

It pooled around and under him, soaking through the cracks in the floor. His eyes were open and his face was absolutely colorless.

"Why didn't you shoot me?" Rafe asked harshly, going down on one knee beside the bounty hunter. He knew he'd given Trahern the perfect opportunity, but when he had seen Annie's skirt flaming nothing else had seemed to matter except getting to her before the fire licked upwards. He had literally turned his back on the bounty hunter—and Trahern had held his fire.

"No point in it," Trahern rasped. He cleared his throat. "I'm not going to be able to collect the money. Hell with it." He moaned again and then said, "Damn. I never thought to see if she had a gun."

Horror licked through Annie. She had shot a man. She had heard other shots, but somehow she knew that Trahern had been falling even before Rafe had come through the door. She hadn't aimed, she didn't even know how she had managed to pull back the hammer. But the bullet had found its mark, and Trahern lay bleeding to death on the floor.

Suddenly she could move, and she whirled to grab her bag, dragging it across the floor to the bounty hunter. "I've got to get that bleeding stopped," she said frantically, going down on her knees beside Rafe. She flinched from the horrible wound. Trahern was gut shot, and her medical training told her that he was a dead man even though her instincts were screaming at her to do something to help him.

She reached out and Rafe's hands shot forward, catching hers and holding them. His gray eyes had a stark look in them. "No," he said. "You can't do anything for him, honey. Don't break your heart trying." He didn't think even Annie's healing touch could work against a wound of such magnitude, but she would exhaust herself in the effort.

She jerked futilely at her hands, trying to free them.

Tears welled in her eyes. "I can stop the bleeding. I know I can stop the bleeding."

"If it's all the same to you, ma'am, I'd rather bleed to death than have the poison set up in my gut and take a couple of hard days to die," Trahern said drowsily. "At least it don't hurt so much now."

She sucked in her breath. Her chest hurt with the effort. She tried to think clinically. The wound was bleeding far more than most abdominal wounds. From the location of it, and from the amount of blood, the bullet must have severed or at least nicked the huge vein that ran along the spine. Rafe was right; there was no way she could save him. Trahern would be dead in another minute or so.

"Just pure luck," Trahern muttered. "I lost your trail in Silver Mesa so I decided to rest up while my leg healed. I headed out yesterday, and saw your smoke this morning. Pure damn luck, and all of it bad." He closed his eyes and seemed to be resting for a moment. It took a great deal of effort for him to open them again.

"It's known you're in the area," he said. "Other bounty hunters… got a U.S. marshal on your trail, too. Name of Atwater. Damn bulldog. You're the best I've ever tracked, McCay, but Atwater don't give up."
Rafe had heard of the lawman. Noah Atwater, even more than Trahern, didn't know the meaning of the word quit. He had to get out of this area, and fast. He looked at Annie and something punched him in the chest, hard.
Trahern coughed. He looked confused. "Got any whiskey? I could use a drink."
"No, no whiskey," Rafe replied.
"I have some laudanum," Annie said, and tried again to free her hands. Rafe still refused to let her go. He pulled her closer to him. "Rafe, let me go. I know there isn't much I can do, but the laudanum will help ease the pain—"
"He doesn't need it, honey," Rafe said gently, and tucked her head against his shoulder.
Annie pushed at him, then she saw Trahern's face. It was utterly still. Rafe reached out and closed the bounty hunter's eyelids.
She sat in frozen shock. Her seat was a rock outside the cabin where Rafe had led her and gently pushed her down. She clutched a blanket around her, because she couldn't seem to get warm.
She had killed a man. She went over and over it in her mind, and each time she accepted that she hadn't had a choice, that she had had to shoot. There hadn't been time to think, only to act. It had been pure chance that the bullet had hit its target, but she couldn't excuse herself on those grounds, for even if she had known the shot would kill Trahern she would still have fired. In a choice between Rafe's life or Trahern's, there was no choice at all. To save Rafe, she would do whatever had to be done. And none of that changed the fact that she had violated her oath, the physician's creed, and her own values by taking a life rather than doing everything in her power to save it. The betrayal of herself was numbing. The knowledge that she would do it again, if faced with the same circumstances, was shattering.
Rafe was swiftly, efficiently getting their gear together. The ground was still too frozen for him to bury Trahern, so the body still lay in the cabin. Annie knew she couldn't go back in there.
Rafe was considering his next move. He had Trahern's weapons and supplies; his own horse was well rested and well fed. He wouldn't need to stock up on grub for a while. He had to get Annie back to Silver Mesa, then

he would cut south through the Arizona desert and head for Mexico. That wouldn't stop the bounty hunters, but it would get Atwater off his trail. Annie—no, he couldn't let himself think about Annie. He'd known from the beginning that they wouldn't have much time together. He'd return her to her home and her work, and let her get on with her life.

But he was worried about her. She hadn't said a word since Trahern had died. Her face was white and still, her eyes huge and black with shock. He remembered the first time he'd killed a man, back during the war; he'd retched until his throat was raw and his stomach muscles sore. Annie hadn't vomited. He'd have felt better if she had.

He got the horses saddled and went over to her, crouching down and taking her cold hands in his, rubbing them to give her some of his warmth. "We have to go, honey. We can make it out of here by sundown, and you can sleep in your own bed tonight."

Annie looked at him as if he were crazy. "I can't go back to Silver Mesa," she said. Those were the first words she'd said in an hour.

"Of course you can. You have to. You'll feel better once you're home."

"I killed a man. I'll be arrested." She spoke very precisely.

"No, honey, listen." He'd already thought about that. It was probably well known that Trahern had been on his trail, and with Atwater following close behind it probably wouldn't be long before Trahern's body was found.

"They'll think I did it. No one knows you've been with me, so we can dp as we originally planned."

But she was shaking her head. "I won't let you take the blame for something I did."

He stared at her in disbelief. "What?"

"I said I won't let you be blamed for something you didn't do."

"Annie, honey, don't you understand?" He smoothed a strand of hair back from her face. "I'm already wanted for murder. Do you think Trahern is going to make any difference to what happens to me?"

She looked at him steadily. "I know you're already blamed for someone else's crime. I won't let you be blamed for mine too."

"Shit." He rose to his feet and restlessly ran his hand through his hair. There had to be some way he could make her see reason, but offhand he couldn't think of it. She might still be in shock, but she'd made up her mind and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He forced himself to consider what would happen. She wasn't likely to hang or even go to jail for

killing Trahern; she was, after all, a woman and a respected doctor, while Trahern had been a bounty hunter. Lawmen didn't think much of bounty hunters. But once the circumstances of Trahern's death became known, that Annie had spent almost two weeks in Rafe's company, he knew that her life wouldn't be worth two red cents. She would be killed by the same man who had had him on the run for four years; rather, the man's minions would do it. Rafe's nemesis had enough money that he never had to dirty his hands with any of the details, and a lot of that money had been earned with other men's blood.

He had to take her with him.

The solution was both simple and terrible. He didn't know if she could survive a life on the run. He knew for certain she wouldn't survive if he took her back to Silver Mesa. Damn her morals; she wouldn't budge from her stand, and it would cost her her life. The cost was too high, at least for him.

But what would it do to her to have to give up everything she'd worked so hard to accomplish? Being a doctor meant so much to her. There wasn't any way she could follow her calling while she was on the hoot-owl trail with him.

Useless regrets, because he had no choice. She wouldn't have a practice if she returned to Silver Mesa; all too soon she would only have a grave. Maybe it had been fever that had clouded his thinking when he had taken her from her house, but maybe it had been his own arrogance. He knew he was good; he had been certain he'd eluded Trahern, and equally certain he could use Annie's healing skills, enjoy her soft body, and return her to Silver Mesa undetected. He hadn't allowed for chance, for the twists of fate that turned the best of plans upside down, and now Annie was caught in the same nightmare web that had bound him for four years.

The only thing in their favor was that no one knew they were together. Atwater was looking for a lone man, not a man and a woman traveling together. It could be a useful disguise.

Annie hadn't thought of it, she was still too much in shock, but it would be assumed that he'd killed Trahern anyway. No one knew she was with him, so how could she be suspected? She was in danger only if she confessed. It made no difference to their situation: she had to go with him.

The thought of it made him dizzy, and after a moment he realized it was relief. He had steeled himself to take her back to Silver Mesa, to say good-

bye and ride away, but now he wouldn't have to. She was his.
He crouched down in front of her again and framed her face with his big hands, forcing her to give him her attention. Her big brown eyes looked so lost and bewildered that he couldn't stop himself from kissing her, hard. That got her attention. She blinked and tried to pull her head away, as if she couldn't understand why he was doing that now when they had more important things to think about.
Just to show her, and because he couldn't stand for her to pull away, he kissed her again. "I'm not taking you back to Silver Mesa," he said. "You'll have to stay with me."
He didn't know if he'd expected an argument or not. He didn't get one. She simply studied him for a minute, then nodded.
"All right." She paused, and worry darkened her face. "I hope I don't slow you down."
She would, but it didn't matter. He couldn't leave her behind. He pulled her to her feet. "Let's go. We need to get away from here."
She obediently climbed into the saddle. "Why aren't we taking Trahern's horse?"
"Because someone might recognize it."
"Will it be all right?"
"I unsaddled it. When it gets hungry enough, it'll start looking for grass. Either someone will find it or it'll go wild."
She looked at the cabin and thought of Trahern lying dead inside it. She hated to leave without burying him, but she accepted that it wasn't possible.
"Stop thinking about it," Rafe ordered. "There's nothing you could have done that would have made any difference, and nothing you can do now."
It was an extremely pragmatic piece of advice; she just hoped she was strong-minded enough to take it.
The bright sunlight was almost blinding on the snow, and the sky was so blue it made her ache inside. There was a fresh, sweet scent that heralded the explosion of new life beneath the snow as spring finally made its appearance. A life had ended, but time moved on. Two weeks ago she had been forced into the mountains on a nightmare ride in the darkness, cold and terrified, pushed to the limits of her strength and beyond. Winter had still held the land in its bleak grip. Now she was leaving these same mountains with something like regret, willingly following the man who had kidnapped her, and this time she was surrounded by a beauty so wild and

intense that she almost couldn't take it in. In those two weeks she had healed a wounded outlaw and fallen in love with him. He was her lover now, this tall, hard man with the frosty eyes, and to protect him she had killed another human being. Just two weeks, but in that length of time the land and her life had changed beyond recognition.

Rafe kept the horses in the snow as much as he could. It made the going slower than necessary and also left an extremely visible trail; she started to point this out to him and then realized that the snow was melting and would destroy all traces of their passage. Anyone trailing them would have to find the cabin and pick up their trail almost immediately, or the tracks would be gone.

"Where are we going?" she asked when they had been riding for a couple of hours.

"Silver Mesa."

She reined in her horse. "No," she said, going pale. "You said I could stay with you."

"Don't fall behind," he snapped. "You are staying with me. I didn't say I was leaving you in Silver Mesa, I said we're going to Silver Mesa."

"But why?"

"You need more clothes, for one thing. I wouldn't normally chance it, but your place is far enough away from the rest of the town that I can get in and out without being seen."

She looked down at her skirt, with a big hole burned in the side where the pocket had been. She had come so close to burning alive that it made her quake to think about it, and yet at the time she hadn't even been aware of the danger.

"I want to go with you."

"No."

His voice had that tone that said he'd made up his mind and wasn't going to be swayed, but she tried anyway. "Why, if no one is likely to see us?"

"Chance," he said. He'd disregarded it once; he wouldn't again. "If by chance I'm seen, I don't want anyone to be able to connect you with me. It's for your own safety. Just tell me what you need, and I'll try to find it."

She thought of all the herbs she had growing in their little pots and knew she would have to leave them behind. All of her books, some of them her father's, were incredibly precious to her and most of them could never be replaced, yet neither could she carry them with her. If she went back, if she

saw her familiar possessions in the place that had become home to her, if she were forced to decide what she took and what was left behind, it would hurt far more than simply never seeing them again and accepting that they were gone. Rafe would pack a few clothes for her and that would be the end of it. At least she still had her medical bag, which was her most precious possession of all.

Even with the slowness of their progress, they reached the base of the mountains well before nightfall. Rafe insisted that they stop while they were still sheltered by the trees and wait until dark. She was glad for the rest. The day's events had left her exhausted, and her mind was still trying to grapple with the changed circumstances of her life. Of all the scenarios she had imagined, this hadn't been one of them.

Sundown painted the sky, then purple shadows crept over the land. Beneath the trees it was almost totally dark. "I'm going now," Rafe said, his deep voice barely audible. He placed a blanket around her shoulders. "Stay right here."

"I will." She was a bit uneasy about remaining there by herself in the dark, but she would manage. "When will you be back?"

"It depends on what I find." He paused. "If I'm not back by morning, assume that I've been caught."

Her heart squeezed painfully. "Then don't go!"

He knelt down and kissed her. "I think it'll be fine, but there's always a chance that it won't be. Just in case, if I get caught—"

"I won't let you hang for something I did," she said, her voice trembling.

He touched her cheek. "They don't hang dead men," he said, and swung into the saddle. Annie listened to the muffled hoofbeats as they faded away into silence.

Wearily she closed her eyes. He wasn't worried about being hanged. A bounty hunter wouldn't worry about keeping him alive for trial; he would be killed immediately. Only if a lawman caught him would there be a chance of him living to see a trial, and she knew he would choose a fast bullet over months in jail that ended with a rope.

She stared into the night, so tired her eyes were burning, yet she couldn't sleep. What could she have done differently that would have changed the morning's events? She could think of nothing, and yet she kept seeing Trahern's open, unseeing eyes. He had been a killer, hunting men for money, but he hadn't seemed particularly mean. He had been polite to her,

had at first tried to reassure her, had even, within the realm of possibility, tried to make certain she wouldn't be hurt. Morals, or had he simply been disinterested because there was no profit to be had in her death? She wished he had been a filthy, brute, but life never seemed to be that clear-cut.
And yet it had been that clear-cut for Trahern. He hadn't shot Rafe when he'd had the chance because he had known he was dying and thus wouldn't be able to collect the bounty money. As Trahern himself had said, there was no point in it. For him, it had simply been a question of money and nothing else.
The stars came out and she stared at them through the trees, wishing that she knew how to tell time by their position. She had no idea how long Rafe had been gone, but it didn't matter. He would either be back by morning, or he wouldn't.
If he didn't return, what would she do? Ride back to Silver Mesa and pick up her life where she had left it?
Say that she had been summoned to treat someone a good distance away? She didn't think she could calmly ride back into town and carry off a charade like that, knowing that Rafe was dead.
She was acutely aware that he could just keep on going, that he might have had no intention of returning for her, but her heart didn't believe it. With no real evidence to sustain her, only the love she bore him, she knew that he wouldn't abandon her like that. Rafe had said he would be back. As long as he was alive, he would keep his word.
It seemed as if hours had passed and dawn had to be on the horizon before she heard the sound of a horse being walked toward her. She scrambled to her feet and almost fell, for she had been sitting so long that her legs were cold and numb. Rafe dismounted and immediately put his arms around her.
"Was there any trouble?" he asked into her hair. "Did anything frighten you?"
"No," she stammered, burying her face against his chest and inhaling the wonderful hot male scent of him. Nothing had frightened her except the horrifying possibility of never seeing him again. She wanted to cling to him and never let go.
"I got fresh clothes for you, and some other things."
"Such as?"
"Another cup, for one thing." She heard the amusement in his voice. "And another cook pot. Soap and matches. Things like that."

"No oil lamp?"
"Tell you what. If we find another cabin to stay in, I promise I'll find an oil lamp for you."
"I'll hold you to that," she said.
He spread a blanket on the ground. "We might as well bed down here," he said. "Come morning, we'll head south."
They had Trahern's blankets now, and were below the snow line, so she knew they would be warm enough. The question was whether or not she could sleep. She curled up on her side and pillowed her head on her arm, but as soon as she closed her eyes she saw Trahern's body and she quickly opened them again.
Rafe lay down beside her and pulled the blankets over them. His hand was heavy on her stomach. "Annie," he said, that special note in his voice that said he wanted her.
She tensed. After everything that had happened that day, she didn't think she could lose herself in lovemaking. "I can't," she said, her voice breaking a little.
"Why not?"
"I killed a man today."
After a moment of silence he leaned up on his elbow. "Accidentally. You didn't mean to kill him."
"Does that make any difference to him?"
Another silence. "Would you hold your fire if you could do it over again?"
"No," she whispered. "Even if I knew I was going to kill him, I would still have to shoot. In that regard, it wasn't an accident at all."
"The men I've killed were during war or to prevent them from killing me. I learned not to worry about their decision in coming after me; they made it, so they took the consequences. I can't live my life regretting that I'm the one alive, instead of them."
She knew that. Her mind accepted it. Her heart, though, was sick with combined shock and sadness.
His hand became more insistent, turning her onto her back. "Rafe, no," she said. "It wouldn't be right."
He tried to see her face through the darkness. All day long he had been aware of her suffering, and though he couldn't put himself in her place to the extent that he could feel her pain, he had understood the reasons and

worried because she was hurting. He had hoped that the sudden action forced on them would keep her from brooding, but it hadn't.
Doctors spent their lives trying to help others. The calling had been even stronger for Annie, for she had had to fight just for the chance to learn. His little darling hadn't even been able to bring herself to hurt him even when she had been terrified for her life, yet she had shot without hesitation to protect him, and now her soul was hurting.
She had no idea how to handle it. When he had been forced to face death he hadn't had the luxury of time to reflect on it; the battle had moved too swiftly. Afterward he had vomited and wondered if he could ever face another dawn, but the sun had risen after all and there had been other battles. He had learned how frail human life was, how easily snuffed, and how little difference it made.
Annie would never be able to accept that. Life was precious to her, and it humbled him that she had killed to defend him. She was mired in remorse, and he couldn't leave her there. He didn't know what else to do but refuse to leave her alone with death filling her memories. He leaned over her. "Annie. Our lives didn't stop."
His strong hands were under her skirt, opening her drawers and pulling them down, then he flipped her skirt up and rolled on top of her. His heavy weight held her down, his thighs forced hers open.
His penetration hurt, because she wasn't ready for him, but her hands dug into his powerful back as she clung to him. His powerful thrusts moved her back and forth on the blanket. His heat comforted her, inside and out. She caught her breath on a sob, but she was glad he hadn't stopped. She sensed that he knew what she was feeling, just as he knew that the celebration of life is keenest when faced with the specter of death. He wouldn't let her wallow in guilt. This is life, he was telling her. With the force of his body he was drawing her away from the death scene being played over and over in her mind.
She did sleep, eventually, worn out from the demands he had made on her and the explosive reaction of her own body. Rafe held her in his arms and felt her finally relax, and only then did he allow himself to sleep.

CHAPTER 12

"Where are we going?" she asked when they stopped at noon to eat and rest the horses.
"Mexico. That'll get Atwater off my trail."
"But not the bounty hunters."
He shrugged.
"Trahern said that the bounty on you is ten thousand dollars."
Rafe's eyebrows went up and he whistled. He looked a little pleased. Annie had never struck a person in her life, but she was sorely tempted to slap him. Men!
"It's gone up," he said. "Last I heard, it was six thousand."
"Who was it you were supposed to have killed?" she asked in bewilderment. "Who was that important?"
"Tench Tilghman." Rafe paused, his eyes on the horizon. In his mind he saw Tench's young, earnest face.
"I've never heard of him."
"No, I suppose not. He wasn't anyone important."
"Then why is there so much money offered for a reward? Was his family rich? Is that what it is?"
"It isn't Tench's family," Rafe muttered. "And Tench was just an excuse. If it hadn't been him, they would have pinned someone else's murder on me. Killing me is the whole point of it, not justice. It doesn't have a damn thing to do with justice."
She said, "You didn't want to tell me before because you said it would be dangerous for me to know. What difference does it make now? I can't go back to Silver Mesa and pretend I've never heard of you."
She was right about that. Rafe looked at her, sitting as erect as if she were in a drawing room back East, her blouse buttoned right up to her throat, and he hurt inside. What had he done to her? He had forced her from the life she had forged for herself and now she was on the run with him. But he couldn't have left her behind or she would have confessed to killing Trahern, and then the men following him would have known, or guessed, that she might know him, might know his secrets, and they wouldn't take a chance; she would be killed. Maybe it was time that she knew about the others; the bounty hunters and the lawmen weren't the only ones after him. It was only fair that she knew what they were up against.
"All right. I guess you have a right to know now."
She gave him a disgruntled look. "I'd say so, yes."

He stood up and looked around, taking his time, studying the horizon. They were well concealed by trees and rocks, and the only things moving were some birds wheeling lazily overhead, black against the cobalt sky. The white-capped mountains towered overhead.
"I met Tench during the war. He was from Maryland, a few years younger than me. A good man. Level-headed."
Annie waited as she saw Rafe trying to work out how to frame the story.
"When Richmond fell, President Davis moved the government by train to Greensboro. The treasury was moved too. On the same day Lincoln was assassinated. President Davis, in a wagon caravan, slipped past the Yankee patrols, and headed south. Another wagon caravan carried the treasury, but it went by a different route."
Her eyes widened suddenly. "Are you talking about the missing Confederate treasure?" she asked in a choked voice. "Rafe, is all of this about gold? You know where it is?" Her voice rose in a squeak.
"No. In a way."
"What do you mean, 'in a way'? Do you know where the gold is or don't you?"
"I don't," he said flatly.
She exhaled, feeling weak. She didn't know if she was relieved or disappointed. All of the newspapers had been full of the mystery of the vanished Confederate gold; some had advanced the theory that the ex-Confederate president had secreted it away, others that remnants or the defeated Confederate armies had taken it to Mexico in an effort to raise more troops. Some Southerners had charged that the gold had been stolen by Yankee troops. She had read of theory after theory, but all of them had seemed to her to be nothing more than guesses. Six years after the war had ended, the lost Confederate gold was still lost.
Rafe was staring at the horizon again, his expression hard and bitter. "Tench was part of President Davis's escort. He said that they went to Washington, Georgia, and found out that the money was in Abbeville, not very far away. The treasure wagons joined up with President Davis. He ordered part of the money, about a hundred thousand dollars in silver, to be paid to some cavalry troops in back pay they were owed. About half of the treasury was sent back to Richmond to the banks, and President Davis took the rest to use to escape and set up another government."

She was stunned. "What do you mean, it was returned to Richmond? Are you telling me the banks have had the gold all this time and didn't tell anyone?"
"No, it never made it back to Richmond. The wagon train was robbed about twelve miles out of Washington—Georgia, not D.C.—probably by some of the locals. Forget about the gold. It isn't important."
She had never heard anyone dismiss a lost fortune as "unimportant" before, but his expression hadn't lightened, so she bit back any other questions.
"President Davis and his escort, with the remainder of the treasury, split up in Sandersville, Georgia. The treasure wagon slowed them down too much, so President Davis and his party went on ahead, trying to get to Texas. Tench was with the group that stayed with the treasure wagon, and they headed down into Florida to keep from being captured. They were supposed to meet up with President Davis at a prearranged place when it was safer."
Rafe paused. She realized that he hadn't looked at her once since he'd started talking. "Money isn't all they were carrying. They had some government papers, and some of President Davis's personal belongings."
"They were close to Gainesville, Florida, when they heard that President Davis had been captured. Since there wasn't any point in going on, they didn't know what to do with the money, but finally they decided to divide it equally among them. It didn't amount to a huge fortune, about two thousand dollars each, but two thousand meant a lot after the war."
"Tench somehow ended up with the government papers and President Davis's personal papers as well as his share of the money. He expected to be stopped and searched—all disbanded Confederate troops were if the Yankees could find them—so he buried the money and the papers, figuring he'd get back to them."
"Did he?"
Rafe shook his head. "I met up with Tench in '67, in New York, just by accident. He was there to attend some sort of convention. I was there with —well, never mind why I was there."
A woman, she thought, and was surprised by a surge of furious jealousy. She glared at him, a wasted effort since he still wasn't looking at her.
"Tench met another friend there, Billy Stone. The three of us went to a club, drank too much, talked over old times. Another man, by the name of Parker Winslow, joined us. He worked for the Commodore, Cornelius Vanderbilt,

and Billy Stone seemed impressed by him, introduced him around, bought him drinks."
"We got drunk, got to talking about the war. Tench told them that I'd ridden with Mosby and they asked a lot of questions. I didn't tell them much; most people wouldn't believe how it was anyway. And Tench told them about what had happened with their part of the treasury, how he had buried his part of it with President Dayis's personal papers and just never gotten back to it. He said he guessed it was about time to go back to Florida. Winslow asked how many people knew about the money and papers, and if anyone else knew where they were buried. Like I said, Tench was drunk; he threw his arm around my shoulders and said that his ol' friend McCay was the only other person on earth who knew where he'd buried his share of the treasury. I was drunk too, so it didn't make any difference to me if he thought he'd told me where the money was buried; I just went along with it."
"The next day, when he was sober, Tench got worried about maybe talking too much. A smart man doesn't let many people know he has money buried somewhere, and this Parker Winslow was a stranger. He felt uneasy about it for some reason. Since he'd already told the other two that I knew the location, he drew a map showing where the money and papers were buried and gave it to me. Three days later he was dead."
She had forgotten about the flare of jealousy. "Dead?" she echoed. "What happened to him?"
"I think it was poison," he said tiredly. "You're a doctor, what will kill a young healthy man within a matter of minutes?"
She thought about it. "Any number of poisons. Prussic acid can kill in as little as fifteen minutes. Arsenic, foxglove, wolfbane, nightshade; they can kill about that fast if enough is used. I've heard there's a poison in South American that kills immediately. But why do you think he was poisoned? People do get sick and die."
"I don't know that it was poison, I only think it was. He was already dead when I found him. I hadn't gone back to my hotel room the night before—"
"Why?" she interrupted, glaring at him again.
Something in her voice got through to him. He turned his head and saw her expression, and for a moment he looked both disconcerted and sheepish. He cleared his throat and said, "Never mind. I went to Tench's room and found him dead. Something didn't feel right, or maybe I was suspicious because

he'd been so uneasy and then died like that. Anyway, I left his hotel room. Parker Winslow was in the lobby of the hotel when I went down; he lived in New York, so I knew he didn't have a room there. He saw me, but didn't speak. I went back to my own hotel and it looked like someone else had been there, but nothing had been taken."
"Then how do you know someone had been in your room?"
He shrugged. "Just a few little things that weren't exactly as I'd left them. I packed in a hurry, but before I could finish there were a couple of policemen beating on the door. I went out the window with what I had. The next morning I read in a newspaper that I was wanted for the shooting murder of Tench F. Tilghman. Tench hadn't been shot when I saw him."
"But why would anyone shoot a dead man?" Annie asked in bewilderment.
He glanced at her. His eyes were wintry. "If someone had had half of their head shot off, would you suspect they'd died of poison?"
Understanding dawned. "Poison does take a certain expertise. Not everyone knows what to use, or how much."
"Right. Like a doctor." He shrugged again. "I haven't had any medical training, so if it were known that Tench died of poisoning, then I wouldn't be the most logical suspect. I figure someone broke into my hotel room to kill me, too, but I wasn't there; then I saw Parker Winslow at the hotel, which means I could have implicated him, so Tench's death was rigged to look like a shooting death and I was charged with it. Since the attempt to kill me hadn't worked, a murder conviction would have me swinging. I'm not a likely poisoner, but I am damn handy with a gun. Of course, it doesn't make any difference to me if I'm wanted for murder by poisoning or murder by shooting; either one would have me hunted down."
"Why go to that much trouble for just two thousand dollars? I assume you think that was the reason why Tench was killed. As you said, it isn't a huge fortune, and it's buried somewhere in Florida. That isn't the same as robbing someone who has two thousand dollars in their possession."
"That's what I thought. So I went to Florida to see exactly what it was Tench had buried. The train stations were watched; I had to go by horse, but I had the advantage of knowing where I was going. They just knew the general area."
"It wasn't the money, was it?" she asked slowly. His pale, frosty eyes met hers, waiting. "It was the papers."

He nodded. He seemed very remote to her, his mind gone back four years in time. "It was the papers."
"You found where Tench had buried them?"
"Yes. Everything was wrapped in oilcloth."
She waited, not saying anything. Rafe was looking at the horizon again.
"The government papers," he said deliberately, "were documentation of Commodore Vanderbilt's financial aid to the Confederacy."
Annie went cold. Those papers were documentation of nothing less than the treason of the wealthiest man, or at least one of the wealthiest men, in the nation.
"Railroads are the backbone of an army," Rafe was continuing, still in that calm, remote voice. "The longer the war lasted, the more profits the railroads made and the more important they were. Vanderbilt made a fortune during the war. President Davis's personal papers included a diary in which he speculated about Vanderbilt's motives and the results of prolonging a war that he already had accepted was a losing effort. Davis knew the war was lost but with Vanderbilt's money he was deliberately prolonging it anyway."
"Vanderbilt knew about the documentation," she whispered.
"Obviously. No government would destroy that kind of evidence when it could be used later, regardless of the outcome of the war. Certainly Vanderbilt never would have destroyed anything that gave him that much influence over anything."
"He must have thought it had disappeared during Mr. Davis's escape, or even that Mr. Davis himself had destroyed it."
"When President Davis was captured and imprisoned, he was…" Rafe paused, frowning as he searched for the correct description. "… subjected to torture, both mental and physical. Perhaps it was encouraged to find out if President Davis knew where those papers were. Perhaps not. If the president hadn't used them as a leverage to get himself out of prison, it was likely he didn't have them. Vanderbilt must have felt safe in assuming them lost forever."
"Until Tench mentioned the papers he had in the hearing of Mr. Winslow, who was an employee of Vanderbilt."
"And someone, obviously, who knew the importance of the papers."
"Someone who could have also participated in the treason, and been implicated."

"Yes."
She stared around them at the glorious spring day. The horses were contentedly cropping the tender new grass, and the world felt fresh. A sense of unreality jarred her. "What did you do with the papers?"
"I sent the silver to Tench's family, anonymously. The papers are in a bank vault in New Orleans."
She jumped to her feet. "Why haven't you used those papers to clear your name?" she yelled, suddenly furious. "Why haven't you turned them over to the government so Vanderbilt can be punished? My God, the lives he cost —"
"I know." He turned to face her. She fell silent at the bleakness of his face. "My brother died at Cold Harbor in June of'64. My father died in March of'65, defending Richmond."
There was no way to tell how long the war would have lasted without Vanderbilt's aid; perhaps the battles at Cold Harbor would still have been fought, but almost certainly it wouldn't have dragged on until April of '65, and his father would still be alive. It had cost him his family.
"All the more reason to make him pay," she finally said.
"I was killing mad at first; I couldn't think. They had picked up my trail in Florida and weren't far behind. I put the papers in the bank vault under a false name and ran. I've been running ever since."
"In God's name, why? Why haven't you used them to clear your name?"
"Because they wouldn't. I'm wanted for Tench's murder. I can't prove that Tench was killed because of the papers; I can't prove that I didn't do it."
"But Vanderbilt is obviously behind it. He's the one who had put such a large bounty on your head. At the very least you can use those papers to force him to cancel the bounty and… and maybe use his influence to have the murder charge dropped."
"Blackmail. I thought of it. I tried, a couple of times, but I needed help. I've been hunted without letup; I couldn't get back to New Orleans. The people I told," he said slowly, "were all killed."
"So you stopped trying." She stared at him with dry, burning eyes. Her chest was hurting. He had been forced to run like a wild animal for four years. What he was saying was that it wasn't only bounty hunters and lawmen after him; Vanderbilt must have a private army searching for him too, perhaps using the bounty hunters and following close behind to eliminate anyone who they thought Rafe might have talked to. It was hideous. She

didn't know how he had survived. Yes, she did. Most men would have been caught and killed a long time ago, but Rafe wasn't most men. He had been one of Mosby's rangers, trained in stealth and evasion. He was tough and smart and cold-minded.

He gave evidence of that now when he turned and said emotionlessly, "We need to be moving."

The pace he set was as fast as he could maintain and still be reasonably careful about their tracks. He wanted to put more distance between them and Silver Mesa, where it was possible that anyone who happened to see them would recognize Annie. He could have traveled faster had he been alone; he had to carefully watch both Annie and her gelding, for neither of them was used to the long hours of travel. His bay was hard and muscled from years on the trail, but the gelding had had only occasional use, and it would take time to build up his stamina.

He wished he knew how close Atwater was, and if any other bounty hunters were in the area. He figured he could bet on the latter, Trahern was too well known for his presence to go unnoticed, and the other vultures would flock around him hoping to get the prey. It would be safer to avoid meeting anyone on the trail for several days, at least.

He tried to shake off his morose mood, but it had settled on his shoulders like a blanket. It had been years since he'd told anyone about Tench and the Confederate papers, years since he'd even let himself think about it that much. All of his attention had been on staying alive, not rehashing the events that had made him an outlaw. He was a little surprised by the intensity of the sense of betrayal he felt even now. He had met Jefferson Davis several times in Richmond and had been impressed, as was almost everyone who had ever met the man, by his almost otherworldly combination of intelligence and integrity. Rafe hadn't believed in slavery, his family hadn't owned any slaves, but he had firmly believed in the concept of states' rights over the authority of a central government and in the protection of his home, Virginia. Mr. Davis had made him feel as the American Revolutionists must have felt a century earlier, as if he were involved in a greater purpose, that of creating a new and sovereign nation. It had been a kick in the teeth to discover that Mr. Davis had given up the cause as lost and yet had still accepted money to keep the war going so a rich man could become even richer.

How many people had died during the last year of the war? Thousands, including the two who had meant the most to him, his father and his brother. It was more than betrayal, it was murder.

Annie's questions, as she tried to understand all the ramifications, had brought it all back to him. In the beginning he had compulsively reexamined every detail, every possibility, in an effort to find some way of stopping Vanderbilt. He hadn't been able to think of one.

Turning the papers over to the authorities would result in Vanderbilt's arrest—or maybe not; the man was enormously rich—but it wouldn't get the murder charges dropped. Rafe would have revenge, but he had to be alive to enjoy it. Revenge didn't do a dead man a whole hell of a lot of good.

Annie had thought of the blackmail gambit too. When he had first thought of it, four years ago, it had seemed simple: he had written a letter to Vanderbilt threatening to send the papers to the president unless the murder charges were dropped. The first problem was that he obviously hadn't been able to tell Vanderbilt how to get in touch with him. He would never have survived to hear Vanderbilt's reply. The second problem was that Vanderbilt seemed to have ignored the threat and continued with his all-out effort to have Rafe killed. It was difficult to blackmail someone who thought he could stop you without bowing to your demands.

That was when he had tried enlisting other people to help him implement the plan. After two of his old friends had been killed, he had given it up. It was obvious Vanderbilt would stop at nothing. But now things had changed; he had Annie to think of. If it would allow them to live in peace, he was willing to try again, if only they could find someone they could trust and who had the means of implementing the threat. It had to be someone whose murder couldn't easily be passed off, someone with authority. The trouble was that not many outlaws knew people like that.

He glanced at Annie, her posture determinedly erect despite her obvious fatigue. He realized that he was thinking in terms of us now rather than him. All of his decisions affected her now.

Right before sunset he signaled a stop and made a small smokeless fire; after they had eaten, he put out the fire and destroyed all sign of it, then they rode another couple of miles in the rapidly deepening twilight to make camp for the night. He estimated they were still too close to Silver Mesa to relax, so they crawled between the blankets completely dressed. He didn't

even remove his boots, nor Annie her shoes. He sighed, remembering the nights in the cabin when they had slept naked.
She turned into his arms, winding her own arms around his muscled neck. "Where in Mexico are we going?" she asked sleepily.
He'd been thinking about that too, and it was a difficult question. "Maybe Juarez," he said. Getting there would be the problem. They would have to go through desert and Apaches to get there. On the other hand, it would make anyone on their trail think twice about following them.

CHAPTER 13

"Why haven't you just changed your name and disappeared?" she asked one day about a week after they had left the cabin. She thought it had been a week, but she wasn't certain. Out here, surrounded by nothing but the sheer majesty of the land, she had lost track of such mundane, human things as names on a calendar.
"I've changed my name several times," he replied. "And grown a beard."
"Then how would anyone know you?"
He shrugged. "I rode with Mosby. There were a lot of photographs taken of the ranger companies, so anyone with money would have been able to come up with some of those and find out what I look like. In some of them I had a beard, because it isn't always convenient to shave. For whatever reason, I seem to be easily recognized."
His eyes, she thought. No one, having once seen those pale, crystalline eyes, would ever forget them. Changing his name and growing a beard wouldn't change his eyes.
He had shot a small deer and they had spent two days at the same camp while he smoked the tender meat. Annie was grateful for the respite; though she knew he had set the pace as slow as he had dared, she had been in agony for the first few days. The soreness in her muscles had eased as she became accustomed to the long hours in the saddle, but spending two entire days without having to even get on a horse had been pure luxury.
Their camp was under an overhang of rock, about ten feet deep and just high enough at the opening for him to stand erect. The farther south they had gone the more sparse the vegetation had become, but there was still some timber to provide cover, and grass for the horses. A jumble of

boulders at the mouth of the overhang kept their fire from being visible, and there was a small stream nearby. Lying in Rafe's arms with the semblance of a roof overhead, she felt almost as secure as she had in the cabin.

He had been considerate of her while she had been so sore, holding her at night without even mentioning making love, but during the two days they had spent in camp he had seemed to be making up for his temporary celibacy. As she cooked their supper over the small fire she watched him curing the deer hide. His dark hair had grown so long it curled down over his shirt collar, and he was so darkly tanned that she thought he could pass as one of the Apaches he had been telling her about. She loved him. It seemed to grow more powerful every day, crowding out everything else until it was difficult to remember how her life in Silver Mesa had been.

The bonds of the flesh. She had known from the beginning that if she allowed him to make love to her he would possess a part of her that she would never be able to reclaim, but not even instinct had prepared her for the strength of the ties. And perhaps his lovemaking had resulted in even more.

She stared pensively into the fire. Since she didn't know the exact day of the month she wasn't certain if her menstrual courses should have begun, but certainly it was almost time. It had been perhaps three weeks since Rafe had taken her from Silver Mesa, and her last course had ended a few days before that. She was fairly regular in her cycle, but not so regular that she could know to the day when it should begin.

She wasn't certain how she would feel if she were indeed pregnant. Was it possible to be both terrified and happy at the same time? The thought of having his baby made her dizzy with delight, but a pregnant woman would slow him down. He would have to leave her somewhere when she became unable to travel, and she couldn't bear the thought of that. Desperately she hoped that her body hadn't proven immediately fertile.

She had taken a human life. It would be ironic justice if the bearing of another human life resulted in the loss of the man she loved. Sermons from her childhood boomed through her head, dire threats of divine retribution and the scales of fate.

Rafe looked up from the hide he was working and saw the desolation in her dark eyes as she stared blindly at the fire. He had hoped she would be able to forget the shock of Trahern's death, but she hadn't, not completely. For

the most part, during the day while she was busy, she could put it out of her mind, but when it grew quiet he could see the sadness growing in her.
After the first time, during the war, he had always been able to accept the deaths he had caused. Reduced to the simplest terms, it had been his life or theirs, and that was still how he looked at it. He was a warrior. Annie wasn't. The tenderness of her emotions, that deep wellspring of compassion, was part of what drew him to her. With bemused disbelief he remembered that when he had first seen her he had thought her to be thin, tired, and rather plain. He didn't know how he could have been so blind, because when he looked at her now he saw a kind of beauty that took his breath. She was softness, and warmth, and an all-encompassing caring that wrapped around him with the tenderest of bonds. He saw intelligence and honor, and God, yes, a physical beauty that gave him an erection just from looking at her. Removing her clothes was like unwrapping a treasure that had been concealed under the drabbest of covers.
She would never be able to calmly dismiss the loss of human life. And he would never be able to watch her suffer without feeling the need to comfort. He just wasn't certain he knew how.
"You saved my life," he said into the silence. She looked up, a little startled, and he realized he hadn't put it into words before.
"Actually, you've saved me twice. Once with your doctoring and then again from Trahern. He wasn't going to even try to take me back alive." He went back to working the deer hide. "Trahern once went after a seventeen-year-old kid who had a dead-or-alive bounty on him. The kid had killed the son of some rich man in San Francisco. When Trahern caught up with him, the kid was on his knees in the dirt begging Trahern not to kill him. He was crying, his nose running. He swore he wouldn't try to escape, that he'd go back peacefully. Guess he'd heard Trahern's reputation. It didn't do him any good. Trahern shot him between the eyes."
She heard his unspoken message, that Trahern wasn't any great loss to the human race. She also saw something else, something she had been too preoccupied before to notice. "I don't regret killing Trahern," she said with slow deliberation, making him look at her. "I regret that it was necessary to kill anyone. But even if it had been that marshal, Atwater, I would have done the same thing." I chose you, she silently told him.
After a moment he gave a brief nod and returned his attention to working the hide.

Annie stirred their supper. Rafe's story had helped dispel her melancholy, though she knew part of her would never be the same. It couldn't be. Night fell in a silent explosion of color, the sky overhead changing from pink to gold to red to purple in a matter of minutes, then fading away and leaving only a hush behind, as if the world had caught its breath at the spectacle. Only the faintest remnant of light lingered in the sky when he took her to their blankets.

"Hello the camp! We're friendly an' sure would appreciate a cup of coffee if you got any to spare. We ran out a couple days ago. All right if we come in?" They had just finished breakfast. Rafe was on his feet with his rifle in his hand before the first word had finished sounding. He motioned for Annie to stay where she was. The shout had come from a stand of pifion pine about a hundred and fifty yards away, far enough that the horses, grazing off to the left in a pocket that wasn't visible from the trees, hadn't warned him of anyone's approach. He could see two men on horseback in the shadows under the pines. He looked at the fire. Only a thin haze was floating upward; someone either had to have damn sharp eyes to have spotted it, or they had to be deliberately looking. He suspected it was the latter.

"We're out of coffee ourselves," he shouted in reply. When no invitation to approach the camp was issued, tnyone without an ulterior motive would ride on. "We'd be glad to share a meal with you, if you're low on food," came the answering shout. "No coffee, of course, but we'd be right glad of the company." Rafe glanced at the horses, but discarded the idea of running for it. Their situation was pretty good; they had food and water, and were protected on three sides. And the country, though mountainous, was too open, without the thick forest that would have enabled them to slip away.

"You'd best ride on," he replied, knowing they wouldn't.

"That's not a very friendly attitude, mister."

He didn't answer again. It would be a distraction, and he wanted all of his attention on the two men. They had separated, to keep from presenting a single target. They definitely didn't have a neighborly visit in mind.

The first shot struck sparks about two feet over his head. Behind him he heard Annie gasp. "Bounty hunters," he said.

"How many?"

He didn't look at her, but she had sounded calm. "Two." If there had been a third one working his way closer, the horses would have heard that. "We'll

be afl right. Just stay down."
He didn't return fire. He didn't believe in wasting ammunition, and he didn't have a clear shot at either one of them.
Annie withdrew to the deepest corner of the overhang. Her heart pounded, making her feel nauseated, but she forced herself to sit quietly. She could help Rafe best by staying out of his way. For the first time she regretted her lack of expertise with a firearm. Out here, it seemed, ineptitude could be suicidal.
Another shot, this one ricocheting off the rocks that guarded the mouth of the overhang. Rafe didn't even flinch. He was well protected and he knew it. He waited. Most men got impatient, or they got too self-confident. Sooner or later they would expose themselves to fire. He settled in with deadly patience.
The minutes ticked past. Occasionally one or the other of the two men would fire a shot as if they weren't certain of Rafe's position and were trying to draw him out. Unluckily for them, he had long ago learned the difference between acting and merely reacting; he would fire only when he felt he had a good shot.
It was over half an hour before the man on the left shifted position. Maybe he was just making himself comfortable, but for a couple of seconds his entire upper body was exposed. Rafe gently squeezed the trigger and made the bounty hunter comfortable permanently.
He was moving before the sound of the shot had died away, slipping past the rocks and away from the overhang with a low-voiced command to Annie not to move a muscle. The other bounty hunter might try to wait him out and collect all of the ten thousand for himself, but it was possible he'd just leave his partner's body behind and ride for reinforcements. Rafe's mind was cold and clear, he couldn't let the other bounty hunter ride away.
There was too much open ground between him and the remaining hunter, preventing him from getting to the trees just as it had prevented them from getting to the overhang. They hadn't chosen their place of attack well. Rafe studied it with a strategist's eye and decided they were fools. A smarter move would have been to hang back until the lay of the land let them get closer, or try to swing around and set up an ambush. Well, now one of them was a dead fool and the other one would be shortly.
More shots were fired from the trees, evidently in a burst of rage that wasted ammunition and didn't accomplish a thing. Rafe glanced back at the

overhang. The only thing Annie was in danger from was a freak ricochet, and the way she had squeezed back into that low corner made it unlikely. If only she stayed there; he'd told her not to move and he'd meant it literally, but it would be nerve-racking for her to sit there without being able to see or knowing what was going on.

Cautiously he worked his way around to a better angle, since he couldn't do much about the distance. He couldn't see the other bounty hunter, but there were still two horses back among the trees.

Then he caught a bit of movement and saw a flash of blue, probably a sleeve. Rafe concentrated on the spot, letting his gaze go unfocused so he could pick up even the slightest movement. Yeah, there he was, fidgeting behind that tree. He didn't have a clear shot at him, though.

The morning sun was heating up fast, shining down on his bare head. He wished he'd gotten his hat, then shrugged. It was probably just as well. It would only have given him a bigger silhouette.

He found a good place to set up, in a split boulder with a small juniper growing out of the split. It made a fine rest for the rifle. He eased into position and set his sights on the tree where the bounty hunter was trying to make up his mind what to do. He hoped it didn't take long.

The bounty hunter fired a few more shots in a futile effort at provoking a response. The best shot Rafe had was at an arm, so he waited. If he just winged the man and he was able to ride off, they'd be in a lot of trouble. An entire army of bounty hunters would converge on the area.

Suddenly the bounty hunter seemed to lose his nerve and started edging backwards, toward the horses. Rafe lined up the sights and tracked his movement with the barrel. "Come on, you son of a bitch," he muttered. "Give me a target for just two seconds. Two seconds, that's all I need."

He actually needed less. The man moved into view, carefully keeping the trees between him and the overhang, but Rale wasn't at the overhang. It wasn't a clean shot, just his shoulder and part of his chest, but it was enough. Rafe squeezed the trigger and the bullet knocked the man off his feet.

Screams of pain came from the trees, evidence that the shot hadn't been a killing one. "Annie!" Rafe roared.

"I'm here."

He heard the fear in her voice. "It's okay. I got both of them. Just stay there, I'll be back in a few minutes."

Then he began working his way toward the trees, not taking it for granted that the man he'd wounded wasn't able to shoot. A lot of men had gotten killed by incautiously approaching a "dead" man or one hurt so bad he was supposedly unable to shoot. Even men who were literally drawing their last breaths were able to shoot.

He could hear the groans of the wounded man as he slipped into the trees. The man was sitting propped against a tree, his rifle on the ground a few feet away. Keeping both his attention and his rifle aimed at the man, Rafe kicked the weapon away, then relieved him of his pistol.

"You should have ridden on," he said evenly.

The bounty hunter glared up at him with pain- and hate-filled eyes. "You son of a bitch, you done killed Orvel."

"You and Orvel fired the first shot. I just fired the last one." Rafe rolled Orvel over with the toe of his boot. Heart-shot. He collected Orvel's weapons.

"We didn't mean you no harm, just thought we'd set a spell. Gets lonesome out here."

"Yeah. You were so hungry for company, you lost your head and started shooting." Rafe didn't believe his show of innocence. The man was filthy and unshaven and smelled to high heaven. Pure, stupid meanness glared out of his eyes.

"That's right. We just wanted some comp'ny."

"How did you know we were up there?" The more he thought about it, the less likely it was they had seen any smoke. Nor did he think this pair had picked up their trail; for one thing, they had already been camped under the overhang for two days, and for another, this pair didn't seem smart enough to follow a trail as elusive as the one he'd been leaving.

"We were just passin' by, seen your smoke."

"Why didn't you ride on when you had the chance?" Rafe regarded him dispassionately. Blood was spreading down the man's chest but he didn't think it was a mortal wound. From the looks of it, the bullet had shattered his collarbone. Rafe wondered what he was going to do with him.

"You didn't have no call tellin' us to ride on, instead of askin' us into camp. Orvel said you just wanted to keep the woman to yourself—" He broke off, wondering if he'd said too much.

Rafe's eyes narrowed with cold rage. No, they hadn't seen any smoke. They had seen Annie when she had gone for water. These two pieces of shit

hadn't had bounty on their minds, but rape.
He now had a dilemma on his hands. If he were smart, he'd put a bullet in this bastard's head and rid the world of some trash. On the other hand, killing him now would be cold-blooded murder, and Rafe wasn't willing to sink down to their level.
"Tell you what I'm going to do," he said, walking toward the horses and gathering their reins. "I'm going to give you some time to think about the error of your ways. A lot of time."
"Where you going with them horses? That's stealing!"
"I'm not taking the horses, I'm turning them loose."
Despite his pain, the man's dirty jaw sagged. "You can't do that!"
"The hell I can't."
"How'm I supposed to get to a doctor without a horse? You done busted up my shoulder."
"I don't care if you get to a doctor or not. If I'd had a better shot, you wouldn't have to worry about your shoulder."
"Damn, man, you can't just leave me out here like this."
Rafe turned his cold, pale eyes on the man and didn't say anything. He started to lead the horses off.
"Hey, wait a minute." The man was staring hard at him. "I know who you are. I'll be damned. I'll just be goddamned. This close to you and we didn't even know—ten thousand dollars!"
"Which you won't be collecting."
The man grinned at him. "I'll dance a jig and buy a drink for whoever does collect it, you bastard."
Rafe shrugged and led the horses past the man, who was struggling to get to his knees. Without the horses, without a weapon, it was unlikely he'd make it to any sort of town. Even if he did it would take him days, perhaps weeks. By then, Rafe figured, he and Annie would be far away. He didn't like the possibility of anyone knowing he was traveling with a woman now, but it was a chance he had to take. At least the bounty hunter hadn't been able to see Annie well enough to be able to give a description of her.
It was the sudden motion, the faint scrabbling noise, that alerted him. He dropped the reins and spun, automatically going down on one knee even as he reached for his pistol. The bounty hunter must have had a spare pistol tucked in his belt against his back; the shot went high, where Rafe had been

only a split second before, merely burning a graze on top of his shoulder. Rafe's shot wasn't high.
The bounty hunter collapsed back against the tree, his mouth and eyes opening in an expression of stupid astonishment. The light died out of his eyes and he fell sideways, burying his face in the dirt.
Rafe got to his feet and calmed the skittish horses. He stared at the dead bounty hunter and was suddenly weary. Damn, would it never end?
He examined the dead men's weapons, which were dirty and in bad shape. He discarded them but took the ammunition. He searched the saddlebags for supplies and found coffee. The lying bastards. He unsaddled the horses and slapped them on the rump, sending them flying. They weren't exactly prime examples of horseflesh, but they couldn't do worse with freedom than they had at the hands of these two. Then he took what supplies he and Annie could use and walked back up to the overhang.
She was still sitting in the corner, hugging her knees.
Her face was pale and strained. She didn't move even when Rafe walked under the sheltering ledge and dropped the bag of supplies, but her big eyes asked questions.
He squatted down in front of her and took her hands, sharply examining her to make certain no flying splinters of rock had hit her. "Are you all right?"
She swallowed. "Yes, but you aren't."
He stared at her. "Why?"
"Your shoulder."
Her words made him aware of the stinging on his left shoulder. He barely glanced at it. "It's nothing, just a graze."
"It's bleeding."
"Not much."
Moving slowly, stiffly, she crawled out of the corner and went over to her medical bag. "Take off your shirt."
He obeyed, though the wound truly was only a burn and was merely seeping a little watery blood. He watched Annie closely. She hadn't asked about the two bounty hunters.
"One of them was already dead," he said. "The other was just wounded. He drew a second pistol from his belt when I was leading the horses away. I killed him too."
She knelt on the ground and carefully washed the graze with witch hazel, making him flinch from the stinging. Her hands were shaking, but she drew

a deep breath and forced herself to steady. "I was just so frightened you'd be hurt," she said.
"I'm fine."
"There's always the chance that you won't be." With a tiny separate part of her brain she wondered why a man who hadn't twitched a muscle when she had treated wounds far worse than this would make such a face at a little stinging. She smeared some of the slippery-elm ointment on the oozing wound and lightly bandaged it. As he had said, it wasn't serious.
Rafe wondered if he should tell her that, though the two had been bounty hunters, it hadn't been bounty on their minds. He decided not to. Instead he waited until she had finished and then drew her up into his arms, kissing her hard and holding her against him, absorbing her special warmth into his bones to chase away the chill of death.
"It's time to leave," he said.
"Yes, I know." She sighed. She had enjoyed the rest, but he had planned for them to move on that day anyway. She just wished they had been able to slip away without seeing anyone.
How had he kept his sanity these past four years, continually hunted like a wild animal and unable to trust anyone he met? He'd had to be on constant guard.
"I'm a burden to you, aren't I?" she asked, keeping her face buried against his chest so she wouldn't have to see the truth in his eyes. "You could move faster without me, and anytime there's trouble you'll have to watch out for me."
"I could travel faster," he said truthfully, and stroked her hair. "On the other hand, no one is looking for a man and a woman traveling together, so it evens out. But you aren't a burden, honey, and I'd rather have you close to hand so I can look out for you. It'd worry the hell out of me if I didn't know what you were doing and if you were all right."
She lifted her head and managed a smile. "Are you trying to sweet-talk me with that southern charm?"
"I don't know, am I?"
"I think so."
"Then you're probably right. So you think I'm charming?"
"You have your moments," she allowed. "They don't come real close together."

He leaned his forehead against hers and chuckled, and with a start she realized it was the first time she had ever heard him laugh, even that small sound. God knew there hadn't been a lot in his life that he could laugh about.

He released her after a moment, his mind already on breaking camp. "We're going to cut more toward the east now," he said. "Straight into Apache country. Maybe it'll make anyone else who cuts our trail think twice about following us."

CHAPTER 14

The land opened up even more, with wider expanses of plains broken by raw, jagged mountains. Varied cactus plants began to appear among the thinning grasses. The huge bowl of sky overhead was so impossibly blue that sometimes she felt lost in it, reduced to total insignificance. She didn't mind. In a way, it was even comforting.

She had spent all of her life in various cities and towns, surrounded by people. Even Silver Mesa, crude as it was, teemed with humanity. Until Rafe had taken her up into the mountains she had never known true solitude, but a part of her, some distant primitive instinct, seemed to recognize it and embrace it like an old friend. The myriad rules of life that had always surrounded her, and which she had followed without question, had no place out here. No one would say anything if she elected not to wear a petticoat, or think her rude if she didn't make small talk. Actually, Rafe was likely to give her unabashed male approval for leaving off her petticoat. The freedom of it sank slowly into her mind, and then into her pores. She felt as unfettered as a child.

The third day after they had left the overhang camp brought evidence that she wasn't pregnant. She had thought she would be relieved, and was startled by a fleeting sense of regret. Evidently the desire to bear his child was another primitive instinct that exerted itself regardless of circumstance and logic.

Her entire life had changed within the space of a few short weeks, and despite the danger dogging their trail she felt wonderful, reborn. If it hadn't been for the threat to Rafe she would have been content with life as it was, just the two of them, alone under a sky so impressive she could understand why simple people had prayed to the sun as a god, why one always had an impression of heaven as being upward, somewhere in that great blue bowl. There was still a lingering pain at having been forced to kill, but Rafe's tale of the kind of man Trahern had been had helped her. She could put it aside, and focus outward as warriors had always done. She couldn't see herself as a warrior, but the situations were roughly the same and so she did as warriors do: she moved on, mentally and emotionally.

"I like it out here," she told Rafe late one afternoon when the purple twilight began creeping down the mountain slopes toward them. For the moment

they were still wrapped in golden sunlight, but the advancing shadows whispered that night would soon arrive.
He smiled a little as he studied her. She no longer seemed to bother much with hairpins; her long, streaked blond hair was plaited into a single loose braid that hung down her back. The spring sun had bleached out the strands around her face so that they looked like a halo. He had trouble making her wear her hat; she would put it on during the middle of the day, but in the morning or afternoon she was just as likely to be bareheaded as not whenever he looked at her. She hadn't tanned much, though, and he suspected she never would. The only difference was a slightly warmer hue to her fine-grained skin. And petticoats seemed to be a thing of the past for her, she had opted for coolness and more freedom of movement. The long sleeves of her blouse were habitually rolled up, except when he made her roll them down for protection from the sun, and the top two buttons at her throat were never fastened.
There was still that feminine fastidiousness about her that made her always look neat and fresh, but she was infinitely more relaxed, and even seemed happy. He wondered about that, because he had thought the loss of her medical practice would constantly chafe at her. But all of this was still new; the fascination of it would wear off, and that was when she would miss the career for which she had trained her entire life.
"What do you like most about it?" he asked lazily.
"The freedom." She smiled at him.
"We're on the run. Does that feel free to you?"
"All of this feels free to me." She waved her hand at the enormous landscape surrounding them. "Everything is bigger than life. And there are no rules; we can do whatever we want."
"There are always rules. It's just that they're a different set of rules. Back in Philadelphia you couldn't go without your petticoat; here, you don't go without your weapons."
"In Philadelphia, I would have to bathe behind a locked door." She pointed to where the small stream they had camped beside widened into a pool just big enough for bathing. "Here, there are no doors to lock."
The expression in his pale eyes changed at the mention of bathing. The past several days, since her menses had started, had been increasingly frustrating. If she stripped off naked, as he suspected she intended, he would be reduced to beating his head against a rock somewhere to take his mind

off his clamoring needs. A man on the trail got used to long periods without a woman, but damn if having one wasn't the easiest thing in the world to get accustomed to again. The tyrant in his pants had come to expect frequent loving attention, and had been making Rafe miserable.

She smiled at him, slowly and sweetly. "Why don't you take a bath with me." It wasn't a question. She began unbuttoning her blouse as she walked down to the curve in the stream where it deepened and widened.

Rafe found himself on his feet, his heart beating hard. "Are you all right now?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "Because if you take off your clothes in front of me I'm going to be inside you, honey, whether you are or not."

She smiled over her shoulder. Her dark eyes looked soft and sleepy. The seductiveness of it slammed into his gut. Damn, how had a woman who had been so innocent such a short time ago learned how to do that?

"I'm fine," she said.

The answer, of course, was that he had made damn certain she lost that innocence. He had made love to her so many times and so many ways over the past weeks that sometimes he had felt drugged with sex. And women were natural seductresses, even when they didn't know what they were doing. Just being female made them seductive, nature's lodestone that drew men like flies to honey.

Not even his surging lust could make him forget the need for caution. He doused the fire so it couldn't be spotted in the deepening shadows, even though he hadn't seen any signs of their being followed, and carried both rifle and pistol with him down to the stream, where he placed them within easy reach. He didn't take his eyes off Annie as he began stripping.

She had removed her blouse, then paused to work her hair free from the braid. Her raised arms lifted and exposed her breasts, barely covered as they were by the thin shift. Her nipples, already erect, pressed against the cloth. Rafe felt dizzy from the rush of blood through his body.

He forced himself to look away, and inhaled deeply to steady himself. He took a slow, careful look around to make certain no danger was threatening, and returned to the task of undressing just as Annie was wading naked into the pool, carrying her clothes. Her round, dimpled buttocks made him dizzy all over again.

The little pool at its deepest was only knee high, and it felt freezing after the spring heat of the sun. Annie bit back a squeal and with her foot found a smooth area in which to sit. She caught her breath and did so. It was a good

thing she had taken a deep breath, because the coldness of the water temporarily deprived her of the ability.
Cold or not, she couldn't pass up the opportunity to bathe and wash her clothes. She lathered up the bar of soap in her hand and began the laundry. She looked up as Rafe waded into the pool. He didn't seem to even notice the temperature of the water. His eyes were intent, and he was fully aroused. Annie's breath caught again at the power of his muscled body. She began to have doubts about finishing the chore first.
"Bring your clothes," she said. "They need washing."
"Later." His voice was guttural.
"Clothes first."
"Why?" He sat down in the water and reached for her. Then suddenly the temperature of the water got through to him and his eyes widened as he said, "Shit!" explosively.
She tried to control her shivers by scrubbing harder. "It'll probably take that long to get used to the water, for one thing. For another, if I don't wash the clothes first, they won't get done. Do you honestly expect me to have the energy to wash clothes afterward?"
"I don't think I can get that used to the water," he muttered. "Hell, we might as well do laundry."
She hid her smile as he stood up and reached for his clothes, dragging them into the water. He was shivering, too. He was scowling as he took the soap and began scrubbing his own garments.
After a few minutes, though, the water didn't seem as cold, and the warmth of the setting sun on her bare shoulders was a delicious contrast. As she finished rinsing each garment she wrung it out and tossed it onto a bush growing alongside the stream. Rafe did the same, and soon the bush was almost flattened beneath the weight of wet clothing. She began soaping herself, and the friction of her hands sliding over her skin added to the warmth.
She wasn't surprised when Rafe's hands joined hers, or at the places he elected to wash. She turned into his arms and his mouth came down hard on hers. The familiar taste of him was like heaven. The restrictions of the past few days had been frustrating for her, too. Without preliminaries he pulled her astride his thighs and onto his thrusting erection.
It had been only a few days, but she was shocked anew at the almost unbearable fullness. How had she forgotten? She couldn't move; she felt as

if he stretched her to the limit, that any motion would result in pain. But his hands were on her buttocks, moving her, and there was no pain, only the overwhelming sense of being penetrated and filled. She collapsed weakly against him, her face buried in the warm flesh of his throat.
"I thought the water was too cold," she managed to murmur.
His reply was deep and rough. "What water?"
Afterward she walked on trembling legs back to the camp, shivering again as the cooling air washed over her wet flesh. She wished she had thought to carry a blanket to the stream so she wouldn't have had to make the short trip while naked. She dried off and hurried into clean clothing.
It was later than when Rafe normally insisted they move camp after having eaten, but she didn't suggest remaining where they were. He'd taught her the value of always being cautious. Without protest she began gathering up their wet clothing and various other articles while be resaddled the horses. Twilight was rapidly fading into true darkness as he led them to a secure place to bed down for the night.
Before she got between the blankets that night, she reached under her skirt and untied her drawers, then stepped daintily out of them. Rafe joined her under the blankets and twice during the night demonstrated his appreciation of the convenience.
He had hoped, since there were only two of them, that they would be able to slip through the Apache lands without seeing or being seen by anyone. It would have been much more difficult for a larger party to travel undetected, but entirely possible for one or two people to do so. It required caution, but Rafe was a cautious man.
The Apache were nomads, wandering wherever the food supply led them. The bands were never large, seldom over two hundred people, since that many would have made fast movement impossible. But the Apache didn't have to be a large band to be dangerous to white people. Cochise, chief of the Chiricahua, had been fighting for his land against the white man for as long as Rafe could remember hearing about it. Before Cochise, it had been Mangas Coloradas, his father-in-law. Geronimo led his own band. Anyone with a brain in their heads would go out of their way to avoid the Apache. With that in mind, he had developed the habit of going ahead to check out the water sources before he allowed Annie anywhere near. The roaming bands of Apache also had to have water, so the most logical place for them to set up their temporary camps was near a stream. The next day, he was

glad of his caution when, lying flat on his belly just at the rise of a hill, he eased his head around a rock just enough to see and found himself looking down at an Apache camp. For a moment sheer terror held him paralyzed, for it was almost impossible for a man to get this close, and slip away again, without being detected. The dogs would bark, the horses would shy, the ever-alert warriors would see him. He began swearing silently as he eased back behind the rock.

There were no shouts of alarm, though, and he forced himself to lie completely still until the tremors in his legs had calmed. If he managed to get back to Annie, he'd take her and ride as hard and fast in the opposite direction as the horses would go. If he got back to Annie… God, what would happen to her if he were captured? She was alone out there, well hidden and protected for the moment, but she would never be able to find her way back to civilization.

The camp was one of the smaller ones. He tried to fix in his mind how many wickiups there had been, but panic had blotted out everything but the overall impression. And come to think of it, there hadn't been many people around; did that mean that the warriors were out hunting, or perhaps on a war party?

Taking even more care this time, he took another look. He counted nineteen wickiups, a small band even if he figured five people for each dwelling. There was almost no activity, in itself unusual because the women always had work to do even if the warriors were gone. There should be children playing, but he saw only two small boys and they seemed to be doing nothing more than quietly sitting. Behind the camp, in a bend where the grasses grew sweeter, were the band's horses. Rafe estimated the number of the remuda and a frown drew his brows together. Unless this band was unusually rich in horses, the warriors were in camp. It didn't make sense. An old woman, bent and gray, hobbled to a wickiup carrying a wooden bowl. Now Rafe noticed a black spot where a wickiup had been burned. There had been a death in the camp. Then he saw another black spot. And another one.

There were likely to be more. There was sickness in that camp.

He felt a cold knot in the pit of his stomach as he thought of the possible diseases. Smallpox was what came to mind first, for it had decimated every Indian band it had touched. Plague, cholera… it could be anything.

He bellied down from the rise and carefully worked his way back to where he had left his horse. He and Annie would give the camp a wide berth.
She was waiting exactly where he had left her, concealed from the sun by rocks and trees. She was half-dozing in the noon heat, languidly fanning herself with her hat, but she sat up as he approached.
"There's a band of Apache about five miles east. We'll head due south for about ten, fifteen miles, then cut east."
"Apache." Her cheeks paled a little. Like everyone out West, she had heard tales of how the Apache tortured their captives.
"Don't worry," he said, wanting to reassure her. "I saw their camp. I think most of them are sick with something. There were only a couple of kids and one old woman moving around, and there were several burned wickiups. That's what the Apache do when there's been a death; everyone else in the family moves out of the wickiup and they burn it to the ground."
"Sickness?" Annie felt herself go even whiter as she felt a horrible decision yawning at her feet like an abyss. She was a physician. The oath she had taken hadn't made any distinction between white, black, yellow, or red. Her duty was to help the sick and injured in any way she could, but she had never imagined that that duty would take her into an Apache camp knowing that she might never leave it.
"Forget it," Rafe said sharply as he read her mind. "You're not going in there. There's nothing you can do anyway; disease seems to go through Indians like a hot knife through butter. And you don't know what it is. What if it's cholera, or the plague?"
"What if it isn't?"
"Then it's most likely smallpox."
She gave him a wry little smile. "I'm the daughter of a physician, remember; I've been vaccinated against smallpox. My father was a firm believer in Dr. Jenner's methods."
Rafe didn't know if he trusted Dr. Jenner's vaccination theories, especially where Annie's life was concerned. "We aren't going in there, Annie."
"We weren't going anyway. I don't see any need for you to be exposed to whatever illness it is."
"No," he said firmly. "It's too dangerous."
"I'm a doctor. Do you think I haven't done this before?"
"Not with Apache, you haven't."

"True, but they're sick. You said so yourself. And there are children in that camp, children who might die if I don't do what I can."
"If it's cholera or plague, there isn't anything to be done."
"But it might not be that. And I'm very healthy; I never get sick. I haven't even had a cold since… why, I don't remember the last time."
"I'm not talking about a cold, damn it." He caught her chin and turned her face up to his. "This is serious. I won't let you risk your life."
His eyes had gone so cold that she almost shivered, but she couldn't back down. "I have to," she replied softly. "I can't pick and choose those I'll aid; that would make a mockery of my training, my oath. I'm either a doctor or I'm… nothing."
His mental rejection of her intention was so violent that he had to clench his fists to keep from grabbing her. By God, he wouldn't let her enter that camp if he had to tie her on that horse and not let her loose until they reached Juarez.
"I have to go," she repeated. Her dark eyes were bottomless, drawing him down into her soul.
He didn't know how it happened. Knowing that it was stupid, knowing that he shouldn't let her get within a mile of that camp, he gave in.
"Then we'll both go."
She touched his face. "There's no need."
"I'll decide what the need is. If you ride into that camp, I'll be riding right beside you. The only way to keep me out is if you stay out too."
"But what if it is smallpox?"
"I had it when I was five; a very mild case. No scars. I'm a lot safer from it than you are with your pin scratches."
Knowing that he had had smallpox was a relief, if he insisted in going into the camp with her as she knew he would. "You can stay back while I go in and see what it is."
He shook his head. "You aren't riding in alone."
They stared at each other, equally stubborn. Because he had given in on the first issue, Annie gave in on the second.
The dogs did come running, barking furiously, when they rode into the camp. The two little boys looked terrified and ran. The old woman Rafe had seen earlier came out of a wickiup, a different one from the one he had seen her enter before, and she too ran as fast as she could.
No one else came out of the wickiups.

Annie was terrified of what they would find when they entered the dwellings. Visions of bloated bodies lying in black vomit floated in her mind, and she knew that sometimes it wasn't a good thing to know so much, for her imagination could conjure up all the hideous symptoms.
The first wickiup they came to was as good a place as any to start. Rafe reined in and she followed suit, sliding out of the saddle. She started for the flap of hide that covered the entrance and he reached out, halting her with a firm grip. He tucked her behind him, men opened the flap himself and looked inside. Two people lay on the blankets. They were covered with spots.
"It looks like smallpox," he reported grimly. If it was, they were wasting their time and Annie was wasting her energy. Unlike the white man, who had built up a certain resistance to the disease after thousands of years of exposure, the Indian hadn't come into contact with it until the white man brought it, and he had no resistance at all.
Annie ducked under his arm and into the wickiup before he could grab her. She knelt beside one of the still figures, a woman, and carefully examined the spots that dotted her skin. She sniffed the air. "It isn't smallpox," she said absently. Smallpox had a distinctive odor that was missing.
"Then what is it?"
The spots on the woman's skin had turned black, indicating hemorrhaging. Annie put her hand to the woman's forehead and felt the fever burning there. Black eyes slowly opened and stared at her, but they were dull and uncomprehending.
"Black measles," she said. "They have measles."
It wasn't as deadly as smallpox, but it was serious enough. The complications from measles killed a lot of people. She wheeled on Rafe. "Have you had measles too?"
"Yeah. Have you?"
"Yes, I'll be fine." She stepped out of that wickiup and began going from one to another, lifting the flaps and looking inside all of them. There were two, three, four people inside each of them, most of them in various stages of the disease. The old woman they had seen earlier cowered in one. A few people were tending the sick, but with a hopelessness that prevented them from even showing alarm at the sudden appearance of two of the white devils, or perhaps those still on their feet were in the first stages and felt ill too. The two little boys they had seen seemed to be all right, and there were

two toddlers and a baby who didn't have the telltale spots. The baby was wailing, an unusual thing in an Apache camp. She stepped inside and lifted the infant, who immediately stopped squalling and stared up at her with innocent, solemn eyes. The baby's mother was so listless with fever that she could barely lift her eyelids.
"I'll need my bag," Annie said briskly, her mind already on the monumental job ahead of her even as she rocked the baby in her arms.

CHAPTER 15

"There's nothing you can do," Rafe said with slow menace. "It's measles. It's the same as smallpox: they'll either die or they won't."
"I can give them something to bring the fever down. I can make them more comfortable." They had been arguing for ten minutes. She still held the baby, who had smiled at her to reveal two tiny white teeth and was now noisily sucking on a plump fist.
"What will you do when some of the warriors get well and decide to kill me and make you a slave? That's if the medicine man doesn't get jealous and decide you should die, too."
"Rafe, I'm sorry, I know it's against your better judgment, but I can't leave any more than I could not have come here in the first place. Please understand. Most of them are already broken out in spots, so it will only be a few days before they'll begin getting well. Just a few days."
Rafe wondered when his brain had begun turning to mush where she was concerned. "You know I can make you go."
"Yes, I know," she admitted. He was strong enough to make her do anything he wanted. She could even understand his position, and knowing the validity of his arguments made her doubly appreciate his restraint, especially since he was usually so implacable.
"It's dangerous for us to stay so long in one place."
"But on the other hand, an Apache camp is probably the safest place for us to be if we aren't moving. How many bounty hunters are likely to look for us here?"
None, he had to admit.
He found himself giving in again. "All right. Will four days be enough?"
She thought about it. "It should be."

"Whether it is or not, four days is the outside limit. When a few of the bucks start moving around, we leave."
"All right." She saw the wisdom of his qualification. Just because she would be working to help the Apache didn't mean they would appreciate it.
She had counted sixty-eight people. She had never had so many patients at one time before and hardly knew how to begin. The first thing she did was go from wickiup to wickiup and check on the condition of each person. Some people seemed to have mild cases of the disease, some severe. The old woman who had evidently been trying to care for the entire band worked up enough courage to fly screeching at Annie when she knelt beside the sick people in the wickiup where she had hidden. Rafe quickly caught the old woman's arms and made her sit down. "Stop it," he said sharply, hoping his tone of voice would keep her quiet even though she wouldn't understand what he was saying. He wished he spoke at least a few words of the Apache tongue, but he didn't, and it wasn't likely anyone here would speak any English. The old woman, however, cowered back mto her corner and contented herself with glaring at the intruders.
Annie didn't have much hope for the ones with black measles, though she had seen people recover.
The greatest danger, to all of them, was the fever that could soar so high it caused convulsions. She had seen that often people who survived such a high fever weren't right in the head afterward. There was also the possibility of pneumonia and other complications. If she let herself stop to think, common sense would force her to admit it was hopeless to expect much. Rather than do that, Annie didn't let herself stop. Even if she saved just one person, that was one person, an atonement for Trahern.
She hoped her supply of willow bark held out. She fetched water and put it on to boil, all the while deciding on her course of action. She would make the tea weak; it would lower the fever even if it didn't break it, and her supply would last longer that way. She was sure the Indians themselves would know which local plants could be used to fight fever, but the language barrier prevented her from asking.
While the tea was steeping she began another search of the wickiups, this time looking for any of the herbs the Indians normally used. Perhaps she would be able to use some of them. Rafe followed her every step, as alert as a hunting wolf.

The baby was howling again. It was probably hungry. She went into the wickiup where it lay screaming and picked it up. Evidently it was more frightened than hungry, for again it cuddled contentedly in her arms. She couldn't bear listening to it cry continuously like that, so she carried the infant with her, reasoning that it couldn't be exposed to the disease more than it already had been.

She did find bundles of dried plants but didn't recognize most of them. She wished she had spent more time in the area so she could have explored the healing properties of the local plants. Nevertheless she gathered them up; maybe the old woman would be able to indicate how some of them were used.

The two young boys had crept out of their wickiup to stare at her and Rafe with huge, frightened eyes.

One of the youngsters carried a bow that was as long as he was but made no effort to use it. Annie smiled at them as she rushed past in an effort to reassure them, but they hid their eyes.

"Let me have the baby," Rafe muttered as she held it with one arm and tried to measure honey and cinnamon into the willow-bark tea with her free hand. She looked at him in surprise; somehow the idea of a baby being cradled in those steely arms seemed ludicrous, but she gladly gave up her burden.

The baby began to cry again. Rafe cradled the fuzzy little head in his big hand as he held the child to his chest, but it wasn't soothed. Annie gave it a worried look. "I hope it isn't getting sick," she said. "Measles is so hard on tiny babies. Maybe it's just hungry."

More than likely it was crying because Annie wasn't holding it, Rafe thought. It was undoubtedly hungry too, but Annie's touch had calmed it despite that. He dipped his finger into the jar of honey and slipped it into the little mouth. The baby squalled around his finger for a minute, then the sweet taste registered and it clamped down on his finger with a frantic sucking. He winced as two sharp little teeth dug into his flesh. "Hey! Damn it, you little cannibal, turn loose!"

The honey was gone and his finger wasn't very productive. The baby began wailing again. Rafe started to dip his finger in the honey again but Annie stopped him. "You have to be careful giving honey to babies. Sometimes it makes them really sick. Maybe the mother is still nursing; why don't you check and see? If not, I wrapped up a biscuit left over from breakfast. Soak

it in water and give it to the baby in tiny bites. And see if the baby needs drying."
She was gone in a flurry of skirts. Rafe looked down with alarm at the little carnivore in his arms. How had he wound up as mammy? How was he supposed to see if the mother was still nursing the baby? The woman was almost unconscious, and he didn't speak Apache anyway. And what did Annie mean, see if it needs drying? So what if it did? He had no idea what to do about it.
Feeding it, though, seemed like a good idea. He could handle that. He searched the saddlebags until he found the leftover biscuit. The kid was squalling again, and kicking in outrage. He'd thought all Apache babies were kept bound in cradleboards, but maybe that was only when the mother was carrying it around.
He did as Annie had directed and soaked the biscuit in water, then broke off small bits of the soggy bread and poked it into the baby's mouth, taking care to avoid those two small teeth. Evidently the baby had already learned the mechanics of eating, because it knew what to do. Blessed silence fell again.
Rafe kept his attention on Annie as she moved from wickiup to wickiup with the pot of willow-bark tea. The two little boys were staring at him as if he had two heads. Probably Apache warriors didn't tend to babies. He could understand why.
The baby did feel decidedly damp. Sighing in resignation, Rafe began unwrapping it. After all, he couldn't keep thinking of it as "it." Time to find out if it was a he or a she.
It was a she. To his relief, being wet was her only problem. The naked baby in his lap seemed to enjoy the cool freedom, and kicked energetically while she made cooing sounds. He smiled as he looked at her, and the round little face smiled back. She was funny-looking, with her soft fuzzy hair sticking straight up on her head like a brush. Her dark skin was as smooth as honey, and her slanted black eyes wrinkled up every time she smiled, which was every time he looked at her.
He tucked her into the cradle of his arm and set off for the wickiup where Annie had found her. There should be some clean cloths in there to wrap her in. When he opened the flap, the young woman who was the baby's mother tried to roll onto her side so she could get up. Her fever-dulled eyes were fixed desperately on the infant. Rafe squatted beside the woman and gently pushed her onto her back again.

"It's all right," he said as soothingly as he could, hoping his tone of voice would calm her even though she couldn't understand the words. He patted her shoulder, then touched his hand to her face. Her skin was scorching hot. "We'll take care of your baby. See, she's fine. I just finished feeding her."
The woman didn't seem comforted, but she was too ill to struggle. She closed her eyes and seemed to sink into a stupor. Beside her lay a warrior who was breathing heavily and hadn't stirred at all. His round face and bristly hair looked exactly like the baby's.
Rafe found the cradleboard and binding cloths, but he didn't want to wrap the kid up to where it couldn't move. He improvised a hip wrapping and was just tying it off when Annie entered the wickiup with her pot of willow-bark tea.
"It's a girl," Rafe said. "I don't know if the mother's still nursing her or not. The kid ate the biscuit like she knew what she was doing."
Annie couldn't help smiling at the plump brown infant resting so calmly in the crook of his muscled arm. She had always liked babies; helping a woman give birth had always been her favorite part of being a doctor. When she had picked up the Indian baby earlier it had felt—right, somehow. Maybe it was because she had been thinking about having Rafe's child, and for the first time she had pictured herself as a mother.
Gently, she opened the front of the woman's dress. Rafe turned his back, jiggling the baby and talking to her. The mother's breasts were normal, not swollen with milk, so Annie knew that, for whatever reason, the infant had already been weaned. It was unusual for a baby so young not to still be nursing, but sometimes the mother either didn't have milk to begin with or something happened that stopped her milk. Annie had even seen a few cases where the infants had weaned themselves as soon as they started cutting teeth. She closed the woman's dress. "You can turn around now. The baby has already been weaned; we'll have to feed her."
She lifted the woman's head and patiently spooned the tea into her mouth, coaxing her to swallow. It was more difficult with the warrior, for she couldn't rouse him. Looking at him, Annie felt her stomach clench; she didn't think he would live. She didn't give up, though. She talked to him and stroked his throat, making him swallow a little bit of tea at a time. His body heaved with coughing, another symptom of the disease. She put her hand on his chest, feeling the congestion rattle in his lungs.

Rafe watched her with enigmatic eyes. She healed wounds with her hot touch, calmed babies and horses, drove him crazy when they were making love, but could her special gift do anything against a disease? He realized that he hadn't considered that before, and wouldn't really be able to tell now. Some of the Indians would recover from the measles and some of them wouldn't; there was no way to tell which of the survivors would have died without Annie. And would it be her herbs, or her touch? Unless, of course, all of them survived. The thought made his heart jump into his mouth, and he fought to keep the panic out of his eyes. God, if she could do that, how could he justify keeping her to himself? Something that special wasn't meant to be hidden away. It would be criminal to do so.

His mouth twisted wryly. He was a fine person to be worrying about anything being criminal or not.

No longer hungry, the baby began yawning. Rafe put her down on a blanket and did what he could to help Annie.

There were two women and one man, besides the old woman, who were still on their feet, but they were feverish and alarmed by the intrusion of white people into their camp. The man had tried to get his weapons, but had calmed down when Annie had spoken softly to him and tried to show that she meant no harm and was trying to help. Annie mentioned this to Rafe as they worked, and he swore to stay by her side from now on. If the Apache warrior had been a little less sick, he might have killed her. He was furious with himself for being so careless.

The old woman crept out again. She watched as Rafe held one big warrior up so Annie could coax him to drink the bark tea. The warrior tried to struggle and Rafe effortlessly subdued him. The old woman spoke to the warrior, perhaps reassuring him; he relaxed, and drank the tea.

The old woman's face was lined with wrinkles like the arroyos scoring the land, and she was thin and bent. She studied these two whites who were the enemies of her people, carefully watching the big man who wore his weapons with such ease, but even the great Cochise admitted that not all white people were bad. At least these two seemed to want to help—well, the woman wanted to help, and the white warrior with the fierce pale eyes let her have her way. The old woman had seen it before in her long life: even the boldest, strongest warrior became oddly helpless around a certain woman.

The woman was interesting. She had the strange pale hair, but her eyes were dark like those of the People. She knew healing, so perhaps she was a medicine woman. The band's medicine man had been one of the first to succumb to the spotted disease, and everyone had been terrified. Perhaps this white woman knew how to cure the white man's disease.

The old woman shuffled forward. She indicated herself and said, "Jacali," which Annie took to be her name, then gestured toward the pot of tea Annie was holding. Annie gave it to her. The old woman sniffed it, then tasted it. She gave it back to Annie with some words and nods, and by gestures gave them to understand that she would aid in the care of her people.

Annie touched herself and then Rafe, repeating their names. The old woman said each name in turn, the syllables harsh and distinct, but Annie smiled and nodded and the introductions were considered finished.

She was glad of an extra pair of hands. Of the entire band, only this old woman and the two boys showed no signs of measles. Everyone would have to be fed, and now that Annie had dispensed the willow-bark tea she set about making a weak broth from the Apaches' stores of dried jerky. It would have helped had there been one big pot, but if there was such an item in the camp she hadn't seen it. Rafe built up the cook fires and she turned the chore over to Jacali, showing the old woman how weak she wanted it. Jacali signaled her understanding.

"What now?" Rafe asked.

She tiredly rubbed her forehead. "I need to make a horehound cough syrup, to help relieve the congestion in their lungs. I think several of them have pneumonia already. And they need to be bathed in cool water to help lower the fevers."

He pulled her to him and held her for a long minute, wishing he could make her rest, but he knew they would both be much more tired before the crisis had passed. He kissed her hair. "I'll wash them down while you make the cough medicine."

He had chosen to undertake a monumental task. By his reckoning there were almost seventy of the Indians, with only three of them healthy, four if he counted the baby girl with the spiky hair. There were old people, young people, middle-aged people, the strong ones afflicted as well as the weak. He stripped muscled warriors down to their breechcloths, fighting some of them, so he could ease the aches of fever with cool water. Knowing the Apache notions and rules of modesty were as strong as, though somewhat

different from, those of the white man, he took care not to expose the women any more than necessary, merely pushing their dresses up so he could bathe their legs and arms.

The children were the easiest, but they were also the most frightened. Some of them cried when he touched them. He handled them gently as he removed their clothes, and held one terrified four-year-old on his lap as he cooled down the sturdy little limbs. The little boy couldn't stop crying in his misery. Rafe cuddled him, talking softly to him, until the child lapsed into a fretful sleep. Then Rafe removed the body of the child's mother, who had died in the short time since Annie had administered the willow-bark tea. Jacali, the old woman, broke into wails when she saw Rafe's blanket-wrapped burden, and the two little boys ran and hid.

It was the grief in Annie's eyes that hit him hardest.

He knew some of the Apache customs dealing with death, but he didn't know how they were going to manage. Apaches wouldn't live in a wickiup where someone had died, but he couldn't bring the sick people outside or be continually moving them from one wickiup to another whenever someone died. Nor did he know the Apache custom for burial. Finally he decided to leave it to Jacali, for she would do as much as she was able within their customs.

Cooling the fevers was a never-ending job. If someone had slipped into a doze he left them alone, but those who were restless, or whose fevers had gone so high that they were insensible, had to be continually bathed. The three who had been trying to help Jacali had evidently been in the beginning stages of the disease; by that night, they were as sick as the others.

Annie moved from one patient to the other, dispensing the horehound cough syrup to those whose lungs sounded congested. To others, who were coughing but whose lungs sounded clear, she gave a hyssop and honey mixture.

It went on all night. She didn't dare sleep, for she was terrified that someone would go into convulsions from the fever. She boiled more willow-bark tea and spent hours coaxing fretful, violent, or unconscious patients to swallow. Some of the younger children cried most of the night, and their misery wrung her heart. Those whose spots seemed to be itching were washed with apple-cider vinegar. The baby girl howled vigorously whenever she became hungry or needed cleaning, or was frightened by the absence of her mother.

The young woman tried several times to respond to her baby's cries, but she was too weak.

By dawn, five more people had died.

Doggedly Annie made the round with yet more tea, her eyes dark-circled with fatigue. She entered one wickiup to find a warrior trying to roll to his side, his hand reaching out for the woman who lay beside him. Her heart catching, Annie rushed to the woman and found that she was merely sleeping. As this was one of the Indians whose lungs had been congested, she went almost limp with relief, and gave the warrior a blinding smile. His slanted, enigmatic black eyes studied her, then with a groan he collapsed onto his back again.

She slipped her arm under his shoulders and eased him up so he could sip the tea, which he did without fuss. When she let him back down, he seemed to be a little dazed, but he muttered something to her in his guttural language. She placed her cool hand on his forehead and indicated that he should go to sleep. Still looking puzzled, he did so.

She stumbled as she left the wickiup. Rafe was immediately beside her, his hard arm around her waist. "That's enough," he said. "You need some sleep." He guided her to the blankets he had spread in the shade of a tree, and Annie gratefully sank down. She should have argued with him, she thought tiredly, but she had sensed that he wasn't going to give in this time. She was asleep by the time her head touched the blanket.

The two little boys had crept curiously near. Rafe put his finger to his lips in a hushing motion. Solemn black eyes looked back.

He was tired himself, but rest could come later, when Annie was awake. He wanted to hold her in his arms while she slept, feel the warmth of her slight body and absorb some of her magic. It was enough, though, to guard her as she slept.

By the third day, Annie didn't know how she was going to make it. She had slept only in snatches, as had Rafe. A total of seventeen people had died since she and Rafe had entered the camp, eight of them children. It was the loss of the children that hurt her the most.

Whenever she could, she would sit and hold the plump baby girl who glowed with health like an oasis in the midst of the desert. The infant cooed and squealed and waved her dimpled hands about, smiling indiscriminately at whoever held her. The weight of that small, wriggling body in her arms was infinitely soothing.

The baby's mother seemed to be recovering, as did her father. The young woman had smiled wanly at her daughter's imperious wails. The round-faced warrior still slept a lot, but his fever seemed to have abated and his lungs were clear.

Then, within a matter of hours, one of the little boys who had seemed so healthy began running a high fever and went into convulsions. Despite the willow-bark tea Annie spooned down him, he died that night without ever breaking out into spots. Only the circles on his gums indicated the disease that had burned through his young body. Annie cried in Rafe's arms.

"I couldn't do anything," she sobbed. "I try, but sometimes it doesn't seem to matter. No matter what I do, they still die."

"Hush, sweetheart," he murmured. "You've done more than anyone else could."

"But it wasn't enough for him. He was only about seven years old!"

"Some younger than he was have already died. They don't have any resistance to the disease, honey; you know that. You knew from the first that a lot of them would die."

"I thought I could help," she said. Her voice was thin and desolate.

He lifted her hand and kissed it. "You have helped. Every time you touch them, you help."

She still couldn't feel as if she were doing enough. Her supply of willow bark had all been used. What she wouldn't have given for more, or for meadowsweet, which was even better at lowering fevers but didn't grow in the Southwest. Jacali had shown her some bark and indicated it came from a tree Rafe called a quaking aspen, but it seemed the women in the band had gathered it during a forage to the north and there was only a small supply of it. She boiled it much as she had the willow bark, and the resulting tea had helped the fevers, but it didn't seem to be as efficient, or perhaps she was simply making it too weak. She was too tired to decide.

Jacali shuffled around with the endless cups of jerky broth, coaxing nourishment down sore throats. The little boy whose friend had died began shadowing Rafe, often peering at Annie from behind the shelter of Rafe's long, muscled legs.

When some of the warriors began showing distinct signs of recovery on the fourth day, staring at her with their unreadable gazes, Annie expected Rafe to throw her on a horse and start riding.

Instead, late that day, he came to her with the baby in his arms. She was crying ceaselessly, her tiny arms and legs jerking, and her dark skin was flushed even darker with fever. Black spots had begun breaking out on her stomach.

CHAPTER 16

"No," Annie said hoarsely. "No. She was fine this morning." Even as she said it, she knew what a useless protest it was. Illnesses didn't always follow the same timetable or have the same symptoms, especially in infants.

His face was grim. Only one of the Indians who had broken out in the black spots that signaled hemor-rhaging had lived, and that one was a warrior, with a warrior's strength. The man was still very ill and weak. Rafe knew as well as Annie that the baby's chances weren't good.

Annie took the baby. The little thing stopped crying, but moved fretfully in her hands as if trying to escape the pain of fever.

It was dangerous to give medication to a baby this little, yet Annie didn't think she had a choice. Perhaps it was just as well that the tea from the quaking aspen was weaker than the willow-bark tea. She dribbled a small amount of it down the baby's throat, then spent an hour gently washing her in cool water. Finally the baby slept, and Annie forced herself to carry her back to her mother's side.

The young woman was awake, her dark eyes huge with anxiety. She turned onto her side and touched her daughter with a trembling hand, then tucked the hot little body close to hers. Annie patted her shoulder, then had to leave before she began crying.

There were still too many very sick people for her to allow herself to break down. She had to see to them.

Rafe had noticed that a few of the warriors were recovered enough to sit up and feed themselves. He was right behind her every time she entered one of those wickiups, the thong slipped off his revolver, and his icy gaze saw every movement while she was there.

The warriors, for their part, stared just as fiercely at the white man who had invaded their camp.

"Do you really think this is necessary?" she asked when they left the second wickiup where the performance had been repeated.

"It's either that or we leave right now," Rafe flatly replied. They should have left anyway, and he knew it, but he would have to tie her over the saddle to make her leave the baby, and something in him didn't want to leave, either. The baby didn't have much of a chance as it was; if Annie left, she wouldn't have any.

"I don't think they'll try to hurt us. They've seen that we're only trying to help."

"We may have violated some of their customs without knowing it. White people are their hated enemies, honey, and don't forget it. When Mangas Coloradas was tricked into a meeting under a guarantee of safety, then killed and his head cut off and boiled, the Apache swore eternal vengeance. Hell, who can blame them? But I won't trust your safety with them for one minute, and for your own sake don't ever forget about Mangas Coloradas, because they won't."

So much pain, on both sides. It weighed down on her as she went from patient to patient, dispensing tea and cough medication, trying to soothe both fever and grief, for there wasn't a family in the little band that hadn't been touched by death. Jacali too made the rounds, talking to her people, so everyone knew the magnitude of the tragedy that had befallen them. Annie heard the soft, stricken wailing within the privacy of the wickiups, though they never displayed their grief in her presence. They were both proud and shy, and naturally wary of her anyway. All of the goodwill on her part wasn't going to wipe out the years of warfare between their people.

When she checked on the baby she found her lying listlessly, no longer even fretting. Again she spoon-fed the tea to the baby and sponged her with cool water, hoping to bring her some relief. The little chest sounded so congested it was as if there were barely room for air in her lungs.

The mother forced herself to sit up, and she held her child on her lap, crooning weakly in an effort to rouse the baby. Rafe entered the wickiup and sat down just inside the entrance. "How is she?"

Annie looked at him with agony in her eyes and gave a tiny shake of her head. The young mother saw it and uttered a sharp protest, snatching the child to her breast. The round, fuzzy head lolled back on the doll-like neck. Jacali too came into the wickiup, and sat waiting.

When the mother grew tired, Annie took the baby and rocked her while she hummed the lullabyes she remembered from childhood. The peaceful,

infinitely tender sounds filled the quiet wickiup. The baby's breath grew more labored. Jacali leaned forward, her old eyes sharp.
Rafe lifted the baby from Annie's exhausted arms and put her to his shoulder. She had been plump and energetic only that morning, but already the heat of the disease was wasting her. He thought of the round cheeks and spiky hair, and the two gleaming little teeth that nipped so sharply.
If it were his child, he thought, to lose her would be unbearable. He had known her only four days, and spent only an hour or so playing with her, yet he had such a heavy weight on his chest he felt almost smothered.
Annie took her again, and coaxed more tea down her. Most of it dribbled from the small, slack mouth. She was still holding her when the tiny body began to stiffen and shudder.
Jacali snatched the baby and carried her outside, despite the mother's sharp cry of anguish. Annie jumped to her feet and surged through the open flap, propelled by a burst of fury that banished her exhaustion. "Where are you going with her?" she demanded, even though she knew the old woman couldn't understand her. She could barely make out Jacali's departing figure in the darkness and she ran after her.
But Jacali only went to the edge of the camp and sank down on her knees. She laid the baby on the ground in front of her, then began a low, mournful chanting that sent shivers down Annie's spine.
Yet when Annie reached for the baby again, Jacali snatched her up with a hissed warning.
Rafe put his hand on Annie's shoulder, holding her in place, his face like stone as he stared at the tiny form in Jacali's hands.
"What is she doing?" Annie cried, tugging against his grip.
"She didn't want the baby to die in the wickiup," he said absently. Perhaps the baby was already dead; it was too dark to tell if she was breathing or not. He felt Annie's warm vibrancy under his hand, and it pierced all the way to his heart.
He hadn't asked her about her special gift, hadn't alluded to it in any way. He was almost certain she didn't realize the power she had and he had kept his awareness of it to himself, probably out of pure selfishness, for he had wanted something of her that no one else knew existed. What was it like for other people when she touched them? Did they feel the same hot rush of passion that she always evoked in him? Surely not, for he had noticed that her touch had calmed the fevered Indians rather than rousing them. And

females wouldn't be stirred to lust by her touch anyway. He had puzzled over the quality of it even as he kept the knowledge to himself.
It had been almost a relief to realize that she couldn't work miracles; people still died, despite her healing touch. But if she realized the power of her gift, she would feel an almost crushing responsibility to use it even when it was hopeless, and for that reason, too, he had kept silent. She worked herself to exhaustion now; what extremes would she push herself to if she knew? How much more deeply would her failures hurt her? Because she would consider them personal failures, and would try all the harder. How much strength did it cost her, this gift, and how much could she bear to lose before her heart or her spirit gave out under the burden of it?
All of his natural instincts shouted for him to protect his woman. He would fight to the death to protect her from harm. Yet how could he stand here and watch the baby die when it was possible Annie could save her? It might not work; the child might die within the next minute, but Annie was the only chance she had.
He moved like lightning striking, scooping the limp little body from Jacali's arms before the old woman could even cry out. He turned and thrust the baby into Annie's arms. "Hold her," he said between his teeth. "Put her against your breast and hold her. Rub her back with your hands. And concentrate."
Stunned, Annie automatically cradled the infant to her. The baby was still alive, she realized dimly, though essentially lifeless with fever. "What?" she asked in confusion.
Jacali was screeching in fury and trying to get around him. Rafe put his hand on her chest and pushed her back. "No," he said in such a deep, crackling tone that the old woman stopped still. His pale eyes glowed with a rage that burned through the darkness, like a demon's, and she screeched again, but this time in terror. She didn't dare move.
Rafe turned back to Annie. "Sit down," he barked. "Sit down and do what I told you."
She did. She sank down onto the dirt, feeling the grit shifting beneath her. The cool night wind fluttered in her hair.
Rafe squatted in front of her and arranged the baby so that she lay against Annie's breast, Annie's strong heart thudding beneath the tiny, failing one. He took her hands and placed them against the baby's back. "Concentrate," he said fiercely. "Feel the heat. Make her feel it."

She felt totally confused; had both Rafe and Jacali run mad? She stared at him, eyes wide. "What heat?" she stammered.
He put his hands on hers, forcing them to flatten against the little form. "Your heat," he said. "Concentrate, Annie. Fight the fever with it."
She had no idea what he was talking about; how could you fight a fever with heat? But his eyes were glittering like ice in the moonlight and she couldn't look away from him; something in those pale, crystalline depths pulled her in, sent the night swirling away. "Concentrate," he said again.
She felt a deep throbbing. His eyes still held her, filling her vision until she could see nothing else. It wasn't possible, she thought, to see so clearly in the dark. There was no moon, only a faint starlight. Yet his eyes were a colorless fire, pulling her out of herself. The throbbing intensified.
It was the baby's heart, she thought, that she could feel throbbing. Or perhaps it was her own. It filled her entire body, surging like the tide. Yes, it was a tide, lifting her up and sweeping her away. She sensed the deep rhythmic surge of it, surrounding her with liquid warmth. She heard the roaring of it, muted and far away. And what she had thought was the moon was really the sun, burning brightly. Her hands were burning too, and now the throbbing was concentrated in her hands. Her fingertips pulsed, her palms thrummed with the energy of it. She thought her skin must surely dissolve under the pressure of it.
And then peace began to edge in as the tide became gentle breakers, lapping lazily against some unknown shore. The light was even brighter than before, but it was also softer, and incredibly clear. She wasn't drifting, she was floating, and she could see forever. The land spread out before her, great expanses of green and brown, and the deepest blue of the oceans, bluer than she had known anything could be, and she could see the misty, glowing curve of the earth, and it humbled her to think that everyone she had known and would ever know lived on this small, lovely place.
The throbbing had subsided to a steady hum, and she felt both incredibly heavy with exhaustion and weightless, as if she were indeed floating. The great light began dimming, and gradually she became aware of the warm little body she held to her breast, wriggling under her hands, crying fretfully.
She opened her heavy eyelids, or perhaps they had been open anyway and only now could she see. A sense of unreality seized her, as if she had awakened in a strange place and didn't know where she was.

But it was the same place. She was sitting in the dirt at the edge of the camp, and Rafe was kneeling in front of her. Jacali was squatting on her haunches a few feet away, her slanted black eyes filled with a sort of wonder.

It was daylight. Somehow the day had come and she hadn't noticed. Perhaps she had slept, and dreamed, but she was so very tired she didn't see how she could have slept. The sun was high; it was late in the morning.

"Rafe?" she asked, bewildered fear making her voice desperate.

He reached out and took the baby, who was squirming and wailing. The fever was down, though not broken, and the spots weren't as dark. She was awake and fretful, and her mother would be totally frantic. He kissed the silky, spiky hair and passed the infant on to Jacali, who accepted her in silence and hugged her to her own sagging bosom. Then he took Annie in his arms.

He was so stiff he could barely move, and he felt disoriented. How had so much time passed? He had been lost in the dark pools of Annie's eyes and… and something had happened. He didn't know what. All he knew was that she needed him, and he was burning for her with a frenzy that was almost uncontrollable. He lifted her high in his arms and bore her away, pausing only long enough to snatch one of their blankets.

He followed the stream until they were out of sight of the camp, and hidden from any casual view by a small copse of trees. There he spread the blanket and placed her on it, and stripped away all of the clothing that had been keeping him from contact with her skin. "Annie," he said in a rough, shaking voice as he spread her thighs, his hard, callused hands dark against the paleness of her skin. His shaft was so engorged he could scarcely breathe or move from the throbbing pressure of it. Her slim arms came up to wrap around his muscled shoulders, and he pushed deep into the tight, wet welcoming of her body. Her soft sheath embraced him with a rhythmic clenching as she adjusted to his width, and her legs came up to lock around his hips.

He wasn't aware of the hard thrusting of his body. He knew only the vibrant energy pouring out of her, more intense than ever, tingling through him like a great underground current. He had never before felt so alive, so fierce, so purified. He heard her cry out, felt the violence of her completion, and his seed spewed out of him in a white-hot eruption of his senses. He thrust deep

in a primal search for her womb at the pinnacle of sensation, and even before the last spasms had faded he knew he had made her pregnant.
He sank weakly to the blanket beside her, still holding her to him with fierce possessiveness. She gave a little sigh and closed her eyes, and was asleep even before her breath had washed over his shoulder where she lay.
He felt as if he had taken a huge blow to the chest, robbing him of breath, but for the first time in years he was seeing clearly.
The four years he had been hunted had almost turned him into a pure killing animal; he had lived by his instincts, his reflexes cat-quick, his sole object to stay alive. But now he didn't have just himself to consider, he had Annie to protect, and probably their child. Yes, he was sure there would be a child, and he had to plan for the future. He had lived in the present for so long that it felt strange to think of the future; hell, for four years he hadn't had a future.
Somehow he had to clear his name. They couldn't just keep running, and even if they did find some remote spot and settle down, they would always be looking over their shoulders, living with the fear that some bounty hunter or lawman, smarter than most, had managed to track them. The running had to end.
Knowing it and planning it were two different things. He was so tired, and the incredible clarity of vision was already fading. He couldn't even think now, his eyes were closing despite himself. And, damn it, he was already hard again, though the urgency was gone. Half asleep, he shifted onto his side and lifted her thigh over his hip, then slipped gently into her sweet warmth. The perfection of it soothed him, and he slept.
The noon sun penetrated the shade of the trees and was burning his bare leg. He opened his eyes and absorbed the details of reality. They had slept only a little over an hour, but he felt as rested as if it had been an entire night. Damn, what had he been thinking of, going to sleep like that with both of them naked and so close to the Apache camp? Not that they hadn't needed the sleep, but he should have been more cautious.
He gently shook her, and her eyes opened sleepily. "Hello," she murmured, and snuggled closer to him as her lashes drooped again.
"Hello yourself. We need to get dressed."
He watched as her eyes popped open. Then she was sitting up and grabbing her shift to cover her naked breasts. She blinked owlishly at him. "Did I

dream?" she asked in bewilderment. "What time is it? Have we slept out here all night?"
He pulled on his pants, wondering what she remembered of the night. He wasn't certain he remembered that much of it himself. He eyed the sun. "It's a little after noon, and no, we didn't sleep out here all night. We made love here about an hour ago. Do you remember?"
She looked at the tangled blanket and her face was radiant. "Yes."
He said cautiously, "Do you remember the baby?"
"The baby." She went very still. "The baby was very sick, wasn't she? She was dying. Was that last night?"
"She was dying," he agreed. "And yes, that was last night."
Annie spread her empty hands and looked down at them with a faintly puzzled expression, as if she expected to see the baby in them and couldn't understand why she wasn't. "But what happened?" Suddenly she began jerking on her clothes, her movements frantic. "I've got to see about her. She could have died while we were out here. I can't believe I just totally forgot about her, that I—"
"The baby's all right." Rafe caught her hands and held them, forcing her to look at him. "She's all right. Do you remember what happened last night?"
She was still again, staring into his light gray eyes. An echo stirred through her, as if she were looking into a deep well where she had once fallen. The familiarity of it stirred other memories. "Jacali grabbed her, and ran outside," she said slowly. "I went after her… no, we went after her. Jacali wouldn't let me have her, and I remember being so angry that I felt like slapping her. Then you… you took her away from Jacali and gave her to me… and you told me to concentrate."
The memories swirled around her, and her hands throbbed with the remnants of energy. She lifted her hands and found herself staring at them without knowing why. "What happened?" she asked blankly.
He was silent while he pulled her shift on over her head, covering her in case anyone intruded on their privacy. "It's your hands," he finally said.
Still she looked at him with a total lack of understanding.
He took her hands and held them to his mouth, kissing her fingertips before folding them warmly in his hard palms and carrying them to his chest. "You have healing hands," he said simply. "I noticed it the first time you touched me, back in Silver Mesa."

"What do you mean? I'm a doctor, so of course you can say I have healing hands, but then so does every doctor—"
"No," he interrupted. "No. Not like yours. It isn't knowledge or training, it's something you have inside you. Your hands are hot, and they make me tingle when you touch me."
She blushed fiery red. "Yours make me tingle, too," she mumbled.
Despite himself he chuckled. "Not like that. Well, yes, like that too. It's your whole body, and it drives me wild when I'm inside you. But you have healing hands, true healing hands. I've heard of it, mostly from old folks, but I didn't believe it until you touched me and I felt it."
"Felt what?" she asked desperately. "My hands are just ordinary."
He shook his head. "No. They aren't. You have a special gift, sweetheart; you can heal where others can't, and it isn't medicine, it's you." He looked away from her, toward the distant purple mountains, but he was seeing deep inside himself. "Last night… last night, your hands were so hot I could barely stand to hold them. Remember? I was pressing them to the baby's back. And I felt as if I were holding a hot poker, as if the skin was being burned off my palms."
"You're lying," she said. The harsh tone of her own voice shocked her. "You have to be lying. I can't do that. If I could, none of them would have died."
He rubbed his face, feeling the rasp of his beard against his palm. God, how long had it been since he'd shaved? He couldn't even remember. "I didn't say you were Jesus," he snapped. "You can't raise the dead. I've watched you, and sometimes the person is too sick for even you to help. You couldn't have helped Trahern, because whatever it is you have doesn't stop bleeding, it didn't even stop the bleeding when my shoulder was grazed. But when I was so sick, when we first met, just your slightest touch made me feel better. You cooled me, took the pain away, made the wounds heal faster. Damn it, Annie, I could feel the skin pulling together. That's what you can do."
She was speechless, and suddenly panic stricken. She didn't want to be able to do any of that, it was too much. She just wanted to be a doctor, the best doctor she could be. She wanted to help people, not—not perform some kind of miracle. If it were true, how could she not have known?
She shouted that question at him, as angry as she was afraid, and he jerked her into his arms. The hard face that bent over hers was just as angry.
"Maybe you've never wanted to save anyone as much as you wanted to save

that baby!" he yelled. "Maybe you've never concentrated like that before. Maybe you were too young, maybe it's something that grows stronger with age."

Tears burned her eyes and she hit at his chest. "I don't want it!" Even to herself she sounded like a child protesting having to eat vegetables, but she didn't care. How could she live with such a burden? She had visions of herself being locked away, with an endless procession of ill and wounded being brought to her, of her life never being her own again.

His anger died as swiftly as it had flared up. "I know, honey. I know."

She pulled away and in silence finished dressing. The sensible part of her scoffed at what he had told her, things like that just didn't exist. She had been trained to trust in her skill, her knowledge, and in luck, because being a good doctor definitely took luck. None of her instructors had ever said anything about her having "healing hands."

But would they even have noticed? She had been largely ignored, and definitely resented. And if they had seen something that made her superior to her classmates, would they have told her? The answer was no.

And common sense didn't explain what had happened last night. There was no explanation. Even if she accepted that she had healing hands, the events of the night, the total immersion of herself in… something… went far beyond that. She remembered the throbbing in her hands, in her entire body and in the baby's body, as if their heartbeats were linked. She remembered being lost in the crystal depths of Rafe's eyes.

And she remembered his frenzied lovemaking, as if he couldn't get inside her quickly enough, or go deep enough. She remembered clinging to him, her hips rocking and reaching up to him like the beat of a primal drum. An instinctive knowledge crept into her mind, and she knew that he had made her pregnant.

A deep sense of peace spread through her even as she gave him a quick, guarded glance. She couldn't imagine it would be welcome news to him. She looked at her hands again, finally accepting. Logic wasn't always necessary, or even possible. "I don't know what I'm going to do," she said in a low voice.

His jaw was rigid as they walked back to the camp, his arm heavy and possessive around her waist. "Pretty much as you did before," he answered. "Nothing's changed, except now you know."

CHAPTER 17

The camp was still quiet when they returned to it, but the quiet had a different quality to it. It was more restful, as if the crisis had passed. Annie ducked into the wickiup belonging to the baby's parents and found the young Apache woman sitting up, holding her child on her lap and crooning to her as she coaxed the fretful infant to drink some of the bark tea. The baby was still feverish and spotty, but even the quickest glance told her that the child was going to live. She examined the mother, and smiled her pleasure, for she expected her to be on her feet in another day. The baby's father, the round-faced warrior, was also awake and without fever, though still very weak. Both parents stared at Annie and the tall white man who stood behind her like a fierce guardian angel, but they didn't seem fearful. The warrior even said something, weakly, and gestured with his hand toward the baby. Even without knowing the language, Annie could tell he was thanking them.

They left the wickiup together, with Annie passing through the flap first. A white man stood some fifteen feet away, a shotgun in his hands. She straightened abruptly, blood rushing from her face and leaving her deathly pale. Behind her, she felt Rafe slowly straighten, then move her gently to the side.

The man's face was as lined and weathered as old leather, and his hair was graying, even though Annie would have guessed his age as in the mid-forties. He was a little over medium height, and as lean and hard as a mustang. His left eyelid drooped a bit, making it look as if he were winking. There was a badge pinned to his vest.

"Atwater," he said in a dry, cracking voice. "U. S. marshal. You're Rafferty McCay, and you're under arrest. Drop that pistol real slow, son, because I'm a mite nervous about bein' in the middle of an Apache camp, and this here Greener will cut you in two if it goes off."

Rafe sat on the ground, his hands tied securely behind his back. Atwater had threatened to tie Annie too if she made any move to help Rafe, so Rafe had sharply ordered her to leave him alone. She sat down nearby, her face as white as paper and her heart beating heavily in her chest.

Jacali circled at a cautious distance, hissing and muttering, and Atwater eyed her warily. The old woman was definitely hostile. Two warriors

managed to step outside their wickiups, though they were too weak to walk even to where Rafe sat tied. One of them was holding a rifle, but he didn't lift it in a threatening gesture. It was as if, as long as this situation remained between the White Eyes, they were content to leave it alone. Still, Atwater kept an eye on him, too.

Atwater was pondering how he was going to get his captive to jail, and he admitted to himself it was going to be a mite tricky. Like he'd said, they were not only in the middle of Apache country, but right smack-dab in the middle of an Apache camp. And there was the woman to consider. Little thing, but Atwater didn't discount her. He'd known women to go to some hellacious lengths for the men they thought they loved.

Tracking McCay had been the damnedest job he'd ever undertaken. If he hadn't been trained by some Injuns himself, he never would have managed it. Even so, part of it had been luck. Following a hunch and hanging around to see what the bounty hunter Trahern had done, for one thing. Going after McCay had been the last job Trahern would ever take. Couldn't say he regretted the bastard's death.

But the tracks around the cabin in the mountains, only a few, had made him think there were two horses. Either McCay now had him a packhorse or someone was with him, someone who didn't weigh much. At first Atwater had thought it was a packhorse, because McCay wasn't likely to take up with any kids or women, he was too smart for that, too much of a lobo. But then he remembered hearing that the doctor in Silver Mesa was a woman, and that she hadn't been seen at her cabin for a week or so. It wasn't unusual, no one seemed to think, since she was sometimes called away to an area ranch, but Atwater had the knack of taking odd pieces of information and making a picture out of them.

So, just for the hell of it, figure McCay had a woman with him now, maybe the doctor. Why would he take up with a woman after all these years? It wasn't likely unless the woman had somehow come to mean something to him. Where would he go with a woman he cared for? North, up the outlaw trail? Maybe. Some good hiding places up in that damn wilderness. North would have been where most men would have gone, where it was logical to go, but McCay wasn't most men. No, McCay would take the least-expected route. South, toward Mexico. Through Indian territory.

Tracking him was slow going. He didn't leave much of a trail even where he could be expected to. But those two dead bounty hunters in the stand of

trees, with the buzzards circling overhead, had been a pretty good signpost. It took continuous circling to find a track, and he'd come across only a couple of camps, so well hidden were they. Atwater was proud of his tracking, but he had to admit it would have taken him a lot longer to catch McCay—he refused to think that he might never have caught him—if the outlaw hadn't stopped at the Apache camp.

Now, there was a puzzle. Atwater didn't like puzzles. He was a naturally curious man, and when a puzzle came along he couldn't rest until he'd solved it. It didn't make sense for McCay to stop for so long at one place, but he had. Atwater knew he'd been at least three days behind the couple, and he had watched from up in the hills for two days before coming down. He'd kept expecting the two to ride out, and it sure as hell would've been easier on his nerves not to have to come down into an Apache camp.

What he had seen just didn't fit with what he knew of McCay. A cold-blooded killer didn't spend five days taking care of a bunch of sick Apaches. Now, he'd have expected the doctor to want to try to help, maybe; at least that wasn't out of the realm of possibilities. But he also would have expected McCay to either override her and force her to ride on, or callously leave her behind. He had done neither.

Instead, for two days Atwater had watched the outlaw carrying water and helping the old woman with the dead, playing with a baby, taking time with that young Injun kid, and watching over the doctor like a hawk. Through his spyglass he had even seen, through an open flap, McCay sponging off a sick warrior. Nope, that just wasn't normal behavior at all.

And then that thing with the sick baby last night. He hadn't been able to tell what was going on in the dark, but come morning he'd seen something he purely didn't understand. The two of them, the outlaw and the doc, had been sitting for hours in the dirt facing each other, motionless. It had looked like they were in some sort of trance or something. Damn spooky. The doc had been holding the baby to her, and McCay had had his hands pressed over hers. The old woman had sort of watched over them, but it had been plain she'd been kinda unnerved, too.

And then the baby had started crying, and they'd woke up from their trance or whatever, and McCay had grabbed his woman and a blanket and taken her off for a while. Atwater hadn't followed. McCay wouldn't be going anywhere without the horses, and he believed in giving folks their privacy at certain times.

So here he had him a dilemma, sure enough. A cold-blooded killer ought to act like a cold-blooded killer, keep things simple. When the little pieces didn't fit, it made Atwater wonder. He was wondering now.
"Gettin' you to a jail somewhere is goin' to be a bitch," he mused aloud. "Pardon me, ma'am. I've been worryin' about it some. What if these here Apaches take it in their heads they don't like you being tied up and all? After you helpin' them when they was sick like you did. Can't tell what an Injun will think. I speak some Apache, and I don't like the things that old woman's been saying, I'll tell you that."
"He won't make it to a jail alive," Annie said desperately. "He'll be killed before you can get him there."
"I don't 'spect no bounty hunter to give me any trouble, ma'am." Atwater stared at her with his odd, half-winking gaze.
"It isn't just the bounty hunters, there are—"
"Annie, no." Rafe's voice cut across hers like a whiplash. "You'll just get him killed too."
The marshal considered that. Another damn puzzle. "Now, why should that matter to you?"
"It doesn't," Rafe said grimly. He shrugged his wide shoulders, trying to ease the pressure on the joints. The rope was tight, and securely knotted. There was no way he could slip out of it.
Atwater continued as if he hadn't spoken. "You've killed so many men, what would one more matter to a bastard like you? Pardon me, ma'am. You've left quite a string of dead men behind you, startin' with that poor Tilghman feller back in New York. Supposed to be a friend of yours, at that."
"He didn't kill Tench," Annie protested. Her mind felt paralyzed. She thought she should be doing something, but she didn't know what. Atwater had sat down about fifteen feet from Rafe, still holding that shotgun with both hammers jacked back, ready to shoot. He seemed to be considering killing Rafe right now and saving himself the trouble of taking him back to jail. He wouldn't receive a bounty, of course, since he was a marshal, but by his lights justice would have been served. Why go to the trouble of a trial?
"He was framed. This isn't about Tench at all."
"Don't matter," Atwater said. "He's killed enough since then. Reckon I could add Trahern to your list, too, McCay, but I didn't much like the bastard. Pardon me, ma'am."

"Rafe didn't kill Trahern, either," Annie said. She was totally without color, even her lips were white.
"Annie, shut up!" Rafe snapped, but he might as well have saved his breath.
"I killed him," she said softly.
Atwater's eyebrows rose. "Do tell."
She was twisting her hands, and suddenly wished violently that she had Rafe's spare pistol in her skirt pocket right now. "He was going to ambush Rafe," she said in an agonized tone. "I had a pistol in my pocket… I'd never fired a weapon before. I couldn't pull the hammer back when I tried… but then he was going to shoot and somehow I did shoot it, I don't know how, while it was still in my pocket. It caught my skirt on fire. I killed him," she said again.
"She didn't do it," Rafe said sharply. "She's just trying to take the blame for me. I did it."
Atwater was getting damn tired of this. He didn't like it when outlaws turned out to have noble streaks. Tarnished his image of them.
Not that he hadn't known women to try to take the blame for something their men had done; the law was going to treat a woman different than it would a man in most cases. Few women ever actually went to prison. But in this case he didn't think the doc was trying to take the blame for something McCay had done, because that tale of her skirt catching fire just wasn't something anyone would make up. No, McCay was the one trying to take the blame, because he was afraid for the doc.
But now the doc had confessed to killing a man, and that annoyed him, because as an officer of the law he was expected to do something about it. He considered it for a minute, then shrugged. "Sounds like an accident to me. Like I said, I didn't think much of the bastard. Pardon me, ma'am."
Rafe closed his eyes with relief. Atwater scowled.
Annie scrambled closer, her eyes both earnest and desperate. Atwater cocked his head warningly, and lifted the shotgun. Off to the side, Jacali muttered a dire threat if he harmed the white magic woman.
"None of this is about Tench," Annie said. "Tench was just an excuse."
Atwater turned his full attention on her, and she ignored the way Rafe was glaring at her. She suspected he thought it was useless to try to persuade Atwater, though perhaps he did feel the knowledge would endanger the marshal's life too. Rafe's streak of gallantry could take her by surprise,

running side by side as it did with his steely implacability when he'd made up his mind to do something.
She started at the beginning. As she told how it had all happened, the improbability of it struck her and she almost faltered. How could anyone believe such a tale? Even the most trusting of persons would need to see the documents Rafe had locked away in a bank vault, and Atwater didn't look trusting at all. He was glaring at Annie, then at Rafe, as if even listening was an insult to his intelligence. His drooping eyelid drooped even more. When she finished he stared at her in silence for a full minute, then grunted. The gaze he turned on Rafe was baleful. "I hate to have to listen to bullshit like that," he barked. "Pardon me, ma'am."
Rafe merely glared back, his jaw set and his mouth a thin, grim line.
"The reason I hate to listen to it," Atwater continued, "is that liars try to sound reasonable. No point in lying if no one's goin' to believe you. So when somebody tells me something that no self-respectin' liar would ever come up with, that makes me curious. I purely hate to be curious about somethin'. Interferes with my sleep. Now, there ain't no doubt you done killed yourself a bunch of men in the last four years, but if what the doc here says is true then I'd have to consider it self-defense. And I did wonder just who this Tench feller was that he'd be worth the ten thousand dollar price on your head, seein' as how I'd never heard of him if he was supposed to be so all-fired important. That's a mite curious in itself."
Annie swallowed hard, not daring to look at Rafe. The marshal seemed to be thinking out loud, and she didn't want to interrupt him. Hope surged wildly through her, making her dizzy. Dear God, please let him believe her!
"So now I've got all these curious things naggin' at me. What in hell am I supposed to do about it? Pardon me, ma'am. The law says you're a murderer, McCay, and as a lawman I'm supposed to bring you in. The doc says there's some people after you paid to make sure you don't ever make it to trial. Now, I figure I'm paid to make sure justice is served, but now I'm not so sure I'd be servin' justice if I bring you in. Not to say that I could do it," he said dryly, eyeing the big Apache warrior who was standing outside again, still holding the rifle and glaring at them with black basilisk eyes. It looked like the Indians weren't taking too kindly to McCay being tied up. He turned back to Rafe. "Why'd you spend so long helpin' these Indians? I wouldn't've caught you if you hadn't stopped."

Annie drew in an agonized breath. Rafe wanted to stomp Atwater for distressing her. "They needed help," he said curtly.
Atwater rubbed his jaw. Probably the doctor had persuaded him, and now she was all tore up about it. He looked at the black-bearded outlaw again and saw the anger in those funny-looking eyes. Well, he'd seen it before. Something about women could sweeten the hardest man, and this rough gunslick was definitely sweet on the doc. She was pleasant on the eye, for certain, but it was more than that. Those big dark eyes of hers made him feel funny in the pit of his stomach, an old trail hound like him. If he were twenty years younger, he might get all testy on her behalf too, especially if she ever looked at him the way she'd been looking at McCay.
Well, hell, here he was faced with a dilemma. Not only did that tale of hers intrigue him, but when added to the other little things that had bothered him, like there being such an unusually large bounty and the evidence of his own eyes that McCay wasn't the cold-blooded killer his reputation made him out to be, he had to consider the possibility that the wild story just might be true. He'd give it even odds, which meant that to serve justice he had to check it out, something easier said than done. He sighed; just as well he hadn't signed on as a marshal because it was an easy job.
Even getting out of this camp could prove to be a mite tetchy. That big warrior was scowling, and brandishing his rifle. It wouldn't do to get him riled.
Atwater made his decision. He sighed wearily as he got to his feet. Now his life was all complicated again, and he suspected it was going to get even worse.
He stalked over to Rafe and slipped his knife from his belt. Annie struggled to her feet, biting back a protest. "These Apaches look a bit testy," Atwater said. "Maybe they don't like you bein' tied up, but maybe they don't like whites, period. Hard to tell. On the chance that what they're objecting to is the rope around your hands, I'm going to risk it and untie you. I'm not going to take my eyes off of you for one minute. Don't even look like you're thinkin' of making a run for it," the lawman said sourly. "It sure gets my water hot when somebody makes me out a fool. Pardon me, ma'am. But I'll cut you down and not lose a minute's sleep over it if you try to give me the slip. Now, I'm willing to take you to New Orleans to check out this wild tale of yours. I'd feel foolish asking for your word that you won't run, so I'm not asking. I'm just going to keep the doc right beside me, 'cause I don't think

you'll leave without her. Now, do you reckon these Apaches are going to get ornery when we leave?"
Rafe's eyes were bright and hard. "I guess we'll find out, won't we?"
There was no point in waiting until the next day to leave the camp. Their horses were well rested, and truth to tell, Rafe was just as glad to get away before any more of the warriors recovered. Several of them were well enough anyway to gather outside as Rafe saddled the horses, and all of them were armed. A few of the squaws also came outside, but most of them remained in the wickiups with the invalids who still needed care. Under Atwater's eagle eye, Annie slipped in to see the baby for a moment, and was rewarded by a smile that revealed the two little teeth. She was still feverish, but chewing energetically on a piece of leather. The mother shyly laid her hand on Annie's arm and said something, a rather long speech that conveyed her thanks by tone and wasn't dependent on the understanding of words.
The warriors watched enigmatically. The biggest of them, a man who was almost as tall as Rafe, wondered if he would ever understand the white eyes. There was enmity between their peoples, yet the white warrior and his woman, the magic woman, had worked hard to save the band. The warrior even remembered lying almost naked while the white warrior cooled him with water, which was a thing that was beyond believing. And the magic woman… never had he known such a touch. Her hands had been cool, yet hot underneath, and so soothing he could almost feel the peace spreading through him. She had given him rest, and eased his struggle against the fever burning him alive. And she had saved Lozun's baby, when Jacali had said the child was so near to the spirit world there had been no breath left in her body. The white woman's magic was true, and the white warrior knew her worth, guarding her well. That was good.
Then this other white man had come, and pointed his weapon at the white warrior, and tied him with rope like a captive. Jacali had been enraged, and had tried to get him to shoot the new intruder, but he had waited, wanting to see what would happen. The three white people had sat down and made many of their strange-sounding words, and then the old one had cut the ropes from about the white warrior and now they were riding out together. Yes, the white eyes were truly strange people. As grateful as he was to the magic woman, he was glad to see them go.

But they would be traveling east, through the land of his people, and perhaps they would need his protection. There were few white eyes the People could call "friend"; it would be a dishonor to him if he allowed them to be killed. So he gave the beaded amulet and his words to Jacali, and she carried them to the magic woman whose pale hair framed her face like the sun. The old white eyes knew some of the words of the People, and he gave them to the magic woman as Jacali spoke them. And the magic woman smiled. Beside her, the white warrior watched everything with his sharp eyes, guarding his woman as he should.

The warrior was glad to see them ride out of his camp.

Annie turned the beaded amulet over and over in her hands, tracing the intricate pattern. It was an exquisite piece of work, and Atwater had explained that it was the equivalent of a safe-conduct pass. That wasn't it literally, but it was as close as he could come. The explanation satisfied her.

It would take them weeks to get to New Orleans; they had to cross the whole of New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana. Atwater had mentioned taking the train, but Rafe had sharply vetoed the idea, which had completely soured the lawman's mood.

When they were out of sight of the Apache camp, Atwater abruptly swung the shotgun on Rafe. As he hadn't returned Rafe's weapons, there wasn't a damn thing Rafe could do about it except face the marshal with cold fury in his eyes. "Don't reckon I need to worry about getting to New Orleans," he said.

"Oh, we're still goin'," Atwater said. "It's just that I don't quite trust you to stay put. Now, I did warn you that I don't take kindly to bein' made a fool of, but people have been known not to take my warnings. I'm goin' to remove temptation from your path, so to speak. Put your hands behind your back."

Rafe did, his face set. Annie wheeled her gelding close by and Atwater gave her a warning look. "Keep your distance, ma'am. This is the way it has to be."

"But there's no need," she protested. "We want to get this settled a lot more than you do. Why would we run?"

He shook his head. "No use arguin'. Don't reckon I'd be much of a lawman if I took every outlaw at his word when he swore not to run."

"Let it drop, Annie," Rafe said tiredly. "It won't kill me."

She knew that, but she also knew from experience just how uncomfortable it was, and Rafe had tied her hands in front of her rather than behind. She thought of trying to ambush Atwater herself, but they needed him; he had the authority to get things accomplished, and surely even the people who were after Rafe would think twice before shooting a U.S. marshal.

When they made camp that night, Atwater didn't even release Rafe so he could eat; Annie had to feed him. She was exhausted after the long days of taking care of the Apaches, and could barely stay awake long enough to eat her own meal. As soon as the dishes were cleaned she got a blanket and rolled up in it between the two men. Rafe's hard face told her that he didn't like the new sleeping arrangements at all, but she could hardly snuggle up against him with Atwater there. She held her breath, but he didn't say anything. Instead he chose to bed down within arm's reach of her, and she gave a little sigh of relief that he would be so close.

He lay down on his side, facing her, his bound hands behind his back. "Will you be able to sleep?" she asked with soft concern in her drowsy voice.

"I'm so tired I could sleep standing up," he replied. She wasn't certain she could believe him, but she was too tired to make certain. She wished she was closer to him. After these weeks of being with him, she felt lost without those hard arms wrapped around her while they slept. It helped that he was at least close enough to touch if she should reach out her hand.

She went to sleep easily, but Rafe lay awake for a while, thinking, trying to ignore the ache in his arms and shoulders. He wondered if she was pregnant. He thought she was, but would have to wait impatiently until nature confirmed it. The conviction that she carried his baby only intensified the twin instincts of possessiveness and protectiveness. If he had his way, she would never sleep more than an arm's length from him again. Taking care of Annie was the most important job he'd ever had in his life.

They were going to New Orleans. The reality of it was a little hard to take. He had spent so many years running, consumed by bitterness and his sense of betrayal, that the sudden reversal was disorienting. Of course, the ropes biting into his wrists and the uncomfortable strain on his shoulders reminded him that not everything had changed, after all. As far as Atwater was concerned, there was something here that needed investigating, but he still considered Rafe an outlaw. Atwater was a funny man, hard to figure. He had a reputation as a real hard case, as willing to bring his man in dead

as alive, as long as he brought him in, but the marshal had simply listened to Annie's explanation and decided, just like that, to see if maybe it was all true. It felt strange, after those years on the run, but for the first time Rafe had a sense of real hope. When Atwater saw those papers in New Orleans, he'd know that Rafe was telling the truth, and since the marshal had federal connections he could probably do something to get the murder charges dropped.

Providence sure manifested itself in some strange shapes, but Rafe had to admit that the lean, cantankerous, droopy-eyed marshal was the answer to his prayers.

Atwater lay awake, watching the stars overhead and thinking. What in hell had he gotten himself into, agreeing to take McCay to New Orleans to check out that story of his? This was Rafe McCay, not some farm boy, sheer practicality told him that he'd have to untie the man occasionally, and if McCay took it in his head to escape Atwater had no doubt he'd find a way to do it. Damn it, why didn't he just take the outlaw to the nearest town and lock him up? He could manage to get McCay a hundred miles or so, but hell, New Orleans had to be around a thousand miles away. This was definitely not one of his better ideas.

But he'd committed himself and he knew he wouldn't change his mind, even though he also knew he couldn't, by himself, keep McCay from escaping somewhere during those thousand miles. After all, he had the doc to help him, and the only way Atwater could prevent that was to tie her up too, and that would bring up more problems than he thought he could handle. Besides, she wasn't a criminal, even though she'd been riding with McCay, so it wouldn't be right to treat her like one.

Why not just accept that somewhere down the line he was going to have to trust McCay and untie him? They sure as hell couldn't ride through a town with the man trussed up like that; people took notice of things like that, and attracting notice was something Atwater didn't want to do. Well, he'd think on it some. Right now he didn't feel certain enough in his mind to let McCay loose.

It wasn't the most comfortable thought for a lawman to have, but Atwater had learned years ago that the law and justice weren't always the same thing. He remembered a woman who had died a few years back when some drunk cowboys, hoorahing a town, had raced a freight wagon down a street in El Paso and run over her. The law had said it was an accident, and let the

cowboys go. The grief-stricken husband had taken his rifle and killed several of the cowboys. The man had obviously been deranged with grief and hadn't known what he was doing. Atwater figured that was justice.
His own wife had died back in '49, caught in a shoot-out between a couple of drunk miners in California. In that case, justice and the law had marched together, and he'd been able to see both of them swinging from a rope. It hadn't brought Maggie back, but knowing that justice had been served had kept him from going crazy with grief himself. To Atwater's way of thinking, everything had to balance out; that was justice. He figured his job as a lawman was to keep the scales balanced. Sometimes it wasn't easy, and sometimes it was a damn pain in the ass, like now.
He wished he hadn't noticed that McCay looked at Annie the way he himself used to look at his own sweet Maggie.

CHAPTER 18

"We're getting married," Rafe said grimly.
Annie lowered her eyes. They were in a hotel room in El Paso; Rafe had stepped inside with her, but the door was still open and she was acutely aware of Atwater standing in the hall, keeping his eye on Rafe. They had been on the trail for six weeks and Atwater had only untied Rafe that morning, muttering a cantankerous warning that he'd shoot first and find out his intentions later if Rafe made any sudden movements. She doubted they would have come into town at all, but they desperately needed supplies and Atwater hadn't been about to leave them while he rode in alone. Rafe had somehow convinced him to check into the hotel so Annie could have a good night's sleep. She knew why he was worried about her.
"Because I'm pregnant." She said it as a statement, because she knew it wasn't a question. She had known for certain for almost a month, since her menses hadn't come, though she had suspected from the very day Rafe had made love to her at the Apache camp. Evidently he had suspected too, for those sharp eyes had noted even the smallest symptom.
She didn't know how she felt, or even how she should feel. Supposedly she should feel relief that he wanted to marry her and give the baby legitimacy, but now she had to wonder, hollowly, if he would have wanted to marry her

if she hadn't been pregnant. It was probably silly of her, under the circumstances, but she would have liked to have been wanted for herself. Rafe saw the hurt in her eyes and instinct led him to the answer she needed to hear. He had paid such close attention to her, looking for the signs, or lack of them, that would signal a pregnancy, that it had become habit for him to study her for the nuances of expression. He took her roughly in his arms and pressed her head against his shoulder, cradling her while he ignored Atwater standing in the hall watching them. "We're getting married now because you're pregnant," he clarified. "If you weren't, I'd want to wait until this mess is cleared up so we could have a proper church wedding—with Atwater giving you away."

She smiled at that last bit. The assurance helped her feelings some, though she couldn't help but think that the subject of marriage had never even come up before. With his arms around her, though, all she could do was close her eyes and relax. It seemed like an eternity since the last time he had held her; all of these weeks on the road they had been constrained by both Atwater's presence and Rafe's bound hands, though Atwater had eventually started tying his hands in front of him. The last two of those weeks she had been burdened by an ever-increasing fatigue, one of the symptoms of early pregnancy, and she had craved his support. It had taken almost more than she could do to stay in the saddle all day.

But now at last she could sleep in a real bed, and she could have a hot bath in a real tub. The luxury of it was almost overwhelming. She did feel a little stifled by having four walls around her and a roof overhead, but that was a tolerable price to pay for the bed and bath.

Rafe felt her relax and rest her weight against him; he slipped his arm under her knees and lifted her. "Why don't you take a nap?" he suggested softly, seeing her eyes already closing. "Atwater and I have something to do."

"I want a bath," she murmured.

"Later. After your nap." He placed her on the bed and she made a sound of pleasure in her throat as she felt the mattress beneath her. He leaned down and kissed her forehead; a little smile fluttered on her lips, then faded as she dropped off to sleep. He regretted that they weren't putting the mattress to better use after those frustrating weeks on the trail, but maybe that would change soon.

He stepped out of the room, closing and locking the door behind him. Atwater scowled at him. "Is she all right?"

"Just tired. You could have given us a minute of privacy," Rafe said, glaring at the lawman.
"I'm paid to see justice done," Atwater replied grouchily. "I ain't paid to trust people." His gaze traveled past Rafe to the closed door. "She needs the rest, poor little thing. I knew we were settin' too hard a pace for her, but you can't just wander through Injun country takin' your time and snimn' the flowers."
"Come with me," Rafe said. "I've got something to do."
"Like what? We're here to get supplies, not traipse all over town. And you can damn sure bet that if you go anywhere, I'm going to be right there behind you."
"I have to find a preacher. We want to get married while we're here."
Atwater scratched his chin, frowning. "I don't advise it, son. You'd have to use your real name, and it ain't exactly unknown."
"I know. I'll just have to take the chance."
"Any particular reason?"
"From here on out, there's more of a chance I'll be recognized, maybe even killed. I want Annie to be my legal wife just in case."
The marshal still wasn't convinced. "Seems to me that gettin' married would just increase those chances. You'd better think it over."
"She's pregnant."
Atwater glared at him for a few seconds, then gestured down the hall toward the stairs. "I guess you're gettin' married, then," he said, and stalked down the hall beside Rafe.
They got lucky with the preacher they found, a tenderfoot newly arrived from Rhode Island who had no idea about the notoriety of the man standing not two feet from him. He gladly agreed to perform the marriage ceremony at six o'clock that evening. Then Rafe insisted on stopping in a dress shop, hoping there would be something already made that Annie could wear for her wedding. There were a few dresses to choose from, and the only one that looked small enough to fit Annie's narrow frame was more serviceable than decorative, but he bought it anyway. It was clean and new, and the blue color was nice.
They started back to the hotel, with Atwater walking just a little behind Rafe so he could keep an eye on him. The marshal's suspicious nature was getting on Rafe's nerves, but he reckoned he could put up with it until they reached New Orleans. It was a small enough price to pay for his freedom.

El Paso was a dirty, bustling, wide-open town, the streets filled with a mixture of humanity from both sides of the border. Rafe kept his hat pulled low over his eyes, hoping he wouldn't be spotted. He didn't see anyone he knew, but there was always a possibility that someone he'd never met would recognize him.

They walked by an alley; Rafe was already half a step past it when he heard the scraping of sudden movement and he whirled instinctively, already going down in a crouch. A pistol barrel was just protruding beyond the wall, and it was aimed at Atwater. In slow motion he saw the marshal grabbing for his pistol, but Rafe knew that he wouldn't get to it in time; Atwater had wasted a precious split second when he had looked first at Rafe. The man's damn suspicious nature would likely get him killed, because he had been so set on keeping Rafe from escaping when he should have been paying attention to what was going on around him.

If Atwater got killed, Rafe wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of getting those charges taken care of before someone put a bullet in his back. Everything was still moving like molasses. He saw the pistol, saw Atwater turning, realized the marshal wouldn't be able to shoot in time—and in the next instant his big, muscled body collided with the marshal, bowling him over as the sound of the shot exploded close to his head. He heard Atwater's grunt of pain, then they hit the sidewalk hard and rolled off it onto the dusty street. He heard men yelling, heard a woman scream, was aware of people scattering. He caught a glimpse of a face in the shadow of the alley and then he had Atwater's pistol in his hand and he was firing, and the man in the alley flopped backward.

Rafe rolled off Atwater and sat up, cocking the hammer again as he scanned the gathering crowd for another threat. He slanted a quick glance at Atwater, who was gingerly sitting up and holding his hand to his head. Blood streaked through the marshal's fingers. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Atwater replied, sounding disgusted. "As okay as a man can be who let himself be blindsided like a dumb greenhorn. Parted my hair for me, but I deserve it." He pulled his bandanna from around his neck and pressed it to the wound.

"You sure as hell do," Rafe agreed. He was totally without sympathy. If Atwater had been paying attention, it wouldn't have happened. He stood and extended his hand to the marshal to help him up, then pushed his way through the crowd gathering around the bushwhacker to kneel by the man's

head. Bloody spittle dripped from his mouth. Lung-shot, Rafe saw. He wouldn't last more than a minute or two.
"Does anyone know who he is?" he asked.
"Don't recognize him right off," someone said. "He might have friends in town, but he's probably just a drifter. We got a lot of strangers riding through."
The man's eyes were open and he was staring at Rafe. His lips moved.
"What's he sayin'?" Atwater asked irritably, going down on one knee on the man's other side. "What did I ever do to him? Can't say as I've ever seen him before."
But the man didn't even glance at Atwater. His lips moved again, and though no sound emerged Rafe could see that his mouth formed the word "McCay." Then he coughed, and a gurgling sound bubbled up from his throat. His legs twitched spasmodically and he died.
Rafe's mouth tightened and he stood up, gripping Atwater's arm to pull him up, too. "Let's go," he said, and practically dragged Atwater out of the alley, leaning down to grab the package containing Annie's dress from the dirt where it had fallen.
"Let go of my arm," Atwater said irritably. "Damn it, you got a grip like a vise. And I'm an injured man, I don't need to be hurryin' along like this. What set your tail on fire?"
"He might have a partner with him." Rafe's voice sounded remote, and his pale eyes were glittering like ice as he examined every face, every shadow they passed.
"Then I'll handle it. I won't be caught by surprise again." Atwater scowled. "You've got my damn pistol."
Silently Rafe tucked it back into the marshal's holster.
Atwater scowled. "Why didn't you use it to escape?"
"I don't want to escape. I want to get to New Orleans and get those papers. You're the only chance I've got of getting my name cleared."
Atwater's frown deepened. Well, he'd known all along that he'd have to trust McCay at some point, but he had still halfway thought that the outlaw would bolt at the first opportunity and he'd have to hunt him down again. McCay had not only just saved his life, he hadn't escaped when he'd had the perfect opportunity. The only reason he wouldn't have done so would be if he'd been telling the truth. What had been a possibility, something that needed checking out, became for Atwater in that instant a definite fact.

McCay wasn't lying. He had been framed for murder, and he was being hunted like a wild animal because of these papers. What had been going on for four years sure as hell wasn't justice, and Atwater was bound and determined to shift the balance.
"I guess I might as well start trusting you," he grumbled.
"Might as well," Rafe agreed.
They had reached the hotel and climbed the stairs to their room, tiptoeing past the room where Annie slept so their footsteps wouldn't awaken her. Atwater poured some water in a bowl and wet his bandanna, then gingerly began washing the crease in his skull. "My head hurts like a son of a bitch," he observed. A minute later he added, "That bushwacker knew who you were. He said your name. So why'd he go after me instead of you?"
"He probably wanted you out of the way so he could collect the bounty. He must have recognized you; you're not exactly unknown in these parts."
Atwater snorted. "I'm just glad he didn't say your name out loud." He peered into the mirror. "Guess the bleedin's stopped. My head's still pounding, though."
"I'll get Annie," Rafe said.
"No need to, unless she can do something about this headache."
His eyes were enigmatic. "She can." He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "I'm going down to the front desk to have water sent up for our baths. I'm not about to get married covered with dust and smelling like a horse. You want to follow me down to make sure I don't run?"
Atwater sighed and waved his hand in dismissal. "I don't reckon," he said, and their gazes met, a look passing between them in which the two men understood each other perfectly.
Rafe arranged for the bathwater first, then returned upstairs. Annie was still sleeping when he let himself back into the room, and he stood beside the bed looking down at her for a moment. God. His baby was growing inside that slim body, already sapping her strength. If he could, he'd carry her around on a cushion for the next eight months. About seven and a halaf months, actually, because it had been six weeks since that time in the Apache camp. Six weeks since he'd made love to her.
He thought about the changes in her body that the coming months would bring, and felt desperate at the thought that he might not be there to see them. Her belly would round out, and her breasts would grow heavy. His shaft lengthened and grew hard at the mental image, and a fleeting grin

touched his mouth. Decent men were expected to leave their wives alone during such a delicate time; guess this proved he wasn't a decent man.
The tub and hot water would be coming up soon and she needed to tend to Atwater before then, so he leaned down and gently shook her awake. She muttered and pushed his hand away. He shook her again. "Wake up, honey. Atwater's had a little accident and needs you."
Her drowsy eyes flew open and she scrambled from the bed. Rafe grabbed her as she swayed, and was almost swamped by the pleasure of holding her again. "Slow down," he murmured. "He isn't hurt bad, just a crease, it left him with a headache."
"What happened?" She pushed her hair away from her face as she reached for her bag. Rafe forestalled her and picked it up himself.
"He got in the way of a stray shot. Nothing serious." No point in worrying her.
In the room next door, she made Atwater sit in a chair while she carefully examined the scalp wound. As Rafe had said, it wasnt serious.
"Sorry to bother you, ma'am," Atwater said apologetically. "It's just a headache. I guess a shot of whiskey would do just as well."
"No, it won't," Rafe said. "Annie, put your hands on his head."
The look she shot him was a little distressed, because she felt both uneasy and unsure about what he'd said about her healing. But she obeyed and gently set her hands on Atwater's skull.
Rafe was watching the marshal's face. At first he looked merely puzzled, then interested, and finally an expression of almost blissful relief spread across his features. "Well, I declare," he sighed. "I don't know what you did, but it sure stopped my headache."
Annie lifted her hands and absently rubbed them together. So it was true. She did have some unexplained power to heal.
Rafe put his arm around her waist. "The wedding's at six o'clock this evening," he said. "I bought you a new dress for the ceremony, and a tub and hot water for a bath are on the way up."
The distraction worked. Her lips parted with pleasure. "A bath? A real bath?"
"A real bath. In a real tub."
He leaned down to get his saddlebags and Annie's dress; Atwater didn't voice a protest at his obvious intentions. Instead the marshal was almost

beaming at them as he absently touched the raw place on his scalp, which somehow wasn't all that sore now.
Annie looked at the saddlebags as he dumped them on the floor in her room. She hadn't missed the implication of his action, either. "What happened?" she asked.
"When Atwater was shot, I didn't try to run," Rafe said in simple explanation. "He decided he might as well trust me."
"He won't tie you up anymore?" Her expression told him how much it had distressed her for him to be bound.
"No." He reached out to touch her hair just as the expected knock sounded on the door. Rafe opened it to admit two half-grown boys, straining under the weight of the tub. Two more boys followed, each carrying two buckets of water that they poured in the tub. They left, and returned a few minutes later with four more buckets of water, this time steaming hot, which were added to the tub. "That'll be four bits, mister," the oldest boy said, and Rafe paid him.
Annie's fingers were flying over her buttons as soon as the door closed behind them. Rafe watched her avidly, his hungry gaze slipping over the pale curves of breast and thigh, the soft curls on her mound. Then she stepped into the water with a voluptuous sigh. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the high lip of the tub.
She hadn't even thought to get the soap. Rafe got it from their saddlebags and dropped it into the water with a small splash. She opened her eyes to smile at him.
"This is heaven," she purred. "Much better than cold streams."
He had some mighty fond memories of a couple of those cold streams. He was growing harder by the second. He began pulling off his clothes, thinking of the fond memories he could have of that tub.
She glanced at the bed as he stepped into the tub. "We'll get to the bed tonight," he promised.
Noah Atwater, U.S. marshal, stood rigidly by her side, all cleaned up and slicked down, and gave her into the protection and care of her new husband.
Annie was a little bemused by it. Rafe had mentioned marriage once, she had lain down to take a nap, and woke a couple of hours later to the news that the wedding would take place in only a couple of more hours. She was wearing a new blue dress, plainly made but it fit well enough. Beneath it,

her body still throbbed from his lovemaking. Six weeks' abstinence had made him… hungry.
His close-cropped black beard suited him. She stole admiring glances at him all during the short ceremony. She wished that her father were alive for this moment, wished that Rafe didn't have a murder charge hanging over his head and an army of assassins looking for him, but even so she was happy. She remembered her terror when Rafe had kidnapped her from Silver Mesa, and marveled at how much the situation had changed during the few short months since then.
Then the ceremony was over, the preacher and his wife were beaming at them, Atwater was surreptitiously wiping his eyes, and Rafe was turning her face up for a warm, hard kiss. She was briefly astonished: why, she was a married woman now! How remarkably simple it had been.
When they reached Austin two weeks later, they checked into another hotel under assumed names. Rafe put Annie to bed again and immediately sought out Atwater. The two weeks since their marriage had seen her strength fade rapidly as morning sickness began to plague her. The trouble was it wasn't limited to the mornings, with the result that she was managing to keep very little food down, and not even the ground ginger powder she'd been taking could settle her stomach.
"We'll have to go the rest of the way by train," he told Atwater. "She can't make it on horseback."
"I know. I been right worried about her myself. She's a doctor, what does she say?"
"She says that she's never again going to pat an expectant mother and tell her that being sick is just part of having a baby." Annie had kept a sense of humor about it. Rafe hadn't. She had been growing thinner by the day.
Atwater scratched his head. "You could leave her here, you know, and we could go on to New Orleans by ourselves."
"No." Rafe was adamant about that. "If anyone heard that I got married and investigates, she'll be in as much danger as I am. More, because she doesn't know how to protect herself."
Atwater glanced down at the gun belt buckled low on Rafe's hips. He had returned Rafe's weapons to him on the theory that two armed men were twice as good as one. If anyone could protect Annie, it was this man.
"Okay," he said. "We'll go by train."

Perhaps it had been the physical exertion of riding that had made Annie so ill, for she began to feel better the next day despite the rocking motion of the train. She had protested the new mode of travel, knowing that Rafe had elected to continue by train because of her, but as usual he'd been as unmovable as a granite wall. Atwater bought some face powder ("Damn humiliatin' thing for a man to be buyin'. Pardon me, ma'am.") and Rafe used it to make his beard gray.

With a bit of the powder dabbed at his temples, he looked very distinguished. Annie was much taken with his appearance, for she thought that was how he would look in twenty years' time.

She had never been to New Orleans before, but she was too tense to appreciate the varied charms of the Crescent City. They checked into another hotel, but it was too late for Rafe to go to the bank and retrieve the documents. Even train travel was tiring, so they ate dinner in the hotel and then retired to their rooms.

"Is Atwater going with you tomorrow?" she asked when they were lying in bed. She had been worrying about it all day.

"No, I'm going alone."

"You'll be careful, won't you?"

He lifted her hand and kissed it. "I'm the most careful man you've ever known."

"Maybe we should make your hair completely gray tomorrow."

"If you want." He was willing to have his entire body powdered if it would relieve her anxiety any. He kissed her fingertips again, and felt the warm tingle that was evidently for him and him alone. No one else felt this from Annie. He figured it was from her response to him. "I'm glad we're married."

"Are you? I seem to be nothing but a nuisance lately."

"You're my wife, and you're pregnant. You aren't a nuisance."

"I've been scared to even think about the baby," she confessed. "So much depends on what happens the next few days. What if something happens to you? What if the papers are gone?"

"I'll be all right. They haven't caught me in four years, they aren't going to catch me now. And if the papers are gone… well, I don't know what we'll do about Atwater, and I don't know what we can do even if the papers are there. Atwater might balk at blackmail."

"I won't," she said, and Rafe heard the determination in her voice.

He left his gun belt at the hotel, though he did carry his spare tucked into his belt at the small of his back Atwater had come up with a coat of more eastern cut for him to wear, as well as another hat Annie powdered his hair and beard. Deciding he was as disguised as it was possible for him to be, he walked the seven blocks to the bank where he had left the documents. It wasn't likely that anyone would notice him, but he carefully watched everyone around him. No one seemed to be displaying any interest in the tall, gray-haired man who moved with pantherish grace.

He knew that it wasn't likely Vanderbilt's men had any inkling of where he'd left the papers; if it had been suspected the documents were in New Orleans, Vanderbilt would have had an army searching the city, including the bank vaults, which weren't proof against influence. And if the documents had been found, the hunt for Rafe wouldn't have been so intense. After all, without the documents to back him up, he had no proof of anything, and who was likely to take his word? Vanderbilt certainly didn't seem to be worrying about Mr. Davis confessing. The ex-Confederate president's word wouldn't carry any weight outside the South, where it might cause a lynching; no, Vanderbilt had nothing to worry about from Mr. Davis.

The easy way out would be to arrange for the documents to be given to Vanderbilt in exchange for the murder charges being dropped, but Rafe didn't like that idea. He didn't want Vanderbilt to walk away unscathed. He wanted the man to pay. He wanted Jefferson Davis to pay. The only thing that bothered him about making certain Mr. Davis suffered for his betrayal was that, all over the South, hundreds of thousands of people had survived because, despite defeat, they had kept their pride intact. He knew his fellow Southerners, knew that fiercely independent pride, and knew also that news of Mr. Davis's betrayal would shatter the pride that was both regional and personal. It wasn't just Mr. Davis who would suffer, it was every man who had fought in the war, every family who had lost a loved one. The folks in the North would have a revenge, for Vanderbilt would be tried for treason and probably shot, but for the Southerners there would be nothing.

When he reached the bank he took out the key to the vault and turned it in his hand. He had kept that key with him for four years, inside his boot. He hoped he would never have to see it again.

He had the key, and he had the name on the bank-vault records. There wasn't any trouble in retrieving the package. He didn't unwrap the oilskin

there in the bank, just tucked it under his coat and walked back to the hotel. He knocked on Atwater's door when he passed it. It opened immediately, and Atwater entered their room with him. Annie was standing rigidly at the foot of the bed, her face white. She relaxed visibly when she saw him, and flew into his arms.
"Any trouble?" Atwater asked.
"Nothing." Rafe took the package from beneath his coat and gave it to the marshal.
Atwater sat down on the bed and carefully unwrapped the oilskin. The sheaf of papers inside was several inches thick, and it took some time to go through them. Rafe waited quietly, just holding Annie. Most of the documents Atwater discarded to the side, but several of them he kept to look over again. When he was finished, he looked at Rafe and let out a long whistle. "Son, I don't know why the bounty on your head isn't ten times what it is. You must be the most wanted man on the face of the earth. You can wreck an empire with this."
Rafe looked cynical. "If the bounty had been much higher, it might have made too many people curious. Someone might have asked questions, the same questions you asked about who Tench was that he was so important."
"And the answer would be that he wasn't, that he was just a nice young feller. Well, it sure made me curious." Atwater looked at the documents again. "That son of a bitch betrayed his country, and caused thousands of people on both sides to be killed. Hanging would be too good for him." For once, he didn't beg Annie's pardon for cursing.
"What do we do now?" Annie asked.
Atwater scratched his head. "I don't rightly know. I'm a lawman, not a politician, and I got a feeling it's gonna take a politician to handle this, damn their slippery souls. Pardon me, ma'am. I don't know the people who have enough power to handle this. For all we know, some of the sons of bitches in Washington, pardon me, ma'am, could have been getting some of the money Vanderbilt made in extra profits. If these papers are used before the murder charges are dropped, then Vanderbilt sure ain't going to use his influence to get them dropped. He'd probably enjoy seein' you hang alongside him. The charges have to be dropped first."
"Wouldn't the existence of these papers make a difference in whether or not Rafe is found guilty?" Annie asked desperately. "You believed us; why wouldn't a jury?"

"I can't say as to that. From what I heard, the case against him is pretty much black and white. He was seen leaving Tilghman's room. Tilghman was then found dead. Some folks might think he murdered Tilghman so he could have those papers and the money all to himself, maybe even to try blackmail. A smart lawyer can turn things around so a man don't even know hisself."
She hadn't thought of that. No, letting Rafe go to trial was too much of a risk.
Atwater was still thinking. "I don't know any politicians," he repeated. "Never wanted to."
Annie picked up some of the papers and began reading. It made her nervous to realize that she was holding history in her hands. She scanned through them and a picture formed in her mind of the man who had written them. Jefferson Davis had been portrayed in the northern papers as a despicable person, but the facts of his life prior to the outbreak of war said differently. He was a graduate of West Point and the son-in-law of Zachary Taylor. He had been a United States senator, and secretary of war under President Pierce. He had been said to possess the finest intellect and most sterling integrity of his age, despite these documents that said otherwise.
"Where is Mr. Davis now?" she asked, without knowing that the question had been forming. It just came out.
Rafe looked blank. The last he'd heard, the ex-Confederate president had been released from prison and had gone to Europe.
Atwater pursed his lips. "Let me see. Seems like I heard tell he's settled in Memphis, with an insurance company or something."
Annie looked back at Rafe. "You know Mr. Davis," she said. "He's a politician."
"Far the losing side," he pointed out ironically.
"Before the war, he was a senator, and on the cabinet. He knows people."
"Why should he help? If anything, he'd turn me in so these papers could be kept private."
"No," she said carefully, "if he has any integrity."
Rafe was enraged. "Are you asking me to trust in the integrity of the man who sold out his country, who caused thousands of people to die needlessly, including my father and brother?"
"Strictly speaking, he didn't do that," Annie argued. "He didn't betray his country, not if you consider his country to be the Confederacy. He took

funds to keep fighting the war so the Confederacy could be preserved."
"And if you'll read those papers again you'll see, in his own handwriting, that he knew it was a useless effort!"
"But he was honor bound to make the effort anyway. That was his job, until the Confederate government dissolved itself and the states rejoined the Union."
"Are you defending him?" Rafe asked, his voice dangerously soft.
"No. I'm saying he's our only chance, the only politician you know who has a vested interest in these papers."
"She has a point," Atwater said. "We could take a steamboat ride up the river to Memphis. Never been on a steamboat before. I heard tell it's a nice way to travel."
Rafe strode to the window and stood looking out at the busy New Orleans street. In four years he'd never been able to get over his anger at and sense of betrayal by President Davis. Maybe that had warped his thinking, maybe not. Going to the man wasn't an option he would ever have considered. But Annie thought it was a viable one, and so did Atwater. Atwater was a shrewd bastard, but the argument that carried the most weight with him was Annie's.
She was his wife and carried his child. That alone made her special, but she wasn't like other people. He hadn't seen a shred of malice in her, not even when he could reasonably have expected it. She had seen ugliness in her life and in her profession, but it hadn't touched the pure inner core of her. Maybe she saw things more clearly than he did right now. Because he trusted her, because he loved her, he sighed and turned from the window.
"We go to Memphis," he said.
"We'll have to be careful," Atwater said. "Ain't no sign that Davis is in on this with Vanderbilt, but he won't want these papers made public either."
Rafe sighed, but remembered Davis's reputation.
Except for this one instance, his integrity had been unblemished. And given the way he had been treated after the war, Mr. Davis couldn't be very sympathetic toward the North. It didn't make any difference anyway. "We don't have a choice. We have to trust him."

CHAPTER 19

It wasn't difficult to find Mr. Davis's house in Memphis, for the ex-Confederate president was a famous personage. He was indeed working with an insurance company, a job provided for him by supporters so the proud man wouldn't be reduced to accepting charity, but quite a comedown for a man who had, for four years, headed a nation.

Rafe and Annie remained secluded in yet another hotel room while Atwater contacted Mr. Davis at his place of business, which seemed the simplest way. Rafe was glad to have Annie all to himself for a while, for even though they had had their own stateroom on the steamboat, Atwater had always been nearby. He wanted to make love to his wife in the daylight, so he could clearly see the subtle changes wrought by pregnancy. As yet her belly was still flat, though it felt taut and her breasts were heavier, the nipples darker. He was entranced, and for a time forgot about Atwater and Mr. Davis, about everything but the magic they had together.

When Atwater returned he was in a disgusted mood. "Refused to even talk to you," he said. "Now, I didn't come right out and say what we had, because there were some folks in the office who could've overheard. But Mr. Davis said he was trying to recover from the war, not relive it, and he didn't think anything could be gained from discussing it yet again. That's his words, not mine. I don't talk like that."

"He'll have to change his mind," Rafe said. His eyes said that he didn't care about Mr. Davis's sensitivity.

Atwater sighed. "He's worn out, true enough. He don't look all that healthy."

"I won't either, at the end of a rope." Then he wished he hadn't said it, because Annie flinched. He patted her knee in apology.

"Well, I'll go back tomorrow," Atwater said. "Maybe I can catch him when there ain't a whole gaggle of folks with one ear cocked toward his office."

The next day Atwater carried a note with him. The note informed Mr. Davis that the people who wished to see him had some of his old papers with them, papers that had been lost during the flight to Texas, right before he was captured.

Mr. Davis read the note and his fine, intelligent eyes went unfocused as he looked back in time to those frantic days six years ago. He carefully folded the note and returned it to Atwater. "Kindly inform these people that I

would be pleased to meet with them at my home for dinner tonight, at eight o'clock. You are included in the invitation, sir."
Atwater nodded, satisfied. "I'll do that," he said.
Annie was so nervous she could barely fasten the blue dress she had worn to be married, and Rafe brushed her hands aside to finish the job himself.
"The dress is getting snug," she said, indicating her waist and bosom. In another month she wouldn't be able to get into it at all.
"Then we'll get you some new dresses," he said, leaning down to kiss her neck. "Or you can just wear my shirts. I'd like that."
She hugged him in sudden panic, as if she could keep him safe within the shelter of her arms. "Why haven't we had any trouble?" she asked. "It worries me."
"Maybe no one expected us to come east—and remember that we traveled through Apache territory. Not only that, they were looking for one man, not two men and a woman."
"Atwater's been a blessing."
"Yeah," he said. "Though I didn't think so when I was sitting in the dirt with my hands tied behind me and that shotgun pointed at my belly." He released her and stepped back. He wasn't nervous, but he was as tense as coiled wire. He didn't look forward to seeing Mr. Davis. It was a meeting he could gladly have foregone the rest of his life.
Mr. Dayis's house was modest, as were his means. He was still sought out by all the people of influence, social and otherwise, and the modest house saw a steady stream of visitors, but that night his only company was a U.S. marshal, a tall man, and a rather slight woman.
Mr. Davis examined Rafe's face carefully, before Atwater could introduce him, and then held out his hand. "Ah, yes, Captain McCay. How have you been, sir? It has been several years since last I saw you, I believe early in '65."
The phenomenal memory didn't take Rafe by surprise. He forced himself to shake the ex-president's hand. "I am well, sir." He introduced Annie, who also shook hands with Mr. Davis. The ex-president's hand was thin and dry, and she held it a moment longer than necessary. Mr. Davis's extraordinarily fine eyes looked thoughtful, and he glanced at their clasped hands.
Rafe's eyelids lowered as he felt a surge of ridiculous jealousy. Had Annie been sending a message with her touch? Mr. Davis's expression had visibly softened.

"Marshal Atwater didn't give me your name when he requested this meeting. Please, won't you sit down? Would you care for something to drink before dinner?"
"No, thank you," Rafe said. "Marshal Atwater didn't tell you who I am because of the chance that my name might have been overheard. I'm wanted for murder, sir, and the reason is these papers."
Annie watched the thin, ascetic face of the ex-president as Rafe told him everything that had happened in the past four years. It was the most intelligent face she had ever seen, with a high, wide forehead and a certain nobility that transcended the flesh. He had been labeled a traitor to the nation by northern newspapers and she supposed she had to consider him so, but she could also see how he had been chosen to lead the government of the breakaway states. There was a certain frailty about him, no doubt caused by two years of imprisonment, and a sadness deep in those fine eyes.
When Rafe had finished Mr. Davis didn't speak, but held out his thin hand. Rafe gave him the documents. He leafed through them in silence for several minutes, then leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He looked unutterably weary.
"I had thought these destroyed," he said after a moment. "Would that they had been; Mr. Tilghman would still be alive, and your own life wouldn't have been ruined."
"Disclosure wouldn't make Vanderbilt's life very comfortable, either."
"No, I can see that it wouldn't."
"Vanderbilt was stupid," Rafe said. "Surely he foresaw that these documents could be used against him, to obtain money."
"I would not have done so," Mr. Davis said. "They must be used, however, to obtain justice for you."
"Why did you do it?" Rafe suddenly asked, bitterness apparent in his tone. "Why did you take the money, knowing it was useless? Why prolong the war?"
"I had wondered if you'd read my private notes." Mr. Davis sighed. "My job, sir, was to keep the Confederacy alive. The thoughts I put down in my private notes were my deepest fears, yet there was always the chance that the North would have grown tired of war and demanded an end to it. So long as the Confederacy existed, I served it. It was not a complicated decision, though it is one I bitterly regret. If foresight were as sharp as

hindsight, think what tragedies could have been avoided. Hindsight is, unfortunately, a useless commodity, good only for regrets."
"My father and brother died the last year of the war," Rafe said.
"Ah." Mr. Davis's eyes darkened with sorrow. "You have just cause for your anger. I apologize to you, sir, and offer you my sincere condolences, though I am certain you don't desire them. If I may make amends to you in any way, I will do so."
Atwater broke in. "You can help us think of a way to get those murder charges dropped. Just revealing Vanderbilt as a traitor won't do it."
"No, I can see that it wouldn't," Mr. Davis said. "Let me think on it."
"You must go back to New York," he said the next day. "Contact Mr. J. P. Morgan; he's a banker. I have written a letter to him." He passed the folded letter to Rafe. "Take the relevant documents pertaining to Mr. Vanderbilt's donations to the Confederacy to the meeting with you. I would like to keep the remaining documents, if you don't mind."
Rafe glanced down at the letter. "What's in it?" he asked bluntly.
"Mr. Vanderbilt has a great deal of money, Captain McCay. The only way to fight him is with more money. Mr. Morgan can do this. He is a young man of rather stringent morals, but an extremely astute businessman. He is building a banking empire that can, I believe, contain Mr. Vanderbilt's influence. I have outlined the situation to Mr. Morgan and asked for his assistance, which I have reason to believe he will give," Annie sighed when Rafe told her they had to go to New York. "Do you think the baby will be born on a train somewhere?" she asked whimsically. "Or perhaps on a steamboat?"
He kissed her and stroked her stomach. He hadn't been a very good husband so far, dragging her all over the country just at the time when she most needed peace and quiet. "I love you," he said.
She jerked back to stare at him, her dark eyes widening with shock. Her heart leaped and she put a hand to her chest. "What?" she whispered.
Rafe cleared his throat. He hadn't planned to say what he had, the words had come out all by themselves. He hadn't realized how naked and vulnerable that short sentence would make him feel, or how uncertain of himself. She had married him, but she hadn't had a lot of choice, since she was having a baby. "I love you," he said again, and held his breath. She was pale, but a radiant smile broke over her face. "I—I didn't know," she whispered. She flung herself into his arms, clinging as if she would never let go-

The constriction in his chest eased, and he could breathe again. He carried her to the bed and placed her on it, then stretched out beside her. "You can say the words, too, you know," he prompted. "You never have."
The smile grew even more radiant. "I love you." There were no extravagant declarations, no analysis, just the simple words, and they were the right ones for both of them. They lay together for a long time, absorbing each other's nearness. He smiled as his chin rested on top of her head. He should have known, that very first time when he had forced her to lie down on the blanket and share her body heat with him on a cold night, and he had wanted her then despite his illness, that she would come to mean more to him than anything else in his life ever had or ever would.
A week later the three of them sat in J. P. Morgan's richly paneled office in New York City, the place where it all had started for Rafe, four years before. Morgan tapped the letter from Jefferson Davis in his hand, thinking how curiosity could motivate men to do unusual things. It had been obvious to Morgan from the start that these people wanted a favor from him and he usually refused to see such people, but his secretary had said they had a letter from Jefferson Davis, the former president of the Confederacy, and sheer curiosity had led him to grant an interview. Why would Mr. Davis write to him? He had never met the man, had strongly disapproved of Southern politics, but Mr. Davis's reputation was intriguing. J. P. Morgan was a man who held integrity to be the most important virtue.
The banker listened to Marshal Atwater outline the circumstances, and only then did he open the letter from Jefferson Davis. He was thirty-four years old, Rafe's age, but already laying the groundwork for a banking empire that he fully intended to control. He was the son of a banker, and understood the subtleties of the business from top to bottom. He even looked like a banker, his form already showing signs of a prosperous stoutness. His intensity shown in his eyes.
"This is incredible," he finally said, laying the letter aside and picking up the documents to study them. He looked at Rafe with the sort of wary respect one gives a dangerous animal. "You've managed to elude what amounts to an army for four years. I think you must be a formidable man in your own right, Mr. McCay."
"We all have our special battlegrounds, Mr. Morgan. Yours are in boardrooms."

"Mr. Davis thinks the boardroom is the way to control Mr. Vanderbilt. I think he is right; money is the one thing Mr. Vanderbilt understands, the one thing he respects. I will be honored to assist you, Mr. McCay. The evidence here is… sickening. I trust you will be able to evade the hunters for another few days?"

It took J. P. Morgan eight days to arrange the kind of backing he needed, but he didn't intend to make a move without it. The way to win battles was not to fight them until you had the weapons needed to win. J. P. Morgan had those weapons when he made an appointment to meet with Vanderbilt, and he already had the idea of another battle forming in his mind, one that would take years to win, but these papers had given him the edge he needed.

Annie was almost ill with tension. Everything hinged on this meeting; the next half hour would decide if she and Rafe could ever live a normal life or would forever be on the run. Rafe had wanted her to remain behind, but she had too much at stake to be able to do so and in the end he relented, perhaps realizing that the apprehension of waiting would be worse on her than knowing what was happening.

Rafe's pistol rested comfortably in the small of his back. On the way into Commodore Vanderbilt's office, he noted every employee, every room. Atwater did the same. "Do you see that Winslow feller?" he hissed, and Rafe shook his head.

Vanderbilt's office was luxuriously furnished, in a far more elaborate style than J. P. Morgan's. The banker's office was intended to convey prosperity and trust; Cornelius Vanderbilt's was intended to showcase his wealth. There was a silk carpet on the floor and a crystal chandelier overhead; the chairs were of the finest leather, the paneling of the richest mahogany. Annie had almost expected to see a cruelly leering devil sitting in the big chair behind the enormous desk, but instead it was occupied by a white-haired old man, growing increasingly frail with age. Only his eyes still hinted of the ruthlessness he had used in building his empire.

Mr. Vanderbilt had looked in surprise at the four people who had entered his office, for he had been under the impression that he would be seeing only Mr. Morgan, a banker of sufficient power that he had deigned to receive him. Nevertheless he offered them the amenities of a host before the conversation turned to business. It always turned to business, and for what other reason would a banker have requested an appointment with him? It

was a matter of pride to him that Mr. Morgan had come to him, rather than expecting that he visit the banker's offices. It revealed exactly who had the most power. He took out his watch and glanced at it, a hint that his time was valuable.

Mr. Morgan noticed the action. "We won't use much of your time, sir. May I introduce U.S. Marshal Noah Atwater, and Mr. and Mrs. Rafferty McCay."

A federal marshal? Vanderbilt scrutinized the older man, a rather unprepossessing individual. He dismissed him as unimportant. "Yes, yes, get on with it," he said impatiently.

All four of them had been watching him closely, and Annie was bewildered by his total lack of response to Rafe's name. Surely a man who had spent a sizable fortune trying to find someone and kill him would remember his quarry's name.

Silently Mr. Morgan placed the documents on Vanderbilt's desk. These were not the originals, but faithful copies. What mattered was that the Commodore knew they had the information.

Vanderbilt picked up the first page with a slightly bored manner. It took him only a few seconds to realize what he was reading and his gaze jumped back to Mr. Morgan, then to Atwater. He sat up very straight. "I see. How much do you want?"

"This isn't blackmail," Mr. Morgan said. "At least not for money. Am I correct in assuming that you didn't recognize Mr. McCay's name?"

"Of course not," Vanderbilt snapped. "Why should I?"

"Because you've been trying to have him killed for four years."

"I've never heard of him. Why should I want to have him killed? And what does he have to do with these papers?"

Mr. Morgan studied the older man for a moment. Vanderbilt hadn't even made an effort to deny the information contained in those papers. "You're a traitor," he said softly. "This information would have you in front of a firing squad."

"I'm a businessman. I make a profit. This"—he indicated the papers—"was a paltry sum compared to the profits it generated. The North was in no danger of losing the war, Mr. Morgan."

Vanderbilt's reasoning made Rafe tense; he wanted very much to slam his fist into the man's face.

Very concisely, Mr. Morgan related the events of four years ago.

Vanderbilt's eyes flicked to Rafe, then to Atwater again. Annie realized that

he expected to be arrested. When Mr. Morgan had finished, Vanderbilt said impatiently, "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't have anything to do with all that."
"You didn't know that the papers had survived, and that young Mr. Tilghman knew where they were?"
Vanderbilt glared at him. "Winslow informed me of that, yes. I told him to take care of it. I assumed he had, as that was the last I heard of it."
"Winslow. That would be Parker Winslow, I take it?"
"Yes. He's my assistant."
"We'd like to speak with him, please."
Vanderbilt rang a bell, and his secretary opened the door. "Fetch Winslow," the Commodore barked, and the man withdrew.
The door opened some five minutes later. The inhabitants of the room had been sitting in thick silence, waiting for the new arrival. Rafe deliberately didn't turn around when he heard footsteps approaching. He pictured Winslow as he had been four years ago: slim, impeccably groomed, his blond hair just going gray. The perfect businessman. Who would ever have thought Parker Winslow was a murderer?
"You sent for me, sir?"
"I did. Do you know any of these gentlemen, Winslow?"
Rafe looked up just as Parker Winslow's bored gaze touched him. The other man looked startled, then afraid. "McCay," he said.
"You killed Tench Tilghman, didn't you?" Atwater asked softly, leaning forward as all his hunting instincts were awakened. "So he could never dig up those papers. You tried to kill McCay too, but when that failed you made it look as if McCay had killed him. It would have been a perfect plan, yessir, perfect, except McCay escaped. The men you hired couldn't catch him. You put a bounty on his head, and kept raisin' it until every bounty hunter in the country was after him, and they still couldn't catch him."
"Winslow, you're a goddamned idiot," Vanderbilt snapped.
Parker Winslow looked wildly around the room, then back to his employer. "You told me to take care of it."
"I wanted you to get those papers, you stupid son of a bitch, not commit murder!"
Rafe was smiling as he came out of his chair. It wasn't a pleasant smile. The Commodore shrank from it; J. P. Morgan was shocked by it. Parker

Winslow was frankly terrified. Atwater settled back in his chair, content to watch.
At first Winslow tried to evade the punishing fists, then he tried to fight back. Both were futile efforts. Calmly, deliberately, Rafe broke the man's nose and knocked out his teeth, shut both of his eyes, then began working on his ribs. Each blow was as precise as a surgeon's scapel. The sound of ribs cracking was audible to everyone in the room. The secretary had opened the door at the first sound of a body thumping to the floor, then hastily closed it again at Vanderbilt's barked order.
Rafe stopped only when Winslow was lying unconscious on the floor. Annie got to her feet, and Rafe whirled with the savage grace of a predator. "No," he said flatly. "You aren't going to help him."
"Of course I'm not," Annie agreed, reaching for her husband's fists and holding them in her own. She lifted them to her lips and kissed the bruised knuckles. There were limits to her oath as a physician, she had found. It hadn't been very civilized of ner, but she had enjoyed every blow Rafe had landed. Rafe shivered at her touch and his eyes darkened.
Winslow began to moan, but after an appalled look at him not even Mr. Morgan paid him any attention. "I don't suppose this settled the matter," Vanderbilt said. "I repeat my original question: how much?"
J. P. Morgan's demands were short. Any further action against Rafferty McCay would result in the Confederate papers being made public, and the Commodore would face a charge of treason. The cooperation of the banks in any future Vanderbilt enterprise depended on McCay's name being cleared of all charges, immediately. Whether the Commodore had had any knowledge of Parker Winslow's actions was irrelevant; it was Vanderbilt money that had been behind it, and his own dishonorable actions that had precipitated it. In return, the papers would remain private, in a location unknown to Vanderbilt. Any action taken against any of the people in the room would result in immediate disclosure.
Vanderbilt's eyes were hooded as he listened to the demands and conditions. He was boxed in and he knew it. "All right," he said abruptly. "The charges will be dropped within twenty-four hours."
"There's also the problem of getting the word out to the men Winslow has hunting Mr. McCay."
"It will be taken care of."
"By you, personally."

Vanderbilt hesitated, then nodded. "Anything else?"
Mr. Morgan considered the question. "Yes, I believe there is. I don't think it would be unreasonable for some sort of restitution to be made to Mr. McCay. A hundred thousand dollars, in fact, seems very reasonable."
"A hundred thousand!" Vanderbilt glared at the younger man.
"As opposed to a firing squad."
Behind them, Atwater chuckled. The sound was loud in the silence of the room.
Vanderbilt swelled with impotent fury. "Very well," he finally said.
"He didn't have any regret or shame at all for betraying his country," Annie said. She couldn't understand someone like that. "All he cared about was his profit."
"That's his god," Rafe said. He still felt dazed. It had been not quite one day, but J. P. Morgan had called at the hotel less than an hour before with the news that Vanderbilt had made good on his promise and that the murder charges against him had been dropped. Mr. Morgan suggested that they remain in New York for a time so the word would have time to spread. He had also said that a hundred thousand dollars had been deposited in Rafe's name, at his own bank, of course.
"Do you mind?" Annie asked quietly. "That he isn't going to be brought to justice?"
"Hell, yes, I mind," he growled, then went to sit down beside her on the bed where she was resting. "For prolonging the war, I'd not only like to see him shot, I'd want to pull the trigger myself."
"I'm not certain I believe he didn't know what Winslow had done."
"It's possible that he sacrificed Winslow without even bunking, but on the other hand Winslow didn't start yelling that Vanderbilt had been behind the entire scheme, so the odds are he really didn't know. It doesn't make much difference. He was at the root of the entire situation."
"No one will ever know what he did, and he'll just continue to get richer and richer. It makes me so angry when I think what they did to you."
He rubbed his hand slowly over her belly. "I never would have met you if it hadn't been for Vanderbilt's treason. Maybe fate evens things out."
Thousands of men dead, all for one man's greed. But if things had been different, he wouldn't have Annie now. Maybe things just happened, maybe there was no great cosmic scale in which evil and good were carefully balanced. He had to live in the present rather than waste any more time with

regrets and bitterness. He not only had Annie, he would be a father soon, an event that was already looming large in his mind. But thanks to Atwater, and Jefferson Davis, and J. P. Morgan, and most of all thanks to Annie, he was not only a free man, he was well off financially and could take care of Annie the way he wanted.

"What will happen to Parker Winslow?" she asked.

"I don't know," Rafe said, but he had a good idea. Atwater had left the hotel without saying where he was going. Sometimes justice worked best in the dark.

Atwater slipped into Winslow's residence with the stealth of a man who had a great deal of practice in getting around without attracting attention. He could make out the rich furnishings as he moved from room to room; the damn varmint had been living well while Rafe McCay had been forced to live like an animal.

The marshal couldn't think of the last time he'd had a friend. Not since sweet Maggie had died, probably. He'd lived a solitary life, in his support of law and order and his own pursuit of justice. But, damn it, Rafe and Annie had become his friends. They had spent long hours talking around campfires, watching each other's backs, planning and worrying together. Things like that tended to bond people together. As a friend and as a lawman, and by his own personal code, he needed to see that justice was served.

He found Winslow's bedroom and entered it as silently as a shadow. It was a hard thing he had to do, and for a moment he hesitated, staring at the sleeping man in the bed. Winslow wasn't married, so there wasn't a missus there to be terrified out of her wits, and Atwater was glad. He thought about waking Winslow, but discarded the idea. Justice didn't demand that the man know of his own death, only that the deed be done. Very calmly, Noah Atwater drew his pistol and evened the scales of justice.

He was gone from the house before the servants sleeping in the attics could rouse themselves and scramble into their clothing, not certain what it was they had heard. Atwater's face was curiously blank as he walked through the night-darkened streets, his thoughts turned inward. His execution of Winslow had been nothing less than justice, but maybe his own motivation had been more complicated than that; maybe, because of the way he felt about Rafe and Annie, there had been a bit of revenge in him, too. And maybe it was time he turned in his badge, because when other things began

to matter, then he couldn't consider himself a pure servant of the law any longer. And after what had happened to Rafe, and seeing how money and power had so successfully manipulated the system to ruin the life of an innocent man branded "outlaw," Atwater couldn't say he believed in the law the way he used to, even if he would always be a man of justice in his heart. But he was satisfied. The scales were balanced.

CHAPTER 20

Atwater slammed into the ranch house, his face pale with anxiety. Rafe stepped into the hall to meet him. His own face was tense, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up.

"Can't find him nowheres," Atwater growled. "What good's a doctor if he ain't never around when a body needs him? He's probably curled up somewhere with a damn bottle."

Atwater's assessment was probably true. The citizens of Phoenix, whose population had exploded since the first house had been built a year before, were rapidly coming to the same conclusion and turning more and more to Annie with their medical problems. That wasn't much help to Annie, though, who was now herself in need of a doctor.

"Keep looking," he said. He didn't know what else to do. Even a drunk doctor had to be better than no doctor.

"Rafe," Annie called from inside the bedroom. "Noah? Come in here, please."

Atwater looked uneasy at entering a room where a woman was in labor, but the two men went into the room Rafe had just left. Rafe went to the bed and took her hand. How could she look so normal when he was frankly terrified? But she smiled at him, and adjusted her bulk more comfortably on the mattress.

"Forget the doctor," she told Atwater. "Just fetch Mrs. Wickenburg. She's had five of her own and has a good head on her shoulders; she'll know what to do. And even if she doesn't, I do." She smiled at Rafe. "It'll be all right."

Atwater was already leaving the ranch house at a run. Another contraction began low in Annie's belly and she grabbed Rafe's hands, placing them flat on her tightening abdomen so he could feel the power of his child's efforts

to be born. He turned absolutely white, but when the contraction eased Annie lay back with a smile. "Isn't it wonderful?" she breathed.
"Hell, no, it isn't wonderful!" he barked. He looked sick. "You're in pain!"
"But our baby will be here soon. I've delivered babies, but obviously I've never experienced it from this position before. It's really interesting; I'm learning a lot."
Rafe felt like tearing his hair out. "Annie, damn it, this isn't a class in medical school."
"I know, darling." She stroked his hand. "I'm sorry you're upset, but truly, everything is perfectly fine." She was surprised at how upset he was, but she realized she should have expected it. No expectant mother in history could have been more cosseted than she had been on the long trip across the country to Phoenix, a brand-new city with brand-new attitudes, not only by Rafe but by Atwater, too, who had resigned his job as marshal and, at Rafe's invitation, joined them as a partner in the sprawling ranch they now owned in the Salt River Valley.
He hadn't wanted her to begin her medical practice until after the baby was born, but time passed slowly for her with nothing to occupy her but the increasing ripeness of her body. So far it was only women who had come to her, women with personal medical problems or their own pregnancies, and sometimes they brought their children. Most people still went to Dr. Hodges, who had an unfortunate fondness for the bottle, but several women had told her that, after her baby was born and she was able to begin a full-time practice, they intended to make certain their entire imilies came to her. She was glad it was winter, so she wasn't having to go through labor during the intense heat. During late summer they had had to sleep out on the veranda, though the adobe ranch house was built along Spanish lines, with arches and clean open spaces, and high ceilings to alleviate the heat. She loved her new home. Everything about her new life seemed perfect. Most of all, there was Rafe. He was still impossibly stubborn and autocratic, still the lean, dangerous man with pale crystal eyes who could make most people shiver with just a look, but she knew the passion and sensuality in him, and had no doubts of the strength of his love. There had been days during the autumn when he had carried her out to a certain place where they could lie unseen, with only the great blue sky overhead and the warm earth beneath them, and they had made love naked on a blanket spread on the ground. Her pregnancy had made her skin acutely sensitive and he had reveled in her

increased sensuality. She had at first been shy of revealing her body as her abdomen swelled larger, but Rafe had loved feeling the movements of his child within her.

Her contractions had begun during the night, very mild twinges that had kept her awake but weren't really uncomfortable, and progressed slowly. She had expected that, since it was her first baby. By noon the contractions had begun to feel sharper, and she had told Rafe she thought the baby would be born that day. To her surprise, he had immediately panicked, and so had Atwater, who had rushed off in search of Dr. Hodges.

"My water hasn't even broken yet," she said. "There's plenty of time."

He looked grim. "You mean this is going to go on a lot longer?"

She bit her lip, knowing that he would find it unforgivable if she smiled. "I hope not too much longer, but it will probably be tonight before it's born."

She wasn't looking forward to the next several hours either, but she was anxious to get it over with and actually hold her baby in her arms. She felt an incredible bond with the little creature who had been growing inside her, this child of Rafe's.

The next contraction felt stronger and came sooner than she had expected it. She breathed carefully until it was over, pleased that things were progressing. Part of her was still a doctor, and academically she found it interesting. She suspected, however, that before it was over she would totally forget about how interesting it was and be just another woman submerged in the struggle to give birth.

It was another two hours before Atwater returned with Mrs. Wickenburg, a sturdy woman with a pleasant face, and during those two hours Annie's labor had rapidly become stronger. Rafe hadn't left her side.

Water was boiled, at Annie's instructions, and the scissors for cutting the cord dropped in the boiling water. Mrs. Wickenburg was calm and capable. Rafe carefully lifted Annie so that thick towels could be placed under her. She managed a smile at him. "I think it's time you left now, darling. It won't be much longer."

He shook his head. "I was there when the baby got started," he said. "I'll be here when it's born. I'm not leaving you to do this alone."

"Just don't faint or get in the way," Mrs. Wickenburg said comfortably.

He didn't. When the contractions came hard and fast, Annie clung to his hands with a grip that left them bruised and swollen the next day. He ground his teeth whenever she groaned aloud, and he held her shoulders

when the great final pain seized her in its grip and didn't relent until a tiny, blood-smeared infant slid out of her body and into Mrs. Wick-enburg's waiting hands.
"My goodness, that was a good birth," Mrs. Wickenburg said. "It's a girl, and what a sweet little thing she is. Look how tiny! My last one was twice this size."
Annie relaxed, sucking in air with great gulps. Her child was already crying, a ridiculous mewing sound like a kitten. Rafe looked dazed as he stared at the baby. He was still holding Annie, and suddenly his grip tightened as he leaned his head down against hers. "God," he said in a ragged voice.
Mrs. Wickenburg tied off the cord and cut it, then quickly cleaned the baby and gave her to Rafe to hold while the afterbirth came and she took care of Annie.
Rafe was entranced. He couldn't take his eyes off his daughter. His two hands were bigger than she was. She wriggled and jerked her legs and her arms waved erratically. She wasn't crying now, but he was fascinated by the expressions fleeting across the tiny face as she frowned and puckered her mouth and yawned. "I'll be damned," he said tightly. Annie's daughter. He felt as if he'd been punched in the chest, much the same sensation he got at times when he looked at Annie.
"Let me see her," Annie breathed, and with exquisite care he placed the baby in her arms.
Raptly, Annie examined the minute features, loving the downy curve of cheek and perfect rosebud mouth. The baby yawned again, and for a minute her vague, unfocused eyes opened. Annie drew in her breath at the light grayish blue color. "She's going to have your eyes! Look, they're already grayish."
To him the baby looked like Annie, with the same delicately formed features already detectable. She did have black hair, though; her tiny head was covered with it. His coloring, Annie's features. A blending of them, formed during a moment of such intense ecstasy it had changed something inside him forever.
"Let her nurse," Mrs. Wickenburg suggested. "It'll help start your milk."
Annie laughed. She had been so fascinated examining her daughter that she had forgotten to do what she had always told her patients to do. A little shyly she opened her nightgown and exposed one swollen breast. Mrs.

Wickenburg discreetly turned away. Rafe reached out and cupped the warm, satiny mound, lifting it up as Annie settled the infant in the crook of her arm, then guided the turgid nipple to the birdlike mouth and rubbed the baby's lips. Annie jumped as the baby instinctively rooted at her breast and began sucking. Hot prickles spread through her breast.

Rafe laughed at the slurping sounds. His pale eyes were shining. "Hurry up with dinner," he advised his daughter. "You have an uncle who's wearing a rut in the floor waiting to meet you. Or maybe he'll be a grandpa to you. We'll have to work that out later."

Ten minutes later he carried the blanket-wrapped infant out to where Atwater was indeed pacing, his hat crushed to a shapeless mass where he had rolled it in his hands. "It's a girl," Rafe said. "They're both fine."

"A girl." Atwater peered at the tiny, sleeping face. He swallowed. "Well, I'll be damned. A girl." He swallowed again. "Jesus, Rafe, how in hell are we goin' to keep all those randy young bucks away from her? I got to think on this."

Rafe grinned as he pulled Atwater's arms out and placed the baby in them. Atwater looked totally panicked and his entire body stiffened. "Don't do that!" he yelped. "I might drop her."

"You'll get used to it," Rafe said, without any sympathy. "You've held puppies, haven't you? She's not much bigger."

Atwater scowled at him. "I ain't holdin' her by the scruff, either." He cuddled the baby to him. "Damn shame, your own youngun and you wantin' to handle her like a puppy."

Rafe's grin grew bigger, and Atwater looked down at the sleeping baby lying so contentedly in his arms. After a minute he smiled, and made a rocking motion. "Guess it comes kinda natural, don't it? What's her name?"

Rafe's mind went blank. He and Annie had talked about it, choosing names for both a boy and a girl, but right offhand he couldn't remember either of them. "We haven't named her yet."

"Well, make up your minds. I gotta know what I'm gonna call this sweet little treasure. And next time you two decide to have a baby, let me know in plenty of time so I can be somewhere else. This is too hard on a man. I swear, I thought my old heart would give out."

Rafe took his daughter back, to return to Annie. Already he felt anxious at being away from her. "Grandfathers have to stay close," he said. "You aren't going anywhere."

Atwater gaped at his retreating back. Grandfather! Grandfather? Well, that did sound kinda nice. He was in his fifties, after all, though he prided himself on looking younger than his age. Never had a family before, except for Maggie, and no one since she had died. Scary as hell, but maybe he'd stick around, keep McCay out of trouble. This grandfather business sounded like a full-time job.

Rafe slipped back into their bedroom and found Annie sleeping peacefully. Mrs. Wickenberg smiled at him and held her finger to her lips. "Let her rest," she whispered. "She's worked hard and deserves it." With another smile, the woman let herself out of the room.

Rafe sat down in the chair beside the bed, still holding the baby. He was reluctant to put her down. She was asleep, too, as if being born had been as tiring for her as for her mother. He felt pretty wrung out himself, but had no inclination to sleep. He looked from Annie's face to that of their daughter, and his heart swelled so much that it pushed against his ribs and almost stopped his breath.

Nine months before he had held an Indian baby and helped Annie preserve her life. Now he held another baby, one to which he and Annie had also given life, but this time it was the life of their very bodies. From the minute he had first seen Annie she had turned his life around, given him something to live for, and if his remaining years gave him nothing else he was content, for this was enough.

EPILOGUE

During the next decade, the brilliant young banker J. P. Morgan arranged a financial coup that broke Commodore Vanderbilt's monopoly on the railroads. No hint of the Confederate papers ever came to light, but Rafe figured that Vanderbilt, knowing Morgan had them, didn't fight the banker as vigorously as he might have. It wasn't the justice Rafe would have chosen, the justice Atwater had meted out to Parker Winslow before resigning as marshal, but it was probably the justice that hurt Vanderbilt the most.

Somehow it didn't much matter anymore. He had Annie and their kids, and the ranch was prosperous. Sometimes when the kids had been rowdy, the two boys driving their sister into temper tantrums, when Annie had had a

busy day with her patients and the cattle had been particularly stubborn, he and Annie would slip out to their place in the desert and make it all go away. He was a slave to her special magic and wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

The story of the lost Confederate treasury happened pretty much as related in this book. The bulk of it was stolen, probably by a group of citizens, on its way back to Richmond from Washington, Georgia. It is also true that Tench Tilghman, a personable young man from Maryland, buried his share of the payroll, the Confederate government papers, and some of Jefferson Davis's personal papers. He kept a diary noting these facts, though the diary doesn't give the location of the buried treasure.

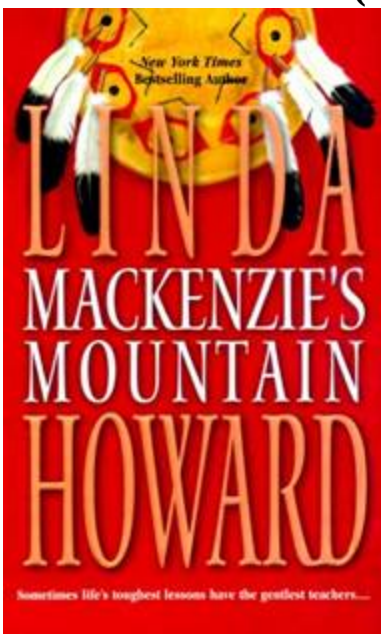
Tench Tilghman did indeed meet William Stone in New York in 1867 and divulge that he had buried the papers and money in Florida, and he did indeed die suddenly, four days later, without revealing the location, as far as is known. The rest of the story is from my imagination.

With apologies to Commodore Vanderbilt, I chose him because he was one of the richest, most powerful men of his day, and I needed such a man because only a very powerful man could have financed such a massive manhunt, or been so largely impervious to retaliation. This is a work of fiction, and except for the details of the Confederate treasury, it exists only in my head.

J. P. Morgan did break Vanderbilt's railroad monopoly.

The sources for my research are: Southern Treasures, by Nina and William Anderson; Indeh, an Apache Odyssey, by Eve Ball; Magic and Medicine of Plants, by Reader's Digest; and Yesterday and Today in the Life of the Apaches, by Irene Burlison.

Mackenzie’s
--1 Mackenzie’s Mountain (1989)--



Chapter One

He needed a woman. Bad.

Wolf Mackenzie spent a restless night, with the bright full moon throwing its silver light on the empty pillow beside him. His body ached with need, the sexual need of a healthy man, and the passing hours only intensified his frustration. Finally he got out of bed and walked naked to the window, his big body moving with fluid power. The wooden floor was icy beneath his bare feet but he welcomed the discomfort, for it cooled the undirected desire that heated his blood.

The colourless moonlight starkly etched the angles and planes of his face, living testimony to his heritage. Even more than the thick black hair worn long to touch his shoulders, even more than the heavy-lidded black eyes, his face proclaimed nun Indian. It was in his high, prominent cheekbones and broad forehead, his thin lips and high-bridged nose. Less obvious, but just as fierce, was the Celtic heritage from his father, only one generation removed from the Scottish Highlands. It had refined the Indian features inherited from his mother into a face like a blade, as clean and sharply cut as it was strong. In his veins ran the blood of two of the most warlike

peoples in the history of the world, Comanche and Celt. He had been a natural warrior, a fact soon discovered by the military when he had enlisted. He was also a sensualist. He knew his own nature well, and though he controlled it, there were times when he needed a woman. He usually visited Julie Oakes at those times. She was a divorced woman, several years older, who lived in a small town fifty miles distant. Their arrangement had lasted five years; neither Wolf nor Julie was interested in marriage, but both had needs, and they liked each other. Wolf tried not to visit Julie too often, and he took care that he was never seen entering her house; he accepted the fact, unemotionally, that her neighbours would be outraged if they knew she slept with an Indian. And not just any Indian; a rape charge stuck to a man forever.

The next day was a Saturday. There would be the normal chores, and he had to pick up a load of fencing materials in Ruth, the small town just at the base of his mountain, but Saturday nights were traditionally for howling. He wouldn't howl, but he'd visit Julie and bum off his sexual tension in her bed. The night was turning colder, and low heavy clouds were moving in. He watched until they obscured the moon, knowing they meant new snow. He didn't want to return to his empty bed. His face was impassive, but his loins ached. He needed a woman.

Mary Elizabeth Potter had numerous small chores to occupy her time that Saturday morning, but her conscience wouldn't let her rest until she had talked to Joe Mackenzie. The boy had dropped out of school two months before, a month before she had arrived to take the place of a teacher who had abruptly quit. No one had mentioned the boy to Mary, but she'd run across his school record, and curiosity had led her to read it. In the small town of Ruth, Wyoming, there weren't that many students in school, and she had thought she'd met them all. In fact, there were less than sixty students, but the graduation rate was almost one hundred percent, so any dropout was unusual. When she had read Joe Mackenzie's record, she'd been stunned. The boy had been at the top of his class, with straight A's in all subjects. Students who did poorly would get discouraged and drop out, but every teaching instinct she had was outraged that such an outstanding student would just quit. She had to talk to him, try to make him understand how important it was to his future that he continue his education. Sixteen was so young to make a mistake that would haunt him the rest of his life. She

wouldn't be able to sleep at night until she had done her best to talk him into returning.

It had snowed again during the night and had turned bitterly cold. The cat meowed plaintively as it wound around her ankles, as if complaining about the weather. "I know, Woodrow," she consoled the animal. "The floor must be cold to your feet." She could sympathize. She didn't think her feet had been warm since she had moved to Wyoming.

Before another winter came, she promised herself, she would own a pair of warm, sturdy boots, fur-lined and waterproof, and she would stomp about in the snow as if she'd been doing it all her life, like a native. Actually she needed the boots now, but the expenses of moving had wiped out her cash reserves, and the teachings of her thrifty aunt prevented her from buying the boots on credit.

Woodrow meowed again as she put on the warmest, most sensible shoes she owned, the ones she privately called her "old maid schoolteacher shoes." Mary paused to scratch behind his ears, and his back arched in ecstasy. She had inherited him with the house, which the school board had arranged for her to live in; the cat, like the house, wasn't much. She had no idea how old Woodrow was, but both he and the house looked a little run-down. Mary had always resisted owning a cat—it seemed the crowning touch to an old maid's life—but finally her fate had caught up with her.

She was an old maid. Now she owned a cat. And wore old maid shoes. The picture was complete.

"Water seeks its own level," she told the cat, who looked back at her with his unconcerned Egyptian gaze. "But what do you care? It doesn't hurt you that my personal water level seems to stop at sensible shoes and cats."

But as she looked in the mirror to make certain her hair was tidy, she sighed. Sensible shoes and cats were just her style, along with being pale, slight and nondescript. "Mousy" was a good word. Mary Elizabeth Potter had been born to be an old maid.

She was dressed as warmly as she could manage, unless she put on socks to wear with her sensible shoes, but she drew the line at that. Dainty white anklets with long ruffled skirts were one thing, but knee socks with a wool dress were something else entirely. She was willing to be dowdy for the sake of warmth; she was not willing to be tacky.

Well, there was no point in putting it off; it wasn't going to get any warmer until spring. Mary braced herself for the shock of cold air on a system that

still expected the warmth of Savannah. She had left her tidy little nest in Georgia for the challenge of a tiny school in Wyoming, for the excitement of a different way of life; she even admitted to a small yearning for adventure, though of course she never allowed it to surface. But somehow, she hadn't taken the weather into account. She had been prepared for the snow, but not the bitter temperatures. No wonder there were so few students, she thought as she opened the door and gasped as the wind whipped at her. It was too cold for the adults to undress enough to do anything that might result in children!

She got snow in her sensible shoes when she walked to her car, a sensible two-door, midsize Chevrolet sedan, on which she had sensibly put a new set of snow tires when she had moved to Wyoming. According to the weather report on the radio that morning, the high would be seven degrees below zero. Mary sighed again for the weather she had left behind in Savannah; it was March now, and spring would be in full swing, with flowers blooming in a riot of colours.

But Wyoming was beautiful, in a wild, majestic way. The soaring mountains dwarfed the puny man-made dwellings, and she had been told that, come spring, the meadows would be carpeted in wildflowers, and the crystal-clear creeks would sing their own special song. Wyoming was a different world from Savannah, and she was just a transplanted magnolia who was having trouble getting acclimated.

She had gotten instructions on how to get to the Mackenzie residence, though the information had been reluctantly given. It puzzled her that no one seemed interested in the boy, because the people in the little town had been friendly and helpful to her. The most direct comment she had gotten had been from Mr. Hearst, the grocery-store owner, who had muttered that "the Mackenzies aren't worth your trouble." But Mary considered any child worth her trouble. She was a teacher, and she meant to teach.

As she got into her sensible car, she could see the mountain called Mackenzie's Mountain, as well as the narrow road that wound up its side like a ribbon, and she quailed inside. New snow tires notwithstanding, she wasn't a confident driver in this strange environment. Snow was… well, snow was alien, not that she'd let it stop her from doing what she had set her mind on doing.

She was already shivering so hard that she could barely fit the key into the ignition. It was so cold! It actually hurt her nose and lungs to inhale.

Perhaps she should wait for better weather before attempting the drive. She looked at the mountain again. Maybe in June all of the snow would have melted… but Joe Mackenzie had already been out of school for two months. Maybe in June the gap would seem insurmountable to him, and he wouldn't make the effort. It might already be too late. She had to try, and she didn't dare let even another week go by.

It was her habit to give herself pep talks whenever she was pushing herself to do something she found difficult, so she muttered under her breath as she began the drive. "It won't seem so steep once I'm actually on the road. All uphill roads look vertical from a distance. It's a perfectly negotiable road, otherwise the Mackenzies wouldn't be able to get up and down, and if they can do it, I can do it." Well, perhaps she could do it. Driving on snow was an acquired skill, one she hadn't as yet mastered.

Determination kept her going. When she finally reached the mountain and the road tilted upward, her hands clenched on the steering wheel as she deliberately refrained from looking over the side at the increasing distance to the valley floor. Knowing how far it was possible for her to fall if she drove off the edge wouldn't help her at all; in Mary's opinion, that would be in the category of useless knowledge, of which she already had quite enough.

"I won't slide," she muttered. "I won't go fast enough to lose control. This is like the Ferris wheel. I was certain I was going to fall out, but I didn't." She had ridden the Ferris wheel once, when she'd been nine years old, and no one had ever been able to talk her into trying it again. Carousels were more her style.

"The Mackenzies won't mind if I talk to Joe," she reassured herself in an attempt to get her mind off the drive. "Maybe he had trouble with a girlfriend, and that's why he doesn't want to go to school. At his age, it's probably all blown over by now."

Actually the drive wasn't as bad as she'd feared. She began to breathe a little easier. The incline was more gradual than it had appeared, and she didn't think she had too much farther to go. The mountain wasn't as enormous as it had looked from the valley.

She was so intent on her driving that she didn't notice the red light appear on the dash. She had no warning of overheating until steam suddenly erupted from beneath the hood, the frigid air instantly converting the mist into ice crystals on the windshield. Mary instinctively hit the brakes, then

uttered a discreet oath when the wheels began sliding. Quickly she lifted her foot from the brake pedal, and the tires found traction again, but she couldn't see. Closing her eyes, she prayed that she was still going in the right direction and let the car's weight slow it to a stop.

The engine was hissing and bellowing like a dragon. Shaking in reaction, she turned off the ignition and got out of the car, gasping as the wind lashed her like an icy whip. The hood release mechanism was stiff from the bitter cold, but finally yielded, and she raised the hood to see what had happened, on the grounds that it would be nice to know what was wrong with the car even if she couldn't fix it. It didn't take a mechanic to see the problem: one of the water hoses had split, and hot water was spitting fitfully from the break.

Instantly she recognized the precariousness of her position. She couldn't stay in the car, because she couldn't let the motor run to keep her warm. The road was a private one, and the Mackenzies might not leave their ranch at all that day, or that entire weekend. It was too far, and too cold, for her to walk back to her own house. Her only option was to walk to the Mackenzie ranch and pray it wasn't very far. Her feet were already numb.

She didn't let herself dwell on the thought that she might not make it to the Mackenzie ranch, either. Instead she began to walk steadily up the road and tried to ignore the snow that got inside her shoes with each step.

She rounded a curve and lost sight of her car, but when she looked ahead there was still no sign of a house, or even a barn. She felt alone, as if she had been dropped into the middle of a wilderness. There was only the mountain and the snow, the vast sky and herself. The silence was absolute. It hurt to walk, and she found that she was sliding her feet instead of picking them up. She had gone fewer than two hundred yards.

Her lips trembled as she hugged herself in an effort to retain her body's heat. Painful or not, she would just have to keep walking.

Then she heard the low growl of a powerful engine, and she stopped, relief welling in her so painfully that tears burned her eyes. She had a horror of crying in public and blinked them back. There was no sense in crying; she had been walking less than fifteen minutes and hadn't been in any real danger at all. It was just her overactive imagination, as usual. She shuffled through the snow to the side of the road, to get out of the way, and waited for the approaching vehicle.

It came into view, a big black pickup with enormous tires. She could feel the driver's eyes lock on her, and in spite of herself she ducked her head in embarrassment. Old maid schoolteachers weren't accustomed to being the center of attention, and on top of that she felt a perfect fool. It must look as if she had gone for a stroll in the snow.

The truck slowed to a stop opposite her, and a man got out. He was big, and she instinctively disliked that. She disliked the way big men looked down at her, and she disliked being forced by sheer physical size to look up at them. Well, big or not, he was her rescuer. She wound her gloved fingers together and wondered what she should say. How did a person ask to be rescued? She had never hitched a ride before; it didn't seem proper for a settled, respectable schoolteacher.

Wolf stared at the woman, astounded that anyone would be out in the cold while dressed so stupidly. What in hell was she doing on his mountain, anyway? How had she gotten here?

Suddenly he knew who she was; he'd overheard talk in the feed store about the new schoolteacher from someplace down South. He'd never seen anyone who looked more like a schoolteacher than this woman, and she was definitely dressed wrong for a Wyoming winter. Her blue dress and brown coat were so frumpy that she was almost a cliché; he could see wisps of light brown hair straggling out from under her scarf, and oversize horn-rimmed glasses dwarfed her small face. No makeup, not even lip gloss to protect her lips.

And no boots. Snow was caked almost to her knees.

He had surveyed her completely in two seconds and didn't wait to hear what explanation she had for being on his mountain, if she intended to say anything at all. So far she hadn't uttered a word, but continued to stare at him with a faintly outraged look on her face. He wondered if she considered it beneath her to speak to an Indian, even to ask for help. Mentally he shrugged. What the hell, he couldn't leave her out here.

Since she hadn't spoken, he didn't, either. He simply bent down and passed one arm behind her knees and the other behind her back, and lifted her as he would a child, ignoring her gasp. As he carried her to the truck, he reflected that she didn't weigh much more than a child. He saw a flash of startled blue eyes behind the lenses of her glasses; then her arm passed around his neck and she was holding him in a convulsive grip, as if she were afraid he'd drop her.

He shifted her weight so he could open the passenger door and deposited her on the seat, then briskly wiped the snow from her feet and legs as well as he could. He heard her gasp again, but didn't look up. When he had finished, he dusted the snow from his gloves and went around to climb behind the wheel.
"How long have you been walking?" he muttered reluctantly.
Mary started. She hadn't expected his voice to be so deep that it almost reverberated. Her glasses had fogged from the truck's heat, and she snatched them off, feeling her cold cheeks prickle as blood rushed to them. "I… not long," she stammered. "About fifteen minutes. I blew a water hose. That is, my car did."
Wolf glanced at her in time to see her hastily lower her eyes again and noticed her pinkened cheeks. Good, she was getting warm. She was flustered; he could see it in the way she kept twisting her fingers together. Did she think he was going to throw her down on the seat and rape her? After all, he was a renegade Indian, and capable of anything. Then again, the way she looked, maybe this was the most excitement she'd ever had.
They hadn't been far from the ranch house and reached it in a few minutes. Wolf parked close to the kitchen door and got out; he circled the truck and reached the passenger door just as she opened it and began to slid down.
"Forget it," he said, and lifted her again. Her sliding motion had made her skirt ride halfway up her thighs. She hastily pushed the fabric down, but not before his black eyes had examined her slim legs, and the colour deepened in her cheeks.
The warmth of the house enfolded her, and she inhaled with relief, hardly noticing as he turned a wooden chair away from the table and placed her on it. Without speaking he turned on the hot water tap and let it run, then filled a dishpan, frequently checking the water and adjusting the temperature.
Well, she had reached her destination, and though she hadn't accomplished her arrival in quite the manner she had intended, she might as well get to the purpose of her visit. "I'm Mary Potter, the new schoolteacher."
"I know," he said briefly.
Her eyes widened as she stared at his broad back. "You know?"
"Not many strangers around."
She realized that he hadn't introduced himself and was suddenly unsure. Was she even at the right place? "Are… are you Mr. Mackenzie?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her, and she noticed that his eyes were as black as night. "I'm Wolf Mackenzie."
She was instantly diverted. "I suppose you know your name is uncommon. It's Old English—"
"No," he said, turning around with the dishpan in his hands. He placed it on the floor beside her feet. "It's Indian."
She blinked. "Indian?" She felt incredibly stupid. She should have guessed, given the blackness of his hair and eyes, and the bronze of his skin, but she hadn't. Most of the men in Ruth had weathered skin, and she had simply thought him darker than the others. Then she frowned at nun and said in a positive tone, "Mackenzie isn't an Indian name."
He frowned back at her. "Scottish."
"Oh. Are you a half-breed?"
She asked the question with the same unconsciousness as if she had been asking directions, silky brows lifted inquiringly over her blue eyes. It set his teeth on edge. "Yeah," he grunted. There was something so irritating about the primness of her expression that he wanted to shock her out of her prissiness. Then he noticed the shivers shaking her body, and he pushed his irritation aside, at least until he could get her warm. The clumsy way she had been walking when he'd first seen her had told him that she was in the first stages of hypothermia. He shrugged out of his heavy coat and tossed it aside, then put on a pot of coffee.
Mary sat silently as he made coffee; he wasn't a very talkative person, though that wasn't going to make her give up. She was truly cold; she would wait until she had a cup of that coffee, then begin again. She looked up at him as he turned back to her, but his expression was unreadable. Without a word he took the scarf from her head and began unbuttoning her coat. Startled, she said, "I can do that," but her fingers were so cold that any movement was agony. He stepped back and let her try for a moment, then brushed her hands aside and finished the job himself.
"Why are you taking my coat off when I'm so cold?" she asked in bewilderment as he peeled the coat down her arms.
"So I can rub your arms and legs." Then he proceeded to remove her shoes. The idea was as alien to her as snow. She wasn't accustomed to anyone touching her, and didn't intend to become accustomed. She started to tell him so, but the words vanished unsaid when he abruptly thrust his hands under her skirt, all the way to her waist. Mary gave a startled shriek and

jerked back, almost oversetting the chair. He glared at her, his eyes like black ice.
"You don't have to worry," he snapped. "This is Saturday. I only rape on Tuesdays and Thursdays." He thought about throwing her back out into the snow, but he couldn't let a woman freeze to death, not even a white woman who obviously thought his touch would contaminate her.
Mary's eyes grew so wide they eclipsed the rest of her face. "What's wrong with Saturdays?" she blurted, then realized that she had almost issued him an invitation, for pity's sake! She clapped her gloved hands to her face as a tide of red surged to her cheeks. Her brain must have frozen; it was the only possible explanation.
Wolf jerked his head up, not believing she had actually said that. Wide, horrified blue eyes stared at him from over black leather gloves, which covered the rest of her face but couldn't quite hide the hot colour. It had been so long since he'd seen anyone blush that it took him a minute to realize she was acutely embarrassed. Why, she was a prude! It was the final cliché to add to the dowdy, old maid schoolteacher image she presented. Amusement softened his irritation. This was probably the highlight of her life. "I'm going to pull your panty hose off so you can put your feet in the water," he explained in a gruff voice.
"Oh." The word was muffled because her hands were still over her mouth. His arms were still under her skirt, his hands clasped on her hips. Almost unconsciously he felt the narrowness of her, and the softness. Dowdy or not, she still had the softness of a woman, the sweet scent of a woman, and his heartbeat increased as his body began to respond to her nearness. Damn, he needed a woman worse than he'd thought if this frumpy little schoolteacher could turn him on.
Mary sat very still as one powerful arm closed around her and lifted her so he could strip the panty hose down her hips and legs; the position put his head close to her breasts and stomach, and she stared down at his thick, shiny black hair. He had only to turn his head and his mouth would brush against her breasts. She had read in books that a man took a woman's nipples into his mouth and sucked them as a nursing infant would, and she had always wondered why. Now the thought made her feel breathless, and her nipples tingled. His roughly callused hands brushed against her bare legs; how would they feel on her breasts? She began to feel oddly warm, and a little dizzy.

Wolf didn't glance at her as he tossed the insubstantial panty hose to the floor. He lifted her feet onto his thigh and slid the dishpan into place, then slowly lowered her feet into the water. He had made certain the water was only warm, but he knew her feet were so cold even that would be painful. She sucked in her breath but didn't protest, though he saw the gleam of tears in her eyes when he looked up at her.

"It won't hurt for long," he murmured reassuringly, moving so that his legs were on each side of hers, clasping them warmly. Then he carefully removed her gloves, struck by the delicacy of her white, cold hands. He held them between his warm palms for a moment, then made a decision and unbuttoned his shut as he crowded closer to her.

"This will get them warm," he said, and tucked her hands into the hollows of his armpits.

Mary was dumbstruck. She couldn't believe that her hands were nestled in his armpits like birds. His warmth seared her cold fingers. She wasn't actually touching skin; he wore a T-shirt, but it was still the most ultimate she had ever been with another person. Armpits… well, everyone had them, but she certainly wasn't accustomed to touching them. She had never before been this surrounded by anyone, least of all a man. His hard legs were on each side of hers, clasping them; she was bent forward a little, her hands neatly tucked beneath his arms, while he briskly rubbed his hands over her arms and shoulders, then down to her thighs. She made a little sound of surprise; she simply couldn't believe this was happening, not to Mary Elizabeth Potter, old maid schoolteacher ordinaire.

Wolf had been concentrating on his task but he looked up at the sound she made, into her wide blue eyes. They were an odd blue, he thought, not cornflower or that pure dark blue. There was just a hint of grey in the shade. Slate blue, that was it. Distantly he noticed that her hair was straggling down from the ungodly knot she'd twisted it into, framing her face in silky, pale brown wisps. She was very close, her face just inches from his. She had the most delicate skin he'd ever seen, as fine-grained as an infant's, so pale and translucent he could see the fragile tracery of blue veins at her temples. Only the very young should have skin like that. As he watched, another blush began to stain her cheeks, and unwillingly he felt himself become entranced by the sight. He wondered if her skin was that silky and delicate all over—her breasts, her stomach, her thighs, between her legs. The thought was like an electrical jolt to his system, overloading his nerves.

Damn, she smelled sweet! And she would probably jump straight out of that chair if he lifted her skirt the way he wanted to and buried his face against her silky thighs.
Mary licked her lips, oblivious to the way his eyes followed the movement. She had to say something, but she didn't know what. His physical nearness seemed to have paralyzed her thought processes. My goodness, he was warm! And close. She should remember why she had come here in the first place, instead of acting like a ninny because a very good-looking, in a rough sort of way, very masculine person was too close to her. She licked her lips again, cleared her throat, and said, "Ah… I came to speak to Joe, if I may."
His expression changed very little, yet she had the impression that he was instantly aloof. "Joe isn't here. He's doing chores."
"I see. When will he be back?"
"In an hour, maybe two."
She looked at him a little disbelievingly. "Are you Joe's father?"
"Yes."
"His mother is…?"
"Dead."
The flat, solitary word jarred her, yet at the same time she was aware of a faint, shocking sense of relief. She looked away from him again. "How did you feel about Joe quitting school?"
"It was his decision."
"But he's only sixteen! He's just a boy—"
"He's Indian," Wolf interrupted. "He's a man."
Indignation mingled with exasperation to act as a spur. She jerked her hands from his armpits and planted them on her hips. "What does that have to do with anything? He's sixteen years old and he needs to get an education!"
"He can read, write and do math. He also knows everything there is to know about training horses and running a ranch. He chose to quit school and work here full-time. This is my ranch, and my mountain. One day it will be his. He decided what to do with his life, and it's train horses." He didn't like explaining his and Joe's personal business to anyone, but there was something about this huffy, dowdy little teacher that made him answer. She didn't seem to realize he was Indian; intellectually she knew it, but she obviously had no idea what it meant to be Indian, and to be Wolf Mackenzie in particular, to have people turn aside to avoid speaking to him.
"I'd like to talk to him anyway," Mary said stubbornly.

"That's up to him. He may not want to talk to you."
"You won't try to influence him at all?"
"No."
"Why not? You should at least have tried to keep him in school!"
Wolf leaned very close, so close that his nose was almost touching hers. She stared into his black eyes, her own eyes widening. "He's Indian, lady. Maybe you don't know what that means. Hell, how could you? You're an Anglo. Indians aren't welcome. What education he has, he got on his own, without any help from the Anglo teachers. When he wasn't being ignored, he was being insulted. Why would he want to go back?"
She swallowed, alarmed by his aggression. She wasn't accustomed to men getting right in her face and swearing at her. Truthfully, Mary admitted that she wasn't accustomed to men at all. When she had been young, the boys had ignored the mousy, bookish girl, and when she had gotten older the men had done the same. She paled a little, but she felt so strongly about the benefits of a good education that she refused to let him intimidate her. Big people often did that to smaller people, probably without even thinking about it, but she wasn't going to give in simply because he was bigger than she. "He was at the head of his class," she said briskly. "If he managed that on his own, think of what he could accomplish with help!"
He straightened to his full height, towering over her. "Like I said, it's up to him." The coffee had long since finished brewing, so he turned to pour a cup and hand it to her. Silence fell between them. He leaned against the cabinets and watched her sip daintily, like a cat. Dainty, yeah, that was a good word for her. She wasn't tiny, maybe five three, but she was slightly built. His eyes dropped to her breasts beneath that dowdy blue dress; they weren't big, but they looked nice and round. He wondered if her nipples would be a delicate shell pink, or rosy beige. He wondered if she would be able to take him comfortably, if she would be so tight he'd go wild—
Sharply he brought his erotic thoughts to a halt. Damn it, that particular lesson should have been etched into his soul! Anglo women might flirt with him and twitch themselves around him, but few of them really wanted to get down and dirty with an Indian. This prissy little frump wasn't even flirting, so why was he getting so turned on? Maybe it was because she was a frump. He kept imagining how the dainty body beneath that awful dress would look, stripped bare and stretched out on the sheets.

Mary set the cup aside. "I'm much warmer now. Thank you, the coffee did the trick." That, and the way he'd run his hands all over her, but she wasn't about to tell him that. She looked up at him and hesitated, suddenly uncertain when she saw the look in his black eyes. She didn't know what it was, but there was something about him that made her pulse rate increase, made her feel faintly uneasy. Was he actually looking at her *breasts*?
"I think some of Joe's old clothes will fit you," he said, face and voice expressionless.
"Oh, I don't need any clothes. I mean, what I have on is perfectly—"
"Idiotic," he interrupted. "This is Wyoming, lady, not New Orleans, or wherever you're from."
"Savannah," she supplied.
He grunted, which seemed to be one of his basic means of communication, and took a towel from a drawer. Going down on one knee, he lifted her feet from the water and wrapped them in a towel, rubbing them dry with a touch so gentle it was at odds with the thinly veiled hostility of his manner. Then, standing, he said, "Come with me."
"Where are we going?"
"To the bedroom."
Mary stopped, blinking at him, and a bitter smile twisted his mouth. "Don't worry," he said harshly. "I'll control my savage appetites, and after you get dressed, you can get the hell off my mountain."

Chapter Two

Mary drew herself up to her full height and lifted her chin, her mouth setting itself in a prim line. "It isn't necessary to make fun of me, Mr. Mackenzie," she said calmly, but her even tone was hard won. She knew she fell short in the come-hither department; she didn't need sarcasm to remind her. Usually she wasn't disturbed by her mousiness, having accepted it as an unchangeable fact, much like having the sun rise in the east. But Mr. Mackenzie made her feel strangely vulnerable, and it was oddly painful that he should have pointed out how unappealing she was.
Wolf's straight black brows drew together over his high-bridged nose. "I wasn't making fun of you," he snapped. "I was dead serious, lady. I want you off of my mountain."

"Then I'll leave, of course," she replied steadily. "But it was still unnecessary to make fun of me."
He put his hands on his hips. "Make fun of you? How?"
A flush tinged her exquisite skin, but her grey-blue eyes never wavered. "I know I'm not an attractive woman, certainly not the type to stir a man's—er, savage appetites."
She was serious. Ten minutes ago he'd have agreed with her that she was plain, and God knew she was no fashion plate, but what astounded him was that she honestly didn't seem to realize what it meant that he was Indian, or what he'd meant by his sarcasm, or even that he had been strongly aroused by her closeness. A lingering throbbing in his loins reminded him that his reaction hadn't completely subsided. He gave a harsh laugh, the sound devoid of amusement. Why not put a little more excitement in her life? When she heard the flat truth, she wouldn't be able to get off his mountain fast enough.
"I wasn't joking or making fun," he said. His black eyes glittered at her. "Touching you like that, being so close to you that I could smell the sweetness, turned me on."
Astonished, she stared at him. "Turned you on?" she asked blankly.
"Yeah." She still stared at him as if he were speaking a different language, and impatiently he added, "Got me hot, however you want to describe it."
She pushed at a silky strand that had escaped from her hairpins. "You're making fun of me again," she accused. It was impossible. She had never made a man… aroused a man in her life.
He was already irritated, already aroused. He had learned to use iron control when dealing with Anglos, but something about this prim little woman got under his skin. Frustration filled him until he thought he might explode. He hadn't intended to touch her, but suddenly he had his hands on her waist, pulling her toward him. "Maybe you need a demonstration," he said in a rough undertone, and bent to cover her mouth with his.
Mary trembled in profound shock, her eyes enormous as he moved his lips over hers. His eyes were closed. She could see the individual lashes, and for a moment marvelled at how thick they were. Then his hands, still clasped on her waist, drew her into firm contact with his muscled body, and she gasped. He took instant advantage of her opened mouth, probing inside with his tongue. She quivered again, and her eyes slowly closed as a strange heat began to warm her inside. The pleasure was unfamiliar, and so intense that

it frightened her. A host of new sensations assailed her, making her dizzy. There was the firmness of his lips, his heady taste, the startling intimacy of his tongue stroking hers as if enticing it to play. She felt the heat of his body, smelled the warm muskiness of his skin. Her soft breasts were pressed against the muscular planes of his chest, and her nipples began to tingle in that strange, embarrassing way again.

Suddenly he lifted his mouth from hers, and sharp disappointment made her eyes fly open. His black gaze burned her. "Kiss me back," he muttered.

"I don't know how," Mary blurted, still unable to believe this was happening.

His voice was almost guttural. "Like this." He took her mouth again, and this time she parted her lips immediately, eager to accept his tongue and feel that odd, surging pleasure once more. He moved his mouth over hers, moulding her lips with fierce pleasure, teaching her how to return the pressure. His tongue touched hers again, and this time she responded shyly in kind, welcoming his small invasion with gentle touches of her own. She was too inexperienced to realize the symbolism of her acceptance, but he began to breathe harder and faster, and his kiss deepened, demanding even more of her.

A frightening excitement exploded through her body, going beyond mere pleasure and becoming a hungry need. She was no longer cold at all, but burning inside as her heartbeat increased until her heart was banging against her ribs. So this was what he meant when he'd said she got him hot. He got her hot, too, and it stunned her to think he had felt this same restless yearning, this incredible wanting. She made a soft, unconscious sound and moved closer to him, not knowing how to control the sensations his experienced kisses had aroused.

His hands tightened painfully on her waist, and a low, rough sound rumbled in his throat. Then he lifted her, pulled her closer, adjusted her hips against his and graphically demonstrated his response to her.

She hadn't known it could be like that. She hadn't known that desire could burn so hot, could make her forget Aunt Ardith's warnings about men and the nasty things they liked to do to women. Mary had quite sensibly decided that those things couldn't be too nasty, or women wouldn't put up with them, but at the same time she had never flirted or tried to attract a boyfriend. The men she had met at college and on the job had seemed normal, not slavering sex fiends; she was comfortable with men, and even considered some to be

friends. It was just that she wasn't sexy herself; no man had ever beaten down doors to go out with her, or even managed to accomplish the dialling of her telephone number, so her exposure to men hadn't prepared her for the tightness of Wolf Mackenzie's arms, the hunger of his kisses, or the hardness of his manhood pushing against the juncture of her thighs. Nor had she known that she could want more.

Unconsciously she locked her arms around his neck and squirmed against him, tormented by increasing frustration. Her body was on fire, empty and aching and wanting all at once, and she didn't have the experience to control it. The new sensations were a tidal wave, swamping her mind beneath the overload from her nerve endings.

Wolf jerked his head back, his teeth locked as he relentlessly brought himself back under control. Black fire burned in his eyes as he looked down at her. His kisses had made her soft lips red and pouty, and delicate pink coloured her translucent porcelain skin. Her eyes were heavy-lidded as she opened them and slowly met his gaze. Her pale brown hair had slipped completely out of its knot and tumbled silkily around her face and over her shoulders. Desire was on her face; she already looked tousled, as if he had done more than kiss her, and in his mind he had. She was light and delicate in his arms, but she had twisted against him with a hunger that matched his own.

He could take her to bed now; she was that far gone, and he knew it. But when he did, it would be because she had consciously made the decision, not because she was so hot she didn't know what she was doing. Her inexperience was obvious; he'd even had to teach her how to kiss—the thought stopped as abruptly as if he'd hit a mental wall, as he realized the full extent of her inexperience. Damn it, she was a virgin!

The thought staggered him. She was looking at him now with those greyish blue eyes both innocent and questioning, languid with desire, as she waited for him to make the next move. She didn't know what to do. Her arms were locked around his neck, her body pressed tightly to his, her legs opened slightly to allow him to nestle against her, and she was waiting for him because she didn't have a clue how to proceed. She hadn't even been kissed before. No man had touched those soft breasts, or taken her nipples in his mouth. No man had loved her at all before.

He swallowed the lump that threatened to choke him, his eyes still locked with hers. "God Almighty, lady, that nearly got out of hand."

She blinked. "Did it?" Her tone was prim, the words clear, but the dazed, sleepy look was still in her eyes,
Slowly, because he didn't want to let her go, and gently, because he knew he had to, he let her body slip down his until she was standing on her feet again. She was innocent of the ramifications, but he wasn't. He was Wolf Mackenzie, half-breed, and she was the schoolteacher. The good citizens of Ruth wouldn't want her associating with him; she was in charge of their young people, with untold influence on their forming morals. No parents would want their impressionable daughter being taught by a woman who was having a wild fling with an Indian ex-con. Why, she might even entice their sons! His prison record could be accepted, but his Indian blood would never go away.
So he had to let her go, no matter how much he wanted to take her to his bedroom and teach her all the things that went on between a man and a woman.
Her arms were still around his neck, her fingers buried in the hair at his nape. She seemed incapable of movement. He reached up to take her wrists and draw her hands away from him.
"I think I'll come back later."
A new voice intruded in Mary's dreamworld of newly discovered sensuality, and she jerked away, colour burning her cheeks as she whirled to face the newcomer. A tall, dark-hatred boy stood just inside the kitchen door, his hat in his hand. "Sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to barge in."
Wolf stepped away from her. "Stay. She came to see you, anyway."
The boy looked at her quizzically. "You could have fooled me."
Wolf merely shrugged. "This is Miss Mary Potter, the new schoolteacher. Miss Potter, my son, Joe."
Even through her embarrassment, Mary was jolted that he would call her "Miss Potter" after the intimacy they had just shared. But he seemed so calm and controlled, as if it hadn't affected him at all, while every nerve in her body was still jangling. She wanted to fling herself against him and give herself up to that encompassing fire.
Instead she stood there, her arms stiffly at her sides while her face burned, and forced herself to look at Joe Mackenzie. He was the reason she was here, and she wouldn't allow herself to forget it again. As her embarrassment faded, she saw that he was very like his father. Though he was only sixteen, he was already six feet tall and would likely match his

father's height, just as his broad young shoulders showed the promise of being as powerful. His face was a younger version of Wolf's, as strong-boned and proud, the features precisely chiseled. He was calm and controlled, far too controlled for a sixteen-year-old, and his eyes, oddly, were pale, glittering blue. Those eyes held something in them, something untamed, as well as a sort of bitter acceptance and knowledge that made him old beyond his years. He was his father's son.
There was no way she could give up on him.
She held out her hand to him. "I'd really like to talk to you, Joe."
His expression remained aloof, but he crossed the kitchen to shake her hand. "I don't know why."
"You dropped out of school."
The statement hardly needed verification, but he nodded. Mary drew a deep breath. "May I ask why?"
"There was nothing for me there."
She felt frustrated by the calm, flat statement, because she couldn't sense any uncertainty in this unusual boy. As Wolf had said, Joe had made up his own mind and didn't intend to change it. She tried to think of another way to approach hum, but Wolf's quiet, deep voice interrupted.
"Miss Potter, you can finish talking after you get into some sensible clothes. Joe, don't you have some old jeans that might be small enough to fit her?"
To her astonishment, the boy looked her over with an experienced eye. "I think so. Maybe the ones I wore when I was ten." For a moment amusement sparkled in his blue-diamond eyes, and Mary primmed her mouth. What did these Mackenzie men get out of needlessly pointing out her lack of attractiveness?
"Socks, shirt, boots and coat," Wolf added to the list. "The boots will be too big, but two pairs of socks will hold them on."
"Mr. Mackenzie, I really don't need extra clothes. What I have on will do until I get home."
"No, it won't. The high temperature today is about ten below zero. You aren't walking out of this house with bare legs and those stupid shoes."
Her sensible shoes were suddenly stupid? She felt like flying to their defence, but suddenly remembered the snow that had gotten inside them and frozen her toes. What was sensible in Savannah was woefully inadequate in a Wyoming whiter.

"Very well," she assented, but only because it was, after all, the sensible thing to do. She still felt uncomfortable about taking Joe's clothes, even temporarily. She had never worn anyone else's clothes before, never swapped sweaters or blouses with chums as an adolescent Aunt Ardith had thought such familiarity ill-bred.
"I'll see about your car while you change." Without even glancing at her again, he put on his coat and hat and walked out the door.
"This way," Joe said, indicating that she should follow him. She did so, and he looked over his shoulder. "What happened to your car?"
"A water hose blew."
"Where is it?"
She stopped. "It's on the road. Didn't you see it when you drove up?" An awful thought struck her. Had her car somehow slid off the mountain?
"I came up the front side of the mountain. It's not as steep." He looked amused again. "You actually tried driving up the back road in a car, when you're not used to driving in snow?"
"I didn't know that was the back road. I thought it was the only road. Couldn't I have made it? I have snow tires."
"Maybe."
She noticed that he didn't sound very confident in her ability, but she didn't protest, because she wasn't very confident herself. He led the way through a rustic but comfortable living room and down a short hallway to an open door. "My old clothes are boxed up in the storage room, but it won't take long for me to dig them out. You can change in here. It's my bedroom."
"Thank you," she murmured, stepping inside the room. Like the living room, it was rustic, with exposed beams and thick wooden walls. There was nothing in it to indicate it was inhabited by a teenage boy: no sports apparatus of any kind, no clothes on the floor. The full-size bed was neatly made, a homemade quilt smoothed on top. A straight chair stood in one corner. Next to his bed, bookshelves stretched from floor to ceiling; the shelves were obviously handmade, but weren't crude. They had been finished, sanded and varnished. They were crammed with books, and curiosity led her to examine the titles.
It took her a moment to realize mat every book had to do with flight, from da Vinci's experiments through *Kitty Hawk* and space exploration. There were books on bombers, fighters, helicopters, radar planes, jets and prop planes, books on air battles fought in each war since pilots first shot at each

other with pistols in World War I. There were books on experimental aircraft, on fighter tactics, on wing design and engine capability.
"Here are the clothes." Joe had entered silently and placed the clothes on the bed. Mary looked at him, but his face was impassive.
"You like planes," she said, then winced at her own banality.
"I like planes," he admitted without inflection.
"Have you thought about taking flying lessons?"
"Yes." He didn't add anything to that stark answer, however; he merely left the room and closed the door behind him.
She was thoughtful as she slowly removed her dress and pulled on the things Joe had brought. The collection of books indicated not merely an interest in flying, but an obsession. Obsessions were funny things; unhealthy ones could ruin lives, but some obsessions lifted people to higher planes of life, made them shine with a brighter light, burn with a hotter fire, and if those obsessions weren't fed, then the person withered, a life blighted by starvation of the soul. If she were right, she had a way to reach Joe and get him back in school.
The jeans fit. Disgusted at this further proof that she had the figure of a ten-year-old boy, she pulled on the too-big flannel shirt and buttoned it, then rolled the sleeves up over her hands. As Wolf had predicted, the worn boots were too big, but the two pairs of thick socks padded her feet enough that the boots didn't slip up and down on her heels too much. The warmth was heavenly, and she decided she would pinch pennies any way she could until she could afford a pair of boots.
Joe was adding wood to the fire in the enormous rock fireplace when she entered, and a little grin tugged at his mouth when he saw her. "You sure don't look like Mrs. Langdale, or any other teacher I've ever seen."
She folded her hands. "Looks have nothing to do with ability. I'm a very good teacher—even if I do look like a ten-year-old boy."
"Twelve. I wore those jeans when I was twelve."
"What a consolation."
He laughed aloud, and she felt pleased, because she had the feeling neither he nor his father laughed much. "Why did you quit school?"
She had learned that if you kept asking the same question, you would often get different answers, and eventually the evasions would cease and the real answer would emerge. But Joe looked at her steadily and gave the same answer as before. "There was nothing for me there."

"Nothing more for you to learn?"
"I'm Indian, Miss Potter. A mixed-breed. What I learned, I learned on my own."
Mary paused. "Mrs. Langdale didn't—" She stopped, unsure of how to phrase her question.
"I was invisible." His young voice was harsh. "From the time I started school. No one took the time to explain anything to me, ask me questions, or include me in anything. I'm surprised my papers were even graded."
"But you were number one in your class."
He shrugged. "I like books."
"Don't you miss school, miss learning?"
"I can read without going to school, and I can help Dad a lot more if I'm here all day. I know horses, ma'am, maybe better than anyone else around here except for Dad, and I didn't learn about them in school. This ranch will be mine someday. This is my life. Why should I waste time in school?"
Mary took a deep breath and played her ace. "To learn how to fly."
He couldn't prevent the avid gleam that shone briefly in his eyes, but it was quickly extinguished. "I can't learn how to fly in Ruth High School. Maybe someday I'll take lessons."
"I wasn't talking about flying lessons. I was talking about the Air Force Academy."
His bronze skin whitened. This time she didn't see a gleam of eagerness, but a deep, anguished need so powerful it shook her, as if he'd been shown a glimpse of heaven. Then he turned his head, and abruptly he looked older.
"Don't try to make a fool of me. There's no way."
"Why isn't there a way? From what I saw in your school records, your grade average will be high enough."
"I dropped out."
"You can go back."
"As far behind as I am? I'd have to repeat this grade, and I won't sit still while those jerks call me a stupid Indian."
"You aren't that far behind. I could tutor you, bring you up fast enough that you could start your senior year in the fall. I'm a licensed teacher, Joe, and for your information, my credentials are very good. I'm qualified to tutor you in the classes you need."
He took a poker and jabbed at a log, sending a shower of sparks flying.
"What if I do it?" he muttered. "The Academy isn't a college where you take

an entrance exam, pay your money and walk in."
"No. The usual way is to be recommended by your congressman."
"Yeah, well, I don't think my congressman is going to recommend an Indian. We're way down on the list of people it's fashionable to help. Dead last, as a matter of fact."
"I think you're making too much of your heritage," Mary said calmly. "You can keep blaming everything on being Indian, or you can get on with your life. You can't do anything about other people's reactions to you, but you can do something about your own. You don't know what your congressman will do, so why give up when you haven't even tried yet? Are you a quitter?"
He straightened, his pale eyes fierce. "I don't reckon."
"Then it's time to find out, isn't it? Do you want to fly bad enough that you'll fight for the privilege? Or do you want to die without ever knowing what it's like to sit in the cockpit of a jet doing Mach 1?"
"You hit hard, lady," he whispered.
"Sometimes it takes a knock on the head to get someone's attention. Do you have the guts to try?"
"What about you? The folks in Ruth won't like it if you spend so much time with me. It would be bad enough if I were alone, but with Dad, it's twice as bad."
"If anyone objects to my tutoring you, I'll certainly set him straight," she said firmly. "It's an honour to be accepted into the Academy, and that's our goal. If you'll agree to being tutored, I'll write to your congressman immediately. I think this time your heritage will work in your favour."
It was amazing how proud that strong young face could be. "I don't want it if they give it to me just because I'm Indian."
"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "Of course you won't be accepted into the Academy just because you're half Indian. But if that fact catches the congressman's interest, I say, good. It would only make him remember your name. It'll be up to you to make the grade."
He raked his hand through his black hair, then restlessly walked to the window to look out at the white landscape. "Do you really think it's possible?"
"Of course it's possible. It isn't guaranteed, but it's possible. Can you live with yourself if you don't try? If we don't try?" She didn't know how to go about bringing someone to a congressman's attention for consideration for

recommendation to the Academy, but she was certainly willing to write to every senator and representative Wyoming had seated in Congress, a letter a week, until she found out.
"If I agreed, it would have to be at night. I have chores around here that have to be done."
"Night is fine with me. Midnight would be fine with me, if it would get you back in school."
He gave her a quick look. "You really mean it, don't you? You actually care that I dropped out of school."
"Of course I care."
"There's no 'of course' about it. I told you, no other teacher cared if I showed up in class. They probably wished I hadn't."
"Well," she said in her briskest voice, "I care. Teaching is what I do, so if I can't teach and feel I'm doing some good, then I lose part of myself. Isn't that how you feel about flying? That you have to, or you'll die?"
"I want it so bad it hurts," he admitted, his voice raw.
"I read somewhere that flying is like throwing your soul into the heavens and racing to catch it as it falls."
"I don't think mine would ever fall," he murmured, looking at the clear cold sky. He stared, entranced, as if paradise beckoned, as if he could see forever. He was probably imagining himself up there, free and wild, with a powerful machine screaming beneath him and taking him higher. Then he shook himself, visibly fighting off the dream, and turned to her. "Okay, Miss Teacher, when do we start?"
"Tonight. You've already wasted enough time."
"How long will it take for me to catch up?"
She gave him a withering look. "Catch up? You're going to leave them in the dust. How long it takes depends on how much work you can do."
"Yes, ma'am," he said, grinning a little.
She thought that already he looked younger, more like a boy, than he had before. He was, in all ways, far more mature than the other boys his age in her classes, but he looked as if a burden had been lifted from him. If flying meant that much to him, how had it felt to set himself a course that would deny him what he wanted most?
"Can you be at my house at six? Or would you rather I come here?" She thought of that drive, in the dark and snow, and wondered if she'd make it if he wanted her to come here.

"I'll come to your house, since you aren't used to driving in snow. Where do you live?"
"Go down the back road and take a left. It's the first house on the left." She thought a minute. "I believe it's the first house, period."
"It is. There isn't another house for five miles. That's the old Witcher house."
"So I've been told. It was kind of the school board to arrange living quarters for me."
Joe looked dubious. "More like it was the only way they had of getting another teacher in the middle of the year."
"Well, I appreciated it anyway," she said firmly. She looked out the window. "Shouldn't your father be back by now?"
"Depends on what he found. If it was something he could fix right then, he'd do it. Look, here he comes now."
The black pickup roared to a stop in front of the house, and Wolf got out. Coming up on the porch, he stomped his feet to rid his boots of the snow caked on them and opened the door. His cool black gaze flickered over his son, then to Mary. His eyes widened fractionally as he examined every slim curve exhibited by Joe's old jeans, but he didn't comment.
"Get your things together," he instructed. "I have a spare hose that will fit your car. We'll put it on, then take you home."
"I can drive," she replied. "But thank you for your trouble. How much is the hose? I'll pay you for that."
"Consider it neighbourly assistance to a greenhorn. And we'll still take you home. I'd rather you practiced driving in the snow somewhere other than on this mountain."
His dark face was expressionless, as usual, but she sensed that he'd made up his mind and wouldn't budge. She got her dress from Joe's room and the rest of her things from the kitchen. When she returned to the living room, Wolf held a thick coat for her to wear. She slipped into it; since it reached almost to her knees and the sleeves totally obscured her hands, she knew it had to be his.
Joe had on his coat and hat again. "Ready."
Wolf looked at his son. "Have you two had your talk?"
The boy nodded. "Yes." He met his father's eyes squarely. "She's going to tutor me. I'm going to try to get into the Air Force Academy."
"It's your decision. Just make sure you know what you're getting into."

"I have to try."
Wolf nodded once, and that was the end of the discussion. With her sandwiched between them, they left the warmth of the house, and once again Mary was struck by the bitter, merciless cold. She scrambled gratefully into the truck, which had been left running, and the blast of hot air from the heater vents felt like heaven.
Wolf got behind the wheel, and Joe got in beside her, trapping her between their two much bigger bodies. She sat with her hands primly folded and her booted feet placed neatly side-by-side as they drove down to an enormous barn with long stables extending off each side of it like arms. Wolf got out and entered the barn, then returned thirty seconds later with a length of thick black hose.
When they reached her car, both Mackenzies got out and poked their heads under the raised hood, but Wolf told her, in that tone of voice she already recognized as meaning business, to stay in the truck. He was certainly autocratic, but she liked his relationship with Joe. There was a strong sense of respect between them.
She wondered if the townspeople were truly so hostile simply because the Mackenzies were half Indian. Something Joe had said tugged at her memory, something about it would be bad enough if it were just him involved, but it would be twice as bad because of Wolf. What about Wolf? He'd rescued her from an unpleasant, even dangerous, situation, he'd seen to her comfort, and now he was repairing her car.
He'd also kissed her silly.
She could feel her cheeks heat as she remembered those fierce kisses. No, the kisses, and remembering them, begot a different kind of heat. Her cheeks were hot because her own behaviour was so appalling she could barely bring herself to think about it. She had never—never!—been so forward with a man. It was totally out of character for her.
Aunt Ardith would have had a conniption fit at the thought of her mousy, sedate niece letting a strange man put his tongue in her mouth. It had to be unsanitary, though it was also, to be honest, exciting in a primitive way.
Her face still felt hot when Wolf got back into the truck, but he didn't even look at her. "It's fixed. Joe will follow us."
"But doesn't it need more water and antifreeze?"
He cast her a disbelieving look. "I had a can of antifreeze in the back of the truck. Weren't you paying attention when I got it out?"

She blushed again. She hadn't been paying attention; she'd been lost in reliving those kisses he'd given her, her heart thundering and her blood racing. It was an extraordinary reaction, and she wasn't certain how to handle it. Ignoring it seemed the wisest course, but was it possible to ignore something like that?

His powerful leg moved against hers as he shifted gears, and abruptly she realized she was still sitting in the middle of the seat. "I'll get out of your way," she said hastily, and slid over by the window.

Wolf had liked the feel of her sitting next to him, so close that his arm and leg brushed her whenever he changed gears, but he didn't tell her that. Things had gotten way out of hand at the house, but he didn't have to let them go any further. This deal with Joe worried him, and Joe was more important to him than the way a soft woman felt in his arms.

"I don't want Joe hurt because your do-gooder instincts won't leave well enough alone." He spoke in a low, silky tone that made her jump, and he knew she sensed the menace in it. "The Air Force Academy! That's climbing high for an Indian kid, with a lot of people waiting to step on his fingers."

If he'd thought to intimidate her, he'd failed. She turned toward him with fire sparking in her eyes, her chin up. "Mr. Mackenzie, I didn't promise Joe he would be accepted into the Academy. He understands that. His grades were high enough to qualify him for recommendation, but he dropped out of school. He has no chance at all unless he gets back into school and gets the credits he needs. That's what I offered him: a chance."

"And if he doesn't make it?"

"He wants to try. Even if he isn't accepted, at least he'll know he tried, and at least he'll have a diploma."

"So he can do exactly what he would have done without the diploma."

"Perhaps. But I'm going to begin checking into the procedure and qualifications on Monday, and writing to people. The competition to get into the Academy is really fierce."

"The people in town won't like you tutoring him."

"That's what Joe said." Her face took on that prim, obstinate look. "But I'll have something to say to anyone who kicks up about it. Just let me handle them, Mr. Mackenzie."

They were already down the mountain that had taken her so long to drive up. Wolf was silent for the rest of the drive, so Mary was, too. But when he

pulled up to the old house where she was living, he rested his gloved hands on the steering wheel and said, "It isn't just Joe. For your sake, don't let on that you're doing it. It's better for you if no one knows you've ever even spoken to me."
"Why ever not?"
His smile was wintry. "I'm an ex-con. I did time for rape."

Chapter Three

Afterward, Mary kicked herself for simply getting out of the truck without saying a word in response to his bald statement, but at the time she had been shocked to the core and incapable of a response. Rape! The crime was repulsive. It was unbelievable. She had actually kissed him! She'd been so stunned that she'd merely nodded goodbye to him and told Joe that she'd see him that night, then gone in the house without thanking them for all their help and trouble.
Now reality set in. Standing alone in the old-fashioned kitchen, she watched Woodrow hungrily lapping milk from his saucer while she considered the man and his statement. She abruptly snorted. "Hogwash! If that man's a rapist, I'll boil you for supper, Woodrow."
Woodrow looked remarkably unconcerned, which to Mary indicated that the cat agreed with her judgment, and she had a high opinion of Woodrow's ability to know what was best for himself.
After all, Wolf hadn't said that he'd committed rape. He'd said that he had served time in prison for rape. When Mary thought of the way both Mackenzies automatically and bitterly accepted that they would be shunned because of their Indian blood, she wondered if perhaps the fact that Wolf was part Indian figured in his conviction. But he hadn't done it. She knew that as well as she knew her own face. The man who had helped her out of a bad situation, warmed her cold hands against his own body and kissed her with burning male hunger, simply wasn't the type of man who could hurt a woman like that. He was the one who had halted before those kisses had gone too far; she had already been putty in his hands.
It was ridiculous. There was no way he was a rapist. Oh, perhaps it hadn't been any great hardship for him to stop kissing her; after all, she was mousy and inexperienced and would never be voluptuous, but… Her thoughts

trailed off as remembered sensations intruded. She was inexperienced, but she wasn't stupid. He had been—well, hard. She had distinctly felt it. Perhaps he hadn't had an outlet for his physical appetites lately and she had been handy, but still he hadn't taken advantage of her. He hadn't treated her with a sailor's attitude that any port in a storm would suffice. What was that awful term she had heard one of her students use once? Oh, yes—horny. She could accept that Wolf Mackenzie had been in that condition and she had accidentally stirred his fire in some way that still remained a mystery to her, but the bottom line was that he hadn't pushed his advantage. What if he had?

Her heart started a strong, heavy beat, and heat crept through her, while an achy, restless feeling settled low inside. Her breasts tightened and began throbbing, and automatically she pressed her palms over them before she realized what she was doing and jerked her hands down. But what if he had touched them? What if he had put his mouth on her? She felt as if she would melt now, just thinking about him. Fantasizing. She pressed her thighs together, trying to ease the hollow ache, and a whimper escaped her lips. The sound was low, but seemed inordinately loud in the silent house, and the cat looked up from his saucer, gave a questioning meow, then returned to the milk.

Would she have been able to stop him? Would she even have tried to stop him? Or would she now be standing here remembering making love instead of trying to imagine how it would be? Her body tingled, but from barely awakened instincts and needs rather than true knowledge.

She had never before known passion, other than the passion for knowledge and teaching. To find her body capable of such strong sensations was frightening, because she had thought she knew herself well. Suddenly her own flesh was alien to her, and her thoughts and emotions were abruptly unruly. It was almost like a betrayal.

Why, this was lust! She, Mary Elizabeth Potter, actually lusted after a man! Not just any man, either. Wolf Mackenzie.

It was both amazing and embarrassing.

Joe proved a quick, able student, as Mary had known he would be. He was prompt, arriving right on time, and thankfully alone. After stewing over the morning's events for the entire afternoon, she didn't think she could ever

face Wolf Mackenzie again. What must he think of her? To her mind, she had practically attacked the man.
But Joe was alone, and in the three hours that followed, Mary found herself liking him more and more. He was hungry for knowledge and absorbed it like a dry sponge. While he worked on the assignments she had set out for him, she prepared a set of records in which to keep the time he spent on each subject, the matter covered and his test scores. The goal they had set for themselves was much higher than just a high school diploma. Though she hadn't promised it, she knew she wouldn't be satisfied unless Joe was accepted into the Air Force Academy. There had been something in his eyes that told her he would never be complete unless he could fly; he was like a grounded eagle, his soul yearning for the sky.
At nine o'clock she called a halt and noted the time in her records. Joe yawned as he rocked the chair onto its back legs. "How often do we do this?"
"Every night, if you can," she replied. "At least until you catch up with the rest of your class."
His pale, blue-diamond eyes glittered at her, and again she was struck by how old those eyes were. "Do I have to go back to regular classrooms next year?"
"It would help if you did. You'd be able to get much more work done, and we could do your advanced studies here."
"I'll think about it. I don't want to leave Dad in the lurch. We're expanding the ranch now, and it means a lot more work. We have more horses now than we've ever had before."
"Do you raise horses?"
"Quarter horses. Good ranch horses, trained to handle cattle. We not only breed them, but people bring their own horses to the ranch for Dad to train. He's not just good, he's the best. Folks don't mind that he's an Indian when it comes to training their horses."
Again the bitterness was apparent. Mary propped her elbows on the table and leaned her chin on her upraised, folded hands. "And you?"
"I'm Indian, too, Miss Potter. Half Indian, and that's more than enough for most people. It wasn't as bad when I was younger, but an Indian kid isn't much of a threat to anyone. It's when that kid grows up and starts looking at the white Anglo daughters that all hell breaks loose."

So a girl had been part of the reason Joe had quit school. Mary raised her eyebrows at him. "I imagine the white Anglo daughters looked back, too," she said mildly. "You're very good-looking."
He almost grinned at her. "Yeah. That and two bits will get me a cup of coffee."
"So they looked back?"
"And flirted. One acted like she really cared something about me. But when I asked her to a dance, the door was slammed in my face right quick. I guess it's okay to flirt with me, sort of like waving a red flag at a bull from a safe distance, but there was no way she was actually going to go out with an Indian."
"I'm sorry." Without thinking, Mary reached out and covered his strong young hand with her own. "Is that when you quit school?"
"There didn't seem to be any point in going. Don't think I was serious about her, or anything like that, because it hadn't gotten that far. I was just interested in her. But the whole thing made it plain that I was never going to fit in, that none of those girls would ever go out with me."
"So what did you plan on doing? Working on the ranch for the rest of your life and never dating, never getting married?"
"I'm sure not thinking of getting married!" he said strongly. "As for the rest of it, there are other towns, bigger towns. The ranch is doing pretty good now, and we have a little extra money." He didn't add that he'd lost his virginity two years before, on a trip to one of those bigger towns. He didn't want to shock her, and he was certain she would be shocked if she had any idea of his experience. The new teacher wasn't just prim, she was innocent. It made him feel oddly protective. That, and the fact that she was different from the other teachers he'd known. When she looked at him she saw him, Joe Mackenzie, not the bronzed skin and black hair of a half-breed. She had looked into his eyes and seen the dream, the obsession he'd always had with planes and flying.
After Joe had left, Mary locked the house and got ready for bed. It had been a tumultuous day for her, but it was a long time before she slept, and then she overslept the next morning. She deliberately kept herself busy that day, not giving herself time to moon over Wolf Mackenzie, or fantasize about things that hadn't happened. She mopped and waxed until the old house was shiny, then dragged out the boxes of books she had brought from Savannah. Books always gave a house a lived-in look. To her frustration, however,

there was no place to put them. What she needed was some of that portable shelving; if all it required for assembly was a screwdriver, she should be able to put it up herself. With her customary decisiveness, she made plans to check at the general store the next afternoon. If they didn't have what she needed, she would buy some lumber and hire someone to build some shelves.

At lunch on Monday she made a call to the state board of education to find out what she had to do to make certain Joe's studies would be accepted toward his diploma. She knew she had the qualifications, but there was also a good deal of paperwork to be done before he could earn the necessary credits by private tutoring. She made the call on the pay phone in the tiny teacher's lounge, which was never used because there were only three teachers, each teaching four grades, and there was never any time for a break. Nevertheless it had three chairs and a table, a tiny, dented refrigerator, an automatic coffee maker and the pay phone. It was so unusual for any of the teachers to use the lounge that Mary was surprised when the door opened and Sharon Wycliffe, who taught grades one through four, poked her head in.

"Mary, are you feeling sick or anything?"

"No, I'm fine." Mary stood and dusted off her hands. The receiver had carried a grey coating, evidence of how often it was used. "I was making a call."

"Oh. I just wondered. You'd been in here a long time, and I thought you might not be feeling well. Who were you calling?"

The question was asked without any hesitancy. Sharon had been born in Ruth, had gone to school here, had married a local boy. Everyone in Ruth knew every one of the other one hundred and eighty inhabitants; they all knew each other's business and saw nothing unusual about it. Small towns were merely large extended families. Mary wasn't taken aback by Sharon's open curiosity, having already experienced it.

"The state board. I needed some information on teaching requirements."

Sharon looked alarmed. "Do you think you aren't properly certified? If there's any trouble, the school board will likely commit mass suicide. You don't know how hard it is to find a teacher with the proper qualifications willing to come to a town as small as Ruth. They were almost at the panic stage when you were located. The kids were going to have to start going to school over sixty miles away."

"No, it isn't that. I thought I might begin private tutoring, if any of the kids need it." She didn't mention Joe Mackenzie, because she couldn't forget the warnings both he and his father had given her.
"Thank goodness it isn't bad news," Sharon exclaimed. "I'd better get back to the kids before they get into trouble." With a wave and a smile she withdrew her head, her curiosity satisfied.
Mary hoped Sharon didn't mention it to Dottie Lancaster, the teacher who taught grades five through eight, but she knew it was a futile hope. Eventually, everything in Ruth became common knowledge. Sharon was warm and full of good humour with her young charges, and Mary's teaching style was rather relaxed, too, but Dottie was strict and abrupt with the students. It made Mary uncomfortable, because she sensed Dottie regarded her job as merely a job, something that was necessary but not enjoyed. She had even heard that Dottie, who was fifty-five, was thinking about an early retirement. For all Dottie's shortcomings, that would certainly upset the local school board, because as Sharon had pointed out, it was almost impossible to get a teacher to relocate to Ruth. The town was just too small and too far away from everything.
As she taught the last classes of the day, Mary found herself studying the young girls and wondering which one had daringly flirted with Joe Mackenzie, then retreated when he had actually asked her out. Several of the girls were very attractive and flirtatious, and though they had the shallowness typical of teenagers, they all seemed likable. But which one would have attracted Joe, who wasn't shallow, whose eyes were far too old for a sixteen-year-old boy? Natalie Ulrich, who was tall and graceful? Pamela Hearst, who had the sort of blond good looks that belonged on a California beach? Or maybe it was Jackie Baugh, with her dark, sultry eyes. It could be any of the eight girls in her classes, she realized. They were used to being pursued, having had the stupendous good luck to be outnumbered, nine to eight, by the boys. They were all flirts. So which one was it?
She wondered why it mattered, but it did. One of these girls, though she hadn't broken Joe's heart, had nevertheless dealt him what could have been a life-destroying blow. Joe had taken it as the final proof that he'd never have a place in the white man's world, and he'd withdrawn. He still might never re-enter this school, but at least he'd agreed to be tutored. If only he didn't lose hope.

When school was out, she swiftly gathered all the materials she would need that night, as well as the papers she had to grade, and hurried to her car. It was only a short drive to Hearst's General Store, and when she asked, Mr. Hearst kindly directed her to the stacks of shelving in a corner.

A few minutes later the door opened to admit another customer. Mary saw Wolf as soon as he entered the store; she had been examining the shelving, but it was as if her skin was an alarm system, signalling his nearness. Her nerves tingled, the hair at the nape of her neck bristled, she looked up, and there he was. Instantly she shivered, and her nipples tightened. Distress at that uncontrollable response sent blood rushing to her face.

With her peripheral vision she saw Mr. Hearst stiffen, and for the first time she truly believed the things Wolf had told her about the way he was regarded in town. He hadn't done anything, hadn't said anything, but it was obvious Mr. Hearst wasn't happy to have him in the store.

Quickly she turned back to the shelving. She couldn't look him in the eye. Her face heated even more when she thought of the way she'd acted, throwing herself at him like a sex-starved old maid. It didn't help her feelings that he probably thought she was a sex-starved old maid; she couldn't argue with the old maid part, but she had never paid much attention to the other until Wolf had taken her in his arms. When she thought of the things she had done…

Her face was on fire. Her body was on fire. There was no way she could talk to him. What must he think of her? With fierce concentration, she read the instructions on the box of shelving and pretended she hadn't seen him enter the store.

She had read the instructions three times before she realized she was acting just like the people he had described: too good to speak to him, disdaining to acknowledge knowing him. Mary was normally even-tempered, but suddenly rage filled her, and it was rage at herself. What sort of person was she?

She jerked the box of shelving toward her and nearly staggered under the unexpected weight. Just as she turned, Wolf laid a box of nails on the checkout counter and reached in his pocket for his wallet.

Mr. Hearst glanced briefly at Wolf; then his eyes cut to where Mary was struggling with the box. "Here, Miss Potter, let me get that," he said, rushing from behind the counter to grab the box. He grunted as he hefted it

in his arms. "Can't have you wrestling with something this heavy. Why, you might hurt yourself."
Mary wondered how he thought she would get it from her car into her house if she didn't handle it herself, but refrained from pointing that out. She followed him back to the counter, squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, looked up at Wolf and said clearly, "Hello, Mr. Mackenzie. How are you?"
His night-dark eyes glittered, perhaps in warning. "Miss Potter," he said in brief acknowledgment, touching the brim of his hat with his fingers, but he refused to respond to her polite inquiry.
Mr. Hearst looked sharply at Mary. "You know him, Miss Potter?"
"Indeed I do. He rescued me Saturday when my car broke down and I was stranded in the snow." She kept her voice clear and strong.
Mr. Hearst darted a suspicious look at Wolf. "Hmmph," he said, then reached for the box of shelving to ring it up.
"Excuse me," Mary said. "Mr. Mackenzie was here first."
She heard Wolf mutter a curse under his breath, or at least she thought it was a curse. Mr. Hearst turned red.
"I don't mind waiting," Wolf said tightly.
"I wouldn't dream of cutting in front of you." She folded her hands at her waist and pursed her lips. "I couldn't be that rude."
"Ladies first," Mr. Hearst said, trying for a smile.
Mary gave him a stern look. "Ladies shouldn't take advantage of their gender, Mr. Hearst. This is an age of equal treatment and fairness. Mr. Mackenzie was here first, and he should be waited on first."
Wolf shook his head and gave her a disbelieving look. "Are you one of those women's libbers?"
Mr. Hearst glared at him. "Don't take that tone with her, Indian."
"Now, just a minute." Controlling her outrage, she shook her finger at him. "That was rude and entirely uncalled for. Why, your mother would be ashamed of you, Mr. Hearst. Didn't she teach you better than that?"
He turned even redder. "She taught me just fine," he mumbled, staring at her finger.
There was something about a schoolteacher's finger; it had an amazing, mystical power. It made grown men quail before it. She had noticed the effect before and decided that a schoolteacher's finger was an extension of Mother's finger, and as such it wielded unknown authority. Women grew out of the feeling of guilt and helplessness brought on by that accusing

finger, perhaps because most of them became mothers and developed their own powerful finger, but men never did. Mr. Hearst was no exception. He looked as if he wanted to crawl under his own counter.
"Then I'm certain you'll want to make her proud of you," she said in her most austere voice. "After you, Mr. Mackenzie."
Wolf made a sound that was almost a growl, but Mary stared at him until he jerked the money from his wallet and threw it on the counter. Without another word, Mr. Hearst rang up the nails and made change. Equally silent, Wolf grabbed the box of nails, spun on his heel and left the store.
"Thank you," Mary said, finally relenting and bestowing a forgiving smile on Mr. Hearst. "I knew you would understand how important it is to me that I be treated fairly. I don't wish to take advantage of my position as a teacher here." She made it sound as if being a teacher was at least as important as being queen, but Mr. Hearst only nodded, too relieved to pursue the matter. He took her money and dutifully carried the box of shelving out to her car, where he stored it in the trunk for her.
"Thank you," she said again. "By the way, Pamela—she is your daughter, isn't she?"
Mr. Hearst looked worried. "Yes, she is." Pam was his youngest, and the apple of his eye.
"She's a lovely girl and a good student. I just wanted you to know that she's doing well in school."
His face was wreathed in smiles as she drove away.
Wolf pulled over at the corner and watched his rearview mirror, waiting for Mary to exit the store. He was so angry he wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled, and that made him even angrier, because he knew he wouldn't do it.
Damn her! He'd warned her, but she hadn't listened. Not only had she made it plain they were acquainted, she had outlined the circumstances of their meeting and then championed him in a way that wouldn't go unnoticed. Hadn't she understood when he'd told her he was an ex-con, and why? Did she think he'd been joking?
His hands clenched around the steering wheel. She'd had her hair twisted up in a knot again, and those big glasses perched on her nose, hiding the soft slate-blue of her eyes, but he remembered how she had looked with her hair down, wearing Joe's old jeans that had clung tightly to her slender legs and hips. He remembered the way passion had glazed her eyes when he'd kissed

her. He remembered the softness of her lips, though she had had them pressed together in a ridiculously prim expression.
If he had any sense he'd just drive away. If he stayed completely away from her, there wouldn't be anything for people to talk about other than the fact that she was tutoring Joe, and that would be bad enough in their eyes.
But how would she get that box out of the car and into the house when she got home? It probably weighed as much as she did. He would just carry the box in for her, and at the same time peel a strip off her hide for not listening to him.
Oh, hell, who was he fooling? He'd had a taste of her, and he wanted more. She was a frumpy old maid, but her skin was as pale and translucent as a baby's, and her slender body would be soft, gently curving under his hands. He wanted to touch her. After kissing her, holding her, he hadn't gone to see Julie Oakes because he hadn't been able to get the feel of Miss Mary Potter out of his mind, off of his body. He still ached. His physical frustration was painful, and it was going to get worse, because if he'd ever known anything, it was that Miss Mary Potter wasn't for him.
Her car pulled out from in front of the store and passed him. Smothering another curse, he put the truck in gear and slowly followed her. She maintained a sedate pace, following the two-lane highway out of town, then turning off on the narrow secondary road that led to her house. She had to see his truck behind her, but she didn't give any indication that she knew she was being followed. Instead she drove straight to her house, carefully turned in at the snow-packed driveway and guided the car around to her customary parking spot behind the house.
Wolf shook his head as he pulled in behind her and got out of the truck. She was already out of her car, and she smiled at him as she fished the house key out of her purse. Didn't she remember what he'd told her? He couldn't believe that he'd told her he'd served time for rape and still she greeted him as calmly as if he were a priest, though they were the only two people for miles around.
"Damn it all, lady!" he barked at her, his long legs carrying him to her in a few strides. "Didn't you listen to anything I said Saturday?"
"Yes, of course I listened. That doesn't mean I agreed." She unlocked the trunk and smiled at him. "While you're here, would you please carry this box in for me? I'd really appreciate it."
"That's why I stopped," he snapped. "I knew you couldn't handle it."

His ill temper didn't seem to faze her. She merely smiled at him again as he lifted the box onto his shoulder, then led the way to the back door and opened it.
The first thing he noticed was that the house had a fresh, sweet smell to it, instead of the musty smell of an old house that had stood empty for a long time. His head lifted, and against his will he inhaled the faint scent. "What's that smell?"
She stopped and sniffed delicately. "What smell?"
"That sweet smell. Like flowers."
"Flowers? Oh, that must be the lilac sachet I put in all the drawers to freshen them. So many of the sachets are overpowering, but the lilacs are just right, don't you think?"
He didn't know anything about sachets, whatever they were, but if she put them in all the drawers, then her underwear must smell like lilacs, too. Her sheets would smell like lilacs and the warm scent of her body. His body responded strongly to the thought, and he cursed, then set the box down with a thud. Though the house was chilly, he felt sweat break out on his forehead.
"Let me turn up the heat," she said, ignoring his cursing. "The furnace is old and noisy, but I don't have any wood for the fireplace, so it'll have to do."
As she talked, she left the kitchen and turned down a hallway, her voice growing fainter. Then she was back, and she smiled at him again. "It'll be warm in just a minute. Would you like a cup of tea?" After giving him a measuring look she said, "Make that coffee. You don't look like a tea-drinking man."
He was already warm. He was burning up. He pulled off his gloves and tossed them on the kitchen table. "Don't you know everybody in that town will be talking about you now? Lady, I'm Indian, and I'm an ex-con—"
"Mary," she interrupted briskly.
"What?"
"My name is Mary, not 'lady.' Mary Elizabeth." She added the second name out of habit because Aunt Ardith had always called her by both names. "Are you certain you don't want coffee? I need something to warm up my insides."
His hat joined the gloves, and he raked an impatient hand through his hair. "All right. Coffee."

Mary turned to run the water and measure the coffee, using the activity to hide the sudden colour in her face. His hair. She felt stupid, but she'd hardly noticed his hair before. Maybe she'd been too upset, then too bemused, or maybe it was just that his midnight-black eyes had taken her attention, but she hadn't noticed before how long his hair was. It was thick and black and shiny, and touched his broad shoulders. He looked magnificently pagan; she had immediately pictured him with his powerful chest and legs bare, his body covered only by a breechclout or loincloth, and her pulse rate had gone wild.

He didn't sit down, but propped his long body against the cabinet beside her. Mary kept her head down, hoping her blush would subside. What was it about the man that the mere sight of him triggered erotic fantasies? She had certainly never had any fantasies before, erotic or otherwise. She had never before looked at a man and wondered what he looked like nude, but the thought of Wolf nude made her ache inside, made her hands itch to touch him.

"What the hell are you doing letting me even come in your house, let alone inviting me to have coffee?" he asked in a low, rough voice.

She blinked at him, her expression startled. "Why shouldn't I?"

He thought he might explode with frustration. "Lady—"

"Mary."

His big fists clenched. "Mary. Don't you have any better sense than to let an ex-con into your house?"

"Oh, that." She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "It would be wise to follow your advice if you were truly a criminal, but since you didn't do it, I don't think that applies in this instance. Besides, if you were a criminal, you wouldn't give me that advice."

He couldn't believe the casual way she disregarded any possibility of his guilt. "How do you know I didn't do it?"

"You just didn't."

"Do you have any reason for your deduction, Sherlock, or are you going on good old feminine intuition?"

She jerked around and glared at him. "I don't believe a rapist would have handled a woman as tenderly as you—as you handled me," she said, her voice tapering off into a whisper, and the colour surged back into her face. Mortified by the stupid way she continued to blush, she slapped her palms to her face in an effort to hide the betraying colour.

Wolf clenched his teeth, partly because she was white and therefore not for him, partly because she was so damned innocent, and partly because he wanted so fiercely to touch her that his entire body ached. "Don't build any dreams because I kissed you Saturday," he said harshly. "I've been too long without a woman, and I'm—"
"Horny?" she supplied.
He was staggered by the incongruity of that word coming from her prim mouth. "What?"
"Horny," she said again. "I've heard some of my students say it. It means—"
"I know what it means!"
"Oh. Well, is that what you were? Still are, for all I know."
He wanted to laugh. The urge almost overpowered him, but he changed the sound into a cough. "Yeah, I still am."
She looked sympathetic. "I understand that can be quite a problem."
"It's hard on a guy."
It took a moment, but then her eyes widened, and before she could stop herself, her gaze had slid down his body. Instantly she jerked her head back up. "Oh. I see. I mean—I understand."
The need to touch her was suddenly so strong that he had to give in to it, had to touch her in even the smallest way. He put his hands on her shoulders, savouring her softness, the delicacy of her joints under his palms. "I don't think you do understand. You can't associate with me and still work in this town. At best, you'd be treated like a leper, or a slut. You would probably lose your job."
At that, she pressed her lips together, and a militant light came into her eyes. "I'd like to see someone try to fire me for associating with a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen. I refuse to pretend I don't know you."
"There's knowing, and there's knowing. It would be bad enough for you to be friends with me. Sleeping with me would make your life here impossible."
He felt her stiffen under his hands. "I don't believe I've asked to sleep with you," she said, but the colour rose in her face again. She hadn't actually said the words, but he knew she certainly had thought about what it would be like.
"You asked, all right, but you're so damned innocent you didn't realize what you were doing," he muttered. "I could crawl on top of you right now, sweetheart, and I'd do it if you had any real idea of what you're asking for.

But the last thing I want is to have some prissy little Anglo screaming 'rape' at me. Believe me, an Indian doesn't get the benefit of the doubt."
"I wouldn't do anything like that!"
He smiled grimly. "Yeah, I've heard that before. I'm probably the only man who has ever kissed you, and you think you'd like more, don't you? But sex isn't pretty and romantic, it's hot and sweaty, and you probably wouldn't like the first time at all. So do me a favour and find some other guinea pig. I have enough troubles without adding you to the list."
Mary jerked away from him, pressing her lips firmly together and blinking her eyes as fast as she could to keep the tears from falling. Not for anything would she let him make her cry.
"I'm sorry I gave you that impression," she said, her voice stifled but even. "It's true I've never been kissed before, but I'm sure you aren't surprised by that I'm obviously not Miss America material. If my—my response was out of line, I apologize. It won't happen again." She turned briskly to the cabinet. "The coffee is ready. How do you take yours?"
A muscle jerked in his jaw, and he grabbed his hat. "Forget the coffee," he muttered as he jammed the hat on his head and reached for his gloves.
She didn't look at him. "Very well. Goodbye, Mr. Mackenzie."
Wolf slammed out the door, and Mary stood there with an empty coffee cup in her hand. If it really was goodbye, she didn't know how she would be able to stand it.

Chapter Four

Mary wasn't weak-willed, and she refused to give in to the desolation that filled her every time she thought of that horrible day. During the days she prodded, cajoled and enticed her students toward knowledge; at night she watched Joe devour the facts she spread before him. His thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and he not only caught up with the students in her regular classes, he passed them.
She had written her letters to the Wyoming members of Congress, and had also written to a friend for all the information she could find on the Air Force Academy. When the package came, she gave it to Joe and watched his eyes take on that fiercely intent, enthralled look he got whenever he

thought of flying. Working with Joe was a joy; her only problem was that he reminded her so strongly of his father.
It wasn't that she missed Wolf; how could she miss someone she had seen only twice? He hadn't imbedded himself in her daily routine so that her life seemed empty without him. But while she had been with him, she had felt more vividly alive than she ever had before. With Wolf, she hadn't been Mary Potter, old maid, she had been Mary Potter, woman. His intense masculinity had reached parts of her that she hadn't known existed, bringing to life dormant yearnings and emotions. She argued with herself that what she felt was plain old garden-variety lust, but that didn't stop the ache she felt whenever she thought of him. Even worse was her humiliation because her inexperience had been so obvious, and now she knew he thought of her as a sex-starved old maid.
It was April before the inevitable happened and word got out that Joe Mackenzie was spending a lot of time at the new teacher's house. At first Mary wasn't aware of the rumour flying through the town, though the kids in her classes had been watching her strangely, and there had been a lot of whispering. Sharon Wycliffe and Dottie Lancaster, the other two teachers, also took to giving her odd looks and whispering to each other. It didn't take Mary long to decide that the secret was no longer secret, but she went about her business with a serene smile. She had already received a favourable letter from a senator, signalling his interest in Joe, and despite her own arguments for caution, her spirits were high.
The school board's regular meeting was scheduled for the third week in April. The afternoon of the meeting, Sharon, with elaborate casualness, asked Mary if she planned to attend. Mary looked at her in surprise. "Of course. I thought all of us were expected to attend on a regular basis."
"Well, yes. It's just that—I thought—"
"You thought I would avoid the meeting now that everyone knows I've been teaching Joe Mackenzie?" Mary asked directly.
Sharon's mouth fell open. "What?" Her voice was weak.
"You didn't know? Well, it isn't an earth-shattering secret." She shrugged. "Joe thought people would be upset if I tutored him, so I haven't said anything. From the way everyone has been acting, I thought the cat was out of the bag."
"I think it was the wrong cat," Sharon admitted sheepishly. "His truck was seen at your house at night and people—um—got the wrong idea."

Mary felt blank. "What wrong idea?"
"Well, he's big for his age and all."
Still Mary didn't understand, until Sharon blushed hotly. Then comprehension burst on her brain like a flash, and horror filled her, followed swiftly by anger. "They think I'm having an affair with a sixteen-year-old boy?" Her voice rose with each word.
"It was late at night when his truck was seen," Sharon added, looking miserable.
"Joe leaves promptly at nine o'clock. Someone's idea of 'late' differs from mine." Mary stood and began shoving papers into her tote, her nostrils flaring, her cheeks white. The awful thing was that she had to simmer until seven o'clock that night, but she didn't think waiting would cool her temper. If anything, pressure would build. She felt savage, not only because her reputation had been impugned, but because Joe had also been attacked. He was trying desperately to make his dreams come true, and people were trying to tear him down. She wasn't a hen fussing with one chick; she was a tigress with one cub, and that cub had been threatened. It didn't matter that the cub was seven inches taller than she and outweighed her by almost eighty pounds; Joe, for all his unusual maturity, was still young and vulnerable. The father had disdained her protection, but there was no power on earth that could stop her from defending the son.
Evidently word had spread, because the school board meeting was unusually crowded that night. There were six members of the board: Mr. Hearst, who owned the general store; Francie Beecham, an eighty-one-year-old former teacher; Walton Isby, the bank president; Harlon Keschel, who owned the combination drugstore/hamburger joint; Eli
Baugh, a local rancher whose daughter, Jackie, was in Mary's class; and Cicely Karr, who owned the service station. All of the board members were solid members of the small community, all of them property owners, and all of them except Francie Beecham had stony faces.
The board meeting was held in Dottie's classroom, and extra desks were brought from Mary's classroom so there would be enough seats for everyone, an indication of how many people felt it necessary to attend. Mary was certain that at least one parent of each of her students was present. As she entered the room, every eye turned toward her. The women looked indignant; the men looked both hostile and speculative, and that made Mary even angrier. What right did they have to look down on her for

her supposed sins, while at the same time they were wondering about the details?
Leaning against the wall was a tall man in a khaki deputy sheriff's uniform, watching her with narrowed eyes, and she wondered if they meant to have her arrested for sexual misconduct. It was ridiculous! If she had looked anything other than exactly what she was, a slight, mousy old maid, their suspicions would at least have made more sense. She poked an errant strand of hair back into the knot at the back of her head, sat down and folded her arms, intending to let them make the first move.
Walton Isby cleared his throat and called the meeting to order, no doubt feeling the importance of his position with so many people present to watch the proceedings. Mary drummed her fingers on her arm. The board went through the routine of its normal business, and suddenly she decided she wasn't going to wait. The best defence, she'd read, was an attack.
When the normal business was finished, Mr. Isby cleared his throat again, and Mary took it as a signal that they were about to get down to the real purpose of the meeting. She rose to her feet and said clearly, "Mr. Isby, before you continue, I have an announcement to make."
He looked startled, and his florid face turned even redder. "This is—uh, well, irregular, Miss Potter."
"It's also important." She kept her voice at the level she used when lecturing and turned so she could see the entire room. The deputy straightened from his position against the wall as everyone's attention locked on her like a magnet to a steel bar. "I'm certified to tutor pupils privately, and the credits they earn in private lessons are as legitimate as those earned in a public classroom. For the past month, I've been tutoring Joe Mackenzie in my home—"
"I'll just bet you have," someone muttered, and Mary's eyes flashed.
"Who said that?" she demanded crisply. "It was incredibly vulgar."
The room fell silent.
"When I saw Joe Mackenzie's school records, I was outraged that a student of his intelligence had quit school. Perhaps none of you know it, but he was at the top of his class. I contacted him and persuaded him to take lessons to catch up to his classmates, and in one month he has not only caught them, he has surpassed them. I have also been in contact with Senator Allard, who has expressed an interest in Joe. Joe's strong academic standing has made him a candidate for recommendation to the Air Force Academy. He's an

honour to the community, and I know all of you will give him your support."
She was gratified to see the stunned looks in the room and sat down with the cool poise Aunt Ardith had tirelessly drummed into her. Only rabble got into brawls, Aunt Ardith had said; a lady could make her point in other ways.
Whispers rustled through the room as people put their heads together, and Mr. Isby shuffled the three sheets of paper in front of him as he searched for something to say. The other members of the board put their heads together, too.
She looked around the room, and a shadow in the hall beyond the open door caught her attention. It was only a slight movement; if she hadn't looked at precisely that second, she would have missed it. As it was, it took her a moment to make out the outline of a tall man, and her skin tingled. Wolf. He was out in the hall, listening. It was the first time she had seen him since the day he'd come to her house, and even though all she could see was a darker outline against the shadows, her heart began to pound.
Mr. Isby cleared his throat, and the murmuring in the room settled down. "That is good news, Miss Potter," he began. "However, we don't think you've given the best appearance as an example to our young people—"
"Speak for yourself, Walton," Francie Beecham said testily, her voice cracking with old age.
Mary stood again. "In precisely what way have I given the wrong appearance?"
"It doesn't look right to have that boy in your house all hours of the night!" Mr. Hearst snapped.
"Joe leaves my home at exactly nine o'clock, after three hours of lessons. What is your definition of 'all hours of the night'? However, if the board doesn't approve of the location, I take it all are agreed that the schoolhouse will be used for night classes? I have no objection to moving the lessons here."
Mr. Isby, who was at heart a good-natured soul, looked harassed. The board members put their heads together again.
After a minute of heated consultation, they looked up again. Harlon Keschel wiped his perspiring face with a handkerchief. Francie Beecham looked outraged. This time it was Cicely Karr who spoke. "Miss Potter, this is a difficult situation. The odds against Joe Mackenzie being accepted into the

Air Force Academy are high, I'm sure you'll admit, and the truth is that we don't approve of your spending so much time alone with him."
Mary's chin lifted. "Why is that?"
"Because you're a newcomer to this area, I'm sure you don't understand the way things are around here. The Mackenzies have a bad reputation, and we fear for your safety if you continue to associate with the boy."
"Mrs. Karr, that's hogwash," Mary replied with inelegant candour. Aunt Ardith wouldn't have approved. She thought of Wolf standing out in the hallway listening to these people slandering both him and his son, and she could almost feel the heat of his temper. He wouldn't let it hurt him, but it hurt her to know he was hearing it.
"Wolf Mackenzie helped me out of a dangerous situation when my car broke down and I was stranded in the snow. He was kind and considerate, and refused payment for repairing my car. Joe Mackenzie is an outstanding student who works hard on their ranch, doesn't drink or carouse—" she hoped that was true "—and has never been anything but respectful. I consider both of them my friends."
In the hallway, the man standing in the shadows knotted his fists. Damn the little fool, didn't she know this would probably cost her her job? He knew that if he stepped into that room all the hostility would instantly be focused on him, and he started to move, to draw their attention away from her, when he heard her speaking again. Didn't she know when to shut up?
"I would be as concerned if any of your children dropped out of school. I can't bear to see a young person give up on the future. Ladies and gentlemen, I was hired to teach. I intend to do that to the best of my ability. All of you are good people. Would any of you want me to give up if it were your child?"
Several people looked away and cleared their throats. Cicely Karr merely raised her chin. "You're sidestepping the point, Miss Potter. This isn't one of our children. This is Joe Mackenzie. He's… he's—"
"Half Indian?" Mary supplied, lifting her brow in question.
"Well, yes. That's part of it. The other part is his father—"
"What about his father?"
Wolf had to stifle a curse, and he started to step forward again when Mary asked scornfully, "Are you concerned because of his prison sentence?"
"That's cause enough, I should think!"
"Should you? Why?"

"Cicely, sit down and hush," Francie Beecham snapped. "The girl has a point, and I agree. If you start trying to think at this stage of your life, it could bring on hot flashes."

Just for a moment there was stunned silence in the room; then it exploded in thunderous laughter. Rough ranchers and their hard-working wives held their stomachs as they bent double, tears running down their faces. Mr. Isby turned so red his face was almost purple; then he burst into a great whooping laugh that sounded like a hysterical crane laying eggs, or so Cicely Karr told him. Her face was red, too, from anger. Big Eli Baugh actually rolled out of his chair, he was laughing so hard. Cicely grabbed his hat from the back of his chair and hit him over the head with it. He continued to howl with laughter as he protected his head with his arms.

"You can buy your motor oil from some other place from now on!" Cicely roared at Mr. Baugh, continuing to bash him with his hat. "And your gas! Don't you or any of your hands set foot on my property again!"

"Now, Cicely," Eli choked as he tried to dodge his hat.

"Folks, let's have some order in here," Harlon Keschel pleaded, though he looked as if he were enjoying the spectacle of Cicely bashing Eli with his own hat. Certainly everyone else in the room was. Almost everyone, Mary thought, as she spotted Dottie Lancaster's cold face. Suddenly she realized that the other teacher would have been glad to see her fired, and she wondered why. She'd always tried to be friendly with Dottie, but the older woman had rebuffed all overtures. Had Dottie seen Joe's truck at Mary's house and started the gossip? Would Dottie have been out driving around at night? There were no other houses on Mary's road, so no one would have been driving past to visit a neighbour.

The uproar had died down, though there was still an occasional chuckle heard around the room. Mrs. Karr continued to glare at Eli Baugh, having for some reason made him the focal point of her embarrassed anger rather than turning it on Francie Beecham, who had started it all.

Even Mr. Isby was still grinning as he raised his voice. "Let's see if we can get back to business here, folks."

Francie Beecham piped up again. "I think we've handled enough business for the night. Miss Potter is giving the Mackenzie boy private school lessons so he can go to the Air Force Academy, and that's that. I'd do the same thing if I were still teaching."

Mr. Hearst said, "It still don't look right—"

"Then she can use the classroom. Everyone agreed?" Francie looked at the other board members, her wrinkled face triumphant. She winked at Mary.
"It's okay by me," Eli Baugh said as he tried to reshape his hat. "The Air Force Academy—well, that's something. I don't reckon anyone from this county has ever been to any of the academies."
Mr. Hearst and Mrs. Karr disagreed, but Mr. Isby and Harlon Keschel sided with Francie and Eli. Mary stared hard at the shadowed hallway, but couldn't see anything now. Had he left? The deputy turned his head to see what she was looking at, but he didn't see anything, either, because he gave a slight shrug and looked back at her, then winked. Mary was startled. More people had winked at her that night than in the rest of her life total. What was the proper way to handle a wink? Were they ignored? Should she wink back? Aunt Ardith's lectures on proper behaviour hadn't covered winking.
The meeting broke up with a good deal of teasing and laughter, and more than a few of the parents took a moment to shake Mary's hand and tell her she was doing a good job. It was half an hour before she was able to get her coat and make it to the door, and when she did, she found the deputy waiting for her.
"I'll walk you to your car," he said in an easy tone. "I'm Clay Armstrong, the local deputy."
"How do you do? Mary Potter," she replied, holding out her hand.
He took it, and her small hand disappeared in his big one. He set his hat on top of dark brown curly hair, but his blue eyes still twinkled, even in the shadow of the brim. She liked him on sight. He was one of those strong, quiet men who were rock steady, but who had a good sense of humour. He'd been delighted by the uproar.
"Everyone in town knows who you are. We don't often have a stranger move in, especially a young single woman from the South. The first day you were here, the whole county heard about your accent. Haven't you noticed that all the girls in school are trying to drawl?"
"Are they?" she asked in surprise.
"They sure are." He slowed his walk to keep pace with her as they walked to her car. The cold air rushed at her, chilling her legs, but the night sky was crystal clear, and a thousand stars winked overhead in compensation.
They reached her car. "Would you tell me something, Mr. Armstrong?"
"Anything. And call me Clay."

"Why did Mrs. Karr get so angry at Mr. Baugh, instead of at Miss Beecham? It was Miss Beecham who started the whole thing."
"Cicely and Eli are first cousins. Cicely's folks died when she was young, and Eli's parents took her to raise. Well, Cicely and Eli are the same age, so they grew up together and fought like wildcats the whole time. Still do, I guess, but some families are like that. They're still pretty close."
That kind of family was strange to Mary, but it sounded warm and secure, too, to be able to fight with someone and know he still loved you.
"So she hit him for laughing at her?"
"And because he was convenient. No one is going to get too angry with Miss Beecham. She taught all the adults in this county, and we all still think a lot of that old lady."
"That sounds so nice," Mary said, smiling. "I hope I'm still here when I'm that old."
"Are you planning to raise Cain at school board meetings, too?"
"I hope so," she repeated.
He leaned down to open the car door for her. "I hope so, too. Be careful driving home." After she got in, he closed the door and touched his fingers to his hat brim, then strode away.
He was a nice man. Most of the people in Ruth were nice. They were blind where Wolf Mackenzie was concerned, but basically they weren't vicious people.
Wolf. Where had he gone?
She hoped Joe wouldn't decide to stop his lessons because of this. Though she knew it was foolish to count her chickens prematurely, she felt a growing certainty that he would be accepted into the Academy and was inordinately proud that she could be part of getting him there. Aunt Ardith would have said that pride goeth before a fall, but Mary had often thought that a person would never fall if he didn't first try to stand. On more than one occasion she had countered Aunt Ardith's cliché of choice with her own "nothing ventured, nothing gained." It had always made Aunt Ardith huffy when her favourite weapon was turned against her. Mary sighed. She missed her acerbic aunt so much. Her supply of clichés might wither from lack of use without Aunt Ardith to sharpen her wits against.
When she turned into her driveway, she was tired, hungry and anxious, afraid that Joe would try to be noble and stop his lessons so she wouldn't

have any more trouble because of him. "I'll teach him," she muttered aloud as she stepped out of the car, "if I have to follow him around on horseback."
"Who are you following around?" Wolf demanded irritably, and she jumped so violently that she banged her knee against the car door.
"Where did you come from?" she demanded just as irritably. "Darn it, you scared me!"
"Probably not enough. I parked in the barn, out of sight."
She stared up at him, drinking in the sight of his proud, chiselled face and closed expression. The starlight was colourless, revealing his features in stark angles and shadows, but it was enough for her. She hadn't realized how starved she had been for the sight of him, the heart-pounding nearness of him. She couldn't even feel the cold now, the way blood was racing through her veins. This was probably what "being in heat" meant. It was breathtaking and a little scary, but she decided she liked it.
"Let's go in," he said when she made no effort to move, and Mary silently led the way to the back door. She'd left it unlocked so she wouldn't have to fumble with a key in the dark, and Wolf's black brows drew together when she turned the knob and pushed the door open.
They entered, and Mary closed the door behind them, then turned on the light. Wolf stared down at her, at the silky brown hair escaping from its knot, and he had to clench his fists to keep from grabbing her. "Don't leave your door unlocked again," he ordered.
"I don't think I'll be burgled," she countered, then admitted honestly, "I don't have anything a self-respecting burglar would want."
He'd sworn he wouldn't touch her, but even though he'd known it would be difficult to keep his hands to himself, he hadn't realized quite how difficult. He wanted to grab her and shake some sense into her, but he knew if he touched her in any way at all, he wouldn't want to stop. Her female scent teased his nostrils, beckoning him closer; she smelled warm and delicately fragrant, so feminine it made his entire body ache with longing. He moved away from her, knowing it was safer for them both if he put some distance between them.
"I wasn't thinking about a burglar."
"No?" She considered that, then realized what he'd meant and what she'd said in response. She cleared her throat and marched to the stove, hoping he wouldn't see her red face. "If I make a pot of coffee, will you drink a cup this time or storm out like you did before as soon as it's made?"

The tart reproach in her voice amused him, and he wondered how he had ever thought her mousy. Her clothes were dowdy, but her personality was anything but timid. She said exactly what she thought and didn't hesitate to take someone to task. Less than an hour before she had taken on the entire county on his behalf. The memory of it sobered him.
"I'll drink the coffee if you insist on making it, but I'd rather you just sat down and listened to me."
Turning, Mary slid into a chair and primly folded her hands on the table. "I'm listening."
He pulled the chair next to her away from the table and turned it to the side, facing her, before he sat down. She turned an unsmiling gaze on him. "I saw you in the hall tonight."
He looked grim. "Damn. Did anyone else notice me?" He wondered how she had seen him, because he'd been very careful, and he was good at not being seen when he didn't want to be.
"I don't think so." She paused. "I'm sorry they said those things."
"I'm not worried about what the good people of Ruth think about me," he said in a hard tone. "I can handle them, and so can Joe. We don't depend on them for our living, but you do. Don't go to bat for us again, unless you don't like your job very much and you're trying to lose it, because that's damn sure what will happen if you keep on."
"I won't lose my job for teaching Joe."
"Maybe not. Maybe they'll have some tolerance for Joe, especially since you threw the Academy at them, but I'm another story."
"Nor will I lose my job for being friendly with you. I have a contract," she explained serenely. "An ironclad contract. It isn't easy to get a teacher in a place as small and isolated as Ruth, especially in the middle of winter. I can lose my job only if I'm judged incompetent, or break the law, and I defy anyone to prove me incompetent."
He wondered if that meant she didn't rule out breaking the law, but didn't ask her. The kitchen light was shining directly down on her head, turning her hair to a silvery halo and distracting him with its glitter. He knew her hair was brown, but it was such a pale, ash brown that it had no red tones, and when light struck it the strands actually looked silver. She looked like an angel, with her soft blue eyes and translucent skin, and her silky hair slipping from its confining knot to curl around her face. His insides knotted painfully. He wanted to touch her. He wanted her naked beneath him. He

wanted to be inside her, to gently ride her until she was all soft and wet, and her nails were clawing at his back—

Mary reached out and put her slim hand on his much larger one, and just that small touch burned him. "Tell me what happened," she invited softly. "Why were you sent to prison? I know you didn't do it."

Wolf was a hard man, by nature as well as necessity, but her simple, unquestioning faith in him shook him to the bone. He had always stood alone, isolated by his Indian blood from Anglos and by his Anglo blood from Indians. Not even his parents had been close to him, though they had loved him and he had loved them in return. They had simply never truly known him, never been admitted into his private thoughts. Nor had he been close to his wife, Joe's mother. They had slept together, he'd been fond of her, but she, too, had been kept at a distance. Only with Joe had his reserve been breached, and Joe knew him as no other person on earth did. They were part of each other, and he fiercely loved the boy. Only the thought of Joe had gotten him through the years in prison alive.

It was more than alarming that this slight Anglo woman had a knack for touching nerves he'd thought completely insulated; he didn't want her close to him, not in any emotional way. He wanted to have sex with her, but he didn't want her to matter to him. Angrily he realized that she already mattered to him, and he didn't like it at all.

He stared at her fragile hand on his, her touch light and soft. She didn't shrink from touching him, as if he were dirty; nor was she grasping at him as some women did, rapaciously, wanting to use him, to see if the savage could satisfy their shallow, greedy appetites. She had simply reached out to touch him because she cared.

Ever so slowly he watched his hand turn and engulf hers, enfolding the pale, slim fingers within his callused palm as if to protect them.

"It was nine years ago." His voice was low, harsh; she had to lean forward to hear him. "No—almost ten years. Ten years this June. Joe and I had just moved here. I was working for the Half Moon Ranch. A girl from the next county was raped and killed, and her body dumped just within the far boundary of Half Moon. I was picked up and questioned, but hell, I'd been expecting it from the minute I heard about the girl. I was new to the area, and Indian. But there was no evidence against me, so they had to let me go.

"Three weeks later, another girl was raped. This one was from the Rocking L Ranch, just to the west of town. She was stabbed, like the other girl, but

she lived. She'd seen the rapist." He paused for a minute, the expression in his black eyes shuttered as he looked back at those long-ago years. "She said he looked like an Indian. He was dark, with black hair, and he was tall. Not many tall Indians around. I was picked up again before I even knew another girl had been raped. They put me in a lineup with six dark-haired Anglos. The girl identified me, and I was charged. Joe and I lived on Half Moon, but somehow no one remembered seeing me at home the night that girl was raped, except Joe, and a six-year-old Indian kid's word didn't carry much weight."

Her chest hurt when she thought of how it had been for him, and for Joe, who had been only a small child. How much worse had it been for Wolf because of Joe, worrying what would happen to his son? She didn't know of anything she could say now to lessen that ten-year-old outrage, so she didn't try; she just tightened her fingers around his, letting him know he wasn't alone.

"I was put on trial and found guilty. I'm lucky they weren't able to tie me to the first rape, the girl who'd been murdered, or I'd have been lynched. As it was, everyone thought I'd done it."

"You went to prison." It was so hard to believe, even though she knew it was true. "What happened to Joe?"

"He was made a ward of the state. I survived prison. It wasn't easy. A rapist is considered fair game. I had to be the roughest son of a bitch in there just to live from one night to the next."

She had heard tales about what happened to men in prison, and her pain increased. He had been locked up, away from the sun and the mountains, the clear fresh air, and she knew it had been like caging a wild animal. He was innocent, but his freedom and his son had been taken from him, and he'd been thrown in with the dregs of humanity. Had he slept soundly even once the entire time he'd been in prison, or had he merely dozed, his senses attuned to attack?

Her throat was tight and dry. All she could manage was a whisper. "How long were you in?"

"Two years." His face was hard, his eyes full of menace as he stared at her, but she knew the menace was directed inward, at his bitter memories. "Then a series of rapes and murders from Casper to Cheyenne were tied together and the guy was caught. He confessed, seemed proud of his accomplishments, but a little put out that they hadn't given him complete

credit. He admitted to the two rapes in this area, and gave them details no one but the rapist could have known."
"Was he Indian?"
His smile was flinty. "Italian. Olive-skinned, curly haired."
"So you were released?"
"Yeah. My name was cleared, and they said 'Sorry about that,' and turned me loose. I'd lost my son, my job, everything I'd owned. I found out where they'd put Joe and hitched there to get him. Then I rodeoed for a while to get some money and lucked out. I did pretty well. I won enough to come back here with something in my pocket. The old guy who had owned Half Moon had died with no heirs, and the land was about to be sold for taxes. It wiped me out, but I bought the land. Joe and I settled here, and I began training horses and building up the ranch."
"Why did you come back?" She couldn't understand it. Why return to the place where he'd been so mistreated?
"Because I was tired of always moving on, never having a place of my own. Damn tired of being looked down on as a trashy, shiftless Indian. Tired of my son not having a home. And because there was no way in hell I was going to let the bastards get the best of me."
The aching in her intensified. She wished she could ease the anger and bitterness in him, wished she dared take him in her arms and soothe him, wished he could become a part of the community instead of a thorn in its side.
"They're not all illegitimate," she said, and wondered why his mouth suddenly twitched as if he might smile. "Any more than all Indians are trashy or shiftless. People are just people, good and bad."
"You need a keeper," he replied. "That Pollyanna attitude is going to get you in trouble. Teach Joe, do what you can for him, but stay the hell away from me, for your own sake. These people didn't change their minds about me just because I was released."
"You haven't tried to change their minds. You've just kept rubbing their noses in their guilt," she pointed out, her tone acerbic.
"Am I supposed to forget what they did?" he asked just as sharply. "Forget that their 'justice' consisted of putting me in a lineup with six Anglos and telling that girl to 'pick out the Indian'? I spent two years in hell. I still don't know what happened to Joe, but it was almost three months after I got him back before he spoke a word. Forget that? Like hell."

"So, they won't change their minds, you won't change your mind, and I won't change mine. I believe we have a stalemate."
His dark eyes burned with frustration as he glared at her, and suddenly he seemed to realize he was still holding her hand. He released her abruptly and stood. "Look, you can't be my friend. We can't be friends."
Now that her hand was free, Mary felt abandoned and cold. She clasped her hands in her lap and looked up at him. "Why? Of course, if you simply don't like me…" Her voice trailed off, and she bent her head to examine her hands as if she'd never seen them before.
Not like her? He couldn't sleep, his temper was frayed, he got hard whenever he thought about her, and he thought about her too damn much. He was so physically frustrated that he thought he might go mad, but he couldn't even ease himself with Julie Oakes or any other woman now, because all he could think about was baby-fine brown hair, slate-blue eyes and skin like translucent rose petals. It was all he could do to keep from taking her, and only the knowledge of how the good townspeople of Ruth would turn on her if he made her his woman kept him from grabbing her. Her stubborn principles hadn't prepared her for the pain and trouble she would face.
Suddenly his frustration boiled over, and he was filled with rage at having to walk away from the one woman he wanted to the point of madness. Before he could stop himself, he reached down and grasped her wrists, hauling her to her feet. "No, damn it, we can't be friends! Do you want to know why? Because I can't be around you without thinking of stripping you naked and taking you, wherever we happen to be. Hell, I don't know if I'd take the time to strip you! I want your breasts in my hands, your nipples in my mouth. I want your legs around my waist, or your ankles on my shoulders, or any position at all if I can just get inside you." He'd pulled her so close that his warm breath brushed her cheeks as he rasped the low, harsh words at her. "So, sweetheart, there's no way we can be friends."
Mary shivered as her body responded to his words. Though they'd been spoken in anger, they told her that he felt the same way she did, and described actions she could only half imagine. She was too inexperienced and honest to hide her feelings from him, so she didn't even try. Her eyes were filled with painful longing. "Wolf?"
Just that, but the way she said his name, with an aching little inflection at the end, made his grip on her wrists tighten. "No."

"I—I want you."
Her whispered, trembly confession left her completely vulnerable to him, and he knew it. He groaned inwardly. Damn it, didn't she have any sense of self-protection at all? Didn't she know what it did to a man to have the woman he wanted offer herself like that, with no qualifications or holding back? His control was stretched hair-thin, but he grimly held on to it because the hard truth was that she truly didn't know. She was a virgin. She was old-fashioned, strictly raised, and had only the vaguest idea of what she was inviting.
"Don't say that," he finally muttered. "I've told you before—"
"I know," she interrupted. "I'm too inexperienced to be interesting, and you… you don't want to be used as a guinea pig. I remember." She seldom cried, but she felt the salty wetness burning her eyes, and he winced at the hurt he saw there.
"I lied. God, how I lied."
Then his control broke. He had to hold her, feel her in his arms just for a little while, have her taste on his mouth again. He drew her wrists up and placed her hands around his neck, then bent his head even as he locked his arms around her and drew her up tight against him. His mouth covered hers, and her eager response seared him. She knew what to do now; her lips parted, allowing his tongue entrance, where she met him with soft, welcoming touches from her own tongue. He had taught her that, just as he'd taught her to melt against him, and the knowledge drove him almost as crazy as the feel of her soft breasts flattening against his chest.
Mary drowned in the sheer ecstasy of being in his arms again, and the tears that she'd held back spilled past her lashes. This was too painful, and too wonderful, to be mere lust. If this was love, she didn't know if she could bear it.
His mouth was hungry and hard, taking long, deep kisses that left her clinging to him mindlessly. His hand moved surely up her stomach and closed over her breast, and all she could do was make a soft sound of pleasure low in her throat. Her nipples burned and throbbed; his touch both assuaged the pain and intensified it, making her want more. She wanted it the way he had described it, with his mouth on her breasts, and she twisted feverishly against him. She was empty and needed to be filled. She needed to be his woman.

He jerked his head up and pressed her face against his shoulder. "I have to stop. Now." He groaned the words. He was shaking, as hot as any teenage stud in the back seat of his daddy's car.
Mary briefly weighed all of Aunt Ardith's strictures against the way she felt and accepted that she was in love, because this mingled glory and torment could be nothing else. "I don't want to stop," she said raggedly. "I want you to love me."
"No. I'm Indian. You're white. The people in this town would destroy you. Tonight was just a taste of what you'd have to go through."
"I'm willing to risk it!" she cried desperately.
"I'm not. I can take it, but you—you hang on to your Pollyanna principles, sweetheart. I can't offer you anything in return." If he'd thought there was even a fifty-fifty chance of living here in peace, Wolf would have taken the risk, but he knew there wasn't, not the way things were. Other than Joe, she was the only human being in the world he'd ever wanted to protect, and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done.
Mary lifted her head from his shoulder, revealing her wet cheeks. "All I want is you."
"I'm the one thing you can't have. They'd tear you apart." Very gently he pulled her arms down and turned to leave.
Her voice came behind him, low and strained as she fought against tears. "I'll risk it."
He stopped, his hand on the doorknob. "I won't."
For the second time she watched him walk away, and this time was far worse than the first.

Chapter Five

Joe was unusually distracted; he was normally the most attentive of students, applying himself to the subject at hand with almost phenomenal concentration, but tonight he had something else on his mind. He'd accepted without comment their move to the school for lessons and never even hinted that he'd learned the subject of the school board meeting that had resulted in the change of locations. As it was the beginning of May, and the day had been unseasonably warm, Mary was half inclined to put his restlessness down to spring fever. It had been a long winter, and she was restless herself.

Finally she closed the book before her. "Why don't we go home early tonight?" she suggested. "We're not getting much done."
Joe closed his own book and pushed his fingers through his thick black hair, identical to his father's. Mary had to look away. "Sorry," he said on a long exhalation. It was typical that he didn't offer an explanation. Joe didn't often feel the need to justify himself.
But in the weeks she'd been tutoring him, they had had a lot of personal conversations between the prepared lessons, and Mary never hesitated when she thought one of her students might be troubled. If it were only spring fever gnawing at him, then she wanted him to say so. "Is something bothering you?"
He gave her a wry smile, one that was too adult to belong to a sixteen-year-old boy. "You could say that."
"Ah." That smile relieved her, because now she thought she knew the cause of his restlessness. It was indeed spring fever, after a fashion. As Aunt Ardith had often lectured her niece, "When a young man's sap rises, a girl should look out. I declare, they seem to ran mad." Evidently Joe's sap was rising. Mary wondered if women had sap, too.
He picked up his pen and fiddled with it for a moment before tossing it aside as he made up his mind to say more. "Pam Hearst asked me to take her to a movie."
"Pam?" This was a surprise, and possible trouble. Ralph Hearst was one of the townspeople most adamantly opposed to the Mackenzies.
Joe's ice-blue eyes were hooded as he glanced at her. "Pam is the girl I told you about before."
So, it was Pam Hearst. She was pretty and bright, and her slim young body had a form guaranteed to affect a young man's sap. Mary wondered if Pam's father knew she had been flirting with Joe and that was one reason for his hostility.
"Are you going to go?"
"No," he said flatly, surprising her.
"Why?"
"There aren't any movie houses in Ruth."
"So?"
"That's the whole point. We'd have to go to another town. No one we know would be likely to see us. She wanted me to pick her up behind the school, after it got dark." He leaned back in his chair and looped his hands behind

his head. "She was too ashamed to go to the dance with me, but I'm good enough for her to sneak around and see. Maybe she thought that even if we were seen, the idea that I might go to the Academy would keep her from getting in too much trouble. Folks seem taken with the idea." His tone was ironic. "I guess it makes a difference when the Indian wears a uniform."
Suddenly her impulsive announcement at the school board meeting didn't seem like such a good idea. "Do you wish I hadn't told them?"
"You had to, considering," he replied, and by that she knew he was aware of the subject of that meeting. "It puts extra pressure on me to get into the Academy, because if I don't they'll all say that the Indian just couldn't cut it, but that's not a bad thing. If it will push me to do more, then I'm that much closer to getting in."
Privately, Mary didn't think Joe needed any added incentive; he wanted it so badly now that the need burned in him. She returned the conversation to Pam. "Does it bother you, that she asked now?"
"It made me mad. And it really made me mad having to turn her down, because I sure would like to get my hands on her." He stopped abruptly and gave Mary another of those too-adult looks before a little grin tugged at his lips. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get too personal. Let's just say that I'm attracted to her physically, but that's all it is, and I can't afford to fool with that kind of situation. Pam's a nice girl, but she doesn't figure in my plans."
Mary understood what he meant. No woman figured in his plans, other than to provide physical release, for a long time, if ever. There was something solitary about him, as there was about Wolf, and in addition, Joe was so possessed by the spectre of flight that part of him was already gone. Pam Hearst would marry some local boy, settle down in Ruth or nearby, and raise her own family in the same calm setting where she'd grown up; she wasn't meant for the brief attention Joe Mackenzie could give her before he moved on.
"Do you have any idea who started the gossip?" Joe asked, his pale eyes hard. He didn't like the idea of anyone hurting this woman.
"No. I haven't tried to find out. It could have been anyone who drove by and saw your truck at my house. But most people seemed to have forgotten about it now, except for—" She stopped, her eyes troubled.
"Who?" Joe demanded flatly.
"I don't mean that I think she started the gossip," Mary said hastily. "I just feel uneasy around her. She dislikes me, and I don't know why. Maybe she's

this way with everyone. Has Dottie Lancaster—"
"Dottie Lancaster!" He gave a harsh laugh. "Now there's a thought. Yeah, she could have started the gossip. She's had a rough life, and I kind of feel sorry for her, but she did her best to make my life hell when I was in her classes."
"Rough? How?"
"Her husband was a truck driver, and he was killed years ago when her son was just a baby. He was on a run in Colourado, and a drunk driver ran him off the side of a cliff. The drunk was an Indian. She never got over it and blames all Indians, I guess."
"That's irrational."
He shrugged, as if to say a lot of things were irrational. "Anyway, she was left alone with her kid, and she had a hard time. Not much money. She started teaching, but she had to pay someone to take care of the kid, and he needed special training when he was old enough to start school, which took even more money."
"I didn't know Dottie had any children," Mary said, surprised.
"Just Robert—Bobby. He's about twenty-three or four,
I guess. He still lives with Mrs. Lancaster, but he doesn't go around other people much."
"What's wrong with him? Does he have Down's syndrome, or a learning disability?"
"He's not retarded. Bobby's just different. He likes people, but not in groups. A lot of people together make him nervous, so he pretty much stays to himself. He reads a lot, and listens to music. But once he had a summer job at the building supply store, and Mr. Watkins told Bobby to fill a wheelbarrow full of sand. Instead of pushing the wheelbarrow to the sandpile and shovelling the sand in, Bobby would get a shovelful of sand and carry it back to the wheelbarrow. It's things like that. He'd have trouble getting dressed, because he'd put his shoes on first, and then he couldn't get his jeans on."
Mary had seen people like Bobby, who had trouble with practical problem-solving. It was a learning disability, and took a lot of patient, specialized training to handle. She felt sorry for him, and for Dottie, who couldn't have had a happy life.
Joe pushed his chair back and stood up, stretching his cramped muscles.
"Do you ride?" he asked suddenly.

"No. I've never even been on a horse." Mary chuckled. "Will that get me thrown out of Wyoming?"
His tone was grave. "It could. Why don't you come up on the mountain some Saturday and I'll give you riding lessons? School will be out for the summer soon, and you'll have a lot of time to practice."
He couldn't know how appealing the idea was, not only to ride but to see Wolf again. The only thing was, it would hurt just as much to see him as it did not to see him, because he was still out of her reach. "I'll think about it," she promised, but she doubted she would ever take him up on the offer.
Joe didn't push it, but he didn't intend to let it drop, either. He'd get Mary up on the mountain one way or another. He figured Wolf had about reached the limits of his restraint. Parading her right under his nose would be like leading a mare in heat in front of a stallion. His pretty, tart-tongued little teacher would be lucky if his dad didn't have her flat on her back before she had the hello out of her mouth. Joe had to hide his smile. He'd never seen anyone get to Wolf the way Miss Mary Elizabeth Potter had. She had Wolf so tied in knots he was as dangerous as a wounded cougar.
He mentally hummed a few bars of "Matchmaker."

When Mary got home the next Friday afternoon, there was a letter in the mailbox from Senator Allard, and her fingers trembled as she tore it open. If it was bad news for Joe, if Senator Allard had declined to recommend him to the Academy, she didn't know what she would do. Senator Allard wasn't their only possibility, but he had seemed the most receptive, and a turndown from him would really be discouraging.
The senator's letter to her was brief, thanking her for her efforts in bringing Joe to his attention. He had decided to recommend Joe for admittance to the Academy, for the freshman class beginning after Joe's graduation from high school. From there on, it would be up to Joe to pass the rigorous academic and physical examinations.
Enclosed was a private letter of congratulations to Joe.
Mary hugged the letters to her breast, and tears welled in her eyes. They had done it, and it hadn't even been that difficult! She had been prepared to petition every congressman every week until Joe was given his chance, but it hadn't been necessary. Joe's grades and credits had done it for him.
It was news too good to wait, so she got back into her car and drove up Mackenzie's Mountain. The drive was much different now; the snow had

melted, and wildflowers bloomed beside the road. After the harsh winter cold, the spring warmth felt like a blessing on her skin, though it still wasn't nearly as warm as the springs she had known in Savannah. She was so excited and happy that she didn't even notice the steep drop on the side of the road as it wound higher, but she did notice the wild grandeur of the mountains, stretching magnificently toward the dark blue heavens. She drew a deep breath and realized that the spring did make up for the winter. It felt like home, a new home, a place dear and familiar.

The tires threw out a spray of gravel as she slid to a stop at the kitchen door of Wolf's one-story frame house, and before the vehicle had rocked back on its springs she was bounding up the steps to pound on the door. "Wolf! Joe!" She knew she was yelling in a very unladylike manner, but she was too happy to care. Some situations just called for yelling.

"Mary!"

The call came from behind her, and she whirled. Wolf was coming from the barn at a dead run, his powerful body surging fluidly. Mary yelped in excitement and launched herself from the steps, her skirt flying up as she bolted down the gravelled drive toward the barn. "He got it!" she screamed, waving the letters. "He got it!"

Wolf skidded to a halt and watched the sedate teacher literally skipping and leaping toward him, her skirt kicking up around her thighs with each step. He just had time to realize there was nothing wrong, that she was laughing, when, three steps away, she went airborne. He braced himself and caught her weight against his chest, his brawny arms wrapping around her.

"He got it!" she shrieked again, and threw her arms around his neck.

Wolf could think of only one thing, and it made his mouth go dry. "He got it?"

She waved the letters under his nose. "He got it! Senator Allard—the letter was in my mailbox—I couldn't wait—where's Joe?" She knew she was almost incoherent and made an effort to compose herself, but she just couldn't stop grinning.

"He's in town picking up a load of fencing. Damn it, are you sure that's what it says? He still has a year of school—"

"Not a year, not at the rate he's going. But he'll have to be seventeen, anyway. The senator has recommended him for the freshman class starting after he graduates. Less than a year and a half!"

Fierce pride filled Wolfs face, the warrior's pride he'd inherited from both Comanche and Celt. His eyes glittered with black fire, and exultantly he lifted her high, his hands under her armpits, and twirled around with her. She threw back her head, shrieking with laughter, and suddenly Wolf felt his entire body clench with desire. It was as powerful as a blow to the gut, knocking the wind out of him. She was soft and warm in his arms, her laughter was as fresh as the spring, and he wanted her out of the prim little shirt-waist she wore.

Slowly his face changed to a harder, more primitive cast. She was still laughing as he lowered her, her hands braced on his shoulders, but he stopped when her breasts were level with his face. The laughter died in Mary's throat as he deliberately brought her closer to him and buried his face between her breasts. His grip shifted, one arm locking around her buttocks and the other around her back, and his hot mouth searched for her nipple. He found it, his mouth clamping down on it through the barriers of her dress and bra, but the sensation was still so exquisite that her breath caught on a moan and her back arched, pushing her breast against him.

It wasn't enough. She burrowed her fingers through his hair, digging into his skull to push him harder against her, but it wasn't enough. She wanted him with sudden, fierce desperation. The layers of cloth that kept him from her drove her mad, and she squirmed against him, low whimpers coming from her throat. "Please," she begged. "Wolf—"

He lifted his head, his eyes savage with need. His blood was thundering through his veins, and he was breathing hard. "Do you want more?" The words were guttural, a normal tone beyond him.

She squirmed against him again, her hands clutching desperately. "Yes."

Very gently he let her slide down his body, deliberately rubbing her over the hardened bulge in his jeans, and both of them shuddered. Wolf was beyond thinking of all his reasons for not becoming involved with her, beyond anything but the urge to mate. To hell with what anyone thought.

He looked around, gauging the distance to both house and barn. The barn was closer. Clamping his hand around her wrist, he strode toward the big open double doors that revealed the dim interior.

Mary could barely get her breath as she was all but dragged in his wake. Her senses bewildered by the sudden cessation of pleasure, she was confused by his actions and wanted to ask what he was doing, but she didn't have enough oxygen in her lungs to form the question. Then they were

inside the barn, and she was swamped by the perceptions of dim light, animal warmth and the earthy smells of dust, hay, leather and horses. She heard soft nickers and the muffled stamping of hooves on straw. Wolf led her into an empty stall and dragged her down onto the fresh hay. She sprawled on her back, and he came down on top of her, his muscled weight pressing her even deeper into the hay.

"Kiss me," she whispered, reaching up to thrust her fingers into his long hair and pull him down to her.

"I'll kiss you all over before I'm through with you," he muttered, and bent his head. Her mouth opened under the force of his, and his tongue moved into her in a deep rhythm that she instinctively recognized and accepted, responded to eagerly. He was heavy, but it was so natural that she bear his weight that she rejoiced in the pressure of his body. She wrapped her arms around his thickly muscled shoulders and hugged him even tighter to her; she wanted to be as close as she could to him, and to that end her hips undulated slightly, adjusting to the carnal pressure of his loins.

The slow movements of her hips beneath him made him feel as if his head would explode from the rush of blood through his body. He made a low, rough sound in his throat and reached for the zipper at the back of her dress. He thought he would die if he didn't feel her silky skin under his hands, if he didn't sheathe his throbbing flesh inside her.

It was startlingly new to her, bringing a delicate flush to her cheeks, but it was still so right that she didn't even think of protesting. She didn't want to protest. She wanted Wolf. She was female to his male, warm and sexual, intensely aware of being a woman and offering herself to the man she loved. She wanted to be naked for him, so she helped him by pulling her arms free of the sleeves as he tugged the dress from her shoulders and let it fall to her waist. She had felt racy, daring to buy a bra with a single front clasp, but as he looked down at her breasts, barely covered by the thin, flesh-coloured material, she was so glad she had done it. He deftly opened the clasp with one hand, a trick she hadn't learned yet, and watched the edges pull back to bare her soft curves, stopping before her nipples were revealed.

He made that rough sound again, almost like a growl, and bent to nuzzle the bra aside. His mouth, warm and wet, slid across her breast and clamped on the tightly beaded nipple. She jumped, her entire body reacting to a pleasure so intense it bordered on pain, as he sucked strongly at her. Mary's eyes

closed, and she moaned. She couldn't bear it; it felt too good, a hot river of pleasure-pain impulses running from breast to loin, where an empty ache made her press her legs together and arch beneath him, silently begging for the release her body had never known, but sensed with ancient wisdom.
Wolf felt her move beneath him again, and the last shred of control he'd retained, vanished. Roughly he jerked her skirt to her waist and kneed her thighs apart, settling himself between the vulnerable V of her legs. She opened her eyes, a little shocked by what she could feel down there, but eager to know more. "Take off your clothes," she whispered frantically, and tore at the buttons on his shirt.
He reared back on his knees and tore his shirt open, then off. His naked skin glistened with a fine patina of sweat; in the dim light, filled with floating dust motes, the overlay of sleek bronze skin on powerful muscles gave him the look of live art sculpted by a master's hand. Mary's gaze moved hungrily, feverishly, over him. He was perfect, strong and male, the scent of his body hot and faintly musky. She reached out for him, her hands sliding over his broad chest, lightly haired in a diamond pattern stretching from nipple to nipple. She touched those tight little buds, and he froze, a massive shiver of pleasure rippling through his muscles.
He groaned aloud and dropped his hands to his belt. He unbuckled the wide band of leather, then unsnapped his jeans and jerked the zipper down, the hissing of the metal teeth blending with their harsh breathing. With some last desperate fragment of willpower, he kept himself from lowering his pants. She was a virgin; he couldn't allow himself to forget that, even in his urgency. Damn it, he had to regain some control, or he'd both scare and hurt her, and he would die before he turned her first time into a nightmare.
Mary's slim fingers curled in the hair on his chest and tugged lightly.
"Wolf," she said. Just his name, just that one word, but her voice was warm and low and drugged sounding, and it beckoned him more powerfully than anything he'd known before.
"Yes," he said in response. "Now." He leaned forward to cover her again, then froze as a distant sound came to his ears.
He swore quietly and sank back on his heels, battling desperately to control his body and his frustration.
"Wolf?" Now her tone was hesitant, consternation and self-consciousness creeping into it. That inflection made him feel murderous, because she

hadn't been self-conscious before. She had been warm and loving, willing to give herself without reserve.
"Joe will be here in a few minutes," he said flatly. "I can hear his truck coming up the mountain."
She was still so far out of it that she merely looked confused. "Joe?"
"Yes, Joe. Remember him? My son, the reason you're up here in the first place."
Her cheeks flooded with colour, and she jerked into an upright position, as far as she could, because her thighs were still draped over his. "Oh my God," she said. "Oh my God. I'm naked. You're naked. Oh my God."
"We're not naked," Wolf muttered, wiping his sweaty face. "Damn it."
"Almost!"
"Not enough." Even her breasts were rosy with embarrassment now. He looked at them with regret, remembering her sweet taste and the way her velvety little nipple had bloomed in his mouth. But the sound of the truck was much closer now, and with a low, obscene comment on his son's rotten timing, he got to his feet and effortlessly lifted Mary to hers.
Tears blurred her vision as she turned her back to fumble with that blasted space-age clasp on her bra. What ever had possessed her to buy such a contraption? Aunt Ardith would have been outraged. Aunt Ardith would have fallen on the ground in a hissy fit if she'd even thought of her niece rolling naked in the hay with a man. And, darn it, she hadn't even been able to finish her rolling!
"Here, I'll do it," Wolf said in a far gentler tone than she'd ever before heard from him. He turned her around and deftly handled the diabolical clasp.
Mary kept her head down, unable to look him in the eye, but the contrast of his sun-bronzed hands against her pale breasts made her feel hot again. She swallowed and looked at his belt buckle. He'd zipped his jeans back up and buckled his belt, but the visible swell of his loins told her he wasn't completely unaffected by this interruption. That made her feel better, and she blinked the tears from her eyes as he helped her back into her dress and turned her around to zip it.
"You have hay in your hair," he teased, and picked the straw from the tangled tresses, then brushed it from her dress.
Mary put up both hands to discern the state of her hair and found it had come completely down. "Leave it," Wolf said. "I like it down. It looks like silk."

Nervously she combed her fingers through the strands and watched as he leaned down to pick up his shirt from the hay. "What will Joe think?" she blurted as the truck pulled to a stop outside the barn.
"That he's lucky he's my son, or I'd have killed him," Wolf muttered grimly, and Mary wasn't certain he was teasing. He put his shirt on but didn't bother buttoning it before stepping into the open door. Taking a deep breath, Mary braced herself to get through the embarrassment and followed him.
Joe had just gotten out of the truck, and now he stood beside the door, his ice-blue eyes moving from his father to Mary and back, taking in Wolfs stone face and open shirt, and Mary's tousled hair. "Damn it!" he swore and slammed the door shut. "If it had just taken me fifteen minutes longer—"
"My feelings exactly," Wolf concurred.
"Hey, I'll leave—"
Wolf sighed. "No. She came to see you anyway."
"That's what you said the first time." Joe grinned hugely.
"And I just said it again." He turned to Mary, and some of the enjoyment of her stunning news returned to his eyes. "Tell him."
She couldn't think. "Tell him?"
"Yeah. Tell him."
Slowly her dazed mind registered what he was saying. She looked in bewilderment at her empty hands. What had happened to the letters? Had they lost them in the hay? How mortifying it would be to have to search through the hay for them! Not knowing what else to do, she spread her hands and said simply, "You're in. I got the letter today."
Blood drained from Joe's face as he stared at her, and he reached out blindly to rest his hand on the truck as if to steady himself. "I got in? The Academy? I got into the Academy?" he asked hoarsely.
"You got the recommendation. It's up to you to pass the exams."
He threw back his head and screamed, an exultant, spine-chilling sound like that of a hunting panther, then leaped at Wolf. The two of them pounded each other's backs, laughing and yelling, then finally just hugging each other in a way two weaker men couldn't have done. Mary folded her hands and watched them, smiling, so happy her heart swelled to the point of pain. Then suddenly an arm reached out and snagged her, and she found herself sandwiched between the two Mackenzies, almost smashed flat by their celebration.

"You're smothering me!" she protested in a gasping voice, wedging her hands against two broad chests and pushing. One of those chests was bare, exposed by an unbuttoned shirt, and the touch of his warm skin made her go weak in the knees. Both of them laughed at her protest, but both of them immediately gentled their embrace.
Mary patted her hair down and smoothed her dress. "The letters are here somewhere. I must have dropped them."
Wolf gave her a wicked look. "You must have."
His teasing made her happy deep inside, and she smiled at him. It was a quietly intimate smile, the sort that a woman gives the man she loves after she has been in his arms, and it warmed him. To cover his reaction, he turned to look for the dropped letters and spotted one on the drive, while the other had fallen close to the barn door. He retrieved both of them, and gave Joe the one addressed to him.
The boy's hands shook as he read the letter, even though he already knew the contents. He couldn't believe it. It had happened so fast. A dream come true should have been harder to attain; he should have had to sweat blood to get it. Oh, he wasn't driving one of those twenty-million dollar babies yet, but he would. He had to, because he would be only half alive without wings.
Mary was watching him with proud indulgence when she felt Wolf stiffen beside her. She looked at him inquiringly. His head was lifted as if he scented danger, and his face was suddenly as impassive as stone. Then she heard the sound of an engine and turned as a deputy sheriffs car rolled to a stop behind Joe's truck.
Joe turned, and his face took on the same stony look as Wolfs as Clay Armstrong got out of the county car.
"Ma'am." Clay spoke to her first, tipping his hat.
"Deputy Armstrong." Two hundred years of strict training on social behaviour were in her voice. Aunt Ardith would have been proud. But she sensed some threat to Wolf, and it was all she could do not to put herself between him and the deputy. Only the knowledge that he wouldn't appreciate the action kept her standing at his side.
Clay's friendly blue eyes weren't friendly at all now. "Why are you up here, Miss Potter?"
"Why are you asking?" she shot back, putting her hands on her hips.
"Just skip to the good part, Armstrong," Wolf snapped.

"Fine," Clay snapped back. "You're wanted for questioning. You can come with me now, the easy way, or I can get a warrant for your arrest."
Joe stood frozen, fury and hell in his eyes. This had happened before, and he'd lost his father for two nightmarish years. It seemed even more terrible this time, because just moments before they had been celebrating, and he'd been on top of the world.
Wolf began buttoning his shirt. In a voice like gravel he asked, "What happened this time?"
"We'll talk about that at the sheriffs office."
"We'll talk about it now."
Black eyes met blue, and abruptly Clay realized this man wouldn't move a foot unless he had some answers. "A girl was raped this morning."
Sulphuric rage burned in those night-dark eyes. "So naturally you thought of the Indian." He spat the words like bullets from between clenched teeth.
God, this couldn't be happening again. Not twice in one lifetime. The first time had almost killed him, and he knew he'd never go back to that hellhole, no matter what he had to do.
"We're just questioning some people. If you have an alibi, there's no problem. You'll be free to go."
"I suppose you picked up every rancher in this area? Do you have Eli Baugh at the sheriff's office answering questions?"
Clay's face darkened with anger. "No."
"Just the Indian, huh?"
"You have priors." But Clay looked uncomfortable.
"I don't have… one… single… prior conviction," Wolf snarled. "I was cleared."
"Damn it, man, I know that!" Clay suddenly yelled. "I was told to pick you up, and I'm going to do my job."
"Well, why didn't you just say so? I wouldn't want to stop a man from doing his job." After that sarcastic jab, Wolf strode to his truck. "I'll follow you."
"You can ride in the car. I'll bring you back."
"No, thanks. I'd rather have my own wheels, just in case the sheriff decides a walk would do me good."
Swearing under his breath, Clay went to the car and got in. Dust and gravel flew from his tires as he headed back down the mountain, with Wolf behind him slinging even more dust and gravel.

Mary began shaking. At first it was just a tremor, but it swiftly escalated into shudders that rattled her entire body. Joe was standing as if turned to stone, his fists clenched. Suddenly he whirled and slammed his fist into the hood of his truck. "By God, they won't do it to him again," he whispered. "Not again."

"No, they certainly won't." She was still shaking, but she squared her shoulders. "If I have to get every judge and court in this country involved, I will. I'll call newspapers, I'll call television networks, I'll call—oh, they don't have any idea of who all I can call." The network of Old Family contacts she had left behind in Savannah was still there, and more favours would be called in than the sheriff of this county could count. She'd hang him out to dry!

"Why don't you go home?" Joe suggested in a flat tone.

"I want to stay."

He'd expected her to quietly walk to her car, but at her words he looked at her for the first time. Deep inside, part of him had thought she wouldn't be able to leave fast enough, that he and Wolf would be alone again, as they had always been. They were used to being alone. But Mary stood her ground as if she had no intention of budging off this mountain, her slate-blue eyes full of fire and her fragile chin lifted in the way that he'd learned meant others could just get out of her path.

The boy, forced by circumstance to grow up hard and fast, put his strong arms around the woman and held her, desperately absorbing some of her strength, because he was deathly afraid he'd need it. And Mary held him. He was Wolf's son, and she'd protect him with every ounce of fight she had.

Chapter Six

It was after nine when they heard Wolf's truck, and both of them froze with mingled tension and relief: tension because they dreaded to hear what had happened, and relief because he was home instead of locked in jail. Mary couldn't imagine Wolf in jail, even though he'd spent two years in prison. He was too wild, like a lobo that could never be tamed. Imprisoning him had been an act so cruel as to be obscene.

He came in the back door and stood there staring at her, his dark face expressionless. She and Joe sat at the kitchen table, nursing cups of coffee.

"Why are you still here? Go home."
She ignored the flatness of his tone. He was so angry she could almost feel the heat from across the room, but she knew it wasn't directed against her. Getting up, she dumped her lukewarm coffee into the sink and got another cup from the cabinet, then poured fresh coffee into both cups. "Sit down, drink your coffee and tell us what happened," she said in her best schoolteacher voice.
He did reach for the coffee, but he didn't sit down. He was too angry to sit. The rage boiled in him, robbing his movements of their usual fluidity. It was starting all over again, and he'd be damned if he'd go to prison again for something he hadn't done. He'd fight any way he could and with any weapon he could, but he'd die before he'd go back to prison.
"They let you go," Joe said.
"They had to. The girl was raped around noon. At noon I was delivering two horses to the Bar W R. Wally Rasco verified it, and the sheriff couldn't figure out a way I could have been in two different places, sixty miles apart, at the same time, so he had to let me go."
"Where did it happen?"
Wolf rubbed his forehead, then pinched his nose between his eyes as if he had a headache, or maybe he was just tired. "She was grabbed from behind when she got in her car, parked in her own driveway. He made her drive almost an hour before telling her to pull off on the side of the road. She never saw his face. He wore a ski mask. But she could tell he was tall, and that was enough of a description for the sheriff."
"The side of the road?" Mary blurted. "That's… weird. It doesn't make sense. I know there's not much traffic, but still, someone could have come by at any time."
"Yeah. Not to mention that he was waiting for her in her driveway. The whole thing is strange."
Joe drummed his fingers on the table. "It could have been someone passing through."
"How many people 'pass through' Ruth?" Wolf asked dryly. "Would a drifter have known whose car it was, or when she was likely to come out of the house? What if the car belonged to a man? That's a big chance to take, especially when rape seems to have been the only thing on his mind, because he didn't rob her, even though she had money."
"Are they keeping her identity secret?" Mary asked.

He looked at her. "It won't stay a secret, because her father was in the sheriff's office waving a rifle and threatening to blow my guts out. He attracted a lot of attention, and people talk."
His face was still expressionless, but Mary sensed the bitter rage that filled him. His fierce pride had been dragged in the dust—again. How had he endured being forced to sit there and listen to insults and threats? Because she knew he'd been insulted, by vile words describing his mixed heritage as well as by the very fact he'd been picked up for questioning. He was holding it all in, controlling it, but the rage was there.
"What happened?"
"Armstrong stopped it. Then Wally Rasco got there and cleared me, and the sheriff let me go with a friendly warning."
"A warning?" Mary jumped to her feet, her eyes flashing. "For what?"
He pinched her chin and gave her a coldly ferocious smile. "He warned me to stay away from white women, sweetcake. And that's just what I'm going to do. So you go on home now, and stay there. I don't want you on my mountain again."
"You didn't feel that way in the barn," she shot back, then darted a look at Joe and blushed. Joe just quirked an eyebrow and looked strangely self-satisfied. She decided to ignore him and turned back to Wolf. "I can't believe you're letting that mush-brain sheriff tell you who you can see."
He narrowed his eyes at her. "Maybe it hasn't dawned on you yet, but it's all starting again. It doesn't matter that Wally Rasco cleared me. Everyone is going to remember what happened ten years ago, and the way they felt."
"You were cleared of that, too, or doesn't that count?"
"With some people," he finally admitted. "Not with most. They're already afraid of me, already distrust and dislike me. Until this bastard is caught, I probably won't be able to buy anything in that town, not groceries, gas or feed. And any white woman who has anything to do with me could be in real danger of being tarred and feathered."
So that was it. He was still trying to protect her. She stared at him in exasperation. "Wolf, I refuse to live my life according to someone else's prejudices. I appreciate that you're trying to protect me—"
She could hear an audible click as his teeth snapped together. "Do you?" he asked with heavy sarcasm. "Then go home. Stay home, and I'll stay here."
"For how long?"

Instead of answering her question, he made an oblique statement. "I'll always be a half-breed."
"And I'll always be what I am, too. I haven't asked you to change," she pointed out, pain creeping into her voice. She looked at him with longing plain in her eyes, as no woman had ever looked at him before, and the rage in him intensified because he couldn't simply reach out and take her in his arms, proclaim to the world that she was his woman. The sheriff's warning had been clear enough, and Wolf knew well that the hostility toward him would rapidly swell to explosive proportions. It could easily spill over onto Mary, and now he wasn't just worried that she would lose her job. A job was nothing compared to the physical danger she could suffer. She could be terrorized in her own home, her property vandalized; she could be cursed and spat upon; she could be physically attacked. For all her sheer determination, she was still just a rather slight woman, and she would be helpless against anyone who wanted to hurt her.
"I know," he finally said, and despite himself, he reached out to touch her hair. "Go home, Mary. When this is over—" He stopped, because he didn't want to make promises he might not be able to keep, but what he'd said was enough to put a glowing light in her eyes.
"All right," she murmured, putting her hand on his. "By the way, I want you to get a haircut."
He looked startled. "A haircut?"
"Yes. You want me to wear my hair down, and I want you to get a haircut."
"Why?"
She gave him a shrewd look. "You don't wear it long because you're Indian. You wear it long just to upset people, so they'll never forget your Indian blood. So get it cut."
"Short hair won't make me less Indian."
"Long hair won't make you more Indian."
She looked as if she would stand there until doomsday unless he agreed to get a haircut. He gave in abruptly, muttering, "All right, I'll get a haircut."
"Good." She smiled at him and went on tiptoe to kiss the corner of his mouth. "Good night. Good night, Joe."
"Goodnight, Mary."
When she was gone, Wolf wearily ran his hand through his hair, then frowned as he realized he'd just agreed to cut it off. He looked up to find Joe watching him steadily.

"What are we going to do?" the boy asked.
"Whatever we have to," Wolf replied, his expression flinty.

When Mary bought groceries the next morning, she found everyone in the store huddling together in small groups of two or three and whispering about the rape. The girl's identity was quickly revealed; it was Cathy Teele, whose younger sister, Christa, was in Mary's class. The entire Teele family was devastated, according to the whispers Mary heard as she gathered her groceries.

Next to the flour and cornmeal, she encountered Dottie Lancaster, who was flanked by a young man Mary assumed was Dottie's son. "Hello, Dottie." Mary greeted the woman pleasantly, even though it was possible Dottie had started the rumour about her and Joe.

"Hello." Dottie wore a distressed expression, rather than her habitual sour one. "Have you heard about that poor Teele girl?"

"I haven't heard anything else since I entered the store."

"They arrested that Indian, but the sheriff had to let him go. I hope now you'll be more careful about the company you keep."

"Wolf wasn't arrested." Mary managed to keep her voice calm. "He was questioned, but he was at Wally Rasco's ranch when the attack occurred, and Mr. Rasco backed him up. Wolf Mackenzie isn't a rapist."

"A court of law said he was and sentenced him to prison."

"He was also cleared when the true rapist was caught and confessed to the crime for which Wolf had been convicted."

Dottie drew back, her face livid. "That's what that Indian said, but as far as we know, he just got out on parole. It's easy to see whose side you're on, but then, you've been running with those Indians since the day you came to Ruth. Well, miss, there's an old saying that if you sleep with dogs, you're bound to get fleas. The Mackenzies are dirty Indian trash—"

"Don't you say another word," Mary interrupted, colour high in her cheeks as she took a step toward Dottie. She was furious; her hand itched to slap the woman's self-righteous face. Aunt Ardith had said that a lady never brawled, but Mary was ready to forever relinquish any claim she had to the tide. "Wolf is a decent, hard-working man, and I won't let you or anyone else say he isn't."

Dottie's colour was mottled, but something in Mary's eyes made her refrain from saying anything else about Wolf. Instead she leaned closer and hissed,

"You'd better watch yourself, Miss Goody-Goody, or you'll find yourself in a lot of trouble."
Mary leaned closer, too, her jaw set. "Are you threatening me?" she demanded fiercely.
"Mama, please," the young man behind her whispered in a frantic tone, and tugged at Dottie's arm.
Dottie looked around at him, and her face changed. She drew back, but told Mary contemptuously, "You just mark my words," and stalked away.
Her son, Bobby, was so distressed he was wringing his hands as he hurried after Dottie. Immediately, Mary was sorry she had let the horrid little scene develop; from what Joe had told her, Bobby had a hard enough time handling everyday problems without adding more.
She took a few deep breaths to regain her composure, but almost lost it again when she turned and found several people standing in the aisle, staring at her. They had all obviously heard every word, and looked both shocked and avid. She had no doubt the tale would be all over town within the hour: two of the schoolteachers brawling over Wolf Mackenzie. She groaned inwardly as she picked up a bag of flour. Another scandal was just what Wolf needed.
In the next aisle, she met Cicely Karr. Remembering the woman's comments during the school board meeting, Mary couldn't stop herself from saying, "I've received a letter from Senator Allard, Mrs. Karr. He's recommending Joe Mackenzie for admission to the Academy." She sounded challenging even to her own ears.
To her surprise, Mrs. Karr looked excited. "He is? Why, I never would've believed it. Until Eli explained it to me, I didn't quite realize what an honour it is." Then she sobered. "But now this terrible thing has happened. It's awful. I—I couldn't help overhearing you and Dottie Lancaster. Miss Potter, you can't imagine what it was like ten years ago. People were frightened and angry, and now the same nightmare has started again."
"It's a nightmare for Wolf Mackenzie, too," Mary said hotly. "He was sent to prison for a rape he didn't commit. His record was cleared, but still he was the first person the sheriff picked up for questioning. How do you think he feels? He'll never get back the two years he spent in prison, and now it looks as if everyone is trying to send him there again."
Mrs. Karr looked troubled. "We were all wrong before. The justice system was wrong, too. But even though Mackenzie proved he didn't rape Cathy

Teele, don't you see why the sheriff wanted to question him?"
"No, I don't."
"Because Mackenzie had reason to want revenge."
Mary was aghast. "So you thought he'd take revenge by attacking a young woman who was just a child when he was sent to prison? What sort of man do you think he is?" She was horrified by both the idea and the feeling that everyone in Ruth would agree with Mrs. Karr.
"I think he's a man who hates," Mrs. Karr said firmly. Yes, she believed Wolf capable of such horrible, obscene revenge; it was in her eyes.
Mary felt sick; she began shaking her head. "No," she said. "No. Wolf is bitter about the way he was treated, but he doesn't hate. And he would never hurt a woman like that." If she knew anything in this world, she knew that. She had felt urgency in his touch, but never brutality.
But Mrs. Karr was shaking her head, too. "Don't tell me he doesn't hate! It's in those black-as-hell eyes every time he looks at us, any of us. The sheriff found out he'd been in Vietnam, in some special assassination group, or something. God only knows how it warped him! Maybe he didn't rape Cathy Teele, but this would be a perfect opportunity for him to get revenge and have it blamed on whoever did rape her!"
"If Wolf wanted revenge, he wouldn't sneak around to get it," Mary said scornfully. "You don't know anything about the kind of man he is, do you? He's lived here for years, and none of you know him."
"And I suppose you do?" Mrs. Karr was getting red in the face. "Maybe we're talking about a different kind of 'knowing.' Maybe that rumour about you carrying on with Joe Mackenzie was half right, after all. You've been carrying on with Wolf Mackenzie, haven't you?"
The scorn in the woman's voice enraged Mary. "Yes!" she half shouted, and honesty impelled her to add, "But not as much as I'd like."
A chorus of gasps made her look around, and she stared into the faces of the townspeople who had stopped in the aisle to listen. Well, she'd really done it now; Wolf had wanted her to distance herself from him, and instead she'd all but shouted from the rooftops that she'd been "carrying on" with him. But she couldn't feel even the tiniest bit of shame. She felt proud. With Wolf Mackenzie she was a woman, not a dowdy, old maid schoolteacher who even owned a cat, for heaven's sake. She didn't feel dowdy when she was with Wolf; she felt warm, wanted. If she had any regrets, it was that Joe hadn't been fifteen minutes later returning the day before, or even five

minutes, because more than anything she wanted to be Wolf's woman in every way, to lie beneath his thrusting body, eagerly accepting the force of his passion and giving him her own. If for that, for loving him, she was ostracized, then she counted society well lost.

Mrs. Karr said icily, "I believe we'll have to have another school board meeting."

"When you do, consider that I have an ironclad contract," Mary shot back, and turned on her heel. She hadn't gathered all of the groceries she needed, but she was too angry to continue. When she plunked the items down on the counter, the clerk looked as if she wanted to refuse to ring them up, but she changed her mind under Mary's glare.

She stormed home and was gratified when the weather seemed to agree with her, if the grey clouds forming overhead were any indication. After storing her groceries, she checked on the cat, who had been acting strange lately. A horrid thought intruded: surely no one would have poisoned the cat? But Woodrow was sunning himself peacefully on the rug, so she dismissed the idea with relief.

When this is over…

The phrase echoed in her memory, tantalizing her and stirring an ache deep inside. She longed for him so intensely that she felt as if she were somehow incomplete. She loved him, and though she understood why he thought it better for her to stay away from him right now, she didn't agree. After what had happened that morning with Dottie Lancaster and Cicely Karr, there was no point in allowing this exile. She might as well have stood in the middle of the street and shouted it: she was Wolf Mackenzie's woman. Whatever he wanted from her, she was willing to give. Aunt Ardith had raised her to believe that intimacy belonged only in marriage, if a woman for some reason felt she simply couldn't live without a man, though Aunt Ardith had made it plain she couldn't imagine what such a reason would be. While Mary had accepted that people obviously were ultimate outside of marriage, she had never been tempted to it herself—until she'd met Wolf. If he wanted her for only a short time, she counted that as better than nothing. Even one day with him would be a bright and shining memory to treasure during the long, dreary years without him, a small bit of warmth to comfort her. Her dream was to spend a lifetime with him, but she didn't allow herself to expect it. He was too bitter, too wary; it was unlikely he would

permit an Anglo to get that close to him. He would give her his body, perhaps even his affection, but not his heart or his commitment.
Because she loved him, she knew she wouldn't demand more. She didn't want anger or guilt between them. For as long as she could, in whatever way, she wanted to make Wolf happy.
He had asked her to wear her hair down, and the silky weight of it lay around her shoulders. She had been surprised, looking in the mirror that morning, how the relaxed hairstyle softened her face. Her eyes had glowed, because leaving her hair down was something she could do for him. She looked feminine, the way he made her feel.
There was no point in trying to make people think her neutral now, not after those arguments she'd gotten into. When she told him what had happened, he'd see the uselessness of trying to maintain the sham. She even felt relieved, because her heart hadn't been in it.
She had started to change into one of her shapeless housedresses when she caught sight of herself in the mirror and paused. In her mind she relived that moment the day she'd first met Wolf, when he'd seen her in Joe's old jeans and his eyes had momentarily widened with a look so hot and male it had the power, even now, to make her shake. She wanted him to look at her like that again, but he wasn't likely to as long as she kept wearing these—these feed sacks!
Suddenly she was dissatisfied with all her clothing. Her dresses were, without exception, sturdy and modest, but they were also too drab and loose-fitting. Her slight build would be better displayed in delicate cottons and light, cheerful colours, or even hip-hugging jeans. She turned and looked at her bottom in the mirror; it was slim and curvy. She could see no reason why she should be ashamed of it. It was a very nice bottom, as bottoms went.
Muttering to herself, she zipped herself back into her serviceable "good" dress and grabbed her purse. Ruth wouldn't offer much in the way of new clothes, but she could certainly buy some jeans and sassy little tops, as well as some neat skirts and blouses that, above all, actually fit her.
And she never wanted to see another "sensible" shoe in her life.
The grey clouds lived up to their promise, and it began to rain as she made the drive into town. It was a steady rain, just the sort ranchers and farmers everywhere loved, rather than a downpour that simply ran off instead of soaking into the ground. Aunt Ardith wouldn't have set foot out of the

house during a rain, but Mary ignored it. She stopped first at the one store in Ruth that dealt exclusively in women's clothing, though by necessity the clothes weren't hot from a fashion show in Paris. She bought three pairs of jeans, size six, two lightweight cotton sweaters, and a blue chambray shirt that made her feel like a pioneer. A snazzy denim skirt, paired with a ruby-red sweater, flattered her so much she spun on her heel in delight, just like a child. She also chose a brown skirt, which fit so well she couldn't turn it down despite the colour, and teamed a crisp pink blouse with it. Her final choice was a pale lavender cotton skirt and matching top, which sported a delicate lace collar. Still in a fit of defiance and delight, she picked out a pair of dressy white sandals as well as a pair of track shoes. When the saleswoman rang them up and called out the total, Mary didn't even blink an eye. This had been too long in coming.

Nor was she finished. She locked her packages in the car and dashed through the rain to Hearst's general store, where everyone bought boots. Since Mary planned to be spending most of her time on Wolf's mountain, she figured she'd need a pair.

Mr. Hearst was almost rude to her, but she stared him down and briefly thought of shaking her schoolteacher's finger at him. She discarded the idea because the finger lost its power if used too often, and she might really need it sometime in the future. So she ignored him and tried on boots until she finally found a pair that felt comfortable on her feet.

She couldn't wait to get home and put on her jeans and chambray shirt; she might even wear her boots around the house to get them broken in, she thought. Woodrow wouldn't know her. She thought of that look in Wolf's eyes and began to shiver.

Her car was parked up the street, a block away, and it was raining hard enough now that she made a disgusted noise at herself for not driving from the clothing store to Hearst's. Ruth didn't have sidewalks, and already huge puddles were standing on the pavement. Well, she had on her sensible shoes; let them earn their keep!

Putting her head down and holding the box containing her boots up in an effort to ward off part of the rain, she darted from the sheltering overhang of the roof and immediately got wet to the ankles when she stepped into a puddle. She was still grumbling to herself about that when she passed the small alley that ran between the general store and the next building, which had formerly been a barbershop but now stood empty.

She didn't hear anything or see a flurry of movement; she had no warning at all. A big hand, wet with rain, clamped over her mouth, and an arm wrapped around the front of her body, effectively holding her arms down as her attacker began hauling her down the alley, away from the street. Mary fought instinctively, wriggling and kicking while she made muffled sounds behind the man's palm. His hand was so tight on her face that his fingers dug painfully into her cheek.

The tall, wet weeds in the alley stung her legs, and the pounding rain stung her eyes. Terrified, she kicked harder. This couldn't be happening! He couldn't just carry her off in broad daylight! But he could; he had done it to Cathy Teele.

She got one arm free and reached back, clawing for his face. Her desperate fingers found only wet, woolly cloth. He cursed, his voice low and raspy, and hit her on the side of the head with his fist.

Her senses blurred as her head was rocked with pain, and her struggles grew aimless. Vaguely she was aware when they reached the end of the alley and he dragged her behind the abandoned building.

His breathing was fast and harsh in her ear as he forced her down on her stomach in the gravel and mud. She managed to get her arm free again and put her hand out to break her fall; the gravel scraped her palm, but she barely felt it. His hand was still over her mouth, suffocating her; he ground her face into the wet dirt and held her down with his heavy weight on her back.

He scrabbled with his other hand for her skirt, pulling it up. Wildly she clawed at his hand, trying to pull it free so she could scream, and he hit her again. She was terrified and kept clawing. Cursing, he forced her legs apart and thrust himself against her. She could feel him through his pants and her undergarments, pushing at her, and began gagging. God, no!

She heard her clothing tear, and overpowering revulsion gave her strength. She bit savagely at his hand and reached back for his eyes, her nails digging for flesh.

There was a roaring in her ears, but she heard a shout. The man on top of her stiffened, then braced his hand beside her head and used it to balance himself as he leaped to his feet. Her vision blurred by rain and mud, she saw only a blue sleeve and a pale, freckled hand before he was gone. From above and behind her came a loud boom, and vaguely she wondered if now she would be struck by lightning. No, lightning came before the thunder.

Running footsteps pounded the ground, going past her. Mary lay still, her body limp and her eyes closed.
She heard low cursing, and the footsteps returned. "Mary," a commanding voice said. "Are you all right?"
She managed to open her eyes and looked up at Clay Armstrong. He was soaked to the skin, his blue eyes furious, but his hands were gentle as he turned her onto her back and lifted her in his arms.
"Are you all right?" The words were sharper now.
The rain stung her face. "Yes," she managed, and turned her head into his shoulder.
"I'll get him," Clay promised. "I swear to you, I'll get the bastard."

There was no doctor in town, but Bessie Pylant was a registered nurse, and Clay carried Mary to Bessie's house. Bessie called the private practitioner for whom she worked and got him to drive over from the next town. In the meantime she carefully cleaned Mary's scrapes and put ice on the bruises, and began pouring hot, too-sweet tea down her. Clay had disappeared.
Bessie's house was suddenly full of women; Sharon Wycliffe came and assured Mary that she and Dottie could handle things on Monday if Mary didn't feel like working; Francie Beecham told tales of her own teaching days, her purpose obvious, and the other women took their cues from her. Mary sat quietly, clutching so tightly at the blanket Bessie had wrapped around her that her knuckles were white. She knew the women were trying to divert her, and was grateful to them; with rigid control she concentrated on their commonplace chatter. Even Cicely Karr came and patted Mary's hand, despite the argument they'd had only a few hours before.
Then the doctor arrived, and Bessie led Mary into a bedroom for privacy while the doctor examined her. She answered his questions in a subdued voice, though she winced when he probed the sore place on the side of her head where the man had struck her with his fist. He checked her pupil response and her blood pressure, and gave her a mild sedative.
"You'll be all right," he finally said, patting her knee. "There's no concussion, so your headache should go away soon. A good night's sleep will do more for you than anything I can prescribe."
"Thank you for driving out here," Mary said politely.
Desperation was growing in her. Everyone had been wonderful, but she could feel a fine wire inside her being coiled tighter and tighter. She felt

dirty and exposed. She needed privacy and a shower, and more than anything she needed Wolf.
She left the bedroom and found that Clay had returned. He came to her immediately and took her hand. "How are you feeling?"
"I'm all right." If she had to say that one more time, she thought she would scream.
"I need a statement from you, if you think you can do it now."
"Yes, all right" The sedative was taking effect; she could feel the spreading sensation of remoteness as the drug numbed her emotions. She let Clay lead her to a chair and pulled the blanket tight around her once more. She felt chilled.
"You don't have to be afraid," Clay soothed. "He's been picked up. He's in custody now."
That aroused her interest, and she stared at him. "Picked up? You know who it is?"
"I saw him." The iron was back in Clay's voice.
"But he was wearing a ski mask." She remembered that, remembered feeling the woolly fabric under her fingers.
"Yeah, but his hair was hanging out from under the mask in back."
Mary stared up at him, the numbness in her changing into a kind of horror. His hair was long enough to hang out from under the mask? Surely Clay didn't think—surely not! She felt sick. "Wolf?" she whispered.
"Don't worry. I told you he's in custody."
She clenched her fists so tightly that her nails dug crescents in her palms. "Then let him go."
Clay looked stunned, then angry. "Let him go! Damn, Mary, can't you get it through your head that he attacked you?"
Slowly she shook her head, her face white. "No, he didn't."
"I saw him," Clay said, spacing out each word. "He was tall and had long black hair. Damn it, who else could it have been?"
"I don't know, but it wasn't Wolf."
The women were silent, sitting frozen as they listened to the argument. Cicely Karr spoke up. "We did try to warn you, Mary."
"Then you warned me about the wrong man!" Her eyes burning, Mary stared around the room, then turned her gaze back to Clay. "I saw his hands! He was a white man, an *Anglo.* He had freckled hands. *It wasn't Wolf Mackenzie!"*

Clay's brow creased in a frown. "Are you certain about that?"
"Positive. He put his hand on the ground right in front of my eyes." She reached out and grabbed his sleeve. "Get Wolf out of jail, right now. Right now, do you hear me! And he'd better not have a bruise on him!"
Clay got up and went to the telephone, and once again Mary looked at the women in the room. They were all pale and worried. Mary could guess why. As long as they had suspected Wolf, they had had a safe target for their fear and anger. Now they had to look at themselves, at someone who was one of them. A lot of men in the area had freckled hands, but Wolf didn't His hands were lean and dark, bronzed by the sun, callused from years of hard manual work and riding. She had felt them on her bare skin. She wanted to shout that Wolf had no reason to attack her, because he could have her any time he wanted, but she didn't. The numbness was returning. She just wanted to wait for Wolf, if he came at all.
An hour later he walked into Bessie's house as if he owned it without knocking. An audible gasp rose when he appeared in the doorway, his broad shoulders reaching almost from beam to beam. He didn't even glance at the other people in the room. His eyes were on Mary, huddled in her blanket her face colourless.
His boots rang on the floor as he crossed to her and hunkered down. His black eyes raked her from head to toe; then he touched her chin, turning her head toward the light so he could see the scrape on her cheek and the bruises where hard fingers had bitten into her soft flesh. He lifted her hands and examined her raw palms. His jaw was like granite.
Mary wanted to cry, but instead she managed a wobbly smile. "You got a haircut" she said softly, and linked her fingers together to keep from running them through the thick, silky strands that lay perfectly against his well-shaped head.
"First thing this morning," he murmured. "Are you all right?"
"Yes. He—he didn't manage to… you know."
"I know." He stood. "I'll be back later. I'm going to get him. I promise you, I'll get him."
Clay said sharply, "That's a matter for the law."
Wolfs eyes were cold black fire. "The law isn't doing a very good job." He walked out without another word, and Mary felt chilled again. While he had been there, life had begun tingling in her numb body, but now it was gone. He had said he would be back, but she thought she should go home.

Everyone was very kind, too kind; she felt as if she would scream. She couldn't handle any more.

Chapter Seven

Though he was stunned by Wolf's changed appearance, it took Clay only a moment to follow him. As he had suspected, Wolf stopped his truck at the alley where Mary had been attacked. By the time Clay parked the county car and entered the alley, Wolf was down on one knee, examining the muddy ground. He didn't even glance up when Clay approached. Instead he continued his concentrated examination of every weed and bit of gravel, every scuff mark, every indentation.

Clay said, "When did you get a haircut?"

"This morning. At the barbershop in Harpston."

"Why?"

"Because Mary asked me to," Wolf said flatly, and returned his attention to the ground.

Slowly he moved down the alley and to the back of the buildings, pausing at the spot where Mary's attacker had thrust her to the ground. Then he moved on, following exactly the path the attacker had taken, and it was in the next alley that he gave a grunt of satisfaction and knelt beside a blurred footprint.

Clay had been over the ground himself, and so had many other people. He said as much to Wolf. "That print could belong to anyone."

"No. It's made by a soft-soled shoe, not a boot." After examining the print awhile longer, he said, "He toes in slightly when he walks. I'd guess he weighs about one seventy-five, maybe one eighty. He isn't in very good shape. He was already tired when he got this far."

Clay felt uneasy. Some people would have simply passed off that land of tracking ability as part of Wolf's Indian heritage, but they would have been wrong. There were excellent trackers of wildlife who could follow a man's footsteps in the wilderness as easily as if he had wet paint on the bottoms of his boots, but the details Wolf had discerned would have been noted only by someone who had been trained to hunt other men. Nor did he doubt what Wolf had told him, because he had seen other men, though not many, who could track like that.

"You were in Nam." He already knew that, but suddenly it seemed far more significant.

Wolf was still examining the footprint. "Yes. You?"

"Twenty-first Infantry. What outfit were you with?"

Wolf looked up, and a very slight, unholy smile touched his lips. "I was a LRRP."
Clay's uneasy feeling became a chill. The LRRPs, pronounced "lurp," were men on long-range reconnaissance patrol. Unlike the regular grunts, the LRRPs spent weeks in the jungles and hill country, living off the land, hunting and being hunted. They survived only by their wits and ability to fight, or to fade away into the shadows, whichever the situation demanded. Clay had seen them come in from the bush, lean and filthy, smelling like the wild animals they essentially were, with death in their eyes and their nerves so raw, so wary, that it was dangerous to touch them unexpectedly, or walk up to their backs. Sometimes they hadn't been able to bear the touch of another human being until their nerves settled down. A smart man walked lightly around a LRRP fresh in from the field.
What was in Wolf's eyes now was cold and deadly, an anger so great Clay could only guess at its force, though he understood it. Wolf smiled again, and in the calmest tone imaginable, one almost gentle, he said, "He made a mistake."
"What was that?"
"He hurt *my* woman."
"It's not your place to hunt him. It's a matter for the law."
"Then the law had better stay close to my heels," Wolf said, and walked away.
Clay stared after him, not even surprised by the blunt words claiming Mary as his woman. The chill ran down his back again and he shivered. The town of Ruth had made a mistake in judging this man, but the rapist had made an even bigger one, one that might prove fatal.

Mary stoically ignored all the protests and pleas when she announced her intention of driving home. They meant well, and she appreciated their concern, but she couldn't stay another moment. She was physically unharmed, and the doctor had said her headache would fade in the next few hours. She simply had to go home.
So she drove alone in the misting rain, her movements automatic. Afterward, she could never recall a moment of the drive. All she was aware of when she let herself into the creaky old house was a feeling of intense relief, and it so frightened her that she pushed it away. She couldn't afford to

let herself relax, not now. Maybe later. Right now she had to hold herself together very tightly.
Woodrow looped around her ankles several times, meowing plaintively. Mary stirred herself to feed him, though he was as fat as a butterball already, then found herself exhausted by that brief effort. She sat down at the table and folded her hands in her lap, holding herself motionless.
That was how Wolf found her half an hour later, just as the grey daylight began to fade. "Why didn't you wait for me?" he asked from the doorway, his tone a low, gentle growl.
"I had to come home," Mary explained.
"I would have brought you."
"I know."
He sat down at the table beside her and took her cold, tightly clasped hands in his. She looked at him steadily, and his heart clenched like a fist in his chest.
He would have given anything never to have seen that look in her eyes. She had always been so indomitable, with her "damn the torpedoes" spirit. She was slight and delicately made, but in her own eyes she had been invincible. Because the very idea of defeat was foreign to her, she had blithely moved through life arranging it to suit herself and accepted it as only natural that shopkeepers quaked before her wagging finger. That attitude had sometimes irritated, but more often entranced, him. The kitten thought herself a tiger, and because she acted like a tiger, other people had given way.
She was no longer indomitable. A horrible vulnerability was in her eyes, and he knew she would never forget the moments when she had been helpless. That scum had hurt her, humiliated her, literally ground her into the dirt.
"Do you know what really horrified me?" she asked after a long silence.
"What?"
"That I wanted the first time to be with you, and he was going to—" She stopped abruptly, unable to finish.
"But he didn't."
"No. He pulled up my skirt and pushed against me, and he was tearing my clothes when Clay—I think Clay shouted. He might have fired a shot. I remember hearing a roaring sound, but I thought it was thunder."

Her flat little monotone bothered him, and he realized she was still in shock.
"I won't let him get near you again. I give you my word."
She nodded, then closed her eyes.
"You're going to take a shower," Wolf said, urging her to her feet. "A long, warm shower, and while you're taking it, I'll fix something for you to eat. What would you like?"
She tried to think of something, but even the thought of food was repugnant. "Just tea."
He walked upstairs with her; she was steady, but the steadiness seemed fragile, as if she were barely holding herself under control. He wished that she would cry, or yell, anything that would break the tension encasing her.
"I'll just get my nightgown. You don't mind if I get my nightgown, do you?" She looked anxious, as if afraid she was being too troublesome.
"No." He started to reach out and touch her, to slide his arm around her waist, but dropped his hand before contact was made. She might not want anyone to touch her. A sick feeling grew in him as he realized she might find his, and any other man's, touch disgusting now.
Mary got her nightgown and stood docilely in the old-fashioned bathroom while Wolf adjusted the water. "I'll be downstairs," he said as he straightened and stepped back. "Leave the door unlocked."
"Why?" Her eyes were big and solemn.
"In case you faint, or need me."
"I won't faint."
He smiled a little. No, Miss Mary Elizabeth Potter wouldn't faint; she wouldn't allow herself to be so weak. Maybe it wasn't tension holding her so straight; it might be the iron in her backbone.
He knew he wouldn't be able to coax her to eat much, if anything, but he heated a can of soup anyway. His timing was perfect; the soup had just boiled and the tea finished steeping when Mary entered the kitchen.
She hadn't thought to put on a robe; she wore only the nightgown, a plain white cotton eyelet garment. Wolf felt himself begin to sweat, because as demure as the nightgown was, he could still see the darkness of her nipples through the fabric. He swore silently as she sat down at the table like an obedient child; now wasn't the time for lust. But telling himself that didn't stop it; he wanted her, under any circumstances.
She ate the soup mechanically, without protest, and drank the tea, then thanked him for making it. Wolf cleared the table and washed up the few

dishes; when he turned, Mary was still sitting at the table, her hands folded and her eyes staring at nothing. He froze briefly and muttered a curse. He couldn't bear it another minute. Swiftly he lifted her out of the chair and sat down in it, then settled her on his lap.

She was stiff in his arms for a moment; then a sigh filtered between her lips as she relaxed against his chest. "I was so frightened," she whispered.

"I know, honey."

"How can you know? You're a man." She sounded faintly truculent.

"Yeah, but I was in prison, remember?" He wondered if she would know what he was talking about, and he saw her brow furrow as she thought. Then she said, "Oh." She began scowling fiercely. "If anyone hurt you—" she began.

"Hold it! No, I wasn't attacked. I'm good at fighting, and everyone knew it." He didn't tell her how he'd established a reputation for himself. "But it happened to other prisoners, and I knew it could happen to me, so I was always on guard." He'd slept only in light naps, with a knife made from a sharpened spoon always in his hand; his cell had hidden a variety of weapons, a lot of which the guards had seen and not recognized for what they were. It would have taken another LRRP to have seen some of the things he'd done and the weapons he'd carried. Yeah, he'd been on guard.

"I'm glad," she said, then suddenly bent her head against his throat and began to cry. Wolf held her tightly, his fingers laced through her hair to press against her skull and hold her to him. Her soft, slender body shook with sobs as she wound her arms around his neck. She didn't say anything else, and neither did he, but they didn't need words.

He cradled her until finally she sniffed and observed dazedly, "I need to blow my nose."

He stretched to reach the napkin holder and plucked a napkin from it to place in her hands. Mary blew her nose in a very ladylike manner, then sat still, searching in her depths for the best way to handle what had happened. She knew it could have been much worse, but it had been bad enough. Only one thought surfaced: she didn't want to be alone tonight. She hadn't been able to tolerate the women fussing around her, but if Wolf would just stay with her, she'd be all right.

She looked up at him. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

Every muscle in his big body tensed, but there was no way he could deny her. "You know I will. I'll sleep on the—"

"No. I mean—if you could sleep with me tonight, and hold me so I won't be alone, just for tonight, I think I'll be all right tomorrow."
He hoped it would be that easy for her, but he doubted it. The memories would linger on, springing out from dark corners to catch her when she least expected it. Until the day she died, she would never entirely forget, and for that he wanted to catch her assailant and break the guy's neck. Literally.
"I'll call Joe and let him know where I am," he said, and lifted her from his lap.
It was still early, but her eyelids were drooping, and after he called Joe he decided there was no point in putting it off. She needed to be in bed.
He turned out the lights and put his arm around her as they climbed the narrow stairs together. Her flesh was warm and resilient beneath the thin cotton, and the feel of her made his heart begin a slow, heavy beat His jaw clenched as blood throbbed through his body, pooling in his groin. He was in for a miserable night, and he knew it.
Her bedroom was so old-fashioned it looked turn-of-the-century, but he hadn't expected anything else. The delicate lilac smell he associated with Mary was stronger up here. The ache in his loins intensified.
"I hope the bed is big enough for you," she said, worrying as she eyed the double bed.
"It'll do." It wasn't big enough, but it would do. He'd have to spend the night curled around her. Her bottom would be nestled against him, and he would quietly go insane. Suddenly he didn't know if he could do it, if he could lie with her all night and not take her. No matter what his mind said, his body knew exactly what it wanted; he was already so hard it was all he could do to keep from groaning.
"Which side do you want?"
What did it matter? Torment was torment, no matter what side he was on.
"The left."
Mary nodded and turned back the covers. Wolf wanted to look away as she climbed into bed, but his eyes wouldn't obey. He saw the curve of her buttocks as the nightgown was momentarily pulled tight. He saw her pale, slim legs and immediately pictured them clasped around his waist. He saw the outline of her pretty breasts with their rosy nipples, and he remembered the feel of her breasts in his hands, her nipples in his mouth, her smell and taste.

Abruptly he bent down and pulled the sheet up over her. "I have to take a shower."
He saw the brief dart of fear at being alone in her eyes, but then she conquered it and said, "The towels are in the closet next to the bathroom door."
He was swearing savagely to himself as he stood in the bathroom, jerking his clothes off. A cold shower wouldn't help; he'd had a lot of them lately, and the effect was remarkably short-lived. He needed Mary—naked, beneath him, sheathing his swollen and throbbing flesh. She would be so tight that he wouldn't last a minute—
Damn. He couldn't leave her, not tonight. No matter what it cost him.
His entire body was aching as he stood under the warm, beating water. He couldn't crawl into bed with her like this. The last thing she needed right now was to have him poking at her all night. She needed comfort, not lust. Not only that, he wasn't entirely certain of his control. He'd been too long without a woman, had wanted her for too long.
He couldn't leave her, but he couldn't go to her like this. He knew what he had to do, and his soapy hand slid down his body. At least this would give him some modicum of control, because he would rather slit his own throat than see that fear and vulnerability in Mary's eyes again.

She was lying very still when he rejoined her, and she didn't move as he turned out the light. It wasn't until his weight depressed the mattress that she shifted to lie on her side. He positioned himself on his side, too, and hooked an arm around her waist to pull her firmly back into the cradle of his body. She sighed, and he felt the tension slowly ebb from her body as she relaxed against him.
"This is nice," she whispered.
"You aren't afraid?"
"Of you? No. Never of you." Her tone was liquid with tenderness. She lifted her hand to reach back and cup his jaw in her palm. "I'll be all right in the morning, wait and see. I'm just too tired right now to deal with it. Will you hold me all night?"
"If you want me to."
"Please."
He brushed her hair to one side and pressed a kiss into the nape of her neck, delighting in the delicate little shiver that rippled through her body when he

did so. "My pleasure," he said gently. "Good night, sweetheart."
It was the storm that woke her. It was barely dawn, the light still dim, though the black clouds contributed to the greyness. The storm was fierce, reminding her of the ferocious thunderstorms in the South. Lightning ripped the dark sky apart, and the booming thunder made the very air vibrate. She lazily counted the seconds between the lightning flashes and the thunder to see how far away the storm was: seven miles. But it was pouring rain, the sound loud on the old tin roof. It was wonderful.
She felt both acutely alive and deeply calm, as if she were waiting for something. Yesterday was, by its very definition, in the past. It could no longer hurt her. Today was the present, and the present was Wolf.
He wasn't in the bed, but she knew he had been there during the night. Even in sleep she had sensed him, felt his strong arms holding her. Sleeping together was a joy so deep she couldn't express it, as if it had been meant to be. Perhaps it had been. She couldn't stop herself from hoping.
Where was he? She thought she smelled coffee and got out of bed. She visited the bathroom, brushed her hair and teeth, and returned to the bedroom to dress. Oddly she felt suddenly constrained by the bra she put on and discarded it. A subtle pulsating sensation had enveloped her entire body, and the sense of waiting increased. Even underpants were too much. She simply pulled on a loose cotton house-dress over her nude body and went downstairs in her bare feet.
He wasn't in the parlour, or the kitchen, though the empty coffeepot and the cup in the sink explained the lingering scent. The kitchen door was open, the screen door no barrier to the cool damp air, and the fresh smell of rain mingled with that of the coffee. His truck was still parked at the back porch steps.
It took only a few minutes to boil water and steep a tea bag, and she drank the tea while sitting at the kitchen table, watching the rain sheet down the window. It was cool enough that she should have been chilled, wearing only the thin dress, but she wasn't, even though she could feel how her nipples had tightened. Once that would have embarrassed her. Now she thought only of Wolf.
She was halfway between the table and the sink, empty cup in hand, when suddenly he was there, standing on the other side of the screen door, watching her through the wire mesh. His clothing was plastered to his skin,

rainwater dripping off of his face. Mary froze, her head turned to stare at him.
He looked wild, primitive, his eyes narrow and glittering, his feet braced apart. She could see every breath that swelled his chest, see the pulse that throbbed at the base of his throat. Though he was very still, she could feel his entire body pulsating with tension. In that moment she knew he was going to take her, and she knew that was why she had waited.
"I'll always be a half-breed," he said in a low, harsh voice, barely audible over the drumming rain. "There will always be people who look down on me because of it Think long and hard before you agree to be my woman, because there's no going back."
Softly, clearly, she said, "I don't want to go back."
He opened the screen door and entered the kitchen, his movements slow and deliberate. Mary's hand shook as she reached out to place her cup on the cabinet; then she turned to face him.
He put his hands on her waist and gently drew her up against him; his clothes were wet, and immediately the front of her dress absorbed the moisture until the damp fabric was moulded to her body. Mary slid her hands up his shoulders to join at the back of his neck and lifted her mouth to his. His kiss was slow and deep, making her toes curl as hot excitement began to dart through her. She knew how to kiss now and welcomed his tongue while she teased him with her own. His chest lifted with a deep, sharp intake of breath, and his grip on her tightened. Suddenly the kiss was no longer slow, but hungry and urgent, and the pressure of his mouth was almost painful.
She felt him gathering her skirt in his hand to lift it; then his callused palm was sliding up her thigh. He reached her hip and paused, shuddering with violent arousal as he realized she was naked under the dress; then his hand moved to her bare buttocks and caressed them. It was surprisingly pleasurable, and she moved her bottom against his hand. He had opened up an entire new world for her, the world of sensual pleasure, and he was constantly expanding the limits.
He couldn't wait much longer, and he lifted her in his arms. His face was hard and intent as he looked down at her. "Unless the house catches on fire, I won't stop this time," he said quietly. "I don't care if the phone rings, or if anyone drives up, or even knocks on the bedroom door. This time, we finish it."

She didn't reply, but gave him a slow, sweet smile that made him burn to take her right there. His arms tightened as he carried her up the narrow, creaky stairs and into her bedroom, where he carefully placed her on the bed.

He stood looking down at her for a moment, then walked to the window and raised it. "Let's let the storm in," he said, and then it was with them, filling the half-dark room with sound and vibration. The rain-chilled air washed over her, cool and fresh on her heated skin. She sighed, the small sound drowned out by the din of thunder and rain.

There by the window, with the dim grey light outlining the bulge and plane of powerful muscle, Wolf removed his wet clothing. Mary lay quietly on the bed, her head turned to watch him. The shirt went first, revealing his sleek, heavy shoulders and washboard stomach. She knew from touching him that he was unbelievably hard, with no give beneath his smooth skin. He bent down to tug off his boots and socks, then straightened and unbuckled his belt. The noise of the storm made his movements a pantomime, but she imagined the small pop as he unsnapped his jeans, then the hissing of the zipper as metal teeth pulled apart. Without hesitation he pushed down his jeans and underwear and stepped free of them.

He was naked. Her heart jerked painfully in her chest as she stared at him, for the first time feeling remarkably small and helpless beside him. He was big, he was strong, and he was undeniably male. She couldn't look away from his hard manhood. She was going to take him inside her, accept his heavy weight as they joined in the act of mating, and she was a little frightened.

He saw it in her eyes as he eased down beside her. "Don't be afraid," he whispered, brushing her hair away from her face. His hands were gentle as he reached under her and unzipped her dress.

"I know what's going to happen," she murmured, turning her face against his shoulder. "The mechanics of it, anyway. But I just don't see how it's possible."

"It is. I'll take it slow and easy."

"All right." She whispered her acquiescence and let him lift her so he could pull the dress off of her shoulders. Her breasts were bare, and she could feel them tightening, swelling, her nipples puckering. He bent to kiss both nipples, wetting them with his tongue, and her back arched as heat spread

through her. He quickly stripped the dress down her hips and legs, the need to have her bare under his hands too urgent for him to ignore it any longer. Mary quivered, then lay still. It was the first time since babyhood that anyone but herself had seen her completely nude; her cheeks heated, and she closed her eyes as she struggled with the sensations of embarrassment and painful exposure. He touched her breasts, gently squeezing them; then his rough palm slowly moved down her stomach until his fingers touched her silky triangle of curls. She made a small sound, and her eyes flew open to find him watching her with such a fierce, heated expression that she forgot her embarrassment. She was suddenly proud that he wanted her so intensely, that her body aroused him. Her legs relaxed, and one finger delved between her soft folds, lightly stroking the ultra-sensitive flesh he found. Mary's entire body tensed again, and she moaned. She hadn't known anything could feel like that, but she sensed there was more, and she didn't know if she could survive it. This was pleasure too intense to be borne.
"Do you like that?" Wolf murmured.
She gasped, her slender body beginning to writhe slowly on the sheets in a rhythm as old as the ages. He opened her legs farther with his hand, then returned to his sensual exploration, and at the same time bent to hungrily cover her mouth with his own. Mary's head spun, and her nails dug into his shoulders as she clung to him. She couldn't believe how he was touching her, how it made her feel, but she never wanted it to stop. He was causing a fever inside her, one that spread and intensified until she was aware of nothing but her own body and his. His stroking fingers raised her to delirium while his mouth muffled the small moans she made.
She tore her mouth away from his. "Wolf, please," she begged, frantic with need.
"Just a minute longer, sweetheart. Look at me. Let me see your face when I —ahh."
She whimpered. He was touching her even more intimately, finding her damp and swollen. His black gaze was locked with hers as he slowly slid his finger inside her, and they both shuddered convulsively.
Wolf knew he couldn't wait any longer. His entire body was throbbing. She was soft and wet and incredibly tight, and she was writhing on the verge of ecstasy. Her pale, translucent skin intoxicated him, enthralled him; just touching her made him wild. The textures of her body excited him more than anything he'd ever known before. Everything about her was soft and

silky. Her hair was baby-fine, her skin delicate and satiny; even the curls between her legs were soft, rather than springy. He wanted her more than he wanted his next breath.
He moved between her legs, spreading them to make room for his hips to nestle against her. She inhaled sharply as she felt him, hard and burning. Their eyes met again as he reached down between their bodies and guided himself into position, then began entering her.
The storm was right over them now. The lightning cracked, and the almost simultaneous thunder boomed, rattling the old house. The sharply gusting wind blew the curtains straight out into the room, spattering rain on the floor in front of the open window and carrying a fine mist over their bodies. Mary cried, her tears mingling with the mist on her face, as she accepted his slow penetration.
He was braced over her on his forearms, his face just an inch from hers. He licked the tears away, then kissed her mouth, and she tasted salt. She could feel burning pain as her body stretched to admit him, and enormous pressure. More tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. He deepened the kiss as his buttocks flexed, exerting more pressure, and suddenly her body's barrier gave way. He pushed deep into her, burying himself to the hilt with a deep, almost tortured groan of pleasure.
There was pain, but there was also a lot more. He'd told her that making love was hot and sweaty, and that she probably wouldn't like it, and he was both right and wrong. It was hot and sweaty, and raw, and primitive. It was so powerful that it swept her along with its rhythms. Despite the pain, she felt exalted by his possession. She could feel the tension and savage excitement in his powerful body as she cradled him with her legs and arms, her soft depths filled with him. She loved him, and he needed her. She had never really lived before, until this moment when she gave herself to the man she loved.
She couldn't keep it back, not that it mattered. He had to know already. Mary had never worn an emotional mask. Her hands moved over his sleek, wet shoulders and into his thick hair. "I love you," she said, her soft voice barely audible over another booming roll of thunder.
If he replied, she didn't hear him. He reached down between their bodies again, but this time his hand was on her, and he began moving. Heat shimmered through her again, making the discomfort fade; her body arched, hips lifting in an effort to take him even deeper, and she told him again that

she loved him. Sweat beaded his taut face as he tried to control his thrusts, but the storm was in the room, in their bodies. Her hips undulated, rolling, driving him mad. They strained together, their movements punctuated by the thunder, by the thudding of the headboard against the wall, and by the creaking of the bedsprings beneath them. Low groans and soft cries; wet flesh and trembling muscles; hands clutching frantically; harsh, rapid breathing and urgent thrusts—she knew all of that, felt it, heard it, and felt herself being consumed by the fever.

"Wolf?" Her questioning cry was thin, frantic. Her nails dug into the flexing muscles of his back.

"Don't fight it, baby. Let it go." He was groaning, feeling his own completion approaching, and he had no more control left. He removed his hand from between them and gripped her hips, lifting them, fitting himself more solidly to her and rocking against her loins.

Mary felt the tension and fever increase to unbearable levels, and then her senses exploded. She cried out, her entire body shuddering and clenching. It was the sweetest madness imaginable, a pleasure beyond description, and it continued until she thought she might die of it. He held her until she quietened, then began thrusting hard and fast. His guttural cries blended with the thunder as he crushed her against the mattress, his body convulsing as the powerful jetting of completion emptied him.

They were silent afterward, as if words would be an intrusion between them. Their mating had been so compelling and urgent that nothing else had existed. Even the storm, as violent as it was, had been only an accompaniment. Slowly, reluctantly, Mary felt reality return, but she was content to lie beneath him and do nothing more than stroke his hair.

Their breathing had long since steadied and the storm moved away when he disengaged their bodies and shifted onto his side. He cradled her for a time, but now that their skin had cooled, the mist-dampened bed was distinctly uncomfortable. When she began to shiver, he got out of bed and crossed to the window to close it. She watched as his muscles alternately bunched and relaxed with each movement of his nude body. Then he turned, and she was instantly, helplessly, fascinated. She wished for the nerve to run her hands all over him, especially his loins. She wanted to inspect him, like an exploration, going over uncharted territory.

"Like what you see?" His voice was low and filled with amusement.

Things had gone too far between them for her to be embarrassed now. She looked up at him and smiled. "Very much. I imagined you once in a loincloth, but this is much better."
He reached down and plucked her from the bed as easily as if she were a feather. "We'd better get dressed before you get cold, and before I forget my good intentions."
"What good intentions?"
"Not to keep at you until you're so sore you can't walk."
She looked gravely at him. "You made it wonderful for me. Thank you."
"It was pretty damn wonderful for me, too." One side of his mouth quirked upward, and he slid his hands into her silvery brown hair. "No bad moments?"
She understood what he meant and leaned her head against his chest. "No. That was an entirely different thing."
But she hadn't forgotten, either, and he knew it. She was still shaky and vulnerable inside, though she kept her chin proudly lifted. He intended for someone to pay for the damage done to her indomitable spirit.
He'd spent years living quietly on the fringes, maintaining the sort of armed truce that had existed between him and the citizens of Ruth, but no more. For Mary, he would find the creep who had attacked her, and if the townspeople didn't like it, that was just too bad.

Chapter Eight

She threw Wolf's wet clothes into the dryer, then prepared a late breakfast. Neither of them talked much. Despite her determination to overcome her shock, she couldn't quite forget those horrifying moments when she had been helpless at the hands of a madman, for he certainly was mad. No matter what she was doing or thinking, a lightning flash of memory would catapult her back to the attack, just for a minute, until she could regain control and put it from her again.
Wolf watched her, knowing what she was experiencing by the way her slight body would tense, then slowly relax. He'd lived through flashbacks, of Vietnam, of prison, and he knew how they worked, as well as the toll they took. He wanted to take her to bed again, to keep the shadows at bay for her, but knew from the occasional gingerness of her movements that she

was too new to lovemaking for another bout right now to be anything other than abusive. When she was used to him… A very slight smile curved his lips as he thought of the hours of pleasure and all the different ways he would take her.
But first he had to find the man who had attacked her.
When his clothes were dry, he dressed and pulled Mary out to the back porch with him. The rain had diminished to a drizzle, so he figured they wouldn't get too wet. "Come out to the barn with me," he said, taking her hand.
"Why?"
"I want to show you something."
"I've been in the barn. There's nothing interesting in there."
"There is today. You'll like it."
"All right" They hurried through the drizzle to the old barn, which was dark and musty, without the warmth and rich, animal smells of his barn. Dust tickled her nose. "It's too dark to see anything."
"There's enough light. Come on." Still holding her hand, he led her into a stall where a couple of boards were missing from the wall, letting in the dreary light. After the darkness of the inner barn, she could see fairly well.
"What is it?"
"Look under the feed trough."
She bent down and looked. Curled up, in a nest of dusty straw and an old towel she recognized, was Woodrow. Curled against Woodrow's belly were four little rat-looking things.
She straightened abruptly. "Woodrow's a father!"
"Nope. Woodrow's a mother."
"A mother!" She stared at the cat, who stared back at her enigmatically before beginning to lick the kittens. "I was specifically told that Woodrow is male."
"Well, Woodrow is female. Didn't you look?"
Mary gave him a severe look. "I don't make a habit of looking at an animal's private parts."
"Just mine, right?"
She blushed, but couldn't deny the charge. "Right."
He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close for a slow, warm kiss. She sighed and softened against him, reaching up to clasp the back of his neck as his mouth moved over hers. The strength of his big body

reassured her, made her feel safe. When his hard arms were around her, nothing could harm her.
"I have to go home," he murmured when he lifted his mouth from hers. "Joe will do as much as he can, but it takes both of us to get everything done."
She had thought she could handle it, but panic seized her at the thought of being alone. Quickly she controlled herself and let her arms drop from around his neck. "Okay." She started to ask if she'd see him later, but kept the words unsaid. Oddly, now that their relationship was so intimate, she felt far less sure of herself than she had before. Letting him get that close, letting him enter her body, had exposed a vulnerability she hadn't known was there. That kind of intimacy was a little scary.
"Get a jacket," he said as they left the barn.
"I already have a jacket."
"I meant, get one now. You're going with me."
She gave him a quick look, then dropped her gaze away from the awareness in his. "I have to be alone sometime," she said quietly.
"But not today. Go on, get that jacket."
She got the jacket and climbed up into his truck, feeling as if she had been reprieved from execution. Maybe by the time night came she would have her fears under control.
Joe came out of the barn as they drove up and walked to the passenger side of the truck. When Mary opened the door, he reached in and lifted her from the truck, then hugged her tightly. "Are you all right?" His young voice was gruff.
She hugged him in return. "He didn't hurt me. I was just scared."
Over her head Joe looked at his father and saw the cold, controlled rage in those black eyes as they lingered on the slight woman in his son's arms. Someone had dared to hurt her, and whoever it was would pay. Joe felt a deep primitive anger, and knew it was only a fraction of what Wolf felt. Their eyes met, and Wolf gave a slight shake of his head, indicating that he didn't want Joe to pursue the subject. Mary was here to relax, not relive the attack.
Wolf approached and looped his arm over her shoulder, using the pressure to turn her toward the stable. "Feel up to helping with the chores?"
Her eyes lit. "Of course. I've always wanted to see how a ranch works."
He automatically shortened his long stride to match hers as the three of them walked toward the stable. "This isn't a ranch, exactly. I run a small

herd, but more for training and our personal beef than any other reason."
"What sort of training?"
"Training the horses to work a herd. That's what I do. I break and train horses. Quarter horses mostly, for ranchers, but sometimes I handle the odd show horse or Thoroughbred, or a fractious pleasure mount."
"Don't Thoroughbred owners have their own trainers?"
He shrugged. "Some horses are harder to train than others. An expensive horse isn't worth a damn if no one can get near him." He didn't elaborate, but Mary knew that he got the horses no one else was able to handle.
The long stable jutted out to the right of the barn. When they entered, Mary inhaled the rich earth scents of horses, leather, manure, grain and hay. Long satiny necks poked over the stall doors, and inquisitive whickers filled the air. She had never been around horses much, but she wasn't afraid of them. She moved down the line, patting and stroking, murmuring to the animals.
"Are these all quarter horses?"
"No. That one in the next stall is a Canadian cutting horse—that's a type, not a breed. He belongs to a rancher in the next county north. Down in the last stall is a saddle-bred, for some big rancher's wife in Montana. He's going to give her the horse for her birthday in July. The rest of them are quarter horses."
They were all young horses, and as playful as children. Wolf treated them as such, talking to them in a low, crooning tone, gentling them like overgrown babies. Mary spent the entire afternoon in the stables with Wolf and Joe, watching them attend to the endless chores of cleaning and feeding, checking shoes, grooming. The drizzle finally stopped in the late afternoon, and Wolf worked with a couple of the young quarter horses in the pen behind the stable, slowly and gently getting them accustomed to bits and saddles. He didn't rush them, or lose his patience when a fractious young horse shied away from him whenever Wolf tried to lift a saddle onto his back. He just soothed the colt and reassured him before trying again. Before the afternoon was over, the colt was ambling around the pen as if he'd been wearing a saddle for years.
Mary was enthralled, partly by his low, velvety voice, and partly by the way his strong hands moved over the young animals, teaching and soothing all at once. He had done that with her, but his hands had also excited her. She shivered as memories washed over her, and her breasts tightened.

"I've never seen anyone like him," Joe said beside her, keeping his tone low. "I'm good, but not near as good as he is. I've never seen a horse he couldn't settle down. We had a stallion brought to us a couple of years ago. He'd been put out to stud, but he was so damn vicious the handlers couldn't control him. Dad just put him in a stall and left him alone, but every so often he'd leave sugar cubes, apples or carrots on the top of the stall door and stand there until the stallion got a good look at him. Then he'd walk off, and the stallion would get whatever he'd left on the door.

"The stallion started watching for him and snorting at him if Dad was taking his time about getting the food over there. Then Dad stopped moving away, and the stallion, Ringer, had to come up to the door while Dad was there if he wanted the food. The first few times, he tried to tear the stall apart, but finally he gave in and got the food. Next he had to eat out of Dad's hand if he wanted his treat. Dad switched completely to carrots then, to make sure he didn't lose any fingers. Finally Ringer was hanging his head over the stall, and he'd nuzzle Dad's shirt like a kid hunting candy. Dad petted him and groomed him—Ringer loved being brushed—and gradually broke him to the saddle and started riding him. I worked with him, too, after Dad had him settled down, and I guess he finally decided he didn't have to fight all the time.

"We had a mare come in heat, and Dad called Ringer's owner to ask if he wanted us to try Ringer on our mare. The guy gave his okay, Ringer performed like a real gentleman, and everybody was happy. The owner got his expensive stud civilized, and we got a hefty fee, as well as a hell of a colt out of the mare Ringer covered."

Mary blinked at all this talk of being "in heat" and "covered," and cleared her throat. "He's wonderful," she agreed, and cleared her throat again. Her skin felt hot and sensitive. She couldn't take her eyes off Wolf, tall and lean and broad-shouldered, the weak sunlight glinting off his black hair.

"When we get through here, maybe we could do a few lessons tonight, since I missed Friday night," Joe said, interrupting her thoughts.

She didn't like thinking about why he had missed Friday night, about the long hours spent waiting to hear if Wolf had been jailed. This afternoon had been a small oasis of calm, with the semblance of normality, but it would be a long time before things were back to normal in the county. A young girl had been raped, and Mary had been attacked the very next day. People would be enraged and wary, looking at their neighbours and wondering.

God help any stranger who happened to wander through, at least until the man was caught.
Tires crunched on the gravel, and Joe left his post to see who had ventured up on Mackenzie's Mountain. He was back in a moment, with Clay Armstrong behind him. It was a replay of Friday afternoon, and Mary felt her heart lurch; surely Clay wasn't going to arrest Wolf now?
"Mary." Clay nodded at her and touched the brim of his hat. "You doing okay?"
"Yes." She said it firmly.
"I thought I'd find you up here. Do you feel like going over it again with me?"
Wolf pulled off his gloves as he approached. His eyes were flinty. "She went over it with you yesterday."
"Sometimes people remember little things after the shock has passed."
Because she sensed Wolf was about to throw Clay off his property, she turned and put her hand on his arm. "It's okay. I'm okay."
She was lying, and he knew it, but her mouth had taken on that stubborn set that meant she wouldn't back down. He felt a tinge of amusement; his kitten was getting back some of her confidence, after all. But no way was he going to let Clay question her alone. He looked at Joe. "Put the horse up. I'm going with Mary."
"That isn't necessary," Clay said.
"It is to me."
Mary felt dwarfed between the two big men as they walked up to the house; she thought she might soon find such protectiveness smothering. A smile touched her lips.
Clay probably felt he had to protect her from Wolf as well as from another attack, while Wolf was determined to protect her, period. She wondered what Clay would think if he knew that she didn't want to be protected from Wolf. Aunt Ardith would say Wolf had taken advantage of her, and Mary earnestly hoped he would do so again. Soon.
Wolf caught her sidelong glance and stiffened as he felt her interest and warmth. Damn it, didn't she know how he'd react, and that it could get embarrassing? Already he could feel the tension in his loins. But, no, she didn't know. Despite their early morning lovemaking, she was still too innocent about sex in general, and the effect she had on him in particular, to know what that look did to him. He hurried his step. He needed to sit down.

When they entered the kitchen, Mary moved around making coffee as naturally as she would have in her own house, emphasizing to Clay that she and Wolf were a couple. Folks in the county were just going to have to get used to it.

"Let's go through it from the beginning," Clay said.

Mary paused fractionally, then resumed her steady movements as she measured coffee into the percolator. "I'd just bought new boots at Hearst's store and was walking back to my car—my boots! I dropped them! Did you see them? Did anyone pick them up?"

"I saw them, but I don't know what happened to them. I'll ask around."

"He must have been standing against the side of Hearst's store, because I'd have seen him if he had been on the other side of the alley. He just grabbed me and put his hand over my mouth. He held my head arched back, so I couldn't move it at all, and started dragging me down the alley. I got one hand free and reached back, trying to scratch his face, but he had on a ski mask. He hit me in the head with his fist and I—I really don't remember much after that until he pushed me down. I kept scratching him, and I think I clawed his hand, because he hit me again. Then I bit him on the hand, but I don't know if I drew blood.

"Someone yelled, and he got up and ran. He put his hand on the ground right in front of my face when he got up. His sleeve was blue, and he had freckles on his hand. A lot of freckles. Then… you were there."

She fell silent and moved to look out the kitchen window, her back to the men sitting at the table, so she didn't see the murderous look in Wolf's eyes, or the way his big fists clenched, but Clay did, and it worried him.

"I was the one who yelled. I saw the package lying on the ground and went over to see what it was, and then I heard scuffling from the back of the building. When I saw him, I yelled and pulled my revolver, and fired over his head to try to stop him."

Wolf looked savage. "You should have shot the son of a bitch. That would have stopped him."

In retrospect Clay wished he'd shot the guy, too. At least then they wouldn't be racking their brains trying to put an ID to him, and the townspeople wouldn't be so jittery. Women were carrying an assortment of weapons with them wherever they went, even outside to hang the wash to dry. The mood people were in, it would be dangerous for a stranger to stop in the county.

That was what bothered him, and he said as much. "It looks like someone would have noticed a stranger. Ruth is a small town, and people pretty well know everyone in the county. A stranger would have been noticed right off, especially one with long black hair."
Wolf gave a wintry smile. "Everyone would have thought it was me."
At the window, Mary stiffened. She had been trying not to listen, trying to push away the memories that had been called up by her recounting of what had happened. She didn't turn around, but suddenly all her attention was focused on the conversation behind her. What Wolf had said was true. On seeing her attacker's long black hair, Clay had immediately had Wolf arrested.
But that long black hair, so distinctive, didn't fit with the wealth of rust-coloured freckles she'd seen on the man's hand. And his skin had been pale. Fair people freckled. The black hair didn't fit.
Unless it was a disguise. Unless the object had been to frame Wolf.
Her spine prickled, and she felt both hot and cold. Whoever had done it hadn't known that Wolf had had his hair cut. But the choice of victim was puzzling; it didn't make sense. Why attack her? Surely no one would think Wolf would attack the one person in town who'd championed him, and she'd made it plain how she felt. Unless she had been a random choice, it just didn't make sense. After all, there was no link between herself and Cathy Teele, no common ground. It could all be chance.
Still without turning around, she asked, "Wolf, do you know Cathy Teele? Have you ever spoken to her?"
"I know her by sight. I don't speak to little Anglo girls." His tone was ironic. "Their parents wouldn't like it."
"You're right about that," Clay said wearily. "A few months back Cathy told her mother you were the best-looking man around, and that she wouldn't mind dating Joe if he weren't younger than she was. The whole town heard about it. Mrs. Teele pitched a fit."
That chill ran down Mary's spine again. There was a link, after all: Wolf. Nor could she dismiss it as coincidence, though something about the whole thing was skewed.
She twisted her hands together, and turned to face them. "What if someone is deliberately trying to frame Wolf?"
Wolf's face went hard and blank, but Clay looked startled. "Damn," he muttered. "Why did you think of that?"

"The long black hair. It could have been a wig. The man had freckles on his hand, a lot of freckles, and his skin was pale."
Wolf got to his feet, and though Mary knew she never had anything to fear from him, she fell back a step at the expression in his eyes. He didn't say anything; he didn't have to. She had seen him angry before, but this was different. He was enraged, but it was an icy rage, and he was in perfect control of himself. Perhaps that was what alarmed her.
Then Clay said, "Sorry, but I don't think it'll wash. Once we had all thought about it, it didn't make sense that Wolf would have attacked you, of all people. You've stood up for him right from the beginning, when the rest of the people in town—"
"Wouldn't spit on me if I were on fire," Wolf finished.
Clay couldn't deny it. "Exactly."
The coffee had finished brewing, and Mary poured three cups. They were silent and thoughtful as they sipped, all of them turning things around in their minds, trying to make the pieces fit. The truth was that no matter how things were arranged, something was always off, unless they went with the idea that a criminal had chosen Mary and Cathy at random, and had perhaps used a long black wig for disguise by pure coincidence.
Everything in Mary rejected the idea of coincidence. So that meant someone was deliberately trying to implicate Wolf. But why choose her as a victim?
To punish Wolf by hurting the people who had championed him?
It was all supposition, without a shred of evidence. Wolf had lived here for years without anything like this happening, even though his presence was like salt on the wound of the town's conscience. They didn't like him, and he didn't let them forget. Still, they had all existed under a silent truce.
So what had triggered the violence?
She rubbed her temples as a sudden twinge of pain threatened to become a full-scale headache. Since she seldom had headaches, she supposed the tension was getting to her, and determined not to let it. She'd never been a Nervous Nellie and didn't intend to start now.
Clay sighed and pushed his empty cup back. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll get the report finished tomorrow. I'll bring the papers by the school for you to sign—uh, are you planning to go to work, or stay home?"
"Why, work, of course."

"Of course," Wolf muttered, and scowled at her. Mary lifted her chin at him. She saw no reason why she should suddenly become an invalid.
Clay left soon afterward, and Joe came up from the stables to join in the dinner preparations. It felt right, the three of them together, working together as comfortably as if they had done so for years. Joe winked at her once, and she blushed, because it was fairly easy to read the expression in his young-old eyes. Awareness, amusement and approval were all there. Was he simply assuming she and Wolf had become intimate because Wolf had spent the night at her house, which she supposed was the common-sense thing to assume, or was there something different about her? What if everyone in town could just look at her and know?
Wolf curved his hand around her waist. She had been standing motionless for several minutes, the pan in her hand forgotten, as she both frowned and blushed. The blush told him what she was thinking, and the familiar tension in his body made his fingers tighten until they dug into her ribs. She looked up at him, her grey-blue eyes wide and startled; then awareness shot into them, and her eyelids dropped to half veil the desire she couldn't disguise.
Joe reached to take the pan from her nerveless fingers. "I think I'll go see a movie somewhere," he announced.
Mary jerked her head around, tearing herself from the sensual spell Wolf spun about her so easily. "No! Your lessons, remember?"
"Another night won't hurt."
"Another night will hurt," she insisted. "The Academy isn't something you can take for granted just because Senator Allard is going to recommend you. You can't afford to let up for a minute."
Wolf released her. "She's right, son. You can't let your grades slip." He could wait. Barely.
It was after nine when Mary closed the books she and Joe had been using and stretched her arms over her head. "Could you take me home now?" she asked Wolf, barely suppressing a yawn. It had been an eventful day.
His face was impassive. "Why don't you stay here." It was more of a command than a suggestion.
"I can't do that!"
"Why not?"
"It isn't proper."
"I stayed with you last night."
"That's different."

"How?"
"I was upset."
"Your bed's too small. Mine's bigger."
"I'm getting out of here," Joe said, and suited the action to the words.
Mary got huffy. "Did you have to say that in front of him?"
"He knew anyway. Remember what I said about no going back?"
She stilled and said, "Yes." That warm look entered her eyes again. "I don't want to go back. But I can't stay here tonight. I have to go to work in the morning."
"No one would think any less of you if you didn't."
"I would." She had that look again, the stubborn, determined expression of a fierce will.
Wolf got to his feet. "All right. I'll take you home." He went into his bedroom and several minutes later reappeared with a small shaving kit in his hand and a change of clothes slung over his shoulder. He knocked briefly on Joe's door as he passed it. "I'll be home in the morning."
The door opened. Joe was barefoot and shirtless, having been preparing to take a shower. "Okay. Are you going to take her to school, or do you want me to?"
"I don't need anyone to take me to work," Mary interrupted.
"That's tough." Wolf turned back to his son. "Baugh is bringing a couple of horses up in the morning, so I'll have to be here. You take her to school, and I'll get her in the afternoon."
"I'm driving my own car, and you can't stop me!"
"That's okay. You'll just have an escort." Wolf crossed the floor to her and took her arm. "Ready?"
Realizing that he'd made up his mind and there wasn't anything she could do about it, Mary walked with him out to the truck. The night air was growing cold, but his big body radiated heat, and she moved closer to him. As soon as they were in the truck, he roughly took her in his arms and bent his head to hers. She opened her mouth beneath his onslaught and thrust her fingers into his thick hair. The warm taste of his mouth filled her; the pressure of his arms around her rib cage, of his hard-muscled chest on her breasts, drugged her more surely than any sedative. If he had pulled her down onto the seat and taken her right then, she wouldn't have objected. As it was, when he put her from him, her entire body was throbbing. She sat silently on the drive down the mountain, thinking of their lovemaking that

morning, aching for it to be repeated. A thought echoed in her mind: so this was what it meant to be a woman.
Woodrow was waiting patiently on the back doorstep. Mary fed him—her!—while Wolf showered and shaved. He didn't have a heavy beard, but two days' growth had darkened his jaw, and her face burned a little from contact with his when they had kissed. She felt that deep, almost painful sense of waiting again as she climbed the stairs to her bedroom.
He silently entered and stood for a moment watching her before she sensed his presence and turned. "The shower's yours."
He was naked, and slightly damp from the humidity in the bathroom. His black hair glistened under the light, and glittering droplets of water were caught in the dark curls of hair on his chest. He was already aroused. The throbbing in her body became acute.
She showered, and afterward, for the first time, sprayed perfume on her pulse points. She had never bought perfume in her life, but luckily one of her students in Savannah had given her the bottle for Christmas. The scent was sweetly exotic.
She opened the bathroom door, then gasped and fell back. Wolf was waiting for her in the doorway, his eyes narrow and fierce as they raked her. She had boldly left off her nightgown, and under his perusal the deep throbbing intensified. He put his big hands on her breasts and lifted them slightly so that they were plumped in his palms. Her nipples tightened even before he began rubbing them with his thumbs. Mary stood very still, her breath quick and shallow, her eyes half closed as she tried to deal with the pleasure his hands brought.
Wolfs own eyes were narrow black slits. "I wanted to do this the day I found you on the road," he murmured. "Such a pretty little body inside that ugly dress. I wanted to take it off of you and see you naked."
The heat in his eyes, in his voice, made her shiver and sway toward him. He pulled her out of the doorway and into the dark hall, then put his hands on her waist and lifted her. She remembered when he had done that before and moaned even before his mouth closed over her nipple. He sucked it so strongly that her back arched, and she cried out as her legs parted and wrapped around his hips for balance. He groaned, unable to wait a minute longer. He had to get inside her or go mad. He shifted her, guided himself and entered her.

Mary shuddered, then went very still as he slowly pushed into her. It was even better than before. Her inner muscles gently clasped and relaxed as she accommodated him, sending waves of pleasure radiating out through her body. She clung to him, gasping. Desire worked its magic on her body, tightening some muscles, loosening others, so that she was both taut and pliable as she lifted herself, then sank back down. The effect of that small movement had both of them gasping, and Wolf shifted to brace his back against the wall. She did it again, then again. He put his hands on her buttocks to take control of the motion and began driving into her. Her skin felt on fire. She radiated heat, making her skin feel tight and smooth and so extraordinarily sensitive that she could feel each of his fingers on her bottom, the rasp of his chest hair on her breasts, the tiny nubs of his nipples, the muscled wall of his belly, the coarse hair at his groin. She could feel him deep inside her.

Her back arched, and her nerves convulsed. Wolf fought his own response, not wanting it to end so quickly, and held her until she quietened. Then he carried her into the bedroom, her legs still locked around him, and eased her down on the bed.

She swallowed and relaxed her hold on him. "You haven't—?"

"Not yet," he murmured, and began moving strongly into her.

She didn't want it to end. She took his thrusts, cradled him when a harsh groan tore from his throat and the powerful shudders of completion shook him, and afterward held him as he rested on her body. She didn't want him to withdraw, to leave her empty again. She had existed in a sort of genteel limbo all her life until she had met him and begun to live. In just a few short months he had so completely taken over the focus of her life that the years before were hazy.

He gathered himself and tried to move off her. Mary tightened her legs around him, and he grunted.

"Let me up, sweetheart. I'm too heavy for you."

"No you aren't," she whispered, and kissed his throat.

"I weigh twice what you do. Do you even weigh a hundred pounds?"

"Yes," she said indignantly. She weighed a hundred and five.

"Not much more than that. I weigh two hundred, and I'm a foot taller than you. If I go to sleep on you, you'll smother."

He did sound drowsy. She ran her hand down the muscled ridges of his side. "I want to stay like this."

He thrust gently against her. "Like this?"
"Yes." She breathed the word.
He settled onto her, but shifted part of his weight to the side. "Is this okay?"
It was wonderful. She could breathe, but he was still close to her, still inside her. He quickly dozed off, as content as she with the position, and Mary smiled in the darkness as she held him.
The dark thoughts slowly intruded. Someone had deliberately tried to frame him, to put him back in prison. The thought of Wolf without his freedom was obscene and scary, because she knew enough about him to know he would never let himself be sent to prison again.
She wanted to keep him safe, to shield him in her arms, putting her own body between him and danger. Dear God, what had started it all? Things had been so quiet! What had been the trigger?
Then she knew, and horror almost stopped her breath. She had been the trigger.
While Wolf and Joe had been outcasts, punished for their heritage and Wolfs past, everything had been calm. Then she had come to town, an Anglo woman, but instead of aligning herself with the townspeople, she had championed the Mackenzies. With her help, Joe had achieved an honour offered to very few. Other people had begun saying what a nice thing it was that the Mackenzie boy was going to the Academy. Cathy Teele had said that Wolf was the best-looking man in the county. The boundaries between the town and the Mackenzies had begun blurring. Someone, with a maggot of hate festering deep inside, had been unable to stand it.
And she had been the cause of it all. If anything happened to Wolf, it would be her fault.

Chapter Nine

She didn't know what to do. The thought that she was the cause of all that had happened tormented her, disturbing her sleep. She moved restlessly, waking Wolf, and he sensed her distress though he attributed it to the wrong cause. He soothed her with whispers and pulled her more completely beneath him. She felt him harden inside her. His lovemaking was gentle this time, and when it was over she slept as effortlessly as a child until he awoke

her again in the total darkness before dawn. She turned to him without question.
Joe drove up just as she and Wolf were preparing breakfast, and without a word Wolf broke more eggs into a bowl to be scrambled. Mary smiled at him, even though she was placing more bacon in the frying pan. "How do you know he's hungry?"
"He's awake, isn't he? My kid eats like a horse."
Joe came in the back door and headed for the coffee, which had already finished brewing. "Morning."
"Good morning. Breakfast will be ready in about ten minutes."
He grinned at her, and Mary smiled back. Wolf watched her, his gaze sharp. She looked frail this morning, her skin pale and even more translucent than usual, with faint mauve shadows under her eyes. She smiled readily, but he wondered what had made her look so delicate. Had he tired her with his lovemaking, or were memories of the attack disturbing her? He thought it must be the latter, because she had responded eagerly every time he'd reached for her. Knowing that she was still frightened made him even more determined to find whoever had attacked her. After Eli Baugh had delivered the horses and left, Wolf planned to do some tracking.
Joe was right behind Mary's car on the way to the school, and he didn't leave immediately, as she had expected. It was still too early for the students to begin arriving, so he walked with her into the empty building and even inspected the rooms. Then he leaned against the door-jamb and waited.
Mary sighed. "I'm perfectly safe here."
"I'll just wait until some other people show up."
"Did Wolf tell you to do this?"
"Nope. He knew he didn't have to."
How did they communicate? By telepathy? Each seemed to know what the other was thinking. It was disconcerting. She just hoped they couldn't read her thoughts, because she'd had some decidedly erotic ones lately.
What would everyone think of Joe's presence? He was so obviously a watchdog. She wondered if it would trigger another act of violence, and she felt sick, because she knew it might. Instinct, sharpened by her fierce protectiveness for both Mackenzies, told her that her theory was correct. Just the possibility that they could become accepted had driven someone over the edge. It revealed so much hate that she shivered.

Sharon and Dottie entered the building and halted briefly when Joe turned his head and looked at them as they passed the open door. "Mrs. Wycliffe. Mrs. Lancaster," he said in acknowledgment as he touched his fingertips to the brim of his hat in a brief salute.
"Joe," Sharon murmured. "How are you?"
Dottie gave him a brief, almost frightened look and hurried to her classroom. Joe shrugged. "I've been doing a bit of studying," he allowed.
"Just a bit?" Sharon asked wryly. She stepped past him to greet Mary, then said, "If you don't feel like working today, Dottie and I can handle your classes. I never dreamed you'd be here today, anyway."
"I was merely frightened," Mary said firmly. "Clay prevented anything else from happening. Cathy is the one who needs sympathy, not I."
"The whole town is in an uproar. Anyone who has freckles on his hands is getting the third degree."
Mary didn't want to talk about it. The image of that freckled hand made her feel nauseated, and she swallowed convulsively. Joe frowned and stepped forward. Mary put up her hand to keep him from throwing Sharon out of the classroom, but at that moment several students entered, and their chatter distracted everyone. The kids said, "Hi, Joe, howya been?" as they clustered around him. They all wanted to know about his plans for the Academy and how he'd gotten interested.
Sharon left to attend to her own classes, and Mary watched Joe with the kids. He was only sixteen, but he seemed older than even the seniors. Joe was young, but he wasn't a kid, and that was the difference. She noticed that Pam Hearst was in the group. She wasn't saying much, but she never took her eyes off Joe, looking at him with both longing and pain, though she tried to hide it. Several times Joe gave the girl a long look that made her fidget uncomfortably.
Then he checked his watch and left his former classmates to say to Mary, "Dad will be here to follow you home. Don't go anywhere alone."
She started to protest, then thought of the man out there who hated them enough to do what he'd done. She wasn't the only one at risk. She reached out and caught his arm. "You and Wolf be careful. You could be the next targets."
He frowned, as if that hadn't occurred to him. The attacker was a rapist, so men wouldn't consider themselves in danger. She wouldn't have thought of it, either, if she hadn't been convinced that the whole thing was intended to

punish the Mackenzies. What greater punishment could there be than to kill them? At some point the madman might decide to take a rifle and dispense his own twisted brand of justice.
Clay showed up at lunch with the papers for her to read and sign. Aware of the kids watching them with acute interest, she walked with him out to the car. "I'm worried," she admitted.
He propped his arm on top of the open door. "You'd be foolish if you weren't worried."
"Not for myself. I think Wolf and Joe are the real targets."
He gave her a quick, sharp look. "How do you figure that?"
Heartened that he hadn't immediately dismissed the idea, but was watching her with a troubled expression in his eyes, Mary told him her theory. "I think Cathy and I were specifically chosen as targets to punish Wolf. Don't you see the link? She said she thought Wolf was handsome, and that she'd like to date Joe. Everyone knows I've been friends with them from the first. So we were chosen."
"And you think he'll attack again?"
"I'm certain he will, but I'm afraid he'll go after one of them this time. I doubt he'd try to manhandle either of them, but what chance would they have against a bullet? How many men in this county have a rifle?"
"Every last mother's son," Clay replied grimly. "But what set this guy off?"
She paused, her face miserable. "I did."
"What?"
"I did. Before I came here, Wolf was an outcast. Everyone was comfortable with that. Then I made friends with him and worked with Joe to get him into the Academy. A lot of people were a little proud of that and were friendlier. It was a crack in the wall, and whoever is doing this just couldn't stand it."
"You're talking about a lot of hate, and it's hard for me to see. People around here don't get along with Wolf, but a lot of it is fear instead of hate. Fear and guilt. The people in this county sent him to prison for something he didn't do, and his presence constantly reminds them of it. He isn't a very forgiving person, is he?"
"Something like that would be a little hard to forgive," Mary pointed out.
He had to agree with that and sighed wearily. "Still, I can't think of anyone who seems to hate him to the point of attacking two women just because

they were friendly to him. Hell, Cathy wasn't even friendly. She just made a chance remark."
"So you agree with me? That all of this is because of Wolf?"
"I don't like it, but I guess I do. Nothing else makes sense, because there may be a few coincidences in life, but none in crime. Everything has a motive."
"So what can we do?"
"We won't do anything," he said pointedly, "I will talk to the sheriff about it, but the fact is we can't arrest anyone without evidence, and all we have is a theory. We don't even have a suspect."
Her jaw set in firm lines. "Then you're passing up a marvellous chance."
He looked suspicious. "To do what?"
"Set a trap, of course."
"I don't like this. I don't know what you're thinking, but I don't like it."
"It's common sense. He failed in his—er, objective with me. Perhaps I could __"
"No. And before you get on your high horse, just think of what Wolf would say if you told him you were setting yourself up as bait. You might—might —be allowed out of his house by Christmas."
That was true enough, but she saw a way around it. "Then I just won't tell him."
"There's no way to keep it from him, unless it didn't work. If it did work—I sure as hell wouldn't want to be around when he found out, and something like that couldn't be kept quiet."
Mary considered all of Wolf's possible reactions and didn't like any of them. On the other hand, she was terrified that something might happen to him.
"I'll take the chance," she said, making her decision.
"Not with my help, you won't."
Her chin lifted. "Then I'll do it without your help."
"If you get in the way of our investigations, I'll put you in the pokey so fast your head will spin," he threatened. When she didn't appear impressed, he swore under his breath. "Hell, I'll just tell Wolf and let him ride herd on you."
She frowned and considered shaking her schoolteacher's finger in his face. "You listen to me, Clay Armstrong. I'm the best chance you have of luring this guy out into the open. You don't have any suspects now. What are you going to do, wait until he attacks some other woman and maybe kills her? Is

that how you want to work it "No, that isn't how I want to work it! I want you and every other woman to stay alert and not go anywhere alone. I don't want to risk you or anyone else. Have you thought that sometimes traps don't work, that the animal gets the bait and still gets away? Do you really want to face the possibility of that?"
The thought made her sick to her stomach, and she swallowed to control the sudden rise of nausea. "No, but I'd do it anyway," she said steadily.
"For the last time, no. I understand that you want to help, but I don't like the idea. This guy is too unstable. He grabbed Cathy in her own driveway, and took you off of the town's main street. The chances he took are crazy, and he probably is, too."
With a sigh, Mary decided that Clay was simply too protective for him to be able to agree to use a woman as bait; it was totally against his basic nature. That didn't mean, however, that she needed his agreement. All she needed was someone who could act as a guard. She hadn't thought of any real plan yet, but obviously there had to be two people to make even the simplest trap work: the bait, and the one who kept the bait from being harmed.
Clay got in the car and closed the door, then leaned out the open window. "I don't want to hear any more about it," he warned.
"You won't," she promised. Not talking to him about it wasn't the same as not doing it.
He gave her a suspicious look, but started the car and drove away. Mary returned to her classroom, her thoughts darting around as she tried to think of a solid plan for luring a rapist with a minimum of danger to herself.

Wolf arrived at the school ten minutes before classes were over. He propped his shoulder against the wall just outside her classroom door and listened to her clear voice instructing her students on how geography and history had combined to produce the current state of Middle East politics. He was certain that wasn't in any of the textbooks, but Mary had a knack for giving her students a way of relating the present to their studies. It made the subjects both more interesting and more understandable. He had heard her doing the same thing with Joe, not that Joe needed encouragement to read. Her students responded easily to her; in such a small class, there was very little formality. They called her "Miss Potter," but weren't shy about asking questions, offering answers, even teasing.

Then she looked at her watch and released them, just as the doors to the other two classrooms opened. Wolf straightened from the wall and walked into her room, aware of how the kids' chatter halted abruptly when they became aware of his presence. Mary looked up and smiled, a private smile meant only for him, and it made his pulse accelerate that she was so open about how she felt.

He removed his hat and shoved his fingers through his hair. "Your escort service has arrived, ma'am," he said.

One of the girls giggled nervously, and Wolf slowly turned his head to look at the motionless teenagers. "Are you girls going home in pairs? Any of you boys making sure they get home all right?"

Christa Teele, Cathy's younger sister, murmured that she and Pam Hearst were walking together. The other four girls said nothing. Wolf looked at the seven boys. "Go with them." It was an order, one that the boys obeyed instantly. The kids left the room, automatically separating so that each girl had at least one male escort.

Mary nodded. "Very nicely done."

"You'll notice that they all had enough sense not to argue that they didn't need an escort."

She frowned at him, because she felt it hadn't been necessary for him to make that point. "Wolf, really, I'm perfectly safe on the drive from my house to here. How could anything happen to me if I don't stop?"

"What if you had a flat? What if a radiator hose blew again?"

It was obvious there was no way she could set her trap if Wolf or Joe was hovering over her every second. It was also obvious from the narrow look Wolf was giving her that he had no intention of changing his mind. Not that it mattered at the moment, as she hadn't come up with a plan yet. But when she did, she would also have to come up with some scheme for slipping away from her watchdogs.

Wolf draped her sweater over her shoulders and picked up her purse and keys, then ushered her out the door. Dottie looked up from where she was locking her own classroom door and stood transfixed while Wolf locked Mary's door, rattled the knob to make certain the lock held, then put his arm around her waist. He saw Dottie and touched the brim of his hat. "Mrs. Lancaster."

Dottie ducked her head and pretended to be having trouble with her key. Her face was flushed. It was the first time Wolf Mackenzie had ever spoken

to her, and her hands shook as she dropped the key into her purse. Almost uncontrollable fear made her break out in a sweat. She didn't know what she was going to do.
Wolf's arm was solid around Mary's waist as they walked to her car. Its weight made her heartbeat quicken. All he had to do was put his hands on her and her body began to ready itself for him. An exquisite shudder began deep inside, spreading outward in a warm tide.
He felt the sudden tension in her slender body as he opened the car door. She was breathing faster, too. He looked down at her, and his entire body tightened, because she was watching him with desire plain in her soft, slate-blue eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted.
He stepped back. "I'll be right behind you." The words were guttural.
She drove sedately home, though her blood was thundering through her veins and pounding in her ears. Never had the isolated, bedraggled old house looked better. Woodrow was sunning on the steps, and Mary stepped over her to unlock the back door. Wolf was out of his truck and right behind her, just as he had promised, by the time she had the door open.
Without a word she took off her sweater, deposited her purse on a chair and walked up the stairs, acutely aware of the heavy tread of Wolfs boots as he followed. They stepped into her bedroom.
He had her naked before she could gather her wits, though she wouldn't have wanted to protest even if he'd given her time. He bore her down on the bed, his big body overwhelming her, his brawny arms cradling her. The hair on his chest rasped her sensitive nipples into hardened peaks, and with a low moan of excitement she rubbed her breasts against him to increase the sensation. He opened her thighs and settled himself between them. His voice was low and rough as he murmured in her ear an explicit explanation of what he was going to do.
Mary drew back a little, her blue eyes slightly shocked, feeling slightly excited, and also slightly embarrassed because she was excited. How was it possible to feel both scandalized and excited? "Wolf Mackenzie!" she said, her eyes going even larger. "You said… that word!"
His hard face looked both tender and amused. "So I did."
She swallowed. "I've never heard anyone say it before. I mean, not in real life. In movies—but of course that isn't real life, and in movies it almost never means what it really means. They use it as an adjective instead of a verb." She looked perplexed at such an inexplicable grammatical oversight.

He was smiling as he entered her, his black eyes shining. "This," he said, "is the verb."
He loved the way she looked when he made love to her, her eyes languorous, her cheeks flushed. She sucked in her breath and moved beneath him, taking him completely into her and enveloping nun in her sweet heat. Her hands moved up to the back of his neck. "Yes," she agreed seriously. "This is the verb."
If their first lovemaking had been fierce, since then he had been teaching her how sweet it was when the pleasure was protracted, when the caresses and kisses lingered while tension slowly coiled within until it was so hot and powerful that it exploded out of control. His hunger for her was so strong that he tried to put off his climax for as long as possible, so he could stay inside her and feed that hunger. It wasn't a hunger for sex, per se, though it had a strong sexual base. He didn't simply want to make love, he wanted—needed—to make love to her specifically, to Mary Elizabeth Potter. He had to feel her silky, fragile skin under his hands, feel her soft body sheathing him, smell her unique scent of womanhood, forge ancient bonds with each slow thrust and acceptance of their bodies. He was a half-breed; his spirit was strong and uncomplicated, his instincts close to those of his ancestors of both races. With other women, he had had sex; with Mary, he mated.
He wrapped his arms around her and rolled onto his back. Startled, Mary sat up, accidentally assuming the exact position he'd wanted her in. She gasped as the motion forced him deep inside her. "What are you doing?"
"Nothing," he murmured, reaching up to place his hands over her breasts. "I'm letting you do the doing."
He watched her face as she considered the situation and was aware of the exact second that her excitement and arousal overcame her discomfort with the unfamiliar position. Her eyelids dropped again, and she bit her lower lip as she moved gently on him. "Like this?"
He almost groaned aloud. That slow movement was exquisite torture, and she quickly got into the rhythm of it He had thought to prolong their lovemaking by changing positions, but now he was afraid he'd outsmarted himself. As old-fashioned as she was, she was also astonishingly sensuous. After a few minutes he desperately rolled again and put her under him. Mary linked her arms behind his neck. "I was having fun."

"So was I." He kissed her briefly, then again, their lips lingering together. "Too much."
She smiled, that secret, womanly little smile she used only with him, and the sight of it made him burn. He forgot about control, forgot about everything but the pleasure that awaited them. Afterward, sated and exhausted, they both dozed.
At the sound of a vehicle, Wolf rolled out of bed, instantly alert. Mary stirred sleepily. "What is it?"
"You have company."
"Company?" She sat up and pushed her hair out of her face. "What time is it?"
"Almost six. We must have gone to sleep."
"Six! It's time for Joe's lesson!"
Wolf swore as he began jerking on his clothes. "This situation's getting out of hand. Damn it, every time I make love to you my own son interrupts us. Once was bad enough, but he's making a habit of it."
Mary was scrambling into her own clothes, wishing that the circumstances weren't so embarrassing. It was hard to face Joe when it was so obvious that she and his father had just been in bed together. Aunt Ardith would have disowned her for so forgetting her morals and sense of proper behaviour. Then she looked at Wolf as he stamped his feet into his boots, and her heart felt as if it had expanded until it filled her entire chest. She loved him, and there was nothing more moral than love. As for proper behaviour—she shrugged, mentally kissing propriety goodbye. One couldn't have everything.
Joe had deposited his books on the table and was making a pot of coffee when they entered the kitchen. He looked up and frowned. "Look, Dad, this situation is getting out of hand. You're cutting into my lesson time." Only the twinkle in his ice-blue eyes kept Wolf from getting angry; after a moment, he tousled his son's hair.
"Son, I've said it before, but you've got lousy timing."
Joe's lesson time was even more limited because they had to take time to eat. They were all starving, so they decided on sandwiches, which were quick, and had just finished when another car drove up.
"My goodness, this house is getting popular," Mary muttered as she got up to open the door.

Clay took his hat off as he entered. He paused and sniffed. "Is that coffee fresh?"
"Yep." Wolf stretched to reach the pot while Mary got a cup from the cabinet for Clay.
He sprawled in one of the chairs and gave a weary sigh, which turned to one of appreciation as he inhaled the fragrant steam rising from the coffee as Wolf poured it "Thanks. I thought I'd find you two here."
"Has anything come up?" Wolf drawled.
"Nothing except a few complaints. You made some people a little nervous."
"Doing what?" Mary interjected.
"Just looking around," Wolf said in a casual tone that didn't fool her at all, nor did it fool Clay.
"Leave it alone. You're not a one-man vigilante committee. I'm warning you for the last time."
"I don't reckon I've done anything illegal, just walking around and looking. I haven't interfered with any law officers, I haven't questioned anyone, I haven't destroyed or hidden any evidence. All I've done is look." Wolf's eyes gleamed. "If you're smart, you'll use me. I'm the best tracker you're going to find."
"And if you're smart, you'll spend your time looking out after what's yours." Clay looked at Mary, and she primmed her mouth. Darn him, he was going to tell!
"That's what I'm doing."
"Maybe not as well as you think. Mary told me about a plan she's got to use herself as bait to bring this guy out in the open."
Wolf's head snapped around, and his brows lowered over narrowed black eyes as he pinned her with a gaze so furious it was all she could do to keep her own gaze steady. "I'll be damned," he said softly, and it was an expression of determination rather than surprise.
"Yeah, that's what I said. I heard you and Joe are escorting her to and from the school, but what about the time in between? And school will be out in a couple of weeks. What about then?"
Mary drew her slender shoulders up. "I won't be talked around as if I'm invisible. This is my house, and let me remind all of you that I'm well over twenty-one. I'll go where I want, when I want." Let them make of that what they would! She hadn't lived with Aunt Ardith for nothing; Aunt Ardith

would have died, just on principle, before she would have let a man tell her what to do.
Wolf's eyes hadn't wavered from her. "You'll do what you're damn well told."
"If I were you," Clay suggested, "I'd take her up on the mountain and keep her there. Like I said, school will be out in a couple of weeks, and this old house is pretty isolated. No one has to know where she is. It'll be safer that way."
Enraged, Mary reached out and whisked the cup of coffee away from Clay, then dumped the contents in the sink. "You're not drinking my coffee, you tattletale!"
He looked astounded. "I'm just trying to protect you!"
"And I'm just trying to protect him!" she shouted.
"Protect who?" Wolf snapped.
"You!"
"Why do I need protecting?"
"Because whoever is doing this is trying to harm you! First by trying to frame you for the attacks, and second by attacking people who don't hate you as he does!"
Wolf froze. When Mary had first advanced the beginnings of her theory the night before, he and Clay hadn't believed it because it simply hadn't made sense that anyone trying to frame Wolf would try to make anyone believe he would attack Mary. But when Mary put it the way she just had, that the attacks were a sort of twisted punishment, it began to make horrible sense. A rapist was warped, so his logic would be warped.
Mary had been attacked because of him. Because he had been so attracted to her that he hadn't been able to control it, some madman had attacked her, terrified and humiliated her, tried to rape her. His lust had brought attention to her.
His expression was cold and blank as he looked at Clay, who shrugged. "I have to buy it," Clay said. "It's the only thing that even halfway makes sense. When she made friends with you and got Joe into the Academy, folks began to look at you differently. Someone couldn't stand it."
Mary twisted her hands. "Since it's my fault, the least I can do is—"
"No!" Wolf roared, surging to his feet and turning over his chair with a clatter. He lowered his voice with a visible effort. "Go upstairs and get your clothes. You're going with us."

Joe slapped his hand on the table. "About damn time." He got up and began clearing the table. "I'll do this while you pack."
Mary pursed her lips. She was torn between wanting the freedom to put her plan into action—when she thought of it—and the powerful temptation of living with Wolf. It wasn't proper. It was a terrible example to her students. The townspeople would be outraged. *He'd watch her like a hawk!* On the other hand, she loved him to distraction and wasn't the least ashamed of their relationship. Embarrassed, sometimes, because she wasn't accustomed to such intimacy and didn't know how to handle it, but never ashamed. Also on the other hand, if she dug in her heels and remained here, Wolf would simply stay here with her, where they would be far more visible and far more likely to outrage the town's sensibilities. That was what decided her, because she didn't want even more animosity directed at Wolf because of her. That could be all that was needed to goad the rapist into attacking him directly, or going after Joe.
He put his hands on her shoulders and gave her a little push. "Go," he said gently, and she went.
When she was safely upstairs and out of hearing, Clay looked at Wolf with a troubled, angry expression. "For what it's worth, she thinks you and Joe are in danger, that this maniac may just start shooting at you. I kind of agree with her, damn it."
"Let him try," Wolf said, his face and voice expressionless. "She's most vulnerable on the way to and from school, and I don't think this guy is going to wait patiently. He hit two days in a row, but he got scared when you nearly got him. It'll take a while for him to settle down, then he'll be looking for another hit to make. In the meantime, I'll be looking for him."
Clay didn't want to ask, but the question was burning his tongue. "Did you find anything today?"
"I eliminated some people from my list."
"Scared some of them, too."
Wolf shrugged. "Folks had better get used to seeing me around. If they don't like it, tough."
"I also heard that you made the boys escort the girls home from school. The girls' parents were mighty relieved and grateful."
"They should have taken care of it themselves."
"It's a quiet little town. They aren't used to things like this."

"That's no excuse for being stupid." And it had been stupid to overlook their daughters' safety. If he'd been that careless in Nam, he would have been dead.
Clay grunted. "I still want to make my point. I agree with Mary that you and Joe are the primary targets. You may be good, but nobody's better than a bullet, and the same goes for Joe. You don't just have to look after Mary, you have to look after yourselves, too. I'd like it if you could keep her from even finishing out the year at school, so the three of you could stay up on your mountain until we catch this guy."
It went against Wolf's grain to hide from anyone, and that was in the look he gave Clay. Wolf had been trained to hunt; more than that, it was in his nature, in the genes passed down from Comanche and Highland warriors that had mingled in his body, in the formation of his character.
"We'll keep Mary safe," was all he said, and Clay knew he'd failed to convince Wolf to stay out of it.
Joe was leaning against the cabinets, listening. "The people in town are going to raise hell if they find out Mary's staying with us," he put in.
"Yeah, they will." Clay stood up and positioned his hat on his head.
"Let them." Wolf's voice was flat. He'd given Mary the chance to play it safe, but she hadn't taken it. She was his now, by God. Let them squawk.
Clay sauntered to the door. "If anyone asks me, I've arranged for her to live in a safer place until this is over. Don't reckon it's anyone's business where that place is, do you? Though of course, knowing Mary, she'll probably tell everyone right out, just like she did Saturday in Hearst's store."
Wolf groaned. "Hell! What did she do? I haven't heard about it."
"Didn't reckon you would have, what with all that happened that afternoon. Seems she got into it with both Dottie Lancaster and Mrs. Karr, and all but told both of them she was yours for the taking." A slow grin shaped Clay's mouth. "From what I heard, she laced into them good."
When Clay had left, Wolf and Joe looked at each other. "It could get interesting around here."
"It could," Joe agreed.
"Keep an eye out, son. If Mary and Armstrong are right, we're the ones this bastard is really after. Don't go anywhere without your rifle, and stay alert."
Joe nodded. Wolf wasn't worried about hand-to-hand fighting, not even if the other guy was armed with a knife, because he'd taught Joe how to fight the way he'd learned in the military. Not karate, kung fu, tae kwon do, or

even judo, but a mixture of many, including good old street fighting. The object of a fight wasn't fairness, but winning, in any way possible, with any weapon handy. It was what had kept him alive and relatively unscathed in prison. A rifle was something else, though. They would have to be doubly alert.
Mary returned and plunked two suitcases on the floor. "I have to have my books, too," she announced. "And someone has to get Woodrow and her kittens."

Chapter Ten

Mary tried to tell herself that she couldn't sleep because she was in a strange bed, because she was too excited, because she was too worried, because—she ran out of excuses and couldn't think of anything else. Though she was pleasantly tired from Wolfs lovemaking, she felt too uneasy to sleep and finally knew why. She turned in his arms and put her hand on his jaw, loving the feel of his facial structure and the slight rasp of his beard beneath her fingers. "Are you awake?" she whispered.
"I wasn't," he said in a low rumble. "But I am now."
She apologized and lay very still. After a moment he squeezed her and pushed her hair away from her face. "Can't you sleep?"
"No. I just feel—strange, I think."
"In what way?"
"Your wife—Joe's mother. I was thinking of her in this bed."
His arms tightened. "She was never in this bed."
"I know. But Joe's in the other room, and I thought this was how it must have been when he was little, before she died."
"Not usually. We were apart a lot, and she died when Joe was two. That was when I got out of the military."
"Tell me about it," she invited, still in a whisper. She needed to know more about this man she loved. "You must have been very young."
"I was seventeen when I enlisted. Even though I knew I'd probably have to do a tour in Vietnam, it was my only way out. My folks were dead, and my grandfather, Mother's father, never really accepted me because I was half Anglo. All I knew was that I had to get off the reservation. It was almost as

bad as prison. It is prison, in a different way. There was nothing to do, nothing to hope for.
"I met Billie when I was eighteen. She was a Crow half-breed, and I guess she married me because she knew I'd never go back to the reservation. She wanted more. She wanted bright lights and city life. Maybe she thought a soldier had it good, transferring from base to base, partying when he was off duty. But she didn't look down on me because I was a half-breed, and we decided to get married. A month later I was in Nam. I got her a ticket to Hawaii when I had R and R, and she went back pregnant Joe was born when I was nineteen, but I was home from my first tour and got to see him being born. God, I was so excited. He was screaming his head off. Then they put him in my hands, and it was like taking a heart punch. I loved him so much I would have died for him."
He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he gave a low laugh. "So there I was, with a newborn son and a wife who didn't think she'd gotten such a good deal, and my enlistment was almost up. I had no prospects of a job, no way of supporting my baby. So I re-upped, and things got so bad between Billie and me that I volunteered for another tour. She died right before my third tour ended. I got out and came home to take care of Joe."
"What did you do?"
"Worked ranches. Rodeoed. It was all I knew. Except for the time I spent in service, I can't remember not working with horses. I was horse crazy when I was a kid, and I guess I still am. Joe and I drifted around until it was time for him to start school, and we landed in Ruth. You know the rest of it."
She lay quietly in his arms, thinking of his life. He hadn't had it easy. But the life he'd led had shaped him into the man he was, a man of strength and iron determination. He had endured war and hell and come out even stronger than before. The thought that someone would want to harm him made her so angry she could barely contain it. Somehow she had to find some way to protect him.
He escorted her to school the next morning, and again Mary was aware of how everyone stared at him. But it wasn't fear or hatred she saw in the kids' eyes; rather, they watched him with intense curiosity, and even awe. After years of tales, he was a larger-than-life figure to them, someone glimpsed only briefly. Their fathers had dealt with him, the boys had watched him at work, and his expertise with horses only added to tales about him. It was

said that he could "whisper" a horse, that even the wildest one would respond to a special crooning tone in his voice.
Now he was hunting the rapist. The story was all over the county.
Dottie wouldn't even talk to Mary that day; she walked away whenever she approached and even ate lunch by herself. Sharon sighed and shrugged. "Don't pay any attention to her. She's always had a burr under her blanket about the Mackenzies."
Mary shrugged, too. There didn't seem to be any way she could reach Dottie.
Joe drove into town that afternoon to follow her home. As they walked out to their respective vehicles, she told him, "I need to stop at Hearst's for a few things."
"I'll be right behind you."
He was on her heels when she entered the store, and everyone turned to look at them. Joe gave them a smile that could have come straight from his father, and several people hastily looked away. Sighing, Mary led her six-foot watchdog down the aisle.
Joe paused fractionally when his gaze met that of Pam Hearst. She was standing as if rooted, staring at him. He tipped his hat and followed Mary. A moment later he felt a light touch on his arm and turned to see Pam standing behind him. "Could I talk to you?" she asked in a low voice. "I—it's important. Please?"
Mary had moved on. Joe shifted his position so he could keep her in sight and said, "Well?"
Pam drew a deep breath. "I thought… maybe… would you go with me to the town dance this Saturday night?" she finished in a rush.
Joe's head jerked. "What?"
"I said—will you go with me to the dance?"
He thumbed his hat back and gave a low whistle under his breath. "You know you're asking for trouble, don't you? Your dad just might lock you in the cellar for a year."
"We don't have a cellar." She gave him a small smile, one that had an immediate reaction on his sixteen-year-old hormones. "And I don't care, anyway. He's wrong, wrong about you and your dad. I've felt horrible about how I acted before. I—I like you, Joe, and I want to go out with you."
He was cynical enough to say, "Yeah. A lot of people started liking me when they found out I had a shot at the Academy. Sure funny how that

worked out, isn't it?"
Hot spots of colour appeared on her cheeks. "That's not why I'm asking you out!"
"Are you sure? It seems I wasn't good enough to be seen in public with you before. You didn't want people to say Pam Hearst was going out with a 'breed. It's different when they can say you're going out with a candidate for the Air Force Academy."
"That's not true!" Pam was truly angry now, and her voice rose. Several people glanced their way.
"It looks that way to me."
"Well, you're wrong! You're just as wrong as my dad is!"
As if he'd been cued, Mr. Hearst, alerted by Pam's raised voice, started down the aisle toward them. "What's going on back here? Pam, is this br—boy bothering you?"
Joe noticed how quickly "breed" had been changed to "boy" and lifted his eyebrows at Pam. She flushed even redder and whirled to face her father. "No, he isn't bothering me! Wait. Yes. Yes, he is! He's bothering me because I asked him to go out with me and he refused!"
Everyone in the store heard her. Joe sighed. The fat was in the fire now. Ralph Hearst turned purplish red, and he halted in his tracks as abruptly as if he'd hit a wall. "What did you say?" he gasped, evidently not believing his ears.
Pam didn't back down, even though her father looked apoplectic. "I said he refused to go out with me! I asked him to the Saturday night dance."
Mr. Hearst's eyes were bulging out of their sockets. "You get on to the house. We'll talk about this later!"
"I don't want to talk about it later, I want to talk about it right now!"
"I said get on to the house!" Hearst roared. He turned his infuriated gaze on Joe. "And you stay away from my daughter, you—"
"He's *been* staying away from me!" Pam yelled. "It's the other way around! I won't stay away from him! This isn't the first time I've asked him out. You and everyone else in this town are wrong for the way you've treated the Mackenzies, and I'm tired of it. Miss Potter is the only one of us who's had the guts to stand up for what she thinks is right!"
"This is all her fault, that do-gooding—"
"Stop right there." Joe spoke for the first time, but there was something in his cool voice, in his pale blue eyes, that stopped the man. Joe was only

sixteen, but he was tall and muscular, and there was a sudden alertness to his stance that made the older man pause.
Pam jumped in. She was bright and cheery-natured, but as headstrong as her father. "Don't start on Miss Potter," she warned. "She's the best teacher we've ever had here in Ruth, and if you do anything to get rid of her, I swear I'll drop out of school."
"You'll do no such thing!"
"I swear I will! I love you, Dad, but you're wrong! All of us talked about it at school today, about how we'd seen the teachers treat Joe over the years, and how wrong it was, because he's obviously the smartest of us all! And we talked about how Wolf Mackenzie was the one who made sure all of us girls got home all right yesterday. No one else thought of it! Or don't you care?"
"Of course he cares," Mary said briskly, having walked up without anyone except Joe noticing. "It's just that Wolf, with his military experience, knew what to do." She'd made that up, but it sounded good. She put her hand on Mr. Hearst's arm. "Why don't you take care of your customers and just let them fight it out? You know how teenagers are."
Somehow Ralph Hearst found himself at the front of the store again before he realized it. He stopped and looked down at Mary. "I don't want my girl dating a half-breed!" he said fiercely.
"She'll be safer with that half-breed than with any other boy around," Mary replied. "For one thing, he's steady as a rock. He won't drink or drive fast, and for another, he has no intention of getting involved with any girl around here. He'll be going away, and he knows it."
"I don't want my daughter dating an Indian!"
"Are you saying that character doesn't mean anything? That you'd rather have Pam go out with a drunk Anglo, who might get her killed in a car accident, than with a sober Indian, who would protect her with his life?"
He looked stricken and rubbed his head in agitation. "No, damn it, that isn't what I mean," he muttered.
Mary sighed. "My Aunt Ardith remembered every old chestnut she ever heard, and one of the ones she brought out most often was 'pretty is as pretty does.' You go by how people act, don't you, Mr. Hearst. You've voted according to how the candidates have stood on issues in the past, haven't you?"
"Of course." He looked uncomfortable. "And?" she prompted.

"All right, all right! It's just—some things are hard to forget, you know? Not things that Joe has done, but just… things. And that father of his is—"
"As proud as you are," she cut in. "All he ever wanted was a place to raise his motherless son." She was laying it on so thick she expected to hear violins in the background any moment now, but it was about time these people realized some things about Wolf. Maybe he was more controlled than civilized, but his control was very good, and they would never know the difference.
Deciding it was time to give him some breathing room, she said, "Why not talk it over with your wife?" He looked relieved at the suggestion. "I'll do that." Joe was walking up the aisle; Pam, who had turned her back, was busily neatening a stack of paint thinner in an obvious effort to act casual. Mary paid for the items she'd gathered, and Joe lifted the sack. Silently they walked out together.
"Well?" she asked as soon as they were outside.
"Well, what?"
"Are you taking her to the dance?"
"It looks like it. She won't take no for an answer, like someone else I know." She gave him a prim look and didn't respond to his teasing. Then, as he opened the car door for her, a thought struck, and she looked at him in horror. "Oh, no," she said softly. "Joe, that man is attacking women who are friendly to you and Wolf."
His whole body jerked, and his mouth tightened. "Damn," he swore. He thought a minute, then shook his head. "I'll tell her tomorrow that I can't go."
"That won't do any good. How many people heard her say what she did? It will be all over the county by tomorrow, whether you take her to the dance or not."
He didn't reply, merely closed the door after she'd gotten into the car. He looked grim, far too grim for a boy his age.
Joe felt grim, too, but an idea was taking form. He'd watch out for Pam and warn her so she'd be on guard, but maybe this would draw the rapist out. He'd use Mary's plan, but with different bait: himself. He'd make certain Pam was safe, but leave himself open at times when he was alone. Maybe, when the guy realized he couldn't get at a helpless woman, he'd get so frustrated he'd go after one of his real targets. Joe knew the chance he was

taking, but unless Wolf could find the track he was looking for, he didn't see any other option.
Mary looked around for Wolf when they got home, but she couldn't find him. She changed into jeans and walked outside. She found Joe in the barn, grooming a horse. "Is Wolf out here?"
He shook his head and continued brushing the horse's gleaming hide. "His horse is gone. He's probably checking fences." Or hunting for a certain track, but he didn't say that to Mary.
She got him to show her how to brush the horse and took over for him until her arm began to hurt. The horse snorted when she stopped, so she went back to brushing. "This is harder than it looks," she panted.
Joe grinned at her over the back of another horse. "It'll give you a few muscles. But you've finished with him, so don't spoil him. He'll stand there all day if someone will keep brushing him."
She stopped and stepped back. "Well, why didn't you say so?" He put the horse in his stall, and Mary walked back to the house. She had almost reached the porch when she heard the rhythmic thudding of a horse's hooves and turned to see Wolf riding up. She caught her breath. Even though she was ignorant about horses, she knew that not many people looked the way he did on a horse. There was no bouncing or jiggling; he sat so easily in the saddle, and moved so fluidly with the animal, that he looked motionless. The Comanche had arguably been the world's best horsemen, better even than the Berber or Bedouin, and Wolf had learned well from his mother's people. His powerful legs controlled the big bay stallion he was riding, so that the reins were lightly held and no harm done to the horse's tender mouth.
He slowed the horse to a walk as he approached her. "Any trouble today?"
She decided not to tell him about Pam Hearst. That was Joe's business, if he wanted it known. She knew he'd tell
Wolf, but in his own time. "No. We didn't see anyone suspicious, and no one followed us."
He reined in and leaned down to brace his forearm on the saddle horn. His dark eyes drifted over her slim figure. "Do you know how to ride?"
"No. I've never been on a horse."
"Well, that situation is about to be remedied." He kicked his boot free of the stirrup and held his hand out to her. "Put your left foot in the stirrup and lift yourself as I swing you up."

She was willing. She tried. But the horse was too tall, and she couldn't reach the stirrup with her foot. She was staring at the bay with an aggravated expression when Wolf laughed and shifted back in the saddle. "Here, I'll pick you up."
He leaned out of the saddle and caught her under the arms. Mary gasped and grabbed at his biceps as she felt her feet leave the ground; then he straightened and set her firmly on the saddle in front of him. She grabbed the saddle horn as he lifted the reins, and the horse moved forward.
"This is a long way up," she said, bouncing so hard her teeth rattled.
He chuckled and wrapped his left arm around her, pulling her back against him. "Relax and let yourself go with the horse's rhythm. Feel how I'm moving and move with me."
She did as he said and felt the rhythm as soon as she relaxed. Her body automatically seemed to sink deeper into the saddle, and her torso moved with Wolfs. The bouncing stopped. Unfortunately by that time they had reached the barn and her first ride was over. Wolf lifted her down and dismounted.
"I liked that," she announced.
"You did? Good. We'll start you on riding lessons tomorrow."
Joe's voice came to them from a stall farther down. "I started her on grooming lessons today."
"You'll be as comfortable with horses as if you'd been around them all of your life," Wolf said, and leaned down to kiss her. She went on tiptoe, her lips parting. It was a long moment before he lifted his head, and when he did, his breathing was faster. His eyes were hooded and narrow. Damn, she got to him so fast he reacted like a teenager when he was around her.
When Mary had gone back to the house, Joe came out of the stall and looked at his father. "Find anything today?"
Wolf began unsaddling the bay. "No. I've had a good look around the ranches, but none of the prints match. It has to be someone from town."
Joe frowned. "That makes sense. Both of the attacks were in town. But I can't think of anyone it could be. I guess I've never noticed before if someone has freckled hands."
"I'm not looking for freckles, I'm looking for that print. I know how he walks, toeing in a little and putting his weight on the outside of his feet."
"What if you find him? Do you think the sheriff will arrest him just because he has freckles on his hands and walks a certain way?"

Wolf smiled, a movement of his lips that was totally without mirth. His eyes were cold. "When I find him," he said softly, "if he's smart, he'll confess. I'll give the law a chance, but there's no way he'll walk free. He'll be a lot safer in jail than out on the streets, and I'll make certain he knows it." It was an hour before they finished with the horses. Joe lingered to look over his tack, and Wolf walked up to the house alone. Mary was absorbed in cooking, humming as she stirred the big pot of beef stew, and she didn't hear him come in the back door. He walked up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder.

Blind terror shot through her. She screamed and threw herself sideways, to press her back against the wall. She held the dripping spoon in her hand like a knife. Her face was utterly white as she stared at him.

His face was hard. In silence they stared at each other, time stretching out between them. Then she dropped the spoon on the floor with a clatter. "Oh God, I'm sorry," she said in a thin voice, and covered her face with her hands.

He drew her to him, his hand in her hair, holding her head to his chest. "You thought it was him again, didn't you?"

She clung to him, trying to drive away the terror. It had come out of nowhere, taking her by surprise and shattering the control she'd managed to gain over her memory and emotions. When Wolf's hand had touched her shoulder, for a brief, horrifying moment it had been happening all over again. She felt cold; she wanted to sink into his warmth, to let the reality of his touch overcome the hideous memory of another touch.

"You don't have to be afraid," he murmured into her hair. "You're safe here."

But he knew her memory was still there, that a touch from behind meant a nightmare to her. Somehow he had to take away that fear, so she could be free of it.

She regained control and eased herself away from him, and he let her, because he knew it was important to her. She appeared almost normal through dinner and Joe's lesson; the only sign of strain was an occasional haunted expression in her eyes, as if she hadn't completely succeeded in pushing the memory away.

But when they went to bed and her silky body was under his hands, she turned to him as eagerly as ever. Wolfs lovemaking left her no room for anything else, no lingering memories or vestiges of terror. Her entire body and mind were occupied with him. Afterward she curled against him and

slept undisturbed, at least until the greying dawn, when he woke her and pulled her beneath him again.

Mary was fully aware of the tenuousness of both her relationship with Wolf and her presence in his house. He often told her explicitly how much he wanted her, but in terms of lust, not love. He never spoke a word about loving, not even during lovemaking, when she was unable to keep from telling him over and over that she loved him. When the fever of lust passed, he might well cut her out of his life, and she tried to prepare herself for that possibility even while she absorbed the maximum pleasure from the present situation.

She knew that living with him was for her protection, and only temporary. She also knew that it was nothing short of scandalous for a small-town schoolteacher to shack up with the local black sheep, and that was exactly how the townspeople would view the situation if they knew about it. She knew the risk she was taking with her career, and decided that the days and nights with Wolf were worth it. If she lost her job, there were other jobs, but she knew there would be no other loves for her. She was twenty-nine and had never even felt a twinge of interest or excitement over any other man. Some people loved only once, and it appeared she was one of them.

The only time she allowed herself to worry over the future was on the drives to and from school, when she was alone in the car. When she was with Wolf she didn't want to waste even a single second on regrets. With him, she was totally alive, totally female.

She worried about Wolf and Joe, too. She knew Wolf was actively hunting the man who had attacked her, and she was terrified he would be hurt. She couldn't let herself even think that he might be killed. And Joe was up to something; she knew it. He was too much like Wolf for her not to recognize the signs. He was preoccupied, and far too sober, as if faced with making a choice when neither of the alternatives was very attractive. But she couldn't get him to open up to her, and that alone frightened her, for Joe had talked to her from the beginning.

Joe was on edge. He'd told Pam to be more cautious than usual, and he tried to make certain she never walked home alone, but there was always a chance she'd be careless. He'd also made a point of letting himself be seen alone, and evidently unaware of the need for caution, but nothing happened. The town was quiet, if edgy. He was forced to the same awareness that Wolf

already had, that with so few clues, all they could do was stay alert and wait until the man made a mistake.
When Joe told his father that he was going to the dance with Pam, Wolf looked piercingly at the boy. "Do you know what you're doing?"
"I hope so."
"Watch your back."
The terse advice brought a thin smile to Joe's mouth. He knew he could be making a big mistake by going to that dance, that the scene could turn ugly, but he'd told Pam he'd take her, and that was that. He'd have to be doubly alert, but damn, he wanted to hold her in his arms while they shuffled slowly across the sawdust floor. Even though he knew he was going away and they'd never have anything permanent between them, he was strongly attracted to her. He couldn't explain it and knew it wouldn't last, but he felt it now, and it was now that he had to deal with it
Pam was edgy, too, when he picked her up. She tried to hide it by talking too fast and too brightly, until he put his hand over her mouth. "I know," he muttered. "It worries me, too."
She tossed her head, freeing her mouth. "I'm not worried. It'll be all right, you'll see. I told you, all of us have talked about it."
"Then why are you so nervous?"
She looked away from him and cleared her throat. "Well, this is the first time I've been out with you. I just felt—I don't know—nervous and scared and excited all at once."
He thought about that for a few minutes, and silence filled the cab of the truck. Then he said, "I guess I can understand being nervous and excited, but why scared?"
Now it was Pain's turn to be silent, and she flushed a little when she finally said, "Because you're not like the rest of us."
That grim look settled around Joe's mouth. "Yeah, I know. I'm a 'breed."
"It isn't that," she snapped. "It's—you're older than the rest of us, somehow. I know we're the same age, but inside you're all grown up. We're ordinary people. We'll stay right here and ranch the way our folks have. We'll marry people from the same background and stay in the county, or move to another county just like it, and have kids and be content. But you're not like that. You're going to the Academy, and you won't be back, at least not to stay. You may come back for a visit, but that's all it'll be."

It surprised him that she had it so neatly pegged. He did feel old inside, and always had, especially in comparison to other kids his age. And he knew he wouldn't be back here to ranch. He belonged in the sky doing Mach 2, marking his place in the universe with a vapour trail.

They were quiet the rest of the way to the dance. When Joe parked his truck with the collection of other trucks and a few cars, he braced himself for whatever could happen.

He was prepared for almost anything, but not for what actually took place. When he and Pam walked into the rundown old building used for the dances, for a moment there was a certain stillness, a strange silence; then in the next heartbeat the noise picked back up and everyone returned to his own conversation. Pam put her hand in his and squeezed it.

A few minutes later the live band started up, and couples drifted onto the sawdust-covered planks of the dance floor. Pam led him to the middle of the floor and smiled at him.

He smiled back, wryly admitting and admiring her courage. Then he took her in his arms to enter the slow rhythm of the dance.

They didn't talk. After wanting for so long just to touch her, he was content to hold her and move with her. He could smell her perfume, feel the softness of her hair, the resilient mounds of her breasts, the movement of her legs against his. As young people have done from the beginning of time, they swayed together in their own private world, reality suspended.

Reality intruded, however, when he heard an angry mutter of "dirty Indian" and automatically stiffened as he looked around for the speaker.

Pam said, "Please," and drew him back into the dance.

When the song ended, a boy stood on his chair and yelled, "Hey, Joe! Pam! Over here!"

They looked in the direction of the yell, and Joe couldn't help grinning. Every student in the three classes Mary taught was grouped at the table, with two empty chairs waiting for him and Pam. They were waving and calling.

The kids saved the evening. They enveloped him and Pam in a circle of laughter and dancing. Joe danced with every girl in the group; the boys talked horses, cattle, ranching and rodeoing, and between them made certain none of the girls had a chance to sit down much. The kids also talked to the other people at the dance, and soon everyone knew that the half-breed was going to the Air Force Academy. Ranchers are generally

hard-working, conservative and firmly patriotic, and before too long, anyone who had a hard word to say about the half-breed found himself hushed and told to mind his manners.
Joe and Pam left before the dance was over, because he didn't want to keep her out too late. As they walked to his truck, he shook his head. "I never would have believed it," he said softly. "Did you know they would all be here?"
Pam denied it. "But they knew I'd asked you. I guess the whole town knew I'd asked you. It was fun, wasn't it?"
"It was fun," he agreed. "But it could have gotten rough. You know that, don't you? If it hadn't been for the guys—"
"And girls!" she interrupted.
"Them, too. If it hadn't been for them, I'd have been thrown out."
"It didn't happen. And next time it will be even better."
"Is there going to be a next time?"
She looked suddenly unsure of herself. "You—you can still come to the dances, even if you don't want to come with me."
Joe laughed as he opened the truck door. He turned and put his hands on her waist, then lifted her onto the seat. "I like being with you."
About halfway back to Ruth, Pam put her hand on his arm. "Joe?"
"Yeah?"
"Do you want to—uh, that is, do you know any place to stop?" She faltered on the words.
He knew he should resist the temptation, but he couldn't He turned off on the next side road they came to, then left the road to bounce across a meadow for about a mile before he parked beneath a stand of trees.
The mild May night wrapped around them. The moonlight couldn't penetrate the shelter of the trees, and the dark cab of the truck was a warm, safe cave. Pam was a pale, indistinct figure as he reached for her.
She was pliant and eager, yielding to his hands, pressing against him to take more of his kisses. Her firm young body made him feel as if he would explode. Barely aware of what he was doing, Joe shifted and twisted until they were lying on the seat with Pam half beneath him. Soon her breasts were bare, and he heard her strangled intake of breath as he took a nipple into his mouth. Then her nails were digging into his shoulders, and her hips arched.

It was quickly getting out of control. Clothing was opened and pushed aside. Bare skin touched bare skin. Somehow, Pam's jeans were off. But when he slid his hands inside her panties, she whispered, "I've never done this before. Will it hurt?"
Joe groaned aloud, but forced himself to stillness. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed, but he stopped his hands. His body throbbed painfully, and he savagely controlled it. After a long minute he sat up and pulled Pam to a sitting position astride his lap.
"Joe?"
He leaned his forehead against hers. "We can't do it," he murmured regretfully.
"But why?" She moved against him, her body still empty and aching with a need she didn't understand. "Because it would be your first time."
"But I want you!"
"I want you, too." He managed a wry grin. "I guess it's pretty obvious. But your first time—baby, it should be with someone you love. And you don't love me."
"I could," she whispered. "Oh, Joe, I truly could."
He was so frustrated that he could barely control his voice enough to speak, but he managed. "I hope you don't. I'm leaving. I have a chance waiting for me that I'd die before I'd give up."
"And no girl is going to change your mind?"
Joe knew the truth inside him, and he knew Pam wouldn't like it, but he had to be honest with her. "No girl could change my mind. I want to go to the Academy so much that nothing can keep me here."
She caught his hands and shyly brought them up to her breasts. "We could still, you know, do it. No one would know."
"You'd know. And when you fall in love with some guy, you'd regret that your first time wasn't with him. God, Pam, don't make this so hard for me! Slap my face or something." The way her firm young breasts filled his hands made him wonder if he wasn't crazy for passing this up.
She leaned forward and rested her head on his shoulder. He felt the way her body shook as she began to cry, and he folded his arms around her.
"You've always been special to me," she said in a stifled tone. "Do you have to be so darn conscientious?"
"Do you want to take a chance on getting pregnant at sixteen?"

That stopped her tears. She sat up. "Oh. I thought you'd have a—don't all boys carry them?"
"I guess not. And it wouldn't matter if I did have one. I don't want to get involved—not this kind of involved—with you or anyone else, because no matter what, I'm going to the Academy. Besides, you're too young."
She couldn't stop the giggle that burst out. "I'm as old as you are."
"Then we're too young."
"You're not." She sobered and cupped his face in her hands. "You're not young at all, and I guess that's why you stopped. Every other boy I know would have had his jeans off so fast he'd have fabric burns on his legs. But let's make a bargain, okay?"
"What kind of bargain?"
"We'll still be friends, won't we?"
"You know it"
"Then we'll go around together and keep things light. No more messing around like this, because it hurts too much when you stop. You go away to Colorado like you've planned, and I'll take things as they come. I may get married. But if I don't, you come on back here one summer and we'll both be old enough then. Will you be my first lover?"
"It won't keep me in Ruth," he said steadily.
"I don't expect it to. But is it a bargain?"
He accepted that the years could make a difference, and he knew she'd most likely be married. If not—maybe.
"If you still want to then, yeah, it's a bargain."
She held out her hand, and they solemnly shook to seal the deal. Then she kissed him and began putting on her clothes.
Mary was waiting up for him when he got home, an anxious look in her eyes. She got to her feet and tightened the belt of her robe. "Are you okay?" she asked. "Did anything happen?"
"I'm fine. Everything went okay."
Then he saw that the anxious look was really fear. She touched his arm. "You didn't see anyone who—" She stopped, then started again. "No one shot at your truck, or tried to run you off the road?"
"No, it was quiet." They looked at each other for a moment, and Joe realized that Mary had feared the same thing that had occurred to him. More than that, she knew he had decided to take the chance in an effort to draw the rapist out.

He cleared his throat. "Is Dad in bed?"
"No," Wolf said quietly from the doorway. He wore only a pair of jeans. His black eyes were steady. "I wanted to make certain you were okay. This was like watching Daniel walk into the lion's den."
"Well, Daniel made it out okay, didn't he? So did I. It was even fun. The whole class was there."
Mary smiled, the dread lifting from her mind. She knew now what had happened. Knowing that the situation could get ugly if Joe had gone to the dance without backup, the kids had taken it on themselves to make him a part of their group and let everyone at the dance know he was accepted.
Wolf held out his hand, and Mary went to him. She could sleep now. They were safe for another night, these two men whom she loved.

Chapter Eleven

School was out. Mary was intensely proud of her students. The seniors had all graduated, and all of the undergraduates had passed. All of them intended to finish high school, and a couple of them wanted to go to college. It was a record to thrill any teacher's heart.
Joe didn't get a respite. Mary decided he needed more advanced classes in math than she was qualified to teach and began a search for a teacher who was qualified. She found one in a town seventy miles distant, and three times a week Joe made the trip for a two-hour accelerated course. She continued to teach him at night.
The days passed in a haze of happiness for Mary. She seldom left the mountain, seldom saw anyone except Wolf and Joe. Even when they were both gone, she felt safe. It had been only a little over two weeks since the attack, but it seemed as if it had happened a long time ago. Whenever a sliver of memory surfaced to unsettle her emotions, she scolded herself for letting it bother her. Nothing had happened, except she had been terrified. If anyone needed care and consideration, it was Cathy Teele. So Mary pushed the memories away and concentrated on the present. The present, inevitably, was Wolf.
He dominated her life, waking and sleeping. He began teaching her how to ride and how to help him with the horses, and she suspected he used the same method with her that he used with the young colts and fillies that were

brought to him. He was firm and demanding, but utterly clear in his instructions and what he wanted out of both her and the horses. When they obeyed, he rewarded them with approval and affection. In fact, Mary mused, he was easier on the horses than he was on her! When they *disobeyed*, he was unfailingly patient. When *she* didn't do something exactly as he'd told her, he let her know about it in unmistakable terms. But he was always affectionate. Actually, she decided, "lusty" was a better description. He made love to her every night, sometimes twice. He made love to her in the empty stall where Joe had interrupted them. He made love to her in the shower. She knew she wasn't even close to voluptuous, but he seemed enthralled with her body. When they lay in bed at night he would turn on the lamp and lean on his elbow, watching as he stroked his hand over her from shoulders to knees, seemingly fascinated by the difference between her pale, delicate skin and his dark, powerful, work-callused hand.
Wyoming weather in the summer was generally cool and dry, at least compared to Savannah, but the summer vacation from school had scarcely begun when a heat wave sent the temperatures into the nineties, even edging into the low hundreds by late afternoon. For the first time in her life, Mary wished she had some shorts to wear, but Aunt Ardith had never allowed them. She did find, however, that her plain cotton skirts were cooler than the new jeans she was so proud of, allowing for the circulation of whatever breeze happened to wander by. Not that Aunt Ardith would have approved of Mary's attire even then, for Mary declined to wear a slip or hosiery. Aunt Ardith had donned both articles of clothing every day of her life and would have considered anyone who dared to go without a slip an out-and-out hussy.
One morning just after Joe had left to drive to his class, Mary walked out to the barn and reflected on her state of hussiness. All in all, she was satisfied with it. Being a hussy had its advantages.
She could hear some horses snorting and stamping around in the small corral behind the barn, though Wolf usually used the larger one adjacent to the stables for training. The sound of activity, however, told her where she could find him, and that was all she wanted to know.
But when she rounded the corner of the barn, she stopped in her tracks. Wolf's big bay stallion was mounting the mare she had been riding during her lessons. The mare's front hooves were hobbled, and protective boots covered her rear hooves. The stallion was snorting and grunting, and the

mare squealed as he entered her. Wolf moved to her head to steady her, and then she stood quietly. "There, sweetheart," he crooned. "You can handle this big old guy, can't you?"
The mare shivered under the impact of the stallion's thrusts, but she stood still for the service and it was over in only a couple of minutes. The stallion snorted and dropped off her, his head down low as he snuffled and blew. Wolf continued talking in that low, soothing voice to the mare as he bent down to remove the hobble. As he started to remove the boots, Mary stepped forward and caught his attention. "You—you tied her!" she said accusingly.
He grinned as he finished unbuckling the protective boots. Miss Mary Elizabeth Potter stood before him in full form, her back ramrod-straight, chin lifted. "I didn't tie her," he said with amused patience. "I hobbled her."
"So she couldn't get away from him!"
"She didn't want to get away from him."
"How do you know?"
"Because she would have kicked him if she hadn't been ready for him to cover her," he explained as he led the mare back into the barn. Mary followed, her face still filled with indignation.
"A lot of good it would have done if she'd kicked him—you put those boots on her so she wouldn't hurt him!"
"Well, I didn't want my stallion damaged. On the other hand, if she had resisted service, I would have gotten her out of there. When a mare resists, it means I've misjudged the time, or something is wrong with her. But she took him nicely, didn't you girl?" he finished, patting the mare's neck.
Mary watched, fidgeting, as he washed the mare. She still didn't like the idea of the mare being unable to run away from the stallion, even though this particular mare was now standing as placidly as if nothing had happened a few minutes ago. It disturbed her on a deep emotional level that didn't respond to logic, and she felt uneasy.
Wolf led the mare to her stall, fed her and gave her fresh water. Then he squatted in front of the faucet to wash his hands and arms. When he looked up, Mary was still standing there, a troubled, almost frightened look in her eyes. He straightened. "What's wrong?"
Desperately she tried to shrug her uneasiness aside, but it didn't work. It was plain in her face and voice. "It looked—it looked…" Her voice trailed off, but suddenly he understood.

He moved slowly toward her and wasn't surprised when she backed up a step. "Horses aren't people," he said gently. "They're big, and they snort and squeal. It looks rough, but that's just how horses mate. It would be even rougher if they were allowed to run free, because they'd kick and bite."
She looked at the mare. "I know. It's just—" She stopped, because she really couldn't say what was bothering her.
Wolf reached her and put his hands on her waist, holding her lightly so she wouldn't be alarmed and wouldn't know that she couldn't break free unless he let her. "It's just that the roughness reminded you of being attacked?" he finished for her.
She gave him a quick, disturbed look, then just as quickly looked away.
"I know the memory is still there, baby." He slowly tightened his hands, bringing her close against him and just holding her. After a moment she began to relax, and her silky head rested against his chest. Only then did he put his arms around her, because he didn't want her to feel restrained.
"I want to kiss you," he murmured.
She lifted her head and smiled at him. "That's why I came out here: to tempt you into a kiss. I've become a shameless hussy. Aunt Ardith would have disowned me."
"Aunt Ardith sounds like a pain in the—"
"She was wonderful," Mary said firmly. "It's just that she was very old-fashioned and had strict notions of what was proper and what wasn't. For instance, only shameless hussies would wear a skirt without a proper petticoat underneath." She lifted her skirt a little to show him.
"Then let's hear it for shameless hussies." He bent his head and kissed her, and felt the familiar hot excitement begin building in his body. Ruthlessly he controlled it, because control was critical right now. He had to show Mary something, and he couldn't do it if his libido overcame his common sense. He had to do something to banish that ever-present fear from the back of her mind.
He raised his head and hugged her for a minute before letting his arms drop. Instead he took her hands and held them, and the expression on his face made the smile leave her eyes. He said slowly, "Are you willing to try something that might get you over being frightened?"
She looked cautious. "Such as?"
"We could reenact parts of the attack."

Mary stared at him. She was curious, but also wary. Part of her didn't want to do anything that would remind her of that day, but on the other hand, she didn't like being afraid. She said, "Which parts?"
"I could chase you."
"He didn't chase me. He grabbed me from behind."
"So will I, when I catch you."
She considered it. "It won't work. I'll know it's you."
"We could try."
She stared at him for a long time, then stiffened as a thought came to her. "He threw me facedown on the ground," she whispered. "He was on top of me, rubbing himself against me."
Wolf's face was strained. "Do you want me to do that, too?"
She shuddered. "Want you to? No. But I think you're going to have to. I don't want to be afraid any longer. Make love to me like that—please."
"What if you get really scared?"
"Don't—" She swallowed. "Don't stop."
He looked at her for a long minute, as if measuring her resolve; then his mouth began to quirk up on one side. "All right. Run."
She didn't. She stared at him. "What?"
"Run. I can't chase you if you don't run."
All of a sudden she felt silly at the thought of running about the yard like a child. "Just like that?"
"Yeah, just like that. Think of it this way: when I catch you, I'm going to pull your clothes off and make love to you, so why are you waiting?"
He removed his hat to hook it on a post. Mary took a step backward, then, despite her dignity, whirled and ran. She heard the thudding of his boots as he came after her, and laughed with excitement despite herself. She knew she didn't have a prayer of reaching the house; his legs were much longer than hers. Instead she relied on agility and dodged around his truck, then a tree.
"I'm going to get you," he growled, his voice right behind her, and his hand closed briefly on her shoulder before she sprinted away from him.
She sought refuge behind his truck again, with him on the other side. They feinted, but neither gained an advantage. Panting, her face alight with both excitement and triumph, Mary taunted him, "Can't catch me, can't catch me."

A slow, unholy smile touched his mouth as he looked at her. She was almost glowing with her success, her silky brown hair tumbling around her face, and he wanted her so much it hurt. He wanted to take her in his arms and make love to her, and he swore to himself because he couldn't, not right now. First he had to play this through, and, despite her brave words, he hoped she could bear it.

They had been staring at each other, and suddenly it struck her how savage he looked. He was aroused. She knew that look on his face as well as she knew her own, and her breath caught. He wasn't playing; he was deadly earnest. For the first time, fear began to creep in on her. She tried to tamp it down, because she knew Wolf would never hurt her. It was just—oh, damn, something about it *did* remind her of the attack, no matter how she tried to push the thought away. The playfulness drained out of her, and an unreasonable panic took its place. "Wolf? Let's stop now."

His chest rose and fell with his breathing, and a bleak look entered his eyes, but his voice was guttural. "No. I'm going to catch you."

She ran blindly, leaving the dubious safety of the truck. His running steps behind her sounded like thunder, obscuring every other sound, even that of her rasping breath. It was like being in that alley again, even though a part of her clung to the knowledge that this was Wolf, and she wanted him to do this. She hadn't had a chance to run from her attacker, but he had been behind her; she had heard his breathing just as she now heard Wolf's. She screamed, a high, terrified sound, just before Wolf caught her and bore her down, on her stomach, to the ground, his heavy weight coming down on top of her.

He supported himself on his arms to keep from crashing her, and nuzzled her ear. "Ha, I caught you." He forced himself to say the words lightly, but his chest was tight with pain at what she was going through. He could feel the terror that held her in its grip, and he began trying to loosen its bonds, speaking softly to her, reminding her of the heated, sensuous pleasures they had shared. Tears stung his eyes at the sounds she made, those of a trapped and terrified animal. God, he didn't know if he could do it. The lust had died in him at her first scream.

At first she straggled like a wild thing, kicking and bucking, trying to free her arms, but he held them clamped down. She was maddened with fear, so much so that despite the difference in their sizes and strength, she might

have hurt him if not for his training. As it was, all he could do was hold her and try to break through the black mist of fear that enveloped her.
"Calm down, sweetheart, calm down. You know I won't hurt you, and I won't let anyone else hurt you. You know who I am." He repeated it over and over, until exhaustion claimed her, and her straggles became weak and aimless. Only then could she begin to listen; only then could his crooning words penetrate the barrier of fear. Suddenly she collapsed on the ground with her face buried in the hot, sweet grass and began to cry.
Wolf lay on top of her with his arms still locked securely around her and soothed her while she cried. He petted her and kissed her hair, her shoulder, her delicate nape, until at last she lay limply on the grass, both tears and energy exhausted. The endless caresses affected him, too, now that she was calmer; he felt a return of the desire that was never far away from him since he'd met her.
He nuzzled her neck again. "Are you still frightened?" he murmured.
Braised, swollen eyelids were closed over her eyes. "No," she whispered. "I'm sorry I keep putting you through this. I love you."
"I know, sweetheart. Hold on to that thought." Then he lifted himself back on his knees and pushed her skirt to her waist.
Mary's eyes flared open when she felt him pulling down her underpants, and her voice was sharp. "Wolf! No!"
He stripped the garment down her legs, and Mary trembled in reaction. It was so much like before, in the alley. She was on her stomach on the ground, with a man's weight on top of her, and she couldn't bear it. She tried to scramble forward, but he locked one arm around her waist and held her while he unfastened his jeans with the other hand. He kneed her thighs farther apart and eased himself against her, then let his weight down on her again.
"This reminds you of it, doesn't it?" he asked in a low, gentle voice. "Being on the ground, on your stomach, with me behind you. But you know I won't hurt you, that you don't have to be afraid, don't you?"
"I don't care. I don't like this! Let me up, I want up!"
"I know, baby. Come on now, relax. Think of how many times I've made love to you and how much you've enjoyed it. Trust me."
The smell of the hot earth was in her nostrils. "I don't want you to make love to me now," she managed to say, albeit raggedly. "Not like this."

"Then I won't. Don't be afraid, baby. I won't go any further unless you want me to. Just relax, and let's feel each other. I don't want you to be afraid when I come up behind you. I admit, your pretty little rear end turns me on. I like to look at it and touch it, and when you cuddle it against me in bed it drives me crazy. I guess you've noticed, though, haven't you?"

Dazedly, she tried to gather her scattered senses. He'd never hurt her before, and now that the haze of fear was fading, she knew he never would. This was Wolf, the man she loved, not her attacker. She was in his strong arms, where she was safe.

She relaxed, her tired muscles going limp. Yes, he was definitely aroused. She could feel him, nestled between her spread legs, but true to his word he was making no move to enter her.

He stroked her sides and kissed her neck. "Are you all right now?"

She sighed, a barely audible release of breath. "Yes," she whispered.

He shifted to his knees again and sat back on his heels. Before she could guess what he was about, his steely hands lifted her up and back, so she was sitting astride his thighs, but facing away from him. Their naked loins were pressed together, but still he didn't enter her.

The first twinge of excitement sang along her nerves. The moment was doubly erotic because they were out in the open, crouched on the grass with the hot, bright sun blazing down on them. If anyone happened to drive up, they would be caught. The sudden sense of danger sharply heightened her arousal. Actually, from the front they were covered, because her skirt was draped over his thighs.

Then that protective cover was whisked away as he pulled her skirt up and to the side. He held her to him with one hand on her stomach, and the other hand slid down between her legs. The intimate contact brought a sharp little cry to her lips.

"Do you like that?" he murmured against her ear and gently nipped the lobe.

Mary made some incoherent answer. His rough fingertips were rasping over her most sensitive flesh, creating and building such pleasure that she could barely speak. He knew exactly how to touch her, how to build her to readiness and take her to ecstasy. Mindlessly she arched back against him; the movement brought his manhood more solidly against her, and she groaned aloud.

"Wolf—please!"

He groaned, too, from between clenched teeth. "I'll please you any way you want, baby. Just tell me how."
She could barely speak for the powerful coil of sensation tightening inside her. "I want you."
"Now?"
"Yes."
"Like this?"
She moved against him and this time had to choke back a cry. "Yes!"
He eased her forward until she was on her stomach again and covered her. His entry was slow and gentle, and fever enveloped her. Eagerly she met the impact of his thrusts, her body on fire, all thoughts suspended before such all-consuming need. This wasn't a nightmare; this was another part of the sensual delights he'd been teaching her. She writhed against him and felt the coil tighten unbearably. Then it sprang free, and she convulsed in his arms. He clamped his hands on her hips and loosed his own responses, driving into her hard and fast until his pulsing release freed him.
They lay together on the grass for a long time, half-dozing, too exhausted to move. Only when Mary felt her legs begin to tingle from too much sun did she find the strength to push her skirt down. Wolf murmured a protest and slid his hand up her thigh.
She opened her eyes. The sky was bright blue, cloudless, and the sweet scent of fresh grass filled her lungs, radiated through her body. The earth was hot beneath her, the man she loved dozed beside her, and every inch of her still held the remnants of sensation from their lovemaking. The memory of it, so fresh and powerful, began to warm her body to desire again, and suddenly she realized that his plan had worked. He had recreated the scenario that had so terrified her, but substituted himself for the attacker. Instead of fear, pain and humiliation, he had given her desire and, ultimately, an ecstasy so strong it had taken her out of herself. He had replaced a terrible memory with a wonderful one. His hand was lying low on her abdomen now, and the simple intimacy of his touch stunned her. She could be carrying his child. She had been aware of the probable consequences of making love without protection, but it was what she wanted, and he had made no mention of birth control. Even if their relationship didn't last, she wanted his baby, a child with his strength and fire. If it could be a duplicate of him, nothing would make her happier. She

stirred, and the pressure of his hand on her abdomen increased. "The sun is too hot," she murmured. "I'm getting burned."
He groaned, but fastened his jeans and sat up. Then he picked up her underpants, put them in his pocket and lifted her in his arms in the same motion he used to get to his feet.
"I can walk," she informed him, though she wound her arms around his neck.
"I know." He grinned down at her. "It's just that it's more romantic to carry you into the house to make love."
"But we just made love."
There was fire in his black eyes. "So?"

Wolf was just about to enter the feed store when a tingle touched the back of his neck like a cool wind. He didn't stop, which would have signalled an alarm to anyone watching, but, using his peripheral vision, he took a quick look around. The sense of danger was like a touch. Someone was watching him. His sixth sense was highly developed from hard training and years of application, and further enhanced by the strong mysticism of his heritage. It wasn't just that he was being watched; he could feel the hatred directed toward him. He strode into the feed store and immediately stepped to the side, flattening himself against the wall as he looked out the door. Conversation in the store halted as if the words had hit a stone wall, but he ignored the thick silence. Adrenaline pumped through his body; he didn't notice that his gloved hand automatically slid over his chest to touch the knife that had been securely attached to the webbing he'd worn sixteen years before, in a steamy, hauntingly beautiful little country that reeked of blood and death. Only when his hand encountered nothing but his shirt did he realize that old habits had come to the fore.
Suddenly he realized that it was the man he'd been hunting, standing somewhere out there and staring at him with hatred, and rage surged through him. He didn't need a knife. Without a word he removed his hat and boots, the hat because it increased his silhouette, the boots because they were too noisy. In his sock feet he ran lightly past the stunned and silent little knot of men who had been standing around chewing the fat. Only one voiced a hesitant, "What's going on?"
Wolf didn't take time to answer, but slipped out the back door of the feed store. His movements were silent, deliberate, as he used every available bit

of cover while moving from building to building, working his way around so he would come out behind where he had estimated the man to be. It was hard to pinpoint his position, but Wolf had automatically picked out the best locations for concealment. If he kept looking long enough, he'd find another of the tracks he'd been searching for; the guy would get careless, and Wolf would get him.

He slid around the back of the drugstore, feeling the heat of the sun-warmed boards against his back. He was more cautious than before, not wanting the wood to rasp against his shirt. It was gravelly here, too, and he placed his feet with care to keep the little rocks from making a telltale grinding.

He heard the heavy, thudding sound of someone running, as if he had bolted in panic. Wolf ran around the front of the building and knelt briefly to inspect a faint print in the dust, only a part of a print, but his blood surged. It was the same print, same shoe, same toeing-in stride. He sprinted like the big timber wolf he'd been named for, no longer caring about noise, racing up the street, looking left and right for anyone in the street.

Nothing. No one. The street was empty. He stopped to listen. He heard birds, the rustle of a fitful breeze in the trees, the far-off sound of an engine climbing the slight rise on the north side of the town. Nothing else. No fast breathing, no running footsteps.

Wolf swore to himself. The guy was worse than an amateur, he was clumsy and made stupid moves, as well as being out of shape. If he'd been anywhere close by, Wolf would have been able to hear his labuored breathing. Damn it, somehow his quarry had slipped away.

Wolf looked at the quiet houses nestled under the trees. Ruth didn't have residential and commercial zoning; it was too small. The result was that the houses and few businesses were mixed together without order. The man could have gone into any of the houses; the way he'd disappeared so suddenly left no other possibility. It verified Wolfs conviction that the rapist lived in Ruth; after all, both attacks had happened right in town.

He noted who lived in the houses on the street and tried to think of who inside them matched Mary's description of a heavily freckled man. No one came to mind. But someone would. By God, Wolf vowed, someone would. He was slowly eliminating men from his mental list. Eventually, there would be only one left.

From inside a house, a curtain moved fractionally. The sound of his own raspy breathing as he sucked air into his labouring lungs filled the man's ears. Through the tiny crack he'd made, he could see the Indian still standing in the street, staring at first one house, then another. Murderous black eyes moved across the window where the man stood, and he automatically stepped back out of sight.

His own fear sickened and enraged him. He didn't want to be afraid of the Indian, but he was.

"Damn filthy Indian!" He whispered the words, then echoed them in his head. He liked doing that, saying things out loud the first time, then saying them to himself for his private understanding and enjoyment.

The Indian was a murderer. They said he knew more ways of killing people than normal folks could even imagine. The man believed it, because he knew firsthand how Indians could kill.

He'd like to kill the Indian, and that boy of his with the strange, pale eyes that looked through him. But he was afraid, because he didn't know how to kill, and he knew he'd wind up getting killed himself. He was too afraid of getting that close to the Indian to even try it.

He'd thought about it, but he couldn't come up with a plan. He'd like to shoot the Indian, because he wouldn't have to get close to do that, but he didn't have a gun, and he didn't want to draw attention to himself by buying one. But he liked what he'd done to get back at the Indian. It gave him savage satisfaction to know he was punishing the Indian by hurting those stupid women who had taken up for him. Why couldn't they see him for the filthy, murdering trash he was? That stupid Cathy had said the Indian was good-looking! She'd even said she'd go out with the boy, and he knew that meant she'd let the boy touch her, and kiss her. She'd been willing to let the filthy Mackenzies kiss her, but she'd fought and screamed and gagged when *he'd* touched her.

It didn't make sense, but, he didn't care. He'd wanted to punish her and punish the Indian for—for being there, for letting stupid Cathy look at him and think he was good-looking.

And the schoolteacher. He hated her almost as much as he hated the Mackenzies, maybe more. She was so goody-goody, making people think the boy was something special, trying to talk people around so they'd be friendly to the half-breeds. Preaching in the general store!

He'd wanted to spit on her. He'd wanted to hurt her, bad. He'd been so excited he almost hadn't been able to stand it when he'd dragged her down that alley and felt her squirming beneath him. If that stupid deputy hadn't shown up, he'd have done to her what he'd done to Cathy, and he knew he'd have liked it more. He'd wanted to hit her with his fists while he did it to her. That would have shown her. She would never have stuck up for the half-breeds again.
He still wanted to get her, to teach her a lesson, but school was out now, and he'd heard people say that the deputy had made her move to some safe place, and no one knew where she was. He didn't want to wait until school started again, but he thought he might have to.
And that stupid Pam Hearst. She needed a lesson, too. He'd heard that she had gone to a dance with the half-breed boy. He knew what that meant. He'd had his hands on her, and she'd probably let him kiss her and maybe do a lot more, because everyone knew what the Mackenzies were like. As far as he was concerned, that made Pam a slut. She deserved to be taught a lesson just like Cathy, and just like the lesson the schoolteacher still had coming.
He peeked outside again. The Indian was gone. He immediately felt safe, and he began to plan.

When Wolf walked back into the feed store, the same group of men were still there. "We don't much like you tracking folks around like we're criminals," one man snapped.
Wolf grunted and sat down to pull on his boots. He didn't care if they liked it or not.
"Did you hear what I said?"
He looked up. "I heard."
"And?"
"And nothing."
"Now look here, damn it!"
"I'm looking."
The men fidgeted under his cold black stare. Another spoke up. "You're making the women nervous."
"They should be nervous. It might keep them on guard, keep them from getting raped."
"It was some drifter trash who blew in and blew out! Likely the sheriff won't ever find who did it."

"It's trash, all right, but he's still here. I just found his track."
The men fell silent and looked at each other. Stu Kilgore, the foreman on Eli Baugh's spread, cleared his throat. "We're supposed to believe you can tell it was made by the same man?"
"I can tell." Wolf gave them a smile that was closer to a snarl. "Uncle Sam made sure I got the best training available. It's the same man. He lives here. He slipped into one of the houses."
"That's hard to believe. We've lived here all our lives. The only stranger around is the schoolteacher. Why would someone just up and start attacking women?"
"Someone did. That's all I care about, that and catching him."
He left the men murmuring among themselves while he loaded his feed.

Pam was bored. Since the two attacks, she hadn't even stepped outside the house by herself; she'd been pretty scared at first, but the days had passed without any more attacks, and the shock had worn off. Women were beginning to venture out again, even by themselves.
She was going to another dance with Joe, and she wanted a new dress. She knew he was going away, knew she couldn't hold him, but there was still something about him that made her heart race. She refused to let herself love him, even though she knew any other boyfriend would have a hard time replacing Joe. Hard, but not impossible. She wasn't going to mope after he'd left; she'd get on with her life—but right now he was still here, and she savoured every moment with him.
She really wanted a new dress, but she'd promised Joe she wouldn't go anywhere alone, and she didn't intend to break her promise. When her mother returned from shopping with a neighbour, she'd ask her about going with her to get a new dress. Not in Ruth, of course; she wanted to go to a real town, with a real dress shop.
Finally she picked up a book and walked out onto the back porch, away from the sun. There were neighbours on both sides, and she felt safe. She read for a while, then became sleepy and lay down on the porch swing, arranging her long legs over the back of the swing. She dozed immediately.
The abrupt jolting of the swing awakened her some time later. She opened her eyes and stared at a ski mask, with narrowed, hate-filled eyes glittering through the slits. He was already on her when she screamed.

He hit her with his fist, but she jerked her head back so that the blow landed on her shoulder. She screamed again and tried to kick him, and the unsteady swing toppled them to the porch. She kicked again, catching him in the stomach, and he grunted, sounding oddly surprised.
She couldn't stop screaming, even as she scrabbled away from him. She was more terrified than she'd ever been before in her life, but also oddly detached, watching the scene from some safe distance. The wooden slats of the porch scraped her hands and arms, but she kept moving backward. He suddenly sprang, and she kicked at him again, but he caught her ankle. She didn't stop. She just kicked, using both legs, trying to catch him in the head or the groin, and she screamed.
Someone next door yelled. The man jerked his head up and dropped her ankle. Blood had seeped through the multicoloured ski mask; she'd managed to kick him in the mouth. He said "Indian's dirty whore" in a hate-thickened voice, and jumped from the porch, already running.
Pam lay on the porch, sobbing in dry, painful gasps. The neighbour yelled again, and somehow she garnered enough strength to scream "Help me!" before the terror made her curl into a ball and whimper like a child.

Chapter Twelve

Wolf wasn't surprised when the deputy's car pulled up and Clay got out. He'd had a tight feeling in his gut since he'd found that footprint in town. Clay's tired face told the story.
Mary saw who their visitor was and automatically got a cup for coffee; Clay always wanted coffee. He took off his hat and sat down, heaving a sigh as he did so.
"Who was it this time?" Wolf asked, his deep voice so rough it was almost a growl.
"Pam Hearst."
Joe's head jerked up, and all the colour washed out of his face. He was on his feet before Clay's next words came.
"She fought him off. She isn't hurt, but she's scared. He jumped her on the Hearsts' back porch, for God's sake. Mrs. Winston heard her screaming, and the guy ran. Pam said she kicked him in the mouth. She saw blood on the ski mask he was wearing."

"He lives in town," Wolf said. "I found another print, but it's hard to track in town, with people walking around destroying what few prints there are. I think he ducked into one of the houses along Bay Road, but he might not live there."
"Bay Road." Clay frowned as he mentally reviewed the people living on Bay Road; most of the townspeople lived along it, in close little clusters. There was also another cluster of houses on Broad Street, where the Hearsts lived. "We might have him this time. Any man who has a swollen lip will have to have an airtight alibi."
"If it just split his lip, you won't be able to tell. The swelling will be minimal. She would have to have really done some damage for it to be visible more than a day or so." Wolf had had more than his share of split lips, and delivered his share, too. The mouth healed swiftly. Now if Pam had knocked some teeth out, that would be a different story.
"Any blood on the porch?"
"No."
"Then she didn't do any real damage." There would have been blood sprayed all over the porch if she'd kicked out his teeth.
Clay shoved his hand through his hair. "I don't like to think of the uproar it would cause, but I'm going to talk to the sheriff about making a house-to-house search along Bay Road. Damn it, I just can't think of anyone it could be."
Joe abruptly left the room, and Wolf stared after his son. He knew Joe wanted to go to Pam, and knew that he wouldn't. Some of the barriers had come down, but most of them were still intact.
Clay had watched Joe leave, and he sighed again. "The bastard called Pam an 'Indian's dirty whore'." His gaze shifted to Mary, who had stood silently the whole time. "You were right"
She didn't reply, because she'd known all along that she was right. It made her sick to hear the name Pam had been called, because it so starkly revealed the hatred behind the attack.
"I suppose all the tracks at Pam's house have been ruined." Wolf said it as a statement, not a question.
"Afraid so." Clay was regretful, but practically everyone in town had been at the Hearsts' house before he'd gotten there, standing around the back porch and tramping around the area.

Wolf muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath about damn idiots. "Do you think the sheriff will go along with a house-to-house search?"
"Depends. You know some folks are going to kick up about it no matter what the reason. They'll take it personally. This is an election year," he said, and they took his point
Mary listened to them talking, but she didn't join in. Now Pam had been hurt; who was next? Would the man work up enough courage to attack Wolf or Joe? That was her real terror, because she didn't know if she could bear it. She loved them with all the fierceness of her soul. She would gladly put herself between them and danger.
Which was exactly what she would have to do.
It made her sick to even think of that man's hands on her again, but she knew in that moment that she was going to give him the opportunity. Somehow, she was going to lure him out. She wouldn't allow herself the luxury of hiding out on Mackenzie's Mountain any longer.
She would begin driving into town by herself. The only problem would be in getting away from Wolf; she knew he'd never agree if he had any idea what she was doing. Not only that, he was capable of preventing her from leaving at all, either by disabling her car or even locking her in the bedroom. She didn't underestimate him.
Since he had moved her up on the mountain with him, he'd been delivering and picking up horses, rather than letting the owners come up to the ranch, where they might see her. Her whereabouts were a well-kept secret, known only to Wolf, Joe and Clay. But that meant she was left alone several times a week while Wolf and Joe ran errands and delivered horses. Joe also left for his math lessons, and they had to ride fences and work the small herd of cattle, just as every rancher did. She really had a lot of opportunities for slipping away, at least the first time. It would be infinitely more difficult to get away after that, because Wolf would be on his guard.
She quietly excused herself and went in search of Joe. She peeked into his bedroom, but he wasn't there, so she went out on the front porch. He was leaning against one of the posts, his thumbs hooked in his front pockets. "It isn't your fault."
He didn't move. "I knew it could happen."
"You aren't responsible for someone else's hate."

"No, but I am responsible for Pam. I knew it could happen, and I should have stayed away from her."
Mary made an unladylike sound. "I seem to remember it was the other way around. Pam made her choice when she made that scene in her father's store."
"All she wanted was to go to a dance. She didn't ask for this."
"Of course not, but it still isn't your fault, any more than it would have been your fault if she'd been in a car accident. You can say you could have delayed her so she'd have been a minute later getting to that particular section of road, or hurried her up so she'd have been earlier, but that's ridiculous, and you know it."
He couldn't prevent a faint smile at the starchiness of her tone. She should be in Congress, cracking her whip and haranguing those senators and representatives into some sort of fiscal responsibility. Instead she'd taken on Ruth, Wyoming, and none of them had been the same since she'd set foot in town.
"All right, so I'm taking too much on myself," he finally said. "But I knew it wasn't smart to go out with her in the first place. It isn't fair. I'll be leaving here when I finish school, and I won't be back. Pam should be dating someone who's going to be around when she needs him."
"You're still taking too much on yourself. Let Pam make her own decisions about who she wants to date. Do you plan to isolate yourself from women forever?"
"I wouldn't go that far," he drawled, and in that moment he sounded so much like his father that it startled her. "But I don't intend to get involved with anyone."
"It doesn't always work out the way you want. You were involved with Pam even before I came here."
That was true, as far as it went. He sighed and leaned his head against the post. "I don't love her."
"Of course not. I never thought you did."
"I like her; I care for her. But not enough to stay, not enough to give up the Academy." He looked at the Wyoming night, the almost painful clarity of the sky, the brightly winking stars, and thought of jockeying an F-15 over these mountains, with the dark earth below and the glittering stars above. No, he couldn't give that up.
"Did you tell her that?"

"Yes."
"Then it was her decision."
They stood in silence, watching the stars. A few minutes later Clay left, and neither of them thought it strange that he hadn't said goodbye. Wolf came out on the porch and automatically slid his arm around Mary's waist, hugging her to his side even as he put his hand on his son's shoulder. "You okay?"
"Okay enough, I suppose." But he understood now the total rage he'd seen in Wolf's eyes when Mary had been attacked, the same rage that still burned in a rigidly controlled fire inside his father. God help the man if Wolf Mackenzie ever got his hands on him.
Wolf tightened his arm around Mary and led her inside, knowing it was best to leave Joe alone now. His son was tough; he'd handle it.
The next morning Mary listened as they discussed their day. There were no horses to deliver or pick up, but Joe had a math lesson that afternoon, and they intended to use the morning inoculating cattle. She had no idea how long it would take to treat the whole herd, but imagined they would both be tied up the entire morning. They would be riding a couple of the young quarter horses, to teach them how to cut cattle.
Joe had changed overnight; it was a subtle change, but one that made Mary ache inside. In repose, his young face held a grimness that saddened her, as if the last faint vestiges of boyhood had been driven from his soul. He'd always looked older than his age, but now, despite the smoothness of his skin, he no longer looked young.
She was a grown woman, almost thirty years old, and the attack had left scars she hadn't been able to handle alone. Cathy and Pam were just kids, and Cathy had to handle a nightmare that was far worse than what Mary and Pam had undergone. Joe had lost his youth. No matter what, that man had to be stopped before he damaged anyone else.
When Wolf and Joe left the house, Mary gave them plenty of time to get far enough away so they wouldn't hear her car start, then hurried out of the house. She didn't know what she was going to do, other than parade through Ruth on the off chance that her presence might trigger another attack. And then what? She didn't know. Somehow she had to be prepared; she had to get someone to keep watch so the man could be caught. It should have been easy to catch him; he'd been so careless, attacking out in the open and in broad daylight, making stupid moves, as if he attacked on impulse and

without a plan. He hadn't even taken the simplest precautions against getting caught. The whole thing was strange. It didn't make sense.
Her hands were shaking as she drove into town; she was acutely aware that this was the first time since the day she'd been attacked that she was without protection. She felt exposed, as if her clothing had been stripped away.
She had to get someone to watch her, someone she trusted. Who? Sharon? The young teacher was her friend, but Sharon wasn't aggressive, and she thought the situation called for aggressiveness. Francie Beecham was too old; Cicely Karr would be too cautious. She discounted the men, because they would get all protective and refuse to help. Men were such victims to their own hormones. Machismo had killed a lot more people than PMS.
Pam Hearst sprang to mind. Pam would be extremely interested in catching the man, and she'd been aggressive enough to kick him in the mouth, to fight him off. She was young, but she had courage. She'd had the courage to go against her father and date a half-breed.
Conversation ceased when she walked into Hearst's store; it was the first time she'd been seen since the end of school. She ignored the thick silence, for she had what she suspected was a highly accurate guess as to the subject of the conversation she'd interrupted, and approached the checkout counter where Mr. Hearst stood.
"Is Pam at home?" she asked quietly, not wanting her question to be heard by the entire store.
He looked as if he'd aged ten years overnight, but there was no animosity in his face.
He nodded. The same thing had happened to Miss Potter, he thought. If she could talk to Pam, maybe she could take that haunted look out of his baby girl's eyes. Miss Potter had a lot of backbone for such a little thing; maybe he didn't always agree with her, but he'd damn sure learned to respect her. And Pam thought the world of her. "I'd appreciate it if you'd talk to her," he said. There was an odd, almost militant expression in her soft bluish eyes.
"I'll do that," she promised, and turned to leave. She almost bumped into Dottie and was startled into a gasp; the woman had been right behind her.
"Good morning," Mary said pleasantly. Aunt Ardith had drilled the importance of good manners into her.
Strangely, Dottie seemed to have aged, too. Her face was haggard. "How are you doing, Mary?"

Mary hesitated, but she could detect none of the hostility she was accustomed to from Dottie. Had the entire town changed? Had this nightmare brought them to their senses about the Mackenzies? "I'm fine. Are you enjoying the vacation?"
Dottie smiled, but it was merely a movement of her facial muscles, not a response of pleasure. "It's been a relief."
She certainly didn't look relieved; she looked worried to a frazzle. Of course, everyone should be worried.
"How is your son?" Mary couldn't remember the boy's name, and she felt faintly embarrassed. It wasn't like her to forget names.
To her surprise, Dottie went white. Even her lips were bloodless. "W—why do you ask?" she stammered.
"He seemed upset the last time I saw him," Mary replied. She could hardly say that only good manners had prompted the question. Southerners always asked after family.
"Oh. He—he's all right. He hardly ever leaves the house. He doesn't like going out." Dottie looked around, then blurted "Excuse me," and left the store before Mary could say anything else.
She looked at Mr. Hearst, and he shrugged. He thought Dottie had acted a bit strange, too.
"I'll go see Pam now," she said.
She started to walk to the Hearst house, but the memory of what had happened the last time she'd walked through town made chills run up her spine, and she went to her car. She checked the back seat and floorboard before opening the door. As she started the engine, she saw Dottie walking swiftly up the street, her head down as if she didn't want anyone to speak to her. She hadn't bought anything, Mary realized. Why had she been in Hearst's store, if not to make a purchase? It couldn't be browsing, because everyone knew what every store in town carried. Why had she left so suddenly?
Dottie turned left down the small street where she lived, and abruptly Mary wondered what Dottie was doing walking around alone. Every woman in town should know better. Surely she had enough sense to be cautious.
Mary drove slowly up the street. She craned her neck when she reached the street where Dottie had turned and saw the woman hurrying up the steps of her house. Her eyes fell on the faded sign: Bay Road.

Bay Road was where Wolf thought the rapist had dodged into a house. It made sense that he wouldn't have entered a house that wasn't his home, unless he was a close friend who came and went just like a family member. That was possible, but even a very close friend would give a yell before just walking into someone else's house, and Wolf would have heard that.

Dottie was certainly acting odd. She'd looked as if she'd been stung by a bee when Mary had asked about her son… Bobby, that was his name. Mary was pleased that she'd remembered.

Bobby. Bobby wasn't "right." He did things in a skewed way. He was unable to apply logic to the simplest of chores, unable to plan a practical course of action.

Mary broke out in a sweat and had to stop the car. She'd only seen him once, but she could picture him in her mind: big, a little soft-looking, with sandy hair and a fair complexion. A fair, freckled complexion.

Was it Bobby? The one person in town who wasn't totally responsible for himself? The one person no one would ever suspect? Except his mother. She had to tell Wolf.

As soon as the thought formed, she dismissed it. She couldn't tell Wolf, not yet, because she didn't want to put that burden on him. His instincts would tell him to go after Bobby; his conscience would argue that Bobby wasn't a responsible person. Mary knew him well enough to know that, no matter which decision he made, he would always have regrets. Better for the responsibility to be hers than to push Wolf into such a position.

She'd call Clay. It was his job, after all. He'd be better able to deal with the situation.

Only a few seconds passed as her thoughts rushed through her mind. She was still sitting there staring at Dottie's house when Bobby came out on the porch. It took him a moment, but suddenly he noticed her car and looked straight at her. A distance of less than seventy-five yards separated them, still too far for her to read his expression, but she didn't need a close-up for sheer terror to spurt through her. She stomped on the gas pedal and the car shot forward, slinging gravel, the tires squealing.

It was only a short distance to the Hearst house. Mary ran to the front door and banged her fist on it. Her heart felt as if it would explode. That brief moment when she had been face-to-face with him was almost more than she could stand. God, she had to call Clay.

Mrs. Hearst opened the door a crack, then recognized Mary and swung it all the way open. "Miss Potter! Is something wrong?"
Mary realized that she must look wild. "Could I use your phone? It's an emergency."
"Why—of course." She stepped back, allowing Mary inside.
Pam appeared in the hallway. "Miss Potter?" She looked young and scared.
"The phone's in the kitchen."
Mary followed Mrs. Hearst and grabbed the receiver. "What's the number of the sheriffs department?"
Pam got a small telephone book from the countertop and began flipping through the pages. Too agitated to wait, Mary dialled the number for Information.
"Sheriff's department, please."
"What city?" the disembodied voice asked.
She drew a blank. For the life of her, she couldn't remember the name of the town.
"Here it is," Pam said.
Mary disconnected the call to Information, then dialled as Pam recited the number. The various computer clicks as the connection was made seemed to take forever.
"Sheriffs office."
"Deputy Armstrong, please. Clay Armstrong."
"One moment."
It was longer than one moment. Pam and her mother stood tensely, not knowing what was going on but reacting to her urgency. Both of them had dark circles under their eyes. It had been a bad night for the Hearst family.
"Sheriff's office," a different voice said.
"Clay?"
"You looking for Armstrong?"
"Yes. It's an emergency!" she insisted. "Well, I don't know where he is right now. You want to tell me what the trouble is—hey, Armstrong! Some lady wants you in a hurry." To Mary, he said, "He'll be right here."
A few seconds later Clay's voice said, "Armstrong."
"It's Mary. I'm in town."
"What the hell are you doing there?"
Her teeth were chattering. "It's Bobby. Bobby Lancaster. I saw him—"
"Hang up the phone!"

It was a scream, and she jumped, dropping the receiver, which dangled from the end of its cord. She flattened against the wall, for Bobby stood there, inside the kitchen, with a huge butcher knife in his hand. His face was twisted with both hate and fear.
"You told!" He sounded like an outraged child.
"Told—told what?"
"You told him! I heard you!"
Mrs. Hearst had shrunk back against the cabinets, her hand at her throat. Pam stood as if rooted in the middle of the floor, her face colourless, her eyes locked on the young man she'd known all her life. She could see the slight swelling of his lower lip.
Bobby shifted his weight from one foot to the other, as if he didn't know what to do next. His face was red, and he looked almost tearful.
Mary strove to steady her voice. "That's right, I told him. He's on his way now. You'd better run." Maybe that wasn't the best suggestion in the world, but more than anything she wanted to get him out of the Hearsts' house before he hurt someone. She desperately wanted him to run.
"It's all your fault!" He looked hunted, as if he didn't know what to do except cast blame. "You—you came here and changed things. Mama said you're a dirty Indian-lover."
"I beg your pardon. I prefer clean people."
He blinked, confused. Then he shook his head and said again, "It's your fault."
"Clay will be here in a few minutes. You'd better go."
His hand tightened on the knife, and suddenly he reached out and grabbed her arm. He was big and soft, but he was faster than he looked. Mary cried out as he twisted her arm up behind her back, nearly wrenching her shoulder joint loose.
"You'll be my hostage, just like on television," he said and pushed her out the back door.
Mrs. Hearst was motionless, frozen in shock. Pam leaped for the phone, heard the buzzing that signalled a broken connection and held the button down for a new line. When she got a dial tone, she dialled the Mackenzies' number. It rang endlessly, and she cursed, using words her mother had no idea she knew. All the while she leaned to the side, trying to see where Bobby was taking Mary.

She was just about to hang up when the receiver was picked up and a deep, angry voice roared, "Mary?"
She was so startled that she almost dropped the phone. "No," she choked. "It's Pam. He has Mary. It's Bobby Lancaster, and he just dragged her out of the house—"
"I'll be right there."
Pam shivered at the deadly intent in Wolf Mackenzie's voice.

Mary stumbled over a large rock hidden by the tall grass and gagged as the sudden intense pain made nausea twist her stomach.
"Stand up!" Bobby yelled, jerking at her.
"I twisted my ankle!" It was a lie, but it would give her an excuse to slow him down.
He'd dragged her across the small meadow behind the Hearsts', through a thick line of trees, over a stream, and now they were climbing a small rise. At least it had looked small, but now she knew it was deceptively large. It was a big open area, not the smartest place for Bobby to head, but he didn't plan well. That was what had thrown everyone off from the beginning, what had never seemed quite *right*. There had been no logic to his actions; Bobby reacted rather than planned.
He didn't know what to do for a twisted ankle, so he didn't worry about it, just pushed her along at the same speed. She stumbled again, but somehow managed to retain her balance. She wouldn't be able to bear it if she fell on her stomach and he came down on top of her again.
"Why did you have to tell?" he groaned.
"You hurt Cathy."
"She deserved it!"
"How? How did she deserve it?"
"She liked him—the Indian."
Mary was panting. She estimated they'd gone over a mile. Not a great distance, but the gradual uphill climb was telling on her. It didn't help that her arm was twisted up between her shoulder blades. How long had it been? When could she expect Clay to arrive? It had been at least twenty minutes.

Wolf made it off his mountain in record time. His eyes were like flint as he leaped from the truck before it had rocked to a complete stop. He and Joe both carried rifles, but Wolf's was a sniper rifle, a Remington with a

powerful scope. He'd never had occasion to try a thousand-yard shot with it, but he'd never missed his target at closer range.
People milled around the back of the house. He and Joe shouldered their way through the crowd. "Everybody freeze, before you destroy any more tracks!" Wolf roared, and everyone stopped dead.
Pam darted to them. Her face was streaked with tears. "He took her into the trees. There," she said and pointed.
A siren announced Clay's arrival, but Wolf didn't wait for him. The trail across the meadow was as plain to him as a neon sign would have been, and he set off at a lope, with Joe on his heels.
Dottie Lancaster was terrified, and nearly hysterical. Bobby was her son, and she loved him desperately no matter what he'd done. She'd been sick when she'd realized he was the one who had attacked Cathy Teele and Mary; she'd almost worried herself into an early grave as she wrestled with her conscience and the sure knowledge that she'd lose her son if she turned him in. But that was nothing compared to the horror she'd felt when she discovered he'd slipped from the house. She'd followed the sounds of a disturbance and found all of her nightmares coming true: he'd taken Mary, and he had a knife. Now the Mackenzies were after him, and she knew they would kill him.
She grabbed Clay's arm as he surged past her. "Stop them," she sobbed. "Don't let them kill my boy."
Clay barely glanced at her. He shook her loose and ran after them. Distraught, Dottie ran, too.
By then some of the other men had gotten their rifles and were joining the hunt. They'd always felt sorry for Bobby Lancaster, but he'd hurt their women, and there was no excuse for it.
Wolf's heartbeat settled down, and he pushed the panic away. His senses heightened, as they always did when he was on the hunt. Every sound was magnified in his ears, instantly recognizable. He saw every blade of grass, every broken twig and overturned rock. He could smell every scent nature had left, and the faint acrid, coppery tang of fear. His body was a machine, moving smoothly, silently.
He could read every sign. Here Mary had stumbled, and his muscles tightened. She had to be terrified. If he hurt her—she was so slight, no match at all for a man. The bastard had a knife. Wolf thought of a blade

touching her delicate, translucent skin, and rage consumed him. He had to push it away because he couldn't afford the mistakes rage could cause.
He broke out of the tree line and suddenly saw them, high on the side of the rise. Bobby was dragging Mary along, but at least she was still alive.
Wolf examined the terrain. He didn't have a good angle. He moved east, along the base of the rise.
"Stop!"
It was Bobby's voice, only faintly heard at that distance. They had halted, and Bobby was holding Mary in front of him. "Stop or I'll kill her!"
Slowly, Wolf went down on one knee and raised the rifle to his shoulder. He sighted through the scope, not for a shot, but to see how he should set it up. The powerful scope plainly revealed the desperation on Bobby's face and the knife at Mary's throat.
"Bobbeee!" Dottie had reached them, and she screamed his name.
"Mama?"
"Bobby, let her go!"
"I can't! She told!"
The men had clustered around. Several of them measured the distance by eye and shook their heads. They couldn't make the shot, not at that range. They were as likely to hit Mary as Bobby, if they hit anything at all.
Clay looked down at Wolf. "Can you make the shot?"
Wolf smiled, and Clay felt that chill run up his spine again at the look in Wolf's eyes. They were cold and murderous. "Yeah."
"No!" Dottie sobbed the word. "Bobby!" she screamed. "Please, come down!"
"I can't! I've got to kill her! She likes him, and he's a dirty Indian! He killed my father!"
Dottie gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "No," she moaned, then screamed again. "No! He didn't!" Pure hell was living in her eyes.
"He did! You said—an Indian—" Bobby broke off and began dragging Mary backward.
"Do it," Clay said quietly.
Wolf braced the barrel of the rifle in the notch of a sapling. It was small but sturdy enough to be steady. Without a word he sighted in the cross hairs of the scope.
"Wait," Dottie cried, anguish in her voice.
Wolf looked at her.

"Please," she whispered. "Don't kill him. He's all I have."
His black eyes were flat. "I'll try."
He concentrated on the shot, shutting everything out as he always had. It was maybe three hundred yards, but the air was still. The image in the scope was huge and clear and flattened, the depth perception distorted. Mary's face was plain. She looked angry, and she was tugging at the arm around her shoulder, the one that held the knife to her throat.
God, when he got her back safe and sound, he was going to throttle her. Because she was so small, he had a larger target than would normally have been presented. His instincts were to go for a head shot, to take Bobby Lancaster completely out of life, but he'd promised. Damn, it was going to be a bitch of a shot. They were moving, and he'd limited his own target area by promising not to go for a kill.
The cross hairs settled, and his hands became rock steady. He drew in a breath, let out half of it and gently squeezed the trigger. Almost simultaneously with the sharp thunder in his ear he saw the red stain blossom on Bobby's shoulder and the knife drop from his suddenly useless hand even as he was thrown back by the bullet's impact. Mary staggered to the side and fell, but was instantly on her feet again.
Dottie sagged to her knees, sobbing, her hands over her face.
The men surged up the hill. Mary ran down it and met Wolf halfway. He still had the rifle in his hand, but he caught her up in his arms and held her locked to him, his eyes closed as he absorbed the miracle of her, warm and alive against him, her silky hair against his face, her sweet scent in his lungs. He didn't care who saw them, or what anyone thought. She was his, and he'd just lived through the worst half hour of his existence knowing that at any moment her life could be ended.
Now that it was over, she was crying.
She'd been dragged up the hill, and now Wolf dragged her down it. He was swearing steadily under his breath, ignoring her gasping protests until she stumbled. Then he snatched her up under his arm like a sack and continued down. People stared after them in astonishment, but no one moved to stop him. After today, they all viewed Wolf Mackenzie differently.
Wolf ignored her car and thrust her into his truck. Mary pushed her hair out of her face and decided not to mention the car; they would pick it up later. Wolf was in a rage, his face set and hard.

They had almost reached the road that wound up his mountain before he spoke. "What in hell were you doing in town?" The even tone didn't fool her. The wolf was dangerously angered.
Perhaps she wasn't as cautious as she should have been, but she still wasn't afraid of him, not of the man she loved. She respected his temper, but she didn't fear him. So she said, just as calmly, "I thought seeing me might trigger him into doing something stupid, so we could identify him."
"You triggered him, all right. What he did wasn't nearly as stupid as what you did. What did you do, parade up and down the streets until he grabbed you?"
She let the insult pass. "Actually it never came to that. I intended to talk to Pam first. I stopped at the store to ask Mr. Hearst if she was home and bumped into Dottie. She acted so strange and looked so worried that it made me wonder. She almost ran out of the store. Then, when I saw her turn onto Bay Road, I remembered Bobby, what he looked like. He came out on the porch and looked at me, and I knew he was the one."
"So you made a citizen's arrest?" he asked sarcastically.
Mary got huffy. "No. I'm not stupid, and you'd better not make another smart remark, Wolf Mackenzie. I did what I thought I had to do. I'm sorry if you don't like it, but there it is. Enough was enough. I couldn't take the chance someone else could be hurt, or that he might start taking shots at you or Joe.
"I drove to Pam's house and called Clay. I had no intention of confronting Bobby, but it didn't work out that way. He followed me to Pam's and heard me talking on the phone. So he grabbed me. You know what happened then."
She was so matter-of-fact about it that he tightened his hands on the steering wheel to keep from shaking her. If she hadn't been crying just a few minutes ago, he might have lost his tenuous control on his temper.
"Do you know what might have happened if I hadn't come back to the barn for something and noticed your car was missing? It was just chance I was there when Pam called to tell me Bobby had grabbed you!"
"Yes," she said patiently. "I know what could have happened."
"It doesn't bother you that he came close to cutting your throat?"
"Close doesn't count except in horseshoes and hand grenades."
He slammed on the brakes, so enraged he could barely see. He wasn't aware of shutting off the motor, only of closing his hands on her slender shoulders.

He was so close to pulling her across his knees that he was shaking, but she didn't seem to realize that she should be frightened. With a faint sound she dived into his arms, clinging to him with surprising strength.
Wolf held her and felt her trembling. The red haze left his vision, and looked at me, and I knew he was the one."
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He was so close to pulling her across his knees that he was shaking, but she didn't seem to realize that she should be frightened. With a faint sound she dived into his arms, clinging to him with surprising strength.
Wolf held her and felt her trembling. The red haze left his vision, and he realized that she was frightened, but not of him. With her normal damn-the-torpedoes attitude, she'd done what she'd thought was right and was probably trying to put up a calm front so he wouldn't be alarmed.
As if anything could ever alarm him more than seeing an unbalanced rapist hold a knife to her throat.
Frantically he started the truck. It wasn't far to his house, but he didn't know if he could make it. He had to make love to her, soon, even if it was in the

middle of the road. Only then would the fear of losing her begin to fade, when he felt her beneath him once more and she welcomed him into her delicate body.

Mary brooded. It had been four days since Wolf had shot Bobby; the first two days had been filled with statements and police procedures, as well as newspaper interviews and even a request from a television station, which Wolf had refused. The sheriff, not being a fool, had hailed Wolf as a hero and praised the shot he'd made. Wolf's military service record was dug up, and a lot was written about the "much-decorated Vietnam veteran" who had saved a schoolteacher and captured a rapist.

Bobby was recuperating in a hospital in Casper; the bullet had punctured his right lung, but he was lucky to be alive under the circumstances. He was bewildered by everything that had happened and kept asking to go home. Dottie had resigned. She'd have to live the rest of her life knowing that her hatred had taken seed in her son's mind and caused the entire nightmare. She knew Bobby would be taken away from her, at least for a time, and that they would never be able to live in Ruth again, even if he was ever a free man. But wherever Bobby was sent, she intended to be close by. As she'd told Wolf, he was all she had.

It was over, and Mary knew that Wolf would never be treated as an outcast again. The threat was past, and the town was safe. Just knowing who it was and that he'd been caught made a lot of difference in Cathy Teele's recovery, though what had happened would always mark her life.

So there was no reason why Mary couldn't return to her own house.

That was why she was brooding. In those four days, Wolf hadn't said a word about her remaining with him. He'd never said a word of love, not even during their wild lovemaking after he'd snatched her to safety. He hadn't said anything at all about their personal situation.

It was time to go home. She couldn't stay with him forever, not when there was no fear for her safety now. She knew their affair would probably continue, at least for a while, but still the thought of leaving his house depressed her. She'd loved every minute of her time on Mackenzie's Mountain, loved sharing the little commonplace things with him. Life consisted of the small things, with only scattered moments of intensity.

She calmly packed and refused to let herself cry. She was going to be under control and not make a scene. She loaded her suitcases into her car, then

waited for Wolf to return to the house. It would be childish to sneak off, and she wouldn't do it; she'd tell him she was returning to her home, thank him for his protection and leave. It would be immensely civilized.
As it happened, it was late afternoon when Wolf got back. He was sweaty and coated with dust, and limping a little, because a cow had stepped on his foot. He wasn't in a good mood.
Mary smiled at him. "I've decided to get out of your hair, since there's no reason to be afraid of staying by myself now. I've already packed and loaded everything in the car, but I wanted to stay until you got home to thank you for everything you've done."
Wolf paused in the act of gulping cool, fresh water down his parched throat. Joe froze on the step, not wanting them to see him. He couldn't believe Wolf would let her leave.
Slowly, Wolf turned his head to look at her. There was a savage expression in his eyes, but she was concentrating too hard on maintaining control to see it. She gave him another smile, but this one was harder, because he hadn't said a word, not even, "I'll call you."
"Well," she said brightly, "I'll see you around. Tell Joe not to forget his lessons."
She marched out the front door and down the steps.
She'd gotten halfway to her car when a hard hand clamped down on her shoulder and spun her around,
"I'll be damned if you're setting foot off this mountain," he said in a harsh tone.
He towered over her. For the first time Mary felt it was a disadvantage that she only reached his shoulder. She had to tilt her head back to talk to him, he was so close. The heat from his body enveloped her like steam. "I can't stay here forever," she replied reasonably, but now she could see the look in his eyes and she shivered. "I'm a smalltown schoolteacher. I can't just cohabit with you—"
"Shut up," he said.
"Now see here—"
"I said shut up. You aren't going anywhere, and you're damn well going to cohabit with me for the rest of your life. It's too late today, but first thing in the morning we're going into town for our blood tests and license. We're going to be married within a week, so get your little butt back in that house and stay there. I'll bring your suitcases in."

His expression would have made most men back up a few steps, but Mary crossed her arms. "I'm not marrying someone who doesn't love me."
"Hellfire!" he roared and jerked her up against him. "Not love you? Damn, woman, you've been wrapping me around your little finger since the first time I set eyes on you! I'd have killed Bobby Lancaster in a heartbeat for you, so don't you ever say I don't love you!"
As a declaration of love cum marriage proposal, it wasn't exactly romantic, but it was certainly exciting. Mary smiled up at him and went on tiptoe to loop her arms around his neck. "I love you, too."
He glared down at her, but noticed how pretty she looked with her soft pink sweater bringing out the delicate roses in her cheeks, and her slate-blue eyes twinkling at him. A breeze flirted with her silky, silvery-brown hair, and suddenly he buried his face in the baby-fine strands at her temple.
"God, I love you," he whispered. He'd never thought he would love any woman, least of all an Anglo, but that was before this slight, delicate creature had bulldozed her way into his life and completely changed it. He could no more live without her now than he could live without air. "I want children," she stated. He smiled against her temple. "I'm willing." She thought about it some more. "I think I'd like four." A slight frown creased his brow as he held her tighter. "We'll see." She was too small and delicate for that many pregnancies; two would be better. He lifted her in his arms and started for the house, where she belonged.
Joe watched from the window and turned away with a grin as his father lifted Mary against his chest.

Epilogue

Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Joe opened the letter from Mary and began grinning as he read. His roommate looked at him with interest. "Good news from home?"

"Yeah," Joe said without looking up. "My stepmother is pregnant again."

"I thought she just had a baby."

"Two years ago. This is their third."

His roommate, Bill Stolsky, watched Joe finish the letter. Privately he was a little awed by the calm, remote half-breed. Even when they'd been doolies, first-year cadets, and normally regarded as lower than the low, there had been something about Joe Mackenzie that had kept the upper-classmen from dealing him too much misery. He'd been at the top of his class from the beginning, and it was already known that he was moving on to flight training after graduation. Mackenzie was on the fast track to the top, and even his instructors knew it.

"How old is your stepmother?" Stolsky asked in curiosity. He knew Mackenzie was twenty-one, a year younger than himself, though they were both seniors in the Academy.

Joe shrugged and reached for a picture he kept in his locker. "Young enough. My dad's pretty young, too. He was just a kid when I was born."

Stolsky took the picture and looked at the four people in it. It wasn't a posed photograph, which made it more intimate. Three adults were playing with a baby. The woman was small and delicate, and was looking up from the baby in her lap to smile at a big, dark, eagle-featured man. The man was one tough-looking dude. Stolsky wouldn't want to meet him in an alley, dark or otherwise. He glanced quickly at Joe and saw the strong resemblance.

But the baby was clinging to the big man's finger with a dimpled fist and laughing while Joe tickled his neck. It was a revealing and strangely disturbing look into Mackenzie's private life, into his tightly knit family.

Stolsky cleared his throat. "Is that the newest baby?"

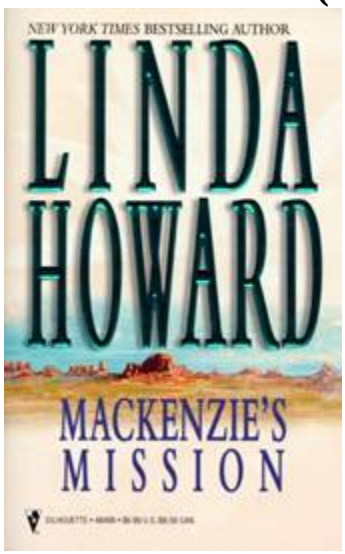
"No, that picture was made when I was a senior in high school. That's Michael. He's four years old now, and Joshua is two." Joe couldn't help grinning and feeling worried at the same time when he thought of Mary's letter. Both his little brothers had been delivered by caesarean, because Mary was simply too slender to have them. After Joshua's birth, Wolf had

said there would be no more babies, because Mary had had such a hard time carrying Josh. But Mary had won, as usual. He'd have to make a point of getting off on leave when this baby was due.
"Your stepmother isn't—uh—"
"Indian? No."
"Do you like her?"
Joe smiled. "I love her. I wouldn't be here without her." He stood and walked to the window. Six years of hard work, and he was on the verge of getting what he'd lived for: fighter jets. First there was flight training, then Fighter Training School. More years of hard work loomed before him, but he was eager for them. Only a small percentage made it to fighters, but he was going to be one of them.
The cadets in his class who were going on to flight training had already been thinking of fighter call signs, picking theirs out even though they knew some of them would wash out of flight training, and an even greater number would never make it to fighters. But they never thought it would be them; it was always the other guy who washed out, the other guy who didn't have the stuff.
They'd had a lot of fun thinking up those signs, and Joe had sat quietly, a little apart as he always was. Then Richards had pointed at him and said, "You'll be Chief."
Joe had looked up, his face calm and remote. "I'm not a chief." His tone had been even, but Richards had felt a chill.
"All right," he'd agreed. "What do you want to be called?"
Joe had shrugged. "Call me 'Breed.' It's what I am."
Already, though they hadn't even graduated yet, people were calling him Breed Mackenzie. The name would be painted on his helmet, and a lot of people would forget his real name.
Mary had given him this. She'd pushed and prodded, fought for him, taught him. She'd given him his life, up in the blue.

Mary turned into Wolf's arms. She was nude, and his big hand kept stroking down her pale body as if searching out signs of her as-yet-invisible pregnancy. She knew he was worried, but she felt wonderful and tried to reassure him. "I've never felt better. Face it, pregnancy agrees with me." He chuckled and stroked her breasts, lifting each one in turn in his palm. They were fuller now, and more sensitive.

He could almost bring her to satisfaction just with his mouth on her nipples.
"But this is the last one," he said.
"What if it's another boy? Wouldn't you like to try for a girl just once more?"
He groaned, because that was the argument she'd used to talk him into getting her pregnant this time. She was determined to have her four children.
"Let's make a deal. If this one is a girl, there won't be any more. If it's a boy, we'll have one more baby, but that's the limit, regardless of its sex."
"It's a deal," she agreed. She paused. "Have you thought that it's possible you could father a hundred children and they'd all be boys? You may not have any female sperm. Look at your track record, three boys in a row—"
He put his hand on her mouth. "No more. Four is the absolute limit."
She laughed at him and arched her slender body against him. His response was immediate, even after five years of marriage. Later, when he slept, Mary smiled into the darkness and stroked his strong back. This baby was a boy, too, she felt. But the next one—ah, the next one would be the daughter he craved. She was certain of it.

--2 Mackenzie's Mission (1992)--



Prologue

"Man must be trained for war, and woman for
the relaxation of the warriors; all else is folly."
—Friedrich Nietzsche

"Hogwash."
—Linda Howard

He was a legend even before he graduated from the Academy, at least among his own classmates and the underclassmen. As first in his graduating class he had his pick of assignments, and to no one's surprise, he chose fighter jets. The politically savvy all knew that the fastest way to promotion in the Air Force was as an aviator, and fighter wings, with their inherent glamour, had always been the most visible. But those who knew Joe Mackenzie, newly commissioned officer in the United States Air Force, knew he didn't give a damn about promotion, only about flying.
His superiors had doubts about his suitability for fighters, but that was the training he had chosen, and they decided to give him the opportunity. He was six foot three, almost too tall for a fighter jockey. He'd be okay as a bomber pilot, but the dimensions of the cockpit in a fighter meant it would

be a tight fit for him, and the physical demands of G forces were generally better met by men who were less than six feet tall, and of stockier build. Of course, there were exceptions to every rule, and the statistics for the physical build of the best fighter pilots were general profiles, not hard-and-fast rules. So Joe Mackenzie was given his chance at fighter training.

His training instructors found that, despite his height, he was better than competent: he was superb. He was that once-in-a-lifetime jet jockey, the one who set the standards for everyone who came after him. He was peculiarly suited, both physically and mentally, for the job he had chosen. His eyesight was better than twenty-twenty, his reflexes were phenomenal and his cardiovascular condition was so good that he was able to withstand greater G forces than his shorter fellow trainees. He remained at the top in his classes on physics and aerodynamics. He had a light touch with the controls and was willing to spend extra hours in the flight simulator perfecting his skills. Most of all, he had the unteachable quality of "situation awareness," the ability to be aware of everything going on around him in a fluid situation and adjust his actions accordingly. All aviators had to have it to some degree, but only in the best of them was it highly developed. He had an amazing degree of it. By the time Joe Mackenzie earned his wings, he was already known as a "hot stick," one of those with the magic touch.

As a very young captain in the first Gulf War, he downed three enemy aircraft in *one day,* an achievement that, to his relief, wasn't publicized. The reasons for it were political: to ensure better public relations with their allies, the United States Air Force was willing to let pilots from the other countries get the glory. Captain Mackenzie was more than willing to go along with policy. It had been mere chance, on the second day of the war, that had put him in the middle of the toughest resistance the enemy put up during the short length of the hostilities. He hadn't been impressed with the enemy pilots' skills. Nevertheless, for about three minutes it had been a real fur ball, when he and his wingman had been jumped by six enemy fighters. The end result was an almost indecently fast promotion to Major, and Joe Mackenzie, tactical call sign "Breed," was recognized as the fastest of the fast trackers, a fast-burner on his way to a general's star.

During the second Gulf War, Major Mackenzie scored two more official kills in air-to-air combat and was designated an ace. This time there was no way to keep his achievements out of the media, not that the Pentagon

wanted to; it recognized that it had a public-relations gold mine in the handsome half-breed American Indian, who exemplified all of the qualities they most wanted to project. He was given the choice assignments and made lieutenant colonel at the age of thirty-two. It was generally recognized that for Breed Mackenzie, there was nowhere to go but up.

Chapter One

She was the most beautiful bitch he'd ever seen, fast and sleek and deadly. Just looking at her made his heart beat faster. Even parked in the hangar, her engines cold and wheels chocked, she gave the impression of pure speed. Colonel Joe Mackenzie reached out and touched the fuselage, his long fingers caressing her with the light touch of a lover. The dark metallic skin of her airframe had a slick feel to it mat was different from every other fighter he'd flown, and the difference entranced him. He knew it was because her airframe was a revolutionary new composite of thermoplastics, graphite and industrial spider silk, which was far stronger and more flexible than steel, meaning she could withstand far greater force without breaking apart than any aircraft ever before built. Intellectually he knew that, but emotionally he felt that it was because she was so alive. She didn't feel quite like metal; maybe it was the spider silk, but she wasn't as cold to the touch as any other airplane.

Developmental programs were usually given code names that didn't reflect the program's nature, which was why the earlier SR-71 Blackbird had been code named "Oxcart." This particular bird, a second-generation advanced tactical fighter, bore the unusually descriptive code name of Night Wing, and when it went into production it would receive some suitably macho designation like the F-1S Eagle or the F-16 Fighting Falcon, but to Colonel Mackenzie she was "Baby." There were actually five prototypes, and he called them all Baby. The test pilots assigned to the program under his command complained that she—whichever "she" it was—always acted up with them because he had spoiled her for other pilots. Colonel Mackenzie had given them his legendary ice-blue stare and replied, "That's what all my women say." His face had remained perfectly expressionless, leaving his men uncertain if that was the truth or a joke. They suspected it to be the truth.

Joe Mackenzie had flown a lot of hot planes, but Baby was special, not just in her construction and power, but her weapons system. She was truly revolutionary, and she was his; as program manager, it was his responsibility to get the kinks worked out of her so she could go into full production. That was assuming Congress came through with the funding, but General Ramey was confident that there wouldn't be any problem there. For one thing, the manufacturer had brought her in on budget, unlike the overrun fiasco that had killed the A-12 in the last decade.

For a long time stealth technology had detracted from a fighter plane's agility and power, until the advent of supercruise had alleviated some of the power problems. Baby was both stealthy and agile, with vectored thrust that let her turn tighter than any fighter had ever turned before, and at higher speeds. She super-cruised at Mach 2, and broke Mach 3 in afterburner. And her weapons system used adjustable laser firing, ALF, a mild little acronym for what would someday revolutionize warfare. Mackenzie knew he was involved in the making of history. Lasers had been used for targeting for some time, the beam guiding missiles to the selected location, but for the first time lasers were being used as the weapons themselves. Scientists had finally solved the difficulty of a manageable energy source for X-ray lasers and teamed it with sophisticated optics. Sensors in the pilot's helmet allowed him to spot a missile, target or enemy plane *in any direction*, and the adjustable targeting system followed the direction of the sensors in the helmet. No matter how an enemy plane turned and juked it couldn't escape; a target would have to go faster than the speed of light to escape the laser beam, something not likely to happen.

Baby was so complex that only the best of the best had been assigned to this phase of her development, and the security surrounding her was so tight that an ant would have had a hard time getting into the hangar without proper clearance.

"Anything you need, sir?"

Joe turned, shifting his attention to Staff Sergeant Dennis Whiteside, known as "Whitey," who possessed fiery red hair, a multitude of freckles and a mechanical genius that bordered on miraculous where airplanes were concerned. Whitey considered Baby *his* plane and suffered the pilots touching her only because he couldn't figure out a way to prevent it

"Just checking her over before I turn in," Joe replied. "Weren't you supposed to go off duty hours ago?"

Whitey took a rag from his back pocket and gently polished the spot where Joe's fingers had touched the plane. "There were some things I wanted to make sure were done right," he replied. "You're taking her up in the morning, aren't you, sir?"
"Yes."
Whitey grunted. "At least you don't jerk her around the way some of those guys do," he said grouchily.
"If you notice any of my guys treating any of the birds rough, let me know."
"Well, it ain't rough, exactly. It's just that they don't have your touch."
"All the same, I mean what I said."
"Yes, sir."
Joe clapped Whitey on the shoulder and headed for his quarters. The sergeant stared after him for a long minute. He had no doubt that the colonel would indeed make any pilot pray he would die and go to hell just to escape his wrath if any of them were caught being careless or stupid with any of the Night Wing prototypes. Colonel Mackenzie was notorious for accepting nothing less than perfection from his pilots, but at the same time they all knew that he valued his men's lives above all else, and maintenance on the buds had to be top-notch, which was why Whitey was still in me hangar long after he should have been off duty. Mackenzie demanded the best from everyone in this program, with no exceptions. A mistake in maintenance on the ground could lead to the loss of one of these eighty-million-dollar aircraft, or even the death of a pilot. It wasn't a job for anyone with a casual attitude.
As Joe walked through the desert night he saw a light on in one of the offices and turned his steps toward the metal building. He didn't object to people working late, but he wanted everyone to be awake and alert the next day, too. There were some workaholics assigned to the Night Wing project who would work eighteen hours a day if he didn't ride herd on them.
His steps were silent, not because he was trying to sneak up on anyone but because that was how he'd been taught to walk from the time he'd taken his first step. Not that anyone in the offices would have heard him approaching anyway; the air conditioners were humming, trying to offset the late July heat and never quite succeeding. The metal Quonset huts seemed to absorb the blistering sun.
The building was dark except for the light in a cubicle on the left. It was one of the offices used by the civilian laser-targeting team, working on-site

to troubleshoot the glitches that inevitably showed up when a new system was put into operation. Joe remembered that a new technician had been scheduled to arrive that day, to replace one of the original team who had had a slight heart attack a week before. The guy who'd had the attack was doing okay, but his doctor didn't want him working in the hundred-degree-plus heat, so the company had flown in a replacement.

Joe was curious about the replacement, a woman named Caroline Evans. He'd heard the other three members of the team grousing about her, calling her "the Beauty Queen," and their tone hadn't been admiring. The team might be civilian, but he couldn't allow friction within the group to affect their work. If everyone couldn't get along, he would have to tell the laser-systems people to replace their replacement. He wanted to talk to whichever of the team was working late, find out if Ms. Evans had arrived without incident and exactly what the problem was that they didn't want to work with her.

He walked silently up to the open doorway and stood in it for a minute, watching. The woman in the office had to be the Beauty Queen herself, because she sure as hell wasn't anyone he'd ever met before. He would have remembered if he had.

It wasn't any hardship to watch her, that was for certain. His erect posture slowly stiffened as every muscle in his body surged to alert status. He'd been tired, but suddenly adrenaline was humming through his system and all of his senses became acute, just the way they did when he kicked in the afterburners and went ballistic.

She wore a straight red skirt that ended well above her knees. Her shoes were off, and she was leaning back in her chair, her bare feet propped on the desk. Joe leaned his shoulder against the door frame, leisurely surveying the smooth, curved legs that had been exposed. No stockings; the heat made them impractical. Nice legs. Better than nice. Verging on stupendous.

A sheaf of computer printouts were on her lap, and she was checking each item, referring occasionally to a textbook beside her. A cup of pale green tea was gently steaming within easy reach of her often blindly reaching hand. Her hair was a pale, bell-shaped curve, combed straight back from her face in the classic style and just long enough to bounce on her shoulders. He could see only part of her face, enough to note her high cheekbones and full lips.

Suddenly he wanted her to face him. He wanted to see her eyes, hear her voice.
"Time to shut it down for the night," he said.
She shot up from the chair with a stifled shriek, tea spilling in one direction and the computer printout in another, long legs flying as she brought them down to the floor, the chair sent spinning across the room to crash into the filing cabinets. She whirled to face him, one hand pressed to her breast as if she could physically calm her heartbeat. A very shapely breast, he noticed, for her hand had pulled the fabric of her cotton blouse tight across her flesh. Anger flashed like lightning across her face, then was just as suddenly gone as her eyes widened. "Oh my God," she said in a hushed tone. "It's G.I. Joe."
He caught the subtle undertone of sarcasm, and his black eyebrows lifted. *"Colonel* G.I. Joe."
"So I see," she said admiringly. "A full bird colonel. And a ring-knocker," she added, pointing to his academy ring and using the less than complimentary term for an academy graduate. "Either you mugged a colonel and stole his insignia, had a fantastic face-lift and dyed your hair black, or you have a sponsor with some heavy-duty juice who's rushing you through me grades."
He kept his expression bland. "Maybe I'm damn good at what I do."
"Promotion on merit?" she asked, as if it were a concept so impossible it was beyond consideration. "Naahh."
He was accustomed to women reacting to him in varying ways, ranging from fascination to a certain intimidation that bordered on fear, always based on a very physical awareness of him. He was also used to commanding respect, if not liking. None of that was in Caroline Evans' expression. She hadn't taken her eyes off him for a second, her gaze as steady and piercing as a gunslinger's. Yeah, that was it; she was facing him like an adversary.
He straightened away from the door frame and held out his hand, abruptly deciding to put the situation on a professional standing and let her know who she was dealing with. "Colonel Joe Mackenzie, project manager."
Service protocol stated that shaking hands was a woman's choice, that a male officer should never extend his hand to a woman first, but he wanted to feel her hand in his and sensed that if he gave her the option, even that touch wouldn't be allowed.

She didn't hesitate but firmly clasped his hand. "Caroline Evans, replacement for Boyce Walton on the laser team." Two quick up and down pumps, then she withdrew her hand.
Since she was barefoot, he could accurately estimate her height as around five-four, the top of her head was even with his collarbone. The difference in their sizes didn't intimidate her, even though she had to look up to meet his gaze. Her eyes were a dark green, he saw, framed by dark lashes and brows that suggested the gold of her hair was chemically achieved.
He nodded toward the printout on the floor. "Why are you working so late, especially on your first day on the job? Is anything wrong that I need to know about?"
"Not that I know of," she replied, stooping down to pick up the accordion of paper. "I was just double-checking some items."
"Why? What made you think of it?"
She gave him an impatient look. "I'm a chronic double-checker. I always double-check that the oven is off, the iron unplugged, the door locked. I look both ways *twice* before I cross a road."
"You haven't found anything wrong?"
"No, of course not. I've already said so."
He relaxed once he was assured that nothing was wrong with the targeting system and resumed his leisurely and enjoyable survey of Caroline Evans as she took a roll of paper towels from a desk drawer and used a couple of sheets to blot up the spilled tea. She bent and twisted with a fluid ease that struck him as sexy. Everything she had done so far, even the barely veiled challenge of her gaze, had struck him as sexy. His loins tightened in response.
She tossed the wet paper towels in the trash and slipped her feet into her shoes. "Nice meeting you, Colonel," she said without looking at him. "See you tomorrow."
"I'll walk you to your quarters."
"No thanks."
The immediate, casual dismissal of his offer irritated him. "It's late, and you're alone. I'm walking you to your quarters."
She did look at him then, turning to face him and putting her hands on her hips. "I appreciate the offer, Colonel, but I don't need those kinds of favors."
"*Those kinds* of favors? What kind are we talking about?"

"The kind that do more harm than good. Look, you're the head honcho. If anyone sees you walking me to my quarters, within two days I'll be hearing snide comments about how I wouldn't be on the team if I wasn't playing footsie with you. It's a hassle I can do without."
"Ah," he said as understanding dawned. "You've run into this before, haven't you? No one thinks you can look like that and have a brain, too."
She stared at him belligerently. "What do you mean, 'look like that'? Just how do I look?"
She had the temperament of a hedgehog, but Joe had to fight the urge to put his arms around her and tell her that he would fight her battles for her from now on. She wouldn't appreciate the gesture, and he wasn't certain why he wanted to make it, since she appeared more than capable of waging her own wars. If he were smart, he would play it safe, make some noncommittal comment to keep from treading on her toes any further, but he hadn't become a fighter pilot because he wanted to play it safe. "Fetching," he replied, and his eyes were hard and bright and hungry.
She blinked, as if startled. She took a step back and said, "Oh," in a soft, befuddled tone.
"You have to know you're attractive," he pointed out.
She blinked again. "Looks shouldn't enter into it. You look like a walking recruiting poster, but it hasn't hurt your career, has it?"
"I'm not defending discrimination," he said. "You asked the question, and I answered it. You look fetching."
"Oh." She was watching him warily now as she sidled past
He put his hand on her arm, stopping her. The feel of her smooth, warm flesh under his palm tempted him to explore, but he resisted. "If anyone here hassles you, Caroline, come to me."
She darted an alarmed look at his hand on her arm. "Uh—yeah, sure."
"Even if it's a member of your own team. You're civilians, but this is my project I can have anyone replaced if he causes trouble."
His touch was making her visibly jittery, and he studied her for a long minute, his brows drawing together in a slight frown, before he let her go. "I mean it," he said in a gentler tone. "Come to me if you have any trouble. I know you don't want me to walk you to your quarters, but I'm going in that direction anyway, since I'm turning in, too. I'll give you a thirty-second head start, so we won't be walking together. Is that okay?"
"Thirty seconds isn't very long."

He shrugged. "It'll put about thirty yards between us. Take it or leave it." He checked his watch. "Starting now."
She immediately turned and fled. That was the only word for it. She all but hiked up that tight skirt and ran. Joe's eyebrows climbed in silent question. When the thirty seconds were up, he left the building and caught sight of her slim figure, barely visible in the darkness and still moving at a fast clip. All the way to his own quarters, he pondered on what had turned an Amazon into a skittish filly.
Caroline slammed and locked the door to her Spartan quarters and leaned against the wood as she released her breath in a big whoosh. She felt as if she'd just had a narrow escape from a wild animal. What was the Air Force thinking, letting that man run loose? He should be locked up somewhere in the bowels of the Pentagon, where they could use him for their posters but keep the susceptible women of America safe.
Maybe it was his eyes, as pale blue and piercing as the lasers she worked on. Maybe it was the way he towered over her, or the graceful power of his muscular body. Maybe it was his deep voice, the particular note in it when he said she was "fetching," or the heat of his lean, callused hand when he'd touched her. Maybe it was all of that, but what had all but panicked her had been the hungry, predatory gleam in those eyes when he'd looked at her.
She'd been doing well up until then. She had definitely been at her off-putting best, both arrogant and dismissive, which had never before failed to keep men at a safe distance. It was a trade-off; it kept her from being friends with her co-workers, but it also stopped any sexual advances before they started. She had battled her way out of so many clinches during college and graduate school and her early days on the job, that she had learned to go on the offensive from the beginning. With all of that experience, she should have been able to keep her composure, but one look from Colonel "Laser-Eye" Mackenzie, one slightly admiring comment, and she had lost both her composure and her common sense. She had been ignominiously routed.
Well, that was what happened when you had Ph.D.s for parents. They had seen the signs of superior intelligence in their only offspring and taken immediate steps to give her the schooling she deserved. All through elementary and high school she had been the youngest in her class, due to her accelerated progress. She hadn't had one date in high school; she had been too weird, too gangly and awkward as she went through puberty two or three years after her classmates.

It hadn't been any better in college. She had started her freshman year right after her sixteenth birthday, and what college man in his right mind would go out with a girl who was legally still jailbait, when there were so many legal lovelies both willing and available?

Isolated and lonely, Caroline had devoted herself to her studies and found herself finishing her senior courses during her eighteenth year. At about the same time the guys in her classes had realized that the Evans girl might be an egghead, but she was easy on the eyes. This time, there was no issue of age to protect her. Having never learned dating skills with anyone her own age, she was totally at a loss on how to handle these… these *octopuses* who suddenly couldn't seem to keep their hands off her. Disconcerted, alarmed, she had withdrawn further into her studies and begun developing a prickly shield for protection.

Her transformation as she reached maturity wasn't drastic enough to equal that of an ugly duckling into a swan; she had simply grown from a gangly adolescent into a woman. Her menses had been late in coming, as if her body had to balance nature by dawdling along while her mind raced ahead. It was all a matter of bad tuning. When her classmates were going through puberty, she was still literally playing with dolls. When she went through puberty, they were already settled into the dating game. She never matched them in terms of physical or emotional maturity. When she was ready to begin dating, she found herself being groped by boys accustomed to a much more sophisticated level of intimacy.

In the end, it was just easier to drive them all away.

So here she was, twenty-eight years old, genius IQ, a bona fide specialist in light amplification and optic targeting, possessed of a Ph.D. in physics, reduced to idiocy and panic because a man had said she was "fetching."

It was disgusting.

It was also a bit frightening, because she sensed Colonel Mackenzie hadn't been alienated as she had intended; instead, he'd looked like a man who enjoyed a challenge.

She hit herself on the forehead. How could she have been such an idiot? The colonel was *& jet jockey,* for heaven's sake. He was a member of a different breed, a man who positively thrived on challenge. The way to keep from attracting his attention was to appear meek and mild, with maybe a little simpering thrown in. Problem was, she didn't know how to simper.

She should have gone to a finishing school rather than graduate school. She would have taken Simpering 101 over and over until she had it nailed. Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe she could act sweet and helpless enough to fool him. No—that would invite attention from the men who *did* like that sort of behavior in a woman. She was caught—damned if she did and damned if she didn't.

The only thing left to do was put up a good fight.

When Joe reached his quarters he stripped out of his uniform, then stood under a cool shower until he began to feel human again. The desert in July was a real bitch, sucking the moisture from his body until even his eyeballs felt dry, but Baby required tight security, and Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada supplied that, in spades. Despite the discomfort and spartan conditions, he was grateful for the security and didn't look forward to taking the wraps off Baby, as would happen when Congress voted on funding. The media would see her then, not that her revolutionary nature was evident in her appearance; her design wasn't radically different from that of the F-22, which was what made it possible for them to do the test flights at Nellis instead of Edwards in California, where test flights were traditionally made. Snoops looked for something different at Edwards, but here at Nellis, with so many different types of aircraft taking part in the war games they conducted, she wasn't so obvious.

The other pilots based here had to notice that they were doing test flights with an aircraft that wasn't exactly like the F-22, but no one who wasn't working on the program was allowed a close look at the Night Wing prototypes, and security was a way of life here anyway. Baby's differences were in her skin and in the electronics suite, her weapons system; when she was unveiled, she would galvanize every hostile espionage agency in the world, and security would have to be even tighter, though he didn't see how it could.

He'd been thinking of Baby, but suddenly the image of Caroline Evans filled his mind and he grinned, wondering what it would take to tame the little hedgehog. His skin suddenly felt hot and tight, despite the cool water, so he shut off the shower and stepped out of the cubicle. It he could get her in the shower with him, they would probably turn the water to steam.

He stood in front of the air conditioner, letting the cold air blow over his wet, naked body and enjoying the shivers that rippled over him, but it didn't do much to ease the sense of fullness in his loins. Grimly he pushed

thoughts of Ms. Evans out of his mind. When he was dry enough not to drip, he went, still naked, into the tiny kitchen area and slapped a sandwich together. The freedom from clothes let something inside him relax. He had spent almost half his life in the military, surrounded by regulations and wearing uniforms, and he felt comfortable with it at home, but at the same time there was still a primitive part of him that sometimes said, "That's enough," and he had to strip.

He had grown up on a horse ranch in Wyoming and he returned there every chance he got; spending a week or two riding the roughest broncs on the ranch satisfied the same wild restlessness in him, but he was tied up with the Night Wing project and couldn't get any free time, so the clothes had to go. The only garment he ever regretted having to remove was his flightsuit; *if* he could just spend all his time in the air, he'd be all right.

Damn it, the higher he was promoted, the less he flew. Responsibilities and paperwork took up more and more of his time. He had accepted the position of project manager on Night Wing only because he'd been guaranteed he would be able to fly the babies. The Air Force had wanted its best in the cockpits of the new planes, and the pilots assigned were all top-notch, but more than that, it had wanted the hands-on opinion of the best of the best, and Colonel Joe Mackenzie still stood head and shoulders above all the others.

Joe wasn't vain about his skill with a fighter, because he'd worked too damn hard to attain it. He'd been born with the intellect, eyesight and lightning-fast reflexes, but the rest was the result of countless hours of study, of practice, of drilling himself in the flight simulator until every reaction was automatic and instantaneous. Even at the age of thirty-five his reaction time was still faster than that of the young Turks coming out of flight school, and his eyesight was still better than twenty-twenty. He had a lot of flying time left, if the military would let him have it. He'd shot up through the ranks so fast that he would probably get his first star in another year, and then he'd be lucky if he could wrangle enough flying time to remain qualified.

The alternative was to resign his commission to take a job with an aircraft manufacturer as a test pilot, throwing away his years in the military. He liked the Air Force, didn't want to leave it, but the idea of being grounded was unbearable. Life would be flat without the challenge of mastering both nature and machine, and knowing his life hung in the balance if he didn't do it right.

Caroline slid into his mind again, a challenge of a different sort plain in her gunslinger's eyes. He could plainly picture the color of those eyes, dark green mostly, mingled with a bit of blue, and gold flecks lighting the depths. The thought of those eyes looking up at him as he moved over her in bed made his heart begin pounding hard and fast, just the way he would take her.

He wanted to make the little hedgehog purr like a kitten.

Chapter Two

Caroline had stringent comfort requirements, which meant it sometimes took her a while to get dressed. If something didn't feel right on a particular day, she took it off and put on something else. Before she left for work each morning she sat, stretched, twisted, moved her arms back and forth, then lifted them over her head to see if her clothes were going to irritate her during the day. She couldn't bear being distracted by an uncomfortable seam or an aggravating fit.

Women's fashions were a sore point with her. Why were most designers men? She thought it should be against the law for a man to design women's clothes. She had decided while still in adolescence that men had no idea how uncomfortable women's fashions usually were and really didn't care, since they themselves weren't called upon to spend hours standing in tendon-shortening high heels, encased in sweltering hosiery, bound either by bras or dresses tight enough to take over the job of lifting and separating, or pushing together to create cleavage, according to the dictates of the occasion.

And why were women's fashions made out of flimsy material, while the temperatures in most offices and restaurants was always set low, so the men in their suits would be comfortable? She found this stupid on two counts: one, why were men required to wear jackets anyway—and was there anything more ridiculous than that remnant of the breastplate, the necktie, that they knotted around their throats like a hangman's noose, interfering with a few basic things like breathing and swallowing—and why weren't women allowed to wear coats, too, if the men felt unable to give theirs up? Fashion, in her mind, consisted of equal parts stupidity and lunacy. In a

logical world, people would wear functional clothing, like jeans and loafers and sweatshirts.
She couldn't change the world, but she could control her own small part of it by insisting on her own comfort. Today she chose a full, gathered white skirt mat came to midcalf, with an elastic waistband. She topped it with an oversize white T-shirt and twisted two scarves, one melon and one aqua, together to be tied around her waist as a belt. Her shoes were white flats. She was cool, coordinated and comfortable, just the way she wanted to be.
During the night she had tried to analyze just what it was about Colonel Mackenzie that had so discomfited her; other men had come on to her like gangbusters and she'd managed to handle it, so why had his rather mild remark, coupled with a look that wasn't mild at all, sent her into such panic? It was definitely the look that had done it. She'd never seen eyes like those before, pale blue diamonds glittering in a bronzed face, so piercing it felt as if they were cutting right into her flesh, and she'd sensed that the man behind them wasn't like any man she'd met before, either.
There were several possible reasons, but none that she could pin down as the primary cause of her reaction. She would just have to handle herself as well as possible, keep her guard up and try to make certain there were always other people around whenever she had dealings with the colonel. Why couldn't he have come around earlier the day before, when the rest of the team had still been working? If he had, she would have slept better last night.
She glanced around, making certain that everything was switched off, then patted her skirt pockets to assure herself that her keys were in there. Pockets were required; every outfit she wore had to have pockets, because handbags were another of her pet peeves. Why were women condemned to lug them around their entire fives? Why couldn't women have pockets like men? Because fashion said that it ruined the "lines" of their clothes. Because women were thought to be too vain. Because men were continually handing items to women with a casual, "Put this in your purse," meaning, "So you can carry it and I won't have to." For women to be truly liberated, she thought, they should have burned their purses instead of their brassieres. And then thrown their high-heeled shoes onto the bonfire.
To keep from having to carry a bag, she had stocked her desk the day before with the grooming items she was likely to need during any given day. After

all, not liking purses was no reason to go without lipstick. She did have personal standards to uphold.
She was normally the first person at work, and that morning was no exception. She liked mornings, and dawn in the desert was something special, with everything so clear and crisply outlined. Later in the day heat waves would blur the edges of the landscape, but right now it was perfect. She hummed as she made coffee. No matter how hot it got, coffee was a necessity in every workplace she'd ever seen.
She tore the wrapper off a honey bun, slapped the pastry into the microwave and zapped it for ten seconds. Breakfast was now ready. She settled into her chair and began rereading a report on the targeting system's last performance as she absently pinched bites from the pastry.
Thirty minutes later Cal Gilchrist came in, looking surprised when he saw her at her desk. "You're in early," he said as he went straight to the coffeepot "I didn't see you at chow."
"I ate a honey bun here." Having finished reading, she tossed the report aside. Of the other three members of the team, Cal was the most amiable. To be honest, she admitted, he was more amiable than even herself. He was good-natured, friendly and capable, maybe thirty years old, still single and he enjoyed an active social life. She had met him before, but this was the first time they'd worked on a project together. They actually worked for two different companies, she with Boling-Wahl Optics, which had developed the laser targeting system, and Cal with DataTech, which had teamed with Boling-Wahl on the computer program that ran the system.
"There's another test at 0800," Cal said as he sipped his coffee. "When Adrian and Yates get here, we'll all go to the control room so we can listen in on the flights. Colonel Mackenzie's going up today. He always comes back to the control room after a flight, and I'll introduce you to him."
"We've already met," she replied. "He came by last night before I quit for the day."
"What did you think of him?"
She thought for a moment, trying to come up with a concise answer, and finally settled on "Scary."
Cal laughed. "Yeah, I wouldn't want to cross him. I would have sworn that fighter pilots didn't respect anything, but they sure as hell respect him, in the air and on the ground. One of them said mat Mackenzie is the best pilot

in the Air Force, period. That's saying a lot, considering none of this group are slouches."
The other two members of the team arrived. Yates Korleski, a short, sturdy, balding man, was the senior member and head of the team. Adrian Pendley was Caroline's fly in the ointment on this particular assignment He was tall and good-looking, divorced, and unrelentingly negative about having Caroline on the team.
When she had first gone to work for Boling-Wahl he had given her the rush, and he'd never forgiven her for the brush-off she had given him in return. He was good at his job, though, so she was determined to work with him, even if it meant ignoring his incessant little gibes.
He walked past her without speaking, but Yates paused beside her desk. "Did you get settled in okay?"
"Yes, thanks. Met the head honcho last night, too."
Yates grinned. "What did you think of him?"
"Like I told Cal, he's a bit scary."
"Just don't ever make a mistake, or you'll find out *how* scary."
"No allowing for human error, huh?"
"Not with his birds or his men."
Yates wandered off in the direction of the coffeepot, and Caroline decided that maybe her panic of the night before had been justified. Yates had been working on defense contracts for twenty years, so if he was impressed, the colonel wasn't any ordinary joe. She grimaced at the inadvertent mental play on words.
At the appointed time they all trooped to the airfield, where the flights were being monitored. Their IDs were checked before they were allowed to enter the control room, reminding her of the tight security. The place swarmed with guards, and she knew that the Night Wing project was only one of several going on. There were a lot of civilians working at Nellis, people with both the highest credentials and the highest security rating. Just being here meant that her background had been checked so thoroughly that her file probably even contained the brand of breakfast cereal she'd liked best as a child.
The control room was a busy place, lined with monitors and people manning them. Practically every part of the Night Wing aircraft incorporated some radical change from how aircraft had been designed in the past, so there were a lot of different companies and defense contractors

working to make certain everything was operational. A group of pilots had gathered, too, some in flightsuits and some in regular service uniforms. Several whistles filled the air when they caught sight of Caroline, and one grinning pilot clasped his hands over his heart
"I'm in love," he announced to the group at large.
"Don't pay any attention to him, ma'am," another of the pilots said. "That's the third time this week, and it's only Tuesday. He's fickle, very fickle."
"But good-looking," the first pilot said in defense of himself. "So what about it, beautiful? Want to get married, live in a rose-covered cottage and have beautiful children?"
"I'm allergic to roses," she said.
"And men," Adrian muttered behind her, just loud enough for her to hear. She ignored him.
"Forget the roses," the pilot said grandly. The tag on his shirt said his name was Major Austin Deale. "I'm adaptable. And fun. Did I mention that we'll have lots of fun?"
A deep voice came over the speaker, and as if a switch had been thrown, the pilots stopped their bantering and turned toward the monitor. It took Caroline a moment to realize that it was an in-cockpit camera, letting them see what the pilot was doing and seeing.
"There are four planes up today," Lieutenant Colonel Eric Picollo said, setting up the situation for them. "Two Night Wings and two F-22s. The F-22 is the only thing in production fast enough to give the prototypes a good test. The Night Wings are doing some stress maneuvers, and then they'll test the targeting system."
The deep voice came from the speakers again, laconic and matter-of-fact, as if the man weren't screaming along faster than the speed of sound high above the desert floor. Caroline shivered, and goose bumps rose on her arms.
"Go to MIL."
"Going to MIL," another voice answered.
"Military power throttle setting," Cal, who was standing just to her right, whispered. "All or more of an engine's rated thrust."
She nodded her understanding, her attention fixed on the monitor. All she could see of Colonel Mackenzie was his gloved hands and long legs, with the throttle between them, but she knew it was him she was watching rather

than the other Night Wing pilot. There was just something about the way he moved.
The pilots took the aircraft through a series of maneuvers, and the sensors embedded in the aircraft's skin sent back readings of the stress levels on the airframe.
"Twenty degrees alpha," the deep voice said, confirming what the digital readout on the computer screen was telling them. "Thirty… forty… fifty… sixty."
One of the pilots standing behind her muttered, "Damn," in a nervous tone.
"Alpha is angle of attack," Major Deale whispered, noticing Caroline's puzzled look. His own expression was tense. "Most high-performance aircraft can only do about twenty degrees before they stall out. We've taken Baby to fifty degrees, because her vectored thrust gives better control, but even the X-29 wasn't controllable above seventy degrees."
"Seventy," said the calm voice. "Seventy-five."
The major had turned pale. He was staring at the changing numbers on the computer screen as if he could control them by willpower alone.
"Seventy-seven… seventy-nine… eighty… controls feel a little spongy. That's enough for now, leveling out."
"How'd Mad Cat do?" someone asked.
"Sixty-five," another someone replied, and the group chuckled.
"Was that his alpha, or his pucker factor?"
"I was sweating at fifty."
"We'll have to haul Mad Cat out of the cockpit. He won't have any starch left in his legs at all."
"Bet Breed's heart rate didn't even go up. He bleeds ice water, man, pure ice water."
Next, the aircraft pulled both negative and positive Gs, provoking more comments as the speakers carried the sounds of the grunts the pilots made to force more oxygen into their brains and keep from blacking out A trained pilot could normally withstand up to six positive Gs before gray-out began, but with specialized breathing techniques tolerance could be raised to about nine Gs for short periods of time.
The colonel was pulling ten Gs.
"Level out, level out," a captain said under his breath.
Major Deale was sweating. "Don't do this to me," he muttered. "Come on, Breed. Don't push it any further."

"Levelling out," a calm voice said over the radio, and she heard the quiet release of air from several pairs of lungs.
"That son of a bitch is a genetic freak," the captain said, shaking his head. *"Nobody* is supposed to be able to tolerate that. How long?"
"Not long," the second lieutenant at the monitor replied. "He actually hit ten for about four-tenths of a second. He's done it before."
"I can only tolerate nine for that long. And he was making sense when he talked! I'm telling you, he's a genetic freak."
"Gawdamighty, think what he must've been like ten years ago."
"About the same as now," Major Deale said.
The next series of tests involved the laser targeting, and Caroline edged her way closer to the monitors. She felt oddly shaky inside, and she tried to gather her thoughts. When she had been chosen to replace Walton on the test site, she had done some quick research on jet aircraft, and that, coupled with her general technical knowledge, told her exactly how dangerous those maneuvers had been. He could have lost control of the aircraft at such extreme angles of attack, or he could have blacked out pulling so many Gs and not regained consciousness in tune to keep from drilling the aircraft nose-first into the desert floor. The reactions of the other pilots told their own tale.
Adrian slipped in front of her, effectively blocking her view, since he was so much taller. Caroline brought her mind back to the current situation. She had no doubt he had done it deliberately, and if she let him get away with it he would only do something worse the next time. "Excuse me, Adrian," she said politely. "Since you're so tall, let me stand in front of you so we both can see."
Yates looked up and smiled, either not seeing or choosing to ignore the sour expression on Adrian's face. "Good idea. Step up in front, Caroline."
The targeting test went well. They were currently sighting in on stationary targets, and all of the components performed within the acceptable range. The data streamed across the screen, each item swiftly checked and noted against the hard-copy lists they all carried.
The four aircraft landed safely, and the atmosphere in the control room suddenly lightened to an almost giddy buzz. The laser team stood around Lieutenant Colonel Picollo and went over the rest results with him. Caroline was initially surprised at his knowledge of the subject, then realized that she shouldn't be. After all, he and the other pilots had been working on this

project for some time; they would have had to be brain-dead not to absorb some of the information. "The colonel may have more questions," he finally said, "but it looks like we can start testing how well it targets and tracks a moving object now."

An arm slipped around her waist, and Caroline went rigid. Her head whipped around. Major Deale grinned at her as his arm tightened. Behind him, she could see the other pilots watching and grinning, too. They all looked like posters for a dental convention. Dismay filled her. Damn, it was starting already.

"So, beautiful, where do you want to go for dinner tonight?" the major asked.

"Hands off, Daffy," came a deceptively mild voice behind them. "Dr. Evans will be with me tonight."

There was no mistaking the speaker's identity. Even if she hadn't recognized those smooth, deep tones, she would have known by the way her heart began pulsing wildly and her lungs suddenly constricted, making it difficult to breathe.

They all turned around at once. Mackenzie was still in his flightsuit, helmet under his arm. His black hair was drenched with sweat and plastered to his skull, and his eyes were bloodshot from pulling Gs. His expression was calm and remote as he looked at them.

"I saw her first," Major Deale protested, but he dropped his arm from around her waist "Damn it, Breed, you can't just take one look and decide __"

"Yes I can," Mackenzie said, then turned to Picollo and began firing questions at him.

The major turned and gave Caroline a slow, considering look, as if he were really seeing her for the first time, and maybe he was. Until then she had been just a reasonably pretty face, a lark, but now he had to look at her as a person. "I've never seen Breed do that before, and I've known him for fifteen years," he said thoughtfully.

"I don't know him at all," Caroline replied in a tart voice. "I mean, I met him last night. Is he always that autocratic?"

"Breed? Autocratic?" The major pursed his lips.

"Despotic," Caroline elaborated helpfully. "Dictatorial. Peremptory."

"Oh, *that* kind of autocratic. You mean, does he make a habit of commandeering a woman's company for dinner?"

"That narrows it down nicely."
"Nope. First time. He usually has to beat women off with a stick. They love him to death. It's the glamour of his profession, you know, the lure of the wild. Women *looove* uniforms, but underneath he's really dull and boring."
"Daffy…" The calm voice was both patient and warning.
The major looked over Caroline's shoulder and broke into a smile. "I was just singing your praises."
"I heard."
Mackenzie was right at her elbow, but she didn't dare glance at him. She had specifically asked him the night before not to single her out in any way, but the very next time she met him he had all but hung a sign around her neck that said "Mackenzie's Woman." She struggled to subdue the impulse to sink her fist into his belly. For one thing, violence was seldom the answer to anything. For another, he was the project manager, and it would be a very stupid career move. For yet another, he looked like he was made of tempered steel and it would probably break her hand.
So she did the prudent thing and concentrated on Major Deale. "Daffy? As in duck?"
"No," Mackenzie said with grim relish. "As in petunia."
"As in flower child," added the captain, who had been in the group watching the monitors.
"As *in… blooming idiot*," several others said in unison.
"Petunia," Caroline repeated. "Flowers. Daffy Deale. Daffydeale. *Daffodil!"* she finished with a peal of laughter.
The major gave Mackenzie a dirty look. "I used to have a good, macho nickname. Concise. Thought provoking. Provocative. 'Big.' That's a good nickname, isn't it? Big Deale. It made women think. Was it just a play on my name, or was there a deeper meaning there? Then this… this spoilsport started calling me Daffy, and Petunia, and I got stuck with it."
Mackenzie smiled. Caroline glimpsed it from the comer of her eye, and the reaction she had been trying to ignore was back in full force. She felt simultaneously hot and cold. Shivers ran up her back, but her skin felt flushed.
"Could you see me in my office in half an hour, Dr. Evans?" the colonel asked now. She hated the way he phrased something as a question when the underlying tone made it an order.
She turned and smiled brightly at him. "If you insist, Colonel."

His eyes gleamed with recognition of the way she had forced him to make it an outright order, but he didn't hesitate. "I do."
"Half an hour, then."
As she and the others walked back to their own offices, Adrian paused beside her. "Smart move," he said, his hostility plain. "Snuggle up to the head man and it doesn't matter if you screw up on the job."
She kept her eyes straight ahead. "I don't screw up on the job." There wasn't any point in denying that she had any sort of relationship with Mackenzie, so she didn't waste the effort.
Cal glanced back, saw Adrian walking beside her, and slowed his steps to allow them to come even with him. "The complicated stuff starts with the moving targets, but so far there haven't been many problems with the program. It's almost scary how well the tests have gone."
Adrian walked on ahead without speaking, and Cal whistled softly through his teeth. "He's not the president of your fan club, is he? When we heard you were going to be the replacement he made some snide remarks, but I didn't figure it was open warfare. What's the deal?"
"Personality conflict," Caroline replied. Trying to place the blame was another pointless exercise.
He looked worried. "We have to function well as a team, or Colonel Mackenzie will have us all replaced, and that won't look good on our records. They're under a deadline with these tests. They want something good to show Congress and the media when the vote for funding comes up, and that's in a few weeks, I think."
"I can ignore Adrian," she assured him.
"I hope so. I'll try to be a buffer when I can, but at some point the two of you will have to work together."
"When it comes to work, I think both of us are professional enough to put our differences aside. But thanks for the thought."
Cal nodded, then grinned at her. "So, the good colonel's interested. He made it pretty plain, didn't he?"
"Without reason," she said grimly.
"Maybe from your way of thinking, but not from his."
It was foolish of her, but she began to look forward to meeting Colonel Mackenzie in the privacy of his office. Project manager be damned, she was going to tell him a few things. At the appointed time, she got directions to

the appropriate Quonset hut and marched across the tarmac with anger propelling every stride.
The outer desk was occupied by Sergeant Vrska, a burly young man who looked better suited to a pro-football team than a desk, but he greeted Caroline pleasantly and ushered her into the colonel's private office.
Mackenzie had showered and changed into his summer service uniform; the blue of the material only intensified the pale blue of his irises. He leaned back in his chair and watched her calmly, as if waiting for her explosion.
Caroline considered exploding, even though he was obviously expecting it. For one thing, it would release a great deal of tension. Losing her temper, however, would only give the advantage to him. There was no invitation to take a seat, but she did so anyway, then crossed her legs and leaned back, her manner making it plain that the opening gambit was his.
"I read your file," he said. "Impressive credentials. You were always ahead of your age group in school, began college at sixteen, B.S. degree at eighteen, master's at nineteen, got your doctorate at twenty-one. Boling-Wahl considers you one of the most brilliant physicists in the country, if not the world."
She didn't know what she had expected, but a listing of her accomplishments wasn't it She gave him a wary look.
"You've never dated," he continued. Alarm shot through her, and she sat up straight, her thoughts darting around as she tried to anticipate where he was going with that line. "Not in high school, which is halfway understandable, considering your age and study load, but not in college or graduate school, either. You've never had a boyfriend, period. In short, Dr. Evans, you don't have any experience at all in handling a rowdy bunch like my men. It upset you when Major Deale put his arm around your waist"
She didn't speak, but continued to watch him.
"We all have to work together, because we have a lot to do and not much time left to do it in. I don't want morale wrecked by hostility, and I don't want you to suffer behavior from my men that makes you uncomfortable. They're men, and they live their lives flying on the edge of disaster. They're wild and arrogant, and they need to blow off steam, typically with booze and women and dumb stunts. One way to keep them from hitting on you is to turn this base into a war zone, with everybody disliking you and not cooperating with you, which won't get the work done. The other way is to let them think you're mine."

She didn't like his phrasing. "That's so Neanderthal, it has hair all over it"
"They won't bother you then," he continued, ignoring her comment "In fact they'll be downright protective."
She stood up and began pacing his office. "I just want to be left alone so I can work. Is that such a big thing to ask? Why should I have to hide behind a false relationship?"
"For one thing, they all assume that you've had the normal experiences of a woman your age."
She scowled at him, not liking the way he'd phrased the sentence. Her "age" indeed! He'd made it sound as if she were almost ready to file for Social Security.
"It won't occur to them that their actions could actually be frightening to you," he continued. "There's also the possibility that some of their teasing won't be so lighthearted, that a couple of them might make some serious moves on you and could turn ugly when you slap them down. I can't afford the disruption to the program if I had to bring disciplinary charges against any of my men. I need them, and I need you. Even if they knew you're so inexperienced, it wouldn't keep them from trying to get in your pants. If anything, knowing that you're a virgin would make it worse. The best thing is to mark you out of bounds for them by pretending you're involved with someone else, and the only man on the base they wouldn't consider poaching on is me. So from now on, as far as they're concerned, you're mine. All you have to do is act halfway friendly to me in front of them, rather than glaring at me as if you'd like to have my head on a platter."
"With an apple stuffed in your mouth," she muttered. Then the details of what he'd just said hit her and she stared at him in mortification, her eyes widening and color burning in her cheeks. Damn it, why hadn't she hooted with laughter when he'd talked about her being a virgin? Now it was too late to deny it.
Joe was still watching her with that calm, remote expression, but his eyes were narrowed and strangely intense.
She couldn't meet that penetrating gaze. Her embarrassment was almost unbearable. She summoned her last dregs of composure and said, "All right" Then, for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, she succumbed to the powerful urge to run from him.

Chapter Three

For several minutes after she had literally run from his office, Joe remained leaning back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head and a small, satisfied smile curving the corners of his firm mouth.

So she was a virgin. He had only been guessing, but it had been a good guess. An experienced woman wouldn't have been so embarrassed or at such total loss about what to say or do. Poor little darling. For all her intelligence, she was a babe in the woods when it came to men and sex, and the reaction she had learned in her youth, when some idiot had probably scared the hell out of her by grabbing at her, had become her standard way of dealing with a man's attention.

He had been in the office before dawn, his mind on her rather than the coming flight and on impulse he had requested her file. It had been interesting reading.

From the time she had started school, she had been separated from her own age group, and she had responded to the inevitable social alienation by devoting herself to her studies, thereby widening the gulf as she outpaced her schoolmates. That wasn't exactly what had been in her file, of course; the impersonal papers had listed only numbers and accomplishments, except for the detailed security check, which had noted the lack of a personal relationship with a man—ever—but neither her psychological profile nor a detailed investigation had revealed any hint of homosexuality. Her work record did reveal a few instances when Dr. Evans hadn't gotten along with a co-worker, always male, but as the field of physics was dominated by men that wasn't in itself meaningful.

Remembering her reaction to him the night before, Joe had begun thinking. Was she so bristly because she had always been the odd man out, socially, emotionally and physically, during her childhood and adolescence? Her own age group would have shunned her, and her classmates wouldn't have been interested in socializing with someone who, compared to them, was a child. By the time she was physically mature and old enough for it not to matter, the pattern was set and she had so many defenses in place that no one could get past all the thorns.

The only way for a man to get close to her was for her to open the gate herself, something that wasn't likely to happen. But then he had seen the way she tensed when Daffy had put his arm around her waist, and the

answer had flashed into his mind. A second later he had put his plan into action.

Her work was important to her. For that, she would tolerate the fiction of having a relationship with him, even though she had made it plain the night before that she didn't want to be gossiped about. He knew she was going to be gossiped about under any circumstances, because she just wasn't the type of woman who faded into the woodwork. Given the choice of having to pretend to be involved with him and putting up with the gossip, or possibly not being able to work on the Night Whig project at all, she had chosen the former. He had counted on that very reaction while he had been forming his argument.

Now the other men would leave her alone, giving him an unobstructed field, and he meant to use his advantage to the fullest. She would have to spend time with him, get to know him, learn to relax with him.

Her seduction would be the sweetest mission he'd ever undertaken. Taming that little hedgehog in bed would be more exciting than breaking Mach 3.

Caroline didn't dare return to work; she knew her discomfort would be written plainly on her face for everyone to see, and Adrian would make some snide comments about taking care of her love life on her own time. She darted into the nearest ladies' room and sought privacy in a stall.

She was trembling all over and felt strangely close to tears. She seldom cried, because it didn't accomplish anything except making her nose stuffy. Even more strangely, she had been ignominiously routed again, and it was time she faced the facts.

It wasn't anything Colonel Mackenzie had done that frightened her so; it was her own reactions to him that were terrifying. Intelligence wasn't worth anything if she hid her head in the sand and didn't admit the truth to herself. She had let herself grow too cocky about her ability to keep men at a distance by using her sharp tongue; not only was the colonel not intimidated by it—damn the man, he seemed to enjoy it!—but maybe she had been able to hold off those other men only because she hadn't been attracted to any of them. The shortness of breath, the panic attacks, the pounding of her heart and cowardly behavior, could all mean only one thing: sexual attraction. As an intelligent female, her instinctive impulse was to run for her life.

She excused herself for not having recognized it immediately, because after all, it was the first time she had ever experienced the phenomenon. She hadn't known how to drive a car the first time she had gotten behind the

steering wheel, either. She had always been slightly puzzled by both genders' sometimes feverish antics when trying to attract someone of the opposite sex, but now she knew what was at the bottom of it all. Gonads. It was disconcerting to have one's glands turn traitor.

And now there was this situation she had somehow become mired in. She felt certain that if she only applied herself to it, she would be able to come up with some other solution, but her brain didn't seem to want to work. It was probably a side effect of overactive gonads. After all, thinking wasn't conducive to mating.

She tried to organize her thoughts. As the situation stood, she had agreed to pretend to be having a relationship with Colonel Mackenzie so the men would leave her alone and she would be able to work, and also so the men wouldn't be distracted by her. Did the colonel pretend to have a relationship with every woman on base? Why her? What was it about her that was so disruptive that she had to be *neutralized?* She knew she was a reasonably attractive woman, but she certainly wasn't a femme fatale.

And just what would pretending to be involved with him entail? Small talk and smiling? She thought she could handle that. She had never cooed like a lovesick bird the way she had seen some women do, but it couldn't be that difficult. But if he thought this pseudo-relationship involved any hugging and kissing, she would have to call it off immediately, because her heart just couldn't stand the strain. All that adrenaline rushing around couldn't be healthy.

But the situation wasn't unmanageable. If she just kept her head and remembered not to trust him no matter how reasonable he seemed, she should be all right

With that thought firmly in mind, she squared her shoulders and left her refuge. As she crossed the tarmac, the desert heat scorched the top of her head and made her arms bum. Everything shimmered around her, and her ears were assaulted by the constant roar of jet engines as planes took off and landed. Airmen swarmed everywhere, attending to the business of the huge base. The activity was exhilarating, and even more exciting was the knowledge that she was working on the most advanced jet fighter ever designed.

Work had always been her panacea. She enjoyed it, embraced it, because it was the one part of her life where she excelled, where she fit in. It was comforting and familiar, even though Adrian Pendley was certain to do his

best to ruin it for her. Well, if she could ignore Mackenzie, she could easily ignore Adrian.
The colonel's darkly tanned, hawkish face swam before her eyes, forming amid the heat waves, and she stumbled on the edge of the tarmac before quickly regaining her balance. So she wasn't ignoring Mackenzie mat well; she would get better at it. For her own sake, she had to.
Sure enough, when she walked back to the office, with her clothing damp with sweat and wisps of hair sticking to her face, Adrian looked at her and sneered. "Didn't you know it's too hot for a quick tussle? You'll learn to save it for a weekend in Vegas."
Yates looked up and frowned. Caroline caught his eye and shrugged to show that it didn't matter.
The laser program was fully developed; they were there as a trouble-shooting team, and since the day's tests had gone well, there was little more to do than recap what they'd seen. Then they went over the next planned test, the first one using a moving target. The aircraft that would be used in the next tests weren't the two that had flown that day, and their targeting systems had already been checked as part of the regularly implemented maintenance schedule. All of that had been done before Caroline's arrival on the base. They did have to check the systems on the aircraft that had flown that day, and she, Yates and Adrian changed into coveralls for the job. Cal remained behind, rechecking the computer data.
"All the different systems people working on the Night Wing project have gotten along well," Yates said as they walked to the hangar. "It's been one of the smoothest operations I've been involved in."
"So don't go screwing it up by insulting any of them," Adrian said.
Yates stopped and swung around to confront Adrian. "That's enough," he said evenly.
"It's only the truth. You know she has a reputation for being hard to work with."
"I know what I'm hearing, and Caroline isn't the one who's being an ass. I hope I don't have to tell you that Colonel Mackenzie can have anyone on this team replaced with one phone call, and he'd do it in a heartbeat if he thought friction between any of us was hindering the work. If mat happens, your career at Boling-Wahl would effectively be over, and that goes for both of you."

Caroline stuffed her hands deep in the pockets of her coveralls. Though Yates had been directing his ire toward Adrian, she knew that her position at Boling-Wahl was a bit tenuous, due to her past difficulties on a couple of jobs. One of those incidents had been with Adrian. Perhaps she had been assigned to work with him as a sort of test and her job depended on passing it.

Adrian turned to glare at her. "I'll stay out of her way," he finally muttered, "if she stays out of mine." Then he strode on ahead of them.

Yates sighed, and he and Caroline resumed walking, but at a more leisurely pace. "Ignore him as much as you can," he advised. "I didn't realize the situation between the two of you was so hostile."

"I'm not hostile," Caroline said in surprise.

He gave her a thoughtful look. "No, I don't guess you are. But *he* is. Is it just a case of mutual dislike, or did something happen that I need to know about?"

She shrugged. "I don't suppose it's any big secret. He came on to me when I first started work for Boling-Wahl, and I turned him down."

"Ahh. A hurt ego."

"It would make more sense if we'd been involved and then broken up, but it was never that personal. I guess he doesn't take rejection well."

"That's all it was? You turned him down for a date?" Yates asked skeptically.

"Not exactly. He made a pass at me."

"And you…?"

She stared straight ahead, but she could feel her cheeks heating again. "He was… well, it was a pretty strong pass, if you know what I mean, and I couldn't seem to make him understand that I wasn't interested. I tried being polite, but it wasn't getting through and he wouldn't let me go. So I told him I'd have gone to work at a zoo if I'd wanted to be grabbed by an ape."

Yates chuckled. "Not very tactful, but effective."

That wasn't all she'd told Adrian, but she thought she had admitted to enough. "He took it personally."

"The two of you will have to get along for the duration."

"I understand. I won't snipe back. But if he grabs me again," she warned, "I won't be nice."

Yates patted her arm. "If he grabs you, knock him on the head with something."

She fully intended to.
They spent the rest of the day checking the targeting systems on the two aircraft, and everything looked good. As maintenance crews crawled in, under, over and around the sleek black aircraft, the scene reminded Caroline of Gulliver being swarmed over by the Lilliputians. Lines and hoses snaked everywhere, crisscrossing the hangar floor.
Adrian didn't speak to her except about work, and that suited her fine. He was good at what he did, and as long as he restricted himself to that, she had no problem with him. Maybe Yates' lecture had made an impression on him.
It was late afternoon before they had the two systems thoroughly checked, and Caroline was glad to call it a day. Thoughts of a long, cool shower filled her head. She returned to the office and didn't bother changing out of the coveralls, simply collecting her dress and checking to make certain everything was locked up. Security demanded that nothing be left out on their desks.
When she reached her quarters she turned the air conditioning on high and stood in front of the cold air for a minute, sighing with relief. There was a benefit to having small rooms: they cooled off quickly. She counted herself lucky to have two rooms, period. The first room was a combination living room, dining room and kitchen, meaning that a nondescript couch and matching nondescript chair, with a scratched fake-wood coffee table, occupied one half of the room and the other half was taken up by a galley-size kitchen and a battered Formica table with two chairs. The predominant color seemed to be institutional green. The room was about twelve feet square and opened directly into the bedroom. The bedroom and bath combined were the same size as the front room. She had a bed that was supposed to be double-sized but didn't quite make it, but since she slept alone it didn't matter. There was a scarred chest of drawers, a cramped closet and a cramped bathroom with barely enough room for the essential plumbing, and then only because there was a small shower stall rather than a bathtub. It was livable, but she couldn't see herself ever growing fond of it
On the bright side, one of the first things she had done had been to replace the light bulbs in the bathroom with new ones of sufficient wattage for the application of makeup. She probably had the brightest bathroom on base. She rather liked the idea.
She took the long, cool shower she had promised herself, gradually turning the hot water off as she became accustomed to the chill, until the spray was

satisfyingly cold. She felt herself revive as her overheated skin drank in the moisture. She didn't turn the water off until she was shivering, then dried herself briskly and dressed in loose, cotton knit pants and a big T-shirt, which perfectly suited her notions of comfort.
Now for food. She had decided from the outset to eat in her quarters as much as possible, so she had stocked the tiny kitchen with a few staples. She was standing in front of an open cabinet door studying the contents and trying to decide on her meal when someone knocked on the door.
"Who is it?" she called.
"Mackenzie."
He didn't have to identify himself by name, she thought irritably as she strode to the door and opened it. All he had to do was rumble something in that deep voice.
She braced herself in the opening and felt the heat settle over her like a suffocating blanket "What do you want?" she demanded. He wasn't wearing a uniform, but the glove-soft jeans, scuffed boots and white T-shirt were oddly disturbing, while the inevitable dark sunglasses every pilot wore hid his eyes. She didn't like it; she didn't want to know what he was like when he was off duty.
Joe noted her challenging stance and the fierceness of her glare. Evidently she had decided that her best course of action was to simply carry on as usual. He was glad; being around her might not be comfortable, but it was sure as hell exciting, and he didn't want mat to change.
"Supper," he said.
She crossed her arms. "I'm not feeding you."
"No, I'm feeding you," he said mildly. "Remember? I told Daffy you'd be with me tonight, and everyone will know about it tomorrow if you aren't" It was an effort to keep his voice mild and his eyes on her face, because she was obviously braless. The thin T-shirt she was wearing plainly revealed the shape of her high breasts and the darker circles of her nipples. Every muscle in his big body tensed with growing arousal.
"Just a cheeseburger," he cajoled in the soft voice he'd often used to calm nervous mares. "You don't even have to change. Just slip on your shoes and we'll go off base and find a hamburger joint"
Caroline hesitated. The thought of a cheeseburger was enticing, since she had been about to choose between two brands of cold cereal.

"All right," she decided abruptly. "Give me a minute." She dashed into the bedroom and put on a pair of sandals, then raked a comb through her hair. Her freshly washed face stared back at her from the mirror, and she contemplated putting on makeup, then shrugged. A cheeseburger was waiting.

Just before she left the room she remembered that she wasn't wearing a bra and hurriedly put one on. She didn't think he would have noticed, but it was better to play it safe.

He hadn't entered her quarters but was still standing just outside the open door. Caroline turned the lock on the door and stepped out, closed the door firmly, then tried the knob to make certain the lock had caught Satisfied, she dropped her keys into her pocket

He was driving a muscular black pickup truck. Caroline looked at him in surprise as he opened the door and she climbed up into the seat. "I never would have figured you for a truck person," she said as he slid his long legs under the steering wheel.

"I grew up on a horse ranch in Wyoming," he said. "I've driven pickups all my life. What did you think I'd drive?"

"Something low and red and flashy."

"I save my speeding for the air." His ice-blue eyes flicked at her. "What do you drive? I know what you're driving now is a rental car, since you flew in, so that doesn't count"

Caroline settled back in the seat. She decided that she rather liked sitting up high so she could see, and she was feeling more comfortable by the minute. Maybe it was the truck that did it; it was such a no-nonsense kind of vehicle. "What do you think I drive?"

"Something safe and dependable."

"Oh."

The one syllable was a little disgruntled. Joe controlled a smile. "Am I wrong?"

"A tad."

"So what *do* you drive?"

She turned her head to the side and stared out the window. "Something low and red and flashy." She had absolutely rebelled against buying anything sedate and conservative. She had wanted power and speed and handling, and had paid a small fortune to get it.

"How flashy?" he asked.

"A Corvette," she said, and suddenly chuckled at the contrast between them. Joe looked at her again. He couldn't keep from it. She had lived the life of a total egghead, reclusive and socially awkward, but the fire in her couldn't be hidden. It was revealed in the unconscious sex appeal with which she moved and dressed, the fierceness of her temper, the adventurous car she drove. She sat so decorously on the passenger side, but her face was lifted to the hot wind blowing in through the lowered windows. There was a streak of wildness in her that intrigued him, and he shifted restlessly to ease the constriction of his jeans.

They were checked through the gate, and he turned the truck toward the sunset, blazing red and gold in front of them. She didn't seem to feel any need to carry on a conversation; Joe was comfortable with silence, too, so he let it continue.

Caroline couldn't stop herself from glancing at him every few minutes, though she would then jerk her gaze back to the sunset. The T-shirt bared his powerful arms, darkly tanned by the desert sun. He had so many muscles, it was unnerving. She knew that fighter pilots regularly worked out, because a dense muscle mass seemed to help them resist the effects of pulling Gs, but his muscularity was somehow different He was powerful—the way a panther or a wolf is powerful—from a lifetime of work and using his body. The sun outlined his profile in gold, mercilessly revealing the bladelike bone structure, as clean and fierce as an ancient warrior's face cast on a coin.

She stared at the thin, high-bridged nose, the wide forehead and high, chiseled cheekbones. His mouth was almost brutally clear-cut. The hot wind was sifting through his thick black hair, disarranging the short military cut and her vision blurred as a disturbing vision filled it of this man with his hair long and flying around his broad, bare shoulders. Her heart thumped in a sort of painful panic, and she jerked her gaze away yet again, but it didn't do any good. She could still see him in her mind. It took her only a minute to decide mat if out of sight wasn't going to be out of mind, she might as well give in and let her eyes feast.

She turned her head toward him, and her hungry gaze slipped down over his wide, powerful chest to his flat belly. She just couldn't stop it, though neither was she brave enough to let her eyes rest on the fly of his jeans, instead hurriedly skimming on to those long, muscled legs.

She blurted out, "Aren't you almost too big to get into a cockpit?"

He briefly took his eyes off the road to look at her, though the dark lenses kept her from reading his expression. She wished he would take them off. "It's a tight fit," he replied, his voice low and slow and growling. "But I always manage to squeeze in."

The underlying sexuality of his words hit her like a sledgehammer. She was woefully inexperienced but not naive, and there was no mistaking his meaning. Now she was glad he had those dark glasses on, because she didn't *want* to read his expression. She wanted to hide her face in her hands. She wanted to jump out of the truck and run all the way back to the *base* and the safety of her quarters. Had she been *mad?* She had actually climbed in the truck with this man, and now here they were, alone in the Nevada desert with the sunset rapidly darkening to purple.

Then she remembered that it was her own reaction to him that frightened her, not anything he had done, and she wondered miserably if she should tell him to bail out now while he still could. The way she had been ogling him, he was probably wondering if he would make it back to the base with his pants on, though considering the notorious libido of pilots in general and military pilots in particular, he might not fight very hard. Maybe it was the contrast he presented that got to her the way no man had before, the sense of an intense, smoldering sexuality beneath that cool remoteness. And maybe, if she was lucky, he had no idea of the tumult going on inside her.

Joe was glad of the dark lenses that protected his eyes from the sun, because they allowed him to study her without her being aware of it She had put on a bra, damn it, but the thin restricting material couldn't quite disguise the pebbled hardness of her nipples. The little darling was aroused—and upset by it; he could feel her tension, see it in the faint trembling of her body mat her still posture couldn't control. His eyes went back to her distended nipples, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel as he inevitably began thinking about taking those hard buds into his mouth. She was so beautifully responsive, and she didn't even know it. If she could be so aroused by a naughty comment, what would she be like when he was actually making love to her?

She wasn't the only one who was aroused. If he looked at her nipples one more time, he might have to stop the truck on the side of the road, and she was far from ready for that. To keep himself from making a big mistake, he didn't look at her again until they had reached his favorite drive-in hamburger joint, which was just seedy enough to be interesting.

He parked beside one of the speakers and turned off the ignition, then removed his sunglasses and put them on the dash. "What do you want?"
She wished he had phrased it differently. She leaned down so she could read the menu posted above the speaker and scowled as she forced herself to concentrate on food. The heavenly aroma of frying hamburgers, onions and French fries filled the air; why did the most unhealthy food always smell the best? "A cheeseburger basket and large soft drink."
He punched the button on the speaker, and when a tinny voice answered, he ordered two cheeseburger baskets. Then he half turned toward Caroline, his wide shoulders wedged into the corner of the truck, and casually said, "I'm going to kiss you when we get back to the base."
Caroline stared wide-eyed at him, her heart going into its crazy thumping rhythm again. "I want onions on my cheeseburger. Lots of onions."
"You don't have to be afraid I'm going to grab you," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "It'll just be a kiss, outside your door where anyone walking by can see us, and someone probably will. I won't even put my arms around you if you don't want me to."
"I don't want you to kiss me," she said, withdrawing to her own corner of the truck and glaring at him across the expanse of the front seat.
"I'm going to anyway. It's expected."
"I don't care what's expected. I agreed to come out with you tonight because it does seem to be a good way to keep all the others in line, but I never agreed to any kissing."
"Don't you like kissing?"
She glared sullenly at him. The perfect answer would be that yes, she liked kissing, but she didn't want to kiss *him*. The perfect answer, however, was a bald-faced lie, and from the way her heart was fluttering like a Victorian maiden's at the prospect of kissing him, she wouldn't be able to carry it off. Lying, she found, seemed to work better when performed with a certain amount of detachment.
On the other hand, the truth was the worst answer she could give him. No, she hadn't liked any of the sloppy kisses mat had been forced on her in a hit-or-miss fashion because she'd been fighting like a wildcat to avoid them, but the thought of kissing him made her light-headed, and she was afraid she would like it *too* much.
When she didn't reply he said calmly, "When we get back to your quarters, unlock your door, then turn and hold out your hand to me. I'll take it, lean

over and kiss you. It won't be a long kiss, but it can't be a quick peck, either. Does three seconds sound long enough to you? Then I'll let go of your hand and say good-night. On a busy base, any number of people will see us, and the word will spread that we don't seem to be having a flaming affair, but we're definitely involved."
She cleared her throat. "Three seconds?" That didn't sound like very long. Surely she could manage not to disgrace herself for three seconds.
"Just three seconds," he reassured her.

Chapter Four

The cheeseburger—without onions—and fries were delicious, reminding her of those few precious times during her childhood when she had been allowed to stay over with her mother's brother and his wife, both of them about ten years younger than her parents, and Uncle Lee had invariably treated her to the biggest, juiciest hamburger she could eat, followed by ice cream, another forbidden food. Her parents had allowed her to eat sorbet or frozen yogurt, but never ice cream. If it hadn't been for Uncle Lee, Caroline thought she might have reached the age of majority without knowing the joys of junk food. She still always felt as if she were having a special treat when she indulged.
After the cheeseburgers, he gave her a slow smile and asked, "Ever played the slots?"
"No. I've never been to a casino."
"That's about to change." He started the truck, and soon they were tooling down Las Vegas Boulevard, an endless array of flashing neon lights in every color of the rainbow. They blinked, they arrowed, they cascaded, they exploded in endless neon showers, inviting one and all to sample whatever it was they were advertising. The big casinos drew the largest crowds, of course, but a goodly number of people were just strolling, tourists determined to see everything in this town geared toward attracting them. People were dressed in clothing that ran the gamut from shorts to formal gowns.
"Do you like to gamble?" she asked.
"I never gamble."

She snorted. "Except with your life. I was in the control room today, remember? Hitting eighty degrees alpha and pulling 10 Gs isn't what I'd call safe living."
"That isn't gambling. Baby was built to give us an unlimited angle of attack, but her capability doesn't do us any good if we don't know how to fly her. My job is to make certain she does what she's supposed to do, get her fully tested out and operational and find out her limitations. I can't do that if I don't exceed what we're already doing in the F-22."
"None of the other pilots are pushing the envelope like that."
His eyes were utterly calm when he looked at her. "They will now. Now that they know Baby will operate under those conditions."
"You did it just to show them it could be done?"
"No. I did it because it's my job."
And because he loved it. The thought echoed in her mind. She had seen it that day when he had entered the control room after his flight, tired and sweaty, his eyes bloodshot, his expression as remote as ever. But his eyes had given him away. They had been fierce and… exalted, the fires of life burning white hot in him.
He parked the truck, and they strolled down the sidewalk. "Do you feel lucky?" he asked.
She shrugged. "How does lucky feel?"
"Want to try it?"
She paused before the entrance to one of the casinos, feeling the cool air gush out through the opened doors. Rows and rows of slot machines stretched before her and even spread out on the sidewalk. Most of them were manned by people automatically feeding in their tokens of worship and pulling the levers. Occasionally there were cries of delight as coins in varying numbers came tumbling out to reward their persistence, but mostly the machines took rather than gave.
"It isn't cost-effective," she said after studying the procedure for a few minutes.
He laughed softly. "That isn't the point Never gamble if you can't afford to lose, that's rule number one. Rule number two is to have fun."
"They don't look like they're having fun," she said doubtfully.
"That's because they've forgotten rule number two, and maybe even number one. C'mon, I'll stake you."

But she waited another few minutes, until she saw someone abandon a machine that hadn't paid anything in quite a while. The law of averages said it was more likely to pay out than one that had just disgorged a few coins would be to do so again. She sat down in front of it and fed in the quarters, feeling like an idiot as she did so. Joe stood behind her, softly laughing when the mechanical bandit gave her nothing in return. After she had fed in about five dollars without winning anything, Caroline began to take it personally. She muttered warnings and threats as she went through the procedure again—and lost again.

"Remember rule number two," Joe cautioned, amusement in his voice.

She told him what he could do with rule number two, and he chuckled.

She hitched her stool closer to the machine and shoved a quarter into the slot. She pulled the lever and the pictures began whirring, then one by one clicked into place. Bells began ringing and quarters began flooding out of the bottom slot, spilling out onto the floor. Caroline jumped up and stared at the silver coins as other slot players crowded around, offering congratulations, and a smiling casino employee came over. Then she gave Joe a look of consternation. "All those quarters won't fit in my pocket."

He threw back his head and began laughing. She stared at his strong brown throat and felt suddenly dizzy as that damn light-headed feeling swept over her again.

The casino employee, still smiling, said, "We'll be glad to change the coins into bills."

They did, and to her relief Caroline found that the flood of quarters wasn't a great fortune after all, only a little over seventy dollars. She returned Joe's stake to him and stuffed the remaining bills into her pocket.

"Did you have fun?" he asked as they left the casino.

She thought about it "I suppose so, but I was beginning to feel a little vindictive toward that machine. I don't think I have the temperament to be a gambler."

"Probably not," he agreed, and took her hand in his to gently pull her out of the path of a man who wasn't looking where he was going. But then he didn't release her as she had expected.

She looked down at their clasped hands. His hand was big and hard, the ringers lean, his palm tough with calluses, but his grip was careful, as if he were very aware of his strength. She had never held hands before, and the touch of palm against palm was surprisingly intimate. She was beginning to

realize that fear had kept her from doing a lot of pleasurable things before, but then, she had never before been even tempted to explore them. Her reactions to other men who had tried to venture into a physical relationship with her had varied from bored and disinterested to absolute revulsion.
She could tug her hand free. That was the safest course of action, but somehow she couldn't do it. So she ignored the situation, acted as if her hand wasn't nestled in his much more powerful one like a bird taking shelter, and inwardly she savored every moment of it.
Finally they walked back to the truck, and she realized she was reluctant for the night to come to an end. It was her first date, if she cared to categorize it as such, and it was almost over.
They were both silent on the drive back to the base, and inevitably her mind turned to the coming kiss. She felt both panicked and excited. Another first for her, the first kiss she had actually agreed to and welcomed. It was a toss-up whether she would bolt in fear or hurl herself into his arms.
The moment of truth came all too soon. He parked in front of her quarters and got out to walk around the truck and open the door for her. There were a number of personnel going about their business, glancing at them with idle curiosity, and she knew he had perfectly gauged the situation.
She took out her keys and unlocked the door, then turned and faced him in the colorless glow of the vapor lights overhead. Her eyes were solemn and defenseless as she stared at him, his eyes glittering like ice.
"Hold out your hand," he commanded softly, and she obeyed.
His hard, warm hand enclosed her fingers, and he pulled her closer even as he bent. His mouth lightly touched hers, lifted, settled again. He turned his head slightly to adjust the pressure, and somehow the motion parted her own lips, so that they yielded to the molding of his.
His taste was warm and pleasant and… male. The scent of him enveloped her, and she shivered in response. His mouth was still on hers, moving gently. She felt the tip of his tongue touch and tease, making her stiffen at the jumbled memory of some uninvited, intrusive kiss, but this was nothing like that. She felt enticed rather than coerced, and his taste was filling her senses. Warm pleasure shuddered up from her depths; with a little whimper she opened her mouth, and slowly he took her.
The carnality of it was staggering, and so was her reaction to it. She heard herself whimper again, and then somehow she was pressed hard against him, her head tilted up and back to give him deeper access, an access he

took with a hard male dominance that stunned her. She felt weak and hot, and her breasts tightened with an ache that contact with his hard chest both soothed and intensified. Her loins felt hot, too, as coils of pleasure tightened deep inside. She was clinging to his hand like a lifeline.
Slowly he lifted his mouth, and it was all he could force himself to do to break the contact. He gave in to the temptation to take several more quick kisses from the soft, innocent mouth that had so quickly warmed to awareness, then he *had* to release her hand and step back. He had promised her. He wanted nothing more than to shove her inside her dark quarters and carry her down to the floor, mounting her with quick, hard urgency, but restraint now would bring him much sweeter rewards in the future. So he controlled his rough, quick breathing and tried to control the fierce rush of blood through his veins.
"Three seconds," he said.
Her eyes were glazed as she stared at him, and she was weaving slightly.
"Yes," she whispered. "Three seconds."
She didn't move. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around.
"Go inside, Caroline." His voice was low and calm. "Good night."
"Good night" She moved jerkily to obey, and as she reached the threshold she paused to look at him over her shoulder. Her eyes were huge and dark with some indefinable emotion. "That was much longer than three seconds."
She switched on the light, then closed and carefully locked the door. Even as she turned the bolt, she heard him drive away, telling her that he hadn't been tempted to linger for even a second, or hadn't considered the idea of knocking on her door. He had accomplished his mission, which was to establish their "relationship," so as far as he was concerned, there was no reason to hang around.
She sat down on the couch and remained there, motionless, for quite some time. She had some thinking to do, and she always concentrated better if she could just sit still and totally lock herself inside her brain, or perhaps it was more a matter of locking everything else *out,* and that included physical stimuli.
It hadn't taken any psychoanalysis for her to understand years ago how her upbringing and accelerated progress through school had combined with her own nature to make her the odd man out, but she hadn't minded. Why should she worry that she had never learned how to associate with the opposite sex on a social and emotional level, when there hadn't been anyone

of the opposite sex she was interested in associating with anyway? So she had never regretted her out-of-sync relationship with the rest of the world—until now.

Now, for the first time, she was strongly attracted to a man and wanted him to be attracted to her, but how did she go about accomplishing that feat? When other girls had been learning how, she had been studying physics. She was an expert in laser optics, but she didn't know a damn thing about flirting.

Why couldn't she have gotten her feet wet with someone less challenging, say a fellow physicist who had also spent more time with books than people and was a little awkward socially, too? But, no, instead she had fallen head over heels in *attraction* with a hotshot fighter pilot, a man who could make women go weak in the knees with one look from those diamond-blue eyes. She didn't have to be an expert at kissing to be able to tell that *he* was, and she had a sneaking suspicion that she had made a fool out of herself. All he had done was hold her hand, as he'd promised, and she had practically been all over him. She had a distinct memory of pushing hard against him and rubbing her front against his like a cat, and thinking that she was going to fall in a heap at his feet.

He'd been nice to her this evening. He'd treated her as a friend, had let her relax, and she had had fun. She couldn't remember the last time she had done something so totally useless and enjoyed it. Simple playing hadn't been part of her childhood; her parents had carefully monitored her activities to make certain they were geared toward her educational progress. No ABC blocks for her; she had used flash cards. In defense of her parents, though, she had been an impatient child, irascible when the pace had lagged behind the speed of her inquisitive, hungry intellect. Her childhood hadn't been unhappy, just different, and she had made her own choices in life.

She was groping her way through unfamiliar territory, but Caroline's approach to any problem was to tackle it head-on. She didn't really know how to use the weapons nature had given her, but Joe Mackenzie was about to find them all brought to bear on him.

The first step in solving any problem was to research the subject. It was early enough that a lot of people were still awake, and there were plenty of female Air Force personnel who turned out to be willing to lend her magazines with articles that she thought addressed the problem, and she was even able to come up with quite a bit of research on fighter pilots in

general. She was an accomplished speed reader and sat up for several hours plowing her way through magazines offering such intriguing articles as "He's Bad, Bad, Bad—So Why Do You Love Him Anyway?" and "Finding The Gold in The Dross—When Not To Give Up." Double titles seemed to abound, as well as hundreds of glossy photos of women five feet nine inches tall who weighed a hundred and fifteen pounds, most of which was evidently hair and breasts. She learned how to tell when he was cheating, and how to get revenge. She learned how to break into real estate or start her own company, how to win at blackjack—she committed that to memory—and where to stay on vacation in Europe. Interesting stuff. She just might subscribe.

The material on fighter pilots was even more interesting.

She was in the office before dawn, dressed in a loose, lightweight jumpsuit. When she had been making her selection that morning, seduction had collided with comfort, and seduction had lost without even a whimper. The temperature hit a hundred and ten during the day, for heaven's sake.

She hauled out the specs for the day's tests and began rechecking them, making a mental note to ask Cal a few questions about the computer program. She had taken a second major in computer programming, which had seemed to be a good complement to physics, and it had in fact come in very handy on several occasions. She logged onto the computer and began running the tests through it, rechecking once again that everything was as perfect as they could get it.

"How long have you been in—"

She shrieked at the voice right behind her and came up swinging, overturning her chair in the process. Joe's hand shot up and caught her right fist before it could connect with his face, and a split second later he caught the left one in his other hand, the twin movements like lightning.

"Don't do that again!" she yelled, going up on tiptoe to glare at him, thrusting her jaw up to his. Her eyes were still dilated from fright. "What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack? From now on, *whistle* before you get to the door!"

With a deft motion he twisted her arms behind her back, still holding her fists clasped in his palms. The action brought her breasts firmly against him and encased her within his arms. "I didn't mean *to* scare you," he said softly. "But if your first reaction is always to attack, you should learn how to do it right, so you won't wind up in the sort of predicament you're in now." He

saw interest sharpen the dark bluish-green of her eyes and knew that he had successfully deflected her attention from the fact that he was holding her captive.
Caroline considered the situation. She tugged briefly on her arms, but he held her firmly, and there was no way she could free herself from those iron hands. He was too tall for her to hit him in the face with her head. "I still have the option of stomping your instep and kicking your ankle or knee."
"Yes, but you're too close to put much power behind it. You can hurt me, but not enough to make me let you go. If I were an attacker, sweetheart, right now you'd be in some serious trouble."
She wiggled experimentally again, testing her limits of movement. His arms were locked around her, and she was pressed fully against his muscled body. She shivered a little at the unexpected pleasure of it, so surrounded by his warmth and scent. He smelled delicious; she had never noticed any other man smelling the way Joe did, and it wasn't just the fresh scent of soap lingering on his skin. It was a hot, musky scent, subtle and powerful, making her want to bury her nose against him and drink it in. The effects were strong and immediate; her breasts began to tingle and ache as her nipples peaked, and hot tension tightened her loins.
She cleared her throat and tried to take her mind off her body's reaction; they were in the office, for heaven's sake. Just because she had changed her mind about wanting to experience more of this man/woman thing didn't mean she wanted to do it *here*. "Umm…so what should I do when I want to attack?"
"You should learn how to fight first," he replied, and pressed a quick, hard kiss on her mouth as he released her.
Her lips tingled from the kiss, and she licked them. His gaze slid to her mouth and darkened. She tried for nonchalance to hide the fact that she was shaking all over. "So, what do you recommend?" she asked as she set the chair upright and briskly backed out of the computer program, just to give herself something to do. She switched the machine off and faced him with a bright smile. "Martial arts?"
"Dirty street fighting would be better. It teaches you how to win any way you can, and to hell with fighting fair. It's the only way you should ever go into a fight."
"You mean like throwing dirt in the guy's eyes and stuff like that?"
"Whatever works. The idea is to win, and stay alive."

"Is that the way you fight?" she asked. She desperately needed to sit down, her legs were shaking so much, but he would tower over her if she did, and the thought of that made her nervous, too. She compromised by propping herself on the edge of the desk. "Is that what the Air Force teaches its pilots now?"
"No, that's the way I was taught to fight when I was a kid."
"Who taught you?"
"My father."
She supposed it was a masculine bonding thing. Her father had taught her calculus, but that wasn't quite the same.
"I've been researching the typical fighter pilot," she said. "It's interesting reading. In some ways, you're the perfect stereotype."
"Is that so?" He showed his teeth in a very white smile, though maybe it wasn't a smile at all.
"Well, in some ways you're atypical. You're unusually tall, more suited to a bomber than a fighter. But fighter pilots are typically intelligent, aggressive, arrogant and as determined—maybe *stubborn* is a better word—as a bulldog. They want to be in control at all times."
He crossed his arms over his chest, dark lashes shadowing his glittering eyes.
"Fighter pilots have keen eyesight and fast reactions. Most of you have blue or light-colored eyes, so you're certainly typical on that. And here's an interesting little tidbit… fighter pilots usually have more female children than male."
"Finding out will be fun," he drawled.
She cleared her throat. "Actually, I thought you might already know."
He lifted his eyebrows. "Why's that?"
"I *did* notice that they called you Breed. I assumed it's because you do it so well."
One corner of his mouth moved in a slow smile. "My breeding productivity doesn't have anything to do with it. They call me Breed because I'm a half-breed Indian."
Caroline was so startled that she could only stare at him. "A Native American?"
He shrugged. "That's what you can call it if you want, but I've always called myself an Indian. Changing labels doesn't change anything else." His voice was casual, but he was watching her closely.

She studied him just as closely. His skin was certainly dark enough, with a deep bronze hue that she had assumed was a dark tan. His hair was thick and black and straight, those sculpted cheekbones high and prominent, his nose thin and high-bridged, and his mouth was typically clean-cut and sensual. His eyes, however, were an oddity. She frowned and said accusingly, "Then how can you have blue eyes? Blue is a recessive gene. You should have dark eyes."

He had been alert to how she would receive his heritage, but at her reply something in him relaxed. How else would Caroline respond to something but with a demand for more information? She wasn't shocked or repelled, as some people still were by his mixed heritage, or even titillated, as sometimes happened—though he had become accustomed to that because women were often excited by his profession, too. Nope, she honed right in on the genetic question of why he had blue eyes.

"My parents were both half-breeds," he explained. "Genetically I'm still half Indian and half white, but I got the recessive blue-eyed gene from both my parents. I'm one-quarter Comanche, one-quarter Kiowa and half white."

She nodded in satisfaction, the mystery of his eye color having been explained. She pursued the subject with interest. "Do you have any brothers or sisters? What color are their eyes?"

"Three brothers and one sister. Half brothers and sister, to be precise. My mother died when I was a baby. My stepmother is white, and she has blue eyes. So do my three brothers. Dad was wondering if he was ever going to have a black-eyed baby until my sister was born."

She was fascinated by this glimpse of family life. "I'm an only child. I always wanted a brother or sister when I was little," she said, unaware of the faint wistful note in her voice. "Was it fun?"

He chuckled and hooked his foot in the chair, turning it around so he could drop his tall frame into it. Caroline remained propped against the edge of the desk, still effectively pinned there, because he was in the way, but she wasn't paying attention to that any longer.

"I was sixteen when Dad married Mary, so I didn't grow up with them, but it was fun in a different way. I was old enough to appreciate babies, to take care of them. The best times were when I would go home on leave and they would swarm all over me like little monkeys. Dad and Mary always take off for one night alone while I'm there, and I have the kids to myself. They aren't little anymore, but we all still like it."

She tried to imagine this big, dangerous-looking man relaxed and surrounded by kids. Even just talking about them had softened his face. It wasn't until she saw him that way that she realized what a barrier he kept between himself and everyone else, because there was no barrier between him and his family. With them he would relax the iron control that characterized his every move, lose the remoteness that lay over his expression and in his eyes. The relationship he had with his men was different. It was the camaraderie that is established with a group whose members work together and depend on each other for a long time. That wasn't personal, and in a way it *required* him to retain his control. Suddenly she felt cold and a little lost, because she wasn't inside his intimate little circle. She wanted him to relax that guard with her, let her see the inner man and get close to him. With her recent feminine awakening came another insight, one that hurt even more: she wanted him to want her enough to lose that frightening control. It hurt because he didn't, and she knew it. What was frightening was that she knew it wouldn't matter to her unless she was already far more involved emotionally than she had thought.

She became aware that she had been staring silently at him for several long minutes, and he had been just as quietly watching her, one eyebrow slightly quirked as he waited for her to say something. She blushed without knowing why. He came lithely to his feet, stepping forward, so close that his legs were touching hers. "What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

"You," she blurted out. Why was he standing so close? Her pulse was beginning to race again. What was it about him that being close to him put her brain into neutral and her body into overdrive?

"What about me?"

She tried to think of something clever and casual, but she had never learned how to prevaricate or hide her feelings. "I don't know anything about men. I don't know how to act around them or how to attract them."

His expression was wry. "You're doing okay."

What did he mean by that? She was being her usual blunt self, which had always sent men running. This was more difficult than she'd imagined it would be. She found that she was wringing her hands and was vaguely astonished at herself, because she'd never thought she was the hand-wringing type. "Am I? Good. I've never seen anyone I wanted to attract before, so I'm at something of a loss. I know you said we'd just pretend to

have a relationship so your men wouldn't bother me, but would it be too much of a bother for you if I wanted to make it more real?"
"Just how'real' did you have in mind?" he asked, amused.
Again she was at a loss. "Well, how would I know? I just know that I'm attracted to you, and I'd like for you to be attracted to me, but I've never done this before, so you're asking me to play a game without knowing the rules. Would you hand a football to some guy who'd never heard of the game before and say 'Here you go, buddy. Play ball'?"
His eyes danced at the astringency of her tone, but his voice was calm and grave when he replied, "I see your point."
"So?" She spread her hands inquiringly. "What are the rules? That is, if you don't mind playing."
"Oh, I like a little game now and then."
He was drawling again. She gave him an uncertain glance, wondering if he was making fun of her.
He put his hands on her hips and moved her a little farther back on the desk. Caroline grabbed his upper arms, her nails digging into his biceps. No one had ever touched her hips before, except for one eager beaver who had pinched her bottom and gotten shoved over a wastebasket for his effort. The steely muscles under her fingers made her doubt she would be able to shove Joe anywhere.
He moved even closer and somehow used his hard thighs to spread her legs. She looked down in shock. He was between her legs. Her head jerked back up, but before she could say anything he brushed a light, gentle kiss across her mouth. The contrast between that non-threatening kiss and his very threatening position between her legs disoriented her.
He cupped her face with one hand, slowly caressing her cheek, his fingertips moving lightly over the smooth, velvet texture of her skin. His other hand slipped around over her bottom and firmly pulled her forward until he was nestled ultimately in the notch of her thighs. Caroline's heart thumped violently, and she lost her breath, as well as her ability to sit upright. Her bones turned liquid and she sank against him, unintentionally deepening the embrace. The hard bulge of his sex throbbed against the soft yielding of her loins, and she felt an answering throbbing begin deep inside her.
He kissed her again, this time with a slowly increasing demand. Helplessly she opened her mouth to the probing of his tongue. His hips moved against

her, between her spread thighs, in the same rhythm as his tongue moved in her mouth. The hard bulge in his trousers was even harder, even bigger. Her senses were swimming, just as they had been the night before. His tongue probed deep into her mouth, stroking her own tongue and demanding a response. His taste was hot and heady, his skin smelling of soap and man. Her breasts were throbbing, and again the only relief seemed to be contact with his hard, muscled chest. It was all almost too much to bear, but the only alternative was to tear herself out of his arms, and she couldn't make herself do that.

She couldn't, but he could. Somehow she found herself being gently freed and set away from him. She swayed, and he steadied her, his hard hands clasping her arms. She stared up at him a little wildly. Damn his control! Why couldn't he feel even a little of the turmoil that enveloped her? He had gotten aroused, no doubt about *that,* but it hadn't affected his control at all, while she was about to go up in flames.

"The rules are simple," he said calmly. "We have to let you get accustomed to touching and being touched, and find out what you like. We'll take it slow, go a little bit further each time. I'll pick you up at seven tonight."

He kissed her again and left as silently as he had entered the room. Caroline sat on the desk, trying to get control of her heart and lungs, trying to deal with the empty ache of her body. She was in trouble. She was in big trouble. She had started something she couldn't handle, but she wouldn't have called it off even if she thought she could, and she strongly suspected it was beyond her control anyway.

Unless she was very much mistaken, Joe Mackenzie intended to have an affair with her. A full-fledged, get-naked, lovemaking affair. And she was willing; she was going into this with her eyes open, knowing full well that for him it was likely to be only an affair, while it would be much more to her. He would always be in control, the strong core of him always guarded and remote and uninvolved, while she was well on her way to losing her heart

Chapter Five

The tests went well that day, which was a good thing, because Caroline was in a daze. Adrian made a snide remark to her when they were alone and she

confounded him by giving him a vague smile. She was alarmed at her own lack of concentration. That had never been a problem before; her ability to concentrate was so strong that one professor in college had made the comment that she would be able to read during an earthquake, and he hadn't been far off the mark.

She would never have believed that a man could totally disrupt her thought processes, especially since he wasn't paying her any particular attention. He didn't have to, she realized. He had made his intention plain the day before, and he'd been seen kissing her goodnight; as far as everyone on base was concerned, she was Colonel Mackenzie's woman. He was the alpha male, and none of the other men would challenge him for his chosen mate. She was a little appalled at this demonstration of how little things had changed since prehistoric times, even though she had done her part by going along with him. Now there was food for thought. Had she gone along with him because his suggestion had made sense, or because he was the alpha male and she had felt subconsciously compelled to obey him?

Nah. She had never felt compelled, subconsciously or otherwise, to obey anyone. She had gone along with him because he made her heartbeat go crazy, pure and simple, and it was useless to keep looking for extenuating circumstances with which to excuse herself.

When they were back in the office going over the day's test results and preparing for the next day's flights, Cal rolled his chair over to hers. "So, how'd it go on the date with the boss man?"

Despite herself, her hands immediately started trembling and she laid down the paper she had been trying to read. "Very casual, low-key. Why do you ask?"

To her surprise, his friendly eyes were full of concern. "Well, I've never known you to date before, and I guess I just wanted to make sure he wasn't twisting your arm. He *is* the head man on this project, and he has a lot of influence, not just with the base commander and the men here, but all the way to the Pentagon."

She was touched. "And you thought I might feel I had to go out with him to stay on the team?"

"Something like that, yeah."

She patted his hand, smiling. "Thanks, but everything's okay."

"Good. Adrian isn't bothering you too much, is he?"

"I haven't paid any attention to him, so I guess he isn't."

Cal smiled and rolled back to his own desk.
Caroline checked the time. Three and a half hours until seven o'clock. She had always found her work engrossing, but along with her loss of concentration she had evidently become a clock-watcher, too. No one had ever warned her that associating with men was efficiency-destroying.
For almost the first time in her life she stopped work when everyone else did. She hurried to her quarters, turned the air conditioner on high and jumped into the shower. It was only as she was stepping out of the stall that she realized she didn't know where they were going or how she should dress.
She stared at the telephone. She could call him. She didn't know his number, but that wasn't any problem, because the base operator would. It was the sensible thing to do. She was a big believer in being sensible, so she sat down on the bed and placed the call before she talked herself out of her own common sense. He answered on the first ring. "Mackenzie."
God, his voice sounded even deeper on the phone. She took a deep breath. "This is Caroline. Where are we going tonight?" There, that was just right. To the point, no silliness, a simple request for information.
"Wear a skirt," he replied maddeningly, cutting through her no-nonsense question to the reason behind it. "Something I can get my hands under."
The receiver clicked in her ear, and she stared at it. The damn man had hung up on her! And her heart was racing again. Damn him, damn him, *damn* him. It wasn't fair. She was all but in a panic with anticipation and fear and wanting, and his heartbeat was probably as steady as a rock.
A skirt? After that comment, he was lucky she wasn't running for the hills. There was no way she could get in that truck with him expecting at any moment to feel those hot, callused hands sliding up her thighs. If he'd kept his mouth shut she would probably have worn a skirt because it was cooler, but if she wore one now, she would automatically be giving him permission to put his hand up it, and God knows what else. And it wasn't that she didn't want him to, just that he'd said they would go slow and that didn't sound slow at all to her, and even if it was, she would like to have a little control over the situation. What she would really like was to destroy *his* control, to have him as hot and bothered and on the verge of madness as she was.
She sat down on the bed and took several deep breaths. Maybe nuns had the right idea. Men were obviously detrimental to a woman's mental health.

She put on khaki fatigue pants and a tailored white shirt. That was as close as she was going to get to a skirt… not very close at all.
He knocked on the door at seven o'clock precisely, and when she opened it he burst out laughing. "What have you been thinking?" he asked, still chuckling. "That I'm a big bad wolf all set to gobble you up?"
"The thought crossed my mind."
He watched as she double-checked the appliances in the small quarters, then locked and double-checked the door. She was a cautious woman indeed. He put his hand on her waist as he walked her to the truck. "You don't have anything to worry about," he said soothingly. "I'm not going to eat you."
Three seconds ticked by before he murmured, "Yet."
He felt her jump. Her peculiar blend of inexperience and sexuality was slowly driving him mad. When he kissed her, she responded with a heat and intensity that brought him to the brink of violence, but at the same time he sensed that she was ready to bolt at any time. She reminded him of nothing so much as a filly when a stallion is brought to her for the first time, nervous and apt to bite or kick, while at the same time her scent was telling the stallion she was more than ready for his mounting and he was going wild trying to accomplish it. Well, he'd calmed many a mare for both riding and servicing, and he knew just how to go about it.
He lifted her into the truck before she could change her mind and went around to the driver's side. The proposition she had put to him that morning had been in his mind all day, as had the blunt, forthright way she had done it. Caroline didn't know how to be flirtatious or sweetly cajoling; she had just laid it on the line, and her ego with it. He had wanted to take her in his arms and hold her, tell her that she needed to learn how to protect herself better than that. She had no defenses and didn't even realize it. Everything about her was straight ahead, no detours or subterfuges. He'd never had a woman ask for him like that before, ask him to teach her about men and sex. He'd been half-aroused all day, silently cursing the constrictions of his uniform.
Now he was in his customary off-duty jeans and boots, but the jeans were even more restrictive. He shifted position uncomfortably, trying to stretch his leg out to give himself more room. Damn it, he either needed to get out of his pants or get rid of his hard-on—preferably both, and in that order.
"Where are we going this time?" she asked, pushing her wind-blown hair out of her face.

"Do you like Mexican?"
Her eyes lit up. "Tacos," she purred. "Enchiladas. Sopapillas."
He laughed. "Got it." As she pushed her hair back once more, he said, "Would you rather I put up the windows and turned on the air conditioning?"
"No, I like it." She paused before admitting, "My'vette is a convertible."
He was smiling as he returned his attention to the road. Her name should have been Paradox, because she was one conflicting characteristic after another.
They went to his favorite Mexican restaurant in Vegas, where the best enchiladas she'd ever eaten, coupled with a frozen Margarita, relaxed her and made her forget that she was nervous. Joe drank water with his dinner, something she found curious. "I thought pilots were supposed to be hard drinkers," she said.
"Most of us put away our share of pilot juice," he said lazily.
"But not you?"
"Nope. There's a time limit within which you aren't supposed to drink if you're going to be flying the next day, but I think it's too close. I want perfect control of myself and my machine. The laws of physics and aerodynamics aren't very forgiving at Mach 2." He lifted his glass of water in a little toast. "Not only that, I'm a half-breed. I don't drink. Period."
She gave a brief nod as if admitting the wisdom of that. "If it's so dangerous, why do any pilots drink?"
"To wind down. You're so tense for so long, with the adrenaline burning up your veins, that you can't come down from the high. Our lives are on the line every minute up there, even on routine flights. Hell, there's no such thing as a routine flight"
She started to ask a question about Night Wing, but remembered where they were and left it for another time. Security wasn't something she took lightly.
After dinner she said, "What now?" then wished she hadn't. She also wished she hadn't had that Margarita. She saw his point about needing perfect control.
"Now, sweetheart, we play."
When he said play, he meant play. Ten minutes later they were on a miniature golf course.
She hefted the putter experimentally. "I've never done this before."

"Looks like I'm going to be first with you at a lot of things," he replied with that maddening calm of his.
She scowled and lifted the putter like a bat. "Maybe not."
He kissed her even as he relieved her of the putter with a move so fast she saw only a blur. Disgruntled, she thought that if he'd lived in the Old West he would have been a gunfighter.
"Your first lesson," he said, turning her so her back was to him and putting his arms around her. He folded her hands around the handle in the correct manner and showed her how to swing, smooth and level, hitting the ball with carefully restrained power. Strength wasn't a factor in miniature golf; the game required judgment and coordination.
He made a hole in one on the first green. "You've done this before," she accused.
"Among other things."
"New rule. Each innuendo will add a stroke to your score."
"Good. Added strokes means it'll last longer."
She wanted to throw her ball at him and stomp off the green, but instead she shouted with laughter and firmly added another stroke to his score. Rules were rules.
To her surprise, she seemed to have the needed judgment of distance, force and direction, and challenged him even though she had never played before. He was too aggressive by nature to give her the game and set himself to the task of beating her, displaying intense concentration and superb hand-eye coordination. Caroline was just as determined, and the game was largely played in silence, to a tie. He pointed out that it was a draw only because of the penalty stroke she'd added to his score.
"So let's play another," she challenged. "Throw this one out, and the best two out of three wins."
"Deal."
They had to play five more games, because two others ended in draws. He won the first game, she won the second, and the next two were the ties; he finally ended it by winning the fifth game by one stroke.
She was scowling as they turned in their putters, and Joe was reminded of the look on her face the night before, when the slot machine had kept taking her quarters without making a payoff. He had had the idle thought that she was on the verge of dismantling the machine when it had finally paid out.

No doubt about it, Caroline made no pretense of being good-natured about losing. She didn't like it. He understood that, because he didn't like it, either. On the drive back to the base he slowed and pulled off the road, then drove about a quarter of a mile into the desert before stopping. He killed the lights and motor, and the night silence poured in through the open windows.
"Are you ready for another first?"
Caroline tensed. "What kind of first?"
"Parking."
"Thanks, but I had to pass a test on that when I got my driver's license."
He chuckled at the testy comment but sensed the nervousness behind it.
"Here are our rules on making out. Number one, I'm not going to make love to you.
Your first time is going to be on a bed, not in the front seat of a truck.
Number two, we're going to keep most of our clothes on, because if we don't, your first time *will* be in the front seat of a truck."
She cleared her throat. "It sounds pretty frustrating."
"It is. That's the whole point of parking and making out." He laughed and slid out from behind the steering wheel, then scooped her onto his lap. A little more shifting and he was sitting with his back propped against the passenger door, his long legs stretched out on the seat, while she was lying pressed against his right side, half on the seat and half on him, her head on his shoulder with her face tilted up, and he was leisurely kissing her.
If the windows had been up they would have fogged over. His mouth was slow and hot and demanding, making her forget about time. The slow beat of pleasure began to pound in her veins, and her arms wound about his neck.
His palm covered her breast and the shock jolted her, making her tear her mouth from his. He ruthlessly took it again, stifling her instinctive protest, so she could only whimper into his mouth. As the shock faded, she began to whimper from the pleasure of it, and her nipple beaded tightly beneath the layers of cloth.
"Do you like it?" he murmured. "Or do you want me to stop?"
She liked it, maybe too much, but she didn't want him to stop. Her breast was tingling and throbbing, the heat from it spreading down to her loins. His strong fingers were slowly kneading, taking care not to hurt her, then he found the turgid nipple and rubbed it through her shirt. She moaned and arched against him.

"Caroline?" he prompted. "Do you want me to stop? Or do you want more?"
"Don't stop," she said, her voice hoarse with strain. "Please, don't stop."
He kissed her reassuringly. "I won't. I'm going to unbutton your shirt and slip my hand inside. All right?"
How was she supposed to stand that when she felt as if she were flying into a thousand pieces right now? But as soon as he said it, she knew that she wanted his hand on her naked breast, that the barriers of cloth between them were too maddening to tolerate. "All right," she whispered, and somehow her hand was busy with the buttons of his shirt as he unfastened hers. She wanted to feel his bare skin as much as she wanted his touch on hers.
His long fingers dipped inside her open shirt and trailed lightly along the edges of her bra, pausing at the front center fastening. "Umm, good," he said, and deftly unfastened the garment. She felt suddenly vulnerable as it loosened; then he slid his hand inside, and all her nerve endings rioted. His palm was hot and rough, the callused skin rasping over her swollen nipples as he rubbed and lightly pinched. She heard herself moan and buried her face against his shoulder to stifle the sound.
He shifted on the seat so he was more on his side and she was lying flatter. She felt like a doll, helpless to prevent him from moving her as he willed. He spread her open shirt wide, exposing her breasts to the bright starlight shining through the windshield. She had seen men do it to women in movies, but still she was unprepared when he bent his head and closed his mouth over her nipple, drawing it in with a curling motion of his tongue. Caroline arched wildly under the lash of a sensation so exquisite and unbearable that her entire body quivered. He controlled her with those incredibly strong hands of his and the pressure of his iron-muscled legs, pressing her down into the seat, and somehow he was on top of her.
Her heart was beating so hard it hurt, and her blood was pounding through her veins. She clung to him, barely able to breathe as her body adjusted to his weight and unyielding hardness. The jarring unfamiliarity of it was matched by a deeper, more primitive sense of lightness. He moved his thighs, spreading her legs and settling himself between them, pushing the hard ridge of his manhood against her soft folds. "This is how we'll be when we make love," he whispered, pressing slow kisses on her neck and collarbone, then moving down to suckle deeply on both her breasts, leaving

her nipples tight and wet and painfully sensitive to the night air when he lifted his head. He eased the coolness with the hot pressure of his chest. His voice was a low, almost soundless rustle in her ear. "I'll move like this, slow and easy, until we're both ready to climax." His hips rocked leisurely, rhythmically pressing his sex against hers. Caroline's whole body lifted into the contact, her slender hips straining and reaching. She wanted to speak, to beg him to do something to ease this unbearable tension inside her, but all she could do was gasp for air and dig her nails into his shoulders in an effort to communicate her need to him.

"Then, when it's time, when we can't stand it any longer, I'll start moving harder and faster, going deeper and deeper into you."

She made a high, wild, pleading sound, spreading her thighs wider and lifting them to clasp his hips. Her ankle banged the steering wheel, a welcome distraction, because the slight pain eased her body's primal attention, but it wasn't enough. She twisted under him, frantic with heat and need and a deep, empty ache.

Joe caught his breath at her wild beauty, fierce and demanding, with only the starlight shining across her face. Her body was hot and tense and untamed, demanding a satisfaction she hadn't yet known, but the lure of which was compelling her ever closer and closer to the edge. He wanted to unfasten her pants and drag them down, then bare his own loins and drive into her, hard and fast, just as he'd told her. He wanted her naked, lying stretched out before him on a bed to cushion her from the force of his thrusts. He wanted to take her with swift, rough lust, plunging into her hot womanhood from behind so her buttocks slapped against his belly with the raw sound of sex. The blood of his ancestors ran hot and thick through his veins, the blood of warriors, uncomplicated, as forceful as the elements. He saw himself taking her with the sun burning down on their naked skin and nothing beneath them but the hard, hot earth. And she was clinging to him, a warrior's woman, as fierce and demanding as he was. He had known she was wild the first time he'd seen her, a wildness that had been stifled and controlled, but it was there, just waiting to break out

He hadn't intended to go this far, but she was pure flame in his arms, her response immediate and strong. His hardness stretched painfully beneath his jeans, demanding his own release, and grimly he knew it wouldn't take much. But the seat of his truck wasn't the place to take her virginity; it was too cramped, too awkward, too inconvenient, and he had also promised her

that he wouldn't make love to her tonight. Caroline needed to know that she could trust him, so he grimly fought for control. It wasn't easy; he was close to climax himself, racked with frustration, but his iron will slowly won out, and he eased himself from the clinging embrace of her arms and legs.
"We have to stop," he said, making his voice even. It took more effort than he liked. "If we don't, you'll lose your cherry right here."
"Yes," she whispered, reaching for him again. She didn't care if her first time was in a pickup truck. Her body burned and ached, and she needed the surcease of his possession.
He caught her hands and firmly held them down. "No. Not here and not now."
She stared at him, her eyes wild with frustration; then anger exploded hotly through her veins. She shoved at him, fighting to sit up in a flurry of tangled arms and legs, and scrambled away from him. "Then why did you let it go that far if you didn't intend to finish it?" she shouted. "You… you *tease!"*
Frustration frayed his own temper. Damn it, did she think it had been easy for him to stop? "Because I got carried away, too!" he snapped.
"Yes, I can tell," she said with a sneer. "It really shows. Your breathing speeded up a little bit there."
Furious, he grabbed her hand and carried it to the front of his jeans, pressing her palm hard against the rigid length of his manhood. "Maybe this feels unaffected to you, but you came damn close to finding out just how involved I am." His voice was guttural with rage, and that made him even angrier, because it was evidence of just how far his control had eroded.
She jerked her hand away, even though the feel of that thick ridge was fascinating. She was too angry to be diverted. "I didn't say no, did I?" she demanded hotly. "Just what was wrong with here and now?"
He ground his teeth together, savagely fighting both his anger and a violent resurgence of sexual need. It had been a mistake to force her hand down on his groin. *"Here* isn't a bed, and *now* isn't enough time. When I get in you, I'm not going to get up for a long time. A cramped quickie isn't what you need or what I want."
She crossed her arms and stared furiously out the windshield.
He was silent, too, as he mastered his temper and his voice, reaching deep down to find the icy control for which he was famous. He was astonished at how quickly she had made him lose his temper, something he couldn't remember doing since childhood. He had been angry, but losing control was

something he didn't permit himself to do. It seemed Caroline had an astonishing knack for breaking through to his primitive impulses, and, even more disturbingly, she wasn't even trying. He had always controlled the relationships he had with women, letting them get only as intimate as *he* wanted, ending things when *he* wanted. The first night he had met Caroline he had coolly decided to have an affair with her, but on his terms and his timetable. It was disconcerting to realize she could not only tempt him to break his own rules but could actually make him fight to control himself.
"My quarters are in the BOQ," he finally said evenly. "I can't take you there. It would be just as inappropriate to use your quarters. Tomorrow is Friday, and I'm off duty this weekend. We'll check into a hotel in Vegas and spend the weekend there."
He assumed she was still willing, she thought angrily, and was disgusted with herself because she was. But he'd made it plain that it had to be his way or not at all. He was the man in control.
"All right," she said through clenched teeth.
The drive back to the base was completed in an atmosphere more like that between adversaries rather than two people who had just decided to begin an affair. When they reached her quarters, she opened the door and jumped down without waiting for him.
He left the engine running and caught her just as she reached the door, catching her arm and whirling her around. "My good-night kiss," he reminded her, and hauled her into his arms.
There was no way anyone watching could have mistaken that kiss as polite or friendly or in the getting-to-know-you stage. He held her plastered to him from knees to breast, her head bent back under the pressure of his kiss. His mouth was hot and angry and overwhelming, forcing her to acknowledge his dominance. For a few seconds she tried to push him away; then she yielded abruptly to the penetration of his tongue and pressed herself even closer to his hard frame, accepting his aggression and meeting it with her own.
He released her abruptly and stepped away, his eyes glittering. "You won't need to pack a nightgown," he said.
She stood silently glaring as he walked to the truck and got in. "I hadn't planned to," she muttered as he drove off.

Chapter Six

Caroline couldn't find her ID tag the next morning. She searched the dresser top where she usually put it, the kitchen table, the cabinet tops, under the furniture, in the dirty laundry where she had thrown the clothes she had worn the day before, even the trash cans, but it wasn't to be found. She sat down and tried to think what she had done with the thing, since she knew she had worn it the day before, but she drew a complete blank. Joe had had her so distracted that she might have eaten it for all she knew.

She couldn't get into the buildings without that tag; they were coded and electronically scanned at the entrances, and anyone entering a classified area without the proper ID set off an alarm that had the security police swarming with weapons drawn. She was mortified that she had so carelessly misplaced it. Security was so tight that cards couldn't be duplicated; the lost or damaged one had to be voided out of the computer system, a new one issued with a new code and that information fed into the computers. Also because of the security, a jillion forms had to be filled out in quadruplicate to authorize and verify the change. Probably even the base commander, Major General Tuell, would have to sign off on it

She had had it the day before; she couldn't have gotten into the buildings without it. She distinctly remembered it snagging on a file folder. The tag had just been clipped on, so could it have been tugged loose without her noticing it? Probably. Joe's kisses had turned her brain into mush, and she hadn't been able to concentrate on anything but seeing him that night

If the tag was lying somewhere in the office, why hadn't the alarm been set off when she had *left* without the proper identification? Or was the scan positioned so that it only read the tags of those entering the building, on the theory that if no one without identification got in, they didn't have to worry about who got out It was a logical theory; she had no problem with it Her problem was how to find out if her tag was in the office.

She considered her options. If she called the security police to have them check, it would mean reports and explanations, the very thing she wanted to avoid. So she called Cal to get him to search the office for her. If he didn't find the tag, she would report it lost and face the hassle.

It took him several rings to answer the phone, and his voice was groggy. "Hullo."

"Cal, this is Caroline. I'm sorry to wake you, but I think I dropped my ID card in the office yesterday, and I need you to look for it before I report that

it's gone."
He made a grunting noise. "Wha—?" He sounded bewildered and still half-asleep. "Caroline?"
"Yes, this is Caroline. Are you awake? Did you understand what I said?"
"Yeah. Yeah, I'm awake. I got it." He yawned into the receiver. "Look for your ID card. Lord, Caroline, how'd you misplace something like that?"
"I think I snagged it on a file folder."
"So wear it on a chain around your neck instead of clipping it on."
Since she had roused him from a sound sleep, she allowed him his disgruntled advice. Maybe it was a psychological thing, but she didn't like chains around her neck, even when they were called necklaces. Instead she would make a mental note to add her ID card to the list of things she double-checked.
"How long will it take you to get dressed?" she asked.
"Give me five minutes." He yawned again. "What time is it?"
She looked at the clock. "It's 5:43."
He groaned audibly. "I'm on my way. Actually, I'm trying to focus my eyes. You owe me one. I wouldn't do this for just anybody."
"Thanks," she said fervently.
She met him outside the Quonset building five minutes later. He was unshaven, his hair rumpled, his eyes bleary, but he was dressed, and his own ID tag was hanging on a chain around his neck. She stood outside while he shuffled through the door, still yawning. He was back in less than three minutes, carrying her tag, which she took with a stream of thank-you's.
"It was under your desk," he said, blinking owlishly at her. "What are you doing going to work this early?"
"I usually do," she said, surprised. She thought everyone knew her habit of going in early and staying late.
He suddenly broke into his normal, easygoing grin. "I'm going to have to revise my opinion of Colonel Mackenzie downward, since he obviously isn't keeping you up late. I'm disappointed in the man."
She lifted her eyebrows in feigned astonishment. "You thought he would let anything interfere with work? Surely you jest."
"Evidently I do. Well, have fun. I'll mosey on back to shower and shave and mainline some coffee. More moving-target tests today. We need to be on our toes, and I'm barely on my feet."

She gave him a quick kiss on his beard-roughened cheek, "Thanks, Cal. It would have taken forever to get it replaced, not to mention all of the reports."
"Anytime, anytime." Then he snickered. "Or you could have called Adrian to look for it."
"I'd rather face the security police."
"That's what I thought." With a wave, he began trudging back to his own quarters, and Caroline firmly clipped the tag in place with a sigh of relief.
At six-thirty, she was engrossed in running through the tests when a low, melodious whistle caught her attention. She burst out laughing and looked up, and two seconds later Joe silently appeared in the doorway.
"Another first," he observed. "No flying cups, reports or fists."
He was dressed in his flightsuit, though he wasn't in full harness yet. Her heart was suddenly in her throat. None of the other flights or tests had made her nervous, but abruptly she felt stricken, barely able to breathe. She had never *cared* before, and all of a sudden her objectivity was destroyed.
It took a special type of man to be a military aviator, and even more so to qualify as a fighter pilot. The numbers were still overwhelmingly male, though women were now accepted into fighter training. Analysts were finding that the female jet jockey shared some personality characteristics with the male pilots, mostly coolness under pressure and situation awareness, but in other significant ways the female pilots were indubitably different from the males. The men were naturally arrogant and supremely self-confident; it took that kind of man to *be* a fighter pilot, to have the kind of assurance that would not only allow him to climb into a machine and streak through the sky at three times the speed of sound, but to have the bloody confidence that he could master not only the machine but anything that might happen, and live to do it again. Fighter training only reinforced that supreme self-confidence.
She stared at him, seeing not only the cool confidence in his eyes but the actual eagerness to strap on that lethal beauty he called Baby. He enjoyed the speed and power, the risk, the ultimate challenge of it He had no doubt in his ability to make the aircraft perform as he wanted and bring it safely to earth again. His air of arrogant invincibility was almost godlike in its fierceness.
But for all his skill and superiority, he was a man, a human being. And men could be killed.

"You're going up today," she said, barely able to force the words through her constricted throat "You didn't tell me."
One eyebrow rose in a faintly quizzical expression. "I'm going up today," he replied mildly. "What about it?"
What was she supposed to tell him, that she was terrified because his chosen occupation was one of the most dangerous in the world? She didn't have the right to impose her fears on him. There was no commitment between them, only an agreement to have an affair, which officially hadn't even begun yet. It wasn't his fault that she was falling in love with him, and even if he returned the sentiment, she wouldn't tell him she was afraid, because she wouldn't risk the possibility of distracting him when he needed to concentrate wholly on his job.
So she swallowed her fear and fought for control. "You're too…um, I think *overwhelming* is the word, in a flightsuit. What do you have on under it?"
The diversion worked. The other eyebrow rose to join its twin. "T-shirt and shorts. Did you expect me to be stark naked?"
"I didn't know. I'd never thought about it before." She made a shooing motion with her hand. "Go on, get out of here. You destroy my concentration. I couldn't work all day yesterday after what you did, so I'm not letting you near me this morning."
As soon as the words were out of her mouth she realized she should have known better. The light of battle gleamed coolly in his eyes as he walked toward her. She had inadvertently issued a challenge, and his dominant nature compelled him to call her on it.
She was still sitting down, and he leaned over her, bracing his hands on the arms of the chair and capturing her before she could scramble away. He kissed her, slanting his hard mouth over hers and using his tongue with devastating thoroughness. Her toes curled in her shoes; she surrendered without even the pretense of struggle, accepting his intrusion and welcoming it with unguarded eagerness.
He shuddered and instantly straightened, his face hard with lust. "What are you wearing tonight?"
She struggled to gather her senses, so easily scattered by his touch. "I don't know. Does it matter?"
She had never before seen his eyes so blue and intense. "No. You'll be naked five minutes after we check into the hotel."

The image was shattering. Helplessly she closed her eyes, her mouth going dry. When she opened them again, he was gone.
If she affected him even half as much as he affected her, he wouldn't be able to fly the damn plane. The fear rose nauseatingly in her throat again, surging back at full force. It took all of her willpower to force it away, but she managed it, because she knew that when it came down to it, that cold-blooded control of his would shut out every thought that didn't pertain to flying, the real love of his life. The truth hurt, but she took comfort in it, too, for as unpalatable as it was it would keep him safe, and that was all she asked.
Cal had been making a point of arriving in the mornings before Adrian, but she had disrupted his schedule that morning and was still alone when Adrian came in. He gave her an almost automatic look of dislike, poured a cup of coffee and sat down without speaking. Adrian didn't bother her much, anyway, but that morning she was so on edge that she scarcely even noticed he was there. She sat at her desk, torn between fear and anticipation. Part of her mind persisted in dwelling on the dangers of test flights, while the other part kept sliding away to sensual images of the coming night. She couldn't believe she was actually looking forward to it, but not even the realistic expectation of discomfort, at the least, was enough to quell her fever. She wanted Joe, needed him desperately, with an instinct so primal that the threat of pain was swept aside like a toothpick in a flood.
But first she had to live through the flights today.
"Dreaming about lover boy?" Adrian asked nastily.
She blinked at the interruption. "What? Oh—yes. I was. Sorry. Did you ask me something?"
"Only about your love life. I'm a little surprised, though. I didn't think it was men you liked, or have you decided to try some variety?"
Inexperience was not the same thing at all as ignorance, and she knew exactly what he was hinting at. She gave him a cold look, suddenly relishing the idea of a good, clean battle, free of entangling emotions. "Did you know I was always so much younger than the boys in my class that I was almost through college before I was mature enough for any of them to notice me?"
The question startled him; the puzzlement showed on his good-looking face. "So?"

"So they came after me hot and heavy, expecting me to know the score, but I didn't know anything at all about men and dating. I'd never been around kids my own age. I'd never been kissed, never been to a prom, never learned the things other girls learned at parties and on double dates. When those guys came on so strong it scared the hell out of me, so I said and did whatever it took to run them off. Are you getting the picture?"
He didn't, not at first. His incomprehension was plain. But then understanding broke through his hostility, and he stared at her in shocked disbelief. "Are you saying you were *afraid* of me?"
"Well, what else could I be?" she flashed. "You were grabbing at me and wouldn't take no for an answer."
"For God's sake, I'm not a rapist!" he snapped.
"How was I supposed to know?" She stood up and shook her fist at him. "If you hadn't been so damn sure of yourself and thought no woman could resist you, you might have noticed that I was scared!"
"You didn't act scared!"
"So I get belligerent when I feel threatened." She was standing over him now, glaring and all but breathing fire. "For your information, Colonel Mackenzie is the first man to notice how uneasy I was, and *he* doesn't attack me like a hungry octopus." No, all he did was make love to her with that infuriating control of his, reducing her to mush while he remained perfectly clearheaded. That, however, wasn't any of Adrian's business. "I'm tired of your snide remarks, do you understand? Put a sock in it, as of right now, or I'll stuff one in for you."
The shock left his face, and he glared back at her with a return of hostility. "Am I supposed to feel guilty because you're a social misfit? You're not the only one with problems, lady. I'd just gone through a god-awful divorce, my wife had dumped me for a weasel who made twice as much money as I did and I needed a little ego building myself. So don't blame me for not noticing your delicate psyche and pandering to it, because you sure as hell didn't notice mine!"
"Then we're even," she charged. "So get off my back!"
"With pleasure!"
She stomped back to her chair and flung herself into it. After glaring at the spec sheet for about thirty seconds she muttered, "I'm sorry about your wife."
"Ex-wife."

"She probably isn't happy."
Adrian leaned back in his chair, scowling at her. "I'm sorry I scared you. I didn't mean to."
It was an effort, but she growled, "That's okay."
He mumbled something and turned to his own work.
She had sought relief and distraction in anger, and it had succeeded while it lasted, but now that the confrontation was over her edginess came creeping back. Still, it looked like the air might have cleared some between Adrian and herself, or at least settled down, so it had been beneficial in that way.
Yates and Cal came trooping in, Cal still looking rumpled and sleepy, but he gave Caroline a grin and a wink. Then they all went over to the control room for the day's flights. The pilots were still there, four of them suited up in full harness, with straps and hoses and oxygen masks, and wearing speed jeans. Joe and Captain Bowie Wade were flying the Night Wings; Daffy Deale and Mad Cat Myrick were flying chase in the F-22s. Joe was totally absorbed in the job at hand, as she had known he would be, and the knot of fear in her throat relaxed some to actually be able to see it.
She tried not to let herself stare at him but the impulse was irresistible. He was a lodestone to her eyes, and she was fascinated by him. It wasn't just his tall, superbly muscled body or the chiseled perfection of his face, but the aura surrounding him. Joe Mackenzie was a warrior—cool, nerveless, lethal in his controlled savagery. The blood of countless generations of warriors ran in his veins; his instincts were those honed in past wars, in numberless bloody battles. The other pilots had some of the same instincts, the same aura, but in him those things had been condensed and purified, meeting in a perfect combination of body, intellect and ability. The others knew it; it was obvious in the way they looked at him, the respect they automatically gave him. It wasn't just that he was a colonel and in charge of the project, though his rank garnered its own respect, but what they gave him as a man and a pilot they would have given him even had they all outranked him. Some men stood out from the crowd, and Joe Mackenzie was one of them. He could never have been a businessman, a lawyer or a doctor. He was what he was, and he had sought the profession that would let him do what he was so perfectly suited to do.
He was a warrior.
He was the man she loved.

Somehow she had lost the ability to breathe, and it didn't matter. She felt dazed, mired in unreality. There couldn't be any more fooling herself. She had admitted her vulnerability to him, but never the immediacy of it. She had warned herself against the danger of *letting* herself fall in love with him, fretted that she *might* be losing her heart, but it had all been an emotional smoke screen to keep her from admitting that it was already too late. She'd had no more control over it than she had over her own body whenever he touched her, which should have been enough warning by itself. Her only excuse for her own blindness was that she'd never been in love before and simply hadn't recognized it.

She couldn't look at him as he and the three other pilots left the control room. If he'd glanced at her, everything that she was feeling would have been plain on her face, and she didn't want him to see it, to maybe think about it at the wrong time. She felt absurdly naked, stripped of all her emotional protection, every nerve ending exposed and agitated by the merest stirring of air.

All four birds lifted off, and technicians crowded the terminals, intently studying the information already pouring back in from the sensors embedded in the skins of the Night Whigs.

Within half an hour they were in position over the test site, where drones would provide them with moving targets at which to aim their lasers. Caroline always anticipated trouble, because in her experience no new system worked in practice exactly the way it worked in theory, but the tests had gone well so far, and she was optimistic that there wouldn't be any major problems. That day, however, seemed to prove her right in her anticipation of trouble and wrong in her hope that it would be minor. The targeting systems refused to lock on the drones, though they had done so the day before. Two different aircraft were up there today, however, and a totally disgusted project manager ordered the day's tests scrapped and the birds back to the base for a thorough check of the targeting systems.

Joe didn't lose his temper, but his displeasure was plain when he strode back into the control room, his hair matted with sweat from the helmet.

"The birds are in the hangar," he said with icy control, including Caroline in his ire as part of the laser team. "The same two are going back up Monday morning. You still have most of today to find the problem and fix it." He turned and strode off, and Cal whistled softly between his teeth.

Yates sighed. "Okay, people, let's get into our coveralls and get out to the hangars. We have work to do."

Caroline was already mentally sorting through the options. Laser targeting wasn't new; just the way they were applying it was. The problem could be the sensors in the pilots' helmets, those in the missile optics, even the switch that activated the targeting. What was disturbing was that it had happened to both aircraft at the same time, possibly indicating a basic problem in manufacturing or even design. She glanced at Cal and saw that he was frowning deeply, for *he* would be thinking that for both aircraft to experience the same difficulty at the same time could indicate trouble with the programming of the on-board computers. They were worrying about the problem from different angles, but both of them had realized the implications.

This had just been a peachy-keen day from the very beginning. If the night with Joe followed the same pattern, she would probably find out she was frigid.

They worked through lunch, running computer analyses of the sensors to try to pinpoint the trouble, but nothing showed up. Everything seemed to be working perfectly. They ran the same tests on the three birds that hadn't had any trouble and compared the results, again coming up with nothing. Everything matched. According to the computer, there was no reason why the lasers shouldn't have locked on to the moving targets.

It was late afternoon, and the heat had built to an uncomfortable level inside the hangar despite the best efforts of the huge air conditioners, when Cal reran the tests on the firing mechanisms of one of the malfunctioning units, and on one that was working. For whatever reason, maybe just the gremlins that invariably plagued every project, this time the computer showed a break in the electrical current in the trigger mechanisms. They were all aggravated because the problem had turned out to be so relatively simple after they had driven themselves crazy for hours and forgone lunch when it was something that could be repaired in less than an hour.

She was in a wonderful mood for a romantic assignation: tired, hungry, hot and ill-tempered. She made a point of scowling down at the ID tag clipped to her pocket before she left the building and headed for her quarters.

A long, cold shower made her feel better, though she was still scowling as she literally threw some clothes and toiletry items into an overnight bag. If *he* wasn't such a martinet, they wouldn't have felt so driven to solve the

problem. She could have eaten lunch. She wouldn't now feel so frazzled and out of sorts. It would serve him right if she refused to go.
The only thing was, she wasn't that big a fool. She wanted to be with him more than she wanted to eat, more than she wanted anything.
It was only six o'clock when the knock came on the door. She was dressed, but her hair was still wet, and she was still hungry. She threw the door open.
"We worked through lunch," she charged ominously. "We got finished—" she turned to check the clock "—thirty-five minutes ago. It was *nothing*—just a break in the current in the switches—but it took us forever to find it, because we were hungry and couldn't concentrate."
Joe lounged in the open doorway and surveyed her thoughtfully. "Do you always get ill-tempered when you're hungry?"
"Well, of course. Doesn't everyone?"
"Um, no. Most people don't."
"Oh."
He held out his hand to her. "Come on, then, and I'll feed you."
"My hair isn't dry."
"It'll dry fast enough in this heat. Are you packed?"
She fetched the overnight bag and did her quick, automatic tour to make certain everything was turned off. Joe took the bag from her hand and ushered her out, closing the door behind him. She stood there and stared meaningfully at the doorknob until he sighed and tried to turn it, to show her it was locked. Satisfied, she walked to the truck. He stowed the bag, then lifted her onto the seat. She had chosen to wear a halter-top sundress with a full skirt, deciding that it no longer mattered if he could slide his hand under it, since she had given him permission to do much more than that, but she nearly had heart failure when that warm, hard hand slipped up under the material and squeezed her bare thigh.
All thoughts of food fled her mind. She stared at him, hunger of another sort building, her need revealed in her suddenly darkened eyes and quickened breath. Joe lightly stroked her inner thigh with his fingertips, then forced himself to withdraw his hand. *"Maybe* I'll feed you first," he muttered.

Chapter Seven

They could have eaten sawdust for all the attention she paid to their meal. All she remembered afterward was that the restaurant was cool and dim, and the dry wine had a crisp, pleasant bite to it. He sat across from her, big and masculine, and with that dangerous glitter in his blue-diamond eyes. He was thinking about the coming night, too, and his sexual intent was plain for her to see. He meant for her to know what he was thinking; he made his possessiveness obvious in the way he looked at her, his gaze lingering on her breasts, his voice low and deep with the gentling, persuasive note of seduction.

They lingered over the meal, and the waiting abraded her nerves like coarsely woven wool. Her clothing irritated her, her breasts ached. She blurted out, "Why are we waiting?"

He had been leisurely studying her erect nipples thrusting against her bodice, and his gaze slowly lifted to her face, scorching her with blue fire. "For you to settle down and relax," he murmured. "For night to fall, so you can have complete darkness, if it would make you feel more secure."

"I don't care." She stood up, her face as fierce and proud as a Valkyrie, her hair as pale as that of those virgin warriors. "You'll have to find some other way to relax me."

Slowly he stood, too, his face hard with the force of his surging lust. Silence strained between them as he paid the bill and they went back out to the truck. The heat was still almost suffocating, the sun a huge red ball low on the horizon, bathing everything with a crimson glow. His fierce, ancient bloodlines were obvious in the primal light falling across the stark lines of his face, giving the lie to the facade of civilization he wore in the form of a white dress shirt and black slacks. He should have been wearing buckskin pants and moccasins, his torso bare, his thick black hair falling free to those wide, powerful shoulders.

She remembered her terror of the morning, that he could be hurt or killed during a flight, and knew she would try never to tell him.

He checked them in at one of the Hilton hotels and, still silently, they rode the elevator upward, with the bellboy carrying their two small bags.

He had taken a one-bedroom suite, and the bellboy performed his customary routine, carrying the bags into the bedroom, showing them how to operate things they already knew how to operate, busily drawing open the curtains to let in the fierce red light of sundown. Joe pressed a five-dollar bill into his hand, and the bellhop took off.

She was still standing in the bedroom, her feet rooted to the carpet while she very determinedly did not stare at the king-size bed, and she listened to Joe lock and chain the door. He walked into the bedroom and very calmly pulled the curtains again, plunging the room into a gloom relieved only by what light spilled through the open doorway. The very air felt charged with tension. He opened his black leather bag and took out a box of condoms, placing it on the bedside table.

"A whole box?" she asked in a husky voice that didn't sound like her own.

He came to stand behind her and deftly undid her dress. As it loosened and fell off her shoulders he said, "I'll go down to the gift shop and buy some more when we run out."

She was suddenly trembling madly, for she had worn only her panties under the dress. No bra, no slip, no hosiery. As the dress pooled around her ankles she was left standing all but naked in front of him, her breasts tight, her nipples thrusting forward in aching need. He lifted her in his arms, and her shoes were left behind on the floor, caught in the froth of material.

He placed one knee on the bed as he lowered her to the surface, then remained kneeling that way while he swiftly, efficiently stripped her panties down her legs. Until that moment she hadn't realized how desperately she had needed that small scrap of protection, or how exposed and vulnerable she would feel without them. She made an incoherent sound of protest as she tried to sit up, for she was naked while he was still completely dressed, but the glitter in his eyes as he stretched her out on her back made her stop struggling.

Joe paused, taking the time to study her naked form and savor the primal satisfaction of the moment when she finally lay bare before him, her tender body exposed and his for the taking. He could already see the signs of arousal in her, manifested in the way her nipples had flushed darker and tightened into buds, and in the way her slim thighs, instinctively pressed together to guard the exquisitely sensitive flesh between them, quivered and flexed in a subtle message. Pale curls, only a shade or two darker than her hair, decorated her mound; a small, fleeting smile tugged at his mouth for a second as he remembered that he hadn't thought her hair color was natural. According to the evidence of his eyes, it indisputably was her own. Those blond curls were so tempting that suddenly just looking wasn't enough.

He put his hand on her breast, gently kneading, cupping, his rough thumb circling her nipple and making it draw even tighter. She caught her breath,

which made her breast swell even more fully into his palm. With the same calm assurance he stroked his other hand down her abdomen to slip it between her legs, pressing his fingers hard against the soft folds of her womanhood. Lightning shimmered through her, lifting her hips from the bed in an automatic seeking of more. If his thumb had felt rough on her nipple, it felt even more so now as it rasped across flesh so sensitive she quivered wildly at the slightest touch.

It was unbearable and she suddenly fought away from him, rising to her knees on the bed, her breasts heaving with the force of her breathing. Joe stood up and began unbuttoning his shirt

His powerful torso was bared as he stripped out of the garment, his skin bronzed, soft black hair matting his chest in a neat diamond and running in a silky line down the center of his stomach. His own nipples were small, dark and tight He kicked his shoes off. Lean fingers unbuckled his belt, unzipped his fly, hooked in the waistbands of both trousers and undershorts and pushed them down. His eyes never left her slim, nude body as he bent to remove them. When he straightened, he was as naked as she.

The strength evident in his masculine body was almost frightening. He could overwhelm her without effort if he chose. Iron-hard muscles ridged his flat belly, corded his rib cage and long thighs. His male length rose thick and full from his groin, visibly throbbing with the force of his lust. Despite the responding heat of her own blood, beating through her veins in rhythm with the throbbing in her loins, she began to have serious doubts about the possibility of this. She made a soft, panicked sound.

"Shh, sweetheart," he murmured softly. "Don't be nervous." His hard hands closed gently on her shoulders, and somehow she found herself lying on her back again, and he was lying beside her, the heat of his big body searing and enveloping her as he folded her close to him. His nakedness was overwhelming, the strength of his sexuality no longer masked either by clothing or the boundaries enforced by society. He continued to soothe her with low whispers that might not even have been words, while his hands stroked slow fire over her.

Caroline clung to him, unsure of herself in this dramatically intensified situation. She had thought he had led her into sensual territory before, but now she found that she had only been loitering in the doorway. If it hadn't been for the pleasure, she would have bolted. But the pleasure… ah, it was slow and insidious and mind numbing, gently seducing her into relaxing her

tight muscles; then, when her resistance was gone, it abruptly turned into a thundering storm that crashed through her nerves and muscles. Her slender body quivered with it, drawing tight as a bowstring again, but this time from a different cause, and he was too instinctive a male animal not to immediately sense that difference. His hands moved over her with a sure and shattering purpose, no longer to calm, but to intensify her arousal.

His mouth drew her nipples into wet beads of sensual torment, punished by sharp little bites and soothed by his tongue. She writhed sinuously in his arms, her hips lifting and rolling in an ancient rhythm that called to him as surely as a drumbeat. Once again his fingers delved between the soft feminine folds and found her moist and swollen, aching for his touch; her thighs opened unconsciously to give him greater freedom, an opportunity he immediately exploited. He carefully penetrated her with one long finger, and a wild little sound burst from her throat as she surged upward against his hand. He lingered over her, drunk with the scent of her warm, aroused body, the silkiness of her skin. He would have crushed her against him if he could have absorbed her into himself, so violent was the urge to meld their two bodies together.

His probing touch taught him both the height of her excitement and the strength of her virginity, and his stomach muscles tightened with almost unbearable anticipation. He couldn't wait much longer, but he wanted her so hot that she would willingly accept the pain of his penetration in order to take the deeper pleasure of their joining. She was so tight he didn't know if he could stand it, but he would go mad if he didn't thrust himself into her sweet depths.

She was arching nearer and nearer to climax as his sensual torment continued, her head thrashing on the bed in a tangle of blond hair, her hands clutching at him with desperate strength. She moaned and sank her nails into his chest. "Now." Her voice was hoarse. "Now now now *now!"*

He couldn't stand it any longer himself. He spread her thighs wide and mounted her, his hard weight pressing her into the mattress as his rigid length pushed against the soft heat of her intimate flesh and felt it begin to yield beneath the pressure. Then the exquisite feel of nakedness brought him to his senses, and he drew back from her, from the maddening closeness of penetration. He reached for the box on the bedside table, extracting one of the small foil packets and tearing it open with his teeth.

"No," Caroline said fiercely, pushing his hand away. "Not this time, not the first time. I want to feel *you,* only you."
Her passion-dark eyes glared up at him; her slim, heated body called to him with a primitive message. She was wild and pagan, even more the Valkyrie now when she lay naked, her thighs open to accept the male intrusion that would end her maidenhood. She challenged his domination, demanded his body and seed in this most ancient celebration of fertility.
Joe braced himself on his arms above her, his face savage as he brought his hips back to hers. He was experienced sexually where she wasn't, knew the wild risk they were taking, but this one time, this first time he, too, wanted her without anything between them.
Caroline went still at the first blunt probing.
Their eyes met and held. A tiny muscle in his cheek twitched as he increased the pressure. Pain threatened for her, became a reality, but she didn't try to push him away. She wanted this, hungered for his possession with a violence that made the pain as nothing. He didn't take it easy with her. His penetration was inexorable: invading, stretching, forcing her soft sheath to accept and hold his turgid length. She arched wildly, unable to take any more, and by her own action found that she could. He gave a harsh sound of pleasure.
"Yes," he muttered tightly. "That's right, sweetheart, you can take me. Come on. More. Do it again." The exquisite feel of her was mind shattering, like hot silk, tight and wet and incredibly soft.
Driven by some frantic need she did, and suddenly he was seated in her to the hilt, the solidness of his possession making hot tears spring to her eyes. The stretched, too-full sensation was unbearable, yet she bore it because the only alternative was to stop, and that was impossible. She was impelled by a need too instinctive for caution, too fierce to slow. The hard planes of his chest crushed her breasts; his hands slid under her and gripped her buttocks with bruising force as he lifted her into his thrusts, and sharp pleasure exploded through her. She clung to him, sobbing and gasping and half screaming.
Grinding his teeth, he fought his own climax and rode her hard, intensifying her spasms of release. Gradually she stopped shaking and the frantic tension eased from her muscles, letting her relax in his arms. A soft, almost purring note sounded in her throat. "Joe," she whispered, just his name, and the lazy pleasure in her voice almost sent him over the edge.

"Now," he said gutturally, rising to his knees. It was his turn, and his need was so savage he could barely control it. He hooked his arms under her legs and leaned forward, bracing himself on his hands with her legs forced high and wide, draped over his arms. She was completely vulnerable to him like that, totally unable to limit the depth of his thrusts, and he took full advantage of it. He drove into her hard and deep, his powerful shoulders hunched with the effort as he hammered into her, and the pleasure hit him just as it had her, without warning, slamming into him like a runaway train. He jerked convulsively under the force of it, a harsh cry ripping from his throat. The spasms went on and on, emptying him into the hot depths of the woman beneath him. When it finally did end, he sank heavily onto her, his chest heaving as his tortured lungs fought for air. His heart was thudding frantically in his chest, and he was so weak he couldn't roll away from her. He'd never felt like this even when pulling Gs, and certainly never from having sex.

He dozed. She should have protested his heavy weight, but instead she cradled him close, loving the feel of his big body crushing her into the mattress. She could barely move, barely breathe, and it was heaven. She ached all over, but especially between her legs, where his heavy manhood still nestled within her, yet she was filled with a sense of contentment that permeated every cell of her body and all but negated the discomfort. Her eyes drifted shut. She had wanted it just the way it had been—raw and forceful. The only thing that could have made it better would have been if he had lost that damnable control of his. It had given a little, but still it had held, whereas she had been helpless in the grip of a wild passion that had known no limits.

"Caroline." His mouth settled over hers just as he said her name, and drowsily she realized that she must have slept, because she hadn't felt him move, but now he was braced on his elbows, her head cradled in his palms. Without pause she responded, her mouth opening and molding itself to his. A little while later he forced himself to stop kissing her and gently disengaged their bodies. She remained limply sprawled on the bed while he went into the bathroom and came out a moment later with a wet washcloth. She thought she should be embarrassed at the intimate way he cleaned her, but it was beyond her. She yawned like a sleepy cat and curled onto her side when he had finished. "Did I bleed?" she asked, her voice holding only an absentminded curiosity.

"Only a little." He caressed her buttocks possessively, filled with fierce satisfaction that she had given herself to him so completely. She hadn't held anything back, hadn't let discomfort or fear of the unknown prevent her from hurling herself headlong into the situation. He'd never been wanted like that before, had never wanted anyone like that before, with no reservations or restraints, no boundaries. Any other woman would have been frightened by the savagery of his possession, but Caroline had reveled in it. He'd never *been* so savage before, had never allowed himself to give in to the fierceness of his sexual needs. His rampant sexuality had always been held under ruthless control, yet now he had not only given in to it, he had done so without protection. He might have made her pregnant with that one irresponsible act.

He should have been furious and disgusted with himself, but somehow he wasn't. The utter pleasure of it had been too strong to allow room for regrets. A dangerous image formed in his mind, a picture of Caroline swollen with his child, and to his surprise he began to be aroused again.

She was asleep. He carried the washcloth back to the bathroom and returned to turn back the covers and tuck her between the cool sheets. She murmured softly; then, when he slipped in beside her, she cuddled against him, automatically seeking the comfort of his warmth. He cradled her head on his shoulder, his free arm wrapped possessively around her hips to hold her close. He went to sleep almost as easily as she had.

When he awakened later, his acute sense of time told him that he'd been asleep for about two hours. He was achingly aroused, and by the time he had caressed her awake, she was, too. This time he forced himself to use protection, though for the first time he bitterly resented the thin barrier between their complete intimacy. She gasped a little when he entered her, her tender flesh sore from the first tune, but again she wouldn't let him be gentle, even if he had wanted to be. There would be time for gentleness later, for now there was only the flood tide of desire, demanding release. They writhed and surged together in the darkness, the only sound the roughness of their breathing and the creaking of the bed beneath them.

They slept again. He awakened three more times during the night and had her. He wondered when the urgency would lessen.

It was after eight the next morning when he opened his eyes to find the bright morning sun trying valiantly to pierce the heavy curtains. The room

was dim, the air conditioning quietly humming, the air pleasantly cool. His body ached from the unbridled activities of the night

Caroline lay curled on her side, facing away from him, and for a moment he admired the delicate line of her spine. How could such a soft, delicately made body have withstood the demands he had made on it?

The bed was a wreck. The covers were all pulled loose and twisted, and mostly on the floor. At some point during the night Caroline had pulled one corner of the bedspread up to hug to her breasts. Even the fitted bottom sheet had come loose. One pillow was stuffed under the headboard. He had a distinct memory of there having been three pillows, but he had no idea where the other two were. He also had a distinct memory of having placed one under her hips during one of their ravenous encounters. He yawned, wondering if she would want to remake the bed before the hotel maids could see it. He didn't see much point in remaking it at all.

He was hungry and gently shook her awake. "What do you want for breakfast, sweetheart? I'll call room service, then we can take a bath while we're waiting."

She opened one eye. "Coffee," she murmured.

"What else?"

She sighed. "Food." The eye closed.

He chuckled. "Can you narrow it down a little?"

She thought about it. "Nothing green," she finally mumbled into the mattress. "I can't eat green in the mornings."

Stunned by the idea, he shuddered with revulsion. Come to think of it, he couldn't eat anything green in the mornings, either.

He ordered pecan waffles and bacon for both of them, with coffee and orange juice. The impersonal voice on the other end of the line informed him that it would be forty-five minutes to an hour before his order arrived, which was fine with him. He hung up the phone and shook Caroline awake again.

"Do you want a shower or a tub bath?"

"Tub. Can't sit down in a shower."

He went into the bathroom and turned on the faucets of the playground-size bathtub. Despite the size of the thing, the water level rose quickly. He returned to the bedroom and lifted Caroline in his arms. Her own arms curled trustingly around his neck. "Are you very sore?" he asked with concern.

"Not *too* sore, if that's what you're asking." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "It's just that I can't walk."

He stepped into the tub with her still in his arms and carefully lowered himself into the warm water, then reclined against the back of the tub with her between his legs, her back to his chest. She sighed with pleasure as the warm water began soaking the stiffness from her legs and easing the discomfort between them.

She would have expected to be embarrassed by the intimacy that had passed between them during the night, as well as uneasy with their nudity, but she didn't feel any of that. She felt bone-deep contentment, a sense of lightness and completion that she'd never before known existed. He was her man, she was his woman; how could she be embarrassed with him?

He bathed her, lathering his hands with the fragrant soap and gently sliding them over the tender parts of her body, which somehow seemed to need more attention than the other parts. By the time he finished she was feeling very warm and so was he, if the fullness of his hard male length was any indication. She returned the favor and bathed him, but the imminent arrival of their food prevented him from doing anything to relieve his arousal.

There were two thick, hooded terry bathrobes hanging on the back of the bathroom door, and they put them on a scant two minutes before the brisk knock on the door heralded room service. Joe signed the order slip while the cart was immobilized and the covers removed from the dishes.

The delicious scent of coffee brought her drifting in from the bedroom. Joe's eyes sharpened with the quick resurgence of lust. Even with her face bare of makeup, her hair tousled and her body wrapped in a thick bathrobe, she was more alluring than every other woman he'd had or even seen. The men she worked with might call her the Beauty Queen because of her fastidious attention to her appearance, but her attraction didn't rely on it.

She attacked the food with unselfconscious appetite, and he thought that even the way she ate made him hard. When she was finished she leaned back with a sigh of contentment and smiled at him, a lazy smile that made his blood sizzle.

"What are we going to do today?"

He lifted his black eyebrow. His pale eyes looked as hard and brilliant as diamonds, and there was fire in their depths. "I don't plan on leaving the suite this entire weekend," he said evenly. "Unless we run out of condoms."

Slowly she stood up. "Maybe room service will deliver," she said in a voice that was suddenly tight with need, and then she was in his arms.

Chapter Eight

She drowned in sensuality that weekend. The two rooms of that impersonal hotel suite became very personal, imbued with the aura and memories of their lovemaking. They didn't leave the suite at all, relying on room service for their food, and never dressing in anything except the bathrobes.

As a lover, he more than matched the strength of her passion. Caroline never did anything in halfway measures; she had been fiercely virgin, and now she was just as fierce in the giving of herself. He had never before given free rein to his appetites, but with Caroline he could. He sated himself with her, and yet never felt as if he had had enough. The hunger would roar back, again and again.

He had no inhibitions. He was earthy and powerful, sweeping her along with him, introducing her to more variations, techniques and positions than she could have imagined. Sometimes he was on top and sometimes she was; sometimes he was behind her. Sometimes he used his mouth, and he taught her how to use hers to pleasure him. He made love to her in the bathtub, on the couch, on the floor, wherever they happened to be.

He had a beeper on his belt, but the beeper remained silent and the outside world didn't intrude on them. She had never before been so completely, overwhelmingly involved with another human being, to the exclusion of everything else. She didn't think about work, didn't fret for a book to read. She simply experienced.

By Sunday morning the initial frenzied hunger had been fed and their lovemaking had become more leisurely, bringing with it the patience to linger over both arousal and satisfaction. An hour of sensual play had satisfied them for the moment, and Joe ordered a late breakfast; then they lounged in the parlor with their feet up while they watched television and caught up on the news. Caroline curled against his side, heavy-eyed with contentment.

He lifted a pale strand of her hair and let it drift down, the sunlight catching the gold and making it glitter. "Where are your parents?" he asked absently, paying more attention to the play of light than to his own question.

"Usually, or at this exact moment?" Her voice was just as lazy as his.
"Both."
"Usually they're in North Carolina, where they teach. Right this moment, they're in Greece on a summer-long cultural tour. They're supposed to come home the middle of September."
"Were you lonely when you were little?"
"Not that I noticed. I wanted to *learn,"* she explained. "I couldn't learn fast enough to keep myself satisfied. I wasn't a comfortable child to be around, I don't think. If I hadn't had them for parents I probably would have been a complete wreck, but they helped me handle the frustration and didn't try to limit what I learned."
"You were probably a holy terror," he said dryly.
"Probably." She felt comfortable with it. "What about you?"
He didn't answer immediately, and a tiny quiver of unease intruded on her massive contentment. He would talk easily about his experiences as a pilot, about work, but he kept his private life very private. He had relaxed his guard a little in telling her that he was a half-breed, and that he had three brothers and one sister, but very little else. He hadn't related any childhood experiences to let the conversation get very close to him. Of course, she reminded herself, she hadn't known him for long at all, actually less than a week. The speed and intensity of their relationship dazed her, made the flow of time seem exaggeratedly long.
"No, I wasn't a holy terror," he finally said. She sensed the remoteness in his answer.
"Are any of your brothers or your sister?"
Because she was so close to him, she could feel the subtle relaxation of his muscles. "Just my sister, and it isn't that she's destructive or bad tempered, just *very* determined to have her own way. She's a little steamroller."
His deep love for his family was evident in his voice. She snuggled closer to him, hoping to keep him talking. "How old are your brothers and sister? What are their names?"
"Michael is eighteen. He's just gotten out of high school and starts college next month. He's interested in cattle ranching and will probably start his own spread when he gets out of college. Joshua is sixteen, and he's the best-natured of the bunch, but he's a jet freak, just like I was at his age. Damn his hide, though, he wants to be a Navy flier. Zane is thirteen, and he's… intense. Silent and dangerous, like Dad. Then there's Maris. She's eleven

going on a hundred. Small for her age, so delicate she looks like a breeze would send her airborne, and a will like iron. We're all good with horses, damn good, but Dad is sheer magic with them, and so is Maris."
"What about your stepmother?" Anything to keep him talking.
He gave a quiet laugh. "Mary. She's even smaller than you are."
She sat up. "I'm not small." Her chin jutted out belligerently.
"You're not exactly tall, either. Not quite average, I'd say. I'm almost a foot taller than you." He pulled her back down against his side, her head nestled in the hollow of his shoulder. "Do you want to know about Mary or not?"
"Go ahead," she grumbled, and he kissed her forehead.
"Mary is warm and open and loving, and when she makes up her mind to do something she's unstoppable. She's a teacher. I wouldn't have made it into the Academy without her tutoring."
"So you didn't mind when she and your father married?"
"Mind?" He gave that quiet laugh again. "I did everything I could to throw them together. Not that it was all that difficult. Dad was like a corralled stallion. He was determined to have her, no matter how many fences he had to kick down or go over."
His ease and earthy understanding of his father's sexual nature made her smile. For her part, she simply couldn't imagine her own parents as intensely sexual beings, probably because they weren't. She was proof that they did have sex, but both of them were low-key and concerned more with intellectual matters than those of a physical nature. Their love life was probably warm and affectionate, rather than the raw, raunchy, intense lovemaking Joe had swept her into.
"What about your dad? What's he like?"
"Tough. Dangerous. And the best father in the world. Even when I was a little kid, I always knew he'd fight to the death for me."
That was an odd way to describe one's parent, but looking at Joe she could easily believe that his father was dangerous. They were probably mirror images of each other.
"That's enough about me," he said abruptly, though very little of the conversation had actually told her about *him.* She sensed that wariness in him again as the steel door guarding his inner thoughts clanged shut. He lifted her astride his lap and pushed her robe open, closing his hands over her breasts. "I want to find out about you."

She shivered and looked down at her breasts, at his bronze hands covering the soft, pale mounds. "That's no longer virgin territory to you."
"So it isn't." The blue of his eyes grew darker, more intense. He stroked one of his hands down her belly and into the notch of her legs, lightly probing. "This isn't, either, but it's even more exciting now than it was before. I could only imagine what you'd feel like before, but now I know how tight and hot you are, and how you start getting wet as soon as I touch you." He circled her delicate opening with one rough fingertip, using exquisite care. She shuddered as pleasure rushed through her, hot and sharp, tightening her muscles and giving him the dampness he sought as her body immediately began preparing to receive him. He pushed his finger a little way into her, and her body quickened, her breath sighing in and out of her lungs, a fine quivering seizing her.
Joe pushed his own robe open. He was as ready as a stallion, his thin nostrils flaring at the female scent of her. With his hand on her bottom he urged her forward, positioned her, then reached down to hold himself steady as she sank onto him with a soft, wild cry. She enveloped him, and he moved his hand, using it to urge her closer.
"Now I know how soft you are," he whispered, "and how you shiver around me, how all those sweet little muscles try to grab me tight and start milking me when we're… *damn!"* The last word was low and fierce. Caroline scarcely heard it. She began moving on him, hungry for him, desperate for the release already luring her.
His hands bit into her hips almost as if he would stay her movements, and she whimpered, but then with another muttered curse he grasped her buttocks and moved her in a hard, quick rhythm on his invading length. This wasn't one of the leisurely times; it was fast and ruthless and basic. She grabbed at his shoulders for balance as she began convulsing and only a heartbeat later he joined her, his head arching back, veins and tendons cording in his muscular neck.
Recovery took longer than the act itself. She slumped forward to lie in exhausted silence on his chest. He smoothed her hair away from her face with gentle fingers, then held her close to him. "I haven't been taking very good care of you," he said quietly. "That's twice."
She couldn't think of any way he could take any *better* care of her. "What is?" she murmured.
"That I've taken you without protection."

"But I asked you to." She closed her eyes, savoring in both memory and actuality the intimate feel of him, "I wanted to know everything, feel everything, about you."
"The first time, yes. Even then, I should have had better sense. And there wasn't any excuse for this time."
At the hardness of his tone she sat up and squarely met his gaze. "I'm neither a child nor an idiot, Joe. I know the risk and the consequence, and the responsibility is half mine. I could have said no, but I didn't. The risk isn't that great. One of the benefits of having an inquiring mind is that I'm curious about almost everything, so I read about it. I know all about rhythm and timing, and we're fairly safe. Safe enough that I'm not going to sweat and watch the calendar."
"There's no guarantee on that. All the timing can give us is better than even odds, and I told you, I'm not a gambler."
"Would you mind so very much?" she asked steadily.
"Wouldn't *you*?"
She shook her head. "No." Her voice was quiet and rock solid.
He gave her a piercing look. She waited for him to ask her why, but he didn't. Instead he said, "I want to know if your next period is even a day late."
His tone of command was so obvious that she snapped off a sharp salute and barked, "Yes, sir!" Sometimes he was very much the colonel.
He laughed and swatted her lightly on the bottom as he shifted her off his lap. She stood up and tied the robe around her. "When do we have to leave?"
"I arranged for a late checkout," he said. "By six tonight."
So their remaining time locked in their private little world could now be counted in a dwindling number of hours. It was amazing how quickly she had grown accustomed to room and maid service, to having him all to herself, to the intoxicating delights of the flesh. Probably this seclusion would wear thin if it stretched out for a week, but she would like to have that week. It wasn't to be, however. Tomorrow they would both be back at work, she on the ground and he in the air. Tomorrow she would have to deal with the fear all over again, because the man she loved was doing something dangerous and she couldn't stop it. It would be obscene to even try. Joe was an eagle; only death or age would ground him. She would gladly endure years of quiet terror, if only they would be granted.

For now, she didn't want to waste even one minute before they were forced to face real life again.
She didn't know what this weekend had meant to him, maybe only a prolonged, intense roll in the hay, sufficient for the pleasure it provided, but for her the man and the weekend had been the catalyst that had unlocked the passion of her nature. She felt… changed inside, somehow, freer, more content. It was as if she had been viewing life through a gray veil and it had been ripped aside, letting her see the true, vibrant colors. She no longer felt set aside and isolated, but part of it all. She was no longer alone, as she had essentially been for most of her life, from the time she had first realized that her brain made her different. In giving herself to him, she had gained rather than lost, because she now had a part of Joe that would never leave her. He had given her memories, experience… ecstasy. Under his earthy tutelage, she had bloomed inside herself, learned the rich depths of her own nature.
Abruptly, despite her own common sense and in full recognition of the difficulties it would involve, she hoped that the timing had been wrong for her and she was carrying his child.
"What?" he asked, black brows lifted, and she realized she had been standing in front of him staring intently at him for God only knew how long.
A slow smile broke across her face, lighting her up like dawn. "I was just thinking," she said seriously, "that a lot more women would enlist if you'd just pose for recruiting posters in the nude."
He looked briefly startled, then gave a roar of laughter as he surged to his feet. He grabbed a fistful of robe and hauled her to him. "Do you mean you'd share me with the women of America?"
"Not in this lifetime."
"Not even if my country needed my services? Where's your patriotism?"
She reached into his open robe and firmly cupped him. "One place it isn't," she replied sweetly, "is here."
He began to fill her palm as he responded to her touch, despite their recent lovemaking. "I'll give you two days to stop that, then I'm calling the police."
"We don't have two days," she pointed out. She looked at the clock. "We only have about eight hours."
"Then damn if I'm going to waste a minute of it," he replied, swiftly lifting her into his arms. He preferred the bed for prolonged lovemaking. As he

carried her into the other room she clung tightly, wishing that time could stand still.
It didn't, of course. It couldn't, despite her wishes. It felt strange leaving their intimate cocoon, but by six-thirty they were headed back to the base. She sat silently, trying to brace herself for the abrupt end to the intimacy they had shared for the past two days. She would sleep alone that night and every night, until the weekend came again. Perhaps even then. He hadn't said anything about tomorrow night, much less next weekend.
She glanced at him. It was a subtle difference, but the closer they got to the base he became less her lover and more the colonel. His thoughts were already on Night Wing, on those sleek, deadly, beautiful planes and how they responded to his skilled hands. Maybe the change in him was that he became their lover rather than hers. They flew for him; they carried him higher and faster than she ever could. She only hoped they would protect him as fiercely, and bring him back to her.
Long before she was ready, he was depositing her at her door. He stood in front of her, those clear, bottomless eyes lingering over every detail of her appearance. "I'm not going to kiss you good-night," he said. "I won't want to stop. I'm too used to having you."
"Then… good night." She started to hold out her hand, then quickly pulled it back. She couldn't share even a handshake with him. It was too much after the concentrated intimacy of the weekend, too much of a temptation, too sharp a reminder that tonight they would sleep alone.
"Good night." He turned abruptly and strode to his truck. Caroline quickly unlocked the door and stepped inside, not wanting to see him drive away. The tiny quarters, luxurious as they were in comparison with most of the temporary quarters on base, were both desolate and suffocating. She quickly turned the air conditioner on high, but nothing could ease the emptiness. Nothing, that is, except Joe.
She didn't sleep well that night. She kept reaching for him, searching for his warmth, for the big, hard, masculine body she had slept draped over and entangled with for the past two nights. Her own body, abruptly deprived of the sensual orgy it had become accustomed to, ached with frustration.
She was awake well before dawn and finally gave up on sleep. Work had always been a panacea for her, so perhaps it would be again. She *was* assigned to the project to work, after all, not to moon over the project manager.

It did help. She managed to lose herself quite satisfactorily in preparation for the day's tests. Joe didn't stop by, for which she was oddly grateful. She was just now getting her bearings back; if he'd kissed her, she would have been lost again. She would probably also have been stretched out across one of the desks with her legs wrapped around his waist. Typically, he had seen the temptation and resisted it. She wasn't certain she could have.

As usual, Cal was the second to arrive. "Where were you this weekend?" he asked casually. "I tried to call a couple of times to see if you wanted to catch a movie."

"In Vegas," she replied. "I stayed there."

"Wish I'd thought of that. It's a fun town, isn't it? Did you hit the casinos?"

"I'm not much of a gambler. Miniature golf is more my game."

He laughed as he got himself a cup of coffee. "You'd better watch living in the fast lane like that," he advised. "Too much excitement can make you old."

If that were the case, she would have aged at least a hundred years over the weekend. Instead, she felt more alive than she ever had before.

Joe wasn't in the control room when the laser team arrived; the pilots were already in the aircraft, engines screaming. The assignments were the same as they had been on Friday: Joe and Bowie Wade in the Night Wings, Daffy Deale and Mad Cat Myrick in the F-22s. All the project teams gathered around their assigned monitors so they could scan the sensor readouts during the flight.

The birds lifted off.

It went smoothly at first, with the lasers locking on to the drones just the way they were supposed to do. Caroline let out a long sigh of relief. She wasn't naive enough to think there wouldn't be any more problems, but at least that particular one seemed to have been solved. They ran through it time after time, at different speeds and ranges. Yates was smiling.

On their return to base, Mad Cat was on Joe's wing and Daffy was shadowing Bowie Wade, to provide visual verification during the flights. Caroline was still idly watching the monitor when suddenly Bowie's target signal lit up. "Did he hit the switch?" she asked aloud.

Yates and Adrian turned back to the monitor, their brows knit with puzzlement. Cal looked up from his own computer. Almost simultaneously, the computer started flashing the red firing signal and all hell broke loose on the radio and in the control room.

"I'm hit, I'm hit!" Daffy screamed, and Bowie was yelling, "This goddamn thing just went off! What the hell happened?"
"What's the damage?" It was Joe's voice, deep and cool, the authority in it overriding everything else.
"No control, my hydraulics are shot to hell. I can't hold it." Daffy's voice was tight.
"Eject!" Bowie was yelling. "Stop screwing around, Daffy. You can't make it!"
The voices were stepping all over each other, and the control room was in an uproar. The pilots there were turned to stone, their faces frozen masks as they waited to see if one of their own made it back or was going to die right in front of them.
Then Joe's voice again, roaring. "Eject—eject—*eject! Now*!"
The iron authority got through to Daffy as nothing else could have, and the computers registered a pilot ejection.
"I see a chute!" It was Mad Cat. "He's too low, he's too low—"
Then the radio exploded with noise as the F-22 augered into the desert floor.

Chapter Nine

Joe was in a rage when he strode into the control room, but his rage was cold, ice-cold. His eyes were blue frost as he fastened them on the laser team. "What the *hell* happened?" he snapped. "The laser cannon isn't even supposed to be activated, much less go off by itself."

They were all at a loss. The systems had checked out perfectly on Friday afternoon.

"Well?" The single word was as sharp as the crack of a rifle. "I nearly lost a man because of it. An eighty-million-dollar aircraft is in tiny pieces all over a square mile of desert. Do any of you have any idea *what the hell you're doing?"*

The control room was dead silent as everyone waited for a reply, any reply. Yates said softly, "We don't know what happened. But we'll find out."

"You're damn right you will. I want a report on this within thirty-six hours, your analysis of the problem and what you've done to fix it. All flights are scrubbed until I know what happened and I'm satisfied it won't happen again." He didn't even glance at Caroline as he turned and walked out, still as furious as he had been when he had entered the room.

Someone whistled softly through their teeth. Yates' face was drawn. "We don't sleep until we know," he said simply.

The loss of the aircraft was bad enough, but it was Daffy's close call that had stretched Joe's control perilously close to the snapping point. Daffy was lost to him anyway: he'd been too low when he ejected for his chute to adequately deploy, and he had landed too hard and too fast. He was hospitalized now with a concussion and a broken left leg.

Bowie, badly shaken, swore he hadn't touched either the lock-on switch or the trigger, and Joe believed him. Bowie was too good, too careful, but the damn laser cannon had somehow locked on and fired by itself, and Daffy had nearly died. The computers would tell them exactly what had happened, but what Joe wanted to know was *why.* The lasers weren't supposed to be activated yet, but the one on Bowie's bird, at least, had been. Had peak energy been used, the F-22 would have been destroyed in the air and Daffy wouldn't have had any chance at all.

Joe's anger was intensified because the misfire was probably linked to the lock-on problem they'd had the

Friday before. Caroline had said the problem was a simple break in the electrical signal and that it had been corrected, but obviously the trouble was much worse than that, and, far from being corrected, it had nearly killed a man. His fury included Caroline; she was part of the laser team, and his relationship with her had nothing to do with her responsibility as a team member. It wouldn't win her any special favors or leniency.

The laser team wouldn't be the only one working late. The loss of an F-22 and the injury of a pilot weren't things the Air Force took lightly. He had to make a report to the base commander and to General Ramey in the Pentagon. Moreover, they couldn't afford this kind of trouble with the Night Wings, not with the vote for funding coming up shortly in Congress. He had to get the tests completed and the kinks worked out; one of the major pluses the project had going for it was that it was coming in on time and under budget, and delays meant money. If the Night Wings were over budget and not working properly when the vote was taken, the project would be in trouble. Funding depended on how well he did his job and demonstrated both the feasibility and dependability of the buds.

His call on a secure line to General Ramey only underlined his concern. "You have to find out what happened with that laser cannon and make damn sure it never happens again," the general said quietly, but those who knew Ramey knew that he meant what he said. "The vote is close, too close for us to afford this kind of snafu. What good is it to have the first feasible X-ray laser cannon if it's uncontrollable? We have to have it, Joe. The Night Wing project is too important."

"Yes, sir," Joe replied. Having flown the birds, he knew exactly how important they were. An aviator going up in a superior aircraft had a much better chance, all other things being equal, of coming back alive. The Night Wing buds gave a huge advantage to American pilots, and to Joe that meant American lives saved as well as wars won. He had already been in two wars and he was only thirty-five, and the world situation was even more volatile now than it had been when he had entered the Academy back during the Cold War. Brushfire wars sprang up overnight, and all of them had the potential of dragging the rest of the world into the maw, while technology was exploding. Within five years the F-22s would merely be equal to other countries' fighters, rather than vastly superior. The Night Wings would get that edge back—in a big way.

"Is there any indication of sabotage?" the general asked.

"There haven't been any alarms triggered, but I've asked the security police for an analysis of the work patterns to see if there's anything suspicious."
"What's your gut feeling?" General Ramey had the utmost respect for Joe's instincts.
Joe paused. "A catastrophic situation developed without warning. We don't know yet if it involves only that one laser cannon or if it's common to all the aircraft, but it's either a major problem with the system, or someone deliberately caused it It's fifty-fifty, so I can't ignore the possibility of sabotage. I'll know more after I get the computer analysis."
"Call me immediately when you know something."
"Yes, sir, I will."
Joe sat back in his chair, his eyes thoughtful. Sabotage. No one ever liked to consider it, but he couldn't afford to discount it. Technology constantly created new techniques in spying and sabotage. The security police had gone to great lengths to keep Night Wing under wraps, which was why every entrance into every building, both doors and windows, contained sensors linked to a central computer that kept track or who was in each building at any given time, recording both entrance and exit times. Guards were also posted at the hangars at night and no one had approached the planes without proper clearance, but if the problem was sabotage, that meant only that the saboteur had the required security clearance.
If he were lucky, the laser team would find the problem and it would be something mechanical, something explicable. If not, he wanted to have the security check already in progress.
What a bitch. If they didn't find out what was wrong immediately, it would ensure that he wouldn't see Caroline tonight, and last night without her had been pure torment. It was amazing how quickly his body had become accustomed to frequent gratification, and how strong his sexual hunger for her was. He'd never wanted a woman that way before, like an incessant fever that refused to be cooled. He'd never enjoyed a woman that way before, without any boundaries or restrictions. She was vital and electric, as straightforward with her loving as her thoughts and personality were. It had been a mistake to let his thoughts slip to her. His pants had become very uncomfortable. *Down, boy,* he thought wryly. Now was definitely not the time or the place.
No matter how they checked, they couldn't discover how the laser had been activated by accident. Caroline's actual expertise was with the laser itself,

not with the triggering mechanism. That was Adrian's field, and he was surly because of it. If the problem was laid at his door, he might be recalled from the project or possibly even fired. Typically, he took out his frustration on Caroline.

"What are you, a jinx?" he muttered, scowling as he painstakingly checked every detail of the firing mechanism. "Everything was going fine, just a few minor kinks now and then, until you showed up. Things started falling apart as soon as you started working on them."

"I haven't worked on that mechanism," she pointed out, refusing to let him anger her or to get embroiled in a finger-pointing episode. She didn't have to say anything else, however, because Adrian took her comment to mean that he *had* been working on it, so therefore it was obviously his fault.

"Let's stop the bickering," Yates ordered. "Cal, is *anything* showing up on the computer?"

Cal looked exhausted, his eyes bloodshot from staring at a monitor screen and stacks of dim printouts for too many hours. He shook his head. "It's all checking out on paper."

They were standing grouped around the laser pod on the belly of the aircraft Bowie had been flying. Caroline stared at the pod, deliberately blotting out what everyone else was saying as she tried to sort things out. The laser seemed to be in perfect working order, as did the firing mechanism. The lock-on was also performing perfectly, but then, they already knew that. After all, it had locked on to Daffy's bird and blown it out of the sky. But what had *told* it to lock on? According to the computer record, Bowie definitely hadn't touched the switch, so the lock-on and firing mechanisms had both operated automatically, something they weren't supposed to do. Nor was the laser supposed to have been activated; actually firing the lasers hadn't been scheduled for another ten days. Three things had gone wrong simultaneously: the laser had activated, the lock-on had targeted Daffy's aircraft and the thing had automatically fired. None of those three things was supposed to have happened at all; for all of them to have happened at the same time went beyond chance or Murphy's Law.

She didn't like the direction her thoughts were taking. If it wasn't logical for those three things to have happened by accident, then they had to have happened by design. The laser couldn't be activated by an accidental bump, and it certainly didn't have an outside switch labeled On and Off. Activating the laser was something the laser team had to do with a precise set of

commands to the computer. Because of the security involved, they were the only ones with access to those commands.
Inescapable logic indicated that one of the team had activated the laser. Caroline didn't believe in leaping to conclusions. Her work habits were orderly and painstakingly precise. Before she let herself begin thinking that one of the three men she worked with was deliberately sabotaging the laser, she had to make certain there was no way anyone outside the team could do it. Everything was computerized now, and though safeguards were built into the programs and elaborate precautions taken, nothing was impossible. There were a lot of things so difficult that no one had done them yet, but that didn't make them impossible. It was feasible that if someone could get the activation commands, he or she could also get into the program and use them. And it would be child's play for anyone that knowledgeable about computers to add commands that would override the pilot's physical keying of the lock-on switch, say if another aircraft came within a certain distance. Maybe Bowie had been flying a ticking timebomb today, just waiting for the right set of circumstances. It had been Daffy's bad luck that he had been assigned to shadow Bowie, but it could as easily have been Mad Cat, or even Joe, who had been shot down.
Yates had been watching her thoughtfully for several minutes. She was standing motionless, her gaze locked on the pod but not seeing it, with all her concentration turned inward. He could almost see that computer brain running down a checklist and inexorably narrowing the possibilities.
"What is it?" he finally asked when he couldn't stand the suspense any longer. "Any ideas?"
She blinked, and her eyes slowly refocused on him. "I think we should check the computer program," she finally said. "If it isn't the equipment, it has to be the program."
Cal looked positively haggard. "Do you know how long it will take to check this entire program?" he asked incredulously. "This thing is huge. It's the most complicated program I've ever worked on."
"Maybe a Cray…" she murmured, looking back at the pod.
"Book time on a Cray supercomputer?" Yates made it a question, but he was already mentally running through the logistics. "Expensive as hell."
"Not as expensive as stopping the program."
"It could take forever to get a booking, unless the Pentagon can line up some priority time."

"Yeah, that's a fine idea," Adrian said impatiently, "but you people are forgetting that the big man gave us thirty-six hours, of which we have already used ten. I don't think he's going to be satisfied with a possibility."
"We've come up with nothing everywhere else. Do you have a better idea?" Caroline replied just as impatiently.
He glared at her without answering. The truth was, they had all reached a dead end.
Caroline didn't mention her other conclusion, that if the solution to their problem was in the computer program they still had to discover whether it was a basic error in programming or if someone had deliberately programmed it in, but running everything through a Cray would give them the answer to that. By comparing the working program with the original, the Cray could tell them if the working program had been altered in any way. If it hadn't, then it was back to the drawing board for DataTech; if it had, then they had to find the person responsible for the changes.
"So what do we do?" Cal asked, rubbing his eyes. "Stop looking and just assume we're going to find it in the program, or stay up all night looking for something when we don't know what we're looking for?"
Despite herself, Caroline had to grin. "If you're as groggy as that sentence sounded, I don't think you *can* stay up all night."
He gave her a bleary look and an equally bleary grin. "Sad, isn't it? In my younger days I could carouse all night and work all day, then go back out for more carousing. What you see here is a shadow of my former self."
"I'm glad you two don't find this serious," Adrian snapped.
"Knock it off!" Yates ordered, temper in his usually calm voice. They were all tired and frazzled. He moderated his tone. "I mean it literally as well as figuratively. We aren't accomplishing anything except exhausting ourselves. We're calling it quits for the night, despite what I said earlier. I think we've eliminated everything it could be except the program, so that's our logical *next* step, and we can't do it here. I'm going to clean up and have a good meal while I think about this, then I'm going to have a talk with Colonel Mackenzie. Let's get some rest."
Captain Ivan Hodge, head of security, said without preamble, "We have a very suspicious pattern here, sir."
Joe's stem face showed no emotion, though he wished the captain hadn't found anything.

Major General Tuell's flinty eyes became even flintier. As base commander, he was ultimately responsible for everything that happened, and he was intensely concerned with whatever had caused the crash of an F-22. "Show us what you've found."

The captain was carrying a thick log. He deposited it on Joe's desk and flipped it open to a premarked page. "Here." He noted an entry he had already highlighted in yellow. "This is the security code number for a member of the laser team, Caroline Evans. She arrived last Tuesday as a replacement for a worker who had a heart attack."

Joe's guts knotted up and his eyes went blank as he waited for Captain Hodge to continue.

"She has a pattern of arriving in the morning before everyone else and being the last to leave," the captain said, and Joe relaxed a little. Caroline was a workaholic; hardly damning circumstances, and he himself had walked in on her unannounced several times, catching her doing nothing suspicious… although she had quickly cleared the computer screen that one time.

He had briefly wondered about it, then forgotten it, until now.

"You yourself have that pattern, sir," Captain Hodge said to Joe. "In itself, it doesn't mean anything." He flipped to another premarked page. "But here, on Thursday night, the sensors show Ms. Evans entering the laser work area shortly before 2400 and not leaving until almost 0400. She was alone the entire time. She reentered the building at 0600 for her normal workday. The birds went up that morning and for the first time experienced some malfunction with the lasers, isn't that right?"

The ice was back in Joe's eyes. "Yes."

"She left the area late that afternoon with the other members of the team and didn't return until Sunday night, again shortly before 2400. Again, she was the only person there. She left the building at 0430, returned at her usual time of 0600. This time, Major Deale's aircraft was shot down. Hell of a lot more disruptive than the lasers not working at all. These midnight appearances in the work area, combined with the fact that the trouble didn't start until she arrived, don't look good." The captain hesitated as he looked at Joe. The colonel's expression was enough to make any sane man hesitate, and Captain Hodge considered himself very sane. Nevertheless, it had to be said. "I understand you've taken a… uh, personal interest in Ms. Evans."

"We've gone out together a few times." They'd done a hell of a lot more than that, he thought savagely. She had given herself to him with a

completeness that had shattered his memories of other women, reduced them to nothingness. And after they had returned from Vegas Sunday night she had slipped out to the work area and… done what? Secretly activated the laser on Bowie's aircraft? Had the laser on the bird he'd been flying been activated, too? Could he just as easily have been the one who shot down a friend?

Captain Hodge looked uncomfortable. "While you were with her, did she say anything? Ask any questions pertaining to Night Wing?"

"No." He was certain of that. Work had been mentioned in only the most general way. But then again, why should she have to ask him anything?

"She has the clearance to find out anything about the project that she wants without having to ask anyone else."

"That's true. But did she say anything that, in retrospect, you could construe as being a reason for wanting the lasers to fail? Or for wanting to scuttle the Night Wing project?"

"No." But she wouldn't; Caroline was too smart for that. Caroline was brilliant. Caroline was perfectly capable of activating the lasers; she was not only an expert, she had access to the codes. "She has the knowledge and she had the opportunity," he heard himself saying. "Do you have anything else? Motive, anything suspicious in her past, any current money problems?"

"Her background is clean as a whistle," the captain admitted. "We're going to do a total recheck to make certain it's correct and none of it has been fabricated, but that's only a precaution. Everyone connected with this project has been verified down to the fillings in their teeth."

"Clarify this for me," Major General Tuell said. "She could activate the lasers from the work area, without actually being in contact with the lasers themselves? The birds are under twenty-four-hour guard."

"Yes, sir," Captain Hodge said. "By computer command. And Ms. Evans carried a double major in college. She got her doctorate in physics, but she also has a master's in computer sciences. She knows her way around computers."

"I see." The general sighed. "What are your recommendations?"

"We won't file formal charges, sir. We can prove opportunity, and the timing is very suspicious, but we haven't as yet proven that the computers have actually been reprogrammed to arm and fire the lasers. There's still a possibility that it's a mechanical snafu."

"But you don't think so?"

"No sir. The problems began when she arrived, and in both instances they occurred after she had made midnight visits to the work area. She's a civilian. I recommend that the FBI be notified and that she be restricted to base, but not yet taken into custody. As a precaution, I would also restrict the entire laser team from the work area until this is settled."
"Why is that, Captain?"
"As I said, sir, as a precaution. She may not be the only one involved."
"The logs don't show anyone else entering the work area at suspicious times."
"That doesn't mean they didn't know about it. I think Colonel Mackenzie will agree with me that it's less expensive to halt testing for a few days than to lose another F-22, or maybe even one of the prototypes."
"Yes." Joe's voice was hard. "Are you going to question Ms. Evans?"
"Yes sir."
"I'd like to be there."
"Of course, sir." Captain Hodge thought wryly that Colonel Mackenzie didn't have to have permission; he had supreme authority on this base with anything concerning the Night Wing project. He would defer to Major General Tuell, but it would be by choice.
"When?"
"I can have my people escort her here now, if you'd like."
"Then do it."
Major General Tuell stood. "Gentlemen, I'm leaving this in your hands. I trust you'll both make certain of our position before charges are filed. However, do whatever has to be done to solve this. The project is too important."
They both saluted, and he returned it. As he left, Captain Hodge gestured to Joe's telephone and said, "With your permission, sir."
Joe nodded curtly. Captain Hodge lifted the receiver and pressed a code. "Have Ms. Caroline Evans, C12X114, escorted to Colonel Mackenzie's office. Verify."
Whoever had answered the phone repeated the code number. Captain Hodge said, "Correct. Thank you."
He hung up the phone and turned to Joe. "Ten minutes," he said.

Chapter Ten

Caroline had never felt so small and exposed and terrified. She sat in a chair in Joe's office and tried to catch his eye, to silently plead with him to believe her, but he wouldn't look at her. Or rather, he was looking at her all right, but it was with a cold, totally impersonal gaze, as if he were observing a bug. He wasn't seeing *her,* Caroline. It was the look on his face more than anything else that frightened her. It was as hard as stone.

"No, I did not reenter the work area on those occasions," she repeated for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"The sensors logged both your entrance and exit tunes, Ms. Evans." Captain Hodge, the head of base security, was also good at repeating himself.

"Then the sensors are wrong."

"No, the sensors are extremely accurate. State-of-the-art."

"The sensors are *wrong."* She drew a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She felt almost sick with fear. "I dislodged my ID card somehow during the day Thursday. I discovered it was missing Friday morning when I dressed."

"So you keep saying. We have no record of you filing a report on this so-called missing card, and you realize, of course, how important this would be on a top-security project. Perhaps you would like to explain your reasoning again."

"I remembered snagging it on a file folder Thursday and thought it must have come loose then. I didn't notify security because it seemed like a lot of bother when I was fairly certain it wasn't lost but was still in the office."

"But the sensors record you leaving the building that afternoon with the other members of your team. You had to have had your tag on for that to be possible, and believe me, Ms. Evans, the security works on both entering and exiting. If anyone crosses that threshold from any direction without the proper identification, it triggers an alarm."

"And that's why I'm telling you that the sensors *have* to be malfunctioning. When I discovered that I'd misplaced my tag, I called Cal Gilchrist and got him to check the office for me. He found my tag lying on the floor under my desk. He brought it back out to me and returned to his quarters while I began work. All you have to do is ask him."

"Mr. Gilchrist will be asked the appropriate questions. However, what the logs show is that both you and Mr. Gilchrist entered the building together and left together two minutes later. Then you reentered alone, and it was over an hour before Mr. Gilchrist returned."

"That's impossible. I did *not* go into the building until Mr. Gilchrist returned with my tag. What do your precious sensors tell you when two tags but only one body leave a building?"
The captain ignored her question and instead made a quick notation on the clipboard he carried. "Did you also misplace your tag on Sunday night?"
"No. I didn't enter the building on Sunday night." She couldn't prevent herself from giving Joe another quick, imploring glance. What was he thinking? Surely he didn't suspect her of sabotaging the lasers.
"The sensors say you did. And by your own testimony, your ID tag was with you."
"The tag was exactly where I had left it Friday afternoon when I put it on again this morning."
"You didn't move it at all during the weekend?"
"I spent the weekend in Vegas."
"And left your tag behind."
"Do you wear *your* ID tag off-base, Captain?" she shot back.
He said mildly, "I'd like to remind you that I'm not the one under suspicion."
"Under suspicion of what? Spell it out for me," she challenged.
He refused to be drawn. "You spent all weekend in
Vegas, you say. You didn't return to the base either Friday night or Saturday night?"
"No."
"Where were you in Vegas?"
"At the Hilton."
"There's more than one. But of course this can be verified?"
Joe interrupted. "Ms. Evans and I spent the weekend together. I can verify her time from late Friday afternoon until 1900 hours Sunday."
"I see." Captain Hodge kept his voice noncommittal, but Caroline's face burned. This time she didn't glance at Joe. "So the name tag was locked in your quarters the entire time."
She tried another calming breath. They didn't seem to be working very well.
"Yes."
"You're certain your quarters were secured."
"Yes. I always double-check my door."
He looked skeptical. " 'Always' is a very exact term. It means without fail. Are you saying you've never failed to double-check your door?"

"On this occasion, Colonel Mackenzie himself checked the door while I watched."
The captain glanced at Joe, who nodded. Joe's eyes were hooded, his expression unreadable.
"You verify that the tag was in your possession and no one else's. You were recorded entering the work area at exactly—" he paused to check the log "—2347 on Sunday night."
"I was in bed at that time Sunday night."
"Alone?" the captain asked indifferently.
"Yes."
"No one can verify that. You say you were in bed. The computer log says you were in the work area."
"Talk to Cal Gilchrist!" she said fiercely. "Stop wasting time with this and verify what I've already told you."
"On Thursday morning, when I walked into your office you cleared the screen and turned the computer off," Joe said. His voice was cold and deep. "What was on the screen that you didn't want me to see?"
She stared at him in silence, completely at a loss. He sounded as certain of her guilt as Captain Hodge was, but surely he knew… She tried to concentrate, to bring the occasion to mind. Thursday morning. He had startled her yet again, she remembered, and when she had reflexively started to slug him he had jerked her into his arms. She remembered fiddling with the computer to give herself something to do while she tried to get a handle on her reaction to him, but she had no idea what she had been working on.
"I don't remember," she said weakly.
"Come on," he scoffed. "You remember everything. You have a mind like a steel trap."
"I don't remember," she repeated, staring at him. With a shock she realized that the expression in his eyes was one of disdain… disgust… even rage. Yes, it was mostly rage, but not the normal heat of temper. Joe Mackenzie's rage was ice-cold, and all the more frightening because of it. He was looking at her as if he could destroy her without regret. *He didn't believe her!*
The enormity of that realization almost choked her. As it was, a huge knot in her chest swelled until she could scarcely breathe, until her heart was beating with slow, painful effort. Had their situations been reversed she

would have given him her complete, unqualified trust without hesitation, because, despite the evidence, she knew he would never betray his country. Evidently he believed her capable of doing just that. Her thought processes were orderly and logical, but all of a sudden a staggering instinctive knowledge filled her: she would trust him because she had been fascinated by him, intensely involved with learning about him as a man because she loved him, while for him their time together had been purely physical. He hadn't bothered to learn about her as a person because he didn't care.
In shock, she withdrew. She didn't move physically, but she had been reaching out to him mentally, and now she slammed her mind's door on those thoughts. She pulled all her reactions inward, bolting them inside in an effort to reestablish her emotional safeguards. It was probably too late, but the human animal's instincts were always to survive, and so she obeyed those instincts. Her face went smooth and expressionless, and she stared back at him with eyes as blank as glass. She couldn't afford to give him even a sliver of herself.
"What were you working on?" he repeated.
"I don't remember." Even her voice was flat. She had so desperately clamped down on her emotions that none of them stood a chance of escaping. Just as emotionlessly she said, "I'm going to assume I'm under suspicion of sabotage."
"We haven't said that," Captain Hodge replied.
"Nor have you said that I'm not, and this feels very much like an interrogation." She fastened her gaze on him, because she couldn't bear to look at Joe. She didn't know if she could ever look at Joe again. Later, when she was alone, she would regroup and take stock, do a damage assessment, but for right now she felt as if everything in her would shatter if she had to look at him. The pain was just too great; she couldn't handle it, so she had to ignore it.
"We couldn't find any malfunction at all in the laser on Captain Wade's aircraft," she said, and even managed a little bit of pride in the evenness of her tone. It was as flat as the EEG line of a corpse. "We all talked it over. Yates Korleski, the team leader, was going to talk to Colonel Mackenzie tonight after he'd thought about it a bit longer, but we think the problem is in the computer program."
Captain Hodge looked mildly interested. "What kind of problem are you talking about, Ms. Evans?"

"We don't know. We want to compare the working program with the original to tell us if any changes have been made on the program we're actually using."
"And if there are changes?"
"Then we find out what those changes are."
"Whose idea was it to verify the program?"
"Mine."
"What made you think of it?"
"It was a process of elimination. The computer program is about all that's left that *could* be wrong."
"But the program was working perfectly before you arrived. It would be a major feather in your cap if you solved a problem of this magnitude, wouldn't it, Ms. Evans?"
She didn't flinch, just continued to stonily watch him. "I didn't sabotage the program so I could have the glory of finding the problem."
"I didn't accuse you of doing so. I merely asked if it would be a feather in your cap if you pinpointed a major flaw in a project this large and important."
"I already have a good professional reputation, Captain. That's why I'm on the team."
"But you weren't an original member, so evidently you weren't good enough for that. Did you resent not being picked in the beginning?"
"I didn't know about it, so I couldn't be resentful. I was working on something else. The Night Wing project was already in full swing before I finished my own project I only became available a month ago. That's verifiable," she added before he could ask.
"Hmmm." He studied the notes he had on his clipboard a moment longer, then looked up with a thin smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I believe that's all I have to ask you for now, Ms. Evans. You may go. Oh—you're restricted to the base. It wouldn't look good if you were caught trying to leave."
"Are my telephone calls also restricted?"
"Do you need to call someone?" he asked without answering her question.
"An attorney, perhaps?"
"Do I need one?"
He gave her that thin smile again. "We haven't pressed any charges yet."

He just had to put that "yet" in there, she noticed distantly, but it didn't affect her. "You aren't filing charges but I'm restricted to base. Let me remind you that I'm a civilian, Captain Hodge, not a part of the military."
"And let me remind you, Ms. Evans, that you *are* on a military base and this is a military matter. If necessary, we can hold you in the brig for the maximum length of time before charges have to be formally filed. A lot of this can be checked out by then, and you may be exonerated, but if you insist on spending the time behind bars, we can accommodate you."
"You've made your point."
"I thought I had."
Caroline got up and concentrated on her legs. She made certain they didn't wobble, that they moved when she told them to. She didn't look at Joe as she walked out of the office, or at burly Sergeant Vrska on duty in the outer office. Evidently the good sergeant left only when the colonel did.
They would talk to Cal, and he would verify everything she had told them, which would force them to accept that their precious security sensors could and had malfunctioned. Perhaps there had been a major foul-up in security and two ID tags had been issued with the same bar code. Perhaps someone had been entering the work area with a duplicate of her tag and had indeed been sabotaging the computer program, but questioning Cal would force them to admit that it wasn't her.
She wasn't worried about being charged with sabotage, though enduring the captain's questions hadn't been a pleasant experience. But she might never recover from the look in Joe's eyes and the realization that he didn't trust her, that he believed her capable of sabotage.
She had made a monumental, colossal fool of herself. Despite the superior capability of her brain, she had made the fundamental feminine mistake of assuming that making love with a man signaled a commitment from him. No, not making love, having sex. That was another mistake she had made, assigning too much importance to the act. To men it was the simple gratification of a physical appetite, like eating. No emotional baggage was involved. She had made love; he had had sex. She had given herself to him, heart, soul and body, and he had given her pleasure in return but nothing of himself beyond the temporary use of his own body. Magnificent as his body was, she had wanted more. She had thought she was getting more.
Oh, she hadn't gone so far as to think he was in love with her, but she had still thought he *cared*, at least a little. But she had been confusing sexual

technique with emotions. He had none, at least none that she could reach. He was always controlled, his inner self firmly locked away from everyone except his immediate family. She was beginning to see the wisdom of that. Right now she would give anything if her own emotions had been that protected, so she wouldn't be about to collapse and curl up in a fetal knot from the pain of it. She would do so if she thought it would ease the pain, but she knew it wouldn't. There was no ease.

Perhaps when he knew the truth he would expect to continue their affair as if nothing had happened. Caroline tried to imagine how she would handle the situation if he did, but she simply couldn't bring anything to mind. Nor could she imagine continuing to work here, seeing him every day. She had always been right, after all, never to become involved with anyone. The first time she had done so had certainly been a disaster. So now she either had to do the unthinkable and somehow manage to survive working with him, or she had to ruin her professional reputation by asking to be taken off the project.

It looked as if her work would be all she had, so she'd be damned if she would throw that away just because of a man, even if that man was Colonel Joe Mackenzie. If it took every ounce of strength she had, she would finish this damn project. She would talk with him about work. She would even be polite. But there was no way she would ever risk opening her heart to him again. She simply couldn't afford the pain. This was already costing her almost more than she could bear, and the ordeal had just begun.

"Cal Gilchrist categorically denies finding her ID card under her desk," Hodge told Joe later. It was almost midnight, but there was no possibility of sleep in sight. "He says she called him early Friday morning and asked him to walk her to the building because she thought someone had followed her the morning before and it made her nervous. He says he also went inside with her for a quick check of the building, then returned to his quarters to shower and shave."

Joe's face was stony. He hadn't allowed himself to hope that Gilchrist would verify everything she had said. It would have been asking for too much, when the sensors had plainly placed her there when she shouldn't have been.

"Then why use him for an alibi? She must have known he wouldn't cover for her."

"Maybe not. Evidently they're fairly good friends. Certainly Adrian Pendley wouldn't have gone a single step out of his way for her. And maybe she and Gilchrist had something going on in the past, for her to feel confident he would protect her if he could."
"No." At least he was certain about that. Caroline had never been intimate with anyone but him. Before Ivan could question him on his certainty Joe asked, "What about Korleski? Did they discuss the possibility that the problem was with the computer program?"
"Yes. She told the truth right down the line with that. He verified that she's the one who suggested the program be checked. He was also vehement that she wouldn't sabotage a project so she could have the credit of saving it. Neither did he believe she would do it for money."
"Did he think anyone else on the laser team *would* do it for either money or prestige?" Joe asked.
Ivan shook his head.
"How do the rest of them check out?"
"It'll take time to reverify everything, but all of them are spotless. I never would have suspected her if it hadn't been for the entrance and exit records."
Joe could understand that. He never would have suspected her, either, but then, he hadn't been able to see past his own obsession with her. All he'd been able to think about was getting her in bed and burying himself in that sweet body. Now he had to wonder how much of it had been calculated, if she had indeed been so attracted to him that she'd given up her virginity to him with hardly a thought or if she had done it… God, what possible reason *was* there for making love with him the way she had, other than desire? No, she hadn't come on to him in an attempt to find out classified information on Night Wing or to use him for protection if she were caught. She hadn't needed him to find out anything; she had access to all the information she wanted. And it was simply too iffy to assume he would protect her just because he'd slept with her. Caroline had wanted him. Even if he couldn't trust anything else about her, he could trust that.
So what did he do now? He'd never before been so enraged and… hurt. He might as well admit it. This had been like taking a roundhouse to the gut. Nobody had ever gotten to him the way Caroline had, with her uncomplicated fierceness. She had been forthright and brutally honest,

without any hidden agenda or stratagems. He wanted to be able to step back from the situation and look at it without emotion, but he couldn't.
He'd never felt about any aircraft the way he felt about Night Wing. It was special. It was more than special. It was history in the making, pure magic in the *air.* He would give his own life unhesitatingly to protect those planes, because they were necessary to protect his country. Simple patriotism, pure love for those buds. They were *his.*
And he'd considered *Caroline* his, too. His woman.
If the choice had been simply between Caroline and the aircraft, he would have chosen Caroline. He might despise himself for it, but he couldn't have stood by and let her be harmed. But between Caroline and his country…
There was no choice. There couldn't be. He couldn't let there be. No matter how fierce and gutsy she was, no matter how she challenged him on a level no one else ever had before and threw herself without restraint into the battle. She hadn't let him be gentle when he'd taken her for the first tune; she had insisted on receiving his full strength and had met him with her own. Caroline met life head-on, without wavering.
He paused in his thoughts, a tiny frown puckering his eyebrows. Caroline didn't seem the type to sneak around in the dark. Maybe he hadn't known her as well as he'd thought, but he would have sworn there wasn't a devious bone in her body.
He wanted to see her. He wanted to ask her some questions one on one, without anyone else in the room to buffer them. He would get the truth out of her come hell or high water.

Chapter Eleven

He had intended to go straight to her quarters, but he stopped halfway there and detoured to his own quarters in the BOQ instead. He was too angry to face her now, especially in the temporary civilian housing where there would be too many onlookers who didn't need to know any of what was going on.
He didn't think he'd ever been this angry before, but then, he'd never been betrayed like this before. Damn it, why would she do something like that? It had to be money, but he'd never understood the mentality that could view treason as just another financial opportunity.

Treason. The word reverberated through his consciousness. If she were charged and convicted, she would likely spend the rest of her natural life behind bars, without possibility of parole.

He would never make love to her again. The thought made him erupt with fury, and he restlessly paced the small confines of his quarters. One weekend hadn't been enough. He doubted that a thousand weekends would be enough to get her out of his system. Nor could he let himself forget that he had made love to her twice without protection. Despite her assurances that the timing was wrong, she could be pregnant.

Hell, what a mess! If she was pregnant… There wasn't any use in borrowing trouble; he'd know soon enough. But what would he do if she was carrying his child? There still wasn't any way he could keep her out of prison.

That was assuming she would even tell him. By the time she had left his office that night she had refused to even look at him. He'd been watching her, trying to read her reactions, and all of a sudden she had started withdrawing. He'd seen it happen right in front of his eyes. It was as if a light had been quenched. All the vitality, the responsiveness, the incredible energy of her, had vanished, and all that had been left was a frozen mannequin of a woman who had answered in a monotone and whose eyes were as blank as a doll's.

It had been infuriating to see her that way. He had wanted to jerk her to her feet and shake her, to make that wonderful, uncomplicated anger come rushing upward to meet him. But he hadn't. If he gave in to those urges, he would lose his control once and for all, and he never wanted to do that. What he did want to do, more than anything else in the world, was storm over to her quarters and make love to her so hard and so long that when it was over she would know she belonged to him. Maybe it wouldn't solve any of this, but it would sure as hell make him feel better. But he couldn't do that, either. Seeing her at all would knock down the last critical brick behind which he had dammed up his temper, releasing a flood of emotion that would sweep him away along with everything else.

Caroline lay on top of the covers on her narrow mattress, too listless to crawl between the sheets and actually go to bed. Such a normal action was beyond her. She had showered and dressed for bed, but she couldn't even go through the motions of pretending to sleep. All she could do was lie there in the silent darkness and stare at the ceiling. She could feel her heart beating,

feel the slow, rhythmic expansions of her rib cage as she breathed. Those actions said that she still lived, but she didn't feel alive. She felt numb, dead inside.

By now they would have talked to Cal, who would have verified that she'd been telling the truth. Joe would know that he'd been wrong, but somehow that didn't give her any satisfaction. Still, she had expected at least a phone call from either him or Captain Hodge, to say "Sorry, we made a mistake." Surely they wouldn't be stupid enough to think she was *resting* and would rather they wait until morning to tell her.

Or Cal could have lied.

She couldn't deny the possibility. The thought had slipped into her consciousness not long after she had lain down on the bed. If she hadn't been so upset, it might have occurred to her earlier. It was the natural progression of the line of thought she had been following earlier in the hangar, when she had been staring at the laser pod and sorting out the various ways in which what had happened could have happened.

Cal was a whiz with computers. He was the one who had found that minor glitch on Friday, but only when Caroline had begun nosing around the computer. She hadn't thought anything of it then, but if he had tampered with the commands, he wouldn't have wanted her to really concentrate on the program. He knew she had a degree in computer science, because they had talked shop on several occasions. And on both Friday and today—yesterday, now, since it was past midnight—he had really looked exhausted. From being up all night? Cal was normally as bouncy as a rubber ball.

And Cal was the only other person who had touched her ID tag. Maybe he had picked it up on Thursday when she'd lost it and had left when she had so that the sensors would match the number of warm bodies leaving with the number of ID cards. She hadn't known the sensors monitored those leaving the buildings, too, but maybe Cal had; after all, he'd been working here from the beginning and noticed things like that, while she tended to pay attention only to what directly concerned her job.

Even if he had used her ID tag to regain entrance to the building Thursday night, she knew he hadn't had it on Sunday night.

But how easily could they be duplicated? He would have had to leave the base to get it done, but she was certain it was possible. After all, the sensors had said she had reentered the work area at midnight, which would have given him several hours to have a copy made.

Then she had called him on Friday morning asking him to search the office for her tag, which had given him the perfect opportunity to return it to her and keep security from being notified. Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to use the card again, because security would have removed that particular code from the computers.

She stopped her thoughts and rubbed her forehead, trying to force everything into making sense. If her call for help had been pure chance, then there wouldn't have been any reason for him to have had the card duplicated. Had he played the odds that she *would* call *him?* They were good odds, she had to admit. She wouldn't have called Yates, and she certainly wouldn't have wasted her tune calling Adrian. It was also a good bet that she wouldn't have wanted to call security. Not a certainty, but good enough that it wasn't much of a risk, either.

So what had happened then? The sensors showed both her and Cal entering the building, then both leaving. He must have had her card on him where the sensor could read it, thereby establishing proof that he hadn't had the opportunity to tamper with the computer program because he hadn't been in there alone. But why hadn't the sensor noticed that there were two cards but only one body?

Maybe the sensors weren't as good as Captain

Hodge obviously liked to believe they were. Maybe they were programmed to catch people without cards, but no one had thought to program it to catch cards without people. Maybe Cal had figured out a way to fool it. There were a lot of maybes, all of them possible. As good as he was with computers, maybe he had somehow gotten into the base computers and logged her both in and out of the building that morning. She didn't know and might never find out.

But what would Cal do now, if he were guilty? If the programs had been tampered with, he would know that analysis would discover it. Would he try to get back into the program and cover his tracks by undoing what he had done, hoping that the analysis wouldn't go any further than a simple comparison? Or would he try to plant more evidence against her?

She had to go with the second option. It was so much more feasible. Why would Cal go to so much trouble only to undo it? No, as long as the finger was pointing toward her, he would be smart to try to make certain it remained pointing in that direction.

Her heart suddenly began thundering in her chest. If Cal were guilty, if he were going to do anything else, he would have to do it *tonight,* while things were still in an upheaval. Given enough tune, the security net would settle down so tightly that nothing would be able to escape, but there were still windows of opportunity when things first started happening.

She knew the entire laser team was being restricted from the work area, but had their bar codes already been deleted from the computers? The military worked a lot like big business when it came to office work: most of it was done during the day. Since the restriction order had only been issued that night, had Captain Hodge called in someone to enter it into the computer or left it to be done first thing in the morning? Knowing human nature, she would bet on the latter. After all, she was the only one under suspicion, and she was probably under surveillance in the interim.

On a hunch she rolled out of bed and silently walked to the small, old-fashioned crank-out window set high in the wall in the kitchen area. She had to stand on a chair to see out of it. Sure enough, a security police car was parked on the opposite side of the street. In the glow of the streetlight she could plainly see two men in the front seat. They were making no effort to disguise their purpose, but then, why should they? This wasn't clandestine surveillance, but plain old guard duty.

There was no other door.

There was, however, another high, narrow window in the bedroom. In the almost total darkness she carefully made her way back to the bedroom and stared at the small oblong of light in the wall. A man certainly couldn't get through there, and she had doubts that she could, either. Nevertheless, she stood on the bed and peeped out. That side of the street was empty.

Well, there was no point in putting herself to a lot of trouble if Cal was peacefully sleeping in bed. She mustn't let herself forget that he might be totally innocent, that he had indeed verified her story. Innocent until proven guilty was the law of the land, though

Captain Hodge could use a little refresher course in the concept.

She didn't want to turn on any lights, alerting those two out front that she was awake, so she dialed Cal's number by feel. What better way to find out if he was in his quarters than to call him? If he answered, she might even chat awhile.

By the fifth ring she began to have serious doubts that he was there. She let it ring longer, just in case he was sleeping very soundly, but on the twentieth

ring she replaced the receiver. Twenty rings, especially since the phones were installed right beside the beds to make certain the occupants would be awakened by any middle-of-the-night phone calls, would wake even the soundest of sleepers. Cal wasn't in his quarters.

She clenched her teeth in anger. Damn him! She had thought he was her friend; she had liked him, trusted him. First Joe, now Cal. Her mind immediately shied away from Joe, because that hurt was too powerful to linger over. It was much safer to focus her anger on Cal.

She stared up at that little window again. Two long, narrow louvered panes that cranked out to let the built-up heat of the day escape. She would have to dismantle the entire mechanism in the dark, and even then, she wasn't certain she would fit through the slot.

Well, she would never know if she didn't try.

Working on lasers and computers had made her familiar with tools, and she never traveled anywhere without a small pouch containing a selection of screwdrivers and pliers, because she never knew when she would need them. She fetched the pouch from the closet and dumped the tools out on the bed. Problem was, in the dark she couldn't tell which tool she needed. She did have a pencil flashlight and decided she would have to take the risk of the small beam being detected through the window, but it wasn't likely to throw a lighted patch on the ground outside and alert the guards. She climbed up on the bed and switched the flashlight on for only the smallest of intervals, just long enough for her to see that the screws holding the mechanism in place needed a Phillips head screwdriver. Five minutes later the two window slats and the cranking mechanism, in pieces, were lying on her bed.

That had been the easy part. Getting through the window was something else.

She measured it visually. She could angle her shoulders through; her head and hips would be the biggest problem, but her buttocks would compress and her skull wouldn't. She decided to go headfirst, so she could find out immediately if her head would fit through. It would be awful to go out feetfirst, then be stuck with her head inside and the rest of her body outside. Humiliating, at the very least. That is, if she didn't find herself hanged.

First, she had to change clothes and put on some shoes. She shone the pencil flashlight on the contents of her closet, taking care that no light was

visible from the outer rooms. Dark clothes would be practical, but she hadn't brought any dark clothes with her. It was
August in the southern Nevada desert; she hadn't anticipated being obliged to sneak around in the dark.
She would stand out like a sore thumb in her light-colored clothes, but there wasn't any help for it. She would just have to make certain no one saw her.
Nevertheless irritated by her lack of preparedness, she quickly pulled on a pair of thin cotton pants and a T-shirt, and defiantly slipped her ED tag into her pocket. If she got caught, they wouldn't be able to say she didn't have proper identification. As an afterthought, she added her keys to her pocket.
She could hardly reenter by the window, though if she managed to catch Cal up to no good, she wouldn't have to worry about the guards out front
She climbed up on the bed again, but a minute's experimentation made it plain that she needed to be higher so she could angle through from a more horizontal position. She got a kitchen chair and balanced it on the bed, then climbed up on the chair. It was a wobbly perch, but she was holding on to the edge of the window and wasn't afraid of falling.
One arm and shoulder went first, then she turned her head to the side and eased it through the slot, earning nothing more horrendous than a minor scrape. She wiggled the other shoulder and arm through and braced her arms on the wall below her as she wriggled forward. As soon as her hips were through, she suspected, her center of gravity would shift drastically forward and she would fall on her head, dragging her legs the rest of the way through the window. It wasn't a high drop, but she didn't want to break her neck landing.
To prevent it, or at least slow her down, she hooked her legs backward so her heels were braced against the inside wall, and inched forward some more.
The edge of the window cut into her soft bottom but she ignored the pain and forced herself on through. Immediately she lurched forward and only her hooked legs inside kept her from doing exactly as she had feared.
Frantically, she braced her arms again, forcing herself as far away from a vertical position as possible, then cast a fearful glance toward the front of the building where the guards were parked. To her relief, she couldn't see the car from where she was.
She hung there a minute before she faced the inevitable: there was no graceful way to do it. She was going to be scraped and bruised. Moreover,

there was no way she could now reverse the process and inch back inside. Her legs were trembling from the strain. Without giving herself time to dwell on how much it was going to hurt, she straightened her legs and gave a push with her arms at the same time, launching herself the rest of the way out of the window. She tried to turn in midair so nothing vital was damaged on landing, like her head, and succeeded in turning mostly to the side. The impact was harder than she ever would have suspected for such a short distance. The loose gravel scraped skin on her temple and cheek, down the side of her left arm and on her left ankle. She had banged both knees somehow, and jarred her shoulder.

But she couldn't just sit there and take stock of her injuries. Her senses were still swimming when she forced herself to move, to scramble against the shadows at the side of the building and walk quickly in the opposite direction. Only when she had gone almost a hundred yards without hearing a warning shout did she relax and take a deep breath. Immediately her pains made themselves felt, and she stopped to lean over and rub both aching knees, then her bottom. She rotated her shoulder to make certain it was in working order and gingerly touched the side of her face. She didn't seem to be bleeding, but the scrapes burned. A scarf threaded through the loops of the pants usually served her as a belt, but she stripped it out and carefully blotted the scrapes to remove the dirt and tiny bits of gravel from her face. Something else she could lay at Cal's door.

She trudged the long way around, no longer making an effort to avoid being seen on the theory that someone would be more likely to notice her if she was trying not to be noticed. If she acted normally, no one would pay any attention to her.

Joe sat up and threw the sheet off, cursing steadily under his breath even as he got up and began dressing in jeans and boots. It wasn't military business he had to attend to, and the long, restless hours in a bed that was far too empty had steadily eroded his patience until there was none left. He glanced at his watch, surprised to see mat it was only about 0200 hours. He'd been in bed less than two hours, but it had felt more like four or five. It didn't matter. No matter how long it had been, he wasn't going to be able to sleep until he'd had it out with Caroline. He wanted to hear her explanation of why she'd done what she had, and he wanted her to tell him to his face. He wouldn't let her ignore him again the way she had earlier in his office.

He decided to walk rather than take the truck for the relatively short distance; maybe the walk would settle him down. He was dangerously close to exploding, and he knew it. He had been six years old the last time he'd lost his temper, and he'd sworn then never to do it again, but Caroline tested his control to the extreme.

He'd walked less than a quarter of a mile when he first saw the slim figure walking boldly through the night, and his first thought was that temper was making him hallucinate. He stopped and stepped back out of sight, going down on one knee next to a trash can. He hadn't mistaken her identity; the overhead streetlights gleamed on her pale hair, and he knew that walk as ultimately as he knew his own face. The arrogant set of slim shoulders, the gentle sway of rounded hips, were burned into his memory.

Was she coming to see him? His heart thumped wildly, but then he wondered how she had gotten past her guards. He knew they had been there, because he had suggested to Hodge that it would be a good idea, and Hodge had agreed. He'd even heard Hodge give the orders. But here she was, walking around the base at two a.m., not a guard in sight.

He waited until she had walked past him before slipping from his cover. As always, he moved soundlessly, dropping back about fifty yards but always keeping her in sight. If she turned toward the BOQ he could rapidly close the distance and approach her. But she didn't even pause at the BOQ, and his anger rose to the boiling point. She was headed straight for the laser work area, damn her treacherous little heart. His palm itched with the almost irresistible impulse to storm up behind her, take her by the nape of the neck and bend her over his knee. By the time he got through walloping that pretty little backside he would feel a lot better and she would have a better appreciation of just how angry he was. Damn it, didn't she know how serious her situation was?

Of course she did. By her own actions, she was proving herself guilty. Probably she intended to finish the traitorous work she had already begun. He thought of stopping to alert the security police, but decided in favor of keeping her in sight. If she tried anything like setting the place on fire he could subdue her and hold her until security got there. In fact, he would *enjoy* subduing her. He just might get that walloping accomplished while they were waiting.

He saw her stop and get something out of her pocket, then attach it to her shirt. Her ID tag. Why hadn't Hodge relieved her of it? Because he hadn't

seen any need to; she had been under guard, and the codes would be deleted from the computer first thing in the morning. Joe was suddenly furious again, but this time at both Hodge and himself. They had been inexcusably lax, especially for a project with security as tight as Night Wing. She couldn't get off the base, but she could still wreak havoc *on* base. They relied too much on technology to do their guarding for them, something he intended to change immediately.

Someone was already inside the building; there was a very dim glow coming from one of the windows, barely noticeable. Caroline saw it, too. He saw her head turn as she stared at the light; then she continued straight up to the door and slipped inside, as silent as a wraith.

Twenty seconds later, he followed. He wasn't wearing his ID tag, so he knew central security would be alerted immediately.

Up ahead, he saw Caroline reach into the office and flip on the light switch, bathing her in the bright light. "What did you do, use my name tag again?" she demanded furiously of someone else inside. "The computers will probably go crazy when they record Caroline Evans entering twice in a row. You sabotaged my project, damn you!"

Realization burst in his brain like a bomb, and shock slammed through him as she stepped completely inside the office, out of sight Damn the little idiot! She didn't have one iota of caution. She had simply charged straight in without thinking that cornering a traitor could be dangerous. Joe launched himself down the corridor, running silently, desperately praying with every fiber in him that he wouldn't hear a gunshot that would mean the end of that foolhardy courageousness.

He heard a sudden movement, a gasp, a sickening thud, and he burst through the open doorway just as Caroline slid to the floor. Cal Gilchrist was standing in front of a glowing computer monitor, his face utterly white. Too late Joe saw Cal's eyes dart to the side, behind him. He tried to whirl, but he'd been too distracted by his own unreasoning fear. Before he could react, something hard crashed against his temple. It felt as if his head was exploding. Then there was nothing but total blackness.

Chapter Twelve

Caroline slowly regained consciousness, at first aware only of being jounced uncomfortably. Her head hurt with a deep throbbing that dulled her senses, but gradually she became aware of pain in her shoulder and arms, too. Then she began to realize that she could hear voices, that there was someone else near her, but for a blank, frightening moment she didn't know who or where she was.

Then she recognized one of the voices, and awareness swept through her. She remembered everything. Cal. It was his voice she recognized, and just as she realized that, she also realized that she was in a vehicle of some sort, perhaps a van, and she was tied. Gagged, too, damn it.

Slowly she opened her eyes, quickly closing them again in pain when a bright light flashed quickly through the windows. She heard a rushing sound and realized some other vehicle had passed them on the road, nothing more. She tried again, this time opening her lids only a slit so she could accustom herself to the discomfort. This must be what a hangover felt like, and she hadn't even indulged. All the misery without any of the fun. Someone was lying beside her.

This time she closed her eyes in panic, startled by the realization that there was a man right next to her. She was acutely aware of her helplessness. Oh, God, were they going to rape her?

But the man wasn't moving. Cautiously she opened her eyes one more tune and found herself staring straight into Joe Mackenzie's pale, furious eyes. Even if she hadn't been gagged, she couldn't have said a word, she was so astonished. How had he gotten there? She had a good idea how *she* had come to be in such a predicament, because she had foolishly rushed into the office to confront Cal without making certain he was alone. But how had Joe gotten involved? Then fear swelled in her chest, because he was in danger, too.

"I say we forget about it and get out of the country," Cal was saying feverishly. "It's over. I can't take it any further. They're going to check the entire system, and they'll find everything."

"I told the others you didn't have the nerve for this," someone else replied dismissively. Caroline tore her gaze from Joe's and craned her neck so she could see up front. Another man was sitting beside Cal, who was driving. She didn't recognize him, but at the same time he looked vaguely familiar.

"Nothing was said about murder," Cal replied furiously.

"And I suppose if that pilot had died when his plane was shot down, you wouldn't have been responsible for mat?"
"That was different." Despite his words, Cal's tone was uneasy.
"Yeah, sure."
"That was… chance. But this is cold-blooded murder. I can't do it"
"No one's asking you to do it," the other man said impatiently. "You don't have the nerve for it. We'll take care of it. Don't worry, you won't even see it happen."
If her hands hadn't been tied behind her back, Caroline would have lunged for the man, she was so angry. He was talking about killing them as casually as he would talk about doing the laundry! Joe silently nudged her ankle with his boot; actually, it was more of a kick, and her ankle was already sore. She turned her glare on him, and he gave a tiny, warning shake of his head. She kicked him in return, and he blinked at the pain.
They were in a van, one which was evidently used for hauling cargo rather than people, for there was no carpeting on the floor, only bare metal. The vehicle swayed with every turn, curve and bump, adding to the discomfort of her position. She was lying on her sore shoulder anyway, and having her hands tied behind her made it worse.
She tried to discern what they had used to bind her; it felt like nylon cord, while it was probably her own scarf they had tied around her mouth, adding insult to injury. Her keys were still in her pocket. If she could get them out, and if she and Joe turned so their backs were to each other, and if they had enough time, she might be able to use the edge of a key to saw through the nylon. The keys weren't sharp, but they were rough. Joe's pockets had probably been searched for a knife, a common item for men to carry, but women weren't expected to carry anything in their pockets, and evidently Cal and his cohort had totally overlooked hers.
"There's no point in killing them," Cal was saying raggedly. "It's over. We barely got out of there before the security police started swarming all over the place. By now they know I left the base, and they have a record of the van's license plate. When Caroline and the colonel are both reported missing but neither of them is recorded as leaving the base, they'll put two and two together so fast there'll be an APB out for the van within another hour, at most. Right now we're looking at life, but if we kill them, we'll get the death penalty."

To Caroline that sounded like a very convincing argument, but the other man didn't seem impressed. He didn't even bother to respond.
Sometimes she wished she weren't so darn logical. She couldn't turn off her thought processes even when they were telling her something she would rather not know. If the other man disregarded Cal's argument, then it must be because he had some reason to believe he himself wouldn't be tied in to the sabotage. As Cal had pointed out, his own involvement was known, but this other guy must think himself safe… except Cal knew about him and could tie him to everything. Therefore, the man felt safe only if he knew that Cal wasn't going to be alive to make the connection.
Furiously she began rubbing her face against the floor of the van, trying to scrape the gag away from her mouth, pushing against it with her tongue at the same time. Joe glared another warning at her, but she ignored him. Her frantic movements attracted the attention of the man in the passenger seat up front, and he turned around.
His voice was genial. "Welcome back, Ms. Evans. I hope your headache isn't too bad."
Joe had closed his eyes again and was still lying motionless. Caroline made an angry noise, muffled by the scarf, and continued her struggles. She kicked her bound feet and twisted her torso, all the while fighting the gag.
"You might as well stop wasting your time," the man said in a mild, faintly bored tone. "You can't get free, and all you're doing is pulling the cord tighter."
She wasn't concerned about the cord. Her two aims were to get the gag off and somehow dislodge the keys from her pocket. Not an impossible task, since her pants were loose, flimsy cotton, but not an easy one, either, because the pockets were deep. She mumbled a few unintelligible curses at him and continued with her struggle.
She had managed to push the scarf out of her mouth, and on an impulse she scooted over next to Joe and pushed her face hard against his shoulder, using the contact and the friction between his shirt and the scarf to roll the gag downward. Joe didn't move, and his eyes remained closed. She worked her jaw until the gag slipped down to hang around her neck. The man in the front seat was frowning at her, starting to get up on his knees and twist around.
"You dirtbag, you've killed him!" she croaked, forcing as much rage as possible into her voice, even though her tongue and jaw didn't want to

work.
The van swayed alarmingly as Cal jerked on the wheel, his head swiveling around to stare into the back. The other man fought for his balance. "Keep your eyes on the road!" he barked at Cal.
"You said he was just unconscious!"
"He isn't dead, damn it. I hit him harder than I did her because I didn't want any trouble with the big bruiser if he woke up before we could get them out of there and tied up."
Caroline yelled, "Cal, he's going to kill you, too! Why else wouldn't he be worried about a murder charge unless he's going to try to blame the whole thing on you?"
The man lunged at her from over the seat, reaching back to grab her around the throat. Quick as a cat she turned her head and sank her teeth into his arm. He howled and tried to jerk back, but she hung on like a limpet, working her jaws to inflict as much damage as possible.
The van was swerving all over the road. Cal was using his right arm to grab at the other man while still driving. Both men were yelling and cursing. Suddenly the other man used his right fist to club her on the side of the head and she saw stars, her jaws going slack as she helplessly sank back. She didn't lose consciousness, but the blow definitely addled her.
They were fighting in the front seat, and the van rose dangerously on two wheels; then Cal jammed on the brakes and it slewed violently to one side, sliding off the pavement. She felt the distinct difference between pavement and dirt; then the van tipped a little to the right as it came to rest, probably in a shallow ditch. The movement threw her against Joe, and she felt his muscles tense as he took her weight, but he didn't so much as even grunt. Instead, there was an almost soundless, barely intelligible whisper against her ear. "There's a knife in my right boot."
Well, of course there was. Didn't all colonels carry knives in their shoes? Furious because he managed to be armed when she couldn't even get her keys out of her pocket, she thought about biting *him,* too. Instead, she hurled herself toward the rear of the van, collecting even more bruises in the process. Cal and the other man were still grappling, and she caught a glimpse of something metallic gleaming in the other man's hand. Instinctively she recognized it as a pistol.
Cal somehow got his door open and leapt out, probably figuring he didn't have very good odds in such close quarters with a pistol. The other man was

swearing viciously, steadily, as he shoved open his own door and went in pursuit.
Caroline rolled around so her back was to Joe's feet, searching by feel for his right boot, struggling to push his pants leg up so she could reach the knife. They wouldn't have long, probably less than a minute. Her scrabbling fingers, numbed from the tightness of the nylon cord, finally grasped the knife handle and drew it out.
Joe was already rolling, presenting his bound hands to her. It wasn't easy to position the knife between their backs, unable to see if she was slicing into flesh or nylon, but she figured Joe would let her know when she got to skin. The knife must have been sharp; within five seconds she felt the cord give and he was rolling away from her again and sitting up. The blade was removed from her numb hands. She twisted her head to see him bending forward to quickly slice the cord around his feet; then he whirled toward her. She felt a swift tug at her hands and they came free. Before she could even bring her arms around he had jackknifed to a sitting position and freed her feet. Only then did he remove his own loosened gag, tugging it down so it hung around his neck just the way the scarf hung around hers.
A shot boomed from in front of them.
"Stay back here," Joe ordered as he lithely swung into the front and folded himself behind the steering wheel. The engine was still running; he slammed the van into gear and stepped on the gas pedal. The wheels spun uselessly, and he cursed himself even as he let up on the gas and put the transmission in reverse, this time easing down on the gas. He was used to his truck, but the van didn't have that kind of traction. The tires clawed for purchase on the loose, shifting dirt, finally caught and reversed out of the rut he'd dug with the first effort.
In the beam of the headlights he could see the second man running back toward the van. There wasn't any sign of Cal.
Caroline's head popped up beside him as he shifted into first, and simultaneously the man stopped and lifted the pistol. Joe put his hand on Caroline's head and shoved her sideways as he ducked himself, just as the pistol boomed again and the windshield shattered, spraying shards of glass all over the interior of the van. He kept his foot on the gas pedal and his head down as the van leapt out of the slight depression and skidded when the tires touched asphalt, slewing sideways again. He fought to keep the vehicle upright.

More shots, one following immediately after the other. He could feel the impact of the heavy slugs on the van. One headlight went out. Briefly he saw the man pinned in the remaining headlight; then the guy jumped sideways to safety as the van roared past

"Caroline!" he shouted, needing to know if she was okay, but he had his hands full battling the van, the wind full in his face and blinding him now that the windshield was gone, and he couldn't turn to see.

"What?" she shouted in reply.

"Stay down, he might shoot—"

Before he could complete the sentence, bullets ripped into the rear of the van, shattering those windows, too. His blood went cold.

"Caroline!"

"What?" she roared, plainly aggravated, and he could have laughed with relief. If Caroline was in a bad mood, she was all right.

The relief didn't last half a minute. A quick glance at the gauges showed the engine's temperature was quickly climbing; one of the shots must have hit the radiator. They were out in the desert somewhere, without a sign of a town, community or even a lone dwelling. The only light was from the stars and their one headlight. They wouldn't be able to get far before the engine locked up, but he intended to put every foot of distance that he could between them and the man with the gun.

The temperature gauge redlined. He kept his foot on the gas pedal.

The engine locked with a harsh, grinding sound. Caroline shot up beside him as they rolled to a stop. "What's going on?"

"Some of those shots hit the radiator. The motor's gone. Come on, out of the van."

She obeyed, pushing the sliding side door open and staggering out into the cool desert night. "Over here," Joe ordered, and she made her way painfully around the van.

"Now what?"

"Now we walk. I hope you're wearing good shoes."

She shrugged. She was wearing loafers, not as good as boots, but better than sandals. She hadn't dressed with an odyssey like this in mind, but what did it matter? She had to walk, even if she'd been barefoot.

"In which direction?"

"Back the way we came."

"*He's* back there."

"Yeah, but we don't know where we are, or how far it is to even a gas station going in the direction we were heading. At least we know that if we go back the way we came, we're going at least roughly toward the base."
Logical. But… "If we're going back the way we came, why didn't you drive in that direction to begin with?"
"Because then he'd *know* what direction we were going in," he explained. "He'll find the van, but he won't know if we continued on ahead or doubled back."
"But obviously we're going to have to pass by him at some point."
"Very possible, but not a dead certainty. He may decide to run rather than try to catch us. Since we don't know, we have to assume he's after us."
She trudged silently beside him as he walked out into the desert. They didn't dare risk walking on the road, so that meant they had to parallel it, far enough from the roadside that they couldn't easily be spotted, but close enough that they wouldn't lose sight of the pavement. She ached in so many places that it didn't seem worth the effort to worry about any of them. They had to walk, so she walked. It was as simple as that.
"Are you wearing a watch?" she asked. "What time is it? It isn't dawn yet, so they couldn't have taken us far."
Joe tilted his wrist to read the luminous dial. "It's four-thirty, so it'll be dawn soon. If they just threw us in the van and left immediately, before the security police could close the base, we're talking at least an hour of driving time. We could be anywhere from thirty to sixty miles away from base."
Walking sixty miles was a daunting thought, but not nearly as daunting as facing that man again. "There are others," she said aloud. "Maybe close by. They could have been taking us to turn over to them. It'll be dawn soon, but we don't dare try to flag anyone down, because we don't know who the others are or what they look like."
"You got it," he said grimly.
"So we have to walk every foot of that blasted sixty miles."
"Unless we see a state trooper. At least when the sun comes up I'll have some idea where we are."
Too far away from anything to suit her. She stopped talking, partly because sound carried so far in the desert and she didn't want to alert anyone to their presence, but mostly because it was taking all her effort just to walk. She had been awake all night—except for when she'd been unconscious, but she was fairly certain that didn't qualify as rest—and she was exhausted. Her

head pounded. She supposed Joe's head hurt, too, but he'd only been hit once. First she had tumbled out her window, then she'd been hit on the head, probably with the pistol, then with that guy's fist, and finally she had hit her head against the side of the van when Joe had shoved her. The wonder was that she had any sense left at all. She ached in every muscle of her body, and a good many of the bruises adorning her had come at Joe's hands. She was glad she'd kicked him back and only wished she had gone ahead and bitten him, too. She hoped he had the granddaddy of all headaches.

Twice he drew her down when a noise alerted him. She never did see anything, but he had superior eyesight, so she let him do the work while she seized the opportunity to rest. When he decided it was safe to continue on he would urge her to her feet with an implacable hand under her elbow, and she would walk some more.

Dawn began to turn the sky pearly to their left, giving them the basic information that they had been carried north into the desert and were now headed south, back toward the base. She supposed it was good information to have, in case they had to lose contact with the road.

"We can't go on much longer," Joe murmured in her ear. "Anyone passing will be able to see us from the road, and it'll get too hot to walk, anyway. We need to find shelter for the day."

She didn't like the sound of that. It was safer to stay hidden and sleep during the day, walking only at night, but it was sure going to take them a long time to get to the base. If she hadn't been so tired she could have argued, but she was beginning to feel incapable of going another foot, and she suddenly realized just how much the night's events had taken out of her. They simply had to rest.

He veered sharply away from the road, deeper into the desert. The light slowly changed to gray, letting them see details but not yet color. A huge rocky outcropping loomed in the distance, and she stared at it in dismay. That was almost surely where he was going, and she wasn't certain she could make it. She ground her teeth to keep from protesting. She either made it or she took a nap in the sun, which would soon be broiling. She was also thirsty, but they had no water, so there wasn't any point in bringing it up. He had to be thirsty, too.

When they finally reached the rocks she leaned thankfully against one huge boulder. "Now what?" she gasped.

"Stay here."

He was already gone, vanished into the rocks. She mumbled, "Sure," and sank down to the ground. Her temples were throbbing. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the stone behind her.
It felt as if she had no sooner closed her eyes than he was saying. "Come on," as he ruthlessly hauled her to her feet. He pulled her higher up into the rocks and shade enveloped her. Until then, she hadn't realized how quickly the desert had heated. He'd found a niche in the rock deep enough to provide protection for both of them, and he deposited her in the crude shelter.
"I've already checked for snakes," he said as he put a stick in her hand. "But if any show up, knock them away with this. I'm going to wipe out our tracks and find something to drink."
Automatically she closed her fingers around the stick. She knew she should be uneasy at the thought of snakes, not to mention watchful, but she had more important things to do right then, like sleep. She turned over onto her right side, because it hurt the least, and immediately dozed.
Joe stared down at her, his jaw muscles flexing. The left side of her face was bruised and scraped, and so was her left arm. He could plainly see a lump on her temple. She was chalk white with exhaustion and pain, her clothes dirty and sporting a few small tears. The contrast between her normally pristine appearance and now, when she lay bedraggled at his feet, sleeping in the dirt, utterly enraged him. Cal Gilchrist was probably dead, but he wanted the other one dead, too, for what they had put her through. He himself hadn't done a very spectacular job of keeping her safe, and he included himself in his rage.
She looked so small and helpless, curled on her side like that, though he knew she wasn't exactly helpless. He remembered her furious struggle to free her mouth from the gag so she could yell her suspicions at Gilchrist; she had caused the fight between the two men, thereby engineering their own escape. It was up to him now to make certain nothing else happened to her.
His own fatigue pulled at him as he backtracked for quite a distance, then obliterated all sign of their passing on his return to the outcropping. He ignored the weariness of his muscles. They needed water; not desperately, not yet, but they would stay much stronger if they had adequate liquids. Before he let her get dehydrated he would take the chance of flagging down a car, but it hadn't come to that yet, and he didn't want to take unnecessary

chances. With an expert eye he noted the stunted plant life dotting the desert floor, studying the growth pattern and picking out the plants that looked slightly more succulent than others growing nearby and indicating more moisture underground. They would be all right.

He climbed back to the niche in the rocks. Caroline hadn't moved; she was breathing with the slow, heavy rhythm of deep sleep. Suddenly it seemed like a lifetime since he had held her, felt her nestling trustingly in his arms, and one moment longer was too long. He lay down beside her and eased her into his arms, cradling her head on his shoulder. She sighed, her soft breath brushing his skin.

Damn her, why hadn't she called him, told him of her suspicions about Gilchrist? It had been obvious that she wasn't surprised to find the man in the work area, had in fact gone there specifically to find him. She had barged straight into danger rather than picking up the telephone and calling him, or even Hodge. All of this could have been prevented if she'd just made that call instead of trying to do things herself.

That would be the first thing he got straightened out between them when she woke up. Why the hell hadn't she trusted him? If he had to tie her to the bed every time she was out of his sight to keep her from rushing headlong into dangerous situations, he would do it He remembered the black terror he'd felt, seeing her dart into the office to confront the saboteur, and he wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled.

Instead he held her tighter, smoothing her pale hair back from her face. He could feel her heart beating against his, and right now that was all he required. He slept as easily as she had, simply closing his eyes and letting weariness sweep over him in a tide.

Chapter Thirteen

It was the heat that woke her. She felt rested, her headache having subsided to a distant and far more tolerable ache. Slowly she sat up, staring out at the glaringly hot landscape stretched before her, wavering in the heat: reds in every shade, yellows, browns, sand colors. Small specks of green that testified to the sparse plant life. Beautiful. Basic. Cal was probably dead somewhere out there, and despite what he had done, what he had tried to do, she couldn't help but mourn him. He hadn't wanted to kill them, had

argued against harming them. Poor Cal. He'd been a traitor, but not a murderer, though what he'd been doing could easily have led to someone's death. Poor Cal. But if Joe had been harmed because of him, she would have killed him herself. Sweat stung her eyes, and she dried her face on the arm of her shirt. If it hadn't been for the sheltering rock, the heat would have been intolerable. She reached out and touched the stone, found it cool to the touch. Where the sun kissed it, it would fry eggs.

Joe wasn't there, but she wasn't alarmed. She had a vague impression that he'd been lying beside her, and the imprint in the dirt confirmed that. Probably he had disturbed her when he'd gotten up, and that had allowed the heat to intrude on her consciousness.

She felt incredibly grubby, and looking down at herself, she saw that she *was* incredibly grubby. She didn't think she'd been this dirty since… come to think of it, she'd never been this duty before. She had been a fastidious child, eschewing the joys of mud puddles for those of computers and books. Stiffly she climbed to her feet, wincing as her various aches made themselves felt. Aching or not, nature called.

When she returned to the niche, she found Joe leaning propped against the rocks, looking disgustingly capable. His eyes were piercingly alert, and even though his clothes were as dirty as hers, they looked made to be dirty. Jeans and a khaki shirt were far more utilitarian than thin white cotton pants and an oversize white T-shirt. Even his scruffy boots were better suited to the desert than her loafers; she had to be careful how she stepped, to avoid getting the fine silt inside her shoes, where it would promptly rub her feet raw.

After a single encompassing look mat avoided meeting his gaze, she stepped past him and sank down in the shade of the rocks again.

Joe's back teeth ground together. He'd thought he had himself firmly in control once more, but all of a sudden he was right back to where he'd started, dangerously close to the precipice. She was shutting him out, damn it, and he found it intolerable.

Grimly he regulated his breathing, forcing his hands to relax, his jaw to unclench. She was still fragile from the rough handling she'd had the day before; now wasn't the time to force a confrontation, even if he had been sure of his control, which he wasn't. Later. He promised himself full satisfaction—later.

"We both need something to drink," he finally said. "Come on."

Unhesitatingly she got to her feet without any sign of her usual argumentativeness, which had to mean she was very thirsty.
They didn't have far to walk; Joe had already scouted the area and marked the most likely spot in a small arroyo, where the scrub grew profusely. He knelt on the sandy bottom and began scooping up the sand with his hands. It quickly grew damp. He slipped the knife from his boot and dug deeper, until muddy water began to gather in the hole.
His gag had been made from a handkerchief, and it came in handy now. He spread the square of cloth over the water to filter the liquid, then gestured for her. "Drink."
Caroline didn't take exception to his curt tone; he had produced water, and that was the important thing. She didn't cavil about unsanitary conditions or the indignity of having to get on her hands and knees and lap liquid like a dog. It was water. She would gladly stand on her head to get it if it was required. She could feel the membranes of her mouth and throat absorbing the tepid moisture, and it was wonderful.
Still, she forced herself to stop long before her thirst was quenched and moved away from the tiny water hole. She gestured to him. "Your turn." She didn't know how much water there was; there might be only enough for both of them to have a few swallows each.
He stretched out full length on the sand to drink, which she considered and decided was a far more comfortable position. She should have thought of it herself, but then, she had never lapped water from a puddle before. She would know next time. Absently she studied his prone figure. As big as he was, it stood to reason that he had more blood in his body than she did, so he would probably require more water. Biology had never been one of her interests, but she would bet he had at least one more deciliter of blood than she did, perhaps two. An interesting little tidbit she needed to investigate…
She blinked and became aware that he had risen to his feet and was waiting, having evidently asked her something. "Do you want more water or don't you?" he repeated impatiently.
"Oh. Yes, thank you." This time she stretched out as he had done, which gave her better access to the small puddle of water. She sucked enthusiastically until she began to feel as if she'd had enough. She paused to ask, "Have you finished, or do you want more?"
"I've had enough," he said.

She soaked the handkerchief as best she could, then gingerly washed her face and hands, wincing when the water stung the scrapes. When she had finished, she offered the handkerchief to Joe, and he scrubbed the damp material over his own face and hands, and around the back of his neck. The moisture had a cooling effect, something he needed right then.

"We'll wait in the rocks until sundown," he said, and she nodded. Without another word she headed back to the protective niche.

Damn it, she was treating him like some stranger she'd been stranded with. No, even worse than that. She would have talked more to a stranger. She hadn't once looked him in the eye. Her gaze would slide past his face without connecting, as if he were someone she passed on the street. His hands clenched into hard fists as he strode after her. It was time to have it out, damn it

She was sitting on the ground in the niche when he got there, her arms looped casually around her drawn-up knees. Joe deliberately walked so close that his boots nudged her feet, forcing her to either stand up and face him or tilt her head back as far as it would go. She continued to sit.

"Why the hell didn't you call me last night instead of tackling Gilchrist on your own?" he asked softly, so softly it would take a discerning ear to catch the quiet fury underlying the words.

Caroline heard it but didn't much care. She shrugged. "I didn't think of it I wouldn't have, anyway. Why would I?"

"So I could take care of it. So you wouldn't nearly have gotten yourself killed."

"And you, too," she pointed out. "How *did* you get involved?"

"I was following you."

"Ah." She gave him a brittle smile. "Thought you'd catch me in the act, didn't you? What a surprise to find out it was someone else who got caught."

"And you knew it when you went there. Damn it, Caroline, for such a smart person, that was a stupid thing to do. You should have called me when you first suspected him."

"Yeah, sure. Why waste my breath?" she asked scornfully. "I'd already seen how much you believed me. I'd rather have called Adrian Pendley than you, and he hates my guts."

His breath hissed softly between his teeth as he leaned down and grasped her arms, jerking her unceremoniously to her feet "If you ever need

anything," he said, the words deliberately spaced as he forced them out, "you call *me*. My woman doesn't go to someone else."
She pulled sharply, trying to dislodge his grip on her arms, but he merely tightened his hands. "Interesting, I'm sure," she snapped. "When you find her, be sure to tell her that, but *I'm* not interested."
A red mist swam in front of his eyes. "Don't push me," he heard himself say hoarsely. "You're mine, damn it Admit it."
Again she tried to pull away, her blue-green eyes spitting fire at him. If he thought he could just pick up again where they had left off, now that it had been proven to his satisfaction that she was worthy, he was in for a nasty surprise. She wanted to scream at him, but instead she limited herself to a scathing retort. "We had a hot weekend in bed, but that doesn't give you a deed to me. Boy, were my eyes opened. I knew you weren't madly in love with me or anything, but you really can't have much of an opinion of someone at all if you think they're capable of betraying their country. It was certainly a learning experience—"
"Shut up." His voice was guttural now.
"Don't tell me to shut up," she fired back. "The next time I go to bed with a man I'll make certain he—"
"*You'll never go to bed with any man but me."* He began shaking her, the force of it whipping her head back and forth. The thought of her turning to another man was unbearable, shattering the last tenuous thread of his control and letting rage spew forth like lava, red-hot and molten. She was his, and he was never going to let her go.
Somehow his mouth was on hers, his hand locked in her hair at the back of her head, holding her still. He tasted blood, whether his or hers he didn't know, but the coppery taste called up a fiercely primitive instinct to brand her as his, sear his flesh into hers so she would never be free of him. His skin felt burning hot and too tight, as if it would burst from the force of his blood pounding beneath it. His manhood was iron hard with lust, straining against the front of his jeans.
He carried her to the ground, blind with the need to feel her soft body beneath him. He began jerking at her pants, tugging them down and off. Her underwear tore when it was subjected to the same treatment.
Caroline lay still, staring in mute fascination at his face. She had always sensed his control and resented it, but abruptly it had shattered, and the naked intensity of his expression was almost frightening. Almost, because

in the deepest, most basic part of her, she trusted him not to hurt her. She saw the savagery of his eyes, felt the barely restrained strength of his hands as he stripped her clothing away, and his wildness called her own fierce spirit soaring up to meet him.

She heard herself give a wild cry; then her hands were buried in his thick black hair, pulling him down to her.

He tore at the fly of his jeans, grunting as he freed his rigid length. He entered her with a powerful, driving thrust that made her cry out again from the impact of it; then her legs came up to hold him in the cradle of her hips as her silky hot depths wrapped around him, yielding, caressing, demanding. The sensation made him feel as if his skull was going to explode.

He rode her hard, grinding her into the hard ground beneath them in his frenzy to irrevocably meld their flesh into one. He'd never felt so savage, so utterly dominant and primitive; he was out of control, reacting purely as a male animal who needed his mate more than anything else in the world.

Caroline lifted her hips to meet his heavy thrusts. She had been sucked up into the maw of a powerful storm, and she loved it, reveled in it, embraced it and wanted more. The pleasure exploded in her, hard and deep. She clutched his hair, her heels digging into the backs of his muscled thighs as her slim body arched in a powerful bow, lifting him with her. The rhythmic surge rolled through her like thunder, and she gave herself up to it with a cry.

Her completion called up his own, the exquisite milking sensation on his hard length sending him over the edge. He convulsed with a powerful jetting that emptied him but seemed to go on forever, longer and harder and deeper than he'd ever known before. He was barely conscious when it ended, barely able to move. He didn't have the strength to roll away from her, or even to support his weight on his arms. He sank down onto her with the dim wish that he would never have to move, that they could lie there entwined for the rest of their lives.

He *needed* her for the rest of his life. He'd always loved flying with a passion that had overshadowed what he'd felt for other women, but right from the start he'd found it impossible to put Caroline out of his mind as he'd always been able to do once he was in the cockpit. She would never make a comfortable wife, but hell, if comfort and placidity were what he wanted, he would never have become a fighter pilot. He'd never been in a

fighter yet, not even Baby, that kept him on his toes the way Caroline did. She both delighted him and challenged him, and she met the strength of his sexual drive with matching strength. He was a warrior, and she was as fierce as he was, with more guts than brains, and that was saying a lot. In more ancient times she would have fought beside him, a sword in her own hand. His Valkyrie. He felt humbled by her spirit.

"I love you," he said. He hadn't known the words were there until they came out, but he wasn't surprised by them. Somehow he found enough strength to surge up onto his elbows, looking down at her with his savage, glittering eyes narrowed. "You're my woman. Don't ever forget it."

Caroline's eyes flared, the pupils expanding to huge black circles that almost completely swallowed the vivid color of her irises. "What did you say?" she demanded.

He thrust his hips against her, deepening the invasion of his still-firm male flesh. God, how could he still be aroused? He was almost dead from exhaustion, but the want, the need, was still there. "I said I love you. And you're mine, Caroline Evans. Forever and a day. Til death and beyond."

"In sickness and in health," she prompted; then suddenly tears welled and overflowed, trickling down her temples.

He cradled her head in his hands and caught the tears with his tongue, tenderly nuzzling against her. His own chest felt tight. He'd never imagined his valiant little warrior crying, and it was almost more than he could bear. "Why the tears?" he murmured, pressing light kisses across her face and neck. "Did I hurt you?"

"You nearly killed me," she replied. "When you didn't believe me." And she balled up her fist and punched him on the side of the head, because it was the only place she could reach. It was an awkward punch, because of their closeness and her position, and didn't pack as much power as she would have liked, but he gave a very satisfying grunt. "Don't let it happen again."

He jerked his head back and glared down at her. "Why in hell did you do that?"

"Because you deserved it," she said, and blinked back another tear.

Joe's mouth twitched, and the glare turned into something tender. "I'm sorry," he breathed, feathering a kiss on each corner of her mouth. "I'm sorry. I was a blind, bull-headed ass. Just the suggestion that you might have betrayed me sent me into a flat spin, and I couldn't pull out of it. I was on my way over to see you when you came marching toward me, right

down the middle of the base like you owned it, when you were supposed to be under guard." A quick frown knitted his brow, and he pulled back a little to scowl at her. "How *did* you get out?"
"I dismantled the glass slats in the bedroom window and crawled out."
He looked astounded. "You can't fit through there. It's too little."
"Hah. I got some scrapes from it and hurt my shoulder when I fell, because I had to go out headfirst, but it can be done." Then she judiciously added, "Though I don't think you would fit through even if you were greased from head to foot."
"Or any other man on base," he said dryly.
"Well, times have changed," she pointed out. "The security police should realize that women are a permanent part of the Air Force, even flying fighters into combat now, so they should adjust their thinking."
Typical of Caroline to point out the security police's errors in letting her escape. He would be sure to pass them on to Hodge. If he beat Caroline to it, that is.
She gave a delicate little cat yawn, and her dark sea-colored eyes looked sleepy. Still, Joe was reluctant to disengage their bodies, though she was lying naked with nothing beneath her but the hard ground. He solved the problem by anchoring her hips with a hard arm and rolling so he was on bottom. She made a soft sound of contentment, very like a purr, and nestled her head into the hollow where his neck and shoulder met.
He leisurely stroked her slim back for a minute, then abruptly his hands tightened, and he lifted her off his chest to give her a hard look. "What about you?" he demanded sharply. "Do you love me, Caroline? Say it"
"Yes, sir, Colonel," she murmured in response to the commanding tone. She supposed it was something he couldn't help. "I love you, Colonel, sir. Stupid of me, wasn't it, to fall in love when you were so determined to hold back, to not give me anything more than sex?"
Tension pulled the skin tight across his cheekbones, starkly revealing the chiseled bone structure. He felt the nausea of panic coiling in his stomach, because suddenly he saw that Caroline would never tolerate that rigid control, doling out passion and love in measured amounts. She wanted all of him. A cliff yawned at his feet, and if he stepped over the edge his life would never be the same, but if he didn't take that one step, he would lose her. He knew it all the way down to his bones, and just the thought of it was a hammer blow to the chest that told him he would never be able to survive

the reality. His instincts were too sharp, too primal, for him to think he would be able to shrug it off. She was his mate; there was no other for him. Somehow he forced his lips to move, though they felt numb. "I… I need to be in control."

He felt her hand on his hair, gently stroking, her soft fingertips trailing down to his cheek and then to his lips. "I noticed," she said, softly wry.

It was hard to explain, impossible with her lying on top of him, so close that she couldn't miss even the most minute change in his expression. He lifted her off him, though his body felt abruptly incomplete without the linkage to hers. She looked disoriented by the sudden shift, automatically crossing her arms over her bare breasts in response to her inner uncertainty. The gesture was so innately feminine that he grabbed her to him, holding her close and savoring the feel of her silky skin, gathering his strength. He brushed the dirt from her back, took off his shirt and slipped it on her. Her own clothes, he saw, were a tangled mess.

He kissed her, hard and quick, before tension drove him to his feet. He stood with his back to her, staring out over the stark, lovely desert.

"Dad was put in prison when I was six years old," he said. His voice was hoarse and raw. "He was innocent. The guy who had committed the crime was finally caught for something else, and he admitted everything. But Dad spent two years in prison, and for those two years I was in foster homes."

There was total silence behind him, but he sensed the intensity of her attention. "Maybe there was just something about me that the man in the first home hated. Maybe it was because I'm a half-breed. They kept other foster kids, but he singled me out. I was just a kid. I broke things, I'd lose my temper playing with the other kids, the way kids do. I was bigger and stronger than most kids my age, but I didn't know how to control that strength. If any of them said anything about Dad being a duty half-breed jailbird, I went at them and did as much damage as I could. God, did I have a temper.

"And this man would beat me whenever I did something, even if it was stumble over an ashtray that he'd left on the floor. At first he used a belt, but it wasn't long before he was using his fists. I fought him, and he beat me that much worse. I missed more school than I attended, because he wouldn't let me go to school with my face bruised up."

It got harder to say, the memories blacker as he dredged them up, and the worst was yet to come. He made himself continue. "He kicked me down the

steps once, broke a couple of my ribs. And still I kept fighting him. I guess you could say I didn't have stopping sense, but my temper flashed like black powder, and I couldn't control it. He started burning me with cigarettes if I sassed him, or twisting my fingers, just to see if he could make me cry.
"I was in a nightmare and I couldn't get out," he said softly. "Nobody seemed to care what happened to me. I was just a half-breed, worth less than a mongrel dog on the side of the road. Then one day he slapped me, and I really lost my temper. I went on a rampage. I kicked in the television set, threw all the little knick-nacks against the wall, got in the kitchen and started breaking the dishes, and he was right behind me, hitting me with his fists, trying to kick my ribs in. I lost, of course. I was only six, even if I was big for my age. He dragged me down to the basement, stripped me naked and beat the bloody hell out of me."
His heart was pounding now, just as it had been that day almost thirty years before. He'd never said it before, but it had to be said now. "Then he raped me."
He could hear the swift movement behind him, feel the rush of air as Caroline surged to her feet. He kept his back turned.
"Looking back, I think it shocked him that he'd done it He never touched me again, even in the slightest way. And I never lost control again," he said remotely. "He must have called the welfare people, or maybe his wife did. I was gone from that house within two weeks. I spent those two weeks in the basement, alone, silent. I stopped talking. The other foster homes were okay, I guess, but I didn't take any chances. I did exactly what I was told, never lost my temper, never lost control, never talked. Then one day, when I was eight, Dad showed up. He'd gotten out of prison and tracked me down. I don't know if he had authorization to get me or if no one was brave enough to tell him he couldn't, but he picked me up and held me so close it hurt, and it was the best hurt in the world. I was safe again."
"Did you tell him?" she asked, the first time she had spoken. He was a little startled at the harshness of her tone.
"No. I've never told anyone, until now. If you knew my dad, you'd know why. He would have gone after the guy and literally killed him with his bare hands, and I couldn't stand to lose Dad again." He steeled himself to turn and face her, braced for the pity he would see in her eyes, but what he saw was a long way from pity. She was standing with her fists clenched, her face savage with rage. If that long-ago man had been standing there right then,

Caroline Evans would have killed him, too. She wasn't a half-breed Comanche warrior, but her spirit was just as swift and fierce, and her sea-colored eyes were blazing. Startled, he began to laugh.
"Don't laugh, don't you dare laugh!" she roared. "I'll *kill* him—"
"You don't have to, sweetheart," he soothed, jerking her into his arms when she evaded his more gentle attempts to embrace her. "He's dead. He died two years after the welfare people took me away. After I had graduated from the Academy I decided to check, just for the information. Hell, who am I kidding? There's no telling what I would have done if he'd still been alive."
He pushed her hair away from her face and kissed her. "Maybe I was tougher than most kids, but he didn't damage me permanently, except for always wanting to be in control. He didn't warp me sexually. Being around Dad was probably the best therapy I could have had, as far as sex is concerned. He was always totally open about it, treating it as just part of nature. And we had the horse ranch. A kid learns the basics damn fast on a ranch. I was okay within six months of getting back with Dad. There was a bedrock of love there that never let me down."
"Except you're still a control fanatic," she growled.
He had to laugh again. "You can't even lay all the blame for that on what happened. I'm a fighter pilot. My life depends on being in control. It's part of my training as well as my personality."
She nuzzled her face against his sweat-dampened chest. "Well, you have a reason for it, but that doesn't mean I like it."
"No, I don't guess you would," he said in amusement. "That's why you continually push me, trying to make me lose control. Well, lady, you succeeded. Are you pleased with yourself?" His voice turned deep and serious. "I could have hurt you, sweetheart."
She looked like the cat who had had an entire gallon of cream, not just a measly saucerful. "It was *wonderful,"* she purred. "And I wasn't frightened. You can't hurt me by loving me. The only way you'll ever hurt me is if you stop loving me."
His arms tightened around her. "Then you're safe for a lifetime." He held her close for a long, long time, and he felt something relax within him, something that he hadn't even known was tightly wound. She was inside his defenses now, and he no longer had to keep his guard up. Defeat had never been sweeter, because he'd come away with the grand prize.

At the moment his grand prize was bruised and half-naked, but still valiant
He released her with a little swat to her bare backside. "Get your clothes on, woman. It's sundown, and we have to get back to the base."

Chapter Fourteen

It was almost anticlimactic. The danger the night before had been very real, but it wasn't long after dusk when they veered back close to the road and a car came by, cruising very slowly, shining a spotlight off to the side. Caroline gasped and started to hit the dirt, but Joe kept her upright with a firm grip on her arm. His eagle eyes had spotted something she couldn't make out in the darkness: the row of lights on top of the car. Literally dragging her in his wake, he strode out into the road.

The car stopped. The spotlight wavered, then settled on him. "I'm Colonel Joe Mackenzie, out of Nellis," he said. His deep voice carried that unmistakable note of command. "I need to get back to the base as soon as possible."

The state trooper switched off the spot and got out of the car, "We've been searching for you, sir," he said in a respectful tone. Military personnel or not, there was something about Joe Mackenzie that elicited that response. "Are you all right, injured in any way? A van was found—"

"We know about the van. We were in it," Joe said dryly.

"We were ordered by the governor to give every assistance to the military in finding you. A statewide search was started this morning."

Joe put his arm around Caroline and ushered her into the back seat; then he went around and took a seat up front. Caroline found herself staring at the back of his head through steel mesh.

"Hey," she said indignantly.

Joe glanced back and began to laugh. "Finally," he said, "I've found a way to control you."

"The sensor alarms went wild," Captain Hodge said. "Once when Ms. Evans entered the work area after she was already recorded as being inside, and again when you entered without your ID tag, Colonel. The first guard was there within two minutes, but the building was empty. They must have dragged both of you out immediately and then panicked. They loaded you in Mr. Gilchrist's van and bolted.

"Ms. Evans' quarters were checked and she was discovered missing. Amazing. I didn't know anyone could get out a window that small," he said, glancing at her.

"I'm not very thick," she replied coolly.

He cleared his throat at the look in her eyes. "I tried to notify you, Colonel, and found that you were missing, too, though there was no record of you leaving the base. Nor had Ms. Evans attempted to leave. There was a record, however, of Mr. Gilchrist leaving immediately after the alarm had sounded."
"The other guy must have been hidden in back with us," Joe said.
"Who was he?" she asked. "He looked familiar, but at the same time I didn't know him."
Hodge looked at his ever-present clipboard. "His name was Carl Mabry. You'd probably seen him in the control room. He was a civilian working with the radar."
"How did Gilchrist get involved with him?" Joe asked. "And there are others. Have you found out anything about them?"
They were sitting in his office. Both he and Caroline had been checked over by the medics and declared basically sound. Somewhere along the line, Caroline's clothes had vanished and the well-meaning nurses had tried to stuff her into one of the too-revealing backless, shapeless gowns that were standard for every hospital. Caroline's sense of style had been outraged, but the green surgicals had appealed to her. She was wearing a set now and somehow looked dashing in them.
"Evidently, Gilchrist was recruited after he began work here," Hodge said. "Mabry belonged to a radical group that opposed defense spending. You know the type. They want the money for humanitarian purposes, even if they have to kill to get it."
"Then just how," Caroline asked in an awful tone, "did he get security clearance?"
Hodge winced. "I—uh, we're still checking on that. But he didn't have clearance into the laser building."
"So how did he get in without triggering the alarms?" Joe asked impatiently.
Caroline snorted. "The program has a major weakness. The alarm is set off by a body entering or leaving without a card—but not a card entering or leaving without a body."
Hodge's hair was too short to pull, so he ran both hands over his crew-cut head. "What?" he almost yelled.
"Well, it's obvious. I certainly didn't go into the building with Cal when he was supposedly searching for my tag, but the computer said that I did, which means he must have had the tag with him and flashed it so the

sensors would pick it up, thereby destroying any record that he had entered the building alone and discrediting my story of having misplaced my tag. There wasn't anything Cal didn't know about computers. He probably figured it out not long after he started work on base, testing it by swinging the tag through me doorway on a string, or something like that. If he'd been caught, he wasn't doing anything he would be arrested for, just playing with the computers like any hacker would. Evidently he picked up my tag when I lost it, but left at the same time I did that day so the sensors weren't set off. He carried it off base and had it duplicated, then returned the original to me the next morning so there wouldn't be a report on it The night we caught them—" She paused, looking confused. "When was it? Just last night?"
"Seems longer, doesn't it?" Joe commented, grinning at her.
"Anyway, he would have entered with the duplicate tag, then tossed it through the doorway to Mabry, who would also have used it to enter. If you check the logs, you'll probably find entry, exit, then reentry with just a few seconds between. *If* you had been on your toes, Captain Hodge, you would have made certain my code had been immediately deleted from the computer instead of waiting until morning, thinking you had me safely under guard."
Hodge was crimson with embarrassment. "Yes, ma'am," he mumbled.
"Likewise, instead of assuming you had the problem contained, the entire laser team should have been restricted to base until you were certain."
"Yes, ma'am."
"The sensor program needs to be rewritten. It's humiliating to think of a sophisticated security system being bypassed by two people tossing ID tags through a doorway like kids playing catch."
"Yes, ma'am."
Joe had covered his mouth with his hand to hide his grin, but his blue crystal eyes were shining. Poor Hodge, by-the-book person that he was, was no match for Caroline at her most haughty, and his little hedgehog was most definitely feeling put upon. He decided to intervene before the captain was reduced to a sense of total inadequacy. "You used the past tense when speaking of Mabry. Is he dead?"
"Suicide. Gilchrist, by the way, was doing it for the money, not for any ideological reason, but Mabry firmly believed that the Night Wing program should be scrapped. They intended to cause so many problems with the tests that funding wouldn't be granted. Good plan, considering the economic and

political climate. Pressure is high in Washington to spend money only on things that *work.* We've tied Mabry to a group called Help Americans First I don't know if we'll be able to implicate any of them without his testimony, but we might be able to turn up a paper trail that ties them to it. We know they were willing to kill both you and Ms. Evans to complete their sabotage of the lasers, so we aren't talking about innocent do-gooders here."
"I want them nailed, Hodge," Joe said softly.
"Yes, sir. The FBI is working on it."
Caroline yawned. Despite sleeping all day, she was tired; it had been an eventful twenty-four hours. Joe leaned back in his chair and hooked his hands behind his head, watching her. It gave him a deep sense of contentment to watch her.
"You're the first to know, Hodge," he said lazily. "Ms. Evans and I are going to be married."
To his amusement, a look of disbelief crossed the captain's face. Hodge looked at Caroline the way he would have looked at a wild animal that had suddenly been turned loose, as if he didn't know whether to run or freeze. She returned the look with a sort of warning indifference.
"Uh… good luck, Colonel," Hodge blurted out "I mean—congratulations."
"Thank you. And I'll probably need that luck."
Two weeks later Caroline whirled in her husband's powerful arms to the strains of a waltz. Washington society glittered around them. The huge ballroom was resplendent with silks and satins, jewels both paste and real, bright chatter and serious dealing. Intermingled with the formal black, gray and midnight-blue tuxedos of the civilians were the gorgeous dress uniforms of the various branches of the military. Joe looked magnificent in his. Caroline saw more than one set of feminine eyes following him wherever he went, and she had been forced to glare several of the owners of those eyes into submission.
"We should have waited," she said.
"For what?" His arm tightened around her as he swung her around.
"To get married."
"For God's sake, why?"
"For your family."
He laughed aloud. "Dad understood. When he decided to marry Mary, he had the deed done within two days. It took me three."
"General Ramey seemed pleased," she commented.

"He is. The Air Force likes its officers to be married. It makes us more settled."
"Sure," she replied doubtfully. "If going Mach 3 is considered settled."
The funding for Night Wing had been granted by a wide margin in Congress the day before. Joe had had to testify before the committee, requiring his presence in Washington, and he had categorically refused to be separated from his wife, so Caroline's presence had also been required. The federal investigation into Help Americans First was ongoing, as was the final phase of testing on the Night Wing project, but the aircraft and laser systems were all functioning perfectly. The damage Cal had done to the computer program had been rectified. And Caroline was slowly beginning to realize what it would mean to her life to be married to a career military officer. When the final testing was completed he would be taking over as wing commander of the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing at Langley AFB in Virginia. She had learned a lot about the military in the ten days they had been married and knew that Joe would be up for his first star after that posting. He was thirty-five years old and would probably make general before he was thirty-seven. She would never admit it to him, because she felt he needed someone who didn't jump every time he issued an order, but sometimes she was a little in awe of his abilities.
He pulled her closer, and the movement of the waltz brought her lower body into firm contact with his. Her gaze flew up to meet his, and she saw his arousal reflected in the glittering blue depths of his eyes.
"I like you in white," he murmured.
"That's good. I wear it a lot." She was wearing it now. Her ball gown was pure, snowy white.
"You look better on white sheets than anyone I know."
"Hmm. I'm going to take flying lessons, so maybe I'll need to have several jumpsuits made in white."
Incredibly, she felt his shoulder tense under her hand. "Flying lessons? Why? If you want to fly, I'll teach you."
She gave him a calm smile. "No. I'd turn you into a trembling wreck if you tried to teach me how to fly, and I'd be ready to kill you. But I need to know, so I'll know something of what it's like for you up there." She figured it was the best way to get over the fear she felt every time he went up. Rather than risk clipping his wings, out of his concern for her, she would grow her own wings.

He still looked uneasy. "Caroline…"
"Joe," she replied firmly, "I'm good at anything I decide to do. Physics, computers, sex. I'll be good at flying, too. And having babies."
He stopped dead in the middle of the dance floor. "Caroline!"
She lifted her brows, ignoring the smiling glances directed their way. "What?"
"Are you pregnant?"
"It's possible," she said serenely. "The timing wasn't right during our weekend in Vegas, but what about since then? Name one time when you used any protection. If I'm not now, the odds are good I will be before the end of the year."
He couldn't seem to breathe. Hell, she probably was pregnant. As she had said, she was very good at anything she decided to do, and so was he.
"It'll be interesting," she said, "to find out if you make girl babies or boy babies."
A slow grin moved his hard, beautiful mouth. "As long as I make you, I'm happy."
"Oh, you do make me, Colonel Mackenzie. Very well indeed. When are we going to Wyoming?"
He adjusted to her lightning change of subject without a pause and resumed the dance. "Next month. I'll only have a week, but we'll get back for Christmas."
"Good. I've talked to Boling-Wahl, and they'll try to keep me assigned to projects in your general vicinity, though of course I won't be working on any project for the Air Force. I may be working in Baltimore while you're at Langley, but the commute isn't bad."
"Not bad," he said doubtfully, "but I don't really like the idea of you having to battle that traffic."
She pulled back a little and her brows slowly rose. "Me?" she asked after a delicate pause.
He stifled a shout of laughter. "I have to be closer to the base than that," he explained, keeping his voice level with an effort.
"Oh." She considered the situation for a moment, then said, "Okay, I'll do it this time. But you owe me, big time, because I believe in being comfortable, and fighting the traffic violates that belief. I'll let you know when I think of some way you can make it up to me."

He tugged her closer, still fighting laughter as he savored the feel of her in his arms. "Mary's going to love you," he said under his breath.

* * * * *

Mary did love her.

The two women were immediate friends, sensing a basic likeness in each other. Caroline fell in love, not only with his family but with Ruth, Wyoming and the prosperous horse ranch on top of Mackenzie's Mountain. The place was beautiful, and the ranch house was one of the most cheerful places she'd ever been in her life.

Mary Mackenzie was a slight, delicately formed woman with soft blue-gray eyes, pale brown hair and the most exquisite complexion in the world. At first sight she struck Caroline as rather plain, but by day's end her gaze had accustomed itself to the glowing purity of Mary's features and she thought her mother-in-law incredibly beautiful. Certainly Wolf Mackenzie thought his wife was beautiful, if the obvious love and lust in his black eyes every time he looked at her were anything to go by.

She had never seen two men more alike than Joe and his father, the only real difference being that Wolfs eyes were as black as night while Joe's were that brilliant, diamond blue. And looking at Wolf, she could easily understand why Joe had thought his father would kill the man who had abused him, if he had known about it. Wolf Mackenzie protected his own. Like his son, he was pure warrior.

Mary was dwarfed by her sons, even thirteen-year-old Zane, the intense one. Michael was off at college; it would be Christmas before she would meet him. But Joshua, at sixteen, was almost as big as Wolf and Joe. Josh was as bright and lighthearted as Zane was dark and quiet, his gaze watchful. The same dangerous intensity that burned in both Joe and Wolf was evident in the boy.

Then there was Maris. At eleven, she was small for her age, with Mary's slight build and exquisitely translucent complexion. Her hair was pale, her eyes as black as Wolfs. She was her father's shadow, her small hands gentling and soothing the fractious horses as well as Wolf's strong ones did. For the first time Caroline saw Joe with horses, and another element of his character fell into place. He was infinitely patient with them and rode as if he'd been born in the saddle, which he almost had.

She stood at the kitchen window watching him and Wolf and Maris in the corral with a tall black mare who was currently Maris's favorite. Mary came

to stand beside her, knowing instinctively who Caroline was watching.
"He's wonderful, isn't he?" Mary sighed. "I loved him the first moment I saw him, when he was sixteen. There aren't many men in this world like Joe. He was a man even then, and I mean it in the purest sense of the word. Of course, I'm prejudiced, but you are, too, aren't you?"
"Just looking at him gives me shivers," Caroline admitted dreamily, then caught herself with a laugh. "But don't tell him that. Sometimes he can be very much the colonel. I try to keep him from being *too* commanding."
"Oh, he knows. The thing is, you give him shivers, too. Keeps things nice and balanced. I should know.
His father has been giving me shivers for almost twenty years now. Do you suppose it's inherited?"
"It probably is. Look at Joshua and Zane."
"I know," Mary sighed. "I feel so sorry for all the girls in school. And all those poor girls in college with Michael haven't had time to get used to him, the way the girls he grew up with did. Not that it did them much good."
"Maris will balance it out with the boys."
Through the window she watched Joe lightly vault the fence and start toward the house. Wolf tousled Maris's hair and followed his son, while Maris remained with the mare.
Both men entered the house, their tall, broad-shouldered forms suddenly making the kitchen seem too small. They brought with them the earthy scents of the outdoors, horse and hay and clear fresh air mingled with their own male sweat
"You two look guilty," Joe observed. "What have you been talking about?"
"Genetics," Caroline replied.
His brows lifted in that characteristic way. She shrugged. "Well, I can't help it I'm probably going to be very interested in genetics for the next eight and a half months. Do you want to lay odds on whether it's a boy or a girl?"
"Oh, it's a boy," Mary said, her entire face lit with delight. Joe had gone weak at the knees, and Wolf was laughing at his son as he helped him to a chair. "Joe's a Mackenzie, hardly a female sperm to be found. Mackenzies have to work really hard to have daughters. That's why they appreciate them so much."

Epilogue

Mary was absolutely right. John Mackenzie, eight pounds and two ounces, made his debut right on time. His heritage was immediately apparent in the thick black hair, blue eyes and straight black brows of his father. After his birth Caroline slept, and Joe dozed in the chair by her bed, his son lying on his chest and making squeaky little grunting noises. Caroline awakened, her drowsy eyes moving around the room until her gaze lit on the pair by her side. She reached out, first touching her husband's hand and then the tiny hand that lay curled on his chest.

Joe's eyes opened. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi, yourself." He looked wonderful, she thought. Kind of grubby and rumpled. He was still in uniform, having been summoned straight from the base. The nurses were probably all swooning at his feet. She grabbed his tie and pulled him closer. "Give me a kiss."

He did, his mouth lingering hungrily over hers. "In a few weeks I'll give you a lot more."

"Umm. I can't wait." He made a few lascivious promises to her that made her heart pound, and she laughed as she took the sleeping baby from him. "You shouldn't talk like that in front of him. He's too young."

"It's nothing new to him, sweetheart. He's been well acquainted with me from the very beginning."

She looked down at the tiny, serious face, and this time her heart swelled, blooming until it nearly filled her chest. It was incredible. This magnificent little creature was incredible. Her parents, having decided to stay in Greece for a couple of years, were on their way, but the flight was so long and the connections so horrible that it would be another ten hours before they arrived. John's other grandparents, however, had managed to get there before he was born, and he'd already been in their arms.

"Where are Wolf and Mary?" she asked sleepily.

"In the cafeteria. They said they were hungry, but I think they wanted to give us some time alone."

"I wish they'd brought Maris and the boys."

"They were taking final exams at school. They'll see him soon enough."

She looked back down at the baby, tracing the downy cheek with her fingertip. To her surprise, he abruptly turned his head toward the touch, the tiny mouth opening as he sought it

Joe laughed and said, "That isn't it, son. You need to fine-tune your targeting a little."

The baby had begun fretting. Caroline opened her gown and gently guided the avid little mouth to her breast. He clamped down on it with a grunting noise.

"He's a typical Mackenzie," she murmured. "Which means he isn't typical at all."

She looked up and met Joe's eyes, brilliant and filled with more desire and love than she'd ever thought to see in her life. No, there was nothing typical about this man. He was on a fast track to the stars, and he was carrying her with him.

--3 Mackenzie's Pleasure (1994 est.)--



Mackenzie's Pleasure is dedicated to all the wonderful fans who fell as much in love with the Mackenzies as I did

Prologue

Wolf Mackenzie slipped out of bed and restlessly paced over to the window, where he stood looking out at the stark, moonlit expanse of his land. A quick glance over his bare shoulder reassured him that Mary slept on undisturbed, though he knew it wouldn't be long before she sensed his absence and stirred, reaching out for him. When her hand didn't encounter his warmth, she would wake, sitting up in bed and drowsily pushing her silky hair out of her face. When she saw him by the window she would slide out of bed and come to him, nestling against his naked body, sleepily resting her head on his chest.

A slight smile touched his hard mouth. Like as not, if he stayed out of bed long enough for her to awaken, when they returned to the bed it wouldn't be to sleep but to make love. As he remembered, Maris had been conceived on just such an occasion, when he had been restless because Joe's fighter wing had just been deployed overseas during some flare-up. It had been Joe's first action, and Wolf had been as tense as he'd been during his own days in Vietnam.

Luckily, he and Mary were past the days when spontaneous passion could result in a new baby. Nowadays they had grandkids, not kids of their own.

Ten at the last count, as a matter of fact.
But he was restless tonight, and he knew why.
The wolf always slept better when all of his cubs were accounted for. Never mind that the cubs were adults, some of them with children of their own. Never mind that they were, one and all, supremely capable of taking care of themselves. They were *his*, and he was there if they needed him. He also liked to know, within reason, where they were bedding down for the night. It wasn't necessary for him to be able to pinpoint their location—some things a parent was better off not knowing—but if he knew what *state* they were in, that was usually enough. Hell, sometimes he would have been glad just to know which *country* they were roaming.
His concern wasn't for Joe, this time. He knew where Joe was—the Pentagon. Joe wore four stars now, and sat on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joe would still rather strap on a metal bird and fly at twice the speed of sound, but those days were behind him. If he had to fly a desk, then he would damn sure fly it the best it could be flown. Besides, as he'd once said, being married to Caroline was more challenging than being in a dogfight and outnumbered four to one.
Wolf grinned when he thought of his daughter-in-law. Genius IQ, doctorates in both physics and computer sciences, a bit arrogant, a bit quirky. She'd gotten her pilot's license just after the birth of their first son, on the basis that the wife of a fighter pilot should know something about flying. She had received her certification on small jet aircraft around the time the third son had made his appearance. After the birth of her fifth son, she had grumpily told Joe that she was calling it quits with that one, because she'd given him five chances and obviously he wasn't up to the job of fathering a daughter. It had once been gently suggested to Joe that Caroline should quit her job. The company that employed her was heavily engaged in government contract work, and the appearance of any favoritism could hurt his career. Joe had turned his cool, blue laser gaze on his superiors and said, "Gentlemen, if I have to choose between my wife and my career, I'll give you my resignation immediately." That was *not* the answer that had been expected, and nothing else was said about Caroline's work in research and development.
Wolf wasn't worried about Michael, either. Mike was the most settled of all his children, though just as focused. He had decided at an early age that he wanted to be a rancher, and that's exactly what he was. He owned a sizable

spread down toward Laramie, and he and his wife were happily raising cattle and two sons.

The only uproar Mike had ever caused was when he decided to marry Shea Colvin. Wolf and Mary had given him their blessing, but the problem was that Shea's mother was Pam Hearst Colvin, one of Joe's old girlfriends—and Pam's father, Ralph Hearst, was as adamantly opposed to his beloved granddaughter marrying Michael Mackenzie as he had been to his daughter dating Joe Mackenzie.

Michael, with his typical tunnel vision, had ignored the whole tempest. His only concern was marrying Shea, and to hell with the storm erupting in the Hearst family. Quiet, gentle Shea had been torn, but she wanted Michael and refused to call off the wedding as her grandfather demanded. Pam herself had finally put an end to it, standing nose to nose with her father in the middle of his store.

"Shea *will* marry Michael," she'd stormed, when Ralph had threatened to take Shea out of his will if she married one of those damn breeds. "You didn't want me to date Joe, when he was one of the most decent men I've ever met. Now Shea wants Michael, and she's going to have him. Change your will, if you like. Hug your hate real close, because you won't be hugging your granddaughter—or your great-grandchildren. Think about that!"

So Michael had married Shea, and despite his growling and grumping, old Hearst was nuts about his two great-grandsons. Shea's second pregnancy had been difficult, and both she and the baby had nearly died. The doctor had advised them not to have any more children, but they had already decided to have only two, anyway. The two boys were growing up immersed in cattle ranching and horses. Wolf was amused that Ralph Hearst's greatgrandchildren bore the Mackenzie name. Who in hell ever would have thought?

Josh, his third son, lived in Seattle with his wife, Loren, and their three sons. Josh was as jet-mad as Joe, but he had opted for the Navy rather than the Air Force, perhaps because he wanted to succeed on his own, not because his older brother was a general.

Josh was cheerful and openhearted, the most outgoing of the bunch, but he, too, had that streak of iron determination. He'd barely survived the crash that left him with a stiffened right knee and ended his naval career, but in typical Josh fashion, he had put that behind him and concentrated on what

was before him. At the time, that had been his doctor—Dr. Loren Page. Never one to dither around, Josh had taken one look at tall, lovely Loren and begun his courtship from his hospital bed. He'd still been on crutches when they married. Now, three sons later, he worked for an aeronautics firm, developing new fighter aircraft, and Loren practiced her orthopedic specialty at a Seattle hospital.

Wolf knew where Maris was, too. His only daughter was currently in Montana, working as a trainer for a horse rancher. She was considering taking a job in Kentucky, working with Thoroughbreds. From the time she'd been old enough to sit unaided on a horse, her ambitions had all centered around the big, elegant animals. She had his touch with horses, able to gentle even the most contrary or vicious beast. Privately Wolf thought that she probably surpassed his skill. What she could do with a horse was pure magic.

Wolf's hard mouth softened as he thought of Maris. She had wrapped his heart around her tiny finger the moment she had been placed in his arms, when she was mere minutes old, and had looked up at him with sleepy dark eyes. Of all his children, she was the only one who had his dark eyes. His sons all looked like him, except for their blue eyes, but Maris, who resembled Mary in every other way, had her father's eyes. His daughter had light, silvery brown hair, skin so fine it was almost translucent, and her mother's determination. She was all of five foot three and weighed about a hundred pounds, but Maris never paid any attention to her slightness; when she made up her mind to do something, she persisted with bulldog stubbornness until she succeeded. She could more than hold her own with her older, much larger and domineering brothers.

Her chosen career hadn't been easy for her. People tended to think two things. One was that she was merely trading on the Mackenzie name, and the other was that she was too delicate for the job. They soon found out how wrong they were on both counts, but it was a battle Maris had fought over and over. She kept at it, though, slowly winning respect for her individual talents.

The mental rundown of his kids next brought him to Chance. Hell, he even knew where Chance was, and that was saying something. Chance roamed the world, though he always came back to Wyoming, to the mountain that was his only home. He had happened to call earlier that day, from Belize. He'd told Mary that he was going to rest for a few days before moving on.

When Wolf had taken his turn on the phone, he had moved out of Mary's hearing and quietly asked Chance how bad he was hurt.
"Not too bad," Chance had laconically replied. "A few stitches and a couple of cracked ribs. This last job went a little sour on me."
Wolf didn't ask what the last job had entailed. His soldier-of-fortune son occasionally did some delicate work for the government, so Chance seldom volunteered details. The two men had an unspoken agreement to keep Mary in the dark about the danger Chance faced on a regular basis. Not only did they not want her to worry, but if she knew he was wounded, she was likely to hop on a plane and fetch him home.
When Wolf hung up the phone and turned, it was to find Mary's slate blue gaze pinned on him. "How bad is he hurt?" she demanded fiercely, hands planted on her hips.
Wolf knew better than to try lying to her. Instead he crossed the room to her and pulled her into his arms, stroking her silky hair and cradling her slight body against the solid muscularity of his. Sometimes the force of his love for this woman almost drove him to his knees. He couldn't protect her from worry, though, so he gave her the respect of honesty. "Not too bad, to use his own words."
Her response was instant. "I want him here."
"I know, sweetheart. But he's okay. He doesn't lie to us. Besides, you know Chance."
She nodded, sighing, and turned her lips against his chest. Chance was like a sleek panther, wild and intolerant of fetters. They had brought him into their home and made him one of the family, binding him to them with love when no other restraint would have held him. And like a wild creature that had been only half-tamed, he accepted the boundaries of civilization, but lightly. He roamed far and wide, and yet he always came back to them.
From the first, though, he had been helpless against Mary. She had instantly surrounded him with so much love and care that he hadn't been able to resist her, even though his light hazel eyes had reflected his consternation, even embarrassment, at her attention. If Mary went down to fetch Chance, he would come home without protest, but he would walk into the house wearing a helpless, slightly panicked "Oh, God, get me out of this" expression. And then he would meekly let her tend his wounds, pamper him and generally smother him with motherly concern.

Watching Mary fuss over Chance was one of Wolf's greatest amusements. She fussed over all of her kids, but the others had grown up with it and took it as a matter of course. Chance, though...he had been fourteen and half wild when Mary had found him. If he'd ever had a home, he didn't remember it. If he had a name, he didn't know it. He'd evaded well-meaning social authorities by staying on the move, stealing whatever he needed, food, clothes, money. He was highly intelligent and had taught himself to read from newspapers and magazines that had been thrown away. Libraries had become a favorite place for him to hang out, maybe even spend the night if he could manage it, but never two nights in a row. From what he read and what little television he saw, he understood the concept of a family, but that was all it was to him—a concept. He trusted no one but himself.

He might have grown to adulthood that way if he hadn't contracted a monster case of influenza. While driving home from work, Mary had found him lying on the side of a road, incoherent and burning up with fever. Though he was half a foot taller than she and some fifty pounds heavier, somehow she had wrestled and bullied the boy into her truck and taken him to the local clinic, where Doc Nowacki discovered that the flu had progressed into pneumonia and quickly transferred Chance to the nearest hospital, eighty miles away.

Mary had driven home and insisted that Wolf take her to the hospital—immediately.

Chance was in intensive care when they arrived. At fkst the nursing staff hadn't wanted to let them see him, since they weren't family and in fact didn't know anything about him. Child services had been notified, and someone was on the way to take care of the paperwork. They had been reasonable, even kind, but they hadn't reckoned with Mary. She was relentless. She wanted to see the boy, and a bulldozer couldn't have budged her until she saw him. Eventually the nurses, overworked and outclassed by a will far stronger than their own, gave in and let Wolf and Mary into the small cubicle.

As soon as he saw the boy, Wolf knew why Mary was so taken with him. It wasn't just that he was deathly ill; he was obviously part American Indian. He would have reminded Mary so forcibly of her own children that she could no more have forgotten about him than she could one of them.

Wolf's expert eye swept over the boy as he lay there so still and silent, his eyes closed, his breathing labored. The hectic color of fever stained his high

cheekbones. Four different bags dripped an IV solution into his muscular right arm, which was taped to the bed. Another bag hung at the side of the bed, measuring the output of his kidneys.

Not a half-breed, Wolf had thought. A quarter, maybe. No more than that. But still, there was no doubting his heritage. His fingernails were light against the tanned skin ' of his fingers, where an Anglo's nails would have been pinker. His thick, dark brown hair, so long it brushed his shoulders, was straight. There were those high cheekbones, the clear-cut lips, the high-bridged nose. He was the most handsome boy Wolf had ever seen.

Mary went up to the bed, all her attention focused on the boy who lay so ill and helpless on the snowy sheets. She laid her cool hand lightly against his forehead, then stroked it over his hair. "You'll be all right," she murmured. "I'll make sure you are."

He had lifted his heavy lids, struggling with the effort. For the fkst time Wolf saw the light hazel eyes, almost golden, and circled with a brown rim so dark it was almost black. Confused, the boy had focused fkst on Mary; then his gaze had wandered to Wolf, and belated alarm flared in his eyes. He tried to heave himself up, but he was too weak even to tug his taped arm free.

Wolf moved to the boy's other side. "Don't be afraid," he said quietly. "You have pneumonia, and you're in a hospital." Then, guessing what lay at the bottom of the boy's panic, he added, "We won't let them take you."

Those light eyes had rested on his face, and perhaps Wolf's appearance had calmed him. Like a wild animal on guard, he slowly relaxed and drifted back to sleep.

Over the next week, the boy's condition improved, and Mary swung into action. She was determined that the boy, who still had not given them a name, not be taken into state custody for even one day. She pulled strings, harangued people, even called on Joe to use his influence, and her tenacity worked. When the boy was released from the hospital, he went home with Wolf and Mary.

He had gradually become accustomed to them, though by no stretch of the imagination had he been friendly, or even trustful. He would answer their questions, in one word if possible, but he never actually *talked* with them. Mary hadn't been discouraged. From the first, she simply treated the boy as if he was hers—and soon he was.

The boy who had always been alone was suddenly plunged into the middle of a large, volatile family. For the first time he had a roof over his head every night, a room all to himself, ample food in his belly. He had clothing hanging in the closet and new boots on his feet. He was still too weak to share in the chores everyone did, but Mary immediately began tutoring him to bring him up to Zane's level academically, since the two boys were the same age, as near as they could tell. Chance took to the books like a starving pup to its mother's teat, but in every other way he determinedly remained at arm's length. Those shrewd, guarded eyes took note of every nuance of their family relationships, weighing what he saw now against what he had known before.

Finally he unbent enough to tell them that he was called Sooner. He didn't have a real name.

Maris had looked at him blankly. "Sooner?"

His mouth had twisted, and he'd looked far too old for his fourteen years. "Yeah, like a mongrel dog."

"No," Wolf had said, because the name was a clue. "You know you're part Indian. More than likely you were called Sooner because you were originally from Oklahoma—and that means you're probably Cherokee."

The boy merely looked at him, his expression guarded, but still something about him had lightened at the possibility that he hadn't been likened to a dog of unknown heritage.

His relationships with everyone in the family were complicated. With Mary, he wanted to hold himself away, but he simply couldn't. She mothered him the way she did the rest of her brood, and it terrified him even though he delighted in it, soaking up her loving concern. He was wary of Wolf, as if he expected the big man to turn on him with fists and boots. Wise in the ways of wild things, Wolf gradually gentled the boy the same way he did horses, letting him get accustomed, letting him realize he had nothing to fear, then offering respect and friendship and, finally, love.

Michael had already been away at college, but when he did come home he simply made room in his family circle for the newcomer. Sooner was relaxed with Mike from the start, sensing that quiet acceptance.

He got along with Josh, too, but Josh was so cheerful it was impossible not to get along with him. Josh took it on himself to be the one who taught Sooner how to handle the multitude of chores on a horse ranch. Josh was the one who taught him how to ride, though Josh was unarguably the worst

horseman in the family. That wasn't to say he wasn't good, but the others were better, especially Maris. Josh didn't care, because his heart was wrapped up in planes just the way Joe's had been, so perhaps he had been more patient with Sooner's mistakes than anyone else would have been.
Maris was like Mary. She had taken one look at the boy and immediately taken him under her fiercely protective wing, never mind that Sooner was easily twice her size. At twelve, Maris had been not quite five feet tall and weighed all of seventy-four pounds. It didn't matter to her; Sooner became hers the same way her older brothers were hers. She chattered to him, teased him, played jokes on him— in short, drove him crazy, the way little sisters were supposed to do. Sooner hadn't had any idea how to handle the way she treated him, any more than he had with Mary. Sometimes he had watched Maris as if she was a ticking time bomb, but it was Maris who won his first smile with her teasing. It was Maris who actually got him to enter the family conversations: slowly, at first, as he learned how families worked, how the give-and-take of talking melded them together, then with more ease. Maris could still tease him into a rage, or coax a laugh out of him, faster than anyone else. For a while Wolf had wondered if the two might become romantically interested in each other as they grew older, but it hadn't happened. It was a testament to how fully Sooner had become a part of their family; to both of them, they were simply brother and sister.
Things with Zane had been complicated, though. Zane was, in his own way, as guarded as Sooner. Wolf knew warriors, having been one himself, and what he saw in his youngest son was almost frightening. Zane was quiet, intense, watchful. He moved like a cat, gracefully, soundlessly. Wolf had trained all his children, including Maris, in self-defense, but with Zane it was something more. The boy took to it with the ease of someone putting on a well-worn shoe; it was as if it had been made for him. When it came to marksmanship, he had the eye of a sniper, and the deadly patience.
Zane had the instinct of a warrior: to protect. He was immediately on guard against this intruder into the sanctity of his family's home turf.
He hadn't been nasty to Sooner. He hadn't made fun of him or been overtly unfriendly, which wasn't in his nature. Rather, he had held himself away from the newcomer, not rejecting, but certainly not welcoming, either. But because they were the same age, Zane's acceptance was the most crucial, and Sooner had reacted to Zane's coolness by adopting the same tactics. They had ignored each other.

While the kids were working out their relationships, Wolf and Mary had been pushing hard to legally adopt Sooner. They had asked him if that was what he wanted and, typically, he had responded with a shrug and an expressionless, "Sure." Taking that for the impassioned plea it was, Mary redoubled her efforts to get the adoption pushed through.

As things worked out, they got the word that the adoption could go forward on the same day Zane and Sooner settled things between them. The dust was what had caught Wolf's attention. At first he hadn't thought anything of it, because when he glanced over he saw Maris sitting on the top rail of the fence, calmly watching the commotion. Figuring one of the horses was rolling in the dirt, Wolf went back to work. Two seconds later, however, his sharp ears caught the sound of grunts and what sounded suspiciously like blows.

He walked across the yard to the other corral. Zane and Sooner had gotten into the corner, where they couldn't be seen from the house, and were ferociously battering each other. Wolf saw at once that both boys, despite the force of their blows, were restraining themselves to the more conventional fisticuffs rather than the faster, nastier ways he'd also taught them. He leaned his arms on the top rail beside Maris. "What's this about?"

"They're fighting it out," she said matter-of-factly, without taking her eyes from the action.

Josh soon joined them at the fence, and they watched the battle. Zane and Sooner were both tall, muscular boys, very strong for thek ages. They stood toe to toe, taking turns driving their fists into each other's faces. When one of them got knocked down, he got to his feet and waded back into the fray. They were almost eerily silent, except for the involuntary grunts and the sounds of hard fists hitting flesh.

Mary saw them standing at the fence and came out to investigate. She stood beside Wolf and slipped her small hand into his. He felt her flinch every time a blow landed, but when he looked at her, he saw that she was wearing her prim schoolteacher's expression, and he knew that Mary Elizabeth Mackenzie was about to call the class to order.

She gave it five minutes. Evidently deciding this could go on for hours, and that both boys were too stubborn to give in, she settled the matter herself. In her crisp, clear teaching voice she called out, "All right, boys, let's get this wrapped up. Supper will be on the table in ten minutes." Then she calmly

walked back to the house, fully confident that she had brought detente to the corral.
She had, too. She had reduced the fight to the level of a chore or a project, given them a time limit and a reason for ending it.
Both boys' eyes had flickered to that slight retreating figure with the ramrod spine. Then Zane had turned to
Sooner, the coolness of his blue gaze somewhat marred by the swelling of his eyes. "One more," he said grimly, and slammed his fist into Sooner's face.
Sooner picked himself up off the dirt, squared up again and returned the favor.
Zane got up, slapped the dirt from his clothes and held out his hand. Sooner gripped it, though they had both winced at the pain in their knuckles. They shook hands, eyed each other as equals, then returned to the house to clean up. After all, supper was almost on the table.
At supper, Mary told Sooner that the adoption had been given the green light. His pale hazel eyes had glittered in his battered face, but he hadn't said anything.
"You're a Mackenzie now," Maris had pronounced with great satisfaction. "You'll have to have a real name, so choose one."
It hadn't occurred to her that choosing a name might require some thought, but as it happened, Sooner had looked around the table at the family that pure blind luck had sent him, and a wry little smile twisted up one side of his bruised, swollen mouth. "Chance," he said, and the unknown, unnamed boy became Chance Mackenzie.
Zane and Chance hadn't become immediate best friends after the fight. What they had found, instead, was mutual respect, but friendship grew out of it. Over the years, they became so close that they could well have been born twins. There were other fights between them, but it was well known around Ruth, Wyoming, that if anyone decided to take on either of the boys, he would find himself facing both of them. They could batter each other into the ground, but by God, no one else was going to.
They had entered the Navy together, Zane becoming a SEAL, while Chance had gone into Naval Intelligence.
Chance had since left the Navy, though, and gone out on his own, while Zane was a SEAL team leader.
And that brought Wolf to the reason for his restlessness. Zane.

There had been a lot of times in Zane's career when he had been out of touch, when they hadn't known where he was or what he was doing. Wolf hadn't slept well then, either. He knew too much about the SEALs, having seen them in action in Vietnam during his tours of duty. They were the most highly trained and skilled of the special forces, their stamina and teamwork proven by grueling tests that broke lesser men. Zane was particularly well-suited for the work, but in the final analysis, the SEALs were still human. They could be killed. And because of the nature of their work, they were often in dangerous situations.

The SEAL training had merely accentuated the already existing facets of Zane's nature. He had been honed to a perfect fighting machine, a warrior who was in top condition, but who used his brain more than his brawn. He was even more lethal and intense now, but he had learned to temper that deadliness with an easier manner, so that most people were unaware they were dealing with a man who could kill them in a dozen different ways with his bare hands. With that kind of knowledge and skill at his disposal, Zane had learned a calm control that kept him in command of himself. Of all Wolf's offspring, Zane was the most capable of taking care of himself, but he was also the one in the most danger. Where in hell *was* he?

There was a whisper of movement from the bed, and Wolf looked around as Mary slipped from between the sheets and joined him at the window, looping her arms around his hard, trim waist and nestling her head on his bare chest.

"Zane?" she asked quietly, in the darkness.

"Yeah." No more explanation was needed.

"He's all right," she said with a mother's confidence. "I'd know if he wasn't."

Wolf tipped her head up and kissed her, lightly at first, then with growing intensity. He turned her slight body more fully into his embrace and felt her quiver as she pressed to him, pushing her hips against his, cradling the rise of his male flesh against her softness. There had been passion between them from their first meeting, all those years ago, and time hadn't taken it from them.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her back to bed, losing himself in the welcome and warmth of her soft body. Afterward, though, lying in the drowsy aftermath, he turned his face toward the window. Before sleep claimed him, the thought came again. Where was Zane?

Chapter 1

Zane Mackenzie wasn't happy.

No one aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Montgomery* was happy; well, maybe the cooks were, but even that was iffy, because the men they were serving were sullen and defensive. The seamen weren't happy, the radar men weren't happy, the gunners weren't happy, the Marines weren't happy, the wing commander wasn't happy, the pilots weren't happy, the air boss wasn't happy, the executive officer wasn't happy, and Captain Udaka sure as hell wasn't happy.

The combined unhappiness of the five thousand sailors on board the carrier didn't begin to approach Lieutenant-Commander Mackenzie's level of unhappiness.

The captain outranked him. The executive officer outranked him. Lieutenant-Commander Mackenzie addressed them with all the respect due their rank, but both men were uncomfortably aware that their asses were in a < sling and their careers on the line. Actually, their careers were probably in the toilet. There wouldn't be any court-martials, but neither would be there any more promotions, and they would be given the unpopular commands from now until they either retired or resigned, their choice depending on how clearly they could read the writing on the wall.

Captain Udaka's broad, pleasant face was one that wore responsibility easily, but now his expression was set in lines of unhappy acceptance as he met the icy gaze of the lieutenant-commander. SEALs in general made the captain nervous; he didn't quite trust them or the way they operated outside normal regulations. This one in particular made him seriously want to be somewhere—anywhere—else.

He had met Mackenzie before, when both he and Boyd, the XO, had been briefed on the security exercise. The SEAL team under Mackenzie's command would try to breach the carrier's security, probing for weaknesses that could be exploited by any of the myriad terrorist groups so common these days. It was a version of the exercises once conducted by the SEAL Team Six Red Cell, which had been so notorious and so far outside the regulations that it had been disbanded after seven years of operation. The concept, however, had lived on, in a more controlled manner. SEAL Team Six was a covert, counterterrorism unit, and one of the best ways to counter

terrorism was to prevent it from happening in the first place, rather than reacting to it after people were dead. To this end, the security of naval installations and carrier battle groups was tested by the SEALs, who then recommended changes to correct the weaknesses they had discovered. There were always weaknesses, soft spots—the SEALs had never yet been completely thwarted, even though the base commanders and ships' captains were always notified in advance.

At the briefing, Mackenzie had been remote but pleasant. Controlled. Most SEALs had a wild, hard edge to them, but Mackenzie had seemed more regular Navy, recruiting-poster perfect in his crisp whites and with his coolly courteous manner. Captain Udaka had felt comfortable with him, certain that Lieutenant-Commander Mackenzie was the administrational type rather than a true part of those wild-ass SEALs.

He'd been wrong.

The courtesy remained, and the control. The white uniform looked as perfect as it had before. But there was nothing at all pleasant in the deep voice, or in the cold fury that lit the pale blue gray eyes so they glittered like moonlight on a knife blade. The aura of danger surrounding him was so strong it was almost palpable, and Captain Udaka knew that he had been drastically wrong in his assessment of Mackenzie. This was no desk jockey; this was a man around whom others should walk very lightly indeed. The captain felt as if his skin was being flayed from his body, strip by strip, by that icy gaze. He had also never felt closer to death than he had the moment Mackenzie had entered his quarters after learning what had happened.

"Captain, you were briefed on the exercise," Zane said coldly. "Everyone on this ship was advised, as well as notified that my men wouldn't be carrying weapons of any sort. Explain, then, *why in hell two of my men were shot!"*

The XO, Mr. Boyd, looked at his hands. Captain Udaka's collar felt too tight, except that it was already unbuttoned, and the only thing choking him was the look in Mackenzie's eyes.

"There's no excuse," he said rawly. "Maybe the guards were startled and fired without thinking. Maybe it was a stupid, macho turf thing, wanting to show the big bad SEALs that they couldn't penetrate our security, after all. It doesn't matter. There's no excuse." Everything that happened on board his ship was, ultimately, his responsibility. The trigger-happy guards would pay for their mistake—and so would he.

"My men had *already* penetrated your security," Zane said softly, his tone making the hairs stand up on the back of the captain's neck.
"I'm aware of that." The breach of his ship's security was salt in the captain's wounds, but nothing at all compared to the enormous mistake that had been made when men under his command had opened fire on the unarmed SEALs. His men, his responsibility. Nor did it help his feelings that, when two of their team had gone down, the remainder of the SEAL team, *unarmed,* had swiftly taken control and secured the area. Translated, that meant the guards who had done the shooting had been roughly handled and were now in sick bay with the two men they had shot. In reality, the phrase "roughly handled" was a euphemism for the fact that the SEALS had beaten the hell out of his men.
The most seriously wounded SEAL was Lieutenant Higgins, who had taken a bullet in the chest and would be evacuated by air to Germany as soon as he was stabilized. The other SEAL, Warrant Officer Odessa, had been shot in the thigh; the bullet had broken his femur. He, too, would be taken to Germany, but his condition was stable, even if his temper was not. The ship's doctor had been forced to sedate him to keep him from wreaking vengeance on the battered guards, two of whom were still unconscious.
The five remaining members of the SEAL team were in Mission Planning, prowling around like angry tigers looking for someone to maul just to make themselves feel better. They were restricted to the area by Mackenzie's order, and the ship's crew was giving them a wide berth. Captain Udaka wished he could do the same with Mackenzie. He had the impression of cold savagery lurking just beneath the surface of the man's control. There would be hell to pay for this night's fiasco.
The phone on his desk emitted a harsh *brr.* Though he was relieved by the interruption, Captain Udaka snatched up the receiver and barked, "I gave orders I wasn't to be—" He stopped, listening, and his expression changed. His gaze shifted to Mackenzie. "We'll be right there," he said, and hung up.
"There's a scrambled transmission coming in for you," he said to Mackenzie, rising to his feet. "Urgent." Whatever message the transmission contained, Captain Udaka looked on it as a much-welcomed reprieve.
Zane listened intently to the secure satellite transmission, his mind racing as he began planning the logistics of the mission. "My team is two men short, sir," he said. "Higgins and Odessa were injured in the security exercise." He

didn't say *how* they'd been injured; that would be handled through other channels.

"Damn it," Admiral Lindley muttered. He was in an office in the US. Embassy in Athens. He looked up at the others in the office: Ambassador Lovejoy, tall and spare, with the smoothness bequeathed by a lifetime of privilege and wealth, though now there was a stark, panicked expression in his hazel eyes; the CIA station chief, Art Sandefer, a nondescript man with short gray hair and tired, intelligent eyes; and, finally, Mack Prewett, second only to Sandefer in the local CIA hierarchy. Mack was known in some circles as Mack the Knife; Admiral Lindley knew Mack was generally considered a man who got things done, a man whom it was dangerous to cross. For all his decisiveness, though, he wasn't a cowboy who was likely to endanger people by going off half-cocked. He was as thorough as he was decisive, and it was through his contacts that they had obtained such good, prompt information in this case.

The admiral had put Zane on the speakerphone, so the other three in the room had heard the bad news about the SEAL team on which they had all been pinning their hopes. Ambassador Lovejoy looked even more haggard.

"We'll have to use another team," Art Sandefer said. "That'll take too much time!" the ambassador said with stifled violence. "My God, already she could be—" He stopped, anguish twisting his face. He wasn't able to complete the sentence.

"I'll take the team in," Zane said. His amplified voice was clear in the soundproofed room. "We're the closest, and we can be ready to go in an hour."

"You?" the admiral asked, startled. "Zane, you haven't seen live action since __"

"My last promotion," Zane finished dryly. He hadn't liked trading action for administration, and he was seriously considering resigning his commission. He was thirty-one, and it was beginning to look as if his success in his chosen field was going to prevent him from practicing it; the higher-ranking the officer, the less likely that officer was to be in the thick of the action. He'd been thinking about something in law enforcement, or maybe even throwing in with Chance. There was nonstop action there, for sure.

For now, though, a mission had been dumped in his lap, and he was going to take it.

"I train with my men, Admiral," he said. "I'm not rusty, or out of shape."

"I didn't think you were," Admiral Lindley replied, and sighed. He met the ambassador's anguished gaze, read the silent plea for help. "Can six men handle the mission?" he asked Zane.
"Sir, I wouldn't risk my men if I didn't think we could do the job."
This time the admiral looked at both Art Sandefer and Mack Prewett. Art's expression was noncommittal, the Company man refusing to stick his neck out, but Mack gave the admiral a tiny nod. Admiral Lindley swiftly weighed all the factors. Granted, the SEAL team would be two members short, and the leader would be an officer who hadn't been on an active mission in over a year, but that officer happened to be Zane Mackenzie. All things considered, the admiral couldn't think of any other man he would rather have on this mission. He'd known Zane for several years now, and there was no better warrior, no one he trusted more. If Zane said he was ready, then he was ready.' 'All right. Go in and get her out."
As the admiral hung up, Ambassador Lindley blurted, "Shouldn't you send in someone else? My daughter's life is at stake! This man hasn't been in the field, he's out of shape, out of practice—"
"Waiting until we could get another team into position would drastically lower our chances of finding her," the admiral pointed out as kindly as possible. Ambassador Lindley wasn't one of his favorite people. For the most part, he was a horse's ass and a snob, but there was no doubt he doted on his daughter. "And as far as Zane Mackenzie is concerned, there's no better man for the job."
"The admiral's right," Mack Prewett said quietly, with the authority that came so naturally to him. "Mackenzie is so good at what he does it's almost eerie. I would feel comfortable sending him in alone. If you want your daughter back, don't throw obstacles in his way."
Ambassador Lindley shoved his hand through his hair, an uncharacteristic gesture for so fastidious a man; it was a measure of his agitation. "If anything goes wrong..."
It wasn't clear whether he was about to voice a threat or was simply worrying aloud, but he couldn't complete the sentence. Mack Prewett gave a thin smile. "Something always goes wrong. If anyone can handle it, Mackenzie can."
After Zane terminated the secure transmission he made his way through the network of corridors to Mission Planning. Already he could feel the rush of adrenaline pumping through his muscles as he began preparing, mentally

and physically, for the job before him. When he entered the room with its maps and charts and communication systems, and the comfortable chairs grouped around a large table, five hostile faces turned immediately toward him, and he felt the surge of renewed energy and anger from his men.
Only one of them, Santos, was seated at the table, but Santos was the team medic, and he was usually the calmest of the bunch. Ensign Peter "Rocky" Greenberg, second in command of the team and a controlled, detail-oriented kind of guy, leaned against the bulkhead with his arms crossed and murder in his narrowed brown eyes. Antonio Withrock, nicknamed Bunny because he never ran out of energy, was prowling the confines of the room like a mean, hungry cat, his dark skin pulled tight across his high cheekbones. Paul Drexler, the team sniper, sat cross-legged on top of the table while he wiped an oiled cloth lovingly over the disassembled parts of his beloved Remington bolt-action 7.62 rifle. Zane didn't even lift his eyebrows at the sight. His men were supposed to be unarmed, and they had been during the security exercise that had gone so damn sour, but *keeping* Drexler unarmed was another story.
"Planning on talcing over the ship?" Zane inquired mildly of the sniper.
His blue eyes cold, Drexler cocked his head as if considering the idea. "I might."
Winstead "Spooky" Jones had been sitting on the deck, his back resting against the bulkhead, but at Zane's entrance he rose effortlessly to his feet. He didn't say anything, but his gaze fastened on Zane's face, and a spark of interest replaced some of the anger in his eyes.
Spook never missed much, and the other team members had gotten in the habit of watching him, picking up cues from his body language. No more than three seconds passed before all five men were watching Zane with complete concentration.
Greenberg was the one who finally spoke. "How's Bobcat doing, boss?"
They had read Spooky's tension, but misread the cause, Zane realized. They thought Higgins had died from his wounds. Drexler began assembling his rifle with sharp, economical motions. "He's stabilized," Zane reassured them. He knew his men, knew how tight they were. A SEAL team had to be tight. Their trust in each other had to be absolute, and if something happened to one of them, they all felt it. "They're transferring him now. It's touchy, but I'll put my money on Bobcat. Odie's gonna be okay, too." He hitched one hip on the edge of the table, his pale eyes glittering with the

intensity that had caught Spooky's attention. "Listen up, children. An ambassador's daughter was snatched a few hours ago, and we're going into Libya to get her."

Six black-clad figures slipped silently along the narrow, deserted street in Benghazi, Libya. They communicated by hand signals, or by whispers into the Motorola headsets they all wore under their black knit balaclava hoods. Zane was in his battle mode; he was utterly calm as they worked their way toward the four-story stone building where Barrie Lovejoy was being held on the top floor, if their intelligence was good, and if she hadn't been moved within the past few hours.

Action always affected him this way, as if every cell in his body had settled into its true purpose of existence. He had missed this, missed it to the point that he knew he wouldn't be able to stay in the Navy without it. On a mission, all his senses became more acute, even as a deep center of calm radiated outward. The more intense the action, the calmer he became, as time stretched out into slow motion. At those times he could see and hear every detail, analyze and predict the outcome, then make his decision and act—all within a split second that felt like minutes. Adrenaline would flood his body—he would feel the blood racing through his veins—but his mind would remain detached and calm. He had been told that the look on his face during those times was frighteningly remote, jarring in its total lack of expression.

The team moved forward in well-orchestrated silence. They each knew what to do, and what the others would do. That was the purpose of the trust and teamwork that had been drilled into them through the twenty-six weeks of hell that was formally known as BUD/S training. The bond between them enabled them to do more together than could be accomplished if each worked on his own. Teamwork wasn't just a word to the SEALs, it was their center.

Spooky Jones was point man. Zane preferred using the wiry Southerner for that job because he had unfrayable nerves and could ghost around like a lynx. Bunny With-rock, who almost reverberated with nervous energy, was bringing up the rear. No one sneaked up on Bunny—except the Spook. Zane was right behind Jones, with Drexler, Greenberg and Santos ranging between him and Bunny. Greenberg was quiet, steady, totally dependable. Drexler was uncanny with that rifle, and Santos, besides being a damn good SEAL, also had the skill to patch them up and keep them going, if they

were patchable. Overall, Zane had never worked with a better group of men.

Their presence in Benghazi was pure luck, and Zane knew it. Good luck for them and, he hoped, for Miss Lovejoy, but bad luck for the terrorists who had snatched her off the street in Athens fifteen hours ago. If the *Montgomery* hadn't been just south of Crete and in perfect position for launching a rescue, if the SEALs hadn't been on the carrier to practice special insertions as well as the security exercise, then there would have been a delay of precious hours, perhaps even as long as a day, while another team got supplied and into position. As it was, the special insertion into hostile territory they had just accomplished had been the real thing instead of just a practice.

Miss Lovejoy was not only the ambassador's daughter, she was an employee at the embassy, as well. The ambassador was apparently very strict and obsessive about his daughter, having lost his wife and son in a terrorist attack in Rome fifteen years before, when Miss Lovejoy had been a child of ten. After that, he had kept her secluded in private schools, and since she bad finished college, she had been acting as his hostess as well as performing her "work" at the embassy. Zane suspected her job was more window dressing than anything else, something to keep her busy. She had never really worked a day in her life, never been out from under her father's protection—until today.

She and a friend had left the embassy to do some shopping. Three men had grabbed her, shoved her into a car and driven off. The friend had immediately reported the abduction. Despite efforts to secure the airport and ports—cynically, Zane suspected deliberate foot-dragging by the Greek authorities—a private plane had taken off from Athens and flown straight to Benghazi.

Thanks to the friend's prompt action, sources on the ground in Benghazi had been alerted. It had been verified that a young woman of Miss Lovejoy's description had been taken off the plane and hustled into the city, into the very building Zane and his team were about to enter.

It had to be her; there weren't that many red-haired Western women in Benghazi. In fact, he would bet there was only one—Barrie Lovejoy.

They were betting her life on it.

Chapter 2

Barrie lay in almost total darkness, heavy curtains at the single window blocking out most of whatever light would have entered. She could tell that it was night; the level of street noise outside had slowly diminished, until now there was mostly silence. The men who had kidnapped her had finally gone away, probably to sleep. They had no worries about her being able to escape; she was naked, and tied tightly to the cot on which she lay. Her wrists were bound together, her arms drawn over her head and tied to the frame of the cot. Her ankles were also tied together, then secured to the frame. She could barely move; every muscle in her body ached, but those in her shoulders burned with agony. She would have screamed, she would have begged for someone to come and release the ropes that held her arms over her head, but she knew that the only people who would come would be the very ones who had tied her in this position, and she would do anything, give anything, to keep from ever seeing them again.

She was cold. They hadn't even bothered to throw a blanket over her naked body, and long, convulsive shivers kept shaking her, though she couldn't tell if she was chilled from the night air or from shock. She didn't suppose it mattered. Cold was cold.

She tried to think, tried to ignore the pain, tried not to give in to shock and terror. She didn't know where she was, didn't know how she could escape, but if the slightest opportunity presented itself, she would have to be ready to take it. She wouldn't be able to escape tonight; her bonds were too tight, her movements too restricted. But tomorrow—oh, God, tomorrow.

Terror tightened her throat, almost choking off her breath. Tomorrow they would be back, and there would be another one with them, the one for whom they waited. A violent shiver racked her as she thought of their rough bands on her bare body, the pinches and slaps and crude probings, and her stomach heaved. She would have vomited, if there had been anything to vomit, but they hadn't bothered to feed her.

She couldn't go through that again.

Somehow, she had to get away.

Desperately she fought down her panic. Her thoughts darted around like crazed squirrels as she tried to plan, to think of something, anything, that she could do to protect herself. But what *could* she do, lying there like a turkey all trussed up for Thanksgiving dinner?

Humiliation burned through her. They hadn't raped her, but they had done other things to her, things to shame and terrorize her and break her spirit. Tomorrow, when the leader arrived, she was sure her reprieve would be over. The threat of rape, and then the act of it, would shatter her and leave her malleable in their hands, desperate to do anything to avoid being violated again. At least that was what they planned, she thought. But she would be damned if she would go along with their plan. She had been in a fog of terror and shock since they had grabbed her and thrown her into a car, but as she lay there in the darkness, cold and miserable and achingly vulnerable in her nakedness, she felt as if the fog was lifting, or maybe it was being burned away. No one who knew Barrie would ever have described her as hot-tempered, but then, what she felt building in her now wasn't as volatile and fleeting as mere temper. It was rage, as pure and forceful as lava forcing its way upward from the bowels of the earth until it exploded outward and swept away everything in its path.

Nothing in her life had prepared her for these past hours. After her mother and brother had died, she had been pampered and protected as few children ever were. She had seen some—most, actually—of her schoolmates as they struggled with the misery of broken parental promises, of rare, stressful visits, of being ignored and shunted out of the way, but she hadn't been like them. Her father adored her, and she knew it. He was intensely interested in her safety, her friends, her schoolwork. If he said he would call, then the call came exactly when he'd said it would. Every week had brought some small gift in the mail, inexpensive but thoughtful. She'd understood why he worried so much about her safety, why he wanted her to attend the exclusive girls' school in Switzerland, with its cloistered security, rather than a public school, with its attendant hurly-burly. She was all he had left. He was all she had left, too. When she'd been a child, after the incident that had halved the family, she had clung fearfully to her father for months, dogging his footsteps when she could, weeping inconsolably when his work took him away from her. Eventually the dread that he, too, would disappear from her life had faded, but the pattern of overprotectiveness had been set. She was twenty-five now, a grown woman, and though in the past few years his protectiveness had begun to chafe, she had enjoyed the even tenor of her life too much to really protest. She liked her job at the embassy, so much that she was considering a full-time career in the foreign service. She enjoyed being her father's hostess. She had the duties and protocol down

cold, and there were more and more female ambassadors on the international scene. It was a moneyed and insular community, but by both temperament and pedigree she was suited to the task. She was calm, even serene, and blessed with a considerate and tactful nature.

But now, lying naked and helpless on a cot, with bruises mottling her pale skin, the rage that consumed her was so deep and primal she felt as if it had altered something basic inside her, a sea change of her very nature. She would *not* endure what they—nameless, malevolent "they"— had planned for her. If they killed her, so be it. She was prepared for death; no matter what, she would not submit.

The heavy curtains fluttered.

The movement caught her eye, and she glanced at the window, but the action was automatic, without curiosity. She was already so cold that even a wind strong enough to move those heavy curtains couldn't chill her more.

The wind was black, and had a shape.

Her breath stopped in her chest.

Mutely she watched the big black shape, as silent as a shadow, slip through the window. It couldn't be human; people made *some* sound when they moved. Surely, in the total silence of the room, she would have been able to hear the whisper of the curtains as the fabric moved, or the faint, rhythmic sigh of breathing. A shoe scraping on the floor, the rustle of clothing, anything—if it was human. After the black shape had passed between them, the curtains didn't fall back into the perfect alignment that had blocked the light; there was a small opening in them, a slit that allowed a shaft of moonlight, starlight, street light—whatever it was—to relieve the thick darkness. Barrie strained to focus on the dark shape, her eyes burning as she watched it move silently across the floor. She didn't scream; whoever or whatever approached her, it couldn't be worse than the only men likely to come to her rescue.

Perhaps she was really asleep and this was only a dream. It certainly didn't feel real. But nothing in the long, horrible hours since she had been kidnapped had felt real, and she was too cold to be asleep. No, this was real, all right.

Noiselessly the black shape glided to a halt beside the cot. It towered over her, tall and powerful, and it seemed to be examining the naked feast she presented.

Then it moved once again, lifting its hand to its head, and it peeled off its face, pulling the dark skin up as if it was no more than the skin of a banana. It was a mask. As exhausted as she was, it was a moment before she could find a logical explanation for the nightmarish image. She blinked up at him. A man wearing a mask. Neither an animal, nor a phantom, but a flesh-and-blood man. She could see the gleam of his eyes, make out the shape of his head and the relative paleness of his face, though there was an odd bulkiness to him that in no way affected the eerily silent grace of his movements. Just another man.

She didn't panic. She had gone beyond fear, beyond everything but rage. She simply waited—waited to fight, waited to die. Her teeth were the only weapon she had, so she would use them, if she could. She would tear at her attacker's flesh, try to damage him as much as possible before she died. If she was lucky, she would be able to get him by the throat with her teeth and take at least one of these bastards with her into death.

He was taking his time, staring at her. Her bound hands clenched into fists. Damn him. Damn them all.

Then he squatted beside the cot and leaned forward, his head very close to hers. Startled, Barrie wondered if he meant to *kiss* her—odd that the notion struck her as so unbearable—and she braced herself, preparing to lunge upward when he got close enough that she had a good chance for his throat.

"Mackenzie, United States Navy," he said in a toneless whisper that barely reached her ear, only a few inches away.

He'd spoken in *English,* with a definitely American accent. She jerked, so stunned that it was a moment before the words made sense. *Navy. United States Navy.* She had been silent for hours, refusing to speak to her captors or respond in any way, but now a small, helpless sound spilled from her throat.

"Shh, don't make any noise," he cautioned, still in that toneless whisper. Even as he spoke he was reaching over her head, and the tension on her arms suddenly relaxed. The small movement sent agony screaming through her shoulder joints, and she sucked in her breath with a sharp, gasping cry. She quickly choked off the sound, holding it inside as she ground her teeth against the pain. "Sorry," she whispered, when she was able to speak.

She hadn't seen the knife in his hand, but she felt the chill of the blade against her skin as he deftly inserted the blade under the cords and sliced upward, felt the slight tug that freed her hands. She tried to move her arms

and found that she couldn't; they remained stretched above her head, unresponsive to her commands.
He knew, without being told. He slipped the knife into its scabbard and placed his gloved hands on her shoulders, firmly kneading for a moment before he clasped her forearms and gently drew her arms down. Fire burned in her joints; it felt as if her arms were being torn from her shoulders, even though he carefully drew them straight down, keeping them aligned with her body to lessen the pain. Barrie set her teeth again, refusing to let another sound break past the barrier. Cold sweat beaded her forehead, and nausea burned in her throat once more, but she rode the swell of pain in silence.
He dug his thumbs into the balls of her shoulders, massaging the sore, swollen ligaments and tendons, intensifying the agony. Her bare body drew into a taut, pale arch of suffering, lifting from the cot. He held her down, ruthlessly pushing her traumatized joints and muscles through the recovery process. She was so cold that the heat emanating from his hands, from the closeness of his body as he bent over her, was searingly hot on her bare skin. The pain rolled through her in great shudders, blurring her sight and thought, and through the haze she realized that now, when she definitely needed to stay conscious, she was finally going to faint.
She couldn't pass out. She refused to. Grimly she hung on, and in only a few moments, moments that felt much longer, the pain began to ebb. He continued the strong kneading, taking her through the agony and into relief. She went limp, relaxing on the cot as she breathed through her mouth in the long, deep drafts of someone who has just run a race.
"Good girl," he whispered as he released her. The brief praise felt like balm to her lacerated emotions. He straightened and drew the knife again, then bent over the foot of the cot. Again there was the chill of the blade, this time against her ankles, and another small tug, then her feet were free, and involuntarily she curled into a protective ball, her body moving without direction from her brain in a belated, useless effort at modesty and self-protection. Her thighs squeezed tightly together, her arms crossed over and hid her breasts, and she buried her face against the musty ticking of the bare mattress. She couldn't look up at him, she couldn't. Tears burned her eyes, clogged her throat.
"Have you been injured?" he asked, the ghostly whisper rasping over her bare skin like an actual touch. "Can you walk?"

Now wasn't the time to let her raw nerves take over. They still had to get out undetected, and a fit of hysteria would ruin everything. She gulped twice, fighting for control of her emotions as grimly as she had fought to control the pain. The tears spilled over, but she forced herself to straighten from the defensive curl, to swing her legs over the edge of the cot. Shakily she sat up and forced herself to look at him. She hadn't done anything to be ashamed of; she would get through this. "I'm okay," she replied, and was grateful that the obligatory whisper disguised the weakness of her voice.

He crouched in front of her and silently began removing the web gear that held and secured all his equipment. The room was too dark for her to make out exactly what each item was, but she recognized the shape of an automatic weapon as he placed it on the floor between them.

She watched him, uncomprehending, until he began shrugging out of his shirt. Sick terror hit her then, slamming into her like a sledgehammer. My God, surely *he* wasn't—

Gently he put the shirt around her, tucking her arms into the sleeves as if she was a child, then buttoning each button, taking care to hold the fabric away from her body so his fingers wouldn't brush against her breasts. The cloth still held his body heat; it wrapped around her like a blanket, warming her, covering her. The sudden feeling of security unnerved her almost as much as being stripped naked. Her heart lurched inside her chest, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. Hesitantly she reached out her hand in an apology, and a plea. Tears dripped slowly down her face, leaving salty tracks in their wake. She had been the recipient of so much male brutality in the past day that his gentleness almost destroyed her control, where their blows and crudeness had only made her more determined to resist them. She had expected the same from him and instead had received a tender care that shattered her with its simplicity.

A second ticked past, two: then, with great care, he folded his gloved fingers around her hand.

His hand was much bigger than hers. She felt the size and heat of it engulf her cold fingers and sensed the control of a man who exactly knew his own strength. He squeezed gently, then released her.

She stared at him, trying to pierce the veil of darkness and see his features, but his face was barely distinguishable and blurred even more by her tears. She could make out some details, though, and discern his movements. He wore a black T-shirt, and as silently as he had removed his gear, he now put

it on again. He peeled back a flap on his wrist, and she caught the faint gleam of a luminous watch.
"We have exactly two and a half minutes to get out of here," he murmured. "Do *what* I say, *when* I say it."
Before, she couldn't have done it, but that brief moment of understanding, of connection, had buoyed her. Barrie nodded and got to her feet. Her knees wobbled. She stiffened them and shoved her hair out of her face. "I'm ready."
She had taken exactly two steps when, below them, a staccato burst of gunfire shattered the night.
He spun instantly, silently, slipping away from her so fast that she blinked, unable to follow him. Behind her, the door opened. A harsh, piercing flood of light blinded her, and an ominous form loomed in the doorway. The guard—of course there was a guard. Then there was a blur of movement, a grunt, and the guard sagged into supporting arms. As silently as her rescuer seemed to do everything else, he dragged the guard inside and lowered him to the floor. Her rescuer stepped over the body, snagged her wrist in an unbreakable grip and towed her from the room.
The hallway was narrow, dirty and cluttered. The light that had seemed so bright came from a single naked bulb. More gunfire was erupting downstairs and out in the street. From the left came the sound of pounding feet. To the right was a closed door, and past it she could see the first step of an unlit stairway.
He closed the door of the room they had just left and lifted her off her feet, slinging her under his left arm as if she was no more than a sack of flour. Barrie clutched dizzily at his leg as he strode swiftly to the next room and slipped into the sheltering darkness. He had barely shut the door when a barrage of shouts and curses in the hallway made her bury her face against the black material of his pants leg.
He righted her and set her on her feet, pushing her behind him as he unslung the weapon from his shoulder. They stood at the door, unmoving, listening to the commotion just on the other side of the wooden panel. She could discern three different voices and recognized them all. There were more shouts and curses, in the language she had heard off and on all day long but couldn't understand. The curses turned vicious as the guard's body, and her absence, were discovered. Something thudded against the wall as one of her kidnappers gave vent to his temper.

"This is One. Go to B."
That toneless whisper startled her. Confused, she stared at him, trying to make sense of the words. She was so tired that it took her a moment to realize he must be speaking a coded message into a radio. Of course he wasn't alone; there would be an entire team of rescuers. All they had to do was get out of the building, and there would be a helicopter waiting somewhere, or a truck, or a ship. She didn't care if they'd infiltrated on bicycles; she would gladly walk out—barefoot, if necessary.
But first they had to get out of the building. Obviously the plan had been to spirit her out the window without her kidnappers being any the wiser until morning, but something had gone wrong, and the others had been spotted. Now they were trapped in this room, with no way of rejoining the rest of his team.
Her body began to revolt against the stress it had endured for so many long hours, the terror and pain, the hunger, the effort. With a sort of distant interest she felt each muscle begin quivering, the shudders working their way up her legs, her torso, until she was shaking uncontrollably.
She wanted to lean against him but was afraid she would hinder his movements. Her life—and his—depended completely on his expertise. She couldn't help him, so the least she could do was stay out of his way. But she was desperately in need of support, so she fumbled her way a couple of steps to the wall. She was careful not to make any noise, but he sensed her movement and half turned, reaching behind himself with his left hand and catching her. Without speaking he pulled her up against his back, keeping her within reach should he have to change locations in a hurry.
His closeness was oddly, fundamentally reassuring. Her captors had filled her with such fear and disgust that every feminine instinct had been outraged, and after they had finally left her alone in the cold and the dark, she had wondered with a sort of grief if she would ever again be able to trust a man. The answer, at least with *this* man, was yes.
She leaned gratefully against his back, so tired and weak that, just for a moment, she had to rest her head on him. The heat of his body penetrated the rough fabric of the web vest, wanning her cheek. He even smelled hot, she noticed through a sort of haze; his scent was a mixture of clean, fresh sweat and musky maleness, exertion and tension heating it to an aroma as heady as that of the finest whiskey. *Mackenzie.* He'd said his name was Mackenzie, whispered it to her when he crouched to identify himself.

Oh, God, he was so warm, and she was still cold. The gritty stone floor beneath her bare feet seemed to be wafting cold waves of air up her legs. His shirt was so big it dwarfed her, hanging almost to her knees, but still she was naked beneath it. Her entire body was shaking.

They stood motionless in the silent darkness of the empty room for an eternity, listening to the gunfire as it tapered off in the distance, listening to the shouts and curses as they, too, diminished, listened for so long that Barrie drifted into a light doze, leaning against him with her head resting on his back. He was like a rock, unmoving, his patience beyond anything she had ever imagined. There were no nervous little adjustments of position, no hint that his muscles got tired. The slow, even rhythm of his breathing was the only movement she could discern, and resting against him as she was, the sensation was like being on a raft in a pool, gently rising, falling—

She woke when he reached back and lightly shook her. "They think we got away," he whispered. "Don't move or make any sound while I check things out."

Obediently she straightened away from him, though she almost cried at the loss of his body heat. He switched on a flashlight that gave off only a slender beam; black tape had been placed across most of the lens. He flicked the light around the room, revealing that it was empty except for some old boxes piled along one wall. Cobwebs festooned all of the comers, and the floor was covered with a thick layer of dust. She could make out a single window in the far wall, but he was careful not to let the thin beam of light get close to it and possibly betray their presence. The room seemed to have been unused for a very long time.

He leaned close and put his mouth against her ear. His warm breath washed across her flesh with every word. "We have to get out of this building. My men have made it look as if we escaped, but we probably won't be able to hook up with them again until tomorrow night. We need someplace safe to wait. What do you know about the interior layout?"

She shook her head and followed his example, lifting herself on tiptoe to put her lips to his ear. "Nothing," she whispered. "I was blindfolded when they brought me here."

He gave a brief nod and straightened away from her. Once again Barrie felt bereft, abandoned, without his physical nearness. She knew it was just a temporary weakness, this urge to cling to him and the security he represented, but she needed him now with an urgency that was close to pain

in its intensity. She wanted nothing more than to press close to him again, to feel the animal heat that told her she wasn't alone; she wanted to be in touch with the steely strength that stood between her and those bastards who had kidnapped her.

Temporary or not, Barrie hated this neediness on her part; it reminded her too sharply of the way she had clung to her father when her mother and brother had died. Granted, she had been just a child then, and the closeness that had developed between her and her father had, for the most part, been good. But she had seen how stifling it could be, too, and quietly, as was her way, she had begun placing increments of distance between them. Now this had happened, and her first instinct was to cling. Was she going to turn into a vine every time there was some trauma in her life? She didn't want to be like that, didn't want to be a weakling. This nightmare had shown her too vividly that all security, no matter how solid it seemed, had its weak points. Instead of depending on others, she would do better to develop her own strengths, strengths she knew were there but that had lain dormant for most of her rife. From now on, though, things were going to change.

Perhaps they already had. The incandescent anger that had taken hold of her when she'd lain naked and trussed on that bare cot still burned within her, a small, white-hot core that even her mind-numbing fatigue couldn't extinguish. Because of it, she refused to give in to her weakness, refused to do anything that might hinder Mackenzie in any way. Instead she braced herself, forcing her knees to lock and her shoulders to square. "What are we going to do?" she whispered. "What can I do to help?"

Because there were no heavy blackout curtains on this grimy window, she was able to see part of his features as he looked at her. Half his face was in shadow, but the scant light gleamed on the slant of one high, chiseled cheekbone, revealed the strong cut of his jaw, played along a mouth that was as clearly defined as that of an ancient Greek statue.

"I'll have to leave you here alone for a little while," he said. "Will you be all right?"

Panic exploded in her stomach, her chest. She barely choked back the scream of protest that would have betrayed them. Grinding her teeth together and electing not to speak, because the scream would escape if she did, she nodded her head.

He hesitated, and Barrie could feel his attention focusing on her, as if he sensed her distress and was trying to decide whether or not it was safe to

leave her. After a few moments he gave a curt nod that acknowledged her determination, or at least gave her the benefit of the doubt. "I'll be back in half an hour," he said. "I promise."

He pulled something from a pocket on his vest. He unfolded it, revealing a thin blanket of sorts. Barrie stood still as he snugly wrapped it around her. Though it was very thin, the blanket immediately began reflecting her meager body heat. When he let go of the edges they fell open, and Barrie clutched frantically at them in an effort to retain that fragile warmth. By the time she had managed to pull the blanket around her, he was gone, opening the door a narrow crack and slipping through as silently as he had come through the window in the room where she had been held. Then the door closed, and once again she was alone in the darkness.

Her nerves shrieked in protest, but she ignored them. Instead she concentrated on being as quiet as she could, listening for any sounds in the building that could tell her what was going on. There was still some noise from the street, the result of the gunfire that had alarmed the nearby citizenry, but that, too, was fading. The thick stone walls of the building dulled any sound, anyway. From within the building, there was only silence. Had her captors abandoned the site after her supposed escape? Were they in pursuit of Mackenzie's team, thinking she was with them?

She swayed on her feet, and only then did she realize that she could sit down on the floor and wrap the blanket around her, conserving even more warmth. Her feet and legs were almost numb with cold. Carefully she eased down onto the floor, terrified she would inadvertently make some noise. She sat on the thin blanket and pulled it around herself as best she could. Whatever fabric it was made from, the blanket blocked the chill of the stone floor. Drawing up her legs, Barrie hugged her knees and rested her head on them. She was more comfortable now than she had been in many long hours of terror and, inevitably, her eyelids began to droop heavily. Sitting there alone in the dark, dirty, empty room, she went to sleep.

Chapter 3

Pistol in hand, Zane moved silently through the decrepit old building, avoiding the piles of debris and crumbled stone. They were already on the top floor, so, except for the roof, the only way he could go was down. He already knew where the exits were, but what he didn't know was the location of the bad guys. Had they chosen this building as only a temporary hiding place and abandoned it when their victim seemingly escaped? Or was this their regular meeting place? If so, how many were there, and *where* were they? He had to know all that before he risked moving Miss Lovejoy. There was only another hour or so until dawn; he had to get her to a secure location before then.

He stopped at a turn in the corridor, flattening himself against the wall and easing his head around the corner just enough that he could see. Empty. Noiselessly, he moved down the hallway, just as cautiously checking the few rooms that opened off it.

He had pulled the black balaclava into place and smeared dust over his bare arms to dull the sheen of his skin and decrease his visibility. Giving his shirt to Miss Lovejoy and leaving his arms bare had increased his visibility somewhat, but he judged that his darkly tanned arms weren't nearly as likely to be spotted as her naked body. Even in the darkness of the room where they had been keeping her, he had been able to clearly make out the pale shimmer of her skin. Since none of her clothes had been in evidence, giving her his shirt was the only thing he could have done. She'd been shaking with cold—evidence of shock because the night was warm—and she likely would have gone into hysterics if he'd tried to take her out of there while she was stark naked. He had been prepared, if necessary, to knock her out. But she'd been a little trooper so far, not even screaming when he had suddenly loomed over her in the darkness. With his senses so acute, though, Zane could feel how fragile her control was, how tightly she was strung.

It was understandable. She had likely been raped, not once but many times, since she had been kidnapped. She might fall apart when the crisis was over and she was safe, but for now she was holding together. Her gutsiness made his heart clench with a mixture of tenderness and a lethal determination to protect her. His first priority was to get her out of Libya, not wreak

vengeance on her kidnappers—but if any of the bastards happened to get in his way, so be it.

The dark maw of a stairwell yawned before him. The darkness was reassuring; it not only signaled the absence of a guard, it would shield him. Humans still clung to the primitive instincts of cave dwellers. If they were awake, they wanted the comfort of light around them, so they could see the approach of any enemies. Darkness was a weapon that torturers used to break the spirit of their captives, because it emphasized their helplessness, grated on their nerves. But he was a SEAL, and darkness was merely a circumstance he could use. He stepped carefully into the stairwell, keeping his back to the wall to avoid any crumbling edges of the stone. He was fairly certain the stairs were safe, otherwise the kidnappers wouldn't have been using them, but he didn't take chances. Like idiots, people stacked things on stair steps, blocking their own escape routes.

A faint lessening of the darkness just ahead told him that he was nearing the bottom of the steps. He paused while he was still within the protective shadow, listening for the slightest sound. There. He heard what he'd been searching for, the distant sound of voices, angry voices tripping over each other with curses and excuses. Though Zane spoke Arabic, he was too far away to make out what they were saying. It didn't matter; he'd wanted to know their location, and now he did. Grimly he stifled the urge to exact revenge on Miss Lovejoy's behalf. His mission was to rescue her, not endanger her further.

There was a stairwell at each end of the building. Knowing now that the kidnappers were on the ground floor at the east end, Zane began making his way to the west staircase. He didn't meet up with any guards; as he had hoped, they thought the rescue had been effected, so they didn't see any point now in posting guards.

In his experience, perfect missions were few and far between, so rare that he could count on one hand the number of missions he'd been on where everything had gone like clockwork. He tried to be prepared for mechanical breakdowns, accidents, forces of nature, but there was no way to plan for the human factor. He didn't know how the kidnappers had been alerted to the SEALs' presence, but he had considered that possibility from the beginning and made an alternate plan in case something went wrong. Something had—exactly what, he would find out later: except for that brief

communication with his men, telling them to withdraw and switch to the alternate plan, they had maintained radio silence.
Probably it was pure bad luck, some late-night citizen unexpectedly stumbling over one of his men. Things happened. So he had formulated Plan B, his just-in-case plan, because as they had worked their way toward the building, he'd had an uneasy feeling. When his gut told him something, Zane listened. Bunny Withrock had once given him a narrow-eyed look and said, "Boss, you're even spookier than the Spook." But they trusted his instincts, to the point that mentally they had probably switched to Plan B as soon as he'd voiced it, before he had even gone into the building.
With Miss Lovejoy to consider, he'd opted for safety. That was why he had gone in alone, through the window, after Spook's reconnaissance had reported that the kidnappers had set guards at intervals throughout the first floor. There were no lights in any of the rooms on the fourth floor, where Miss Lovejoy was reportedly being held, so it was likely there was no guard actually in the room with her; a guard wouldn't want to sit in the darkness. The kidnappers had inadvertently pinpointed the room for him: only one window had been covered with curtains. When Zane had reached that room, he had carefully parted the heavy curtains to make certain they hadn't shielded an interior light, but the room beyond had been totally dark. And Miss Lovejoy had been there, just as he had expected.
Now, ostensibly with nothing left to guard, the kidnappers all seemed to be grouped together. Zane cat-footed through the lower rooms until he reached the other staircase, then climbed silently upward. Thanks to Spooky, he knew of a fakly secure place to take Miss Lovejoy while they waited for another opportunity for extraction; all he had to do was get her there undetected. That meant he had to do it before dawn, because a half-naked, red-haired Western woman would definitely be noticeable in this Islamic country. He wouldn't exactly blend in himself, despite his black hair and tanned skin, because of his dark cammies, web gear and weaponry. Most people noticed a man with camouflage paint on his face and an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder.
He reached the room where he'd left Miss Lovejoy and entered as quietly as he'd left. The room was empty. Alarm roared through him, every muscle tightening, and then he saw the small, dark hump on the floor and realized that she had curled up with the thin survival blanket over her. She wasn't moving. Zane listened to the light, almost inaudible evenness of her

breathing and realized she had gone to sleep. Again he felt that subtle inner clenching. She had been on edge and terrified for hours, obviously worn out but unable to sleep; the slight measure of security he'd been able to give her, consisting of his shirt, a blanket and a temporary, precarious hiding place, had been enough for her to rest. He hated to disturb her, but they had to move.

Gently he put his hand on her back, lightly rubbing, not shaking her awake but easing her into consciousness so she wouldn't be alarmed. After a moment she began stirring under his touch, and he felt the moment when she woke, felt her instant of panic, then her quietly determined reach for control.

"We're moving to someplace safer," he whispered, removing his hand as soon as he saw she was alert. After what she had been through, she wouldn't want to endure a man's touch any more than necessary. The thought infuriated him, because his instinct was to comfort her; the women in his family, mother, sister and sisters-in-law, were adored and treasured by the men. He wanted to cradle Barrie Lovejoy against him, whisper promises to her that he would personally dismember every bastard who had hurt her, but he didn't want to do anything that would undermine her fragile control. They didn't have time for any comforting, anyway.

She clambered to her feet, still clutching the blanket around her. Zane reached for it, and her fingers tightened on the fabric, then slowly loosened. She didn't have to explain her reluctance to release the protective cloth. Zane knew she was still both extrasensitive to cold and painfully embarrassed by her near nudity.

"Wear it this way," he whispered, wrapping the blanket around her waist sarong-style so that it draped to her feet. He tied the ends securely over her left hipbone, then bent down to check that the fabric wasn't too tight around her feet, so she would have sufficient freedom of movement if they had to run.

When he straightened, she touched his arm, then swiftly lifted her band away, as if even that brief touch had been too much. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Watch me closely," he instructed. "Obey my hand signals." He explained the most basic signals to her, the raised clenched fist that meant "Stop!" and the open hand that meant merely "halt," the signal to proceed and the signal to hide. Considering her state of mind, plus her obvious fatigue, he doubted

she would be able to absorb more than those four simple commands. They didn't have far to go, anyway; if he needed more commands than that, they were in deep ca-ca.
She followed him out of the room and down the west staircase, though he felt her reluctance to step into the Stygian depths. He showed her how to keep her back to the wall, how to feel with her foot for the edge of the step. He felt her stumble once, heard her sharply indrawn breath. He whirled to steady her; his pistol was in his right hand, but his left arm snaked out, wrapping around her hips to steady her as she teetered two steps above him. The action lifted her off her feet, hauling her against his left side. She felt soft in his grip, her hips narrow but nicely curved, and his nostrils flared as he scented the warm sweetness of her skin.
She was all but sitting on his encircling arm, her hands braced on his shoulders. Reluctantly he bent and set her on her feet, and she immediately straightened away from him. "Sorry," she whispered in the darkness.
Zane's admiration for her grew. She hadn't squealed in alarm, despite nearly falling, despite the way he'd grabbed her. She was holding herself together, narrowing her focus to the achievement of one goal: freedom.
She was even more cautious in her movements after that one misstep, letting more distance grow between them than he liked. On the last flight of steps he stopped, waiting for her to catch up with him. Knowing that she couldn't see him, he said, "Here," when she was near, so she wouldn't bump into him.
He eased his way down the last couple of steps into the faint light. There was no one in sight. With a brief wave of his hand he signaled her forward, and she slipped out of the darkness of the stairwell to stand beside him. There was a set of huge wooden double doors that opened onto the street, but Zane was aware of increased noise outside as dawn neared, and it was too risky to use that exit. From their left came a raised voice, shouting in Arabic, and he felt her tense. Quickly, before the sound of one of her kidnappers unnerved her, he shepherded her into a cluttered storage room, where a small, single window shone high on the wall. "We'll go out this window," he murmured. "There'll be a drop of about four feet to the ground, nothing drastic. I'll boost you up. When you hit the ground, move away from the street but stay against the side of the building. Crouch down so you'll present the smallest possible silhouette. Okay?"

She nodded her understanding, and they picked their way over the jumbled boxes and debris until they were standing under the window. Zane stretched to reach the sill, hooked his fingers on the plaster and boosted himself up until he was balanced with one knee on the sill and one booted foot braced against a rickety stack of boxes. The window evidently hadn't been used in a long time; the glass was opaque with dust, the hinges rusty and stiff. He wrestled it open, wincing at the scraping noise, even though he knew it wouldn't carry to where the kidnappers were. Fresh air poured into the musty room. Like a cat he dropped to the floor, then turned to her.

"You can put your foot in my hand, or you can climb on my shoulders. Which do you prefer?"

With the window open, more light was coming through. He could see her doubtful expression as she stared at the window, and for the first time he appreciated the evenness of her features. He already knew how sweetly her body was shaped, but now he knew that Miss Lovejoy didn't hurt his eyes at all.

"Can you get through there?" she whispered, ignoring his question as she eyed first the expanse of his shoulders and then the narrowness of the window.

Zane had already made those mental measurements. "It'll be a tight fit, but I've been through tighter ones."

She gazed at his darkened face, then gave one of her sturdy nods, the one that said she was ready to go on. Now he could see her calculating the difficulty of maneuvering through the window with the blanket tied around her waist, and he saw the exact moment when she made her decision. Her shoulders squared and her chin came up as she untied the blanket and draped it around her like a long scarf, winding it around her neck and tossing the ends over her shoulders to dangle rakishly down her back.

"I think I'd better climb on your shoulders," she said. "I'll have more leverage that way."

He knelt on the floor and held his hands up for her to catch and brace herself. She went around behind him and daintily placed her right foot on his right shoulder, then lifted herself into a half crouch. As soon as her left foot had settled into place and her hands were securely in his, he rose steadily until he was standing erect. Her weight was negligible compared to what he handled during training. He moved closer to the wall, and she

released his right hand to brace her hand against the sill. "Here I go," she whispered, and boosted herself through the window.
She went through it headfirst. It was the fastest way, but not the easiest, because she had no way of breaking her fall on the other side. He looked up and saw the gleam of pale, bare legs and the naked curves of her buttocks; then she vanished from sight, and there was a thump as she hit the ground. Quickly Zane boosted himself up again. "Are you all right?" he whispered harshly.
There was silence for a moment, then a shaky, whispered answer. "I think so."
"Take the rifle." He handed the weapon to her, then dropped to the floor while he removed his web gear. That, too, went through the window. Then he followed, feet first, twisting his shoulders at an angle to fit through the narrow opening and landing in a crouch. Obediently, she had moved to the side and was sitting against the wall with the blanket once more clutched around her and his rifle cradled in her arms.
Dawn was coming fast, the remnants of darkness no more than a deep twilight. "Hurry," he said as he shrugged into the web vest and took the rifle from her. He slid it into position, then drew the pistol again. The heavy butt felt reassuring and infinitely familiar in his palm. With the weapon in his right hand and her hand clasped in his left, he pulled her into the nearest alley.
Benghazi was a modern city, fairly Westernized, and Libya's chief port. They were near the docks, and the smell of the sea was strong in his nostrils. Like the vast majority of waterfronts, it was one of the rougher areas of the city. From what he'd been able to tell, no authorities had shown up to investigate the gunfire, even supposing it had been reported. The Libyan government wasn't friendly—there were no diplomatic relations between the United States and Libya—but that didn't mean the government would necessarily turn a blind eye to the kidnapping of an ambassador's daughter. Of course, it was just as likely that it would, which was why diplomatic channels hadn't been considered. The best option had seemed to go in and get Miss Lovejoy out as quickly as possible.
There were plenty of ramshackle, abandoned buildings in the waterfront area. The rest of the team had withdrawn to one, drawing any pursuers away from Zane and Miss Lovejoy, while they holed up in another. They would rendezvous at oh-one-hundred hours the next morning.

Spooky had chosen the sites, so Zane trusted their relative safety. Now he and Miss Lovejoy wended their way through a rat's nest of alleyways. She made a stifled sound of disgust once, and he knew she'd stepped on something objectionable, but other than that she soldiered on in silence.
It took only a few minutes to reach the designated safe area. The building looked more down than up, but Spooky had investigated and reported an intact inner room. One outer wall was crumbled to little more than rubble. Zane straddled it, then caught Miss Lovejoy around the waist and effortlessly lifted her over the heap, twisting his torso to set her on the other side. Then he joined her, leading her under half-fallen timbers and around spiderwebs that he wanted left undisturbed. The fact that he could see those webs meant they had to get under cover, fast.
The door to the interior room hung haphazardly on one hinge, and the wood was rotting away at the top. He pulled her inside the protective walls. "Stay here while I take care of our tracks," he whispered, then dropped to a crouch and moved to where they had crossed the remnants of the outer wall. He worked backward from there, scattering dirt to hide the signs of their passage. There were dark, wet places on the broken pieces of stone that were all that remained of the floor. He frowned, knowing what those dark patches meant. Damn it, why hadn't she said something? Had she left a trail of blood straight to their hiding place?
Carefully he obliterated the marks. It wasn't completely her fault; he should have given more thought to her bare feet. The truth was, his mind had been more on her bare butt and the other details of her body that he'd already seen. He was far too aware of her sexually; the proof of it was heavy in his loins. After what she had been through that was the last thing she needed, so he would ignore his desire, but that didn't make it go away.
When he had worked his way to the room, he silently lifted the door and reset it in the frame, bracing it so it wouldn't sag again. Only then did he turn to face her. "Why didn't you tell me you'd cut your foot? When did it happen?" His voice was low and very even.
She was still standing where he'd left her, her face colorless in the half light coming through the open shutters of the window, her eyes so huge with fatigue and strain that she looked like a forlorn, bedraggled little owl. A puzzled frown knit her brows as she looked at her feet. "Oh," she said in dazed discovery as she examined the dark stains on her left foot. "I didn't realize it was cut. It must have happened when I stepped in that...

whatever... in the alley. I remember that it hurt, but I thought there was just a sharp rock under the... stuff."
At least it hadn't happened any sooner than that. Their position should still be safe. He keyed the radio, giving the prearranged one click that told the team he was in the safe area and receiving two clicks in return, meaning his men were secure in their position, too. They would check in with each other at set intervals, but for the most part they would spend the day resting. Relieved, Zane turned his mind to other matters.
"Sit down and let me see your foot," he ordered. The last thing he needed was for her to be hobbled, though from what he'd seen of her so far, she wouldn't breathe a word of complaint, merely limp along as fast as she could.
There was nothing to sit on except the broken stones of the floor, so that was where she sat, carefully keeping the blanket wrapped around her waist. Her feet were filthy, caked with the same mess that caked his boots. Blood oozed sullenly from a cut on the instep of her left foot.
Zane shucked off his black hood and headset, took off his web vest and removed his gloves; then he unpacked his survival gear, which included a small and very basic first-aid kit. He sat cross-legged in front of her and lifted her foot to rest on his thigh. After tearing open a small packet containing a premoistened antiseptic pad, he thoroughly cleaned the cut and the area around it, pretending not to notice her involuntary flinches of pain, which she quickly tried to control.
The cut was deep enough that it probably needed a couple of stitches. He took out another antiseptic pad and pressed it hard over the wound until the bleeding stopped. "How long has it been since your last tetanus vaccination?" he asked.
Barrie thought that she had never heard anything as calm as his voice. She could see him clearly now; it was probably a good thing she hadn't been able to do so before, because her nerves likely couldn't have stood the pressure. She cleared her throat and managed to say, "I don't remember. Years," but her mind wasn't on what she was saying.
His thick black hair was matted with sweat, and his face was streaked with black and green paint. The black T-shirt he wore was grimy with mingled dust and sweat, not that the shirt she had on was in much better shape. The material strained over shoulders that looked a yard wide, clung to a broad chest and flat stomach, stretched over powerful biceps. His arms were

corded with long, steely muscles, his wrists almost twice as thick as hers; his long-fingered hands were well-shaped, callused, harder than any human hands should be—and immensely gentle as he cleansed the wound on her foot.

His head was bent over the task. She saw the dense black eyelashes, the bold sweep of his eyebrows, the thin and arrogantly high bridge of bis nose, the chiseled plane of his cheekbones. She saw his mouth, so clear-cut and stern, as if he seldom smiled. Beard stubble darkened his jaw beneath the camouflage paint. Then his gaze flicked up to her for a moment, cool and assessing, as if he was gauging her reaction to the sting of the antiseptic, and she was stunned by the clear, pale beauty of his blue gray eyes. He had silently and efficiently killed that guard, then stepped over the body as if it didn't exist. A wicked, ten-inch black blade rode in a scabbard strapped to his thigh, and he handled both pistol and rifle with an ease that bespoke a familiarity that went far beyond the normal. He was the most savage, dangerous, lethal thing, man or beast, that she had ever seen—and she felt utterly safe with him.

He had given her the shirt off his back, treating her with a courtesy and tenderness that had eased her shock, calmed her fears. He had seen her naked; she had been able to ignore that while they were still trapped in the same building with her kidnappers, but now they were relatively safe, and alone, and she was burningly aware of both his intense masculinity and of her nakedness beneath his shirt. Her skin felt unusually sensitive, as if it was too hot and tight, and the rasp of the fabric against her nipples was almost painfully acute.

Her foot looked small and fragile in his big hands. He frowned in concentration as he applied an antibiotic ointment to the cut, then fashioned a butterfly bandage to close the wound. He worked with a swift, sure dexterity, and it was only a moment before the bandaging was complete. Gently he lifted her foot off his leg. "There. You should be able to walk with no problem, but as soon as we get you to the ship, get the doc to put in a couple of stitches and give you an injection for tetanus."

"Yes, sir," she said softly.

He looked up with a swift, faint smile. "I'm Navy. That's, 'Aye, aye, sir.'"

The smile nearly took her breath. If he ever truly smiled, she thought, she might have heart failure. To hide her reaction, she held out her hand to him. "Barrie Lovejoy. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

He folded his fingers around hers and solemnly shook hands. "Lieutenant-Commander Zane Mackenzie, United States Navy SEALs."
A SEAL. Her heart jumped in her chest. That explained it, then. SEALs were known as the most dangerous men alive, men so skilled in the arts of warfare that they were in a class by themselves. He didn't just look lethal; he *was* lethal.
"Thank you," she whispered.
"My pleasure, ma'am."
Hot color flooded her face as she looked at her blanket-covered lap. "Please, call me Barrie. After all, your shirt is the only thing I..." Her voice trailed off, and she bit her lip. "I mean, formality at this point is—"
"I understand," he said gently, breaking into her stumbling explanation. "I don't want you to be embarrassed, so the circumstances are strictly between us, if you prefer. But I advise you to tell the ship's surgeon, or your own doctor, for the sake of your health."
Barrie blinked at him in confusion, wondering what on earth her health had to do with the fact that he'd seen her naked. Then comprehension dawned; if she hadn't been so tired, she would have realized immediately what conclusion he had drawn from the situation.
"They didn't rape me," she whispered. Her face flushed even hotter. "They —they touched me, they hurt me and did some... other things, but they didn't actually rape me. They were saving that for today. Some important guy in their organization was supposed to arrive, and I suppose they were planning a sort of p-party."
Zane's expression remained calm and grave, and she knew he didn't believe her. Why should he? He'd found her tied up and naked, and she'd already been in the kidnappers' hands for most of a day. Chivalry wasn't part of their code; they had refrained from rape only on orders from their leader, because he wanted to be there to enjoy her himself before the others had their turn on her.
He didn't say anything, and Barrie busied herself with the used antiseptic pads, which were still damp enough to clean the rest of the disgusting muck from her feet. She longed for a bath, but that was so far out of the question that she didn't even voice the wish.
While she busied herself with tidying up, he explored the small room, which didn't take long, because there was nothing in it. He closed the broken shutters over the window; the wooden slats were rotted away at the

top, allowing some light through but preventing any passersby from seeing inside.
With the room mostly dark once more, it was like being in a snug, private cave. Barrie smothered a yawn, fighting the fatigue that dragged on her like lead weights. The only sleep she'd had was that brief nap while Zane had been finding a way out of the building, and she was so tired that even her hunger paled in comparison.
He noticed, of course; he didn't miss anything. "Why don't you go to sleep?" he suggested. "In a couple of hours, when more people are moving around and I won't be as noticeable, I'll go scrounge up something for us to eat and liberate some clothes for you."
Barrie eyed the paint streaking his face. "With makeup like that, I don't believe you're going to go unnoticed no matter how crowded the streets are."
That faint smile touched his lips again, then was gone. "I'll take it off first."
The smile almost kept her awake. Almost. She felt her muscles slowly loosening, as if his permission to sleep was all her body needed to hear. Her eyelids were too heavy for her to hold open anymore; it was like a veil of darkness descending. With her last fraction of consciousness, she was aware of his arms around her, gently lowering her to the floor.

Chapter 4

She had gone to sleep like a baby, Zane thought, watching her. He'd seen it often enough in his ten nephews, the way little children had of dropping off so abruptly, their bodies looking almost boneless as they toppled over into waiting arms. His gaze drifted over her face. Now that dawn was here, even with the shutters closed, he could plainly see the exhaustion etched on her face; the wonder was that she had held up so well, rather than that she'd gone to sleep now.
He could use some rest himself. He stretched out beside her, keeping a slight distance between them; not touching, but close enough that he could reach her immediately if their hiding place was discovered. He was still wired, too full of adrenaline to sleep yet, but it felt good to relax and let himself wind down while he waited for the city to come completely awake.

Now he could also see the fire in her hair, the dark auburn shade that, when she stood in the sun, would glint with gold and bronze. Her eyes were a deep, soft green, her brows and lashes like brown mink. He wouldn't have been surprised by freckles, but her skin was dear and creamy, except for the bruise that mottled one cheek. There were bruises on her arms, and though he couldn't see them, he knew the shirt covered other marks left by brutal men. She'd insisted they hadn't raped her, but probably she was ashamed for anyone else to know, as if she'd had any choice in the matter. Maybe she wanted to keep it quiet for her father's sake. Zane didn't care about her reasons; he just hoped she would get the proper medical care.

He thought dispassionately about slipping to the building where they'd held her and killing any and all of the bastards who were still there. God knew they deserved it, and he wouldn't lose a minute's worth of sleep over any of them. But his mission was to rescue Miss Lovejoy—Barrie—and he hadn't accomplished that yet. If he went back, there was the chance that he would be killed, and that would endanger her, as well as his men. He'd long ago learned how to divorce his emotions from the action so he could think clearly, and he wasn't about to compromise a mission now... But *damn*, he wanted to kill them.

He liked the way she looked. She wasn't drop-dead gorgeous or anything like that, but her features were regular, and asleep, with her woes put aside for the moment, her expression was sweetly serene. She was a pretty little thing, as finely made as an expensive porcelain figurine. Oh, he supposed she was probably of middle height for a woman, about five feet five, but he was six-three and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds, so to him she was little. Not as little as his mother and sister, but they were truly slight, as delicate as fairies. Barrie Lovejoy, for all her aristocratic bloodlines, had the sturdiness of a pioneer. Most women, with good reason, would have broken down long before now.

He was surprised to feel himself getting a little drowsy. Despite their situation, there was something calming about lying here beside her, watching her sleep. Though he was solitary by nature and had always preferred sleeping alone after his sexual appetite had been satisfied, it felt elementally right, somehow, to guard her with his body as they slept. Had cavemen done this, putting themselves between the mouth of the cave and the sleeping forms of their women and children, drowsily watching the gentle movements of their breathing as the fires died down and night

claimed the land? If it was an ancient instinct, Zane mused, he sure as hell hadn't felt it before now.
But he wanted to touch her, to feel the softness of her flesh beneath his hand. He wanted to fold her within the warm protection of his body, tuck her in close, curl around her and keep her there with an arm draped around her waist. Only the knowledge that the last thing in the world she would want now was a man's touch kept him from doing just that.
He wanted to hold her. He ached to hold her.
She was dwarfed by his shirt, but he'd seen the body hidden by the folds of cloth. His night vision was very good; he'd been able to discern her high, round breasts, not very big, but definitely mouth-watering, and tipped with small, tight nipples. She was curvy, womanly, with a small waist and rounded hips and a neat little triangle of pubic hair. He'd seen her buttocks. Just thinking about it made him feel hollowed out with desire; her butt was fine indeed. He would like to feel it snuggled up against his thighs.
He wasn't going to be able to sleep, after all. He was fully aroused, desire pulsing through his swollen and rigid flesh. Wincing, he turned onto his back and adjusted himself to a more comfortable position, but the comfort was relative. The only way he would truly find ease was within the soft, hot clasp of her body, and that wasn't likely to happen.
The small room grew brighter and warmer as dawn developed into full morning. The stone walls would protect them from most of the day's heat, but soon they would need water. Water, food, and clothes for her. A robe would be better than Western-style clothing, because the traditional Muslim attire would cover her hak, and there were enough traditionalists in Benghazi that a robe wouldn't draw a second glance.
The streets were noisy now, the waterfront humming with activity. Zane figured it was time for him to do some foraging. He wiped the camouflage paint from his skin as best he could and disguised what was left by smearing dirt on his face. He wasn't about to go unarmed, so he pulled the tail of his T-shirt free from his pants and tucked the pistol into the waistband at the small of his back, then let the shirt fall over it. Anyone who paid attention would know the bulge for what it was, but what the hell, it wasn't unusual for people to go armed in this part of the world. Thanks to his one-quarter Comanche heritage, his skin had a rich bronze hue, and in addition he was darkly tanned from countless hours of training in the sun and sea and wind. There was nothing about his appearance that would

attract undue notice, not even his eyes, because there were plenty of Libyans with a European parent.

He checked Barrie, reassuring himself that she was still sleeping soundly. He'd told her that he would be slipping out for a while, so she shouldn't be alarmed if she woke while he was gone. He left their crumbling sanctuary as silently as he had entered it.

It was over two hours before he returned, almost time for the designated check-in time with his men. He had a definite talent for scavenging, he thought, though outright thievery would probably be a better term. He carried a woman's black robe and head covering, and wrapped up in it was a selection of fruit, cheese and bread, as well as a pair of slippers he hoped would fit Barrie. The water had been the hardest to come by, because he'd lacked a container. He'd solved that by stealing a stoppered gallon jug of wine, forbidden by the Koran but readily available anyway. He had poured out the cheap, sour wine and filled the jug with water. The water would have a definite wine taste to it, but it would be wet, and that was all they required.

While he had the opportunity, he disguised the entrance to their lair a bit, piling some stones in front of it, arranging a rotted timber so that it looked as if it blocked the door. The door was still visible, but looked much less accessible. He tested his handiwork to make certain they could still get out easily enough, then slipped inside and once again braced the door in its sagging frame.

He turned to check on Barrie. She was still asleep. The room was considerably warmer, and she had kicked the blanket aside. His shirt was up around her waist.

The kick of desire was like taking a blow to the chest. He almost staggered from it, his heart racing, his breath strangling in his throat. Sweat beaded on his forehead, ran down his temple. *God.*

He should turn away. He should put the blanket over her. He should put sex completely out of his mind. There were any number of things he should do, but instead he stared at her with a hunger so intense he ached with it, quivered with it. Greedily his gaze moved over every female inch of her. His sex was throbbing like a toothache. He wanted her more intensely than he'd ever wanted a woman before. His famous cool remoteness had failed him—there wasn't a cool inch on him, and his desire was so damn strong and immediate, he was shaking from the effort of resisting it.

Moving slowly, stiffly, he set his purloined goodies on the floor. His breath hissed between his clenched teeth. He hadn't known sexual frustration could be this painful. He'd never had any trouble getting a woman whenever he'd wanted one. This woman was off-limits, though, from even an attempt at seduction. She'd been through enough without having to fend off her rescuer, too.

As warm as the room was now, if he spread the blanket over her she would only kick it off again. Gingerly he went down on one knee beside her and with shaking hands pulled the shirt tail down to cover her. With slight disbelief he eyed the fine tremor of his fingers. He never trembled. He was rock steady during the most tense and dangerous situations, icily controlled in combat. He had parachuted out of a burning plane, swum with sharks and sewn up his own flesh. He had ridden unbroken horses and even bulls a time or two. He had killed. He had done all of that with perfect control, but this sleeping, red-haired woman made him shake.

Grimly he forced himself to turn aside and pick up the radio headset. Holding the earpiece in place, he clicked once and immediately heard two clicks in response. Everything was okay.

Maybe some water would cool him down. At least thinking about it was better than thinking about Barrie. He dropped a couple of purification tablets into the jug, in case the small amount of wine that had remained in it wasn't enough to kill all the invisible little critters. The tablets didn't improve the taste any—just the opposite— but they were better than a case of the runs.

He drank just enough to relieve his thirst, then settled down with his back to a wall. There was nothing to do but wait and contemplate the walls, because he sure as hell didn't trust himself to look at Barrie.

Voices woke her. They were loud, and close by. Barrie bolted upright, her eyes huge with alarm. Hard arms grabbed her, and an even harder hand clamped itself over her mouth, stifling any sound she might have made. Confused, disoriented, in sheer terror she began to fight as much as she could. Teeth. She should use her teeth. But his fingers were biting hard into her jaw, and she couldn't open her mouth. Desperately she tried to shake her head, and he merely gathered her in tighter, tucking her against him in a way that was oddly protective.

"Shh" came that toneless whisper, and the familiarity of it cut through the panic and fog of sleep. Zane.

Instantly she relaxed, weak with relief. Feeling the tension leave her muscles, he tilted her face, still keeping his hand over her mouth. Their eyes met in the shadowed light, and he gave a brief nod as he saw that she was awake now, and aware. He released her jaw, his hard fingers trailing briefly over her skin in apology for the tightness of his grip. The barely there caress went through her like lightning. She shivered as it seared a path along nerve endings throughout her body and instinctively turned her face into the warm hollow created by the curve of his shoulder.

The arm around her had loosened immediately when she shivered, but at her action she felt him hesitate a fraction of a second, then gather her snugly against him once more.

The voices were closer, and added to them were some thuds and the sound of crumbling rock. She listened to the rapid, rolling syllables of Arabic, straining to concentrate on the voices. Were they the same voices she had heard through yesterday's long nightmare? It was difficult to tell.

She didn't understand the language; hers had been a finishing-school education, suited to an ambassador's daughter. She spoke French and Italian fluently, Spanish a little less so. After her father's posting in Athens she had made it a point to study Greek, too, and had learned enough that she could carry on a simple conversation, though she understood more than she spoke. Fiercely she wished she had insisted on lessons in Arabic, too. She had hated every moment she'd spent in the kidnappers' hands, but not speaking the language had made her feel even more helpless, more isolated.

She would rather die than let them get their hands on her again.

She must have tensed, because Zane gave her a light squeeze of reassurance. Swiftly she glanced at his face. He wasn't looking at her; instead he was concentrating on the fragile, half-rotted door that protected the entrance to their sanctuary, and on the voices beyond. His expression was utterly calm and distant. Abruptly she realized that he *did* understand Arabic, and whatever was being said by the people picking through the ruins of the building, he wasn't alarmed by it. He was alert, because their hiding place could be compromised at any moment, but evidently he felt confident of being able to handle that problem.

With reason, no doubt. From what she'd seen, she thought he was capable of handling just about any situation. She would trust him with her life—and had.

The voices went on for a long time, sometimes coming so close to their hiding place that Zane palmed that big pistol and held it aimed unwaveringly at the door. Barrie stared at that hand, so lean and powerful and capable. There wasn't the slightest tremor visible; it was almost unreal, almost inhuman, for any man to be that calm and have such perfect control over his body.

They sat silently in the warm, shadowy little room, their breathing for the most part their only movements. Barrie noticed that the blanket no longer covered her legs, but the shirt, thank God, kept her reasonably decent. It was too hot to lie under the blanket, anyway.

Time crept by at a sloth's pace. The warmth and silence were hypnotic, lulling her into a half dream state of both awareness and distance. She was ferociously hungry, but unaffected by it, as if she was merely aware of someone else's hunger. After a while her muscles began to ache from being in one position for so long, but that didn't matter, either. Thirst, though, was different. In the increasing heat, her need for water began to gnaw at her. The kidnappers had given her some water a couple of times, but she'd had nothing to drink in hours—since she had learned they expected her to relieve herself in their presence, in fact. She had chosen to do without water rather than provide them with such amusement again.

Sweat streaked down Zane's face and dampened his shirt. She was perfectly content to remain where she was, nestled against his side. The arm around her made her feel safer than if their hiding place had been constructed of steel, rather than crumbling stone and plaster, and rotting wood.

She had never been exposed to a man like him before. Her only contact with the military had been with the senior officers who attended functions at the embassy, colonels and generals, admirals, the upper brass; there were also the Marine guards at the embassy, with their perfect uniforms and perfect manners. Though she supposed the Marine guards had to be exemplary soldiers or they wouldn't have been chosen as embassy guards, still, they were nothing like the man who held her so protectively. They were soldiers; he was a warrior. He was as different from them as the lethal, ten-inch black blade strapped to his thigh was from a pocketknife. He was a finely honed weapon.

For all that, he wasn't immortal, and they weren't safe. Their hiding place could be discovered. He could be killed; she could be recaptured. The hard

reality of that was something she couldn't ignore as she could hunger and cramped muscles.
After a long, long time, the voices went away. Zane released her and walked noiselessly to the door to look out. She had never before seen anyone move with such silent grace, like a big jungle cat on velvet paws instead of a battle-hardened warrior in boots.
She didn't move until he turned around, the faint relaxation of his expression telling her the danger was past. "What were they doing?" she asked, taking care to keep her voice low.
"Scavenging building materials, picking up blocks, any pieces of wood that hadn't rotted. If they'd had a sledgehammer, they probably would have dismantled these walls. They carted the stuff off in a wheelbarrow. If they need more, they'll probably be back."
"What will we do?"
"The same thing we did this time—hunker down and keep quiet."
"But if they come in here—"
"I'll handle it." He cut her worry short before she could completely voice it, but he did it with a tone of reassurance. "I brought some food and water. Interested?"
Barrie scrambled to her knees, eagerness in every line of her body. "Water! I'm so thirsty!" Then she halted, her recent experience fresh in her mind. "But if I drink anything, where will I go to... you know."
He regarded her with faint bemusement, and she blushed a little as she realized that wasn't a problem he normally encountered. When he and his men were on a mission, they would relieve themselves wherever and whenever they needed.
"I'll find a place for you to go," he finally said. "Don't let that stop you from drinking the water you need. I also found some clothes for you, but as hot as it's getting in here, you'll probably want to wait until night before you put them on."
He indicated the black bundle beside his gear, and she realized it was a robe. She thought of the modesty it would provide, and gratitude flooded her; at least she wouldn't have to face his men wearing nothing more than his shirt. But he was right; in the heat of day, and in the privacy of this small room, she would prefer wearing his shirt. They both knew she was bare beneath it; he'd already seen her stark naked, and demonstrated his

decency by giving her the shirt and ignoring her nakedness, so there was no point now in swathing herself in an ankle-length robe.
He produced a big jug and unstoppered it. "It'll taste funny," he warned as he passed the jug to her. "Purification tablets."
It did taste funny—warm, with a chemical flavor. But it was wonderful. She drank a few swallows, not wanting to make her stomach cramp after being empty for so long. While she was drinking, he unwrapped the bits of food he'd procured—a loaf of hard bread, a hunk of cheese and several oranges, plums and dates. It looked like a feast.
He straightened the blanket for her to sit on, then took out his knife and cut small portions of both the loaf and cheese and gave them to her. She started to protest that she was hungry enough to eat much more than that, but realized that what he had would have to last them all day, and perhaps longer than that. She wasn't about to complain about the amount of food she *did* have.
She had never been particularly fond of cheese, and she suspected that if she hadn't been so hungry she wouldn't have been fond of this cheese, either, but at the moment it was delicious. She nibbled at both bread and cheese, finding satisfaction in the simple act of chewing. As it happened, she had overestimated her appetite. The small portion he had given her was more than enough.
He ate more heartily, and polished off one of the oranges. He insisted that she eat a couple of the juicy slices and drink a bit more water. Feeling replete, Barrie yawned and refused the offer of another orange slice.
"No, thanks, I'm full."
"Would you like to freshen up now?"
Her head whipped around, sending her red hair flying. Amusement twinkled in his pale eyes at her eager, pleading expression. "There's enough water?"
"Enough to dampen a bandana."
She didn't have a bandana, of course, but he did. Carefully he poured just enough water from the jug to wet the square cloth, then politely turned his back and busied himself with his gear.
Slowly Barrie smoothed the wet cloth over her face, sighing in pleasure at the freshness of the sensation. She hadn't realized how grimy she felt until now, when she was able to rectify the situation. She found a sore place on her cheek, where one of the men had hit her, and other tender bruises on her arms. Glancing at Zane's broad back, she quickly unbuttoned the shirt just

enough that she could slide the handkerchief inside and rub it over her torso and under her arms. After she fastened the garment, her dusty legs got the same attention. The dampness was wonderfully cooling, almost voluptuous in the sensual delight it gave her.

"I'm finished," she said, and returned the dark bandana to him when he turned around. "It felt wonderful. Thank you."

Then her heart leaped in her chest, because he evidently felt the same need to cool off as she had, but unlike her, he didn't keep his shirt on. He peeled the snug black T-shirt off over his head and dropped it on the blanket, then sat on his heels while he moistened the bandana and began scrubbing it over his face.

Oh, my. Helplessly she stared at the rippling muscles of his chest and stomach, the way they flexed and relaxed with the flow of his movements. The dim light caught the deep bronze of his skin, gleamed on the smooth, powerful curve of his shoulder. Her fascinated gaze wandered over the slant of his shoulder blades, the diamond of black hair that stretched from nipple to nipple on his chest. He twisted around to reach for something, and she found his back equally fascinating, with the deep furrow of his spine bisecting two muscular planes.

There was an inch-long scar on his left cheekbone. She hadn't noticed it before because his face had been so dirty, but now she could plainly see the silvery line of it. It wasn't a disfiguring scar at all, just a straight little slash, as precise as a surgeon's cut. The scar along his rib cage was different, easily eight or nine inches in length, jagged, the scar tissue thick and ridged. Then there were the two round, puckered scars, one just above his waist, the other just below his right shoulder blade. Bullet wounds. She'd never seen one before, but she recognized them for what they were. There was another slash running along his right bicep, and God only knew how many other scars there were on the rest of his body. The warrior hadn't led a charmed life; his body bore the signs of battle.

He squatted half-naked, unconcernedly rubbing the damp handkerchief across his sweaty chest, lifting his arms to wash under them, exposing the smooth undersides and intriguing patches of hair. He was so fundamentally, elementally male, and so purely a warrior, that her breath strangled in her lungs as she watched him.

The rush of warmth through her body told her that she was more female than she'd ever imagined.

A little dazed, she sat back, resting against the wall. Absently she made certain the shirt tail preserved her modesty, but thoughts were tumbling through her mind, dizzyingly fast yet very clear.
They weren't out of danger yet.
During the past twenty-four horrific hours, she hadn't spent a lot of time wondering about the motive behind her kidnapping. She'd had too much to deal with as it was, the sheer terror, the confusion, the pain of the blows they'd given her.
She'd been blindfolded much of the time, and disoriented. She'd been humiliated, stripped naked and roughly fondled, taunted with the prospect of rape, and yet they had stopped short of rape—for a reason. Sheer psychological torture had undoubtedly played a role, but most of all they'd had orders to save her for the man who was to arrive today.
Who was he? He was the one behind her kidnapping; he had to be. But why?
Ransom? When she thought about it now, coolly and clearly, she didn't think so. Yes, her father was rich. Many a diplomat came from a moneyed background; it wasn't unusual. But if money had been the motive, there were others who were richer, though perhaps she had been chosen specifically because it was well known that her father would beggar himself to keep her safe. Perhaps.
But why would they have taken her out of the country? Wouldn't they have wanted to keep her close by, to make the exchange for money easier? No, the very fact that they'd taken her out of the country meant they'd kidnapped her for another reason. Maybe they would have asked for money anyway; since they already had her, why not? But money wasn't the primary object.
So what was?
She didn't know, and since she didn't know who the leader was, she had no way of guessing what he truly wanted.
Not herself. She dismissed that notion out of hand. She wasn't the object of obsession, because no man so obsessed with a woman that he was driven to such lengths would let his men maul her. Nor was she the type to inspire obsession, she thought wryly. Certainly none of the men she'd dated had shown any signs of obsessive behavior.
So... there was something else, some piece of puzzle she was missing. Was it someone she knew? Something she'd read or seen?

Nothing came to mind. She wasn't involved in intrigue, though of course she knew which employees at the embassy were employed by the CIA. That was standard, nothing unusual. Her father often spoke privately with Art Sandefer and, lately, Mack Prewett, too. She'd often thought that Art was more bureaucrat than spy, though the intelligence in his tired gaze said he'd done his time in the field, too. She didn't know about Mack Prewett. There was something restless and hard about him, something that made her uneasy.

Her father said Mack was a good man. She wasn't certain about that, but neither did he seem like a villain. Still, there had been that time a couple of weeks ago when she hadn't known anyone was with her father and had breezily walked in without knocking. Her father had been handing a thick manila envelope to Mack; both of them had looked startled and uncomfortable, but her father wasn't a diplomat for nothing. He'd efficiently smoothed over the slight awkwardness, and Mack had left the office almost immediately, taking the envelope with him. Barrie hadn't asked any questions about it, because if it was CIA business, then it wasn't her business.

Now she wondered what had been in that envelope.

That small incident was the only thing the slightest bit untoward that she could remember. Art Sandefer had once said that there was no such thing as coincidence, but could that moment be linked to her kidnapping? Could it be the *cause* of it? That was a reach.

She didn't know what was in the envelope, hadn't shown any interest in it. But she had seen her father giving it to Mack Prewett. That meant... what? She felt as if she was feeling her way through a mental maze, taking wrong turns, stumbling into dead ends, then groping her way back to logic. Her father would never, in any way, do anything that would harm her. Therefore, that envelope had no significance—unless he was involved in something dangerous and wanted out. Her kidnapping made sense only if someone was using her as a weapon to make her father do something he didn't want to do. She couldn't accept the idea of her father doing anything traitorous—at least, not voluntarily. She wasn't blind to his weaknesses. He was a bit of a snob, he didn't at all like even the idea that someday she might fall in love and get married, he was protective to the point of smothering her. But he was an honorable man, and a truly patriotic man. It could be that the kidnappers were trying to force her father to do something, give them some

information, perhaps, and he had resisted; she could be the means they were using to force him to do what they wanted.
That felt logical. The envelope probably had nothing at all to do with her kidnapping, and Art Sandefer was wrong about coincidence.
But what if he wasn't?
Then, despite her instincts about him, her father was involved in something he shouldn't be. The thought made her sick to her stomach, but she had to face the possibility, had to think of every angle. She had to face it, then put it aside, because there was nothing she could do about it now.
If the kidnappers had been going to use her as a weapon against her father, then they wouldn't give up. If it had just been ransom, they would have thrown up their hands at her supposed escape and said the Arabic equivalent of, "Ah, to hell with it."
The leader hadn't been here. She didn't even know where "here" was; she'd had too much on her mind to ask questions about her geographic location.
"Where are we?" she murmured, thinking she really should know.
Zane lifted his eyebrows. He was sitting down, lounging against the wall at a right angle to her, having finished cleaning up, and she wondered how long she'd been lost in thought. "The waterfront district," he said. "It's a rough section of town."
"I meant, what town?" she clarified.
Realization dawned in his crystal clear eyes. "Benghazi," he said softly. "Libya."
Libya. Stunned, she absorbed the news, then went back to the mental path she'd been following.
The leader had been flying in today. From where? Athens? If he'd been in contact with his men, he would know she'd somehow escaped. But if he had access to the embassy, and to her father, then he would also know that she hadn't been returned to the embassy. Therefore, she would logically still be in Libya. Also logically, they would be actively searching for her.
She looked at Zane again. His eyes were half-closed, he looked almost asleep. Because of the heat, he hadn't put his T-shirt back on. But despite the drowsy look on his face, she sensed that he was vitally aware of everything going on around them, that he was merely letting his body rest while his mind remained on guard.
After the humiliation and pain her guards had dealt her, Zane's concern and consideration had been like a balm, soothing her, helping to heal her bruised

emotions before she even had time to know how deep the damage went. Almost before she knew it, she had been responding to him as a woman does to a man, and somehow that was all right.
He was the exact opposite of the thugs who had so delighted in humiliating her. Those thugs were probably searching all over the city for her, and until she was out of this country, the possibility existed that they would recapture her. And if they did, this time there would be no respite.
No. It was intolerable. But if the unthinkable happened, she would be damned if she would give them the satisfaction they'd been anticipating. She would be damned if she would let them take her virginity.
She had never thought of her virginity as anything other than a lack of experience and inclination. At school in Switzerland there had been precious few opportunities for meeting boys, and she hadn't been particularly interested in those she had met. After she left school, her father's protective possessiveness, as well as her duties at the embassy, had restricted any social life she might have developed. The men she met hadn't seemed any more | interesting than the few boys she had met while in school. With AIDS added in as a threat, it simply hadn't seemed worth the risk to have sex simply for the experience.
But she had dreamed. She had dreamed of meeting a man, growing to love him, making love with him. Simple, universal dreams.
The kidnappers had almost taken all that from her, almost wrecked her dream of loving a man by abusing her so severely that, if she had remained in their hands much longer, she knew she would have been so severely traumatized that she might never have been able to love a man or tolerate his touch. If Zane hadn't taken her out of there, her first sexual experience would have been one of rape.
No. A thousand times no.
Even if they managed to recapture her, she wouldn't let them murder that dream.
Scrambling to her feet, Barrie took the few steps to where Zane lounged against the wall. She saw his muscled body come to alertness at her action, though he didn't move. She stood over him, staring at him with green eyes burning in the dim light. The look he gave her was hooded, unreadable.
"Make love to me," she said in a raw voice.

Chapter 5

"Barrie..." he began, his tone kind, and she knew he was going to refuse.
"No!" she said fiercely. "Don't tell me I should think about it, or that I really don't want to do it. I know what I went through with those bastards. I know you don't believe it, but they *didn't* rape me. But they looked at me, they touched me, and I couldn't stop them." She stopped and drew a deep breath, steadying herself. "I'm not stupid. I know we're still in danger, that you and your men could be wounded or even killed trying to rescue me and that I could end up back in their hands anyway. I've never made love before, with anyone. I don't want my first time to be rape, do you understand? I don't want them to have that satisfaction. *I want the first time to be with you."*
She had surprised him, she saw, and she had already noticed that Zane Mackenzie wasn't a man whose expression revealed much of what he was thinking. He sat up straight, his pale eyes narrowed as he examined her with a piercing gaze.
He was still going to refuse, and she didn't think she could bear it. "I promise," she blurted desperately. "They didn't do that to me. I can't have any disease, if that's what you're worried about."
"No," he said, his voice suddenly sounding strained. "That isn't what I'm worried about."
"Don't make me beg," she pleaded, wringing her hands together, aware that she was already doing exactly that.
Then the expression in those pale eyes softened, grew warmer. "I won't," he said softly, and rose to his feet with that powerful, feline grace of his. He towered over her, and for a moment Barrie felt the difference in their sizes so sharply that she wondered wildly what she thought she was doing. Then he moved past her to the blanket; he knelt and smoothed it, then dropped down on it, stretching out on his back, and watched her with a world of knowledge in his slightly remote, too-old eyes.
He knew. And until she read that knowledge in his eyes, she hadn't even been aware of what she really needed. But watching him lie down and put himself at her service, something inside her shattered. *He knew.* He understood the emotions roiling deep inside her, understood what had brought her to him with her fierce, startling demand. It wasn't just that she wanted her first time to be of her own volition, with the man of her choice; the kidnappers had taken something from her, and he was giving it back. They had tied her down, stripped her, humiliated her, and she had been

helpless to stop them. Zane was giving control back to her, reassuring her and at the same time subtly letting her exact her vengeance against the male of the species.
She didn't want to lie helpless beneath him. She wanted to control this giving of her body, wanted things to move at her pace instead of his, wanted to be the one who decided how much, how far, how fast.
And he was going to let her do it.
He was giving control of his body to her.
She could barely breathe as she sank to her knees beside him. The warm, bare, richly tanned flesh lured her hands closer, closer, until the urge overcame her nervousness and her fingers lightly skimmed over his stomach, his chest. Her heart hammered wildly. It was like petting a tiger, knowing how dangerous the animal was but fascinated beyond resistance by the rich pelt. She wanted to feel all of that power under her hands. Carefully she flattened her hands along his ribs, molding his flesh beneath her palms, feeling the resilience of skin over the powerful bands of muscle and, beneath that, the strong solidity of bone. She could feel the rhythmic thud of his heartbeat, the expansion of his ribs as he breathed.
Both heartbeat and breathing seemed fast. Swiftly she glanced at his face and blushed at what she saw there, the heat in his heavy-lidded eyes, the deepened color of his lips. She knew what lust looked like; she'd seen the cruel side of it on the faces of her captors, and now she saw the pleasurable side of it in Zane. It startled her, because somehow she hadn't considered lust in the proposition she'd made to him, and her hands fell away from his body.
His lips parted in a curl of amusement that revealed the gleam of white teeth, and she felt her heart almost stop. His smile was even more potent than she'd expected. "Yeah, I'm turned on," he said softly. "I have to be, or this won't work."
He was right, of course, and her blush deepened. That was the trouble with inexperience. Though she knew the mechanics of lovemaking, and once or twice her escort for the evening had kissed her with unexpected ardor and held her close enough for her to tell that he was aroused, still, she'd never had to deal directly with an erection—until now.
This particular one was there for her bidding. Furtively she glanced at the front of his pants, at the ridge pushing against the cloth.

"We don't have to do this," he offered once again, and Barrie flared from hesitance to determination.
"Yes, I do."
He moved his hands to his belt. "Then I'd better—"
Instantly she stopped him, pushing his hands up and away, forcing them down on each side of his head. "I'll do it," she said, more fiercely than she'd intended. This was her show.
"All right," he murmured, and again she knew that he understood. Her show, her control, every step of the way. He relaxed against the blanket, closing his eyes as if he was going to take a nap.
It was easier, knowing he wasn't watching her, which of course had been his intention. Barrie didn't want to fumble, didn't want to underline her inexperience any more than she already had, so before she reached for his belt she studied the release mechanism for a moment to make certain she understood it. She didn't give herself time to lose her nerve. She simply reached out, opened the belt and unfastened his pants. Under the pants were black swim trunks. Puzzled, Barrie stared at them. Swim trunks?
Then she understood. He was a SEAL; the acronym stood for SEa, Air and Land. He was at home in all three elements, capable of swimming for miles. Since Benghazi was a seaport, that was probably how his team had infiltrated, from the sea. Maybe they'd used some sort of boat to reach land, but it was possible they'd been dropped off some distance from the port and had swum the rest of the way.
He had risked his life to save her, was still doing so, and now he was giving her his body. Everything inside her squeezed tight, and she trembled from the rush of emotion. Oh, God. She had learned more about herself in the past twenty-four hours than in the entire past twenty-five years of her life. Perhaps the experience had changed her. Either way, something had happened inside her, something momentous, and she was learning how to deal with it.
She had let her father wrap her in a suffocating blanket of protection for fifteen years; she couldn't blame him for it, because she'd *needed* that blanket. But that time was past. Fate had pitched her headlong into life, ripped her out of her protective cocoon, and like a butterfly, she couldn't draw the silken threads back around her. All she could do was reach out for the unknown.

She slipped her hands under the waistband of the swim trunks and began working them, and his pants, down his hips. He levered his pelvis off the ground to aid her. "Don't take them all the way off," he murmured, still keeping his eyes closed and his hands resting beside his head. "I can handle things if I get caught with my pants down, but if they're completely off, it would slow me down some."

Despite her nervousness, Barrie smiled at that supreme self-confidence, the wry humor. If he wasn't so controlled, he could be described as cocky. He had no doubt whatsoever about his fighting ability.

Her hands stroked down his buttocks as she slipped her hands inside his garments. An unexpected frisson of pleasure rippled through her at the feel of his butt, cool and smooth, hard with muscle, lush connoisseurs would envy her the moment, and she wished she had the nerve to linger, to fully appreciate this male perfection. Instead she tugged at his clothes, pulling them down to the middle of his thighs. He relaxed, letting his hips settle on the blanket again, and Barrie studied the startling reality of a naked man. She'd read books that described sexual arousal, but seeing it firsthand, and at close range, was far more impressive and wondrous.

Blindly she reached out, her hand drawn as if by a magnet. She touched him, stroking one fingertip down the length of his swollen sex. It pulsed and jerked upward, as if following the caress. He inhaled sharply. His reaction wanned her, and the tightness in her chest, her body, clenched once more, then began to loosen with that rush of warmth. Bolder now, she folded her fingers around him, gently sighing with pleasure as she felt the heat beneath the coolness, iron beneath silk, the urgent throbbing.

And she felt her own desire, rushing like a heated river through her flesh, turning angry determination into love-making. *This is how it should be,* she thought with relief; they should come together in pleasure, not in anger. And she didn't want to wait, didn't want to give herself time to reconsider, or she would lose her nerve.

Swiftly she straddled him, mounted him. No longer in anger at other men, no longer in desperation. *Pleasure*, warm and sweet. With her knees clasping his hips, acting on instinct, she held the thick shaft in position and slowly sank down on him, guiding their bodies together.

The first brush of his flesh against hers was hot, startling, and she instinctively jerked herself upright, away from the alien touch. Zane

quivered, the barest ripple of reaction, then once more lay motionless between her legs, his eyes still closed, letting her proceed at her own pace. Her chest was so constricted she could barely breathe; she sucked in air in quick little gasps. That contact, brief as it had been, had touched off an insistent throbbing between her legs, as if her body, after its initial startled rejection, had paused in instinctive recognition of female for male. Her breasts felt tight and feverish beneath the black fabric of his shirt. Alien, yes... but infinitely exciting. Desire wound through her, the river rising.
She told herself that she was prepared for the sudden acute sense of vulnerability, for her body's panic at the threat of penetration, even though desire was urging her on to that very conclusion. More gingerly, she settled onto him again, holding herself steady as she placed him against the entrance to her body and let her weight begin to impale her on the throbbing column of flesh.
The discomfort began immediately and was worse than she'd expected. She halted her movement, gulping as she tried to control her instinctive flinching away from the source of pain. He was breathing deeply, too, she noticed, though that was the only motion he made. She pushed harder, gritting her teeth against the burning sensation of being stretched, and then she couldn't bear any more and jerked herself off him. This time the discomfort between her legs didn't go away but continued to burn.
It wasn't going to get any better, she told herself. She might as well go ahead and do it. Breathing raggedly, once more she lowered herself onto him. Tears burned in her eyes as she struggled to complete the act. Why wouldn't it just go *in?* The pressure between her legs was enormous, intolerable, and a sob caught in her throat as she surged upward.
"Help me," she begged, her voice almost inaudible.
Slowly his eyes opened, and she almost flinched at the pale fire that burned there. He moved just one hand, the right one. Gently he touched her cheek, his callused fingertips rough and infinitely tender; then he trailed them down her throat and lightly over the shirt to her left breast, where they lingered for a heart-stopping moment at her nipple, then finally down to the juncture of her legs.
The caress was as light as a whisper. It lingered between her legs, teasing, brushing, stroking. She went very still, her body poised as she concentrated on this new sensation. Her eyes closed as all her senses focused on his hand and what it was doing, the way he was touching her. It was delicious, but

not... quite... enough. He tantalized her with the promise of something more, something that was richer, more powerful, and yet that lightly stroking finger never quite touched her where she wanted. Barrie inhaled deeply, her nipples rising in response. Her entire body hung in suspense. She waited, waited for the gentle touch to brush her with ecstasy, waited.... Her hips moved, her body instinctively seeking, following his finger.

Ah. There. Just for a moment, *there,* A low moan bubbled up in her throat as pleasure shot through her. She waited for him to repeat the caress, but instead his fingers moved maddeningly close, teasing and retreating. Again her hips followed, and again she was rewarded by that lightning flash of pure sensation.

A subtle, sensual dance began. He led, and she followed. The just-right touches came more often, the pleasure became more shattering as the intensity built with each repetition. Between her legs, his male shaft still probed for entrance, and somehow each movement of her hips seemed to ease him a bit closer to that goal. Her body rocked, swaying in the ancient rhythm of desire, surging and retreating like the tides. She could feel him stretching her, feel the discomfort sharpened by her movements. . .and yet the desire lured her onward like a Lorelei, and somehow she began to need him inside her, need him to the point that the pain no longer mattered. She braced her hands on his chest, and her movements changed, lifting and falling rather than swaying side to side. His touch changed, too, suddenly pressing directly on the place where she most wanted it.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. His thumb rubbed insistently, releasing a torrent, turning the warm river into something wild and totally beyond her control. She was so hot that she was burning up with desire, aching with emptiness. The pain no longer mattered; she had to have what his body promised, what hers needed. With a low moan she pressed downward, forcing her soft flesh to admit the intruder. She felt the resistance, the inner giving; then suddenly his hot, swollen sex pushed up inside her.

It hurt. It hurt a lot. She froze in place, and her eyes flew open, huge with distress. Their gazes locked, hers dark with pain, his burning with ruthlessly restrained desire. Suddenly she became aware of how taut the muscled body beneath her was, how much his control was costing him. But he had promised to let her set the pace, and he had kept that promise, moving only when she had asked for help.

Part of her wanted to stop, but a deeper, more powerful instinct kept her astride him. She could feel him throbbing inside her, feel the answering tightening of her body, as if the flesh knew more than the mind, and perhaps it did. He tensed even more. His skin gleamed with sweat, his heartbeat hammered beneath her palm. She felt a jolt of excitement at having this supremely male, incredibly dangerous warrior as hers to command, just for this time suspended from reality. They had met only hours ago; they had only hours left before they would likely never see each other again. But for now he was hers, embedded inside her, and she wasn't going to forgo a moment of the experience.

"What do I do now?" she whispered.

"Just keep moving," he whispered in return, and she did.

Rising. Falling. Lifting herself almost off him, then sinking down. Over and over, until she forgot about the pain and lost herself in the primeval joy. His hand remained between her legs, continuing the caress that urged her onward, even though she no longer needed to be urged. She moved on him, faster and faster, taking him deeper and deeper. His powerful body flexed between her thighs, arching, and a growl rumbled in his throat. Immediately he forced himself to lie flat again, chained by his promise.

Up. Down. Again. And again, the crescendo building inside her, the heat rising to an unbearable fever, the tension coiling tighter and tighter, until she felt as if she would shatter if she moved another muscle. She froze in place over him, whimpering, unable to push herself over the final hurdle. The growl rumbled in his throat again. No, deeper than a growl; it was the sound of a human volcano exploding from the forces pent up inside. His control broke, and he moved, fiercely clamping both hands on her hips and pulling her down hard even as he arched once more and thrust himself in her to the hilt. He hadn't gone so deep before; she hadn't taken that much of him. The sensation was electric. She stifled a scream as he convulsed beneath her, heaving upward between her thighs, lifting her so that her knees left the ground. His head was thrown back, his neck corded with the force of his release, his teeth bared. Barrie felt the hot spurting of his release, felt him so deep inside her that he was touching the very center of her being, and it was enough to push her over the edge.

Pure lightning speared through her. She heard herself cry out, a thin cry of ecstasy that nothing could stifle. All her inner muscles contracted around

him, relaxed, squeezed again, over and over, as if her body was drinking from his.

Finally the storm subsided, leaving her weak and shaking. Her bones had turned to jelly, and she could no longer sit upright. Helplessly she collapsed forward, folding on him like a house of cards caught in an earthquake. He caught her, easing her down so that she lay on his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her as she lay there gasping and sobbing. She hadn't meant to cry, didn't understand why the tears kept streaming down her face. "Zane," she whispered, and couldn't say anything more.

His big, hard hands stroked soothingly up and down her back. "Are you okay?" he murmured, and there was something infinitely male and intimate in his deep voice, an undertone of satisfaction and possessiveness,

Barrie gulped back the tears, forcing herself to coherency. "Yes," she said in a thin, waterlogged tone. "I didn't know it would hurt so much. Or feel so good," she added, because she was crying for both reasons. Odd, that she should have been as unprepared for the pleasure as she had been for the pain. She felt overwhelmed, unbalanced. Had she truly been so foolish as to think she could perform such an intimate act and remain untouched emotionally? If she had been capable of that kind of mental distance she wouldn't have remained a virgin until now. She would have found a way around her father's obsessive protectiveness if she had wanted to, if any man had ever elicited one-tenth the response in her this warrior had aroused within two minutes of their meeting. If her rescuer had been any other man, she wouldn't have asked such an intimate favor of him.

Their lovemaking had forged a link between them, a bond of the flesh that was far stronger and went far deeper than she'd imagined. Despite her chastity, had she believed the modern, permissive notion that making love could have no more lasting meaning than simple fun, like riding a roller coaster? Maybe, for some people, *sex* could be as trivial as a carnival ride, but she would never again think of lovemaking as anything that shallow. True love-making was deep and elemental, and she knew she would never be the same. She hadn't been from the moment he had given her his shirt and she had fallen in love with him. Without even seeing his face, she had fallen in love with the essence of the man, his strength and decency. It wouldn't have mattered if, when morning came, his features had been ugly or twisted with scars. In the darkness of that barren room, and the darkness

of her heart, she had already seen beneath whatever lay on the surface, and she had loved him. It was that simple, and that difficult.
Just because she felt that way didn't mean he did. Barrie knew what a psychologist would say. It was the white-knight syndrome, the projection of larger-than-life characteristics onto a person because of the circumstances. Patients fell in love with their doctors and nurses all the time. Zane had simply been doing his job in rescuing her, white to her it had meant her life, because she hadn't for a moment supposed that her captors would let her live. She owed him her life, would have been grateful to him for the rest of that life—but she didn't think she would have loved just any man who had crawled through that window. She loved *Zane*.
She lay silently on him, her head nestled against his throat, their bodies still linked. She could feel the strong rhythm of his heartbeat thudding against her breasts, could feel his chest expand with each breath. His hot, musky scent excited her more than the most expensive cologne. She felt more at home here, lying with him on a blanket in the midst of a shattered building, than she ever had in the most luxurious and protected environment.
She knew none of the details of his life. She didn't know how old he was, where he was from, what he liked to eat or read or what programs he watched on television. She didn't know if he'd ever been married.
Married. My God, she hadn't even asked. She felt suddenly sick to her stomach. If he was married, then he wouldn't be the man she had thought he was, and she had just made the biggest mistake of her life.
But neither would the fault be entirely his. She had begged him, and he had given her more than one chance to change her mind. She didn't think she could bear it if he'd made love to her out of pity.
She drew a deep breath, knowing she had to ask. Ignorance might be bliss, but she couldn't allow herself that comfort. If she had done something so monumentally wrong, she wanted to know.
"Are you married?" she blurted.
He didn't even tense but lay utterly relaxed beneath her. One hand slid up her back and curled itself around her neck. "No," he said in that low voice of his. "You can take your claws out of me now." The words were lazily amused.
She realized she was digging her fingernails into his chest and hastily relaxed her fingers. Distressed, she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"There's pain, and there's pain," he said comfortably. "Bullets and knives hurt like hell. In comparison, a little she-cat's scratching doesn't do much damage."
"She-cat?" Barrie didn't know if she should be affronted or amused. After a brief struggle, amusement won. None of her friends or associates would ever have described her in such terms. She'd heard herself described as ladylike, calm, circumspect, conscientious, but certainly never as a she-cat.
"Mmm." The sound was almost like a purr in his throat. His hard fingers lazily massaged her neck, while his other hand slipped down her back to burrow under the shirt and curl possessively over her bottom. His palm burned her flesh like a brand. "Dainty. And you like being stroked."
She couldn't deny that, not when he was the one doing the stroking. The feel of his hand on her bottom was startlingly erotic. She couldn't help wiggling a little, and then gasped as she felt the surge of his flesh inside her. His breath caught, too, and his fingers dug into the cleft of her buttocks.
"I need to ask you a couple of questions," he said, and his voice sounded strained.
Barrie closed her eyes, once again feeling the warm loosening deep inside that signaled the return of desire. That had been a remarkable sensation, when his sex had expanded inside her, both lengthening and getting thicker. Oh, dear. She wanted to do it again, but she didn't think she had the strength. "What?" she murmured, distracted by what was happening between her legs.
"Did you get rid of the ghosts?"
Ghosts. He meant her lingering horror at the way those men had touched her. She thought about it and realized, with some surprise, that she had. She was still angry at the way she'd been treated, and she would dearly love to have Zane's pistol in her hands and those men in her sights, even though she'd never held a pistol before in her life. But the wounded, feminine part of her had triumphed by finding pleasure in making love with Zane, and in doing so she had healed herself. Pleasure... somehow the word fell far short of what she had experienced. Even ecstasy didn't quite describe the intensity, the sensation of imploding, melting, becoming utterly lost in her physical self.
"Yes," she whispered. "The ghosts are gone."
"Okay." His voice still sounded strained. "Second question. Will that damn shirt have to be surgically removed?"

She was startled into sitting upright. The action drove him deeper inside her and wrenched a sharp gasp from her, a groan from him. Panting, she stared at him. They had just made love—were, in fact, *still* making love—but the shirt she wore was what had kept her from going to pieces when he'd first found her, had given her the nerve to run barefoot down dark alleys, had become the symbol of a lot more than just modesty. Maybe she wasn't as recovered as she'd thought. The kidnappers had stripped her, forced her to be naked in front of them, and when Zane had first entered the room and seen her that way, she had been mortified. She didn't know if she could be naked with him now, if she could let him see the body that had been pinched and bruised by other men.

His crystal clear gaze was calm, patient. Again he understood. He knew what he was asking of her. He could have left things as they were, but he wanted more. He wanted her trust, her openness, with no dark secrets between them.

He wanted them to become lovers.

The realization was sharp, almost painful. They had loved each other physically, but with restraint like a wall between them. He had done what she had asked of him, had held himself back until the last moment, when his climax had shattered his control. Now he was asking something of her, asking her to give as he had given.

Almost desperately she clutched the front of the shirt. "I—they left marks on me."

"I've seen bruises before." He reached up and gently touched her cheek. "You have one right here, as a matter of fact."

Instinctively she reached up to the cheek he'd touched, feeling the tenderness. As soon as she released the front of the shirt, he moved his hands to the buttons and slowly began unfastening them, giving her time to protest. She bit her lip, fighting the urge to grab the widening edges of the cloth and hold them together.

When the garment was open all the way down, he slid his hands inside and cupped her breasts, his palms hot as they covered the cool mounds. Her nipples tingled as they hardened, reaching out for the contact. "The bruises shame *them,"* he murmured. "Not you."

She closed her eyes as she sat astride him, feeling him hard and hot inside her, his hands just as hard and hot on her breasts. She didn't protest when his hands left her breasts, left them feeling oddly tight and aching, while he

pushed the black shirt off her shoulders. The fabric puddled around her arms, and he lifted each in turn, slipping them free.
She was naked. The warm air brushed against her bare skin with the lightest of touches, and then she felt his fingertips doing the same, trailing so gently over each of the dark marks on her shoulders, her arms and breasts, her stomach, that she barely felt him. "Lean down," he said.
Slowly she obeyed, guided by his hands, down, down— and he lifted his head, meeting her mouth with his.
Their first kiss... and they'd already made love. Bar-rie was shocked at how she could have been so foolish as to forgo the pleasure of his kisses. His lips were firm, warm, hungry. She sank against him with a little sound of mingled surprise and delight humming in her throat. Her breasts flattened against him, the crisp hair on his chest rasping her ultrasensitive nipples, another joy she had unknowingly skipped.
Oh, this was delicious. His tongue probed for entrance, and she immediately gave it.
Several minutes later he let his head drop to the blanket. He was panting slightly, his eyes heavy-lidded. "I have another question."
"What?" She didn't want to give up the delights of his mouth. She'd never enjoyed kissing so much before, but he was diabolically good at it. She followed him down, nipping at his lower Up, depositing hot little kisses.
He chuckled beneath her mouth. The deep, rusty sound charmed her. She sensed that his laughter was even rarer than his smiles, therefore doubly precious.
"Will you let me be on top this time?"
The question surprised her into laughter. She stifled it as best she could, burying her head against his neck, but her body shook with giggles. He slipped out of her, making her laugh even harder. She was still laughing when he wrapped one strong arm around her and rolled, lifting her so they didn't roll off the blanket, efficiently tucking her beneath him and settling between her legs. Her laughter caught on a gasp as he surged heavily into her.
Her senses swam as she was bombarded by new feelings, when she had already experienced so much. She'd known he was a big man, but lying beneath him sharply brought home the difference in their sizes. Though he propped his weight on his forearms to keep from crushing her, she still felt the heaviness of that iron-muscled body. His shoulders were so broad that

he dwarfed her, wrapped around her, shielded her. When she had been on top, she had controlled the depth of his penetration. The control was his now, her thighs spread wide by his hips. He felt bigger, harder than he had before.
He waited a moment to see how she would accept the vulnerability of her position. But she didn't feel vulnerable, she realized. She felt utterly secure, buffered by his strength. Tremulously she smiled at him and lifted her arms to wind them around his neck.
He smiled in return. And then Zane Mackenzie made love to her.

Chapter 6

There seemed to be scarcely a moment for the test of the day when they weren't making love, resting from making love or about to make love. The sounds of the waterfront surrounded them, the low bellow of ships, truck horns, the sounds of chains and cranes, but inside that small, dim room there seemed to be nothing else in the world but each other. Barrie lost herself in the force of his unbridled sensuality and discovered within herself a passion that matched his. The need to be quiet only added to the intensity. He kissed the bruises on her breasts and sucked her nipples until they throbbed with pleasure. His beard-stubbled chin rasped against her breasts, her belly, but he was always careful not to cause her pain as he searched for all the other bruises on her body and paid them the same tender homage.
"Tell me how they hurt you," he murmured, "and I'll make it better."
At first Barrie shied away from divulging the details, even to him, but as the hot afternoon wore on and he pleasured her so often she was drunk with the overload on her senses, it began to seem pointless to keep anything from him. Haltingly she began to whisper things to him.
"Like this?" he asked, repeating the action that had so upset her—except it wasn't the same. What had been meant to punish at the hands of the kidnappers became purest pleasure in Zane Mackenzie's hands. He caressed her until her body forgot those other touches, until it remembered only him. She whispered another detail, and he wiped out that memory, too, replacing the bad with caresses that lifted her to peak after sensual peak. She couldn't imagine being handled more tenderly than he handled her, or with such delight. He didn't try to hide how much he enjoyed looking at her, touching

her, making love to her. He reveled in her body, in the contrast between her soft curves and his hard muscularity. It aroused her to be the focus of such intense masculine pleasure, to feel his absorption with the texture of her skin, the curve of her breast, the snug sheathing between her legs. He explored her; he petted her, he drowned her in sexuality. The area around them was still so busy they didn't dare converse much, so they communicated with their bodies.

Three times, while they were lying drowsily in the aftermath of loving, he checked his watch and reached for the headset radio. He would click it once, listen, then put it aside.

"Your men?" she asked, after the first time.

He nodded. "They're hiding out, waiting until it's safe to rendezvous."

Then the chatter of voices outside became louder as some people approached, and they fell silent.

The afternoon wore on, and the light began to dim. She wasn't particularly hungry, but Zane insisted that she eat. He pulled up his pants; she once more donned his shirt. More formally attired now, they sat close together on the blanket and finished off the bread and fruit, but neither of them wanted any of the cheese. The water was warm and still tasted of chemicals. Barrie sat within the curve of his arm and dreaded leaving.

She wanted to be safe and comfortable again, but she hated to lose this closeness with Zane, this utter reliance and companionship and intimacy. She wouldn't push him to continue their relationship; under the circumstances, he might feel responsible and think he would have to let her down gradually, and she didn't want to put him in that position. If he indicated that he wanted to see her afterward, then... why, then her heart would fly.

But even if he did, it would be difficult for them to see each other regularly. He was more than just a military man; he was a SEAL. Much of what he did couldn't be discussed. He would have a home base, duties, missions. If they escaped safely, the danger to him didn't end there. A chill settled around her heart when she thought of the times in the future when, because it was his job, he would calmly and deliberately walk into a deadly situation. While they were hidden in this small room might be the only time she could ever be certain he was safe and unharmed.

The fear and uncertainty would almost drive her mad, but she would endure them, she would endure anything, for the opportunity to see him, to grow

closer to him. Their relationship, if there was to be one, would have to grow in reverse. Usually people came to know each other, grew to trust and care, and then became lovers; they had become lovers almost immediately, and now they would have to get to know each other, find out all the quirks and personal history and tastes that made them individuals.

When she got back, she would have to deal with her father. He must be frantic, and once she was safely home, he would be even more paranoid and obsessive. But if Zane wanted her, she would have to deliberately hurt her father's feelings for the first time in her life; he would be supplanted as number one in her life. Most parents handled the change in their offsprings' lives with happiness, assuming the chosen mate was decent, but Barrie knew it wouldn't matter who she fell in love with, her father would be opposed to him. No man, to him, was good enough for her. Even more, he would bitterly resent anything that would take her out of his protection. She was all he had left of his family, and it didn't help that she greatly resembled her mother. As ambassador, her father had a very active social life, but he'd only ever loved one woman, and that was her mother.

She would never turn her back on her father, because she loved him dearly, but if the chance for a relationship, possibly a lifetime, with Zane was in the balance, she would put as much distance between herself and her father as necessary until he accepted the situation.

She was planning her life around dreams, she thought wryly as she brushed the bread crumbs from the blanket. She would do better to let the future take care of itself and concern herself with how they were going to get out of Benghazi.

"What time do we leave?"

"After midnight. We'll give most people time to get settled down for the night." He turned to her with the heavy-lidded gaze she had already learned signaled arousal and, reaching out, he began to unbutton her shirt. "Hours," he whispered.

Afterward they lay close together, despite the heat, and dozed. She didn't know how long it was before she woke, but when she did it was to almost total darkness. Unlike the night before, though, when she had lain in cold, lonely terror, now she was pressed against Zane's side, and his arms securely held her. Her head was pillowed on his shoulder, one bare leg was hooked over his hips. She stretched a bit and yawned, and his arms tightened, letting her know that he was awake. Perhaps he had never slept at

all, but had held her and safeguarded her. The noise beyond the ruined building had died down; even the sounds from the docks were muted, as if the darkness smothered them.
"How much longer?" she asked, sitting up to fumble for the jug of water. She found it and drank; the taste wasn't too bad, she decided. Maybe she was becoming used to the chemicals, whatever they were.
He peeled the cover from his watch so he could see the luminous dial. "Another few hours. I need to check in with the guys in a couple of minutes."
She passed the water jug to him, and he drank. They lay back down, and she cuddled close. She put her right hand on his chest and felt the strong, healthy thudding of his heart. Idly she twirled her fingers in the crisp hairs, delighting in the textures of his body.
"What happens then? When we leave, I mean."
"We get out of the city, make our rendezvous point just at sunrise, and we're picked up."
He made it sound so simple, so easy. She remembered the swim trunks he wore and lifted her head to frown at him, even though she knew he couldn't see her. "Is our rendezvous point on dry land?"
"Not exactly."
"I see. I hope you have a boat?" It was a question, not a statement.
"Not exactly."
She caught his chest hairs and gave them a tug. *"Exactly what do* you have?"
"Ouch!" Snagging her hand, he disentangled it and lifted it to his mouth, lightly brushing his lips across her knuckles. *"Exactly*, we have a Zodiac, a seven-man, motorized inflatable craft. My team came in short two men, so there are only six of us. We'll be able to fit you in."
"I'm so glad." She yawned and snuggled her head more securely into the hollow of his shoulder. "Did you leave someone behind so there would be room for me?"
"No," he said shortly. "We're undermanned because of a problem I'll have to take care of when we get back. If there had been any other team available, we wouldn't be here, but we were the closest, and we needed to get you out in a hurry, before they moved you."
His tone dissuaded her from asking about the problem that put him in such a black mood, but she'd seen him in action; she knew she wouldn't want to be

on the receiving end of his anger when he got back. She waited while he picked up the .headset and checked in with his men, then returned to her questions.
"Where do we go in the Zodiac?"
"Out to sea," he said simply. "We radio ahead, and we'll be picked up by a helicopter from the *Montgomery,* an aircraft carrier. You'll be flown home from the carrier."
"What about you?" she whispered. "Where will you go?" That was as close as she would allow herself to get to asking *him* about his future plans.
"I don't know. My team was performing exercises on *the Montgomery,* but that's blown to hell now, with two of them injured. I'll have to clean up that mess, and I don't know how long it will take."
He didn't know where he would be, or if he did, he wasn't saying. Neither was he saying that he would call her, though he *did* know where *she* would be. Barrie closed her eyes and listened painfully to all that he wasn't saying. The hurt was worse than she'd anticipated, but she closed it off in a place deep inside. Later it would come out, but if she only had a few hours left with him, she didn't intend to waste them crying about what might have been. Few women would have a chance to even know a man like Zane Mackenzie, much less love him. She was greedy; she wanted it all, wanted everything, but even this little bit was more than a lot of people experienced, and she would have to be grateful for that.
Whatever happened, she could never return to the safe little cocoon her father had fashioned for her. She couldn't let herself forget the kidnapping and the unknown *why* of it. Of course, her father would know why; the kidnapper would already have made his demands. But Barrie wanted to know the reason, too; after all, she had been more directly affected than anyone else.
Lightly Zane touched her nipple, circling it with his callused fingertips and bringing it erect. "I know you have to be sore," he said, sliding his hand down her belly to nestle it between her legs. "But can you take me again?"
With the utmost care he eased one long finger into her; Barrie winced, but didn't flinch away from htm. Yes, she was sore; she had been sore since the first time. She had discovered that the discomfort was easily discounted when the rewards were so great.
"I could be persuaded," she whispered, sliding her hand down his belly to measure his immediate seriousness. She found that he was very serious.

Granted, she had no experience against which to compare this, but she had read magazine articles and knew that usually only teenage boys and very young men could maintain this pace. Maybe it was because he was in such superb physical condition. Maybe she was just lucky, though twenty-four hours before she hadn't thought so. But circumstances had changed, and so had she.

Fate had given her this man for now, and for a few more hours, she thought as he leaned over her and his mouth captured hers. She would make the most of it.

* * *

Once mote he led her through the maze of alleys, but this time she was clad in the enveloping black robe, and a chador covered her hair. Her feet were protected by slippers, which were a little too big and kept slipping up and down on her heels, but at least she wasn't barefoot. It felt strange to have on clothes, especially so many, even though she was bare underneath the robe. Zane was once more rigged out with his gear and weaponry, and with the donning of those things he had become subtly more remote, almost icily controlled, the way he'd been the night before when he'd first found her. Barrie sensed his acute alertness and guessed that he was concentrating totally on the job at hand. She silently followed him, keeping her head a little bowed as a traditional Muslim woman would do.

He halted at the corner of a building and sank to his haunches, motioning for her to do the same. Barrie copied him and took the extra precaution of drawing the chador across her face.

"Two, this is One. How's it looking?" Once more he was speaking in that toneless whisper that barely carried to her, though she was right behind him. After a moment he said, "See you in ten."

He glanced around at Barrie. "It's a go. We don't have to shift to Plan C."

"What was Plan C?" she whispered.

"Run like hell for Egypt," he said calmly. "It's about two hundred miles due east."

He would do it, too, she realized. He would steal some kind of vehicle and go for it. His nerves must be made of solid iron. Hers weren't; she was shaking inside with nervousness, but she was holding up. Or maybe it wasn't nervousness; maybe it was exhilaration at the danger and excitement of action, of *escaping.* As long as they were still in Benghazi, in Libya, they hadn't really gotten free.

Ten minutes later he stopped in the shadow of a dilapidated warehouse. Perhaps he clicked his radio; in the dark, she couldn't tell. But suddenly five black shapes materialized out of the darkness, and they were surrounded before she could blink.

"Gentlemen, this is Miss Lovejoy," Zane said. "Now let's get the hell out of Dodge."

"With pleasure, boss." One of the men bowed to Barrie and held out his hand. "This way, Miss Lovejoy."

There was a certain rough elan about them that she found charming, though they didn't let it interfere with the business at hand. The six men immediately began moving out in choreographed order, and Barrie smiled at the man who'd spoken as she took the place he had indicated in line. She was behind Zane, who was second in line behind a man who moved so silently, and blended so well into the shadows, that even knowing he was there, sometimes she couldn't see him. The other four men ranged behind her at varying distances, and she realized that she couldn't hear them, either. In fact, she was the only one of the group who was making any noise, and she tried to place her slippered feet more carefully.

They wound their way through the alleys and finally stopped beside a battered minibus. Even in the darkness Barrie could see the huge dents and dark patches of rust that decorated the vehicle. They stopped beside it, and Zane opened the sliding side door for her. "Your chariot," he murmured.

Barrie almost laughed as he handed her into the little bus: if she hadn't had experience navigating long evening gowns, she would have found the ankle-length robe awkward, but she managed it as if she was a nineteenth-century lady being handed into a carriage. The men climbed in around her. There were only two bench seats; if there had ever been a third one in the back, it had long since been removed, perhaps to make room for cargo. A wiry young black man got behind the steering wheel, and Zane took the other seat in front. The eerily silent man who had been on point squeezed in on her left side, and another SEAL sat on her right, carefully placing her in a human security box. The other two SEALs knelt on the floorboard behind them, their muscular bodies and their gear filling the limited space.

"Let's go, Bunny Rabbit," Zane said, and the young black man grinned as he started the engine. The minibus looked as though it was on its last wheels, but the motor purred.

"You shoulda been there last night," the black guy said. "It was tight for a minute, real tight." He sounded as enthusiastic as if he was describing the best party he'd ever attended.
"What happened?" Zane asked.
"Just one of those things, boss," the man on Barrie's right said with a shrug evident in his voice. "A bad guy stepped on Spook, and the situation went straight into fubar."
Barrie had been around enough military men to know what fubar meant. She sat very still and didn't comment.
"Stepped right *on* me," the SEAL on her left said in an aggrieved tone. "He started squalling like a scalded cat, shooting at everything that moved and most things that didn't. Aggravated me some." He paused. "I'm not staying for the funeral."
"When we got your signal we pulled back and ran like hell," the man on her right continued. "You must've already had her out, because they came after us like hound dogs. We laid low, but a couple of times I thought we were going to have to fight our way out. Man, they were walking all over us, and they kept hunting all night long."
"No, we were still inside," Zane said calmly. "We just stepped into the next room. They never thought to check it."
The men snorted with mirth; even the eerie guy on her left managed a chuckle, though it didn't sound as if he did it often enough to be good at it. Zane turned around in the seat and gave Barrie that brief twitch of a smile. "Would you like some introductions, or would you rather not know these raunchy-smelling bums?"
The atmosphere in the bus *did* smell like a locker room, only worse. "The introductions, please," she said, and her smile was plain in her voice.
He indicated the driver. "Antonio Withrock, Seaman Second Class. He's driving because he grew up wrecking cars on dirt tracks down South, so we figure he can handle any situation."
"Ma'am," said Seaman Withrock politely.
"On your right is Ensign Rocky Greenberg, second in command."
"Ma'am," said Ensign Greenberg.
"On your left is Seaman Second Class Winstead Jones."
Seaman Winstead Jones growled something unintelligible. "Call him Spooky or Spook, not Winstead," Zane added.
"Ma'am," said Seaman Jones.

"Behind you are Seamen First Class Eddie Santos, our medic, and Paul Drexler, the team sniper."
"Ma'am," said two voices behind her.
"I'm glad to meet you all," Barrie said, her sincerity plain. She had trained her memory at countless official functions, so she had their names down cold. She hadn't yet put a face to Santos or Drexler, but from his name she figured Santos would be Hispanic, so that would be an easy distinction to make.
Greenberg began to tell Zane the details of everything that had happened. Barrie listened and didn't intrude. The fact was, this midnight drive through Benghazi felt a littie surreal. She was surrounded by men armed to their eyeteeth, but they were traveling through an area that was still fairly active for so late at night. There were other vehicles in the streets, pedestrians on the sidewalks. They even stopped at a traffic light, with other vehicles around them. The driver, Withrock, hummed under his breath. No one else seemed concerned. The traffic light changed, the battered little minibus moved forward, and no one paid them any attention at all.
Several minutes later they left the city. Occasionally she could see the gleam of the Mediterranean on their right, which meant they were traveling west, toward the center of Libya's coast. As the lights faded behind them, she began to feel lightheaded with fatigue. The sleep she had gotten during the day, between bouts of lovemaking, hadn't been enough to offset the toll stress had taken on her. She couldn't see herself leaning on either of the men beside her, however, so she forced herself to sit upright and keep her eyes open.
She suspected that she was more than a little punch-drunk.
After a while Zane said, "Red goggles."
She was tired enough that she wondered if that was some kind of code, or if she'd misunderstood him. Neither, evidently. Each man took a pair of goggles from his pack and donned them. Zane glanced at her and said in explanation, "Red protects your night vision. We're going to let our vision adjust now, before Bunny kills the headlights."
She nodded, and closed her eyes to help her own vision adjust. She realized at once that, if she wanted to stay awake, closing her eyes for whatever reason wasn't the smartest thing to do, but her eyelids were so heavy that she couldn't manage to open them again. The next thing she knew, the minibus was lurching heavily from side to side, throwing her against first

Greenberg, then Spooky. Dazed with sleep, she tried to hold herself erect, but she couldn't seem to find her balance or anything to hold on to. She was about to slide to the floorboard when Spooky's forearm shot out in front of her like an iron bar, anchoring her in the seat.
"Thank you," she said groggily.
"Anytime, ma'am."
Sometime while she had been asleep, Bunny had indeed killed the headlights, and they were plunging down an embankment in the dark. She blinked at something shiny looming in front of them; she had a split second of panic and confusion before she recognized the sea, gleaming in the starlight.
The minibus lurched to a halt. "End of the line," Bunny cheerfully announced. "We have now reached the hidey-hole for one IBS. That's military talk for inflatable boat, small," he said over his shoulder to Barrie. "These things are too fancy to be called plain old rafts."
Zane snorted. Barrie remembered that he'd described it as exactly that, a raft.
Watching them exit the minibus was like watching quicksilver slip through cracks. If there had been a working overhead light when the SEALs had commandeered the vehicle, they had taken care of that detail, because no light came on when the doors were cracked open. Spooky slipped past her, no mean feat given the equipment he was carrying, and when Greenberg slid the side door open a few inches, Spooky wiggled on his stomach through the small opening. One second he was there, the next he was gone. Barrie stared at the door with widened eyes in full appreciation of how he'd acquired his nickname. He was definitely spooky.
The others exited the minibus in the same manner; it was as if they were made of water, and when the doors opened they simply leaked out. They were that fluid, that silent. Only Bunny, the driver, remained behind with Barrie. He sat in absolute silence, pistol in hand, as he methodically surveyed the night-shrouded coast. Because he was silent, she was too. The best way not to be any trouble to them, she thought, was to follow their example.
There was one quick little tap on the window, and Bunny whispered, "It's clear. Let's go, Miss Lovejoy."
She scooted over the seat to the door while Bunny eeled out on the driver's side. Zane was there, opening the door wider, reaching in to steady her as

she slid out onto the ground. "Are you holding up okay?" he asked quietly. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, because she was so tired her speech was bound to be slurred.
As usual, he seemed to understand without being told. "Just hold on for another hour or so, and we'll have you safe on board the carrier. You can sleep then."
Without him, though; that fact didn't need stating. Even if he intended to continue their relationship, and he hadn't given any indication of it, he wouldn't do so on board the ship. She would put off sleeping forever if it would postpone the moment when she had to admit, once and for all, that their relationship bad been a temporary thing for him, prompted by both the hothouse of intimacy in which they'd spent the day, and her own demands. She wouldn't cry; she wouldn't even protest, she told herself. She'd had him for a day, for one incredibly sensual day.
He led her down to the small, rocky strip of beach, where the dark bulk of the IBS had been positioned. The other five men were gathered around it in specific positions, each standing with his back to the raft while he held his weapon at the ready, edgily surveying the surroundings.
Zane lifted her into the IBS and showed her where to sit. The IBS bobbed in the water as the men eased it away from the shore. When the water was chest deep on Santos, the shortest one, they all swung aboard in a maneuver they had practiced so many times it looked effortless. Spooky started the almost soundless motor and aimed the IBS for the open sea.
Then a roar erupted behind them, and all hell broke loose.
She recognized the sharp *rat-tat-tat* of automatic weapons and half turned to look behind them. Zane put his hand on her head and shoved her down to the bottom of the boat, whirling, already bringing his automatic rifle around as he did so. The IBS shot forward as Spooky gave it full throttle. The SEALs returned fire, lightning flashing from the weapons, spent cartridges splattering down on her as she curled into a ball and drew the chador over her face to keep the hot brass from burning her.
"Drexler!" Zane roared. "Hit those bastards with explosives!"
"Got it, boss!"
Barrie heard a grunt, and something heavy and human fell across her. One of the men had been hit. Desperately she tried to wriggle out from under the crushing weight so she could help him, but she was effectively pinned, and he groaned every time she moved.

She knew that groan.
Terror such as she had never felt before raced through her veins. With a hoarse cry she heaved at the heavy weight, managing to roll him to the side. She fought her way free of the enveloping chador and didn't even notice the hot cartridge shell that immediately skimmed her right cheek.
An explosion shattered the night, lighting up the sea like fireworks, the percussion knocking her to the bottom of the boat again. She scrambled to her knees, reaching for Zane. "No," she said hoarsely. "No!"
The light from the explosion had sharply delineated every detail in stark white. Zane lay sprawled half on his side, writhing in pain as he pressed his hands to his abdomen. His face was a colorless blur, his eyes closed, his teeth exposed in a grimace. A huge wet patch glistened on the left side of his black shirt, and more blood was pooling beneath him.
Barrie grabbed the chador and wadded it up, pressing it hard to the wound. A low animal howl rattled in his throat, and he arched in pain. "Santos!" she screamed, trying to hold him down while still holding the chador in place.
"Santos!"
With a muttered curse the stocky medic shouldered her aside. He lifted the chador for a second, then quickly pressed it into place and grabbed her hand, guiding it into position. "Hold it," he rapped out. "Press down—hard."
There was no more gunfire, only the hum of the motor. Salt spray lashed her face as the boat shot through the waves. The team maintained their discipline, holding their assigned positions. "How bad is it?" Greenberg yelled.
Santos was working feverishly. "I need light!"
Almost instantly Greenberg had a flashlight shining down on them. Barrie bit her lip as she saw how much blood had puddled around them. Zane's face was pasty white, his eyes half-shut as he gasped for breath.
"He's losing blood fast," Santos said. "Looks like the bullet got a kidney, or maybe his spleen. Get that damn helicopter on the way. We don't have time to get into international waters." He popped the cap off a syringe, straightened Zane's arm and deftly jabbed the needle into a vein. "Hang on, boss. We're gonna get you airlifted outta here."
Zane didn't reply. He was breathing noisily through his clenched teeth, but when Barrie glanced at him she could see the gleam of his eyes. His hand lifted briefly, touched her arm, then fell heavily to his side.

"Damn you, Zane Mackenzie," she said fiercely. "Don't you *dare—"* She broke off. She couldn't say the word, couldn't even admit to the possibility that he might die.
Santos was checking Zane's pulse. His eyes met hers, and she knew it was too fast, too weak. Zane was going into shock, despite the injection Santos had given him.
" I don't give a damn how close in we still are!" Greenberg was yelling into the radio. "We need a helo *now.* Just get the boss out of here and we'll wait for another ride!"
Despite the pitching of the boat, Santos got an IV line started and began squeezing a bag of clear plasma into Zane's veins. "Don't let up on the pressure," he muttered to Barrie.
"I won't." She didn't take her gaze off Zane's face. He was still aware, still looking at her. As long as that connection was maintained, he would be all right. He had to be.
The nightmare ride in the speeding boat seemed to take forever. Santos emptied the first bag of plasma and connected a second one to the IV. He was cursing under his breath, his invectives varied and explicit.
Zane lay quietly, though she knew he was in terrible pain. His eyes were dull with pain and shock, but she could sense his concentration, his determination. Perhaps the only way he could remain conscious was by focusing so intently on her face, but he managed it.
But if that helicopter didn't get there soon, not even his superhuman determination would be able to hold out against continued blood loss. She wanted to curse, too, wanted to glare at the night sky as if she could conjure a helicopter out of thin air, but she didn't dare look away from Zane. As long as their gazes held, he would hold on.
She heard the distinctive *whap-whap-whap* only a moment before the Sea King helicopter roared over them, blinding lights picking them out. Spooky throttled back, and the boat settled gently onto the water. The helicopter circled to them and hovered directly overhead, the powerful rotors whipping the sea into a frenzy. A basket dropped almost on their heads. Working swiftly, Santos and Greenberg lifted Zane into the basket and strapped him in, maneuvering around Barrie as she maintained pressure on the wound.
Santos hesitated, then indicated for her to let go and move back. Reluctantly she did. He lifted the chador, then immediately jammed it back into place.

Without a word he straddled the basket, leaning hard on the wound. "Let's go!" he yelled. Greenberg stepped back and gave the thumbs-up to the winch operator in the helicopter. The basket rose toward the hovering monster, with Santos perched precariously on top of Zane. As the basket drew even with the open bay, several pairs of hands reached out and drew them inward. The helicopter immediately lifted away, banking hard, roaring toward the carrier.

There was an eerie silence left behind. Barrie slumped against one of the seats, her face rigid with the effort of maintaining control. No one said a word. Spooky started the motor again, and the little craft shot through the darkness, following the rapidly disappearing lights of the helicopter.

It was over an hour before the second helicopter settled onto the deck of the huge carrier. The remaining four members of the team leaped to the deck almost before the helicopter had touched down. Barrie clambered after them, ran with them. Greenberg had one hand clamped on her arm to make certain she didn't get left behind.

Someone in a uniform stepped in front of them. "Miss Lovejoy, are you all right?"

Barrie gave him a distracted glance and dodged around him. Another uniform popped up, but this one was subtly different, as if the wearer belonged on board this gigantic ship. The first man had worn a dress uniform, marking him as a non-crew member. Greenberg skidded to a halt. "Captain—"

"Lieutenant-Commander Mackenzie is in surgery," the captain said. "Doc didn't think he'd make it to a base with such a high rate of blood loss. If they can't get the bleeding stopped, they'll have to remove his spleen."

The first uniformed officer had reached them. "Miss Lovejoy," he said firmly, taking her arm. "I'm Major Hodson. I'll escort you home."

The military moved at its own pace, to its own rules. She was to be taken home immediately; the ambassador wanted his daughter back. Barrie protested. She yelled, she cried, she even swore at the harried major. None of it did any good. She was hustled aboard another aircraft, this time a cargo transport plane. Her last glimpse of the *Montgomery* was as the sun's first rays glistened on the blue waters of the Mediterranean, and the sight was blurred by her tears.

Chapter 7

By the time the transport touched down in Athens, Barrie had cried so hard and for so long that her eyes were swollen almost shut. Major Hodson had tried everything to pacify her, then to console her; he assured her that he was just following orders, and that she would be able to find out bow the SEAL was doing later. It was understandable that she was upset. She'd been through a lot, but she would have the best medical care—

At that, Barrie shot out of the uncomfortable web seat, which was all the transport plane afforded. *"I'm* not the one who was shot!" she yelled furiously. "I don't need medical care, best, worst or mediocre! I want to be taken to wherever Zane Mackenzie is taken. I don't care what your orders are!"

Major Hodson looked acutely uncomfortable. He tugged at the collar of his uniform. "Miss Lovejoy, I'm sorry. I can't do anything about this situation. After we're on the ground and your father is satisfied that you're okay, then where you go is up to you."

His expression plainly said that as far as he was concerned, she could go to hell. Barrie sat down, breathing hard and wiping away tears. She'd never acted like that before in her life. She'd always been such a lady, a perfect hostess for her father.

She didn't feel at all ladylike now; she felt like a ferocious tigress, ready to shred anyone who got in her way. Zane was severely wounded, perhaps dying, and these *fools* wouldn't let her be with him. Damn military procedure, and damn her father's influence, for they had both wrenched her away from him.

As much as she loved her father, she knew she would never forgive him if Zane died and she wasn't there. It didn't matter that he didn't know about Zane; nothing mattered compared to the enormous horror that loomed before her. *God, don't let him die!* She couldn't bear it. She would rather have died herself at her kidnappers' hands than for Zane to be killed while rescuing her.

The flight took less than an hour and a half. The transport landed with a hard thump that jerked her in the web seat, then taxied for what seemed like an interminable length of time. Finally it rolled to a stop, and Major Hodson stood, plainly relieved to be free of his unpleasant burden.

A door was slid open, and a flight of steps rolled up to it. Clutching the black robe around her, Barrie stepped out into the bright Athens sunlight. It

was full morning now, the heat already building. She blinked and lifted a hand to shield her eyes. It felt like forever since she'd been in the sunshine. A gray limousine with darkly tinted windows was waiting on the tarmac. The door was shoved open, and her father bounded out, dignity forgotten as he ran forward. "Barrie!" Two days of worry and fear lined his face, but there was an almost desperate relief in his expression as he hurried up the steps to fold her in his arms.

She started crying again, or maybe she had never stopped. She buried her face against his suit, clutching him with desperate hands. "I've got to go back," she sobbed, the words barely intelligible.

He tightened his arms around her. "There, there, baby," he breathed. "You're safe now, and I won't let anything else happen to you, I swear. I'll take you home—"

Wildly she shook her head, trying to pull away from him. "No," she choked out. "I've got to get back to the *Montgomery.* Zane—he was shot. He might die. Oh, God, I've got to go back *now!"*

"Everything will be all right," he crooned, hustling her down the steps with an arm locked around her shoulders. "I have a doctor waiting—"

"I don't need a doctor!" she said fiercely, jerking away from him. She'd never done that before, and his face went blank with shock. She shoved her hair out of her face. The tangled mass hadn't been combed in two days, and it was matted with sweat and sea spray. "Listen to me! The man who rescued me was shot. *He might die.* He was still in surgery when Major Hodson forced me on board this plane. I want to go back to the ship. I want to make sure Zane is okay."

William Lovejoy firmly took hold of his daughter's shoulders again, leading her across the tarmac to the waiting limo. "You don't have to go back to the ship, sweetheart," he said soothingly. "I'll ask Admiral Lind-ley to find out how his man is doing. He *is* one of the SEAL team, I presume?"

Numbly she nodded.

"There wouldn't be any point in going back to the ship, I'm sure you can see that. If he survived surgery, he'll be airlifted to a military hospital."

If he survived surgery. The words were like a knife, hot and slicing, going through her. She balled her hands into fists, every cell in her body screaming for heir to ignore logic, ignore the attempts to soothe her. She needed to get to Zane.

Three days later, she stood in her father's office with her chin high and her eyes colder than he'd ever seen them. "You told Admiral Lindley to block my requests," she accused.

The ambassador sighed. He removed his reading glasses and carefully placed them on the inlaid walnut desk. "Barrie, you know I've denied you very little that you've asked for, but you're being unreasonable about this man. You know that he's recovering, and that's all you need to know. What point would there be in rushing to his bedside? Some tabloid might find out about it, and then your ordeal would be plastered in sleazy newspapers all over the world. Is that what you want?"

"My ordeal?" she echoed. *"My* ordeal? What about his? He nearly died! That's assuming Admiral Lindley told me the truth, and he really is still alive!"

"Of course he is. I only asked Joshua to block any inquiries you made about his location." He unfolded his tall form from the chair and came around to lean against the desk and take her resistant hands in his. "Barrie, give yourself time to get over the trauma. I know you've invested this... this guerrilla fighter with all sorts of heroic characteristics, and that's only normal. After a while, when you've regained your perspective, you'll be glad you didn't embarrass yourself by chasing after him."

It was almost impossible to contain the volcanic fury rising in her. Nobody was listening; no one wanted to listen. They kept going on and on about her ordeal, how she would heal in time, until she wanted to pull her hair out. She had insisted over and over that she hadn't been raped, but she had fiercely refused to be examined by a doctor, which of course had only fueled speculation that the kidnappers had indeed raped her. But she'd known her body bore the marks of Zane's lovemaking, marks and traces that were precious and private, for no one else's eyes. Everyone was treating her as if she was made of crystal, carefully not mentioning the kidnapping, until she thought she would go mad.

She wanted to see Zane. That was all. Just see him, assure herself that he would be all right. But when she'd asked one of the Marine officers stationed at the embassy to make some inquiries about Zane, it was Admiral Lindley who had gotten back to her instead of the captain.

The dignified, distinguished admiral had come to the ambassador's private quarters less than an hour before. Barrie hadn't yet returned to her minor job

in the embassy, feeling that she couldn't keep her mind on paperwork, so she had received the admiral in the beautifully appointed parlor.
After polite conversation about her health and the weather, the admiral came to the point of his visit. "You've been making some inquiries about Zane Mackenzie," he said kindly. "I've kept abreast of his condition, and I can tell you now with complete confidence that he'll fully recover. The ship's surgeon was able to stop the bleeding, and it wasn't necessary to remove his spleen. His condition was stabilized, and he was transferred to a hospital. When he's able, he'll be sent Stateside for the remainder of his convalescence."
"Where is he?" Barrie had demanded, her eyes burning. She'd scarcely slept in three days. Though she was once more impeccably clothed and coifed, the strain she'd been under had left huge dark circles under her eyes, and she was losing weight fast, because her nerves wouldn't let her eat.
Admiral Lindley sighed. "William asked me to keep that information from you, Barrie, and I have to say, I think he's right. I've known Zane a long time. He's an extraordinary warrior. But SEALs are a breed apart, and the characteristics that make them such great warriors don't, as a whole, make them model citizens. They're trained weapons, to put it bluntly. They don't keep high profiles, and most information about them is restricted."
"I don't want to know about his training," she said, her voice strained. "I don't want to know about his missions. I just want to see him."
The admiral shook his head. "I'm sorry."
Nothing she said budged him. He refused to give her even one more iota of information. Still, Zane was alive; he would be all right. Just knowing that made her feel weak inside, as the unbearable tension finally relaxed.
That didn't mean she would forgive her father for interfering.
"I love him," she now said deliberately. "You have no right to keep me from seeing him."
"Love?" Her father gave her a pitying look. "Barrie, what you feel isn't love, it's hero-worship. It will fade, I promise you."
"Do you think I haven't considered that?" she fired back. "I'm not a teenager with a crush on a rock star. Yes, I met him under dangerous, stressful circumstances. Yes, he saved my life—and he nearly died doing it. I know what infatuation is, and I know what love is, but even if I didn't, the decision isn't yours to make."

"You've always been reasonable," he argued. "At least concede that your judgment may not be at its sharpest right now. What if you acted impulsively, married this man—I'm sure he'd jump at the chance—and then realized that you really didn't love him? Think what a mess it would be. I know it sounds snobbish, but he isn't our kind. He's a sailor, and a trained killer. You've dined with kings and danced with princes. What could the two of you have in common?"

"First, that doesn't just *sound* snobbish, it *is* snobbish. Second, you must not think much of me as a person if you consider your money my only attraction."

"You know that isn't what I meant," he said, genuinely shocked. "You're a wonderful person. But how could someone like that appreciate the life you live? How do you know he wouldn't have his eye on the main chance?"

"Because I know him," she declared. "I know him in a way I never would have if I'd met him at an embassy party. According to you, a SEAL couldn't be kind and considerate, but he was. They all were, for that matter. Dad, I've told you over and over that I wasn't raped. I know you don't believe me, and I know you've suffered, worrying about me. But I swear to you—*I swear*—that I wasn't. They were planning to, the next day, but they were waiting for someone. So, though I was terrified and upset, I haven't been through the trauma of a gang rape the way you keep thinking. Seeing Zane lying in a pool of blood was a hell of a lot more traumatic than anything those kidnappers did!"

"Barrie!" It was the first time her father had ever heard her curse. Come to think of it, she had never cursed at all, until rough men had grabbed her off the street and subjected her to hours of terror. She had cursed them, and meant it. She had cursed Major Hodson, and meant that, too.

With an effort, she regulated her tone. "You know that the first attempt to get me out didn't quite work."

He gave an abrupt nod. He'd suffered agonies, thinking their only hope of rescuing her had failed and imagining what she must be suffering. That was when he'd given up hope of ever seeing her alive again. Admiral Lindley hadn't been as pessimistic; the SEALs hadn't checked in, and though there were reports of gunfire in Benghazi, if a team of SEALs had been killed or captured, the Libyan government would have trumpeted it all over the world. That meant they were still there, still working to free her. Until they heard from the team that the rescue had failed, there was still hope.

"Well, it did work, in a way. Zane came in alone to get me, while the rest of the team was a diversion, I guess, in case things went wrong. He had a backup plan, what to do if they were spotted, because you can't control the human factor." She realized she was repeating things Zane had said to her during those long hours when they had lain drowsily together, and she missed him so much that pain knotted her insides. "The team was so well-hidden that one of the guards didn't see Spooky until he actually stepped on him. That's what gave the alarm and started the shooting. A guard had been posted in the corridor outside the room where they had me tied up, and he ran in. Zane killed him," she said simply. "Then, while the others were chasing the team, he got me out of the building. We were separated from the team and had to hide for a day, but I was safe."

The ambassador listened gravely, soaking up these details of how she had been returned to him. They hadn't talked before, not about the actual rescue. She had been too distraught about Zane, almost violent in her despair. Now that she knew he was alive, even though she was still so angry she could barely contain it, she was able to tell her father how she had been returned to him alive.

"While I stayed in our hiding place, Zane risked his life by going out and stealing food and water for us, as well as the robe and chador for me. He took care of the cut on my foot. When scavengers were practically dismantling the place around us, he kept himself between me and any danger. That's the man I fell in love with, that's the man you say isn't 'our kind.' He may not be yours, but he's definitely mine!"

The expression in her father's eyes was stunned, almost panicked. Too late, Barrie saw that she had chosen the wrong tack in her argument. If she had presented her concern for Zane as merely for someone who had done so much for her, if she had insisted that it was only right she thank him in person, her father could have been convinced. He was very big on preserving the niceties, on behaving properly. Instead, she had convinced him that she truly loved Zane Mackenzie, and too late she saw how much he had feared exactly that. He didn't want to lose her, and now Zane presented a far bigger threat than before.

"Barrie, I..." He fumbled to a stop, her urbane, sophisticated father who was never at a loss for words. He swallowed hard. It was true that he'd seldom denied her anything, and those times he had refused had been because he thought the activity she planned or the object she wanted—once it had been

a motorcycle—wasn't safe. Keeping her safe was his obsession, that and holding tightly to his only remaining family, his beloved child, who so closely resembled the wife he'd lost.

She saw it in his eyes as his instinct to pamper her with anything she desired warred with the knowledge that this time, if he did, he would probably lose her from his life. He didn't want occasional visits from her; they had both endured that kind of separation during her school years. He wanted her *there*, in his everyday life. She knew part of his obsession was selfish, because she made domestic matters very easy for him, but she had never doubted his love for her.

Pure panic flashed in his expression. He said stiffly, "I still think you need to give yourself time for your emotions to calm. And surely you realize that the conditions you describe are what that man is *used* to. How could he ever fit into your life?"

"That's a moot question, since marriage or even a relationship was never discussed. I want to see him. I don't want him to think that I didn't care enough even to check on his condition."

"If any sort of relationship was never discussed, why would he expect you to visit him? It was a mission for him, nothing more."

Barrie's shoulders were military straight, her jaw set, her green eyes dark with emotion. "It was more," she said flatly, and that was as much of what had happened between her and Zane as she was willing to discuss. She took a deep breath and pulled out the heavy artillery. "You owe it to me," she said, her gaze locked with his. "I haven't asked any details about what happened here, but I'm an intelligent, logical person—"

"Of course you are," he interrupted, "but I don't see—"

"Was there a ransom demanded?" She cut across his interruption.

He was a trained diplomat; he seldom lost control of his expression. But now, startled, the look he gave her was blank with puzzlement. "A ransom?" he echoed.

A new despair knotted itself in her stomach, etched itself in her face. "Yes, ransom," she said softly. "There wasn't one, was there? Because money wasn't what *he* wanted. He wants something from you, doesn't he? Information. He's either trying to force you to give it to him, or you're already in it up to your eyebrows and you've had a falling out with him. Which is it?"

Again his training failed him; for a split second his face revealed panicked guilt and consternation before his expression smoothed into diplomatic blandness. "What a ridiculous charge," he said calmly.
She stood there, sick with knowledge. If the kidnapper had been using her as a weapon to force her father into betraying his country, the ambassador most likely would have denied it, because he wouldn't want her to be worried, but that wasn't what she'd read in his face. It was guilt.
She didn't bother responding to his denial. "You owe me," she repeated. "You owe Zane."
He flinched at the condemnation in her eyes. "I don't see it that way at all."
"You're the reason I was kidnapped."
"You know there are things I can't tell you," he said, releasing her hands and walking around the desk to resume his seat, symbolically leaving the role of father and entering that of ambassador. "But your supposition is wrong, and, of course, an indication of how off-balance you still are."
She started to ask if Art Sandefer would think her supposition was so wrong, but she couldn't bring herself to threaten her father. Feeling sick, she wondered if that made her a traitor, too. She loved her country; living in Europe as much as she had, she had seen and appreciated the dramatic differences between the United States and every other country on earth. Though she liked Europe and had a fondness for French wine, German architecture, English orderliness, Spanish music and Italy in general, whenever she set foot in the States she was struck by the energy, the richness of life where even people who were considered poor lived well compared to everywhere else. The United States wasn't perfect, far from it, but it had something special, and she loved it.
By her silence, she could be betraying it.
By staying here, she remained in danger. Kidnapping her had failed once, but that didn't mean *he*, the unknown, faceless enemy, wouldn't try again. Her father knew who *he* was, she was certain of it. Immediately she saw how it would be. She would be confined to the embassy grounds, or allowed out only with an armed escort. She would be a prisoner of her father's fear.
There was really no place she would be entirely safe, but remaining here only made the danger more acute. And once she was away from the enclave of the embassy, she would have a better chance of locating Zane, because Admiral Lindley's influence couldn't cover every nook and cranny of the

globe. The farther away from Athens she was, the thinner that influence would be.

She faced her father, knowing that she was deliberately breaking the close ties that had bound them together for the past fifteen years. "I'm going home," she said calmly. "To Virginia."

Two weeks later, Zane sat on the front porch of his parents' house, perched on top of Mackenzie's Mountain, just outside Ruth, Wyoming. The view was breathtaking, an endless vista of majestic mountains and green valleys. Everything here was as familiar to him as his own hands. Saddles, boots, some cattle but mostly horses. Books in every room of the sprawling house, cats prowling through the barns and stables, his mother's sweet, bossy coddling, his father's concern and understanding.

He'd been shot before; he'd been sliced up in a knife fight. He'd had his collarbone broken, ribs cracked, a lung punctured. He had been seriously injured before, but this was the closest he'd ever come to dying. He'd been bleeding to death, lying there in the bottom of the raft with Barrie crouched over him, pressing the chador over the wound with every ounce of her weight. Her quickness, her determination, had made the difference. Santos squeezing the plasma from the bags into his veins had made the difference. He had been so close that he could pick out a dozen details that had made the difference; if any one of them hadn't happened, he would have died.

He'd been unusually quiet since leaving the naval hospital and returning home for convalescence. It wasn't that he was in low spirits, but rather that he had a lot of thinking to do, something that hadn't been easy when practically the entire family had felt compelled to visit and reassure themselves of his relative well-being. Joe had flown in from Washington for a quick check on his baby brother; Michael and Shea had visited several times, bringing their two rapscallion sons with them; Josh and Loren and their three had descended for a weekend visit, which was all the time Loren's job at the hospital in Seattle had allowed. Mans had driven all night to be there when he was brought home. At least he'd been able to walk on his own by then, even if very slowly, or likely she would still be here. She had pulled up a chair directly in front of him and sat for hours, her black eyes locked on his face as if she was willing vitality from her body into his. Maybe she had been. His little sister was fey, magical; she operated on a different level than other people did.

Hell, even Chance had shown up. He'd done so warily, eyeing their mother and sister as if they were bombs that might go off in his face, but he was here, sitting beside Zane on the porch.
"You're thinking of resigning."
Zane didn't have to wonder how Chance had known what was on his mind. After nearly battering each other to death when they were fourteen, they had reached an unusual communion. Maybe it was because they'd shared so much, from classes to girls to military training. Even after all this time, Chance was as wary as a wounded wolf and didn't like people to get close to him, but even though he resisted, he was helpless against family. Chance had never in his life been loved until Mary had brought him home with her and the sprawling, brawling Mackenzies had knocked him flat. It was fun to watch him still struggle against the family intimacy each time he was drawn into the circle, because within an hour he always surrendered. Mary wouldn't let him do anything else; nor would Maris. After accepting him as a brother, Zane had never even acknowledged Chance's wariness. Only Wolf was willing to give his adopted son time to adjust—but there was still a limit on how much time he would allow.
"Yeah," he finally said.
"Because you nearly bought it this time?"
Zane snorted. "When has that ever made any difference to either of us?" He alone of the family knew the exact details of Chance's work. It was a toss-up which of them was in the most danger.
"Then it's this last promotion that did it."
"It took me out of the field," Zane said quietly. Carefully he leaned back in the chair and propped his booted feet on the porch railing. Though he was a fast healer, two and a half weeks wasn't quite long enough to let him ignore the wound. "If two of my men hadn't been wounded in that screwup on the *Montgomery,* I wouldn't have been able to go on this last mission."
Chance knew about the screwup. Zane had told him about it, and screwup was the most polite description he'd used. As soon as he'd regained consciousness in the naval hospital, he'd been on the phone, starting and directing the investigation. Though Odessa would fully recover, it was likely Higgins would have to retire on disability. The guards who had shot the two SEALs might escape court-martial if their counsel was really slick, but at the very least they would be cashiered out of the service. The extent of the damage to the careers of Captain Udaka and Executive Officer Boyd

remained to be seen; Zane had targeted the shooters, but the ripple effect would go all the way up to the captain.
"I'm thirty-one," Zane said. "That's just about the upper limit for active missions. I'm too damn good at my job, too. The Navy keeps promoting me for it, then they say I'm too highly ranked to go on missions."
"You want to throw in with me?" Chance asked casually.
He'd considered it. Very seriously. But something kept nagging at him, something he couldn't quite bring into focus.
"I want to. If things were different, I would, but..."
"What things?"
Zane shrugged. At least part of his uneasy feeling could be nailed down. "A woman," he said.
"Oh, hell." Chance kicked back and surveyed the world over the toes of his boots. "If it's a woman, you won't be able to concentrate on anything until you've gotten her out of your system. Damn their sweet little hides," he said fondly. Chance generally had women crawling all over him. It didn't hurt that he was drop-dead handsome, but he had a raffish, daredevil quality to him that brought them out of the woodwork.
Zane wasn't certain he could get Barrie out of his system. He wasn't certain he wanted to. He didn't wonder why she had disappeared without even saying goodbye, hope you're feeling better. Bunny and Spook had told him how she'd been dragged, kicking and yelling and swearing, aboard a plane and taken back to Athens. He figured her father, combined with the Navy's policy of secrecy concerning the SEALs, had prevented her from finding out to which hospital they'd taken him.
He missed her. He missed her courage, her sturdy willingness to do whatever needed doing. He missed the serenity of her expression, and the heat of her lovemaking.
God, yes.
The one memory, more than any of the others, that was branded in his brain was the moment when she had reached for his belt and said in that fierce whisper, "I'll do it!"
He'd understood. Not just why she needed to be in control, but the courage it took her to wipe out the bad memories and replace them with good ones. She'd been a virgin; she had told the truth about that. She hadn't known what to do, and she hadn't expected the pain. But she had taken him

anyway, sweetly, hotly, sliding her tight little body down on him and shattering his control the way no other woman had ever done.
She could have been a spoiled, helpless little socialite; she *should* have been exactly that. Instead she had made the best of a tense, dangerous situation, done what she could to help and hadn't voiced a single complaint.
He liked being with her, Weed talking to her. He was too much of a loner to easily accept the word love in connection with anyone other than family, but with Bar-rie...maybe. He wanted to spend more time with her, get to know her better, let whatever would develop get to developing.
He wanted her.
First things first, though. He had to get his strength back; right now he could walk from room to room without aid, but he would think twice about heading down to the stables by himself. He had to decide whether or not he was going to stay in the Navy; it felt like time to be moving on, since the reason he'd joined in the first place was being taken away from him as he moved up the ranks. If he wasn't going to remain a SEAL, then what would he do for a living? He had to decide, had to get his life settled.
Barrie might not be interested in any kind of relationship with him, though from the way Spook and Bunny had described her departure, he didn't think that was the case. The day of lovemaking they had shared had been more than propinquity for both of them.
Getting in touch with her could take some doing, though. That morning he had placed a call to the embassy in Athens. He'd given his name and asked to speak to Barrie Lovejoy. It had been Ambassador William Lovejoy who had come on the line, however, and the conversation hadn't been cordial.
"It isn't that Barrie doesn't appreciate what you did, but I'm sure you understand that she wants to put all of that behind her. Talking with you would bring it all back and needlessly upset her," the ambassador bad said in a cool, well-bred voice, his diction the best money could buy.
"Is that her opinion, or yours?" Zane had asked, his tone arctic.
"I don't see that it matters," the ambassador had replied, and hung up.
Zane decided he would let it rest for now. He wasn't in any shape to do much about it, so he would wait. When he had his mind made up about what he was going to do, there would be plenty of time to get in touch with Barrie, and now that he knew the ambassador had given orders for his calls not to be routed to her, the next time he would be prepared to do an end run around her father.

"Zane," his mother called from inside the house, pulling his thoughts to the present. "Are you getting tired?"
"I feel fine," he called back. It was an exaggeration, but he wasn't unduly tired. He glanced at Chance and saw the smirk on his brother's face.
"With all the worry about you, she forgot about my cracked ribs," Chance whispered.
"Glad to be of service," Zane drawled. "Just don't expect me to get shot every time you bang yourself up a little." The entire family thought it was hilarious the way Chance reacted to Mary's coddling and fussing, as if the attention terrified him, even though he was never able to resist her. Chance was putty in Mary's hands, but then, they all were. They'd grown up with the fine example of their father to emulate, and Wolf Mackenzie might growl and stomp, but Mary usually got her way.
"Chance?"
Zane controlled a grin as Chance stiffened, the smirk disappearing from his face as if it had never been.
"Ma'am?" he answered cautiously.
"Are you still keeping a pressure wrap on your ribs?"
That familiar panicked expression was in his eyes now. "Ah...no, ma'am."
He could have lied; Mary would have believed him. But none of them ever lied to her, even when it was in their best interests. It would hurt the little tyrant s feelings too much if she ever discovered any of her kids had lied to her.
"You know you're supposed to wrap them for another week," said the voice from inside the house. It was almost like hearing God speak, except this voice was light and sweet and liquidly Southern.
"Yes, ma'am."
"Come inside and let me take care of that."
"Yes, ma'am," Chance said again, resignation in his voice. He got up from his rocking chair and went into the house. As he passed Zane, he muttered, "Getting shot didn't work. Try something else."

Chapter 8

Two months later, Sheriff Zane Mackenzie stood naked at the window of the pleasant two-bedroom Spanish-style house he had bought in southern Arizona. He was staring out over the moonlit desert, something wild and hot running through him at the sight. His SEAL training had taught him how to adapt to any environment, and the hot, dry climate didn't bother him. Once he'd made up his mind to resign his commission, things had rapidly fallen into place. Upon hearing that he was leaving the Navy, a former SEAL team member who was now on the governor's staff in Phoenix had called and asked if he would be interested in serving the remaining two years of the term of a sheriff who had died in office.

At first Zane had been taken aback; he'd never considered going into law enforcement. Moreover, he didn't know anything about Arizona state laws.

"Don't worry about it," his friend had said breezily. "Sheriff is a political position, and most of the time it's more administrative than anything else. The situation you'd be going into is more hands-on, though. A couple of the deputies have quit, so you'd be shorthanded until some more can be hired, and the ones still there will resent the hell out of you because one of them wasn't appointed to finish out the sheriff's term."

"Why not?" Zane asked bluntly. "What's wrong with the chief deputy?"

"She's one of the ones who quit. She left a couple of months before the sheriff died, took a job on the force in Prescott."

"None of the others are qualified?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Then what would you say?"

"You gotta understand, there's not a lot of selection here. A couple of the young deputies are good, real good, but they're *too* young, not enough experience. The one twenty-year guy isn't interested. A fifteen-year guy is a jerk, and the rest of the deputies hate his guts."

Sheriff. Zane thought about it, growing more intrigued with the idea. He had no illusions about it being a Cakewalk. He would have difficulties with the fifteen-year veteran, at least, and likely all the other deputies would have some reservations and resistance about someone from the outside being brought in. Hell, he liked it better that way. Cakewalks didn't interest him. He'd rather have a challenging job any day. "Okay, I'm interested. What does it involve?"

"A lot of headache, mostly. The pay's decent, the hours are lousy. A reservation sits on part of the county, so you'll have to deal with the BIA. There's a big problem with illegal immigrants, but that's for the INS to worry about. Generally, this isn't a high crime area. Not enough people."
So here he was, his strength back, the owner of a house and a hundred acres of land, newly sworn in as sheriff. He'd brought in a few of his horses from his parents' place in Wyoming. It was a hell of a change from the Navy.
It was time to see about Barrie. He'd thought about her a lot over the past few months, but lately he couldn't think about anything else. The uneasy feeling was persisting, growing stronger. He'd put his resources to work, and to his surprise found that she'd left Athens within a week of being returned there. She was currently living at the Lovejoy private residence in Arlington, Virginia. Moreover, last month the ambassador had abruptly asked to be replaced, and he, too, had returned to Virginia. Zane wished Mr. Lovejoy had remained in Athens, but his presence was a problem that could be handled.
No matter what her father did or said, Zane was determined to see Barrie. There was unfinished business between them, a connection that had been abruptly cut when he'd been shot and she had been forced aboard a flight to Athens. He knew the hot intimacy of those long hours together could have been a product of stress and propinquity, but at this point, he didn't give a damn. There were other considerations, ones he couldn't ignore. That was why he had a flight out of Tucson to Washington in the morning. He needed to be sleeping, but one thought kept going around and around in his head. She was pregnant. He couldn't say why he was so convinced of it. It was a gut feeling, an intuition, even a logical conclusion. There hadn't been any means of birth control available; they had made love several times. Put the two facts together, and the possibility of pregnancy existed. He didn't think it was a mere possibility, though; he thought it was a fact.
Barrie was going to have his baby.
The rush of fierce possessiveness he felt was like a tidal wave, sweeping away all his cautious plans. There wouldn't be any gradual getting-to-know-each-other stage, no easing into the idea of a serious relationship. If she was pregnant, they would get married immediately. If she didn't like the idea, he would convince her. It was as simple as that.
She was pregnant. Barrie hugged the precious knowledge to herself, not ready yet to let anyone else know, certainly not her father. The kidnapping

and the aftermath had driven a wedge between them that neither of them could remove. He was desperate to restore their former relationship; nothing else could have induced him to resign from a post, an action that could have had serious repercussions for his career if it hadn't generally been thought that he had resigned because she had been so traumatized by the kidnapping that she couldn't remain in Athens and he wanted to be with her.

She tried not to think about whatever he might be involved in, because it hurt. It hurt horribly that he might be a traitor. Part of her simply couldn't believe it; he was an old-fashioned man, a man to whom honor wasn't just a word but a way of life. She had no proof, only logic and her own deductions... that, and the expression he hadn't quite been able to hide when she had asked him directly if he was involved in anything that might have resulted in her being kidnapped.

It also hurt horribly that he had kept her from Zane. She had made inquiries once she reached Virginia, but once again she had collided with a stone wall. No one would give her any information at all about him. She had even contacted SEAL headquarters and been politely stonewalled again. At least with the SEALs it was probably policy to safeguard the team members' identities and location, given the sensitive nature of the antiterrorism unit.

She was having his baby. She wanted him to know about it. She wouldn't expect anything of him that he didn't want to give, but she wanted him to know about his child. And she desperately wanted to see him again. She was adrift and lonely and frightened, her emotions in turmoil, and she needed some security in that part of her life, at least. He wasn't the kind of man who would blithely walk away from his offspring and ignore their existence. This baby would be a permanent link between them, something she could count on.

She doubted her father would relent concerning Zane even if he knew about the baby; his possessiveness would probably extend to a grandchild, even an illegitimate one. He would take steps to keep her pregnancy quiet, and even when the news got around, as it inevitably would, people would assume it was a child of rape, and they would look at her pityingly and talk about how brave she was.

She thought she would go mad. She had escaped to Virginia only to have her father follow. He panicked if she went anywhere unescorted. She had her own car, but he didn't want her driving it; he wanted his driver to take

her wherever she wanted to go. She had had to sneak to a pharmacy to buy a home pregnancy test, though she had been sure fairly early on that she was pregnant. The test had merely confirmed what her body had already told her. Barrie knew she should be worried and upset about this unplanned pregnancy, but it was the only thing in her life right now that made her happy. She was intensely lonely; the kidnapping and the long hours alone with Zane had set her apart from the other people in her life. She had memories they couldn't share, thoughts and needs no one could understand. Zane had been there with her; he would have understood her occasional pensiveness, her reticence in talking about it. It wasn't that she was secretive, for she would have liked to talk to someone who understood. But what she had shared with Zane was like a combat experience, forming a unique bond between the people who had lived it.

She wouldn't be able to keep her pregnancy secret much longer; she had to arrange prenatal care, and all telephone calls were now recorded. She supposed she could sneak out again and set up a doctor's appointment from a pay phone, but she would be damned if she would.

Enough was enough. She was an adult, and soon to be a mother. She hated the fact that her relationship with her father had deteriorated to the point where they barely spoke, but she couldn't find a way to mend it. As long as the possibility of his involvement in treasonous activities remained, she was helpless. She wanted him to explain, to give her a plausible reason why she had been kidnapped. She wanted to stop looking over her shoulder every time she went out; she didn't want to feel as if she truly *needed* to be guarded. She wanted to live a normal life. She didn't want to raise her baby in an atmosphere of fear.

But that was exactly the atmosphere that permeated the house. It was stifling her. She had to get away, had to remove herself from the haunting fear that, as long as her father was involved in whatever had given him such a guilty expression, she could be kidnapped again. The very thought made her want to vomit, and she didn't have just herself to worry about now. She had her baby to protect.

The fatigue of early pregnancy had gotten her into the habit of sleeping late, but one morning she woke early, disturbed by a pair of raucous birds fighting for territory in the tree outside her window. Once she was awake, nausea soon followed, and she made her usual morning dash to the bathroom. Also as usual, when the bout of morning sickness had passed,

she felt fine. She looked out the window at the bright morning and realized she was inordinately hungry, the first time in weeks that the idea of food was appealing.

It was barely six o'clock, too early for Adele, the cook, to have arrived. Breakfast was normally at eight, and she had been sleeping past that. Her stomach growled. She couldn't wait another two hours for something to eat. She put on her robe and slippers and quietly left her room; her father's bedroom was at the top of the stairs, and she didn't want to disturb him. Even more, she didn't want him to join her for an awkward tete-a-tete. He tried so hard to carry on as if nothing had happened, and she couldn't respond as she had before.

He should still be asleep, she thought, but when she reached the top of the stairs she heard him saying something she couldn't understand. She paused, wondering if he'd heard her after all and had been calling out to her. Then she heard him say *Mack* in a sharp tone, and she froze.

A chill roughened her entire body, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. The only Mack she knew was Mack Prewett, but why would her father be talking to him? Mack Prewett was still stationed in Athens, as far as she knew, and since her father had resigned, he shouldn't have had any reason to be talking to him.

Then her heart leaped wildly as another possibility occurred to her. Perhaps he had been saying *Mackenzie* and she'd heard only the first syllable. Maybe he was talking about Zane. If she listened, she might find out where he was, or at least *how* he was. With no additional information about his condition, it had been hard to believe Admiral Lindley's assurance that he would fully recover. Belief required trust, and she no longer trusted the admiral, or her father.

She crept closer to his door and put her ear against it.

"—finished soon," he was saying sharply, then he was silent for a moment. "I didn't bargain on this. Barrie wasn't supposed to be involved. Get it wrapped up, Mack."

Barrie closed her eyes in despair. The chill was back, even colder than before. She shook with it, and swallowed hard against the return of nausea. So he was involved, he and Mack Prewett both. Mack was CIA. Was he a double agent, and if so, for whom? The world situation wasn't like it had been back in the old days of the Cold War, when the lines had been clearly drawn. Nations had died since then, and new ones taken their place.

Religion or money seemed to be the driving force behind most differences these days; how would her father and Mack Prewett fit into that? What information would her father have that Mack wouldn't?

The answer eluded her. It could be anything. Her father had friends in every country in Europe, and any variety of confidential information could come his way. What didn't make sense was why he would sell that information; he was already a wealthy man. But money, to some people, was as addictive as a narcotic. No amount was ever enough; they had to have more, then still more, always looking for the next hit in the form of cash and the power that went with it.

Could she have been so wrong in her judgment of him? Had she still been looking at him with a child's eyes, seeing only her father, the man who had been the security in her life, instead of a man whose ambitions had tainted his honor?

Blindly she stumbled to her bedroom, not caring if he heard her. He must still have been engrossed in his conversation, though, or she didn't make as much noise as she thought she had, because his door remained closed.

She curled up on the bed, protectively folding herself around the tiny embryo in her womb.

What was it he hadn't bargained on? The kidnapping? That was over two months in the past. Had there been a new threat to use her as a means of ensuring he did something?

She was helplessly fumbling around in the dark with these wild conjectures, and she hated it. It was like being in alien territory, with no signs to guide her. What was she supposed to do? Take her suspicions to the FBI? She had nothing concrete to go on, and over the years her father had made a lot of contacts in the FBI; who could she trust there?

Even more important, if she stayed here, was she in danger? Maybe her wild conjectures weren't wild at all. She had seen a lot during her father's years in foreign service and noticed even more when she had started working at the embassy. Things happened, skulduggery went on, dangerous situations developed. Given the kidnapping, her father's reaction and now his unreasonable attitude about her safety, she didn't think she could afford to assume everything would be okay.

She had to leave.

Feverishly she began trying to think of someplace she could go where it wouldn't be easy to find her, and how she could get there without leaving a

paper trail that would lead a halfway competent terrorist straight to her. Meanwhile, Mack Prewett wasn't a halfway competent bureaucrat, he was frighteningly efficient; he was like a spider, with webs of contacts spreading out in all directions. If she booked a flight using her real name, or paid for it with a credit card, he would know.

To truly hide, she had to have cash, a lot of it. That meant emptying her bank account, but how could she get there without her father knowing? It had reached the point where she would have to climb out the window and walk to the nearest pay phone to call a cab.

Maybe the house was already being watched.

She moaned and covered her face with her hands. Oh, God, this was making her paranoid, but did she dare *not* suspect anything? As some wit had observed, even paranoids had enemies.

She had to think of the baby. No matter how paranoid an action seemed, she had to err on the side of safety. If she had to dress in dark clothing, slither out a window in the wee hours of the morning and crawl across the ground until she was well away from this house... as ridiculous as it sounded, she would do it. Tonight? The sooner she got away, the better.

Tonight.

That decision made, she took a deep breath and tried to think of the details. She would have to carry some clothing. She would take her checkbook and bank book, so she could close out both her checking and savings accounts. She would take her credit cards and get as much cash as she could on them; everything together would give her a hefty amount, close to half a million dollars. How would she carry that much money? She would need an empty bag.

This was beginning to sound ludicrous, even to her. How was she supposed to crawl across the lawn in the darkness, dragging two suitcases behind her? Think! she fiercely admonished herself. Okay, she wouldn't have to carry either clothes or suitcases with her.

All she would need to carry was her available cash, which was several hundred dollars, her checkbook and savings account book, and her credit cards, which she would destroy after they had served their purpose. She could buy new clothes and makeup, as well as what luggage she would immediately need, as soon as a discount store opened. She could buy do-it-yourself hair coloring and dye her red hair brown, though not until after she

had been to the bank. She didn't want the teller to be able to describe her disguise.

With cash in her possession, she would have several options. She could hop on Amtrak and go in any direction, then get off the train before her ticketed destination. Then she could buy a cheap used car, pay cash for it, and no one would know where she went from there. To be on the safe side, she would drive that car for only one day, then trade it in on a better car, again paying cash.

These were drastic measures, but doable. She still wasn't certain she wasn't being ridiculous, but did she dare bet that way, when her life, and that of her child, could hang in the balance? *Desperate times call for desperate measures.* Who had said that? Perhaps an eighteenth-century revolutionary; if so, she knew how he had felt. She had to disappear as completely as possible. She would mail her father a postcard before she left town, letting him know that she was all right but that she thought it would be better to get away for a while, otherwise he would think she had indeed been kidnapped again, and he would go mad with grief and terror. She couldn't do that to him. She still loved him very much, even after all he had done. Again a wave of disbelief and uncertainty hit her. It seemed so impossible that he would sell information to terrorists, so opposite to the man she had always known him to be. She was aware that he wasn't universally well liked, but the worst accusation she had ever heard leveled against him was that he was a snob, which even she admitted was accurate. He was very effective as a diplomat and ambassador, working with the CIA, which was of course set up in every embassy, using his social standing and contacts to smooth the way whenever a problem cropped up. He had personally been acquainted with the last six presidents, and prime ministers called him a friend. This man was a traitor?

It couldn't be. If she had only herself to consider, she would give him the benefit of the doubt.

But there was the baby, the tiny presence undetectable to any but herself. She could feel it in her breasts, which had become so tender she was always aware of them, and in the increased sensitivity and pressure low down in her abdomen, as her womb began to swell with amniotic fluid and increased blood flow. It was almost a hot feeling, as if the new life forming within her was generating heat with the effort of development.

Zane's baby.

She would do anything, no matter how Draconian, to keep it safe. She had to find some secure place where she could get the prenatal care she needed. She would have to change her name, get a new driver's license and a new social security card; she didn't know how these last two would be accomplished, but she would find out. There were always shady characters who could tell her. The driver's license could be forged, but the social security card would have to come through the regular administration. Even though social security was being phased out, until it was completely gone, everyone still had to have a number in order to get a legitimate job.

There was something else to consider. It would be stupid of her to live off her cash until it was all gone. She would need a job, anything that paid enough to keep a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. She had degrees in art and history, but she wouldn't be able to use her own name, so she wouldn't be able to use those degrees to get a teaching job.

She didn't know what the job situation would be wherever she settled; she would simply have to wait and see. It didn't matter what she did, waiting tables or office work, she would take whatever was available.

She glanced at the clock: seven-thirty. Nerves notwithstanding, she was acutely hungry now, to the point of being sick with it. Her pregnant body had its own agenda, ignoring upset emotions and concentrating only on the business at hand.

The thought brought a smile to her face. It was almost as if the baby was already stomping a tiny foot and demanding what it wanted.

Tenderly she pressed her hand over her belly, feeling a slight firmness that surely hadn't been there before. "All right," she whispered to it. "I'll feed you."

She showered and dressed, mentally preparing herself to face her father without giving anything away. When she entered the breakfast room, he looked up with an expression of delight, quickly tempered by caution.

"Well, it's a pleasure to have your company," he said, folding the newspaper and laying it aside.

"Some birds woke me up," she said, going to the buffet to help herself to toast and eggs. She fought a brief spell of nausea at the sight of sausage and changed her mind about the eggs, settling on toast and fruit. She hoped that would be enough to satisfy the demanding little creature.

"Coffee?" her father asked as she sat down. He already had the silver carafe in his hand, poised to pour.

"No, not today," she said hastily, as her stomach again clenched warningly. "I've been drinking too much caffeine lately, so I'm trying to cut down." That was a direct lie. She had stopped drinking anything with caffeine in it as soon as she suspected she might be pregnant, but it was as if her system was still warning her against it. "I'll drink orange juice." So far, that hadn't turned her stomach.

She applied herself to her food, replying civilly to his conversational gambits, but she couldn't bring herself to wholeheartedly enter into a discussion with him the way she once would have done. She could barely look at him, afraid her feelings would be plain on her face. She didn't want him any more alert than he already was.

"I'm having lunch with Congressman Garth," he told her. "What are your plans for the day?"

"None," she replied. Her plans were all for the night.

He looked relieved. "I'll see you this afternoon, then. I'll drive myself, so Poole will be available to drive you if you do decide to go anywhere."

"All right," she said, agreeing with him because she wasn't going anywhere.

Once he'd left the house, she spent the day reading and occasionally napping. Now that she had made up her mind to go, she felt more peaceful. Tomorrow would be an exhausting day, so she needed to rest while she could.

Her father returned in the middle of the afternoon. Barrie was sitting in the living room, curled up with a book. She looked up as he entered and immediately noticed how the drawn look of worry eased when he saw her.

"Did you have a nice lunch?" she asked, because that was what she would have done before.

"You know how these political things are," he said. Once he would have sat down and told her all about it, but this time he smoothly evaded talking specifics. Senator

Garth was on several important committees concerning national security and foreign affairs. Before she could ask any more questions, he went into his study, closing the door behind him. Before, he had always kept it open as an invitation to her to visit whenever she wanted. Sadly Barrie looked at the closed door, then returned to her book.

The doorbell startled her. She put the book aside and went to answer it, cautiously looking through the peephole before opening the door. A tall, black-haired man was standing there.

Her heart jumped wildly, and a wave of dizziness swept over her. Behind her, she heard her father coming out of his study. "Who is it?" he asked sharply. "Let me get it."
Barrie didn't reply. She jerked the door open and stared up into Zane's cool, blue gray eyes. Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely breathe. That sharp gaze swept down her body, then came up to her face. "Are you pregnant?" he asked quietly, his voice pitched low so her father couldn't hear, even though he was rapidly approaching.
"Yes," she whispered.
He nodded, a terse movement of his head as if that settled that. "Then we'll get married."

Chapter 9

Her father reached them then, and shouldered Barrie aside. "Who are you?" he demanded, still in that sharp tone.
Zane coolly surveyed the man who would be his father-in-law. "Zane Mackenzie," he finally replied, when he had finished his appraisal. His darkly tanned face was impassive, but there was a piercing quality to his pale eyes that made Barrie suddenly aware of how dangerous this man could be. It didn't frighten her; under the circumstances, this quality was exactly what she needed.
William Lovejoy had been alarmed, but now his complexion turned pasty, and his expression froze. He said stiffly, "I'm sure you realize it isn't good for Barrie to see you again. She's trying to put that episode behind her—"
Zane looked past Lovejoy to where Barrie stood, visibly trembling as she stared at him with pleading green eyes. He hadn't realized how green her eyes were, a deep forest green, or how expressive. He got the impression that she wasn't pleading for him to be nice to her father, but rather that she was asking for help in some way, with some thing. His battle instincts stirred, his senses lifting to the next level of acuity. He didn't know exactly what she was asking of him, but he would find out, as soon as he dealt with the present situation. It was time to let the former ambassador know exactly where he stood.
"We're getting married," he said, still looking at Barrie, as he cut through the ambassador's continuing explanation on why it would be best if he left

immediately. His steely voice, which had instantly commanded the attention of the deadliest guerrilla fighters in the world, cut through Lovejoy's stuffy, patronizing explanation.
The ambassador broke off, and a look of panic flashed across his face. Then he said, "Don't be ridiculous," in a strained tone. "Barrie isn't going to marry a sailor who thinks he's something special because he's a trained assassin."
Zane's cool gaze switched from Barrie to her father and went arctic cold, the blue fading to a gray that glinted like shards of ice. Lovejoy took an involuntary step back, his complexion going from pasty to white.
"Barrie, will you marry me?" Zane asked deliberately, keeping his gaze focused on Lovejoy.
She glanced from him to her father, who tensed as he waited for her answer. "Yes," she said, her mind racing. Zane. She wouldn't question the miracle that had brought him here, but she was so desperate that she would have married him even if she hadn't loved him. Zane was a SEAL; if anyone could keep her safe from the unknown enemy who had her father so on edge, he could. She was carrying his child, and evidently that possibility was what had brought him to Virginia in search of her. He was a man who took his responsibilities seriously. She would have preferred that he cared for her as deeply as she did for him, but she would take what she could get. She knew he was attracted to her; if he wasn't, she wouldn't be pregnant. She would marry him, and perhaps with time he would come to love her.
Her father flinched at her answer. Half turning to her, he said imploringly, "Baby, you don't want to marry someone like him. You've always had the best, and he can't give it to you."
Squaring her shoulders, she said, "I'm going to marry him—as soon as possible."
Seeing the intractability in her expression, her father looked at Zane. "You won't get a penny of her inheritance," he said with real venom.
"Dad!" she cried, shocked. She had her own money, inheritances from her mother and grandparents, so she wasn't worried about being destitute even if he carried through on his threat; it was the fact that he'd made the threat at all, that he would try to sabotage her future with Zane in such a blatant, hurtful manner, that hurt.
Zane shrugged. "Fine," he said with deceptive mildness. Barrie heard the pure iron underlying the calm, even tone. "Do what you want with your

money, I don't give a damn. But you're a fool if you thought you could keep her with you for the rest of your life. You can act like an ass and cheat yourself out of your grandchildren if you want, but nothing you say is going to change a damn thing."

Lovejoy hung there, his face drawn with pain. Anguish darkened his eyes as he looked at his daughter. "Don't do it," he pleaded, his voice shaking.

Now it was her turn to wince, because in spite of everything, she hated to hurt him. "I'm pregnant," she whispered, straightening her shoulders against any other hurtful thing he might say. "And we're getting married."

He swayed on his feet, stunned by her announcement. She hadn't thought it possible he could turn any whiter, but he did. "What?" he croaked. "But— but you said you weren't raped!"

"She wasn't," Zane said. There was a soft, drawling, very masculine undertone in his voice.

Their eyes met. Barrie gave him a soft, wry smile. "I wasn't," she verified, and despite everything, a sudden, subtle glow lit her face.

Her father couldn't think of anything else to say. He gaped at them for a moment, unable to handle this turn of events. Then a red tide of anger ran up his face, chasing away the pallor. "You bastard!" he choked out. "You took advantage of her when she was vulnerable— "

Barrie grabbed his arm and jerked him around. "Stop it!" she yelled, her slender body tense with fury. Her nerves had been shredded since that morning, and this confrontation was only making them worse. Zane's sudden appearance, though it made her almost giddy with happiness, was another shock to her system, and she'd had enough. "If anyone took advantage, *I* did. If you want the details I'll give them to you, but I don't think you really want to know!"

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him if he'd thought he could keep her a virgin forever, but she bit the bitter words off unspoken. That would be too hurtful, and once said, she would never be able to take the words back. He loved her, perhaps too much; his fear of losing her was why he was lashing out. And, despite everything, she loved him, too. Pain congealed inside her as she stared starkly at him, all pretense gone. "I know," she whispered. "Do you understand? I *know.* I know why you've been so paranoid every time I've left the house. *I have to leave.*"

He inhaled sharply, shock ripping away his last vestige of control. He couldn't sustain her burning gaze, and he looked away. "Keep her safe," he

said to Zane in a stifled voice, then walked stiffly toward his study.
"I intend to." That difficulty solved, he spared no more than a glance for his departing foe. His gaze switched to Barrie, and a slow, heart-stopping smile touched his lips. "Go get packed," be said.
They were on their way within the hour.
She hurried up to her bedroom and filled her suitcases, bypassing the evening gowns and designer suits in favor of more practical clothing. The ankle-length cotton skirt she was already wearing was comfortable enough for travel; she pulled on a silk shirt over the sleeveless blouse she wore and let it go at that. Every instinct she had was screaming at her to hurry.
She dragged the bags to the top of the stairs. It didn't require a lot of effort, they all had wheeled bottoms, but when Zane saw her, he left his post by the door and took the stairs two at a time. "Don't lift those," he ordered, taking the bags from her hands. "You should have called me."
His tone was the same one he had used in commanding his men, but Barrie was too nervous to fight that battle with him right now. He lifted all three cases with an ease that made her blink and started down the stairs with them. She rushed after him. "Where are we going? Are we flying or driving?"
"Las Vegas. Flying."
"You already have the tickets?" she asked in surprise.
He paused and glanced over his shoulder at her, the dark wings of his eyebrows lifting fractionally. "Of course," he said, and resumed his trip down the stairs.
Such certainty and self-assurance were daunting. Briefly she wondered what on earth she was getting herself into. More and more she was becoming aware of just how much in control Zane Mackenzie was, of himself and everything around him. She might never be able to break through that barrier. *Except in bed.* The memory zinged through her, bringing a flush to her cheeks that wasn't caused by rushing around. He had lost control there, and it had been... breathtaking.
"What time is the flight?" Once more she hurried to catch up to him. "Will we have time to go to my bank? I need to close out my accounts—"
"You can transfer them to a local bank when we get home."
While he carried her bags out to the rental car he was driving, Barrie went to the study and knocked softly on the door. There was no answer; after a

moment she opened the door anyway. Her father was sitting at the desk, his elbows propped on top of it and his face buried in his hands.
"Bye, Dad," she said softly.
He didn't answer, but she saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.
"I'll let you know where I am."
"No," he said, his voice strangled. "Don't." He lifted his head. His eyes were anguished. "Not yet. Wait... wait a while."
"All right," she whispered, understanding slicing through her. It was safer for her that way. He must suspect the phone line was tapped.
"Baby, I—" He broke off and swallowed hard again. "I only want you to be happy—and safe."
"I know." She felt dampness on her cheeks and wiped away the tears that were wetting them.
"He isn't the kind of man I wanted for you. The SEALs are—well, never mind." He sighed. "Maybe he *can* keep you safe. I hope so. I love you, baby. You've been the center of my life. You know I never meant—" He halted, unable to go on.
"I know," she said again. "I love you, too."
She quietly closed the door and stood with her head bowed. She didn't hear him approach, but suddenly Zane was there, his arm hard around her waist as he drew her with him out to the car. He didn't ask any questions, just opened the door for her and helped her inside, then closed the door with a finality that was unmistakable.
She sat tensely during the drive to the airport, watching the traffic buzz around them.
"This is the most privacy we'll have for a while," Zane said as he competently threaded the car through the insanity of rush hour. "Why don't you tell me what's going on?" He had slipped on a pair of sunglasses, and his eyes were hidden from her view, but she didn't have to see them to know how cool and remote the expression in them was.
She lifted her chin and stared straight ahead, considering the way his suggestions sounded like orders. This wasn't going to be easy, but he had to know everything. She needed his protection, at least while she still carried his child. He wouldn't be on guard unless he knew there was a threat. She had to be honest with him. "I want you to know—one of the reasons I agreed to marry you is that I need protection, and you're a SEAL. If anything... dangerous... happens, you'll know how to handle it."

"Dangerous, how?" He sounded very matter-of-fact, almost disinterested. She supposed that, given his job, danger was so common to him that it was more the rule than the exception.
"I think the kidnappers may try again. And now I have more than just myself to worry about." Briefly, unconsciously, her hand moved to her lower belly in the instinctive way a pregnant woman touched the growing child within, as if reassuring it of its safety.
He glanced in the rearview mirror, calmly studying the traffic behind and around them. After a moment of consideration, he went straight to the heart of the matter. "Have you notified the FBI? The police?"
"No."
"Why not?"
"Because I think Dad may be involved," she said, almost strangling on the words.
Once again he checked the rearview mirror. "In what way?"
He sounded so damn remote. She clenched her hands into fists, determined to hold on to her control. If he could be self-contained, then so could she. She forced her voice to evenness. "The reason for the kidnapping wasn't ransom, so they must want information from him. I can't think of anything else it *could* be."
He was silent for a moment, deftly weaving in and out of the tangle of vehicles. She could almost hear that cool, logical brain sorting through the ramifications. Finally he said, "Your father must be in it up to his neck, or he'd have gone to the FBI himself. You would have been taken to a safe place and surrounded by a wall of agents."
He'd reached exactly the same conclusion she had. That didn't make her feel any better. "Since we've been back in Vkginia, he's been impossible. He doesn't want me to leave the house by myself, and he's monitoring all telephone calls. He was always protective, but not like this. At first I thought he was overreacting because of what happened in Athens, but when I thought it through, I realized the threat still existed." She swallowed. "I'd made up my mind to sneak out tonight and disappear for a while."
If Zane had waited another day, she would have been gone. He wouldn't have had any idea where to find her, and she had no way of contacting him. Tears burned her eyes at the thought. Dear God, it had been so close.
"Hold on," he said, then jerked the steering wheel to the right, cutting across a lane of traffic and throwing the car into a sharp turn into another street.

The tires squealed, and horns blared. Even with his warning, she barely had time to brace herself, and the seat belt tightened with a jerk.
"What's wrong?" she cried, struggling to right herself and ease the strangling grip of the seat belt.
"There's a possibility we had company. I didn't want to take any chances."
Alarmed, Barrie twisted around in the seat, staring at the cars passing through the intersection behind them, vainly trying to see anyone who looked familiar or any vehicle making an obvious effort to cut across traffic and follow them. The traffic pattern looked normal.
"Two Caucasian men, in their thirties or forties, both wearing sunglasses," Zane said with no more emphasis than if he'd been observing the clouds in the sky. She remembered this almost supernatural calmness from before. In Benghazi, the more tense the situation, the cooler he had become, totally devoid of emotion. For him to take the action he had, he'd been certain they were being followed. The bottom dropped out of her stomach, and she fought a sudden rise of nausea. To suspect she was in danger was one thing, having it confirmed was something else entirely.
Then what he'd said registered in her brain. "Caucasian?" she echoed. "But —" She stopped, because of course it made sense. While she had subconsciously been looking for Libyans, she had to remember that this Gordian knot of intrigue involved both Libyans and Mack Prewett's cohorts; given his resources, she had to be suspicious of everyone, not just Middle Easterners. Black, white or Oriental, she couldn't trust anyone—except Zane.
"Since they know what I'm driving, we're going to ditch the car." Zane took another turn, this time without the dramatics, but also without signaling or slowing down more than was necessary. "I'll make a phone call and have the car taken care of. We'll get a ride to the airport."
She didn't ask who he would call; the area was crawling with military personnel from all the branches of service. Someone in dress whites would collect the car and return it to the rental company, and that would be that. By then, she and Zane would be on their way to Las Vegas.
"They'll be able to find me anyway," she said suddenly, thinking of the airline ticket in her name.
"Eventually. It'll take a while, though. We have a substantial grace period."
"Maybe not." She bit her lip. "I overheard Dad talking to Mack Prewett this morning. Mack's CIA, deputy station chief in Athens. Dad told him that he

wanted this finished, that he never meant for me to be involved."
Zane lifted his eyebrows. "I see."
She supposed he did. If her father was working with the CIA in anything legitimate, he would have been able to protect her through legal channels. Mack Prewett's involvement changed the rules. He would have access to records that ordinary people wouldn't have. Even though the CIA didn't operate within the United States, the tentacles of influence were far-reaching. If Mack wanted to know if she'd taken a flight out of either of the major area airports, he would have that information within minutes.
"If they were sharp enough to get the license plate number on the car, they'll have my name very shortly," he said. "If they didn't get the number, then they won't have a clue about my identity. Ether way, it's too late to worry about it now. They either have it or they don't, and there's no need to change our immediate plans. We'll take the flight to Las Vegas and lose them there, at least for a while."
"How will we lose them? If Mack can get access to your records..."
"I resigned my commission. I'm not a SEAL anymore."
"Oh," she said blankly. She struggled to adjust to yet another change. She had already been imagining and mentally preparing for life as the wife of a military officer, with the frequent moves, the politics of rank. It wouldn't have been much different from life in the embassy, just on a different level. Now she realized she had no idea what kind of life they would have.
"What will we do, then?" she asked.
"I've taken the job of sheriff in a county in southern Arizona. The sheriff died in office, so the governor appointed me to complete his term. There are two years left until new elections, so we'll be in Arizona for at least two years, maybe more."
A sheriff! That was a definite surprise, and the offhand manner with which he had announced it only deepened her sense of unreality. She struggled to focus on the important things. "What your job is doesn't matter," she said as evenly as possible. "It's your training that counts."
He shrugged and wheeled the car into the entrance of a parking garage. "I understand." His voice was flat, emotionless. "You agreed to marry me because you think I'll be able to protect you." He let down the window and leaned out to get the ticket from the automatic dispenser. The red barrier lifted, and he drove through.

Barrie wound her fingers together. Her initial flush of happiness had given way to worry. Zane had come after her, yes, and asked her to marry him, but perhaps she'd been wrong about the attraction between them. She felt uprooted and off-balance. Zane didn't seem particularly happy to see her, but then, she had certainly tossed a huge problem into his lap. He would become a husband and a father in very short order, and on top of that, he had to protect them from an unknown enemy. He hadn't even kissed her, she thought, feeling close to tears, and she was a little surprised at herself for even thinking of such a thing right now. If he was right and someone had been following them, then the danger had been more immediate than she had feared. How could she worry about his reasons for marrying her? After all, the baby's safety was one of the reasons she was marry ing *him. "I* want you to protect our baby," she said quietly. "There are other reasons, but that's the main one." Her feelings for him were something she could have handled on her own; she wouldn't take that chance with her baby's safety.
"A damn important one. You're right, too." He gave her a brief glance as he pulled the car into a parking slot on the third level. "I won't let anything hurt you or the baby."
He pulled off his sunglasses and got out of the car with a brief "Wait here," and strode off toward a pay phone. When he reached it, he punched in a series of numbers, then turned so he could watch her and the car while he talked.
Barrie felt her nerves jolt and her stomach muscles tighten as she stared across the parking deck at him. She was actually marrying this man. He looked taller than she remembered, a little leaner, though his shoulders were so wide they strained the seams of his white cotton shirt. His black hair was a bit longer, she thought, but his tan was just as dark. Except for the slight weight loss, he didn't show any sign of having been shot only a little over two months earlier. His physical toughness was intimidating; *he* was intimidating. How could she have forgotten? She had remembered only his consideration, his passion, the tender care he'd given her, but he'd used no weapon other than his bare hands to kill that guard. While she had remembered his lethal competency and planned to use it on her own behalf, she had somehow forgotten that it was a prominent part of him, not a quality she could call up when she needed it and tuck away into a corner when the need was over. She would have to deal with this part of him on a

regular basis and accept the man he was. He wasn't, and never would be, a tame house cat.
She liked house cats, but she didn't want him to be one, she realized.
She felt another jolt, this time of self-discovery. She needed to be safe now, because of the baby, but she didn't want to be permanently cossetted and protected. The grueling episode in Benghazi had taught her that she was tougher and more competent than she'd ever thought, in ways she hadn't realized. Her father would have approved if she'd married some up-and-coming ambassador-to-be, but that wasn't what she wanted. She wanted some wildness in her life, and Zane Mackenzie was it. For all that maddening control of his, he was fierce and untamed. He didn't have a streak of wildness; he had a core of it.
The strain between them unnerved her. She had dreamed of him finding her and holding out his arms, of falling into them, and when she had opened the door to him today she had expected, like a fool, for her dream to be enacted. Reality was much more complicated than dreams.
The truth was, they had known each other for about twenty-four hours total, and most of those hours had been over two months earlier. In those hours they had made love with raw, scorching passion, and he had made her pregnant, but the amount of time remained the same.
Perhaps he had been involved with someone else, but a sense of responsibility had driven him to locate her and find out if their lovemaking had had any consequences. He would do that, she thought; he would turn his back on a girlfriend, perhaps even a fiancee, to assume the responsibility for his child.
Again she was crashing into the brick wall of ignorance; she didn't know anything about his personal life. If she had known anything about his family, where he was from, she would have been able to find him. Instead, he must think she hadn't cared enough even to ask about his condition, to find out if he had lived or died.
He was coming back to the car now, his stride as smooth and effortlessly powerful as she remembered, the silent walk of a predator. His dark face was as impassive as before, defying her efforts to read his expression.
He opened the door and slid behind the wheel. "Transport will be here in a few minutes."
She nodded, but her mind was still occupied with their personal tangle. Before she lost her nerve, she said evenly, "I tried to find you. They took me

back to Athens immediately, while you were still in surgery. I tried to get in touch with you, find out if you were still alive, how you were doing, what hospital you were in—anything. Dad had Admiral Lindley block every inquiry I made. He did tell me you were going to be okay, but that’s all I was able to find out."
"I guessed as much. I tried to call you at the embassy a couple of weeks after the mission. The call was routed to your father."
"He didn't tell me you'd called," she said, the familiar anger and pain twisting her insides. Since she'd been forced off the *Montgomery,* those had been her two main emotions. So he *had* tried to contact her. Her heart lifted a little. "After I came home, I tried again to find you, but the Navy wouldn't tell me anything."
"The antiterrorism unit is classified." His tone was absent; he was watching in the mirrors as another car drove slowly past them, looking for an empty slot.
She sat quietly, nerves quivering, until the car had disappeared up the ramp to the next level.
"I'm sorry," she said, after several minutes of silence. "I know this is a lot to dump in your lap."
He gave her an unreadable glance, his eyes very clear and blue. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be."
"Do you have a girlfriend?"
This time the look he gave her was so long that she blushed and concentrated her attention on her hands, which were twisting together in her lap.
"If I did, I wouldn't have made love to you," he finally said.
Oh, dear. She bit her lip. This was going from bad to worse. He was getting more and more remote, as if the fleeting moment of silent communication between them when he'd asked her to marry him had never existed. Her stomach clenched, and suddenly a familiar sensation of being too hot washed over her.
She swallowed hard, praying that the nausea that had so far confined itself to the mornings wasn't about to put in an unexpected appearance. A second later she was scrambling out of the car and frantically looking around for a bathroom. God, did parking decks *have* bathrooms?
"Barrie!" Zane was out of the car, striding toward her, his dark face alert. She had the impression that he intended to head her off, though she hadn't

yet chosen a direction in which to dash.
The stairwell? The elevator? She thought of the people who would use them and discarded both options. The most sensible place was right there on the concrete, and everything fastidious in her rebelled at the idea. Her stomach had different ideas, however, and she clamped a desperate hand over her mouth just as Zane reached her.
Those sharp, pale eyes softened with comprehension. "Here," he said, putting a supporting arm around her. The outside barriers of the parking deck were waist-high concrete walls, and that was where he swiftly guided her. She resisted momentarily, appalled at the possibility of throwing up on some unsuspecting passerby below, but his grip was inexorable, and her stomach wasn't waiting any longer. He held her as she leaned over the wall and helplessly gave in to the spasm of nausea.
She was shaking when it was over. The only comfort she could find was that, when she opened her eyes, she saw there was nothing three stories below but an alley. Zane held her, leaning her against his supporting body while he blotted her perspiring face with his handkerchief, then gave it to her so she could wipe her mouth. She felt scorched with humiliation. The strict teachings of her school in Switzerland hadn't covered what a lady should do after vomiting in public.
And then she realized he was crooning to her, his deep voice an almost inaudible murmur as he brushed his lips against her temple, her hair. One strong hand was splayed over her lower belly, spanning her from hipbone to hipbone, covering his child. Her knees felt like noodles, so she let herself continue leaning against him, let her head fall into the curve of his shoulder.
"Easy, sweetheart," he whispered, once again pressing his lips to her temple. "Can you make it back to the car, or do you want me to carry you?"
She couldn't gather her thoughts enough to give him a coherent answer. After no more than a second, he evidently thought he'd given her enough time to decide, so he made the decision for her by scooping her up into his arms. A few quick strides brought them to the car. He bent down and carefully placed her on the seat, lifting her legs into the car, arranging her skirt over them. "Do you want something to drink? A soft drink?"
Something cold and tart sounded wonderful. "No caffeine," she managed to say.
"You won't be out of my sight for more than twenty seconds, but keep an eye out for passing cars, and blow the horn if anything scares you."

She nodded, and he hit the door lock, then closed the door, shutting her inside a cocoon of silence. She preferred the fresh air but understood why she shouldn't be standing outside the car, exposed to view—and an easy target. She leaned her head against the headrest and closed her eyes. The nausea was gone as swiftly as it had come, though her insides felt like jelly. She was weak, and sleepy, and a bit bemused by his sudden tenderness. Though she shouldn't be surprised, she thought. She was pregnant with his child, and the possibility of exactly that was what had brought him in search of her. As soon as he'd realized she was nauseated, a condition directly related to her condition, so to speak, he'd shown nothing but tender concern and demonstrated once again his ability to make snap decisions in urgent situations.

His tap on the window startled her, because in her sleepy state she hadn't thought he'd been gone nearly long enough to accomplish his mission. But a green can, frosty with condensation, was in his hand, and suddenly she ferociously wanted that drink. She unlocked the door and all but snatched the can from him before he could slide into the seat. She had it popped open and was drinking greedily by the time he closed the door.

When the can was empty, she leaned back with a sigh of contentment. She heard a low, strained laugh and turned her head to find Zane looking at her with both amusement and something hot and feral mingled in his gaze.

"That's the first time watching a woman drink a soft drink has made me hard. Do you want another? I'll try to control myself, but a second one might be more than I can stand."

Barrie's eyes widened. A blush warmed her cheeks, but that didn't stop her from looking at his lap. He was telling the truth. Good heavens, was he ever telling the truth! Her hand clenched with the sudden need to reach out and stroke him. "I'm not thirsty now," she said, her voice huskier than usual. "But I'm willing to go for a second one if you are."

The amusement faded out of his eyes, leaving only the heat behind. He was reaching out for her when his head suddenly snapped around, his attention caught by an approaching vehicle. "Here's our ride," he said, and once again his voice was cool and emotionless.

Chapter 10

She was marrying him because she wanted his protection. The thought gnawed at Zane during the long flight to Las Vegas. She sat quietly beside him, sometimes dozing, talking only if he asked her a question. She had the drained look of someone who had been under a lot of pressure, and now that it had eased, her body was giving in to fatigue. Finally she fell soundly asleep, her head resting against his shoulder.

The pregnancy would be taking a toll on her, too. He couldn't see any physical change in her yet, but his three older brothers had produced enough children that he knew how tired women always got the first few months— at least, how tired Shea and Loren had been. Nothing ever slowed Caroline down, not even five sons.

At the thought of the baby, fierce possessiveness jolted through him again. His baby was inside her. He wanted to scoop her onto his lap and hold her, but a crowded plane wasn't the place for what he had in mind. That would have to wait until after the marriage ceremony, when they were in a private hotel room. He wanted her even more than he had before. When she had opened the door and he'd looked down into her stunned green eyes, his arousal had been so strong and immediate that he'd had to restrain himself from reaching for her. Only the sight of her father bearing down on them had held him back.

He shouldn't have waited as long as he had. As soon as he'd been able to get around okay, he should have come after her. She had been living in fear, and handling it the same way she had in Benghazi, with calm determination. He didn't want her ever to be afraid again. Bunny's and Spooky's arrival at the parking deck, in Bunny's personally customized 1969 Oldsmobile 442, had been like a reunion. Barrie had tumbled out of the rental car with a happy cry and been enthusiastically hugged and twirled around by both SEALs. They were both discreetly armed, he'd noticed approvingly. They were wearing civilian clothes, with their shirts left loose outside their pants to conceal the firepower tucked under their arms and in the smalls of their backs. Normally, when they were off-duty, they didn't carry firearms, but Zane had explained the situation to them and left their preparations to their own discretion, since he wasn't their commanding officer any longer. In typical fashion, they had prepared for anything. His own weapon was still resting in a holster under his left armpit, covered by a lightweight summer jacket.

"Don't you worry none, ma'am," Spooky had reassuringly told Barrie. "We'll get you and the boss to the airport safe and sound. There's nothing outside of NASCAR that can keep up with Bunny's wheels."
"I'm sure there isn't," she'd replied, eyeing the car. It looked unremarkable enough; Bunny had painted it a light gray, and there wasn't any more chrome than would be on a factory job. But the deep-throated rumble from the idling engine didn't sound like any sound a factory engine would make, and the tires were wide, with a soft-looking tread.
"Bulletproof glass, reinforced metal," Bunny said proudly as he helped Zane transfer her luggage to the trunk of his car. "Plate steel would be too heavy for the speed I want, so I went with the new generation of body armor material, lighter and stronger than Kevlar. I'm still working on the fireproofing."
"I'll feel perfectly safe," she assured him.
As she and Zane crawled into the back seat of the two-door car, she whispered to him, "Where's Nascar?"
Spooky could hear a pin drop at forty paces. Slowly he turned around in the front seat, his face mirroring his incredulity. "Not where, ma'am," he said, struggling with shock. *"What.* NASCAR. Stock car racing." A good Southerner, he'd grown up with stock car racing and was always stunned when he encountered someone who hadn't enjoyed the same contact with the sport.
"Oh," Barrie said, giving him an apologetic smile. "I've spent a lot of time in Europe. I don't know anything about racing except for the Grand Prix races."
Bunny snorted in derision. "Play cars," he said dismissively. "You can't run them on the streets. Stock car racing, now that's real racing." As he was speaking, he was wheeling his deceptive monster out of the parking deck, his restless gaze touching on every surrounding detail.
"I've been to horse races," Barrie offered, evidently in an attempt to redeem herself.
Zane controlled a smile at the earnestness of her tone. "Do you ride?" he asked.
Her attention swung to him. "Why, yes. I love horses."
"You'll make a good Mackenzie, then," Spooky drawled. "Boss raises horses in his spare time." There was a bit of irony in his tone, because SEALs had about as much spare time as albinos had color.

"Do you really?" Barrie asked, her eyes shining.
"I own a few. Thirty or so."
"Thirty!" She sat back, a slight look of confusion on her face. He knew what she was thinking: one horse was expensive to own and keep, let alone thirty. Horses needed a lot of land and care, not something she associated with an ex-Naval officer who had been a member of an elite antiterrorism group.
"It's a family business," he explained, swiveling his head to examine the traffic around them.
"Everything's clear, boss," Bunny said. "Unless they've tagged us with a relay, but I don't see how that's possible."
Zane didn't, either, so he relaxed. A moving relay surveillance took a lot of time and coordination to set up, and the route had to be known. Bunny was taking such a circuitous route to the airport that any tail would long since have been revealed or shaken. Things were under control—for now.
They made it to National without incident, though to be on the safe side Bunny and Spooky had escorted them as far as the security check. While Zane quietly handled his own armed passage through security, his two former team members had taken themselves off to collect the rental car and turn it in, though to the agency office at Dulles, not National, where he had rented it. Just another little twist to delay anyone who was looking for them.
Now that they were safely on the plane, he began planning what he would do to put an end to the situation.
The first part of it was easy. He would put Chance on the job of finding out what kind of mess her father was involved in; for her sake, he hoped it wasn't anything treasonous, but whatever was going on, he intended to put a stop to it. Chance had access to information that put national security agencies to shame. If William Lovejoy was selling out his country, then he would go down. There was no other option. Zane had spent his adult years offering his life in protection of his country, and now he was a peace officer sworn to uphold the law; it was impossible for him to look the other way, even for Barrie. He didn't want her to be hurt, but he damn sure wanted her to be safe.
Barrie slept until the airliner's wheels bounced on the pavement. She sat upright, pushing her hair away from her face, looking about with a slight sense of disorientation. She had never before been able to sleep on a plane; this sleepiness was just one more of the many changes her pregnancy was

making in her body, and her lack of control over the process was disconcerting, even frightening.
On the other hand, the rest had given her additional energy, something she needed to face the immense change she was about to make in her life. This change was deliberate, but no less frightening.
"I want to shower and change clothes first," she said firmly. This marriage might be hasty, without any resemblance to the type of wedding ceremony she had always envisioned for herself, but while she was willing to forgo the pomp and expensive trappings, she wasn't willing — outside of a life-and-death situation — to get married wearing wrinkled clothes and still blinking sleep from her eyes.
"Okay. We'll check in to a hotel first." He rubbed his jaw, his callused fingers rasping over his beard stubble. "I need to have a shave anyway."
He had needed to shave that day in Benghazi, too. In a flash of memory she felt again the scrape of his rough chin against her naked breasts, and a wave of heat washed over her, leaving her weak and flushed. The cool air blowing from the tiny vent overhead was suddenly not cool enough.
She hoped he wouldn't notice, but it was a faint hope, because he was trained to take note of every detail around him. She imagined he could describe every passenger within ten rows of them in either direction, and when she'd been awake she had noticed that he'd shown an uncanny awareness of anyone approaching them from the rear on the way to the lavatories.
"Are you feeling sick?" he asked, eyeing the color in her cheeks.
"No, I'm just a little warm," she said with perfect truth, while her blush deepened.
He continued to watch her, and the concern in his eyes changed to a heated awareness. She couldn't even hide that from him, damn it. From the beginning it had been as if he could see beneath her skin; he sensed her reactions almost as soon as she felt them.
Slowly his heavy-lidded gaze moved down to her breasts, studying the slope and thrust of them. She inhaled sharply as her nipples tightened in response to his blatant interest, a response that shot all the way to her loins.
"Are they more sensitive?" he murmured.
Oh, God, he shouldn't do this to her, she thought wildly. They were in the middle of a plane full of people, taxiing toward an empty gate, and he was

asking questions about her breasts and looking as if he would start undressing her any minute now.
"Are they?"
"Yes," she whispered. Her entire body felt more sensitive, from both her pregnancy and her acute awareness of him. Soon he would be her husband, and once again she would be lying in his arms.
"Ceremony first," he said, his thoughts echoing hers in that eerie way he had. "Otherwise we won't get out of the hotel until tomorrow."
"Are you psychic?" she accused under her breath.
A slow smile curved his beautiful mouth. "It doesn't take a psychic to know what those puckered nipples mean."
She glanced down and saw her nipples plainly beaded under the lace and silk of her bra and blouse. Her face red, she hastily drew her shirt over the betraying little nubs, and he gave a low laugh. At least no one else was likely to have heard him, she thought with scant comfort. He'd pitched his voice low, and the noise on board made it difficult to overhear conversations, anyway.
The flight attendants were telling them to remain in their seats until the plane was secured and the doors opened, and as usual the instructions were ignored as passengers surged into the aisles, opening the overhead bins and dragging down their carry-on luggage or hauling it out from under the seats.
Zane stepped deftly into the aisle, and the movement briefly pulled his jacket open. She saw the holster under his left arm and the polished metal butt of the pistol tucked snugly inside it. Then he automatically shrugged one shoulder, and the jacket fell into place, a movement he'd performed so many times he didn't have to think about it.
She'd known he was armed, of course, because he'd informed the airport and airline security before they'd boarded the plane. During the boredom and enforced inactivity of the flight, however, she had managed to push the recent events from her mind, but the sight of that big automatic brought them all back.
He extended his hand to steady her as she stepped into the aisle ahead of him. Standing pressed like sardines in the line, she felt him like a warm and solid wall at her back, his arms slightly extended so that his hands rested on the seat backs, enveloping her in security. His breath stirred the hair on top of her head, making her realize anew exactly how big he was. She was of

average height, but if she leaned back, her head would fit perfectly into the curve of his shoulder.
The man in front of her shifted, forcing her backward, and Zane curved one arm around her as he gathered her against his body, his big hand settling protectively over her lower belly. Barrie bit her lip as her mind bounced from worry to the pleasure of his touch. This couldn't go on much longer—either this exquisite frustration or the sharp darts of terror—or she would lose her mind.
The line of passengers began to shuffle forward as the doors were opened and they were released from the plane. Zane's hand dropped from her belly. As she began to move forward, Barrie caught the eye of an older woman who had chosen to remain in her seat until the stampede was over, and the woman gave her a knowing smile, her gaze flicking to Zane.
"Ma'am," Zane said smoothly in acknowledgment, and Barrie knew he'd caught the little byplay. His acute awareness of his surroundings was beginning to spook her.
What if she didn't want him to notice everything? Most women would be thrilled to death with a husband who actually took note of details, but probably not to the extent that Zane Mackenzie did.
On the other hand, if the alternative was living without him, she would learn how to cope, she thought wryly. She'd spent over two months pining for him, and now that she had him, she wasn't about to get cold feet because he was alert. He was a trained warrior—an assassin, her father had called him. He wouldn't have survived if he hadn't been aware of everything going on around him, and neither would she.
That alertness was evident as they followed the signs to the baggage claim area. The airport was a shifting, flowing beehive, and Zane's cool gaze was constantly assessing the people around them. As he had more than once before, he kept himself between her and everybody else, steering her close to the wall and protecting her other side with his body. He'd already taken one bullet while doing that, she thought, and had to fight the sudden terrified impulse to grab him and shove *him* against the wall.
Before they reached the baggage claim, however, he pulled her to a halt. "Let's wait here a minute," he said.
She strove for calm, for mastery over the butterflies that suddenly took flight in her stomach. "Did you see anything suspicious?" she asked.

"No, we're waiting for someone." He looked at her, his cool gaze warming as he studied her face. "You're a gutsy little broad, Miss Lovejoy. No matter what, you hold it together and try to do the best you can. Not bad for a pampered society babe."

Barrie was taken aback. She'd never been called a broad before, or a society babe. If it hadn't been for the teasing glint in his eyes, she might have taken exception to the terms. Instead, she considered them for a moment, then gave a brief nod of agreement. "You're right," she said serenely. "I *am* gutsy for a pampered society babe."

He was surprised into a chuckle, a deliriously rich sound that was cut short when they were approached by a middle-aged man who wore a suit and carried a radio set in his hand. "Sheriff Mackenzie?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Travis Hulsey, airport security." Mr. Hulsey flashed his identification. "We have your luggage waiting for you in a secure area, as requested. This way, please."

So he'd even thought of that, Barrie marveled as they followed Mr. Hulsey through an unmarked door. An attempt to grab her inside the airport would be tricky, given the security, so the most logical thing to do would be to wait at the ground transportation area, where everyone went after collecting luggage, then follow them to their destination and wait for a better opportunity. Zane had thwarted that; he must have made the arrangements when he'd gone forward to the lavatory.

The dry desert heat slapped them in the face as soon as they stepped through the door. Her three suitcases and his one garment bag, which he had collected from a locker at National, were waiting for them at a discreet entrance well away from the main ground transportation area. Also waiting for them was a car, beside which stood a young man with the distinctive austere military haircut, even though he wore civilian clothes.

The young man all but snapped to attention. "Sir," he said. "Airman Zaharias at your service, sir."

Zane's dark face lit with amusement. "At ease," he said. "I'm not my brother."

Airman Zaharias relaxed with a grin. "When I first saw you, sir, I wasn't sure."

"If he pulled rank and this is messing up your leave time, I'll get other transport."

"I volunteered, sir. The general did me a personal favor when I was fresh out of basic. Giving bis brother a ride downtown is the least I can do."
Brother? *General?* Barrie raised some mental eyebrows. First horses, now this. She realized she didn't know anything about her soon-to-be husband's background, but the details she'd gleaned so far were startling, to say the least.
Zane introduced her with grave courtesy. "Barrie, Airman Zaharias is our safe transport, and he has donated his personal vehicle and time off for the service. Airman Zaharias, my fiancee, Barrie Lovejoy."
She solemnly shook hands with the young airman, who was almost beside himself in his eagerness to please.
"Glad to meet you, ma'am." He unlocked the trunk and swiftly began loading their luggage, protesting when Zane lifted two of the bags and stowed them himself. "Let me do that, sir!"
"I'm a civilian now," Zane said, amusement still bright in his eyes. "And I was Navy, anyway."
Airman Zaharias shrugged. "Yes, sir, but you're still the general's brother." He paused, then asked, "Were you really a SEAL?"
"Guilty."
"Damn," Airman Zaharias breathed.
They climbed into the air-conditioned relief of the airman's Chevrolet and were off. Their young driver evidently knew Las Vegas well, and without asking for instructions he ignored the main routes. Instead he circled around and took Paradise Road north out of the airport. He chattered cheerfully the entire time, but Barrie noticed that he didn't mention the exact nature of the favor Zane's general brother had done for him, nor did he venture into personal realms. He talked about the weather, the traffic, the tourists, the hotels. Zane directed him to a hotel off the main drag, and soon Airman Zaharias was on his way and they were checking in to the hotel.
Barrie bided her time, standing quietly to one side while Zane arranged for them to be listed in the hotel's computer as Glen and Alice Temple—how he arrived at those names she had no idea—and ignoring the clerk's knowing smirk. He probably thought they were adulterous lovers on a tryst, which suited her just fine; it would keep him from being curious about them.
They weren't alone in the elevator, so she held her tongue then, too. She held it until they were in the suite Zane had booked, and the bellman had been properly tipped and dismissed. The suite was as luxurious as any she

had stayed in in Europe. A few hours before, she might have worried that the cost was more than Zane could afford, that he'd chosen it because he thought she would expect it. Now, however, she had no such illusion. As soon as he had closed and locked the door behind the bellman, she crossed her arms and stared levelly at him. "Horses?" she inquired politely. "Family business? A brother who happens to be an Air Force general?"

He shrugged out of his jacket, then his shoulder holster. "All of that," he said.

"I don't know you at all, do I?" She was calm, even a little bemused, as she watched him wrap the straps around the holster and deposit the weapon on the bedside table.

He unzipped his garment bag and removed a suit from it, then began unpacking other items. His pale glance flashed briefly at her. "You know *me,"* he said. "You just don't know all the details of my family yet, but we haven't had much time for casual chatting. I'm not deliberately hiding anything from you. Ask any question you want."

"I don't want to conduct a catechism," she said, though she needed to do exactly that. "It's just..." She spread her hands in frustration, because she was marrying him and she didn't already know all this.

He began unbuttoning his shirt. "I promise I'll give you a complete briefing when we have time. Right now, sweetheart, I'd rather you got your sweet little butt in one shower while I get in the other, so we can get married and into this bed as fast as possible. About an hour after *that*, we'll talk."

She looked at the bed, a bigger-than-king-size. Priorities, priorities, she mused. "Are we safe here?"

"Safe enough for me to concentrate on other things."

She didn't have to ask what those other things were. She looked at the bed again and took a deep breath. "We could rearrange the order of these things," she proposed. "What do you think about bed, talk and then wedding? Say, tomorrow morning?"

He froze in the act of removing his shirt. She saw his eyes darken, saw the sexual tension harden his face. After a moment he pulled the garment free and dropped it to the floor, his movements deliberate. "I haven't kissed you yet," he said.

She swallowed. "I noticed. I've wondered—"

"Don't," he said harshly. "Don't wonder. The reason I haven't kissed you is that, once I start, I won't stop. I know we're doing things out of order—hell,

everything's been out of order from the beginning, when you were naked the first time I saw you. I wanted you then, sweetheart, and I want you now, so damn bad I'm aching with it. But trouble is still following you around, and my job is to make damn sure it doesn't get close to you and our baby. I might get killed—"

She made a choked sound of protest, but he cut her off. "It's a possibility, one I accept. I've accepted it for years. I want us married as soon as possible, because I don't know what might happen tomorrow. In case I miscalculate or get unlucky, I want our baby to be legitimate, to be born with the Mackenzie name. A certain amount of protection goes with that name, and I want you to have it. Now."

Tears swam in her eyes as she stared at him, at this man who had akeady taken one bullet for her and was prepared to take another. He was right—she knew *him,* knew the man he was, even if she didn't know what his favorite color was or what kind of grades he'd made in school. She knew the basics, and it was the basics she had so swiftly and fiercely learned to love. So he wasn't as forthcoming as she might have wished; she would deal with it. So what if he was so controlled it was scary, and so what if those uncanny eyes noticed everything, which would make it difficult to surprise him on Christmas and his birthday? She would deal with that, too, very happily.

If he was willing to die for her, the least she could do was be completely honest with him.

"There's another reason I agreed to marry you," she said.

His dark brows lifted in silent question.

"I love you."

Chapter 11

He wore a dark gray suit with black boots and a black hat. Barrie wore white. It was a simple dress, ankle length and sleeveless, classic in its lines and lack of adornment. She loosely twisted up her dark auburn hair, leaving a few wisps hanging about her face to soften the effect. Her only jewelry was a pair of pearl studs in her ears. She got ready in the bath off the bedroom, he showered in the bath off the parlor. They met at the door

between the two rooms, ready to take the step that would make them husband and wife.

At her blunt declaration of love, an equally blunt expression of satisfaction had crossed his face, and for once he didn't hide anything he was feeling. "I don't know about love," he'd said, his voice so even she wanted to shake him. "But I do know I've never wanted another woman the way I want you. I know this marriage is forever. I'll take care of you and our children, I'll come home to you every night, and I'll try my damnedest to make you happy."

It wasn't a declaration of love, but it was certainly one of devotion, and the tears that came so easily to her these days swam in her eyes. Her self-contained warrior *would* love her, when he lowered his guard enough to let himself. He had spent years with his emotions locked down, while he operated in tense, life-and-death situations that demanded cool, precise thoughts and decisions. Love was neither cool nor concise; it was turbulent, unpredictable, and it left one vulnerable. He would approach love as cautiously as if it was a bomb.

"Don't cry," he said softly. "I swear I'll be a good husband."

"I know," she replied, and then they had both gone to their separate bathrooms to prepare for their wedding.

They took a taxi to a chapel, one of the smaller ones that didn't get as much business and didn't have a drive-through service. Getting married in Las Vegas didn't take a great deal of effort, though Zane took steps to make it special. He bought her a small bouquet of flowers and gave her a bracelet of dainty gold links, which he fastened around her right wrist. Her heart beat heavily as they stood before the justice of the peace, and the bracelet seemed to burn around her wrist. Zane held her left hand securely in his right, his grip warm and gentle, but unbreakable.

Outwardly it was all very civilized, but from the first moment they'd met, Barrie had been acutely attuned to him, and she sensed the primal possessiveness of his actions. He had already claimed her physically, and now he was doing it legally. She already carried his child inside her. His air of masculine satisfaction was almost visible, it was so strong. She felt it, too, as she calmly spoke her vows, this linkage of their lives. During a long, hot day in Benghazi they had forged a bond that still held, despite the events that had forced them apart.

He had one more surprise for her. She hadn't expected a ring, not on such short notice, but at the proper moment he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced two plain gold bands, one for her and one for him. Hers was a little loose when he slipped it over her knuckle, but their eyes met in a moment of perfect understanding. She would be gaining weight, and soon the ring would fit. She took the bigger, wider band and slid it onto the ring finger of his left hand, and she felt her own thrill of primal satisfaction. He was hers, by God!

Their marriage duly registered, the certificate signed and witnessed, they took another taxi to the hotel. "Supper," he said, steering her toward one of the hotel's dining rooms. "You didn't eat anything on the plane, and it's after midnight eastern time."

"We could order room service," she suggested.

His eyes took on that heavy-lidded look. "No, we couldn't." His tone was definite, a little strained. His hand was warm and heavy on the small of her back. "You need to eat, and I don't trust my self-control to last that long unless we're in a public place."

Perhaps feeding her was his only concern, or perhaps he knew more about seduction than most men, she thought as they watched each other over a progression of courses. Knowing that he was going to make love to her as soon as they reached the suite, anticipating the heaviness of his weight on her, the hard thrust of his turgid length into her... the frustration readied her for him as surely as if he was stroking her flesh. Her breasts lifted hard and swollen against the bodice of her dress. Her in-sides tightened with desire, so that she had to press her legs together to ease the throbbing. His gaze kept dropping to her breasts, and as before, she couldn't temper her response. She could feel her own moisture, feel the heaviness in her womb. She was scarcely aware of what she ate—something bland, to reduce the chances of early-pregnancy nausea. She drank only water. But turnabout was fair play, so she lingered over each bite while she stared at his mouth, or in the direction of his lap. She delicately licked her lips, shivering with delight as his face darkened and his jaw set. She stroked the rim of her water glass with one fingertip, drawing his gaze, making his breath come harder and faster. Beneath the table, she rubbed her foot against the muscled calf of his leg.

He turned to snare their waiter with a laser glare. "Check!" he barked, and the waiter hurried to obey that voice of command. Zane scribbled their

room number and his fictitious name on the check, and Barrie stared at him in amazement. It was hard to believe he could remember something like that when she could barely manage to walk.
For revenge, when he pulled her chair back so she could stand, she allowed the knuckles of one hand to brush, oh, so very lightly, against his crotch. He went absolutely rigid for a moment, and his breath hissed out between his teeth. All innocence, Barrie turned to give him a sweetly inquiring What's-wrong? look.
His darkly tanned face was even darker with the flush running under the browned skin. His expression was set, giving away little, but his eyes were glittering like shards of diamond. His big hand closed firmly around her elbow. "Let's go," he said in the soundless whisper she'd first heard in a dark room in Benghazi. "And don't do that again, or I swear I'll have you in the elevator."
"Really." She smiled at him over her shoulder. "How... uplifting."
A faint but visible shudder racked him, and the look he gave her promised retribution. "Here I've been thinking you were so sweet."
"I am sweet," she declared as they marched toward the elevator. "But I'm not a pushover."
"We'll see about that. I'm going to push you over." They reached the bank of elevators, and he jabbed the call button with more force than necessary.
"You won't have to push hard. As a matter of fact, you can just blow me over." She gave him another sweet smile and pursed her lips, blowing a tiny puff of air against his chest to demonstrate.
The bell chimed, the doors opened, and they stood back to allow the car's passengers to exit. They stepped inside alone, and even though people were hurrying toward them to catch that car, Zane ruthlessly punched their floor number and then the door close button. When the car began to rise, he turned on her like a tiger on fresh meat.
She stepped gracefully out of his reach, staring at the numbers flashing on the digital display. "We're almost there."
"You're damn right about that," he growled, coming after her. In the small confines of the elevator she didn't have a chance of evading him, not that she wanted to. What she wanted was to drive him as crazy as he was driving her. His hard hands closed around her waist and lifted her; his muscled body pinned her to the wall. His hips pushed insistently at hers, and she gasped at how hard he was. Automatically her legs opened, allowing him access to

the tender recesses of her body. He thrust against her, his hips moving rhythmically, and his mouth came down on hers, smothering, fiercely hungry.

The bell chimed softly, and the elevator gave a slight lurch as it stopped. Zane didn't release her. He simply turned with her still in his grasp and left the elevator, striding rapidly down the hall to their suite. Barrie twined her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips, biting back little moans as each stride he took rubbed his swollen sex against the aching softness of her loins. Pleasure arced through her like lightning with every step, and helplessly she felt her hips undulate against him in a mindless search for a deeper pleasure. A low curse hissed out from between his clenched teeth. She didn't know if they passed anyone in the hall. She buried her face against his neck and gave in to the soaring hunger. She had needed him for so long, missed him, worried herself sick about him. Now he was here, vitally alive, about to take her with the same uncomplicated fierceness as before, and she didn't care about anything else.

He pushed her against a wall, and for one terrified, delirious moment she thought she had tempted him too much. Instead he unhooked her legs from around his waist and let her slide to the floor. He was breathing hard, his eyes dilated with a sexual hunger that wouldn't be denied much longer, but on one level he was still very much in control. Lifting one finger to his lips to indicate silence, he slipped his right hand inside his jacket. When his hand emerged, it was filled with the butt of that big automatic. He thumbed off the safety, dealt with the electronic lock on the door to their suite, depressed the door handle and slipped noiselessly inside. The door closed as silently as it had opened.

Barrie stood frozen in the hallway, sudden terror chasing away her desire as she waited with her eyes closed and her hands clenched into fists, all her concentration focused on trying to hear anything from inside the suite. She heard nothing. Absolutely nothing. Zane moved like a cat, but so did other men, men like him, men who worked best under cover of night and who could kill as silently as he had dispatched that guard in Benghazi. Her kidnappers hadn't possessed the same expertise, but whoever was behind her abduction wouldn't use Middle Eastern men here in the middle of the glitter and flash of Las Vegas. Perhaps this time he would hire someone more deadly, someone more interested in getting the job done than in terrifying a bound and helpless woman. Any thump, any whisper, might

signal the end of Zane's life, and she thought she would shatter under the strain.
She didn't hear the door open again. All she heard was Zane saying, "All clear," in a calm, normal tone, and then she was in his arms again. She didn't think she moved; she thought he simply gathered her in, pulling her into the security of his embrace.
"I'm sorry," he murmured against her hair as he carried her inside. He paused to lock and chain the door. "But I won't take chances with your safety."
Fury roared through her like a brushfire. She lifted her head from the sanctuary of bis shoulder and glared at him. "What about yours?" she demanded violently. "Do you have any idea what it does to me when you do things like that? Do you think I don't notice when you put yourself between me and other people, so if anyone shoots at me, you'll be the one with the bullet hole?" She hit him on the chest with a clenched fist, amazing even herself; she had never struck anyone before. She hit him again. "Damn it, I want you healthy and whole! I want our baby to have its daddy! I want to have more of your babies, so that means you have to stay alive, do you hear me?"
"I hear," he rumbled, his tone soothing as he caught her pounding fists and pressed them against his chest, stilling them. "I'd like the same things myself. That means I have to do whatever's necessary to keep you and Junior safe."
She relaxed against him, her lips trembling as she fought back tears. She wasn't a weepy person; it was just the hormonal roller coaster of pregnancy that was making her so, but still, she didn't want to cry all over him. He had enough to handle without having to deal with a sobbing wife every time he turned around.
When she could manage a steady tone, she said in a small voice, "Junior, is it?"
She saw the flash of his grin as he lifted her in his arms. "I'm afraid so," he said as he carried her to the bed. "My sister Mans is the only female the Mackenzies have managed to produce, and that was twenty-nine years and ten boys ago."
He bent and gently placed her on the bed and sat down beside her. His dark face was intent as he reached beneath her for the zipper of her dress. "Now

let's see if I can get you back to where you were before you got scared, and we'll introduce Junior to his daddy," he whispered.
Barrie was seized by a mixture of shyness and uneasiness as he stripped the dress down her hips and legs, then tossed it aside. Since her kidnappers had stripped her in a deliberate attempt to terrorize her, to break her spirit, she hadn't been comfortable with being naked. Except for those hours hidden in the ruins in Benghazi, when Zane had finally coaxed her out of his shirt and she had lost herself in his lovemaking, she had hurried through any times of necessary nudity, such as when she showered, pulling on clothes or a robe as soon as possible. Once upon a time she had lingered after her bath, enjoying the wash of air over her damp skin as she pampered herself with perfumed oils and lotions, but for the past two months that luxury had fallen beneath her urgent need to be covered.
Zane wanted her naked.
Her dress was already gone, and the silk and lace of her matching bra and underpants weren't much protection. Deftly he thumbed open the front fastening of her bra, and the cups loosened, sliding apart to reveal the inner curves of her breasts. Barrie couldn't help herself; she protectively crossed her arms over her breasts, holding the bra in place.
Zane paused, his face still as his pale gaze lifted to her face, examining the helpless, embarrassed expression she wore. She didn't have to explain. He'd been there; he knew. "Still having problems with that shirt?" he asked gently, referring to the way she'd clung so desperately to his garment.
He'd switched on a single lamp. She lay exposed in the small circle of light, while his face was shadowed. She moistened her lips and nodded once, a slight acknowledgment that was all he needed.
"We can't undo things," he said, his face and tone serious. Using one finger, he lightly stroked the upper curves of her breasts, where they plumped above the protection of her crossed arms. "We can put them behind us and move on, but we can't undo them. They stay part of us, they change us inside, but as other things happen, we change still more. I remember the face of the first man I killed. I don't regret doing it, because he was a bomb-happy piece of scum who had left his calling card on a cruise ship, killing nine old people who were just trying to enjoy their retirement. Right then he was trying like hell to kill *me*... but I always carry his face with me, deep inside."

He paused, thinking, remembering. "He's a part of me now, because killing him changed me. He made me stronger. I know that I can do whatever has to be done, and I know how to go on. I've killed others," he said, as calmly as if he was discussing the weather, "but I don't remember their faces. Only his. And I'm glad I won."

Barrie stared at him, the shadows emphasizing the planes and hollows of his somber face, deepening the oldness in his eyes. Deep inside she understood, the realization going past thought into the center of instinct. Being kidnapped had changed her; she'd faced that before Zane had rescued her. She *was* stronger, more decisive, more willing to take action. When he'd shown up that afternoon, she had been preparing to take extraordinary measures to protect herself and the child she carried by disappearing from the comfortable life she'd always known. She'd been naked with Zane before—and enjoyed it. She would again.

Slowly she lifted one hand and stroked the precise line of the small scar on his left cheekbone. He turned his head a little, rubbing bis cheek against her fingers.

"Take off *your* clothes," she suggested softly. Balance. If her nudity was balanced by his, she would be more comfortable.

His eyebrows quirked upward. "All right."

She didn't have to explain, but then, she'd known she wouldn't. She lay on the bed and watched him peel out of his jacket, then remove the shoulder holster, which once more carried its lethal cargo. This last was carefully placed on the bedside table, where it would be within reach. Then his shirt came off, and he dropped it on the floor, along with her dress and his jacket. The new scar on his upper abdomen was red and puckered, and bisected by a long surgical scar where the ship's surgeon had sliced into him to stop the bleeding and save his life. She had seen the scar before, when he had removed his shirt before showering, but she had been under orders not to touch him then lest she make him forget his priorities. There was no such restriction now.

Her fingers moved over the scar, feeling the heat and vitality of the man, and she thought how easily all of that could have been snuffed out. She had come so close to losing him....

"Don't think about it," he murmured, catching her hand and lifting it to his lips. "It didn't happen."

"It could have."

"It didn't." His tone was final as he bent over to tug off his boots. They dropped to the floor with twin thuds, then he stood to unfasten his pants.
He was right. It hadn't happened. Pick yourself up, learn something, and go on. It was in the past. The future was their marriage, their child. The present was *now,* and as Zane swiftly stripped off his remaining clothes, a lot more urgent.
He sat beside her again, comfortable in his own skin. It was such wonderful skin, she thought a little dreamily, reaching out to stroke his gleaming shoulders and furry chest and rub the tiny nipples hidden among the hair until they stood stiffly erect. She knew she was inviting him to reciprocate, and her breath caught in her chest as she waited for him to accept.
He wasn't slow about it. His hands went to the parted cups of her bra, and his gaze lifted to hers. "Ready?" he asked with a slight smile.
She didn't reply, just shrugged one shoulder so that her breast slid free of the cup, and that was answer enough.
He glanced downward as he pushed the other cup aside, and she saw his pupils flare with arousal as he looked at her. His breath hissed out through parted lips. "I see our baby here," he whispered, gently touching one nipple with a single fingertip. "You haven't gained any weight, your stomach's still flat, but he's changed you here. Your nipples are darker, and swollen." Ever so lightly, his touch circled the aureola, making it pucker and stand upright. Barrie whimpered with the rush of desire, the familiar lightning strike from breast to loin.
He rubbed his thumb over the tip, then gently curved his hand beneath her breast, lifting it so that it plumped in his palm. "How much more sensitive are they?" he asked, never looking up from his absorption with these new details in her body.
"Some—sometimes I can't bear the touch of my bra." she breathed.
"Your veins are bluer, too," he murmured. "They look like rivers running under a layer of white satin." He leaned down and kissed her, taking possession of her mouth while he continued to fondle her breasts with exquisite care. She melted with a purring little hum of pleasure, lifting herself so she could taste him more deeply. His lips were as hot and forceful as she remembered, as delicious. He took his time; the kiss was slow and deep, his tongue probing. Her pregnancy-sensitive breasts hardened into almost painful arousal, her loins becoming warm and liquid.

He bore her down onto the pillows, his hands slipping over her body, completely removing the bra and then disposing of her underpants. His eyes glittered hotly as he leaned over her. "I'm going to do everything to you I couldn't do before," he whispered. "We don't have to worry about being on guard, or making noise, or what time it is. I'm going to eat you up, Little Red."

She should have been alarmed, because his expression was so fierce and hungry she could almost take him literally. Instead, she reached out for him, almost frantic with the need to feel him covering her, taking her.

He had other ideas. He caught her hands and pressed them to the bed, as she had once done to him. He had trusted her with control, and now she returned the gift, arching her body up for whatever was his pleasure.

His pleasure was her breasts, with their fascinating changes. He took one distended nipple into his mouth, carefully, lightly. That was enough to make her moan, though not with pain; the prickles of sensation were incredibly intense. His tongue batted at her nipple, swirled around it, then pushed it hard against the roof of his mouth as he began suckling.

Her cry was thin, wild. Her breath exploded out of her lungs, and she couldn't seem to draw in any replacement air. Oh, God, she hadn't realized her breasts were *that* sensitive, or that he would so abruptly push her past both pleasure and pain into a realm so raw and powerful she couldn't bear it. She surged upward, and he controlled the motion, holding her down, transferring his mouth to her other nipple, which received the same tender care and enticement, then the sudden, deliberate pressure that made her cry out again.

He wouldn't stop. She screamed for him to, begged him, but he wouldn't stop. She heard her voice, frantic, pleading: "Zane—please. Oh, God, please. Don't—more. *More"* And then, sobbing, *"Harder!"* And she realized she wasn't begging him to stop, but to continue. She writhed in his arms as he pushed her higher and higher, harder and harder, his mouth voracious on her breasts, and suddenly all her senses coalesced into a huge single throb that centered in her loins, and she came apart with pleasure.

When she could breathe again, think again, her limbs were weak and useless in the aftermath. She lay limply on the bed, her eyes closed, and wondered how she had survived the implosion.

"Just from sucking your breasts?" he murmured incredulously as he kissed his way down her stomach. "Oh, damn, are we going to have fun for the

next seven months!"
"Zane... wait," she whispered, lifting one hand to his head. It was the only movement she had enough energy to make. "I can't—I need to rest."
He slid down between her legs and lifted her thighs onto his shoulders. "You don't have to move," he promised her in a deep, rich voice. "All you have to do is lie there." Then he kissed her, slowly, deeply, and her body arched as it began all over again, and he showed her all the things he hadn't been able to do to her before.
He brought her to completion once more before finally crawling forward and settling his hips between her thighs. She moaned when he filled her with a smooth, powerful thrust. She quivered beneath him, shocked by the thickness and depth of his penetration. How could she have forgotten? The discomfort took her by surprise, and she clung to him as she tried to adjust, to accept. He soothed her, whispering hot, soft words in her ear, stroking her flesh, which was already so sensitive that even the smooth sheet beneath her felt abrasive.
But, oh, how she had wanted this. *This.* Not just pleasure, but the sense of being joined together, the deep and intimate linkage of their bodies. This fed a craving within her that the climaxes he'd given her hadn't begun to touch. Her hips lifted. She wanted all of him, wanted him so deep that he touched her womb, ripening with his seed. He tried to moderate the thrusts that were rapidly pushing her toward yet another climax, but she dug her nails into his back, insisting without words on everything he had to give. He shuddered, and with a deep-throated groan, gave her what she asked.
She slept then. It was long after midnight on the east coast, and she was exhausted. She was disturbed by the presence of the big, muscled man beside her in the bed, though, his body radiating heat like a furnace, and she kept waking from a restless doze.
He must sleep like a cat, she thought, because every time she woke and changed positions, he woke up, too. Finally he pulled her on top of him, settling her with her face tucked against his neck and her legs straddling his hips. "Maybe now you can rest," he murmured, kissing her hair. "You slept this way in Benghazi."
She remembered that, remembered the long day of making love, how he had sometimes been on top when they dozed, and sometimes she had. Or perhaps she had been the only one who dozed while he had remained alert.

"I've never slept with a man before," she murmured in sleepy explanation, nestling against him. *"Slept* slept, that is."
"I know. I'm your first in both cases."
The room was dark; at some time he had turned off the lamp, though she didn't remember when. The heavy curtains were drawn against the neon of the Las Vegas night, with only thin strips of light penetrating around the edges. It reminded her briefly of that horrible room in Benghazi, before Zane had taken her away, but then she shut out the memory. That no longer had the power to frighten her. Zane was her husband now, and the pleasant ache in her body told her that the marriage had been well and truly consummated.
"Tell me about your family," she said, and yawned against his neck.
"Now?"
"Mmm. We're both awake, so you might as well."
There was a twitch of flesh against her inner thigh. "I can think of other things to do," he muttered.
"I'm not ruling anything out." She wriggled her hips and was rewarded by a more insistent movement. "But you can talk, too. Tell me about the Mackenzie clan."
She could feel his slight shrug. "My dad is a half-breed American Indian, my mom is a schoolteacher. They live on a mountain just outside Ruth, Wyoming. Dad raises and trains horses. He's the best I've ever seen, except for my sister. Maris is magic with horses."
"So the horses really are a family business."
"Yep. We were all raised on horseback, but Maris is the only one who went into the training aspect. Joe went to the Air Force Academy and became a jet jockey, Mike became a cattle rancher, Josh rode jets for the Navy, and Chance and I went to the Naval Academy and got our water wings. We can both fly various types of aircraft, but flying is just a means of getting us to where we're needed, nothing else. Chance got out of Naval Intelligence a couple of years ago."
Barrie's talent with names kicked in. She lifted her head, all sleepiness gone as she ran that list of names through her head. She settled on one, put the details together and gasped. "Your brother is General Joe Mackenzie on the Joint Chiefs of Staff?" Of course. How many Joe Mackenzies were Air Force generals?
"The one and only."

"Why, I've met him and his wife. I think it was the year before last, at a charity function in Washington. Her name is Caroline."
"You're right on target." He shifted a little, and she felt a nudging between her legs. She inhaled as he slipped inside her. Talk about right on target.
"Joe and Caroline have five sons, Michael and Shea have two boys, and Josh and Loren have three," Zane murmured, gently thrusting. "Junior will be the eleventh grandchild."
Barrie sank against him, her attention splintered by the pleasure building with each movement of his hips. "Don't talk," she said, and heard his quiet laughter as he rolled over and placed her beneath him...just where she wanted to be.

Chapter 12

Barrie awoke to nausea, sharp and urgent. She bolted out of bed and into the bathroom, barely reaching it in time. When the bout of vomiting was over, she sank weakly to the floor and closed her eyes, unable to work up enough energy to care that she was curled naked on the floor of a hotel bathroom, or that her husband of less than twelve hours was witness to it all. She heard Zane running water; then a wonderfully cool, wet washcloth was placed on her heated forehead. He flushed the toilet, something she hadn't been able to manage, and said, "I'll be right back."
As usual, she rapidly began to feel better after she had thrown up. Embarrassed, she got up and washed out her mouth and was standing in front of the mirror surveying her tousled appearance with some astonishment when Zane appeared with a familiar green can in his hand. He had already popped the top. She snatched the can from him and began greedily drinking, tilting the can up like some college freshman guzzling beer. When it was empty, she sighed with repletion and slammed the can down on the countertop as if it was indeed an empty soldier of spirits. Then she looked at Zane, and her eyes widened.
"I hope you didn't go out to the drink machine like that," she said faintly. He was still naked. Wonderfully, impressively naked. And very aroused.
He looked amused. "I got it out of the minibar in the parlor." He glanced down at himself, and the amusement deepened. "There's another can. Want to go for it?"

Barrie drew herself up and folded a bold hand around his thrusting sex. "I'm not the kind of woman who loses her inhibitions after a couple of Seven-Ups," she informed him with careful dignity. She paused, then winked at him. "One will do."

Somehow she had expected they would make it back to the bed. They didn't. His hunger was particularly strong in the mornings, and after a tempestuous few moments she found herself on her knees, half bent over the edge of the bathtub while he crouched behind her. Their love-making was raw and fast and powerful, and left her once again lying weakly on the floor. She found some satisfaction in the fact that he was sprawled beside her, his long legs stretched under the vanity top.

After a long time he said lazily, "I'd thought I could wait until we were in the shower. I underestimated the effect of a soft drink on you, sweetheart... and what watching you drink it does to me."

"I think we're on to something," she reflected, curling nakedly against him and ignoring the chill of the floor. "We need to buy stock in the company."

"Good idea." He turned his head and began kissing her, and for a moment she wondered if the bathroom floor was going to get another workout. But he released her and rose lithely to his feet, then helped her up. "Do you want to have room service, or go down to a restaurant for breakfast?"

"Room service." She was already hungry, and with room service their breakfast should be there by the time she showered and dressed. She gave Zane her order, then, while he called it in, she selected the clothes she wanted. The silk dress was badly wrinkled, so she carried it into the bathroom with her to let the steam from her shower repair the damage.

She took her time in the shower, but even so, some wrinkles remained in the dress by the time she finished. She left the water running and turned it on hot to increase the amount of steam. On a hook behind the door hung a thick terry-cloth bathrobe with the hotel's logo stitched on the breast pocket. She pulled it on and belted it around her, smiling at the weight and size of the garment, and went out to see how long it would be before their breakfast arrived.

Zane wasn't in the bedroom; she could hear him talking in the parlor, and wondered if room service had been unusually quick. But she heard only his voice as she walked to the open door.

He was on the phone, half-turned away from her as he sat on the arm of the couch. She had the impression that he was listening to the shower running

even as he carried on his conversation.
"Keep the tail on her father, as well as on *his* tail," he was saying. "I want to catch them all at one time, so I don't have to worry about any loose ends. When the dust settles, Justice and State can sort it out between them."
Barrie gasped, all the color washing out of her face. Zane's head jerked around, and he stared at her, the blue mostly gone from his eyes, leaving them as sharp and gray as frost.
"Yeah," he said into the receiver, his gaze never wavering from hers. "Everything's under control here. Keep the pressure on." He hung up and turned fully to face her.
He hadn't showered yet, she noticed dully. His hair wasn't wet; there was no betraying dampness to his skin. He must have gotten on the phone as soon as she had begun her shower, setting in motion the betrayal that could send her father to jail.
"What have you done?" she whispered, barely holding herself together against the pain that racked her. "Zane, *what have you done?"*
Coolly he stood and came toward her. Barrie backed up, clutching the lapels of the thick robe as if it could protect her.
He flicked a curious glance toward the bathroom, where billows of steam were escaping from the half-open door. "Why is the shower still running?"
"I'm steaming the wrinkles out of my dress," she answered automatically.
His eyebrows lifted wryly. Though she didn't find the pun amusing, she had the thought that this was evidently a wrinkle he hadn't anticipated.
"Who were you talking to?" she asked, her voice stiff with hurt and betrayal and the strain of holding it all under control.
"My brother Chance."
"What does he have to do with my father?"
Zane watched her steadily. "Chance does intelligence work for a government agency; not the FBI or CIA."
Barrie swallowed against the constriction in her throat. Maybe Zane hadn't betrayed her father; maybe he'd already been under surveillance. "How long has he been following my father?"
"Chance is directing the tails, not doing them himself," Zane corrected.
"How long?"
"Since last night. I called him while you were showering then, too."
At least he didn't try to lie or evade. "How could you?" she whispered, her eyes wide and stark.

"Very easily," he replied, his voice sharp. "I'm an officer of the law. Before that, I was an officer in the Navy, in service to this country. Did you think I would ignore a traitor, even if it's your father? You asked me to protect you and our baby, and that's exactly what I'm doing. When you clean out a nest of snakes, you don't pick out a few of them to kill and leave the others. You wipe them out."

The edges of her vision blurred, and she felt herself sway. Oh, God, how could she ever forgive him if her father went to prison? How could she ever forgive herself? She was the cause of this. She had known the kind of man Zane was, but she had allowed herself to ignore it because she'd wanted him so desperately. Of course he'd turned her father in; if she'd been thinking clearly, instead of with her emotions, her hormones, she would have known exactly what he would do, what he had done. It didn't take a genius to predict the actions of a man who had spent his life upholding the laws of his country, and only a fool would ignore the obvious conclusion.

She hadn't even thought about it, so she guessed that made her the biggest fool alive.

She heard him say her name, his tone insistent, and then her vision was blocked by his big body as he gripped her arms.

Desperately she hung on to consciousness, gulping in air and refusing to let herself faint. "Let go of me," she protested, and was shocked at how far away her voice sounded.

"Like hell I will." Instead he swung her off her feet and carried her to the bed, then bent to place her on the tumbled sheets.

As he had the night before, he sat beside her. Now that she was lying down, her head cleared rapidly. He was leaning over her, one arm braced on the other side of her hip, enclosing her in the iron circle of his embrace. His gaze never left her face.

Barrie wished she could find refuge in anger, but there was none. She understood Zane's motives, and his actions. All she could feel was a huge whirlpool of pain, sucking her down. Her father! As much as she loved Zane, she didn't know if she could bear it if he caused her father to be arrested. This wasn't anything like theft or drunken driving. Treason was heinous, unthinkable. No matter what conclusion her logic drew, she simply couldn't see her father doing anything like that, unless he was somehow being forced to do it. She knew *she* wasn't the weapon being used against him, although she had been drawn into it, probably when he had balked at

something. No, she and Zane had both realized immediately that if she was being threatened and her father had nothing to hide, he would have had her whisked away by the FBI before she knew what was happening.
"Please," she begged, clutching his arm. "Can't you warn him somehow, get him out of it? I know you didn't like him, but you don't know him the way I do. He's always done what he thought was best for me. He was always there when I needed him, and b-before I left he gave me his blessing." Her voice broke on a sob, and she quickly controlled it. "I know he's a snob, but he isn't a bad person! If he's gotten involved in something he shouldn't, it was by accident, and now he doesn't know how to get out without endangering me! That *has* to be it. Zane, please!"
He caught her hand, folding it warmly within his. "I can't do that," he said quietly. "If he hasn't done anything wrong, he'll be all right. If he's a traitor —" He shrugged, indicating the lack of options. He wouldn't lift a finger to help a traitor, period. "I didn't want you to know anything about it because I didn't want you to be upset any more than necessary. I knew I wouldn't be able to protect you from worry if he's arrested, but I didn't want you to find out about it beforehand. You've had enough to deal with these past couple of months. My first priority is keeping you and the baby safe, and I'll do that, Barrie, no matter what."
She stared at him through tear-blurred eyes, knowing she had collided with the steel wall of his convictions. Honor wasn't just a concept to him, but a way of life. Still, there was one way she might reach him. "What if it was your father?" she asked.
A brief spasm touched his face, telling her that she'd struck a nerve. "I don't know," he admitted. "I hope I'd be able to do what's right... but I don't know."
There was nothing more she could say.
The only thing she could do was warn her father herself.
She moved away from him, sliding off the bed. He lifted his arm and let her go, though he watched her closely, as if waiting for her to faint or throw up or slap him in the face. Considering her pregnancy and her state of mind, she realized, all three were possible, if she relaxed her control just a fraction. But she wasn't going to do any of them, because she couldn't afford to waste the time.
She hugged the oversize robe about her, as she had once hugged his shirt. "What exactly is your brother doing?" She needed as much information as

possible if she was going to help her father. Maybe it was wrong, but she would worry about that, and face the consequences, later. She knew she was operating on love and blind trust, but that was all she had to go on. When she thought of her father as the man she knew him to be, she knew she had to trust both that knowledge and his honor. Despite their enormous differences, in that respect he was very like Zane, the man he'd scorned as a son-in-law: honor was a part of his code, his life, his very being.

Zane stood. "You don't need to know, exactly."

For the first time she felt the flush of anger redden her cheeks. "Don't throw my words back at me," she snapped. "You can say no without being sarcastic."

He studied her, then gave a curt nod. "You're right. I'm sorry."

She stalked into the bathroom and slammed the door. The small room was hot and damp with steam, the air thick with it. Barrie turned off the shower and turned on the exhaust fan. There wasn't a wrinkle left in the silk dress. Hurriedly she shed the robe and pulled on the underwear she'd carried into the bathroom, then pulled the dress on over her head. The silk stuck to her damp skin; she had to jerk the fabric to get it into place. The need to hurry beat through her like wings. How much time did she have before room service arrived with their breakfast?

The mirror was fogged over. She grabbed a towel and rubbed a clear spot on the glass, then swiftly combed her hair and began applying a minimum of makeup. The air was so steamy that it would be a wasted effort to apply very much, but she wanted to appear as normal as possible.

Oh, God, the exhaust fan was making so much noise she might not have heard their breakfast arriving. Hastily she cut it off. Zane would have knocked if their food was here, she assured herself. It hadn't arrived yet. She tried to remember where her purse was, and think how she could get it and get out the door without Zane knowing. His hearing was acute, and he would be watching for her. But the room service waiter would bring their breakfast to the parlor, and Zane, being as cautious as he was, would watch the man's every move. That was the only time he would be distracted, and the only chance she would have to get out of the room undetected. Her window of opportunity would be brief, because he would call her as soon as the waiter left. If she had to wait for an elevator, she was sunk. She could always try the stairs, but all Zane would have to do was take the elevator down to the lobby and wait for her there. With his hearing, he probably

heard the elevator every time it chimed, and that would give him an idea of whether she had been able to get one of the cars or had taken the stairs.
She opened the bathroom door a little, so he wouldn't be able to catch the click of the latch.
"What are you doing?" he called. It sounded as if he was standing just inside the double doors that connected the bedroom to the parlor, waiting for her.
"Putting on makeup," she snapped, with perfect truth. She blotted the sweat off her forehead and began again with the powder. Her brief flash of anger was over, but she didn't want him to know it. Let him think she was furious; a woman who was both pregnant and angry deserved a lot of space.
There was a brief knock on the parlor door, and a Spanish-accented voice called out, "Room service."
Quickly Barrie switched on the faucet, so the sound of running water would once again mask her movements. Peering through the small opening by the door, she saw Zane cross her field of vision, going to answer the knock. He was wearing his shoulder holster, which meant, as she had hoped, that he was on guard.
She slipped out of the bathroom, carefully pulled the door back to leave the same small opening, then darted to the other side of the bedroom, out of his line of sight if he glanced inside when he passed by the double doors. Her purse was lying on one of the chairs, and she snatched it up, then slipped her feet into her shoes.
The room service cart clattered as it was rolled into the room. Through the open parlor doors she could hear the waiter casually chatting as he set up the table. Zane's pistol made the waiter nervous; she could hear it in his voice. And his nervousness made Zane that much more wary of him. Zane was probably watching him like a hawk, those pale eyes remote and glacier-cold.
Now was the tricky part. She eased up to the open double doors, peeking through the crack to locate her husband. Relief made her knees wobble; he was standing with his back to the doors while he watched the waiter. The running faucet was doing its job; be was listening to it, rather than positioning himself on the other side of the table so he could watch both the waiter and the bathroom door. He probably did it deliberately, dividing his senses rather than diluting the visual attention he was paying to the waiter.

Her husband was not an ordinary man. Escaping him, even for five minutes, wouldn't be easy.

Taking a deep breath, she silently crossed the open expanse, every nerve in her body drawn tight as she waited for his hard hand to clamp down on her shoulder. She reached the bedroom door to the hallway and held the chain so it wouldn't clink when she slipped it free. That done, her next obstacle was the lock. She moved her body as close to the door as possible, using her flesh to muffle the sound, and slowly turned the latch. The dead bolt slid open with smooth precision and a snick that was barely audible even to her. She closed her eyes and turned the handle then, concentrating on keeping the movement smooth and silent. If it made any noise, she was caught. If anyone was walking by in the hallway and talking, the change in noise level would alert Zane, and she was caught. If the elevator was slow, she was caught. Everything had to be perfect, or she didn't have a chance.

How much longer did she have? It felt as if she had already taken ten minutes, but it was probably no more than one. Crockery was still rattling in the parlor as the waiter arranged their plates and saucers and water glasses. The door opened, and she slipped through, then spent the same agonizing amount of time making sure it closed as silently as it opened. She released the handle and ran.

She reached the elevators without hearing him shout her name and jabbed the down button. It obediently lit, and remained lit. There was no welcoming chime to signal the arrival of the elevator. Barrie restrained herself from punching the button over and over again in a futile attempt to convey her urgency to a piece of machinery.

"Please," she whispered under her breath. *"Hurry."*

She would have tried calling her father from the hotel room, but she knew Zane would stop her if he heard her on the phone. She also knew her father's phone was tapped, which meant that incoming calls were automatically recorded. She would try to protect her father, but she refused to do anything that might endanger either Zane or their baby by leading the kidnappers straight to the hotel. She would have to call her father from a pay phone on the street, and a different street, at that.

Down the hall, she heard the room service cart clatter again as the waiter left their suite. Her heart pounding, she stared at the closed elevator doors, willing them to open. Her time was down to mere seconds.

The melodic chime sounded overhead.

The doors slid open.
She looked back as she stepped inside, and her heart nearly stopped. Zane hadn't yelled, hadn't called her name. He was running full speed down the hall, his motion as fluid and powerful as a linebacker's, and pure fury was blazing in his eyes.
He was almost there.
Panicked, she simultaneously pushed the buttons for the lobby and for the door to close. She stepped back from the closing gap as Zane lunged forward, trying to get his hand in the door, which would trigger the automatic opening sensor.
He didn't quite make it. The doors slid shut, and the box began to move downward. "God *damn* it," he roared in frustration, and Barrie flinched as his fist thudded against the doors.
Weakly she leaned against the wall and covered her face with her hands while she shook with reaction. Dear God, she'd never imagined anyone could be so angry. He'd been almost incandescent with it, his eyes all but glowing.
He was probably racing down the stairs, but he had twenty-one floors to cover, and he was no match for the elevator—unless it stopped to pick up passengers on other floors. This possibility nearly brought her to her knees. She watched the numbers change, unable to breathe. If it stopped even once, he might catch her in the street. If it stopped twice, he would catch her in the lobby. Three times, and he would be waiting for her at the elevator. She would have to face that rage, and she'd never dreaded anything more.
Leaving Zane had never been her intention. After she'd warned her father, she would go back to the suite. She didn't fear Zane physically; she knew instinctively that he would never hit her, but somehow that wasn't much comfort.
She had wanted to see him lose control, outside of that final moment in lovemaking when his body took charge and he gave himself over to orgasm. Nausea roiled in her stomach, and she shuddered. Why had she ever wished for such a stupid thing? Oh, God, she never wanted to see him lose his temper again.
He might never forgive her. She might be forsaking forever any chance that he could love her. The full knowledge of what she was risking to warn her father rode her shoulders all the way to the lobby, one long, smooth descent, without any stops.

The rattle and clink of the slot machines never stopped, no matter how early or how late. The din surrounded her as she hurried through the lobby and out to the street. The desert sun was blindingly white, the temperature already edging past ninety, though the morning was only half gone. Barrie joined the tourists thronging the sidewalk, walking quickly despite the heat. She reached the corner, crossed the street and kept walking, not daring to look back. Her red hair would be fairly easy to spot at a distance, even in a crowd, unless she was hidden by someone taller. Zane would have reached the lobby by now. He would quickly scan the slot machine crowd, then erupt onto the street.

Her chest ached, and she realized she was holding her breath again. She gulped in air and hurried to put a building between herself and the hotel entrance. She was afraid to look back, afraid she would see her big, black-haired husband bearing down on her like a thunderstorm, and she knew she would never be able to outrun him.

She crossed one more street and began looking for a pay phone. They were easy to find, but getting an available one was something else again. Why were so many tourists using pay phones at this time of the morning? Barrie stood patiently, the hot sun beating down on her head, while a blue-haired elderly lady in support stockings gave detailed instructions to someone on when to feed her cat, when to feed her fish and when to feed her plants. Finally she hung up with a cheerful, "Bye-bye, dearie," and she gave Barrie a sweet smile as she hobbled past. The smile was so unexpected that Barrie almost burst into tears. Instead she managed a smile of her own and stepped up to the phone before anyone could squeeze ahead of her.

She used her calling card number because it was faster, and since she was calling from a pay phone, it didn't matter how she placed the call. *Please, God, let him be there*, she silently prayed as she listened to the tones, then the ringing. It was lunchtime on the east coast; he could be having lunch with someone, or playing golf—he could be anywhere. She tried to remember his schedule, but nothing came to mind. Their relationship had been so strained for the past two months that she had disassociated herself from his social and political appointments.

"Hello?"

The answer was so cautious, so wary sounding, that at first she didn't recognize her father's voice.

"Hello?" he said again, sounding even more wary, if possible.

Barrie pressed the handset hard to her ear, trying to keep her hand from shaking. "Daddy," she said, her voice strangled. She hadn't called him Daddy in years, but the old name slipped out past the barrier of her adulthood.
"Barrie? Sweetheart?" Life zinged into his voice, and she could picture him in her mind, sitting up straighter at his desk.
"Daddy, I can't say much." She fought to keep her voice even, so he would be able to understand her. "You have to be careful. You have to protect yourself. People *know.* Do you hear me?"
He was silent a moment, then he said with a calmness that was beyond her, "I understand. Are you safe?"
"Yes," she said, though she wasn't sure. She still had to face her husband.
"Then take care, sweetheart, and I'll talk to you soon."
"Bye," she whispered, then carefully hung the receiver in its cradle and turned to go to the hotel. She had taken about ten steps when she was captured in the hard grip she had been dreading. She didn't see him coming, so she couldn't brace herself. One second he wasn't there, the next second he was, surfacing out of the crowd like a shark.
Despite everything, she was glad to see him, glad to get it over with instead of dreading the first meeting during every dragging step to the hotel. The tension and effort had drained her. She leaned weakly against him, and he clamped his arm around her waist to support her. "You shouldn't be out in the sun without something on your head," was all he said. "Especially since you haven't eaten anything today."
He was in control, that incandescent fury cooled and conquered. She wasn't foolish enough to believe it was gone, however. "I had to warn him," she said tiredly. "And I didn't want the call traced to the hotel."
"I know." The words were brief to the point of curt-ness. "It might not make any difference. Las Vegas is crawling with a certain group of people this morning, and you may have been spotted. Your hair." Those two words were enough. Redheads were always distinctive, because there were so few of them. She felt like apologizing for the deep, rich luster of her hair.
"They're here?" she asked in a small voice. "The kidnappers?"
"Not the original ones. There's a deep game going on, baby, and I'm afraid you just jumped into the middle of it."
The sun beat down on her unprotected head, the heat increasing by the minute. Every step seemed more and more of an effort. Her thoughts

scattered. She might have plunged Zane and herself into the very danger she'd wanted to avoid. "Maybe I *am* a pampered society babe with more hair than brains," she said aloud. "I didn't mean—"
"I know," he said again, and unbelievably, he squeezed her waist. "And I never said you have more hair than brains. If anything, you're too damn smart, and it seems you have a natural talent for sneaking around. Not many people could have gotten out of that suite without me hearing them. Spook, maybe. And Chance. No one else."
Barrie leaned more of her weight against him. She was on his left side, and she felt the hard lump of the holster beneath his jacket. When he'd grabbed her, he'd instinctively kept his right hand free, in case he needed his pistol. What he *didn't* need, she thought tiredly, was having to support her weight and keep his balance in a firefight. She forced herself to straighten away from him, despite the way his arm tightened around her waist. He gave her a questioning look.
"I don't want to impede you," she explained.
His mouth curved wryly. "See what I mean? Now you're thinking of combat stuff. If you weren't so sweet, Mrs. Mackenzie, you'd be a dangerous woman."
Why wasn't he lambasting her? She couldn't imagine he'd gotten over his fury so fast; Zane struck her as the type of man who seldom lost his temper, but when he did, it was undoubtedly a memorable occasion—one that could last for years. Maybe he was saving it for when they were in the privacy of the suite, remaining on guard while they were in the street. He could do that, compartmentalize his anger, shove it aside until it was safe to bring it out.
She found herself studying the surging, milling, strolling crowd of tourists that surrounded them, looking for ' any betraying sign of interest. It helped take her mind off how incredibly weak she felt. This pregnancy was making itself felt with increasing force; though it had been foolish of her to come out into the sun without eating breakfast, and without a hat, normally she wouldn't have had any problem with the heat in this short amount of time. How much farther was it to the hotel? She concentrated on her steps, on the faces around her. Zane maintained a slow, steady pace, and when he could, he put himself between her and the sun. The human shade helped, marginally.

"Here we are," he said, ushering her into the cool, dim cavern of the lobby. She closed her eyes to help them adjust from the bright sunlight and sighed with relief as the blast of air-conditioning washed over her.
The elevator was crowded on the ride up. Zane pulled her against the back wall, so he would have one less side to protect, and also to set up a human wall of protection between them and the open doors. She felt a faint spurt of surprise as she realized she knew what he was thinking, the motives behind his actions. He would do what he could to keep anything from happening, and to protect these people, but if push came to shove, he would ruthlessly sacrifice the other people in this elevator to keep her safe.
They got off on the twenty-first floor, the ride uneventful. A man and woman got off at the same time, a middle-aged couple with Rochester accents. They turned down the hallway leading away from the suite. Zane guided Barrie after them, following the couple until they reached their room around the corner. As they walked past, Barrie glanced inside the room as the couple entered it; it was untidy, piled with shopping bags and the dirty clothes they'd worn the day before.
"Safe," Zane murmured as they wound their way to the suite.
"They wouldn't have had all the tourist stuff if they'd just arrived?"
He slanted an unreadable look at her. "Yeah."
The suite was blessedly cool. She stumbled inside, and Zane locked and chained the door. Their breakfast still sat on the table, untouched and cold. He all but pushed her into a chair anyway. "Eat," he ordered. "Just the toast, if nothing else. Put jelly on it. And drink all the water."
He sat down on the arm of the couch, picked up the phone and began dialing.
Just to be safe, she ate half a slice of dry toast first, eschewing the balls of butter, which wouldn't melt on the cold toast anyway. Her stomach was peaceful at the moment, but she didn't want to do anything to upset it. She smeared the second half slice with jelly.
As she methodically ate and drank, she began to feel better. Zane was making no effort to keep her from hearing his conversation, and she gathered he was talking to his brother Chance again.
"If she was spotted, we have maybe half an hour," he was saying. "Get everyone on alert." He listened a moment, then said, "Yeah, I know. I'm slipping." He said goodbye with a cryptic, "Keep it cool."
"Keep what cool?" Barrie asked, turning in her chair to face him.

A flicker of amusement lightened his remote eyes. "Chance has a habit of sticking his nose, along with another part of his anatomy, into hot spots. He gets burned occasionally."
"And you don't, I suppose?"
He shrugged. "Occasionally," he admitted.
He was very calm, unusually so, even for him. It was like waiting for a storm to break. Barrie took a deep breath and braced herself. "All right, I'm feeling better," she said, more evenly than she felt. "Let me have it."
He regarded her for a moment, then shook his head-regretfully, she thought. "It'll have to wait. Chance said there's a lot of activity going on all of a sudden. It's all about to hit the fan."

Chapter 13

They didn't have even the half hour Zane had hoped for.
The phone rang, and he picked it up. "Roger," he said, and placed the receiver into its cradle. He stood and strode over to Barrie. "They're moving in," he said, lifting her from the chair with an implacable hand. "And you're going to a different floor."
He was shoving her out of harm's way. She stiffened against the pressure of his hand, digging in her heels. He stopped and turned to face her, then placed his hand over her belly. "You have to go," he said, without a flicker of emotion. He was in combat mode, his face impassive, his eyes cold and distant.
He was right. Because of the baby, she had to go. She put her hand over his. "All right. But do you have an extra pistol I could have—just in case?"
He hesitated briefly, then strode into the bedroom to his garment bag. The weapon he removed was a compact, five-shot revolver. "Do you know how to use it?"
She folded her hand around the butt, feeling the smoothness of the wood. "I've shot skeet, but I've never used a handgun. I'll manage."
"There's no empty chamber, and no safety," he said as he escorted her out the door. "You can pull the hammer back before you fire, or you can use a little more effort and just pull the trigger. Nothing to it but aiming and firing. It's a thirty-eight caliber, so it has stopping power." He was walking swiftly toward the stairs as he talked. He opened the stairwell door and

began pushing her up the stairs, their steps echoing in the concrete silo. "I'm going to put you in an empty room on the twenty-third floor, and I want you to stay there until either Chance or I come for you. If anyone else opens the door, shoot them."
"I don't know what Chance looks like," she blurted.
"Black hair, hazel eyes. Tall. So good-looking you start drooling when you see him. That's what he says women do, anyway."
They reached the twenty-third floor. Barrie was only slightly winded, Zane not at all. As they stepped into the carpeted silence of the hallway, she asked, "How do you know which rooms are empty?"
He produced one of the electronic cards from his pocket. "Because one of Chance's people booked the room last night and slipped me the key card while we were eating supper. Just in case."
He always had an alternate plan—just in case. She should have guessed.
He opened the door to room 2334 and ushered her inside, but he didn't enter himself. "Lock and chain the door, and stay put," he said, then turned and walked swiftly toward the stairwell. Barrie stood in the doorway and watched him. He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. "I'm waiting to hear the door being locked," he said softly.
She stepped back, turned the lock and slid the chain into place.
Then she stood in the middle of the neat, silent room and quietly went to pieces.
She couldn't stand it. Zane was deliberately walking into *danger—on her account*—and she couldn't join him. She couldn't be there with him, couldn't guard his back. Because of the baby growing inside her, she was relegated to this safe niche while the man she loved faced bullets for her.
She sat on the floor and rocked back and forth, her arms folded over her stomach, keening softly as tears rolled down her face. This terror for Zane's safety was worse than anything she'd ever felt before, far worse than what she'd known at the hands of her kidnappers, worse even than when he'd been shot. At least she'd *been* there then. She'd been able to help, able to touch him.
She couldn't do anything now.
A sharp, deep report that sounded like thunder made her jump. Except it wasn't thunder; the desert sky was bright and cloudless. She buried her face against her knees, weeping harder. More shots. Some lighter, flatter in tone.

A peculiar cough. Another deep thundering, then several in quick succession.

Then silence.

She pulled herself together and scrambled to the far corner of the room, behind the bed. She sat with her back against the wall and her arms braced on her knees, the pistol steady as she held it trained on the door. She didn't see how anyone other than Zane or Chance could know where she was, but she wouldn't gamble on it. She didn't know what any of this was about, or who her enemies were, except for Mack Prewett, probably.

Time crawled past. She didn't have her wristwatch on, and the clock radio on the bedside table was turned away from her. She didn't get up to check the time. She simply sat there with the pistol in her hand and waited, and died a little more with each passing minute of Zane's absence.

He didn't come. She felt the coldness of despair grow in her heart, spreading until it filled her chest, the pressure of it almost stopping her lungs. Her heartbeat slowed to a heavy, painful rhythm. *Zane*. He would have come, if he'd been able. He'd been shot again. Wounded. She wouldn't let herself even think the word *dead*, but it was there, in her heart, her chest, and she didn't know how she could go on.

There was a brief knock on the door. "Barrie?" came a soft call, a voice that sounded tired and familiar. "It's Art Sandefer. It's over. Mack's in custody, and you can come out now."

Only Zane and Chance were supposed to know where she was. Zane had said that if anyone else opened the door, to shoot them. But she'd known Art Sandefer for years, known and respected both the man and the job he did. If Mack Prewett had been dirty, Art would have been on top of it. His presence here made sense.

"Barrie?" The door handle rattled.

She started to get up and let him in, then sank back to the floor. No. He wasn't Zane and he wasn't Chance. If she had lost Zane, the least she could do was follow his last instructions to the letter. His objective had been her safety, and she trusted him more than she had ever trusted anyone else in her life, including her father. She definitely trusted him more than she did Art Sandefer.

She was unprepared for the peculiar little coughing sound. Then the lock on the door exploded, and Art Sandefer pushed the door open and stepped inside. In his hand was a pistol with a thick silencer fitted onto the end of

the barrel. Their eyes met across the room, his weary and cynical and acutely intelligent. And she knew.
Barrie pulled the trigger.
Zane was there only moments, seconds, later. Art had slumped to a sitting position against the open door, his hand pressed to the hole in his chest as his eyes glazed with shock. Zane kicked the weapon from Art's outstretched hand, but that was all the attention he paid to the wounded man. He stepped over him as if he wasn't there, rapidly crossing the room to where Barrie sat huddled in the corner, her face drawn and gray. Her ga2e was oddly distant and unfocused. Panic roared through him, but a swift inspection didn't reveal any blood. She looked unharmed.
He hunkered down beside her, gently brushing her hair from her face. "Sweetheart?" he asked in a soft tone. "It's over now. Are you all right?"
She didn't answer. He sat down on the floor beside her and pulled her onto his lap, holding her close and tight against the warmth of his body. He kept up a reassuring murmur, a gentle sound of reassurance. He could feel the thud of her heartbeat against him, the rhythm hard and alarmingly slow. He held her tighter, his face buried against the richness of her hair.
"Is she all right?" Chance asked as he, too, stepped over Art Sandefer and approached his brother and new sister-in-law. Other people were coming into the room, people who tended to the wounded man. Mack Prewett was one of them, his eyes sharp and hard as he watched his former superior.
"She'll be fine," Zane murmured, lifting his head. "She shot Sandefer."
The brothers' eyes met in a moment of understanding. The first one was tough. With luck and good care, Sandefer would survive, but Barrie would always be one of those who knew what it was like to pull that trigger.
"How did he know which room?" Zane asked, keeping his voice calm.
Chance sat down on the bed and leaned forward, his forearms braced on his knees. His expression was pleasant enough, his eyes cool and thoughtful. "I must have a leak in my group," he said matter-of-factly. "And I know who it is, because only one person knew this room number. I'll take care of it."
"You do that."
Barrie stirred in Zane's grip, her arms lifting to twine around his neck. "Zane," she said, her voice faint and choked, shaking.
Because he'd felt the same way, he heard the panic in her voice, the despair. "I'm okay," he whispered, kissing her temple. "I'm okay."

A sob shook her, then was quickly controlled. She was soldiering on. Emotion swelled in his chest, a huge golden bubble of such force that it threatened to stop his breathing, his heartbeat. He closed his eyes to hold back the tears that burned his lids. "Oh, God," he said shakily. "I thought I was too late. I saw Sandefer walk in before I could get off a round at him, and then I heard the shot."

Her arms tightened convulsively around his neck, but she didn't say anything.

Zane put his hand on her belly, gulping in air as he fought for control. He was trembling, he noticed with distant surprise. Only Barrie could make mincemeat of his nerves. "I want the baby," he said, his voice still shaking. "But I didn't even think about it then. All I could think was that if I lost you —" He broke off, unable to continue.

"Baby?" Chance asked, politely inquiring.

Barrie nodded, her head moving against Zane's chest. Her face was still buried against him, and she didn't look up.

"Barrie, this is my brother Chance," Zane said. His tone was still rough, uneven.

Blindly Barrie held out her hand. Amused, Chance gently shook it, then returned it to Zane's neck. He had yet to see her face. "Glad to meet you," he said. "I'm happy about the baby, too. That should deflect Mom's attention for a while."

The room was filled to overflowing: hotel security, Las Vegas police, medics, not to mention Mack Prewett and the FBI, who were quietly controlling everything. Chance's people had pulled back, melting into the shadows where they belonged, where they operated best. Chance picked up the phone, made one brief call, then said to Zane, "It's taken care of."

Mack Prewett came over and sat down on the bed beside Chance. His face was troubled as he looked at Barrie, clutched so tightly in Zane's arms. "Is she all right?"

"Yes," she said, answering for herself.

"Art's critical, but he might make it. It would save us a lot of trouble if he didn't." Mack's voice was flat, emotionless.

Barrie shuddered.

"You were never meant to be involved, Barrie," Mack said. "I began to think Art was playing both sides, so I asked your father to help me set him up. The information had to be legitimate, and the ambassador knows more

people, has access to more inside information, than can be believed. Art went for the bait like a hungry carp. But then he asked for something really critical, the ambassador stalled, and the next thing we knew, you'd been snatched. Your dad nearly came unglued."
"Then those bastards in Benghazi knew we were coming in," Zane said, his eyes going cold.
"Yeah. I managed to shuffle the time frame a little when I gave the information to Art, but that was the most I could do to help. They weren't expecting you as early as you got there."
"I couldn't believe it of him. Art Sandefer, of all people," Barrie said, lifting her head to look at Mack. "Until I saw his eyes. I thought *you* were the dirty one."
Mack smiled crookedly. "It rocked me that you figured out anything was going on at all."
"Dad tipped me off. He acted so frightened every time I left the house."
"Art wanted you," Mack explained. "He was playing it cool for a while, or we would have had this wrapped up weeks ago. But it wasn't just the information. Art wanted *you*."
Barrie was stunned by what Mack was saying. She glanced at Zane and saw his jaw tighten. So that was why she hadn't been raped in Benghazi; Art had been saving her for himself. He could never have released her, of course, if she had seen his face. Perhaps he would have drugged her, but more likely he would simply have raped her, kept her for himself for a while, then killed her. She shuddered, turning her face once more against Zane's throat. She was still having trouble believing he was safe and unharmed; it was difficult to drag herself out of the black pit of despair, even though she knew the worst hadn't happened. She felt numb, sick.
But then a thought occurred to her, one she would have had sooner if concern for Zane hadn't wiped everything else from her mind. She looked at Mack again. "Then my father's in the clear."
"Absolutely. He was working with me from the get-go." He met her gaze and shrugged. "Your dad can be a pain in the rear, but his loyalty was never in question."
"When I called him this morning—"
Mack grimaced. "He was relieved to know you loved him enough to call, despite the evidence against him. Your leaving the hotel stirred up a hornet's nest, though. I thought we had everything under control."

"How?"
"Me," Chance interjected, and for the first time Barrie looked at her brother-in-law. She didn't drool, but she had to admit that his good looks were startling. Viewed objectively, he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. However, she far preferred Zane's scarred, somber face, with its ancient eyes.
"I checked into another hotel under Zane's name," Chance explained. "You weren't listed at all, but Art knew you were with Zane, because he'd checked the license plate on that rental car and traced the rental to Zane's credit card. We didn't want to make it too obvious for him, we wanted him to have to work to find us, so he wouldn't be suspicious. When he found out you'd married Zane, though, he stopped being so cautious." Chance grinned. "Then you went for a walk this morning, and fubar happened. The pay phone you chose was right across the street from the hotel where I'd checked in, and Art's people spotted you immediately."
Across the room, the medics finally had Art Sandefer ready for transport to a hospital. Zane watched the man being carried out, then cut his narrowed gaze to Mack. "If I'd known about you a little sooner, most of this could have been avoided."
Mack didn't back down from that glacial stare. "As far as that goes, Commander, I didn't expect you to have the contacts you have—" he glanced at Chance "—or to move as fast as you did. I'd been working on Art for months. You made things happen in one day."
Zane stood, effortlessly lifting Barrie in his arms as he did so. "It's over now," he said with finality. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I need to take care of my wife."
Taking care of her involved getting a third room, because the suite was in bad shape and he didn't want her to see it. He placed her on the bed, locked the door, then stripped both her and himself and got into bed with her, holding their naked bodies as close together as possible. They both needed the reassurance of bare skin, no barriers between them. He got hard immediately, but now wasn't the time for lovemaking.
Barrie couldn't seem to stop trembling, and, to her astonishment, neither could Zane. They clung together, touching each other's faces, absorbing the smell and feel of each other in an effort to dispel the terror.
"I love you," he whispered, holding her so close her ribs ached from the pressure. "God, I was so scared! I can't keep it together where you're

concerned, sweetheart. For the sake of my sanity, I hope the rest of our lives are as dull as dishwater."
"They will be," she promised, kissing his chest. "We'll work on it." And tears blurred her eyes, because she hadn't expected so much, so fast.
Then, finally, it was time for more. Gently he entered her, and they lay entwined, not moving, as if their nerves couldn't stand a sharp assault now, even one of pleasure. That, too, came in its own time... her pleasure, and his.

Epilogue

"Twins," Barrie said, her voice still full of stunned bewilderment as she and Zane drove along the road that wound up the side of Mackenzie's Mountain. "Boys."
"I told you how it would be," Zane said, glancing at the mound of her stomach, which was much too big for five months of pregnancy. "Boys."
She gave him a glassy stare of shock. "You didn't," she said carefully, "say they would come in pairs."
"There haven't been twins in our family before," Zane said, just as carefully. In truth, he felt as shaky as Barrie did. "This is a first."
She stared out the window, her gaze passing blindly over the breathtaking vista of craggy blue mountains. They lived in Wyoming now; with Zane's two-year tenure as sheriff in Arizona over, he had declined to run for election, and they had moved closer to the rest of the family. Chance had been after him for those two years to join his organization—though Barrie still wasn't certain exactly what that organization *was*—and Zane had finally relented. He wouldn't be doing fieldwork, because he didn't want to risk the life he had with Barrie and Nick and now these two new babies who were growing inside her, but he had a rare knack for planning for the unexpected, and that was the talent he was using.
The entire family, including her father, was gathered on the mountain to celebrate the Fourth of July, which was the next day. Zane, Barrie and Nick had driven up two days before for an extended visit, but today had been her scheduled checkup, and he'd driven her into town to the doctor's office. Given the way her waistline had been expanding, they should have expected the news, but Zane had simply figured she was further along in her

pregnancy than they'd thought. Seeing those two little fetuses on the ultrasound had been quite a shock, but there hadn't been any doubt about it. Two heads, two tails, four arms and hands, four legs and feet—and both babies definitely male. Very definitely.
"I can't think of two names," Barrie said, sounding very near tears.
Zane reached over to pat her knee. "We have four more months to think of names."
She sniffed. "There's no way," she said, "that I can carry them for four more months. We'll have to come up with names before then."
They *were* big babies, both of them, much bigger than Nick had been at this stage.
"After Nick, it took a lot of courage just to think of having another baby," she continued. "I'd geared myself up for one. *One*. *Zane*, what if *they're both like Nick?"*
He blanched. Nick was a hellion. Nick had a good shot at turning the entire family gray-haired within another year. For a very short person with a limited vocabulary, their offspring could cause an unbelievable uproar in a remarkably short period of time.
They reached the crest of the mountain, and Zane slowed the car as they neared the large, sprawling ranch house. A variety of vehicles were parked around the yard—Wolf's truck, Mary's car, Mike and Shea's Suburban, Josh and Loren's rental, Ambassador Lovejoy's rental, Maris's snazzy truck, Chance's motorcycle. Joe and Caroline and their five hooligans had arrived by helicopter. Boys seemed to be everywhere, from Josh's youngest, age five, to John, who was Joe's oldest and was now in college and here with his current girlfriend.
They were adding two more to the gang.
They got out and walked up the steps to the porch. Zane put his arm around her and hugged her close, tilting her face up for a kiss that quickly grew heated. Barrie glowed with a special sexuality when she was pregnant, and the plain truth was he couldn't resist her. Their love play was often extended these days, now that pregnancy had once again made her breasts as sensitive as they had been when she'd carried Nick.
"Stop that!" Josh called cheerfully from inside the house. "That's what got her in that condition in the first place!"
Reluctantly Zane released his wife, and together they went into the house.
"That isn't exactly right," he told Josh, who laughed.

The big television was on, and Maris, Josh and Chance were watching some show-jumping event. Wolf and Joe were discussing cattle with Mike. Caroline was arguing politics with the ambassador. Mary and Shea were organizing a game for the younger kids. Loren, who was often an oasis of calm in the middle of the Mackenzie hurricane, gave Barrie's rounded stomach a knowing look. "How did the checkup go?" she asked.
"Twins," Barrie said, still in that numb tone. She gave Zane a helpless, how-did-this-happen look.
The whirlwind of activity came to a sudden stop. Heads lifted and turned. Her father gasped. Mary's face suddenly glowed with radiance.
"Both boys," Zane announced, before anyone could ask.
A sigh almost of relief went around the room. "Thank God," Josh said weakly. "What if it was another one – or fwo – likeNick!"
Barrie's head swiveled around as she began searching for a particular little head. "Where *is* Nick?" she asked.
Chance bolted upright from his sprawled position on the couch. The adults looked around with growing panic. "She was right here," Chance said. "She was dragging one of Dad's boots around."
Zane and Barrie both began a rapid search of the house. "How long ago?" Barrie called.
"Two minutes, no more. Just before you drove up." Maris was on her knees, peering under beds.
"Two minutes!" Barrie almost moaned. In two minutes, Nick could almost single-handedly wreck the house. It was amazing how such a tiny little girl with such an angelic face could be such a demon. "Nick!" she called. "Mary Nicole, come out, come out, wherever you are!" Sometimes that worked. Most times it didn't.
Everyone joined in the search, but their black-haired little terror was nowhere to be found. The entire family had been ecstatic at her birth, and she had been utterly doted on, with even the rough-and-tumble cousins fascinated by the daintiness and beauty of the newest Mackenzie. She really did look angelic, like Pebbles on the old *Flints tones* cartoons. She was adorable. She had Zane's black hair; slanted, deceptively innocent blue eyes; and dimples on each side of her rosebud mouth. She had sat up by herself at four months, crawled at six, walked at eight, and the entire family had been on guard ever since.

They found Wolf's boot beneath Mary's glassed-in collection of angels. From the scuff marks on the wall, Zane deduced his little darling had been trying to knock the collection down by heaving the boot at it. Luckily the boot had been too heavy for her to handle. Her throwing arm wasn't well developed yet, thank God.

She had a frightful temper for such a little thing, and an outsize will, too. Keeping her from doing something she was determined to do was like trying to hold back the tide with a bucket. She had also inherited her father's knack for planning, something that was eerie in a two-year-old. Nick was capable of plotting the downfall of anyone who crossed her.

Once, when Alex, Joe's second oldest, had seen her with a knife in her hand and swiftly snatched it away before she could harm anyone or anything, Nick had thrown a howling temper tantrum that had been halted only when Zane swatted her rear end. Discipline from her adored daddy made her sob so heartbrokenly that everyone else got a lump in their throats. That, and making her sit down in her punishment chair, were so far the only two things they'd discovered that could reduce her to tears.

When she had stopped sobbing, she had pouted in a corner for a while, all the time giving Alex threatening looks over one tiny shoulder. Then she had gone to Bar-rie for comfort, crawling into her mother's lap to be rocked. Her next stop had been Zane's lap, to show him that she forgave him. She'd wound her little arms around his neck and rubbed her chubby little cheek against his rough one. She'd even taken a brief nap, lying limply against his broad shoulder. She'd woken, climbed down and darted off to the kitchen, where she'd implored Mary, whom she called Gamma, for a "dink." She was allowed to have soft drinks without caffeine, so Mary had given her one of the green bottles they always kept in store especially for Nick. Zane and Barrie always shared a look of intimate amusement at their daughter's love for Seven-Up, but there was nothing unusual about seeing her clutching the familiar bottle in her tiny hands. She would take a few sips, then with great concentration screw the top onto the bottle and lug it around with her until it was finally empty, which usually took a couple of hours. On this occasion, Zane had happened to be watching her, smiling at her blissful expression as her little hands closed on the bottle. She had strutted out of the kitchen without letting Mary open the bottle for her and stopped in the hallway, where she vigorously shook the bottle with so much vigor that her entire little body had been bouncing up and down. Then, with a

meltingly sweet smile on her face, she had all but danced into the living room and handed the bottle to Alex with a flirtatious tilt of her head. "Ope' it, pees," she'd said in her adorable small voice... and then she'd backed up a few steps.
"No!" Zane had yelled, leaping up from his chair, but it was too late. Alex had already twisted the cap and broken the seal. The bottle spewed and spurted, the sticky liquid spraying the wall, the floor, the chair. It hit Alex full blast in the face. By the time he'd managed to get the cap securely back on the bottle, he was soaked.
Nick had clapped her hands and said, "Hee, hee, hee," and Zane wasn't certain if it was a laugh or a taunt. It didn't matter. He had collapsed on the floor in laughter, and there was an unbreakable law written in stone somewhere that you couldn't punish youngsters if you'd laughed at what they'd done.
"Nick!" he called now. "Do you want a Popsicle?" Next to Seven-Ups, Popsicles were her favorite treat.
There was no answer.
Sam tore into the house. He was ten, Josh and Loren's middle son. His blue eyes were wide. "Uncle Zane!" he cried. "Nick's on top of the house!"
"Oh, my God," Barrie gasped, and rushed out of the house as fast as she could. Zane tore past her, his heart in his throat, every instinct screaming for him to get to his child as fast as possible.
Everyone spilled into the yard, their faces pale with alarm, and looked up. Nick was sitting cross-legged on the edge of the roof, her little face blissful as she stared down at them. "Hi," she chirped.
Barrie's knees wobbled, and Mary put a supporting, protective arm around her.
It was no mystery how Nick had gotten on the roof—a ladder was leaning against the house, and Nick was as agile as a young goat. The ladder shouldn't have been there; in fact, Zane would have sworn it hadn't been when he and Barrie had arrived, no more than five minutes earlier.
He started up the ladder, his gaze glued on his daughter. A scowl screwed her small features together, and she scrambled to her feet, perilously close to the edge of the roof. "No!" she shrieked. "No, Daddy!"
He froze in place. She didn't want to come down, and she was absolutely fearless. She paid no more heed to her danger than if she'd been in her bed.
"Zane," Barrie whispered, her voice choked.

He was shaking. Nick stomped one little foot and pointed a dimpled finger at him. "Daddy down," she demanded.
He couldn't get to her in time. No matter how fast he moved, his baby was going to fall. There was only one thing to do. "Chance!" he barked.
Chance knew immediately. He ambled forward, not making any swift movements that would startle her. When he was directly below her, he grinned at his cherubic niece, and she grinned at him. He was her favorite uncle.
"Dance," she crowed, showing all her tiny white teeth.
"You little Antichrist," he said fondly. "I'm really going to miss you when you're in prison. I give you... oh, maybe to the age of six."
Benjy, Josh's youngest, piped up behind them, "Why did Uncle Chance call her Dannychrist? Her name's Nick."
Nick spread her arms wide, bouncing up and down on her tiptoes. Chance held up his arms. "Come on, cupcake," he said, and laughed. "Jump!"
She did.
He deftly snagged her in midair, and hugged the precious little body to his chest. Barrie burst into tears of relief. Then Zane was there, taking his daughter in his arms, pressing his lips to her round little head, and Barrie rushed over to be enveloped in his embrace, too.
Caroline looked at Joe. "I forgive you for not having any female sperm," she announced, and Joe laughed.
Josh was frowning sternly at Sam. "How did the ladder get there?" he demanded.
Sam looked at his feet.
Mike and Joe began to frown at their boys.
"Whose bright idea was it to play on top of the house?" Mike asked of the seven boys who hadn't been inside, and thus absolved of blame.
Seven boys scuffed their shoes on the ground, unable to look up at the three fathers confronting them.
Josh took down the ladder, which was supposed to be in the barn. He pointed to the structure in question. "March," he said sternly, and two boys began their reluctant walk to the barn—and their retribution. Benjy clung to Loren's leg, blinking at his two older brothers.
Mike pointed to the barn. His two boys went.
Joe raised an eyebrow at his three youngest. They went.
The three tall, broad-shouldered brothers followed their sons to the barn.

Nick patted Barrie's face. "Mommy cwy?" she asked, and her lower lip quivered as she looked at Zane "Fix Daddy."
"I'll fix, all right," he muttered. "I'll fix some glue to your little butt and stick you on a chair."
Barrie giggled through her tears. "Everyone wished for a girl," she said, hiccuping as she laughed and cried at the same time. "Well, we got our wish!"
Wolf reached out and plucked his only granddaughter from his son's brawny arms. She beamed at him, and he said ruefully, "With luck, it'll be thirty years before there's another one. Unless ..." His dark eyes narrowed as he looked at Chance.
"No way," Chance said firmly. "You can turn that look on Maris. I'm not getting married. I'm not reproducing. They're starting to come by the bunches now, so it's time to call a halt. I'm not getting into this daddy business."
Mary gave him her sweet smile. "We'll see," she said.

--4 Mackenzie's Magic (1996)--

Synopsis: Maris, the only Mackenzie daughter, is magic. She's fey, almost psychic and can charm the wildest horse - as well as other dangerous animals, such as the undercover FBI agent who's hot on the trail of a killer, and in whose bed Maris lands. The problem is, she was wanted for horse theft, but she was banged on the head and doesn't remember what happened or how she got there. With no memory, she had little chance of proving her innocence or eluding the villains behind the prize stallion's mysterious disappearance. Her only hope for salvation? The stranger in her bed.

Dear Reader,

Not all that long ago, the world was a much slower place. Generations of a family would be born, grow up, marry, set up their own homes, and all stay within the same neighborhood. It wasn't unusual for a house to be home to three generations at the same time. Babies were born in the same house where grandparents died, and there was a wonderful sense of continuity, of roots, that has gone by the wayside now as families scatter to the four corners of the earth.

But we still have that yearning for the safe place of our hearts, the center of the family, and Christmas is the perfect expression of that "Are you going home for Christmas?" is a phrase spoken thousands¡Xmillions¡Xof times as the holiday nears. People seldom live in the same house their entire lives now, but the house isn't the home; the family is. The family is the sanctuary, and people travel untold miles to reach it every year at that special time, the time of Christmas.

I hope you reach your sanctuary, and I hope you have a wonderful Christmas.

Linda Howard

Chapter One

Her head hurt.

The pain thudded against the inside of her skull, pounded on her eyeballs. Her stomach stirred uneasily, as if awakened by all the commotion.
"My head hurts." Maris Mackenzie voiced the complaint in a low, vaguely puzzled tone. She never had headaches; despite her delicate appearance, she possessed in full the Mackenzie iron constitution. The oddity of her condition was what had startled her into speaking aloud.
She didn't open her eyes, didn't bother to look at the dock. The alarm hadn't gone off, so it wasn't time to get up. Perhaps if she went back to sleep the headache would go away.
"I'll get you some aspirin."
Maris's eyes snapped open, and the movement made her head give a sickening throb.
The voice was male, but even more startling, it had been right beside her; so close, in fact, that the man had only murmured the words and still his warm breath had stirred against her ear. The bed shifted as he sat up.
There was a soft click as he turned on the bedside lamp, and the light exploded in her head. Quickly she squeezed her eyes shut again, but not before she saw a man's broad, strongly muscled, naked back, and a well-shaped head covered with short, thick dark hair.
Confused panic seized her. Where was she? Even more important, who was he? She wasn't in her bedroom; one glance had told her that. The bed beneath her was firm, comfortable, but not hers.
An exhaust fan whined to life when he turned on the bathroom light. She didn't risk opening her eyes again, but instead relied on her other senses to orient herself. A motel, then. That was it. And the strange whump-ing sound she had only now heard was the blower of the room's climate-control unit. She had slept in plenty of motels, but never before with a man. Why was she in a motel, anyway, instead of her own comfortable little house close by the stables? The only time she stayed in motels was when she was traveling to or from a job, and since she had settled in Kentucky a couple of years ago the only traveling she'd done had been when she went home to visit the family.
It was an effort to think. She couldn't come up with any reason at all why she was in a motel with a strange man.
Sharp disappointment filled her, temporarily piercing the fogginess in her brain. She had never slept around before, and she was disgusted with herself

for having done so now, an episode she didn't remember with a man she didn't know.
She knew she should leave, but she couldn't seem to muster the energy it would take to jump out of bed and escape. Escape? She wondered fuzzily at the strange choice of word. She was free to leave any time she wanted...if she could only manage to move. Her body felt heavily relaxed, content to do nothing more than lie there. She needed to do something, she was certain, but she couldn't quite grasp what that something was. Even aside from the pain in her head, her mind felt fuzzy, and her thoughts were vague and drifting.
The mattress shifted again as he sat down beside her, this time on the side of the bed closest to the wall, away from the hurtful light. Carefully Maris risked opening her eyes just a little; perhaps it was because she was prepared for the pain, but the resultant throb seemed to have lessened. She squinted up at the big man, who sat so close to her that his body heat penetrated the sheet that covered her.
He was facing her now; she could see more of him than just his back. Her eyes widened.
It was him.
"Here you go," he said, handing the aspirin to her. His voice was a smooth, quiet baritone, and though she didn't think she'd ever spoken to him before, something about that voice was strangely familiar.
She fumbled the aspirin from his hand and popped them into her mouth, making a face at both the bitter taste of the pills and her own idiocy. Of course his voice was familiar! After all, she'd been in bed with him, so she supposed she had talked to him beforehand, even if she couldn't remember meeting him, or how she'd gotten here.
He held out a glass of water. Maris tried to prop herself up on her elbow to take it, but her head throbbed so violently that she sank back against the pillow, wincing with pain as she put her hand to her forehead. What was wrong with her? She was never sick, never clumsy. This sudden uncooperativeness of her own body was alarming.
"Let me do it." He slipped his arm under her shoulders and effortlessly raised her to a sitting position, bracing her head in the curve of his arm and shoulder. He was warm and strong, his scent musky, and she wanted to press herself closer. The need surprised her, because she'd never before felt that way about a man. He held the glass to her lips, and she gulped thirstily,

washing down the pills. When she was finished, he eased her down and removed his arm. She felt a pang of regret at the loss of his touch, astonishing herself.

Fuzzily she watched him walk around the bed. He was tall, muscular, his body showing the strength of a man who did physical work instead of sitting in an office all day. To her mingled relief and disappointment, he wasn't completely naked; he wore a pair of dark gray knit boxers, the fabric clinging snugly to his muscled butt and thighs. Dark hair covered his broad chest, and beard stubble darkened his jaw. He wasn't handsome, but he had a physical presence that drew the eye. It had drawn hers, anyway, since she'd first seen him two weeks ago, forking down hay in the barn.

Her reaction then had been so out of character that she had pushed it out of her mind and ignored it, or at least she had tried. She had deliberately not spoken to him whenever their paths crossed, she who had always taken pains to know everyone who worked with her horses. He threatened her, somehow, on some basic level that brought all her inner defenses screaming to alert. This man was dangerous.

He had watched her, too. She'd turned around occasionally and found his gaze on her, his expression guarded, but still, she'd felt the male heat of his attention. He was just temporary help, a drifter who needed a couple of weeks' pay in his pocket before he drifted away again, while she was the trainer at Solomon Green Horse Farms. It was a prestigious position for anyone, but for a woman to hold the job was a first. Her reputation in the horse world had made her a sort of celebrity, something she didn't particularly enjoy; she would rather be with the horses than putting on an expensive dress and adorning a party, but the Stonichers, who owned Solomon Green, often requested her presence. Maris wasn't a snob, but her position on the farm was worlds apart from that of a drifter hired to muck out the stables.

He knew his way around horses, though; she'd noticed that about him. He was comfortable with the big animals, and they liked him, which had drawn her helpless attention even more. She hadn't wanted to pay attention to the way his jeans stretched across his butt when he bent or squatted, something that he seemed to do a thousand times a day as he worked. She didn't want to notice the muscles that strained the shoulder seams of his shirts as he hefted loaded shovels or pitchforks. He had good hands, strong and lean; she hadn't wanted to notice them, either, or the intelligence in his blue eyes.

He might be a drifter, but he drifted for his own reasons, not because he wasn't capable of making a more stable life for himself.
She'd never had time for a man in her life, hadn't particularly been interested. All her attention had been focused on horses, and building her career. In the privacy of her bed at night, when she wasn't able to sleep and her restless body felt too hot for comfort, she had admitted to herself the irony of her hormones finally being kicked into full gallop by a man who would likely be gone in a matter of weeks, if not days. The best thing to do, she'd decided, would be to continue ignoring him and the uncomfortable yearnings that made her want to be close to him.
Evidently she hadn't succeeded.
She lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the light as she watched him return the water glass to the bathroom, and only then did she notice what she herself was wearing. She wasn't naked; she was wearing her panties, and a big T-shirt that drooped off her shoulders. His T-shirt, specifically. Had he undressed her, or had she done it herself? If she looked around, would she find their clothes haphazardly tossed together? The thought of him undressing her interfered with her lung function, constricting her chest and stifling her oxygen flow. She wanted to remember¡Xshe needed to remember¡Xbut the night was a blank. She should get up and put on her own clothes, she thought. She should, but she couldn't. All she could do was lie there and cope with the pain in her head while she tried to make sense of senseless things.
He was watching her as he came back to bed, his blue eyes narrowed, the color of his irises vivid even in the dim light. "Are you all right?"
She swallowed. "Yes." It was a lie, but for some reason she didn't want him to know she was as incapacitated as she really was. Her gaze drifted over his hairy chest and flat belly, down to the masculine bulge beneath those tight boxers. Had they really... ? For what other reason would they be in a motel bed together? But if they had, why were they both wearing underwear?
Something about those sophisticated boxer shorts teemed a little out of place on a guy who did grunt work on a horse farm. She would have expected plain white briefs.
He turned off the lamp and stretched out beside her, the warmth of his body wrapping around her as he settled the sheet over them. He lay on his side, facing her, one arm curled under his pillow and the other resting across her

belly, holding her close without actually wrapping her in his embrace. It struck her as a carefully measured position, close without being intimate. She tried to remember his name, and couldn't.
She cleared her throat. She couldn't imagine what he would think of her, but she couldn't bear this fogginess in her mind any longer. She had to bring order to this confusion, and the best way to do that was to start with the basics. "I'm sorry," she said softly, almost whispering. "But I don't remember your name, or¡Xor how we got here."
He went rigid, his arm tightening across her belly. For a long moment he didn't move. Then, with a muffled curse, he sat bolt upright, the action jarring her head and making her moan. He snapped on the bedside lamp again, and she closed her eyes against, the stabbing light.
"Damn it," he muttered, bending over her. He sank his long fingers into her hair, sifting through the tousled silk as he stroked his fingertips over her skull. "Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?"
"I didn't know I was." It was the truth. What did he mean, hurt?
"I should have guessed." His voice was grim, his mouth set in a thin line. "I knew you were pale, and you didn't eat much, but I thought it was just stress." He continued probing, and his fingers brushed a place on the side of her head that made her suck in her breath as a sickening throb of pain sliced through her temples.
"Ah." Gently he turned her in to him, cradling her against his shoulder while he examined the injury. His fingers barely touched her scalp. "You have a nice goose egg here."
"Good," she mumbled. "I'd hate for it to be a bad goose egg."
He gave her another narrow-eyed look, something he had down to an art. "You have a concussion, damn it. Are you nauseated? How's your vision?"
"The light hurts," she admitted. "But my vision isn't blurred."
"What about nausea?"
"A little."
"And I've been letting you sleep," he growled to himself, half under his breath. "You need to be in a hospital."
"No," she said immediately, alarm jangling through her. The last thing she wanted was to go to a hospital. She didn't know why, but some instinct told her to stay away from public places. "It's safer here."
In a very controlled tone he said, "I can handle the safety. You need to see a doctor."

Again there was that nagging sense of familiarity, but she couldn't quite grasp what it was. There were other, more serious, things to worry about, however, so she let it go. She took stock of her physical condition, because a concussion could be serious, and she might indeed need to be in a hospital. There was the headache, the nausea... What else? Vision good, speech not slurred. Memory? Rapidly she ran through her family, remembering names and birthdays, thinking of her favorite horses through the years. Her memory was intact, except for... She tried to pinpoint her last memory. The last thing she could remember was eating lunch and walking down to the stables, but when had that been?

"I think I'm going to be okay," she said absently. "If you don't mind, answer a couple of questions for me. First, what's your name, and second, how did we wind up in bed together?"

"My name's MacNeil," he said, watching her closely.

MacNeil. MacNeil. Memory rushed back, bringing with it his first name, too. "I remember," she breathed. "Alex MacNeil." His name had struck her when she'd first heard it, because it was so similar to the name of one of her nephews, Alex Mackenzie, her brother Joe's second-oldest son. Not only were their first names the same, but their last names both indicated the same heritage.

"Right. As for your second question, I think what you're really asking is if we had sex. The answer is no."

She sighed with relief, then frowned a little. "Then why are we here?" she asked in bewilderment.

He shrugged. "We seem to have stolen a horse," he said.

Chapter Two

Stolen a horse? Maris blinked at him in total bewilderment, as if he'd said something in a foreign language. She'd asked him why they were in bed together, and he'd said they had stolen a horse. Not only was it ridiculous that she would steal a horse, but she couldn't see any connection at all between horse thievery and sleeping with Alex MacNeil.

Then a memory twinged in her aching head, and she went still as she tried to solidify the confused picture. She remembered moving rapidly, driven by an almost blinding sense of urgency, down the wide center aisle of the barn,

toward the roomy, luxurious stall in the middle of the row. Sole Pleasure was a gregarious horse; he loved company, and that was why his stall was in the middle, so he would have companionship on both sides. She also remembered the fury that had gripped her; she'd never been so angry before in her life.

"What'is it?" he asked, still watching her so intently that she imagined he knew every line of her face.

"The horse we 'seem' to have stolen¡Xis it Sole Pleasure?"

"The one and only. If every cop in the country isn't already after us, they will be in a matter of hours." He paused. "What were you planning on doing with him?"

It was a good question. Sole Pleasure was the most famous horse in America right now, and very recognizable, with his sleek black coat, white star, and white stocking on the right foreleg. He'd been on the cover of Sports Illustrated, had been named their Athlete of the Year. He'd won over two million dollars in his short career and been retired at the grand old age of four to be syndicated at stud. The Stonichers were still weighing the offers, determined to make the best deal. The horse was black gold prancing around on four powerful, lightning-fast legs.

What had she been going to do with him? She stared at the ceiling, trying to bring the hours missing from her memory back to the surface of consciousness. Why would she steal Sole Pleasure? She wouldn't have sold him, or raced him¡Xin disguise, of course¡Xon her own. She rejected those possibilities out of hand. Stealing a horse was so foreign to her nature that she was at a loss to explain having apparently done exactly that. The only reason she could even imagine having for taking a horse would be the animal was in danger. She could see herself doing that, though she was more likely to take a whip to anyone mistreating one of her babies, or any horse at all, for that matter. She couldn't bear seeing them hurt.

Or killed.

The thought knifed through her, and suddenly she knew. Oh, God, she knew.

She jerked upright in bed. Instantly pain mushroomed inside her skull, the pressure almost blinding her for a second. She gave a gasping, almost soundless cry; a hard arm shot upward and closed around her, preventing her getting up, but it didn't matter anyway. She felt her muscles going slack, unable to support her, and she slumped over on him. The pain quickly

subsided to a far more manageable level, but the moment of agony left her weak and shaking, collapsed on his chest, in his arms, her eyes closed as she tried to recover from the shock. MacNeil gently turned so that she was flat on her back and he was half over her, one heavy, hairy, muscled leg thrown across her much slimmer ones, his arm under her neck, his broad shoulders blocking the light from her closed eyelids. One big hand covered her left breast, the contact brief and warm and electrifying, then moved up to her throat. She felt his fingers pressing against the artery there, then a soft sigh eased from him, and he briefly leaned down to press his forehead against hers, very gently, as if he were afraid the touch might hurt her. She swallowed, trying to control her breathing. That was the limit of her control, though, because there was nothing she could do about the speed at which her blood was thundering through her veins. Only the thought of Sole Pleasure kept her focused. Maris gulped, opening her eyes and staring up at him. "They were going to kill him," she said in a stifled tone. "I remember. They were going to kill him!" Renewed rage bubbled in her bloodstream, giving force to the last sentence.

"So you stole him to save his life."

He said it much more as a statement than as a question, but Maris nodded anyway, remembering at the last second to limit herself to only a tiny movement of her head. The calmness of his voice again piqued her interest with its familiarity. Why wasn't he alarmed, indignant, or any number of other responses that could reasonably be expected? Maybe he'd already guessed, and she had only confirmed his suspicion.

He was a drifter, a man who routinely walked away from responsibility, but even though he'd guessed what she was doing, he had involved himself anyway. Their situation was highly precarious, because unless she could prove the charge she'd made, they would be arrested for stealing Sole Pleasure, the most valuable horse in the country. All she remembered now was the danger to the stallion, not who was behind it, so proving it could be a bit chancy.

Chancy... Chance. Chance and Zane. The thought of her brothers was like sunrise, bringing light to the darkness in her mind. No matter what was going on or who was behind it, all she had to do was call Zane, and he would get to the bottom of it. Maybe that had been her original plan, lost in the fog that obscured the past twelve hours. Get Sole Pleasure out of harm's way, contact Zane, and lay low until the danger was over. She stared at the

ceiling, trying to remember any other detail that would help clear up the situation. Nothing. "Did I call anyone last night?" she asked. "Did I say anything about calling one of my brothers?"
"No. There was no time or opportunity to call anyone until we got here, and you were out like a light as soon as you hit the bed."
That information didn't clear up the question of whether she had undressed herself or he had done it. She scowled a little, annoyed at how the physical intimacy of the situation kept distracting her from the business at hand.
He was still watching her closely; she felt as if his attention hadn't wavered from her for so much as a split second. She could sense him analyzing every nuance of her expressions, and the knowledge was unsettling. She was accustomed to people paying attention to her; she was, after all, the boss. But this was different, on an entirely different level, as if he missed nothing going on around him.
"Were you going to call your family for help?" he asked when she didn't say anything else.
She pursed her lips. "That would have been the most logical thing to do. I should probably call them now." Zane had left the SEALs, he was much easier to contact; Barrie and the kids kept him closer to home. And he would know how to get in touch with Chance, though the odds of Chance even being in the country weren't good. It didn't matter; if she needed them, if she made the call, she knew her entire family would descend on Kentucky like the Vikings swooping down on a medieval coastal village¡Xand heaven help those who were behind all this.
Maris tried to ease herself away from him so that she could sit up and reach the phone. To her amazement, he tightened his grip, holding her in place.
"I'm okay," she said in reassurance. "As long as I remember to move slowly and not jar my head, I can manage. I need to call my brother as soon as possible so he can¡X"
"I can't let you do that," he said calmly.
She blinked, her dark eyes growing cool. "I beg you pardon?" Her tone was polite, but she let him hear the steel underlying it.
His lips twitched, and a ruefully amused look entered his eyes. "I said I can't let you do that." The amusement spread to his mouth, turning the twitch into a smile. "What are you going to do, fire me?"
Maris ignored the taunt, because if she couldn't prove Sole Pleasure was in danger, neither of them would have to worry about a job for some time. She

lay still, considering this sudden change in the situation, possibilities running through her mind. He was too damn sure of himself, and she wondered why. He didn't want her to call for help. The only reason she could come up with was that he must be involved somehow, in the plot to kill Sole Pleasure. Maybe he was the one who'd been hired to do it. Suddenly looking up into those blue eyes, Maris felt the danger in him again. It wasn't just a sensual danger, but the inherent danger of a man who had known violence. Yes, this man could kill.

Sole Pleasure might already be dead. She thought of that big, sleek, powerful body lying stiff, never to move again, and a nearly crippling grief brought the sheen of tears to her eyes. She couldn't control that response, but she allowed herself no other. Maybe she was wrong about MacNeil, but for Sole Pleasure's sake, she couldn't take the chance.

"Don't cry," he murmured, his voice dropping into a lower note. He lifted his hand to gently stroke her hair away from her temple. "I'll take care of things."

This was going to hurt. Maris knew it, and accepted the pain. Her father had taught her to go into a fight expecting to get hurt; people who didn't expect the pain were stunned by it, incapacitated and, ultimately, defeated. Wolf Mackenzie had taught his children to win fights.

MacNeil was too close; she was also lying flat on her back, which took away a lot of her leverage. She had to do it anyway. The first blow had to count.

She snapped her left arm up at him, striking for his nose with the heel of her palm.

He moved like lightning, his right forearm coming up to block the blow. Her palm slammed into his arm with enough force to jar her to the teeth. Instantly she recoiled and struck again, this time aiming lower, for his solar plexus. Again that muscular forearm blocked her way, and this time he twisted, catching both of her arms and pinning them to the pillow on each side of herhead. With another smooth motion he levered himself atop her, his full weight crushing her into the bed.

The entire thing took three seconds, maybe less. There had been no explosion of movement; anyone watching might not even have realized a brief battle had taken place, so tight had been the movements of attack and response, then counterattack. Her head hadn't even been unduly jarred. But Maris knew. Not only had she been trained by her father, she had also

watched Zane and Chance spar too often to have any doubts. She had just gone up against a highly trained professional¡Xand lost.
His blue eyes were flinty, his expression cold and remote. His grip on her wrists didn't hurt, but when she tried to move her arms, she found that she couldn't.
"Now, what in hell was that about?" His voice was still calm, but edged with an icy sharpness.
Then it all fell together. His control, his utter self-confidence, the calmness that seemed so familiar. Of course it was familiar¡Xshe saw it constantly, in her brothers. Zane had just that way of speaking, as if he could handle anything that might happen. MacNeil hadn't hurt her, even when she had definitely tried to hurt him. She couldn't have expected such concern from a thug hired to kill a horse. The clues were there, even those sexy gray boxers. This was no drifter.
"My God," she blurted. "You're a cop."

Chapter Three

"Is that why you attacked?" If anything, those blue eyes were even colder.
"No!" she said absently, staring up at his face as if she'd never seen a man before. She felt stunned, as if she really hadn't. Something had just happened, but she wasn't sure what. It was like the way she'd felt when she first saw him, only more intense, primally exciting. She frowned a little as she tried to pin down the exact thought, or sensation, or whatever it was.
His hands tightened on her wrists, drawing her back to the question he'd asked and the answer he wanted, and reluctantly she gathered her thoughts.
"I just now realized that you're a cop. The reason I tried to hit you was because you wouldn't let me call my family, and I was afraid you might be one of the bad guys."
"So you were going to try to take me out?" He looked furious at the idea. "You have a concussion. How in hell did you expect to fight me? And who taught you those moves, anyway?"
"My father. He taught all of us how to fight. And I could have won, against most men," she said simply. "But you¡XI know professional training when I see it."
"So the fact that I know how to fight makes you think I'm a cop?"
She could have told him about Zane and Chance, who, even though they weren't cops, had many of the same characteristics she'd noticed in him. She didn't, though, because she wasn't one hundred percent certain their organization or agency or whatever it was was exactly squared away with either the State or Justice Department. Instead, she gave MacNeil a secret little smile. "Actually, it was your shorts."
He was startled out of his control, his blue eyes widening. "My shorts?"
"They aren't briefs. They're not white. They're too sexy."
"And that's a dead giveaway for being a cop?" he asked incredulously, color staining his cheekbones.
"Drifters don't wear sexy gray boxers," she pointed out. She didn't mention the interest she could feel stirring in those sexy gray boxers. Perhaps, under the circumstances, she shouldn't have mentioned his underwear. Not that his reaction was unexpected, she thought. She was barely clothed, and he wore even less. She could feel the hard, hairy bareness of his legs against hers, the pressure of his hips. Just minutes before, she had thought his touch carefully controlled, so that there was no intimacy, despite his closeness.

She didn't feel that way now. It wasn't just his arousal; there was something very intimate in the way he held her beneath him, as if their brief battle had startled him out of his careful control and provoked him into a heated, purely male response. She took a deep breath as an unfamiliar excitement made her heart beat faster made every cell in her body tingle with life. The secret part of her, the wildness that she had always known was there but which no man had ever before managed to touch, shivered in fierce satisfaction at the way he held her.

"Cops don't necessarily wear them, either." Her comment about his shorts had definitely disturbed him. She smiled again, her dark eyes half closing in sensual delight as she absorbed the novel sensation of having a hard male body on top of her¡X an extremely aroused male body. "If you say so. I've never seen one undressed before. What kind of cop are you, specifically?"

He was silent for a moment, studying her face. She didn't know what he saw there, but the set of his mouth eased, and if anything, he settled even more heavily against her. "Specifically, FBI. Special agent." A federal agent? Startled out of her sensual preoccupation, she gave him a puzzled look. "I didn't think stealing a horse was a federal crime."

He almost smiled. "It isn't. Look, if I let go of your hands, are you going to try to kill me again?"

"No. I promise," she said. "Besides, I wasn't trying to kill you, and even if I had been, I'm not as good as you are, so you don't have to worry."

"I can't tell you how reassuring that is," he said dryly, but he released her hands and shifted his position a little, propping himself over her on his forearms. The change forced his hips more firmly against hers, forced her thighs slightly apart to accommodate the pressure. She caught her breath. His interest had grown, to the point that there was no politely ignoring it. But he was ignoring it, not in the least embarrassed by his body's response to her.

Maris took another deep breath, delighting in the way the simple action rubbed her breasts against the hard, muscled planes of his chest, making her nipples tingle. Oh, God, that felt so good. She would gladly lie in his arms and do nothing more than breathe, if they didn't have a stolen champion horse stashed somewhere and someone presumably on their trail, trying to kill both them and the stallion.

But they did have a stolen horse hidden away, and a big problem on their hands. She focused her thoughts, and despite the fact that she was lying

helplessly pinned beneath him, she fixed him with a dark, penetrating gaze. "So why was a federal special agent mucking out my stables?"
"Trying to find out who's been killing horses and collecting the insurance money on them¡Xboss." He added the last word in a dry tone, responding to her arrogant claiming of the Solomon Green stables as her own.
She ignored the not-so-subtle teasing, because she'd heard it so often from her family. What she loved, she claimed; it was as simple as that. She drew her head back deeper into the pillow and gave him a frankly skeptical look. "Insurance fraud rates a special agent?"
"It does when it involves kidnapping, crossing state lines and murder."
Murder. So she'd been right: Someone was trying to kill them. Had this someone hit her on the head, or had she gained the goose egg by a more mundane method, such as falling? "What brought you to Solomon Green?"
"A tip." One corner of his mouth curved slightly. His face was so close to hers that she could see the tiny lines created by the movement, as if he smiled easily. "Law enforcement agencies couldn't operate without snitches."
"So you knew Sole Pleasure was in danger?" She didn't like that. Anger began to smolder in her dark eyes. "Why didn't you tell me? I could have been on guard without causing any suspicion. You didn't have a right to gamble with his life."
"All of the horses are insured. Any of them could have been targeted. Sole Pleasure should have been their least likely target, because he's so well-known. His death would raise a lot of questions, attract a lot of attention." He paused, watching her carefully. "And, until last night, you were on my list of suspects."
She absorbed that, her only reaction a slight tightening of her mouth. "How did last night change your mind? What happened?" It was both frustrating and frightening, not being able to remember.
"You came to me for help. You were so angry you could barely speak, and you were scared. You said we had to get Sole Pleasure out of there, and if I didn't want to help, you'd manage on your own."
"Did I say who was after him?"
He gave a slight shake of his head. "No. Like I said, you were barely speaking. You wouldn't answer any questions. I thought at the time you were too scared, and once we had the horse safe, I was going to give you a little time to settle down before I started questioning you. Then I noticed

how pale and shaky you were, maybe a little shocky from the adrenaline crash. You wanted to go on, but I made you stop here. You conked out as soon as we got in the room."

That reminded her again of both the interesting question of whether she had undressed herself or he had done it for her and his rather irritating assumption that he could make her do anything. She frowned when she realized that he could back up that assumption with action; her current position proved it. He hadn't hurt her, but physically she was still very much under his control.

Her frown deepened as she grew more annoyed with herself than before. She was doing it again, letting her attention drift. She could keep letting herself get sidetracked by her undeniable attraction to him, or she could keep her mind on the problem at hand. Sole Pleasure's life, and perhaps her own, depended on doing whatever she could to help this man.

There was no question which was most important.

"The Stonichers," she said slowly. "They're the only ones who would benefit financially from Sole Pleasure's death, but they'd make more by syndicating him for stud, so killing him doesn't make sense."

"That's another reason I didn't think he was in danger. I was watching all the other horses. The insurance on them wouldn't be as much, but neither would their deaths cause much of a stir."

"How did I find you?" she asked. "Did I come to your room? Call you? Did anyone see us, or did you see anyone?" His room was one of ten, tiny but private, in a long, narrow block building the Stonichers had built specifically to house the employees who were transient and had no other quarters, as well as those who needed to be on-site. As the trainer, Maris was important enough to have her own small three-room cottage on the premises. The foaling man, Mr. Wyse, also had his own quarters, an upstairs apartment in the foaling barn, where he watched the mothers-to-be on video monitors. There were always people around; someone had to have seen them.

"I wasn't in my room. I'd been in the number two barn, checking around, and had just gone out the back door when you rode by on Sole Pleasure. It was dark, so I didn't think you'd seen me, but you stopped and told me I had to help you. The truck and trailer that brought in that little sorrel mare this afternoon were still sitting there, hooked up, so we loaded Sole Plea-sure in

and took off. If anyone saw us, I doubt they could even have seen there was a horse in the trailer, much less recognized it as Sole Pleasure."
It was possible, she thought. The number two barn was where the mares who had been sent to the farm for breeding were stabled. Night came early in December, and the horses were already settled down, the workers relaxing or at supper. The truck and trailer didn't belong to Solomon Green, and everyone knew they had brought in a mare that afternoon, so no one would think anything of the rig leaving, except the driver, who had decided to spend the night and start back at dawn the next day. And Sole Pleasure was exceptionally easy to load; he never made a fuss and, in fact, seemed to enjoy traveling. Loading him wouldn't have taken more than a minute, and then they would have been on their way.
"I didn't have a chance to call my family," she said, "but did you call anyone while I was asleep?"
"I went out to a pay phone and let my office know what was going on. They'll try to run interference for us, but they can't be too obvious without blowing the operation. We still don't know who's involved in the ring¡Xunless you've remembered something else in the past few minutes?"
"No," she said regretfully. "My last clear memory is of walking down to the stables yesterday afternoon. I know it was after lunch, but I don't know the exact time. What little else I remember is just flashes of being angry, and scared, and running to Pleasure's stall."
"If you remember anything else, even the smallest detail, tell me immediately. By taking the horse, we've given them the perfect opportunity to kill him and blame it on us, or at least they'll see it that way, since they don't know I'm FBI. They'll be after us hot and heavy, and I need to know who to expect."
"Where's Pleasure now?" she asked in alarm, put-ting her hands on his shoulders and pushing. She squirmed under him, trying to slip free of his weight so that she could get up, get dressed and get to the horse. It wasn't like her to be so lax about a horse's comfort and security, and though she had watched MacNeil enough to know that he was conscientious with the animals, the final responsibility was hers.
"Calm down. He's all right." MacNeil caught her hands, once more holding them down on the pillow. "I've got him stashed in the woods. No one's going to find him. I couldn't make it easy for them. Leaving him in the

parking lot, where anyone could get at him, would have made even a fool suspicious. They're going to have to come to us in order to find him."
She relaxed against the pillows, reassured about Pleasure's safety. "All right. What are we going to do now?"
He hesitated. "My original plan was to find out what you knew, then put you somewhere safe until we had everything settled."
"Where were you going to put me, in the trailer with Pleasure?" she asked, a slight caustic edge to her voice. "Well, too bad. I can't tell you what I know, and you need to keep me handy in case I do remember something. You're stuck with me, MacNeil, and you aren't putting me anywhere."
"There's only one place I'd like to put you," he said slowly. "And I already have you there."

Chapter Four

It wasn't a surprise, given all the evidence at hand.
Pure male possessiveness was in Alex MacNeil's attitude, in every line of his body, staring plainly down at her from those sharp blue eyes.
Maris knew she wasn't mistaken about that look. She had grown up seeing it in her father's eyes every time he looked at her mother, seen the way he stood so close to her, touched her, a subtle alertness in every muscle of his body. She had also seen it innumerable times in her five brothers, first with their girlfriends and later, for four of them, with their wives. It was a look of desire, heated and potent.
It was both scary and exhilarating, startling her, and yet at the same time it was as if she had known, from the moment she first saw him, that there was something between them and eventually she would have to deal with it.
That was why she'd been at such pains to avoid him, not wanting the complication of an involvement with him, or having to endure the resultant gossip among the other employees. She had dated, some, but she had instinctively shied away whenever a boy or man showed signs of becoming too involved, possessive. She'd never had much time or patience for anything that interfered with her concentration on her horses and her career, nor had she ever wanted to let anyone that close to her.
She had a strong private core that she'd never let anyone touch, except for her family. It seemed to be a Mackenzie trait, the ability to be alone and be

perfectly content, and even though all her brothers except Chance had eventually married and were frighteningly in love with their wives, they had married because they were in love. Maris had always been content to wait until that once-in-a-lifetime love happened to her, too, rather than waste time by flinging herself without thought into a brief affair with any man who just happened to have the right physical chemistry with her.

The chemistry was there with MacNeil, all right. The proof of it, on his part, was pressing urgently against the soft notch of her legs, tempting her to open her thighs wider and allow herself to feel that rigid length full against her loins. The fact that she wanted to do so was proof of the right chemistry on her part. She should move away, she knew she should, but she didn't. There wasn't a cell in her body that wanted to move, unless it was closer into his embrace.

She stared up into his beard-stubbled face, into blue eyes that were hard and darkened by sharp desire, a desire he was ruthlessly containing. Her own eyes were dark, bottomless pools as she met that sharp gaze. "The question is," she said slowly, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Not very damn much," he muttered, shifting restlessly against her. His jaw tightened at the sensations resulting from that movement, and his breath sighed out between his teeth. "You have a concussion. You have a killer headache. We have an unknown number of unknown people looking for us, so I have to keep my mind on the situation, instead of thinking about getting into your little panties. And even if you said yes, damn it, I'd have to say no, because the concussion could be causing mental impairment!" The last sentence was raw with frustration, ground out as if every word hurt him.

She lay very still beneath him, though her instinct was to part her thighs and cradle him against her, pulling him into her soft heat. Her eyes went as dark as night, softening, something mysterious and eternal moving there. "My headache is better." Her voice was low, her gaze drawing him in. "And I'm not mentally impaired."

"Oh, God," he groaned, resting his forehead against hers and closing his eyes. "Two out of four."

Maris moved her hands, and he immediately freed them. She laid her palms against his shoulders, and he tensed, waiting for her to push him away, knowing it was for the best but dreading the loss of contact. She didn't push. Instead, she curved her hands over the powerful muscles that cushioned the balls of his shoulder joints, trailed her fingers over the curve of his

collarbone and finally flattened her hands against the hard planes of his chest. His crisp black chest hair tickled her palms. His tiny flat nipples hardened to pinpoints, intriguing her. His heartbeat was hard and strong, throbbing beneath her touch.

She was amazed, a little taken aback, by the intensity of the desire that shook her. No, not just desire¡Xneed. Need, hot and strong. She had seen sexual attraction all her life, at the most basic level in her horses and the other animals on the ranch, and in her own family as something powerful and tender and somehow both straightforward and complicated at the same time. She didn't underestimate the compelling power of sex. She had seen it, but she'd never before felt it, not this heat and ache, this emptiness that could be filled only by him, this melting sensation deep inside. She had always thought that if she ever felt this way it would be associated with love, and love was impossible here, because she didn't know him, not really. She knew his name and his occupation, but nothing about the type of person he was, and it was impossible to love a stranger. Be attracted, yes, but not love.

But her sister-in-law Barrie had once said that within five minutes of meeting Zane she had known the kind of person he was, and loved him. They had been strangers, but extraordinary circumstances had forced them into an intimate situation and shown them facets of each other's characters that otherwise would have taken months for them to discover.

Maris considered her own situation and the stranger who was so intimately sharing it with her. What had she learned about him since awakening¡Xor regaining consciousness¡Xin his arms?

He wasn't pushing her. He wanted her, but he wasn't pushing. The circumstances weren't right, so he was waiting. He was a patient man, or at least a man who knew how to be patient when he had to be, something that was entirely different. He was intelligent; she would have seen that days¡Xweeks¡Xago, if she had let herself study him. She wasn't certain, but she thought that an FBI special agent had to have a law degree. He had some working medical knowledge, at least about concussions. He was evidently strong-willed enough to have gotten her to do something she didn't want to do, though, of course, with a concussion she wouldn't have been at her best. He had taken care of her. And most of all, despite the fact that she had slept almost naked in his arms, he hadn't taken sexual advantage of her.

That was quite a list. He was patient, intelligent, educated, strong-willed, caring and honorable. And there was something else, the subtle quality of danger and controlled power. She remembered the quiet, authoritative tone of his voice, the utter confidence that he could take care of any problem that might arise. In that he was like her brothers, particularly Zane and Chance, and they were two of the most dangerous men she could imagine.

She had always known that one of the reasons she'd never fallen in love was that so few men could compare favorably with the men in her family. She had been content to dedicate herself to her career, unwilling to settle for less than what she knew a man could be. But Alex MacNeil was of that stamp, and her heart lurched. Suddenly, for the first time in her life, she was in danger of falling in love.

And then, looking into those eyes so blue it was like drowning in the ocean, she knew. She remembered the change inside herself, the quiet recognition of her mate.

"Oh, dear," she said softly. "I have a very important question to ask you."

"Shoot," he said, then gave a wry shrug of apology at his word choice.

"Are you married, or otherwise involved with anyone?"

He knew why she was asking the question. He would have had to be dead not to feel the electricity between them, and his state of arousal proved that he was far from it. "No. No involvements, period." He didn't ask the same question of her; the background check he'd run on all the employees at Solomon Green had given him the basic information that she was single and had no record of prior arrests. In the time he'd worked at the farm, from the questions he'd asked, he had also found out that she didn't date any one man on a steady basis. The other guys had kidded him about having the hots for the boss, and he'd gone along with the idea. Hell, it was true, so why not use it as part of his cover?

Maris took a deep breath. This was it, then. With the directness with which she faced life, and the fey quality with which she saw things so clearly, she gave him a tiny smile. "If you aren't already thinking of marrying me," she said, "you'd better get used to the idea."

Mac kept his expression still, not allowing it to betray the shock that was reverberating through him. Marriage? He hadn't even kissed her yet, and she was talking marriage!

A sane man would get up and get his mind back on the business at hand, which included keeping them alive through the next few hours. A sane man

wouldn't continue to lie here with this woman in his arms, not if he wanted to preserve his enjoyable single state.
He wanted her, no doubt about that. He was familiar with desire, having indulged that particular urge since the age of fourteen, and knew how to ignore it when indulgence would interfere with work. The work was absorbing, and he'd thrown himself into it with the cool, incisive intelligence that he also used to govern his personal life. He'd always been the one in control in his relationships, the one who called an end to things whenever he thought a woman was beginning to cling, to expect more from him than he was willing to give. It wasn't fair to string a woman along and let her hope when there was no hope, so he always simply ended the affair before it got to the tears-and-recriminations stage.
But then, he'd never met Maris Mackenzie before.
He didn't get up. More disturbing, he didn't laugh and say the concussion must have impaired her mentally after all. She was small, delicately built, even fragile, so it was ridiculous for him to dread making her angry or, even worse, hurting her feelings. He wanted to continue holding her, wanted to cradle her close to him and protectively cover her, keep her safe from the danger that would erupt around them within the next couple of hours, shield her from everything¡Xexcept himself. He wanted her open to him, vulnerable, naked, completely at his disposal. He wanted to sink into those beguiling, mysterious black eyes and forget everything but the feverish delight of thrusting into her. The sharp turn of events had thrown him off balance, that was all. Until last night, she and everyone else at Solomon Green had been on his list of possible suspects, and he had refused to let himself dwell on the heat that ran through him every time her slight, disconcertingly female body came within sight. Hell, she hadn't even had to be in sight; the thought of her had slipped into his consciousness at odd times during the day and disturbed his sleep at night.
He had resented his inability to ignore her as easily as she ignored him. She had a very still, intense quality about her, a focus that bespoke a will of iron. She was as absorbed in her job as he was in his, to the point that he'd thought she didn't even know he existed as a person, much less as a man. The idea had been strangely disturbing. He'd needed to blend in, but instead he'd found himself wanting to stand out, so that she would look at him with recognition in her eyes instead of a blank stare. Night after night he'd lain alone and thought about her, resenting both the fact that he couldn't seem to

stop and the fact that she was oblivious to him. He wanted her to be as aware of him as he was of her, wanted to know that she, too, twisted on lonely sheets and thought of him in bed with her. He wanted her with an intensity that infuriated him. Everything about her appealed to him, and that was surprising in itself, because there was nothing overtly sexual about her manner. She was pure business; she never flirted, never played favorites with the men un-der her authority, never made a suggestive remark, didn't go out of her way to make herself more attractive. Not that she had to; he couldn't have been more aware of her than if she made a practice of parading naked in front of him.

He knew exactly how her jeans clung to her curvy little ass, had imagined more than once gripping those round cheeks in his hands and lifting her into his thrust. He'd studied the shape of her high, round breasts underneath the flannel shirts she wore and, considering the slightness of her build, driven himself crazy thinking about how tight she would be when he slid into her. He'd had all the normal, heated sexual thoughts. But he'd also found himself absorbed in the satiny texture of her skin, as flawless as if she didn't spend countless hours outdoors. No woman should have skin like that, as pure as a child's, and so trans-lucent he could see the fragile blue veins in her temples. He would look at her pale brown hair, bleached by the sun into streaks of ashy blond, and think of how it would trail across his arm like a fall of silk. Her eyes were as black as night, fey and unfathomable, tempting a man to try to plumb those mysterious depths.

Desire, like heat, was measured in degrees, and ran the gamut from lukewarm to vaporization. She had long since turned him to steam, he thought; it was nothing short of a miracle that he'd held her in his arms all night and done nothing more than that, even though all she was wearing was a pair of skimpy, blood-pressure-raising panties and his own T-shirt, which was so large on her that it kept slipping down to reveal one silky shoulder.

This was desire, all right¡Xand more. It was want carried to a higher degree than he'd ever before experienced, a fever that refused to cool, a need he hadn't let himself satisfy. Until last night, he hadn't even let himself talk to her, even though he'd known he should, to see what, if anything, he could find out from her. Oddly enough, she had seemed to avoid him, too, though he'd noticed immediately that Ms. Mackenzie was a hands-on trainer who knew everyone working under her and was on easy terms with them. She

was pure magic with the horses and a tyrant when it came to their care, but a benevolent tyrant, and everyone from the stable hands to the riders seemed to treat her with varying degrees of respect and adoration. It was out of character for her to avoid him, but that was exactly what she'd done.
It had made him suspicious. It was his job to be suspicious, to notice anything out of the ordinary, and her behavior toward him had made him wonder if something about him had made her suspicious, put her on guard. With his background, he was familiar with horses, which had made him the logical choice for the job, and he'd tried to blend in. Still, he was always aware that his training had permanently changed him, and a sharp eye might be able to spot the little things that forever set him apart from others: the extraordinary alertness, so that he was aware of every little detail of the activity going on around him; his sharp, fast reflexes; his unconscious habit of placing himself in positions that could be defended.
And she had spotted those details, known what they meant. He didn't at all like the swiftness with which she had sized him up and said, "You're a cop," even if her actions of the night before had already convinced him that she wasn't involved in the ring that killed racehorses and collected the insurance money. She saw too much, with those black eyes of hers, and now she was looking at him as if she could see into his soul.
Honesty prodded at him. Even though every hormone in his body was roaring at him not to do anything to jeopardize his current position, to stay right where he was, on top of her and all but between her legs, he ground his teeth and said what he knew be had to say.
"Marriage? You must be hurt worse than I thought, since you're delirious."
She didn't take offense. Instead, she curled her arms around his neck and gave him that small, inscrutable, damnably female smile again. "I understand.¡v She said gently. "You need time to get used to the idea, and you have a job to do. This can wait. Right now, you have to catch some damn horse killers.

Chapter Five

She needed to clear her head, needed some time away from him so that her nerves would settle down. Maris pushed lightly against his shoulders; he hesitated, but then rolled to the side, freeing her from his weight. The loss

of that heavy pressure, the vital heat, was so unexpectedly painful that she almost reached out to pull him over her again. One glance at the straining fabric of his shorts told her that he might not be able to withstand any more temptation, and while her entire body yearned for him, she wanted to be able to fully enjoy their first time together. She had a concussion, and there were an unknown number of people after them who would likely try to kill them, as well as Sole Pleasure¡Xpowerful distractions, indeed.

Gingerly she sat up on the side of the bed, being very careful to hold her head as still as possible. The aspirin had helped; the pain was still there, but it didn't throb as sickeningly as it had before. She eased into a standing position and was relieved when the room remained stable.

Instantly he was on his feet beside her, his hand on her arm. "What are you doing? You need to rest as much as possible."

"I'm going to take a shower and get dressed. If I'm going to be shot at, I want to be on my feet and wearing clothes when it happens." God, he was big, and there was all that naked flesh right in front of her. She took a deep breath, fighting the urge to press herself against him, to find out exactly where her head would fit against his shoulder now that they were standing up.

His body was so beautiful, his shoulders wide and powerful, his arms and legs thick with muscle. How silly she'd been to avoid him all these weeks, when she could have been getting to know him! Silently she mourned those wasted days. She should have realized sooner why her reaction to him had been so sharp, why she'd felt that odd sense of fright.

This was the man with whom she would spend the rest of her life. No matter where her career had taken her, home had always been a mountain in Wyoming, and Alex MacNeil was going to change that. Her home would be with him, wherever he was, and an FBI special agent could be assigned anywhere. Though her life would never be completely without horses, he might be assigned to a city, where she wouldn't be able to find a job as trainer. She had never before met a man whom she would even consider putting ahead of her horses¡X but she looked at him and instinctively thought, No contest.

He was hers. She was his. She recognized it at every level of her being, as if she were vibrating to a resonance that only he produced.

But danger surrounded them, and she had to be prepared.

He had been watching her face with that narrow-eyed, intensely focused way of his. He didn't release her, but drew her closer, his arm circling her narrow waist. "Forget whatever you're thinking. You don't have to do any thing but stay out of the way."

His nearness was too tempting. Maris leaned her head on his chest, rubbing her cheek against the hairy roughness as an almost painful tenderness filled her. "I won't let you do this alone." His nipple was right there, only a few inches from her mouth, and as irresistible as catnip to a kitten. She moved those few inches, and her tongue darted out, delicately licking the flat brown circle.

He shuddered, his arm tightening convulsively around her. But his gaze was grim and determined as he cupped her chin with his other hand and gently lifted her face. "It's my job," he said in the even, quietly implacable tone she had heard before. "You're a civilian, and you're hurt. The best way you can help me is by staying out of the way."

She smiled in wry amusement. "If you knew me better, you wouldn't say that." She was fiercely, instinctively, protective of those she loved, and the thought of letting him face danger alone made her blood freeze in horror. Unfortunately, fate had decreed that she love a man whose profession was putting himself between the lawless elements in society and those he had sworn to protect. She couldn't demand that he quit his job any more than her family had demanded that she quit the dangerous work of gentling unbroken horses. He was what he was, and loving him meant not trying to change him.

She straightened away from him. "I'm still going to shower and dress. I still don't want to face anyone in just my panties and a T-shirt...." She paused. "Except you."

He inhaled sharply, his nostrils flaring, and she saw his hand flex as if he wanted to reach for her again. Because time had to be growing short, she stepped away from him, away from temptation, and gathered up her clothes. Just as she reached the bathroom door a thought occurred to her, and she stopped, looking back at him. Was he alone? Though Zane and Chance never talked about their assignments, they had sometimes discussed techniques, back in their training days, and she had absorbed a lot. It would be very unusual for an FBI agent to be working without backup.

"Your partner should be close by," she said. "Am I right?"

His eyebrows lifted in faint surprise; then he smiled. "In the parking lot. He got into position an hour or so after we got here. No one's going to take us by surprise."
If his partner hadn't been on watch, Maris realized, MacNeil never would have relaxed his guard enough to be in bed with her or let himself be distracted by the sexual attraction between them. Still, she was certain he hadn't slept but had remained awake in case his partner signaled him.
"What's his name? What does he look like? I need to be able to tell the good guys from the bad."
"Dean Pearsall. He's five-eleven, skinny, dark hair and eyes, receding hairline. He's from Maine. You can't miss the accent."
"It's cold out there," she said. "He must be frozen."
"Like I said, he's from Maine. This is nothing new to him. He has a thermos of coffee, and he lets the car run enough to keep the frost off the windshield, so he can see."
"Won't that be a dead giveaway, no frost on the car?"
"Only if someone knows how long the car has been there, and it isn't a detail most people notice." He picked up his jeans and stepped into them, never taking his eyes off her as he considered the somewhat startling workings of her nimble brain. "Why did you think of it?"
She gave him a sweet smile, her mother's smile. "You'll understand when you meet my family." Then she went into the bathroom and closed the door.
Her smile faded immediately once she was alone. Though she fully realized and accepted the wisdom of not interfering with a trained professional and his partner, she was also sharply aware that plans could go wrong and people could get hurt. It happened, no matter how good or careful someone was. Chance had been wounded several times; he always tried to keep it from their mother, but somehow Mary always sensed when he'd been hurt, and Maris did, too. She could fed it deep inside, in a secret place that only those she loved had managed to touch. She had been almost insane with fear that time when Zane was nearly killed rescuing Barrie from terrorists in Libya, until she saw him for herself and felt his steely life force undiminished.
It had happened to Zane, and he was the best planner in the business. In fact, expecting things to go wrong was one of the things that made Zane so good at what he did. There was always a wild card in the deck, he said, and she had to be prepared for it, no matter how it was played.

Her advantages were that she was trained in self-defense, was a very good shot, and knew more about battle tactics than anyone could expect. On the other hand, her pistol was in her cottage, so she was unarmed, unless she could talk MacNeil into giving her a weapon. Considering how implacable his expression had been, she didn't think she had much chance of that. She was also concussed, and though the headache had lessened and she was feeling better now, she wasn't certain how well she could function if the situation called for fast movement. The fact that her memory hadn't returned was worrisome; the injury could be more severe than she'd initially thought, even though her other symptoms had lessened.

Who had hit her? Why was someone trying to kill Sole Pleasure? Damn it, if only she could remember!

She wrapped a towel around her head to keep her hair dry and stood under a lukewarm spray of water, going over and over the parts she remembered, as if she could badger her bruised brain into giving up its secrets. Everything had been normal when she went back to the stables after lunch. It had been after dark, say around six or six-thirty, when she stumbled across MacNeil. Sometime during those five hours she had learned that Sole Pleasure was in danger and either surprised someone trying to kill him or confronted the person beforehand and earned herself a knock on the head.

It didn't make sense, but the Stonichers had to be behind the threat to their prize stallion, because they were the only ones who could benefit financially from his death. Since they would make much more by syndicating him for stud, the only way killing him made any sense at all was if he had some problem that would prevent them from syndicating him. It wasn't a question of health; Maris had grown up around horses, loved them with a passion and devotion that had consumed her life, and she knew every detail of the well-being of her charges. Sole Pleasure was in perfect health, an unusually strong, fast horse who was full of energy and good spirits. He was a big, cheerful athlete who ran for the sheer love of running, sometimes mischievous but remarkably free of bad habits. She loved all her horses, but Pleasure was special to her. It was unthinkable that anyone would want to kill him, destroy forever that big, good-natured heart and matchless physical ability,

The only thing she could think of that would interfere with his syndication, the only possible reason anyone would grab for insurance money rather

than hold out for the much larger fortune to be gained from syndicating him, was if the fertility tests had proved him sterile.
If that was the case, the Stonichers might as well geld him and race him as long as he was healthy. But injuries happened to even the hardiest animals, and a racing career could be ended in a heartbeat. The great filly Ruffian had been on the way to victory, well ahead of her male opponent in a special match race, when an awkward step shattered her leg and she had to be put down. Given the uncertainties of winning purses on the track and the given of insurance money, if Sole Pleasure was sterile, the Stonichers could conceivably be going for the sure thing and have hired someone to kill him.
She didn't want to think it of them. Joan and Ronald Stonicher had always seemed like decent people to her, though not the kind with whom she would ever be close friends. They were Kentucky blue bloods, born into the life, but Ronald particularly seemed to be involved in raising horses only because he'd inherited the farm. While Joan knew the horses better and was a better rider than her husband, she was a cool, emotionally detached woman who paid more attention to social functions than she did to the earthy functions in the stables. The question was, could they deliberately kill a champion Thoroughbred for the insurance money?
No one else was in a position to collect, so it had to be them.
They wouldn't do it themselves, however. Maris couldn't imagine either one of them actually doing the deed. They had hired someone to kill Pleasure, but who? It had to be someone she saw every day, some-one whose presence near the horses wouldn't attract attention. It was likely one of the temporary hands, but she couldn't rule out a longtime employee; a couple hundred thousand would be terribly tempting to someone who didn't care how he earned it.
She turned off the shower and stepped out, turning the situation around and around in her head. By the time she was dressed, one thought was clear: MacNeil knew who the killer was.
She opened the door and stepped out, almost stumbling over him. He was propped against the counter-top in the small dressing area, his arms crossed and his long legs stretched out, patiently waiting in case she became dizzy and needed him. He, too, had dressed, and though he looked mouth-wateringly tough and sexy in jeans, flannel shirt and boots, she regretted no longer being able to see him in nothing more than tight-fitting boxers.

Maris jabbed a slender finger at his chest. "You know who it is, don't you?" something the way you did, but he wasn't as lucky. The next morning there was a dead horse in the stall and the kid was missing. That was in Connecticut. A week later his body was found in Pennsylvania."
She stared at him, her dark eyes stark. The Stonich-ers might just be after the money, but they had aligned themselves with people who were truly evil. Any regret she might have felt for them vanished.
MacNeil's face was like stone. "I won't move too soon and blow the investigation. No matter what, I'm going to nail these bastards. Do you understand?"
She did. Completely. That left only one thing to do. "You refuse to compromise the case, and I won't let Pleasure be hurt. That means you'll have to use me as the bait."

Chapter Six

"Absolutely not." The words were flat and implacable. "No way in hell."
"You have to."
He looked down at her with mingled exasperation and amusement. "Sweetheart, you've been the boss for so long that you've forgotten how to take orders. I'm running this show, not you, and you'll damn well do what I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it, or you're going to find yourself handcuffed and gagged and your sweet little ass stuffed in a closet until this is over."
Maris batted her long eyelashes at him. "So you think my ass is sweet, huh?"
"So sweet I'll probably be biting it before too much longer." The concept appealed to him; she could tell by the way his eyes darkened. She was rather taken by it, herself. Then he shrugged the moment away and grinned. "But no matter how good you taste or how fast you flutter those eyelashes, you aren't going to change my mind about this."
She crossed her arms and offered him an irrefutable fact. "You need me. I don't know what I saw or who hit me. It could have been one of the Stonichers, or it could have been whoever they hired. But they don't know that I can't remember, and they don't know about you, so they think I'm the biggest threat to them."

"That's exactly why you're staying out of sight. If it's one of the Stonichers holding the gun, I can't predict how he or she will act. Give me a professional killer any day, rather than an amateur, who's likely to panic and do something really stupid, like shooting you in front of a bunch of witnesses."
"God forbid you should have to deal with anyone who would get rattled by committing murder," she said, sweetly sarcastic, and he gave her another of those patented narrow looks of his. She continued with her argument.
"They're probably surprised that I haven't already called the cops on them. By now they're figuring I was either hurt more than they'd thought at first and I'm lying unconscious somewhere, or that I've realized I have no proof to take to the cops, so I have no excuse for stealing a priceless horse. Either way, they want me. I'm the perfect patsy. They can kill Pleasure, make it look like I did it, and then kill me. Everything's tied up nice and clean, and who knows, the insurance policy may even pay double indemnity, which is more money in everyone's pocket. Nothing will make them commit faster than seeing me."
"Damn it, no." He shook his head in exasperation. "I can't believe the way your mind works. You must read a lot of thrillers."
She glared at him, affronted. Her argument was perfectly logical, and he knew it. That didn't mean he liked it. It didn't even mean he would agree with it; she was fast learning that she could add protective to the list of his characteristics. And stubborn. God forbid she should forget stubborn.
"Sweetheart..." He smoothed his hands over her shoulders, an unfamiliar, tender ache in his chest as he felt the delicacy of her bones. He tried to think of the words that would convince her to leave this business to him and Dean. It was their job; they were trained for it. She would be in the way, and worrying about her would drive him crazy. God, she evidently thought she was seven feet tall and made of pig iron, but he could see how pate she was, how carefully she moved. She wasn't normally fragile, despite the slightness of her build; he'd seen her ride, effortlessly controlling stallions that most men would have trouble handling, so he knew she was strong. She was also alarmingly valiant, and he didn't know if his nerves could stand the stress.
"Look at it this way," she said. "As long as they don't know where Pleasure is, I'm safe. They need me to get to him."

He didn't argue, didn't try to convince her. He just shook his head and said, "No."
She gave his forehead an experimental rap with her knuckles, a puzzled look on her face.
He drew back a little, blinking in surprise. "What are you doing?"
"Seeing if your head's made out of wood," she retorted, her exasperation showing through. "You're letting your emotions interfere with your job. I'm your best bet¡Xso use me!"
Mac stood motionless. He couldn't have been more stunned if this delicate fire-eater had suddenly lifted him over her head and tossed him through the window. He was letting his emotions interfere with the job? That was the last thing he'd ever imagined anyone would say to him. What made him so good at his job was his ability to divorce himself from the emotions that could hamper his actions. He'd always been the one who kept his head, who remained cool no matter how tense the situation. He might have some sleepless nights afterward, he might sweat bullets, but while the job was going down he was an iceman.
He couldn't be emotional about her; it wasn't logical. Okay, so he'd had the hots for her since he'd first seen her. Chemistry happened. With her, it had happened in a big way. And he liked her; he'd learned a lot about her since she had practically commandeered him the night before. She was quick-thinking, had a sense of humor, and was too damned gutsy for his peace of mind. She also responded to his slightest touch, her soft body melting against him, with a sheer delight that went to his bead faster than a bit of whiskey.
He frowned. Only the fact that she was concussed had kept him from taking her, and even then, it had been a near thing. Never mind that they were waiting for a killer to come after them, that he had deliberately left a trail that was just difficult enough to keep from being obvious. He never should have undressed last night; he knew that. But the fact was, he had wanted to feel her against his skin, and so he'd taken off everything but his shorts and slipped into bed with her. Dean would beep him when anyone showed up; if Mac had timed it right, he figured it would take another hour at least before anything happened, but still he should have been dressed and ready in case some-thing went wrong. Instead, he had been on top of her, between her legs, and thinking that only two thin layers of cotton were keeping him from her. It would have taken him maybe five seconds to get those two layers out

of the way, and then he would have been inside her and to hell with anything else.
But none of that was emotion. That was liking, and a powerful lust. So she had this crazy idea, after spending only a few hours with him¡Xand being asleep most of that time¡Xthat they were going to get married. Just because she felt that way didn't mean he did, and he sure as hell wasn't going to let himself be buffaloed into something like marriage, no matter how hard he got whenever she was anywhere around.
The thought of using her as bait almost made the top of his head come off, but that wasn't emotion, it was common sense.
"You're concussed," he finally said. "You're moving like a snail, and you don't need to be moving at all. You'd be more of a hindrance than a help, because I'd have to watch you, as well as myself."
"Then give me a weapon," she replied, her tone so unruffled that he wasn't sure he'd heard right.
"A weapon?" he echoed incredulously. "Good God, you think I'm going to arm a civilian?"
She straightened away from his grasp, and his palms ached from the loss of contact. All of a sudden her black eyes weren't bottomless at all, they were cool and flat, and the recognition of what he was seeing jolted him.
"I can handle a pistol as well as you, maybe better."
She wasn't exaggerating. He'd seen that look in the eyes of snipers, and in the eyes of some fellow agents who had been there, done that, and had the guts to do it again. He had seen it in his own eyes, and he'd understood when some women had shied away from him, frightened by the dangerous edge they sensed in him.
Maris wouldn't shy away. She looked delicate, but she was pure steel.
He could use her. The thought flashed into his brain, and he couldn't dismiss it. Policy said that no civilians should be involved if it could be avoided, but too many times it couldn't be avoided. She was right; she was his best bet, and he would be a fool if he compromised the investigation by not using her. It wrenched every instinct he had to do it, but he had to put his feelings aside and concentrate on the job.
Damn it, he thought in surprise, he had been letting his emotions cloud his thinking. That wasn't a good sign, and he had to put a stop to that kind of idiocy right now.

"All right," he said swiftly, wheeling around to get their jackets. He jerked his on and began stuffing Maris into hers. "Time's short, so we have to move fast. First we need to get the stallion out of the trailer and hidden somewhere else, then position the trailer so that whoever comes can't see that he isn't in it. Then we come back here. You drive the truck, I'll be hidden in the truck bed, under some blankets or something." He turned out the bathroom light and began ushering her toward the door. "We'll post Dean down the road, where he can see them arrive. He'll leave then and get into position at the trailer. He'll give us warning. You leave by the back way just as they arrive, let them get a glimpse of the truck. They follow."

They reached the door. MacNeil turned out the lights and took a small radio out of his pocket, keying it. "Is everything clear?" he asked. "We're coming out."

"What?" His partner's voice was startled. "Yeah, everything's clear. What's up?"

"Tell you in a minute."

He slipped the radio back into his pocket and unchained the door. He paused then, looking down at her. "Are you sure you can do this? If your head is hurting too much, let me know now, before it goes any further."

"I can do it." Her voice was calm, matter-of-fact, and he gave a short nod.

"Okay, then." He opened the door, and cold air slapped her in the face. She shivered, even though she was wearing her thick down jacket. The weather bureau had been predicting the arrival of a cold front, she remembered. She had watched the noon news and weather yesterday; perhaps that was why she now had this thick jacket instead of the flannel-lined denim jacket she had been wearing yesterday morning. She was glad she had changed coats, because the temperature now had to be in the twenties.

She looked around as she left the cozy warmth of the motel room. The motel office and the highway were on her right. MacNeil took her arm and steered her to the left, circling her behind a late-model pickup truck that was covered over with frost. "Hold it a minute," he said, and left her hidden by the truck's bulk while he went around to the driver's side. He opened the door and leaned in. She caught the faint metallic jingle of keys; then the motor started and settled into a quiet idle. She noticed with approval that the interior light hadn't come on, which meant he had taken care of that little detail earlier.

Interior lights. As he closed the truck door with a barely audible click, the neon light from the motel sign slanted across his high cheekbones, and a door opened in her mind.
She remembered the way his face had looked last night as he drove, the grimness of his expression highlighted by the faint green glow from the dash.
She remembered the desperation with which she had hidden her condition from him. She had been afraid to let him know how weak she was, how terribly her head hurt, that she was vulnerable in any way. He hadn't said much, just driven in dark silence, but even through her pain she had felt the physical awareness running between them like a live electrical wire. If she showed any vulnerability, she'd thought, he would be on her.
That was why he'd come with her, not because he was concerned about Sole Pleasure.
Her thinking had been muddled by the knock she'd taken on the head. She had been terrified for Pleasure's safety, trying to think of the best way to protect him, and she hadn't been certain she could trust MacNeil. She had taken a big chance in asking for his help; he had given it without question, but afterward she'd been too unbalanced by the concussion and the strength and unfamiliarity of her own sensual awareness of him to think straight.
She had wound up exactly where she was afraid she would, under him in bed. And he hadn't done a darn thing, except make her fall in love with him.
"Come on," he said softly, not looking at her. In fact, he was looking at everything except her, his head swiveling, restless eyes noting every detail of their surroundings.
The early morning was dark and silent, so cold that their breath fogged into ice crystals. No stars winked overhead, and she knew why when a few white flakes began drifting soundlessly to the ground. A cold breeze sliced through her jeans, freezing her legs.
He led her across to a nondescript tan Oldsmobile that was backed into a parking slot between a scraggly bush, the motel's attempt at landscaping, and a Volvo station wagon. She walked carefully, and her headache obliged by remaining bearable.
He opened the rear door of the four-door car and put her inside, then he got into the front, beside his partner. Dean Pearsall was exactly as MacNeil had described him, thin and dark, as well as definitely puzzled. "What the hell's going on?"

Briefly MacNeil outlined the plan. Pearsall's head swiveled, and he looked over the seat at Maris, doubt plain in his expression.
"I can do it," she said, not giving him time to voice that doubt.
"We have to work fast," MacNeil said. "Can you get the video equipment set up?"
"Yeah," Pearsall replied. "Maybe. We're cutting it damn close, though."
"Then let's not waste any more time." MacNeil popped open the glove box and removed a holstered pistol. He took it out, checked it, then slid it back into the holster before handing it back to Maris. "It's a .38 revolver, five shots, and there's a round under the hammer."
She nodded and checked the weapon herself. A faint smile eased the grim line of his mouth as he watched her; he wouldn't have taken someone else's word on the state of a weapon's readiness, either.
"There's a Kevlar vest on the seat beside you. It'll be way too big for you, but put it on anyway," he instructed.
"That's your vest," Pearsall said.
"Yeah, but she's going to wear it."
Maris slipped the revolver into her coat pocket and grabbed the vest. "I'll put it on in the truck," she said as she opened the door and slid out. "We have to hurry."
The snowflakes were still drifting down, ghostly in the predawn quiet. Their footsteps crunched on the gravel as she and MacNeil crossed the parking lot to the truck. The defroster had cleared the bottom half of the windshield, and that was enough for him to drive.
He didn't turn on the headlights until they were on the highway and he could tell there was nothing in sight in either direction except for the tan Oldsmobile, which had pulled out behind them. Then he hit the switch, and the green dash lights illuminated his face just as they had earlier.
Maris shrugged out of her coat and into the Kevlar vest. It was heavy and far too big, so big it covered her hips, but she didn't waste her time arguing about wearing the cumbersome garment, because she knew MacNeil would never give in on this.
"I remember driving with you last night," she said.
He glanced at her. "Your memory's back?"
"Not all of it. I still don't remember who hit me on the head, or taking Pleasure. By the way, don't you think you should tell me?"

He grunted. "I don't know who hit you. There's a choice between at least three people, maybe more."
"Ronald and Joan are two. Who's the one you followed to Solomon Green?"
"The new vet. Randy Yu."
Maris was silent. That name surprised her; she would have thought of a lot of other people before she would have come up with the vet's name. She'd been impressed with his skill, and he'd never shown anything but the utmost care for his four-legged patients. He was a quarter Chinese, in his middle thirties, and with the strength a veterinarian needed. If he was the one she'd tangled with, she was surprised she'd managed to get away from him with no more than a bump on the head. Of course, whoever she'd fought with wouldn't have expected her to know how to fight, much less fight hard and dirty.
"It makes sense," she said, thinking about it. "A quick injection, Pleasure dies of cardiac arrest, and it looks like natural causes. Not nearly as messy as a bullet."
"But you ruined that plan for them," MacNeil said, harshness underlying the calm of his tone. "Now they'll be planning to use bullets¡Xfor both you and the horse."

Chapter Seven

Sole Pleasure wasn't happy. He didn't like being alone, he didn't like being cramped in a small trailer for so long, and he was both hungry and thirsty. MacNeil had backed the horse trailer deep into a section of woods, so deep she didn't know how he'd managed it, and Pleasure didn't like the unfamiliar surroundings, either. He was a horse accustomed to open pastures, roomy stalls, noise and people. As soon as they got out of the truck they heard his angry neighing and the thud of one of his rear hooves repeatedly kicking against the back of the trailer.
"He'll hurt himself!" Maris hurried to the trailer, moving faster than she should have for the sake of her head, but if Pleasure managed to break his leg, he would have to be put down. "Easy, baby, easy," she crooned as she unlatched the back gate, the special note she used for her horses entering her tone. The kicking stopped immediately, and she could almost see the alert black ears swiveling to catch her voice.

"Hold it." MacNeil's hand came down on top of hers as she started to open the gate. "I'll get him out. He's fractious, and I don't want him bumping you around. You stand over there and keep talking to him."
She gave him a considering look as she moved to the side. Really, the man was acting as if this were the first time she'd ever been hurt. Anyone who worked with horses could expect to be kicked, bitten, bruised and bucked off¡Xthough she hadn't been thrown since she'd been a kid. Still, she'd collected her share of injuries: Both arms had been broken, as well as her collarbone. She'd had a concussion before, too. What was the best way to handle an overprotective man, especially after you were married?
Exactly the way her mother handled her father, she thought, grinning. By standing her ground, talking rings around him, and distracting him with sex, and by choosing her battles and sometimes actually letting him have his way. This was one of the times to not kick up a fuss. She would ignore him later, when the stakes were greater.
MacNeil skillfully backed the big stallion out of the trailer; Pleasure came eagerly, happy to have company again, relieved to be unconfined. He showed his happiness by dancing around and playing, shoving MacNeil with his head and generally acting like any four-year-old. All things considered, Maris was just as happy not to be on the receiving end of those head butts, or to have to control all that power as he danced around. He would have been quieter for her¡Xthe horses found her especially soothing¡Xbut any jolt right now wasn't fun.
MacNeil led Pleasure away from the trailer, the stallion's hooves almost soundless on the thick pad of pine needles and decomposing leaves that carpeted the forest floor. He tied the reins to a sapling and patted the animal's glossy neck. "Okay, you can come over now," he called to Maris. "Keep him happy while I reposition the trailer."
She took control of the stallion, calming him with her voice and hands. He was still hungry and thirsty, but he was such a curious, gregarious horse that his interest in the proceedings kept him occupied. Dean Pearsall had stopped the Oldsmobile farther back, positioning the car so its headlights lit the area. MacNeil got in the truck and put it in reverse, leaning out the open door to check his position as he backed the track up to the trailer. He was good at it; it took some people forever to get the trailer hitch in the right position, but MacNeil did it on the first try. Pretty good for an FBI agent,

Maris thought. He was a fed now, but he'd obviously spent a lot of time around horses in the past.
It was snowing a little more heavily now, the headlight beams catching the drifting flakes as they sifted through the bare branches of the hardwoods. The pines were beginning to acquire a dusting of white. MacNeil maneuvered the trailer around, threading it through the trees, repositioning it so that it directly faced the narrow trail they'd made and anyone coming down it wouldn't, be able to see that Pleasure wasn't inside. There were high, narrow side windows in the trailer, but none in front.
As soon as the trailer was in position and MacNeil had unhooked the truck and pulled away, Pearsall went to work, squirming underneath the trailer and setting up a video camera so that it couldn't easily be seen but would still have a good angle on anyone approaching the trailer.
MacNeil turned to Maris. "While Dean's working, let's get Pleasure tucked away back in the woods." He checked the luminous hands on his watch. "We need to be out of here in five minutes, ten tops."
The trailer contained blankets that had been used to cover the mare who had been brought to Solomon Green the day before. Maris got the darkest one and spread it across Pleasure's broad back. He liked that, swaying his muscular rump as if he were doing the hootchie-cootchie, and blowing in the particular way he did when he was pleased. She laughed, the sound quiet and loving, as she reached up to hug his big neck. He lipped her hair, but gently, as if he'd somehow realized by the way she moved that she wasn't quite up to speed.
"This way." MacNeil's voice held an odd note as he handed a flashlight to Maris, then untied the reins and began leading Pleasure deeper into the trees. He curved his other arm around Maris, holding her close to his side as they walked. Between the oversize Kevlar vest and her thick down jacket, he couldn't feel her, so he slipped his hand under the coat, under the vest, resting it on the swell of her hip. "How are you feeling?" he asked as they picked their way through the dark woods, stepping over fallen limbs and evading bushes that clutched at their clothes.
"Okay." She smiled up at him, letting herself lean closer into the heat and strength of his big body. "I've had a concussion before, and though this one isn't any fun, I don't think it's as bad as the first one. The pain is going away faster, so I don't understand why I can't remember what happened."

Her bewilderment was plain, and his fingers tightened on her hip. "A different part of your brain is affected, I guess. And parts of your memory are already coming back, so by tomorrow you'll probably remember everything."
She hoped so; these blank holes in her life were unsettling. It was just a matter of a few hours now, as she regained partial memory of things that had happened both before and after she was hit, but she didn't like not knowing everything that had happened. She remembered driving with MacNeil, but why couldn't she remember arriving at the motel?
Only one way to find out what she wanted to know. "Did I undress myself?"
Glancing up, she saw him smile at the abrupt change of subject. His voice deepened, evidence of the way the memory affected him. "It was a joint effort."
Maybe she would have been embarrassed an hour ago, but not now. Instead she felt a sort of aroused contentment fill her at the thought of him pulling off his T-shirt and putting it on her, the soft cotton still warm from his body.
"Did you touch me?" The whispered words were like heated honey, flowing over him, telling him how much she liked the idea.
"No, you were too out of it." But he'd wanted to, he thought. God, how he'd wanted to. He helped her over a fallen tree, supporting her so that she wouldn't stumble, but he was remembering how she'd looked sitting on the side of the bed, wearing nothing but her panties, her eyes closing, her pale hair floating around her delicate, satiny shoulders. Her breasts were high, firm, small but deliciously round, her nipples like dark pink little crowns. His right hand clenched on the reins; his palm was actually aching to touch her now, to fill his hand with that cool, richly resilient flesh and warm it with his loving.
"Well, darn," she said sedately, and in the glow of the flashlight he saw the welcome in her night-dark eyes.
He inhaled deeply, reaching for control. They had no time for any delay, much less one that would last an hour. An hour? He gave a mental snort. Who was he kidding? He was so worked up that five minutes was more like it, and that was only if his self-control turned out to be a lot stronger than it felt right now.
"Later," he promised, his voice a rough growl of need. Later, when this was settled and his job done. Later, when he could take the time with her that he wanted to take, behind a locked door and with the telephone off the hook.

Later, when she felt better, damn it, and wasn't dealing with a concussion. He figured it would be two days, at least, before her headache was gone¡Xtwo long, hellish days.
He stopped and looked back. They had gone far enough that he could no longer see the headlights through the trees. A small hollow dipped just ahead, and he led Sole Pleasure into it. The hollow blocked the wind, and tall trees leaning overhead protected him from the light snow. "You'll be okay here for a couple of hours," he told the horse as he tied the reins to a low, sturdy branch. Pleasure would be able to move around some, and if there were any edible leaves or stray blades of grass, he would be able to graze within a small area.
"Be good," Maris admonished the horse, stroking his forehead. "We won't be gone long. Then we'll take you back to your big, comfortable stall, and you can have your favorite feed, and an apple for dessert." He blew softly, then bobbed his head up and down in agreement. She didn't know how many actual words he understood, but he definitely understood the love in her voice, and he knew she was telling him good stuff.
MacNeil took the flashlight from her hand and settled his arm around her again as they walked back to the truck. Pleasure neighed his disapproval of being left alone, but soon the trees blotted out the sound and there was only the rustle of their feet in the leaves.
"You know what to do," he said. "They won't follow you too closely on the highway, because they won't want to make you suspicious. Let them see where you leave the road, but then drive as fast as you can, to give yourself as much time as possible. They'll be able to follow the tracks. Pull up to the trailer, get out of the truck and get into the trees. Don't waste time, don't look back to see what I'm doing. Get into a protected place and stay there until either Dean or I come for you. If anyone else shows up, use that pistol."
"You need the vest more than I do." Worry gnawed at her. He was sending her out of harm's way, while he would be right in the middle of it, without protection. "They might pull in before you're completely out of sight and get a shot off at you. The only way I'll let you do this is if you're wearing the vest."
There that stubborn streak was again, she thought. Streak? Ha! He was permeated with it. She was beginning to think that if she scratched his skin, stubbornness would ooze out instead of blood. Living with him was going

to be interesting; as he'd noted, she was used to being the boss, and so was he. She looked forward to the fights¡Xand to the making up.
Pearsall was waiting for them when they got back. "Everything's ready," he said. "There's a six-hour tape in the camera, and the battery pack is fully charged. Now, if we can just get back into position before the bad guys show up, we're set."
MacNeil nodded. "You leave first. We'll let you get out of sight before we follow. Radio if you see anything suspicious."
"Give me an extra minute so I can swing through the motel parking lot to make sure there aren't any new arrivals. Then I'll pull back and take up position."
Pearsall got into the car and backed out, his headlights bobbing through the trees.
Darkness settled around them as they listened to the sound of the car fading in the distance. MacNeil opened the passenger door of the truck and put his hands on Maris's waist, lifting her onto the seat. In the darkness, his face was only a pale blur. "Whatever happens, make sure you stay safe," he growled, and bent his head to her.
His lips were cold, and firm. Maris wound her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to him as he deepened the kiss, slanting his head for better contact. His tongue wasn't cold at all, but hot and strong, and her entire body tightened with excitement as she leaned closer to him. It wasn't enough; with the pleasure came frustration. She swiveled on the seat to face him, parting her legs so that he stood between them, pressed hard against her as the kiss changed yet again, into something fierce with need.
It was their first kiss, but there was no tentative-ness, no searching. They already knew each other, had already made the inner adjustment to the hot ache of physical desire, and accepted the hunger. They were already lovers, though their bodies hadn't yet been joined. The pact had been made. Invisible strands of attraction had been pulling them together from the first, and the web was almost complete.
He tore his mouth away from hers, breathing hard, his breath fogging in the cold air. "No more," he said, the words strained. "Not now. I'm as hard as a rock already, and if we¡X" He broke off. "We have to go. Now."
"Have we given Dean enough time?"
"Hell, I don't know! All I know is that I'm about ten seconds away from pulling your jeans off, and if we don't go now, the whole plan is blown."

She didn't want to let him go. Her arms didn't want to release their hold on him, her thighs didn't want to loosen from around his hips. But she did it, forced herself to open her embrace, because she could feel the truth pushing against her.

In silence he stepped back, and she turned in the seat so that she faced forward. He closed the door, then walked stiffly around the truck to climb in under the steering wheel, a look of acute discomfort on his face.

She wasn't good for his sanity, he thought as he started the truck and put it in gear. She made him forget about the job and think only about sex. Not sex in general, but sex in particular. Sex with her. Again and again, holding that slim body beneath him until he was satisfied.

He tried to imagine being sated with her, and be couldn't. Alarm tingled through him. He tried to think of some of the other women he'd slept with over the years, but their names wouldn't come to mind, then faces eluded him, and there was no concrete memory of how any of them had felt. There was only her mouth, her breasts, her legs. Her voice, her body in his arms, her hair spread across the pillow. He could imagine her in the shower with him, her face across the table from him every morning, her clothes hanging beside his in the closet.

The most frightening thing was that it was so damn easy to imagine it all. The only thing that frightened aim more was the thought that it might not happen, that he was actually using her in a setup where she could be hurt, despite all the pains he was taking to keep her safe.

They left the cover of the woods, and he eased the truck across the rutted ditch and onto the highway. No headlights appeared in either direction. Fat snow-flakes swirled and danced in the beams of their own headlights, and the low clouds blocked any hint of the approaching dawn. The radio remained silent, meaning Dean hadn't seen anything suspicious. After several minutes the lights of the motel sign came into view, and a few seconds after that they passed the Oldsmobile, pulled off on the side of the road and were facing back the way they'd come. It looked unoccupied, but Mac knew Dean was there, watching everything. No vehicle could approach the motel without being seen.

He pulled into the parking lot and backed into a slot, so that she could get out faster. He left the engine running, though he killed the lights. He turned to face her.

"You know what to do. Do exactly that and nothing else. Understand?"

"Yes."
"All right. I'm going to get into the back of the truck now. If the fools start shooting early, hit the floorboards and stay there."
"Yes, sir," she said, this time with a hint of dryness.
He paused with his hand on the door handle. He looked at her and muttered something under his breath. Then she was in his arms again, and his mouth was hard, urgent, as he kissed her. He let her go as abruptly as he'd grabbed her, and got out of the truck. Without another word, he closed the door, then vaulted lightly into the truck bed, where he lay down out of sight and waited for a killer to appear.

Chapter Eight

The motel was located where a small side road entered the main highway. The highway ran in front of the motel, the secondary road along the right side. Dean had checked out the little road as soon as he arrived and found that it wandered aimlessly through the rural area. No one looking for them was likely to arrive by that route, because it went nowhere and took its time getting there. The Stonichers and/or their hired killer would be on the highway, checking motels, following the faint but deliberate trail Mac had left. The plan was for Maris to let their pursuers catch a glimpse of her as she drove around the back of the motel and onto the secondary road. She would turn left, then right, onto the highway. They would notice immediately that she wasn't pulling the horse trailer, so instead of trying to cut her off, they would hang back and follow her, expecting her to lead them to Sole Pleasure.
At least Mac hoped that was how it worked. If Yu was the only one following them, that was how it would go down. Yu was a professional; he would keep his head. If anyone else was with him, the unpredictability factor shot sky-high.
It was cold in the back of the truck. He had forgotten to get any blankets to cover himself, and the snow was still falling. Mac huddled deeper into his coat and tried to be thankful he was out of the wind. It wasn't working.
The minutes dragged by, drawn out agonizingly by his tension as he waited. Dawn finally began to penetrate the cloud cover, the darkness fading to a deep gray, though true daylight was at least an hour away. Traffic would

begin picking up soon, making it difficult for Dean to spot their tail. People would begin leaving the motel, complicating the traffic pattern even more. And better light would make it more difficult for Maris to hide in the woods.

"Come on, come on," he muttered. Had he made the trail too difficult?

Right on cue, the radio clicked. Mac keyed it once in reply, then gave a single rap on the back of the cab to alert Maris, who had shifted into position behind the wheel.

The radio clicked again, twice this time. Quickly he rapped twice on the cab. Maris put the truck into gear and eased out of the parking slot. She was turning the corner behind the motel when headlights flashed across the cab as a vehicle pulled into the lot, and Mac knew the lure had been cast. In a few seconds they would know if the bait had been taken.

Maris kept the truck at an even pace. Her instinct was to hurry, but she didn't want whoever was following them to know they'd been spotted. The car hadn't turned the corner behind them by the time she pulled onto the secondary road, so if it was them, they were hanging back, not wanting her to spot them.

She stopped at the stop sign, then turned right onto the highway. Watching her rearview mirror as she turned, she saw the car easing out from behind the motel. Its lights were off now, and its gray color made it difficult to spot in the faint light; she wouldn't have noticed it at all if she hadn't been looking for it.

They were driving Ronald's gray Cadillac. Maris had only seen it once or twice, because she usually dealt with Joan, who drove a white BMW. The driveway wasn't visible from the stables, and she seldom paid attention to the comings and goings at the big house. All that interested her was at the stables.

Still, she wondered that they would drive one of their personal cars at all, until she realized that it didn't matter. Sole Pleasure was their horse, and no crime had been committed. If she had called the police, it would have been their word against hers that a crime had even been attempted, and no one in the world would believe the Stonichers were willing to kill a horse worth over twenty million dollars.

Dean's Oldsmobile was nowhere in sight. Maris hoped she was giving him the time he needed to drive the car deep enough into the woods that it couldn't be seen and to work his way into position on foot.

Watching the mirror, she saw the Cadillac turn onto the highway behind her. Without its headlights on, and with the swirling snow cutting visibility, she could barely make out the gray bulk. They would be able to see her much better than she could see them, though, because her lights were on; that was why they were hanging back so far, because they were unable to judge how visible they themselves were.

Their caution was working for her and against them. The distance would give her a few extra seconds to get out of the truck and hide, a few seconds longer for Dean to get set, a few seconds longer that Mac was safe. She tried not to think of him lying on the cold metal bed, unprotected from any stray bullets except by a thin sheet of metal that wouldn't even slow down a lead slug.

It was only a few miles to the place where she would leave the road and drive into the woods. A couple of times the snow became so heavy that she couldn't sec the Cadillac behind her. The white flakes were beginning to dust the ground, but it was a dry, fluffy snow that swirled up with every breath of wind, and the passage of the truck blew it off the highway.

She maintained a steady speed, assuming they could see her, even though she couldn't see the Cadillac. She couldn't do anything that would make them suspicious. Finally she passed the mile marker that told her she was close, and she began braking, looking for the tire ruts where they'd driven before. There. She steered the truck off the highway, bouncing across the ditch faster than, for the sake of her head, she wanted to, but she didn't want to go any slower than she already was. Now that they had seen her leave the highway, she wanted to go as fast as she could, to gain a few more of those precious seconds.

Her headache, which had lessened but never disappeared, increased in severity with each bounce. She ignored it, gritting her teeth against the pain, concentrating on steering the truck on the narrow, winding path MacNeil had already blazed through the trees. She couldn't begin to imagine how difficult it must have been to do this with the trailer in tow, but it was a testament to both his stubbornness and skill that he had.

The Cadillac wouldn't be able to take the bumps and holes as fast as the truck did; it was too low to the ground. More seconds gained.

A bare limb scraped over the windshield, then her headlights caught the dark bulk of the trailer, almost concealed among the trees. Now. She parked the truck in the exact position MacNeil had decreed, killed the lights so the

glare wouldn't blind the camera hidden under the trailer, then slipped out the door and walked swiftly to the trailer and then beyond it. She cut sharply to the left, stepping in places where the snow hadn't sifted down. She left no tracks as she removed herself from the scene so he could do his job without worrying about her.

She'd caught movement in her peripheral vision as she walked away, a big, dark shape silently rolling over the side of the truck bed to conceal himself behind one of the tires. At least he would have some protection, she thought, trying to console herself with that. His mind might be easier now, but hers certainly wasn't. He needed the vest she was wearing; she would never forgive herself if he was killed because she'd agreed to take his vest. It would have been better to remove herself entirely, even if it meant they wouldn't be able to get any solid evidence against the Stonichers. The FBI would get another crack at Randy Yu, but she would never find another MacNeil.

She'd gone far enough. She stopped, her back against a big oak. Snowflakes drifted silently down in the gray dawn, settling in a lacy cap on her unprotected head. She leaned her aching head against the tree and closed her eyes, listening, waiting, her breath almost halted, her heart barely beating, waiting.

. Mac waited, his eyes never leaving the rutted trail. They might drive right up to the truck, but if Yu was in charge, they would probably get out of the car and come the rest of the way on foot. He and Dean were prepared for both circumstances. The underbrush was thick; if they tried to force their way through it, they would make a lot of noise. The best thing to do was to walk up the trail, staying close to the edges. Maris had parked the truck so that they could bypass it only on the driver's side; the tailgate on the passenger side was right up against the bushes. Anyone coming along that trail would be funneled into the camera's view and duly recorded on tape.

After what seemed an interminable length of time, he heard a twig snap. He didn't move. His position, crouched by the right front tire, was secure; he couldn't be seen until they walked in front of the truck, but by then they would have looked into the cab and seen it was empty, and wouldn't pay any more attention to the truck. They would be looking instead at the trailer, and at Maris's small footprints in the thin layer of snow, leading right up to it.

There were other sounds now, rustles from careless feet, more than one pair; the brushing sounds of clothing, the harshness of someone who was slightly winded trying to regulate their breathing. They were close, very close.
The footsteps stopped. "She isn't in the truck." The whisper was barely audible, sexless.
"Look! Her footprints go right up to the trailer." It was another whisper, excitement making it louder than the first.
"Shut... up." The two words were hissed between clenched teeth, as if they had already been said more than once.
"Don't tell me to shut up. We have her cornered. What are you waiting for?" Though still whispering, the speaker's voice was so forceful that it was almost as audible as if he¡Xor she¡X had spoken aloud. The mike might have caught it, Mac thought. With enhanced sound-extraction techniques, which the Bureau had, he was certain the words were now on tape. The only problem was, they hadn't exactly been damning.
"You hired me to do a job. Now stay out of my way and let me do it." There was fury evident now, in both words and tone.
"You're the one who bungled it the first time, so don't act as if you're Mr. Infallible. If you'd been half as smart as you seem to think you are, the horse would already be dead and Maris Mackenzie wouldn't suspect a thing. I didn't bargain on murder when I hired you."
That should do it, Mac thought with grim satisfaction. They had just talked themselves into a prison sentence.
He tightened the muscles in his legs, preparing to step out and identify himself, pistol trained and ready. A crashing, thudding noise behind him made him freeze in place. He looked over his shoulder and almost groaned aloud. A big, black, graceful horse was prancing through the trees toward them, proudly shaking his head as if wanting them to admire his cleverness in getting free.
"There he is! Shoot him!" It was a shout. Pleasure's unexpected appearance had started them out of caution. Almost instantaneously there was the sharp crack of a shot, and bark exploded from the tree just behind the horse.
Damn amateurs! He silently cursed. Pleasure was behind him; if he stood up now, he would be looking straight down the barrel, caught between the shooter and the target. He couldn't do anything but wait for the next shot to hit the beautiful, friendly stallion, who had evidently caught their scent and pulled free so he could join the party.

Dean realized Mac's predicament and stepped from concealment, pistol braced in both hands. "FBI! Drop your weapons on the ground¡Xnow."
Mac surged upward, bracing his arms across the hood of the truck. He saw Randy Yu, his hands already reaching upward as his pistol thudded to the ground. You could always trust a professional to know how to do things.
But Joan Stonicher was startled by Mac's sudden movement, and she wheeled toward him, her eyes wide with panic and rage. She froze, the pistol in her hand and her finger on the trigger.
"Ease off, lady," Mac said softly. "Don't do anything stupid. If I don't get you, my partner will. Just take your finger off the trigger and let the gun drop. That's all you have to do, and we'll all be okay."
She didn't move. From the excellent viewpoint he had, Mac could see her finger trembling.
"Do as he says," Randy Yu said wearily. The two agents had them caught in an excellent cross field. There was nothing they could do, and no sense in making things worse.
Pleasure had shied at the noise of the shot, neighing his alarm, but his life had been too secure for him to panic. He trotted closer, his scooped nostrils flaring as he examined their familiar scents, searching for the special one he could detect. He came straight for Mac.
Joan's eyes left Mac and fastened on the horse. He saw the exact instant when her control shattered, saw her pupils contract and her hand jerk.
A shrill whistle shattered the air a split second before the shot.
A lot of things happened simultaneously. Dean shouted. Randy Yu dropped to the ground, his hands covering his head. Pleasure screamed in pain, rearing. Joan's hand jerked again, back toward Mac.
And there was another whistle, this one ear splitting.
Maris stepped from behind a tree, her black eyes glittering with rage. The pistol was in her hand, trained on Joan. Joan wheeled back toward this new threat, and without hesitation Mac fired.

Chapter Nine

He was mad enough to murder her, Maris thought.
She was still so enraged herself that it didn't matter. Fury burned through her. It was all she could do to keep from dismantling Joan Stonicher on the

spot, and only the knowledge that Pleasure needed her kept her even remotely under control.

The woods were swarming with people, with medics and deputies and highway patrol officers, with onlookers, even some reporters already there. Pleasure was accustomed to crowds, but he'd never before been shot, and pain and shock were making him unruly. He'd wheeled at Maris's whistle, and his lightning reflexes had saved his life; Joan's bullet had gouged a deep furrow in his chest, tearing the muscle at an angle but not penetrating any internal organs. Now it took all of Maris's skill to keep him calm so she could stop the bleeding; he kept moving restlessly in circles, bumping her, trying to pay attention to her softly crooning voice but distracted by the pain.

Her head was throbbing, both from Pleasure's skittishness and from her own desperate run through the woods. She'd heard him moving through the trees, and in a flash she'd known exactly what had happened, what he would do. How he'd gotten free didn't matter; he had heard and smelted them, and pranced happily to greet them, sure of his welcome. She'd known he would catch her scent on MacNeil's clothes and go straight to him. It had been a toss-up which of them would be shot first, MacNeil or Pleasure. All she could do was try to get there in time to draw the horse's attention, as well as everyone else's.

For one awful, hellish moment, when Pleasure screamed and she saw Joan swing back toward MacNeil, she'd thought she'd lost everything. She had stepped out from the trees, moving in what felt like slow motion. She couldn't hear anything then, not even Pleasure; she hadn't been able to see anything except Joan, her vision narrowing to a tunnel with her target as the focus. She hadn't been aware of whistling again, or of taking the pistol from her pocket, but the weapon had been in her hand and her finger had been smoothly tightening on the trigger when Joan jerked yet again, panicked, this time aiming at Maris. That was when Mac had shot her. At such close range, just across the hood of the truck, his aim had been perfect. The bullet had shattered her upper arm.

Joan would probably never have use of that arm again, Maris thought dispassionately. She couldn't bring herself to care.

The entire scene had been recorded, complete with audio. The camera had playback capability and Dean had obliged the sheriff by playing the tape for him. Both Yu and Joan were nailed, and Yu, being the professional he was,

was currently bargaining for all he was worth. He was willing to carry others down with him if it would lighten his sentence.
It had stopped snowing, though the day hadn't gotten any warmer. Her hands were icy, but she couldn't leave Pleasure to warm them. Blood glistened on his black chest and down his legs, staining his white stocking, splattering on the snow-frosted leaves and on Maris. She whispered to him, controlling him mostly with her voice, crooning reassurance and love to him while she held his bridle in one hand and with the other held some gauze the medics had given her to the wound on his chest. She had asked a deputy to contact a vet, but as yet no one had shown up.
Yu could have seen to the horse, but he hadn't offered, and Maris wouldn't have trusted him, anyway. It was he who had hit her on the head. As soon as she saw him again she had remembered that much, remembered his upraised arm, the cold, remorseless expression in his dark eyes. Other memories were still vague, and there were still blank spots, but they were gradually filling in.
She must have gone to the big house to see Joan about something. She didn't know why, but she remembered standing with her hand raised to knock, and freezing as Joan's voice filtered through the door.
"Randy's going to do it tonight. While everyone's eating will be a good time. I told him we couldn't wait any longer, the syndicates are pushing for a decision."
"Damn, I hate this," Ronald Stonicher had said. "Poor Pleasure's been a good horse. Are you certain the drug won't be detected?"
"Randy says it won't, and it's his can on the line," Joan had coolly replied.
Maris had backed away, so angry she could barely contain herself. Her first concern had been for Pleasure. It was the time when the stable hands would either be eating or have gone home for the night. She couldn't delay a moment.
Her next memory was of running down the aisle to his stall. She must have surprised Randy Yu there, though she didn't remember actually coming up on him. She remembered enough to testify, though, even if she never remembered anything else, and assuming her testimony was needed. The tape was solid evidence.
Another vehicle joined the tangle, and a roly-poly man in his late fifties, sporting a crew cut, got out of a battered pickup truck. He trudged wearily toward Maris, clutching a big black bag in his hand. Finally, the vet, she

thought. Dark circles under his eyes told her that he'd probably been up late, possibly all night, with an ailing animal.
Tired or not, he knew horses. He stopped, taking in Pleasure's magnificent lines, the star on his forehead, the bloodstained white stocking. "That's Sole Pleasure," he said in astonishment.
"Yes, and he's been shot," Maris said tersely. Her head was throbbing; even her eyeballs ached. If Pleasure didn't settle down soon, her head would likely explode. "No internal organs affected, but some chest muscle torn. He won't settle down and let the bleeding stop."
"Let's take care of that problem, first off. I'm George Norton, the vet hereabouts." He was working as he spoke, setting down the bag and opening it. He prepared a hypodermic and stepped forward, smoothly injecting the sedative into one of the bulging veins in Pleasure's neck. The stallion danced nervously, his shoulder shoving her once again. She clenched her teeth, enduring.
"He'll quiet down in a minute." The vet gave her a sharp glance as he peeled away the blood-soaked gauze she'd been holding to the wound. "No offense, but even with the blood, the horse looks in better shape than you do. Are you all right?"
"Concussion."
"Then for God's sake stop letting him bump you around like that," he said sharply. "Sit down somewhere before you fall down."
Even in the midst of everything that was going on, as the medics readied Joan for transport, Mac somehow heard the vet. All of a sudden he was there, looming behind her, reaching over her shoulder for Pleasure's bridle.
"I'll hold him." The words sounded as if he were spitting them out one at a time, like bullets. "Sit down."
"I¡X" She'd started to say "I think I will," but she didn't have a chance to finish the sentence.
He assumed she was about to mount an argument, and barked out one word. "Sit!"
"I wasn't going to argue," she snapped back. What did he think she was, a dog? Sit, indeed. She felt more like lying down.
She decided to do just that. Pleasure was going to be all right; as soon as he quieted and let the vet do his work, the bleeding would stop. The torn muscle would have to be stitched, antibiotics administered, a bandage secured, but the horse would heal. Even though the truck and trailer were

stolen, under the circumstances she couldn't imagine that there would be any problem with using them to transport Pleasure back to Solomon Green. Until the vet was finished and Pleasure was loaded in the trailer, she intended to stretch out on the truck seat.

Wearily she climbed into the cab. The keys were still in the ignition, so she started the engine and turned on the heater. She took off her coat, removed the Kevlar vest and placed it in the floorboards, then lay down on the seat and pulled the coat over her.

She almost cried with relief as the pain immediately began easing now that she was still. She closed her eyes, letting the tension drain out of her, along with the terror and absolute rage. She might have killed Joan. If the woman had shot Mac, she would have done it. Enveloped in that strange vacuum of despair and rage, she had been going for a head shot. She hadn't even thought about Pleasure, not in that awful moment when Joan turned on Mac. She was glad she hadn't had to pull the trigger, but she knew she would have. Knowing her own fiercely protective nature was one tiling, but this was the first time she had been faced with the true extent of it. The jolt of self-knowledge was searing.

Mac had already faced this; it was in his eyes. She had seen it in her father, in her brothers, the willingness to do what was necessary to protect those they loved and those who were weaker. It wasn't easy. It was gut-wrenching, and those who were willing to stand on the front lines paid for it in a thousand little ways she was only beginning to understand. She hadn't had to take that final, irrevocable step, but she knew how close it had been. Her mother also had that willingness, and a couple of her sisters-in-law. Valiant Mary, intrepid Caroline, sweet Barrie. They had each, in different circumstances, faced death and seen the bottom line. They would understand the wrenching she felt. Well, maybe Caroline wouldn't. Caroline was so utterly straightforward, so focused, that Joe had once compared her to a guided missile.

The door by her head was wrenched open, and cold air poured in. "Maris! Wake up!" Mac barked, his voice right over her. His hand closed on her shoulder as if he intended to shake her.

"I am awake," she said, without opening her eyes. "The headache's better, now that I'm still. How much longer will it be before I can take Pleasure back?"

"You aren't taking him anywhere. You're going to a hospital to be checked out."
"We can't just leave him here."
"I've arranged for him to be driven back."
She could hear the effort he was making to be calm; it was evident in his careful tone.
"Are things about wrapped up here?"
"Close enough that I can leave it with Dean and take you to a hospital."
He wouldn't let it go until a doctor had told him she was all right, Maris realized, and with a sigh she opened her eyes and sat up. She understood. If their situations were reversed, she would be doing the same thing.
"All right," she said, slipping on her coat. She turned off the ignition and picked up the Kevlar vest. "I'm ready."
Her willingness scared him. She saw his eyes darken, saw his jaw clench.
"I'll be okay," she said softly, touching his hand. "I'm going because I know you're worried, and I don't want you to be."
His expression changed, something achingly tender moving in his eyes. Gently he scooped her into his arms and lifted her from the truck.
Dean had brought the Oldsmobile out of its hiding place. Mac carried her to it and deposited her on the front seat as carefully as if she were made of the most fragile crystal. He got in on the driver's side and started the car; the milling crowd in front of them parted, allowing them through. She saw Pleasure, standing quietly now. The bandage was in place, and the wild look was gone from his eyes. He was watching the activity with his characteristic friendly curiosity.
As they drove by, Dean lifted his hand to wave. "What about Dean?" Maris asked.
"He'll get transport. It isn't a problem."
She paused. "What about you? When do you leave? Your job here is finished, isn't it?" She didn't intend to let him get away, but she wasn't sure exactly how much he understood of their situation.
"It's finished." The words were clipped. The look he gave her was one of restrained violence. "I'll have to do the paperwork, tie up some loose ends. I may have to leave tonight, tomorrow at the latest, but I'll be back, damn it!"
"You don't sound happy about it," she observed.
"Happy? You expect me to be happy?" His jaw clenched. "You didn't obey orders. You stepped right out into the open, instead of staying hidden the

way you were supposed to. That idiot woman could have killed you!"
"I was wearing the vest." She pointed that out rather mildly, she thought.
"The damn vest only improves the odds, it isn't a guarantee! The issue here is that you didn't follow the plan. You risked your life for that damn horse! I didn't want him hurt, either, but¡X"
"It wasn't for Pleasure," she said, interrupting him. "It was for you." She looked out the window at the snow-dusted pastures they were passing.
It was quiet in the car for a moment.
"Me?" He was using that careful tone again.
"You. I knew he'd go straight to you, that he'd catch my scent on your clothes. At the very least he would distract you, bump you with his head. It was even possible he'd give away your position."
Mac was silent, absorbing the shock of the realization that she was willing to risk her own life to protect his. He did the same thing on a fairly regular basis, but it was his job to take risks and protect others. But he'd never before felt the terror he'd known when he saw Maris draw Joan's attention, and he hoped he never felt it again.
"I love you," she said quietly.
Damn. Sighing inwardly, Mac kissed his bachelorhood goodbye. Her courage stunned him, humbled him. No other woman he'd known would have put herself on the line the way Maris had done, both physically and emotionally. She didn't play games, didn't jockey for control. She simply knew, and accepted; he'd seen it in the soft depths of her black eyes, an instinctive inner knowledge that few people ever achieved. If he didn't snatch her up, it would be the biggest mistake of his life.
Mac didn't believe in making mistakes.
"How long does it take to get married in Kentucky?" he asked abruptly. "If we can't get it done tomorrow, we'll go to Las Vegas¡Xassuming the doctor says you're all right."
He hadn't said he loved her, but she knew he did. She sat back, pleased with the situation. "I'm all right," she said, completely confident.

Chapter Ten

"Getting married in Las Vegas seems to be a tradition in my family," she mused the next day as her new husband ushered her into their suite. "Two of

my brothers have done it."
"Two? How many brothers do you have?"
"Five. All of them older." She smiled sweetly at him over her shoulder as she walked to the window to look out at the blazing red sunset. It was odd how completely connected to him she felt, when they hadn't had tune to talk much, to share the details of their lives. Events had swept them along like gulls before a hurricane.
The emergency room doctor had pronounced her concussion mild and told her to take it easy for a day or so. He had agreed with her that, if she had been going to lapse into a coma, she would already have done so. Over the course of the day her memory had completely returned, filling in the blank spots, so she knew she was okay.
Reassured, Mac had driven her back to Solomon Green and turned his attention to the job, ruthlessly clearing up details and paperwork so he could concentrate on the business of getting married. While she slept, he and Dean had worked. He had arranged for time off, checked into the details of marriage in Kentucky, decided it couldn't be done fast enough to suit him and booked them on a flight to Las Vegas.
Ronald Stonicher had been arrested for conspiracy to commit fraud; he'd had no idea his wife and Randy Yu planned to kill Maris, too, and was shattered by what had happened. Joan had undergone surgery on her arm, and according to the surgeon the nerve and tissue damage was extensive; he expected her to regain some use of the arm, but she would never again be able to write with her right hand, or eat, do or anything else requiring precise movements. Randy was spilling his guts to the feds, implicating a lot of people in the horse world in the scheme to kill off horses for the insurance money. He hadn't been charged with killing the sixteen-year-old boy. Evidently he had some information on it, though, and was holding that in reserve to bargain for an even bigger break on the charges.
Maris had called her mother, briefly filled her in on what had happened and told her she was getting married. "Have fun, baby," Mary had told her daughter. "You know your father will want to walk you down the aisle, so we'll plan another wedding for Christmas. That gives me three weeks. There shouldn't be any problem."
Most people would have screamed in panic at the thought of organizing a wedding in three weeks. Mary saw no problem, and from experience Maris

knew that while other people might have problems accomplishing what her mother wanted, in the end she would have her way,
Mac had phoned his family, which consisted of his mother, stepfather and two half-sisters. They would be joining the Mackenzies in Wyoming for the wedding at Christmas.
During the ceremony an hour before, Maris had learned that her husband's full name was William Alexander MacNeil. "A few people call me Will," he told her afterward, when she mentioned how difficult it was for her to think of him as Alex. "Most people call me Mac." Since in her mind she had already begun shortening MacNeil to Mac, that suited her fine.
"Five older brothers?" Mac asked now, walking up behind her and slipping his arm around her waist. He bent his head to nuzzle her pale hair.
"Five. Plus twelve nephews and one niece."
He chuckled. "Holidays must be lively."
"Riotous would be a better word. Wait until you see."
He turned her in his arms. "What I can't wait to see is my wife, in bed with me."
She clung to his neck as he lifted her and carried her into the bedroom. His mouth closed on hers as he lowered her to the bed, and the aching passion that had subsided but never vanished surged back at full force. He crushed her into the mattress in his need, but at the same time he tried not to be rough as he eased her out of her clothes.
She squirmed against him, pulling at his clothes, the roughness of the fabric against her nakedness driving her crazy. Mac drew back, staring down at her delicate body with open hunger. He was breathing hard, obviously struggling for control, his eyes hard and glittering with lust. Gently he shaped her breasts with his hand, each in turn, rubbing his thumb over her nipples and bringing them to aching hardness. "Hurry," she whispered, reaching for his belt. He laughed a little, though there was no humor in the sound; instead, it was raw with need. He shed his clothes, kicking them away, and rolled on top of her. A groan of deep satisfaction tore from her throat as his heavy weight settled on her, and she opened her legs to cradle him close. She wanted him with a ferocity that would brook no delay, wanted him as she had never wanted or needed anything else in her life.
Mac positioned himself, then framed her face with his hands and kissed her as he slowly pushed into her body. Her flesh resisted, and she gasped, surprised by the painful difficulty. She had expected all her riding to have

eased the way, but the lack of a barrier had in no way prepared her for his size.
He lifted his mouth, staring down at her as realization dawned. He didn't say anything, didn't ask any questions, but something hot and primitive flared deep in his gaze. As gently as possible, he completed his penetration, and when he was fully home inside her he waited, waited until the tension left her and her body softened beneath him, around him. Then he began moving, a slight rocking at first that did no more than nudge him back and forth, but enough to make her gasp again, this time with sensual urgency, and lift herself to him.
He took exquisite care with her, restraining the power of his thrusts, maintaining a slow, easy pace even when anticipation clawed at him, making him groan aloud with each movement. She clung to him, desperately searching for her own ease, trying to take him as deep inside her as possible, because instinct led her to that satisfaction. She cried out, overwhelmed by the sheer glory of this dance and struggle they shared, by the generosity of his loving.
She surged upward, unable to bear it a moment longer, and everything inside her shattered with a burst of pleasure so intense that she lost herself, sucked down in the whirlpool of sensation, a mindless creature knowing only the feel of his body, and hers. And she felt him join her, convulsing, thrusting, hotly emptying.
He cradled her afterward, stroking her with shaking hands as if to reassure himself she was real, that both of them were still whole.
"How did this happen?" he asked roughly. He tilted her chin so he could look into her face, and she saw that the glitter in his eyes was wetness now, not lust. "How could I love you so much, so fast? What kind of magic did you use?"
Tears burned her own eyes. "I just loved you," she said, the words simple. "That's all. I just loved you."
The mountain was wreathed with snow, and her heart lifted when she saw it. "There," she said, pointing. "That's Mackenzie's Mountain."
Mac stared with interest at the massive bulk. He'd never known anyone before who owned an entire mountain, and he wondered about the people, and the way of life, that had nurtured this magical creature beside him. In the two days they had been married, he had come to wonder how he'd ever existed without her. Loving her was like becoming whole, when he hadn't

even known anything was missing. She was so delicate and fairylike, with her pale hair streaming over her shoulders and her great black eyes that held all the knowledge of centuries of women, but he'd learned that she was strong, and that the heart of a lion beat beneath her lovely breasts.
His wife! The unexpected marvelousness of it kept waking him in the middle of the night to look at her, to wonder at how fast it had happened. Only three days before, she had awakened in his arms and politely said, "I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name," and the realization that she'd been hurt had jarred him down to his toes. Only three days, and yet now he couldn't imagine sleeping without her, or waking without seeing her sleepy urchin's grin as she curled into his arms. He had only five days off, so they had to make the best of it. Yesterday they had made a fast trip to San Antonio, where he had introduced her to his family. Both of his sisters had arrived with their broods of kids, three each, husbands in tow, but after the crowd Maris was accustomed to, she hadn't turned a hair at any of it. His mother had been absolutely thrilled that he'd married at last, thrilled at the prospect of a Christmas wedding on top of a snow-covered mountain in Wyoming. Having gotten the telephone number from Maris, her mother had already called his mother, and they'd evidently become fast friends, judging from the number of times his mother referred to what Mary had said.
Today they were in Wyoming, and Mac wondered why he was getting a tight feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Tell me about your brothers," he murmured. "All five of them." He knew something about older brothers, being one himself.
She smiled, her eyes going soft. "Well, let's see. My oldest brother, Joe, is a general in the air force¡Xon the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as a matter of fact. His wife, Caroline, has doctoral degrees in physics and computer science, and they have five sons.
"My next-oldest brother, Mike, owns one of the largest cattle ranches in the state. He and Shea have two sons.
"Next is Josh. He was a navy fighter pilot, aircraft carrier, until a crash stiffened his knee and the navy grounded him. Now he's a civilian test pilot. His wife, Loren, is an orthopedic surgeon. They have three sons."
"Do any of your brothers have anything but sons?" Mac asked, fascinated by the recital, and growing more worried by the minute. He tried to focus on the mundane. He thought he remembered Maris saying she had a niece, but perhaps he'd been mistaken.

"Zane has a daughter." There was a different note in Maris's voice and he raised his eyebrows in inquiry, but she ignored him. "He and Barrie also have twin sons, two months old. Zane was a Navy SEAL. Barrie's an ambassador's daughter."
A SEAL. He wondered how much worse this could get.
"Then there's Chance. He and Zane might as well be twins. They're the same age, and I think their brains are linked. Chance was in Naval Intelligence. He isn't married." She deliberately didn't mention what Zane and Chance did now, because it seemed safer not to.
"I wonder," Mac murmured to himself as he steered their rented four-wheel-drive up the mountain, "why I expected you to have a normal family."
She lifted delicate brows at him. "You're a special agent with the FBI," she pointed out. "There isn't one of those standing on every street corner, you know."
"Yeah, but my family is normal."
"Well, so is mine. We're just overachievers." Her smile turned into a grin, the urchin's grin that had laced itself around his heart and tightened the bonds every time he saw it. He stopped the Jeep in the middle of the road and reached for her. His kiss was hard, urgent with hunger. Her eyes were slumberous when he released her. "What was that for?" she murmured, her hand curling around his neck.
"Because I love you." He wanted to tell her one last time, in case he didn't survive the coming confrontation. She might think her family would welcome him with open arms, but he had a much better understanding of the male psyche and he knew better. He put the Jeep in gear again, and they resumed their drive up the snow-covered road.
When they topped the crest and saw the big ranch house sprawling in front of them, Maris said happily, "Oh, good, everyone's here," and Mac knew he was a dead man. Never mind that he'd married her before sleeping with her; he was an unknown quantity, and he was making love to their darling every night. She was the only daughter, the baby, for God's sake. He understood. If he lived, and he and Maris ever had a daughter, there was no way in hell he was going to let some horny teenage boy anywhere near his little girl.
He looked at the array of vehicles parked in front of the house, enough vehicles to form a good parade, and wondered if they would give chase if he turned around and headed back down the mountain.

Well, it had to be done. Resigned, he parked the Jeep and came around to open the door for Maris, clasping his hands around her narrow waist and lifting her to the ground. She took his hand and led him up the steps, all but running in her eagerness.

They stepped into warmth, into noise, into confusion. A very small person wearing red overalls suddenly exploded from the crowd, racing forward on chubby legs and shrieking, "Marwee, Marwee," at the top of her lungs. Maris laughed and dropped to her knees, holding out her arms in time to catch the tiny tornado as she launched herself forward. Mac looked down at the little girl, not much more than a baby, and fell in love. He lost his heart. It was that simple.

She was beautiful. She was perfect, from the silky black hair on her round little head to her crystal-blue eyes, dimpled cheeks, rosebud mouth and dainty, dimpled hands. She was so small she was like a doll, and his arms ached to hold her. Little kids and babies had never affected him like this before, and it shook him.

"This is Nick," Maris said, rising to her feet with her niece in her arms. "She's the one and only granddaughter."

Nick reached out a tiny hand and poked him in the chest, in a movement so exactly like Maris's that Mac couldn't help grinning. "Who dat?" the little angel asked.

"This is Mac," Maris said, and kissed the soft, chubby cheek. Nick solemnly regarded him for a moment, then stretched out her arms in the manner of someone who is absolutely sure of their welcome. Automatically he reached out and took her, sighing with pleasure as the little body nestled against his chest.

Mac became aware of a spreading silence in the room, of what looked like an entire football team of big men getting to their feet, menace in every movement, in the hard faces turned toward him.

Maris looked at them, her face radiant, and he saw her eyes widen with surprise at their militant stances.

He eyed the competition. His father-in-law had iron gray hair and the black eyes Maris had inherited, and looked as if he ate nails for breakfast. His brothers-in-law looked just as lethal. Expertly Mac assessed each one, trying to pick out the most dangerous one. They all looked like bad asses. The one with the graying temples and the laser blue eyes, that would be the general, and damn if he didn't look as if he went into combat every day.

That one would be the rancher, whipcord lean, iron hard, a man who faced down Mother Nature every day. The test pilot...let's see, that would be the one standing with his feet apart in the instinctive cocky stance of someone who coolly gambled with death and never blinked an eye.
Then Mac's gaze met a pair of deadly, icy eyes. That one, he thought. That was the most dangerous one, the one with the quiet face and eyes like blue-gray frost. That one. He would bet a year's pay that was the SEAL. But the one who moved up to stand beside him looked just as lethal, despite the almost unearthly handsomeness of his face. That would be the one in naval intelligence.
He was in big trouble. Instinctively he moved, depositing Nick in Maris's arms and stepping in front of them both, shielding them with his body. Six pairs of fierce eyes noted the action.
Maris peeked around his shoulder, assessing the situation. "Moth-er! " she called urgently, stressing both syllables as she brought in reinforcements.
"Maris!" There was utter delight in the soft voice that came from what Mac assumed was the kitchen, the cry followed by light, fast footsteps. A small, delicate woman, no bigger than Maris and with the same exquisite, translucent skin, burst into the room. She was laughing as she grabbed her daughter, hugging her and doing the same to him, even though he stood rigidly, not daring to take his eyes off the threat looming in front of them like a wall.
"Mom," Maris said, directing her mother's attention across the room. "What's wrong with them?"
Mary took one look at her husband and sons and put her hands on her hips. "Stop that right now," she ordered. "I refuse to have this, do you hear?"
Her voice was sweetly Southern, as light as a breeze, but Wolf Mackenzie's black eyes flickered to her. "We just want to know a little about him," he said in a voice as deep and dark as thunder.
"Maris chose him," Mary replied firmly. "What else could you possibly need to know?"
"A lot," the one with the quiet, lethal eyes said. "This happened too fast."
"Zane Mackenzie!" a pretty redhead exclaimed, stepping out of the kitchen and eyeing him in amazement. "I can't believe you said that! We got married after knowing each other for one day!" She crossed the no-man's-land between the two battle lines, hugged Maris and turned to glare at her husband.

So he'd been right, Mac thought. That was the SEAL. It would look good on his tombstone: He Was Right.
"This is different," said the general, a perfect clone of Wolf Mackenzie except for his light blue eyes. He, too, looked as if nails were a regular part of his diet.
"Different, how?" asked a crisp voice, and a stylish blonde stepped out of the kitchen. She pinned a sharp green gaze on the six men. "You're all suffering from an overdose of testosterone. The main symptom is an inability to think." Marching forward, she aligned herself on Mac's other side. Something that was both heated and amused lit the general's eyes as he looked at his wife.
Another bruiser, the test pilot, said, "Maris is¡X"
"A grown woman," another feminine voice said, interrupting. A tall, curvy woman with chestnut hair and serene blue eyes took up a position beside the blonde. "Hi, I'm Loren," she said to Mac. "The one who just spoke is Josh, my husband, who usually exhibits better sense."
"And I'm Shea, Mike's wife." Another reinforcement arrived. She was dark haired, and sweetly shy. She stood beside Loren, crossed her arms over her chest and calmly looked across at her husband.
The two sides looked at each other, the men glaring at their turncoat wives, the women lined up protectively beside Mac. He was a little stunned to find himself surrounded by this perfumed wall of femininity.
Caroline gave her husband glare for glare. "Every one of us was welcomed with open arms when we married into this family, and I expect you to extend the same courtesy to Maris's husband¡Xor else!"
Joe considered the challenge, his pale blue eyes glittering as he cocked his head. "Or else, what?" he asked, his deep voice silky and full of something that might have been anticipation.
Silence fell in the room, even the kids were quiet as they watched their parents. Mac looked at the six women ranged on either side of him, and his face softened into tender amusement. "It's okay," he said. "I understand."
"I'm glad you do, because I don't," Maris growled.
"It's a--"
"Don't say it's a man thing," Mary warned, interrupting, and he bit back the words.
"No, ma'am," he said meekly.

Wolf's dark face lightened, and his lips twitched. Those two words were very familiar to him.
Nick squirmed to get down, and Maris leaned over to deposit her on her feet. The little girl patted Mac on the knee and said, "Mac," with great satisfaction in her tone. She trotted across to her father, holding up her arms to be picked up. Zane leaned down and lifted her, settling her on one brawny arm. "Dat's Mac," she said, pointing. "I wike him."
Suddenly that hard, deadly face softened into a smile, and a big hand smoothed a silky tendril of hair away from her face. "I noticed," he said dryly. "He took one look at you and turned into your slave, just like the rest of us. That's what you really like, isn't it?"
Her little head bobbed up and down, very definitely. Zane chuckled as he shot an amused glance across the room at her mother. "I thought you would."
From somewhere down the hall came a baby's wail. "Cam's awake," Barrie said, and immediately abandoned Mac to go to her baby.
"How does she do that?" Chance asked of the room in general. "They're only two months old. How do you tell twins apart by their cries?"
The females, Nick included, had won. The tension in the room dissipated, smiles breaking out as Chance followed his sister-in-law down the hall, intent on finding out if she'd been right. Before he walked out he winked at Mac, in a moment of male understanding. The crisis had come and gone, because when it came down to it, the Mackenzie men were unwilling to distress their women. The women had liked Mac on sight, and that was that.
Barrie was back in only a moment, a squirming bundle in her arms. Chance followed her, expertly holding another one. "She was right," he announced, shaking his head in bewilderment.
Mac looked at the two tiny faces, finding them as identical as if they were mirror images. It was impossible to tell them apart even by looking at them; how in hell did Chance know if she was right or not?
"Cameron," Barrie said, indicating her burden and smiling at his skeptical look. "Chance is holding Zack." She also carried two small, milk-filled bottles.
"How do you know?" He shook his head, still looking for any distinguishing difference in the babies.
"Cameron's the most impatient, but Zack is more determined."
"You can tell that in their cries?"

"Well, of course," she said, as if anyone should be able to do the same. Nick was climbing up on her father's shoulder, gripping his hair for leverage. "Wook, Unca Dance," she exclaimed, standing upright and releasing her safety hold.
Zane reached up and snagged his daughter off his shoulder. "Here, swap with me," he said, and he and Chance exchanged kids. Zane settled the baby in the crook of his arm and took one of the bottles from Barrie, expertly slipping the nipple into the rapacious little mouth.
Chance balanced Nick on his hands, firmly holding her feet while she straightened and crowed with delight at her achievement. "Chance," he coaxed. "My name is Chance. Chance."
Nick placed her little hands on each side of his face, leaning close to peer into his eyes and impress him with her seriousness. "No," she said with great finality. "Dance. Oo say it wong."
The room exploded with laughter at Chance's expression. He eyed the pint-size dictator in his hands, then shook his head and gave up. "Are you sure you want to marry into this family?" He directed the question at Mac.
Mac looked at Maris and winked. "Yeah," he said.
Zane was watching him while the baby took the bottle, his calm eyes measuring. "Maris said you're an FBI special agent," he said, and something in his tone must have alerted Maris.
"No," she said firmly, pushing Mac toward the kitchen. "You can't have him. Being in the FBI is enough. You absolutely can't have him."
Mac found himself borne along on the tide of women, because they all wanted to discuss the wedding, but before he left the room he looked back. His gaze met Zane's... and Zane Mackenzie smiled.
"Welcome to the family," he said.

Epilogue

"You so pwetty," Nick sighed, her big blue eyes rapt as she propped her elbows on Maris's knee and stared at her aunt. The entire process of preparing for a wedding had fascinated the little girl. She had intently scrutinized everything as the women of the household had painstakingly made hundreds of tiny net bags, filled them with bird seed and tied them with ribbons. She had stood on her tiptoes, clinging to the table's edge, and

watched as Shea, who made wonderful cakes, practiced making dozens of roses from icing before decorating Maris's wedding cake. Before long the practice roses had all borne evidence of a tiny, investigative finger. Once Nick had determined they were edible, they'd gradually disappeared, and her little face wore telltale smears.

Maris's gown held her absolutely enthralled. The long skirt, the lace, the veil, everything about it entranced her. When Maris had tried it on for the final fitting, Nick had clasped her hands under her chin and with shining eyes had said, "Oo a pwincess!"

"You're pretty, too, darling," Maris said. Nick was her flower girl. Zane had muttered about inviting disaster, and since Nick wasn't quite three years old, Maris was prepared for anything, including an outright refusal to perform her role. At the rehearsal the night before, however, Nick had strutted down the aisle with her little basket of rose petals and proudly strewn them, aware that every eye was on her. Whether she would do so when watched by a huge crowd was another question, but she was undeniably adorable in her long, blush pink dress, with ribbons and flowers in her silky black hair.

"I know," Nick replied matter-of-factly, and left her post at Maris's knee to return to the mirror to admire herself. It was something she had done every five minutes since Barrie had dressed her.

Barrie and Caroline were the acknowledged fashion mavens of the Mackenzie family, and they had taken over the arrangement of Maris's hair and the application of her makeup. They were astute enough to keep things simple, rather than overwhelming Maris's dainty face and frame with big hair and layers of makeup. Barrie had finished her hair and retired to a rocking chair to nurse the twins before the ceremony started. She supplemented their feedings with a bottle, but breast milk kept them contented longer, and she didn't want to have to feed them again in the middle of the reception.

Mary had quickly realized that the Mackenzie house, as large as it was, simply couldn't hold the crowd that was invited to the wedding. Because Christmas was on a Wednesday, the church in Ruth had held its Christmas service on Sunday, freeing it for the ceremony. The nine-foot-tall Christmas tree still stood in the corner, its multitude of white lights twinkling. Holly and evergreen needles still decorated the windowsills, filling the church with a wonderful aroma. White lights outlined the arched doorway, the windows, the sanctuary and the steps leading up to it. Rows of white

candles lent their mellow glow to the church. None of the overhead lights would be on, but the tree, the Christmas lights and the candles combined to give the setting a magical aura.

This was Christmas Eve, a time when most of the occupants of Ruth would normally have been at home either having their private celebrations or preparing for them the next day. This year they were attending a wedding. From the private room off the vestibule, Maris could hear the swell of noise as more and more people arrived.

Mary stood quietly, a sheen of tears in her slate blue eyes as she watched her daughter prepare for her wedding. It didn't matter that Maris and Mac were already married; this was the wedding that counted. This was her beloved daughter who looked so delicate and beautiful in her silvery white gown, a color that turned Maris's pale, ash brown hair to a darker shade of silver. She remembered the first time she had seen her daughter, only seconds old, so tiny and lovely and already staring around with big, solemn black eyes, her father's eyes. She remembered the tears that had sheened Wolf's own black eyes as he'd taken Maris in his arms and hugged the little scrap to his chest as if she were the most precious thing he'd ever seen.

There were thousands of other memories. Her first tooth, her first step, her first word¡Xpredictably, "horsie." Maris sitting on a pony for the first time, her eyes huge with delight while Wolf kept a protective arm around her. Maris, a little shadow dogging her father's footsteps just -as her older brothers had done. Mans in school, fiercely joining in any fight the boys had gotten into, her little fists flying as she rushed to their defense, utterly ignoring the fact that the boys were twice her size. Maris sobbing when her old pony had died, and her radiant joy when, the next Christmas, Wolf had given her her first "real" horse.

There had been Maris's first date, and Wolf's scowling, prowling nervousness until his baby was safely back under his roof. One of Mary's favorite memories was of Zane and Josh and Chance pacing along with their father; if Joe and Mike had been there, they would have been pacing, too. As it was, the poor boy who had been so brave as to take Maris out had been terrified when the four Mackenzie males met them on the front porch on their return and had never asked her out again. They had gotten better about it over the years, but Maris must have forgotten her first date or she wouldn't have been so surprised at their reaction to Mac when she'd brought him home. Men. Mary loved her men, but really, they could be so

overbearing. Why, they liked Mac, once they'd gotten over their bristly protectiveness. If Maris didn't watch out, Zane would have Mac recruited into whatever it was he and Chance.

Zane. Mary stopped short in her thoughts, looking around the room. All three of his children were here, with Barrie. Usually he was tending to at least one of the babies, or riding herd on Nick. That meant Zane was free and unencumbered, and she was sure it wasn't by accident.

"Zane's free," she announced, because she thought Maris really ought to know.

Her daughter's head snapped up, and her lovely eyes caught fire. "I'll skin him alive," she said wrathfully. "I will not have Mac gone for months on end the way Chance is. I just got him, and I'm not letting him go."

Barrie looked startled; then she, too, realized the significance of having all three children with her. She shook her head in rueful acknowledgment of her husband's canniness. "It's too late to do anything about it now. He's had plenty of time to have a private talk with Mac, and you know Zane, he planned it perfectly."

Maris scowled, and Caroline drew back with the eye shadow brush in her hand. "I can't do this with your eyebrows all scrunched up," she admonished. Maris smoothed her expression, and Caroline went back to work. "I don't believe in letting hormone-driven men interfere in a woman's wedding. You can skin him alive tomorrow. Ambush him when he least expects it."

"Zane always expects everything," Barrie said, grinning. Then she looked at her daughter, who was twirling and dancing in front of the mirror, admiring herself. "Except Nick," she added. "He wasn't prepared for her."

"Was anyone?" Loren murmured, smiling fondly down at the little girl. Nick, hearing her name, stopped her pirouetting to favor them all with an angelic smile that didn't fool them for one second.

"Mac's besotted with her," Maris said. "He didn't turn a hair even when she polished his boots with the Magic Marker."

"An indication of true love if I've ever seen it," Caroline said dryly. She touched the mascara wand to Maris's already dark lashes, then stood back to admire her handiwork. "There! Mac would be crazy to leave you and go running around half-civilized countries where there's no sanitation and no shopping." Caroline's philosophy in life was to be comfortable, and she went to extraordinary lengths to accomplish it. She would gladly walk miles

to find the perfect comfortable pair of shoes. It made perfect sense to her, since her work often required her to be on her feet for hours; how could she possibly concentrate if her toes were cramped?
"I don't think Mac would care about the shopping," Shea said. She picked Nick up and whirled around the room with the giggling little girl, humming a lively tune.
There was a knock on the door, and John poked his head inside. "It's time," he said. His pale blue gaze fell on Caroline. "Wow, Mom, you look great."
"Smart guy," she said approvingly. "I'll let you stay in my will."
He grinned and ducked out again. Maris stood, sucking in a deep breath. It was time. Never mind that they'd been married for three weeks already; this was a production, and practically the entire town was on band to witness it.
Shea set Nick on her feet and got the basket of rose petals from the top of the closet, where they'd put it to keep Nick from scattering the flowers around the room. They'd already picked up the velvety petals once, and once was enough.
Barrie laid Zack beside Cameron. Both babies were sleeping peacefully, their little bellies full. Right on time, one of Shea's teenaged nieces arrived to watch them while Barrie attended the wedding.
The music began, their cue to begin entering the sanctuary.
One by one they began filing out, escorted by the Mackenzie men to their reserved seats. Zane's big form filled the doorway. Maris said, "No," and he grinned as he held his hand out to Barrie.
"Just a minute." Barrie stooped in front of Nick, straightening the ribbons in her hair and at last placing the basket of flower petals in the eager, dimpled little hands. "Do the flowers just the way you did them last night, okay? Do you remember?"
Nick nodded. "I fwow dem aroun' on de fwoor."
"That's right, sweetheart." Having done all she could, Barrie stood and went to Zane, who slipped his arm around her waist and briefly hugged her close before they left to take their places.
Wolf came to the door, severely elegant in a black tuxedo. "It's time, honey," he said to Maris. His black eyes were tender as he wrapped his arms around her and rocked her back and forth, the way he had done all her life.
Maris laid her head on her father's chest, almost overwhelmed by the sudden rush of love for him. She'd been so lucky in her parents!

"I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever forget about horses long enough to fall in love," he said, "but now that you have, I feel like we haven't had you long enough."
She chuckled against his chest. "That's exactly how I knew." She lifted her head, her eyes shining with both tears and laughter. "I kept forgetting about Sole Pleasure and thinking only about Mac. It had to be love."
He kissed her forehead. "In that case, I'll forgive him."
"Poppy!"
The imperious small voice came from the vicinity of his knee. They looked down. Nick was tugging on Wolf's pant leg. "We dotta huwwy. I dotta fwow fwowers."
As usual, her mangled English made him laugh. "All right, cupcake." He leaned down and took her free hand, to keep her from darting ahead of them and "fwowing fwowers" before they were ready.
He and Maris and Nick made their way into the vestibule, and Maris leaned down to kiss Nick's cheek. "Are you ready?" she asked.
Nick nodded, her slanted blue eyes wide and shining with excitement, and she clutched the flower basket with both hands.
"Here you go, then." Gently Maris urged Nick forward, into the center aisle. The church glowed with candlelight, and hundreds of smiling faces were turned toward them, it seemed.
Nick stepped out into the limelight like a Miss America taking her victory walk. She bestowed smiles to the left and the right, and she daintily reached into the basket for a rose petal. One. She held it out and let it drift downward. Then she reached for another. One by one she distributed the rose petals on the carpet with dainty precision, taking her time, even stooping once to adjust a petal that had fallen too close to another one.
"Oh, God." Beside her, Maris could feel Wolf shaking with laughter. "She's enjoying this too much. At this rate, you won't get to walk down the aisle until midnight."
People were turning and looking, and laughing at Nick's concentration on the task. Barrie buried her head in Zane's shoulder, lost in a helpless fit of giggling. Zane was grinning, and Chance was laughing out loud. Mac, standing at the altar, was beaming at the little imp who had so won his heart. The pianist, looking around, saw what was taking so long and gamely continued playing.

Tickled to be the center of attention, Nick began improvising. The next rose petal was tossed backward, over her shoulder. The minister choked, and his face turned red as he tried to hold back his guffaws.
She twirled on her tiptoes, flinging rose petals in a circle. Several flew out of the basket, and she frowned, stooping to pick them up and return them to the basket.
I can't laugh, Maris thought, feeling it bubbling inexorably upward. If laugh, I'll laugh until I cry, and it'll ruin my makeup. She put her hand over her mouth to hold the mirth inside, but it didn't work. Her chest constricted, her throat worked and suddenly laughter burst joyously out of control.
Nick stopped and turned to look, beaming at them, waiting for them to tell her what a good job she was doing.
"Fwow, I mean, throw them," Maris managed to say between whoops.
The little head lilted to one side. "Wike dis?" she asked, taking a handful of petals from the basket and flinging them upward.
At least it was a handful, and not just one. "Like that," Maris said in approval, hoping it would speed the procedure.
It did. Another handful followed the first one, and Nick's progress down the aisle picked up speed. At last she reached the end, and bestowed an absolutely radiant smile on Mac. "I fwowed dem all," she told him.
"You did it just right," he said, barely able to speak for laughing. Her mission accomplished, she strutted to the pew where Zane and Barrie sat, and held up her arms to be lifted to the seat.
Relieved, the pianist launched into the familiar strains of "Here Comes the Bride," and at last Wolf and Maris began their stately walk down the aisle. Everyone rose to their feet and turned to watch, smiling.
Because time had been so short, there were no Bridesmaids or groomsmen, no maid of honor or best man, so only Mac awaited Maris at the altar. He watched her approach, his hard face relaxed in a tender expression, his blue eyes still shining from his laughter. As soon as she stopped beside him, he gently took her hand in his, and behind them, they heard his mother give a teary, joyful little gasp.
Because Maris and Mac were already married, they had decided to skip the part about "who gives this woman." Wolf leaned down and kissed his daughter's cheek, hugged her tenderly, then shook hands with Mac and took a seat beside Mary.

"Dearly beloved," the minister began; then there was another gasp behind them. Recognizing Barrie's voice, Maris wasn't surprised when a little body slithered between her and Mac, taking a stance directly in front of them.
"I do it, too," Nick chirped, her little voice audible in every corner of the church.
Glancing over her shoulder, Maris saw Zane start to rise to retrieve his errant offspring. She shook her head, smiling. He winked and sank back into his seat.
So Nick stood pressed against their legs while the minister performed the service. They could feel her quivering with excitement, and Mac subtly gathered her closer to him so he would have a better chance of grabbing her if she started to do something startling, such as peek under the minister's cassock. She was already eyeing the garment with some curiosity. But she was content for the moment, completely taken with the ceremony, the candles, the twinkling Christmas tree, the beautiful clothes. When the minister said, "You may now kiss the bride," and Mac did so, Nick merely tilted her head back to watch.
"What's the best way to handle her when we leave?" Mac whispered against Maris's lips.
"Pick her up and hand her to Zane as we pass," she whispered back. "He'll be expecting it."
The pianist launched into the familiar stirring strains. Mac swooped Nick up with one arm, put the other around Maris, and they hurried up the aisle to the accompaniment of music, laughter, tears and a round of applause. As they passed the second pew, a tiny girl in a long dress was deftly passed from one pair of strong arms to another.
The reception was a long, glorious party. Maris danced endlessly with her husband, her father, all her brothers, several of her nephews, her brothers-in-law and an assortment of old friends. She danced with the sheriff, Clay Armstrong. She danced with Ambassador Lovejoy, Barrie's father. She danced with Shea's father and grandfather, with the ranchers and merchants and gas station attendants. Finally Mac claimed her again, holding her close and swaying to the music as he rested his cheek against hers.
"What did Zane say to you?" she demanded suddenly.
She felt him grin, though he didn't lift his head. "He said you'd know."
"Never mind that. What did he say?"
"You already know what he said."

"Then what did you say?"
"That I'm interested."
She growled. "I don't want you to spend months out of the country. I'm willing¡Xbarely¡Xto let the FBI use you on investigations, but I don't like it. I want you with me every night, not thousands of miles away."
"That's exactly what I told Zane. Remember, I don't have to do what Chance does." He held her closer, dropping his voice to an intimate murmur. "Has your period started yet?"
"No." She was only two days late¡Xbut two days was two days, and she was normally very regular. It was possible her system had been disrupted by the concussion and the stress of everything that had happened, so she wasn't making any announcements yet. "Would you mind if I am pregnant so soon?"
"Mind?" He kissed her ear. "When we might get our own Nick?" His shoulders quivered under her embrace. "I didn't think she was ever going to get rid of those damn flower petals."
"She's one of a kind, I hope." But she leaned against him, feeling her breasts, her entire body, tighten with desire. If she wasn't already pregnant, she likely would be soon, given how often he made love to her.
They danced in silence for a moment, then Mac said, "Pleasure should have arrived by now."
She had to blink back tears, because Mac had given her the most wonderful gift for Christmas. With Sole Pleasure's worth hugely reduced now that the racing world had been rocked with news of his very low sperm count, the syndication offers had evaporated. It was possible Pleasure could sire a foal, but it was such a small possibility as to be negligible. He still had worth as a racehorse, and Ronald Stonicher might have gotten more for him than Mac had offered, but huge legal expenses had been staring him in the eye, and he'd jumped at the chance to sell the horse. Maris had worried so about Pleasure's future that Mac had made the offer for him without telling her, because he didn't want her to be disappointed in case the deal fell through.
"Dad can hardly wait to ride him," she said. "He's said several times that he envied me because I got to work with Pleasure."
They fell silent, simply enjoying the feel of being in each other's arms. Their wedding hadn't been a stately, solemn affair¡XNick had seen to that¡Xbut it had been perfect. People had laughed and enjoyed themselves,

and everyone for years would smile whenever they thought of Maris Mackenzie's wedding.
"It's time to throw the bouquet!"
The cry went up, and they swung around to see a crowd of giggling teenage girls gathering for the tradition, flipping back their hair, throwing sidelong glances at the older Mackenzie boys. There were more mature women there, too, giving Chance measuring looks.
"I thought you were supposed to throw it when we're ready to leave?" Mac said, amused.
"Evidently they can't wait."
She didn't mind hurrying things up a little; after that dance, she was ready to be alone with her husband.
Nick had been having the time of her short life, stuffing herself with cake and mints, and being whirled around the dance floor in the arms of her father, her grandfather and all her uncles and cousins. When she saw Maris get the bouquet that had so fascinated her earlier, with all the "pwetty" flowers and lace and ribbons, she squirmed away from Sam's grip on her hand and moved to where she had a better view of the situation, her little head cocked to the side as she intently watched.
Maris climbed on the dais, turned her back and threw the bouquet high over her shoulder. Cries of "Catch it! Catch it!" filled the reception hall.
Almost immediately there was a collective cry of alarm. Maris whirled. The crowd of girls and women was rushing forward, eyes lifted, intent on the bouquet sailing toward them. And directly in front of them, also concentrating on the bouquet as she darted forward, was a tiny figure in pale pink.
There was a surge of black-clad bodies moving forward as seventeen males, one MacNeil and sixteen Mackenzies, from six-year-old Benjy up to Wolf, all leapt for the little girl. Maris caught a glimpse of Zane's face, utterly white as he tried to reach his baby before she was trampled, and somehow she, too, was running, leaping from the dais, heedless of her dress.
Two crowds of people were moving toward each other at breakneck speed, with Nick caught in the middle. One of the teenage girls looked down, saw Nick and emitted a shrill scream of panic as she tried to stop, only to be shoved forward by the girl behind her.
Chance had been standing back, avoiding any contact with that wedding bouquet business, but as a result, his movements were less impeded. He

reached Nick two steps ahead of Zane, scooping her up, enfolding her in his arms and rolling with her out of harm's way. Zane veered, putting himself between Chance and anyone who might stumble over him, and in another second there was practically a wall of boys and men protecting the two on the floor.

The bouquet hit Chance in the middle of the back.

Carefully he rolled over, and Nick's head popped out of the shield he'd made with his arms. "Wook!" she said, spying the bouquet. "Oo caught de fwowers, Unca Dance!"

Maris skidded to a stop beside them. Chance lay very still on the floor, with Nick on his chest. He glared up at Maris, his light, golden-hazel eyes narrow with suspicion. "You did that on purpose," he accused.

The MacNeils and the Mackenzies moved forward, smiles tugging at stern mouths. Maris crossed her arms. "There's no way I could have arranged this." She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at his outraged expression.

"Hah. You've been doing spooky stuff all your life."

Nick leaned over and grasped one of the ribbons of the bouquet, pulling it toward her. Triumphantly she deposited it on Chance's chest. "Dere," she said with satisfaction, and patted it.

Zane rubbed the side of his nose, but he was less successful than Maris at hiding his grin. "You caught the bouquet," he said.

"I did not," Chance growled. "She hit me in the back with it!"

Mary walked up and stood beside Wolf, who automatically put his arm around her. Slowly a radiant smile spread across her face. "Why, Chance!" she exclaimed. "This means you're next."

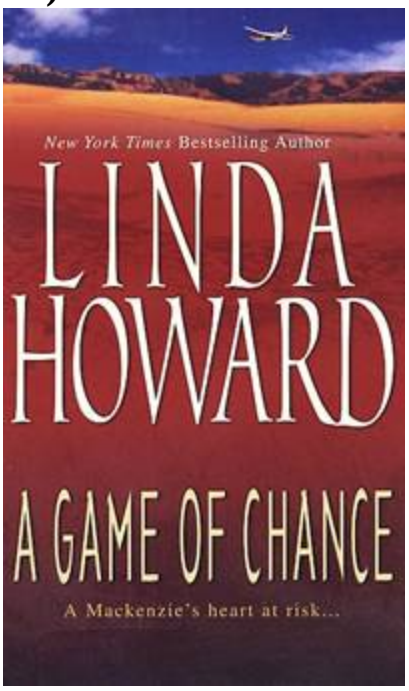
"I¡Xam¡Xnot¡Xnext." He ground the words out, sitting up with Nick in his arms. Carefully he put her on her feet, then climbed to his own. "Trickery doesn't count. I don't have time for a wife. I like what I do, and a wife would just get in the way." He was backing away as he talked. "I'm not good husband material, anyway. I--"

A little hand tugged on his pant leg. He stopped and looked down.

Nick stretched on tiptoe, holding the bouquet up to him with both hands. "Don't fordet oor fwowers," she said, beaming.

***** The End *****

--5 Game of Chance (2000)--



The Beginning

Coming back to Wyoming--coming home--always evoked in Chance Mackenzie such an intense mixture of emotions that he could never decide which was strongest, the pleasure or the acute discomfort. He was, by nature and nurture--not that there had been any nurturing in the first fourteen or so years of his life--a man who was more comfortable alone. If he was alone, then he could operate without having to worry about anyone but himself, and, conversely, there was no one to make him uncomfortable with concern about his own well-being. The type of work he had chosen only reinforced his own inclinations, because covert operations and anti-terrorist activities predicated he be both secretive and wary, trusting no one, letting no one close to him.

And yet… And yet, there was his family. Sprawling, brawling, ferociously overachieving, refusing to let him withdraw, not that he was at all certain he could even if they would allow it. It was always jolting, alarming, to step back into that all-enveloping embrace, to be teased and questioned--*teased*, him, whom some of the most deadly people on earth justifiably feared--hugged and kissed, fussed over and yelled at and… loved, just as if he were

like everyone else. He knew he wasn't; the knowledge was always there, in the back of his mind, that he was *not* like them. But he was drawn back, again and again, by something deep inside hungering for the very things that so alarmed him. Love was scary; he had learned early and hard how little he could depend on anyone but himself.

The fact that he had survived at all was a testament to his toughness and intelligence. He didn't know how old he was, or where he had been born, what he was named as a child, or if he even had a name--nothing. He had no memory of a mother, a father, anyone who had taken care of him. A lot of people simply didn't remember their childhoods, but Chance couldn't comfort himself with that possibility, that there had been someone who had loved him and taken care of him, because he remembered too damn many other details.

He remembered stealing food when he was so small he had to stand on tiptoe to reach apples in a bin in a small-town supermarket. He had been around so many kids now that, by comparing what he remembered to the sizes they were at certain ages, he could estimate he had been no more than three years old at the time, perhaps not even that.

He remembered sleeping in ditches when it was warm, hiding in barns, stores, sheds, whatever was handy, when it was cold or raining. He remembered stealing clothes to wear, sometimes by the simple means of catching a boy playing alone in a yard, overpowering him and taking the clothes off his back. Chance had always been much stronger physically than other boys his size, because of the sheer physical difficulty of staying alive--and he had known how to fight, for the same reason.

He remembered a dog taking up with him once, a black-and-white mutt that tagged along and curled up next to him to sleep, and Chance remembered being grateful for the warmth. He also remembered that when he reached for a piece of steak he had stolen from the scraps in back of a restaurant, the dog bit him and stole the steak. Chance still had two scars on his left hand from the dog's teeth. The dog had gotten the meat, and Chance had gone one more day without food. He didn't blame the dog; it had been hungry, too. But Chance ran it off after that, because stealing enough food to keep himself alive was difficult enough, without having to steal for the dog, too. Besides, he had learned that when it came to survival, it was every dog for himself.

He might have been five years old when he learned that particular lesson, but he had learned it well.

Of course, learning how to survive in both rural and urban areas, in all conditions, was what made him so good at his job now, so he supposed his early childhood had its benefits. Even considering that, though, he wouldn't wish his childhood on a dog, not even the damn mutt that had bitten him.

His real life had begun the day Mary Mackenzie found him lying beside a road, deathly ill with a severe case of flu that had turned into pneumonia. He didn't remember much of the next few days--he had been too ill--but he had known he was in a hospital, and he had been wild with fear, because that meant he had fallen into the hands of the system, and he was now, in effect, a prisoner. He was obviously a minor, without identification, and the circumstances would warrant the child welfare services being notified. He had spent his entire life avoiding just such an event, and he had tried to make plans to escape, but his thoughts were vague, hard to get ordered, and his body was too weak to respond to his demands.

But through it all he could remember being soothed by an angel with soft blue-gray eyes and light, silvery brown hair, cool hands and a loving voice. There had also been a big, dark man, a half-breed, who calmly and repeatedly addressed his deepest fear. "We won't let them take you," the big man had said whenever Chance briefly surfaced from his fever-induced stupor.

He didn't trust them, didn't believe the big half-breed's reassurances. Chance had figured out that he himself was part American Indian, but big deal, that didn't mean he could trust these people any more than he could trust that damn thieving, ungrateful mutt. But he was too sick, too weak, to escape or even struggle, and while he was so helpless Mary Mackenzie had somehow hog-tied him with devotion, and he had never managed to break free.

He hated being touched; if someone was close enough to touch him, then they were close enough to attack him. He couldn't fight off the nurses and doctors who poked and prodded and moved him around as if he were nothing more than a mindless piece of meat. He had endured it, getting his teeth, struggling with both his own panic and the almost overpowering urge to fight, because he knew if he fought them he would be restrained. He had to stay free, so he could run when he recovered enough to move under his own power.

But *she* had been there for what seemed like the entire time, though logically he knew she had to have left the hospital sometimes. When he burned with fever, she washed his face with a cold cloth and fed him slivers of ice. She brushed his hair, stroked his forehead when his head ached so bad he thought his skull would crack; and took over bathing him when she saw how alarmed he became when the nurses did it. Somehow he could bear it better when she bathed him, though even in his illness he had been puzzled by his own reaction.

She touched him constantly, anticipating his needs so that his pillows were fluffed before he was aware of any discomfort, the heat adjusted before he became too hot or too cold, his legs and back massaged when the fever made him ache from head to toe. He was swamped by maternal fussing, enveloped by it. It terrified him, but Mary took advantage of his weakened state and ruthlessly overwhelmed him with her mothering, as if she were determined to pack enough loving care into those few days to make up for a lifetime of nothing.

Sometime during those fever-fogged days, he began to like the feel of her cool hand on his forehead, to listen for that sweet voice even when he couldn't drag his heavy eyelids open, and the sound of it reassured him on some deep, primitive level. Once he dreamed, he didn't know what, but he woke in a panic to find her arms around him, his head pillowed on her narrow shoulder as if he were a baby, her hand gently stroking his hair while she murmured reassuringly to him--and he drifted back to sleep feeling comforted and somehow… safe.

He was always startled, even now, by how small she was. Someone so relentlessly iron-willed should have been seven feet tall and weighed three hundred pounds; at least then it would have made sense that she could bulldoze the hospital staff, even the doctors, into doing what she wanted. She had estimated his age at fourteen, but even then he was over a full head taller than the dainty woman who took over his life, but in this case size didn't matter; he was as helpless against her as was the hospital staff.

There was nothing at all he could do to fight off his growing addiction to Mary Mackenzie's mothering, even though he knew he was developing a weakness, a vulnerability, that terrified him. He had never before cared for anyone or anything, instinctively knowing that to do so would expose his emotional underbelly. But knowledge and wariness couldn't protect him now; by the time he was well enough to leave the hospital, he loved the

woman who had decided she was going to be his mother, loved her with all the blind helplessness of a small child.
When he left the hospital it had been with Mary and the big man, Wolf. Because he couldn't bear to leave her just yet, he braced himself to endure her family. Just for a little while, he had promised himself, just until he was stronger.
They had taken him to Mackenzie's Mountain, into their home, their arms, their hearts. A nameless boy had died that day beside the road, and Chance Mackenzie had been born in his place. When Chance had chosen a birthday--at his new sister Maris's insistence--he chose the day Mary found him, rather than the perhaps more logical date that his adoption was final. He had never had anything, but after that day he had been flooded with… everything. He had always been hungry, but now there was food. He had been starved, too, for learning, and now there were books everywhere, because Mary was a teacher down to her fragile bones, and she had force-fed him knowledge as fast as he could gulp it down. He was accustomed to bedding down wherever and whenever he could, but now he had his own room, his own bed, a routine. He had clothes, new ones, bought specifically for him. No one else had ever worn them, and he hadn't had to steal them. But most of all, he had always been alone, and abruptly he was surrounded by family. Now he had a mother and a father, *four* brothers, a little sister, a sister-in-law, an infant nephew, and all of them treated him as if he had been there from the beginning. He could still barely tolerate being touched, but the Mackenzie family touched *a lot.* Mary--Mom--was constantly hugging him, tousling his hair, kissing him good-night, fussing over him. Maris, his new sister, pestered the living hell out of him just the way she did her other brothers, then would throw her skinny arms around his waist and fiercely hug him, saying, "I'm so glad you're ours!"
He was always taken aback on those occasions, and would dart a wary glance at Wolf, the big man who was the head of the Mackenzie pack and who was now Chance's dad, too. What did he think, seeing his innocent little daughter hug someone like Chance? Wolf Mackenzie was no innocent; if he didn't know exactly what experiences had molded Chance, he still recognized the dangerous vein in the half-wild boy. Chance always wondered if those knowing eyes could see clear through him, see the blood on his hands, find in his mind the memory of the man he had killed when he was about ten.

Yes, the big half-breed had known very well the type of wild animal he had taken into his family and called son, had known and, like Mary, had loved him, anyway.

His early years had taught Chance how risky life was, taught him not to trust anyone, taught him that love would only make him vulnerable and that vulnerability could cost him his life. He had known all that, and still he hadn't been able to stop himself from loving the Mackenzies. It never stopped scaring him, this weakness in his armor, and yet when he was in the family bosom was the only time he was completely relaxed, because he knew he was safe with them. He couldn't stay away, couldn't distance himself now that he was a man who was more than capable of taking care of himself, because their love for him, and his for them, fed his soul.

He had stopped even trying to limit their access to his heart and instead turned his considerable talents to doing everything he could to make their world, their lives, as safe as possible. They kept making it tougher for him; the Mackenzies constantly assaulted him with expansions: his brothers married, giving him sisters-in-law to love, because his brothers loved them and they were part of the family now. Then there were the babies. When he first came into the family there was only John, Joe and Caroline's first son, newly born. But nephew had followed nephew, and somehow Chance, along with everyone else in the Mackenzie family, found himself rocking infants, changing diapers, holding bottles, letting a dimpled little hand clutch one of his fingers while tottering first steps were made… and each one of those dimpled hands had clutched his heart, too. He had no defense against them. There were twelve nephews now, and one niece against whom he was particularly helpless, much to everyone else's amusement.

Going home was always nerve-racking, and yet he yearned for his family. He was afraid for them, afraid for himself, because he didn't know if he could live now without the warmth the Mackenzies folded about him. His mind told him he would be better off if he gradually severed the ties and isolated himself from both the pleasure and the potential for pain, but his heart always led him home again.

Chapter One

Chance loved motorcycles. The big beast between his legs throbbed with power as he roared along the narrow winding road, the wind in his hair, leaning his body into the curves with the beast so they were one, animal and machine. No other motorcycle in the world sounded like a Harley, with that deep, coughing rumble that vibrated through his entire body. Riding a motorcycle always gave him a hard-on, and his own visceral reaction to the speed and power never failed to amuse him.

Danger was sexy. Every warrior knew it, though it wasn't something people were going to read about in their Sunday newspaper magazines. His brother Josh freely admitted that landing a fighter on a carrier deck had always turned him on. "It falls just short of orgasm," was the way Josh put it. Joe, who could fly any jet built, refrained from commenting but always smiled a slow, knowing smile.

As for both Zane and himself, Chance knew there were times when each had emerged from certain tense situations, usually involving bullets, wanting nothing more than to have a woman beneath him. Chance's sexual need was ferocious at those times; his body was flooded with adrenaline and testosterone, he was *alive,* and he desperately needed a woman's soft body in which he could bury himself and release all the tension.

Unfortunately, that need always had to wait: wait until he was in a secure position, maybe even in a different country entirely; wait until there was an available, willing woman at hand; and, most of all, wait until he had settled down enough that he could be relatively civilized in the sack.

But for now, there was only the Harley and himself, the rush of sweet mountain air on his face, and the inner mixture of joy and fear of going home. If Mom saw him riding the Harley without a helmet she would tear a strip off his hide, which was why he had the helmet with him, securely fastened behind the seat. He would put it on before sedately riding up the mountain to visit them. Dad wouldn't be fooled, but neither would he say anything, because Wolf Mackenzie knew what it was to fly high and wild.

He crested a ridge, and Zane's house came into view in the broad valley below. The house was large, with five bedrooms and four baths, but not ostentatious; Zane had instinctively built the house so it wouldn't attract undue attention. It didn't look as large as it was, because some of the rooms were underground. He had also built it to be as secure as possible,

positioning it so he had an unrestricted view in all directions, but using natural formations of the land to block land access by all but the one road. The doors were steel, with state-of-the-art locks; the windows were shatterproof, and had cost a small fortune. Strategic walls had interior armor, and an emergency generator was installed in the basement. The basement also concealed another means of escape, if escape became necessary. Motion sensors were installed around the house, and as Chance wheeled the motorcycle into the driveway, he knew his arrival had already been signaled.

Zane didn't keep his family locked in a prison, but the security provisions were there if needed. Given their jobs, prudence demanded caution, and Zane had always prepared for emergencies, always had a backup plan.

Chance cut off the motor and sat for a minute, letting his senses return to normal while he ran a hand through his windswept hair. Then he kicked the stand down and leaned the Harley onto it, and dismounted much the way he would a horse. Taking a thin file from the storage compartment, he went up on the wide, shady porch.

It was a warm summer day, mid-August, and the sky was a cloudless clear blue. Horses grazed contentedly in the pasture, though a few of the more curious had come to the fence to watch with huge, liquid dark eyes as the noisy machine roared into the driveway. Bees buzzed around Barrie's flowers, and birds sang continuously in the trees. Wyoming. Home. It wasn't far away, Mackenzie's Mountain, with the sprawling house on the mountaintop where he had been given… life and everything else in this world that was important to him.

"The door's open." Zane's low, calm voice issued from the intercom beside the door. "I'm in the office."

Chance opened the door and went inside, his booted feet silent as he walked down the hall to Zane's office. With small clicks, the door locks automatically engaged behind him. The house was quiet, meaning Barrie and the kids weren't at home; if Nick was anywhere in the house she would have run squealing to him, hurling herself into his arms, chattering nonstop in her mangled English while holding his face clasped between both her little hands, making certain his attention didn't wander from her--as if he would dare look away. Nick was like a tiny package of unstable explosives; it was best to keep a weather eye on her.

The door to Zane's office was unexpectedly closed. Chance paused a moment, then opened it without knocking.
Zane was behind the desk, computer on, windows open to the warm, fresh air. He gave his brother one of his rare, warm smiles, "Watch where you step," he advised. "Munchkins on deck."
Automatically Chance looked down, checking out the floor, but he didn't see either of the twins. "Where?"
Zane leaned back in his chair a little, looking around for his offspring. Spotting them, he said, "Under the desk. When they heard me let you in, they hid."
Chance raised his eyebrows. To his knowledge, the ten-month-old twins weren't in the habit of hiding from anyone or anything. He looked more carefully and saw four plump, dimpled baby hands peeping from under the cover of Zane's desk. "They aren't very good at it," he observed. "I can see their hands."
"Give them a break, they're new at this stuff. They've only started doing it this week. They're playing Attack."
"Attack?" Fighting the urge to laugh, Chance said, "What am I supposed to do?"
"Just stand there. They'll burst from cover as fast as they can crawl and grab you by the ankles."
"Any biting involved?"
"Not yet."
"Okay. What are they going to do with me once they have me captured?"
"They haven't gotten to that part yet. For now, they just pull themselves up and stand there giggling." Zane scratched his jaw, considering. "Maybe they'll sit on your feet to hold you down, but for the most part they like standing too much to settle for sitting."
The attack erupted. Even with Zane's warning, Chance was a little surprised. They were remarkably quiet, for babies. He had to admire their precision; they launched themselves from under the desk at a rapid crawl, plump little legs pumping, and with identical triumphant crows attached themselves to his ankles. Dimpled hands clutched his jeans. The one on the left plopped down on his foot for a second, then thought better of the tactic and twisted around to begin hauling himself to an upright position. Baby arms wrapped around his knees, and the two little conquerors squealed with delight, their bubbling chuckles eliciting laughter from both men.

"Cool," Chance said admiringly. "Predator babies." He tossed the file onto Zane's desk and leaned down to scoop the little warriors into his arms, settling each diapered bottom on a muscular forearm. Cameron and Zack grinned at him, six tiny white baby teeth shining in each identical dimpled face, and immediately they began patting his face with their fat little hands, pulling his ears, delving into his shirt pockets. It was like being attacked by two squirming, remarkably heavy marshmallows.

"Good God," he said in astonishment. "They weigh a ton." He hadn't expected them to have grown so much in the two months since he had seen them.

"They're almost as big as Nick. She still outweighs them, but I swear they feel heavier." The twins were sturdy and strongly built, the little boys already showing the size of the Mackenzie males, while Nick was as dainty as her grandmother Mary.

"Where are Barrie and Nick?" Chance asked, missing his pretty sister-in-law and exuberant, cheerfully diabolic niece.

"We had a shoe crisis. Don't ask."

"How do you have a shoe crisis?" Chance asked, unable to resist. He sat down in a big, comfortable chair across from Zane's desk, setting the babies more comfortably in his lap. They lost interest in pulling his ears and began babbling to each other, reaching out, entwining their arms and legs as if they sought the closeness they had known while forming in the womb. Chance unconsciously stroked them, enjoying the softness of their skin, the feel of squirming babies in his arms. All the Mackenzie babies grew up accustomed to being constantly, lovingly touched by the entire extended family.

Zane laced his hands behind his head, his big, powerful body relaxed. "First you have a three-year-old who loves her shiny, black, patent leather Sunday shoes. Then you make the severe tactical error of letting her watch *The Wizard of Oz."* His stern mouth twitched, and his pale eyes glittered with amusement.

Chance's agile mind immediately made the connection, and his acquaintance with the three-year-old in question allowed him to make a logical assumption: Nick had decided she had to have a pair of red shoes.

"What did she use to try to dye them?"

Zane sighed. "Lipstick, what else?" Each and every young Mackenzie had had an incident with lipstick. It was a family tradition, one John had started

when, at the age of two, he had used his mother's favorite lipstick to recolor the impressive rows of fruit salad on Joe's dress uniform. Caroline had been impressively outraged, because the shade had been discontinued and finding a new tube had been much more difficult than replacing the small colored bars that represented medals Joe had earned and services he had performed.
"You couldn't just wipe it off?" The twins had discovered his belt buckle and zipper, and Chance moved the busy little hands that were trying to undress him. They began squirming to get down, and he leaned over to set them on the floor.
"Close the door," Zane instructed, "or they'll escape."
Leaning back, Chance stretched out a long arm and closed the door, just in time. The two diaper-clad escape artists had almost reached it. Deprived of freedom, they plopped down on their padded bottoms and considered the situation, then launched themselves in crawling patrol of the perimeters of the room.
"I *could* have wiped it off," Zane continued, his tone bland, "if I had known about it. Unfortunately, Nick cleaned the shoes herself. She put them in the dishwasher."
Chance threw back his head with a shout of laughter.
"Barrie bought her a new pair of shoes yesterday. Well, you know how Nick's always been so definite about what she wants to wear. She took one look at the shoes, said they were ugly, *even though they were just like the ones she ruined*, and refused to even try them on."
"To be accurate," Chance corrected, "what she said was that they were 'ugwy'." Zane conceded the point. "She's getting better with her *L*s, though. She practices, saying the really important words, like lollipop, over and over to herself."
"Can she say 'Chance' yet, instead of 'Dance'?" Chance asked, because Nick stubbornly refused to even acknowledge she couldn't say his name. She insisted everyone else was saying it wrong.
Zane's expression was totally deadpan. "Not a chance."
Chance groaned at the pun, wishing he hadn't asked. "I gather Barrie has taken my little darling shopping, so she can pick out her own shoes."
"Exactly." Zane glanced over to check on his roaming offspring. As if they had been waiting for his parental notice, first Cam and then Zack plopped down on their butts and gave brief warning cries, all the while watching their father expectantly.

"Feeding time," Zane said, swiveling his chair around so he could fetch two bottles from a small cooler behind the desk. He handed one to Chance. "Grab a kid."
"You're prepared, as always," Chance commented as he went over to the twins and leaned down to lift one in his arms. Holding the baby up, he peered briefly at the scowling little face to make sure he had the one he thought he had. It was Zack, all right. Chance couldn't say exactly how he knew which twin was which, how anyone in the family knew, because the babies were so identical their pediatrician had suggested putting ID anklets on them. But they each had such definite personalities, which were reflected in their expressions, that no one in the family ever confused one twin for the other.
"I have to be prepared. Barrie weaned them last month, and they don't take kindly to having to wait for dinner."
Zack's round blue eyes were fiercely focused on the bottle in Chance's hand.
"Why did she wean them so early?" Chance asked as he resumed his seat and settled the baby in the crook of his left arm. "She nursed Nick until she was a year old."
"You'll see," Zane said dryly, settling Cam on his lap.
As soon as Chance brought the bottle within reach of Zack's fat little hands the baby made a grab for it, guiding it to his rapacious, open mouth. He clamped down ferociously on the nipple. Evidently deciding to let his uncle hold the bottle, he nevertheless made certain the situation was stabilized by clutching Chance's wrist with both hands, and wrapping both chubby legs around Chance's forearm. Then he began to growl as he sucked, pausing only to swallow.
An identical growling noise came from Zane's lap. Chance looked over to see his brother's arm captured in the same manner as the two little savages held on to their meals.
Milk bubbled around Zack's rosebud mouth, and Chance blinked as six tiny white teeth gnawed on the plastic nipple.
"Hell, no wonder she weaned you!"
Zack didn't pause in his gnawing, sucking and growling, but he did flick an absurdly arrogant glance at his uncle before returning his full attention to filling his little belly.
Zane was laughing softly, and he lifted Cam enough that he could nuzzle one of the chubby legs so determinedly wrapped around his arm. Cam

paused to scowl at the interruption, then changed his mind and instead favored his father with a dimpled, milky smile. The next second the smile was gone and he attacked the bottle again.

Zack's fuzzy black hair was as soft as silk against Chance's arm. Babies were a pure tactile pleasure, he thought, though he hadn't been of that opinion the first time he'd held one. The baby in question had been John, screaming his head off from the misery of teething.

Chance hadn't been with the Mackenzies long, only a few months, and he had still been extremely wary of all these people. He had managed--barely--to control his instinct to attack whenever someone touched him, but he still jumped like a startled wild animal. Joe and Caroline came to visit, and from the expressions on their faces when they entered the house, it had been a very long trip. Even Joe, normally so controlled and unflappable, was frustrated by his futile efforts to calm his son, and Caroline had been completely frazzled by a situation she couldn't handle with her usual impeccable logic. Her blond hair had been mussed, and her green eyes expressed an amazing mixture of concern and outrage.

As she had walked by Chance, she suddenly wheeled and deposited the screaming baby in his arms. Startled, alarmed, he tried to jerk back, but before he knew it he was in sole possession of the wiggling, howling little human. "Here," she said with relief and utmost confidence. "You get him calmed down."

Chance had panicked. It was a wonder he hadn't dropped the baby. He'd never held one before, and he didn't know what to do with it. Another part of him was astounded that Caroline would entrust her adored child to *him*, the mongrel stray Mary--Mom--had brought home with her. Why couldn't these people see what he was? Why couldn't they figure out he had lived wild in a kill-or-be-killed world, and that they would be safer if they kept their distance from him?

Instead, no one seemed to think it unusual or alarming that he was holding the baby, even though in his panic he held John almost at arm's length, clutched between his two strong young hands.

But blessed quiet fell in the house. John was startled out of his screaming. He stared interestedly at this new person and kicked his legs. Automatically Chance changed his grip on the baby, settling him in the cradle of one arm as he had seen the others do. The kid was drooling. A tiny bib was fastened around his neck, and Chance used it to wipe away most of the slobber. John

saw this opportunity and grabbed Chance by the thumb, immediately carrying the digit to his mouth and chomping down. Chance had jumped at the force of the hard little gums, with two tiny, sharp teeth already breaking the surface. He grimaced at the pain, but hung in there, letting John use his thumb as a teething ring until Mom rescued him by bringing a cold wet washcloth for the baby to chew.

Chance had expected then to be relieved of baby duty, because Mom usually couldn't wait to get her hands on her grandson. But that day everyone had seemed content to leave John in his hands, even the kid himself, and after a while Chance calmed down enough to start walking around and pointing out things of interest to his little pal, all of which John obediently studied while gnawing on the relief-giving washcloth.

That had been his indoctrination to the ways of babies, and from that day on he had been a sucker for the parade of nephews his virile brothers and fertile sisters-in-law had produced on a regular basis. He seemed to be getting even worse, because with Zane's three he was total mush.

"By the way, Maris is pregnant."

Chance's head jerked up, and a wide grin lit his tanned face. His baby sister had been married nine whole months and had been fretting because she hadn't immediately gotten pregnant.

"When is it due?" He always ruthlessly arranged things so he could be home when a new Mackenzie arrived. Technically, this one would be a MacNeil, but that was a minor point.

"March. She says she'll be crazy before then, because Mac won't let her out of his sight."

Chance chuckled. Other than her father and brothers, Mac was the only man Maris had ever met whom she couldn't intimidate, which was one of the reasons she loved him so much. If Mac had decided he was going to ride herd on Maris during her pregnancy, she had little hope of escaping on one of those long, hard rides she so loved.

Zane nodded toward the file on his desk. "You going to tell me about it?"

Chance knew Zane was asking about more than the contents of the file. He was asking why it hadn't been transmitted by computer, instead of Chance personally bringing a hard copy. Zane knew his brother's schedule; he was the only person, other than Chance himself, who did, so he knew Chance was currently supposed to be in France. He was also asking why he hadn't

been notified of Chance's change in itinerary, why his brother hadn't made a simple phone call to let him know he was coming.
"I didn't want to risk even a hint of this leaking out." Zane's eyebrows rose. "We have security problems?"
"Nothing that I know of," Chance said. "It's what I don't know about that worries me. But, like I said, no one else can hear even a whisper of this. It's between us."
"Now you've made me curious." Zane's cool blue eyes gleamed with interest.
"Crispin Hauer has a daughter."
Zane didn't straighten from his relaxed position, but his expression hardened. Crispin Hauer had been number one on their target list for years, but the terrorist was as elusive as he was vicious. They had yet to find any way to get close to him, any vulnerability they could exploit or bait they could use to lure him into a trap. There was a record of a marriage in London some thirty-five years ago, but Hauer's wife, formerly Pamela Vickery, had disappeared, and no trace of her had ever been found. Chance, along with everyone else, had assumed the woman died soon after the marriage, either by Hauer's hand or by his enemies'.
"Who is she?" Zane asked. "*Where* is she?"
"Her name is Sonia Miller, and she's here, in America."
"I know that name," Zane said, his gaze sharpening.
Chance nodded. "Specifically, she's the courier who was supposedly robbed of her package last week in Chicago."
Zane didn't miss the "supposedly," but then, he never missed anything. "You think it was a setup?"
"I think it's a damn good possibility. I found the link when I checked into her background."
"Hauer would have known she'd be investigated after losing a package, especially one containing aerospace documents. Why take the risk?"
"He might not have thought we would find anything.
She was adopted. Hal and Eleanor Miller are listed as her parents, and they're clean as a whistle. I wouldn't have known she was adopted if I hadn't tried to pull up her birth certificate on the computer. Guess what--Hal and Eleanor never had any children. Little Sonia Miller didn't have a birth certificate. So I did some digging and found the adoption file--"

Zane's eyebrows rose. Open adoptions had caused so many problems that the trend had veered sharply back to closed files, which, coupled with electronic privacy laws and safeguards, had made it damn difficult to even locate those closed files, much less get into them. "Did you leave any fingerprints?"

"Nothing that will lead back to us. I went through a couple of relays, then hacked into the Internal Revenue and accessed the file from their system."

Zane grinned. If anyone did notice the electronic snooping, it likely wouldn't even be mentioned; no one messed with the tax people.

Zack had finished his bottle; his ferocious grip on it slackened, and his head lolled against Chance's arm as he briefly struggled against sleep.

Automatically Chance lifted the baby to his shoulder and began patting his back. "Ms. Miller has been employed as a courier for a little over five years. She has an apartment in Chicago, but her neighbors say she's seldom there. I have to think this is a long-term setup, that she's been working with her father from the beginning."

Zane nodded. They had to assume the worst, because it was their job to do so. Only by anticipating the worst could they be prepared to handle it.

"Do you have anything in mind?" he asked, taking the bottle from Cam's slackened grip and gently lifting the sleeping baby to his own shoulder.

"Getting next to her. Getting her to trust me."

"She's not going to be the trusting sort."

"I have a plan," Chance said, and grinned, because that was usually Zane's line.

Zane grinned in return, then paused as a small security console in the wall dinged a soft alarm. He glanced at the security monitor. "Brace yourself," he advised. "Barrie and Nick are home."

Seconds later the front door opened and a shriek filled the house. "Unca *Dance!* UncaDanceUncaDance*UncaDance!"* The chant was punctuated by the sound of tiny feet running and jumping down the hall as Nick's celebration of his visit came closer. Chance leaned back in his chair and opened the office door a bare second before Nick barreled through it, her entire little body quivering with joy and eagerness.

She hurled herself at him, and he managed to catch her with his free arm, dragging her onto his lap. She paused to bestow a big-sisterly kiss and a pat on the back of Zack's head--never mind that he was almost as big as she was--then turned all her fierce attention to Chance.

"Are you staying dis time?" she demanded, even as she lifted her face for him to kiss. He did, nuzzling her soft cheek and neck and making her giggle, inhaling the faint sweet scent of baby that still clung to her.
"Just for a few days," he said, to her disappointment. She was old enough now to notice his long and frequent absences, and whenever she saw him she tried to convince him to stay.
She scowled; then, being Nick, she decided to move on to more important matters. Her face brightened. "Den can I wide your moborcycle?"
Alarm flared through him. "No," he said firmly.
"You can't ride it, sit on it, lean on it, or put any of your toys on it *unless I'm with you."* With Nick, it was best to close all the loopholes. She seldom disobeyed a direct order, but she was a genius at finding cracks to slip through. Another possibility occurred to him. "You can't put Cam or Zack on it, either." He doubted she could lift either of them, but he wasn't taking any risks.
"Thank you," Barrie said dryly, entering the office in time to catch his addendum. She leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, at the same time lifting Zack from his arms so he could protect himself from Nick's feet. All the Mackenzie males, at one time or another, had fallen victim to a tiny foot in the crotch.
"Mission accomplished?" Zane asked, leaning back in his chair and smiling at his wife with that lazy look in his pale eyes that said he liked what he was seeing.
"Not without some drama and convincing, but, yes, mission accomplished." She pushed a feather lock of red hair out of her eyes. As always, she looked stylish, though she was wearing nothing dressier than beige slacks and a white sleeveless blouse that set off her slim, lightly tanned arms. You could take the girl out of the finishing school, Chance thought admiringly, but you could never take the finishing school out of the girl, and Barrie had gone to the most exclusive one in the world.
Nick was still focused on negotiating riding rights on the motorcycle. She caught his face between her hands and leaned down so her nose practically touched his, insuring his complete attention. He nearly laughed aloud at the fierce intent in her expression. "I wet you wide my twicycle," she said, evidently deciding to cajole instead of demand.
"Somehow I missed that," Zane murmured in amusement, while Barrie laughed softly.

"You *offered* to let me ride your tricycle," Chance corrected. "But I'm too big to ride a tricycle, and you're too little to ride a motorcycle."
"Den when *can* I wide it?" She made her blue eyes wide and winsome.
"When you get your driver's license."
That stymied her. She had no idea what a driver's license was, or how to get it. She stuck a finger in her mouth while she pondered this situation, and Chance tried to divert her interest. "Hey! Aren't those new shoes you're wearing?"
Like magic, her face brightened again. She wriggled around so he could hold one foot up so close to his face she almost kicked him in the nose. "Dey're so *pwetty,"* she crooned in delight.
He caught the little foot in his big hand, admiring the shine of the black patent leather. "Wow, that's so shiny I can see my face in it." He pretended to inspect his teeth, which set her to giggling.
Zane rose to his feet. "We'll put the boys down for their naps while you have her occupied."
Keeping Nick occupied wasn't a problem; she was never at a loss for something to say or do. He curled one silky black strand of her hair around his finger while she chattered about her new shoes, Grampa's new horses, and what Daddy had said when he hit his thumb with a hammer. She cheerfully repeated exactly what Daddy had said, making Chance choke.
"But I'm not 'posed to say dat," she said, giving him a solemn look. "Dat's a weally, weally bad word."
"Yeah," he said, his voice strained. "It is."
"I'm not 'posed to say'damn,' or 'hell,' or 'ass,' or--"
"Then you shouldn't be saying them now." He managed to inject a note of firmness in his tone, though it was a struggle to keep from laughing.
She looked perplexed. "Den how can I tell you what dey are?"
"Does Daddy know what the bad words are?"
The little head nodded emphatically. "He knows dem *all*."
"I'll ask him to tell me, so I'll know which words not to say."
"Otay." She sighed. "But don't hit him too hard."
"Hit him?"
"Dat's de only time he says *dat* word, when he hits his dumb wid de hammer. He said so."
Chance managed to turn his laugh into a cough. Zane was an ex-SEAL; his language was as salty as the sea he was so at home in, and Chance had

heard "dat word," and worse, many times from his brother. But Mom had also instilled strict courtesy in all her children, so their language was circumspect in front of women and children. Zane must not have known Nick was anywhere near him when he hit his thumb, or no amount of pain could have made him say that in her hearing. Chance only hoped she forgot it before she started kindergarten.

"Aunt Mawis is goin' to have a baby," Nick said, scrambling up to stand in his lap, her feet braced on his thighs. Chance put both hands around her to steady her, though his aid probably wasn't needed; Nick had the balance of an acrobat.

"I know. Your daddy told me."

Nick scowled at not being the first to impart the news. "She's goin' to foal in de spwing," she announced.

He couldn't hold back the laughter this time. He gathered the little darling close to him and stood, whirling her around and making her shriek with laughter as she clung to his neck. He laughed until his eyes were wet. God, he loved this child, who in the three short years of her life had taught them all to be on their toes at all times, because there was no telling what she was going to do or say. It took the entire Mackenzie family to ride herd on her.

Suddenly she heaved a sigh. "When's de spwing? Is it a wong, wong time away?"

"Very long," he said gravely. Seven months was an eternity to a three-year-old.

"Will I be old?"

He put on a sympathetic face and nodded. "You'll be four."

She looked both horrified and resigned. "Four," she said mournfully. "Whodadunkit?"

When he stopped laughing this time, he wiped his eyes and asked, "Who taught you to say *whodathunkit?"*

"John," she said promptly.

"Did he teach you anything else?"

She nodded.

"What? Can you remember it?"

She nodded.

"Will you tell me what they are?"

She rolled her eyes up and studied the ceiling for a moment, then gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Will you wet me wide your moborcycle?"

Damn, she was bargaining! He trembled with fear at the thought of what she would be like when she was sixteen. "No," he said firmly. "If you got hurt, your mommy and daddy would cry, Grampa and Gamma would cry, *I* would cry, Aunt Maris would cry, Mac would cry, Unca Mike would cry--"
She looked impressed at this litany of crying and interrupted before he could name everyone in the family. "I can wide a horse, Unca Dance, so why can't I wide your moborcycle?"
God, she was relentless. Where in the hell were Zane and Barrie? They'd had plenty of time to put the twins down for their naps. If he knew Zane, his brother was taking advantage of having a baby-sitter for Nick to get in some sexy time with his wife; Zane was always prepared to use a fluid situation to his advantage.
It was another ten minutes before Zane strolled back into the office, his eyes slightly heavy-lidded and his hard face subtly relaxed. Chance scowled at his brother. He'd spent the ten minutes trying to talk Nick into telling him what John had taught her, but she wasn't budging from her initial negotiation. "It's about time," he groused.
"Hey, I hurried," Zane protested mildly.
"Yeah, right."
"As much as possible," he added, smiling. He smoothed his big hand over his daughter's shining black hair. "Have you kept Uncle Chance entertained?"
She nodded. "I told him de weally, weally bad word you said when you hit your dumb."
Zane looked pained, then stern. "How did you tell him when you aren't supposed to say the word?"
She stuck her finger in her mouth and began studying the ceiling again.
"Nick." Zane plucked her from Chance's arms. "Did you say the word?"
Her lower lip stuck out a little, but she nodded, owning up to her transgression.
"Then you can't have a bedtime story tonight. You promised you wouldn't say it."
"I'm sowwy," she said, winding her arms around his neck and laying her head on his shoulder.
Gently he rubbed his hand up and down her back. "I know you are, sweetheart, but you have to keep your promises." He set her on her feet. "Go find Mommy."

When she was gone, out of curiosity Chance asked, "Why didn't you tell her that she couldn't watch television, instead of taking away the bedtime story?"
"We don't want to make television attractive by using it as a treat or a privilege. Why? Are you taking notes on being a parent?"
Appalled, Chance said, "Not in this lifetime."
"Yeah? Fate has a way of jumping up and biting you on the ass when you least expect it."
"Well, my ass is currently bite-free, and I intend to keep it that way." He nodded at the file on Zane's desk. "We have some planning to do."

Chapter Two

This whole assignment was a tribute to Murphy's Law, Sunny Miller thought in disgust as she sat in the Salt Lake City airport, waiting for her flight to be called--if it were called at all, which she was beginning to doubt. This was her fifth airport of the day, and she was still almost a thousand miles from her destination, which was Seattle. She was *supposed* to have been on a direct flight from Atlanta to Seattle, but that flight had been canceled due to mechanical problems and the passengers routed on to other flights, none of which were direct.
From Atlanta she had gone to Cincinnati, from Cincinnati to Chicago, from Chicago to Denver, and from Denver to Salt Lake City. At least she was moving west instead of backtracking, and the flight from Salt Lake City, assuming it ever started boarding, was supposed to actually land in Seattle. The way her day had gone, she expected it to crash instead.
She was tired, she had been fed nothing but peanuts all day, and she was afraid to go get anything to eat in case her flight was called and the plane got loaded and in the air in record time, leaving her behind. When Murphy was in control, anything was possible. She made a mental note to find this Murphy guy and punch him in the nose.
Her normal good humor restored by the whimsy, she resettled herself in the plastic seat and took out the paperback book she had been reading. She was tired, she was hungry, but she wasn't going to let the stress get to her. If there was one thing she was good at, it was making the best of a situation.

Some trips were smooth as silk, and some were a pain in the rear; so long as the good and the bad were balanced, she could cope.

Out of ingrained habit, she kept the strap of her soft leather briefcase looped around her neck, held across her body so it couldn't easily be jerked out of her grasp. Some couriers might handcuff the briefcase or satchel to their wrists, but her company was of the opinion that handcuffs drew unwanted attention; it was better to blend in with the horde of business travelers than to stand out. Handcuffs practically shouted "Important stuff inside!"

After what had happened in Chicago the month before, Sunny was doubly wary and also kept one hand on the briefcase. She had no idea what was in it, but that didn't matter; her job was to get the contents from point A to point B. When the briefcase had been jerked off her shoulder by a green-haired punk in Chicago last month, she had been both humiliated and furious. She was *always* careful, but evidently not careful enough, and now she had a big blotch on her record. On a very basic level, she was alarmed that she had been caught off guard. She had been taught from the cradle to be both prepared and cautious, to be alert to what was going on around her; if a green-haired punk could get the best of her, then she was neither as prepared nor alert as she had thought. When one slip could mean the difference between life and death, there was no room for error.

Just remembering the incident made her uneasy. She returned the book to her carry-on bag, preferring to keep her attention on the people around her. Her stomach growled. She had food in her carry-on, but that was for emergencies, and this didn't qualify. She watched the gate, where the two airline reps were patiently answering questions from impatient passengers. From the dissatisfied expressions on the passengers' faces as they returned to their seats, the news wasn't good; logically, she should have enough time to find something to eat.

She glanced at her watch: one-forty-five p.m., local time. She had to have the contents of the briefcase in Seattle by nine p.m. Pacific time tonight, which should have been a breeze, but the way things were going, she was losing faith the assignment could be completed on time. She hated the idea of calling the office to report another failure, even one that wasn't her fault. If the airline didn't get on the ball soon, though, she would have to do something. The customer needed to know if the packet wasn't going to arrive as scheduled.

If the news on the flight delay hadn't improved by the time she returned from eating, she would see about transferring to another airline, though she had already considered that option and none of the possibilities looked encouraging; she was in flight-connection hell. If she couldn't work out something, she would have to make that phone call.

Taking a firm grip on the briefcase with one hand and her carry-on bag with the other, she set off down the concourse in search of food that didn't come from a vending machine. Arriving passengers were pouring out of a gate to her left, and she moved farther to the right to avoid the crush. The maneuver didn't work; someone jostled her left shoulder, and she instinctively looked around to see who it was.

No one was there. A split-second reaction, honed by years of looking over her shoulder, saved her. She automatically tightened her grip on the briefcase just as she felt a tug on the strap, and the leather fell limply from her shoulder.

Damn it, not again!

She ducked and spun, swinging her heavy carry-on bag at her assailant. She caught a glimpse of feral dark eyes and a mean, unshaven face; then her attention locked on his hands. The knife he had used to slice the briefcase strap was in one hand, and he already had his other hand on the briefcase, trying to jerk it away from her. The carry-on bag hit him on the shoulder, staggering him, but he didn't release his grip.

Sunny didn't even think of screaming, or of being scared; she was too angry for either reaction, and both would have splintered her concentration. Instead, she wound up for another swing, aiming the bag for the hand holding the knife.

Around her she heard raised voices, full of confused alarm as people tried to dodge around the disturbance, and jostled others instead. Few, if any, of them would have any idea what the ruckus was about. Vision was hampered; things were happening too fast. She couldn't rely on anyone coming to help, so she ignored the noise, all her attention centered on the cretin whose dirty hand clutched her briefcase.

Whap! She hit him again, but still he held on to the knife.

"Bitch," he snarled, his knife-hand darting toward her.

She jumped back, and her fingers slipped on the leather. Triumphantly he jerked it away from her. Sunny grabbed for the dangling strap and caught it,

but the knife made a silver flash as he sliced downward, separating the strap from the briefcase. The abrupt release of tension sent her staggering back. The cretin whirled and ran. Catching her balance, Sunny shouted, "Stop him!" and ran in pursuit. Her long skirt had a slit up the left side that let her reach full stride, but the cretin not only had a head start, he had longer legs. Her carry-on bag banged against her legs, further hampering her, but she didn't dare leave it behind. Doggedly she kept running, even though she knew it was useless. Despair knotted her stomach. Her only prayer was that someone in the crowd would play hero and stop him.

Her prayer was abruptly answered.

Up ahead, a tall man standing with his back to the concourse turned and glanced almost negligently in the direction of the ruckus. The cretin was almost abreast of him. Sunny drew breath to yell out another "Stop him," even though she knew the cretin would be past before the man could react. She never got the words out of her mouth.

The tall man took in with one glance what was happening, and in a movement as smooth and graceful as a ballet pirouette, he shifted, pivoted and lashed out with one booted foot. The kick landed squarely on the cretin's right knee, taking his leg out from under him. He cartwheeled once and landed flat on his back, his arms flung over his head. The briefcase skidded across the concourse before bouncing against the wall, then back into the path of a stream of passengers. One man hopped over the briefcase, while others stepped around it.

Sunny immediately swerved in that direction, snatching up the briefcase before any other quick-fingered thief could grab it, but she kept one eye on the action.

In another of those quick, graceful movements, the tall man bent and flipped the cretin onto his stomach, then wrenched both arms up high behind his back and held them with one big hand.

"Owww!" the cretin howled. "You bastard, you're breaking my arms!"

The name-calling got his arms roughly levered even higher. He howled again, this time wordlessly and at a much higher pitch.

"Watch your language," said his captor.

Sunny skidded to a halt beside him. "Be careful," she said breathlessly. "He had a knife."

"I saw it. It landed over there when he fell." The man didn't look up but jerked his chin to the left. As he spoke he efficiently stripped the cretin's

belt from its loop and wound the leather in a simple but effective snare around his captive's wrists. "Pick it up before someone grabs it and disappears. Use two fingers, and touch only the blade."
He seemed to know what he was doing, so Sunny obeyed without question. She took a tissue out of her skirt pocket and gingerly picked up the knife as he had directed, being careful not to smear any fingerprints on the handle. "What do I do with it?"
"Hold it until Security gets here." He angled his dark head toward the nearest airline employee, a transportation escort who was hovering nervously as if unsure what to do. "Security *has* been called, hasn't it?"
"Yes, sir," said the escort, his eyes round with excitement.
Sunny squatted beside her rescuer. "Thank you," she said. She indicated the briefcase, with the two dangling pieces of its strap. "He cut the strap and grabbed it away from me."
"Any time," he said, turning his head to smile at her and giving her her first good look at him.
Her first look was almost her last. Her stomach fluttered. Her heart leaped. Her lungs seized. *Wow,* she thought, and tried to take a deep breath without being obvious about it.
He was probably the best-looking man she had ever seen, without being pretty in any sense of the word. *Drop-dead handsome* was the phrase that came to mind. Slightly dazed, she took in the details: black hair, a little too long and a little too shaggy, brushing the collar at the back of his battered brown leather jacket; smooth, honey-tanned skin; eyes of such a clear, light brown that they looked golden, framed by thick black lashes. As if that wasn't enough, he had also been blessed with a thin, straight nose, high cheekbones, and such clearly delineated, well-shaped lips that she had the wild impulse to simply lean forward and kiss him.
She already knew he was tall, and now she had the time to notice the broad shoulders, flat belly and lean hips. Mother Nature had been in a *really* good mood when he was made. He should have been too perfect and pretty to be real, but there was a toughness in his expression that was purely masculine, and a thin, crescent-shaped scar on his left cheekbone only added to the impression. Looking down, she saw another scar slashing across the back of his right hand, a raised line that was white against his tanned skin.
The scars in no way detracted from his attractiveness; the evidence of rough living only accentuated it, stating unequivocally that this was a *man.*

She was so bemused that it took her several seconds to realize he was watching her with mingled amusement and interest. She felt her cheeks heat in embarrassment at being caught giving him a blatant once-over. Okay, twice-over.

But she didn't have time to waste in admiration, so she forced her attention back to more pressing concerns. The cretin was grunting and making noises designed to show he was in agony, but she doubted he was in any great pain, despite his bound hands and the way her hero had a knee pressed into the small of his back. She had the briefcase back, but the cretin still presented her with a dilemma: It was her civic duty to stay and press charges against him, but if her flight left any time soon, she might very well miss it while she was answering questions and filling out forms.

"Jerk," she muttered at him. "If I miss my flight…"

"When is it?" asked her hero.

"I don't know. It's been delayed, but they could begin boarding at any time. I'll check at the gate and be right back."

He nodded with approval. "I'll hold your friend here and deal with Security until you get back."

"I'll only be a minute," she said, and walked swiftly back to her gate. The counter was now jammed with angry or upset travelers, their mood far more agitated than when she had left just a few moments before. Swiftly she glanced at the board, where CANCELED had been posted in place of the DELAYED sign.

"Damn," she said, under her breath. "Damn, damn, damn." There went her last hope for getting to Seattle in time to complete her assignment, unless there was another miracle waiting for her. Two miracles in one day was probably too much to ask for, though.

She needed to call in, she thought wearily, but first she could deal with the cretin and airport security. She retraced her steps and found that the little drama was now mobile; the cretin was on his feet, being frogmarched under the control of two airport policemen into an office where they would be out of the view of curious passersby.

Her hero was waiting for her, and when he spotted her, he said something to the security guys, then began walking to meet her.

Her heart gave a little flutter of purely feminine appreciation. My, he was good to look at. His clothes were nothing special: a black T-shirt under the old leather jacket, faded jeans and scuffed boots, but he wore them with a

confidence and grace that said he was utterly comfortable. Sunny allowed herself a moment of regret that she would never see him again after this little contretemps was handled, but then she pushed it away. She couldn't take the chance of letting anything develop into a relationship--assuming there was anything there to develop--with him or anyone else. She never even let anything start, because it wouldn't be fair to the guy, and she didn't need the emotional wear and tear, either. Maybe one day she would be able to settle down, date, eventually find someone to love and marry and maybe have kids, but not now. It was too dangerous.

When he reached her, he took her arm with old-fashioned courtesy. "Everything okay with your flight?"

"In a way. It's been canceled," she said ruefully. "I have to be in Seattle tonight, but I don't think I'm going to make it. Every flight I've had today has either been delayed or rerouted, and now there's no other flight that would get me there in time."

"Charter a plane," he said as they walked toward the office where the cretin had been taken.

She chuckled. "I don't know if my boss will spring for that kind of money, but it's an idea. I have to call in, anyway, when we're finished here."

"If it makes any difference to him, I'm available right now. I was supposed to meet a customer on that last flight in from Dallas, but he wasn't on the plane, and he hasn't contacted me, so I'm free."

"You're a charter pilot?" She couldn't believe it. It--*he*--was too good to be true. Maybe she did qualify for two miracles in one day after all.

He looked down at her and smiled, making a tiny dimple dance in his cheek. God, he had a dimple, too! Talk about overkill! He held out his hand. "Chance McCall--pilot, thief-catcher, jack-of-all-trades--at your service, ma'am."

She laughed and shook his hand, noticing that he was careful not to grip her fingers too hard. Considering the strength she could feel in that tough hand, she was grateful for his restraint. Some men weren't as considerate. "Sunny Miller, tardy courier and target of thieves. It's nice to meet you, Mr. McCall."

"Chance," he said easily. "Let's get this little problem taken care of, then you can call your boss and see if he thinks a charter flight is just what the doctor ordered."

He opened the door of the unmarked office for her, and she stepped inside to find the two security officers, a woman dressed in a severe gray suit and the cretin, who had been handcuffed to his chair. The cretin glared at her when she came in, as if all this were her fault instead of his.
"You lyin' bitch--" the cretin began.
Chance McCall reached out and gripped the cretin's shoulder. "Maybe you didn't get the message before," he said in that easy way of his that in no way disguised the iron behind it, "but I don't care for your language. Clean it up." He didn't issue a threat, just an order--and his grip on the cretin's shoulder didn't look gentle.
The cretin flinched and gave him an uneasy look, perhaps remembering how effortlessly this man had manhandled him before. Then he looked at the two airport policemen, as if expecting them to step in. The two men crossed their arms and grinned. Deprived of allies, the cretin opted for silence.
The gray-suited woman looked as if she wanted to protest the rough treatment of her prisoner, but she evidently decided to get on with the business at hand. "I'm Margaret Fayne, director of airport security. I assume you're going to file charges?"
"Yes," Sunny said.
"Good," Ms. Fayne said in approval. "I'll need statements from both of you."
"Any idea how long this will take?" Chance asked. "Ms. Miller and I are pressed for time."
"We'll try to hurry things along," Ms. Fayne assured him.
Whether Ms. Fayne was super-efficient or yet another small miracle took place, the paperwork was completed in what Sunny considered to be record time. Not much more than half an hour passed before the cretin was taken away in handcuffs, all the paperwork was prepared and signed, and Sunny and Chance McCall were free to go, having done their civic duty.
He waited beside her while she called the office and explained the situation. The supervisor, Wayne Beesham, wasn't happy, but bowed to reality.
"What's this pilot's name again?" he asked.
"Chance McCall."
"Hold on, let me check him out."
Sunny waited. Their computers held a vast database of information on both commercial airlines and private charters. There were some unsavory

characters in the charter business, dealing more in drugs than in passengers, and a courier company couldn't afford to be careless.
"Where's his home base?"
Sunny repeated the question to Chance.
"Phoenix," he said, and once again she relayed the information.
"Okay, got it. He looks okay. How much is his fee?"
Sunny asked.
Mr. Beesham grunted at the reply. "That's a bit high."
"He's here, and he's ready to go."
"What kind of plane is it? I don't want to pay this price for a crop-duster that still won't get you there in time."
Sunny sighed. "Why don't I just put him on the line? It'll save time." She handed the receiver to Chance. "He wants to know about your plane."
Chance took the receiver. "McCall." He listened a moment. "It's a Cessna Skylane. The range is about eight hundred miles at seventy-five percent power, six hours flying time. I'll have to refuel, so I'd rather it be around the midway point, say at Roberts Field in Redmond, Oregon. I can radio ahead and have everything rolling so we won't spend much time on the ground." He glanced at his wristwatch. "With the hour we gain when we cross into the Pacific time zone, she can make it--barely."
He listened for another moment, then handed the receiver back to Sunny.
"What's the verdict?" she asked.
"I'm authorizing it. For God's sake, get going."
She hung up and grinned at Chance, her blood pumping at the challenge.
"It's a go! How long will it take to get airborne?"
"If you let me carry that bag, and we run… fifteen minutes."
Sunny never let the bag out of her possession. She hated to repay his courtesy with a refusal, but caution was so ingrained in her that she couldn't bring herself to take the risk. "It isn't heavy," she lied, tightening her grip on it. "You lead, I'll follow."
One dark eyebrow went up at her reply, but he didn't argue, just led the way through the busy concourse. The private planes were in a different area of the airport, away from the commercial traffic. After several turns and a flight of stairs, they left the terminal and walked across the concrete, the hot afternoon sun beating down on their heads and making her squint. Chance slipped on a pair of sunglasses, then shrugged out of the jacket and carried it in his left hand.

Sunny allowed herself a moment of appreciation at the way his broad shoulders and muscled back filled out the black T-shirt he wore. She might not indulge, but she could certainly admire. If only things were different--but they weren't, she thought, reining in her thoughts. She had to deal with reality, not wishful thinking.

He stopped beside a single-engine airplane, white with gray-and-red striping. After storing her bag and briefcase and securing them with a net, he helped her into the copilot's seat. Sunny buckled herself in and looked around with interest. She'd never been in a private plane before, or flown in anything this small. It was surprisingly comfortable. The seats were gray leather, and behind her was a bench seat with individual backs. Carpet covered the metal floor.

There were two sun visors, just like in a car. Amused, she flipped down the one in front of her and laughed aloud when she saw the small mirror attached to it.

Chance walked around the plane, checking details one last time before climbing into the seat to her left and buckling himself in. He put on a set of headphones and began flipping switches while he talked to the air traffic control tower. The engine coughed, then caught, and the propeller on the nose began to spin, slowly at first, then gaining speed until it was an almost invisible blur.

He pointed to another set of headphones, and Sunny put them on. "It's easier to talk using the headphones," came his voice in her ear, "but be quiet until we get airborne."

"Yes, sir," she said, amused, and he flashed a quick grin at her.

They were airborne within minutes, faster than she had ever experienced on a commercial carrier. Being in the small plane gave her a sense of speed that she had never before felt, and when the wheels left the ground the lift was incredible, as if she had sprouted wings and jumped into the air. The ground quickly fell away below, and the vast, glistening blue lake spread out before her, with the jagged mountains straight ahead.

"Wow," she breathed, and brought one hand up to shield her eyes from the sun.

"There's an extra pair of sunglasses in the glove box," he said, indicating the compartment in front of her. She opened it and dug out a pair of inexpensive but stylish Foster Grants with dark red frames. They were obviously some woman's sunglasses, and abruptly she wondered if he was

married. He would have a girlfriend, of course; not only was he very nice to look at, he seemed to be a nice person. It was a combination that was hard to find and impossible to beat.
"Your wife's?" she asked as she put on the glasses and breathed a sigh of relief as the uncomfortable glare disappeared.
"No, a passenger left them in the plane."
Well, that hadn't told her anything. She decided to be blunt, even while she wondered why she was bothering, since she would never see him again after they arrived in Seattle. "Are you married?"
Again she got that quick grin. "Nope." He glanced at her, and though she couldn't see his eyes through the dark glasses, she got the impression his gaze was intense. "Are you?"
"No."
"Good," he said.

Chapter Three

Chance watched her from behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses, gauging her reaction to his verbal opening. The plan was working better than he'd hoped; she was attracted to him and hadn't been trying very hard to hide it. All he had to do was take advantage of that attraction and win her trust, which normally might take some doing, but what he had planned would throw her into a situation that wasn't *normal* in any sense of the word. Her life and safety would depend on him.
To his faint surprise, she faced forward and pretended she hadn't heard him. Wryly, he wondered if he'd misread her and she wasn't attracted to him after all. No, she had been watching him pretty blatantly, and in his experience, a woman didn't stare at a man unless she found him attractive.
What was *really* surprising was how attractive he found *her.* He hadn't expected that, but sexual chemistry was an unruly demon that operated outside logic. He had known she was pretty, with brilliant gray eyes and golden-blond hair that swung smoothly to her shoulders, from the photographs in the file he had assembled on her. He just hadn't realized how *damn fetching* she was. He slanted another glance at her, this time one of pure male assessment. She was of average height, maybe, though a little more slender than he liked, almost delicate. Almost. The muscles of her

bare arms, revealed by a white sleeveless blouse, were well-toned and lightly tanned, as if she worked out. A good agent always stayed in good physical condition, so he had to expect her to be stronger than she looked. Her delicate appearance probably took a lot of people off guard.
She sure as hell had taken Wilkins off guard. Chance had to smother a smile. While Sunny had gone back to her gate to check on the status of her flight, which Chance had arranged to be cancelled, Wilkins had told him how she had swung her carry-on bag at him, one-armed, and that the damn thing had to weigh a ton, because it had almost knocked him off his feet. By now, Wilkins and the other three, "Ms. Fayne." and the two security "policemen," would have vanished from the airport. The real airport security had been briefed to stay out of the way, and everything had worked like a charm, though Wilkins had groused at being taken down so roughly. "First that little witch damn near breaks my arm with that bag, then you try to break my back," he'd growled, while they all laughed at him.
Just what was in that bag, anyway? She had held on to it as if it contained the crown jewels, not letting him carry it even when she was right there with him, and only reluctantly letting him take it to stow in the luggage compartment behind them. He'd been surprised at how heavy it was, too heavy to contain the single change of clothes required by an overnight trip, even with a vast array of makeup and a hairdryer thrown in for good measure. The bag had to weigh a good fifty pounds, maybe more. Well, he would find out soon enough what was in it.
"What were you going to do with that guy if you'd caught him?" he asked in a lazy tone, partly to keep her talking, establishing a link between them, and partly because he was curious. She had been chasing after Wilkins with a fiercely determined expression on her face, so determined that, if Wilkins were still running, she would probably still be chasing him.
"I don't know," she said darkly. "I just knew I couldn't let it happen again."
"Again?" Damn, was she going to tell him about Chicago?
"Last month, a green-haired cretin snatched my briefcase in the airport in Chicago." She slapped the arm of the seat. "That's the first time anything like that has ever happened on one of my jobs, then to have it happen again just a month later--I'd have been fired. Heck, *I* would fire me, if I were the boss."
"You didn't catch the guy in Chicago?"

"No. I was in Baggage Claims, and he just grabbed the briefcase, zipped out the door and was gone."
"What about security? They didn't try to catch him?"
She peered at him over the top of the oversize sunglasses. "You're kidding, right?"
He laughed. "I guess I am."
"Losing another briefcase would have been a catastrophe, at least to me, and it wouldn't have done the company any good, either."
"Do you ever know what's in the briefcases?"
"No, and I don't want to. It doesn't matter. Someone could be sending a pound of salami to their dying uncle Fred, or it could be a billion dollars worth of diamonds--not that I think anyone would ever ship diamonds by a courier service, but you get the idea."
"What happened when you lost the briefcase in Chicago?"
"My company was out a lot of money--rather, the insurance company was. The customer will probably never use us again, or recommend us."
"What happened to you? Any disciplinary action?" He knew there hadn't been.
"No. In a way, I would have felt better if they had at least fined me."
Damn, she was good, he thought in admiration--either that, or she was telling the truth and hadn't had anything to do with the incident in Chicago last month. It was possible, he supposed, but irrelevant. Whether or not she'd had anything to do with losing that briefcase, he was grateful it had happened, because otherwise she would never have come to his notice, and he wouldn't have this lead on Crispin Hauer.
But he didn't think she was innocent; he thought she was in this up to her pretty neck. She was better than he had expected, an actress worthy of an Oscar--so good he might have believed she didn't know anything about her father, if it wasn't for the mystery bag and her deceptive strength. He was trained to put together seemingly insignificant details and come up with a coherent picture, and experience had made him doubly cynical. Few people were as honest as they wanted you to believe, and the people who put on the best show were often the ones with the most to hide. He should know--he was an expert at hiding the black secrets of his soul.
He wondered briefly what it said about him that he was willing to sleep with her as part of his plan to gain her trust, but maybe it was better not to think about it. Someone had to be willing to work in the muck, to do things

from which ordinary people would shrink, just to protect those ordinary people. Sex was… just sex. Part of the job. He could even divorce his emotions to the point that he actually looked forward to the task.
Task? Who was he kidding? He couldn't wait to slide into her. She intrigued him, with her toned, tight body and the twinkle that so often lit her clear gray eyes, as if she was often amused at both herself and the world around her. He was fascinated by her eyes, by the white striations that made her eyes look almost faceted, like the palest of blue diamonds. Most people thought of gray eyes as a pale blue, but when he was close to her, he could see that they were, very definitely, brilliantly gray. But most of all he was intrigued by her expression, which was so open and good-humored she could almost trademark the term "Miss Congeniality." How could she look like that, as sweet as apple pie, when she was working hand in glove with the most-wanted terrorist in his files?
Part of him, the biggest part, despised her for what she was. The animal core of him, however, was excited by the dangerous edge of the game he was playing, by the challenge of getting her into bed with him and convincing her to trust him. When he was inside her, he wouldn't be thinking about the hundreds of innocent people her father had killed, only about the linking of their bodies. He wouldn't let himself think of anything else, lest he give himself away with some nuance of expression that women were so good at reading. No, he would make love to her as if he had found his soul mate, because that was the only way he could be certain of fooling her.
But he was good at that, at making a woman feel as if he desired her more than anything else in the world. He knew just how to make her aware of him, how to push hard without panicking her--which brought him back to the fact that she had totally ignored his first opening. He smiled slightly to himself. Did she really think that would work?
"Will you have dinner with me tonight?"
She actually jumped, as if she had been lost in her thoughts. "What?"
"Dinner. Tonight. After you deliver your package."
"Oh. But--I'm supposed to deliver it at nine. It'll be late, and--"
"And you'll be alone, and I'll be alone, and you have to eat. I promise not to bite. I may lick, but I won't bite."
She surprised him by bursting into laughter.

Of all the reactions he had anticipated, laughter wasn't one of them. Still, her laugh was so free and genuine, her head tilted back against the seat, that he found himself smiling in response.
"'I may lick, but I won't bite.' That was good. I'll have to remember it," she said, chuckling.
After a moment, when she said nothing else, he realized that she was ignoring him again. He shook his head. "Does that work with most men?"
"Does what work?"
"Ignoring them when they ask you out. Do they slink away with their tails tucked between their legs?"
"Not that I've ever noticed." She grinned. "You make me sound like a femme fatale, breaking hearts left and right."
"You probably are. We guys are tough, though. We can be bleeding to death on the inside and we'll put up such a good front that no one ever knows." He smiled at her. "Have dinner with me."
"You're persistent, aren't you?"
"You still haven't answered me."
"All right--no. There, I've answered you."
"Wrong answer. Try again." More gently, he said, "I know you're tired, and with the time difference, nine o'clock is really midnight to you. It's just a meal, Sunny, not an evening of dancing. That can wait until our second date."
She laughed again. "Persistent *and* confident." She paused, made a wry little face. "The answer is still no. I don't date."
This time he was more than surprised, he was stunned. Of all the things he had expected to come out of her mouth, that particular statement had never crossed his mind. Damn, had he so badly miscalculated? "At all? Or just men?"
"At all." She gestured helplessly. "See, this is why I tried to ignore you, because I didn't want to go into an explanation that you wouldn't accept, anyway. No, I'm not gay, I like men very much, but I don't date. End of explanation."
His relief was so intense, he felt a little dizzy. "If you like men, why don't you date?"
"See?" she demanded on a frustrated rush of air. "You didn't accept it. You immediately started asking questions."

"Damn it, did you think I'd just let it drop? There's something between us, Sunny. I know it, and you know it. Or are you going to ignore that, too?"
"That's exactly what I'm going to do."
He wondered if she realized what she had just admitted. "Were you raped?"
"No!" she half shouted, goaded out of control. "I just… don't… date."
She was well on her way to losing her temper, he thought, amused. He grinned. "You're pretty when you're mad."
She sputtered, then began laughing. "How am I supposed to stay mad when you say things like that?"
"You aren't. That's the whole idea."
"Well, it worked. What it didn't do was change my mind. I'm sorry," she said gently, sobering. "It's just… I have my reasons. Let it drop. Please."
"Okay." He paused. "For now."
She gave an exaggerated groan that had him smiling again. "Why don't you try to take a nap?" he suggested. "You have to be tired, and we still have a long flight ahead of us."
"That's a good idea. You can't badger me if I'm asleep."
With that wry shot, she leaned her head back against the seat. Chance reached behind her seat and produced a folded blanket. "Here. Use this as a pillow, or you'll get a stiff neck."
"Thanks." She took off the headset and tucked the blanket between her head and shoulder, then shifted around in her seat to get more comfortable.
Chance let silence fall, occasionally glancing at her to see if she really fell asleep. About fifteen minutes later, her breathing deepened and evened out into a slow rhythm. He waited a few minutes longer, then eased the plane into a more westerly direction, straight into the setting sun.

Chapter Four

"Sunny." The voice was insistent, a little difficult to hear, and accompanied by a hand on her shoulder, shaking her. "Sunny, wake up."
She stirred and opened her eyes, stretching a little to relieve the kinks in her back and shoulders. "Are we there?"
Chance indicated the headset in her lap, and she slipped it on. "We have a problem," he said quietly.

The bottom dropped out of her stomach, and her heartbeat skittered. No other words, she thought, could be quite as terrifying when one was in an airplane. She took a deep breath, trying to control the surge of panic.
"What's wrong?" Her voice was surprisingly steady. She looked around, trying to spot the problem in the cluster of dials in the cockpit, though she had no idea what any of them meant. Then she looked out of the window at the rugged landscape below them, painted in stark reds and blacks as the setting sun threw shadows over jagged rock. "Where are we?"
"Southeastern Oregon."
The engine coughed and sputtered. Her heart felt as if it did, too. As soon as she heard the break in the rhythm, she became aware that the steady background whine of the motor had been interrupted several times while she slept. Her subconscious had registered the change in sound but not put it in any context. Now the context was all too clear.
"I think it's the fuel pump," he added, in answer to her first question.
Calm. She had to stay calm. She pulled in a deep breath, though her lungs felt as if they had shrunk in size. "What do we do?"
He smiled grimly. "Find a place to set it down before it falls down."
"I'll take setting over falling any day." She looked out the side window, studying the ground below. Jagged mountain ridges, enormous boulders and sharp-cut arroyos slicing through the earth were all she could see. "Uh-oh."
"Yea. I've been looking for a place to land for the past half hour."
This was not good, not good at all. In the balance of good and bad, this weighed heavily on the bad side.
The engine sputtered again. The whole frame of the aircraft shook. So did her voice, when she said, "Have you radioed a Mayday?"
Again that grim smile. "We're in the middle of a great big empty area, between navigational beacons. I've tried a couple of times to raise someone, but there haven't been any answers."
The scale tipped even more out of balance. "I knew it," she muttered. "The way today has gone, I *knew* I'd crash if I got on another plane."
The grouchiness in her voice made him chuckle, despite the urgency of their situation. He reached over and gently squeezed the back of her neck, startling her with his touch, his big hand warm and hard on her sensitive nape. "We haven't crashed yet, and I'm going to try damn hard to make sure we don't. The landing may be rough, though."

She wasn't used to being touched. She had accustomed herself to doing without the physical contact that it was human nature to crave, to keep people at a certain distance. Chance McCall had touched her more in one afternoon than she had been touched in the past five years. The shock of pleasure almost distracted her from their situation--almost. She looked down at the unforgiving landscape again. "How rough does a landing have to get before it qualifies as a crash?"

"If we walk away from it, then it was a landing." He put his hand back on the controls, and she silently mourned that lost connection.

The vast mountain range spread out around them as far as she could see in any direction. Their chances of walking away from this weren't good. How long would it be before their bodies were found, if ever? Sunny clenched her hands, thinking of Margreta. Her sister, not knowing what had happened, would assume the worst--and dying in an airplane crash was *not* the worst. In her grief, she might well abandon her refuge and do something stupid that would get her killed, too.

She watched Chance's strong hands, so deft and sure on the controls. His clear, classic profile was limned against the pearl and vermillion sky, the sort of sunset one saw only in the western states, and likely the last sunset she would ever see. He would be the last person she ever saw, or touched, and she was suddenly, bitterly angry that she had never been able to live the life most women took for granted, that she hadn't been free to accept his offer of dinner and spend the trip in a glow of anticipation, free to flirt with him and maybe see the glow of desire in his golden-brown eyes.

She had been denied a lot, but most of all she had been denied opportunity, and she would never, never forgive her father for that.

The engine sputtered, caught, sputtered again. This time the reassuring rhythm didn't return. The bottom dropped out of her stomach. God, oh God, they were going to crash. Her nails dug into her palms as she fought to contain her panic. She had never before felt so small and helpless, so fragile, with soft flesh and slender bones that couldn't withstand such battering force. She was going to die, and she had yet to live.

The plane jerked and shuddered, bucking under the stress of spasmodic power. It pitched to the right, throwing Sunny against the door so hard her right arm went numb.

"That's it," Chance said between gritted teeth, his knuckles white as he fought to control the pitching aircraft. He brought the wings level again. "I

have to take it down now, while I have a little control. Look for the best place."
Best place? There *was* no best place. They needed somewhere that was relatively flat and relatively clear; the last location she had seen that fit that description had been in Utah.
He raised the right wingtip, tilting the plane so he had a better side view.
"See anything?" Sunny asked, her voice shaking just a little.
"Nothing. Damn."
"Damn is the wrong word. Pilots are supposed to say something else just before they crash." Humor wasn't much of a weapon with which to face death, but it was how she had always gotten herself through the hard times.
Unbelievably, he grinned. "But I haven't crashed yet, sweetheart. Have a little faith. I promise I'll say the right word if I don't find a good-looking spot pretty soon."
"If you don't find a good-looking spot, I'll say it for you," she promised fervently.
They crossed a jagged, boulder-strewn ridge, and a long, narrow black pit yawned beneath them like a doorway to hell. "There!" Chance said, nosing the plane down.
"What? Where?" She sat erect, desperate hope flaring inside her, but all she could see was that black pit.
"The canyon. That's our best bet."
The black pit was a canyon? Weren't canyons supposed to be big? That looked like an arroyo. How on earth would the plane ever fit inside it? And what difference did it make, when this was their only chance? Her heart lodged itself in her throat, and she gripped the edge of the seat as Chance eased the pitching aircraft lower and lower.
The engine stopped.
For a moment all she heard was the awful silence, more deafening than any roar.
Then she became aware of the air rushing past the metal skin of the plane, air that no longer supported them. She heard her own heart beating, fast and heavy, heard the whisper of her breath. She heard everything except what she most wanted to hear, the sweet sound of an airplane engine.
Chance didn't say anything. He concentrated fiercely on keeping the plane level, riding the air currents down, down, aiming for that long, narrow slit

in the earth. The plane spiraled like a leaf, coming so close to the jagged mountainside on the left that she could see the pits in the dark red rock. Sunny bit her lip until blood welled in her mouth, fighting back the terror and panic that threatened to erupt in screams. She couldn't distract him now, no matter what. She wanted to close her eyes, but resolutely kept them open. If she died now, she didn't want to do it in craven fear. She couldn't help the fear, but she didn't have to be craven. She would watch death come at her, watch Chance as he fought to bring them down safely and cheat the grim horseman.

They slipped below the sunshine, into the black shadows, deeper and deeper. It was colder in the shadows, a chill that immediately seeped through the windows into her bones. She couldn't see a thing. Quickly she snatched off the sunglasses and saw that Chance had done the same. His eyes were narrowed, his expression hard and intent as he studied the terrain below.

The ground was rushing at them now, a ground that was pocked and scored with rivulets, and dotted with boulders. It was flat enough, but not a nice, clear landing spot at all. She braced her feet against the floor, her body rigid as if she could force the airplane to stay aloft.

"Hold on." His voice was cool. "I'm going to try to make it to the stream bed. The sand will help slow us down before we hit one of those rocks."

A stream bed? He was evidently much better at reading the ground than she was. She tried to see a ribbon of water, but finally realized the stream was dry; the bed was that thin, twisting line that looked about as wide as the average car.

She started to say "Good luck," but it didn't seem appropriate. Neither did "It was nice knowing you." In the end, all she could manage was "Okay."

It happened fast. Suddenly they were no longer skimming above the earth. The ground was *there,* and they hit it hard, so hard she pitched forward against the seat belt, then snapped back. They went briefly airborne again as the wheels bounced, then hit again even harder. She heard metal screeching in protest; then her head banged against the side window, and for a chaotic moment she didn't see or hear anything, just felt the tossing and bouncing of the plane. She was boneless, unable to hold on, flopping like a shirt in a clothes dryer.

Then there came the hardest bounce of all, jarring her teeth. The plane spun sideways in a sickening motion, then lurched to a stop. Time and reality

splintered, broke apart, and for a long moment nothing made any sense; she had no grasp on where she was or what had happened.
She heard a voice, and the world jolted back into place.
"Sunny? Sunny, are you all right?" Chance was asking urgently.
She tried to gather her senses, tried to answer him. Dazed, battered, she realized that the force of the landing had turned her inside the confines of the seat belt, and she was facing the side window, her back to Chance. She felt his hands on her, heard his low swearing as he unclipped the seat belt and eased her back against his chest, supporting her with his body.
She swallowed, and managed to find her voice. "I'm okay." The words weren't much more than a croak, but if she could talk at all that meant she was alive. They were both alive. Joyful disbelief swelled in her chest. He had actually managed to land the plane!
"We have to get out. There may be a fuel leak." Even as he spoke, he shoved open the door and jumped out, dragging her with him as if she was a sack of flour. She felt rather sacklike, her limbs limp and trembling.
A fuel leak. The engine had been dead when they landed, but there was still the battery, and wiring that could short out and spark. If a spark got to any fuel, the plane and everything in it would go up in a fireball.
Everything in it. The words rattled in her brain, like marbles in a can, and with dawning horror she realized what that meant. Her bag was still in the plane.
"Wait!" she shrieked, panic sending a renewed surge of adrenaline through her system, restoring the bones to her legs, the strength to her muscles. She twisted in his grasp, grabbing the door handle and hanging on. "My bag!"
"Damn it, Sunny!" he roared, trying to break her grip on the handle. "Forget the damn bag!"
"No!"
She jerked away from him and began to climb back into the plane. With a smothered curse he grabbed her around the waist and bodily lifted her away from the plane. "I'll get the damn bag! Go on--get out of here! Run!"
She was appalled that he would risk his life retrieving her bag, while sending her to safety. "I'll get it," she said fiercely, grabbing him by the belt and tugging. *"You* run!"
For a split second he literally froze, staring at her in shock. Then he gave his head a little shake, reached in for the bag and effortlessly hefted it out. Wordlessly Sunny tried to take it, but he only gave her an incendiary look

and she didn't have time to argue. Carrying the bag in his left hand and gripping her upper arm with his right, he towed her at a run away from the plane. Her shoes sank into the soft grit, and sand and scrub brush bit at her ankles, but she scrambled to stay upright and keep pace with him.
They were a good fifty yards away before he judged it safe. He dropped the bag and turned on her like a panther pouncing on fresh meat, gripping her upper arms with both hands as if he wanted to shake her. "What the hell are you thinking?" he began in a tone of barely leashed violence, then cut himself off, staring at her face. His expression altered, his golden-brown eyes darkening.
"You're bleeding," he said harshly. He grabbed his handkerchief out of his pocket and pressed it to her chin. Despite the roughness of his tone, his touch was incredibly gentle. "You said you weren't hurt."
"I'm not." She raised her trembling hand and took the handkerchief, dabbing it at her chin and mouth. There wasn't much blood, and the bleeding seemed to have stopped. "I bit my lip," she confessed. "Before you landed, I mean. To keep from screaming."
He stared down at her with an expression like flint. "Why didn't you just scream?"
"I didn't want to distract you." The trembling was growing worse by the second; she tried to hold herself steady, but every limb shook as if her bones had turned to gelatin.
He tilted up her face, staring down at her for a moment in the deepening twilight. He breathed a low, savage curse, then slowly leaned down and pressed his lips to her mouth. Despite the violence she sensed in him, the kiss was light, gentle, more of a salute than a kiss. She caught her breath, beguiled by the softness of his lips, the warm smell of his skin, the hint of his taste. She fisted her hands in his T-shirt, clinging to his strength, trying to sink into his warmth.
He lifted his head. "That's for being so brave," he murmured. "I couldn't have asked for a better partner in a plane crash."
"Landing," she corrected shakily. "It was a landing."
That earned her another soft kiss, this time on the temple. She made a strangled sound and leaned into him, a different sort of trembling beginning to take hold of her. He framed her face with his hands, his thumbs gently stroking the comers of her mouth as he studied her. She felt her lips tremble a little, but then, all of her was shaking. He touched the small sore spot her

teeth had made in her lower lip; then he was kissing her again, and this time there was nothing gentle about it.
This kiss rocked her to her foundation. It was hungry, rough, deep. There were reasons why she shouldn't respond to him, but she couldn't think what they were. Instead, she gripped his wrists and went on tiptoe to slant her parted lips against his, opening her mouth for the thrust of his tongue. He tasted like man, and sex, a potent mixture that went to her head faster than hundred-proof whiskey. Heat bloomed in her loins and breasts, a desperate, needy heat that brought a low moan from her throat.
He wrapped one arm around her and pulled her against him, molding her to him from knee to breast while his kisses became even deeper, even harder. She locked her arms around his neck and arched into him, wanting the feel of his hard-muscled body against her with an urgency that swept away reason. Instinctively she pushed her hips against his, and the hard length of his erection bulged into the notch of her thighs. This time she cried out in want, in need, in a desire that burned through every cell of her body. His hand closed roughly around her breast, kneading, rubbing her nipple through the layers of blouse and bra, both easing and intensifying the ache that made them swell toward his touch.
Suddenly he jerked his head back. "I don't believe this," he muttered. Reaching up, he prised her arms from around his neck and set her away from him. He looked even more savage than he had a moment before, the veins standing out in his neck. "Stay here," he barked. "Don't move an inch. I have to check the plane."
He left her standing there in the sand, in the growing twilight, suddenly cold all the way down to the bone. Deprived of his warmth, his strength, her legs slowly collapsed, and she sank to the ground.
Chance swore to himself, steadily and with blistering heat, as he checked the plane for fuel leaks and other damage. He had deliberately made the landing rougher than necessary, and the plane had a reinforced landing gear as well as extra protection for the fuel lines and tank, but a smart pilot didn't take anything for granted. He had to check the plane, had to stay in character.
He didn't want to stay in character. He wanted to back her against one of those big boulders and lift her skirt. Damn! What was wrong with him? In the past fifteen years he'd held a lot of beautiful, deadly women in his arms, and even though he let his body respond, his mind had always remained

cool. Sunny Miller wasn't the most beautiful, not by a long shot; she was more gamine than goddess, with bright eyes that invited laughter rather than seduction. So why was he so hot to get into her pants?

"Why" didn't matter, he angrily reminded himself. Okay, so his attraction to her was unexpected; it was an advantage, something to be used. He wouldn't have to fake anything, which meant there was even less chance of her sensing anything off-kilter.

Danger heightened the emotions, destroying inhibitions. They had lived through a life-threatening situation together, they were alone, and there was a definite physical attraction between them. He had arranged the first two circumstances; the third was a bonus. It was a textbook situation; studies in human nature had shown that, if a man and a woman were thrown together in a dangerous situation and they had only each other to rely on, they quickly formed both sexual and emotional bonds. Chance had the advantage, in that he knew the plane hadn't been in any danger of crashing, and that they weren't in a life-and-death situation. Sunny would think they were stranded, while he knew better. Whenever he signaled Zane, they would promptly be "rescued," but he wouldn't send that signal until Sunny took him into her confidence about her father.

Everything was under control. They weren't even in Oregon, as he'd told her. They were in Nevada, in a narrow box canyon he and Zane had scouted out and selected because it was possible to land a plane in it, and, unless one had the equipment to scale vertical rock walls, impossible to escape. They weren't close to any commercial flight pattern, he had disabled the transponder so no search plane would pick up a signal, and they were far off their route. They wouldn't be found.

Sunny was totally under his control; she just didn't know it.

The growing dusk made it impossible to see very much, and it was obvious that if the plane was going to explode in flames, it would already have done so. Chance strode back to where Sunny was sitting on the ground, her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around her legs, and that damn bag close by her side. She scrambled to her feet as he approached. "All clear?"

"All clear. No fuel leaks."

"That's good." She managed a smile. "It wouldn't do us any good for you to fix the fuel pump if there wasn't any fuel left."

"Sunny… if it's a clogged line, I can fix it. If the fuel pump has gone out, I can't."

He decided to let her know right away that they might not be flying out of here in the morning.
She absorbed that in silence, rubbing her bare arms to ward off the chill of the desert air. The temperature dropped like a rock when the sun went down, which was one of the reasons he had chosen this site. They would have to share their body heat at night to survive.
He leaned down and hefted the bag, marveling anew at its weight, then took her arm to walk with her back to the plane. "I hope you have a coat in this damn bag, since you thought it was important enough to risk your life getting it," he growled.
"A sweater," she said absently, looking up at the crystal clear sky with its dusting of stars. The black walls of the canyon loomed on either side of them, making it obvious they were in a hole in the earth. A big hole, but still a hole. She shook herself, as if dragging her thoughts back to the problem at hand. "We'll be all right," she said. "I have some food, and--"
"Food? You're carrying food in here?" He indicated the bag.
"Just some emergency stuff." Of all the things he'd expected, food was at the bottom of the list. Hell, food wasn't even *on* the list. Why would a woman on an overnight trip put food in her suitcase?
They reached the plane, and he set the bag down in the dirt. "Let me get some things, and we'll find a place to camp for the night. Can you get anything else in there, or is it full?"
"It's full," she said positively, but then, he hadn't expected her to open it so easily.
He shrugged and dragged out his own small duffel, packed with the things a man could be expected to take on a charter flight: toiletries, a change of clothes. The duffel was unimportant, but it wouldn't look right if he left it behind.
"Why can't we camp here?" she asked. "This is a stream bed. It's dry now, but if it rains anywhere in the mountains, we could be caught in the runoff."
As he spoke, he got a flashlight out of the dash, the blanket from the back, and a pistol from the pocket in the pilot's side door. He stuck the pistol in his belt, and draped the blanket around her shoulders. "I have some water," he said, taking out a plastic gallon milk jug that he'd refilled with water. "We'll be all right tonight." Water had been the toughest thing to locate. He and Zane had found several box canyons in which he could have landed the plane, but this was the only one with water. The source wasn't much, just a

thin trickle running out of the rock at the far end of the canyon, but it was enough. He would "find" the water tomorrow. He handed her the flashlight and picked up both bags.
"Lead the way," he instructed, and indicated the direction he wanted. The floor of the canyon sloped upward on one side; the stream bed was the only smooth ground. The going was rough, and Sunny carefully picked her way over rocks and gullies. She was conscientious about shining the light so he could see where he was going, since he was hampered by both bags.
Damn, he wished she had complained at least a little, or gotten upset. He wished she wasn't so easy to like. Most people would have been half-hysterical, or asking endless questions about their chances of being rescued if he couldn't get the plane repaired. Not Sunny. She coped, just as she had coped at the airport, with a minimum of fuss. Without *any* fuss, actually; she had bitten the blood out of her lip to keep from distracting him while he was bringing the plane down.
The canyon was so narrow it didn't take them long to reach the vertical wall. Chance chose a fairly flat section of sandy gray dirt, with a pile of huge boulders that formed a rough semi-circle. "This will give us some protection from the wind tonight."
"What about snakes?" she asked, eyeing the boulders.
"Possible," he said, as he set down the bags. Had he found a weakness he could use to bring her closer to him? "Are you afraid of them?"
"Only the human kind." She looked around as if taking stock of their situation, then kind of braced her shoulders. It was a minute movement, one he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been studying her so keenly. With an almost cheerful note she said, "Let's get this camp set up so we can eat. I'm hungry."
She squatted beside her bag and spun the combination dial of the rather substantial lock on her bag. With a quiet *snick* the lock opened, and she unzipped the bag.
Chance was a bit taken aback at finding out what was in the bag this easily, but he squatted beside her. "What do you have? Candy bars?"
She chuckled. "Nothing so tasty." He took the flashlight from her and shone it into the bag as she began taking out items. The bag was as neatly packed as a salesman's sample case, and she hadn't been lying about not having any room in there for anything else. She placed a sealed plastic bag on the ground between them. "Here we go. Nutrition bars." She slanted a look at

him. "They taste like you'd expect a nutrition bar to taste, but they're concentrated. One bar a day will give us all we need to stay alive. I have a dozen of them." The next item was a tiny cell phone. She stared at it, frozen, for a moment, then looked up at him with fragile hope in her eyes as she turned it on. Chance knew there wasn't a signal here, but he let her go through the motions, something inside him aching at the disappointment he knew she would feel.

Her shoulders slumped. "Nothing," she said, and turned the phone off. Without another word she returned to her unpacking.

A white plastic box with a familiar red cross on the top came out next. "First aid kit," she murmured, reaching back into the bag. "Water purification tablets. A couple of bottles of water, ditto orange juice. Light sticks. Matches." She listed each item as she set it on the ground. "Hairspray, deodorant, toothpaste, pre-moistened towelettes, hairbrush, curling iron, blow dryer, two space blankets--" she paused as she reached the bottom of the bag and began hauling on something bigger than any of the other items. "--and a tent."

Chapter Five

A tent. Chance stared down at it, recognizing the type. This was survivalist stuff, what people stored in underground shelters in case of war or natural disaster--or what someone who expected to spend a lot of time in the wilderness would pack.

"It's small," she said apologetically. "Really just a one-man tent, but I had to get something light enough for me to carry. There will be enough room for both of us to sleep in it, though, if you don't mind being a little crowded."

Why would she carry a *tent* on board a plane, when she expected to spend one night in Seattle--in a hotel--then fly back to Atlanta? Why would anyone carry that heavy a bag around when she could have checked it? The answer was that she hadn't wanted it out of her possession, but he still wanted an explanation of why she was carrying it at all.

Something didn't add up here.

His silence was unnerving. Sunny looked down at her incongruous pile of possessions and automatically emptied out the bag, removing her sweater and slipping it on, sitting down to pull on a pair of socks, then stuffing her

change of clothes and her grooming items back into the bag. Her mind was racing. There was something about his expression that made a chill go down her spine, a hardness that she hadn't glimpsed before. Belatedly, she remembered how easily he had caught the cretin in the airport, the deadly grace and speed with which he moved. This was no ordinary charter pilot, and she was marooned with him.

She had been attracted to him from the first moment she saw him, but she couldn't afford to let that blind her to the danger of letting down her guard. She was accustomed to living with danger, but this was a different sort of danger, and she had no idea what form it could, or would, take. Chance could simply be one of those men who packed more punch than others, a man very capable of taking care of himself. Or he could be in her father's pay. The thought chilled her even more, the cold going down to her bones before common sense reasserted itself. No, there was no way her father could have arranged for everything that had happened today, no way he could have known she would be in the Salt Lake City airport. Being there had been pure bad luck, the result of a fouled-up flight schedule. *She* hadn't known she would be in Salt Lake City. If her father had been involved, he would have tried to grab her in either Atlanta or Seattle. All the zig-zagging across the country she had done today had made it impossible for her father to be involved.

As her mind cleared of that silent panic, she remembered how Chance had dragged her bodily from the plane, the way he had draped the blanket around her, even the courtesy with which he had treated her in the airport. He was a strong man, accustomed to being in the lead and taking the risks. *Military training*, she thought with a sudden flash of clarity, and wondered how she had missed it before. Her life, and Margreta's, depended on how well she could read people, how prepared she was, how alert. With Chance, she had been so taken off guard by the strength of her attraction to him, and the shock of finding that interest returned, that she hadn't been thinking.

"What's this about?" he asked quietly, squatting down beside her and indicating the tent. "And don't tell me you were going to camp out in the hotel lobby."

She couldn't help it. The thought of setting up the tent in a hotel lobby was so ludicrous that she chuckled. Seeing the funny side of things was what had kept her sane all these years.

One big hand closed gently on the nape of her neck. "Sunny," he said warningly. "Tell me."
She shook her head, still smiling. "We're stranded here tonight, but essentially we're strangers. After we get out of here we'll never see each other again, so there's no point in spilling our guts to each other. You keep your secrets, and I'll keep mine."
The flashlight beam sharpened the angles of his face. He exhaled a long, exasperated breath. "Okay--for now. I don't know why it matters, anyway. Unless I can get the plane fixed, we're going to be here a long time, and the reason why you have the tent will be irrelevant."
She searched his face, trying to read his impassive expression. "That isn't reassuring."
"It's the truth."
"When we don't show up in Seattle, someone will search for us. The Civil Air Patrol, someone. Doesn't your plane have one of those beacon things?"
"We're in a canyon."
He didn't have to say more than that. Any signal would be blocked by the canyon walls, except for directly overhead. They were in a deep, narrow slit in the earth, the narrowness of the canyon limiting even more their chances of anyone picking up the signal. "Well, darn," she said forcefully. This time he was the one who laughed, and he shook his head as he released her neck and stood up. "Is that the worst you can say?"
"We're alive. That outcome is so good considering what *could* have happened that, in comparison, being stranded here only rates a'darn.' You may be able to fix the plane." She shrugged. "No point in wasting the really nasty words until we know more."
He leaned down and helped her to her feet. "If I can't get us going again, I'll help you with those words. For now, let's get this tent set up before the temperature drops even more."
"What about a fire?"
"I'll look for firewood tomorrow--*if* we need it. We can get by tonight without a fire, and I don't want to waste the flashlight batteries. If we're here for any length of time, we'll need the flashlight."
"I have the lightsticks."
"We'll save those, too. Just in case." Working together, they set up the tent. She could have done it herself; it was made for one person to handle, and she had practiced until she knew she could do it with a minimum of fuss,

but with two people the job took only moments. Brushing away the rocks so they would have a smooth surface beneath the tent floor took longer, but even so, they weren't going to have a comfortable bed for the night.
When they were finished, she eyed the tent with misgivings. It was long enough for Chance, but… She visually measured the width of his shoulders, then the width of the tent. She was either going to have to sleep on her side all night long--or on top of him.
The heat that shot through her told her which option her body preferred. Her heart beat a little faster in anticipation of their enforced intimacy during the coming night, of lying against his strong, warm body, maybe even sleeping in his arms.
To his credit, he didn't make any insinuating remarks, even though when he looked at the tent he must have drawn the same conclusion as she had. Instead, he bent down to pick up the bag of nutrition bars and said smugly, "I knew you'd have dinner with me tonight."
She began laughing again, charmed by both his tact and his sense of humor, and fell a little in love with him right then.
She should have been alarmed, but she wasn't. Yes, letting herself care for him made her emotionally vulnerable, but they had lived through a terrifying experience together, and she *needed* an emotional anchor right now. So far she hadn't found a single thing about the man that she didn't like, not even that hint of danger she kept sensing. In this situation, a man with an edge to him was an asset, not a hindrance.
She allowed herself to luxuriate in this unaccustomed feeling as they each ate a nutrition bar--which was edible, but definitely not tasty--and drank some water. Then they packed everything except the two space blankets back in the bag, to protect their supplies from snakes and insects and other scavengers. They didn't have to worry about bears, not in this desertlike part of the country, but coyotes were possible. Her bag was supposedly indestructible; if any coyotes showed up, she supposed she would find out if the claim about the bag was true, because there wasn't room in the tent for both them and the bag.
Chance checked the luminous dial of his watch. "It's still early, but we should get in the tent to save our body heat, and not burn up calories trying to stay warm out here. I'll spread this blanket down, and we'll use your two blankets for cover."

For the first time, she realized he was in his T-shirt. "Shouldn't you get your jacket from the plane?"
"It's too bulky to wear in the tent. Besides, I don't feel the cold as much as you do. I'll be fine without it." He sat down and pulled off his boots, tossed them inside the tent, then crawled in with the blanket. Sunny slipped off her own shoes, glad she had the socks to keep her feet warm.
"Okay, come on in," Chance said. "Feet first."
She gave him her shoes, then sat down and worked herself feetfirst into the tent. He was lying on his side, which gave her room to maneuver, but it was still a chore keeping her skirt down and trying not to bunch up the blanket as she wiggled into place. Chance zipped the tent flaps shut, then pulled his pistol out of his waistband and placed it beside his head. Sunny eyed the big black automatic; she wasn't an expert on pistols, but she knew it was one of the heavier calibers, either a .45 or a 9mm. She had tried them, but the bigger pistols were too heavy for her to handle with ease, so she had opted for a smaller caliber.

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He had already unfolded the space blankets and had them ready to pull in place. She could already feel his body heat in the small space, so she didn't need a blanket yet, but as the night grew colder, they would need all the covering they could get.
They both moved around, trying to get comfortable. Because he was so big, Sunny tried to give him as much room as possible. She turned on her side and curled her arm under her head, but they still bumped and brushed against each other.
"Ready?" he asked.
"Ready."
He turned off the flashlight. The darkness was complete, like being deep in a cave. "Thank God I'm not claustrophobic," she said, taking a deep breath. His scent filled her lungs, warm and… different, not musky, exactly, but earthy, and very much the way a man should smell.
"Just think of it as being safe," he murmured. "Darkness can feel secure."
She did feel safe, she realized. For the first time in her memory, she was certain no one except the man beside her knew where she was. She didn't have to check locks, scout out an alternate exit, or sleep so lightly she sometimes felt as if she hadn't slept at all. She didn't have to worry about being followed, or her phone being tapped, or any of the other things that

could happen. She did worry about Margreta, but she had to think positively. Tomorrow Chance would find the problem was a clogged fuel line, he would get it cleared, and they would finish their trip. She would be too late to deliver the package in Seattle, but considering they had landed safely instead of crashing, she didn't really care about the package. The day's outcome could have been so much worse that she was profoundly grateful they were all in one piece and relatively comfortable--"relatively" being the key word, she thought, as she tried to find a better position. The ground was as hard as a rock. For all she knew the ground was a rock, covered by a thin layer of dirt.

She was suddenly exhausted. The events of the day--the long flight and fouled-up connections, the lack of food, the stress of being mugged, then the almost unbearable tension of those last minutes in the plane--finally took their toll on her. She yawned and unconsciously tried yet again to find a comfortable position, turning over to pillow her head on her other arm. Her elbow collided with something very solid, and he grunted.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. She squirmed a little more, inadvertently bumping him with her knee. "This is so crowded I may have to sleep on top."

She heard the words and in shock realized that she had actually said them aloud. She opened her mouth to apologize again.

"Or I could be the one on top."

His words stopped her apology cold. Her breath tangled in her lungs and didn't escape. His deep voice seemed to echo in the darkness, that single sentence reverberating through her consciousness. She was suddenly, acutely, aware of every inch of him, of the sensual promise in his tone. The kiss--the kiss she could write off as reaction; danger was supposed to be an aphrodisiac, and evidently that was true. But this wasn't reaction; this was desire, warm and curious, seeking.

"Is that a 'no' I'm hearing?"

Her lungs started working again, and she sucked in a breath. "I haven't said anything."

"That's my point." He sounded faintly amused. "I guess I'm not going to get lucky tonight."

Feeling more certain of herself with his teasing, she said dryly, "I guess not. You've already used up your quota of luck for the day."

"I'll try again tomorrow."

She stifled a laugh.
"Does that snicker mean I haven't scared you?"
She should be scared, she thought, or at least wary. She had no idea why she wasn't. The fact was, she felt tempted. Very tempted. "No, I'm not scared."
"Good." He yawned. "Then why don't you pull off that sweater and let me use it as a pillow, and you can use my shoulder. We'll both be more comfortable."
Common sense said he was right. Common sense also said she was asking for trouble if she slept in his arms. She trusted him to behave, but she wasn't that certain of herself. He was sexy, with a capital SEX. He made her laugh. He was strong and capable, with a faintly wicked edge to him. He was even a little dangerous. What more could a woman want?
That was perhaps the most dangerous thing about him, that he made her want him. She had easily resisted other men, walking away without a backward look or a second thought. Chance made her long for all the things she had denied herself, made her aware of how lonely and alone she was.
"Are you sure you can trust me to behave?" she asked, only half joking. "I didn't mean to say that about being on top. I was half-asleep, and it just slipped out."
"I think I can handle you if you get fresh. For one thing, you'll be sound asleep as soon as you stop talking."
She yawned. "I know. I'm crashing hard, if you'll pardon the terminology."
"We didn't crash, we landed. Come on, let's get that sweater off, then you can sleep."
There wasn't room to fully sit up, so he helped her struggle out of the garment. He rolled it up and tucked it under his head, then gently, as if worried he might frighten her, drew her against his right side. His right arm curled around her, and she nestled close, settling her head in the hollow of his shoulder.
The position was surprisingly comfortable, and comforting. She draped her right arm across his chest, because there didn't seem to be any other place to put it. Well, there were other places, but none that seemed as safe. Besides, she liked feeling his heartbeat under her hand. The strong, even thumping satisfied some primitive instinct in her, the desire not to be alone in the night.
"Comfortable?" he asked in a low, soothing tone.
"Um-hmm."

With his left arm he snagged one of the space blankets and pulled it up to cover her to the shoulders, keeping the chill from her bare arms. Cocooned in warmth and darkness, she gave in to the sheer pleasure of lying so close to him. Sleepy desire hummed just below the surface, warming her, softening her. Her breasts, crushed against his side, tightened in delight, and her nipples felt achy, telling her they had hardened. Could he feel them? she wondered. She wanted to rub herself against him like a cat, intensifying the sensation, but she lay very still and concentrated on the rhythm of his heartbeat.

He had touched her breasts when he kissed her. She wanted to feel that again, feel his hard hand on her bare flesh. She wanted him, wanted his touch and his taste and the feel of him inside her. The force of her physical yearning was so strong that she actually ached from the emptiness.

If we don't get out of here tomorrow, she thought in faint despair just before she went to sleep, I'll be under him before the sun goes down again.

Sunny was accustomed to waking immediately when anything disturbed her; once, a car had backfired out in the street and she had grabbed the pistol from under the pillow and rolled off the bed before the noise had completely faded. She had learned how to nap on demand, because she never knew when she might have to run for her life. She could count on one hand the number of nights since she had stopped being a child that she had slept through undisturbed.

But she woke in Chance's arms aware that she had slept all night long, that not only had lying next to him not disturbed her, in a very basic way his presence had been reassuring. She was safe here, safe and warm and unutterably relaxed. His hand was stroking slowly down her back, and that was what had awakened her.

Her skirt had ridden up during the night, of course, and was twisted at midthigh. Their legs were tangled together, her right leg thrown over his; his jeans were old and soft, but the denim was still slightly rough against the inside of her thigh. She wasn't lying completely on top of him, but it was a near thing. Her head lay pillowed on his chest instead of his shoulder, with the steady thumping of his heart under her ear.

The slow motion of his hand continued. "Good morning," he said, his deep voice raspy from sleep.

"Good morning." She didn't want to get up, she realized, though she knew she should. It was after dawn; the morning light seeped through the brown

fabric of the tent, washing them with a dull gold color. Chance should get started on the fuel pump, so they could get airborne and in radio contact with someone as soon as possible, to let the FAA know they hadn't crashed. She knew what she should do, but instead she continued to lie there, content with the moment.

He touched her hair, lifting one strand and watching it drift back down. "I could get used to this," he murmured.

"You've slept with women before."

"I haven't slept with *you* before."

She wanted to ask how she was different, but she was better off not knowing. Nothing could come of this fast-deepening attraction, because she couldn't let it. She had to believe that he could repair the plane, that in a matter of hours they would be separating and she would never see him again. That was the only thing that gave her the strength, finally, to pull away from him and straighten her clothes, push her hair out of her face and unzip the tent.

The chill morning air rushed into their small cocoon. "Wow," she said, ignoring his comment. "Some hot coffee would be good, wouldn't it? I don't suppose you have a jar of instant in the plane?"

"You mean you don't have coffee packed in that survival bag of yours?" Taking his cue from her, he didn't push her to continue their provocative conversation.

"Nope, just water." She crawled out of the tent, and he handed her shoes and sweater out through the opening. Quickly she slipped them on, glad she had brought a heavy cardigan instead of a summer-weight one.

Chance's boots came out next, then him. He sat on the ground and pulled on his boots. "Damn, it's cold. I'm going to get my jacket from the plane. I'll take care of business there, and you go on the other side of these boulders. There shouldn't be any snakes stirring around this early, but keep an eye out."

Sunny dug some tissues out of her skirt pocket and set off around the boulders. Ten minutes later, nature's call having been answered, she washed her face and hands with one of the pre-moistened towelettes, then brushed her teeth and hair. Feeling much more human and able to handle the world, she took a moment to look around at their life-saving little canyon.

It was truly a slit in the earth, no more than fifty yards wide where he had landed the plane. About a quarter of a mile farther down it widened some,

but the going was much rougher. The stream bed was literally the only place they could have safely landed. Just beyond the widest point, the canyon made a dog leg to the left, so she had no idea how long it was. The canyon floor was littered with rocks big and small, and a variety of scrub brush. Deep grooves were cut into the ground where rain had sluiced down the steep canyon walls and arrowed toward the stream.

All the different shades of red were represented in the dirt and rock, from rust to vermillion to a sandy pink. The scrub brush wasn't a lush green; the color was dry, as if it had been bleached by the sun. Some of it was silvery, a bright contrast against the monochromatic tones of the earth.

They seemed to be the only two living things there. She didn't hear any birds chirping, or insects rustling. There had to be small wildlife such as lizards and snakes, she knew, which meant there had to be something for them to eat, but at the moment the immense solitude was almost overwhelming. Looking at the plane, she saw that Chance was already poking around in its innards. Shoving her cold hands into the sweater pockets, she walked down to him. "Don't you want to eat something?"

"I'd rather save the food until I see what the problem is." He gave her a crooked grin. "No offense, but I don't want to eat another one of those nutrition bars unless I absolutely have to."

"And if you can fly us out of here, you figure you can hold out until we get to an airport."

"Bingo."

She grinned as she changed positions so she could see what he was doing. "I didn't eat one, either," she confessed.

He was checking the fuel lines, his face set in that intent expression men got when they were doing anything mechanical. Sunny felt useless; she could have helped if he was working on a car, but she didn't know anything about airplanes. "Is there anything I can do to help?" she finally asked.

"No, it's just a matter of taking off the fuel lines and checking them for clogs."

She waited a few more minutes, but the process looked tedious rather than interesting, and she began getting restless. "I think I'll walk around, explore a bit."

"Stay within yelling distance," he said absently. The morning, though still cool, was getting warmer by the minute as the sun heated the dry desert air. She walked carefully, watching where she placed each step, because a

sprained ankle could mean the difference between life and death if she had to run for it. Someday, she thought, a sprain would be an inconvenience, nothing more. One day she would be free.

She looked up at the clear blue sky and inhaled the clean, crisp air. She had worked hard to retain her enjoyment of life, the way she had learned to rely on a sense of humor to keep her sane. Margreta didn't handle things nearly as well, but she already had to deal with a heart condition that, while it could be controlled with medication, nevertheless meant that she had to take certain precautions. If she were ever found, Margreta lacked Sunny's ability to just drop out of sight. She had to have her medication refilled, which meant she had to occasionally see her doctor so he could write a new prescription. If she had to find a new doctor, that would mean being retested, which would mean a lot more money.

Which meant that Sunny never saw her sister. It was safer if they weren't together, in case anyone was looking for sisters. She didn't even have Margreta's phone number. Margreta called Sunny's cell phone once a week at a set time, always from a different pay phone. That way, if Sunny was captured, she had no information her captors could get by any means, not even drugs.

She had four days until Margreta called, Sunny thought. If she didn't answer the phone, or if Margreta didn't call, then each had to assume the other had been caught. If Sunny didn't answer the phone, Margreta would bolt from her safe hiding place, because with the phone records her location could be narrowed down to the correct city. Sunny couldn't bear to think what would happen then; Margreta, in her grief and rage, might well throw caution to the wind in favor of revenge.

Four days. The problem *had* to be a clogged fuel line. It just had to be.

Chapter Six

Mindful of Chance's warning, Sunny didn't wander far. In truth, there wasn't much to look at, just grit and rocks and scraggly bushes, and those vertical rock walls. The desert had a wild, lonely beauty, but she was more appreciative when she wasn't stranded in it. When rain filled the stream this sheltered place probably bloomed with color, but how often did it rain here? Once a year?

As the day warmed, the reptiles began to stir. She saw a brown lizard dart into a crevice as she approached. A bird she didn't recognize swooped down for a tasty insect, then flew back off to freedom. The steep canyon walls didn't mean anything to a bird, while the hundred feet or so were unscalable to her.

She began to get hungry, and a glance at her watch told her she had been meandering through the canyon for over an hour. What was taking Chance so long? If there was a clog in the lines he should have found it by now.

She began retracing her steps to the plane. She could see Chance still poking around the engine, which meant he probably hadn't found anything. A chilly finger of fear prodded her, and she pushed it away. She refused to anticipate trouble. She would deal with things as they happened, and if Chance couldn't repair the plane, then they would have to find some other way out of the canyon. She hadn't explored far; perhaps the other end was open, and they could simply walk out. She didn't know how far they were from a town, but she was willing to make the effort. Anything was better than sitting and doing nothing.

As she approached, Chance lifted his hand to show he saw her, then turned back to the engine. Sunny let her gaze linger, admiring the way his T-shirt clung to the muscles of his back and shoulders. The fit of his jeans wasn't bad, either, she thought, eyeing his butt and long legs.

Something moved in the sand near his feet. She thought she would faint. Her vision dimmed and narrowed until all she saw was the snake, perilously close to his left boot. Her heart leaped, pounding against her ribcage so hard she felt the thuds.

She had no sensation or knowledge of moving; time took on the viscosity of syrup. All she knew was that the snake was getting bigger and bigger, closer and closer. Chance looked around at her and stepped back from the plane, almost on the coiling length. The snake's head drew back and her hand closed on a coil, surprisingly warm and smooth, and she threw the awful thing as far as she could. It was briefly outlined against the stark rock, then sailed beyond a bush and dropped from sight.

"Are you all right? Did it bite you? Are you hurt?"

She couldn't stop babbling as she went down on her knees and began patting his legs, looking for droplets of blood, a small tear in his jeans, anything that would show if he had been bitten.

"I'm all right. I'm all right. Sunny! It didn't bite me." His voice overrode hers, and he hauled her to her feet, shaking her a little to get her attention. "Look at me!" The force of his tone snagged her gaze with his and he said more quietly, "I'm okay."
"Are you sure?" She couldn't seem to stop touching him, patting his chest, stroking his face, though logically she knew there was no way the snake could have bitten him up there. Neither could she stop trembling. "I hate snakes," she said in a shaking voice. "They terrify me. I saw it--it was right under your feet. You almost *stepped* on it."
"Shh," he murmured, pulling her against him and rocking her slowly back and forth. "It's all right. Nothing happened."
She clutched his shut and buried her head against his chest. His smell, already so familiar and now with the fault odor of grease added, was comforting. His heartbeat was steady, as if he hadn't almost been snakebitten. *He* was steady, rock solid, his body supporting hers.
"Oh my God," she whispered. "That was awful." She raised her head and stared at him, an appalled expression on her face. "Yuk! I *touched* it!" She snatched her hand away from him and held it at arm's length. "Let me go, I have to wash my hand. Now!"
He released her, and she bolted up the slope to the tent, where the towelettes were. Grabbing one, she scrubbed furiously at her palm and fingers. Chance was laughing softly as he came up behind her.
"What's the matter? Snakes don't have cooties. Besides, yesterday you said you weren't afraid of them."
"I lied. And I don't care what they have, I don't want one anywhere near me." Satisfied that no snake germs lingered on her hand, she blew out a long, calming breath.
"Instead of swooping down like a hawk," he said mildly, "why didn't you just yell out a warning?"
She gave him a blank look. "I couldn't." Yelling had never entered her mind. She had been taught her entire life not to yell in moments of tension or danger, because to do so would give away her position. Normal people could scream and yell, but she had never been allowed to be normal.
He put one finger under her chin, lifting her face to the sun. He studied her for a long moment, something dark moving in his eyes; then he tugged her to him and bent his head.

His mouth was fierce and hungry, his tongue probing. She sank weakly against him, clinging to his shoulders and kissing him in return just as fiercely, with just as much hunger. More. She felt as if she had always hungered, and never been fed. She drank life itself from his mouth, and sought more.

His hands were all over her, on her breasts, her bottom, lifting her into the hard bulge of his loins. The knowledge that he wanted her filled her with a deep need to know more, to feel everything she had always denied herself. She didn't know if she could have brought herself to pull away, but he was the one who broke the kiss, lifting his head and standing there with his eyes closed and a grim expression on his face.

"Chance?" she asked hesitantly.

He growled a lurid word under his breath. Then he opened his eyes and glared down at her. "I can't believe I'm stopping this a second time," he said with a raw, furious frustration. "Just for the record, I'm *not* that noble. Damn it all to hell and back--" He broke off, breathing hard. "It isn't a clogged fuel line. It must be the pump. We have other things we need to do. We can't afford to waste any daylight."

Margreta. Sunny bit her lip to hold back a moan of dismay. She stared up at him, the knowledge of the danger of their situation lying like a stark shadow between them.

She wasn't licked yet. She had four days. "Can we walk out?"

"In the desert? In August?" He looked up at the rim of the canyon. "Assuming we can even get out of here, we'd have to walk at night and try to find shelter during the day. By afternoon, the temperature will be over a hundred."

The temperature was probably already well into the seventies, she thought; she was dying of heat inside her heavy sweater, or maybe that was just frustrated lust, since she hadn't noticed how hot it was until now. She peeled off the sweater and dropped it on top of her bag. "What do we need to do?"

His eyes gleamed golden with admiration, and he squeezed her waist. "I'll reconnoiter. We can't get out on this end of the canyon, but maybe there's a way farther down."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Look for sticks, leaves, anything that will bum. Gather as much as you can in a pile."

He set off in the direction she had gone earlier, and she went in the opposite direction. The scrub brush grew heavier at that end of the canyon, and she would find more wood there. She didn't like to think about how limited the supply would be, or that they might be here for a long, long time. If they couldn't get out of the canyon, they would eventually use up their meager resources and die.

He hated lying to her. Chance's expression was grim as he stalked along the canyon floor. He had lied to terrorists, hoodlums and heads of state alike without a twinge of conscience, but it was getting harder and harder to lie to Sunny. He fiercely protected a hard core of honesty deep inside, the part of him that he shared only with his family, but Sunny was getting to him. She wasn't what he had expected. More and more he was beginning to suspect she wasn't working with her father. She was *too… gallant* was the word that sprang to mind. Terrorists weren't gallant. In his opinion, they were either mad or amoral. Sunny was neither.

He was more shaken by the episode with the snake than he had let her realize. Not by the snake itself--he had on boots, and since he hadn't heard rattles he suspected the snake hadn't been poisonous--but by her reaction. He would never forget the way she had looked, rushing in like an avenging angel, her face paper-white and utterly focused. By her own admission she was terrified of snakes, yet she hadn't hesitated. What kind of courage had it taken for her to pick up the snake with her bare hand?

Then there was the way she had patted him, looking for a bite. Except with certain people, or during sex, he had to struggle to tolerate being touched. He had learned how to accept affection in his family, because Mom and Maris would *not* leave him alone. He unabashedly loved playing with all his nephews--and niece--but his family had been the only exception. Until now. Until Sunny. He not only hadn't minded, he had, for a moment, allowed himself the pure luxury of enjoying the feel of her hands on his legs, his chest. And that didn't even begin to compare to how much he had enjoyed sleeping with her, feeling those sweet curves all along his side. His hand clenched as he remembered the feel of her breast in his palm, the wonderful resilience that was both soft and firm. He ached to feel her bare skin, to taste her. He wanted to strip her naked and pull her beneath him for a long hard ride, and he wanted to do it in broad daylight so he could watch her brilliant eyes glaze with pleasure.

If she wasn't who she was he would take her to the south of France, maybe, or a Caribbean island, any place where they could lie naked on the beach and make love in the sunshine, or in a shaded room with fingers of sunlight slipping through closed blinds. Instead, he had to keep lying to her, because whether or not she was working with her father didn't change the fact that she was the key to locating him.

He couldn't change the plan now. He couldn't suddenly "repair" the plane. He thanked God she didn't know anything about planes, because otherwise she would never have fallen for the fuel pump excuse; a Skylane had a backup fuel pump, for just such an emergency. No, he had to play out the game as he had planned it, because the goal was too damned important to abandon, and he couldn't take the risk that she was involved up to her pretty ears, after all.

He and Zane had walked a fine line in planning this out. The situation had to be survivable but grim, so nothing would arouse her suspicion. There was food to be had, but not easily. There was water, but not a lot. He hadn't brought any provisions that might make her wonder why he had them, meaning he had limited himself to the blanket, the water and the pistol, plus the expected items in the plane, such as flares. Hell, she was a lot more prepared than he was, and that made him wary. She wasn't exactly forthcoming about her reason for toting a damn tent around, either. The lady had secrets of her own.

He reached the far end of the canyon and checked to make certain nothing had changed since he and Zane had been here. No unexpected landslide had caved in a wall, allowing a way out. The thin trickle of water still ran down the rock. He saw rabbit tracks, birds, things they could eat. Shooting them would be the easy way, though; he would have to build some traps, to save his ammunition for emergencies.

Everything was just as he had left it. The plan was working. The physical attraction between them was strong; she wouldn't resist him much longer, maybe not at all. She certainly hadn't done anything to call a halt earlier. And after he was her lover--well, women were easily beguiled by sexual pleasure, the bonds of the flesh. He knew the power of sex, knew how to use it to make her trust him. He wished he could trust *her*--this would be a lot easier if he could--but he knew too much about the human soul's capability of evil, and that a pretty face didn't necessarily mean a pretty person was behind it.

When he judged enough time had passed for him to completely reconnoiter the canyon, he walked back. She was still gathering sticks, he saw, going back and forth between the bushes and the growing pile next to the tent. She looked up when he got closer, hope blazing in her expression.
He shook his head. "It's a box canyon. There's no way out," he said flatly. "The good news is, there's water at the far end."
She swallowed. Her eyes were huge with distress, almost eclipsing her face. "We can't climb out, either?"
"It's sheer rock." He put his hands on his hips, looking around. "We need to move closer to the water, for convenience. There's an overhang that will give us shade from the sun, and the ground underneath is sandier, so it'll be more comfortable."
Or as comfortable as they could get, sleeping in that small tent.
Wordlessly she nodded and began folding the tent. She did it briskly, without wasted movement, but he saw she was fighting for control. He stroked her upper arm, feeling her smooth, pliant skin, warm and slightly moist from her exertion. "We'll be okay," he reassured her. "We just have to hold out until someone sees our smoke and comes to investigate."
"We're in the middle of nowhere," she said shakily. "You said so yourself. And I only have four days until--"
"Until what?" he asked, when she stopped.
"Nothing. It doesn't matter." She stared blindly at the sky, at the clear blue expanse that was turning whiter as the hot sun climbed upward.
Four days until what? he wondered. What was going to happen? Was she supposed to do something? Was a terrorist attack planned? Would it go forward without her?
The dogleg of the canyon was about half a mile long, and the angle gave it more shade than where they had landed. They worked steadily, moving their camp, with
Chance hauling the heaviest stuff. Sunny tried to keep her mind blank, to not think about Margreta, to focus totally on the task at hand.
It was noon, the white sun directly overhead. The heat was searing, the shade beneath the overhang so welcome she sighed with relief when they gained its shelter. The overhang was larger than she had expected, about twelve feet wide and deep enough, maybe eight feet, that the sunshine would never penetrate its depths. The rock sloped to a height of about four

feet at the back, but the opening was high enough that Chance could stand up without bumping his head.
"I'll wait until it's cooler to get the rest," he said. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Let's have half of one of your nutrition bars now, and I'll try to get a rabbit for dinner."
She rallied enough to give him a look of mock dismay. "You'd eat Peter Cottontail?"
"I'd eat the Easter Bunny right now, if I could catch him."
He was trying to make her laugh. She appreciated his effort, but she couldn't quite shake off the depression that had seized her when her last hope of getting out of here quickly had evaporated.
She had lost her appetite, but she dug out one of the nutrition bars and halved it, though she hid the fact that Chance's "half" was bigger than hers. He was bigger; he needed more. They ate their spartan little meal standing up, staring out at the bleached tones of the canyon. "Drink all the water you want," he urged. "The heat dehydrates you even in the shade."
Obediently she drank a bottle of water; she needed it to get the nutrition bar down. Each bite felt as if it was getting bigger and bigger in her mouth, making it difficult to swallow. She resorted to taking only nibbles, and got it down that way.
After they ate, Chance made a small circle of rocks, piled in some sticks and leaves, both fresh and dead, and built a fire. Soon a thin column of smoke was floating out of the canyon. It took him no more than five minutes to accomplish, but when he came back under the overhang his shirt was damp with sweat.
She handed him a bottle of water, and he drank deeply, at the same time reaching out a strong arm and hooking it around her waist. He drew her close and pressed a light kiss to her forehead, nothing more, just held her comfortingly. She put her arms around him and clung, desperately needing his strength right now. She hadn't had anyone to lean on in a long time; she had always had to be the strong one. She had tried so hard to stay on top of things, to plan for every conceivable glitch, but she hadn't thought to plan for this, and now she had no idea what to do.
"I have to think of something," she said aloud. "Shh. All we have to do is stay alive. That's the most important thing."
He was right, of course. She couldn't do anything about Margreta now. This damn canyon had saved their lives yesterday, but it had become a prison

from which she couldn't escape. She had to play the hand with the cards that had been dealt to her and not let depression sap her strength. She had to hope Margreta wouldn't do anything foolish, just go to ground somewhere. How she would ever find her again she didn't know, but she could deal with that if she just knew her sister was alive and safe somewhere.
"Do you have family who will worry?" he asked. God, that went to the bone! She shook her head. She had family, but Margreta wouldn't worry; she would simply assume the worst.
"What about you?" she asked, realizing she had fallen halfway in love with the man and didn't know a thing about him.
He shook his head. "C'mon, let's sit down." With nothing to use for a seat, they simply sat on the ground. "I'll take two of the seats out of the plane this afternoon, so we'll be more comfortable," he said. "In answer to your question, no, I don't have anyone. My folks are dead, and I don't have any brothers or sisters. There's an uncle somewhere, on my dad's side, and my mom had some cousins, but we never kept in touch."
"That's sad. Family should stay together." *If they could,* she added silently.
"Where did you grow up?"
"All over. Dad wasn't exactly known for his ability to keep a job. What about your folks?"
She was silent for a moment, then sighed. "I was adopted. They were good people. I still miss them." She drew a design in the dirt with her finger.
"When we didn't show up in Seattle last night, would someone have notified the FAA?"
"They're probably already searching. The problem is, first they'll search the area I should have been over when I filed my flight plan."
"We were off course?" she asked faintly. It just kept getting worse and worse.
"We went off course looking for a place to land. But if anyone is searching this area, eventually he'll see our smoke. We just have to keep the fire going during the day."
"How long will they look? Before they call off the search?"
He was silent, his golden eyes narrowed as he searched the sky. "They'll look as long as they think we might be alive."
"But if they think we've crashed--"
"Eventually they'll stop looking," he said softly. "It might be a week, a little longer, but they'll stop."

"So if no one finds us within, say, ten days--" She couldn't go on.
"We don't give up. There's always the possibility a private plane will fly over."
He didn't say that the possibility was slight, but he didn't have to. She had seen for herself the kind of terrain they'd flown over, and she knew how narrow and easily missed this canyon was.
She drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs, staring wistfully at the languid curls of gray smoke. "I used to wish I could go someplace where no one could find me. I didn't realize there wouldn't be room service."
He chuckled as he leaned back on one elbow and stretched out his long legs. "Nothing gets you down for long, does it?"
"I try not to let it. Our situation isn't great, but we're alive. We have food, water and shelter. Things could be worse."
"We also have entertainment. I have a deck of cards in the plane. We can play poker."
"Do you cheat?"
"Don't need to," he drawled.
"Well, I do, so I'm giving you fair warning."
"Warning taken. You know what happens to cheaters, don't you?"
"They win?"
"Not if they get caught."
"If they're any good, they don't get caught."
He twirled a finger in her hair and lightly tugged. "Yeah, but if they get caught they're in big trouble. You can take that as my warning."
"I'll be careful," she promised. A yawn took her by surprise. "How can I be sleepy? I got plenty of sleep last night."
"It's the heat. Why don't you take a nap? I'll watch the fire."
"Why aren't you sleepy?"
He shrugged. "I'm used to it."
She really was sleepy, and there was nothing else to do. She didn't feel like setting up the tent, so she dragged her bag into position behind her and leaned back on it. Silently Chance tossed her sweater into her lap. Following his example, she rolled up the sweater and stuffed it under her head. She dozed within minutes. It wasn't a restful sleep, being one of those light naps in which she was aware of the heat, of Chance moving around, of

her worry about Margreta. Her muscles felt heavy and limp, though, and completely waking up was just too much trouble.
The problem with afternoon naps was that one woke feeling both groggy and grungy. Her clothes were sticking to her, which wasn't surprising considering the heat. When she finally yawned and sat up, she saw that the sun was beginning to take on a red glow as it sank, and though the temperature was still high, the heat had lost its searing edge.
Chance was sitting cross-legged, his long, tanned fingers deftly weaving sticks and string into a cage. There was something about the way he looked there in the shadow of the overhang, his attention totally focused on the trap he was building while the light reflected off the sand outside danced along his high cheekbones, that made recognition click in her brain. "You're part Native American, aren't you?"
"American Indian," he corrected absently. "Everyone born here is a native American, or so Dad always told me." He looked up and gave her a quick grin. "Of course, 'Indian' isn't very accurate, either. Most labels aren't. But, yeah, I'm a mixed breed."
"And ex-military." She didn't know why she said that. Maybe it was his deftness in building the trap. She wasn't foolish enough to attribute that to any so-called Native American skills, not in this day and age, but there was something in the way he worked that bespoke survival training.
He gave her a surprised glance. "How did you know?"
She shook her head. "Just a guess. The way you handled the pistol, as if you were very comfortable with it. What you're doing now. And you used the word'reconnoiter'."
"A lot of people are familiar with weapons, especially outdoorsmen, who would also know how to build traps."
"Done in by your vocabulary," she said, and smirked. "You said 'weapons' instead of just 'guns,' the way most people--even outdoorsmen--would have."
Again she was rewarded with that flashing grin. "Okay, so I've spent some time in a uniform."
"What branch?"
"Army. Rangers."
Well, that certainly explained the survival skills. She didn't know a lot about the Rangers, or any military group, but she did know they were an elite corps.

He set the finished trap aside and began work on another one. Sunny watched him for a moment, feeling useless. She would be more hindrance than help in building traps. She sighed as she brushed the dirt from her skirt. Darn, stranded only one day and here she was, smack in the middle of the old sexual stereotypes. She surrendered with good grace. "Is there enough water for me to wash out our clothes? I've lived in these for two days, and that's long enough."

"There's enough water, just nothing to collect it in."

He unfolded his legs and stood with easy grace. "I'll show you."

He led the way out of the overhang. She clambered over rocks in his wake, feeling the heat burn through the sides of her shoes and trying not to touch the rocks with her hands. When they reached more shade, the relief was almost tangible.

"Here." He indicated a thin trickle of water running down the face of the wall. The bushes were heavier here, because of the water, and the temperature felt a good twenty degrees cooler. Part of it was illusion, because of the contrast, but the extra greenery did have a cooling effect.

Sunny sighed as she looked at the trickle. Filling their water bottles would be a snap. Washing off would be easy. But washing clothes--well, that was a different proposition. There wasn't a pool in which she could soak them, not even a puddle. The water was soaked immediately into the dry, thirsty earth. The ground was damp, but not saturated.

The only thing she could do was fill a water bottle over and over, and rinse the dust out. "This will take forever," she groused.

An irritating masculine smirk was on his face as he peeled his T-shirt off over his head and handed it to her. "We aren't exactly pressed for time, are we?"

She almost thrust the shirt back at him and demanded he put it on, but not because of his comment. She wasn't a silly prude, she had seen naked chests more times than she could count, but she had never before seen *his* naked chest. He was smoothly, powerfully muscled, with pectorals that looked like flesh-covered steel and a hard, six-pack abdomen. A light patch of black hair stretched from one small brown nipple to the other. She wanted to touch him. Her hand actually ached for the feel of his skin, and she clenched her fingers hard on his shirt.

The smirk faded, his eyes darkening. He touched her face, curving his fingers under her chin and lifting it. His expression was hard with pure male

desire. "You know what's going to happen between us, don't you?" His voice was low and rough.
"Yes." She could barely manage a whisper. Her throat had tightened, her body responding to his touch, his intent.
"Do you want it?"
So much she ached with it, she thought. She looked up into those golden-brown eyes and trembled from the enormity of the step she was taking.
"Yes," she said.

Chapter Seven

She had lived her entire life without ever having lived at all, Sunny thought as she mechanically rinsed out his clothes and draped them over the hot rocks to dry. She and Chance might never get out of this canyon alive, and even if they did, it could take a long time. Weeks, perhaps months, or longer. Whatever Margreta did, she would long since have done it, and there wasn't a damn thing Sunny could do about the situation. For the first time in her life, she had to think only about herself and what *she* wanted. That was simple; what she wanted was Chance.

She had to face facts. She was good at it; she had been doing it her entire life. The fact that had been glaring her in the face was that they could very well die here in this little canyon. If they didn't survive, she didn't want to die still clinging to the reasons for not getting involved that, while good and valid in civilization, didn't mean spit here. She already *was* involved with him, in a battle for their very lives. She certainly didn't want to die without having known what it was like to be loved by him, to feel him inside her and hold him close, and to tell him that she loved him. She had a whole world of love dammed up inside her, drying up because she hadn't had anyone to whom she could give it, but now she had this opportunity, and she wasn't going to waste it.

A psych analyst would say this was just propinquity: the "any port in a storm" type of attraction, or the Adam and Eve syndrome. That might be part of it, for him. If she had to guess, Sunny would say that Chance was used to having sex whenever he wanted it. He had that look about him, a bone-deep sexual confidence that would draw women like flies. She was currently the only fly available.

But it wasn't just that. He had been attracted to her before, just as she had been to him. If they had made it to Seattle without trouble, she would have been strong enough to refuse his invitation and walk away from him. She would never have allowed herself to get to know him. Maybe they had met only twenty-four hours before, but those hours had been more intense than anything else she had ever known. She imagined it was as if they had gone into battle together; the danger they had faced, and were still facing, had forged a bond between them like soldiers in a war. She had learned things about him that it would have taken her weeks to learn in a normal situation, weeks that she would never have given herself. Of all the things she had

learned about him in those twenty-four hours, there wasn't one she didn't like. He was a man willing to step forward and take a risk, get involved, otherwise he wouldn't have stopped the cretin in the airport. He was calm in a crisis, self-sufficient and capable, and he was more considerate of her than anyone else she had ever known. On top of all that, he was so sexy he made her mouth water.

Most men, after hearing something like what she had told him, would have immediately gone for the sex. Chance hadn't. Instead, he had kissed her very sweetly and said, "I'll get the rest of the things from the plane, so I can change clothes and give you my dirty ones to wash."

"Gee, thanks," she had managed to say. He had winked at her. "Any time."

He was a man who could put off his personal pleasure in order to take care of business. So here she was, scrubbing his underwear. Not the most romantic thing in the world to be doing, yet it was an intimate chore that strengthened the link forming between them. He was working to feed her; she was working to keep their clothes clean.

So far, Chance was everything that was steadfast and reliable. So why did she keep sensing that edge of danger in him? Was it something his army training had given him that was just *there* no matter what he was doing? She had never met anyone else who had been a ranger, so she had no means of comparison. She was just glad of that training, if it helped keep them alive.

After his clothes were as clean as she could get them, she hesitated barely a second before stripping out of her own, down to her skin. She couldn't tolerate her grimy clothes another minute. The hot desert air washed over her bare skin, a warm, fresh caress on the backs of her knees, the small of her back, that made her nipples pinch into erect little nubs. She had never before been outside in the nude, and she felt positively decadent. What if Chance saw her? If he was overcome with lust by the sight of her naked body, nothing would happen that hadn't been going to happen, anyway. Not that it was likely he would be overcome, she thought wryly, smiling to herself, her curves were a long way from voluptuous. Still, if a man was faced with a naked, available woman--it could happen.

She poured a bottle of water over herself, then scooped up a handful of sand and began scrubbing. Rinsing off the sand was a matter of refilling the bottle several times. When she was finished she felt considerably refreshed and her skin was baby smooth. Maybe the skin-care industry should stop

grinding up shells and rock for body scrubs, she thought, and just go for the sand.
Naked and wet, she could feel a slight breeze stirring the hot air, cooling her until she was actually comfortable. She didn't have a towel, so she let herself dry naturally while she washed her own clothes, then quickly dressed in the beige jeans and green T-shirt that she always carried. They were earth colors, colors that blended in well with vegetation and would make her more difficult to see if she had to disappear into the countryside. She would have opted for actual camouflage-patterned clothing, if that wouldn't have made her more noticeable in public. Her bra was wet from its scrubbing, so she hadn't put it back on, and the soft cotton of the T-shirt clung to her breasts, clearly revealing their shape and their soft jiggle when she walked, and the small peaks of her nipples. She wondered if Chance would notice.
"Hey," he said from behind her, his voice low and soft.
Startled, she whirled to face him. It was as if she had conjured him from her thoughts. He stood motionless about ten yards away, his eyes narrowed, his expression focused. His whiskey-coloured gaze went straight to her breasts. Oh, he noticed all right.
Her nipples got even harder, as if he had touched them.
She swallowed, trying to control a ridiculous twinge of her nerves. After all, he had already touched her breasts, and she had given him permission to do more. "How long have you been there?"
"A while." His eyelids were heavy, his voice a little rough. "I kept waiting for you to turn around, but you never did. I enjoyed the view, anyway." Her breath hitched. "Thank you."
"You have the sweetest little ass I've ever seen." Liquid heat moved through her. "You sweet talker, you," she said, not even half kidding. "When do I get a peep show?"
"Any time, honey." His tone was dark with sensual promise. "Any time." Then he smiled ruefully. "Any time except now. We need to move these clothes so I can set the trap up here. Since this is where the water is, this is where the game will come. I'll set the traps now and try to catch something for supper, then wash up after I clean whatever we catch--if we catch anything at all."
He wasn't exactly swept away with lust, but there was that reassuring steadfastness again, the ability to keep his priorities straight. In this

situation, she didn't want Gonad the Barbarian; she wanted a man on whom she could depend to do the smart thing.
He began gathering the wet clothes off the rocks, and Sunny moved to help him. "Let me guess," she said. "The clothes still smell like humans."
"There's that, plus they're something different. Wild animals are skittish whenever something new invades their territory."
As they walked back to the overhang she asked, "How long does it normally take to catch something in a trap?"
He shrugged. "There's no 'normal' to it. I've caught game before within ten minutes of putting out the trap. Sometimes it takes days."
She wasn't exactly looking forward to eating Peter Cottontail, but neither did she want another nutrition bar. It would be nice if some big fat chicken had gotten lost in the desert and just happened to wander into their trap. She wouldn't mind eating a chicken. After a moment of wishful thinking she resigned herself to rabbit--if they were lucky, that is. They would have to eat whatever Chance could catch.
When they reached "home," which the overhang had become, they spread their clothes out on another assortment of hot rocks. The first items she had washed were already almost dry; the dry heat of the desert was almost as efficient as an electric clothes dryer.
When they had finished, Chance collected his two handmade traps and examined them one last time. Sunny watched him, seeing the same intensity in his eyes and body that she had noticed before. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she asked, only mildly surprised. This was, after all, the ultimate in primitive guy stuff.
He didn't look at her, but a tiny smile twitched the corners of his mouth. "I guess I'm not all that upset. We're alive. We have food, water and shelter. I'm alone with a woman I've wanted from the first minute I saw her." He produced a badly crushed Baby Ruth candy bar from his hip pocket and opened the wrapper, then pinched off small pieces of it and put them in the traps.
Sunny was instantly diverted. "You're using a candy bar as bait?" she demanded in outraged tones. "Give me that! You can use my nutrition bar in the traps."
He grinned and evaded her as she tried to swipe the remainder of the candy bar. "The nutrition bar wouldn't be a good bait. No self-respecting rabbit would touch it."

"How long have you been hiding that Baby Ruth?"
"I haven't been hiding it. I found it in the plane when I got the rest of the stuff. Besides, it's melted from being in the plane all day."
"Melted, schmelted," she scoffed. "That doesn't affect chocolate."
"Ah." He nodded, still grinning. "You're one of those."
"One of those *what*?"
"Chocoholics."
"I am not," she protested, lifting her chin at him. "I'm a sweetaholic."
"Then why didn't you pack something sweet in that damn survival bag of yours, instead of something that tastes like dried grass?"
She scowled at him. "Because the idea is to stay alive. If I had a stash of candy, I'd eat it all the first day, then I'd be in trouble."
The golden-brown gaze flicked at her, lashing like the tip of a whip. "When are you going to tell me why you packed survival gear for an overnight plane trip to Seattle?" He kept his tone light, but she felt the change of mood. He was dead serious about this, and she wondered why. What did it matter to him why she lugged that stuff everywhere she went? She could understand why he would be curious, but not insistent.
"I'm paranoid," she said, matching his tone in lightness. "I'm always certain there will be some sort of emergency, and I'm terrified of being unprepared."
His eyes went dark and flat. "Bull. Don't try to blow me off with lies."
Sunny might be good-natured almost to a fault, but she didn't back down. "I was actually trying to be polite and avoid telling you it's none of your business."
To her surprise, he relaxed. "That's more like it."
"What? Being rude?"
"Honest," he corrected. "If there are things you don't want to tell me, fine. I don't like it, but at least it was the truth. Considering our situation, we need to be able to totally rely on each other, and that demands trust. We have to be up front with each other, even when the truth isn't all sweetness and light."
She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, giving him an "I'm not buying this" look. "Even when you're just being nosy? I don't think so." She sniffed. "You're trying to psych me into spilling my guts."
"Is it working?"
"I felt a momentary twinge of guilt, but then logic kicked in."

She sensed he tried to fight it, but a smile crinkled his eyes, then moved down to curl the corners of that beautifully cut mouth. He shook his head. "You're going to cause me a lot of trouble," he said companionably as he picked up the traps and started back to their little water hole, if a trickle could be called a hole.

"Why's that?" she called to his back.

"Because I'm afraid I'm going to fall in love with you," he said over his shoulder as he walked around a jutting curve of the canyon wall and disappeared from sight.

Sunny's legs felt suddenly weak; her knees actually wobbled, and she reached out to brace her hand on the wall. Had he really said that? Did he mean it? Would a man admit to something like that if he wasn't already emotionally involved?

Her heart was pounding as if she had been running. She could handle a lot of things most people never even thought of having to do, such as running for her life, but when it came to a romantic relationship she was a babe in the woods--or in the desert, to be accurate. She had never let a man get close enough to her to matter, because she had to be free to disappear without a moment's notice or regret. But this time she couldn't disappear; she couldn't go anywhere. This time she was in a lot more trouble than Chance was, because she was already in love--fully, falling-down-a-mine-shaft, terrifyingly in love.

The feeling was a stomach-tightening mixture of ecstasy and horror. The last thing she wanted to do was love him, but it was way too late to worry about that now. What had already begun had blossomed into full flower when he *didn't* make love to her after she had said he could. Something very basic and primal had recognized him then as her mate. He was everything she had ever wanted in a man, everything she had ever dreamed about in those half-formed thoughts she had never let fully surface into her consciousness, because she had always known that life wasn't for her. But those circumstances held sway up in the world, not down here in this sunlit hole where they were the only two people alive. She felt raw inside, as if all her nerve endings and emotions had been stripped of their protective coverings, leaving her vulnerable to feelings she had always before been able to keep at bay. Those emotions kept sweeping over her in exhilarating waves, washing her into unknown territory. She wanted very

much to protect herself, yet all the shields she had used over the years were suddenly useless.

Tonight they would become lovers, and one last protective wall would be irrevocably breached. Sex wasn't just sex to her; it was a commitment, a dedication of self, that would be part of her for the rest of her life.

She wasn't naive about what else making love with him could mean. She wasn't on any form of birth control, and while he might have a few condoms with him, they would quickly be used. The bell couldn't be unrung, and once they had made love they couldn't go back to a chaste relationship. What would she do if she got pregnant and they weren't rescued? She had to hold out hope that they wouldn't be down here forever, yet a small kernel of logic told her that it was possible they wouldn't be found. What would she do if she got pregnant even if they *were* rescued? A baby would be a major complication. How would she protect it? Somehow she couldn't see herself and Chance and a baby making a normal little all-American family; she would still be running, because that was the only way to be safe.

Keeping him at a distance, remaining platonic, was the only safe, sane thing to do. Unfortunately, she didn't seem to have a good grip on her sanity any longer. She felt as if those waves had carried her too far from shore for her to make it back now. For better or worse, all she could do was ride the current where it would take her.

Nevertheless, she tried. She tried to tell herself how stupidly irresponsible it was to risk getting pregnant under any circumstances, but particularly in *this* circumstance. Yes, women all over the world conceived and gave birth in primitive conditions, but for whatever reasons, cultural, economic or lack of brain power, they didn't have a choice. She did. All she had to do was say "no" and ignore all her feminine instincts shrieking "yes, yes."

When Chance returned she was still standing in the same spot she had been when he left, her expression stricken. He was instantly alert, reaching for the pistol tucked into his waistband at the small of his back. "What's wrong?"

"What if I get pregnant?" she asked baldly, indicating their surroundings with a sweep of her hand. "That would be stupid."

He looked surprised. "Aren't you on birth control?"

"No, and even if I was, I wouldn't have an unlimited supply of pills."

Chance rubbed his jaw, trying to think of a way around this one without tipping his hand. He knew they wouldn't be here for long, only until she gave him the information he needed on her father, but he couldn't tell her that. And why in the hell wasn't she on some form of birth control? All of the female agents he knew were on long-term birth control, and Sunny's circumstances weren't that different. "I have some condoms," he finally said.

She gave him a wry smile. "How many? And what will we do when they're gone?"

The last thing he wanted to do now was make her hostile. Deciding to gamble a little, to risk not being able to make love to her in exchange for keeping her trust, he put his arms around her and cradled her against his chest. She felt good in his arms, he thought, firm with muscle and yet soft in all the right places. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about the way she looked naked: her slender, graceful back and small waist, and the tight, heart-shaped--and heart-stopping--curve of her butt. Her legs were as slim and sleekly muscled as he had expected, and the thought of them wrapping around his waist brought him to full, instant arousal. He held her so close there was no way she could miss his condition, but he didn't thrust himself at her; let her think he was a gentleman. *He* knew better, but it was essential she didn't.

He kissed the top of her head and took that gamble. "We'll do whatever you want," he said gently. "I want you--you know that. I have about three dozen condoms--"

She jerked back, glaring at him. *"Three dozen?"* she asked, horrified. "You carry around three dozen condoms?"

There it was again, that urge to laugh. She could get to him faster than any other woman he knew. "I had just stocked up," he explained, keeping his tone mild.

"They have an expiration date, you know!"

He bit the inside of his jaw--hard. "Yeah, but they don't go bad as fast as milk. They're good for a couple of years."

She gave him a suspicious look. "How long will thirty-six condoms keep you supplied?"

He sighed. "Longer than you evidently think."

"Six months?"

He did some quick math. Six months, thirty-six condoms… he would have to have sex more than once a week. If he were in a monogamous relationship, that would be nothing, but for an unattached bachelor…
"Look," he said, letting frustration creep into both his voice and his expression, "with you, three dozen might last a week."
She looked startled, and he could see her doing some quick math now. As she arrived at the answer and her eyes widened, he thrust his hand into her hair, cupping the back of her head and holding her still while he kissed her, ruthlessly using all his skill to arouse her. Her hands fluttered against his chest as if she wanted to push him away, but her hands wouldn't obey. He stroked his tongue into her mouth, slow and deep, feeling the answering touch of her tongue and the pressure of her lips. She tasted sweet, and the fresh smell of her was pure woman. He felt her nipples peak under the thin fabric of her T-shirt, and abruptly he had to touch them, feel them stabbing into his palm. He had his hand under her shirt almost before the thought formed. Her breasts were firm and round, her skin cool silk that warmed under his touch. Her nipples were hard little nubs that puckered even tighter when he touched them. She arched in his arms, her eyes closed, a low moan humming in her throat.
He had intended only to kiss her out of her sudden attack of responsibility. Instead, the pleasure of touching her went to his head like old whiskey, and suddenly he had to see her, taste her. With one swift motion he pulled her shirt up, baring her breasts, and tilted her back over his arm so the firm mounds were offered up to him in a sensual feast. He bent his dark head and closed his mouth over one tight, reddening nipple, rasping his tongue over it before pressing it against the roof of his mouth and sucking. He heard the sound she made this time, the cry of a sharply aroused woman, a wild, keening sound that went straight to his loins. He was dimly aware of her nails biting into his shoulders, but the pain was small, and nothing in comparison with the urgency that had seized him. Blood thundered in his ears, roared through his veins. He wanted her with a savage intensity that rode him with sharp spurs, urging him to take instead of seduce.
Grimly he reached for his strangely elusive self-control. Only the experience and training of his entire adulthood, spent in the trenches of a dirty, covert, ongoing war, gave him the strength to rein himself in. Reluctantly he eased his clamp on her nipple, giving the turgid little bud an

apologetic lick. She quivered in his arms, whimpering, her golden hair spilling back as she hung helplessly in his grasp, and he almost lost it again. Damn it all, he couldn't wait.

Swiftly he dipped down and snagged the blanket from the ground, then hooked his right arm under her knees and lifted her off her feet, carrying her out into the sunlight. The golden glow of the lowering sun kissed her skin with a subtle sheen, deepened the glitter of her hair. Her breasts were creamy, with the delicate blue tracery of her veins showing through the pale skin, and her small nipples were a sweet rosy color, shining wetly, standing out in hard peaks. "God, you're beautiful," he said in a low, rough voice.

He set her on her feet; she swayed, her lovely eyes dazed with need. He spread out the blanket and reached for her before that need began to cool. He wanted her scorching hot, so ready for him that she would fight him for completion.

He stripped the T-shirt off over her head, dropped it on the blanket, and hooked his fingers in the waistband of her jeans. A quick pop of the snap, a jerk on the tab of the zipper, and the jeans slid down her thighs.

Her hands gripped his forearms. "Chance?" She sounded strangely uncertain, a little hesitant. If she changed her mind now--

He kissed her, slow and deep, and thumbed her nipples. She made that little humming sound again, rising on her toes to press against him. He pushed her jeans down to her ankles, wrapped both arms around her and carried her down to the blanket.

She gasped, her head arching back. "Here? Now?"

"I can't wait." That was nothing more than the hard truth. He couldn't wait until dark, until they had politely crawled into the tent together as if they were following some script. He wanted her now, in the sunlight, naked and warm and totally spontaneous. He stripped her panties down and freed her ankles from the tangle of jeans and underwear.

It seemed she didn't want to wait, either. She tugged at his shirt, pushing it up. Impatiently he gripped the hem and wrenched the garment off over his head, then spread her legs and eased his weight down on her, settling into the notch of her open thighs.

She went very still, her eyes widening as she stared up at him. He fished in his pocket for the condom he'd put there earlier, then lifted himself enough to unfasten his jeans and shove them down. He donned the condom with an abrupt, practiced motion. When he came back down to her, she braced her

hands against his shoulders as if she wanted to preserve some small distance between them. But any distance was too much; he grasped her hands in one of his and pulled them over her head, pinning them to the blanket and arching her breasts against him. With his free hand he reached between them and guided his hard length to the soft, wet entrance of her body.
Sunny quivered, helpless in his grasp. She had never before felt so vulnerable, or so alive. His passion wasn't controlled and gentle, the way she had expected; it was fierce and tumultuous, buffeting her with its force. He held her down, dwarfed her with his big muscular body, and she trembled as she waited for the hard thrust of penetration. She was ready for him, oh, so ready. She ached with need; she burned with it. She wanted to beg him to hurry, but she couldn't make her lungs work. He reached down, and she felt the brush of his knuckles between her legs, then the stiff, hot length of him pushing against her opening.
Everything in her seemed to tighten, coiling, focusing on that intimate intrusion. The soft flesh between her legs began to burn and sting as the blunt pressure stretched her. He pushed harder, and the pressure became pain. Wild frustration filled her. She wanted him *now,* inside her, easing the ache and tension, stroking her back into feverish pleasure.
He started to draw back, but she couldn't let him, couldn't bear losing what his touch had promised. She had denied herself so many things, but not this, not now. She locked her legs around his and lifted her hips, fiercely impaling herself, thrusting past the resistance of her body.
She couldn't hold back the thin cry that tore from her throat. Shock robbed her muscles of strength, and she went limp on the blanket.
Chance moved over her, his broad shoulders blotting out the sun. He was a dark, massive silhouette, his shape blurred by her tears. He murmured a soft reassurance even as he probed deeper, and deeper still, until his full length was inside her.
He released her hands to cradle her in both arms. Sunny clung to his shoulders, holding as tight as she could, because without his strength she thought she might fly apart. She hadn't realized this would hurt so much, that he would feel so thick and hot inside her, or go so deep. He was invading all of her, taking over her body and commanding its responses, even her breathing, her heartbeat, the flow of blood through her veins.
He moved gently at first, slowly, angling his body so he applied pressure where she needed it most. He did things to her with his hands, stroking her

into a return of pleasure. He kissed her, leisurely exploring her with his tongue. He touched her nipples, sucked them, nibbled on the side of her neck. His tender attention gradually coaxed her into response, into an instinctive motion as her hips rose and fell in time with his thrusts. She still clung to his shoulders, but in need rather than desperation. An overwhelming heat swept over her, and she heard herself panting.

He pushed her legs farther apart and thrust deeper, harder, faster. Sensation exploded in her, abruptly convulsing her flesh. She writhed beneath him, unable to hold back the short, sharp cries that surged upward, past her constricted throat. The pounding rhythm wouldn't let the spasms abate; they kept shuddering through her until she was sobbing, fighting him, wanting release, wanting more, and finally--when his hard body stiffened and began shuddering--wanting nothing.

Chapter Eight

A virgin. Sunny Miller had been a *virgin.* He tried to think, when he could think at all, what the possible ramifications were, but none of that seemed important right now. Of far more immediate urgency was how to comfort a woman whose first time had been on a blanket spread over the rough ground, in broad daylight, with a man who hadn't even taken off his boots.

He lay sprawled on his back beside her on the blanket. She had turned on her side away from him, curling in on herself while visible tremors shook her slender, naked body. Moving was an effort--*breathing* was an effort--as he pulled off the condom and tossed it away. He had climaxed so violently that he felt dazed. And if it affected him so strongly, with his experience, what was she thinking? Feeling? Had she anticipated the pain, or been shocked by it?

He knew she had climaxed. She had been as aroused as he; when he had started to pull back in stunned realization, she had hooked her legs around his and forced the entry herself. He had seen the shock in her eyes as he penetrated her, felt the reverberations in her flesh. And he had watched her face as he carefully aroused her, holding himself back with ruthless control until he felt the wild clenching of her loins. Then nothing had been able to hold him back, and he had exploded in his own gut-wrenching release.

For a woman of twenty-nine to remain a virgin, she had to have some strongly held reason for doing so. Sunny had willingly, but not lightly, surrendered her chastity to him. He felt humbled, and honored, and he was scared as hell. He hadn't been easy with her, either in the process or the culmination. At first glance the fact that she had climaxed might make everything all right with her, but he knew better. She didn't have the experience to handle the sensual violence her body and emotions had endured. She needed holding, and reassuring, until she stopped shaking and regained her equilibrium.

He put his hand on her arm and tugged her over onto her back. She didn't actively resist, but she was stiff, uncoordinated. She was pale, her eyes unusually brilliant, as if she fought tears. He cradled her head on his arm and leaned over her, giving her the attention and the contact he knew she needed. She glanced quickly up at him, then away, and a surge of color pinkened her cheeks.

He was charmed by the blush. Gently he smoothed his hand up her bare torso, stroking her belly, trailing his fingers over her breasts. The lower curves of her breasts bore the marks of his beard stubble. He soothed them with his tongue, taking care not to add more abrasions, and made a mental note to shave when he washed.

Something needed to be said, but he didn't know what. He had talked his way into strongholds, drug dens and government offices; he had an uncanny knack for making a lightning assessment of any given person and situation, and then saying exactly the right thing to get the reaction he wanted. But from the moment he had seen Sunny, lust had gotten in the way of his usual expertise. No amount of prep work could have prepared him for the impact of her sparkling eyes and bright smile, or told him he could be so disarmed by a sense of humor. "Sunny" was a very apt nickname for her.

Just now his sunshine was very quiet, almost stricken, as if she regretted their intimacy. And he couldn't bear it. He had lost count, over the years, of the women who had tried to cling to him after the sex act was finished and he slipped away, both physically and mentally, but he couldn't bear it that this one woman wasn't trying to hold him. For some reason, whether this was simply too much too soon or for some deeper reason, she was trying to hold her distance from him. She wasn't curling in his arms, sighing with repletion; she was retreating behind an invisible wall, the one that had been there from the beginning.

Everything in him rejected the idea. A primitive, possessive rage swept over him. She was his, and he would not let her go. His muscles tightened in a renewed surge of lust, and he mounted her, sliding into the tight, swollen clasp of her sheath. She inhaled sharply, the shock of his entry jarring her out of her malaise. She wedged her hands between them and sank her nails into his chest, but she didn't try to push him away. Her legs came up almost automatically, wrapping around his hips. He caught her thighs and adjusted them higher, around his waist. "Get used to it," he said, more harshly than he'd intended. "To me. To this. To us. Because I won't let you pull away from me."

Her lips trembled, but he had her full attention now. "Even for your own sake?" she whispered, distress leaching the blue undertones from her eyes and leaving them an empty gray.

He paused for a fraction of a second, wondering if she was referring to her father. "Especially for that," he replied, and set himself to the sweet task of arousing her. This time was totally for her; he wooed her with a skill that went beyond sexual experience. His extensive training in the martial arts had taught him how to cripple with a touch, kill with a single blow, but it had also taught him all the places on the human body that were exquisitely sensitive to pleasure. The backs of her knees and thighs, the delicate arches of her feet, the lower curve of her buttocks, all received their due attention. Slowly she came alive under him, a growing inner wetness easing his way. She began to move in time with his leisurely thrusts, rising up to meet him. He stroked the cluster of nerves in the small of her back and was rewarded by the reflexive arch that took him deeper into her.

She sighed, her lips parted, her eyes closed. Her cheeks glowed; her lips were puffy and red. He saw all the signs of her arousal and whispered encouragement. Her head tossed to the side, and her hardened nipples stabbed against his chest. Gently, so gently, he bit the tender curve where her neck met her shoulder.

She cried out and began climaxing, her peak catching him by surprise. So did his own. He hadn't meant to climax, but the delicate inner clench and release of her body sent pleasure roaring through him, bursting out of control.

He tried to stop, tried to withdraw; his body simply wouldn't obey. Instead, he thrust deep and shuddered wildly as his seed spurted from him into the hot, moist depths of her. He heard his own deep, rough cry; then both time

and thought stopped, and all that was left of him sank down on her in a heavy sprawl.
Shadow had crept across the canyon floor when he wrapped her in the blanket and carried her back to the sheltering overhang. The surrounding rock blocked the sun during the day, but it also absorbed its heat so that at night, when the temperature dropped, it was noticeably warmer in their snug little niche than it was outside. Sunny yawned, drowsy with satisfaction, and rested her head on his shoulder. "I can walk," she said mildly, though she made no effort to slide her feet to the ground.
"Hey, I'm doing my macho act here," he protested. "Don't ruin it."
She tilted her head back to look at him. "You aren't acting, though, are you?"
"No," he admitted, and earned a chuckle from her.
Time had gotten away from him while they drifted in the sleepy aftermath of passion. The sun was so far down in the sky that only the upper rim of the canyon was lit, the reds and golds and purples of the rock catching fire in the sunset, while the sky had taken on a deep violet hue.
"I'm going to check the traps while there's still a few minutes of light left," he said as he deposited her on the ground. "Sit tight. I won't be long."
Sunny sat tight for about two seconds after he disappeared from view, then bounced to her feet. Quickly she washed and dressed, needing the protection of her clothing. She had the uneasy feeling that nothing was the same as it had been before Chance carried her out into the sunlight. She had been prepared for the lovemaking, but not for that overwhelming assault on her senses. She had hoped for pleasure, and instead found something so much more powerful that she couldn't control it.
And most of all, Chance had revealed himself for the marauder he was. She had seen glimpses of it before, in moments when the force of his personality broke through his control. She should have realized then; one didn't bolt a steel gate on an empty room. His control had given her the rare, luxurious feeling of safety, and she had been so beguiled that she had ignored the power that gate held constrained, or what would happen if it ever broke loose. This afternoon, she had found out.
He had said he'd been in the Army Rangers. That should have told her everything she needed to know about the kind of man he was. She could only think she'd let the stress of the situation, and her worry about Margreta, blind her to his true nature.

A shiver rippled down her spine, a totally sensual reaction as she remembered the tumultuous hour--or hours--on the blanket. She had been helpless, totally blindsided by the force of her reaction. She had known from the beginning that she responded to him as she never had before to any man, but she still hadn't been prepared for such a complete upheaval of her senses. He wasn't the only one accustomed to control; her very life had depended on her control of any given situation, and with Chance, she had found that she couldn't control either him or herself.

She had never been more terrified in her life.

The way she had felt about him before was nothing compared to now. It wasn't just the sex, which had been so much more intense and harsh than she had ever imagined. No, it was the part of his character he had revealed, the part that he had tried to keep hidden, that called to her so strongly she knew only her own death would end the love she felt for him. Chance was one of a very special breed of men, a warrior. All the little pieces of him she had sensed were now settled into place, forming the picture of a man who would always have something wild and ruthless inside him, a man willing to put himself at risk, step into the line of fire, to protect what he loved. He was the complete antithesis of her father, whose life was devoted wholly to destruction.

Sunny hadn't had a choice in a lot of the sacrifices of her life. Their mother had given her and Margreta away in an effort to save them, but hadn't been able to completely sever herself from her daughters' lives. Instead, she had taught them all her hard-learned skills, taught them how to hide, to disappear--and, if necessary, how to fight. By necessity, Pamela Vickery Hauer had become an expert in her own brand of guerrilla warfare. Whenever she thought it safe she would visit, and the kindly Millers would go out of their way to give her time with her girls.

When Sunny was sixteen, Pamela's luck had finally run out. Their father's network was extensive, and he had many more resources at his disposal than his fugitive wife could command. Logically, it had been only a matter of time before he found her. And when she was finally run to ground, Pamela had killed herself rather than take the chance he would, by either torture or drugs, be able to wring their location from her.

That was Sunny's legacy, a life living in shadows, and a courageous mother who had killed herself in order to protect her children. No one had asked

her if this was the life she wanted; it was the life she had, so she had made the best of it she could.
Nor had it been her choice to live apart from Margreta; that had been her sister's decision. Margreta was older; she had her own demons to fight, her own battles to wage, and she had never been as adept at the survival skills taught by their mother as Sunny had been. So Sunny had lost her sister, and when the Millers died, first Hal and then Eleanor, she had been totally alone. The calls on her cell phone from Margreta were the only contact she had, and she knew Margreta was content to leave it at that.
She didn't think she had the strength to give up Chance, too. That was why she was terrified to the point of panic, because her very presence endangered his life. Her only solace was that because he was the man he was, he was very tough and capable, more able to look after himself.
She took a deep breath, trying not to anticipate trouble. If and when they got out of this canyon, then she would decide what to do.
Because she was too nervous to sit still, she checked the clothes she had washed out and found they were already dry. She gathered them off the various rocks where they had spread them, and though the little chore had taken only minutes, by the time she walked back to the overhang there was barely enough light for her to see.
Chance hadn't taken the flashlight with him, she remembered. It was a moonless night; if he didn't get back within the next few minutes, he wouldn't be able to see. The fire had been kept smoldering all day, to maximize the smoke and conserve their precious store of wood, but now she quickly added more sticks to bring up a good blaze, both for her own sake and so he would have the fire as a beacon. The flickering firelight penetrated the darkness of the overhang, sending patterns dancing against the rock wall. She searched through their belongings until she found the flashlight, to have it at hand in case she had to search for him.
Total blackness came suddenly, as if Mother Nature had dropped her petticoats over the land. Sunny stepped to the front of the overhang.
"Chance!" she called, then paused to listen.
The night wasn't silent. There were rustlings, the whispers of the night things as they crept about their business. A faint breeze stirred the scrub brush, sounding like dry bones rattling together. She listened carefully, but didn't hear an answering call.

"Chance!" She tried again, louder this time. Nothing. "Damn it," she muttered, and flashlight in hand set off for the deep end of the canyon where their life-giving water trickled out of a crack in the rock.
She walked carefully, checking where she put her feet. A second encounter with a snake was more than she could handle in one day. As she walked she periodically called his name, growing more irritated by the moment. Why didn't he answer her? Surely he could hear her by now; sound carried in the thin, dry air.
A hard arm caught her around the waist and swung her up against an equally hard body. She shrieked in alarm, the sound cut off by a warm, forceful mouth. Her head tilted back under the pressure, and she grabbed his shoulders for support. He took his time, teasing her with his tongue, kissing her until the tension left her body and she was moving fluidly against him. When he lifted his head his breathing was a little ragged. Sunny felt obliged to complain about his treatment of her. "You scared me," she accused, though her voice sounded more sultry than sulky.
"You got what you deserved. I told you to sit tight." He kissed her again, as if he couldn't help himself.
"Is this part of the punishment?" she murmured when he came up for air.
"Yeah," he said, and she felt him smile against her temple.
"Do it some more."
He obliged, and she felt the magic fever begin burning again deep inside her. She ached all over from his previous lovemaking; she shouldn't feel even a glimmer of desire so soon, and yet she did. She wanted to feel all the power of his superbly conditioned body, take him inside her and hold him close, feel him shake as the pleasure overwhelmed him just as it did her. Finally he tore his mouth from hers, but she could feel his heart pounding against her, feel the hard ridge in his jeans. "Have mercy," he muttered. "I won't have a chance to starve to death. I'm going to die of exhaustion."
Starving reminded her of the traps, because she was very hungry. "Did you catch a rabbit?" she asked, her tone full of hope.
"No rabbit, just a scrawny bird." He held up his free hand, and she saw that he held the plucked carcass of a bird that was quite a bit smaller than the average chicken.
"That isn't the Roadrunner, is it?"
"What's this thing you have with imaginary animals? No, it isn't a roadrunner. Try to be a little more grateful."

"Then what is it?"
"Bird," he said succinctly. "After I spit it and turn it over the flames for a while, it'll be roasted bird. That's all that matters."
Her stomach growled. "Well, okay. As long as it isn't the Roadrunner. He's my favorite cartoon character. After Bullwinkle."
He began laughing. "When did you see those old cartoons? I didn't think they were on anywhere now."
"They're all on disk," she said. "I rented them from my local video store."
He took her arm, and they began walking back to camp, chatting and laughing about their favorite cartoons. They both agreed that the slick animated productions now couldn't match the older cartoons for sheer comedy, no matter how realistic the modern ones were. Sunny played the flashlight beam across their path as they walked, watching for snakes.
"By the way, why were you calling me?" Chance asked suddenly.
"It's dark, in case you didn't notice. You didn't carry the flashlight with you."
He made a soft, incredulous sound. "You were coming to *rescue* me?"
She felt a little embarrassed. Of course, a former ranger could find his way back to camp in the dark. "I wasn't thinking," she admitted.
"You were thinking too much," he corrected, and hugged her to his side.
They reached their little camp. The fire she had built up was still sending little tongues of flame licking around the remnants of the sticks. Chance laid the bird on a rock, swiftly fashioned a rough spit from the sticks, and sharpened the end of another stick with his pocket knife. He skewered the bird with that stick, and set it in the notches of the spit, then added some small sticks to the fire. Soon the bird was dripping sizzling juice into the flames, which leaped higher in response. The delicious smell of cooking meat made her mouth water.
She shoved a flat rock closer to the fire and sat down, watching him turn the bird. She was close enough to feel the heat on her arms; as chilly as the night was already, it was difficult to remember that just a few short hours ago the heat had been scorching. She had camped out only once before, but the circumstances had been nothing like this. For one thing, she had been alone.
The amber glow of the flames lit the hard angles of his face. He had washed up while he was gone, she saw; his hair was still a little damp. He had shaved, too. She smiled to herself.

He looked up and saw her watching him, and a wealth of knowledge, of sensual awareness, flashed between them. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.
"I'm fine." She had no idea how her face glowed as she wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her drawn-up knees.
"Are you bleeding?"
"Not now. And it was only a little, at first," she added hastily when his eyes narrowed in concern.
He returned his gaze to the bird, watching as he carefully turned it. "I wish I had known."
She wished he didn't know now. The reasons for her recently lost virginity weren't something she wanted to dissect. "Why?" she asked, injecting a light note into her tone. "Would you have been noble and stopped?"
"Hell, no," he said. "I'd have gone about it a little differently, is all."
Now, that was interesting. "What would have been different?"
"How rough I was. How long I took."
"You took long enough," she assured him, smiling.
"Both times."
"I could have made it better for you."
"How about for you?"
His dark gaze flashed upward, and he gave a rueful smile. "Sweetheart, if it had been any better for me, my heart would have given out."
"Ditto."
He turned the bird again. "I didn't wear a condom the second time."
"I know." The evidence had been impossible to miss.
Their gazes met and locked again, and again they were linked by that silent communication. He might have made her pregnant. He knew it, and she knew it.
"How's the timing?"
She rocked her hand back and forth. "Borderline." The odds were in their favor, she figured, but it wasn't a risk she wanted to take again.
"If we weren't stuck here--" he began, then shrugged.
"What?"
"I wouldn't mind."
Desire surged through her, and she almost jumped his bones right then. She got a tight grip on herself, literally, and fought to stay seated. Hormones

were sneaky devils, she thought, ready to undermine her common sense just because he mentioned wanting to make her pregnant.
"Neither would I," she admitted, and watched to see if he had the same reaction. Color flared high on his carved cheekbones, and a muscle in his jaw flexed. His hand tightened on the spit until his knuckles were white. Yep, it went both ways, she thought, fascinated by his battle to remain where he was.
When he judged the bird was done, he took the skewer off the spit and kicked another rock over to rest beside hers, then sat down on it. With his pocket knife he cut a strip of meat and held it out to her. "Careful, don't burn yourself," he warned as she reached eagerly for the meat.
She juggled the strip back and forth in her hands, blowing on it to cool it. When she could hold it, she took her first tentative bite. Her taste buds exploded with the taste of wood and smoke and roasted fowl. "Oh, that's good," she moaned, chewing slowly to get every ounce of flavor.
Chance cut off a strip for himself and took his first bite, looking as satisfied as she with their meal. They chewed in silence for a while. He was careful to divide the meat equally, until she was forced to stop eating way before she was satisfied. He was so much bigger than she was that if they each ate the same amount, he would be short-changed.
He knew what she was doing, of course. "You're taking care of me again," he observed. "You're hell on my image, you know that? I'm supposed to be taking care of you."
"You're a lot bigger than I am. You need larger portions."
"Let me worry about the food, sweetheart. We won't starve. There's more game to catch, and tomorrow I'll look for some edible plants to round out our diet."
"Bird and bush," she said lightly. "What all the trendy people are eating these days."
Her quip made him grin. He persuaded her to eat a little more of the meat, then they finished off one of the remaining nutrition bars. Their hunger appeased, they began getting ready to turn in for the night.
He banked the fire while she got the tent ready. They brushed their teeth and made one last nature call, just like old married folks, she thought in amusement. Their "home" wasn't much, really nothing more than a niche in the rock, but their preparations for the night struck her as very domestic--

until he said, "Do you want to wear my shirt tonight? It would be more like a nightgown on you than the shirt you're wearing."

There was nothing the least bit tamed in the way he was looking at her. Her heartbeat picked up in speed, and the now familiar heat began spreading through her. That was all he had to do, she thought; one look and she was aroused. He had taught her body well during the short time she had been sprawled beneath him on the blanket. Now that she knew exactly how it felt to take his hard length inside her, she craved the sensation. She wanted that convulsive peak of pleasure, even though it had frightened her with its intensity. She hadn't realized she would feel as if she were flying apart, as if her soul was being wrenched from her body. In a blinding, paralyzing moment of clarity, she knew that no other man in the world would be able to do that for her, to her. He was the One for her, capital *O*, big letter, underlined and italicized. The One. She would never again be whole without him.

She must have looked stricken, because suddenly he was by her side, supporting her with an arm around her waist as he gently but inexorably guided her to the tent. He would be considerate, she realized, but he didn't intend to be refused.

She cleared her throat, searching for her equilibrium. "You'll need your shirt to keep warm--"

"You're joking, right?" He smiled down at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Or did you think we were through for the night?"

She couldn't help smiling back. "That never crossed my mind. I just thought you'd need it *afterward."*

"*I* don't think so," he said, his hands busy unsnapping her jeans.

They were both naked and inside the tent in record time. He switched off the flashlight to save the batteries, and the total darkness closed around them, just as it had the night before. Making love when one was going totally by feel somehow heightened the other senses, she found. She was aware of the calluses on his hands as he stroked her, of the heady male scent of his skin, of the powerful muscles that bunched under her own exploring hands. His taste filled her; his kisses were a feast. She reveled in the smooth firmness of his lips, the sharp edges of his teeth; she rubbed his nipples and felt them contract under her fingers. She loved the harsh groan he gave when she cupped the soft, heavy sacs between his legs, and the way they tightened even as she held them.

She was shocked when she closed her hand around his pulsing erection. How on earth had she ever taken him inside her? The long, thick column ended in a smooth, bulbous flare, the tip of which was wet with fluid. Entranced, she curled down until she could take the tip in her mouth and lick the fluid away.

He let out an explosive curse and tumbled her on her back, reversing their positions. The confines of the small tent restricted their movement, but he managed the shift with his usual powerful grace.

She laughed, full of wonder at the magic between them, and draped her arms around his neck as he settled on top of her. "Didn't you like it?"

"I almost came," he growled. "What do you think?"

"I think I'll have my way with you yet. I may have to overpower you and tie you up, but I think I can handle the job."

"I'm positive of it. Let me know when you're going to overpower me, so I can have my clothes off."

That afternoon, caught in the whirlpool of his lovemaking, she wouldn't have believed she would be so at ease with him now, that they could indulge in this sensual teasing. She wouldn't have believed how naturally her thighs parted to accommodate his hips, or how comfortable it was, as if nature had designed them to fit together just so. Actually nature had; she just hadn't realized it until now.

He gave her a taste of her own medicine, kissing his way down her body until his hair brushed the insides of her thighs and she discovered a torture so sweet she shattered. When she could breathe again, when the colored pinpoints of light stopped flashing against her closed eyelids, he kissed her belly and laid his head on the pillowing softness. "My God, you're easy," he whispered.

She managed a strangled sound that was almost a laugh. "I guess I am. For you, anyway."

"Just for me." The dark tones of masculine possessiveness and triumph underlaid the words. "Just for you," she whispered in agreement. He put on a condom and slid into place between her thighs. She fought back a cry; she was sore and swollen, and he was big. He moved gently back and forth until she accepted him more easily and the discomfort faded, but gradually his thrusts quickened, became harder. Even then she sensed he was holding himself back to keep from hurting her. When he climaxed, he pulled back

so only half his length was inside her, and held himself there while shudders racked his strong body.
Afterward, he tugged his T-shirt on over her head, immediately enveloping her in his scent. The roomy garment came halfway to her knees--or it would have if he hadn't bunched it around her waist. He cradled her in his arms, one big hand on her bare bottom to keep her firmly against him. He used her rolled-up cardigan for a pillow, and she used him. Oh, this was wonderful.
"Is Sunny your real name, or is it a nickname?" he asked sleepily, his lips brushing her hair.
Even as relaxed as she was, as sated, a twinge of caution made her hesitate. She never told anyone her real name. It took her a moment to remember that none of that made any difference here now. "It's a nickname," she murmured. "My real name is Sonia, but I've never used it. Sonia Ophelia Gabrielle."
"Good God." He kissed her. "Sunny suits you. So you're saddled with four names, huh?"
"Yep. I never use the middle ones, though. What about you? What's your middle name?"
"I don't have one. It's just Chance."
"Really? You aren't lying to me because it's something awful, like Eustace?"
"Cross my heart."
She settled herself more comfortably against him. "I suppose it balances out. I have four names, you have two--together, we average three."
"How about that."
She could hear a smile in his voice now. She rewarded him with a small, sneaky pinch that made him jump. His retaliation ended, a long time later, in the use of another condom.
Sunny went to sleep to the knowledge that she was happier now, with Chance, than she had ever before been in her life.

Chapter Nine

The next morning the traps were empty. Sunny struggled with her disappointment. After such an idyllic, pleasure-filled night, the day should

have been just as wonderful. A nice hot, filling breakfast would have been perfect.
"Could you shoot something?" she asked as she chewed half of one of the tasteless nutrition bars. "We have eight of these bars left." If they each ate a bar a day, that meant they would be out of food in four days.
In three days, Margreta would call.
Sunny pushed that thought away. Whether or not they got out of here in time for her to answer Margreta's call was something she couldn't control. Food was a more immediate problem.
Chance narrowed his eyes as he scanned the rim of the canyon, as if looking for a way out. "I have fifteen rounds in the pistol, and no extra cartridges. I'd rather save them for emergencies, since there's no telling how long we'll be here. Besides, a 9mm bullet would tear a rabbit to pieces and wouldn't leave enough left of a bird for us to eat. Assuming I could hit a bird with a pistol shot, that is."
She wasn't worried about his marksmanship. He was probably much better with a rifle, but with his military background, he would be more than competent with the pistol. She looked down at her hands. "Would a .38 be better?"
"It isn't as powerful, so for small game, yeah, it would be better. Not great, but better--but I have a 9mm, so it's a moot point."
"I have one," she said softly.
His head whipped around. Something dangerous flashed in his eyes. "What did you say?"
She nodded toward her bag. "I have a .38."
He looked in the direction of her gaze, then back at her. His expression was like flint. "Would you like to tell me," he said very deliberately, "just how you happen to have a pistol of any kind with you? You were on a commercial flight. How did you get past the scanners?"
She didn't like giving away all her secrets, not even to Chance. A lifetime on the run had ingrained caution into her very bones, and she had already given him more of herself than she ever had anyone else. Still, they were in this together. "I have some special containers."
"Where?" he snapped. "I saw you unpack everything in your bag and there weren't any--ah, hell. The hair spray can, right?"
Unease skittered along her spine. Why was he angry? Even if he was a stickler for rules and regulations, which she doubted, he should be glad they

had an extra weapon, no matter how they came by it. She straightened her shoulders. "And the blow-dryer."
He stood over her like an avenging angel, his jaw set. "How long have you been smuggling weapons on board airplanes?"
"Every time I've flown," she said coolly, standing up. She was damned if she would let him tower over her as if she was a recalcitrant child. He still towered over, just not as much. "I was sixteen the first time."
She walked over to the bag and removed the pertinent items. Chance leaned down and snagged the can of spray from her hands. He took the cap off and examined the nozzle, then pointed it away from him and depressed it. A powder-fine mist of spray shot out.
"It's really hair spray," she said. "Just not much of it." She took the can and deftly unscrewed the bottom. A short barrel slid out of the can into her hands. Putting it aside, she lifted the hair-dryer and took it apart with the same deft twist, yielding the remaining parts of the pistol. She assembled it with the ease of someone who had done the task so often she could do it in her sleep, then fed the cartridges into the magazine, snapped it into place, reversed the pistol and presented it to him butt-first.
He took it, his big hand almost swallowing the small weapon. "What in *hell* are you doing with a weapon?" he bit out.
"The same thing you are, I imagine." She walked away from him and missed the look of shock that crossed his face. With her back to him she said, "I carry it for self-protection. Why do you carry yours?"
"I charter my plane to a lot of different people, most of whom I don't know. I fly into some isolated areas sometimes. And my weapon is licensed." He hurled the words at her like rocks. "Is yours?"
"No," she said, unwilling to lie. "But I'm a single woman who travels alone, carrying packages valuable enough that a courier service is hired to deliver them. The people I deliver the packages to are strangers. Think about it. I'd have to be a fool not to carry some means of protection." That was the truth, as far as it went.
"If your reason for carrying is legitimate, then why don't you have a license?"
She felt as if she were being interrogated, and she didn't like it. The tender, teasing lover of the night was gone, and in his place was someone who sounded like a prosecutor.

She had never applied for a license to carry a concealed weapon because she didn't want any background checks in the national data system, didn't want to bring herself to the notice of anyone in officialdom.
"I have my reasons," she retorted, keeping her tone very deliberate.
"And you aren't going to tell me what they are, right?" He threw her a look that was almost sulfuric in its fury and stalked off in the direction of the traps. His stalking, like everything else he did, was utterly graceful--and completely silent.
"Good riddance, Mr. Sunshine," she hurled at his back. It was a childish jab, but she felt better afterward. Sometimes a little childishness was just what the doctor ordered.
With nothing better to do, she set off in the opposite direction, toward the plane, to gather more sticks and twigs for the all-important fire. If he tried to keep her pistol when they got out of here--and they *would* get out, she had to keep hoping--then it would be war.

* * * * *

Chance examined the compact pistol in his hand. It was unlike any he had ever seen before, for the simple reason that it hadn't come from any manufacturer. A gunsmith, a skilled one, had made this weapon. It bore no serial number, no name, no indication of where or when it was made. It was completely untraceable.
He couldn't think of any good reason for Sunny to have it, but he could think of several bad ones.
After yesterday, he had been more than halfway convinced she was innocent, that she was in no way involved with her father. Stupid of him, but he had equated chastity with honor. Just because a woman didn't sleep around didn't mean she was a fine, upstanding citizen. All it meant was that, for whatever reason, she hadn't had sex.
He knew better. He was far better acquainted with the blackness of the human soul than with its goodness, because he had chosen to live in the sewers. Hell, he came from the sewers; he should be right at home there, and most of the time he was. The blackness of his own soul was always there, hidden just a few layers deep, and he was always aware of it. He used to make his way in the dangerous world he had chosen, shaped it into a weapon to be used in defense of his country and, ultimately, his family. And being on such intimate terms with hell, with the twisted evil humans could visit on one another, he should know that golden hair and bright, sparkling

eyes didn't necessarily belong on an angel. Shakespeare had hit the nail on the head when he warned the world against smiling villains.
It was just--*damn* it, Sunny got to him. She had slipped right past defenses he would have sworn were impregnable, and she had done it so easily they might as well not have been there at all. He wanted her, and so he had almost convinced himself that she was innocent.
Almost. There was just too much about her that didn't add up, and now there was this untraceable pistol that she smuggled on board airplanes, concealed in some very effective but simple containers. Airport scanners would show metal, but if a security guard was suspicious enough to check, he or she would find only the normal female styling aids. The hair spray can actually sprayed, and he didn't doubt the blow-dryer would work, too.
If Sunny could get a pistol on board a plane, then others could, too. He went cold at the thought of how many weapons must be flying around at any given time. Airport security wasn't his line of work, but damn if he wasn't going to make it a point to kick some asses over this.
He shoved his anger aside so he could concentrate on this assignment. He hoped he hadn't blown it by losing his temper with her, but his disillusionment had been too sharp for him to contain. The pleasure of the night they had just spent together should more than outweigh their first argument. Her inexperience with men worked against her; she would be easy to manipulate, where a seasoned veteran of the mattress wars would be more wary and blasé about their lovemaking. He still held all the trump cards, and soon he would be playing them.
He reached a particular point in the canyon and positioned himself so he was in the deepest morning shadows. Sunny couldn't catch him unawares here, and he had a clear line of sight to a certain rock on the rim of the canyon. He took a laser light from his pocket, a pencil-thin tube about two inches long that, when clicked, emitted an extraordinarily bright finger of light.
He aimed it at the rock on the rim and began clicking, sending dashes of light in the code he and Zane had agreed on at the beginning of the plan. Every day he signalled Zane, both to let him know that everything was all right and that they shouldn't be rescued yet.
There was an answering flash, message received. No matter how closely he watched that rock, he never saw any movement, though he knew Zane would have immediately pulled back. He himself was damn good at moving

around undetected, but Zane was extraordinary even for a SEAL. There was no one else on this earth Chance would rather have beside him in a fight than Zane.

That mission accomplished, Chance settled down in some cover where he could watch the trickle of water. Since the traps hadn't been productive overnight, he really did need to shoot something for supper. He was willing to starve to achieve his ends--but only if he had to. If a bunny rabbit showed its face, it was history.

As Sunny walked the canyon floor, picking up what sticks she could find, she studied the rock walls, looking for a fissure that might have escaped notice, an animal trail, anything that might point the way to freedom. If they only had some rock-climbing gear, she thought wistfully. A rope, cleats, anything. She had tried to anticipate any possible need when she packed her bag, but somehow being trapped in a box canyon hadn't occurred to her.

For the most part, the walls were perpendicular. Even when they slanted a little, the angle wasn't much off ninety degrees. Erosion from wind and rain had, over millions of years, cut grooves in the rock that looked like ripples in water. The only sign the canyon wasn't impregnable was the occasional little heap of rubble where smaller rocks had crumbled and fallen.

She had passed several of those small heaps before the light went on.

A fragile stirring of hope made her stomach tighten as she investigated one scattered pile of rock. It looked as if a larger boulder had fallen from the rim and shattered on impact. She picked up a fist-sized rock and rubbed her thumb over the surface, finding it gritty, the texture of sandpaper.

Sandstone, she thought. It was a lovely pink color. It was also soft.

Just to be certain, she banged the rock down on a larger rock, and it broke into several pieces.

This site was no good; it was too steep. She walked along the wall, looking up at the rim and trying to find a place where the wall slanted back just a little. That was all she asked; just a little slant, enough that the angle wasn't so extreme.

There. One of the ripples curved backward, and when she picked her way through rocks and bushes to investigate she saw the opportunity for which she had been looking. She ran her hand over the rock, exulting in the sandpaper texture of it under her palm. Maybe, just maybe…

She ran back to the camp and grabbed the curling iron out of the bag. Chance hadn't asked, but the pistol wasn't the only weapon she carried.

Quickly she unscrewed the metal barrel from the handle and removed a knife from the interior. It was a slender blade, made for slicing rather than hacking, but sharp and almost indestructible.

Her idea registered somewhere between being a long shot and just plain crazy, but it was the only idea she'd had that was even remotely possible. At least she would be doing *something,* rather than just waiting around for a rescue that might never happen.

She needed gloves to protect her hands, but she didn't have any. Hastily she opened the first-aid box and took out the roll of gauze. She wrapped the gauze around her palms and wove it in and around her fingers, then taped the loose ends. The result was crude but workable, she thought. She had seen the gloves rock climbers wore, with their fingers and thumbs left free; this makeshift approximation would have to do. She might wear blisters on her hands, anyway, but that was a small price to pay if they could get out of here.

Knife in hand, she went back to her chosen point of attack and tried to figure out the best way to do this. She needed another rock, she realized, one that wasn't soft. Anything that crumbled would be useless. She scouted around and finally found a pitted, dark gray rock that was about the size of a grapefruit, heavy enough to do the job.

Digging the point of the knife into the soft sandstone of the wall, she gripped the rock with her right hand and pounded it against the knife, driving the blade deeper. She jerked the blade out, moved it a little to the right, and pounded it in again. The next time she drove the knife in at a right angle to the original gouge, and hammered it downward. A chunk of sandstone broke loose, leaving a nice little gouge in the rock.

"This just might work," Sunny said aloud, and set herself to the task. She didn't let herself think how long it would take to carve handholds out of the rock all the way to the top, or if it was even possible. She was going to try; she owed it to Margreta, and to herself, to do everything she could to get out of this canyon.

Almost two hours later, the sharp crack of a pistol shot reverberated through the canyon, startling her so much that she nearly fell. She clung to the rock, her cheek pressed against the rough surface. Her heart pounded from the close call. She wasn't that high, only about ten feet, but the canyon floor was jagged with rock, and any fall was certain to cause injuries.

She wiped the sweat from her face. The temperature was rising by the minute, and the rock was getting hotter and hotter. Standing with her toes wedged into the gouges she had hammered out of the rock, she had to lean inward against the rock to brace herself, because she had to have both hands free to wield the knife and the rock. She couldn't put nearly as much effort into it now, or the impact would jar her from her perch.

Panting, she reached over her head and blindly swung the rock. Because she had to press herself to the rock to keep her balance, she couldn't see to aim. Sometimes she hit the target and the knife bit into the rock; sometimes she hit her own hand. There had to be a better way to do this, but she couldn't think of one. She was an expert at working with what she had; she could do it this time, too. All she had to do was be careful, and patient.

"I can do this," she whispered.

Chance carried the skinned and cleaned rabbit back to the camp. He had also found a prickly pear cactus and cut off two of the stems, sticking himself several times as he removed the spines. The prickle pear was both edible and nutritious; it was usually fried, but he figured roasting would do just as well.

His temper had cooled. All right, so she had taken him in. He hadn't blown the plan; everything was still on track. All he had to do was remember not to be fooled by that oh-so-charming face she presented to the world and the plan would work just as he had expected. Maybe he couldn't make her love him, but he could make her think she did, and that was all he needed. A little trust, a little information, and he was in business.

He stepped beneath the overhang, grateful for the relief the shade afforded, and took off his sunglasses. Sunny wasn't here. He turned around and surveyed what he could see of the canyon but couldn't spot her. Her green T-shirt and beige jeans didn't exactly stand out in the terrain, he thought, and abruptly realized what effective camouflage her clothing was. Had she chosen it for that exact purpose? She must have; everything she carried in that bag had been geared toward survival, so why should her clothing be any different?

"Sunny!" he called. His voice echoed, then died. He listened, but there was no answer.

Damn it, where was she?

The fire had died down, which meant she hadn't tended it in quite a while. He bent down and added more sticks, then skewered the rabbit and set it on

the spit, more to keep it away from insects than anything else. The fire was too low to cook it, but the smoke wafting over the meat would give it a good flavor. He wrapped the prickly pear stems in his handkerchief and walked back under the overhang to keep them out of the sun until he was ready to cook them.

The first thing he saw was the open first aid kit.

Alarm punched him in the gut. The paper wrapping had been torn off the roll of gauze; the tape was lying in the lid of the box, and it had also been used, because the end had been left free rather than stuck back to the roll. Another detail caught his eyes. The curling iron had been taken apart; the two halves of it lay in the sand.

He swore viciously. Damn it, he should have remembered the curling iron and not assumed the pistol was the only weapon she had. She couldn't have hidden another pistol in the curling iron, but a knife would fit.

He didn't see any blood, but she must have injured herself somehow. Where in the hell was she?

"Sunny!" he roared as he stepped back out into the sun. Only silence answered him.

He studied the ground. Her footprints were everywhere, of course, but he saw where she had walked to her bag, presumably to get the first aid kit; then the prints led back out into the canyon. She was headed toward the plane.

He wasn't aware of reaching for his pistol. He was so accustomed to it that he didn't notice the weight of it in his hand as he followed her tracks, everything in him focusing on finding her.

If it hadn't been for the tracks, he would have missed her. She was almost at the far end of the canyon, past where the plane sat baking in the sun. The rock walls were scored with hundreds of cuts, and she was tucked inside one of them, clinging to the rock about a dozen feet off the ground.

Astonishment, anxiety, relief and anger all balled together in his gut. In speechless fury he watched her reach over her head and stab a wicked-looking blade into the soft rock, then, still keeping her face pressed against the hot stone, use another rock to try to pound the knife deeper. She hit her hand instead of the knife handle, and the curse she muttered made his eyebrows rise.

Strips of gauze were wound around her hands. He didn't know if she had wrapped her hands because she had hurt them, or if the gauze was an effort

to keep them from being hurt. All he knew was that if she fell she would likely maim herself on the rocks, and that he really, *really* wanted to spank her.

He ruthlessly restrained the urge to yell at her. The last thing he wanted to do was startle her off her precarious perch. Instead, he stuck the pistol in his waistband at the small of his back and worked his way over until he was standing beneath her, so he could catch her if she fell.

He forced himself to sound calm. "Sunny, I'm right beneath you. Can you get down?"

She stopped with her right hand drawn back to deliver another blow with the rock. She didn't look down at him. "Probably," she said. "It has to be easier than getting up here."

He was fairly certain what she was doing, but the sheer magnitude of the task, the physical impossibility of it, left him stunned. Just for confirmation he asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm cutting handholds in the rock, so we can climb out of here." She sounded grim, as if she also realized the odds against success.

His hands clenched into fists as he fought for control. He looked up at the towering wall, at the expanse stretching above her. The dozen feet she had climbed was only about one tenth of the distance needed--and it was the easiest tenth.

He put his hand on the rock and almost jerked back at the heat radiating from it. A new concern gnawed at him. He didn't yell at her that this was the stupidest idea he'd ever heard of, the way he wanted. Instead, he said, "Sweetheart, the rock's too hot. Come down before you're burned."

She laughed, but without her usual humor. "It's too late."

To hell with cajoling. "Throw the knife down and get off that damn rock," he barked in sharp command.

To his surprise, she dropped the knife, then the rock she held in her right hand, tossing both to the side so they wouldn't land near him. Every muscle in her body was taut with strain as she reached for the handholds she had cut and began to work her way down, feeling with her toes for the gouges.

He stood directly beneath her, reaching up for her in case she fell. The muscles in her slender arms flexed, and he realized anew just how strong she was. One didn't get that kind of strength with a once-in-a-while jog or the occasional workout in a gym. It took dedication and time; he knew, because he kept himself in top physical condition. Her normal routine

would be at least an hour of work, maybe two, every day. For all he knew, while he had been checking the traps she had been doing pushups.
For all the gut-deep burn of his anger, it was overridden by his concern as he watched her inch her way down the face of the rock. She was careful and took her time, despite the fact that he knew the rock was scorching her fingers. He didn't speak again, not wanting to distract her; he simply waited, not very patiently, for her to get within his reach.
When she did, he caught her feet and guided them to the next gouges.
"Thanks," she panted, and worked her way down another foot.
That was enough. He caught her around the knees and scooped her off the rock. She shrieked, fighting for her balance, but now that he had her in his grip he wasn't about to let her go. Before she could catch her breath, he turned her and tossed her face down over his shoulder.
"Hey!" The indignant protest was muffled against his back.
"Just shut up," he said between his teeth as he dipped down to pick up her knife, then set off for the camp. "You scared the hell out of me."
"Good. You had too much hell in you, anyway." She clutched him around the waist to steady herself. He just hoped she didn't grab the pistol out of his waistband and shoot him, since it was so close to hand.
"Damn it, don't you dare joke about it!" Her upturned bottom was very close to his hand. Temptation gnawed at him. Now that he had her down, he was shaking, and he wanted some retribution for having been put through that kind of anxiety. He put his hand on her butt and indulged in a few moments of fantasy, which involved her jeans around her knees and her bent over his lap.
He realized he was stroking his palm over the round curves of her buttocks and regretfully gave up on his fantasy. Some things weren't going to happen. After he tended her hands and got through raising hell with her for taking such a risk, he fully intended to burn off his fright and anger with an hour or two on the blanket with her.
How could he still want her so much? This wasn't part of the job; he could live with it, if it had been. This was obsession, deep and burning and gut-twisting. He had tried to put a light face on it, for her benefit, but if she had been more experienced, she would have known a man didn't make love to a woman five times during the night just because she was available. At this rate, those three dozen condoms wouldn't last even a week.

He had already used six, and it might take two or three more to get him settled down after the scare she had given him.
The hard fact of it was, a man didn't make love to a woman that often unless he was putting his brand on her.
This wouldn't work. Couldn't work. He had to get himself under control, stay focused on the job.
He heard her sniffing as they neared the camp. "Are you *crazy?"* he demanded incredulously.
She sniffed again. "Don't be silly. What's that smell?" She inhaled deeply. "It smells like… food."
Despite himself, a smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "I shot a rabbit."
There was a small disruption on his shoulder as she twisted around so she could see the fire. Her squeal of delight almost punctured his eardrums, and his smile grew. He couldn't stop himself from enjoying her; he had never before met anyone who took such joy in life, who was so vibrantly alive herself. How she could be a part of a network devoted to taking lives was beyond his understanding.
He dumped her on the ground under the overhang and squatted beside her, taking both her hands in his and turning them up for his inspection. He barely controlled a wince. Her fingers were not only scorched from the hot rock, they were scraped raw and bleeding.
Fury erupted in him again, a flash fire of temper at seeing the damage she had done to herself. He surged to his feet. "Of all the stupid, lame-brained…! What in hell were you thinking? You weren't thinking at all, from the looks of it! Damn it, Sunny, you risked your life pulling this stupid stunt--"
"It wasn't stupid," she shouted, shooting to her feet to face him, her brilliant eyes narrowed. She clenched her bleeding hands into fists. "I know the risks. I also know it's my only hope of getting out of this damn canyon before it's too late!"
"Too late for what?" he yelled back. "Do you have a date this weekend or something?" The words were heavy with sarcasm.
"Yeah! It just so happens I do!" Breathing hard, she glared at him. "My sister is supposed to call."

Chapter Ten

A sister? Chance stared at her. His investigation hadn't turned up any information about a sister. The Millers hadn't had any children of their own, and he had found adoption papers only on Sunny. His mind raced. "You said you didn't have any family." She gave him a stony look. "Well, I have a sister." Yeah, right. "You'd risk your life for a phone call?" Some terrorist act was being planned after all, he thought with a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. That was why she'd been lugging the tent around. He didn't know how the tent fit into the scheme, but evidently she had been planning to drop out of sight.

"I would for this one." She wheeled away, every line of her body tense. "I have to try. Margreta calls my cell phone every week at the same time. It's how we know the other is still alive." She turned back to him and shouted, "If I don't answer that call, she'll think I'm dead!"

Whoa. Once again, the pieces of the puzzle that was Sunny had been scattered. Margreta? Was that a code name? He searched his memory, which was extensive, but couldn't find anything or anyone named Margreta. Sunny was so damned convincing…

"Why would she think you're dead?" he demanded. "You might just be in a place that doesn't have a signal--like here. What is she, some kind of nutcase?"

"I make certain I'm always somewhere that has a signal. And, no, she isn't a *nutcase!"* She threw the words back at him like bullets, her mouth twisted with fury at him, at the situation, at her own helplessness. "Her problem is the same as mine--we're our father's daughters!"

His pulse leaped. There it was, out in the open, just like that. He hadn't needed seduction; anger had done the job. "Your father?" he asked carefully. Tears glittered in her eyes, dripped down her cheeks. She dashed them away with a furious gesture. "Our father," she said bitterly. "We've been running from him all our lives."

The pieces of the puzzle jumped about a little more, as if a fist had slammed down and jarred them. Easy, he cautioned himself. Don't seem too interested. Find out exactly what she means; she could be referring to his influence. "What do you mean, running?"

"I mean running. Hiding." She wiped away more tears. "Father dear is a terrorist. He'll kill us if he ever finds us."

Chance gently cleaned her hands with the alcohol wipes from the first aid kit, soothed the red places with burn ointment and the raw spots with antibiotic cream. The gauze she'd wrapped around her hands had protected her palms, but her fingers were a mess. Sunny felt a little bewildered. One minute they had been yelling at each other, the next she had been locked against him, his arms like a vise around her. His heart had been pounding like a runaway horse.

Since then he had been as tender as a mother with a child, rocking her in comfort, cuddling her, drying her tears. The emotional firestorm that had burned through her had left her feeling numb and disoriented; she let him do whatever he wanted without offering a protest, not that she had any reason to protest. It felt good to lean on him.

Satisfied with the care he had given her hands, he left her sitting on the rock while he added some fuel to the fire and turned the rabbit on the spit. Coming back under the overhang, he spread the blanket against the wall, scooped her into his arms, and settled on the blanket with her cradled against him. He propped his back against the wall, arranged her so she was draped half across his lap and lifted her face for a light kiss.

She managed a shaky smile. "What was that? A kiss to make it better?"

He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip, his expression strangely intent as if studying her. "Something like that."

"I'm sorry for crying all over you. I usually handle things better than this."

"Tell me what's going on," he said quietly. "What's this about your father?"

She leaned her head on his shoulder, grateful for his strength. "Hard to believe, isn't it? But he's the leader of a terrorist group that has done some awful things. His name is Crispin Hauer."

"I've never heard of him," Chance lied.

"He operates mostly in Europe, but his network extends to the States. He even has someone planted in the FBI." She was unable to keep the raw bitterness out of her voice. "Why do you think I don't have a license for that pistol? I don't know who the plant is, how high he ranks, but I do know he's in a position to learn if the FBI gets any information Hauer wants. I didn't want to be in any database, in case he found out who adopted me and what name I'm using."

"So he doesn't know who you are?"

She shook her head. She had spent a lifetime keeping all her fear and worry bottled up inside her, and now she couldn't seem to stop it from spewing

out. "My mother took Margreta and left him before I was born. I've never met him. She was five months pregnant with me when she ran."
"What did she do?"
"She managed to lose herself. America's a big place. She stayed on the move, changing her name, paying with cash she had taken from his safe. When I was born, she intended to have me by herself, in the motel room she'd taken for the night. But I wouldn't come, the labor just kept on and on, and she knew something was wrong. Margreta was hungry and scared, crying. So she called 911."
He wound a strand of golden hair around his finger. "And was there something wrong?"
"I was breech. She had a C-section. While she was groggy from the drugs, they asked her the father's name and she didn't think to make up a name, just blurted out *his.* So that's how I got into the system, and how he knows about me."
"How do you know he knows?"
"I was almost caught, once." She shivered against him, and he held her closer. "He sent three men. We were in… Indianapolis, I think. I was five. Mom had bought an old car and we were going somewhere. We were always on the move. We got boxed in, in traffic. She saw them get out of their cars. She had taught us what to do if she ever told us to run. She dragged us out of the car and screamed 'Run!' I did, but Margreta started crying and grabbed Mom. So Mom took off running with Margreta. Two men went after them, and one came after me." She began shuddering. "I hid in an alley, under some garbage. I could hear him calling me, his voice soft like he was singing. 'Sonia, Sonia.' Over and over. They knew my name. I waited forever, and finally he went away."
"How did your mother find you again? Or was she caught?"
"No, she and Margreta got away, too. Mom taught herself street smarts, and she never went anywhere that she wasn't always checking out ways to escape."
He knew what that was like, Chance thought.
"I stayed in my hiding place. Mom had told us that sometimes, after we thought they were gone, the bad men would still be there watching, waiting to see if we came out. So I thought the bad men might be watching, and I stayed as still as I could. I don't think it was winter, because I wasn't wearing a coat, but when night fell I got cold. I was scared and hungry and

didn't know if I'd ever see Mom again. I didn't leave, though, and finally I heard her calling me. She must have noticed where I ran and worked her way back when she thought it was safe. All I knew was that she'd found me. After that was when she decided it wasn't safe to keep us with her anymore, so she began looking for someone to adopt us."

Chance frowned. He hadn't found a record of any adoption but hers. "The same family took both of you?"

"Yes, but I was the only one adopted. Margreta wouldn't." Her voice was soft. "Margreta… remembers things. She had lost everything except Mom, so I guess she clung more than I did. She had a hard time adapting." She shrugged. "Having grown up the way I did, I can adjust to pretty much anything."

Meaning she had taught herself not to cling. Instead, with her sunny personality, she had found joy and beauty wherever she could. He held her closer, letting her cling to him. "But… you said he was trying to kill you. It sounds as if he was trying very hard to get you back."

She shook her head. "He was trying to get *Margreta* back. He didn't know me. I was just a means he could have used to force Mom to give Margreta back to him. That's all he would want with me now, to find Margreta. If I was caught, when he found out I don't know where she is, I'd be worthless to him."

"You don't know?" he asked, startled.

"It's safer that way. I haven't seen her in years." Unconscious longing for her sister was in her voice. "She has my cell phone number, and she calls me once a week. So long as I answer the call, she knows everything is all right."

"But you don't know how to get in touch with her?"

"No. I can't tell them what I don't know. I move around a lot, so a cell phone was the best way for us. I keep an apartment in Chicago, the tiniest, cheapest place I could find, but I don't live there. It's more of a decoy than anything else. I suppose if I live anywhere it's in Atlanta, but I take all the assignments I can get. I seldom spend more than one night at a time in one place."

"How would he find you now, since your name has been changed? Unless he knows who adopted you, but how could he find that out?" Chance himself had found her only because of the incident in Chicago, when her courier package was stolen and he checked her out. As soon as he said it,

though, he knew that the mole in the *FBI*--and he would damn sure find out who *that* was--had probably done the same checking. Had he gone as deep in the layers of bureaucracy as Chance had, to the point of hacking into those sealed adoption records? Sunny's cover might have been blown. He wondered if she realized it yet.

"I don't know. I just know I can't afford to assume I'm safe until I hear he's dead."

"What about your mom? And Margreta?"

"Mom's dead." Sunny paused, and he felt her inhale as if bracing herself. "They caught her. She committed suicide rather than give up any information on us. She had told us she would--and she did."

She stopped, and Chance gave her time to deal with the bleakness he heard in her voice. Finally she said, "Margreta is using another name, I just don't know what it is. She has a heart condition, so it's better if she stays in one location."

Margreta was living a fairly normal life, he thought, while Sunny was on the move, always looking over her shoulder. That was what she had known since birth, the way she had been taught to handle the situation. But what about the years they had spent with the Millers? Had her life been normal then?

She answered those questions herself. "I miss having a home," she said wistfully. "But if you stay in one place you get to know people, form relationships. I couldn't risk someone else's life that way. God forbid I should get married, have children. If Hauer ever found me--" She broke off, shuddering at the thought of what Hauer was capable of doing to someone she loved in order to get the answers he wanted.

One thing didn't make sense, Chance thought. Hauer was vicious and crazy and cunning, and would go to any lengths to recover his daughter. But why Margreta, and not Sunny, too? "Why is he so fixated on your sister?"

"Can't you guess?" she asked rawly, and began shuddering again. "That's why Mom took Margreta and ran. She found him with her, doing… things. Margreta was only four. He had evidently been abusing her for quite a while, maybe even most of her life. By then Mom had already found out some of what he was, but she hadn't worked up the nerve to leave. After she found him with Margreta, she didn't have a choice." Her voice dropped to an agonized whisper. "Margreta remembers."

Chance felt sick to his stomach. So in addition to being a vicious, murdering bastard, Hauer was also a pervert, a child molester. Killing was too good for him; he deserved to be dismembered--slowly.

Worn out by both physical labor and her emotional storm, Sunny drifted to sleep. Chance held her, content to let her rest. The fire needed more fuel, but so what? Holding her was more important. Thinking his way through this was more important.

First and foremost, he believed every word she'd said. Her emotions had been too raw and honest for any of it to have been faked. For the first time, all the pieces of the puzzle fit together, and his relief was staggering. Sunny was innocent. She had nothing to do with her father, had never seen him, had spent her entire life running from him. That was why she lugged around a tent, with basic survival provisions; she was ready to disappear at any given moment, to literally go to ground and live out in the forest somewhere until she thought it was safe to surface and rebuild her life yet again.

She had no way of contacting Hauer. The only way to get to him, then, was to use her as bait. And considering how she felt about her father, she would never, under any circumstances, agree to any plan that brought her to his attention.

He would have to do it without her agreement, Chance thought grimly. He didn't like using her, but the stakes were too high to abandon. Hauer couldn't be left free to continue wreaking his destruction on the world. How many innocent people would die this year alone if he wasn't caught?

There was no point in staying here any longer; he'd found out what he needed to know. Zane wouldn't check in again, though, until tomorrow morning, so they were stuck until then. He adjusted Sunny in his arms and rested his face against the top of her head. He would use the time to formulate his game plan--and to use as many of those condoms as possible.

"Get away from me," Sunny grumbled the next morning, turning her head away from his kiss. She pried his hand off her breast. "Don't touch me, you--you *mink."*

Chance snorted with laughter.

She pulled his chest hair.

"Ouch!" He drew back as far as he could in the small confines of the tent. "That hurt."

"Good! I don't think I can walk." Quick as a snake, her hand darted out and pulled his chest hair again. "This way, you can have as much fun as I'm

having."
"Sunny," he said in a cajoling tone.
"Don't 'Sunny' me," she warned, fighting her way into her clothes. Since they barely had room to move, he began dodging elbows and knees, and his hands slipped over some very interesting places. "Stop it! I mean it, Chance! I'm too sore for any more monkey business."
More to tease her than anything else, he zeroed in on an interesting place that had her squealing. She shot out of the tent, and he collapsed on his back, laughing--until she raised the tent flap and dashed some cold water on him.
"There," she said, hugely satisfied by his yelp. "One cold shower, just what you needed." Then she ran.
If she thought the fact that he was naked would hamper his pursuit, she found out differently. He snatched up a bottle of water as he passed by their cache of supplies and caught her before she had gone fifty yards. She was laughing like a maniac, otherwise she might have gotten away. He held her with one arm and poured the water over her head. It was ice-cold from having been left out all night, and she shrieked and sputtered and giggled, clinging to him when her legs went weak from so much laughter.
"Too sore to walk, huh?" he demanded.
"I w-wasn't walking," she said, giggling as she pushed her wet hair out of her face. Cold droplets splattered on him, and he shivered.
"Damn, it's cold," he said. The sun was barely up, so the temperature was probably in the forties.
She slapped his butt. "Then get some clothes on. What do you think this is, a nudist colony?"
He draped his arm around her shoulders, and they walked back to the camp. Her playfulness delighted him; hell, everything about her delighted him, from her wit to her willingness to laugh. And the sex--God, the sex was unbelievable. He didn't doubt she was sore, because *he* was. Last night had been a night to remember.
When she awakened yesterday afternoon she had been naturally melancholy, the normal aftermath of intense emotions. He hadn't talked much, letting her relax. She went with him to check the traps, which were still empty, and they had bathed together. After a quiet supper of rabbit and cactus they went to bed, and he had devoted the rest of the night to raising her spirits. His efforts had worked.

"How are your hands?" he asked. If she could pull his chest hairs and slap his butt, the antibiotic cream must have worked wonders.
She held them out, palms up, so he could see. The redness from the burns was gone, and her raw fingertips looked slick and shiny. "I'll wrap Band-Aids around them before I get started," she said.
"Get started doing what?"
She gave him a startled look. "Cutting handholds in the rock, of course."
He was stunned. He stared at her, unable to believe what he was hearing. "You're not climbing back on that damn wall!" he snapped.
Her eyebrows rose in what he now recognized as her "the-hell-you-say" look. "Yes, I am."
He ground his teeth. He couldn't tell her they would be "rescued" today, but no way was he letting her wear herself out hacking holes in rock or put herself at that kind of risk.
"I'll do it," he growled.
"I'm smaller," she immediately objected. "It's safer for me."
She was trying to protect him again. He felt like beating his head against a rock in frustration.
"No, it isn't," he barked. "Look, there's no way you can cut enough handholds for us to climb out of here in the next two days. You got, what, twelve feet yesterday? If you managed twelve feet a day--and you wouldn't get that much done today, with your hands the way they are--it would take you over a week to reach the top. That's if--*if*-- you didn't fall and kill yourself."
"So what am I supposed to do?" she shot back. "Just give up?"
"Today you aren't going to do a damn thing. You're going to let your hands heal if I have to tie you to a rock, is that clear?"
She looked as if she wanted to argue, but he was a lot bigger than she was, and maybe she could tell by his expression that he meant exactly what he said. "All right," she muttered. "Just for today."
He hoped she would keep her word, because he would have to leave her alone while he went to the spot where he signaled Zane. He would just have to risk it, but there would be hell to pay if he came back to find her on that rock.
He quickly dressed, shivering, and they ate another cold breakfast of water and nutrition bar, since there wasn't anything left of the rabbit from the

night before. Tomorrow morning, he promised himself, breakfast would be bacon and eggs, with a mountain of hash browns and a pot of hot coffee.
"I'm going to check the traps," he said, though he knew there wouldn't be anything in them. When he'd checked them the afternoon before, knowing they would be leaving here today, he had quietly released them so they couldn't be sprung. "Just tend to the fire and keep it smoking. You take it easy today, and I'll wash our clothes this afternoon." That was a safe promise to make.
"It's a deal," she said, but he could tell she was thinking about Margreta.
He left her sitting by the fire. It was a good ten-minute walk to the designated spot, but he hurried, unwilling to leave her to her own devices for so long. Taking the laser light from his pocket, he aimed it toward the rock on the rim and began flashing the pickup signal. Immediately Zane flashed back asking for confirmation, to make certain there wasn't an error. After all, they hadn't expected this to happen so fast. Chance flashed the signal again and this time received an okay.
He dropped the light back in his pocket. He didn't know how long it would take for Zane to arrange the pickup, but probably not long. Knowing Zane, everything was already in place,
He was walking back to the camp when the small twin-engine plane flew over. A grin spread across his face. That was Zane for you!
He began running, knowing Sunny would be beside herself. He heard her shrieking before he could see her; then she came into view, jumping in her glee as she came to meet him. "He saw me!" she screamed, laughing and crying at the same time. "He waggled the wings! He'll come back for us, won't he?"
He caught her as she hurled herself into his arms and couldn't stop himself from planting a long, hard kiss on that laughing mouth. "He'll come back," he said. "Unless he thought you were just waving hello at him." The opportunity to tease her was too great to resist, considering she had pulled his chest hair and poured cold water on him. He'd retaliated for the cold water; this was for the hair-pulling.
She looked stricken, the laughter wiped from her face as if it had never been. "Oh, no," she whispered.
He didn't have the heart to keep up the pretense. "Of course he'll come back," he chided. "Waggling the wings was the signal that he saw you and would send help."

"Are you sure?" she asked, blinking back tears.
"I promise."
"I'll get you for this."
He had to kiss her again, and he didn't stop until she had melted against him, her arms locked around his neck. He hadn't thought he would be interested in sex for quite a while, not after last night, but she proved him wrong.
He huffed out a breath and released her. "Stop manhandling me, you hussy. We have to get packed."
The smile she gave him was brilliant, like the sun rising, and it warmed him all the way through.
They gathered their belongings. Chance returned her pistol to her, and watched her break it down and store the pieces in their hiding places. Then they walked back to the plane and waited.
Rescue came in the form of a helicopter, the blades beating a thumping rhythm in the desert air, the canyon echoing with the sound. It hovered briefly over them, then lowered itself like a giant mosquito. Sand whipped into their air, stinging them, and Sunny hid her face against his shut.
A sixtyish man with a friendly face and graying beard hopped out of the bird. "You folks need some help?" he called.
"Sure do," Chance answered.
When he was closer, the man stuck out his hand. "Charlie Jones, Civil Air Patrol. We've been looking for you for a couple of days. Didn't expect to find you this far south."
"I veered off course looking for a place to land. Fuel pump went out."
"In that case, you're mighty lucky. That's rough territory out there. This might be the only spot in a hundred miles when you could have landed. Come on. I expect you folks are ready for a shower and some food."
Chance held out his hand to Sunny, and she gave him that brilliant smile again as she put her hand in his and they walked to the helicopter.

Chapter Eleven

Sunny was almost dizzy with mingled relief and regret; relief because she wouldn't miss Margreta's call, regret because this time with Chance, even under such trying conditions, had been the happiest, most fulfilling few

days of her life and they were now over. She had known from the beginning that their time together was limited; once they were back in the regular world, all the old rules came back into play.

She couldn't, wouldn't risk his life by letting him be a part of hers. He had given her two nights of bliss, and a lifetime of memories. That would have to be enough, no matter how much she was already aching at the thought of walking away from him and never seeing him again. At least now she knew what it was to love a man, to revel in his existence, and she was richer for it. She wouldn't have traded these few days with him for any amount of money, no matter the price in loneliness she would have to pay.

So she held his hand all during the helicopter flight to a small, ramshackle air field. The only building was made of corrugated metal, rounded at the top like a Quonset hut, with a wooden addition, housing the office, added to one side. If the addition had ever seen a coat of paint, the evidence of it had long since been blasted off by the wind-driven sand. After living under a rock for three days, Sunny thought the little field looked like heaven.

Seven airplanes, of various makes and vintage, were parked with almost military precision along one side of the air strip. Charlie Jones landed his helicopter on a concrete pad behind the corrugated building. Three men, one wiping his greasy hands on a stained red rag, left the building by the back door and walked toward them, ducking their heads against the turbulence of the rotor blades.

Charlie took off his headset and hopped out of the chopper, smiling. "Found 'em," he called cheerfully to the approaching trio. To Chance and Sunny he said, "The two on the left fly CAP with me. Saul Osgood, far left, is the one who spotted your smoke this morning and radioed in your position. Ed Lynch is the one in the middle. The one with the greasy hands is Rabbit Warren, the mechanic here. His real name's Jerome, but he'll fight you if you call him that."

Sunny almost laughed aloud. She controlled the urge, but she was careful not to look at Chance as they shook hands with the three men and introduced themselves.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw your bird in that little bitty narrow canyon," Saul Osgood said, shaking his head after Chance told them what had happened. "How you ever found it is a miracle. And to make a dead stick landing--" He shook his head again. "Someone was sure looking out for you, is all I can say."

"So you think it was your fuel pump went out, huh?" Rabbit Warren asked as they walked into the hangar.
"Everything else checked out."
"It's a Skylane, right?"
"Yeah." Chance told him the model, and Rabbit stroked his lean jaw.
"I might have a pump for that. There was a feller in here last year flying a Skylane. He ordered some parts for it, then left and never did come back for 'em. I'll check while you folks are refreshing yourselves."
If "refreshing" themselves had anything to do with a bathroom, Sunny was more than ready. Chance gave her the first turn, and she almost crooned with delight at the copious water that gushed from the faucet at a turn of the handle. And a flush toilet! She was in heaven.
After Chance had his turn, they indulged in ice-cold soft drinks from a battered vending machine. A snack machine stood beside it, and Sunny surveyed the offerings with an eager eye. "How much change do you have?" she asked Chance.
He delved his hand into his front pocket and pulled out his change, holding it out for Sunny to see. She picked out two quarters and fed them into the machine, punched a button, and a pack of cheese and crackers fell to the tray.
"I thought you'd go for a candy bar," Chance said as he fed more quarters into the machine and got a pack of peanuts.
"That's next." She raised her eyebrows. "You didn't think I was going to stop with cheese and crackers, did you?"
Ed Lynch opened the door to the office. "Is there anyone you need to call? We've notified the FAA and called off the search, but if you have family you want to talk to, feel free to use the phone."
"I need to call the office," Sunny said, pulling a wry face. She had a good excuse--a very good one--for not making her delivery, but the bottom line was that a customer was unhappy.
Chance waited until she was on the phone, then strolled over to where Rabbit was making a show of looking for a fuel pump. His men were good, Chance thought; they had played this so naturally they should have been on the stage. Of course, subterfuge was their lives, just as it was his.
"Everything's good," Chance said quietly. "You guys can clear out after Charlie takes us back to the canyon with the fuel pump."

Rabbit pulled a greasy box from a makeshift shelf that was piled with an assortment of parts and tools. Over Chance's shoulder he eyed Sunny through the windowed door to the office. "You pulled a real hardship assignment this time, boss," he said admiringly. "That's the sweetest face I've seen in a while."

"There's a sweet person behind it, too," Chance said as he took the box. "She's not part of the organization."

Rabbit's eyebrows went up. "So all this was for nothing."

"No, everything is still a go. The only thing that's changed is her role. Instead of being the key, she's the bait. She's been on the run from Hauer her entire life. If he knows where she is, he'll come out of hiding." He glanced around to make certain she was still on the phone. "Spread the word that we're going to be extra careful with her, make sure she doesn't get hurt. Hauer has already caused enough damage in her life."

And he himself was going to cause more, Chance thought bleakly. As terrified as she was of Hauer, when she learned Chance had deliberately leaked her location to the man she was going to go ballistic. That would definitely be the end of *this* relationship, but he'd known from the beginning this was only temporary. Like her, he wasn't in any position for permanent ties. Sunny's circumstances would change when her father was gone, but Chance's wouldn't; he would move on to another crisis, another security threat.

Just because he was her first lover didn't mean he would be her last.

The idea shot a bolt of pure rage through him. Damn it, she was *his*--he caught the possessive thought and strangled it. Sunny wasn't his; she was her own person, and if she found happiness in her life with some other man, he should be happy for her. She more than deserved anything good that came her way.

He wasn't happy. Her laughter, her passion--he wanted it all for himself. Knowing he couldn't have her was already eating a huge hole out of his insides, but she deserved far better than a mongrel with blood on his hands. He had chosen his world, and he was well-suited for it. He was accustomed to living a lie, to pretending to be someone he wasn't, to always staying in the shadows. Sunny was… sunny, both by name and by nature. He would enjoy her while he had her--by God, he'd enjoy her--but in the end he knew he would have to walk away.

Sunny ended the call and left the office. Hearing the door close, he turned to watch her approach, and he let himself savor the pleasure of just watching her.
She wrinkled her nose. "Everyone's glad the plane didn't crash, that I'm alive--but the fact that I didn't die makes it a little less forgivable that I didn't deliver the package on time. The customer still wants it, though, so I still have to go to Seattle."
She came to him as naturally as if they had been together for years, and just as naturally he found himself slipping his arm around her slender waist.
"Screw 'em," he said dismissively. He lifted the box. "Guess what I have."
She beamed. "The keys to the kingdom."
"Close enough. Charlie's going to take me back to the plane so I can swap out the fuel pump. Do you want to go with me, or stay here and rest until I get back?"
"Go with you," she said promptly. "I don't know anything about airplanes, but I can keep you company while you work. Are we coming back here, anyway?"
"Sure. This is as good a place to refuel as any." Plus she wouldn't find out they weren't in Oregon as he'd told her.
"Then I'll leave my bag here, if that's all right with Rabbit." She looked inquiringly at Rabbit, who nodded his head.
"That'll be just fine, ma'am. Put it in the office and it'll be as safe as a baby in the womb."
Sunny walked away to get the bag. She felt safe, Chance realized, otherwise she would never let the bag out of her possession. Except for her worry for Margreta, these last few days she must have felt free, unburdened by the need to constantly look over her shoulder.
He had enjoyed their little adventure, too, every minute of it, because he had known they weren't in any danger. Sunny made him feel more alive than he ever had before, even when he was angry at her because she had just scared him half to death. And when he was inside her--then he was as close to heaven as he was ever likely to get. The pleasure of making love to her was so intense it was almost blinding.
He grinned to himself as he hefted his own overnight bag. No way was he leaving it here; after all, the condoms were in it. No telling what might happen when he and Sunny were alone.

The afternoon was wearing on when Charlie set the helicopter down in the canyon again. He looked up at the light with an experienced pilot's eye. "You think you have enough time to get that fuel pump put on before dark?"
"No problem," Chance said. After all, as he and Charlie both knew, there was nothing wrong with the fuel pump, anyway. He would tinker around for a while, make it look realistic. Sunny wasn't likely to stand at his elbow the entire time, and if she did he would distract her.
He and Sunny jumped out of the helicopter, and he leaned in to get his bag. "See you in a few hours."
"If you don't make it back to the airfield, we know where you are," Charlie said, saluting.
They ducked away from the turbulence as the helicopter lifted away. Sunny pushed her hair away from her face and looked around the canyon, smiling. "Home again," she said, and laughed. "Funny how it looks a lot more inviting now that I know we aren't stuck here."
"I'm going to miss it," he said, winking at her. He carried his bag and the box containing the fuel pump over to the plane. "But we'll find out tonight if a bed is more fun than a tent."
To his surprise, sadness flashed in her eyes. "Chance… once we're away from here…" She shook her head. "It won't be safe."
He checked for a moment, then very deliberately put down the bag and box. Turning back to her, he put his hands on his hips. "If you're saying what I think you're saying, you can just forget about it. You aren't dumping me."
"You know what the situation is! I don't have a choice."
"*I* do. You're not just a fun screw who was available while we were here. I care about you, Sunny," he said softly. "When you look over your shoulder, you're going to see my face. Get used to it."
Tears welled in her brilliant eyes, filling them with diamonds. "I can't," she whispered. "Because I love you. Don't ask me to risk your life, because I can't handle it."
His stomach muscles tightened. He had set out to make her love him, or at least get involved in a torrid affair with him. He had succeeded at doing both. He felt humbled, and exhilarated--and sick, because he was going to betray her.
He had her in his arms before he was aware of moving, and his mouth was on hers. He felt desperate for the taste of her, as if it had been days since he'd kissed her instead of just hours. Her response was immediate and

wholehearted, as she rose on her tiptoes to fit her hips more intimately to his. He tasted the salt of her tears and drew back, rubbing his thumbs across her wet cheeks.
He rested his forehead against hers. "You're forgetting something," he murmured.
She sniffed. "What?"
"I was a ranger, sweetheart. I'm a little harder to kill than your average guy. You need someone watching your back, and I can do it. Think about it. We probably made the news. When we get to Seattle, don't be surprised if there's a television camera crew there. Both our faces will be on television. Besides that, we were reported missing to the FAA, which is federal. Information would have been dug up on both of us. Our names our linked. If the mole in the FBI tumbles to who you are, your father's goons will be after me, anyway--especially if they can't find you."
She went white. "Television?" She looked a lot like her mother; Chance had seen old photos of Pamela Vickery Hauer. Anyone familiar with Pamela would immediately notice the resemblance. As sharp as she was, Sunny also knew the danger of being on television, even a local newscast.
"We're in this together." He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles, then grinned down at her. "Lucky for you, I'm one mean son of a bitch when I need to be--lucky for you, unlucky for them."
Nothing she said would sway him, Sunny thought with despair late that night as she showered in the hotel suite he had booked them into for the night--a suite because it had more than one exit. He had been exactly right about the television news crew. Crews, she corrected herself. News had been slow that day, so every station in Seattle had jumped on the human-interest story. The problem was, so had both national news channels.
She had evaded the cameras as much as possible, but the reporters had seemed fixated on her, shouting questions at her instead of Chance. She would have thought the female reporters, at least, would be all over Chance, but he'd worn such a forbidding expression that no one had approached him. She hadn't answered any questions on camera, though at Chance's whispered suggestion she had given them a quick comment off-camera, for them to use as a filler on their broadcast.
Her one break was that, since it had been so late when they landed, the story didn't make even the late news. But unless something more newsworthy

happened soon, the story would air in just a few hours over millions of breakfast tables countrywide.
She had to assume her cover had been blown. That meant leaving the courier service, moving--not that she had much to move; she had never accumulated many possessions--even changing her name. She would have to build a new identity.
She had always known it could happen, and she had prepared for it, both mentally and with actual paperwork. Changing her name wouldn't change who she was; it was just a tool to use to escape her father.
The real problem was Chance. She couldn't shake him, no matter how she tried, and she knew she was good at that kind of thing. She had tried to lose him at the airport, ducking into a cab when his back was turned. But he seemed to have a sixth sense where she was concerned, and he was sliding in the other door before she could give the driver the address where she had to deliver the courier package. He had remained within touching distance of her until they walked into the hotel room, and she had no doubt that, if she opened the bathroom door, she would find him sprawled across the bed, watching her.
In that, she underestimated him. Just as she began lathering her hair, the shower curtain slid back and he stepped naked into the tub with her. "I thought I'd conserve water and shower with you," he said easily.
"Hah! You're just afraid I'll leave if you shower by yourself," she said, turning her back on him.
A big hand patted her bottom. "You know me so well."
She fought a smile. Damn him, why did he have to be so well-matched to her in every way? She could, and had, run rings around most people, but not Chance.
She hogged the spray, turning the nozzle down to rinse her hair. He waited until she was finished with that, at least, then adjusted the nozzle upward so the water hit him in the chest. It also hit her full in the face. She sputtered and elbowed him. "This is *my* shower, and I didn't invite you. I get control of the nozzle, not you."
She knew challenging him was a mistake. He said, "Oh, yeah?" and the tussle was on. Before she knew it she was giggling, he was laughing, and the bathroom was splattered with water. She had played more with Chance than she had since she'd been a little girl; she felt lighthearted with him, despite her problems. Their wet, naked bodies slid against each other, and

neither of them could get a good grasp on any body part. At least, she couldn't. She suspected he could have won the tussle at any time simply by using his size and strength and wrapping his arms around her, but he held back and played at her level, as if he were used to restraining his strength to accommodate someone weaker than himself.
His hands were everywhere: on her breasts, her bottom, sliding between her legs while she laughed and batted them away. One long finger worked its way inside her and she squealed, trying to twist away while excitement spiraled wildly through her veins. Their naked wrestling match was having a predictable effect on both of them. She grabbed for the nozzle and aimed the blast of water at his face, and while he was trying to deflect the spray she made her escape, hopping out of the tub and snatching up a towel to wrap around her.
He vaulted out of the tub and slammed the door shut just as she reached for it. "You left the shower running," she accused, trying to sidetrack him.
"I'm not the one who turned it on." He grinned and hooked the towel away from her.
"Water's getting all over the floor." She tried to sound disapproving.
"It needed mopping, anyway."
"It did not!" She pushed a strand of dripping wet hair out of her eyes.
"We're going to be kicked out. Water will drip through the floor into the room below and we'll be kicked out."
He grabbed her and swung her around so she was facing the shower. "Turn it off, then, if you're worried."
She did, because she hated to waste the water, and it was making such a mess. "There, I hope you're satisfied."
"Not by a long shot." He turned her to face him, holding her lips against his and angling her torso away from him, so he could look his fill at her. "Have I told you today how damn sexy you are?"
"Today? You've never told me at all!"
"Have so."
"Have not. When?"
"Last night. Several times."
She tried not to be entranced by the way water droplets were clinging to his thick dark lashes. "That doesn't count. Everyone knows you can't believe anything a man says when he's in… uh--"
"You?" he supplied, grinning.

She managed a haughty look. "I was going to say 'extremis,' but I think that applies only to dying."
"Close enough." He looked down at her breasts, his expression altering and the laughter fading. Still holding her anchored to him with one arm, he smoothed a hand up her torso to cup her breasts, and they both watched his long brown fingers curve around the pale globes. "You're sexy," he murmured, a slow, dark note entering his voice. She knew that note well, having heard it many times over the past two nights. "And beautiful. Your breasts are all cream-and-rose colored, until I kiss your nipples. Then they pucker up and turn red like they're begging me to suck them."
Her nipples tightened at his words, the puckered tips flushing with color. He groaned and bent his dark head, water dripping from his hair onto her skin as he kissed both breasts. She was leaning far back over his arm, supported by his arm around her hips and her own desperate grasp on his shoulders. She didn't know how much longer she would be able to stand at all. Her loins throbbed, and she gasped for breath.
"And your ass," he growled. "You have the sweetest little ass." He turned her around so he could stroke the aforementioned buttocks, shaping his palms to the full, cool curves. Sunny's legs trembled, and she grabbed the edge of the vanity for support. The cultured marble slab was a good six feet long, and a mirror covered the entire wall behind it. Sunny barely recognized herself in the naked woman reflected there, a woman whose wet hair dripped water down her back and onto the floor. Her expression was etched with desire, her face flushed and her eyes heavy-lidded.
Chance looked up, and his gaze met hers in the mirror. Electricity sparked between them. "And here," he whispered, sliding one hand around her belly and between her legs. His muscled forearm looked unbelievably powerful against her pale belly, and his big hand totally covered her mound. She felt his fingers sliding between her folds, rubbing her just as she liked. She moaned and collapsed against him, her legs going limp.
"You're so soft and tight," the erotic litany continued in her ear. "I can barely get inside you. But once I do--my heart stops. And I can't breathe. I think I'm going to die, but I can't, because it feels too good to stop." His fingers slid farther, and he pressed two of them inside her.
She arched under the lash of sensation, soaring close to climax as his fingers stretched her. She heard herself cry out, a strained cry that told him exactly how near she was to fulfillment.

"Not yet, not yet," he said urgently, sliding his fingers out of her and bending her forward. He braced her hands on the vanity. "Hold on, sweetheart."
She didn't know if he meant to the vanity, or to her control. Both were impossible. "I can't," she moaned. Her hips moved, undulating, searching for relief. "Chance, I can't--please!"
"I'm here," he said, and he was, dipping down and pushing his muscled thighs between her legs, spreading them. She felt his lower belly against her buttocks, then the smooth, hard entry of his sex. Instinctively she bent forward to aid his penetration, taking all of him deep within her. He began driving, and on the second hard thrust she convulsed, crying out her pleasure. His climax erupted a moment later, and he collapsed over her back, holding himself as deep as he could while he groaned and shook.
Sunny closed her eyes, fighting for breath. Oh God, she loved him so much she ached with it. She wasn't strong enough to send him away, not even for his own protection. If she had been really trying, she could have gotten away from him, but deep down she knew she couldn't give him up. Not yet. Soon. She would have to, to keep him safe.
Just one more day, she thought as tears welled. One more. Then she would go.

Chapter Twelve

Ten days later, Sunny still hadn't managed to shake him. She didn't know if she was losing her touch or if army rangers, even ex ones, were very, very good at not being shaken.

They had left Seattle early the next morning. Sunny was too cautious to fly back to Atlanta; as she had feared, the morning newscasts had been splashed with the "real-life romantic adventure" she and Chance had shared. His name was mentioned, but by some perverse quirk his face was never clearly shown; the camera would catch the back of his head, or while he was in a quarter profile, while hers was broadcast from coast to coast.

One of the a.m. news shows even tracked them down at the hotel, awakening them at three in the morning to ask if they would go to the local affiliate studios for a live interview.

"Hell, no," Chance had growled into the phone before he slammed it down into the cradle.

After that, it had seemed best they remove themselves from the reach of the media. They checked out of the hotel and took a taxi to the airport before dawn. The plane was refueled and ready to go. By the time the sun peeked over the Cascades they were in the air. Chance didn't file a flight plan, so no one had any way of finding out where they were going. Sunny didn't know herself until they landed in Boise, Idaho, where they refurbished their wardrobes. She always carried a lot of cash, for just such a situation, and Chance seemed to have plenty, too. He still had to use his credit card for refueling, so she knew they were leaving a trail, but those records would show only where they had last been, not where they were going.

Chance's presence threw her off her plan. She knew how to disappear by herself; Chance and his airplane complicated things.

From a pay phone in Boise, she called Atlanta and resigned her job, with instructions to deposit her last paycheck into her bank. She would have the money wired to her when she needed it. Sometimes, adrift from the familiar life she had fashioned for herself, she wondered if she was overreacting to the possibility anyone would recognize her. Her mother had been dead for over ten years; there were few people in the world able to see the resemblance. The odds had to be astronomical against one of those few people seeing that brief human-interest story that had been shown for only one day.

But she was still alive because her mother had taught her that any odds at all were unacceptable. So she ran, as she had learned how to do in the first five years of her life. After all, the odds were also against her getting pregnant, yet here she was, waiting for a period that hadn't materialized. They had slipped up twice, only twice: once in the canyon, and in the hotel bathroom in Seattle. The timing hadn't been great for her to get pregnant even if they hadn't used protection at all, so why hadn't her period started? It was due two days ago, and her cycle was relentlessly regular.

She didn't mention it to Chance. She might just be late, for one of the few times in her life since she'd starting having menstrual periods. She had been terrified when she thought they were going to crash; maybe her emotions had disrupted her hormones. It happened.

She might sprout wings and fly, too, she thought in quiet desperation. She was pregnant. There were no signs other than a late period, but she knew it deep down in her bones, as if on some level her body was communicating with the microscopic embryo it harbored.

It would be so easy just to let Chance handle everything. He was good at this, and she had too much on her mind to be effective. She didn't think he'd noticed how easily distracted she'd been these past few days, but then, he didn't know when her period had been due, either.

She had talked to Margreta twice, and told her she was going underground. She would have to arrange for a new cellular account under a different name, with a new number, and do it before the service she now had was disconnected. She had tried to tell Margreta everything that was going on, but her sister, as usual, kept the calls short. Sunny understood. It was difficult for Margreta to handle anything having to do with their father. Maybe one day they would be able to live normal lives, have a normal sisterly relationship; maybe one day Margreta would be able to get past what he had done to her and find some happiness despite him.

Then there was Chance. He had brought sunshine into her life when she hadn't even known she was living in shadows. She had thought she managed quite well, but it was as if B.C., Before Chance, had been in monochrome. Now, A.C., was in vivid technicolor. She slept in his arms every night. She ate her meals with him, quarreled with him, joked with him, made plans with him--nothing long term, but plans nevertheless. Every day she fell more and more in love with him, when she hadn't thought it possible.

Sometimes she actually pinched herself, because he was too good to be true. Men like him didn't come along every day; most women lived their entire lives without meeting a man who could turn their worlds upside down with a glance.

This state of affairs couldn't last much longer, this aimless drifting. For one thing, it was expensive. Chance wasn't earning any money while they were flying from one remote airfield in the country to another, and neither was she. She needed to get the paperwork for her new name, get a job, get a new cellular number--and get an obstetrician, which would cost money. She wondered how her mother had managed, with one frightened, traumatized child in tow, pregnant with another, and without any of the survival skills Sunny possessed. Pamela must have spent years in a state of terror, yet Sunny remembered her mother laughing, playing games with them, and making life fun even while she taught them how to survive. She only hoped she could be half as strong as her mother had been.

She was full of wild hopes these days. She hoped she hadn't been recognized. She hoped her baby would be healthy and happy. Most of all, she hoped she and Chance could build a life together, that he would be thrilled about the baby even though it was unplanned, that he truly cared about her as much as he appeared to. He never actually said he loved her, but it was there in his voice, in his actions, in his eyes and his touch as he made love to her.

Everything had to be all right. It had to. There was too much at stake now.

Sunny slept through the landing as Chance set the plane down in Des Moines. He glanced at her, but she was soundly asleep, like a child, her breathing deep and her cheeks flushed. He let her sleep, knowing what was coming to a head.

The plan was working beautifully. He had arranged for Sunny's face to be broadcast worldwide, and the bait had been taken immediately. His people had tracked two of Hauer's men into the country and maintained discreet but constant surveillance on them. Chance hadn't made it easy for anyone to follow him and Sunny; that would have been too obvious. But he had left a faint trail that, if the bloodhounds were good, they would be able to follow.

Hauer's bloodhounds were good. They had been about a day behind them for about a week now, but until Hauer himself showed up, Chance made sure the hounds never caught up with him.

The news he'd been waiting for had finally come yesterday. Word in the underground of terrorist organizations was that Hauer had disappeared. He hadn't been seen in a few days, and there was a rumor he was in the States planning something big.

Somehow Hauer had slipped out of Europe and into America without being spotted, but now that Chance knew there was a mole in the FBI helping Hauer, he wasn't surprised.

Hauer was too smart to openly join his men, but he would be nearby. He was the type who, when Sunny was captured, would want to interrogate this rebellious daughter himself.

Chance would take him apart with his bare hands before he let that happen. But he would have to let them think they had her, not knowing they were surrounded at all times, at a distance, by his men. Chance just hoped he himself wasn't shot at the beginning, to get him out of the way. If Hauer's men were smart, they would realize they could use threats to Chance to keep Sunny in line, and they had proven they were smart. This was the risky part, but he had taken all the safeguards he could without tipping his hand.

His interlude with Sunny would end tonight, one way or another. If all went well, they would both live through it, and she would be free to live her life out in the open. He just hoped that one day she wouldn't hate him, that she would realize he had done what he had to do in order to capture Hauer. Who knows? Maybe one day he would meet her again.

He guided the Cessna to a stop in its designated spot and killed the engine. Sunny slept on, despite the sudden silence. Maybe he'd cost her too much sleep and it had finally caught up with her, he thought, smiling despite his inner tension. He had glutted himself with sex for the past two weeks, as if subconsciously he had been trying to stockpile memories and sensations for the time when she was no longer there. But as often as he'd had her, he still wanted her. Again. More. He was half hard right now, just thinking about her.

Gently he shook her, and she opened her sleepy eyes with a look of such trust and love that his heart leaped. She sat up, stretching and looking around. "Where are we?"

"Des Moines." Puzzled, he said, "I told you where we were going."

"I remember," she said around a yawn. "I'm just groggy. Wow! That was some nap. I don't usually sleep during the daytime. I must not be getting enough sleep at night." She batted her eyelashes at him. "I wonder why."

"I have no idea," he said, all innocence. He opened the door and climbed out, turning around to hold his hands up for her. She clambered out, and he lifted her to the ground. Looking up at the wide, cerulean-blue sky, he stretched, too, twisting his back to get out the kinks. "It's a pretty day. Want to have a picnic?"
"A what?" She looked at him as if he were speaking a foreign language.
"A picnic. You know, where you sit on the ground and eat with your hands, and fight wild animals for your food."
"Sounds like fun. But haven't we already done that?"
He laughed. "This time we'll do it right--checkered tablecloth, fried chicken, the works."
"All right, I'm game. Where are we going to have this picnic? Beside the runway?"
"Smart-ass. We'll rent a car and go for a drive."
Her eyes began to sparkle as she realized he meant it. That was what he loved best about Sunny, her ability to have fun. "How much time do we have? What time are we leaving?"
"Let's stay for a couple of days. Iowa's a nice place, and my tail could use some time away from that airplane seat."
He handled his business with the airport, then went to a rental car desk and walked away with the keys to a sport utility.
"You rented a *truck*?" Sunny teased when she saw the green Ford Explorer. "Why didn't you get something with style, like a red sports car?"
"Because I'm six-three," he retorted. "My legs don't fit in sports cars."
She had bought a small backpack that she carried instead of the bulky carry-on she had been lugging around. She could get her toiletries and a change of clothes into the backpack, and that was enough for the single night they usually spent in a place. That meant her pistol was always with her, fully assembled when they weren't having to go through x-ray scanners, and he didn't protest. He always carried his own pistol with him, too, tucked into his waistband under his loose shirt. She put the backpack on the floorboard and climbed into the passenger seat, and began pushing buttons and turning knobs, every one she could reach.
Chance got behind the wheel. "I'm afraid to start this thing now. There's no telling what's going to happen."
"Chicken," she said. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"I'm just thankful Explorers don't have ejection seats," he muttered as he turned the key in the ignition. The engine caught immediately. The radio blared, the windshield wipers flopped back and forth at high speed, and the emergency lights began blinking. Sunny laughed as Chance dived for the radio controls and turned the volume down to an acceptable level. She buckled herself into the seat, smiling a very self-satisfied smile.

He had a map from the rental car company, though he already knew exactly where he was going. He had gotten very specific directions from the clerk at the rental agency, so the clerk would remember where they had gone when Hauer's men asked. He had personally scouted out the location before putting the plan into motion. It was in the country, to cut the risk of collateral damage to innocent civilians. There was cover for his men, who would be in place before he and Sunny arrived. And, most important, Hauer and his men couldn't move in without being observed. Chance had enough men in place that an ant couldn't attend this picnic unless he wanted it there. Best of all, he knew Zane was out there somewhere. Zane didn't usually do fieldwork, but in this instance he was here guarding his brother's back. Chance would rather have Zane looking out for him than an entire army; the man was unbelievable, he was so good.

They stopped at a supermarket deli for their picnic supplies. There was even a red-checkered plastic cloth to go on the ground. They bought fried chicken, potato salad, rolls, coleslaw, an apple pie, and some green stuff Sunny called pistachio salad. He knew he wasn't about to touch it. Then he had to buy a small cooler and ice, and some soft drinks to go in it. By the time he got Sunny out of the supermarket, over an hour had passed and he was almost seventy bucks lighter in the wallet.

"We have apple pie," he complained. "Why do we need apples?"

"I'm going to throw them at you," she said. "Or better yet, shoot them off your head."

"If you come near me with an apple, I'll scream," he warned. "And pickled beets? Excuse me, but who eats pickled beets?"

She shrugged. "Someone does, or they wouldn't be on the shelves."

"Have *you* ever eaten pickled beets?" he asked suspiciously.

"Once. They were nasty." She wrinkled her nose at him.

"Then why in hell did you buy them?" he shouted.

"I wanted you to try them."

He should be used to it by now, he thought, but sometimes she still left him speechless. Muttering to himself, he stowed the groceries--including the pickled beets--in the back of the Explorer.
God, he was going to miss her.
She rolled down the window and let the wind blow through her bright hair. She had a happy smile on her face as she looked at everything they passed. Even service stations seemed to interest her, as did the old lady walking a Chihuahua that was so fat its belly almost kept its feet from touching the ground. Sunny giggled about the fat little dog for five minutes.
If it made her laugh like that, he thought, he would eat the damn pickled beets. But he'd damn sure eat something else afterward, because if he got shot, he didn't want pickled beets to be the last thing he tasted.
The late August afternoon was hot when he pulled off the road. A tree-studded field stretched before them. "Let's walk to those trees over there," he said, nodding to a line of trees about a hundred yards away. "See how they're growing, in a line like that? There might be a little creek there."
She looked around. "Shouldn't we ask permission?"
He raised his eyebrows. "Do you see a house anywhere? Who do we ask?"
"Well, all right, but if we get in trouble, it's your fault."
He carried the cooler and most of the food. Sunny slung her backpack on her shoulders, then took charge of the ground cloth and the jar of pickled beets. "I'd better carry these," she said. "You might drop them."
"You could take something else, too," he grunted. This stuff was heavy.
She stretched up to peek in the grocery bag. The apple pie was perched on top of the other stuff. "Nah, you won't drop the pie."
He grumbled all the way to their picnic site, more because she enjoyed it than any other reason. This was the last day she would ever tease him, or he would see that smile, hear that laugh.
"Oh, there *is* a creek!" she exclaimed when they reached the trees. She carefully set the jar of beets down and unfolded the ground cloth, snapping it open in that brisk, economical movement all women seemed to have, and letting it settle on the thick, overgrown grass. A light breeze was blowing, so she anchored the cloth with her backpack on one corner and the jar of beets on the another.
Chance set the cooler and food down and sprawled out on the cloth. "I'm too tired now to enjoy myself," he complained.

She leaned over and kissed him. "You think I don't know what you're up to? Next thing I know you'll get something in your eye, and I'll have to get really, really close to see it. Then your back will need scratching, and you'll have to take off your shut. Before I know it, we'll both be naked and it'll be time to leave, and we won't have had a bite to eat."
He gave her a quizzical look. "You have this all planned out, don't you?"
"Down to the last detail."
"Suits me." He reached for her, but with a spurt of laughter she scooted out of reach. She picked up the jar of beets and looked at him expectantly.
He flopped back with a groan. "Oh, man. Don't tell me you expect me to try them *now."*
"No, I want you to open the jar so *I* can eat them."
"I thought you said they were nasty."
"They are. I want to see if they're as nasty as I remember." She handed him the jar. "If you'll open them for me, I'll let you eat fried chicken and potato salad to build up your strength before I wring you out and hang you up to dry."
He sat up and took the jar. "In your dreams, little miss'don't-touch-me-again-you-lech.' " He put some muscle behind the effort, twisting the lid free.
"I've been sandbagging," she said. "This time, don't even bother begging for mercy."
She reached for the jar. The loosened lid came off, and the jar slipped from her hands. He dived for it, not wanting beets all over everything. Just as he moved, the tree beside him exploded, and a millisecond later he heard the blast of the shot.
He twisted in midair, throwing himself on top of Sunny and rolling with her behind the cover of the tree.

Chapter Thirteen

"Stay down!" Chance barked, shoving her face into the grass.
Sunny couldn't have moved even if she had wanted to, even if his two hundred-plus pounds hadn't been lying on top of her. She was paralyzed, terror freezing in her veins as she realized her worst nightmare had come true; her father had found them, and Chance was nothing more than an

obstacle to be destroyed. That bullet hadn't been aimed at *her.* If she hadn't dropped the jar of beets, if Chance hadn't lunged for it, the slug that blew chunks of wood out of the tree would have blown off half his head.
"Son of a bitch," he muttered above her, his breath stirring her hair. "Sniper."
The earth exploded two inches from her head, clods of dirt flying in her face, tiny pieces of gravel stinging her like bees. Chance literally threw her to the side, rolling with her again; the ground dropped out from beneath her, and her stomach gave a sickening lurch. As suddenly as the fall began, it stopped. She landed hard in three inches of sluggish water.
He had rolled them into the creek, where the banks afforded them more cover. A twist of his powerful body and he was off her, his big pistol in his hand as he flattened himself against the shallow bank. Sunny managed to get to her knees, slipped on the slimy creek bottom, and clambered on her hands and knees to a spot beside him. She felt numb, as if her arms and legs didn't belong to her, yet they were working, moving.
This wasn't real. It couldn't be. How had he found them?
She closed her eyes, fighting the terror. She was a liability to Chance unless she got herself under control. She'd had close calls before and handled herself just fine, but she had never before seen the man she loved almost get killed in front of her. She had never before been pregnant, with so much to lose.
Her teeth were chattering. She clamped her jaw together.
Silence fell over the field. She heard a car drive by on the road, and for a wild moment she wondered why it didn't stop. But why would it? There was nothing the average passerby would notice, no bodies lying around on the highway, no haze of gun smoke hanging over the green grass. There was only silence, as if even the insects had frozen in place, the birds stopped singing; even the breeze had stopped rustling the leaves. It was as if nature held its breath, shocked by the sudden violence.
The shot had come from the direction of the road, but she hadn't seen anyone drive up. They had only just arrived themselves; it was as if whoever had shot at them had already been here, waiting. But that was impossible, wasn't it? The picnic was an impulse, and the location sheer chance; they could just as well have stopped at a park.
The only other explanation that occurred to her was if the shooter had nothing to do with her father. Maybe it was a crazy landowner who shot at

trespassers.
If only she had brought her cell phone! But Margreta wasn't due to call her for several more days, and even if she had brought the phone, it would be in her backpack, which was still lying on the ground cloth. The distance of a few yards might as well be a mile. Her pistol was also in the pack; though a pistol was useless against a sniper, she would feel better if she had some means of protection.
Chance hadn't fired; he knew the futility of it even more than she did. His dark gold eyes were scanning the countryside, looking for anything that would give away the assailant's position: a glint of sunlight on the barrel, the color of his clothing, a movement. The extreme angle of the late afternoon sun picked out incredible detail in the trees and bushes, but nothing that would help them.
Only nightfall would help, she thought. If they could just hold out for… how long? Another hour? Two hours, at most. When it was dark, then they could belly down in the little creek and work their way to safety, either upstream or down, it didn't matter.
If they lived that long. The sniper had the advantage. All they had was the cover of a shallow creek bank.
She became aware that her teeth were chattering again. Again she clamped her jaw together to still the movement. Chance spared a glance at her, a split-second assessment before he returned to once again scanning the trees for the sniper. "Are you all right?" he asked, though he obviously knew she was all in one piece. He wasn't asking about her physical condition.
"S-scared spitless," she managed to say.
"Yeah. Me, too."
He didn't look scared, she thought. He looked coldly furious.
He reached out and rubbed her arm, a brief gesture of comfort. "Thank God for those beets," he said.
She almost cried. The beets. She had thoroughly enjoyed teasing him about the beets, but the truth was, when she saw them in the supermarket she had been overcome by an almost violent craving for them. She wanted those beets. She felt as if she could eat the entire jar of them. Could cravings start this early in a pregnancy? If so, then he should thank God not for the beets, but for the beginnings of life forming inside her.
She wished she had told him immediately when her period didn't come. She couldn't tell him now; the news would be too distracting.

If they lived through this, she thought fervently, she wouldn't keep the secret to herself a minute longer.
"It can't be Hauer's men," she blurted. "It's impossible. They couldn't be here ahead of us, because we didn't know we were coming here. It has to be a crazy fanner, or a--a jerk who thought it would be funny to shoot at someone."
"Sweetheart." He touched her arm again, and she realized she was babbling. "It isn't a crazy farmer, or a trigger-happy jerk."
"How do you know? It could be!"
"The sniper's too professional."
Just four words, but they made her heart sink. Chance would know; he had training in this sort of thing.
She pressed her forehead against the grassy bank, fighting for the courage to do what she had to do. Her mother had died protecting her and Margreta; surely she could be as brave? She couldn't tell Hauer anything about Margreta, so her sister was safe, and if she could save Chance, then dying would be worth it…
Her child would die with her.
Don't make me choose, she silently prayed. *The child or the father*.
If it were just her, she wouldn't hesitate. In the short time she had known Chance--was it really just two weeks?--he had given her a lifetime of happiness and the richness of love. She would gladly give her life in exchange for his.
The life inside her wasn't really a child yet; it was still just a rapidly dividing cluster of cells. No organs or bones had formed, nothing recognizable as a human. It was maybe the size of a pin head. But the potential… oh, the potential. She loved that tiny ball of cells with a fierceness that burned through every fiber of her being, had loved it from the first startled awareness that her period was late. It was as if she had blinked and said, "Oh. Hello," because one second she had been totally unaware of its existence, and the next she had somehow known.
The child or the father. The father or the child.
The words writhed in her brain, echoing, bouncing. She loved them both. How could she choose? She couldn't choose; no woman should have to make such a decision. She hated her father even more for forcing her into this situation. She hated the chromosomes, the DNA, that he had

contributed to her existence. He wasn't a father, he had never been a father. He was a monster.
"Give me your pistol." She heard the words, but the voice didn't sound at all like hers.
His head snapped around. "What?" He stared at her as if she had lost her mind.
"Give me the pistol," she repeated. "He--they--don't know we have it. You haven't fired back. I'll tuck it in the back of my jeans and walk out there--"
"The hell you will!" He glared at her. "If you think I--"
"No, listen!" she said urgently. "They won't shoot me. He wants me alive. When they get close enough for me to use the pistol I--"
"No!" He grabbed her by the shirt and hauled her close so they were almost nose to nose. His eyes were almost shooting sparks. "If you make one move to stand up, I swear I'll knock you out. Do you understand me? *I will not let you walk out there."*
He released her, and Sunny sank back against the creek bank. She couldn't overpower him, she thought bleakly. He was too strong, and too alert to be taken by surprise.
"We have to do something," she whispered.
He didn't look at her again. "We wait," he said flatly. "That's what we do. Sooner or later, the bastard will show himself."
Wait. That was the first idea she'd had, to wait until dark and slip away. But if Hauer had more than one man here, the sniper could keep them pinned down while the other worked his way around behind them--
"Can we move?" she asked. "Up the creek, down the creek--it doesn't matter."
He shook his head. "It's too risky. The creek's shallow. The only place we have enough cover is flat against the bank on this side. If we try to move, we expose ourselves to fire."
"What if there's more than one?"
"There is." He sounded positive. A feral grin moved his lips in a frightening expression. "At least four, maybe five. I hope it's five."
She shook her head, trying to understand. Five to two were deadly odds.
"That makes you happy?"
"Very happy. The more the merrier."
Nausea hit the back of her throat, and she closed her eyes, fighting the urge to vomit. Did he think sheer guts and fighting spirit would keep them alive?

His lean, powerful hand touched her face in a gentle caress. "Chin up, sweetheart. Time's on our side."
Now wasn't the time for explanations, Chance thought. The questions would be too angry, the answers too long and complicated. Their situation was delicately balanced between success and catastrophe; he couldn't relax his guard. If he was correct and there were five men out there hunting them--and that was the only explanation, that one of his own men was a traitor and had given Hauer the location of their supposedly impromptu picnic--then they could, at any time, decide to catch him in a pincer movement. With only one pistol, and Sunny to one side of him, he couldn't handle an attack from more than two directions. The third one would get him--and probably Sunny, too. In a fire fight, bullets flew like angry hornets, and most of them didn't hit their target. If a bullet didn't hit its target, that meant it hit something--or someone--else.
His own men would have been stood down, or sent to a bogus location. That was why there hadn't been any return fire when he and Sunny were fired on--no one was there. For that to have happened, the traitor had to be someone in a position of authority, a team leader or higher. He would find out. Oh, yeah, he'd find out. There had been several betrayals over the years, but they hadn't been traceable. One such breach had almost cost Barrie, Zane's wife, her life. Chance had been trying to identify the bastard for four years now, but he'd been too smart. But this time it was traceable. This time, his men would know who had changed their orders.
The traitor must have thought it was worth blowing his cover, to have this opportunity to kill Chance Mackenzie himself. And he should be here in person, to see the job done. Hauer's two men would bring the count to three. Hauer made it four. The only way Hauer could have gotten into the country and moved about as freely and undetected as he had was with inside help--the FBI mole. If Chance were really lucky, the mole was here, too, bringing the count to five.
But they'd made a big mistake. They didn't know about his ace in the hole: Zane. They didn't know he was out there; that was an arrangement Chance had made totally off the record. If Zane wasn't needed, no one would ever know he was there. Chance's men were damn good, world class, but they weren't in Zane's class. No one was.
Zane was a superb strategist; he always had a plan, and a plan to back up his plan. He would have seen in an instant what was going down and been

on the phone calling the men back into position from wherever they'd been sent. How long it took them to get here depended on how far away they were, assuming they could get here at all. And after the call Zane would have started moving, ghosting around, searching out Hauer and his men. Every minute that passed increased the odds in Chance's favor.

He couldn't explain any of that to Sunny, not now, not even to ease the white, pinched expression that made him ache to hold her close and reassure her. Her eyes were haunted, their sparkle gone. She had worked her entire life to make certain she was never caught off guard, and yet she had been; he himself had seen to it.

The knowledge was bitter in his mouth. She was terrified of the monster who had relentlessly hunted her all her life, yet she had been willing to walk out there and offer herself as a sacrifice. How many times in the short two weeks he'd known her had she put herself on the line for him? The first tune had been when she barely knew him, when she swooped down to grab the snake coiled so close to his feet. She was terrified of snakes, but she'd done it. She was shaking with fear now, but he knew that if he let her, she would do exactly what she'd offered. That kind of courage amazed him, and humbled him.

His head swiveled restlessly as he tried to keep watch in all directions. The minutes trickled past. The sun slid below the horizon, but there was still plenty of light; twilight wouldn't begin deepening for another fifteen, twenty minutes. The darker it was, the more Zane was in his element. By now, he should have taken out at least one, maybe two--

A man stepped out from behind the tree under which Chance and Sunny had intended to have their picnic and aimed a black 9mm automatic at Sunny's head. He didn't say "Drop it" or anything else. He just smiled, his gaze locked with Chance's.

Carefully Chance placed his pistol on the grass. If the gun had been aimed at his own head, he would have taken the risk that his reflexes were faster. He wouldn't risk Sunny's life. As soon as he moved his hand away from the pistol, the black hole in the man's weapon centered between his eyes.

"Surprised?" the man asked softly. At his voice Sunny gasped and whirled, her feet sliding on the slippery creek bottom. Chance reached out and steadied her without taking his gaze from a man he knew very well.

"Not really," he said. "I knew there was someone."

Sunny looked back and forth between them. "Do you *know* him?" she asked faintly.
"Yeah." He should have been prepared for this, he thought. Knowing one of his own men was involved, he should have realized the traitor would have the skill to approach silently, using the same tree that helped shield them as his own cover. Doing so took patience and nerve, because if Chance had happened to move even a few inches to one side, he would have seen the man's approach.
"H-how?" she stammered.
"We've worked together for years," Melvin Darnell said, still smiling. Mel the Man. That was what the others called him, because he would volunteer for any mission, no matter how dangerous. What better way to get inside information? Chance thought.
"You sold out to Hauer," Chance said, shaking his head. "That's low."
"No, that's lucrative. He has men everywhere. The FBI, the Justice Department, the CIA… even here, right under your nose." Mel shrugged. "What can I say? He pays well."
"I misjudged you. I never thought you'd be the type to get a kick out of torture. Or are you chickening out and leaving as soon as he gets his hands on her?" Chance nodded his head toward Sunny.
"Nice try, Mackenzie, but it won't work. He's her father. All he wants is his little girl." Mel smirked at Sunny.
Chance snorted. "Get a clue. Do you think she'd be so terrified if all he wanted was to get to know her?"
Mel spared another brief glance in her direction. She was absolutely colorless, even her lips. There was no mistaking her fear. He shrugged. "So I was wrong. I don't care what he does with her."
"Do you care that he's a child molester?" Keep him talking. Buy time. Give Zane time to work.
"Give it up," Mel said cheerfully. "He could be Hitler's reincarnation and it still wouldn't change the color of his money. If you think I'm going to develop a conscience--well, you're the one who needs to get a clue."
There was movement behind Mel. Three men approaching, walking openly now, as if they had nothing to fear. Two were dressed in suits, one in slacks and an open-necked shirt. The one in slacks and one of the suits carried hand guns. The suit would be the FBI informant, the one in slacks one of Hauer's bloodhounds. The man in the middle, the one wearing the double-

breasted Italian silk suit, his skin tanned, his light brown hair brushed straight back--that was Hauer. He was smiling.
"My dear," he said jovially when he reached them. He stepped carefully around the spilled beets, his nose wrinkling in distaste. "It is so good to finally meet you. A father should know his children, don't you think?"
Sunny didn't speak for a moment. She stared at her father with unconcealed horror and loathing. Beside her, Chance felt the fear drain out of her, felt her subtly relax. Extreme terror was like that, sometimes. When one feared that something would happen, it was the dread and anxiety, the anticipation, that was so crippling. Once the thing actually happened, there was nothing left to fear. He took a firm grip on her arm, wishing she had remained petrified. Sunny was valiant enough when she was frightened; when she thought she had nothing left to lose, there was no telling what she would do.
"I thought you'd be taller," she finally said, looking at him rather dismissively.
Crispin Hauer flushed angrily. He wasn't a large man, about five-eight, and slender. The two men flanking him were both taller. Chance wondered how Sunny had known unerringly how to prick his ego. "Please get out of the mud--if you can bring yourself to leave your lover's side, that is. I recommend it. Head shots can be nasty. You wouldn't want his brains on you, would you? I hear the stain never comes out of one's clothes."
Sunny didn't move. "I don't know where Margreta is," she said. "You might as well kill me now, because I can't tell you anything."
He shook his head in mock sympathy. "As if I believe that." He held out his hand. "You may climb out by yourself, or my men will assist you."
There wasn't much light left, Chance thought. If Sunny could keep delaying her father without provoking him into violence, Zane should be here soon. With Hauer out in the open, Zane must be positioning himself so he could get all four men in his sights.
"Where's the other guy?" he asked, to distract them. "There *are* five of you, aren't there?"
The FBI man and the bloodhound looked around, in the direction of the trees on the opposite side of the road. They seemed vaguely surprised that no one was behind them.
Mel didn't take his attention from Chance. "Don't let him spook you," he said sharply. "Keep your mind on business."
"Don't you wonder where he is?" Chance asked softly.

"I don't give a damn. He's nothing to me. Maybe he fell out of the tree and broke his neck," Mel said.
"Enough," Hauer said, distaste for this squabbling evident in his tone. "Sonia, come out now. I promise you won't like it if my men have to fetch you."
Sunny's contemptuous gaze swept him from head to foot. Unbelievably, she began singing. And the ditty she sang was a cruel little song of the sort gradeschoolers sang to make fun of a classmate they didn't like. "Monkey man, monkey man, itty bitty monkey man. He's so ugly, he's so short, he needs a ladder to reach his butt."
It didn't rhyme, Chance thought in stunned bemusement. Children, crude little beasts that they were, didn't care about niceties such as that. All they cared about was the effectiveness of their taunt.
It was effective beyond his wildest expectation.
Mel Darnell smothered a laugh. The two other men froze, their expressions going carefully blank. Crispin Hauer flushed a dark, purplish red and his eyes bulged until white showed all around the irises. "You bitch!" he screamed, spittle flying, and he grabbed for the gun in the FBI mole's hand.
A giant red flower bloomed on Hauer's chest, accompanied by a strange, dull splat. Hauer stopped as if he had run into a glass wall, his expression going blank.
Mel had excellent reflexes, and excellent training. In that nanosecond before the sound of the shot reached them, Chance saw Mel's finger begin tightening on the trigger, and he grabbed for his own weapon, knowing he wouldn't be fast enough. Then Sunny hit him full force, her entire body crashing into him and knocking him sideways, her scream almost drowning out the thunderous boom of Mel's big-caliber pistol. She clambered off him almost as fast as she had hit him, trying to scramble up the grassy bank to get to Mel before he could fire another round, but Mel never had another opportunity to pull the trigger. Mel never had anything else, not even a second, because Zane's second shot took him dead center of the chest just as his first had taken Hauer.
Then all hell broke loose. Chance's men, finally back in position and with the threat to Chance and Sunny taken care of, opened fire on the remaining two men. Chance grabbed Sunny and flattened her in the creek again, covering her with his own body, holding her there until Zane roared a cease fire and the night was silent.

Sunny sat off to the side of the nightmarish scene, brightly lit now with battery-operated spotlights that picked out garish detail and left stark black shadows. From somewhere, one of the small army of men who suddenly swarmed the field had produced a bucket that he turned upside down for her, providing her with a seat. She was wet and almost unbearably cold, despite the warmth of the late August night. Her muddy clothes were clammy, so the blanket she clutched around her with nerveless fingers didn't do much to help, but she didn't release it.

She hurt, with an all-consuming agony that threatened to topple her off the bucket, but she grimly forced herself to stay upright. Sheer willpower kept her on that bucket.

The men around her were professionals. They were quiet and competent as they dealt with the five bodies that were laid out on the ground in a neat row. They were courteous with the local law enforcement officers who arrived *en force,* sirens blasting, blue lights strobing the night, though there was never any doubt who held jurisdiction.

And Chance was their leader.

That man, the one who had first held a gun on them, had called him "Mackenzie." And several times one or another of the locals had referred to him as Mr. Mackenzie; he had answered, so she knew there was no mistake in the name.

The events of the night were a chaotic blur in her mind, but one fact stood out: this entire scene was a setup, a trap--and she had been the bait.

She didn't want to believe it, but logic wouldn't let her deny it. He was obviously in charge here. He had a lot of men on site, men he commanded, men who could be here only if he had arranged it in advance.

Viewed in the light of that knowledge, everything that had happened since she met him took on a different meaning. She even thought she recognized the cretin who had stolen her briefcase in the Salt Lake City airport. He was cleaned up now, with the same quiet, competent air as the others, but she was fairly certain he was the same man.

Everything had been a setup. Everything. She didn't know how he'd done it, her mind couldn't quite grasp the sphere of influence needed to bring all of this off, but somehow he had manipulated her flights so that she was in the Salt Lake City airport at a certain time, for the cretin to grab her briefcase and Chance to intercept him. It was a hugely elaborate play, one that took skill and money and more resources than she could imagine.

He must have thought she was in cahoots with her father, she thought with a flash of intuition. This had all happened after the incident in Chicago, which was undoubtedly what had brought her to Chance's notice. What had his plan been? To make her fall in love with him and use her to infiltrate her father's organization? Only it hadn't worked out that way. Not only was she not involved with her father, she desperately feared and hated him. So Chance, knowing why Hauer really wanted her, had adjusted his plan and used her as bait.

What a masterful strategy. And what a superb actor he was; he should get an Oscar.

There hadn't been anything wrong with the plane at all. She didn't miss the significance of the timing of their "rescue." Charlie Jones had just happened to find them first thing in the morning after she spilled her guts about her father to Chance the night before. He must have signaled Charlie somehow.

How easy she had been for him. She had been completely duped, completely taken in by his lovemaking and charm. He had been a bright light to her, a comet blazing into her lonely world, and she had fallen for him with scarcely a whisper of resistance. He must think her the most gullible fool in the world. The worst of it was, she was an even bigger fool than he knew, because she was pregnant with his child.

She looked across the field at him, standing tall in the glaring spotlights as he talked with another tall, powerful man who exuded the deadliest air she had ever seen, and the pain inside her spread until she could barely contain it.

Her bright light had gone out.

Chance looked around at Sunny, as he had been doing periodically since the moment she sank down on the overturned bucket and huddled deep in the blanket someone had draped around her. She was frighteningly white, her face drawn and stark. He couldn't take the time to comfort her, not now. There was too much to do, local authorities to soothe at the same time that he let them know he was the one in control, not they, the bodies to be handled, sweeps initiated at the agencies Mel had listed as having Hauer's moles employed there.

She wasn't stupid; far from it. He had watched her watching the activity around her, watched her expression become even more drawn as she inevitably reached the only conclusion she *could* reach. She had noticed when people called him Mackenzie instead of McCall.

Their gazes met, and locked. She stared at him across the ten yards that separated them, thirty feet of unbridgeable gulf. He kept his face impassive. There was no excuse he could give her that she wouldn't already have considered. His reasons were good; he knew that. But he had used her and risked her life. Being the person she was, she would easily forgive him for risking her life; it was the rest of it, the way he had used her, that would strike her to the core.

As he watched, he saw the light die in her eyes, draining away as if it had never been. She turned her head away from him--

And gutted him with the gesture.

Shaken, pierced through with regret, he turned back to Zane and found his brother watching him with a world of knowledge in those pale eyes. "If you want her," Zane said, "then don't let her go."

It was that simple, and that difficult. Don't let her go. How could he not, when she deserved so much better than what he was?

But the idea was there now. Don't let her go. He couldn't resist looking at her again, to see if she was still watching him.

She wasn't there. The bucket still sat there, but Sunny was gone.

Chance strode rapidly across to where she had been, scanning the knots of men who stood about, some working, some just observing. He didn't see that bright hair. Damn it, she was just here; how could she disappear so fast?

Easily, he thought. She had spent a lifetime practicing.

Zane was beside him, his head up, alert. The damn spotlights blinded them to whatever was behind them. She could have gone in any direction, and they wouldn't be able to see her.

He looked down to see if he could pick up any tracks, though the grass was so trampled by now that he doubted he would find anything. The bucket gleamed dark and wet in the spotlight.

Wet?

Chance leaned down and swiped his hand over the bucket. He stared at the dark red stain on his fingers and palm. Blood. Sunny's blood.

He felt as if his own blood was draining from his body. My God, she'd been shot, and she hadn't said a word. In the darkness, the blood hadn't been noticeable on her wet clothing. But that had been… how long ago? She had sat there all that time, bleeding, and not told anyone.

Why?

Because she wanted to get away from him. If they had known she was wounded, she would have to be bundled up and taken to a hospital, and she wouldn't be able to escape without having to see him again. When Sunny walked, she did it clean. No scenes, no excuses, no explanations. She just disappeared.

If he had thought it hurt when she turned away from him, that was nothing to the way he felt now. Desperate fear seized his heart, froze his blood in his veins. "Listen up!" he boomed, and a score of faces, trained to obey his every command, turned his way. "Did anyone see where Sunny went?" Heads shook, and men began looking around. She was nowhere in sight. Chance began spitting out orders. "Everyone drop what you're doing and fan out. Find her. She's bleeding. She was shot and didn't tell anyone." As he talked, he was striding out of the glare of the spotlights, his heart in his mouth. She couldn't have gone far, not in that length of time. He would find her. He couldn't bear the alternative.

Chapter Fourteen

Chance blindly paced the corridor outside the surgical waiting room. He couldn't sit down, though the room was empty and he could have had any chair he wanted. If he stopped walking, he thought, he might very well fall down and not be able to stand again. He hadn't known such crippling fear existed. He had never felt it for himself, not even when he looked down the barrel of a weapon pointed at his face--and Mel's hadn't been the first--but he felt it for Sunny. He'd been gripped by it since he found her lying facedown in the grassy field, unconscious, her pulse thready from blood loss.

Thank God there were medics on hand in the field, or she would have died before he could get her to a hospital. They hadn't managed to stop the bleeding, but they had slowed it, started an IV saline push to pump fluid back into her body and raise her plummeting blood pressure, and gotten her to the hospital still alive.

He had been shouldered aside then, by a whole team of gowned emergency personnel. "Are you any relation to her, sir?" a nurse had asked briskly as she all but manhandled him out of the treatment room.

"I'm her husband," he'd heard himself say. There was no way he was going to allow the decisions for her care to be taken out of his hands. Zane, who had been beside him the entire time, hadn't revealed even a flicker of surprise.

"Do you know her blood type, sir?"

Of course he didn't. Nor did he know the answers to any of the other questions posed by the woman they handed him off to, but he was so numb, his attention so focused on the cubicle where about ten people were working on her, that he barely knew anyone was asking the questions, and the woman hadn't pushed it. Instead, she had patted his hand and said she would come back in a little while when his wife was stabilized. He had been grateful for her optimism. In the meantime, Zane, as ruthlessly competent as usual, had requested that a copy of their file on Sunny be downloaded to his wireless Pocket Pro, so Chance would have all the necessary information when the woman returned with her million and one questions. He was indifferent to the bureaucratic snafu he was causing; the organization would pay for everything.

But the shocks had kept arriving, one piling on top of the other. The surgeon came out of the cubicle, his green paper gown stained red with her blood. "Your wife regained consciousness briefly," he'd said. "She wasn't completely lucid, but she asked about the baby. Do you know how far along she is?"

Chance had literally staggered and braced his hand against the wall for support. "She's pregnant?" he asked hoarsely.

"I see." The surgeon immediately switched gears. "I think she must have just found out. We'll do some tests and take all the precautions we can. We're taking her up to surgery now. A nurse will show you where to wait." He strode away, paper gown flapping.

Zane had turned to Chance, his pale blue eyes laser sharp. "Yours?" he asked briefly.

"Yes."

Zane didn't ask if he was certain, for which Chance was grateful. Zane took it for granted Chance wouldn't be mistaken about something that important. Pregnant? How? He pinched the bridge of his nose, between his eyes. He knew how. He remembered with excruciating clarity how it felt to climax inside her without the protective sheath of a condom dulling the sensation. It had happened twice--just twice--but once was enough.

A couple of little details clicked into place. He'd been around pregnant women most of his life, with first one sister-in-law and then another producing a little Mackenzie. He knew the symptoms well. He remembered Sunny's sleepiness this afternoon, and her insistence on buying the beets. Those damn pickled beets, he thought; her craving for them--for he was certain now that was why she'd wanted them--had saved his life. Sometimes the weird cravings started almost immediately. He could remember when Shea, Michael's wife, had practically wiped that section of Wyoming clean of canned tuna, a full week before she missed her first period. The sleepiness began soon in a pregnancy, too.

He knew the exact day when he'd gotten her pregnant. It had been the second time he'd made love to her, lying on the blanket in the late afternoon heat. The baby would be born about the middle of May… if Sunny lived. She had to live. He couldn't face the alternative. He loved her too damn much to even think it. But he had seen the bullet wound in her right side, and he was terrified.

"Do you want me to call Mom and Dad?" Zane asked.

They would drop everything and come immediately if he said yes, Chance knew. The whole family would; the hospital would be inundated with Mackenzies. Their support was total, and unquestioning.

He shook his head. "No. Not yet." His voice was raw, as if he had been screaming, though he would have sworn all his screams had been held inside. If Sunny… if the worst happened, he would need them then. Right now he was still holding together. Just.

So he walked, and Zane walked with him. Zane had seen a lot of bullet wounds, too; he'd taken his share. Chance was the lucky one; he'd been cut a few times, but never shot.

God, there had been so much blood. How had she stayed upright for so long? She had answered questions, said she was all right, even walked around a little before one of the men had found that bucket for her to sit on. It was dark, she had a blanket wrapped around her--that was why no one had noticed. But she should have been on the ground, screaming in pain.

Zane's thoughts were running along the same path. "I'm always amazed," he said, "at what some people can do after being shot."

Contrary to what most people thought, a bullet wound, even a fatal one, didn't necessarily knock the victim down. All cops knew that even someone whose heart had been virtually destroyed by a bullet could still attack and

kill *them*, and die only when his oxygen-starved brain died. Someone crazed on drugs could absorb a truly astonishing amount of damage and keep on fighting. On the other side of the spectrum were those who suffered relatively minor wounds and went down as if they had been poleaxed, then screamed unceasingly until they reached the hospital and were given enough drugs to quiet them. It was pure mind over matter, and Sunny had a will like titanium. He only hoped she applied that will to surviving.

It was almost six hours before the tired surgeon approached, the six longest hours of Chance's life. The surgeon looked haggard, and Chance felt the icy claw of dread. No. No--

"I think she's going to make it," the surgeon said, and smiled a smile of such pure personal triumph that Chance knew there had been a real battle in the O.R. "I had to remove part of the liver and resection her small intestine. The wound to the liver is what caused the extensive hemorrhage. We had to replace almost her complete blood volume before we got things under control." He rubbed his hand over his face. "It was touch and go for a while. Her blood pressure bottomed out and she went into cardiac arrest, but we got her right back. Her pupil response is normal, and her vitals are satisfactory. She was lucky."

"Lucky," Chance echoed, still dazed by the combination of good news and the litany of damage.

"It was only a fragment of a bullet that hit her. There must have been a ricochet."

Chance knew she hadn't been hit while he'd had her flattened in the creek. It had to have happened when she knocked him aside and Darnell fired. Evidently Darnell had missed, and the bullet must have struck a rock in the creek and fragmented.

She had been protecting him. Again.

"She'll be in ICU for at least twenty-four hours, maybe forty-eight, until we see if there's a secondary infection. I really think we have things under control, though." He grinned. "She'll be out of here in a week."

Chance sagged against the wall, bending over to clasp his knees. His head swam. Zane's hard hand gripped his shoulder, lending his support. "Thank you," Chance said to the doctor, angling his head so he could see him.

"Do you need to lie down?" the doctor asked.

"No, I'm all right. God! I'm great. She's going to be okay!"

"Yeah," said the doctor, and grinned again.

Sunny kept surfacing to consciousness, like a float bobbing up and down in the water. At first her awareness was fragmented. She could hear voices in the distance, though she couldn't make out any words, and a soft beeping noise. She was also aware of something in her throat, though she didn't realize it was a tube. She had no concept of where she was, or even that she was lying down.

The next time she bobbed up, she could feel smooth cotton beneath her and recognized the fabric as sheets.

The next time she managed to open her eyes a slit, but her vision was blurry and what seemed like a mountain of machinery made no sense to her.

At some point she realized she was in a hospital. There was pain, but it was at a distance. The tube was gone from her throat now. She vaguely remembered it being removed, which hadn't been pleasant, but her sense of time was so confused that she thought she remembered the tube being there after it was removed. People kept coming into the small space that was hers, turning on bright lights, talking and touching her and doing intimate things to her.

Gradually her dominion over her body began to return, as she fought off the effects of anesthesia and drugs. She managed to make a weak gesture toward her belly, and croak out a single word. "Baby?"

The intensive care nurse understood. "Your baby's fine," he said, giving her a comforting pat, and she was content.

She was horribly thirsty. Her next word was "Water," and slivers of ice were put in her mouth.

With the return of consciousness, though, came the pain. It crept ever nearer as the fog of drugs receded. The pain was bad, but Sunny almost welcomed it, because it meant she was alive, and for a while she had thought she might not be.

She saw the nurse named Jerry the most often. He came into the cubicle, smiling as usual, and said, "There's someone here to see you."

Sunny violently shook her head, which was a mistake. It set off waves of agony that swamped the drugs holding them at bay. "No visitors," she managed to say.

It seemed as if she spent days, eons, in the intensive care unit, but when she asked Jerry he said, "Oh, about thirty-six hours. We'll be moving you to a private room soon. It's being readied now."

When they moved her, she was clearheaded enough to watch the ceiling tiles and lights pass by overhead. She caught a glimpse of a tall, black-haired man and quickly looked away.

Settling her into a private room was quite an operation, requiring two orderlies, three nurses and half an hour. She was exhausted when everything, including herself, had been transferred and arranged. The fresh bed was nice and cool; the head had been elevated and a pillow tucked under her head. Sitting up even that much made her feel a hundred percent more normal and in control.

There were flowers in the room. Roses, peach ones, with a hint of blush along the edges of their petals, dispensed a spicy, peppery scent that overcame the hospital scents of antiseptics and cleaning fluids. Sunny stared at them but didn't ask who they were from.

"I don't want any visitors," she told the nurses. "I just want to rest."

She was allowed to eat Jell-O, and drink weak tea. On the second day in the private room she drank some broth, and she was placed in the bedside chair for fifteen minutes. It felt good to stand on her own two feet, even for the few seconds it took them to move her from bed to chair. It felt even better when they moved her back to the bed.

That night, she got out of bed herself, though the process was slow and unhappy, and walked the length of the bed. She had to hold on to the bed for support, but her legs remained under her.

The third day, there was another delivery from a florist. This was a bromeliad, with thick, grayish green leaves and a beautiful pink flower blooming in its center. She had never had houseplants for the same reason she had never had a pet, because she was constantly on the move and couldn't take care of them. She stared at the bromeliad, trying to come to grips with the fact that she could have all the houseplants she wanted now. Everything was changed. Crispin Hauer was dead, and she and Margreta were free.

The thought of her sister sent alarm racing through her. What day was it? When was Margreta due to call? For that matter, where was her cell phone?

On the afternoon of the fourth day, the door opened and Chance walked in. She turned her head to look out the window. In truth, she was surprised he had given her this long to recover. She had held him off as long as she could, but she supposed there had to be a closing act before the curtain could fall.

She had held her inner pain at bay by focusing on her physical pain, but now it rushed to the forefront. She fought it down, reaching for control. There was nothing to be gained by causing a scene, only her self-respect to lose.
"I've kept your cell phone with me," he said, walking around to place himself between her and the windows, so she had to either look at him or turn her head away again. His conversational opening had guaranteed she wouldn't turn away. "Margreta called yesterday."
Sunny clenched her fists, then quickly relaxed her right hand as the motion flexed the IV needle taped to the back of it. Margreta would have panicked when she heard a man's voice answer instead of Sunny's.
"I talked fast," Chance said. "I told her you'd been shot but would be okay, and that Hauer was dead. I told her I'd bring the phone to you today, and she could call again tonight to verify everything I said. She didn't say anything, but she didn't hang up on me, either."
"Thank you," Sunny said. He had handled the situation in the best possible way.
He was subtly different, she realized. It wasn't just his clothing, though he was now dressed in black slacks and a white silk shirt, while he had worn only jeans, boots, and casual shirts and T-shirts before. His whole demeanor was different. Of course, he wasn't playing a raffish, charming charter pilot any longer. He was himself now, and the reality was what she had always sensed beneath the surface of his charm. He was the man who led some sort of commando team, who exerted enormous influence in getting things done his way. The dangerous edge she had only glimpsed before was in full view now, in his eyes and the authority with which he spoke.
He moved closer to the side of the bed, so close he was leaning against the rail. Very gently, the touch as light as gossamer, he placed his fingertips on her belly. "Our baby is all right," he said.
He knew. Shocked, she stared at him, though she realized she should have known the doctor would tell him.
"Were you going to tell me?" he asked, his golden-brown eyes intent on her face, as if he wanted to catch every nuance of expression.
"I hadn't thought about it one way or the other," she said honestly. She had just been coming to terms with the knowledge herself; she hadn't gotten around to forming any plans.
"This changes things."

"Does it really," she said, and it wasn't a question. "Was *anything* you told me the truth?"
He hesitated. "No."
"There was nothing wrong with the fuel pump."
"No."
"You could have flown us out of the canyon at any time."
"Yes."
"Your name isn't Chance McCall."
"Mackenzie," he said. "Chance Mackenzie."
"Well, that's one thing," she said bitterly. "At least your first name was really your own."
"Sunny…don't."
"Don't what? Don't try to find out how big a fool I am? Were you really an army ranger?"
He sighed, his expression grim. "Navy. Naval Intelligence."
"You arranged for all of my flights to be fouled up that day."
He shrugged an admittance.
"The cretin was really one of your men."
"A good one. The airport security people were mine, too."
She creased the sheet with her left hand. "You knew my father would be there. You had it set up."
"We knew two of his men were trailing us, had been since the television newscast about you aired."
"You arranged that, too."
He didn't say anything.
"Why did we fly all over the country? Why didn't we just stay in Seattle? That would have been less wear and tear on the plane."
"I had to make it look good."
She swallowed. "That day… the picnic. Would you have made love--I mean, had sex--with me with your men watching? Just to make it look good?"
"No. Having an affair with you was necessary, but… private."
"I suppose I should thank you for that, at least. Thank you. Now get out."
"I'm not going anywhere." He sat down in the bedside chair. "If you've finished with the dissection, we need to make some decisions."
"I've already made one. I don't want to see you again."

"Sorry about that, but you aren't getting your wish. You're stuck with me, sweetheart, because that baby inside you is mine."

Chapter Fifteen

Sunny was released from the hospital eight days after the shooting. She could walk, gingerly, but her strength was almost negligible, and she had to wear the nightgown and robe Chance had bought her, because she couldn't stand any clothing around her middle. She had no idea what she was going to do. She wasn't in any condition to catch a flight to Atlanta, not to mention that she would have to travel in her nightgown, but she had to find somewhere to stay. Once she knew she was being released, she got the phone book and called a hotel, made certain the hotel had room service, and booked herself a room there. The hotel had room service; until she was able to take care of herself again, a hotel was the best she could do.

In the hospital she had, at first, entertained a fragile hope that Margreta would come to stay with her and help her until she was recovered. With their father dead, they didn't have to hide any longer. But though Margreta had sounded happy and relieved, she had resisted Sunny's suggestion that she come to Des Moines. They had exchanged telephone numbers, but that was all--and Margreta hadn't called back.

Sunny understood. Margreta would always have problems relating to people, forming relationships with them. She was probably very comfortable with the longdistance contact she had with Sunny, and wanted nothing more. Sunny tried to fight her sadness as she realized she would never have the sister she had wanted, but melancholy too easily overwhelmed her these days.

Part of it was the hormonal chaos of early pregnancy, she knew. She found herself tearing up at the most ridiculous things, such as a gardening show she watched on television one day. She lay in her hospital bed and began thinking how she had always wanted a flower garden but had never been able to have one, and presto, all of a sudden she was feeling sorry for herself and sitting there like an idiot with tears rolling down her face.

Depression went hand in glove with physical recovery, too, one of the nurses told her. It would pass as she got stronger and could do more.

But the biggest part of her depression was Chance. He visited every day, and once even brought along the tall, lethal-looking man she had noticed him talking to the night she was injured. To her surprise, Chance introduced the man as his brother, Zane. Zane had shaken her hand with exquisite gentleness, shown her photos of his pretty wife and three adorable children, and spent half an hour telling her yarns about the exploits of his daughter, Nick. If even half of what he said about the child was true, the world had better brace itself for when she was older.

After Zane left, Sunny was even more depressed. Zane had what she had always wanted: a family he loved, and who loved him in return.

When he visited, Chance always avoided the subject that lay between them like a coiled snake. He had done what he had done, and no amount of talking would change reality. She had to respect, reluctantly, his lack of any attempt to make excuses. Instead, he talked about his family in Wyoming, and the mountain they all still called home, even though only his parents lived there now. He had four brothers and one sister, a dozen nephews--and one niece, the notorious Nick, whom he obviously adored. His sister was a horse trainer who was married to one of his agents; one brother was a rancher who had married the granddaughter of an old family enemy; another brother was an ex-fighter pilot who was married to an orthopedic surgeon; Zane was married to the daughter of an ambassador; and Joe, his oldest brother, was General Joseph Mackenzie, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

That couldn't all be true, she thought, yet the tales had a ring of truth to them. Then she remembered that Chance was a consummate actor, and bitterness would swamp her again.

She couldn't seem to pull herself out of the dismals. She had always been able to laugh, but now she found it difficult to even smile. No matter how she tried to distract herself, the knowledge was always there, engraved on her heart like a curse that robbed her life of joy: Chance didn't love her. It had all been an act.

It was as if part of her had died. She felt cold inside, and empty. She tried to hide it, tried to tell herself the depression would go away if she just ignored it and concentrated on getting better, but every day the grayness inside her seemed to spread and deepen.

The day she was released, the escort finally arrived with a wheelchair and Sunny called a taxi to meet them at the entrance in fifteen minutes. She

gingerly lowered herself into the wheelchair, and the escort obligingly placed the small bag containing her few articles of clothing and her backpack on her lap, then balanced the bromeliad on top.
"I'm sure I have to sign some papers before I'm released," Sunny said.
"No, I don't think so," the woman said, checking her orders. "According to this, you're all ready to go. Your husband probably handled it for you."
Sunny bit back the urge to snap that she wasn't married. He hadn't mentioned it, and in truth she hadn't given a thought to how she would pay for her hospital care, but now that she thought about it, she realized Chance had indeed handled all of that. Maybe he thought the least he could do was pick up her tab.
She was surprised he wasn't here, since he'd been so adamant about being a part of the baby's life, and persistent in visiting. For all she knew, she thought, he had been called away on some mysterious spy stuff.
She underestimated him. When the escort rolled her to the doors of the patient discharge area, she saw a familiar dark green Ford Explorer parked under the covered entrance. Chance unfolded his long length from behind the steering wheel and came to meet her.
"I've already called a taxi," she said, though she knew it was a waste of breath.
"Tough," he said succinctly. He took her clothes and the bromeliad and put them in the back of the Explorer, then opened the passenger door.
Sunny began to inch herself forward in the wheelchair seat, preparatory to standing; she had mastered the art when seated in a regular chair, but a wheelchair was trickier. Chance gave her an exasperated look, then leaned down and scooped her up in his powerful arms, handling her weight with ease as he deposited her in the Explorer.
"Thank you," she said politely. She would at least be civil, and his method had been much less painful and time-consuming than hers.
"You're welcome." He buckled the seat belt around her, making certain the straps didn't rub against the surgical incision, then closed the door and walked around to slide under the steering wheel.
"I've booked a room in a hotel," she said. "But I don't know where it is, so I can't give you directions."
"You aren't going to a hotel," he growled.
"I have to go somewhere," she pointed out. "I'm not able to drive, and I can't handle negotiating an airport, so a hotel with room service is the only

logical solution."
"No it isn't. I'm taking you home with me."
"No!" she said violently, everything in her rejecting the idea of spending days in his company.
His jaw set. "You don't have a choice," he said grimly. "You're going--even if you kick and scream the whole way."
It was tempting. Oh, it was tempting. Only the thought of how badly kicking would pull at the incision made her resist the idea.
The dime didn't drop until she noticed he was driving to the airport. "Where are we going?"
He gave her an impatient glance. "I told you. Hell, Sunny, you know I don't live in Des Moines."
"All right, so I know where you don't live. But I *don't* know where you *do* live." She couldn't resist adding, "And even if you had told me, it would probably be a lie."
This time his glance was sulfuric. "Wyoming," he said through gritted teeth. "I'm taking you home to Wyoming."
She was silent during the flight, speaking only when necessary and then only in monosyllables. Chance studied her when her attention was on the landscape below, his sunglasses hiding his eyes. They had flown around so much during the time they'd been together that it felt natural to once again be in the plane with her, as if they were where they belonged. She had settled in with a minimum of fussing and no complaints, though he knew she had to be exhausted and uncomfortable.
She looked so frail, as if a good wind would blow her away. There wasn't any color in her cheeks or lips, and she had dropped a good ten pounds that she didn't need to lose. The doctor had assured him that she was recovering nicely, right on schedule, and that while her pregnancy was still too new for any test to tell them anything about the baby's condition, they had taken all precautions and he had every confidence the baby would be fine.
As thrilled as he was about the baby, Chance was more worried that the pregnancy would sap her strength and slow her recovery. She needed all the resources she could muster now, but nature would ensure that the developing child got what it needed first. The only way he could be confident she was getting what *she* needed was if he arranged for her to be watched every minute, and coddled and spoiled within an inch of her life. The best place for that was Mackenzie's Mountain.

He had called and told them he was bringing Sunny there, of course. He had told them the entire situation, that she was pregnant and he intended to marry her, but that she was still mad as hell at him and hadn't forgiven him. He had set quite a task for himself, getting back in Sunny's good graces. But once he had her on the Mountain, he thought, he could take his time wearing her down.

Mary, typically, was ecstatic. She took it for granted Sunny would forgive him, and since she had been prodding him about getting married and giving her more grandchildren, she probably thought she was getting everything she wanted.

Chance was going to do everything he could to see that she did, because what she wanted was exactly what he wanted. He'd always sworn he would never get married and have children, but fate had stepped in and arranged things otherwise. The prospect of getting married scared him--no, it terrified the hell out of him, so much so that he hadn't even broached the subject to Sunny. He didn't know how to tell her what she needed to know about him, and he didn't know what she would do when she found out, if she would accept his proposal or tell him to drop dead.

The only thing that gave him hope was that she'd said she loved him. She hadn't said it since she found out how he'd set her up, but Sunny wasn't a woman who loved lightly. If there was a spark of love left in her, if he hadn't totally extinguished it, he would find a way to fan it to life.

He landed at the airstrip on Zane's property, and his heart gave a hard thump when he saw what was waiting for them. Even Sunny's interest was sparked. She sat up straighter, and for the first time since she'd been shot he saw a hint of that lively interest in her face. "What's going on?" she asked.

His spirits lifting, he grinned. "Looks like a welcoming party."

The entire Mackenzie clan was gathered by the airstrip. Everyone. Josh and Loren were there from Seattle with their three sons. Mike and Shea and their two boys. Zane and Barrie, each holding one of the twins. And there was Joe, decked out in his Air Force uniform with more rows of fruit salad on it than should be allowed. How he had carved time out of his schedule to come here, Chance didn't know--but then, Joe could do damn near anything he wanted, since he was the highest ranking military officer in the nation.

Caroline, standing beside him and looking positively chic in turquoise capri pants and white sandals--and also looking damn good for her age--had probably had a harder time getting free. She was one of the top-ranked

physicists in the world. Their five sons were with him, and John, the oldest, wasn't the only one this time who had a girlfriend with him. Maris and Mac stood together; Mac had his arm draped protectively around Maris's slight frame. And Mom and Dad were in the middle of the whole gang, with Nick perched happily in Wolf's arms.

Every last one of them, even the babies, held a balloon.

"Oh, my," Sunny murmured. The corners of her pale mouth moved upwards in the first smile he had seen in eight days.

He cut the motor and got out, then went to the other door and carefully lifted Sunny out. She was so bemused by the gathering that she put her arm around his neck.

That must have been the signal. Wolf leaned down and set Nick on her feet. She took off toward Chance like a shot, running and skipping and shrieking his name in the usual litany. "UncaDance, UncaDance, Unca*Dance!*" The balloon she was holding bobbed like a mad thing. The whole crowd started forward in her wake.

In seconds they were surrounded. He tried to introduce everyone to Sunny, but there was too much of a hubbub for him to complete a sentence. His sisters-in-law, bless them, were laughing and chattering as if they had known her for years; the men were flirting; Mary was beaming; and Nick's piping voice could be heard above everyone. "Dat's a weally, weally pwetty dwess." She fingered the silk robe and beamed up at Sunny.

John leaned down and whispered something in Nick's ear. *"Dress,"* she said, emphasizing the *r.* "Dat's a weally, weally pwetty *dress."*

Everyone cheered, and Nick glowed.

Sunny laughed.

Chance's heart jumped at the sound. His throat got tight, and he squeezed his eyes shut for a second. When he opened them, Mary had taken control.

"You must be exhausted," she was saying to Sunny in her sweet, Southern-accented voice. "You don't have to worry about a thing, dear. I have a bed all ready for you at the house, and you can sleep as long as you want. Chance, carry her along to the car, and be careful with her."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Wait!" Nick wailed suddenly. "I fordot de sign!"

"What sign?" Chance asked, gently shifting Sunny so he could look down at his niece.

She fished in the pocket of her little red shorts and pulled out a very crumpled piece of paper. She stretched up on her tiptoes to hand it to Sunny. "I did it all by myself," she said proudly. "Gamma helped."
Sunny unfolded the piece of paper.
"I used a wed cwayon," Nick informed her. "Because it's de pwettiest."
"It certainly is," Sunny agreed. She swallowed audibly. Chance looked down to see the paper shaking in her hand.
The letters were misshapen and wobbly and all different sizes. The little girl must have labored over them for a long time, with Mary's expert and patient aid, because the words were legible. " 'Welcome home Sunny'," Sunny read aloud. Her face began to crumple. "That's the most beautiful sign I've ever seen," she said, then buried her face against Chance's neck and burst into tears.
"Yep," Michael said. "She's pregnant, all right."
It was difficult to say who fell more in love with whom, Sunny with the Mackenzies, or the Mackenzies with her. Once Chance placed her in the middle of the king-sized bed Mary had made up for her--he didn't tell her it was his old bedroom--Sunny settled in like a queen holding court. Instead of lying down to sleep, she propped herself up on pillows, and soon all of the women and most of the younger kids were in there, sitting on the bed and on the floor, some even in chairs. The twins were working their way from one side of the bed to the other and back again, clutching the covers for support and babbling away to each other in what Barrie called their "twin talk." Shea had Benjy down on the floor, tickling him, and every time she stopped he would shriek, "More! More!" Nick sat cross-legged on the bed, her "wed cwayon" in hand as she studiously worked on another sign. Since the first one had been such a resounding success, this one was for Barrie, and she was embellishing it with lopsided stars. Loren, being a doctor, wanted the details of Sunny's wound and present condition. Caroline was doing an impromptu fashion consultation, brushing Sunny's hair and swirling it on top of her head, with some very sexy tendrils curling loose on her slender neck. Maris, her dark eyes glowing, was telling Sunny all about her own pregnancy, and Mary was overseeing it all.
Leaving his family to do what they did best, weave a magic spell of warmth and belonging, Chance walked down to the barn. He felt edgy and worried and a little panicked, and he needed some peace and quiet. When everything quieted down tonight, he had to talk to Sunny. He couldn't put it off any

longer. He prayed desperately that she could forgive him, that what he had to tell her didn't completely turn her against him, because he loved her so much he wasn't certain he could live without her. When she had buried her face against him and cried, his heart had almost stopped because she had turned *to* him instead of away from him.

She had laughed again. That sound was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard, and it had almost unmanned him. He couldn't imagine living without being able to hear her laugh.

He folded his arms across the top of a stall door and rested his head on them. She had to forgive him. She had to.

"It's tough, isn't it?" Wolf said in his deep voice, coming up to stand beside Chance and rest his arms on top of the stall door, too. "Loving a woman. And it's the best thing in the world."

"I never thought it would happen," Chance said, the words strained. "I was so careful. No marriage, no kids. It was going to end with me. But she blindsided me. I fell for her so fast I didn't have time to run."

Wolf straightened, his black eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'end with you'? Why don't you want kids? You love them."

"Yeah," Chance said softly. "But they're Mackenzies."

"You're a Mackenzie." There was steel in the deep voice.

Tiredly, Chance rubbed the back of his neck. "That's the problem. I'm not a real Mackenzie."

"Do you want to walk in the house and tell that little woman in there that you're not her son?" Wolf demanded sharply.

"*Hell*, no!" No way would he hurt her like that.

"You're my son. In all the ways that matter, you're mine."

The truth of that humbled Chance. He rested his head on his arms again. "I never could understand how you could take me in as easily as you did. You know what kind of life I led. You may not know the details, but you have a good general idea. I wasn't much more than a wild animal. Mom had no idea, but you did. And you still brought me into your home, trusted me to be around both Mom and Maris--"

"And that trust was justified, wasn't it?" Wolf asked.

"But it might not have been. You had no way of knowing." Chance paused, looking inward at the darkness inside him. "I killed a man when I was about ten, maybe eleven," he said flatly. "That's the wild kid you brought home with you. I stole, I lied, I attacked other kids and beat them up, then took

whatever it was they had that I wanted. That's the kind of person I am. That kid will always live inside me."
Wolf gave him a sharp look. "If you had to kill a man when you were ten, I suspect the bastard deserved killing."
"Yeah, he deserved it. Kids who live in the street are fair game to perverts like that." He clenched his hands. "I have to tell Sunny. I can't ask her to marry me without her knowing what she'll be getting, what kind of genes I'll be passing on to her children." He gave a harsh laugh. "Except I don't know what kind of genes they are. I don't know what's in my background. For all I know my mother was a drugged-out whore and--"
"Stop right there," Wolf said, steel in his voice.
Chance looked up at him, the only father he had ever known, and the man he respected most in the world.
"I don't know who gave birth to you," Wolf said. "But I do know bloodlines, son, and you're a thoroughbred. Do you know what I regret most in my life? Not finding you until you were fourteen. Not feeling your hand holding my finger when you took your first step. Not getting up with you in the night when you were teething, or when you were sick. Not being able to hold you the way you needed holding, the way all kids need holding. By the time we got you I couldn't do any of that, because you were as skittish as a wild colt. You didn't like for us to touch you, and I tried to respect that.
"But one thing you need to know. I'm more proud of you than I've ever been of anything in my life, because you're one of the finest men I've ever known, and you had to work a lot harder than most to get to where you are. If I could have had my pick of all the kids in the world to adopt, I still would have chosen you."
Chance stared at his father, his eyes wet. Wolf Mackenzie put his arms around his grown son and hugged him close, the way he had wanted to do all these years. "I would have chosen you," he said again.
Chance entered the bedroom and quietly closed the door behind him. The crowd had long since dispersed, most to their respective homes, some spending the night here or at Zane's or Michael's. Sunny looked tired, but there was a little color in her cheeks.
"How do you feel?" he asked softly.
"Exhausted," she said. She looked away from him. "Better."
He sat down beside her on the bed, taking care not to jostle her. "I have some things I need to tell you," he said.

"If it's an explanation, don't bother," she shot back. "You used me. Fine. But *damn* you, you didn't have to take it as far as you did! Do you know how it makes me feel that I was such a fool to fall in love with you, when all you were doing was playing a game? Did it stroke your ego--"
He put his hand across her mouth. Above his tanned fingers, her gray eyes sparked pure rage at him. He took a deep breath. "First and most important thing is: I love you. That wasn't a game. I started falling the minute I saw you. I tried to stop it but--" He shrugged that away and got back to the important part. "I love you so much I ache inside. I'm not good enough for you, and I know it--"
She swatted his hand aside, scowling at him. "What? I mean, I agree, after what you did, but--what do you mean?"
He took her hand and was relieved when she didn't pull away from him. "I'm adopted," he said. "That part's fine. It's the best. But I don't know who my biological parents are or anything about them. They--she--tossed me into the street and forgot about me. I grew up wild in the streets, and I mean literally in the streets. I don't remember ever having a home until I was about fourteen, when I was adopted. I could come from the trashiest people on the planet, and probably do, otherwise they wouldn't have left me to starve to death in the gutter. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but if you marry me, you have to know what you'll be getting."
"What?" she said again, as if she couldn't understand what he was telling her.
"I should have asked you to marry me before," he said, getting it all out. "But--hell, how could I ask anyone to marry me? I'm a wild card. You don't know what you're getting with me. I was going to let you go, but then I found out about the baby and I couldn't do it. I'm selfish, Sunny. I want it all, you and our baby. If you think you can take the risk--"
She drew back, such an incredulous, outraged look on her face that he almost couldn't bear it. "I don't believe this," she sputtered, and slapped him across the face.
She wasn't back to full strength, but she still packed a wallop. Chance sat there, not even rubbing his stinging jaw. His heart was shriveling inside him. If she wanted to hit him again, he figured he deserved it.
"You fool!" she shouted. "For God's sake, my father was a *terrorist!* That's the heritage *I'm* carrying around, and you're worried because you *don't know who your parents were?* I wish to hell I didn't know who my father

was! I don't believe this! I thought you didn't love me! Everything would have been all right if I'd known you love me!"
Chance uttered a startled, profound curse, one of Nick's really, really bad words. Put in those terms, it did sound incredibly trivial. He stared at her lovely, outraged face, and the weight lifted off his chest as if it had never been. Suddenly he wanted to laugh. "I love you so much I'm half crazy with it. So, will you marry me?"
"I have to," she said grumpily. "You need a keeper. And let me tell you one thing, Chance Mackenzie, if you think you're still going to be jetting all over the world getting stabbed and shot at while you get your adrenaline high, then you'd better think again. You're going to stay home with me and this baby. Is that understood?"
"Understood," he said. After all, the Mackenzie men always did whatever it took to keep their women happy.

Epilogue

Sunny was asleep, exhausted from her long labor and then the fright and stress of having surgery when the baby wouldn't come. Her eyes were circled with fatigue, but Chance thought she had never been more beautiful. Her face, when he laid the baby in her arms, had been exalted. Until he died, he would never forget that moment. The medical personnel in the room had faded away to nothing, and it had been just him and his wife and their child.
He looked down at the wrinkled, equally exhausted little face of his son. The baby slept as if he had run a marathon, his plump hands squeezed into fierce little fists. He had downy black hair, and though it was difficult to judge a newborn's eye color, he thought they might turn the same brilliant gray as Sunny's.
Zane poked his head in the door. "Hi," he said softly. "I've been sent to reconnoiter. She's still asleep, huh?"
Chance looked at his wife, as sound asleep as the baby. "She had a rough time."
"Well, hell, he weighs ten pounds and change. No wonder she needed help."
Zane came completely into the room, smiling as he examined the unconscious little face. "Here, let me hold him. He needs to start meeting

the family." He took the baby from Chance, expertly cradling him to his chest. "I'm your uncle Zane. You'll see me around a lot. I have two little boys who are just itching to play with you, and your aunt Maris--you'll meet her in a minute--has one who's just a little older than you are. You'll have plenty of playmates, if you ever open your eyes and look around."

The baby's eyelids didn't flicker open, even when Zane rocked him. His pink lips moved in an unconscious sucking motion.

"You forget fast how little they are," Zane said softly as he smoothed his big hand over the baby's small round skull. He glanced up at Chance and grinned. "Looks like I'm still the only one who knows how to make a little girl."

"Yeah, well, this is just my first try."

"It'll be your last one, too, if they're all going to weigh ten pounds," came a voice from the bed. Sunny sighed and pushed her hair out of her eyes, and a smile spread across her face as she spied her son. "Let me have him," she said, holding out her arms.

There was a protocol to this sort of thing. Zane passed the baby to Chance, and Chance carried him to Sunny, settling him in her arms. No matter how often he saw it, he was always touched by the communion between mother and new baby, that absorbed look they both got as if they recognized each other on some basic, primal level.

"Are you feeling well enough for company?" Zane asked. "Mom's champing at the bit, wanting to get her hands on this little guy."

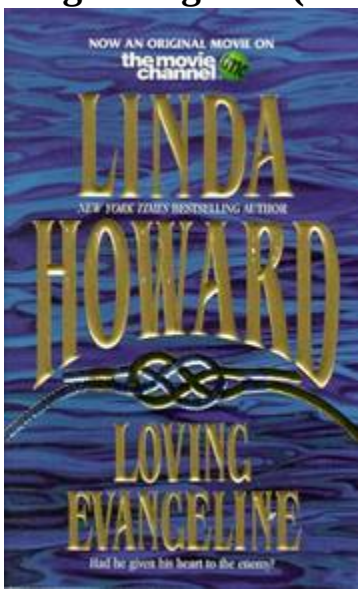
"I feel fine," Sunny said, though Chance knew she didn't. He had to kiss her, and even now there was that flash of heat between them, even though their son was only a few hours old. She pulled back, laughing a little and blushing. "Get away from me, you lech," she said, teasing him, and he laughed.

"What are you going to name him?" Zane demanded. "We've been asking for months, but you never would say. It can't stay a secret much longer."

Chance trailed his finger down the baby's downy cheek, then he put his arms around both Sunny and the baby and held them close. Life couldn't get much better than this.

"Wolf," he said. "He's little Wolf."

Loving Evangeline (1994)



Chapter One

Davis Priesen didn't think of himself as a coward, but he would rather have had surgery without anesthesia than face Robert Cannon and tell him what he had to tell him. It wasn't that the majority stockholder, CEO and president of Cannon Group would hold him responsible for the bad news; Cannon had never been known to shoot the messenger. But those icy green eyes would become even colder, even more remote, and Davis knew from experience that he would feel the frigid touch of fear along his spine. Cannon had a reputation for scrupulous fairness, but also for unmatched ruthlessness when someone tried to screw him. Davis couldn't think of anyone he respected more than Robert Cannon, but that didn't relieve his dread.

Other men in Cannon's position, with his power, insulated themselves behind layers of assistants. It was a measure of his own control and personal remoteness that only Cannon's personal assistant guarded the gates to his inner sanctum. Felice Koury had been Cannon's PA for eight years and ran his office with the precision of a Swiss watch. She was a tall, lean, ageless woman with iron-gray hair and the smooth complexion of a twenty-year-old. Davis knew that her youngest child was in his mid-twenties, putting Felice at least in her mid-forties, but it was impossible to guess her age

from her appearance. She was cool under fire, frighteningly efficient and had never shown a hint of nervousness around her boss. Davis wished he had a little of that last ability.

He had called beforehand to make certain Cannon could see him, so Felice wasn't surprised when he entered her office. "Good morning, Mr. Priesen." She reached immediately for the phone and punched a button. "Mr. Priesen is here, sir." She replaced the receiver and stood. "He'll see you now." With the smooth efficiency that always intimidated him, she was at the door of the inner office before he could reach it, opening it for him, then firmly closing it when he was inside. There was nothing subservient in Felice's attention; rather, he felt as if she controlled even his entrance into Cannon's office. Which, of course, she did.

Cannon's office was huge, luxurious and exquisitely decorated. It was a tribute to his taste that the effect was relaxing, rather than overwhelming, even though original oil paintings hung on the walls and a two-hundred-year-old Persian rug was underfoot. To the right was a large sitting area, complete with entertainment center, though Davis doubted that Cannon ever used the large-screen television or VCR for anything other than business. Six Palladian windows marched along the wall, framing the matchless views of New York City as if they were six paintings. The windows were works of art in themselves, beautifully fashioned panes of cut glass that took the light streaming through them and splintered it into diamonds. Cannon's massive desk was another antique, a masterpiece of carved black wood that supposedly had belonged to the eighteenth-century Romanovs. He looked very at home behind it.

He was a tall, lean man, with the elegant grace and power of a panther. There was something pantherish about his coloring, too, with his sleek black hair and pale green eyes. One might even think of Robert Cannon as indolent. One would be dangerously mistaken.

He rose to his feet to shake hands, his long, well-shaped fingers gripping Davis's with surprising strength. Davis was always taken aback by the steeliness of that grip.

On some occasions Cannon had invited him to the sitting area and asked if he would like coffee. This was not one of those occasions. Cannon hadn't reached his position by misreading people, and his eyes narrowed as he examined the tension in Davis's face. "I would say it's good to see you,

Davis," he remarked, "but I don't think you're here to tell me something I'm going to like."
His voice had been easy, almost casual, but Davis felt his tension go up another ten notches. "No, sir."
"Is it your fault?"
"No, sir." Then, scrupulously honest, he admitted, "Though I probably should have caught it sooner."
"Then relax and sit down," Robert said gently as he reseated himself. "If it isn't your fault, you're safe. Now, tell me what the problem is."
Davis nervously took a seat, but relaxing was out of the question. He perched on the edge of a soft leather chair. "Someone in Huntsville is selling our software for the space station," he blurted.
Cannon was never a restless man, but now he became even more still, and those green eyes took on the glacial look that Davis dreaded. "Do you have proof?" he asked. "Yes, sir."
"Do you know who?"
"I think so, sir."
"Fill me in." With those abrupt words, Cannon leaned back, his gaze focused on Davis like a pale green laser.
Davis did, stumbling several times as he tried to explain how he had become suspicious and done a bit of investigating on his own to verify his suspicions before he accused anyone. Cannon listened in silence, and Davis wiped the sweat from his brow as he described the results of his sleuthing. The Cannon Group company, PowerNet, located in Huntsville, Alabama, was currently working on highly classified software developed for NASA. That software was definitely showing up in the hands of a company affiliated with another country. This wasn't just industrial espionage, which would have been enough; this was treason.
His suspicions had centered on Landon Mercer, the company manager. Mercer had divorced the year before, and his style of living had gone noticeably upward. His salary was very good, but not good enough to support a family and live the way he had been living. Davis had discreetly hired an investigation service that had discovered large deposits into Mercer's bank account. After following him for several weeks, they had reported that he regularly visited a marina in Guntersville, a small town nearby, situated on Guntersville Lake, an impoundment of the Tennessee river.

The owner/operator of the marina was a woman named Evie Shaw; the investigators hadn't yet been able to find out anything substantive from her bank accounts or spending habits, which could mean only that she was smarter than Mercer. On at least two occasions, however, Mercer had rented a motorboat at the marina, and shortly after he had left in the boat, Evie Shaw had closed the marina, gotten into her own boat and followed him. They had returned separately, some fifteen minutes apart. It looked as if they were meeting somewhere on the big lake, where they would find it very easy both to conceal their actions, and to see and hear anyone approaching them. It was much safer than trying to conduct clandestine business in the busy marina; in fact, the popularity of the marina made it all the odder that she would close it down in the middle of the day.

When Davis had finished and sat nervously cracking his knuckles, Cannon's face was hard and expressionless. "Thank you, Davis," he said calmly. "I'll notify the FBI and take it from here. Good work."

Davis flushed as he got to his feet. "I'm sorry I didn't catch it sooner."

"Security isn't your area. Someone was falling down on the job. I'll take care of that, too. We're lucky that you're as sharp as you are." Robert made a mental note to both increase Davis's salary, which was already healthy, and begin grooming him for more responsibility and power. He had shown a sharpness and initiative that shouldn't go unrewarded. "I'm sure the FBI will want to speak with you, so stay available for the rest of the day."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as Davis had left, Robert used his private line to call the FBI. The bureau maintained a huge force in the city, and he had had occasion to work with them before. He was put through immediately to the supervisory agent. His control was such that none of his rage was revealed in his voice as he requested that the two best agents come to his office as soon as possible. His influence was such that no questions were asked; he was simply given the quiet assurance that two agents would be there within the half hour.

That done, he sat back and considered all the options open to him. He didn't allow his cold fury to cloud his thinking. Uncontrolled emotion was not only useless, it was stupid, and Robert never allowed himself to do anything stupid. He took it personally that someone at one of his companies was selling classified computer programs; it was a blemish on his own reputation. He had nothing but contempt for someone who would sell out his own country merely for the money involved, and he would stop at

nothing to halt the theft and put the perpetrator behind bars. Within fifteen minutes, he had formulated his plan of action.

The two agents arrived in twenty minutes. When Felice buzzed him, he told her to send them in, and that he wanted no interruptions of any kind until the gentlemen had left. A perfect secretary to the bone, she asked no questions.

She ushered the two conservatively dressed men into his office and firmly closed the door behind them. Robert stood to welcome them, but all the while he was assessing them with his cool, unreadable gaze. The younger man, about thirty, was immediately recognizable as a midlevel civil servant, but there was also a certain self-assurance in the man's eyes that Robert approved of. The older man, perhaps in his early fifties, had light brown hair that had gone mostly gray. He was not quite of average height, and was stocky of build. The blue eyes, behind metal-framed glasses, were tired, but nevertheless sparkled with intelligence and authority. No junior agent, this.

The older man held out his hand to Robert. "Mr. Cannon?" At Robert's nod, he said, "I'm William Brent, senior agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is Lee Murray, special agent assigned to counterespionage."

"Counterespionage," Robert murmured, his eyes cool. The presence of these two particular agents meant that the FBI had already been investigating PowerNet. "Good guess, gentlemen. Please sit down."

"It wasn't much of a guess," Agent Brent replied ruefully, as they took the offered seats. "A corporation such as yours, which handles so many government contracts, is unfortunately a prime target for espionage. I'm also aware that you have some experience in that area yourself, so it followed that you might need our particular talents, so to speak."

He was good, Robert thought. Just the type of person to inspire trust. They wanted to know if he knew anything, but they weren't going to tip their own hand if he didn't mention PowerNet. That little charade was a screen of innocence, behind which they could exhibit surprise and consternation if he informed them that he had discovered a leak at the company, or hide their own knowledge if he didn't mention the matter.

He didn't let them get away with it. "I see you've picked up some disquieting information yourselves," he said remotely. "I'm interested in knowing why you didn't contact me immediately."

William Brent grimaced. He had heard that nothing got by Robert Cannon, but still, he hadn't expected the man to be so acute.
Cannon was looking at him with a slight, cool lift of his eyebrow that invited explanations, an expression most people found difficult to resist. Brent managed to control the inclination to rush into speech, mingling explanation with apology; he was astonished that the impulse even existed. It made him study Robert Cannon even more closely. He already knew a lot about the man, as he had made it his business to find out. Cannon came from a cultured, moneyed background, but had made himself much wealthier with his own astute business sense, and his reputation was impeccable. He also had a lot of friends in both the State and Justice departments, powerful men in their own right, who held him in the greatest respect. "Look, here," one of those men had said. "If something crooked is going on with any of me Cannon Group companies, I'd take it as a personal favor if you'd let Robert Cannon know about it before you do anything."
"I can't do that," Brent had replied. "It would compromise the investigation."
"Not at all," the man had said. "I would trust Cannon with the country's most sensitive intelligence. As a matter of fact, I already have, on several occasions. He's done some… favors for us."
"It's possible he could be in on it," Brent had warned, still resisting the idea of briefing a civilian outsider on the situation developing down in Alabama. But the other man had shaken his head. "No. Not Robert Cannon."
After learning something about the nature and magnitude of the "favors" Cannon had done, and the dangers involved, Brent had reluctantly agreed to apprise Cannon of the situation before they put any plans into operation. Cannon had derailed that by calling first, and they hadn't been certain if he already knew, or not. The plan had been to keep quiet until they found out why he had called. It hadn't worked. He'd seen through them immediately. Brent was used to reading men, but he couldn't read Cannon. His persona was that of a wealthy, cultured, sophisticated man, and Brent supposed he was all that, but nevertheless, it was only the first layer. The other layers, whatever they were, were so well hidden that he only sensed their existence, and even that was due only to his own access to privileged information. Watching Cannon's leanly handsome face, he couldn't catch so much as a flicker of expression; there were only those remote eyes watching him with unlimited patience.

Making a swift decision, William Brent leaned forward. “Mr. Cannon, I’m going to tell you a lot more than I had originally planned. We have a definite problem at one of your companies, a software company down in Alabama—”
“Suppose I tell you what I know?” Robert interrupted in an even tone. “Then you can tell me if you have anything to add.”
With calm, precise sentences, he recounted what Davis Priesen had told him. The two agents shared one startled, involuntary glance that revealed they hadn’t discovered as much as Davis had, which upped that young man’s stock with Robert even more.
When he had finished, William Brent cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Congratulations. You’re a bit ahead of us. This will help us considerably in our investigation—”
“I’m flying down there tomorrow morning,” Robert said.
Brent looked disapproving. “Mr. Cannon, I appreciate your desire to help, but this is best handled by the bureau.”
“You misunderstand. I don’t intend to *help.* This is my company, my problem. I’ll take care of it myself. I’m merely apprising you of the situation and my intentions. I don’t have to take the time to set up a cover and get inside the operation, because I own it. I will, of course, keep you informed.”
Brent was already shaking his head. “No, it’s out of the question.”
“Who better? I not only have access to everything, my presence wouldn’t be as alarming as that of federal investigators.” He paused, then said gently, “I’m not a rank amateur.”
“I’m aware of that, Mr. Cannon.”
“Then I suggest you talk this over with your superiors.” He glanced at his watch. “In the meantime, I have arrangements to make.”
He had no doubt that when Brent took this to his superiors, he would be surprised and chagrined to be told to back off and let Robert Cannon handle this problem on his own. They would provide every assistance, of course, and have backup in place if he needed it, but Agent Brent would find that Robert was calling the shots.
He spent the rest of the day clearing his calendar. Felice made the open-ended flight arrangements and his hotel reservation in Huntsville. Just before leaving that night, he checked his watch and took a chance. Though it was eight o’clock in New York, it was only six in Montana, and the long

summer daylight hours meant ranch work went on for much longer than during the winter.
To his delight, the phone was picked up on the third ring and his sister's lazy drawl came over the line. "Duncans' Madhouse, Madelyn speaking."
Robert chuckled. He could hear in the background the din his two young nephews were making. "Had a busy day, honey?"
"Robert!" Pleasure warmed her voice. "You might say that. Would you be interested in having your nephews for a prolonged visit?"
"Not until they're housebroken. I won't be at home, anyway."
"Where are you off to this time?"
"Huntsville, Alabama."
She paused. "It's hot down there."
"I'm aware of that."
"You might even *sweat,*" she warned him. "Think how upset you'd be."
His firm mouth twitched at the amusement in her voice. "That's a chance I'll have to take."
"It must be serious, then. Trouble?"
"A few glitches."
"Take care."
"I will. If it looks as though I'll be down there for any length of time, I'll call you and give you my number."
"All right. Love you."
"Love you, too." He smiled a bit as he hung up. It was typical of Madelyn that she hadn't asked questions but had immediately sensed the seriousness of the situation awaiting him in Alabama. In six words she had given him her blessing, her support and her love. Though she was actually only his stepsister, the affection and understanding between them were as strong as if they had been connected by blood.
Next he called the woman he had been escorting rather regularly lately, Valentina Lawrence. The relationship hadn't progressed far enough that he would expect her to wait until his return, so the easiest thing for both of them was if he made it clear that she was free to see anyone she wished. It was a pity; Valentina was too popular to remain unattached for long, and he suspected he would be in Alabama for several weeks.
She was just the sort of woman Robert had always been most attracted to: the thoroughbred racehorse type—tall, lean, small-breasted. Her makeup was always impeccable and understated, her clothing both stylish and

tasteful. She had a genuinely pleasant personality, and enjoyed the theater and opera as much as he did. *She* would have been a wonderful companion, if this problem hadn't interfered.

It had been several months since he had ended his last relationship, and he was feeling restless. He much preferred living with a woman to living alone, though he was perfectly content with his own company. He deeply enjoyed women, both mentally and physically, and he normally preferred the steadiness of a long-term relationship. He didn't do one-nighters and disdained those who were so stupid. He refrained from making love to a woman until she had committed herself to a relationship with him.

Valentina accepted the news of his prolonged absence with grace; after all, they weren't lovers and had no claim on each other. He could hear the gentle regret in her voice, but she didn't ask him to call when he returned.

That final piece of business concluded, he sat for several minutes, frowning as he allowed himself to think about the relationship that hadn't quite developed into intimacy, and how long it would be before he had time to attend to the sexual part of his life again. He wasn't pleased at the prospect of a long wait.

He wasn't casual about sex in any way. His intense sexuality was always under strict control; with the difference between a man's strength and a woman's, a man who *wasn't* in control could easily brutalize a woman, something that disgusted him. He tempered both his sexual appetite and his steely strength, reining them in with the icy power of his intellect. He never pressured a woman, though he always made it clear when he was attracted, so she would know where she stood. But he let his lady set the pace, let the intimacy progress at her speed. He respected a woman's natural caution about opening her tender, vulnerable body to a much bigger, stronger male. When it came to sex, he treated women gently and took his time so they could become fully aroused. Such control was no hardship; he could spend hours caressing soft, feminine skin and intriguing curves. Lingering over the lovemaking helped satisfy his own hunger, while intensifying his partner's.

There was nothing like making love that first time with a new partner, he mused. Never again was the experience so intense and hungry. He always tried to make it special for his lady, to make *her* feel special. He never stinted on the little details that made a woman feel treasured: romantic dinners for two, candlelight, champagne, thoughtful gifts, his complete

attention. When the time finally came to retire to the bedroom, he would use all of his skill and control to satisfy her again and again before he allowed release for himself.

Thinking about what the problem in Alabama was causing him to miss made him irritated.

He was roused by a knock on his door. He looked up as Felice stuck her head in. “You should have gone home,” he reproved. “You didn’t have to stay.”

“A messenger brought this envelope for you,” she said, approaching to place it on his desk. She ignored his comment. No matter how late, she seldom left before he did.

“Go home,” he said calmly. “That’s an order. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Do you need anything before I go? A fresh pot of coffee?”

“No, I won’t be staying much longer myself.”

“Then have a good trip.” She smiled and left the room. He could hear her in the outer office gathering together her possessions and locking everything up for the night.

He doubted that anything about the trip would be good. He was in a vengeful mood and out for blood.

He noticed that the manila envelope had no return address. He opened it and slid several pages out There was one grainy, photostated picture, a recap of the situation and what they already knew about it, and a brief message from Agent Brent, identifying the woman in the picture and informing Robert that the bureau would cooperate with him in all matters, which was only what he had expected.

He picked up the reproduced photograph and studied it. It was of very poor quality, but pictured a woman standing on a dock, with motorboats in the background. So this was Evie Shaw. She was wearing sunglasses, so it was difficult to tell much about her, other than she had blondish, untidy hair and seemed to be rather hefty. No Mata Hari there, he thought, his fastidious taste offended by her poor choice of clothes and her general hayseed appearance. She looked more like a female mud wrestler, a coarse hick who was selling out her country for greed.

Briskly he returned the papers to the envelope. He looked forward to bringing both Landon Mercer and Evie Shaw to justice.

Chapter Two

At was a typically hot, sultry Southern summer day. The sky overhead was a deep, rich blue, dotted with fat white clouds that lazily sailed along on a breeze so slight it barely rippled the lake's surface. Gulls wheeled overhead and boats bobbed hypnotically in their slips. A few diehard fishermen and skiers dotted the water, ignoring the heat, but most of the fishermen who had gone out that morning had returned before noon. The air was heavy and humid, intensifying the odors of the lake and the surrounding lush, green mountains.

Evangeline Shaw looked out over her domain from the big plate-glass windows at the rear of the main marina building. Everyone on earth needed his own kingdom, and hers was this sprawling skeletal maze of docks and boat slips. Nothing within these few square acres escaped her attention. Five years ago, when she had taken over, it had been run-down and barely paying expenses. A sizable bank loan had been required to give it the infusion of capital it had needed, but within a year she had had it spruced up, expanded and bringing in more money than it ever had before. Of course, it took more money to run it, but now the marina was making a nice profit. With any luck she would have the bank loan paid off in another three years. Then the marina would be completely hers, free and clear of debt, and she would be able to expand even more, as well as diversify her holdings. She only hoped business would hold up; the fishing trade had slacked off a lot, due to the Tennessee Valley Authority's "weed management" program that had managed to kill most of the water plants that had harbored and protected the fish.

But she had been careful, and she hadn't overextended. Her debt was manageable, unlike that of others who had thought the fishing boom would last forever and had gone deeply into debt to expand. Her domain was secure.

Old Virgil Dodd had been with her most of the morning, sitting in the rocking chair behind the counter and entertaining her and her customers with tales of his growing-up days, back in the 1900s. The old man was as tough as shoe leather, but almost a century weighed on his increasingly frail shoulders, and Evie was afraid that another couple of years, three at the most, would be too much for him. She had known him all her life; he had been *old* all her life, changing little, as enduring as the river and the mountains. But she knew all too well how fleeting and uncertain human life

was, and she treasured the mornings that Virgil spent with her. He enjoyed them, too; he no longer went out fishing, as he had for the first eighty years of his life, but at the marina he was still close to the boats, where he could hear the slap of the water against the docks and smell the lake.

They were alone now, just the two of them, and Virgil had launched into another tale from his youth. Evie perched on a tall stool, occasionally glancing out the windows to see if anyone had pulled up to the gas pump on the dock, but giving most of her attention to Virgil.

The side door opened, and a tall, lean man stepped inside. He stood for a moment before removing his sunglasses, helping his eyes adjust to the relative dimness, then moved toward her with a silent, pantherish stroll.

Evie gave him only a swift glance before turning her attention back to Virgil, but it was enough to make her defenses rise. She didn't know who he was, but she recognized immediately *what* he was; he was not only a stranger, he was an outsider. There were a lot of Northerners who had retired to Guntersville, charmed by the mild winters, the slow pace, low cost of living and natural beauty of the lake, but he wasn't one of them. He was far too young to be retired, for one thing. His accent would be fast and hard, his clothes expensive and his attitude disdainful. Evie had met his kind before. She hadn't been impressed then, either.

But it wasn't just that. It was the other quality she had caught that made her want to put a wall at her back.

He was dangerous.

Though she smiled at Virgil, instinctively she analyzed the stranger. She had grown up with bad boys, daredevils and hell-raisers; the South produced them in abundance. This man was something different, something… more. He didn't embrace danger as much as he *was* danger. It was a different mind-set, a will and temperament that brooked no opposition, a force of character that had glittered in those startlingly pale eyes.

She didn't know how or why, but she sensed that he was a threat to her.

"Excuse me," he said, and the deepness of his voice ran over her like velvet. A strange little quiver tightened her belly and ran up her spine. The words were courteous, but the iron will behind them told her that he expected her to immediately attend to him.

She gave him another quick, dismissive glance. "I'll be with you in a minute," she said, her tone merely polite, then she turned back to Virgil with real warmth. "What happened then, Virgil?"

No hint of emotion showed on Robert's face, though he was a bit startled by the woman's lack of response. That was unusual. He wasn't accustomed to being ignored by anyone, and certainly not by a woman. Women had always been acutely aware of him, responding to the intense masculinity he kept under ruthless control. He wasn't vain, but his effect on women was something he largely took for granted. He couldn't remember ever wanting a woman and not having her, eventually.

But he was willing to wait and use the opportunity to watch this woman. Her appearance had thrown him a little off balance, also something unusual for him. He still hadn't adjusted his expectations to the reality.

This was Evie Shaw, no doubt about it. She sat on a stool behind the counter, all her attention on an old man who sat in a rocking chair, his aged voice gleeful as he continued to recount some tall tale from his long-ago youth. Robert's eyes narrowed fractionally as he studied her.

She wasn't the thick-bodied hayseed he had expected. Or rather, she wasn't thick-bodied; he reserved judgment on the hayseed part. The unflattering image he'd formed must have been caused by the combination of bad photography and poorly fitting clothes. He had walked in looking for a woman who was coarse and ill-bred, but that wasn't what he'd found. Instead, she… glowed.

It was an unsettling illusion, perhaps produced by the brilliant sunlight streaming in through the big windows, haloing her sunny hair and lighting the tawny depths of her hazel eyes. The light caressed her golden skin, which was as smooth and unblemished as a porcelain doll's. Illusion or not, the woman was luminous.

Her voice had been surprisingly deep and a little raspy, bringing up memories of old Bogie and Bacall movies and making Robert's spine prickle. Her accent was lazy and liquid, as melodious as a murmuring creek or the wind in the trees, a voice that made him think of tangled sheets and long, hot nights.

Watching her, he felt something inside him go still.

The old man leaned forward, folding his gnarled hands over the crook of his walking cane. His faded blue eyes were full of laughter and the memories of good times. "Well, we'd tried ever way we knowed to get John H. away from that still, but he weren't budging. He kept an old shotgun loaded with rat shot, so we were afeard to venture too close. He knowed it was just a bunch of young'uns aggravating him, but *we* didn't know he knowed. Ever

time he grabbed that shotgun, we'd run like jack-rabbits, then we'd come sneakin' back…"

Robert forced himself to look around as he tuned out the rest of Virgil's tale. Ramshackle though the building was, the business seemed to be prospering, if the amount of tackle on hand and the number of occupied boat slips were any indication. A pegboard behind the counter held the ignition keys to the rental boats, each key neatly labeled and numbered. He wondered how she kept track of who had which boat.

Virgil was well into his tale, slapping his knee and chortling. Evie Shaw threw back her head with a shout of pure enjoyment, her laughter as deep as her speaking voice. Robert was suddenly aware of how accustomed he had become to carefully controlled social laughter, how shrill and shallow it was compared to her unabashed mirth, with nothing forced or held back.

He tried to resist the compulsion to stare at her, but, to his surprise, it was like resisting the need to breathe. He could manage it for a little while, but it was a losing battle from the start. With a mixture of fury and curiosity, he gave in to the temptation and let his gaze greedily drink her in.

He watched her with an impassive expression, his self-control so absolute that neither his posture nor his face betrayed any hint of his thoughts. Unfortunately, that self-control didn't extend to those thoughts as his attention focused on Evie Shaw with such intensity that he was no longer aware of his surroundings, that he no longer heard Virgil's cracked voice continuing with his tale.

She wasn't anything like the women he had always found most attractive. She was also a traitor, or at least was involved in industrial espionage. He had every intention of breaking her, of bringing her to justice. Yet he couldn't take his eyes off her, couldn't control his wayward thoughts, couldn't still the sudden hard thumping in his chest. He had been sweating in the suffocating heat, but suddenly the heat inside him was so blistering that it made the outer temperature seem cool in comparison. His skin felt too tight, his clothing too restrictive. A familiar heaviness in his loins made the last two sensations all too real, rather than products of his imagination.

The women he had wanted in the past, for all the differences in their characters, had shared a certain sense of style, of sophistication. They had all looked—and been—expensive. He hadn't minded, and had enjoyed spoiling them more. They had all been well dressed, perfumed, exquisitely turned out. His sister Madelyn had disparagingly referred to a couple of

them as mannequins, but Madelyn herself was a clotheshorse of the highest order, so he had been amused rather than irritated by the comment.
Evie Shaw, in contrast, evidently paid no attention to her clothes. She wore an oversize T-shirt that she had knotted at the waist, a pair of jeans so ancient that they were threadbare and almost colorless, and equally old docksiders. Her hair, a sun-streaked blond that ranged in color from light brown to the palest flax, and included several different shades of gold, was pulled back and confined in an untidy braid that was as thick as his wrist and hung halfway down her back. Her makeup was minimal and probably a waste of time in this humidity, but with her complexion, she didn't really need it.
Damn it, how could she glow like that? It wasn't the sheen of perspiration, but the odd impression that light was attracted to her, as if she forever stood in a subtle spotlight. Her skin was lightly tanned, a creamy golden hue, and it looked like warm, living satin. Even her eyes were the golden brown hazel of dark topaz.
He had always preferred tall, lean women; as tall as he was himself, he had felt better matched with them on the dance floor and in bed. Evie Shaw was no more than five-four, if that. Nor was she lean; rather, the word that came to mind was *luscious*, followed immediately by *delicious.* Caught off guard by the violence of his reaction, he wondered savagely if he wanted to make love to her or eat her, and the swift mental answer to his own question was a flat, unequivocal "yes." To both choices.
She was a symphony of curves, not quite full-figured, but sleek and rounded, the absolute essence of femaleness. No slim, boyish hips there, but a definite flare from her waist, and she had firm, round buttocks. He had always adored the delicacy of small breasts but now found himself entranced by the soft globes that shaped the front of the annoyingly loose T-shirt. They weren't big, heavy breasts, though they had a slight bounce that riveted his attention whenever she moved; they weren't exactly voluptuous, but were just full enough to be maddeningly tempting. Their soft, warm weight would fill his hands, hands that he tightened into fists in an effort to resist the urge to reach out and touch her.
Everything about her was shaped for a man's delight, but he wasn't delighted by his reaction. If *he* could respond to her like this, maybe Mercer was her pawn rather than the other way around. It was a possibility he couldn't ignore.

Not only was she nothing like the women he had previously desired, he was furious with himself for wanting her. He was down here to gather evidence that would send her to prison, and he couldn't let lust make him lose sight of that. This woman was wading hip-deep in the sewer of espionage, and he shouldn't feel anything for her except disgust. Instead he was struggling with a physical desire so intense that it was all he could do to simply stand there, rather than act. He didn't want to court her, seduce her; he wanted to grab her and carry her away. His lair was a hideously expensive Manhattan penthouse, but the primitive instinct was the same one that had impelled men to the same action back when their lairs were caves. He wanted her, and there was nothing civilized or gentle about it. The urge made a mockery of both his intellect and his self-control.

He wanted to ignore the attraction, but he couldn't; it was too strong, the challenge too great. Evie Shaw was not just ignoring him, she was totally oblivious to the pure male intent that was surging through him. He might as well have been a post for all the attention she was paying to him, and every aggressive cell in his body was on alert. By God, he *would* have her.

The door behind him opened, and he turned, grateful for the interruption. A young woman, clad in shorts, sandals and a T-shirt, smiled at him and murmured, "Hello," as she approached. Both the smile and the look lingered for just a moment before she turned her attention to the two people behind the counter. "Have you enjoyed your visit, PawPaw? Who all has been in today?"

"Had a good time," Virgil said, slowly getting to his feet with a lot of help from the cane. "Burt Mardis spent some time with us, and both of the Gibbs boys came by. Have you got the young'uns rounded up?"

"They're in the car with the groceries." She turned to Evie. "I hate to run, but it's so hot I want to get the food put up before it spoils."

"Everything I can, I put off until night," Evie said. "Including buying groceries. Bye, Virgil. You take care of that knee, all right? And come back soon."

"The knee feels better already," he assured her. "Getting old ain't no fun, but it's better than dying." He winked and steadily made his way down the aisle, using the cane but otherwise not making much allowance for his noticeable limp.

"See you later, Evie," the young woman said as she turned to go. She gave Robert another smile in passing.

When the old man and young woman had left and the door had closed behind them, Robert leaned negligently against the counter and said in a mild tone, “I assume she’s his granddaughter.”

Evie shook her head and turned away to check the gas pumps again. She was too aware of being alone with him, which was ridiculous; she was alone with male customers several times a day and had never felt the least hint of uneasiness—until now. She had felt a subtle alarm the second he had walked in the door. He hadn’t said or done anything untoward, but still, she couldn’t shake that feeling of wariness. “Great-granddaughter. He lives with her. I apologize for making you wait, but I’ll have other customers, while Virgil is ninety-three, and he may not be around much longer.”

“I understand,” he said calmly, not wanting to antagonize her. He held out his hand, a gesture calculated to force her to look at him, truly acknowledge him, *touch* him. “I’m Robert Cannon.”

She put her hand in his, just slowly enough to let him know that she was reluctant to shake hands with him and did it only to be polite. Her fingers were slim and cool and gripped his with surprising strength. “Evie Shaw,” she said. He made certain his own grip was firm, but not enough to hurt, and promptly released her. The contact was brief, impersonal… and not enough.

Immediately she turned away and said briskly, “What is it you need, Mr. Cannon?”

He came up with several graphic ideas but didn’t give voice to them. Instead he thoughtfully eyed her slim back, rapidly adjusting his impressions. He had thought her oblivious to him, but she was too studiously ignoring him for that; no, quite the contrary, she was very aware of him, and very on edge. In a flash, all of his plans changed.

He had entered the marina wanting only to look around a little, get an idea of the security and layout of the place, maybe buy a fishing license or map, but all of that had changed in the past few minutes. Rather than shadow Mercer, he now intended to stick to Evie Shaw like glue.

Why was she so wary of him? She had been, right from the beginning, even before he had introduced himself. The only explanation that came to mind was that she had already known who he was, had somehow recognized him, and she could only have done that if she had been briefed. If so, this operation was more sophisticated than he had expected. It wouldn’t be beyond his capabilities, but it would certainly be more of a challenge. With

one of his lightning-fast decisions, he changed the base of his investigation from Huntsville to Guntersville. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, he had, on a couple of memorable occasions, found himself attracted to female operatives; taking them to bed had been a risk, but a delightful one. Danger certainly added to the excitement. Bedding Evie Shaw, he suspected, would be an event he would never forget.

"First, I need information," he said, irritated because she still wasn't looking at him, but not a hint of it sounded in his voice. He needed to lull her suspicions, make her comfortable with him. Gentling women had never been difficult for him before, and he didn't expect it to be now. As far as anyone outside a few government officials knew, he was nothing more than a very wealthy businessman; if she was as smart as he now suspected her to be, she would soon see the benefits in becoming close to him, not only for what he could give her but for the information she could get from him. A summer fling would be perfect for her needs, and he intended to give her just that.

"Perhaps you should go to the Visitors' Center," she suggested.

"Perhaps," he murmured. "But I was told that you can help me."

"Maybe." Her tone was reluctant. She certainly wasn't committing herself to anything. "What kind of information do you need?"

"I'm taking a long vacation here, for the rest of the summer," he said. "My second reason for coming here is to rent a boat slip, but I also want someone to show me around the lake. I was told that you know the area as well as anyone."

She faced him, her gaze hooded. "That's true, but I don't guide. I can help you with the boat, but that's all."

She had thrown up a wall as soon as she had seen him, and she had no intention of being cooperative about anything. He gave her a gentle smile, one that had been soothing nervous women for years. "I understand. You don't know me."

He saw the involuntary reaction to that smile in the way her pupils flared. Now she looked uncertain. "It isn't that. I don't know a lot of my customers."

"I believe the going rate for guides is a hundred a day, plus expenses. I'm willing to pay twice that."

"It isn't a matter of money, Mr. Cannon. I don't have the time."

Pushing her now wouldn’t accomplish anything, and he had a lot to get in place before he could really pursue her. He had made certain she wouldn’t forget him, which was enough for a first meeting. “Can you recommend a guide, then?” he asked, and saw her relax a little.
She reeled off several names, which he committed to memory, for he fully intended to learn the river. Then she said, “Would you like to look at the boat slips that are available now?”
“Yes, of course.” It would give him a chance to inspect her security arrangements, too.
She picked up a portable phone and clipped it to a belt loop, then came out from behind the counter. Robert fell into step slightly behind her, his heavy-lidded gaze wandering over her curvy hips and heart-shaped bottom, clearly outlined by the snug jeans. Her sun-streaked head barely reached the top of his shoulder. His blood throbbed warmly through his veins as he thought of cupping her bottom in his hands. It was an effort to wrench his attention away from the image that thought provoked.
“Do you just leave the store unattended?” he asked as they walked down the dock. The sunlight was blinding as it reflected off the water, and he slipped his sunglasses into place again. The heat was incredible, like a sauna.
“I can see from the docks if anyone drives up,” she replied.
“How many others work here?”
She gave him a curious glance, as if wondering why he would ask. “I have a mechanic, and a boy who works mornings for me during the summer, then shifts to afternoons during the school year.”
“How many hours a day are you open?”
“From six in the morning until eight at night.”
“That’s along day.”
“It isn’t so bad. During the winter, I’m only open from eight until five.”
Four of the docks were covered, and most of the slips were occupied. A variety of crafts bobbed in the placid water: houseboats, cabin cruisers, pontoon boats, ski boats, sailboats. The four covered docks were on the left, and the entrance to them was blocked by a locked gate. To the right were two uncovered docks, for use by general traffic. The rental boats were in the first row of boat slips on the secured dock closest to the marina building.
Evie unlocked the padlock that secured the gate, and they stepped onto the floating dock, which bobbed gently on the water. Silently she led him down

the rows of boats, indicating which of the empty slips were available. Finally she asked, “What size boat do you have?”
He made another instant decision. “I intend to buy a small one. A speedboat, not a cabin cruiser. Can you recommend a good dealership in the area?”
She gave him another of those hooded looks, but merely said in a brisk tone, “There are several boat dealerships in town. It won’t be hard to find what you want.” Then she turned and started back toward the marina office, her steps sure and graceful on the bobbing dock.
Again Robert followed her, enjoying the view just as much as he had before. She probably thought she was rid of him, but there was no way that would happen. Anger and anticipation mingled, forming a volatile aggression that made him feel more alert, more on edge, than he ever had before. She would pay for stealing from him, in more ways than one.
“Will you have dinner with me tonight?” he asked, using a totally unaggressive tone. She halted so abruptly that he bumped into her. He could have prevented the contact, but deliberately let his body collide with hers. She staggered off balance, and he grabbed her waist to steady her, easing her back against him before she regained control. He felt the shiver that ran through her as he savored the heat and feel of her under his hands, against his thighs and loins and belly. “Sorry,” he said with light amusement. “I didn’t realize having dinner with me was such a frightening concept.”
She should have done a number of things. If reluctant, she should have moved away from the subtle sexuality of his embrace. If compliant, she should have turned to face him. She should have hastened to assure him that his invitation hadn’t frightened her at all, then accepted to prove that it hadn’t. She did none of those things. She stood stock-still, as if paralyzed by his hands clasping her waist. Silence thickened between them, growing taut. She shivered again, a delicately sensual movement that made his hands tighten on her, made his male flesh quiver and rise. Why didn’t she move, why didn’t she say something?
“Evie?” he murmured.
“No,” she said abruptly, her voice raspier than usual. She wrenched away from him. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go out to dinner with you.”
Then a boat idled into the marina, and he watched her golden head turn, her face light with a smile as she recognized her customer. Sharp fury flared

through him at how easily she smiled at others, but would scarcely even glance at him.
She lifted her left arm to wave, and with shock Robert focused on that slim hand.
She was wearing a wedding ring.

Chapter Three

Evie tried to concentrate on the ledgers that lay open on her desk, but she couldn't keep her mind on posting the day's income and expenses. A dark, lean face kept forming in her mind's eye, blotting out the figures. Every time she thought of those pale, predatory eyes, the bottom would drop out of her stomach and her heart would begin hammering. Fear. Though he had been polite, Robert Cannon could no more hide his true nature than could a panther. In some way she could only sense, without being able to tell the exact nature of it, he was a threat to her.
Her instincts were primitive; she wanted to barricade herself against him, wall him out. She had fought too long to put her life on an even keel to let this dark stranger disrupt what she had built. Her life was placid, deliberately so, and she resented this interruption in the even fabric of days she had fashioned about herself.
She looked up at the small photograph that sat on the top shelf of her old-fashioned rolltop desk. It wasn't one of her wedding photos; she had never looked at any of those. This photo was one that had been taken the summer before their senior year in high school; a group of kids had gotten together and spent the whole day on the water, skiing, goofing off, going back on shore to cook out. Becky Watts had brought her mother's camera and taken photos of all of them that golden summer day. Matt had been chasing Evie with an ice cube, trying to drop it down her blouse, but when he finally caught her, she had struggled and made him drop it. Matt's hands had been on her waist, and they had been laughing. Becky had called, "Hey, Matt!" and snapped the photo when they both automatically looked over at her. Matt. Tall, just outgrowing the gangliness of adolescence and putting on some of the weight that came with maturity. That shock of dark hair falling over his brow, crooked grin flashing, bright blue eyes twinkling. He'd always been laughing. Evie didn't spare any looks for the girl she had been

then, but she saw the way Matt had held her, the link between them that had been obvious even in that happy-go-lucky moment. She looked down at the slim gold band on her left hand. *Matt.*

In all the years since, there hadn't been anyone. She hadn't wanted anyone, had been neither interested nor tempted. There were people she loved, of course, but in a romantic sense her emotional isolation had been so complete that she had been totally unaware if any man had been attracted to her… until Robert Cannon had walked into her marina and looked at her with eyes like green ice. Though his expression had been impassive, she had felt his attention focus on her like a laser, had felt the heated sexual quality of it. That, and something else. Something even more dangerous.

He had left immediately after looking at the boat slips, but he would be back. She knew that without question. Evie sighed as she got up and walked to the French doors. She could see starlight twinkling on the water and stepped out onto the deck. The warm night air wrapped around her, humid, fragrant. Her little house sat right on the riverfront, with steps leading down from the deck to her private dock and boathouse. She sat in one of the patio chairs and propped her feet on the railing, calmed by the peacefulness of the river.

The summer nights weren't quiet, what with the constant chirp of insects, frogs and night birds, the splash of fish jumping, the rustle of the trees, the low murmur of the river itself, but there was a serenity in the noise. There was no moon, so the stars were plainly visible in the black bowl of the sky, the fragile, twinkling light reflected in millions of tiny diamonds on the water. The main river channel curved through the lake not sixty feet from her dock, the current ruffling the surface into waves.

Her nearest neighbors were a quarter of a mile away, out of sight around a small promontory. The only houses she could see from her deck were on the other side of the lake, well over a mile away. Guntersville Lake, formed when the TVA had dammed the Tennessee River back in the thirties, was both long and wide, irregularly shaped, curving back and forth, with hundreds of inlets. Numerous small, tree-covered islands dotted the lake.

She had lived here all her life. Here was home, family, friends, a network of roots almost two hundred years old that spread both wide and deep. She knew the pace of the seasons, the pulse of the river. She had never wanted to be anywhere else. The fabric of life here was her fortress. Now, however,

her fortress was being threatened by two different enemies, and she would have to fight to protect herself.

The first threat was one that made her furious. Landon Mercer was up to no good. She didn't know the man well, but she had a certain instinct about people that was seldom wrong. There was a slickness to his character that had put her off from the start, when he had first begun renting one of her boats, but she hadn't actually become suspicious of him for a couple of months. It had been a lot of little things that had gradually alerted her, like the way he always carefully looked around before leaving the dock; it would have made sense if he'd been looking at the river traffic, but instead he'd looked at the parking lot and the highway. And there was always a mixture of triumph and relief in his expression when he returned, as if he'd done something he shouldn't have and gotten away with it.

His clothes were wrong, somehow. He made an effort to dress casually, the way he thought a fisherman would dress, but never quite got it right. He carried a rod and reel and one small tackle box, but from what Evie could tell, he never used them. He certainly never came back with any fish, and the same lure had been tied onto the line every time he went out. She knew it was the same one, because it was missing the back set of treble hooks.

No, Mercer wasn't fishing. So why carry the tackle? The only logical explanation was that he was using it as a disguise; if anyone saw him, they wouldn't think anything about it.

But because Evie was alert to anything that threatened her domain, she wondered why he would need a disguise. Was he seeing a married woman? She dismissed that possibility. Boats were noisy and obvious; using them wasn't a good way to sneak around. If his lover's house was isolated, a car would be better, because then Mercer wouldn't have to worry about the vagaries of the weather. If the house had neighbors within sight, then a boat would attract attention when it pulled up to the dock; river people tended to notice strange boats. Nor was an assignation in the middle of the lake a good idea, given the river traffic.

Drugs, maybe. Maybe the little tackle box was full of cocaine, instead of tackle. If he had a system set up, selling in the middle of the river would be safe; the water patrol couldn't sneak up on him, and if they did approach, all he had to do was drop the evidence over the side. His most dangerous time would be before he got out on the water, while he could be caught carrying the stuff. That was why he never examined the parking lot when he

returned; the evidence was gone. For all intents and purposes, he had just been enjoying a little fishing.

She had no hard evidence. Twice she had tried to follow him, but had lost him in the multitude of coves and islands. But if he was using one of her boats to either sell or transfer drugs, he was jeopardizing her business. Not only could the boat be confiscated, the publicity would be terrible for the marina. Boat owners would pull out of the slips they rented from her; mere were enough marinas in the Guntersville area that they could always find another place to house their boats.

Both times Mercer had headed toward the same area, the island-dotted area around the Marshall County Park, where it was easy to lose sight of a boat. Evie knew every inch of the river; eventually she would be able to narrow down the choices and find him. She didn't have any grandiose scheme to apprehend him, assuming he was doing something illegal. She didn't even intend to get all that close to him; she carried a pair of powerful binoculars with her in the boat. All she wanted to do was satisfy her suspicions; if she was correct, then she would turn the matter over to the sheriff and let him work it out with the water patrol. That way, she would have protected both her reputation and the marina. She might still lose the boat, but she didn't think the sheriff would confiscate it if she were the one who put him onto Mercer to begin with. All she wanted was to be certain in her own mind before she accused a man of something as serious as drug dealing.

The problem with following Mercer was that she never knew when to expect him; if she had customers in the marina, she couldn't just drop everything and hop in a boat.

But she would handle that as the opportunity presented itself. Robert Cannon was something else entirely.

She didn't want to handle him. She didn't want anything to do with him—this man with his cold, intense eyes and clipped speech, this stranger, this Yankee. He made her feel like a rabbit facing a cobra: terrified, but fascinated at the same time. He tried to hide his ruthlessness behind smooth, cosmopolitan manners, but Evie had no doubts about the real nature of the man.

He wanted her. He intended to have her. And he wouldn't care if he destroyed her in the taking.

She touched her wedding ring, turning it on her finger. Why couldn't Matt have lived? So many years had passed without him, and she had survived,

had gotten on with her life, but his death had irrevocably changed her. She was stronger, yes, but also set apart, isolated from other men who might have wanted to claim her. Other men had respected that distance; *he* wouldn't.

Robert Cannon was a complication she couldn't afford. At the very least, he would distract her at a time when she needed to be alert. At the worst, he would breach her defenses and take what he wanted, then leave without any thought for the emotional devastation he left behind. Evie shuddered at the thought. She had survived once; she wasn't sure she could do it again.

Today, when he had put his hands on her waist and pulled her against his lean, hard body, she had been both shocked and virtually paralyzed by the exquisite pleasure of the contact. It had been so many years since she had felt that kind of joy that she had forgotten how enthralling, how potent, it was to feel hard male flesh against her. She had been startled by the heated strength of his hands and the subtle muskiness of his scent. She had been swamped by the sensations, by her memories. But her memories were old ones, of two young people who no longer existed. The hands holding her had been Matt's; the eager, yearning kisses had been from Matt's lips. Time had dulled those memories, the precious ones, but the image of Robert Cannon was sharp, almost painful, in its freshness.

The safest thing would be to ignore him, but that was the one thing she was sure he wouldn't allow.

Robert strolled into the offices of PowerNet the next morning and introduced himself to the receptionist, a plump, astute woman in her thirties who immediately made a phone call and then personally escorted him to Landon Mercer's office. He was in a savage mood, had been since he'd seen the wedding ring on Evie Shaw's hand, but he gave the receptionist a gentle smile and thanked her, making her blush. He never took out his temper on innocents; in fact, his self-control was so great that the vast majority of his employees didn't know he even *had* a temper. The few who knew otherwise had learned it the hard way.

Landon Mercer, however, was no innocent. He came swiftly out of his office to meet Robert halfway, heartily greeting him. "Mr. Cannon, what a surprise! No one let us know you were in Huntsville. We're honored!"

"Hardly that," Robert murmured as he shook hands with Mercer, deliberately modifying his grip to use very little strength. His mood deteriorated even further to find that Mercer was tall and good-looking,

with thick blond hair and a very European sense of style. Expertly Robert assessed the cost of the Italian silk suit Mercer was wearing, and mentally he raised his eyebrows. The man had expensive tastes.
“Come in, come in,” Mercer urged, inviting Robert into his office. “Would you like coffee?”
“Please.” The acceptance of hospitality, Robert had found, often made subordinates relax a little. Landon Mercer would be edgy at his sudden appearance, anyway; it wouldn’t hurt to calm him down.
Mercer turned to his secretary, who was making herself very busy. “Trish, would you bring in two coffees, please?”
“Of course. How do you take yours, Mr. Cannon?”
“Black.”
They went on into Mercer’s office, and Robert took one of the comfortable visitors’ chairs, rather than automatically taking Mercer’s big chair behind the desk to show his authority. “I apologize for just dropping in on you without warning,” he said calmly. “I’m in the area on vacation and thought I’d take the opportunity to see the operation, since I’ve never personally been down here.”
“We’re pleased to have you anytime,” Mercer replied, still in that hearty tone of voice. “Vacation, you say? Strange place to take a vacation, especially in the middle of summer. The heat is murderous, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”
“Not so strange.” Robert could almost hear Mercer’s furiously churning, suspicious thoughts. Why was Robert here? Why now? Were they on to Mercer? If they were, why hadn’t he been arrested? Robert didn’t mind Mercer being suspicious; in fact, he was counting on it.
There was a light knock on the door; then Trish entered with two cups of steaming coffee. She passed Robert’s to him first, then gave the other cup to Mercer. “Thank you,” Robert said. Mercer didn’t bother with the courtesy.
“About your vacation?” Mercer prompted, when Trish had closed the door behind her.
Robert leaned back in the chair and indolently crossed his legs. He could feel Mercer sharply studying him and knew what he would see: a lean, elegantly dressed man with cool, slightly bored eyes, certainly nothing to alarm him, despite this unexpected visit. “I have a house on the lake in Guntersville,” he said in a lazy, slightly remote tone. It was a lie, but Mercer wouldn’t know that. “I bought it and some land several years ago. I’ve

never been down here before, but I've let several of my executives use the place, and they've all returned with the usual exaggerated fishing stories. Even allowing for that, they've all been enthusiastic about coming back, so I thought I'd try out the fishing for myself."
"I've heard it's a good lake," Mercer said politely, but the mental wheels were whirling faster than before.
"We'll see." Robert allowed himself a slight smile. "It seems like a nice, quiet place. Just what the doctor ordered."
"Doctor?"
"High blood pressure. Stress." Robert shrugged. "I feel fine, but the doctor insisted that I needed a long vacation, and this seemed like the perfect place to avoid stress."
"That's for sure," Mercer said. Suspicion still lingered in his eyes, but now it was tempered with relief at the plausible explanation for Robert's presence.
"I don't know how long I'll stay," Robert continued in an indifferent tone. "I won't be dropping in on you constantly, though. I'm supposed to forget about work for a while."
"We'll be glad to see you anytime, but you really should listen to your doctor," Mercer urged. "Since you're here, would you like a tour of the place? There isn't much to see, of course, just a lot of programmers and their computers."
Robert glanced at his watch, as if he had somewhere else to go. "I believe I have time, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."
"No, not at all." Mercer was already on his feet, anxious to complete the tour and send Robert on his way.
Even if he hadn't already known about Mercer, Robert thought, he would have disliked him; there was a slickness to him that was immediately off-putting. Mercer tried to disguise it with a glib, hearty attitude, but the man thought he was smarter than everyone else, and the contempt slipped through every so often. Did he treat Evie with the same attitude? Or was she, despite her relative lack of sophistication, cool and discerning enough that Mercer watched his step with her?
They were probably lovers, he thought, even though she was married. When had marital vows ever prevented anyone from straying, if they were so inclined? And why would a woman involved in espionage hesitate at cheating on her husband? Odd that her marital status hadn't been included

in the information he'd received on her, but then, why would it be, unless her husband was also involved? Evidently he wasn't, but nevertheless, as soon as Robert had returned to his hotel room in Huntsville the afternoon before, he had called his own investigative people and asked for information concerning the man. He was coldly furious; he had never, under any circumstances, allowed himself to become involved with a married woman, and he wasn't going to lower his standards now. But neither had he ever wanted another woman as violently as he wanted Evie Shaw, and knowing that he had to deprive himself made his temper very precarious.
Mercer was all smooth bonhomie as he escorted Robert through the offices, pointing out the various features and explaining the work in progress. Robert made use of the tour to gather information. Calling on his ability to totally concentrate on one thing at a time, he pushed Evie Shaw out of his mind and ruthlessly focused on the business at hand. PowerNet was housed in a long, one-story brick building. The company offices were in front, while the real work, the programming, was done in the back, with computer geniuses working their peculiar magic. Robert quietly noted the security setup and approved; there were surveillance cameras, and motion and thermal alarms. Access to the classified material could be gained only by a coded magnetic card, and the bearer still had to have the necessary security clearance. No paperwork or computer disks were allowed to leave the building. All work was logged in and placed in a secure vault when the programmers left for the day.
For Robert, the security measures made things simple; the only way the system could have been breached without detection was by someone in a position of authority, someone who had access to the vault: Landon Mercer. He made a point of checking his watch several times during the tour, and as soon as it was completed, he said, "I've enjoyed this very much, but I'm supposed to meet with a contractor to do a few repairs on the house. Perhaps we could get together for a round of golf sometime."
"Of course, anytime," Mercer said. "Just call." Robert allowed himself a brief smile. "I'll do that." He was satisfied with the visit; his intention hadn't been to do any actual snooping but rather to let Mercer know he was in town and to see for himself the security measures at PowerNet. He had the security layout from the original specs, of course, but it was always best to check out the details and make certain nothing had been changed. He might have to slip into the building at night, but that wasn't his primary

plan, merely a possibility. Catching Mercer on-site with classified data didn't prove anything; the trick was to catch him passing it to someone else. Let his presence make Mercer nervous. Nervous people made mistakes.
An envelope from his personal investigators was waiting for him at the desk when he returned to the hotel. Robert stepped into the empty elevator and opened the envelope as the car began moving upward. He quickly scanned the single sheet. The information was brief. Matt Shaw, Evie's husband, had been killed in a car accident the day after their wedding, twelve years before.
He calmly slid the sheet back into the envelope, but a savage elation was rushing through him. She was a widow! She was available. And, though she didn't know it yet, she was his for the taking.
Once in his hotel room, he picked up the phone and began making calls, sliding the chess pieces of intrigue into place.

Chapter Four

Evie stuck her head out the door. "Jason!" she bellowed at her fourteen-year-old nephew. "Stop horsing around. *Now!*"
"Aw, okay," he grudgingly replied, and Evie pulled her head back inside, though she kept an eye on him, anyway. She adored the kid but never forgot that he *was* just a kid, with an attention span that leaped around like a flea and all the ungovernable energy and awkwardness that went with early adolescence. Her niece, Paige, was content to sit inside with her, in the air-conditioning, but a couple of Jason's buddies had come by, and now they were out on the docks, clowning around. Evie expected any or all of the boys to fall into the water at any time.
"They're so jerky," Paige said with all the disdain a thirteen-year-old could muster, which was plenty.
Evie smiled at her. "They'll improve with age."
"They'd better," Paige said ominously. She pulled her long, coltish legs up into the rocking chair and returned to the young-adult romance she was reading. She was a beautiful girl, Evie thought, studying the delicate lines of the young face, which still wore some of the innocence of childhood. Paige had dark hair, like her father, and a classic bone structure that would

only improve with age. Jason was more outgoing than his sister, but then, Jason was more outgoing than just about everyone.

A boat idled into the marina and pulled up to the gas pumps. Evie went outside to take care of her customers, two young couples who had already spent too much time on the water, judging by their sunburns. After they had paid and left, she checked on Jason and his friends again, but for the time being they were ambling along one of the docks and refraining from any rough horseplay. Knowing teenage boys as she did, she didn't expect that state of affairs to last long.

The day was another scorcher. She glanced up at the white sun in the cloudless sky; no chance of rain to cool things off. Though she had been outside for only a few minutes, she could already feel her hair sticking to the back of her neck as she opened the door to the office and stepped inside. How could the boys stand even being outside in this heat, much less doing anything as strenuous as their energetic clowning around?

She paused as she entered, momentarily blinded by the transition from bright sunlight into relative dimness. Paige was chatting with someone, her eager tone unusual in a girl who was normally quiet except with family members. Evie could see a man standing in front of the counter, but it was another minute before her vision cleared enough for her to make out his lean height and the width of his shoulders. She still couldn't see his features clearly, but nevertheless a tiny alarm of recognition tingled through her, and she drew a controlled breath. "Mr. Cannon."

"Hello." His pale green gaze slipped downward, leisurely examined her legs, which were exposed today, because the heat had been so oppressive that she had worn shorts. The once-over made her feel uncomfortable, and she slipped behind the counter to ring up the gas sale and put the money in the cash drawer.

"What may I do for you?" she asked, without looking at him. She was aware of Paige watching them with open interest, alerted perhaps by the difference in Evie's manner from the way she usually treated customers.

He ignored the distance in her tone. "I've brought my boat." He paused. "You *do* still have an available slip?"

"Of course." Business was business, Evie thought. She opened a drawer and pulled out a rental agreement. "If you'll complete this, I'll show you to your slip. When you were here the other day, did you see any particular location that you'd like?"

He glanced down at the sheet in his hand. “No, any one of them will do,” he absently replied as he rapidly read the agreement. It was straightforward and simple, stating the rental fee and outlining the rules. At the bottom of the sheet was a place for two signatures, his and hers. “Is there an extra copy?” he asked, the businessman in him balking at signing something without keeping a record of it.

She shrugged and pulled out an extra copy of the rental agreement, took the one he held from his hands and slipped a sheet of carbon paper between the two sheets. Briskly she stapled them together and handed them back to him. Controlling a smile, Robert swiftly filled out the form, giving his name and address and how long he intended to rent the slip. Then he signed at the bottom, returned the forms to her and pulled out his wallet. The small sign taped to the counter stated that the marina accepted all major credit cards, so he removed one and laid it on the counter. She still didn’t look at him as she prepared a credit-card slip. Robert watched her with well-hidden greed. In the three days since he’d first met her, he had decided that she couldn’t possibly have been as lovely as he had first thought or have such an impact on his senses. He had been wrong. From the moment he had entered the marina and watched her through the plate-glass window as she pumped gas, tension had twisted his guts until he could barely breathe. She was still as sleek and golden and sensual as a pagan goddess, and he wanted her.

He had accomplished a lot in those three days. In addition to making the first chess move with Mercer, he had bought a boat, a car and a house on the river. It had taken two days for the dealership to rig the boat, but he had taken possession of the house faster than that, having moved in the afternoon before. The Realtor still hadn’t recovered from his blitzing style of decision making. But Robert wasn’t accustomed to being thwarted; in record time the utilities had been turned on, the paperwork completed, a cleaning service from Huntsville dragooned into giving the place a thorough cleaning, and new furniture both selected and delivered. He had also put another plan into progress, one that would force Evie Shaw and Landon Mercer into a trap.

Silently Evie handed him the credit-card slip to sign. He scrawled his signature and returned it to her just as shouts from outside made her whirl. Robert glanced out the window and saw several teenage boys roughhousing on the docks. “Excuse me,” Evie said, and went over to open the door.

“They’re going to get it now,” Paige piped up with obvious satisfaction, getting to her knees in the rocking chair.

Just as Evie reached the door, Jason laughingly pushed one of his buddies, who immediately returned the shove, with interest. Jason had already turned away, and the motion propelled him forward; his sneakers skidded on a wet spot perilously close to the edge of the dock. His gangly arms began windmilling comically as he tried to reverse direction, but his feet shot out from under him and he flew into the air, over the water.

“Jason!”

He was too close to the dock. Evie saw it even as she raced through the door, her heart in her mouth. She heard the sickening crack as his head hit the edge of the dock. His thin body went limp in midair, and a half second later he hit the water, immediately slipping beneath the surface.

One of the boys yelled, his young voice cracking. Evie caught only a glimpse of their bewildered, suddenly terrified faces as she fought her way through the thick, overheated air. The dock looked so far away, and she didn’t seem to be making any progress, even though she could feel her feet thudding on the wood. Frantically she searched the spot where Jason had gone under, but there was nothing, nothing…

She hit the water in a long, flat dive, stroking strongly for where she had last seen him. She was dimly aware of a distant splashing, but she ignored it, all her attention on reaching Jason in time. Don’t let it be too late. Dear God, don’t let it be too late. She could still hear the sodden *thunk* of his head hitting the dock. He could already be dead, or paralyzed. No. Not Jason. She refused to lose him; she couldn’t lose him. She couldn’t go through that again.

She took a deep breath and dived, pushing her way through the water, her desperately searching hands reaching out. Visibility in the river wasn’t good; she would have to locate him mostly by touch. She reached the muddy bottom and clawed her way along it. He had to be here! There was the dark pillar of the dock, telling her that she wasn’t too far away from where he had gone in.

Her lungs began to ache, but she refused to surface. That would use precious seconds, seconds that Jason didn’t have.

Maybe the wave motion had washed him *under* the dock.

Fiercely she kicked, propelling herself into the darker water under the dock. Her groping hands swept the water in front of her. *Nothing.*

Her lungs were burning. The need to inhale was almost impossible to resist. Grimly she fought the impulse as she forced her way down to feel along the bottom again.

Something brushed her hand.

She grabbed, and clutched fabric. Her other hand, groping blindly, caught an arm. Using the last of her strength, she tugged her limp burden out of the shadow of the docks and feebly kicked upward. Progress was frustratingly, agonizingly slow; her lungs were demanding air, her vision fading. Dear God, had she found Jason only to drown with him, because she lacked the strength to get them to the surface?

Then strong hands caught her, gripping her ribs with bruising force, and she was propelled upward in a mighty rush. Her head broke the surface, and she inhaled convulsively, choking and gasping.

"I have you," a deep, calm voice said in her ear. "I have both of you. Just relax against me."

She could hardly do anything else. She was supported by an arm as unyielding as iron as he stroked the short distance to the dock. The boys were on their knees, reaching eager hands down toward him. "Just hold him," she heard Cannon order. "Don't try to pull him out of the water. Let me do it. And one of you go call 911."

"I already have," Evie heard Paige say, the girl's voice wavery and thin.

"Good girl." His tone changed to brisk command, the words close by her ear. "Evie. I want you to hang on to the edge of the dock. Can you do that?"

She was still gasping, unable to talk, so she nodded.

"Let go of Jason. The boys are holding him, so he'll be okay. Do it now."

She obeyed, and he placed her hands on the edge of the dock. Grimly she clung to the wood as he heaved himself out of the water. She pushed her streaming hair out of her eyes with one hand as he knelt down and slipped both hands under Jason's arms. "He might have a spinal-cord injury," she croaked.

"I know." Robert's face was grim. "But he isn't breathing. If we don't get him up here and do CPR, he won't make it."

She swallowed hard and nodded again. As gently as possible, Robert lifted Jason out of the water, the muscles in his arms and shoulders cording under the wet shirt. Evie took one agonized look at Jason's still, blue face, and then she hauled herself out of the water, using strength she hadn't known

she still possessed. She collapsed on the dock beside Jason, then struggled to her knees. “Jason!”
Robert felt for a pulse in the boy’s neck and located a faint throb. Relieved, he said, “He has a heartbeat,” then bent over the sprawled, limp body, pinching the boy’s nostrils shut and using his other hand to press on his chin, forcing his mouth open. He placed his own mouth on the chill blue lips and carefully, forcefully, blew his breath outward. The thin chest rose. Robert lifted his mouth, and the air sighed out of the boy, his chest falling again.
Evie reached out, then forced herself to draw back. She couldn’t do anything that Robert wasn’t already doing, and she was still so weak and shaky that she couldn’t do it nearly as well. She felt as if she were choking on her pain and desperation, on the overwhelming need to do *something*, anything. Her ears were buzzing. She would rather die herself than helplessly watch someone else she loved slowly die before her eyes.
Robert repeated the process again and again, silently counting. Fiercely he focused on what he was doing, ignoring the terrified kids grouped around them, not letting himself think about Evie’s silence, her stillness. The kid’s chest was rising with each breath forced into him, meaning oxygen was getting into his lungs. His heart was beating; if he didn’t have a serious head or spinal injury, he should be okay, if he would just start breathing on his own. The seconds ticked by. One minute. Two. Then abruptly the boy’s chest heaved, and he began choking. Quickly Robert drew back.
Jason suddenly convulsed, rolling to his side and knocking against Evie as he choked and gagged. She lurched sideways, off balance, unable to catch herself. Robert’s hand shot out across Jason to steady her, the lean fingers catching her arm and preventing her from going into the water a second time. With effortless strength, he dragged her across Jason’s legs, pulling her to him.
Water streamed from Jason’s nostrils and open mouth. He gulped and coughed again, then abruptly vomited up a quantity of river water.
“Thank God,” Robert said quietly. “No paralysis.”
“No.” Evie pulled loose from his grip. Tears burned her eyes as she crouched once again by Jason’s side. Gently she touched the boy, soothing him, and noticed that the back of his head was red with blood. “You’ll be okay, honey,” she murmured as she examined the cut. “Nothing that a few

stitches won’t fix.” She glanced up and saw Paige’s white, tear-streaked face. “Paige, get a towel for me, please. And be careful! Don’t run.”
Paige gulped and headed back toward the marina. She didn’t exactly run, but it was close.
Jason’s coughing fit subsided, and he lay exhausted on his side, gulping in air. Evie stroked his arm, repeating that he was going to be all right.
Paige returned with the towel, and gently Evie pressed it to the deep cut, stanching the flow of blood. “A-aunt Evie?” Jason croaked, his voice so hoarse it was almost soundless.
“I’m here.”
“Can I sit up?” he asked, beginning to be embarrassed by me attention.
“I don’t know,” she replied neutrally. “Can you?”
Slowly, cautiously, he eased himself into a sitting position, but he was weak, and Robert knelt down to support him, shifting so that one strong thigh was behind Jason’s back. “My head hurts,” Jason groaned.
“I imagine so,” Robert said in a calm, almost genial voice. “You hit it on the edge of the dock.” Sirens wailed, swiftly coming closer. Jason’s eyes flickered as he realized a further fuss was going to be made.
Gingerly he reached back and touched his head. Wincing, he let his hand fall to his side. “Mom’s going to be peed off,” he said glumly.
“Mom isn’t the only one,” Evie replied. “But we’ll settle that between ourselves later.”
He looked abashed. He tried to move away from Robert’s support but didn’t quite make it. Then the paramedics were there, hurrying down the dock, carrying their tackle boxes of medical equipment. Robert drew back and pulled Evie with him, giving the paramedics room to work. Paige sidled over and slipped her arms around Evie’s waist, burrowing close and hiding her face against Evie’s wet shirt in a child’s instinctive bid for reassurance.
It was a simple thing for Robert to put his arms around both of them, and Evie was too tired, too numb, to resist. She stood docilely in his embrace. His strength enfolded her; his heat comforted her. He had saved Jason’s life, and maybe even her own, because she wasn’t certain she could have gotten Jason to the surface without his help. If so, she would simply have drowned with him rather than let him go and try to save her own life at the expense of his.
Jason was quickly checked; then the paramedics began preparations to transport him to the hospital. “That cut will have to be stitched,” one of

them said to Evie. “He probably has a concussion, too, so I wouldn’t be surprised if they keep him overnight, at least.”
Evie stirred in Robert’s embrace. “I have to call Rebecca,” she said. “And I want to ride with him to the hospital.”
“I’ll drive you,” he said, releasing her. “You’ll need a way back.”
“Rebecca can bring me,” she said as she hurried to the office, Robert and Paige both following her inside. She reached for the phone, then halted, rubbing her forehead. “No, she’ll stay with Jason. Never mind. I can drive myself.”
“Of course you can,” he said gently. “But you won’t, because I’m driving you.”
She gave him a distracted look as she dialed her sister’s number. “That isn’t necessary—Becky. Listen, Jason slipped on the dock and cut his head. He’s going to be okay, but he needs stitches, and the paramedics are taking him to the hospital. They’re leaving now. I’ll meet you there. Yes, I’m bringing Paige with me. Okay. Bye.”
She hung up, then lifted the receiver and dialed another number. “Craig, this is Evie. Can you take over the marina for a couple of hours? Jason’s had an accident, and I’m going with him to the hospital. No, he’ll be okay. Five minutes? Great. I’m leaving now.”
Then, moving swiftly, she got her purse from under the counter and fished out her keys. Like lightning, Robert caught her hand and calmly removed the keys from her grasp. “You’re too shaky,” he said in a gentle, implacable tone. “You came close to drowning yourself. Don’t fight me on this, Evie.”
It was obvious that she lacked the strength to physically fight him for the keys. Frustrated, she gave in rather than waste more time. “All right.”
She drove a sturdy, serviceable four-wheel-drive pickup, handy for pulling boats up a launch ramp. Paige raced ahead to scramble inside, as if afraid she would be left behind if she didn’t beat them to the vehicle. Evie was only grateful that the child automatically slid to the middle of the seat, positioning herself between Evie and Robert and hastily buckling herself in.
“It’s a straight shift,” she blurted unnecessarily as she buckled her own seat belt.
He gave her a gentle smile as he started the engine. “I can manage.”
Of course, he did more than manage. He shifted gears with the smooth expertise of someone who knew exactly what he was doing. Evie’s heart

gave a little thump as she tried to imagine Robert Cannon being awkward at anything.
She forced herself to watch the road, rather than him, as she gave directions to the hospital. She didn't want to look at him, didn't want to feel that primal pull deep inside her. He was dripping wet, of course, his black hair plastered to his head and his white silk shirt clinging to his muscled torso like a second skin. His leanness was deceptive; the wet shirt revealed the width of his shoulders and chest, and the smooth, steely muscles of his abdomen and back. She thought the image of him, the outline of his body, was probably branded on her mind for all eternity, as was everything else that had happened in the last fifteen minutes. Only fifteen minutes? It felt like a lifetime.
He drove fast, pulling into the hospital parking lot right behind the ambulance. The hospital was small but new, and he couldn't fault the staffs response. Jason was whisked into an examining room before Evie could reach his side to speak to him.
Firmly Robert took her arm and ushered both her and Paige to seats in the waiting area. "Sit here," he said, and though his voice was mild, that implacable tone was in it again. "I'll get coffee for us. How about you, sweetheart?" he asked Paige. "Do you want a soft drink?"
Dumbly Paige nodded, then shook her head. "May I have coffee, too, Aunt Evie?" she whispered. "I'm cold. Or maybe hot chocolate."
Evie nodded her agreement, and Robert strode to the vending machines. She put her arm around Paige and gathered her close, knowing that the girl had suffered a shock at seeing her brother almost die. "Don't worry, honey. Jason will be home by tomorrow, probably, griping about his headache and driving you up the wall."
Paige sniffed back tears. "I know. I'll get mad at him then, but right now I just want him to be okay."
"He will be. I promise."
Robert returned with three cups, one filled with hot chocolate and the other two with coffee. Evie and Paige took theirs from him, and he settled into the chair on Evie's other side. When she sipped the hot brew, she found that he had liberally dosed it with sugar. She glanced at him and found him watching her, gauging her reaction. "Drink it," he said softly. "You're a little shocky, too."

Because he was right, she obeyed without argument, folding her cold fingers around the cup in an effort to warm them. Her wet clothes were uncomfortably chilly here in the air-conditioned hospital, and she barely restrained a shiver. He should be cold, too, she thought, but knew that he wasn't. His arm touched hers, and she felt heat radiating through his wet clothing.

As slight as it was, he felt the shiver that raced through her. "I'll get a blanket for you," he said, rising to his feet.

She watched him approach the desk and speak to the nurse. He was courteous, restrained, but in about thirty seconds he was returning with a blanket in his hands. He had an air of natural command, she thought. One look into those icy green eyes and people scurried to do his bidding.

He bent over her to tuck the blanket around her, and she let him. Just as he finished, the emergency room doors swung open and her sister, Rebecca, hurried inside, looking tense and scared. Seeing Evie and Paige, she changed her direction to join them. "What's happening?" she demanded.

"He's in the treatment room now," Robert answered for Evie, his deep voice as soothing as when he'd talked to Paige. "He'll have a few stitches in the back of his head, and a bad headache. They'll probably keep him overnight, but his injuries are relatively minor."

Rebecca turned her shrewd brown eyes on him and bluntly demanded, "Who are you?"

"This is Robert Cannon," Evie said, making an effort to appear calm as she made the introductions. "He dragged both Jason and me out of the water. Mr. Cannon, this is my sister, Rebecca Wood."

Rebecca took in Robert's wet clothes, then looked at Evie, seeing the strain on her sister's pale face. "I'll see about Jason first," she said in her usual decisive manner. "Then I want to know exactly what happened." She turned and marched toward a nurse, identified herself and was directed to the treatment room where Jason was located.

Robert sat down beside Evie. "What branch of the military was your sister in?" he asked, provoking a nervous giggle from Paige.

"I think it's called motherhood," Evie replied. "She began practicing on me at an early age."

"She's older, I presume."

"Five years."

"So you've always been 'baby sister' to her."

“I don’t mind.”
“I’m sure you don’t. Drink your coffee,” he admonished, lifting the cup himself and holding it to her lips.
Evie drank, then gave him a wry glance. “You aren’t bad at the mother-hen routine yourself.”
He allowed himself a slight smile. “I take care of my own.” The words were a subtle threat—and a warning, if she were astute enough to hear it.
She didn’t make the obvious retort, that she wasn’t “his”; instead she withdrew, sinking back in her chair and staring straight ahead. Jason’s close call had brought too many old memories to the surface, making it difficult for her to deal with anything just now, much less Robert Cannon. Right now, what she wanted most of all was to crawl into bed and pull the covers over her head, shutting out the world until she felt capable of facing it again. Maybe by the time night came, certainly by tomorrow, she would be all right. Then she would worry about the way he had taken over and about the gentle possessiveness that she couldn’t fight. With Cannon, Evie was beginning to link gentleness with an implacable force of will that let nothing stand in his way. He would be tender and protective, but he would not be thwarted.
They sat in silence until Rebecca came out of the treatment room to rejoin them. “They’re keeping him overnight,” she said. “He has a slight concussion, a big shaved spot on the back of his head and ten stitches. He also won’t say exactly what happened, other than mumbling that he fell. What’s he trying to hide from me?”
Evie hesitated, trying to decide exactly what to tell Rebecca, and that gave Paige enough time to pipe up. “Scott and Jeff and
Patrick came by the marina, and they were all acting silly out on the docks. Aunt Evie yelled at Jason to settle down, but they didn’t. Jason pushed Patrick, and Patrick pushed him back, and Jason slipped and fell, and hit his head on the dock, then went into the water. Aunt Evie went in after him, and she was under forever and ever, and Mr. Cannon tried to find both of them. Then Aunt Evie came up, and she had Jason, and Mr. Cannon pulled them to the dock. Jason wasn’t breathing, Mom, and Aunt Evie nearly drowned, too. Mr. Cannon had to do that artificial breathing stuff on Jason, and then Jason started coughing and puking, and the paramedics came. I called 911,” she finished in a rush.

Rebecca looked a bit bemused at this flood of words from her quiet child but heard the fear still lurking under the loquaciousness. She sat down beside Paige and hugged her. “You did exactly right,” she praised, and Paige gave a little sigh of relief.

Rebecca examined Evie’s pale, drawn face. “He’s all right,” she said reassuringly. “At least for now. As soon as he’s recovered, I’m going to kill him. Better yet, I think I’ll ground him for the rest of the summer. *Then* I’ll kill him.”

Evie managed a smile. “If he lives through all that, I want a turn at him.”

“It’s a deal. Now, I want you to go home and get out of those wet clothes. You look worse than Jason does.”

The smile, this time, was easier. “Gee, thanks.” But she knew that Rebecca’s sharp eyes had seen below the surface and recognized the strain that she was under.

“I’ll see to her,” Robert said, standing and urging Evie to her feet. She wanted to protest, she really did, but she was so tired, her nerves so strained, that it was too much effort. So she managed to say goodbye to Rebecca and Paige, and tell them to kiss Jason for her; then she gave in and let him usher her out of the building and across the parking lot to the truck. She had left the blanket behind, but the searing afternoon heat washed over her like a glow, and she shivered with delight.

Robert’s arm tightened around her waist. “Are you still cold?”

“No, I’m fine,” she murmured. “The heat feels good.”

He opened the truck door and lifted her onto the seat. The strength in his hands and arms, the ease with which he picked her up, made her shiver again. She closed her eyes and let her head rest against the window, as much from a desire to shut him out as from an almost overpowering fatigue.

“You can’t go to sleep,” he said as he got in on the driver’s side, amusement lacing his tone. “You have to give me directions to your house.”

She forced herself to open her eyes and sit up, and gave him calm, coherent directions. It didn’t take long to get anywhere in Guntersville, and less than fifteen minutes later he stopped the truck in her driveway. She rumbled with the door but was so clumsy that he was there before she managed it, opening it and supporting her with a firm hand under her elbow. She got out, reluctant to let him inside her house but accepting the inevitable. Best just to go shower and change as fast as she could, and get it over with.

He entered right behind her. “Have a seat,” she invited automatically as she headed toward her bedroom. “I’ll be out in about fifteen minutes.”
“I’m still too wet to sit down,” he said. “But take your time. I’ll go out on the deck, if that’s okay with you.”
“Of course,” she said, giving him a polite smile without really looking at him, and escaped into me privacy of her bedroom.
Robert eyed the closed door thoughtfully. She was so wary of him that she wouldn’t even look at him if she could help it. It wasn’t a response he was accustomed to from a woman, though God knew she had reason to be wary, given his assumption that she knew of his connection to PowerNet. She couldn’t have acted any more guilty if he had caught her red-handed. He could opt for patience and let time disarm her, but he already had plans in motion that would force the issue, so he decided to allay her suspicions in another manner, by making a definite, concerted effort to seduce her. He had planned to seduce her, anyway; he would simply intensify the pressure.
He heard the shower start running. He couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity to look around, and he took advantage of it.
The house was probably forty years old, he thought, but had been remodeled so the interior was open and more modern, with exposed beams and gleaming hardwood floors. She had a green thumb; indoor plants of all sizes occupied every available flat surface. He could see into the kitchen from where he stood in the living room, and beyond that was the deck, with double French doors opening onto it. A dock led from the deck down to a boathouse.
Her furnishings were neat and comfortable, but certainly not luxurious. Without haste, he went over to the big, old-fashioned rolltop desk and methodically searched it, unearthing nothing of any great interest, not that he had expected to find anything. It wasn’t likely she would have been fool enough to leave him in the room with an unlocked desk if the desk contained anything incriminating. He looked through her bank statement but found no unusually large deposits, at least at this particular bank or on this particular statement.
There was a small, framed photograph on the desk. He picked it up and examined the two people pictured. Evie, definitely—a very young Evie, but already glowing with seductiveness. The boy, for he was nothing more than that, was probably her husband, dead now for twelve years. Robert studied the boy’s face more closely, seeing laughter and happiness and yes,

devotion. But had the boy any idea how to handle the sensual treasure that the girl in his arms represented? Of course not; what teenage boy would? Still, Robert felt an unexpected and unpleasant twinge of jealousy for this long-dead boy, for the riches that had so briefly been his. Evie had loved him, enough that she still wore his wedding ring after all these years.

He heard the shower shut off and replaced the photograph, then quietly walked out onto the deck. She had a nice place here, nothing extravagant, but cozy and homey. There was plenty of privacy, too, with no houses visible except for those on the far side of the lake. The water was very blue, reflecting both the green of the mountains and the deep blue bowl of the sky. The afternoon was slipping away, and the sun was lower now, but still white and searing. Soon it would begin to turn bronze, and the lush scents of the heavy greenery would grow stronger. By the time purple twilight brought a respite from the heat, the air would be redolent with honeysuckle and roses, pine and fresh-cut grass. Time was slower here; people didn't rush from one occupation to another. He had actually seen people sitting on their front porches, reading newspapers or shelling peas, occasionally waving to passersby. Of course, people from New York and other large cities would say that the locals here had nothing to rush *to*, but from what he'd seen they stayed busy enough; they just didn't get in any great hurry.

He heard Evie come to the open French door. "I'm ready," she said.

He turned and looked at her. Her newly washed hair was still wet, but she had braided it and pinned the braids up so they wouldn't get her shirt damp. She had exchanged the shorts for jeans, and had on a pink T-shirt that made her golden skin glow. But her cheeks were still a bit pale, and her expression was strained.

"You have a nice place," he said.

"Thanks. I inherited it from my in-laws."

Though he knew the answer, now was the time to ask for information; it would be odd if he didn't. "You're married?" he asked.

"Widowed." She turned and retreated into the house, and Robert followed her.

"Ah. I'm sorry. How long has it been?"

"Twelve years."

"I saw the picture on the desk. Is that your husband?"

"Yes, that's Matt." She stopped and looked toward the photograph, and an ineffable sadness darkened her eyes. "We were just kids." Then she seemed

to gather herself and walked briskly to the door. “I need to get back to the marina.”
“My house is about five miles from here,” he said. “It won’t take long for me to shower and change.”
She carried a towel out to the truck and dried the seat before she got inside. She didn’t even bother protesting his continued possession of her keys; it would be pointless, though she was now obviously calm enough to drive safely.
His clothes had dried enough that they were merely damp now, rather than dripping wet, but she knew they had to be uncomfortable. Hers certainly had been. Her conscience twinged. He had not only saved Jason’s life but likely hers, as well, and had put himself to a great deal of trouble to see that she was taken care of. No matter how he alarmed her, she knew that she would never forget his quick actions or his cool decisiveness.
“Thank you,” she said softly, staring straight ahead. “Jason and I probably wouldn’t have made it without you.”
“The likelihood was unnerving,” he said, his tone cool and even. “You’d pushed yourself so far that you couldn’t have gotten him out of the water. Didn’t it occur to you to let go of him and come up for another breath?”
“No.” The single word was flat. “I couldn’t have done that” He glanced at her profile, saw the deepening strain in her expression and deftly changed the subject. “Will your sister really ground him for the rest of the summer?”
Evie was startled into a laugh, a rusty little sound that went right to his gut. “I’d say he’ll be lucky if that’s all she does. It isn’t that he was fooling around, but that I’d already told him to stop and he disobeyed me.”
“So he broke a cardinal rule?”
“Just about.”
Robert intended to have a few words with the young man himself, about acting responsibly and the possible consequences of reckless actions, but he didn’t mention it to Evie. She was obviously very protective of her niece and nephew, and though she couldn’t say that it wasn’t any of his business, she wouldn’t like it. His conversation with Jason would be private.
When he stopped in the driveway of his new house, Evie looked around with interest. “This place has been on the market for almost a year,” she said.
“Then I’m lucky no one beat me to it, aren’t I?” He got out and walked around the truck to open the door for her. Though she hadn’t waited for him

to perform the service at the hospital, that had been an emergency; nor would she have waited when they had reached her house, if she had been able to get the door open in time. He'd had the strong impression then that she had wanted to bolt inside and lock him out. Now, however, she waited with the natural air of a queen, as if he were only doing what he should. She might be dressed in jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt, but that didn't lessen her femininity one whit; she *expected* that male act of servitude. Robert had always preferred to treat women with the small courtesies but hadn't insisted on them when his partner had protested. He was both amused and charmed by Evie's rather regal, very Southern attitude.

He mused about this subtle signal as he ushered her into the house. Though she was still very wary of him, obviously on some level her resistance had weakened. Anticipation tightened his muscles, but he deliberately resisted it. Now was not the time. Not quite yet.

"Make yourself at home while I shower," he invited, smiling faintly as he walked toward his bedroom, which was down the hallway to the right. He had no doubt that she would do exactly as he had done, take full advantage of the opportunity to do a quick search.

Evie stood in the middle of the living room after he had gone, too tense to "make herself at home." She looked around, trying to distract herself. The house was sprawling and modern, one story of brick and redwood, easily three times the size of her own. A huge rock fireplace dominated the left wall, the chimney soaring upward to the cathedral ceiling. Twin white ceiling fans stirred a gentle breeze. The furniture was chic but comfortable-looking, sized to fit a man of his height.

The living room was separated from the dining room by a waist-high planter in which luxurious ferns flourished. Huge double windows revealed a deck, furnished with comfortable chairs, an umbrella table and even more plants. Hesitantly she walked into the dining room for a better view. The kitchen opened up to the right, an immaculate oasis gleaming with the most modem appliances available. Even the coffeemaker looked as if the user would need a degree in engineering to work the thing. There was a breakfast nook on the far side of the kitchen, occupied by a smallish table with a white ceramic tile top. She could see him sitting there in the mornings, reading a newspaper and drinking coffee. Double French doors, far more ornate and stylish than her own, led from the breakfast nook onto

the deck. She would have liked to explore further but felt too constrained here on his territory. Instead she retreated to the living room once more. Robert took his time showering and dressing. Let her look around all she wanted; the fact that she wouldn't find anything alarming would help allay her suspicions. She would begin to relax, which was exactly what he wanted.

A lot of men, maybe most of them, would have made a move while they had been at her house; she had been more off-balance, vulnerable. He had even had the opportunity, had he chosen to take it, of walking in on her while she was unclothed. But he had elected to wait, knowing she would be more at ease now that the most provocative and dangerous circumstances were past. He hadn't made a pass at her then, so she wouldn't be expecting him to do so now. And since she wouldn't be mentally prepared to handle an advance, her response would be honest, unguarded.

Finally he stopped dawdling and returned to the living room. To his surprise, she was still standing almost exactly where he had left her, and little of the strain had faded from her face. She turned to watch him. Her lovely golden brown eyes were still dark with some inner distress that went far deeper than the episode with Jason, traumatic as that had been.

Robert paused while still several feet from her, studying those somber eyes. Then he simply moved forward with a graceful speed that gave her no time to evade him, and took her in his arms. He heard her instinctive intake of breath, saw the alarm widening her eyes as she lifted her head to protest, a protest that was smothered when his mouth covered hers.

She jerked in his arms, and he gently controlled the action, pulling her even more firmly against him. He took care not to hurt her but deepened the insistent pressure of his mouth until he felt her own mouth yield and open. The sweetness of her lips sent an electrical thrill along his nerves, tightening his muscles and swelling his sex. He took her mouth with his tongue, holding her still for the imitative sexual possession, repeating the motion again and again, until she shivered and softened in his arms, her lips beginning to cling to his.

Her tentative response made his head swim, and to his surprise he had to struggle to maintain his control. But she felt perfect in his arms, damn her, all those soft, luscious curves molding to the hard, muscled planes of his body. Her mouth was sweeter than any he had ever tasted before, and the simple act of kissing her was arousing him to an unbelievable degree.

He didn’t want to stop. He hadn’t planned to do more than kiss her, but he hadn’t expected the intensity of his own response. His mouth crushed fiercely down on hers, demanding even more. He heard the soft, helpless sound she made in her throat; then her arms lifted around his neck, and she pressed full length against him. Pure, primitive male triumph roared through him at this evidence of her own arousal. He could feel her breasts, round and firm, the nipples hard against his chest, and he slipped his hand under her shirt to cup one of them, his thumb rubbing across the peaked nipple through the thin lace of her bra. Her body arched, her hips pressing hard against his… and then suddenly she was fighting, panicked, trying to squirm free.

He let her go, though every cell in his body was screaming for more.

“Easy,” he managed to say, but the word was low and rough and his breath was uneven. He tried for a more controlled reassurance. “I won’t hurt you, sweetheart.”

Evie had backed away from him, her face pale but her lips swollen and red from his kisses. She forced herself to stop retreating, to stand her ground and face him. The sensual pull of his masculinity was almost overwhelming, tempting her to go back into those arms, to yield to that fierce domination. She felt a sense of doom; he was far more dangerous to her than she had first suspected.

“Yes, you will,” she whispered. Her teeth were chattering. “Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?”

Chapter Five

One looked ready to bolt. To soothe her, he moved back a few paces and let his hands relax at his sides. His eyes gleamed with faint irony. “You’re a lovely woman, sweetheart. Surely you aren’t surprised that I’m attracted to you? As for what I want from you, I was holding you closely enough that the answer to that question should have been obvious.”

She didn’t respond to his gentle teasing. Instead her somber gaze remained locked on his face, trying to probe beneath that smooth, urbane sophistication. He was very cosmopolitan, beyond a doubt, but he used that slick surface as a shield to hide the real man, the man who had kissed her with such ruthless passion. There were many hidden layers to him, his

motives complex and unfathomable. Yes, he was attracted to her, as she was to him. It would be foolish to deny her own participation, and Evie wasn't a foolish woman. But she always had the feeling that he was studying her, manipulating her in some subtle manner. From the very first she had sensed his determination to force himself into her life, and he was doing exactly that with a calm force of will that refused to be denied. Whatever his motive, it was something that went beyond the physical.

"I don't have casual sex," she said.

He almost smiled. It was merely an expression in those pale eyes, rather than an actual movement of his mouth. "My dear, I promise you there wouldn't be anything *casual* about it." He paused. "Are you involved with someone else?"

She shook her head. "No."

He wasn't surprised that she had denied any involvement with Mercer. "Then we don't have a problem, do we? You can't say that you aren't attracted to me, too."

She lifted her chin, and his pale eyes gleamed at that proud motion. "That velvet glove covers an iron fist, doesn't it?" she commented neutrally. "No, I can't say that I'm not attracted to you."

Her perception disturbed him, a reaction that he didn't allow to surface. "I can be determined when I want something… or someone."

She made an abrupt motion, as if tiring of the verbal jousting. "I phrased it wrong. I don't have affairs, either."

"A wise decision, but in this case too restrictive." He approached her now, and she didn't retreat. Gently he cupped her face with one long-fingered hand, his fingers stroking over the velvety texture of her cheek. God, she was lovely, not classically beautiful, but glowing with an intensely female seductiveness that made him think her name was very apt indeed. So must Eve have been, glorious in her nudity. No wonder Adam had been so easily led, a weakness he wouldn't allow himself, though he intended to fully enjoy Evie's sensuality. Her sweet, warm scent wafted up to him. "I won't force you," he murmured. "But I will have you."

"If you won't use force, how do you intend to go about it?" she asked.

His eyebrows lifted. "You think I should warn you?"

"Yes."

"An interesting notion, but one I'm going to leave untried." He rubbed his thumb over her lower lip. "For now, sweetheart, we'd better get back to the

marina. You have a business to run, and I have a boat to get into a slip.”
He let his hand drop as he spoke, and Evie turned from him with relief, as if she had been released from a force field. Her face tingled where he had touched her, and she remembered the electric sensation when he had put his hand on her breast. His boldness spoke of vast experience and self-confidence with women, something that put her at a disadvantage.
They were both silent on the drive back to the marina. She was vaguely surprised to see how late it was, the sun dipping low even for these long summer days. The sultry heat hadn’t abated, though there was a hint of purple on the horizon that gave the promise of a cooling rain shower.
Robert’s speedboat, a sleek, dark eighteen-footer, was still where he had left it, hitched to a black Jeep Renegade. Thank heavens it hadn’t been blocking the launch ramps, or Craig would have had a mess on his hands. She hurried into the marina office, and Craig looked up from the sports magazine he was reading. “Is everything okay?” he asked, getting to his feet. “The kids said that Jason nearly drowned.”
“He has a concussion, but he’ll go home tomorrow,” she said. “Thanks for coming in. I’m sorry for wrecking your day.”
“No problem,” he said cheerfully. He was seventeen, a tall, muscular, dark-haired kid who would be a senior when the new school year started. He had been working part-time for her for almost two years and was so steady that she had no qualms about leaving him in charge. “Say, what about that new boat outside?”
“It’s mine,” Robert said, stepping inside. “I’ll be renting a slip here.” He held out his hand. “I’m Robert Cannon.”
Craig took his hand with a firm grip. “Craig Foster. Glad to meet you, Mr. Cannon. You must be the guy who pulled Evie and Jason out of the water. The kids said it was a tall Yankee.”
“I’m the guy,” Robert affirmed, amusement in his eyes.
“Thought so. Want me to help you get the boat into a slip?”
“I can do it,” Evie said. “I’ve taken enough time out of your day.”
“You pay me for it,” Craig replied, grinning. “I might as well, since I’m already here. Mom won’t be expecting me back until supper, anyway.” He and Robert left, chatting companionably.
Kids seemed to like Robert, Evie thought, watching them from the window. Even shy Paige had been at ease with him. He didn’t treat kids as equals—he was the adult, his was the authority—but at the same time he didn’t

dismiss them. Authority and responsibility sat easily on those broad shoulders, she mused. He was obviously accustomed to command.
For her own sake, her own protection, she had to hold him at bay, and she didn't know if she could. Today, with a few kisses and frightening ease, he had shown her that he could arouse her beyond her own control. She could love him, and that was the most terrifying prospect of all. He was a strong man, in mind and soul as well as body, a man worthy of love. He would steal her heart if she weren't careful, if she didn't keep her guard up at all times.
She turned away from the window. Twelve years ago, love had almost destroyed her, leaving only a forlorn heap of ashes from which she had laboriously rebuilt a controlled, protected life. She couldn't do that again; she didn't have the strength to once more live through that hell and emerge victorious. She had already lost too many people to believe that love, or life, lasted forever. She couldn't do anything about the people she already loved, the ones already in her heart: her family, old Virgil, a very few close friends, but she hadn't allowed anyone new to stake a claim on her emotions. She had already paid out too much in pain and had precious little reserve of spirit left. She had almost lost Jason today, and the pain had been overwhelming. Rebecca knew, had realized that if Evie hadn't been able to find Jason, she would now be mourning a sister as well as a son. That was the real basis for her sister's fury with Jason.
And Evie knew that Robert Cannon planned to force his way into her life. He would be here for the summer, he'd said; he wouldn't be looking for anything more than a pleasant affair, companionship during the long, lazy weeks. If she fell in love with him, that would make the affair sweeter. But at the end of summer he would go back to his real life, and Evie would have to continue here, with one more wound on a heart that had barely survived the last blow. Emotionally, she couldn't afford him.
There were always a hundred and one things to be doing around the marina, but suddenly she couldn't think of a single one. She felt oddly disoriented, as if the world had been turned upside down. Maybe it had.
She called the hospital and was put through to Jason's room. Her sister answered the phone on the first ring. "He's grouchy and has a throbbing headache," Rebecca cheerfully announced when Evie asked his condition. "I have to wake him every couple of hours tonight, but if he does okay, then he can go home in the morning. Paul left just a few minutes ago to take

Paige to his mother's, then he's coming back here. How about you? Nerves settled down yet?"
"Not quite," Evie said truthfully, though Jason's close call wasn't all that had unsettled her. "But I'm over the shakes."
"Are you at home, I hope?"
"You know better than that."
"You should have taken it easy for the rest of the day," Rebecca scolded. "I had hopes that Mr. Cannon would take you in hand. He seems good at giving orders."
"World-class champion," Evie agreed. "I'll come by to see Jason after the marina closes. Do you want me to bring you anything? A pillow, a book, a hamburger?"
"No, I don't need anything. Don't come here. Jason's okay, and you need to go home and rest. I mean it, Evie."
"I'm okay, too," Evie calmly replied. "And I want to see Jason, even if just for a few minutes—" She cried out in surprise as the phone was plucked from her hand. She whirled as Robert lifted the receiver to his ear.
"Mrs. Wood? Robert Cannon. I'll see that she goes straight home. Yes, she's still a little wobbly."
"I am not," Evie said, narrowing her eyes at him. He reached out and gently stroked her cheek. Deliberately she stepped back, out of his reach.
"I'll take care of her," he firmly assured Rebecca, never moving his gaze from Evie's face. "On second thought, I'll take her out to dinner before I take her home. I think so, too. Goodbye."
As he hung up, Evie said in a cold voice, "I despise being treated as if I'm a helpless idiot."
"Hardly that," he murmured.
She didn't relent. "I suppose you thought that I would feel safe and protected, to have you take over and make my decisions for me. I don't I feel insulted."
Robert lifted an inquisitive brow, hiding his true reaction. He had indeed hoped to provoke exactly that response from her and felt an uneasy surprise that she had so easily gone straight to the truth of the matter. She was proving to be uncomfortably astute. "What I think," he said carefully, "is that you were in more danger than you want your sister to know, and that you're still shaky. If you go to the hospital again, you'll have to put up a

front to keep from scaring both her and Jason, and that will put even more strain on you."
"What *I* think," she replied, standing with her fists clenched at her sides, "is that I'm in far more danger from you than I ever was from the water." Her golden brown eyes were cool and unwaveringly level.
Again he felt a twinge of discomfort at her insight. Still, he was certain he could soften her stand, and his tone turned gently cajoling. "Even if I offer you a truce for tonight? No kisses, not even any hand-holding. Just dinner, then I'll see you safely home, and you can get a good night's rest."
"No, thank you. I won't have dinner with you, and I can get home by myself."
He gave her a considering look. "In that case, the offer of a truce is null and void."
His tone was so calm that she listened to it first, rather than to the actual words. She hesitated only a split second, but that was enough for him to have her in his arms again, and again she felt overcome by his steely, deceptive strength. His body was unyielding, his grip careful but unbreakable. The male muskiness of his clean, warm skin made her head swim. She had the dizzy impression that his mouth was lowering to hers and quickly ducked her head to rest it against his chest. It was disconcerting to hear a quiet chuckle over her head.
"Such a cowardly act, from one who isn't," he murmured, the words rich with amusement "But I don't mind simply holding you. It has its own compensations."
She *was* a coward, though, Evie thought. She was terrified of him, not in a physical way, but emotional fear was just as weighty a burden to carry. She was handling him all wrong; he wouldn't be accustomed to rejection, so every time she turned him down it made him just that much more determined to have his way. If she had played up to him from the beginning, gushed over him, he would have been bored and left her alone. Hindsight, though, despite its acuity, was depressingly useless.
His hand moved soothingly over her back, subtly urging her closer. It was so easy to let him take more of her weight, so easy to give in to the strain and fatigue she had been successfully fighting until now. She resisted the urge to put her arms around him, to feel the heated vibrancy of his body under her hands, but she could hear the strong, steady thumping of his heartbeat beneath her ear, feel the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed,

and that was enough to work its own seduction. The forces of life were strong in him, luring women to that intense strength. She was no different from all those countless, nameless others.
“Robert,” she whispered. “Don’t.” A cowardly, shameless, useless plea. That hand stroked up to her shoulder blades, rubbed the sensitive tendons that ran from her neck to her shoulders, massaged her tender nape. “Evie,” he whispered in return. “Don’t what?” He continued without waiting for a reply. “Is Evie your real name, or is it a nickname for Eve? Or possibly Evelyn? No matter, it suits you.”
Her eyes drifted shut as his warmth and strength continued to work their black magic on her nerves, her will. Oh God, it would be so foolishly easy just to give in to him. His skill was nothing short of diabolical. “Neither. It’s short for Evangeline.”
“Ah.” The short sigh was one of approval. He truly hadn’t known her full name; none of the reports he had seen had called her anything except Evie. “Evangeline. Feminine, spiritual, sensual… sad.”
Evie didn’t respond outwardly to that analysis of her name, but the last word shook her. Sad… yes. So sad that for several long, bleak years she couldn’t have said if the sun ever shone or not, because with her heart she had seen only gray. She could see the sunshine now; the relentless current of life as a whole had swept her out of the darkness, but there was never a day when she didn’t realize how closely the shadows lurked. They were always there, a permanent counterpoint to life. If there was light, there had to be darkness; joy was balanced by pain, intimacy by loneliness. No one sailed through life untouched.
He was subtly rocking her with his body, a barely perceptible swaying that nevertheless urged her deeper and deeper into his embrace. He was aroused again; there was no mistaking that. She thought she should move away, but somehow in the past few minutes that had ceased to be an option. She was so tired, and the gentle motion of his body was soothing, like the swaying of a boat at anchor. The ancient rhythms were difficult to resist, linked as they were to instincts aeons beyond her control.
After several minutes he murmured, “Are you going to sleep?”
“I could,” she replied, not opening her eyes. Beyond the danger, there was deep comfort in his embrace.
“It’s almost six-thirty. Under the circumstances, I’m sure your customers would understand if you closed a little early.”

“An hour and a half isn’t a ‘little’ early. No, I’ll stay until eight, as usual.”
“Then so will I.” He stifled his surge of annoyance. He himself let very few things interfere with his work—in actuality, only Madelyn and her family—but he didn’t like the idea of Evie pushing herself into exhaustion at the marina.
“It isn’t necessary.”
“I rather believe it is,” he replied thoughtfully.
“I still won’t go out to dinner with you.”
“Fair enough. I’ll bring dinner to you. Do you have any preferences?”
She shook her head. “I’m not very hungry. I was going to have a sandwich when I got home.”
“Leave it all to me.”
She said against his chest, “You take charge very naturally. I suppose this is normal behavior for you.”
“I’m decisive, yes.”
“Don’t forget autocratic.”
“I’m sure you’ll remind me if I forget.”
She heard the undertone of amusement in his voice. Damn him, why couldn’t he be nasty in his bullying, rather than relentlessly, gently cosseting? She never allowed herself to rely on anyone, though Rebecca had been trying to take care of her for years, but Robert simply ignored her resistance.
“I realize I’m rushing you,” he murmured into her hair. “Today is only the second time we’ve met. I’ll back off, sweetheart, and give you time to get to know me better and feel more comfortable around me. Okay?”
Her head moved up and down. She didn’t want to agree to have anything to do with him, but right now she would grasp at any offer to cool down the situation. He had knocked her off balance, and she still hadn’t regained it. Yes, she needed time, a lot of it.
Robert cupped her chin in his hand and forced her to lift her head away from the shelter of his chest. His pale green eyes were glittering with intensity. “But I won’t go away,” he warned.
Evie slept heavily that night, exhausted by the stress of the day. When she woke at dawn at the far-off roar of an early fisherman’s outboard motor, she didn’t rise immediately as was her habit but lay watching the pearly light spread across the sky.

For twelve years she had kept herself safe inside her carefully constructed fortress, but Robert was storming the walls. *Had* stormed them, if she was honest with herself. He was already in the inner court, though he hadn't yet managed to breach the defenses of the keep. Since Matt's death, she hadn't really *seen* any man, but Robert had forced her to see him. She was attracted to him, mentally as well as physically; it was only with effort that she had kept her emotions still safely locked away. She didn't want to love him and knew she risked doing exactly that if she continued to see him. But she *would* see him, time and again. He had warned her—or was it a promise?—that he wasn't going to leave her alone, and he wasn't a man who could be easily distracted from his purpose.

He would kiss her, hold her, caress her. Eventually, she knew, all of her caution would vanish under the sheer force of physical desire, and she wouldn't be able to stop him—or herself.

She closed her eyes and relived the way he had kissed her the afternoon before, the way he had tasted, the calm expertise with which he had deepened the kiss. She thought of his lean fingers on her breast, and her nipples throbbed. For the first time since Matt, she wondered about making love in relation to herself. She thought of the feel of Robert's hard weight pressing down on her, of his hands and mouth moving over her bare skin, of his muscled thighs spreading hers apart as he positioned himself to take her. The appeal of her fantasy was strong enough to make her entire body clench with desire. Yes, she wanted him, as much as she feared the pain he would leave behind when he walked out of her life.

A prudent woman would immediately see a doctor about birth control, and Evie was a prudent woman. She could protect herself in that way, at least.

Chapter Six

Evie slid two food-filled plates onto the table, one in front of Rebecca and the other in front of her own seat, then refilled their coffee cups. “Thanks.” Rebecca sighed, picking up her fork. Her eyes were dark-circled after the long, sleepless night spent with Jason in the hospital.

Evie sat down. After making a doctor’s appointment for the next day, she had called the hospital to check on Jason. He was fine, but Rebecca had some definitely frayed edges. Not only had she been awake all night to keep watch on him and wake him regularly, evidently Jason had become as fractious and ill-tempered as he’d been as a baby whenever he was ill. He had complained about everything, griping about being woken every hour, even though both the doctor and Rebecca had explained the reason for it. In short, his mother’s wrath was about to come down hard on his sore head.

So Evie had gone up to the hospital to take care of the myriad details involved in releasing Jason. Then she’d followed them home, helped get the restless teenager settled, pushed Rebecca into a chair and set about making breakfast for them all. She knew her way around Rebecca’s kitchen as well as she did her own, so the work went smoothly, and in no time at all they were digging into scrambled eggs, bacon and toast. Jason was enthroned on the couch with a tray on his lap and the television blaring.

The coffee revived Rebecca enough that her big-sister instincts kicked in. She gave Evie a shrewd look over the rim of her cup. “Where did you have dinner last night?”

“At the marina. Sandwiches,” Evie clarified.

Rebecca sat back, looking disgruntled. “He said he would take you out to dinner, then make sure you got home okay.”

“I didn’t want to go out.”

“Really,” Rebecca grumbled, “I’d thought the man was made of stronger stuff than that.”

If he’d been any stronger, Evie thought wryly, she would have slept in *his* bed last night. “I was too tired to go out, so he brought sandwiches there. It was kind of him to do everything he did yesterday.”

“Especially hauling both you and my brat out of the river,” Rebecca said judiciously as she demolished a slice of bacon. “I need to thank him again for you. I’m reserving judgment on the wisdom of saving Jason.”

Evie chuckled at Rebecca's sardonic statement. A sharp turn of phrase was a family trait that she shared with her sister, and even Paige had been exhibiting it for some time now.
"However," Rebecca continued in the same tone, "I know a man on the hunt when I see one, so don't try to throw me off the subject by telling me how *kind* he was. Kindness was the last thing on his mind."
Evie looked down at her eggs. "I know."
"Are you going to give him a chance, or are you going to look straight through him, like all the others?"
"What others?" Evie asked, puzzled.
"See what I mean? They were invisible to you. You've never even noticed all the guys who would have liked to go out with you."
"No one's ever asked me out."
"Why would they, when you never notice them? But I'll bet Robert asked you out, didn't he?"
"No." He'd *told* her that she was going out to dinner with him, and he had told her that he intended to make love to her, but he'd never actually asked her out.
Rebecca looked disbelieving. "You're pulling my leg."
"I am not. But he'll probably ask the next time he comes to the marina, if that's any consolation to you."
"The real question," her sister said shrewdly, "is if you'll go with him."
"I don't know." Evie propped her elbows on the table, the coffee cup cradled in her palms as she sipped the hot liquid. "He excites me, Becky, but he scares me, too. I don't want to get involved with anyone, and I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to stop myself with him."
"This is bad?" asked her sister with some exasperation. "Honey, it's been twelve years. Maybe it's time you became interested in men again."
"Maybe," Evie said in qualified agreement, though privately she didn't think so at all. "But Robert Cannon isn't the safest choice I could make, not by a long shot. There's something about him… I don't know. I just get the feeling that he's coming on to me for another reason besides the obvious. There's a hidden agenda there somewhere. And he puts up a good front, but he's *not* a gentleman."
"Good. A gentleman would probably take you at your word and never bother you again, after a hundred or so refusals. I have to admit, though, he struck me as being both gentle and protective."

“Possessive,” Evie corrected. “And ruthless.” No, he wasn’t a gentleman. That cold force of will in his green diamond eyes was the look of an adventurer with a predator’s heart. A hollow look of fear entered her own eyes.

Rebecca leaned forward and touched Evie’s arm. “I know,” she said gently. And she did, because Rebecca had been there and seen it all. “I don’t want to push you into doing something you’ll regret, but you never know what’s going to happen. If Robert Cannon is someone you could love, can you afford to pass up that chance?”

Evie sighed. Rebecca’s arguments to the contrary, could she afford to *take* that chance? And was she going to have the choice?

To her relief, Robert wasn’t at the marina when she arrived to relieve Craig. Huge, black-bellied clouds were threatening overhead, and a brisk, cool wind began to blow, signaling one of the tempestuous thunderstorms so common during summer. Both pleasure-boaters and fishermen began coming in off the lake, and for an hour she didn’t have a moment’s rest. Lightning forked downward over the mountains, a slash of white against the purplish black background. Thunder boomed, echoing over the water, and the storm broke with blinding sheets of rain blowing across the lake.

With all of the fishermen who had put in at the marina safely off the water and the other boats snugly in their slips, Evie gladly retreated to the office where she could watch the storm from behind the protection of the thick, Plexiglas windows. She hadn’t quite escaped all the rain, though, and she shivered as she rubbed a towel over her bare arms. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees in about ten minutes; the break from the heat was welcome, but the abrupt contrast was always chilling.

She loved the energy and drama of thunderstorms, and settled contentedly into her rocking chair to watch this one play out against the background of lake and mountains. Listening to the rain was unutterably soothing.

Inevitably she became drowsy and got up to turn on the small television she kept to entertain Paige and Jason. A small logo at the bottom of the television screen announced “T’storm watch.”

“I’m watching, I’m watching,” she told the television, and returned to the rocking chair.

Eventually the violence of the storm dissipated, but the welcome rain continued, settling down to a steady soaker, the kind farmers loved. The marina was deserted, except for the mechanic, Burt Mardis, who was

contentedly working on an outboard motor in the big metal building where he did all the repairs. She could see him occasionally through the open door as he moved back and forth. There wouldn't be any more business until the weather cleared, which it showed no signs of doing. At the top of the hour the local television meteorologist broke in on the normal programming to show the progression of the line of thunderstorms that were marching across the state, as well as the solid area of rain they had left behind, stretching all the way back into Mississippi. Rain was predicted well into the night, tapering off shortly before midnight.

It looked like a long, lazy afternoon ahead of her. She always kept a book there for such times and pulled it out now, but so much time had lapsed since she had started the thing that she didn't remember much about it, so she had to start over. Actually, this was the third time she had started over; she would have to carry it home if she ever hoped to finish it.

But she was already fighting drowsiness and after ten minutes she knew that reading was going to tip the scales in favor of sleep. Regretfully she put the book aside and looked around for some chores to do. Craig, however, had cleaned up that morning; the floors were freshly swept and mopped, the merchandise impeccably straight on the shelves or hanging on pegboard hooks.

She yawned and desperately turned the television channel to rock music videos. That should jar her awake.

When Robert walked in half an hour later, she was standing in front of the television, watching with a sort of amazed disbelief. Turning to him, she said in bemusement, "I wonder why bird-legged, sunken-chested musicians feel compelled to show their bodies to the audience?"

He was startled into a deep chuckle. He almost never laughed aloud, his amusement normally expressed, at most, by a twinkle in his eyes. This was twice, though, that Evie had charmed him into laughter. No one would ever suspect her of espionage, he thought suddenly, perhaps because of that very charm. It would be almost impossible for anyone who knew her at all to think ill of her. Even he, who was well aware of her activities, couldn't keep himself from wanting her with a violence that both angered him and made him uneasy, because he couldn't control it.

He pushed those thoughts away as he walked toward her. If he let himself think about it now he would become enraged all over again, and Evie was so astute that he might not be able to hide it from her. When he reached her,

though, and encircled her with his arms, forgetting about the other was laughably easy.
She blinked up at him, startled. Automatically she put her hands against his chest in a defensive movement. “You said you were going to back off and give me time,” she accused.
“I am,” Robert replied, lifting her left hand and pressing his warm, open mouth to the tender flesh on the inside of her wrist. Her pulse fluttered and raced beneath his lips. The scent of her skin was fresh and elusively, lightly fragrant, teasing him far more than if she had dabbed herself with perfume, no matter how expensive. He touched the tip of his tongue to the delicate blue veins that traced just under her skin and felt the throb of her blood beneath his touch.
Evie trembled at the subtle caress, her knees weakening. He felt that betraying quiver and gathered her more firmly against him, then lightly bit the pad at the base of her thumb. She swallowed a gasp; dear God, she hadn’t known that could be so erotic.
“Will you go out to dinner with me tonight?” he murmured as his lips traveled on to her palm. Again his tongue flicked out, tasting her. Her hand trembled at the sensation.
“No, I can’t” The instinctive denial was out before she could stop it, the habits of a dozen years firmly ingrained. Stunned, she realized that she *had* wanted to accept, much as a moth yearned toward the flame.
“Do you have another date?”
“No. It—it’s difficult.” He had no idea how difficult. She took a deep breath. “I haven’t dated since my husband died.”
Robert lifted his head, a slight frown drawing the black wings of his eyebrows together. “What did you say?”
She flushed and tugged her hand free. She started to wipe her palm against her jeans but instead tightly closed her fingers to hold the feel of his kiss. “I haven’t gone out with anyone since Matt died.”
He was silent, digesting this information, weighing it for truth. It was difficult to believe of anyone, but especially of a woman who looked like Evie. It was possible, of course, that she wasn’t having an affair with Mercer after all, but to have lived like a nun for twelve years just didn’t seem feasible. Still, he wasn’t about to infuriate her by suggesting she was a liar.

Instead he gently stroked the underside of her jaw with the back of one finger and was immediately absorbed with the velvety texture of her skin.
“Why is that?” he murmured a bit absently. “I know all the men down here can’t be blind.”
She bit her lip. “It was my choice. I… wasn’t interested, and it didn’t seem fair to waste a man’s time under those circumstances.”
“Reasonable, for a while. But twelve years?”
Restlessly she tried to pull away from him, but he stilled the movement, tightening the arm that remained around her. They were pressed firmly together from waist to knees, his muscled thighs hard and warm against hers. A man’s strength was wonderful, she thought, inviting a woman to relax against him. Until Robert had taken her in his arms, she hadn’t realized how very much she needed to be held. But not by just any man; only by him. In that moment Evie knew for certain that she had lost the battle. There was no use trying to evade him; not only would he refuse to let her get away with it, but she didn’t *want* to get away with it, not any longer. For better or worse, and with dizzying speed, she had gotten herself involved with Robert Cannon. Dear God, she didn’t know if she had the strength to do this, but she knew she had to try.
She didn’t try to explain those twelve years. Instead she said, to his chest, “All right. I’ll go out with you. Now what?”
“For starters, you could raise your head.”
Slowly she did, mentally bracing herself as she met his crystalline eyes. She had expected to see amusement in them, but it was triumph glittering there rather than mirth. She shivered, more from sudden alarm than from the coolness brought by the steady rain.
“Cold?” he asked softly, rubbing his warm hands up the length of her arms.
“No. Afraid,” she admitted, with painful candor. “Of you, of getting involved with you.” Her eyes were deep and mysterious with shadows as she looked up at this man who had so inexplicably forced himself into her life. If he insisted on establishing some kind of romantic relationship with her, he should know up front how she felt about a few things. “I’m not good at games,
Robert. Don’t kiss me unless it’s for real. Don’t come around unless you mean to stay.”
“Do you mean marriage?” he asked coolly, his expressive eyebrows lifting.

Her cheeks burned at his tone. Of course it was ridiculous to think of marriage; that wasn't at all what she had meant. At least, not the legality of marriage, the institution itself. Mentally she shied from the notion, unable to even think of it. "Of course not! I never want to get married again. But the stability, the emotional security, what I had with Matt… well, I won't settle for anything less than that, so if you're looking for a summer affair, I'm not your woman."

His mouth twisted as an unreadable expression crossed his face. "Oh, but you are. You just haven't admitted it to yourself yet."

She shivered again, but her gaze didn't waver. "I want emotional commitment. Under those terms, if you're still willing to get involved with me, I'll go out with you. I'm not comfortable with you, but I expect that will change as we get to know each other. And I don't want to sleep with you. That would just be too risky." He probably thought she meant physically, but for her the emotional risk was by far more dangerous.

He studied her face for a long moment before saying calmly, "All right, we'll take our time and get to know each other. But I *do* want to make love with you, and I'm not going to take a vow of chastity." He cupped her face in his hands, and the glitter in his eyes became more pronounced as his head began to slowly descend. "All you have to do to stop me, at any time," he whispered as his mouth touched hers, "is say no."

Her breath sighed out of her, as soft as a night breeze. The freedom to enjoy him was glorious; it felt as if she had long been frozen and was now thawing, growing warm with life again. For the first time her mouth opened welcomingly beneath his, and he took it with a calm mastery that liquefied her bones. He could give lessons in kissing, she thought hazily. His tongue probed and stroked, enticing her into a like response, so that their tongues touched and curled and petted. It was surprisingly sweet, and totally erotic. It seemed as if he kissed her like that for a long time, simply holding her face between his palms, her body still pressed full against his. The play of his lips and tongue was both lulling and arousing. Her anxiety faded even as warmth slowly spread through her breasts and loins, making her feel as soft as butter. Her left hand was closed around his right wrist, but her right hand was leisurely stroking his back, feeling the firm, hard layers of muscle, the hollow of his spine, instinctively learning some of the details of how he was made.

The television played on unnoticed. No one came to the door on this rainy day; they stood alone in the office, oblivious to the music and the steady patter of the rain, hearing only each other's breathing and the soft, unconscious sounds of pleasure. Like a morning glory opening its shy face to the sun, Evie slowly bloomed in his arms, her golden sensuality growing in confidence. He was painfully aroused but held himself under strict control, ignoring his own condition so that she didn't feel pressured. She felt… safe, free to relax, and let herself feel the new sensations, explore the limits of her own desire. It was very different from the way it had been with Matt. She had been a girl then, and now she was a woman, with a woman's deeper and richer passion.

Though he had kissed her before, she had been distracted by the dangerous desire she felt for this man. Now, having given in, she could concentrate on the little details. She reveled in his taste, as the coolness of his lips rapidly became warm, then hard and hot. She measured the broadness of his shoulders, her palms smoothing over the curve of the joint and feeling the hardness of his solid bones covered by pads of muscle. She touched his hair, feeling it thick and silky and cool, warmer underneath, where it lay close to his skull. She felt the rasp of his five o'clock stubble against her cheeks. She inhaled the clean, musky scent of his maleness, a faint odor of soap, the fresh smell of rain on his clothes and skin.

"God." Abruptly he drew away, letting his head fall back as he drew in a deep breath. Her response had been hesitant at first, but then she had come alive in his arms, and he felt singed, as if he had been holding the sweetest of fires. His own response to her shook him with its violence. It was difficult to think of anything but taking her, and only their present location kept him from trying. "I'm the one calling a halt this time, sweetheart. We either have to stop or find a more private place."

She felt bereft, suddenly deprived of his touch. Her heart was pounding, and her skin felt as if it glowed with heat. Still, he was right. This wasn't the place for making out like teenagers. "There isn't a more private place," she said as she reached out to turn the television from rock to a country video station. The music abruptly changed from rap to a hauntingly passionate love song, and that was even more jarring to her nerves. She punched the Off button, and in the sudden quiet the rain sounded heavier than before. She looked out the window at the gray curtain that veiled the lake, obscuring the far bank.

“No one will be using their boats for the rest of the day,” Robert said. “Why don’t you close early and we’ll go to Huntsville for dinner.”
She considered how his questions and suggestions sounded like statements and demands. Had no one before her ever said no to this man? “I can’t close early.”
“The rain is supposed to last halfway through the night,” he said reasonably. “But that won’t stop people from coming in to buy tackle. Granted, there probably won’t be many, maybe not any, but the sign says that I’m open until eight.”
And she would be, he thought, exasperated by the difficulty of courting a woman who refused to make time for him. He had certainly never had that problem before. In fact, he couldn’t say that he’d ever had a problem with a woman at all—until Evie. Getting close to her presented him with as many obstacles as a mine field. Ruefully he thought that if he was going to spend any time with her, most of it would obviously be here at the marina.
Rather than become angry, which would only make her more obstinate, he said, “Could Craig swap shifts with you occasionally, if we give him advance notice?”
A tiny smile lifted the corners of her mouth, telling him that he was learning. “I suppose he could. He’s generally accommodating.”
“Tomorrow?”
This time she almost laughed aloud. “I can’t tomorrow.” She had an appointment with her doctor at ten in the morning. Though she had told Robert that she didn’t want to sleep with him, he had said only that he would stop if she told him to. The “if” told her that she should be prudent, because his physical effect on her was potent. Of course, she wasn’t going to tell Robert that she was arranging birth control; he would consider it a green light to making love.
He sighed. “The day after tomorrow?”
“I’ll ask him.”
“Thank you,” he said with faint irony.
Robert received two phone calls the next morning. He was out on the deck, reading a sheaf of papers that Felice had faxed to him; it was remarkably easy, he’d found, to keep abreast of things by way of phone, computer and fax. The first call was from Madelyn. “How are things in Alabama?”
“Hot,” he replied. He was wearing only gym shorts. The rain of the day before had made everything seem even more green and lush, the scents

more intense, but it hadn't done anything to ease the heat. If anything, the heat was worse. The morning sun burned on his bare chest and legs. Luckily, with his olive complexion, he didn't have to worry about sunburn.
"The weather is perfect here, about seventy-five degrees. Why don't you fly up for the weekend?"
"I can't," he said, and realized how much he sounded like Evie. "I don't know how long I'll be down here, but I can't leave until everything is tied up."
"The invitation stands," Madelyn said in her lazy drawl. A funny pang went through him as he realized how similar Madelyn's accent was to Evie's. "If you do happen to find a couple of days free, we'd love to see you."
"I'll try to get up there before I go back to New York," he promised.
"Try really hard. We haven't seen you since spring. Take care."
The phone rang again almost immediately. This time it was the man he had hired to keep watch on Landon Mercer. "He had a visitor last night. We followed the visitor when he left, and we're working on identifying him. There hasn't been anything of interest on the phones."
"All right. Keep watching and listening. Has he spotted his tail yet?"
"No, sir."
"Anything in his house?" Robert was briefly thankful that he was a civilian and didn't have to follow the same tortuous rules and procedures that cops did, though it could have been sticky if his men had been caught breaking and entering. They hadn't seized any evidence, merely looked for it. Information was power.
"Clean as a whistle. Too clean. There's not even a bank statement lying around. We found out that he has a safety deposit box, so he might keep his paperwork in it, but we haven't been able to get into it yet. I'm working on getting a copy of his bank statement."
"Keep me informed," Robert said, and hung up. In a few days Mercer would start feeling a slight squeeze. He wouldn't think much of it at first, but soon it would become suffocating. Robert's plans for Evie, both personal and financial, were moving along nicely, too.

Chapter Seven

Robert didn’t intend to see Evie at all that day. He was an expert strategist in the eternal battle between men and women; after his determined pursuit of her, she would be expecting him to either call or come to the marina, and the lack of any contact with him would knock her slightly off balance, further weakening her defenses. He had often thought that seduction was similar to chess, in that the one who could keep the other guessing was the one in control of the game.

He was in control of the seduction. His instincts in that part of the game were infallible. It might take him a few weeks of gentling, but Evie would end up in his bed. Not long after that, he would have this entire mess cleaned up; Mercer and Evie would be arrested, and he would go back to New York.

Damn.

That was the problem, of course. He didn’t want Evie in jail. He had been furious when he had come down here, determined to put both her and her lover away for a very long time. But that was before he had met her, before he had held her and tasted the heady sweetness of her. Before he had seen the underlying sadness in those golden brown eyes, and wondered if he would cause that expression to deepen. The thought made him uneasy.

Was she even guilty? At first he had been convinced that she was; now, even after such a short acquaintance, he was no longer certain. No criminal was untouched by his deeds. There was always a mark left behind, perhaps in a certain coldness in the eye, a lack of moral concern in certain matters. He hadn’t been able to find any such mark in Evie. He had often thought that those who dealt in espionage, in the betrayal of their own country, were some of the coldest people ever born. They lacked the depth of emotion that others had. That lack of feeling wasn’t evident in Evie; if anything, he would say that she felt far too much.

She hadn’t hesitated at all in going into the river after Jason. That in itself wasn’t unusual; any number of strangers would have done the same thing, much less a relative. But, knowing that every second counted, she had stayed down far too long herself in the effort to find the boy. He knew as surely as he knew the sun was in the sky that she would not have been able to make it back to the surface without his help… and that she had been willing to die rather than release Jason and save herself. Even now, the memory made his bones turn cold.

He had gone inside to work at the computer, but now he got up and restlessly walked out onto the deck, where the burning sun could dispel his sudden chill.

Only a person of deep emotion was capable of that kind of sacrifice.

He braced his hands on the top railing and stared out at the river. It wasn't green today, but rather a rich blue, reflecting the deep blue of the cloudless sky. There was little, if any, breeze, and the water's surface was calm. It lapped gently against the dock and the bank with a sound that tugged at something deep within him. All life had originated in the sea; perhaps it was an echo of that ancient time that made people respond so to water. But this river, peaceful as it was now, had almost taken Evie's life.

He shivered from another chill. He couldn't remember, he thought absently, when he had been so enraged… or so afraid. He had ruthlessly controlled both emotions, allowing no hint of them to surface, but they had roiled deep within him. It hadn't been an intellectual anger, but rather a gut-level rage at fate, at chance, which had seemed to be snatching Evie out of his grasp before he could… what? Have her indicted? He snorted mirthlessly at that idea. The thought hadn't entered his mind. No, he had been furious that he wouldn't be able to hold her, make love to her, that the endless stretch of his days wouldn't have her in them.

Was Evie the type of person who could betray her country? He was beginning to doubt his own information.

Indecision wasn't normally part of Robert's makeup, and he was impatient with himself now. He couldn't allow his doubts about Evie's guilt to alter his plans. If she was innocent, then she wouldn't be harmed. She would have some uncomfortable moments, she would be worried, but in the end he would take care of the situation, and she would be okay.

Thinking about her made him edgy. He glanced at his watch; it was a little after noon. She should be at the marina now, and he should already have heard from the tail that he had assigned to follow her every move.

Right on cue, the phone rang, and he stepped inside to pick it up.

"She went to Huntsville this morning," a quiet female voice reported. "Her destination was an office building. The elevator closed before I could get on it with her, so I don't know where she went. I waited, and she returned to the lobby after an hour and twenty-three minutes. She drove straight home, changed clothes and then went to the marina. Mercer was in his office at

PowerNet the entire time, and they didn't talk on the phone. There was no contact between them at all."
"What kind of tenants are in the office building?"
"I made a list. There are two insurance firms, a real estate office, four medical doctors, four lawyers, three dentists, an office temp company and two computer programming firms."
Damn, Robert thought bleakly. Aloud he said, "Find out where she went. Concentrate first on the two programming firms."
"Yes, sir."
He swore as he hung up. Why couldn't she have spent the morning shopping, or paying bills?
He wanted to see her. He wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled. He wanted to whisk her away to some secluded place and keep her locked up there until he had this mess settled. He wanted to ride her until she wept with submission. The violence of all those longings was alien to him, but he couldn't deny it. She had definitely gotten under his skin in a way no other woman had ever done.
Temper and frustration merged, and with a muttered curse he gave in. After swiftly dressing, he left the house and climbed in the black Jeep. Damn it, he wanted to see her, so he would.
Virgil was visiting with Evie again that day. His knee was better, he said, and indeed, he was walking with less effort. The day had been fairly busy, with customers in and out on a regular basis, and Virgil had passed the time with several old friends and casual acquaintances.
She was busy ringing up a fisherman's purchase of gas, a soft drink and a pack of crackers when the door opened. Without looking, she knew Robert had entered. Her skin tingled, and she felt an instant of panic. She had hoped, foolishly, that she wouldn't see him that day, that her frazzled nerves would have a chance to recover somewhat before she actually went out with him the next night. On the other hand, she thought wryly, time and distance probably wouldn't help at all. Even if he wasn't there personally, he was in her mind, dominating both her thoughts and dreams.
Her customer taken care of, she allowed herself to look at him as he genially introduced himself to Virgil, who remembered him, of course. Very little got by that old man.
Robert was wearing jeans and a loose, white cotton shirt. A khaki baseball cap covered his black hair, and a pair of expensive sunglasses dangled from

one hand. Her blood raced through her veins in excitement; even in such casual dress, there was something elegant and dangerous about him. The jeans were soft and faded with age, and he was as at home in them as he was in his silk shuts.
Then he was touching her on the arm, and it was like being burned with a tiny spark of electricity. “I’m going to take the boat out for a while, run the river and learn something about it”
So he wasn’t going to be hanging around the marina all day. She was both relieved and disappointed. “Have you hired a guide?”
“No, but the river channel’s marked, isn’t it?”
“Yes, there shouldn’t be any problem, unless you want to explore out of the channel. I’ll give you a map.”
“Okay.” Thoughtfully Robert looked at Virgil. “Would you like to show me around the lake, Mr. Dodd? That is, if you don’t have plans for the afternoon.”
Virgil cackled, his faded eyes suddenly gleaming with enthusiasm. “Plans?” he snorted. “I’m ninety-three years old! Who in tarnation makes plans at my age? I could stop breathin’ any minute now.”
Amusement danced in Robert’s eyes, making them look like pale green diamonds. “I’m willing to take the chance if you are, but I warn you, a corpse in the boat would be a real inconvenience.”
Virgil hauled himself out of the rocking chair. “Tell you what, son. For the chance to park myself in a boat again, I’ll try real hard not to put you to the trouble of havin’ to call the coroner.”
“It’s a deal.” Robert winked at Evie as he turned away.
Evie shook her head as she smiled at Virgil. She knew better than to try talking him out of going. Besides, he deserved to enjoy an hour or so on the river he loved, and she had faith that Robert would be as skillful at handling a boat as he was at everything else he did. How had he guessed, on such short acquaintance, that Virgil would dearly love getting out on the water again?
“Both of you be careful,” she admonished. “Virgil, don’t forget your cap.”
“I won’t, I won’t,” he said testily. “Think I’m fool enough to go out without somethin’ on my head?”
“I’ll bring the boat around to the dock,” Robert said, and she was grateful to him for sparing Virgil the longer walk to the boat slip. He reached the door, stopped and came back to her. “I forgot something.”

“What?”
He cupped her chin in one hand, leaned down and calmly kissed her. It wasn’t a passionate kiss; it was almost leisurely. Still, when he lifted his head, her heart was pounding and her thoughts scattered. “That,” he murmured.
She heard Virgil’s cracked laughter and became aware of the interested gazes of the two customers who were browsing among the hooks and spinner baits. Her cheeks burned with a blush, and she turned away to fiddle with some papers until she could regain her composure.
Virgil patted her on the arm. Though stooped under the weight of nine decades, he was still taller than she, and he grinned at her. “Heard tell that young feller made hisself useful the other day, when Becky’s boy fell in.”
She cleared her throat. “Yes. If he hadn’t been there, Jason and I both would probably have drowned.”
“Fast mover, is he?”
She found herself blushing again and waved Virgil off with shooing motions. Why on earth had Robert kissed her in public? She would never have thought that he was given to public displays of affection; there was something too contained about him. But he had certainly done just that!
She watched out the window as he idled the sleek black boat around to the dock, the powerful motor rumbling like thunder. The sunglasses were in place on the high-bridged nose, giving him a remote, lethal air. She had seen soldiers with that exact expression, and she wondered at it. With a start, she realized how little she knew about Robert Cannon. What did he do for a living? She knew he had to have some money to be able to afford that house, a new boat and the new Jeep. Where was he from? Did he have family, had he been married before, was he married *now*, did he have children? A chill went through her as she thought of all she didn’t know about him.
And yet, in a way, she knew the man. He was cool and complicated, a private man who kept a subtle but permanent distance between himself and everyone else. The distance wasn’t physical, God knows; he was the most physical, *sensual* man she’d ever met. Emotionally, though, he always held something back, keeping the inner man untouched. Probably most people thought of him as very controlled and unemotional; Evie agreed with the controlled part, but there was a ferocity lurking beneath the control that alarmed her even as it called to her own inner fire. He was ruthless, he was

autocratic… and he had seen, almost at a glance, how much an old man would love to take a boat ride on his beloved river once more.
Her breath caught, and there was a pain in her chest. Panic filled her as she watched Virgil hobble out to the dock as Robert brought the boat alongside. Robert held out a strong hand, and Virgil gripped it and stepped aboard the craft. There was a wide smile on his face as he settled onto the seat. Robert handed him a life jacket, and obediently Virgil slipped it on, though Evie was fairly certain he'd never worn one before in his life.
The panic that almost suffocated her was comprised of equal parts terror and tenderness. She *couldn't* feel this much for him, not so soon. You had to know someone for that, and she had just been thinking how little she knew about him. She was fascinated by him, that was all. It was understandable. He was the first man in her life since Matt's death, twelve long, desolate years ago. He had brought passion alive in her again, with his skillful kisses and determined pursuit.
She had never felt so violently attracted to a man before.
With Matt… they had grown up together, they'd been in the same class in school, from first grade through graduation. She had known Matt as well as she knew herself; they'd been like two halves of a whole. The love had grown gradually between them, pure and steady, like a candle flame.
Robert… Robert was an inferno, and the heat between them could leave her in ashes.
Robert and Virgil had been gone for over an hour when Landon Mercer strolled into the marina. "Hi, doll," he said jovially. "How's the prettiest woman in this part of the state?"
Evie's expression was impassive as she glanced at him. Unfortunately, business had slowed down and she was there alone. She always preferred to have company around when she had to deal with him. Of course, being alone meant that she would have the opportunity to follow him again. Her thoughts began to hum. "Hello, Mr. Mercer."
"Landon," he said, as he always did. He leaned against the counter in a negligent pose, one designed to show off his physique. Mercer was a good-looking man, she admitted, but he left her cold.
"Do you want to rent a boat today?" she asked, turning to check which ones were available, though she knew without looking. She had quickly discovered that the best way to deflect his attention was to appear oblivious to it.

“Sure do. It’s been a while since I’ve done any fishing, so I decided to play hooky from work this afternoon.” He laughed at his own pun.
Evie managed a polite smile. He had brought in a small tackle box and one rod and reel, the same rig he always carried. The same lure was tied to the line.
“Do you want any particular boat?”
“No, any of them will do.” He leaned closer. “When I get back, why don’t we go out to dinner tonight? Not anywhere here. We’ll go someplace nice, maybe in Birmingham.”
“Thanks, but I’m busy tonight,” she replied, her tone conveying no interest at all. Unfortunately, he was so taken with his own charm that he was oblivious to her lack of response to him.
“Tomorrow night, then. It’s Saturday night. We can even go to Atlanta for some real fun, since we wouldn’t have to be back for work.”
“The marina’s open seven days a week.”
“Oh. Okay, we’ll go to Birmingham.”
“No, thank you, Mr. Mercer. I’m busy tomorrow night, too.”
“C’mon, how busy can you be? Whatever it is, you can put it off.”
Her teeth were on edge. She barely managed to be polite as she said, “I have a date tomorrow night.”
“Now I’m jealous. Who’s the lucky man?”
“No one you know.” She took an ignition key from the peg-board and slid it across the counter to him. “There you go. Number five, the one at the end of the dock.”
He took out his wallet and extracted a couple of twenties. “I’ll have it back in two hours.” He picked up the ignition key.
“Fine.” She mustered a smile. “Have a good time. Hope you catch a lot.”
“I never do, but it’s fun to try,” he said breezily as he picked up his tackle and went out the door.
Evie put the money into the cash drawer and locked it, all the while eyeing Mercer as he walked down the dock. He was looking around, studying the parking lot and the traffic on the street out front, as well as on the bisecting causeway.
Swiftly she picked up the phone and buzzed Burt in the maintenance building. He picked up just as Mercer was getting into the boat.
“Burt, I’m taking the boat out for a while,” Evie said swiftly. “I’m locking the store, but keep an eye on the gas pumps while I’m gone.”

“Sure,” he said, as unquestioning as ever. Burt Mardis didn’t have a curious bone in his body.

Mercer was idling away from the dock. Evie jammed a ball cap on her head, grabbed her sunglasses and hurried from the building. She locked the door behind her, then sprinted for her own boat.

He was beyond the wave breakers by the time she reached her boat, and she heard the roar as he opened up the throttle. She all but threw herself into the boat and turned the key in the ignition. The motor coughed to life with a satisfying roar. Her boat was faster than any of the rentals, but on the water, and at speed, it was difficult to distinguish one vessel from another.

She had to idle away from the marina, because a fast takeoff would make waves large enough to violently rock the boats in their slips, possibly damaging them. Swearing at every lost second, she waited until she was past the wave breakers before pushing the throttle forward. The motor roared, and the front end of the boat lifted in the air as the vessel shot forward. It planed off almost immediately, the nose dropping into the running position.

She scanned the water for Mercer; unfortunately, he had gained enough distance that she couldn’t positively identify him, and there were three boats speeding away from her, small specks that bobbed slightly as they cut through the waves. Which one was Mercer? The sun wasn’t far past its apex, and the glare turned the lake into a mirror. Hot air hit her, pulling tendrils of hair loose around her face. The scent of the river filled her head and lungs, and a quiet exultation spread through her. This was a part of her life that she loved—the wind in her face, the sense of speed, the feel of the boat as it glided over calm water and bumped over waves. Though there were other boats on the lake, and houses visible all along the shoreline, when she was speeding across the water it was like being alone with God. She would have been perfectly content, if only she knew what Mercer was up to.

After a minute one boat slowed and turned toward another marina. As she neared, she could tell that it held two passengers.

That left two. The throttle was full forward, and she was gaining on one, while the other, probably a speedy bass boat, was pulling away. Since her boat was faster than the rental, the one she was overtaking had to be Mercer. Cautiously she throttled back, enough to stay at a pace with him but not so close that he would see and identify her. Just about everyone on the water

would be wearing a ball cap and sunglasses, and her hair was pulled back in a braid rather than flying loose, so she felt fairly confident that he wouldn't recognize her.

He was heading toward the same area, where there were a lot of small islands dotting the lake. She wouldn't be able to get very close, because once he cut his speed he would be able to hear other boats. Her best bet, she thought, was to stop some distance away and pretend to be fishing.

The boat ahead slowed and cut between two islands. Evie kept her speed steady and cruised on past. There was a distance of over two hundred yards between them, but she could tell that now he was idling closer to the bank of the island on the right.

She turned in the opposite direction, away from him. A barge was coming downriver, heavily loaded and settled deep into the water, pushing out a wave as it plowed forward. If she let the barge come between her and Mercer, it would block his activities for almost half a minute, plenty long enough for her to lose him. But if she moved inside the barge's path, it would put her closer to him than she wanted to be.

There was no help for it. She tucked her long braid inside her shirt to hide that identifying detail and turned the boat to angle back across the river ahead of the barge.

"Guntersville Lake's easy to learn," Virgil stated. " 'Course, I was fishin' the river back before the TVA built the dam, so I knowed the lay of the land before the water backed up and covered it. Not many of us around now remembers the way it used to be. River used to flood a lot. So Roosevelt's boys decided we needed us a dam, so there wouldn't be no more floods. Well, hell, 'course there ain't, 'cause now the land that flooded ever now an' then is permanently under water. The government calls it flood control. They throwed around words like eminent domain, but what they did is take people's land, turn them off their farms, and put a lot of good land under water."

"The TVA brought electricity to the Tennessee River Valley, didn't it?" Robert asked. He was holding the boat to around twenty miles an hour, not much more than idling speed to the powerful motor behind them, but the slow speed made conversation possible. They had to raise their voices, but they could hear each other.

Virgil snorted. "Sure it did. Glad to have it, too. But nobody ever thought the TVA built that dam to make our lives easier. Hell, we knew what was

goin’ on. It was the Depression, and Roosevelt would have built the second Tower of Babel to make jobs for folks, for all the good it did to the economy. It took the war to kick-start things again.”
“Did you fight in the war?”
“Too old for that one.” Virgil cackled with glee. “Imagine that! Over fifty years ago, they said I was too old! But I was in the first one. Lied about my age to get in. Not that they checked too close, ‘cause they needed men could hit the broad side of a barn with a rifle slug. During the second one, I volunteered to help train the younger fellers with their rifles, but that was all stateside. Suited me. My wife weren’t none too pleased with me, anyway, leavin’ her to handle five young’uns on her own. She’d have been mad as hell if I’d gone overseas. Our oldest boy, John Edward, was seventeen when it all started, and he joined the navy.
It fretted her enough that he was gone. He made it back fine, though. Imagine that. The boy went through a war in the Pacific without a scratch, then come home and died two years later with the pneumonia. Life’s got a lotta strange turns in it. Don’t guess I’ll see too many more of them, but then, I didn’t plan on hangin’ around this long to begin with.”
The old man lapsed into silence, perhaps remembering all the people who had come and gone through his life. After a minute he roused himself. “Got a lot of creeks emptyin’ into the lake. We passed Short Creek a ways back. This here’s Town Creek.”
Robert had studied maps of the lake, so when Virgil identified the creeks he was able to pinpoint their location. Since the river channel was marked, staying in safely deep water was no problem. It was when he ventured out of the river channel that Virgil’s expertise came in handy, because he knew where it was shallow, where the hidden stump rows were lurking just under the surface, ready to tear the bottom out of a boat if the driver wasn’t careful. For several more minutes, Virgil devoted himself to his appointed task, pointing out quirks of the lake.
Then he said, “I’ve lost a lot of folks over the years. My own mama and pa, of course, and all my brothers and sisters. There were sixteen of us, and I’m the only one left. Got a piss pot full of nieces and nephews, though, and all of their kids, and their kids’ kids. My wife passed on in sixty-four. Lord, it don’t seem like it’s been that long. I’ve lost three of my own kids. Parents ought not to outlive their kids. It ain’t right. And all my friends that I growed up with, they’re long gone.

“Yep, I’ve had to bury many a loved one, so I get right protective of the ones I got left.” Faded blue eyes were suddenly piercing as he turned them on Robert. “Evie’s a special woman. She’s had enough sorrow in her young life, so if you don’t mean to do right by her, it would be a kindness if you’d leave her alone and haul your ass back up north.”

Robert’s face was impassive. “Evie’s related to you?” he asked neutrally, ignoring Virgil’s rather combative statement. He wasn’t about to get into an argument with a ninety-three-year-old man.

Virgil snorted. “Not by blood. But I’ve knowed her all her life, watched her grow up, and there’s not a finer woman in this town. Now, I watch television, so I know times have changed from when I was young enough to court a woman. Back then we had enough respect for womenfolk not to do nothing to cause them harm. But, like I said, times have changed. I know young folks now get serious about things without tyin’ the knot proper, and that ain’t what I’m talkin’ about. Thing is, if you’re just lookin’ for a good tune, then find some other woman. Evie ain’t like that.”

Robert had to struggle with several conflicting emotions. Foremost was his cold, instinctive anger at Virgil’s scolding interference. In neither his business nor his personal life was he accustomed to being taken to task. Right after that, though, was amusement. He was thirty-six and, moreover, an extremely wealthy man who wielded a great deal of power in both financial and political circles. He almost smiled at Virgil lumping him in with “young folks.”

What took most of his attention, though, was this second warning that Evie wasn’t a good-time girl. Evie herself had issued the first warning: *Don’t kiss me unless it’s for real.* After Virgil’s little speech, the underlying meaning of those warnings was clear, though the reason wasn’t

“I don’t usually discuss my relationships,” he finally said in a faintly distant tone, just enough to signal his displeasure. “But my interest in Evie isn’t casual.” *In any way.* “What did you mean, she’s had enough sorrow in her life?” Because that had been the basis of the talk: *Don’t hurt her.*

“I mean, life ain’t been easy on her. Grief comes to everybody, if they live long enough. Some folks, though, it hits harder than others. Losin’ Matt the way she did, the day after they got married… well, it changed her. There ain’t no sunshine in her eyes now, the way there used to be. She never looked at another man since Matt died, until you. So don’t disappoint her, is what I’m sayin’.”

Robert was knocked off balance by the surge of jealousy that seared through him. Jealousy? He'd never been jealous in his life, especially where a woman was concerned. Either his women were faithful to him or the relationship ended. Period. How could he be jealous of a boy who had been dead for a dozen years? But Evie still wore Matt Shaw's wedding ring on her finger and had evidently remained faithful to him even after all this time. Forget Mercer; that had obviously been an error. An understandable one, but still an error. He was both glad that she wasn't involved with Mercer, at least on that level, and furious that she was determined to waste herself on a memory. *I don't want to sleep with you,* she'd said. She was still trying to be faithful to a dead husband.

"What kind of person was Matt?" he asked. He didn't want to know, didn't want to talk about the boy, but he felt compelled to find out.

"He was a fine boy. Would have been a good man, if he'd had the chance. Good-natured, honest. Kindhearted, too. Can't say that about too many folks, but Matt didn't have a mean bone in his body. He never dated anybody but Evie, and it was the same with her. They planned to marry each other from the time they started high school together. Never saw two kids love each other the way they did. It was a shame that they didn't have no more time together than what they had. She didn't even have his child to keep part of him alive. Damn shame. She needed somthing to live for, back then."

Robert had had enough. He couldn't listen to much more about how wonderful Matt Shaw had been, and how much Evie had loved him, without losing his temper. He couldn't remember the last time he had lost control, but mere was a deep-seated fury in him now that was surging forward. He didn't try to analyze his anger; he simply and ruthlessly contained it, shoving it down as he turned the boat downriver and headed back toward the marina. He eased the throttle forward so the noise would make conversation impossible.

Fifteen minutes later they were idling up to the docks. At the sound of the motor, a man wearing grease-covered coveralls came out of the maintenance building and walked out on the dock. He nodded a greeting to Robert and said to Virgil, "Come in outta the sun and keep me company for a while. Evie closed the office and took her boat out for a while." As he talked, he extended a muscular arm to steady Virgil as he climbed out of the boat onto the dock.

“When was this?” Robert asked sharply.
The mechanic shrugged. “An hour, maybe. I didn’t pay no attention to the time.”
She had refused to close the marina early one rainy late afternoon, when there had been no customers, but now she had closed it not long after lunch on a beautiful, sunny, *busy* day. Robert’s eyes narrowed. He looked at the parking lot. He knew the make, model and color of Mercer’s car, and there it sat
Damn her. She had left to meet with the traitorous bastard.

Chapter Eight

Robert was standing on the dock when Evie eased her boat into its regular slip. He was wearing those extra dark sunglasses that completely hid his eyes, but she didn’t need to see them to know that they were icy with rage. Maybe it was the way he moved, very deliberately, every action contained, that alerted her to his mood. An uncontrollable shiver ran over her, despite the heat. There was something far more alarming about that cold, ruthless control than if he had been violent. Again she had the thought that he was the most dangerous man she’d ever seen. But what had put him in such a menacing mood?
She tied off and leapt up onto the dock. “Did Virgil enjoy himself?” she asked as she stepped around Robert, heading toward the office. He wasn’t the only one who had self-control. Right now she had other concerns besides dealing with his temper. She could hear the roar of a boat coming closer; that might or might not be Mercer, but she wasn’t taking any more chances. When Mercer returned to the marina, she intended to be inside the office building, doing business as usual.
“Just a minute,” Robert said, his tone clipped, and reached for her.
Evie evaded his grasp. “Later,” she said, and hurried up the dock.
He was right behind her when she unlocked the door, but he didn’t have a chance to say anything. Virgil had seen her boat and was slowly making his way across the lot. Robert eyed the old man’s progress; he wouldn’t have time to get any answers out of her before Virgil was there, so it would be better to wait, as she’d said, until later. Once more he controlled his anger

and frustration, but the fury in him remained hot. If anything, he was becoming even angrier.

Virgil reached the doorway and gave a sigh of pleasure as the cool air-conditioning washed over him. “Got spoiled in my old age,” he griped. “The heat didn’t used to bother me none.”

“No point in letting it bother you back then,” Evie pointed out, smiling at him. “There wasn’t any air-conditioning, so we all had to put up with it.”

The old man eased into the rocking chair. “Spoiled,” he repeated contentedly.

She went over to a vending machine and fed in the change for three soft drinks. She kept the machine’s temperature set low enough to form ice crystals in the drinks, to the delight of her customers. She popped the tops off the bottles and thrust one into Robert’s hands, then gave another to Virgil. The third she drank herself, turning up the bottle for a long, cold swallow of the crisp, biting liquid.

She saw Robert eye the hourglass bottle in his hand with a less-than-thrilled expression; then he, too, took a drink. His tastes were probably too sophisticated to run to soft drinks, she thought, but if he was going to live here for the summer, he should do as the natives did. One of the front lines of defense against the heat was to consume cola every day as coolant for the insides.

A boat was idling in past the wave breakers. A quick glance told Evie that it was the rental boat. Mercer had seen her, she knew, but she didn’t think he had recognized her. Wearing the universal ball cap and sunglasses, with her hair tucked in, she could have been anyone. It was doubtful that he had even been able to tell she was a woman.

Robert hitched one hip onto the counter, a sockless, docksider-clad foot swinging as he nursed the soft drink. His expression didn’t give anything away, but she had the strong impression that he was… waiting. Until they could talk? No. It was more immediate than that.

She watched Mercer tie up the boat and walk jauntily along the dock, tackle box in one hand and useless tackle in the other. Then the door opened and he breezed in, all ego and self-satisfaction. “Nothing today, doll,” he said in his obnoxious, too-hearty manner. “Maybe I’d have better luck if you went along. What do you say?”

“I’m not much for fishing,” she lied without compunction, causing Virgil to almost choke on his drink.

Robert's back, as he sat on the counter, had been half-turned toward Mercer. Now he shifted around to face the other man. "Hello, Landon," he said coolly. "I'd like to go fishing with you the next time you take the afternoon off."

Evie was startled to hear Robert call Mercer by his first name, and a mental alarm began clanging. *How did Robert know the man?*

But if she was startled, the effect on Mercer was electric. He froze in place, his face draining of color as he gaped at Robert. "M-Mr. Cannon," he shuttered. "I—uh, how—w-what are you doing here?"

The black slashes of Robert's eyebrows rose in that sardonic way of his. Mercer was totally aghast at having run into him, Evie saw, and the tension in her relaxed. Whatever the connection, Robert wasn't in league with Mercer, or the other man wouldn't have been so taken aback at his presence.

The most obvious answer to Mercer's question would have been that he kept his boat here; that wasn't, however, what Robert said. Instead he looked deliberately at Evie and said, "The place has a certain attraction."

She felt silly, but she couldn't stop the color from heating her face. Mercer looked even more aghast, for some reason.

"Oh," he mumbled. "Yeah, sure." With an effort, he regained a bit of control and managed a sickly smile. "It's getting late. I should be going. Call me when you're free, Mr. Cannon, and we'll get in that game of golf we talked about."

"Or some fishing," Robert suggested, his voice like silk.

"Uh… yeah. Yes, we'll do that. Anytime." Mercer tossed the boat keys onto the counter and hastily left.

"Wonder what set his britches on fire," Virgil mused.

"Perhaps it was his bad luck in taking an afternoon off from work to go fishing and running into his employer at the marina," Robert suggested, his eyes hooded.

Virgil leaned back in the rocker, wheezing with laughter. "Well, I'll be! He works for you, eh? Bet that ruined his fun for the day."

"I'm certain it did."

Evie stood motionless, absorbing all the nuances of the brief scene with Mercer, and also the silkiness of Robert's murmured reply. He had taken a great deal of pleasure in watching Mercer squirm. He had also made that remark about her being the reason for his presence for the same reason: to

make Mercer squirm. After all, what man would feel comfortable to find out he had just come on to the boss's woman… in front of the boss? This was in addition to being caught playing hooky from work.
Mercer probably didn't realize it, but it had been plain to Evie that Robert disliked him. He had been perfectly cordial, but the dislike had been there, underlying every word. She was enormously relieved. For a horrible moment she had been afraid that Robert was involved with whatever crooked deal Mercer had going on, but Mercer's manner certainly hadn't been that of someone who had met a friend. She was worried, though, to find that Mercer worked for Robert. Just as she didn't want his dirty waves to touch the marina, she also didn't want him to somehow harm Robert.
She hadn't been successful in finding out any more about what Mercer was up to; he had idled a twisting path around several of the islands, finally stopping for a moment on the back side of one of the larger ones. She hadn't been able to see what, if anything, he was doing. If she had had a trolling motor, she would have been able to get much closer without him hearing her, but her boat wasn't equipped with one. Then Mercer had started his motor again and resumed his weaving in and out of the islands. She had watched him as best she could, but there was no way to keep him in sight all the time. When he had finally left the islands, it had taken all the speed her boat was capable of to outpace him and reach the marina far enough in advance that he wouldn't see her.
So she still had nothing but suspicion. While she was wondering whether or not to confide in Robert when she had nothing of substance to tell him, Virgil's great-granddaughter came in. This time she was carrying a wide-eyed, eleven-month-old girl on her hip, and was followed by two towheaded boys, ages four and six. "PawPaw, PawPaw," both boys yelled. They ran toward the rocking chair, climbing up on Virgil's lap with a naturalness that suggested they had been doing it all their lives.
"Well, how'd it go?" Virgil asked, gathering both small bodies against him. "Did the dentist give you a sucker?"
"Yep," said the oldest one, pulling a bright red lollipop from his pocket. "Mom says it's okay, because it's sugarless. You want it?" His expression said that he was disappointed by the sugarless state of the candy.
"It's tempting," Virgil allowed, "but you keep it." Evie smiled as she watched Virgil with his great-greatgrandchildren, then turned back to their mother. "Sherry, this is Robert Cannon. He and Virgil have been out

running the river today. Robert, Virgil's great-granddaughter, Sherry Ferguson."
"Pleased to meet you," Sherry said with her friendly smile. She obviously remembered Robert from the first time he had come to the marina. She shifted the baby onto her other hip and held out her hand.
Robert reached to shake Sherry's hand, and the baby evidently thought he was reaching for her; with a gurgle of pleasure she released her grip on Sherry's blouse and lunged forward, both dimpled little arms outstretched. Sherry made a startled grab for the child, but Robert was faster, scooping the baby into his arms almost before she had left the safety of her mother's.
"Allison Rose!" Sherry gasped, staring at the baby. "I'm sorry," she apologized to Robert as she reached to retrieve her child. "I don't know what got into her. She's never gone to a stranger like that before."
Allison Rose wouldn't have any of it; she shrieked and turned away from her mother's hands, clinging to Robert's shirt with all her might.
"She's all right," Robert said, his wonderful deep voice now holding a soothing tone to calm both mother and daughter. One powerful hand steadied the baby's back as his eyes smiled at Sherry. "I've always had a way with women."
That was nothing less than the truth, Evie thought, her blood moving in a slow throb through her veins as she watched him cradle the baby as comfortably as if he had a dozen of his own. Was there anything the man couldn't do? Sherry was all but melting under that smiling look, and tiny Allison was in heaven.
Perched on his arm, Allison looked around with a beatific expression, as if she were a queen surveying her subjects. Robert bent his head to brush his nose against the soft blond curls and reflected that girls were different from boys even at this young age. He had rocked Madelyn's two boys when they were infants and played with them as toddlers, but they hadn't been quite as soft as the baby girl in his arms, and her scent was indefinably sweeter. He found himself enchanted by the tiny sandals on her feet and the ruffled sundress she wore. The feel of her chubby, dimpled arms clinging to him was strangely satisfying.
Oh God, Evie thought. Her chest was so tight she could barely breathe. She had to turn away to hide the shattered look in her eyes. Why couldn't he have been uncomfortable with babies? Why did he have to cradle Allison so tenderly and close his eyes with delight at her sweet baby scent? The

emotion swelling in her was so overwhelming that she couldn't think, couldn't function.

For the rest of her life she would remember the exact moment when she fell in love with Robert Cannon.

She busied herself fiddling with papers, though she couldn't have said what those papers were. As if from a distance, she could hear Sherry asking about Virgil's excursion on the river, could hear the enthusiasm in Virgil's reply and Robert's comments. The calm, soothing tone was still there, she noticed. How could Sherry fail to be reassured about the safety of the outing when his utter placidity and self-confidence said that he had taken every care without appearing to fuss over Virgil's safety?

He did it deliberately, she realized as she listened to them talk. She felt oddly detached, not really hearing words, but rather the way things were said, the underlying emotion. Robert was a master at reading people, then using his voice and manner with uncanny accuracy to manipulate them into the response he desired. It was almost as if he were a puppeteer, pulling everyone's strings so subtly that they never noticed they were being directed by his will.

And if he manipulated *them*, then it followed that he manipulated *her*.

There was a dull roaring in her ears, as if she might faint. Evie flatly refused to do something that silly and concentrated on breathing deeply. As she sucked in the first breath, she discovered that it was the first time she had done so for some time, judging by the acute relief in her lungs. She had simply stopped breathing, probably about the time Robert had rubbed his face against Allison's curls. No wonder she had felt faint.

Emotionally she had been groping for solid ground, had felt her fingers finally brush against something to which she had thought she could hold. Now she felt as if that lifeline had been jerked away from her and she was lost again, swirling away. Had anything Robert said to her been the truth, or had every word been a subtle manipulation, designed to… what? Get her into his bed? Was the thrill, for him, in the chase? The problem was that he could just as easily be sincere. How was she to tell the difference?

The answer, she thought painfully, was that she couldn't. Only time would tell if she could depend on him, entrust her heart to him, and she doubted that the time was there. He'd said he was here for the rest of the summer, and summer was half-over. He would be here another six, maybe seven, weeks.

“Evie.” Her name was spoken quietly, almost in her ear. She felt his heat against her back, smelled the fresh, clean sweat on his body. His hand touched her arm. “Sherry and Virgil are leaving.”

She turned, summoning both a smile and self-control. No one else had noticed her preoccupation, she saw, but Robert had, another disturbing example of his acute perception. Allison had been enticed, with one of the red suckers as bait, back into Sherry’s arms, where she was engrossed with turning the cellophane-wrapped candy around and around, trying to find access. Finally she simply popped it into her mouth, cellophane and all. Virgil was standing, and the boys were already at the door, shouting that they wanted a Blizzard before they went home, while Sherry insisted that she wasn’t driving all the way to Boaz to get one, at which Virgil added that he wouldn’t mind having a Blizzard, himself. That, of course, settled the issue.

Evie added her voice to all the rowdy commotion, telling them goodbye, telling Virgil to take care. The boys raced out the door and headed toward the docks. Sherry stepped out and said, “Y’all get back here, *now!*” in a tone that stopped them in their tracks and brought them, pouting, back to her. It took another few minutes to get everyone settled in the station wagon, and through it all Evie was acutely aware of Robert standing very close behind her, his hand on the small of her back. Neither Sherry nor Virgil would have missed the body language, much less the touch, that stated his claim on her.

The silence after their departure was almost deafening. She closed the door and tried to slide past him, but his hands closed on her waist, and, with a dizzy whirl, she found herself plunked down on the counter with him standing between her legs to prevent her from getting down. She stared at the center of his chest, refusing to look up at him. She didn’t want this, didn’t want to confront him when she was still reeling from the jolting realization that she loved him and could trust him even less than she had thought.

“Damn it,” he said very softly. Then, “Look at me.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to talk to the top of your head.”

“I can hear you just fine the way I am.”

He hissed a curse just under his breath and caught her face between his hands, tilting it up. He was careful not to hurt her, but there was no resisting

the easy strength of that grip. She tried to concentrate on his nose, but the pale green glitter of his eyes dominated his face, drawing her attention. There was no way *not* to see the cold fury there.
“Where did you go?”
The question was deceptively calm, almost idle. If she hadn’t been able to see his eyes, if she hadn’t been able to feel the roiling anger in him, she might have been fooled. “I had an errand to run.”
“Ah.” His hands tightened on her face. “Were you meeting Landon Mercer?” he asked abruptly. “Are you having an affair with him?”
She stared at him, stupefied. For several moments she was unable to formulate a single thought, her mind a total blank. How on earth had he managed to link her to Mercer? He had been gone when she had left, and she and Mercer had not come back at the same time. But she *had* left because of Mercer, even though she hadn’t been with him. She could feel her cheeks heating and knew that she looked guilty, but she still couldn’t seem to manage a coherent reply. Then the last question sank in, and she snapped, “No, I’m not having an affair with him! I *detest* the man!”
Robert’s lips were thin. “Then why did you sneak off to meet with him?”
“I didn’t sneak anywhere,” she flared. “And I did *not* meet him!”
“But you closed the office in the middle of a busy day,” he said relentlessly. “When you wouldn’t close it a little early on a rainy afternoon when there weren’t any customers at all.”
“I told you, I had an errand.”
“So you went in a boat?”
“I live on the water,” she pointed out, light brown eyes glowing more golden by the second. “I can cross the lake faster than I can drive to my house. Sometimes, if the weather is good and I’m in the mood, I use the boat, anyway, rather than driving.”
The dangerous look hadn’t faded from his eyes. “Are you saying that you went home?”
Very deliberately she caught his wrists and removed his hands from her face. “I had an errand,” she repeated. “I didn’t meet Mercer. I’m not having an affair with him. And what in hell makes you think you have the right to interrogate me?” The last sentence was shouted as she tried to shove him away.
He didn’t move, not an inch. “This,” he said in a stifled tone, then moved forward as he bent his head to her.

She caught her breath at the heat of his mouth, the ravaging pressure. His movement had forced her thighs even wider, and he settled his hips in the notch. Evie quivered at the hard thrust of his sex against the vulnerable softness of her private body, alarmed by the contact even through several layers of cloth. The passion in him was as overwhelming as his anger had been, buffeting her, bending her under his will. His arms were painfully tight, and she tried to push him away once more, with the same result. “Stop it,” he muttered against her mouth, and one arm dropped to encircle her bottom and pull her closer against him, rubbing her against the ridge beneath his jeans.

Unexpected, acute, the pleasure that shot through her loins made her cry out, the sound muffled by his lips. He repeated the motion, rocking his pelvis against her in a fury of jealousy and desire. The jolt was even stronger, and she arched in his arms, her hands lifting to cling to his shoulders. The transition from anger to desire was so swift that she couldn’t control it, and the current of pleasure leaped within her. Every move he made increased the sensation, pushed her higher, as if she were being forced up a mountain and the purpose, once she reached the peak, was to hurl her over. The dizzying, panicked sensation was the same, and she clutched at him as the only anchor.

It had never been like this with Matt, she thought dimly. Their youthful passion had been shy, untutored, sweet but hesitant. Robert was a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

Though he hadn’t touched them, her breasts were throbbing, the nipples tightly drawn and aching. She arched again, a soft, frantic sound in her throat as she tried to ease the ache by rubbing them against his chest. He knew, and whispered, “Easy,” just as his hand closed over one firm, jutting mound.

She whimpered at the heat, the delicious pressure. She knew she should stop him, but putting an end to this ecstasy was the last thing she wanted to do. Her body was pliant, voluptuous with need, glowing with heat. He put his hand under her shirt and deftly opened the front snap of her bra. The cups slid apart, and then his fingers were on her naked flesh. He stroked the satin curves, then circled the tight nipples until she writhed in an agony of unfulfillment. “Is this what you want?” he murmured, and lightly pinched the distended tips. She moaned as a river of heat ran through her, gathering moisture to deposit between her thighs.

He bent her backward over his arm, the position thrusting her breasts upward. Her shirt was pulled up to completely bare them, she realized, wondering when that had happened. She saw her nipples, as red as berries; then his mouth closed over one, and her eyes closed as her head fell back. He was going to take her right here, on the counter. She felt his determination, his own rampant desire. Panic surged through her, combating the heat that undermined her own will and common sense. He would take her here, where anyone could walk in and see them. He would take her without any thought for birth control. And she, besides risking her reputation and the chance of pregnancy, would lose the last bit of protection she retained for her heart.

His mouth was tugging at her nipple, drawing strongly on it before moving to the other one. And his hands were working at the waistband of her jeans, unsnapping and unzipping.

Desperately she wedged her arms between their bodies and stiffened them. "No," she said. The word was hoarse, barely audible. "Robert, no! Stop it!"

He froze, his muscled body taut as he held himself motionless for a long moment. Then, very slowly, he lifted his hands from her and moved back, one step, then two. His breathing was fast and audible.

Evie couldn't look at him as she slid from the counter and hastily fumbled her clothing back into presentable shape, fastening her bra, smoothing her shirt down, snapping and zipping her jeans. Her own breath was coming light and fast.

"Don't look so scared," he said calmly. "I gave you my word that I'd stop, and I did."

No, the problem wasn't with his willpower, she thought wildly, but with hers. Had they been anywhere else but in the marina, she didn't know if she could have made herself say no.

"Nothing to say?" he asked a moment later, when she remained silent.

She cleared her throat. "Not yet."

"All right" He still sounded far too calm and in control. "We'll talk tomorrow. I'll pick you up at seven o'clock."

"Seven," she echoed as he left.

Robert was on the secure mobile phone in the Jeep by the time he had pulled out of the marina's parking lot. "Did you follow him from the time he left work?" he asked as soon as the phone was answered.

"Yes, sir, we did. We saw your Jeep at the marina and pulled back."

“Damn. I was out in my boat. He rented a boat and met someone out on the lake, possibly Evie, because she left the marina in her boat, too. Was he carrying anything when he left work?”
“Not that we could tell, but he could easily have had a disk in his coat pocket.”
“He didn’t fish in his suit. Where did he change clothes?”
“At his house. He was there for not quite five minutes, then came out carrying a tackle box and a fishing rod.”
“If he had a disk at all, it would have been in the tackle box.”
“Yes, sir. We didn’t have a chance to get to it.”
“I know. It wasn’t your fault. First thing, though, I’m going to have a secure phone put in the boat. That way, if I’m out on the water, you can get in touch with me.”
“Good idea. We went through his house again while we had the chance. Nothing.”
“Damn. Okay, continue to watch him. And send someone out to Evie’s house tonight.”
“The matter we discussed?”
“Yes,” Robert replied. It was time for the pressure to begin.

Chapter Nine

The next morning was awful. Evie hadn’t slept well—had scarcely slept at all. She had set the alarm for four-thirty, and when it went off she had been asleep for less than two hours. Dreaming about Robert was one thing, but she had been wideawake and hadn’t been able to get him out of her mind. Her thoughts had darted from the seething passion of his lovemaking, incomplete as it had been, to the unease she felt every time she thought of how he so skillfully manipulated people. She tried to analyze what he did and couldn’t find any time when he had been malicious, but that didn’t reassure her.
Sometime after midnight, lying in the darkness and staring at the ceiling, she realized what it was that so bothered her. It was as if Robert allowed people to see and know only a part of him; the other part, probably the closest to being the real man, was standing back, inviolate, carefully watching and analyzing, gauging reactions, deciding which subtle pressures

to apply to gain the results he wanted. Everyone was shut away from that inner man, the razor-sharp intelligence functioning almost like a computer, isolated in a sterile environment. What was most upsetting was to realize that this was how he wanted it, that he had deliberately fashioned that inner isolation and wasn't about to invite anyone inside.

What place could she hope to have in his life? He desired her; he would be perfectly willing to make her the center of his attention for a time, in order to gain what he wanted: a carnal relationship. But unless she could break through into that fiercely guarded inner core, she would never reach his emotions. He would be fine, but she would break her heart battering against his defenses.

She, better than others, knew how important emotional barriers were. She had propped herself up with her own defenses for many years, until she had slowly healed to the point where she could stand on her own. How could she condemn him for staying within his own fortress? She didn't know if she should even try to get inside.

The thing was, she didn't know if she had a choice any longer. For better or worse, this afternoon he had slipped through her defenses. Such a little thing: playing with a baby. But it was the little things, rather than the watershed events, on which love was built. She had softened toward him when he had saved her and Jason's lives, but her heart had remained her own. Today she had fallen in love; it wasn't something she could back away from and ignore. It might be impossible to breach Robert's defenses and reach his heart, but she had to try.

Finally she drifted into sleep, but the alarm too soon urged her out of bed. Heavy-eyed, she put on the coffee and showered while it was brewing. Then, as she absently munched on a bowl of cereal and poured in the caffeine, a dull cramp knotted her lower belly. "Damn it," she muttered. Just what she needed; she was going out with Robert for the first time that night, and her period was starting. She had thought she had another couple of days before it was due. She made a mental note that in a few days she should begin taking the birth-control pills the doctor had just prescribed.

Normally her period didn't bother her, but the timing of this one, added to lack of sleep, made her cranky as she left the house in the predawn darkness and climbed into the truck.

The sturdy pickup, usually so reliable despite its high mileage, made some unfamiliar noises as she drove along the dark, deserted side road. "Don't

you dare break down on me now," she warned it. She was just getting on a firm financial footing; a major repair job right now was just what she didn't need.

She reached U.S. 431 and turned onto it. The truck shuddered and began making loud clanging noises. Startled, she slowed and swept the gauges with a quick glance. The temperature was fine, the oil—Oh God, the oil gauge was red-lining. She slammed on the brakes and started to veer toward the shoulder, and that was when the engine blew. There were more clanging and grinding noises, and smoke boiled up around the hood, obscuring her vision. She steered the truck off the highway, fighting the heavy wheel as, deprived of power, the vehicle lurched to a halt.

Evie got out and stood looking at the smoking corpse as it pinged and rattled, the sounds of mechanical death. Her language was usually mild, but there were some occasions that called for swear words, and this was one of them. She used every curse word she had ever heard, stringing them together in rather innovative ways. That didn't bring life back to the motor, and it didn't make her bank account any healthier, but it relieved some of her frustration. When she ran out of new ways to say things, she stopped, took a deep breath and looked up and down the highway. Dawn was lightening the sky, and traffic was picking up; maybe someone she knew would come by and she wouldn't have to walk the full two miles to a pay phone. With a sigh she got the pistol out from under the truck seat, slipped it into her purse, then locked the truck—though obviously anyone who stole it would have to haul it away—and began walking.

It was less than a minute when another pickup rolled to a stop beside her. She glanced around and saw the boat hitched up behind. Two men were in the truck, and the one on the passenger side rolled down his window. "Havin' trouble?" Then he said, a bit uncertainly, "Miss Evie?"

With relief she recognized Russ McElroy and Jim Haynes, two area fisherman whom she had known casually for several years. "Hi, Russ. Jim. The motor in my truck just blew."

Russ opened the door and hopped out. "Come on, we'll give you a ride to the marina. You don't need to be out by yourself like this. There's too much meanness goin' on these days."

Gratefully she climbed into the cab of the truck and slid to the middle of the seat. Russ got back in and closed the door, and Jim eased the rig onto the highway. "You got a good mechanic?" Jim asked.

“I thought I’d have Burt, the mechanic at the marina, take a look at it. He’s good with motors.”
Jim nodded. “Yeah, I know Burt Mardis. He’s real good. But if he can’t get to it, there’s another guy, owns a shop just off Blount, who’s just as good. His name’s Roy Simms. Just look it up in the phone book, Simms’ Automotive Repair.”
“Thanks, I’ll remember that.”
Jim and Russ launched into a discussion of other good mechanics in the area, and soon they reached the marina. She thanked them, and Russ got out again to let her out. They probably hadn’t intended to put in at her marina, but since they were there they decided they might as well. As she unlocked the gate that blocked the launch ramp, Jim began to maneuver the truck so he could back the boat into the water. Next she unlocked the office and turned on the lights. Just as Jim and Russ were idling away from the dock, Burt drove up, and she went to tell him about the demise of her truck.
It wasn’t long after dawn when the phone rang. Robert opened one eye and examined the golden rose of the sky as he reached for the receiver. “Yes.”
“The truck didn’t make it into town. It blew just as she reached the highway. She caught a ride to the marina.”
Robert sat up in bed. He could feel the fine hairs on the back of his neck prickling with mingled anger and alarm. “Damn it, she hitchhiked?”
“Yeah, I was a little worried about that, so I followed to make certain she didn’t have any trouble. No problem. It was a couple of fishermen who picked her up. I guess she knew them.”
That wasn’t much better. Guntersville wasn’t exactly a hotbed of crime, but anything could happen to a woman alone. Neither did it soothe him that she had been followed, that help was right behind if she’d needed it. The situation shouldn’t have arisen in the first place. “Why was the timing off?”
“The hole in the oil line must have been bigger than West thought. Probably there’s a big oil puddle in her driveway. She would have seen it if it hadn’t still been dark when she left the house.”
In a very calm, remote voice Robert said, “If anything had happened to her because of his mistake, I wouldn’t have liked it.”
There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then, “I understand. It won’t happen again.”
Having made his point, Robert didn’t belabor it. He moved on. “Be careful when you’re in the house tonight. I don’t want her to notice anything out of

place.”
“She won’t. I’ll see to it myself.”
After hanging up the phone, Robert lay back down and hooked his hands behind his head as he watched the sun peek over the mountains. The day before had made him more uncertain than ever of Evie’s connection with Mercer. He was fairly certain she had rendezvoused with Mercer out on the water, but either she hadn’t told Mercer of his presence, or she had been unaware of his own connection with PowerNet. This appeared to be an efficient espionage ring, to have escaped notice and capture for as long as they had; given that, Evie should have known of him. At the very least, Mercer should have notified her of his presence. What reason could they have had for keeping her in the dark about his identity, unless her participation was very peripheral and no one had thought she needed to know?
The other possibility was that Evie had indeed recognized his name, or been notified, but for reasons of her own had chosen not to pass on the information that he had leased a slip at her marina and appeared to have formed an intense personal interest in her.
Either way, it followed that Evie wasn’t on good terms with the others in the espionage ring. On the one hand, it gave him a weakness he could exploit. On the other, her life could be in danger.
Evie made arrangements to have a wrecker tow the truck to the marina. That accomplished, Burt stuck his head under the hood to begin the examination. Next he lay down on a dolly and rolled underneath for another view. When he emerged, he wasn’t optimistic about rebuilding the motor.
“Too much damage,” he said. “You’d be better off just buying another motor.”
She had been expecting that, and she had already been mentally juggling her finances. The payment on the bank loan for the marina would be late this month, and then she would have to put off other payments to make the one on the loan. She could get by without transportation for a few days by using the boat to go back and forth from home to the marina. If she absolutely needed to go somewhere, she could borrow Becky’s car, though she didn’t like to.
“I’ll call around and try to find one,” she said. “Will you have time to put it in for me?”
“Sure,” Burt said easily. “It’s a little slow right now, anyway.”

By the time Craig arrived to relieve her, it was all arranged. She had located an engine, and Burt would begin work putting it in as soon as it arrived. Depending on how much marina work came in, she might be driving home the next afternoon.

In Evie's experience, things didn't generally work that well. She wouldn't be surprised if Burt was suddenly flooded with a lot of boats needing attention.

The trip across the lake was enjoyable, despite her worries. The water was green, the surrounding mountains a misty blue, and fat, fluffy clouds drifted lazily across the sky, offering an occasional brief respite from the blazing sun. Gulls wheeled lazily over the water, and an eagle soared high in the distance. It was the kind of day when being inside was almost intolerable. With that thought in mind, once she arrived home she put her financial worries on hold and got out the lawn mower to give her yard a trimming. She glared at the big black oil stain on the driveway where the truck had been parked. If it had been daylight when she'd left this morning, if she hadn't swapped shifts with Craig, she would have seen the oil and not have driven the truck; the motor would still be intact, and the repair bill would be much smaller.

Just simple bad timing.

The yard work finished, she went inside to cool off and tackle the housework, which was minimal. By three o'clock she was back outside, sitting on the dock with her feet in the water and a sweat-dewed glass of ice tea beside her. Fretting about the truck wouldn't accomplish anything. She would handle this just as she had handled every other money crisis that had arisen over the years, by strict economizing until all bills were paid. She couldn't do anything more than that, since it wasn't likely a good fairy would drop the money into her lap. Though there might be the possibility of taking a part-time job in the mornings at one of the fast-food restaurants serving breakfast. Forty dollars a week was a hundred and sixty dollars a month, enough to pay the power bill, with a little left over for the gas bill. But for now all she wanted was to sit on the dock with her feet in the water and gaze at the mountains, feeling contentment spread through her.

That was how Robert found her. He came around the side of the house and paused when he saw her sitting on the weathered dock, her eyes closed, face lifted to the sun. The long, thick, golden braid had been pulled forward over one shoulder, revealing the enticing, delicate furrow of her nape. She was

wearing faded denim shorts and a white chemise top, hardly a sophisticated outfit, but his pulse began to throb as he studied the graceful curve of her shoulders, the delectable roundness of her slender arms, the shapeliness of her legs. Her skin glowed with a warm, pale gold luminescence, like a succulent peach. His eyes, his entire body, burned as he stared at her. His mouth was literally watering, and he had to swallow. He had never felt such urgent lust for any other woman. What he wanted was to simply throw himself on her and have her right here, right now, without thought or finesse.

She was unaware of his presence until the dock vibrated when he stepped onto it. There was no alarm in her eyes as she turned her head to see who had come visiting, only lazy curiosity followed by a warm look of welcome. Even the average five-year-old in a large city was more wary than the people around here, he thought as he sat down beside her and began taking off his shoes.

"Hi," she said, a sort of smiling serenity in that one word, which was drawled so that it took twice as long for her to say than it did for him.

He found himself smiling back, actually smiling, his mouth curved into a tender line as his heart pounded inside his chest. He had wanted her from the moment he'd first seen her; he'd been, several times, unexpectedly charmed by her. Both reactions were acute at this moment, but even more, he was enchanted.

He had whirled across countless dance floors with countless beautiful women in his arms, women who could afford to pamper themselves and wear the most expensive gowns and jewelry, women whom he had genuinely liked. He had made love to those women gently, slowly, in luxurious surroundings. He had taken women when the added fillip of danger made each encounter more intense. But never had he felt more enthralled than he was right now, sitting beside Evie on a weathered old dock, with a blazing afternoon sun, almost brutal in its clarity, bathing everything in pure light. Sweat trickled down his back and chest from the steamy heat, and his entire body pulsed with life. Even his fingertips throbbed. It took all of his formidable self-control to prevent himself from pushing her down on the dock and spreading her legs for his entry.

And yet, for all the intensity of his desire, he was oddly content to wait. He would have her. For now he was caught in the enchantment of her slow smile, in the luminous sheen of her skin, in her warm, female scent that no

perfume could match. Simply to sit beside her was to be seduced, and he was more than willing.
Having removed his shoes, he rolled up the legs of his khaki pants and stuck his feet into the water. The water was tepid, but refreshing in contrast to the heat of his skin. It made him feel almost comfortable.
“It isn’t seven o’clock yet,” she pointed out, but she was smiling.
“I wanted to make sure you hadn’t chickened out.”
“Not yet. Give me a couple of hours.”
Despite the teasing, he was certain she wouldn’t have stood him up. She might be nervous, even a little reluctant, but she had agreed, and she would keep her word. Her lack of enthusiasm in going out with him might have been insulting if he hadn’t known how potent her physical reaction to him was. Whatever reasons she had for being wary of him, her body was oblivious to them.
She lazily moved her feet back and forth, watching the water swirl around her ankles. After a minute of wondering about the advisability of bringing up the subject that had been bothering her so much, she decided to do so, anyway. “Robert, have you ever let anyone really get close to you? Has anyone ever truly known you?”
She felt his stillness, just for a split second. Then he said in a light tone, “I’ve been trying to get close to you from the moment I first saw you.”
She turned her head and found him watching her, his ice-green eyes cool and unreadable. “That was a nice evasion, but you just demonstrated what I meant.”
“I did? What was that?” he murmured indulgently, leaning forward to press his lips to her bare shoulder.
She didn’t let that burning little caress distract her. “How you deflect personal questions without answering them. How you keep everyone at arm’s length. How you watch and manipulate and never give away anything of your real thoughts or feelings.”
He looked amused. “You’re accusing *me* of being difficult to get to know, when you’re as open as the Sphinx?”
“We both have our defenses,” she admitted readily.
“Suppose I turn your questions around?” he said, watching her intently. “Have you ever let anyone get close to you and really get to know you?”
A pang went through her. “Of course. My family… and Matt.”

She lapsed into silence then, and Robert saw the sadness move over her face, like a cloud passing over the sun. Matt again! What had been so special about an eighteen-year-old boy that twelve years later just the mention of his name could make her grieve? He didn't like himself for the way he felt, violently jealous and resentful of a dead boy. But at least Matt's memory had diverted Evie from her uncomfortable line of questioning.

She seemed content to sit in silence now, dabbling her feet in the water and watching the sunlight change patterns as it moved lower in the sky. Robert left her to her thoughts, suddenly preoccupied with his own.

Her perception was disturbing. She had, unfortunately, been dead on the money. He had always felt it necessary to keep a large part of himself private; the persona he presented to the world, that of a wealthy, urbane businessman, was not false. It was merely a small part of the whole, the part that he chose to display. It worked very well; it was perfect for doing business, for courting and seducing the women he wanted, and was an entree into those parts of the world where his business was not quite what it seemed.

None of his closest associates suspected that he was anything other than the cool, controlled executive. They didn't know about his taste for adventure, or the way he relished danger. They didn't know about the extremely risky favors he had done, out of sheer patriotism, for various government departments and agencies. They didn't know about all the ongoing, specialized training he did to keep himself in shape and his skills sharp. They didn't know about his volcanic temper, because he kept it under ruthless control. Robert knew himself well, knew his own lethal capabilities. It had always seemed better to keep the intense aspects of his personality to himself, to never unleash the sheer battering force of which he was capable. If that meant no one ever really *knew* him, he was content with that. There was a certain safety in it.

No woman had ever reached the seething core of his emotions, had ever made him lose control. He never wanted to truly love a woman in the romantic sense, to find himself open to her, vulnerable to her. He planned to marry someday, and his wife would be supremely happy. He would treat her with every care and consideration, pleasing her in bed and cosseting her out of it. She would never want for anything. He would be a tender, affectionate husband and father. And she would never know that she had never truly reached him, that his heart remained whole, in his isolated core.

Madelyn, of course, knew that there were fiercely guarded depths to him, but she had never probed. She had known herself to be loved, and that was enough for her. His sister was a formidable person in her own right, her lazy manner masking an almost frightening determination, as her husband had discovered to his great surprise.

But how could Evie, on such short acquaintance, so clearly see what others never did? It made him feel exposed, and he didn't like it one damn bit. He would have to be more careful around her.

The sun was shining full on his back now, and his spine was prickling with sweat. Deciding that the silence had gone on long enough, he asked in an idle tone, "Where's your truck?"

"I'm having a new motor put in it," she replied. "I might have it back by tomorrow afternoon, but until then I'm using the boat to get to the marina and back."

He waited, but there was no additional explanation. Surprised, he realized that she wasn't going to tell him about the motor blowing, wasn't going to broadcast her troubles in any way. He was accustomed to people bringing their problems to him for deft handling. He had also thought it possible that Evie would ask him for a loan to cover the repairs. They hadn't discussed his financial status, but she had seen the new boat, the new Jeep, the house on the waterfront, and she was far from stupid; she had to know he had money. He wouldn't have given her a loan, of course, because that would have defeated his subtle maneuvering to put financial pressure on her, but still, he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd asked. Instead, she hadn't even planned to tell him that her truck had broken down.

"If you need to go anywhere, call me," he finally offered.

"Thanks, but I don't have any errands that can't be put off until I get the truck back."

"There's no need to put them off," he insisted gently. "Just call me."

She smiled and let the subject drop, but he knew she wouldn't call. Even if he installed himself at the marina until her truck was repaired, she wouldn't tell him if she needed anything.

He took her hand and gently stroked her fingers. "You haven't asked me where we're going tonight."

She gave him a surprised look. "I hadn't thought about it" That was the truth. Where they went was inconsequential; the fact that she would be with *him* was what had occupied her mind.

“That isn’t very flattering,” he said with a faint smile.
“I didn’t say I hadn’t thought about going out with you. It’s just that the *where* never entered my mind.”
The sophisticated socialites he normally squired about New York and the world’s other major cities would never have made such an artless confession. Or rather, if they had, it would have been in an intimately flirtatious manner. Evie wasn’t flirting. She had simply stated the truth and let him take it as he would. He wanted to kiss her for it but refrained for now. She would be more relaxed if she didn’t have to deal with a seduction attempt every time she saw him.
Then she turned to him, brown eyes grave and steady. “I answered your question,” she said. “Now answer mine.”
“Ah.” So she had been delayed but not diverted. Swiftly he decided on an answer that would satisfy her but not leave him open. It had the advantage of being the truth, as far as it went. “I’m a private person,” he said quietly. “I don’t blurt out my life story to anyone who asks. You don’t either, so you should understand that.”
Those golden brown eyes studied him for another long moment; then, with a sigh, she turned away. He sensed that his answer hadn’t satisfied her, but that she wasn’t going to ask again. The sensation of being given up on wasn’t a pleasant one, but he didn’t want her to keep prying, either.
He checked his watch. There were a few calls he had to make before picking her up for the evening, not to mention showering and changing clothes. He kissed her shoulder again and got to his feet. “I have to leave or I’ll be late to an appointment. Don’t stay out much longer or you’ll get a sunburn. Your shoulders are already hot.”
“All right. I’ll see you at seven.” She remained sitting on the dock, and Robert looked down at her streaked tawny head with stifled frustration. Just when he thought he was finally making serious progress with her, she mentally retreated again, like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. But this afternoon’s mood was an odd blend of contentment, melancholy and resignation. Maybe she was worried about the truck; maybe she was nervous about their first date, though why she should be, when he’d already had her half-naked, was beyond his comprehension.
The truth was that she was as opaque to him as he was to others. He had always had the ability to read people, but Evie’s mind was either closed to him or she reacted in a totally unexpected way. He couldn’t predict what

she would do or tell what she was thinking, and it was slowly driving him mad. He forced himself to walk away, rather than stand there waiting for her to look up at him. What would that accomplish? It was likely that she would figure out why he was waiting and look up just to get it over with, so he would go. Little mind games were only for the insecure, and Robert didn't have an insecure bone in his body. Nevertheless, he was reluctant to leave her. The only time he wasn't worried about what she was doing was when he was with her.

As he climbed into the Jeep, he wryly reflected that it was a sad state of affairs when he was so obsessed with a woman he couldn't trust out of his sight.

Evie remained where she was until long after the sound of the Jeep's engine had faded in the distance. Robert had stonewalled her questions, and sadly she realized that he simply wasn't going to allow her to get close to him. She supposed she could make a pest of herself and keep yammering at him, but that would only make him close up more. No, if she wanted a relationship with him, she would have to content herself with the little he was comfortable in giving. She had known Matt to the bone and loved him as deeply. How ironic it was that now she had fallen in love with a man who allowed her to touch only the surface.

Finally she pulled her feet out of the water and stood. This had been a day of fretting, though she had tried not to. She would be better off getting ready for her big date. She had the feeling she would need every bit of preparation she could manage.

Chapter Ten

A woman couldn't have asked for a more perfect escort, she realized about halfway through the evening. For all his sophistication, or perhaps because of it, there was something very old-fashioned in the courtesy and protectiveness with which he treated her. Everything was arranged for *her* pleasure, *her* comfort, and she herself was old-fashioned enough, Southern enough, to accept it as the way things should be. Robert Cannon was courting her, so of course he should make certain she was pleased by the evening.

His attention was solely on her. He didn't eye other women, though she noticed other women watching him. He held her chair for her whenever she got up or sat down, poured wine for her and asked the maitre d' to turn up the thermostat when he noticed her shivering. It was a matter of his own presence that his request was instantly honored. Whenever they walked, his hand rested warmly on the small of her back in a protective, possessive touch.

In no time, he had put her at ease. It was only natural that she had been nervous about the evening; after all, she hadn't been on a date in twelve years, and there was a great deal of difference between eighteen and thirty. Back then a date had been a hamburger and a movie, or just getting together with a bunch of friends at the skating rink. She wasn't at all certain what one did on a date with a man who was used to the most cosmopolitan of entertainments.

As she watched his dark, lean face, she realized how truly sophisticated he was. He had brought her to a very nice restaurant in Huntsville, but she was well aware that it didn't compare to the sort of establishments available in New York or Paris or New

Orleans. Not by even a hint, though, did he indicate that the standards were less than those to which he was accustomed. Others, worldly but less sophisticated—and certainly less polite—would have subtly tried to impress by describing the *truly* good restaurants where they'd eaten. Not Robert. She doubted that he even thought of it, for he had the true sophisticate's knack of being at home in any surrounding. He didn't rate or compare; he simply enjoyed. He would have been as happy eating barbecue with his fingers as he was dining with gold flatware and blotting his mouth with a starched linen napkin.

Oh, God. Not only did he play with babies, he was totally comfortable in her world. Just one more thing to love.

He waved his fingers in front of her face. "You've been watching me and smiling for about five minutes," he said with amusement coloring his tone. "Ordinarily I'd be flattered, but somehow it makes me uneasy."

Her mouth quirked as she picked up her fork. "It shouldn't, because actually it was flattering. I was thinking how comfortable you are down here, despite how different things are."

He shrugged and said gently, "The differences are mostly good ones, though I admit I wasn't prepared for the heat. Somehow, ninety degrees in New

York is different from ninety degrees here.”
Her brows lifted delicately. “Ninety degrees isn’t all that hot.”
He chuckled and again wondered briefly at her ability to amuse him. It wasn’t anything overt, just the subtle differences in her outlook and the way she phrased it. “That’s the difference, one of attitude. Though, of course, it gets hotter than that occasionally, to a New Yorker ninety degrees is *hot.* To you, it’s a nice day.”
“Not exactly. Ninety degrees is hot to us, too. It’s just that, compared to a hundred degrees, it isn’t bad.”
“Like I said, attitude.” He sipped his wine. “I like New York for what it is. I like it down here for the same reason. In New York there’s an air of excitement and energy, the opera and ballet and museums. Here, you have clean air, no overcrowding, no traffic jams. No one seems to hurry. People smile at strangers.” His eyes lingered on her face, and when he continued his voice was a little deeper. “Though I admit I’ve been disappointed that I haven’t heard you say ‘y’all’ at all. In fact, I’ve heard it very few times since I’ve been here.”
She hid her smile. “Why would I say it to you? Y’all is plural. You’re singular.”
“Is it? That minor detail had escaped me.”
“That you’re singular?” She paused, aware that she was trespassing into his private life and that he might well shut down as he had that afternoon. “Have you ever been married?”
He sipped his wine again, and his eyes glittered at her over the rim of the glass. “No,” he replied easily. “I was engaged once, when I was in college, but we both realized in time that getting married—particularly to each other—would have been a stupid thing to do.”
“How old are you?”
“Thirty-six. To satisfy any other pertinent questions you may have, my sexual interest is exclusively in women. I’ve never done drugs, and I don’t have any communicable diseases. My parents are dead, but I have a sister, Madelyn, who lives in Montana with her husband and two sons. There are a few distant cousins, but we don’t keep in touch.”
She regarded him calmly. He was totally relaxed, telling her that he didn’t regard those details of his life as being particularly revealing. They were simply facts. She listened, though, because such minutiae made up the skeleton of his life. “Becky and I have relatives scattered all over the state,”

she said. “One of my uncles has a huge farm down around Montgomery, and every June we get together there for a family reunion. We aren’t a close family, but we’re friendly, and it’s a way to stay in touch. If it wasn’t for the reunion, Jason and Paige would never know Becky’s side of the family, only their father’s, so we make an effort to go every year.”
“Your parents are dead?” He knew they were, for that had been in the supplementary report he had received.
“Yes.” The golden glow in her eyes dimmed. “Becky is the only immediate family I have. When Mom died, I lived with
Becky and Paul until Matt and I married.” Her voice faltered, just a little, at the end.
“What about afterward?” he asked gently.
“Then I lived with Matt’s parents.” The words were soft, almost soundless. “Where I live now. It was their house. The marina was theirs, too. Matt was their only child, and when they died, they left everything to me.”
Robert was pierced by another arrow of jealousy. She was still living in the house where Matt had grown up; there was no way she could walk into that house without being reminded of him at every turn. “Have you ever thought of moving? Of buying a more modern house?”
She shook her head. “Home is important to me. I lost my home when Mom died, and though Becky and Paul made me welcome, I was always aware that it was their home and not mine. Matt and I were going to live in a trailer, at first, but after he died I couldn’t… Anyway, his parents asked me to live with them, and they needed me as much as I needed company. Maybe because they needed me, I felt comfortable there, more like it really was my own home. And now,” she said simply, “it is.”
He regarded her thoughtfully. He had never felt that sort of attachment for a place, never felt the tug of roots. There had been a large country estate in Connecticut, when he was growing up, but it had simply been the place where he lived. Now his penthouse served the same emotionless function. Evie wouldn’t like it, though it was spacious and impeccably decorated. Still, he was comfortable there, and the security was excellent.
The restaurant featured a live band, and they were really very good. In keeping with the image of the place, they played old standards, meant for real dancing rather than solitary gyrations. He held out his hand to Evie. “Would you like to dance?”

A glowing smile touched her face as she placed her hand in his, but then she hesitated, and a look of uncertainty replaced the pleasure. “It’s been so long,” she said honestly, “that I don’t know if I can.”
“Trust me,” he said, soothing her worries. “I won’t let you come to grief. It’s like riding a bicycle.”
She went into his arms. She was stiff at first, but after several turns she relaxed and let the pleasure of the music and the movement sweep through her. Robert was an expert dancer, but then, she hadn’t expected anything else. He held her closely enough that she felt secure, but not so close as to touch intimately. More of those exquisite manners, she thought.
As the music continued, she realized that he didn’t have to be blatant. Dancing was its own seduction. There was the tender way he clasped her hand, the warm firmness of his other hand on her back. His breath brushed her hair; the clean scent of his skin teased her nostrils. This close, she could see the closely shaven stubble of his beard, dark against his olive skin. Occasionally her breasts brushed against his chest or arm, or their thighs slid together. It was stylized, unconsummated lovemaking, and she wasn’t immune to it.
They left at midnight. During the forty-minute drive back to Guntersville, Evie sat silently beside him as he competently handled the black Renegade. They didn’t speak until he pulled into her driveway and turned off the ignition, flooding the sudden darkness with silence. As their eyes adjusted, they could see the river stretching, soundless and glistening, behind her house.
“Tomorrow night?” he asked, turning toward her and draping one arm over the steering wheel.
She shook her head. “I can’t. I haven’t arranged for Craig to take over my shift, so he’ll open the marina in the morning as usual. I wouldn’t, anyway. That isn’t the deal we made.”
He sighed. “All right, we’ll compromise. How about swapping shifts with him once a week? Would that be acceptable to your strange scruples? He works for you, rather than the other way around, you know.”
“He’s also a friend, and he does a lot of favors for me. I won’t take advantage of him.” The coolness in her voice told him that he had offended her.
He got out and walked around to open the door for her. As he lifted her to the ground, he said with a touch of whimsy, “Will you *try* to make a little

time for me, anyway?”
“I’ll talk to Craig about it,” she replied noncommittally.
“Please.”
She extracted her house key from her purse, and Robert deftly lifted it out of her fingers. He unlocked the door, reached inside to turn on a light, then stepped back. “Thank you,” she said.
He delayed her with his hand on her arm as she started to go inside. “Good night, sweetheart,” he murmured, and placed his mouth over hers.
The kiss was slow and warm and relatively undemanding. He didn’t touch her, except for his hand on her arm and his lips moving over hers. Unconsciously she sighed with pleasure, opening her mouth to the warmth of his breath and the leisurely penetration of his tongue.
When he lifted his head, her breasts were tingling, her body was warm, and she was breathing faster than normal. It gratified her to notice that his breath, too, was a little rough. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. Then he kissed her again and walked back to the Jeep.
She closed the door, locked it and leaned against it until she heard the sound of the Jeep fade in the distance. Her chest felt tight, her heart swollen and tender. She wanted to weep, and she wanted to sing.
Instead, she kicked off her shoes and walked into the kitchen to get a drink of water. Her left foot landed solidly in something wet and cold, and she jumped in alarm. Quickly she turned on the kitchen light and stared in dismay at the puddle around the bottom of the refrigerator. Even more ominously, there was no faint humming sound coming from the appliance. She jerked the door open, but no little light came on. The ulterior remained dark.
“Oh no, not now,” she moaned. What a time for the refrigerator to die! She simply couldn’t afford to get it repaired now. She supposed she could buy a new one on credit, but she hated to add another payment to the monthly load. The refrigerator had been elderly, but why couldn’t it have lasted another year? By then she would have paid off a couple of debts and had more ready cash. Another six months would have made a difference.
There was nothing, however, that she could do about the refrigerator at nearly one in the morning. She was drooping with fatigue, but she mopped up the water and put down towels to catch any additional leaks.
When she finally got into bed, she couldn’t sleep. That part-time job she had thought about during the afternoon now looked like a necessity, rather

than an option. Her lower abdomen was dully aching. The evening with Robert, about which she had been so nervous, had turned out to be the best part of the day.

At seven o'clock she was on the phone to Becky. While Becky was calling around to her friends, Evie began systematically calling in response to every Refrigerator For Sale ad in the paper. As she had suspected, even at that early hour there were a number of calls that weren't answered. One, which had seemed the most promising, had sold the refrigerator as soon as the ad appeared.

By nine o'clock, she and Becky had located a good refrigerator for sale. At a hundred dollars, it was more than she could readily afford, but considerably less than a new one would cost. Becky came to get her, and they drove out together to look at it.

"It's ten years old, so it probably has another five to seven years," the woman said cheerfully as she showed them into the kitchen. "There isn't anything wrong with it, but we're building a new house, and I wanted a big side-by-side refrigerator. We were getting one, anyway, but last week I found just what I wanted, on sale at that, so I didn't wait. As soon as I get this one sold, I can have the new one delivered."

"It's sold," Evie said.

"How are you going to get it home?" asked Becky practically. "Until your truck is fixed, you don't have any way to haul it" Having stated the problem, she set about trying to solve it, running down the list of everyone she knew who owned a pickup truck and might be available.

Evie's own list was formidable. After all, she knew a lot of fishermen. Half an hour later, Sonny, a friend who worked second shift and had his mornings free, was on his way.

Time was running short for Evie by the time they got the refrigerator to her house. She called Craig to let him know what was going on and that she might be a few minutes late. "No sweat," was his easygoing reply.

Sonny hooked up the ice maker while Evie and Becky hurriedly transferred what food had survived from the old refrigerator into the new one. The frozen stuff was okay, and since she hadn't opened the door, most of the food in the other compartment was still cool and salvageable. She threw away the eggs and milk, just to be on the safe side.

"Do you want me to haul off the old one?" Sonny asked.

“No, you need to go to work. Let’s just push it out onto the deck, and I’ll take care of getting rid of it when I get my truck back. Thanks, Sonny. I don’t know what I’d have done without you today.”
“Anytime,” he said genially, and bent his muscles to the job of getting the old refrigerator outside.
After that was accomplished and Sonny had left, Becky grinned at her sister “I know you’re in a hurry to get to the marina, so I’ll call you tonight I can’t wait to hear all the juicy details about your evening with Robert.”
Evie blew a wisp of hair out of her face. “It was fine,” she said, smiling because she knew the answer would disappoint Becky. “I was worried for nothing. He was a perfect gentleman all night long.”
“Well, damn,” muttered her once-protective big sister.
With Murphy’s Law in full effect, when Evie arrived at the marina she found that the afternoon before had indeed brought Burt several repair jobs on boats that had to be done before he could get to her truck. Because the people who used the marina were her livelihood, she didn’t protest the delay. Financially, it would be better for her if even more repair jobs came in. Enough of them would pay for fixing her truck.
Craig met her at the dock, took one look at her and said, with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, “Boss, you need to stop all this carousing and get a good night’s sleep.”
“That bad, huh?”
“Not really. Dark circles are in this month.”
“If one more thing tears up,” she said direly, “I’m going to shoot it”
He put his brawny young arm around her shoulders. “Aw, everything will be okay. Chin up, boss. You’re just tired. If you want to take a nap, I’ll hang around for another couple of hours. I’ve got a date tonight, but I’m free this afternoon.”
She smiled at him, touched by his offer. “No, I’m fine. You go on home, and I’ll see about getting a morning job to help pay for all this stuff that’s going kablooey.”
“What stuff?” asked a deep voice behind them. She and Craig turned. A boat had been idling outside, and the noise had masked the sound of Robert’s arrival. Unlike her, he looked well rested. His expression didn’t give anything away, but she sensed that he didn’t like Craig putting his arm around her.

“My refrigerator died last night,” she replied. “I spent the morning locating a good used one and getting it home.”
That seemed to give him pause, for some reason. Then he gave her a considering look and said, “You didn’t get much sleep, did you?”
“A few hours. I’ll sleep like a log tonight, though.”
Craig said, “If you’re sure you don’t want me to stay for a while…?”
“I’m sure. I’ll see you tomorrow.”
“Okay.” He took off, whistling. Robert turned to watch him go, a tall, well-built boy who gave the promise of being an outstanding man.
“You don’t have any reason to be jealous of Craig,” Evie said coolly as she brushed by him, heading toward the office and the promise of air-conditioning.
Robert’s eyebrows climbed as he followed her. When they were inside, he murmured, “I don’t recall saying anything.”
“You didn’t, but it was plain what you were thinking.”
He was taken aback. God, her perception was expanding into mind reading. He didn’t like the feeling of transparency.
“I’ve known Craig since he was a child. There’s absolutely nothing sexual in our relationship.”
“Maybe not from your perspective,” he said calmly, “but I was a teenage boy once myself.”
“I don’t want to hear about raging hormones. If all you can do is criticize, then leave. I’m too tired to deal with it right now.”
“So you are.” He took her in his arms and tucked her head into the hollow of his shoulder. With one hand he stroked her sun-warmed hair, which was restricted into its usual braid. The night before, she had worn it in an elegant twist. One day soon—or rather, one night—he was going to see it down and spread across his pillow.
Gently he swayed, rocking her. The support of his hard, warm body was so delicious that Evie felt her eyes drifting shut. When she realized that she actually was dozing off, she forced herself to lift her head and step away.
“Enough of that or I’ll be asleep in your arms.”
“You’ll sleep there eventually,” he said. “But in different surroundings.”
Her heart gave a great thump. What he so effortlessly did to her simply wasn’t fair. Unbidden, she thought of the one night she had slept in Matt’s arms, the sweetness that had so shortly been overlaid with bitterness and

regret when his life had ended me next day. Sleeping with Robert wouldn't be anything like that long-ago night…

He saw the sadness darken her eyes again, and he felt like swearing savagely. Every time he thought he was making progress, he slammed into Matt Shaw's ghost, standing like an ethereal wall between Evie and any other man. As unlikely—as damned *ridiculous*—as it seemed, he couldn't doubt that she'd been entirely chaste during her widowhood. Her connection with Landon Mercer, whatever else it was, certainly wasn't physical.

Her relationship with *him*, on the other hand, certainly would be.

"Did you come by for any particular reason?" she asked.

"Just to see you for a moment. Would you like to get a quick bite to eat tonight before you go home?"

"I don't think so. I'm so tired I just want to go home and get some sleep."

"All right." Gently he touched her cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, then. Take care going across the lake tonight."

"I will. The days are so long, I'll be home before it gets dark."

"Take care, anyway." He leaned over and kissed her, then left.

As soon as he was out of her sight, his black brows pulled together in a frown. Last night's ploy hadn't worked all that well because of something he simply hadn't considered, and he was impatient with himself. He'd been born into money and had made even more, so the option of buying a second-hand refrigerator hadn't occurred to him. He had no idea what she'd paid for it, but he assumed that it was considerably less than a new one, even the cheapest model, would have cost. Though a little more financial pressure had been brought to bear on her, it hadn't been as much as he'd planned.

Mercer was beginning to find the financial waters a little choppy these days, too. It wasn't anything for him to worry about… yet. Soon he would find himself in a pinch with a growing need for ready cash. The next time he made a move, Robert would be ready for him. The net was slowly closing. He estimated another two weeks, three at the most. He could make things move faster, but he was oddly reluctant to bring everything to a close just yet. If Mercer tried to make another sale, of course he would have to act, but until then, he intended to use the time to complete Evie's seduction. That was, if he could keep her mind off her dead husband. Robert's jealous fury was banked, but glowing hotly under the restraint. It was ironic that he,

of all people, should be jealous. It wasn't an emotion that he'd ever felt before, and he'd been coolly contemptuous of those who allowed someone to become that important to them. But he had never wanted a woman so violently, nor found himself up against such a formidable rival. That, too, was a new experience for him. If a woman had been interested in another man, he had simply moved on, on the theory that battling for her affections was too much trouble and complicated what was, for him, a fairly simple issue.

But then he'd met Evangeline. Her name whispered through his mind, as musical and elegant as the wind sighing in the trees. Evangeline. A poetic name, associated with undying love.

He couldn't accept that she was Matt Shaw's forever, that he might never have her.

Damn it, what was this appeal that teenage boys had for her? He had wanted to punch Craig in the jaw for daring to touch her, but his own sense of fair play had restrained him. Craig looked to be as strong as a young ox, but Robert knew his own capabilities. He could easily have killed the boy without meaning to.

Because Matt had died so young, was Evie's taste forever frozen at that age? The idea was distasteful. He was disgusted with himself for even thinking it. He had no basis for the ugly speculation; he knew very well that there was nothing sexual between Evie and Craig. It was his own jealousy that had spurred the thought.

He had to have her. Soon.

Chapter Eleven

Evie slept soundly for ten hours that night, from nine until seven the following morning. She woke feeling much better, though she was groggy from sleeping so hard. She stumbled through the house toward the kitchen, keeping her fingers crossed that nothing else had gone on the fritz during the night, especially the coffee-maker. Everything seemed to be in working order, though, so she put on a pot of coffee and headed back toward the bathroom while it was brewing.

Fifteen minutes later, semidressed and with hair and teeth brushed, she was contentedly curled in a chair on the deck, sipping her first cup of coffee.

She closed her eyes as the morning sun bathed her with soothing heat. It was a perfect morning, clear and still and fragrant. The birds were singing madly, and the temperature was still comfortable, probably in the high seventies.

She heard tires singing on the road, the particular note that meant four-wheel drive, and a few seconds later Robert pulled into her driveway. Though she couldn't see either the driveway or the road from the deck, and though she knew any number of people who had four-wheel-drive vehicles, she had no doubt of her visitor's identity. Her blood had started moving faster, her skin tingled, and a subtle heat that had nothing to do with either the sun or the coffee had begun spreading through her body.

How many women had loved him? Instinct told her that she was far from the first Poor creatures. They, like her, had been unable to resist that gentle, ruthless charm. She knew just as certainly that he had never loved any of them in return.

Through the open patio door she heard the knock at the front "Robert?" she called. "I'm on the deck."

His footsteps in the grass were silent as he walked around, but in fifteen seconds he was coming up the three shallow steps onto the deck. He stopped, his eyes kindling as he stared at her.

Surprised, she curled a little tighter in the chair. "What have I done now?"

His expression relaxed as he moved to take the chair beside her. "You mistake the matter. That was lust, not anger."

"Ah." She used the cup to hide her face as she took another sip. "That should tell you something."

"Should it?"

"That I see anger from you more often than I do lust." Her heart was pounding even harder. My God, she was *flirting.* She was stunned by the realization. She had never in her life engaged in suggestive banter with a man, especially not to discuss his lust for her. She didn't think she had ever even flirted with Matt; somehow things had always seemed settled between them, and they hadn't gone through that dizzying, intense stage of courtship before commitment. They had grown up committed to each other.

"Again you mistake the matter," Robert said idly.

"In what way?"

"The lust is always there, Evangeline."

The quiet, almost casual, statement left her breathless. This time she took refuge in good manners, unwinding her legs to stand up as she said, “Would you like a cup of coffee?”
“I’ll get it,” he said, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. His touch lingered, his fingertips lightly caressing the curve of the joint “You look as contented as a cat. Just tell me where the cups are.”
“In the cabinet directly over the coffeemaker. I don’t have any cream, only skim milk—”
“It doesn’t matter. I drink it black, like you. While I’m in there, would you like a refill?”
Silently she handed him her cup, and he disappeared into the house.
As Robert got a cup from the cabinet, he noticed that his hand was shaking slightly. He was both amused and amazed at the force of his reaction to her, though he had gotten used to being at least semi-aroused whenever he was in her company. But when he had first seen her this morning… well, he had wanted to see her with her hair down, and now he had gotten his wish.
He just hadn’t expected the potency of his response, hadn’t expected that thick, tawny-gold, streaky mantle flowing halfway down her back, the sunlight glinting along the strands like precious metal. Only the ends curled, frothing in delight at having been released from the confines of her habitual braid. One lock hung over her shoulder and breast, the curl wrapping around her nipple as perfectly as if it had been created to do just that. It had taken only a glance for him to tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra under the pale peach camisole top with the tiny tucks down the front that she probably thought disguised her braless state.
He should have become accustomed by now to the luminosity of her skin. He hadn’t. Every time he saw her anew, he was struck by the way she seemed to glow. This morning the effect had been particularly acute. She had been curled in the chair like a cat, sleepy and slightly tousled, her shapely legs and delicate feet bare, the bright sunlight somehow lighting her from within.
He wanted to pick her up and carry her back into the dim coolness of her bedroom, strip her naked and sate himself on the golden pearl of her flesh. But he remembered, with an unpleasant jolt, that this was the house where Matt had grown up. He didn’t want to take her here, where the memories of the boy abounded.
“Robert?” Her tone was questioning at his long delay.

“I’m just reading your coffee cups,” he called back, and heard her chuckle in reply.
He chose the cup that said, “I’m forty-nine percent sweet. It’s the other fifty-one percent you have to worry about,” and poured coffee into it, then refilled her cup. He carried both of them out onto the deck and carefully gave hers to her, not wanting even a drop of the hot liquid to spill on her bare legs.
“That’s quite a collection of cups.”
“Isn’t it? Jason and Paige are the culprits. Every birthday, every Christmas, they give me a cup as a gag gift. It’s become tradition. They put so much time and effort into picking the cup that it’s gotten to where unwrapping it is the highlight of the occasion. They don’t let Becky or Paul see it beforehand, so it’s always a surprise to them, too.”
“Some of them are rather suggestive.”
She grinned. “Paige’s doing. She’s an expert at finding them.”
He raised his eyebrows. “That delicate, innocent child?”
“That precocious, inventive child. Don’t let the shyness fool you.”
“She didn’t seem shy to me. She started talking to me right away when I first met her.”
“Blame your own charm. She isn’t that open with most people. But considering the way Sherry’s baby took to you,” she said judiciously, “it seems that little girls have an affinity for you.”
“That’s all well and good,” he replied, watching her calmly over the rim of his cup, “but what about the grown-up ones?”
“I’ll bring you a big stick tomorrow so you can keep them beat off.” Very calmly he leaned over to place his cup on the deck, then took her cup from her hand and put it beside his. She eyed him warily. “What are you doing?”
“This.” With one swift, deft movement, he scooped her out of her chair, and settled down in his again with her on his lap. She sat stunned, stiffly erect, her eyes big with surprise. He retrieved her cup and placed it in her hands, then shifted her so she was off balance and had to relax against his chest.
“Robert,” she said in a weak protest.
“Evangeline.” His voice lingered over the long *i*.
She couldn’t think of anything else to say. She sat there wrapped by his strength, his warmth, his scent. She could feel the steady thumping of his heart. She had known that he was tall, but even now, with her sitting on his

lap, her head wasn’t as high as his. She felt physically overwhelmed and remarkably safe. Not from him, but from the rest of the world.
His thighs were hard under her, and something else was, too.
“Finish your coffee,” he said, and unthinkingly she raised the cup to her lips.
They sat there in peaceful silence as the heat grew and the traffic on the river increased. When their cups were empty, he set them aside, then caught her face in his hand and turned it up for his slow, deep kiss.
Like a flower turning toward the sun, she shifted toward him, fitting herself more firmly against him. The taste of coffee was in his mouth and hers. His tongue gently explored, and she trembled, her arms lifting to encircle his neck. How long he drank from her mouth she didn’t know; time was measured only by the heavy pulse of her blood, throbbing through every inch of her body.
His hand brushed across her breast, pushing her hair aside, then returned to firmly cup the soft mound. Evie stiffened slightly, but he soothed her with a deep murmur, not really a word, only a calming sound. He had had his hands and his mouth on her breasts before, but he could sense that she was still uncertain about allowing the caress. He petted her, gently circling her nipples with one fingertip until they stood temptingly erect, stroking the lush curves with tender care. He wanted her to relax, but instead the tension in her changed, became more finely charged, and he knew that he was arousing her instead.
Deliberately he unbuttoned the first three buttons of the camisole and slid his hand inside. With a sharply indrawn breath, she turned her face into his neck, but she didn’t say the one word that would stop him. Her satiny flesh was cool to his touch, the small nipples puckered and tight. He played with them, rubbing them between his fingers, lightly pinching as he watched her with acute attention to learn exactly what she liked. Slowly her breasts grew warm from his touch, the paleness taking on a pinkish glow.
Evie held herself very still, barely breathing, her eyes closed as she tried to deal with the delicate, exquisite pleasure sweeping through her. She knew she was playing with fire, but she couldn’t seem to make herself stop. What if he carried her inside? She would have to call a halt then, because she was still having her period, and she was neither sophisticated nor experienced enough to either let him proceed or tell him, without embarrassment, why he couldn’t.

“Shall I stop?” he asked, the sound very low.
She swallowed. “I think you should.” But she didn’t lift her face, and that wasn’t the agreed signal. He shifted her, lifted her, and the shocking heat of his mouth closed over the distended nipple of her exposed breast. She cried out, her nipple prickling at the sensation, and fire shot straight through to her loins.
Then, incredibly, his mouth left her body and he was sitting her up on his lap. “We have to stop,” he was saying with gentle regret. “I don’t think you’re ready to give me the go-ahead, and I don’t want to push my self-control much further.”
Evie bent her head, struggling with a mixture of relief and chagrin as she fumbled with her buttons, restoring her clothing to order. He was right, of course. She didn’t want their intimacy to go any further than it already had, though she intended to be prepared if it did.
She managed to smile at him as she scrambled out of his lap and bent down to get the coffee cups. “Thank you,” she said, and carried the cups inside.
Robert rubbed his hand over his eyes. God, that had been closer than he’d let on, at least for him. Would she have let him make love to her, after all? Somehow he didn’t think so; he could still sense reluctance in her. In a few more minutes she would have said no, and the way he felt now, the strain might well have killed him. Even if she had said yes, he didn’t want to make love to her in this house, so it was just as well he’d had the sense to stop.
They spent the morning together without a repeat of the scene on the deck. He’d already had enough frustration for one day, he decided. When it was time for her to cross the lake to work, he kissed her goodbye and left.
The wind blowing in her face helped clear Evie’s mind as she sped across the water. What did he do for most of the day? she wondered. He’d said that he was on vacation, but a person, especially a man like Robert, could take only so much relaxation.
To her relief, Burt had made real progress on the marina jobs and thought he would be able to get started on her truck that afternoon. The prospect of having a vehicle to drive home the next day made her cheerful. Perhaps the run of bad luck was over.
She called the local fast-food restaurants to ask about a part-time job in the mornings, but with school out for the summer, none of them needed any

help, all of the part-time jobs being filled by teenagers. Call again after school starts, she was told.

"Well, that was a dead end," she muttered to herself as she hung up from the last call. It looked as if the pendulum of luck hadn't swung back her way, after all.

On the other hand, she had the knack of existing on practically nothing when she had to. Over the next few days Evie cut operating expenses where she could and her personal expenses to the bone. She ate oatmeal or cold cereal for breakfast, and allowed herself one sandwich for lunch and one for supper. There were no snacks, no soft drinks, nothing extra. She turned off the air-conditioning at home, making do with the ceiling fans and drinking a lot of ice water. She was pragmatic enough that she didn't feel particularly deprived by these cost-cutting measures. It was simply something that had to be done, so she did it and didn't think much about it one way or the other.

For one thing, Robert occupied a great deal of her thoughts. If he didn't drop by the house in the morning, he came by the marina in the afternoon. He often kissed her, whenever they were alone, but he didn't pressure her for sex. The more he refrained, the more confused she became about whether she wanted to make love with him or not. She had never bemoaned her lack of practical experience before, but now she did; she needed every bit of help she could muster in handling her feelings for him. With every passing day she wanted him more physically, but caution kept warning her away from letting him become more important to her than he already was. She loved him, but somehow, if she didn't make love with him, some small part of her heart remained hers. If he claimed her body, he would claim all of her, and she would have no reserve to fall back on when the end came.

Still, she was acutely aware of how gradually and skillfully he was undermining her resolve. Every day she became more accustomed to his kisses, to the touch of those lean hands, until he had only to look at her and her breasts would tighten in anticipation. Frightened of the consequences if her willpower faltered, she began taking the birth-control pills on schedule, and as she did so, she wondered if she wasn't actually weakening her own position, for knowing that she was protected might make her less inclined to say no. She was well and truly caught on the horns of that particular dilemma, afraid not to take the pills and afraid of what would happen if she did. In the end, the deciding factor had been that she would rather gamble with her own well-being than that of a helpless baby.

When the next weekend came, Robert once again asked her to swap shifts with Craig so they could have an evening out. Remembering with pleasure the first time she'd had dinner with him, and the dancing afterward, she quickly agreed.

When he picked her up the next night, a slow fire lit the green of his eyes as he looked her up and down. Evie felt a very female gratification at his response. She knew she was looking particularly good, her hair and makeup just as she had wanted, and her dress was very flattering. It was the only cocktail dress she owned, purchased three years before, when the chamber of commerce had organized a party for the local businessmen and women to meet some manufacturing representatives who were thinking about locating in Guntersville.

The deal had fallen through, but the cocktail dress was still smashing. It was teal green, a shade that did wonders for her complexion. There was a full, flirty skirt that swirled just above her knees, a sweetheart bodice supported by thin straps, and it was very low-cut in the back. She had pinned up her hair in a loose twist, with several tendrils left around her ears. Simple gold hoop earrings and her wedding band were the only jewelry she wore, but she had never liked a lot of jewelry weighing her down, so she was satisfied.

Robert was wearing an impeccable black suit with a snowy white silk shirt, but with the heat so oppressive, she wondered how he could stand it. Not that he looked hot; on the contrary, he was as cool and imperturbable as ever, except for the expression hi his eyes.

"You're lovely," he said, touching her cheek and watching her bloom at the compliment.

"Thank you." She accepted his verbal appreciation with serene dignity as he drew her outside and locked the door behind them.

He helped her into the Jeep, and as he got in on the other side he said, "I think you'll like the club we're going go. It's quiet, has good food and a wonderful patio for dancing."

"Is it in Huntsville?"

"No, it's here. It's a private club."

She didn't ask how, if it were private, he had managed to get reservations for them. Robert didn't make a show of being wealthy and influential, but he obviously was, given the quality of his clothing, the things he'd bought.

Any local bigwig worth his salt would be more than willing to extend an invitation for Robert to join his club.
There was no place in Guntersville that couldn't be gotten to rather quickly. Robert turned the Jeep off of the highway onto a small private road that wound toward the river and soon was parking in a paved lot. The club was a sprawling one-story cedar-and-rock affair, with manicured grounds and a soothing atmosphere. She had seen it before only from the water which glistened just beyond the club. It was only seven-thirty, still daylight, but already the parking lot was crowded.
Robert's hand was firm and very warm on Evie's bare back as he ushered her inside, where they were met by a smiling, very correct maitre d'. They were seated in a small horseshoe booth, upholstered in buttery soft leather. They ordered their meals, and Robert requested champagne. Evie didn't know anything about wines, period, but his choice brought a spark to the waiter's eyes.
The only time she had tasted champagne had been at her wedding, and that had been an inexpensive brand. The pale gold wine that Robert poured into her glass had nothing in common with that long-ago liquid except its wetness. The taste was dry and delicious, the bubbles dancing in her mouth and exploding with flavor. She was careful to only sip it, not knowing what effect it would have on her.
As before, the evening was wonderful, so wonderful that it was half-over before Evie realized that Robert was herding her toward some swiftly nearing conclusion as implacably as a stallion herded the mare he had chosen to breed, keeping after her, blocking all retreat, until she was cornered. Robert was unfailingly gentle and courteous, but nevertheless relentless. She could see it in those pale eyes, in which a fire smoldered. He intended to have her before the evening was finished.
It was evident in the way he touched her almost constantly, small touches that looked casual but were not. They were seductive touches, light caresses that both gentled her and accustomed her to his hand on her body, while at the same time patiently beginning the process of arousing her.
When they danced, his fingertips moved over her bare back, leaving a trail of heat behind and making her shiver in response. His body moved against hers in rhythm with the music, with her heartbeat, until it seemed as if the music flowed through her. And when they returned to their booth, he was close beside her. Several times she shifted uncomfortably, putting more

distance between them, but he was inexorable; he would move closer, so that she could feel the heat of his body, smell the faint, spicy scent of his cologne and the muskiness of his skin. He would lightly stroke her arm, or trace the line of her jaw with one long finger, or rub his thumb over the curve of her collarbone. His leg would slide along hers, and then she would feel the hard curve of his arm behind her back, the firm clasp of his hand at her waist. With every move he made her more aware of him and at the same time broadcast his possession of her to any male in the vicinity who might be thinking of poaching.

Evie was both alarmed and excited, and therefore couldn't get her thoughts in order. She managed to retain an outward calm, but inside she was quietly panicking. Robert had always presented the image of an urbane, eminently civilized man, but from the beginning she had seen beneath the cosmopolitan surface to a far more primitive man, a man of swift and ruthless passion. Now she saw that she had underestimated that volatile streak. He meant to take her to bed with him that very night, and she didn't know if she could stop him.

She didn't even know if she *wanted* to stop him. Was it the champagne, or the fever of desire he had been expertly feeding, not just tonight, but from the moment he'd first kissed her? Her usually clear thought processes kept getting tangled by the slowly increasing heat and hunger of her own body. She tried to think why she should say no, why he was so dangerous for her, but all she could bring to mind was his mouth on her breasts, the way it felt when he touched her.

Physically… oh God, physically he had destroyed all the years of control, of peaceful solitude. She had wanted no man since Matt—until Robert—and she had never wanted Matt this much. Matt had died on the verge of manhood and was forever frozen in her memory as a laughing, wonderful boy. Robert was a man, in the purest sense of the word. He knew the power of the flesh. He knew that, in the taking of her body, he would also be forging a claim, a possession as old as time. His experience far exceeded hers, and he wanted all of her. She would never be able to hold herself, her inner self, inviolate against his taking. A small voice in her cried out in abject fear, and she struggled toward control.

But he seemed to sense whenever that clear inner voice would gather itself, whenever she would panic as she realized anew what he was doing, and with a warm, lingering touch and the brush of his hard body against her soft

curves, he would fan the flames of physical desire to overcome the voice of sanity. He was too good at seduction; even though she recognized it, she couldn't stop it. She had the bitter realization that he could have had her any time he'd wanted, that her will was proving no match for his expertise. He had held back only for some reason of his own, and now he had decided that he wasn't waiting any longer.

He asked her to dance again, and helplessly she went into his arms. She felt too warm, her skin too sensitive. She could feel the fabric of her dress sliding over her body, rasping her nipples, caressing her belly and thighs. Whenever he touched her, her entire body seemed to clench. They moved across the dance floor on the patio, and he held her close while his powerful legs slid against hers, sometimes thrusting his thigh between hers, and she began to throb with a hollow ache between her legs. In the distance, heat flashes lit the sky over the mountains with flickers of purple and gold. There was a sullen rumble of thunder, and the air was humid and still, waiting.

She felt weak, physically weak. She hadn't known that desire robbed the muscles of power. She melted against him, flowed against him, until she felt as if only his arm around her was holding her up.

He brushed his hard mouth over the fragile skin at her temple, his warm breath stirring her hair, touching her ear. "Shall we go home?"

A last, small vestige of caution cried, "No!" but she was so caught in his sensual web that she could only nod her head, and the cry remained unvoiced. She leaned against him as he walked her out to the Jeep.

Not even on the way home did he ease the relentless pressure. After he had shifted gears, he put his right hand on her thigh, sliding it up under her skirt, and the heat of his palm on her naked flesh almost made her moan aloud. She didn't even realize where he was taking her until he parked in front of his house, rather than hers.

"This isn't—" she blurted.

"No," he said quietly. "It isn't. Come inside, Evie."

She could say no. Even now, she could say no. She could insist that he take her home. But even if she did, she suspected, the outcome would be the same. All she would be changing was the location.

He held out his hand. The intent behind it was ruthless. She could feel the heavy arousal and hunger that tightened his lean, powerful frame. He was going to take her.

She put her hand in his.
Even though she sensed his savage satisfaction at her tacit surrender, he remained gentle. If he had not, perhaps her common sense would have won after all. But he was too experienced to make that mistake, and she found herself standing in his moonlit bedroom with his big bed looming behind her. She looked out the French doors to the lake, a black mirror reflecting the cool, pale moon. Another low rumble of thunder reached her ears, and she knew that the heat flashes were continuing, bright bursts of light that teased with their promise of rain but never delivered.
Robert put his hands on her waist and turned her to him. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs as he bent his head and his mouth claimed hers. His kisses were slow, so slow, and devastatingly thorough. His tongue probed, and his mouth drank deeply from hers as his hands leisurely moved over her body, unzipping, loosening, removing. The bodice of her dress fell to her waist, and beyond. He paused a moment to caress her smooth back, the inward curve of her waist; then he gently removed the dress and tossed it aside.
She stood before him wearing only high heels and panties. He caught her to him for more kisses, his tongue stroking deeply within. His hands moved over her breasts, molding them under his lean fingers. Desperately Evie clung to his broad, muscled shoulders, trying to steady her spinning senses. His silk shirt slid across her tightly budded nipples, making her whimper. He murmured soothingly as he unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of it, dropping it, too, to the floor. Then her naked breasts were pressed full against his bare chest, nestled into the curly black hair, and she heard herself make a low, hungry sound.
“Easy, darling,” he whispered. He kicked out of his shoes and unfastened his pants, letting them drop. His thick sex extended the front of his short, snug boxers. She arched against him, blindly thrusting her pelvis forward to nestle that rigid length. His breath hissed inward, and his control cracked. Fiercely he crushed her to him, his arms tightening until pain made her cry out, the sound stifled against his shoulder.
He lowered her to the bed, the sheets cool against her heated flesh. In a swift movement he divested himself of his shorts. Evie’s eyes flared as she saw him totally naked, aroused, the muscles in his body taut with desire and the strain of control. His leanness was dangerously deceptive, for it was all steely muscle, the graceful strength of a panther rather than the bulk of a

lion. He lowered himself beside her, one arm cradling her head, while his other hand efficiently removed her shoes and panties. Her total nudity was suddenly startling; she made a brief movement to cover herself, a movement that he halted by catching her wrists and pinning them on each side of her head. Then, very deliberately, he mounted her.

Evie couldn't catch her breath. He was heavier, much heavier, than she had imagined. The sensations were alarming, jarring through her consciousness, coming too swiftly on waves of pleasure that both panicked and beguiled. She was violently aware of his muscled thighs pushing between hers, holding them apart, of his furry, ridged abdomen rubbing against her much softer belly, of the hard press of his chest on her breasts. Between her legs, on her bare loins, she could feel the insistent push of his naked sex against her. Her own sex felt swollen and hot, throbbing in rhythm to her own heartbeat.

He loomed over her in the darkness, much bigger, much stronger. The moonlight was sufficient for her to see the pale gutter of his eyes, the hard planes of his face. His expression was stamped with savage male triumph. Then he released her wrists and cupped her jaw in one hard, hot hand, turning her face up to him. He held her for the deep thrust of his tongue, the blatant domination of his mouth. Helplessly she responded, caught in the heated madness.

He suckled her breasts, lingering over them and making her writhe with pleasure, and all the while she could feel that hard length impatiently nudging her softest flesh.

The moment came too soon, and not fast enough. He braced himself over her on one arm and reached between their bodies with the other. She felt his lean fingers on her sex, gently parting the folds, finding and stroking her soft, wet entrance. Her hips strained instinctively upward. Her entire body was throbbing. "Robert," she whispered. The single word was taut with strain.

He guided his rigid shaft to her, leaning over and into her as he tightened his buttocks and increased the pressure against the tender opening, forcing it to widen and admit him.

Evie stiffened, her breath quickening. The pressure swiftly became burning pain, real pain. He rocked against her, forcing himself fractionally deeper with every controlled thrust. Her fists knotted the sheet beneath her. She

turned her head away, closing her eyes against the hot tears that seeped out beneath her lashes.

He froze as realization hit him.

He turned her head so that she faced him. Her eyes flew open, brilliant with tears in the silver moonlight, and then she couldn't look away. His chest was heaving with the force of his breathing, the sound loud in the quiet, still bedroom. There was nothing of the urbane sophisticate in the man who leaned over her, his face hard with desire. For a split second she saw straight into his soul, into the frighteningly intense, primitive core of him. He held her, forced her to look at him, and with a guttural, explosive sound of control breaking, thrust hard into the depths of her silky body, forcing his way past the barrier of her virginity. She cried out, her body arching under the deep lash of pain. Beyond the pain was the stunning shock of invasion, worse than she had imagined, her delicate inner tissues shivering as they tried to adjust to and accommodate the hard bulk of the intruder.

A rough, deep growl sounded in his throat as he gripped her hips, pulling her more tightly into his possession.

He rode her hard, thrusting heavily, his hips hammering and recoiling as he imprinted his physical brand on her flesh. He had never before been less than gentle with a woman, but with Evie he was ferocious in his need. He couldn't be gentle, not with his head and heart reeling, his entire body exploding with savage pleasure. She was hot and tight, silky, wet… and his. No one else's. Ever. *His.*

He shuddered, gasping, convulsing, and she felt the hot wash of his seed deep inside her. Then he slowly collapsed, shaking in every muscle, blindly groping for support. His heavy weight settled over her, pressing her into the mattress.

Dazed, Evie lay beneath him. She felt shattered, unable to form a coherent thought.

And then she found that it wasn't over.

Chapter Twelve

Slowly Robert surfaced from the depths of pure physical sensation, his mind sluggishly beginning to function once more. The power of what he had experienced left him shaken, with a sense of being outside himself, not quite connected. He was intensely aware of his own body in a way he never had been before. He could feel the warmth of his blood pumping through his veins with the heavy, slowly calming beats of his heart. He could feel the harsh bellowing of his lungs decreasing to a more normal pace, feel the intense sexual satisfaction relaxing his muscles, feel the hot, delicious clasp of Evie's body as he remained firmly inside her, satisfied but not yet sated. She was naked beneath him, just the way he had wanted.

Then, with an abrupt shift, the sluggishness was gone from his brain and reality settled in with ruthless clarity. Robert tensed, appalled at himself. He had lost control, something that had never happened before. Gentleness on his part had never been more needed, and instead he had taken her like a marauder, intent only on his own pleasure, on the conquest and possession of her silky flesh.

She lay motionless beneath him, holding herself in a sort of desperate stillness, as if to avoid attracting his attention again. His heart squeezed painfully. Robert shoved aside the matter of her virginity—he would know the answer to that puzzle later—and concentrated instead on the task of reassuring her. His mind was racing. If he let her escape him now, he would have a hell of a time getting anywhere near her again, and he couldn't blame her for being wary. Wary, hell. She would probably be downright scared, and with good reason.

He had shown her the relentless drive of passion but none of the pleasure. She had known nothing but pain, and the scale was dangerously tilted; unless he could balance the pain with pleasure, he was afraid he would lose her. It was the first time Robert had felt that sort of fear, but a sensation of panic seized him and mixed with his determination. A part of his brain remained blindingly clear. He knew exactly how to bring a woman to climax in a variety of ways: fast or slow, using his mouth or hands or body. He could gently take her to ecstasy with his mouth, and that way would perhaps be the kindest, but his instinct rejected it. He had to do it fast, before she recovered enough to begin fighting—God, he couldn't bear that—and he had to do it the same way that had caused her the pain to begin

with. He wanted her to find pleasure in his body rather than dread the thrust that brought their flesh together.

He was still hard, and once more he began moving, slowly, within her. She tensed, and her hands flattened against his chest as if she would try to shove him off. “No,” he said harshly, forestalling her resistance. “I won’t stop. I know I’m hurting you now, but before I’m finished I’m going to make you like having me inside you.”

She stared up at him, her eyes darkened with distress. But she didn’t say anything, and he gathered her close, adjusting their positions so she would have the maximum sensation. He could feel her thighs quivering alongside his hips.

He took a deep breath and gentled his voice, wanting to reassure her. “I can make it good for you,” he promised, brushing her soft mouth with kisses and feeling it tremble beneath his. “Will you trust me, Evangeline? Will you?”

Still she didn’t say anything, hadn’t spoken a word since whispering his name at the beginning. Robert hesitated for half a heartbeat, then lifted her hands and put them around his neck. After a moment her fingers shifted slightly to press against him, and relief shuddered through him at that small gesture of permission.

Evie closed her eyes again, gathering herself to once more endure this painful use of her body. At the moment, that was the limit of her capability; she couldn’t act, couldn’t think, could only endure. She wanted to curl herself into a protective ball and weep in shock and pain and disappointment, but she couldn’t do that, either. She was helpless, her body penetrated; she was dependent on his mercy, and he seemed to have none.

At first there was only more pain. But then, abruptly, the twisting thrust of his hips made her arch off the bed with something that wasn’t pain, but was just as sharp. There was no warning, no gradual lessening of pain and buildup of pleasure, only that jolt of sensation that made her cry out. He did it again, and with a strangled moan she discovered that her body was even less under her control than she had thought

She had been cold, but now she was suffused with heat, great waves of it, rolling up from her toes until she felt as if her entire body glowed. It concentrated between her legs, increasing with each inward thrust. Her hands slid from his neck to his shoulders, clinging now, her nails biting into the hard layer of muscle. He was gripping her buttocks, lifting her up to

meet him, moving her, rocking her subtly back and forth, and each tiny movement set off new explosions of pleasure within her. She had the sensation of being relentlessly driven up an internal mountain toward some point she couldn't see, but now she was straining to reach it. He pushed her further with each hard recoil of his hips until she was panting and desperate, sobbing as she arched tightly into him. And then he forced her over the edge, and Evie screamed as her senses shattered.

She shuddered and bucked, trying to meld into his flesh, as devastated by the paroxysms of pleasure as she had been by the pain that went before. Robert held himself still and deep, gritting his teeth, but the frantic milking of her internal muscles was more than he could stand, and with a groan he gave himself over, pulsing with release. Somehow he forced himself not to thrust, to let her take her pleasure and not intrude with his, and that only intensified the sensation. From a distance he heard himself groan again as he dissolved, collapsing heavily in her arms.

If Evie had been dazed before, she was even more so now. She lay limply beneath him, drifting in and out of a haze. The demands he'd made on her body, the roller-coaster succession of pain and shock and ecstasy, had left her with neither mind nor body functioning. Perhaps she dozed; she knew she dreamed, flickering images that faded too swiftly to grasp as she surfaced into foggy consciousness once more. She felt him separate himself from her, knew he was trying to be careful, but couldn't prevent a moan at the pain of his withdrawal. She didn't open her eyes as he paused, then murmured softly, a soothing sound that also held a note of apology, and completed the motion. She felt instantly bereft, cold in the air-conditioned darkness. She would have curled protectively on her side, but her limbs were too heavy. The next moment the dark fog closed about her again.

A light snapped on, blindingly bright against her eyelids. She flinched away from it, but he stilled her with a touch. The mattress shifted as he sat down beside her and firmly parted her thighs. Evie made a faint sound of protest and tried to struggle upward, but again the effort was too much.

"Shh," he whispered, a mere rustle of reassurance. "Let me make you more comfortable, sweetheart. You'll sleep better."

A cool wet cloth touched her between her legs. Deftly, tenderly, he cleaned away the evidence of their lovemaking, then dried her with a soft towel. Evie gave a soft sigh of pleasure. He returned the washcloth and towel to the bathroom, and when he came back to turn out the lamp and slide into

bed beside her, she was asleep. She didn't rouse even when he turned her into his arms, cradling her protectively against him.

Evie woke in the still, dark silence before dawn. The moon had long since set, and even the stars seemed to have given up their twinkling efforts. The darkness that pressed against the patio doors was more complete than at any other time of night, in the last moments before being dispelled by the first graying that heralded the approach of the sun. She was still sleepy, exhausted by the tumultuous night in Robert's arms. It was as if her body was no longer hers, the way he called forth and controlled her responses. He had seduced her past caring about fear, about pain, so that her body arched eagerly into his possessive thrusts.

Robert lay beside her, his breathing slow and deep. One arm was curled under her head, the other lay heavily across her waist His heat enveloped her, welcome in the cool night. The strangeness of his presence beside her made her breath catch.

She didn't want to think about the night that had just passed, or the things that had happened between them. She was too tired, too off balance, to handle the riot of impressions and thoughts that whirled in her brain, but she was also too tired to fend them off. She gave up the effort and instead tried to make sense of what she was feeling.

She had never thought that giving herself to the man she loved would prove so traumatic, but it had. The physical pain, oddly, was the least of it, the most understandable. She had known that, under his urbane manner, Robert had the soul of a conqueror. She had also known that he had been sexually frustrated from the time they'd met. It would have made her very uneasy if, under those circumstances, his control *hadn't* wavered. She hadn't expected such a complete collapse, but then, to be perfectly fair, he hadn't expected everything that had happened, either.

She should have told him that she was a virgin, she knew, but the telling would have required an explanation that she simply hadn't been able to give. Talking about Matt, reliving those brief hours of their marriage, was too painful. Her throat tightened with dread, knowing that Robert would demand that explanation soon. She had hoped—foolishly—that he wouldn't be able to tell, that her first time would provide no more than a momentary discomfort that she could easily disguise or ignore. She felt like weeping and laughing at the same time. Had she told him, that might well have been

the extent of her pain. As it was, she had paid dearly for keeping her secret, only to have it known, anyway.

The two most difficult things for her to deal with, however, were mingled grief and terror. She had known that sleeping with Robert would destroy her defenses, but she hadn't known how panicked she would feel, or that giving herself to him would call up such poignant memories of Matt. She couldn't distance herself from the grief; loving Matt, and losing him the way she had, had shaped her life and her soul. He had, in effect, made her into the woman she was now.

For twelve years she had been faithful to him, and his memory had wrapped around her like an invisible shield, protecting her. But now she had given herself irrevocably to another man, in both heart and body, and there was no going back. She loved Robert with an intensity that swelled in her chest and made her breath catch. For better or worse, *he* filled her life now. She would have to let Matt go, surrender his memory so that it became only a small, indelible part of her, rather than a bulwark between her and the world. It was like losing him twice.

"Goodbye, Matt," she whispered in her mind to the image of the laughing, dark-haired boy she carried there. "I loved you… but I'm his now, and I love him, too, so much." The image stilled, then nodded gravely, and she saw a smile, a blessing, move across the young face as it faded away.

She couldn't bear it. With a low, keening sound of grief she surged out of bed, awakening Robert. He shot out a hand to catch her, but she evaded it and stood in the middle of the floor, looking wildly around the dark bedroom, her fist pressed to her mouth to stop the sobs that pressed for release.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly, every muscle in his body tense and alert. "Come back to bed, sweetheart."

"I—I have to go home." She didn't want to turn on a light, feeling unable to bear his too-discerning gaze, not now, with her emotions stripped bare. But she needed to find her clothes, get dressed… There was a dark heap on the carpet, and she snatched it up, touch telling her that it was her dress. Oh God, her muscles protested every move she made, his lovemaking during the night echoing now in her flesh. A deep internal ache marked where he had been.

"Why?" His voice remained soft, compelling. "It's early yet. We have time."

Time for what? she wanted to ask, but she knew, anyway. If she got back into that bed, he would make love to her again. And again. Shaking with grief, caught in the transition between the old love and the new, she thought she would break into pieces if he touched her. She was irrevocably passing from one phase of her life into another, traumatic enough under any circumstances, but she had the sensation of leaving a secure fortress and plunging headlong into unknown danger. She needed to be alone to deal with what she was feeling, to get herself back.

"I have to go," she repeated in a ghostly voice, tight with suppressed tears.

He got out of bed, his naked body pale in the shadowy darkness. "All right," he said gently. "I'll take you home." She watched in bewilderment as he stripped the top sheet from the bed. His next movement was a blur, so swift that she couldn't tell what he was doing until it was too late. With two quick steps he was beside her. He swathed the sheet tightly around her, then lifted her in his arms. "Later," he added as he opened the patio doors and stepped outside with her.

The early morning was silent, as if all God's creatures were holding their breath, waiting for first light. Not even a cricket chirped. The water lapped at the bank with only a slight rustling sound, like silk petticoats. Robert sat down in one of the deck chairs and held her cradled on his lap, the sheet protecting her from the cool, damp air.

Evie tried to hold herself tight, all emotion contained. She managed for a few minutes. Robert simply held her, not saying anything, looking out over the dark water as if he, too, were waiting for the dawn. It was his silence that defeated her; if he had talked, she could have concentrated on her replies. Faced with nothing but her own thoughts, she lost the battle.

She turned her face into his neck as hot tears ran down her cheeks and her body shook with sobs.

He didn't try to hush her, didn't try to talk to her, simply held her more closely to him and gave her the comfort of his body. It was, despite her chaotic emotions, a considerable comfort. The bonds of the flesh that he had forged during the night were fresh and strong, her senses so attuned to him that it was as if his breath were hers, her jerky inhalations gradually slowing and taking on the steady rhythm of his.

When she had calmed, he used a comer of the sheet to dry her face. He didn't bother to wipe her tears from his neck.

Exhausted, empty of emotion, her eyes burning and grainy feeling, she stared out at the lake. In a tree close by, a bird gave a tentative chirp, and as if that were a signal, in the next moment hundreds of birds began singing madly, delirious with joy at the new day. In the time while she had wept, the morning had grown perceptibly lighter, the darkness fading to a dim gray that gave new mystery to details that had been hidden before. That dark hump out in the water—was that a stump, a rock or a magical sea creature that would vanish with the light?

Robert was very warm, the heat of his powerful, naked body seeping through the sheet in animal comfort. She felt the steely columns of his thighs beneath her, the solid support of his chest, the secure grasp of his arms. She rested her head against that wide, smoothly muscled shoulder and felt as if she had come home.

"I love you," she said quietly.

Foolish of her to admit it; how many other women had told him the same thing, especially after a night in his arms? It must be nothing new to him. But what would she gain by holding it back? It would allow a pretense, when he left, that he had been nothing more than a summer affair, but she couldn't fool herself with a sop to her pride. Probably she couldn't even fool him, though he would be gentleman enough to allow her the pretense. All the same, she was glad of his self-possession. He didn't parrot the words back to her; she would have known he was lying, and she would have hated that. Nor did he act uncomfortable or nervous. He merely gave her a searching look and asked in a level tone, "Then why the tears?"

Evie sighed and returned to staring at the water. He was due some explanation, would probably insist on one, but even though she loved him, she simply couldn't strip her soul bare and blurt out everything. She had a deeply private core, and even if she remained Robert's lover for years, there would be some things she wouldn't be able to tell him, memories that brought up too much pain.

"Evie." It wasn't a prompt but a gentle, implacable demand.

Sadness haunted her eyes and trembled around her mouth. She was very familiar with it, had walked with it for twelve years, gone to bed with it at night, awakened with it on countless mornings. Sadness and a deep loneliness that neither friends nor family had been able to dispel had been her constant, invisible companions. But Robert wanted an answer. A man

who had held a woman through such a bout of bitter weeping should at least know the reason for her tears.
“I realized,” she finally said in a low, shaking voice, “that Matt is truly gone now.”
Cradled against him as she was, she felt the way his muscled body tightened. His words, however, were still controlled. “He’s been gone for a long time.”
“Yes, he has.” Only she knew exactly how long those twelve years had been. “But until last night, I was still his wife.”
“No,” he said flatly. “You weren’t.” He put one finger under her chin and tilted it up, forcing her to look at him. It was light enough now for her to see those pale eyes glittering. “You were never his wife. You never slept with him. I hope you aren’t going to try to pretend you weren’t a virgin, because I’m *not* a fool, and the stain on the sheet isn’t because you’re having your period.”
Evie flinched. “No,” she whispered. God, it was eerie how he had gone straight to the secret she had kept for so long.
“You married him,” he continued relentlessly. “How is it that I’m the only man who’s ever had you?”
Sadness still darkened her eyes, but she said, “I had a June wedding,” and a wealth of grief and irony lay in those brief words.
He didn’t understand, but he lifted his dark brows, inviting her to continue.
“It’s impossible to book a church for a wedding in June unless you do it about a year in advance,” she explained. “Matt and I picked the day when we were still juniors in high school. But there’s no way to do any personal planning that far ahead of time.” Evie turned her head away from him once more, toward her private solace, the water. “It was a beautiful wedding. The weather was perfect, the decorations were perfect, the cake was perfect. Everything went off without a hitch. And my period started that morning.”
Robert was silent, still waiting. Evie swallowed, aching inside as she looked back at the innocent girl she had been. “I was so embarrassed that night, when I had to tell Matt that we couldn’t make love. We were both miserable.”
“Why didn’t you—” he began, but then stopped as he realized that two teenagers wouldn’t have the ease and experience of two adults.
“Exactly,” Evie said, as if he had put his thoughts into words. “We had never made love, obviously. Matt didn’t have any more experience than I

did. What experience we had, we'd gotten together, but we'd both wanted to wait until after we were married. So there we were, two eighteen-year-olds on our wedding night, and all we could do was neck and hold hands. Matt was so miserable that we didn't even do much of that.

"But he was basically such a cheerful person that nothing depressed him for long. He was making jokes about it the next morning, making me laugh, but we both agreed that it was something we'd *never* tell our kids when we got old." Her voice wavered and faded until it was almost soundless. "He died that day."

Gently Robert pushed a strand of hair away from her face. So she had never made love with her young husband, but for over a decade had kept herself untouched for him. With an acuteness of insight that often made people uncomfortable, he saw exactly how it had been. Traumatized by Matt's death, she had doubly mourned the fact that they had never been able to make love and had sealed herself off from other men. If her first time couldn't be with Matt, it would be with no one. She had existed ever since as an animated Sleeping Beauty whose body had kept on functioning while her emotions had been suspended.

Robert felt a deep, savage satisfaction. Despite that enormous barrier, he had succeeded where others hadn't even been able to begin. Her first time had been *his.* She was *his.*

He had always despised promiscuity but hadn't prized virginity. It had seemed to him the height of hypocrisy to demand something from a woman that he himself lacked. All of his sophisticated affairs, however, had nothing in common with the powerful, primitive sense of jealous possessiveness that had swept over him the moment he had realized that he was the only man ever to make love to Evie.

Her association with Landon Mercer, whatever it was, was certainly not romantic in any sense. Sitting there in the early dawn, with Evie cradled on his lap, Robert made a swift decision. He wouldn't stop the investigation, wouldn't warn her in any way, because the espionage had to be halted before it did irreparable harm to both the space station and national security. But when the net was tightened and all the traitorous little fish caught, he would step in and use his influence to shield Evie from prosecution. She wouldn't escape punishment, but the punishment would be his, and his alone, to mete out. The simple truth was that he couldn't bear for her to go to prison. He was astonished at himself, but there it was.

He didn’t know why she was involved in something so vile. He was a very good judge of people, and he would have sworn that honor was a cornerstone of her character. Therefore, she had to be doing it for what she considered a good reason, though he couldn’t imagine what that could be. It was possible she didn’t realize exactly what was going on; that explanation fit better than any other, and made him all the more determined to protect her. As he had told her once, he was good at taking care of his own, and last night Evie had become his in the most basic of ways.

He was fiercely glad that nature’s rhythm had interfered with her wedding night all those years ago. Poor Matt. A lot of his jealousy for the boy faded away, and a rather poignant pity took its place. Matt Shaw had died without ever tasting the perfection of his young wife’s body.

Robert remembered the moment the night before when he had removed her last garment and seen her totally naked, nothing left to his imagination any longer. To his numb surprise, his imagination had fallen short. He had seen her breasts before, but each time he had marveled at how firm and round they were, delightfully upright, the nipples small and a delectable shade of dark pink. Her body curved in to a lithe waist, then flared again to very womanly hips. Her skin, in the silver moonlight, had glowed like alabaster. Instead of being model thin, like the women he had been accustomed to, her curves had been lush and sensual. He hadn’t been able to wait but had mounted her immediately.

A gentleman would have been far more considerate of her than he had been, but he had always been wryly aware that, despite what all his acquaintances thought, he was definitely *not* a gentleman. He was controlled and intelligent and not a cruel man, but that wasn’t the same thing as being gentlemanly. Where Evie was concerned, though, his control went right out the window. His mouth took on a grim line as he remembered the wild rush of passion, the primitive instinct to make her his, that had blotted out all reason. Not only had he hurt her, he hadn’t used a condom. He, who had never before neglected to make certain some form of protection was used, hadn’t even given a thought to birth control.

She might be pregnant. He allowed the possibility to seep into his mind just as the golden light began to seep over the ridge of mountains. To his surprise, he didn’t feel any panic or disgust at his stupidity. Rather, he felt pleased—and intrigued.

He put his hand inside the sheet, resting it on her cool, flat belly. “We may be parents. I didn’t wear a condom.”
“It’s all right.” She gave him a composed look. The tears and grief were now well under control. “I went to my doctor in Huntsville and got a prescription for birth-control pills.”
He felt a not altogether pleasant jolt. He should have been relieved, but instead he was strangely disappointed. Common sense prevailed however. “When?”
“Not long after meeting you,” she said wryly.
Robert almost snorted at the amount of work he’d had his people doing, trying to find out what she had been doing, whom she had seen, that day in Huntsville. He would pull them off that particular job now, but he would be damned if he’d tell them what she *had* been doing.
He lifted his eyebrows at her, a sardonic look on his face. “I distinctly remember you saying that you didn’t intend to sleep with me.”
“I didn’t. But that doesn’t mean I’d leave something that important to chance, because you were determined, and I wasn’t entirely sure of my willpower.”
“Your willpower would have been fine,” he said, “if you hadn’t wanted me, too.”
“I know,” she admitted softly.
Dawn was well and truly upon them now, golden light spilling across the water. The roar of outboard motors broke the serene hush of the morning, and soon the river would be crowded with fishermen and pleasure boaters. Though Evie’s position on his lap would keep anyone from seeing he was naked, Robert thought it best not to chance shocking the locals. After all, she ran a business here, and she might be recognized. He stood up easily, still cradling her securely in his arms, and carried her back through the open patio doors.
He had never been more content than he was at this moment. Evie probably didn’t know what was really going on with Mercer and was involved only peripherally; he would be able to protect her without much problem. He had taken her to bed, and now he knew what had lain beneath her mysterious sadness. He doubted that Evie would ever completely stop thinking about Matt, but that was okay now, because Matt Shaw’s ghost had been banished and she had emerged from her emotional deep freeze. She had said that she loved him, and he knew instinctively that she hadn’t been mouthing the

words merely to rationalize their lovemaking. If she hadn't already loved him, he would never have been able to seduce her.
Some of the women who had come before had also told him that they loved him—most of them, in fact. The declarations had never elicited more from him than a rather tender pity for their vulnerability. Though he had liked and enjoyed all his lovers, none of them had ever managed to pierce his shell; he doubted any of them had even known the shell existed.
Evie's simple statement, though, had filled him with a satisfaction so fierce that his blood had thrummed through his veins. She hadn't expected him to respond. Now that he thought about it, she expected less from him than anyone else ever had. It was a startling realization to a man accustomed to having people come to him with their problems, expecting him to make decisions that would affect thousands of workers and millions of dollars. Evie expected nothing. How was it, then, that she gave so much?
He carried her into the bathroom and stood her on her feet, then unwrapped her from the sheet. The sight of her creamy golden flesh aroused him again, drew his hands to cup her breasts and feel the cool, silky weight of them. His thumbs rubbed across her nipples, making them tighten. Evie's eyes were wide with alarm as she stared at him.
His mouth quirked into a crooked smile. "Don't look so worried," he said as he bent down to press his lips to her forehead. "I'll restrain myself until you've had time to heal. Get in the tub, sweetheart, while I put on the coffee. A bath will relieve some of the soreness."
"Good idea," she said with absolute sincerity.
He chuckled as he left her there. The feeling of contentment was even deeper. She was *his.*

Chapter Thirteen

How could experiencing such a night not leave an imprint on her face? Evie wondered as she got ready for work. After her leisurely soak in the soothing hot water and an equally leisurely breakfast, which Robert had cooked with the same easy competence with which he handled everything else, he had driven her home and reluctantly kissed her goodbye for the day, saying that he had some business to attend to in Huntsville but would try to get back before she closed the marina. If not, he would come to her house.

She had forced herself to do the normal things, but she felt as if her entire life had been turned upside down, as if nothing were the same. *She* wasn't the same. Robert had turned her into a woman who actively longed for his possession, despite the discomfort of her newly initiated body. She hadn't known, hadn't even suspected, that passion could be so savage and all-encompassing, that the pain would be as nothing before the need to link her body with his.

She wanted him even more now than before. He had brought up the long-buried sensuality of her nature and made it his, so that she responded to the lightest touch of his hand. When she thought of him, her body throbbed with the need to wrap her legs around him and take him inside her, to cradle his heavy weight, accept and tame the driving need of his masculinity. The scent of his skin, warm and musky, aroused her. Her memory was filled now with details that she hadn't known before, like the guttural growl of his words and the way his neck corded when he threw his head back in the arching frenzy of satisfaction.

She stared at her face in the mirror as she swiftly braided her hair. Her *eyes* had shadows under them, but she didn't look tired. She simply looked… like herself. If there was any change at all, it was in the expression in her eyes, as if there was a spark that had been missing before.

But if her face was the same, her body bore the signs of his lovemaking. Her breasts were pink and slightly raw from contact with his beard stubble, her nipples so sensitive from his mouth that the soft fabric of her bra rasped them. There were several small bruises on her hips, where he had gripped her during his climax, and her thighs ached. She was sore enough that every step reminded her of his possession and awakened echoes of sensation that made her acutely aware of her body.

It was much earlier than usual when she drove to the marina, but she needed the distraction to take her mind off Robert. If she was lucky, Sherry would bring Virgil by to spend the day with her.

Craig was gassing up a boat when she arrived. When he had finished, he came in and rang up the sale, putting the money in the cash drawer. "How come you're in so early? Have a nice time last night?"

Her nerves jumped, but she managed a composed smile. "Yes, we did. We went to a private club for dinner and dancing. And I came in early… just because."

“That’s a good enough reason for me.” He brushed his dark hair out of his eyes and gave her an urchin’s grin. “I’m glad you’re going out with him. You deserve some fun, after the way you’ve worked to build up this place.”
“Thanks for swapping shifts with me.”
“You bet.”
Another customer idled up to the docks, and Craig went out again. Evie picked up the morning mail and began sorting through it. The junk mail and sales papers went into the trash. The bills went to one side, to be juggled later. One letter was from a New York bank she’d never heard of, probably wanting her to apply for a credit card. She started to toss it without opening it, but on second thought decided to see what it was about. She picked up the penknife she used as a letter opener and slit the envelope.
Thirty seconds later, her brows knit in puzzlement, she let the single sheet of paper drop to the desk. Somehow this bank had gotten her confused with someone else, though she couldn’t think how they had gotten her name on one of their files when she had never done business with them. The letter stated, in brisk terms, that due to a poor payment record they would be forced to foreclose on her loan unless it was paid in full within thirty days. She would have ignored it except that the amount noted was the same as what she owed her bank for the loan against the marina. She knew that figure well, had struggled to get it down to that amount. Each payment brought it even lower. She didn’t know how, but obviously her file had gotten into this other bank’s computers, and they wanted her to pay fifteen thousand, two hundred and sixty-two dollars within thirty days.
Well, it was obviously something she would have to clear up before it got even more tangled. Evie called her bank, gave her name and asked for her loan officer, Tommy Fowler, who was also an old school friend.
The line clicked, and Tommy’s voice said, “Hi, Evie. How’re you doing?”
“Just fine. How are you and Karen doing, and the kids?”
“We’re doing okay, though Karen says the kids are driving her crazy, and if school doesn’t start soon she’s going to get herself arrested, so she can have some peace and quiet.”
Evie chuckled. The Fowler kids were known for their frenetic energy.
“What can I help you with today?’’ Tommy asked.
“There’s been a really strange mix-up, and I need to know how to straighten it out. I got a letter today from a bank in New York, asking for payment in

full on a loan, and it's the same amount as the one I took out from you, on the marina."
"Is that so? Wonder what's going on. Do you have your account number handy?''
"Not with me, no. I'm at work, and all my bookkeeping is at home."
"That's okay, I'll pull it up under your name. Just a minute."
She could hear the tapping of computer keys as he hummed softly to himself. Then he stopped humming and silence reigned, stretching out for so long that Evie wondered if he'd left the room. Finally a few more keys were tapped, then more silence.
He fumbled with the receiver. "Evie, I—" Reluctance was heavy in his voice.
"What's wrong? What's happened?"
"There's a problem, all right, hon. A big one. Your loan was bought by that bank."
Evie's mind went blank. "What do you mean, bought?"
"I mean we sold off some of our loans. It's a common practice. Banks do it to reduce their debt load. Other financial institutions buy them to diversify their own debt load. According to the records, this transaction took place ten days ago."
"Ten days! Just ten days, and already they're demanding payment in full? Tommy, can they do that?"
"Not if you've fulfilled the terms of the loan. Have you… ah… were you late with the payment?"
She knew he must have her payment record there in front of him, showing that she had been late several times, though she had never fallen a full month behind and had always gotten back on schedule. "It's late now," she said numbly. "I had an unexpected expense, and it'll be next week before I can."
She heard him exhale heavily. "Then they're legally within their rights, though the normal procedure would be to make an effort at collecting the payment, rather than the full amount."
"What do I do?"
"Call them. It should be fairly easy to straighten out After all, you're a good risk. But be sure to follow up by letter, so you'll have a record in writing."
"Okay. Thanks for the advice, Tommy."

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry about this, hon. It never would have happened if we’d still held the loan.”
“I know. I’ll see what I can do.”
“Call me if there’s anything I can do to help.”
“Thanks,” she said again and hung up.
Her heart was pounding as she dialed the number on the letterhead. An impersonal voice answered and nasally requested her business. Evie gave the name of the man who had signed the letter, and the connection was made before she could even say please.
The call was brief. Mr. Horowitz was as brisk as his letter had been and as impersonal as the operator. There was nothing he could do, nor did he sound interested in trying. The outstanding amount was due in full by the time limit set forth in the letter, or the loan would be foreclosed and the property forfeit.
Slowly she hung up and sat there staring out the window at the blindingly bright day. The lake was crowded with boaters, people laughing, having fun. The marina was busy, with owners cleaning their craft, others using her ramps to launch their boats, still others idling in for gas. If she didn’t somehow come up with over fifteen thousand dollars within the next thirty days, she would lose it all.
She loved the marina. Because she and Matt had been playmates before they had become sweethearts, she had spent a lot of time here even as a child. She had spent hours playing on the docks, had grown up with the smell of the water in her nostrils. The rhythms of the marina were as much a part of her as her own heartbeat. She had helped Matt work here, and later, after his death, had taken over the lion’s share of the work from his parents. When they had left the marina to her, she had channeled all her energy and efforts into making it prosperous, but it had been a labor of love. The marina, as much as her family, had given her a reason for going on when she had been doubtful that she wanted to even try.
This was her kingdom, her home, as much or more than the house in which she lived. She couldn’t bear to lose it. Some way, any way, she would find the money to pay off the loan.
The most obvious solution was to borrow against the house. The amount of the debt would be the same, but it would be stretched out over a longer period of time, and that would actually lower the payments. She felt giddy

for a moment as the shock and horror lifted from her shoulders. She would be in even better shape than before, with more free cash every month.
She called Tommy again and got the ball rolling. He agreed that a mortgage was the perfect solution. He would have to get an okay on the loan, but he didn't foresee any problems and promised to call her as soon as permission came through.
When she hung up, Evie sat with her head in her hands for a long moment. She felt as if she had just survived combat. She was shaky, but elated at her victory. If she had lost the marina… She couldn't let herself imagine it.
When she finally lifted her head and looked out the window, driven by a need to see her domain still safe and secure, still hers, her face broke into a smile. Business was good today. So good, in fact, that Craig desperately needed a hand and was probably wondering why she wasn't out there helping him. Evie bounded to her feet, energy restored, and rushed out to help him with the sudden glut of customers.
Robert arrived at the marina just after seven that evening. It had been busy all day, and she was on the dock selling gas and oil to yet another happy, sun-roasted boater. Alerted by a sensitivity to her lover's presence, Evie looked around and saw him standing just outside the door, watching her. She lifted her hand. "I'll be there in a few minutes."
He nodded and stepped inside, and she turned her attention back to her customer.
Robert watched her through the big window as he stepped behind the counter. He had been notified that she had received the letter and called the bank that he had arranged to buy her loan, and that, as instructed, they had been totally unwilling to cooperate on the matter. Glancing down, he saw the letter lying on top of the stack of mail, the single sheet of paper neatly folded and stuffed back into the envelope.
She had to be upset. He regretted the need for it, but he had decided to see the plan through. Though he was almost certain she didn't know exactly what Mercer was doing, that she was more of an unwitting accomplice than anything else, there was still the small chance that she was involved up to her pretty neck. Because of that, he couldn't relent in his financial pressure. If she *was* involved, she would be forced into another sale just to raise the money to pay the loan. If she wasn't involved, he would take care of her money problems just as soon as he had Mercer in jail. There were others, and he would get them, too. But Evie was his, one way or the other.

Since he had left her that morning, he had several times been struck with amazement that he wouldn't see her sent to jail, even if she was guilty. This was his country's security at stake, something he took very seriously indeed. He had risked his life more than once for the same principle. He had relished the adventure, but the underlying reason for taking those risks had been a simple, rock-solid love of country. If Evie had betrayed it, she deserved prison. But acknowledging that in no way changed his decision. He would protect her from prosecution.

The sunburned customer and his trio of friends, all young men in their early twenties, were obviously in no hurry to stop chatting with Evie. Robert scowled out the window, but he couldn't blame them. Only a dead man wouldn't respond to her curvy, glowing femininity.

He slipped the letter out of the envelope and unfolded it. There was no reason for doing so, except a meticulous attention to detail. He wanted to know exactly what it said. Swiftly he scanned the , satisfied with the way it had been handled. Then he read Evie's notes, hastily scribbled in the margin.

She had written down the name "Tommy Fowler," with a phone number beside it. Underneath she had written "mortgage house" and circled that

A smile tugged at his mouth. She was certainly a resourceful, common-sense woman. Relief welled up in him. If she was truly involved in stealing the NASA computer programs, she wouldn't be trying to mortgage her house to pay the loan; she would simply arrange another buy. In his experience, criminals didn't think of things like honest work to pay off debts; they were leeches, living off the effort of others, and would simply steal again.

Robert returned the letter to the envelope. More than ever, he regretted the need to play out what he had begun, but he never left anything to chance, certainly not in a matter this serious. He would have to squash any attempt to mortgage the house, of course. Evie would be worried sick, but he would make it up to her afterward.

He sat down on the high stool and watched her as she finally got rid of the four admiring young men. She was dressed much as she had been the first time he'd seen her, in jeans and a T-shirt with her tawny blond hair in a thick, loose braid. His reaction, too, was almost the same: he was poleaxed with lust. The only difference was that it was more intense now, and he hadn't thought that possible. But now he knew exactly how she looked

naked, knew all the delectable textures and curves of her body, and the hot, tight clasp of being sheathed deep inside her. He shivered with desire, his burning gaze locked on her as she walked up the dock. He knew the sounds she made at the peak of pleasure, knew how she clung to him, the way her legs locked convulsively around him, and how her nipples hardened to tight little raspberries. He knew the taste of her, the scent, and wanted to have it again.

She came inside, glanced at him and froze in place. He saw the shudder of awareness that rippled over her as she sensed his arousal. God, was she even more attuned to him than she had been before? The thought was unsettling.

"Come here," he said softly, and she blindly walked into his arms.

He didn't rise from the stool but pulled her between his thighs. Her arms circled his shoulders as he bent his mouth to hers. He kissed her for a long time, so hungry for her that he couldn't be gentle. Evie moved against him, her hips rolling in a languorous, wanton manner that made his heart almost stop in his chest. Kissing her when her response was reluctant had been intoxicating enough; now that she was willing, her mouth clung to his in a way that made him forget about Mercer and the stolen computer programs, about the mess she was embroiled in, even where he was, everything but the hot joy of holding her.

But she would be too sore for any more lovemaking today, and reluctantly he eased away from her mouth, trailing kisses across her temple and the curve of her jaw. He would have to restrain himself for a while yet.

"How did your day go?" he murmured, opening the door for her to tell him about the problem with the bank loan.

"It was as busy today as I've ever seen it," she replied, leaning back in the circle of his arms. Her eyes were soft and sleepy. "How about yours?"

"Tedious. I had some boring details to handle." That was a lie. No detail was boring to him.

"I wish you had been here today, I'd have put you to work. I think everyone who owns a boat was on the water today." She glanced over his shoulder. "There's another one," she said as she slipped out his arms.

This group didn't need any gas but trooped inside in search of some snacks and cold drinks. They had the ruddiness of people who had been out in the sun and wind all day, and brought with them the coconut scent of sunscreen lotion. Once inside, they seemed reluctant to leave the air-conditioning and

milled around looking at the fishing tackle. Evie didn't try to hurry them, instead chatting pleasantly. They were two couples about her age, out for a day of relaxation on the lake. One of the women mentioned how nice it was to have a day away from the kids, and for a while the conversation centered on the antics of their children. When the group finally left, it was with friendly goodbyes.

"Alone at last," Robert said, glancing at his watch. "It's closing time, anyway."

"Thank goodness." Evie stretched and yawned, catching herself in midstretch with a wince that she quickly covered, but not quickly enough.

He saw that slight hesitation. He would indeed have to exercise self-control. He helped her to close up, then sent her home while he stopped for takeout. They ate dinner together, then sat out on the deck in the cooling night, talking softly about routine things. But Evie soon became sleepy, a direct result of not sleeping much the night before. On her third yawn, Robert stood up and held out his hand. "That's it, sleepyhead. Bedtime."

She put her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet. He led her to the bedroom and gently began undressing her.

"Robert, wait," she said uneasily, trying to draw away from him. "I can't—"

"I know," he said, and kissed her forehead. "I told you I'd give you time to heal. I didn't say anything about not sleeping together, but *sleep* is the operative word."

She relaxed into his arms again, and he finished the task of undressing both of them. It was too warm in the house for him to be comfortable, but when they were both naked and lying on the bed, the ceiling fan wafted a cooling breeze over them, and he began to get drowsy, anyway. They lay nestled spoon fashion, his hard thighs under her round bottom, one hand possessively covering a breast.

He lay quietly. She was already asleep, her breathing slow and even. All his objections to staying in this house had faded when he had found that Evie had never truly been Matt's wife. He would still have preferred being in his own house; the bed was much bigger, for one thing. But Evie would be more comfortable in her own home, and that was the most important thing. He had notified his people where he would be, just as he had notified them that Evie would be staying with him the night before.

He had given her every opportunity to tell him about the bank loan, but she hadn't said a word about it Just as she had with the blown motor in her

truck, she kept her trouble to herself rather than running to him for help or even emotional support. For someone who was so open and friendly, Evie was a very solitary person, accustomed to handling everything on her own. Though he would have had to turn her down if she'd asked for help, he wanted her to confide in him, to let him far enough into her life that he knew about the problems as well as the pleasures. When they were married, he would make damn certain he knew every time she stubbed her toe.

Until that moment, he hadn't let his plans for the future progress that far, but suddenly it seemed the thing to do. He had never wanted any other woman the way he wanted Evie, and he sincerely doubted that he ever would. After this mess was settled, he intended to keep her close by, which would mean taking her to New York with him. And he knew Evie. Though she had given herself to him, she was essentially a conventional soul. She would want the security of marriage; therefore, he would marry her. Other women had wanted marriage from him, but this was the first time in his life he'd been willing to give it. He couldn't imagine ever becoming bored with Evie, which had always happened with other lovers. Even more, he couldn't imagine letting any other man have the chance to marry her.

He didn't regret the impending loss of freedom. He thought of dressing her in silk gowns and expensive jewelry, of settling her in the lap of luxury—his—so that she wouldn't have to work seven days a week or worry about paying bills. She wouldn't have to make do with a secondhand refrigerator or drive around in a beat-up old truck. She wouldn't be so tired that dark smudges lay under her eyes. He would take her with him on his business trips, show her Paris and London and Rome, and they would take vacations on the ranch in Montana. Madelyn, he suspected, would gloat because he had finally been caught, but she would like Evie. Evie, despite that glowing sensuality, wasn't the type of woman that other women disliked on sight. She was friendly and courteous and unselfconscious about her looks. He had seen a lot of women who were far more vain than Evie, and with a lot less reason.

Within a month, perhaps even sooner, all of this would be behind them and they would be in New York. He fell asleep, thinking with pleasure of having her all to himself.

As usual, Evie woke at dawn. Robert lay close beside her, his body heat bathing her in warmth, despite the fact that the sheet had been kicked completely off the bed. He had done that, she supposed, because he wasn't

accustomed to doing without air-conditioning. His arm was draped heavily across her hips, and his breath stirred the hair at the back of her neck.
She had slept with him for two nights in a row now and wondered how she would be able to bear the desolation when he was no longer there.
She turned within the circle of that enveloping arm and rose up on one elbow. He woke immediately. “Is anything wrong?” he asked, and just for a moment there was something feral and frightening in his eyes, and an instant tension in his muscles, as if he were poised to attack.
Quickly she shook her head to reassure him. “No. I just wanted to see you.”
He relaxed at her words, lying back on the pillows. His olive-toned skin was dark against the whiteness. His thick black hair was tousled, and his jaw darkened by a heavy stubble. She was entranced by his sheer, uncomplicated masculinity, not yet smoothed over with grooming and clothes that somewhat obscured his true nature. Lying there with his iron-hard body naked and relaxed, he looked like what he was, a warrior honed down and redefined by years of battle.
She put her hand on his chest, and he lay quietly, watching her from beneath lowered lids but content to let her do as she wished. She didn’t whisper her love to him; she had already told him how she felt and didn’t intend to badger him about it. She concentrated, instead, on learning as much as she could about him. She had spent the first eighteen years of her life gathering memories about Matt, but she would have a much shorter time with Robert, and she didn’t want to waste a minute.
She bent over him, her long hair trailing across his chest and shoulder as she planted a line of gentle kisses down his body. He smelled delicious in the morning, she thought, all warm and sleepy. The crispy curls of black hair on his chest invited her to rub her cheek against them, catlike. His nipples, tiny and brown, were almost hidden in the hair. She sought them out, tickled by the minute points that stood out when she rubbed her fingertip across them. Robert flexed restlessly on the sheet as desire tightened his muscles, then forced himself to relax again to better enjoy her attentions.
“I wonder if that’s the same expression a pasha would have, lying back and letting his favorite concubine pleasure him,” she murmured.
“Probably.” He put his hands on her head, fingers sliding beneath the heavy fall of hair to massage her scalp. “You do pleasure me, Evangeline.”

She continued her dreamy exploration, down the furry ridged abdomen toward his hips and thighs, detouring around his early morning erection. Something high on the inside of his left thigh caught her eye, and she bent closer to examine the mark. The morning sunlight clearly revealed a stylized outline of an eagle, or perhaps a phoenix, with upswept wings. The tattoo was small, not even an inch in length, but so finely made that she could see the fierceness of the raptor.

She was startled by the tattoo—not the design, but its very presence. Lightly she traced her finger over it, wondering why he had it. After all, Robert hardly seemed the type of man who would have a tattoo; he was too polished and sophisticated. But for all that sophistication, he wasn't quite civilized, and the tattoo matched that part of him. This was perhaps the only overt signal he permitted himself that he was more than what he seemed.

"How long have you had it?" she asked, looking up at him.

He was watching her with piercingly intent eyes. "Quite a while."

It was a very inexact answer, but she sensed that it was all she would get from him, at least for now. Slowly she leaned down and licked the tattoo, her tongue gently caressing the sign in his flesh that signaled the presence of the inner man.

A low, rough sound vibrated in his throat, and his entire body tightened.

"Do you want me?" she whispered, licking him again. She felt very warm, and slightly drunk with her feminine power. Desire was unfurling inside her, opening like a flower. Her breasts throbbed, and she rubbed them against his leg.

He gave a strangled laugh, almost undone by her natural sensuality. "Look a few inches to your right and tell me what you think."

She did, turning her head with slow deliberation to survey the straining, pulsing length of his sex. "I believe you do."

"The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is, how do *you* feel?"

Evie gave him a slow, luminous smile of desire that promised him more than he thought he could survive. "I feel… willing." she purred, crawling up the length of his body to lie on him as she wound her arms around his neck.

His face was strained as he rolled, placing her beneath him. "I'll be careful," he promised in a rough whisper.

She reached up to touch his beard-roughened cheek and opened her thighs to clasp them around him. Her heart was in her eyes as he began slowly,

with almost agonizing care, to enter her. “I trust you,” she said, giving him her body as surely as she had given him her heart.

Chapter Fourteen

Landon Mercer caught himself wearing a habitually worried expression whenever he glanced into a mirror. Nothing was going right, for no particular reason that he could tell. One day he had been feeling pretty damn good about himself and the way everything was going, and the next it all began to go to hell. It was just little things at first, like that bastard Cannon showing up and nearly giving him a heart attack, though it turned out that Cannon had been the least of his worries. The big boss’s reputation had been vastly overstated; he was nothing more than another lazy playboy, born into money, without any real idea of what it was like to get out and hustle for what he had.

Sometimes, though, Cannon had a cold look in his eyes that was downright spooky, as if he could see right through flesh. Mercer wouldn’t soon forget the panic he’d felt when Cannon had caught him in Shaw’s Marina. For one terror-stricken minute, Mercer had thought he was caught, that they’d somehow managed to find out what he was doing. But all Cannon had seemed interested in was that he’d taken off from work for the afternoon, something he’d been careful not to do again. Of all the damn luck! There were plenty of marinas in Guntersville; why had Cannon picked Shaw’s? It wasn’t the biggest, or the best run. In fact, for him, its major attraction was that it was small, a bit out of the way and basically a one-horse outfit. Evie Shaw didn’t have time to pay attention to everything going on around her. Of course, once Cannon had seen Evie, it was understandable why he kept hanging around. Mercer had been trying for months to get her to go out with him, but she was as standoffish as she was stacked. He just didn’t have enough money, he supposed; she had latched on to Cannon fast enough.

Of course, if things had worked out, he *would* have had enough money to interest her. He wasn’t stupid. He hadn’t blown the payoffs; he’d invested them. The ventures he’d picked had all seemed sound. He’d stayed away from the high-interest but volatile money markets and opted for slower but more secure returns. In a few years, he’d figured, he would have enough money invested to be on easy street.

But stocks that had looked good one day went sour the next, prices going on a steady slide as other investors dumped their shares. In one terrible week the tidy little nest egg he'd built up had decreased in value to less than half of what it had been before. He had sold out, taking a loss, and in a desperate move to recoup his money had invested it all in the money markets. The money market had promptly plummeted, almost wiping him out. He felt like King Midas in reverse; everything he touched turned to dross.

When he was contacted about another sale, he was so relieved that he almost thanked them for calling. If his bank account didn't get a cash transfusion soon, he wouldn't be able to make his car payment, or the payments on all his credit cards. Mercer was horrified at the thought of losing his beloved Mercedes. There were more expensive cars, and he intended to have them eventually, but the Mercedes was the first car he'd had that said he was *somebody*, a man on the way up. He couldn't bear to go back to being nothing.

Evie felt as if she had been split into two separate beings. Half of her was deliriously happy, overwhelmed by the intoxication of having Robert for a lover. She had never dreamed she could be so happy again, or feel so whole, but the great emptiness that had lurked in her heart for so long had been filled. Robert was both passionate and considerate, paying her so much attention that she felt as if she were the center of his universe. He never ignored her, never took anything about her for granted, always made her feel as if she were the most desirable woman he'd ever seen. Whenever they went out, his attention never wandered to other women, though she was well aware of other women looking at him.

She saw him every day, slept with him almost every night. As she became more at ease with her own body and the passion he aroused, their lovemaking became more leisurely, and even more intense, until sometimes she screamed with the force of it. He was a sophisticated lover, leading her into new positions, new variations, new sensations, and he was so skilled that he didn't make her feel awkward or ignorant. He made love to her almost every night. Only once, but that once was long and complete, leaving her sated and sleepy. Then, in the morning when they woke, they would make love again, silently, drifting in that half-awake state when dreams still shadow consciousness.

His mastery of her body was so complete that thoughts of him were always with her, lurking just under the surface, ready to come to the fore and

bringing desire with them. She didn’t know which she enjoyed most, the intense sessions at night or the dreamy ones of early morning. It was amazing how quickly her body had learned to crave sexual pleasure with him, so that, as the afternoon hours advanced, she would become jittery with anticipation and need. He knew it, surely. She could see him watching her, as if gauging her readiness. Sometimes she had a violent desire to pin him to the floor and have her way with him, but she always restrained herself, because the buildup of desire, though maddening, was equally delicious.

She had become accustomed to containing her thoughts and emotions, guarding them behind a wall of reserve, but Robert drew her out. They had long, involved discussions about a wide variety of subjects. Sitting out on the deck at night, staring up at the stars, they would discuss astronomy and various theories, from the big bang to black holes, dark matter and the relativity of time. His intelligence and the scope of his interests were almost frightening. Without giving any indication of restlessness, his mind was always working, looking for new facts to absorb or arranging those he already had. They would trade sections of the newspaper, and debate politics and national events. They swapped childhood stories, she telling him about growing up with an older sister as bossy as Becky, he making her laugh with stories of his indomitable younger sister, Madelyn. He told her about the ranch in Montana, which he owned in partnership with Reese Duncan, Madelyn’s husband, and about their two rowdy little boys.

The sense of closeness with Robert was at once seductive and terrifying. There was a powerful lure that drew her to him, creating an intimacy as much of the mind as of the body, so that she was no longer a solitary creature but half of a *couple*, her entire sense of being altering to include him. Sometimes, in the back of her mind, she wondered how she would survive if he were to leave—she had to think of it as *if* now, rather than *when*—and the thought of losing him made her almost sick with terror. She couldn’t let herself worry about that. Loving him now, in the present, demanded all her attention. She couldn’t hold anything back; she was helpless to even try.

At the same time, the other part of her, the part that wasn’t preoccupied with Robert, worried incessantly about the bank loan and the mortgage on the house. Tommy hadn’t called her back. She had called the bank twice; the first time he said that permission simply hadn’t come through yet, but he

didn’t think there was any problem and that she should just be patient. The second time she called, he was out of town.

She couldn’t wait much longer. It had already been eleven days, leaving just nineteen until the loan had to be paid. If her bank couldn’t give her a loan, she would have to find a bank that would, and if all banks moved so slowly, she could find herself running out of time. Just thinking of the possibility was enough to make her break out in a cold sweat.

She tried to think of other options, of some way to quickly raise the money in case the loan didn’t go through fast enough. She could put her boat up for sale, but it wasn’t worth even half the amount that she needed and might not sell in time, anyway. Asking Becky and Paul for a loan was out of the question; they had their own financial responsibilities, and supporting two teenagers was expensive.

She could sell the rental boats, which would raise enough money but deprive her of a surprisingly tidy bit of income. Of course, with the loan paid, and if she didn’t have to take out another one, she would have much more available cash and would soon be able to acquire more boats for rent. The only problem with that was time—again. In her experience, people took their time buying boats. Boats, even in a town like Guntersville that was geared toward the river, weren’t a necessity of life. People looked at them, thought about it, discussed it over the dinner table, checked and double-checked their finances. It was possible, but unlikely, that she would be able to sell enough of them to raise the money she needed in the time she had.

Of the limited options available to her, however, that was the best one. She put a sign that read Used Boats For Sale in front of the marina and posted other notices in the area tackle stores. Even if she sold only one, that would lower the amount of money she would need to borrow.

Robert noticed the sign immediately. He walked in late that afternoon, removed his sunglasses and pinned her with a pale, oddly intense look. “That sign out front—which boats are for sale?”

“The rental boats,” she calmly replied and returned her attention to waiting on a customer. Once she had made the decision to sell the boats, she hadn’t allowed herself any regrets.

He moved behind the counter and stood in front of the window with his hands in his pockets, looking out at the marina. As she had known he

would, he waited until the customer had left before turning to ask, “Why are you selling them?”

She hesitated for a moment. She hadn’t told him anything about her financial worries and didn’t intend to do so now, for a variety of reasons. One was simply that she was reticent about personal problems, disinclined to broadcast her woes to the world. Another was that she was fiercely possessive about the marina, and she didn’t want word to get around that it was on shaky financial ground. Yet another was that she didn’t want Robert to think she was obliquely asking for a loan, and she would be distressed if he offered one. He was obviously wealthy, but she didn’t want the issue of money to become a part of their relationship. If it did, would he ever be certain, in his own mind, that her attraction to him wasn’t based on his wealth? Still another reason was that she didn’t want anyone else to have a share, and thus a say-so, in the marina. Banks were one thing, individuals another. The marina was *hers,* the base on which she had rebuilt the ruins of her life. She simply couldn’t give up any part of it.

So when she answered, she merely said, “They’re getting old, less reliable. I need to buy newer ones.”

Robert regarded her silently. He didn’t know whether to hug her or shake her, and in fact he could do neither. It was obvious that she was trying to raise money by any means available, and he wanted to put his arms around her and tell her it would be all right. But his instinct to protect his own had to be stifled, at least for now. Despite his decision that she was largely innocent in Mercer’s espionage dealings, the small chance that he was wrong about her wouldn’t let him relent. Soon he would know for certain, one way or the other. But if she sold the rental boats, what means would Mercer use to deliver the goods? Every one of those rental boats was now equipped with tiny electronic bugs that would allow them to be tracked; if Mercer was forced to use some other boat, or even change his method of delivery entirely, Robert would lose his control of the situation.

On the plus side, he was certain Mercer would act soon. They had intercepted a very suspicious phone call, putting them on the alert. It didn’t matter if Evie managed to sell a couple of boats, or even most of them, so long as she had one remaining when Mercer made his move. He would simply have to monitor the situation and step in to prevent a sale if it looked as if she would manage to unload all of them.

Aloud he asked, “Have you had any offers yet?”

She shook her head, a wry smile curving her mouth. “I just put the sign up this morning.”
“Have you put an ad in any of the newspapers?”
“Not yet, but I will.”
That might bring in more customers than he could block, he thought with a sigh. The easiest way would be to stop the ads from being printed; there weren’t that many area newspapers. The phones both here and at her house were being monitored, so he would know which papers she called.
Somehow he hadn’t expected to have so much trouble keeping abreast of her maneuvers. Evie was a surprisingly resourceful woman.
Five days later, Evie rushed in from overseeing a delivery of gas to answer the phone. She pushed a wisp of hair out of her face as she lifted the receiver. “Shaw’s Marina.”
“Evie? This is Tommy Fowler.”
As soon as she heard his voice, she knew. Slowly she sank down onto the stool, her legs so weak that she needed the support. “What’s the verdict?” she asked, though she knew the answer.
He sighed. “I’m sorry, hon. The board of directors says we already have too many real-estate loans. They won’t okay the mortgage.”
Her lips felt numb. “It isn’t your fault,” she said. “Thanks, anyway.”
“It isn’t a lost cause. Just because we aren’t making that type of loan right now doesn’t mean other banks aren’t.”
“I know, but I have a deadline, and it’s down to fourteen days. It’s taken you longer than that to tell me no. How long would it take to process a loan at any other bank?”
“Well, we took longer than usual. I’m sorry as hell about it, Evie, but I had no idea the okay wouldn’t go through. Go to another bank. Today, if possible. An appraiser will have to make an estimate of the house’s value, but it’s waterfront property and in good shape, so it’s worth a lot more than the amount you want to mortgage. Getting an appraiser out there is what will take so much time, so get started as soon as you can.”
“I will,” she said. “Thanks, Tommy.”
“Don’t thank me,” he said glumly. “I couldn’t do anything. Bye, hon.”
She sat there on the stool for a long time after she hung up the phone, trying to deal with her disappointment and sense of impending disaster. Though she had been worried, the worry had been manageable, because even

though she had been making contingency plans, she had been certain the mortgage would go through.
She hadn’t sold a single boat.
Time was of the essence, and she didn’t have a lot of faith in getting a loan through any other bank. It was as if an evil genie was suddenly in control of things, inflicting her with malfunctioning machinery and uncooperative banks.
Still, she had to try. She couldn’t give up and perhaps lose the marina from lack of effort. She *wouldn’t* lose the marina. No matter what, she simply refused to let it go. If she couldn’t get a mortgage, if she couldn’t sell the boats, she had one other option. It was strictly last-resort, but it was there.
She picked out a bank with a good reputation and called to make an appointment with a loan officer for the next morning.
The heat was already intense the next day when she was getting ready. Despite the ceiling fans, her skin was damp with perspiration, making her clothes cling to her. Robert hadn’t asked why her house was so hot, but the past three nights he had insisted on taking her to his home and bringing her back after breakfast. This morning she had showered at his house as she usually did, then asked him to bring her home earlier than usual because she had a business appointment at nine. He hadn’t asked any questions about that, either.
She retrieved her copy of the deed from the fireproof security box under the bed and braced herself like a soldier going to war. If this bank wouldn’t give her a loan, she wasn’t going to waste any more time going to another one. Time was too short. She would rather be too hasty than take the chance of losing the marina.
She rolled the truck window down, and the wind blowing in her face cooled her as she drove to the bank. The heat was building every day, and soon it would be unbearable in the house if she didn’t turn on the air-conditioning. She smiled grimly. She might as well turn it on; one way or the other, she would have the money to pay the power bill.
Her appointment was with a Mr. Waldrop, who turned out to be a stocky, sandy-haired man in his late forties. He gave her a strangely curious look as he led her into his small office. Evie took one of the two comfortable chairs arranged in front of the desk, and he settled into the big chair behind it.
“Now then, Mrs. Shaw, what can we do for you today?”

Concisely, Evie told him what she needed, then pulled the copy of the deed from her purse and placed it on his desk. He unfolded it and looked it over, pursing his lips as he read.

"It looks straightforward enough." He opened his desk and extracted a sheet of paper. "Fill out this financial statement, and we'll see what we can do."

Evie took the sheet of paper and went out to one of the small searing areas off the lobby. While she was answering the multitude of questions, her pen scratching across the paper, someone else came in to see Mr. Waldrop. She glanced up automatically, then realized she knew the newcomer, not an unusual occurrence in a small town like Guntersville. He was Kyle Brewster, a slightly shady businessman who owned a small discount store, dealing in seconds and salvage material. He was also known as a gambler and had been arrested once, several years back, when the back room of a pool hall had been raided on the information that an illegal game was being conducted there. Evie supposed that Kyle was fairly successful in his gambling; his style of living was considerably higher than the income from the discount store could provide.

The door to Mr. Waldrop's office was left open. She couldn't hear what Kyle was saying, only the indistinct drawl of his voice, but Mr. Waldrop's voice was more carrying. "I have the check right here," he was saying cheerfully. "Do you want to cash it, or deposit it into your account?"

Evie returned her attention to the form, feeling slightly heartened. If the bank would lend money to Kyle Brewster, she saw no reason why it wouldn't lend money to her. Her business was more profitable, and her character was certainly better.

Kyle left a few minutes later. When Evie completed the form, someone else had come in and was with Mr. Waldrop. She sat patiently, watching the hour hand on the clock inch to ten o'clock, then beyond. At ten-thirty, the other customer left and she carried the form in to Mr. Waldrop.

"Have a seat," he invited as he looked over the information she had provided. "I'll be back in a few minutes." He carried the form out with him.

Evie crossed her fingers, hoping the loan would be okayed that morning, pending an appraisal of the property. She would get the bank's appraiser out to the house if she had to call him ten times a day and hound him until he appeared.

More time ticked by. She shifted restlessly in the chair, wondering what was taking so long. But the bank seemed busy this morning, so perhaps the

person Mr. Waldrop had taken the form to was also tied up, and Mr. Waldrop was having to wait.

Forty-five minutes later Mr. Waldrop returned to his office. He settled into his chair and tapped his fingertips together. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Shaw,” he said with real regret. “We simply aren’t making this type of loan right now. With the economy the way it is…”

Evie sat up straight. She could feel the blood draining from her face, leaving the skin tight. Enough was enough. “The economy is fine,” she interrupted sharply. “The recession didn’t hit down here the way it did in other parts of the country. And your bank is one of the strongest in the country. There was an article in one of the Birmingham papers just last week about this bank buying another one in Florida. What I want to know is why you would lend money to someone like Kyle Brewster, a known gambler with a police record, but you won’t make a loan on a property worth five or six times that amount.”

Mr. Waldrop flushed guiltily. A distressed look came into his eyes. “I can’t discuss Mr. Brewster’s business, Mrs. Shaw. I’m sorry. I don’t make the decisions on whether or not to okay a loan.”

“I realize that, Mr. Waldrop.” She also realized something else, something so farfetched she could hardly believe it, but it was the only thing that made any sense. “I didn’t have a chance of getting the loan, did I? Having me fill out that form was just for show. Someone is stepping in to block the loan, someone with a lot of influence, and I want to know who it is.”

His flush turned even darker. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “There’s nothing I can tell you.”

She stood and retrieved the deed from his desk. “No, I don’t suppose you can. It would mean your job, wouldn’t it? Goodbye, Mr. Waldrop.”

She was almost dizzy with fury as she went out to the truck. The heat slammed into her like a blow, but she ignored it, just as she ignored the scorching heat of the truck’s upholstery. She sat in the parking lot, tapping her finger against the steering wheel as she stared unblinkingly at the traffic streaming by on U.S. 431.

Someone wanted the marina. No one had made an offer to buy it, so that meant whoever it was knew she wasn’t likely to sell. This mysterious someone was powerful enough, well-connected enough with the local bankers, to block her attempts to get a loan. Not only that, the original transfer of the loan from her bank to the New York bank had probably been

arranged by this person, though she couldn’t think of anyone she knew with that kind of power.
She couldn’t think why anyone would want her little marina enough to go to such an extreme. Granted, she had made a lot of improvements in it, and business was better every year. When she paid off the outstanding debt, the marina would turn a healthy profit, but it wouldn’t be the kind of money that would warrant such actions from her unknown enemy.
Why didn’t matter, she thought with the stark clarity that comes in moments of crisis. Neither did *who.* The only thing that mattered was that she kept the marina.
There was one move she could make that wouldn’t be blocked, because she wouldn’t be the one obtaining the loan. She wouldn’t breathe a word about this to anyone, not even Becky, until it was a done deal.
Numbly she started the truck and pulled out into traffic, then almost immediately pulled off again when she spotted a pay phone outside a convenience store. Her heart was thudding with slow, sickening power against her ribs. If she let herself think about it, she might not have the nerve to do it. If she waited until she got back home, she might look around at the dear, familiar surroundings and not be able to make the call. She had to do it now. It was a simple choice. If she lost the marina, she stood to lose everything, but if she sacrificed the house now, she would be able to keep the marina.
She slid out of the truck and walked to the pay phone. Her legs seemed to be functioning without any direction from her brain. There was no phone book. She called Information and got the number she wanted, then fed in another quarter and punched the required numbers. Turning her back on the traffic, she put her finger in her other ear to block out noise as she listened to the ringing on the other end of the line.
“Walter, this is Evie. Do you and Helene still want to buy my place on the river?”
“She stopped at a convenience store immediately after leaving the bank and made a call from a pay phone,” the deep voice reported to Robert.
“Could you tell what number she called?”
“No, sir. Her position blocked the numbers from view.”
“Could you hear anything she was saying?”
“No, sir. I’m sorry. She kept her back turned, and the traffic was noisy.”

Robert rubbed his jaw. “Have you checked to see if it was the marina she called?”
“First thing. No such luck. She didn’t call Mercer, either.”
“Okay. It worries me, but there isn’t anything we can do about it. Where is she now?”
“She drove straight home from the convenience store.”
“Let me know if she makes any more calls.”
“Yes, sir.”
Robert hung up and stared thoughtfully out at the lake as he tried to imagine who she had called, and why. He didn’t like the angry little suspicion that was growing. Had she called the unknown third party to whom Mercer had been selling the stolen computer programs? Was she involved up to her pretty little neck after all? He had backed her up against a financial wall, just to find out for certain, but he had a sudden cold, furious feeling that he wasn’t going to like the results worth a damn.

Chapter Fifteen

“Would you like to go fishing this morning?” Robert asked lazily, his voice even deeper than usual. “We’ve never been out in a boat together.”
It was six-thirty. The heat wave was continuing, each day seeing temperatures in the high nineties, and it was supposed to reach the hundred mark for the next few days, at least. Even at that early hour, Evie could feel the heat pressing against the windows.
It was difficult to think. Robert had just finished making love to her, and her mind was still sluggish with a surfeit of pleasure. He had awakened her before dawn and prolonged their loving even more than usual. Her entire body still throbbed from his touch, the echoes of pleasure still resounding in her flesh. The sensation of having him inside her lingered, though he had withdrawn and moved to lie beside her. Her head was cradled on one muscled arm, while his other arm lay heavily across her lower abdomen. She would have liked nothing better than to snuggle against him and doze for a while, then wake to even more lovemaking. It was only when she was sleeping, or when Robert was making love to her, that she was able to forget what she was doing.

But the throb of pleasure was lessening, and a dull ache resumed its normal place in her chest. “I can’t,” she said. “I have some errands to run.” Errands such as finding a place to live. Walter and Helene Campbell had jumped at the chance to buy her house. They had wanted it for years and had decided to pay cash for it and worry about the financing later, afraid she would change her mind if she had a chance to think about it. Evie had promised she would be out within two weeks.

She couldn’t bring herself to tell Robert, at least, not yet. She was afraid he would feel pressured to ask her to live with him, when he seemed perfectly satisfied with things the way they were now. It was difficult to think of anyone pressuring Robert to do anything he didn’t want to do, and he might not offer, but neither did she want him to think she was hinting that he should. It would be best to find an apartment or house for rent first, then tell him about it.

For that matter, she hadn’t told Becky, either. She hadn’t told anyone. She had made her decision, but hadn’t managed to come to terms with it yet. Every time she thought about moving, tears burned in her eyes. She couldn’t bear to go into the explanations and listen to the arguments.

She didn’t let herself think about who was behind all these financial maneuverings. First she had to concentrate on saving the marina and finding a place to live. After that was settled, she would try to find out who had been doing this to her.

“What kind of errands?” Robert asked, nuzzling her ear. His hand stroked warmly over her stomach, then covered her left breast. Her nipple, still sensitized from the strong suckling he had subjected it to a short while ago, twinged with a sharp sensation and immediately puckered against his palm. Her breathing deepened. Rather than becoming less intense with familiarity, his sensual power over her body seemed to increase each time he took her.

“I have to pay a few bills and do some shopping,” she lied, and wondered why he’d asked. He had no compunction about taking over every facet of her private life but seldom inquired about what she did when they weren’t together.

“Why not put it off until tomorrow?” His nuzzling was growing a bit more purposeful, and she closed her eyes as pleasure began to warm throughout her body again.

“I can’t,” she repeated regretfully. He rolled her nipple between this thumb and forefinger, making it even harder. She caught her breath at the tug of

desire, as if the nerves of her nipples were directly connected to those in her loins.
“Are you certain?” he murmured, pressing his open mouth against the rapid pulse at the base of her throat.
Going fishing didn’t tempt her, at least not in this heat. Lying in bed with him all morning, though, was so tempting it took all of her willpower to resist. “I’m certain,” she forced herself to say. “It has to be done today.”
Another man might have turned surly at having his advances refused, but Robert only sighed as he rested his head once again on the pillow. “I suppose we should get up, then.”
“I suppose.” She turned into him, pressing her face against his chest. “Hold me, just for a minute.”
His arms tightened around her, satisfyingly tight. “What’s wrong?’’
“Nothing,” she whispered. “I just like for you to hold me.”
She felt his muscles tense. Abruptly he rolled on top of her, his hair-roughened thighs pushing hers apart. Startled, she looked up into slitted green eyes, glittering beneath those heavy black lashes. She couldn’t read his expression but sensed his tightly contained violence.
“What—” she began to ask.
He thrust heavily into her, the power of his penetration making her body arch and shudder. He had had her only a little while before, but he was as hard as if that had never happened, so hard that she felt bruised by the impact of his flesh against hers. She gasped and clutched his shoulders for support. Not since the first time he’d taken her had he moved so powerfully. A primal feminine fear beat upward on tiny wings and mingled with an equally primitive sense of excitement. He wasn’t hurting her, but the threat was there, and the challenge was whether she could handle him in this dangerous mood, all raw, demanding masculinity.
Desire flooded through her. She dug her nails into his muscular buttocks, pulling him deeper, arching her hips higher to take all of him. He grunted, his teeth clenched against the sound. Evie locked him to her, as fiercely female as he was dominatingly male, not only accepting his thrusts but demanding them. The sensation spiraled rapidly inside her, burning out of control, and she bit his shoulder. He cursed, the word low and hoarse, then slid his arms under her bottom to lift her even more tightly against him. All of his heavy weight bore her into the mattress as they strained together.

The sensation peaked, and Evie cried out as she shuddered wildly in the throes of pleasure. His hips hammered three more times; then he stiffened and began to shake as satisfaction took him, too. He ground his body against hers, as if he could meld their flesh.

The room slowly stopped spinning about her. She heard the twin rhythms of their panting breaths begin to calm. His heartbeat seemed to be thudding through her body, until it was in sync with her own. Their bodies were sealed together with sweat, heat rolling off them in waves.

Their first lovemaking of the morning had lasted an hour. This time, it hadn't taken even five minutes. The fury and speed of it, the raw power, left her even more exhausted than she'd been before.

What had aroused him so violently? After their first night Robert had been a slow, considerate lover, but he had just taken her like a marauder.

He was very heavy on top of her, making breathing difficult. She gasped, and he shifted his weight to the side. Pale green eyes opened, the expression still shuttered. His mouth had a ruthless line to it. "Stay with me today," he demanded.

Regret pierced her, sharp and poignant. "I can't," she said. "Not today."

For a split second something frightening flickered in his eyes, then was gone. "I tried," he said with rueful ease, rolling off her and sitting up. He stretched, rolling his shoulders and lifting his muscled arms over his head.

Evie eyed his long, powerful back with pleasure and approval. The layered muscles were tight and hard, the deep hollow of his spine inviting kisses, or clutching hands. He was wide at the shoulders, his body tapering in a lean vee to his hips. She reached out and ran a lingering hand over the round curve of his buttocks, loving the cool resilience of his flesh.

He looked at her over his shoulder, and she saw a smile come into those green eyes. He leaned over to kiss her, his mouth lingering warmly for a moment; then with a yawn he was off the bed and heading toward the shower. She watched him until he closed the bathroom door behind him, drinking in his tall, naked body. She felt like smacking her lips, like a child drooling after a tasty treat. He was a fine figure of a man, all right.

Sometimes, when she saw him sprawled naked and sleepy beside her, it was all she could do to keep from attacking him. She lay in bed for a while, listening to the shower run and entertaining a wicked, delicious fantasy in which he was tied to the bed and totally at her mercy.

But a glance at the clock told her that time was still ticking away. Sighing, she got out of bed and slipped into his shirt, then went to the kitchen to make coffee.

When she returned, he was just coming out of the bathroom, a towel draped around his neck but otherwise still completely naked. His skin was glowing from the shower, his black hair wet and slicked back.

“I put on the coffee,” she said as she went to take her turn in the shower. “I’ll start breakfast. What do you want this morning?”

The thought of what she had to do that day killed her appetite. “I’m not hungry. I’ll just have coffee.”

But when she had showered and dressed, she went into the kitchen to find that he had his own ideas about what she was having for breakfast A bowl of cereal, as well as a glass of orange juice and the requested coffee, was sitting at her customary place at the table. “I’m really not hungry,” she repeated, lifting the coffee cup and inhaling the fragrant steam before sipping.

“Just a few bites,” he cajoled, taking his own place beside her. “You need to keep up your strength for tonight.”

She gave him a heated, slumberous look, remembering her fantasy. “Why? Are you planning something special?”

“I suppose I am,” he said consideringly. “It’s special every time we make love.”

Her heart swelled in her chest, making it impossible for her to speak. She simply looked at him, her golden brown eyes glowing.

He picked up the spoon and put it into her hand. “Eat. I’ve noticed you haven’t been eating much while it’s been so hot, and you’re losing weight.”

“Most people would consider that a good thing,” she pointed out.

His black eyebrows lifted. “I happen to like your butt as round as it is now, and your breasts perfectly fit my hands. I don’t want to sleep with a stick. Eat.”

She laughed, amused by his description of her rear end, and dipped the spoon into the cereal. It was her favorite brand, of course; once he had seen the box in her cabinets, a box of the same cereal had taken up residence in his.

She managed to choke down a few bites, more than she wanted and not enough to satisfy him, which was a reasonable compromise. The cereal felt like a lump in her stomach.

Less than an hour later he kissed her goodbye at her door. “I’ll see you tonight, sweetheart. Take care.”

As she entered the house, she thought it a little odd for him to have added that last admonition. What on earth did he think she would be doing?

Sadly she dressed for work, so she wouldn’t have to come back to the house before going to the marina. She wouldn’t be braiding her hair in front of this mirror very many more times, she thought. After this afternoon, the house would no longer belong to her. Walter and Helene were getting a real estate agent, a friend of theirs, to handle the transaction immediately. They were supposed to bring all the paperwork to the marina this afternoon, along with a cashier’s check in the specified amount. Evie was taking the deed to the property, the surveyor’s report that she had had done when she inherited the house, as well as the certification of me title search that had also been done at that time. It was a measure of their trust in her that they were willing to forgo another title search, probably against their agent friend’s advice.

She addressed an envelope to the bank in New York, stamped it and added it to her stack of papers. She would take the cashier’s check immediately to her bank, deposit it and have another cashier’s check made out in the amount of the outstanding loan against the marina. Then she would express-mail that check to New York, to Mr. Horowitz’s attention. All her financial troubles would be over.

She wouldn’t have her home any longer, but she could live anywhere, she told herself. The marina was more important, the means of her support. With it, she could someday buy another house. It wouldn’t hold the memories this one did, but she would make it into a home.

She took a last look in the mirror. “Standing here won’t get anything done,” she said softly to herself and turned away.

She spent the morning driving around Guntersville. She had checked a few of the rental ads in the newspaper but didn’t want to call them yet, preferring to see the houses and the neighborhoods before calling. She knew she was just stalling, despite the urgency of the situation, but somehow actually making contact was beyond her at the moment. She gave herself a stern talking-to, but it didn’t help much. She didn’t like any of the houses she saw.

It was almost noon when she came to a decision. She made an abrupt turn, causing a car behind her to squeal its tires and the irate driver to lean on the

horn. Muttering an apology, she cut through a shopping-center parking lot and back onto the highway, but in the opposite direction.
The apartment complex she had chosen was new, less than two years old, incongruously known as the Chalet Apartments. She stopped the truck outside the office and went inside. Twenty minutes later she was the new resident of apartment 17, which consisted of a living room and combination dining room/kitchen downstairs, along with a tiny laundry area just big enough to hold a washer and dryer, and two bedrooms upstairs. There were no one-bedroom apartments available. She paid a deposit, collected two sets of keys and went back out to the truck.
It was done. She doubted she would be happy there, but at least she would have a roof over her head while she took her time looking for a house.
The cellular phone beeped, and Robert answered it as he threaded his way through the traffic on Gunter Avenue, the oneway street that bisected Guntersville's downtown area and also ran through a neighborhood of grand old houses that looked turn-of-the-century.
"I think she spotted me."
"What happened?" he asked in a clipped tone.
"First she just drove around, all over town. I had to hang back so I wouldn't be as easy to spot. She slowed down several times but didn't stop anywhere. Maybe she was looking for something. Then she got on the highway, going south toward Albertville. She was on the inside lane, I was on the outside. All of a sudden, without a turn signal, she whipped the truck into a parking lot and nearly got hit doing it I was in the wrong lane and couldn't follow her. By the time I got turned around, she'd vanished."
"Damn." Robert felt both tired and angry. Just when he'd been convinced of Evie's innocence, she was suddenly doing some very suspicious things. She was obviously worried about the marina, but there was something else on her mind, something she was trying to keep hidden. This morning, in bed, he had been seized by the urgent need to keep her with him all day, thereby preventing her from doing anything foolish. He wasn't used to women refusing any request he made, but Evie didn't appear to have any trouble doing it. She had said no with insulting ease.
Furious, he had even tried to seduce her into staying with him, only to lose his control, something he'd sworn wouldn't happen again. And afterward she'd still said no.

“I’ll pick her up again when she comes to the marina,” the man said in his ear. “I’m sorry, sir.”
“It wasn’t your fault No tail’s perfect.”
“No, sir, but I should have been more careful about letting her see me.”
“Have two cars next time, so you can swap.”
“Yes, sir.”
Robert ended the call and replaced the receiver. It took all his self-control to keep from driving to the marina to wait for her so he could shake some sense into her as soon as he saw her. But he had to play this through to the end.
As mundane as it was, he had his own errand to run that day: grocery shopping. It wasn’t something he normally did for himself, but it wasn’t an onerous duty. Despite its strangeness, or perhaps because of it, he didn’t mind doing it. Southerners imbued grocery shopping with the same casualness that characterized almost everything else they did. Shoppers ambled down the aisles, stopping to talk with chance-met acquaintances or to strike up conversations with strangers. The first time he had gone into the big grocery store, he had been amused by the thought that a New Yorker relaxed in the park with more energy than Southerners shopped. But when in Rome… He had learned to slow his own pace, to keep from smashing into old ladies who had stopped to pass the time of day.
Today, though, he wasn’t in the mood to be amused. It went against his protective, controlling nature to leave Evie to hang herself with all the evidential rope he was feeding to both her and Mercer. He wanted to snatch her away from here, kidnap her if necessary. But if she *were* involved with Mercer, that would scare off the others and they might never be caught. Not knowing for certain, one way or the other, was driving him crazy with frustration.
Two more days. From the telephone calls they had intercepted, they knew that Mercer would transfer more stolen data the day after tomorrow. Evie hadn’t been able to sell any of the rental boats, so that was one less problem for Robert. It didn’t matter which boat Mercer took, since they were all wired. As a precaution, he had also had Evie’s boat wired. In two days it would all be over except for the cleanup. In three days, if all went on schedule, he would be back in New York, and Evie would be with him.
He wouldn’t need many groceries, just enough for three days, but he was completely out of coffee and almost out of food, and he didn’t want to eat in

restaurants for three days. He strode through the aisles of the grocery store, his expression remote as he planned the damage-control measures he would use. Operating with his usual efficiency, he was in and out of the store within fifteen minutes. As he walked out the automatic doors with a grocery bag in his arms, though, the woman just entering through the other set of doors stopped and stared at him.

"Robert."

He paused, immediately recognizing Evie's sister, Becky. Another shopper was exiting behind him, and he stepped out of the way. "Hello, Becky. How are you?" He smiled faintly. "And how's Jason? I haven't seem him at the marina again."

"Didn't Evie tell you? He can't come back to the marina for the rest of the summer. That's a real punishment to him," Becky said dryly. "The marina's one of his favorite places." She too, stepped away from the doors. "There's no sense standing here blocking traffic. I'll walk you to your car."

They strolled across the hot, sticky pavement. The heat was smothering, and sweat began to gather almost immediately on his skin. Wryly he waited, seeing Becky's determination plain on her face. The protective older sister wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with him, to make certain he didn't hurt Evie.

They reached the Jeep, and he stored the groceries inside, leaving the door open so some of the heat inside could dissipate. He leaned against the vehicle and calmly eyed her. "You worried about Evie?" he prompted.

She flashed him a rueful look. "Am I that easy to read?"

"She mentioned that you're a bit protective," he murmured.

Becky laughed and pushed her hair out of her face. Her hair was darker than Evie's, but in that moment Robert saw a flash of resemblance, a similarity in expression and in the husky tone of their voices. "The big-sister syndrome," she said. "I didn't use to be this bad, only since—"

She stopped, and Robert felt his curiosity stir. "Since when?"

Becky didn't answer immediately, instead turning her gaze to the traffic on the highway. It was a delaying tactic, to give her time to think and organize her answer. He waited patiently.

"Are you serious about her?" she asked abruptly.

He wasn't accustomed to being interrogated about his intentions, serious or otherwise, but he quelled his surge of irritation. Becky was asking only out

of concern for Evie, an emotion he shared. In a very level tone he said, “I intend to marry her.”
Becky closed her eyes on a sigh of relief. “Thank God,” she said.
“I didn’t realize the state of our relationship was so critical,” he said, still in that cool, dead-level tone.
Becky’s eyes opened, and she gave him a considering look. “You can be very intimidating, can’t you?”
He almost smiled. If he could, it obviously wasn’t working on her. He’d never managed to intimidate Evie, either.
Becky sighed and looked again at the traffic. “I was worried. I didn’t know how important Evie is to you, and… well, the success of your relationship *is* critical to her.”
His curiosity became intense. “In what way?”
Becky didn’t answer that directly, either. Instead she asked, “Has she told you about Matt?”
Robert’s eyes glittered suddenly. “Probably more than even you know,” he said, his voice deepening as he remembered the first time he’d made love to Evie.
“About how he died?”
Sweat trickled down his back, but suddenly nothing could have moved him from the scorching asphalt parking lot. “He died in a car accident, didn’t he?” He couldn’t remember if Evie had told him that, or if it had been in the report he’d requested on Matt Shaw.
“Yes, the day after they married.” She paused, organizing her thoughts, and again she made what appeared to be a shift in topic. “Our father died when Evie was fifteen. I was twenty, already married, already about to be a mother. A year later our mother died. Can you understand the difference in the way losing our parents affected us?” she asked, her voice strained. “I loved them both dearly, but I had built my home with Paul. I had him, I had my son, I had an entire life away from my parents. But losing Daddy shook Evie’s foundations, and then when Mother died… Evie didn’t just lose Mother, she lost her home, too. She came to live with Paul and me, and we loved having her, but it wasn’t the same for her. She was still just a kid, and she had lost the basis of her life.”
Robert stood silently, all his attention on this insight into Evie’s past life. She didn’t talk about her childhood much, he realized. They had talked about a lot of things, sitting on the deck at night with all the lights off and

the starry sky spread like a quilt overhead, but it was as if Evie had closed a mental door on her life before Matt's death.
"But she had Matt," Becky said softly. "He was a great kid. We'd known him all his life, and I can't remember when they hadn't been inseparable, first as buddies, then as sweethearts. They were the same age, but even as young as he was, when Daddy died, Matt was right there beside Evie. He was there with her when Mother died. I think he was her one constant, the only person other than me who had been there for as long as she could remember. But I had my own family, and Evie had Matt. He put a smile back in her eyes, and because she had him, she weathered the loss of our parents. I remember what she was like back then, a giggling teenager as rowdy as Jason is now, and full of mischief."
"I can't picture Evie as rowdy," he commented, because Becky's voice had become strained, and he wanted to give her a moment to compose herself. "There's something so solemn about her."
"Yes, there is," Becky agreed. "Now."
The jealousy he thought he had banished swelled to life again. "Because of Matt's death."
Becky nodded. "She was in the car with him." Tears welled in her eyes. "For the rest of my life, I'll carry two pictures of Evie in my mind. One is of her on her wedding day. She was so young and beautiful—so *glowing*—that it hurt to look at her. Matt couldn't take his eyes off her. The next time I saw her, she was in a hospital bed, lying mere like a broken doll, her eyes so empty that—" She stopped, shuddering.
"They had spent me night in Montgomery and were going on to Panama City the next morning. It was raining. It was Sunday, and they were in a rural area. There wasn't much traffic. A dog ran out into the highway, and they hit it, and Matt lost control of the car. The car left the road and rolled at least twice, then came to a stop, on its right side, in a stand of trees. Evie was pinned on the bottom. Matt was hanging in his seat belt above her. She couldn't get out, couldn't get to him, and he b-bled to death in front of her, his blood dripping down on her. He was conscious, she said." Furiously Becky dashed the tears from her cheeks. "No one saw the car for a long time, what with the rain and the trees blocking the view. He knew he was dying. He told her he loved her. He told her goodbye. He'd been dead for over an hour before anyone saw the car and came to help."

Robert turned to stone, his eyes burning as he pictured, far too clearly, what a young girl had gone through that rainy Sunday. Then he reached out automatically and took Becky in his arms, holding her head against his shoulder while she wept.

"I'm sorry," she finally managed, lifting her head and wiping her eyes yet again. "It's just that, when I let myself think about it, it tears my heart out all over again."

"Yes," he said. Still holding her with one arm, he fished his handkerchief out of his pocket and gently wiped her face.

"She's never let herself love anyone else," she said fiercely. "Do you understand? She hasn't risked letting anyone else get close to her. She's stuck with the people she already loved, before the accident—Paul and me, Jason and Paige, and a few, very few, special friends, but no one else. If you hadn't pulled her and Jason out of the river, she would have drowned rather than let him go, because she couldn't have stood to lose anyone else she loves. She's been so… so *solitary,* keeping everyone a safe distance from her heart."

"Until me," he said.

Becky nodded and managed a wavery little smile. "Until you. I didn't know whether to be glad or terrified, so I've been both. I want her to have what I've got, a husband I love, kids I love, a family that will give her a reason to go on living when someone else dies." She saw the sudden flare in Robert's eyes and said quickly, "No, she never said anything about suicide, not even right after Matt died. That isn't what I meant. She recovered from her injuries—both legs were broken, some ribs, and she had a concussion—and did exactly what the doctors told her, but you could see that she wasn't interested. For *years,* life for her was just going through the motions, and every day was an effort. It took a long time, but finally she found a sort of peace. Evie's incredibly strong. In her place, I don't know if I could have managed it."

Robert kissed Becky's forehead, touched and pleased by this fiercely competent woman's concern for her sister. He would, he realized, like having her for a sister-in-law. "You can put down your shield and sword, and rest," he said gently. "I'll take care of her now."

"You'd better," Becky said, her fierceness not one bit abated. "Because she's already paid too much for loving people. God only knows where she found the courage to love you. I've been terrified that you didn't care about

her, because if you waltzed out of here at the end of the summer, it might well destroy her."
Robert's eyes glittered. "When I waltz out of here," he said, "I'm taking her with me."

Chapter Sixteen

W alter and Helene Campbell were in their mid-sixties, retired, comfortable but not wealthy. Evie's house was just what they wanted, well-built and maintained, but old enough and small enough that her asking price was much less than what they would have paid for a new house on the lakefront. They were both thrilled to the point of giddiness at their unexpected good fortune, for though they had asked several times if she would sell, they had long since given up hope that she would.
They arrived at the marina over half an hour early, their estate agent in tow and bearing a huge sheaf of papers. Having never bought or sold a house before, Evie was struck by the amount of paperwork it evidently required and amazed that the agent had managed to get it all prepared in less than a day.
There weren't sufficient chairs for everyone to sit down, so they stood grouped around the counter. The agent explained the purpose of each document as he presented it first for her signature, then the Campbells'. After an hour of dedicated document-signing, it was finished. Evie had sold her house, and the check was in her hand.
She managed a smile to send the joyous Campbells on their way, but as soon as the door had closed behind them, her smile collapsed. She closed her eyes and shuddered in an effort to control the grief that had been growing since she had made the phone call the day before. No matter that she had told herself it was just a house and she could live anywhere, it was her *home,* and she had just lost part of herself. No, not lost it—sold it.
But the marina was a more important part of her foundation, and the green cashier's check in her hand had just saved it.
She wiped the betraying moisture from her eyes and braced her shoulders. She called Burt and told him she had to go to the bank and would be back in about half an hour. "Okay," he said, as laconic as ever, when she asked him to watch for customers.

The transaction at the bank took very little time. The Campbells' cashier's check was deposited and a new cashier's check cut in the amount she owed on the loan. Tommy Fowler saw her standing at the counter and came out to speak to her, his eyes anxious.
"How're you doing, Evie?"
She heard the worry in his tone and managed a version of the same smile she had given the Campbells. "I'm okay. I have the money to pay the loan."
Relief flooded his face. "Great! That didn't take long. So another bank gave you the mortgage?"
"No, I sold my house."
The relief faded, and he stared at her, aghast. "Sold your house? But, Evie… God, why?"
She wasn't about to tell him, with the teller and other customers listening, that she suspected someone of blocking the mortgage. "It was something I'd been thinking about," she lied. "Now my bank account is healthy, the marina is out of debt and will turn a pure profit, and I can take my time looking for another house."
Varying expressions were flickering across Tommy's face like slides. The final one, a rather uneasy relief, was testament to his belief in her pragmatic lie. "I guess it's worked out, then," he said.
She kept her smile intact with an effort. "Yeah, I guess it has."
The teller handed the check over the counter to her, and she slipped it into the envelope. "I'm getting this mailed today," she said to Tommy. "Thanks for all you did."
"I didn't manage to do anything," he replied.
"Well, no, but you tried."
She left the bank and drove straight to the post office, where the precious envelope was dispatched by express mail. She felt a sense of finality. It was done; she had gotten past this. It hadn't been easy, but now she could move on.
Robert was waiting at the marina when she got back. "Where have you been?" he demanded, striding up as she slid out of the truck.
She blinked at the unguarded fierceness of his tone. Robert was seldom overt in his reactions, except in bed. "The bank and the post office. Why?"
He didn't answer but caught her shoulders in a hard grasp and pulled her to him. His mouth was heavy and hungry, demanding rather than seducing a response from her. Evie made a muffled sound of surprise, her hands lifting

to rest against his chest, but she gave him what he wanted, her mouth opening to admit the thrust of his tongue, her lips shaping to the pressure of his.

Passion rose sharply between them, strong and heady. She hadn't recovered her balance after the difficult events of the day and she melted against him, drawn irresistibly to the whipcord strength of his body. Although a whirlwind was tossing the rest of her life about, he wasn't swayed but remained solidly on his feet and in control. Though she had bitterly resisted —and feared—coming to depend on him, his very presence now made her feel better. She was both aroused and comforted by the familiarity of his body, his warm animal scent, all the subtle details by which she knew her mate.

He drew back, hampered by the public nature of the parking lot. Inside wouldn't be much better, with people coming and going. He threaded his hands through her hair, tilting her face back so he could read every nuance of her expression. He must have been pleased by the drowning look of desire he saw there, for his fingers tightened on her scalp. "Not here, damn it. But as soon as I get you home…" He didn't have to finish the sentence. Raw lust was on his face and in his voice, violent and intense.

Recalled to where she was, Evie cast a half-embarrassed look around and touched his hand as she slipped from his grasp. How many hours until they could go home? She didn't know if she could wait that long. Her body was throbbing.

The long afternoon was an exercise in self-control, and she wished the summer days weren't quite so long. She needed Robert, needed his driving presence within her, taking her into oblivion so she could forget everything but the almost narcotic pleasure of making love with him. She felt raw, her emotions sharp and too near the surface.

It was difficult, when she was finally able to close the marina that night, to hold to the schedule they had established. Robert wanted to take her straight to his house, but she resisted. "I don't want to leave my truck here overnight," she said. "You'd either have to bring me to pick it up in the morning or waste your morning hanging around so you could drive me to work."

"It wouldn't be a waste," he growled, his lean face taut, and she knew what he envisioned them doing to pass the time.

Temptation weakened her, but she shook her head again. “It would be so blatant, if my truck was still here and you brought me to work. Craig—”
“You’re worried about Craig knowing that we sleep together?” he asked, amusement lighting his eyes. “He’s seventeen, sweetheart, not seven.”
“I know, but… this isn’t New York. We’re more conventional down here.”
He was still smiling, but he gave in with good grace. “All right, protect his tender sensibilities, though I have to tell you that most teenage boys have the sensibility of a rhino in heat.”
She laughed, and it felt good, her heart lightening. “Then let’s just say that *I* wouldn’t feel comfortable.”
He kissed her forehead. “Then go home, sweetheart. I bought some fillets this afternoon, and I’ll get them ready to grill before I pick you up.”
“I have a better idea,” she said. “You start grilling, and I’ll drive over. That will save even more time.”
He smiled again as he rubbed his thumb over her lower lip in a gentle caress. “You make me feel like a teenage rhino myself,” he murmured, and she blushed.
Anticipation heated her blood as she drove home, preoccupying her so much that she showered and dressed without more than a twinge of sadness. Her heartbeat pounded in the rhythm of his name.
It was still hot, so hot that she couldn’t bear the idea of encasing her legs in clothing, but she didn’t want to wear shorts. She opted instead for a gauzy blue skirt and a sleeveless, scoop-necked chemise, with her breasts unconfined beneath. The floaty skirt was virtually transparent, clearly showing her legs, but allowed air to filter through the flimsy fabric and cool her skin. She would never have worn it out in public, but to Robert’s house… yes, definitely.
He came to the door when he heard the truck in his driveway. His face tightened as he watched her walk toward him. “God,” he muttered. As soon as she was inside, he slammed the door and caught her arm, pulling her rapidly down the hall to the bedroom.
“What about the steaks?” she cried, startled by his haste despite the pleasant frustration of the afternoon.
“Screw the steaks,” he said bluntly, wrapping his arms around her and falling across the bed. His heavy weight crushed her into the mattress. With a quick motion he flipped the skirt to her waist and caught the waistband of

her panties, tugging them down her legs. When her feet were free, he tossed her underwear aside and pulled her thighs apart, kneeling between them.
Evie laughed, the sound low and provocative. He hadn't even kissed her, and her entire body was throbbing. He was tearing at his belt buckle with impatient fingers, and she added her hands to the confusion, trying to find the tab of his zipper and pull it down. She could feel the hard, swollen ridge of his sex, pushing at his clothing. He granted as his length sprang free and lowered himself between her legs.
No matter how many times he took her, she always felt a small sense of surprise at his size and heat, and a flutter of uncertainty at the stretching sensation that followed the initial pressure as he sank deep within. She gasped, her entire body lifting to the impact. She was tender from the unbridled lovemaking of the morning, his thrusting sex rasping against inner tissues that were sensitive to the least touch. Intense pleasure rippled through her, tossing her unprepared into paroxysms of satisfaction. She cried out, her hands digging into his back as the shivery delight went on and on, past bearing, until she thought she would die if he didn't let the pleasure ebb. He was muttering hotly in her ear, sex words, the sound indistinct but the meaning clear.
And then he shuddered, too, holding himself deep as the spasms took him. Afterward, he lay heavily on her, both of them breathing deeply in the exhausted aftermath. Drowsily she let her eyes drift shut, only to open them again as he suddenly chuckled, the small movement shaking them both.
"Definitely like a teenager," he murmured, nuzzling the lobe of her ear before taking it between his teeth and gently biting it. "No matter how often I have you, I want you again almost as soon as I move off you. The only time I'm satisfied is when we're like this." He thrust lazily, their bodies still linked.
"Then let's stay like this." She ran her hands down his muscular back, feeling the heat of him through the fabric of his shirt. "Someone will find us in a couple of weeks."
He laughed and kissed her. "They'd probably think, wow, what a way to go, but I'd prefer both of us being warm and pliable. If I want to keep you that way, I suppose I'd better feed you, hadn't I?" He kissed her again and rolled away to sit up.
She stretched, replete, the afternoon's aching frustration relieved. Even the hollowness in her chest had faded, though by no means vanished. She had

never had this before, she thought dimly, this bone-deep sense of connection. And she wouldn't have it now if Robert had been less ruthlessly determined to have his way.

They spent the next couple of hours grilling the steaks, then sitting out on the deck after they had eaten and cleaned the kitchen. The night was thick and warm, the temperature still in the high eighties. Robert stretched out on a chaise longue and pulled Evie down on top of him. There were no lights on in the house, and the concealing darkness was like a blanket. They lay there in the heavy, peaceful silence, with his hand slowly moving over her back. Slowly his caresses grew more purposeful, and Evie melted against him. Her chemise top was lifted off over her head and dropped to the deck. She hadn't put her underwear back on, so when his hand moved under the gauzy skirt, he touched only the bare flesh of her thighs and buttocks. He cupped the twin mounds in his hands and held her hard against him, nestling his arousal in the soft junction of her thighs.

"You have on too many clothes," she murmured, kissing the underside of his jaw.

"You, on the other hand, hardly have on any."

"Whose fault is that?" Her wandering mouth nibbled down his neck. "I was completely dressed when I arrived here."

"I wouldn't say that, sweetheart. Even if your nipples hadn't been sticking out like little berries, the delicious jiggle of your breasts when you walked made it obvious you weren't wearing anything under your top. And this thing," he continued lazily, grasping a handful of material, "doesn't qualify as a skirt." Tiring of her mouth being on his throat rather than his own mouth, he pulled her up for a long kiss, during which his own clothing was opened and removed. Sighing with pleasure, she lifted the skirt out of the way and settled over him, gasping a little as he slid inside her.

Then they lay quietly again, bodies linked, content with the sensation as it was. The lights of a night fisherman drifted by on the lake, but they were shielded by the darkness. Sometime later it became difficult to lie still. Hidden impulses twinged deep inside, inviting undulating movement. She resisted, but knew he was feeling the same compulsion. He was growing even harder, reaching deeper into her, and a fine tension invaded his muscles as he lay motionless beneath her.

She pressed her forehead hard against his jaw, fighting not to move. He throbbed inside her, and she moaned softly. Her inner muscles clenched in

helpless delight on his invading length, then did so again, and her soft cries floated in the night air as the moment took her. In an effort to control his own reaction, Robert gripped her bottom hard, his teeth clenched against the almost overwhelming need to give in. He won, but sweat beaded on his forehead from the struggle.

When she stilled, he lifted her from him and bent her over the end of the chaise. He knelt behind her, his thighs cupping hers, and thrust heavily into her moist, relaxed sheath. She clung to the chaise, unable to stifle her moans of pleasure as his rhythmic motion increased in speed and power. He convulsed, flooding her with warmth, and lay heavily over her for a long time, while his breathing slowed and his heartbeat returned to normal. Recovered, he gathered their scattered clothing and pushed it into her arms, then lifted her and carried her inside, to the big bed that awaited them.

They slept late the next morning, until after nine o'clock. She yawned and stretched like a sleepy cat, and Robert held her close, stroking her tangled hair away from her face. As usual, he had awakened her at dawn with silent, drowsy lovemaking; then they had both gone back to sleep.

With a quick kiss and a lingering pat on her bare bottom, he left the bed and headed toward his shower. Evie yawned again and got up herself. She slipped into his shirt as she went to the kitchen to make coffee. "Robert, you need an automatic timer on your coffeemaker," she muttered to herself as she scooped the coffee into the round filter. Not that they would ever remember to prepare the coffee and set the timer before they went to bed. Standing there in the sun-drenched kitchen, listening to the coffeemaker pop and hiss, she became aware that she felt strangely light, almost carefree. She hugged herself in an effort to contain the elusive feeling. She was happy, she thought with some surprise. Despite selling the house, she was happy. She had saved the marina, and she had Robert. Most of all, she had Robert

Her love for him quietly grew each time she was with him. He was such a complicated, controlled, private man; no matter how often he made love to her, he still kept that inner core of himself inviolate, not allowing her or anyone else inside. Knowing that had no effect on the way she felt about him. He hadn't opened his heart to her, but that in no way made him less worthy of love. He might never love her, she realized. But if this was all he could give a woman, then she would take it.

A ringing interrupted the quiet. It sounded like a telephone, but the phone mere in the kitchen definitely wasn't ringing, and this sound was muffled, as if it were in a different room. The line in Robert's office must be a different number, she realized. He was in the shower and wouldn't be able to hear it. It rang only once, though, and she realized that the answering machine there must have picked up the call.

She walked down the hall to the office and opened the door. The whirring sound of the fax machine greeted her. So it hadn't been a call, after all, but a fax.

The machine stopped whirring and lapsed into silence after having spat out only one sheet of paper. As she turned to go, her eye was caught by a name on the page, and curiously she turned back.

It was her name that had caught her attention.

The message was brief. "Mr. Horowitz just reported that a cashier's check from E. Shaw, in full payment of the outstanding amount, was delivered by express mail and received by him. His hands are tied. Further instructions?" The scrawled signature looked like "F. Koury."

Evie picked up the page and read it again. At first she was merely puzzled. Why would this F. Koury be telling Robert that she had paid the loan? And why would Mr. Horowitz be reporting it at all? Robert didn't even know about the loan, much less the threat of foreclosure.

Her mind stopped, along with her breathing. She hung there, paralyzed by a sickening realization. Robert knew all about it because he was the one who had been blocking her efforts to mortgage the house. He was also the reason why her loan had been bought, and why Mr. Horowitz had been so intractable in demanding full payment. He had been instructed to give her no cooperation at all, instructed by Robert Cannon. Her lover was her enemy.

Her chest was hurting. She gasped and resumed breathing, but the pain remained, a cold, heavy lump in her chest. The sense of betrayal was suffocating.

Obviously Robert was far wealthier and more powerful than she had imagined, to have this much influence, she thought with detached calm. She didn't know why he wanted her marina, but he obviously did. There were a lot of why's she couldn't comprehend, particularly right now. Maybe later, when she could think better, some of this would make sense.

Right now, all she could think was that Robert had tried to take over her marina and had cost her her home.
That distance she had sensed in him had been all too real. He hadn't committed his heart because, for him, it had all been business. Had he seduced her simply so he could stay close and keep tabs on what she was doing? Given what else he had done, that seemed to her like a reasonable assumption.
Her lips felt numb, and her legs moved like an automaton's as she left the office, carefully closing the door behind her. The damning fax was still in her hand as she returned to the kitchen.
The hopeless enormity of the situation overwhelmed her. How ironic that she had fallen in love with the man who was coolly trying to destroy her! Oh, she doubted he looked at it in such melodramatic terms, but then, he probably saw the whole thing as a successful business takeover, rather than a love affair.
She heard the shower cut off. With slow, achingly precise movements, she folded the fax and dropped it into the trash, then poured a cup of coffee. She desperately needed the caffeine, or anything, to bolster her. Her hands were shaking slightly as she lifted the cup to her lips.
She was standing in front of the window when Robert came into the kitchen a few moments later, wearing only a pair of jeans and still rubbing a towel across his chest. He stopped, his entire body clenching at the sight of her. God, she was breathtaking, with her mane of tawny gold hair loose and tousled. She was wearing only his shirt, and it was unbuttoned. There had never been another garment invented, he thought with a surge of desire, that looked better on a woman than a man's shirt. She was sipping coffee and looking out the window, lost in thought, her expression as calm and remote as a statue's.
He dropped the towel and went to her, sliding one arm around her as he took the cup and lifted it to his own lips. He imagined he could taste her on the rim, but then, his senses were so attuned to her that he could pick her out of a crowd blindfolded.
No woman had ever responded to him the way Evie did. She was pure fire in his arms, reveling in every thrust, tempting more from him. If he was gentle, she melted. If he was rough in his passion, she clung to him, clawed at him, her soaring desire feeding his own until they were both frenzied with need. He wanted her incessantly.

He smoothed his hand over the curve of her bottom, delighting in the silky texture of her flesh. “The shower’s all yours, sweetheart.”
“All right,” she said automatically, but he had the impression she didn’t really hear him. She was still looking out the window.
He tipped his head to see if he could tell what had her so interested. He saw only a wide expanse of lake, dotted with a few boats. “What are you looking at?”
“Nothing. Just the lake.” She turned away from his embrace and left the kitchen.
Robert’s brows briefly knit in puzzlement, but he was hungry, and breakfast took precedence at the moment. He had scarcely gotten the bacon started when Evie reappeared in the kitchen, fully dressed, and with her keys in her hand.
“A fax came in while you were in the shower,” she said quietly.
He turned, going still at what he saw in her face—or rather, what he didn’t see. She was pale and expressionless, her eyes empty. With a chill, he remembered how Becky had described the look in Evie’s eyes after the accident and he knew it must have been something like this. She looked so terribly remote, as if she had somehow already left.
“Who was it from?” he asked, keeping his voice gentle while his mind raced, sorting through the possibilities, all of them damning. The worst-case scenario was if she was indeed working with Mercer and had found out that the trap was closing tight about them.
“An F. Koury.”
“Ah.” He nodded, concealing a sense of relief. “My secretary.” Probably it had nothing to do with Mercer, then, but why was Evie looking so frozen?
“It’s there in the trash, if you want to read it, but I can tell you what it said.”
He leaned against the cabinet and crossed his arms, eyeing her carefully.
“All right. Tell me.”
“Mr. Horowitz notified your secretary that he’d received a cashier’s check from E. Shaw for payment in full of the loan, and that his hands were tied. She asked for further instructions.”
Robert’s expression didn’t change, but inwardly he was swearing viciously. Of all the things for Evie to stumble onto! It was less damaging, from a security standpoint, than anything connected with Mercer would have been, but a hell of a thing to try to explain to a lover. He’d never intended her to know about it. The pressure had been real, but he would never have let it go

to foreclosure. He didn’t rush into explanations but waited for her reaction so he could better gauge what to say to her. And how in hell had she managed to get the money to pay the loan?

“You’re the reason I couldn’t get a mortgage on my house,” she said, her voice so strained it was almost soundless.

She’d put it together quickly, he thought. But then, from the beginning, she’d proven herself to be uncomfortably astute. “Yes,” he said, disdaining to lie.

“You’re behind the loan being sold to another bank in the first place.”

He inclined his head and waited.

She was gripping the keys so tightly that her fingers were white. He noted that small giveaway of emotion held in check. She took several shallow breaths, then managed to speak again. “I want your boat gone from my marina by the end of the day. I’ll refund the balance of the rent.”

“No,” he said gently, implacably. “I’m holding you to the agreement.”

She didn’t waste her breath on an argument she couldn’t win. She had hoped he would have the decency to do as she asked, but given his ruthless streak, she hadn’t really expected it.

“Then leave it there,” she said, her voice as empty as her eyes. “But don’t call me again, because I don’t want to talk to you. Don’t come by, because I don’t want to see you.”

Sharply he searched her expression, looking for a way to penetrate the wall she had thrown up between them. “You won’t get rid of me that easily. I know you’re angry, but—”

She laughed, but it was raw and hollow, not a sound of amusement. Robert winced. “Is that how you’ve decided to ‘handle’ me? I can see you watching me, trying to decide which angle to take to calm me down,” she said. “You never just react, do you? You watch and weigh other people’s reactions so you can manipulate them.” She heard the strain in her voice and paused to regain control of it. “No, I’m not angry. Maybe in fifty years or so, it’ll just be anger.” She turned on her heel and started for the door.

“Evie!” His voice cracked like a whiplash, and despite herself, she stopped, shivering at the force of will he commanded. This wasn’t the cool strategist speaking but the ruthless conqueror.

“How did you pay off the loan?” The words were still sharp.

Slowly she looked at him over her shoulder, her eyes dark and unguarded for a moment, stark with pain. “I sold my house,” she said, and walked out.

Chapter Seventeen

Robert started to go after her, then stopped. Instead he swore and hit the countertop with his fist. He couldn't explain anything to her, not yet. Every instinct in his body screamed for him to stop her, but he forced himself to let her go. He stood rigidly, listening as the truck door slammed and the motor started. She didn't spin the wheels or anything like that; she simply backed out of the driveway and drove away without histrionics.

God! *She had sold her house.* The desperation of the action staggered him, and with sudden, blinding clarity he knew, beyond the faintest doubt, that she wasn't involved with Mercer in any way. A woman who could make money by espionage would never have sold her home to pay a debt. She had appeared to be leaving the marina and meeting with Mercer on the lake, but it must have been nothing more than damnable coincidence. Evie was totally innocent, and his machinations had cost her her home.

She wouldn't listen to anything he said right now, but after he had the espionage ring broken up and Mercer safely behind bars, he would force her to understand why he had threatened foreclosure on her loan. That he had suspected her of espionage was another rocky shoal he would have to navigate with care. He didn't imagine it would be easy to get back into her good graces, but in the end he would have her, because he didn't take no for an answer when he really wanted something. And he wanted Evie as he had never wanted anything or anyone else in his life.

He would have to make amends, of course, far beyond apologies and explanations. Evie was the least mercenary person he'd ever met, but she had a strong sense of justice, and an offer of reparation would strike a chord with her. He could buy her house from the new owners—they probably wouldn't be willing to sell at first, but he cynically suspected that doubling the price would change their minds—and present her with the deed, but he far preferred that she have a newer, bigger house. The simplest thing would be to deed over his own house to her. It meant nothing *to* him, he could buy a house anywhere he wanted, but Evie needed a base that was hers and hers alone. It would be a vacation home, a getaway when they needed a break from the hubbub of New York, a place for her to stay when she wanted to visit Becky.

He fished the damning fax out of the trash and read it. Three concise sentences, Felice at her most efficient. There was nothing more he could do

about the loan; realizing that, she had deprioritized it and sent the information by fax so he could have it immediately but respond at his leisure, rather than calling and wasting both his time and hers. Felice was a genius at whittling precious seconds here and there so she would have more time to devote to the truly important matters. In this instance, however, her knack for superefficiency had worked against him and perhaps cost him Evie.

No. No matter what, he wouldn't let Evie go.

Evie drove automatically, holding herself together with desperate control. She tried to empty her mind, but it wasn't possible. How could she be so numb but hurt so much at the same time? She literally ached, as if she had been beaten, yet felt somehow divorced from her body. She had never felt as remote as she did now, or as cold and hollow. The heat of the sun washed over her, but it didn't touch her. Even her bones felt cold and empty.

Why? She hadn't asked him that and couldn't think of a reason that would matter. The why of it wasn't important. The hard fact was that he had sought her out for a reason that had nothing to do with love or even attraction, used the intimacy he had deliberately sought as a means to gather information that he wanted, and men turned that knowledge against her.

How had he known about the loan in the first place? She supposed it was possible a credit report would have given him the information, but a far more likely explanation was that he had simply taken a look through the papers in her desk at home. There had been ample opportunity for him to do so; the very first time he had been in her house, she remembered, was when he had brought her home to change clothes after Jason had fallen in the water, and she had left him alone while she showered and changed.

She didn't know why he had targeted her marina, and she didn't care. She marked it down to simple avarice, the greedy impulse to take what belonged to others.

She hadn't known him at all.

She was still calm and dry-eyed when she reached her house. No—not her house any longer, but the Campbells'. Dazed, she unlocked the door and walked inside, looked at the familiar form and content of her home, and bolted for the bathroom. She hung over the toilet and vomited up the little coffee she had swallowed, but the dry, painful heaves continued long after her stomach was emptied.

When the spasms finally stopped, she slumped breathless to the floor. She had no idea how long she lay there, in a stupor of exhaustion and pain, but after a while she began to cry. She curled into a ball, tucking her legs up in an effort to make herself as small as possible, and shuddered with the violent, rasping sobs that tore through her. She cried until she made herself sick and vomited again.

It was a long time before she climbed shakily to her feet. Her eyelids were swollen and sore, but she was calm, so calm and remote that she wondered if she would ever be able to feel anything again. God, she hoped not!

She stripped, dropping her clothes to the floor. She would throw them out later; she never wanted to see that skirt again, or any other garment she had worn that night. She was shivering as she climbed into the shower, where she stood for a long time, letting the hot water beat down on her, but the heat sluiced off her skin just like the water, none of it soaking in to thaw the bone-deep cold that shook her.

She would have stood there all day, paralyzed by the mind-numbing pain, but at last the hot water began to go and the chill forced her out. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed, close her eyes and forget, but that wasn't an option. She wouldn't forget. She would never forget. She could stay in the shower forever, but it wouldn't wash his touch off her flesh or his image out of her mind.

He had never wanted her at all. He had wanted the marina.

The marina. Her mind fastened on it with desperate gratitude. She still had the marina, had salvaged something from the ruin Robert Cannon had made of her life. No matter how much damage he had done, he hadn't won.

The habits of years took over as she moved slowly about, getting ready to go to work. After towel-drying her hair, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror to brush out the tangles and braid it. Her own face looked back at her, white and blank, her eyes dark, empty pools. Losing Matt had been devastating, but she had carried the knowledge of his love deep inside. This time she had nothing. The care Robert had shown her had been an illusion, carefully fostered to deceive her. The passion between them, at least on his part, had been nothing more than a combination of mere sex and his own labyrinthine plotting. The man could give lessons to Machiavelli.

He had destroyed the protective shield that had encased her for so many years. She had thought she couldn't bear any more pain, but now she was learning that her capacity for pain went far beyond imagination. She

wouldn’t die from it, after all; she would simply rebuild the shield, stronger than before, so that it could never be penetrated again. It would take time, but she had time; she had the rest of her life to remember Robert Cannon and how he had used her.

She hid her sore, swollen eyes behind a pair of sunglasses and carefully drove to the marina, not wanting to have an accident because she wasn’t paying attention. She refused to die in a car accident and give Cannon the satisfaction of winning.

When she drove up to the marina, everything looked strangely normal. She sat in the truck, staring at it for a few seconds, bewildered by the sameness of it. So much had happened in such a short time that it seemed as if she had been gone for weeks, rather than overnight. No matter what, she still had this.

Robert prowled the house like a caged panther, enraged by the need to wait. Waiting was alien to him; his instinct was to make a cold, incisive decision and act on it. The knowledge of the pain Evie must be feeling, and what she must be thinking, ate at him like acid. He could make it up to her for the house, but could he heal the hurt? Every hour he was away from her, every hour that passed with her thinking he had betrayed her, would deepen the wound. Only the certainty that she would refuse to listen to him now kept him from going after her. When Mercer was in jail, when he had the proof of what he’d been doing and could tell her the why, then she would listen to him. She might slap his face, but she would listen.

It was almost three o’clock when the phone rang. “Mercer’s moving early,” his operative barked. “He panicked and called them from the office. No dead drop this time. He told them that he needed the money immediately. It’s a live handoff, sir. We can catch the bastards red-handed!”

“Where is he now?”

“About halfway to Guntersville, the way he was driving. We have a tail on him. I’m on the way, but it’ll take me another twenty-five minutes to get there.”

“All right. Use the tracking device and get there as fast as you can. I’ll go to the marina now and get ahead of him. He’s never seen my boat, so he won’t spot me.”

“Be careful, sir. You’ll be outnumbered until we can get there.”

Robert smiled grimly as he hung up the phone. Everything he needed was in the boat: weapons, camera, binoculars and tape recorder. Mercer’s ass was

in a sling now.
He drove to the marina, ignoring the speed laws. He only hoped Evie wouldn't come out when she saw him and do something foolish like cause a scene. He didn't have time for it, and he sure as hell didn't want to attract any attention. He tried to imagine Evie causing a scene, but the idea was incongruous. No, she wouldn't do that; it wasn't her style at all. She would simply look through him as if he didn't exist. But when he reached the marina, he didn't take any chances. He went straight to the dock where his boat was moored, not even glancing at the office.
Evie heard him drive up. She knew the sound of that Jeep as intimately as she knew her own heartbeat. She froze, trying to brace herself for the unbearable, but the seconds ticked past and the door didn't open. When she forced herself to turn and look out the window, she caught a glimpse of his tall, lean figure striding purposefully down the dock toward his boat. A minute later she heard the deep cough of the powerful motor, and the sleek black boat eased out of its slip. As soon as he was out of the Idle Speed Only zone, he shoved the throttle forward, and the nose of the boat rose like a rearing stallion as the craft shot over the water, gaining speed with every second.
She couldn't believe how much it hurt just to see him.
Landon Mercer walked in ten minutes later. Loathing rose in her throat, choking her, and it was all she could do to keep from screaming at him. Today, though, there was none of the slimy come-on attitude he thought was so irresistible; he was pale, his face strained. He was wearing slacks and a white dress shirt, the collar unbuttoned. Sweat beaded on his forehead and upper lip. He carried the same tackle box, but no rod and reel.
"Got a boat for me, Evie?" he asked, trying to smile, but it was little more than a grimace.
She chose a key and gave it to him. "Use the one on the end."
"Thanks. I'll pay you when I get back, okay?" He was already going out the door when he spoke.
Something in her snapped. It was a quiet snap, but suddenly she had had enough. Mercer was definitely up to no good, and today he hadn't even made the pretense of going fishing. The marina was all she had left, and if that bastard was dealing drugs and dragged her into it by using her boats, she might lose the marina after all.
Over her dead body.

It was too much, all the events of the day piling on top of her. She wasn't thinking when she strode out to the truck and retrieved her pistol from under the seat, then hurried to her own boat. If she had been thinking, she would have called the police or the water patrol, but none of that came to mind. Still reeling from shock, she could focus on only one thing—stopping Mercer.

Robert had positioned his boat where he could see Mercer leave the marina and fall in behind him without attracting his notice. The tracking device was working perfectly, the beeping increasing in speed as Mercer approached his position, then decreasing as the rental boat sped past. Not wanting to get too close and scare off the people Mercer was meeting, he started the motor and began idling forward, letting Mercer put more distance between them. Another boat was coming up fast on the left, intersecting his path at a right angle. There was enough space that Robert didn't have to back off his speed, and he kept his eye on the diminishing dot on Mercer's boat. Then the other boat flashed across his line of vision, and he saw a long blond braid bouncing as the boat took the waves.

Evie! His heart leapt into his throat, almost choking him. Her appearance stunned him; then, suddenly, he knew. *She was following Mercer!* That was what she'd been doing all along. With that unsettling intuition of hers, she had known that Mercer was up to no good and had taken it upon herself to try to find out what it was. He even knew her reasoning: by using one of her boats, Mercer was involving her marina. Robert knew better than most to what lengths she would go to protect that place. She would give up her home, and she would risk her life.

Swearing savagely, he picked up the secure phone and punched in the number even as he pushed the throttle forward. "Evie is following Mercer," he snarled when the call was answered on half a ring. "She's on our side. Pass the word and make damn sure no one fires on her by mistake!"

His blood ran cold at the thought. None of his people would shoot at her, but what about the others?

* * * * *

Mercer was heading toward the islands again, as she had known he would. She kept about five hundred yards between them, enough distance that her presence wouldn't worry him, at least not yet. She would close the gap in a hurry when he reached the islands and slowed down.

The pistol lay in her lap. It was a long-barreled .45 caliber, very accurate, and she not only had a license to carry it, she knew how to use it. Whatever Mercer was doing, it was going to stop today.

There was another boat anchored between two of the smaller islands, two men inside it. Mercer didn't take his usual circuitous route around and through the islands, but headed straight toward the other boat. Grimly Evie increased her speed and followed.

Mercer pulled up alongside the other boat and immediately passed the tackle box over. Evie saw one of the men point to her as she neared, and Mercer turned to look. She wasn't wearing a hat or sunglasses, and though her hair was braided, she knew she was easily recognizable as a woman. But she didn't care if Mercer recognized her, because the time for stealth was past.

The fact that she was a woman, and alone, made them less cautious than they should have been. Mercer was standing, his feet braced against the gentle rocking of the boat. Confident that they hadn't been caught doing anything suspicious, he said something in a low tone to the two other men, then raised his voice to call to her. "Evie, is something wrong?"

She waved to allay any suspicions. She was still twenty yards away. She eased the throttle into neutral, knowing that the boat would continue nosing forward for several yards even without power. Then, very calmly, she lifted the pistol and pointed it at the man holding the tackle box.

"Don't make me nervous," she said. "Put the tackle box down."

The man hesitated, darting a petrified look at his partner, who was still behind the wheel of the boat. Mercer was frozen, staring at her and the huge pistol in her hand.

"Evie," he said, his voice shaking a little. "Listen, we'll cut you in. There's a hell of a lot of money—"

She ignored him. "I told you to put the box down," she said to the man who was holding it. Her mind still wasn't functioning clearly. All she could think was that if he dropped the tackle box into the river, the evidence would sink and there wouldn't be any way of proving what he was doing. She had no idea how she would manage to get three men and three different boats to the authorities, but there was a lot of boat traffic on the river this afternoon, and eventually someone would come over this way.

Another boat was coming up behind her already, way too fast. Mercer's attention switched to it, and a sick look spread over his face, but Evie didn't

let her attention waver from the man holding the tackle box. A sleek black boat appeared in her peripheral vision, nosing up to the side of the boat holding the two men. Robert rose from the seat, holding the steering wheel steady with his knee as he leveled a pistol on the three men, his two-fisted grip holding the weapon dead level despite the rocking of the boat.

"Don't even twitch a muscle," he said, and the tone of his voice made Evie risk a quick glance at him. The facade of urbanity had fallen completely away, and he made no attempt now to disguise his true nature. The lethal pistol in his hand looked like a natural extension of his arm, as if he had handled weapons so often it was automatic to him now. His face was hard and set, and his eyes held the cold ferocity of a hunting panther.

The waves made by Robert's boat were washing the others closer together, inexorably sweeping Evie's boat forward to collide with them. "Look out," she warned sharply, dropping one hand to the throttle to put her motor into reverse, to counteract the force of the waves. The two other boats bumped together with staggering force, sending Mercer plunging into the river. The man holding the tackle box cursed and flailed his arms, fighting for balance, and dropped the box. It fell into the bottom of the boat. Robert's attention was splintered, and in that instant the driver of the boat reached beneath the console and pulled out his own weapon, firing as soon as he had it clear.

Evie screamed, her heart stopping as she tried to bring her pistol around. Robert ducked to the side, and the bullet tore a long gouge out of the fiberglass hull. Going down on one knee, he fired once, and the driver fell back, screaming in pain.

The second man dived sideways into the rental boat. Mercer was clinging to the side, screaming in panic as the man hunched low in the boat and turned the ignition key. The motor coughed into life, and the boat leapt forward. Knowing she couldn't get a good shot at a moving target, especially with her own boat still rocking, Evie dropped the pistol and shoved the throttle back into forward gear. The two boats collided with a grinding force that splintered the fiberglass of both craft, her more powerful motor shoving her boat on top of the other. The impact tossed her out of the seat, and she hit the water with a force that knocked her senseless.

She recovered consciousness almost immediately but was dazed by the shock. She was underwater, the surface only a lighter shade of murky green. There was a great roaring in her ears, and a vibration that seemed to go straight through her. Boats, she thought dimly, and terror shot through her

as she realized how much danger she was in. If the drivers couldn't see her, they might drive right over her, and the propeller would cut her to pieces. She clawed desperately for the surface, kicking for all she was worth. Her head cleared the water, and she gulped in air, but there was a boat almost on top of her, and she threw herself to the side. Someone in the boat yelled, and she heard Robert's deep voice roaring, but she couldn't understand his words. Her ears were full of water, and dizziness made everything dim. If she passed out, she thought, she would drown. She blinked the water out of her eyes and saw the wreckage of the two boats, not five yards away. She struggled toward it and shakily hooked her arm over the side of the rental boat. It was very low in the water and would probably sink within half an hour, but for now it was afloat, and that was all that mattered.

The boat that had almost hit her was idling closer. Two men were in it, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. The driver brought the boat around sideways to her, and the other man leaned out, his arm outstretched to her. The sunlight glinted off a badge pinned to the waistband of his jeans. Evie released the rental boat and swam the few feet to the other craft. The man caught her arms, and she was hauled out of the water and into the boat. She sank down onto the floor. The man knelt beside her. His voice was anxious. "Are you all right, Mrs. Shaw?"

She was panting from exertion, gulping air in huge quantities, so she merely nodded. She wasn't hurt, just dazed from the impact, so dazed that it was a minute before she could wonder how he knew her name.

"She's okay!" she heard him yell.

Gradually her confusion faded, and things began to sort themselves out. She remained quietly in the bottom of the boat, propped against one of the seats, and watched as the two men in the water were hauled out and roughly handcuffed, and the man Robert had shot was given medical aid. Though pale and hunched over, he was still upright and conscious, so Evie assumed he would live.

Four more boats had arrived, each of them carrying a team of two men, and all of those men wore badges, either pinned to their jeans or hung around their necks. She heard one of them briskly identify himself to Mercer as FBI and assumed that they all were.

Other boats who had seen the commotion on the water were approaching but stopped at a short distance when they noticed the badges. "Y'all need

any help with those boats?" one fisherman called. "We can keep 'em afloat and haul 'em to a marina, if you want."
She saw one agent glance at Robert, as if for permission, then say, "Thanks, we'd appreciate your help." Several of the fishermen idled forward and added their boats to the snarl.
Evie resisted the urge to look at Robert, though she could feel his hard, glittering gaze on her several times. For the rest of her life she would remember the cold terror she'd felt when that man had shot at him and she had thought she would have to watch another man she loved die in front of her. The devastation she'd been feeling all day, bad as it was, paled in comparison to that horror. Robert didn't want her, had used her, but at least he was alive. Reaction was setting in, and fine tremors were starting to ripple through her body.
The mopping-up seemed to take forever, so long that her sopping clothes began to dry, as stiff as cardboard from the river water. The wounded man was placed in another boat and taken for further medical attention, with two agents in attendance. Mercer and the other man were taken away next, both of them handcuffed. There was a lot of maneuvering around the two wrecked boats as the salvaging continued. Gathering her strength, she took control of the boat she was in, while the driver added his efforts to the job. Finally, though, it all seemed to be winding down. Robert brought his boat alongside the one Evie was handling.
"Are you all right?" he asked sharply.
She didn't look at him. "I'm fine."
He raised his voice. "Lee, get this boat. I'm taking Evie back to the marina."
Immediately the agent clambered back into the boat, and Evie relinquished her place behind the wheel. She didn't want to go anywhere with Robert, however, and looked around for anyone else she knew.
"Get in the boat," he said, his voice steely, and rather than make a fool of herself, she did. There was no way to avoid him, if he was determined to force the issue. If he wanted to discuss private matters, then she would prefer that they were private when he did.
Nothing was said on the ride back to the marina. The black boat moved like oiled silk over the choppy waves, but still every small bump jolted her head. She closed her eyes, trying to contain the nausea rising in her throat.

As Robert throttled down to enter the marina, he glanced over at her and swore as he took in her closed eyes and pale, strained face. “Damn it, you *are* hurt!”

Immediately she opened her eyes and stared resolutely ahead. “It’s just reaction.”

Coming down off an adrenaline high could leave a person feeling weak and sick, so he accepted the explanation for now but made a mental note to keep an eye on her for a while.

He idled the boat into his slip, and Evie climbed onto the dock before he could get out and assist her. True daughter of the river that she was, she automatically tied the lines to the hooks set in the wood, the habits of a lifetime taking precedence over her emotions. The boat secured, she turned without a word and headed toward the office.

Burt was behind the counter when she entered, and a look of intense relief crossed his lined face, followed by surprise and then concern when he saw her condition. It went against his grain to ask personal questions, so the words came reluctantly out of his throat, as if he were forcing them. “Did the boat flip? Are you all right?”

Two questions in a row from Burt? She needed to mark this date on her calendar. “I’m all right, just a little shaken up,” she said, wondering how many more times that day she would have to say those words. “The boat’s wrecked, though. Some guys are bringing it in.”

Robert opened the door behind her, and Burt’s expression went full cycle, back to relief. “I’ll get back to the shop, then. How long do you reckon it’ll take ‘em to get the boat here?”

“About an hour,” Robert answered for her. “They’ll have to idle in.” He went to the soft-drink machine and fed in quarters, then pushed the button. With a clatter, the bottle rolled down into the slot, and he deftly popped off the top.

“Well, don’t make no difference. I reckon I’ll stay until they get here.” Burt left the unnatural surroundings of the office and headed back to where he felt most comfortable, leaving the oily smell of grease behind.

Evie walked behind the counter and sat down, wanting to put something between herself and Robert. It didn’t work, of course; he knew all the moves, all the stratagems. He came behind the counter, too, and propped himself against it with his long legs outstretched and crossed at the ankle.

He held out the Coke. “Drink this. You’re a little shocky and need the sugar.”
He was probably right. She shrugged and took the bottle, remembering another time when she’d been fished out of the water, and how he had insisted she drink very sweet coffee. The last thing she wanted to do was faint at his feet, so she tilted the bottle and drank.
He watched until he was satisfied that she was going to follow his orders, then said, “Mercer was manager of my computer programming firm in Huntsville. We’ve been working on programs for the space station, as well as other things, and the programs are classified. They began turning up where they shouldn’t. We figured out that Mercer was the one who was stealing them, but we hadn’t managed to catch him at it, so we didn’t have any proof.”
“So that’s what was in the tackle box,” she said, startled. “Not dope. Computer disks.”
His dark eyebrows rose. “You thought he was a drug dealer?”
“That seemed as plausible as anything. You can’t sneak up on anyone in the middle of the river. He must have been weighting the package and dropping it in a shallow spot between the islands, and the others were picking it up later.”
“Exactly. But if you thought he was a drug dealer,” he said, his voice going dangerously smooth, “why in hell did you follow him today?”
“The federal seizure law,” she replied simply. “He was in my boat. I could have lost everything. At the very least, he could have given the marina a bad reputation and driven away business.”
And she would do anything to protect the marina, he thought furiously, including sell her house. Of course she hadn’t balked at following a man she suspected of being a drug dealer! She had been armed, but his blood ran cold at the thought of what could have happened. She had been outnumbered three to one. In all honesty, however, she had had the situation under control until the waves from his boat had washed them all together.
“You could have killed yourself, deliberately ramming the boat like that.”
“There wasn’t much speed involved,” she said. “And my boat was bigger. I was more afraid of the gas tanks exploding, but they’re in the rear, so I figured they’d be okay.”
She hadn’t had time to consider all that, he thought; her reaction had been instantaneous and had nearly given him a heart attack. But a lifetime spent

around boats had given her the knowledge needed to make such a judgment call. She hadn't known that reinforcements were almost there, she had simply seen that one of them was about to escape, and she had stopped him. Robert didn't know if she was courageous or foolhardy or both.

She still hadn't so much as glanced at him, and he knew he had his work cut out for him. Carefully choosing his words, he said, "I've been working with the FBI and some of my own surveillance people to set a trap for Mercer. I soured some deals he had made, put some financial pressure on him, to force him to make a move."

It didn't take more explanation than that. Watching her face, he saw her sort through the implications and the nuances of what he had just said, and he knew the exact moment when she realized he had also suspected her. A blank shield descended over her features. "Just like you did with me," she murmured. "You thought I was working with him, because he was using my boats, and because I'd been following him, trying to find out what he was doing."

"It didn't take me long to decide that if you were involved at all, you probably didn't realize what was going on. But you kept doing suspicious things, just enough that I didn't dare relax my pressure on you."

"What sort of suspicious things?" she asked, a note of disbelief entering her flat tone.

"Leaving the marina in the middle of the day to follow him. The day before yesterday, when you left the bank, you immediately stopped at a pay phone and made a call that we couldn't monitor. Yesterday you led the guy following you all over Guntersville, then ditched him by making an abrupt turn across traffic, and we weren't able to find you again until you came to work."

Evie laughed, but the sound was bitter and disbelieving. "All that! It's amazing how a suspicious mind can see suspicious actions everywhere. When the mortgage was turned down a second time, I realized there had to be someone behind it, someone who was blocking the loans. I couldn't lose the marina. The only thing left to do was sell the house, and I knew if I didn't make the call right then, I'd lose my nerve. So I stopped at the first pay phone I came to and called some people who have tried several times to buy the house, to see if they were still interested. They were so interested that they decided to pay me immediately rather than take a chance that I'd change my mind.

“Yesterday,” she said softly, “I was looking for a place to live. But I knew I was just dithering, and that the longer I put it off, the worse it would be. So I made a quick turn, drove to an apartment complex and rented an apartment.”
Yes, he thought, watching her colorless face. A quick, sharp pain was better than endless agony. Innocent actions based on desperate decisions.
She shrugged. “I thought you wanted the marina. I couldn’t figure out why. It means a lot to me, but if you were looking for a business investment, there are bigger, more profitable ones around. Instead, you thought I was a traitor, and what better way to keep tabs on me than to start a bogus relationship and push it until we were practically living together?”
This was the tricky part, he thought. “It wasn’t bogus.”
“The moon isn’t round, either,” she replied, and turned to look out the windows at her kingdom, saved at such cost to herself.
“I wasn’t going to go through with the foreclosure,” he said. “It was just a means of pressure. Even if you’d been guilty, I’d already decided to prevent them from prosecuting you.”
“How kind of you,” she murmured.
He uncrossed his ankles and left the support of the counter, moving until he was directly in front of her. He put his hands on her shoulders, warmly squeezing. “I know you’re hurt and angry, but until Mercer was caught, I didn’t dare ease up on the pressure.”
“I understand.”
“Do you? Thank God,” he said, closing his eyes in relief.
She shrugged, her shoulders moving under his hands. “National security is more important than hurt feelings. You couldn’t have done anything else.”
The flat note was still in her voice. He opened his eyes and saw that he hadn’t cleared all the hurdles. The issue of the house was still between them.
“I’m sorry about your house,” he said gently. “I would never have let you sell it if I’d known that was what you were planning.” He cupped her cheek with one hand, feeling the warm silkiness of her skin under his fingers. “I can’t get your house back, but I can give you mine. I’m having the deed made over in your name.”
She stiffened and jerked her face away from his hand. “No, thank you,” she said coldly, standing up and turning to stare out the window, her back to him.

Of course she had jumped to the wrong conclusion, he thought, annoyed with himself that he had brought up the house before settling the other issue. “It isn’t charity,” he said in a soothing tone, putting his hand on the nape of her neck and gently rubbing the tense muscles he found there. “It isn’t even much of a gesture, come to that, since it will be staying in the family. Evie, sweetheart, will you marry me? I know you love it here, but we can compromise. I won’t take you completely away from your family. We can use the house for vacations. We’ll come down every summer for a long vacation, and of course we’ll visit several times during the year.”
She pulled away from him and turned to face him. If she had been white before, she was deathly pale now. Her golden brown eyes were flat and lusterless, and with a chill he remembered how Becky had said she’d looked after Matt had died. What he saw in Evie’s eyes was an emotional wasteland, and it froze him to the bone.
“Just like everything else, your *compromises* are heavily in your favor,” she said, a rawness in her voice that made him flinch. “I have a better one than that. Why don’t you stay in New York, and I’ll stay here, and that way we’ll both be a lot happier.”
“Evie…” He paused, forced himself to take a deep breath and reached for control. She was wildly off balance, of course, with everything that had happened today. She loved him, and he had hurt her. Somehow he had to convince her to trust him again.
“No!” she said violently. “Don’t try to decide how you’re going to manipulate me into doing what you want. You’re too intelligent for your own good, and too damn subtle. Nothing really reaches you, does it?” She spread her hands far apart and gestured. “You’re over here, and everyone else is way over here, and never the twain shall meet. Nobody and nothing gets close to you. You’re willing to marry me, but nothing would change. You’d still keep yourself closed off, watching from the distance and pulling strings to make all the puppets do what you want What I had with Matt was *real,* a relationship with a person instead of a facade! What makes you think I’d settle for what you’re offering?” She stopped, shuddering, and it was a moment before she could speak again. “Go away, Robert.”

Chapter Eighteen

Evie's absence left a great, gaping hole in his life. Robert had never before in his life missed a woman or let one assume enough importance to him that he was lonely without her, but that was the predicament he found himself in now. After her flat rejection of his marriage proposal, he'd returned to New York the next day and immediately taken up the threads of his business concerns, but the social whirl he had enjoyed before seemed simultaneously too frantic and too boring. He didn't want to attend the opera or the endless parade of dinner parties; he wanted to sit out on the deck in the warm, fragrant night, listening to the murmur of the river and enjoying the array of stars scattered across the black sky. He wanted to lie naked on the chaise with Evie, motionless, their bodies linked, until their very stillness was unbearably erotic and they both shattered with pleasure.

Sex had always been a controlled but extremely important part of his life, but now he found himself unresponsive to the lures cast his way. His sex drive hadn't abated; it was driving him crazy. But he didn't want the controlled pleasure he'd known before, his mind staying remote from his body. He hadn't been remote when he'd made love with Evie, and several times he hadn't been controlled, either. Having her naked under him, thrusting into her tight, unbelievably hot sheath, and feeling her turn into pure flame in his arms…

The carnal image brought him to full arousal, and he lunged to his feet to prowl restlessly around the apartment, swearing between his teeth with every step. Nothing else made him hard these days, but just the thought of Evie could do it. He wanted her, and her absence was like acid, eating away at his soul.

He still couldn't decide what had gone wrong. He sensed the answer, but it was an ethereal thing, always floating just beyond his comprehension. His inability to understand the problem was as frustrating, in its own way, as his hunger for Evie. He had always been able to grasp nuances, see clearly to the crux of any problem, with a speed that left others in the dust. Now it was as if his brain had failed him, and the thought infuriated him.

It wasn't the house. As much as that had hurt her, she had understood his explanation; he had seen that in her eyes. Balanced against national security, her house was nothing, and she had believed him when he'd told her that he'd never intended to go through with the foreclosure. It was a dreadful miscalculation on his part, and though it chafed that he had made such a mistake, Evie had made a move that no one could have anticipated.

Mortgage the house, yes, but not *sell* it. He was still stunned by the solution she had chosen.

But she had forgiven him for that, had even forgiven him for suspecting that she might be a traitor.

Why in hell, then, had she refused to marry him? The expression in her eyes still haunted him, and he lay awake nights aching with the need to put the glow back into her face. His golden, radiant Evie had looked like… ashes. She loved him. He knew that as surely as he knew his heart beat in his chest. And still she had turned him down. "Go away, Robert," she'd said, and the finality in her voice had stunned him. So he had gone away, and he felt as if, every day away from her, he died a little more.

Madelyn had called several times, and she was becoming insistent that he come to Montana for a visit. Knowing his sister as he did, he was ruefully aware that he had maybe two more days to get out there before she turned up on his doorstep, holding one toddler by the hand and the other balanced on her hip, a ruthless expression in those lazy gray eyes. She knew him well enough to sense that something was wrong, and she wouldn't rest until she knew what it was. Her determination had been a fearsome thing when she'd been a child, and it had gotten worse as she'd grown older.

Robert swore in frustration, then made a swift decision. Other than Evie, Madelyn was the most astute woman he knew. Maybe, as a woman, she could put her finger on the reason that was eluding him. He called Madelyn to let her know he was coming.

With the time difference, it was still early the next morning when his plane landed in Billings. The ranch was another hundred and twenty miles, and had its own airstrip, so he had long since developed the habit of renting a small plane and flying the rest of the way, rather than making the long drive. As he banked to align the Cessna with the runway, he saw Madelyn's four-wheel drive Explorer below; she was leaning against the hood, her long hair lifting in the breeze. The color of her hair was lighter and cooler than Evie's tawny-blond mane, but still his heart squeezed at the similarity.

He landed the plane and taxied it close to the vehicle. As he cut the engine, he could see the two lively little boys bouncing in the cargo area, and a rueful smile touched his eyes. He had missed the little hooligans. He wanted some of his own.

As he crossed the pavement, Madelyn came to meet him, her lazy stroll fluid and provocative. "Thank God you're here," she said. "The imps of

Satan have been driving me crazy since I told them you were coming. Did you know that when a one-year-old says Uncle Robert, it sounds remarkably like Ali Baba? I've heard it fifteen thousand times in the past hour, so I'm an expert."

"Dear God," he murmured, looking past her to where the two imps of Satan were shrieking what was undoubtedly their version of his name.

She went up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek and he hugged her to him. Something guarded inside him always relaxed when he set foot on the ranch. The sense of nature was much closer here, just as it had been in Alabama.

Madelyn waited until after lunch before broaching the subject he knew had been eating her alive with curiosity. The boys had been put down for their afternoon naps, and he and Reese were sitting at the table, relaxing over coffee. Madelyn came back into the dining room, sat down and said, "All right, what's wrong?"

He gave her a wry smile. "I knew you couldn't wait much longer. You've always been as curious as a cat."

"Agreed. Talk."

So he did. It felt strange. He couldn't remember ever needing help before in deciding what to do. He concisely outlined the situation with Mercer, explaining Evie's suspected involvement and the method he had used to force them into action. He described Evie, unaware of the aching hunger in his eyes as he did so. He told them everything—how Evie had sold her house to stop the foreclosure on the marina, how she had discovered that he was behind it all, and how Mercer had been caught. And how she had turned down his marriage proposal.

He was aware that Madelyn had stiffened during his recital of events, but she was looking down at the table, and he couldn't read her expression. When he finished, however, she lifted her head, and he was startled to see the molten fury in her eyes.

"Are you that dense?" she shouted, jumping to her feet with a force that overturned her chair. "I don't blame her for not marrying you! I wouldn't have, either!" Infuriated, she stomped out of the dining room.

Bemused, Robert turned to stare after her. "I didn't know she could move that fast," he murmured.

Reese gave a startled shout of laughter. "I know. It took me by surprise the first time I made her lose her temper, too."

Robert turned back to his brother-in-law, a big, tough rancher as tall as himself, with dark hair and hazel-green eyes, coloring that he had passed on to his two sons.
“What set her off?”
“Probably the same thing that set her off when I was being that dense, too,” Reese explained, amusement in his eyes.
“Would someone please explain it to me?” Robert asked with strained politeness. On the surface he was still in complete control, but inside he was dying by inches. He didn’t know what to do, and that had never happened to him before. He was at a complete loss.
Reese leaned back in his chair, toying with the handle of his cup. “I almost lost Madelyn once,” he said abruptly, looking down. “She probably never told you, but she left me. She didn’t go far, just into town, but it might as well have been a million miles, the way I felt.”
“When was this?” Robert asked, his eyes narrowing. He didn’t like knowing that Madelyn had had problems and hadn’t told him about them.
“When she was pregnant with Ty. I tried everything I could think of to convince her to come back, but I was too stupid to give her the one reason that mattered.”
Reese was going somewhere with this, Robert realized. He was a private man and not normally this talkative. “Which reason was that?”
Reese lifted his gaze to meet Robert’s, and hazel-green eyes met ice-green ones, both stark with emotion.
“It isn’t easy to give someone else that kind of power over you,” Reese said abruptly. “Hell, it wasn’t easy to even admit it to myself, and you’re twice as bad as I ever was. You’re a tough son of a bitch, more dangerous than you want people to know, so you keep it all under control. You’re used to controlling everything around you, but you can’t control this, can you? You probably don’t even know what it is. I practically had to be hit in the head before I saw the light. You love her, don’t you?”
Robert froze, and his eyes went blank with shock. Love? He’d never even thought the word. He wanted Evie, wanted to marry her, wanted to have children with her. God, he wanted all of that with a fierce passion that threatened to destroy him if he didn’t get it. But everything in him rebelled at the thought of being in *love.* It would mean a terrible helplessness; he wouldn’t be able to hold himself apart from her, to keep uncompromised the basic invulnerability that was at the core of him. He was well aware of his

true nature, knew the savage inside. He didn't want to unleash that kind of raw passion, didn't want anyone to even know it existed.
But Evie knew, anyway, he realized, and felt another shock. She had seen through him right from the beginning. With that maddening intuition of hers, she sometimes went straight into his thoughts. He could shut everyone else out, but he had never been able to shut out Evie, and he had spent the entire time they were together trying to regain control over himself, over the situation, over her. She knew him for what he was, and she loved him, anyway.
He swore, running a shaking hand over his face, blinding truth staring him in the eye. Evie wouldn't have loved him if that savage intensity hadn't been there. She had known real love with Matt, and lost it; only something incredibly powerful could take her beyond that. Loving Evangeline couldn't be a civilized, controlled affair; she would want him heart and soul, nothing held back.
The house hadn't been the issue. Neither had suspecting her of a crime. He could offer her a hundred houses, all the power his wealth could bring, and none of that would tempt her. What she wanted was the one thing he hadn't offered: his love.
"It was that simple," Reese said softly. "I told Maddie that I love her. More importantly, I admitted it to myself."
Robert was still stunned, still turned inward. "How do you know?" he murmured.
Reese made a low, harsh sound. "Do you feel as if you can never get enough of her? Do you want to make love to her so much that the ache never quite leaves your gut? Do you want to protect her, carry her around on a satin cushion, give her everything in the world? Are you content just being with her, listening to her, smelling her, touching her hand? Do you feel as if someone's torn your guts out, you miss her so much? When Maddie left me, it hurt so damn bad I could barely function. There was a big empty hole in me, and it ached so much I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. The only thing that could make it better was seeing her. Is that the way it feels?"
Robert's green eyes were stark. "Like I'm bleeding to death inside."
"Yep, that's love," Reese said, shaking his head in sympathy.
Robert got to his feet, his lean face setting in lines of determination. "Kiss Madelyn goodbye for me. Tell her I'll call her."

“You can’t wait for morning?”
“No,” Robert said as he took the stairs two at a time. He couldn’t wait another minute. He was on his way to Alabama.
Evie didn’t like her new home. She felt hemmed in, though she had a corner apartment and neighbors on only one side. When she looked out the window, she saw another apartment building, rather than the river sweeping endlessly past. She could hear her neighbors through the thin walls, hear them arguing, hear their two small children whining and crying. They were out until all hours, children in tow, and came dragging the poor little tykes in at one or two in the morning. The commotion inevitably woke her, and she would lie in bed staring at the dark ceiling for hours.
She could look for another place, she knew, but she couldn’t muster enough energy or interest to do it. She forced herself to go to the marina every day, and that was the limit of what she could do. She was going through the motions, but each day it took more and more effort, and soon she would collapse under the strain.
She felt cold, and she couldn’t get warm. It was an internal cold, spreading out from the vast emptiness inside, and no amount of heat could get past it. Just thinking his name was like having a knife jabbed into her, shards of pain splintering in all directions, but she couldn’t get him out of her mind. A glimpse of black hair brought her head snapping around; a certain deep tone of voice made her heart stop for an instant—a precious instant—as uncontrollable joy shot through her and she thought, *He’s back!* But he never was, and the joy would turn to ashes, leaving her more desolate than before.
The sun burned down, the heat wave continuing, but she couldn’t feel its heat or see its bright light. The world was colored in tones of cold gray.
I got through this before, she would think on those mornings when there didn’t seem to be any reason to get out of bed. *I can do it again.* But the fact was, doing it before had nearly killed her, and the depression that sucked all the spirit out of her was getting deeper every day. She didn’t know if she had the strength to fight it.
Becky had gone ballistic when she found out Robert had left town. “He told me he was going to ask you to marry him,” she’d roared, so enraged her hair had practicality been standing on end.
“He did,” Evie had said listlessly. “I said no.” And she had refused to answer any more questions; she hadn’t even told Becky why she’d sold the

house.
Summer was coming to an end, burning itself out. It was almost time for school to start. The calendar said that fall was a month away, but the scent of it was in the air, crisp and fresh, without the redolent perfumes of summer. She was burning herself out, too, Evie thought, and didn't much care.
She went to bed as soon as it was dark, hoping to get a few hours' sleep before her noisy neighbors came home. It was usually a useless effort. Whenever she stopped, she couldn't keep the memories at bay; they swarmed at her from all the comers of her mind. Lying in bed, she would remember Robert's warm presence beside her, feel his weight compressing the mattress, and the memory was so real that it was almost as if she could reach out and touch him. Her body throbbed, needing his touch, the exquisite relief of having him inside her. She would relive every time he had made love to her, and her breasts would grow heavy with desire.
He was gone, but she wasn't free of him.
That night was no different; if anything, it was worse. She tossed about, trying to ignore the fever in her flesh and the misery in her heart. The T-shirt she wore rasped her aching nipples, tempting her to remove it, but she knew better. When she had tried to sleep nude, her skin had become even more sensitive.
Someone banged on the door, startling her so much that she bolted upright in bed. She glanced at the clock. It was after ten.
She got up and slipped on a robe. The banging came again, as thunderous as if someone was trying to beat down her door. She paused to turn on a lamp in the living room. "Who is it?"
"Robert. Open the door, Evie."
She froze, her hand on the knob, all the blood draining from her face. For a moment she thought she would faint. "What do you want?" she managed, the words so low that she wasn't sure he could hear them, but he did.
"I want to talk to you. Open the door."
The deep, rich voice was the same, the tone as controlled as ever. She leaned her head against the door facing, wondering if she had the strength to send him away again. What remained to be said? Was he going to try to make her accept the house? She couldn't live there; the memories of him were too strong.
"Evangeline, *open the door*."

She fumbled with the lock and opened the door. He stepped in immediately, tall and overwhelming. She was swamped by her reactions as she fell back a pace. The scent of him was the same, the leashed vitality of his tall, lean body slamming against her like a blow. He closed the door and locked it, and when he turned back to her she saw that his black hair was tousled, and a dark shadow of beard covered his cheeks. His eyes were glittering like green fire as they fastened on her. He didn't give the apartment a glance.
"I'm only going to ask you once more," he said abruptly. "Will you marry me?"
Evie shuddered with the strain, but slowly shook her head. She could have married him before, when she'd thought he cared for her at least a little, but when she had realized he'd only been using her… No, she couldn't do it.
A muscle clenched in his jaw. She could feel the tension in him, like some great beast coiled to jump, and she took another step back. When he spoke, however, his voice was almost mild. "Why not?"
The contrast of his voice to the energy she could feel pulsing in him was maddening. All the misery of the past weeks congealed inside her, and she felt herself splintering inside. "Why not?" she cried incredulously, her voice shaking. "My God, look at yourself! Nothing touches you, does it? You'd take everything I have to give, but you'd never let me inside where you really live, where I could reach the real man. You keep yourself behind a cold wall, and I'm tired of bruising myself against it!"
His nostrils flared. "Do you love me?"
"Is that what you came for?" Tears welled in her eyes, rolled slowly down her cheeks. "A sop to your ego? Yes, I love you. Now *get out!"*
She saw his powerful muscles tense, saw his eyes flare with something savage. Her heart leapt, and too late she saw the danger. She turned to run, but Robert grabbed her, whirling her to face him. Confused, Evie thought at first it was one of his carefully gauged actions, designed to impress upon her how serious he was, but then she saw his eyes. The pupils were contracted to tiny black points, the irises huge and glittering like pale fire. His face was tight and pale, except for two spots of color high on the blades of his cheekbones. Not even Robert, she thought dazedly, could control those physical reactions.
His hands tightened on her waist until his fingers dug painfully into her soft flesh, a grip that she knew would leave bruises. "You're right," he said almost soundlessly. "I've never wanted anyone to get close to me. I've

never wanted to care this much for anyone, to let you or anyone else have this kind of power over me.'' His lips drew back over his teeth, and he was breathing hard. "Shut you out? My God, I've tried to, but I can't. You want the real man, sweetheart? All right, I'm yours. I love you so much it's tearing me apart. But there's a flip side to it," he continued harshly. "I'll give you more than I've ever given any other human being, but by God, I'll take more, too. You don't get to pick and choose which qualities you like the best. It's a package deal. You get all the bad with the good, and I warn you now, I'm not a gentleman."

"No," she whispered, "you're not." She hung in his grip, her eyes fastened on his face, seeing the sheen of sweat on his forehead and the ferocity of his expression. Her heart thundered at what he had just said, her mind reeling with joy. He loved her? She almost couldn't take it in, couldn't believe he'd actually said it. She stared up into those fiery eyes, too dazed to say anything else.

"I'm jealous," he muttered, still in that tone of stifled violence. "I don't want you even looking at another man, and if any fool tries to come on to you, he'll be lucky if I only break his arm." He shook her with enough force to make her teeth snap together.

"I want you all the time, and now, damn it, I'll take you. I'll be on you so often, four and five times a day, that you'll forget what it's like not to have me inside you. No more being a gentleman and restricting myself to twice a day."

Her golden brown eyes widened. "No," she said faintly. "I wouldn't want you to restrict yourself." There were no controls on him now; she could feel the passion surging through him, a wild and savage force that caught her up in its tide and swept her along with him.

"I'll want you at my beck and call. I can't ignore the business, so I'll expect you to fit your schedule around mine, to be available whenever I'm home." As he talked, he moved her backward and roughly pushed her against the wall. His hands tugged at her panties, stripping them down her legs. He leaned against her, his heavy weight pinning her to the wall as he tore his pants open. She gave a brief, incoherent prayer of thanks that her neighbors were gone, then clung to his shoulders as he hooked one arm under her bottom and lifted her. Her heart pounding, her blood rushing through her veins on a giddy tide of joy, she parted her thighs, and he shoved himself between them. His penetration was fast and rough. She bit back a cry and

buried her face against his neck. She could feel his own heartbeat thudding against her breast.

They were both motionless, overwhelmed by the stunning relief and pleasure of their bodies being joined once more, she trying to adjust to the hard fullness of him, he groaning at the tightness of her inner clasp on his sex. Then, still caught in the savage exaltation of emotional freedom, he drove mercilessly into her.

"I don't want to wear a condom," he said fiercely, his breath hot against her ear. "I don't want you to take birth-control pills. I don't want you to act like my semen is some hostile marauder that you have to protect yourself against. I want to give it to you. I want you to want it. I want you to have my babies. I want a house full of kids." With each word he thrust, pushing himself deeper and deeper into her.

She moaned, shuddering around him with the force of her pleasure. "Yes." She had unleashed a monster of passion, a total dictator, but she could meet his power with her own. This was the real man, the one who made her feel alive again, who sent heat throbbing through every cell of her body. She wasn't cold any longer, but radiant with vibrant life.

"I want marriage." His teeth were ground together, and a drop of sweat ran down his temple. "I want you tied to me—legally, financially, every way I can devise. I want you to take my name, Evangeline, do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, and splintered with joy. "Robert, *yes*!"

He bucked violently against her with his climax, flooding her with moisture and heat. Evie locked her legs around him and took him deep within, her senses whirling and fading, all consciousness gone except for the primal awareness of him inside her.

Some endless time later, she realized that she was on the bed and he was stretched out naked beside her. She hadn't fainted, but neither had she been aware of anything else but him. He hadn't released her during the entire time he had stripped both her and himself, struggling out of clothing while still keeping her in his grasp. She turned to snuggle closer, and the lure of his body, after the long deprivation, was too great. She found herself on top of him, wriggling to find the right contact and nestle his sex against the soft heat between her legs. He caught his breath, and she felt him begin to harden again.

"You might get started on that house full of kids sooner than you thought," she murmured, moving against him again in voluptuous delight. "I stopped

taking the birth-control pills the day you left."
"Good." He caressed her bottom and hip, urging her closer to him. "I don't want to hurt you," he said even as he slipped inside her.
She heard the worry in his voice and knew that he was uneasy with releasing all the force he'd kept contained for so long. She kissed him and bit his lip as his subtle movements made her nerve endings riot with pleasure. "You can't hurt me by loving me," she said.
His eyes glittered in the faint light coming from the lamp in the living room. "That's good," he murmured. "Because God knows I do."

Epilogue

Evie heard the elevator arrive and crouched down beside the tiny, adorable creature who was clinging unsteadily to the chair in the entrance hall. "There's Daddy," she whispered, and watched her daughter's big eyes go round with delight. She barely restrained herself from gathering the baby into her arms; sometimes the surge of love was so strong that she thought she would burst from the force of it.
The elevator doors slid open, and Robert stepped out, an indescribable light flaring in his pale green eyes as he saw them waiting for him. With a joyous gurgle, the baby let go of the chair and hurled herself toward him, every toddling step teetering on the edge of disaster. Robert turned absolutely white, dropped his briefcase with a thud, and went down on one knee to swoop her into his arms. "My God," he said, shocked. "She's walking!"
"For a couple of hours now," Evie said, smiling as Angel caught her father's silk tie in one tiny, chubby hand and began babbling at him. "It makes my heart stop every time she lurches across the floor."
"She's too young to walk. She's only seven months old." Aghast, he stared down at the small head, covered with downy dark hair, that butted against his chest. He had been just as aghast when she had started crawling at five months. If he could, Robert would have kept his darling offspring as a babe in arms for the first five years of her life. She, however, was blissfully oblivious of his panic at her daring.
Still holding the baby, he hugged Evie close for a long kiss, one that quickly grew heated despite his squirming burden, who tried to poke her fingers between their mouths. They had named her Jennifer Angelina, intending to

call her Jenna, but instead she had been Angel from the day she'd been born. She was angelic only when she was asleep, however; during waking hours, she had the fearless spirit of a daredevil.

Evie clung to his mouth for a long time, her hand clenching his hair to hold him in place. She had been waiting all day for him to come home, feeling shivery and excited and a little frightened.

"You were right," she murmured.

He lifted his head, and the green eyes gleamed. "I was, huh?"

She laughed and pinched him. "You knew you were." They had decided to have another baby as soon as possible. Both pregnancy and delivery had been easy for her, and though they had decided that two children would fill the house they were building just fine, they had both wanted to have them close together.

Three weeks ago, they had spent the night locked together, lost in the passion that hadn't faded during the sixteen months of their marriage. When they had awakened at dawn, for their ritual of morning love, Robert had looked down at her with his sleepy green eyes barely open and said, "We made a baby last night."

She had thought so, too, her instincts certain even before the early pregnancy test she'd taken just that morning had confirmed it Already it was as if she could feel that hot, tiny weight in her womb, pulsing with life. She leaned her head against his broad shoulder, remembering the sheer terror she'd felt when she had realized that she was pregnant the first time. Taking a chance on loving Robert had required all her courage, but now there was to be someone else to love, someone who was part of her, part of Robert. She would have no defense against this new little person, and she had thought she would shatter from the fear. But Robert had known how she was feeling, had seen the raw fear in her eyes and hadn't left her side all day. He had called Felice and announced that he wouldn't be in, cancel everything, and had spent the day holding Evie on his lap or making love to her. His solution, she thought wryly, had been to overwhelm her with what had gotten her in that condition to begin with; the tactic had been amazingly successful.

Angel was trying to throw herself bodily out of his arms. Sighing, he released Evie to bend down and set the baby on her chubby feet. As soon as he released her, she was off like a wobbly rocket. Evie went back into his

arms, but they both kept a weather eye on their precocious daughter as she began investigating a fascinating crack in the hardwood floor.

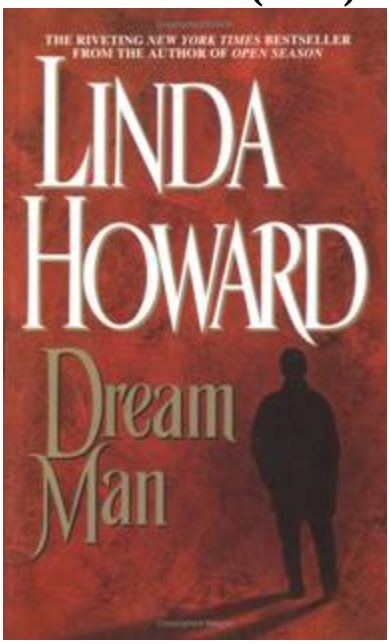
Evie rested her head on his chest, reassured by the strong, steady thump of his heart beneath her ear. Far from losing himself in his work and demanding that she structure her time around him, as he'd said he would, Robert had instead ruthlessly reorganized his office schedule so he could spend every available moment with her and Angel. She had known that he was a man of alarming intensity, but instead of being frightened when he focused it on her, she had bloomed. Robert wasn't a man who loved lightly; when he loved, it was with every fiber of his being.

His hand moved to Evie's belly and pressed in gentle reassurance. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

She lifted her head and gave him a luminous smile. His love had renewed her strength, banished the shadows. "I've never been better."

Robert kissed her, savoring her sweet taste and the familiar, delicious tension of desire that quivered in their bodies. "I love you, Evangeline," he said, gathering her close to him. Loving her was the most joyous, satisfying thing he'd ever done. She demanded everything from him and gave him all of herself, and sometimes he was staggered by the richness of the bond between them. He'd been right; loving Evangeline took everything he had, heart and soul.

Dream Man (1994)



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Chapter 1

It was eleven-thirty when Marlie keen left the Cinemaplex with the rest of the Friday night moviegoers. The movie had been a good one, a lighthearted romp that had made her laugh aloud several times and left her in a cheerful mood. As she walked briskly to her car, she thought she could tell which movie people had seen by how they were acting now. It wasn't that difficult; the couples who were holding hands, or even exchanging kisses in the parking lot, had obviously seen the sexy romance. The aggressive bunch of teenage boys had seen the latest martial arts thriller. The well-dressed young professionals who were in earnest discussions had seen the latest *Thelma and Louise* imitation. Marlie was glad she had chosen the comedy.

It was as she was driving home on the brightly lit expressway that it hit her: She felt good. The best she had felt in years. Six years, to be precise.

In startled retrospect, she realized that she had been at peace for several months now, but she had been so caught up in the sedative routine of the life she had built here that she hadn't noticed. For a long time she had simply existed, going through the motions, but time had done its slow work and eventually she had healed, like an amputee recovering from the loss of a limb and learning to cope, then to enjoy life again. Her loss had been mental rather than physical, and unlike an amputee, she had prayed through dark, endless nights that she never recover that part of herself. At some point in the past six years, she had stopped living in dread that the knowing would return, and simply gotten on with her life.

She liked being normal. She liked being able to go to movies the way normal people did, liked being able to sit in a crowd; she hadn't been able to do that before. Several years ago, when she had realized it was actually possible, she had turned into a movie junkie for a while, visually gorging on the films that she thought were safe. For a long time any degree of violence was unbearable, but for the past couple of years she had been able to watch the occasional thriller, though they weren't her favorite type. To her surprise, she hadn't yet been able to watch any sex scenes; she would have thought that violence would have been immeasurably more difficult for her to handle, maybe even impossible, but instead it was the portrayal of intimacy that gave her problems. Dr. Ewell had been fond of saying that no one should ever lay bets on the human psyche, and she was amused to find

he was right. The violence in her life had been traumatic, devastating, while the sex had been merely unpleasant, but it was the “love” scenes that still had her squeezing her eyes shut until it was over.

She exited off the expressway onto a four-lane street, and of course was caught by the traffic light at the bottom of the exit ramp. The radio was tuned to an easy-listening station and she inhaled deeply, feeling the slow music and the lingering lightheartedness of the movie combine in a delicious, physical sense of contentment—

—the knife flashed down, gleaming dully. A sodden, muffled THUNK! as it struck. The blade rose again, dripping red—

Marlie jerked back, an unconscious physical denial of the horribly real image that had just flashed in her mind. “No,” she moaned softly to herself. She could hear her own breathing, sharp and gasping.

“No,” she said again, though she already knew the protest was useless. Her hands were clenched on the steering wheel, white-knuckled, and even that wasn’t enough to stop the trembling that started at her feet and went all the way up. Dimly she watched her hands start shaking as the spasms intensified.

—Black, gloating pleasure. Triumph. Contempt—

It was happening again. Dear God, *it was coming back!* She had thought herself free, but she wasn’t. The knowing was coming closer, growing, looming, and she knew from experience that soon it would overwhelm her. Clumsily, her coordination already deteriorating, she steered the car to the right, so she wouldn’t block the exit ramp. A car horn blared as she wavered too close to the vehicle beside her, but the noise was distant, muted. Her vision was fading. Desperately she braked to a stop and shoved the gear lever into park, hoping that she had managed to get completely out of traffic, but then the nightmare image was back, hitting her full strength like a beacon that had brushed by her in search before homing in.

Her hands fell limply into her lap. She sat in the car staring straight ahead, her eyes unblinking, unseeing, everything focused inward.

Her breathing became harsher. Rough sounds began to form in her throat, but she didn’t hear them. Her right hand lifted slowly from her lap and formed itself into a fist, as if she were gripping something. The fist twitched violently, three times, in a rigidly restrained stabbing motion. Then she was quiet again, her face as still and blank as a statue’s, her gaze fixed and empty.

It was the sharp rapping on the window beside Marlie that brought her back. Confused and exhausted, for a terrifying moment she had no idea who she was, or where, or what was happening. An unearthly blue light was flashing in her eyes. She turned a dazed, uncomprehending look at the man who was bent over, peering into the window as he tapped on it with something shiny. She didn't know him, didn't know anything. He was a stranger, and he was trying to get into her car. Panic was sharp and acrid in her mouth.

Then identity, blessed identity, returned with a rush and brought reality with it. The shiny thing the man was using to rap against the glass transformed itself into a flashlight. A glint on his chest became recognizable as a badge, and he, frown and commanding voice and all, was a policeman. His patrol car, Mars lights flashing, was parked at an angle in front of hers.

The images of horror were still too close, too frighteningly real. She knew she had to block it out or she wouldn't be able to function at all, and she needed to get control of herself. Some vague danger was threatening; some memory that danced close to the surface but wouldn't quite crystallize. Desperately she pushed away the fog of confusion and fumbled to roll down the window, fighting for the strength to complete even that small act. The exhaustion was bone-deep, paralyzing, muscles turned to mush.

Warm, humid air poured through the open window. The officer flashed the light beam around the interior of her car. "What's the problem here, ma'am?"

She felt cotton-brained, thought processes dulled, but even so she knew better than to blurt out the truth. That would immediately get her hauled in on suspicion of being under the influence of some kind of drug, probably a hallucinogen. Yes, that was it; that was the vague danger she had sensed. A night in jail, for a normal person, would be bad enough; for her, under these circumstances, it could be catastrophic.

She had no idea how much time had passed, but she knew that she must took pale and drained. "Ah… I'm sorry," she said. Even her voice was shaky. Desperately she sought for a believable explanation. "I—I'm an epileptic. I began to feel dizzy and pulled over. I think I must have had a slight seizure."

The flashlight beam sought her face, played across her features. "Please step out of the car, ma'am."

The trembling was back; she didn't know if her legs would hold her. But she got out, holding to the open door for support. The blue lights stabbed

her eyes, and she turned her head away from the brightness as she stood there pinned in the glare, a human aspen, visibly quaking.
“May I see your driver’s license?”
Her limbs were leaden. It was an effort to retrieve her purse, and she dropped it immediately, the contents spilling half in the car, half on the ground. Innocuous contents, thank God; not even an aspirin bottle or pack of cigarettes. She was still afraid to take over-the-counter medications, even after six years, because the mental effects could be so unpredictable.
By concentrating fiercely, holding the crippling fatigue at bay, she managed to pick up her wallet and get out her license. The policeman silently examined it, then returned it to her. “Do you need help?” he finally asked.
“No, I’m feeling better now, e-except for the sh-shakes,” she said. Her teeth were chattering from reaction. “I don’t live far. I’ll be able to make it home.”
“Would you like for me to follow you, make sure you get there okay?”
“Yes, please,” she said gratefully. She was willing to tell any number of lies to keep from being taken to a hospital, but that didn’t mean she had lost her common sense. She was incredibly tired, the aftermath worse than she remembered. And there was still the nightmare image—knowing or memory, she couldn’t tell—to be dealt with, but she pushed it out of her mind. She couldn’t let herself think about it; right now she had to concentrate only on the tasks at hand, which were remaining coherent, upright, and functional, at least until she could get home.
The policeman helped her pick up her belongings, and in a few moments she was behind the wheel again, edging back onto the pavement, driving with excruciating care because every movement was such an effort. Twice she caught herself as her eyes were closing, the darkness of unconsciousness inexorably closing in.
Then she was home, turning in to the driveway. She managed to get out of the car and wave at the officer. She leaned against the car, watching him drive away, and only when he turned the corner did she set herself to the task of getting inside the house. To safety.
With weak, shaking, uncooperative hands she looped the strap of her purse around her neck, so she wouldn’t drop it. After pausing for a moment to gather strength, she launched herself away from the car in the direction of the front porch. As a launch, it was spectacularly lacking in power. She staggered like a drunk, her steps wavering, her vision fading. Every

movement became more and more difficult as the fatigue grew like a living thing, overwhelming her muscles and taking them from her control. She reached the two steps leading up to the porch and stopped there, swaying slowly back and forth, her blurred gaze fixed on those two steps that normally required no effort at all. She tried to lift her foot enough to take the first step, but nothing happened. She simply couldn't do it. Iron weights were dragging around her ankles, holding her back.

She began to shiver, another familiar reaction from before, in that other life. She knew she had only a few minutes to get inside before she completely collapsed.

She dropped heavily to her knees, feeling the resulting pain as only a dull, distant sensation. She could hear her own harsh, strained breathing, echoing hollowly. Slowly, torturously, she dragged herself up the steps, fighting for each inch, fighting to keep the darkness at bay.

She reached the front door. Keys. She needed the keys to get in.

She couldn't think. The black fog in her brain was paralyzing. She couldn't remember what she had done with her keys. In her purse? Still in the car? Or had she dropped them? There was no way she could retrace her steps, no way she could remain conscious much longer. She began fumbling in her purse, hoping to find the key ring. She should be able to recognize it by touch; it was one of those stretchy bracelet things, the type that could be slid onto the wrist. She could feel metal, but it eluded her grasp.

Bracelet… She had slipped the keys onto her wrist. It was a habit so ingrained that she seldom even thought about it. The shaking was worse; she pulled the key ring off her wrist but couldn't manage to fit the key into the lock. She couldn't see, the blackness almost complete now. Desperately she tried again, locating the lock purely by touch, concentrating with her last fierce vestige of strength on the Herculean task of guiding the key into the lock… Got it! Panting, she turned the key until she felt the click. There. Unlocked.

She mustn't forget the keys, mustn't leave them in the lock. She slid the bracelet back onto her wrist as she twisted the doorknob and the door swung open, away from her. She had been leaning on the door, and with that support suddenly gone she sprawled in the doorway, half in and half out of the house.

Just a little more, she silently urged herself, and struggled to her hands and knees again. *Get in far enough to close the door. That's all.*

It wasn’t really crawling now. She dragged herself in, whimpering with the effort, but she didn’t hear the noise. The door. She had to close the door. Only then could she give herself over to the blackness.
Her arm waved feebly, but the door was out of reach. She sent a command to her leg and somehow it obeyed, slowly lifting, kicking—a very weak kick. But the door swung gently shut.
And then the darkness overwhelmed her.
She lay motionless on the floor as the clock ticked away the hours. The gray dawn light penetrated the room. The passing morning was marked by the path of sunlight, shining through a window, as it moved down the wall and across the floor to finally fall on her face. Only then did she move in a restless attempt to escape the heat, and the deep stupor changed into a more normal sleep.
It was late afternoon when she began to rouse. The floor wasn’t the most comfortable of sleeping places; each shift of position brought a protest from her stiff muscles, nudging her toward consciousness. Other physical complaints gradually made themselves felt, a full bladder protesting the most insistently. She was also very thirsty.
She struggled to her hands and knees, her head hanging low like a marathon runner at the end of the race. Her knees hurt. She gasped at the sharp, puzzling pain. What was wrong with her knees? And why was she on the floor?
Dazedly she looked around, recognizing her own safe, familiar house, the cozy surroundings of the small living room. Something was tangled around her, hampering her efforts to stand—she fought the twisted straps and finally hurled the thing away from her, then frowned because it looked familiar, too. Her purse. But why had her purse straps been around her neck?
It didn’t matter. She was tired, so tired. Even her bones felt hollow.
She used a nearby chair to steady herself and slowly got to her feet. Something was wrong with her coordination; she stumbled and lurched like a drunk on the way to a common destination: the john. She found the comparison faintly humorous.
After she had taken care of her most pressing need, she ran a glass of water and gulped greedily, spilling it down her chin in the process. She didn’t care. She couldn’t remember ever being so thirsty before. Or so tired. This was the worst it had ever been, even worse than six years ago when—

She froze, and her suddenly terrified gaze sought her own reflection in the mirror. The woman who stared back at her had her face, but it wasn't the soothingly ordinary face she had become accustomed to. It was the face from before, from six years in the past, from a life that she had thought, hoped, was finished forever.

She was pale, her skin taut with strain. Dark circles lay under her eyes, dulling the blue to a muddy shade. Her dark brown hair, normally so tidy, hung around her face in a mass of tangles. She looked older than her twenty-eight years, her expression that of someone who has seen too much, lived through too much.

She remembered the stark, bloody vision, the storm of dark, violent emotion that had taken control of her mind, that had left her empty and exhausted, just as the visions always had. She had thought they had ended, but she had been wrong. Dr. Ewell had been wrong. They were back.

Or she had had a flashback. The possibility was even more frightening, for she never wanted to relive that again. But it suddenly seemed likely, for why else would she have seen that flashing knife blade, dripping scarlet as it slashed and hacked—

"Stop it," she said aloud, still staring at herself in the mirror. "Just stop it."

Her mind was still sluggish, still grappling with what had happened, with the aftereffects of the long stupor. Evidently the results of a flashback were the same as if she had had a true vision. If the mind thought it was real, then the stress on the body was just as strong.

She thought about calling Dr. Ewell, but a gap of six years lay between them and she didn't want to bridge it. Once she had relied on him for almost everything, and though he had always supported her, protected her, she had become accustomed to taking care of herself. Independence suited her. After the encompassing, almost suffocating care of the first twenty-two years of her life, the solitude and self-reliance of the last six had been especially sweet. She would handle the flashbacks by herself.

Chapter 2

The doorbell rang. Detective Dane Hollister opened one eye, glanced at the clock, then closed it again with a muttered curse. It was seven o'clock on a

Saturday morning, his first weekend off in a month, and some idiot was leaning on his doorbell. Maybe whoever it was would go away.

The bell rang again, and was followed by two hammering knocks on the door. Muttering again, Dane threw aside the tangled sheet and swung naked out of bed. He grabbed the wrinkled pants he had discarded the night before and jerked them on, zipping but not fastening. Out of habit, a habit so ingrained that he never even thought about it, he picked up his 9mm Beretta from the bedside table. He never answered the door unarmed. For that matter, he didn't even collect his mail unarmed. His last girlfriend, whose tenure had been brief because she couldn't handle a cop's erratic hours, had said caustically that he was the only man she knew who carried a weapon into the bathroom with him.

She hadn't had much of a sense of humor, so Dane had refrained from making a smart-ass remark about male weapons. Except for missing the sex, it had been a relief when she had called it quits.

He lifted one slat of the blinds to peer out, and with another curse he clicked the locks and opened the door. His friend and partner, Alejandro Trammell, stood on the small porch. Trammell lifted elegant black brows as he studied Dane's wrinkled cotton slacks. "Nice jammies," Trammell said.

"Do you know what the hell time it is?" Dane barked.

Trammell consulted his wristwatch, a wafer-thin Piaget. "Seven oh two. Why?" He strolled inside. Dane slammed the door with a resounding bang. Trammell halted, belatedly asking, "Do you have company?"

Dane ran his hand through his hair, then rubbed his face, hearing the rasp of beard against his callused palm. "No, I'm alone." He yawned, then surveyed his partner. Trammell was perfectly groomed, as usual, but his eyes were dark-circled.

Dane yawned again. "Is this a very late night, or an early morning?"

"A little bit of both. It was just a bad night, couldn't sleep. I thought I'd come over for coffee and breakfast."

"Generous of you, to share your insomnia with me," Dane muttered, but he was already on his way to the kitchen. He had his own share of bad nights, so he understood the need for company. Trammell had never turned him away on those occasions. "I'll put on the coffee, then you're on your own while I shower and shave."

"Forget it," Trammell said. "I'll put on the coffee. I want to be able to drink it."

Dane didn’t argue. He could drink his own coffee, but so far no one else could. He didn’t much care for the taste of it himself, but since the caffeine kick was what he was after, the taste was secondary.

He left Trammell to the coffee and sleepily returned to the bedroom, where he stripped off his pants, leaving them in their original location on the floor. Ten minutes in the shower, leaning with one hand propped on the tile while the water beat down on his head, made waking up seem possible; shaving made it seem desirable, but it took a nick on his jaw to convince him. Muttering again, he dabbed at the blood. He had a theory that any day that started with a shaving nick was shit from start to finish. Unfortunately, on any given day his face was likely to sport a small cut. He didn’t deal well with shaving. Trammell had once lazily advised him to switch to an electric shaver, but he hated the idea of letting a razor get the best of him, so he kept at it, shedding his blood on the altar of stubbornness.

Dressing, at least, was easy. Dane simply put on whatever came to hand first. Because he sometimes forgot to put on a tie, he always kept one in his car; it might clash with whatever he was wearing, but he figured a tie was a tie, and it was the spirit rather than the style that mattered. The chief wanted detectives to wear ties, so Dane wore a tie. Trammell sometimes looked horrified, but Trammell was a clothes-horse who tended toward Italian silk suits, so Dane didn’t take it to heart.

If any other cop had dressed the way Trammell did, or drove a car like Trammell’s, Internal Affairs would have been all over him like stink on shit, which was an appropriate way to describe IA. But Trammell was independently wealthy, having inherited a nice little bundle from his Cuban mother as well as several successful concerns from his father, a New England businessman who had fallen in love while on a vacation in Miami and remained in Florida for the rest of his life. Trammell’s house had cost a cool million, easy, and he never made any effort to tone down his way of living. His partner was such an enigmatic son of a bitch that Dane couldn’t decide if Trammell lived as luxuriously as he did simply because he liked the life-style and had the means, or if he did it to piss off the bastards in IA. Dane suspected the latter. He approved.

He and Trammell were opposites in a lot of ways. Trammell was whipcord-lean, and as aloof as a cat. No matter what the circumstances, he always looked elegant and cultured, his clothes hanging perfectly. He liked—actually *liked*—opera and ballet. Dane was the exact opposite: he could

wear the most expensive silk suit made, perfectly tailored to fit his muscled, athletic frame, and he would still look subtly unkempt. He liked sports and country music. If they had been vehicles, Trammell would have been a Jaguar, while Dane would have been a pickup truck. Four-wheel drive.

On the other hand, Dane thought as he wandered back out to the kitchen, nature had balanced itself out in their faces, in a kind of backwards way. In person, Trammell was smoothly handsome, but in photographs his face took on a sinister cast. Dane figured his own face would frighten children and small animals, assuming there was any difference between the two, but the camera loved him. All those angles, Trammell had explained. Trammell was a camera buff and took a lot of photos; he was never without his camera. Dane, being his partner and constantly in his company, was naturally in a lot of the photos. On film, the brutal lines of high, prominent cheekbones, the deep-set eyes and cleft chin, all became brooding and intriguing instead of merely brutish. Even the broken nose somehow looked right in a photograph. In person, he looked grim, his face battered, his eyes a cop's eyes, watchful and too old.

Dane got himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. Trammell was still cooking, and whatever it was smelled good.

"What's for breakfast?" he asked.

"Whole wheat waffles with fresh strawberries."

Dane snorted. "There's never been any whole wheat flour in *my* house."

"I know. That's why I brought it with me."

Healthy stuff. Dane didn't mind. He could be pretty damn affable when someone else was doing the cooking. When they were working they mostly lived on junk, whatever was fast and easy, so he didn't mind balancing it with low-fat, nutritious shit whenever they had the time. Hell, he'd even learned to like sprouts. They tasted like green peanuts, fresh out of the ground and not quite developed, with the hulls still soft. He'd eaten a lot of green peanuts when he was a kid, preferring them over the fully formed ones that had to be shelled.

"So what kept you awake last night?" he asked Trammell. "Anything in particular?"

"No, just one of those nights when a weird dream starts every time you doze off."

It was funny how the dreams came and went. All cops had dreams, but he and Trammell had gone through a rough patch a few years back, just after

the shootout; the dreams had come every night for a while. Most cops went through their entire careers without ever firing their weapons on the job, but Dane and Trammell hadn't been that lucky.

They had been trying to find a suspect for questioning in a shooting and had been led, by the suspect's pissed-off girlfriend, right into the middle of a big-time drug operation, operated by none other than the suspect himself. That was usually the way the bad guys went down; they weren't caught by sharp detective work most of the time, but by someone dropping the dime on them.

That particular time, instead of bailing out any available window and disappearing down rat holes, the bad guys had come up with lead flying. Dane and Trammell had hit the floor, diving into another room, and for five of the longest minutes in history they had been cornered in that room. By the time backup had arrived, in the form of every cop in the vicinity, uniformed and otherwise, who had heard Dane's radio call of "officer under fire," three of the bad guys and the girlfriend were down. The girl and one of the men were dead. A slug had ricocheted, splintered, and part of it had hit Dane in the back, just missing his spine. It had still packed enough punch that it had broken a rib and torn a hole in his right lung. Things had gotten a little fuzzy there, but the one clear memory he had was of Trammell kneeling beside him and cussing a blue streak while he tried to stop the bleeding. Three days in intensive care, fifteen days total in the hospital, nine weeks before he'd been able to return to the job. Yeah, they'd both had a lot of bad dreams for a while after that.

Just as Trammell served up the waffles, the phone rang. Dane stretched to pick up the receiver, and at the same time Trammell's beeper went off.

"Shit!" they both said, staring at each other.

"It's Saturday, damn it!" Dane barked into the receiver. "We're off today." He listened while he watched Trammell hurriedly gulp a cup of coffee, then sighed. "Yeah, okay. Trammell's here. We're on our way."

"What canceled our day off?" Trammell wanted to know as they went out the door.

"Stroud and Keegan are already working another scene. Worley called in sick this morning. Freddie's in the dentist's office with an abscessed tooth." Things happened; no sense getting hot about it. "I'll drive."

"So where are we going?"

Dane gave him the address as they got into his car, and Trammell wrote it down. “A man called in and said his wife was hurt. An EMT was dispatched, but a patrol officer got there first. He took one look and canceled the EMT, and called Homicide instead.”

It took them about ten minutes to reach the address, but there was no mistaking the house. The street was almost blocked with patrol cars, a paramedics van, and various other official-capacity vehicles. Uniformed officers stood around on the small lawn, while neighbors gathered in small bunches, some of the onlookers still in their nightclothes. Dane automatically studied the onlookers, looking for something that didn’t fit, someone who didn’t seem to belong or who was maybe just a little bit too interested. It was amazing how often a murderer would hang around.

He shrugged into a navy jacket and grabbed the spare tie out of the backseat, loosely knotting it around his neck. Somehow, he noticed, Trammell had managed to impeccably tie his own tie in the car. He looked again. Damn, he didn’t believe it! The dapper bastard had chosen a double-breasted Italian suit to wear *on his day off.* He’d simply slipped into the suit jacket as they’d left the house.

Sometimes he worried about Trammell.

They showed their badges to the policeman at the door, and he stood aside to let them enter.

“Sheeit,” Dane said in an undertone as he got a good look.

“And all the other bodily excretions,” Trammell replied in the same disbelieving tone.

Murder scenes were nothing new. After a while, cops reached the point where violent crimes were pretty routine, in their own way. Stabbings and shootings were a dime a dozen. If anyone had asked him half an hour earlier, Dane would have said that he and Trammell had been detectives long enough that, for the most part, they were unshockable.

But this was different.

Blood was everywhere. It was splattered on the walls, on the floor, even on the ceiling. He could see into the kitchen, and the bloody path wound from there through the living room, then into a small hallway and out of sight. He tried to imagine the kind of struggle that would have sprayed blood so extensively.

Dane turned to the uniformed policeman who was guarding the door. “Have the crime lab guys showed up yet?”

“Not yet.”
“Shit,” he said again. The longer it took the crime lab, or forensics, team to arrive, the more the crime scene would be compromised. Some disturbance was unavoidable, unless the forensics boys were the ones to discover the victim and immediately secured the area. But forensics wasn’t here, and the house was crowded with both uniformed and plainclothes policemen, milling around and inevitably muddying the evidential waters.
“Don’t let anybody else in except for Ivan’s guys,” he told the officer. Ivan Schaffer was head of the crime lab team. He was going to be really pissed off about this.
“Lieutenant Bonness is on the way.”
“You can let him in, too,” Dane replied, his mouth quirking.
The house was middle-class, nothing out of the ordinary. The living room was furnished with a couch and matching chair, the required coffee table and matching lamp tables of genuine wood veneer, while a big brown recliner had the best spot in front of the television. The recliner was occupied now by a dazed-looking man in his late forties or early fifties, probably the victim’s husband. He was giving monosyllabic answers to the questions put to him by another uniformed officer.
The victim was in the bedroom. Dane and Trammell forced their way through the crowd and into the small room. The photographer had already arrived and was doing his job, but for once was noticeably lacking in his usual nonchalance.
The nude woman lay jammed in the cramped space between the bedside table and the wall. She had been stabbed repeatedly—*hacked* was a better description. She had tried to run, and when she had been cornered in the bedroom she had tried to fight, as evidenced by the deep defensive wounds on her arms. She had been nearly decapitated, her breasts mutilated by the sheer number of wounds, and all of her fingers had been severed. Dane looked around the room, but he didn’t see the missing digits. The bed was still neatly made, though splattered with blood.
“Has the weapon been found?” Dane asked.
A patrolman nodded. “It was right beside the body. A Ginsu knife from the kitchen. She had a whole set. It looks like they really do what the ads say; I think I’ll get my wife some.”
Another patrolman snorted. “I’d rethink that idea if I was you, Scanlon.”

Dane ignored the black humor, which all cops used to help them handle the ugliness they saw on a daily basis. “What about her fingers?”
“Nope. No sign of ‘em.”
Trammell signed. “I think we’d better go talk to the husband.”
It was a fact that most homicides, except for the random gang drive-bys, were committed by someone who knew the victim: a friend, a neighbor, co-worker, or relative. When the victim was a woman, the usual list of suspects was narrowed down even more, because the murderer was almost invariably her husband or boyfriend. A lot of times, the murderer was the one who “discovered” the body and reported the crime.
They went back to the living room, and Dane caught the eye of the officer who was talking to the husband. The officer came over to them.
“Has he said anything?” Dane asked.
The officer shook his head. “Most of the time he won’t answer the questions. He did say that his wife’s name is Nadine, and his name is Vinick, Ansel Vinick. They’ve lived here twenty-three years. Beyond that, he ain’t talking.”
“Is he the one who called it in?”
“Yeah.”
“Okay. We’ll take it now.”
He and Trammell went over to Mr. Vinick. Dane sat down on the couch, and Trammell moved the other chair closer before sitting down, effectively sandwiching Mr. Vinick between them.
“Mr. Vinick, I’m Detective Hollister and this is Detective Trammell. We’d like to talk to you, ask you a few questions.”
Mr. Vinick was staring at the floor. His big hands hung loosely over the padded arms of the recliner. “Sure,” he said dully.
“Are you the one who found your wife?”
He didn’t answer, just continued to stare at the floor.
Trammell stepped in. “Mr. Vinick, I know it’s tough, but we need your cooperation. Are you the person who called the police?”
Slowly he shook his head. “I didn’t call no police. I called 911.”
“What time did you call?” Dane asked. The time would be on record, but liars often tripped themselves up on the simplest details. Right now, Vinick was a suspect by virtue of being married to the victim.
“Dunno,” Vinick muttered. He took a deep breath and seemed to make an effort to concentrate. “Seven-thirty or thereabouts, I guess.” He rubbed his

face with a trembling hand. “I got off work at seven. It takes about twenty, twenty-five minutes to drive home.”
Dane caught Trammell’s glance. They had seen enough death to know that Mrs. Vinick had been dead for several hours, not half an hour or so. The medical examiner would establish the time of death, and if Mr. Vinick had been at work during that time, if witnesses could reliably state that he hadn’t left, then they’d have to start looking at other possibilities. Maybe she’d had a boyfriend; maybe someone had been keeping Mr. Vinick’s bed warm for him while he worked third shift.
“Where do you work?”
There was no answer. Dane tried again. “Mr. Vinick, where do you work?”
Vinick stirred and named a local trucking company.
“Do you normally work third shift?”
“Yeah. I work on the dock, loading and unloading trailers. Most freight comes in at night, see, for delivery during the day.”
“What time did you leave to go to work last night?”
“Usual time. Around ten.”
They were on a roll, finally getting some answers. “Do you punch a time card?” Trammell asked.
“Yeah.”
“Do you punch in as soon as you get there, or wait until time for your shift to start?”
“As soon as I get there. The shift starts at ten-thirty. We have half an hour to eat, and get off at seven.”
“Do you have to clock in and out for lunch?”
“Yeah.”
It looked like Mr. Vinick’s night would be pretty much accounted for. They would check out everything he’d told them, of course, but that wouldn’t be any problem.
“Did you notice anything unusual this morning?” Dane asked. “Before you came in the house, I mean.”
“No. Well, the door was locked. Nadine usually gets up and unlocks it for me, then starts cooking breakfast.”
“Do you usually come in the front door or the back door?”
“Back.”
“What did you see when you opened the door?”

Mr. Vinick's chin trembled. "Nothing, at first. The shades were pulled and the lights weren't on. It was dark. I figured Nadine had overslept."
"What did you do?"
"Turned on the light in the kitchen."
"What did you see then?"
Mr. Vinick swallowed. He opened his mouth but couldn't speak. He put his hand to his eyes. "B-Blood," he managed. "All—all over the place. Except—it looked like ketchup, at first. I thought she'd dropped a bottle of ketchup and broken it, the way it was splattered. Then—then I knew what it was. It scared me. I thought she must have cut herself, real bad. I yelled her name and ran to the bedroom, looking for her." He stopped, unable to carry the tale any further. He began to shake, and didn't notice when Dane and Trammell got up and stepped away, leaving him alone with his grief and horror.
Ivan Schaffer and an assistant arrived with their bags and disappeared into the bedroom to gather what evidence they could salvage from the carnage. Lieutenant Gordon Bonness arrived practically on their heels. He skidded to a stop just inside the door, his expression one of shock. "Holy shit," he muttered.
"That seems to be the consensus," Trammell said in an aside to Dane as they joined the lieutenant.
Bonness wasn't a bad sort, even if he was from California and could come up with some pretty weird ideas on things. He was as fair as possible in the way he ran the unit, which Dane considered a pretty good recommendation, and he was tolerant of the different quirks and work habits of the detectives under him.
"What have you got so far?" Bonness asked.
"We have a lady who was hacked to pieces, and a husband who was at work. We'll check out his alibi, but my gut says he's in the clear," Dane answered.
Bonness sighed. "Maybe a boyfriend?"
"We haven't gotten that far yet."
"Okay. Let's move fast on this one. Jesus, look at these walls."
They went into the bedroom, and the lieutenant blanched. "Holy shit," he said again. "This is sick!"
Dane gave him a thoughtful look, and his stomach tightened. A feeling of dread went up his spine. Sick. Yeah, this was sick. And he was suddenly a

lot more worried than he had been before.
He squatted beside Ivan as the tall, lanky man painstakingly searched for fibers, hair, anything that could be analyzed into giving up its secrets.
“Found anything?”
“Won’t know until I get it to the lab.” Ivan looked around. “It would help if we could find her fingers. Maybe there’d be some skin under the nails. I’ve got people going through the trash in the neighborhood. No garbage disposal here, so that’s out.”
“Was she raped?”
“Don’t know. There’s no obvious semen.”
Dane’s feeling of dread was growing stronger. What had seemed like a fairly simple, if gruesome, murder was getting complicated. His gut feeling was seldom wrong, and he had alarm signals going off like an entire brass section.
He followed the gory trail back to its beginning, in the kitchen. Trammell came with him, and they both stood in the small, homey room, looking around. Nadine Vinick had evidently liked to cook; the kitchen was more modern than the rest of the house, with gleaming appliances, a small cooking island, and a variety of shiny but well-used pots and pans hanging over the island. A butcher’s block stood at one end of the counter, and a set of Ginsu knives, with one knife missing, was arranged in a rack on top of the butcher’s block.
“How did the son of a bitch get in?” Dane muttered. “Has anyone even looked for signs of forced entry, or did they just play the odds that the husband was the one who did her?”
Trammell had worked with him long enough to read him. “You getting a feeling about this?”
“Yeah. A bad one.”
“You don’t think maybe she had a boyfriend?”
Dane shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. It was just something the lieutenant said, about this being sick. It is. And that makes me real uneasy. Come on, let’s see if we can figure out how he got in.”
It didn’t take long. There was a small cut at the bottom of the screen on the window in the spare bedroom. The screen was in place but unfastened, and the latch on the window was open, not that it would have kept out even a determined ten-year-old. “I’ll get Ivan,” Trammell said. “Maybe he can lift a print, or find a couple of stray threads.”

Dane’s gut feeling was getting worse. A forced entry put a different slant on the situation, indicating a stranger. This didn’t feel like a burglary that had escalated into violence when the intruder had been suddenly confronted by Mrs. Vinick. The ordinary burglar would have been more likely to run, and even if he had attacked, it would have been quick. The attack on Mrs. Vinick had been both vicious and prolonged. *Sick.*

He walked back into the kitchen. Had the first confrontation taken place here, or had Mrs. Vinick seen the intruder and tried to run out the back door, getting as far as the kitchen before he caught her? Dane stared at the appliances as if they could tell tales. A small frown knit his brows and he went over to the automatic coffee maker, the kind that was installed under the upper cabinets so it didn’t take up counter space. The carafe held about five cups of coffee. Using the backs of his fingers, he touched the glass. It was cold. The coffee maker was the kind with the automatic switch that turned off the warming plate after two hours. A coffee mug, filled almost to the rim with coffee, sat on the counter. It didn’t look as if it had been touched since the coffee had been poured into it. He stuck his finger into the dark liquid. Cold.

He pulled a pair of surgical gloves out of his pocket and put them on. Carefully touching only the wooden rim of the cabinet doors rather than the metal handles, he began opening them. The second door revealed a canister of decaffeinated coffee. Mrs. Vinick could drink it late at night without worrying about her sleep being disturbed.

She had made a pot of coffee and she had been in here, in the kitchen. She had just poured the first cup and replaced the carafe on the warming plate. The door from the living room was behind her and to the right. Dane went through the motions as if he had just poured the coffee himself, standing where she would have stood. According to the placement of the cup on the counter, she would have been standing slightly to the left of the coffee maker. That was when she had seen the intruder, just as she had set the carafe in place. The coffee maker had a dark, shiny surface, almost mirror like, behind the hands of the built-in clock. Dane bent his knees, trying to lower himself to Mrs. Vinick’s general height. The open doorway was reflected in the surface of the coffee maker.

She had never even picked up her cup of fresh coffee. She had seen the intruder’s reflection and turned, perhaps thinking, in that first moment, that

her husband had forgotten something and returned home to get it. By the time she had realized her mistake, he had been on her.
She probably hadn't been standing naked in her kitchen, though Dane had been a cop long enough to know that anything was possible. It was just another gut feeling. But she had been naked when the killer had finished with her, and probably naked when he had started.
The odds were that she had been raped at knife point, right here in the kitchen. The lack of obvious semen didn't mean anything; after so many hours, and with the struggle that had gone on, it would take a medical examiner to make a judgment. And a lot of times, rapists didn't climax anyway. Orgasm wasn't the point of rape.
After the rape, he had started work with the knife. Until then, she had been terrified but hoping, probably, that when he was finished he would just go away. When he started cutting her, she had known that he intended to kill her and she had started fighting for her life. She had escaped from him, or maybe he had let her escape, like a cat toying with a mouse, letting her think she had gotten away before easily catching her again. How many times had he played his sick little game before finally cornering her in the bedroom?
What had she been wearing? Had the killer taken her clothing with him as a souvenir or trophy?
"What?" Trammell asked quietly from the doorway, his dark eyes intent as he watched his partner.
Dane looked up. "Where are her clothes?" he asked. "What was she wearing?"
"Maybe Mr. Vinick knows." Trammell disappeared, and returned in less than a minute. "She had already changed into her nightgown when he left for work. He said it was white, with little blue things on it."
They began looking for the missing garment. It was startlingly easy to find. Trammell opened the folding doors that hid the washer and dryer, and there it was, neatly placed on top of the pile of clothing in the laundry basket that sat on top of the dryer. The garment was splattered with blood, but certainly not soaked. No, she hadn't been wearing it when the knife attack had begun. Probably it had been lying on the floor, thrown aside, and the blood had splattered on it later.
Dane stared at it. "After raping and killing her, the son of a bitch put her nightgown in the laundry?"

“Rape?” Trammell queried.
“Bet on it.”
“I didn’t touch the handle. Maybe Ivan can get a print; he came up empty in the second bedroom.”
Dane had another gut feeling, one he liked even less than the others. “I’m afraid we’re going to come up empty all the way around,” he said bleakly.

Chapter 3

It hadn’t been a flashback.
She knew because she had been having real flashbacks all day, frightening resurgent memories that swept over her, overwhelmed her, and left her limp and exhausted when her own reality returned.
Marlie knew the details of her own particular nightmare, was as familiar with them as she was with her face; the details that had been flashing in her brain all day were new, different. When she had awoken from her stupor the afternoon before, she had been able to remember little more than the image of the slashing knife, and she had still been so tired that she had barely been able to function. She had gone to bed early and slept deeply, dreamlessly, until almost dawn when the details began to surface.
The bouts of memory had happened all day long; she would barely recover from one when another, vivid and horrible, would surge into her consciousness. It had never happened this way before; the visions had always been overwhelming and exhausting, yes, but she had always been able to immediately recall them. These ongoing *attacks* left her bewildered, and helpless from fatigue. Several times she had been tempted to call Dr. Ewell and tell him about this frightening new development, but something in her had held back.
A woman had been murdered. It had been real. God help her, the knowing had returned, but it was different, and she didn’t know what to do. The vision had been strong, stronger than any she’d ever had before, but she didn’t know who the victim was and couldn’t tell where it had happened. Always before she had had at least an inkling, had grasped some clues to identity and location, but not this time. She felt disoriented, her mind reaching out but unable to find the signal, like a compass needle spinning in search of a magnetic pole that wasn’t there.

She had seen the murder happen over and over in her mind, and each time more details had surfaced, as if a wind were blowing away layers of fog. And each time she roused from a replay of the vision, more exhausted than before, she had been more horrified.

She was seeing it through *his* eyes.

It had been *his* mind that had caught hers, the mental force of *his* rage that had blasted through six years of blank, blessed nothingness and jolted her, once again, into extrasensory awareness. Not that he had targeted her; he hadn't. The enormous surge of mental energy had been aimless, without design; he hadn't known what he was doing. Normal people never imagined that there were people like her out there, people with minds so sensitive that they could pick up the electrical signals of thought, read the lingering energy patterns of long-ago events, even divine the forming patterns of things that hadn't yet happened. Not that this man was normal in any sense other than his lack of extra sensorial sensitivity, but Marlie had long ago made the distinction to herself: Normal people were those who didn't know. She had the knowing, and it had forever set her apart, until six years ago when she had been caught in a nightmare that still haunted her.

Traumatized, that part of her brain had shut down. For six years she had lived as a normal person, and she had enjoyed it. She wanted that life to continue. She had slowly, over the years, let herself come to believe that the knowing would never return. She had been wrong. Perhaps it had taken this long for her mind to heal, but the visions were back, stronger and more exhausting than ever before.

And seen through the eyes of a murderer.

Part of her still hoped… what? That it hadn't been real, after all? That she was losing her mind? Would she really rather be delusional than accept that the visions had returned, that her safe, normal life had come to an end?

She had looked through the Sunday paper but hadn't been able to concentrate; the memory flashes had been too frequent, too strong. She hadn't found any mention of a murder that had triggered a response. Maybe it had been there and she had simply overlooked it; she didn't know. Maybe it hadn't happened anywhere nearby, but by some freak chance she had happened to catch the killer's mental signals. If the woman had lived in some other town, say in Tampa or Daytona, Orlando's papers wouldn't carry it. Marlie would never know the woman's identity or location.

Part of her was a coward. She didn't *want* to know, didn't want to become part of that life again. She had built something safe and solid here in Orlando, something that would be destroyed if she became involved again. She knew exactly what would happen: the disbelief, followed by derision. Then, when people were forced to accept the truth, they would become suspicious and afraid. They would be willing to use her talent, but they wouldn't want to be friends. People would avoid her; little kids would daringly peek in her windows and run, screaming, if she looked back. The older kids would call her "the witch." Inevitably some religious fanatic would start muttering about "the work of the devil," and sporadic picket lines would spring up in front of her house. No, she would have to be a fool to get involved in that again.

But she couldn't stop wondering about the woman. There was an aching need to at least know her name. When someone died, at least her name should be known, a tiny link with immortality that said: This person was here. This person existed. Without a name, there was only a blank.

So now, still shaking with fatigue, she turned on the television and waited, in a daze, for the local news to come on. She almost dozed several times, but shook herself awake.

"It's probably nothing," she mumbled aloud. "You're just losing it, that's all." Strange comfort, but there it was. Everyone's private fears were different, and she would rather be crazy than right.

The television screen flickered as the talking heads segued into another story, this time devoting an entire minute to an in-depth look at the effect of crack and gangs on inner-city neighborhoods. Marlie blinked, suddenly terrified that the visual images would overwhelm her with mental ones, as had happened in the past when she had picked up on the emotions of the people she had watched. Nothing happened. Her mind remained blank.

After a minute she relaxed, sighing with relief. Nothing was there, no bleak feelings of despair and hopelessness. She began to feel a little more cheerful; if she couldn't receive those images and emotions the way she had in the past, maybe she *was* just going a little crazy.

She continued watching, and became a little drowsy again. She felt herself begin to give in to the fatigue, effortlessly sliding into a light doze even though she tried to remind herself to stay awake for the rest of the newscast —

—"… NADINE VINICK…"

Marlie jerked violently as the name blared both inside and outside of her head, her inner awareness amplifying the name just spoken by the television announcer. She struggled to an upright position on the couch, unaware of having slumped over as she dozed. Her heart pounded frantically against her ribs and she heard her own panicked breathing, fast and shallow, as she stared at the screen.

"The Orlando police aren't releasing any information about the stabbing murder of Mrs. Vinick, as the slaying is still under investigation."

A photo of the victim was flashed on the screen. Nadine Vinick. That was the woman Marlie had seen in the vision. She had never heard the name before, but there was a strong sense of recognition, too strong to ignore. Just hearing the name spoken on television had been like a bullhorn sounding in her head.

So it was true, it was real. All of it.

The knowing was back.

And it would tear her life apart again if she did anything about it.

On Monday morning Dane stared at the stark photographs of the murder scene, examining each minute detail over and over as he allowed his thoughts free range, hoping that some crucial, previously unnoticed item would slip into focus, something that would give them a direction, any direction. They had nothing to go on, damn it, absolutely nothing. A neighbor across the street had heard a dog bark around eleven, she thought, but it had stopped and she hadn't thought anything else about it until they had questioned her. Mr. Vinick had definitely been at work; he had been helping another dock man unload a trailer, his time completely accounted for. The medical examiner couldn't give an exact time of death, because unless there was a witness, such a thing was impossible, and the time frame unfortunately included the half hour before Mr. Vinick had gone to work.

Dane still went with his gut feeling: Vinick hadn't done it. According to his co-workers, Mr. Vinick had been completely normal when he had arrived at work, joking around. It would have taken a real monster, which Mr. Vinick had never given any indication of being, to have butchered his wife, coolly cleaned up and changed clothes, then gone to work as usual without any vestige of nervous-ness.

They had no semen, though the medical examiner said that vaginal bruising indicated Mrs. Vinick had been violently penetrated. They had no fibers alien to the house, except for what the Orlando Police Department had

brought in themselves. They had no hair samples, pubic or otherwise. They had no fingerprints. And they hadn't found Nadine Vinick's fingers.
"We don't have shit," he muttered, tossing the photographs onto his desk.
Trammell grunted in agreement. They were both tired; they had scarcely stopped in the forty-eight hours since they had first entered the Vinick home. And with every passing hour, the chances of finding Mrs. Vinick's murderer diminished. Crimes were either solved fast, or they tended not to be solved at all. "Look at the rundown of their garbage."
He handed the itemized list over to Dane, who glanced down it. Typical garbage: food waste, empty milk cartons and cereal boxes, an assortment of uninteresting junk mail, plastic shopping bags from a couple of stores, used coffee filters, a pizza box with two remaining slices of pizza, soiled paper towels, an old shopping list, last week's *TV Guide*, a couple of scribbled phone numbers, a voided check made out to the telephone company, various empty spray cans, about a week's worth of newspapers—evidently the Vinicks hadn't been into recycling. Nothing that was out of place or unusual.
"What about the phone numbers?" he asked.
"I just called both of them." Trammell leaned back in his chair and propped his Italian-leather-clad feet on the desk. "One is the pizza delivery joint, the other is their cable company."
Dane grunted. He leaned back in his chair and propped his own feet on the desk. Dan Post instead of Gucci, and scuffed at that. What the hell. He and Trammell eyed each other across their four feet and two desks. Sometimes they did their best brainwork in this position.
"Pizza delivery would involve a stranger coming to the house, and there's a fifty-fifty chance the cable company would send out a repairman."
Trammell's lean, dark face was thoughtful. "Even if a repairman had gone out to the house, it wouldn't have been at night."
"And it would probably be too much to hope that Mrs. Vinick ordered a pizza that late at night, to pig out all by herself. The analysis of her stomach contents…" Dane stretched out his right arm and sifted through the scattered papers on his desk, finally plucking the one he wanted out of the mess. "Here it is. Doc says that she hadn't eaten anything for at least four or five hours. No pizza. So the pizza in the trash was from earlier, at least lunch. Maybe a day or two." For all the tantalizing possibilities, in his experience it never had been a pizza deliverer.

“We can find out from Mr. Vinick exactly when they ordered the pizza.”
“And the cable company can tell us if they had to send a repairman out to the Vinick’s house.”
“So we have definitely one, and possibly two, strangers who have been to the house. A pizza delivery boy would have been kept outside, but he could still have seen her. A repairman might actually have been in the house.”
“Women chat to repairmen,” Dane said, eyes narrowed as he followed the line of reasoning. “Maybe she asked him to please be quiet, since her husband worked third shift and was asleep in the bedroom. The guy says, yeah, he used to work third, too, and it was rough. Where does her husband work? And she tells him, even throws in what time hubby leaves, when he gets home. Why should she worry? After all, would the cable company have hired him if he hadn’t been an upstanding citizen? Women don’t think anything about letting a repairman in and spilling their guts to him while he’s working.”
“Okay.” Trammell got a pad and propped it on his legs. “One: We check with Mr. Vinick on when the pizza was actually delivered, and maybe a description of the delivery boy.”
“Delivery person. It could’ve been a girl. So could a cable repairman.”
“Repairperson,” Trammell corrected. “Possible. If not, then we get a name from the pizza place and go from there. Two: Do the same with the cable company.”
Dane felt better. At least they were working, had come up with a direction in which to start looking.
His phone rang. It was the intercom line. He punched the button and lifted the receiver. “Hollister.”
“Dane,” Lieutenant Bonness said. “You and Trammell come to my office.”
“On our way.” He hung up the phone. “LT wants to see us.”
Trammell swung his feet down and stood. “What have you done now?” he complained.
Dane shrugged. “Nothing that I know of.” He certainly wasn’t the movie image of a rogue cop, but he did have a certain knack of stepping on toes and pissing off people. It happened. He just didn’t have much patience with bullshitters.
The lieutenant’s office had two big interior windows; they saw the woman with the lieutenant, sitting with her back to the door. “Who is she?” Dane murmured, and Trammell shook his head. Dane rapped once on the glass,

and Lieutenant Bonness gestured them inside. “Come on in, and close the door,” he said.
As soon as they were inside he said, “Marlie Keen, this is Detective Hollister and Detective Trammell. They’re in charge of the Vinick case. Miss Keen has some interesting information.”
Trammell took a seat on the other side of the lieutenant’s desk, away from Miss Keen. Dane leaned against the wall on her other side, out of her direct line of vision but where he could still see her face. She had barely glanced at either him or Trammell; nor was she looking at the lieutenant. Instead she seemed to be concentrating on the blinds that shaded the outside windows.
A short silence fell as she seemed to be bracing herself. Dane eyed her curiously. She was so tense, he could almost see her muscles tighten. There was something vaguely intriguing about her, something that kept him looking at her. She wasn’t a beauty, though she was even-featured and certainly not hard on the eyes, but she sure didn’t do anything to attract attention. She wore plain black flats, a narrow black denim skirt that came down to midcalf, and a sleeveless white blouse. She had nice, clean-looking dark hair, but it had been pulled back into one of those severe French twists. About thirty years old, he guessed, his policeman’s eye making an automatic assessment. Hard to tell with her sitting down, but probably average height, maybe a little less. A little slimmer than he liked, about a hundred and twenty pounds; he preferred a woman to be soft rather than bony.
Her hands were tightly clenched in her lap. He found himself watching them: slim, fine-boned hands, free of any jewelry, and a dead giveaway to her tension even if he hadn’t already noticed that her posture was stiff rather than still.
“I’m psychic,” she said baldly. He barely kept himself from snorting in derision. His eyes met Trammell’s in a lightning-quick glance of shared thought: *Another one of the lieutenant’s weird California ideas!*
“Last Friday night I was driving home from a late movie,” she continued in a flat little monotone that didn’t diminish the low, raspy quality of her voice. A smoker’s voice, he thought, except he’d bet the farm that she didn’t smoke. Uptight types like her seldom went in for the easy vices. “It was about eleven-thirty when I left the theater. I had just left the expressway when I began to have a vision of a murder that was taking place. The… visions are overwhelming. I managed to pull off the street.”

She paused, as if reluctant to continue, and Dane watched her hands twist together until they were bloodless. She took a deep breath.
“I see it through his eyes,” she said tonelessly. “He climbed in through a window.”
Dane stiffened, his attention shifting to her face. He didn’t have to look at Trammell to know that his partner’s attention had sharpened, too.
The recitation continued in a slow, evenly spaced cadence that felt oddly hypnotic. Her eyes were wide and unfocused, as if she were looking inward.
“It’s dark in the room. He waits there until she’s alone. He can hear her in the kitchen, talking to her husband. The husband leaves. He waits until the husband’s car has pulled out of the driveway, then he opens the door and starts the stalk. He feels like a hunter after game.
“But she’s easy prey. She’s in the kitchen, just pouring a cup of coffee. He pulls a knife from the set that’s sitting there, waiting for him. She hears him and turns. She says, ‘Ansel?’ but then she sees him and opens her mouth to scream.
“He’s too close. He’s already on her, his hand over her mouth, the knife at her throat.”
Marlie Keen stopped talking. Dane kept his concentration on her face. She was pale now, he noticed, colorless except for the full bloom of her lips. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck lifting in response to that eerie present tense she was using when she spoke, as if the murder were happening right now.
“Go on,” the lieutenant urged.
It was a moment before she resumed, and her tone was even flatter than before, as if she could thus distance herself from the words. “He makes her take off her nightgown. She’s crying, begging him not to hurt her. He likes that. He wants her to beg him. He wants her to think that she’ll be okay if she just does as he says. It’s more fun that way, when she realizes—”
She interrupted herself, leaving the sentence unfinished. After another moment she resumed. “He uses a condom. She’s grateful for that. She tells him thank you. He’s easy with her, almost gentle. She starts to relax, even though she’s still crying, because he isn’t hurting her and she thinks he’ll just leave when he’s finished. He knows how the stupid bitches think.
“When he’s through, he helps her to her feet. He holds her hand. He bends down and kisses her cheek. She just stands there, until she feels the knife. He keeps the first cut shallow, enough to let her know what’s going to

happen, so he can see the look in her eyes when she panics, but the cut shouldn't be so bad that it slows down the chase. There wouldn't be any fun in that.

"She panics; she screams and tries to run, and the rage in him is let loose. He's held it in check all this time, toying with her, enjoying her fear and humiliation, allowing her to hope, but now he can let it out. Now he can do what he came for. This is what he likes best, the complete terror he can see in her eyes, the feeling of invincibility. He can do anything he wants to her. He has total power over her, and he revels in it. He is her god; her life or death is *his* choice now, *his* decision. But it's death, of course, because that's what he enjoys most.

"She's fighting, but the pain and loss of blood have slowed her down. She makes it into the bedroom and falls down. He's disappointed; he wanted the fight to go on longer. It makes him angry that she's so weak. He bends over to slice her throat, to finish it, and the bitch turns on him. She's been faking it. She hits at him. He'd meant to make it quick, but now he'll show her, she should never have tried to trick him. The rage is like a hot red balloon, swelling up and filling him. He slashes at her over and over, until he's tired. No, not tired. He's too powerful to be tired. Bored. It was over too soon; she's learned her lesson. She hadn't been as much fun as he'd hoped."

Silence fell. After a few seconds, Dane realized that she was finished. She still sat stiffly in the chair, her gaze locked on the window blinds.

Lieutenant Bonness seemed disappointed by Dane and Trammell's lack of reaction. "Well?" he demanded impatiently.

"Well, what?" Dane straightened away from the wall. Rage had slowly built inside him as he had listened to the flat, emotionless recital, but it was a cold, controlled anger. He didn't know what the bitch's motive was in coming here, but there was one thing he knew for certain, and he didn't have to be any sort of mind reader to figure it out: She had been there. Maybe she herself had murdered Mrs. Vinick, maybe not, but she had been in that house when it had happened. At the very least she was an accomplice, and if she thought she could waltz in here with that bullshit story and get a lot of media attention while she jerked them around, she had tangled with the wrong guy.

"What do you think?" Bonness snapped, irritated that he had to ask.

Dane shrugged. "A psychic? Get real, LT. That's the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard."

Marlie Keen stirred, slowly unknotting her hands as if the movement were difficult. Just as slowly she turned her head and looked at Dane for the first time. Despite his icy rage, his stomach muscles contracted abruptly in reaction. *No wonder Bonness had been taken in!* Her eyes were the deep, dark, fathomless blue of the ocean, the kind of eyes a man could look into and forget what he'd been saying. There was something exotic about them, other than the richness of colon a sort of otherworldliness that he couldn't quite grasp. The expression in them, however, was easy to read, and Dane knew beyond a doubt that he hadn't exactly overwhelmed her with his charm.

She stood and faced him, squaring off with him as if they were two adversaries in the old West about to draw down on each other. Her face had gone calm and curiously remote. "I've told you what happened," she said in a clear, deliberate voice. "You can believe it or not; it doesn't make any difference to me."

"It should," he replied just as deliberately.

She didn't ask why, though he paused for her to do just that. Instead her mouth twitched into a tiny, humorless smile. "I realize that I just became your prime suspect," she murmured. "So why don't I save your time and mine by telling you that my address is 2411 Hazelwood, and my telephone number is 555-9909."

"You know the routine," he said with sarcastic admiration. "I'm not surprised." He moved a step closer to her, close enough that she had to look up to maintain eye contact, close enough to intrude into her space and subtly threaten her. "Or maybe you're just reading my mind, since you're psychic." He put an unflattering emphasis on the last word. "Maybe you can tell me what comes next, unless you need a crystal ball to tell you what I'm thinking."

"Oh, that doesn't take a mind reader, but then you aren't very original." She paused, then gave him that little smile again. "I have no intention of leaving town." She wasn't backing down, and his stomach muscles knotted again. At first glance she had looked like a drab, a nonentity afraid of making herself more attractive in any way, but the first look into her eyes had forcibly changed that opinion. The woman facing him didn't lack self-confidence, and she wasn't the least bit intimidated by him even though he was almost a foot taller. Something else stole into his awareness. Damn, he could smell her, a sweet, soft scent that had nothing to do with perfume and

everything to do with female flesh. His involuntary reaction made him even angrier.
“See that you don’t.” His voice was low and harsh. “Is there anything else you see in your crystal ball, anything you want to tell me?”
“Of course,” she purred, and the sudden glint in her blue eyes told him that he’d walked right into that one. “Go to hell, Detective.”

Chapter 4

“Dammit, Hollister!” Bonness glared at him. “Did you have to be such an asshole? The woman came in here trying to help, for Chrissake! She told us some amazing stuff—”
“Amazing, my ass,” Dane interrupted, still aware of the fury boiling up inside, though now at least half of it was directed at himself. “If she didn’t do it herself, then she was there when it was done. She did it, or she’s an accomplice, and she’s daring us to catch her by feeding us this loony psychic story.”
“She knew details that no one but the killer, or killers, could have known,” Trammell said tersely. “Hell, we’ve all heard the kind of crap those so-called psychics describe in their so-called visions. ‘I’m getting an impression of the letter *C,*’” he mimicked. ‘“It’s something to do with the letter *C.* And it’s wet… Yes, yes, I’m definitely getting the impression of wetness. The body is close to water.’”
“Which narrows it down to the whole fucking state,” Dane finished. “That wasn’t a psychic vision she described; it was an eyewitness account. The lady was there when it happened, and she just placed herself at the top of my list.”
“She couldn’t have done it,” Bonness protested weakly, his disappointment plain.
“Not alone,” Dane agreed. “She wouldn’t have been strong enough.”
“We definitely should check this lady out,” Trammell said.
The lieutenant sighed. “I know you think it was a goofy idea, but psychics have really helped in some cases I’ve been involved in.”
Dane snorted. “As far as I can tell, a psychic is just a psychotic with a couple of letters missing.”

“All right, all right.” Bonness still looked unhappy, but he flapped his hand at them in dismissal. “See what you can find out about her.”
Trammell was right behind him as they walked back to their desks. “What the hell’s the matter with you?” he muttered to Dane’s back.
“Whaddaya mean? You think I should have pretended to believe her?”
“No, I mean you had a hard-on the size of a goddamn nightstick, and you were standing so close, you were about to poke her in the belly with it,” Trammell snapped.
Dane turned and glared at his partner, but he couldn’t think of any excuse to give. He didn’t know what had happened, only that from the minute she had turned those dark blue eyes on him, he’d had a boner so hard a cat couldn’t scratch it. He was still twitching. “Hell, I don’t know,” he finally said.
“If you’re that horny, partner, you’d better get the itch scratched before you get around her again. Either the lady’s very familiar with a knife, or she hangs out with someone who is. I wouldn’t want any of *my* body parts sticking out to draw her attention.”
“Stop worrying about my sex life,” Dane advised grimly. “We need to find out all we can about Marlie Keen.”
It had never made her angry before. Marlie was used to mingled disbelief and derision, but she had always felt an almost desperate need to *make* people believe, to convince them that she could help, that her claims were true. She felt no such need where Detective Hollister was concerned. She didn’t give a damn what that Neanderthal thought, assuming he was capable of such an advanced mental process.
Maybe it was because she had dreaded going to the police so much, with the full knowledge of how this could disrupt her carefully built life. Maybe it was simply that *she* had changed. But when he had been so insultingly dismissive, she had felt nothing but anger. She certainly wasn’t about to stay there and plead with him to believe her. She was already late to work, damn it, and though she had called in, she resented it that she had gone to so much trouble for nothing. She had put herself through the ordeal of recounting what she had seen, and that big jerk had called it bullshit!
Her movements were jerky as she negotiated the heavy traffic, and with sheer force of will she made herself calm down before she caused an accident. She had dealt with jerks before, many times. He was nothing new, except for the way he had moved so close to her, trying to intimidate her with his brute size. She had had to steel herself to face him, to allow him

that close. He had used his masculinity as a weapon, knowing that any woman would feel threatened by a strange man looming over her like that, especially a man who looked as if he were hewn out of wood and ate nails for breakfast. In any good cop/bad cop routine, his looks would automatically make him the bad cop. No one in his right mind would expect leniency or consideration from that man.

She had almost panicked when he had moved so close. In her mind, she could still feel the heat his body had generated, overpowering the small space that had been between them. Furiously she wondered if he would have done that if she had been a man; her instinct said no. That was a tactic that men used only on women, the threat of touching. Odd that something so simple, so basic, could also be so frightening-She shuddered. She couldn't have borne it if he *had* touched her. She would have bolted like a total coward.

As late as she was, it was difficult to find a parking space at the bank where she worked. She had to circle the lot three times before a departing customer left an open slot that she managed to get to before someone else did. Then she sat in the car for several minutes, taking deep breaths and trying to achieve some sense of calm. She stared at the bank building, finding comfort in its solidity. Her job was such a nice, safe, passionless one, in accounting. She had chosen it deliberately, when she had moved here. Numbers didn't bombard her with thoughts and feelings, didn't ask for anything from her. Their qualities never varied; a zero was always a zero. All she had to do was align them into columns, feed them into a computer, keep track of their credits and debits. Numbers were always neat, never messy like human beings were.

And it felt good to support herself, even though she knew she didn't have to. The small house she had made into a home had been bought outright for her, when she had decided that she wanted to live in Florida, on the opposite end of the country from Washington. Dr. Ewell would have arranged for her to receive a check each month, had she wanted; she hadn't, preferring to finally stand alone, without all the support systems of the Association. Even now, all she had to do was pick up the telephone and tell Dr. Ewell that she needed help, and it would be provided. Though it hadn't been his fault, hadn't been anyone's fault, Dr. Ewell was still dealing with his guilt over what had happened six years ago.

She sighed. She was paid by the hour, every minute she sat there was being deducted from her paycheck. Resolutely she pushed Detective Hollister out of her mind and got out of the car.

“Hey, doll, found anything interesting yet?” Detective Fredericka Brown, who answered only to “Freddie,” patted Dane on the head as she passed behind his chair. She was a tall, lanky, endearingly plain woman, with a habitually cheerful and amused expression that invited smiles. It was tough for a woman to be a cop in general, and a detective in particular, but Freddie had fit right in. She was blissfully married to a high school football coach, size huge, who looked as if he would tear limb from limb anyone who caused his Freddie the least upset. Freddie tended to treat all of the other detectives as if they were the teenage boys on her husband’s team, with a disconcerting blend of light flirtation and motherliness.

Dane scowled at her. “This should have been your case. We had the weekend off, damn it.”

“Sorry,” she said blithely, giving Trammell a smile of greeting when he looked up from the telephone that had been welded to his ear for most of the morning.

“How’s the tooth?” Dane asked.

“Better. I’m up to my eyeteeth in antibiotics and painkillers, no pun intended. It was an abscess, so now I’m having a root canal.”

“Tough.” The sympathy was sincere.

“I’ll live, but Worley’s doing all the driving while I have to take this stuff.” Worley was her partner. “Anything we can do to help, any leads we can run down? We have our own cases, but from what I’ve heard, the scene Saturday morning was straight out of a horror movie.”

“It wasn’t pretty.” An understatement if he’d ever made one. Freddie patted him again, this time on the shoulder, and went about her business. Dane turned back to his.

Detective work was mostly boring; it involved a lot of talking on the telephone, going through papers, or going out to talk to people face-to-face. Dane had spent the last few hours involved in the first two activities. Usually Trammell handled this part of the job better than he did, being more patient, but this time he had set himself to it with grim determination. What had happened to Nadine Vinick should never happen to anyone, but it really pissed him off that Marlie Keen had all but rubbed his nose in her knowledge of it.

“Got anything yet?” Trammell asked, frustration plain in his voice as he hung up the telephone. “I came up empty on both the pizza delivery and the cable company. The entire street had trouble with the cable, and it was repaired on the line, over a block away. It wasn’t necessary to enter any residence. And the pizza was delivered by a sixteen-year-old girl. Mr. Vinick is the one who paid her, anyway. Dead end.”

“Nothing here, either,” Dane muttered. “Yet.” Marlie Keen had never been arrested, had never even had a parking ticket, as far as he could find. He didn’t let that discourage him. Maybe “Marlie Keen” was an alias. If so, he’d eventually turn up that information. People could be tracked through Social Security numbers, tax returns, any number of means. He knew where she worked and what kind of car she drove. He’d already sent out various requests, such as for a record of calls she’d made and received; by the time he was finished, he’d even know her bra size.

He bet he could make a damn good guess at that right now: 34C. At first he would have guessed no more than a B cup, but that nunnish white blouse had been deceiving. He had noticed a tantalizing roundness—

Damn it! He had to stop thinking about sex, at least in connection with her. Every time he remembered that eerie, macabre tale she’d spun, he almost choked with rage. Nadine Vinick had endured unutterable hell before she’d died, and Marlie Keen, if that was her real name, was trying to turn it into a sideshow. He wouldn’t be surprised to get a call from the local media, asking if there was any truth to the rumor that the OPD was working with a psychic to find the murderer. If Marlie Keen wanted publicity, for whatever sick reason, her next move would be to notify the media herself.

Her gall still astounded him. He totally discounted that psychic shit; the only way she could have known the things she’d known was to have been there. He didn’t know if the murder had been played out exactly as she’d said, but the pertinent details of it had been dead on the money. The only way she would have had the nerve to bring herself to their attention was if she knew there was no evidence to link her to the crime. The murderer had been excruciatingly careful; forensics hadn’t turned up even the tiniest shred of alien material. Therefore, she had done it for the thrill of thumbing her nose at the police department, flaunting the details before them and knowing they couldn’t pin anything on her.

She hadn’t handled the knife herself; he was fairly certain of that. So the actual murderer was someone she knew, someone she was close to. A

brother, maybe, or a boyfriend. Someone close enough to share torture and murder. He thought of her in bed with the bastard who had carved up Mrs. Vinick, and his stomach twisted.

She had made a mistake, taunting him with her knowledge. She was the thread that would lead him to the murderer, and he wouldn't let go until he reached the end.

He stood up and reached for his jacket. "Let's go," he said to Trammell.

"Any place in particular?"

"To talk to Ms. Keen's neighbors. Find out if she has a boyfriend."

She didn't. The neighbors on the left, retirees from Ohio, were certain of that. Bill and Lou, as they introduced themselves, described Marlie as quiet, friendly, and always accommodating about collecting their newspaper and mail whenever they visited their daughter back in Massillon, and feeding their cat. Not many neighbors were so friendly.

"Have you noticed anyone coming or going from the house? Does she have many visitors?"

"Not that I've seen, though of course, we don't just sit and watch Marlie's house," Lou said with all the indignant righteousness of someone who did just that. "No, I don't think I've ever noticed any visitors over there. Have you, Bill?"

Bill scratched his jaw. "Don't think so. She's just about the perfect neighbor, you know. Always speaks when we see her, don't have her nose in the air like some. Keeps her yard neat, too."

Dane frowned as he scribbled in the small notebook that every policeman carried. "Not *any* visitors?" he stressed. "Ever?"

Lou and Bill looked at each other and shrugged helplessly, shaking their heads.

"No family? Brothers, sisters?"

More head shaking.

"Girlfriends?" he growled.

"No," Lou repeated a bit testily. "No one. She even takes care of the yard work herself, instead of hiring a neighborhood boy. I've never seen anyone over there except for the mailman."

Dead end. He was frankly puzzled by it. He glanced at Trammell and saw the small frown that said his partner was just as baffled. Men could be loners, but women seldom were. He tried another tack. "Does she go out much?"

“Not often, no. She sees an occasional movie, I think. I can’t believe she’s in any sort of trouble. Why, when Bill broke his leg two years ago, she’d stay with him whenever I had to go out.” Lou glared at him. Dane noticed that she was saving it all for him, rather than including Trammell in her bad graces.

He flipped his notebook shut. “Thanks for your help.” Some help.

The neighbors on the right had basically the same comments, except the lady of the house had two squalling rug rats hanging on her legs and couldn’t be expected to pay a lot of attention to the comings and goings next door. No, she’d never seen anyone visiting Marlie.

They went back to the car and got in, both sitting in silence and staring at 2411 Hazel wood. It was a neat, solid little bungalow, typical of houses built in the fifties, though it had been spruced up with a cool, sand-colored paint and enlivened with the kind of touches women put on their nests, the trim done in what he thought of as ice cream colors, which only women and gays knew the names for. The front porch was decorated with a couple of ferns and some pinkish flowers, all in pots hanging from hooks. So what had they just found out? That their most likely suspect sounded like some kind of nun?

“That big thud we just heard was us, hitting a blank wall,” Trammell finally said.

Dane scowled, but there was no denying it. He felt frustrated and angry, but underlying it was a certain… relief? Damn, what was wrong with him? He was feeling relieved because a murder case was turning into one big headache, and he couldn’t come up with anything on the best lead they’d had?

“She had to have been there,” he said. “She knew too much.”

Trammell shrugged. “There’s another possibility.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe she’s psychic,” he suggested lightly.

“Give me a break.”

“Then you explain it some other way. I can’t. I’ve been thinking about it, and nothing that we’ve been able to find out about her even hints that she’d be involved in something like this. Weird as it sounds, maybe there’s something to it.”

“Yeah. And maybe aliens are going to land on the White House lawn.”

“Face it, buddy. That neighbor lady is the type who peeps out the window every time a pizza delivery car goes down the street. If Marlie Keen went out, or had anyone over, you can bet it would have been noticed.”
“We still haven’t checked out her friends at work, who she has lunch with.”
“Yeah, well, let me know how it goes. I for one know how to recognize a dead end when I see one.”

Chapter 5

She saw him immediately when she left the bank. He was alone in his car, just sitting there, watching for her. The late afternoon sunshine glinted off the windshield and prevented her from clearly seeing his face, but she knew it was him. Detective Hollister. Though she could really only discern the width of those heavy shoulders and the shape of his head, some primal sense of self-preservation, an alertness to danger, recognized him.
He didn’t get out of the car, didn’t call to her. Just watched her.
Marlie strode to her car, stonily refusing to react to his presence. When she pulled out of the parking lot, he pulled out right behind her.
He stayed there, tight on her rear bumper, as she threaded her way through the normal afternoon traffic. If he thought he could rattle her with this juvenile game, he was in for a surprise; her nerves had been tested in circumstances far more dire than this, and she had survived.
She had errands to run, things she would have done over the weekend if she hadn’t been overwhelmed by that nightmare vision. She didn’t let his presence stop her; if he wanted to see what she did after work, he was in for a real thrill. She stopped at the cleaners, leaving a few soiled garments, picking up the clean ones. Next stop was the library, where she returned two books. Then she went to the neighborhood grocery store. At every stop, he parked as close to her as possible, twice right beside her, and imperturbably waited until she returned. When she came out of the grocery store, he watched as she wheeled the cart, loaded with four bags, to the back of her car. She put her foot on the cart to keep it from rolling while she unlocked the trunk.
He was out of the car and standing beside her almost before the sound of the car door slamming could alert her. Her head jerked up and he was there, as big and grim as a thunderstorm. His eyes were hidden by a pair of very

dark sunglasses. Sunglasses had always made her vaguely uneasy. As before, his physical presence was as forceful as a blow. She had to restrain herself from automatically stepping back. “What do you want?” she asked in a cool, flat voice.
He reached out one big hand and effortlessly lifted a grocery bag from the cart into the trunk. “Just helping you with the groceries.”
“I’ve managed all my life without you, Detective, so I can manage now.”
“It’s no problem.” The smile he gave her was both humorless and mocking. He stowed the remaining three bags in the trunk beside the first one. “Don’t bother saying thank you.”
Marlie shrugged. “Okay.” Turning away, she unlocked the door and slid behind the wheel. The parking space in front of her was empty, meaning she didn’t have to back out; she pulled out through the space in front, leaving him to park the cart or do whatever he wished with it. She wasn’t in the mood to be gracious. She was tired, depressed, and angry.
Worse than that, she was frightened. Not of Detective Hollister, as unpleasant as he was. Her fears were much deeper than that.
She was afraid of the monster who had butchered Nadine Vinick.
And she was afraid of herself.
By the time she stopped at the second traffic light after leaving the grocery store parking lot, he was right behind her again. The man really had a talent for getting around in traffic.
The sight of her house wasn’t as enticing as it usually was. She was wryly certain that its sanctuary was going to be violated by a big, grim man who seemed to have taken an immediate dislike to her. She was used to skepticism from people, but not actual dislike; his attitude wounded her a little, though she was surprised at herself for feeling that way. Detective Hollister wasn’t anything to her, so it had to be merely that it was human nature to want others to think well of oneself.
Just as she had expected, he pulled into her driveway before she had time to cut the ignition off. He got out of the car and took off the sunglasses, tucking them into his shirt pocket. No matter how uneasy sunglasses made her, she suddenly wished he had left them on, because his hazel green eyes, caught by the last rays of the sinking sun, were hard and frighteningly intense.
“What now?” she asked. “Or did you come all this way to help me carry in my groceries?”

“You said you could manage them without my help,” he pointed out. “I thought we’d have a little talk.”
Someone came out next door. She looked up and saw her neighbor, Lou, standing on the porch and staring curiously at them. Marlie waved and called out a hello. Beside her. Detective Hollister also waved.
“Nice to see you again,” he called.
Marlie sternly controlled her temper. Of course he had already been out questioning her neighbors; she wouldn’t have expected him to do otherwise. He had made it plain this morning that he was very suspicious of her. Despite what he had said, when she opened the trunk he plucked all four bags of groceries out, clutching two in each hand. “After you,” he said politely.
She shrugged; if he was willing to carry her groceries, she was willing to let him. She unlocked the front door and held it open for him, then followed him inside and directed him back to the kitchen, where he placed the bags on the table.
“Thank you,” she said.
“Why say thank you now, when you didn’t before?”
She lifted her brows. “You told me not to.” She began putting the groceries away. “What’s on your mind, Detective?”
“Murder.”
The circumstances of Nadine Vinick’s death weren’t something she could be flippant about. Strain tightened her face as she said simply, “Mine, too.” Her eyes were wide and haunted.
He leaned against the cabinet, eyeing her thoughtfully as she moved about the kitchen, bending to stow this item here, stretching to put another on a top shelf. He hadn’t missed the strain in her expression.
He looked around. He liked the kitchen, which was a rather unsettling thought; whatever he had expected the interior of her house to be like, this soothing coziness wasn’t it. His own kitchen was strictly utilitarian; Trammell’s was the latest in high tech, totally intimidating. Marlie Keen’s kitchen was comforting. Rows of herbs in small pots grew in a rack in the window over the sink, giving the air a fresh scent. The tile under his feet was a creamy white, with patterns of soft blues and greens. The open shutters over the windows were painted the same soft blue. A white ceiling fan was positioned over the table.

“Did you find out anything interesting about me today?” she asked, keeping her back turned to him as she placed canned goods on a shelf.
He didn’t reply, just broodingly watched her. He wasn’t about to keep her informed of his progress, or lack of it.
“Let me tell you,” she offered lightly. “Today you found that I’ve never been arrested, never had a traffic ticket, and that to the best of my neighbors’ knowledge, I don’t date or have anyone over. I pay my bills on time, don’t use credit cards, and don’t have any books overdue at the library, though I would have if I hadn’t returned those today.”
“Why don’t you tell me again about Friday night,” he said. His tone was sharp. She had neatly outlined his day, and he didn’t like it. The anger that had simmered in him all day was under control, but just barely. The lady definitely put his back up.
He could see her shoulders tense. “What part didn’t you understand?”
“I’d like to hear it all. Humor me. Just start at the beginning.”
She turned around, and she was as pale as she had been that morning, when she had related the story for the first time. Her hands, he noticed, were knotted into fists at her sides.
“Does it bother you to talk about it?” he asked coolly. He hoped it did. If her conscience was bothering her, maybe she’d spill her guts. It had happened before, though usually it was sheer stupidity and a perverted sort of pride that led the perp into confession.
“Of course. Doesn’t it bother you to hear about it?”
“Seeing it was a lot worse.”
“I know,” she murmured, and for a moment the expression in her eyes was unguarded. There was pain in those dark blue depths, and anger, but most of all he saw a desolation that punched him square in the chest.
He had to clench his own hands, to prevent himself from reaching out to support her. Suddenly she looked so frail, as if she might faint. And maybe she was just a damn good actress, he grimly reminded himself, pushing away the unwanted and uncharacteristic concern for a suspect. “Tell me about Friday night,” he said. “What did you say you were doing?”
“I went to a movie, the nine-o’clock one.”
“Where?”
She told him the name of the cinemaplex.
“What movie did you see?”

She told him that, too, then said, “Wait—I may still have the ticket stub. I usually put it in my pocket. I haven’t done laundry since then, so it should still be there.” She walked swiftly out of the room; he didn’t follow but listened intently, tracing her movements through the house so she wouldn’t be able to slip out without his knowledge, if that had been her intention. Of course, he had her car blocked in the driveway, and he didn’t think she would try to run away. Why should she, when she was so certain he didn’t have anything on her? The hell of it was, she was right.

She came back in only a minute and gave him the ticket stub, being careful not to touch him as she let the small piece of paper drop into his hand. Then she swiftly retreated a few steps; his mouth twisted as he noticed the move. She could hardly make it more plain that she didn’t like being close to him. He looked down at the ticket stub in his hand; it was computer-generated, with the name of the movie, the date, and the time printed on it. It proved that she had bought a ticket; it didn’t prove that she had actually watched the movie. He hadn’t seen it himself, so he couldn’t ask her any pertinent questions about it.

“What time did you leave the movie?”

“When it was over. About eleven-thirty.” Marlie stood tensely beside the table.

“Coming home, what route did you drive?”

She told him, even the exit numbers.

“And where were you when you had this so-called vision?”

Her lips tightened, but she kept her composure, and her voice was steady. “As I told you this morning, I had just left the expressway. The visions have always been very… draining, so I pulled off to the side.”

“Draining? How?”

“I lost consciousness,” she said flatly.

His eyebrows rose. “You lost consciousness,” he repeated, disbelief so plain in his tone that her palm itched with the urge to slap him. “You mean you fainted from the stress?”

“Not exactly.”

“What, *exactly*?”

She shrugged helplessly. “I’m taken over by the vision. I can’t see anything else, I don’t hear anything else, I don’t know anything else.”

“I see. So you sat there in your car until the vision ended, then calmly drove home and went to bed. If you’re so certain that you’re psychic, Miss Keen,

why did you wait over two days before telling the police? Why didn't you call it in immediately? We might have been able to catch the guy still in the neighborhood, or maybe even in the house, if you'd called."
Marlie's face lost its last tinge of color under the lash of that deep, sarcastic voice. There was no way she could explain what had happened six years before, why some of the details had confused her until she wasn't certain if she'd had a flashback or if the knowing had returned. She couldn't expose herself to this man like that, strip her psyche naked to let him see all of her fears, her vulnerabilities. Instead she focused on the one thing he'd said that she could refute.
"N-No," she stammered, hating the unsteadiness of her voice. She took a deep breath to banish that hint of weakness. "I didn't just drive home. A patrolman noticed my car and stopped to see if there was any trouble. I don't remember anything except the vision from the time I pulled over until he knocked on my window and brought me out of it. I was pretty shaky, and I told him that I was an epileptic and must have had a mild seizure. He was a little suspicious and made me get out of the car, but finally he let me go, and followed me home to make certain I got here okay."
Dane didn't straighten away from the cabinet, but acute attention was in every line of his big body. "What time was this?"
"I don't know."
"Estimate. You left the movie at eleven-thirty; about what time did the vision start?"
"Eleven-forty, eleven forty-five. I'm not certain."
"So what time did you get home? How long did the vision last?"
"I don't know!" she shouted, whirling away from him. "I barely made it home; I collapsed afterward and didn't wake up until late Saturday afternoon."
Dane studied her rigid back. She was shaking, a very faint but visible tremor. He should have been glad that he had her rattled, but instead he had this crazy urge to comfort her.
"I'll be in touch," he said abruptly, and left before he gave in to that urge. Damn it, what was it about her? He was very aware of the heaviness in his loins, and knew that if she had looked, there was no way she could have missed it. Thank God, she seemed to want to look anywhere but at him. He'd heard of cops who got turned on by danger, but he'd never been one of them. What in hell was the matter with him?

As he got into his car he admitted that he never should have come here, at least not without Trammell. Ostensibly they had called it a day, but he hadn't been able to. Instead he'd waited for her in the parking lot where she worked, then followed her home. Stupid move; what if she called the lieutenant and complained that he was harassing her? The LT had given them the go-ahead to investigate her, but Dane knew he'd been out of bounds this afternoon.

At least she'd given him something interesting to check out. If a patrolman had stopped to investigate a suspicious vehicle, it wouldn't be difficult to verify. He had the location and date, and he knew it was on third shift. Piece of cake.

He went back to the office and started making phone calls. It took him an hour to get the name of the patrolman in question, Jim Ewan, a six-year street veteran. When he called Officer Ewan's home, there was no answer. He waited another hour, calling Officer Ewan four more times, without results. He checked his watch; it was almost eight o'clock, and he was hungry. He supposed he could get up early in the morning and catch Officer Ewan as he was coming off his shift, but he'd never been very good at waiting when he wanted something. What the hell; Ewan would be reporting in to work in less than three hours, so Dane figured he might as well get something to eat, then come back and talk to the officer tonight. Whatever he found out, it would give him the night to think about it.

He drove home and slapped together a couple of sandwiches, then checked his messages while he munched and caught up on the scores of the new baseball season. He was still pissed at the San Francisco Giants, and wanted anyone but them to win.

Baseball couldn't hold his attention, and his thoughts kept slipping back to Marlie Keen, to deep blue eyes that held more shadows than a graveyard. Whatever scheme she was running, she wasn't entirely comfortable with it; she became visibly upset every time she talked about Friday night. Not even an Oscar-winning actress could make herself go as white as chalk, the way Marlie had been this afternoon.

He remembered how her slender frame had been shaking, and the urge welled up again to put his arms around her, cradle her close to him and tell her everything would be all right. What was with this crazy protectiveness? He accepted his natural male instinct to take care of a woman; he was bigger and stronger, so why shouldn't he put himself between a woman and

any danger that might threaten her? Why shouldn't he guard her when she went up or down stairs, always ready to catch her if those treacherous high heels women wore caused her to trip? Why shouldn't he do any grunt work for her when he could, schedule permitting? When he'd been a patrolman, investigating car accidents, he had always gone first to check on any woman or child involved, without even thinking about it. But damn it, his protectiveness had never before extended to someone he suspected of murder.

He was a cop; she was a suspect. He couldn't allow himself to touch her in any way, except those necessary in his job. Cuddling her wasn't included on that list.

But he wanted to. Damn, he wanted to. He wanted to let her rest her head on his shoulder, he wanted to stroke her cheek, her neck, then let his hand drop lower to investigate her breasts, the curve of her belly, the soft notch between her legs.

He surged to his feet, cursing to himself. He'd seen her for the first time that morning, and hadn't been able to stop thinking about her since. That good old physical chemistry had sure blindsided him with this one.

He checked the time: nine-fifteen. Hell, he might as well go down to the station and wait for Officer Ewan. At least the usual bullshit going on would keep him from thinking about her so much. He paced restlessly for a moment, then got his car keys and put the plan into action.

As he had hoped, Officer Ewan came in early, as a lot of policemen did, so he would have plenty of time to change clothes and drink coffee, kind of settle into routine before the shift began. Jim Ewan was average in almost every way: average height, average weight, average features. His eyes, though, were the alert, cynical eyes of a cop, someone used to seeing everything and expecting anything.

He remembered the incident Friday night very clearly.

"It was a little spooky," he said, thinking about it. "She was just sitting there, like a statue. Her eyes were open and fixed, at first I thought I had a stiff. I turned on the flashlight, but couldn't see anything suspicious in the car, and I could tell then that she was breathing. I rapped on the window with the flash, but it took her a while to come around."

Dane felt an uneasy tingle up his spine. "Had she fainted, maybe?"

Officer Ewan shrugged. "Only people I've ever seen with their eyes fixed like that were stiffs or crazies. The eyes close when it's just a faint."

“So what happened then?”
“It was like she was real confused, and she looked scared at first. She had trouble moving, like someone coming out of anesthesia. But then she managed to get the window rolled down, and she said that she was an epileptic and must have had a seizure. I asked her to get out of the car, and she did. She was shaky, trembling all over. I couldn’t smell any alcohol, and she didn’t seem to be on anything; I’d already called in her plate number, and it had checked out okay, so there wasn’t any reason to hold her. Like I said, she was pretty wobbly, so I followed her home to make sure she made it.”
“What time was this?” Dane asked.
“Let’s see. I can check my paperwork for that night to give you the exact time, if you need it, but I think it was a little after midnight, maybe twelve-fifteen.”
“Thanks,” Dane said. “You’ve helped a lot.”
“My pleasure.”
He drove back home, mulling over everything Officer Ewan had said. For such a brief meeting, it had given him a lot of information.
For one thing, Marlie Keen had been on the opposite side of town from the Vinick residence at about the same time Nadine Vinick was being murdered.
Officer Ewan’s observations pretty much verified what Marlie had told him about how the “vision” affected her.
So what did he have now? Logically he could no longer consider her a suspect, and something inside loosened with relief. She hadn’t been there; she had an alibi. There was nothing to connect her to the murder… except her own words. She had *seen* the murder happen. There was no other way. But how?
She knew something, something she hadn’t told him. Something that put those shadows in her eyes. He was going to find out what she was hiding, find out exactly how she was tied to this murder. The only alternative was that she really was psychic, and he couldn’t buy that. Not yet. Maybe not ever, but… not yet.

Chapter 6

He could feel the anger burning in him as the woman marched away, and he sternly controlled it, as he controlled everything. Now wasn't the time to let his anger show; it would be inappropriate. Everything in its own time. He looked down at the complaint form the woman had filled out and smiled as he read her name: Jacqueline Sheets, 3311 Cypress Terrace. The guarantee of retribution gave him a certain peace. Then, taking care that his body blocked Annette's view of what he was doing, he slipped the complaint form into his pocket to be disposed of later. Only a stupid person would leave it lying about, perhaps for some busybody to look at and remember later, and Carroll Janes did not consider himself stupid. Quite the opposite, in fact. He prided himself on taking care of every little detail.

"I don't know how you can be so calm when people talk to you like that, Mr. Janes," Annette muttered behind him. "I wanted to punch her in the face."

His expression was perfectly calm. "Oh, someday she'll get hers," he said. He liked Annette; she had to put up with the same things he did, and she was always sympathetic when someone gave him a hard time. Most people were acceptably courteous, but there were always those few who needed to be taught a lesson. Annette, however, was unfailingly polite, calling him Mister. He appreciated her perception. She was a homely little thing, short and dark and plain, but generally amiable. She didn't irritate him as so many other women did, with their silly airs and pettishness.

Carroll Janes carried himself in an erect, military posture. He had often thought he would have been perfectly suited for the military—as an officer, of course. He would have been at the top of his class in any of the academies, had he been able to attend. Unfortunately, he hadn't had the connections necessary to get into any of the military academies; connections were imperative, and those who lacked them were shut out. It was how the upper class kept their ranks closed. Joining the military as an enlisted man was unthinkable; he had likewise rejected both ROTC and OCS as being a poor second to the academies. Instead of the distinguished military career he should have had, he was stuck in this degrading job handling customer complaints in a ritzy department store, but that didn't mean he would let his personal standards slide.

He was five foot ten, but his erect carriage often fooled people into thinking he was taller. And he was generally considered a nice-looking man, he thought: in good shape, thanks to twice-weekly visits to a gym; thick, curly

blond hair; even features. He enjoyed dressing well, and was always meticulous in his grooming. Attention to detail meant the difference between success and failure. He never let himself forget that.

He wondered what Annette would say if she discovered the power he kept concealed, under perfect control until it was time to be unleashed. But no one suspected, least of all Annette. Fooling them all so completely gave him immense satisfaction; the cops were so stupid, so utterly outclassed!

He was patient enough to wait until Annette took her afternoon break before going to the computer to see if Jacqueline Sheets had a charge account with the store; to his delight, she did. It was always so much easier when he had this initial access to information. He wasn't interested in her payment record, however. The information from each customer's credit request form was at the top of each file, and that information included the spouse's name and occupation. Jacqueline Sheets was divorced. He clucked his tongue. What a pity, she couldn't maintain a relationship.

Of course, that didn't mean she lived alone. She might have children, or a live-in boyfriend, or a lesbian roommate. She might live with her mother. Any of those scenarios would make his task more difficult, but by no means impossible. He almost hoped such a complication would develop, for it was a truer test of his nerve and intelligence. It was unusual to have another transgressor so soon after the last one; he was a bit curious to see if he would be sharper, like an athlete intensifying his training, or if the opposite would be true. He hoped he would be even stronger and faster, his mind clearer, the surge of power more intense.

When he left work, he could already feel the anticipation humming in him. He ignored the pleasurable sensation and followed his normal routine, for of course, he couldn't allow it to strengthen now; it wasn't time. The pleasure would be all the more intense for having waited, once he let it go. So he drove to his apartment, read the newspaper, popped a microwave dinner into the oven. While it was heating, he set the table: place mat, napkin, everything just as it should be. Just because he lived alone was no reason to let his standards slide.

Only after it was fully dark outside did he allow himself to get out his map of the Orlando area and locate Cypress Terrace, marking the route from his apartment with a yellow highlighter, carefully memorizing the turns. It was closer than he'd expected, no more than fifteen minutes by car. Convenient.

Then he went for a pleasant, leisurely drive, enjoying the mild spring weather. This first reconnaissance was little more than a drive-by, to locate the house and fix it in his mind. He'd also notice a few other details, such as how close the other houses were, if there were a lot of pets in the neighborhood, how many children seemed to be around. If there was a fence around the yard, how many cars were parked in the driveway, or if there was a garage. Little things like that. Details. Later he would find out more, much more, discovering more on each trip until the final reconnaissance, when he would go inside the house itself, learn the layout of the rooms. He would let the pleasure begin building then, for there was something delicious about wandering through her house when she wasn't there, touching her things, looking in her closets and bathroom cabinet. He would already be inside her, and she wouldn't even know it. It would lack only the finale.

He drove past 3311 Cypress Terrace; there was a narrow, one-slot carport instead of a garage, and a five-year-old Pontiac occupied the space. There were no other cars, no bicycles, no skateboards, nothing to indicate kids. Only one light was on in the house, indicating that there was either only one person there, or everyone was in one room. Usually it was the former.

He circled the block and drove by a second time; twice was all he allotted himself on one trip. If anyone was watching, which wasn't likely, the second pass would be attributed to someone lost, while a third pass would be suspicious. The second time he noted the fence that ran down the left side of the house, on the opposite side of the carport. Good. A fence was nice concealment. The right side was more open than he liked it, but all in all the situation was very nice. Very nice indeed. Everything was falling into place.

Marlie had been curled up on the couch, reading a book that was only mildly interesting and slowly feeling herself relax. She had felt the strain all day long, wondering if

Detective Hollister would be waiting in the parking lot when she left work as he had been the day before. She wasn't certain she could handle another of those hostile confrontations with him, but at the same time she felt curiously cast adrift when she walked out of the bank and he wasn't there. It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop, only it never did.

She leaned her head against the back of the couch and closed her eyes. His face formed behind her eyelids: the rough planes, the broken nose, the hazel

green of those deep-set eyes. Not the face of a sophisticate; even if the features had been more even, the expression in those eyes would always set him apart. They were the piercing eyes of a predator, always watching. She rather thought that the people of Orlando could count themselves lucky that he had come down on the side of the law, making criminals his natural prey instead of themselves. Now, added *to* the force of his own nature, was the look that all cops had: that all-encompassing cynicism, the cool distance, the wall that those in law enforcement erected between themselves and those they served.

She had known a lot of cops, had seen it in all of them. Cops relaxed only with their own kind, with others who had seen the same things, done the same things. None of them went home and told their spouses about the meanness and depravity that they saw every day. What a great topic that would have been over dinner! Cops had a high divorce rate. The stress was incredible.

Cops had never known how to take her. At first, of course, they had all thought of her as a joke. After she had proved herself, though, they had all become very uneasy around her, because her psychic insight had included them. Only a cop understood another cop: That was a given. But *she* had felt their emotions, their anger and fear and disgust. They couldn't erect that wall against her, and they had felt vulnerable.

Then, six years ago, she had had to learn how to read people's emotions the way everyone else did, by picking up subtle clues of body language and voice tone, by reading expressions. She had been like a baby learning how to talk, because she had never before had to rely on visual clues. For a while she hadn't wanted to learn, all she had wanted was to be left alone in the blessed silence. But total isolation wasn't human nature; even hermits usually took up with animals. Instinctively, once she had felt safe, she had begun to watch people and read them. It was difficult to read Detective Hollister, though. Her mouth quirked with wry humor. Maybe she had such a hard time reading him because she could barely stand to look at him. It wasn't that he was repulsive, because for all his rough features, he wasn't, but rather because he was so intense. He made her uncomfortable, glaring at her the way he did, battering at her until he forced her to pull up memories she would rather forget.

She wasn't afraid of him; no matter how much he might try, he couldn't tie her to Nadine Vinick's murder, because there was no tie. He couldn't find

evidence that didn’t exist. The uneasiness she felt—

Marlie froze, her eyes flying open and focusing on nothing as she mentally searched the feeling that had crept over her. It wasn’t a vision, or anything else that overwhelming. But she definitely sensed a vague, cold malevolence, a threat.

She got jerkily to her feet and began pacing as she tried to order her thoughts. What was happening? Was the knowing truly returning, or was she experiencing a perfectly normal reaction to a lot of stress?

She had been thinking of Hollister, and all of a sudden she had felt uneasy and threatened. Easy enough to understand that, if Hollister was the source of the threat. Most people would think so, but Marlie analyzed the feeling again and couldn’t find any fear of Hollister in any way connected with his investigation.

The malevolence slapped at her, growing stronger. Marlie gagged on a sudden rise of nausea. Something was happening. God, something was happening. What? Was it connected with Hollister? Was he in danger?

She lurched to a halt, her fists clenched. Maybe she should call him, see if he was all right. But what should she say? Nothing. She didn’t have to say anything. If he answered the phone, then he was obviously all right. She could just hang up-Childish trick. This unformed threat was sickening. She broke out in a sweat, torn with indecision, and all of a sudden the old instincts took over. Blindly she reached out with her mind, searching for Hollister, trying to pinpoint that nebulous cloud of evil. It was like groping in fog; she couldn’t focus on anything.

Groaning, she sank down on the couch again. What had she expected? She hadn’t been able to do that for six years, and even before, it hadn’t been easy. Just because she had had one freak vision, and felt this vague threat, she thought all of the old skills had come back? She hoped they never would, damn it! But just now she needed them, needed something to calm this panic she felt.

But if he was unconscious—she banished the word *dead* before it could form—then she wouldn’t be able to pick up his mental signals. Feeling even more frantic, she summoned up an image of his partner, Alex Trammell. She hadn’t paid much attention to him, but she was observant enough to be able to recall his face. She closed her eyes, concentrating, hearing her own harsh, fast breathing as she tried to find one particular person. *Think!* she fiercely commanded herself. Think of Trammell. It was no use. Nothing.

Swearing under her breath, she grabbed the phone book and ran her finger down the *Hs* until she found the Hollisters. Why were there so damn many of them? Ah, there it was. Dane Hollister. She picked up the receiver and punched in the number before she could talk herself out of this.

And suddenly she knew that he was all right.

It wasn't like before. She hadn't tuned in to his emotions; there was no mental barrage. She just knew. She had a mental picture of him sitting barefoot and bare-chested in front of the television, watching a baseball game and sipping on a beer. He muttered a curse as he reached for the telephone—

—"Yeah."

Marlie jumped. The word had sounded in her ear just as she had pictured him in her mind, speaking. "Ah… uh. Sorry," she stammered, and dropped the receiver clattering into the cradle. She stared at the phone, so stunned she didn't know what to do. She had heard the definite sounds of a baseball game in the background.

Dane shrugged with mild irritation and hung up the telephone. He had missed an out in the game, just in that short time when he'd taken his attention off the screen. He settled back down with a grunt, his bare feet propped on the coffee table and crossed at the ankle. This was the most comfortable he'd been in a while: no shirt, no shoes, the beer in his hand so cold that it made his mouth tingle to drink it.

The caller had been a woman. He knew it instinctively, even though the voice had been low and unusually husky. A smoker's voice.

He thought of Marlie Keen. Her voice had that little rasp; just hearing it gave him a hard-on every time. Reflexively he looked down at his lap. Bingo.

He reached for the phone.

"Did you just call?" he demanded tersely, after a quick call to local Information.

"I… yes. I'm sorry."

"Any reason for it?"

He could hear her breathing over the line, the sounds fast and shallow. Something had upset her. "I was worried," she finally admitted.

"Worried? About what?"

"I thought you might be in some sort of trouble. I was wrong. I'm sorry," she said again.

“You were wrong,” he repeated, with exaggerated disbelief. “Imagine that.”
She slammed the receiver down in his ear. He winced, angrily started to punch the redial button, but hung up instead. Instead of being sarcastic, he should have tried to find out more about what had her so upset; maybe Nadine Vinick was weighing on her conscience. Maybe she’d been about to spill the beans; Officer Ewan had cleared her, though she didn’t know that yet, but he’d still bet money that she knew the perp’s identity. Now, because of his own big mouth, he had blown the chance to find out, because she sure as hell wasn’t going *to* talk to him now.
Then he realized that neither of them had identified themselves. She had known who he was, just as he had known who she was.
And she had been right about one thing, damn it. He *was* in trouble. He looked down at his lap again. Big trouble.
Temptation gnawed at him. He slammed the beer down onto the table so hard that foam sloshed out of the can. Then, cussing at his own stupidity, he picked up the receiver and hit the redial.
“What?” she snapped, answering before the first ring had even completed.
“What’s going on? Talk to me.”
“What would you like me to say?” she asked sweetly.
“How about the real reason why you called.”
“I *told* you. I thought something was wrong.”
“What gave you that idea?” Try as he might, he couldn’t keep the skepticism out of his tone.
She took a deep, steadying breath. “Look. I had an uneasy feeling about you and I was worried. I was wrong.”
“What made you think it had anything to do with me?”
Dead silence. He waited, but she didn’t say anything. It was such a complete silence, without even the sound of her breathing, that alarm chilled his spine. “Are you all right?” he asked sharply. “Marlie?” Silence.
“Come on, babe, talk to me, or I’m on my way over there.”
“No!” Her voice sounded strangled. “No—don’t come over.”
“Are you okay?”
“Yes. Yes, I’m fine. I just… thought of something else.”
“Such as?”
“Maybe it wasn’t connected with you. Maybe it was someone else. I have to think about this. Good-bye.”

“Don’t hang up,” he warned. “Goddamn it, Marlie, don’t hang up—shit!” The dial tone buzzed in his ear. He slammed the phone down and surged to his feet. He’d go over there, check it out—

—And find what? He sincerely doubted she’d open the door to him. Nor did he have a reason, because Officer Ewan had cleared her. That had eaten at him all day; unless something else turned up, and things were looking damn hopeless in that respect, he had no reason to talk to her again. And solving Nadine Vinick’s murder seemed more and more unlikely. It pissed him royally that it looked as if the case would be a real mystery, a stranger-to-stranger killing, the kind that was almost never resolved. Mrs. Vinick deserved better than that.

And he didn’t want never to see Marlie Keen again. If she wasn’t involved in the case, and officially he had to accept that, then he’d have to arrange something else. He didn’t like what he was feeling, but it was too damn strong to ignore.

Marlie paced, alternately swearing and wiping away tears. Damn Hollister! He made her so angry, she could have cheerfully taken a swing at him, had he been there right then. But Hollister was the least of her problems. The knowing was definitely coming back, maybe a little altered from before. Maybe she wasn’t as empathic as she had been; maybe there was a bit more clairvoyance. How else could she have known that Hollister was watching a baseball game? How else could she have anticipated his answer right down to the second? That had never happened before.

She had been thinking about him, unwillingly, but he had definitely been on her mind when the uneasiness, the sense of danger, had swept over her. She had automatically thought it had something to do with him, but it hadn’t; he had just been so strongly in her mind that she hadn’t realized the two weren’t connected. That meant she had two problems; no, three. One: Her extra sensorial skills were coming back, in fits and starts. She didn’t want them to, but they were, and she’d have to deal with it. She pushed that acknowledgment away, because though this problem would have the biggest effect on her life, the others were more immediate.

Two: Detective Hollister was going to be a big complication. He already was. He made her angrier than anyone else she’d ever met, and he did it without even trying. He was a big Neanderthal, sarcastic and skeptical, and she could feel his own anger blazing at her. He was so intense that she almost yielded to the impulse to hide her face every time she saw him. He

burned with the sort of fierce masculinity that made women turn and go all google-eyed when they watched him. Marlie knew she didn't have much experience with men, but that didn't mean she was stupid, either. Her reactions to him were too intense, out of all proportion. The last thing she needed right now was a sexual attraction to handle, especially when nothing could come of it. Groaning, she realized that Hollister felt the same reluctant attraction. He had called her "babe." Probably the only thing that had held him back was his suspicion of her, and that couldn't last in the absence of evidence. Men like him didn't hesitate when they wanted a woman; once he admitted that she had nothing to do with Nadine Vinick's murder, she would have to fend him off.

Which brought her to problem number three, the one so distressing that she had put off thinking about it: The evil she had felt, which had made her so uneasy, had the same… texture, or personality, as the force she had felt the night Nadine Vinick had been murdered. It was the same man. He was still out there, and his evil was focusing on someone else. It was unformed as yet; she had caught only an echo of it. But he was going to act again, and she was the only hope the police had, and his intended victim had, to stop him in time.

She had nothing to go on. No face, no name. Eventually, though, she would be able to focus on him, stay with him, and he would make some mistake that would tell her his identity.

She would have to work with the police, and that meant working with Hollister. She had no doubt it would be an uncomfortable, difficult situation, but she had no choice. She was caught up in this and had no way of getting out.

Chapter 7

Marlie had just finished dressing the next morning when the heavy knock at the front door made her jump, then frown with both annoyance and alarm. She had no doubt who was pounding on her door at seven-twenty in the morning, and it didn't take any special skills to figure it out.

The best way to deal with him, though, was to not let him know that she reacted to him in any way. He would see her anger as a weakness, and

heaven help her if he should get even a hint of the unwilling attraction she felt. He was too aggressive to let either circumstance pass by.
She wasn't about to invite him in. She had to get to work, and she had no intention of letting him make her late. She got her purse and had her keys in hand as she marched to the front door. When she opened it, he was standing almost in her face, leaning with one muscular arm braced against the frame and the other one raised to pound on her door again. The closeness of his body made her catch her breath, a reaction she hid by stepping out and turning to close the door behind her. Unfortunately, he didn't move back, and she fetched up solidly against him, all heat and hard muscle. She was practically in his arms; all he had to do was close them around her, and she would be caught.
Grimly she concentrated on locking the door, trying to ignore the situation. The brief look she had had at his face told her that he was ill tempered this morning, but now she sensed an alarming male edginess beneath the temper. He was as fractious as a stallion scenting a mare in season.
The mental image was unfortunate, and so apt that her heart began beating wildly. With her back turned to him as she wrestled with the stubborn lock, she was suddenly acutely aware of the press of his body against her buttocks. An unmistakable ridge had formed, thick and hard, blatant in intent.
The lock finally clicked into place. She stood motionless, frozen with indecision. If she moved, she would be rubbing against him; if she didn't move, he might take it as an invitation. She closed her eyes against the insidious temptation to simply turn and face him, giving him silent permission by giving him access. Only the certainty that it wouldn't work, that she would freeze under the onslaught of a six-year-old horror, kept her from giving in. She couldn't go through that again.
She forced her voice to work. "What do you want, Detective?" Then she could have bit her tongue. Bad choice of words, under the circumstances. With his erection insistently nudging her, what he wanted was obvious.
For two seconds he didn't answer. She felt the lift of his chest as he slowly inhaled; then, thankfully, blessedly, he moved back a step. "I'm not here as a detective. I just came to see if you're all right."
The heavy sexual tension eased with the small distance between them, making her feel as if she had been freed from shackles. The relief made her light-headed, a reaction she countered with action. "I'm fine," she said

briskly, and went down the steps before he could stop her. Oh, damn. His car was blocking hers in the driveway. She stopped, and her self-control had returned enough that she hesitated only briefly before turning to face him. "I have to leave or I'll be late to work."
He glanced at his wristwatch. "It's a fifteen-minute drive. You have plenty of time."
"I like to leave early, in case of trouble."
The explanation didn't budge him. His heavy-lidded hazel eyes moved over her, their expression shielded. "Anything else scare you last night?"
"I wasn't scared."
"Couldn't prove it by me."
"I wasn't scared," she repeated, this time with her teeth clenched. His obstinance was already fraying her temper. She needed to get away from him, *now.*
"Sure you were. And you're scared now." His gaze raked over her again. "Though not for the same reason," he said softly. This time when his eyelids lifted, she saw the predatory gleam of male awareness.
Marlie stiffened, a chill of apprehension touching her. He might not be psychic himself, but his male instincts were acute. It would be more difficult to evade him than she'd thought, for he sensed the response she couldn't quite mask. He came down the steps toward her, and she swiftly retreated to her car. She jerked the door open and slid behind it, using it as a barricade against him.
He regarded her over the open door, his eyes sharp now, piercingly intent. "Calm down," he murmured. "Don't get in such a snit."
She glared at him, agitated almost beyond endurance. If he didn't leave soon, she was going to lose control and say something she knew she would regret. She clutched at the door for support, her knuckles white with the effort. "Move your car, Detective. And unless you have a warrant, don't come to my house again."
Great going, Hollister. Dane felt violent as he swore at himself. He glared down at his desk, ignoring the noise around him of overlapping voices and the incessant ringing of the telephones. He was raw with frustration, both sexual and professional. There were no leads in the Vinick case, no evidence. The investigation was going nowhere, and it looked as if his interest in Marlie Keen was rapidly headed in the same direction.

What else had he expected? That she wouldn't notice his erection jammed against her ass? The wonder was that she hadn't started screaming.
He should have moved back immediately when she had stepped out of the house, but he hadn't. The first accidental touch of her body had frozen him in place, all of his senses painfully focused on the contact. It had felt so good that he had barely been able to tolerate it, but at the same time it hadn't been enough. He had wanted more. He had wanted to strip her naked, to thrust inside her. He had wanted to feel her legs wrapped around his hips, wanted to feel her quivering beneath him as she came. He wanted to dominate her, smash her resistance, bend her so thoroughly to his will that he could take her whenever he wanted… and he wanted to protect her from everything and everyone else. That was why he had been on her front porch this morning. He hadn't been able to rest all night, almost certain something had frightened her but totally certain that she wouldn't welcome his concern if he'd called her again. When morning came, he hadn't been able to resist. He'd had to see for himself that she was all right.
So what had he done? Alienated her even further. He had mishandled her from the very beginning, and he still had no idea what he was supposed to do about her. Officer Ewan had cleared her of being at the scene of Nadine Vinick's murder, but she obviously knew something about it, and had come to the police with it. So what was she, a suspect or a witness? Logic said the former, some uneasy instinct said the latter, and his dick frankly didn't give a damn.
"You're in a piss-poor mood," Trammell commented lazily, all tipped back in his chair and watching Dane's expression.
He grunted. There was no denying it.
"Talked to Marlie lately?"
Annoyed, Dane shot him a glance. "This morning," he said briefly.
"And?"
"And nothing."
"Nothing? Then why did you call her?"
"I didn't." Restlessly Dane twirled a pencil. "I went over there."
"Oh, ho. Keeping secrets from your partner, huh?"
"No secrets to keep."
"So why did you go over there?"
Damn, all this interrogation was making him feel twitchy. Dane had a brief moment of sympathy for the suspects he and Trammell had questioned for

hours. A very brief moment. “No reason,” he replied, blatantly stonewalling and not giving a damn if Trammell knew it.
“No reason, huh?” Trammell was having fun. His dark eyes were gleeful. He had never thought he’d see the day when his good buddy Dane would be so antsy over a woman, and he intended to enjoy every minute of it. Dane *never* had woman trouble; they had always cared about him far more than he cared for them, which gave him a tremendous advantage in his relationships. He’d never mistreated a woman, but at the same time their influence on him had been very slight. If they didn’t like his irregular hours, tough. If he had to miss a date, so what? He’d never given anything of himself beyond the physical to a woman, because the job had always come first. Dane was a damn good cop, one of the best. But he’d pretty much sailed unscathed through the rough seas of romance, unlike the rest of them who wrestled with the conflicts between job and relationships, so it was nice to see him squirming now.
Trammell prodded the beast again. “What did she say?”
Dane scowled, and darted another irritated look at his partner. “Why are you so curious?”
Trammell spread his hands, feigning innocence. “I thought we were working on this case together.”
“It didn’t have anything to do with the case.”
“Then why were you over there?”
“Just checking on her.”
Trammell couldn’t hold back a chuckle, and the telephone rang while he was still laughing.
Dane picked up the receiver. “Detective Hollister,” he barked.
“Finally turned up some stuff on the Keen woman you asked about,” a laconic voice said in Dane’s ear. “Interesting. Damn interesting.”
Dane had stiffened at the first mention of Marlie’s name, his entire body alert. “Yeah? Like what?”
“I’ll let you read it for yourself, pal. I’m faxing it to you. Didn’t know you went in for that kind of shit. Nice-looking woman, though.”
“Yeah,” he said automatically. “Thanks, Baden. I owe you one.”
“I’m marking that down in my little book,” Baden said cheerfully. “See ya.”
Dane hung up the phone to find Trammell watching him with sharp interest, all amusement gone. “What’s up?”
“Baden’s faxing me some information on Marlie Keen.”

“No kidding.” Trammell’s eyebrows lifted. “I didn’t think anything would turn up on her.”
“Well, it has.” The fax machine in the corner began to hum and spit out paper. Dane got up and went over to it, his face grim. He wasn’t sure he wanted to see this. Two days ago he would have loved to get his hands on some information about Marlie, but not now. Ever since she had called him the night before, he had stopped even trying to deny the effect she had on him. He wanted her, damn it. And he wanted her to be innocent. He wanted there to be some explanation of the things she had told them on Monday.
Trammell came over to stand beside him, his dark gaze inscrutable as he watched Dane.
The first sheet came out. It was a photocopy of a newspaper article. Quickly he scanned the headline: teenage psychic FINDS MISSING CHILD.
Trammell whistled, the single note almost soundless.
Page after page followed. They all had a common theme: Marlie Keen’s psychic abilities. Some of the articles seemed to be from psychology magazines, or were papers on parapsychology. Several grainy photographs were printed, showing a younger, almost childish-looking Marlie. Most of them were newspaper articles, reporting how “noted psychic” Marlie Keen had worked with police to solve various cases. The articles were all from the Northwest, he noted. Oregon and Washington mostly, though there were a couple in Idaho, one in northern California, one in Nevada.
Sometimes she was described as a “youthful clairvoyant,” once as “lovely,” twice as “extraordinary.” It was a common theme in the articles that the local police forces had been, at the beginning, both skeptical and derisive of her talents, until she had done exactly what she had said she could do.
Usually it was to find a missing person, though on a couple of occasions she had helped find kidnappers. Several times it was mentioned that, when not involved in a case, Miss Keen lived in Boulder, Colorado, at the Institute of Parapsychology. A Dr. Sterling Ewell, a professor of parapsychology at the Institute, was quoted several times.
Trammell was standing right beside him, reading each sheet as he did. They were both silent. Even though they had been forewarned, by Marlie herself, reading about it in black and white was unsettling.
Then one stark headline jumped out at them: killer attacks psychic. Dane grabbed the sheet, holding it taut as it was printed, and they began reading as it emerged from the machine.

There had been a series of child kidnappings in a remote area of Washington; one child had been found dead, two others were still missing. Marlie had been brought in by the local sheriff, with whom she had worked before in another town, to help find the children. Just before she had arrived, another child had disappeared. A big article about her had been printed in the paper the same day.

That night Arno Gleen had kidnapped Marlie from her motel room and taken her to the same place he had taken the most recent missing child, a five-year-old boy. He had been seen, though, and the sheriff alerted. It was a small town; they were able to identify Gleen and track him down. But the little boy was already dead when they got there, and though they were in time to save Marlie's life, she had been severely beaten.

Her condition, "poor," was reported in a subsequent article. Then there was nothing else. Absolutely nothing. Dane checked the date on the last article. A little over six years ago. For six years Marlie Keen had literally disappeared from the public eye. Why had she relocated to Florida? As soon as he had the thought, he pictured a map in his mind and knew why. Florida was as far from Washington as she could get and still stay in the country. But why, after six years of anonymity and a completely normal life, had she walked into the lieutenant's office and told them about Nadine Vinick's murder?

"It couldn't have been easy," Trammell murmured, his thoughts obviously following the same path. "To have involved herself after what happened the last time."

Dane ran his hand through his hair. Part of him was elated, the last doubt demolished. There was an explanation for her knowledge. If he still couldn't quite believe, at least now he had to suspend his disbelief. There was no longer any reason at all for him to stay away from her; he could go after her the way his body had wanted right from the beginning. But another part of him, perversely, didn't want to accept what he had read. Half of it was the sheer unlikelihood of it, for it went against the grain with someone so solidly grounded in reality and facts. The other half was alarm. Shit, what if it was for real? He didn't want anyone reading his mind, though after a moment's reflection he had to admit that it would be convenient if a woman could tell how he felt and he wouldn't have to talk about it.

But it was more than that. He was a cop. He had seen things, heard things, done things, that he didn't want to have as common knowledge between

him and his woman. It was something only another cop would understand. The job marked them, forever set them apart from civilians. Some cases would go with him to the grave, living in his mind. Some victims' faces, he would always see.

He didn't want anyone invading the privacy of his mind. Not even Marlie. His nightmares were his own.

He gathered up the sheets. "I'm going to check on some of this," he said. "Talk to this Dr. Ewell, find out about the past six years."

Trammell looked a little strange, a kind of amusement vying with sympathy. Dane scowled at him. Sometimes having a partner was like living with a psychic, you got to know each other so well. Trammell was sadistic enough, damn him, to enjoy seeing Dane squirm over a woman.

"What's so damn funny?" he growled. , Trammell shrugged. "It looks like we'll be working with her, and I was just picturing you trying to get on her good side, after the way you two hit it off. Or didn't hit it off, I should say."

Dane went back to his desk and got on the horn. Wryly he remembered when he had put in for detective. He had pictured a lot of fieldwork, fitting obscure pieces of evidence together like Sherlock Holmes. Instead, he had spent a lot of hours on the phone, and he'd found out that a detective was only as good as his snitches. A smart detective cultivated a lot of contacts on the street, lowlifes who were willing to drop a dime on someone else. Too bad he hadn't had any snitches in Nadine Vinick's neighborhood.

A call to Information got him the number for the Institute of Parapsychology in Boulder. Less than a minute later he was being connected to Dr. Sterling Ewell.

"Dr. Ewell, this is Detective Dane Hollister, Orlando Police Department."

"Yes?"

Dane frowned slightly. There had been a wealth of caution in that one word.

"I'd like to ask you some questions about Marlie Keen. She used to be affiliated with the Institute."

"I'm sorry, Detective," the professor said coolly. "I don't give out any information over the telephone about my colleagues."

"Ms. Keen isn't in any trouble—"

"I never thought she was."

"I simply need some background information on her."

"As I said, Detective, I'm sorry. I have no way of knowing if you are who you say you are. Tabloid reporters have often tried to get information by

claiming to be with various police departments."
"Call the Orlando Police Department," Dane said tersely. "Ask for me."
"No. If you want any information about Ms. Keen, you'll have to apply for it in person. With the proper identification, of course. Good-bye, Detective."
The receiver clicked in his ear, and Dane hung up with a curse. Trammell said, "No luck?"
"He wouldn't talk to me."
"Any reason why?"
"He said he doesn't give out information over the phone. If I want to know anything about Marlie, I have to go to Boulder and talk to him in person."
Trammell shrugged. "So what's the big deal? Go to Boulder."
Dane gave him an irritated look. "The LT is going to be tickled that she's really a psychic, but there's no way he'll authorize a plane ticket just for a background check on someone who isn't a suspect."
"You won't know until you try."
Ten minutes later, he had the answer he'd expected. Bonness was indeed elated that his hunch about Marlie had turned out to be accurate, and he even gloated a bit that he must have a touch of psychic ability himself. Dane barely managed to restrain himself from rolling his eyes at that. But no way could the lieutenant justify the cost of sending Dane to Colorado to check out something that didn't really need checking out. They already had all the verification they needed, didn't they? He dismissed the six missing years as being unimportant. The budget was tight, and they needed all the resources they had to be used tracking down criminals, not snooping into the private lives of people who weren't doing anything wrong.
But those six years were important to Dane. "Do you have any objection if I take off tomorrow and go on my own?"
Bonness looked startled. "You mean pay your own way?"
"That's exactly what I mean."
"Well, no, I don't guess there's any problem, except that you're in the middle of a murder investigation."
"This is related. And the investigation isn't going anywhere. We have no evidence, no motive, no suspects."
Bonness sighed. "Take off, then. But just tomorrow. I want you back here by Friday morning."
"No problem."

Dane returned to his desk and told Trammell what was happening, then got on the phone again. He had to call three airlines before he found an available flight. After booking his ticket, he called Professor Ewell again and tersely informed him when he would be arriving.

Dane felt naked without the Beretta, but since he wasn't traveling in any official capacity, he reluctantly left it at home. He couldn't make himself travel without any weapon, though; he carried a pocketknife that was only a little larger than normal, with nothing else about its appearance that was out of the ordinary, but which had a single blade made from an alloy stronger than steel. The knife also had perfect balance, a requisite for a throwing knife. Throwing a blade was an arcane little skill he had taught himself, on the theory that it might come in handy someday. The knife wasn't the equal of a pistol, but it was better than nothing.

He was a nervous flier. It wasn't the flying itself that got to him, but the strain of being trapped in a small space with so many strangers. He couldn't leave old habits behind, couldn't draw a boundary between on-duty and off-duty. He was the same man regardless. That meant he automatically watched everyone, subconsciously noting any erratic behavior, studying appearance, constantly evaluating the situation. The situation was boring, but that didn't mean he could stop. Just as sure as he let his guard down, something bad would happen; it was an unwritten law.

He had taken the earliest flight out. Because of the two-hour time difference between Orlando and Colorado, he arrived in Denver well before lunch. He had no luggage, so all he had to do was go to the car-rental desk and lease a car for the day. Boulder was about twenty-five miles to the northwest, interstate all the way.

Once in Boulder, he stopped to look up the address of the Institute and ask for directions. With one thing and another, it was twelve-thirty when he drove up to the Institute. There were no fences, no gates; his policeman's eye noted that the security measures were skimpy, at best. There was an alarm wired to the door, but nothing any third-rate burglar couldn't disarm, institute of parapsychology was neatly painted in large block letters on the double glass doors. He pushed the doors open and noted that there was no tone to signal his entrance. It looked as if anyone could walk in off the street.

About twenty feet up the hallway was an office on the left, the door open. Dane approached it and stood for a moment in the doorway, silently

observing a neat, middle-aged woman in front of a computer, typing a letter while she concentrated on what she was hearing through the headset plugged into her ears. Dane cleared his throat, and she glanced up, a smile breaking like sunshine. “Oh, hi. Have you been waiting long?”
“No, I just have walked up.” She had a very cheerful face, and he found himself smiling back at her. This place seemed to be as short on formality as it was on security. “I’m Dane Hollister, Orlando PD. I’m here to see Professor Sterling Ewell.”
“I’ll give him a call to let him know you’re here. He was expecting you, so he brought his lunch today instead of going out.”
The artlessness of that reply made him smile again. Her brown eyes twinkled at him. “He’s my husband,” she confided. “I can deflate his dignity if I want to, not that he gives a hoot.” She picked up a phone and punched two numbers. “Sterling, Detective Hollister is here. Okay.”
She hung up the phone. “Go on back to his office. I would take you myself, but I’m swamped today. Take the next corridor to the right, and his is the office on the right at the very end of the hall.”
“Thanks,” he said, winking at her as he left. To his amusement, she winked back.
Professor Ewell was a tall, barrel-chested man with thick white hair and a lined face that wore his years with grace. Like his wife, he seemed a very cheerful man, and he wasn’t very big on formality either. He was wearing an ancient pair of chinos and a faded chambray shirt, and his feet were clad in scuffed boots. Dane immediately felt a sense of kinship, for the professor evidently ranked clothing fairly low on his list of priorities. His blue eyes were bright with intelligence and humor, but he regarded Dane very sharply for a long minute before some hitherto unnoticed suspicion faded away.
With a jolt, Dane understood. “All of that about tabloid reporters was bullshit,” he said. “You’re…” He paused, unwilling to accuse the professor of being something he didn’t really believe in.
“Psychic,” Professor Ewell supplied benignly. He waved a large hand at a comfortable-looking chair. “Sit down, sit down.” When Dane had complied, he resumed his own seat. “Not very much,” he said. “Nothing like some of the people I work with. But my one small talent is that I’m very good at reading people when I meet them in person. Because of that, I don’t give out any information over the telephone. My long-distance instincts are deplorable.” He smiled ruefully.

“No reading minds, or anything like that?”
The professor chuckled. “No, you can relax. Telepathy definitely isn’t one of my talents, as my wife will gladly tell you. Now, tell me about Marlie. How is she?”
“I’d hoped you would give *me* information about her,” Dane said dryly.
“You haven’t asked anything yet,” the professor pointed out. “I have.”
Dane was torn between impatience and humor. There was something in the good doctor that reminded him very much of an impudent six-year-old. He let humor get the upper edge, and gave in to the professor’s air of expectancy. “I don’t know what I can tell you. I’m not her favorite person,” he admitted, rubbing his jaw. “When I saw her yesterday morning, she told me not to set foot on her property again unless I had a warrant.”
The professor sighed blissfully. “That’s Marlie. I was afraid the trauma might have permanently damaged her. She can be very patient, when she wants, but sometimes she can be a bit testy, too.”
“Tell me about it,” Dane muttered, then latched on to what had just been said. “This trauma you mentioned; was it when Gleen kidnapped her?”
“Yes. It was horrible. Marlie was in a catatonic state for a week, and didn’t speak for almost two months. Everyone thought, including her, that she had lost all of her psychic abilities.” Bright blue eyes studied Dane. “I assume, from your interest in her, that those abilities have returned.”
“Maybe.” Dane didn’t want to commit himself to anything.
“Ah, I see. Skepticism. But you’re intrigued enough by what she told you to take a flight to see me. It’s okay, Detective; skepticism is not only expected, it’s healthy. I’d worry about you if you automatically believed everything you’re told. For one thing, you’d be terrible in your job.”
Dane firmly returned the conversation to the subject. “About the kidnapping. There was a newspaper article saying that she’d been beaten.” Ruthlessly he kept himself from imagining details; he’d seen too many results from beatings, and didn’t want to picture Marlie in that condition.
“There’s been nothing else about her since then. Are you saying the injuries were so severe—”
“No, not that at all,” Professor Ewell interrupted. “I don’t mean to downplay the severity of her injuries, but she was fully recovered from them well before she started talking again. In this case, it was the mental trauma that did her the greatest harm.”
“What happened, exactly?”

The professor looked thoughtful. “How much do you know about parapsychology?”
“I know how to spell it.”
“I see. From that, I take it that most of your information about it is gleaned from television shows and fortune-tellers in county fairs.”
“Just about.”
“Well, discard all of what you think you know. I’ve always thought that the basis of it was very simple: electrical energy. Every action and every thought uses electrical energy. This energy is detectable. Some people are sensitive to bee stings; others are sensitive to energy. There are degrees of sensitivity, with some people being only mildly sensitive and a very few being ultra sensitive. I don’t see why the issue has to be confused with hocus-pocus, though of course, there are charlatans who wouldn’t know psychic ability if it bit them on the ass—” The professor broke off, and gave Dane a sheepish look. “Sorry. My wife says I get carried away.”
She was right, too. Dane smiled. “I understand. Now, about Marlie—”
“Marlie is exceptional. Most people have some extrasensory ability, and call it hunches, gut instinct, mother’s intuition, whatever they’re comfortable with. Their degree of ability is mild. Some are a bit sharper than that. A few others are even more sensitive, to a degree that can be tested. And then there are the rare ones, like Marlie. She’s the most sensitive receptor I’ve ever seen. To give you a comparison, most people are biplanes, some few are Cessnas, and Marlie is a high-performance fighter jet.”
“You’ve tested her, of course?”
“My God, Marlie’s been tested almost continuously since she was four years old! She could be fractious even then,” he said fondly.
“What exactly are her—er, talents?”
“Mainly, she’s an empath.”
“A what?”
“Empath. She’s empathic. She feels others’ emotions, so much so that an ordinary drive on a crowded street could make her scream with frustration. All those feelings bombarding her, from all directions. She described it once as a blend of screams and static, at high volume. The biggest problem she had was controlling it, blocking it out so she could function normally.”
“You said mainly. What else does she do?”
“You said that as if she’s a trick pony,” the professor observed, his tone disapproving.

“No offense meant. I won’t lie and tell you that I’m buying all of this, but I’m interested.” And that was an understatement if he’d ever made one.
“You’ll come around,” Professor Ewell predicted with a certain amount of malicious satisfaction. “All of you do, once you’ve been around Marlie any length of time.”
“Who is ‘all of you’?”
“Policemen. You’re the world’s most cynical people, but eventually you won’t be able to deny what she can do. Back to your question: She’s also a bit clairvoyant, though certainly not to the same degree that she’s empathic. She has to concentrate to block her empathic abilities, something she had never quite managed to completely do, while she has to concentrate to *use* her clairvoyance.”
“You mean she predicts that things will happen?”
“No, that’s precognitive.”
Dane rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache come on. “I don’t think I have all of this straight. I’ve always thought a clairvoyant is someone with a crystal ball, predicting the future.”
Professor Ewell laughed. “No, that’s a charlatan.”
“Gotcha. Okay, an empathic person is someone who receives and feels the emotions of other people.”
The professor nodded. “A clairvoyant senses distant objects, and is aware of events in distant places. A precognitive is someone who knows of events in the future. A telekinetic is someone who can move physical objects with the force of their minds.”
“Spoon benders.”
“Mostly charlatans.” The spoon benders were dismissed with a wave. “I won’t say that one or two don’t have telekinetic talent, but for the most part it’s just showmanship. None of the extrasensory abilities can be neatly categorized, because capability varies from person to person, just like reading ability.”
“And Marlie’s particular blend of talents made her good at finding people?”
“Mmmm. Extraordinary. Her empathy was so strong that, when she focused on one particular person, she would… well, she called them ‘visions,’ but I’ve observed her during the events, and I would use a stronger word than that.
A vision is something that can be easily interrupted. It was as if her mind would leave, though of course, it didn’t. But she would be totally taken over

by the event, so completely in empathy with the subject that she was aware of nothing else. Terribly draining for her, of course. She would virtually collapse afterward. But while she was linked, she would observe enough about the surroundings to pinpoint the location, and she always managed to fight off the exhaustion long enough to pass the details along to the local law enforcement officers.“
“What else happened with Arno Gleen?”
Professor Ewell’s face changed, his expression that of mingled pain and hatred. “Gleen was a monster. A pedophile, a sadist, a murderer. Little boys were his favorite. He would kidnap them, take them to a remote place, abuse them for a day or two, then kill them. Unfortunately, there are no secrets in a small town, and when the sheriff called Marlie for help, the news was all over town before sundown. The next day there was a prominent article in the local newspaper about her, mentioning her successes and when she would arrive. Gleen was waiting. As soon as he caught her alone, he grabbed her.”
“But if she’s as empathic as you say she is, why didn’t she sense him?”
“By that time, she had learned how to block, and she automatically did it whenever she was in a town. It was the only way she could function. And there are some people who naturally block their own transmissions; maybe Gleen was one of them. Maybe he was simply a sociopath, and didn’t feel anything for her to pick up. She’s never said. In fact, she’s never discussed it at all.”
Dane was beginning to get an ugly feeling, one that was all too likely. “Did he rape her?” His voice was low and harsh.
The professor shook his head. “He couldn’t.”
Dane exhaled, his eyes closing briefly.
“But he tried.” The professor looked down at his hands, his mouth tight. “He took her to where he had his latest victim stashed. The little boy had been horribly abused. Gleen had him tied to a bed. I believe the child was about five years old. Gleen dumped Marlie on the floor, stripped her, and tried to rape her. She wasn’t a little boy, though, so he couldn’t achieve the necessary erection. Every time he failed, he would hit her, working himself into a greater rage. Maybe he thought inflicting pain would arouse him enough. But it didn’t, and in a frenzy he turned on the child. He stabbed the little boy to death in front of her. There were twenty-seven puncture wounds

in the child’s face, chest, and abdomen. And all the while Marlie was linked with the child. She felt him die.”

Chapter 8

Dane felt as if he had been scraped raw on the inside. He didn't have to imagine what Marlie had gone through. He was a cop; he had seen too much to ever have to rely on his imagination to supply details. He knew what beatings really were. He knew what stabbings looked like. He knew how much blood there was, how it spread and spread and got all over everything, even your dreams. He knew how the little boy had sobbed and screamed, had seen in other children's faces his terror and despair, his pain, his utter helplessness.

Marlie had endured that. And when she had had the vision of Nadine Vinick's murder, what had it cost her to see those images again? The similarity was sickening.

At some point during the visit with Professor Ewell, his healthy cynicism had gone south. The germ of possibility had been planted. He didn't like it, but despite himself, he accepted that Marlie had "seen" Mrs. Vinick die. Maybe it was a one-shot deal. According to the professor, after Marlie had recovered from her injuries and the emotional trauma she had suffered, she had had no extrasensory abilities at all.

For the first time in her life, she had been able to live normally. It was something she had always wanted to be able to do, but the price had been horrendous. Even after six years, she was still paying it. Now Dane knew why there were no boyfriends.

It made him all the more determined that *he* would change that situation. Objectively he could be a little amused at the range of conflicts that were clouding his mind and tangling his guts. He'd always been able to hold himself a little apart, unaffected by most of the worries that gnawed at other cops. Subjectively he wasn't enjoying it worth a damn. He didn't believe in paranormal stuff, had always laughed at those who did. Now he found himself not only halfway believing, but trying to figure out how he could use Marlie to find Mrs. Vinick's murderer.

That last thought tied another knot in his intestines. He wanted to protect her; he didn't want her involved with another murderer in any capacity. But he was a cop, and his job was to use whatever source he could to solve a crime, especially one as brutal as this. The bastard didn't need to be walking around, loose among the unsuspecting public. And despite the primal male instinct that told him to keep Marlie away from it, he knew that, if possible,

he would use her. He would do everything he could to keep her safe, but the greatest need was to find this guy and put him away. Unless he was a certified wacko, the savagery of the murder was such that he was almost certain to be given the death penalty… but first he had to be caught.

Another conflict was with his own male wariness. No man he knew gladly embraced the turmoil and restrictions of an emotional relationship with a woman, and he was no exception. He liked his life; he liked not being tied down to any one woman. He didn't want to have to account for his time to anyone, didn't want to have to consider someone else when making plans for what he wanted to do. But now there was Marlie, and damn it if he didn't feel as if he'd been cornered. He'd been attracted to a lot of women before, but not like this. This was a fever, a gnawing need that never left him. It had been only four days since he'd walked into Bonness's office and seen her for the first time, and she hadn't been out of his mind since. The more he learned about her, the more involved he became. The hell of it was, *she* certainly wasn't doing anything to get him involved; he was doing it all on his own, and having to fight her every inch of the way.

She had totally avoided men, romantically and sexually speaking, since Gleen had almost destroyed her. Dane tried to tell himself to back off, to give her both time and space in order to come to trust him, but he knew it wasn't going to happen. He'd never been the type to sit and wait. He was going to make her his, and pretty damn soon, too. She would understandably be afraid of sex. He, and no one else, was going to teach her that it could be pleasurable, too. He'd never been jealous before in his life, but now he felt almost violent with it. Not jealous of Gleen, God knows, but of every other man out there who would take one look and get lost in Marlie's bottomless blue eyes. He wanted the right to pull her possessively against his side and glare a warning at any bastard who dared look too long at her.

Trammell would gloat at the irony of it. Dane had never had any trouble separating his love life from his work, because his work had always taken precedence. Now here he was, obsessed with a woman who was his best link with a killer.

It was nine-thirty when his plane landed. He was tired, having been up since before dawn, not to mention having flown most of the way across the country and back. He checked in with Trammell from a pay phone in the airport, told him he'd see him in the morning and tell him everything then.

After hanging up, he stood there for a minute, thinking. He was tired, his clothes were tired, he was grumpy. He should go home and get some sleep, think things over. He knew what he should do, but damn if he'd do it. He wanted to see Marlie. He might not like the complications, but he couldn't wait to get entangled with them, like a moth rushing giddily toward a flame.
Marlie jerked the door open on his fifth knock. She stood squarely in the doorway, her posture plainly denying him admittance. "It's ten-thirty, Detective," she said coldly. "Unless you have that warrant, get off of my porch."
"Sure," Dane replied easily, and stepped forward. She wasn't prepared for the maneuver, automatically moving back to give him room before she caught herself. She tried to recover, grabbing for the door, but it was too late; he was already over the threshold.
He didn't take his eyes off her as he shut the door behind him. She was wearing a pair of cutoffs, droopy socks, and a flimsy old T-shirt that draped over her braless breasts as faithfully as her own skin. Very pretty breasts, he noticed, making no effort to hide the direction of his gaze. High and pointed, with small dark nipples peaking the fabric. His mouth went dry and his loins tightened, the same reaction he had every time he was in her company. He was beginning to expect it, anticipate it, enjoy it.
The casualness of her clothing jolted him, making him acutely aware of the prim facade she normally projected. Behind that facade was a woman whose natural sensuality took his breath, and made him realize how successfully she had managed to hide it. He wanted to shake his head at the waste and at the same time thank God that, evidently, no other man had seen through her defenses.
She had more layers than an onion, and she was determined to keep them hidden beneath that prickly shield she had developed. The blistering glare she was giving him should have shriveled his skin. Instinctively he knew that her hostility was because of her vulnerability; she was naturally angry at his previous suspiciousness and less than gentle questioning, but most of her dismay was caused by the fact that he was seeing her like this, without the armor of her bland disguise.
Patience wouldn't work with her. She was too used to hiding, to protecting herself. He was going to have to break down her defenses, force her to let him get close to her. His blood surged hotly as he decided how to do it.

Deliberately he let his gaze roam over her. Her glossy dark hair was hanging loose on her shoulders. He liked that. Her bare legs… He felt another jolt of lust. Damn, her legs were great. And her breasts were so tempting that his mouth began to water, until he was all but drooling. He wasn't going to try to hide his attraction another minute; it was time to start getting her accustomed to it.

Marlie flushed angrily as he continued to stare at her breasts. She crossed her arms over them in a half-belligerent, half-defensive gesture. "If you don't have a good reason for this, I'm going to file a complaint about you," she warned.

His gaze flicked upward. "I've been to Boulder," he said abruptly. "I just got back an hour ago." He paused, watching for any flicker of expression. She didn't give much away, but he was learning to read her eyes. She hadn't quite learned how to shield the expression in them. "I talked with Dr. Ewell."

Her pupils dilated wildly, and there was no disguising her dismay. She stood stiffly, glaring at him. "So?"

He moved closer to her, so close that he knew she could feel his heat, close enough to intimidate her with his size. It was a deliberate tactic, one he had used before in interrogation, but there was a big difference this time in his own attitude. Talking to her was still important, but underlying it was the powerful sexual need to make her aware of him as a male. The closeness of his body shocked her; he saw her waver, saw the sudden color in her cheeks, saw the alarmed flicker of her eyes. She didn't allow herself to retreat, but she went very still, her nostrils flaring delicately as the hot scent of his skin reached her.

Her own feminine scent wrapped subtly about him, drawing him even closer. It was a clean, soapy odor that told him she wasn't long from her bath, mingled with the warm sweetness of woman. He wanted to lean down and nuzzle her neck, to follow that faint scent to its source, investigate all the intriguing places where it might linger.

Later. It was too soon for that.

"So the good doctor had a lot of interesting things to say," he murmured. He began to slowly circle her, letting his body brush hers, the light touches tingling through his nerves like electricity. Stallion circling mare, getting her accustomed to his touch, his smell. Gentling her. "It seems you're some kind of miracle of ESP, if you believe in that kind of stuff."

Her lips tightened. She had herself under control again, not even glancing at him as he continued to circle her, ignoring the fleeting contact of his arm, or his chest, the graze of his thigh. “You don’t, of course.”
“Nope,” he said blithely. It wasn’t a complete lie, but he wasn’t about to tell her he was at least halfway convinced. He’d get a lot more reaction out of her if she was angry, and reaction was exactly what he wanted. “Unless you can prove it to me. Why don’t you give it a try? Come on, Marlie, read my mind or something.” Slowly, slowly, around and around. Never letting her completely escape his touch, his heat.
“I can’t. There has to be something *in* your mind.”
“Nice shot, but it doesn’t prove anything.” He kept his voice low, almost crooning. “Make me believe it.”
“I don’t do parlor tricks,” she snapped, goaded. She was drawing more and more taut, the force of his nearness wearing on her nerves.
“Not even to prove yourself innocent of murder?” He pushed her even further. “This isn’t a party, babe, in case you haven’t noticed.”
Her head whipped around, dark hair flying, and she gave him the full force of her glare, blue eyes narrowing like a cat’s. “I suppose I *could* change you into a toad,” she said speculatively, then shrugged. “But someone has already beaten me to it.”
He gave a bark of laughter, startling her. “You’ve seen too many of the old ‘Bewitched’ shows; that’s witchcraft, not ESP.”
The slow circling finally got to her. Abruptly she bolted, toward the kitchen. He let her go, following closely behind her. “Coffee,” he said blandly. “Good idea.”
She hadn’t planned on making coffee, of course. She had simply been fleeing. But she seized gratefully on something to do, as he had known she would. She was rattled, and fighting it every inch of the way. He was beginning to realize how important control was to her. Too bad he couldn’t let her keep it.
She opened a cabinet door and took down a canister of coffee. Her hands were visibly shaking. Then she halted, her back to him as she carefully set the canister down on the countertop. “I don’t read minds,” she blurted. “I’m not telepathic.”
“Aren’t you?” That wasn’t what Dr. Ewell had said, exactly. He felt a tinge of triumph. Finally she was starting to talk to him, rather than resisting him. He wanted to put his arms around her and hold her close, shelter her from

the trauma of her own memories, but it was too soon. She was physically aware of him now, but she was still frightened, still hostile.
“Not—not a classic telepath.” She looked down at the coffee. He could see that her hands were still shaking.
“So what are you?”
So what are you? Marlie heard the question echo in her mind. *Freak*, some people might say. *Charlatan* was the word others would use. Detective Hollister hadn’t been that polite. He’d called her a fake, and possibly an accomplice to murder. It was ridiculous, of course. Even he would have had to give up on that idea by now, faced with a complete lack of evidence, opportunity, and motive. But he’d checked her out, he’d actually gone to Boulder and talked to Dr. Ewell. He knew about her now. He might not believe, but at least now he was asking instead of simply accusing. But how much did he know? Dr. Ewell could teach discretion to a diplomat, when he so chose; how much would he have told a stranger, even if that stranger was a cop? Marlie hoped desperately that he didn’t know it all, because then he would ask her about it, and she didn’t think she could bear to bring it all up now. She felt oddly vulnerable and exposed, her nerve endings raw. *He* had done that to her, forcing his big body so close to her that his heat had seared her skin, deliberately brushing against her, blatantly staring at her breasts. She didn’t want to be even more aware of him than she had already been. She was safe in her solitude.
“What are you?” he repeated calmly.
She turned to face him, her movements slow and deliberate. She squared her shoulders as if bracing herself for an ordeal. “I’m a clairvoyant empath. Or I was.” Suddenly confused, she rubbed her forehead. “I suppose I still am.”
“But you have read minds before.”
“Maybe. Not exactly.” It was difficult to describe being so linked with someone that you could interpret his thoughts through his emotions. Sometimes the link was so strong that it happened.
Choosing his words carefully, he said, “According to Dr. Ewell, you were the most sensitive receptor he’s ever known.”
She gave him a harassed look. “Receptor’s as good a word as any. I pick up —I *used* to pick up things. Emotions, energy from actions. Thoughts, too, sometimes, but usually it was emotion rather than actual thoughts. The static was unbelievable.”

“That’s why you joined Dr. Ewell’s study, for the peace of controlled surroundings.”
She bit her lip. “Yes. I couldn’t drive down a street, shop in a mall, go to a movie. It was like a thousand voices screaming at me at once. Most people don’t make any effort to shield themselves, they just blast everything out like a shotgun, spewing their emotions in all directions.”
“You didn’t live at the Institute, though.”
“No, I had a little place outside of Boulder. It was peaceful.”
“I know about what happened six years ago.”
The brusque statement was like being hit between the eyes. She reeled from the force of the blow, staggering back against the cabinet. He moved, coming toward her with that lethal, catlike grace so unusual in such a big man. Dazed, appalled, she held out a hand to ward him off. With ludicrous ease he brushed it aside and instead pulled her into his arms.
The shock of his hard body against hers was stunning. He was incredibly hot, burning her even through their layers of clothing. His muscled arms were as unyielding as steel bands; they forced her closer, until her thighs were against his, until her breasts were flattened against the hard ridges of his stomach muscles. She felt weak, disoriented, and automatically clutched his biceps in an effort to steady herself.
“Don’t be scared,” he murmured, bending his head down to hers. His warm breath tickled her ear as he gently nuzzled the side of her neck. He licked the small hollow beneath her ear and the sensation, as tender as a mother’s kiss, made her begin to tremble. “I won’t let anything like that happen to you again. I know you’re skittish with men now, babe, but I’ll take care of you. I’m going to take *real* good care of you.”
She pulled her head back so she could look at him. Her eyes were huge, and edged with panic. “What are you talking about?” she cried thinly. She was afraid, scared by the way things had so suddenly gotten out of her control, afraid of the proximity of his big body. She didn’t want this, didn’t want to have to deal with the memories and unpleasantness. For whatever reason, he had decided not to ignore the wildfire of attraction that they had both been fighting, and moved with bewildering speed to change their situation. There was nothing of the detective in him now; he was purely a man, his hazel eyes glittering with sexual intent.
He pressed his mouth to her temple. “In bed, babe. When we make love.”

She stiffened, pushing against his heavy shoulders as hard as she could. He didn't budge at all. "No, I don't want that. Let me go!"
"Hush," he said firmly, gathering her even closer. "I'm just holding you, Marlie. That's all. I've wanted to hold you since I first set eyes on you Monday morning."
"There has to be some sort of rule against a detective making a pass at a suspect," she blurted, searching for any weapon at all. "If you think I won't report you—"
"You're not a suspect," he interrupted. His mouth quirked. "Maybe I should have told you sooner, but the officer who saw you Friday night gave you a pretty good alibi, since you couldn't have been in two places at once."
She went still, her attention focusing on what he had just said. Her gaze locked on his. Uncomfortably he realized that there was something oddly compelling about her eyes. "When did you talk to him?"
The even tone of her voice didn't fool him. He winced inwardly. "Um… Tuesday night." He should have lied. He shouldn't have brought it up in the first place, at least not right now. He should have—
She bit him. He had been halfway expecting her to take a swing at him. He had to admit that he might deserve one, and he was willing to absorb a shot if it would make her feel better. Besides, the way he was holding her, he knew she wouldn't be able to put much power behind it. Evidently she realized that, too, because she simply leaned forward and sank her teeth into his chest.
"Ouch!" he bellowed, startled by the sharp pain. She hung on like a bulldog, and the pain caused by his involuntary movement quickly convinced him to stand still. "Shit! Turn loose!"
She did, and regarded him with baleful satisfaction as he hastily stepped back and rubbed his chest. A wet spot on his shirt marked where she had bitten.
Gingerly he unbuttoned his shirt and took a look, expecting to see blood. It didn't make him feel a lot better to discover that, though the indentations of her sharp little teeth were plain in his hide, there wasn't even much bruising. "The professor said you were testy," he muttered. "But he didn't mention the cannibalism."
"Serves you right," she said. "You've been hounding me for two days when you *knew* I'd been telling you the truth."

He looked a little sheepish, and continued to rub his chest. “I had to have some excuse.”
“To do what?”
“See you.”
“That’s supposed to endear you to me?” she asked caustically, turning away to pick up the canister of coffee and return it to the cabinet. “I’m not making coffee. You can leave now.”
“Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?”
“No.”
He folded his arms. “Then I’m not leaving.”
She slapped the countertop in frustration and whirled to face him. “Can’t you take a hint? *I don’t want this.* Whatever you’re offering, I don’t want it.”
“That’s a lie.”
Those hazel eyes were glittering again, this time with stubbornness. She had already noted that trait in him. It felt as if she had a bull in her kitchen, and couldn’t budge him.
“You feel it the same way I do,” he continued relentlessly. “You’re attracted to me, and it scares the hell out of you, because of Gleen.”
Her face closed up. “I don’t want to talk about Gleen.”
“That’s understandable, but I’m not going to let you hold him between us. The bastard’s dead; he can’t ever hurt you again. There’s too much pleasure in life to turn your back on it.”
“And you’re just the man who can show me what I’m missing, right?” she asked with heavy sarcasm.
“Bet on it, babe.”
She crossed her arms and leaned back against the cabinet, holding herself away from him. “I’ve always hated being called babe or baby,” she observed.
“Fine. I’ll call you whatever you like.”
“I don’t want you to call me anything. Can’t you get it through your thick head, Detective? There can’t be anything between us, full stop, period.”
He grinned suddenly, and her heart gave a thump at the miracle it worked on his harsh features. “There already is something between us. Can you think of anyone else who makes you as angry as I do?”
“Not right offhand,” she admitted.

“See? I’ve been the same way. Since I saw you Monday morning, I’ve been in a hell of a mood, mad at you for being a suspect, mad at myself for being so attracted to you in spite of it.”
“Maybe we just intensely dislike each other,” she suggested.
“I don’t think so.” He glanced swiftly downward. “There’s evidence to the contrary.”
Marlie fiercely controlled the impulse to let her own gaze drift downward. After what she had felt yesterday morning on the porch, she was fairly certain what she would see. Despite herself, she was charmed by his air of slight bemusement at his body’s response, and it took all of her willpower not to let it show. It just wouldn’t do. He was going to be difficult enough to discourage as it was, without letting him see how very much she wished things could be different. She had always longed for a normal relationship, but she had always been set apart, first by her own talents, then by Gleen.
“It won’t work,” she said aloud.
He looked downward again. “You think so? I dunno,” he said doubtfully, “it looks like it will work pretty well to me.”
Startled, she laughed aloud, and quickly clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. He grinned at her again, making her heart do acrobatics even as she tried to control herself. He was far more dangerous than she had feared; he could make her laugh.
“I can’t,” she said, sobering quickly. Her voice was soft, with an undertone of regret that she couldn’t hide. “Gleen—”
With two long steps he reached her, closing his hands on her waist. The humor fled his face as if it had never existed. “Gleen is dead. The only way he can hurt you anymore is if you let him.”
“Do you think it’s that easy?”
“Hell, no, I don’t think it’s easy. I’m a cop, remember. I’ve seen what rape victims go through.”
“I wasn’t—”
“Technically raped? I know. But he tried, and beat the hell out of you because he couldn’t. Your reaction probably isn’t any different than if he had been able to penetrate.”
She laughed again, but this time the sound was harsh, tearing. “It’s a little different. I wish he *had* raped me! I lie awake at night and know that if he’d been able to get an erection, maybe if I hadn’t fought him so hard, that little boy would still be alive! But he got more and more frenzied, and I kept

struggling, and all of a sudden he left me and attacked the little boy." She was silent for a minute. "His name was Dustin," she said. "His parents called him Dusty."

Dane's hands tightened convulsively on her waist, then relaxed. "It wasn't your fault; no one can predict what a madman will do. But that's a bad thing to have to deal with," he said quietly. His chest was tight with suppressed emotion. Gently he smoothed her hair, then slid his fingers under the warm, silky weight to cup her head in his big hand. "Have you ever told anyone everything that happened that night?"

She shook her head. "Not everything. Not the details. It was too… ugly."

"Have you ever told anyone else what you just told me?"

"No." She looked up, confusion in her eyes. "I don't know why I did."

"Because there's something between us, and you can't deny it any more than I can. We aren't comfortable with each other yet, but one day it will be okay. I can wait. And I can wait until you're ready to make love, too."

Frustrated at his stubbornness, at her inability to convince him, she shook her head. She didn't know whether to laugh or scream. "You're so damn sure of yourself."

"Trust me," he murmured. His hard fingers massaged her skull, relieving tension she hadn't even been aware of. "You'll think about it now, and the more you think about it, the more used to the idea you'll get. Then you'll start getting curious, wondering about how we would be together. You've done a good job putting your life back together, but you're too smart not to know that until you can trust a man in bed again, you're still letting Gleen have a hold over you. The next step is obvious. And I can promise you one thing: If anyone gets in bed with you, it's going to be me."

Before she could think of a response to that supremely self-confident statement, he took her by the hand and led her back into the living room. His palm was callused, his fingers hard and warm. His touch was consciously gentle, that of a man who was very aware of his own strength and was careful not to squeeze. There was something beguiling about his hand linked with hers, a subtle asking for, and reassurance of, trust. She felt oddly safe with him, though not safe *from* him.

"Let's sit down," he said, urging her toward the couch. Belatedly she tried to detour to a chair, but he tugged her to the couch and pulled her down beside him. He kept her hand folded in his as he settled back with a sigh of

relief, stretching his long, muscular legs out before him. “Airplane seats aren’t made for anyone over five and a half feet tall. I still feel cramped.”
“Why don’t you go home,” she said tiredly. “It’s late.”
“Because we still need to talk.”
She shook her head and tried to tug her hand free. It was a useless effort.
“We don’t have anything to talk about.”
“I’ve got some more questions about what you saw Friday night.”
She stiffened. She couldn’t help it; every time she was reminded of that evil, something inside her froze. “I’ve already told you everything. Tomorrow’s a workday, and I’d like to get some sleep.”
“Just a few minutes,” he coaxed, smiling at her. That little crook of his mouth caused another disruption in her cardiac rhythm, and she quickly looked away. Whoever would have thought that such a roughhewn face could produce such a charming smile? He shouldn’t be allowed to do anything except frown, for her own protection.
“I kept thinking about it on the plane,” he said, taking her silence for acquiescence. “You aren’t a suspect, you’re a witness. In fact, you’re the only witness we have. We have no leads, no evidence, no idea who we’re looking for. Two earlier possibilities turned out to be dead ends. I’m not saying I buy into this paranormal stuff, but I’m willing to investigate any leads you can give me. For instance, can you give me a description of the guy?”
She shook her head, ignoring the dismissive way he said “this paranormal stuff.”
“Nothing at all? C’mon. You described the murder scene down to the smallest detail.”
“But I saw it from *his* eyes. I saw… everything else. Not him.”
“Did you see his hands?”
A memory swam into focus, that of a hand reaching for a knife, holding the knife, slashing—
“Yes.” The word was a whisper of sound.
“Good.” Her eyes had gone slightly unfocused. Dane made his voice as soothing as he could, not wanting to startle her. “What color was his skin? Light or dark?”
“I don’t know.”
“Think, Marlie.”

“I don’t know! He was wearing gloves. Surgical gloves. And he had long sleeves.” She paused, looking inward again. “His clothes were dark.”
“He didn’t pull off the gloves even when he raped her?”
“No.”
“Okay, then let’s work on his height. We know how tall Mrs. Vinick was; how tall was he in comparison?”
Marlie silently marveled at how his cop’s brain worked; she hadn’t thought of height at all. Her head tilted in concentration as she tried to focus the mental images.
“When he first grabs her, in the kitchen, he holds her close, with one hand over her mouth and the other holding the knife.” Marlie lifted her hands into the positions she described, pantomiming the action. “The hand over her mouth is… like this. Even with his shoulder.”
“So that’s the level of her mouth. That puts him around six feet. We can’t know how long his neck is—he may be an inch shorter or taller—but at least that’s something. What about his voice? Do you remember anything about it?”
She closed her eyes. “Nothing that stands out. It was just a man’s voice, not particularly deep or high.” His actual voice hadn’t mattered; it had been overwhelmed by the raging violence, the hatred, of his emotions.
“How about an accent? Can you distinguish an accent?”
“Not southern,” she said promptly, opening her eyes. “Big deal. This is Orlando; half the population, including me, is from somewhere else.”
“Can you narrow it down any more than that? There are a lot of distinctive accents: New York, Boston, Ohio, Chicago, Minnesota, the western accents.”
She was shaking her head even as he rattled them off.
“Nothing that I can pin down. He didn’t actually *say* that much, or maybe I didn’t pick it up.”
“Then let’s move on to something else. Did you get an impression of his body?”
Utter revulsion crossed her face.
“I mean his weight,” Dane said hastily. “Was he thin, average, or heavy?”
She gave him a dirty look. “Average, I think. And strong. Very strong. Maybe it was anger, or the adrenaline, but she was helpless against him. He gloated about it. He loved it.”

She leaned back, suddenly very tired, and discovered that sometime during their conversation he had draped his arm behind her, so that when she sat back she was all but in his arms. She bolted forward, only to find that heavy arm around her shoulders and herself being urged back once more, and his face was very close to hers.
“Shhh, don’t panic,” he murmured in a dark, soft voice. “You’re still holding my hand, and the other one’s behind you. You’re okay.”
She glared at him. “I am *not* holding your hand,” she snapped. “You’re holding mine!”
“Minor detail. I’m going to kiss you, Marlie—”
“I’ll bite you again,” she swiftly warned.
He shrugged. “I always have had more guts than sense,” he said, and very gently brushed her mouth with his.
It was only a fleeting contact, lighter than a whisper, but laden with a tantalizing hint of his taste. Her pulse leaped again, but he was drawing back before the expected fear could materialize. A tiny frown drew her brows together.
He released her hand, finally, and cupped her chin in his palm. The rough pad of his thumb traced the fullness of her lower lip, his gaze focused on the movement.
“Any bad thoughts?” he asked. His voice was even darker, softer.
“No.” Her response was a whisper.
“In that case…”
This time his mouth lingered. He wasn’t holding her; she didn’t feel constrained, but was somehow helpless to move away. His lips were firm and warm, but tender in their pressure even as they moved, and shaped her own lips to accommodate him. Marlie closed both hands around his thick wrist, and her eyes fluttered shut.
The gentle pleasure of the kiss made her dizzy. She hadn’t expected such tender consideration from him, or the flood of sensation that rushed through her. She made a little sound of confusion, and he lifted his head immediately.
“Are you okay?”
“Y-Yes,” she stammered, her eyes blinking open.
“Good.” He bent his head to her again, and resumed the kiss. His tongue slipped into her mouth, not thrusting deep but inviting her to taste him.
Marlie didn’t know what to do; what was happening was so opposite to

what she had expected that she couldn't think. The most stunning fact was that she wasn't afraid. This was nothing like—no, she wouldn't even think his name. The shimmering pleasure she was feeling was too precious to destroy.

Hesitantly, trusting a long-unused instinct, she accepted the invitation and sucked lightly at his tongue. Instantly a shudder ran through his big body, astonishing her. She did it again, and he groaned aloud, a deep sound that reverberated through his chest. Delight in this newfound sensual power shyly bloomed inside her.

He suddenly released her mouth and sat back. His skin was flushed, and pulled taut across his cheekbones. "That's enough. That's almost too much. I'm going to leave now, before I try to push you too far."

She blinked at him, her eyes languorous and dazed, as if she wasn't quite certain what had happened. He wasn't too sure himself. He hadn't been that turned on by a simple kiss since he'd been fifteen, and lost his virginity under the stadium bleachers with a seventeen-year-old cheerleader.

He forced himself to stand up before he made a big mistake and changed his mind about leaving. He had kissed her; that wasn't enough for him, but it was probably as much as she could stand. All in all, he was extremely pleased with the evening.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said as he walked to the door. She followed him, the awareness rushing back into her eyes. He winked at her. "Your sexy voice turns me on even over the telephone."

Like a light blinking off, all of the softness vanished from her expression. "I'm glad you like it," she said flatly. "I screamed so much when Gleen was butchering the little boy that my voice broke. It hasn't been the same since then."

Chapter 9

He was so alive that it was almost painful. Carroll Janes could feel the anticipation pooling in him, the power gathering, until it felt as if he should be glowing. He was always amazed that people couldn't *see* the power, but then most people really were extraordinarily stupid.

It would be tonight. It was unusual that only a week had passed since the one last Friday, but this was so *easy,* there was no point in putting it off.

And it was pleasant, this buildup of power almost as soon as the glow had faded from before. Of course, he couldn't count on this occurring every week; the really rude ones didn't happen all that often. And he normally liked to draw it out much longer, maybe even as long as a month, but that was because there were almost always difficulties to be overcome, complications to solve. Jacqueline Sheets had none. She lived alone, and her routine was suffocating in its rigidity. No, there was no reason to wait.
It was odd that it was almost always women who were rude, though there had been a man once or twice whom he had been obliged to punish. He didn't like it when it was a man. It wasn't that a man's strength made it more difficult; he was contemptuous of that concept. He was strong enough to handle almost anyone, and religiously worked out to maintain that strength. Men simply didn't offer the pleasure, the opportunity for prolonged teasing while the power built. Men were almost boring. And of course, he wasn't queer, so at least half the fun was missing. No way would he screw a man. If he was sometimes a bit more lenient with a man's rudeness—well, it was *his* decision to make, after all, not anyone else's. If he preferred women, that was no one's business but his own.
He hummed all day, causing Annette to remark that he was certainly in a good mood. "You must have big plans for the weekend," she said, and he heard the unconscious note of jealousy in her voice. He liked that. Of course, he had been aware that Annette yearned for him, for all the good it would do her. She simply wasn't his type.
"A hot date," he replied, not caring if she heard the quivering anticipation in the words. It might liven up her fantasies.
He thought of Jacqueline Sheets waiting for him. He had been inside her house, and could picture the scene exactly. He knew where she sat while watching television—which was about all she did. He knew how her bedroom looked, what she wore to sleep in: utilitarian pajamas. He hadn't been surprised. He preferred nightgowns, but pajama bottoms weren't a problem. She would pull them off for him; they all did, with a blade shining in their faces.
He had checked out the kitchen. Her knives had been in disappointing shape, with dulled edges barely capable of slicing a banana. She was obviously not a very good cook, or her knives would have been in better condition. He had selected a filleting knife and carried it home, where he

had spent the past two nights painstakingly putting a razor edge on the blade. He hated having to work with inferior tools.
He could barely wait for the night, when the ritual would begin, as his father had taught him. When you are rude, you are punished.
Dane had called Marlie at seven that morning, just to say hello and ask if she'd slept well, and the irritation in her voice had made him chuckle. She was still resisting him mentally, but physically it had gone much better than he had ever hoped. He had kissed her, and she not only hadn't been afraid, she had enjoyed it. Considering her background, that was a giant stride forward.
He grinned like an idiot all the way to work. He had kissed her! So what if it had been a kiss that would make the average teenage stud roll his eyes in boredom? What did teenage studs know? They weren't interested in anything but squeezing breasts and a few quick thrusts. He was old enough, thank God, to know that the slower it was, the better it was. He might be crazy with frustration by the time Marlie came to him, but after last night he had no doubt that it would happen. He was dizzy with delight, anticipation fizzing in him like champagne bubbles.
Trammell was already there when Dane walked in, his dark eyes sleepy as he leaned back in his chair and watched Dane approach. People moved around them, talking and swearing; telephones rang incessantly, the fax machine and photocopier hummed almost without pause. A typical day, but Dane didn't feel typical. He was still smiling as he went to the coffee machine and poured two cups of coffee. He sipped one as he returned to his desk, and gave Trammell the other. "You look like you need it. Bad night?"
"Thanks." Trammell cautiously tasted it, eyeing Dane over the rim. "It was a long night, but not a bad one. Well? Did you find out anything interesting yesterday?"
"Quite a bit. For one thing, let's say I'm not as skeptical as I was before."
Trammell rolled his eyes. "What about Marlie? What's she been doing for six years?"
"Trying to recover," Dane said briefly. "Arno Gleen beat her, tried to rape her, and when he couldn't, he killed the kid in front of her. According to Dr. Ewell, the trauma of it severely damaged, maybe even destroyed, her paranormal abilities. Evidently this vision about the Vinick murder is the first psychic tickle she's had since then."
"So the psychic stuff is coming back to her?"

Dane shrugged. “Who knows. Nothing else has happened.” *Thank God.* “I talked to her last night, asked a few more questions about what she saw in the vision, and she remembered a couple of details.”
“Like what?”
“The guy is about six feet tall, he’s in very good shape, and he isn’t from the South.”
Trammell snorted. “That really narrows it down for us.”
“It beats what we had before.”
“Agreed. Anything beats nothing. That’s assuming we accept a psychic’s vision for leads, because a court sure as hell won’t accept her as evidence.”
“What choice do we have? There *is* nothing else. This guy didn’t leave a clue. I’ll take any lead I can get, and worry about proof when we find him.”
“Actually,” Trammell said slowly, “we’ve already talked to someone who fits that description.”
“Yeah, I know. Ansel Vinick. He’s as strong as a bull, and even though he’s lived in Florida for over twenty years, he still has a midwestern accent.” He hadn’t been surprised; very few people who weren’t raised in the South ever managed to get the accent right. The movie and television industries never had. “But my gut says he didn’t do it.”
“He had opportunity.”
“But no motive. No boyfriend, no insurance. Nothing.”
“Maybe an argument that got out of hand?”
“The medical examiner didn’t find any bruises on her that would indicate blows. She wasn’t just killed, she was slaughtered.”
“The textbooks say that when there are that many stab wounds, the killer was really pissed at the victim. And that if he spends a lot of time doing it, he probably lives in the neighborhood. You know the numbers as well as I do: Eighty percent of the time, when a woman’s killed, it’s her husband or boyfriend who does her in. And a lot of the time, the killer is the one who calls the police when he ‘discovers’ the body. Vinick fits into all of the categories.”
“Except for the first one. If they were arguing, no one knows anything about it. The neighbors didn’t hear anything, they always seemed to get along fine, and Vinick didn’t act unusual in any way at work that night. And she was raped, but there wasn’t any semen. Marlie says the perp wore a rubber; why would Vinick bother? She was his wife, for Pete’s sake. Finding his semen in her wouldn’t be incriminating. What really bothers me,” he said,

thinking hard, “is her fingers. Why chop off her fingers? We haven’t found them. There wasn’t any reason to cut off her fingers. unless—”
“—she scratched him,” Trammell finished, dark eyes shining intently. “She scratched him, and he knew about DNA profiling. He cut off her fingers so forensics couldn’t get a skin sample from under her nails.”
“Vinick was wearing a short-sleeved shirt that morning,” Dane recalled. “Do you remember any scratches?”
“No. It’s possible he could have had some on his chest or upper arms, but the hands and lower arms are the most likely location.”
“Don’t forget the cut screen in the bedroom. If Vinick had done it himself, to make it look like a forced entry, wouldn’t he have made it more obvious? He didn’t strike me as a subtle type of guy, anyway. And everything that Marlie told us dovetailed with what we found at the scene. It wasn’t Vinick.”
“Wait a minute,” Trammell said. “Marlie didn’t mention the fingers, did she?”
Dane thought about it, then shook his head. “No, and it doesn’t seem like the kind of detail anyone would forget.”
The omission troubled him, and he made a mental note to ask her about it that night.
“All the same, I’d feel better if we talked to Vinick again,” Trammell insisted.
Dane shrugged. “It’s all right with me, I just feel like it’s wasted time.”
Trammell tried several times that day to get in touch with Mr. Vinick, between the hundred other things they had to do, but there was no answer. He called the trucking company where Mr. Vinick worked, and was told that he had been off all week, and all things considered, they really didn’t expect him to return to work for at least another week.
“The funeral was yesterday,” Dane said. “Maybe he’s staying with friends. Hell, of course he isn’t staying in the house. Forensics is finished with the scene, but would you want to sleep there?”
Trammell grimaced. “Guess not. But how are we going to get in touch with him?”
“Ask one of the neighbors. They’ll know.”
It was late afternoon when they pulled up in front of the Vinick house. It had a closed, unoccupied look. The yellow crime scene tape had been removed, but the house still looked set apart, made forever different from its

neighbors by the violence that had happened within. A car was parked in the driveway, and Dane recognized it as the one that had been sitting there last Saturday morning. “He’s here.”
They knocked on the front door. There was no answer, no sound of movement inside the house. Trammell went around to the back door, with the same results. All of the curtains were pulled, so they couldn’t see in any of the windows.
Both doors were locked. They banged again, identifying themselves. Nothing.
Dane walked next door. A woman came out on the porch at his knock. “I’m Detective Hollister,” he said, flipping his ID wallet open.“Have you seen Mr. Vinick? His car is here, but we can’t get anyone to the door.”
She frowned, and pushed her hair out of her eyes. “No, I haven’t seen him since the funeral. I went to it; just about everyone on the street did. She was such a nice lady. I don’t know when he parked his car in the driveway. It wasn’t there late yesterday afternoon, but was when I got up this morning.”
“You haven’t seen anyone over there at all?”
“No. Of course, I haven’t been here all day, but no one has been there that I’ve seen.”
“Thanks.” Dane nodded in good-bye and walked back to the Vinick house.
“I don’t like it,” he said, after telling Trammell what the neighbor had said. “How do you feel about forced entry?”
“I think we’d better,” Trammell said soberly. “If we’re wrong, we’ll grovel and apologize and pay for the damages.”
They went around back. The top half of the kitchen door was small, diamond-shaped panes of glass. Dane pulled out the Beretta and used the butt to knock out the corner pane closest to the doorknob. He was always surprised at how hard it was to actually break out a window. Shattered glass tinkled on the tile floor inside. Carefully wrapping his hand in a handkerchief, he reached inside and unlocked the door.
The house was hot, and foul with the odor of death that had been closed up inside it. The silence was almost physical.
Dane unwrapped the handkerchief from his hand and held it over his nose. “Shit,” he muttered, then raised his voice. “Mr. Vinick? Detectives Hollister and Trammell.”
Nothing.

The smell seeped through the cloth. It wasn't the cloying, sickeningly sweet odor of decayed flesh, but a pungent smell of human waste underlaid with the metallic scent of blood, both old and new. Dane's stomach knotted. He cursed again, quietly, and stepped inside.

The living room was empty; he had expected it to be. The walls were still splattered with Mrs. Vinick's blood, the stains turned brown.

Mr. Vinick was in the bedroom.

It hadn't been cleaned, either. Chalk still outlined the position of her body, there in the corner. Mr. Vinick lay beside the outline. There was a small pistol lying close by his head.

He hadn't taken any chances with botching the job. Anyone who jams the barrel into his mouth is serious about the attempt.

"Ah, shit," Trammell said tiredly. "I'll call it in."

Dane squatted by the body, being careful not to touch anything. Nothing he could see indicated that it was anything but a suicide, but it was habit not to disturb a scene.

He looked around, and saw a sheet of paper lying on the bed. The sheets had been stripped off, leaving only the bare mattress, and the white paper wasn't immediately noticeable against the white ticking. He could read what it said without bending down.

I don't have any family now, with Nadine gone, so I don't guess it matters much. I just don't want to go on. He had dated and signed it, even noted the time. Eleven-thirty p.m., just about the same time of night his wife had been murdered.

Dane rubbed the back of his neck, his mouth set in a grim line. Damn, this was tough. The guy had buried his wife, then returned to where she had been murdered and put a bullet in his head.

Trammell came back into the room and stood beside Dane, reading the note himself. "Was it guilt or depression?"

"Who the hell knows?"

"Shit," Trammell said. There was just something about this house of death that reduced comment to that crude, simple word. It was sad.

By the time the scene had been secured, the body taken away, and the paperwork dealt with, it was almost nine o'clock. Dane thought about calling Marlie, but decided against it. He wasn't in a good mood, and didn't feel up to any romancing. Trammell had had a date, but he was as surly as Dane, and called to cancel. Instead they went to the cops' favorite bar and

slugged back a couple of beers. A lot of cops had a drink or two, or three, before they went home. It was the easiest way to wind down, and an opportunity to dump all the tension on people who knew exactly what they were talking about, before they went home to the spouse and kiddies and pretended everything was sweetness and light.

"If he *was* the perp, we'll never find out now," Trammell grunted, licking foam off his upper lip.

Dane had always liked it about Trammell that the man drank beer, instead of some hoity-toity wine. He could accept the Italian suits and silk shirts, the Gucci loafers, but he would have had a hard time connecting with a wine drinker. He didn't know why Trammell had suddenly decided that Ansel Vinick was their best bet as a suspect, but they all got maggots in their heads from time to time. "I don't think he did it. I think the poor sad son of a bitch just couldn't face living after finding his wife like that."

"I wasn't convinced he did it," Trammell denied grumpily. "I just wanted to make sure he didn't get away because we were too busy looking for phantoms."

Dane finished his beer. "Well, innocent or guilty, he didn't get away. You want another one?"

Trammell considered the level of beer in his glass. "No, this will do it." He paused, still frowning at the amber liquid. "Say, Dane…"

His voice trailed off, and Dane lifted his brows, waiting inquisitively. "Yeah, what?"

"These gut feelings you get. Your instincts are usually right on, and everyone knows it. Have you ever thought… you aren't a lot different from Marlie?"

If Dane hadn't already finished his beer, he'd have spewed it all over the table. He choked, and his outraged "What?" was just a wheeze of sound.

"Just think about it." Trammell warmed to his subject, leaning forward to prop his elbows on the table. "We all get hunches, we all go with our guts. Most of the time we don't need to, because the perp is sitting there singing like a good little birdie, but every so often we get a mystery. So how are our hunches different from what Marlie does?"

"That's a crock. Hunches are just the subconscious noticing something that consciously we haven't thought about yet."

"That's pretty much what a psychic does, isn't it?"

Dane gave him a sour look. “I think two beers is maybe one over your limit. We get hunches because of evidence we can see, and circumstances we can think about. Hell, a psychic doesn’t have to be anywhere around or know anything about the situation, they just pick up these vibes, or whatever.”
Trammell rubbed his head, disturbing his hair. Dane began to feel vaguely concerned; maybe two beers *was* too much for Trammell. God knows he’d never seen Trammell with so much as one hair out of place, except for that time when they’d gotten in a shootout and Dane had caught a bullet, but those were extenuating circumstances.
“I can’t make up my mind what to believe,” Trammell muttered. “Logic and the law of averages says that Ansel Vinick was the most likely suspect. But Marlie knew everything, except about the fingers, and how did she know unless she’s for real? If she’s for real, then Vinick was innocent and we’re back to square one.” He picked up the glass and drained it, then set it on the table with a thunk.
“That’s exactly where we are. Square one. I’m beginning to feel stupid, because we sure as hell aren’t accomplishing anything.”
“No evidence, no witnesses, no motive. Know what?”
Trammell’s lean, faunlike face was so funereal that Dane had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. “No, what?”
“I don’t metabolize alcohol very well,” his dapper partner announced with grave dignity.
“No!” Dane clapped his hands to his face. “I never would have guessed.” Privately he thought that anyone who could still say “metabolize” without tripping over the syllables was in damn good shape.
“I’m usually more careful than this. I… sip.”
“You’re a world-class sipper.”
“Thank you. But it’s probably a good thing that you’re driving.”
“I think so. Are you ready to go home now?”
“Any time you are. You won’t have to put me to bed or anything like that, but I wouldn’t want to drive.”
“I wouldn’t want you to drive, either, buddy. C’mon, let’s go.”
Trammell was steady on his feet, but he was humming under his breath, and Dane almost laughed again. Humming “My Darling Clementine” didn’t fit with the image. “Will you have a hangover?” he asked curiously. A hangover from two beers would be hilarious.

“Never have,” Trammell said. They were outside, and he inhaled a deep breath of smoke-free air. “This doesn’t happen very often. Not since college.”
“That’s good.”
“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”
“Naw. I promise.” It would be tempting, but he’d keep it to himself. Though most embarrassing things were fair game, this was something Trammell couldn’t help, and the guys would rag him unmercifully for the rest of his life. On the other hand, it was nice to have something he could hold over Trammell’s head occasionally. He whistled cheerfully as they got in the car, his good mood restored.
The ritual was comforting. He liked for everything to happen in exactly the same order every time, because *he* commanded it. He didn’t do it often enough for it to be routine—that would weaken the power of it—but there was reassurance in the sameness of preparation. Knowing that these very preparations would make it impossible for the police to ever catch him gave him a sense of gleeful power. They caught only stupid people who made stupid mistakes, and he had never made a mistake. Not one.
Anticipation for the coming night kept rising in him, but he kept it firmly under control. He wanted to concentrate on the preparations.
First the hairpiece of blond curls came off. It was a very good hairpiece; he had paid an outrageous amount for it, but it had been worth every penny. No one had ever discovered that it was a full wig. Not only was blond his natural coloring, which meant the color wasn’t jarring, but the style of blond curls was something that people remembered. It was very recognizable.
There was nothing wrong with his own hair, he thought, examining his temples for any telltale sign of a retreating hairline. But it would be stupid to let a stray hair give the police a means of identifying him. He carefully shaved his head, taking his time about it, though there was only stubble because the last time had been so recent.
He loved shaving, the wetness, the slick feel of the shaving gel, the glide of the razor over his flesh. It was almost like sex.
His beard was next. It wouldn’t be gentlemanly to scratch her with a rough chin. Then his chest. He had a neat diamond of chest hair, and he was rather proud of its thickness, but it had to go.

Then his legs and arms. Slick. No wonder women shaved their legs. It really felt marvelous.

Finally, his crotch. No curlies left behind to be combed out, examined, gloated over. He was extremely careful in this area, for even a tiny nick could leave an unnoticed stain of blood behind. That simply wouldn't do. And of course, he always wore a condom, so there was no semen left behind. He even had a contingency plan in case the condom broke; so far, he hadn't had to use the plan.

Some men, he'd read, couldn't be identified by their semen; they were called "nonsecreters," and about one man in five was like that. It would have been nice to know if he was in that twenty percent, but he could hardly go to a lab and ask to have his semen classified as secreter or nonsecreter. He didn't mind wearing the condom; he didn't want his sperm inside the transgressors anyway.

Next were his clothes. Leather. No fabric fibers to be left behind, nothing to give them a clue. He kept his leathers carefully stored in a cardboard box, away from everything else. He had a vinyl seat cover that he put over his car seat, and the floorboard was covered with vinyl mats. He was always very careful not to let his feet touch anything but the mat, so his boots wouldn't pick up any fibers from the carpet. Detail. Attention to detail was everything. There was no way the police could identify him, because he left nothing behind except the object of the lesson.

Detective Hollister hadn't called, though Marlie had expected him to, or even shown up unannounced as he had a tendency to do. She had been on edge, afraid he *would* call or come by, then irritable with him for not doing so. Either way, he had managed to ruin her quiet evening at home.

She had toyed with the idea of going to a movie, partly to stymie Hollister if he did call, but had rejected the idea. She couldn't forget what had happened last Friday night. Had it only been a week? It seemed like a month. Perhaps next week she would go to a movie, but not tonight.

She went to bed earlier than normal, before ten, not even staying up to watch the late news. She was tired; the week of tension had taken a toll on her. It was a relief to close her eyes and know that she didn't have to go to work in the morning, that she could stay in bed as long as she wanted. She relaxed into the mattress, feeling her muscles go limp and her mind ease into sleep…

—He moved silently through the house. The television was blaring, masking his presence. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching the woman who sat with her back to him while she watched an old movie, and contempt filled him. She was so easy. He walked forward, taking his time, enjoying the suspense. The flickering light from the television glinted on the slim, curved blade of the knife in his hand— A grunting, animal sound tore from deep in her chest as Marlie tried to scream, tried to send a desperate warning through her closed throat. God, oh God. She whimpered, fighting the covers as she tried to throw herself out of bed. The vision was so real that she expected to see him coming at her out of the darkness, silver blade gleaming.

*—He stood right behind her, looking down at her. The stupid bitch had no idea he was there. He liked that. Maybe he'd just stand here until the end of the movie, and all the time she'd never know—*She scrambled out of bed and fell, caught by the sheet tangled around her legs. She fought her way free of the sheet and stumbled to her feet, lurching wildly from side to side as she staggered for the door. Panic blinded her, froze her brain—no, it was dark, the lights were off. She careened into the wall, and the hard impact steadied her, somehow. She groped for the light switch, but it wasn't there.

—This was boring. Smiling, he reached out to touch her neck—

Marlie stumbled into another wall, a wall that wasn't supposed to be there. She stood there, trembling, totally disoriented. Where was she?

Headlights from a passing car briefly illuminated the room. The living room. How had she gotten in here? She remembered trying to get to the bedroom door, but not reaching it. But at least now she knew where a light was.

She almost knocked the lamp over as she fumbled with the switch, and the sudden bright flare of light momentarily blinded her. The phone. The phone was right there, on the table.

His number. What was his number, damn it? She couldn't remember, couldn't think—the redial button. Had she called anyone since that night? She didn't know, didn't care. It would reach someone. She lifted the receiver, banging it painfully against her temple as she tried to hold it in place with a violently trembling hand, and punched what she hoped was the redial button. Her vision was blurring, and she wasn't certain.

The first ring buzzed in her ear. She closed her eyes, fighting to remain within herself.

The second ring. Hurry. Please, hurry hurry hurry.
The third ring cut off in midbuzz, and a deep, sleepy, grouchy voice said, "Hollister."
"D-Dane." Her voice was thin, wavering out of control.
"Marlie?" All sleepiness was gone. "Marlie, what's wrong?"
She tried to speak and couldn't; her throat was too tight. She took deep, gulping breaths.
"Marlie, goddammit, say something!" He was yelling at her now.
It was coming. She couldn't fight it off any longer. The trembling was convulsive, the light fading as her vision went. She made a desperate effort, screaming, and her voice was only a whisper. "He's… doing it… again."

Chapter 10

He couldn't get her to say anything else, though the line was still open. Dane scrambled into his clothes and shoved his sockless feet into running shoes. He grabbed his shoulder holster, with the Beretta in it, but didn't take the time to slip it on. Barely a minute after answering the telephone, he was on his way out the door.
His heart was slamming painfully against his ribs. What had she said? Her last sentence had been so faint, he could barely hear; something about doing it again.
It didn't matter what she had said. Her panic had reached through the phone line to him, as real as if he could see it. She was in trouble, serious trouble.
It was raining lightly, just enough to slick the streets and make him keep the wipers on. He couldn't drive as fast as he wanted, but he was still going too fast for the road conditions. The sense of urgency kept his foot on the accelerator. He merely slowed down for stop signs, and halted at red lights only until there was a break in traffic.
An accident on the expressway forced him to cut across the median, backtrack, and take another route, wasting valuable time. Almost twenty minutes had passed when he pulled into Marlie's driveway. Her car was in its customary place, and a light was on in the living room. He didn't bother with the two shallow steps, but leaped onto the porch with a single bound and knocked on the door.
"Marlie? It's Dane. Open up."

The silence inside was absolute, as complete as it had been that afternoon at the Vinick house, as if no living creature were inside. Dane's blood chilled, and his voice was hoarse as he called her again, banging on the door with his fist.

There were no windowpanes in this door to break, and he didn't take the time to go around back and check out the kitchen door. He backed up and lashed out with his foot. Four kicks broke the lock and splintered the frame, and the door flew open to crash against the wall. He knew he should take his time, not rush in without knowing the situation, but fear was greater than caution and he hurled himself through the opening, the Beretta in his hand.

"Marlie!"

She was just sitting there on the couch, in a pool of light from the lamp, like a statue in a niche. Her eyes were open, fixed and unseeing. She was utterly still, utterly white, and for an agonized moment he stopped breathing. The pain was like a fist, clenched around his heart.

Then he remembered what Officer Ewan had said, that at first he had thought she was dead, and he started breathing again, managed to move, though the fear hadn't released its icy hold on him. He laid the pistol aside and knelt on the floor in front of the couch, picked up one of her hands from her lap and held it against his chest while he put two fingers on her fragile wrist, pressing and finding the reassuring throb of her pulse. It was slow but steady. Her skin was cool, but the warmth of life lay just under the surface chill.

"Marlie," he said again, much calmer now. There was still no response. Carefully he looked her over, then examined the surroundings. There was no sign of struggle, and no injuries that he could see. She seemed fine, physically.

The phone receiver was lying beside her on the couch, a beeping noise coming from it. He picked it up and replaced it in the cradle.

He swallowed as he realized what must have happened. She had had another vision, might even still be locked in it. What was it this time? Another murder? God knows, with drugs and street gangs, it was a wonder she didn't spend most of her time in a catatonic state. Did she ever pick up on the good stuff, on happy times, on people playing with their kids or groaning at a dumb joke? How could she function, if she was overloaded with all the shit in people's lives?

She was wearing only a thin tank top and panties, and her legs felt chilled to his touch. He got up and closed the ruined door, then went into her bedroom in search of a blanket. The small room, like every other room he'd seen in her house, was cozy and soothing. She had made the house her retreat, her barricade against the world. He stood in the middle of it and looked around, getting to know her in little ways. The covers on the double bed were twisted and half on the floor; she had evidently been in bed when the vision had started, and the condition of the covers was a measure of her agitation. There was a crocheted throw lying across a rocking chair. He picked it up and returned to the living room, where he draped it over her, tucking the folds around her bare arms and legs. As far as he could tell, she hadn't moved even a centimeter, except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

He didn't know what else to do, except wait. He went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee; she might not need it when she came out of this, but he sure as hell did.

He sat on the couch -beside her, watching her. Her expression was as blank and empty as that of the statue she had reminded him of earlier. There was no awareness in her; her eyes were open, but she was either unconscious or… gone, somehow.

He studied her oblivious face. Seen in profile, there was an otherworldly purity to her features that he hadn't noticed before. When she was awake, the sharpness of her tongue and the cool intelligence in those bottomless blue eyes took most of his attention. Most, but not all. If she had been awake, he sure wouldn't have put a cover over her half-naked body. He looked at the tender curve of her lips, remembering how they had felt, how she had tasted. Her shape was all feminine daintiness, soft, lithe curves that made his entire body feel hot, and his skin too tight.

Ten minutes had ticked by. The mechanical thumping and spitting in the kitchen had stopped, indicating that the coffee had finished brewing.

He fetched a cup of coffee, then resumed his seat beside Marlie and placed the cup on the lamp table. Very gently he lifted her, and settled her on his lap.

"Marlie. Can you wake up now? Come on, honey, wake up." He stroked her face, then grasped her shoulder and shook her.

She made a little sound, not quite a whimper, and her lashes fluttered.

“Come back to me, Marlie. It’s Dane. Wake up and tell me what happened.” Her head lolled against his shoulder. He cradled her with his supporting arm and rubbed his free hand over her upper arm and shoulder, feeling the cool, sleek skin under his hard palm. He shook her again, but not hard, only enough to jar her. Her eyes were closed now, which seemed to him at least more natural, as if she were sleeping.

“Marlie!” He made his voice sharp. “Wake up and talk to me, damn it!” She moaned and tried to push away from him, but her hand fell heavily to her lap as if she couldn’t quite control it. She drew several jerky breaths, and her lashes lifted, then closed again, the effort beyond her.

“Marlie, look at me.” He deliberately said her name, calling her from the far reaches of darkness, back toward the light.

Someone was insistently calling her name. Marlie’s exhausted mind latched on to the familiarity, like a drowning person desperately clutching at a life ring. It gave her a center, a sense of identity in the swirling fog of nightmare. The voice was far away at first, but then came closer and closer, until it was right over her head. Reality seeped back, though there was something very unreal about it. It felt as if she was lying against someone, as if arms were around her, and the sensation was so alien that it confused her. She didn’t allow people to hold her; the mental intrusion, strengthened by physical contact, was just too disrupting. But someone *had* held her, a dim memory insisted. Oh, yes. Dane. Gently bullying, stubborn, refusing to listen to her… Of course. Dane.

She forced her heavy eyelids to lift, and found herself staring at that roughhewn face, the hazel eyes dark with worry. His heart thumped steadily against her, a comforting rhythm that made her want to curl against him. The heat of his big body was under her, around her, chasing away the bone-deep chill. Why was she so cold?

Hazily she looked around. She was in her living room. But why was Dane here, and why was she on his lap? Why was she so tired? She had expected him to call, but he hadn’t, and she had gone to bed—

She had called him. She stiffened, memory returning in a flood of awful details that she would have given anything not to recall. Her exhausted mind struggled to cope.

“Dane.” She clutched his shirt, fingers twisting in the material.

“It’s all right,” he murmured, smoothing back her hair. “I’m here. You had another vision, didn’t you? What was it about this time? Just take your time,

settle down. Do you want some coffee? Will that help?”
He was holding a cup of coffee to her lips, and she sipped it, hoping the caffeine would buy her a few extra minutes. She had to get her thoughts ordered, tell him as much as she could, but the coffee was the worst she had ever tasted, and with a grimace she turned her head away when he tried to get her to drink again.
“He did it again,” she said, the words slurred a little.
“Who did?” he asked absently, trying to get her to drink a little more coffee. She turned her head away from the cup.
“*Him.* He killed another woman tonight.” The trembling had started again, shaking her from the inside out.
He tensed. She could feel his muscles coiling beneath her. “The same one who killed Nadine Vinick?” he asked carefully.
“Yes. I knew he was out there, looking… I felt him, just a hint, the night I called you.” She forced the words out in a tumble, trying to get it all said.
“That’s what scared you?”
She nodded, her head barely moving in the hollow of his shoulder.
Holding her securely against him, Dane picked up the telephone and called central dispatch. He identified himself and said, “Has a stabbing murder of a woman been called in?”
“No, it’s been pretty quiet for a Friday night. Guess the rain’s put a damper on things. You know something we don’t?”
“Maybe, maybe not. Listen, if there is anything like that, give me a call on the pager. Night or day, no matter what.”
“You got it.”
He hung up and looked down at Marlie. “Nothing’s been called in.”
She was still gripping his shirt, and her eyes had taken on that faraway look they had had Monday morning, when she had recited a horror tale in a flat, emotionless voice. The trembling in her slight body had increased; he held her with both arms, trying to cushion her against the shock waves he could feel rippling through her.
“She has red hair,” she said in that small, ghostly voice. “She’s very pretty. She’s watching television, some old movie. She doesn’t know he’s there. He walks up behind her and stands there, looking down. He’s amused; how long will it be before she senses his presence? Too long. She’s a stupid cow, and he’s getting bored. He touches her neck, with his left hand, then slaps it

over her mouth before she can scream. He loves that first moment of terror. The knife is in his right hand. He holds it to her throat."
"Are you sure it's the same one?" Dane asked. He desperately wanted her to say that she wasn't certain.
"Yes. The movie is still on; it masks the noise. He makes her take off her pajamas and lie down on the floor. Couches are too cramped; he doesn't like couches. He uses a condom. She doesn't deserve his sperm. Slow and easy, slow and easy… let her relax, not be so afraid. Don't hurt her, not yet, not yet."
Dane anchored her to him, holding her so tight he expected her to protest, but she didn't, all of her attention on her litany of terror. Chills rippled up his spine, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Oh, God.
"He's finished. He's on his knees beside her. She's looking up at him, eyes wide and scared, but hoping. That's good, that's real good. He smiles at her, and her stupid mouth quivers, but she smiles too. She's afraid not to, she thinks he's crazy. Too stupid to live. He's bored; this isn't as much fun as the last one. Maybe he can liven her up. He sticks her a little and she squeals like a pig, and the race is on. Around and around the mulberry bush."
"Jesus God," Dane said, his voice hoarse. "Marlie, stop it. That's enough."
She blinked and refocused on him, and the expression in her eyes made him want to cry. The pallor of exhaustion lay over her face like a clay mask.
"You have to catch him," she said in a drugged voice.
"I know. I will, honey. I promise."
She turned her face in to his shoulder and closed her eyes.
Her body went limp in his arms. He looked down at her as she began breathing in a slow, heavy rhythm that signaled deep sleep. As quickly as that, she had slipped into unconsciousness. He wasn't alarmed. After seeing her as she had been when he'd first arrived, this looked downright normal.
He sat there for several minutes, his face grim as he considered the ugly ramifications. Finally he got to his feet, with Marlie still in his arms, and carried her into the bedroom, where he carefully placed her on the bed. She didn't move when he pulled the throw away and re-covered her with the sheet.
He refilled the cup with hot coffee, then resumed his seat and thought about what had happened tonight. He didn't like any of it.
He glanced at the clock; it was after midnight. He called Trammell anyway.

The receiver was fumbled upward on the other end and he heard a very feminine “Hello?” at the same time as Trammell was saying, “Don’t answer that!” Evidently two beers hadn’t incapacitated him *too* much, and evidently the canceled date had been rescheduled.
Then Trammell got the phone away from his lady friend. “Yeah?”
Dane wasn’t in the mood to tease him. “Marlie had another vision tonight,” he said without preamble. “The same guy. She says he did another one.”
Trammell was silent for a shocked two seconds as the ramifications of it hit him, too. “Where?” he asked.
“Nothing’s been called in yet.”
More silence. Then he said, “This will prove one way or the other if she’s for real.”
“Yeah. She was in pretty bad shape. I’m at her house, if you need me. Dispatch is going to call if anything’s reported.”
“Okay. If she’s right… shit!”
Yeah, shit. Dane sat there drinking coffee, brooding. If Marlie was right, and the same guy who had murdered Nadine Vinick had done another woman, in the same way, they had big-time trouble. As bad as he had wanted the bastard, he thought he had been looking for a one-timer, he had hoped it was someone who had known Mrs. Vinick. He had thought it had been personal, though he hadn’t been able to find anything to indicate what that would have been. Multiple stab wounds usually meant someone was really pissed at the victim.
But another victim, killed with the same MO, meant they had a psychopath in Orlando. A serial killer. Someone without conscience, someone who acted only according to his own weird rules. Worse, it looked as if he was an intelligent serial killer, taking pains to leave no evidence behind. Serial killers were a real bitch to catch under any circumstances, and a smart one was almost impossible. Look at how long Bundy had killed before he’d finally made a mistake.
He couldn’t do anything but wait. He couldn’t investigate a murder that hadn’t been reported, a body that hadn’t been found. Until a victim turned up, all he had was a vision by a burned-out, trauma-damaged psychic. He believed her, though; his gut believed her, and that was frightening in itself. A cold corner of logic in his brain was still saying “wait and see,” but logic couldn’t dissipate the knot in his stomach.

He knew the terminology. Escalating sexual serial killer. He tried to remember if there had been any unsolved stabbing murders in Orlando before Nadine Vinick, but none came to mind, at least none that resembled it. Either the guy had just recently started murdering his victims, or he had moved in from another city. If a killer moved around, kept the murders spread out over different jurisdictions, cops might never figure out that it was the work of a serial killer because they wouldn't have the other murders to compare the method to.

If Mrs. Vinick was his first victim, then to have killed again so soon the guy had to have gone totally out of control, and they would soon have a bloodbath in the city. An escalating killer started out slow; there might be months between his victims. Then the killings would start getting closer and closer together, because that was the only way he could get his rocks off, and he wanted it more and more often. Only a week between victims signaled an incipient rampage.

And he couldn't do anything except wait.

When would the body, if there was a body, most likely be discovered? Maybe the husband worked third shift, like Mr. Vinick. Maybe that was the common denominator, that the husband was gone nights. If so, the discovery would be in the morning, say from six until eight. But if the lady lived alone, it could be a couple of days or longer before anyone missed her enough to check on her. Hell, he'd seen cases where people had been dead for *weeks* before anyone noticed.

Wait.

He looked at the clock again. Five after two. The coffee was gone, and he drank so much of the stuff that it only worked as long as he was pouring it in. He was tired; his eyelids felt like sandpaper.

He looked at Marlie's couch, and snorted in dismissal. He was six two, and the couch was five feet. He'd never been into masochism.

He peeked into the one room in the little house that he hadn't seen, wondering if it was a spare bedroom. It wasn't. This was where she stored odd pieces of furniture, luggage, boxes of books. It wasn't as cluttered as the main rooms in his home usually were.

The only bed in the place was the one Marlie was sleeping in. He supposed he could go home, but he didn't want to leave her alone. The lock on her door was ruined. He didn't know how long she would sleep, but he intended to be there when she woke.

He hesitated for only the barest second, wondering what she would say if she woke up with him in bed beside her, but then he shrugged and went into her bedroom. As far as he could tell, she hadn't moved at all.

He stripped down to his shorts, tossing his clothes over the rocking chair, and placed the pistol on the bedside table. His pager went right beside the pistol. There was only the one table, and Marlie was lying on that side of the bed. Dane scooted her over, then without even a twinge of conscience, slid in beside her and turned off the lamp.

It felt good. Contentment spread through him, a warm antidote to the worry of the last few hours. As big as he was, the double bed felt cramped to him, but even that had its good points because Marlie was so close to him. He put his arms around her, holding her cradled to him with her head in the hollow of his shoulder. Her slight body felt soft and fragile, and her breath moved across his chest with the lightest of touches.

He would be willing to lie awake for the rest of his life, if he could protect her from what she had gone through tonight. She had told him, Officer Ewan had told him, the professor had told him, but until he had seen it with his own eyes, he simply hadn't realized how traumatic it was for her, how it hurt her, how much it cost her.

What a price she had paid! He knew the toll it took on the human spirit to see so much ugliness, day in and day out. Some cops handled it better than others, but they all paid, and they had only normal sensitivities. What must it have been like for her, feeling everything, all the pain and rage and hate? Losing her empathic ability must have been like being rescued from torture. Now that it was evidently coming back, how must she feel? Trapped? Desperate?

Desire pulsed in his loins; he couldn't be around her and not want her. But stronger than desire was the need to hold her close and protect her, from the horrors within as well as those without.

He slept until eight, and woke instantly aware that the pager hadn't beeped at him during the night. Neither had Marlie stirred. She lay limply against his side, her very stillness a gauge of her exhaustion. How long did this stupor normally last?

He showered, figuring she wouldn't mind the use of her bathroom and towels. Then he shaved, using her razor and swearing when he nicked himself. Then he went into the kitchen and put on another pot of coffee. He was beginning to feel as comfortable in Marlie's house as he was in his

own. While he was waiting for the coffee to brew, he measured the ruined front door for a replacement. He had just finished that when the phone rang.
“Heard anything?” Trammell asked.
“Nothing.”
“What does Marlie say?”
“She hasn’t said anything. She’s been asleep almost since she came out of the vision last night. She managed to tell me what she’d seen, then passed out.”
“I thought about this for hours last night. If it’s a serial killer…”
“We’ve got trouble.”
“Should we tell Bonness what we think?”
“We’d better. After all, he believed Marlie before either of us did. We can’t do anything until the murder is verified, but we should keep him informed.”
“We’re going to feel like fools if no one’s found.”
“I hope so,” Dane said grimly. “I honest to God hope I feel like the biggest fool walking. That would be a hell of a lot better than the alternative.”
Trammell sighed. “I’ll talk to Bonness,” he volunteered. “How long are you going to be at Marlie’s?”
“I don’t know. At least until she’s capable of functioning on her own. All weekend, the way it looks.”
“Wipes her out, huh?”
“You don’t know the half of it.” A thought occurred to him. “And while you’re out and around today, I need you to get a door for me. Marlie’s isn’t very secure.”
The voice pulled insistently at her, refusing to let her rest. It was a very patient voice, though relentless. On the far fringes of consciousness she knew that it was familiar, but she couldn’t quite recognize it. She was tired, so tired; she just wanted to sleep, to forget. The voice had pulled her from oblivion before. Why didn’t it leave her alone? Fretfully she resisted the disturbance, trying to find the comfort of nothingness again.
“Marlie. Come on, Marlie. Wake up.”
It wasn’t going to stop. She tried to turn away from the noise, but something was holding her down.
“That’s right, honey. Open your eyes.”
Surrender seemed easier; she didn’t have the energy to fight. Her eyelids felt like stone, but she forced them open, and frowned in confusion at the man who was sitting on the bed beside her. His arms were braced on either

side of her, holding the sheet tight; that was what was preventing her from moving.
“There you are,” he said softly. “Hi, honey. I was getting worried.”
She couldn’t think; everything was fuzzy. Why was Dane holding her trapped like this? Her confusion must have been on her face, because he smiled and lifted one hand to smooth her tangled hair back from her face.
“Everything’s okay. But you’ve been asleep for a long time, and I didn’t know if it was normal or not, so I decided to try to wake you up. It took some doing,” he added wryly.
“What… ? Why are you here?” she mumbled, trying to sit up. He sat back, releasing the sheet, and she struggled into an upright position. It took so much effort that she ached. What was wrong? Had she been sick? The flu, maybe; her bones ached so, that could be the explanation. But why was Dane here?
“If I had to make a guess,” he said, his voice pitched to a soothing rumble, “I’d say your need for the John has to be critical. Can you make it there?”
When he mentioned it, she realized that he was exactly right. She nodded and clumsily pushed the sheet away. He stood so she could swing her legs off the bed. She didn’t have many clothes on, she thought weakly as she sat on the edge looking down at her bare limbs, but she just didn’t have the strength to care.
She tried to stand and sank heavily back onto the mattress. Dane bent and lifted her easily in his arms. Her head drooped into the curve of his shoulder and neck, and the position seemed so comfortable that she let it stay there. She heard the hum of the air conditioner. The air was cold on her bare skin, and the radiant heat of his big body was heavenly as he carried her… somewhere. She closed her eyes.
“No you don’t,” he scolded, putting her on her feet. Her heavy eyelids opened and she saw that she was in her own bathroom. “Make an effort, honey. Now, can you manage by yourself or do you want me to stay in here with you?”
She wasn’t so tired that she couldn’t give him a “get real” look, and he chuckled. “I’m fine,” she said, though she heard the fretful weakness in her own voice. She ignored it. She would manage; she always had.
“Okay, but I’ll be right outside the door. Sing out if you need me.”
She stood swaying in the small room after he had left, staring longingly at the bathtub and wondering if she could stand upright long enough to take a

shower. It would be so embarrassing if Dane had to help her, handling her naked body as if she were a helpless infant.
First things first, though. She was very thirsty, but there was a more pressing concern. When that was taken care of, she gulped two glasses of water, then stood with the cool glass pressed against her forehead. Her mind was still so foggy, every thought such an effort. She needed to remember something, she felt the urgency, but couldn't concentrate long enough to bring it to mind. All she wanted to do was sleep. Blessed sleep. She didn't want to remember.
She really wanted that shower a lot.
Finally the simplest thing to do was to turn on the water and step under it, clothes and all, so that's what she did. She deliberately left the water not quite lukewarm, knowing that it would wake her up, not wanting to but accepting the necessity. She stood under the cool spray, her face turned up to catch the full blast, and let the fog dissipate. Let memory return. Let the water overcome and wash away the hot salty tears, the way a flood overcomes and obliterates a trickle.
Until it wasn't enough and she buried her face in her hands, sobs shaking her body.
"Marlie… ?" The worried, impatient tone changed at once, became quiet and steady. "I know, honey. I know it's bad. But you're not alone now. I'll take care of you."
The water was turned off, and his strong hands were on her, helping her out of the tub. She stood dripping on the mat, her eyes still closed while tears tracked down her cheeks.
"You're soaked," he said, still in that soothing, rock steady tone. "Let's get these clothes off—"
"No," she managed, the word strangled.
"You can't keep them on."
"I'll do it."
"Are you sure?"
She nodded.
"Okay. Just open your eyes for me, honey, and tell me that you can manage, and I'll get some dry clothes for you and leave you to it. But I want to see those eyes before I do."
She swallowed, and took two deep breaths to control the tears. When she thought she could handle it, she forced herself to open her eyes and look up

at him. “I can do it.”
His gaze was piercing as he studied her, then he gave a short nod. “I’ll get your clothes. Tell me what you want.”
She tried to think, but nothing came to mind. “I don’t care. Anything.”
“Anything,” left to his decision, was a pair of panties and her cotton robe. While he waited outside, she stripped off her wet clothes, clumsily dried herself, then dressed in what he had provided. She was rubbing her wet hair with a towel when he decided she had had enough time, and opened the door again.
“Here, I’ll do it,” he said, taking the towel from her and putting down the lid on the toilet for her to sit down. She did, and he carefully blotted all the excess water from her hair, then took the comb and smoothed out all the tangles. She sat there like a child, letting him minister to her, and the small attentions gave her a comfort she’d never had before. Numbly she realized that what he’d said was true: She wasn’t alone this time. Dane was with her. He had been there last night, and he was still there, taking care of her, lending her his strength when she had none.
“What time is it?” she finally asked. Mundane thing, but the small and unimportant were the anchors of life, the constants that held one steady.
“Almost one. You need to eat; come on in the kitchen and I’ll put on a pot of fresh coffee, then fix breakfast for you.”
She remembered his coffee. She gave him an appalled look. “I can do the coffee.”
He accepted the rejection of his coffee with good grace, being used to it. She was coming out of it; she could say anything she wanted about his coffee. She was more alert, though her face was utterly colorless, except for the shadows under her eyes, and tight with strain. He put his arm around her waist to support her as they slowly made their way to the kitchen.
She leaned against the cabinet while she made coffee, then sat and watched Dane competently assemble a meal of toast, bacon, and a scrambled egg. She ate a couple of bites of egg and bacon, and one slice of toast. Dane ate the rest.
When she crumpled, without a word he scooped her onto his lap and held her while she cried.

Chapter 11

Trammell arrived about four that afternoon, driving a pickup truck he had borrowed, with the replacement door in the truck bed. Dane paused for a moment to savor the incongruity of Trammell driving a truck, then went out to help him unload the door. “Whose truck is it?” he asked.

“Freddie’s husband’s.” They each grabbed one side of the door and slid it off the bed. They didn’t have to ask if anything had been reported; if it had, they both would have heard. Next door, Lou came out on her porch to watch them with open and suspicious interest. Dane took the time to wave to her. She waved back, but frowned disapprovingly. No doubt she had looked out her window first thing this morning and seen his car in Marlie’s driveway; he had undoubtedly besmirched Marlie’s spotless reputation.

“New lady friend?” he inquired delicately as they carried the door to the porch.

“Um, no.” Trammell was being unusually reticent, and Dane was instantly suspicious. It wasn’t that Trammell was the kind of guy who regaled the squad room with play-by-play details of a hot night, but he was usually forthcoming enough to at least give the lady a name.

“I thought the date was called off.”

Trammell cleared his throat. “She came over anyway.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“No. Maybe. But not yet.”

Dane didn’t get to be such a good detective by being stupid. He wondered why Trammell would feel it necessary to protect a woman’s identity, and only two possibilities presented themselves. One: The lady was married. Trammell wasn’t a poacher, though; married women were off limits to him. Two: The lady was a cop. That made sense; it fit. Immediately he began running through names and faces, trying to match them to the voice he’d heard last night. Everything clicked into place like three cherries in a slot machine. Ash blond hair sternly subdued to fit under her patrolman’s cap, a rather austere face, quiet brown eyes. Not beautiful, but deep. She wouldn’t enjoy being the butt of the raucous gossip that squad rooms specialized in, and she wasn’t the kind of woman to be trifled with. “Grace Roeg,” he said.

“Goddammit!” Trammell dropped his end of the door to the porch with a thump, and glared at him.

Dane set his end down with less force. “I’m good,” he said, shrugging. “What can I say?”

“Nothing. Make sure you say absolutely nothing.”
“No problem, but you’re really getting in deep with me. That’s two secrets I have to keep.”
“God. All right. If you feel the need to blab about something, if you just can’t stand the pressure, then tell them about the beer. I can live with that. But keep Grace out of it.”
“Like I said, no problem. I like her; she’s a good cop. I’d spill the beans on *you*, but I wouldn’t upset *her* for anything. Watch yourself, though, pal. You could be asking for major trouble. You outrank her.”
“There’s no question of sexual harassment.”
“Maybe not to you, maybe not to her, but the paper pushers may not look at it that way.‘” Though the concern was a legitimate one, Dane was enjoying himself immensely. Trammell was glaring at him, black eyes as hot as coals. It was nice to get back at him, after the way he’d silently laughed at Dane’s predicament with Marlie. “How long has it been going on?” Not long, he’d bet. He’d have noticed it before now.
“A couple of days,” Trammell said grumpily.
“Moving a little fast there, partner.”
Trammell started to say something, shut his mouth, then mumbled, “*I’m* not.”
Dane started laughing at the helplessness in Trammell’s tone. He knew exactly how it felt. “Another good man bites the dust.”
“No! It’s not that serious.”
“Keep telling yourself that, buddy. It might keep you from panicking on the way to the church.”
“Damn it, it isn’t like that. It’s—”
“Just an affair?” Dane inquired with lifted brows. “A good time in bed? It doesn’t mean anything?”
Trammell looked hunted. “No, it’s… ah, shit. But no wedding bells. I don’t want to get married. I have no intention of getting married.”
“Okay, I believe you. But it’ll hurt my feelings if I’m not your best man.”
Smiling at Trammell’s frustrated curse, Dane went inside to get a screwdriver, and Trammell followed him. Marlie was lying curled on the couch, asleep. Dane paused to look down at her and tuck the light coverlet around her feet. She looked small and pale, utterly defenseless as her mind recovered from the devastating exhaustion.

Trammell was watching Dane's face rather than looking at Marlie. "You have it bad yourself, partner," he said softly.
"Yeah," Dane murmured. "I do." So bad he was never going to recover.
"I thought it was just a case of the hots, but it's more than that."
"Afraid so."
"Wedding bells for you?"
"Maybe." He smiled crookedly. "I'm still not her favorite person, so I'll have to work on that. And we have a killer to catch."
He continued on into the kitchen, where he went through the cabinet drawers in search of a screwdriver. All kitchens, in his experience, contained a junk drawer, and that was the most likely place to find a screwdriver since he couldn't imagine Marlie having an actual toolbox. *Her* junk drawer, bless her neat little heart, was more organized than his flatware, and lying there in its own clear plastic holder was a set of screwdrivers. He could picture her carefully selecting the appropriate tool, using it, then sliding it back into its place in the holder, never getting them out of the order they'd been in when she'd bought them. He took the entire pack, and the small hammer lying there.
She woke as he used the hammer to tap the pin out of the second hinge, sitting up on the sofa and pushing the heavy curtain of her hair out of her face. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, her expression still showing the remoteness of mingled fatigue and shock. Dane gave her an assessing glance and decided to let her have a moment to herself. She sat quietly, watching with only mild interest as they removed the damaged door and replaced it with the new one.
It wasn't until they were finished that she said bemusedly, "Why did you change my door?"
"The other one was damaged," Dane explained briefly as he gathered up the tools.
"Damaged?" She frowned. "How?"
"I kicked it in last night."
She sat very still, slowly reconstructing the memories, putting details into place. "After I called you?"
"Yes."
There was another pause. "I'm sorry," she finally said. "I didn't intend to worry you."

“Worry” wasn’t quite how Dane would have described it. He had been in a gut-twisting panic.
“Do you remember my partner, Alex Trammell?”
“Yes. Hello, Detective. Thank you for helping replace my door.”
“My pleasure.” Trammell’s voice was more gentle than usual. It was obvious that Marlie was still struggling to get things together.
“Have you heard anything yet?” she asked.
He and Trammell exchanged a quick look. “No,” he finally said.
A faraway look drifted into her eyes. “She’s just lying there. Her family doesn’t know, her friends don’t know. They’re going about their routine, happy and oblivious, and she’s lying there waiting to be found. Why doesn’t someone call or go by, just to check on her?”
Dane felt uncomfortable, and Trammell did, too, restlessly shifting position. They were more objective about bodies, especially bodies that might not even exist. They saw so many of them that they were hardened, for the most part thinking of the bodies as victims but not as individuals. The possibility of another murder victim had them both worried, because of the implication of a serial killer on the loose in Orlando. For Marlie, however, it was personal. She didn’t have that inner wall to protect her.
“There’s nothing we can do,” he said. “Unless you can give us a name or a location, we have nothing to go on, nowhere to look. If it happened, someone will eventually find her. All we can do is wait.”
Her smile was bitter, and not really a smile. “It happened. It’s never *not* happened.”
He sat down beside her. Trammell took a chair. “Can you think of any details, something you didn’t tell me last night? Not about the killing, but about the location. Could you see anything that might give us a clue? Is it a house or an apartment?”
“A house,” she said instantly.
“A nice-looking house, or a slum?”
“Very neat, good furnishings. One of those larger-screen televisions, on a pedestal.” She frowned, rubbing her forehead as if she had a headache.
Dane waited. “Cypress.”
“Cypress? There’s a cypress tree out front, a park with cypress trees, what?”
“I don’t know. I didn’t really see it. He just *thought* it.”
“That’s a big help,” Dane muttered.

“What did you expect?” she snapped. “That he’d think, ‘Now I’m breaking into this house at so-and-so number on so-and-so street, where I’m going to rape and kill Jane Doe?’ *Nobody* thinks like that, everything’s more automatic and subconscious. And I’m not telepathic anyway.”
“Then how did you pick up on a cypress tree?”
“I don’t know. It was just an impression. This guy is an unbelievably strong broadcaster,” she said, trying to explain. “He’s like a super powerful radio station, overriding all the other signals.”
“Can you pick him up now?” Trammell interjected, his eyes bright with interest.
“I can’t pick up *anything* now. I’m too tired. And he probably isn’t broadcasting.”
“Explain,” Dane said briefly.
She glanced at him, then away. His attention was focused on her so intently that she almost couldn’t bear it, because the lure of it was so strong and she was afraid to give in.
“His mental intensity builds as he gets closer and closer to the kill. Probably he can’t maintain that level of rage for very long; he couldn’t function at anything approaching normality if he did. So the only time his mental energy is strong enough for me to read is right before and during the kill, when he’s at his peak. I lose him shortly after that; I don’t even know how he leaves the scene.”
“That explains the fingers,” Dane said to Trammell, who nodded.
“Fingers?”
“Did Mrs. Vinick scratch him at any time?” Dane asked, ignoring her puzzled question.
Her eyes went blank again as she turned inward. “I’m not certain. She tried to fight, clawing at him. It’s possible, but I don’t think he noticed if she did.”
Until afterward, Dane thought. That was why Marlie didn’t know anything about Mrs. Vinick’s fingers. The killer had been very calm and deliberate when he’d done it, because he hadn’t noticed the scratches until his killing frenzy had cooled. That her fingers had been cut off was one of the details that hadn’t been released to the press, and he didn’t intend to tell Marlie about it. She had enough to bear, enough gory details to fill a thousand nightmares; he wasn’t going to add to it.
“You said that you picked up a hint of him the other night.”

“It wasn’t a clear image; it wasn’t an image at all. It was just a feeling of evil, a sense of threat. He was probably stalking her,” she said, her voice trailing away as she realized that was exactly what he’d been doing. He had controlled the rage, but the hatred and contempt had leaked through, and she had felt it.

She was becoming very tired again, and her eyelids drooped. She wanted to curl up and sleep. She wanted him to leave her alone. She wanted to lose herself in the sanctuary of his arms. She wanted everything and nothing, and she was too tired to make up her mind.

But then Dane’s hands were on her, strong and sure, turning her so that she was lying down, and the light blanket was arranged over her again. “Sleep,” he said, his deep voice immensely reassuring. “I’ll be here.”

She took one slow, deep breath, and settled into oblivion.

Trammell’s lean, dark face was somber as he watched her. “She’s helpless,” he said. “Is it like this every time?”

“Yeah. She’s recovered some now. It was a lot worse last night, and earlier today.”

“Then I hope the killer never finds out about her; she’s completely vulnerable to him. If his mental energy is so strong it can block hers even from a distance, think what it would do to her if *she* were the one he was after. He’d be right on her, and she wouldn’t be able to protect herself in any way.”

“He won’t get the chance to get to her,” Dane said, and in the grimness of his voice there was a promise. No matter what, he’d keep Marlie safe.

“Have you talked to Bonness?”

“He wasn’t thrilled with the possibility that there could be a serial killer, so he said to play it close to the vest and not mention it to anyone else until, and if, we find out there really was another murder. But he was also as thrilled as a kid at the idea of working with Marlie, because after all, it was *his* idea. I swear to God, sometimes I wonder if there isn’t some weirdo juice in the water in California.”

“Don’t laugh,” Dane advised. “Right now we’re pretty involved in it ourselves.”

“Yeah, but we aren’t jumping up and down with joy over it.”

“Bonness is a good guy; a little weird, but okay. I’ve seen worse.”

“Haven’t we all.” It was a statement, not a question.

Dane's gaze wandered over Marlie's sleeping face, and his brows drew together in a frown. "Cypress," he said.
Trammell read him immediately. "You've thought of something."
"Maybe. That's all she said. Cypress. Not cypress *tree*. That was just an association I made."
"Cypress. Cypress," Trammell muttered. They looked at each other, two minds racing madly down the same track. "Maybe it's the—"
"Address," Dane finished, already on his feet. "I'll get the map." Like all cops, he had a city map in his car.
A minute later they were both bent over the map, open on the kitchen table. Dane ran down the alphabetical list of streets. "Shit! Don't developers ever think of any other word to use? Cypress Avenue, Cypress Drive, Cypress Lane, Cypress Row, Cypress Terrace, Cypress Trail—"
"It's worse than that," Trammell said, scanning the other listings. "Look at this. Old Cypress Boulevard. Bent Cypress Road. And isn't there an apartment complex called Cypress Hills?"
"Yeah." Dane folded the map in disgust. "There's no telling how many streets have cypress in the name. That's a dead end. We can't go door to door on every one of them, checking for bodies. What would we do if no one answered the door? Break in?"
Trammell shrugged. "You've done it twice in less than twenty-four hours."
"Yeah, well, there were extenuating circumstances."
"You're right, though. We're stuck. We may be fairly certain Marlie's for real, but Bonness wouldn't authorize that kind of search. People would be calling the mayor at home, screaming that Orlando wasn't a police state and we had no right to come into their homes like that. And they'd be right. We can't do that."
"So we're back to waiting."
"Looks like it."
There was no point in fretting over something they couldn't change. Dane allowed himself a moment of frustration, then changed the subject. "Would you mind going over to my place and getting some clothes for me? And my shaving kit. I had to use Marlie's razor this morning."
"I noticed," Trammell said, eyeing the nick on Dane's jaw. "Sure, no problem." He checked his watch. "I have time. I have a date tonight, but I'll be close to a phone."
"Grace?" Dane asked slyly.

Trammell scowled. “Yes, I’m seeing Grace. What about it?”
“Nothing, just asking.”
“Then stop grinning like a jackass.”
He left and was back within the hour with Dane’s clothes and shaving kit. “Your wardrobe is severely limited,” he groused, dumping the clothes on a chair. He glanced down at Marlie, who was still asleep. “Maybe she can do something about it.”
“Maybe,” Dane said. “What’s wrong with my clothes?” he asked innocently. If anything was certain to send Trammell into a tirade, it was that question.
“What’s *right* with them?” Trammell snorted. “You have mostly jeans, very old ones. You have one suit, and it looks as if you got it from the Salvation Army store. Assorted slacks and sport coats, none of which really go together, and the most disgusting collection of ties I’ve ever seen. Did you actually *buy* this stuff? You paid good money for it?”
“Well, yeah. Nobody gives stuff away, you know.”
“They should have paid you to take it off their hands!”
Dane hid his grin as he picked up the clothes and carried them into Marlie’s bedroom, where he hung them in her closet, her very neat closet. His haphazardly hung garments looked out of place there, but he stood back and admired the sight for a minute. He liked the idea of his clothes in her closet, or her clothes in his closet. He thought about that possibility for a minute. He’d have to clean out his closet before she could, or would, put anything of hers in it.
Trammell left, and Dane watched television for a while. He couldn’t find a baseball game, so he settled for a basketball playoff game. He kept the volume low, and Marlie slept undisturbed.
He’d been on a lot of stakeouts, spent a lot of time just waiting. In stakeouts, boredom and the need to piss were the two biggest problems. This reminded him of a stakeout, because the waiting seemed interminable, but the quality was different. They weren’t waiting to catch a criminal, or to prevent a crime. The crime had already been done, they just didn’t know where or to whom. They were waiting for a victim to surface, waiting for suspicion and worry to send someone to a quiet house somewhere in the city, to check on a friend, neighbor, or relative. Then the waiting would be over.
“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?”

Marlie's voice startled him. Dane jerked his head around to look at her, she was sitting up again, her somber eyes on him. He realized that he had been staring sightlessly at the television for some time, because it was almost eight o'clock.
"It isn't something you put out of your mind," he said.
"No, it isn't." For her more than anyone else.
He got up and turned off the television. "How about calling out for a pizza? Are you hungry?"
She thought about it. "A little."
"Good, because I'm starving. What do you like? The works?"
"That's fine." She yawned. "You call it in, and I'll go take a shower while we're waiting. Maybe it will wake me up."
"Take your clothes off this time," he advised, and she smiled a little.
"I will."
The water felt good, washing away the mental cobwebs and cleansing her of the sensation of having been tainted, dirtied somehow by the evilness she had witnessed. She was tempted to linger under the cool spray, but thinking of the pizza, forced herself to briskly shower and shampoo. After blow-drying her hair to a semblance of order, she thought about clothes, but settled for the light robe Dane had selected for her.
She left the bathroom and halted, staring at her unmade bed. If she had been more alert, she would have noticed it sooner. The fact that her bed was unmade was unusual enough, but what riveted her to the spot was the sight of twin indentations in the pillows, where two people had slept. Awareness roared through her like a brushfire. Dane had slept with her, in her bed.
She had docilely accepted his presence all day, knowing that she had talked to him the night before but never wondering about his location during the lost hours. Now she knew. He had been right there, in bed with her.
A wave of sensual heat overcame her and she closed her eyes, shuddering at the deliciousness of it. Her heart pounded, her breasts tightened, and a flooding, loosening sensation in her loins made her knees go weak. Lust. She was astounded as its presence, at its power. Instead of being outraged that he had taken advantage of the situation, she was aroused by the thought of him sleeping beside her.
He had been so gentle in his care of her that day, that iron strength and fierceness controlled so that she had felt only the protection he offered. He had combed her hair, fed her, held her while she cried, and most of all, he

had given her the comfort of his presence. She hadn't been alone this time, though somehow she always had been before, even while she had still been with the Institute. Dr. Ewell and the others had always maintained a distance from her; mental privacy had been so difficult for her to attain that they had gone out of their way to let her recover in her own way, at her own pace. Until now, she hadn't realized how lonely and terrifying that had been.

Dane knocked briefly on the door and opened it without waiting for an answer. "Pizza's here."

As always, the impact of his presence was like a blow. He was so big and rugged, exuding a male vitality that made her shiver. For the first time she began to think that it might be possible, that Arno Gleen's legacy of terror was losing its power over her. Gleen had been a sick, sadistic bastard. Dane was pure, hard-edged male, too intense and grim for life around him to ever be entirely comfortable, but a woman would always feel safe with him, in bed and out.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you all right?" He reached her in two long strides, his arm sliding around her waist and pulling her into the support of his body.

"Yes," she said, not thinking about it, and slipped her hand around the back of his neck.

He didn't hesitate, didn't give her time to think about it. She wasn't certain she was extending an invitation, but he accepted it before she could decide. This time there was no careful restraint; he set his mouth over hers with open hunger, a hunger so intense and greedy that it stunned her. He caught her chin with his free hand and held her, then moved his tongue deep inside her mouth, touching her own tongue in blatant demand. She sagged against him, both frightened and tempted, and he gathered her in against his hard frame. His erection pushed against her belly. She had never been wanted before like that, so swiftly and violently. She had no experience of men like Dane Hollister, or of how he could make her feel.

But contact with that potent body was suddenly all she wanted. She put both arms around his neck, moving against him, trying to get closer. He was bruising her with the force of his kisses, and she wanted more. Her loins were tight and achingly empty, growing moist with yearning.

He put his hand on her breast, and her breath locked in her throat. His thumb rubbed over and around her nipple; at first it was a curious sensation,

like a slight pricking of pins, then it suddenly intensified and pure sensation zinged from the nipple to her loins. She moaned aloud, frightened by the way her own body had so swiftly gone beyond her control.
Dane lifted his head. There was a hard, predatory expression on his face, the faint cruelty of arousal, and his lips were wet from their kisses. His hand remained on her breast, with only the very thin cotton of the robe between them. His breath was coming too fast, and she could feel the hard pounding of his heart against her. “Bed, or pizza?” he asked. His voice was so guttural, she could barely hear him. “If it’s pizza, you’d better say so *now.”*
She wanted to say “bed,” she wanted it so much. She had never felt desire before, and the lure of it was almost irresistible. She wanted to forget the reason he was there, the murders she had seen, and simply give herself over to the physical. She had never been able to do that before, and maybe couldn’t now, but for the first time it seemed possible.
“P-Pizza,” she managed, and closed her eyes as she fought for control. Sick dismay filled her at her own cowardice.
She could feel him bracing himself, and he took a deep breath. “Pizza it is, then.” Slowly he released her and stepped back. A huge, obvious ridge in his pants told her how difficult it had been for him to stop. Most men wouldn’t even have made the offer.
He gave her a wry, crooked smile that lit his rough features. “I guess I was going too fast for you, honey. I’m sorry. It’s just that I have a hair trigger where you’re concerned, and I’m not talking about firearms.”
Marlie stared at him, a lump in her throat and a huge knot in her chest. She felt dizzy with shock and realization. Oh, God. She had been attracted to him from the first, had recognized it and fought it, but with that smile she slipped helplessly over the edge. She had loved, but she had never been in love before, and the power of it made her actually feel faint. Swaying, she put out her hand in search of support, and he was there, solid and vital and so hot that she almost melted. His arm was around her, and her head lay against his chest.
“Shhh, it’s okay,” he crooned. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry.”
“No,” she managed to croak, alarmed that he thought he had reminded her of Gleen. He hadn’t; she had been expecting it, but it simply hadn’t happened. She had always assumed that sexual fear would be a constant in her life, and now that it hadn’t materialized, she felt oddly adrift and off balance. “It isn’t you. I was just dizzy for a minute.” Somehow she formed

a smile, and it was a real one for all its shakiness. “Maybe your kisses are more potent than you thought.”
“You think so?” His voice rumbled under her ear. “We’ll have to experiment, wont we? After the pizza.”
He walked her into the living room and guided her to the couch. “Just sit; I’ll get the drinks. Do you want a plate?”
“Well… yes. Of course.”
He chuckled. “It must be a woman thing.”
“I prefer a napkin, too,” she said politely. “As opposed to licking my fingers.”
He winked at her. “I’ll be glad to lick your fingers.”
She shivered in response and sat, dazed and quiescent, while he puttered around in the kitchen. He seemed to know his way around in her house. How had this happened? She was bewildered by the speed and force of it. In less than twenty-four hours he had taken over, he had spent the night with her, apparently moved in with her, and with a grin made her fall in love with him. He was a one-man SWAT team, overwhelming her defenses without effort.
He was back in a few minutes with the iced soft drinks, a plate and fork for her, and a couple of napkins. He sat beside her on the sofa, turned on the television to a sports channel, and gave a grunt of satisfaction when a baseball game filled the screen. He served her a slice of pizza, got one for himself, and settled back with obvious enjoyment. Marlie blinked at him. This was what she’d gotten herself into? She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. In the end she simply concentrated on the pizza, sitting curled beside him on the sofa, bemused that she was so content to just be close to him and watch his face as he watched the game.
Sometimes his size overwhelmed her and sometimes she was comforted by it, but this was the first time she had had the opportunity to simply sit and study him. He was definitely a big man, even bigger than she had thought, at least six two and over two hundred pounds. The feet parked on her coffee table had to be size twelves, or larger. His shoulders were so wide, he took up almost half the couch; his arms were thick and hard, sinewy with ropy layers of muscle. His chest, she knew, was rock-hard, and so was his abdomen. His long legs, stretched out before him, looked like tree trunks. His hair was darker than hers, almost black. She eyed the blade of a nose and the brutally carved cheekbones, and wondered if there was any

American Indian in his heritage. He had a heavy beard; evidently he had shaved that morning, since there was a fresh-looking nick, but already the black stubble had darkened his jaw.

He leaned forward to get another slice of pizza, and her gaze fell on his hands. Like everything else about him, they were big, easily twice the size of her own. But they weren't thick hams; though powerful, they were lean and well shaped, with short, clean nails. She felt safe with those hands on her; not safe from *him*, but from everything else. She didn't want to be safe from him. She had lost her heart about fifteen minutes ago, and she was still reeling from the shock of it.

He was a cop, a man who made his living in violence. He didn't commit the violence, as a rule, but he had to clean up after it, he was constantly surrounded by it. Close by his right hand was a big automatic pistol. At some point during the day she had become aware of it, and now she realized that it was never far from his side. A shoulder holster was slung across the back of the couch, beside him.

There was a scar across the back of his right hand. She caught a glimpse of it when he reached for a third slice of pizza, and recognition congealed in her. "That scar on your hand," she said. "How did you get it? It looks like a knife wound."

He turned his hand to look at it, then shrugged and gave his attention back to the television. "It is. A close encounter of the punk kind, when I was still working patrol."

"It looks bad."

"It wasn't any fun, but it wasn't serious. It was a shallow cut, didn't slice through any tendons. A few stitches and I was as good as new."

"Gleen cut me," she said. She didn't know why she said it; she hadn't meant to.

His head snapped around, all affability gone as if it had never been, and the expression in those hazel eyes was scary. "What?" he asked softly, putting down the slice of pizza. His thumb moved on the remote control, and the television screen went blank. "The professor didn't say anything about that."

She set the plate aside and drew her knees tighter to her chest. "They weren't serious cuts, just little slices. He was playing with me, trying to break me down with pain and fear. He got off on that; it was what he needed. And he wasn't trying to kill me, at least not then. He wanted to

keep me alive so he could play with me. He would have killed me later, of course, if the sheriff hadn't gotten there."
"Let me see." The words were a soft growl and he was already reaching for her, uncurling her, his hands opening the robe. Marlie struggled briefly for control of the robe, but then he had it open, spreading it wide as he looked down at her, naked except for thin, brief panties.
The scars, six years old, weren't disfiguring. They would, given time, probably fade completely. She had never fretted about them, because they were so unimportant compared to everything else, and she had never been vain anyway. They were just small, silvery lines, five of them: one on the inner curve of her right breast, the rest on her abdomen. There would have been more, but Gleen had swiftly lost control when the gambit hadn't worked, degenerating to the crude force of his fists to elicit the response he had wanted.
She quivered, a hot blush staining her cheeks as Dane slowly examined her. She was acutely aware of her bareness, in a way she never had been before. His mouth was a grim line as he traced the line on her breast with his fingertip, the touch as light as a breath. Her nipple tightened, though he wasn't even touching it. She heard her own ragged breathing as he slowly touched every scar. He was shaking, too, and suddenly she realized that it was with pure fury, at a man forever beyond his reach.
She put her hand on his hair, threading her fingers into the warm thickness of it. "They aren't important," she said, forgetting her embarrassment. "Of everything that he did, those little cuts amounted to the least."
"It isn't the cuts." His voice was thick with rage as he pulled her into his arms, cradling her head against his shoulder. "It's knowing what you went through, how terrified you were. You didn't *know* that he wasn't going to kill you."
"No, I expected to die. In some ways, that would have been easier."

Chapter 12

Somehow she was being held on his lap, her robe still open and his hand inside it, but instead of threatened, Marlie felt utterly safe, his warmth and strength surrounding her like a citadel. It was a delicious sensation, one she had never been able to enjoy before. She wanted to sink into him, revel in

this new freedom, for that's what it was, an entirely new vista opened up to her. But Dane wanted information, chapter and verse, and Detective Hollister was very good at getting his way. She could have resisted bullying, but not the waiting silence in which he held himself, a silence in which she could feel his tension. The tension wouldn't ease until he knew, and so she told him, the ugly details, the guilt that she had held inside for years.

Her head was lying on his shoulder, her face turned in to the muscled wall of his chest. Somehow it was easier that way, as if she could neither see nor be seen.

"He had knocked me out," she began. "When I came to I was naked, lying flat on my back on the floor, with my hands tied to some kind of pipe, maybe an old radiator. Gleen was naked, too, sitting astride my hips with the knife in his hand, smiling and waiting for me to wake up. Dusty was tied to a cot about five feet away, watching the whole thing. He was such a pretty little boy." Her voice was soft and distant as she remembered. "Auburn curls all over his head, and big, round blue eyes. He was so scared. He cried the whole time."

Dane looked down at his big hand lying on her belly, almost completely spanning her. The thought of Gleen seeing her like this, and using a knife on this slender, womanly soft body, was so obscene that he barely stifled the growl that began rumbling up from his chest. She seemed to have forgotten that she was all but naked now, her mind lost in the past, but Dane was very aware of it. Even in his rage, he looked at those soft, round breasts with their tender pink nipples, and felt the desire burning low in his belly. He controlled it, forcing it aside so he could hold her, and listen to her. Had anyone ever held her, given her comfort? He thought not, and that added to his anger.

"I don't know why I did it," she continued, her head lying trustingly in the hollow of his shoulder. "But something in me refused—I couldn't give in to him. I would rather have died than give him what he wanted. He wanted me to beg, but I wouldn't. He wanted me to be afraid, and I was, but I didn't let him see it. I laughed at him. Oh God, I *laughed.* He cut me, and I yelled at him that he was a pitiful excuse for a man. He pulled my legs apart and tried to put it in me." She hesitated uncomfortably. "You know—*it*, not the knife."

"I know what 'it' is," he growled.

She buried her face deeper into the curve of his neck. “He couldn’t, and I laughed at him. I made fun of him, I told him what a miserable little worm he had, and what a miserable little worm he was. He was wild with it, I could feel how out of control he was, all that hate and fury pouring out, but I just kept pushing. I could feel Dusty, too, so terrified, reaching out for me, begging me not to let the bad man hurt him again.

“So I kept laughing at Gleen, and kicking at him as much as I could. Somehow I managed to kick him between the legs, not really hard because my foot slipped off his thigh, but he… lost it. It was like he exploded, somehow. One second he was on me and the next he was on Dusty, and Dusty was screaming. I still hear him scream. I could feel him, the absolute terror, the agony. It was like a black wave, all over me, all through my brain, and I was screaming too. I screamed and screamed and screamed. Blood was everywhere…” She paused, and after an interminable silence that lasted only a few seconds, said simply, “I don’t remember anything else. Dusty died, and I died with him.”

Dane knew what had happened after that; the professor had told him. Her screams had pinpointed Gleen’s location to the sheriff and his men, and they had killed Gleen before he could turn his murderous fury on Marlie. But they hadn’t been in time to save Dusty, and in a way they hadn’t been in time for Marlie either. As linked to Dusty as she had been, his death had been her death, too, and it was a miracle she had survived the shock.

He smoothed her hair behind her ear, and stroked her cheek. “But you came back,” he said with controlled ferocity.

“Eventually. It was a long time before I felt anything, any kind of emotion. Before, I had felt everything, everyone else’s emotions, and after that I couldn’t even feel my own. I didn’t have any.”

“You healed, Marlie. It’s been a long time, but he didn’t win. He couldn’t break you.”

“He came damn close,” she said. She quietly rested against him for a minute. “If I hadn’t pushed him, if I’d given him what he wanted, probably Dusty would still be alive.”

Dane snorted. “Yeah, it’d be nice if we were all omnipotent.” He wasn’t going to waste his time babying the natural guilt she felt. He jostled her a little, forcing her to look up at him. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said deliberately.

She managed a fragile smile. “So am I. And sometimes that seems like the most callous thing of all, that I’m glad to be alive. I wasn’t thinking beyond the moment when I was laughing at Gleen; the only thing I knew was that I absolutely couldn’t bear for him to rape me. The thought of him being inside me was so revolting that I was willing to push him into killing me, rather than tolerate his touch. Of all the things that gave me nightmares, sex was the worst. I can watch some violence on television or in movies, but I still can’t watch a sex scene. I can’t think of it as love. I remember Gleen’s face, the smell of his breath, the way saliva sprayed when he screamed at me. I remember the feel of him against me, between my legs, and I still want to gag.” She took a deep breath. “Not that sex was ever good for me anyway,” she said honestly.

“How so?” His voice was undemanding, and his touch almost absent as he stroked her hair back from her temple, but his hazel eyes were intense.

She had never talked about the difficulty she’d had with sex, but somehow, lying cradled in his protective arms, with the rest of the world held at bay, she could. She felt oddly dreamy, caught in a combination of fatigue and the aftermath of stress, as if nothing else were quite real. “It was awful. Mentally, I couldn’t bear it. I had to work so hard to build a shield, to protect myself from everything,” she explained. “It was the only way I could function, and the shield was at best only a partial protection. All my life I wanted to be *normal.* I wanted to love someone, I wanted a relationship, I wanted what normal people had. I didn’t want to be alone. I wanted intimacy to be wonderful, but it wasn’t. Being intimate, physically, just blew away my mental shields. I couldn’t block out anything. The mental interference was enormous; all I could feel was *his* emotions, blotting out any physical enjoyment I might have felt. It wasn’t very flattering, either.” Her mouth quirked. “He wasn’t overcome by fondness for me; all he wanted was sex.

And he was feeling proud of himself for daring to have sex with a weirdo psychic.“

“The son of a bitch,” Dane said softly.

She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. “I *was* weird. I still am.”

“Hell, no wonder you’re skittish about sex. All you’ve ever seen is the ugly side of it; you’ve never had any romantic illusions, have you? You know about scoring, and about rape. You must think men are scum.”

“No,” she denied. “When you know what other people are feeling, the way I did, you know that couldn’t be so. There are selfish, mean-spirited women just like there are nasty men. But when it came to sex, I couldn’t close my mind and just feel. It wouldn’t have been any different if I’d been madly in love with a wonderful guy who loved me just as much; I couldn’t have enjoyed sex with all that mental static going on.

“I think I had accepted that I couldn’t have any sort of romantic relationship,” she continued. “I liked being alone, in my little cabin in the mountains. Dr. Ewell thought that moving into the cabin was good for me, a move toward normalizing my life. And it was; it was great. I worked with him on experiments and documentation, and occasionally helped find missing people, though the effort involved was such a strain that—well, you know what it’s like. Once upon a time, before Gleen, I could direct the knowing. I could lock on to someone specific, and go into a vision. I can’t control it at all now.”

“Do you want it to be like before?”

“I never wanted to have another vision in my life,” she murmured. “But if I don’t have any choice about it, then yes, I’d like to be able to control them. This—this is like being ambushed.” She was getting drowsy again, and her eyelids drooped.

“But except for the two visions, you haven’t had any other episodes?”

She thought of the first night she had called him, and known what he was doing, what he would say, even as he answered the telephone. “There was one flash of clairvoyance, but it wasn’t related to the murders, and hasn’t happened again. It was just a second or two. I don’t think of the visions as clairvoyant episodes; they’re… different, more strongly grounded in emotion. Anyway—no. Nothing else.”

“Good.”

There was a wealth of dark satisfaction in his voice, a satisfaction she couldn’t quite decipher. Then his warm hand covered her breast, and she knew, with an instinct that had nothing to do with her psychic abilities, and everything to do with being a woman. No longer sleepy, she tilted her head back on his arm to look at him.

“It seems to me that now is the perfect time to show you some of the pleasure of sex,” Dane murmured. Those hazel eyes were blazingly intent, and deeply green. “You can’t feel my emotions, so that takes care of one problem. If you were afraid of me, you wouldn’t have been lying almost

naked on my lap for half an hour, which takes care of the other problem. All you have to do is lie there and let me make you feel good."
She quivered, her gaze locked with his. Was now the time? Until Dane, she hadn't felt desire. Sex had been an experiment, a hope, and ultimately, a disappointment. She wasn't afraid of him, but rather that she would fail again. Loving him was still so new, so startling, that she didn't want to tarnish it. It was cowardly, but she would prefer to never try, and retain the frail hope that it might have been possible, than to try and fail. Might-have-been was a poor comfort, but better than nothing.
"I don't know," she said nervously. "What if—"
"Stop worrying about it," he interrupted. "Just lie back, close your eyes, and leave everything to me."
Easier said than done. Still she stared up at him with worried eyes, unable to decide yes or no. Too much had happened to her for her to be able to make that move. She hated herself for being so weak, and tears began welling.
Dane gave her approximately two seconds, then settled the issue himself. He stroked down her body and beneath the waistband of her panties, tucking his hand into the notch between her thighs. Marlie cried out in surprise, automatically grabbing his wrist. Her thighs clamped tight around his hand. Her eyes were huge, eclipsing her wan face. But even as they stared at each other, hectic color warmed her cheeks.
"Do you trust me?" he asked in a calm voice, as if it weren't taking every bit of self-control he had to keep from rolling her beneath him and sinking into her, finding blessed relief for his throbbing erection.
She chewed her lower lip, and he almost groaned aloud at the provocation.
"Well, yes."
"Then relax your legs. I'm not going to hurt you. As a matter of fact, I guarantee that you'll like it."
She managed a wobbly smile. "Guarantee, huh?"
"Absolutely." He bent his head and brushed a gentle kiss across her mouth.
Marlie quivered, caught on the twin prongs of cowardice. She was afraid to try and fail, and afraid that if she didn't trust him now, she might never have another chance. In the end, the second fear proved stronger. No matter what, she wanted to know what it was like to cradle Dane within her body, to feel his incredible strength as he drove into her, to give *him* pleasure if nothing else. He was determined to bring her to pleasure first, she knew, but she

also knew that afterward it would be his turn. She wasn't agreeing to just heavy petting, but to the complete sex act.
She drew a deep, shaky breath. "Okay. As long as I have your personal guarantee."
"I'll put it in writing and have it notarized," he promised, and kissed her again.
She couldn't control the fine tremors that shook her entire body, but she took another deep breath and slowly parted her thighs. He gently stroked the soft, closed folds, and Marlie released her death grip on his wrist. "Easy now," he whispered, then deftly opened her and penetrated her with one long finger.
She stiffened in his arms, her thighs locking together again in an effort to control his invading hand. It was useless, because there was nothing she could do to stop the slow probe of his finger inside her. Shock made her dizzy. Oh, God.
She wasn't dry, but she was far from being ready for penetration. The friction made his finger seem as big as a penis. She struggled briefly to contain the chaos of her rioting nerve endings, then collapsed against his chest in surrender.
"There, that's good," he crooned, and pushed another finger into her. Her hips arched, then subsided. She felt stretched, invaded, her body no longer under her control. Some dormant, primal instinct was stirring into life. Her inner muscles contracted gently in adjustment, and Dane's entire body shivered.
His voice was hoarse. "This is the most that I'm going to do to you, at least right now. You can relax because it's already happened. Am I hurting you?"
Yes. No. She hadn't realized it could feel like this. She was a little delirious with shock and pleasure, and shook her head, her hair cascading over his chest. She was stunned that her body was capable of such intense sensation.
"Then close your eyes, honey. Close your eyes and feel. Don't think, just feel."
Helplessly, she did. With her eyes shut, her concentration centered on her body and what was happening to it. Color swirled behind her eyelids. Heat surged through her, followed rapidly by a chill that wasn't really a chill, but rather a ripple of almost painful delight. Her skin felt too tight, too sensitive. Her nipples puckered and hardened, standing firmly upright.

His fingers reached deep inside her, rasping her delicate inner tissues. Helplessly she arched her hips again, taking his touch deeper within. Her thighs fell open, giving him easier access. Her heart was thundering, and she felt as if she might fly apart. She clutched his shirt, her fingers digging into the flesh beneath as she tried to anchor herself against the storm that was buffeting her.

She heard him say something, but there was a roaring in her ears and she couldn't quite make out the words. The words weren't important; she could hear the fierce tenderness in his tone, and that was what she needed. His fingers slipped out of her, and she made a soft sound of distress, her hips rolling toward him. Swiftly he stripped her panties off and returned his hand to her body. This time she willingly parted her thighs, and felt the eager dampness between them. The intrusion, when it came, was exquisite relief, yet the relief lasted only a moment. The slow thrust of his fingers elicited a deep, powerful hunger, so that his touch wasn't an easing, but a need. Then his rough thumb searched upward in her soft folds and pressed on the small,, tautly swelling nub at the top of her sex. Pure fire exploded through her nerves, and she gave a strained cry as she curled toward him.

He held her tightly against him, subduing her sensual struggles. He was talking to her, the words low and hoarse in her ear, encouraging her to greater heights while his strength kept her safely grounded. He continued to circle and rub with his thumb, tormenting the little nubbin, each touch making the fire burn hotter. A pulse began throbbing between her legs, beating in a rhythm she had never felt before. Passion was a brand, searing her flesh with its invisible mark.

"D-Dane!" It was a wail almost of anguish. He tilted her head back and set his mouth on hers, his tongue repeating the invasive movements of his fingers, the pressure hard and rough. She reveled in it, reaching up to cling to his heavy shoulders, offering her mouth more fully to him.

It built quickly, sensation spiraling into a tighter and tighter coil, and suddenly it was too much. Her entire body clenched, then surged wildly as her climax rolled through her in waves. She shook in uncontrollable spasms, feeling as if she were flying apart. He held her close, letting her know that she wasn't alone in the tempest. She cried out in a thin, hoarse voice, and he muffled the cries with his own mouth.

The crest of sensation subsided, though small shock waves continued to ripple through her loins. She went limp, her face buried against his chest

while she gasped for breath. He shifted her, then his muscles tensed beneath her and he got to his feet, holding her firmly in his arms. She gripped his shirt as he carried her swiftly into the bedroom and placed her on the bed. Her robe was hanging on her shoulders, and he pulled it completely away, then stood and began stripping off his own clothes.

He hadn't turned on the light, but the door was open, and light from the living room spilled across the bed. Marlie lay without moving, enveloped in a lassitude so complete that she thought she might never move again. In that quiet state of subconsciousness, with her physical senses so acute and her mental processes barely functioning, she could feel every slow, heavy beat of her heart as it moved blood through her veins. Her pulse throbbed in the tender places of her body.

With an effort, she lifted her heavy eyelids and watched him undress. His urgency was an almost palpable force, his movements swift and violent. In only seconds, his powerful form was bare. He crawled over her, his hard thighs pushing between hers and forcing them wide, then settled his heavy weight on her.

There was a wonderful stillness, a silence, both without and within. With incredible joy, and some trepidation, she felt the hardness of his genitals against the yielding softness of her own. He braced himself on one arm and reached between them with his other hand, guiding his shaft as he tensed his buttocks and slowly began pushing into her.

Marlie's breath tangled in her throat, and she felt herself drowning in sensation again. She had felt stretched by his fingers probing her, but his thick sex filled her to the point of distress. Though she was damp, her delicate inner tissues were swollen by his previous attentions; her sheath was ultra sensitive, tightening convulsively on him as he inexorably thrust himself to the hilt. She gave a soft, panicked sound of discomfort that verged on real pain.

Dane paused, holding himself deep within her. His powerful body was shaking. "Are you okay?" His voice was hoarse, and barely audible.

She couldn't think what to say. She wasn't having any empathic interference; her attention was wholly focused on her body. But physically she wasn't certain she could bear it when he started thrusting. He was so big, and the slightest movement rasped along her inner nerve endings; the sensation hovered between ecstasy and pain. Her mind was a blank, and she couldn't find the words to give him the reassurance he wanted.

He was a man, not a saint. His male flesh was throbbing inside her. He held himself rigidly still for a tense moment while he waited for her answer, but when none came his control shattered. A rough sound burst from his throat and he began thrusting with heavy power, reaching deep into her. The impact shook her entire body. Now she knew her answer, and clung fiercely to him as his hips hammered. The sharp slap of their bodies coming together mingled with his harsh breathing, and her own soft moans.

She had wanted Dane, and she had wanted this. Tightly she shut her eyes, savoring every moment She loved his roughness, the savagery of his hunger. She loved the helpless groans that escaped him, the heat and sweat as his body coiled and struck. She had always felt apart, an oddity, but with Dane she was simply, and purely, a woman. Nothing interfered with the moment; they were male and female, mating with fierce and uncomplicated passion. She wished it could go on forever.

It didn't, though. It couldn't, given the urgency of his need. All too soon his rhythm quickened, and he reared back, pounding into her with heavy force. He pushed her legs high, lifting her ankles onto his shoulders. Gasping, she felt him getting even bigger and harder inside her. He gave a harsh cry, one last thrust, and began shuddering convulsively.

When he had stopped shaking, when the last small quake had rippled through him, she opened her arms, and he weakly let himself sink into them. His heavy weight crushed her into the mattress, but she was too tired to care. His heartbeat thudded slowly against her breast. His dark head, wet with sweat, rested beside hers on the pillow. His face was turned toward her, and his warm breath washed over her neck.

She stroked his back, loving the feel of his heated skin beneath her palms. He was becoming heavier as he drifted into sleep, but she didn't care. She was limp with utter contentment. Only heaven could be better than this, lying in the aftermath of lovemaking, the man she loved sleeping cradled in her body and her arms. She wanted time to stand still in a place where evil couldn't intrude.

It intruded with a sudden shrill beeping.

Dane reacted instantly, withdrawing from her and sitting up in the same fluid motion. He turned on the lamp and silenced his beeper, briefly glancing at the digital readout. Marlie lay frozen. Without a word he picked up the phone and punched in a number, holding the receiver cradled between his head and shoulder while he began putting on his rumpled

clothes. “This is Hollister,” he said tersely. He listened for a moment, then said, “I’ll be there in ten minutes. Have you called Trammell? Never mind, I’ll do it. Radio back to the patrol officer and tell him to make damn certain the scene is secured.”

He depressed the button and got another dial tone. While he called the second number, Marlie got out of bed and fumbled for her robe. It was twisted, one of the arms turned inside out. Her hands were shaking. but she managed to straighten the garment and wrap herself in it, pulling the belt tight. Dane sat down on the side of the bed and began putting on his shoes.

“We have a victim,” he said quietly into the phone. “I’ll meet you there.” He didn’t glance at Marlie. “It’s 3311 Cypress Terrace.”

Cypress. Her stomach knotted into a cold lump. She had known, but this dispelled the last faint doubt.

He hung up the phone and went into the living room, shrugging into his shirt as he walked. Marlie followed him, as silent as a ghost, and stood in the doorway watching as he slipped into his shoulder holster. He tucked the big pistol into place under his left arm.

She didn’t approach him, and he didn’t come to her. He paused by the front door and looked back at her. “Are you all right?” he asked, but there was remoteness in his eyes and his voice, his mind already on the job awaiting him.

“Sure,” she said, burying the terror and pain and loneliness deep inside her. She couldn’t allow her weakness to delay him,

“I’ll be back when I can,” he said, and left.

She stood until the sound of his car had died away, then steadily went to the front door and locked it. Next she cleaned up the remains of their pizza, and washed the few dishes that were dirty. When she went back into the living room, she saw her panties in the corner of the couch and picked them up, wadding them in her hand.

She was very tired, but sleep seemed impossible. The delight of the night had been destroyed by a return of horror. She couldn’t allow herself to think of either right now. She sat down on the couch and quietly watched the minutes of the night tick away, as she held her own vigil.

Chapter 13

Lightning flashed in the distance, revealing the underbelly of low, purplish black clouds. It would rain again before morning. Dane drove automatically, clearing his mind of everything. He couldn't let himself think about Nadine Vinick, or the expectation might lead him to see similarities that weren't there. He couldn't think about Marlie, or his concentration would be completely shot. He tried not to anticipate anything about the scene he was about to see, tried not to remember how Marlie had described it. Again, he didn't want to prejudice himself. He had to see everything clearly.

It was still early enough that traffic was fairly heavy. Anxious to reach the exit, he tucked up too close behind a semitrailer. One of the retreads on the rig chose that moment to come apart, throwing up a big road gator that slapped into the front of his car. Cursing, he backed off to a safer distance, but the distraction helped, pulled his mind away from everything he was trying not to think about.

It took a little longer than ten minutes to reach 3311 Cypress Terrace. The street was cluttered with the usual assortment of official vehicles and sightseers. Dane got out of the car, studying the bystanders with acute interest, looking for one who seemed familiar. If the same guy had done both women, he might have been at the Vinick scene, too. Nothing; not one of the gawkers triggered a memory.

Cypress Terrace was in a slightly more upscale neighborhood than the Vinicks had lived in. The houses weren't bigger, but they were about ten years newer. There was a small, attached carport, and that was where the knot of uniforms had gathered, though one patrolman was guarding the front door, and he hoped another one was at the back.

Freddie Brown and her partner, Worley, were the detectives on call that weekend, and they were already there. Freddie detached herself from the group of patrolmen as soon as she saw him. "Hi, doll," she said, tucking her hand inside his arm and drawing him to a standstill. "There's no hurry. Talk to me for a minute."

If it had been anyone but Freddie, Dane would have shrugged him off. But it was Freddie, and this was her crime scene. She wouldn't have taken him to the side without a good reason. He looked down at her and lifted an eyebrow in question.

"Word is that you asked to be notified of any female stabbing fatality," she said.

He gave a brief nod, hoping she wasn't irritated about him horning in on one of her cases.
She patted his arm, reassuring him. "I figured you wouldn't have done that without a damn good reason, so I've held the scene for you. We'll consider it a birthday present."
"Held the scene?" he repeated, stunned. "You mean no one has gone in?"
"That's what I mean. The patrolman who found the body deserves a medal. He backed out as soon as he saw her, didn't touch anything except the doorknob, and secured the area. It's probably the most pristine crime scene you'll ever get. Ivan's on the way."
"We'll wait for him," Dane decided. "Thanks, Freddie How did a patrolman happen to find the body?"
She flipped to her notes. "The victim's name is Jacqueline Sheets, divorced, no children. Her ex-husband lives in Minnesota. She worked at one of the bigger law firms as a legal secretary, very good at her work. She had made plans to meet a friend for dinner, one of the other legal secretaries. When she didn't show, the friend tried to call, but there was no answer. Evidently Sheets was normally very punctual, and had recently had some medical problems, so the friend was concerned. She drove over here to check. Sheets's car is in the carport, there's a light on, and the television is blaring, but she can't get anyone to the door. She went to a neighbor's house and called 911. Patrol Officers Charles Marbach and Perry Palmer were nearby and got here before the emergency crew. They beat on the doors and couldn't get any response. Officer Marbach forced the lock on the front door, saw the victim immediately when he opened it, and stepped right back out." She closed the notebook. "The friend's name is Elizabeth Cline. She's sitting down in the carport. She caught a glimpse of the body and she's pretty rattled."
Another car added itself to the congestion. Dane glanced at it and identified Trammell. Freddie did the same, and looked back at Dane with a wry look. "Now, how about you tell me what's going on?"
"We want to look for similarities to the Vinick case," he said quietly. "We think it might be the same perp."
Her eyes widened, and a look of horror came over her freckled face as the implications hit home. "Oh, shit," she breathed. "It's even the same day of the week."

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed.” He could just see the headlines about the Saturday Slasher. He wondered what sensational name the newspapers would apply if the time *of* death was put before midnight, making it a Friday murder. The Friday Fucker?

Trammell joined them, resplendent in oatmeal linen slacks and a sky blue silk shirt. His hair was perfectly combed, his exotic face freshly shaved, and there wasn’t a wrinkle in sight. Dane wondered how in the name of God he did it.

He brought Trammell up to date on what had happened so far. Freddie asked, “Do you want to question the friend?”

Dane shook his head. “This is your show. All we want is to see the scene.”

“You don’t have to wait for Ivan, you know.”

“I know. I’d just like for him to get it as clean as possible.”

“At a guess, I’d say he’s never going to get one any cleaner.” She patted both of them in that motherly way she had, and returned to the group in the carport.

“It’s a house,” Trammell said unnecessarily. “No cypress trees, but the address is Cypress Terrace. We were on the right track. It’s going to be interesting to see if the television is one of the big-screen models, on a pedestal.”

Dane put his hands in his pockets. “Do we really have any doubt?”

“I don’t.”

“I don’t either. Damn it.”

“I called the lieutenant. He should be here any time.”

Ivan Schaffer arrived, in the crime scene van. He unfolded his long, lanky body from behind the steering wheel as Dane and Trammell walked to meet him.

Ivan wasn’t in a good mood. He scowled at both of them. “I don’t know why I had to personally handle this one. I have good people on duty. Why did Freddie insist that I be here?”

Evidently Freddie had sensed something unusual all the way around, bless her. Dane wondered if her husband would break his nose if he kissed her.

“This one’s special,” he told Ivan, helping him unload his kits and equipment. “For one thing, the scene’s untouched. You’re the first person in.”

Ivan halted. “You’re shitting me.” His eyes began to gleam. “That doesn’t happen.”

“It’s happening this time. Don’t expect it again in your lifetime.”
“What do I look like, an optimist? Okay, what’s the second thing?”
Trammell was coolly studying all the murmuring bystanders. “The second thing is, we think it was done by the same guy who did Nadine Vinick.”
“Ah, jeez.” Ivan sighed and shook his head. “God, I wish you hadn’t told me that. That’s big trouble, but I guess you already know that.”
“We’d thought about it. Is this all your stuff?”
“Yeah, that’s it. Okay, let’s see what we have.”
Dane called Officer Marbach to go in with them. A patrolman who had done that good a job deserved to be included. Marbach was young, not long out of training, and was pale under his tan. But he was steady as he detailed his actions for them, even telling them the body’s approximate distance from the front door.
“Can the body be seen from the street when we open the door?” Freddie asked, she and Worley having joined them.
Marbach shook his head. “There’s a little entry, with the living room to the right. I had taken one step in before I saw her.”
“Okay. Ivan, it’s your show.”
Ivan opened the door and went in. The rest of them followed, but stopped in the small entry hall and shut the door behind them. The television, tuned to an all-movie channel, was currently showing a Fred-and-Ginger. It was too loud, as if Jacqueline Sheets had been a little hard of hearing. Either that, or the sound had been turned up to drown out her screams. Ivan punched the power button and the screen went to black, filling the room with blessed silence. Dane and Trammell, standing in the entry, looked at the television. It was a thirty-five-incher, very modern and sleek, set on a pedestal.
None of them said anything. Ivan silently began his collection ritual.
From their viewpoint, only the upper half of the body was visible. She was nude, and her torso looked as if it had been savaged by a wild animal. The pattern of blood completely circled the couch, splattering over walls and carpet, and Dane remembered the odd phrase Marlie had used: *around and around the mulberry bush.* But it hadn’t been a bush, it had been the couch. Why had she used those words? Had they been something the killer had said, or thought? Had the bastard been *amused* by Jacqueline Sheets’s fight for her life?
The door opened behind them and Lieutenant Bonness came in. He looked at the gore and turned white. “Oh, Jesus.” The first scene had been more

gruesome, but they had looked at it as a onetime deal, unconnected to anything else. This time, however, they knew better. Now they were looking at it as the work of a madman who would do this again and again, murdering innocent women and devastating the lives of their families and friends, until they could stop him. And they knew that the odds weren't in their favor, serial killers were notoriously difficult to apprehend.

But this time, Dane thought grimly, they had something the killer couldn't have anticipated. They had Marlie.

Worley said, "Dane, you and Trammell have a look around. You know what you're looking for."

"That's why you and Freddie should do it," Trammell said. His thoughts had run the same as Dane's, but then they almost always did. "Just tell us what you find, and then well have a look ourselves."

Worley nodded. He and Freddie briskly began their methodical search of the house. Ivan summoned the fingerprint team, and they began dusting every hard surface with black powder. Soon the house was crowded with people, most of them standing about, some of them actually working. Eventually Jacqueline Sheets's body was bagged and removed. Dane could hear the clamor of reporters' voices outside, see the glare of television lights. They wouldn't be able to keep the lid on it much longer, but he thought nothing much would be made of a second stabbing within a week. If there was a third one, though, no reporter worth his or her salt would let it pass as coincidence. Even if there were no similarities in the cases, there would be enough interest to warrant a "special segment," whatever the hell that was.

Bonness took Dane and Trammell aside. "If it looks like the same guy did it __"

"He did," Dane said.

"Everything's just the way Marlie described it," Trammell added. "Even the type of television set."

"Any way she could have had any prior knowledge? I know, I know," Bonness said, holding up his hands. "I was the one who originally thought she could help us, and you guys were the ones who thought she was an accessory, but this is a question that needs to be asked."

"No," Dane said. "We established that there was no way she could have been at the crime scene of the first murder, and I was with her last night. She called me when the vision started, and I drove straight to her house."

“Okay. I want to see everyone in my office tomorrow morning at ten. We’ll go over what we have, anything new that Ivan’s found, set up a task force. I’ll notify the chief, and he can decide when and how much to tell city hall.”
“I hope he holds off,” Dane said. “Information leaks out of city hall like it’s a damn sieve.”
Bonness looked unhappy. “This isn’t something he can keep to himself. It would cost him his job if the media break the story and he hasn’t kept the head honchos informed.”
“Then ask him if he can give us a couple of days, at least. Both of the murders have been on Friday night or early Saturday morning, so if the pattern holds, the guy won’t hit again for almost another week. The longer we can work without him knowing that we’re on to him, the better chance we have of catching him.”
“I’ll talk to him,” was all Bonness would promise. Dane really hadn’t expected any more than that.
Worley and Freddie joined them. “The murder weapon was a kitchen knife, probably belonging to the victim,” Worley reported. “It matches others in the kitchen. He entered through the window in the guest bedroom, by cutting the screen.”
“It rained last night,” Dane said. “Any footprints beneath the window?”
Freddie shook her head. “Nothing. He was very careful.‘*
“Or he got in before it started raining, and waited in the bedroom,” Trammell suggested.
The idea made Freddie blanch. “God, that gives me the queasies, thinking of him in the house with her for hours, and her not knowing it.”
“What about afterward?” Officer Marbach asked. He blushed a little when they all turned to look at him. “I mean, it should have been raining when he left. Wouldn’t he have been likely to leave footprints then?”
“Only if he exited the same way he entered,” Dane said. “And there was no reason for him to. All he had to do was walk out the door, making him much less conspicuous if anyone happened to see him, which I doubt. The sidewalk and driveway are concrete; no prints.”
“She was evidently wearing pajamas at the time of the attack,” Freddie continued, looking at her notes. “We found a pair with blood on them, dropped into the laundry basket. We’re having the blood typed to make sure it’s the victim’s.”
“How about a husband or boyfriend?” Bonness asked.

“Nope. According to her friend outside, there’s an ex-husband who lives in Minnesota, but they’ve been divorced for twenty years, and it’s been almost that long since Sheets had any contact with him. No current boyfriend, either. Okay, guys, level with me: Does this sound like the same guy did both women?”
“Afraid so,” Dane replied. “Did Sheets frequent bars, gyms, anything where she’d be in contact with a lot of men?”
“I don’t know. We hadn’t gotten that far in questioning the friend when you guys got here. Why don’t you talk to her while we finish up in here? We’re all going to be pooling our notes, anyway,” Worley suggested. From his tone, he would have been glad to hand the entire investigation over to Dane and Trammell.
A low wall of cement blocks, two high, enclosed the carport on the open side. Elizabeth Cline was sitting on the wall, huddled in on herself, staring numbly at the crowd of policemen milling around. She was a tall, sleek blonde, with her hair cut short in a feathery cap, and long earrings that dangled almost to her shoulders. Despite the earrings, she wasn’t togged out in party clothes; she was wearing sandals, yellow leggings, and a long white tunic with a gaudy yellow and purple parrot on the front. She wore several rings, Dane noticed, but none of them was a wedding band.
He sat down beside her on the block wall, and Trammell, more aloof as always, leaned against Sheets’s car a couple of feet away.
“Are you Elizabeth Cline?” Dane asked, just to make certain.
She gave him a vaguely startled look, as if she hadn’t noticed him sitting beside her. “Yes. Who are you?”
“Detective Hollister.” He indicated Trammell. “And Detective Trammell.”
“It’s nice to meet you,” she said politely, then a horrified look edged into her eyes. “Oh, God, how can I say that? It *isn’t* nice to meet you. It’s because of Jackie that you’re here—”
“Yes, ma’am, it is. I’m sorry, I know it was a shock for you. Would you mind answering a few more questions for us?”
“I’ve already talked to those other two detectives.”
“I know, ma’am. But we thought of a couple of other things, and anything you can tell us will help us find her killer.”
She inhaled shakily. She was shivering, and hugging her arms. It was a warm, muggy night, but shock was getting to her. Dane wasn’t wearing a jacket to put around her, so he asked a patrolman standing nearby to get a

blanket. A few minutes later a blanket was produced, and he put it about her shoulders.
“Thanks,” she said, huddling gratefully into the folds.
“You’re welcome.” His instincts were to put his arm around her and comfort her, but he felt constrained and settled for patting her on the back. The only woman he could hold now was Marlie; somehow, in taking her, he had forever set himself apart from other women. He was uneasily aware of the change but pushed it beneath his consciousness, to be considered later when he had the time.
“You told Detective Brown that Ms. Sheets didn’t have a current boyfriend. Had she recently broken up with someone, or maybe had a casual date or two?”
She shook her head. “No.”
“No one? Any steady boyfriends at all since her divorce?”
Elizabeth gathered herself enough to lift her head and give him a shaky, wintry smile. “Sure.” The one word was bitter. “She had a twelve-year affair with one of the attorneys in the firm. He told her they’d be married when he divorced his wife, but the time wasn’t right while he was building his career. Then the time was right, he got his divorce, and promptly married a twenty-three-year-old trophy wife. Jackie was devastated, but she’d been with the firm for a long time and couldn’t afford to start over. He wanted to continue the affair, but Jackie broke it off, very quietly. At least he didn’t try to get her fired, but I don’t guess there was any reason for it. Their affair wasn’t a secret; everyone in the office knew about it.”
“When was this?”
“Let’s see. About four years ago, I guess.”
“Who has she dated since then?”
“I don’t know that she’s dated at all. Maybe once or twice, right after the affair ended, but I know she hasn’t gone out with anyone for at least a year. She started having health problems, and she didn’t feel well enough for the dating scene. We would eat dinner out every week or so; it helped keep her spirits up.”
“What kind of health problems?”
“Several things. She had really bad endometriosis, and about a year ago finally had a hysterectomy. A stomach ulcer, high blood pressure. Nothing life-threatening, but everything seemed to hit at once, and it made her

depressed. Lately she'd fainted a couple of times. That was why I was so worried when she didn't show up at the restaurant on time."
They had hit a dead end on ex-boyfriends, but Dane hadn't really expected anything different. He was just covering all the bases. "Had she mentioned anyone she'd met recently? Did she get into an argument with anyone, or had she mentioned anyone following her?"
Elizabeth shook her head. "No, Jackie was very even-tempered, got along with everyone. She didn't even lose her temper when David married his little bimbo. Actually, the closest she came to getting angry recently was when a new silk blouse came apart at the seams the first time she washed it. Jackie loved clothes, and was very particular about them."
"Did she go any place regularly, where she might have met someone?"
"Not unless it was the grocery store."
"Everyone has a routine," Dane insisted gently. They had to discover how the killer picked his victims. Nadine Vinick and Jackie Sheets had had something in common, something that had brought them to the killer's attention. They had lived in different neighborhoods, so it had to be something else, and putting his finger on that something else was vital. "Did she have her hair done regularly, go to the library, anything like that?"
"Jackie had beautiful red hair. She got it trimmed every few weeks, at a little salon close to the office. The Hairport. The stylist's name is Kathy, I think. Maybe Kathleen, or Katherine. Something like that. The library? No, Jackie wasn't much of a reader. She loved movies; she rented a lot of movies."
"Where did she rent them?"
"At the supermarket. She said they have a nice video selection, and it saved making an extra stop."
"Which supermarket did she shop at?"
"Phillips, about a mile from here."
A neighborhood market, not one where Nadine Vinick would have shopped. But Dane made notes of everything; they wouldn't know exactly what they had until they had compared every detail with the Vinick case.
"What about you?" he asked. "Are you married?"
"Widowed. Seven years ago. Jackie helped me through a rough time, and that's when we became close friends. We were friendly before that, you know, working in the same office for as long as we had, but that's when I

really got to know her. She was—she was a really great friend." Tears slipped down Elizabeth's cheeks.
Dane patted her some more, aware of and ignoring Trammell's enigmatic gaze. Trammell hadn't spoken once, leaving all the questioning to him. Occasionally he did that, when for some reason he decided Dane would have better luck getting answers.
"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said, still weeping. "I know I haven't been able to help."
"But you did," Dane assured her. "You helped us eliminate several things, so we know where to concentrate and won't waste our time on dead ends." Basically it was a lie; all they had was dead ends. But she needed all the comfort she could get, lie or not.
"Do I need to come down to the station or anything? Funny," she said, wiping her eyes and trying a pathetic smile. "I know how law works on the finished end, the courthouse end, but nothing about the raw stages."
"No, there's no need for you to come to the station," he said, soothing her. "Does Detective Brown have your address and phone number?"
"I think so. Yes, I remember telling her."
"Then I don't see why you can't go home, if you like. Do you want me to have someone drive you? Or call someone, a friend or relative, to stay with you tonight?"
She looked around vaguely. "I can't leave my car here."
"If you want someone to drive you, I'll get a patrolman to drive your car and another one to follow, to bring him back. Okay?"
But she didn't seem able to make a decision, still too stunned and devastated to think clearly. Dane made the decision for her, getting her to her feet, calling a patrolman over and arranging for her to be taken home, giving instructions for her to call a friend or neighbor to stay with her that night. She nodded as docilely as a child taking homework instructions.
"I have a niece nearby," she said. "I'll call her." And she looked at him as if asking for his permission to call the niece instead of a friend. He patted her and told her that was fine, and sent her off with the patrolman, who had taken his cue from Dane and treated her as gently as he would a lost child.
When Dane turned around, Trammell was still looking as enigmatic as a cat.
"What?" he demanded testily.
Trammell raised his eyebrows. "I didn't say anything."

“You’re thinking something, though. You’ve got that shit-eating smirk on your face.”
“Why would anyone smirk while they eat shit?” Trammell asked rhetorically.
He loved the man like a brother, but honest to God, sometimes Dane felt like messing up that pretty face. But when Trammell was in one of his moods, nothing could pry information out of him. Dane thought about giving him a couple of beers to loosen his tongue, then decided to leave well enough alone. He’d save the beer for special occasions.
There was nothing left to do but assist Freddie and Worley in tying up the loose ends: make certain the trash had been sacked up, to be gone through later; search the house for personal papers such as a diary, telephone and address books, life insurance policies. In death, Jackie Sheets would lose all of her privacy. They would go through her closets and her cabinets, in search of that one snippet of coincidence and fate that linked her to Nadine Vinick. Whatever the two women had had in common was the key to the killer. If poor Ansel Vinick hadn’t killed himself, he could have helped them pinpoint the crucial link, and maybe found a reason for living in helping to find his wife’s killer. In Dane’s opinion, the bumper sticker “Shit happens” should have the word “frequently” tacked on to the end of it.
Ivan had taken his meager findings back to the lab to begin analyzing them; the medical examiner’s office had Jackie Sheets’s body, though there was little to be added other than the approximate time of death. They could have saved the ME the time and trouble; Dane knew the time of death, because Marlie had called him.
Worry had settled new lines in the lieutenant’s face as he glumly surveyed the outline on the floor where Sheets had lain. “Everyone be in my office at ten tomorrow morning,” he said. “For now, go home and get some sleep.”
Dane glanced at his watch. It was almost one, and he was suddenly aware that he hadn’t had much sleep the night before.
“Are you going back to Marlie’s?” Trammell asked.
He wanted to; God, did he want to. “No, I won’t disturb her,” he said. “She’ll be asleep.”
“You think so?”
He remembered the way she had looked when he’d left, that haunted expression back in her drawn face. He hadn’t even kissed her, he realized. His mind had already been on the murder scene, and he had totally blocked

Marlie out. He had just made love to her, had gotten off her warm body to answer the beeper's summons, and he had walked out without kissing her.
"Damn," he said tiredly.
Trammell said, "See you in the morning," and got in his car. Grace Roeg would probably still be waiting, Dane thought. She was a cop, too; she would understand that he had had to leave suddenly. But Marlie wasn't a cop; she was a woman who had been too solitary her entire life, a woman who had borne enough pain for ten lifetimes. She was strong, incredibly so; she hadn't cracked, but she wore the scars, both physically and mentally. It had taken guts for her to let him make love to her, and what had he done? Their first time, and he had turned it into a slam-bam; he hadn't even said "thank you."
If he could have reached it, he'd have kicked his own ass.
She wouldn't be asleep; she would be sitting on the couch, still and quiet, waiting for his return. He couldn't protect her by keeping her in the dark, because she knew more than he did. She was an eyewitness, inside the killer, watching through his eyes as he gleefully hacked and slashed.
Dane drove quickly, the streets much emptier now. It began raining, the slow-moving storm finally reaching the city. He felt as if it were a replay of Friday night, when he had hurried through the wet streets to reach Marlie. As he had expected, there was a light on in the living room when he pulled into the driveway and killed the motor. Before he could get out of the car, she had opened the front door and was standing there, silhouetted against the light, waiting for him.
She was still wearing the thin robe, and he could see the outline of her body through the fabric. He ran through the rain and leaped up the two shallow steps onto the porch. She didn't say anything, just stepped back to let him in. She didn't have to ask what they had found, because she knew.
She was tired, her face wan, her eyes dark-circled. In those eyes was a weariness that went far beyond the physical, and the subtle air of distance had settled around her again.
He meant to offer comfort, if she would accept it. He meant to take care of her, give her the healing unconsciousness of sleep. She could relax, knowing that she was secure.
He meant to hold her all night long, offering her the primitive animal comfort of his closeness.

That was what he meant to do. But as they silently faced each other, with the rain pattering outside in rhythm to his suddenly racing heart, he forgot about all the noble things he meant to do. He had claimed her only a few hours before, making her his in the physical possession of mating, but they had been interrupted. The act had been completed, but the seal of the flesh hadn't been. True intimacy wasn't found in penetration and climax, but in the quiet time afterward, in the small ways that two lives meshed. He had left that undone, and his instincts were too primal and sure for him to ignore it.

He shut the door and locked it, without once looking away from her. Then, without haste, he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, pausing on the way to turn off the lamp.

There were no angry recriminations from her, no reluctance. She lay quietly where he had placed her on the bed, waiting while he impatiently threw off his clothes. He removed the robe from her for the second time that night. Her naked body gleamed dimly in the darkness; he felt the delicious softness of her beneath him, felt her thighs opening to embrace him. He held her head between his palms and kissed her with slow hunger as he probed, found the moist yielding of her entrance, and pushed within. The heat and tightness of her enfolded him, making his shaft throb so violently that he groaned into her mouth.

"Make me forget," she pleaded, whispering in broken desperation. He forced his way in to the hilt, holding her as she arched beneath him in an effort to accommodate her body to his size and force. She made a hot little whimpering sound, and her tight nipples stabbed against his chest.

He could give her only the forgetfulness of passion, fill her senses with his body, and the pleasure he could give her. He couldn't make the night go away, but he could turn the darkness into their own private sanctuary. He could rein in his own unruly passion and make certain she was with him this time, and afterward, lying in the warm silence, he could hold her so that, all through the night, she could feel his warmth and the steady beat of his heart and know that she wasn't alone.

Chapter 14

Marlie stirred and came abruptly awake, startled by the realization that there was someone in the bed with her. She knew who he was, recalled everything, but still there was that first jarring moment when consciousness adjusted to reality. He had slept with her the night before last, too, but she hadn't been aware of it. This was the first time that she had awakened with a very hard, very warm man lying close beside her, one heavy arm thrown across her waist and anchoring her to the bed. It was a good thing he was holding her, she reflected, since he took up most of the space, and she might well have fallen off if he hadn't held her pinned.

She turned her head to look at him, enchanted by the novelty of having a naked man in her bed, of having *Dane* naked in her bed. She savored the moment, a small, quiet oasis of happiness.

The soft morning light, filtered through a light rain, gleamed on the curve of his shoulder. She lightly cupped her hand on the ball of the joint, feeling the cool resilience of his flesh, the relaxed power of the muscle beneath her palm. He stirred at her touch, tucking her more closely into the curve of his body before lapsing with a grunt back into his morning dreams.

He radiated heat like the healthy animal he was, despite the surface coolness of his skin. She felt as warm and cozy as if the bedcovers were tucked around her, rather than lying in a tangled heap on the floor.

In all her life, she had never been physically demonstrative because the mental barriers had always gotten in the way. But the psychic damage she had suffered at Gleen's hands had demolished those barriers, and last night Dane had forcefully shown her, several times, that now she could give herself over to the physical.

She felt tremulous with joy at this new world he had opened up, a world she had thought permanently closed to her. She loved him, and he had claimed her body, and given her his own. She had always been alone in the darkness, but not last night, and she had understood what he had been saying with his body, his hunger. There was death, yes, but life marched hand in hand with it. There was evil out there, but between the two of them there had been pleasure, a basic and joyful celebration of life and flesh. She had always protected herself from the world, set apart from birth by her own abilities, while he had reveled in and dominated the hot, pulsing currents. He was fierce and vital in his intensity, meeting life on its own

terms and coming out the victor. Last night, with Dane, she had broken free of her self-imposed restrictions.

And now this big bruiser was lying totally, blissfully naked in her bed. She had the freedom of his powerful body, to explore and excite as she wished. She felt like a child at an amusement park, an adventurer opening the sealed door to a room of treasure. There was so much to see and do, and she quivered with excitement at the possibilities. To totally give in to the needs of her body, to find out exactly what those needs *were*—she almost couldn't bear it.

She smoothed her hand over his chest, delighting in the roughness of the thick, curly hair under her palm. Beneath the hair was a rock-solid layer of muscle, hard and warm. She found his nipples, flat brown circles with tiny points in the middle, points that hardened when she touched them. Fascinated, she rubbed her fingertip over one of the little points and watched chills roughen his skin.

A deep rumble in his chest made her look up. He was awake, the hazel eyes heavy-lidded and sleepy. Down below, his sex twitched and stretched, prodding her in the stomach. "Like what you see?" His early morning voice was like distant thunder, rough and barely audible.

"Very much." Her own voice was raspier than usual, too.

He rolled over onto his back, spreading his arms and legs wide. "Then take a good look."

The temptation was irresistible. Though they had made love several times, it had been in the dark. She hadn't been able to see her lover's body, only to feel him. Now that he had given her permission, there was no way she could deny her fascination. She got to her knees, unconscious and unheeding of her own nudity, intent on exploring this new and wondrous territory.

She put both hands on his chest and circled his nipples with her thumbs, watching in delight as they hardened again. She looked up at him, eyes luminous with discovery. "You like that, too."

He swallowed. He was breathing roughly, his deep chest expanding with the force of it. "Yeah. A lot."

His heart almost stopped at the luminous smile of discovery she gave him. She turned her attention back to him, leaning down and circling a nipple with her tongue, then gently sucking at it. He stifled a groan as a shudder racked through him. She moved her attention to the other nipple, giving it

the same tender treatment while her hands slipped around his rib cage, molding the shape and feel of him, learning the textures of his skin.
Dane sucked in his breath, digging his lingers into the mattress as he tried to control himself. Oh, God, he wanted to touch her so much, he could barely stand it. He had never felt anything as excruciatingly gentle, as exquisitely painful, as her slow exploration of his body, and he had the feeling that it was going to get much worse.
She ran her hands up to the tufts of hair under his arms, enjoying the silkiness that seemed so incongruous on so tough a man. His skin, in those hidden, protected areas, was as sleek as her own.
The crisp mat of hair on his chest narrowed to a thin line that ran down the center of his belly, circled his tight navel, .then flared again at his loins. She followed the line of hair with one finger, down, down, until her hand brushed his straining erection. She paused, then turned her hand and curled her fingers around him. He gave a shaky groan, and his legs shifted restlessly, then he was still again. Marlie lifted her other hand and held him between her palms, examining him with absorbed fascination. She was entranced by the contrasts, the coolness that contained intense heat, the soft skin lying over iron hardness. He was very thick, and pulsing with arousal. She thought of taking that thickness into her body, and grew excited; she could hear herself breathing, in soft, rapid pants. Her blood was singing through her veins and she felt too warm, her skin too tight.
The sheer masculinity of him was beautiful. She cupped his heavy testicles in her hands, very gently, and his powerful body arched. He shook from head to toe. “Lord have mercy,” he said in a strangled tone.
“The Lord?” she asked softly. “Or me?” The sense of her own feminine power over him was heady.
“You. Or both. I don’t care.”
Her secret places were damp and swollen, throbbing with need. Sex, even last night with Dane, had always been something that had been done *to* her. She wanted, needed, to be in control this time of her own body, and his. She wanted to give pleasure as well as seek it. She wanted the warm sexual confidence of a woman who had no fears, no restraints. She was tired of boundaries.
With a sigh like a soft spring breeze she mounted him, straddling his hips and holding his shaft steady as she positioned it and slowly sank down. She was sore; she bit her lip at the discomfort of her tender flesh stretching to

admit him. But there was also the wonder of feeling that warmth and hardness probing deeper inside her as she slowly took him, and lingered over the taking, inch by slow inch. The sensation was so exquisite that she lifted herself almost completely off him and began again. And again.
Dane's fists knotted in the sheets, and sweat popped out on his forehead. She was only taking about half of him before sliding upward again, and he thought he was going to go howling mad for sure. He didn't dare touch her, because if he did, he would lose control. This was her show, all the way. Her face was solemn, dreamy, absorbed as she explored the pleasure she could take from his body. She was concentrating on nothing except her physical sensations as she slid up and down on him, but he didn't feel left out. Watching her learn about her own sensuality was as much a turn-on as anything in his life had been, and the way she was doing it was killing him with pleasure.
Marlie closed her eyes against the almost overwhelming surge of passion and pleasure. All that she had learned the night before was as nothing compared to this; now her body knew the sublime ecstasy awaiting, and enjoyed as well every inch of the path leading up to it. She fought against the need to rush to the finish. She wanted to savor every delicious explosion of sensation deep inside her as she lifted herself from him, feeling the drag of his sex on her acutely sensitive tissues, followed by that indescribable moment of deepening penetration as she took him again. She moaned aloud, sensing the approach of climax drawing inexorably nearer. *Not yet,* she thought dimly. She was enjoying this too much. There was no hurry.
Dane writhed on the sheet. Oh, God, if she didn't hurry, he was going to die. The shallow way she was riding him was working the swollen head of his shaft with almost ceaseless pressure. A harsh groan tore from his chest. He wanted to thrust, deep, needed to thrust more than he had ever needed anything, but he refused to let himself do so. There would be times when his needs would take precedence. This time, however, was Marlie's. He shivered with the intensity of the pleasure. He thought his heart was going to explode; he knew for damn sure his cock was.
She was very wet now, and her rhythm had become faster. The fitted sheet came loose as he pulled at it. He arched, his body so rigid that his weight was supported only on his heels and his shoulders. A mist swam in front of his eyes.

“Marlie.” The word was guttural, his voice almost unrecognizable. Despite himself, he was pleading. “Deeper… please. Deeper. Take… the rest… of it.”

If she heard him, she didn’t respond. She was lost in her own sensual whirlpool, unheeding of everything else. Her hands were braced on his chest, her eyes were closed. Her hips rocked. A breathless sob broke from her lips, and with a convulsive shudder she went down into the swirling depths, her entire body given over to the pleasure racking it.

The rhythmic tightening of her inner muscles on him blasted the last shred of his control to smithereens. With a harsh, explosive growl he released his death grip on the sheet and grabbed her surging hips, forcing her downward as his own hips slammed upward, pushing his full length into her. He came with the first stroke, his orgasm bursting from him in a powerful stream as he convulsed beneath her, clamping her to him with ruthless, implacable hands, until it was over for both of them and she lay limply on his chest. Their heartbeats pounded together, shaking them from within.

He felt as if he would never have the strength to move again. She felt as if she were warm wax, melted and poured over him. Neither of them could bear to separate their bodies.

He trailed his hand up the slender length of her spine, feeling the way she was put together. He didn’t know how many women he had made love to in his lifetime, but he did know that the way he had felt then was nothing compared to how he felt now. There had been no other woman like Marlie; everything about her was new. He had never before been so fascinated by the details of a woman’s body, soft and fragrantly feminine. He had never before concentrated so intensely on a woman, so that he saw every flicker of expression and read every nuance of emotion. From the very beginning he had been aware of her slightest move, his body and senses attuned to her. He couldn’t even remember the name of his last lover; there was only Marlie.

But as much as he wanted to spend the rest of the day right where he was, the red digital numbers of the clock beside the bed continued to chronicle the silent, relentless stream of time. It was eight-fifteen. He had to shower and shave, eat breakfast, and be downtown at ten.

“I have to go,” he murmured.

She didn’t lift her head from his chest. He continued to stroke her spine.

“Where?”

“To the station. We have a meeting with the lieutenant at ten.”
She didn’t tense, but he felt the stillness that came over her. “About last night?”
“Yeah. It was him, all right.”
“I know.” She paused. “What happens now?”
“We put together all the details we have from both cases, try to find what the victims had in common. Set up a task force to concentrate on this guy. Maybe call in the FBI.”
She said steadily, “If you need me to go over it again, I will.”
He knew what that offer could cost her, and he knew she had already braced herself to pay it. She would be met with ridicule, disbelief, and suspicion; that was what she had gotten from him, even though he had been so attracted to her, he could barely think straight. She knew what she was letting herself in for, and was willing to do it anyway.
He squeezed her. “I don’t want to put you through that.”
“But you will if you have to.”
“Yes.”
To his relief, her feelings weren’t hurt. She accepted the necessity. He smoothed her hair. “There’s something I need to tell you,” he said reluctantly. “I don’t want you to read about it in the papers, or see it on the news.”
She waited, knowing that it was going to be bad. Dane wished that he didn’t have to tell her, but he’d put it off as long as possible. Yesterday she hadn’t been in any shape to watch the news, but today was a different story. He didn’t want her to be alone when she found out.
“Ansel Vinick killed himself Friday night.”
The breath she had been holding leaked out in a sigh. So much pain, she thought sadly.
“That’s three,” she said. “In one week, he’s killed three people.”
“We’ll catch him,” Dane assured her, though they both knew it was far from a sure thing. He looked at the clock again. Eight-twenty.
He rolled with her until he was on top, then gently disconnected their bodies. “Want to shower with me?”
She looked at the clock, too. “No, I’ll cook breakfast. It’ll be ready when you’re finished.”
“Okay. Thanks, honey.”

Amused at how quickly he had accepted her offer to cook for him, she dressed and went into the kitchen. She usually ate simply, cereal and fruit, but a man his size would probably need more than that. She put on a pot of coffee, then hauled out her seldom-used waffle iron. While it was heating she stirred up the batter from a package mix. How much would he eat? She couldn't finish one, but suspected he could put two or even three away with no trouble.

She could hear the shower running, hear him whistling. The coffee maker was hissing and popping in the manner peculiar to coffee makers. She was cooking his breakfast. The domesticity of it stunned her, and her arms dropped to her sides. She had never cooked breakfast, cooked *any* meal, for another person in her life.

For six years she had worked to build a safe, secure, ordinary, and solitary life. In one week, though, her life had been totally changed, and she was still struggling to find her balance. Safe, secure, and ordinary had gone by the wayside; now, evidently, her solitude was also gone. It wasn't something she had chafed against; she had enjoyed being able to do things at her own pace, to sit up all night reading if she chose, to eat whatever she desired at the moment. Before Gleen, she had very much wanted a relationship, marriage, children. After Gleen, however, she had wanted only to be left in peace.

Instead, there was a man in her shower. Not just any man, but Dane Hollister: grim, rough, frighteningly intense, a police detective who never went anywhere unarmed—and who was the most generous man she'd ever met. He gave of himself in a way she'd never expected, given the hostility of their first few encounters. He had come to her without hesitation, after her despairing cry for help on Friday night, and since then she had seen only tenderness in him. She had been attracted to him before, but had fallen in love with him because of his unhesitating generosity. She had needed him, so he had been there. It was as simple as that.

She heard the shower cut off, then water running in the basin as he shaved. She finished the preparations for breakfast: a dusting of powdered sugar on the waffles, fresh strawberries, and syrup that she had heated in the microwave. She was pouring the coffee when he came into the kitchen. He wore only a pair of pants, and she went weak in the knees at the sight of that broad, muscular chest. His hair was damp and his face was freshly scraped,

with two small nicks decorating his jaw. She inhaled deeply, drawing in his moist, soapy, slightly musky male scent.
He smiled when he saw the meal awaiting him. “Waffles,” he said appreciatively. “I was expecting cereal.”
She laughed. “That’s what I usually eat.”
“I usually grab a doughnut, or a fast-food biscuit.” He sat down and began eating with obvious relish.
She clicked her tongue reprovingly. “All that fat and cholesterol.”
“That’s what Trammell says.”
“How long have you been partners?” She hadn’t been around Trammell much, but she had liked him. He reminded her of a panther, sleek and exotic, with the same kind of supple, dangerous strength.
“Nine years. We were on patrol together before we made detective, which we did at the same time.” Dane set to work on the waffles with obvious zeal.
“That’s longer than a lot of marriages last.”
He grinned. “Yeah, but if I’d had to sleep with him, it wouldn’t have lasted a day.”
“Have you ever been married?” She bit her lip as soon as the question was out. Her own privacy had been at such a premium for most of her life that she seldom asked any personal question. “Never mind. Forget I asked.”
“Why?” He shrugged. “I don’t care if you ask. I’ve never been married, never been engaged.” He cleared his throat, evidently feeling that called for some explanation. “But I’m heterosexual.”
“I noticed,” she said dryly.
He grinned, his hazel gaze moving warmly over her. “For the record, I’m thirty-four. My folks live in Fort Lauderdale, and I have three brothers and two sisters, all of whom are married and have contributed to the population growth. Between the five of them, I have eighteen nieces and nephews, ranging in age from two to nineteen. When we all get together for holidays, it’s a zoo. All of them live in Florida, though we’re scattered all over the state. There are also the uncles and aunts and cousins, but we won’t go into them.” He watched her carefully as he outlined his large family, knowing that someone who had lived as Marlie had might find even the thought of all those relatives alarming. He had never before wanted to include any of his women friends in his private life, but everything was different with her. He hadn’t yet decided *how* it was different, but he accepted that it *was*.

Marlie tried to imagine that kind of extended family, but couldn't. She had always been forced to keep relationships of any kind at a minimum, and though in the past six years that limitation hadn't been necessary, still she had clung to it, reluctant to let herself be vulnerable in any way.
"My mother died in a fire when I was three," she said. "Lightning struck our house. I don't remember anything about it except this loud crack, louder than anything you can imagine, and even the air seemed to dissolve. A white light blotted out everything. A neighbor got me out of the house, and I was only slightly burned. My mother was in the part of the house that took the direct hit."
"Thunderstorms must make you nervous," he commented.
"They should, but they don't. I've never been frightened of them, not even immediately afterwards." She had had all of her waffle that she wanted, so she laid her fork down and picked up her coffee cup. "Lightning does some funny things. Dr. Ewell theorized that the enormous jolt of electricity somehow altered or enhanced my normal mental processes, making me more sensitive to the electrical energy given off by others. I was supposedly normal before, but afterward I became difficult, easily upset."
"Maybe because you'd lost your mother."
"Maybe. Who knows? I could have had the ability before, but simply wasn't old enough to make myself understood. From what I was told, my mother was a quiet, serene sort of person, so maybe her presence kept me calm. At any rate, my father had a difficult time trying to raise me. The more frustrated and angry he became, the more I felt it. I had no idea of how to block him out. We were both very unhappy people.
"I was the area weirdo. When I started school I didn't make any friends, but that was okay with me because it was just too exhausting. Then I found some toddler who had wandered off, and it was in the newspapers, and Dr. Ewell came to talk to my father. I went to the Institute to be tested, liked the peace and quiet of it, and stayed. My father and I were both relieved."
"Where is he now?" Dane asked.
"Dead. He visited me regularly for a while, but it was uncomfortable for both of us. The visits became further and further apart. He remarried when I was fourteen, I think, and moved to South Dakota. I met his wife only once. She was nice enough, but very uneasy with me. She had two children from her first marriage, but she and Dad didn't have any. He died of a massive stroke when I was twenty."

“No other relatives?”
“A few aunts and uncles, and some cousins I’ve never met.”
She had essentially been alone since she’d been a child, he thought. No snuggling, no hugging. No giggling sleepovers with friends during her teen years. He wondered if she had ever really *been* a child, if she had ever played. Probably not. There was something very adult about Marlie, a mental maturity that went far beyond her years. But despite her unorthodox childhood and, by necessity, very austere lifestyle, she was amazingly normal. Almost any eccentricity could have been justified by her upbringing, but she didn’t have any oddball habits or quirks.
Unless he counted picking up the thought waves of a serial killer.
He looked at the clock, and took one last sip of coffee. “I have to go, honey. This was great. What are we having for supper?”
Caught between amusement, hope, and absolute terror that he evidently planned to stay with her again, all she could do was start laughing. “You’ve just finished breakfast,” she said between giggles.
He pinched her chin. “Even in the *Rubaiyat,* old Omar listed food first.”
“I thought the wine came first.”
“Tells us a lot about him, doesn’t it?” He winked at her and went into the bedroom to finish dressing, and Marlie began clearing the table. She felt giddy. He was coming back that night.
She wondered how he usually conducted his affairs. Was he satisfied with spending a night together every now and then, maybe just the weekends? Or would he come by every night, spend time with her, make love, and then go home to his own house? She didn’t know what to expect. There was a very satisfied air about him that led her to think he was very pleased with the personal outcome of the weekend, but perhaps that was just sexual satiation. She wasn’t experienced enough to tell the difference, assuming there was one. Despite his kindness, his tenderness, even his passion, despite the fact that she had fallen headlong in love with him, she was aware that she really didn’t know him.
He was shrugging into his shoulder holster as he came out of the bedroom. “I forgot that I don’t have a jacket here,” he said, frowning. “I’ll have to stop by my house to get one, so I have to run.” He bent down to kiss her. “‘Bye, honey. I don’t know how long this will take.”
She put her hands on his chest and lifted herself on tiptoe for another kiss. “I have to do my grocery shopping, if you want anything at all to eat. If I’m

not here, that's where I'll be."
He put his arms around her and pulled her close, forcing her hips against his. His mouth settled on hers for a kiss so hard and hungry that she went limp in his arms, shivering with delight. His hands sought her breasts, and rubbed between her legs. He forced her back against the cabinets and swiftly lifted her up onto them, pushing his hips between her spread thighs. She clung to his heavy shoulders, feeling the leather of the holster beneath her palms.
He tore his mouth away with a groan. "God Almighty. We can't do this. I don't have time." Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his eyes had that heavy-lidded, intent look that nearly made her beg him to stay. But she of all people knew the price of duty, and she forced herself to release him.
"Go," she said. "Now."
He stepped back, wincing as he reached down to adjust himself. "I'll be back as soon as I can, but it may take several hours. Do you have an extra house key?"
"Yes, of course."
"Let me have it."
No hesitation or uncertainty for *him*, she thought as she jumped off the countertop and hurried to her purse. She gave him the extra key, and he slipped it onto his key ring. He started to reach for her, for another kiss, but caught himself in time. "Later," he said, winking at her, and headed for the door.
When he was gone, Marlie collapsed on the couch and tried to take stock of her life. She was wary, even frightened, of what was happening, but nothing on earth could have stopped her from plunging into the experience. For the first time in her life, she was in love, and it was wonderful.
To Dane's surprise, the chief of police was present at the meeting. Rodger Champlin, tall, white-haired, and stooped from too many years behind a desk, was nevertheless a career policeman who had come up through the ranks, and he had over forty years of service under his belt. He was a sly old dog who had managed to stay abreast of the flood of new technologies involved in police work, rather than stubbornly clinging to the outmoded ways he had learned in his youth.
Bonness's cramped office wasn't big enough to hold everyone, so they went into a conference room and closed the door. Ivan was there, his lined face and bloodshot eyes evidence that he had been up all night. All the detectives

were there, most of them obviously puzzled by this Sunday morning meeting, especially one that involved the chief.
Bonness was drinking coffee as if it were all that kept him going. From the looks of him, he hadn't slept much, if at all, and the hand holding the coffee cup trembled slightly from caffeine overload.
Everyone got his own cup of coffee and settled into his chosen seat. Dane decided to stand, and propped himself against the wall.
Bonness looked down at the sheaf of papers on the table before him, and sighed. He was obviously reluctant to begin, as if officially putting it in words would make it more real.
"People, we have a big problem," he said. "We only have two cases to compare, but the similarities are so overwhelming that we're pretty certain we have a serial murderer operating in Orlando."
Dead silence filled the room as the detectives exchanged glances.
"We were alerted to the possibility," he said, without going into specifics, "which is why we're able to get on it so fast." He passed some of the papers to the detective seated to his right, Mac Stroud. "Take one and pass it down. These are the files on Nadine Vinick and Jacqueline Sheets. Read both of them carefully. Mrs. Vinick was murdered a week ago Friday, Ms. Sheets was killed this past Friday night."
"So what do we have?" Mac asked.
Bonness looked at Ivan Schaffer. "Nothing," Ivan said flatly. "Not a damn thing. No fingerprints; he wears gloves. No semen, though vaginal bruising in both women indicates that they were raped. He either wears a condom or uses a foreign object. I haven't found any stray hairs, either. No footprints, no fibers from his clothing, no witnesses. We have nothing."
"Let me understand this," Chief Champlin said. His eyes flashed at the group. "I'm supposed to tell the mayor that there's a serial killer working in the city, and we don't have a shred of evidence on him? That even if, by some miracle, we managed to get our hands on him, we couldn't tie him to the crimes?"
"That's about it," Ivan said.
"How can you be so sure it's the same guy? There have only been two murders, and stabbing deaths aren't that unusual—"
"Two stabbing deaths with absolutely no evidence left behind?" Dane interrupted. "Both of them occurred on a Friday night, at roughly the same hour. Both of the murders were done with a knife from the victim's kitchen,

and both times the weapon was left behind. It's the same guy." He didn't mention Marlie, and he was betting that Bonness wouldn't, either. She would have to be brought into it sooner or later, but he wanted it to be later, when it was the right time and everything was under his control.
"Any connection between the two victims?" Mac asked.
Dane looked at Freddie and Worley, who had handled the paperwork on Jackie Sheets. Freddie shook her head. "There are still several people we need to talk to, but so far we haven't found any connection at all. They didn't look alike, they didn't live in the same neighborhood. Mrs. Vinick was a housewife, Ms. Sheets was a legal secretary. They didn't frequent the same places. As far as we've been able to find out, they never met."
"We can get a list from the telephone company of the calls made from both residences, and compare them. Maybe we'll get lucky and they have some numbers in common," Trammell said. "And there's the always interesting contents of the trash."
"And we need to get copies of their canceled checks from the banks." Dane wrote a note to himself. "Also copies of their charges on any credit cards. There's a link. There's always a link."
"I want to hold off on telling the mayor for a day or so," the chief said, glaring at all of them. "Until you can come up with a little concrete evidence so I won't feel as big of a fool as I do right now."
"The total lack of forensic evidence is a characteristic in itself," Dane pointed out. "I think we should take it to the FBI for analysis."
As he had expected, the chief's face took on a sour expression. "Goddamn Feds," he snapped. "Are you saying you aren't good enough to handle it yourself, Hollister?"
Dane shrugged. All cops were jealous of their jurisdiction, and nobody, especially the old-timers, liked bringing the Bureau in on anything. Inevitably the federal boys got all the credit. "The Investigative Support Unit specializes in this, and I'd say we need all the help we can get. I don't have to prove that my dick's bigger than theirs."
"That's easy for you to say," Freddie remarked dryly. "But what about me?"
"What about the rest of us?" Worley countered in a plaintive tone.
The room erupted into laughter and a few coarse remarks. Bonness flushed at the lack of decorum, but couldn't keep himself from grinning. Dane winked at Freddie, and she winked back.

“If all of you are through comparing inches—or lack of them,” the chief said, raising his voice, “maybe we can get back to the business at hand. Okay, maybe we take it to the FBI. But not until I say so, and not until I’ve talked to the mayor. Is that understood? Exhaust all the other avenues first.”
“We can’t afford to wait too long. Another Friday is only five days away.”
“I know what day of the week it is,” the chief snapped. “I’ll talk to him Tuesday afternoon, and that’s the absolute soonest I’ll do it. That means, people, that you have two days to come up with something, so I suggest you all get to work.”

Chapter 15

There wasn’t a helluva lot that could be done on a Sunday. A call to the Hairport, where Jackie Sheets had regularly gotten her hair cut, didn’t even get an answering machine but instead rang endlessly. No banks were open. The telephone company, however, was on duty and protecting the public’s right to reach out and touch whomever they wanted twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Someone was *always* there, so Dane started the process of getting a listing of all the calls made from the Sheets residence.
Bonness organized a task force, choosing Dane, Trammell, Freddie, and Worley, since the four of them were already working on the two known cases. All of their other ongoing cases were parceled out to the other detectives, who were warned to tie up as many loose ends as they could, as fast as they could, because they would all probably be brought in on the task force soon.
What with one thing and another, it was after four when Dane and Trammell were finally able to leave the building.
Dane squinted up at the bright sky before slipping on his sunglasses. After the morning rain, the day had turned into a scorcher, with the rainfall only adding to the humidity as the heat turned the moisture to steam.
“How’s Grace?” he asked.
Trammell was annoyed. “You sound as if you expect us to elope at any moment, and, old buddy, it ain’t going to happen.” He paused. “Grace is fine.”
“Still at your place?”
Trammell checked his watch. “No.”

Dane chuckled. “Not quite yet, huh? Maybe en route? You made a call right before we left; now, who could it have been to?”
“Fuck you,” Trammell said mildly. “Where are *you* going?”
“Home. To my place.”
Black eyebrows lifted inquiringly.
“To pick up more clothes,” he enlarged, with some satisfaction.
“Why don’t you just pack a suitcase and move in?”
“I would, but I still have to go by the house every day to get my mail, so that wouldn’t be saving me any trouble. Most of my clothes will end up at her house eventually.”
“All of your other girlfriends have moved in with you,” Trammell pointed out.
“Marlie’s different. She feels safe in her house; she won’t willingly leave it.” Besides, he didn’t like the idea of Marlie moving into his own house. As Trammell had pointed out, several women over the years had taken up temporary residence there. He had liked and enjoyed them at the time, but in the end they hadn’t been very important to him, certainly not as important or interesting as his job. Marlie *was* different; she didn’t belong in that company of ultimately forgettable women.
Thinking of his house made him restless. It had always suited him before, but then, he had never been picky.
Suddenly he wanted to change things around. “My place needs some work done on it,” he decided abruptly. “This would be a good time to have it done.”
“What kind of work?”
“Maintenance stuff. New paint, the floors refinished. The bathroom needs complete renovation.”
“I see.” Trammell’s dark eyes began to gleam. This was something he’d been itching to do for years. “How about new furniture while you’re at it? That stuff you’re using is about twenty years old.”
“The place belonged to my grandparents. When they left it to me, the furniture came with it.”
“It shows. How about it? New furniture, too?”
Dane considered it. Unlike most cops, and not counting Trammell, his bank account was healthy. He was single and had cheap tastes in food, clothes, and cars. He had inherited the house from his grandparents, so he didn’t have a mortgage payment every month. He actually lived on half of his

income, so the other half had been accumulating in the bank for years. Several times he'd thought about buying a boat, but when would he have time to use it? No other money-using schemes had come to mind. The house *did* need redecorating. He would like to take Marlie there occasionally, though he really couldn't imagine her living there with him, and he wanted the place to look nice for her. Unfortunately, now it looked exactly like what it was: a bachelor's home. And a bachelor who didn't pay much attention to his surroundings, at that. He wasn't the kind of slob who left food and empty beer cans everywhere, but he wasn't great on dusting or replacing things, either.

"Okay," he said. "New furniture, too."

Trammell rubbed his hands together. "I'll get started tomorrow."

Warily Dane eyed his friend. "Whaddaya mean, *you'll* get started? You're going to be busy. I'll arrange for the painters and floor refinishers, and pick out some new furniture next weekend."

"That's not quite how it's going to be, old buddy. We've already agreed that your taste in everything except women is atrocious. You have great taste in women. Just leave the rest to me."

"Hell, no! I know you. You'll put one of those little rugs that costs a fortune on the living room floor, and I'll be afraid to even walk on it. My bank account isn't yours, *old buddy."*

"I'll take that into consideration. And no dhurrie rugs. Unlike you, I have excellent taste. It'll be a place you can be comfortable in, but it'll look a hell of a lot better. Marlie will like it," he added slyly.

Dane scowled at him, and Trammell clapped him on the shoulder. "Just relax and enjoy it."

"That sounds like I'm going to get fucked."

"I can do it for about ten thousand. How does that sound?"

"Like a damn expensive fuck. How about five?"

Trammell snorted. "Only if you want to sleep on a futon and sit on a bean bag."

Ten thousand. It was a lot of money. But Trammell was right, the self-satisfied bastard: He did have good taste. The house needed renovating, and he wanted it fresh and clean for Marlie, even if she never actually lived there. None of those other women had left much of an imprint, but he wanted even the hint of them gone. "How are you going to find time to do it?" he asked grudgingly.

“Ever hear of the telephone? It’s no problem. I’ll have stuff delivered, drop by to take a look at it, and if I don’t like it, the store will pick it up again.”
“You’ve been rich for too long. You need to come out of the stratosphere and live like regular folks for a change.”
“Conspicuous consumers like me create jobs and keep the economy growing. It’s time you did your part.”
“I agreed, damn it.”
“Then stop complaining about it.” Trammell checked his watch again. “Gotta go. If you have an extra house key, bring it to me in the morning.”
“Sure,” Dane said, wondering if his house would be recognizable as the same residence when Trammell got through with it. Still, it accomplished two things at once: The place *did* need some work, and it gave him a perfect excuse to completely move in with Marlie during the renovation. He was whistling as he got in his car.
An hour and a half later, Marlie went still with shock as she stood in the doorway and watched him unload suitcases and boxes from his car.
“What’s all that?” she asked faintly. Silly question; she could see very clearly what it was. The question she really wanted to ask was “Why?” but she figured she knew the answer to that, too. Dane might enjoy very much the physical side of their relationship, but she couldn’t let herself forget that, no matter what, he was always a cop. What better way to keep an eye on her than to move right in? That way he would know immediately if she had another vision.
“My stuff. My house is being renovated, and I have to clear out for a couple of weeks.” He stopped on the porch, watching her intently. “I apologize for not asking, but it was a sudden decision to have the work done.”
“I see.” She managed an ironic smile. “Moving in is a good way to stay on top of the situation, I guess. Figuratively as well as literally.”
Very carefully he set the box down on the porch. His expression was both cool and blank. “What does that mean, exactly?”
She shrugged. “Can you honestly say that moving in with me has nothing to do with the murders, with this entire situation?”
“No,” he said bluntly. It was the truth. He couldn’t. Marlie was his best chance of catching the bastard, but it wasn’t just that. He had seen how the visions affected her, the physical and mental price she paid. For both of those reasons, in addition to the fact that he was violently attracted to her, he wanted to stay close to her.

She stood silently for a moment, considering the situation. They had become lovers, but her instinct was to take things slowly. Circumstances had decreed otherwise, throwing them together in a pressure cooker. Even though she would like to put the brakes on now, feel her way through this strange new relationship, those same circumstances were still aligned against her. He was, first and foremost, a cop, and she was his direct link to a killer. Until the murderer was caught, she couldn't expect Dane to stray far from her side. She would simply have to remember that the main reason he was there was his job; it was a sure bet that he didn't practically force his way in to live with every woman with whom he had gone to bed.

She stepped aside. "Just so we understand each other. Come on in."

Trammell gave a long, low whistle when Dane walked in the next morning, and everyone in the squad room turned to look. Never mind that there was a serial killer on the loose; cops were never too busy to harass one of their own. Freddie clutched her heart and pretended to swoon. Bonness, who had been standing beside Keegan's desk, was totally deadpan as he asked, "May we help you, sir?"

"You sure can," Dane replied good-naturedly as he dropped into his chair. "All you smart-asses can apologize for the crap you've given me for years about how I dressed."

"He said it in the past tense," Trammell noted, turning his eyes upward. "Please, God, let it stay that way."

Dane smiled at him. "Want to go for a couple of beers after work?" he asked silkily. Trammell picked up the hint and subsided, but still with an unholy gleam of amusement in his dark eyes.

"Take *me,* take *me!"* Freddie cried, waving her hand exuberantly.

"Yeah, sure, and get my legs broken?"

She shrugged. "*I* don't mind."

"Gee, thanks. I'm overwhelmed by your concern."

Bonness left Keegan's desk to perch on Dane's. "What caused the transformation?" he asked. "Were you mugged by a fashion designer on the way to work?"

Dane grinned, knowing that his answer would make Bonness choke. It wasn't something he could keep to himself, so he decided to have a little fun. "Marlie doesn't like wrinkles," he explained calmly.

Bonness looked blank. "Marlie?" Obviously he could think of only one Marlie and just as obviously he couldn't get the connection.

“Marlie Keen. You know, the psychic.”
“I know who she is,” Bonness said, still confused. “What does she have to do with it?”
“She doesn’t like wrinkles,” Dane explained again, as deadpan as Bonness had been. He could hear Trammell snickering, but didn’t dare glance that way.
Poor Bonness was slow that day. “So she goes around the city zapping them out?” he demanded with heavy sarcasm.
“No.” Dane smiled, a slow, very satisfied smile. “She ironed them out. At least, she ironed the shirt. She made me iron the slacks myself, because she said I had to learn.”
Bonness gaped at him. Trammell was making choking sounds as he tried to keep from laughing aloud. “You—you mean… Marlie… that is, you and Marlie—”
“Marlie and I are what?”
“Urn… dating?”
“Dating?” Dane pretended to think. “No, I wouldn’t say that.”
“Then what would you say?”
He gave a negligent shrug. “It’s simple. When I got dressed this morning, she said that no way was I leaving the house looking like that, so she hauled out her iron and ironing board and made me take off my clothes. When I put them back on, they looked like this.” He wondered why a crisply ironed shirt, neatly knotted tie, and slacks with a razor-edge crease were such a big deal, not just to Marlie but to everyone else. Not that he minded; he just hadn’t cared before. He didn’t care about his clothes now, but Marlie did, so therefore he would make more of an effort. Simple.
Bonness was literally sputtering, his eyes bugging out. “But you only met a week ago. You ridiculed her, accused her of being an accomplice to murder. She hated your guts on sight.”
“We changed our minds,” Dane said. “If you need me, you can reach me at her house.”
“Shit. You’re kidding me. I thought she had better taste than that.”
Dane smiled peacefully. “She does. She’s already improving me.” And he would let her do it. If she wanted him to wear Italian loafers like Trammell’s, he’d do it. If she wanted him to shave twice a day, he’d do that too. If she wanted him to stand on his head for an hour every morning, he would happily put his butt in the air. When he had returned the afternoon

before, with his clothing, it had been plain that the thought of living with him made her uneasy. He knew he should have lied to her about his motives, but damn it, his interest in her *was* two-pronged. He couldn't just forget about the murders and assure her that her involvement never entered his mind. Hell, her involvement never *left* his mind.

After this was over, he would devote all of his attention to her, but right now he couldn't, and she knew it. Right away he had sensed a slight distance that hadn't been there when he'd left. She kept rebuilding that damn wall of reserve, as if she couldn't quite trust herself to let go, or trust him to catch her if she did. He would let her reform him from the ground up if it would make her feel more secure with him.

Marlie was a solitary creature who didn't easily share either her space or her time. He had carefully spent the evening not crowding her too much, but all the same establishing a tone of normalcy to his presence. They had done very ordinary things—cooked dinner, cleaned the kitchen, watched television—just as if they had been together for months instead of one stressful weekend. It had worked; she had relaxed more and more as the evening wore on. And when they had gone to bed and he had begun making love to her, the reserve had completely vanished. He didn't know if it was permanently gone; probably not. But he would deal with each reappearance as it happened, and in the meantime insinuate himself ever more deeply into the everyday fabric of her life. Besides, he had enjoyed it when she had made several acerbic remarks about his clothes. She had been too subdued and vulnerable for the past two days, and he had been delighted to see her return to her normal, sharp-tongued spirits.

Still shaking his head at Marlie's evident loss of common sense, Bonness gestured for Freddie and Worley to come over. When everyone was grouped together, they decided their course of action for the day. Freddie and Worley were going to talk to the people Jackie Sheets had worked with, including Liz Cline again, for she would be calmer now and might remember something else. They arranged to get copies of the canceled checks of both victims. Dane and Trammell went to the Hairport to talk to Jackie Sheets's hair stylist.

The Hairport was situated in a small, renovated house. There was none of the pink neon and purple-and-black decor so beloved by the trendier salons where all the clients came out looking as if they'd stuck their finger into a light socket. But there were real ferns (Dane knew because Trammell stuck

his finger into the dirt to check), and comfortable waiting chairs, as well as a truly impressive selection of magazines, stacked in rickety towers on every available flat surface. There were several women in the salon, in various stages of tonsorial improvement. A sharp chemical smell hung in the air, with an undertone of hairspray and nail polish.

The Kathy who cut Ms. Sheets's hair was Kathleen McCrory, who looked as Irish as her name. She had sandy red hair that feathered around her face, a very fair complexion, and round blue eyes that widened even more when Dane and Trammell introduced themselves. She led them back to the tiny break room the stylists used, poured them each a cup of coffee, and offered them their choice of any of the varied snacks piled on the small table. They accepted the coffee, but turned down the Bugles and Twinkies.

Kathleen was a cheerful, self-confident young woman. Trammell began to ask her about Jackie Sheets, and Dane settled back to enjoy his coffee, which was pretty good. He watched Kathleen lightly flirt with Trammell, and his partner lightly flirt in return, all the while asking questions.

Kathleen did stop flirting when he told her that Jackie Sheets had been killed, and her big blue eyes slowly filled with tears. She looked back and forth between Dane and Trammell, as if wanting one of them to say it was a joke. Her lips began trembling. "I—I haven't watched the news this weekend," she said, and swallowed hard. "My boyfriend and I went to Daytona."

Dane reached across the small table and covered her hand with his. She clutched his fingers, and clung tightly to him until she had fought off the tears. She gave him a small, watery, apologetic smile as she began groping for a tissue to wipe her eyes.

Yes, she had cut Jackie's hair about every three weeks. Jackie had gorgeous hair, thick and silky, with a lot of body. She could do anything she wanted with it. Trammell gently interrupted the hair analysis to get her back on track. No, Jackie hadn't mentioned seeing anyone for quite a while now. No, Kathleen couldn't remember anyone named Vinick.

Did she have any male customers? Sure. There were quite a few. Had Jackie spoken to any of them, gotten acquainted? Not that Kathleen could remember.

Another dead end, Dane thought. He was getting damn tired of them.

Tuesday was more of the same dead ends. A comparison of canceled checks and credit card receipts revealed that the Vinicks and Jackie Sheets had

shopped at some of the same department stores, which told them exactly nothing. Dane imagined that almost everyone in Orlando had been in at least one of those stores at one time or another. Still, it was the only link they had come up with, so he doggedly pursued it, comparing dates to see if maybe they had been in any store at the same time.

Jackie Sheets had had several department store credit cards, but Nadine Vinick hadn't had any, usually paying for her purchases by check or charging the expense to their one credit card, a MasterCard, when she didn't have the ready funds. But Mrs. Vinick had been very frugal, and had used the card only twice in the past year. Mostly the Vinicks had operated in a pay-as-you-go household, while Jackie Sheets had regularly made charges on her cards and paid in monthly installments, always living slightly above her means. Most of her purchases had been clothes, from the best stores in the city.

Their life-styles had been different. The Vinicks had been blue-collar, and Nadine's greatest interest had been cooking. Jackie Sheets had been white-collar, a woman who had loved clothes and made an effort to always look her best. But somewhere, somehow, the two women, as different as they were, had had the bad luck to attract the attention of the same man. But *where,* and *how?*

Chief Champlin had clearly hoped they would come up with something; his disappointment that afternoon wasn't pleasant. But he was also a cop, and he had looked at the files. The same man had done both women. The very lack of forensic evidence was as much an indicator as if they had found the same fingerprints at both scenes. This was a smart bastard, and they needed help.

"All right," he said. "Call the Bureau. I'll tell the mayor."

Bonness made the call, and briefly explained the situation. The local Bureau guys knew big stuff when they heard it, and said they would like to go over the files immediately.

"Hollister and Trammell, get the files and go," Bonness said.

Dane saw Trammell check his watch, a sure sign that he had something else to do. "Why not send someone from each case?" he suggested. "They may have questions about Jackie Sheets that Trammell and I can't answer."

"Okay," Bonness agreed. "Freddie? Worley? Which one of you wants to go?"

Worley grimaced. He clearly wanted to go, but he, too, checked his watch. "It's my mother-in-law's birthday. If I'm late for the party, my wife won't speak to me for a year."
"I'm free," Freddie said. "Which one of you guys is going?"
"I am," Dane said, and Trammell flashed him a grateful smile.
FBI Agent Dennis Lowery was waiting for them. Lowery had that Ichabod Crane look to him: thin, long-legged, stoop-shouldered, his clothes always flapping about him as if they were too large. His eyes were deep-set, his nose was beaky. But he was a calm, intelligent man who was more diplomatic than some when it came to dealing with local law enforcement agencies. Dane had dealt with him before, and liked him well enough.
A second agent, Sam DiLeonardo, was a young fart barely out of training, all spit and polish. Dane wasn't as inclined to like him, because he looked like the type who would insist on going by the book even when everything was falling apart around him, but the kid redeemed himself by taking one look at Freddie and immediately falling in lust. He went absolutely still, his eyes widening a little as he stared at her. A slight blush darkened his cheeks. Freddie was always kind and could be very ladylike when she chose, so she pretended not to notice the kid's fascination. Dane and Lowery exchanged wry glances as they sat down at a long conference table.
"So what do you have?" Lowery asked, pulling a legal pad toward him and uncapping a pen.
Freddie gave copies of the files to both agents, who silently leafed through them. DiLeonardo forgot his preoccupation with the plain but remarkably fetching Detective Freddie Brown, his expression turning grim as he stared at the stark photos of the bodies, in both color and black and white.
"He probably stalks them before acting," Dane said. "He knows if they're alone or not. In both cases, we think it's possible that he was in the house for some time before they knew it, hiding out in the spare bedroom. In the Vinick case, he was probably waiting for her husband to go to work. With Jackie Sheets, we don't know why he waited."
"Maybe for the neighbors to go to bed," DiLeonardo said absently, still studying the notes.
"They would be less likely to hear anything if they were still up, with the television on. At any rate, none of the neighbors heard any screams."
Lowery's face was impassive as he looked at the photos. "You'd think, the way these women were butchered, that they would have been screaming

bloody murder, but a lot of times it doesn't work that way. He chased them, didn't he? They were terrified, breathless, already traumatized by being raped. It's difficult to scream, really scream, under those conditions. The throat tightens up, restricts sound. Probably they didn't make all that much noise."

He tossed the files onto the table and rubbed his jaw. "Just two cases? That doesn't give us much to work on, but I agree, it looks like the same guy. What's the link?"

"We haven't been able to find one," Dane said. "Not looks, life-style, friends, neighborhood, anything. We compared canceled checks and credit card receipts, and except for shopping at some of the same department stores, which applies to everyone else in town, their paths never crossed. They never met each other."

"They did something to attract this guy's attention, though. Did they both buy something from the same store within, say, the last month?"

"Not that we can find. It's hard to say, because the Vinicks evidently paid cash for a lot of things." Dane wasn't irritated by Lowery's questions, though some people would have been, taking it as a suggestion that the local cops hadn't done a good job. The same questions were bound to come up over and over again, as different people grappled with the problem. There had been a lot of times when he had doggedly gone over the same file time and again, until something clicked and he saw a detail that had been there all along, but just hadn't registered.

"I'll get this up to Quantico," Lowery said. "Two murders in a week isn't a good sign. If he's escalating that fast, he's out of control."

"I'm hoping it was unusual for him to kill two so close together. Maybe Jackie Sheets was an easy opportunity that he couldn't resist."

"Maybe. But if he liked it, he won't wait long before doing it again."

"Oh, he likes it," Dane said bitterly. "He takes his time, plays with them. The son of a bitch loves his work."

Chapter 16

Carroll Janes was sulky. He had been in a sour mood since last Friday night. Jacqueline Sheets hadn't been as much fun as he had anticipated. The big rush of power he had expected just hadn't materialized. She had been

pathetic, just whining and scrambling in circles, rather than making it interesting. And there hadn't been much press coverage about it either, which really disappointed him. Part of the fun—as it turned out, *most* of the fun—of this last one had been knowing that the cops would go crazy, with two incidences so similar, so close together, and absolutely no clues with which they could work. But evidently the cops were more stupid than he had thought, which took even more of the fun out of it. Where was the challenge? Not that they could catch him, but he had thought they would at least have *noticed.*

He wasn't sure what had interfered with his pleasure. Maybe Sheets had just been too soon after the last one. He hadn't been in the proper state of anticipation, hadn't drawn out the stalking over several weeks while the tension drew tighter and tighter, until he was at fever pitch, all of his senses almost painfully acute, all of his power focused.

Of course, he would have to try another one to make certain. He hated to waste himself on a disappointment, but it was the only way he could find out. If the next one was as boring, he would know to spend more time on the process and wouldn't let the apparent ease of a job sucker him into moving too fast, and cheating himself of his pleasure.

Every day at work he waited and watched for the slightest transgression. Which unhappy customer was going to have to pay? After all, to make it a fair test, he would have to act as soon as possible.

Marlie felt edgy, restless from an inner tension that just wouldn't let up. She couldn't pin down any one reason for it, because there were so many candidates from which to choose. The biggest reason, of course, was dread of the coming weekend. She couldn't explain to anyone, not even Dane, how she felt after touching the killer's thoughts during those bloody moments. She didn't just feel dirty, she felt permanently contaminated by his evil, as if her soul would never be free of the ugliness. More than she had ever wanted anything in her life, she wanted to run, to get far away so she wouldn't know when he killed again. That relief, unfortunately, was the one thing she couldn't allow herself, or then she would be truly contaminated by her own cravenness. She had to stay, had to stick it out, for the sake of the two women who had already died, for the others she didn't know about, for little Dusty… for herself.

Then there was Dane. She loved him, but having him around all the time was still disconcerting. She had spent so many years alone that it sometimes

startled her to turn around and bump into him. Suddenly there was twice the amount of laundry to do, three times as much food to prepare, schedules to adjust since there was only one bathroom, and very little room in bed. Her life had been totally in control, and now everything had changed.

He knew, of course. Those sharp hazel eyes saw everything, though she struggled to hide how unsettled she was. He didn't just dump all the chores in her lap, as a lot of men would have done; he was accustomed to doing his own laundry and didn't hesitate to wash a load of clothes. The safe limits of his cooking were heating the contents of cans or slapping a sandwich together, so she did all of the cooking, and he took over the cleanup chores. He did what he could to ease the transition for her, but at the same time he refused to back off and give her more space. He was there; she had to accustom herself to him. She was happy to do so, to have this time with him no matter what his motivation, but it was still unnerving.

She couldn't escape the coming weekend, couldn't distract herself. Would the killer strike again? The thought of some other innocent woman being butchered, of herself being sucked into the sickening, evil morass of the killer's mind, was almost more than she could bear. She tried not to think of it, but it was like being tracked by a mad dog and trying not to think about that, either. With every tick of the clock, the weekend loomed closer, and there was nothing she could do to avoid it. She tried to brace herself to endure, instead, because she was Dane's only link to the killer. Sooner or later, he would give her a clue to his identity. All she had to do was wait, and endure his killing frenzies without going mad herself.

By Thursday, she was so tense that she couldn't eat the Chinese food Dane had brought for dinner, and she loved Chinese. Her throat was tight, and when she swallowed, the food seemed to form a lump halfway down her esophagus. She didn't have an appetite anyway, so finally she stopped even making an effort.

As usual, Dane hadn't missed a trick, though he was making impressive inroads on the food. "Worried?" he asked.

"How can I not be? The last two weekends haven't been a picnic."

"Are you picking up anything from him?" Dane asked the question casually, but the interest behind it was intense.

"I'm uneasy, but it's *my* feelings, not his." She rubbed her hands over her arms. "How long will it take the FBI to get a profile on him?"

“I don’t know. We only had two cases, so that may make it harder for them. But they may be able to match the MO to other cases that have been brought to their attention, and that will help.”
“Do you think he’s killed before?” she asked tensely, looking out the back door. She could see Bill trimming the shrubbery at the rear of his lot. Her neighbors lived such nice, ordinary lives; she envied them the boredom of their security.
“Probably. He’s too good at it to be a beginner. It’s likely that he moves around, to keep any one area from becoming too hot for him.”
“So he’s moved here recently?”
“I’d say so.”
“Isn’t there any way you can check on recent arrivals? Wouldn’t the post office have a record? Or maybe you could get a list of new customers from the utility companies.”
“Do you know how many people move to central Florida every year?” he asked. “It would take a helluva lot of time. Still, it’s an idea.”
“You could eliminate all the women, which would cut the list in half.”
“And still leave us with a cast of thousands.” He stood and began clearing the table. “I’ll talk to Bonness about it.”
She knotted her hands together and stared at him. “Do any of the others know about me?”
“You mean, any of the other detectives?”
“Yes.”
“Just Bonness, Trammell, and me. Why?”
“I’ve been worried about it.”
“Again, why?”
“They would talk.” Restlessly she got up and helped him clear the table.
“So?”
“That kind of talk would get to the media. You know how it is.”
“So far, the media doesn’t even know about the killer. I’m surprised, because once we told the mayor, I expected it to be blasted on the six-o’clock news that there’s a serial killer loose in Orlando. No one in city hall can keep a secret. It’ll leak out any day, though.” He began washing their few dishes, and watched her as she paced the kitchen. “Have you had a rough time with the media before?”
She shot him an incredulous look. “Are you kidding?”
“What happened?”

“Which time?” she asked caustically. “The reporters are bad enough, every time a story breaks, with the phone ringing incessantly, and cameras and microphones pushed in my face every time I open the door. But the reporters aren’t the worst of it. They’re just the cause. The worst comes after they’ve done their stories, when the death threats start, and the crackpot evangelists hold prayer meetings in front of my house to drive out Satan, because I obviously do the devil’s work. If it got out this time, I’d probably lose my job. I’ve never been in these circumstances before, because the Institute always supported me. But can you imagine a *bank* tolerating that kind of publicity? A weirdo psychic working in their accounting department! Some of their customers would close out their accounts, afraid I would pry into their business.”
“Wonder what they have to hide,” Dane said, his eyes speculative.
“Nothing, probably. Some people are paranoid enough that they think the ‘authorities,’ whoever that may be, watch everyone and check everything. They won’t fill out their census papers because they think the information will be turned over to the IRS.”
“How do you know?” he asked, sliding the question in as smooth as silk.
She glanced at him to find those hazel eyes glittering with amusement. She choked on a spurt of laughter as she realized where he had led her.
“Because I used to be able to read them! *Used* to, Hollister. I can’t do it anymore.”
“Are you sure? Have you tried?”
“Yes, smarty, I’ve tried.”
“When?”
“Last week. I tried to pick *him* up, but couldn’t. I tried to find you. I tried to find Trammell. Nothing. I did finally see you, very briefly, but I couldn’t read anything from you.”
“You saw me.” He didn’t look pleased at the idea. “What was I doing?”
“Watching a ball game and answering the telephone,” she snapped. “It was when I called you the first time. If I hadn’t been so worried and frightened, I doubt if I could have seen you. That never was my strength, anyway.”
He rinsed the dishes and stacked them in the drainer, then dried his hands.
“But that was before we became involved. Now, maybe you could do it any time you wanted.”
“Maybe. I don’t know. I haven’t tried again.”

He turned around and propped against the sink, his arms crossed as he studied her. Marlie stood her ground, but she wasn't certain what against. He looked grim, and bigger than usual. He had removed his jacket when he'd gotten home with the cartons of takeout Chinese, but still wore his shoulder holster. A chill went through her. He had been with her for a week now, and in that short length of time she had become accustomed to his protectiveness, even to being cosseted. But a week *was* a very short time, and before that they had been adversaries.

In a flash she realized what the problem was. He wanted her, but he didn't trust her. How could he? He didn't know her well enough. Wasn't that a big part of *her* problem, too? They had been propelled together without having time to get to know each other. He was a cop; distrust and suspicion were his stock in trade. He had made love to her, moved in with her, thinking that she had lost most of her psychic abilities. He didn't at all like the idea that she could check up on him without his knowledge. He wanted to keep himself private, except for the parts he chose to share with her.

It hurt, but she couldn't blame him. She had spent a lot of effort in trying to secure privacy for herself, so she couldn't decry the same instinct in him.

"Do you want me to apologize for being what I am?" she asked steadily. "Or put my hand on a Bible and swear a sacred oath that I'll never again try to reach you?"

"You don't know that you can, except in an emergency."

She shrugged. "I won't try it even then, if you don't want me to."

"I don't like being spied on," he said, his gaze never leaving hers.

"Then I won't do it."

He shoved his hand through his hair. "Damn it," he said under his breath. "Does it work the other way around? The other time, you were worried about me. But what if you're the one in trouble? Can you call me, psychically?"

"I can place the call, Detective," she said sardonically. "But if you don't have a receiver, you can't get the signals. But I wouldn't, anyway."

"Why not?" He didn't like that. She could see his temper rising.

"That boundary you just drew. If you don't want me to cross it for my convenience, I'll be damned if I'll cross it for yours."

"Shit! I don't believe this." He closed his eyes and pinched the narrow bridge of his nose. "We're arguing about something that doesn't exist. If

you can’t contact me anyway, what the hell difference does it make that you wouldn’t even try?”
“You tell me. You’re the one with the problem about it.” She turned around and headed for the living room. She had taken maybe three steps when a hard arm passed around her waist from behind and drew her back against him. She didn’t try to struggle free, but neither did she relax and let him take her weight. She stood stock still, waiting. He had an erection; she could feel it pressing against her bottom. She wasn’t surprised, because in the week they had been together, it seemed as if he had been hard most of the time.
“We aren’t going to get this settled, are we?” His breath was warm against her temple.
“I don’t see how.”
“Then let’s forget about it for now. Want to go for a ride?”
“Where to?”
“My place. I’m curious about what Trammell is doing to it.”
She turned her head to stare incredulously at him. “You mean you don’t know?”
“Nope. He told me to stay away until he’s finished.”
“For heaven’s sake, why? It’s your house.”
“He said that I know as much about decorating as I know about clothes.”
“In that case, I understand completely,” she said wryly.
“Smart-ass. Do you want to go or not?”
“Sure.” She had to admit to being curious about his house. She knew that it would be a mess while the renovation work was in progress, but houses were very personal things. Since she couldn’t read Dane psychically, she had to pick up clues about him any way she could.
The drive to Dane’s house took her mind off the uneasy feeling that had been her constant companion. Dismissing their quarrel for now, because there was nothing they could do about it, she prepared to enjoy prowling through his house.
Though it was late, almost seven, and long past the time when the workers would have gone home, there was another car in the driveway, and lights were on in the house. “Uh-oh,” Dane said. “Caught in the act. Trammell’s here.”
“You don’t have to stop,” Marlie pointed out.
He smiled. “And miss the fun?” Deftly he pulled in behind Trammell’s car.

They had barely gotten out of the car when Trammell appeared in the doorway. “I told you to stay away,” he called.
“So arrest me. I’ve been good for four days. How long did you think it would last?”
“Three,” Trammell said, stepping aside to let them in.
A tall, slim woman came forward to greet them. “Grace,” Dane said, pleasure evident in his voice as he hugged her. “Marlie, this is Grace Roeg, a patrol officer with the city. Grace, Marlie Keen.”
“Hello,” Grace said in a slow, grave voice. Marlie swiftly evaluated her, and liked what she saw. There was something stately about Grace Roeg, and her deep brown eyes reflected the inner stillness of an unshakable serenity.
“Well, go ahead, look around,” Trammell said irritably.
Dane looked around at the empty room, all the while keeping his arm around Grace. “Where’s my stuff?”
“In storage,” Trammell growled, forcefully removing his arm from Grace’s shoulders. He glanced sharply at Marlie, as if instructing her to take Dane into custody and control him. She put an innocent look on her face, amused by watching the elegant Trammell descend to the primitive levels of jealousy.
Grace said, “Don’t mind him. We’re getting married, and he’s still in shock.” She extended her left hand to show them an exquisite marquise diamond, about three carats worth.
“I am not.” Trammell turned a violent look on Dane. “Don’t start.”
Dane was grinning. “Start what? I’m glad for you. Congratulations, buddy. Grace is way too good for you. When are you going to do the deed?”
“About six months,” Grace answered comfortably. “I thought a nice, long engagement would give him time to get used to the idea. Things have happened pretty fast, so we don’t want to rush into anything and maybe make a mistake.”
“I don’t need time,” her intended said, looking haunted. “It was my idea, wasn’t it?”
“Of course it was, darling,” she soothed, tucking her arm through his. “But it will take that long to plan the wedding. Now, why don’t you show Dane what you’re doing to his house?”
“Is it going to be a big wedding?” Marlie asked.
“Big enough,” Trammell said, and turned an evil smile on Dane. “You’ll have to wear a tuxedo.”

“I’m tough,” Dane replied, concealing his instant dread. “It might damage me, but it won’t kill me. For you, old buddy, anything.”
Trammell scowled, as if he had been hoping for more of a reaction, but turned and led the way through the empty rooms. Dane was frankly amazed at what had been accomplished in just four days. His grandmother had loved wallpaper, and every room in the house had sported a different pattern. The wallpaper was gone now, and in its place was fresh stucco, painted a soothing, mellow white. All of the interior doorways had been reframed into arches.
“It would look better if the exterior doors and the windows were arches,” Trammell said, “but changing them would cost a lot more money than you want to spend. The floor refinishers start tomorrow.”
Dane skidded to a halt, gaping at the hull of what had been his bathroom. “You’ve gutted it,” he blurted.
“Yeah. I hadn’t planned to do it, but the plumbing was fifty years old. It’ll cost you probably another thousand.”
“Damn it, the next time you feel the urge to spend another thousand or so of my money, ask me first!”
“If I’d asked, you’d have said no,” Trammell replied calmly. “Wait until I’m finished, and you’ll agree that it was worth the money.”
“It had better be,” Dane muttered. He sensed Trammell’s amusement, and knew his partner was getting back at him for being so gleeful about the impending marriage. He didn’t mind, much. He was glad Trammell had found someone as wonderful as Grace, though he understood exactly his partner’s sense of panic, as if his life had suddenly rocketed out of control. He had felt that way himself since meeting Marlie. Things had happened too fast. Trammell and Grace had decided to get married, then set the date far enough in the future to give themselves time to settle down and be certain of their feelings. Dane hadn’t mentioned marriage or even love to Marlie, preferring to give himself the time *before* the commitment. Maybe what he felt for her wouldn’t last. It sure felt permanent, but maybe it wasn’t; time would tell. In the meantime, they were together, and in the end that was really all that mattered. He woke up with her every morning and went to bed with her every night. As long as he had that, he could wait for the rest.
He wasn’t certain how Marlie felt, either. There was passion, liking, companionship… maybe love. Who could tell? She had been under

considerable stress from the first. When everything was settled down, then they would be able to tell more about their relationship. For the first time he considered marriage a possibility, and that in itself was a huge step for him. It would all have to wait, though. There was a killer to catch, a plan to put into action, and he had to protect Marlie while he did it. And if he had learned anything about Marlie in the time he had been with her, it was that she wasn't going to like his plan worth a damn.

Chapter 17

Lowery called first thing Monday morning, asking them to come over immediately. He had just returned from Quantico with the character profile. The day was hot and clear and sticky, with the temperature already in the mid-eighties, predicted to reach the high nineties, and the humidity there already. Dane hadn't slept well the entire weekend, probably because Marlie hadn't. She had been restless, able to doze for only short periods before jerking awake. The strain of the weekend, waiting for a vision of murder to appear, had left her pale and withdrawn, with dark circles of fatigue under her eyes. He had spent long hours cuddling her, letting her know that she wasn't alone even if he couldn't prevent the vision, if it came. It hadn't.

How much more of this could she take? She was under so much stress, both physically and emotionally, that he was afraid for her. A lot of people would have broken under the strain, years ago. She hadn't, which was a testimony to her strength; Marlie wasn't a delicate flower, wilting at any hardship. Despite the finely drawn lines of her too thin body, she was remarkably sturdy. But even an oak tree could be felled, and he was worried.

Trammell was showing strain, too, probably from terror of his impending nuptials. He and Dane barely spoke on the way over to the Bureau, each of them absorbed in his own worries.

Freddie and Worley were already there, as was Bonness. DiLeonardo was present, with that besotted look on his face again as he maneuvered around the conference table for a seat next to Freddie.

Lowery was freshly shaved but was more rumpled than usual, making Dane think that he had truly just arrived from Virginia, on the early-bird flight.

“The ISU really worked on this,” he said quietly. “You’re to be congratulated on noticing the pattern so quickly, but catching this guy isn’t going to be easy. He’s the worst kind of killer, the Bundy type. He’s as cold as ice; he’s intelligent, resourceful, and totally without a shred of guilt.

“I have a list of similar murders: slashings, no suspects, no evidence. It’s possible some of them were done by the same guy. Some of them are impossible, because they took place at roughly the same time on opposite sides of the country as some of the other murders, but there’s no way of telling which one to eliminate.

“The murders started approximately ten years ago. ISU puts his age in the early to mid-thirties. Most serial killers start killing in their early twenties. But ten years of successful killings means he’s going to be very hard to apprehend; he’s experienced, he has learned from his mistakes and perfected his crime. He knows what he’s doing. He has studied forensics and police procedure, and he’s very careful to leave no identifiable evidence behind.”

“Could he have been a cop?” Bonness asked. “Maybe in the military?”

“Not likely,” Lowery replied. “He wouldn’t deal well with authority of any type, so it isn’t feasible that he would have been able to complete any type of military or police training. He wouldn’t even have been accepted as a candidate.

“He’s white; all of the victims have been white, and serial killers seldom cross racial boundaries. He’s athletic, very strong. He’s an organized killer, very confident, and that’s the worst kind. An unorganized killer is messy, makes mistakes, has no clear plan. This guy has everything planned, down to the last detail. He doesn’t knock the victims out or tie them; he’s confident that he can control the situation, and so far, he has. The weapon he uses is a knife from the victim’s kitchen, which he leaves at the scene. Since there are no fingerprints, the weapon can’t be connected to him. He takes no trophies. ISU thinks he stalks the victims, possibly for weeks beforehand; he enters the house when no one is home, becomes familiar with it. He’s very patient.

“He rapes, but doesn’t use restraints, and that’s a slight aberration. Some women will fight even with a knife at their throat. For some reason, his victims haven’t.”

Because he soothes them, at first, Dane thought violently. He made them think that they wouldn’t be hurt if they just didn’t fight. He was gentle, and

he used a rubber. They were paralyzed by the unexpectedness of being attacked in their own homes, and in that first terror, they believed him. But those were details Marlie had given him, so he kept quiet.

"He doesn't blindfold the victims," Lowery continued, "doesn't keep the corpses. Again, those are traits of the organized killer. It was surprising that he cut off Mrs. Vinick's fingers, because mutilation isn't one of the traits—"

"We think she scratched him," Dane interrupted.

Lowery sighed. "If so, that's even more evidence of his intelligence. He couldn't risk his skin samples being found under her fingernails. A brutal but effective solution. He doesn't panic. He thinks on his feet, and isn't a slave to a rigid plan.

"He likely holds down a full-time job, is outwardly normal. The other murders were all done at roughly the same time for each area. In one area, the murders were committed in the daytime, meaning he was either unemployed or working nights somewhere. I suspect he was working, because there's nothing about this man that would attract attention. He's methodical, predatory, and has this down to a science. His car will be several years old, nothing flashy, the kind of car you would see hundreds of in any neighborhood. Middle-class all the way. He could walk into police headquarters and no one would think anything about it, except to ask how they could help him.

"There is the danger that he's escalating. Until now, he has kept himself under control, spacing out the murders. Killing on two successive weekends could mean that he is beginning to need the thrill of the hunt more often. I know there haven't been any slashing murders reported this weekend, but it's possible the victim simply hasn't been found."

A quick look passed between Dane, Trammell, and Bonness. They knew there hadn't been another murder, because Marlie hadn't had a vision.

"Identification at this point is impossible," Lowery said. "Unless he makes a mistake and leaves some evidence behind to link him to the crime, he'll have to be caught in the act."

It was a grim group that returned to headquarters, though Lowery hadn't told them much that they hadn't already known. The killer was a smart son of a bitch, and ordinarily they wouldn't have had a prayer of catching him. Dane was silent, thinking of Marlie. She was their secret weapon; she would be the one who caught him.

It broke on the news that afternoon. Dane was surprised that the leak had taken that long; for something to remain a secret at city hall for a week was almost unheard-of, particularly something that dramatic. It was the headline story for all the local television and radio news; he caught it on the radio while he was driving home.

"A source in city hall has confirmed that police believe a serial killer is stalking women in the Orlando area," the announcer intoned solemnly. The plummy voice continued, "Two recent murders appear to have been committed by the same man. Two weeks ago, Nadine Vinick was murdered in her home, and a week later Jacqueline Sheets was found murdered in *her* home. Chief of Police Rodger Champlin refuses to comment on the cases or say if they have any suspects. He does urge women in the city to take precautions for their safety—"

He snapped off the radio, infuriated by the knowledge that the killer was getting a real rush from this. He had expected the news to break, was prepared for it, but knowing that the bastard was laughing and soaking up all the attention was still hard to take.

Marlie was sitting curled on the couch when he got home. The television was on, though the news program had advanced to the weather portion. He tossed his jacket across a chair and sat down beside her, then lifted her onto his lap. They sat silently, watching the meteorologist point to this high-pressure system and that low one, make sweeping movements of his hand to indicate their projected movement, and finally make his prediction: hot and muggy, the way it had been all day, with the ever-present possibility of thunderstorms.

"Anything interesting happen today?" she asked.

"The local FBI gave us the character profile they had worked up; this guy has probably been moving around the country for the last ten years, leaving a string of victims behind, and nobody has a clue what he looks like, or a shred of evidence that connects to him." He hugged her to him. "But we're working on getting a list of new accounts from the utility companies. It's a long shot, but it's something."

She had changed into shorts and a T-shirt when she had gotten home from work, and he stroked his hand appreciatively over her bare thighs. "What about you? Anything interesting happen in the accounting department?"

She snorted. "Get real. The most exciting part of the day was when a man called, irate because he had been charged an overdraft fee on a bad check

when he had been a customer of the bank for years."
"Bet that got the old ticker revved up."
"I almost fainted from the stress of it all." Marlie sighed and climbed from his lap. "I'd better see what's in the kitchen if we're going to eat tonight."
"Want me to go out for something?" he offered.
"No, I'm not in the mood for takeout. I'll think of something. Why don't you just sit here and read the newspaper? You look as if you need to unwind a little."
He definitely agreed with that assessment, and went into the bedroom to change out of his sticky, wrinkled clothes. Marlie poked around in the refrigerator and cabinets before deciding on chicken stir-fry. She was glad Dane had gone along with her suggestion, because she needed more time by herself. He was so intuitive that he would soon figure out that something more than the situation was upsetting her, and she didn't want to be around him until she had herself more under control.
She hadn't been paying much attention today when the head of accounting had been talking to the irate customer, trying to explain and soothe without backing down, but suddenly she had been overwhelmed by frustration and anger. Startled, she had automatically looked around for the source, and only then realized what had happened. She was picking up the department head's emotions.
She had quietly panicked, sitting frozen in her chair and trying to shut out the flow of emotion. To her surprise, it had stopped as abruptly as it had started, though the conversation behind her had continued.
She didn't know if she had succeeded in blocking it, or if her ability to read people was merely sputtering to life again. Either way, Dane wouldn't like it.
She knew that he viewed the visions differently, that he didn't see them as a threat to his privacy. But if her ability to read people returned in full force, she didn't know if Dane would be able to accept it. He hadn't liked being the target of clairvoyance, which was not, and never had been, her major talent. If he knew that she could read him at will… he would probably leave, even though she had promised that she wouldn't invade his privacy. She had to face that likelihood. Dane cared for her, but she doubted that he cared enough to stay under those circumstances. It wasn't anything new; people had always been uncomfortable around her.

The decision not to tell him had been easily made. She didn’t know what was happening: if her abilities would return in full force, if she would recover only a portion of her former capability, or if she would be even stronger. She hoped it wasn’t the last possibility, for if her empathic powers returned stronger than before, she would have to move into an underground bunker to find any peace. It was a certainty that Dane wouldn’t share that bunker with her.

She felt as if she were living in limbo with him. There had been none of the customary courtship stages, no getting to know each other. They had been thrown together in a crisis, had first been adversaries, then, abruptly, lovers. They had never had a discussion about their relationship, whatever it was. He had simply moved in, and she had no idea what to expect. After the killer was caught, would he simply return to his own house with a blithe “See you around” or—or what? If circumstances had been normal, the logical step, the one she had expected, would have been for him to spend a few nights each week with her.

She needed emotional security. She could bear anything if she had a solid foundation to fall back on, but she wasn’t certain she had that with Dane. It was silly, considering that she was living and sleeping with the man, but somehow she couldn’t bring herself to ask him outright what his intentions were. She admitted to herself that she was frankly afraid of hearing the answer. Dane wasn’t a man who would prevaricate; he would bluntly tell her the truth, and she wasn’t ready for that. Later. Everything had to wait. After this was all over, then she would be able to handle anything he said, even if it was exactly what she didn’t want to hear.

She had fallen in love with him, but she didn’t fool herself that she knew all about the kind of man he was. For all their physical intimacy, he kept a large part of himself private, safely secluded behind an iron wall. Sometimes he watched her with a silent, intent speculation that was almost frightening, because she couldn’t read any desire in his eyes during those times.

What was he thinking? More important, what was he planning?

The media were relentless. The phones in headquarters rang endlessly. Reporters camped outside the chief’s office, outside the mayor’s office, outside police headquarters. Both uniformed and plainclothes officers began taking evasive action when entering or leaving the building, going to extraordinary lengths to avoid the hassle.

Even worse than the media were the crank calls that began pouring in. Hundreds of people in Orlando suddenly recalled suspicious persons skulking around Dumpsters and storefronts. People with grudges found revenge by phoning in anonymous tips, accusing the person they disliked of being the killer. Every night officers investigated panicked calls of a prowler in the house, but most times it was nothing. Several mothers-in-law turned in their daughters' despicable husbands, certain that the lazy bastards were guilty of all manner of unspeakable crimes. The hell of it was, all of it had to be investigated. No matter how wild an allegation, it had to be checked. The uniformed officers were run ragged, worn down by the sizzling heat and never-ending demands on their time.

Chief Champlin held a news conference, hoping to ease some of the intense media pressure. He explained that there wasn't a lot of information he could give them, because of the ongoing investigations. But logic was a useless weapon; it didn't satisfy the voracious appetite for facts, for stories, for airtime and column space. It didn't sell newspapers or jack up the ratings numbers. The reporters wanted juicy, gory, frightening details, and were frustrated when none were forthcoming.

Carroll Janes watched the news programs and read the newspapers, and smiled with satisfaction. The police couldn't give the media much information because they didn't have much. The stupid saps were overmatched, just as all the others had been. He was too smart for them to catch—ever.

Chapter 18

All in all, Carroll Janes was pleased with the frenzy. Just two punishments, and look how he had taken over as top story. Of course, he would have to take back his insulting thoughts about the Orlando PD; they weren't as stupid as he had feared. Though the second punishment *had* been rather obvious, a lot of departments wouldn't have made the connection between the two, for after all, he had left the fingers intact on the second one. It had irritated him when the Vinick bitch had scratched him and he had been obligated to go to the extra trouble of removing her fingers and disposing of them, but at least fingers were small and easy to get rid of. Dogs had no

trouble with them at all, and the tiny bones, if any remained, were unidentifiable.

There was no way the cops could catch him, but at least they *knew* about him; it added an extra fillip to the process. It was nice to be appreciated, rather like the difference between an actor performing in an empty theater and one performing before an awestruck, standing-room-only crowd. He enjoyed the details so much more, knowing that the police would be amazed at his intelligence, his inventiveness, his absolute perfection, even while they cursed it. How gratifying it was to know one's opponents were properly respectful of one's talents.

He had been frustrated in his attempt to find another transgressor, for experimental purposes, but Janes considered himself a patient man. What would be, would be. It would be cheating to rush things; it would take away from the power of the moment. He had been more content since the news had broken, for of course, it was always exhilarating to read about oneself, to be the topic of conversation on everyone's lips. Even Annette, at work, had talked of little else. She had told him about all the elaborate precautions she was taking, as if he would ever be challenged by her, the little sow. But it amused him to commiserate with her, to feed her fear and drive her to even more ridiculous safety measures. She refused to even walk to her car by herself, as if he had ever dragged anyone off the streets. How pedestrian that was—he chuckled at his own wit—when the real challenge was to take them in their own homes, where they felt safest.

Annette was at lunch on Wednesday when a tall, buxom brunette sailed up to the counter, her face tight with anger. "I want to speak to someone about the service in this store," she snapped.

Janes gave her his best smile. "May I be of assistance, ma'am?"

The crux of the problem was that she was on her lunch hour and had stood for fifteen minutes in the clothing department trying to get someone to exchange a blouse for her. She still hadn't been waited on, and now she wouldn't have time to eat lunch. Janes controlled a thrill of anticipation as she ranted on, fury in every line of her body.

"I'll call the clothing department and make certain you're taken care of immediately," he said. "Your name is… ?"

"Farley," she said. "Joyce Farley."

He glanced at her hands. No wedding ring. "Do you have an account with us, Miss Farley?"

“That’s *Ms.* Farley,” she snapped. “What difference does that make? Does a customer have to have a charge account before this store is interested in her?”
“Not at all,” he said politely. It was simply easier to get vital information if she was in the computer bank. She was one of those prickly, man-hating feminists. The anticipation grew stronger; he would enjoy punishing her. He slid a form toward her. “If you don’t mind, would you fill out this complaint form? We like to follow through on all complaints, and make certain the customer is satisfied with our action.”
“I really don’t have time for this. I’m going to be late back to work already.”
“Then just your name and address will do. I’ll pencil in the details myself.”
Hastily she scribbled her name and address at the top of the form while he phoned the clothing department and spoke with the head clerk. He smiled again as he hung up. “Mrs. Washburn will be waiting personally to make the exchange.”
“This shouldn’t have been necessary.”
“I completely agree.” He slid the form off the top of the counter.
She turned to go, took a step, then abruptly stopped and turned back. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have a terrible headache and I’m angry, but I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. It wasn’t your fault, and you’ve done everything you can to help me. I apologize for being so nasty to you.”
He was so taken aback that it was a moment before he could say, “Think nothing of it. I’m glad I could be of service.” Conventional reply, one that was mouthed thousands of times a day by thousands of bored salespeople, because it would mean their jobs if they said what they really wanted to say.
Ms. Farley gave him a brief, hesitant smile and walked away.
Janes stared after her, fury rising in him. Viciously he crumpled the complaint form and threw it in the trash. How dare she apologize! She had ruined everything. That wasn’t the point. Punishment was the point. He felt cheated, as if a ripe prize had been dangled in front of him and then snatched away. He had already begun to feel the flow of vitality, and known the hunger to let his power have free rein. Now he was left with nothing! He should kill the bitch anyway, to teach her that she couldn’t act any way she wanted and then escape the consequences by whining an apology.
No. Rules were rules. He had to obey them; it would ruin everything if he didn’t. There were certain criteria to be met, standards to be upheld. If he

couldn’t maintain those standards, then he would *deserve* to be caught. No matter how much he wanted to discipline her, he had to save himself for the true lessons.

Marlie sat very still at her desk, trying to control her trembling. Thank God it was lunchtime, and almost everyone had gone out to eat. She had brought her lunch and a book, intending to spend a quiet hour reading. She had been happily engrossed in the book, absently munching an apple, when a dark sense of mingled anger and anticipation had filled her. It hadn’t been as overwhelming as a full vision, but she had recognized the source. There was no mistaking the cold evilness at the core. And then, suddenly, the anger had intensified, but the anticipation was gone, and she sensed disappointment instead.

She had come to know him. His mental force hadn’t been strong enough for her to “see” the events, but she knew without seeing. He had selected his next victim, and something had happened to deprive him of his sadistic pleasure.

He was out there. And he was hunting.

“He’s looking for someone,” she told Dane that night. She prowled restlessly around the room. “I felt him today.”

He put aside the newspaper he had been reading—which was full of slightly hysterical and mostly erroneous stories about the Orlando Slasher—and focused the full intensity of his attention on her. Even the planes of his face hardened; she had grown accustomed to that roughhewn face, seeing it through the eyes of love, but abruptly she perceived him again as she had seen him the first time they had met: Dane Hollister the cop, the Dane Hollister who was dangerous.

“What happened?” he asked, a bite in his tone. “*When* did it happen? Why didn’t you call me?”

She shot him a brief glance and resumed her aimless pacing. “What could you have done?”

The answer was “nothing,” and she saw he didn’t like that. “It was during my lunch, about twelve-thirty. All of a sudden he was there. I could feel his anger, but he was excited, too, like a kid anticipating a treat. He had picked her out, I know he had. Then something happened, I don’t know what, but she got away and he was disappointed.”

“And then?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t feel him anymore.”

He was watching her closely. “But you can tell when he’s choosing his victim?”
She shrugged. “I did this time.”
“Anything else? Could you tell anything about the victim?”
“No.”
“The slightest detail would help—”
“I told you, no!” she suddenly shouted, wheeling toward the bedroom. “Don’t you think I’ve tried?”
He moved like a tiger pouncing, springing up from the couch and catching her before she could reach the bedroom and close the door between them. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her tightly against him. Now he could feel the slight tremors running through her, the shaking that hadn’t completely left her since lunch. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, rubbing his rough chin against her temple. “I know how hard this is for you. Are you okay?”
She hesitated, then reluctantly admitted, “I’m a little spooked.”
He rocked her back and forth for a minute, letting her absorb the security of his presence. She had been living with the stress for almost a month now, and it had to be much worse for her than for him. She needed a break. He brushed her hair back from her face, thinking hard. “Want to go see a movie?”
“That was your solution last time,” she said tautly. “Going somewhere.”
“Did it work?”
Involuntarily she relaxed a little. She was so tired; it felt good to lean on him. “You know it did.”
“Then let’s go to a movie. Isn’t there something you’d like to see?”
“I don’t know.” She was hesitant. “I haven’t been to a movie since the first murder.”
“Then it’s time. I haven’t seen a movie in a couple of years. What interests you?”
“I don’t know what’s playing.” She turned to face him, and managed a smile. “I’d rather just go for a drive, I think.”
He was relieved to feel the tension easing out of her. He would have preferred to take her to bed, but knew she was too tense to enjoy it. “Then that’s what we’ll do,” he said.
The twilight air was thick and heavy when they left the house, the heat lingering even though the sun had gone down, and thunder rumbled dully in

the distance. Dane rolled down his window, hit the interstate highway, and turned the car's nose toward the Gulf Coast, straight into the approaching storm. The cloud bank loomed overhead like a great beast, streaks of lightning darting across its purplish black underbelly.

The air blasting in through the open window became cooler, almost cold, and carried with it the sweet, dusty scent of rain. Marlie sat silently beside him, her eyes on the storm. The first raindrops splatted on his windshield. He had time to roll up his window and turn on the wipers, and then they were plunging headlong into the torrent sweeping toward them.

He had to slow down to almost a crawl, while the thunder boomed around them and lightning cracked. Other, more prudent drivers pulled off the highway completely, seeking shelter under overpasses or simply getting out of traffic. A few daring souls continued into the heart of the storm, as darkness crashed down and the puny efforts of headlights could illuminate only a short distance in front of them.

Marlie was motionless. The fierceness of the storm emptied her, sucked out all sense of self and filled her instead with its own raw power. She knew she should have been afraid of electrical storms, but she wasn't. The magnificence of it filled her with awe, and the energy unleashed somehow replenished her.

Dane always drove with his interior lights extinguished, and the car was a dark cave. He didn't speak, and neither did she. She felt no need for words. She was safe and dry while the fury thrashed around them, battering the car with sheets of rain and gusts of wind that rocked it from side to side. Dane held it steady, his powerful forearms rippling with muscles as he fought to counteract the storm's fury. Marlie didn't feel even a second of uneasiness; she was safe and she knew it.

Eventually they drove out of the storm, leaving it flashing and rumbling sulkily in the distance. It continued to rain, but it was a light, steady, ordinary rain. They rolled their windows down a couple of inches and let the sweet air flow around them.

He looped around on the next exit and headed back toward Orlando, this time chasing the storm.

She leaned her head back. The storm had intensified everything; she had never felt quite like this before. Her heartbeat was slow and heavy, a silent drum; her body felt heavy and ripe, pulsing with life. She wanted him, wanted his hardness and passion inside her. She could feel him beside her,

taut with sexual awareness. His eyes were on the road, but his attention was focused on her, she knew that he was acutely aware of every movement she made, of the slight rustling of her breathing, the warm, faint scent of her body.

“Dane,” she said. The one word vibrated in the darkness.

He was sweating; she could see the sheen on his face whenever they met an oncoming vehicle. Heat was rolling off him in waves. Excitement coiled in her belly; he was almost out of control, in a way she hadn’t experienced before. Always before, even the first time, no matter how aroused he was, he had managed to hold himself back until she had been satisfied. He had wanted her before they had left the house, and the primal fury of the storm had only fed his hunger, just as it had awakened hers.

She wanted to ask him if he loved her, but the words wouldn’t come. He was with her here and now, and if sexual attraction was all he felt, she would find out all too soon. Since the present was all the time she was guaranteed, she decided to stop fretting and make the most of it. Wasn’t that what life was about anyway? Hadn’t she learned anything from all the pain, her own and others, she had experienced? No one made it through life without suffering. The trick was to make the most of the present, and enjoy the gifts of life as they were offered.

She reached out and gently trailed one finger along the crease between thigh and groin, feeling his muscles harden beneath her touch. His erection was like iron, pushing against the constraint of his pants. She stroked her finger up and down the length of it.

His breath hissed out between his teeth. “Stop teasing me.”

“I’m not teasing,” she murmured, almost purring the words. “I’m very serious.” She delved her hand between his legs, and he groaned as involuntarily he shifted them apart. The car slowed, then he gathered himself and increased speed again.

“I can’t stop now,” he said with stifled violence. “There’s too much traffic.”

“See any interesting motels?” she asked, her tone absent as she concentrated on unbuckling his belt.

He shuddered, sucking in his breath to give her hands more room. He wanted her to stop, but at the same time he was helpless against the pleasure. “I don’t have any rubbers with me.” Except for their first night together, he had used a condom every time they made love. That first night, he hadn’t been able to think of anything except getting inside her. Privately

he had been shocked at his own carelessness, which had never happened before, and since then had made damn sure it hadn't happened again.
The solution of stopping at a drugstore occurred to her, but she dismissed it. She didn't want the distraction, and he wasn't in any shape to go shopping.
"You'd better drive faster," she said, just as she eased down his zipper and worked her hand inside his pants to close her fingers around his naked shaft.
A rough moan burst out of him. She savored the sound of it, just as she savored the feel of him throbbing in her hand. She knew that a few quick, hard pumps would finish it for him, so she deliberately kept her touch light, slow, and lingering. His face was set in taut lines as she snuggled closer and kissed the underside of his jaw. Her breasts were pressed against his muscled arm, and she could feel the fine tremor shaking it.
"You're going to pay for this," he warned.
She bit his earlobe. "Sounds interesting. Got any ideas?"
He had several, but none that could be enacted in the car. He only hoped he wasn't stopped for speeding, because he didn't think there was any way in hell he could get his pants fastened. She continued to gently caress him, keeping him achingly hard. "Are you having fun?" His lungs were constricted, preventing him from speaking above a growl.
"Oodles." Her tongue dipped briefly into his ear, and he shivered convulsively. "I'm not ready to stop, either. You just keep on driving."
He did. He drove as he had never driven before, with a desperate concentration that still wasn't enough to block out what she was doing to him. A rough laugh escaped his throat. "You little witch, you're enjoying this."
She gave him a slow, satisfied smile. "Of course I am. You usually drive *me* crazy. How does it feel to be on the receiving end?"
"Like I'm going to die," he gasped.
She looked around and pinpointed their location. "We'll be home in another five minutes. You can hold out that long, can't you?" She continued caressing him, using every bit of knowledge she had about his body to enflame him further. She licked him very delicately.
He gasped again, his body going rigid. "Maybe."
By the time they got home he was wild, his hips surging upward with every lingering stroke of her hand. He literally dragged her out of the car and into the house, where they stumbled, into the bedroom, tearing and pulling at each other's clothes. They were still half-clothed when they fell onto the

bed. Dane managed to delay until he got a condom on, then he flipped her onto her stomach, kneed her legs apart, and drove into her with battering force.

Marlie dug her fingers into the bedcovers, her body shuddering under the force of his thrusts. She was as excited as if she had been the one so deliriously tormented. She lifted her buttocks, wriggling against him to take him deeper, though that didn't seem possible. He groaned with every thrust, wild, guttural sounds that hung in the darkness of the night. And then his entire body tensed and he shoved violently into her and held himself there, shuddering, hoarsely crying out his satisfaction as his climax shook him to the core.

Afterward he eased down to lie half beside her and half on her, his movements blind and uncoordinated, his big body trembling. His chest heaved as he struggled to get enough oxygen, and she could feel the force of his heartbeats thudding through his body. "Oh, God," he wheezed. "That damn near killed me."

"Really?" she murmured. "I thought you enjoyed it. But if you didn't like it, I won't do it again—"

He thrust his hand into her hair and turned her head so he could stop the words with a hard, forceful kiss. "I'll try to bear up under the strain."

"My hero," she said, nipping at his lower lip, then returning for a deeper kiss.

A bass purr rumbled in his chest. He turned her in his arms and lifted himself to loom over her. "Now, lady, let's see about you."

He took care of that very well, leaving her exhausted, limp, and satiated.

Afterward they lay together in the darkness, listening to the rain. She absently played with the curly hair on his chest. After a while she yawned and said, "Did you close the car door?"

He went still, thinking very hard. Then he said, "Oh, hell," and heaved himself out of bed. She lay there giggling while he pulled on his pants and stumbled through the dark house. She heard the front door open, then close again a couple of seconds later. In another minute he came back into the bedroom. "Yes, I did, smart-ass," he rumbled.

"Well, I didn't remember."

He chuckled. "I didn't either." He shucked his pants and crawled back into bed. He yawned as he gathered her close to him again, tucking her protectively into his embrace. "When this is over," he murmured into her

hair, “we’re both going to need a vacation. Which do you like, the mountains or the beach?”
Her heart gave a little skip of happiness. It was the first time he had said anything about a mutual future, even if it was something as casual as planning a vacation. “This is Florida,” she replied. “We can go to the beach anytime.”
“Mountains it is, then. We’ll rent a cabin with a hot tub, get naked, unwind, and shock the squirrels.”
“It’s a deal.”
The phone rang, and Dane stretched out his arm to get it. “Hollister,” he said lazily. Lying against him as she was, Marlie felt him tense. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. “Okay, okay, I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes. Try to keep the media from driving everyone into hysterics.”
He hung up the phone and turned on the lamp. “There’s been another slashing murder,” he said, hastily pulling on his clothes.
Marlie sat up, fear consuming her as she remembered earlier in the day when she had felt the killer searching for another victim. She and Dane had gone for that drive out of town; had they been so far away that she wouldn’t have been able to pick up the killer’s energy? Had he acted, after all, and somehow she hadn’t felt him?

Chapter 19

What's the victim's name?" Dane asked, looking at the body as the police photographer snapped pictures from different angles.

It was a typical murder scene, if there was such a thing. The place was working like a beehive, and most of the people weren't doing a damn thing except standing around. The house was crawling with policemen, and the neighborhood was crawling with reporters, who ignored the light rain in favor of getting comments from anyone who would talk to them. Bonness was there, Trammell was there, Freddie and Worley were there—hell, it looked as if every detective on the squad was there—and the chief was reportedly on the way. The fingerprint guys were dusting their black powder over everything, the forensic evidence people were vacuuming—it was a zoo.

"Felicia Alden," Freddie said. "Her husband, Gene, found her. He's a sales rep for a pharmaceutical firm and had been away on business."

"And he just happened to come home right after his wife was murdered," Dane said wearily. They all looked at one another. They had seen the other scenes, and this was nothing like them, except for the fact that a woman had died from knife wounds. For one thing, the victim was still clothed, and she was lying on the bed as if she had been arranged there. There was no indication of sexual attack.

Dane sighed with relief. Marlie hadn't failed; they all knew, and it was just a matter of proving it, that Gene Alden had probably murdered his wife and tried to set it up so that it looked like one of the serial murders. Alden had likely thought that, since the media had reported there was no evidence left behind, he would be safe when investigation turned up only forensic material that could be linked to him; after all, he *lived* there.

"Take him in for questioning, and find out about any life insurance policies he had on her," Bonness said. "Or maybe if he caught her fooling around. I'll try to calm the reporters down, but I can't say much until we actually charge the guy, so they won't believe me." He looked depressed at the thought of facing the horde of shouting reporters.

"At least we'll be able to do something about this one," Freddie said.

Trammell walked over to join Dane, and they went outside. Reporters were mobbing Bonness, shouting questions at him. He was trying to talk, but

they kept interrupting him. “I guess Marlie didn’t have a vision with this one,” Trammell said.
“Not even a glimmer, but it was scary anyway; it wasn’t a vision, but this afternoon she sort of locked on to him. He had picked out his next victim, but something happened and he lost her.”
Trammell whistled. “How’s Marlie?”
“On edge. It’s wearing her down.”
“No wonder. I wish there was some way to make it easier for her.”
“I’ll make damn sure she’s okay,” Dane said grimly. “By the way, how’s the work going on my house?”
“The floors are almost finished, and the furniture will be delivered this weekend. You can move back in on Monday, if you want.”
Dane snorted as he got in his car. “Get real, buddy.”
Trammell laughed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. See you in the morning.”
As Dane had expected, Marlie was still awake when he got there. “It wasn’t him,” he said, and watched the tension ease out of her face. She looked very small, curled up in a corner of the couch with her robe pulled tightly around her. “Probably the woman’s husband did it, and tried to make it look like the other murders.” He held out his hand to her. “Come on, honey, let’s go back to bed.”
Janes carefully controlled his elation Friday afternoon as he watched the indignant customer stalk away. Annette was there, so it wouldn’t do to let even a hint of his emotions show. At last! He was going to savor this one; too much time had passed, three weeks, for him to accurately compare it with the last one. Besides, he had concluded that it was the haste of the last punishment that had ruined it for him. He would do this one the way it should be done, with slow and careful planning, letting the anticipation build. He needed at least a week to do it properly.
He checked the calendar, though of course, he didn’t need to. It was just a part of his incredible precision. Yes, the earliest possible date would be next Friday night. The weekends were the best because those were his off days, and he could sleep late the next day. Let the media hoopla, satisfying as it was, die down a bit. The frenzy had nothing to feed on, though there had been that silly burst of hysteria the other night when some salesman had offed his wife and tried to blame it on him. It hadn’t worked, of course; the stupid bastard hadn’t had the same attention to detail. The cops had

immediately seen through him. The television reports had sounded a tad disappointed.

Yes, this one would be good, maybe the best yet. The woman had been a complete bitch, the kind he had always despised on sight: lean, tanned, brittle, overloaded with jewelry of questionable taste. She flaunted her money. She might have a security system, or even guard dogs. The possibility was intriguing. It would be a real test of his genius, if she did. He disregarded the probability of a husband; that had never stopped him before. He looked down at the name she had scribbled, repeating it in his mind, savoring the syllables. Marilyn Elrod. Anticipation was already flooding his body with energy. Marilyn Elrod. He hummed a few bars of a song, substituting her name. Mar-uh-lynn, O Mar-uh-lynn, ta dum de dum something. It was played before the Preakness race. The joke was, she didn't know she should be running.

Friday night, Marlie asked him how work was coming along on his house. Dane lied without hesitation. "It's almost finished," he said. "There's been a delay on the furniture Trammell ordered."

The furniture was in place, and everything looked great, but he had no intention of moving out of Marlie's house until the killer was caught.

Another weekend had come and gone without a murder. A few sarcastic reporters were beginning to ask if the police were *certain* there was a serial killer, or had they just been spooked by a similarity between the murders of Nadine Vinick and Jackie Sheets?

"Feel anything today?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing concrete. Just kind of uneasy." And when she had been driving home, she had passed a young couple so engrossed with each other that they had been passionately kissing there on the sidewalk. She had been in that automatic state that takes over when driving, her guard down, and suddenly she had been reading the young man. Again, it had been such a shock that she had immediately shut down, withdrawing from the emotional contact. She had had the wry thought that she hoped they would find somewhere private soon, given the intensity of the young man's arousal, or she wouldn't be the only one shocked.

Then the realization dawned that twice now she had been able to control the contact, to break it off. Even before, at the height of her abilities, she hadn't been able to do that. She had learned how to partially shield herself, but had never managed complete protection. Okay, so the initial contact had slipped

in, when she had been relaxed; she had still been able to immediately sever the connection.
She hadn’t wanted the return of her abilities, but suddenly she was filled with a sense of triumph, and contentment. Gleen hadn’t won, after all. The healing process had taken a long time, but in the end, she was the victor. She had emerged from the trauma even stronger than before, better able to control the gift that had been given her. She had even, with Dane, gotten past the physical terror and learned the joy of sexual pleasure. She couldn’t have done it two years ago, even a year ago, but her healing had finally progressed to the point that she had won.
“Is he hunting?” Dane asked.
“Who knows? Like I said, it wasn’t anything concrete. Maybe it’s just that I dread tonight so much.”
“Maybe I can do something about that,” he said in a slow, deep tone. He was leaning against the cabinets while she threw together a quick meal, getting in her way as usual. She looked at him and went weak in the knees. He looked so thoroughly male that every cell in her body responded. Dane was always slightly rough-edged, even when his clothes were freshly ironed, but even more so now with his shirt wrinkled, his dark hair disheveled, and his jaw showing both the mark of this morning’s assault with a razor and the need for another shave. As always, he still wore his shoulder holster, the butt of the big pistol sticking out under his armpit; he was so accustomed to being armed that he no longer noticed it. Those sharp hazel eyes were greener than usual, and held a predatory gleam as he watched her.
“Maybe you can,” she agreed, her own voice huskier than usual. Maybe, nothing; she was certain of it. His sexual power over her was so strong that the only thing that kept her from panicking was the knowledge that, when she chose, she could drive him just as crazy. She might have doubts about his emotional involvement, but there was no mistaking his physical response. All she had to do was brush against him, or give him a certain look, or even do nothing, and he would get aroused.
It sometimes startled her, for she was certainly not a sex kitten by any stretch of the imagination. She had always deliberately dressed to downplay her femininity, because she had never wanted to attract attention of any kind. None of that mattered with Dane; it was as if he never saw the clothes, but looked straight through to the woman. She still dressed the same, out of

habit and convenience—after all, the clothes were *there*—but now, a bit surprised at herself, she realized that she didn't feel the need to continue the camouflage. Things had changed. She didn't have to hide herself away to protect her mental privacy, nor did she have to worry about the sickening intrusion of sexual advances. Dane intruded with sexual advances quite often, and there wasn't anything the least sickening about them.

She was stronger. Her abilities had changed. She had healed, and was in control. She felt another little jolt as she truly realized, for the first time, that she was no longer at the mercy of her own mental powers.

She could dress any way she wanted. She could buy the trim, stylish clothes she had always admired, or even something downright sexy.

"What are you thinking?" Dane asked uneasily. "You've been staring at me like I'm Tweetie Bird, and you're a hungry cat."

She let her gaze drop lower, and delicately licked her lips.

His face changed. He straightened away from the cabinet, every muscle in his powerful body growing taut. Then he reached out and deliberately turned off the stove. She raised her eyebrows at him. "This may take a while," he explained, his eyes heavy-lidded as he pulled her close.

Nothing happened that weekend, though Marlie couldn't shake the uneasy anticipation. She was beginning to think she would feel that way until the man was caught. But she managed the tension better than she had the weekend before, perhaps because of her newfound confidence. She tested her control when she stood talking to Lou for a while on Saturday, deliberately opening herself up; she immediately read her neighbor's emotions, and when she decided to stop, the flow was blocked. It was like opening a door and closing it again. She could do it!

It wasn't an entirely satisfying experience, however; she found that Lou was extremely disapproving of the situation next door, with that man, even if he was a police officer, just blatantly moving in. Lou felt it set a bad example. Marlie wondered who she was setting a bad example *for*, since she was the youngest person in the neighborhood anyway. Most of her neighbors were retirees.

It didn't help when Dane chose that moment to come out on the front porch, wearing only a pair of disreputable jeans. Because they had spent a lazy day around the house, he hadn't shaved. He looked big, rough, slightly dangerous, and wholly masculine, with his powerful chest bare. "Hi, Lou,"

he called. “Sorry to interrupt. Honey, do you know where I put my gun oil?”
“You didn’t,” she replied. “You left it out. *I* put it in the kitchen, second drawer from the right.”
He flashed a grin at her. “Sorry.” Then he disappeared back into the house.
Lou’s face was stiff, her eyes wide as she stared at the spot where he had stood. Marlie shifted uncomfortably. This was one time she definitely didn’t want to open that door and feel what Lou was feeling.
Then Lou exhaled in a long sigh. “Holy cow,” she said.
Her cheeks looked a little flushed. She gave Marlie a slightly embarrassed look. “I may be old-fashioned,” she admitted, “but I’m a long way from blind.”
Marlie entered the kitchen a few minutes later to find Dane calmly reassembling his pistol. There was no way he could have cleaned the weapon in the time that had elapsed. “You did that deliberately,” she accused, keeping her voice level with an effort. Lou had still been a little giddy when she had gone inside.
He grinned, not pausing in his brisk, practiced actions. “I like ruffling her feathers,” he admitted. “I thought about unsnapping my jeans, but I decided against it. Overkill.”
“It’s a good thing. You might not have made it back into the house unscathed, if you had.”
“Really pissed her off, huh?”
“Not exactly.”
He glanced up, his expression quizzical. Marlie smiled sweetly at him. “Lou fell in lust with your manly form, big boy.”
After a startled moment, he began laughing. He was too heavy for her to budge his chair, so she shoved the table away and planted her hands on his shoulders as she straddled the chair and sat down on his lap. His laughter stopped, that familiar tenseness hardening his features. “I know how she feels,” Marlie whispered, nuzzling his jaw. Her heart pounded at the scent of him, all hot, musky male mingled with the sharp odor of gun oil. She moved slowly against the ridge in his jeans.
“Wait.” His protest was feeble. “I have oil on my hands.”
“So? I’m washable,” she murmured, and that was all he needed to hear.
The weekend was wonderful. She ignored the frisson of alarm that was always there, never quite allowing her nerves to settle down, and enjoyed

what she had. There were no visions, no false alarms of copycat murders. She suggested going over to his house to see how everything looked, but he was in a lazy mood and didn't seem interested. They watched television and read. They tried out recipes… or rather, Marlie tried them out, while Dane kept her company and sampled the results. And they made love, often. It was exactly the type of life Marlie had always wanted, and always thought impossible.

By Monday, with nothing happening over the weekend, the press reports were scathing. The Orlando PD had overreacted, like Chicken Little squawking about the sky falling. One columnist suggested that not only had they made fools of themselves on the basis of two similar murders, but the hoopla might even have triggered the copycat murder of Felicia Alden.

"They forget," Dane said sarcastically, "that the department isn't responsible for all the publicity; the media did that. We've been trying to keep everything as low-key and under wraps as possible."

Marlie gave him a troubled look. "But now, with them calling it a false alarm, people will stop being as careful. It's giving him a greater opportunity of success."

"Tell that to the press. All they'll give you is the smart-ass answer that they don't make the news, they just report it."

"If reporting was all they did, that would be fine. But they angle it, they slant it, they 'interpret' it."

He saw how truly upset she was; he was pissed off, but the press reports bothered Marlie on a deeper level. He remembered that her experiences with the media generally weren't pleasant, and he swiftly changed the subject.

Janes was pleased with what he had accomplished over the weekend. He had made several casual trips by the Elrod house, and been delighted by what he had discovered so far. The house was large and upscale, set in the middle of a big lot with an excess of landscaping that would provide plenty of cover. Six-foot-high fences marked the boundary lines of almost every lot in the neighborhood, which further restricted any nosy neighbor's observation.

He hadn't seen Mr. Elrod, though the city directory listed one. Was he out of town? It was a concern that had been laughably easy to answer, though the answer had come from an unexpected source. Marilyn Elrod had conveniently left the house not five minutes before her mail was delivered,

and Janes had simply used the opportunity to collect the mail and go through it. Some of the usual assortment of junk mail had been addressed to a Mr. James Elrod, confirming his existence. A more interesting envelope bore the imprint of an Orlando law firm. Janes didn't hesitate to open it, and what he read greatly pleased him. It seemed Mr. and Mrs. Elrod were currently embroiled in divorce proceedings, and Mr. Elrod had recently moved out. What a pity.

He kept the letter, since it had been opened, and shoved the remainder of the mail back into the box. A quick look around the house revealed that there was no dog—if there had been, it would have been barking like mad by then— but there was an alarm system. Not particularly sophisticated, he saw, but a problem. Still, every system had a weakness, and he had no doubt that he would be able to find a means of entry. All in good time, though, all in good time. He wouldn't make the mistake of hurrying as he had the last time.

"We're being made to look like fools," Chief Champlin growled. He wasn't in a good mood. The mayor had raked him over the coals for jumping the gun and driving old women all over the city into hysteria. Not only that, the bad publicity had cost the city money. Orlando relied heavily on the tourist trade, with visitors from all over the world coming to the Mouse House. The rate of occupancy at the local motels and hotels had fallen off since the news had broken.

"I can't believe this," Bonness said plaintively. "Everyone is bitching because someone *hasn't* been murdered!"

"There were just two murders. Granted, the details were eerie in their similarity—"

"The FBI agrees that it's the same man," Dane broke in.

"We didn't go out on a limb in this, Chief. He's out there. With the Bureau's help, we think we've identified at least seventeen other killings that he's done."

"So maybe he left the city when the news broke!" the chief snapped.

Dane shook his head. "We think he's still here."

"On the basis of what information?"

"Marlie," he wanted to say, but he didn't. He contented himself with replying, "He never left an area so soon before. We're going with his established pattern."

“The mayor wants to know, and so do I, just what you’re doing with your time. If there is no evidence, just what in hell are you doing?”
Dane’s face had taken on a stony look. Trammell saw the signs of an incipient loss of temper and stepped in. “We’ve received lists of names from the utility companies on new customers for the past year, and we’re working our way down the list, investigating all the men on it. With the profile the FBI gave us, we’ll be able to narrow it down to a few possibilities.”
Chief Champlin was from the old school. He didn’t like Trammell’s slick sophistication, his money, his snappy clothes, or his exotic looks. He did, however, respect the political ties that Trammell had in the city, courtesy of that same money. He growled a reply along the lines of “They’d better come up with something soon, or else,” and left Bonness’s office.
Bonness sighed and pulled out a handkerchief to blot his forehead. “Shit. Anything on those names we’re running?”
“Nothing that sets off any alarms, but we still have a lot of names to go.”
“Okay. Let me know the minute you hear bells.”
“Will do.”
“Son of a bitch,” Dane said between his teeth as they returned to their desks.
“Calm down, partner. He doesn’t know what we know, because we can’t tell him about Marlie. I don’t think he’d understand.”
“Bonness was right.” Cold fury was still in Dane’s voice and eyes. “These bastards won’t be satisfied until another woman is killed.”
Janes made good use of his time at night. He found a secure place to leave his car, he checked out the situation with the neighbor’s dogs. There were two, but one of them tended to bark at everything, and the other, across the street, would join him. The barking usually elicited no more than a few irritable “Shut ups.”
Marilyn Elrod was a party girl. She was out hitting the bars almost every night, which may have been the reason Mr. Elrod was no longer living there. So far, though, she hadn’t brought anyone home with her. Her active night life gave him plenty of opportunity to make sure things were perfect. Her night life also gave him a means of getting into the house. Thick shrubbery grew all along the house, right up to the garage. She had a habit of backing into the garage, so she could just drive right out whenever she left; since she was facing ahead, it was child’s play for him to slip from his

hiding place in the shrubbery into the garage, before the automatic door closed. She never looked back.

The door leading from the garage into the utility room wasn't wired into the security system, though the door from outside into the garage was. It was locked, but locks weren't a problem for him. It was another skill he had taught himself, with the aid of a mail-order locksmithing course that he had taken under an alias, just as a precaution. Another little detail he had foreseen and taken care of.

The first time he entered the house he had simply walked around and familiarized himself with it. He kept himself calm, not letting anticipation trick him into acting before he was really ready, as he had the last time.

The second time, he explored more. He opened her closets and went through her clothes, deciding that her taste seemed frozen in the eighties singles-bar style. She spent a fortune on makeup, he noticed, prowling through her bathroom vanity.

He satisfied himself that there were no guns in the house. Guns could be a big problem.

Then, humming to himself, he explored the kitchen. She wasn't much on cooking; the refrigerator held mostly microwave stuff. But she had catered to the fashion of having a large rack of butcher's knives standing on the shiny black countertop, something he had counted on. Since she cooked so little, it wasn't likely that she would miss a knife. He examined each knife, *tsk*ing at the dulled edges on the stainless steel blades. Most women no longer had any pride in the domestic skills, which he deplored. If she had kept her knives in good condition, he wouldn't have to take the slight but admitted risk of removing one of them so he could put a proper edge on it.

All in all, he severely disapproved of Marilyn Elrod.

"Come to the house for dinner with Grace and me tonight," Trammell said on Friday.

Dane leaned back in his chair. He was so sick of the damn lists on his desk that he wanted to cram them all into the trash. He never would have believed that so many people had moved into the Orlando area in the past year. What really pissed him off was that they weren't turning up a damn thing. He was glad the weekend had come, though he and Trammell were on call.

"It's Friday," he reminded Trammell.

"So? You have to eat on Fridays the same as any other day, don't you?"

“Marlie gets pretty tense on Fridays.”
“Then it will do her good to take her mind off things. If she has a vision, she can have it just as well at my house as at hers.”
“Okay, let me call her.”
Marlie advanced the same arguments that he had, and he gave her the same answers Trammell had given him. She really didn’t need much convincing, because she had spent the week dreading the approaching weekend. Dinner with Trammell and Grace would be a welcome distraction.
She had spent a few of her lunch hours shopping this past week, and for the first time wore one of her new outfits that evening. Trammell had said to dress casually, and she did, but the slim, white cotton pants and sleeveless white vest were very fetching, if she did say so herself. Dane shared the opinion. When she came out of the bedroom, his gaze settled on her bare shoulders and the deep vee of the neckline. “Are you wearing a bra?” he asked in a strained voice.
She looked down at herself. “Why?”
“I just want to know. Are you?”
“Can you see anything?” she asked, returning to the bedroom to examine herself in the mirror.
Dane followed. “Damn it, Marlie, are you wearing a bra or aren’t you?”
“Do I need one?”
“I’ll find out for myself,” he said in frustration, reaching for her.
She slipped away, giving him a roguish smile. “Down, boy. You’ll have to wait until later to find out. We’re going to be late if we don’t leave right now.”
“I haven’t seen that outfit before,” he said as he followed her out the door.
“It’s new. I bought it this week.”
He studied her back, trying to decide if he could make out the outline of a bra beneath the white vest that bared a disconcerting amount of her. It wasn’t that it was indecent, just that he wasn’t used to seeing her dress like that. He liked the hell out of it, but he didn’t want anyone else to appreciate the view.
Trammell’s house was large and airy, with sleek furnishings in light, soft colors that opened up the rooms even more. His taste, Marlie admitted, was wonderful. There was a sense of space, serenity, and coolness, enhanced by lush indoor plants and overhead fans gently stirring the air.

Dinner was relaxed, with a lot of joking and teasing. Marlie asked Trammell when Dane's house would be finished, and he lied without turning a hair. More delays, he said solemnly.

Grace told Marlie all about the wedding plans she was making, and how lucky it was that they had planned on a long engagement because she would need all the time to plan a large, formal wedding. Trammell broke out in a slight sweat as he listened to the discussion, but the look of wild panic was gone; he was adjusting to the idea of marriage in connection with himself.

A series of thunderstorms, normal during the hot summer nights, popped up and entertained them with dramatic flashes of lightning and booms of thunder. After dinner, Trammell took several photographs of them all, and that led him into showing the thick albums of shots he had taken over the years.

Dane figured prominently in a good many of them, and Marlie studied his face with interest. He looked different, somehow, in the stark black-and-white photos Trammell had taken. Seeing her interest, Trammell settled beside her to tell her all about every shot.

It was earlier than usual when Marilyn Elrod arrived home, but the passing storms had knocked out the electricity at the bar, and the patrons had been politely but firmly invited to leave. She was also tipsier than usual, and when the garage door didn't lift, she pressed the button on the opener again. Still nothing happened.

"Damn it," she muttered, pointing the opener directly at the doors and holding her thumb on the button. Nothing. She threw it onto the car seat beside her. "Stupid batteries."

She tottered in her high heels up the walk to the front door, then stood weaving as she tried to remember the code for the security alarm. She only had a few seconds after unlocking the door, she didn't remember how long, to punch in the code and prevent the alarm from sounding. She hated that damn alarm, so shrill it hurt her eardrums. The security system had been James's idea, not hers. Men and their gadgets.

It took her a minute to notice that the little red light above the lock wasn't shining. Damn, was everything in the house malfunctioning?

Then she laughed softly to herself. Of course! The electricity was off here, too. She should have noticed how dark the neighborhood was.

She fumbled the key into the lock and opened it, stumbling a bit over the threshold as she went inside. Damn, it was dark as a tomb! How was she

supposed to see?
Candles, she thought. She had candles. She had bought an assortment of incense candles, thinking of the sexy atmosphere they would make when she brought a lover home. There hadn't been any lovers yet, but she was prepared just in case. James had probably had some flashlights around, but she didn't know where they were. It was likely he had taken them with him, the bastard. He wouldn't want his little dolly to be caught in the dark.
But where had she put them? The kitchen? That didn't seem like the right place to put incense candles.
On the other hand, that's where the matches were, and maybe she had put them there. She slipped out of her heels as she felt her way through the dark house to the kitchen. She found the matches first and struck one, relieved by the small flare of light. Three of them burned down before she located the incense candles.
She lit one immediately, to give herself light. Well, this was a fine end to a boring evening, she thought in disgust.
She might as well go to bed, since she couldn't even watch television.

She carried the sack of candles in one hand and the lighted candle in the other as she went upstairs, only stumbling once. "Oops," she whispered. "Have to be careful. I'm carrying fire." The thought made her giggle.
In her bedroom, which she had changed completely after James had left—she had burned all the sheets the bastard had slept on—she lit the candles one by one and set them on her dresser, so she could see the effect when they were reflected in the mirror. Yeah, she thought. Pretty damn sexy. The thick aroma of incense rose, and she coughed a little. Maybe she should go for unscented candles.
She began to undress, leaving her clothes were they fell. The incense grew stronger, and she coughed again.
She halted, her head tilted a little to the side. Had she heard something? She waited, but the house remained silent. Too silent, she thought. Yeah, that was the problem. She was accustomed to hearing the quiet hum of the refrigerator, the clocks, the ceiling fans. Without them, she was too aware of the sounds outside.
When she was naked, she pulled on a robe and belted it loosely at her waist. She was suddenly too sleepy to do the complete cleansing cream routine, so she simply wet a washcloth in the dark bathroom and scrubbed it over her face, then dropped it in the basin.

She yawned as she went back into the bedroom. The candle flames flickered, sending up sickening waves of incense. She leaned over to blow them out, and a face appeared in the mirror.
She whirled around, a scream lodging in her throat.
“Hellooo,” the man said softly.

Chapter 20

The album went skidding across the floor, startling everyone. Marlie was on her feet, swaying, her face utterly white. Her pupils were so constricted that only tiny black dots remained, the intense blue of the irises dominating her stricken face.
“Dane,” she said. Her voice was thin and almost soundless.
“Oh, hell.” He lunged out of his chair and caught her weight against him as her knees began to buckle.
“What’s wrong?” Grace cried in alarm.
Both Dane and Trammell ignored her, their attention focused on Marlie. She was breathing in heavy, jerky gasps, her eyes wide and fixed as she stared at something they couldn’t see.
“Dane?” she said again, pleading despair in her voice. Her hands clutched his shirt, twisting the fabric.
Dane gently eased her down onto the couch. “I’m here, baby,” he said, hoping she could hear him. “Is it happening again?” She didn’t answer. He shook her insistently. “Marlie!”
The jerky breaths roughened into dry sobs. “He’s looking at me,” she said in a voice that was no longer hers.
Dane couldn’t get her to respond again. She sat motionless, her breathing evening out until it was barely perceptible. Her eyes were open and unseeing, unblinking.
“Shit,” Trammell said softly, crouched beside Dane. “When I said she could have a vision here as well as at home, I was joking.”
“Alex,” Grace said in a very clear, determined voice. “What is going on?”
Her lack of understanding proved that Trammell had been his usual closemouthed self, not telling even Grace about Marlie’s abilities.
Dane didn’t take his worried gaze off Marlie’s face. She was beyond his reach and he didn’t like it, didn’t like knowing that she was going through

hell and there was nothing he could do. The waiting was over.
“Alex.” Grace sounded as if she were about to resort to violence.
“Go ahead,” Dane murmured absently to Trammell. “You might as well tell her.”
“Tell me what? What’s wrong with Marlie?”
Trammell stood up and put his hand on Grace’s arm. “Marlie’s psychic,” he explained softly. “She has visions of the murders while they’re happening.”
“Psychic?” Grace glared at him. “I’m warning you, Alex Trammell—”
“It’s true,” Dane said. Violently he wished that it weren’t. “She’s having a vision now. Another murder is happening right now.”
“If this is a joke—”
“It isn’t,” he said flatly.
“Don’t tell anyone,” Trammell instructed. “Other than the three of us, and Lieutenant Bonness, no one else knows.”
She looked uneasily at Marlie. “How long does this last?”
Dane checked his watch. It was 10:36, earlier than the other two murders had happened. “I don’t know. Half an hour, maybe.” The last time, when Jackie Sheets was killed, it had taken him longer than that to bring her out of it. Somewhere in the city, at this very moment, another woman was dying a horrible death; Marlie was gone from him until it was finished.
At 10:54, her right hand twitched convulsively several times, in an abbreviated stabbing motion. Both Dane and Trammell understood the significance of the small movement. Sweat rolled down Dane’s face despite the chill of the air conditioning. He caught her hand and held it, hoping that the contact would comfort her on some unconscious level. Trammell paced restlessly, his dark eyes hooded and dangerous.
“Make some coffee,” Dane murmured. “Or tea. She’ll need it.” Grace moved toward the kitchen, but Trammell waved her back to her seat and went to do it himself.
At eleven, Dane sat down beside her and eased her against his shoulder. Her arms felt icy to his touch. He shook her gently. “Marlie? Can you come back to me now, honey?”
Her eyes didn’t even flicker.
He waited a couple of minutes and shook her again, calling her name. He saw some small movement in her eyelids.
He began stroking her hands and arms, trying to rub some warmth back into her skin. “Wake up and talk to me, honey. Come on, pull out of it.”

Slowly her eyes began to close, and she drooped in his arms as the rigidity began to leave her muscles. He shook her again, not wanting her to slide into that deep, unconscious sleep. “You have to talk to me, Marlie. You can’t go to sleep yet.”

With visible effort she lifted her eyelids and looked at him. She was dazed, incomprehension in her eyes. Panic edged into the blue depths as she fought for consciousness, for her sense of self. It was another moment before recognition flared, followed closely by horror and anguish.

“Shhh, shhh,” he whispered, holding her close. “I’m here, baby.” He could feel the tremor that started in her legs and worked upward, becoming stronger and more violent with every passing second. He reached out, and Trammell put the coffee cup in his hand. Carefully he held it to Marlie’s trembling lips, forcing her to sip. She was gray now, as the shock worsened.

“Please,” she begged, her voice shaking and barely audible. “Let me lie down.”

“Not yet. Drink some more coffee.” He wanted to carry her to bed and let her sleep, while he held her close against the terrors of the night, but ruthlessly he pushed that impulse away. He had to get the details before he could allow her to rest.

“Tell me about it,” he demanded, putting force in his voice. “Tell me what you saw.”

She closed her eyes, trying to pull away from him.

“Damn it, Marlie!” He wasn’t gentle when he shook her this time. “Tell me!”

Her mouth trembled wildly, and tears seeped out from under her lashes.

“It’s dark,” she said. She took a deep breath and let it out with a shuddering sigh. She opened her eyes. “The electricity is out. The storm knocked it out.”

That flat, expressionless tone entered her voice, as she let herself sink into the horror again. She stared straight ahead, and Dane braced himself. “She came home earlier than expected. She’s drunk. She puts some candles on the dresser, lights them. Incense candles, in little glass holders. They stink. She takes off her clothes, puts on a robe. Nice of her, saves him some trouble. She goes into the bathroom and washes her face. When she comes out, he’s waiting for her.”

“Dear God,” Grace said quietly, as the horror of what she was hearing, of what Marlie had endured, began to come home to her.

“He comes up behind her when she bends down to blow out the stinking candles. She sees him, turns around. She doesn’t scream; they almost never do. He’s already too close, the knife already at her throat. Even though she’s drunk, the stupid bitch, he can see that she knows what’s happening. Good. There’s no point in punishment if they don’t understand the lesson.
“He makes her take off the robe. She’s too skinny; he can see her ribs. He doesn’t like that. She’s terrified. She doesn’t argue when he tells her to lie down. Not on the bed—the floor. He prefers the floor. He’s gentle with her, but he can see in her eyes that she knows who he is, knows his power. That’s nice, but it takes away the element of surprise.
“Afterward, he helps her to her feet. He kisses her cheek, strokes her hair. He pulls on her hair a little to make her tilt her head back, and she looks up at him. Please, she says, begging already. No pride. They never have any pride. He smiles at her, and watches her eyes as she feels the first sting of the blade. Then he lets her go, so the race can start.”
Trammell swung away, muttering a curse.
Marlie wasn’t looking at any of them, wasn’t seeing any of them. “She doesn’t run. She just looks at him. He cuts her again. Says, *Run bitch.* She doesn’t. She swings at him, hits him in the face. Then she’s all over him, hitting, kicking, screaming at him. He’s furious; this isn’t the way he wanted it to work. Stupid bitch. If that’s the way she wants it, he’ll give it to her. He slices deep, again and again, to get it over with. He hates her. She was stupid, she ruined it for him. It was supposed to be a race, like the Preakness. Maryland, O Maryland.” Marlie sang the last little bit.
“She’s down. His arm is tired. She isn’t even grunting now when the knife goes in. He gets up…” Her voice suddenly wavered. Dane felt her jerk, then begin to tremble again.
“What?” he asked softly.
Her face was colorless, her eyes stark. “He looked in the mirror,” she said. When Dane merely stared at her, puzzled, she said it again. “He looked in the mirror! He saw himself—and *I* saw him!”
“Jesus Christ.” Every hair on his body stood upright, and a chill chased down his spine. Trammell and Grace were utterly silent, their attention riveted on her.
“He’s completely bald,” she whispered. “He shaves his head. A square jawline. H-His eyes are a little too small, a little too close together.”

Dane couldn’t contain himself. He was on his feet, his powerful body tense and ready for action, “We’ll get a police artist in,” he said. “He’ll work with you on the sketch, and then we’ll get it to all the television stations and newspapers in the area.” It was their first break, and it was a huge one.
“Call Bonness,” he told Trammell. “Fill him in on what’s happened. We need to find the woman, too, one way or another. Marlie, what did she look like—” He turned back to her, and broke off in midsentence. Her head had fallen back against the couch and her eyes were closed, her hands lying limply in her lap.
“Ah, honey,” he said softly. She had given in to the debilitating exhaustion. For a moment he had forgotten the physical price she paid in this. He wanted to kick himself. Immediately he pushed all other concerns aside; others could take care of the details in finding the victim, but only he could take care of Marlie. “You handle everything,” he told Trammell as he bent over her to lift her in his arms. “I’m taking her home.”
“You can both stay here,” Trammell said, but Dane shook his head.
“She’s confused when she first wakes up, and it takes her a while to get her bearings again. It’ll be easier for her if she’s in her own home.”
“How long will it be before she’ll be able to talk to an artist? Bonness will want to know.”
“Noon, at the very earliest. More likely two or three in the afternoon.”
“He won’t like waiting that long.”
“He’ll have to.” With Trammell and Grace flanking him, and cradling Marlie gently in his arms, he carried her to the car. Trammell opened the door for him, and he placed her on the seat, let the back down into a reclining position, and buckled her seat belt.
“Do you need me?” Grace asked. She eyed Marlie’s pale, unconscious face worriedly. “I’ll be glad to sit up with her.” .
“I can handle it. She’ll sleep for at least twelve hours.”
“Well, all right. Call me if you need me.”
“I will,” he said, and kissed her cheek. “Thanks for the offer, though.”
Marlie didn’t move during the drive through the misty, foggy night. Having seen it before, he wasn’t as worried as he had been the first time, but on the other hand, now he knew how exhausted she would be, and how long it would take her to recover. This had to be the last one. He couldn’t let her go through this time and again. As soon as they got a police sketch ready and to the media, he would put his plan into action.

He had barely gotten Marlie home and placed her on the bed before the phone began ringing. Irritably he snatched it up. “Hollister.”
It was Bonness. “We can’t wait until tomorrow to get started on that sketch. This is information that needs to be in newspapers tomorrow.”
“It’ll have to wait,” Dane said harshly. “She can’t do it now.”
“She *has* to.”
“She can’t,” he snapped. “This isn’t a choice she has, or that you have. She’s unconscious with exhaustion, and it takes hours for her to recover.”
“Maybe a doctor can give her adrenaline or something, to snap her out of it —”
Dane ground his teeth together to control a flare of fury. “I’ll break anyone’s arm who comes near her with a needle,” he said, his voice hard and crisp.
Bonness paused, taken aback more by the warning implicit in his tone than the actual words. The words were bad enough, but the tone was deadly. Nevertheless, he tried again. “Damn it, Hollister, you need to get your priorities straight—”
“They’re as straight as they’re going to get,” Dane interrupted again. “No one is touching her. I’m turning off the phone here, so she won’t be disturbed. If you need me, call the beeper number, but don’t waste my time trying to change my mind. Talk to Trammell if you have any doubts about her condition.”
“I already have,” Bonness said reluctantly.
“Then why the hell did you call?”
“I thought maybe there was something we could do—”
“I’ve already pushed her as far as possible, to get what information we did. This hit her harder than the last time, harder and faster. Just leave her alone and let her sleep. I promise that I’ll call as soon as she wakes up.”
“Well, all right.” Bonness was still reluctant. “But the chief is going to be pissed. Obviously, for us to have a sketch, there has to be a witness. He’s going to want to know who and how.”
“You can keep it quiet about the sketch until we actually have one. Until then, just say that a street informant gave us the word on another murder.”
“That’s a good idea. Okay. But when he finds out—”
“Blame it on me,” Dane said impatiently. “I can take the heat. But make it damn plain that if anyone gets to her, he’ll have to go through me.”
“I’ll do that.”

Hanging up the phone, Dane first cut off the ringer, then turned his attention back to Marlie. She lay limply where he had placed her, her chest barely moving. She had lost weight during these past few weeks, he realized, and she hadn't had a lot to spare. When this was over, he was definitely taking her away on that vacation he had promised her, someplace quiet and serene, with nothing to do but eat, sleep, and make love.

Gently he removed her clothes and placed her, naked, between the sheets. Since he had moved in, she hadn't worn anything to bed anyway. He checked the time: fifteen after midnight. Time for him to be in bed, too. He doubted he would sleep for quite a while yet, but at least he could hold her. He threw off his own clothes and got into bed beside her, then gathered her thin, silky body against his sheltering warmth. The faint, sweet scent of her skin soothed him. He buried his face against the thick swath of straight, dark hair. "Sleep, baby," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."

He began trying to rouse her at eleven the next morning, but she was totally unresponsive. His beeper had been driving him crazy all morning. Bonness had called every half hour. Trammell had called twice. Grace had called three times, demanding to know if there was anything she could do, if he needed her to spell him so he could rest.

Trammell had hit on the idea of having the television and radio stations broadcast the information that there had been another murder, but that so far no victim had been found, and asking that people check on their neighbors and call their relatives to account for everyone. It was a tactic likely to drive some people into hysterics if a family member was unreachable for any reason, and Chief Champlin had gone through the roof when he heard it on the radio. The mayor was apoplectic. Didn't they realize the risk they were running with lawsuits? He envisioned thousands of people suing over emotional distress. Bonness covered his ass by blaming it all on Trammell, even though he had given his approval. When the chief called him, screaming in fury, Trammell coolly pointed out that the tactic had precedence, that during natural disasters and emergencies, such as heat alerts, people were often urged to check on their friends and relatives. That calmed the chief down somewhat, but he still wasn't happy.

All over the city, telephones and doorbells rang.

Carroll Janes, indulging in a lazy morning in bed, was puzzled when he turned on the television at noon and heard the news. If the cops hadn't found the victim, how did they know there was one? He wasn't alarmed,

though; he was almost certain no one had seen him, even at a distance, but even if someone had, he couldn't be identified. He yawned and turned off the television set. Let them look.

By twelve-thirty, Dane had gotten Marlie roused enough to visit the bathroom and drink some water, but she had gone to sleep again as soon as he helped her back into bed.

At 12:55, his beeper went off again. The number displayed was Trammell's. Impatiently Dane dialed it.

"We found her," Trammell said, his voice cool and expressionless. "Her name is Marilyn Elrod. Her estranged husband heard the bulletin and called from his girlfriend's house to check up on her. When he didn't get an answer, he drove over. Her car was in the driveway, and she always put it in the garage, so that bothered him right away. He still had keys to the house and let himself in, and found her upstairs in her bedroom."

"Marilyn," Dane said. "Not Maryland. Marilyn."

"Yeah. Look, do you want Grace to come over and stay with Marlie so you can go to the scene?"

He didn't like leaving Marlie, but it was his job, his weekend on call. "Send her over," he said gruffly.

"She's on her way," Trammell said. "I gave her directions. She should be there in five minutes or less."

"You think you're smart, don't you?"

"I just know you, pal."

Grace proved that she drove faster than Trammell by knocking on the door right then. Her normally serene face was troubled when Dane let her in.

"How is she?" she asked immediately.

"Still sleeping. I managed to rouse her for a few minutes about half an hour ago, but she was still too groggy to think. She conked out again as soon as I got her back to bed." As he talked, Dane was slipping into his shoulder holster and putting on his jacket.

"I'm on second shift tonight," Grace said, following him to the door. "I brought my uniform so I can stay until the last possible minute, but I can't stay much past two-thirty. I know it isn't enough time," she said apologetically.

Dane swore under his breath, but didn't see anything else he could do. "It's okay. She'll be more alert next time. Let her sleep until two, then *make* her

respond to you. Tell her where I am, and that I'll be back as soon as possible."
Grace nodded in understanding. As he started down the steps, she said hesitantly, "Dane? Um… I was wondering. That is… Marlie… Can she… ? Oh, damn," she said in frustration. "I don't know how to say this."
Dane turned back. It was unusual for Grace to lose her composure. He saw how uncomfortable she looked, and took a guess. "Can she read your mind?"
Grace bit her lip. "Alex said you were good at doing that yourself," she muttered. "But… yes. Can she read my mind?"
"She says she doesn't." Let Grace see if she could find any more reassurance in that than he did. "And I didn't read your mind. It was a lucky guess, because the idea makes *me* uncomfortable too."
Grace nodded, understanding completely. Dane went to his car, and she stepped back inside, closing the door against the heat.
She followed his instructions and at two began shaking Marlie and talking to her. To Grace's relief, Marlie blinked her eyes open after only a minute.
"Grace?" she asked, the word as blurred as if she had been drinking.
Grace sighed with relief. "Yes, it's me. I've made some fresh coffee. Would you like some?"
Marlie swallowed, trying to push aside the thick fog in her brain so she could think. "Yes," she finally said.
"I'll get it. Don't go back to sleep."
"I won't." It was difficult. Marlie fought it, struggling to understand. Grace was here… Where was Dane? Had something happened to him? Sudden panic dissipated the fog even more, and she managed to sit up. She was nude under the sheet; she clutched the bedcovers to her, looking around, trying to gather some clue about what was going on.
Grace returned with a cup only half-full of coffee, making it easier for Marlie to hold without spilling any. "Where's Dane?" she blurted, her eyes dark with distress. "Has something happened to him?"
"No, of course not!" Seeing her distress, Grace sat down on the bed and patted her arm. "Dane's fine. He left just an hour ago."
"Left?" Confused, Marlie closed her eyes. Behind her lids flashed a nightmare image, surrounded with what seemed like a hundred candles, reflected in a darkened mirror. She caught her breath as part of her memory returned. "What day is this?"

“Saturday,” Grace replied.
“Then it was just last night that it happened.” She inhaled deeply, shoring up her fragile control, and opened her eyes.
“The victim’s been found. Dane’s at the scene now.” Grace knew, from talking to Trammell, that the scene was exactly as Marlie had described it. If she hadn’t been there herself last night, and listened to Marlie talking, she would never have thought it possible. Being an eyewitness, however, tended to make one a believer. “He didn’t want to leave you alone, so I came over.”
“Thank you,” Marlie said. “I’m so foggy when I first wake up that it’s easier if someone is here to explain things.” She had always gotten through it alone until Dane, but still, it was nice to have someone there.
“I can’t stay much longer. I’m on second shift,” Grace explained. “Will you be okay by yourself?”
“I’ll probably go back to sleep.” Marlie sipped the coffee. “Does Trammell mind that you work nights?”
“Of course. If I were on first shift and he worked nights, I wouldn’t like it either,” Grace said, her eyes twinkling. “However, being an intelligent man, he hasn’t made the mistake of demanding that I quit work or try to arrange my hours around his.”
“He’s doing better. We mentioned the word ‘marriage’ several times last night, and you couldn’t see the white around his eyes.”
Grace considered the matter. “His eyes did look rather like those of a panicked horse, didn’t they?” she said judiciously. “I keep reminding him that it was his idea, and he can change his mind any time he wants. Then he thinks that I must not be sold on the idea myself, so he tries to convince me it’s the right thing to do and convinces himself instead.”
“Dane may have to prop him up at the altar.”
“I expect he’ll be steadier by then. I hope so, anyway. It’s just that it happened so fast between us. Things were out of control from the first time we went out together. Alex likes to be in control, so it’s driving him crazy.”
Tactfully Grace didn’t ask about Marlie’s relationship with Dane, and Marlie was grateful. There was nothing settled between them, no hint of permanence despite their living together, and she was too tired to try to explain. She liked Grace a lot, but she had never had the comfort of a confidante, nor had she grown up spending long hours giggling with other girls her age while they dissected every detail of their lives. Until Dane, she hadn’t really spent a lot of time just talking with anyone.

“Do you want to shower while I’m here?” Grace asked. “That will clear out a few of the cobwebs. Trammell said that they’ll want you to work with a police sketch artist as soon as possible, to get the killer’s description out.”
Marlie shoved aside the memory of his face. She couldn’t let herself dwell on it right now. “I’d love a shower. I’ll hurry, so you won’t be late.”
Grace left her alone, and Marlie got out of bed. She felt stiff and uncoordinated, her muscles weak. She had made an effort with Grace, but things still hadn’t quite clicked back into their proper places for her. She would have to make an even greater effort to concentrate, later on, so the sketch would be accurate.
She kept the shower brief, and as cold as she could stand it. After dressing and drinking more coffee, she felt more in control. Grace was reluctant to leave, but Marlie shooed her on her way, then forced herself to walk around rather than lying down as she wanted.
How long would Dane be gone? Would he immediately take her to headquarters, so they could get started on the sketch? She paced until she was dragging, then stretched out on the couch. Sleep came almost immediately, but right before the dark curtain dropped, she had one last, very clear thought:
How long would it be before she no longer saw that face every time she closed her eyes?

Chapter 21

The sketch artist was a short, plump redhead named Esther. Esther had small, quick, ink-stained fingers, shrewd eyes, and a voice like Tinkerbell’s. Her age could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty; her hair was liberally salted, but her skin was smooth and fresh. Like most artists, she wore whatever was at hand. In this case, it was a pair of cutoff sweatpants, one of her husband’s shirts, and sneakers but no socks.
With a cup of coffee in her hand to sustain her, Marlie sat beside Esther and worked through the details of the killer’s appearance. It was a painstaking chore, involving endless variations of eyebrows and noses, size of eyes, width and thickness of lips, slant of jaw, jut of chin. She could close her eyes and picture the face, but duplicating it on paper wasn’t easy.

Dane didn’t interrupt but was always close by, frequently refilling Marlie’s coffee cup. It had been close to six when he had gotten home and roused her from the couch, where she had been sleeping. Though he had been solicitous of her, his mood had been grim as he drove her to police headquarters.

“The bridge of the nose should be higher,” Marlie said thoughtfully, examining the latest effort. She’d done work with police artists so many times in the past, she knew what they needed from her. “And his eyes were a bit closer together.”

With a few deft strokes of her pencil, Esther made the changes. “Is this better?”

“Better, but still not quite right. It’s the eyes. They’re small, hard, and close together. Sort of deep-set, with a straight browridge.”

“Sounds like an ugly son of a bitch to me,” Esther drawled, making more minute adjustments.

Marlie frowned. She was very tired, but forced herself to concentrate. “No, he really wasn’t, not physically. I suppose he could have been called attractive, even with a bald head.”

“Bundy was a handsome devil, but he wasn’t anyone’s dream man. Just shows that you can’t tell by looks.”

Marlie leaned forward. This time Esther’s corrections had brought the sketch closer to the face in her memory. “That’s good. Make the forehead a little wider, and taper the skull more. His head wasn’t that round.”

“More like Kojak, huh?” Deft pencil strokes changed the shape of the head.

“Stop. That’s good.” Seeing the face on paper made her feel a little queasy. “It’s him.”

Dane came over to stand behind Marlie and look at the finished sketch, staring hard at it. So that was the bastard. Now he had a face. Now he would be hunted.

“Thanks, Esther,” he said.

“Any time.”

Marlie stood and stretched, vaguely surprised at how stiff she felt.

Trammell, who had been waiting patiently in the background, came forward to stand beside Dane and examine the sketch. “I’ll get this circulated,” he said. “Take Marlie home and put her to bed before she collapses.”

“I’m okay,” she said, but the flesh around her eyes was dark with fatigue, and her face was drawn.

Dane didn’t argue. “I’ll call later tonight,” he said, putting his arm around Marlie and urging her toward the door. Once they were in the car, she tried to stay awake, but her eyes drifted shut before they had reached the second traffic light.

As he had the night before, Dane carried her inside, put her on the bed, and efficiently stripped her. “Good night, honey,” he whispered, bending over to kiss her.

She put her arms around his neck and clung. “Hold me tonight,” she said.

“I will. Go to sleep now. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

She was in his arms when she awoke the next morning. Seeing her eyes open, Dane turned her to her back and moved on top of her, pushing her thighs apart and settling himself between them. Gently he penetrated, and rocked them both to climax.

His lovemaking made her feel alive again, pushed the ugliness into the background. They lay together for a long time, each finding comfort in the other’s embrace. Finally she said, “Tell me about her.”

Dane kissed her temple, and held her closer as if his nearness would keep the horror at bay. “Her name was Marilyn Elrod,” he said. “Recently separated from her husband, but he was concerned enough to check on her, and went to the house when he couldn’t get her on the phone. He seems pretty broken up about it now, when it’s too late.”

“Marilyn,” she said, making the connection. “Not Maryland, then. Marilyn.”

“The storm had knocked out the electricity in the neighborhood. She lit candles on her dressing table. Everything else was the way you saw it.”

“She fought him?”

“Looks like it. Her knuckles were bruised. Pity she didn’t manage to scratch his face; that would have given us an identifying mark.” Though it probably would have gotten her fingers cut off like Nadine Vinick’s, but he had never told Marlie that little detail. If she didn’t see it in the vision, he certainly wasn’t going to add to her burden of knowledge.

“Won’t his face be marked? Maybe she cut his lip. Was there any blood other than hers?”

“Not that we’ve been able to identify,” he said carefully. He tried not to think about the savage butchery, the vast amount of blood that soaked the room. Finding a few alien drops of blood wouldn’t have been feasible; it would have taken pure dumb, blind luck, and luck hadn’t been their best

friend so far. If it hadn't been for Marlie, they wouldn't have a clue even now.
"But there should be a bruise, or a fat lip."
"That was Friday night. A cut lip heals quickly, and isn't all that noticeable anyway. A bruise can be minimized with ice, and covered with makeup. This is a smart guy. He'll know all the tricks."
"But you'll catch him anyway."
"Yes," Dane said grimly. "I will."
Carroll Janes stared at the Sunday morning newspaper in infuriated disbelief. The police sketch was eerily accurate, though of course, it showed him completely bald rather than with thick blond curls. He crushed the paper and threw it aside. For the first time, he felt a twinge of alarm, and that made him even angrier. The police weren't supposed to get this close to him! Oh, they wouldn't catch him, but they shouldn't even know this much. Who had seen him? He would have sworn he had been unobserved. Had that stupid bitch had a security camera somewhere? He couldn't believe it, for if she had, it would have shown him the first two times he had entered the house, unless, of course, she had been so stupid that she never checked the tape. The police would have, even if she hadn't. No, there hadn't been a camera. He would have discovered it, had there been.
How had this happened? What had gone wrong?
He took comfort in the fact that, as usual, he hadn't left any forensic evidence behind. No hair, no skin, no fingerprints, no footprints. The knife belonged to the victim, and had been left at the scene. He had taken no trophies, nothing that could link him to the scene. He was safe.
But someone had seen him. He had slipped up—totally unacceptable—and someone had seen him. To atone for his error, he would have to correct it. He would have to find this person, and eliminate him—or her.
"Will you go with me over to the Elrod house?" Dane asked.
Marlie stared at him, so stunned for a moment that she couldn't believe what he'd asked. To actually go into the house… Her mind reeled away from the idea. It was bad enough to see it in her mind; to walk into that blood-soaked room was more than she thought she could bear.
Dane's mouth set in a hard line as he saw her sudden loss of color. He clasped her shoulders so she couldn't turn away. "I know what I'm asking," he said harshly. "I know how much it will cost you. I wouldn't ask if I didn't need your help. We're all stumbling around in the dark here, and

you’re the only light we have. It’s a long shot, but maybe, if you were at the actual scene, you’d be able to pick up more about him.”
The last scene she’d been at had been when Dusty had been murdered, when she had lain helplessly and watched as Gleen butchered a terrified, equally helpless little boy. She had lived with the memories ever since; it wasn’t fair of Dane to ask her to add to those memories. He knew what she’d been through, but he hadn’t lived it, so he didn’t know the torment as intimately as she did.
She stared up into those fiercely determined hazel eyes, feeling the force of his will batter at her. She could withstand him, she thought dimly. It was much more difficult to withstand the silent entreaties of Nadine Vinick, of Jackie Sheets, of Marilyn Elrod. She could see all of them, their shades crying out for justice.
Why hadn’t she been able to get into *their* minds, instead of his? He had to select them in some manner; maybe one or all of them had known his name. But instead it was his mental energy that had reached out and tapped into hers, forcing her to feel his evil. But she had once before been in the victim’s mind, had felt Dusty’s death, and it had nearly killed her too. What would it have done to her to have mentally endured that pain and terror again?
“Marlie?” Dane shook her lightly, forcing her to focus on him.
She squared her shoulders, bracing herself. She couldn’t turn her back on this now any more than she could have at the beginning. “All right,” she said steadily. “I’ll go with you.”
Once she had agreed, he didn’t waste any time. Within five minutes they were on their way. It was just after noon; churches had let out, and children were swarming as they drove through the upscale neighborhood where the Elrods had lived. She sat silently, her eyes on her hands as she tried to prepare herself. She didn’t know what to expect; maybe nothing, maybe she would relive the vision, maybe she really would sense something new. And maybe she would look in the mirror and come face-to-face with a killer.
She knew him, knew that he killed without remorse. He enjoyed it. He gloated over his victims’ pain and terror. He wore a human form, but he was a depraved monster who would keep killing until someone stopped him.
Dane pulled into a driveway. The house was sealed with yellow crime scene tape. Though it had been twenty-four hours since the body had been found,

neighbors stood in small knots pointing and gawking, rehashing the few details they had gleaned from television and newspaper reports, and adding new gory ones from the multitude of rumors that raced through the neighborhood.

“We think he entered through the garage, when she went out early in the evening,” Dane said, keeping a firm hand on Marlie’s elbow as they went up the walk to the front door. He held up the crime scene tape for them to duck under. “Because the power was off when she got home, the electric garage door opener wouldn’t work. She left the car in the driveway and entered through the front door. The alarm system didn’t work, either, because of the power outage, but it wouldn’t have helped in any case: It wasn’t connected to the door from the garage into the house. People can make some of the dumbest decisions, for the dumbest reasons. Mr. Elrod said that particular door wasn’t connected so they would have a way of entering without having to fool with the alarm code. They might as well have put a sign on it saying ‘Criminals Enter Here.’”

He talked steadily as he unlocked the front door and ushered her inside. The alarm system had been turned off, because there had been so many people coming and going the day before.

Marlie took a deep breath. The house looked deceptively normal, except for the black powder dusting every slick surface. It had been a very nice, upscale home at one time. She wondered if anyone would ever live here again, if Mr. Elrod would be able to sleep in this house, or be able to sell it if he couldn’t. Perhaps it could be unloaded on some unsuspecting snowbird newly migrated from the North. In her opinion, it should be razed.

She looked around at the spacious, open, high-ceilinged rooms. There was a sense of airy coolness; it must have been a wonderful place to live. The downstairs floors were either polished hardwood or designer tile. She wandered silently through the rooms, trying to force herself to relax and let her mind open, but she couldn’t lock out the dread of going upstairs. She didn’t want to, but knew that she would have to.

Maybe if they waited another day; she wasn’t fully recovered from the vision. Maybe that was why she couldn’t open the mental door that would allow the impressions to enter. She glanced at Dane, then abandoned the suggestion that had been on her tongue. He hadn’t been following her every step, but remained in the doorway of each room while she prowled it. His face was grim, his expression shuttered as she had never seen it before.

There was something curiously remote about him, as if he had shut himself off from any appeal she might make.
“Anything?” he asked, seeing her look at him.
She shook her head.
He didn’t push her. He didn’t urge her to try harder. He didn’t try to hurry her, or tell her to go upstairs to the scene. He was just there, waiting, implacable.
But when she put her hand on the railing and her foot on that first step of the staircase, he caught her arm. His gaze bored into hers, an expression she couldn’t quite read flickering in his eyes. “Are you all right?”
“Yes.” She took a deep breath. “I’m not enjoying this, but I’ll make it.”
“Just remember,” he muttered. “I’m not enjoying it either.”
She looked at him questioningly. “I never thought you were.”
Then she went upstairs. He was right behind her, his tread silent, his presence as solid as a wall.
Where had the killer waited for Marilyn to come home? Her vision hadn’t quite picked up on that; it had begun when he had begun trailing her through the dark house. Maybe, when the electricity had gone off, he had left his hiding place and made himself comfortable where he could see if anyone drove up. She stopped in the hallway and closed her eyes, concentrating, trying to read any leftover energy. Cautiously she opened that mental door, and a buzz of static assaulted her. She slammed the door shut and opened her eyes. She had gotten an impression of many people, of much activity; too many people had been here since the murder, blurring the image.
The door at the end of the hall stood open. That was Marilyn’s bedroom. Marlie walked steadily toward it, and once more Dane caught her arm. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said abruptly. “You don’t need to go in there.”
“Marilyn Elrod didn’t need to die, either,” she replied. “Neither did Nadine Vinick or Jackie Sheets, or any of the other women he killed before moving here.” She gave him a wintry smile and tugged her arm free. “Besides, I’ve already been in there, remember? I was there when it happened.”
Four quick steps carried her into the room. She stopped. She couldn’t go any farther without stepping on dark brown bloodstains. There was no way to avoid them; the blood was spattered all over the carpet, the walls, the bed, though the largest stain by far was the huge one beside the bed, where Marilyn Elrod’s life had finally ended. But she had fought him all over this

room, and left her own blood as her witness. About ten incense candles in their tiny glass pots still sat on the dresser; it was in that mirror that Marlie had seen the killer, looking at him through his own eyes.

She had to open that mental door again, to perhaps glean some other snippet of information. Marilyn deserved that she at least try.

"Don't talk to me for a minute, okay?" she said to Dane, her voice soft, almost soundless. "I want to think."

Maybe the energy was in layers, with the most recent on top. She closed her eyes, picturing the layers, giving them different colors so she could more easily tell them apart. She had to block out that top layer, the one peopled with detectives, uniformed officers, photographers, forensic squads, the multitude who had swarmed the house after Marilyn's death. They had been trying to help, but they got in the way. Mr. Elrod had been here, too, adding another level of energy.

She assigned blue to the policemen and related others, and red to Mr. Elrod. The killer's color was black, the density evil and thick, resisting any penetration of light.

Marilyn… Marilyn's color would be a pure, translucent white.

She formed the picture in her mind, seeing the layers, concentrating on them so all else was forgotten. She existed only inside herself, pulling inward so her ability wouldn't be diluted. Very delicately she peeled off the blue layer and put it to the side. Next came the red layer, very thin because Mr. Elrod hadn't contributed much, harder to handle. It, too, went to the side.

Only black and white were left, but the layers were so entwined that she didn't know if she could separate them. Killer and victim, locked together in a life-and-death struggle. Marilyn had lost that fight.

Very clearly she saw that if she tried to pull the layers apart, she might damage them, damage the information they held. She would have to leave them as they were.

Now was the time to open the door. She mentally stepped into the layers, like stepping into a mist, wrapping the energies around her. She let them surround her, soak into her pores. And then she opened the door.

The blast of evil was suffocating, but nothing she hadn't felt before. She forced herself not to retreat from it, to examine it, while fighting to keep it from overwhelming her as it had the first time. She couldn't let herself be

sucked into reliving the murder, or the effects would be so debilitating, she wouldn't be able to continue.
The evil layer writhed around her, but bits of white kept touching her, distracting her. She pushed the contact away, intent on reading every black energy wave.
There was nothing new, no mental clue about how he had selected Marilyn as his victim. A touch of white jolted her again. There was something compelling about it, an insistence on gaining her attention.
Marlie held back. She couldn't experience Marilyn's death. She simply couldn't.
But the white layer pressed more strongly. The evil of the killer was pushed aside. Marlie saw it clearly in her mind, and was astonished, for she hadn't done it. She looked back to the whiteness, and that break in concentration was enough to let the white energy in.
Panic squeezed her heart as sheer terror seized her. And then a sense of calm seeped in, a quiet soothing.
She stood bathed in the translucent whiteness. This wasn't the energy of Marilyn's last moments, of her terrified, pain-filled struggle for life. This was the energy of afterward, and it wasn't in the past. It was here. It was now.
There were no spoken sentences, no actual words. Marilyn wasn't suffering anymore. She seemed peaceful. But there was a sense of inconclusiveness; she was reluctant to leave. Justice had not been done, the scale was still unbalanced, and Marilyn couldn't leave until her killer no longer stalked innocent women in the night.
Don't worry, Marlie whispered in her mind. *He made a mistake. Dane will catch him now.*
Though the reassurance was welcome, it made no difference. Marilyn would linger until a resolution.
A noise tugged at Marlie's consciousness. It was irritating, but insistent. Instinctively she recognized its source, and her automatic response.
I have to go now. He's calling.
Still she was reluctant to leave that serenity. She hesitated, and felt one last touch of the white energy.
"—Marlie! Goddamn it, answer me!"
She opened her eyes to Dane's furious, worried face. He was shaking her, and her head wobbled back and forth. She squeezed her eyes shut against

the dizziness. “Stop,” she gasped.
He did, and hauled her into his arms. She could feel his heart pounding against his ribs like thunder, hard and frantic. He held her head pressed to his chest, and his grip was so tight that it compressed her rib cage.
“What were you doing?” he raged. “What happened? You’ve been standing there like a damn doll for half an hour. You wouldn’t answer me, wouldn’t even open your eyes!”
She put her arms around him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t hear you. I was concentrating.”
“I don’t call that mere concentration, babe. You put yourself into a goddamn trance, and I don’t like it. Don’t you ever do that again, do you hear me?”
She had frightened him, she realized, and like all strong men, he didn’t take kindly to it. In his anger he had even called her “babe,” something he hadn’t done since she’d told him how much she disliked it.
He bent his head down to hers, pressing his forehead against her hair. “This was a bad idea,” he muttered. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”
But because he was a cop, when they were halfway down the stairs he reluctantly asked, “Did you pick up on anything?”
“No,” she said softly. “Nothing that would help.” She didn’t tell him about Marilyn’s presence, peaceful but resolute, patiently waiting. That had nothing to do with the investigation. It was private, between herself and Marilyn, both of them victims, in different ways, of the same evil.
Dane opened the door, and she stepped out. The bright sun glared directly into her eyes, momentarily blinding her, and she paused. She didn’t see the people rushing toward her until they were right on her.
“I’m Cheri Vaughn with WVTM-TV,” a young woman said. “We have learned that the Orlando Police Department is using a psychic named Marlie Keen to aid in apprehending the Orlando Slasher. Are you Marlie Keen?” Then she thrust a fat black microphone in Marlie’s face.
Stunned, she stared at the lean, fashionably dressed young woman, and at the burly, shorts-clad man who stood behind her with a camera balanced on his shoulder. A van with the station’s insignia blazoned on the side was parked at the curb, and the crowd of neighbors had drastically increased, drawn by the television camera. Roughly Dane shouldered in front of her.
“I’m Detective Hollister,” he snapped. “You’re behind the police line. You have to leave—*now.*”

But the tenacious Ms. Vaughn neatly sidestepped him and once more pushed the microphone at Marlie. “Are you the psychic?”
A confusing flurry of impressions hit Marlie broadside. She couldn’t read Dane; his mental shields were too strong. But Cheri Vaughn, ambitious and slightly nervous, was no match for Marlie’s abilities. Marlie didn’t even have to try; the truth was broadcast at her in deafening waves.
Shock hit her in the pit of her stomach, and she almost choked as the bile of betrayal rose to her throat. It was possible that someone else had leaked the news of her involvement—but no one else had. And only one person had known where she would be at this exact moment.
She felt cold, icy cold, and suddenly alone. Slowly, her face very still, she looked at Dane. He still wore that grim expression, his eyes as narrow and fierce as a hawk’s as he watched her. She could barely breathe. Accusation and betrayal were in her expression as she put her hand over the microphone.
“You set me up,” she said to the man she loved, the man who had used her.

Chapter 22

Marlie turned back to the television reporter. “Yes, I’m Marlie Keen,” she said coldly.
“Ms. Keen, have you been working with the Orlando Police Department to help them locate the killer?”
“Yes.” The one word was clipped. She could barely contain her fury, her sense of betrayal.
Dane put his hand out, as if to block the camera, but Marlie knocked it aside. Cheri Vaughn plunged ahead. “In what way have you aided them, Ms. Keen?”
“I gave them the killer’s description.”
“How did you know what he looked like? Did you have a psychic vision?”
Again Dane moved in front of her, his rough face furious. Marlie sidestepped. This was what he’d wanted, wasn’t it? She was going to deliver, in spades. “Something like that. I know the killer the way no one else does. He’s not a dream man, unless you’re into nightmares,” she said, borrowing Esther’s words. “He’s a worm, a coward who gets his jollies by attacking women—”

“That’s enough!” Dane roared, pushing the camera down and grabbing Marlie’s arm with his other hand, his fingers biting into her soft flesh. “You people leave this scene, *now.*”

Cheri Vaughn blinked at him, looking both frightened and elated. Marlie didn’t have to guess how the reporter felt; she knew. She had come here to act a part, with the promise of some news, but she had walked into a sensational gold mine. Her stock at the station had just gone stratospheric.

Still gripping her arm, Dane hustled Marlie to the car, putting her in on the driver’s side and shoving her over to make room for himself. He slammed the door and turned the key in the ignition. “What the hell were you doing?” he said from between clenched teeth.

She could feel the white heat of his rage, but she wasn’t impressed. “What you wanted me to do,” she replied bitterly. “Attracting the killer’s attention. Wasn’t that the whole point of the exercise?”

Dane thought of denying it, but realized there wasn’t any point in it. She wouldn’t believe any denials he could come up with, and he was so angry right now that he wasn’t inclined to try. “Attract his attention, yes, not drive him into a killing rage!”

“But now you can be certain he’ll come after me. He won’t forgive an attack on his ego.” She was facing forward, not even glancing at him as he drove.

Dane took a firm grip on his temper. He had known she wouldn’t like being exposed as a psychic, but he hadn’t expected her to immediately realize he had set up the entire situation, or to react by goading and taunting the killer.

“How did you know?” he asked a moment later, his voice as grim as his face. “Did you read my mind?”

“You can’t get over your fear of that, can you?” she gibed. “You can relax; your head’s too thick for me to get even a glimmer from you. But the reporter was a different story. She might as well have been carrying a sign. Why didn’t you call her anonymously?”

“She knows me, knows my voice. Besides, I owed her a favor for some information she got for me last year. Breaking a story would help her at the station.”

“Then by all means, if it will help her, throw me to the wolves,” she said, her voice flat. Now that the first shock of betrayal and exposure had passed, several likelihoods had presented themselves, none of them pleasant. She had fretted over his lack of commitment, over the way they had never even

discussed their relationship, and now she knew why. For Dane, there *was* no commitment; he had simply been marking time until the killer struck again, so he could put his plan into action. He had played her perfectly, setting her up for that scene. She thought of what it had cost her to go to that house, and got even angrier.

"I haven't thrown you to the wolves!" he snapped.

"Haven't you? You've set me up as bait."

"Damn it, he's not going to get anywhere near you! Do you think I'd take a chance on something like that happening? I've arranged for a policewoman to take your place. She's already at your house. All you have to do is pack some clothes, and I'll take you to a safe house until it's over."

"No," she said, just as flatly as before.

He slammed his fist onto the steering wheel. "Don't fight me on this, Marlie. You don't have a choice."

"I'm not going to a safe house." She thought of being confined for days, perhaps weeks, with shifts of officers to guard her, and knew she couldn't tolerate it. Her nerves were already raw; that would simply be too much.

Very evenly he said, "I can take you into protective custody and lock you in a cell, if you'd prefer. I don't think you'd like it."

She whirled on him, incensed by the threat. "I don't think you would either, Hollister. I can't stop you from doing it, but I promise you that I'll make your life miserable if you do."

"For God's sake, use your common sense! You can't stay in your house. Or do you think I'd planned to actually use you as a tethered goat?"

"Why not? Why stop short of that? Using me has been your plan all along, hasn't it? Personally, I think you carried it a little far by moving in with me, but I suppose you needed to be on hand when I had another vision, so you could get the ball rolling."

His head snapped around. "Just what you are saying?"

"That if you'd bothered to *ask* me, Detective, I'd have gone along with your plan if it would help flush out the killer. I hate being exposed by the media, because this will wreck my life again, but I'd have done it. You didn't have to sacrifice your body for the cause."

Furiously he slammed on the brakes, stopping the car with a force that jerked her forward in her seat. Luckily there was no one behind them or they'd have been rear-ended. He was as infuriated as she. "Getting involved with you has nothing to do with this!"

“Doesn’t it? I’ve been puzzled by the situation from the very beginning. Can you honestly say that you didn’t have this plan in mind *before* you moved in?”
His jaw worked. “No.” Damn if he’d lie.
“I didn’t think so.”
“Moving in wasn’t part of the plan.”
“It was just too much to resist, wasn’t it?” she taunted.
Roughly he seized her shoulders. “You’re damn right it was. I wanted you, and when I got the opportunity to move in, I took it. Or maybe you think I’ve been faking all those hardons?”
“That doesn’t prove anything. I think you’d get an erection if a fly landed on you.” She tried to jerk away, but he tightened his grip.
Dane took another grip on his temper, the first one hadn’t lasted very long. “Our relationship has nothing to do with this. They’re two totally separate things.”
“If you say so,” she drawled, mimicking his accent.
“Damn it, Marlie—” An angry blast of a horn interrupted him, and he darted a furious glance into the rearview mirror. Several cars were lined up behind him. He stomped the accelerator. “We’ll finish this at the house, while you pack.”
“I’m not going to a safe house.” The words were stony, implacable. “I’m going to work tomorrow just like always. You’ve probably wrecked that, too. They’ll probably fire me, but I’m still going to try.”
“You aren’t going to be fired!”
She stared out the window. So he thought he could just use her to bait his trap, and afterward everything would return to normal? “You can pack, too.”
He slanted a look at her. “What?” He couldn’t stay at the safe house with her.
“I want your stuff out of my house.”
For the first time, the conviction in her voice pierced his impatient anger. Marlie wasn’t just upset; she was deeply, coldly furious, and she hadn’t believed a word he’d said. His stomach knotted. He inhaled deeply, reaching for control. “Okay. Maybe it’s for the best, for now. I’ll see you as often as I can at the safe house—”
“*I am not going to a safe house*. Can’t you understand English?”

“Maybe you don’t,” he said slowly. “Honey, I’m not giving you a choice in this. You can’t stay in your house.”
“Then I’ll stay in a motel, or rent an apartment. I am not going to be locked up because of your schemes. As much as I can, I’m going to live a normal life. I’m going to work, if I have a job, and I’m going to do normal things, like laundry and shopping and going to movies. I lived like a virtual prisoner for the first twenty-two years of my life. I’ll be damned if I let you lock me up again.”
He thrust his hand through his hair. God Almighty, he hadn’t expected her to dig in her heels like this. This was a Marlie he hadn’t seen since the first week he’d known her, and somehow he had let himself forget about her temper. The woman sitting beside him was seething like a volcano, and wasn’t likely to cooperate with him in anything he suggested. He decided to shut his mouth, for now, and cut his losses.
The remainder of the drive was accomplished in silence. When they reached her house, there was a strange car in her driveway, and Trammell’s sports car was parked out front. Marlie got out and went inside without looking at Dane.
Trammell and Grace were both there, as well as a young policewoman who resembled Marlie in size and general coloring. Trammell stood when Marlie entered, took one look at her face, and said, “Uh-oh.”
Coming in behind her, Dane sharply drew a finger across his throat, silencing any other comments.
Marlie turned in time to see the gesture. She gave Trammell a cool look. “Were you in on it too?”
He shifted uneasily. “Not until yesterday.” He had become accustomed to thinking of Marlie as someone who was vulnerable and needed protecting, but there was a look in those deep blue eyes that suddenly made him wary. Dane had told him about Gleen, but until this moment he really hadn’t seen her as a woman who, tied and helpless, had nevertheless spat defiance at a crazed killer. “I take it you’re unhappy.”
“A mite disturbed,” she said, her tone heavy with irony. “I barely lived through one attack from a maniac with a knife, so it bothers me to be set up as bait for another one.”
Dane flinched. He hadn’t thought of it that way. “You’ll be safe,” he said. “Do you think I’d have done it if there were any risk to you?”

She tilted her head, considering him. “Yes,” she finally said, and went into her bedroom.
Trammell whistled through his teeth. “I sense trouble in paradise.”
Grace gave Dane a dirty look. “I would think so,” she said, and followed Marlie into the bedroom.
The policewoman, Beverly Beaver, sat watching them uncomfortably. “Is the stakeout canceled?”
“No,” Dane answered. “You’re still on. As soon as I get Marlie settled, I’ll be back to help set up everything. We have time; the bit won’t be on until the evening news.”
Beverly said, “How are you going to keep the reporters away? The guy can’t get to me if a hundred reporters and photographers are camped on the front yard.”
“The television station is going to play it as a joke. The department will take a lot of heat for it, and the chief is going to say they’ve investigated Marlie and there isn’t anything to her claims. But the killer will know the truth, and he’ll come after her.” He paused. “Are you sure you want to do this, Bev?”
“I’m sure. I’m closest to her in size and coloring, and I’ve had advanced self-defense training. I’m the best choice.” Her voice was philosophical.
Dane wasn’t fooled; Beverly had the reputation of being a tiger. She was chomping at the bit to be in on the stakeout, even though she knew she would have to let the killer get far too close for comfort, so they would have enough on him to make the charges stick.
“Okay.” He cast a harried glance toward the bedroom. “She’s refusing to go to a safe house.”
“We already have it set up,” Trammell said.
“Tell it to her. She’s agreed to leave, but she says she’s going to stay in a motel, or rent an apartment. She’s so mad at me that she won’t go along with anything I suggest.”
“I’ve got an idea. Maybe she’ll listen to me.”
“Give it a try.”
Marlie looked up from the bags she was packing when Trammell sauntered lazily into the bedroom. Grace was helping, taking garments out of the closet and placing them on the bed for Marlie to fold and pack in the suitcases. Dane leaned against the doorway, his face like a thundercloud as he watched her.

“Dane says you don’t want to go to a safe house,‘’ Trammell began.
“That’s right.”
Grace gave her a quick, concerned look. “Marlie, it’s the best place for you.”
“Would you like being confined, possibly for weeks? It would drive me crazy. I’ve done whatever I can to help, and I refuse to be punished for it.”
“But it isn’t punishment,” Grace tried to explain. “It’s to keep you safe.”
“The best judge of whether or not something is punishment is the one on the receiving end,” Marlie replied. “I don’t mind being secluded; I even like it. But I can’t bear being confined.”
“A motel won’t be very comfortable,” Trammell said. “I have an idea. You’ll still need protection, so why don’t you move into Dane’s house? I’ve finished with the renovations, and got the furniture delivered yesterday. That way you’ll be more comfortable, and he’ll be with you at night.”
She gave him an icy glare. “That’s *not* a very good suggestion.”
“It’s the only workable solution.” Trammell countered her glare with a gentle smile. “I know it isn’t ideal, but it’s a compromise that will work, if you’ll let it. Dane won’t take you into protective custody, but I can tell you right now that the chief will order it and not blink an eye.”
Frustrated fury welled up in her, almost choking her. She didn’t want to stay in Dane’s house, didn’t want to be forced into intimacy with him. But Trammell, unfortunately, was right; the chief didn’t know her, and wouldn’t think twice about ordering her detained, for her own good.
“Trammell’s wrong,” Dane said softly, breaking into the silence. He met her angry gaze without blinking. “I *will* take you into custody. You might hate my guts for it, but I’ll do it if I have to. It’s better than risking your life. So, honey, it’s my house or jail.”
Stated like that, she accepted that she had no choice. The move was swiftly accomplished. Marlie took the time to thank Beverly for the risk she was taking, and to show her around the house, then she was hustled out. She insisted on taking her car, so it was a caravan of three that parked at Dane’s house not long afterward.
Dane had seen the completed changes Trammell had wrought in his house, and considered the money well spent. The new furniture was both comfortable and chic; his living room now felt like a patio, with the same sense of freshness and space. His bed was the one thing in the house that had been fairly new; he’d replaced his grandparents’ standard double with a

king-size when he inherited the house. The only reason he had endured the double bed at Marlie's these past weeks was the fact that she had been in it. For that, he had been content to have his feet hang off the end.
If he had had any hope of sharing that big bed with her now, it disappeared when she resolutely carried her clothes into the second bedroom, which had also received Trammell's sprucing up. Still he was fiercely elated. She was here; that was what mattered. She obviously wanted to make a complete break with him, but circumstances had conspired against her, and she was forced to stay with him. He would have the chance to break down that wall of anger.
Again Grace helped Marlie with her clothes. They worked quietly together for several minutes before Grace said, "You're really angry at him, aren't you?"
"Anger doesn't begin to describe it. Not only did he set me up, that was his reason from the beginning for getting involved with me."
Grace looked shocked. "That can't be so!"
"Can't it? He didn't deny planning it before he moved in with me."
"But Alex has been positively gleeful because Dane is so obviously crazy about you. Surely you know that he loves you!"
"If he does, he's never even come close to saying it. In fact, we've never discussed our relationship at all, except for sex. I'm beginning to think that's all it ever was, just sex. He had this plan of his, and as a side benefit I happened to be acceptable in bed."
Grace thought about it. "You've never talked about your feelings at all?"
"Not one word. I called him when a vision started, he came over and took care of me, and simply never left. The next thing I knew, he was hanging up his clothes in my closet."
"I see. Even on our first date, Alex admitted that emotionally he was in deep water," Grace murmured. "And Alex is the most skittish man in the world." She thought about it some more, then pronounced: "You're right. On the evidence, you have to assume that Dane deliberately became involved with you to gain your trust, and moved in with you to stay close to the action, so to speak."
"In a nutshell, he used me."
When Grace left the bedroom, she gave Dane a frosty glare. Trammell caught his partner's eye and shrugged in amusement. Dane didn't think it was a damn bit funny. He didn't protest when they left; the sooner he and

Marlie were alone, the sooner he could begin mending fences. God, what if he couldn't change her mind?

At the thought of losing her forever, he felt a cold knot of panic form in the pit of his stomach.

Marlie finally came out of the bedroom to watch the local evening news. As she had expected, she was the lead story.

"WVTM learned today that the Orlando Police Department has been using the services of a local psychic, Marlie Keen, to aid them in their search for the Orlando Slasher. WVTM reporter Cheri Vaughn talked to Ms. Keen earlier today, when she and a city detective were seen leaving the house of the latest victim, Marilyn Elrod, who lived in Wildwood Estates."

The picture switched from the studio to the tape shot earlier. Marlie watched in silence for a minute, then said, "You played it perfectly. The way you told them to leave, and kept stepping in front of me, looked exactly as if you were trying to keep me under wraps. Do you think I came across as a publicity-hungry kook?"

"Not quite," he muttered. At least she was talking to him. He had been worried that she would give him the silent treatment for the rest of his life. No, she hadn't come across as a kook, at least not to anyone with an ounce of perception. There had been too much controlled anger in her face, too much disgust when she had described the killer.

The next scene featured Lieutenant Bonness, sweating in the heat, looking properly embarrassed. Dane had briefed him on how to play it. Bonness wasn't comfortable with what he was doing, but his discomfort fit in with what he wanted to project. Yes, Marlie Keen had contacted them. They were willing to listen to anyone who might be able to help them with the investigation. Ms. Keen's allegations hadn't panned out, though, and the Orlando PD would no longer be working with her.

Back to the studio. The evening anchors had a few pithy remarks to make about the police department wasting tax dollars chasing down wild ideas from the loony fringe. The spot ended with the information that Ms. Keen, the alleged psychic, worked in the accounting department of a local bank, and named the bank.

"There goes my job," Marlie drawled.

Dane's hand tightened on the can of beer he was holding. "I told you—"

"I know what you told me. I also know you don't know what you're talking about."

His teeth ground together. “For the last time, I didn’t get involved with you just to set you up as bait.”
“No? Just exactly when did you come up with this brilliant plan? And I’m not being sarcastic. It’s a damn good idea. It’ll probably work. But when did you think of it?”
He didn’t have to think, he knew exactly when the plan had occurred to him. Again he chose not to lie. “On the plane coming back from Denver.”
Her eyebrows lifted. “You mean right before you came to my house and made a heavy-duty pass?”
“Yes,” he growled.
“The timing’s a mite suspicious, isn’t it?”
“I wanted you before that, damn it!” he yelled. “But you were a suspect, and I couldn’t get involved with you. As soon as I cleared you of all suspicion, I was knocking on your door.”
She smiled. “And it was just pure luck that I could be used in this way, wasn’t it? I don’t mind that part of it, Dane, I really don’t. What I hate is the way you used a personal relationship to set it up—though it wasn’t very personal for you, was it?”
Red mist swam in front of his eyes. He was so angry that he could feel himself losing control. He got up and walked out of the house, to keep himself from doing something he would regret later.
Damn, this wasn’t looking good at all. How could she doubt what they’d had together? He’d never felt like this about any other woman, and she thought it meant less than nothing to him. He walked around the yard, the lingering evening heat making him sweat. When he thought he had himself under control, he went back inside, but Marlie had gone back into the bedroom.
Probably that was for the best. Both their emotions were too raw for them to talk about this sensibly. Tomorrow, when they both had calmed down, would be better.
Carroll Janes watched the evening news telecast. So that was how they had known! A damn psychic. Whoever would have thought? That certainly wasn’t something for which he could have planned.
The cops didn’t seem to have much faith in her, but just looking at her had given him chills. And what she had said; how could she have been so vicious? She had called him a worm and a coward. After a moment of hurt,

he began to get angry. So he wasn't anyone's dream man, was he? What did that little bitch know?
Actually, he realized, she knew quite a lot. The cops didn't believe her—for now—but the fact was, she was a real danger to him. As no one else had, she had gotten close to him. The only way she could have seen him was in a psychic vision, and the thought made him feel maddeningly vulnerable.
It was intolerable. How ignominious it would be for his downfall to come about because of some kook psychic! The trouble was that she *wasn't* a kook. She was for real. It was the only way she could know what he looked like.
He wasn't safe as long as she lived.
The solution was obvious. The psychic would have to die.

Chapter 23

Janes called in sick the next morning. Marlie Keen had been listed in the phone book, and he had looked up her address on a city map. He didn't have any time to waste; he had to get rid of her as soon as possible. And then perhaps he would think about leaving Orlando; he usually remained in an area longer than this, but the psychic bitch had loused things up for him here. They had that sketch of him. They might discount it now, but when the bitch turned up dead, they would give it a lot more credence.
He smelled setup, but he didn't dare ignore the situation. It was simply too dangerous for him. But he didn't take any chances; he switched license plates with a car belonging to an old lady in the apartment building who seldom drove anymore. He would switch them back when he returned, so that if any suspicious cop was watching the traffic on Marlie Keen's street, when they traced that tag, it would come back as belonging to a Mrs. Velma Fisher, whose car was nothing like the one that had been sporting the plate. But when they checked Mrs. Fisher's car, the license plate would be there, convincing them that they had made an error in writing down the number.
His blond curls were snugly in place when he set out. Such an extravagant head of hair was a brilliant disguise, if he did say so himself. They were looking for a bald guy. It was an ingenious way of changing his appearance, because either way, his head was what people noticed: They would look at the blond curls, and not the face beneath it, or, if he was seen during one of

his nights, they would notice the slick skull and nothing else. Simply brilliant.
He rolled down his car window and turned up the radio. That was another piece of psychological subterfuge: Cops wouldn't expect him to draw attention to himself with a loud radio. If this was a trap, they wouldn't expect him to boldly drive by, where they could get a good look at him. That was why they never had been able to catch him. He could predict their actions and reactions, but they didn't have a clue how his mind worked. After all, how could anyone without an imagination begin to understand what it was like to have one?
So he casually drove by the bitch's house, and just as casually glanced at it. There was a car in the driveway, why wasn't she working? The newscast had plainly said that she was employed at a bank. There seemed to be a lot of cars parked along the street. That chill went down his spine again. He didn't actually see anything, but he hadn't escaped for so long by being stupid; quite the opposite. This definitely felt like a setup.
He didn't risk another drive-by. He drove back to his apartment, switched the license plates again, and thought. If it was a setup, then the cops wouldn't let the bitch stay at her house. They would have her salted away somewhere they thought was safe. It would be impossible for him to locate her, much less get at her.
Or would they? The trap would look much more realistic if she appeared to be going about her normal routine.
There was only one way to check. He looked up the telephone number of the bank where she worked and punched in the numbers. It was answered on the first ring, by a bored-sounding young woman with a breathy voice.
"Marlie Keen, in accounting, please," Janes said briskly.
"Just one moment."
Another ring, and a click. "Accounting." Another female voice.
"Marlie Keen, please."
"Hold on." He heard the woman say, in a more distant voice that indicated she had taken the receiver away from her mouth, "Marlie, line two."
Janes hung up the phone. She was at work.
He laughed to himself as he went back out to his car. What simpletons they all were, if that was the best they could do! He would follow her when she left work, though of course, if she went to her house, he would break off contact rather than take the risk of driving down her street again.

His biggest problem, he told himself, was finding some shade to park in while waiting for her to leave the bank.
He picked her out when she went to lunch; he remembered that thick dark hair and slender build. His heart pounded with excitement, then he sternly brought himself under control. He couldn't allow himself to make a mistake out of haste.
He snickered as he followed her. She wasn't much of a psychic if she couldn't tell that he was only two cars behind her. But she was still a danger to him, and that couldn't be tolerated.
She picked up lunch at a drive-through fast-food window, and returned to the bank. He had no chance to get at her. So he patiently settled down to wait once more.
She left work at four. He had carefully watched the parking lot. There hadn't been any suspicious lingerers— other than himself, of course. He hummed as he pulled out a few cars behind her, and kept about the same distance behind her.
She didn't make any stops. She drove straight to a smallish house in an older neighborhood. He noted the address and kept on driving. He went to the library and looked up the address in the city directory; the house was listed as the residence of Dane Hollister. Janes's eyebrows shot up, and he grinned. He knew that name; it had been in the papers quite a bit lately. Detective Dane Hollister was investigating the Slasher murders. Now, wasn't that a coincidence?
The bank president hadn't done it; not even the vice president had done it. But the head of accounting had been called into a meeting with them, and this was one of those occasions when Marlie didn't need to be psychic to know what was happening. She wasn't surprised when the department head returned, looking unhappy, and asked Marlie into her office. They regretted the necessity, but their first responsibility was to their depositors, et cetera, et cetera. The bottom line was that Friday was her last day. They felt magnanimous in allowing her to stay that long.
She thought about being magnanimous in turn and quitting right then, which was obviously what they wanted, but the impulse didn't last long. She wasn't in the best of moods.
She was still angry when she drove to Dane's house, so angry that there wasn't much room for anything else. She had been angry since the moment

she had realized how Dane had betrayed her, and expected to be angry for the foreseeable future.
She had been home just long enough to change into comfortable clothes when she heard a car drive up. She looked out the window expecting to see Dane, but instead watched Trammell unfold his long form from his low-slung car. She went to the door to let him in.
“Hi, sweetie.” He twirled his sunglasses from one long finger and bent down to kiss her cheek.
She lifted a sardonic brow at the display of affection. “What’s with the sweet talk?”
He grinned and raised his hands. “Don’t shoot, I’m unarmed. I see you haven’t cooled down much.”
“Are you the symbolic hat through the door, to see if I attack?”
“Not exactly. Dane got delayed for a few minutes, and we don’t think you should be alone.”
“Thanks for the concern.”
“You don’t sound sincere,” he teased, but his lazy dark eyes were watchful.
“I was fired today,” she retorted. “I don’t feel like celebrating. Out of the goodness of their hearts, I’ll be allowed to finish out the week.”
He snorted. “I’d have walked out on them today.”
“So would I, if that hadn’t been exactly what they wanted. Do you want something cold to drink?”
“Only if it isn’t alcoholic.”
“I can manage that. Lemonade, fruit juice, tea, or soft drink?”
“Tea.”
“Coming up. Smart man, not to drink and drive.”
“I don’t drink much anyway. It upsets my system,” he drawled. He followed her into the kitchen. “Did you get settled in last night?”
“I wouldn’t go that far. I got my things put away.” She took two glasses out of the cabinet, dropped ice cubes in them, and filled them up with the tea she had brewed that morning before going to work. “Lemon?”
“No, thanks. I drink my tea straight.”
She chuckled as they clinked glasses.
Trammell eyed her as he sipped the cold liquid. “Are you going to forgive him?”
She shrugged. “It wasn’t the media ploy that upset me as much as realizing he ‘trifled with my affections,’ to use an old southern phrase.”

“You really think he doesn’t care anything for you?”
“If he does, he’s never mentioned it. What hurts is that he deliberately cultivated my feelings for him, and then used them to manipulate me.”
“He can have tunnel vision when it comes to his work,” Trammell said delicately. “Let’s sit down.”
“Are you going to plead his case?” she asked as they took chairs at the table.
“Not really, but I know Dane better than anyone else on earth, including you, including anyone in his family. They only grew up with him; you’ve only slept with him. I’ve risked my life with him. I know him from the ground up.”
“Do you think he’s capable of cold-bloodedly using someone in an investigation?”
“Of course he is. He’s a cop. So am I. But he’s never been cold-blooded where you’re concerned. How can I put this without being crude?” he mused, looking at the ceiling. “Do you remember when you came to Bonness’s office, and you and Dane all but went to war right then?”
She nodded.
“Well, to put it delicately, he had a boner so hard a cat couldn’t scratch it.”
Marlie choked on her tea, then fell back in the chair, shrieking with laughter. Trammell stretched out his long legs, as languorous as a cat, looking pleased with himself while he waited for her to calm down.
“He’s my hero,” he continued lazily after a moment. He wasn’t looking at her now, but a tiny, rather self-mocking smile lurked around his mouth as he stared at the ice in his glass. “I didn’t join the force out of idealism or anything like that; I was bored, and it seemed like an interesting job. Dane and I were paired after the first year, and we’ve been together ever since. I don’t believe in much, or trust much, but Dane is a rock I can rely on no matter what. Not that he’s idealistic, either. He’s even more cynical than I am.
“But he’s got a sense of right and wrong that he’s never lost touch with. All I see are shades of gray, but Dane can see the black and white. He knows that there are certain things worth fighting for, and he’s willing to put himself in the front line. He’s a gallant, heroic bastard, and he’s never even conscious of it. He’s an old-fashioned southern good old boy, the salt of the earth. He’s street-smart, woods-savvy, and sly as a fox. A real throwback. Mean, too. Damn, can he be mean! But he turns to putty where women are

concerned. We used to laugh at him, when he was still on patrol and had to work an accident. If there was a woman involved, it didn't matter if she was just holding her arm and a man was lying there bleeding from a dozen places; it was as if Dane never saw the guy. He'd go straight to the woman, make certain she was all right, so tender they'd be melting at his feet within a few minutes. It would embarrass him when he realized he'd left another man lying in the street, and we were all laughing at him."
"You don't have to tell me he has a good bedside manner," she said dryly.
"No, I don't suppose I do. But I've never before seen him the way he is with you. He's always had women, and not one of them ever meant enough to him to interfere with the job. Until you. He couldn't get you off his mind. You drove him crazy; you made him so angry he couldn't think. It was the most amusing thing I've seen in a couple of years. *He* may not know he's in love with you, but trust me, he won't let you go. I know him. If you walk out that door, he'll be right behind you."
She gave him an incredulous look. "How can a man not know if he's in love? Give me a break."
"Well, it's never happened to him before."
"Had it happened to *you*, before Grace?"
He looked uncomfortable. He swallowed, hard. "Uh, no."
"Did you recognize it?"
"Let's just say that I fought it."
"But you knew it was there. *I'd* never been in love before, either, but I knew what it was."
"Dane's more hardheaded than most."
"You're telling me," she muttered. "I can't read a thing from him."
Trammell gave a shout of laughter, but quickly sobered. He gave her an uneasy look. "Can you read me?"
She smirked at him, happy to see him squirm. "I haven't tried since I regained the ability."
"How about Grace?"
"I don't intrude on my friends," she said sternly.
"Psychic's Code of Honor, huh?"
"It wouldn't be polite. I've always had to try to block people out, rather than try to receive their feelings."
They heard a car door slam outside. "There's Dane," Trammell said, and drained his glass. "Think about it, Marlie. Give the guy a break, and save

our sanity. It's been dangerous to talk to the man today."
"I'll consider your view of things," she said. "But my final decision depends on him." Until ten minutes ago, she had thought that she had already made her final decision, but Trammell's explanation that Dane was hardheaded had made her pause.
Dane walked in, looking hot and irritable. His gaze settled first on Marlie, with a sort of bad-tempered yearning, then on the tea they were drinking. He prepared a glass of tea for himself and sat down with a sigh. "It's been a bitch of a day."
"Tell me about it," Marlie said sweetly. "I got fired."
He stared at her for a moment, then dropped his head to the table in despair. "Shit."
"I'm out of here," Trammell said, smiling at Marlie. "See you in the morning, partner."
Dane didn't reply. Marlie sipped her tea. Trammell let himself out.
The silence in the kitchen became thick. Marlie said, "When this is over, I think I'll move back to Colorado."
Dane lifted his head. There was a pale cast to his tanned skin, and his mouth was compressed to a thin line. "No," he said, very softly.
She leaned back and crossed her arms. "What are you going to do, threaten me with protective custody again? I don't think you can get away with that." She pushed her chair back and got up, then carried her glass to the sink.
She had just rinsed it out and placed it in the drainer when two hard hands closed on her arms and whirled her around. She drew back as far as she could, but the cabinets halted her retreat. He leaned heavily into her, his hips grinding against hers. His face was stark.
"I won't let you go," he muttered. "Damn it, Marlie, how can you even talk about leaving when we have this between us?"
"This?" she flared, wriggling her hips and feeling him get hard. "It's just sex."
"It's more than just sex, damn it!"
"Is it? From where I stand, that's all it's ever been," she taunted him, feeling him quiver with rage and enjoying it. Something fierce and hurt inside her wanted him to feel the pain as she had.
His hazel eyes went green as his control broke. "By God, if sex is all it is, then we might as well enjoy it," he said thickly as he swooped her into his

arms.
Dizzily off balance, Marlie clung to him as he strode toward the bedroom. Her heartbeat was thundering wildly, blood surging through her veins. She wanted to hit him. She wanted to bite him. She wanted to tear his clothes off and hurl herself onto him. Love and anger and lust swirled together in a volatile mixture. Maybe they couldn't communicate with words just yet, the anger was too strong, but maybe their bodies could bridge the gap. When he roughly placed her on the bed, she reached up and grabbed his shirt and tugged, pulling him down on top of her.
In fierce silence they struggled together. His hard mouth bruised hers with the force of his kisses; she bit his lower lip, making him curse, then gently sucked at it. He tore the button off her shorts in his need to get her out of her clothes. She fought with his zipper, finally got it down, and hungrily shoved her hand down the front of his briefs. His shaft filled her hand, hard and throbbing. The head of it was already wet.
He was breathing roughly, audibly, as he stripped her panties off and in the same movement rolled on top of her, kneeing her thighs apart. He drove into her with savage need, and she cried out at the rough penetration even as she coiled her legs around him.
Supper was forgotten in the long, heated hours that followed. The heat of sunset dimmed into twilight. At first, Dane made love to her with a furious intensity that held anger and resentment at the tension he had been under. Marlie was as fierce, biting him, digging her nails into him, slamming her hips upward to take him.
They didn't talk. That first wild lovemaking didn't allow room, or thought, for words. Afterward they lay together in silent exhaustion, their bodies still linked. The bond they had just reforged felt too new, too fragile, to allow for separation just yet. They dozed, and Marlie awoke some undetermined time later when he began making love to her again.
This time he was tender, lingering over her. He kissed the bruises his fierce grip had left on her silky skin, silently apologizing. She licked the crescents her nails had made on him. He rode her for a long time, slowing down whenever he felt his climax approaching, not yet ready to release the pleasure.
Both of them were acutely aware that he wasn't wearing a condom. He supported his weight on his forearms as he moved in and out of her, their gazes locked, and the knowledge was in their eyes. When he couldn't hold

off his climax any longer, when she had already convulsed twice, she gripped his buttocks and pulled him deeper into her as he let it overtake him. He shuddered and bucked with the force of his pleasure as he jetted his semen into her.

Again, it wasn't time for words. Not yet. They slept again, entwined together, and twilight became dark.

Marlie woke first. Her body ached deliriously, and she felt the hunger growing for more of what had caused the ache. Dane still slept, but when she began caressing his shaft, both he and it stirred immediately. He rolled over onto his back and closed his arms around her as she slid on top of him.

"Stay with me," he whispered, and closed his eyes in delight at the way the hot silk of her body so snugly enveloped him.

She hesitated, then felt him throb within her. "All right," she whispered in return, and gently began to move. It wasn't much, but after the ferocity of their lovemaking, she didn't doubt his sincerity. He hadn't been a cop, trying to catch a killer; he had been simply a man, wild with need for his woman. He hadn't committed himself yet, at least not with words, but the bond of the flesh had reassured her. She could wait for the rest of it.

Carroll Janes had thought it over very carefully. He had to get the bitch alone, so that meant he had to get Detective Hollister to leave.

He didn't call 911, which would give the dispatcher the telephone number he'd called from. He called police headquarters directly.

He knew himself to be a very good actor. He was proud of the frantic tone of his voice when he said, "There's been a woman killed! There's been another—it's him! I swear to God it had to be him. Blood—she's cut everywhere! Butchered! I saw him leaving, bald head just like in that sketch!"

"Slow down, slow down," the authoritative voice said. "I can't understand you. Repeat that, please."

Janes drew in deep, audible breaths. "Another woman's been killed. I saw a bald man run. She's cut all to pieces, there's blood—" He made gagging noises in the phone.

"Calm down, sir. Where are you? Can you give me an address?"

Janes rattled off an address he had looked up, on the opposite side of town. He stumbled over the street and numbers a couple of times to make it realistic. Then he hung up and waited.

He was at a phone booth two blocks from Detective Hollister's house.

The telephone rang. Dane snatched it up. After listening a minute, he said, "I'm on my way." He rolled out of bed and began pulling on his clothes.
Marlie raised herself on her elbow. "What?"
"Another murder," he said tersely. "They think it was him."
She shook her head. "No."
He paused, remembering. "That's right. You didn't feel anything, did you?"
"Not a thing. It wasn't him." She got out of bed and began dressing, too.
He sighed. "It's probably another copycat, damn it. I'm sorry, baby."
"It isn't your fault," she said. "You're on the task force; you have to go."
He pulled her into his arms, holding her tight against him. "I don't know how long I'll be gone."
She rubbed her face against his chest, enjoying the heated scent of him. "I'll watch television and wait up for you."
He tilted her face up and leaned down to kiss her. "If you happen to go to sleep, I'll wake you up."
"It's a deal."
"We have a lot to talk about," he said, determination in his voice.
"I know. Go!"
He started toward the door, then turned back. He pulled open the top drawer of the bedside table and took out a pistol. He checked it, made certain the chamber was full and that the safety was on. "Keep this handy. Do you know how to use it?"
She nodded. She wasn't exactly experienced, but she knew how a pistol worked. After all, she had lived alone in the mountains; it had seemed only smart to teach herself the basics.
He kissed her again. "Okay. Be careful, keep the pistol with you, and don't open the door to strangers. I'll radio in and have a patrolman over to watch the house; one should be outside within five minutes. I'll call you when I'm on the way home, so you won't shoot me by mistake."
"I said I'll wait up for you," she said, smiling.
"A man can't be too careful. Or a woman," he added sternly.
"Gotcha."
He left, and she turned on the television, settling down on the couch to run through the channels and look for something interesting.
Dane had been gone for less than five minutes when she sat bolt upright, her heart pounding. A cold chill chased over her skin, roughening it. A powerful sense of alarm filled her.

She felt the blow of recognition as an image flashed through her mind, blotting out her own thought: black-gloved hands, one of them holding wire cutters, tugging at a group of wires.
She panted, trying to draw in enough oxygen from air that suddenly seemed to suffocate. Dear God, so he was striking after all! And Dane had left. Had the call been a false alarm, to draw them away, so the killer could get at Beverly? The policewoman would be all alone.
Marlie stumbled toward the phone. A vision flashed, halting her. In her mind, she saw the wire cutters biting through plastic and wire.
And the lights went out.

Chapter 24

Marlie. Froze, blinded by the sudden darkness, paralyzed by terror and the crashing knowledge. He wasn't after Beverly, he was after her—*and he was right outside.*
She closed her eyes, squeezing them tight, trying to hurry her night vision. She should try to get out, but by which door, front or back? Or was he at a window? Which one? *Which one?*
—Gently he cut a screen, snipping the tiny strands one by one—
Desperately she fought off the vision. Oh, God, she wouldn't let herself be swamped by the vision.
She would be helpless. But she had never been able to resist one for long, never been able to block it, or control it. They rolled over her like tidal waves.
—He knew she was in there. He could *feel* her, the bitch. He could already taste the triumph, the power—"No," Marlie moaned in a whisper.
Desperately she summoned up an image of the mental door she had learned how to open and close. All she had to do was close it, and keep him on the other side.
—He'd see how smart she was when she felt the blade biting into her—It was washing over her in black waves. The evil was so strong, she couldn't breathe. He was so close, the power of it was crushing her. She couldn't fight him off.
—The damn lock on the window wouldn't budge. White-hot fury roared through him at this delay. Snarling, he smashed his gloved fist into the glass

—

She heard the crash and tinkle of breaking glass, but the vision was roaring through her, blotting out everything else, and she couldn't tell where it was coming from. It could have been right behind her, but he was sucking all the strength out of her, and she couldn't even turn around.

Dane. Oh, God, Dane! She didn't want him to have to see this.

As soon as he got into his car, Dane radioed in and told the dispatcher to send a patrol car to his house immediately.

"Ten-four," said the dispatcher. "It'll take ten, fifteen minutes, though. It's a busy night."

"Do it faster than that," Dane said, iron in his voice.

"I'll try. Depends on when a patrolman gets free."

Dane hesitated, reluctant to leave Marlie alone for that long, but his job was to be on the crime scene, copycat or not. The detectives who had worked the other scenes had to make the call, decide if it was the same perp. He had given her his pistol, and a patrolman would be there soon. She would be okay.

He told himself that for several miles, but finally pulled to the side of the street and stopped. This didn't feel right, damn it. Something was wrong. He felt a sense of dread that had grown stronger with each passing mile and minute, but he couldn't pin down the cause.

It was a copycat killing, no doubt about that. It wasn't unusual; they had already had one. But something was *wrong.*

He keyed the mike. "Dispatch, this is Hollister. Has a patrolman gotten to my house yet?"

"Not yet. A car is on its way."

Frustration welled in him. "Any further information on that knifing that was just called in?"

"No further—wait." Dane listened to static, then dispatch came back on the air. "That's affirmative. A squad car is on the scene, and the patrolman just radioed in. It looks like a false alarm."

Dane's sense of dread increased. His mind raced as he went through the angles. "Dispatch, was it a male or a female who called in the initial report?"

"A male."

"Shit!" He keyed the mike again. "Dispatch, contact the stakeout immediately! Verify that everything is okay. The false alarm may have been

deliberate.”
“Affirmative. Stand by.”
Dane waited tensely in the dark car, sweat rolling down his face. Within a minute his radio crackled. “No problems at the stakeout, Dane. Everything’s as quiet as a graveyard.”
He shook his head. There was trouble and he knew it. But where? *Where*? The false alarm had been deliberate, in an effort to draw off Marlie’s protection. But Beverly had taken Marlie’s place, and the ploy hadn’t worked—
He froze, horror exploding in his brain. It had worked all too well. Marlie!
More glass shattered as he punched the window again. Desperately Marlie pictured the door, pictured the vision pressing against it, all black, loathsome evil. She pictured herself shoving against the door, forcing it shut, closing out the vision. She had to control it; she would die if she didn’t. Her only chance was to control it, as she had the knowing.
She was stronger now than she had been before. She could do it.
The pistol. It had been beside her on the couch. She opened her eyes and lurched in the direction of the couch, but the vision had already sapped her strength, and her legs gave way beneath her. She fell heavily to the floor, but her outstretched hand brushed the couch, and she forced herself to her hands and knees, crawling to it and groping along the cushions for the pistol.
There it was, cold and heavy, reassuring in her hand. With wildly trembling fingers she fumbled the safety off.
—He was in. It wouldn’t be long now. The knife glinted in his hand, long and lethal, the blade honed to a razor’s edge—
The door! Mentally she slammed it shut once more. Keep him out. She had to keep him out.
She could hear her own breath coming in strangled sobs. Quiet. She had to be quiet. Weakly she crawled toward the corner, to put a wall at her back so he couldn’t come at her from behind. The darkness in the house was almost total, with the blinds closed. She had the advantage there; she knew the house, knew where she was. He had to hunt her. She had to be very, very quiet.
Keep the door closed.
But where was he? She couldn’t hear over the roaring in her ears, deafened by the thunder of her own blood racing through her veins.

She used both hands to steady the heavy pistol. Dane. Dane, who never went anywhere unarmed. *Thank you, Dane, for this chance. I love you. Where was he?*

She closed her eyes and mentally opened the door a crack.

—Where was she, the bitch? He could turn on the flashlight, but not yet, not yet. So she thought she could hide, did she? Didn't she know how much he enjoyed the chase? Of course she did. Sweet bitch. Was she in the bathroom? He pushed the door open. The white fixtures gleamed in the darkness like enamel ghosts. No bitch here—

She slammed the door. She could feel the pressure of his mental energy, pushing against her. She opened her eyes and forced herself to look toward the hall where the bathroom was. *Don't stare, Marlie. Don't let yourself stare. You won't see him if you do. Keep your eyes moving, don't let them fix. You'll see his movement.*

Was that him? Was that a darker shadow, coming toward her? She didn't dare open the door again, not now. If it was him, he was too close. He would be on her before she could react. But was he really there, or was it her imagination?

A bright light exploded in her face, blinding her, and a ghastly voice crooned, "Well, hellooo there."

She pulled the trigger.

Several cars converged on the house almost simultaneously. Dane had given orders for them to go in with lights flashing and siren blaring, hoping against hope that they would be in time and scare him off. He drove like a maniac, praying as he had never prayed before. He didn't care if they missed this chance to catch him. *Please, God, let them scare him off. Don't let him be in the house. Don't let him have already been and gone. God, please. Not Marlie.*

He slammed the gear into park, the car rocking violently on its springs. He was out and running before the motion stopped. The house was dark. *God, no.*

Something heavy hit Dane in the back, sending him sprawling on the ground. He roiled to his feet with a savage snarl, his fist drawn back. Trammell picked himself up, as fast as Dane, and grabbed his arm. "Get control of yourself!" Trammell roared, his face as savage as Dane's. "You won't help her by going in blind! Do it the way you know it's supposed to be done!"

Uniformed officers were swarming around the house, surrounding it. All Dane could think of was Marlie inside. He shook Trammell off and plunged at the door. It was locked. He threw himself at it like a maddened animal, the force of his weight making it shudder in the frame. It was a solid door, reinforced with steel. The dead-bolt lock was one of the best made. It held. The hinges didn't. The screws ripped out of the wood with a tortured shriek, metal twisting.

Seeing he couldn't stop Dane, Trammell added his considerable strength to the task, and helped him wrench the door out of the frame. Hoarsely screaming Marlie's name, Dane pitched himself into the dark bowels of the house.

He stumbled over something soft and heavy, and crashed to the floor. His heart stopped beating, for a long, agonized moment that froze in time.

"Oh, God," he said, the voice not recognizable as his. "Get a light."

One of the patrol officers took his long, heavy flashlight out of his belt and thumbed the switch. The powerful beam illuminated Dane, crouched on the floor with a look of frozen horror on his face, and Trammell, who looked almost as bad. In the center of the beam sprawled a black-clad figure, the shaven skull gleaming dully. He was on his back, and his sightless eyes stared upward. The stench of blood and death was overpowering. A black pool of blood had gathered around the body.

"Dane." The almost soundless whisper raised the hairs on their arms. "Dane, I'm here."

The flashlight beam swung wildly toward the corner, and Marlie flinched from the light, closing her eyes and turning her head away. Dark wetness glistened on the white of her shirt. She still held the pistol, both hands clasped around it.

Dane couldn't manage to get to his feet. He crawled to her, his mind still unable to believe that she was alive. He cupped her cheek in a shaking hand, and smoothed her hair back from her face. "Baby. Oh, God, honey."

"He cut me," she said, as if apologizing. "I shot him, but he didn't stop. He just kept coming. So I kept shooting."

"Good," he said with barely restrained savagery. His hands were trembling wildly, but with the utmost tenderness he lowered her to the floor. "Just lie down, honey. Let me see how bad you're hurt."

"I don't think it's serious," she said judiciously. "It's the top of my shoulder, and my left side. But it's just cuts; he didn't stab me."

He was barely holding himself together. Only the knowledge that she needed him now kept him from throwing himself on the body and tearing it to pieces. God! This was the second time in her life a madman had attacked her with a knife. How could she be so calm, when he was shaking apart?
“He cut the wiring,” she was saying. Suddenly she sounded exhausted. “I’m very tired. If you don’t mind, I’ll tell you all about it later.”
“Sure, baby.” He pressed the heel of his palm over the oozing cut in her side. “Go to sleep. I’ll be with you when you wake up.”
She gave a little sigh, and her heavy eyelids closed. Dane was aware of the house filling with people, but he didn’t look up.
“Dane.” It was Trammell, kneeling beside him. “The medics are here, buddy. You need to move back so they can help her.”
“I’m stopping the bleeding,” he said in a hoarse voice.
“I know. It’s almost stopped. She’s going to be all right, partner. Everything’s going to be okay.” Trammell wrapped his arms around him, easing him away from Marlie. The medics moved to take his place. “We’ll go to the hospital with her, but she’s going to be fine. I promise.”
Dane closed his eyes and let Trammell lead him away.
“I really do feel well enough to go home,” Marlie said the next morning. She yawned. “It’s just that I’m tired from fighting off the vision.”
“And from loss of blood,” Dane said. “Maybe tomorrow.”
She was propped up in bed, and except for the thickness of the bandages on top of her shoulder and at her waist, it was difficult to tell there was anything wrong with her, though to Dane’s critical eye she was still far too pale.
He had been at the hospital with her all night. If he lived to be a hundred and fifty, he’d never forget the absolute, bone-chilling terror of those minutes when he had realized that he had been lured away, and left Marlie unprotected. It had taken him a lifetime to get back to her, and cost him another lifetime in the effort to get into the house. The hospital had been a zoo, with cops everywhere and reporters fighting to get in to talk to Marlie, and Dane had been totally unable to cope with it. All he had been able to do, once the doctors had let him get to her again, was hold her hand and try to reassure himself that she was really all right.
Trammell had taken over, he had handled the reporters, categorically denying them access to “Marlie’s room but promising a news conference later in the morning. He had deflected Bonness and Chief Champlin away

from Dane. He had called Grace, who had brought fresh clothes and toiletries for both Dane and Marlie. Dane had showered and shaved, but the haggard lines in his face revealed the toll the night had taken on him. If it hadn't been for Trammell, he wouldn't have made it through the night. Trammell had been there for most of the night, too, but he had left around dawn and just returned. He was impeccably dressed, as always, though he, too, showed the signs of a sleepless night. Grace had remained with them.
Marlie pressed the button that moved the head of the bed to a more upright position. She truly did feel well enough to go home; the cuts were sore, and she had to be careful when she moved, but all in all she wasn't in any undue pain. She was alive. The heavy sense of evilness that had been pressing down on her for weeks was gone. The sun seemed brighter, the air fresher.
"I've told you everything that happened last night," she said. "Now I want to know what you've found out this morning."
Dane smiled at her reassuringly normal tone. "Don't look at me. I haven't left this place. I don't know anything."
Grace stretched out her long legs. "Yes, Alex, spill your guts."
Trammell propped himself against the windowsill. "We found his car about two blocks away, and ran the license plate. His name was Carroll Janes; he moved here from Pittsburgh about five months ago. Pittsburgh PD have several unsolved murders that fit the bill. We searched his apartment and found a blond wig he evidently wore all the time, except when he was killing. He worked at Danworth's department store, in customer service. Evidently that's how he picked his victims. If anyone gave him a hard time — bingo."
"That was the tie," Dane murmured. "They all shopped at Danworth's. I remember Jackie Sheets's friend saying that she had been upset about a blouse that came apart, or something like that. God, it was right there in front of me. I even thought that they shopped at the same place, but that just about everyone in the city did, too."
"Don't beat yourself up over it," Marlie advised tartly. "You aren't clairvoyant, you know." After a startled second, he chuckled. He was looking better, she decided, that stark look fading as he recovered from the shock.
"Carroll Janes," Grace said. "That's a strange name for a man."
"No joke. That's why we didn't turn him up on those lists we were running. His name was crossed out because it looked like a woman's name."

Trammell sounded disgusted at that oversight. “We don’t have much background on him yet. We may never know what made him tick. I don’t know if it even matters. A subhuman son of a bitch like that doesn’t deserve to live.”
Marlie saw Dane flinch. He was having a harder time handling the night’s events than she was. He deeply regretted that she had been touched by such ugly violence, but in an odd way she felt stronger. She wasn’t elated that she had killed a man, but neither was she consumed by guilt. She had done what was necessary. If she had hesitated, she would be dead now. She had controlled the vision, and this time she had won. Carroll Janes was dead; Marilyn Elrod and Nadine Vinick and Jackie Sheets, and all of the other women he had killed, finally had their justice.
Dane picked up her hand and played with her fingers, his eyes closing as he felt again the overwhelming relief that she was all right.
Grace elbowed Trammell. “We have to go now,” she said. “I have to get ready for work.”
“I’ll be back this afternoon,” Trammell added. “Call me if you need me before then.”
“Okay,” Dane agreed. After they left, he walked to the door and leaned out to get the attention of the uniformed officer who stood guard there. “No visitors,” he said. “Not even the mayor. No one.”
“I may have trouble keeping the docs out, Hollister,” the officer warned.
“Well, maybe them. But knock first.” He closed the door and went back to Marlie’s bedside. He stroked her face, smoothed her hair.
She reached up and touched his cheek. “I really am all right. And I’d much rather be at home than here.”
He turned his head to kiss her fingers. “Just be patient, okay? If the doctor wants to watch you for another twenty-four hours, he must have a reason. Let me be certain you’re okay before you leave. I need that.”
There was naked emotion in his face. Dane was wide open, not bothering to guard himself. After what he had been through, he would never again try to control his feelings for her. He had almost lost her the night before; life was too short, too uncertain, to do anything but live it to the fullest.
His expression was serious as he smoothed her hair away from her face. “We didn’t finish getting things ironed out between us last night.”
“No, everything got a little hectic there, didn’t it?”
“Are you still mad at me?”

A little smile curved her mouth. “No.”
“I swear to God I didn’t string you along just to stay on top of the situation. The only thing I thought about being on top of was you.”
She snorted. “Gosh, that’s romantic.” But the smile remained.
“I don’t know how to be romantic. All I know is I want you, and I can’t let you go. I’ve never run into this type of situation before, so I probably messed up in the way I handled it. I wanted to take my time, see how things developed. I didn’t want to rush you, or put pressure on you while all of this other mess was going on. You had enough to worry about.”
She bit her lip, bemused by his words. Ye gods, maybe Trammell was right; maybe Dane really was too hardheaded to know when he was in love, or that a woman would reasonably expect him to say so. She took a deep breath, conscious of how much she wanted everything to go right this time. Maybe he wasn’t the only one who had been a little too cautious; maybe she needed to encourage him more.
“Is sex all you want?” she asked, tension invading her as she waited for his answer.
“Hell, no!” he said explosively. “Honey, tell me what *you* need. I can do something about it if you’ll tell me, but don’t leave me in the dark like this. What can I do to convince you of how I feel about you?”
She drew back in the hospital bed, giving him an incredulous look.
“Convince me? Dane, you’ve never told me to begin with! I don’t have any idea how you feel!”
It was his turn to stare incredulously. “What the hell do you mean, you don’t have any idea how I feel?”
She rolled her eyes beseechingly toward the heavens.
“Lord help me, the man’s as thick as a tree. How am I supposed to know if you don’t tell me? I’ve told you time and again that I can’t read you! Say it in plain English, Dane. Do you love me? That’s what I need to know.”
“Of course I love you!” he roared, his temper flashing.
“Then *say* so!”
“I love you, damn it!” He surged to his feet and stood over her bed, hands on hips. “What about you? Are we in this together, or am I soloing?”
She thought of punching him, but decided not to put that much strain on her stitches. She contented herself with saying, “No, you aren’t soloing.”
“Then *say* it!”
“I love you, damn it!” She said it just as belligerently as he had.

His chest heaved with the force of his breathing as they faced each other down in silence. Finally the tension eased out of his coiled muscles. “That’s settled, then.” He sat down again.
“What’s settled?” she challenged.
“That I love you and you love me.”
“So what do we do? Call a truce?”
He shook his head and picked up her hand again. “What we do is get married.” He pressed a kiss to her fingertips. “We aren’t going to wait six months, either, like some people I know. It’ll probably be this weekend. No longer than a week.”
Marlie’s breath caught, and a luminous smile broke over her face like sunrise. “I’m sure we can manage it by this weekend,” she said.
He wanted to fold her in his arms, but he was too afraid of hurting her. He looked at her, and was amazed at how calm she was. She had been stalked by a killer, had emptied a pistol into him, and she seemed so… peaceful. Not even getting engaged had shaken that serenity.
He began shaking, as he had several times that night. “I’m sorry,” he blurted, for the fifteenth time, his expression telling her where his thoughts had gone. “God, baby, I messed up bad. I never intended for you to be in danger. I don’t know how he found you.”
Her blue eyes were even more bottomless than usual. “Maybe it was meant. Maybe it was my fault that he found me. I should have gone to a safe house. Maybe, at the end, he could sense me the way I could sense him. Maybe I was the only one who had a chance against him, because I could tell where he was, what he was doing. There are too many maybes; we’ll never know for certain. But I’m *okay*, Dane, in every way.”
“I love you. When I thought he had you—” His voice cracked. Suddenly he couldn’t stand it. With exquisite care he gathered her up in his arms and lifted her from the bed, then sat down and cradled her on his lap, his face buried in her hair.
“I know. I love you too.” She didn’t protest that the action jarred her shoulder, or that he was holding her too tightly for comfort. She needed that contact, the security and warmth of his embrace. She nestled against him.
“Dane?”
“Hmmm?”
“There is one thing.”
He raised his head. “What?”

“Are you certain you want to marry me?”
“Damn right I am. What brought this on?”
“I know how uncomfortable it makes you that I am what I am. And I can’t marry you without telling you everything. I’ve pretty much recovered all my abilities. In fact, I’m better at it than I was before, because now I can control it.”
He didn’t hesitate. The only way to have Marlie was to take her as she was, psychic abilities and all. “But you can’t read *me* at all, right?”
“Nope. You’re the most thickheaded man I’ve ever seen. It’s *such* a relief.”
He grinned, and brushed a kiss across her temple. “It wouldn’t make any difference anyway. I’m going to marry you, no matter what.”
“But I *can* check up on you,” she admitted, ‘if you have a bad day, you won’t be able to hide it from me, the way cops usually do with their wives. There won’t be any tucking it away in a corner of your mind, because I’ll already know what happened.“
“I can live with that.” Easily, he realized. At this point he could probably live with her even if she were a card-carrying swami and rode a magic carpet. “If you can handle being a cop’s wife, I can be a psychic’s husband. What the hell; how rough can it be?”

Epilogue

Dane rolled out of bed, looked at Marlie, turned green, and dashed for the bathroom. She propped herself up on her elbow, considering the situation with mild disbelief. “I’m the one who’s pregnant,” she called. “Why are you having morning sickness?”
He came out of the bathroom several minutes later, still rather pale. “One of us has to,” he said. He groaned and collapsed on the bed. “I don’t think I can make it in to work today.”
She nudged him with her foot. “Sure you can. Just eat some dry toast and you’ll feel better. You know Trammell will tease you if you don’t show up.”
“He already does.” Dane’s voice was muffled in the pillow. “The only thing that keeps him from telling everyone else is that I know something just as bad about him. We have each other in a Mexican standoff.”
She threw back the covers and got out of bed. She felt wonderful. She had been queasy a little at first, but never quite to the point of throwing up, and

that had soon passed.
For her, that is. Dane was still throwing up regularly, every morning, though it was just past New Year's and she was now six months along. He was paying the price for getting her pregnant immediately after their wedding.
"I wonder how you're going to handle labor and delivery," she mused aloud, giving him a wicked look.
He groaned. "I don't want to think about it."
He didn't handle it at all well. As a labor coach, he was a complete washout. From the time her pains started, he was in agony. The nurses loved him. They installed him on a cot next to her, so he could hold her hand; it seemed to give him comfort. He was pale and sweating, and every time she had a contraction, he had one too.
"This is wonderful," one older nurse said, watching him with joy. "If only all the fathers could do this. There may be justice in this world, after all."
Marlie patted his hand. She was ready for this to be over, even if the price was these steadily increasing pains that were now threatening to become very serious indeed. She felt heavy and exhausted, and the pressure in her pelvis threatened to tear her apart, but a part of her was still able to marvel at her husband. And *she* was supposed to be empathic! Dane had suffered through every month, every pain, with her; she wondered just how labor pains felt in a man.
"Oh, God, here comes another one," he groaned, gripping her hand, and sure enough, her belly began to tighten. She fell back, gasping, trying to find the crest of the pain and ride it.
"This is going to be an only child," he panted. "There won't be another one, I swear. God, when is he going to get here?"
"Soon," she answered. She could feel the deep, heavy tightening within. Their son would arrive soon.
He did, within half an hour. Dane wasn't able to be there during delivery; the doctor had been forced to give him a sedative to ease his pain. But when Marlie woke up from an exhausted doze, he was sitting in the chair beside her bed, looking pale and exhausted himself, and he was holding the baby. His rough face broke into a grin. "It was rough," he said, "but we did it. He's great. He's perfect. But he's still going to be an only child."

After the Night (1995)



Synopsis

FAITH DEVLON: A poor, outcast child in Prescott, Louisiana, she'd always adored the town's golden boy from afar. But he called her white trash that sultry Southern night when his rich, respected father disappeared, along with her pretty Mom. Now Faith wanted to hate Gray Rouillard…not to feel a powerful surge of desire. But she couldn't quench her passion, any more than she could hide the truth about the past she had waited so long to unravel.

GRAY ROUILLARD: Even when he raised hell, he did it with style. Reckless, charming, and backed by Rouillard money, Gray controlled the town of Prescott – and Devlin was a name he never wanted to hear again. But when he gazed at Faith Devlin, all he saw was a swirl of tangled, sheets and her silken flesh beneath him. To care for her was impossible, unthinkable…because Gray Rouillard planned to use all his power to ruin her.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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One

It was a good day for dreaming. It was late in the afternoon, the sun throwing long shadows when it could manage to break through the thick woods, but for the most part the translucent golden light was tangled in the tops of the trees, leaving the forest floor mysteriously shadowed. The hot, humid summer air was redolent with the pink sweetness of honeysuckle nectar, all mingled with the rich, brown odor of the earth and rotting vegetation as well as the crisp green scent of the leaves. Odors had color for Faith Devlin, and since she'd been a little girl she had entertained herself by coldring the smells around her.

Most of the colors were obvious, drawn from the way something looked. Of course the earth smelled brown; of course that fresh, tangy scent of leaves would be green in her mind. Grapefruit smelled bright yellow; she'd never eaten one, but once had picked up one in the grocery store and hesitantly sniffed its skin, and the scent had exploded on her taste buds, sour and sweet all at the same time.

The smell of things was easy to color in her mind; the color scent of people was more difficult, because people were never just one thing, but different colors mixed together. Colors didn't mean the same in people smells that they did in thing smells. Her mother, Renee, had a dark, spicy red scent, with a few sworls of black and yellow, but the spicy red almost crowded out all the other colors. Yellow was good in things, but not in people; neither was green, or at least some shades of it. Her father, Amos, was a sickening mixture of green, purple, yellow, and black. That one was real easy, because from a very early age she had associated him with vomit. Drink and puke, drink and puke, that's all Pa did. Well, and pee. He peed a lot.

The best smell in the world, Faith thought as she meandered through the woods, staring up at the captured sunlight and holding her secret happiness cradled deep in her chest, was Gray Rouillard. Faith lived for the glimpses of him she got in town, and if she was close enough to hear the deep, dark rumble of his voice, she trembled with joy. Today she'd gotten close enough to *smell* him, and he had actually touched her! She was still giddy from the experience.

She had gone into the drugstore in Prescott with Jodie, her older sister, because Jodie had stolen a couple of bucks from Renee's purse and wanted to buy some fingernail polish. Jodie's smell was orange and yellow, a pale

imitation of Renee’s scent. They had been coming out of the drugstore, the precious hot pink polish carefully tucked into Jodie’s bra so Renee wouldn’t see it. Jodie had been wearing a bra for almost three years now, and she was only thirteen, a fact she used to taunt Faith whenever she thought about it, because Faith was eleven and still didn’t have any boobs. Lately Faith’s flat, childish little nipples had begun to swell, though, and she was in an agony of embarrassment that someone would notice them. She had been intensely conscious of them poking out under the thin, purple LSU T-shirt she wore, but when they almost collided with Gray on the sidewalk as he was going into the drugstore and they were coming out, Faith forgot about the flimsiness of her shirt.

"Nice shirt," Gray had said, amusement dancing in his dark eyes, and patted her on the shoulder. Gray was home for the summer from college. He played football for LSU, a starting linebacker in his freshman year. He was nineteen, six foot three and still growing, and weighed a hard-packed two hundred thirty pounds. Faith knew because she’d read all that in the sports page of the local newspaper. She knew he ran a 4.6 forty, and had great lateral speed, whatever that was. She also knew that he was beautiful, not in a pretty way, but in the same wild, powerful way that his father’s prize stallion, Maximillian, was beautiful. His French Creole ancestry was obvious in his dark coloring, and in the clear, strong bones of his face. His thick black hair hung down to his shoulders, making him look like a medieval warrior accidentally set down in the present time. Faith read every romance about medieval knights and their fair ladies that she could get her hands on, so she knew a knight when she saw one.

Her shoulder had tingled where Gray touched it, and her swelling nipples throbbed, making her blush and duck her head. Her senses were whirling dizzily with his scent, a rich, indefinable blend that she couldn’t describe, warm and musky, with an even deeper red than Renee’s, full of tantalizing colors in deep, luxurious hues.

Jodie thrust out her round breasts, covered by a sleeveless, hot pink blouse. She had left the top two buttons undone. "What about *my* shirt?" she asked, pouting a little to make her lips stick out more too, as she had seen Renee do thousands of times.

"Wrong color," Gray had said, his voice going hard and contempt leaking into the tone. Faith knew why. It was because Renee was sleeping with his

father, Guy. She'd heard the way others talked about Renee, knew what "whore" meant.

He had brushed past them then, pushing open the door and disappearing into the drugstore. Jodie stared after him for a few seconds, then turned her greedy eyes on Faith. "Let me have your shirt," she said.

"It's too little for you," Faith replied, and was fiercely glad that it was. Gray had liked her shirt, had touched it, and she wasn't about to give it up.

Jodie had scowled at the obvious truth. Faith was small and skinny, but even her narrow shoulders strained at the seams of the two-year-old T-shirt. "I'll get my own," she'd declared.

She would, too, Faith thought now as she gazed dreamily up at the flickering patterns made by the sun in the trees. But Jodie wouldn't have the one Gray had touched; Faith had taken it off as soon as she'd gotten home, carefully folded it, and hidden it under her mattress. The only way anyone would find it there would be if they stripped the bed to wash the sheets, and since Faith was the only one who did that, the shirt would be safe, and she could sleep on it every night.

Gray. The violence of her emotions scared her, but she couldn't control them. All she had to do was see him and her heart would begin pounding so hard in her skinny chest that it hurt her ribs, and she felt hot and shivery all at the same time. Gray was like a god in the small town of Prescott, Louisiana; he was wild as a buck, she'd heard people say, but he was backed by the Rouillard money, and even as a young boy he'd had a hard, reckless charm that made feminine hearts flutter. The Rouillards had spawned their share of rascals and renegades, and Gray had early shown the potential to be the wildest of the lot. But he was a Rouillard, and even when he raised hell, he did it with style.

For all that, he'd never been unkind to Faith, the way some of the people in town had. His sister, Monica, had once spat in their direction when Faith and Jodie had met her on the sidewalk. Faith was glad that Monica was in New Orleans at some fancy private girls' school, and wasn't home very often even during the summer, because she was visiting with friends. On the other hand, Faith's heart had bled for months when Gray had gone oif to LSU; Baton Rouge wasn't that far away, but during football season he didn't get much time off, and came home only on the holidays. Whenever she knew he was home, Faith tried to hang around town where she might

catch a glimpse of him, strolling with the indolent grace of a big cat, so tall and strong and dangerously exciting.

Now that it was summer, he spent a lot of time at the lake, which was one of the reasons for Faith's afternoon expedition through the woods. The lake was a private one, over two thousand acres, and totally contained by Rouillard land. It was long and irregularly shaped, with several curves in it; broad and fairly shallow in some places, narrow and deep in others. The big, white Rouillard mansion was to the east of it, the Devlin shack on the west, but neither was actually on the lakeshore. The only house on the lake was the Rouillard summerhouse, a white, one-story house with two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a screened-in porch that totally encircled it. Down from the summerhouse was a boathouse and a pier, and a brick barbecue pit had been built there. Sometimes, during the summer, Gray and his friends would gather there for a rowdy afternoon of swimming and boating, and Faith would slip along the edge of the woods so she could watch him to her heart's content.

Maybe he'd be there today, she thought, aching with the sweet yearning that filled her every time she thought about him. It would be wonderful to see him twice in one day.

She was barefoot, and her threadbare shorts left her skinny legs unprotected from scratches and snakes, but Faith was as at home in the woods as the other shy creatures; she wasn't worried about the snakes, and disregarded the scratches. Her long, dark red hair tended to hang untidily in her eyes and annoy her, so she had pulled it back and secured it with a rubber band. She slipped like a wraith through the trees, her big cat eyes dreamy as she pictured Gray in her mind. Maybe he'd be there; maybe one day he'd see her hiding in the bushes, or peeking out from behind a tree, and he'd hold his hand out to her and say, "Why don't you come out from there and have some fun with us?" She lost herself in the delicious daydream of being part of that group of laughing, roughhousing, suntanned kids, of being one of those curvy girls in a brief bikini.

Even before she got to the edge of the clearing where the summerhouse was, she could see the silver gleam of Gray's Corvette parked in front of it, and her heart began the familiar violent pounding. He was here! She slid cautiously behind the shelter of a big tree trunk, but after a moment she realized that she couldn't hear anything. There were no splashing sounds, no yells or shrieks or giggles.

Maybe he was fishing from the pier, or maybe he'd taken the boat out. Faith moved closer, angling for a view of the pier, but the wooden length was empty. He wasn't there. Disappointment filled her. If he'd taken the boat out, there was no telling how long he'd be gone, and she couldn't stay there waiting for him. She had stolen this time for herself, but she had to get back soon and start cooking supper, and take care of Scottie.

She was turning to go when a muted sound reached her ears and she stopped, head cocked to try to locate it. She left the edge of the woods and took a few steps into the clearing, closer to the house, and now she could hear a murmur of voices, too low and indistinct for her to understand. Instantly her heart swelled again; he *was* here, after all. But he was inside the house; it would be difficult to catch a glimpse of him from the woods. If she went closer, though, she could hear him, and that was all she required. Faith had the knack of small, wild things for silence. Her bare feet didn't make a sound as she crept closer to the house, trying to stay out of a direct line to any of the windows. The murmur of voices seemed to be coming from the back of the house, where the bedrooms were located.

She reached the porch and squatted by the steps, her head cocked again as she tried to catch the words, but she couldn't quite understand them. It was Gray's voice, though; the deep tones were unmistakable, at least to her. Then she heard a gasp, and a kind of moan, in a much lighter voice. Irresistibly drawn by curiosity and the lodestone of Gray's voice, Faith eased out of her squatting position and cautiously tugged at the handle of the screen door. It was unlatched. She eased it open barely enough for a cat to slip through, and wriggled her own lithe, skinny body inside, then just as silently let the door close. Going down on hands and knees, she crawled across the plank porch to the open window of one of the bedrooms, from which the voices seemed to be coming.

She heard another gasp. "Gray," said the other voice, a girl's voice, strained and shaking.

"Shhh, shhh," Gray murmured, the sound low and barely reaching Faith. He said something else, but the words didn't make any sense to her. They slid past her ears without triggering any understanding. Then he said, *"Mon ch&re,"* and the tumblers clicked into place. He was speaking French, she realized, and as soon as she did so, the words became clear, as if it had taken that small understanding for the sounds to find the needed rhythm in her brain. Though the Devlins were neither Cajun nor Creole, Faith

understood most of what he was saying. The majority of the people in the parish spoke and understood French, in varying degrees.
It sounded as if he were trying to coax a scared dog to him, Faith thought. His voice was warm and crooning, the words scattered with reassurances and endearments. When the girl spoke again, her voice was still strained, but now there was a drugged undertone to it.
Curious, Faith eased to the side and carefully moved her head so that one eye peeked around the frame of the open window. What she saw froze her to the spot.
Gray and the girl were both naked on the bed, which was positioned with the headboard under the window on the adjoining wall. Neither of them was likely to see her, which was a stroke of fortune, because Faith couldn't have moved then even if they had both looked straight at her.
Gray was lying with his back to her, his left arm positioned under the girl's tousled blond head. He was leaning over her in a way that made Faith catch her breath, for there was something both protective and predatory in him. He was kissing her, long kisses that left the room in silence except for their deep sighs, and his right arm – it looked as if – he *was* – he shifted his position, and Faith could clearly see that his right hand was between the girl's naked thighs, right there on her kitty cat.
Faith felt dizzy, and she realized that her chest hurt from holding her breath. Carefully she let it out, and rested her cheek against the white wood. She knew what they were doing. She was eleven, and she wasn't a little girl anymore even if her breasts hadn't started to grow yet. Several years ago she had heard Renee and Pa carrying on in their bedroom, and her oldest brother, Russ, had leeringly and graphically explained what was going on. She had seen dogs doing it, too, and heard cats screeching while they did it.
The girl cried out, and Faith peeked again. Gray was on top of her now, still gently murmuring in French, cajoling, soothing. He told her how pretty she was, how much he wanted her, how hot and delicious she was. And as he talked, he was adjusting his position, reaching between their bodies with his right hand while he remained propped on his left arm. Because of the angle, Faith couldn't see what he was doing, but she knew anyway. With a shock, she recognized the girl. Lindsey Partain; her father was a lawyer in Prescott.
"Gray!" Lindsey cried, her voice tight with strain. "My God! I can't – "
Gray's muscular buttocks tightened, and the girl arched beneath him, crying out again. But she was clinging to him, and the cry was one of intense

pleasure. Her long legs lifted, one twining around his hip, the other hooking around his leg.

He began moving slowly, his muscled young body rippling with power. The scene was raw and disturbing, but there was also a beauty to it that kept Faith riveted. Gray was so big and strong, his darkly tanned body graceful and intensely masculine, while Lindsey was slim and shapely, delicately feminine in his grasp. He seemed to be taking such care of her, and she was enjoying it so much, her slim hands clinging to his back, her head arched back and her hips lifting in time with his slow rhythm.

Faith stared at them, her eyes burning. She wasn't jealous. Gray was so far above her, and she was so young, that she had never thought of him in a romantic, possessive sense. Gray was the shining center of her universe, to be worshiped from afar, and she was giddily happy with the occasional glimpse of him. Today, when he had actually spoken to her, and touched her shirt, had been paradise. She couldn't imagine herself in Lindsey's place, lying naked in his arms, or even imagine what it felt like.

Gray's movements were getting faster, and the girl was crying out again as she strained up to him, her teeth clenched as if she were in pain, but instinctively Faith knew that she wasn't. Gray was hammering at her now, his own head thrown back, long black hair damp at the temples and the ends sticking to his sweaty shoulders. He tensed and shuddered, and a raw, deep sound burst from his throat.

Faith's heart was hammering, and her greenish cat eyes were huge as she ducked away from the window, slipping through the screen door and off the porch as silently as she had arrived. So that was what *it* was like. She had actually seen Gray doing *it.* Without his clothes, he was even more beautiful than she had imagined. He hadn't made disgusting snorting pig noises the way Pa did, whenever he was sober enough to talk Renee into the bedroom, which wasn't very often for the past couple of years.

If Gray's father, Guy, was as beautiful doing it as Gray was, Faith thought fiercely, she didn't blame Renee for choosing him over Pa.

She gained the safety of the woods and slipped silently through the trees. It was late, and she'd likely get a belting from Pa when she got home, for not being there to start his supper and look after Scottie, the way she was supposed to do, but it would be worth it. She had seen Gray.

Exhausted, elated, shaking and breathing hard in the aftermath of orgasm, Gray lifted his head from the curve of Lindsey's neck and shoulder. She was

still gasping herself, her eyes closed. He had spent the better part of the afternoon seducing her, but it had been worth the effort. That long, slow buildup had made the sex even better than he'd expected.

A flash of color, a tiny movement in his peripheral vision, caught his attention and he turned his head toward the open window and the woods beyond the porch. He caught only a glimpse of a small, frail figure topped by dark red hair, but that was enough for him to identify the youngest Devlin girl.

What was the kid doing wandering around the woods this far from their shack? Gray didn't say anything to Lindsey, because she would panic if she thought someone might have seen her sneaking into the summerhouse with him, even if that someone was just one of the trashy Devlins. She was engaged to Dewayne Mouton, and she wouldn't take kindly to anything screwing that up, even her own screwing. The Moutons weren't as rich as the Rouillards – no one in this part of Louisiana was – but Lindsey knew she could handle Dewayne in a way she could never hope to do with Gray. Gray was the bigger catch, but he wouldn't be a very comfortable husband, and Lindsey was shrewd enough to know she didn't have a chance with him anyway.

"What is it?" she murmured now, stroking his shoulder.

"Nothing." He turned his head and kissed her, hard, then disengaged their bodies and sat up on the edge of the bed. "I just noticed how late it is."

Lindsey took a look out the window at the lengthening shadows, and sat up with a squeal. "My God, I'm supposed to have dinner with the Moutons tonight! I'll never be able to get ready on time!" She scrambled from the bed and began grabbing up her scattered articles of clothing.

Gray dressed in a more leisurely fashion, but his mind was still on the Devlin kid. Had she seen them, and if she had, would she say anything? She was a strange little kid, shyer than her older sister, who was already showing signs of being as big a slut as their mother. But the younger one had wise old eyes in that thin kid's face, eyes that reminded him of a cat's eyes, hazel green with flecks of gold in them so that sometimes they were green and sometimes looked yellowish. He got the feeling that she didn't miss much. She would know that her mother was his father's piece on the side, that the Devlins lived rent-free in that shack so Renee would be handy whenever Guy Rouillard wanted her. The kid wouldn't risk getting on the bad side of any Rouillard.

Poor little skinny kid, with the fey eyes. She'd been born into trash and wouldn't have the chance to ever get out of it, assuming she even wanted to. Amos Devlin was a mean drunk, and the two older boys, Russ and Nicky, were lazy, thieving bullies, as mean as their father and showing signs of turning into drunks as well. Her mother, Renee, liked the booze too, but she hadn't let it get the upper hand on her the way it had on Amos. She was lush and beautiful, despite having borne five children, with the dark red hair that only her youngest daughter had inherited, as well as the green eyes and creamy, delicate skin. Renee wasn't mean, like Amos, but she wasn't much of a mother to those kids, either. All Renee cared about was getting screwed. The joke in the parish was that her heels were so round, she had been used as the pattern for Weebles. Unlike Weebles, however, Renee would stay down, as long as there was a man ready to crawl on top of her. She exuded sex, raunchy sex, drawing men to her like dogs to a bitch in heat.

Jodie, the oldest girl, was pure jailbait, already on the lookout for any hard cock she could get. She had Renee's single-mindedness when it came to sex, and he very much doubted that she was still a virgin, though she was only in junior high. She kept offering it to him, but Gray wasn't the least bit tempted. He'd rather screw a snake than Jodie Devlin.

The youngest Devlin boy was retarded. Gray had only seen him once or twice, and each time he had been clinging to the youngest girl's legs – what was her name, damn it? Something he'd thought a minute ago had reminded him of it. Fay? Fay with the fey eyes? No, it was something else, but like that – Faith. That was it. Funny name for a Devlin, since neither Amos nor Renee was the least bit religious.

With a family like that, the kid was doomed. In another couple of years, she'd be following in her mother's and sister's footsteps, because she wouldn't know any better. And even if she did know better, all the boys would come sniffing around her anyway, just because her name was Devlin, and she wouldn't hold out for long.

The whole parish knew that his father was screwing Renee, had been for years. As much as Gray loved his mother, he figured he couldn't blame Guy for going elsewhere; God knows, his mother didn't. Noelle was the least physical person Gray had ever seen. At thirty-nine, she was still as cool and lovely as a Madonna, unfailingly composed and remote. She didn't like to be touched, even by her children. The wonder was that she'd even *had*

children. Of course Guy wasn’t faithful, had never been, much to Noelle’s relief. Guy Rouillard was hot-blooded and lusty, and he’d found his way into a lot of beds before settling, more or less, on Renee Devlin, But Guy was always gently courteous and protective with Noelle, and Gray knew he would never leave her, especially not for a cheap slut like Renee.

The only person upset by the arrangement, apparently, was his sister, Monica. Starved by Noelle’s emotional distance, Monica doted on her father, and was fiercely jealous of Renee, both on behalf of her mother and because Guy spent so much time with Renee. It was a lot calmer around the house now that Monica had gone away to school and become involved with her friends there.

"Gray, *hurry,"* Lindsey begged frantically.

He shoved his arms into his shirtsleeves, but disdained to button the garment, leaving it hanging open. "I’m ready." He kissed her, and patted her butt. "Don’t get your feathers ruffled, *chérie.* All you have to do is change clothes. The rest of you looks beautiful just as you are."

She smiled, pleased by the compliment, and calmed down. "When can we do this again?" she asked as they left the summerhouse.

Gray laughed aloud. It had taken him most of the summer to get into her pants, but now she didn’t want to waste any more time. Perversely, now that he’d had her, much of his ruthless determination had faded. "I don’t know," he said lazily. "I have to report back to school soon, for football practice."

To her credit, she didn’t pout. Instead she tossed her head so the wind lifted her hair as the Corvette streaked down the private road toward the highway, and smiled at him. "Any time." She was a year older than he was, and had her own share of confidence.

The Corvette skidded into the highway, the tires grabbing asphalt. Lindsey laughed as Gray handled the powerful car with ease. "I’ll have you home in five minutes," he promised. He didn’t want anything to interfere with her engagement to Dewayne, either.

He thought of skinny little Faith Devlin, and wondered if she’d made it safely home. She shouldn’t be wandering around alone in the woods like that. She could get hurt, or lost. Worse, though this was private land, the lake drew the local high school boys like a magnet, and Gray had no illusions about teenage boys when they were in a pack. If they ran across Faith, they might not stop to think about how young she was, only that she was a Devlin. Little Red wouldn’t have a chance against the wolves.

Someone needed to keep a closer eye on the kid.

Two

Three Years Later

"Faith," Renee said fretfully, "make Scottie stop. He’s driving me crazy with that whining."

Faith put aside the potatoes she was peeling, wiped her hands, and went to the screen door, where Scottie was slapping at the screen and making the little snuffling sounds that meant he wanted to go outside. He was never allowed to go out by himself, because he didn’t understand what "stay in the yard" meant, and he would wander off and get lost. There was a latch high on the screen, where he couldn’t reach it, that was always kept fastened to prevent him from going out by himself. Faith was busy with supper, though likely only she and Scottie would be here to eat it, and couldn’t go out with him right now.

She pulled his hands away from the screen and said, "Do you want to play ball, Scottie? Where’s the ball?" Easily distracted, he trotted off in search of his dogchewed red ball, but Faith knew that wouldn’t occupy him for long. With a sigh, she went back to the potatoes.

Renee drifted out of her bedroom. She was dressed fit to kill tonight, Faith noted, in a tight, short red dress that showed off her long, shapely legs and somehow didn’t clash with her hair. Renee had great legs; she had great everything, and she knew it. Her thick red hair was brushed into a cloud, and her musky perfume clung to her in a deep, rich red scent. "How do I look?" she asked, whirling on her red high heels as she attached cheap rhinestone earrings to her earlobes.

"Beautiful," Faith said, knowing it was what Renee expected, and it was nothing less than the truth. Renee was as amoral as a cat, but she was also a startlingly beautiful woman, with a perfectly formed, slightly exotic face.

"Well, I’m off." She bent to brush a careless kiss over the top of Faith’s head.

"Have fun, Mama."

"I will." She gave a husky laugh. "Oh, I will." She unlatched the screen and left the shack, long legs flashing.

Faith got up to latch the door again, and stood watching Renee get into her flashy little sports car and drive off. Her mother loved that car. She had driven up in it one day without a word of explanation about how she had

gotten it, not that there was much doubt in anyone’s mind. Guy Rouillard had bought it for her.

Seeing her at the door, Scottie returned and began making his "go outside" noise again. "I can’t take you outside," Faith explained, endlessly patient though he didn’t understand much. "I have to cook supper. Would you rather have fried potatoes or mashed ones?" It was a rhetorical question, because mashed potatoes were much easier for him to eat. She smoothed his dark hair and returned once again to the table and the bowl of potatoes.

Lately, Scottie wasn’t as energetic as usual, and more and more his lips took on a blue tinge when he played. His heart was failing, just like the doctors had said would likely happen. There wouldn’t be a miracle heart transplant for Scottie, even had the Devlins been able to afford it. The few available children’s hearts were too precious to be wasted on a little boy who would never be able to dress himself, or read, or manage more than a few garbled words no matter how long he lived. "Severely retarded" was how he was categorized. Though a hard little lump formed in Faith’s chest at the thought of Scottie dying, she wasn’t bitter that nothing would be done about his failing health. A new heart wouldn’t help Scottie, not in any way that mattered. The doctors hadn’t expected him to live this long, and she would just take care of him for whatever time he had left.

For a while, she had wondered if he was Guy Rouillard’s son, and felt furious on his behalf that he wasn’t taken to live in the big white house, where he would have the best of care, and his few years would be happy. Because Scottie was retarded, she thought, Guy was happy to keep him out of sight.

The truth was, Scottie could just as easily be Pa’s son, and it was impossible to tell. Scottie didn’t look like either man; he simply looked like himself. He was six years old now, a placid little boy who was pleased by the smallest things, and whose security was rooted in his fourteen-year-old sister. Faith had taken care of him from the day Renee had brought him home from the hospital, protected him from Pa’s drunken rages, kept Russ and Nicky from teasing him unmercifully. Renee and Jodie mostly ignored him, which was okay with Scottie.

Jodie had asked Faith to "double date" with her that night, and shrugged when Faith refused because someone had to stay home and take care of Scottie. She wouldn’t have gone out with Jodie anyway; their ideas of fun were radically different. Jodie thought having fun was sneaking some illegal

booze, since she was only sixteen, getting drunk, and having sex with the boy or group of boys who were hanging around her that night.
Everything in Faith shuddered in revulsion at the thought. She had seen Jodie come in, stinking of beer and sex, her clothes torn and stained, giggling at how much "fun" she had had. It never seemed to bother her that those same boys wouldn't speak to her if they met her in public.
It bothered Faith. Her soul burned with humiliation at the contempt in people's eyes whenever they looked at her, at anyone in her family. The trashy Devlins, that's what they were called. Drunks and whores, the whole bunch.
But I'm not like that! The silent cry sometimes welled up in Faith, but she always held it in. Why couldn't folks see beneath the name? She didn't paint herself up and wear too short, too tight clothes like Renee and Jodie. She didn't drink, didn't hang around rough joints trying to pick up anything in pants. Her clothes were cheap and ill made, but she kept them clean. She never missed a day of school, if she could help it, and she had good grades. She hungered for respectability, wanted to be able to walk into a store and not have the clerks watch her like a hawk, because she was one of those trashy Devlins and everyone knew they'd steal you blind. She didn't want people to make comments behind their hands whenever they saw her.
It didn't help that she resembled Renee far more than did Jodie. Faith had the same thick, dark red hair, as vibrant as a flame, the same porcelain-grained skin, the same high cheekbones and exotic green eyes. Her face wasn't perfectly proportioned like Renee's; her face was thinner, her jaw more square, her mouth as wide but not as full. Renee was voluptuous; Faith was both taller and leaner, her body more delicately made. Her breasts had finally grown, firm and pert, but Jodie, at the same age, had been wearing a bra cup two sizes bigger.
Because she looked like Renee, people seemed to expect Faith to act like her, too, acd then never looked beyond their own expectations. She was tarred with the same brush that had painted the rest of the family.
"But I'll get out someday, Scottie," she said softly. "See if I don't."
He didn't react to the words, just kept patting the screen.
As always, when she needed to cheer herself, she thought of Gray. Her painful feelings for him hadn't lessened in the three years since she had seen him making love to Lindsey Partain, but rather had intensified as she had matured. The awestruck joy with which she had watched him at eleven

had grown and changed, as she had grown and changed. When she dreamed of him now, physical feelings mingled sharply with the romantic ones, and with her upbringing the details were far sharper and more explicit than other fourteen-year-old girls could have been expected to know.

Her dreams weren't colored just by her own surroundings; that day at the summerhouse when she had seen Gray with Lindsey Partain – Lindsey Mouton now – had given her a great deal of knowledge about his body. She hadn't actually seen his genitals, because at first his back had been turned to her, and then when he had gotten on top, their legs had blocked her view. It didn't much matter, though, because she knew what one looked like. Not only had she taken care of Scottie all of his life, but Pa and Russ and Nicky, when they were drunk, were just as likely as not to pull it out of their pants and take a pee off the front step as they were to use the toilet.

But Faith knew enough details about Gray's body to heat her dreams. She knew how muscled those long legs were, and that black hair grew on them. She knew that his buttocks were small and round and tight, and that he had adorable twin dimples just above them. She knew that his shoulders were broad and powerful, that his back was long, with the groove of his spine deeply indented between the thick layers of muscle. There had been a light dusting of black hair on his wide chest.

She knew that he made love in French, his deep voice soft and dark and crooning.

She had followed his career at LSU with secret pride. He had just been graduated with a double major in finance and business administration, with an eye toward taking over the Rouillard holdings someday. As good as he had been at football, he hadn't wanted a career in the pros, and instead had come home to begin helping Guy. She would be able to catch glimpses of him year round now, rather than just during the summer and holidays.

Unfortunately, Monica was home for good, too, and was as spiteful as ever. Everyone else was merely contemptuous; Monica actively *hated* anyone with the name of Devlin. Faith couldn't blame her, though, and sometimes even sympathized with her. No one had ever said that Guy Rouillard wasn't a good father; he loved both of his children, and they loved him. How did Monica feel, hearing people talk about Guy's long-standing arrangement with Renee, knowing that he was openly unfaithful to her mother?

When she was younger, Faith had daydreamed that Guy was her father too; Amos was nowhere in the picture. Guy was tall and dark and exciting, his

lean face so much like Gray's that, no matter what, she couldn't hate him. He had always been kind to her, to all Renee's kids, but he had sometimes gone out of his way to speak to Faith and had once or twice bought her a small treat. It was probably because she looked like Renee, Faith thought. If Guy had been her father, then Gray would be her brother, and she would be able to worship him up close, live in the same house with him. Those daydreams had always made her feel guilty about Pa, and then she would try to be extra nice to him to make up for it. Lately, however, she was fiercely glad that Guy wasn't her father, because now she didn't want Gray to be her brother.

She wanted to marry him.

This most private of her daydreams was so shocking that sometimes it startled her, that she would dare to even dream so high. A Rouillard, marry a Devlin? A Devlin set foot in that hundred-year-old mansion? All the Rouillard ancestors would rise up from their graves to drive out the intruder. The parish would be aghast.

But still she dreamed. She dreamed of being dressed in white, of walking down the wide aisle of the church with Gray waiting for her at the altar, turning to watch her with those heavy-lidded dark eyes, the expression in them hot and wanting, and just for her. She dreamed of him sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her over the threshold – not at Rouillard House, she couldn't imagine that, but somewhere else that was theirs alone, maybe a honeymoon cottage – to a big bed that awaited them. She imagined lying under him, her legs around him as she had seen Lindsey's, imagined him moving, heard his seductive voice whispering French love words in her ear. She knew what men and women did together, knew where he would put his thing, even though she couldn't imagine how it would feel. Jodie said that it felt wonderful, the best thing in the world…

Scottie gave a sharp cry, jerking Faith from her daydream. She dropped the potato she had been dicing and jumped to her feet, because Scottie didn't cry unless he was hurt. He was still standing at the screen, holding his finger. Faith picked him up and carried him to the table, where she sat down with him on her lap and examined his hand. There was a small, deep scratch on the tip of his index finger; probably he had raked his hand across a hole in the screen, and the torn wire had dug into his skin. A single drop of blood had welled in the tiny wound.

"There, there, it’s all right," she soothed, hugging him and wiping away his tears. "I’ll put a Band-Aid on it and it’ll get well. You like Band-Aids."
He did. Whenever he had a scrape that needed bandaging, she ended up plastering the things over his arms and legs, because he would keep nudging her until all the Band-Aids in the box had been used. She had learned to take most of the bandage strips out of the box and hide them, so that only two or three were there for him to see.
She washed his finger and got the box down from the top shelf, where it was kept to keep him out of it. His round little face was glowing with delight and anticipation as he held out his stubby finger. Making a big production out of it, Faith applied the bandage to the wound.
He leaned forward and peered into the open box, then grunted as he held out his other hand.
"Is that one hurt, too? Poor hand!" She kissed the grubby little paw and applied a bandage to the back of it.
He leaned over and looked into the box again, and grinned as he held up his right leg.
"My goodness! You’re hurt all over!" she exclaimed, and bandaged his knee.
He checked the box again, but it was now empty. Satisfied, he trotted back to the door, and Faith returned to fixing supper.
With the long summer days, it was just twilight at eight-thirty, but by eight that evening Scottie was already tired and nodding off. Faith gave him a bath and put him to bed, her heart squeezing painfully as she stroked his hair. He was such a sweet little boy, oblivious to the health problems that would keep him from living to adulthood.
At nine-thirty she heard Amos driving up, his old truck clanking and backfiring. She went to unlatch the screen and let him in. The stink of whiskey came in with him, a purulent, greenish yellow stench.
He stumbled over the threshold, and righted himself.
"Where’s your ma?" he growled, in the ugly mean tone he always used when he was drinking, which was most of the time.
"She went out a couple of hours ago."
He lurched toward the table, the uneven floor making his steps that much more perilous. "Damn bitch," he muttered. "Ain’t never here. Always out shakin’ her ass at her fancy rich boyfriend. Ain’t never here to fix my

supper. How’s a man supposed to eat?" he suddenly roared, hitting the table with his fist.
"Supper’s ready, Pa," Faith said quietly, hoping the uproar didn’t wake Scottie. "I’ll fix you a plate."
"Don’t want anything to eat," he said, as she had expected. When he was drinking, he never wanted food, just more *booze.*
"Is there anythin’ in this damn house to drink?" He staggered to his feet and began opening cabinet doors, slamming them when they didn’t reveal what he wanted.
Faith moved quickly. "There’s a bottle in the boys’ bedroom. I’ll get it." She didn’t want Amos stumbling around in there, cussing and probably puking, and waking Scottie. She darted into the dark little room and blindly searched under Nick’s cot until her hand brushed against cool glass. Dragging the bottle out, she carried it back into the kitchen. It was only about one quarter full, but anything would pacify Pa. She twisted the cap off and handed the bottle to Amos.
"Here, Pa."
"Good girl," he said, brightening as he tipped the bottle to his mouth. "You’re a good girl, Faith, not a whore like your ma and sister."
"Don’t talk like that about them," she protested, unable to listen. Knowing it was one thing, but talking about it was another. It wasn’t as if Pa had any room to throw stones.
"I’ll say what I damn well please!" Amos flared. "Don’t sass me, girl, or I’ll belt you one."
"I wasn’t sassing you, Pa." She kept her voice calm, but prudently moved out of reach. If he couldn’t reach her, he couldn’t hit her. He was likely to throw something, but she was quick and his missiles seldom struck her.
"Fine kids she gave me," he sneered. "Russ and Nick are the only two I can stomach. Jodie’s a whore like her ma, you’re a prissy smart-ass, and the last one’s a goddamn idiot."
Keeping her head turned away so he couldn’t see the tears that burned her eyes, Faith sat down on the ragged, sagging couch and began folding the laundry she’d done that day. It would never do to let Amos see that he’d hurt her. If he ever scented blood, he moved in for the kill, and the drunker he was, the more vicious he became. The best thing to do was ignore him. Like all drunks, he was easily distracted, and she figured he’d soon be passed out anyway.

She didn’t know why it hurt. She had long since ceased to have any feelings for Amos, not even fear. There was certainly nothing there to love, the man he had been long since destroyed in countless bottles of whiskey. If he had ever shown any promise, it had been gone by the time she’d been born, but somehow she thought he had always been pretty much as he was now. He was simply the type of person who always blamed others for his problems rather than doing something to correct them.

Sometimes, when he was sober, Faith thought she could see why Renee had once been attracted to him. Amos was a little over average height, with a wiry body that had never gone to fat. His hair was still dark, if thinning on top, and he could even be called a good-looking man – when he was sober. Drunk, as he was now, unshaven and with his hair mussed and hanging in dirty strings, his eyes red and rheumy with alcohol, his face bloated, there was nothing the least attractive about him. His clothes were dirty and stained, and he stank to high heaven. Judging by the sourness of his smell, he had already puked at least once, and the stains on the front of his pants meant that he hadn’t been as careful as he should have been when he’d peed.

He finished off the bottle in silence, then belched loudly. "Gotta piss," he announced, staggering to his feet and heading toward the front door.

Faith’s movements were measured, her hands never faltering as she listened to the stream of urine spattering in front of the step, for everyone else who came in that night to tramp into the house. She would mop the floor first thing In the morning.

Amos weaved back into the house. He hadn’t zipped his pants, she noticed, but at least his sex wasn’t exposed.

"Goin’ to bed," he said, making his way toward the back room. Faith watched him stumble and right himself by bracing his hand on the doorframe. He didn’t undress, but fell across the bed as he was. When Renee came home and found Amos lying across the bed in his filthy clothes, she would raise hell and wake everyone in the house.

Within minutes, Amos’s heavy snoring was echoing through the cramped shack.

Faith immediately got up and went into the lean-to that had been built onto the back of the shack, which she shared with Jodie. Only Amos and Renee had an honest-to-goodness bed; all the rest of them had cots. She turned on the light, the single bare bulb glaring, and quickly changed into her

nightgown. Then she pulled her book out from under the mattress. Now that Scottie was in bed and Amos passed out drunk, she would likely have a couple of peaceful hours before anyone else came home. Amos was always the first one home, but then he always got started first.

She had learned not to hesitate when an opportunity for enjoyment presented itself, but to seize each moment. There were too few of them in her life for her to allow any to pass untasted. She loved books, and read anything that came to hand. There was something magical in the way words could be strung together and a whole new world fashioned by the arrangement. While reading she could leave this crowded shack far behind, and go to worlds filled with excitement and beauty and love. When she was reading, she was someone else in her mind, someone worthwhile, rather than one of the trashy Devlins.

She had learned not to read in front of Pa or the boys, though. The least they did was make fun of her. Any one of them, in one of their meaner moods, was likely to snatch the book from her and throw it in the fire, or into the toilet, and laugh uproariously as if her frantic efforts to save it were the funniest thing they'd ever seen. Renee would grumble about her wasting her time reading instead of doing her chores, but she wouldn't do anything to the book. Jodie made fun of her sometimes, but in a careless, impatient way. She couldn't understand for the life of her why Faith would rather stick her nose in a book than go out to have some fun.

These precious moments alone, when she could read in peace, were the highlight of Faith's day, unless she had happened to see Gray. Sometimes she thought that if she couldn't read, just for a few minutes, she would go crazy and start screaming, and not be able to stop. But no matter what Pa did, no matter what she overheard someone say about her family, no matter what Russ and Nicky had been up to or how weak Scottie seemed, if she could open a book, she would lose herself in the pages.

Tonight she had more than a few minutes free for reading, for losing herself in the pages *of Rebecca.* She settled on her cot and pulled out the candle that she kept under her bed. She lit the candle, positioned it just so, balanced on a crate to the right of the cot, and scooted so that her back was braced against the wall. The light from the candle, small as it was, was enough to offset the back glare of the light bulb and allow her to read without straining her eyes too much. One of these days, she promised herself, she would get a lamp. She imagined it, a real reading lamp that

gave off soft, bright light. And she would have one of those wedge-shaped pillows to lean against.
One of these days.
It was almost midnight when she gave up the battle against her heavy eyelids. She hated to stop reading, not wanting to waste any of this time to herself, but she was so sleepy, she couldn't make sense of the words any longer, and wasting the words seemed a lot worse than wasting the time. Sighing, she got up and returned the book to its hiding place, then turned out the light. She crawled between the threadbare sheets, the frame of the cot squeaking under her weight, and blew out the candle.
Perversely, in the sudden darkness, sleep wouldn't come. She shifted restlessly on the thin cot, drifting in a half daydream, half doze, reliving the strained, shadowed romance in the book she'd been reading. She knew instantly when Russ and Nicky drove up, close to one o'clock. They staggered into the house, making no effort to be quiet, laughing uproariously at something their drinking buddies had done that night. Both of them were still underage, but a little thing like a law had never gotten in the way whenever a Devlin wanted to do something. The boys couldn't go to roadhouses, but there were plenty of other ways they could get booze, and they knew them all. Sometimes they stole it, sometimes they paid other people to buy it for them, in which case they had stolen the money. Neither of them had a job, part-time or otherwise, because no one would hire them. It was well known the Devlin boys would steal you blind.
"OF Poss," Nicky was giggling. "Booooooom!"
It was enough to send Russ into drunken whoops. From the incoherent fragments she heard, evidently "Or Poss," whoever that was, had been scared by something that had made a loud booming noise. The boys seemed to think it was hilarious, but they probably wouldn't remember it in the morning.
They woke Scottie, and she heard him grunting, but he didn't cry, so she remained in bed. She wouldn't have liked traipsing into the boys' bedroom in her nightgown – in fact, she would have gone cold with dread – but she would have done it if they'd scared Scottie and made him cry. But Nicky said, "Shaddup and go back to sleep," and Scottie was quiet again. After a few minutes, they were all asleep, the chorus of snores rising and falling in the darkness.

Half an hour later, Jodie came home. She was quiet, or at least tried to be, tiptoeing through the shack with her shoes in hand. The stench of beer and sex came with her, all yellow and red and brown in a noxious swirl. She didn’t bother to undress but flopped down on her cot and heaved a deep sigh, almost like a purr.
"You awake, Faithie?" she asked after a moment, her voice slurred.
"Yeah."
"Thought you were. You should’ve come with me. Had fun, lots of fun." The last sentence was deep with sensuality. "You don’t know what you’re missin’, Faithie."
"Then I don’t miss it, do I?" Faith whispered, and Jodie giggled.
Faith dozed lightly, listening for Renee’s car so she would know everyone was safely home. Twice she came awake with a start, wondering if Renee had managed to come in without waking her, and got up to look out the window to see if her car was there. It wasn’t.
Renee didn’t come home at all that night.

Three

"Daddy didn’t come home last night."
Monica’s face was tight with misery as she stood at the window of the dining room. Gray continued eating his breakfast; there wasn’t much that could curb his appetite. So that was why Monica was up so early, since she usually didn’t crawl out of bed until ten or later. What did she do, wait up until Guy came home? He wondered with a sigh what Monica thought he could do about their father’s hours; send him to bed without supper? He couldn’t remember when Guy hadn’t had women on the side, though Renee Devlin had certainly had a lot more staying power than the rest of them. His mother, Noelle, didn’t care where Guy spent his nights, so long as it wasn’t with her, and simply pretended that her husband’s affairs didn’t exist. Because Noelle didn’t care, Gray didn’t either. It would have been different if Noelle had been distressed, but that was far from the case. It wasn’t that she didn’t love Guy; Gray supposed she did, in her fashion. But Noelle intensely disliked sex, disliked being touched, even casually. For Guy to have a mistress was the best solution all around. He didn’t mistreat Noelle, and though he never bothered to hide his affairs, her position as his wife was safe. It was a very Old World arrangement that his parents had, and one that Gray knew he wouldn’t like at all when he finally decided to get married, but it suited both of them fine.
Monica hadn’t ever been able to see that, however. She was painfully protective of Noelle, relating to her in a way that Gray never could, imagining that Noelle was humiliated and hurt by Guy’s affairs. At the same time, Monica adored Guy, and was never happier than when he was paying attention to her. She had a picture in her mind of how families should be, close-knit and loving, always supporting each other, with the parents devoted to each other, and she had been trying her entire life to make her own family match that picture.
"Does Mother know?" he asked calmly, and refrained from asking if Monica really thought Noelle would care even if she did know. He sometimes felt sorry for Monica, but he also loved her, and didn’t deliberately try to hurt her.
Monica shook her head. "She isn’t up yet."
"Then why worry about it? By the time she gets up, when he comes in she’ll just think he’s already gone somewhere this morning."

"But he’s been out with *her!"* Monica whirled to face him, her dark eyes swimming with tears. "That Devlin woman."
"You don’t know that. He could have gotten into an all-night poker game." Guy did love to play poker, but Gray doubted that cards had anything to do with his absence. If he knew his father, and he knew him very well, Guy had far more likely spent the night with Renee Devlin, or some other woman who caught his eye. Renee was a fool if she thought Guy was any more faithful to her than he was to his wife.
"You think so?" Monica asked, eager to believe any excuse other than the most likely one.
Gray shrugged. "It’s possible." It was also possible a meteor would strike the house that day, but not very likely. He drank the last of his coffee and pushed back his chair. "When he comes in, tell him I’ve gone to Baton Rouge to look over that property we were talking about. I’ll be back by three, at the latest." Because she still looked so forlorn, he put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. Somehow Monica had been born without the decisiveness and arrogant self-assurance of the rest of the family. Even Noelle, as remote as she was, always knew exactly what she wanted and how to go about getting it. Monica always seemed so helpless against the forceful personalities of everyone else in the family.
She buried her dark head in his shoulder for a moment, just as she had when she’d been a little girl and gone running to her big brother whenever something had gone wrong and Guy hadn’t been available to put-things to rights again. Though he was only two years older, he had always been protective of her, knowing even as a child that she lacked his own inner toughness.
"What do I do if he *has* been out with that slut?" she asked, her voice muffled against his shoulder.
Gray tried to stifle his impatience, but some of it leaked through in his voice. "You don’t do anything. It’s none of your business."
She drew back, stung, and stared reproachfully at him. "How can you say that? I’m worried about him!"
"I know you are." He managed to soften his tone. "But it’s a waste of time, and he wouldn’t thank you for it."
"You always take his side, because you’re just like him!" The tears were slowly dripping down her cheeks now, and she turned away. "I bet the

property in Baton Rouge happens to have two legs and big boobs. Well, have fun!"

"I will," he said ironically. He really was going to see some property; afterwards was a different story. He was a strong, healthy young man, with a sex drive that had shown no signs of slacking off since his middle teens. It was a persistent burning in his guts, a hungry ache in his balls. He was lucky enough to be able to get women to ease that hunger, and cynical enough to realize that his family's money added to his sexual success.

He didn't care what the woman's reason was, whether she came to him because she liked him and enjoyed his body, or whether she had her eye on the Rouillard bank account. Reasons didn't matter, because all he wanted was a soft, warm body beneath him, taking his surging lust and giving him temporary ease. He'd never loved a woman yet, but he definitely loved sex, loved everything about it: the smells, the sensations, the sounds. He was particularly entranced by his favorite moment, the instant of penetration when he felt the small resistance of the woman's body to his pressure, then the acceptance, the sensation of being taken in and enveloped with hot, tight, wet flesh. God, that was wonderful! He was always extremely careful to protect against unwanted pregnancies, wearing a rubber even if the woman said she was on birth control pills, because women had been known to lie about things like that and a smart man didn't take chances.

He didn't know for certain, but he suspected Monica was still virgin. Though she was far more emotional than Noelle, there was still something of their mother in her, some deep remoteness that so far hadn't let any man get too close. She was an awkward mix of their parents' natures, receiving some of Noelle's cool distance without any of her self-assurance, and some of Guy's emotionalism without his intense sexuality. Gray, on the other hand, had his father's sexuality tempered with Noelle's control. As much as he wanted sex, he wasn't a slave to his cock the way Guy was. He knew when, and how, to say no. Thank God, he seemed to have better sense picking his women than Guy did, too.

He tugged on a strand of Monica's dark hair. "I'll call Alex and see if he knows where Dad is." Alexander Chelette, a lawyer in Prescott, was Guy's best friend.

Her lips trembled, but she smiled through her tears. "He'll go find Daddy and tell him to come home."

Gray snorted. It was a wonder how Monica had reached the age of twenty and learned absolutely nothing about men. "I wouldn’t bet on that, but maybe he can ease your mind." He intended to tell Monica that Guy was in a poker game, even if Alex knew the number of the motel room in which Guy was screwing the morning away.

He went into the study from which Guy handled the myriad Rouillard financial interests, and where Gray was learning how to handle them. Gray was fascinated by the intricacies of business and finance, so much so that he had willingly bypassed a chance to play pro football in favor of plunging headlong into the business world. It hadn’t been that much of a sacrifice for him; he knew he was good enough to play pro, because he had been scouted, but he knew he wasn’t star material. Had he given his life to football, he would have played eight years or so, if he’d been lucky enough to escape injury, and made a good but not spectacular salary. What it came down to, in the end, was that, as much as he loved football, he loved business more. This was a game that he could play much longer than he could football, make a hell of a lot more money, and was just as dog-eat-dog.

Though Guy would have burst his buttons with pride if his son had gone into pro football, Gray thought he’d been somehow relieved when Gray had chosen to come home instead. In the few months since Gray had gotten his degree, Guy had been happily cramming his head full of business knowledge, stuff that couldn’t be gotten from a textbook.

Gray ran his fingers over the polished wood of the big desk. An eight-by-ten photograph of Noelle was positioned on one corner, surrounded by smaller photos of himself and Monica at various stages of growth, like a queen with her subjects gathered around her. Most people would have thought of a mother with her children gathered about her knee, but Noelle wasn’t in the least motherly. The morning sunlight was falling across the photograph, picking up details that usually went unnoticed, and Gray paused to look at the still image of his mother’s face.

She was a beautiful woman, in a totally different way from Renee Devlin’s beauty. Renee was the sun, bold and hot and bright, while Noelle was the moon, cool and remote. She had thick, sleek, dark hair which she wore in a sophisticated twist, and lovely blue eyes which neither of her children had inherited. She wasn’t French Creole, but plain old American; some folks in the parish had wondered if Guy Rouillard wasn’t marrying beneath himself.

But she had turned out to be more queenly than any Creole born to the role could have been, and those old doubts had long since been forgotten. The only reminder was his own name, Grayson, which was her family name, but as it had long since been shortened to Gray, most people thought it had been chosen because of its similarity to his father’s name.

Guy’s appointment book was open on the desk. As Gray hitched one hip onto the desk and reached for the telephone, he ran his eye down the appointments listed for that day. Guy had an appointment with William Grady, the banker, at ten. For the first time, Gray felt a twinge of uneasiness. No matter what, Guy had never let his women get in the way of business, and he would never go to a business meeting unshaven, and without a fresh change of clothes.

Quickly he dialed Alex Chelette’s number, and his secretary answered on the first ring. "Chelette and Anderson, Attorneys at Law."

"Good morning, Andrea. Is Alex in yet?"

"Of course," she replied with good humor, having immediately recognized Gray’s distinctive deep voice, like smoky velvet. "You know how he is. It would take an earthquake to keep him from coming through the door on the dot of nine. Hold on and I’ll get him."

He heard the click as he was put on hold, but he knew Andrea too well to think that she was buzzing Alex on the intercom. He’d been in the office often enough, as both child and man, to know that the only time she used the intercom was when a stranger was in the office. Most of the time, she simply turned around in her chair and raised her voice, since the open door of Alex’s office was right behind her.

Gray smiled as he remembered Guy roaring with laughter as he told how Alex had once tried to get Andrea to behave more formally, as was proper for a law office. Poor easygoing Alex hadn’t stood a chance against his secretary. Affronted, she had turned so cold, the office had frosted over. Instead of the usual "Alex," she had started calling him "Mr. Chelette" whenever she had to address him, the intercom was always used, and their easy camaraderie had gone out the window. When he stopped by her desk to try to chat, she got up and went to the rest room. All of the small details that she had once handled as a matter of course, taking a good deal of work off his shoulders, were now dumped on Alex’s desk for him to do. He found himself coming in earlier and staying later, while Andrea suddenly

developed a very precise time schedule. There was no question of replacing her; legal secretaries weren't easy to come by in Prescott.
Within two weeks, Alex had abjectly surrendered, and Andrea had been yelling through his office door ever since.
The line clicked again as Alex picked up. His lazy, good-natured drawl came over the line. "Good mornin', Gray. You're out and about early today."
"Not so early." He had always kept earlier hours than Guy, but most people assumed like father, like son. "I'm going to Baton Rouge to look at some property. Alex, do you know where Dad is?"
There was a small silence on the other end of the line. "No, I don't."
Another cautious little pause. "Is something wrong?"
"He didn't come home last night, and he has an appointment with Bill Grady at ten."
"Damn," Alex said softly, but Gray could hear the alarm in the word. "Oh, God. I didn't think he'd – *goddamn* it!"
"Alex." Gray's voice was as hard and sharp as polished steel, slicing through the wire. "What's going on?"
"I swear, Gray, I didn't think he'd do it," Alex said miserably. "Maybe he didn't. Maybe he just overslept."
"Do what?" '
"He mentioned it a couple of times, but only when he'd been drinking. I swear, I never thought he was serious. God, how could he be?"
The plastic of the receiver cracked under Gray's grip. "Serious about what?"
"About leaving your mother." Alex audibly swallowed, the gulping sound plain. "And running away with Renee Devlin."
Very gently, Gray replaced the receiver in its cradle. He stood motionless for several seconds, staring down at the instrument. It couldn't – Guy wouldn't have done that. Why should he? Why run away with Renee when he could and did screw her whenever he wanted? Alex had to be wrong. Guy would never have left his children or the business – but he had been relieved when Gray had chosen to turn down pro football, and had given Gray a crash course in running everything.
For a blessed little while Gray was numb with disbelief, but he was too much of a realist for it to last long. The numbness began to fade, and pure rage rushed in to fill the void. He moved like a snake striking, snatching the

phone from the desk and hurling it through the window, shattering glass and bringing several sets of footsteps rushing down the hall to the study.
Everyone slept late except Faith and Scottie, and she left the shack as soon as she had fed Scottie his breakfast, taking him down to the creek so he could splash in the shallow water and try to catch the darting crawfish. He never did, but he loved to try. It was a gorgeous morning, with the sunlight slanting bright and golden through the trees, dappling the water. The smells were fresh and sharp, full of good, clean colors that wiped out the sour miasma of alcohol lingering in her nostrils, exuded from the four people she had left sleeping off the effects of the night.
Expecting Scottie to keep his clothes dry was like expecting the sun to rise in the west. When they reached the creek, she pulled off his shorts and shirt, and let him plunge into the water wearing only his diaper. She had brought a dry one to put on him when they left. She carefully hung the discarded garments on limbs, then stepped into the creek to wade and keep an eye on him. If a snake slithered toward him, he wouldn’t know to be alarmed. She wasn’t afraid of them either, but she was definitely cautious.
She let him play for a couple of hours, then had to pick him up and carry him out of the water, with him kicking and protesting every inch of the way. "You can’t stay in the water," she explained. "Look, your toes are wrinkled like a prune." She sat down on the ground and changed his diaper, then "dressed him. It was a difficult job, with him still squirming and trying to escape back into the water.
"Let’s look for squirrels," she said. "Can you see any squirrels?"
Distracted, he immediately looked upward, his eyes rounded with excitement as he searched the trees for a squirrel. Faith took his stubby hand in hers and slowly led him through the woods, taking a meandering path back to the shack. Maybe by the time they got back, Renee would be home.
Though her mother had stayed out all night before, it always made Faith uneasy. She kept it in the back of her mind, but she lived with the constant fear that Renee would leave one night and never come home. Faith knew, with bitter realism, that if Renee met some man who had a bit of money and promised her pretty things, she would be gone like a shot. Probably the only thing that kept her in Prescott anyway was Guy Rouillard, and what he could give her. If Guy ever dumped her, Renee wouldn’t hang around any longer than it took her to pack her clothes.

Scottie managed to spot two squirrels, one jumping along a tree limb and another climbing a tree, so he was happy to go where Faith led him. When they came in sight of the shack, however, he realized that they were going home and began to make grunting noises of disapproval as he pulled back, trying to tug his hand from her grip.

"Scottie, stop it," Faith said, as she dragged him out of the woods into the rutted dirt road leading up to the shack. "I can't play with you anymore right now, I've got to do the wash. But I promise I'll play cars with you when I get – "

She heard the low, rumbling sound of a car engine behind her, getting louder as it got closer, and her first, relieved thought as she turned was *Mama's home.* But it wasn't Renee's flashy red car that came into sight around the curve. It was a black Corvette convertible, one bought to replace the silver one Gray had driven since high school. Faith stopped in her tracks, forgetting all about Scottie and Renee as her heart stopped, then began pounding against her rib cage with a force that almost made her sick. Gray was coming here!

She was so stunned with joy that she barely remembered to pull Scottie out of the road to stand in the weeds on the side. *Gray,* her heart sang. A fine trembling began in her knees and worked its way up her slender body at the thought of actually speaking to him again, even if it was just to mumble a hello.

Her gaze locked on him, drinking in the details as he drove closer. Though he was sitting behind the wheel and she couldn't see that much of him, she thought that he seemed leaner than he'd been while he was playing football, and his hair was a little longer. His eyes were the same, though, dark as sin and just as tempting. They flashed over her as the Corvette bumped past where she and Scottie were standing, and he curtly nodded his head.

Scottie squirmed and tugged at his hand, fascinated by the pretty car. He loved Renee's car, and Faith had to watch to keep him away from it, because it made Renee mad if he patted it and left his dirty little handprints behind.

"All right," Faith whispered, still dazed. "We'll go see the pretty car." They stepped back into the road and followed the Corvette, which had now stopped in front of the shack. Gray slid up from behind the wheel and swung one long leg over the door, then the other, stepping out of the low-

slung car as if it were a child’s vehicle. Going up the two rickety steps, he jerked open the screen door and went inside.
He didn’t knock, Faith thought. Something’s wrong. He didn’t knock.
She speeded up, hurrying Scottie so that his short legs pumped and he gave a squawk of protest. She thought of his heart, and terror squeezed her insides. She skidded to a stop, and swiftly stooped down to pick him up.
"I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to make you run." Her back arched from the strain of carrying him, but she ignored it and hurried her steps again. Small rocks rolled unnoticed under her bare feet, and little clouds of dust flew up with every thud of her heels. Scottie’s weight seemed to drag at her, keeping her from reaching the shack. Blood roared in her ears, and a sense of dread swelled in her chest until she almost choked.
She heard some dim, faraway roar that she recognized as Pa’s vo’ice, underlaid by Gray’s deeper, more thunderous tones. Panting, she pumped her thin legs even harder, and finally reached the shack. The screen door squeaked as she jerked it open and hurled herself inside, only to skid to a stop, blinking in an effort to adjust her eyes to the dimness. Unintelligible shouts and curses swirled around her, making her feel as if she were caught in some nightmare tunnel.
She gulped in air as she let Scottie slip to the floor. Scared by the shouting, he latched on to her legs and buried his face against her.
As her vision adjusted and the roaring in her ears subsided, the shouts began to make sense, and she wished they hadn’t.
Gray had hauled Amos out of bed and was dragging him into the kitchen. Amos was yelling and swearing, grabbing at the doorframe in an effort to halt Gray’s momentum. He was no match for the young man’s enraged strength, however, and could only scramble for balance as Gray shoved him toward the center of the room.
"Where’s Renee?" Gray barked, looming threateningly over Amos, who shrank back.
Amos’s rheumy eyes darted around the room, as if looking for his wife.
"Not here," he mumbled.
"I can see she isn’t here, you stupid bastard! I want to know where in hell she *is!"*
Amos weaved back and forth on his bare feet, and suddenly belched. He was bare-chested, his pants still gaping open. His uncombed hair stood out in all directions, he was unshaven, his eyes bloodshot, and his breath foul

with sleep and drink. In contrast, Gray towered over him, six feet four of lean, steely muscle, his black hair neatly brushed back, his white shirt spotless and his slacks hand-tailored to fit him.
"You ain’t got no call to be shovin’ me around, I don’t care who your daddy is," Amos complained. Despite his bluster, he cowered back every time Gray moved.
Russ and Nicky had crowded out of their bedroom, but they made no move to back their father. Facing down a raging Gray Rouillard wasn’t their style; attacking anyone who could cause them trouble wasn’t their style.
"Do you know where Renee is?" Gray asked again, his voice icy.
Amos hitched one shoulder. "Must’ve gone out," he mumbled sullenly.
"When?"
"Whaddaya mean, when? I was in bed. How in hell would I know what time she left?"
"Did she come home last night?"
"Course she did! Gawddammit, what’re you sayin’?"
Amos yelled, the slur in his words testimony to the alcohol still in his blood.
"I’m saying your whore of a wife has left!" Gray yelled back, his dark face twisted with rage, his neck corded.
Pure terror sliced through Faith, and her vision blurred again. "No," she gasped.
Gray heard her, and his head snapped around. His dark eyes were glittering with fury as they raked over her. "You look sober, at least. Do you know where Renee is? Did she come home last night?"
Numbly Faith shook her head. Black disaster loomed in front of her, and her nostrils were filled with the sharp, yellow, acrid smell of fear… her own.
His upper lip curled, showing strong white teeth in a snarl. "I didn’t think so. She’s run away with my father."
Faith shook her head again, and then couldn’t seem to stop it from wagging. *No.* The word reverberated through her brain. *God, please, no.*
"You’re lyin’!" Amos yelled, tottering toward the rickety table and sagging into one of the chairs. "Renee wouldn’t leave me and our kids. She loves me. Your whore-hoppin’ pa’s out with some new piece he’s found – "
Gray lunged forward like a snake striking. His fist connected with Amos’s jaw, knuckles smashing against bone, and both Amos and the chair crashed to the floor. The chair splintered into kindling beneath him.

With a terrified wail, Scottie burrowed his face harder against Faith's hip. She was too frozen to even put a comforting arm around his shoulders, and he began to cry.

Amos groggily scrambled up from the floor, and staggered to put the table between him and Gray. "Why'd you hit me?" he whined, holding his jaw. "I ain't done nothin' to you. Whatever Renee and your pa done, it ain't my fault!"

"What's all the yellin' about?" came Jodie's deliberately sultry voice, the one she put on whenever she was trying to entice a man. Faith looked toward the entrance to the lean-to, and her eyes widened with horror. Jodie posed against the doorframe, her uncombed reddish blond hair tossed back over her bare shoulders. She wore only a pair of red lace panties, and demurely held the matching lace camisole so that it barely covered her breasts. She blinked at Gray with wide-eyed innocence so blatantly false that Faith cringed inside.

Gray's expression tightened with disgust as he glanced at her; his mouth curled and he deliberately turned his back. "I want you gone by nightfall," he said to Amos, his voice steely. "You stink up our land, and I'm tired of smelling you."

"Leave?" Amos croaked. "You high-and-mighty bastard, you can't make us leave. There're laws – "

"You don't pay rent," Gray said, a cold, deadly smile twisting his lips. "Eviction laws don't apply to trespassers. Get out." He turned and started toward the door.

"Wait!" Amos cried. His panicked gaze darted around the room as if looking for inspiration. He licked his lips. "Don't be so hasty. Maybe… maybe they just took a little trip. They'll come back. Yeah, that's right. Renee'll be back, she didn't have no reason to leave."

Gray gave a harsh bark of laughter, his contemptuous gaze moving around the room, taking in the mean interior of the shack. Someone, probably the youngest girl, had made an effort to keep it clean, but it was like trying to hold back the tide. Amos and the two boys, who were younger editions of their father, sullenly watched him. The older girl still lounged in the doorway trying to show him as much of her tits as she could without actually dropping that scrap of cloth. The little boy with Down's syndrome was clinging to the younger girl's legs and bawling. The girl was standing

as if turned to stone, staring at him with huge, blank green eyes. Her dark red hair hung untidily around her shoulders, and her bare feet were dirty. Standing so close to him, Faith could read his expression, and she cringed inside as his gaze swept over the shack and its inhabitants, finally settling on her. He catalogued her life, her family, herself, and found it all worthless. "No reason to leave?" he sneered. "My God, as far as I can tell, she doesn’t have a reason to come back!"

In the silence that followed, he stepped around Faith and shoved the screen door open. It banged against the side of the shack, then slammed shut. The Corvette’s engine roared to life, and a moment later Gray was gone. Faith stood frozen in the middle of the floor, with Scottie still clinging to her legs and crying. Her mind felt numb. She knew she needed to do something, but what? Gray had said they had to leave, and the enormity of it stunned her. Leave? Where would they go? She couldn’t make her mind start working. All she could do was lift her hand, which felt as heavy as lead, and smooth Scottie’s hair while saying, "It’s all right, it’s all right," even though she knew it was a lie. Mama was gone, and it would never be all right again.

Four

Gray managed to make it almost half a mile before the shaking became so hard that he had to stop the car. He leaned his head on the steering wheel and closed his eyes, trying to fight off the waves of panic. God, what was he going to do? He had never before been as scared as he was now.
Bewildered pain filled him, and he felt like a child who runs to hide his face in his mother's lap, much as that Devlin kid had tried to hide against his sister's skinny legs. But he couldn't go to Noelle; even when he had *been* a child, she'd pulled away from clinging little hands, and he'd learned to go to his father for reassurance. Even had Noelle been more affectionate, he couldn't look to her for support, because she would be looking to him for the same thing. Taking care of his mother and sister was his responsibility now.
Why had Guy done it? How could he have left? His father's absence, his betrayal, made Gray feel as if his heart had been torn out. Guy had had Renee anyway; what had she offered that tempted him into turning his back on his children, his business, his heritage? Gray had always been close to his father, had grown up surrounded by his love, had always felt his support like a solid rock at his back, but now that loving, reassuring presence was gone, and with it the foundation of his life.

He was terrified. He was only twenty-two, and the problems looming over him looked like unscalable mountains. Noelle and Monica still didn't know; somehow he had to find the strength to tell them. He had to be a rock for them, and he had to put aside his own pain and concentrate on holding the family finances together, or they stood to lose everything. This wasn't the same situation it would have been if Guy had died, for Gray would have inherited the shares, the money, and the control. As it was now, Guy still owned everything, and he was gone. The Rouillard fortune could come tumbling down around their ears, with wary investors jumping ship and various boards of directors seizing power. Gray would have to fight like a son of a bitch to keep even half of what they now had.
He, Monica, and Noelle had some assets hi their own names, but it wouldn't be enough. Guy had been giving Gray a crash course in managing it all, but hadn't given him the power to do so, unless he'd left a letter giving Gray his

proxy. Desperate hope reared its head. Any such letter, if it existed, would be in the desk in the study.
Failing that, he'd have to call Alex and get his help in laying out a strategy. Alex was a damn smart man and a good corporate lawyer; he could have had a much more lucrative practice somewhere else, but he was backed by his own family money and hadn't felt the need to leave Prescott. He had handled all of Guy's business, as well as being his best friend, so he knew as much or more about the legal situation as did Gray.
God knows, Gray thought bleakly, he'd need all the help he could get. If there wasn't a letter of proxy, he'd be lucky to keep a roof over them.
When he raised his head from the steering wheel, he had regained his self-control, the pain pushed to the background and steely determination taking its place. By God, his mother and sister would have a hard enough time dealing with this as it was; he'd be damned if he let them lose their home, too.
He put the car into gear and drove away, leaving the last remnants of his boyhood behind on the rutted dirt track.
He went first into Prescott, to Alex's office. He would have to move fast to salvage anything. Andrea broke into a smile when he came in, something women often did at the sight of him. Color heightened a little on her round, pleasant face. She was forty-five, old enough to be his mother, but age had nothing to do with her instinctive female reaction to his tall, muscular presence.
Gray automatically returned the smile, but his mind was racing with plans. "Is anyone with Alex? I need to see him."
"No, he's alone. Go on in, hon."
Gray walked past her desk and into Alex's office, firmly closing the door behind him. Alex looked up from the well-ordered mountain of files on his desk, and got to his feet. His good-looking face was taut with worry. "Did you find him?"
Gray shook his head. "Renee Devlin's gone, too."
"Oh, God." Alex collapsed back into his chair and shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I can't believe it. I didn't think he was serious. My God, why would he be? He was – " He stopped and opened his eyes, flushing a little.
"Fucking her anyway," Gray finished bluntly. He walked over to the window and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down on the main

street. Prescott was a small town, only about fifteen thousand citizens, but today traffic hummed around the courthouse square. Soon everyone down there would know that Guy Rouillard had left his wife and children and run off with the Devlin whore.

"Does your mama know?" Alex's voice was strained.

Gray shook his head. "Not yet. I'll tell her and Monica when I go home." The original shock and pain had gone, leaving behind a ruthless willpower and a certain remoteness, as if he were standing at a distance watching himself go through the motions. Some of that distance leaked into his tone, making him sound cool and steady. "Did Dad leave a letter of proxy with you?"

Until then, evidently, Alex had thought only of the personal ramifications of Guy's defection. Now the legal aspects dawned on him, and his eyes widened with horror. "Shit," he said, lapsing into unusual vulgarity. "No, he didn't. If he had, I'd have known he was serious about leaving and tried to stop him."

"There may be a letter in the desk at home. He may call in a day or so. If so, there's no problem with the financial side of things. But if there isn't a letter, and he doesn't call… I can't afford to wait. I'll have to liquidate as much as I can, before news of this gets around and stock prices drop like a rock."

"He'll call," Alex said feebly. "He has to. He can't just walk away from this kind of financial obligation. A fortune is involved!"

Gray shrugged, his face a careful blank. "He walked away from his family. I can't afford to assume that the business means more to him." He paused. "I don't think he'll come back or call. I think he meant to walk away from everything and never come back. He's been teaching me as much as he could, and now I know why. If he had meant to stay in charge of everything, he wouldn't have done that."

"Then there should be a letter of proxy," Alex said insistently. "Guy was too sharp of a businessman not to have taken care of that."

"Maybe, but I have Mother and Monica to think about. I can't wait. I have to liquidate now, and get as much money as I can, so I'll have something to work with and rebuild. If I don't, and he doesn't make arrangements, we won't have a pot to piss in."

Alex swallowed, but he nodded. "Okay. I'll start doing what I can to shore up your legal position, but I have to tell you, unless Guy gets back in touch

or left a letter of proxy, it’s a mess. Everything is tied up unless Noelle divorces him and the court awards her half of his assets, but that will take time."
"I have to plan for the worst," Gray said. "I’ll go home and look for a letter, but don’t wait until you hear from me to get started. If there isn’t a letter, I’ll call the broker immediately and start selling. Either way, I’ll let you know. Keep it quiet until I call."
Alex got to his feet. "I won’t even let Andrea know." He shoved his hands through his dark hair, an indication of his worry, because Alex wasn’t given to nervous gestures. His gray eyes were dark with misery. "I’m sorry, Gray. I feel like this is my fault. I should have done something."
Gray shook his head. "Don’t blame yourself. Like you said, who would have thought he was serious? No, the only people I blame are Dad and Renee Devlin." He gave a wintry smile. "I can’t imagine anything she had being good enough to make him walk out on his family, but evidently it was." He paused, lost for a moment in the grimness of his thoughts, then shook himself and headed toward the door. "I’ll call you when I find out something."
After he had gone, Alex sank back into his chair, his movements stiff and feeble. He barely managed to control his expression when Andrea popped into the office, alive with curiosity. "What’s going on with Gray?"
"Nothing much. A personal matter he wanted to talk over with me."
She was disappointed that he didn’t confide in her. "Is there anything I can do to help?"
"No, everything will be all right." He sighed, and rubbed his eyes. "Why don’t you go on to lunch, and bring me back a sandwich or something. I’m waiting for a call, so I can’t leave."
"Okay. What do you want?"
He waved his hand. "Anything. You know what I like. Surprise me."
She rambled around in the outer office for a few minutes, cutting off the computer he’d bought the year before, storing the disks, collecting her purse. After she’d gone, Alex waited a few minutes before going into the other room and locking the door. Then he sat down in her chair and turned on the computer, and swiftly began typing. "Damn you, Guy," he whispered. "You son of a bitch."
Gray parked the Corvette in front of the five wide steps leading up to the covered porch and double front doors, though Noelle frowned on that and

preferred that the family’s cars be properly protected and out of sight in the attached garage behind. The front drive was for visitors, who shouldn’t be able to tell which family members were at home by the vehicles parked in front. That way, one felt no obligation to admit to being there, and thus forced to receive unwanted guests. Some of Noelle’s notions were positively Victorian; usually he indulged her, but today he had more important things on his mind, and was in a hurry.

He leaped up the steps with two strides, and pushed open the door. Monica had probably been watching from her bedroom window, because she was hurrying down the stairs, anxiety twisting her face. "Daddy *still* hasn’t come home!" she hissed, glancing toward the breakfast parlor, where Noelle was evidently lingering over a late breakfast. "Why did you break the window in his study, then light out of here like a cat with its tail on fire? And why did you park in front? Mother won’t like that."

Guy didn’t answer, but strode rapidly down the hall to the study, his bootheels thudding on the parquet floor. Monica rushed after him, and slipped into the study as he began examining, one by one, the papers on Guy’s desk.

"I don’t believe Alex told the truth about the poker game," she said, her lips trembling a little. "Call him again, Gray. Make him tell you where Daddy is."

"In a minute," Gray murmured, not sparing her a glance. None of the papers on top of the desk was a letter of proxy. He began opening drawers.

"Gray!" Her voice rose sharply. "Surely finding Daddy’s more important than looking through his desk!"

He stopped, took a deep breath, and straightened. "Monica, honey, sit down over there and hush," he said in a kind tone that nevertheless was underlaid with steel. "I have to look for a very important paper that Dad may have left here. I’ll be with you in a minute."

She opened her mouth to say something else, but he gave her a look that changed her mind. Silently, vague surprise on her face, she sat down, and Gray returned to his search.

Five minutes later, he sat back with the taste of defeat bitter in his mouth. There was no letter. It didn’t make sense. Why would Guy have gone to so much trouble to teach him everything, then leave without providing the proxies? As Alex had said, Guy was too smart not to have thought of it. If he intended to stay in charge himself, why had he bothered to give Gray

such intense instruction? Maybe he had intended to turn over the reins to Gray, then changed his mind. That was the only other explanation there could be. In that case, they would be hearing from him again, within a few days at the most, because his financial dealings were too complicated to leave for longer than that.

But, as he'd told Alex, he couldn't afford to assume things would be taken care of. He couldn't imagine Guy *not* taking care of business, but until this morning he hadn't been able to imagine Guy leaving them for Renee Devlin, either. The impossible had happened, so how could he blindly trust in anything else he had always assumed to be true of his father? Responsibility for his mother and sister weighed heavily on his shoulders. He couldn't risk their welfare.

He reached for the telephone, but it wasn't there. Dimly he remembered throwing it earlier, and glanced at the window that was now boarded over, awaiting new panes. He got up and walked out into the hallway, to the phone on the table at the foot of the stairs. Monica trailed after him, still silent but plainly resenting the restriction.

He called Alex first. Alex answered the phone on the first ring. "No letter," Gray said briefly. "See what you can do about getting power of attorney for me, or anything else that will shore up my position." Power of attorney was a long shot, but maybe a few strings could be pulled.

"I've already started," Alex said quietly.

Next Gray called his broker. His instructions were brief, and explicit. If worst came to worst, he would need every bit of ready cash he could scrape together.

Now for the hardest part. Monica was staring at him, her big, dark eyes filled with alarm. "Something's wrong, isn't it?" she asked.

He mentally braced himself, then took Monica's hand in his. "Let's go talk to Mother," he said.

She started to ask something else, but he shook his head. "I can only say it once," he said, his voice rough.

Noelle was enjoying her last cup of tea as she read the society section of the New Orleans newspaper. Prescott had its own small weekly paper, in which she was regularly mentioned, but being in the New Orleans paper was what really counted. Her name was listed there often enough to make her the envy of the rest of the parish society. She was dressed in her favorite white, with her sleek dark hair pulled back into a French twist. Her makeup was

minimal but perfect, her jewelry expensive but understated. There was nothing gaudy or frivolous about Noelle, not one bow or ruffle or jarring bit of color, just clean, classic lines. Even her nails never wore anything but clear polish.

She looked up as Gray and Monica entered the breakfast parlor, and her gaze flicked briefly to their clasped hands. She didn't comment on it, though, for that would express personal interest, and perhaps invite the same. "Good morning, Gray," she greeted him, her voice perfectly composed as always. Noelle could violently hate someone, but the person would never be able to tell by her voice; it never revealed warmth, affection, anger, or any other emotion. Such a display would be common, and Noelle allowed nothing about herself to sink to that low standard.

"Shall I call for another pot of tea?"

"No, thank you, Mother. I need to talk to you and Monica; something serious has happened." He felt Monica's hand tremble in his, and squeezed it reassuringly.

Noelle put aside the newspaper. "Should we be more private?" she asked, concerned that one of the servants would overhear them discussing a personal matter.

"There's no need." Gray pulled out a chair for Monica, then stood behind her with one hand on her shoulder. Noelle would be upset because of the social nuances, the embarrassment of it, but Monica's pain would be worse. "I don't know of any way to make this easier. He didn't leave a note or anything like that, but Dad seems to have left town with Renee Devlin. They're both gone."

Noelle's slender hand fluttered toward her throat. Monica was motionless, not even breathing.

"I'm sure he wouldn't take a woman like that on a business trip," Noelle said with calm certainty. "Think how it would look."

"Mother – " Gray cut himself off, stifling his impatience. "He isn't on a business trip. Dad and Renee Devlin have run away together. He won't be coming back."

Monica gave a thin cry, and pressed both hands to her mouth to cut *off* the sound. Noelle's face lost its color, but her movements were precise as she placed her teacup in the center of the saucer. "I'm sure you're mistaken, dear. Your father wouldn't risk his social position for – "

"For God’s sake, Mother!" Gray snapped, his tenuous control on his patience snapping like a thread. "Dad doesn’t give a rat’s ass about his social position. You’re the one it’s important to, not him!"
"Grayson, it isn’t necessary to be vulgar."
He ground his teeth together. It was typical of her to ignore something she found unpleasant and focus on the trivial. "Dad’s gone," he said, deliberately emphasizing the words. "He’s left you for Renee. They’ve run away together, and he won’t be coming back. No one else knows it yet, but it’ll probably be all over the parish by tomorrow morning."
Her eyes widened at that last sentence, and horror filled them as she realized the humiliation of her position. "No," she whispered. "He couldn’t do that to me."
"He did. It’s done."
Blindly she got to her feet, shaking her head. "He – he’s really gone?" she asked in a faint murmur. "He left *me* for that… that – " Unable to finish, she walked quickly from the room, almost as if she were fleeing.
As soon as Noelle was gone, as soon as she was no longer there to frown at unseemly displays, Monica wilted onto the table, falling forward to bury her face against her arm. Harsh sobs tore up from her throat and shook her slim body. Almost as angry at Noelle as he was at Guy, Gray knelt beside his sister and put his arms around her.
"It’s going to be tough," he said, "but we’ll get through this. I’m going to be really busy the next few days, getting our finances under control, but I’ll be here if you need me." He couldn’t bring himself to tell her that financial disaster was looming. "I know it hurts now, but we’ll make it all right."
"I hate him," Monica sobbed, her voice muffled. "He left us for that… that *whore!* I hope he doesn’t come back. I *hate* him, I never want to see him again!" Abruptly she tore away from him, overturning her chair as she shoved it back from the table. She was still sobbing as she ran from the parlor, and he heard the harsh, gulping sounds continue all the way up the stairs. A moment later the slam of her bedroom door echoed through the house.
Gray wanted to bury his own face in his hands. He wanted to punch something, preferably his father’s nose. He wanted to roar his rage to the heavens. The situation was bad enough as it was; why did Noelle have to make it worse by being concerned only with what her friends would say? For once, why couldn’t she give some support to her daughter? Couldn’t

she see how much Monica needed her now? But she had never been there for them, so why should that change now? Unlike Guy, Noelle was at least constant.

He needed a drink, a stiff one. He left the breakfast parlor and went back to the study, to the bottle of Scotch that Guy always kept in the liquor cabinet behind his desk. Oriane, their longtime housekeeper, was going up the stairs with an armload of towels, and she gave him a curious look. Not being deaf, of course, she had heard some of the uproar. The speculation between Oriane, her husband, Garron, who took care of the grounds, and Delfina, the cook, would be rampant. They would have to be told, of course, but he couldn't bring himself to do it right then. Maybe after he had that drink of Scotch.

He opened the cabinet and took out the bottle, and splashed a couple of inches of the amber liquid into a glass. The smoky, biting flavor was sharp on his tongue as he took the first sip, then threw the rest of it back with a neat, stiff motion of his wrist. He needed the sedative effect, not the taste.

He had just poured himself a second drink when a shrill scream from upstairs pierced the air, followed by Oriane shrieking his name, over and over.

Monica. As soon as he heard Oriane scream, Gray knew. Dread congealed in his chest as he bolted from the study and took the stairs three at a time, his long, powerful legs propelling him upward. Oriane rushed down the hall toward him, her eyes wide with panic. "She's cut herself, bad! Ohmigod, ohmigod, there's blood all over the place – "

Gray pushed past her and ran into Monica's bedroom. She wasn't there, but the door to her bathroom was open, and he threw himself toward it, only to stop, frozen, in the doorway.

Monica had decorated her bedroom and bath herself, in delicate pinks and pearly whites that looked absurdly little-girlish. Normally Gray was reminded of cotton candy, but now the pink ceramic tile on the bathroom floor was covered with dark red splotches. Monica sat calmly on the fuzzy pink toilet lid, her big, dark eyes empty as she stared out the window. Her hands were neatly folded on her lap. Blood pulsed from the deep gashes she had made in both wrists, soaking her lap, running down her legs to pool on the floor.

"I'm sorry for the commotion," she said in an eerily remote little voice. "I didn't expect Oriane to bring up clean towels."

"Jesus," he groaned, and snatched up the towels Oriane had dropped. He went down on one knee beside Monica and grabbed her left wrist. "Damn it, Monica, I ought to tan your ass!" He wrapped one towel around her wrist, then tied another one around it as tightly as he could.
"Just leave me alone," she whispered, trying to tug her arm away from him, but she was already frighteningly weak. "Shut up!" he barked, taking her right wrist and repeating the procedure. "Goddamn it, how could you do something this stupid?" This, on top of everything else he had gone through that day, was almost more than he could bear. Fear and rage mingled in his chest and swelled until he thought he would choke. "Did you stop to think about anyone but yourself? Did you think that maybe I could use your help, that this is as hard on everyone else as it is on you?" He ground the words out between clenched teeth as he snatched her up against his chest and ran, past Noelle, who was simply standing in the hallway with a dazed expression on her bloodless face, down the stairs, and past Oriane and Delfina clutching each other in the foyer.
"Call the clinic and let Dr. Bogarde know we're on the way," he ordered as he carried Monica out the front door and down the steps, to the Corvette parked there. "I'll get blood in your car," Monica protested feebly. "I told you to shut up," he snapped. "Don't talk unless you have something sensible to say." Probably he was supposed to be more sensitive with someone who had just attempted suicide, but this was his sister, and he was damned if he would let her take her own life. He was in a towering rage, the fury just barely controlled. It seemed as if his life had gone to hell in just the past few hours, and he was fed up with the people he loved doing stupid things.
He didn't bother opening the door of the Corvette, but simply leaned over and deposited her in the seat, then vaulted over her into the driver's seat. He started the engine, let out the clutch, and left rubber on the driveway as he pushed the powerful motor to the limit. Monica slumped weakly against the passenger door, her eyes closed. He shot her a panicked glance, but didn't risk taking the time to stop. She was deathly white, and there was a faint bluish tinge forming around her mouth. Blood was already seeping through the towels, the bright red garish against the white fabric. He had seen the cuts; they hadn't been shallow slices, gestures made more to frighten and gain attention than seriously threaten a life. No, Monica had been very

serious about the attempt. His sister might die because his father couldn’t resist chasing after that redheaded Devlin whore.
He made the fifteen-mile trip to the clinic in just under ten minutes. The parking lot was full, but he pulled around to the back door of the one-story brick building and blew the horn, then leaped out to lift Monica into his arms again. She was totally limp, her head lolling against his shoulder, and hot tears seared his eyelids.
The back door opened and Dr. Bogarde rushed out, followed by both his nurses. "Put her in the first room on the right," he said, and Gray turned sideways to get her through the doorway. Sadie Lee Fanchier, the senior nurse, held the door to the examining room open and he carried Monica inside, then gently deposited her on the narrow table, the sheet-covered vinyl creaking as it took her weight.
Sadie Lee was wrapping a blood pressure cuff around Monica’s arm even as Dr. Bogarde was untying Gray’s first-aid efforts. Quickly she pumped it up, then listened through the stethoscope pressed to the inside of Monica’s elbow. "Seventy-five over forty."
"Start an IV," Dr. Bogarde ordered. "Glucose." The other nurse, Kitty, moved to follow his instructions.
Dr. Bogarde kept his eyes on Monica’s wrists as he worked. "She needs blood," he said. "Fast. We have to get her to the hospital in Baton Rouge, because I can’t do it here. She’ll need a vascular specialist to repair her veins, too. I can stabilize her, Gray, but I can’t do any more than that."
Kitty hung the clear bag of glucose on the metal rack and deftly inserted the IV needle in Monica’s arm. "We don’t have time to get an ambulance here," the doctor continued. "We’ll take her ourselves, in my car. You okay to drive?" he asked Gray, shooting him a sharp glance.
"Yes." The answer was flat, unequivocal.
Dr. Bogarde tightly taped Monica’s wrists. "Okay, that’s got the bleeding stopped. Kitty, I need a couple of blankets. Put one over the backseat of my car, and tuck the other one over Monica. Gray, pick her up again, and be careful of that IV line. Sadie Lee, call the hospital and let ‘em know we’re on the way, and then give a call to the sheriffs department so they can clear the roads a mite."
Gently Gray lifted his sister. Dr. Bogarde took the glucose bag in one hand and his medical bag in the other, and trotted at Gray’s side as he carried Monica out to the doctor’s four-door Chrysler. The doctor climbed in first,

then helped Gray carefully maneuver Monica onto the backseat. Dr. Bogarde hooked the glucose bag on the garment hanger over the side window, and took up a position on his knees on the floorboard.
"Don’t go slamming us around," he instructed as Gray squeezed his long frame under the steering wheel. Dr. Bogarde was barely five foot five, so the seat was so close to the steering wheel that Gray’s chest was brushing it. He couldn’t let the seat back, though, with Dr. Bogarde on the back floorboard. "Keep it at a steady speed and we’ll make better time. And put on the emergency lights."
Gray had a violent thought about backseat drivers, but he kept it to himself. Following orders, he left the clinic more sedately than he had arrived, though his instincts were screaming at him to push the gas pedal to the floorboard and keep it there. Only the knowledge that the roomy sedan, built more for comfort than road handling, would likely straighten out a curve if he pushed it the way he did the Corvette kept him at a reasonable speed.
"How’d this happen?" Dr. Bogarde asked.
Gray glanced at him in the rearview mirror. The doctor was a small, dapper man with shrewd blue eyes. Despite his name, he was neither Creole nor Cajun; he had to be in his mid-fifties, with graying, sandy blond hair. Gray had known him all of his life. Noelle had never gone to him, preferring an urbane physician in New Orleans, but everyone else in the family had been to see him with everything from childhood cuts to influenza to the broken arm Gray had received in spring practice when he was fifteen.
Gray didn’t want to tell him everything, preferring to keep the details quiet for a while longer until his broker had had time to sell and Alex had done his legal maneuvers, but it wouldn’t be possible to completely stifle the news. He gave Dr. Bogarde the central fact, the only one that mattered.
"Dad and Mother have separated. Monica…" He hesitated.
Dr. Bogarde sighed. "I see." Everyone in the parish knew how Monica doted on Guy.
Gray concentrated on his driving. The Chrysler’s suspension evened out the bumpy roads, and the tires sang on the pavement. The sense of unreality he’d experienced earlier returned. The sun poured hotly through the window, burning his jean-clad leg, and the tall pines flashed by. The sky overhead was a deep, pure blue. It was high summer, and everything was as

familiar as his own face. That was what was strange. How could it all be so unchanged, when his world had crashed around him today?
Behind him, Dr. Bogarde checked Monica’s pulse and blood pressure again. "Gray," he said quietly. "You’d better go faster."

Five

It was ten-thirty that night when Gray and Dr. Bogarde left the hospital in Baton Rouge. Gray's eyes burned with fatigue, and he was numb from the emotional roller coaster he'd been on all day long. Monica had finally been stabilized and undergone surgery, and was sleeping peacefully, under sedation. She had gone into cardiac arrest soon after arriving at the hospital, but the emergency room team had gotten her heartbeat back almost immediately. She had been given four units of blood prior to surgery, and another two units in surgery. The doctor who had done the repair work thought there was no permanent damage in her right wrist, but she had severed a couple of tendons in her left wrist and might not regain full mobility there.

All that mattered to Gray was that she was going to live. She had awakened briefly when she was transferred from recovery to the private room he'd gotten for her, and had groggily murmured, "I'm sorry, Gray," when she had seen him. He didn't know if she'd meant she was sorry she'd tried to kill herself, sorry that she hadn't succeeded, or sorry that she had caused him so much worry. He chose to believe she meant the first possibility, because he couldn't handle the thought that she might try again.

"I'll drive," Dr. Bogarde said, reaching up to slap him on the shoulder. "You look like hell."

"I feel like hell," Gray rumbled. "I need a cup of coffee." He was just as glad to let Doc drive. His brain felt like a wasteland; it probably wouldn't be safe for him to do the driving, and it *was* the doc's car. His knees would still be sticking up under his chin, but at least he'd have room to breathe.

"I can manage that. There's a McDonald's a few blocks from here."

Gray folded and inserted himself, and thanked God that the Chrysler had a padded dashboard. If it hadn't, his shins would have been black and blue.

Fifteen minutes later, with a large polystyrene cup of coffee gently steaming in his hand, he watched the streetlights of Baton Rouge slide past. Some of the happiest years of his life had been spent here, at LSU. He had prowled all over this city, a wild, energetic, perpetually homy kid on the hunt for action, and there was plenty of it. No one knew how to have more fun than a Cajun, and Baton Rouge was full of coon-asses. His four years here had been a ball.

It hadn’t been that long ago that he’d come home for good, only a couple of months, but it felt like a lifetime. This nightmarish, unending day had forever sealed away that high-spirited kid, leaving a definite line of demarcation between the two parts of his life. Gray had been growing up gradually, like most people, but today the full weight of adult responsibility had been dumped on his shoulders. They were broad enough to carry the load, so he’d braced himself and done what had to be done. If the man who emerged from the wreckage was grimmer and more ruthless than he’d been when he’d gotten out of bed that morning – well, if that was the price of survival, he’d gladly pay it.

More problems awaited him at home. Under these circumstances, most mothers would have had to be pried from their child’s bedside with a crowbar, but not Noelle. He hadn’t even been able to get her to the telephone. He’d talked instead to Oriane, who told him that Miss Noelle had locked herself in her bedroom and wouldn’t come out. At his instruction, Oriane had relayed the information that Monica would be all right, shouting it through the locked door. At least he had no fears that Noelle would try the same stunt Monica had pulled. He knew his mother too well; she was too self-centered to harm herself.

Despite the coffee, he dozed on the way home, and woke only when Dr. Bogarde stopped the car at the rear of the clinic. He’d left the top down on the Corvette, having more important things on his mind, so dew had collected on the seats. He’d have a wet ass on the drive home, and he was almost grateful. Maybe it would keep him awake.

"Will you be able to sleep tonight?" Dr. Bogarde asked. "I can give you something if you think you’ll need it."

Gray gave a short bark of laughter. "My problem will be staying awake until I get home."

"In that case, maybe you’d better sleep here at the clinic."

"Thanks, Doc, but if the hospital needs me, they’ll call me at home."

"All right. Be careful, then."

"I will." Gray swung his leg over the door of the ‘Vette and slid into the seat. Yep. A definite wet ass. The cool moisture made him shiver.

He left the top down, letting the air slap him in the face. The night smells were clear and sweet, fresher than when heated by the sun. As he left Prescott behind, the rural darkness closed in around him, soothing and protective.

One oasis of light disturbed the darkness, though. Jimmy Jo's, the local roadhouse, was still booming. The gravel parking lot was crowded with cars and pickup trucks, the neon sign blinked in endless welcome, and the walls were thudding with the force of the music. As Gray neared, the black Corvette slicing through the night, a battered pickup shot out of the parking lot into his path, tires screeching as they grabbed for traction.

Gray stomped the brake pedal, bringing the 'Vette to a sliding halt. The truck skidded sideways, almost overturned, then righted itself. His headlights caught the faces of the occupants, roaring with laughter as the one on the passenger side, waving a bottle of beer in his hand, leaned out and shouted something at Gray.

Gray froze. He couldn't understand what had been shouted, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that the occupants were Russ and Nicky Devlin, and that they were headed in the same direction he'd been going, toward Rouillard land.

The bastards hadn't left. They were still on his property.

The rage built slowly. It was cold, but it was powerful. Oddly detached, he felt it come, starting at his feet and working up, as if transmuting the very cells of his body. It reached his abdomen and tightened the muscles, then filled his chest before spreading upward to explode in his brain. It was almost a relief, banishing the fatigue and mental fog, leaving his thought processes cool and precise even as all systems kicked into overdrive.

He turned the Corvette around and headed back toward Prescott. Sheriff Deese wouldn't like being woken up this time of night, but Gray was a Rouillard, and the sheriff would do as he asked. Hell, he'd even enjoy it. Getting rid of the Devlins would cut the crime rate of the parish in half.

Faith hadn't been able to relax all day. She had been almost sick with a sense of disaster and loss, unable to eat. Scottie, sensing her mood, had been whiny and fearful, continually clutching at her legs and getting in her way as she mechanically tried to do her chores.

After Gray had left that morning, Faith had numbly started packing, but Amos had slapped her on the side of the head and yelled at her not to be stupid. Renee might've gone off for a couple of days, but she'd be back, and old man Rouillard wouldn't let that young son of a bitch run them out of their home.

Even in her misery, Faith wondered why Pa called Guy an old man, when he was a year younger than Pa.

After a while, Amos had gotten into his truck and gone in search of a drink. As soon as he was out of sight, Jodie darted into the bedroom and began going through Renee’s closet.

Faith followed her sister, and watched in bewilderment as she began tossing garments onto the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Mama won’t need these anymore," Jodie blithely replied. "Guy will buy her all new stuff. Why do you think she didn’t carry this with her? I can sure use it, though. She never would let me borrow any of her clothes." This last was said with a tinge of bitterness. She held up a tight yellow dress with sequins around the neckline. It had been oddly striking on Renee, with her dark red hair, but clashed horribly with Jodie’s carroty locks. "I had a hot date with Lane Foster last week and wanted to wear this, but she wouldn’t let me," she said resentfully. "I had to wear my old blue dress, and he’d seen it before."

"Don’t take Mama’s clothes," Faith protested, her eyes filling with tears.

Jodie gave her an exasperated look. "Why not? She won’t be needin’ them."

"Pa said she’ll come back."

Jodie hooted with laughter. "Pa don’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. Gray was right. Why on earth would she come back? Nan, even if Guy chickens out and goes running home to that ice cube he’s married to, Mama will get enough from him to keep herself real pretty for a long time."

"Then we’ll have to leave," Faith said, and a salty tear trickled down her cheek to puddle at the corner of her mouth. "We should be packing."

Jodie patted her on the shoulder. "Baby sister, you’re too innocent for your own good. Gray was mad as hell, but like as not, he won’t do anything. He was just shootin’ off his mouth. I think I’ll go see him, and maybe get the same kind of arrangement his pa had with Mama." She licked her lips, and a hungry look came over her face. "I’ve always wanted to find out if what he has in his britches is as big as I’ve heard it is."

Faith jerked away, jealousy slicing through her misery. Jodie didn’t have the sense to see that a snowball would have a better chance at surviving a Fourth of July picnic on the equator than she had of attracting Gray, but oh, how Faith envied her the gumption to try. She tried to imagine how powerful it would feel, to have the self-confidence to walk up to a man and be certain he found her attractive. Even when Gray turned Jodie down, it wouldn’t put a dent in her ego, because there were too many other boys and men panting after her. It would just make Gray more of a challenge to her.

But Faith had seen the cold contempt in his eyes that morning when he had surveyed the shack and its inhabitants, and shame had shriveled her soul. She had wanted to say, "I'm not like that," wanted him to look at her with admiration. But she *was* like that, as far as he was concerned, because she lived in this squalor.

Humming happily, Jodie took Renee's gaudy rainbow of clothes into the back room, to try them on and put darts in the bodice, because Renee's breasts were larger.

Barely choking back sobs, Faith grabbed Scottie by the hand and took him outside to play. She sat on a stump with her face buried in her hands while he pushed his little cars around in the dirt. Normally he would be happy doing that all day, but after about an hour he came over to her and curled up by her legs, and was soon asleep. She smoothed his hair, terrified by the faint blue tinge of his lips.

She rocked back and forth on the stump, her eyes stark with misery as she stared at nothing. Mama was gone, and Scottie was dying. There was no telling how much longer he could last, but she didn't think it would be more than a year. As bad as things had been, at least there had been a kind of security, because things were the same day after day and she knew what to expect. Now everything had come apart, and she was terrified. She had learned how to get along, how to manage Pa and the boys, but nothing was going according to plan now and she was helpless. She hated the feeling, hated it with a ferocity that made her stomach knot.

Damn Mama, she thought rebelliously. *And damn Guy Rouillard.* All they had thought about was themselves, not their families, nor about the turmoil they would leave behind.

She hadn't felt like a child in a long time. Responsibility had been pushed onto her frail shoulders at an early age, giving her eyes a solemn maturity that jarred with her youth, but now she acutely felt her lack of years. She was too young to *do* anything. She couldn't take Scottie and leave, because she was too young to work and support them. She was too young even to live by herself, according to law. She was helpless, her life controlled totally by the whim of the adults around her.

She couldn't even run away, because she couldn't leave Scottie. No one else would look after him, and he was almost as helpless as an infant. She had to stay.

So she sat on the stump as the afternoon hours slid away, too miserable to go inside and do any of her regular chores. She felt as if she were on a guillotine, waiting for the blade to fall, and as evening approached the tension grew and stretched until every nerve ending felt raw and exposed, until she felt like screaming to shatter the waiting stillness. Scottie had awakened from his nap and played close by her legs, as if afraid to get too far from her.

But evening came, and the blade didn't fall. Scottie was hungry, pulling at her, wanting to go in. Reluctantly Faith got up from the stump and took him inside just as Russ and Nicky left to go about their nightly carousing. Jodie dressed in the yellow dress she had coveted, and left too.

Maybe Jodie was right, Faith thought. Maybe Gray had just been blowing off steam, and hadn't meant what he'd said. Maybe Guy had gotten in touch with his family sometime during the day, and somehow defused the situation. He could have changed his mind about leaving, and denied having Renee with him. Anything was possible.

No matter what, though, she didn't expect Renee to come back. And without Renee, even if Guy did return to his family, there wouldn't be any reason for him to let them stay on in the shack. It wasn't much, but it was a roof over their heads, and it was free. No, it was no use hoping; she had to use her common sense. One way or another, maybe not right away but pretty soon, they were going to have to leave. If she knew Pa, though, he wouldn't make a move to get out until he was forced. He would milk every free hour he could from the Rouillards.

She fed Scottie and bathed him, then put him to bed. For the second night in a row she had blessed privacy, and she hurried to take her own bath and put on her nightgown. But when she pulled out her precious book, she couldn't concentrate enough to read. The scene that morning with Gray continually replayed itself in her mind, like film on a mental tape that just kept running. Every time she thought of that look of contempt in his eyes, pain expanded in her chest until she could barely breathe. She rolled over and buried her face in her pillow, fighting the hot tears. She loved him so, and he despised her, because she was a Devlin.

She dozed, exhausted by the restless night before and the trauma of the day. Always a light sleeper, as alert as a cat, she awakened and mentally checked the roll every time a member of the family came home. Pa came home first. He was drunk, of course, having gotten such an early start on the process,

but for once he didn’t bellow for a supper that he wouldn’t eat anyway. Faith listened to his progress as he stumbled and lurched toward his bedroom. Moments later came the familiar, labored snoring.

Jodie came home about eleven, sullen and pouting. Her evening must not have gone as she had planned, Faith thought, but she lay quietly on her cot and didn’t ask. Jodie took off the yellow dress, wadded it up, and threw it into a corner. Then she flounced onto her own cot and turned her back.

It was an early night for everyone. The boys rolled in not long after, laughing and raising a ruckus, waking Scottie as usual. Faith didn’t get up, and soon things quieted down again.

They were all home, all except for Mama. Faith cried silently, wiping her tears with the thin sheet, and soon dozed again.

A huge crash brought her upright in the cot, confused and terrified. A bright light flashed in her eyes, blinding her, and a rough hand hauled her out of the cot. Faith screamed and tried to tear away from the painful grip on her arm, tried to dig in her heels and brace herself, but whoever it was jerked her off her feet as if she weighed no more than a child, and literally dragged her through the shack. Over her own terrified screams she could hear Scottie’s shrieks, hear Pa and the boys cussing and yelling, hear Jodie sobbing.

There was a semicircle of piercingly bright lights arranged out on the dirt yard, and Faith had a blurred impression of a lot of people, moving back and forth. The man holding her kicked open the screen door and shoved her outside. She tripped over the rickety steps and sprawled on her face in the dirt, her nightgown riding high on her legs. Rocks and grit skinned the hide from her knees and palms, and scraped a raw place on her forehead.

"Here," someone said. "Take the kid." Scottie was roughly deposited beside her. He was screaming hysterically, his round blue eyes blank and terrified. Faith scrambled to a sitting position, shoving her nightgown down over her legs, and gathered him into her arms.

Things were flying through the air, crashing and thudding all around her. She saw Amos, clinging to the doorframe as two men in brown uniforms bodily hauled him out of the house. Deputies, she thought, dazed. What were deputies doing out here, unless Pa or the boys had been caught stealing something? As she watched, one of the deputies cracked Amos’s fingers with his flashlight. Amos cried out and released the frame, and they tossed him into the yard. A chair came sailing out the door, and Faith

ducked to the side. It hit the ground right where she had been, and splintered. Half crawling, with Scottie’s arms locked around her neck and dragging her down, she struggled toward the shelter of Pa’s old truck, where she huddled against the front tire.
Stunned, she stared at the nightmare scene, trying to make sense of it. Things were being tossed out windows, clothes and pots and dishes flying. The dishes were plastic, and made a huge clatter as they landed. A drawer of flatware was emptied out a window, the cheap stainless steel flashing in the lights of the patrol cars.
"Clean it out," she heard a deep voice growl. "I don’t want anything left inside."
Gray! The recognition of that beloved voice froze her, crouched there on the ground with Scottie clutched protectively to her. She found him almost immediately, his tall, powerful form standing with arms crossed over his chest, next to the sheriff.
"You ain’t got no call to do this to us!" Amos was bawling, trying to grab Gray by the arm. Gray shook him off with no more effort than if he’d been a pesky little dog. "You can’t throw us out in the middle of the night! What about my children, my poor little retarded boy? Ain’t you got no feelin’ at all, treatin’ a helpless child like that?"
"I told you to be out by nightfall, and I meant it," Gray snapped. "Gather up what you want to take with you, because in half an hour I’m setting fire to whatever is left."
"My clothes!" Jodie yelped, leaping out from between the safety of two cars. She began darting around the wreckage, grabbing up garments and discarding them when they proved to be someone else’s, draping her own over one shoulder.
Faith struggled to her feet with Scottie still clinging to her, desperation giving her strength. Their possessions were probably trash to Gray, but it was all they had. She managed to pry Scottie’s hands loose long enough for her to bend down and scoop up an armful of tangled clothes, which she tossed into the back of Amos’s truck. She didn’t know what belonged to whom, but it didn’t matter. She had to save as much as she could.
Scottie latched around her leg like a tick, determined to hang on. Hampered by him, Faith grabbed Amos’s arm and shook him. "Don’t just stand there!" she yelled urgently. "Help me get our things in the truck!"

He shoved her away, sending her sprawling. "Don’t tell me what to do, you stupid little bitch!"
She bounced up, not even feeling the extra bruises and scrapes, anesthetized by urgency. The boys were even drunker than Amos, staggering around and cussing. The deputies had finished emptying the shack now and were standing around, watching the show.
“Jodie, help me!" She clutched at Jodie as her sister stormed past, crying because she couldn’t find her clothes. "Grab what you can, as fast as you can. We’ll sort it out later. Gather all the clothes, and that way you know yours wiil be there." It was the only argument she could think of to gain Jodie’s cooperation.
The two girls began darting swiftly around the yard, gathering up every item they came to. Faith worked harder than she ever had in her life, her slender body bending and weaving, moving so fast that Scottie couldn’t keep up with her. He followed in her path, sobbing hoarsely, his pudgy little hands clutching at her whenever she came within reach.
Her mind was numb. She didn’t let herself think, couldn’t think. She moved automatically, cutting her hand on a broken bowl and not even noticing. One of the deputies did, though, and gruffly said, "Here, girl, you’re bleeding," and tied his handkerchief around her hand. She thanked him without knowing what she said.
She was too innocent, and too dazed, to realize how the lights of the cars shone through the thin fabric of her nightgown, silhouetting her youthful body, her slim thighs and high, graceful breasts. She bent and lifted, each change of position outlining a different part of her body, pulling the fabric tight across her breast and showing the small peak of her nipple, the next time revealing the round curve of her buttock. She was only fourteen, but in the stark, artificial light, with her long, thick hair flowing over her shoulders like dark flame, with the shadows catching the angle of her high cheekbones and darkening her eyes, her age wasn’t apparent.
What was apparent was her uncanny resemblance to Renee Devlin, a woman who had only to walk across a room to bring most men to some degree of arousal. Renee’s sensuality was sultry and vibrant, beckoning like a neon sign to male instincts. When the men looked at Faith, it wasn’t her whom they were seeing, but her mother.
Gray stood silently, watching the proceedings. The rage was still there, still cold and consuming, undiluted. Disgust filled him as the Devlins, father and

sons, staggered around, cussing and making wild threats. With the sheriff and his deputies there, though, they weren't going to do anything more than shoot off their mouths, so Gray ignored them. Amos had had a close call when he'd pushed the youngest girl down; Gray's fists balled, but she had jumped up, apparently unhurt, and he had restrained himself.

The two girls were rushing around, valiantly trying to gather up the most necessary items. The male Devlins took out their vicious, stupid frustrations on the girls, snatching things from their arms and throwing the items to the ground, loudly proclaiming that no goddamn body was going to throw *them* out of their house, not to waste time picking things up because they weren't goin' nowhere, goddamn it. The oldest girl, Jodie, pleaded with them to help, but their drunken boasting drowned out her useless efforts.

The younger girl didn't waste her time trying to reason with them, just moved silently back and forth, trying to bring order to chaos despite the clinging hands of the little boy. Despite himself, Gray found his gaze continually seeking her out, and himself unwillingly fascinated by the graceful, feminine outline of her body beneath that almost transparent nightgown. Her very silence drew attention to her, and when he glanced sharply around, he noticed that most of the deputies were watching her, too. There was an odd maturity to her, and a trick of the lights gave him the strange feeling that he was looking at Renee rather than her daughter. The whore had taken his father from him, driven his mother into mental withdrawal, and nearly cost his sister her life, and here she was again, tempting men in her daughter's flesh.

Jodie was more voluptuous, but she was noisy and cheap. Faith's long, dark red hair swirled over the pearly sheen of her shoulders, bared by the straps of that nightgown. She looked older than he knew she was, not quite real, an incarnation of her mother drifting silently through the night, every move like a carnal dance.

Unwillingly, Gray felt his shaft stir and thicken, and he was disgusted with himself. He looked around at the deputies and saw his response mirrored in their eyes, an animal heat that they should be ashamed of having for a girl that young.

God, he was no better than his father. Give him a whiff of a Devlin woman and he was like a wild buck in rut, hard and ready. Monica had nearly died today because of Renee Devlin, and here he was watching Renee's daughter with his cock twitching in his britches.

She walked toward him, carrying a pile of clothes. No, not toward him, but toward the truck behind him. Her green cat eyes flickered at him, the expression in them hooded and mysterious. His pulse leaped, and the look of her broke his tenuous hold on his temper. The events of the day piled up on him and he lashed out with devastating fierceness, wanting the Devlins to suffer as he had suffered.

"You’re trash," he said in a deep, harsh voice as the girl drew even with him. She halted, frozen to the spot, with the kid still clinging to her legs. She didn’t look at Gray, just stared straight ahead, and the stark, pure outline of her face enraged him even more. "Your whole family is trash. Your mother is a whore and your father is a thieving drunk. Get out of this parish and don’t ever come back."

Six

Twelve years later, Faith Devlin Hardy returned to Prescott, Louisiana. Curiosity had been her companion on the drive up from Baton Rouge, and she hadn't thought much beyond her reason for going back. Nothing about the road was familiar, because when she had lived in Prescott she'd seldom ventured farther than the small town, so no memories rose to link the past with the present, the girl with the woman.

But when she passed the Prescott city limit sign, when houses became closer together, forming actual streets and neighborhoods, when the tall pine and hardwood forests gave way to service stations and convenience stores, she felt an aching tension begin to grow in her. It increased when sheTeached the town square, with the redbrick courthouse looking exactly as it had in her memory. Cars still parked at angles all around the square, and park benches were still situated one to each side, for the old men to gather there on hot summer days, sheltering beneath the dense shade of the immense oak trees that grew on the square.

Some things had changed, of course. Some of the buildings were newer, while a few of the older ones were no longer there. Flower beds had been added to each corner of the courthouse square, no doubt by the enterprising Ladies' Club, and pansies nodded their purple funny faces to passersby.

For the most part, though, things were the same, and the small differences only made the familiar stand out. The ache in her chest swelled until she could barely breathe, and her hands shook on the steering wheel. A piercing sense of sweetness went through her. *Home.*

It was so sharp that she had to stop the car, easing it into a parking slot in front of the courthouse. Her heart was pounding wildly, and she took deep breaths to steady herself. She hadn't expected this, hadn't expected the tug of roots she thought had been severed a dozen years before. It shook her, it exhilarated her. She had been led here by nothing more than puzzlement, wanting to know for certain what had happened after the Devlins had been forcibly escorted out of the parish, but this burgeoning sense of belonging pushed curiosity aside.

But she didn't belong here, she told herself. Even when she had lived here, she had never really *belonged*, only been tolerated. Whenever she had gone into any store in town, she had been watched like a hawk, because everyone

knew a Devlin would steal anything that wasn't nailed down. That wasn't acceptance.

Knowing that, however, had no effect on her heart. Her instincts, her senses, recognized this as home. The rich, colorful scents that were like nowhere else on earth, the sights that had been imprinted on her brain from birth, the subtle influences of latitude and longitude that were recognized by every cell in her body, said that this was home. She had been born here, grown up here. Her memories of Prescott were bitter, but still it pulled at her with invisible strings she hadn't even known existed. She hadn't wanted this. She had wanted only to satisfy her curiosity, gain a sense of closure, so she could completely let go of the past and build her future.

It hadn't been easy, coming back. Gray Rouillard's words still burned in her memory as if it had been yesterday he'd said them rather than twelve years before. Sometimes she went for days without thinking of him, but the pain was always there – under control, but there, a permanent companion. Coming back made the memories more immediate, and she heard his voice echoing in her mind: *You're trash.*

She drew in a deep, shaking breath, and inhaled the sweet green scent so bound up in memories of her childhood. Steadying herself, she made a more leisurely examination of the square, familiarizing herself once again with what had once been as well known as her own hand.

Some of the old businesses lining the square had been spruced up; the hardware store had a rock and cedar front now, and rustic double doors. A McDonald's occupied the space where the Dairy Dip had been. A new bank had been built, and she'd bet money that it belonged to the Rouillards.

People walked by, glancing curiously at her as small-town people did at strangers, but no one recognized her. She hadn't expected them to; twelve years had changed her from child into woman, and she had changed herself from helpless to capable, from poor to prosperous. In her tailored creamy business suit, with her heavy red hair tucked into a sophisticated twist and her eyes protected by sunglasses, there was nothing about her to remind people of Renee Devlin.

It was ironic, Faith supposed; Renee had been guilty as sin of most of the charges laid at her door, but she had been innocent of the one that had finally gotten the Devlins run out of town. She hadn't run away with Guy Rouillard.

It was curiosity about exactly what Guy had done that had brought Faith back to Prescott after all these years. Had he been shacked up with a new girlfriend, and turned up a day or so later astonished at the uproar he'd caused? Had he been on a drinking spree, or maybe even a marathon poker game? Faith wanted to know. She wanted to come face-to-face with him, look him in the eye, and tell him what his irresponsibility had cost her.

She stared sightlessly at the courthouse square, memories washing over her. Her family had splintered after that dreadful night. They had driven as far as Baton Rouge before stopping for the night, sleeping in their vehicles. Amos had been alone in his truck, Russ and Nicky in their truck, with Jodie following in her old rattletrap of a car.

Faith and Scottie had been in the car with Jodie, Scottie asleep on Faith's lap.

Looking back, most of what she remembered was terror and shame. Certain memories were frozen, crystal-clear in her mind: the blinding lights of the patrol cars, that moment of sheer terror when she had been dragged out of bed and pushed through the door onto the ground, Scottie's shrieks. Sometimes she could even feel the way his hands had clung to her, feel the terrified pressure of his little body against her legs. The most acute memory, though, the one that echoed in her mind with painful clarity, was Gray looking at her with that paralyzing contempt.

She remembered desperately trying to gather their pitiful possessions. She remembered the long drive through the darkness; it hadn't been that long, but had seemed to take forever, each second expanded so that a minute took an hour to pass. She didn't remember sleeping, even after they got to Baton Rouge; she had sat stiffly, staring with burning eyes into nothing, cradling Scottie's warm weight on her lap. Barely after dawn, a cop had run them off from the city park where they had stopped, and the shabby little caravan had started out again. They made it to Beaumont, Texas, before stopping again. Amos rented a motel room in the worst part of town, and the six of them crowded into it. At least it was a roof over their heads.

A week later, they got up one morning to find Amos gone, just as Renee had left, though Amos did at least take his clothes. Nicky and Russ handled the crisis by spending the meager remains of their cash on beer, and getting roaring drunk. Not long after that, Russ left, too.

Nicky tried. To his credit, he tried. He was only eighteen, but when suddenly faced with the care of his three younger siblings, he took what odd

jobs he could. Jodie helped out by working at fast-food restaurants, but even with her help, it wasn't enough. It wasn't long before the social workers came around, and Jodie, Faith, and Scottie were taken into the custody of the state. Nicky made a few noises of protest, but Faith could tell that he was mostly relieved. She never saw him again. Adoption wasn't an option; Jodie and Faith were too old, and no one wanted Scottie. The best they could hope for was to be in the same foster home, where Faith could take care of Scottie. The best wasn't what they got, but the alternative was workable, at least for Faith. Jodie went to one foster home, while Faith and Scottie went to another. All of Scottie's care fell on her shoulders, but since she had been taking care of him since his birth anyway, that wasn't a burden to her. That had been the condition under which they had been able to stay together, so she worked hard to fulfill her promise.

Jodie didn't stay long at any one foster home, but was moved twice. Faith counted herself lucky in her foster home; the Greshams hadn't had much, but they had been willing to share what they did have with foster kids. For the first time in her life, Faith saw how respectable people lived, and she soaked up the life like a sponge. It was an unfailing delight to her to come home from school to a clean house, to the smells of supper cooking. Her clothes, though inexpensive, were neat and as stylish as the Greshams could afford on the money they were given for her upkeep. At school, no one called her "a trashy Devlin." She learned what it was like to live in a house where the adults loved and respected each other, and her hungry heart reveled in the wonder of it.

Scottie was petted, and they bought new toys for him, though it wasn't long before he began failing drastically. For Faith, the kindness that surrounded Scottie for the short time left of his life had been worth everything. For a little while, he had been happy. That first Christmas after Renee left had made him delirious with joy. He had sat for hours, too tired to play but content to stare at the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree. He had died in January, easing away in his sleep. Faith had known that the time was near and had started spending the nights in a chair by his bed. Something, perhaps the change in his breathing, had awakened her. So she took his stubby little hand in hers, and held it while his indrawn breaths came further and further apart, and finally, gently, ceased altogether. She had continued to hold his hand until she felt the growing coolness of his flesh, and only then did she wake the Greshams.

She had spent almost four full years with the kindly Greshams, Jodie finished high school, got married right away, and left for the bright lights of Houston. Faith was totally alone, all of her real family gone. She concentrated on school, ignoring the boys who continually pestered her for dates. She had been too numb, too traumatized by the upheaval in her life, to throw herself into the giddy teenage social whirl. The Greshams had shown her how good stability and respectability could be, how sweet, and that was what she wanted for herself. To that end, she focused all of her energy on building something out of the ashes to which her life had been reduced. After endless hours of study, she made valedictorian, and won a scholarship to a small college. Leaving the Greshams wasn't easy, but with the state no longer paying for her upkeep, she had to move on. She worked two part-time jobs to support herself while going to school, but Faith didn't mind hard work, having known little else for most of her life.

Her senior year in college, she fell in love with a graduate student, Kyle Hardy. They dated for six months, and got married the week after Faith was graduated. For a short while she had been almost dizzy with happiness, certain that dreams did come true, after all. The dream hadn't lasted long, not even as long as her brief marriage. Faith had envisioned settling down, furnishing a cute little apartment, and saving for the future, which included kids, a nice house, and two cars. It hadn't worked out that way. Despite the responsibilities of his new job, Kyle had continued to enjoy the heavy-drinking, freewheeling life he had enjoyed as a student. It had gotten the best of him one night, coming home from a bar, when his car went off a bridge. No other cars were involved, which was a blessing; when an autopsy was performed, it was found that his blood alcohol level was twice what was legal.

At twenty-two, Faith was alone again. She grieved, then doggedly rebuilt her life. She had a degree in business administration and money from the small life insurance policy Kyle had had, as well as that provided by his job. She moved to Dallas and got a job in a small travel agency; two years later, the agency belonged to her. It had already expanded to a branch in Houston; Faith took a leap of faith and spent her capital to open another branch, this time in New Orleans. To her joy, the business grew steadily.

She had achieved financial stability, and it was as wonderful as she had always imagined it would be, but she was aware of an aching emptiness in her life. She needed emotional solid ground, too. She didn't want to become

romantically involved with anyone; the two men she had dared to love, Gray Rouillard and Kyle Hardy, had both taught her how dangerous that was. But she still had family out there, somewhere, and she wanted to find them.

Vaguely she had recalled that her grandmother on Renee's side had lived around Shreveport; Faith could remember seeing her only once in her life, and when the social services in Texas had tried to contact her grandmother, they hadn't been able to find her. But the social services were overworked and understaffed, and had given up after a desultory search. Faith had more time, and more determination. She began calling around, and thankfully there weren't that many Armsteads in the Shreveport area. She finally reached someone, a cousin on her grandfather Armstead's side, who knew that Jeanette Armstead had moved to Jackson, Mississippi, about ten or twelve years ago, right after that oldest daughter of hers had turned up again.

Faith had been stunned. Her mother, Renee, had been the oldest daughter. But Renee had run away with Guy Rouillard; what had happened that she had sought out her mother? Was Guy still with her, or had he returned to the bosom of his family? A lot of years lay between the present and that horrible night in Prescott. For all she knew, Guy might have spent them very happily with his family, while her own family had been torn apart, destroyed.

Faith had called Information, gotten her grandmother's number, and called. To her surprise, Renee had answered the phone. Even after all those years, she still remembered her mother's voice. Startled, excited, she had identified herself. Their conversation had been awkward at first, but finally Faith got up the nerve to ask Renee what had happened with Guy Rouillard.

"What about him?" Renee had said, sounding bored. "Jodie told me that wild tale about me and him runnin' off, but it was news to me. I got fed up with bein' Amos's punching bag and living like dirt, and God knows Guy Rouillard wasn't goin' to do nothing about it, so I just left, went up to Shreveport and moved in with Mama. Your aunt Wilma lives here in Jackson, so about a month after that, we moved here, too. I ain't seen Guy Rouillard."

Faith had had trouble absorbing everything at once, there were so many thoughts flying in her head. Jodie had obviously found their mother, but neither of them had made any effort to get in touch with Faith. Renee could

have gotten her two youngest children out of foster care, but she had been content to leave them where they were. She hadn’t even asked about Scottie, Faith noticed.

Then there was the mystery of Guy Rouillard. Maybe he hadn’t left with Renee, but he *had* left, at least temporarily, and by his leaving had set in motion the events that had shaped her life. Puzzled and intrigued, Faith decided to find out for certain what had happened. At the age of fourteen, she had literally been thrown out into the night like a piece of trash, and she had lived with that pain ever since. She needed to know the end of the story. She wanted to close out her past, so she could get on with hef future.

So here she sat, parked on the courthouse square in Prescott, swamped by memories and wasting time. It shouldn’t be very difficult to find out where Guy Rouillard had been for what was probably only that one day, that one crucial day that had totally altered her life.

Her first order of business, she supposed, was to find somewhere to stay for the night. She had flown into Baton Rouge that morning, conducted the business she had, then rented a car and driven to Prescott. It was late afternoon, and she was tired. It wouldn’t take long to find out what she wanted to know, but she didn’t want to make the drive back to Baton Rouge if she could get a motel room in Prescott.

There had been a motel twelve years ago, but it had been slightly seedy even then and might not still be there. It had been on the east side of town, on the road leading to 1-55.

She rolled down the car window and called to a woman walking down the sidewalk. "Excuse me. Is there a motel in town?"

The woman stopped, and came over to the side of the car. She was in her mid-forties and looked vaguely familiar, but Faith couldn’t place her. "Yes, there is," the woman replied, and turned to point. "Go to the corner of the square and turn right. It’s about a mile and a half that way."

It sounded like the same motel. Faith smiled. "Thank you."

"You’re welcome." The woman smiled and nodded, and returned to the sidewalk.

Faith reversed out of the parking space and maneuvered the small rental car into the leisurely traffic. Prescott didn’t bustle now any more than it had twelve years ago. In two minutes she reached the motel. It was in the same place, but it wasn’t the same motel. This one looked new, no more than a couple of years old, and much more substantial. It was still only one story,

though this one was built in a U around a center courtyard where a fountain bubbled and flowers grew. It lacked a pool, which she didn’t mind. The fountain was much more charming.
The desk clerk was a man in his fifties, and his name tag read "Reuben." Memory stirred, and a last name surfaced to go with the first. Reuben Odell. One of his daughters had been in Faith’s class. He chatted as he took her credit card imprint, glancing curiously at the name, but nothing about "Faith D. Hardy" rang a bell in his memory. Faith wasn’t a common name, but probably he hadn’t even known her first name back then, so of course, he wouldn’t recognize it now.
"I’ll give you number twelve," he said, taking the key from its compartment. "It’s at the back of the courtyard, farther away from the road so the traflic won’t bother you."
‘‘Thank you." Faith smiled, and removed her sunglasses to sign the credit card slip. He blinked at her smile, his own expression growing fractionally warmer.
She parked the car at the rear of the courtyard, in front of number twelve. When she unlocked the door, she was pleasantly surprised. The room was larger than most motel rooms, with a love seat and coffee table close to the door, and a king-size bed beyond that. The dresser was long, with the television on one end, and a desk area on the end closest to the bathroom. The clothes rack was adequate, the vanity in the dressing area boasted two basins and was large enough for two people to get ready without continually bumping into each other. She looked into the bathroom, expecting the standard tub, but instead there was a sizeable shower stall with sliding doors. Since she never took a tub bath, she was pleased by the extra room to bathe. All in all, the little motel was a cut above the norm.
She unpacked her toiletries and the single change of clothes she’d brought, then plotted her course of action. There shouldn’t be much problem in finding out what she wanted to know, as long as no one recognized her as a Devlin. Small towns could have notoriously long memories, and the town of Prescott had belonged to the Rouillards heart and soul, as well as most of its brick.
The easiest and most anonymous way, probably, was to go to the library and look through the old newspapers. The Rouillards had constantly been in the news, so if Guy Rouillard had returned from his little jaunt and resumed

business as usual, she wouldn’t have to check many editions before his name would crop up.
She checked her watch and saw that she probably wouldn’t have more than an hour to do what she’d come to do; from what she remembered about the small library, it closed about six P.M. during the summer, and in a town the size of Prescott, that wasn’t likely to change. She was hungry, but first things first; food could wait, the library wouldn’t.
It was odd how selective memory could be; she had never been to the motel when she had lived here, and had often gone to the library, whenever she’d gotten the chance, but she had remembered the motel’s location while she drew a blank on the library. She fished the small phone book out of the dresser and looked up the address, and after a moment remembered the library’s location. Grabbing her purse and keys, she went out to the car and drove back to downtown Prescott. Before, the library had been located behind the post office, but when she got there she was dismayed to find the building gone.
She looked around, and heaved a sigh of relief. A prominent sign in front of the new building next door to the post office proclaimed it the Prescott Library. The builders had disdained the sleekness of modern architecture and instead used an antebellum style, a redbrick two-story with four white columns out front, and shutters on the six-foot windows. There were plenty of parking spaces, probably more than needed, for only three cars were parked in the lot. Faith brought the total to four, parking in front and hurrying to the double doors. The sign posted on the left-hand door told her that she’d been right about the hours the library was open: nine A.M. to six P.M.
The librarian was a small, plump, chatty woman who wasn’t in the least familiar to Faith. She went up to the desk and asked where the old newspaper files were.
"Right over here," the woman said, coming out from behind the counter. "Everything’s on microfiche now, of course. Are you looking for any particular dates? I’ll show you how the microfiches are filed, and how to work the scanner."
"I’d appreciate that, thanks," said Faith. "I want to start about ten years ago, but I may have to go a little further back."
"That’s no problem. It would have been until a couple of years ago, but Mr. Rouillard insisted that everything be put on microfiche when we moved into

this building. I declare, the system here was positively antiquated; it’s so much easier now."
"Mr. Rouillard?" asked Faith, keeping her tone casual despite the way her heart jumped. So Guy *had* come back.
"Gray Rouillard," said the librarian. "The family practically owns this town – the whole parish, come to that – but he’.s just as nice as he can be." She paused. "Are you from around here?"
"A long time ago," Faith replied. "My family moved away when I was a child. I thought I’d check the old obituaries for some of my parents’ cousins. We lost track of them through the years, but I’ve started working on a family tree and got curious about what happened to them." For a spur-of-the-moment explanation, it wasn’t bad. People trying to trace their family trees always made up the bulk of those using the microfiche machines, at least in her experience. From what she had gathered, listening to them talk and exchange tales of extended detective work that finally unearthed the whereabouts of Great-great-aunt Ruby on Mother’s side of the family, the quest could become addictive.
She had hit the right tone, for the librarian beamed. "Good luck, dear, I hope you find them. I’m Carlene DuBois. Call me if you need any help. We do close at six, though, and that’s less than an hour."
"It shouldn’t take long," said Faith, while searching her memory for a DuBois family in the parish. None came to mind, so perhaps they had moved to the area after the Devlin family had left so ignominiously.
Once she was alone, she quickly began scrolling through the files, scanning page after page of the *Prescott Weekly,* beginning from the date they had been escorted from the parish. She found several mentions of Gray, and though she tried to ignore them, she found that she couldn’t. Though that long-ago night had cured her of her infatuation for him, she had never been able to forget him; his image had lingered in her memory like a sore tooth, to be worried occasionally.
Helplessly giving in to the probing of that mental tongue, she scrolled back to the places where she had seen Gray’s name. The *Weekly* would never print anything derogatory or scandalous about the Rouillards – that was left to the Baton Rouge and New Orleans newspapers – but the normal comings and goings of the family were all duly reported to the inquiring minds that wanted to know, which was most of the parish. The first two tiny articles were mere mentions that Gray had attended such and such function. The

third article was in the business section, and, stunned, Faith read it through twice before the words really sank in.

No one else would have seen anything alarming or even unusual in the sentence. "… Grayson Rouillard, who has taken financial control of the family enterprises, voted against the measure to…"

Taken control of the family enterprises. Why would he have done that? Guy would still have been in charge, for after all, everything had belonged to him. Faith glanced at the date of the newspaper. August fifth, not quite three weeks after Renee had left. What had happened?

She switched off the microfiche machine and sat back in the chair, staring at the blank screen. She had come back to Prescott only to tie off some loose ends in her life, to see that things had gone on as before. No one would have missed the Devlins; their absence would have been noted with relief, and then forgotten, but Faith had never been able to forget. She had thought that, once she had seen Prescott again, seen how no one had missed them, or even remembered them, she would be able to forget about the town in return. If she ran into Guy Rouillard, so much the better. She had never blamed Gray for what he'd done; she'd seen the pain in his face, heard it in his voice. But Guy… yes, she blamed him, and Renee. Even if they hadn't run away together, Renee had walked out on her children, and Guy's irresponsibility had caused a lot of suffering.

But Gray had taken over the family business. Instead of tying up all the old loose ends, she had found another one: Why had Gray taken charge?

She got up and went in search of Carlene DuBois. The front desk was empty, and the rest of the library appeared to be, too. "Mrs. DuBois?" she called, the sound absorbed and flattened by the rows of books. Carlene heard her, however, for there was the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the tile.

"Right here," said Carlene cheerfully, emerging from the back of the reference book section. "Did you find what you needed?"

"Yes, I did, thank you. I noticed something else that puzzjed me, though. It was just a little article, but it said that Gray Rouillard had taken over control of the family businesses. This was twelve years ago, and it seemed strange, because Gray had to have been only in his early twenties – "

"My, yes. You must have left before the big scandal, or maybe you were too young to pay much attention to that sort of thing. We moved to town, oh,

eleven years ago, and it was still a hot topic of conversation then, I can tell you."
"What scandal?" Faith tensed, her puzzlement turning into alarm. Something wasn't right.
"Why, when Guy Rouillard ran off with his mistress. I don't know who she was, but everyone says she was nothing but trash. He must have absolutely lost his mind, is all I can say, to walk off from his family and fortune the way he did."
"He never came back?" Faith couldn't hide her shock, but Carlene saw nothing wrong with that reaction.
"No one's seen hide nor hair of him since then. When he left, he stayed gone. Some say his wife was enough to drive any man away, but I can't say for sure myself, because I've never met her. Folks say she hasn't left the house since the day he walked out. He never even bothered to get in touch with his own children again."
Faith was staggered. Guy Rouillard had adored his kids; regardless of his feelings for his wife, there had never been any doubt about how much he had loved Gray and Monica.
"I suppose Mrs. Rouillard divorced him?" she asked, but Carlene shook her head.
"Never has. Reckon she didn't want him to be able to marry again, if he was so inclined. Anyway, as young as Mr. Gray was, he stepped into his father's shoes and things carried on just as if Mr. Rouillard was still here. Probably better, from what folks say."
"I was too young to remember much about him," Faith lied. "I do remember that he was a sort of local hero, playing football at LSU, things like that."
"Well, honey, let me tell you, things haven't changed much," Carlene said, and fanned herself with her hand. "Lordy, that man rates a ten on my scale, I can tell you. He makes my heart flutter, and me ten years older than he is and about to be a grandmother besides!" She blushed, but gave a surprisingly bawdy laugh. "It might be those bedroom eyes, or maybe it's the hair. Or it *could* be that tight little butt!" She sighed dreamily. "He's a scoundrel, all right, but who cares?"
"Does he know you're sweet on him?" Faith teased.
"Honey, every woman in town is sweet on him, and yes, he knows it, the devil." Carlene gave her lusty laugh again. "My husband teases me about getting *his* ear pierced so he can compete."

Gray had a pierced ear? Faith found herself caught in imagination, and shook herself free. What she had learned was startling, and she needed to be alone so she could think things through.
She glanced at her watch. "It's almost closing time, so I'd better clear out. Thanks for your help, Mrs. DuBois. It was nice meeting you."
"You, too." Carlene paused. "I'm sorry, I don't believe I caught your name." Because it hadn't been thrown, but Faith saw no reason not to tell her. "I'm Faith Hardy," she said.
"Well, nice to meet you, Faith. That's such a pretty, old-fashioned name. You don't hear it much anymore."
"No, I suppose you don't." Faith glanced at her watch again. "Good-bye. Thanks again for your help."
"Any time."
Faith drove back to the motel, stopping by McDonald's for a sandwich. She didn't particularly like fast food, but didn't want to go to a restaurant where she might be recognized, so she made do. She ate half the sandwich and tossed the rest of it in the trash, too disturbed to have much of an appetite. Guy Rouillard had disappeared. But if he hadn't run away with Renee, what *had* happened to him?
Faith lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to sort things out. Guy wouldn't have walked away from his home, his family, his wealth, without a reason. Everyone had thought Renee was that reason, but Faith knew it wasn't so. And even if he had simply gotten fed up with his marriage, why hadn't he just gotten a divorce? The Rouillards were Catholic, but divorce wasn't a problem unless he wanted to remarry. But he had never seemed to be an unhappy man; why should he be? His world had been the way he wanted it. She couldn't think of any reason why he would have left so abruptly, without word, and never tried to contact his family. Unless he was dead.
The possibility – no, the *probability* – was stunning. Faith felt almost sick at the idea as she considered and rejected scenarios. He might have simply gone away for a couple of days and suddenly gotten sick, or maybe had an accident, but if either of those possibilities had been the case, he would have been found, identified, his family notified. That hadn't happened. Guy Rouillard had disappeared, on the same night her mother had run away.
Dear God, had Renee killed him? Faith sat up and distractedly ran her hands through her hair. She couldn't dismiss the thought, even though she couldn't

see her mother doing such a thing. Renee had the morals of an alley cat, but she wasn't, never had been, a violent person.
Amos, then? Faith could better envision that. If he'd thought he could get away with it, Amos had been capable of anything. But she remembered that night well; Amos had staggered home around nine, already falling down drunk and swearing at her because Renee wasn't at home. Both Russ and Nicky, also drunk, had come home after that. Could one of them have killed Guy Rouillard, or perhaps even both of them? But nothing had seemed out of the ordinary, and Faith would have sworn they had been as surprised as she when Renee didn't come home. More than that, they simply hadn't *cared thai* their mother was sleeping with Guy; neither had Amos, for that matter.
Who else was possible? Maybe Mrs. Rouillard. Maybe Noelle had killed her husband because she was tired of his unfaithfulness, though from all reports he had been sleeping around since the beginning of their marriage, and she had never seemed to care, had even been grateful. His affair with Renee had been going on for years; why should she suddenly object to it? No, Faith doubted Noelle had cared enough even to scold him, much less go to the trouble of murder.
That left one person: Gray.
Forcefully she rejected that thought. No, not Gray. She remembered his face as it had been when he had come to the shack that morning, and as he had been that awful night. She remembered his fury, his implacable hatred. Gray had thought his father had run away with her mother, and he'd been in a rage.
But Gray had had the most to gain from his father's death. With Guy gone, he had taken over the reins to the Rouillard fortune, and made himself even wealthier, from what the librarian had said. He had been groomed from the day of his birth to one day step into his father's shoes; had he gotten tired of waiting, and put Guy out of the way?
Faith's thoughts darted around like a squirrel in a cage, banging against the bars. The door rattled under the force of several heavy blows and she jumped, startled and not a little alarmed. Why would anyone be at her door? No one knew where she was, so there couldn't be a message from her office. She got up and went to the door, but didn't open it. There wasn't a peephole, either, she noticed. "Who is it?"
"Gray Rouillard."

Her heart almost stopped beating. It had been twelve years since she had heard that deep, smoky voice, but she went weak at the sound of it, excitement mingled with fear. He had hurt her worse than anyone else in her life, but still he had the power to electrify every cell in her body with nothing but his voice. Just hearing him again made her feel like the child she had been at fourteen, all shivery and agitated at his nearness. And always, always, was that ugly counterweight pulling her in the opposite direction, the stark memory of him saying, *You're trash.* She had never been able to find any balance where Gray was concerned, had never been able to forget him, dream and nightmare combined.

The timing of his arrival made her skin prickle. Had she conjured him up with her thoughts? She stood there for so long that the door rattled again under the impact of his fist.

"Open up." In his tone was the iron authority of someone who expected to be obeyed, immediately, and intended to see that he was.

Cautiously she unchained the door and opened it, and looked up at the man she hadn't seen for a dozen years. It didn't matter. No matter how long it had been, she would have recognized him. He stood there in the doorway, disdaining to come in, and the impact of his physical presence took her breath.

He was bigger than she remembered, but then six four always seemed taller when you were looking up at it. His waist and hips were still lean, but he was heavier through the chest and shoulders, having achieved the hard solidity of manhood. And he was definitely a man, all hint of boyhood long gone. His face was leaner, stronger, more harsh, with grooves bracketing his mouth and lines of maturity at the corners of his eyes. She stared up into the face of a pirate, and knew why Carlene DuBois had gotten the shivers at the mere mention of his name. His black hair was longer than she had ever seen it before, pulled back from his face and secured at the nape of his neck. A tiny diamond winked in his left earlobe. At twenty-two, he had been impressive. At thirty-four, he was dangerous, a pirate in nature as well as appearance. Looking at him made her feel hot and shivery all at once, her heart suddenly pounding so hard, she wondered that he couldn't hear it. She recognized the symptoms, and hated her sickness. God, was she doomed to spend her entire life going weak at the sight or sound of Gray Rouillard? Why couldn't she get beyond that leftover childhood reaction?

Above the thin blade of his nose, his sinfully dark eyes were still cold and implacable.
The sensual line of his mouth twisted as he looked down at her. "Faith Devlin," he said. "Reuben was right; you look just like your mother."
But if he had changed, so had she. Faith had won her confidence the hard way. She gave him a cool little smile and said, "Thank you."
"It wasn't a compliment. I don't know why you're here, and it doesn't matter. This motel belongs to me. You aren't welcome. You have half an hour to get packed and get out." He gave her a wolfish smile that wasn't really a smile. "Or do I have to call the sheriff again to get rid of you?"
The memory of that night lay between them, so strong that it was almost tangible. For a moment she saw again the lights, felt the confused terror, but she refused to let him throw her into a state of panic. Instead she gave a graceful shrug and turned away from him, strolling into the small dressing area, where she efficiently swept her few toiletries into her overnight case and took her single change of clothes from the rack. Acutely aware of those dark eyes boring a hole through her, Faith folded the clothes over her arm, slipped on her shoes, picked up her purse, and sauntered past him without ever changing her calm expression.
As she drove away from the motel, on her way back to Baton Rouge, he was still standing in the open door staring after her.
Faith Devlin! How about that for a blast from the past? Gray stood watching her taillights until they disappeared from view. When Reuben had called to tell him that a woman who was the spitting image of Renee Devlin had checked into the motel, and that she had registered as Faith D. Hardy, he'd had no doubt about her identity. So one of the Devlin spawn had finally worked up the nerve to come back to Prescott! He wasn't surprised that it was Faith. She had always had more backbone than the rest of the bunch put together. Which didn't mean he'd been inclined to let her stay.
He turned back into the lighted room that she had abandoned with so little fuss. Without any fuss, damn it. If he'd wanted a fight, she hadn't obliged him. She hadn't even asked for a refund on her credit card. Without so much as a flicker of an eyelash, she had gathered up her stuff and left. It hadn't taken a minute; hell, he doubted it had taken her thirty seconds.
She was gone, and except for the wrinkled bedspread, the room was as pristine as if she'd never been there, but her presence still lingered. There was a sweet, faintly spicy scent in the air that overrode the staleness

endemic to all motel rooms, and his blood stirred in instinctive reaction to it. It was the smell of woman, universal in some ways, exclusive to her in others. He stepped farther into the room, drawn by that elusive scent, his nostrils flaring like a stallion's.

F.aith Devlin. Just hearing her name had brought back that night and he had seen her again in his mind, silent and willowy, with that dark-fire hair tumbling over her shoulders and her slender body silhouetted inside her thin nightgown, weaving a sensual spell over the deputies and himself. She had been only a kid then, for God's sake, but she had had her mother's sultry aura even then.

When she had opened the door to this room and he had seen her again, he had been stunned. She looked so much like Renee that he'd wanted to throttle her, but at the same time there was no mistaking her for her mother. Faith was a little taller, still more slender than voluptuous, though she had filled out nicely in the twelve years since he'd last seen her. Her coloring was the same as Renee's: the dark red mane, the slumberous gold-flecked green eyes, the translucent skin. What had infuriated him, though, was her eifort-less sensuality, and his own unwilling reaction to it. It wasn't anything she had said or done, or even what she'd been wearing, which had been a stylish business suit. A Devlin wearing a suit, by God! No, it had been something intrinsic in her nature, something Renee had also possessed. The older daughter – he couldn't remember her name – hadn't had that potent allure. She had been easy and cheap, not sexy. Faith was sexy. Not overtly so, as Renee had been, but just as potent. He had looked into those cat eyes and thought of the bed just behind her, thought of tangled sheets and hot flesh, of having her naked beneath him and feeling her thighs clasp his hips just as he found the soft opening between her legs and pushed deep inside…

Gray broke out in a sweat and swore aloud in the empty room. Damn, he was as bad as his father! Give him a whiff, and he was ready to forget everything else in his rush to screw a Devlin woman. No, not every Devlin woman, he mentally amended. Thank God for that, at least. He had seen Renee's potent appeal but found it resistible, and the idea of sharing a woman with his father repellent. Nothing about the older girl had been attractive to him. Faith, though… If she were anyone but a Devlin, he wouldn't rest until he had her in bed and settled down to a long, hard ride.

But she was a Devlin, and just the mention of that name made him furious. His family had been wrecked because of Renee, and he could never forgive or forget that. Forgetting was impossible, when he lived every day with the results of Guy’s desertion. His mother had withdrawn until she was just a shell of her former self. She hadn’t left her bedroom for over two years, and even now refused to venture from the house except for doctors’ appointments in New Orleans, on those rare occasions when she was ill. Gray had lost his father, and to all intents and purposes had also lost his mother.

Noelle was a silent, sad ghost of a woman who spent most of her time in her room. Only Alex Chelette could coax her into a little smile and bring a hint of life to her blue eyes. Gray had realized some time ago that Alex had fallen in love with his mother, but it was a hopeless cause. Not only was Noelle oblivious to his devotion, she wouldn’t have done anything about it if she had been aware of it. She was married to Guy Rouillard, and that was that. Divorce was unthinkable. Gray sometimes wondered if Noelle was still clinging to the hope that Guy would come back. He himself had long ago accepted that he would never see his father again. If Guy had intended to come back, he wouldn’t have sent that letter of proxy which Gray had received two days after his disappearence. It had been mailed in Baton Rouge the day he left; the language had been terse and to the point, with nothing personal included. He hadn’t even signed it "Love, Dad," but limited himself to a businesslike "Sincerely, Guy A. Rouillard." When he had read that, Gray had known that Guy was gone from his life forever, and his eyes had burned with tears for the first and only time.

He didn’t know what he would have done without Alex those first desperate months when he had been scrambling to solidify his position with the stockholders and various boards of directors. Alex had guided him through the rocky shoals, fought with him for every advantage, done whatever he could to help with Noelle and Monica. Alex had grieved, too, for the loss of his best friend. Guy and Alex had grown up together, been as close as brothers. He had been stunned that Guy would actually turn his back on his family for the sake of Renee Devlin, and had left without even saying good-bye.

In some ways, Monica was stronger now than she had been before. She wasn’t as emotionally needy, so dependent on others. She had quietly apologized to Gray for her suicide attempt, and assured him that she would

never do something that stupid again. But if she was stronger, she was also more remote, as if that paroxysm of pain and grief had burned out her excess of emotion, leaving her calm but also distant. She had interested herself in his work and gradually became an excellent assistant, one on whom he could rely with every faith in her judgment and ability, but she was almost as reclusive as Noelle. Monica did go out into the community; she was particular about her appearance and got her hair styled regularly, and made an effort to dress well. She hadn't dated for years, though. At first Gray thought she was embarrassed by her suicide attempt, and would relax as the scars faded. She hadn't, though, and eventually he had realized that it wasn't embarrassment that had kept her at home. Monica simply wasn't interested in socializing with anyone. She would do it at a business function, but on a personal level she refused all invitations, and steadfastly turned aside his suggestions that she reenter the dating scene. All he could do to bolster her confidence was show her how he trusted her in their work, and pay her a good salary so she would have a tangible proof of her worth, and a sense of independence.

Last year, though, the new sheriff, Michael McFane, had somehow talked her into going out with him. Monica had been seeing him fairly regularly since then. Gray had been so relieved, he could have cried. Maybe, just maybe, Monica had a shot at a normal life, after all.

No, he would never forget what the Devlins had done to his family. And with luck, he would never see Faith Devlin again.

Thank you. Those had been the only words she'd uttered, other than to ask who was at the door. She had been cool and enigmatic, watching him as if faintly amused, her poise unshaken by his threat. It hadn't been a threat, though, but a promise. He would have had her escorted out of the parish for a second time if she hadn't left on her own. And he would have had to call the sheriff, because if he had touched her himself, he would have lost control, and he had known it.

She was a woman now, not the kid he remembered. She had always been different from the rest of the Devlins, a fey woodland creature who had grown up to be as much of a temptation as her mother. Some poor fool had evidently thought so, because the fact that her last name was now Hardy meant that she was married, though she hadn't been wearing a wedding ring. He had noticed her hands, slim, elegant, well kept, and been cynically amused by the absence of a wedding band. Renee hadn't worn one, either; it

had cramped her style. Evidently her daughter felt the same way, at least when she was traveling sans the unknown Mr. Hardy.

She had looked prosperous, so, like a cat, she had landed on her feet. Gray wasn't surprised. It had always been a particular talent of the Devlin women that they could always find someone to support them. Her husband must be a good provider, the poor sap. He wondered how often she left her husband at home while she rambled.

And he wondered why she had come back to Prescott. There was nothing for her here, no family, no friends. The Devlins hadn't had friends, only victims. She had to have known she wouldn't be welcomed back with open arms. Probably she had thought she could slip in without anyone being the wiser, but folks around here had long memories, and her resemblance to her mother was too marked. Reuben had recognized her as soon as she'd taken off her sunglasses.

Well, it didn't make any difference. He had rid the parish of the Devlin vermin for the second time, and with a hell of a lot less trouble than it had been twelve years ago. He just wished she hadn't come back at all, hadn't revived the potent memory of his unwilling response to her, hadn't replaced his image of her as a young girl with the image of her as she was now, a woman. He wished he had never heard her soft, cool voice saying, "Thank you."

Faith drove steadily along the dark road, not letting herself stop even though her insides were shaking like jelly. She refused to let her reaction get the best of her. She had learned the hard way what Gray Rouillard thought of her, dealt with the shock and pain years ago. She would *not* let him hurt her again, or get the best of her. She hadn't had any choice but to leave the motel, because she had seen the ruthless determination in his eyes and known he hadn't been bluffing about having her thrown out. Why should he balk at that, when he hadn't balked at having her entire family removed? Her calm acquiescence didn't mean, however, that he had won.

The threat of the sheriff hadn't frightened her. What had her both scared and angry was the intensity of her reaction to Gray. Even after all those years, after what he had done to her family, she was as helpless as a Pavlovian dog to stop her response to him. It was infuriating. She hadn't rebuilt her life just to let him reduce her to the status of trash, to be gotten rid of as soon as possible.

The day had long passed when she could be intimidated. The quiet, vulnerable child she had been had died one hot summer night twelve years ago. Faith was still a fairly quiet person, but she had learned how to survive, how to use her own steely will and determination to get what she wanted out of life. She had even become confident enough to indulge in her redheaded temper from time to time. If he had wanted to get rid of her, Gray had made a mistake in forcing the issue. He would soon learn that what looked like a retreat just meant she was adjusting her position for attack from another angle.

She couldn't let him run her off again. Not only was it a matter of honor, she still hadn't found out what had happened to Guy. She couldn't forget about it, couldn't let it go.

A plan began to form in her agile mind, and a smile touched her lips as she drove. Gray would find himself outflanked before he knew it. She was going to move to Prescott, and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop it, because she would be ensconced before he knew it. It was past time she faced all of her old ghosts, cemented her own self-respect. She would prove herself to the town that had looked down on her, and then she could forget about the past.

And she wanted to prove to Gray that he had been wrong about her from the beginning. She wanted that so fiercely that she could taste it, the victory sweet in her mouth. Because she had loved him so intensely as a child, because he had been the stern, ruthless judge and executioner, so to speak, on the night when he had run them out of the parish, he had assumed far too much importance in her mind. It shouldn't be that way, she should have been able to forget him, but the fact was there: She wouldn't/*?*?/ like anything other than trash until Gray was forced to admit that she was a decent, moral, successful person.

She didn't just want to find out what had happened to Guy. Maybe it had begun as that, or maybe she had hidden the truth from herself, but now she knew.

She wanted to go home.

Seven

"Yes, that’s right. I want everything handled in the agency’s name. Thank you, Mr. Bible. I knew I could count on you." Faith’s smile was warm in her voice, something Mr. Bible must have heard, because his reply made her laugh aloud. "You’d better be careful," she teased. "Remember, I know your wife."

She hung up the phone and her assistant, Margot Stanley, gave her a rueful look. "Was that old goat flirting with you?" Margot asked.

"Of course," Faith said good-naturedly. "He always does. It gives him a thrill if he thinks he’s being wicked, but he’s actually a sweet old guy."

Margot snorted. "Sweet? Harley Bible’s as sweet as a rattlesnake. Let’s face it, you have a way with men."

Faith restrained herself from an unladylike snort. If Margot had seen Gray run her out of town – again – she wouldn’t think Faith had such a "way" with men. "I’m just nice to him, is all. It’s nothing special. And he can’t be as bad as you say he is, or he wouldn’t still be in business."

"He’s still in business because the old fart is a smart businessman," Margot said. "He has an evil genius for sniffing out prime property right before it becomes prime, and buying it up for a song. Damn him, people only go to him because he has the land they want."

Faith grinned. "Like you said, a smart businessman. He’s always been as nice as he can be to me."

She might have restrained herself from snorting, but Margot had no such inhibition. "I’ve never seen a man who *wasn ‘t* nice to you. How many times have you been stopped for speeding?"

"All total?"

"Just this past year will do."

"Ummm… four times, I think. But that’s unusual; it’s just that I’ve been traveling so much this past year."

"Uh-huh. And how many times have you gotten a ticket?"

"None," Faith admitted, rolling her eyes. "That’s just coincidence. Not once have I tried to talk my way out of it."

"You don’t have to, and that’s my point. The cop walks up to your car, you hand him your license and say, ‘I’m sorry, I know I was flying,’ and he ends up handing your license back and telling you to slow down, because he’d hate to see your pretty face all cut up in an accident."

Faith burst out laughing, because Margot had been in the car with her when she had been stopped that time. The Texas state trooper in question had been a burly gentleman of the old school, with a thick gray mustache and a drawl as slow as molasses. "That's the only time a cop has said anything about my 'pretty face,' quote and unquote."
"But they were all thinking it. Admit it. Have you *ever* gotten a speeding ticket?"
"Well, no." She controlled her amusement. Margot had gotten two speeding tickets within the past six months, and now was having to stick strictly to the speed limit, to her great resentment, because a third ticket would result in the temporary loss of her driver's license.
"You can bet neither one of the cops who stopped me said anything about slowing down before I got my pretty face all cut up," Margot muttered. "No sirree, they were pure business. 'Let me see your license, ma'am. You were doing sixty-five in a fifty-five zone, ma'am. Your court date will be such and such, or you can mail in your fine by such and such date and waive your right to a court appearance.'" She sounded so disgusted that Faith had to turn away to keep from laughing in her face. Margot didn't see anything funny about her two speeding tickets.
"I'd never had a ticket before in my life," Margot continued, scowling. Faith had heard it many times before, so that she could almost say the words in unison with her friend. "I've been driving for half my life without so much as a parking ticket, and then all of a sudden the damn things seem to be coming out of the woodwork."
"You make it sound as if you could paper your walls with them."
"Don't laugh. Two tickets are pretty damn serious, and a third one is a catastrophe. I'll be poking along at fifty-five for two years. Do you know how much this throws off a schedule? I have to get up earlier and leave earlier, everywhere I go, because it takes me so long to get there!" She sounded so aggrieved that Faith gave up the struggle and began giggling helplessly.
Margot was a joy. She was thirty-six, divorced, and had absolutely no intention of staying that way. Faith didn't know what she would have done without her. When she had finally scraped up enough money to buy the agency, she had known how to handle the customer part of the business, but despite her college degree in administration, there was a great deal of difference between textbooks and real life. Margot had been assistant to J.

B. Holladay, the previous owner of Holladay Travel, and had been glad to handle the same duties for Faith. Her experience had been invaluable. She had kept Faith from making some serious mistakes in financial matters. More than that, Margot had become a friend. She was a tall, lean woman with bleached blond hair and a dramatic flair for clothes. She made no bones about being in search of a new husband – "Men are a lot of trouble, honey, but they do have their good points, one big one in particular" – and was so good-natured about it that she had no trouble getting dates. Her social life would have exhausted the strongest debutante. For her to claim that Faith had a way with men, when Faith seldom went out with anyone and she herself was seldom at home, was pushing it a bit, in Faith's opinion.
"Don't laugh," Margot warned. "You're going to be stopped by a female cop one of these days, and that's when your luck will run out."
"That's all it is, luck."
"Sure it is." Margot abandoned that subject and gave her a curious look. "Now, what's this about a house in Godforsaken Louisiana?"
"Prescott," Faith corrected, smiling. "It's a little town north of Baton Rouge, almost at the Mississippi state line."
Margot snorted again. "That's what I said. Godforsaken."
"It's my hometown. I was born there."
"You don't say. And you actually admit that out loud?" Margot asked with all the incredulity of a true Dallas native.
"I'm going home," Faith said softly. "I want to live there." It wasn't a step she took lightly; she was going back with the full knowledge that the Rouillards would do everything they could to cause trouble for her. She was deliberately placing herself once more in proximity with Gray, and the danger of it made her lie awake at nights. Besides trying to find out what had happened to his father, all those years ago, she had a lot of ghosts to face, and Gray was the biggest one. He had tormented her, in one way or another, for most of her life, and she was still caught in the helpless childhood whirl of emotions where he was concerned. In her mind he was omnipotent, bigger than life, with the power to either destroy her or exalt her, and her last meeting with him had done nothing to dilute that impres-siqn. She needed to see him as a normal man, meet him on equal footing as an adult, rather than a vulnerable, terrified young girl. She didn't want him to have this power over her; she wanted to get over him, once and for all.

"It was that trip to Baton Rouge that did it, wasn't it? You got that close and just couldn't stand it." Margot didn't know about what had happened twelve years ago, didn't know anything about Faith's childhood other than she'd been in foster care and was very fond of her foster parents. Faith had never talked about her past or her family.

"I guess it's true about roots."

Margot leaned back in her chair. "Are you going to sell the agency, or what?"

Startled, Faith stared at her. "Of course not!"

There was a subtle relaxation of Margot's expression, and abruptly Faith realized how alarming her decision could be for her employees. "Everything will go on just like before, with two minor exceptions," she said.

"How minor?" Margot asked suspiciously.

"Well, for starters, I'm going to be living in Prescott. When Mr. Bible finds a house for me, I'm going to put in a fax machine, a computer, and a photocopier, so I'll be as in touch, electronically speaking, as I am now."

"Okay, that's one. What's the other?"

"You're going to be in charge of all the offices. A district manager, you might say, except there's only one district and you're the only manager. You don't mind traveling, do you?" Faith asked, suddenly anxious. She had forgotten to consider that when making her plans.

Margot's eyebrows arched in disbelief. "Me, mind traveling? Honey, are you out of your ever-lovin' mind? I *love* to travel. You might say it expands my hunting area, and God knows I've already given most of the prime bucks around here their chance for a life of excitement. It's their hard luck if some lucky guy somewhere else takes me out of circulation. Besides, it's never a hardship to go to New Orleans."

"And Houston and Baton Rouge."

"Cowboys in Houston, Cajuns in Baton Rouge. Yum, yum," said Margot, licking her lips. "I'll have to come back to Dallas to *rest."*

Her plan fell smoothly into place, but then Faith went to a lot of trouble to make certain it did. She took a great deal of satisfaction in her efforts; she had been helpless at fourteen, but now she had resources of her own, and four years in the business community had given her a lot of contacts.

With Mr. Bible's help, she quickly located and settled on a small house for sale. It wasn't in Prescott, but was situated a couple of miles outside the town limits, on the edge of Rouillard land. Buying it put a sizable dent in

her savings, but she paid for it in full, so Gray wouldn't be able to pull any strings with a mortgage holder and cause her any trouble. She knew enough now to foresee what steps he might take to make things rough for her, and counteract them. It gave her great pleasure to know she was outflanking him, and he wouldn't know anything about it until it was too late to stop her.

Very quietly, handling everything through the agency so her name didn't appear anywhere that it might cause an alert, she got the utilities turned on, the house cleaned, and gleefully shipped her furniture to her new home.

Only a month after Gray had run her out of town for the second time, Faith pulled her car into the driveway of her house and .looked at it with extreme satisfaction.

She hadn't bought a pig in a poke. Mr. Bible had arranged for her to look at photos of the house, both inside and out. The house was small, only five rooms, and had been built back in the fifties, but it had been remodeled and modernized with an eye toward selling it. The previous owner had done a good job; the new front porch went all the way across the front, and there was a porch swing at one end to lure the new inhabitants out to enjoy the good weather. Ceiling fans at each end of the porch guaranteed that the heat would seldom become too uncomfortable. Each room inside also had a ceiling fan.

Both bedrooms were the same size, so she had chosen the back one for herself and converted the front one into a home office. There was only one bath, but she was only one person, so she didn't expect to have a problem with that. The living room and dining room were pleasant, but the best thing about the house was the kitchen. Evidently it had been remodeled several years before, because she couldn't imagine anyone spending the money to customize a kitchen when a more standard approach would have made the house just as saleable and cost a lot less. Someone had loved to cook. There was a six-eye cooktop, and built-in microwave and conventional ovens. Floor-to-ceiling cupboards all along one wall provided enough storage space for a year's worth of food, if she so chose. Instead of a work island, a six-foot butcher-block table occupied the middle of the room, providing plenty of work space for any culinary adventures. Faith wasn't that enthralled with cooking herself, but she liked the room. She was, in fact, thrilled with the entire house. It was the first place she had ever lived that

belonged to her; apartments didn’t count, because she had rented those. This house was hers. She had a real home.
She was fizzing with internal delight when she drove into Prescott to stock up on groceries, and take care of two necessary errands. Her first stop was the courthouse, where she bought a Louisiana tag for her car and applied for her Louisiana driver’s license. Next was the grocery store. It was a subtle pleasure to shop without thought of cost in the same store where the owner had once followed her around every time she came in, eyeing every move she made to make certain she didn’t slip something into her pocket and walk out without paying for it. Morgan had been his name, she remembered, Ed Morgan. His youngest son had been in Jodie’s class.
Leisurely she selected fruit and produce, putting each selection in a plastic bag and twisting a green tie around the bag to close it. A gray-haired man in a stained apron came out of the stockroom carrying a crate of bananas, which he began arranging on an almost empty display shelf. He glanced at her, then looked back, his eyes widening in disbelief.
Though his hair was a great deal thinner and what was left had changed color, Faith had no trouble recognizing the man about whom she had just been thinking. "Hello, Mr. Morgan," she said pleasantly as she wheeled her buggy past him. "How are you?"
"R-Renee," he sputtered, and something in the way he said her mother’s name made Faith freeze inside, and look at him with new eyes. God, not him, too! Well, why not? Guy Rouillard hadn’t always been available, and Renee wasn’t the type of woman to deny herself.
Her smile faded, and her voice cooled. "No, not Renee. I’m Faith, the youngest daughter." She was incensed on behalf of her childhood self, constantly humiliated by being treated like a thief, when all the while the man who had made such a production of following her around in the store had been part of the pack of hounds baying after her mother.
She pushed the buggy on down the aisle. It wasn’t a large store, so she heard the flurry of voices as he hurried to tell his wife who she was. Not long afterward, she became aware that she had picked up a shadow. She didn’t recognize the teenage boy, also wearing a long, stained apron, who blushed uncomfortably when she glanced at him, but it was obvious he’d been told to make certain everything went into the buggy and not her purse.
Her temper flared, but she held it in tight control and didn’t allow herself to be hurried. When she had gotten everything on her list, she wheeled the

buggy to the checkout counter and began unloading it.
Mrs. Morgan had been operating the cash register when Faith had entered the store, but Mr. Morgan had taken over the duty and his wife was watching intently from the small office cubicle. He eyed the groceries she was unloading. "You'd better have the money to pay for all this," he said unpleasantly. "I'm real careful who I take a check from."
"I always pay cash," Faith retorted coolly. "I'm careful who I let see the number of my checking account."
It was a moment before he realized he had been insulted in kind, and he flushed darkly. "Watch your mouth. I don't have to take that kind of lip in my own store, especially from the likes of you."
"Really." She gave him a smile and kept her voice low. "You weren't that particular when it came to my mother, were you?"
The flush faded as abruptly as it had come, leaving him pale and sweating, and he cast a swift glance toward his wife. "I don't know what you're talking about."
"Fine. See that the subject never comes up again." She pulled out her wallet and stood waiting. He began pulling the items down the counter, punching in prices as he went. Faith watched each price as he rang it up, and stopped him once. "Those apples are a dollar twenty-nine a pound, not a dollar sixty-nine."
He flushed again, furious that she had caught him in an error. At least, she assumed it was an error, rather than deliberate cheating. She would make certain she checked every item on the sales receipt before leaving the store. Let him get a taste of what it was like to be automatically assumed dishonest. Once she would have backed down, humiliated to the core, but those days were long past.
When he rang up the total, she opened her wallet and pulled out six twenty-dollar bills. Normally her grocery bill was less than half that, but she had let herself run out of a lot of things rather than going to the trouble of moving them, so she had to restock. She saw him eyeing the cash left in her wallet, and knew the story would fly around town that Faith Devlin had come back, and was flashing a roll that would choke a horse. No one would think she had come by it honestly.
She couldn't tell herself that she didn't care what the townspeople thought; she always had. That was one of the reasons she'd come back, to prove to them, and herself, that not all Devlins were trash. She knew in her mind that

she was respectable, but she didn’t know it in her heart yet, and wouldn’t until the folks in her hometown accepted her. She couldn’t divorce herself from Prescott; this town had helped shape who she was as a person, and her roots went deep. But wanting acceptance from the people here didn’t mean she would let anyone insult her and get away with it. As a child she had been quietly obstinate about going her own way, but in the twelve years since she had lived here, she had grown up and learned how to stand up for herself.

The same boy who had followed her in the store carried the bags out to her car. He was about sixteen, she guessed; his joints still had the looseness of childhood, and his feet and hands were too big for the rest of him. "Are you related to the Morgans?" she asked as they walked across the parking lot, with him pushing the buggy.

He blushed at being personally addressed. "Uh, yeah. They’re my grandparents."

"What’s your name?"

"Jason."

"I’m Faith Hardy. I used to live here, and I’ve just moved back." She stopped at her car and unlocked the trunk. Like most teenage boys, he was interested in anything with four wheels on it, and gave it a good look. She had bought a solid, reliable sedan rather than a sports car; the sedan was better for business, and it took a certain type of attitude to drive around in a sports car anyway, an attitude Faith had never had. She had always been older than her years, and stability, dependability, were far more important to her than speed and flashy looks. But the car, a dark, sophisticated European green, was less than a year old and had a certain style to it, for all its reliability.

"Nice car," Jason felt moved to comment as he transferred the groceries from the buggy to the trunk.

"Thanks." She tipped him, and he looked at the dollar in surprise. By that, she could deduce that either tipping wasn’t the norm in Prescott, or people usually carried out their own groceries and he had been pressed into duty so he could see if she kept the inside of her car clean, or something like that. She suspected the latter; the nosiness of smalltown people knew no bounds.

A small, white Cadillac wheeled into the parking lot as Faith was unlocking her car door, and abruptly braked as it came even with her. She glanced up and saw a woman staring at her, dumbstruck. It took a moment before she

recognized Monica Rouillard, or whatever her name was now. The two women faced each other, and Faith remembered how Monica had always gone out of her way to be nasty to the Devlins, unlike Gray, who had pretty much treated them normally until Guy had disappeared. Despite herself, Faith felt a flash of pity; if her suspicions were right, their father was dead, and they had gone all these years without knowing what had happened to him. The Devlins had suffered because of Guy's actions, but the Rouillards had suffered, too.

Even in the shadows of the car, Faith could see how pale and strained Monica looked as she stared at her. This was one confrontation that would be best postponed; though she intended to stand her ground, there was no need to flaunt her presence in the Rouillards' faces. Turning away, she got into her car and started the engine. Monica was blocking her so she couldn't back out, but the space in front of her was empty, so there was no need. She simply drove out through the empty parking slot, leaving Monica still sitting there staring after her.

When she got home, she found several faxes waiting for her, all from Margot. She put up the groceries before settling down in the office to take care of whatever problems had cropped up. She enjoyed the travel industry; it wasn't without its share of headaches and crises, but for the most part, by the very nature of the business, the customers were upbeat and excited. The agency's job was to make sure their vacation tours were properly booked, with reliable accommodations. They gently steered vacationers away from inappropriate tour packages; for instance, a family with small children probably wouldn't be all that pleased with a cruise on a party ship geared more toward adult pleasures. Her employees knew how to handle things like that; most of the problems that came Faith's way were of a different nature. There was a payroll to meet, tax forms to complete, an unending parade of paper. Faith had decided that she would still handle the payroll, with the pertinent information faxed to her from the four office locations every Monday morning. She would do the paperwork, prepare the checks, and Express Mail them on Wednesday morning. It was a workable solution, and the convenience of working at home delighted her.

The biggest inconvenience was still doing her banking in Dallas, both business and personal, but she had decided against transferring her funds to Prescott or even Baton Rouge; the Rouillard influence had long arms. She hadn't checked to see if the family owned the new bank in town, because it

hadn’t really mattered; whether they owned it or not, Gray would have a lot of pull. There were rules and laws in banking, but in this part of the state the Rouillards were a law unto themselves. The balance in her accounts, even copies of her canceled checks, would be easy for Gray to get. She had no doubt that he could also cause trouble for her by delaying credit for checks deposited until the last possible minute, and bouncing her own checks if he could. No, it was best to keep her account in Dallas. Gravel crunched in the driveway and she looked out the window to see a sleek, gunmetal gray Jaguar come to a stop. Resigned, she let the curtain fall back into place and pushed her chair away from the desk. She didn’t have to see who got out of the car to know who had come calling, just as she knew this wasn’t the Welcome Wagon.

Going into the living room, she opened the door as she heard footsteps on the porch. "Hello, Gray. Please come in. I see you’ve given up your ‘Vettes."

Surprise flickered in his eyes as he stepped over the threshold, immediately overwhelming her with his size. He hadn’t expected her to calmly invite him inside, the rabbit offering the hospitality of its burrow to the wolf. "I’m slower in a lot of things than I used to be," he drawled.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, "Better, too, I suppose," but she bit the words back. She doubted that Gray Rouillard would be making suggestive remarks to her, of all people, and if she took it as such, he would think it was just what he might have expected from a Devlin. There was no room for normal flirtatious byplay between the two of them.

The weather was hot this late spring day, and Gray was dressed in a loose, white cotton shirt that was open at the throat, and khaki linen trousers. Curly black chest hair was visible in the open vee of the shirt, and Faith forced herself to look away, conscious of a sudden difficulty in breathing. He brought with him the fresh, earthy scent of clean sweat and the animal muskiness of man. She never had been able to decide what color his scent was, she thought dazedly, inhaling his rich, subtle odor. His physical impact made her senses reel, just as it always had. Nothing had changed. It hadn’t been the unexpectedness of seeing him the last time that had so shaken her; the old reactions were still there, still potent, undimmed by time and maturity. She looked at him with hidden, helpless rage. God, this man had all but ground her into the dirt, and wouldn’t hesitate to do it again; what

was *wrong* with her that she couldn’t see him without feeling that hot, automatic tingle of excitement?
He stood too close to her, just inside the door, staring down at her with narrowed dark eyes. She moved away to give herself breathing space. He was physically too imposing, ten inches taller and with that lean, hard athlete’s body.
She would have to go on tiptoe to kiss even the hollow of his tanned, muscular throat. The aberrant thought shocked her, shook her, and instinctively she guarded her expression. She could never let him know that she was even remotely attracted to him; it would give him a weapon of devastating power to use against her.
"This is a surprise," she said lightly, though it wasn’t. "Have a seat. Would you like a cup of coflee, or maybe iced tea?"
"Skip the pleasantries," he said, moving toward her, and she heard the cold anger in his smoky voice. "What are you doing here?"
"I live here," she replied, arching her brows in mock surprise. She hadn’t expected the confrontation to come quite so soon; he was more efficient than she had expected. She moved away from him again, desperate to keep a safe distance between them. His gaze sharpened, then gleamed with satisfaction, and with a chill she knew he had realized that his closeness made her nervous. She halted, determined not to let him know that he could intimidate her that way, and turned to squarely face him. She lifted her chin, the expression in her green eyes cool and unruffled. It took a lot of effort, but she managed it.
"You won’t for long. You’ve wasted your time and effort in coming back."
With gentle amusement she said, "Even you could have problems throwing me out of my own house."
His gaze sharpened as he glanced around the neat, cozy living room. "I bought it," she enlarged. "It isn’t financed, it’s mine free and clear."
He gave a harsh crack of laughter, startling her. "You must have divorced Mr. Hardy and taken him to the cleaners. Did you get everything he had?"
Faith stiffened. "As a matter of fact, I did. But I didn’t divorce him."
"What did you do, snare yourself an old geezer who kicked off after a year or two? Did he have heirs you gypped out of their inheritance?"
Color fled her cheeks, leaving her as pale as a statue. "No, I snared myself a healthy young man of twenty-three, who died in a car accident before we’d been married a year."

His mouth tightened. "I’m sorry," he said gruffly. "I shouldn’t have said that."
"No, you shouldn’t have, but I’ve never noticed that concern for other’s feelings has ever worried a Rouillard."
He gave a snort of derision. "A Devlin should be careful about throwing rocks in that particular glass house."
"I’ve never harmed anyone," she said with a bitter little smile. "I just got caught between the lines when the battle started."
"All innocence, hmmm? You were pretty young when all that happened, but I have a real good memory, and you were sashaying around in front of me and all those deputies, wearing your little thin nightgown that we could see through. Like mother, like daughter, I’d say."
Faith’s eyes widened, full of outrage and horrified embarrassment, and color flooded back into her face. She took two quick steps forward and jabbed him in the chest with her forefinger. "Don’t you *dare* throw that in my face!" she said, choking with rage. "I was dragged out of my bed in the middle of the night, and tossed into the yard like a piece of trash. Don’t say it," she warned sharply, when he opened his mouth to retort that trash was exactly what she’d been, and jabbed him in the chest again. "Everything we owned was dumped out, my little brother was hysterical and wouldn’t turn loose of me. What was I supposed to do, take time out to find some of my own clothes and retire into the woods to change? Why didn’t you so-called *decent* men turn your backs, if you were seeing a little too much?"
He looked down into her furious face, his expression strangely arrested, then his eyes became more heavy-lidded and intent. He took hold of her hand, moving it away from his chest. He didn’t release her, but kept her fingers folded against his hard, calloused palm. "You’ve got a little redheaded temper there, haven’t you?" he asked with amusement.
His touch shocked her with a hot twinge of electricity. She tried to jerk her hand free, but he merely tightened his grip, effortlessly restraining her.
"Now, don’t get all in a pucker," he said lazily. "Maybe you thought I’d stand here and let you poke holes in me with your fingernail, but I have to be in a different mood to enjoy that."
Faith glared up at him. She could humiliate herself by giving in to the useless urge to struggle, or she could wait until he decided to release her. Her instincts were to struggle away from the disturbing heat of his touch, the surprising roughness of his palm, but she forced herself to stand still,

sensing that he would enjoy watching her try to free herself. Then the sensual undertone of his comment registered, and her eyes widened as shock rippled through her. There was no mistaking his meaning this time.
"Smart girl," he said, his gaze sliding down to her breasts. He took his time, examining the shape of them beneath her silk, mint green shirt. She caught her breath, his gaze like an actual touch that made her breasts tingle. "You don't want to start a tussle with me that you can't win – or do you? Your mama probably taught you that a man gets hard real quick when a woman starts wiggling against him. Did you come back thinking you might step into your mother's shoes? Do you want to be my whore, the way she was my dad's?"
Swift fury glittered in her eyes, and she swung her free hand with all her strength. Quick as a rattlesnake his other hand lashed out, blocking the blow and capturing that hand, too. He gave a low whistle at the force she had put into the swing. "Temper, temper," he chided, looking as if he were enjoying her anger. "Were you trying to knock my teeth out?"
"Yes!" she flared, gritting her teeth together and forgetting her determination to deny him the pleasure of a struggle. She jerked her hands, trying to twist free, and succeeded only in bruising her wrists. "Get out! Get out of my house."
He laughed down at her, easily reducing her to a standstill as he brought her hard against him. "What are you going to do, throw me out?"
She froze, alarmed to find that his reaction to a struggle was exactly what he'd said it would be. There was no mistaking the ridge pressed against her belly. She struck out with the only weapon left to her, her tongue. "If you'll let *go* of me, you Neanderthal, what I'll do is put ice on my wrists to stop them from turning black and blue!" she hotly retorted.
He looked down at his long fingers encircling her slender wrists, loosening his grip and scowling at the dark red marks that quickly formed. "I didn't mean to hurt you," he said, surprising her. He immediately released her. "You have skin like a baby."
She drew back, massaging her wrists and steadfastly refusing to look at the front of his trousers. That, too, could be ignored. "My guess is you didn't care if you hurt me. Now, get out."
"In a minute. I have a few things to say." • She gave him a cold look. "Then for God's sake, say them and leave."

Danger glittered in those dark eyes, and before she knew it, he was right in front of her again, almost playfully pinching her chin. "You're a ballsy little babe, aren't you? Maybe too ballsy for your own good. Don't take me on in a fight, sweet thing, because you'll get hurt. The best thing you can do is pack up your stuff and get out of here, just as fast as you moved in; I'll buy the house from you, for what you gave for it, so you won't be out anything. You aren't welcome here, and I don't want my mother and sister hurt by seeing you parading around as if nothing ever happened, bringing up that old scandal again and getting everybody upset. If you stay, if you force my hand, I can make things rough for you here, and you'll wind up getting hurt. You won't be able to get a job, and you'll find out damn fast that you don't have any friends here."

She jerked her chin away from him. "What will you do, burn me out?" she goaded. "I'm not a helpless fourteen-year-old anymore, and you'll find that it isn't as easy to bully me now. I'm here, and I'm staying."

"We'll see about that, won't we?" His hooded gaze dropped to her breasts again, and suddenly he grinned. "You're right about one thing: You're not fourteen anymore."

He walked out then, leaving Faith staring after him, her fists clenched with impotent anger, and panic clenching her stomach. She didn't want him to notice her as a woman, didn't want him to turn that hot, hooded gaze on her, because she wasn't certain of her ability to resist him. She felt sick at the thought of being like her mother, of being what he had taunted her with being, a whore for a Rouillard.

"Was it Renee?" Monica asked quietly, though she was drawn so tight that the tension was almost visible. She had called Gray from Morgan's grocery store, more upset than he had heard her in years, since the day he'd had to tell her that their father had left them for Renee Devlin, in fact. Monica had come a long way since then, but the haunted look in her eyes told Gray that the pain was still too close to the surface for her to be objective about it.

"No, but it was definitely a Devlin." He poured himself a finger of Scotch and tossed it back, then poured another finger, feeling that he needed it after another encounter with Faith Devlin. Faith Devlin *Hardy,* that is. A widow. A young, lovely, red-haired widow with so much fire in her that he'd wanted to check his hands for singe marks after touching her. He had disconcerted her a couple of times, but for the most part she exhibited a

maddeningly cool confidence. She hadn’t been the least bit worried by his threats, though she had to know he wasn’t bluffing.
They were in the study, enjoying a before-dinner drink, at least Gray was. Alex was coming to dinner, and Noelle would be down soon, so Gray and Monica had gone into the study to have a few minutes of privacy for their discussion.
Monica looked blank. "It wasn’t Renee? It looked just like her, as if she hadn’t aged at all. She even looked younger. Oh – I see." Comprehension dawned. "It was one of the girls, wasn’t it?"
"The youngest one. Faith. She always looked more like Renee than any of the others."
"What’s she doing here?"
"She says she’s come back to stay."
Horror filled Monica’s dark eyes. "She can’t! Mother couldn’t bear it! Alex has gotten her to come out of her shell a little, but if she hears any of the Devlins are back in town, there’s no telling how far it will set her back. You’ll have to get rid of her again, Gray."
Wryly he considered his Scotch, and finished it with one gulp. The whole town knew the story about him running the Devlin family out of the parish. It wasn’t something he was particularly proud of, but neither did he regret it, and the incident had become enshrined as a sort of local legend. Monica hadn’t been there, hadn’t seen the ugliness; she knew only the results, not the process. She didn’t have the memory seared into her brain. It was always with him: Faith’s terror, the little boy’s hysterical shrieks and pitiful attempts to cling to her, her desperate struggle to gather up their belongings… and the potent, uncomfortable lust with which the men had watched her, the night shadows Concealing her youth and revealing only her resemblance to her mother.
With a sharp little pang he realized that that night was a link between them, him and Faith, a bond forged by a common memory that couldn’t be broken short of death. He had never really known her, and twelve years lay between then and now, and yet… he hadn’t thought of her or treated her as a stranger. It was as if they had resumed an acquaintance of long standing. They weren’t strangers; there was that night between them.
"Getting rid of her may be harder this time," he said abruptly. "She’s bought the Cleburne place, and as she pointed out to me, I can’t kick her off her own property."

"If she’s buying it, there has to be some way to interfere with the mortgage _ "
"I didn’t say she’s buying it, I said she’s bought it. There’s a difference." Monica frowned. "Where would a Devlin get that kind of money?"
"Probably life insurance. She’s a widow. Her last name is Hardy now."
"How convenient for her," Monica said sarcastically.
"No, from what I gather, it wasn’t," Gray said, seeing in his mind how pale Faith had gone when he had said much the same thing. He heard the doorbell ring, and Alex’s voice as Oriane opened the door to him. Discussion time was over. He patted Monica’s shoulder as they moved to the door. "I’ll do what I can to make her leave, but it isn’t a foregone conclusion. She isn’t a typical Devlin."
No, not typical in any way. Even when she’d been a teenager, looking at her had been enough to get him hard. That hadn’t changed. But she was also a more capable opponent than any of the rest of her family ever could have been. She was poised and intelligent, and seemed to have pulled herself, by whatever means, out of the gutters where her family had always lived. He respected her for that, but it didn’t make any difference; she had to go. Monica was worried about what her presence would do to Noelle, but he was worried about what it would do to Monica as well.
They went out into the foyer as Noelle came gracefully down the stairs to greet Alex, offering her cheek for his kiss, allowing him to tuck her hand into the crook of his arm, small touches that she had seldom allowed her husband. Alex’s devotion had been good for Noelle, soothing a bit the pain of her shattered self-confidence, but Gray wasn’t so sure it had been good for Alex. His wife had died fifteen years before and he should have remarried; he’d been only forty-one at the time of her death. Perhaps he would have, in time, but then Guy had left, and Alex, good friend that he was, had devoted himself to helping the Rouillards through the crisis. Even after receiving the letter of proxy, it had taken Gray a good two years to consolidate his position, and Alex had been right there, sitting up through all-night strategy sessions, becoming a sort of surrogate father to Monica, gradually cajoling Noelle out of her total depression. He had fallen painfully in love with Noelle, a fact to which she seemed oblivious.
He should have seen it coming, Gray thought, watching his mother. She was still incredibly lovely, in a cool, classic way that would appeal to Alex’s romanticism. Her dark hair was only lightly grayed, and it was remarkably

becoming. Her skin was still smooth and unwrinkled, though somehow there was no mistaking her age. There was no youth in her, no lightness of spirit, and sadness always lurked in the depths of her blue eyes. Looking at his mother, at Monica, at Alex, Gray savagely damned his father for what he had done.

As Alex seated Noelle, he said to Gray, "I heard a curious rumor today, about one of the Devlins." Monica froze, her anxious gaze darting to Noelle, who had gone still and pale. Alex didn't see Gray's sharp, warning motion. "I ran into Ed Morgan, and it seems one of the girls has moved back to town."

Alex straightened, his eyes levelly meeting Gray's, and Gray realized that Alex had chosen not to see his warning. He had deliberately brought up the subject, forcing Noelle to confront it. He had done that a few times before, talking about Guy when Noelle recoiled from any mention of her husband. Perhaps it was the right thing to do; God knows, Alex had been able to get more response from Noelle than either Gray or Monica had ever managed.

Noelle's hand fluttered toward her throat. "Moved… back?"

"It's the youngest daughter, Faith," Gray said, keeping his voice calm. "She's bought the old Cleburne place and moved into it."

"No." Noelle turned her agonized gaze on her son. "I can't – I can't bear it."

"Of course you can," Alex said comfortably, taking his seat. "You don't go out or talk to any of the townspeople, so you'll never see her or know anything about her. There's no reason for you to be upset."

Gray leaned back in his chair, controlling a slight smile. He and Monica tended to handle Noelle with kid gloves; he couldn't help it, even when she frustrated the hell out of him. Alex had no such compunction. He was relentless in his efforts to completely pry her out of her shell and back into society. Probably he was right to bring the subject into the open, and Gray's and Monica's inclinations were too protective.

Noelle shook her head, still looking at Gray. "I don't want her here," she said, openly pleading. "People will talk… it will all be rehashed again, and I can't bear it."

"You won't know anything about it," Alex said.

She shuddered. "I don't have to hear it to know it's going on."

No, she probably didn't. Anyone who had ever lived in a small town would know all too well how gossip was recycled, and nothing was ever forgotten.

"Please," she said to Gray, blue eyes haunted. "Make her leave."

Gray sipped his wine, carefully expressionless. He was getting damn tired of the way people thought he could wave a magic wand and make people disappear. Short of kidnapping or murder, all he could do was make things as uncomfortable for Faith as possible. He had no legal ground this time, no charge of trespass, no family of drunks and thieves the sheriff had been glad to escort out of his parish. What he had was one young woman, stubbornly determined to stand her ground.

"It won't be easy," he said.

"But you have so much influence… with the sheriff, the bank – "

"She hasn't opened an account at the bank, and the sheriff can't do anything unless she breaks a law. So far, she hasn't." She wouldn't be opening an account at his bank, either, he realized. She was too smart. She had known exactly what she would be facing when she moved back to Prescott, otherwise she wouldn't have bought the Cleburne place outright. She had taken steps to limit what moves he could make against her. He had to respect her as an opponent, for her foresight. She had definitely made things more difficult for him. He would check around, use his sources to try to verify that she had indeed paid for the house rather than financing it, but he suspected she had been telling the truth.

"There must be something," Noelle said desperately.

Gray arched his brows. "I draw the line at murder," he drawled.

"Gray!" Shocked, she stared at him. "I wasn't suggesting anything of the sort!"

"Then we may have to get used to the idea of her living here. I can make things damned inconvenient for her, but that's about it. And I don't want anyone getting any bright ideas about having her physically harassed," he said, giving both Monica and Noelle a hard look, just in case the thought had occurred to either of them. It wasn't likely, but he didn't intend to take the chance. "If we can get rid of her my way, fine, but I won't have her hurt." He didn't question this odd protectiveness on behalf of a Devlin. Faith had had enough pain and fear in her life, he thought, remembering the terrified girl caught in the glare of a semicircle of headlights.

"As if we'd do anything like that," Monica said, insulted.

"I didn't think you would, but I didn't want to leave the matter open to question."

Delfina brought in the first course, a creamy cucumber soup, and by mutual consent the subject was dropped, to Gray's amusement. There wasn't

anything going on in the house that Oriane and Delfina didn’t know almost as soon as it happened, but Noelle and Monica both adhered to the old stricture against personal conversation in front of the servants. He doubted that anyone who worked for them considered him or herself a "servant," especially Delfina. She had worked there for as long as he could remember, and had whacked his hands with a wooden spoon whenever she’d caught him trying to sneak one of the petit fours she baked for Noelle’s luncheons.
Monica began telling Alex about an interesting documentary she’d seen on television. Gray glanced at Noelle to make a comment, and stilled when he saw the tears gliding silently down her cheeks. She was calmly eating her soup, the spoon dipping and lifting in graceful rhythm, and all the while she was crying.
Alex joined Gray in the study after dinner, and they discussed business for half an hour before Gray said wryly, "Monica and I had decided not to tell Mother about Faith."
Alex grimaced. "I figured as much. I know it isn’t my place to butt in – "
Gray snorted, bringing a quick grin to Alex’s face before he resumed. "But she can’t keep hiding from the world forever."
"Can’t she? She’s been giving it a damn good try for the past twelve years."
"If she won’t go to the world, I’ve decided to bring the world to her. Maybe she’ll see that, if she can’t escape it, she might as well join it."
"Good luck," Gray said, and meant it.
Alex gave him a curious look. "Are you really going to make Faith leave?"
Gray leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on the desk, lounging like a sleepy panther, relaxed but still dangerous. "I’m damn sure going to try, but I told Mother the truth. Legally, there isn’t a lot I can do."
"Why not leave the girl alone?" Alex asked, and sighed. "I’d say she’s had a rough enough life as it is, without folks deliberately trying to make trouble for her."
"Have you seen her?"
"No, why?"
"She looks enough like Renee to be her twin," Gray said. "Just being a Devlin is bad enough, but looking the way she does…" He shook his head. "She’s going to stir up a lot of memories, and not just in my family. Renee Devlin got around."
"I still say give her a chance," Alex argued. "If she’s trying to make something of herself, it would be a shame to stand in her way."

Gray shook his head. "I have to think of Mother and Monica. They're more important to me than a little piece of white trash trying to make good."
Alex regarded him with disappointment. Gray was a hard man and a dangerous enemy, but he'd always been fair. Guy's disappearance had thrust him headlong into a situation wherein responsibility for the family's financial, as well as emotional, well-being had been dumped on his young shoulders. Gray had been a cheerful, happy-go-lucky hell-raiser until then, but overnight he had changed into a much harder, more ruthless man. His sense of humor still bordered on the bawdy and outrageous, when he indulged in humor, but for the most part he was far more serious. Gray was a man who knew the extent of his power, and didn't shrink from using it. If Guy had been respected in the financial community, Gray was regarded with the awe and caution one would afford a marauder.
"You're too protective," Alex finally said. "Noelle and Monica won't collapse if Faith Devlin lives in Prescott. They won't like it, but they'll learn to live with it."
Gray shrugged. Maybe – hell, probably – he was too protective, but Alex wasn't the one who had watched Monica nearly bleed to death, or seen how total Noelle's emotional collapse had been. By the time Alex had become involved in cajoling Noelle out of her room, at least she'd been talking again, and feeding herself.
"I give up," Alex said, shaking his head. "You'll do whatever you want, anyway. But think about it, and maybe cut the girl some slack."
Later that night, sitting alone in the study with his feet still propped on the desk in his usual position, while he read a financial report on some stocks he'd bought, Gray found it difficult to concentrate. It wasn't the Scotch; he had poured himself a drink when he had begun doing paperwork, over two hours before, and most of the liquor was still in the glass. The fact was, he couldn't get the problem of Faith Devlin out of his mind. Noelle's silent tears had reached him in a way nothing she could have said would have. If Faith didn't deserve to be hurt again, neither did his mother or sister. They had been innocent victims too, and Monica had almost died. He couldn't forget that, and he couldn't see them upset without trying to do something about it.
And it was a fact that if Faith Hardy stayed in Prescott, Noelle and Monica would be even more hurt and upset than they were now.

Gray stared broodingly at the level of Scotch in the glass. Maybe if he drank it, he could forget how warm and vital Faith had felt under his hands, how that sweet, spicy scent of hers had gone straight to his head and made him dizzy with lust. Maybe if he drank the whole goddamn bottle, he could forget about the urge to plunge his hands into the fire of her hair to see if it burned him, or the hunger to taste the wide, full bloom of her lips. He thought of her skin, so fine-grained and translucent that he marked her with the lightest touch; her breasts, high and round, the peaks of her nipples discernible even beneath her bra. She had *it,* the same indefinable quality Renee had possessed, an effortless sensuality that drew men to her like a lodestone. Faith wasn't as blatant about it as Renee had been; she had toned it down with better clothes, but the quality had merely been refined, not diluted. What Faith Hardy looked like was a classy lady who loved a long, hard ride in bed, and damn if he didn't want to give it to her.

If she didn't leave, it was likely that the residents of Prescott were going to be shocked out of their small-town minds, and Noelle ten times more upset than she was now, by the spectacle of another Rouillard man having a hot and heavy aiFair with a Devlin woman.

Eight

Ed Morgan made a point of meeting Faith at the door as she entered the grocery store. "Sorry," he said, not looking the least bit regretful. "I don’t have anything you need."
Faith stopped, and gave him a cool look. "You don’t know what I need," she pointed out.
"Doesn’t matter." He folded his arms and smirked at her. "Guess you’ll have to shop somewhere else."
Faith controlled her temper. She detected the fine hand of Gray Rouillard in this, and getting into an argument with Mr. Morgan wouldn’t accomplish anything except possibly getting her arrested for causing a public disturbance, which would suit Gray just fine.
He had kept his word about making it difficult for her to live-in the parish. Not ten minutes earlier, the attendant at the service station where she stopped had gleefully told her that they were out of gas, and she’d have to go elsewhere. At the tune, the man at the next pump had been filling his car. If Gray thought this would send her packing, he had seriously underestimated his opponent. She could sue these people for refusing service, but that wouldn’t make her very popular in town. She intended to live here, so she discarded that option. Besides, the real battle was between her and Gray; everyone else was secondary.
She shrugged as she turned to leave. "Fine. If you can do without my money, I can do without your groceries."
"All the other stores in town are in the same predicament," he called after her, gloating. "Fresh out of whatever it is you want."
Faith contemplated giving him the finger, but resisted the urge; he might take it as an invitation. She walked calmly back to her car. Obviously she’d have to do her shopping and buy her gasoline somewhere else, but it was only an inconvenience, not an insurmountable problem.
Inconvenient in the short term, that is; long term, she would have to do something about it. And in the *very* shprt term, she was mad as hell.
There was a pay phone on the corner. Faith stalked past her car and down to the open kiosk. This one had a phone book in it, swinging from a stiff metal cord. It would be just like the Rouillards to have an unlisted number, she silently fumed as she opened the thin little book and flipped through the

pages until she reached the *Rs.* But no, there it was. She dug a quarter out of her purse and fed it into the slot, then punched in the number.
A woman’s voice answered on the second ring. "Rouillard residence."
"Gray Rouillard^ please," Faith said in her most businesslike tone.
"May I say who is calling?"
"Mrs. Hardy," she replied.
"Just a moment."
No more than ten seconds later, the line clicked and Gray’s velvety dark voice purred, "Is this *the* Mrs. Hardy?"
She could hear the mocking amusement in his voice, and her hand clenched around the receiver so hard, it was a wonder the plastic didn’t crack. "It is."
"Well, well. I’ll bet you didn’t think you’d be asking for favors so soon, did you, sweetheart? What can I do for you today?" He didn’t even try to disguise the satisfaction in his tone.
"Not a damn thing," she said coldly. "I just wanted you to know your childish little tricks won’t work. I’ll have my groceries shipped in from Dallas before I’ll give you the satisfaction of seeing me leave!" She slammed down the receiver before he could reply, and marched to her car.
She hadn’t really accomplished anything, other than blowing off some steam and letting him know that she realized who was behind this latest development, and that it wasn’t going to work. It was satisfying anyway.
At Rouillard House, Gray chuckled as he sat back in his chair. He’d been right about her redheaded temper. He’d have liked to see her just now, with those green eyes snapping fire. Maybe his maneuver had made her dig in her heels rather than prompting her to go to a friendlier locale, but one thing for certain, it had gotten a reaction! Then his eyes sharpened. Dallas, huh? Maybe he should do some checking there.
Faith allowed herself to stew for a minute, then put her anger aside as a waste of energy. She refused to let this town, and Gray Rouillard, get the best of her. She would change their opinions of her if it took twenty years!
The key to changing their minds, she realized, was proving that Guy Rouillard hadn’t run off with her mother. For whatever reason he had left, it couldn’t be blamed on her family. Taking that into consideration, she had far more reason to hold a grudge than did the Rouillards or anyone else in the parish.
Knowing that Guy hadn’t been with Renee and proving it, however, were two different things. Perhaps if she could get Renee to talk to Gray, he

would at least be curious enough to start searching for his father. Maybe he already had, and Mrs. DuBois at the library simply didn't know the result of the search. If Guy was alive, though, there would be a traceable paper record somewhere.

She drove to New Roads, where she filled up the car and bought the few groceries she had needed. So much for Gray's effort to starve her out, she thought with satisfaction when she returned home and carried in the bag. She hadn't even had to go that much farther afield.

After she had put up the groceries, she went into her office and called her grandmother Armstead in Jackson. As before, Renee answered the phone.

"Mama, this is Faith."

"Faith! Hi, honey," Renee said in her lazy, sultry voice. "How're you doin', baby? I didn't expect to hear from you again so soon."

"I'm fine, Mama. I've moved back to Prescott."

There was a moment of silence on the line. "Why'd you do that? From what Jodie told me, them folks didn't treat you right."

"It was home," Faith said simply, knowing Renee wouldn't understand. "But that isn't why I called. Mama, everyone here still thinks you ran off with Guy Rouillard."

"Well, I told you that isn't so, didn't I? It's no skin off my nose what they think."

"It's causing me a little bit of trouble, though. Mama, if I can get Gray Rouillard to call you, would you talk to him and tell him that you didn't run away with his father?"

Renee gave an uneasy laugh. "Gray wouldn't believe a word I said. Guy was easy to get along with, but Gray… No, I don't want to talk to him."

"Please, Mama. If he doesn't believe you, that's up to him, but – "

"I said no," Renee interrupted sharply. "I'm not going to talk to him, and you're just wastin' your breath. I don't give a shit what those bastards in Prescott think." She slammed down the receiver, and Faith winced at the crash in her ear.

She hung up the phone, frowning in thought. For whatever reason, Renee was nervous about talking to Gray, and that meant Faith didn't have much chance of changing her mind. Renee had never been one to go out of her way for anyone, even in a matter as simple as a telephone call.

Well, if Renee wouldn't talk to Gray, then Faith had to find some other way to convince him, and the best way to do that was find out what had really

happened to Guy.
How did you go about finding out if someone who had disappeared twelve years ago was alive or dead? Faith wondered. She wasn't a detective, didn't know the procedures to follow to gain access to the records that would normally be examined if you were looking for someone. The thing to do, she supposed, was to hire a real private detective, one who would know those things. It would be expensive, though, and she didn't have much extra money after spending her ready cash on the house.
Where to find a detective? There wasn't any such animal in Prescott, but she supposed they could be found in any moderate-sized town; Baton Rouge was a city of almost a quarter million people, but it was also a little too close to Gray's sphere of influence. New Orleans would probably be safer. Maybe she was being paranoid about Gray's power, but she would rather be paranoid than caught unawares. A man who would try to stop a woman from buying groceries was diabolical! Her mouth quirked at the thought, and she allowed herself a tiny smile. On a more serious note, she had a healthy respect for the lengths to which he would go to follow through on his promises, and his warnings.
She would find a good detective and hire him to search credit card and bank records, things like that. If Guy was alive, surely he would have used some of his vast financial assets to support himself; she couldn't see him washing dishes at minimum wage. Perhaps it would be possible to find out if he had filed an income tax return. Surely any decent detective would be able to do that in a short amount of time, maybe a week, so the cost should be manageable.
What if the detective did find a paper trail? If Guy had used a credit card, Gray would have known about it, seen the charge on the monthly statement. Had Gray known where his father was all these years, and not said anything? The possibility was intriguing… and infuriating. If Gray *had* found Guy, wouldn't he have contacted him? And if he had done that, then he would know that Guy hadn't left with Renee. It followed, then, that for whatever reason, Gray had never tried to find his father, otherwise he would know there was no reason for this vendetta against her.
She couldn't forget what she considered the most likely scenario: Guy was dead. She could see him leaving, though divorce would have been a more logical step, but she couldn't see him never contacting his kids again, or walking away from the Rouillard money. That just wasn't human nature.

She had to give the private detective a chance to find Guy, but she didn’t think he’d succeed. After that, she would start asking questions around town; she didn’t know what she could discover, but the answer to the puzzle was there, if she could just figure out how to put the pieces together. Someone had to know what had happened that night. The truth was there, waiting for someone to find it. She pulled out a sheet of paper, paused for a moment, and unwillingly wrote her mother’s name at the top. It was asking too much of coincidence for Renee to have left the same night Guy had disappeared and not know anything about it. Maybe they really *had* run away together, and something had happened to Guy afterward, something that Renee didn’t want known. Though the only circumstances under which Faith could imagine Renee stirring herself to violence would be to protect herself, she had to put Renee’s name at the top of the list.

Beside Renee’s name, because he had the motive, she wrote "Gray" in block letters. She looked at the two names. One of them, possibly both of them, knew what had happened to Guy. She would bet her socks on it. Nausea roiled in her stomach. Between murder suspects, which did she choose as the most likely: her mother, or the man she had always loved?

Stricken, Faith stared bitterly at the paper. Self-knowledge was seldom sweet. She must be the biggest fool alive, for no matter how Gray had wrecked her life or tried to make things impossible for her, no matter that she thought he might be involved in his father’s death, she couldn’t run from, destroy, or even ignore that bone-deep, compelling attraction to him, like metal shavings to a magnet. Just the sight of him made her go weak inside, and when he touched her she felt the electricity of it in every cell of her body. He had never touched her except in anger; v;hat would it be like if he came to her as a lover, with pleasure his intention? She couldn’t imagine it. Her blood would boil, her heart stop.

What would she do if she found that Gray had indeed killed his father, or had him killed? The thought caused a sharp pain in her chest, and she barely stifled a moan. She would have to do the same thing she would do if it were anyone else. She couldn’t live with herself otherwise. And she would grieve for the rest of her life.

There were other suspects, though less likely. She listed them under the two top names. Noelle. Amos. Perhaps Monica. Thinking laterally, the list widened to the other men Renee had slipped around and slept with, as well as Guy’s other women. For two people infatuated with each other, they had

been remarkably unfaithful. Ed Morgan had to go on that list, and Faith wrote his name down with pleasure. She racked her brain, trying to think of more names, but twelve years was a long time and most of the men had been eminently forgettable. Maybe town gossip could supply them, as well as some of Guy's conquests. From his reputation, he had cut quite a swath through southeastern Louisiana. Probably she could list quite a few of Prescott's society ladies, which would also make their husbands legitimate candidates for the list. Wryly she tossed down the pen. The way this list was going, she might as well take a phone book and start at the *A's.*

"You don't look like a private detective."

Francis P. Pleasant looked like a prosperous, conservative businessman. There were no ashtrays in his office; it was neat, and his light gray suit fit well. He had sad, dark eyes, but the expression in them lightened and warmed as he smiled at her. "Did you think I would have a bottle of bourbon on my desktop, and a cigarette with an inch-long ash dangling from my mouth?"

"Something like that." She returned his smile. "Or that you'd be wearing a Hawaiian shirt."

He laughed aloud at that. "Not my style. My wife always picked out my clothes – " He stopped, and the sadness returned to his eyes as he glanced at a photograph on his desk.

Faith followed his gaze. The frame was set at an angle to her, but she could still see that it was a picture of a pretty middle-aged woman, her expression so cheerful that it invited smiles. She must have died, for that sadness to be in his eyes. "Is that your wife?" she asked gently.

He managed another smile, but it was strained. "Yes, it is. I lost her a few months ago."

"I'm so sorry." She had just met him, but her sympathy was genuine.

"It was a sudden illness," he said, his voice a little jerky. "I have a bad heart; we both thought I would be the first to go. We were prepared for that. We were saving as much money as we could, for the time when I wouldn't be able to work. Then she got sick, just a cold, we thought, but forty-eight hours later she was dead from viral pneumonia. By the time she realized she was really sick, that it wasn't just a cold, it was too late."

Tears swam in his eyes, and Faith reached across the desk to put her hand on his. He turned his hand to squeeze her fingers, then blinked in bewilderment.

"I’m sorry," he apologized, blushing. He took out his handkerchief and blotted his eyes. "I don’t know what came over me. You’re a client, we’ve just met, and here I am crying on your shoulder."
"I’ve lost people I loved, too," she said, thinking of Scottie and Kyle. "Sometimes it helps to talk about it."
"Yes, it does, but that was still inappropriate of me. My only excuse is that there’s something very warm about you, my dear." He realized that he had added an endearment, and blushed again. "Well! Perhaps I’d better ask what has brought you here."
"A man disappeared twelve years ago," she said. "I’d like you to find out if he’s still alive."
He picked up a pen and rapidly scrawled something on a legal pad. "Your father? An old boyfriend?"
"Nothing like that. He was my mother’s lover." Mr. Pleasant glanced up at her, but didn’t appear startled. Probably in his business he had received requests far more bizarre than hers. Thinking that he would have a better chance of finding something if he knew all the details and circumstances, rather than just the bare facts of Guy’s name, age, and description, she related everything that had happened twelve years ago, and why she wanted to find out if Guy was still alive. "I have to tell you," she said, "I think he’s dead. Maybe my imagination is running away with me, but I think someone killed him."
Mr. Pleasant carefully placed the pen on the legal pad, positioning it between the blue lines. "You do realize, Mrs. Hardy, that, considering what you’ve told me, your mother is likely involved. For her to have left the same night… well, you understand how that looks."
"Yes, I understand. I can’t think, though, that she would have killed him herself. My mother," Faith said with a faint smile, "would never kill the goose that laid the golden egg."
"But you do think that she knows what happened."
Faith nodded. "I’ve tried to get her to talk about it, but she won’t."
"I assume there’s no evidence to bring to the attention of the sheriff?"
"None. I don’t want you to find out if Guy was murdered, Mr. Pleasant, I just want you to find out, if you can, whether or not he’s alive. There *is* a remote possibility that he simply walked away from everything."
"Very remote," he said dryly. "Though I have to admit that stranger things have happened. If there’s a paper trail, though, I’ll find it. If he had been

running from the law, he would have changed his name, but there was no reason for him to disguise his identity. It should be fairly easy to find out if he’s ever surfaced."

"Thank you, Mr. Pleasant." She took out a business card and gave it to him. "Here’s my number. Call me when you know something."

She left his office feeling pleased with her selection. She had contacted him first by phone, discussed his fee, and made an appointment. Then she had checked his references, and been well satisfied with the answers. Mr. Pleasant had been highly recommended by her business contacts, described as both honest and competent, the kind of person one instinctively trusted. If Guy was alive, Mr. Pleasant would find him.

She glanced at her watch. She had left Prescott early that morning and driven down to New Orleans for her appointment with Mr. Pleasant, which hadn’t taken as long as she had anticipated. Margot was in town, and Faith had made a lunch date with her at the Court of Two Sisters. She had plenty of time to get there, so she drove back to her hotel and left the car, then set out on foot to do some window-shopping along the way.

It was steaming hot as she walked along the narrow streets of the French Quarter, and she crossed over to the shady side. She visited New Orleans frequently, because of the agency office here, but she had never really taken the time to explore this old district. Horse-drawn carriages moved slowly through the streets, with the driver and guide pointing out attractions to the tourists in the carriage. Most people, though, depended on their own feet to take them through the Quarter. Later, the main attraction would be the bars and clubs; this early in the day, shopping was the goal, and the myriad of boutiques, antiques shops, and specialty stores gave plenty of choice and opportunity to people who wanted to spend their money.

She went into a lingerie shop and bought a peach silk nightgown that looked like something one of the Hollywood movie queens would have worn back in the forties and fifties. After wearing almost nothing but hand-me-downs for the first fourteen years of her life, she felt sinfully self-indulgent about new clothes now. She could never bring herself to go on shopping binges now that she had a bit of cash, but every so often she allowed herself a luxury purchase: lace underwear, a sumptuous nightgown, a really good pair of shoes. Those small indulgences made her feel as if the bad times were truly in the past.

When she reached the restaurant, Margot was waiting for her inside. The tall blonde jumped up and hugged her enthusiastically, though it had been only a little over a week since Faith had left Dallas. "It’s so good to see you! Well, are you settling down okay in your little burg? / don’t think I’ll ever settle down again! My first business trip, and it’s to New Orleans. Isn’t this a great place? I hope you don’t mind sitting in the courtyard rather than inside. I know it’s hot, but how often do you get to eat lunch in a courtyard in New Orleans?"

Faith smiled at the barrage of words. Yes, Margot was definitely excited by her new job. "Well, let’s see. I’m twenty-six, and this is the first time I’ve eaten lunch or anything else in a courtyard, so I’d say it doesn’t happen too often."

"Honey, I can give you ten years, so it’s even rarer than you think, and I intend to enjoy every minute." They took their seats at one of the tables in the courtyard. Actually, it wasn’t uncomfortably hot; there were umbrellas, and trees to give shade. Margot eyed the bag in Faith’s hand. "I see you’ve been shopping. What did you buy?"

"A nightgown. I would show it to you, but I don’t want to drag it out here in the middle of the restaurant."

Margot’s eyes twinkled. "That kind of nightgown, huh?"

"Let’s just say it isn’t a Mother Hubbard," Faith replied delicately, and they laughed. A smiling waiter poured water for them, the light tinkle of the ice cubes making her suddenly aware of her thirst, and how hot she had become on the walk to the restaurant. She glanced around at the other diners as she sipped the cold water, and looked straight at Gray Rouillard.

Her heart gave that immediate, betraying little jump. He was sitting, with another man whose back was to her, two tables over from her and Margot. His dark eyes gleamed as he lifted his glass of wine to her in a silent toast. She lifted the water glass in a return salute, inclining her head in a mock gracious nod.

"Do you know someone here?" Margot asked, turning in her seat. Gray smiled at her. Margot smiled in return, a rather weak effort, then turned back to Faith with a poleaxed expression on her face. "Holy cow," she said in a dazed voice.

Faith understood perfectly. The flamboyance of New Orleans suited Gray. He was wearing a lightweight, Italian-cut suit, and a pale blue shirt that flattered the olive tones of his skin. His thick black hair was brushed back

from his face and secured with a bronze clasp at the nape of his neck. The tiny diamond stud glittered in his left earlobe. With the breadth of his linebacker's shoulders and the feline grace with which he lounged at the small table, he drew the eye of every woman in the courtyard. He wasn't pretty-boy handsome; his French ancestors had bequeathed him a thin, high-bridged Gallic nose, slightly too long, and a heavy beard that left him with a five-o'clock shadow even at lunchtime. His jaw looked as solid as a rock. No, there was nothing pretty about Gray. What he was, was striking, and dangerously exciting, with his bold, dark eyes and the *lazy*, sensual curve of his mouth. He looked like a man who was adventurous and confident, both in bed and out.

"Who is he?" Margot breathed. "And do you know him, or are you flirting with a stranger?"

"I'm not flirting," Faith said, startled, and deliberately turned her gaze to the other side of the courtyard, away from Gray.

Margot laughed. "Honey, that little toast you gave him said, 'Come and get me, big boy, if you think you're man enough.' Do you think a pirate like that is going to ignore the challenge?"

Faith's eyes widened. "It did not! He raised his wineglass to me, so I did the same with my water glass. Why would he think anything about it when he started it?"

"Have you looked in the mirror lately?" Margot asked, sneaking another look over her shoulder at Gray, and a smile spread across her face.

Faith made a dismissive gesture. "That has nothing to do with it. He wouldn't – "

"He is," Margot said with satisfaction, and Faith couldn't control a little jump as she looked around and saw Gray almost upon them, "Ladies," he drawled, lifting Faith's hand from the table and bowing over it with an Old World gesture that seemed entirely natural to him. Her startled eyes met his, and she saw deviltry, as well as something hot and dangerous, in those dark depths before he shielded them as he touched his lips to her fingers. His lips were soft and warm, very warm. Her heart banged painfully against her ribs and she tried to withdraw her hand, but his grip tightened and she felt the tip of his tongue probe delicately into the sensitive hollow between her last two fingers. Startled, she jumped again, and his awareness of that betraying little movement was in his eyes as he straightened and finally released her hand. He turned to Margot, bending low over the hand she had extended with a

dazed expression, but Faith noticed that he didn’t kiss Margot’s fingers. It didn’t matter. Margot couldn’t have looked more bedazzled if he had presented her with diamonds. Wondering if that same weak, yielding expression was on her face, Faith quickly looked down to disguise it, though of course it was too late. Gray was too experienced to miss any of the nuances. Her fingers tingled, and the skin between her fingers throbbed where his tongue had touched. The tiny damp spot felt both hot and cold, and she clenched her hand to dispel the sensation. Her face was burning. His action had been a subtle parody of sex, a mock penetration that her body recognized, and responded to with a pooling of heat in her lower body, a growing moistness. She could feel her nipples tighten and thrust against the lace of her bra. *Damn* him!

"Gray Rouillard," he was murmuring to Margot. "Faith and I are old acquaintances."

At least he hadn’t lied and said they were friends, Faith thought, watching tautly as Margot introduced herself, and, to her horror, asked Gray to join them. Too late, she gave Margot a warning nudge with her foot.

"Thank you," Gray said, smiling down at Margot with such charm that she didn’t react at all to Faith’s kick. "But I’m here on business, and I have to get back to my own table. I just wanted to come over and speak to Faith for a moment. Have you known each other long?"

"Four years," Margot replied, and proudly added, "I’m her district manager."

Faith nudged her ankle again, harder this time, and when Margot gave her a surprised look, she glared a warning.

"Really," Gray said, sounding interested. His gaze was sharper. "What business are you in?"

Finally having gotten the message, Margot gave Faith a swift, questioning glance.

"Nothing on your scale," Faith said, smiling at him so coolly that he shrugged, realizing he wasn’t going to gain any more information.

She exhaled with relief, but tensed again when he squatted by the table, a gracefully masculine action that brought his face more on a level with hers. It was more difficult to hide her expression now than when he had been standing. This close, she could see the bottomless black pupils of his eyes, the glitter in them as he looked at her. "I wish I’d known you were coming to New Orleans, sweetheart. We could have driven down together."

If he thought she would dissemble in front of Margot, he had sadly mistaken her. If he thought his charm had turned her brain into mush, he was wrong there, too. How she would like to rub his nose in the fact that she was a successful businesswoman, but the past week had made her wary of giving him any information about herself. Respectability wouldn't make any difference to either him or the town of Prescott; until – and if – she could prove that her mother hadn't run away with his father, nothing would change his attitude. Lifting her chin, a sure sign of temper, she said, "I'd rather have walked all the way than get in a car with you."

Margot made a choking sound, but Faith didn't spare a look for her, she kept her gaze locked with Gray's, the battle visually joined. He grinned with a buccaneer's reckless enjoyment of a fight.

"But we could have had a lot of fun, and shared… expenses."

"I'm sorry you're having money problems," she said sweetly. "Perhaps your business associate will put you up if you can't afford your own hotel room."

"I don't have to worry about hotel expenses." The grin broadened. "I own the hotel."

Damn, she thought. She'd have to find out which one he owned, and make sure she didn't book any tour groups into it.

"Why don't we have dinner together tonight?" he suggested. "We have a lot to talk about."

"I can't imagine what. Thank you, but no." She was driving back to Prescott this afternoon, but she would much rather he think she was refusing the invitation purely because she didn't want his company.

"It would be to your advantage," he said, and the dangerous look was back in his eyes.

"I doubt that anything a Rouillard suggested would be to my advantage."

"You haven't listened to my… suggestions yet."

"I don't intend to, either. Go back to your table and leave me alone."

"I'd planned on doing the first." He stood and trailed a long forefinger down her cheek. "There's no way in hell I'll do the last." He nodded to Margot and strolled back to his own table.

Margot blinked, her eyes owlish. "Shouldn't I check him for wounds? You really had the knife out for him. What on earth has that dark-eyed piece of work done to make you so mad at him?"

Faith took refuge in her water glass again, sipping from it until she had her expression under control. When she lowered it, she said, "It goes back a

long way. He’s a Hatfield and I’m a McCoy."
"A family feud? C’mon."
"He’s trying to run me out of Prescott," Faith said baldly. "If he found out about the travel agency, it’s possible he could cause trouble by ruining some of the tours we arrange. That would hurt our reputation, and we’d lose money. You heard him: He owns a hotel here. Not only is he filthy rich, so he has the money to bribe people to do what he wants, but he has contacts in the business. I wouldn’t put anything past him."
"Wow. This sounds serious. What started this feud, and has there ever been actual bloodshed?"
"I don’t know." Faith fiddled with her silverware, not wanting to mention her suspicion that Guy had been killed. "My mother used to be his father’s mistress. Needless to say, his family hates anyone with the name of Devlin." That would do for an explanation; she couldn’t go into the full tale, couldn’t trot out her memories of that night even for a sympathetic audience.
"What did you say is the name of this town?" Margot demanded. "Prescott? Are you sure it isn’t Peyton Place?"
They both laughed, and the waiter approached then to ask their preference for lunch. They both chose the buffet, and went inside to make their selections. Faith was acutely aware of a dark gaze following her every move, and wished Margot hadn’t been so set on eating in the courtyard. She would much rather have been shielded from his view. Who could have guessed that he would be in New Orleans today, though, or that in a city of this size they would immediately run into each other? True, the Court of Two Sisters was a popular restaurant, but New Orleans was larded with popular restaurants.
Gray and his business associate left the restaurant not long after Faith and Margot returned to the table with their loaded plates. He paused beside Faith. "I do want to talk to you," he said. "Come to my suite tonight at six. I’m at the Beauville Courtyard."
She hid her dismay. The Beauville was a lovely, mid-size hotel with a great atmosphere, built around an open courtyard. She had booked tour groups and vacationers in there many times. If Gray owned it, she would have to find another lovely, mid-size hotel with a great atmosphere, because she didn’t dare use his again. In answer to his command, for that was what it was, she shook her head. "No. I won’t be there."
His eyes gleamed. "Then take your chances," he said, and walked away.

"Take your chances?" Margot echoed indignantly, staring at his broad back. "What the hell did he mean by that? Was he *threatening* you?"
"Probably," Faith said, lifting a bite of pasta salad to her mouth. She closed her eyes in delight. "Mmmm, taste this. It's wonderful."
"Are you out of your mind? How can you eat when Mr. Macho just threatened to… do something, I guess." Frustrated, Margot picked up her fork and tasted the pasta salad. She paused. "This is good. You're right, worrying about him can wait until after we eat." Faith chuckled. "I'm used to his threats."
"Does he ever carry through with them?"
"Always. One thing about Gray, he means what he says, and he isn't shy about throwing his weight around."
Margot's fork clattered to the table. "Then what are you going to do?"
"Nothing. After all, he didn't actually threaten anything specific."
"That means you have to be on your guard against everything."
"I am anyway, where he's concerned." Pain pierced her at her own words, and she looked down at her plate to hide it. How wonderful it would be to feel safe and relaxed with Gray, to feel she could trust that all his ruthless determination, his vital intensity, would be used in defense of her rather than against her. Did Noelle and Monica know how lucky they were, to have someone like him standing ready to go to battle on their behalf? She loved him, but he was her enemy. She could never let herself forget that, not let wishful thinking cloud her common sense.
Deliberately she steered the conversation into safer waters, namely the few problems that had developed with her in Prescott rather than on the scene in Dallas. She was relieved that the problems *were* few, and relatively minor. Some difficulties had been expected, but Margot was a good business manager and got on well with the travel agents in the other offices. The only real difference was that now Margot was the one traveling around, instead of Faith, though there would be times when Faith's presence was required. For the most part, everything had worked out. They decided that, since Faith was so close to Baton Rouge and New Orleans anyway, she would continue overseeing those offices, because it would be foolish for Margot to fly or drive all that way. Margot was a little disappointed, because she was entranced with New Orleans, but she was also extremely practical, and the change was her suggestion. There would be times when it wouldn't be

convenient for Faith to get to either city, so she would content herself with the occasional visit.

After lunch, they parted company outside the restaurant, for Margot’s hotel was in the opposite direction from where Faith had left her car. It was even hotter now than it had been before, the mugginess making the air feel thick, hard to breathe. The smell of the river was stronger, and black clouds were looming on the horizon, promising a spring thunderstorm that would temporarily relieve the heat, then turn the streets into a steam bath. Faith speeded up her steps, wanting to be on her way home before the storm broke.

As she drew even with a recessed doorway that led into a darkened, deserted shop, a strong hand seized her arm from behind and dragged her into the doorway. *Mugged!* she thought, and anger flashed through her, red-hot and reckless. She had struggled too hard for what she had to give it up without protest, the way the police advised. Instead she jabbed her elbow backward, slamming it into a hard belly and eliciting a very satisfactory grunt from her assailant. She turned, her fist drawn back, and belatedly opened her mouth to yell for help. She had a blurred impression of height and wide shoulders, then she was jerked hard against him and her voice was muffled against an expensive, oatmeal-colored Italian suit.

"God Almighty," Gray said, amusement rich in his deep voice. "You little redheaded wildcat, if you’re as wild as this in bed, it must be a hell of a ride."

Shock at his comment mingled with relief at his identity, and neither diluted her anger. Breathing hard, she shoved at his chest, freeing herself. "Damn you! I thought I was being mugged!"

His eyebrows drew together. "And you started slinging that sharp little elbow?" he asked in disbelief, rubbing his stomach. "What if I *hadbeen* a mugger, and had a knife or a gun? Don’t you know you’re supposed to give up your purse rather than chance getting hurt?"

"Like hell," she snapped, pushing her hair out of her face.

His face cleared, and he laughed. "No, I guess you wouldn’t." He reached out and tucked a fiery strand behind her ear. "Attack first and think about it later, hm?"

She jerked her head away from his touch. "Why did you grab me like that?"

"I’ve been following you since you left the restaurant, and thought this would be as good a place as any for our little chat. You really should pay

more attention to who’s behind you."
"Skip the lecture, if you don’t mind." She glanced at the sky. "I want to get to my car before that storm gets here."
"We can go to my hotel – or yours – if you don’t want to talk here."
"No. I’m not going anywhere with you." Especially to a hotel room. He kept making those sexually loaded remarks, alarming her. She didn’t trust his motives, and she didn’t trust herself to resist him. All in all, it was best to stay as far away from him as she could.
"Then here it is." Gray looked down at her, standing so close to her in the narrow space of the doorway that her breasts were almost brushing his suit. When he had jerked her against him to muffle her scream, he had felt them, firm and round and luscious. He wanted to see them, wanted to touch them, taste them. He was so physically aware of her that he felt as if he were standing in the middle of an electrical field, with the air snapping and sizzling around them, sparks flying. Fighting with her was more exhilarating than making love to other women. Maybe as a young girl she had been as shy as a fawn, but she had grown into a woman who wasn’t afraid of anger, hers or anyone else’s.
"I’ll buy the house from you," he said abruptly, reminding himself why he had wanted to talk to her. "I’ll give you double what you paid for it."
Her green eyes narrowed, making them look even more catlike. "That isn’t a good business decision," she said, her tone light, but with temper still seething just below the surface.
He shrugged. "I can afford it. Can you afford to turn it down?"
"Yes," she said, and smiled.
The satisfaction in that smile almost made him laugh again. So she had made something of herself, had she? More than had been obvious at first; if she had a district manager, then obviously she had other employees, in several locations. He felt unwilling pride at what she had accomplished swell in his chest. He knew in intimate detail how little she had possessed when he’d had the Devlins thrown out, because he had watched her frantically picking her things up out of the dirt. Most people had a backup system of friends and relatives, pooled resources; Faith had had nothing, making her accomplishments all the more remarkable. If she’d had *his* assets, Gray thought, she might own the whole state by now. It wouldn’t be easy to get rid of a woman with that kind of grit.

Lust coiled and tightened in his guts. He'd never been attracted to weak, helpless women who needed protecting; he had enough of that with his family. There was nothing weak about Faith.

He studied her face, seeing both the resemblance to Renee and the differences. Her mouth was wider, more mobile, her lips red and lush and as velvety as rose petals. Her skin was perfect, with a porcelain texture that would show the imprint of a touch, a kiss. He thought of marking her with his mouth, kissing his way down her body until he reached the soft folds between her legs, folds that protected places even more tender. The image brought him to full, painful erection. Standing this close to her, he could smell the sweet, delicious scent of her skin, and he wondered if that sweetness would be more intense between her legs. He had always loved the way women smelled, but Faith's scent was so enticing that every muscle in his body tightened with need, making it difficult for him to think of anything else.

He knew he shouldn't do it, even as he reached for her. The last thing he wanted was to follow his father's example; he still couldn't think of his father's leaving without feeling the hurt and anger, the betrayal, as fresh as if it had just happened. He didn't want to hurt Noelle and Monica, didn't want to revive that old scandal.

There were a hundred reasons, all of them good, why he shouldn't want Faith Devlin in his arms, but in that instant none of them mattered a rat's ass. His hands closed on her waist, and the feel of her, warm and soft, so vibrant that his palms tingled where he touched her, went to his head like a potent wine. He saw her eyes widen, the black pupils expanding until only a thin rim of green remained. Her hands lifted and flattened against his chest, the placement covering his own nipples, and a shiver of response rippled his skin. Inexorably, his gaze fastened on her mouth, he drew her closer until her slim body rested against him. He felt her legs tangle with his, her firm breasts push against his stomach, saw those soft, full lips part as she drew in a startled breath. Then he lifted her on tiptoe and bent his head, and fed that particular hunger.

Her lips felt like rose petals, too, soft and velvety. He slanted his head and increased the pressure of his mouth, forcing them to open, a flower blooming at his command. Blood thundered through his veins and he pulled her tighter, sliding his arms around her and holding her welded to his body, letting her feel the swollen ridge of his erection against the softness of her

belly. He felt her shudder, felt the convulsive movement of her hips, arching into him, and fierce male triumph flooded him. Her arms slid upward over his shoulders, to twine around his neck, and her teeth parted to allow him deeper access. A low growl sounded deep in his throat, and he took it, plundering her mouth with his tongue. Her taste was sweet and hot, flavored with the strong coffee she had drunk with her dessert. Her tongue curled around his in heated welcome, then she sucked daintily, holding him within her mouth.

He drove her backward, forcing her against the locked and boarded door. Dimly he could hear the voices of the people passing on the sidewalk behind them, hear the sullen rumble of thunder, but they meant nothing. She was live fire in his arms, not struggling against his kiss, not just accepting it, but responding wildly to his touch. Her lips trembled and clung and caressed. He wanted more, wanted everything. Deliberately he cupped her buttocks and lifted her, drawing her hips inward so that his erection was nestled in the soft notch of her legs. He rubbed her back and forth against him, groaning aloud at the exquisite pressure.

Rain pattered on the street, signaling the arrival of the storm, and there was a scurry of movement as people darted for cover. A clap of thunder made him lift his head and look around, a little irritated by this intrusion into the sensual haze that clouded his mind.

Whether it was the thunder or his own reaction to it that broke the spell on Faith, she suddenly stiffened in his arms and began shoving against him. He caught a glimpse of her furious face and quickly set her on her feet, releasing her and stepping back before she began screaming bloody murder. She wriggled past him, onto the sidewalk, where the rain immediately soaked her, and turned to face him. Her eyes were yellowish with turbulence. "Don’t touch me again," she said, her voice rough and low. Then she turned and began walking as fast as she could, her head lowered against the rain that swept down the narrow street like a gray curtain. He started after her, intending to drag her to shelter, but forced himself to stop and step back into the doorway. She would fight him like a wildcat if he went after her now. He watched her until she turned the corner two blocks down, and disappeared from sight. She was almost running by then… escaping. From him.

For now.

Nine

Faith was dripping wet and shaking with both cold and reaction when she reached her car. Her hands trembled as she tried to fit the key into the lock, and it took her several tries before she succeeded. Crawling in, she collapsed against the steering wheel, pressing her forehead hard against the cold vinyl. *Idiot!* she thought violently. *Fool!*

She had to have been insane to give in to the craving to kiss him. Now he knew; she couldn't hide it from him any longer. For the sake of a few moments of pleasure, she had let him see her weakness, and now he knew that she wanted him. Humiliation burned in her face, ate like acid at her insides. She knew his nature very well, having firsthand experience of his ruthlessness. He was a predator, and the first hint of weakness would draw him straight in for the kill.

He wouldn't rest now until he'd had her; the occasional suggestive remark would become full-fledged attempts at seduction, and what had just happened proved that she couldn't trust her common sense to resist him. Where he was concerned, she didn't have any common sense. Horror filled her at the thought of being casually used and discarded, as if she were a sexual Kleenex. He thought of her as her mother's clone, a slut willing to spread her legs for anyone who had the equipment – and from what she'd felt, he had more than his share – while she ached for him, her childhood infatuation having changed into a very adult yearning. She wanted nothing more than to be loved by him, to be free to open the floodgates on her own dammed-up reservoir of love; he would turn that dream into a bitter nightmare, using her weakness for him as a means to hurt her, reduce her to being, after all, another Devlin whore for a Rouillard to use.

As much as she wanted to stay in Prescott, she would rather leave than live with that humiliation, to see contempt in his eyes when he looked at her, as she had seen it once before. His words echoed in her mind, a refrain that she had heard many times over the years: *You're trash.* The phrase was branded on her subconscious, surfacing every so often to taunt her.

No. She couldn't live through that again. But for a few minutes, she had been in heaven. His arms had been around her and she had been free to touch him, to stroke his shoulders, thrust her fingers into the thick, silky tail of hair gathered at the nape of his neck. What would he look like with his

hair loose, hanging to his shoulders? Or damp with sweat, and swinging forward as he bent over her, his face tight with passion –

She moaned, aching with a sweet pain that only he could ease. She had never been promiscuous; she had been a virgin when she'd married Kyle, and he was the only man with whom she'd ever made love. Her chastity, however, reflected her horror of being like Renee, with all the ugly association of being the town whore, rather than a lack of interest in the act itself. She loved making love, loved the feel of a man inside her, loved the scents and sounds, the tangled sweatiness. As her grief at Kyle's death had eased, her hunger for sexual contact had grown, intensified by her own restraint. She simply couldn't bring herself to have sex purely for the physical release, and after Kyle's death she hadn't wanted emotional involvement, either. She had gone four years without being held, without being kissed, until Gray had taken her in his arms and briefly opened the door to paradise.

There was a hot earthiness in him that fanned the banked coals of her own sexual fire. He had been as hard as a rock, and blatant about it. He had wanted her to feel him, had deliberately pulled her into him, lifted her to push the hard ridge of his erection against her mound. They had been on a public street, in daylight, but that hadn't stopped him. Even though this *was* New Orleans, where such things might not be all that unusual, *she* had never before done anything like that. She had always gone out of her way to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Respectability, responsibility, were too important to her for her to allow herself to be publicly fondled, yet that was exactly what she had done.

When he touched her, she forgot everything else but the hot joy of being in his arms. Despairing, she wondered if she would have stopped him even if he had done more, or if she would have let herself be taken there in the street like the lowest of whores, oblivious to decency, modesty, even legality. Her face burned at the thought of being arrested for public lewdness, or whatever it was called. Acute stupidity would be a better term. It would never have happened with anyone but Gray. With no one else would she have lost herself so completely. She sat motionless in the car, watching the rain beat down in sheets beyond the concrete pillars of the public parking garage, and let appalled realization seep into her mind. Perhaps she had always sensed the truth, but pushed it away. She couldn't hide from the full reach of reality any longer. She had loved Kyle, enjoyed

sleeping with him, but it was as if only half of her had been involved. There had always been this other part of herself that was set aside, and belonged, irrevocably, to Gray. She had cheated Kyle; perhaps he had never known, and granted, their marriage had been in trouble because of his drinking, but still she should never have married him without loving him wholeheartedly. In the back of her mind had always been the thought that she would remarry someday, but now she knew that she couldn't; she couldn't cheat another man. There was only one man whom she could love completely, heart and soul and body, nothing held back, and that was Gray Rouillard. And he was the one man to whom she didn't dare give herself, because he would destroy her.

When the rain stopped, Gray walked back to his hotel and went up to his suite, where he made one phone call, to Dallas. "Truman, look something up for me. You have a city directory, don't you? See if there's a Faith Hardy listed in it."

He crossed his legs at the ankle, his feet propped on the coffee table, and waited while his friend and business associate thumbed through the massive volume. A moment later the Texas accent twanged in his ear. "I got two Faith Hardys, and about ten other Hardys with the first initial F."

"Any of them F. D. Hardy?"

"Ah… no. There's an F. C. and an F. G. but not an F. D."

"Occupations?"

"Let's see. One's a schoolteacher, one's retired…" Truman ran down the list of occupations. None fit the meager facts Gray had on Faith. Dallas might not be the right city, after all, but it was more likely that Faith had declined to be listed in the city directory.

"Okay, that's a dead end, I think. Look up Margot Stanley, M-a-r-g-o-t."

Truman snorted. "Are you sure it isn't M-a-r-g-a-u-x? Isn't that the way the 'in' people spell it these days?"

"Look up both spellings."

There was the sound of more pages being turned, and Truman humming. He paused. "There's a shit pot full of Stanleys."

"Any Margots, of either the American or 'in' variety?"

"Yeah, here's an American-variety Margot."

"Where does she work?"

"Holladay Travel. Spelled with two *I's* and an a."

"Cross-reference that, and see if it lists the owner." More humming.
"Bingo," Truman said. "The owner is F. D. Hardy."
"Thanks," Gray said, amused at how easy it had been, after all. "Any time."
Gray hung up the phone and considered what he had just discovered. Faith owned a travel agency. Good for her, he thought, inexplicably pleased. On a hunch, he dragged the New Orleans phone directory out of the desk and looked through the yellow pages. There it was, in a discreet, tasteful ad: "Holladay Travel – Put the Holiday Back in Your Vacation, and Leave the Worry to Us."
So she had at least two offices, and probably more, which explained how she had been able to pay cash for her house. He grinned as he remembered the satisfied little smile on her face when she had thrown his offer to buy the house back in his face. But if she was this prosperous, why did she want to keep it such a secret? Why wasn't she broadcasting it all over Prescott, to show everyone that a Devlin could crawl out of the trash heap, after all? Why had she so obviously interrupted Margot and kept her from giving out any more information than she had already let slip?
It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. Faith was afraid he would do something to sabotage her business. Not only did he carry a lot of weight in Louisiana and beyond, but he had just told her that he owned a hotel, in a city that made its living from tourists. It would be easy for him to cause trouble for her agency, and she evidently expected him to do exactly that. Her opinion of him wasn't very high, he thought wryly.
Hell, why should it be? On a steamy summer night, twelve years ago, he had ground her into the dirt. After that night, she probably thought of him as the devil incarnate.
Only an hour before, he had scared her by unceremoniously grabbing her from behind, though Little Red had seemed more furious than frightened; she had come out swinging, those green eyes narrowed and determined. Then he had all but mauled her on a public street, gripping her ass, lifting her up and grinding his cock against her mound. No wonder she had run from him, when he had finally turned her loose.
Except… she hadn't protested. Instead she had been so hot and sweet that he felt dizzy remembering her in his arms, plastered against his body. She had been taut and trembling with desire, vibrating with it. Her response had broadsided him, knocked him so crazy that he still hadn't recovered. For a moment he had been blind with lust, insensible to everything else but the

driving need to be inside her. If that clap of thunder hadn't startled him, he might have tried to take her right there, standing in the doorway, with people walking past no more than two feet away. He couldn't remember ever before being so wild for a woman that nothing else mattered, but Faith had reduced him to that level with only a kiss.

Just a kiss, sweet and spicy at the same time, so hot it had seared him. Her tongue, curling against his in love play. The unreserved sensuality in the way she had sucked on his tongue. The press of her body, eager and instinctive. She wanted him, as fiercely as he wanted her.

Memory re-created the resilient fullness of her buttocks in his hands, and he clenched them into fists to contain the tingling of his palms. It was worse than he had thought, this gnawing lust to have her. He wasn't accustomed to denying himself any of his sexual appetites, but the barriers between them were both solid and maddening. There was his mother, who had so totally withdrawn when faced with the humiliation of her husband leaving her for the town whore. Monica, her wrists slashed and her blood pooling at her feet; her white face was another image that never left him. There were his own feelings, the rage and pain at being abandoned by his father. The barriers weren't all on his side, either; the memory of that night lay between him and Faith, a mental Berlin Wall, stark and shattering. Too much pain, too many reasons.

Their bodies didn't give a damn.

That was it in a nutshell. He wasn't a Don Juan, but it was a fact that getting sex had always been easy for him. Nothing in his considerable experience, however, had prepared him for this… fever. They couldn't look at each other without feeling its heat. And when they touched, it was like an inferno.

Restlessly he paced the floor, trying to find some way around the barriers. She couldn't stay in Prescott; that was asking too much of his family. No, he couldn't let up on making life as miserable as possible for her there, not that he had been able, or willing, to do much anyway. He had inconvenienced her, period. He couldn't bring himself to really persecute her. She didn't deserve it; she had been a victim, too. She had worked hard to make something of her life, and had succeeded. If it weren't for his family, hell, he'd welcome her with open arms. An open fly, too, he thought wryly, and felt the twinge of arousal in his groin.

But he couldn’t make his family go away, couldn’t change the way they felt, so Faith had to go. Maybe not far. Maybe he could convince her to move to Baton Rouge, or even any of the small towns around Prescott. Just somewhere out of the parish, but close enough that they could see each other. She had made a strategic mistake in letting him see how much she wanted him, because he could use that as a means of convincing her to move. *We can’t be together here. Move, and we’ll see each other as often as possible.* She wouldn’t like it; she’d probably tell him to go to hell, at first. But the fever was there, burning in her the same way it was burning in him. If he used every opportunity to fan the flames, she would eventually see things his way, assuming they didn’t both go up in smoke in the meantime. She could keep the house in Prescott, if selling it made her feel as if she was giving up too much. He’d buy her another house, anywhere she wanted.
He was faced with two facts. She had to leave Prescott, and he had to have her. Whatever it took, he had to have her.
"I agree with you," Mr. Pleasant said, sipping from the glass of iced tea Faith had given him. "I think Guy Rouillard is dead, and has been for twelve years."
He was dressed today in a pale blue seersucker suit; it would have been tacky if it hadn’t fit so well, if his white shirt hadn’t been so pristine, his tie so impeccable. On Mr. Pleasant, a seersucker suit looked natty. Some of the sadness was gone from his dark eyes, replaced by the sparkle of interest.
They sat in the air conditioned coolness of her living room. Faith had been surprised when he’d called her; it had been only two days since she had hired him. But here he was, with a notepad balanced on his knee.
"There’s been no trace of him since the night he vanished," he said. "No credit card purchases, no bank withdrawals, no Social Security taxes paid in or tax return filed. Mr. Rouillard wasn’t a criminal, so there was no need for him to change his name or disappear so completely. Logically, then, he’s dead."
Faith drew a deep breath. "That’s what I thought. I wanted to make certain, though, before I begin asking questions."
"You do realize that, if he was murdered, your questions could make someone very anxious." He took another sip of his tea. "The situation could be dangerous for you, my dear. Perhaps it would be better to let sleeping dogs lie."

"I’ve thought of the possibility of danger," she admitted. "But considering my mother’s involvement with him and the fact that everyone thinks they ran away together, no one would be surprised at my interest. My gall, maybe, but not my interest."
He chuckled. "It depends on the nature of the questions, I suppose. If you came right out and said you thought Mr. Rouillard had been killed, that would attract a lot of attention." He sobered, and his tone softened. "My advice is to forget about it. The murder, if there was one, is twelve years old. Time covers a lot of tracks, and you have no evidence to tell you where to begin looking. You aren’t likely to find anything, but you may put yourself in danger."
"Not even try to find out what happened?" she asked softly. "Let a murderer go unpunished?"
"Ah. You’re thinking about justice. It’s a wonderful concept, if you have the means to accomplish it. Sometimes, though, justice has to be weighed against other considerations, and reality gets in the way. Probably Mr. Rouillard was murdered. Probably your mother is involved, in knowledge if not in deed. Could you handle that? What if his death was an accident, but she was brought up on murder charges? Gray Rouillard is a powerful man; do you think he’d let his father’s death go unpunished? The worst scenario, of course, is if his death wasn’t an accident. In that case, my dear, you would definitely be in danger yourself." She sighed. "My reasons for wanting to find out what happened to him aren’t entirely altruistic. In fact, they’re mostly selfish. I want to live here; this is home, this is where I grew up. But I won’t be accepted here as long as everyone thinks Guy ran away with my mother. The Rouillards don’t want me here; Gray is making things difficult for me. I can’t buy my groceries in Prescott, I can’t fill up my car. Unless I can prove Mama didn’t have anything to do with Guy’s disappearance, I’ll never have a friend here."
"And what if you prove she killed him?" Mr. Pleasant softly asked.
Faith bit her lip, and rolled the cold, damp glass between her hands. "That’s a chance I’ll have to take." The words were low, almost inaudible. "I know that, if she’s guilty, I won’t be able to live here. But knowing what really happened, no matter how bad, won’t be as bad as *not* knowing. Maybe I won’t find out anything, but I’m going to try."
He sighed. "I thought you’d say that. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask a few questions around town, just out of curiosity. Folks might tell me things that

they wouldn’t tell you."
That was true. Now that her identity was known, most people would clam up around her rather than defy Gray. Still, Mr. Pleasant had already completed the job for which she’d hired him. "I can’t afford any further investigation," she said honestly.
He waved his hand in dismissal. "This is for my own curiosity. I’ve always loved a good mystery."
She eyed him doubtfully. "Has that ever kept you from charging your regular fees?"
"Well, no," he admitted, and laughed. "But I don’t need the money, and I’d like to know what happened to Mr. Rouillard. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to work with my heart the way it is. Probably not long, so I’m only going to spend my time on cases that interest me. As for money… well, let’s just say I don’t have much need for it now."
With his wife dead, he meant. He suddenly busied himself with flipping through his notes, and she knew he was once again fighting tears. She allowed him the dignity of pretense and asked if he would like more iced tea.
"No, thank you. It was delicious, just the thing on a hot day." He stood, smoothing the crisp seersucker into place. "I’ll let you know if I get any interesting answers. Is there a motel in town?"
She gave him the directions to the motel as she walked out on the porch with him. "Have supper with me tonight," she invited on impulse, disliking the thought of him eating alone, making do with a fast-food sandwich.
He blushed, the color extending all the way into his thinning hair. "I’d be delighted."
"Would you mind if we ate at six? I prefer eating early."
"So do I, Mrs. Hardy. Six o’clock, then." He was smiling as he walked jauntily to his car. Faith watched him drive away, then returned to the paperwork she had abandoned at his arrival. She looked forward to supper; she had developed a definite soft spot for Mr. Pleasant.
He arrived promptly at six, as she had known he would, and they sat down to a light meal of tender grilled pork chops, saffron rice, and fresh green beans. He kept looking around, absorbing the little details – the starched linen napkins, the fragrant centerpiece of tiny wild roses, the aromas of home-cooked food – and she knew that he had missed this since his wife had died. They lingered over dessert, a lemon sorbet with just the right

amount of tartness. Talking with him was easy; he was very old-fashioned, and she found that comforting. Consideration of any sort had been in such short supply during her formative years that she doubly appreciated it now.
It was almost eight when a single hard knock rattled her front door. Faith stiffened; she didn’t have to open the door to know who was standing on her porch.
"Is something wrong?" Mr. Pleasant asked, too astute to miss her change of expression.
"I think you’re about to meet Gray Rouillard," she said, getting to her feet and crossing to the door. As usual, her heart was beating too fast and too hard at the prospect of seeing him, talking to him. In over fifteen years, that hadn’t changed; she might as well be eleven again, big-eyed with hero worship. It was twilight, the long spring days reluctant to give up their glow. He was silhouetted against the pale opal of the sky, a tall, broad-shouldered, faceless figure. "I hope Fm not interrupting you," he said, but there was a hard undertone to his rumbling voice that told her he didn’t give a damn if he was or not.
"If you were, I wouldn’t have answered the door," she replied as she let him in. She couldn’t erase the challenge of her own tone, though she tried to moderate it for Mr. Pleasant’s sake.
Gray’s smile was nothing more than a baring of teeth as he turned to Mr. Pleasant, who had politely risen from his seat at Gray’s entrance. The room suddenly seemed too small, filled and dominated by Gray’s vital masculine presence, all six feet four of it. He was wearing a white shirt, black jeans, and low-heeled boots, and looked more like a pirate than ever. His teeth flashed as white as the tiny diamond in his ear.
"We’ve already finished dinner," Faith said smoothly, recovering her control. "Mr. Pleasant, this is Gray Rouillard, a neighbor. Gray, Francis Pleasant, from New Orleans."
Gray held out his hand, and Mr. Pleasant’s smaller hand was swallowed by his grip. "A friend or a business associate?" he asked, as if he had a right to the information.
Mr. Pleasant’s eyes twinkled, and he thoughtfully pursed his mouth as he retrieved his hand. "Why, both, I believe. And you? A friend as well as a neighbor?"
"No," Faith said.
Gray shot her a hard, quick look. "Not exactly," he said.

Mr. Pleasant’s eyes twinkled even more. "I see." He took Faith’s hand in his and lifted it to his mouth for a courtly kiss, then bestowed another one on her cheek. "I must be going, my dear; my old bones want to rest. My hours resemble an infant’s these days. It was a lovely dinner. Thank you for inviting me."

"It was my pleasure," she said, patting his hand and kissing his cheek, too.

"I’ll call," he promised as he went out the door. As she had that morning, Faith waited in the doorway until he was in his car, and waved as he reversed out of the driveway.

Fighting down her dread, she closed the door and turned to face Gray, who had silently approached until he stood only a foot behind her. His eyes were black with temper. "Who the hell is he?" he growled. "Your sugar daddy? Did you mix business with pleasure in New Orleans, or is it all business to you?"

"None of your business," she said flatly, mocking him with her repetition of the word. She glared up at him, fighting the tiny red flare of rage and not completely succeeding. Mr. Pleasant was forty years older than she, but of course, Gray’s first thought was that she was sleeping with him.

He moved one step closer, erasing the small distance between them. "By God, it is my business, and has been for the past two days."

Hot color ran into Faith’s cheeks at the reference to what had happened between them in New Orleans. "That didn’t mean anything," she began, her voice gruff with embarrassment, but he gripped her shoulders and gave her a single shake.

"The hell it didn’t. Maybe you need to refresh your memory." He bent his head and, too late, she put up her hands to try to hold him away. Her palms flattened against his chest as his mouth covered hers, and immediately she was engulfed in heat. His heat. Her own. Dizziness roared in her ears. She swayed against him, her lips parting to mold more precisely to the demanding pressure of his, to admit the hot probe of his tongue. All the rich blues and golds and burgundies of his scent swirled around her, inside her, possessing her. His heartbeat thudded, strong and heavy, beneath her right palm. She felt the hard, immediate swell of his erection against her belly, and her hips moved automatically, seeking.

He lifted his head and moved back, putting a few inches between them. He was breathing hard, his eyes fierce with arousal, his lips red and moist and a

little swollen from that hard kiss. His fingers moved on her shoulders, massaging, caressing. "Don’t deny what happened."
"Nothing happened." She uttered the lie with a defiance that hid her desperation. He knew it was a lie, she saw the anger in his face, but she said it anyway. She knew what he was doing. In New Orleans she had made the mistake of giving him an inch, and now he was trying to take full advantage of it and gain a mile. Perhaps he had come here tonight thinking she would be easy for him; he could take her to bed, then cajole her into leaving town. For him, he would say. So they could be together without upsetting his mother. Her blatant lie served notice that she didn’t intend to let him have his way. She wrenched away from him, sliding sideways to prevent him from pinning her against the door. "It was just a kiss – "
"Yeah, and King Kong was just a monkey. Goddammit, stand still," he said irritably, reaching out to grab her, this time holding her arms. "You make me dizzy with that damn two-step. I’m not going to throw you down and crawl on top of you – not just yet, anyway."
Her eyes flared with panic. "You can bet your sweet bottom dollar, you’re not!" she shouted, once again trying to jerk away. "Tonight, or any other time!"
"Would you stop that?" he snapped. "You’re going to bruise yourself." With a quick movement he whirled her around and folded his arms about her, crossing them under her breasts and holding her wrists manacled. Just that quickly, that easily, she was subdued and surrounded, his muscled body hard and warm against her back. Temptation rose, strong and immediate, urging her to relax her neck and let her head fall backward onto his chest, let her body soften and mold itself against his, let herself inhale the rich, musky scent of his skin and grow intoxicated on it. She shuddered as hunger surged within her, and knew that if she gave him the smallest response now, she would be lost. It wouldn’t take five minutes for him to have her flat on the bed.
"You see?" he asked, his voice softening to a velvety punas he felt her tremble. His warm breath stirred her hair. "All I have to do is touch you. It’s the same for me, Faith. I don’t like this worth a damn, but by God, I want you, and we’re going to do something about it."
She closed her eyes, still shaking with the effort of resisting him, and gave a sharp little shake of her head. "No."

"No, what?" He nuzzled his cheek against the top of her head. "No, you don’t want me, or no, we aren’t going to do something about it? Which one are you lying about now?"
"I won’t let you," she said, not letting him distract her. She opened her eyes and stared straight ahead, focusing on one of the lamps in an effort to ignore the feel of his arms around her. "I won’t let you treat me like dirt again."
He stilled, even his breath halting for a moment. Then he let it out with a quiet sigh. "It’s always between us, isn’t it?" There was no need to be more specific; the memory of that night was almost tangible. He paused. "Baby, I know about Holladay Travel, that you’ve worked for everything you have. I know you’re not like your mother."
Oh, God. He knew about her agency. She fought a lurch of panic, and instead concentrated on his last statement. "Sure you do," she said bitterly. "You think so highly of my character that you just accused me of having a sugar daddy. My God, I invited a lonely old man to have dinner with me, so of course I’m crawling into bed with him!" Infuriated, she tried once again to wrench free.
His arms tightened until she could barely breathe. "I told you to stop that," he warned. "You’ll be black and blue."
"If I am, it’ll be your fault, not mine! You’re the one doing the manhandling!" She kicked backward, catching his shin with her heel, but she was wearing soft-soled slippers and he was wearing boots; he grunted, but she knew she hadn’t hurt him. She twisted her body, trying to turn around so she could do more damage.
"You… little… wildcat," he said, panting with the effort of controlling her. "Damn it, would you be still! I was jealous," he admitted baldly.
For a moment, she was too stunned to react. She stood motionless in the circle of his arms, wariness at battle with a dizzying spurt of elation. Jealous! He couldn’t be jealous unless he cared – no. She couldn’t let herself fall into that trap. She didn’t dare believe him. She had witnessed his seduction technique before; she remembered how he had soothed Lindsey Partain, complimenting her, telling her how much he wanted her, needed her. He was adept at getting what he wanted. While she had no doubt that he wanted her physically, with the evidence so prominent, she knew that nothing else had changed. He still wanted her to leave, and would use her weakness for him to convince her to go.

"Do you honestly expect me to believe you?" she finally asked, weariness in every word.
He nudged his hips forward. "Do you deny this?"
She forced herself to shrug. "What's there to deny? You have a hard-on. Big deal. That doesn't mean anything."
A chuckle vibrated in his chest. "It's a good thing I have a healthy ego, or you'd give me an inferiority complex."
She wished he wouldn't laugh. She didn't want him to have a sense of humor. She wanted him to be mean-spirited and small-minded, so she could despise him. Instead he was bold and audacious, with a disarming laugh. He was ruthless, but he wasn't mean.
He bent his head to nuzzle her ear, his warm breath tickling the sensitive whorls. "There doesn't have to be a problem," he murmured. "We can be together – not here, but there's a workable solution."
Faith stiffened again. "I'll just bet there is. And it involves my leaving town, doesn't it?"
His tongue flicked out, lazily playing with her earlobe before he caught it between his teeth and sensuously nipped at it. "You wouldn't have to go far," he cajoled. "You don't even have to sell this house. I'll buy another house for you, a bigger one, if you want – "
Rage engulfed her, red-hot and seething. She wrenched free of his slackened embrace and spun to face him, her face white and her eyes burning. "Shut up! You can't stop thinking that I'm for sale, can you? The only change is that you've moved me up into a higher price bracket! I don't want your damn house, but I do want you out of mine. Right now!"
His eyes narrowed, and he didn't move an inch. "I wasn't thinking about buying you. I was trying to make things as easy as possible for you."
"Nice try, but I know too much about you. I've seen you in action, remember?" The memory of that night was bitter in her tone, and flashed starkly between them. She had that other memory, too, one he didn't know about: the time she had watched him with Lindsey Partain. She'd seen him in action, all right.
He was silent a moment, his dark gaze moving over her. "That won't happen again," he said gently.
"No, it won't," she agreed, lifting her chin. "I won't let you ever treat me that way again."

"You wouldn’t have much choice, if I decided to do it," he said, that dangerous glitter coming into his eyes. He chucked her under the chin. "Remember that, baby. I can play a lot rougher than I have so far." She jerked her head away. "So can I." His gaze slid down her body, the expression in his eyes changing into something slow and heated. "I’ll bet you can. You almost tempt me to find out how rough you can be, just for the fun of it. But this discussion has gone way off course. We aren’t in a war, baby. We can have a nice arrangement, and enjoy ourselves without hurting my family, if you’ll only agree to it."
"No," she said.
"That must be your favorite word. I’m getting damn tired of hearing it."
"Then stay away." She sighed, weary of the battle, and shook her head. "I don’t want to hurt your family. That isn’t why I came back. This is my home; I don’t want to cause any trouble, I just want to live here. If I have to fight you to do that, then I will."
"The battle lines are drawn, then." He shrugged. "It’s up to you, how much trouble you want to put up with to live here. I won’t back down; you’re still going to be unwelcome in town. If you change your mind, though, all you have to do is call me. I’ll take care of you, no questions asked, and no gloating."
"I won’t call."
"Maybe you won’t, but maybe you will. Think about what we could have together."
"What? A couple of quickies every week? Lying about where you are, because you don’t want your family to know? Thanks, but no thanks." He reached out and cupped her cheek, and this time she didn’t pull away. His touch was gentle as his thumb rubbed her lower lip, probing the inner softness. "There’s more to it than just the fucking," he said softly. "Though God knows I want that so much I hurt."
Because she wanted so desperately to believe him, she didn’t dare. She had to fight tears as she shook her head. "Please leave."
"All right, I’ll go. But think about it." He turned toward the door, then stopped. "About your company – "
Instantly she was alarmed, and tensed for another battle. "If you dare do anything to hurt my business – "
He gave her an impatient look. "Hush. I’m not going to do a thing. I just wanted you to know how proud I am of you. I’m glad you’ve accomplished

as much as you have. In fact, I told my manager at the hotel to give special consideration to any groups booked by your agency."

Proud of her? Faith stood silently as he left, and the tears she had successfully held back began to trickle down her cheeks. Did she dare believe him in this? She couldn’t, she realized. She would keep to her original decision not to book any more groups into his hotel.

But the tears still fell. He’d said he was *proud* of her.

Ten

Monica took her time in the bathroom, needing the privacy to get herself back. It was always slightly alarming, that loss of self, of personhood. Michael didn't seem to feel it; he was always content, a little drowsy, when he moved off of her. She could hear the squeak of the bed now as he moved, probably to put out his cigarette. He didn't smoke much, he was trying to quit, but after sex was one of the times when he found cigarettes harder to resist. Today his hand had been shaking a little as he flicked his lighter, making the tiny flame dance.

That telltale reaction made her feel soft inside, and she stayed in the bathroom longer than usual so he wouldn't see. It was bad enough that he knew how wild she went when he was inside her, moaning, clutching at him with wet hands, her hips moving. No matter how she tried, she couldn't make them stay still. And she was wet down there, too; she heard the embarrassing slurping sounds when he moved in and out of her. She wasn't embarrassed *then*, all she could think of was the fever building inside her, but afterward she felt the shame.

It wasn't that way with Alex. With Alex she could restrain herself; he seemed to prefer it that way, and she knew why. He was pretending she was Mama.

She didn't want to do it with Alex, but at the same time, she did. She couldn't say that he forced her, not even to make herself feel better about what she did. She loved Alex, but – he was almost like a father to her. He couldn't take Daddy's place, no one could do that, but Alex had been Daddy's best friend, and he had been so hurt when Daddy had left like that. Quietly he had given them all a shoulder to lean on, or to cry on, as the case may be. Sometimes, in those first awful days, she had been able to pretend a little bit that he *was* her father, that nothing had changed.

But the pretense hadn't held up for long. The horrible shock of that day had forever changed something inside her, and she had accepted that things would never be perfect. Daddy wasn't coming back; he'd preferred living with that slut rather than living with his own family. He didn't love Mama and never had.

Alex loved Mama, though. Poor Alex. She couldn't remember when she had first realized how he felt, when she had seen the devotion and sadness

in his eyes; it had been several years after Daddy had left, though. It was about the time he had first coaxed Mama to eat dinner with them. He could do more with Mama than either she or Gray could; maybe it was the gentle, devoted courtesy with which he treated her. God knows Daddy had never been like that with her. He had been polite, and gentle, but you could tell he was just going through the motions and didn't really care. Alex cared.

She remembered the night it had first happened. Gray had been in New Orleans on business. Mama had come down for dinner, but despite Alex's cajoling, had been more depressed than usual and had really made an effort just to eat with them. She had gone back to her room almost immediately, despite his pleas. When he had turned back to face Monica, she had seen the desolation in his eyes, and impulsively reached out to put her hand on his arm, wanting to comfort him.

It had been a chilly winter night. There was a fire in the parlor, so they had gone in there, and she had set herself to easing that look from his eyes. They had sat on the sofa in front of the fire, talking quietly of many things while he sipped an after-dinner brandy, his favorite. The house was quiet, the room dim, with only one lamp on. The fire had softly snapped. And in the firelight, she must have looked like Mama. She had worn her dark hair in a twist that night, and she always dressed in the conservative, classic style Mama preferred. For all those reasons, the brandy, the solitude, the darkened room, his own disappointment, her resemblance to Mama – it had happened.

A kiss had become two, then more. His hands were in her hair, and he was groaning. Monica remembered how her heart had pounded, in fear and an almost painful sympathy. He had touched her breasts, almost reverentially, but only through her clothes. And he had pushed up her skirt only enough to bare the essential part, as if he didn't want to violate her modesty more than was necessary. She had a confused memory of naked flesh, unseen but felt, as he pressed himself to her, then a sharp sting of pain and the quick pumps into her. Unfaded by time, however, was the memory of how his voice had broken as he murmured, "Noelle," in her ear.

He didn't seem to know he'd been the first. In his mind, she'd been Mama. And in her mind, God help her, he'd been Daddy. It was so sick that she was still disgusted at herself. She'd never had any sexual feelings for Daddy; hadn't had any at all, until Michael. But in the tumult of emotion that night, she'd thought, Maybe he won't leave, if I give him what Mama

won’t. So she had taken her mother’s place, offering herself sexually as a bribe to keep Daddy at home. Poor Alex… poor *her.* Both of them surrogates for something neither one could ever have. Freud would have had a field day with her.

But that night had been the first of many, over the past seven years. Though not that many, come to think of it. Michael had probably had her more often in just a year than Alex had in seven. Alex had been so ashamed, so apologetic. But he had come to her again, helplessly needing the pretense that Noelle would ever lie in his arms, and Monica had let him have the ease that he needed. He never approached her when Gray was home, only when he was out of town on business.

The last time had been just two days ago, when Gray had been in New Orleans. She had gone to Alex’s office that night, as she usually did, and he had done it to her on the sofa there. It never took long. He never undressed her, or himself. Seven years he’d been doing it to her, and she’d never seen him naked, had actually only seen his thing a few times. He was still apologetic about his need, as if she really were Mama, and thought the process was nasty. So he finished as fast as he could, and Monica cleaned herself and went home.

It wasn’t like that with Michael. She still didn’t know what had attracted him to her, or how she had actually allowed things to progress so far. He’d grown up in Prescott, so she’d known him, to put a name to his face, to speak to, all of her life. He was five years older than Gray, and already a deputy with the sheriffs department when she had finished high school. He’d married his high school sweetheart and had two little boys. They’d been like Ward and June Cleaver, and then she’d up and left him, right out of the blue. She had moved to Bogalusa and remarried a couple of years later. His sons were seventeen and eighteen now, and he had a good relationship with them.

Michael had a good relationship with everyone, she thought, a smile curving her mouth. That was why he’d been elected sheriff when Sheriff Deese had finally retired three years ago. He was a true good old boy, disdaining suits in favor of a uniform, and wing tips in favor of boots. He was a lanky six feet, with sandy hair and friendly blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles across his nose. Opie, all grown up.

One day, a year ago, she’d been in town and decided to eat lunch at the courthouse grill, which made the best hamburgers in town. Mama would

have been horrified at such a plebeian taste, but Monica loved hamburgers and treated herself occasionally. She'd been sitting at the little table when Michael had come in, gotten his own hamburger, and was on his way back to a booth when he suddenly paused by her table and asked if he could join her. Startled, she'd said yes.

At first she'd been stiff, but Michael could tease the starch out of a shirt. Soon they'd been laughing and talking as easily as if they were best friends. She'd had another moment of stunned awkwardness when he'd asked her to have dinner with him; she was acutely aware that Mama wouldn't approve. There was nothing upper-crust about Michael McFane. But she had agreed, and to her surprise, he had cooked dinner himself, grilling steaks in his backyard. He lived now on the small farm where he'd grown up, with the closest neighbor a mile down the road, and Monica had felt relaxed by the quiet solitude of his rural home.

Relaxed enough, after they'd eaten and danced to country tunes on the radio, moving slowly around his small living room, to let him take her into his bedroom. She hadn't planned to let him, hadn't even considered that he'd try. But he'd started kissing her, and his kisses were warm and slow, and for the first time in her life she felt the curl of desire deep in her body. Alarmed by what was happening, and the speed of it, she had nevertheless stood in his bedroom and let him unzip her dress, then unhook her bra and remove it. No one had ever seen her bare breasts, but all of a sudden Michael had not only seen them, but was busy sucking on them. The drawing pressure of his mouth had made her go wild, and they had tumbled to the bed. Not for him a discreet pumping, with trousers barely lowered. Soon they were both naked, locked together on the cotton sheets, and that curl of desire had exploded into a wantonness that still alarmed her.

No *lady* would act in such a manner, but then Monica had always known she wasn't a lady. Mama was a lady; Monica had been trying all her life to be like Mama, so Mama would love her, but she'd always fallen short. Mama would be horrified and disgusted if she knew her daughter spent several hours a week in bed with Michael McFane – the *sheriff*, of all people! – screwing like a rabbit.

Sometimes Monica felt resentful of the strictures that had been drummed into her from the cradle. *Gray* hadn't been subjected to, and confined by, all the things that ladies didn't do. It was as if Mama had written Gray off as a lost cause from the moment of his birth; he was a male, therefore she

expected him to act like an animal. Because she was a lady, she had ignored the sexual escapades of both father and son; such things were of no interest to her, and she expected her daughter not to be interested in them, either.
It hadn't worked that way, though Monica had tried. She had tried really hard, for the first twenty-five years of her life. Even after Mama had withdrawn from them, after Daddy left, Monica had kept trying, hoping that, if she was good enough, Mama wouldn't feel so bad about Daddy being gone.
But she had always hungered for more. Mama had always been so reserved and cool, perfect, untouchable. Daddy had been warm and loving; he had hugged her, tussled with her despite Mama's disapproval of such rowdiness with her daughter. Gray was even more physical than Daddy; he had always burned with an inner fire that Monica had recognized at an early age.
She remembered once, when Gray had been home from college, they had lingered around the dinner table, talking. Gray had been lounging in his chair with that big-cat grace of his, laughing as he described a prank some of the football players had pulled on one of the coaches, and there had been… she couldn't quite describe it… a sort of sensual wildness in the tilt of his head, the motion of his hand as he picked up his glass. She had glanced at Mama and found her staring at Gray with an expression of revulsion on her face, as if he were a disgusting animal. He *had been* an animal, of course, a healthy, rambunctious teenage boy, blazing with the testosterone pumping into his body. But there was nothing repulsive about him, and Monica had felt resentful of that disapproval, on his behalf.
Gray was a wonderful brother, she didn't know what she would have done without him, in those awful days after Daddy left. She had been so ashamed of her own attempted suicide that she had sworn then she would never again be that weak, that much of a burden to Gray. It had been a struggle, but she'd kept that promise to herself. She had only to look at the thin, silvery lines on her wrists to forcibly remind herself of the price of weakness.
Seeing Faith Devlin in the parking lot at the grocery store had shocked her so much that, for the first time in a long while, she'd fallen into the old habit of running to Gray, expecting him to take care of her problems. She was disgusted with herself for falling to pieces the way she had, but when she had seen that dark red hair, such a rich color that it was almost wine-colored, her heart had almost stopped. For a wild, dizzying moment, she

had thought, *Daddy's back!* because if Renee was here, then surely Daddy was, too.

But Daddy was nowhere in sight. There was only Renee, looking even younger than when she had left, which was pure injustice. Someone as wicked and trashy as Renee Devlin should wear her sins on her face, so everyone would know. But the face staring back at Monica had been as exquisitely complexioned as ever, without a wrinkle in sight. The same slumberous green eyes, the wide, soft, sensual mouth – nothing had changed. And for a moment, Monica had been again the hurt, helpless girl she'd been before, and she had gone running to Gray.

Only it hadn't been Renee; the woman in the parking lot was Faith Devlin, and Gray had been oddly reluctant to use all his influence against her. Monica couldn't recall much about Faith, just a vague memory of a skinny little girl with her mother's hair, but that didn't matter. What wasn't vague was the twist of pain at seeing her, the rush of memories, the old sense of betrayal and abandonment. She had been afraid to go to town since then, afraid she would see Faith again and feel the sting of salt in the reopened wound.

"Monica?" came Michael's lazy voice. "You go to sleep in there, honey?"

"No, I was just primping," Monica called, and ran the water in the basin to give credence to her lie. Her reflection looked back at her. Not bad, for thirty-two. Sleek dark hair, not as black as Gray's, but not a silver strand in sight. Her face was fine-boned, like Mama's, but she had the Rouillard dark eyes. Not overweight, and her breasts were firm.

Michael was still sprawled naked on the bed when she left the bathroom, and a slow smile lit his face as he held out his hand to her. "Come snuggle," he invited, and her heart turned over. She crawled back into bed, and into the warmth of his encircling arm. He sighed with contentment as he settled her against him, and his big hand moved to squeeze one resilient breast. "I think we should get married," he said.

Her heart didn't just turn over this time, it almost stopped. She stared up at him, eyes round with both panic and astonishment. "M-Marry?" she stuttered, then crammed both hands against her mouth to hold back the hysterical giggle that bubbled up. "Michael and Monica McFane?" The giggle erupted anyway.

He grinned. "So it sounds like we're twins. I can live with it if you can." He thumbed her nipple, enjoying the way it peaked at his touch. "But if we

have a kid, its name will start with anything but an *M."*
Marriage. Kids. Oh, God. Somehow she had never envisioned that he might want to marry her. She had never even thought of marriage in connection with herself. Her life had gone into deep freeze twelve years ago, and she had never expected it to change.
But nothing is static. Even rock changed, ground down by time and the elements. Alex hadn't disrupted the even rhythm of her life, but Michael had blazed through like a comet.
Alex. Oh, God.
"I know I don't have much to offer you," Michael was saying. "This house sure ain't nothing like what you're used to, but I'll fix it up any way you want; you just tell me what to do and I'll do it."
Another shock. She had lived her entire thirty-two years at Rouillard House. She tried to imagine living anywhere else, and couldn't. Twelve years ago the entire foundation of her life had crumbled, and since then she hadn't dealt well with any change, even a relatively minor one such as getting a new car. Gray had finally forced her to give up the one she had been driving since she was nineteen, just as, five years ago, he had forced her to redo her bedroom. She had been heartily sick of the little-girl decor for years, but the thought of changing it had made her feel even worse. It had been a relief when Gray had brought a decorator in one day while she had a dentist appointment, and returned to find the wallpaper already stripped off and the carpet removed. Still, she had cried for three days. So little of her former life had remained the way it was before Daddy left, and it hurt to give up anything else. After she stopped crying, and the decorator was finished, she loved the room; it was the transition that was so wrenching.
"Honey?" Michael said now, hesitation creeping into his voice. "I'm sorry, I guess I thought – "
Fiercely she put her hand against his mouth. "Don't you dare put yourself down to me," she said, low and violent, aching inside that he would think for a minute that she would consider herself too good for him. The reverse was true; Michael was too good for her. Only two days ago she had lain on the leather sofa in Alex's office and let him screw her. Ugly word. Ugly process. It had nothing in common with Michael's lovemaking. She had felt nothing, except pity, and relief when it was over.
If Michael knew about Alex, he wouldn't want her any longer. How could he? For the past year he had thought she was his alone, and all the while she

had been letting an old family friend screw her, just as she had for the six years before.
She hadn’t felt any guilt at all, on Alex’s behalf, when Michael had become her lover. She didn’t feel any connection with Alex; how could she? It wasn’t even her he was doing it to, but her mother. But she was eaten alive with guilt when she went to Alex, because it was such a betrayal of Michael. She would have to tell Alex that it had to stop, but the old terror was still there, buried deep. If she stopped letting him do it, would he leave? Would it matter if he did? She wasn’t a hurt, confused girl any longer, she didn’t need Daddy – or his stand-in.
But what would happen to Mama if Alex stopped coming to the house? He loved Mama, but could he bear to see her, so lost to him, if he didn’t have the release of pretending that he was making love to her?
"I love you," she said now to Michael, and tears trickled from her eyes. "I just – I never thought you’d want to marry me."
"Silly." He wiped the wetness from her cheeks, and a crooked smile lit his grown-up Opie face. "It took me a year to work up the nerve, is all."
She managed a smile of her own. "I hope it doesn’t take me that long to work up the nerve to say yes."
"That scary, huh?" he asked, and laughed.
"Any… any change is hard for me." She swallowed, terrified at the prospect, and of telling Mama about Michael. Gray knew about him, of course; it was no secret that they were seeing each other, but no one suspected they’d been sleeping together for a year. But since Mama never went to town anymore, and didn’t have any friends over to visit, she knew nothing about what went on these days. She wouldn’t like it on two counts. One, she wouldn’t like the idea of Monica marrying anyone, because that would mean her pristine daughter would be subjected to a man’s disgusting touch. Two, she especially wouldn’t like it if that man were Michael McFane. The McFanes had never been anything but poor farmers, certainly not in the same social stratum as the Graysons and the Rouillards. The fact that Michael was the sheriff wouldn’t raise him any in her estimation; he was just a public servant earning a nice but unspectacular salary.
And she would have to tell Alex.
"It’ll be all right," Michael said comfortingly. "I’ll get started on fixing up the house. It should be finished in, say, six months. That’ll give you enough time to get used to the idea, won’t it?"

She looked up into his beloved face and said, "Yes." Yes to it all. Her heart was pounding wildly. She would manage. She would tell Mama, and face that chilly disapproval. She would tell Alex that she couldn't meet him again. It would hurt him, but he would understand. He wouldn't abandon Mama; it was silly of her even to think it. She had to look at things as an adult, not a scared girl. Alex hadn't remained a friend because she'd allowed him to stick his thing in her; he was Gray's legal representative, and a friend even before she'd been born. Probably he had just gotten into the habit of using her. Maybe he'd be glad of an excuse to stop, maybe he felt as guilty about it as she did.

She had to make things as right as possible. Not even one little thing could be wrong, or it would all unravel. A normal, happy life loomed before her like the golden ring on a carousel, and she could grab it if she could just manage to do everything right. The last time, Renee Devlin had wrecked her dream.

Her thoughts jolted. Even as Michael was hugging her exuberantly, a face swam before her eyes: sleepy green eyes, a sensuous mouth that drove men wild. Renee was still there, in the form of her daughter.

Faith had to go. Mama would be much happier if Faith left town. She might even approve of Monica, if she were the one to make Faith leave. And if Michael were involved, too…

Her hands pushed at his bare shoulders. "There's a problem."

He released her, sighing with disappointment. The reason for his disappointment twitched in his lap. "What?"

"It's Mama."

He sighed again. "You don't think she'll like the idea of you marryin' me?"

"She won't like the idea of me marrying anyone," Monica said bluntly.

"You don't know – she'll be so upset."

He looked startled. "For God's sake, why?"

Monica bit her lip, uncomfortable with airing their family laundry. "Because that means I'd be sleeping with you."

"Of course you'd – oh." Now he looked uncomfortable. He was probably recalling all the old gossip about the arrangement Mama and Daddy had had. "I guess she doesn't like things like that."

"She hates the very idea. And with Faith Devlin back in town, she's already upset." Cautiously Monica nudged him in the direction she wanted him to go. "If Faith left again, it would put Mama in a lot better mood, but I don't

know how to manage that. Gray is trying to make her leave, but he says there isn’t much he can do, not like before."
To her surprise, Michael went still, and a grim look darkened his face. "I know how he feels. I wouldn’t want to do anything to put that girl out of another home, either."
Monica drew back, uneasy that he had responded directly opposite to the way she had wanted. She had expected him to understand immediately. "She’s a Devlin! I can’t look at her without feeling sick – "
"She didn’t do anything," Michael pointed out in a reasonable tone that set her teeth on edge. "We had trouble with all the other Devlins, but not her."
"She looks just like her mother. Mama nearly went to pieces when she found out one of the Devlins had come back here to live."
"There’s no law that says she can’t live where she wants."
Because he seemed to have trouble grasping the point, Monica decided to be blunt. "You could do something about it, though, couldn’t you? Gray isn’t doing much, but you could think of some way to make her leave."
But Michael shook his head, and disappointment knotted her stomach. "I was there the last time," he said soberly, a distant and somber look darkening the blue of his eyes. "When we ran them out of that shack they lived in. For the rest of the Devlins, I didn’t care, it was nice to get rid of them, but Faith and that little boy – well, they suffered. I’ll never forget the look that was on her face, and I bet Gray still thinks about it, too. That’s probably why he’s taking it easy on her this time. God knows I couldn’t do something like that to her again."
"But if Mama – " Monica stopped herself. He wasn’t going to do it. He couldn’t understand, not really, because he didn’t live with Mama, didn’t know how that cold disapproval could slice to the bone. She controlled her dismay, and smiled at him. "Never mind. I’ll handle Mama, somehow."
But how? She had never yet managed to handle Mama, to shrug off those hurtful things she said the way Gray did. Gray loved Mama, she knew, but he ignored her a lot of the time. Monica still felt like an anxious little girl, trying so desperately to live up to the standards Mama set, and always falling short.
She would have to do it. She couldn’t lose Michael. She would tell Alex she couldn’t meet him anymore, and somehow – somehow – she would get rid of Faith Devlin, and make Mama so happy, she wouldn’t mind if Monica got married.

Eleven

Faith hung up the phone, a puzzled frown on her face. That was the sixth time she'd called Mr. Pleasant and not gotten an answer. He didn't have a secretary; Mrs. Pleasant had filled that role, and he hadn't had the heart to replace her when she had died. Mr. Pleasant had checked out of the motel; rather, the key had been left on the nightstand in the room, and his things were gone. The room had been paid for in advance, so there was nothing unusual in that. She had done it herself, more than once.

What was unusual was that he hadn't called her, and he'd said that he would. She couldn't believe he had forgotten. He would have called if something wasn't wrong. Given the state of his health, she was afraid he was in a hospital somewhere and was too ill to call. He could even be dying, and she wouldn't know about it. The thought of dying alone made her chest hurt. Someone should at least be there to hold his hand, as she had held Scottie's.

Other than being worried about him, she didn't know what, if anything, he had found or whom he had questioned. She would have to continue on her own, without the benefit of whatever answers he had gotten.

She didn't have a clear idea of how to go about it, what clues to look for, even what questions to ask – assuming anyone would talk to her. The only ones who were likely to answer her questions would be any newcomers, and they wouldn't be in a position to know anything. The old-timers would know, but they would heed Gray's edict against having anything to do with her.

A thought came to her, and she grinned with anticipation. There was one person, at least, who would talk to her – unwillingly, but he would talk.

She dragged a brush through her hair and twisted the heavy mass into a top-knot, securing it with a few pins and leaving tendrils loose around her face and at the nape of her neck. That was the limit of her grooming; a few minutes after having made up her mind, she was on her way to Prescott, to Morgan's Grocery.

As she had expected, Mrs. Morgan spotted her the moment she entered the door. Faith ignored her and wandered toward the dairy section, which was at the back of the store, safely away from Mrs. Morgan's sharp ears. It wasn't long before Ed came hot-footing it down the aisles, his beefy face florid with both indignation and exertion. "Maybe you didn't understand too

good," he said, huffing to a stop in front of her. "Get on out of my store. You can’t buy your groceries here."
Faith stood her ground and gave him a cool smile. "I didn’t come here to buy anything. I want to ask you a few questions."
"If you don’t leave, I’m goin’ to call the sheriff," he said, but an uneasy expression crossed his face.
His mention of the sheriff made her stomach clench, probably the reaction he had hoped to get. Her spine stiffened, and she forced herself to ignore the threat. "If you answer my questions," she said quietly, "I’ll be gone in a few minutes. If you don’t, your wife may learn more than you want her to know." When it came to threats, she could make a few of her own.
He paled, and cast an anxious look toward the front of the store. "I don’t know what you’re talking about."
"Fine. My questions don’t concern my mother. I want to know about Guy Rouillard."
He blinked, surprised by the turn. "About Guy?" he repeated.
"Who else was he seeing that summer?" she asked. "I know my mother wasn’t the only one. Do you remember any of the gossip?"
"Why do you want to know about all that? It don’t matter who else he was seeing, because it was Renee he ran away with, not any of the others."
She glanced at her watch. "I figure you have about two minutes before your wife comes back here to see what’s going on."
He glared at her, but said reluctantly, "I heard he was seeing Andrea Wallice, Alex Chelette’s secretary. Alex was Guy’s best friend. Don’t know that it’s true, though, because she didn’t seem tore up when Guy left. There was a waitress out at Jimmy Jo’s, I can’t remember her name, but Guy saw her a few times. She’s not there anymore. Heard tell he had a thing going with Yolanda Foster, too. Guy got around. I can’t remember who all he was messin’ around with, or when, exactly."
Yolanda Foster. That must be the ex-mayor’s wife. Their son, Lane, had been one of that group of boys who hung around Jodie when they wanted a good time, but wouldn’t speak to her if they met her in public.
"Was that common knowledge?" she asked. "Were there any jealous husbands around?"
He shrugged, and glanced again toward the front of the store. "Maybe the mayor knew, but Guy donated a lot of money to his campaigns, so I doubt Lowell Foster would have kicked up very much if he’d known Yolanda

was… uh, collecting donations." He smirked, and Faith thought how much she disliked him.
"Thanks for the information," she said, and turned to go.
"You won't come here again?" he asked anxiously.
She paused and gave him a considering look. "Maybe not," she said. "Call me if you think of any more names." Then she walked briskly from the store, not even glancing at Mrs. Morgan on the way out.
Two names, plus the possibility of the unknown waitress. It was a beginning. What intrigued her, though, was the mention of Guy's best friend, Alex Chelette. *He* would likely have the answers to most of her questions.
The Chelettes were one of the old, monied families in the parish – not on a level with the Rouillards, but then neither was anyone else. She knew the name, but couldn't dredge up any memories of them as people. She had been only fourteen when she'd left, and more withdrawn than most, keeping to herself as much as possible. She had paid attention only to those who had direct contact with her family, and as far as she could remember, she had never met any of the Chelettes. Alex was still likely to be around, though; the case of Guy Rouillard aside, old money tended to remain in one place.
She walked down to the pay phone at the end of the parking lot and looked up the Chelettes. The residence was listed as "Alexander Chelette, atty." Below it was the number for "Chelette and Anderson, Attorneys at Law." Thinking that now was as good a time as any, she fed in a quarter and dialed the law office. A musical voice answered on the second ring.
Faith said, "My name is Faith Hardy. Could Mr. Chelette see me today?"
There was a tiny pause that told Faith her name had been recognized, then the musical voice said, "He's in court all morning, but he can see you this afternoon at one-thirty, if that's convenient."
"It is. Thank you." As she hung up, Faith wondered if the musical voice belonged to Andrea Wallice, who had been Mr. Chelette's secretary when it had all happened, or if this was a different one.
She had almost three hours to kill, unless she wanted to drive home and come back later. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that the slice of toast she'd eaten at six-thirty had long since vanished. She wondered if she would be served in any of the restaurants in town, or if Gray's influence had extended there, too. She shrugged. No time like the present for finding out.

There was a small cafe on the square. She had never been in it, she thought as she parked almost directly in front of the door. She had never eaten out until she had gone to live with the Greshams, and they had introduced her to the wonders of restaurants. The thought of them made her smile as she entered the cool, darkened cafe, and she made a mental note to call them that night. She tried to stay in touch, calling them at least once a month, and it had been almost that long since they last spoke.

Customers seated themselves, so Faith chose the booth at the rear of the cafe. A pleasant-faced young woman, short and round, bustled up with a menu. "What will you have to drink?"

"Sweet tea." That the tea would be iced was a given, unless hot tea was specifically requested. The usual choices were merely between sweet and unsweetened.

The waitress darted off to get the tea, and Faith glanced down the selections on the plastic menu. She had just decided on the chicken salad when someone paused beside the booth. "Aren't you Faith Devlin?"

Faith tensed, wondering if she would be asked to leave. She looked up at the woman standing there. "Yes, I am." The woman looked vaguely familiar, brown eyes, brown hair, and a square-jawed, dimple-cheeked face. She was smallish, about five foot three, and had the perkiness of a cheerleader.

"I thought so. It's been a while, but it's hard to forget hair that color." The woman smiled. "I'm Halley Bruce – Johnson, now. I was in your class at school."

"Of course!" As soon as she heard the name, the face clicked in her memory. "I remember you. How are you?" Halley had never been her friend – she hadn't had any friends – but neither had Halley taken part in any of the cruel-teasing Faith had endured. She had been civil, at least.

The expression in her eyes now, however, was downright friendly. "Will you join me?" Faith invited.

"Just for a minute," Halley said, slipping into the booth opposite Faith. The waitress returned with Faith's tea, and took the order for her chicken salad. When they were alone again, Halley smiled wryly. "My husband's folks own this place, and I run it for them. I'm expecting a delivery any minute now, and I'll have to check it in."

Since Gray already knew about the agency, there was no point in not talking about it, so Faith said, "I'm playing hooky. I have a travel agency in Dallas,

and I really should have told my manager where I'd be, but I forgot to call before I left the house."
Social and financial positions established, they smiled at each other as equals. Faith felt a warm rush of pleasure. Even after she had gone to live with the Greshams and attended high school, she hadn't had any girlfriends; she had still been too wary and withdrawn, too traumatized, to form any friendships. It wasn't until she had started college that she had made any friends at all, and the casual acceptance of her dorm mates had been a revelation to her. Shy at first, she had quickly bloomed, joyfully participating in the female rituals that had been closed to her as a girl: the all-night gab sessions, the teasing and laughter, the swapping of clothes and makeup, the frenzy of getting ready in the mornings, sharing the bathroom mirror with her roommate. For the first time she had participated in the endless analysis of the murky mystery of men – rather, she had listened, smiling a little at their naivete. Though at that point many of her dorm mates had already had sex and Faith had still been virgin, she had felt infinitely older, more experienced. They still viewed men through the rosy lenses of romance, while she had no such illusion.
But female friendship had remained a special joy to her, and she looked at Halley Johnson with the hope of finding that trembling within her.
"Where did you move to, when you left?" Halley asked, with a casual note that glossed over the circumstances under which Faith had left Prescott.
"Beaumont, Texas. Then I moved to Austin when I started college, and Dallas afterward."
Halley sighed. "I've never lived anywhere but here, don't guess I ever will. I used to think about traveling, but then Joel and I got married, and the kids came. We have two," she said, brightening. "A boy and a girl. With one of each, it seemed like a good time to stop. How about you?"
"I'm a widow," Faith said, her eyes darkening with the shadow of sadness that she always felt when she thought about Kyle, dying so young and so needlessly. "I married right out of college, and he died in a car wreck within the year. No kids."
"That's rough." There was genuine sympathy in Halley's voice. "I'm so sorry. I can only imagine what it would be like to lose Joel. He drives me crazy sometimes, but he's my rock, always there when I need him." She was silent a moment, then the smile came back to her face. "What brings

you back to Prescott? I can imagine someone leaving Prescott to move to Dallas, but not vice versa."
"It’s home. I wanted to come back."
"Well, I don’t want to be nosy or rude, but I would have thought Prescott would be the last place you’d want to live. After what happened, I mean."
Faith gave her a quick look, but couldn’t see any malice in Halley’s expression, only a certain watchfulness, as if she hadn’t quite made up her mind about Faith.
"It hasn’t been a bowl of cherries," she replied, and decided she could be as frank as the other woman. "I don’t know if you’ve heard or not, but Gray Rouillard won’t like it if he finds out you’ve served me. I gather he’s put out the word to all the merchants that he doesn’t want them doing business with me."
"Oh, I’ve heard," Halley said, and grinned, some of the watchfulness fading. "But I like to make up my own mind about people."
"I don’t want to cause trouble for you."
"You won’t. Gray isn’t vindictive." She paused. "I can see where you might not agree with me. Granted, I wouldn’t want him for an enemy, but he won’t turn mean just because you ate some chicken salad in here."
"Everyone else in town seems to take him seriously."
"He has a lot of influence," Halley agreed.
"But not with you?"
"I didn’t say that. It’s just that I remember you from school. You weren’t like the others. If it had been Jodie, now – she wouldn’t be sitting here waiting for her chicken salad. You’re welcome any time, though."
"Thanks, but let me know if there’s a problem."
"I’m not worried about it." Halley smiled as the waitress set the plate of chicken salad on the table. "If he’d meant to be a hard-ass about it, he’d have said so. One thing about Gray, you don’t have to second-guess him. He says what he means, and means what he says."
Alex Chelette’s secretary was still Andrea Wallice, according to the nameplate on her desk. The woman sitting behind the desk was comfortably fiftyish, her face wearing every one of the years, her gray hair styled in a short, neat bob. Looking at her, trying to subtract a dozen years, Faith still couldn’t imagine her as the type of woman Guy Rouillard would pursue. His taste had run toward the flamboyant, not this tidy woman with the openly curious gaze.

"You look like your mother," Andrea finally said, her head tilting a bit to one side as she studied Faith's face. "A few differences, but for the most part you could be her, especially in your coloring."
"Did you know her?" Faith asked.
"Only by sight." She gestured to the sofa. "Have a seat. Alex hasn't come back from lunch yet."
Just as Faith sat down, the door opened and a slim, good-looking man entered. He was wearing a suit, an oddity in Prescott, unless one happened to be an attorney who had been at the courthouse all morning. He glanced toward Faith and visibly started, then relaxed, and a smile touched his mouth. "You must be Faith. God knows, you couldn't be anyone else, unless Renee discovered the Fountain of Youth."
"That's what I thought," Andrea said, turning to him, and for a moment the expression in her eyes was unguarded. Faith quickly looked down. From what she had just seen, she very much doubted that Andrea had ever been involved with Guy, because she was very much in love with her boss. She wondered if Mr. Chelette knew, and just as quickly decided that he didn't. There was no hint of awareness on his part.
"Come in," he invited, ushering Faith into his office ahead of him, and closing the door. "I know we must seem rude, discussing you that way. I'm sorry. It's just that the resemblance is so pronounced, and yet, on second glance, the differences are obvious."
"Everyone seems to have that reaction when they see me for the first time," she admitted, and smiled at him. It was very easy to smile at Alex Chelette. He was the type of man whom age refined; always slim, he would pare down even more with the passing years. His dark hair had grayed at the sides, and there were lines at the corners of his gray eyes, but he easily looked to be in his mid-forties, rather than his fifties. His scent was light green, as fresh as newly cut grass.
"Sit down, please," he said, and settled into his own chair. "What can I do for you today?"
Faith seated herself on the leather sofa. "Actually, I came on personal reasons, and I realize now I shouldn't have taken up your work time – "
He shook his head, smiling. "It's my pleasure. Now, tell me what's bothering you. Is it Gray? I tried to get him to leave you alone, but he's very protective of his mother and sister, and he doesn't want them upset."

"I understand Gray’s position very well," Faith said dryly. "That isn’t why I’m here."
"Oh?"
"I wanted to ask you some questions about Guy Rouillard. You were his best friend, weren’t you?"
He gave her a faint smile. "I thought so. We grew up together."
Should she tell him that Guy hadn’t, after all, left with Renee? She toyed with the idea, then discarded it. As friendly as he seemed, she couldn’t forget that he was an old family friend of the Rouillards. She had to assume that anything she told him would go straight to Gray.
"I’m curious about him," she finally said. "That night wrecked my family, just as it did Gray’s. What was he like? I know he wasn’t faithful to my mother any more than he was to his wife, so why would he all of a sudden walk away from everything, his family, his business, to be with her?"
"I don’t think you really want me to answer that," he replied wryly. "To put it as politely as I can, Renee was a fascinating woman, at least to men. Physically she was… well, Guy was very responsive to Renee’s sensuality."
"But he was already having an affair with her. There wasn’t any reason for them to leave."
Alex shrugged, a very Gallic gesture. "I’ve never understood it myself."
"Why didn’t he just get a divorce?"
"Again, I don’t have an answer for that. Perhaps because of his religion; Guy wasn’t a regular at mass, but he felt more strongly about religion than you might have expected. Perhaps he thought it would be easier on Noelle if he didn’t divorce her, if he just handed everything over to Gray and left. I simply don’t know."
"Hand everything over to Gray?" Faith repeated. "What do you mean?"
"I’m sorry," he said gently. "I can’t divulge details of my clients’ business dealings."
"No, of course not." Quickly she backtracked. "Do you remember anything else about that summer? Who else Guy was seeing?"
He looked startled. "Why would you want to know?"
"Like I said, I have an interest in the man. Because of him, I haven’t seen my mother since that day. Was he likeable? Did he have any honor, or was he just a tomcat?"
He stared at her for a moment, and pain crept into his eyes. "Guy was the most likeable man in the world," he finally said. "I loved him like a brother.

He was always laughing, teasing, but if I needed him for anything, he was there like a shot. His marriage to Noelle was a disappointment to him, but still I was surprised when he left, because he was so close to Gray and Monica. He was a terrible husband, but a wonderful father." He looked down at his hands. "It's been twelve years," he said softly. "And I still miss him."
"Did he ever call?" she asked. "Or get in touch with his family in any way?"
He shook his head. "Not to my knowledge."
"Who else was he seeing that summer, besides Yolanda Foster?"
Once again, her question startled him. His eyebrows rose, and rebuke was in his voice when he spoke. "None of that matters. As I keep telling Gray, it's in the past; let it go. There was a lot of pain that summer, and keeping it alive doesn't do anyone any good."
"I can't let it go, when no one else in the parish will. No matter how successful I am, or respectable, some people here still think of me as trash." Her voice trembled a little on the last word. She hadn't meant to let her control waver, and she was both embarrassed and irritated that it had. Sometimes, though, the pain leaked through.
Alex must have heard it, because his expression changed, and suddenly he left his chair to come sit beside her and take one of her hands in both of his. "I know it's been difficult for you," he said gently. "They'll change their minds, when they get to know you better. And Gray will eventually relent. As I said, he reacted the way he did because he's so protective of his family, but basically he's a very fair man."
"And ruthless," Faith added.
A rueful smile touched his face. "That, too. But not unkind. Take my word for it. If there's anything I can do to change his mind, I promise you I'll do it."
"Thank you," Faith said. That wasn't why she'd come to see him, but he was too conscientious to divulge personal details about his clients and friends. The visit wasn't a total waste, however, she felt she could safely mark Andrea Wallice off her list.
She took her leave, and drove home pondering the scraps of information she'd gotten that day. If Guy had been murdered, Lowell or Yolanda Foster seemed to be the most likely suspects. She wondered how she could contrive a meeting with either of them. And she wondered where Mr. Pleasant was, and if he was all right.

"I met Faith today," Alex said that night as he and Gray were-going over some papers. He picked up his brandy and keenly eyed the younger man over the rim of the glass. "The resemblance is eerie, at first glance, but by the second look there's no way of mistaking her for Renee. Odd, isn't it, the way Renee was more beautiful, but Faith is more attractive?"

Gray glanced up, wry awareness in his dark eyes as he caught the expression in Alex's gray ones. "Yes, I've noticed how attractive she is, if that's what you're asking. Where did you meet her?" He picked up his own glass, filled with his favorite Scotch, and savored the smoky bite of it on his tongue.

"At my office. She came to ask me about Guy."

Gray almost choked. He set his glass down with a force that made the whisky slosh dangerously close to the rim. "She *what?* What in hell did she want to know about Dad?" The thought of Faith asking anything about his father made him bitterly angry. It was a knee-jerk reaction; for a moment she wasn't *Faith*, the person, but a *Devlin*, with all the connotations elicited by the name. He himself wanted her with a fierce need that both alarmed and disgusted him, even though he knew he was going to ease that need if possible, but he didn't want anything about her touching his family. He didn't want Monica or Noelle exposed to her, and he sure as hell didn't want her asking about his father. Guy was gone. His absence, his betrayal, was a wound that remained perilously close to the surface, and bled at the slightest scratch.

"She wanted to know what he was like, had he ever gotten in touch, if he'd been seeing anyone else that summer."

Furious, Gray half rose from his chair, intending to go to her house right now and have it out with her. Alex stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"She has a right to know," he said mildly. "Or at least to be curious."

"I'll be goddamned if she does!" Gray snapped.

"She hasn't seen her mother since then, either."

Gray froze, then sank back into the chair. Alex was right, damn it. It rankled, but he had to admit the truth. At least he'd been a grown man, if inexperienced in business, when his father had left; Faith had been only fourteen, as helpless and vulnerable as a child. He didn't know anything about her life between then and now, except that she was a widow and now owned a successful travel agency, but he'd bet his last red cent it hadn't been pleasant. Living with Amos Devlin and those two hoodlum boys, as

well as her slut of a sister, couldn’t have been easy. It wouldn’t have been easy before, but at least Renee had been there.
"Let up on her, Gray," Alex said softly. "She deserves better than the reception she’s getting from some people, and part of it’s your fault."
Gray picked up the glass and swirled the whiskey, looking down into the amber depths. "I can’t," he said gruffly. He got up and carried his drink to the window, where he stood staring at his reflection in the glass, and the darkness beyond. He took another sip of fortification. "She has to go, before I do something that really hurts Monica and Mother."
"Such as?" Alex asked, puzzled.
"Let’s just say that, where Faith is concerned, I’m caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock is my family, and the hard place – " he looked around with a sort of angry amusement in his eyes " – is in my pants."
Appalled, Alex stared at him. "My God."
"It must be genetic." That was the only explanation for it, he thought grimly. He had inherited his father’s cock. Put a Devlin woman in front of it, and it got hard. No, not just any Devlin woman; two of them had left him cold. But Faith… Nothing about him was cold if she was anywhere within a country mile.
"You can’t do that to your mother," Alex whispered. "The humiliation would kill her."
"Hell, I know that! That’s why I want Faith to leave, before I do something stupid." He turned to face Alex, that angry amusement still burning in his eyes. "The attraction isn’t all on my side, damn it. It’d be easier if it was. I went to her house the other night to put a proposition to hen If she didn’t want to leave the area, I’d buy a house for her in any town close by, as long as it wasn’t in this parish. That way we could see each other without hurting anyone. There was an old man there, having dinner with her, and I was so jealous, I accused her of having a sugar daddy." He shook his head, and laughed softly at himself. "Can you believe it? The old guy looked as frail as a toothpick, but he was all dressed up like something out of the fifties, and all I could think was that he was trying to get her in bed."
"What old guy?" Alex asked, plainly curious. "Anyone I know?"
"He was from New Orleans. His last name was Pleasant. I was so mad, I don’t remember if she told me his first name. He said he was a business associate."
"Was he?"

Gray shrugged. "Probably. Faith owns a travel agency, and she has a branch in New Orleans."
"She *owns* it?"
"She's done pretty good for herself, hasn't she?" There it was again, that damn little twinge of pride. "She started out in Dallas. I don't know how many branch offices she has, but I have someone gathering information on her. I expect to have a report any day."
"Are you going to try to ruin her business if she doesn't leave?" Alex asked, but less sharply than Gray had expected.
"No. For one thing, I'm not that big of a bastard. For another, if I did, I could kiss my chances with her goodbye." His mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Decide for yourself which reason is the most important."
Alex didn't smile in return. "This is a hell of a situation. If you're bound and determined to have her – "
"I am," Gray said, and tossed back the last of the whiskey.
" – then she can't live here. Noelle would be devastated."
"I'm worried more about Monica than I am Mother."
Alex blinked, as if he hadn't considered Monica. He probably hadn't; all of his attention was focused on Noelle. He knew about Monica's suicide attempt, of course; it hadn't been possible to keep it quiet, not with all the commotion at Dr. Bogarde's office. Monica didn't try to hide the scars, anyway. She was too proud to let herself take the cowardly route of long sleeves or wide bracelets.
"Monica is a lot stronger than she was then," Alex finally said. "But Noelle doesn't have anything to fall back on. I thought at the beginning, and still do, that she should face up to facts and get on with her life, but if she found out you were having an affair with Faith – no. She couldn't stand it. She might try suicide herself."
Gray shook his head, amazed that Alex could have known Noelle all these years and still not realized that she was too self-centered to harm herself. The myopia of love allowed him to see only her cool, perfect, unattainable beauty. It was that romantic streak in him, a strange characteristic for a lawyer.
"She has to go," Alex said regretfully.

Twelve

The fax machine was humming, so Faith didn't hear the car turn in to the driveway. When the knock rattled the front door, she leaned over to look out the window. She couldn't see who was standing on the porch, but she could see the gray Jaguar parked behind her car, and she sighed as she went, coffee cup in hand, into the living room to answer the door. It was barely eight-thirty, too early to have to deal with Gray Rouillard.

The first thing she noticed when she opened the door was that he was in a towering rage.

The only other time she had seen him like this was the day he'd come to the shack to tell them Renee had left, and again that night, when he'd had them thrown out. As she looked up into the cold ruthlessness of those dark eyes, the memory of that night flashed in her mind, the stark images reducing her in an instant to the terrified girl she'd been then. Her blood chilled, and she fell back a step as he came inside, letting the screen door slam behind him. She jumped at the sound. Her eyes, green and unblinking, were fastened on his face as if she didn't dare look away.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked very softly, the velvety sound as chilling as a sword sliding against another blade. He advanced another step, so that he loomed over her, and Faith retreated again. The coffee cup shook in her hand.

For every step he took forward, she took one back, a slow dance that ended when she bumped into the wall, her shoulder blades pressing hard against the Sheetrock as if she could force her way through it. His arms shot out before she could slide sideways, his palms flattening against the wall on either side of her shoulders, imprisoning her within the cage of his arms and body. He leaned down slightly; the top two buttons of his white shirt were open, revealing a wedge of warm olive skin decorated with curly black hair. His pulse throbbed visibly in the hollow at the base of his strong throat, right in front of her eyes. Faith fastened her gaze on that rhythmic movement, desperately seeking to steady herself. She was *not* fourteen. He could *not* throw her out of her own house.

"Well?" he asked, still in that dangerous, purring tone.

His thick wrists were squeezing her shoulders, bared by her sleeveless blouse; his skin was hot against hers. His wide shoulders and broad chest were like a wall in front of her, and his rich, musky male scent made her

nostrils flare in automatic delight. Still clasping the coffee cup, holding it like a shield between them, she swallowed and managed to say, "What are you talking about?"

He leaned closer, so close that his stomach brushed against her fingers. "I'm talking about all those questions you've been asking. Alex told me last night you'd been to his office. Talking to Alex is one thing, he'll keep his mouth shut, but guess who I saw this morning. Ed Morgan." Despite the calmness of his tone, she could see the cold fury flickering in his eyes. If he'd been having a roaring fit, she wouldn't have been half as nervous. In this mood, he was capable of anything, but oddly enough, she didn't fear him physically. No, if Gray harmed her, the damage would be to her emotions.

"I'm only going to tell you once." He said the words very precisely, leaning down even closer, until his nose was almost touching hers. "Don't ask any more questions about my father. Your nosiness will only stir up gossip, and hurt my family again. If that happens, Faith, I *will* run you out of the parish again, by any means necessary. You can take that to the bank. So keep it in mind: I don't want your pretty mouth even shaping my father's name."

Wide green eyes stared into chilly dark ones, only a couple of inches apart. Her chin tilted upward, and her mouth, which he thought was pretty, parted as she deliberately tugged on the tiger's tail, and uttered two words: "Guy Rouillard."

She saw his pupils widen in disbelief, then the chill in his eyes was swallowed by pure fire. Maybe it hadn't been prudent to provoke him, but watching the result was fascinating. He seemed to expand with fury, dark color running into his face, and if his long hair hadn't been pulled back and secured, she rather thought it would have lifted from his head.

She had a split second in which to enjoy the entertainment. Then he moved with the blurring speed she had seen before, his hands leaving the wall to clasp hard around her upper arms, and he gave her a teeth-rattling shake. Her grip loosened on the forgotten cup in her hands, and she felt it slip. With a cry she tried to juggle it, but he was too close, and all she could do was knock the falling cup toward herself, rather than let the steaming liquid burn him. The coffee soaked into her thin skirt, plastering it to her right thigh, and splattered over their feet. She cried out again, this time in pain. The cup hit the floor with a crash, breaking off the handle but otherwise

remaining intact. Gray jumped back, automatically releasing her, and frantically she pulled the wet fabric away from her stinging thigh.
His dark gaze swept down her, and he said, "Shit," in a rough tone. He grabbed her, pulling her against him, and his hands worked briefly at the back of her waist. Her skirt loosened and dropped to her feet. He lifted her out of the circle of fabric, swinging her up in his arms, and dizzily she clutched his shoulders as the room whirled around her.
"What are you doing?" she cried in alarm as he rapidly carried her into the kitchen. She was confused by the shock of pain, and he was moving too fast for her to get her bearings. Beneath all that, she was acutely aware of her bare legs draped over his arm, and that she was dressed in only her panties and blouse.
He hooked his foot around a chair leg and pulled the chair away from the table, then carefully set her in it. Turning to the sink, he pulled off several paper towels, folded them into a pad, and wet them under the cold water. The pad was still dripping when he plopped it over her reddened, stinging thigh. She jumped at the chill. Trickles of water ran down her thigh, into the seat of the chair, and soaked into her panties.
"I forgot about the coffee," he muttered. Truth to tell, he hadn’t even noticed it until he’d seen it spilling down her leg. "I’m sorry, Faith. Do you have any tea?" Before she could answer, he was already opening the refrigerator door, and taking out the pitcher of tea that was almost de rigueur in southern kitchens.
He opened and closed cabinet drawers until he found her clean towels. Taking one out, he dropped it into the pitcher of tea, then removed it and carefully squeezed out most of the excess liquid. She watched in bemusement as he took away the pad of paper towels, tossing it into the sink with a sodden plop, and replaced it with the tea-soaked towel. If the water had been cold, the tea was icy. Faith drew in a hissing breath as it, too, ran down her leg to pool beneath her bottom.
"Does it hurt?" Gray asked, going down on his knee beside the chair to smooth the towel over her thigh. His voice was tight with anxiety.
"No," she said bluntly. "It’s cold, and you’re soaking my rear end."
His face was level with hers. At her words, she saw the worry leave his eyes, and the tension ease from his shoulders. He grasped the back of the chair with his left hand, and with wry, faint humor asked, "Did I overreact?"
She pursed her lips. "A tad."

"Your thigh is red. I know you’re burned."
"Only a little. It stings a bit, is all. I doubt it’ll blister." She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to hide the laughter she could feel bubbling in her chest. "I appreciate your concern, but it certainly didn’t warrant having half my clothes stripped off."
He looked down at her bare legs, and the white cotton underwear barely visible beneath the hem of her blouse. A tremor ran through him. He put his right hand on her uninjured thigh, smoothing his palm over the firm, cool resilience of her flesh, entranced by the silky texture. "I’ve wanted to get your panties wet for a long time," he murmured. "But not with tea."
Her laughter disappeared as if it had never existed. Tension stretched between them, almost palpable in its thickness. Her insides clenched at his words, heat pooling in her loins, her breasts tightening. She felt the dampening of desire, and the admission *You have* trembled on her lips. She bit it back, knowing that voicing the telltale response would cross a boundary over which she didn’t dare pass. Sexual tension emanated from him like a force field, hot and urgent. It would take only that confession, and he would be on her.
She ached with the need to touch him, to press herself against that big, steely body and open her own body to him. Only the instinct for self-preservation kept her silent, and still.
He leaned imperceptibly closer, inhaling her spicy sweet scent. His blood throbbed through his veins, pulsing, swelling. Silently they watched each other, like two adversaries coming face-to-face in a dusty street. He wanted to pull down her panties and bury his face in her lap, the impulse so strong that he shuddered with the effort of resisting it, and wondered what she would do if he gave in. Would she be frightened, would she push him away… or would her legs fall open, and her hands clench in his hair?
His hand flexed on her thigh, his fingers pressing into the silky flesh that had warmed beneath his touch. He saw her pupils dilate, then her lashes droop heavily as she drew in a deep, slow breath that made him acutely aware of her breasts. He shifted his hand a little, and rubbed his thumb back and forth, each sweep moving higher, probing deeper into the cleft of her clenched thighs. He wanted to touch her.
He forgot about Monica, about Guy, about everything but the slow, hot movement of his thumb, closer and closer to the exquisitely tender flesh between her legs, so flimsily protected by the thin layer of cotton. He would

slide his thumb under the elastic of the leg opening, and find the furrow of her tightly closed folds. Then he would drag his thumb upward, opening her as he went, until he found the tiny bud at the top of her sex.
If she let him touch her, she'd be his. He'd have her then.
His thumb brushed elastic. And she moved, her hand clamping down over his and tugging it away from her thigh. "No," she whispered.
Frustration roared through him like a brush fire. A sound very much like a growl rumbled in his throat as physical instincts fought for supremacy over thought. His brain won, but barely. He was sweating, shaking with the need to have her. His erection strained painfully against the restriction of his pants.
"No," she said again, as if the original refusal needed reinforcing, and perhaps it did.
Slowly he turned his hand, so that his fingers meshed with hers. "Then hold my hand for a minute."
She did, clinging tightly to him, feeling his fingers twitch and flex as if reaching for something. His other hand was clamped around the slat of the chairback, his knuckles white from the pressure.
After a moment of unknown duration, time suspended as their gazes locked and lust shimmered between them, the terrible tension in him began to fade. He winced and shifted position, stretching his leg out. He freed his hand to reach down and make an adjustment, the furrow between his brows smoothing out as he made himself more comfortable.
She cleared her throat, uncertain what to say, if anything.
He rose stiffly to his feet. The thick ridge in his pants was unmistakable, but he was in control now. He plucked the hand towel from its rack and draped it over her thighs, removing temptation from sight, if not proximity.
After a minute he said in a quiet voice, "Are you certain you're not hurt?"
"Yes." She too spoke quietly, as if a too loud noise would shatter their control and send them tumbling over the precipice she had barely managed to avoid. The hunger hadn't been one-sided. "It's a minor burn. I probably won't even feel it tomorrow." The stinging had completely vanished, soothed away by the cold, wet tea.
"All right." He looked down at her, and lifted his hand as if he would smooth her hair, but then let it fall back to his side. He couldn't safely allow himself to touch her just yet. "Now, tell me why you've been asking all those questions about Dad."

She looked up at him, the dark fire of her hair spilling down her back. She wanted to tell him what she suspected, that his father was dead, but found that the words stuck in her throat. She couldn’t do it. She had to believe he knew nothing about it, that he had nothing to do with his father’s death, because she loved him and it would break her heart otherwise. And because she loved him, she couldn’t bring herself to hurt him. She had deliberately tilted the falling coffee cup towards herself to keep him from suffering a minor scald; how could she now tell him that the father he loved was probably dead, murdered?

So instead she told him what was both the truth in substance and a lie in intent, murmuring, "He was my past, too. I can barely remember when he wasn’t there, but I never really knew him. He was always kind when he saw me, which wasn’t often, but then I lost my mother because of him. Do you think I’m not curious about the kind of person he was? That I shouldn’t try to fill in the gaps, to make sense of what happened?"

"Good luck," he growled. "I thought I knew him better than anyone else on earth, and I still can’t make sense of it." He paused. "If you have any more questions about him, ask *me*, because I meant what I said. I don’t want to get rough with you, Faith, but I’ll do what’s necessary to protect my family. Remember that."

Since he’d offered… But, no, it was hardly the time to prolong this encounter by firing questions at him, with her sitting there half-naked, and Gray a sexual powder keg, primed and ready to explode. So she merely looked at him in silence, and after a moment his mouth quirked with a smile. "I’m not hearing any promises, am I? Think about it, baby. Don’t make it any tougher on yourself than it has to be. Just keep quiet, and behave yourself."

"Like a good little girl?"

"Like a smart woman," he corrected. Again his hand moved toward her, and again the movement was aborted. She could sense that he wanted to stay, wanted to continue what he had begun, but she had refused him and he was forcing himself to accept her decision – for now. Every time they met, the battle would be joined again, and the temptation to give in would be just that much stronger for having been denied.

"I’m going to go," he said.

"All right."

He didn’t move. Then: "I don’t want to."

"Do it anyway."
He chuckled. "You’re a hard woman, Faith Devlin."
"Hardy."
"I didn’t know him. He isn’t real to me. Did you love him?"
"Yes." But not the way I love you. Never like that.
His dark eyes glittered, and this time he did touch her, his hand cupping her cheek. "You’ll always be a Devlin to me, with that red hair and your witch’s eyes." He bent, and moved his mouth warmly against hers in a brief kiss. Then he was gone, and when the door closed behind him, Faith sagged back in the chair with relief.
She felt as if a storm had entered the room and tossed her around. Her heart was still pounding, and her muscles felt like spaghetti noodles. Those few moments had been among the most erotic of her life, and all he had done was touch her leg. If he had actually made love to her, she would have totally lost control of herself. She was frightened by the intensity of the desire he could arouse with a look, a brief touch, even the delicious muskiness of his male scent.
You’ll always be a Devlin to me.
Not the greatest of recommendations. She could only suppose that he meant he’d never be able to forget her background, her heritage, that nothing she did would ever change his mind about her.
And I’ll always love you, she whispered to him in her mind. *Always.*
Just a touch on her leg, and he’d been almost ready to come, Gray thought wryly. God, if he ever actually got inside her, his heart would probably explode from the strain.
His hands were shaking as he drove, a common reaction if he spent more than a minute in Faith’s company. It would be easier if she didn’t respond to him the way she did; she might hold herself still, she might be able to say no, but that hot, languorous look was still in her eyes. He knew all the signs. Her breathing deepened, her breasts rising round and full, her nipples peaking. Though he hadn’t kissed her until that light peck on the lips as he was leaving, because he couldn’t resist the urge any longer, her mouth had been red and swollen. A delicate flush had glowed under her translucent skin.
He wanted her. He had to make her leave. He wanted her. The opposing needs were driving him crazy.

She hadn’t agreed to stop asking questions. She hadn’t argued with him, but he was beginning to realize that her silence masked a streak of stubbornness as wide as the Grand Canyon. She might not fight, but she definitely resisted. As a girl, Faith had too often been beaten down by life, when she had been helpless to make her own decisions. Now that she could decide her own course, she let very little sway her from it. That single-mindedness was probably the main reason why, at the young age of twenty-six, she owned her own business.

Given that, it wasn’t likely he would be able to convince her to leave. And since he sure as hell couldn’t trust his own good sense to keep him away from her, he foresaw some rocky days ahead.

Monica’s hands were shaking as she opened the door to Alex’s office and smiled at Andrea. She managed to keep her voice steady and cheerful, though, as she said, "I hope he’s in. I was in town, and thought of something I wanted to ask him."

"It’s your lucky day," Andrea said, smiling. She had known Monica since babyhood. "He came in about five minutes ago. He’s washing up, but he’ll be out in a minute. Go on in and have a seat."

Washing up, of course, was a polite way of saying he was in the bathroom. It was what Mama would say, Monica thought, if she alluded to a bathroom at all. In thirty-two years, she couldn’t remember her mother in any way acknowledging the real function of a toilet. Physical reality had to be hidden if possible, and ignored if not. Try as she might, Monica couldn’t imagine her mother having sex, though she and Gray were proof that it had happened at least twice. And as for visiting an obstetrician, and the indignity of having a baby – the wonder was that Mama hadn’t locked Daddy out of the bedroom after Gray was born, rather than go through that again.

Monica avoided the leather sofa and walked over to the window, to look out at the courthouse square. The fresh blooms of spring were rapidly giving way to the lush, heavy foliage of full summer. Time moved relentlessly onward, the earth and plants going through their cycles oblivious to the puny humans who were so caught up in their own grandeur that they thought they affected everything.

Alex entered the room, smiling as he saw her. "What brings you here today?" He’d had dinner with them the night before, so any business would have been discussed then.

Monica looked at that lean, good-looking face, the kind gray eyes, and her throat went dry. She had been trying for a week to work up enough courage to talk to him. She had actually made it as far as his office, but now her voice had failed her.

He frowned at the misery in her dark eyes. "What is it, dear?" he asked softly, closing the door and coming over to take her hand.

She sucked in a deep breath. Sometimes she thought she was crazy, that those times with Alex existed only in her imagination. There was never any hint of it in his eyes, or his manner, when they were together during normal times. He was just Alex, as he had always been, a sturdy shoulder to lean on, quietly stepping in to take on as much of the weight as he could, until she and Gray had been able to manage. It really was as if those furtive moments existed between two other people, between Daddy and Mama, coming together in borrowed flesh.

This was *Alex*, she reminded herself. He wouldn't leave. His love and support didn't depend on whether or not she slept with him. She had been a convenience for him, that was all, an outlet for his pent-up emotions.

That was what logic told her. Emotionally, however, she was terrified. One father had already left her, his love for her not strong enough to hold him against the lure of screwing Renee Devlin. She couldn't bear it if she lost Alex, too.

But then there was Michael. Sweet, sexy Michael. If she didn't seize her chance now, she might lose *him* forever, and of the choice between the two men, there was no choice at all. Michael was her heart, the very blood moving through her body.

"Monica?" Alex prodded, gray eyes darkening with worry.

She gulped. She had to tell him. She closed her eyes and blurted it out. "I'm going to marry Michael McFane."

There was silence for a moment, and she squeezed her eyes tighter, waiting with dread. But the seconds ticked past, and still Alex didn't say anything, and finally the stress became so acute that she couldn't stand it any longer and opened her eyes.

He was smiling at her, fond exasperation on his face. "Congratulations," he said, then chuckled. "What did you expect me to say?"

Stunned, she stared at him. "I – I don't know."

"I'm happy for you, dear. Neither you nor Gray have shown any inclination to get married, and I've worried about that. The sheriff is a good, steady

man."
She wet her lips. "Mama won’t like it."
He paused, considering that for a moment. "Probably not, but don’t let that stop you. You deserve happiness, Monica."
"I don’t want to upset her."
"There are some things she needs to face, and some things she shouldn’t have to. In this case, marry Michael, and be as happy as possible. Believe me, this won’t upset her half as much as hearing about Faith Devlin."
Faith Devlin? Monica blinked. "What about her?" Since Mama already knew the woman had moved back to Pres-cott, Alex’s statement didn’t make sense.
"Gray hasn’t told you?" He seemed surprised.
"Evidently not. Told me what?"
He sighed. "She’s been asking questions around town – about Guy. Personal questions. If she isn’t stopped, she’ll stir everything up again, and that will hurt Noelle far more than your marriage."
Monica felt as if she’d been slapped. Faith Devlin was asking around town about her father? The very thought outraged her. Wasn’t it enough that her slut of a mother had taken her daddy away, and she’d never seen him again? Her face flushed with anger. "What sort of questions has she been asking? My God, what business is it of hers?"
"Personal questions, what sort of person he was, things like that. She came here yesterday, because she’d heard I was Guy’s best friend. Talking to me is one thing, but Gray found out this morning that she’d been pestering Ed Morgan with questions, too."
"She’s been asking *Ed Morgan* about Daddy?" Monica cried. "The man’s the biggest gossip in town!"
"Gray took care of it," Alex said soothingly, and patted her hand. "You know Gray. He had Ed stuttering and back-stepping within ten seconds."
Gray in a temper *was* a fearsome sight, with those dark eyes turning so cold and deadly. She couldn’t imagine Ed Morgan withstanding him for even ten seconds. The notion entertained her for a brief moment, but then was pushed aside by her indignation at Faith Devlin’s gall.
"I understand her curiosity," Alex said, "but as I told Gray, it could be disastrous for your mother to find out."
"Well, / don’t understand her curiosity!" Monica cried. God, it took so little to bring it all back, the sense of loss, and of being lost, and the suffocating

pain. Hatred swelled within her. She pulled her hand free, and turned away.
"Gray shut up Ed Morgan, but what's he doing about *her?"*
"I don't know." He shook his head. "I know you don't agree, but when she first moved back, I was all for leaving her alone. What happened wasn't her fault, and she deserves the right to live where she wants. That was something Noelle should have faced, and made the best of. This is different. This is deliberate, and it's something that is her fault."
"Gray will take care of it," Monica said. "He has to."
"I don't know if he can."
"Of course he can! There are a lot of things he could do."
"Then let me put it another way. I don't think he can be that drastic with Faith, considering how he feels about her. Wake up, Monica!" he admonished. "Pay attention to your brother. He's attracted to her. Nothing about this is easy for him."
Monica felt the blood drain out of her face, leaving it stiff. Gray was… *attracted to* that woman? No. God couldn't be that cruel. He wouldn't make her live through that nightmare again.
Unable to say anything else, she warded off Alex with an outstretched hand, unable to cope with the sympathy she could see in his eyes. Hurriedly she left his office, and it wasn't until she reached the street that she realized she hadn't told him she couldn't be with him anymore.
It would kill Mama if Gray took up with Renee Devlin's daughter. The gossip would be so vicious, she would never be able to lift her head again.
Monica gave a bitter little laugh. And to think she'd been worried what Mama would think about Michael McFane!

Thirteen

Mr. Pleasant's office was located on the top floor of a two-story building. Faith climbed the stairs, hoping against hope that she would find him there, that his telephone had been out of service, that he would be all right. A malfunctioning telephone wasn't much of a possibility, because if he hadn't been able to call out, he would have known about it and simply gone to another phone. Surely, too, he would have noticed if there were no incoming calls. Maybe he'd taken another case, and forgotten about her. She doubted Francis P. Pleasant ever forgot anything.

His office was the first door on the left. The upper half of the door was glass, but the interior blinds had been closed, preventing her from seeing inside. The day she had met him, the blinds had been open. She tried to open the door and found it locked. Not really expecting a response, she knocked, and put her ear against the glass. The room beyond was silent. There was a mail slot in the door. Faith pushed the little flap open, and angled her head to look inside. Her view was extremely limited, but she could see the mail, quite a lot of it, scattered across the floor.

He wasn't here, and the amount of his mail indicated that he hadn't been here in several days.

Growing more worried by the minute, Faith walked down the hall to the next door. According to the lettering on the door, she was at the law office of Houston H. Manges. She could hear the clatter of a typewriter and voices, so she opened the door and entered.

Houston H. Manges's environs were small and cramped, with file cabinets crammed into every available space. She was in the reception area, populated by a tiny white-haired woman and three rubber plants, one of which had reached gargantuan size. The room beyond, which she could see through the open door, was about the same size, with floor-to-ceiling books. A heavyset man lounged behind a battered desk, and he was talking to a client who sat in one of the two cracked imitation leather chairs positioned in front of the desk. All that was visible of the client was the back of his head.

The tiny woman looked up and smiled in question, but made no move to close the door and give her employer and his client any privacy. Faith gave a mental shrug and approached.

"I’m a client of Mr. Pleasant, next door," she said. "I’ve been trying to reach him for several days and can’t seem to locate him. Do you happen to have any idea where he is?"
"Why, no," the tiny woman said. "He left about a week ago to go to this little town up close to Mississippi, I don’t remember the name. Perkins, something like that. I assumed he was still there."
"No, he left there the next day. He has a bad heart, and I’m worried about him."
"Oh, dear." The small face took on a distressed look. "I never thought about his heart. I knew, of course. His wife, Virginia – we used to have lunch together, it was so sad when she died – told me about his trouble. It was really bad, she said. I never thought to check on him." She reached immediately for the phone index, and flipped through it until she came to the *Ps*. "I’ll try his home phone. It’s unlisted, you know. He didn’t like business intruding on his private life."
Faith knew. She had called information, trying to get the number. It was her lack of success that had spurred her to drive down and try to find him.
After a minute the little lady hung up the phone. "There’s no answer. Oh, dear. I *am* worried now. It isn’t like Francis not to let someone know where he is."
"I’m going to call all the hospitals," Faith said decisively. "May I borrow your telephone?"
"Of course, honey. We have two lines, so people will still be able to get through. If a call comes in, though, I’ll need you to hang up so I can answer it."
Thanking God for southern hospitality, Faith accepted the New Orleans directory and flipped to the listing of hospitals. There were more than she had expected. Starting at the top, she began dialing.
Thirty minutes and three interruptions for incoming calls later, she hung up in defeat. Mr. Pleasant wasn’t a patient in any of the local hospitals. If he had taken ill while driving back from Prescott, he could be in a hospital somewhere else, but where?
Or something could have happened to him. It was a possibility she didn’t want to consider, but one she had to accept. If Guy Rouillard had been murdered, and Mr. Pleasant had been asking questions that made someone uncomfortable… She felt sick at the thought. If anything had happened to that sweet old man, it would be her fault for involving him. It wasn’t as if

she’d had anything to go on, other than Renee’s statement that Guy hadn’t been with her at all, that she hadn’t seen him since that night twelve years ago.

Most people wouldn’t have suspected murder. Most people wouldn’t now be afraid that poor Mr. Pleasant had somehow run afoul of the same person who had killed Guy. But neither had most people been dragged out of their home in the middle of the night and thrown into the dirt; until Renee and Guy had disappeared, Faith’s life had been predictable, if a bit grim. But that night her trust in the comforting ordinariness of life had been shattered, and she had never regained that sense of security, of obliviousness to things that just didn’t happen to normal people. It was as if a curtain had been torn aside, and after that night she was acutely aware of all the dangers and what-ifs. Bad things were not only possible; in her experience, there was a damn good chance they would happen. She had held Scottie’s hand as he died, she had identified Kyle’s body in a morgue… Yes, bad things happened.

"What are you going to do?" the little secretary asked, automatically accepting that Faith would do *something.*

"File a missing person’s report," Faith said, because it was the only thing she could think to do. Mr. Pleasant had disappeared as suddenly and thoroughly as Guy Rouillard had; he had been asking questions about Guy. Coincidence? Not likely, but neither did she have any evidence that would warrant a criminal investigation. The best she could do was file a missing person’s report. At least that would trigger an investigation of some sort.

She asked directions to police headquarters, and managed to find it with only two wrong turns. A desk sergeant directed her to the proper office, and soon she was seated in a straight-back chair reciting what information she had to a tired detective in a tired suit, who nevertheless managed to seem interested.

"You called the motel where he’d been staying, and he’d checked out?" Detective Ambrose asked, his world-weary eyes warming a bit when he looked at her.

"The clerk didn’t actually see Mr. Pleasant. He said the key was left on the nightstand, and Mr. Pleasant’s things were gone."

"Had the room been paid for in advance?"

Faith nodded.

"Nothing unusual in that, then. Let’s see. No one has seen him since he left Prescott, the mail is piling up at his office, there’s no answer at his home, and he has a bum ticker." The detective shook his head. "I’ll go by his house and see what I can find, but…" He hesitated, sympathy in his expression. But probably the old guy’s heart failed, was what he was thinking. Faith hunched her shoulders in misery. She would hate it if Mr. Pleasant had died, and she hadn’t been there to hold his hand or even attend his funeral. She had checked only the current admissions at the hospitals, not whether he’d been a patient any time in the past week. But he’d known about his heart, had been prepared, had even been waiting to join his wife; she would grieve, but there would be a sense of lightness if he’d gone that way. The real nightmare would be if the detective couldn’t find him. Then she would fear the worst, and have no way of knowing for certain.

She extracted a business card from her purse and handed it across the desk. "Please call me if you find anything," she said. "I didn’t know him very well, but I liked him a lot. He was a sweet old man." To her horror, she realized she was referring to him in the past tense, and flinched.

The detective took the card, and rubbed his fingers along the thin edges. "There’s something I’d like to know, Mrs. Hardy. What was he investigating for you?"

She’d known he would ask, and told him the truth. "Twelve years ago, my mother ran away with her lover. I wanted Mr. Pleasant to find them, if he could."

"And did he?"

She shook her head. "He hadn’t the last time I talked to him."

"Which was…?"

"I had dinner with him, the night before he left the motel."

"Did anyone see him after that?"

"I don’t know." It was easy to see the direction of this line of questioning. At least the detective was taking her seriously.

"Did he seem all right when he left?"

"He seemed fine. I had some unexpected company, and Mr. Pleasant left right after dinner."

"So you weren’t the only one to see him?"

She gave him a faint smile. "No."

"Who was your visitor?"

"A neighbor, Gray Rouillard. He came to see about buying my house." It was amazing how far the bare facts could be from what had really happened. She was becoming an expert at exposing the tip while keeping the rest of the iceberg of truth submerged.
"Gray Rouillard," Detective Ambrose repeated, tired eyes lighting with recognition. "Would that be the same Rouillard who played football for LSU, oh, ten or so years ago?"
"Almost thirteen years," she said. "Yes, he's the same man."
"The Rouillards are big stuff in this part of the state. Well, well. So you're selling your house to him?"
"No. He asked to buy it, but I don't want to sell."
"Are you on good terms with him?"
"Not exactly."
"Oh." He seemed disappointed. Faith stared at him a moment, then her mouth curved in a tiny smile. This was the South, after all. Pro football had made some inroads, but college football still reigned supreme.
"No, I don't have any influence with him to get tickets to the games," she said.
He shrugged, and a responding smile twitched his lips. "It was worth a try." He clicked his pen and rose to his feet, indicating that he had no more questions to ask. "I'll see what I can find out about Mr. Pleasant. Will you be in town awhile longer, or are you going home now?"
"I'm going home. My only reason for driving down was to see if I could find him." Gratefully she stood up from the straight-back chair, and refrained from stretching.
He put his hand on her arm, the touch light. "You know my first check will be of the obituaries," he said gently.
Faith bit her lip, and nodded.
His hand made two brief pats. "I'll let you know."
She cried during most of the drive back to Prescott. She had cried very little in the past twelve years, some tears shed for Kyle and more for Scottie, but the thought of losing Mr. Pleasant made her ache inside. She hadn't had much room for optimism in her life, and she expected the worst.
Detective Ambrose was on the ball. When she checked the answering machine immediately on arriving home, there was a message from him: "I've checked Mr. Pleasant's residence, and there's no sign of him. The mail has piled up there, too, and the neighbors haven't seen him." A pause. "He

hasn’t been listed in the obits, either. I’ll keep checking, and get back to you."

He wasn’t there. The thought echoed around and around in her mind. No one had seen him since he’d left Prescott. Assuming he had ever left.

Pure rage began to build, and push aside the grief. Her mother and Guy had created a tangle, twelve years ago, that was still wreaking destruction. Faith had to absolve Renee of any involvement in Mr. Pleasant’s disappearance, since her mother hadn’t known the man existed, but she was still part and parcel of the root cause.

For Faith, deed followed closely on the heels of thought. Furiously she picked up the telephone and dialed her grandmother’s number.

She was thwarted, however, by the endless ringing on the other end. No one was home.

She called four more times before she got an answer, and her grandmother’s cracked voice called Renee to the phone. "Who is it?" she heard Renee ask in the background. "That girl of yourn, the youngest one."

"I don’t want to talk to her. Tell her I’m not here." Faith’s hand tightened on the receiver, and her eyes ‘narrowed. She heard her grandmother fumbling with the phone again. She didn’t wait for the parroted excuse. "Tell Mama that if she doesn’t talk to me, I’m going to the sheriff." It was a bluff, at least at this point, but a calculated one. Renee’s response to it would tell her a lot. If her mother didn’t have anything to hide, the bluff wouldn’t work. If she did –

There was a pause as the message was relayed, then more fumbling with the telephone. "What on earth are you talkin’ about, Faithie? What’s the sheriff got to do with anything?" The tone was too bright, too cheerful. "I’m talking about Guy Rouillard. Mama – " "Would you quit harping about Guy Rouillard? I told you, I ain’t seen him."

Faith suppressed the nausea roiling in her stomach, and made her voice more soothing. "I know, Mama. I believe you. But I think something happened to him that night, after you left." Don’t let Mama think she was suspected of anything, or she’d close up tighter than a miser’s purse. "I don’t know nothing about that, and if you’re as smart as you think you are, missy, you’ll stop pokin’ your nose into other folks’ business."

"Where did you meet him that night, Mama?" Faith asked, ignoring the motherly advice.

"I don’t know why you’re so worried about him," Renee said sullenly. "If he’d done what he should, I’d’ve been taken care of. You kids, too," she added as an afterthought. "But he kept puttin’ it off, waiting until Gray was out of school – well, it don’t make no difference now."
"Did you go to the motel? Or did you meet him somewhere else?"
Renee drew in a seething breath. "You’re like a bulldog when you get something on your mind, did you know that? You always were the most stubborn of my kids, so bound and determined to have your way that you’d do what you wanted, even knowin’ your Pa would slap you for it. We met at the summerhouse, where we usually went, if you just have to know! Go nosing around there, and you’ll find out in a hurry that Gray ain’t nearly as easygoin’ as Guy was!"
Faith winced as Renee slammed down the phone, then drew a deep, shaky breath as she replaced her own receiver. Whatever had happened that night, Renee knew about it. Only her own self-interest could stir her to do something she didn’t want to do, so she had a reason for not wanting Faith to talk to the sheriff. Getting her to admit it, however, would take some doing.
It had to be the summerhouse, of course, Faith thought with resignation. Why couldn’t Guy and Renee have rendezvoused at a motel, in keeping with the American tradition? Faith’s memories of the summerhouse were bittersweet, like everything else connected with Gray Rouillard. She didn’t want to see it again, for doing so would remind her too vividly of the child she had been, of the long hours she had spent lurking at the edge of the woods, hoping for a glimpse of Gray. She had lain on her belly in the pine needles and contentedly watched him and his friends swimming in the lake, listened to their boisterous Shouts of laughter, and woven fancy daydreams of one day joining in their fun. Silly dreams. Silly child.
There, too, she had watched Gray making love to Lindsey Partain. Her stomach tightened now as she thought of it, and her hands curled with an impotent mixture of anger and jealousy. At the time, she had merely thought how beautiful he was. Now, however, she was a woman, with a woman’s needs and desires, and she didn’t want even to think of him making love to another woman, much less see it.
That had been fifteen long years ago, but she could still call up his image in her mind as if it had been yesterday. She could hear his deep, smoky voice

murmuring French love words and husky reassurances, see his powerful young body moving between Lindsey's spread legs.

Damn him. Why had he kissed her, that day in New Orleans? It was one thing to dream of his kisses, and another to know exactly how he tasted, how soft his lips were, how it felt to be in his arms and feel his erection thrusting insistently against her stomach. It was unfair of him to feed her hunger, and then try to use it against her. But then, everything about Gray was unfair. Why couldn't bis hair have thinned over the years, rather than remaining that thick, vibrant mane? Why couldn't he have put on weight, developed a beer belly and worn his pants slung low under it, rather than honing down to such lean muscularity, even more finely tuned than during his football days? And even if he hadn't changed, why couldn't *she* have, altering enough so that he no longer affected her so violently, or her heart would beat normally in his presence?

Instead, in that respect, she was still the adoring girl who had spent hours, weeks, *months* of her childhood lying on her belly in the woods, her eyes straining for a glimpse of her hero. Not even finding out that her hero could be a ruthless bastard when he wanted had been able to shake that painful fixation.

She didn't want to go back to the summerhouse, to the scene of her youthful foolishness. What could she possibly find there, after twelve years? Nothing.

But no one else had looked at it with her eyes. No one had suspected that Guy Rouillard might have spent the last hours of his life there.

Faith growled at herself. She was tired and hungry, after the long drive to New Orleans and back, as well as exhausted by worry over Mr. Pleasant. She didn't want to go to the summerhouse, but she had just given herself a convincing argument on why it was necessary. And if she was going, she should do it now, while the afternoon sun was still strong.

She grabbed her keys and stalked out of the house.

The best way to get there, she supposed, was the way she had gone when she'd been eleven. There was a road from the Rouillard house to the lake, but she could hardly take that route. From her younger days of roaming and spying, however, she knew the Rouillard land as well as she knew her own face. She drove to a secluded spot close to the old shack where she had grown up, but when she reached the last curve before the shack would come into view, she stopped the car and sat for a moment, hands gripping the

steering wheel. She couldn't bring herself to drive around the curve. The shack had probably fallen in by now, but that wouldn't ease her memories. She didn't want to see it, didn't want to relive the memories of that night. Pain was a lump in the middle of her chest, obstructing her breathing, making her eyes burn. She didn't cry. She had cried for Mr. Pleasant, for Scottie, for Kyle. She hadn't cried for herself since the night Renee had left.
Well, delaying wouldn't accomplish anything except putting *off* dinner, and she was already starving. She got out of the car and locked the doors, and dropped the keys into her skirt pocket. Brush grew thickly along the sides of the road, now little more than a track as the vegetation gradually reclaimed the land. She had to pick her way around some briar bushes, but once into the woods, it was fairly easy to walk. She picked up a stick, in case she came across a snake, but she wasn't at all afraid. She had grown up in these woods, played in them, hidden in them when Amos had been drunk and slinging his fists at anyone who got in his way.
The familiar scents washed over her, fresh and powerful with spring, and she stopped for a moment to absorb them. Her eyes closed so she could concentrate. There was the rich brown scent of the earth, the fresh verdant of leaves, the spicy golden scent of pine sap. She inhaled that last with a little shiver of recognition. Gray's scent contained a hint of that golden spice. She would love to have him naked and at her disposal, so she could explore all the shadings of his scent. She would absolutely wallow on him, drunk with delight –
Her eyes popped open. The telltale wanning of her body told her where that particular fantasy had been going. It was coming back here that had done it; in her mind, the smells of the forest were inextricably linked with Gray: the hope of seeing him, the fizzing joy of seeing him.
Resolutely she walked on. If she didn't get him out of her mind, she'd find herself lying on her stomach in the pine needles at the edge of the woods, completely reverted to childhood.
The walk to the lake wasn't a long one, about twenty minutes. The forest had changed, of course; time didn't stand still with trees any more than it did with people. She had to pick her way around obstacles that hadn't been there before, and old landmarks were missing, but still she knew her way with the accuracy of a homing pigeon.
She approached the summerhouse from the angle she always had, from the back and right side. From there she could see the dock, and a corner of the

boathouse. Once she had prayed to see a Corvette parked in front, but now she was just as glad not to see a Jaguar there. It would have been too ironic for Gray to appear. Thank God he had business concerns now, and didn't have the luxury of spending long, lazy days swimming and fishing.

Time had laid its hand on the summerhouse, too. It wasn't dilapidated, Gray had kept it up, but an air of disuse had fallen over it. Things that had regular human use wore a certain sheen of accomplishment, a sheen that the summerhouse no longer possessed. There was a subtle reverse of order. Before, the grass had always been neatly manicured, and though the yard wasn't overgrown with weeds now, it still showed a certain roughness that said it had been over a week since the grass had been cut. On the other hand, the summerhouse had always been littered with the flotsam of human habitation, and now it was *too* neat, without the activity that had kept it cluttered and alive.

She went up the back steps, the same steps where she had crouched to listen to Gray making love to Lindsey Partain. The screen door to the porch wasn't latched, and creaked a little as she opened it. The sound made her smile, so woven was it into the days of her childhood.

For all the difficulties, she hadn't had a horrible childhood. Much of it had been downright enjoyable, rich with fantasy, especially the long hours spent exploring the woods. She had waded in creeks, caught crawdads with her bare hands, marveled at the delicate tracery of a leaf held up to the sun. She had never had a bicycle, but she'd had fresh air and blue skies, the anticipation of turning over a rotting log to see how many insects and worms it hid. She had eaten wild berries straight off the bush, found the occasional arrowhead, and painstakingly constructed her own bow and arrow from a green limb, old fishing line, and sharpened sticks. The joys of all those things had created a reserve of strength for her to draw on when times were bad.

The boards of the porch creaked beneath her feet as she crossed to the back door. In the old days, there had been several rocking chairs scattered about the porch, for the enjoyment of fine summer nights. All swimming and fishing paraphernalia was supposed to have been kept in the boathouse, but somehow bits of it had always been lying about on the porch: an inner tube that needed patching, a fishing rod, an assortment of lures, hooks, and floats. Now, however, the porch was empty, no longer a place for rowdy teenagers and rendezvousing adults.

She walked to the window where she had watched Gray and Lindsey making love; the room was empty now, the hardwood floors bare and coated with a light layer of dust. She stood for a moment, remembering that long-ago summer day, gilded with the magic of childhood.

Turning away, she tried the back door, and was surprised when the knob twisted easily in her hand. She had never been inside the summerhouse. The closest she had ever been was on the porch, that one time. She stepped into the kitchen, looking around with interest. Once there had been a refrigerator and stove, for empty spaces and the electrical connections marked where they had stood. She opened the cabinet doors and drawers, but they were all empty. Each sound echoed through the bare rooms.

Everything was clean enough, without the smell of mice, though it had obviously been a couple of weeks since the last cleaning. As she wandered into the other rooms, she saw that none of the light fixtures sported so much as a single light bulb. There was a small closet in each of the two bedrooms, and she looked in both of them. Nothing, not even a single clothes hanger. The summerhouse was completely empty.

Which one of the bedrooms had Renee and Guy used? It didn't matter; there was nothing to be found here, no interesting nooks or crannies where a body could have been hidden. There was absolutely nothing suspicious about the house. Any evidence had long since been swept away, mopped up, or painted over. She wondered that there wasn't any sign of vagrants, considering the house was unlocked, but since it was in the middle of Rouillard land, she supposed there weren't many passersby.

There was still the boathouse to check, though she didn't really expect to find anything. She had come only to satisfy herself that she had done everything possible to find out what had happened to Guy, and Mr. Pleasant. Leaving by the front door, she walked down to the dock. Both the dock and boathouse were set at an angle to the house, slightly to the left, positioned on the curve of a small slough. Since she had been here last, twelve years ago, vegetation had been allowed to grow over the banks. Young willow trees, growing in clumps along the lake's edge, had matured to provide much more shade and cover than she remembered. Once there had been an almost unobstructed view of the lake, except for the boathouse, but now saplings and bushes had taken advantage of the subtle neglect to sink their roots into the rich soil.

The dock had been kept in good repair, though, and she walked out to the end. It was a calm day, with an almost imperceptible breeze making faint ripples in the water, which lapped against the dock pilings with wet, rhythmic slaps. It was one of those hot, lazy days that made her want to lie on her back on the dock, and stare up at the fat white clouds floating across a deep blue sky. Birds were calling in the trees, and somewhere a fish jumped, a quiet splash that didn't disturb the peace. Over to the left, a red and white float bobbed happily on the little ripples – She stiffened, her eyes widening with dread as she slowly turned. A fishing float meant someone was fishing, someone who had been hidden from her view by the angle of the boathouse. Like a felon approaching the gallows, her gaze followed the fishing line as it arced gracefully up from the float, across the water, to where it was threaded through the eyes of a fishing rod. A fishing rod that was held by Gray Rouillard, standing shirtless on the bank on the other side of the boathouse, watching her with narrowed dark eyes.

For an instant they stared at each other across the small expanse of water. Faith's thoughts darted about in panic, trying to think of a good reason for her presence, but her normally nimble mind was blank with shock. She had thought herself totally alone, and then to turn and see Gray, of all people – a shirtless Gray, at that. It wasn't fair. She needed all her wits about her when dealing with him; she couldn't afford to be distracted by that bare expanse of chest, and his long hair hanging loose to his shoulders.

He began reeling in the float with quick, deliberate movements. Choosing caution over valor, Faith bolted up the dock, her feet thudding on the planks. He threw down the fishing rod and sprinted around the boathouse. Panting, she reached for more speed; if she could just get to the edge of the woods ahead of him, he wouldn't be able to catch her. She was smaller, slimmer, and would be able to dodge between trees he would have to go around. But as fast as she was, he still had the speed of a linebacker. She saw him out of the corner of her eye, too close, and gaining ground with each long stride. He beat her by a split second, his big body suddenly blocking her way off the dock. She tried to stop, but she was already on him, and her shoes weren't made for traction. She slammed into his chest, the impact knocking her breath out with a *whoq/J* He grunted and staggered back a few steps, his arms coming up just in time to catch her against his chest and prevent her from falling on her face.

He caught his balance, and gave a muffled laugh as his arms tightened around her, holding her off the ground. "That’s a pretty good hit, for a lightweight. Nice speed, too. Where’re you going in such a hurry, Red? And what the hell are you doing here in the first place?"
She fought for her breath, sucking in desperate drafts to fill her aching lungs. God, he was as hard as a rock! She had probably bruised herself, barreling into him that way. After a short while she managed to say, "Reminiscing," and pushed against his bare shoulders in a hint that he should set her on her feet.
He snorted, and ignored the hint. "You’re trespassing. You’ll have to think of a better reason than that."
"Nosy," she offered breathlessly, still finding oxygen in somewhat short supply. The tightness of his arms was interfering with her efforts to take deep breaths. She squirmed against him, then immediately stopped. The friction of his bare skin against her was too distracting, too dangerous.
"That I can believe," he muttered. "What are you up to now?" He decided to let her down, loosening his grip so that she slid against his body. Faith’s cheeks flushed as she stepped away from him, and the color wasn’t just from the deep breaths she was taking. He was wearing only a pair of glove-soft jeans and scuffed boots, and she stared in helpless fascination at his naked torso. His shoulders were a good two feet wide, and heavy with muscle, a powerful layering that continued in plates across his chest. Curly black hair grew there, almost completely hiding his tiny, flat nipples, and arrowing down the middle of his abdomen to where it grew straight and downy around his shallow navel, which was exposed by sinfully low-riding jeans. A light sheen of sweat gleamed on his skin, making him glisten like a warm-toned statue with carved muscle and sinew.
"How did you get here?" she blurted, not answering his question. "I didn’t see a car."
"Horseback." He jerked his head toward the field on the other side of the slough. "He’s over there, eating his head off."
"Maximillian?" she asked, remembering the name of the prize stallion Guy had owned.
"One of his sons." Gray frowned down at her. "How do you know about Maximillian? And how did *you* get here?"
"I imagine most of the people in the parish know you have horses." As she spoke, she edged sideways.

He reached out and clamped one hand on her arm. "Hold it. Yeah, a lot of people know we have horses, but not many would know the name of our breeding stallion. You've been asking questions about us again, haven't you?" His hand tightened. "Who have you been talking to now? Tell me, damn it!" He emphasized the demand with a slight shake.
"No one," she flared. "I remembered the name from before."
"How would you have known it back then? Renee didn't balk at much, but I doubt she went home and regaled her family with details of her lover's life."
Faith closed her lips tightly together. She had known the stallion's name because she had been like a sponge, absorbing every little snippet of conversation she overhead, if it pertained to Gray. She wasn't about to admit such a thing to him, though. "I remembered it from before," she finally repeated.
He didn't believe her, and his face darkened.
"I haven't been talking to anyone!" she cried, trying to tug away from him. "I remembered the horse's name, that's all." Why did every encounter with him seem to involve playing tug-of-war with one or both of her arms?
He surveyed her upturned face with narrowed eyes. "All righf, I'll give you that one. Now tell me why you're poking around my summerhouse, and how you got here. I know damn good and well *you* don't have a horse."
That, at least, seemed safe enough to tell him. "I walked," she said. "Through the woods."
Pointedly he looked down at her feet. "You're not dressed for hiking through the woods."
That was true enough. She hadn't taken the time to change clothes, so she was still wearing the midcalf skirt, hosiery, and dress flats that she'd worn to New Orleans. She had grown up roaming barefoot through those woods, so she certainly hadn't worried about wearing flats. Shrugging to show her indifference, she said, "I didn't think about it." Quickly she added, "I'm sorry I trespassed. I'll leave – "
"Whoa." He drew her to a standstill again. "You'll leave when I say you can leave, and not before. I'm still waiting for an answer to my other question."
Thankfully her brain was working again. "I was just curious," she said. "They used to meet here, so… I wanted to see it." There was no need to elaborate on who "they" were.
To her dismay, his eyes grew cold. "Don't give me that. You've been here before, because I've seen you."

Shocked, she stared at him. "When?"
"When you were a kid. You slipped around through the woods like a little ghost, but you forgot to cover your head." He tugged on a strand of hair, then smoothed it behind her ear. "It was like watching a flame bob through the trees."
He had known she was there. For an appalled, heart-stopping moment she wondered if he had guessed he was the attraction that had drawn her like a moth. Bitterly she remembered all her childish fantasies, that one day he would look up and see her, and ask her to join their fun. He'd seen her, all right, but no invitation had been issued. The surprise would have been if he *had* asked her to join them. The eight-year age diiference between twenty-six and thirty-four was almost nonexistent, but an enormous gulf between eleven and nineteen. Even if she hadn't been too young, she was a Devlin, forever locked outside his circle.
"I'm going to ask you one more time," he said softly, when she remained silent. A chill ran down her spine at the steel in his tone. "What are you doing here?"
"I told you." She lifted her chin and met his gaze. "Nosing around."
"The next question is: Why? You've been doing a lot of nosing around since you moved back here. What are you up to, Faith? I warned you about stirring up old gossip and upsetting my family, and I meant every word of it."
She had already given him the only answer she could, and he hadn't believed it. She could tell him the entire truth, or she could lie. In the end, she chose to do neither, but stood silently in his grasp.
His jaw flexed with anger, and his hand tightened on her arm. Faith winced, and his gaze dropped to the livid marks where his fingers bit into her soft skin. He cursed and relaxed his grip, and like a shot she tore away from him, sprinting for the safety of the woods. Within two steps she knew it was a mistake, but emotion rather than logic had the upper hand. He reacted like the predator he was, springing after her. She was barely halfway across the grass when the impact of his heavy body knocked her off her feet, a tiger bringing down a gazelle. He fell with her, holding her tight against his chest and twisting his body so that he took the brunt of the fall, with her on top of him. Her vision was filled with a confusing tumble of grass, trees, and sky as he rolled, deftly placing her beneath him.

Oh, God. The surge of primal recognition shocked her body into stillness, as if she didn’t dare move in that first shattering moment of delight. Being in his arms was one thing; lying sprawled beneath him was quite another. His considerable weight pressed her into the grass, releasing the sweet green fragrance of the crushed blades to mingle with the heady masculine scent of his sweaty skin. The fall had rucked her skirt up to midthigh, and one of his legs rode high between hers, so that her thighs clasped the muscular column. Instinctively she had clung to him as they were falling, and now her fingers were digging hard into his bare back, feeling the slick heat of his flesh. Their position was that of lovemaking, and her body responded with mindless intensity. Her senses blurred, overloaded in that first explosion of sexual signals.

"Are you all right?" he muttered, raising his head.

Faith swallowed, words sticking in her throat. Her insides were clenching, urging her to lift against him in blind, searing need. She resisted the urge, turning her head to the side so she couldn’t see if it was mirrored in his dark eyes.

"Faith?" His tone was more insistent, demanding an answer.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Look at me." He lifted himself to his elbows, removing most of his weight so that she breathed easier, but he was still far too close, his face mere inches from hers.

Temptation shimmered between them, made all the more potent by the times she had resisted it. It took so little to bring desire into full flame, a kiss, a touch, like a spark to dry straw. Each time it was more difficult to resist him, and only the strength of her aversion to casual sex, to being a moral replica of her mother, had enabled her to hold him at bay. But each contact with him eroded her willpower, wearing it down bit by bit so that each refusal took more effort.

His breath wafted over her lips, the subtle touch making them part as if she would inhale his essence. His head lowered, his mouth moving toward hers. Desperately she wedged her arms between them, bracing her hands against his chest. The curls of hair tickled her palms, and she felt the hard nubs of his nipples against the heels of her hands. Hidden beneath blouse and bra, her own nipples had peaked.

He paused, hovering over her. A trickle of sweat ran down his temple and curved along his jaw. His nipples felt like tiny spikes, burning into her

hands. She wanted to touch them, to put her mouth over them and feel them with her tongue, taste the saltiness of his skin, feel him stiffen and shudder from excitement.

Temptation gnawed at her, sharp and insistent. He inhaled, his chest expanding beneath her palms, and the sand castle of her resistance crumbled beneath the wave of pleasure. Letting out her breath on a soft sigh, she turned her hands, moving them so that her thumbs brushed over his nipples, once, twice, again. The delight of it made her feel dizzy.

His pupils dilated, the black centers flaring until they all but eclipsed the dark irises. His head fell forward between his arms, his long black hair curtaining their faces, and his breath hissed between his teeth. Having given in, she couldn’t make herself stop touching him. She explored the hard planes of his chest, returning time and again to the hard little peaks that had lured her so far into dangerous territory. She couldn’t touch him enough, couldn’t sate her hunger for the feel of him.

Then he drew her hands away from his body, and his eyes were fierce as he looked down at her. "Turnabout’s fair play," he said, and put his hand on her breast.

She arched beneath him, crying out at the hot lash of pleasure. Her breasts strained into his touch, so taut and sensitive that the hot weight of his hand was almost unbearable, and yet the cessation of contact would be torture. Even through her clothes, the rasp of his thumbs made her nipples burn and throb.

He lowered his head and kissed her, the pressure hard and ravaging, while he tugged her blouse loose from the waistband of her skirt. When it was free, he thrust his hand beneath the cloth, burrowing under her bra to close his fingers on the satiny mound of her bare breast. "You know what I want," he said roughly, moving more fully onto her and pushing his muscular legs between hers to make a place for himself.

She knew. She wanted it too, so fiercely that the need almost obliterated all other considerations. His callused fingers plucked at her nipple, rolling it between finger and thumb. She wanted his mouth there, sucking strongly. She wanted him to take her, here on the grass with the hot sun burning down on their bare bodies. She wanted *him*, forever.

"Tell me," he said. "Tell me why." The words were muffled against her throat as he trailed kisses down to her collarbone.

She blinked, staring up at the clouds in confusion. Then the meaning of the words washed over her like a dash of ice water. He wanted her – the thick ridge of proof pushed against her loins – but while she had been lost in the fog of desire, his brain had been clear, still working, still trying to get answers.

With a hiss of rage she erupted, shoving against him, kicking. He rolled off of her and sat up, looking like a half-naked savage with his hair tangled around his face and his dark eyes narrowed with dangerous lust.

"You bastard!" she spat, so angry she was quivering. She surged to her knees, hands clenched into fists as she fought the urge to hurl herself at him. Now wasn't the time to challenge him physically, not with his entire big body taut with the need to mate. Control, his and hers, was stretched to a hairsbreadth; the least pressure would snap it. He waited, poised to meet her attack, and she saw the sexual anticipation hot in his eyes. For a long moment they faced each other, until gradually she forced herself to relax. There was nothing to be gained in this confrontation.

There was nothing to be said, either. Perhaps she hadn't exactly started the fire, but she had certainly fanned the flames by caressing his nipples the way she had. If things had gone beyond what she wanted, she had only herself to blame.

At last she got to her feet, moving stiffly. Her skirt was torn, her panty hose shredded down one leg. She turned away, only to find herself caught again, this time by a handful of skirt. "I'll take you back," he said. "Let me get the horse."

"Thank you, but I'd rather walk," she replied, the words as stiff as her body.

"I didn't ask what you wanted. I said I'll take you back. You shouldn't be wandering around in the woods by yourself." Not trusting her to remain there if he released her, he began dragging her along in his wake.

"I wandered around them by myself for over half my life," she growled.

"Maybe so, but you aren't doing it now." He slanted a brief, hard glance her way. "It's my land, and I make the rules."

He kept his fist twisted in her skirt, so she was obliged to keep step with him or have her clothes torn off. They walked past the boathouse and around the slough, a distance of about a hundred yards, to where Gray had hobbled the stallion so he could graze. At his whistle, the big, dark brown animal began moving toward him. To her dismay, there was no saddle anywhere in evidence.

"You rode him bareback?" she asked uneasily.
His dark eyes glinted. "I won’t let you fall."
She didn’t know a lot about horses, having never been on one, but she did know that stallions were fractious animals, difficult to control. She tried to back away as the horse ambled closer, but Gray’s grip on her skirt kept her at his side.
"Don’t be afraid. He’s the sweetest-tempered stallion I’ve ever seen, or I wouldn’t be riding him without a saddle." The horse came within reach and he caught the halter, crooning praise into the pricked ears.
"I’ve never been on a horse," she admitted, staring up at the big head as it lowered. Velvety lips whuffled at her arm, scooped-out nostrils flaring as he caught her scent. Hesitantly she put out her hand and stroked above his nose.
"Then your first ride will be on a Thoroughbred," Gray said, and lifted her onto the broad back. She clutched at the thick mane, alarmed by the height at which she found herself, while the living platform beneath her moved restlessly.
Gray gathered the reins, then caught two handfuls of mane and swung up behind her. The stallion skittered beneath the extra weight, making Faith catch her breath, but Gray’s touch, and the sound of his voice, soothed him immediately.
"Where did you leave your car?" he asked.
"On the last curve before you get to the shack," she replied, and those were the only words spoken during the ride. Gray guided the horse through the trees, avoiding low-hanging limbs, walking him around obstacles. Faith held on, acutely aware of Gray’s bare chest against her back, and of the way her buttocks were nestled against his crotch. His muscular thighs hugged her hips, and she felt them clenching and relaxing as he guided the horse. They reached the road far too quickly, but in another sense the journey had taken a small eternity.
He reined in beside her car and swung to the ground, then reached up to catch her under the arms and lift her down. Suddenly alarmed that she might have lost her keys in the scuffle, she patted her skirt pocket, and heard the reassuring rattle. She didn’t want to look at him, so she took out the keys and turned to unlock the car.
"Faith."

She hesitated, then turned the key in the lock and opened the door. He stepped forward, and the expression in his eyes made her grateful for the car door between them.
"Stay off my property," he said evenly. "If I catch you on Rouillard land again, I’m going to give you the fucking you’ve been asking for."

Fourteen

The next day, Faith found the note inside her car, lying on the driver's seat. She saw the folded piece of paper and picked it up, wondering what she had dropped. She unfolded it, and saw the block letters:
DON'T ASK ANY MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT GUY ROUILLARD
SHUT UP IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU
She leaned against the car, a light breeze fluttering the paper in her hands. She didn't lock her car at home, so she didn't have to wonder how the note had gotten in there. She stared at the paper, reading it again and wondering if she had been threatened, or if the writer had simply used a familiar phrase. *Shut up if you know what's good for you.* She had heard variations of it a hundred times, with only the command changing. The note might or might not be a threat; likely it was more of a warning. Someone didn't like her asking questions about Guy.
Gray hadn't left the note. It wasn't his style, for one thing; he had delivered his threats in person, and spelled them out. The last one still had her rattled. Who else would have been disturbed by her questions? There were two possibilities: someone with something to hide, or someone who thought to curry Gray's favor.
She had been on her way to town for yet another fact-finding mission, this time to try having a word with Yolanda Foster, so there was a certain irony to the timing of the note's appearance. After a moment's consideration, she decided that she was still going to try. If the writer wanted her to take the threat seriously, he or she would have to be more specific.
First, though, she carried the note inside and locked it in the desk, being careful not to handle the paper more than necessary. In itself, this wasn't something that warranted calling the sheriff, but if she received another, she wanted to be able to present both of them to him for evidence. She wasn't eager to see the sheriff in any case. She had a stark memory of him standing beside his patrol car, beefy arms folded as he approvingly watched his deputies empty the shack of the Devlins' belongings. Sheriff Deese was thoroughly in Gray's hip pocket; the question was whether or not he would do anything even if she received a death threat.
The note properly stored, she drove to town. Lying in bed last night, unable to sleep, she had planned her strategy. She wouldn't call Mrs. Foster; that would give her a chance to refuse a meeting. It would be best to take her by

surprise, face-to-face, and slip in a few questions before Yolanda got over being startled. She didn’t know where the Fosters lived, however, and the address in the phone book had been unfamiliar to her.
Her first stop was the library. To her disappointment, the chatty Carlene DuBois wasn’t behind the desk; instead it was manned – or girled – by a frothy little blonde who barely looked old enough to be out of high school. She was chewing gum as she leafed through a rock music fanzine. What had happened to the stereotypical librarian with her hair pulled back in a bun and reading glasses perched on a thin nose? The gum-chewing rock fan wasn’t an improvement.
Realistically, Faith knew, she herself was probably no more than four or five years older than the little librarian. Mentally and emotionally, however, she wasn’t even in the same generation. She had never been young in the way this girl still was, and she didn’t think it was a bad thing. She’d had responsibilities from an early age; she could remember cooking when the iron frying pan had been too heavy for her to lift, and she’d had to stand on a chair to stir a pot of beans. She had swept with a broom that was almost twice as tall as herself. Then she’d had Scottie to care for, the greatest responsibility of all. But when she had finished high school, she’d been prepared for life, unlike kids who had never taken care of anything and had no idea how to cope. Those "kids" were still running back to their parents for help when they were twenty-five.
The girl looked up from her magazine to pull her bubble-gum pink lips into what passed for a professional smile. Her eyes were so heavily lined with black that they looked like almonds in a pit of coal dust. "May I help you?"
The tone was competent, Faith thought with relief. Maybe the girl was just stuck in makeup limbo. "Do you have maps of both the town and parish?"
"Sure." She led Faith to a table on which a large globe stood. "Here are all the maps and atlases. They’re updated yearly, so if it’s an older map you need, you’ll have to go to the archives."
"No, I need a current map."
"Here you go, then." The girl pulled out an enormous book, easily three by two feet, but she handled it easily as she placed it on the table. "We have to seal the maps in plastic and put them in the book," she explained. "If we don’t, they get stolen."
Faith smiled as the girl left her. The solution made sense to her. It was one thing to fold a map and put it in your pocket; spiriting out a huge, plastic-

encased sheet would take some ingenuity.
She didn’t know if the Fosters lived in town or out in the parish, but she looked first in the town map, running her finger down the list of streets printed on the back. Bingo. Noting the coordinates, she flipped the page and quickly located Meadowlark Drive, in a subdivision that hadn’t existed when she had lived here before. With a name like Meadowlark Drive, she should have known. Land developers were an unimaginative bunch. After memorizing how to get there, she replaced the map book and left. The librarian was engrossed in her magazine again, and didn’t look up as Faith passed the desk.
Prescott being the size it was, finding Meadowlark Drive took less than five minutes. The subdivision included acreage, rather than just lots, so the houses were fewer and farther apart than normal. There probably weren’t many people in Prescott who could afford to build there, either, as the houses looked to be in the two-hundred-thousand range. In the Northeast and along the West Coast, they would have been worth a cool million, easy.
The Foster house was designed to look like a Mediterranean villa, nestled comfortably amid huge oaks draped with Spanish moss. Faith parked in the driveway and walked up the brown brick pathway to the double front doors. The button for the door bell was disguised amid some scrolls, then discreetly lit so people could find it. She pressed it, and heard the chimes echo through the house.
After a moment there was the rapid tapping of heels on a tiled floor, and the right half of the door was pulled open to reveal a very pretty middle-aged woman, stylishly clad in slim taupe pants and a white tunic. Her short, ash brown hair was a tumble of curls, swept to one side, and she wore gold hoop earrings. Startled recognition flashed in the dark blue eyes.
"Hello, I’m Faith Hardy," Faith said, hurrying to correct the woman’s horrified assumption that she was Renee. "Are you Mrs. Foster?"
Yolanda Foster nodded, evidently struck speechless. She continued to stare.
"I’d like to talk to you, if it’s convenient." To tilt the answer in her favor, Faith took a step forward. Yolanda fell back, in an involuntary gesture of admittance.
"I really don’t have much time," Yolanda said, her tone apologetic rather than impatient. "I’m having lunch with a friend."
That was believable, unless Yolanda always dressed at home as if she were the nineties version of June Cleaver. "Ten minutes," Faith promised.

Looking puzzled, Yolanda led her into a spacious living room, and they sat down. "I don't mean to stare, but you *are* Renee Devlin's daughter, aren't you? I heard you were in town, and the resemblance – well, I'm sure you've been told it's startling."
Unlike a lot of people, there was no censure in Yolanda's tone, and Faith found herself unexpectedly liking the woman. "Several people have mentioned it," she said dryly, earning a chuckle from her hostess that made her like her even more. Liking her, however, didn't deflect Faith from her course. "I want to ask you some questions about Guy Rouillard, if I may."
The blusher-pinkened cheeks paled a bit. "About *Guy?"* Her hands fluttered a bit, then she clasped them in her lap. "Why ask me?"
Faith paused. "Are you alone?" she finally asked, not wanting to cause the woman any trouble if someone should overhear their conversation. "Why, yes. Lowell is in New York this week." That was fortuitous in one way, and not in another, because depending on her conversation with Yolanda, she might want to talk to Lowell, too. She took a deep breath and went right to the heart of the matter. "Were you having an affair with Guy that summer before he left?"
The blue eyes darkened with distress, and the cheeks paled even more. Yolanda stared at her, the seconds ticking away in silence. Faith waited for a denial, but instead Yolanda gave a curiously gentle sigh. "How did you find out?"
"I asked questions." She didn't say that it had evidently been common knowledge, for Ed Morgan to know about it. If Yolanda wanted to think she had been discreet, let her have.that dubious comfort.
"That was the only time I was ever unfaithful to Lowell." The older woman looked away, and her fingers plucked nervously at her slacks.
"I'm sure it was," Faith said, because Yolanda seemed to need to be believed. "From what I've heard about Guy Rouillard, he was an expert at seduction."
An unwilling, rueful little smile touched Yolanda's lips. "He was, but I can't blame it on him. I was determined to sleep with him before I ever approached him." Her fingers continued their nervous little movements, now smoothing the upholstered arm of the chair. "I found out Lowell was carrying on with his secretary, and had been for years. I pitched a fit, let me tell you. I threatened him with all sorts of things if he didn't stop, immediately, and divorce was the only one of them that wasn't physically

damaging. He begged me not to leave him, swore that she didn’t mean anything to him, it was just the sex, and he’d never do it again – you know, that kind of bull. But I caught him, not three weeks later. It’s so silly, the little things that give them away. When he undressed one night, his shorts were on wrong side out, the label visible in the back. The only way he could have gotten them turned wrong would be if he’d had them off."

She shook her head, as if she couldn’t understand why he hadn’t been more careful. The words were spilling out of her now, as if she had held them inside for twelve years. "I didn’t say anything to him. But the next day I called Guy and asked him to meet me at the summerhouse on their lake. Lowell and I, and some other friends, had been there for barbecues and picnics, so I knew the place."

The summerhouse again! Faith thought wryly. Between father and son, the sheets in those two bedrooms must have stayed hot. "Why did you pick Guy?" she asked.

Yolanda gave her a surprised look. "Well, I’d hardly have picked anyone repulsive, would I?" she asked reasonably. "If I was going to have an affair, I at least wanted it to be with someone who knew what he was doing, and from Guy’s reputation, I thought he likely filled the bill. Then, too, Guy was safe. I intended to tell Lowell what I’d done, because what good is revenge if no one knows about it, and Guy was powerful enough that Lowell couldn’t do anything to him, if Lowell found out his identity. I intended to keep *that* secret, at least.

"So I met Guy at the summerhouse, and told him what I wanted. He was very sweet, very reasonable. He tried to talk me out of it, if you can imagine! Talk about a wound to the ego!" Yolanda smiled, her eyes misty with memory as they met Faith’s. "Here was a man who tomcatted all over the state, and he turned me down. I had always considered myself attractive, but evidently he didn’t. I almost cried. I did tear up a little bit, and Guy was frantic. He was so sweet, a real woman’s man. Tears turned him to mush. He started patting my shoulder, explaining that he really thought I was pretty and he’d love to take me to bed, but I had asked for all the wrong reasons, and Lowell was his friend – he went on and on."

"But you finally convinced him?"

"What I said was, ‘If it isn’t you, it’ll be someone else.’ He just looked at me with those dark eyes that made you feel like you could drown in them, and I could tell he was wondering who I would pick next. He was *worried*

about me, thinking I'd be down at Jimmy Jo's, looking that crowd over for candidates. Then he took my hand, put it on his crotch, and he was ready. He said, 'I'm it,' and took me to the bedroom." She shivered a little, her gaze unfocused as she looked back in time. She fell silent, and Faith waited patiently for her to sort through her memories.

"Can you imagine," Yolanda finally said, her voice soft, "what it's like to be married for twenty years, to love your husband and be perfectly satisfied in bed – and then find out that you had no idea what passion could be? Guy was… God, I can't tell you what Guy was like as a lover. He made me scream, he made me feel and do things I didn't – I only meant it to be that one time. But we stayed there the whole afternoon, making love.

"I didn't tell Lowell. Telling him would have ended my revenge, and I couldn't do it, I couldn't stop seeing Guy. We met at least once a week, if I could manage it. Then he left." She glanced at Faith, as if gauging the effect of her next sentence. "With your mother. When I heard, I cried for a week. And then I told Lowell.

"He was furious, of course. He ranted and raved, and threatened to divorce me. I sat there and watched him, not arguing or anything, and that made him even madder. Then I said, 'You should always make sure your shorts are right side out before you put them back on,' and he stopped dead, staring at me with his mouth open. He knew that I'd caught him again. I got up and left the room. He followed me about half an hour later, and he was crying. We made up," she said, briskly now. "And as far as I know, he's never been unfaithful again."

"Did you ever hear from Guy?"

Slowly Yolanda shook her head. "I hoped, at first, but… no, he never wrote, or called." Her lips trembled, and she looked at Faith with anguish stark on her face. "My God," she whispered, "I loved him so."

Another dead end, Faith thought as she drove home. According to Yolanda, her husband hadn't known about her affair with Guy until after Guy had already disappeared, which put Lowell in the clear. Yolanda had been too open, too oblivious to even the possibility that Guy had been killed, or that there was the slightest reason why she shouldn't unburden herself to Faith. Instead she had wound up clinging to Faith's hands while she wept for a man whom she hadn't seen in twelve years, but with whom she had shared a summer of passion.

She had finally recovered her poise, flustered and embarrassed. "My goodness, look at the time – I'm going to be late. I can't imagine – I mean, you're a *stranger* – crying all over you this way, carrying on – oh, my." This last as she fully realized just what she had been saying to this stranger. She had stared at Faith with horrified dismay.

Feeling compelled to comfort Yolanda, Faith had touched her shoulder and said, "You needed to talk about it. I understand, and I swear I'll keep your confidence."

After a few strained seconds, Yolanda had relaxed. "I believe you. I don't know why, but I do."

So now Faith was left with no suspects or leads, not that she'd had anything concrete to begin with. All she had was questions, and her questions were annoying someone. The proof of that was in the note she'd found that morning. Whether the note was indicative of a guilty conscience, she didn't know.

Nor did she know what else to do, except keep asking questions. Sooner or later, someone would be stung to respond.

If she could keep busy enough, maybe she wouldn't think about Gray.

The theory was proving difficult to put into practice. She had avoided thinking about him, purposefully pushing him from her mind after she had left him the afternoon before. She had ignored the unfulfilled ache in her body, and refused to think about what had almost happened between them. But for all her will, her subconscious had betrayed her, admitting him into her dreams so that she had awakened in the early morning to find herself reaching for him. The dream had been so vivid that she had cried out, in longing and disappointment.

She had no more resistance to him; she might as well admit it. If he hadn't said what he had, she'd have given in to him there on the grass. Her morals and standards were useless when he took her in his arms, paper tigers that were vanquished by his first kiss.

As she eliminated each person from her list of suspects, the tower of motive leaned more and more toward Gray. Logically, she could see it.

Emotionally, the idea met with total rejection. Not Gray. *Not Gray!* She couldn't believe it; she wouldn't believe it. The man she knew was capable of going to extraordinary lengths to protect those he loved, but cold-blooded murder wasn't one of them.

Her mother knew who the killer was. Faith was as certain of that as she'd ever been of anything. Getting Renee to admit it, however, would take some doing, for that would mean trouble for herself. Renee wasn't likely to act against her own self-interest, certainly not for such an abstract notion as justice. Faith knew her mother well; if she pushed too hard, Renee would run, partly from fear, but the biggest reason would be to avoid trouble for herself. After wringing the information about the summerhouse from her, Faith knew she would have to wait awhile before calling again.

The box was delivered the next day.

She returned home from a grocery-shopping expedition to the neighboring parish, and after carrying the groceries in and putting them away, went out to the mailbox to collect the day's mail. When she opened the lid of the oversized box, there was the usual assortment of bills, magazines, and sales papers lying there, with a box deposited on top of them. Curiously she picked it up; she hadn't ordered anything, but the weight of the box was intriguing. The flaps had been sealed with shipping tape, and her name and address were scrawled across the top.

She carried everything in and placed it on the kitchen table. Taking a knife from the cabinet drawer, she slit the tape down the seam of the flap and opened the two halves, then parted the froth of tissue paper that had been used for packing. After one horrified glance, she turned and vomited into the sink.

The cat wasn't just dead, it had been mutilated. It was wrapped in plastic, probably to keep the smell from alerting anyone before the box was opened. Faith didn't think, she reacted instinctively. When the violent retching had stopped, she reached out blindly for the telephone.

She closed her eyes as the deep, smoky voice spoke in her ear, and she held on to the receiver as if it were a lifeline. "G-Gray," she stammered, then fell silent as her mind went blank. What could she say to him? *Help, I'm scared, and I need you?* She had no claim on him. Their relationship was a volatile mixture of enmity and desire, and any weakness on her part would only give him another weapon. But she was both sickened and abruptly terrified, and he was the only person she could think of to call for help.

"Faith?" Something of her terror must have been evident in the one word she'd spoken, because his voice became very calm. "What is it?"

Turning her back on the obscenity on the table, she fought to regain control of her voice, but still it emerged as only a whisper. "There's a… cat here,"

she managed to say. "A cat? Are you afraid of cats?" She shook her head, then realized he couldn’t see her over the phone. Her silence must have made him think the answer was yes, though, because he said soothingly, "Just throw something at it; it’ll scat."
She shook her head again, more violently this time. "No." She took a deep breath. "Help."
"All right." Evidently deciding she was too terrified of cats to deal with it on her own, he assumed a brisk and reassuring tone. "I’ll be right there. Just sit someplace where you can’t see it, and I’ll take care of it when I get there."
He hung up, and Faith took his advice. She couldn’t bear to be in the house with the thing, so she went outside on the porch and sat motionless in the swing, waiting numbly for him to arrive.
He was there in less than fifteen minutes, but those fifteen minutes seemed like an eternity. His tall form unfolded from the Jaguar, and he strolled up to the porch with his graceful, loose-hipped gait and a faint smile of masculine condescension on his lips, the hero arrived to save the helpless little woman from the ferocious beast. Faith didn’t take umbrage; he could think what he liked, if he would just get rid of that thing in her kitchen. She stared up at him, her face so bloodless that his smile faded.
"You’re really frightened, aren’t you?" he asked gently, hunkering down in front of her and taking one of her hands in his. Her fingers were icy, despite the steamy heat of the day. "Where is it?"
"In the kitchen," she said, through stiff lips. "On the table."
With a comforting pat to her hand, he stood and opened the screen door. Faith listened to his footsteps moving through the living room and into the kitchen.
"Goddamn fucking son of a bitch!" She heard the vicious curse, followed by a string of others. Then the back door slammed. She put her hands over her face. Oh, God, she should have warned him, she shouldn’t have given him the same shock she had received, but she simply hadn’t been able to say the right words.
A few minutes later he came around to the front of the house, and remounted the steps to the porch. His jaw was set, and his dark eyes were colder than she had ever seen them before, but this time his rage wasn’t turned on her.

"It’s all right," he said, still in that gentle tone. "I got rid of it. Come inside, baby." Putting his arm around her, he urged her up from the swing and into the house. He directed her toward the kitchen; she stiffened and tried to pull back, but he was having none of it. "It’s okay," he reassured her, and forced her into a chair. "You look a little shocky. What do you have to drink around here?"
"There’s tea and orange juice in the refrigerator," she said, her voice faint.
"I meant the alcoholic variety. Do you have any wine?"
She shook her head. "I don’t drink alcohol."
Despite the fury in his eyes, he gave her a little grin.
"Puritan," he said mildly. "Okay, orange juice it is." He took a glass from the cabinet and filled it with orange juice, then thrust it into her hand. "Drink it. All of it, while I make a call."
She sipped obediently, more because it gave her something to concentrate on than because she wanted it. Gray opened the phone book, ran his finger down the first page, then punched in the number. "Sheriff McFane, please."
Faith lifted her head, suddenly more alert. Gray stared down at her, his expression daring her to protest. "Mike, this is Gray. Could you come out to Faith Hardy’s house? Yeah, it’s the old Cleburne place. She just got a real ugly surprise in her mail. A dead cat… Yeah, there’s one of those, too." He hung up, and Faith cleared her throat. "One of what, too?"
"A threatening letter. Didn’t you see it?"
She shook her head. "No. All I saw was the cat." A shudder rippled through her body, making the glass tremble in her hand. He began opening and closing doors. "What are you looking for?" she asked.
"The coffee. After the sugar to counteract shock, you need a shot of caffeine."
"I keep it in the refrigerator. Top shelf."
He got out the canister, and she directed him to the filters. He made coffee rather competently, for a rich man who probably never did it at home, she thought, and felt a ghost of amusement flicker inside.
Once the coffee was in the process of making, he drew up another chair and sat facing her, so close that their legs touched, his on the outside of hers, warmly clasping. He didn’t ask her what had happened, knowing she would soon be going through that with the sheriff, and she was grateful for his tact. He just sat there, lending her his heat and the comfort of his nearness, those

dark eyes sharp on her face as if he were debating pouring the orange juice down her, if she didn’t drink it as fast as he thought she should.
To forestall just such an action, she took a healthy swallow of juice, and actually felt a slight lessening of tension in his muscles. "Don’t you dare," she muttered. "I’m trying my best not to throw up again."
The grimness of his expression was lightened briefly by amusement. "How did you know what I was thinking?"
"The way you were staring at the glass, and then at me." She took another swallow. "I thought Deese was the sheriff."
"He retired." Gray had the fleeting thought that her memory of Sheriff Deese wouldn’t be a pleasant one, and wondered if that was why she had looked at him with such alarm when he’d asked for the sheriff. "You’ll like Michael McFane. How’s that for a good Irish name? He’s young for the job, still interested in keeping up with new techniques." Mike had also been at the shack that night, Gray remembered, but Faith wouldn’t know that, probably wouldn’t recognize him. In her shock, the deputies would have been faceless uniformed figures. Only he and the sheriff, standing off to the side, would have been locked in her memory.
The *puzzling* contradiction formed in his mind. She had been.obviously reluctant to meet Sheriff Deese, but she had never revealed any such uneasiness in her dealings with himself. She’d been bold, provoking, maddening, *frustrating,* but she’d never shown the least hesitation about being in his company.
Nor was hesitation something that had troubled him. Why else, when he’d gotten her call, he thought to remove a pesky cat from the premises, had he promptly canceled a business meeting and driven here as fast as possible, with Monica’s enraged protests still ringing in his ears? Faith had called him for help, and no matter how minor he thought the problem, he would help her if he could. As it turned out, the problem hadn’t been minor at all, and all his protective instincts had been outraged. He intended to find out who had done such a disgusting thing, and someone would catch hell. His fists ached with the need to pound them into the culprit’s face.
"Why didn’t you think I’d done it?" he asked softly, his attention locked on her face to catch every flicker of expression. "I’ve been trying to get you to leave town, so logically I should have been the person you’d suspect first."
She was shaking her head before he’d finished speaking, the movement making the sleek bell of her hair swing about her face. "You wouldn’t do

something like that," she said with absolute conviction. "Any more than you would have left me the first note."
He paused, distracted from the pleasure of her trust in him. "Note?" Sternness laced that one word.
"Yesterday. When I went out, there was a note in the front seat of the car."
"Did you report it?"
She shook her head again. "It wasn't a specific threat."
"What did it say?"
The look she gave him now was slightly uneasy, and he wondered why. "To quote: Shut up if you know what's good for you."
The coffee was ready. He got up and poured a cup for both of them. "How do you drink yours?" he asked absently, his thoughts still on the note and the package, which this time had been accompanied by a more specific threat. The wings of cold, black fury beat upward within him, barely controlled. "Black."
He gave her the cup, and sat down again in his original position, close enough to touch. She was more adept than anyone else at reading his face, and something in his expression must have alarmed her, because she launched into one of those deflecting maneuvers of hers, "I used to drink coffee with loads of sugar, but Mr. Gresham is diabetic. He said that it was easier to give up everything sweet than to fool with artificial sweeteners, so there wasn't anything in the house to use. They would have bought it for me if I'd asked, but I didn't want to impose – "
If she'd meant to distract him, he thought irritably, she'd succeeded. Even recognizing the maneuver didn't blunt its effectiveness, because she used such interesting bait. "Who's Mr. Gresham?" he asked, breaking into the flow of words. He felt the burn of jealousy, wondering if she was telling him about some guy she'd lived with before moving back to Prescott.
The slumberous green eyes blinked at him. "The Greshams were my foster parents."
A foster home. God. A cold fist clenched his stomach. He had imagined her life as continuing in much the same vein as before. Realistically, a good foster home would have been far preferable to the way she'd been living, but it was never easy for kids to lose their families, no matter how rotten, and be deposited with strangers. Finding a good home was a crapshoot, at best. A lot of kids were abused in foster homes, and for a young girl who looked like Faith…

The crunch of gravel signaled Mike’s arrival. "Stay here," Gray growled, and went out the back door. He beckoned to Mike as the other man’s lanky form unfolded from the patrol car, and walked around to the back of the house where he had left the box.

Mike joined him, his freckled face tightening with disgust as he looked down at the carcass. "I see a lot of sick things in this job," he said conversationally, squatting by the box, "but some things still turn my stomach. Why in hell would someone do this to a helpless animal? Have you handled the box much?"

"Just to carry it out. I was careful to touch only the front left corner, and the back right. I don’t know how much Faith handled it before she opened it. I used a pen to open the flaps wider," he added. "There’s a message on one of them."

Mike used the same technique, taking a ballpoint from his pocket. He pursed his lips as he read the message, printed in block letters, with a felt-tip marker, on the cardboard:

GET OUT OF PRESCOTT OR YOU’LL BE JUST LIKE THE CAT

"I’ll carry it in, see if we can get any fingerprints. The plastic would be our best bet, since it hasn’t been disturbed." He glanced toward the house. "Is she okay?"

"She was pretty shaky when I got here, but she’s settled down now."

"Okay." Still using the pen, Mike closed the flaps and stared down at the box for a few seconds, then grunted.

Gray looked down, too, and saw what he had missed the first time. "Shit. There’s no postage mark. It was on top of her other mail, so I thought it had been mailed, too."

"Nope. Someone hand-delivered it. Let’s go see if she heard anything, or saw a car."

They entered the kitchen, and Gray saw that Faith was still sitting where he had left her, sipping her coffee. She glanced up, outwardly calm now, but he suspected her control was hanging by no more than a few thin threads.

She immediately got to her feet, looking at Mike. "Ma’am." He touched his fingers to his hat. "I’m Michael McFane, the sheriff here. Do you feel like answering a few questions?"

"Of course," she said. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Please."

"Sugar or cream?"

"Sugar."
That social nicety taken care of, Faith returned to her chair. Gray stood beside her, propped against the enormous table. Mike took up his position by the sink, his feet crossed at the ankles.
"Where did you find the box?" Mike asked.
"In the mailbox."
"There's no postage mark on it. It wasn't mailed, so I'm assuming someone put it in the box after your mail was delivered. No one's supposed to use the box except the postal service, so the carrier probably would have taken it out. Did you hear the mail run, or see another car pass by?"
She shook her head. "I wasn't here. I'd been grocery shopping. I came home, put up the groceries, then went out to get the mail."
"Is anyone mad at you? Someone who might give you a dead cat to get even?"
Another shake of the head.
"She found a note in her car yesterday," Gray interjected.
"What kind of note? What did it say?"
"To shut up if I knew what was good for me," Faith replied.
"Did you keep it?"
She sighed, gave Gray a wary glance, and went to get the note. She came back holding the sheet of paper by one corner. "Put it on the counter," Mike said. "I don't want to handle it."
She obeyed, and Gray moved beside Mike to read it. It was printed in the same block letters than adorned the cardboard box. *Don't ask any more questions about Guy Rouillard shut up if you know what's good for you.*
Gray flashed her an irritated glance, understanding now that wary look she'd given him.
"All right," he growled. "What have you been up to now?"
"You know as much about it as I do," she replied, with a smoothness that he was beginning to think hid as much as it revealed.
"Well, now." Mike scratched his jaw. "What does your daddy have to do with this, Gray?"
"Little Miss Nosy has been asking questions about him all over town." He scowled at her.
"Why would that aggravate someone so much that they'd send her a note like this, and leave a dead cat in the mailbox?"

"It aggravated the hell out of me," Gray said frankly. "I don’t want Monica or Mother upset by having all the old gossip stirred up again. I don’t know who it would piss off this much."
The sheriff was silent, blue eyes hooded as he thought. "On the surface," he finally drawled, "you’re the most likely suspect, Gray." Faith started an immediate protest, but he waved her to silence. "Guess you knew that, too, what with the note and all," he said to her. "So that makes me wonder why you called him, rather than the sheriff’s department."
"I knew he didn’t leave the note, or the box."
"It’s no secret that you weren’t happy when she moved back," Michael said, looking at Gray.
"No, I wasn’t. I’m still not." Gray’s hard mouth curved into a humorless smile. "But threatening notes and dead cats aren’t my style. I fight my battles out in the open."
"Hell, I know that. I just wondered why Mrs. Hardy called you for help." Gray snorted. "Figure it out."
"Reckon I already have."
"Then stop being an asshole."
The sheriff didn’t take umbrage, just grinned. An instant later, he was all business again. "I need for both of you to come down to the courthouse so we can get your fingerprints, and check the box and note for any sets that don’t match. You’ll need to give us a statement, too, Mrs. Hardy."
"All right. I’ll get my keys." Faith stood, and Gray caught her arm.
"I’ll drive you."
"There’s no need in your coming all the way back here – "
"I said I’ll drive you." Implacably he looked down at her, forcing his will on her. She looked irritated, but made no further protest, and the sheriff grinned again.
Gray hustled her out and deposited her in the luxurious leather seat of the Jaguar. "You don’t have to drive me," she said grumpily, as she buckled the seat belt.
"Sure I do, if I want to talk to you."
"What’s there to say?"
He started the car and reversed out of the driveway, following Sheriff McFane’s patrol car down the road. "Obviously some nutcase has it in for you. You’ll be a lot safer somewhere away from Prescott."

She averted her head, staring stonily out the window. "It didn’t take long for you to come up with that angle," she retorted.
"You stubborn little witch, can’t you get it through that red head of yours that you might be in danger?"

Fifteen

Faith was boiling mad by the time she left the courthouse, though she had kept her temper mostly under control. Gray had badgered her all the way to town about moving out of Prescott, and to her fury, Sheriff McFane had agreed that she might not be entirely safe, living alone as she did, and with no close neighbors. Faith had pointed out that if she left, the harassment would stop, they'd never find who did it, and the guilty party would be pleased as punch that his tactics had worked. She wasn't inclined to give him the satisfaction.

Sheriff McFane had allowed that her logic was impeccable, and her bravery was commendable, but her common sense was a mite off. She could get *hurt.*

She had agreed with him in that assessment, and stubbornly refused to budge an inch. Now that she had gotten over the shakes, she was seeing cause and effect. The dead cat meant that, somehow, she had gotten close to finding out what had really happened to Guy, and if she left now, she would never know for certain. The sheriff and Gray thought someone was harassing her; she knew that it was far more serious than that. She had to fight the temptation to tell them what she thought was behind the cat and the notes; if word got out that she was suggesting Guy had been murdered, it would warn the guilty party, making him or her even more difficult to catch. So she kept silent, and the frustration of it made her irritable.

She could ignore Sheriff McFane's arguments that she leave; Gray's went straight to her heart. His cajoling suggestions had long since deteriorated to forceful demands by the time they left the courthouse for the drive back to her house.

"For the last time, no!" she shouted, for at least the fifth time, as they got into the car. Heads swiveled in their direction.

"Shit," Gray muttered. For a man who wanted to avoid gossip, he'd been pretty blatant today. His Jaguar wasn't a car that was easily overlooked, and Faith was a woman who turned heads. A lot of people would have noted that he had driven her into town, gone with her into the courthouse, and then left with her, not to mention the fact that she was yelling at him. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. Given the same set of circumstances he'd been faced with today, he'd do the same thing again.

Faith jammed the two ends of the seat belt buckle together. "I know you didn’t have anything to do with the cat, or either of the notes," she said, anger seething in her voice. "But you aren’t above using it to your own advantage, are you? You’ve wanted me gone from day one, and it sticks in your craw that you can’t make me do what you want."
He gave her a hooded, dangerous look as he negotiated the traffic in the square. "Don’t believe that for a minute," he said quietly. "I could have you gone in half an hour if I wanted. I decided against it."
"Really?" she drawled, infusing the word with disbelief. "Why pull your punches?"
"For two reasons. One is that you didn’t deserve what happened twelve years ago, and I wasn’t inclined to treat you that way again." He took his gaze from the street long enough to sweep it down her body, lingering briefly on her breasts and thighs. "You know what the second reason is."
The truth of that simmered between them, just below boiling point. He wanted her. She had known that… oh, almost from the first, certainly since that incendiary kiss in New Orleans. But he wanted her on his terms; he wanted to set her up in a little house somewhere away from Prescott, completely out of the parish, so his liaison with her wouldn’t upset his family. Those circumstances would be perfect for him, because he would be accomplishing both his goals with one fell swoop.
"I won’t let you hide me away as if I’m something shameful," she said, her eyes hot and bitter as she stared fixedly out the windshield. "If you can’t associate with me out in the open, then stay the hell away from me."
He slammed his fist against the steering wheel. "Goddamn it, Faith! That cat wasn’t from the Welcome Wagon. I’m thinking of your safety! Yes, it would please the hell out of me if you moved to another town. My mother drives me crazy, but that doesn’t mean I want to hurt her. Am I supposed to apologize for loving her, despite everything? You know how to roll with the punches, but she doesn’t. I’m a greedy bastard; I want to do what’s best for her, and have you, too. If you moved, we could have a damn satisfying relationship, and I wouldn’t have to worry that some maniac is stalking you!"
"Then don’t. Let me do the worrying."
He made a sound of muffled anger and frustration. "You won’t budge an inch, will you?"

Again, she had to fight the urge to tell him that she had reasons for staying right where she was, reasons that went beyond their personal entanglement. The mood he was in, he wouldn’t believe her anyway.
They were out of town now, and there was very little traffic on the road. Soon he turned off on the secondary road that led to her house. She had never really noticed before how isolated her house was, at least not from the viewpoint of her own vulnerability. She had enjoyed the peace and quiet, the sense of space. *Damn* the unknown, unseen enemy, for destroying her pleasure in at last coming home.
She didn’t speak again until he turned in to her driveway. It was late afternoon, and the setting sun bathed the little house in a golden glow. In only a short while she had settled in here, surrounded by her own things, her own walls, covered by her own roof. Leave here? She couldn’t imagine it.
"Answer something for me," she said, one hand on the door handle. "I don’t want to have an affair with you, no matter where I live. Does that lessen your concern for my safety?"
He stopped her, wrapping his fingers around her wrist and holding her in the car. His eyes were black with anger, but he didn’t answer the insulting question, merely replied to the statement. "I can change your mind," he said softly. "We both know it."
She opened the door and he let her go, content that he’d had the last word. He often did, she thought. He had a knack for pushing the conversation further than she wanted it to go, so that her only recourse was silence.
She was aware of him sitting in the driveway, watching until she was safely in the house. He was right, damn him. He *could* change her mind, with little or no effort. Her statement had been a bluff, but not a lie. She didn’t *want* to have an affair with him, but that didn’t mean she would be able to resist him. If he had insisted on coming in with her now, after one kiss she would probably let him lead her straight into the bedroom. Afterward was when the regret would begin.
"Gray, what in hell were you thinking of?" Alex asked irritably. "Driving around town with her, arguing with her in front of the courthouse. My God, half the town saw you, and the other half heard about it within the hour."
Monica’s head came up, and she turned stricken eyes on Gray. He felt like throttling Alex for bringing up the subject in front of her.
"I was trying to convince her to leave," he replied shortly, and even without looking directly at her, he could see the tension ease in Monica’s body.

"Someone’s playing nasty tricks on her. Today a dead cat was left in her mailbox."
"A dead cat?" Alex made a face. "That’s disgusting. But why was she in your car?"
"She called me when she found it – "
"Why call you?" Monica demanded resentfully.
"Because." Gray knew his answer was blunt and uncommunicative, but he didn’t care. "I called Mike, and he came out to her house. He wanted both of us to go to the courthouse for fingerprinting – " Monica gave a sharp cry " – and Faith was still shaky, so I drove her there."
"Why did you have to be fingerprinted?" Monica asked, incensed. "Did she accuse you of doing it?"
"No, but I handled the box. If Mike didn’t know which fingerprints were ours, he couldn’t tell if there were any belonging to the son of a bitch who left the box."
Monica chewed on her lip. "Did he find anything?"
"I don’t know. When she was finished filing a report, I drove her home."
"Is she going to move?" Alex asked.
"Hell, no." Gray shoved an agitated hand through his hair. "She turned stubborn about it." Turned stubborn, nothing. She’d been born stubborn. He pushed away from the desk and got to his feet. "I’m going out."
"Now?" Monica asked, startled. "Where?"
"Just out." He was as restless and fractious as a stallion who could scent a mare in season, but couldn’t get to her. His blood was throbbing through his veins, urging him to action, any action. He felt as if there should be a violent thunderstorm brewing, but the weather was calm, and the lack of thunder frustrated him. "I don’t know what time I’ll be back. We’ll get to those papers tomorrow, Alex."
Baffled, worried, Monica watched him stalk out of the room. She chewed her lip some more. It sounded as if Gray was getting increasingly involved with the Devlin woman. She couldn’t understand how he could do it, after all the misery her family had caused. And Michael had been out to her house! Monica didn’t want him anywhere around Faith Devlin; those Devlin women were like spiders, spinning sticky little webs that trapped the men unwary enough to wander into their vicinity.
Alex shook his head, his own eyes worried. "I’ll go say good night to your mother," he said, and went upstairs. Noelle had retired to her own sitting

room not long after dinner, pleading fatigue, but the truth was that she was simply more comfortable upstairs.
He stayed up there for half an hour. Monica was still sitting in the study when she heard him coming down the stairs, his step slower than when he had gone up. He came to the door and paused, looking at her. Monica's head came up and she stared at him, stricken. His hand went to the light switch. Monica froze in dread, her breath clogging in her lungs, as he turned out the light.
"My dear," he said, and she knew the words were spoken to the woman upstairs.
Faith prowled the house, unable to interest herself in either reading or television. Despite her insistence on staying, she was more disturbed than she wanted to admit. She had to force herself to go into the kitchen, the memory of that box on the table was so strong. It was a relief to see the table bare, to find that the association faded as she made herself a skimpy meal. Skimpy or not, she could only eat half of it.
She called Renee again. She knew it was too soon, but some faint, long-buried instinct made her reach out to Mama, not so much in search of comfort but because there was a link between them beyond kinship: the Rouillard men.
To her relief, Renee answered. If her grandmother had answered, Faith knew that Renee never would have come to the phone.
"Mama," she said, and was disconcerted to hear her voice shake a little. "I need help."
There was silence on the other end of the line, then Renee said warily, "What's wrong?" Motherly concern wasn't a natural response for her.
"Someone left a dead cat in my mailbox, and I've gotten a couple of threatening notes, telling me to stop asking questions or I'll end up like the cat. I don't know who's doing it – "
"What kind of questions?"
Faith hesitated, afraid Renee would hang up on her. "About Guy," she admitted.
"Damn it, Faith!" Renee yelled. "I told you not to be nosing around, but would you listen? No, you have to stir shit up, and now the stink's gettin' too bad for you. You're going to get yourself killed if you don't shut up!"
"Someone killed Guy, didn't they? You know who did it. That's why you left."

Renee’s breathing sounded over the line, harsh and rapid. "Stay out of it," she begged. "I can’t tell, I promised never to tell. He has my bracelet. He said he’d blame the killing on me if I ever told, he said he’d put the bracelet where it would look like Guy and me had had a fight, and I’d killed him."
After the weeks of suspicion, of sifting through old rumors and continually coming to dead ends, to suddenly hear the truth was startling. It took Faith a moment to recover from the shock, to absorb it.
"You loved Guy," she said, her own conviction ringing in her voice. "You couldn’t have killed him."
Renee began to cry. It wasn’t noisy sobs, designed to gain sympathy. Her tears were betrayed by the sudden thickness in her voice. "He’s the only man I ever did love," she said, and Faith knew that whether or not Renee really had loved Guy, she believed she had, and that was enough.
"What happened, Mama?"
"I can’t tell – "
"Mama, please." Desperately Faith searched her mind for a reason that would mean something to Renee. It would take a lot to overcome her mother’s basic self-interest, and in this case, Faith couldn’t really blame her for looking out after number one. The only thing that had ever been greater than Renee’s self-absorption had been her greed… "Mama, as far as everyone is concerned, Guy is still alive somewhere. He hasn’t been declared dead, so that means his will hasn’t been read."
Renee sniffed, but the word "will" caught her interest. "So what?"
"So if he left anything to you, it would be in his will. You could have had a lot of money coming to you all these years."
"He always said he’d take care of me." A whining note of self-pity entered Renee’s voice. She took a deep breath, as if to calm herself, and Faith could almost hear the decision being made.
"We met at the summerhouse, as usual," Renee said. "We’d already… you know. Done it. Anyway, we were lyin’ in the dark talkin’ when he drove up. We didn’t know who it was, and Guy jumped up and grabbed his pants, afraid it might be one of his kids. He didn’t never worry about his wife none, because he knew she wouldn’t care.
"They went out to the boathouse to talk. I could hear them yellin’, so I put on my clothes and went down there. Guy opened the door and came out just as I got there. He stopped and looked back, and I’ll never forget, he said, ‘I’ve made up my mind.’ That’s when he was shot, right in the head. He fell

on the grass, there in front of the boathouse. I was on my knees beside him, yellin' and cryin', but he was dead when he hit the ground. He never even twitched."
"Was it Gray?" Faith asked, agony in her tone. It couldn't be. Not Gray. But she had to ask. "Did Gray kill his daddy?"
"Gray?" A startled note sounded through the tears. "No, not Gray. He wasn't there."
Not Gray. Thank you, God. *Not Gray.* No matter how she had told herself that he couldn't have done it, there must have been a hidden reservoir of doubt, because she felt a sudden relief, a lightening of spirit.
"Mama – Mama, no one would believe you shot Guy. Why didn't you go to the sheriff?"
"Are you kiddin'?" Renee gave a sharp laugh, which ended in a sob. "People in that town would believe anything about me. Most of 'em would've been glad to see me arrested even if they knew for certain I was innocent. Besides, he had it all figured out – "
"But you didn't even have a gun!"
"He was goin' to kill me, too! He said he'd put the gun in my mouth and make me pull the trigger, his hand over mine, if I didn't promise to leave and never come back, and never say nothing about it to anybody. He's strong, Faithie, strong enough to do it. I tried to fight him and he hit me, I couldn't get away – "
"Why *didn't* he kill you, then?" Faith asked, trying to make sense of why a murderer would deliberately let a witness go.
Renee couldn't answer for a moment, she was crying too hard. Finally she gulped, and regained shaky control of her voice. "He – he didn't mean to kill Guy, he was just so damn mad, he said. He didn't want to have to kill me too. He told me to go away, and he t-took my bracelet. He said if I ever came back, he could make it look like I'd killed Guy, and I'd get the death sentence. He can do it, you don't know him!" Her voice rose shrilly on the last sentence, and she dissolved once more into wrenching sobs.
Faith felt her own eyes burning. For the first time, she felt pity for her mother. Poor Renee, without education, influence, or friends, with all her wild living and lack of responsibility, had been a prime target for anyone who wanted to make her a scapegoat. She had seen the one man she cared for, the man she was depending on to make her life easy, shot to death, and then been threatened with having his death blamed on her. No, the killer had

gauged her well; there was no way Renee would have gone to the sheriff. She would have believed everything he said, probably with good reason.
"It’s all right, Mama," she said gently. "It’s all right."
"You – you won’t say anything? This has to be our secret, or he’ll have me arrested, I know he will – "
"I won’t let anyone arrest you, I promise. Do you know what he did with the body?"
Renee hiccuped, caught by surprise. "His body?" she asked vaguely. "I guess he must have buried it somewhere."
That was possible, but would the killer have wasted time digging a grave, a grave that might be noticed, with the lake right there? Weight the body, and the problem of disposal was solved.
"What kind of gun did he use? Did you see it?"
"I don’t know anything about guns. It was a pistol, is all I can tell you."
"Was it a revolver, like the ones used in Westerns, with the round chamber that the bullets fit into, or was it the kind with the clip in the handle?"
"Clip in the handle," Renee said after a moment’s thought.
An automatic. That meant the shell casing had been ejected, somewhere inside the boathouse. The killer had had a body to dispose of, and a witness to terrify into fleeing. Had he thought about the casing, gone back to pick it up?
What were the chances that a shell casing would still be there after twelve years? Almost none. But the place had fallen into disuse after Guy’s disappearance, so it was likely only the minimum upkeep had gone into the boathouse. The casing could have landed in the boat, or even in the water, to be lost forever.
It could also have landed in a corner, or behind something. Stranger things had happened.
"Don’t say anything," Renee begged. "Please don’t say anything. You never should have moved back there, Faithie; now he’s after you too. Leave before you get hurt, you don’t know him – "
"I might. Who is he, Mama? Maybe I can do something – "
Renee hung up the phone, the connection breaking in the middle of a sob.
Faith slowly replaced her own receiver. She had learned so much tonight, and still not enough. The most important thing was that Gray was innocent. The most frustrating thing was that she still had no idea who was guilty.

The killer was a "he." That eliminated Andrea Wallice and Yolanda Foster, even if Faith hadn't already decided they likely weren't guilty. Supposedly Lowell Foster hadn't known about his wife's affair with Guy until afterward, but the way gossip moved through the town like fat through a goose, it was possible some self-righteous busybody had taken it upon himself to enlighten the wronged husband. Never mind that the wronged husband had been screwing around with his secretary; that was different. So Lowell had to remain on her list.

Who would have been arguing with Guy that night, and why? A business associate, upset at some financial wheeling and dealing? The way Guy got around, an enraged husband was more likely. Who else had he been sleeping with that summer?

Faith couldn't find the answer to those questions tonight. She could, however, see for herself whether or not a stray shell casing was still lying overlooked in the boathouse.

She glanced at the clock. It was nine-thirty. If she was going to do it, night would be the best time, with much less chance of running into Gray and a much better chance of avoiding him if she did.

Faith wasn't one to tarry once she'd made a decision, though this time she paused long enough to put on sturdier shoes. She grabbed a flashlight on her way out the door.

She started to drive right to the summerhouse, on the private road, but changed her mind at the last minute. Someone might see her turn onto the road and notify the Rouillards, which she definitely didn't want. And if the god of misfortune smiled on her twice, and someone was at the summerhouse, she didn't want her headlights to give advance warning.

So she drove instead to the same place she had parked before, even though it meant walking a mile through the woods at night. It wasn't a problem for her. She had never been afraid of the dark, or of snakes and the other denizens of the forest, though she did pick up a stick to be on the safe side, if she did come upon a snake before the shy creature could slide away.

The woods at night were noisy, filled with rustles as the nocturnal animals went about their business. Possums and raccoons clambered in the trees, owls hooted, frogs croaked, insects zinged, night birds called, and crickets chirped frenetically. The breeze added its own whisper to the cacophony, the pine trees swaying gently. Faith took her time, making certain she didn't wander off track; when she came to the little creek, in exactly the same

place she had always crossed, she smiled at the accuracy of her old instincts. She paused to shine the light around the creek to make certain no water moccasins were enjoying a swim, then stepped onto the flat rock in the middle of the water and from there onto the other bank. From here, it was only a couple of hundred yards to the summerhouse.

Five minutes later she stopped at the edge of the clearing, taking stock before she left the cover of the trees. The house was dark and silent. She listened, but heard only the normal night sounds. The lake murmured, slapping against the dock pilings, its glassy surface rippling occasionally with a breeze and disturbing the reflection of the three-quarter moon. Night-feeding fish added their own ripples and the occasional quiet splash to the subtle commotion.

Faith walked down the slight slope to the house, her steps soundless.

She didn't know what she would do if the boathouse was locked, which, of course, it probably was, though the house had been open the other day when she'd been here. But Gray had also been here; he could have unlocked the house, gone inside to make certain nothing had been vandalized.

If she were a truly adventurous type, she thought wryly, she could swim under the wall of the boathouse and come up in the boat slip. To hell with locked doors.

Not bloody likely.

Nighttime underwater swimming wasn't her cup of tea. The thought of stripping down to her underwear and sliding beneath the surface of that dark water was enough to make her shiver. If the boathouse had been closed all these years, it was probably inhabited by mice, snakes, squirrels, maybe a raccoon or two, all of which would be startled by a visitor suddenly popping up from the water. No, she would much rather give any boathouse occupants sufficient warning to skedaddle, by jiggling door locks or maybe breaking windows, if the boathouse had a window. She had never noticed.

The boathouse loomed over the shiny black water, the white walls ghostly in the moonlight. As Faith crossed the graveled drive, she flicked the flashlight beam across the front of the wide doors, and stifled a groan of disappointment. A thick, shiny padlock was looped through both hasps, securing the doors with stainless steel. She might have jimmied or broken a normal door lock, but she couldn't do anything with that big padlock. Her only recourse now was a window.

There wasn’t one on the side facing the dock, only smooth blank wall. She walked around to the other side, and stared with mixed feelings at the window that sat like a black eye in a pale face. The good news was that it *was* a window, with breakable glass. The bad news was that solid ground ended about a foot shy of being directly underneath it. The window was also high enough that it would be difficult for her to hoist herself through; not impossible, not if she set her mind to it, but definitely difficult.
A very warm, very solid hand closed over her bare arm and whirled her around, bringing her against a hard, muscled body. "I told you what I’d do if I caught you here again," Gray said softly.

Sixteen

He carried her onto the porch, where the screens would protect them from the mosquitoes and other biting insects. Frightened almost out of her wits by his abrupt appearance, a panic that wasn't much relieved by recognition, Faith could do no more than cling to his shoulders as he lifted her in his arms and carried her swiftly across the grass, to the house.

She was submerged almost at once by & dark tide of desire, sucking her below the level of reason or will. Protest wasn't an option; the needs of her body, so long suppressed, surged to the forefront and pushed thought aside. She was shaking by the time he released her legs and let her body slide down, all along the front of his, the sweet friction almost painfully arousing. It was time. Dear God, it was past time. She wanted him with a blind, ferocious need that could no longer be delayed, and she clung to him, her body pliant, willing.

He backed her up against one of the square columns supporting the porch, pinning her against the wood. Despite the bright moonlight, it was dark there on the porch, dark and warm, scented with the perfumes of summer and his own hot, musky smell. His breathing was fast and urgent as he leaned heavily against her, pushing himself into the yielding softness of her body. He thrust his fingers into her hair, holding her skull cradled between his big, powerful hands, holding her head still for the deep thrust of his tongue into her mouth. He was fully aroused, his erection as hard as marble, straining against her belly.

Faith whimpered into his mouth, squirming hungrily against him, trying to lift herself enough so that she could cradle that thick ridge in the yielding notch between her legs. She was aching and empty, so empty, growing moist with the need to have him there.

His shirt was hanging open. The flesh where her fingernails dug into his shoulders was covered by cloth, but his chest was bare. She could feel his skin, slick with sweat, and the roughness of curly hair. Her breasts grew taut, her nipples rising hard and tight, throbbing with the need to be touched.

He tore his mouth away from hers, gasping for air, his chest working like bellows with each breath. Faith licked her bruised lips, tasting him on them, and tugged on the back of his neck to bring him back down to her. He

obliged at once, his mouth hard and biting, the primal force of it exciting her beyond what she had ever known before.

He cupped both of her breasts, roughly kneading them, and the relief was so acute that she made a small keening sound of both pleasure and want, but in only seconds that wasn't enough. He knew her need, or perhaps his own was the same, for he jerked at the front of her blouse and sent buttons flying, the small popping sounds loud in the bubble of silence that surrounded them. With one hand he released the front clasp of her bra and shoved the cups aside, baring the firm rise of her breasts to his hungry, demanding mouth. He wrapped one arm under her bottom and lifted her, his open mouth sliding down her chest, a damp path marking where his lips had been. A taut nipple popped into his mouth and he sucked hard at it, making her breast prickle with a sharp sensation that had her arching against him as if to throw him off. He responded by holding her tighter, gripping her bottom and grinding his erection into the soft notch between her legs. The blatant sexuality of his movements let loose the firestorm of her response, and helplessly she felt herself sliding down the dark, slippery tunnel toward climax.

She fought it; she didn't want this wild fever to end so soon. She shrank back against the wood, trying to pull her hips away from that hard ridge. She couldn't; his arm around her bottom kept her molded to him, allowing her so little movement that she couldn't even close her legs. A heavy coil tightened in her loins, the tension pulling tighter and tighter –

He set her on her feet again and jerked at her skirt, pulling it to her waist. Faith leaned weakly against the column, her senses whirling with the speed and violence with which this was happening. Dimly she thought of that time she had watched him making love, so slowly and tenderly, his smoky voice soothing and cajoling, crooning love words. She had thought it would be like that, but instead she was caught like Dorothy in a whirlwind, being hurled dizzily into uncharted territory. They were going at each other like animals, unable to slow down or inject any tenderness into the act, and she didn't care. The urgency was too strong, too immediate.

He wound his left hand in her skirt, holding it up and to the side, while with his right one he stripped her panties down. The night air washed over her naked buttocks, making her feel excruciatingly exposed, and she quivered in his grasp. He forced the panties down to her knees, then lifted one booted foot and set his toe in the crotch of the garment, pushing it down the rest of

the way. She heard fabric separate with a faint sibilant protest, then the cloth fell around her feet and he lifted her out of the ruins of her underwear. He braced her against the column, pulling her thighs wide and pushing himself between them. Faith’s head fell back; she heard her own panting breath as she waited in agonized anticipation for the hard thrust that would fill her emptiness, ease the deep ache of desire. His hand worked frenziedly between their bodies, fumbling with his belt, tearing at the fastening of his jeans, and the brush of his knuckles against her moist, yearning flesh was enough to make her cry out with longing. He managed to open the zipper and his straining flesh sprang free, pushing upward into the folds between her legs.

"I want to fuck you," he muttered indistinctly, the sound low and harsh as he hoisted her a bit, adjusting her position. "Let me in. *Now."* His hand was still between their bodies, his fingers moving with sure knowledge over her slick flesh. He found her soft, damp opening and sank one finger deep into her, drawing the moisture out to prepare her for his entry. Faith shuddered, her arms wrapping tight around his head as that long finger rasped exquisitely sensitive tissues and set off subterranean explosions of pleasure. Her inner muscles eagerly clasped the intruding finger, tightening, subtly caressing, and Gray swore with savage arousal. Unable to wait any longer, he withdrew his finger and guided the broad head of his penis into place. Faith went still, frozen by the enormous pressure between her legs as he began pushing into her. The fever of desire faded, banished by alarm. In a flash of clarity she remembered Lindsey Partain’s startled, panicked cry at his entry, and now she knew why. Then all thoughts fled, her mind focused only on the massively thick shaft that each short, powerful thrust of his hips forced deeper into her body. He grunted at the difficulty of penetration, his entire body taut and straining.

She writhed in his arms like a worm caught on a fishing hook, sharp little cries of distress breaking from her throat. Gray stopped, sweat dripping off his face to trace tiny paths down the slope of her bare breasts. Desperately he fought for control, the effort tearing at his guts.

"Shhh, shhh," he whispered, his lips pressed against the delicate curve of her jaw. The sound was a mere rustle of reassurance, wafted away in the night breeze. "It’s all right, baby. You can handle it. Just be still now, and let me get it in. I won’t hurt you, I’ll be real slow and easy." As he spoke he began rocking his hips back and forth, slight movements that coaxed her

taut muscles to relax, allowing the next forward rock to slide him deeper into the hot, wet, incredibly tight clasp of her. She moaned, shuddering in his arms. He felt her body arch convulsively, in an instinctive effort to accept and adjust to him; he tried to control the movement, but he was too late. The sharp, twisting movement impaled her on his rigid shaft, seating him to the hilt, and the hot gloving of her body made him feel as if his entire body was exploding.

Shock reverberated through her. She sagged weakly in his arms, her head falling back like a daisy on a broken stem. His hard-won control splintered. His hips jackhammered, driving in and out of her. She hung there, supported only by his driving body and the wooden column at her back. For a measureless length of time her senses narrowed to the thudding of her heart and the hard pounding of his body into hers, relentlessly battering. She clenched her hands on his shirt, twisting fistfuls of the fabric as she tried to endure, tossed helplessly about in the violent upheaval of his lust.

Then he stopped, a growl rough in his throat, as her physical and mental withdrawal registered through the demanding throb of his body. "No," he said with furious frustration. "I won’t let you pull back from me. Come for me, baby. Let me feel it."

Faith tried to speak, to say anything. *I can’t do it,* she thought, but no words would form on her lips. Climax, which had shimmered so maddeningly near a short while ago, now seemed totally out of reach. She felt painfully stretched, impaled, beyond pleasure.

But he adjusted his position, hooking his arms under her thighs and holding them wider apart, the weight of his torso pinning her to the column. She felt herself open completely, unable to either control or react to his thrusts. He briefly freed one hand, reaching down to find the small sexual bud at the top of her sex, using his finger and thumb to open the protective fold and expose it. He adjusted his position again, moving deep into her so that he pressed hard against the little nub, and then he began again to thrust.

Lightning speared through her body, gathering between her legs. She had no defense against the rush of sensation, ruthlessly intensified with every inward thrust. He had known exactly what he was doing, inexorably forcing her toward orgasm. In seconds she was moaning with the return of desire; in less than a minute the fury was upon her, and she screamed with the force of her release, her body arching and shuddering in his restraining arms. It

went on and on, so strong that she knew nothing else, reduced to a completely physical being.
Her spasms had barely slowed when his began, and he bucked heavily under the lash of it, his head thrown back and his neck corded as he shook and pulsed. A deep, harsh groan rumbled up from his chest, repeated again and again in rhythm with his pumping hips.
The aftermath was silent, punctuated only by the rapid harshness of their breathing and the occasional, involuntary little moan or grunt as laggard nerve endings twitched in the remnants of pleasure. Faith was dazed, her head drooping forward to lie against his shoulder. He sagged heavily in her arms, the column supporting them both. Where naked flesh touched, sweat glued them together. Their clothes were damp and twisted. She felt as numb as if she had just been through a battle.
His breathing slowed and he gathered himself, as if every movement was an effort. His heart was thudding against her breast, each beat slow and heavy. He withdrew carefully from her body, holding her steady when she tensed, for even with the slickness of his climax easing the way, her swollen tissues released him with almost as much difficulty as she had accepted him.
Gray was stunned, rocked to the foundation by the intensity of what had just occurred. That wasn’t sex. He’d had sex before, more times than he could count. Sex was a pleasure, sometimes gentle, sometimes raunchy; an appetite, persistent but easily satisfied. What he’d just had with Faith was as powerful and unstoppable as an avalanche, a fire that left him scorched and already needing to feel the flame again. He could feel her lithe, tender body trembling in his arms, and he wanted to lie down with her, comfort her, and then thrust himself deep into her again. He wanted it with a violence that twisted in his guts. Because he didn’t trust himself not to do it, he let his arms drop from around her.
Shaken, only one thought came to his mind. "My God," he said, his voice still harsh from his wrenching climax. "If fucking Renee was like that, I understand why Dad couldn’t stay away from her."
Faith froze, the delicious heat of their mating turning cold under the bite of his words. She didn’t respond to his insulting crudeness, though it had been effective. If he had set out to make her feel cheap, he had succeeded admirably. Humiliation and misery pooled in her stomach, forcing her to clench her teeth against a sudden rise of nausea. She had felt as if her heart

were leaving her body, but to him it had been – what? A measure of revenge? Renee was beyond his reach, so take it out on her daughter?
She didn’t look at him as she fumbled her clothing back into order. Her bra was twisted, but she finally managed to secure the clasp. There were no buttons left on her blouse, so she tied the shirttail into a knot at her waist. She bent to pick up her panties, intending to put them on, but they were ripped beyond wearing. Color burned in her face, but thankfully the darkness hid that bloom of shame from him.
Silently she slipped the ruined, flimsy underwear into the pocket of her skirt and turned away, walking with as much dignity as possible, under the circumstances. It wasn’t much. How could a woman have any dignity when she had just been taken, standing up, with all the grace and tenderness of a sailor just off a six-month cruise nailing a whore in an alley? Her legs trembled like noodles, her loins ached from the battering, and, even worse, his semen was wet between her thighs.
She opened the screen door and wobbled down the steps. The flashlight lay where she had dropped it, the beam illuminating blades of grass and the darting insects attracted by the light. She retrieved it, and collided with him as she straightened. He moved like a ghost, she thought; she hadn’t heard him leave the porch. She stepped around him, and he caught her arm, dragging her to a halt.
"Where the hell do you think you’re going?"
"Back to my car."
He snorted. "If I wouldn’t let you walk back alone during the daytime, you can sure as hell bet you won’t do it at night."
She could feel an angry tension in him, but she was too exhausted and sick to worry about it. Gently she disengaged her arm, still not looking at him. "I grew up roaming these woods. I don’t need an escort."
"Get in the car," he said, that soft, steely edge in his voice that said he’d made his decision and wasn’t going to change it. "I’ll take you back."
Car? Bewildered, Faith looked around. Until now, she hadn’t had time to wonder how he’d gotten to the summer-house. She saw the Jaguar now, parked by the side of the house rather than in the drive. As always, she had approached from the other side, so she hadn’t seen it. What evil genie had prompted him to park there, instead of in the drive? If she had seen the car, she never would have left the safety of the woods.

He was propelling her toward the car, and Faith didn’t waste her time arguing. She simply wanted to get away from him, and the fastest way to do that was to give in and get it over with.
He opened the car door and urged her inside with a hand on the small of her back. Faith sat down, sighing shakily at the relief of being off her trembling legs. He walked around and slid under the steering wheel, his powerful hands sure and competent as he started the motor and put the transmission into gear. "Are you parked the same place you were before?" he asked, that muted anger humming through his tone.
"Yes," she murmured, then lapsed into silence. Maintaining that silence seemed to be both the safest and easiest thing to do, so she concentrated on staring at the dark trees sliding past the car window.
The road looped around the lake, entered the highway, and then he had to take another turn onto the rutted track that had once led to her home. Getting there didn’t take much less time than if she had walked, but for all the tension, she was grateful she hadn’t had to put her shaky limbs to the test. She probably would have stumbled over every root and rock in her path.
The Jaguar purred around a curve and her car came into view. She felt for her keys, and her searching fingers patted an empty pocket. Panic twisted her stomach. "I’ve lost my keys," she said thinly. Of course she had. Her skirt had practically been over her head. It would have been a miracle if the keys had stayed in her pocket.
"Here." A small, jangling heap landed in her lap. "I picked them up."
Her cold hand closed over the keys as Gray stopped the Jaguar beside her car, and she had her door open before he could let out the clutch and turn off the ignition. She stumbled out, ignoring his demand to wait, and frantically sorted through the keys in her hand, looking for the one to open the car door. She found it, and turned it in the lock. Gray was out of the car, coming around the front of it toward her. She jerked open the door and slid inside.
He said, "Faith," but she jammed the key into the ignition and started the engine, then pulled the gear lever down and started moving with the door still open. She leaned out and slammed it, wrenching it away from Gray’s hands, and left him standing as she reversed too rapidly down the track until she reached a spot wide enough for her to turn around.

Gray stood in the middle of the road, watching her headlights veer crazily as she maneuvered the car, followed by the red dots of her taillights disappearing. His hands were knotted into fists, tight with the effort it took not to get in his car and chase her down. She was too shaky, drawn so tight, any more pressure could make her shatter. If he chased her, she was likely to drive headlong into a tree.

He turned back to the car, cursing viciously under his breath. If he could reach his own ass, he'd have kicked it. God, of all the stupid, boneheaded, downright *cruel* things to say! The irony of it wasn't lost on him. He had smooth-talked more women than he could remember, and none of them had meant a hill of beans to him. But with Faith, who tied his guts in knots, he managed to say exactly the worst thing possible. She had immediately withdrawn into herself, all of that wonderful fire reduced to ash, her face as smooth and blank as a doll's. He had seen that expression once before, on another night he'd never forget, and he hoped to God he never saw it again.

The tumultuous events of the day had left him more than a little shaken himself. First there was finding that damn mangled cat on Faith's table, then the frustration of trying to convince her that she could be in danger, damn it, and it would be in her own best interest if she moved away from Prescott. Telling her that was like talking to a fence post, except the fence post at least wouldn't argue back. She just got that stubborn look, her chin went in the air, and she dug those dainty heels in deeper than the Grand Canyon. Then Alex had gotten huffy about Faith being in the car with him, as if she were contaminated somehow, damn it, and Monica had looked as if he'd slapped her in the face with a fish.

He'd driven out to the lake for complete solitude, and he'd been sitting on the porch with his back against the wall, watching the moonlight on the water and sorting through the day's irritants, when Faith had drifted by, as silently as a ghost. He'd stared, not trusting his eyes, fighting the surge of fury that she'd evidently walked through the woods at night, because she sure as hell hadn't driven there. She'd headed straight to the boathouse, the beam of her flashlight flickering over it. What in *hell* was she looking for? This was twice he'd caught her prowling around.

And then the lust had hit him, washing away everything else. He'd warned her, and the fact that she was here meant she was willing to pay the price. He wanted to believe he could have stopped if she'd said no, but he was glad he hadn't been put to the test. She hadn't said no, she hadn't said

anything. Instead she had squirmed against him as if she were trying to get inside his skin, and the top of his head had damn near come off. She had been sweet and hot, her body arching into his touch, her mouth tender and wild. At that moment, nothing and no one could have kept him off of her, and he was still shaking from the results.

He had called her a Puritan, and been right on target. He shook his head, still trying to come to grips with what he'd learned about her tonight. Faith Devlin Hardy, the daughter of a drunk and a whore, didn't drink, didn't smoke, and didn't screw around. He'd had virgins who weren't as tight. She had probably been a virgin when she'd married, and Gray was abruptly certain that he was the only man she'd been with since her husband had died. For all the searing sensuality with which she responded to him, she was a bit of a prude. Not judgmental of others, but certainly holding herself to strict standards.

It was because of her parents, of course. Growing up the way she had, Faith was determined that she would never be like them.

That was fine with him, as long as she didn't try to retrench and keep herself from him. He had a feeling that was exactly what she would do, and no way in hell was he going to let her get away with it.

Don't think about it. Don't think about *him.*

Faith woke early from a restless sleep, her eyes heavy, feeling as tired as when she had gone to bed. She had shut thoughts of Gray from her mind last night, ignoring the lingering throb from his use of her body, even blanking him out while she showered away the evidence of that use. But for all her will, her subconscious had betrayed her, admitting him into her dreams so that she had awakened to find herself reaching for him, her flesh trembling with eager need.

For four years, the needs of her body had been so firmly repressed as to be nonexistent, but she had no control where Gray was concerned. She might as well admit it. Last night he had ruthlessly aroused her, forcing her to a completion that had eluded her, and now her body wanted more. It didn't seem to matter that she was sore and stiff, or that he had battered her mind with hurtful words; physically, she wanted him. She wanted more of that violent, shattering pleasure. She hadn't known it could be like that, and the discovery left her both stunned and humiliated.

He had treated her like a whore. He had seduced Lindsey Partain with patience and tender care, and Faith had seen it, so she knew the difference.

He had murmured French love words to Lindsey, and raw Anglo-Saxon sex words to herself. Evidently only his social equals rated consideration. Her soul writhed with shame, but her body was already craving more of that rough treatment. Maybe he'd been right in the way he'd treated her. Maybe her heritage had only been dormant all these years, and was now coming to life.

He wouldn't leave her alone. She knew that as well as she knew her own name. He had tried to get her to move away from Prescott so they could be together, but perhaps the opposite tack would be more effective. She would try, but she wouldn't be able to avoid him completely, and she didn't know how many more encounters with him her self-esteem could take.

She still had to find out who had killed Guy. Not so much for herself now, but for Gray. Guy's family deserved to know that he hadn't run out on them. She hadn't been able to get into the boathouse, and she needed to do that. She needed to check with Detective Ambrose and see if he had found Mr. Pleasant. She needed to ask more questions, prod a killer into action, for only if he moved would she be able to see him.

Seventeen

The telephone drove her crazy that day. Faith thought about unplugging the damn thing, but reminded herself that she still had a business to run. She didn't have a separate line for the fax, so the phone had to stay in operation. She did let the answering machine screen her calls. Unfortunately, most of them were from Gray.

His tone in the first message had been both exasperated and soothing. "I wanted to see you today, but I had to go to New Orleans first thing this morning. I'm there now, and it looks like I won't get back until late tonight." Well, that was a relief, she thought. Now she wouldn't be on edge, afraid he would show up on her front porch at any moment.

The message continued, his voice sliding into a deeper, more intimate tone. "We need to talk, baby. Do you want me to come by tonight when I get home? I'll call you back later."

"No!" Faith shouted at the phone as he hung up and the answering machine clicked oif.

It was about half an hour later when realization dawned on her. Gray was in New Orleans. She wasn't anxious to return to the summerhouse, but at least if she went now, she knew she would be safe from detection. This might be the best chance she'd ever get, and she wouldn't even have to walk through the woods.

If she broke out the window, Gray would immediately suspect she had done it, since he had caught her slipping around the boathouse the night before. Besides, climbing through the window would be difficult without a ladder, and she didn't own one. But it wasn't night now, and she was a good swimmer. What had been unthinkable the night before was very doable under a bright morning sun.

The phone was ringing when she left the house with her supplies in hand. Not normally prepared for this kind of adventure, she made do. She had changed into her old swimsuit, and covered it with slacks and a blouse. In a bag she carried two towels and her flashlight, which she might need for searching dark corners. The flashlight wasn't waterproof, so she had sealed it in a Ziploc plastic bag. For her safety, she also carried the longest butcher knife from the kitchen. She didn't know what use she would have for it – she hoped she wouldn't be close enough to an angry snake that she had to stab it – but carrying it made her feel better, so she did.

She was almost gleeful as she drove out to the summer-house. Twice before she had tried to search the place, and twice Gray had caught her. The third time was the charm.

When she reached the lake, she resolutely refused to look at the summerhouse, but she couldn't entirely escape the memories of what had transpired there on the porch. How could she, when she felt the soreness between her legs with each step she took? But she also felt a faint throb of desire, and she hated herself for it.

Hurriedly she undressed, and beat on the door to the boathouse to roust any inhabitants. She didn't hear any scurrying, or the plop of anything into the water, so perhaps the place was clear. Nevertheless, she beat on the door again, and rattled the chain for good measure. Satisfied that she had done all she could in that regard, she walked out onto the dock until she was even with the garage door that sealed the boathouse on the lake side.

Gray and Monica and their friends had swum here often during the summers; Faith had sneaked into the water for a swim on more than one occasion herself, but never when anyone else was present. She wasn't afraid of being in the water alone, and she knew how deep it was around the dock. Clutching the plastic-enclosed flashlight in one hand, she entered the water with a shallow dive, and surfaced with a gasp at the coldness. By July and August, the water would be pleasantly warm, but this was the end of May and it still held some of the winter chill. She swam briefly back and forth, acclimatizing herself to both the water and the activity, and in a moment the temperature felt much better.

It would be dark under the boathouse. Fumbling through the plastic, she switched on the flashlight, then didn't give herself any more time to think. Taking a deep breath, she dove beneath the edge of the door.

Visiblity was poor, even with the flashlight, and beneath the boathouse it was almost stygian. Above her was a rectangle of light, thankfully unoccupied by a boat, which would have made climbing out more difficult. Faith kicked for the light, and her head popped out of the water almost before she realized she had broken the surface. She reached out and grasped the edge of the boat slip to steady herself, and placed the flashlight on a solid surface. Only then did she brush her hair out of her face so she could clearly see her surroundings.

The interior of the boathouse was dim and mostly empty. She hauled herself out of the water and stood dripping, looking around and letting her eyes

grow accustomed to the dimness. Once the boathouse had been littered with air mattresses and inner tubes, with life jackets festooned on wall hooks. The ski boat had rocked gently against the padded edges of the slip, and cases of marine oil had been stacked in one corner. All of that was gone. The boathouse had been emptied and cleaned; all it held now was a lawn mower, of the push variety, a yard rake, and a worn broom. There was no chance a single shell casing would have remained in place for twelve years. Knowing it was useless, she looked anyway. She shone the flashlight into every corner, got down on her hands and knees and looked from that angle. Nothing, Well, it had been a long shot anyway, she consoled herself. She had tried, and had enjoyed a nice morning swim.

She dove back into the water and under the door, surfacing into bright sunlight. This time there were no surprises waiting for her. Uneventfully she climbed onto the dock and stripped off the wet swimsuit, then toweled dry and dressed, having also had the foresight to bring along dry underwear. Except for her wet hair, she looked perfectly normal as she drove back to her house.

The answering machine held two more messages from Gray.

"Where are you, baby? Are you sleeping late, and have the phone turned off? I'll call back."

She buried her face in her hands. The machine beeped, and played another message. "You can't put it off forever. You have to talk to me sooner or later. Pick up the phone, baby."

She went to shower the lake water out of her hair. She heard the phone ringing even with the water running, and tried to ignore the sensation of being hounded. It wasn't easy. The calls continued all day long, each message becoming more and more irritated. He stopped cajoling, and started demanding.

"Faith, damn it, pick up the phone! If you think I'm going to let you ignore me – " He hung up without finishing the threat.

In between calls from Gray, she placed one to New Orleans, but Detective Ambrose wasn't available. She left a message for him, and waited for him to return her call.

It was late afternoon before he did so. She snatched up the receiver as soon as she heard the detective's voice. "This is Faith Hardy, Detective. Have you found Mr. Pleasant yet?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Hardy. I’m sorry. His car hasn’t been found, either." His voice gentled. "Frankly, it doesn’t look good. He doesn’t fit the profile of someone who would disappear voluntarily; he had nothing to run from, and nothing to run to. He could have lost control of his car, had a heart attack, gone to sleep… If the car left the road and went into a bayou or river…" He let the sentence trail off, but Faith didn’t need it spelled out. He thought a fisherman would eventually find Mr. Pleasant.
"Will you let me know?" she whispered, blinking back tears.
"Yes, ma’am, just as soon as I hear anything."
He wouldn’t hear anything, though. Faith replaced the receiver in its cradle. Guy Rouillard had been murdered. It wasn’t just a theory now; her mother had witnessed it. Mr. Pleasant had been asking pointed questions about Guy’s disappearance. Would the murderer just have sat tight, figuring there was no evidence to be found, or would the fact that Mr. Pleasant was an investigator make him nervous? Nervous enough to commit another murder, perhaps?
That sweet little man was dead, and it was her fault.
No sooner had the thought registered than she rejected it. No, it wasn’t her fault, it was the fault of the murderer. She wasn’t willing to absolve him of one iota of blame.
Finding proof of Guy’s murder would be extremely difficult, after twelve years. Mr. Pleasant had been missing less than two weeks. It would be smarter to concentrate on finding Mr. Pleasant. The evidence wouldn’t be destroyed by time.
If she had killed someone, where would she hide the body? In Guy’s case, the most likely answer was the lake. At the time of the murder, the boat had been right there. What would have been easier than to take him out to the deepest part of the lake, weight his body, and push him overboard? Such a convenient means had been lacking in Mr. Pleasant’s case. For one thing, he probably hadn’t been at the lake, and for another, there was no boat. So where would the killer try to dispose of the body?
Someplace where he wasn’t likely to be seen. There were plenty of woods around for a hasty burial. Every so often, hunters would stumble across a body that had lain hidden for months, even years. But the killer had already successfully concealed one murder, so wouldn’t he be likely to use the same method to dispose of a second body? If she thought so, and she did, then the Rouillard private lake was the place to search.

She couldn’t do it by herself. She was willing to tackle almost any job, but she had sense enough to know when she needed help. The lake would need to be dragged. That required boats, people, equipment. The sheriff could order it done, but she would have to convince him there was cause, and that the lake was the place to look. She couldn’t do that without telling what she knew about Guy.

And she couldn’t tell what she knew about Guy without first telling Gray. She couldn’t let him find out from someone else, couldn’t let his family be dragged into this mess without warning. Despite the hurt that still compressed her chest, despite the fact that she was too ashamed of herself to face him, she would somehow have to bring herself to tell him his father had been murdered, and she didn’t know if she could do it.

Right on cue, the telephone rang. Faith closed her eyes.

"Goddamn it, Faith!" The muted fury in his voice came through loud and clear. "If you don’t pick up the phone and tell me you’re all right, I’m calling Mike McFane to come out there – "

She grabbed the receiver. "I’m all right!" she yelled, and slammed it back down. The *persistence* of the man!

The phone rang again, after just enough time for him to have redialed the number. "All right," he said when the machine answered, his voice under control now, though the anger still seethed in every word. "I shouldn’t have said what I did. I was an asshole, and I’m sorry."

"I’m sorry you’re an asshole, too," Faith muttered at the phone.

"You can kick my ass or slap my face tomorrow, whichever you want," he continued. "But don’t think you’re going to avoid me forever, because I’m not about to let it happen."

The line clicked as he hung up, and she sent up a hopeful prayer that he would stop calling now.

The phone rang again. She groaned. The machine picked up.

"I didn’t wear a rubber last night," he calmly informed her.

"I noticed," she said sarcastically.

"I’d bet my ass you aren’t using any kind of birth control, either," he said.

"Think about it." The line clicked off again.

"You *fiend!"* Faith shrieked, her face turning red with rage. Think about it! How was she supposed to think about anything else, now that he’d so kindly brought the matter to her attention?

She stomped around the house, angry at both Gray and herself. They had no excuse; they weren't irresponsible teenagers, operating on hormones instead of brains – but that was exactly how they had acted. How could they have been so careless? She should have thought of the possibility of pregnancy before, but she had been so upset and miserable that consequences hadn't occurred to her.

Well, they were occurring now, with a vengeance. As if she didn't already have enough to worry about!

She was so panicked that it was half an hour before she thought to consult the calendar and count days. When she did, she sagged with relief. Her period was due to start in a week, and she had always been very regular. Nothing was certain, but the odds were on her side.

The next morning there was another note. Faith had been careful to keep her car locked since the first one, so this one was secured under the windshield wiper. She noticed it when she glanced out the window, and went out to investigate. When she saw what it was, she didn't touch it. She didn't want to know what it said. It had evidently been there all night, because the paper was wet with dew, the ink smeared.

She hadn't heard anything last night, even though she had slept restlessly once again. At least it was just a note, rather than another mutilated animal.

She was still in her pajamas, having just finished breakfast. Leaving the note where it was, she returned to the house. Within fifteen minutes she had dressed, put on her makeup, brushed her hair, and was on the way out the door.

She unlocked the car door and dropped her purse into the seat. Being careful not to tear the soggy paper, she lifted the windshield wiper and retrieved the note, holding one corner between thumb and forefinger. Then she got in the car and drove straight to the courthouse.

She parked in front of the square and, holding the note exactly the way she had before, marched up the three long, shallow steps. There was an information desk stationed just inside the doors, and she paused to ask a blue-haired little woman exactly where the sheriffs office was located.

"Just down this hall, dear, and to the left." The little woman pointed to her own left, and Faith obediently turned.

The smell of the courthouse was surprisingly pleasant, settling her jangled nerves a bit. It was composed of paper and ink, cleaning compounds, the ever-changing mix of people, and the cool gray scent of the marble floors

and halls. The courthouse had been built fifty or sixty years before, when buildings had individual character. It had, of course, been "updated" several times over the years, with fluorescent lights replacing the original incandescent ones, so the clerks could have headaches to go along with the cheaper lighting costs. Window air-conditioning units were attached like barnacles to the building, growing randomly from office windows. In some places, though, particularly the hallways, ceiling fans still whirled lazily through the workday, keeping the air moving and fresh.

She reached the end of the hallway and turned left, to find another hallway stretching before her. Five doors down she came to an open set of double doors, with SHER DEPAR stenciled on the left half and IFF'S TMENT on the right, so that they made whole words only if the doors were closed. Inside was a long room with a high counter running the length of it; behind the counter were several desks, the dispatch radio, and two offices, one of which was slightly bigger than the other. The biggest office had Sheriff McFane's name on the door, which was half-open, but Faith couldn't see into the office from where she was standing. Photographs of past sheriffs hung on the wall, the extent of the parish's efforts at decoration. It wasn't a cheerful effect.

A middle-aged woman in a brown deputy's uniform looked up as Faith approached the counter. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to speak with Sheriff McFane, please."

The deputy peered over her reading glasses at Faith, obviously recognizing her from her visit the day before yesterday. All she said, though, was, "What's your name?"

"Faith Hardy."

"Let me see."

She went into Sheriff McFane's office with only a perfunctory knock, and Faith heard the murmur of voices. The deputy came out, said, "Come through there," and indicated a half door at the end of the counter. She hit a buzzer located under the counter, and the door clicked open.

Sheriff McFane came to the door of his office to greet her. "Good morning, Mrs. Hardy. How're you doin' today?"

For answer, Faith held up the note. "I got another one."

The good humor faded from his face, and he was instantly serious. "I don't like this at all," he murmured, plucking an evidence envelope from a desk

and holding it open for Faith to drop in the note. She released it with the air of one disposing of smelly trash. "What does it say?"
"I haven't read it. It was under my windshield wiper this morning when I got up. I've only touched one corner, so I wouldn't smear any fingerprints, assuming any are left. The paper's wet," she explained.
"Dew. That means it had been on your windshield for several hours. Actually, we have several good prints already, from the other note and the box. The problem is, we won't be able to find a match unless the note writer has been fingerprinted before." He ushered her into his office and dumped the note out onto his desk blotter.
"Since you haven't read it yet, let's see what it says." He opened the lap drawer of his desk and pawed through the contents, finally coming up with eyebrow tweezers. Using the tweezers and the tip of a pen, he carefully unfolded the damp paper. Faith angled her head to read the block letters:
YOU'RE NOT WANTED HERE LEAVE BEFORE YOU GET HURT
"Same person," Sheriff McFane said. "No punctuation."
"A deliberate signature?"
"Maybe, but could be it's just a departure from his usual style, sort of camouflage." He frowned at her. "Mrs. Hardy – Faith – Gray and I both told you the other day, living out there all by yourself could be dangerous."
"I'm not going to move," she said, repeating a sentence she must have said twenty times when she had been here to fill out the report on the dead cat.
"Then how about getting yourself a dog? It doesn't have to be a guard dog, just one that will set up a racket if it hears anything outside."
Surprised, she stared at him. A dog. She'd never had a pet of any kind, so that option simply hadn't occurred to her. "Why, I think I will. Thank you, Sheriff. That's a good idea."
"Good. Get one as soon as possible. Stop by the pound and pick out a young, healthy one. A half-grown youngster would be good, still young enough to take to you real quick, but old enough that it can bark, not just make puppy yaps." He looked down at the note on his desk. "About all I can do right now is have my deputies drive by your house a couple of times each shift. We just don't have much to go on."
"And a few notes and a dead cat aren't exactly the crime of the century."
He gave her a quick grin, full of Huckleberry Finn charm. "Can't even get 'im for cruelty to animals. If it makes you feel any better, the cat wasn't tortured. It was a road kill. Somebody just scooped it up, is all. It makes *me*

feel a little better about the danger of the situation. A real psycho would have enjoyed killing a cat."
It did make her feel better. The memory of that mangled little corpse had made her feel sick every time it came to mind. The cat was still just as dead, but at least if it had been hit by a car, it had probably died instantly. She couldn’t bear to think that it had suffered.
She left the sheriffs department and retraced her path. Halfway down the long corridor, she saw a tall, powerfully built man with long, dark hair stop to speak to the little blue-haired lady.
Faith’s heart almost stopped. Without missing a step she whipped around to go back toward the sheriffs department, panicked at the thought of facing him again after the rawness of their last meeting. It was a purely instinctive reaction; her mind knew she needed to talk to him, but her body fled.
She heard the low rumble of his voice, recognizable anywhere, and speeded her steps. As she reached the end of the hallway and turned the corner, she glanced back and saw him striding rapidly toward her, his long legs shrinking the distance between them at an alarming rate. His dark eyes were locked on her.
She whisked around the corner, and the women’s rest room was right there, on the left. She saw the sign and darted inside, then pushed the door closed and stood with one hand pressed to her chest in an effort to calm the thudding of her heart. She glanced around. She was alone in the tiny, two-stall facility, and she waited, frozen, for the sound of his footsteps passing by.
The door swung abruptly inward, forcing her to jump back to avoid being hit. Gray filled the doorway, big and muscular and threatening, a dark scowl on his face. His eyes glittered like black ice.
Faith tried to back away, but she bumped against the wash-area counter. There was very little room for maneuvering in the tiny rest room. "You can’t come in here!"
He stepped forward and shut the door. "Are you sure about that?"
She took a deep breath, reaching for calmness. "Someone will come in."
"Maybe." He moved closer, so close that only inches separated them and she had to tilt her head back to see him. "Maybe not. You chose the place, I didn’t,"
"I didn’t choose anything," she snapped. "I was trying to avoid you – "
"I noticed," he said dryly. "What are you doing here?"

There was no reason not to tell him. "I found another note on my car this morning. I brought it to Sheriff McFane."
His scowl grew darker. "Damn it, Faith – "
"He told me to get a dog," she said, interrupting the sermon. "I was just on my way to the pound."
"That's a good idea. Don't bother with the pound, though; I'll get one for you. Why didn't you answer the phone yesterday?"
"I didn't want to talk to you." She glared up at him. "I'll get my own dog, thank you. And I'm not pregnant."
His dark brows arched. "How do you know? Did you start your period?"
"No, but it isn't the right time of the month."
He snorted. "Honey, I'm Catholic. I know a lot of kids who got their start at the wrong time of the month."
"Maybe you do, but you can take my word on this." As she spoke, she tried to slide sideways.
Gray put his hands on her waist, trapping her. "For God's sake, stand still," he said irritably. "You're always trying to run away. What do you think I'm going to do to you?"
"The same thing you did the last time I saw you," she retorted, then blushed. As much as she had dreaded meeting him again, now that it had happened, she felt the usual rush of excitement. No matter what, she could never be matter-of-fact about being with him, whether in battle or anything else. Gray wasn't a man who elicited boredom in the people around him. He was too big, too vital, too overwhelmingly male and sexual. Even as a child she had responded to his presence, and now that she was a woman, the effect he had on her was painfully magnified. She would try not to let *him* know it, but she couldn't lie to herself. Already her body was tightening, growing warm and moist with response. It was instinctive, and totally separate from the dictates of her mind.
His brows lowered over those midnight eyes, which began to glitter. "You liked it," he said softly, dangerously. "Don't try to pretend you weren't willing. I felt every little ripple, baby."
Faith felt the color intensify in her cheeks, and not just from embarrassment. If only he hadn't touched her, if only he weren't so close that she could smell him, hot and musky and deliciously male. "No," she said just as softly. "I wasn't saying that." She paused, gathering herself for the lie of her life. "I just don't want to do it again. It was a mistake, and – "

"You’re lying." His gaze was on her breasts. Slowly his eyes lifted, and his expression changed again, tightening with lust. "Your nipples are puckered," he whispered, "and I haven’t even kissed you yet."
Her breath caught. She didn’t have to look down to see if he was telling the truth; she could feel the heavy tightness of her breasts, feel her nipples rasping against the lace that covered them. Warmth was gathering in her body, seeping down to pool in her loins. She stared helplessly at him.
Color darkened his high cheekbones, and his breathing deepened. "Faith," he murmured.
The tension was like a cord between them, thrumming with awareness. She felt as if the cord were being reeled in, inexorably pulling them together. Panicked, she flattened her hands on his chest and pushed, with a total lack of results. "We can’t," she said weakly. "Not here, for God’s sake!"
He wasn’t listening. His eyes were fastened on her mouth. He said, "What?" in an absent tone as his hands tightened on her waist and pulled her against him. She moaned aloud at the feel of his hard, vital body pressed all along her. He bent his head to kiss her, and she automatically lifted her mouth. His lips were soft, his mouth hot. Response thrilled through her, as irresistible as the tide, and her hands stopped pushing against him to clench fistfuls of his shirt. He urged her even closer, and slanted his head to deepen the kiss, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She made *a* little "hmmm" of delight and sucked at it, curling her own tongue upward to stroke his.
He shuddered as if struck, and cupped her buttocks to lift her hard against his thick erection. The heat of desire exploded into a wildfire, melding them together. He tore his mouth free and groaned, "Jesus," as he jerked up her skirt and roughly shoved her panties down her thighs.
The sink counter was cold against her bare buttocks, and she blinked at the shock, surfacing a bit from the dark tide. "Wait," she blurted.
"I can’t." His voice was rough, shaky. He gripped her hips with one arm as he bent to strip her panties completely off. Before she could react, he straightened and hoisted her onto the counter. Pushing her thighs apart, he moved between them, then began jerking frenziedly at the zipper of his fly. He grunted as he freed his erection, and then guided himself to her. Faith dug her nails into his heavy shoulders as she felt the heat of his naked flesh pressing against her soft folds, burrowing between them, searching for the opening to her body. He found it, and she moaned at the pressure as that heavy invasion began. He pushed into her, stretching her almost unbearably.

She was still a little sore from the first time, and he felt even more massive than before.
Then he was in her to the hilt, and he paused, resting his damp forehead against hers. "God, you’re tight as a fist," he gasped. She was trembling violently, and he gathered her closer, stroking her back, comforting her. After a moment he moved experimentally, restrained little thrusts that set oif spasms of painfully intense pleasure and made both of them shudder wildly.
"Just putting it in you makes me ready to come." His voice was thick, his breath warm in her ear. He thrust a little harder, a little faster. She felt the thick ridge of his penis head moving back and forth inside her, and her inner muscles clamped down in frantic pleasure. She moaned again, digging her nails into him in an effort to control that wild rush. He cursed, the words low and shaky with delight. Putting his hand on her bare bottom, he pulled her to the edge of the counter, positioning her so that every thrust ground him against her exposed, straining little sexual nub. It was what he had done before, and she had no more defense against it than she’d had the first time. He began thrusting heavily into her, pounding toward orgasm. She felt on fire, arching helplessly to meet his hips, the ecstatic tension in her loins coiling violently, out of control, her body taken over by and intent on this swelling, ungovernable pleasure.
The door creaked as it began to open.
Gray moved like lightning, slapping his left palm against the door and slamming it shut before it had opened more than a fraction of an inch.
"Hey!" a woman squawked indignantly from the other side.
"This one’s occupied," he said hoarsely, not missing a beat with his plunging hips. "Go somewhere else." Faith couldn’t say anything. Her eyes widened with alarm, but all she could do was look helplessly up at him. Gray’s lips drew back over his teeth and his head dropped forward as he began hammering faster. His face was flushed, satisfaction only a few moments away.
Faith shuddered wildly as the coil of tension suddenly released and the fierce, pulsing flood of sensation swept through her. Shivering and pushing hard against him, she buried her face against his chest and bit his shirt to muffle her gasping cries.
He kept his hand flat against the door, gripping her bottom with his right hand to anchor himself. He shoved hard into her, twice, three times, again,

then bucked violently. His head fell back and a harsh, guttural cry rumbled up from his chest.

There was an insistent banging on the door. "What are you doing in there?" the woman said in shrill, grating tones. "That’s the lady’s room! You aren’t supposed to be in there!"

Slowly Gray’s head came up. The expression in his eyes was indescribable, as if he couldn’t believe what was happening. He took a deep breath, and exploded. "Goddamn it, woman!" he roared with furious indignation. "Can’t you tell I’m *busy?"*

Faith dissolved into laughter.

Eighteen

Faith had never been more embarrassed in her life. When she got home, she dashed into the house and locked all the doors, as if that would do any good. She had no clear memory of the drive home, but she could recall in excruciating detail every step she had made through the courthouse, with her face flaming and her thighs sticking together, and every curious look had made her want to cringe. She hadn't, though; she had walked out with her chin in the air and an "I dare you to say anything" look on her face. The bluff must have worked, because no one had stopped her.

She had jumped off the counter as soon as Gray released her, and locked herself in one of the stalls. Uncontrollable giggles shook her as she tried to tidy herself. The arrival of her panties, tossed over the top of the stall, sent her into absolute whoops. "Would you shut up?" she heard Gray mutter fiercely, and she all but collapsed in hysterics. He said something else, but she didn't understand him, and a moment later the door squeaked as he left. It swung open immediately, and a pair of navy pumps took up residence in the stall next to Faith. The owner of the pumps was also the owner of the shrill voice, and she was extremely indignant.

"I ought to tell the sheriff," she said huffily, loud enough that Faith could hear her over the sound of her own giggles.

"Carryin' on in the ladies' rest room! No telling who might have walked in, maybe a mother with her little kids, and just imagine children seein' something like that. It's sinful and disgusting, the way people don't have no shame anymore – "

The tirade was delivered to the accompaniment of a steady stream of urine splashing into the toilet bowl. Evidently part of the lady's wrath was due to the fact that she had been in desperate need of a bathroom. Trying to control her giggles, Faith took advantage of the woman's preoccupation and dashed out of the stall. Once in the hallway, she tried to assume a normal air, and walked quickly to her car. Gray hadn't been anywhere in sight, but then she hadn't exactly looked for him. Probably he'd ducked into the men's room.

Faith sank down in a kitchen chair and covered her face with her hands, groaning with mortification. What was wrong with her, that she couldn't manage to say no to him even in a public place? *The courthouse rest room!* Even Renee had used more discretion than that.

The telephone rang, but she didn’t move to answer it. The machine in the office picked up, and she heard Gray’s deep voice, but was too far away to understand what he was saying. He hung up, and a few minutes later the phone rang again. This time, however, Faith recognized Margot’s voice. She knew she should pick up, but she didn’t. She simply couldn’t carry on a normal conversation; her nerves were still jangling, and she was physically shaking from the aftereffects of an adrenaline rush. She didn’t understand how risk junkies got addicted, because the crash was making her sick.
When she thought her knees would support her, she got up and headed for the bathroom. What she needed right now, more than anything, was a shower.
Gray shook his head in disbelief at himself as he drove to Faith’s house. He was sure she was there, even though she hadn’t answered the phone. He couldn’t believe what they’d done, or the force of the attraction that had made it irresistible. He hadn’t done anything *that* stupid even as a teenager, and God knows he’d been wild as a buck.
He snorted with suppressed laughter. That damned old biddy! Faith had jumped up and hidden in a stall, laughing like a maniac, and he’d been left there with one hand on the door to keep it shut, and his pants down around his knees. Quickly he’d shifted position, moving to stand with his back against the door while he pulled up his pants. Faith’s panties had been lying on the floor, so he’d scooped them up and tossed them over the stall, and she’d shrieked all the louder despite his order to be quiet. The old bitch outside wasn’t going away; she kept beating on the door, getting louder and louder. Between her and Faith, he was almost deafened.
Finally he told Faith he’d meet her out front, but he wasn’t certain she’d heard him, the way she was whooping hysterically. There was nothing to do but brazen it out. After glancing down to make certain everything was zipped and fastened, he opened the door and stepped out, glaring down at a plump, red-faced woman who was all but squirming with indignation. She sputtered furiously at him, but Gray cut her off". "The men’s room was full," he snapped. "What did you expect me to do, piss in the hallway?"
Then he stalked into the men’s room, which was right next door, and leaned against the wall until his shoulders stopped shaking with silent laughter, because the old biddy had snapped right back, "Then what *did* you piss in, the sink?"

Oh, Jesus. He began laughing helplessly again. He knew the old biddy, at least by sight. She worked in the tax assessor’s office. The tale that he’d been fooling around with some hussy in the women’s rest room would be all over the courthouse by lunch, and all over the town by tomorrow morning.

His grin faded. Faith would be mortified.

She probably was anyway. She hadn’t waited for him out front, but had probably driven home with all possible speed, and barricaded herself in the house. His little Puritan would be sick with embarrassment.

He sighed with relief when he saw her car in the driveway. He pulled in, but didn’t stop behind her car. Instead he steered his car around to the backyard, and circled behind the open tool shed where she kept her lawn mower. Honeysuckle vines grew over the shed and part of the way up a steel cable bracing a power pole, forming a nice screen to hide the car. He nosed the Jaguar forward until the hood was just touching the honeysuckle, then got out, checking in both directions. The road wasn’t visible in either direction, so that meant the car wasn’t visible from the road. He felt like an idiot, but he hoped Faith appreciated the concern for her reputation.

He went to the kitchen door and rapped on it, waiting impatiently. She didn’t open it, and he knocked again. "Faith, open the door."

Faith halted on the other side of the door, her hand hovering at the curtain. She had just been about to twitch it aside and see who was pounding on her kitchen door. She had almost jumped out of her skin at the sounds of a car pulling into her driveway and behind the house. She was relieved that it was Gray, but of all the people she didn’t think she could face right now, he headed the list.

"Go away," she said.

The doorknob rattled. "Faith." Her name was spoken softly, calmly. "Open the door, baby."

"Why?"

"We have things to talk over."

Undoubtedly, but she didn’t want to do it. She wanted to be a coward about the whole thing, and hide until she was over the embarrassment. "Maybe tomorrow," she hedged.

"Now." There it was, that gentle, inflexible note that said her door would be kicked open within the next ten seconds if she didn’t open it herself.

Helpless and resentful, she unlocked the door.

He stepped inside and immediately turned the lock again, his gaze never leaving her. She had just gotten out of the shower, and hadn’t had time to dress before she heard the car pulling in. She had grabbed her thin robe from the back of the bathroom door, and put it on. There was nothing seductive about the robe; it was plain, white cotton, belted at the waist. But she was acutely aware that, beneath it, she was damp and bare. She clutched the lapels together over her breasts. "What do you want to talk about?"
An incredibly gentle smile spread over his face as he looked down at her. "Later," he said, and swept her up in his arms.
Two hours later, they lay sweaty and exhausted amid the tangled sheets on her bed. The noon sun forced its way through the closed slats of the blinds, throwing thin lines of white across the floor. A gentle breeze from the ceiling fan wafted across her bare flesh, raising tiny goose bumps. Her body was so acutely sensitive that she imagined she could feel each fine, downy hair lifting at the slight chill. Her heart was beating in slow, heavy thumps, her veins and arteries pulsing with each beat. Gray lay sprawled on his back, his eyes closed and his chest heaving, while she was curled against his side with her head pillowed on his shoulder.
It was a long time before she felt as if she could move. Her limbs were heavy and limp, utterly boneless. In those two hours he had taken her three times, with as much ferocity as if the time in the courthouse hadn’t happened. And as demanding and immediate as his hunger had been, her response had matched it. She had clung to him, her nails digging into his back, her hips lifting eagerly to meet each thrust, and it seemed as if her fire had only fed his own. She didn’t know how^many times she had reached satisfaction; this last time had felt like one long swell that crested, then refused to subside, so that she had been awash in sensation, drunk with pleasure.
As his breathing slowed, Gray stirred beside her and tried to lift his head, only to let it fall back with a groan. "Oh, God. I can’t move."
"Then don’t," she muttered, opening her eyes a slit.
A couple of minutes later, he tried again. With a great deal of effort he raised his head and slowly surveyed the tangle of their nude bodies lying amid the wreckage of the bed. His gaze settled on his penis, lying soft on his thighs. "You damn fool," he barked. "This time, *stay down!"*
The whimsy startled her, and she began giggling helplessly. She buried her face against his shoulder, her entire body shaking.

Gray let his head drop back to the pillow, and cuddled her closer. "Easy for you to laugh," he grumbled. "The damn thing's trying to kill me. It never has had much stopping sense, but this is ridiculous. It must think I'm still sixteen."
"It can't think," she pointed out, her giggles increasing.
"You're telling me. You can reason with something that thinks." Her giggles escalated even more, and he tickled her in revenge. "Stop laughing," he ordered, though a smile teased his mouth. "Do you know what it's like to have a prominent body part that won't listen to either common sense or orders?"
"Well, no, but I know what it's like to be in the vicinity of one."
He chuckled and lazily rubbed his hand across his chest. "Do you know why men name their cocks?"
"No, why?" she asked, trying to stifle her laughter.
"So most of the major decisions in their lives won't be made by a total stranger."
They shook with laughter, and Faith grabbed a corner of the sheet to dry her eyes. She had never seen this playful, bawdy side of Gray before, and she was charmed down to her toes.
He heaved himself up on his elbow, holding her head cradled in the crook of his arm as he smiled down at her. "It's all your fault, anyway," he told her, smoothing a tangle of dark red hair away from her face. His hand continued in a slow stroke down her throat, over the delicate sweep of her collarbone, to close over her breast.
"Mine?" she asked indignantly.
"Sure." Gently he cupped her breast, lifting it. He lightly rasped the pad of his thumb over the puffy pink swell of her nipple, and watched in fascination as it immediately puckered and turned red. "Your nipples are like raspberries," he marveled, and leaned down to take that particular raspberry into his mouth, circling it with his tongjie, rolling it back and forth.
Faith quivered in his arms, alarmed by the immediate swell of desire. She didn't think she could stand it again. "I can't," she moaned, but he noticed that her other nipple had also puckered.
He drew back and admired his work, the red nipple glistening wetly. "That's good," he said absently, "because I sure as hell can't." Faith's breasts were pale, with the sheen of satin, and her skin so translucent and fine that the

blue tracery of veins seemed just under the surface. They were firm and full and upright, and he couldn’t keep his hands off of them. Hell, he couldn’t keep his hands off of her, period. "Just think how pretty these will be, when they’re full of milk."
She slapped his shoulder. "I told you, I’m not pregnant!"
"You don’t know that," he teased.
"Yes, I do know that."
"Your timing could be off."
"My timing is never off"
"This once it could be."
She glared at him, then returned to what he’d said before. "How is it my fault?"
"It must be," he said reasonably. "Every time you’re near, I get hard."
"I’m not doing anything. It has to be your fault."
"You’re breathing. Evidently that’s enough." He collapsed back on the bed and pulled her so she was lying half on him. His free hand smoothed over her slender back, and down to stroke the round curves of her bottom. "Part of it’s the way you smell, like honey and cinnamon, all sweet and spicy at the same time."
Her head lifted and she stared at him, startled. "I’ve always loved the way you smell," she confessed. "Even when I was a little kid. I thought you were the best smell in the world, but I’ve never been able to exactly describe it."
"So you’ve had a crush on me since you were little?" he asked, pleased.
To hide her expression, she tucked her head back into its resting place in the hollow of his shoulder, and inhaled the delicious male scent she had just mentioned. "No," she said softly. "It wasn’t a crush."
He grunted and settled himself more comfortably, pulling her thigh up to ride across his hips. She felt his penis twitch warningly against the soft inside of her leg, then subside. "I used to worry about you," he murmured, his voice becoming sleepy. "Running around alone in the woods the way you did."
She was silent a moment. "How often did you see me?"
"A couple of times."
"I saw you," she said, gathering her courage.
"In the woods?"
"At the summerhouse. With Lindsey Partain. I watched through the window."

His eyes shot open. "Why, you little sneak!" he said, and swatted her bottom, hard. "I guess you got an eyeful."
"I sure did," she agreed, rubbing her bottom indignantly. She retaliated by twisting her fingers in his chest hair and pulling.
He yelped and rubbed his chest. "Ouch!"
"Revenge is sweet," she said. "And prompt."
"I'll remember that," he said ruefully, squinting down at his chest. "Damn, there's a bald patch there."
"There is not."
She rubbed her cheek against him, her eyes closing as she luxuriated in the feel of him, so warm and solid and vital. She had been in paradise from the moment he carried her to bed. Lying here like this with him, so relaxed, all hostility gone and desire thoroughly sated, was more than she had ever dared hope for in her life. None of their problems were solved and the hostility would undoubtedly return, but for right now, this moment, she was happy.
So happy, in fact, that there was only a little hurt mixed in with the curiosity when she said, "You made love to Lindsey in French."
His eyes had closed drowsily, but they popped open again. "What?"
"I heard you. You made love to her in French. Lots of love words and compliments."
Gray was too experienced not to notice how she felt about that, and immediately discerned the reason. He gave her a disbelieving look, then put his head back on the pillow and shouted with laughter. Faith's lower lip trembled and she tried to turn away, but his arms tightened and he held her right where she was.
"Oh, Jesus," he said, wheezing with the effort it took to control himself. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "You little innocent. I'm fluent in French, but it isn't my first language." It was plain by the mortified expression in those green eyes that she didn't understand, so he explained. "Baby, if I can still think clearly enough to speak French, then I'm not totally involved in what I'm doing. It may sound pretty, but it doesn't mean anything. Men are different from women; the more excited we are, the more like cavemen we sound. I could barely speak English with you, much less French. As I remember, my vocabulary deteriorated to a few short, explicit words, 'fuck' being the most prominent."

To his amazement, she blushed, and he smiled at this further evidence of her charming prudery. "Go to sleep," he said gently. "Lindsey didn’t even rate a replay."

God only knew why she found that reassuring, but she did. She went to sleep as easily as a child, exhausted by the events of the morning, and woke to make love again. He was more leisurely this time, and, with a positively wicked gleam in his dark eyes, whispered French love words to her. Then he had to grab her hands to protect his chest hairs, roaring with laughter at her indignation. That was how they passed the afternoon, sleeping, making love, and murmuring drowsily to each other afterward. If the lovemaking was wildly exciting, it was in the pillow talk that a deeper kind of intimacy was forged, a quiet sharing of secrets and thoughts, a linking together of their pasts.

"Tell me about the foster home you were in," he said once, and was relieved when she smiled.

"The Greshams. They gave me the first real home I’d ever known. I still keep in touch with them."

"How did you wind up in a foster home?"

"Pa took off not long after… after that night," she said, faltering a little. "Russ, my oldest brother, wasn’t far behind him. Nicky tried to earn enough to feed us, I’ll say that for him, but he was relieved when the social services people found us. We were in Beaumont at the time. Jodie was put in one foster home, and Scottie and I in another. It wasn’t easy to find someone who would take Scottie, too, but the Greshams agreed if I would take care of him. As if I would leave him behind," she said softly.

"What happened to him?"

"He died the next January. At least he was happy, the last six months of his life. After we moved in, the Greshams were wonderful to him. They bought him toys, played with him. He had so much fun at Christmas, but he faded fast after that. I sat up with him," she said in a quiet voice, her eyes liquid with tears as she stared down the years. "I held his hand while he died." She brushed her hand across her eyes. "I used to wonder if Guy was his father."

He’d never thought of that. He stared at her, disturbed both by the idea that his father might have sired other children, and by the horrifying thought that he might have thrown his little brother out into the dirt.

Faith groped for his hand. "I don’t think he was," she said, compelled to comfort him. "Your father wouldn’t have left one of his children to live the

way we did. If Scottie had been his, he'd have taken care of him. There's no telling who Scottie's daddy was; I doubt it was Pa."
Gray blinked, his own eyes shiny with tears. "Yes," he said hoarsely. "He'd have taken care of him."
Later, he asked, "What happened to the rest of your family?"
"I don't know. I think Jodie's living around Jackson, but I haven't seen her since she turned eighteen. I don't have any idea what happened to Pa and the boys." She carefully didn't mention Renee.
So her family, such as it was, had been shattered by his actions. He held her tight, as if he could shield her from the pain of the past.
"I hated Dad, for a while," he admitted. "God, when I found out he'd left – he was our rock, not Mother. It hurt so much, I couldn't stand it."
Faith bit her lip, thinking of what she had to tell him, and soon.
"Monica tried to kill herself," he said abruptly. "She cut her wrists right after I told her Dad was gone. She almost bled to death before I could get her to a hospital. When I came to the shack that night, I'd just left the hospital in Baton Rouge."
He was trying to explain his rage, she realized, why he'd done what he had. She kissed his shoulder, forgiveness in the gesture. Actually, she had forgiven him long ago, understanding the pain and sense of betrayal he must have been feeling.
He stared up at the ceiling fan. "Mother withdrew completely. She stopped talking, even stopped feeding herself. She didn't come out of her room for two years. She's the most self-centered person I've ever known," he said with brutal honesty, "but I don't ever want to see her that way again."
And that was why he was so adamant that neither Monica nor his mother be upset by anything Faith said or did. She had experienced some of his overprotectiveness herself. In some ways, he was like a feudal lord in Prescott, his influence touching almost every aspect of parish life, and like a feudal lord, he took his responsibilities seriously.
He rolled on top of her, entering her with a gentle insistence that nevertheless made her catch her breath, for she was sore from all the other times. He braced himself on his elbows and cradled her head in his hands.
"That night is a link between us," he whispered. "Ugly as it was, we share the memories. And it wasn't all ugly. I wanted you that night, Faith." He began moving slowly inside her, his eyes darkening with the slow build of passion. "You were only fourteen, but I wanted you. And when I saw you

again, in the motel, it was as if the twelve years apart didn’t exist, because I still wanted you."
Then he began to smile. "Do you want me to say it in French?" he asked.
When she woke the next time, she lay quietly and watched him sleeping. His black lashes were dark smudges on his cheekbones, and black beard stubbled his lower jaw. His lips were softly parted as he slept, his powerful body relaxed. The beauty of him shook her. With his long hair tousled around his shoulders, he looked like a pirate taking his rest in a lady’s bed after a long day of ship-boardings and sword fights. The tiny diamond in his left ear didn’t do anything to detract from the image.
She was too sore to possibly make love again, she thought, but still his body drew her. He was wonderfully made, all long bones and hard muscle. One arm dangled off the side of the bed, but his other hand lay relaxed on his chest. He had big hands, his fingers lean and well shaped, but his little finger was as thick as her thumb. She thought of those hands on her body and shivered with delight.
She leaned over him, delicately inhaling the warm scent of his skin, rising off him on waves of heat. This was *Gray.* The realization stunned her anew. He was actually here. She could touch him, kiss him, do all the things she had spent most of her life only dreaming about.
His flesh drew her like a lodestone, making her breath come a little faster, and her skin flush. There were no restraints on her natural sensuality now, and the freedom to touch him, and be touched by him, was intoxicating. She laid her hand on his thigh, feeling hard muscle under the roughness of hair, then slipped her fingertips, in a dreamy, sensual sampling, down to where the flesh was smooth and hairless, trailing her fingertips across it. His scrotum hung low, his testicles like two small eggs in their soft sac. She turned her hand and cupped it, feeling it cool and heavy in her palm. He stirred restlessly, his legs falling apart, but he didn’t wake. He was a wonderfully male animal, and, for the moment at least, totally hers.
She leaned over him even closer, letting the tips of her breasts drag through the crisp, curly hair on his chest, and sucked in a quick breath at the sharp tingle of sensation that drew her nipples erect.
His eyelids fluttered and opened. "Ummm," he said, a low hum of pleasure, and automatically reached up to circle her with his arms.
She nuzzled her face against his throat and slid all the way onto him, her entire body squirming sinuously as she rubbed herself over him, feline in

her enjoyment. "You feel so good," she whispered, nipping his earlobe, then licking it. "All three of the H factors."
"What are the H factors?" he asked. "Or do I want to know?"
"Hot, hard, and hairy."
He chuckled, and stretched languidly beneath her. It was a startling sensation, like being on a lumpy raft tossed about by the ocean. She hung on to his shoulders to keep from falling off.
His hair brushed her fingers, and when he had settled, she thrust her hand into the black mass of it. It was thick and silky, with just a hint of curl. Most women would have killed to have hair like that. "Why do you wear your hair long?" she asked, picking up another strand and pulling it around to tickle his nose with the end of it. "And why the earring? That's pretty dashing for a man who sits on several corporate boards."
He obligingly made a face, then began to laugh. "Promise not to tell?"
"Promise – unless you say someone scared you with a picture of Sinead O'Connor; I'd have to tell that."
His white teeth flashed as he gave her a faintly embarrassed grin. "It's almost as bad. I'm afraid of hair clippers." She was so astonished that she slipped off his chest. "Hair clippers?" she echoed. This six foot four, over-two-hundred-pound pirate was afraid of *hair clippers?*
"I don't like the noise," he explained, turning onto his side and curling one arm under his head. His eyes were smiling. "Gives me the willies. I can remember when I was four or five years old, howling my head off as Dad tried to hold me still for old Herbert Dumas to give me a haircut. Evidently holding me down made Dad feel like a traitor, so he started trying to bribe me to be good, but I just couldn't do it. I'd hear that first *bzzz* and nearly jump out of my skin. By the time I was ten, we had negotiated our way to scissor cuts. The older I get, the further apart the hair trims are. As for the earring – " He laughed out loud. "It's sort of camouflage. Wearing the earring makes it look as if my hair is long on purpose. A style, rather than a phobia."
"Who trims your hair?" she asked, too fascinated to laugh. She was still trying to deal with the image of a grown man avoiding barbershops the way some people avoided the dentist.
"Sometimes I do. Sometimes I'll get it trimmed when I'm in New Orleans. There's a salon there with a standing rule not to turn on any hair clippers while I'm there. Why? Do you want to take over the job?" He laid his hand

on the side of her neck, his thumb brushing her earlobe. He was smiling, but she sensed he was serious.
"You'd trust me to cut your hair?"
"Of course. Wouldn't you trust me to cut yours?"
Her reply was swift. "Not in this lifetime. But I'd let you shave my legs."
"It's a deal!" was his reply, just as swift, as he grabbed for her.
It was almost twilight the next time he stirred awake, and groaned as he rubbed his hand over his face. "I'm starving," he announced in a rumbling voice. "Damn, I need to call home and let someone know where I am."
Faith rolled onto her back, cautiously stretching. Though she had spent most of the day in bed, she was as tired as if she had been up all night. Being in bed with Gray Rouiliard was not restful. It was a lot of fun, it was wonderfully exciting, but restful, it wasn't.
Now that he had mentioned it, she realized how hungry she was. The idea of lunch hadn't occurred to either of them, and breakfast had been many hours ago. Food was just what she needed.
He sat up on the side of the bed, giving her a wonderful view of his buttocks. She reached out and stroked them as he picked up the phone, and he tossed a quick grin over his shoulder. "Feel free," he invited, punching in his own number.
His back was just as marvelous as his front, she thought dreamily. Thick with muscle, bisected by the deep groove of his spine, tapering from those wide shoulders down to a taut waist.
"Hi," he said into the phone. "Tell Delfina I won't be home for dinner."
Faith heard the indistinct murmur of a voice, evidently asking where he was, because he calmly replied, "I'm at Faith's house."
The voice was still indistinct, but considerably more agitated. She watched his back muscles tense and immediately felt uncomfortable, as if she was eavesdropping. She had to get away, she thought distractedly. She couldn't bear to listen to him make an excuse for his presence here. She sat up and swung her legs off the bed, wincing at the unexpected stiffness of her back and legs.
"Monie," Gray said patiently, and sighed. "We have to talk. I'll be home in the morning – no, not before. In the morning. If anything important comes up, call me here."
Slowly Faith stood up, straightening with difficulty. Every muscle in her body seemed to be protesting. Her legs were ridiculously weak, her thigh

muscles trembling. She desperately wanted to leave the room, but nothing was cooperating. She took one hobbling step, wincing with pain, then another.
"I said, we'll talk tomorrow." His voice was firm. He looked over his shoulder at Faith, started to glance away, then his attention focused on her like a laser beam. " 'Bye," he said absently to Monica, hanging up and cutting her off in midprotest. Then he was on his feet, coming around the end of the bed to where Faith wobbled.
"Poor baby," he crooned. "Muscles sore?"
She scowled at him.
"I know just the thing," he promised, stripping the top sheet from the bed and snaking it out.
"So do I. A hot shower."
"Later." He wrapped the sheet around her and picked her up. "Just be quiet and enjoy."
"Enjoy what?"
"Being quiet, what else?" he replied maddeningly, and she couldn't even hit him, because her arms were wrapped up in the sheet.
She found out soon enough. He carried her into the kitchen and carefully laid her on the table, unwrapping the sheet to spread it out beneath her. "I had some great ideas about this table the first time I saw it," he said, with more than a little satisfaction.
Startled, she said, "What are you doing?" She had been naked in his arms for hours, but somehow, lying naked on top of her kitchen table made her feel unbearably exposed, as if she were a human sacrifice lying on a stone altar.
"Massage," he said. "Stay there." He left the room, leaving her lying there. The hard surface was uncomfortable, but the promise of a massage kept her in place. He returned to the kitchen with a bottle of baby oil and a washcloth in his hands. "On your stomach," he ordered. He turned on the hot water in the sink and let it run until steam began to rise, then filled a bowl and dropped the bottle of oil into it.
Stiffly she obeyed. He hadn't turned on any lights and the kitchen was deeply shadowed, twilight only a few moments away. The air conditioning was on, and though she had been perfectly comfortable in the bedroom, the cold of the table seeped through the sheet and chilled her. She shivered, wishing he would hurry.

"Close your eyes and relax," he said quietly. "Go to sleep if you want."
Her sore muscles were adjusting to the hardness of the table, allowing her to relax fractionally. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the sounds of what he was doing. She could hear water splashing, and sighed in anticipation of feeling that warm oil being rubbed into her skin.
His voice was low and soothing, little more than a murmur. "I'm going to wash you, so you'll be more comfortable," he said, just before she felt a wet, very warm washcloth between her legs. The heat felt wonderful on her sore, swollen flesh. He was incredibly gentle, but just as thorough as he cleaned away the evidence of his lovemaking. He took the cloth away, and she heard water running again. "It's going to be cold this time," he warned, and the cold pad of the washcloth was pressed between her legs. He repeated the compress several times, soothing the ache. Then he reached for the oil.
He began at her shoulders, his powerful fingers digging deep into her muscles. She automatically tightened in resistance, then relaxed as the strength and tension seemed to flow out of her. The heated oil made his hands slide over her skin, leaving it slick and fragrant. He worked down each arm, even massaging her hands, and between her fingers. And everywhere his hands went, they left behind loosened tendons, limp muscles, and total contentment. Faith purred her pleasure as he returned to her back, starting at her waist and moving his hands upward in long, powerful sweeps that compressed her rib cage and made her groan aloud with each stroke. He relentlessly searched out every stiff muscle, and kneaded it until it was pliant beneath his hands.
Her legs were next. He kneaded her hamstring muscles, her calves, her Achilles tendons, the bottoms of her feet. He rotated her ankles back and forth, pressing his thumbs hard into her arches, and a startlingly sexual pleasure made her toes curl.
"Oh!" she said involuntarily.
"Like that, do you?" he asked, his voice soft and muted in the growing darkness of the room. He did it again, and she moaned in response.
He moved back up her legs, spreading them apart and massaging the stretched, sore tendons on the upper insides of her thighs. Her moan this time was of pain, and she gripped the sides of the table. He murmured reassuringly, moving his attention to her buttocks. She relaxed again, closing her eyes. She was feeling pleasantly warm now, and not just from

the oil; his stroking hands were having another effect entirely. Desire was curling lazily, heating her blood, totally without urgency.
"On your back, now," he said, and helped her to roll over. He looked with interest at her peaked nipples, and smiled. His big, oil-slick hands covered her breasts, gentle there, smoothing the oil into nipples sore from vigorous sucking and the rasp of his stubbled face. "Your skin's as delicate as a baby's," he observed. "I'll need to shave twice a day." Faith didn't reply, too caught up in what he was doing. By the time he was finished with her stomach and thighs, she was in an agony of anticipation, her body arching under his hands. The room was almost completely dark now, the lavender shadows of twilight giving way to the night. He paused to turn on the light over the sink, isolating them in a small glow.
The sore muscles on the insides of her thighs received more attention, and this time he didn't relent until her groans had turned to purrs. His oily fingers slipped higher then, gently stroking and probing, and she shook with delight.
"Gray." Her voice was smoky, drugged with desire. She reached out for him. "Please."
"No, baby, you're too sore for another round," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."
He dragged her to the end of the table, sheet and all, the fabric slipping easily over the smooth surface. "What –?" Faith began, then fell back with a moan as he draped her thighs over his shoulders. Gently he opened the swollen folds between her legs, and she felt his warm breath wash over her. She barely had time to catch her breath before his tongue delved into her painfully sensitive flesh with a lightning bolt of sheer sensation that made her cry out. He was very tender, and very thorough, reducing her to quivering, screaming ecstasy within minutes.
Afterward, he carried her into the bathroom. She stood sleepily in the shower with him, her arms around his waist and her head on his chest. A lot of the soreness was gone, but now her muscles felt like mush.
When the hot water began to go, he lifted his cheek from the top of her head. "Food," he murmured.
Reluctantly she released him and let him turn off the water. She sleeked her wet hair back from her face, and looked up at him with diamonds of water clinging to her lashes. He seemed so ruthless and strong, but he was very human, with desires and fears and quirks, and she loved him all the more

deeply for those qualities. Just for a while, though, she would have wished he were more impervious, because she couldn’t put off much longer telling him about his father.

The least she could do was feed him first.

He wolfed down two ham and tomato sandwiches, then took his time on the third while she polished off one. Afterward, they remade the bed with fresh sheets, and he flopped down with a sigh of exhaustion. The sprawl of his arms and legs took up most of the room, but she crawled into one of the niches and burrowed her damp head into its accustomed place on his shoulder. She put her arms around him, holding him tight as if she could shield him from the pain. "I have to tell you something," she said quietly.

Nineteen

Monica cried for a long time after Gray hung up, her arms folded on top of his desk and her head resting on them. Hot, salty tears dripped onto the polished surface and she rubbed them away with her sleeve, not wanting to mar the finish of his desk. She had never felt more lost and confused, even when Daddy had left.

Nothing was working out right. She hadn't managed to tell Alex she wouldn't let him screw her anymore; when he had come down from Mama's room the other night and stood in the doorway, staring at her, her heart had stopped. She had tried to get the words out, but her throat had been too dry, and then he had been bending over her and it was too late. She squirmed with shame every time she thought about it. How *could* she have let him touch her? She was going to marry Michael. She felt dirty, felt as if she were dirtying *him* by going into his arms after having been with Alex. And she still hadn't told Gray that Michael had asked her to marry him, much less telling Mama that she was even dating him. She had been so careful to keep her life under control after the stupid stunt with her wrists, but now it all seemed to be spiraling away again.

Gray was with Faith Devlin. Another man she loved and depended on had been seduced away by one of those whores. How could he do that, Gray, of all people? Monica rocked back and forth, hugging herself and moaning with pain as tears streamed down her cheeks. He was spending the night with her, uncaring of what people might say, of the gossip that would eventually reach Mama no matter how hard they tried to keep it from her. Family hadn't mattered to Daddy when he was in bed with Renee Devlin, and now it looked as if Gray was following in his footsteps with Renee's daughter. Just give them sex, and they didn't care who they hurt.

Monica sobbed until her eyes were sore and almost swollen together, until her chest ached with the effort of breathing. Then, finally, a sort of terrible calm came over her.

She opened Gray's desk drawer and stared at the revolver he kept there. The Devlin bitch hadn't paid any attention to the warnings Monica had given her, so it was time to stop being subtle. In her furious hurt, it didn't matter that Gray was with Faith; it might do him good to be shaken up, she thought, reaching for the pistol. This time, *she* was ridding the parish of a Devlin.

"What is it?" Gray asked, stretching to turn off the lamp. In the sudden darkness, he cradled Faith against him. "You sound serious."
"I am." She blinked back the sudden burn of tears. "I've put off telling you this because I – I can't bear to hurt you. And I – I want you to know something else, first." She gasped for breath, and seized her courage with both hands. "I love you," she said in a low voice, aching with tenderness. "I've always loved you, even when I was a little girl. I lived for glimpses of you, and the chance to hear your voice. Nothing has ever changed that, not what happened that night, not the twelve years when I was gone."
His arms tightened and his lips parted, but she laid her fingers on his mouth, stopping the words. "No, don't say anything," she begged. "Let me finish." If she didn't get it all said in a hurry, she might lose her nerve.
"Gray, your father didn't run away with Mama." She felt his body tense, and she hugged him closer. "I know where Mama is, and he isn't with her. He never was. He's dead," she said as gently as possible. The hot tears leaked out of her eyes to slowly trickle down her cheeks. "Someone killed him that night. Mama saw who did it, and was scared he'd kill her too, so she ran."
"Stop it," Gray said harshly. He pulled her arms away from him and gave her a hard little shake. "I don't know if this is your lie or Renee's, but I got a letter from him that was postmarked the next day, in Baton Rouge. If he was killed the night before, then a dead man wrote it."
"A letter?" she asked, stunned. Of all the things she'd thought he might say, this wasn't one of the possibilities. "From your father? Are you sure?"
"Of course I'm sure."
"It was in his handwriting?"
"It was typed," he said, his annoyance rapidly escalating into anger. He sat up and swung his legs out of bed. "The signature was his, though."
Faith flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders to hold him, though she was well aware he could have shaken her off as if she were no more than a pesky mosquito. Desperately she said, "What did the letter say?"
"What does it matter, goddamn it?" He caught her wrists, trying to free himself without hurting her. She clung all the harder, pressing her body against him.
"It matters!" She was weeping now, her tears hot and wet on his back.
He muttered another curse, but sat still. Despite how furious he was with her for even bringing up the subject, much less trying to convince him of

such a ridiculous lie, she was crying, and he had to fight the urge to drag her around onto his lap and comfort her. Roughly he said, "It was a letter of proxy. Just that, no explanation. Without it, we likely would have lost almost everything we owned."

His chest expanded as he took a deep breath. "If it hadn't been for that letter, I'd have tried to find him. But he didn't even say he was sorry, didn't say good-bye. It was as if he was taking care of a minor detail he'd forgotten."

"Maybe someone else wrote it," Faith said, aching with the pain he must have felt then. "Maybe the murderer did.

Gray, I swear, Mama said she saw him get shot! They were out at the summerhouse that night when someone drove up. She said that Guy and the other man went into the boat-house and she heard them arguing – "

He erupted off the bed, breaking free of her grasp. He whirled around to catch her arms and pin her to the mattress. "That's why you were sneaking around the place," he said incredulously, and reached out to turn on the lamp so he could see her face. He glared down at her, his eyes burning like coals. He shook her again. "You little witch! That's why you've been asking all those questions about Dad! You think he was murdered and *you've been trying to find out who killed him!"*

He had seldom in his life been more furious; his hands shook with the effort of controlling himself. He didn't believe his father had been murdered, but it was obvious that Faith did, and the foolhardy woman had been trying to find a murderer all by herself. If there really had been a murder, she would have been putting herself at enormous risk. He was torn between snatching her up in his arms to kiss her and turning her over his knee. Both choices held enormous attraction.

While he was still trying to decide, she said, "I knew I likely wouldn't find anything, but I searched the boathouse for a shell casing – "

"Wait a minute." He rubbed his hand over his face, trying to get a handle on this latest confession. "When did you search the boathouse?"

"Yesterday morning."

"It's kept padlocked. Have you added breaking and entering to your repertoire?"

"I swam underneath the door and came up in the boat slip."

Gray closed his eyes and counted to ten. Then he did it again. His hands twitched, and he balled them into fists. Finally he opened his eyes, staring

down at her in appalled disbelief. Foolhardy wasn't the word for her. She was too intrepid for her own safety, much less his sanity. The net beneath the boathouse, designed to keep out unwelcome guests of the reptile variety, had come loose over the years and he hadn't had it repaired, but it was still there. She could so easily have become entangled in it and drowned. He would have lost her forever. Clammy sweat formed on his brow.

"I didn't find anything," she said, eyeing him uneasily. "But I'm making someone nervous. Why do you think I got those threatening notes?"

It was like being punched in the stomach. He hung there, his mind reeling. Then his knees sagged, and he sat down heavily on the bed. "My God," he said blankly, as horrified realization began to form.

"I hired a private detective," she said, reaching for him again, desperately needing to touch him. She pressed close, and this time his arms came up to wrap around her, hauling her against his chest. "Mr. Pleasant. He searched credit card records, Social Security records, tax files – there was no trace of Guy after that night. Gray, there was no reason for Guy to walk away from you and Monica, or from all that money! He wouldn't have left you for Mama; why should he? It didn't make sense that he would disappear like that, unless he was dead. Mr. Pleasant thought he must be, too, and he was going to ask some questions in town." A sob rose in her chest. "Now he's disappeared, too, and I'm afraid the same person killed him!"

"Oh, God," Gray said, his voice tight. "Faith – don't say anything else. Be quiet for a minute. Please."

She pressed her face into his chest and obeyed. Despite everything, his arms were around her, and she began to hope. He rocked her gently back and forth, comforting himself as well as her.

"Alex sent the letter," he finally said, his voice muffled in her hair. "I should have guessed. He was the only other person who knew Dad hadn't left a letter of proxy, and he knew what a mess we were in without it, if Dad didn't come back, so he didn't take the chance. He was almost as upset as I was, and he said the same thing you did: What *reason* did Dad have for running away with Renee? He already had her, and Mother turned a blind eye to his affairs, so he wouldn't have… He's dead. He's really dead." He choked, and his chest heaved beneath her cheek.

Faith held him tight, guiding him down onto the bed. He clutched at her, his hands desperate. "Turn… turn off the light," he said, and she did, understanding how a strong man could need darkness for his tears.

He shook in her arms, his wet face buried against her breasts as harsh sobs tore up from his chest. She cried with him, stroking his head, his back and shoulders, not speaking but offering him the comfort of her body, of not being alone. Without the intimacy of the day they had just passed binding them together, she doubted he would have allowed her to see him so vulnerable. But they were linked, as he had said, their lives inextricably woven together by the past, and cemented by the long hours of intense pleasure.

Something he had said jarred, but the significance of it escaped her. She pushed it aside, for the moment intent only on holding him.

Gradually he calmed, but his desperate grip on her didn't relax. She smoothed his hair back from his damp face, her fingers gentle.

"All these years," he said in a hushed, choked voice. "I've hated him, and cursed him… and missed him… and all the time he's been dead."

Something else needed to be said, something hurtful. "Have the lake dragged," she suggested, and felt him flinch. He had swum in that lake, fished in it.

There were other things to talk about, decisions to make, but his head was heavy on her breast and she sensed his utter exhaustion. Her own fatigue, mental and physical, was dragging her down. "Go to sleep," she whispered, stroking his temple. "We'll talk in the morning."

She must have dozed, but for all her tiredness, something kept dragging her back to semiconsciousness. She shifted restlessly, feeling Gray's heavy weight against her. What was it he had said? Something about the letter of proxy…

His body was like a furnace, pouring off heat in waves. Sweat dewed her body, despite the efforts of the ceiling fan. She didn't open her eyes, but her brow furrowed as she tried to bring the thought into focus. The letter of proxy… Why would Alex have sent a bogus letter of proxy so quickly, when no reasonable person would expect Guy to completely walk away from his family and business? Surely he had expected Guy to get in touch… Unless he had known that it was impossible.

Alex.

Her eyes flew open, and she stared in confusion at the strange red glow that suffused the room. The heat was more intense, and the air was acrid, burning her eyes and nose. Realization exploded in her head.

"Gray!" She screamed his name, shaking him hard. "Get up! *The house is on fire!"*

Monica stopped the car where she had both times before, pulling off the road onto a pasture access, out of sight of the house. She wore dark clothes and soft-soled dark shoes, for moving quietly without being seen. It was so easy to sneak up to the house on foot, leave her messages, and depart undetected. Leaving the package had required more planning, since it had been daylight, but Faith had simplified things by not being at home. It had just been a matter of slipping the package into the mailbox and driving away.

She got out of the car, pistol in hand, and stepped into the dark road. There wasn't much traffic on this road even during the daytime, and if a car did come along, she would be able to both see and hear it in plenty of time to hide. In the meantime, the road was the easiest walking, and left no footprints.

There was a strange reddish glow in the night sky, just visible above the trees. Monica stared at it, puzzled. It was a few seconds before she realized what it was, and her eyes widened with alarm. The house was on fire, and Gray was there! Her throat closing on a moan of terror, she began to run.

Gray rolled off the bed and dragged her with him, down onto the floor where it was easier to breathe, though the acrid smoke still burned her throat and lungs with every breath. He grabbed her robe from the chair and thrust it at her. "Crawl into the hall, then put this on," he ordered, "and some shoes." He snagged his pants and shoes, jerking them on with three fast motions. "I'll be right behind you."

She obeyed, glancing back several times to make certain he was there. Coughing violently, she pulled the robe around her.

Once in the hallway, they could see flames licking outside the bathroom window, too. Gray ignored it, crawling into the bathroom and snatching towels from the rack. By some miracle, there was still water pressure, and he soaked the towels in the sink. He was coughing and gagging as he tossed one sodden towel at her. "Put it over your face," he said hoarsely.

She did, holding the dripping material over her mouth and nose with one hand and crawling as best she could. The towel helped, and she breathed a bit easier.

The fire seemed to surround them, the wicked orange flames dancing every way they turned. The thick smoke filling the house reflected the glow, so

that it seemed to come from all directions. How could it have spread so fast, so completely engulfing the house? The cackle of licking flame had become a roar as it grew stronger, consuming more and more of her home. The heat seared her skin, and sparks showered down like thousands of tiny glowing knives, pricking where they landed. The boards beneath her hands felt as if they were breathing, growing hotter and hotter, and she knew that soon the floor would combust. If they weren't out before then, they would die.

Gray could feel the same thing. Faith wasn't moving fast enough; her robe tangled around her legs, slowing her. Roughly he shouldered her aside so he could move in front of her. He gripped the collar of her robe and used it to pull her along, all but dragging her, forcing her to a faster pace. He could feel the floor getting hotter and hotter beneath them, and knew they had only a minute at most to get out, or it would be too late. He strained his eyes to see through the swirling smoke, and the relative darkness at the front of the house gave him a glimmer of hope. "The front door!" he roared, trying to make himself heard above the din of the inferno. "It isn't burning yet!"

Her house was so small, but the front door seemed so far away. Faith's lungs ached and burned, desperately pumping for air, but the fire was consuming all of the precious oxygen. Her sight dimmed, and she felt the world sliding sideways. The wood floor scraped her knees as Gray dragged her, and the pain roused her to greater effort. Gathering herself, she forced her muscles to keep moving as she silently repeated a litany of desperation: *Don't stop, don't stop, if you stop Gray will too, don't stop.* Terror for his safety, above all, kept her moving.

Abruptly he staggered to his feet and hauled her upright, holding her clasped tightly to him. She stared dimly up at his beloved, smoke-blackened face. "Get ready!" he bellowed, and used his towel to cover the heated doorknob as he jerked the door open.

He ducked as flames licked in with a deep, whooshing sound, then just as quickly subsided. Picking Faith up, he tucked her under his arm as if she were a football, and ran through the burning portal.

His speed carried them off the porch, and they pitched into the empty darkness. Gray twisted in midair, trying to put his body between Faith and the ground, but he only partially succeeded and they sprawled on the grass with a bone-jarring impact. He heard her soft, gasping cry, but they were still dangerously close to the house and he couldn't take the time to see if

she was injured. He caught her under the arms and began pulling her. "Move! Get away from the house!"
"No," someone said hoarsely, with horror in the tone. The crackle and roar of the flames almost drowned out the words. "Gray, *what are you doing here?"*
Gray straightened slowly, pulling Faith up with him and automatically tucking her behind him. They were caught between two dangers, the fire at the back and the rifle in the hands of the man who had been his honorary uncle, and lifelong friend and advisor.
"No," Alex moaned, his eyes white-edged with panic. He shook his head in denial of Gray's presence. "I thought she was alone! I swear, Gray, I would never have put you in danger – "
The heat on Gray's naked back was intense, scorching his skin. Deliberately he moved forward, never taking his eyes away from Alex but desperate to get Faith away from that heat. He stopped as fits of coughing racked him. He could hear Faith coughing and gasping, and he kept a hard grasp on her arm, forcing her to stay shielded behind him.
Several ugly suspicions were crowding his mind, and all of them made him sick. When he could talk, he straightened and wiped his streaming eyes with a grimy hand. "You're the one who's been sending those notes, aren't you?" he rasped, his voice so raw as to be almost unrecognizable. "And the cat – "
"No," Alex denied, his voice filled with ludicrous indignation, under the circumstances. "I wouldn't do something like that."
"But you would set fire to a house and try to kill an innocent woman?" Gray asked coldly, the harshness of his voice making the words even more jarring.
"I hoped she would leave," Alex replied in a frighteningly reasonable tone. "But nothing you did made her leave, and neither did the notes. I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't let her keep asking questions, and upsetting Noelle."
Gray gave a rasping crack of laughter. "You didn't care whether or not Mother was upset," he snapped. "You were afraid she'd find out what happened to Dad!"
"That's not true!" Alex said furiously. "I've always loved her! You know that!"
"Did you love her so much that you shot my father so you could have her?"

Gray bellowed the accusation at him, so infuriated by the danger to Faith and the realization that Alex had killed his father that it was all he could do to keep from leaping at Alex and strangling him with his bare hands. The only thing that held him back was the knowledge that, if he failed, Faith would die.

They still stood dangerously close to the burning house, the hellish light enveloping them in a red circle beyond which nothing else existed. Alex's face twisted with pain. "I didn't mean to!" he screamed. "I just wanted to stop him – he was going to divorce Noelle! The humiliation would have killed her! I tried to make him see reason, but he was determined. My God, how could any man prefer that slut over your mother? I think he was crazy, he had to be."

The irony of Alex calling Guy crazy wasn't lost on Gray. Then, to his horror, Faith wrenched loose from his grasp and stepped out from the protection of his body. "So you shot him," she said, her own voice so raspy, he could barely hear her over the roar of the hungry flames. "And told my mother that you'd say she'd done it if she ever said anything. There wasn't any doubt who would be believed in this town, was there?"

Alex glared at her with such hatred and fury that the rifle trembled in his hands, and Gray reached out to pull her close. He wasn't afraid for himself; Alex's horror at having endangered him had been genuine. But Faith – oh, God, even now, Alex still intended to kill her. Gray could see it written plainly in his eyes.

"I didn't mind your moving back," Alex told her. "You didn't have anything to do with what happened. But you wouldn't keep your mouth shut, you kept asking questions, and you hired that old bastard to stick his nose into things – "

"Did you kill him, too?" she interrupted, her face twisting with rage. *"Did you?"*

"I had to, you stupid bitch!" Alex howled, beside himself with fury. "He got too close… he asked me if Noelle had had any affairs… She wasn't like that – "

"Did you dump his body in the lake, the way you did Guy's?" Faith spat, her entire body quivering. But it wasn't fear Gray felt running through her, it was absolute fury, a mirror of his own, and he had a sudden nightmare vision of her going for Alex herself. There wasn't much Faith wouldn't dare, when she had made up her mind to do it. She had deliberately tried to

stir up a killer and bring him out into the open, even though she'd known she was putting herself at risk.
Her plan had worked like a dream, he thought viciously. Now if he could just keep her from getting killed. Holding her with bruising force, he jerked her behind him again, trusting that Alex wouldn't shoot through him to get to her.
She immediately began twisting, fighting to get away from him.
Alex stared at them as they struggled, Faith trying to get away from Gray so he wouldn't be hurt, and Gray desperately trying to hold her close for the same reason. Alex's handsome face twisted. "Let her go! She isn't worth it, Gray. I'll take care of her, and everything can go on the way it was. She's only a Devlin; no one will care. She's ruined everything! Guy was my best friend, damn it! I loved him! But he was dead… I had to do something."
"You could have turned yourself in," Gray pointed out, trying to keep a reasonable tone in his voice as he finally wrapped his arms around Faith and crushed her in his embrace. If he could lull Alex, then get close enough to knock the barrel of the rifle upward… He was much stronger than the older man, he could subdue him. "If it was an accident, you wouldn't have – "
"Oh, please. I *am* a lawyer, Gray. The charge would have been involuntary manslaughter, not murder, but I still would have done time." Alex shook his head. "Noelle would never have spoken to me again… she wouldn't associate with someone who had been in jail. I'm sorry, but it has to be this way." Lifting the rifle, Alex sighted along the barrel, and Gray knew he was going to fire.
He shoved Faith away, and charged Alex. He saw the rifle barrel track to the side, following Faith, and he plowed into Alex with more force than he had ever used playing football. The sharp crack of rifle fire split the night, and the hot casing hit his cheek as it ejected. He caught the rifle, shoving it upward as they hit the ground, but the impact broke his grip. With surprising speed Alex rolled away, springing to his feet and grabbing the rifle again. Gray got to his feet and began advancing on Alex. He didn't dare glance at where Faith lay, couldn't bear to see… The thought of losing her clawed at his gut with unbearable pain. Terror and rage combined in his chest, and Alex's death was written on his stark features as he moved forward.

"Don’t," he pleaded, backing away a few steps. "Gray, don’t make me shoot you, too – "
"You bastard!"
The shriek came out of nowhere. Blinded by the fierce glare of the fire, Gray couldn’t see anything at first. Then Monica materialized out of the night, dressed head to toe in dark clothing that had cut down her visibility. His sister’s face was dead white, her dark eyes wild.
"You bastard!" she shrieked again, advancing on Alex like a Fury. The firelight gleamed on the barrel of the revolver in her hand. "All these years… you’ve been screwing me… pretending I was Mama… and you *killed my father!"*
Maybe Alex saw her intention to fire in Monica’s eyes. Maybe he was simply startled by her appearance, her screaming attack. For whatever reason, he swung the rifle around toward her. Gray leaped for him again, a roar of protest on his lips, knowing he couldn’t reach him in time any more than he’d been able to a moment before.
Monica closed her eyes and fired.

Twenty

"The bastard," Monica kept whispering in a drained, lifeless voice. "The bastard."

Faith sat in a county patrol car with Monica, holding her when she cried, letting her talk as she would. The door on her side of the car had been left open, while the one on Monica's side had been closed; a subtle splitting of hairs on the part of the parish law enforcement. Monica didn't seem to care that the door beside her didn't have any inside handles. She was in shock, shivering occasionally despite the heat of the night, added to that from the fire, and Sheriff McFane himself had carefully spread a blanket over her.

Faith stared out the open door, feeling more than a little numb herself. It had all happened so quickly… The house was gutted, a total loss. Alex had poured gasoline all around the house and tossed a match to it, intending that she be trapped inside with no clear way out. Had she somehow managed to get out, he had been waiting with a rifle. It would have been assumed that she'd been killed by whoever had been sending her the notes, and since he was innocent of that, he'd felt safe. But Gray had hidden his car behind the shed, and in the darkness Alex hadn't seen it. When Gray had come stumbling out of the burning house, Alex's careful plans had been shattered. He had been shocked by Gray's presence – Gray, whom he loved like a son. All they could do now was guess what Alex would have done, faced with that dilemma.

Her car, sitting so close to the house, was also a total loss. Without the key to crank the engine and pull it away, she had watched as a section of wall fell on it and set it afire. Gray's Jaguar had been pulled away from the shed and now sat safely on the side of the road. The shed still stood, though. She stared at it through the smoke. Maybe she could sleep there, she thought with ghoulish humor.

Her small yard swarmed with people. The sheriff and his deputies, the volunteer firefighters, the fire medics, the coroner, the sightseers. God knows what so many people had been doing out that time of night, but an inordinate number of them had evidently followed all the flashing lights. She watched Gray's tall body, silhouetted against the dying blaze. He was talking to Sheriff McFane, a few yards away from Alex Chelette's covered body. He was shirtless, his long hair flying around his bare shoulders, and even from here she could hear him coughing.

Her own throat felt like fire, and she could feel the stinging of several burns, on her hands and arms, her back, her legs. It hurt to cough, which didn’t stop her lungs from periodically trying to clear themselves, but all in all she felt lucky to be alive and in relatively good health.
"I’m sorry," Monica said abruptly. She was staring straight ahead. "I sent the notes… I just wanted to scare you into leaving. I never would have – I’m sorry."
Stunned, Faith sat back, then immediately straightened her sore back away from the seat. She started to say, "That’s all right," then changed her mind. It wasn’t all right. She had been frightened, and sickened. She had known there was a killer out there. Monica hadn’t known, but that didn’t excuse her. She hadn’t killed the cat, but that didn’t excuse her either. So Faith said nothing, leaving Monica to find her own absolution.
Faith watched as a medic approached Gray and tried to get him to sit down, tried to put an oxygen mask on him.
Gray shook him off, gesturing angrily, and pointed him toward Faith.
"I’m going to tell them," Monica said, still in that expressionless voice. "Gray and Michael. About the notes, and the cat. I won’t be arrested for shooting Alex… but I don’t deserve to go unpunished."
Faith didn’t have time to respond. The medic brought his equipment over to the patrol car, and squatted in the open door. His penlight flashed in her eyes, making her blink. He took her pulse, checked the burns on her hands and arms, tried to put the oxygen mask on her. She pulled away. "Tell him," she said, indicating Gray, "that I will when he does."
The medic stared at her, then gave a little grin. "Yes, ma’am," he said, and jauntily returned to his first reluctant patient.
Faith watched as he repeated what she’d said to Gray. Gray wheeled around to glare at her. She shrugged. Annoyed and frustrated, he grabbed the oxygen mask and with ill grace clapped it over his nose and mouth. He immediately began coughing again.
Because she had promised, she had to submit to treatment when it came her turn again. The medics agreed that her lung function was good, meaning that her smoke inhalation wasn’t critical. Her burns were mostly first-degree, with a few second-degree blisters on her back, and they wanted her to see Dr. Bogarde. Gray was in much the same shape. Both of them were extremely lucky.

Except he had lost a friend, and she had lost every possession except the robe on her back and the shoes on her feet. And an open shed, a lawn mower, and two rakes, she reminded herself. She had insurance on both the house and car, but it would take time to replace everything. Her tired mind began trying to catalogue all the things she would have to do: have her credit cards replaced, get new checks, buy new clothes, get a car, find a place to live, have her mail rerouted to somewhere.

So many things to do, and she was so tired that she felt incapable of accomplishing a single one. At least nothing was irreplaceable, except for the few photographs she'd had of Kyle. There were no other family mementos.

Alex's body was eventually taken away. Monica stared at it being loaded in the hearse, for transport to the parish morgue. Because he had died by violent means, there would be an autopsy. "For seven years he used me," she whispered. "He pretended I was Mama." She shuddered. "How do I tell Michael?" she asked bleakly.

"Who's Michael?"

Monica gave her a puzzled look. "The sheriff. Michael McFane. He's asked me to marry him."

Faith sighed. The tangle just kept getting worse. "You don't," she said, and touched Monica's arm. "Put it behind you. Don't hurt Michael by telling him. It won't make you hurt any less, and it'll give Alex just one more victim. Pick up from here and go on."

Monica didn't reply, to either agree or disagree, but Faith hoped she took her advice. She had picked herself up enough times to know the value of going on.

Eventually both she and Gray were taken to Dr. Bogarde's clinic and put in separate examining rooms. The dapper little doctor checked Gray first; Faith could hear them talking through the thin walls. Then he came bustling into the tiny room where she sat uncomfortably on the table. He cleaned and dressed her burns and checked her breathing, then gazed at her with a sympathetic eye.

"Do you have a place to sleep?"

Faith gave him a rueful smile and shook her head.

"Then why don't you stay here? You look out on your feet. There's a rollaway bed that we use sometimes, and you're welcome to it. I can give you a set of scrubs to wear – don't tell, but I sneaked them from the hospital

in Baton Rouge." His eyes twinkled at her. "A few hours' sleep will do wonders for you. My nurses get here at eight-thirty, and then you can call your insurance agent, buy clothes, handle all those things. Trust me, you'll feel a lot more capable after you've had some sleep."
"Thank you," she said sincerely, accepting his offer. The difficulties of being virtually naked, without transportation, cash, or credit cards, were almost more than she could deal with at the moment. In the morning she could have Margot wire her some money, and she would begin the process of picking herself up again, but for tonight she simply couldn't cope.
Dr. Bogarde left, and in a few minutes Gray came in. His torso and face were still streaked with black smoke, but the doctor had cleaned some patches and applied bandages, giving him the look of a large calico cat. Figuring she looked much the same, and not wanting to look in a mirror to verify it, she smiled at him.
His tired face moved into an answering smile. "Dr. Bogarde said you're okay, but I wanted to see for myself."
"I'm fine, just tired."
He nodded, then simply put his arms around her and folded her against him, sighing deeply as he absorbed her nearness. Until he had seen that she was okay, merely stunned from her fall when he'd shoved her, he had lived in a hell of fear. The events of the night were still catching up with him; part of him felt numb, while another part was still aching with almost inexpressible grief. It didn't matter that his father had been dead for twelve years; he had just learned of his death, so the pain was fresh. If anything had happened to Faith, too –
"Come home with me," he said, pressing his lips to her temple and smelling the smoke in her hair. He didn't care.
Shocked, she drew back and stared at him. "I can't do that," she blurted.
"Why not?"
"Your mother… No."
"Leave Mother to me," he said. "She won't like it – "
"That's an understatement if I've ever heard one!" Faith shook her head. "You can't spring me on her at a time like this. Everything that's happened tonight will be enough of a shock at one time. Dr. Bogarde offered to let me sleep here tonight, and I accepted."
"Forget it," he growled. He hated to admit she was right, but he could see that she wasn't going to budge. "If you won't come home with me, then I'll

take you to the motel."
"I don’t have any money or credit card – "
He set her away from him, and temper sparked in his dark eyes. "Damn it, Faith, did you think I’d charge you for the room?"
"I’m sorry," she apologized. "I’m used to paying my way, so I just didn’t think." A motel room *would* be more comfortable, and more private.
He sighed, and reached out to cup her cheek. The anger died out of his eyes. It was amazing how flowers could grow in the damnedest places, but the Devlin weed patch had sprouted quite a wildflower in Faith. "Come on," he said, helping her down from the examination table. "Let’s tell Dr. Bogarde you’re going with me."
Ten minutes later, he drove up to the motel office and wearily unfolded his long length from the Jaguar. There was still a lot to be done this hellish night. Uncaring how he looked, he went inside and got a key, returning in less than a minute to escort her to room number eleven. He unlocked the door, turned on the light, and stepped aside to let her enter. Tiredly Faith moved past him, and looked longingly at the bed. She would love to just lie down and sleep, but couldn’t bear the thought of getting the sheets filthy with soot.
Gray followed her inside, closed the door, and pulled her to him. She laid her head on his chest, shutting her eyes as she reveled in the feel of him, so hard and strong and vital. Death had been so close…
His fingers gently encircled one of her wrists, and he lifted her sooty fingers to his lips, then folded his hand around hers. "We start dragging the lake tomorrow," he said abruptly.
She rubbed her cheek against his hand, aching for him. "I’m sorry," she said gently.
He took a deep breath. "There’s a lot to be done. I don’t know when I’ll have a free minute."
"I understand. I have a’ lot to do myself. All of the insurance claims, things like that." It would have been nice if they could have leaned on each other during the coming ordeals, but necessity was pulling them in different directions. Because the dragging of the lake would be done under law enforcement authority, access to the process would be limited; she knew that without having to have it explained.
Gray would be there, but no other civilians not directly involved in the dragging operation would be allowed.

"I don’t want to leave you," he murmured, and indeed he seemed incapable of making himself move, despite everything else that had to be done before this long night was over.
"You have to. My problems are mostly paperwork and shopping; I can take care of them. You have more serious problems."
He tilted her head up with his fingers, dark eyes boring into hers. "We’ll talk when this is over," he said, the promise somehow sounding ominous. He kissed her, the pressure of his mouth warm and hard. "Call if you need me."
"All right."
He kissed her again, and she sensed his reluctance. She stroked his hair in comfort. "I don’t want to go," he confessed, resting his forehead against hers. "Twelve years ago I had to tell Mother that Dad had left her for another woman. Now I have to tell her that he was murdered, instead. The hell of it is, I know this won’t upset her as much as the first did."
"You’re not responsible for what she feels or doesn’t feel," Faith replied, touching her thumb to his lower lip. "You and Monica loved him, so he won’t be unmourned."
"Monica." Gray’s mouth tightened, and his eyes turned flinty. "She confessed what she did, about the notes and the cat. Michael’s all torn up about it. She broke several laws with that little caper."
"Let things settle down before you do anything," Faith advised. "Family’s family, after all. You don’t want to do anything rash and cause a breach. Remember, she’s been through a lot, too." Her own family was scattered to the four winds, and her life was littered with loss, so she knew what she was saying. She saw the swift acknowledgment of that reflected in Gray’s eyes. A huge yawn overtook her, and her head dropped against his shoulder. "That’s my last piece of advice for the night," she said, and yawned again.
He kissed her forehead and eased her away from him. He had to force himself to leave her, but he knew if he didn’t do it now, he’d collapse on the bed with her. "Get some sleep, baby. Call if you need me."
She had one friend in town, Faith realized over the next few days. Whether Halley Johnson had learned from town gossip where Faith was staying and volunteered her own services, or Gray had called her and asked her to help, Faith didn’t know and didn’t ask. Halley knocked on the motel room door at ten o’clock the next morning, and put herself at Faith’s service.

Faith had already called Margot and arranged for money to be wired to her, but she still needed some means of getting to the bank to get the money. She also needed, quite desperately, to do some shopping, and she didn't know if any of the stores in town would sell anything to her. The situation between herself and Gray had altered drastically, but no one in town knew it.

"First things first," Halley announced, when Faith said she had to go to the bank. She looked Faith over with a critical eye as she carefully walked out to get into Halley's car. The burns weren't all that uncomfortable, but Faith felt as if she'd been hit by a truck, probably the result of the two bone-jarring collisions she'd had with the ground. "I'll take you to my house," Halley said. "Feel free to use my makeup, do your hair, pamper yourself a little. And while you're doing that, if you'll tell me your sizes, I'll do some quick shopping for you. Nothing fancy," she said, holding up her hand when Faith opened her mouth to protest. "Just underwear, a pair of slacks and a shirt, so you can get out of that robe. You can pay me back when you pick up your money."

With it put to her like that, Faith couldn't refuse. "Thanks," she said, smiling at Halley. "I was wondering if I'd be able to buy clothes in town."

"You will," Halley said with complete assurance, "or I'll call Gray Rouillard myself, and tell him to straighten out his mess. Besides, the whole town's buzzing with the news that his daddy didn't really run off with your mama, that you figured he'd been killed and came back to town to try to prove it. We're all just flabbergasted about Mr. Chelette. Imagine getting in an argument with his best friend and accidentally killing him, and trying to hide it all of these years! It must have driven him crazy, for him to burn down your house like that. Is it true he tried to shoot you, too, and Monica Rouillard managed to shoot first?"

"Something like that," Faith said faintly, wondering what the official version was. She didn't want to contradict whatever was being told. As far as she knew, only she, Gray, and Monica knew about Monica's unwilling seven-year affair with Alex.

Halley dropped her at her house, and Faith enjoyed another long, soaking shower, shampooing her hair twice with strawberry-scented shampoo before the stench of smoke was completely gone. She took Halley at her word and indulged in moisturizer from head to foot, after which she began to feel almost human again. She used a minimal amount of makeup, just enough to put a bit of color in her face, and blow-dried her hair. By the time she was

finished, Halley was back with her packages, which blessedly included a new toothbrush.

The clothes were simple, cotton panties and bra, and a lightweight knit pants and tunic outfit. Just having underwear again was wonderful. She had been acutely aware of being naked beneath the robe and scrubs. Halley had a good eye for color; the knit outfit she'd selected was a flattering pale pink. A carroty redhead couldn't have worn the color, but Faith's hair was a dark, almost wine-colored red, and the knowledge that she looked good in the pink perked up her spirits.

Halley stayed with her most of the day, driving her where she needed to go: the bank, first and foremost. Having a thousand dollars in cash did wonders for her sense of security, and the first thing she did was reimburse Halley for her clothes. Next visit was to the insurance office, which thankfully was one-stop shopping, because the same company insured both house and car. Faith had recovered enough to be amused by the sympathetic, almost deferential treatment she received in the insurance office; the line between celebrity and notoriety was a very thin one, but evidently she was now on the celebrity side.

As the morning wore on, she was grateful for her new status. Because she was totally without identification, the insurance agent had to step in and verify everything before she could get replacement credit cards, credit card companies not being inclined to blithely send out cards to everyone who called. New cards were being expressed to her in care of the insurance agent, and would be there the next day. The insurance company also took care of a rental car for her, and one would be there that afternoon.

Next was shopping, and Faith needed so much that her mind boggled at the enormity of it. Even when she'd been run out of the parish, she hadn't lost all her possessions, meager as they'd been. This time she was starting from scratch, but this time she also had resources.

Emcient Halley suggested they make a list, and that helped Faith get her thoughts organized. Suitcase, purse, wallet; shampoo, soap, deodorant, toothpaste, tampons; makeup and perfume; razor, brush, comb, hair dryer, travel iron; underwear, hosiery, shoes, clothing. "My God," Faith said, staring at the list, which kept getting longer and longer. "This will cost a fortune."

"Only because you're buying it all at one time. Everything on there is something you would have bought anyway, eventually. What would you

leave off, anyway? The makeup?"
"Get real," Faith said, and they laughed. It was her first laugh of the day, and it felt good.
They descended on the local Wal-Mart, and filled two carts. Even keeping her purchases to a minimum of the necessities, she was accumulating major stuff. None of the shoes fit, however, which meant another stop. Halley was so cheerful about the entire process, though, that Faith found herself enjoying the expedition. She had never participated in that rite of American girlhood, shopping with friends, and this was a new experience for her.
Halley unwittingly echoed her thoughts. "Wow, this is fun! I haven't done this in a coon's age. We need to do it again – under different circumstances, of course."
The total tally put a sizeable dent in her cash fund. That accomplished, Faith realized she was exhausted, and an observant Halley drove her back to the motel.
Gray called her that night, and he sounded as exhausted as she still felt.
"How are you, baby?" he asked. "Did you get everything done today?"
"I'm fine," she said. "Functional, at least." She had taken a two-hour nap, but it hadn't helped much. "The insurance company is handling the details with the rental car and credit card companies, so everything is working out. Halley took me shopping, so I have clothes now."
"Damn."
She ignored that comment, but a smile flirted with her mouth. "How do *you* feel?"
"As if I'm three days older than dirt."
She hesitated, not certain if she wanted to hear the answer to her next question. "Have you found anything yet?"
"Not yet." His voice was strained.
"How's Monica?"
He sighed. "I don't know. She just sits with her head down. She and Mike will have to work this out themselves; I can't run interference for her on this."
"Take care of yourself," she said, tenderness vibrant in her tone.
"You, too," he said softly.
As soon as he hung up, Faith called Renee. She felt guilty for not having thought of it sooner, knowing how upset Renee had been.

Her grandmother answered the phone. When Faith asked for Renee, the old woman said in a fretful voice, "Guess she’s gone. Took her clothes and lit out, night before last. I ain’t heard from her."

Faith’s heart sank. Renee had probably panicked after confessing what had happened at the summerhouse, and now she was running again, for no reason.

"If you hear from her, Granny, there’s something I want you to tell her. It’s important. The man who killed Guy Rouillard is dead. She doesn’t have to be afraid anymore."

Her grandmother was silent a moment. "So that’s why she was so jumpy," she finally said. "Well, maybe she’ll call. She left some stuff, so she might come back for it. I’ll tell her, if she does."

Mr. Pleasant’s car was pulled from the lake the next afternoon. Mr. Pleasant was in it.

Probably on Gray’s orders, a deputy came to the motel to tell Faith. The young man was uncomfortable and respectful, twisting his hat in his hands. He couldn’t say how Mr. Pleasant had died, but the body was being taken to the parish morgue, where he would lie in the same room with his killer. Faith had to bite back an instinctive protest, knowing it would be useless. After the deputy left, she sat down on the bed and had a good cry, then called Detective Ambrose. Poor Mr. Pleasant didn’t have any remaining family, but the detective promised to find out what he could about any arrangements Mr. Pleasant might have made for his own funeral, given the state of his health. There was red tape to go through, of course, since his death was a homicide, but with his killer already dead, gathering forensic evidence for a trial wasn’t an issue.

Guy Rouillard’s Cadillac was found the next morning, not far from where Mr. Pleasant’s car had been found. The long skeleton in the backseat was the only earthly remains of Gray’s father. Alex Chelette’s method of disposal had been simple: put them in their cars, prop a brick on the accelerator, and put the car in gear. Sheriff McFane was the one who had thought about finding the cars, and there were only three places on the lake where the water was deep enough to hide a car, and it was possible to get a car there. With their search locations narrowed down, it hadn’t taken them long to find the bodies.

Faith didn’t get to talk to Gray, but information flew around the town, and she knew he was ruthlessly using his influence to get Guy’s remains

released as soon as possible, for a funeral twelve years delayed. Noelle Rouillard appeared in town for the first time since her husband's disappearance, looking tragic and unbelievably beautiful in a black dress. Gray's cynical assessment of his mother's reaction had been on target; being a widow was far preferable to being abandoned. Now that everyone knew her husband had *not* left her for the town whore, she could hold her head up again.

The funeral was held four days after Guy's remains were found. Though she knew people would whisper about her presence, Faith bought a black dress and attended the service, sitting on a back pew beside Halley and her family. Gray didn't see her there at the church, but later, after the funeral procession had transported Guy's body to the burial site, his dark gaze was drawn by the sunlight on her flaming hair.

He was standing with a supporting arm around Monica. Sheriff McFane was on her other side, so Faith supposed the engagement was still on. Noelle was bearing up with the sympathetic support of all her old friends, the ones she had refused to see for a dozen years. Faith was some ten yards away, separated from him by a group of people, but their eyes met and she knew he was thinking about what she had said. Guy was sincerely mourned by his children; what Noelle felt didn't matter.

She stared at him, drinking him in with her eyes. He looked tired, but composed. His mane of hair was pulled back and secured at the back of his neck, and he wore a beautifully fitted, double-breasted black Italian suit. Sweat gleamed on his forehead in the noonday heat.

She made no move to go to him, and he didn't gesture her closer. What was between them was private, not for public display at his father's funeral. He knew he had her support, for he had cried out his grief in her arms. It was enough that she was there.

It was as they were leaving the grave site that Faith saw Yolanda Foster, standing by herself; Lowell was nowhere in evidence. Yolanda had been crying, but now her eyes were dry as she stared at the grave, an open look of heartbreak on her face. Then she gathered herself and turned away, and Faith felt all the pieces of the puzzle click into place.

It had never made sense that Guy would leave everything for Renee, not after all the years they'd been having an affair. Alex had said that Guy had been planning to divorce Noelle, and that had made more sense, but abruptly Faith knew that it wasn't Renee Guy had been planning to marry.

After all his years of tomcatting around, Guy Rouillard had fallen in love that summer, with the mayor’s wife. He had protected Yolanda’s reputation, not even telling his best friend about her. Gossip about them had leaked out, or Ed Morgan wouldn’t have known, but their affair hadn’t been common knowledge. It was even possible Renee had told Ed that Guy was seeing the mayor’s wife.

Yolanda and Guy had made secret plans. And now, after all these years, she knew that her lover hadn’t deserted her. Guy was sincerely mourned by someone other than his children, after all.

It was late that night before all of the sympathizers ran out of excuses to stay any longer, and Gray had a private moment with his family. He sipped his Scotch as he studied Noelle, who was infinitely more cheerful now after burying her husband than she had been during the twelve years he’d been missing. He needed Faith, he thought. He wanted to be with her. Seeing her at the cemetery had made the hunger even sharper. Sexual hunger, emotional hunger, mental hunger. He simply wanted her, in all the ways possible. He remembered the way his heart had swelled in his chest when she’d told him she loved him, remembered the moment of blinding joy. Like a fool, he hadn’t yet told her that he loved her, too, but that was an oversight he intended to rectify as soon as they could be alone.

Right now, he had something to say to his mother and sister.

"I’m getting married," he said calmly.

Two startled pairs of eyes looked back at him. He saw Monica’s dismay, saw it quickly change to acceptance, and she gave him a tiny nod.

"Really, dear?" Noelle murmured. "I’m sorry, I haven’t been keeping current with your social life. Is it someone from New Orleans?"

"No, it’s Faith Devlin."

Calmly Noelle set her glass of wine aside. "Your joke is in extremely bad taste, Grayson."

"It isn’t a joke. I’m marrying her as soon as it can be arranged."

"I forbid it!" she snapped.

"You can’t forbid anything, Mother."

Though he said it calmly, Noelle reacted as if he’d slapped her. She rose to her feet, holding herself as erect as a queen. "We’ll see about that. Your father may have associated with trash, but at least he never brought it home and expected *me* to associate with it!"

"That’s enough," he said, his tone soft and dangerous.

"On the contrary, if you lower yourself to marry that slut, you'll find it's just beginning. I'll make her life here so miserable – "
"No, you won't," he interrupted, slamming his glass down so that the Scotch sloshed over the rim. "Let me make your position plain, Mother. I know what's in Dad's will. He left you enough money to keep you in style, but he left everything else to Monica and me. If you behave yourself, and treat my wife with every courtesy, you may continue to live here. But make no mistake, the first time you upset her, I'll escort you out the door myself. Is that clear?"
Noelle shrank back, her face pale, her eyes livid as she stared at her son. "Monica," she said, her voice abruptly frail. "Help me to my room, darling. Men are so uncivilized…"
"Put a sock in it, Mother," Monica said tiredly.
"I beg your pardon." The words were freezing.
Monica visibly braced herself. She was as pale as Noelle, but she didn't back down. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. But Gray deserves to be happy. If you don't want to come to his wedding, fine, but I'll be there with bells on. And while we're on the subject, I'm getting married, too. To Michael McFane."
"Who?" Noelle asked, her face blank.
"The sheriff."
Disdain curled Noelle's lip. "The sheriff! Really, dear, he's – "
"Perfect for me," Monica finished firmly. She looked both scared and exhilarated at finally having stood up to Noelle. "If you want to come to my wedding, I'll be pleased, but you can't stop me from marrying him. And, Mother – I think you'll be happier if you move to New Orleans."
"Good idea," Gray said, and winked at his sister.
The next morning, Faith drove down to New Orleans for Mr. Pleasant's funeral. She had hoped Gray would call her, but understood why he hadn't. She had pestered Sheriff McFane mercilessly about doing what he could to get Mr. Pleasant's body released, and he had told her that Gray was embroiled in the process of having Guy's will probated, using his influence to hurry the process. The legal difficulties of a forged letter of proxy, under which he had been governing their financial holdings all these years, were mostly negated since Guy's will had left everything to Gray and Monica anyway, but there were still problems to handle.

Margot flew down to New Orleans to be with Faith, somehow discerning over the telephone that she was more upset about Mr. Pleasant than she had let on. The brief funeral service was attended by only a handful of people: some neighbors, herself and Margot, the little blue-haired lady from Houston H. Manges's law office. To her surprise, Detective Ambrose came by, wearing what looked like the same fatigued suit. He patted Faith's hand, as if she were Mr. Pleasant's family, and all the while his cynical cop's eyes never left Margot's face.

Too tired to drive home, Faith got a hotel room for the night. Margot decided to stay overnight too – no surprise there – and went out with Detective Ambrose.

"I don't sleep with men on the first date," Margot said the next morning, chattering nervously. "I mean, I just don't. It's too dangerous, and tacky besides." She couldn't sit still as they ate their breakfast at the room service cart in Faith's room; she fidgeted with her napkin, her silverware, her clothes. Her gaze flitted around the hotel room; hers was connecting, and virtually identical, but she seemed to find everything of immense interest. "I may be old-fashioned, but I think sex should wait at least until there's a commitment, and waiting until marriage would be even better. Women risk too much by sleeping with men who aren't their husbands – "

"So was he any good?" Faith interrupted, sipping her coffee.

Margot clapped her hand to her chest and rolled her eyes dramatically. "Oh my Gawd, was he!" She jumped up and began to pace the room. "I couldn't *believe* what was happening, I just don't *do* that, but that man had made up his mind and it was like being on a roller coaster, there was just no way to get off. Well, that's not exactly what I mean. About getting off, that is, because I did – " She stopped and turned dark red. Faith almost choked on her coffee, she was laughing so hard.

"He wants to see me tonight, but I told him I have a flight back to Dallas, and he should call me at home if he wants to see me again." Margot looked anxious. "Do you think there's any way I can slow this down and get back on the right track?"

"Maybe," Faith said, but she had seen Margot in love before, and doubted anything could slow her down.

They spent the morning shopping, replenishing Faith's wardrobe from the chic New Orleans boutiques. She left the city about two o'clock, giving

Margot both the privacy and time for another meeting with Detective Ambrose.

She arrived back at the motel, her temporary home, at four. Reuben waved to her, and came out to help her carry in her purchases. Then, hungry from the exertion, she drove downtown to Halley's cafe.

She chatted with Halley for a while, then ordered the chicken salad sandwich that had become her usual supper. She was sitting in a booth with her back to the door, and her sandwich had just been placed in front of her, when she heard the door crash open behind her, and an abrupt silence fell over the cafe.

Startled, she looked up and found an enraged Gray Rouillard towering over her. Reuben must have called him, she thought absently. His black hair was loose, tangled around his shoulders. "Where the *hell,"* he barked, "have you been?"

"New Orleans," she replied in a mild tone, though she was acutely aware of the breathless interest of everyone in the cafe.

"Would it be asking too much of you to let me know where you're going to be?" he snapped.

"I went to Mr. Pleasant's funeral," she said.

He slid into the booth opposite her, some of the fury fading from his face. Beneath the table, his long legs clasped hers, and he reached across to take both her hands in his. "I was scared sh – spitless," he confessed, quickly adjusting his first word choice to something more socially acceptable. "You hadn't checked out, but Reuben saw you put a suitcase in the car. I even had him open your room to see if any of your things were still there."

"I wouldn't have left town without telling you," she said, secretly amused that he thought she might have left town at all.

"You'd better not," he muttered. His hands tightened on hers. "Look," he began, and stopped. "Ah, hell, I know this isn't the best place to do it, but I've still got tons of paperwork to wade through and I don't know how long it'll be before I see daylight. Will you marry me?"

He had succeeded in surprising her. He had gone beyond surprising her. She sat back, stunned into speechlessness. Gray wanted to *marry* her? She hadn't dared let herself even think of it. With their tangled pasts… the thorny situation with his mother and sister… well, it just hadn't seemed to be an option.

Evidently he took her reaction as rejection, and his dark brows drew together. Being Gray, he immediately took ruthless measures to get what he wanted. "You have to marry me," he said, loudly enough that everyone in the cafe could hear him. "That's my baby girl you're carrying. She'll need a daddy, and you need a husband."

Faith gasped, her eyes rounding with horror. *"You fiend,"* she shrieked, scrambling out of the booth. She wasn't pregnant and she knew it, her period having arrived right on time, three days before. She had a confused, dizzying impression of a room full of avid faces, staring at her, and Gray wore a ruthlessly satisfied look on his face as he smiled at her, enjoying her sputtering, incoherent fury. Maybe he saw something in her eyes, a split second of warning, but it wasn't enough. Her hand shot out for her glass of iced tea and she dashed it full in his face. "I am *not* pregnant!" she yelled.

Gray climbed out of the booth, wiping tea from his eyes with Faith's napkin. "Maybe not now, but if you want to be, we'd better get married."

"Marry him," Halley advised, leaning over the counter. She was grinning hugely. "And make his life hell. He deserves it, after this stunt."

"Yeah," he said positively. "I deserve it."

Faith stared up at him. "But – what about your mother?" she asked helplessly.

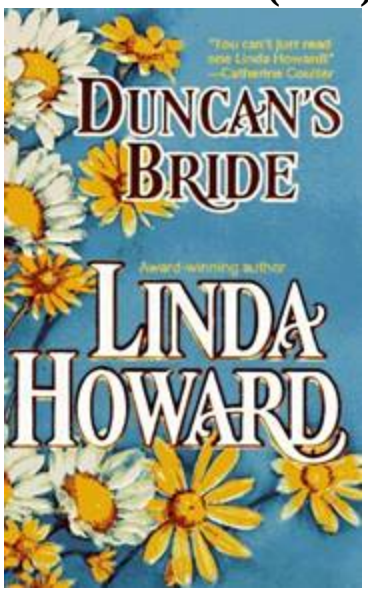
He shrugged. "What about her?" Faith opened her mouth to yell at him again, and he grinned, holding up his hand. "I told her and Monica that I intended to marry you. Mother went into her acute disapproval syndrome, but Monica told her, literally, to put a sock in it. Funniest thing I've ever seen. Well, except for one." His eyes glittered at her, outrageously reminding her of the courthouse. "Monica gives us her best wishes; she and Michael are getting married next week. She strongly suggested to Mother that she move to New Orleans, which she's always liked better than Prescott, anyway. So, baby, I'm going to be rattling around in that big house all by myself, and I need my own personal redhead to keep me company."

He meant it. Faith swallowed, once again unable to speak. Gray's head tilted as he smiled down at her, dark eyes full of desire and tenderness. "There's something else I've been meaning to tell you," he murmured. "I love you, baby. I should have told you sooner, but things started happening."

She thought of hitting him. She thought of snatching someone else's tea to toss in his face. Instead she said, "Yes." He held out his arms, and she

walked into them, to the accompanying spatter of applause from the cafe patrons.

Duncan’s Bride (1995)



Chapter 1

It was time he looked for a wife, but this time around he wasn't looking for "love" as part of the bargain. He was older and infinitely wiser, and he knew that „love" wasn't necessary, or even desirable.

Reese Duncan had made a fool of himself once and nearly lost everything. It wouldn't happen again. This time he'd choose a wife with his brain instead of the contents of his jeans, and he'd pick a woman who would be content to live on an isolated ranch, who was willing to work hard and be a good mother to their kids, one who cared more about family than fashion. He'd fallen for a pretty face once, but good looks wasn't on his list of requirements now. He was a normal man with a healthy sex drive; that would be enough to get the kids he wanted. He didn't want passion. Passion had led him into the worst mistake of his life. Now he wanted a reliable, common sense woman.

The problem was, he didn't have time to find her. He worked twelve to sixteen hours a day, trying to keep his head above water. It had taken him seven years, but it looked like this year would put him in the black, finally. He had lost half his land, a loss that ate at his soul every day of his life, but there was no way in hell he would lose what remained. He had lost most of his cattle; the huge herds were gone, and he worked like a slave taking care

of the remaining heads of beef. The ranch hands were gone, too; he hadn't been able to afford their wages. He hadn't bought a new pair of jeans in three years. The barns and house hadn't been painted in eight.
But April, his ex-wife, had her outstanding debts, incurred before their marriage, paid. She had her lump-sum settlement. She had her Manhattan apartment, her expensive wardrobe. What did it matter to her that he'd had to beggar himself and sell his land, his herds, wipe out his bank accounts, to give her the half of his assets to which she felt "entitled"? After all, hadn't she been married to him for two whole years? Hadn't she lived through two hellish Montana winters, entirely cut off from civilization? So what if the ranch had been in his family for a hundred years; two years of marriage "entitled" her to half of it, or its equivalent in cold, hard cash. Of course, she had been more than happy to settle for the cash. If he didn't have that much, he could sell a little land. After all, he had oodles of it; he wouldn't miss a few thousand acres. It helped that her father was a business magnate who had a lot of connections in Montana as well as the other western states, which explained why the judge hadn't been swayed by Reese's arguments that the amount April was demanding would bankrupt him.
That was another mistake he wouldn't make. The woman he married this time would have to sign a prenuptial agreement that would protect the ranch in case of divorce. He wouldn't risk so much as one square foot of the dirt of his children's heritage, or the money it would take to run it. No woman was going to take him to the cleaners again; she might leave, but she wouldn't leave with anything of his.
Given the way he felt, he would have been just as happy to remain single for the rest of his life if there hadn't been the question of children. He wanted kids. He wanted to teach them to love the land as he had been taught, to leave that land to them, to pass on the legacy that had been passed on to him. More than that, he wanted the life that children would bring to the empty old ranch house, the laughter and tears and anger, the pain of childish fears and the shouts of joy. He wanted heirs of his bone and blood. To have those children, he needed a wife.
A wife would be convenient, too. There was a lot to be said for available sex, especially since he didn't have the time to waste trying to find it. All he needed was a solid, steady, undemanding woman in his bed every night, and his hormones would take care of the rest of it.

But unmarried, marriageable women were scarce in that part of the country; they were all packing up and moving to the cities. Ranch life was hard, and they wanted some excitement in their lives, some luxuries. Reese didn't have the time, money or inclination to go courting, anyway. There was a more efficient way to find a woman than that.

He'd read a magazine article about how many farmers in the Midwest were advertising for wives, and he'd also seen a television program about men in Alaska who were doing the same. Part of him didn't like the idea of advertising, because he was naturally a private man and had become even more so after his disastrous marriage. On the other hand, he wouldn't have to spend a lot of money just put a few ads in the personal sections of some newspapers, and money meant a lot to him these days. He wouldn't have to meet the women who didn't appeal to him, wouldn't have to waste time driving here and there, taking them out, getting to know them. He didn't particularly want to get to know them, not even the one he would eventually choose to be his wife. There was a hard layer of ice encasing him, and he liked it that way. Vision was much clearer when it was unclouded by emotion. The impersonality of an ad appealed to that part of him, even though the private part of him disliked the public nature of it.

But he'd decided that was the way to go, and Reese Duncan didn't waste time once he'd made a decision. He would put the ad in several of the larger newspapers in the West and Midwest. Drawing a pad of paper toward him to begin framing how he wanted the ad to read, he wrote in bold, slashing strokes: WANTED:

A WIFE...

* * *

Madelyn Sanger Patterson sauntered back into the office after lunch. You never got the sense that Madelyn had hurried over anything, her friend Christine mused as Madelyn strolled toward her. Nor did you ever think that Madelyn sweated. It was ninety-five degrees outside, but no dampness or wrinkles marred her perfect oyster-white dress, set off by the periwinkle silk scarf draped artfully over one shoulder. Madelyn was a clotheshorse; everything looked good on her, but her own sense of style and color added a panache that stirred women to envy and men to lust.

"You're a disgusting person," Christine announced, leaning back in her chair to better appraise Madelyn's approach. "It's unhealthy not to sweat, unnatural not to wrinkle, and ungodly for your hair not to get mussed."

"I sweat," Madelyn said with idle amusement.
"When?"
"Every Tuesday and Thursday at 7:00 p.m."
"I don't believe it. You give your sweat glands an appointment?"
"No, I play racquetball."
Christine held up her fingers in the sign of the cross to ward off the mention of exercise, which in her opinion was the eighth deadly sin. "That doesn't count. Normal people sweat without exertion in weather like this. And do your clothes wrinkle? Does your hair ever hang in your face?"
"Of course."
"In front of witnesses?" Satisfied she had won that exchange, Christine looked pleased with herself.
Madelyn propped herself against the edge of Christine's desk and crossed her legs at the ankle. It was an angular, almost masculine pose that looked graceful when Madelyn did it. She tilted her head to study the newspaper Christine had been reading. "Anything interesting?"
Christine's mother always mailed her the Sunday edition of their newspaper from Omaha, so Christine could stay up-to-date on local news. "My best friend from high school is getting married. Her engagement announcement is here. A distant acquaintance has died, an old boyfriend has made his first million, the drought is driving feed prices sky-high. Usual stuff."
"Does she hold the old boyfriend against you?"
"Nan. She couldn't stand his guts when we were dating. He was a know-it-all."
"And it turns out he did know it all?"
"Evidently. It's disconcerting when things turn out to be exactly as they seemed."
"I know," Madelyn sympathized. "It's hard on your natural skepticism."
Christine folded the paper and handed it to Madelyn, who enjoyed newspapers from different cities. "There's a good article in here about relocating to a different part of the country for a job. I wish I'd read it before I left Omaha."
"You've been here two years. It's too late for culture shock."
"Homesickness is on a different timetable." "But are you really? Or are you just in a blue mood because you broke up with the Wall Street Wonder last week and haven't found a replacement yet?"
Christine sighed dramatically. "I have a bad case of heartbent."

"What's a dent to a Sherman tank?"
"Bent, not dent!"
"Then shouldn't it be 'heartbend'?"
"That sounds like something you get from diving too deep, too fast."
"Surfacing."
"Whatever."
They grinned, content with the exchange, and Madelyn returned to her own office with the newspaper in hand. She and Christine honed their wits on each other with mutual enjoyment while still maintaining a totally amicable relationship. Madelyn had learned early that not everyone enjoyed that kind of conversation. Several teenage boyfriends had been, in various degrees, insulted, angered, or intimidated, which had promptly ended her fledgling relationships with them. Boys were too caught up in their hormonal urges and too wildly protective of their newfound masculinity to tolerate what they saw as the faintest slight to that masculinity, and unfortunately, Madelyn's lazy wit often seemed to offend. She sighed, thinking about it, because somehow it didn't seem that things were much different now.
She stared at her desk. It was disgustingly and disgracefully clear. She could either stay at the office for the rest of the day or go home, and it wouldn't make a bit of difference either way. Odds were, no one would even know she had left, unless she stopped on the way out and made a point of telling someone. That was how often her phone rang.
There were advantages to being the stepsister of the owner. Boredom, however, wasn't one of them. Being idle was excruciating for her. The time was swiftly approaching when she would have to kiss Robert's cheek, thank him for the thought, but politely decline to continue with this "job".
Maybe she should even consider moving away. The West Coast, maybe. Or Fiji. Robert didn't have any business concerns in Fiji. Yet.
She unfolded the newspaper and leaned back in her chair with her feet propped on top of the desk and her ankles crossed. The decision would wait; she had been working on the problem for some time now, so it would still be there when she finished reading the paper.
She loved out-of-town newspapers, especially the smaller ones, the weekly editions that were more folksy gossip-columns than anything else. The Omaha newspaper was too large for that kind of coziness, but it still had a midwestern flavor to remind her that there was, indeed, a life outside New York City. The city was so large and complex that those who lived in it

tended to be absorbed by it. She was constantly looking for windows on other ways of life, not because she disliked New York, but because she was so curious about everything.

She skipped over World Affairs – they were the same in Omaha as in New York – read Midwestern and local news, learning how the drought was affecting farmers and ranchers but creating a booming business for the slaughterhouses, and who had married or was intending to. She read the sale ads, compared the price of real estate in Omaha to that in New York, and was, as always, amazed at the difference. She was skipping around through the want ads when an ad in the personals caught her attention.

"Wanted: a wife for able-bodied rancher. Must be of steady character, want children, and be able to work on ranch. Age 25 to 35 preferable."

Those interested should contact said able-bodied rancher at a box number in Billings, Montana.

Madelyn was instantly diverted, her imagination caught by the ad, though she wasn't certain if she should be amused or outraged. The man was practically advertising for a combination brood mare and ranch hand! On the other hand, he had been brutally honest about his expectations, which was oddly refreshing after some of the personal ads she'd seen in the New York newspapers and magazines. There had been none of that slick "Sensitive Aquarian needs a New-Age Nineties woman to explore the meaning of the universe with him" hypersell that told one nothing except that the writer had no concept of clarity in the written word.

What could be learned about the rancher from that ad, other than his honesty? His age could be anywhere from fifty on down, but since he wanted children she thought he would be younger – probably in his thirties or early forties. Also, that bit about children probably meant one could take the able-bodied part literally. If he wanted a wife of steady character, he probably wasn't a party animal, either. He sounded like a sober, hardworking rancher who wanted a wife but didn't have the time to look for one.

She had read an article several months ago about mail-order brides, and though she'd found it interesting, she had been put off by the impersonality of it all. It was evidently a big business, matching Oriental women with men in Western nations, but it wasn't limited to that; farmers and ranchers in the less-populated states had started advertising, simply because there were

so few women in their areas. There was even an entire magazine devoted to it.
Really, this ad was the same in intent as the slick ads: someone was looking for companionship. The need was the same the world over, though it was often couched in more amusing or romantic terms.
And answering the ad was doing nothing more than agreeing to meet someone, like a blind date. It was a way of making contact. All relationships began with a first date, blind or otherwise.
She folded the paper and wished she had something to do other than ponder the issue of social advertising.
She could go upstairs and pound on Robert's desk, but that wouldn't accomplish anything. Robert didn't respond well to force; he wouldn't disturb the smooth running of his offices just to give her something to do. He had offered her the job as a means of giving her a focus in life after losing both her mother and grandmother within a short length of time, but both of them knew that the job had outlived its purpose. Only an incurable optimism had kept her at it this long, hoping it would turn into something legitimate. If she pounded on Robert's desk, he would lean back in his chair and smile at her with his wickedly amused eyes, though his mouth seldom actually joined his eyes in celebration, and say, "The ball's in your court, babe. Serve it or go home."
Yes, it was time to go on to something new. The shock of grief had led to inertia, and inertia was even harder to handle, otherwise she would have left over two years ago.

* * *

Wanted: a wife.
She picked up the newspaper and read the ad again.
Naw. She wasn't that desperate. Was she? She needed a new job, a change of scenery, not a husband.
On the other hand, she was twenty-eight, old enough to know that the swinging life wasn't for her. Nor was city living, really, though she had lived in cities most of her life. As a child in Richmond, she had dearly loved the weekends when she had visited her grandmother in the country. Though it had been only a rural house, not an actual farm, she had still reveled in the peace and quiet, and longed for it when her mother had remarried and they had moved to New York.

No, she wasn't desperate at all, but she was curious by nature and badly needed a diversion while she decided what sort of job she should look for, and where. It was like a first date. If it clicked, then it clicked. She had nothing against Montana, and wouldn't that be a wild tale to tell her grandchildren, that she'd been a mail-order bride? If, as was far more likely, nothing came of it, then no harm had been done. She felt far safer answering an ad from a Montana rancher than she would one from a freestyle urbanite.

Feeling a bit exhilarated from the daring of it, she quickly rolled a sheet of paper into her top-of-the-line electronic typewriter, wrote a reply to the ad, addressed an envelope, put a stamp on it and dropped it down the mail chute. As soon as the silver metal flap swallowed the envelope, she felt a peculiar, hollow feeling in her stomach, as though she had done something incredibly stupid. On the other hand, she had had this same feeling the first time she'd gotten behind the wheel of a car. And when she'd ridden one of the super rollercoasters. *And* when she'd gone to college, flown for the first time, and gone on her first date. This same feeling had accompanied almost every first in her life, but it had never been a forerunner of disaster. Instead she had thoroughly enjoyed all those firsts. Maybe that was a good sign. On the other hand... a mail-order bride? *Her?* Then she shrugged. It was nothing to worry about. The odds were that she would never hear from this Montana rancher. After all, what could they have in common?

* * *

Reese Duncan frowned at the New York return address on the envelope as he slit it open and removed the single sheet of typewritten paper inside. What would anyone in New York know about life on a ranch? He was tempted to toss the letter into the trash; it would be a waste of his time to read it, just as this trip into Billings to pick up the mail had been a waste of time. Today there had been only this one response to his ad, and from New York, of all places.

But the overall response to the ad hadn't been exactly overwhelming, so he might as well read it. In fact, this was just the third answer he'd gotten. Guess there weren't too many women in the world anxious for life on a Montana ranch.

The letter was short, and remarkable in the information it *didn't* give. Her name was Madelyn S. Paterson. She was twenty-eight, had never been

married, and was healthy, strong and willing to work. She hadn't sent a picture. She was the only one who hadn't.

She was younger than the other two women who had responded; they were both in their thirties. The schoolteacher was his age, and not bad to look at. The other woman was thirty-six, two years his senior, and had never worked at a paying job; she had remained at home to care for her invalid mother, who had recently died. She was plain, but not homely. Both of them would have far more realistic expectations of the vast, empty spaces and hard life on a ranch than this Madelyn S. Patterson.

On the other hand, she might be some small-town girl who had moved to the big city and found she didn't like it. She must have read his ad in a hometown newspaper that had been mailed to her, because he sure as hell hadn't wasted his money placing it in the *New York Times.* And he hadn't had so many responses that he could afford to ignore one. He would make the same arrangements with her that he'd made with the others, if she were still interested when he wrote to her.

He tapped the folded letter against his thigh as he left the post office and walked to his pickup truck. This was taking up more time than he could truly afford. He wanted to have everything settled by July, and it was already the middle of May. Six weeks. He wanted to find a wife within the next six weeks.

* * *

Madelyn almost dropped her mail when she saw the Montana address on the plain white envelope. Only nine days had passed since she had answered the ad, so he must have replied almost by return mail. In those nine days she had convinced herself that he wouldn't answer at all.

She sat down at her small dining table and ripped open the envelope. There was only one sheet inside.

Miss Patterson,

My name is Reese Duncan. I'm thirty-four years old, divorced, no children. I own a ranch in central Montana.

If you're still interested, I can see you two weeks from Saturday. Let me know by return mail. I'll send you a bus ticket to Billings.

There was no closing salutation, only his signature, *G. R. Duncan.* What did the *G* stand for? His handwriting was heavy, angular and perfectly legible, and there were no misspellings.

Now she knew his name, age and that he was divorced. He hadn't been real before; he had been only an anonymous someone who had placed an ad for a wife. Now he was a person.

And a busy one, too, if he could only spare the time to see her on a Saturday over two weeks away! Madelyn couldn't help smiling at the thought. He certainly didn't give the impression of being so desperate for a wife that he had been forced to advertise. Once again she had the distinct impression that he was simply too busy to look for one. He was divorced, the letter said, so perhaps he had lost his first wife precisely because he was so busy. She tapped the letter with her fingernails, studying the handwriting. She was intrigued, and becoming more so. She wanted to meet this man.

* * *

Madelyn S. Patterson had answered promptly, which the other two hadn't; he had yet to hear from them. Reese opened her letter.

Mr. Duncan, I will arrive in Billings on the designated date. However, I can't allow you to pay for my travel expenses, as we are strangers and nothing may come of our meeting.

My flight arrives at 10:39 a.m. I trust that is convenient. Enclosed is a copy of my flight schedule. Please contact me if your plans change.

His eyebrows rose. Well, well. So she preferred to fly instead of taking the bus. A cynical smile twisted his mouth. Actually, so did he. He had even owned his own plane, but that had been B.A.: before April. His ex-wife had seen to it that it had been years since he'd been able to afford even an airline ticket, let alone his own plane.

Part of him appreciated the fact that Ms. Patterson was sparing him the expense, but his hard, proud core resented the fact that he wasn't able to afford to send her an airline ticket himself. Hell, come to that, even the bus ticket would have put him in a bind this week. Probably when she found out how broke he was, she'd leave so fast her feet would roll back the pavement. There was no way this woman would work out, but he might as well go through the motions to make certain. It wasn't as if applicants were beating down his door.

Madelyn invited Robert to dinner the Thursday before her Saturday flight to Montana, knowing that he would have a date on Friday night, and she wanted to talk to him alone.

He arrived promptly at eight and walked to her small liquor cabinet, where he poured himself a hefty Scotch and water. He lifted the glass to her, and

as always his eyes smiled without his mouth joining in.
Madelyn lifted her wineglass in return. "To an enigma," she said.
He arched his elegant dark brows. "Yourself?" "Not me, I'm an open book." "Written in an unknown language."
"And if your covers were *ever* opened, what language would be there?"
He shrugged, his eyes still smiling, but he couldn't refute the charge that he held himself off from people. Madelyn was closer to him than anyone; his father had married her mother when she was ten and he sixteen, which should have been too great an age difference for any real closeness, but Robert had unaccountably taken the time to make her feel welcome in her new home, to talk to her and listen in return. Together they had weathered first the death of his father, then, five years later, that of her mother; most stepsiblings probably would have drifted apart after that, but they hadn't, because they truly liked each other as friends as well as brother and sister.
Robert was a true enigma: elegant, handsome, almost frighteningly intelligent, but with a huge private core that no one was ever allowed to touch. Madelyn was unique in that she even knew that core existed. No one else had ever seen that much of him. In the years since he had inherited the Cannon Companies, he had reshaped the various enterprises and made them even larger and richer than before. An enormous amount of power rested in his lean hands, but not even the Cannon empire seemed to reach that private center of him. The inner man was a citadel, inviolate.
It was as if he kept himself leashed, his fires banked. Women flocked around him, of course, but he was particular in his bed partners and preferred monogamy to musical beds. When he chose a particular woman friend, they were usually together for at least a year, and he was entirely faithful to her for as long as the affair lasted. One of his ex-amours had gotten drunk and cried on Madelyn's shoulder at a party shortly after Robert had ended their affair, sobbing that she would never be able to love another man because how could anyone compare to Robert? The woman's drunken confession had, so far, been pathetically accurate; she had drifted into a couple of affairs, but both of them had been short-lived, and since then she had stopped dating entirely.
Now he was watching Madelyn with his amused eyes, and after a minute she answered her own question. "Your language would be an obscure one, dead, of course, and translated into a cipher of your own invention. To

paraphrase Winston Churchill, you're an enigma inside a puzzle wrapped in a riddle, or some such complicated drivel."
He almost smiled; his lips twitched, and he dipped his head to acknowledge the accuracy of her assessment. He tasted the Scotch, savoring the smoky bite of it. "What's for dinner?"
"Conversation."
"A true case of eating our words." "And spaghetti."
He gave the Scotch a pained look and set the glass down; he didn't think it would go well with pasta. Madelyn gave him an angelic look that deepened the amused expression in his eyes. "So what are we conversing about?"
"The fact that I'll be looking for a new job, at the very least," she said as she went into the kitchen. He followed her, and without hesitation began helping her carry the food to the table.
"So it's time, is it?" he asked shrewdly. "What made you decide?"
She shrugged. "Several things. Basically, as you said, it's time."
"You said, 'at the very least.' And at the most?" Trust Robert to see the implication of every little word. She smiled as she poured wine into their glasses.
"I'm flying to Montana this Saturday."
His eyes flickered just a little, signalling his intense interest. "What's in Montana?" "Not what. Who." "Who, then?"
"A man named Reese Duncan. There's a possibility of matrimony."
There were times when a look from Robert's pale green eyes could slice like a razor, and now was one of those times. "That sounds like a weather report," he said in an even tone. "Care to give me a percentage? Forty percent chance of matrimony? Fifty?"
"I don't know. I won't know until I meet the man." He had been forking the pasta onto his plate, but now he carefully laid the utensils down and took a deep breath. Madelyn watched him with interest. It was one of the very few times when she could say she had seen Robert actually surprised.
He said, very carefully, "Do you mean you haven't met him yet?"
"No. We've corresponded, but we've never actually met. And we might not like each other in person. There's only a very small chance of matrimony, actually. In weather terms, no accumulation expected."
"But it's possible."
"Yes. I wanted you to know."
"How did you get to know him?"

"I don't know him. I know a little about him, but not much."
"So how did you start corresponding?"
"He advertised for a wife."
He looked stunned, really stunned. Madelyn took pity on him and ladled the thick, spicy sauce over his pasta before it grew cold, since it looked as if he had totally forgotten about it.
"You answered a personal ad?" he finally asked in a strained voice.
She nodded and turned her attention to her own plate. "Yes."
"Good God, do you know how risky that is?" he roared, half rising from his chair.
"Yes, I know." She reached over to pat his hand. "Please sit down and eat. You wouldn't panic if I'd told you I'd met someone at a singles bar in Manhattan, and that's a lot riskier than meeting a rancher from Montana."
"From a health viewpoint, yes, but there are other things to consider. What if this man is abusive? What if he has a criminal record, or is a con man? Just how much *do* you know about him?"
"He's your age, thirty-four. He owns a ranch in central Montana, and he's divorced, no children. I've been writing to a box number in Billings."
From the sharp look in Robert's eyes, Madelyn knew that he had made a mental note of everything she'd told him and wouldn't forget a single detail. She also knew that he would have Reese Duncan thoroughly investigated; she thought of protesting, but decided that it wouldn't make any difference. By the time Robert had his report, she would already have met Mr. Duncan and formed her own opinion. She could even see why Robert felt alarmed and protective, though she didn't agree that there was any need for it. Mr. Duncan's blunt correspondence had reassured her that this was a man who dealt in the unvarnished truth and didn't give a damn how it looked or sounded. It was relaxing not to have to gauge the sincerity of a come-on line.
"Can I talk you out of going?" Robert asked. "Or at least into delaying your meeting?"
"No." She smiled, her gray eyes aglow with anticipation. "I'm so curious I can hardly stand it."
He sighed. Madelyn was as curious as a cat, in her own lazy way. She didn't scurry around poking her nose into every new detail that came her way, but she would eventually get around to investigating any subject or situation that intrigued her. He could see where an ad for a wife would have been

irresistible to her; once she had read it, it would have been a foregone conclusion that she had to meet the man for herself. If there was no way he could talk her out of going, he could make certain she wouldn't be in danger. Before she got on that plane, he would know if this Reese Duncan had any sort of criminal record, even so much as a parking ticket. If there was any indication that Madelyn wouldn't be perfectly safe, he would keep her off the flight if he had to sit on her.

As if she'd read his mind, she leaned forward. She had that angelic expression again, the one that made him wary. When Madelyn was angelic, she was either blisteringly angry or up to mischief, and he could never tell which until it was too late. "If you interfere in my social life, I'll assume that I have the same freedom with yours," she said sweetly. "In my opinion, you need a little help with your women."

She meant it. She never bluffed, never threatened unless she was prepared to carry through on her threats. Without a word, Robert tugged his white handkerchief out of his pocket and waved it in surrender.

Chapter 2

The flight was a bit early landing in Billings. Madelyn carefully scrutinized the small group of people waiting to greet those leaving the plane, but she didn't see any lone males who appeared to be looking for her. She took a deep breath, glad of the small reprieve. She was unexpectedly nervous. She used the time to duck into the ladies' room; when she came out, she heard her name being called in a tinny voice. "Madelyn Patterson, please meet your party at the Information desk. Madelyn Patterson, please meet your party at the Information desk."

Her heart was beating a little fast, but not unpleasantly so. She liked the feeling of excitement. The moment was finally at hand. Anticipation and curiosity were killing her.

She walked with an easy stride that was more of a stroll than anything else, despite her excitement. Her eyes were bright with pleasure. The Billings airport, with its big fountain, was more attractive than the general run of airports, and she let the surroundings begin to soothe her. She was only a little nervous now, and even that small bit wasn't revealed.

That must be him, leaning against the Information desk. He was wearing a hat, so she couldn't see his face all that well, but he was trim and fit. A smile quirked her mouth. This was a truly impossible situation. A real wild goose chase. They would meet, be polite, spend a polite day together; then tomorrow she would shake his hand and tell him she had enjoyed the visit, and that would be the end of it. It would all be very civil and low-keyed, just the way she liked –

He straightened from his relaxed position against the desk and turned toward her. Madelyn felt his eyes focus on her and grow intent.

She knew the meaning of the word *poleaxed,* but this was the first time she had ever experienced the feeling. Her lazy walk faltered, then stopped altogether. She stood frozen in the middle of the airport, unable to take another step. This had never happened to her before, this total loss of composure, but she was helpless. She felt stunned, as if she'd been kicked in the chest. Her heart was racing now, pounding out a painful rhythm. Her breath came in short, shallow gasps; her carry-on bag slipped out of her fingers and landed on the floor with a soft thud. She felt like a fool, but didn't really care. She couldn't stop staring at him.

It was just old-fashioned lust, that was all. It couldn't be anything else, not at first sight. She felt panic at the very idea that it could be anything else. Just lust.

He wasn't the most handsome man she'd ever seen, because New York was full of gorgeous men, but it didn't matter. In all the ways that did matter, all the primitive, instinctual ways, call it chemistry or electricity or biology or whatever, he was devastating. The man oozed sex. Every move he made was imbued with the sort of sensuality and masculinity that made her think of sweaty skin and twisted sheets. Dear God, why on earth should this man ever have had to advertise for a wife?

He was at least six-three, and muscled with the iron, layered strength of a man who does hard physical labor every day of his life. He was very tanned, and his hair, what she could see of it under his hat, was dark brown, almost black. His jaw was strongly shaped, his chin square, his mouth clear-cut and bracketed by twin grooves. He hadn't dressed up to meet her, but was wearing a plain white shirt with the cuffs unbuttoned and rolled back, ancient jeans and scuffed boots. She found herself frantically concentrating on the details of his appearance while she tried to deal with the havoc he was wreaking on her senses, all without saying a word.

None of her excited imaginings had prepared her for this. What was a woman supposed to do when she finally met the man who turned her banked coals into a roaring inferno? Madelyn's first thought was to run for her life, but she couldn't move.
Reese's first thought was that he'd like to take her to bed, but there was no way he'd take her to wife.
She was everything he'd been afraid she would be: a chic, sophisticated city woman, who knew absolutely nothing about a ranch. It was obvious from the top of her silky blond head down to the tips of her expensive shoes. She was wearing white, not the most practical color for travel, but she was immaculate, without even a wrinkle to mar her appearance. Her skirt was pencil-slim and stopped just above her knees, revealing knockout legs. Reese felt his guts tighten, just looking at her legs. He wrenched his gaze upward with an effort that almost hurt and was struck by her eyes. Beneath the loose, matching jacket she was wearing a skimpy top in a rich blue color that should have made her eyes look blue, but didn't. Her eyes made him feel as if he were drowning. They were gray, very gray, without a tinge of blue. Soft-looking eyes, even now when they were large with... dismay? He wasn't certain of the expression, but belatedly he realized that she was very pale and still, and that she'd dropped her bag.
He stepped forward, seizing on the excuse to touch her. He curved his hand around her upper arm, which felt cool and slim under his warm palm. "Are you all right? Miss Patterson?"
Madelyn almost shuddered at his touch, her response to it was so strong. How could such a small thing produce such an upheaval? His closeness brought with it the animal heat of his body, the scent of him, and she wanted to simply turn into his arms and bury her face against his neck. Panic welled up in her. She had to get out of here, away from him. She hadn't bargained on this. But instead of running, she called on all her reserves of control and even managed to smile as she held out her hand. "Mr. Duncan."
Her voice had a small rasp to it that tugged at him. He shook her hand, noting the absence of jewelry except for the plain gold hoops in her ears. He didn't like to see a woman's hands weighted down with rings on every finger, especially when the hands were as slim as hers. He didn't release her as he repeated, "Are you all right?"

Madelyn blinked, a slow closing and opening of her eyelids that masked a deep shifting and settling inside. "Yes, thank you," she replied, not bothering to make an excuse for her behavior. What could she say? That she'd been stunned by a sudden surge of lust for him? It was the truth, but one that couldn't be voiced. She knew she should be charming to ease the awkwardness of this meeting, but somehow she couldn't summon up the superficial chatter to gloss things over. She could do nothing but stand there.

They faced each other like gunfighters on a dirt street, oblivious to the eddies of people stepping around their small, immobile island. He was watching her from beneath level brows, taking his time with his survey but keeping his thoughts hidden. Madelyn stood still, very aware of her femaleness as he looked her up and down with acutely masculine appraisal, though he revealed neither appreciation nor disapproval. His thoughts were very much his own, his face that of an intensely private man.

Even shadowed by his hat brim as they were, she could tell that his eyes were a dark green-blue-hazel color, shot through with white striations that made them gleam. They were wrinkled at the outer corners from what must have been years of squinting into the sun, because he sure didn't look as if he'd gotten those lines from laughing. His face was stern and unyielding, making her long to see how he'd look if he smiled, and wonder if he had ever been carefree. This man wasn't a stranger to rough times or hard work.

"Let's go fetch your other luggage," he said, breaking the silent confrontation. It was a long drive back to the ranch, and he was impatient to be on the way. Chores had to be done no matter how late he got back.

His voice was a baritone, a bit gravelly. Madelyn registered the rough texture of it even as she nodded toward the carry-on bag. "That's it."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

If all her clothes were in that one small bag, she sure hadn't made any big plans to impress him with her wardrobe, he thought wryly. Of course, she would impress him most without any wardrobe at all.

He bent down to lift the carry-on, still keeping his hand on her arm. She was pure, walking provocation, totally unsuitable for ranch life, but every male hormone in him was clanging alert signals. She was only going to be here for a day; why shouldn't he enjoy being with her? It would be sort of a last fling before settling down with someone better prepared for the job, and

job it would be. Ranching was hard work, and Madelyn Patterson didn't look as if she had ever been exposed to the concept.
Right now, though, he didn't mind, because she was so damn enticing and he was dead tired of the relentless months – years – of sixteen-hour days and back-breaking work. He would take her out to eat tonight, after his chores were done; maybe they'd go to Jasper's for some dancing, and he'd hold her in his arms for a while, feel the softness of her skin, smell her perfume. Who knew, maybe when they went back to the ranch it wouldn't be to separate beds. He'd have to be up front in telling her that she wasn't right for the job, so there wouldn't be any misunderstanding, but maybe it wouldn't make any difference to her. Maybe.
His hand naturally moved from her arm to her back as he led her out of the terminal. Deliberately he set about charming her, something he had once done with women as effortlessly as he had smiled. Those days were far in the past, but the touch remained. She chatted easily, thank God, asking questions about Montana, and he answered them just as easily, letting her relax and get comfortable with him, and all the while he studied her face and expressions.
Strictly speaking, she was merely pretty, but her face was lit by a liveliness that made her stunningly attractive. Her nose had a slight bump in it and was just a tiny bit crooked. A light dusting of freckles covered the bridge of it and scattered across her cheekbones, which were exquisitely chiseled. World-class cheekbones, just like her legs. Her lips weren't full, but her mouth was wide and mobile, as if she were forever on the verge of smiling. Her eyes were the grayest eyes he'd ever seen. They were calm, sleepy eyes that nevertheless revealed on closer inspection an alert and often amused intelligence, though he didn't see what she found so amusing.
If he'd met her before his rotten marriage and disastrous divorce, he would have gone after her like gangbusters, and gotten her, too, by God. Just the thought of those legs wrapped around his waist brought him to instant, uncomfortable arousal. No way, though, would he let his gonads lead him into another unsuitable marriage. He knew what he wanted in a wife, and Madelyn wasn't it. She didn't look as if she'd ever even seen a steer.
None of that decreased his physical response to her one whit. He'd been attracted to a lot of women at first sight, but not like this, not like a slam in the gut. This wasn't just attraction, a mild word to describe a mild interest; this was strong and wrenching, flooding his body with heat, making him

grow hard even though he sure as hell didn't want to here in the middle of the airport. His hands actually hurt from wanting to touch her, to smooth over her breast and hip in a braille investigation of those sleek curves.
He felt a twinge of regret that she was so out of place, so totally unsuitable for his purposes. Walking beside her, he saw the sidelong glances that other men were giving her. Women like her just naturally attracted male speculation, and he wished he could afford to keep her, but she was too expensive for him. Reese was broke now, but at one time he had been accustomed to money; he knew how it looked and smelled and tasted, and how it fit. It fit Madelyn Patterson as perfectly as her silky skin did. She was slim and bright in her Paris-made suit, and the perfume sweetened by her warm flesh cost over two hundred dollars an ounce. He knew because it was one of his favorites. He couldn't even afford to keep her in perfume, much less clothes.
"What sort of work do you do?" he asked as they stepped into the bright sunshine. Those terse little letters she'd written hadn't revealed much.
She made a face, wrinkling her nose. "I work in an office without a window, doing nothing important, in my stepbrother's company. It's one of those jobs made for family." She didn't tell him that she'd turned in her notice, because he might assume she had done it thinking that she would be moving to Montana, and the one had nothing to do with the other. But her racing pulse told her that if he asked, she'd be packed and moved in with him so fast he'd think she owned her own moving company.
"Have you ever been on a ranch?" He asked it even though he already knew the answer.
"No." Madelyn looked up at him, something she still had to do despite her three-inch heels. "But I do know how to ride." She was actually a very good horsewoman, courtesy of her college roommate in Virginia, who had been horse mad.
He dismissed any riding she might have done. Recreational riding was a far cry from riding a workhorse, and that was what his horses were, trained and as valuable in their own way as a racehorse. It was just one more area where she didn't measure up.
They reached his truck, and he watched to see if she turned up her nose at it, as dusty and battered as it was. She didn't blink an eye, just stood to the side while he unlocked the door and placed her bag on the middle of the seat. Then he stepped back for her to get in.

Madelyn tried to seat herself and found that she couldn't. An astonished expression crossed her face; then she began to laugh as she realized her skirt was too tight. She couldn't lift her legs enough to climb up on the seat. "What women won't do for vanity," she said in a voice full of humor at her own expense and began tugging up the hem of the skirt. "I wore this because I wanted to look nice, but it would have been smarter to have worn slacks."

Reese's throat locked as he watched her pull up the skirt, exposing increasing amounts of her slim thighs. Heat exploded through him, making him feel as if his entire body were expanding. The thought flashed through his mind that he wouldn't be able to stand it if she pulled that skirt up one more inch, and in the next split second his hands shot out, catching her around the waist and lifting her onto the seat. She gave a startled little cry at his abrupt movement and grabbed his forearms to brace herself.

His mouth was dry, and sweat beaded on his forehead. "Don't pull up your skirt around me again, unless you want me to do something about it," he said in a guttural tone. His pulse was throbbing through him. She had the best legs he'd ever seen, long and strong, with sleek muscles. She'd be able to lock them around him and hang on, no matter how wild the ride.

Madelyn couldn't speak. Tension stretched between them, heavy and dark. Fierce, open lust burned in his narrowed eyes, and she couldn't look away, caught in the silent intensity. She was still gripping his forearms, and she felt the heat of his arms, the steely muscles bunched iron-hard under her fingers. Her heart lurched at the sharp realization that he felt some of the turmoil she had been feeling.

She began babbling an apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend – that is, I didn't realize – " She stopped, because she couldn't come right out and say that she hadn't meant to arouse him. No matter how she reacted to him, he was still essentially a stranger.

He looked down at her legs, with the skirt still halfway up them, and his hands involuntarily tightened on her waist before he forced himself to release her. "Yeah, I know. It's all right," he muttered. His voice was still hoarse. It wasn't all right. Every muscle in his body was tight. He stepped back before he could give in to the impulse to move forward instead, putting himself between her legs and opening them wider. All he would have to do would be to slide his hands under the skirt to push it up the rest

of the way – He crushed the thought, because if he'd let himself finish it, his control would have shattered.

* * *

They had left Billings far behind before he spoke again. "Are you hungry? If you are, there's a cafe at the crossroads up ahead."

"No, thank you," Madelyn replied a bit dreamily as she stared at the wide vista of countryside around her. She was used to enormous buildings, but suddenly they seemed puny in comparison with this endless expanse of earth and sky. It made her feel both insignificant and fresh, as if her life were just starting now. "How far is it to your ranch?"

"About a hundred and twenty miles. It'll take us almost three hours to get there."

She blinked, astonished at the distance. She hadn't realized how much effort it was for him to come to Billings to meet her. "Do you go to Billings often?"

He glanced at her, wondering if she was trying to find out how much he isolated himself on the ranch. "No," he said briefly. "So this is a special trip?"

"I did some business this morning, too." He'd stopped by the bank to give his loan officer the newest figures on the ranch's projected income for the coming year. Right now, it looked better than it had in a long time. He was still flat broke, but he could see daylight now. The banker had been pleased.

Madelyn looked at him with concern darkening her gray eyes. "So you've been on the road since about dawn." "About that." "You must be tired."

"You get used to early hours on a ranch. I'm up before dawn every day."

She looked around again. "I don't know why anyone would stay in bed and miss dawn out here. It must be wonderful."

Reese thought about it. He could remember how spectacular the dawns were, but it had been a long while since he'd had the time to notice one. "Like everything else, you get used to them. I know for a fact that there are dawns in New York, too."

She chuckled at his dry tone. "I seem to remember them, but my apartment faces to the west. I see sunsets, not dawns."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that they would watch a lot of dawns together, but common sense stopped him. The only dawn they would have in common would be the next day. She wasn't the woman he would choose for a wife.

He reached into his shirt pocket and got out the pack of cigarettes that always resided there, shaking one free and drawing it the rest of the way out with his lips. As he dug in his jeans pocket for his lighter he heard her say incredulously, "You *smoke!"*
Swift irritation rose in him. From the tone of her voice you would have thought she had caught him kicking puppies, or something else equally repulsive. He lit the cigarette and blew smoke into the cab. "Yeah," he said. "Do you mind?" He made it plain from *his* tone of voice that, since it was his truck, he was damn well going to smoke in it.
Madelyn faced forward again. "If you mean, does the smoke bother me, the answer is no. I just hate to see anyone smoking. It's like playing Russian roulette with your life." "Exactly. It's my life."
She bit her lip at his curtness. Great going, she thought. That's a good way to get to know someone, attack his personal habits.
"I'm sorry," she apologized with sincerity. "It's none of my business, and I shouldn't have said anything. It just startled me."
"Why? People smoke. Or don't you associate with anyone who smokes?"
She thought a minute, treating his sarcastic remark seriously. "Not really. Some of our clients smoke, but none of my personal friends do. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, and she was very old-fashioned about the vices. I was taught never to swear, smoke or drink spirits. I've never smoked," she said righteously.
Despite his irritation, he found himself trying not to laugh. "Does that mean you swear and drink spirits?"
"I've been known to be a bit aggressive in my language in moments of stress," she allowed. Her eyes twinkled at him. "And Grandma Lily thought it was perfectly suitable for a lady to take an occasional glass of wine, medicinally, of course. During my college days, I also swilled beer."
"Swilled?"
"There's no other word to describe a college student's drinking manners."
Remembering his own college days, he had to agree. "But I don't enjoy spirits," she continued. "So I'd say at least half of Grandma Lily's teachings stuck. Not bad odds."
"Did she have any rules against gambling?" Madelyn looked at him, her mouth both wry and tender, gray eyes full of a strange acceptance.
"Grandma Lily believed that life is a gamble, and everyone has to take their chances. Sometimes you bust, sometimes you break the house." It was an

outlook she had passed on to her granddaughter. Otherwise, Madelyn thought, why would she be sitting here in a pickup truck, in the process of falling in love with a stranger?

* * *

It had been a long time since Reese had seen his home through the eyes of a stranger, but as he stopped the truck next to the house, he was suddenly, bitterly ashamed. The paint on the house was badly chipped and peeling, and the outbuildings were even worse. Long ago he'd given up trying to keep the yard neat and had finally destroyed the flowerbeds that had once delineated the house, because they had been overrun with weeds. In the past seven years nothing new had been added, and nothing broken had been replaced, except for the absolute necessities. Parts for the truck and tractor had come before house paint. Taking care of the herd had been more important than cutting the grass or weeding the flowerbeds. Sheer survival hadn't left time for the niceties of life. He'd done what he'd had to do, but that didn't mean he had to like the shape his home was in. He hated for Madelyn to see it like this, when it had once been, if not a showplace, a house no woman would have been ashamed of.

Madelyn saw the peeling paint, but dismissed it; after all, it wasn't anything that a little effort and several gallons of paint wouldn't fix. What caught her attention was the shaded porch, complete with swing, that wrapped all the way around the two-story house. Grandma Lily had had a porch like that, and a swing where they had whiled away many a lazy summer day to the accompaniment of the slow creak of the chains as they gently swayed.

"It reminds me of Grandma Lily's house," she said, her eyes dreamy again.

He opened her door and put his hands on her waist, lifting her out of the truck before she could slide to the ground. Startled all over again, she quickly looked up at him.

"I wasn't taking any chances with that skirt," he said, almost growling.

Her pulse began thudding again.

He reached inside the truck and hooked her carry-on bag with one hand, then took her arm with the other. They entered by the back door, which was unlocked. She was struck by the fact that he felt safe in not locking his door when he was going to be gone all day.

The back door opened into a combination mudroom and laundry. A washer and dryer lined the wall to the left, and the right wall bristled with pegs from which hung an assortment of hats, coats, ponchos and bright yellow

rain slickers. A variety of boots, most of them muddy, were lined up on a rubber mat. Straight ahead and across a small hall was a full bathroom, which she realized would be convenient when he came in muddy from head to foot. He could take a bath without tracking mud or dripping water all through the house to the bathroom upstairs.

They turned left and were in the kitchen, a big, open, sunny room with a breakfast nook. Madelyn looked with interest at the enormous appliances, which didn't fit her image of what the kitchen of a small-scale, bachelor rancher should look like. She had expected something smaller and much more old-fashioned than this efficient room with its institutional-sized appliances.

"The house has ten rooms," he said. "Six downstairs, and four bedrooms upstairs."

"It's a big house for just one person," she commented, following him upstairs.

"That's why I want to get married." He made the comment as if explaining why he wanted a drink of water. "My parents built this house when I was a baby. I grew up here. I want to pass it on to my own children."

She felt a little breathless, and not just from climbing the stairs. The thought of having his children weakened her.

He opened a door directly across from the top of the stairs and ushered her into a large, pleasant bedroom with white curtains at the windows and a white bedspread on the four-poster bed. She made a soft sound of pleasure. An old rocking chair sat before one of the windows, and what was surely a handmade rug covered the smooth, hardwood plank flooring. The flooring itself was worth a small fortune. For all the charm of the room, there was a sense of bareness to it, no soft touches to personalize it in any way. But he lived here alone, she reminded herself; the personal touches would be in the rooms he used, not in the empty bedrooms waiting for his children to fill them.

He stepped past her and put her bag on the bed. "I can't take the whole day off," he said. "The chores have to be done, so I'll have to leave you to entertain yourself for a while. You can rest or do whatever you want. The bathroom is right down the hall if you want to freshen up. My bedroom has a private bath, so you don't have to worry about running into me."

In the space of a heartbeat she knew she didn't want to be left alone to twirl her fingers for the rest, of the day. "Can't I go with you?"

"You'll be bored, and it's dirty work." She shrugged. "I've been dirty before." He looked at her for a long moment, his face unsmiling and expressionless. "All right," he finally said, wondering if she'd feel the same when her designer shoes were caked with the makings of compost.
Her smile crinkled her eyes. "I'll be changed in three minutes flat."
He doubted it. "I'll be in the barn. Come on out when you're ready."
As soon as he had closed the door behind him, Madelyn stripped out of her clothes, slithered into a pair of jeans and shoved her feet into her oldest pair of loafers, which she had brought along for this very purpose. After all, she couldn't very well explore a ranch in high heels. She pulled a white cotton camisole on over her head and sauntered out the door just as he was starting downstairs after changing shirts himself. He gave her a startled look; then his eyes took on a heavy-lidded expression as his gaze swept her throat and shoulders, left bare by the sleeveless camisole. Madelyn almost faltered as that very male look settled on her breasts, and her body felt suddenly warm and weighed down. She had seen men cast quick furtive glances at her breasts before, but Reese was making no effort to hide his speculation. She felt her nipples tingle and harden, rasping against the cotton covering them.
"I didn't think you'd make it," he said.
"I don't fuss about clothes."
She didn't have to, he thought. The body she put inside them was enough; anything else was superfluous. He was all but salivating just thinking of her breasts and those long, slender legs. The jeans covered them, but now he knew exactly how long and shapely they were, and, as she turned to close the bedroom door, how curved her buttocks were, like an inverted heart. He felt a lot hotter than the weather warranted.
She walked beside him out to the barn, her head swiveling from side to side as she took in all the aspects of the ranch. A three-door garage in the same style as the house stood behind it. She pointed to it. "How many other cars do you have?"
"None," he said curtly.
Three other buildings stood empty, their windows blank. "What are those?"
"Bunkhouses."
There was a well-built chicken coop, with fat white chickens pecking industriously around the yard. She said, "I see you grow your own eggs."
From the corner of her eye she saw his lips twitch as if he'd almost smiled.
"I grow my own milk, too."

"Very efficient. I'm impressed. I haven't had fresh milk since I was about six."
"I didn't think that accent was New York City. Where are you from originally?"
"Virginia. We moved to New York when my mother remarried, but I went back to Virginia for college."
"Your parents were divorced?" .
"No. My father died. Mom remarried three years later."
He opened the barn door. "My parents died within a year of each other. I don't think they could exist apart."
The rich, earthy smell of an occupied barn enveloped her, and she took a deep breath. The odors of animals, leather, manure, hay and feed all mixed into that one unmistakable scent. She found it much more pleasant than the smell of exhaust.
The barn was huge. She had noticed a stable beside it, also empty, as well as a machinery shed and a hay shed. Everything about the ranch shouted that this had once been a very prosperous holding, but Reese had evidently fallen on hard times. How that must grate on a man with his obvious pride. She wanted to put her hand in his and tell him that it didn't matter, but she had the feeling he would reject the gesture. The pride that kept him working this huge place alone wouldn't allow him to accept anything he could interpret as pity.
She didn't know what chores needed doing or how to do them, so she tried to stay out of his way and simply watch, noting the meticulous attention he paid to everything he did. He cleaned out stalls and put down fresh hay, his powerful arms and back flowing with muscles. He put feed in the troughs, checked and repaired tack, brought in fresh water. Three horses were in a corral between the barn and stable; he checked and cleaned their hooves, brought them in to feed and water them, then put them in their stalls for the night. He called a ridiculously docile cow to him and put her in a stall, where she munched contentedly while he milked her. With a bucket half full of hot, foaming milk, he went back to the house, and two cats appeared to meow imperiously at him as they scented the milk. "Scat," he said. "Go catch a mouse."
Madelyn knew what to do now. She got the sterilized jugs she had noticed on her first trip through the kitchen and found a straining cloth. He gave her a strange look as she held the straining cloth over the mouth of the jug for

him to pour the milk through. "Grandma Lily used to do this," she said in a blissful tone. "I was never strong enough to hold the bucket and pour, but I knew I'd be an adult the day she let me pour out the milk."
"Did you ever get to pour it?"
"No. She sold the cow the summer before I started school. She just had the one cow, for fresh milk, but the area was already building up and becoming less rural, so she got rid of it."
He set the bucket down and took the straining cloth. "Then here's your chance for adulthood. Pour."
A whimsical smile touched her lips as she lifted the bucket and carefully poured the creamy white liquid through the cloth into the jug. The warm, sweet scent filled the kitchen. When the bucket was empty she set it aside and said, "Thank you. As a rite of passage, that beats the socks off of getting my driver's license."
This time it happened. Reese's eyes crinkled, and his lips moved in a little half grin. Madelyn felt more of that inner shifting and settling, and knew that she was lost.

Chapter 3

"There isn't much nightlife around, but there is a beer joint and cafe about twenty miles from here if you'd like to go dancing."
Madelyn hesitated. "Would you mind very much if we just stayed here? You must be tired, and I know I am. I'd rather put my feet up and relax."
Reese was silent. He hadn't expected her to refuse, and though he was tired, he'd been looking forward to holding her while they danced. Not only that, having people around them would dilute his focus on her, ease the strain of being alone with her. She wasn't right for him, damn it.
On the other hand, he'd been up since four that morning, and relaxing at home sounded like heaven. The hard part would be relaxing with her anywhere around.
"We could play Monopoly. I saw a game in the bookcase," she said. "Or cards. I know how to play poker, blackjack, spades, hearts, rummy, Shanghai, Spite and Malice, Old Maid and Go Fish."
He gave her a sharp glance at that improbable list. She looked as innocent as an angel. "I lost my Old Maid cards, but we can play rummy."

"Jokers, two-eyed jacks, threes, fives, sevens and Rachel are wild," she said promptly.
"On the other hand, there's a baseball game on television tonight. What the hell is a rachel?"
"It's the queen of diamonds. They have names, you know."
"No, I didn't know. Are you making that up?"
"Nope. Rachel is the queen of diamonds, Palas is the queen of spades, Judith is the queen of hearts, and Argine is the queen of clubs."
"Do the kings and jacks have names?"
"I don't know. That little bit of information has never come my way."
He eyed her again, then leaned back on the couch and propped his boots on the coffee table. She saw a hint of green gleam in his eyes as he said, "The little plastic doohickey on the end of your shoelaces is called an aglet."
She mimicked his position, her lips quirking with suppressed laughter. "The dimple in the bottom of a champagne bottle is called a punt."
"The empty space between the bottle top and the liquid is called ullage."
"A newly formed embryo is called a zygote."
"Bird's nest soup is made from the nests of swift-lets, which make the nests by secreting a glutinous substance from under their tongues."
Madelyn's eyes rounded with fascination, but she rose to the challenge. "Pink flamingos are pink because they eat so many shrimp."
"It takes light from the sun eight minutes and twenty seconds to reach earth."
"The common housefly flies at the speed of five miles an hour."
"An ant can lift fifty times its own weight."
She paused and eyed him consideringly. "Were you lying about the bird nests?"
He shook his head. "Are you giving up?"
"Never use all your ammunition in the opening salvo."
There wouldn't be much opportunity for follow-up salvos, he thought. In about eighteen hours he'd be putting her on a plane back to New York and they would never meet again.
The silence that fell between them was a little awkward. Madelyn got up and smiled at him. "I'll leave you to your baseball game, if you don't mind. I want to sit on the porch swing and listen to the frogs and crickets."
Reese watched her as she left the room, her hips rolling in a lazy sway. After a minute he heard the squeak of the chains as she sat down in the

swing; then the creaking as she began pushing it back and forth. He turned on the television and actually watched a little of the ball game, but his mind was on the rhythmic creaking. He turned the television off.
Madelyn had been swinging and dreaming, her eyes closed, but she opened them when she heard the screen door open and close, then his boots on the wooden porch. He stopped a few feet away and leaned his shoulder against one of the posts.
His lighter flared; then the end of the cigarette glowed as it began to burn. Madelyn stared at his dim figure, wishing she had the right to get up and go to him, to slide her arms around his waist and rest her head on his shoulder. When he didn't speak, she closed her eyes again and began drifting in the peaceful darkness. The late spring night was comfortable, and the night creatures were going about their business as usual. This was the type of life she wanted, a life close to the earth, where serenity could be drawn from nature.
"Why did you answer the ad?"
His rough-textured voice was quiet, not disturbing the night. A few seconds passed before Madelyn opened her eyes and answered.
"For much the same reason you placed it, I suppose. Partly out of curiosity, I admit, but I also want to get married and have a family."
"You don't have to come all the way out here to do that."
She said, "Maybe I do," and was completely serious.
"You don't have any boyfriends in New York?"
"I have friends, yes, but no one I'm serious about, no one I'd want to marry. And I don't think I want to live in New York. This place is wonderful."
"You've only seen it at its best. Winter is frozen hell. Every place has its drawbacks."
"And its advantages. If you didn't think the positives outweighed the negatives, you wouldn't be here."
"I grew up here. This is my home. The Eskimos are attached to their homes, too, but I wouldn't live there."
Madelyn turned her head and looked out into the night, sensing what was coming and wishing, praying, that he wouldn't say it. She could tell from the way he'd been throwing up those subtle obstacles and objections what he was going to say.
"Madelyn. You don't fit in out here."

Her right foot kept up the slow, steady rhythm of the swing. "So the visit has been a failure?"
"Yes."
"Even though you're attracted to me?" In the darkness she could be bolder than she would have been otherwise. If faint heart ne'er won fair lady, she was sure that the fair lady ne'er won with a faint heart, either.
"The spark goes both ways." He stubbed out the cigarette on his boot heel and flipped it out into the yard.
"Yes. So why am I unsuitable for your purposes?"
"You're real suitable for the purposes of bed," he said grimly. "I'd like to take you there right now. But out of bed – no. You won't do at all."
"Please explain. I like to understand my rejections."
Suddenly he moved away from the post and sat next to her on the swing, setting it to dipping and swaying with his weight. One firmly planted boot took control of the motion and began the gentle rocking movement again.
"I was married before, for two years. You're like my first wife in a lot of ways. She was a city person. She liked the entertainment and variety of a big city. She'd never been on a ranch before, and thought it was romantic, just like a movie – until she realized that most of a rancher's time is spent working, instead of having a good time. She was already restless before winter came, and that just put the frosting on the cake. Our second year was pure hell."
"Don't judge me by someone else, Reese Duncan. Just because one woman didn't like it, doesn't mean another won't."
"A man who doesn't learn from his mistakes is a damn fool. When I marry again, it'll be to a woman who knows what ranch life is like, who'll be able to work with me. I won't risk the ranch again."
"What do you mean?"
"This ranch was once one of the biggest and best. You can tell by looking around you that it used to be a lot more than what it is now. I had the two best breeding bulls in four states, a good insemination program going, over four thousand head of beef, and fifty people working for me. Then I got divorced." He lifted his arm and rested it along the back of the swing. She could see only his profile, but even in the darkness she could make out the bitter line of his mouth, hear his bitterness in his voice. "April's family had a lot of influence with the judge. He agreed that two years as my wife entitled her to half of my assets, but she sweetly decided that a lump sum

settlement would do just fine, thank you. I nearly went bankrupt. I had to liquidate almost everything to buy her off. I sold land that had been in my family for over a hundred years. That was seven years ago. I've been working my ass off since then just trying to keep this place going, and this year it looks like I'll finally make a profit again. I want kids, someone to leave the ranch to, but this time I'll make a better choice of woman."
She was appalled at the cause of his circumstances, but still said tartly, "What about love? How does that fit into your plans?"
"It doesn't," he replied in a flat tone.
"What if your wife wants more?"
"I don't plan to spin her a pretty story. She'll know where I stand from the first. But I'll be a good husband. I don't stray, or mistreat women. All I ask from a wife is loyalty and competence and the same values I have."
"And to be ready to stand as a brood mare."
"That too," he agreed.
Disappointment so sharp that it felt like a knife stabbed into her midsection. He was going to marry someone else. She looked away from him and reached deep for the control she needed. "Then I wish you luck. I hope you have a happy marriage this time. Do you have any more applicants?"
"Two more. If either of them is interested in ranch life, I'll probably ask her to marry me."
He had it as cut-and-dried as any business deal, which was all it was to him, even though he would be sleeping with his business partner. Madelyn could have cried at such a waste of passion, but she held on to her control. All she could do now was cut her losses and try to forget him, so she wouldn't measure every man she met against him for the rest of her life.
The darkness hid the desolation in her eyes as she said, "A jackrabbit can run as fast as a racehorse – for a short distance, of course."
He didn't miss a beat. "A group of bears is called a sloth."
"The Pacific Ocean covers almost sixty-four-million square miles."
"The safety pin was invented in 1849."
"No! That long ago? Zippers were invented in 1893, and it's a good thing, because wouldn't you hate to get caught in a safety pin?"

* * *

She was quiet on the drive back to Billings the next morning. The evening had ended well, with the hilarity of their mutual store of odd facts, but the strain had told on her in the form of a sleepless night. She couldn't bear the

thought of never seeing him again, but that was the way it was, and she was determined to keep her pain to herself. Nothing would be gained by weeping all over him, which was exactly what she felt like doing.
He looked tired, too, and it was no wonder when she considered how early he'd had to get up for the past two days, and how much driving he'd done. She said, "I'm sorry you're having to go to so much trouble to take me back."
He shot her a glance before returning his attention to the road. "You had a wasted trip, too."
So she was categorized under "Wasted Trip." She wondered wryly if her other dates had merely been flattering her all these years.
It was only about half an hour before her flight when they reached the airport. He'd timed it nicely, she thought. She wouldn't have to rush, but on the other hand, there wasn't time for a lengthy goodbye, and she was glad. She didn't know how much she could take. "You don't need to park," she said. "Just let me out."
He gave her another glance, but this one was strangely angry. He didn't speak, just parked and came around to open the door for her. Quickly she jumped out before he could catch her by the waist and lift her out again. Reese's mouth had a grim set as he put his hand on the small of her back and walked with her into the terminal. At least the skirt she was wearing today was full enough that she could move freely, but the way it swung around her legs was just as maddening, in a different way, as that tight white skirt had been. He kept thinking that this one would be even easier to push up out of the way.
Her flight was just being called when they reached the gate. She turned with a smile that cost more than she could afford and held out her hand. "Goodbye, Reese. I wish you luck."
He took her hand, feeling the smooth texture of her ringers in contrast to his hardened, callused palm. She would be that smooth and silky all over, and that was why he was sending her away. He saw her wide, soft lips part as she started to say something else, and hunger rose up in him like a tidal wave, crashing over barriers and sweeping everything away.
"I have to taste you," he said in a low, harsh tone, carrying her hand upward to tuck it around his neck. "Just once." His other arm circled her waist and pulled her to him as he bent his head.

It wasn't a polite goodbye kiss. It was hard and deep. His mouth was hot and wild, with the taste of tobacco and himself. Madelyn put her other arm around his neck and hung on, because her legs had gone watery. The force of his mouth opened hers, and he took her with his tongue. He held her to him with painful pressure, crushing her breasts against him and cradling her pelvis against the hard, aching ridge of his manhood.

Vaguely she heard other people around them. It didn't matter. He was making love to her with his mouth, arousing her, satisfying her, consuming her. He increased the slant of his head, tucking her head more firmly into his shoulder, and kissed her with all the burning sensuality she had sensed in him on first sight.

Her heart lurched as pleasure overrode shock, swiftly escalating to an almost unbearable tension. She not only welcomed the intrusion of his tongue, she met it with her own, making love to him as surely as he was to her. He shuddered, and for a second his arms tightened so fiercely that she moaned into his mouth. Instantly they loosened, and he lifted his head. Breathing swiftly, only inches apart, they stared at each other. His expression was hard and sensual, his eyes dilated with arousal, his lips still gleaming from the moisture of their kiss. He was bending back toward her when another call for her flight stopped him, and he slowly released her. Her entire body ached for him. She waited, hoping he would say the words that would keep her there, but instead he said, "You'd better go. You'll miss your flight."

She couldn't speak. She nodded instead and walked away on shaky legs. She didn't look back. It was bad form for a grown woman to howl like an infant, and that was what she was very much afraid she would do if she gave in to the need to see him for even a split second.

She had gotten off the plane in Billings feeling confident and alive with anticipation. She left twenty-four hours later feeling shattered.

* * *

Robert met her plane in New York, which told Madelyn how worried he'd been. She gave him a parody of a smile and saw his pale eyes sharpen as he immediately read her distress. The smile wobbled and collapsed, and she walked into his arms. She didn't cry; she didn't let herself cry, but her chest heaved with convulsive breaths as she fought for control.

"I'll kill him," Robert said in a very soft, almost gentle tone.

Madelyn shook her head and took one more deep breath so she could talk. "He was a perfect gentleman. He's a hard-working, salt-of-the-earth type, and he said I wasn't suitable for the job."
He rocked her gently back and forth. "And that hurt your ego?"
She raised her head and managed a real smile this time, though it was just as wobbly as the first. "No, I think he managed to break my heart."
Robert gave her a searching look, reading the expression in her bottomless gray eyes. "You don't fall in love in one day."
"Sometimes you don't, sometimes you do. He didn't feel the same way, so it's something I have to live with."
"Maybe it's just as well." Keeping his arm around her shoulder, he guided her toward the entrance. "I investigated him – I know, you told me not to," he added warily as he saw the menacing look she gave him. "But he would be a tough man for any woman to live with. He's understandably bitter about the raw deal he got in his divorce – "
"I know," she said. "He told me about it."
"Then you know that any woman he marries will have a cold marriage. He's still carrying a lot of anger inside him."
"I saw the ranch. He has reason to be angry."
"His ex-wife and her family took him to the cleaners. I've dealt with them – cautiously. You have to be careful when you wade into a pool of barracudas."
"I'd like for you to ruin them financially, if you can, please," she said in the manner of a socialite idly asking for another glass of champagne.
"That won't give him back what he lost."
"No, but I'm vindictive enough that I want to see them get what they deserve."
"You don't have a vindictive bone in your body."
"Yes I do," she said in the same gentle tone he occasionally used, the one that made smart people back away.
He kissed her hair and hugged her closer. "So what are you going to do now?"
"Carry on, I suppose." She shrugged. "There's nothing else I can do."
Robert looked at her, wryly admiring her resilience. Madelyn was a trooper; she always carried on. Sometimes she needed a crutch for a while, but in the end she stood upright again and continued on her own. Reese Duncan had to be a lot of man to have gotten to her this way.

* * *

Two weeks later, Reese got back into his truck after seeing his latest visitor, Juliet Johnson, off on the bus. He cursed and slammed his fist against the steering wheel, then lit a cigarette and began smoking it with fast, furious puffs.

This had all been a damn waste of time and money. The schoolteacher. Dale Quillan, had taken a good hard look at the isolation of the ranch and politely told him she wasn't interested. Miss Johnson, on the other hand, had been willing to take on the job, but he couldn't bring himself to make the offer. That was the sourest woman he'd ever met, humorless and disapproving of almost everything she saw. He'd imagined her as the family-oriented type, since she had sacrificed her life to care for her invalid mother, but now he figured she had been more of a cross than a blessing to the poor woman. She had informed him tartly that she would be willing to perform her duties by him once they were sanctified by marriage, but she hoped he didn't plan on a lot of foolish shenanigans because she didn't believe in such. Reese had told her just as sharply that he believed she could rest easy on that score.

Three applicants. One he wouldn't have, one wouldn't have him, and the other was all wrong for the job.

Madelyn. Long, beautiful legs. Silky blond hair and deep gray eyes. A soft mouth and a taste like honey. What would ranch life do to someone that elegant and unprepared?

But he'd spent two weeks turning his bed into a shambles every night because his frustrated body wouldn't let him sleep, and when he did manage to sleep he dreamed about her and woke up in even worse shape than when he'd dozed off. His loins ached, his temper was frayed, and he was smoking twice as much as normal. Damn her for being more than he wanted, or could afford.

She had clung to him and kissed him with such a fiery response that he hadn't been able to sleep at all that night, but she'd walked away from him without a backward glance. If she'd turned around just once, if she'd shown the least reluctance to go, he might have weakened and asked her to stay, but she hadn't. She'd even wished him good luck in finding a wife. It didn't sound as if his rejection had wounded her too badly.

He could have kept her. It drove him half-wild to know that she would have stayed if he'd asked her, that they could have been married by now. She

would be lying under him every night, and the bed might get torn up, but it wouldn't be out of frustration.
No. She was too much like April. If he ever let her get her claws into him, she would rip him to shreds even worse than April had done, because even in the beginning he'd never been as hot to have April as he was to have Madelyn. She was used to city life, and though she'd appeared to like Montana and the ranch, the real test was living through a winter here. She'd never make it.
He ground out the cigarette and lit another, feeling the smoke burn his throat and lungs.
Fury and frustration boiled over. He got out of the truck and strode to a pay phone. A call to Information got her number. This was probably another waste of time; at this time of day she'd be at work, but he was driven by an urgency he bitterly resented and was still unable to resist.
He punched in her number, and an operator came on the line to tell him how much money to deposit. He dug in his pocket for change, swearing under his breath when he saw he didn't have enough.
"Sir, please deposit the correct amount."
"Just a minute." He got out his wallet and flipped through the papers until he found his telephone credit card and read off the account number to the operator. He hadn't used the card in seven years, so he hoped it was still good.
Evidently it was, because the operator said, "Thank you," and he heard the electronic beeps as the call went through.
It rang three times; then there was a click as the receiver was picked up and that warm, faintly raspy voice said, "Hello."
"Madelyn."
There was a pause; then she said, "Yes. Reese?"
"Yes." He stopped as a truck roared by, waiting until he could hear again. "You've been out here and seen what it's like. Are you willing to marry me?"
The pause this time was longer, and his fist tightened on the receiver until he thought the plastic might crack under the pressure. Finally she said, "The other two didn't work out?"
"No. What's your answer?"
"Yes," she said calmly.

He closed his eyes as the almost unbearable tension eased. God, he might be making a mistake as bad as the one he'd made with April, but he had to have her. "You'll have to sign a prenuptial agreement giving up all rights to the property I own prior to marriage and waiving any right to alimony or a lump sum settlement in case of divorce."
"All right. That's a mutual agreement, isn't it? What's yours remains yours and what's mine remains mine?"
Irritation lashed at him. "Of course."
"Fine, then."
"I want a certification from a doctor that you're in good health."
"All right. I require a certification from *your* doctor, as well."
The irritation threatened to become rage, but he held it in control. She had as much right to be reassured about his health as he did to be reassured about hers. Sexually transmitted diseases didn't stop at the Montana border, and AIDS wasn't the only concern people should have.
"I want the wedding within two weeks. When can you get out here?"
"How long is the waiting period?"
"Five days, I think. I'll have to check. Can you get here next week?"
"I think so. Give me your number and I'll call you."
He recited his phone number; then silence crackled along the line. He said, "I'll see you next week."
Another pause. Then, "Yes, I'll see you then. 'Bye."
He said goodbye and hung up, then leaned against the booth for a minute, his eyes closed. He'd done it. He'd asked her to marry him against all common sense, but this time he would protect himself and the ranch. He'd have her, but he'd keep her at a distance, and all the legal documents would keep the ranch safe.
He lit another cigarette and coughed as the acrid smoke stung his raw throat. In his mind's eye he saw her incredulous face when she'd looked at him and said, *"You smoke?"* He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it; he'd smoked for years, and usually enjoyed it, but he'd been smoking too much lately.
You smoke?
Swearing again, he put out the cigarette. As he strode angrily back to the truck he passed a trash barrel, and without giving himself time to think he tossed the cigarette pack into it. He was still swearing as he got into the

truck and started it. For a few days he was going to be in the mood to wrestle grizzlies, and he didn't look forward to it.

* * *

Madelyn slowly replaced the receiver, numb with shock. She couldn't believe he'd called. She couldn't believe she'd said she would marry him. She couldn't believe anything about their conversation. It had to be the most unromantic, businesslike, *insulting* proposal on record. And she'd still said yes. Yes! A thousand times *yes!*

She had to be in Montana in a week. She had a million things to do: get packed, get the apartment closed up, say goodbye to all her friends – and have a physical, of course. But all she could do right now was sit, her thoughts whirling.

She had to be practical. It was obvious Reese wasn't giving the marriage much of a chance, even though he was going into it for his own reasons. She wondered why the other two hadn't worked out, because he'd been so adamant that she was wrong for the job. But he wanted her, she knew, remembering that kiss at the airport and the way he'd looked at her. She wanted him, more than she'd ever thought it was possible to want a man, both physically and emotionally, but was that enough to hold together a relationship when they were faced with the day-in, day-out routine that marriage entailed? Would she still love him when he had a cold and was grouchy, or yelled at her for something that wasn't her fault? Would he still want her after he'd seen her without makeup, stumbling around in the morning with uncombed hair, or when she was in a bad mood, too?

Looking at it clearly, she decided that she should ask the doctor about birth control pills while she was there. If everything worked out and they decided to have children, it would be easy to go off the pill, but what a mess it would be if she got pregnant right away and then the marriage fell apart. It was something she would already have discussed with Reese if their situation had been a normal one, but nothing about this was normal.

She was making a complete change in her life, from urban to rural, from single to marriage, all without really knowing the man she was marrying. She didn't know his favorite foods or colors, his moods, how he would react to any given situation; all she really knew about him was that his store of miscellaneous knowledge rivaled hers, and that she responded more violently to him than anyone she'd ever met before. She was definitely following her heart here, and not her head.

Reese would want the marriage ceremony to be conducted with as little fuss as possible, before a magistrate or a justice of the peace. She didn't mind that, but she made up her mind that Robert would be there, and her friend Christine. They could be the witnesses, rather than two strangers.
Robert was less than thrilled with the news, as she had expected. "I know you fell for him, but shouldn't you give this more time? You've met him once. Or did you get to know him *really* well during that one meeting?"
"I told you, he was a perfect gentleman."
"Ah, but were you a perfect lady?"
"I'm good at whatever I do, but I've never claimed to be perfect."
His eyes twinkled, and he leaned over to pinch her cheek. "You're determined to have this man, aren't you?"
"He gave me this chance, and I'm taking it before he changes his mind. Oh yes, we're getting married now if I have to kidnap him."
"He may be in for a surprise," Robert mused. "Does he know about that bulldog stubbornness you hide behind that lazy walk and talk?"
"Of course not. Give me some credit. He'll learn about that in due time, after we're married." She smiled that sweet smile.
"So, when do I get to meet him?"
"The day of the wedding, probably. No matter what you have scheduled, I expect you to drop everything and fly out when I call you."
"Wouldn't miss it."
Christine was even less encouraging. "What do you know about ranch life?" she asked ominously. "Nothing. There are no movies, no neighbors, not even any television reception to speak of. No plays, no operas or concerts."
"No pollution, no having to put six different locks on my door when I go out, no getting mugged when I go shopping."
"You've never been mugged."
"But there's always the possibility. I know people who've been mugged several times."
"There's the *possibility* of a lot of things. It's *possible* I may even get married some day, but I'm not holding my breath waiting. That isn't the point. You really have no idea what life on a ranch is like. At least I have *some* idea. It's a hard, lonely way to live, and you're not the isolated type."
"Au contraire, dear friend. I'm just as content by myself as I am surrounded by people. If I had to live in Outer Mongolia to be with him, I'd do it."
Christine looked amazed. "Ye gods," she blurted. "You're in love!"

Madelyn nodded. "Of course. Why else would I marry him?"
"Well, that explains the sudden madness. Does he feel the same way?"
"Not yet. I'm going to do my best to convince him, though."
"Would it be wasting my breath to point out that that usually comes *before* the part where you say 'I do'? That courtship usually covers this phase?"
Pursing her lips, Madelyn considered it, then said, "No, I think it would come more under 'falling on deaf ears' than 'wasting your breath.' I'm getting married. I'd like you to be there."
"Of course I'll be there! Nothing could keep me away. I have to see this paragon of manly virtues."
"I never said he was virtuous."
In complete understanding, they looked at each other and smiled.

Chapter 4

They were married in Billings twelve days later. Madelyn was exhausted by the time of the wedding, which was performed in the judge's chambers. She had gotten only a few hours of sleep each night since Reese's phone call, because it had taken so much time to pack up a lifetime of belongings, sorting through and discarding what she wasn't taking, and packing what she couldn't bear to do without. She had also gotten the required physical and expressed the results to Reese, and hadn't been surprised when she had received his results by express mail the same day.
She had shipped numerous boxes containing books, albums, tapes, CDs, stereo equipment and winter clothes to the ranch, wondering what Reese would have to say about having his home taken over by the paraphernalia of a stranger. But when she'd spoken to him during two brief telephone calls he hadn't mentioned it. Before she knew it she was flying to Billings again, but this time she wasn't coming back.
Reese didn't kiss her when he met her at the airport, and she was glad. She was tired and on edge, and the first self-doubts were creeping in. From the look on his face, when he started kissing her again he didn't intend to stop, and she wasn't ready for that. But her heart leaped at the sight of him, reassuring her that she was doing the right thing.
She planned to stay at a motel in Billings for the five days until their marriage; Reese scowled at her when she told him her plan.

"There's no point in paying for a motel when you can stay at the ranch."
"Yes, there is. For one thing, most of my New York clothes are useless and will just stay packed up. I have to have Montana clothing – jeans, boots and the like. There's no point in making an extra trip later on to buy it when I'm here already. Moreover, I'm not staying alone with you right now, and you know why."
He put his hands on her waist and pulled her up against him. His narrowed eyes were dark green. "Because I'd have you under me as soon as we got in the house."
She swallowed, her slender hands resting on his chest. She could feel the heavy beat of his heart under her palms, a powerful pumping that revealed the sexual tension he was holding under control. "Yes. I'm not ready to start that part of our relationship. I'm tired, and nervous, and we really don't know each other that well – "
"We're getting married in five days. We won't know each other much better by then, baby, but I don't plan on spending my wedding night alone."
"You won't," she whispered.
"So one of the conditions for getting you in bed is to put a ring on your finger first?" His voice was getting harsher.
He was angry, and she didn't want him to be; she just wanted him to understand. She said steadily, "That isn't it at all. If the wedding were two months away, or even just a month, I'm certain we'd... we'd make love before the ceremony, but it isn't. I'm just asking you for a little time to rest and recuperate first."
He studied her upturned face, seeing the translucent shadows under her eyes and the slight pale cast to her skin. She was resting against him, letting his body support hers, and despite his surging lust he realized that she really was tired. She had uprooted her entire life in just one week, and the emotional strain had to be as exhausting as the physical work.
"Then sleep," he said in a slow, deep voice. "Get a lot of sleep, baby, and rest up. You'll need it. I can wait five days – just barely."
She did get some sleep, but the emotional strain was still telling on her. She was getting married; it was natural to be nervous, she told herself.
The day they signed the prenuptial agreement at the lawyer's office was another day of stress. Reese was in a bad mood when he picked her up at the motel, growling and snapping at everything she said, so she lapsed into silence. She didn't think it was a very good omen for their marriage.

The prenuptial agreement was brief and easily understood. In case of divorce, they both kept the property and assets they had possessed prior to their marriage, and Madelyn gave up all rights to alimony in any form. She balked, however, at the condition that he retain custody of any children that should result from their union.

"No," she said flatly. "I'm not giving up my children."

Reese leaned back in the chair and gave her a look that would have seared metal. "You're not taking my children away from me."

"Calm down," the lawyer soothed. "This is all hypothetical. Both of you are talking as if a divorce is inevitable, and if that's the case, I would suggest that you *not* get married. Statistics say that half of new marriages end in divorce, but that means that half don't. You may well be married to each other for the rest of your lives, and there may not be any children anyway."

Madelyn ignored him. She looked only at Reese. "I don't intend to take our children away from you, but neither do I intend to give them up. I think we should share custody, because children need both parents. Don't try to make me pay for what April did," she warned.

"But you'd want them to live with you."

"Yes, I would, just as you'd want them to live with you. We aren't going to change that by negotiation. If we did divorce, I'd never try to turn our children against you, nor would I take them out of the area, but that's something you'll just have to take on trust, because I'm not signing any paper that says I'll give up my children."

There were times, he noted, when those sleepy gray eyes could become sharp and clear. She was all but baring her teeth at him. It seemed there were some things that mattered enough to rouse her from her habitual lazy amusement, and it was oddly reassuring that the subject of their children, hypothetical though they were, was one of them. If he and April had had a child, she would have wanted custody of it only as a way to get back at him, not because she really wanted the child itself. April hadn't wanted to have children at all, a fact for which he was now deeply grateful. Madelyn not only appeared to want children, she was ready to fight for them even before they existed.

"All right," he finally said, and nodded to the lawyer. "Strike that clause from the agreement. If there's ever a divorce, we'll hash that out then."

Madelyn felt drained when they left the lawyer's office. Until then, she hadn't realized the depth of Reese's bitterness. He was so determined not to

let another woman get the upper hand on him that it might not be possible for her to reach him at all. The realization that she could be fighting a losing battle settled on her shoulders like a heavy weight.
"When do your stepbrother and best friend get here?" he asked curtly. He hadn't liked the idea of Robert and Christine being at their wedding, and now Madelyn knew why. Having friends and relatives there made it seem more like a real wedding than just a business agreement, and a business agreement, with bed privileges, was all Reese wanted, all he could accept.
"The day before the wedding. They won't be able to stay afterward, so we're going out to a restaurant the night before. You can be here, can't you?"
"No. There's no one at the ranch to put the animals up for the night and do the chores for me. Even if I left immediately afterward, it's almost a three hour drive, so there's no point in it."
She flushed. She should have thought of the long drive and how hard he had to work. It was a sign of how much she had to learn about ranching. "I'm sorry, I should have thought. I'll call Robert – "
He interrupted her. "There's no reason why you should cancel just because I can't be here. Go out with them and enjoy it. We won't have much chance to eat out after we're married."
If he'd expected her to react with horror at that news, he was disappointed. She'd already figured that out on her own, and she didn't care. She intended to be his partner in rebuilding the ranch; maybe when it was prosperous again he could let go of some of his bitterness. She would gladly forego restaurant meals to accomplish that.
"If you're certain..."
"I said so, didn't I?" he snapped.
She stopped and put her hands on her hips. "I'd like to know just what your problem is! I've seen men with prostate problems and women with terminal PMS who aren't as ill-tempered as you. Have you been eating gunpowder or something?"
"I'll tell you what's wrong!" he roared. "I'm trying to quit smoking!" Then he strode angrily to the truck, leaving her standing there.
She blinked her eyes, and slowly a smile stretched her lips. She strolled to the truck and got in. "So, are you homicidal or merely as irritable as a wounded water buffalo?"
"About halfway in between," he said through clenched teeth.
"Anything I can do to help?"

His eyes were narrow and intense. "It isn't just the cigarettes. Take off your panties and lock your legs around me, and I'll show you."
She didn't want to refuse him. She loved him, and he needed her, even if it was only in a sexual way. But she didn't want their first time to be a hasty coupling in a motel room, especially when she was still jittery from stress and he was irritable from lack of nicotine. She didn't know if it would be any better by their wedding day, but she hoped she would be calmer.
He saw the answer in her eyes and cursed as he ran his hand around the back of his neck. "It's just two damn days."
"For both of us." She looked out the window. "I admit, I'm trying to put it off. I'm nervous about it."
"Why? I don't abuse women. If I don't have the control I need the first time, I will the second. I won't hurt you, Maddie, and I'll make certain you enjoy it."
"I know," she said softly. "It's just that you're still basically a stranger."
"A lot of women crawl into bed with men they've just met in a bar."
"*I* don't."
"Evidently you don't crawl into bed with the man you're going to marry, either."
She rounded on him. "That's unfair and you know it, because we aren't getting married under the usual circumstances. If you're not going to do anything but snap at me and try to pressure me into bed, maybe we shouldn't see each other until the wedding."
His teeth came together with a snap. "That sounds like a damn fine idea to me."
So she spent the last two days before her wedding alone, at least until Robert and Christine arrived the afternoon before. She hadn't expected Reese to drive to Billings every day, and in fact he hadn't, except to meet her at the airport and to go to the lawyer's office, but it disturbed her that they had already quarreled. If their marriage survived, it looked like it would be a tempestuous one.
When she met Christine and Robert at the airport, Christine looked around impatiently. "Well, where is he?"
"At the ranch, working. He doesn't have anyone to look after the animals, so he isn't coming in tonight."
Christine frowned, but to Madelyn's surprise Robert took it in stride. It only took a moment's thought to realize that if there was anything Robert

understood, it was work coming before everything else.
She hooked her arms through theirs and hugged both of them. "I'm so glad you're here. How was the flight?"
"Exciting," Christine said. "I've never traveled with the boss before. He gets red-carpet treatment, did you know?"
"Exasperating," Robert answered smoothly. "She makes smart-mouth comments, just like you do. I kept hearing those sotto voce remarks in my ear every time a flight attendant came by."
"They didn't just come by," Christine explained. "They stopped, they lingered, they swooned."
Madelyn nodded. "Typical." She was pleased that Christine wasn't intimidated by Robert, as so many people were. Christine would never have been so familiar in the office, and in fact Madelyn doubted that the two had ever met before, but in this situation he was merely the bride's brother and she was the bride's best friend, and she had treated him as such. It also said something about Robert's urbanity that Christine did feel at ease with him; when he chose, her stepbrother could turn people to stone with his icy manner.
Now if only her two favorite people in the world would like the man she loved. She hoped he'd recovered from his nicotine fit by the morning, or it could be an interesting occasion.
They took a cab to the motel where she was staying, and Robert got a room, but Madelyn insisted that Christine stay in the room with her. On this last night as a single woman, her nerves were frayed, and she wanted someone to talk to, someone she could keep up all night if she couldn't sleep herself. After all, she reasoned, what were friends for if not to share misery?
They shared a pleasant meal and enjoyed themselves, though Madelyn wished Reese could have been there. By ten o'clock Christine was yawning openly and pointed out that it was midnight in New York. Robert signaled for the check; he looked as fresh as he had that morning, but he was used to working long hours and usually only slept four hours a night anyway.
"Will you sleep tonight?" he asked Madelyn when they got back to the motel, having noticed her shadowed eyes.
"Probably not, but I don't think a bride is supposed to sleep the night before she gets married."
"Honey, it's the night she gets married that she isn't supposed to sleep."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Then either. I’m tired, but I'm too nervous and excited to sleep. It's been that way since he called."
"You aren't having second thoughts?"
"Second, third and fourth thoughts, but it always comes back to the fact that I can't let this chance pass."
"You could always postpone it."
She thought of how impatient Reese was and wryly shook her head. "No, I couldn't, not one more day."
He hugged her close, resting his cheek on her bright head. "Then give it all you've got, honey, and he'll never know what hit him. But if it doesn't work out, don't punish yourself. Come home."
"I've never heard such a bunch of doubting Thomases before," she chided. "But thanks for the concern. I love you, too."
By the time she went inside, Christine was already crawling into bed. Madelyn picked up the pillow and hit her with it. "You can't sleep tonight. You have to hold my hand and keep me calm."
Christine yawned. "Buy some beer, get wasted and go to sleep."
"I'd have a hangover on my wedding day. I need sympathy, not alcohol."
"The most I can offer you is two aspirin. I'm too tired to offer sympathy. Besides, why are you nervous? You want to marry him, don't you?"
"Very much. Just wait until you see him, then you'll know why."
One of Christine's eyes opened a crack. "Intimidating?"
"He's very... male."
"Ah."
"Eloquent comment."
"It covered a lot of ground. What did you expect at – " she stopped to peer at her watch " – one o'clock in the morning? Shakespearean sonnets?"
"It's only eleven o'clock here."
"My body may be here, but my spirit is on Eastern Daylight Time. Good night, or good morning, whichever the case may be."
Laughing, Madelyn let Christine crash in peace. She got ready for bed herself, then lay awake until almost dawn, both mind and body tense.

* * *

The dress she had bought for the wedding was old-fashioned in design, almost to her ankles, with eyelet lace around the hem and neckline. She pinned up her hair in a modified Gibson girl, and put on white lace hosiery and white shoes. Even though it was just going to be a civil ceremony, she

was determined to look like a bride. Now that the day had actually arrived she felt calm, and her hands were steady as she applied her makeup. Maybe she had finally gotten too tired for nervousness.
"You look gorgeous," said Christine, who looked pretty good herself in an ice-blue dress that did wonders for her olive complexion. "Cool and old-fashioned and fragile."
Fragile was a word Madelyn had never used to describe herself, and she turned to Christine in disbelief.
"I didn't say you *were* fragile, I said you *looked* fragile, which is just the way you're supposed to look on your wedding day."
"You have some interesting ideas. I know the something borrowed, something blue routine, but I always thought a bride was supposed to look radiant, not fragile."
"Pooh. Radiance is easy. Just a few whisks with a blusher brush. Fragile is much harder to achieve. I'll bet you stayed up nights perfecting it."
Madelyn sighed and looked at herself in the mirror again. "I didn't think it showed."
"Did you sleep any?"
"An hour or so."
"It shows."
When Reese knocked on the door, Madelyn froze. She knew it was Reese, and not Robert. Her heart began that slow, heavy beat as she crossed the room to open the door.
Reese looked down at her, his expression shadowed by his gray dress Stetson. With his boots on he stood over six-four, closer to six-five, and he filled the doorway. Behind her Madelyn heard Christine gasp, but Reese didn't even glance at her; he kept his eyes on Madelyn. "Are you ready?"
"Yes," she whispered. "I'm completely packed."
"I'll put your suitcases in the car."
He was wearing a charcoal pin-striped suit with a spotlessly white shirt. Madelyn recognized both the cut and fabric as being expensive, and knew this must be a suit he'd had before his divorce. He was breathtaking in it. She glanced at Christine, who still wasn't breathing.
"Christine, this is Reese Duncan. Reese, my best friend, Christine Rizzotto."
Reese gave Christine a half smile and touched his fingers to the brim of his hat. "I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am."

She was still ogling him, but she managed a weak, "And you, Mr. Duncan." He picked up two of Madelyn's suitcases, nodded to Christine, and carried them out. Christine's breath escaped her with a whoosh. "That man is... is potent," she half gasped. "Now I understand."

Madelyn knew how she felt, and fingered the string of pearls around her neck. The nervousness was coming back.

Robert's pale eyes were cool when he was introduced to Reese, which bothered Reese not at all. They were polite to each other. Madelyn hadn't hoped for anything more. Their personalities were both too strong to allow for easy companionship.

It wasn't until everyone had checked out that she realized what he had said and turned to him in bewilderment. "You said you'd put the suitcases in the car. You don't have a car."

"I do now. You'll need something to drive when I have the truck out on the range. It isn't new, but it's dependable."

She was overwhelmed, and her throat tightened. It was a white Ford station wagon, a useful vehicle on a working ranch. She'd had a car while she'd been in college in Virginia, but that had been years ago, and she hadn't had any need for one in the city. With money so tight for Reese, this was a big gesture for him to make. If she had thought about it she would have bought her own car, but she hadn't.

The judge was waiting for them in his chambers. Madelyn opened her purse and got out the ring she'd bought for Reese, slipping it on her finger and closing her hand into a fist to keep it on. The judge saw her do it, and smiled. Christine took her purse from her, and after clearing his throat twice, the judge began.

Her hands were cold. Reese held her left one, folding his hard, warm fingers over hers to share his body heat with her, and when he felt her shaking he put his arm around her waist. He repeated the vows, his dark-textured voice steady. She learned that Gideon was his first name, something she hadn't known before and hadn't gotten around to asking. When it was her turn, she was surprised to hear her own vows repeated just as evenly. He slipped a plain gold band on her finger, and the judge smoothly continued, having seen Madelyn take out Reese's ring. Reese started with surprise when the judge did the ring ceremony again, and Madelyn slid a gold band over his knuckle. It was a plain band, like hers, but he hadn't expected a ring. He

hadn't worn one before. The wedding band looked odd on his hand, a thin ring of gold signaling that he was now a married man.
Then he kissed her. It was just a light touch of the lips, lingering only a moment, because he didn't want to start kissing her now. He was under control, and he wanted it to stay that way. It was done. They were married.
Madelyn was quiet as they drove Robert and Christine back to the airport. Their flight was already being called, so they didn't have time to do more than hug her fiercely. Reese shook Robert's hand, and a very male look passed between the two men. Madelyn blinked back tears as both Christine and Robert turned back to wave just before they disappeared from view.
They were alone. Reese kept his arm clamped around her waist as they walked back to the car. "You look like you're about to collapse," he growled.
She felt light-headed. "I may. I've never been married before. It's a nerve-racking business."
He put her in the car. "Have you had anything to eat today?"
She shook her head.
He was cursing when he slid under the steering wheel. "No wonder you're so shaky. We'll stop and get something."
"Not just yet, please. We can stop closer to home. I'm still too nervous right now to eat anything."
In the end, they wound up driving straight to the ranch. Reese carried her suitcases up to his bedroom. "There's a big walk-in closet," he said, opening the door to show her the enormous closet, as big as a small room. "But don't start unpacking now. You need to eat first."
She gestured to her clothes. "I'll have to change before I start cooking."
"I'll do the cooking," he said sharply.
There wasn't much cooking to it, just soup and sandwiches. Madelyn forced herself to eat half a sandwich and a bowl of soup. It all seemed so unreal. She was married. This was her home now.
Reese went upstairs and changed into his work clothes. Wedding day or no, the chores had to be done. Madelyn cleaned up the kitchen, then went upstairs and began hanging up her new clothes. His bedroom was much larger than the one she had slept in before, with a big private bath that included both bathtub and shower. The bed was king-size. She thought of lying in that bed with him and felt herself get dizzy. It was already late afternoon.

She was in the kitchen again, dressed more appropriately this time in jeans and a short-sleeved sweater, when he came in tired and dirty. "Are you hungry again?" she asked. "I can do something fast while you're showering."
"Just more sandwiches tonight," he said. "I'm not much interested in food right now." He was unbuttoning his shirt as he went up the stairs.
She made the sandwiches and sat at the table with him, drinking a glass of milk while he ate. She had never thought about how much a hard-working man needed to eat, but she could see she would have to cook twice the amount she had imagined.
"I have some paperwork to do," he said when he'd finished and carried his plate to the sink. "It won't take me long."
She understood. After she'd washed the few dishes, she went upstairs and took a bath. She had just left the bathroom, her skin flushed from the damp heat, when he entered the bedroom.
She stopped, biting her lip at the searing look he gave her from her tumbled hair down to her bare toes, as if he could see through her white cotton gown. He sat down on the bed and took off his boots, then stood and tugged his shirt free. His eyes never left her as he unbuttoned the shirt and took it off.
His chest was tanned and muscled and covered with curly black hair. The smooth skin of his shoulders gleamed as he unbuckled his belt and began unfastening his jeans.
Madelyn drew a deep breath and lifted her head. "There's something you need to know."
He paused, his eyes narrowing. She was standing ramrod straight, her pale hair swirling around her shoulders and down her back. That loose, sleeveless gown wasn't anything like the sheer silk confection April had worn, but Madelyn didn't need silk to be seductive. The shadow of her nipples pressing against the white cotton was seduction enough. What could she have to tell him that was keeping her strung as tight as fence wire?
He said softly, "Don't tell me you've decided to wait another couple of nights, because I'm not going for it. Why are you so nervous?"
She gestured at the bed. "I've never done this before."
He couldn't have heard right. Stunned, he released his zipper. "You've never had sex before?"

"No, and to be honest, I'm not really looking forward to it. I want you and I want to be intimate with you, but I don't expect to enjoy the first time." Her gaze was very direct.
An odd kind of anger shook him. "Damn it, Maddie, if you're a virgin why didn't you say so, instead of having that damn physical?"
She looked like a haughty queen. "For one thing, we weren't married before. Until you became my husband this morning it wasn't any of your business. For another, you wouldn't have believed me. You believe me now because there's no reason for me to lie when you'll find out the truth for yourself in a few minutes." She spoke with cool dignity, her head high.
"We were planning to get married."
"And it could have been called off."
Reese stared silently at her. Part of him was stunned and elated. No other man had ever had her; she was completely his. He was selfish enough, male enough, primitive enough, to be glad the penetration of her maidenhead would be his right. But part of him was disappointed, because this ruled out the night of hungry lovemaking he'd planned; he would have to be a total bastard to be that insensitive to her. She would be too sore and tender for extended loving.
Maybe this was for the best. He'd take her as gently as possible, but he wouldn't, couldn't, lose his control with her. He wouldn't let himself drown in her; he would simply consummate the marriage as swiftly and easily as he could and preserve the distance between them. He didn't want to give in completely to the fierce desire in him, he just wanted to ease himself and keep her in the slot he'd assigned to her. He wanted her too much; she was a threat to him in every way he'd sworn a woman would never be again. As long as he could keep his passion for her under control she wouldn't be able to breach his defenses, so he would allow himself only a simple mating. He wouldn't linger over her, feast on her, as he wanted to do.
Madelyn forced herself not to tremble when he walked over to her. It had been nothing less than the bald truth when she'd said she wasn't looking forward to this first time. Romantically, she wanted a night of rapture. Realistically, she expected much less. All they had shared was one kiss, and Reese was sexually frustrated, his control stretched to the limit. She was going to open her body to a stranger, and she couldn't help being apprehensive.

He saw the almost imperceptible way she braced herself as he came near, and he slid his hand into her hair. "You don't have to be afraid," he murmured. "I'm not going to jump on you like a bull." He tilted her head up so she had to look at him. His eyes were greener than she'd ever seen them before. "I can make it good for you, baby."
She swallowed. "I'd rather you didn't try, I think, not this time. I'm too nervous, and it might not work, and then I'd be disappointed. Just do it and get it over with."
A faint smile touched his lips. "That's the last thing a woman should ever say to a man." It was also a measure of her fear. "The slower I am, the better it will be for you."
"Unless I have a nervous breakdown in the middle of it."
She wasn't joking. He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip, feeling the softness of it. It was beginning to make sense. A woman who reached the age of twenty-eight still a virgin had to have a strong sense of reserve about being intimate with a man. The way she'd kissed him had set him on fire, but this final step wasn't one she took easily. She preferred to gradually get used to this powerful new intimacy, rather than throw herself totally into the experience expecting stars and fireworks.
He picked her up and put her on the bed, then turned out all the lights except for one lamp. Madelyn would have preferred total darkness but didn't say anything. She couldn't stop staring when he stripped off his jeans and got into bed with her. She had seen male nudity before: babies and little boys, men in clinical magazines. She knew how the male body functioned. But she had never before seen a fully aroused man, and Reese was definitely that. She lost her hope for nothing worse than discomfort.
He was a big man. He leaned over her, and she felt totally dwarfed by the width of his chest and shoulders, the muscled power of his body. She could barely breathe, her lungs pumping desperately for quick, shallow gasps. By her own will and actions she had brought herself to this, placed herself in bed with a man she didn't know.
He slid his hand under her nightgown and up her thigh, his hard, warm palm shocking on her bare skin. The nightgown was pulled upward by his action, steadily baring more and more of her body until the gown was around her waist and she lay exposed to him. She closed her eyes tightly, wondering if she could go through with this.

He pulled the nightgown completely off. She shivered as she felt him against every inch of her bare body. "It won't be horrible," he murmured as he brushed her lips in a gentle kiss. "I'll make certain of it." Then she felt him close his mouth on her nipple, and the incredible heat and pressure made her moan. She kept her eyes closed as he stroked and fondled her body until gradually the tension eased and she was pliable under his hands. Her senses couldn't reach fever pitch. She was too tired and nervous. He slid his hand between her legs and she jumped, her body tensing again even though she parted her thighs and allowed him the intimacy. His long fingers gently parted and stroked, probed to find both the degree of her readiness and the strength of her virginity. When his finger slid into her she flinched and turned her head against his shoulder.

"Shh, it's all right," he murmured soothingly. He stretched to reach the bedside table and opened the top drawer to retrieve the tube of lubricant he had put in there earlier. She flinched again at the cool slickness of it as his finger entered her once more and moved gently back and forth.

Her heart was slamming so hard against her ribs that she thought she might be sick. He mounted her, his muscled thighs spreading hers wide, and her eyes flew open in quick panic. She subdued the fear, forcing herself to relax as much as possible. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know you wanted it to be better than this."

He rubbed his lips over hers, and she clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as she felt his hips lift and his hardness begin to probe her. "I wish it were better for you," he said in a low, taut voice. "But I'm glad you're a virgin, that this first time is mine." Then he started entering her. She couldn't prevent the tears that scalded her eyes and ran down her temples. He was as gentle as possible, but she didn't accept him easily. The stretching and penetration of her body was a burning pain, and the rhythmic motions of his body only added to it. The only thing that made it bearable for her was, perversely, the very intimacy of having her body so deeply invaded by the man she loved. She was shattered by how primitively natural it was to give herself to him and let him find pleasure within her. Beyond the pain was a growing warmth that promised much more.

Chapter 5

The alarm went off at four-thirty. She felt him stretch beside her and reach out to shut off the insistent buzzing. Then he sat up, yawning, and turned on the lamp. She blinked at the sudden bright light.

Unconcernedly naked, he went into the bathroom. Madelyn used the privacy to bound out of bed and scramble into her clothes. She was just stepping into her jeans when he came out to begin dressing. His eyes lingered on her legs as she pulled the jeans up and snapped them. Surrounded by the early-morning quiet and darkness, with only the one lamp lighting the room, looking at his naked body seemed as intimate as the night before when he had entered her. Warmth surged in her as she realized that intimacy had many facets. It wasn't just sex, it was being at ease with each other, the daily routine of nakedness and dressing together.

As he dressed, he watched her drag a brush through her hair in several swift strokes, restoring it to casual order. Her slender body bent and swayed with a feminine grace that made it impossible for him to look away. He remembered the way it had felt to be inside her the night before, the tightness and heat, and against his will his loins responded. He couldn't take her now; she would be too tender. She had cried the night before, and every tear had burned him. He could wait.

She put the brush down and began plumping the pillows. He went over to help her make the bed, but when she threw the tumbled covers back to straighten the bottom sheet, she saw the red stains smeared on the linen and went still.

Reese looked at the stains, too, wondering if she had any pleasure to remember as he had, or if they reminded her only of the pain. He bent and tugged the sheet loose and began stripping the bed. "The next time will be better," he said, and she gave him such a solemn look that he wanted to hold her in his arms and rock her. If she had wanted it, he could have brought her to pleasure in other ways, but she had made it plain she wasn't ready for that. He wondered how he would be able to retain his control if she did give him the total freedom of her body. That one, restricted episode of lovemaking hadn't come close to satisfying the surging hunger he felt, and that was the danger of it.

He tossed the sheet to the floor. "I'll do the morning chores while you cook breakfast."

Madelyn nodded. As he went out the door she called, "Wait! Do you like pancakes?"
He paused and looked back. "Yes, and a lot of them."
She remembered from her earlier visit that he liked his coffee strong. She yawned as she went downstairs to the kitchen; then she stood in the middle of the room and looked around. It was difficult to know where to begin when you didn't know where anything was.
Coffee first. At least his coffee maker was an automatic drip. She found the filters and dipped in enough coffee to make the brew twice as strong as she would have made it for herself.
She had to guess at the amount of bacon and sausage to fry. As hard as he worked, he would need an enormous amount of food to eat, since he would normally burn off four or five thousand calories a day. As the combined smells of brewing coffee and frying breakfast meats began to fill the kitchen, she realized for the first time what an ongoing chore just the cooking would be. She would have to become very familiar with some cookbooks, because her skills tended toward the most basic.
Thank God he had pancake mix. She stirred up the batter, searched out the syrup, then set the table. How long should she give him before she poured the pancakes on the griddle?
A heaping platter of bacon and sausage was browned and on the table before he came back from the barn, carrying a pail of fresh milk. As soon as the door opened, Madelyn poured four circles of batter on the griddle. He put the milk on the countertop and turned on the tap to wash his hands.
"How much longer will it be until breakfast is ready?"
"Two minutes. Pancakes don't take long." She flipped them over. "The coffee's ready."
He poured himself a cup and leaned against the cabinet beside her, watching her stand guard over the pancakes. It was only a couple of minutes before she stacked them on a plate and handed it to him. "The butter's on the table. Start on these while I cook some more."
He carried the plate to the table and began eating. He was finished with the first round of pancakes by the time the second was ready. Madelyn poured four more circles on the griddle. This made an even dozen. How many would he eat?
He only ate ten. She got the remaining two from the last batch and slid onto a chair beside him. "What are you doing today?"

"I have to check fences in the west quarter so I can move the herd there for grazing."
"Will you be back for lunch, or should I pack some sandwiches?"
"Sandwiches."
And that, she thought half an hour later when he'd saddled a horse and ridden out, was that. So much for conversation over breakfast. He hadn't even kissed her this morning. She knew he had a lot of work to do, but a pat on the head wouldn't have taken too much of his time.
Their first full day of marriage didn't appear to be starting out too well. Then she wondered just what she had expected. She knew how Reese felt, knew he didn't want her to get too close to him. It would take time to break down those barriers. The best thing she could do was learn how to be a rancher's wife. She didn't have time to fret because he hadn't kissed her good morning.
She cleaned the kitchen, which became an entire morning's work. She mopped the floor, scrubbed the oven, cleaned out the big double refrigerator, and rearranged the pantry so she'd know where everything was. She inventoried the pantry and started a list of things she'd need. She did the laundry and remade the bed with fresh linens. She vacuumed and dusted both upstairs and down, cleaned the three bathrooms, sewed buttons on his shirts and repaired a myriad of small rips in his shirts and jeans. All in all, she felt very domestic.
Marriage was work, after all. It wasn't an endless round of parties and romantic picnics by a river.
Marriage was also night after night in bed with the same man, opening her arms and thighs to him, easing his passion within her. He'd said it would be better, and she sensed that it would, that she had just been too tired and tense the night before for it to have been pleasurable no matter what he'd done. The whole process had been a bit shocking. No matter how much she had technically known about sex, nothing had prepared her for the reality of penetration, of actually feeling his hardness inside her. Her heartbeat picked up speed as she thought of the coming night.
She started unpacking some of the boxes she had shipped, reassembling the stereo equipment and putting some of her books out. She was so busy that when she noted the time, it was almost dark. Reese would be coming in soon, and she hadn't even started dinner. She stopped what she was doing

and raced to the kitchen. She hadn't even planned what they would have, but at least she knew what was in the pantry.
A quick check of the freezer produced some thick steaks and one pack of pork chops and very little else. She made mental additions to the grocery list as she unwrapped the chops and put them in the microwave to defrost. If he hadn't had a microwave she would have been in big trouble. She was peeling a small mountain of potatoes when the back door opened. She heard him scrape his boots, then sigh tiredly as he took them off.
He came into the kitchen and stopped, looking around at the bare table and stove. "Why isn't dinner ready?" he asked in a very quiet, ominous tone.
"I was busy and didn't notice the time – "
"It's your job to notice the time. I'm dead tired and hungry. I've worked twelve hours straight, the least you could do is take the time to cook."
His words stung, but she didn't pause in what she was doing. "I'm doing it as fast as I can. Go take a shower and relax for a few minutes."
He stomped up the stairs. She bit her lip as she cut up the potatoes and put them in a pan of hot water to stew. If he hadn't looked so exhausted she might have told him a few things, but he'd been slumping with weariness and filthy from head to foot. His day hadn't been an easy one.
She opened a big can of green beans and dumped it into a pan, then added seasonings. The chops were already baking. Bread. She needed bread. There were no canned biscuits in the refrigerator. She couldn't dredge the recipe for biscuits from her memory, no matter how many times she'd watched Grandma Lily make them. She found the cookbooks and began checking the indexes for biscuits.
Once she had the list of ingredients before her it all began to come back. She mixed the dough, then kneaded it and rolled it out as she'd done when she was a little girl. She couldn't find a biscuit cutter, so she used a water glass, pressing it down into the dough and coming up with a perfect circle. A few minutes later, a dozen biscuits were popped into the oven.
Dessert. She'd seen some small, individually wrapped devil's food cakes. She got those out, and a big can of peaches. It would have to do, because she didn't have time to bake. She opened the can of peaches and poured them into a bowl.
By the time she had the table set, Reese had come back downstairs, considerably cleaner but unimproved in mood. He looked pointedly at the empty table and stalked into the living room.

She checked the potatoes; they were tender. She mixed up a small amount of flour and milk and poured it into the potatoes; it instantly began thickening. She let them stew while she checked the chops and green beans. The biscuits were golden brown, and had risen nicely. Now if only they were edible... Since she'd followed a recipe, they shouldn't be too bad, she hoped. She stacked them on a plate and crossed her fingers for luck.
The chops were done, finally. "Reese! Dinner's ready."
"It's about time."
She hurried to put the food on the table, realizing at the last minute that she had made neither coffee nor tea. Quickly she got two glasses from the cabinet and poured milk. She knew that he liked milk, so perhaps he sometimes drank it at dinner.
The chops weren't the tenderest she'd ever cooked, and the biscuits were a bit heavy, but he ate steadily, without comment. Heavy or not, the dozen biscuits disappeared in short order, and she ate only one. As his third helping of stewed potatoes was disappearing, she got up. "Do you want any dessert?"
His head came up. "Dessert?"
She couldn't help smiling. You could tell the man had lived alone for seven years. "It isn't much, because I didn't get around to baking." She put the small cakes in a bowl and dipped peaches and juice over them. Reese gave them a quizzical look as she set the bowl in front of him.
"Just try it," she said. "I know it's junk food, but it tastes good."
He did, and cleaned the bowl. Some of the fatigue was fading from his face.
"The stereo in the living room looks like a good one."
"I've had it for several years. I hope it survived the shipping."
He'd sold his stereo system years ago, deciding that he needed the money more than he needed the music, and he'd never let himself think too much about it. When you were fighting for survival, you quickly learned how to get your priorities in order. But he'd missed music and was looking forward to playing some of his old classics again.
The house was full of signs of what she'd been doing all day, and he felt guilty about yelling at her because dinner hadn't been ready. The floors were cleaner than they'd been in years, and the dust was gone from every surface. The house smelled of household cleaner and furniture polish, and the bathroom had sparkled with cleanliness. The house was ten rooms and over four thousand square feet; his fancy city woman knew how to work.

He helped her clean the table and load the dishwasher. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to her list.
"The shopping list. The pantry has a limited selection."
He shrugged. "I was usually so tired I just ate sandwiches."
"How far is the nearest market? And don't tell me I'm going to have to go to Billings."
"There's a general store about twenty miles from here. It isn't a supermarket, but you can get the basics there. I'll take you there day after tomorrow. I can't do it tomorrow because I've got more fencing to repair before I can move the herd."
"Just give me directions. I don't think the food situation will wait until the day after tomorrow."
"I don't want you out wandering around," he said flatly.
"I won't be wandering. Just give me the directions."
"I'd rather you wait. I don't know how reliable the car is yet."
"Then I can take the truck."
"I said I'll take you day after tomorrow, and that's that."
Fuming, she went upstairs and took a shower. Why on earth was he so intractable? The way he'd acted, she might as well have said she was going to find a bar and spend the day in it. But then, that might have been what his first wife had done. Even if it were true, Madelyn was determined that she wasn't going to spend her life paying for April's sins.
She finished unpacking her clothes, hanging most of her New York clothes in the closet in another bedroom, since she wouldn't have much use for them now. It still made her feel strange to see her clothes in the same closet with a man's; she'd shared room, closet and clothes in college, but that was different. This was serious. This was a lifetime.
One thing about getting up at four-thirty: she was already sleepy, and it was only eight. Of course, she was still feeling the effects of not getting enough sleep for the past two weeks, as well as a very active day, but she could barely hold her eyes open.
She heard Reese come upstairs and go into their bedroom; then he called, "Maddie?" in a rougher voice than usual.
"In here," she called.
He appeared in the doorway, and his eyes sharpened as he took in the clothes piled on the bed. "What're you doing?" There was an oddly tense set to his shoulders.

"I'm hanging the clothes I won’t use in here, so they won't clutter up our closet."
Maybe it was only her imagination, but he appeared to relax. "Are you ready to go to bed?"
"Yes, I can finish this tomorrow."
He stood aside to let her get past him, then turned out the light and followed her down the hall. Madelyn was barefoot and in another thin gown much like the one she'd worn the night before, and she got that dwarfed, suffocated feeling again, sensing him so close behind her. The top of her head would just reach his chin, and he had to weigh at least two hundred pounds, all of it muscle. It would be easy to let herself be intimidated by him, especially when she thought of lying beneath him on that big bed. She would be going to bed with him like this for the rest of her life. Maybe he had doubts about the longevity of their marriage, but she didn't.
It was easier this time. She lay in his muscular arms and felt the warmth grow under his stroking hands. But now that she was less nervous she sensed something wrong, as if he were keeping part of himself separate from their lovemaking. He touched her, but only under strict control, as if he were allowing himself only so much enjoyment and not a bit more. She didn't want those measured touches, she wanted his passion. She knew it was there, she sensed it, but he wasn't giving it to her.
It still hurt when he entered her, though not as much as before. He was gentle, but he wasn't loving. This was the way he would have treated either of those other two women he'd been willing to marry, she thought dimly, as a body he'd been given the use of, not as a warm, loving woman who needed more. This was only sex, not making love. He made her feel like a faceless stranger.
This was war. As she went to sleep afterward, she was planning her campaign.

* * *

"I want to go with you today," she said the next morning over breakfast.
He didn't look up from his eggs and biscuits. "You're not up to it."
"How do you know?" she retorted.
He looked annoyed. "Because a lot of *men* aren't up to it."
"You're repairing fencing today, right? I can help you with the wire and at least keep you company."

That was exactly what Reese didn't want. If he spent a lot of time in her company he'd end up making love to her, and that was something he wanted to limit. If he could hold himself to once a night, he'd be able to keep everything under control.
"It'll only take a couple of hours to finish repairing the fence, then I'll bring the truck home and go back out on horseback to move the herd."
"I told you, I can ride."
He shook his head impatiently. "How long has it been since you've been on a horse? What kind of riding did you do, tame trail riding on a rented hack? This is open country, and my horses are trained to work cattle."
"Granted, it's been almost a year since I've been on a horse, but I know all about liniment. I have to get used to it sometime."
"You'd just be in the way. Stay here and see if you can have dinner done on time tonight."
She narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "Reese Duncan, I'm going with you and that's final."
He got up from the table. "You'd better learn that this is my ranch, and what I say goes. That includes you. A few words by a judge doesn't give you any say-so in my work. I do the ranch work, you take care of the house. I want fried chicken for dinner, so you can get started on that."
"There isn't any chicken in the freezer," she retorted. "Since you don't want me to go shopping, I guess you'll have to change your request."
He pointed out to the yard. "There are plenty of chickens out there, city slicker. Meat doesn't always come shrink-wrapped."
Madelyn's temper was usually as languorous as her walk, but she'd had enough. "You want me to catch a chicken?" she asked, tight-lipped. "You don't think I can do it, do you? That's why you said it. You want to show me how much I don't know about ranch life. You'll have your damn chicken for dinner, if I have to ram it down your throat feathers and all!"
She turned and stormed up the stairs. Reese stood there, a little taken aback. He hadn't known Madelyn could move that fast.
She was back downstairs before he could get the truck loaded and leave. He heard the back door slam and turned. His eyes widened. She had strapped protective pads on her knees and elbows, with the knee-pads over her jeans. She'd put on athletic shoes. She still looked furious, and she didn't even glance at him. Reese hooked his thumbs in his belt loops and leaned against the truck to watch.

She picked out a hen and eased up to it, scattering a few handfuls of feed to lure the birds. Reese lifted his eyebrows, impressed. But she made her move just a little too soon; the hen squawked and ran for her life with Madelyn in pursuit.
She dove for the bird, sliding along the ground on her belly and just missing the frantic bird. Reese winced and straightened away from the truck, horrified at the thought of what the dirt and rocks were doing to her soft skin, but she jumped up and took off after the hen. The bird ran in erratic circles around the yard, then darted under the truck. Madelyn swerved to head it off, and another headlong tackle fell an inch short.
"Look, just forget about the chick – " he began, but she was already gone. The bird managed to take flight enough to land in the lower branches of a tree, but it was still over Madelyn's head. She narrowed her eyes and bent to pick a few rocks up from the ground. She wound up and let fly. The rock went over the chicken's head. The hen pulled her head down, her bright little eyes glittering. The next rock hit the limb next to her and she squawked, shifting position. The third rock hit her on the leg, and she took flight again.
This time Madelyn judged her dive perfectly. She slid along the ground in a flurry of dust and pebbles, and her hand closed over one of the hen's legs. The bird immediately went wild, flapping her wings and trying to peck the imprisoning hand that held her. They grappled in the dust for a minute, but then Madelyn stood up with the hen upside down and firmly held by both feet, its wings spread. Her hands were dotted with blood where the furious hen had pecked her, breaking the skin. "Faster than a speeding pullet," she said with grim triumph.
Reese could only stare at her in silence as she stalked up to him. Her hair was a mess, tangled and hanging in her eyes. Her face was caked with dust, her shirt was filthy and torn, and her jeans were a mess. One knee-pad had come loose and was drooping down her shin. The look in those gray eyes, however, kept him from laughing. He didn't dare even smile.
The chicken hit him in the chest, and he grabbed for it, just preventing the bird from making a break for freedom.
"There's your damn chicken," she said between her teeth. "I hope you're very happy together." She slammed back into the house.
Reese looked down at the bird and remembered the blood on Madelyn's hands. He wrung the hen's neck with one quick, competent twist. He'd never

felt less like laughing.
He carried the dead bird inside and dropped it on the floor. Madelyn was standing at the sink, carefully soaping her hands. "Let me see," he said, coming up behind her and reaching around to take her hands in his, effectively pinning her in place. The hen had drawn blood in several places, painful little puncture wounds that were blue around the edges. He'd had a few of them himself and knew how easily they could become infected.
He reached for a towel to wrap around her hands. "Come upstairs to the bathroom and I'll put disinfectant on them."
She didn't move. "It's my hands, not my back. I can reach them just fine, thank you. I'll do it myself."
His muscled arms were iron bands around her; his hard hands held her easily. Her front was pressed against the sink, and his big body was against her back, hemming her in, holding her. She felt utterly surrounded by him and had the sudden violent thought that she should never have married someone who was almost a foot taller than she was. She was at a woeful disadvantage here.
He bent, hooked his right arm under her knees and lifted her with insulting ease. Madelyn grabbed for his shoulders to keep her balance. "The hen pecked my hands, not my feet," she said caustically.
He slanted a warning look at her as he started up the stairs.
"Men who use force against women are lower than slugs."
His arms tightened, but he kept a tight rein on his temper. He carried her into the bathroom and put her on her feet. As he opened the medicine cabinet she headed out the door, and he grabbed her with one hand, hauling her back. She tugged violently, trying to free her arm. "I said I'd do it myself!" she said, furious with him.
He put the lid down on the toilet, sat down and pulled her onto his lap. "Be still and let me clean your hands. If you still want to fight after I'm finished, then I'll be glad to oblige you."
Fuming, Madelyn sat on his lap while he dabbed the small wounds with an antiseptic that stung sharply. Then he smoothed antibiotic cream on them and put Band-Aids over the two worst breaks. His arms were still around her; he was holding her as a parent would a child, to soothe it and tend its hurts. She didn't like the comparison, even if it was her own. She shifted restlessly, feeling his hard thighs under her bottom.

His face was very close to hers. She could see all the different colored specks in his eyes, green and blue dominating, but shot through with black and white and a few glittering flecks of gold. Though he had shaved the night before, his beard had already grown enough to roughen his cheeks and chin. The brackets on each side of his mouth framed the beautiful cut of his lips, and suddenly she remembered the way he had closed those lips over her nipple, sucking her tender flesh into his mouth. She quivered, and the rigidity went out of her body.

Reese closed the first-aid box and set it aside, then let his arm rest loosely across her thighs as he gave her a measuring look. "Your face is dirty."

"So let me up and I'll wash it."

He didn't. He washed it himself, slowly drawing a wet washcloth over her features, the fabric almost caressing her skin. He wiped her mouth with a touch so light she could barely feel it and watched the cloth tug slightly at her soft, enticing lower lip. Madelyn's head tilted back, and her eyelids drooped. He drew the cloth down her neck, wiped it across her exposed collarbone, then dipped his hand down inside the loose neck of her top. She caught her breath at the damp coolness on her breasts. He drew the cloth back and forth, slowly rasping it across her nipples and bringing them to wet attention. Her breasts began to throb, and her back arched involuntarily, offering them for more. She could feel a hard ridge growing, pressing against her hip, and her blood moved heavily through her veins.

He tossed the washcloth into the basin and took his hat off, dropping it onto the floor. The arm behind her back tightened and drew her in to him as he bent his head, and his mouth closed over hers.

It was the same way he'd kissed her in the airport, the way he hadn't kissed her since. His mouth was hard and hot, urgent in his demands. His tongue pushed into her mouth, and she met it with her own, welcoming, enticing, wanting more.

She gave way beneath his onslaught, her head falling back against his shoulder. He pursued the advantage, taking her mouth again, putting his hand beneath her shirt and closing it over her breast. Gently he kneaded the firm mound, rubbing his rough palm over the nipple until she whimpered into his mouth from the exquisite pain of it. She turned toward him, lifting her arms around his neck. Excitement pounded in the pit of her stomach, tightening every muscle in her body and starting an aching tension between her legs.

With a rough sound of passion he bent her back over his arm and shoved her top up, exposing her breasts. His warm breath feathered across them as he bent to her; then he extended the tip of his tongue and circled one pink nipple, making it constrict into a tightly puckered nub and turn reddish. He shifted her body, bringing her other breast closer to his mouth, and gave that nipple identical treatment, watching with pleasure as it, too, tightened. Madelyn clutched at him. "Reese," she begged in a low, shaking voice. She needed him.

This was the hot magic she had sensed about him from the beginning, the blatant sensuality. This was the warm promise she had felt lying beneath him at night, and she wanted more.

He drew her nipple into his mouth with a strong, sucking pressure, and she arched again, her thighs shifting. She felt like a dessert offered up to him, lying across his lap with her body lifted to his mouth, glorying in the way his lips and teeth and tongue worked at her breast.

"Reese," she said again. It was little more than a moan, heavy with desire. Everything that was male in him responded to that female cry of need, urging him to surge deep within her and ease the empty ache that made her twist in his arms and cry out for him. His loins were throbbing, his body radiating heat. If she needed to be filled, he needed to fill her. The two restrained matings he'd had with her hadn't been enough, would never satisfy the lust that intensified every time he looked at her.

But if he ever let himself go with her, he'd never be able to get that control back. April had taught him a bitter lesson, one that he relearned every day when he worked on his diminished acres, or saw the paint peeling on his house. Madelyn might never turn on him, but he couldn't take the chance and let his guard down.

With an effort that brought sweat to his brow, he lifted his mouth from her maddeningly sweet flesh and shifted her to her feet. She swayed, her eyes dazed, her top twisted up under her arms and exposing those firm, round breasts. She didn't understand and reached for him, offering a drugging sensuality that he wouldn't let himself take.

He caught her wrists and held her arms to her sides while he stood up, an action that brought their bodies together. He heard her moan softly again, and she let her head fall forward against his chest, where she rubbed her cheek back and forth in a subtle caress that made him curse his shirt for covering his bare skin.

If he didn't get out of here now, he wouldn't go at all.
"I have work to do." His voice was hoarse with strain. She didn't move. She was melting against him, her slim hips starting a drumbeat roll that rocked into his loins and made him feel as if his pants would split under the pressure.
"Madelyn, stop it. I have to go."
"Yes," she whispered, rising on tiptoe to brush her lips against his throat. His hands closed tightly on her hips, for one convulsive second pulling her into his pelvis as if he would grind himself into her; then he pushed her away. He picked up his hat and strode from the bathroom before she could recover and reach for him again, because he damn sure wouldn't have the strength to stop this time.
Madelyn stared after him, confused by his sudden departure and aching from the loss of contact. She swayed; then realization burst within her, and she gave a hoarse cry of mingled rage and pain, putting her hand out to catch the basin so she wouldn't fall to her knees.
Damn him, damn him, damn him! He'd brought her to fever pitch, then left her empty and aching. She knew he'd wanted her; she had felt his hardness, felt the tension in his corded muscles. He could have carried her to the bed or even had her right there in the bathroom, and she would have gloried in it, but instead he'd pushed her away.
He'd been too close to losing control. Like a flash she knew what had happened, knew that at the last minute he'd had to prove to himself that he could still walk away from her, that he didn't want her so much that he couldn't master it. The sexuality of his nature was so strong that it kept burning through those walls he'd built around himself, but he was still fighting it, and so far he'd won.
Slowly she went downstairs, holding the banister because her knees felt like overcooked noodles. If she were to have any chance with him at all, she would have to find some way to shatter that iron control, but she didn't know if her nerves or self-esteem would hold out.
He was already gone, the truck nowhere in sight. She looked around blankly, unable to think what she should do, and her eyes lit on the dead chicken lying on the floor.
"I'll get back at you for this," she said with grim promise in her voice, and began the loathsome task of getting that blasted hen ready to cook.

Chapter 6

When Reese came in that evening, Madelyn didn't look up from the bowl of potatoes she was mashing. The force with which she wielded the potato masher went far beyond what was required and carried a hint of savagery. One look at her averted face told Reese she was probably imagining using that potato masher on him. He looked thoughtful. He'd expected her to be cool, maybe even a little hurt, but he hadn't expected her temper to still be at boiling point; it took a lot of energy to sustain a rage that many hours. Evidently it took her as long to cool off as it did to lose her temper to begin with.

He said, "It'll take me about fifteen minutes to get cleaned up."

She still didn't look up. "Dinner will be ready in ten."

From that he deduced that she wasn't going to wait for him. The thoughtful look deepened as he went upstairs.

He took one of the fastest showers of his life and thought about not shaving, but he didn't like the idea of scraping her soft skin with his beard, so he ran the risk of cutting his own throat due to the speed with which he dragged the razor across his skin. He was barefoot and still buttoning his shirt when he went back down the stairs.

She was just placing the glasses of iced tea on the table, and they sat down together. The platter of fried chicken was sitting right in front of his plate. He'd either have to eat the damn bird or wear it, he decided.

He piled his plate with chicken, mashed potatoes, biscuits and gravy, all the while eying the platter curiously. He continued to examine the contents while he took his first bite and controlled a grunt of pleasure. The chicken was tender, the crust crisp and spicy. Madelyn made a better cook than he'd expected. But the remaining pieces of chicken looked... strange.

"What piece is that?" he asked, pointing at a strangely configured section of chicken.

"I have no idea," she replied without looking at him. "I've never cleaned and butchered my food before."

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. If he made the mistake of laughing she would probably dump the bowl of gravy over his head.

The meal was strained and mostly silent. If he made a comment, she replied, but other than that she made no effort to hold a conversation. She

ate a small portion of each item, though minuscule was perhaps a better word. As soon as she was finished she carried her plate to the sink and brought back a clean saucer, as well as a cherry cobbler that was still bubbling.

Very little in life had ever interfered with Reese's appetite, and tonight was no exception. He worked too hard to pick at his food. By the time Madelyn had finished dabbling with a small helping of cobbler he had demolished most of the chicken, all the potatoes and gravy, and only two biscuits were left. He was feeling almost contented as Madelyn placed an enormous portion of cobbler onto a clean plate for him. A quick look at her icy face, however, told him that food hadn't worked the same miracle on her. "How did you learn to cook like this?" "There are cookbooks in the cabinet. I can read." So much for that conversational gambit.

She went upstairs immediately after the kitchen was clean. Reese went into his office and took a stab at the paperwork that never ended, but his mind wasn't on it, and by eight o'clock he was glancing at his watch, wondering if Madelyn was ready to go to bed. He'd already heard the shower running, and the image of her standing nude under the steaming water had had him shifting restlessly in his chair. There were times when a man's sexual organs could make him damned uncomfortable, and this was one of them. He'd been hard most of the day, cursing himself for not having made love to her that morning, even though it would have been a huge mistake.

He tossed the pen onto his desk and closed the books, getting to his feet with restrained violence.

Damn it, he needed her, and he couldn't wait any longer.

He turned out the lights as he went upstairs, his tread heavy and deliberate. His mind was on that searing, gut-wrenching moment when he first entered her, feeling the small resistance of her tight flesh, the giving, the enveloping, then the wet, clasping heat and his senses exploding. It was all he could do not to keep after her time and again, to try to remember that she was very new to lovemaking and still tender, to stay in control.

The bedroom door was open. He walked in and found her sitting on the bed painting her toenails, her long legs bare and curled in one of those positions that only females seemed able to achieve and males went crazy looking at. His whole body tightened, and he became fully, painfully erect. She was wearing a dark pink satin chemise that ended at the tops of her thighs and revealed matching petal pants. The satin molded to her breasts, revealing

their round shape and soft nipples. Her blond hair was pulled to one side, tumbling over her shoulder, and her skin was still delicately flushed from her shower. Her expression was solemn and intent as she concentrated on the strokes of the tiny brush that turned her toenails the same deep pink as the chemise.

"Let's go to bed." His voice was guttural. He was already peeling off his shirt.

She hadn't even glanced at him. "I can't. My toenails are wet."

He didn't much care. He'd keep her legs raised long enough that the polish would be dry when he'd finished,

She capped the polish bottle and set it aside, then bent bonelessly over to blow on her toes. Reese unsnapped and unzipped his jeans. "Come to bed anyway."

She gave him an impatient look and got to her feet. "You go on. I'll go downstairs and read awhile."

He stretched his arm out in front of her when she would have passed, barring her way. His hand closed on her upper arm. "Forget reading," he muttered, pulling her toward him.

Madelyn wrenched away, staring at him in incredulous anger. "I don't believe this! You actually think I could want to make love *now?*"

His eyebrows lowered, and he hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. "Why not?" he asked very softly.

"For one very good reason. I'm angry! What you did stinks, and I'm not even close to forgiving you for it." Just the way he was standing there with his thumbs in his belt loops, his jeans open and his attitude one of incredible male arrogance, made her so angry she almost couldn't talk.

"The best way to make up is in bed."

"That's what men think," she said scornfully. "Let me tell you, no woman wants to make love with a man while she's still thinking how funny it would have been if he'd choked on a chicken bone!" She whirled and stalked barefoot from the bedroom.

Reese began swearing. Frustration boiled up in him, and for a moment he started after her. He reached the door and stopped, then slammed his fist into the doorframe. Damn it all to hell!

* * *

The atmosphere was decidedly chilly between them the next morning when he drove her to the small town of Crook to buy groceries. Though she was

no longer so furious, she was no less determined. He couldn't reject her one time and the next expect her to accommodate him without question. If that was his idea of what a marriage should be, they were both in for some rocky times.

To call Crook a town was to flatter it. There were a few residences sprawled out in a haphazard manner, a service station, a food store, the general store, and a small cafe with the expected assortment of pickup trucks parked in front of it. Madelyn wondered just what sort of dangerous behavior Reese had expected her to get up to in Crook. Maybe he thought she'd run wild and drive on the sidewalks, which looked as if someone had already done so. They were actually wood, and were the only sidewalks she'd ever seen with skidmarks on them.

"Let's get a cup of coffee," Reese suggested as they got out of the station wagon, and Madelyn agreed. It would be nice to have a cup of coffee she didn't have to water down before she could drink it.

The cafe had five swivel stools, covered in split black imitation leather, in front of the counter. Three round tables were each surrounded by four chairs, and along the left side were three booths. Four of the stools were occupied, evidently by the owners of the four trucks outside. The men had different features but were identical in weathered skin, battered hats, and worn jeans and boots. Reese nodded to all of them, and they nodded back, then returned their attention to their coffee and pie.

He guided her to a booth, and they slid onto the plastic seats. The waitress behind the counter gave them a sour look. "You want something to eat, or just coffee?"

"Coffee," Reese said.

She came out from behind the counter and plunked two coffee cups down in front of them. Then she went back for the coffeepot and returned to pour the coffee, all without changing her expression, which bordered on a glare.

"Coffee's fifty cents a cup," she said as if it were their fault, then marched back to her post behind the counter.

Madelyn sighed as she saw how black the coffee was. A tentative sip told her that this, too, was strong enough to strip paint.

One of the men eased down from the stool and went over to the corner jukebox. The waitress looked up. "I'll unplug that thing if you play one of them caterwauling love songs," she said, her voice just as sour as her looks. "You'll owe me a quarter if you do."

"And don't play none of them god-awful rock songs, neither. I don't like music where the singers sound like they're being gelded."
Madelyn's eyes rounded, and she choked a little on the coffee. Fascinated, she stared at the waitress.
The cowboy was grumbling, "I don't know of nothing you *do* like, Floris, so just shut your ears and don't listen."
"I'll tell you what I like," she snapped. "I like peace and quiet."
"Then find some library to work in." He jammed his quarter into the slot and defiantly punched buttons.
A rollicking country song filled the cafe. Floris began clattering cups and saucers and silverware. Madelyn wondered what the breakage bill was every month if Floris began abusing the crockery every time someone played the jukebox. The cowboy glared, and Floris banged louder. He stomped back to the jukebox and fed it another quarter, but in the manner of vending machines everywhere, it took the coin but refused his selection. He scowled and beat it with his fist. The arm scratched across the record with a hair raising screech, then, having reached the end of the groove, lifted automatically as the record was returned to its slot, and silence reigned. With a triumphant look Floris sailed through the swinging door into the kitchen.
"The waitress from hell," Madelyn breathed in awe, watching the door swing gently back and forth.
Reese choked and had to spit his coffee back into the cup. She didn't want to look at him, but the urge was irresistible. Without turning her head she glanced toward him and found him watching her, his face unnaturally stiff. She looked at him, and he looked at her, and they began snickering. He tried to control it and quickly gulped his coffee, but Madelyn was still giggling as he grabbed for his wallet. He threw a dollar and change on the table, grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the entrance. The door had barely closed behind them when he released her and bent forward, bracing his hands on his knees as a great roar of laughter burst from him. Madelyn collapsed over his back, seeing again the helpless, stunned look on the cowboy's face and the gleeful look on Floris's, and went off into helpless gales.
After her bad temper the laughter felt great. It was even more wonderful to hear Reese laughing, and a pang struck her as she realized that this was the first time she had heard him laugh. He rarely even smiled, but now he was

hugging his ribs and wiping tears from his eyes, and still the deep sounds were booming up from his chest. She had an overwhelming urge to cry, but conquered it.

A lot of the tension between them dissolved as they bought groceries. Reese had been right; the general store did carry mostly basics, but Madelyn had carefully studied the cookbooks and knew what she could do with what was available. Thank God Reese wasn't a fussy eater.

A cheerful woman with a truly awesome bosom checked them out while carrying on a casual conversation with Reese. She eyed Madelyn questioningly, then looked down at the ring on her left hand. Reese saw the look and braced himself for the curiosity he knew would come. "Glenna, this is my wife, Madelyn."

Glenna looked startled, and her glance flew down to his own left hand. The gold ring on his tanned finger clearly astounded her. Reese carried on with the introduction, hoping to bridge her reaction. "Maddie, this is Glenna Kinnaird. We went to school together."

Recovering herself, Glenna beamed and held out her hand. "I can't believe it! Congratulations! You got married, after all this time. Why, just wait until I tell Boomer. We didn't really go to school together," she said chattily to Madelyn. "I'm ten years older than he is, so I graduated when he was in third grade, but I've known him all his life. How on earth did you catch him? I'd have sworn he'd never marry again – Uh, that is..." Her voice trailed off uneasily as she glanced at Reese.

Madelyn smiled. "It's okay. I know about April. As for how I caught him... .well, I didn't. He caught me."

Glenna's face regained its cheerful expression. "Took one look and forgot about being a bachelor, huh?"

"Something like that," Reese said. He'd taken one look and gotten hard, but the end result had been the same: the leggy blonde with the lazy, seductive stroll was now his wife.

As they left the store with Glenna waving at them, he realized something that had him frowning thoughtfully as they loaded the groceries into the station wagon: Glenna had disliked April on sight, but had been perfectly comfortable and friendly with Madelyn. Even though, in an indescribable way, Madelyn dressed more fashionably than April, she had an easy, friendly manner to which Glenna had responded. Madelyn didn't dress as expensively as April, but what she wore had a certain style to it, as if she

had practiced for hours to get her collar to stand up just so, or her sleeves to roll up that precise amount. She would always draw eyes, but she didn't inspire the sort of hostility from her own sex that April had.
Style. He looked at his wife and thought of how she'd looked the day before, with one kneepad slipping down her shin and her hair hanging in her face. He hadn't dared laugh then, but in retrospect he couldn't help himself and began to chuckle. Even when chasing chickens, Madelyn did it with style.

* * *

Madelyn had been outside all morning, scraping the peeling paint off the house. Having brought the interior up to snuff, she was working on the exterior, and it was such a beautiful morning that she'd been enjoying herself despite the hard work. It was getting close to noon, though, and the temperature was rising uncomfortably. Sweat was making her clothes stick to her. Deciding that she'd done enough for the day, she climbed down from the ladder and went inside to take a shower.
When she came back downstairs, the first thing she saw was the bag containing Reese's lunch sitting on the cabinet. He was out repairing fencing again and wouldn't be back until dinnertime, but he'd forgotten his lunch and thermos of tea.
She checked the clock. He had to be starving by now. Quickly she emptied the thermos and filled it with fresh ice cubes and tea, then got the keys to the station wagon and hurried outside with his lunch. By chance she knew where he was working, because in the past two weeks he'd shown her around the ranch a little, and he'd mentioned this morning where he'd be. It was actually a safety precaution for someone to know where he was, and she frowned as she thought of the years he'd worked alone, with no one at the house to know where he'd gone or how long he'd been out. If he'd gotten hurt, he could have lain there and died without anyone ever knowing he'd been hurt until it was too late.
Her marriage wasn't even three weeks old yet, and already she could barely remember her previous life. She'd never before been as busy as she was now, though she had to admit she would gladly forego the housework to ride around the ranch with Reese, but he still refused to hear of it. She was certain that if anyone looked up the word "stubborn" in the dictionary, it would have Reese Duncan's picture beside it. He'd decided where she would fit in his life, and he wouldn't let her get outside that boundary.

She could almost feel the hunger in him at night when he made love to her, but he never let himself go, never released the passion she sensed, and as a result she couldn't let herself go, either. Sex was no longer uncomfortable, and she desperately wanted more from their lovemaking, but the intensity she needed wasn't there. He held back, diminishing the pleasure they both could have had and thereby preserving that damned inner wall of his. She didn't know how much longer she would be able to bear it, how much longer it would be before she began making excuses and turn away from him in the night. The situation was dire, she knew, when she was actually looking forward to having her period!

She drove slowly, preoccupied with her thoughts and with watching for any sign of his truck out on the range somewhere. Like all ranchers, Reese paid no attention to roads; he simply drove across the land. The truck was a tool to him, not a prized and pampered status symbol. If it had been a Rolls he would have treated it the same, because it had no value beyond that of its worth as a working vehicle. So she knew the area where he was working, but that area covered a lot of ground and he could be anywhere in it. She didn't see him anywhere, but fresh tire tracks scored the ground, and she simply followed them, carefully steering around the rougher ground that Reese had driven over without concern, because the station wagon was much lower than the truck and couldn't negotiate such terrain.

It took her almost forty-five minutes to find him. He'd parked the truck under a tree, partially shielding it from view. It was the chance glint off a strand of wire as he pulled it tight that caught her eye, and she eased the car across the range to him.

He glanced up briefly as she approached but didn't pause in his work. Her throat tightened. He'd removed his shirt and hung it over the side of the truck bed, and his muscled torso glistened with sweat. She'd known he was strong, realized from the first that his body made her mouth go dry with almost painful appreciation, but this was the first time she had seen those powerful muscles bunching and flexing like that. He moved with a fluid grace that made his strength that much more noticeable. His biceps and triceps bulged as he hammered a staple into the post, securing the new strand of wire.

When he was finished he tossed the hammer onto the sack of staples and pulled his hat off, wiping the sweat from his face with his forearm. "What are you doing out here?" He didn't sound at all pleased to see her.

Madelyn got out of the car, carrying the thermos and sandwiches with her. "You forgot your lunch."
He walked toward her and took the thermos, twisting the top off and tilting it up to drink directly from the spout. His strong throat worked as he swallowed the cold liquid. He'd been working all morning without anything to drink, she realized. A drop of tea escaped his lips and ran down his throat. She watched it in painful fascination as it slid down his hot skin, and she envied it the path it was taking. So often she had wanted to trail kisses down his body but had held back because he didn't want that sort of intimacy. All he wanted was the release of sex, not the love expressed in slow, sensual feasting.
He set the thermos down on the lowered tailgate and reached for his shirt, using it to wipe the sweat from his face, shoulders, arms and chest. Tossing the garment back across the side, he eased one hip onto the tailgate and took the sandwiches from her. "The station wagon isn't meant for driving across the range," he said as he unwrapped a sandwich.
Madelyn's lips tightened. "I didn't want you to go all day without anything to eat or drink, and I was careful."
"How did you find me?"
"I followed your tire tracks."
He grunted and applied himself to the sandwich. It and another disappeared without another word being said between them. Madelyn lifted her hair off her neck, letting a slight breeze cool her heated skin. She usually braided her hair away from her face during the day, but she'd taken it down when she showered and hadn't put it back up again before she'd started searching for Reese.
Reese watched her graceful gesture, and his heartbeat speeded up. She was wearing a gathered white cotton skirt with one of her favorite white camisole tops, and a pair of sandals that were little more than thin soles with a few delicate straps. She looked cool and fragrant, while he was hot and sweaty, a result of the difference in the way they'd spent the day. Now that the house was clean and polished it probably didn't take much to keep it that way.
The breeze caught a strand of hair and blew it across her face. She shook it back, tilting her head to make all of her hair swing down her back.
Every movement she made was naturally seductive. He felt the response in his groin and in his veins, as his blood heated and began racing. It was

becoming more and more difficult to keep his hands off her during the day, to keep from turning to her time and again during the night. He grew angry at himself for wanting her so much, and at her for doing everything she could to make it worse.
"Why did you really come out here?" he asked harshly. "I would've finished with this and gotten back to the house in another hour or so. I've gone without eating or drinking all day before, and I'll do it again. So why did you really come parading out here?"
Madelyn's eyes narrowed as she slowly turned her head to look at him. She didn't say anything, and the combined anger and sexual frustration built up even more pressure in him.
"Do you want me to stop work and play with you? Can't you go a whole day without a man's attention? Maybe you thought we'd have a sexy little picnic out here and you'd get your skirt tossed."
She turned to fully face him, her eyes locked with his. Her words were slow and precise. "Why would I care? From what I can tell, sex isn't worth a walk across the yard, let alone chasing it down on the range. I've got better things to do with my time."
He took the verbal jab square on the ego, and suddenly it was too much. It was all too much, the wanting and not having, the needing and not taking. A red mist swam before his eyes, and his whole body seemed to expand as he blindly reached for her, catching her by the arm and swinging her up against him.
Madelyn was unprepared for the blurring speed with which he moved. She didn't even have time to take a step back. Suddenly he had her arm in a painful grip and with one motion brought her colliding with his hard body, almost knocking the breath from her. His mouth came down, hot and ravaging, not waiting for her compliance but taking it. His teeth raked across her bottom lip, and when she made a shaky sound of... response? protest? he used the opportunity to enter her mouth with his tongue.
Her heart lunged wildly in her chest as she realized he was out of control. His arms had tightened around her, lifting her off her feet, and his mouth took hers with bruising force. Elation swirled in her, and she wound her arms tightly around his neck as she kissed him back.
He hefted her onto the tailgate of the truck and reached for his shirt, tossing it down on the truck bed.

With a motion so smooth it seemed like one movement he slid her backward and leaped to a crouching position on the tailgate; then he was pushing her down onto the shirt and lowering himself on top of her.
Dimly she realized that once you had unleashed a tiger, it wasn't so easy to get him back under control again. Of course, she wasn't sure she wanted to. The sunlight sifted down through the leaves, dappling his gleaming skin, and his eyes were fiercely primitive as he kneed her thighs apart. He looked wild and magnificent, and she made a soft whimpering sound of need as she reached for him.
He tore her clothes, and she didn't care. The seam of her chemise gave way beneath his twisting fingers, and the taut rise of her breasts thrust nakedly up at him. He sucked strongly at her while he shoved her skirt to her waist and hooked his fingers in the waistband of her underpants. She lifted her hips to aid him, but heard the rip of lace, and then he threw the shreds to one side. He transferred his lips to her other breast and sucked the nipple into his mouth while he worked at the fastening of his jeans. He grunted as the zipper parted, releasing his throbbing length, and he shoved both underwear and jeans downward with one movement.
His entry was hard and fast. Her body shuddered under the impact of it, and her hips lifted. He groaned aloud as the exquisite feminine sheath enveloped him, immediately changing his unbearable ache into unbearable pleasure. Madelyn sank her nails into his back as she arched up, driven by an explosion of heat. Coiling tension tightened her body until she thought she would go mad, and she struggled with both him and the tension, crying out a little as her heaving body strained to throw him off even as her legs tightened around him to pull him deeper. If he was wild, so was she. He pounded into her, and she took him. Her hips hammered back at him and he rode her, wrapping his arms under her buttocks to pull her up tighter, to shove himself in deeper.
A great rolling surge exploded her senses without warning, and she gave a primal scream that sliced across the clear air. He kept thrusting heavily into her, and it happened again, the second time following the first so closely that she hadn't had time to regain her breath, and the second time was more powerful, tossing her even higher. She bit his shoulder, sobbing from the force of it, and suddenly she could feel him grow even harder and bigger inside her, and his entire body began shuddering and heaving. He threw

back his head with a guttural cry that ripped up from his chest as his hips jerked in the spasms of completion.

The quiet afterward had a drifting, dreamy quality to it. She could feel the sunlight filtering down on her skin, the heat of the metal truck bed beneath her, his shirt pillowing her head. A bird sang, and a breeze rustled the leaves and grass. She could hear the faint buzzing of a bee somewhere, and the slowing sound of his breathing.

They lay beside each other, his heavy arm across her stomach. She might have dozed. The breeze dried the sweat on her body with a gentle, cooling touch. After a long, long time that might have been only minutes, she turned into his arms and pressed her mouth to his.

He got his boots and jeans off this time. As rawly frenzied as the first time had been, this one wasn't much less. The force of his restrained hunger had built up until, like a Hooding river overwhelming a dam, it had broken through and could no longer be controlled. He undid her skirt and stripped it down her legs; then she parted her thighs and reached for him again, and he couldn't wait a minute longer. The sight of those sleek legs opening for him was an image that had haunted his dreams. He'd intended to be easier with her this time, but as soon as he penetrated she made a wild sound in her throat and her hips rolled, and he went mad again.

This time when it was over he didn't withdraw, but lay on her in continued possession. "Reese," she whispered, her fingers sliding into his damp hair. He slid his thumbs under her chin and tilted her face up, slanting his head so he could drink from her in the long, deep kisses he'd been craving. He began to grow hard again, but he was still inside her and there was no urgency, only steadily increasing pleasure.

They were both drugged with it. He fondled her breasts, caressing them with both hands and mouth. Her slim hands moved over him like silk, sleeking over his broad shoulders and down the taut muscles of his back, finally cupping and kneading his buttocks. Lifting himself on his arms, he began a slow, steady thrusting. She surged upward, too, kissing his throat and chest and licking at his little nipples, half-hidden in the curls of hair on his chest. When her time was close, she writhed on the twisted bed of clothing, and he watched enthralled as her torso flushed and her nipples tightened. He caught her hips and lifted them, sliding her up and down on his impaling flesh, and the sight of her convulsive satisfaction brought him to the peak before she had finished.

The hot midday hours slipped away as they sated themselves on each other's bodies. Nothing else existed but sensual exploration and hot satisfaction. He kissed her from head to toe, tasting the sweetness of her flesh, delighting in the way she responded to his slightest touch. When her back became tender from rubbing on the hard bed he pulled her on top of him, watching her pleasure at the freedom it gave her to take him at her own pace.

He thought he had to be completely empty, yet he couldn't stop. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to stop. The peaks were no longer shattering, but were slow, strong swells that seemed to last forever.

Madelyn clung to him, not thinking, never wanting to think. This was the magic she had wanted, the burning sensuality she had sensed in him. No part of her body was untouched, unloved. Exhaustion crept in and entwined with pleasure, and at some point they went to sleep.

The sun was low when they woke, and the air was getting cooler. Reese pulled her into the heat of his body and smoothed her hair back from her face. "Are you all right?" he murmured, concerned when he remembered the violent intensity of their lovemaking.

She nuzzled her face against his throat, lifting one slender arm to curl it around his neck. "Umm," she said and closed her eyes again. She didn't feel like moving.

He sleeked his hand over her hip and up her side, then cupped her breast. "Wake up, honey."

"I am awake." The words were slow and muffled against his throat.

"It's almost sunset. We need to go."

"We can sleep here." She moved as if trying to sink into his skin, and her own hand strayed downward. He closed his eyes as her fingers closed gently around him. Her lips opened against his throat, then slid upward to his jaw. "Make love to me again, Reese. Please."

"Don't worry about that," he said beneath his breath. There was no way he could restrain himself now that he'd tasted her passion, no way she would let him, now that she knew. With a mixture of anger and despair he knew he'd never be able to keep his hands off her now. But the temperature was getting cooler by the second as the sun began dipping below the horizon; even though he was tempted to lie there with her, he didn't want her to get chilled.

He sat up and drew her with him. "Home," he said, his voice roughening. "My knees have had about all they can take. I want to be in bed the next time."
Her eyes were slumberous, her lips swollen from his kisses. "As long as it's soon," she whispered, and thought she would cry, she loved him so much.

Chapter 7

Her spirit was willing but her body went to sleep. She slept in his arms that night, her head on his shoulder and one leg thrown over his hip. Reese let her sleep, feeling the contentment of his own body as well as a certain wryness. If Madelyn had been seductive before, she was doubly so now. It was as if she had been holding back, too. That night, she hadn't walked past him without reaching out to touch him somewhere: a lingering hand sliding along his ribs, a gentle touch on his hand or arm, or a light ruffling of his hair, a tickle of his ear, a quick kiss on his chin, an appreciative pat on his butt, even a bold caress of his crotch. After denying himself for so long, he couldn't keep his hands off her, either. By the time he'd showered, eaten dinner and rested for an hour, the accumulated effect of all those caresses, both given and received, had had him hard and aching again. She had gone sweetly into his arms in bed, he'd made love to her, this time with lingering gentleness, and then she had gone to sleep before he'd withdrawn from her. He'd stayed inside her for a long time, dozing himself and luxuriating in the intimacy. When he tried to move she muttered a protest and turned with him, burrowing against him and retaining the connection. So he hooked his arm around her bottom and kept her locked to him all night, and he slept better than he had since the day he'd met her.
He was on his back and she was sprawled on top of him when the alarm went off the next morning. He stretched to shut it off while she wiggled sleepily on his chest like a cat. He rubbed his hand down her back. "Time to get up."
His early-morning voice was dark and rough. Madelyn settled her head in the hollow of his shoulder again. "Did you know," she said sleepily, "that more words in the English language start with S than with any other letter?"
"Ah, God, not now," he groaned. "Not before coffee."
"Chicken."

"I don't want to talk about any damn chickens, either." He struggled to wake up. "Canada is over two hundred thousand square miles larger than the United States."
"A pound of feathers weighs more than a pound of gold because of the different weighing systems used."
"Catgut comes from sheep guts, not cat guts."
She jerked upright, frowning at him, and he used the opportunity to turn on the lamp. "No gross stuff," she ordered, then settled back down on his chest.
"A blue whale's heart beats just nine times a minute."
"Robert E. Lee's family home is now Arlington National Cemetery."
"MonaLisa doesn't have any eyebrows, and the real name of the painting is *La Gioconda."*
"Quicksand is more buoyant that water. Contrary to Hollywood, you'd really have to work at it to go completely under in quicksand."
She yawned and was silent, listening to his heartbeat, a strong, steady drumming in her ear. As she listened it began beating faster, and she raised her head to look at him. His eyes were narrowed and intent. He locked his arms around her and rolled until she was beneath him, his legs between hers and spreading them wide. Madelyn clung to him and gave herself up to the now-familiar rise of ecstasy as he began making love to her.

* * *

"What are you doing today?" she asked over breakfast.
"Moving a portion of the herd to another section so they won't overgraze."
"I'm going with you."
He automatically started to refuse, and she gave him a hard look. "Don't say no," she warned. "I've already got steaks marinating in the refrigerator, and the baked potatoes are almost done, so they'll finish baking while the steaks are grilling. There's no reason for me to sit here every day when I can be with you."
"What I wonder," he muttered, "is if I'll get any work done at all. All right, I'll saddle a horse for you. But I'm warning you, Maddie, if you can't ride well enough to keep up, you won't go out with me again."
She showed up at the barn half an hour later wearing jeans, boots and one of his denim workshirts with the sleeves rolled up and the tails tied in a knot at her waist. Her hair was French-braided in one long braid down the center of her back, she wore a new pair of wrist-length gloves, and she looked as chic as if she were modeling clothes rather than heading out for a day of herding

cattle. She carried a western straw hat and settled it on her head before she approached the horse Reese had saddled for her.
He watched as she gave the animal time to get acquainted with her, letting it snuffle at her arms, scratching it behind its ears. She wasn't afraid of horses, at least. April had never been around them, and as a result had been jumpy in their vicinity, which in turn made the horses skittish. Madelyn petted the horse and crooned to it, then untied the reins, put her boot in the stirrup and competently swung into the saddle. Reese eyed the stirrups and decided he had judged the length correctly, then mounted his own horse.
He watched her carefully as they cantered across a field. She had a good seat and nice steady hands, though she lacked the easy posture he possessed, but he'd been riding since he was a toddler. The smile she gave him was so full of pleasure he felt guilty at not taking her with him before. He set an easy pace, not wanting to push her too hard. When they reached the herd he explained how he worked. The herd was already divided into three smaller groups grazing different sections; the entire herd was too big for him to move by himself. He spent a lot of time moving them to fresh grazing and making certain they didn't destroy the plant cycle by overgrazing. He pointed out the bunch they would be moving and gave her a coiled section of rope. "Just wave it alongside the horse's shoulder in a shooing motion, and let the horse do the work if a cow decides to go in a different direction. All you have to do is sit deep in the saddle and hang on."
Sitting deep in the saddle was no problem; the big western rig felt like a cradle after the small eastern saddle she was familiar with. She took the coil of rope and practiced a few waves with it, just to be certain it didn't startle the horse. He treated it as commonplace, which, of course, to him it was.
She enjoyed the work. She liked being outside, and there was a sort of peace to riding alongside the cattle and waving a coil of rope at them occasionally, listening to the deep-throated bawls and learning the joy of riding a well-trained cutting horse. She liked watching Reese most of all. He had been born to do this, and it was obvious in every movement and sound he made. He rode as if he were a part of the horse, anticipating every change of direction, encouraging the cattle with whistles and calls that seemed to reassure them at the same time.
She felt almost dazed with pleasure, her senses overloaded. She had felt that way since the afternoon before, when his self-control had broken and he had taken her like a man possessed. Her body was sated, her emotions freed

to reach out to him and shower him with the love that had been dammed up inside her. She had no illusions that the battle was won, but the first skirmish was hers; until yesterday, he would never have allowed her to pet him as she had been doing, nor would he have lingered in bed that morning to make love again. His face was still set in those stern, unsmiling lines, but he was subtly more relaxed. Judging from the past twenty-four hours, he must have had a difficult time controlling his sex drive. The thought made her smile.

They stopped for lunch and to let the cattle and horses drink from a small natural pond. When the horses had been seen to, Reese tethered them nearby and sat down next to her on the small rise she'd chosen for the site of their meal. He took off his hat and put it on the grass beside him. "How do you like it so far?"

"A lot." Her lips curved softly as she handed him a sandwich. "It's so peaceful out here, no cars, no telephones, no smog. You may have to help me out of bed in the morning, but it'll be worth it."

"I'll rub you down with liniment tonight." His eyes glinted at her. "Afterward."

That statement earned him a kiss. Then she straightened and unwrapped her own sandwich. "How am I doing? Have I done anything totally amateurish?"

"You're doing fine. The only problem is that I keep worrying you're going to get tossed and stepped on. You're the first female cowhand I've ever had." He was very western in his attitude toward women, but she didn't mind him coddling her as long as he didn't also try to stop her from doing what she wanted. Since he was bound to do that, their lives together should never become too complacent.

He propped himself on one elbow and stretched his long legs out as he ate his second sandwich. She began to feel warm as she watched him; though he was simply dressed in brown jeans, a-white shirt and those disreputably scuffed boots, he outshone male models she'd seen in tuxedos. His first wife had to be president of a Stupid Club somewhere, but the wretched woman shouldn't be allowed to get away with what she'd done to him. Madelyn had never before thought of herself as vindictive, but she felt that way about anyone who had ever harmed Reese. If she ever met April, she would snatch her bald-headed.

He found the cookies she'd packed and washed them down with the last of the tea. Feeding this man could be a full-time job, she thought fondly. If his children inherited his appetite, she'd never get out of the kitchen.
Thinking of having his children made her feel even warmer, but reminded her of something she'd meant to discuss with him. She turned to face him, sitting with her legs folded in front of her.
"There's something we have to talk about."
"What's that?" he asked, stretching out on his back and settling his hat over his eyes.
"Children."
One eye opened and peered at her; then he removed the hat and gave her his full attention. "Ye gods, are you already pregnant?"
"No, and even if I were, I wouldn't know yet, because it isn't time for my period. We didn't talk about it before we got married, so I didn't know if you wanted to wait before we had children or if you wanted to have them right away. When you called, it was almost time for my period, so when I went to the doctor for the physical I got a prescription for birth control pills."
He sat up, his face darkening. "You're on the Pill?"
"Yes. I've only taken it for this month. If you want to start trying to have children right away, I can stop."
"You should have discussed it with me before, or was that another one of those subjects, like your virginity, that you didn't think were any of my business?"
She gave him one of those sidelong glances. "Something like that. I didn't know you, and I didn't feel very comfortable with you."
He watched her for a minute, then reached out to take her hand, rubbing his rough thumb over her soft palm. "How do you feel about getting pregnant right away?"
"I wouldn't mind. I want your children. If you want to wait, that's okay with me, too, but I don't want to wait more than a year. I'm twenty-eight. I don't want to be in my mid-thirties when we get started."
He thought about it while he studied the contrast of her delicate hand in his big, rough one. Now that he'd given in to the powerful physical attraction between them, he didn't want to give it up too soon. He wanted to fully enjoy her for a while before pregnancy put necessary limits on the wildness of their lovemaking. He carried her hand to his mouth and licked her palm.

"Take the Pill for a few months," he said. "We'll talk about it again in the fall."
She shivered, a dazed expression coming into her eyes at the stroke of his tongue on her palm. As he pulled her down on the grass she asked, "Do you think you'll get your boots off this time?"
And he replied, "I doubt it."
He didn't, but she didn't care.

* * *

She went with him often after that. She helped him move cattle, inoculate them, and staple tags in their ears. After he'd cut and baled the hay, she drove the truck pulling the hay trailer around while he swung the heavy bales onto it. It was work that really required a third person, to stack the bales, but it was easier than when Reese had had to do it by himself. When she didn't go out with him, she continued with the project of scraping the house.
He finally noticed the difference in the house and investigated. The dusting of white paint chips on the ground told him all he needed to know.
He leaned against the kitchen cabinet and crossed his arms. "Are you scraping the house?"
"Yep."
"Don't pull the Gary Cooper routine on me. I want it stopped right now."
"The routine or the scraping?"
"Both."
"The house can't be painted until the old paint is scraped off," she said reasonably.
"I can't afford the paint, so it doesn't make any difference. And I don't want you climbing around on a fourteen-foot ladder. What if you fell while I'm out on the range?"
"What if you got hurt out on the range by yourself?" she retorted. "I'm careful, and I haven't had any trouble so far. It shouldn't take too much longer."
"No," he said, enunciating carefully. "I can't afford the paint, and even if I could I wouldn't let you do the scraping." "*You* don't have time for it, so who else is going to do it?" "For the third time," he yelled, *"I can't afford the paint!* What does it take to make you understand that?"
"That's something else we've never talked about. What makes you think *we* can't afford the paint? I supported myself before I married you, you know."

She put her hands on her hips and faced off with him. "I have both a checking and a savings account, which I transferred to a bank in Billings. I also have a trust fund that I inherited from Grandma Lily. It isn't a fortune by any means, but we can certainly afford a few gallons of paint!"
Reese's face was like granite. "No. Remember our prenuptial agreement? What's yours is yours and what's mine is mine. If you spent your money on the ranch it would go a long way toward negating that agreement, giving you a claim to it on the basis of upkeep."
She poked him in the chest, her jaw jutting forward. "For one thing, G. Reese Duncan, *I'm* not planning on getting a divorce, so I don't give a flip what's in your precious agreement. For another, how much would it cost to paint the house? A hundred dollars? Two hundred?"
"Closer to two hundred, and no, by God, you're not buying the paint!"
"I'm not only going to buy it, I'm going to paint it! If you're so set on protecting the ranch from my scheming, then we'll draw up a contract where you agree to repay me for the paint – and my time, too, if you insist – and that will take care of any claim I could make against you. But I live here, too, you know, and I want the outside to look as nice as the inside. Next spring I'm planting flowers in the flowerbeds, so if you object to that we might as well fight it out now. The only choice you have right now is the color you want the house painted, and your choices are white and white."
She was yelling by the time she finished, her face flushed.
He was more furious than she'd ever seen him before. "Do whatever the hell you want," he snapped and slammed out of the kitchen.
She did. The next time they went into town she bought the paint and brushes and paid for them with one of her own checks, glaring at him and daring him to start again. He carried the paint out to the truck with ill grace. The high point of that day was when they stopped at the cafe for coffee and listened to Floris berating her customers.
She had the house painted by the middle of August, and had developed a healthy respect for people who painted houses for a living. It was some of the hardest work she'd ever done, leaving her shoulders and arms aching by the end of the day. The most aggravating part was painting the hundreds of thin porch railings; the most nerve-racking was doing the second floor, because she had to anchor herself to something. But when it was finished and the house gleamed like a jewel, and the shutters wore a new coat of

black all-weather enamel, she was prouder of her efforts than she had ever been before of anything she'd done.
Even Reese grudgingly admitted that the house looked nice and she'd done a good job, but he still resented the fact that she'd done it. Maybe it was only male pride, but he didn't want his wife paying for something when he couldn't afford it himself.
His wife. By the time they had been married two months, she had insinuated herself so completely into his life that there wasn't a portion of it she hadn't touched. She had even rearranged his underwear drawer. Sometimes he wondered how she managed to accomplish as much as she did when her pace seldom exceeded a stroll, but it was a fact that she got things done. In her own way she worked as hard as he did.
One hot morning at the end of August she discovered that she didn't have enough flour to do the day's cooking. Reese had already left for the day and wouldn't be coming back for lunch, so she ran upstairs and got ready. It was almost time they replenished their supplies anyway, so she carried the grocery list with her. It would save an extra trip if she did all the shopping while she was in town.
She loved listening to Floris, so she stopped by the cafe and had coffee and pie. After Floris had sent her only other customer stomping out in anger, she came over to Madelyn's booth and sat down.
"Where's that man of yours today?"
"Out on the range. I ran out of flour and came in to stock up."
Floris nodded approvingly, though her sour face never lightened. "That first wife of his never bought no groceries. Don't guess she knew nothing about cooking, though of course Reese had a cook hired back then. It's a shame what happened to that ranch. It used to be a fine operation."
"It will be again," Madelyn said with confidence. "Reese is working hard to build it back up."
"One thing about him, he's never been afraid of work. Not like some men around here." Floris glared at the door as if she could still see the cowboy who had just left.
After talking with Floris, Glenna's cheerfulness was almost culture shock. They chatted for a while; then Madelyn loaded the groceries into the station wagon and drove back to the ranch. It wasn't quite noon, so she would have plenty of time to cook the cake she'd planned.

To her surprise, Reese's truck was in the yard when she drove up. He was coming around from the back of the house carrying a bucket of water, but when he saw her, he changed direction and stalked over, his face dark with temper and his eyes shooting green sparks. "Where in hell have you been?" he roared.
She didn't like his manner, but she answered his question in a reasonable tone. "I didn't have enough flour to do the cooking today, so I drove to Crook and bought groceries."
"Damn it, don't you ever go off without telling me where you're going!"
She retained her reasonableness, but it was becoming a strain. "How could I tell you when you weren't here?"
"You could have left a note."
"Why would I leave a note when you weren't supposed to be back for lunch, and I'd be back long before you? Why *are* you back?"
"One of the hoses sprang a leak. I came back to put a new hose on." For whatever reason, he wasn't in a mood to let it go. "If I hadn't, I wouldn't have found out you've started running around the country on your own, would I? How long has this been going on?"
"Buying food? Several centuries, I'd say."
Very carefully he put the bucket down. As he straightened, Madelyn saw his eyes; he wasn't just angry or aggravated, he was in a rage. He hadn't been this angry before, even over painting the house. With his teeth clenched he said, "You dressed like that to buy groceries?"
She looked down at her clothes. She wore a slim pink skirt that ended just above her knees and a white silk blouse with the sleeves rolled up. Her legs were bare, and she had on sandals. "Yes, I dressed like this to buy groceries! It's hot, in case you haven't noticed. I didn't want to wear jeans, I wanted to wear a skirt, because it's cooler."
"Did you get a kick out of men looking at your legs?"
"As far as I noticed, no one looked at my legs. I told you once that I won't pay for April's sins, and I meant it. Now, if you don't mind, I need to get the groceries into the house."
He caught her arm as she turned away and whirled her back around to face him. "Don't walk away when I'm talking to you."
"Well excuse me, Your Majesty!"
He grabbed her other arm and held her in front of him. "If you want to go to town, I'll take you," he said in an iron-hard voice. "Otherwise, you keep

your little butt here on the ranch, and don't you ever, *ever,* leave the house without letting me know where you are."
She went up on tiptoe so angry she was shaking. "Let me tell you a few things, and you'd better listen. I'm your wife, not your prisoner of war. I won't ask your permission to buy groceries, and I won't be kept locked up here like some criminal. If you take the keys to the car or do something to it so it won't run, then I'll walk wherever I want to go, and you can bet the farm on that. I'm not April, do you understand? *I'm not April!*"
He released her arms, and they stood frozen, neither of them giving an inch. Very deliberately Madelyn bent down and lifted the bucket of water, then upended it over him. The water splashed on his head and shoulders and ran down his torso, to finally end up pooling around his boots.
"If that isn't enough to cool you off, I can get another one," she offered in an icily polite tone.
His movements were just as deliberate as hers as he removed his hat and slapped it against his leg to rid it of excess water, then dropped it to the ground. She saw his teeth clench; then he moved like a snake striking, his hands darting out to grasp her around the waist. With one swift movement he lifted her and plonked her down on the front fender of the car.
His hands were flexing on her waist; his forearms were trembling with the force it took to restrain his temper. His dark hair was plastered to his skull; water still dripped down his face, and his eyes were pure green fire.
His dilemma nearly tore him apart. He was trembling with rage, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. His wife didn't back down from anyone, not even him, and he'd cut off his own hands before he would do anything to hurt her. All he could do was stand there and try to get his temper back under control.
They faced each other in silence for nearly a minute, with him still holding her on the fender of the car. She tilted her chin, her eyes daring him to start the fight again. He looked down at her legs, and a shudder ran through him. When he looked back up at her, it wasn't rage in his eyes.
Green eyes locked with gray. He hooked his fingers in the hem of her skirt and jerked it upward, at the same time spreading her legs and moving forward between them. She sank her hands into his wet hair and held his head while her mouth attacked his with a fierce kiss that held mingled anger and desire. He said, "Maddie," in a rough tone as he tore her underpants out of the way, then jerked at his belt and the fastening of his jeans.

It was just as it had been in the back of the truck. The rush of passion was hard and fast and overwhelming. With one hand he guided himself, while the other propelled her hips forward onto him. She moaned and wrapped her legs around him, then held his head so that their eyes met again. "I love you," she said fiercely. "I love you, damn it."

The words hit him like a thunderbolt, but her eyes were clear and direct, and he was losing himself in her depths. What had begun wild suddenly turned slow and hot and tender. He put his hand in her hair and tugged her head back to expose the graceful arch of her throat to his searching mouth. He began moving within her, probing deep and slow, and he said, "Maddie," again, this time in a voice that shook.

She was like fire, and she was all his. She burned for him and with him, her intense sensuality matching his. They clung together, savoring the hot rise of passion and the erotic strokes that fed it and would eventually extinguish it, but not now. Not right now.

He unbuttoned her blouse while she performed the same service for his shirt. When he had undipped her bra he slowly brought their bare torsos together, turning her slightly from side to side so that her breasts rubbed his chest and his curly hair rasped against her nipples, making her arch in his arms.

"God, I can't get enough of you," he muttered.

"I don't want you to." Passion had glazed her eyes, making them heavy and slumberous. He took her mouth again, and he was still kissing her when she cried out and convulsed in a crest of pleasure. He held himself deep within her, feeling the hot, gentle tightening of her inner caresses around him. He would never find this kind of overwhelming passion with any other woman, he thought dimly. Only with Maddie.

Release left her weak, pliable. She lay back across the hood of the car, breathing hard, her eyes closed. Reese gripped her hips and began thrusting hard and fast, wanting that sweet weakness for himself. Her eyes slowly opened as he drove into her, and she closed her hands around his wrists. "I love you," she said again.

Until he heard the words once more he hadn't realized how badly he'd needed them, wanted them. She was his, and had been from the moment she'd walked through the airport toward him. He groaned, and his hips jerked; then the pleasure hit him, and he couldn't think for a long time. All he could do was feel, and sink forward onto her soft body and into her arms.

In bed that night, he gently traced his fingertips over the curve of her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I was out of line today, way out."
She kissed him drowsily on the jaw. "I think I understand more than before. Did April... ?"
"Have other men? Yeah."
"The fool," she muttered, sliding her hand down to intimately caress him.
He tilted her head up. "I wasn't a saint, Maddie. I can be hard to live with."
She widened her eyes mockingly and made a disbelieving sound. He chuckled and then sighed, spreading his legs. What her hand was doing to him felt so good it was almost criminal. She was all woman, and this was going to end up only one way, but he wanted to put it off for a few minutes.
"You're right, I've been trying to keep you a prisoner on the ranch. It won't happen again."
"I'm not going to run off," she assured him in a whisper. "I've got what I want right here. And you were right about one thing."
"What?"
"Making love is one of the best ways to make up."

Chapter 8

Reese sold the beef herd for more than he had anticipated, or even hoped. With cholesterol-consciousness at such a high level he had been working to breed and raise cattle with leaner meat that still remained tender, and all his research was paying off. He made his mortgage payments with grim satisfaction, because he had enough left over to expand the herd come spring and bring in some new blood strains he'd been wanting to try. He'd be able to repair equipment when it needed it, instead of scraping and saving and doing without. He'd even be able to take Madelyn out to eat once in a while. It galled him that the limit of their outside entertainment was an occasional cup of coffee or slice of pie at Loris's cafe. He wanted to be able to take Madelyn places and spoil her, buy her new clothes and jewelry, all the things he had once taken for granted in his life. The ranch was a long way from being as rich as it had once been, but he was clawing his way back. He'd made a profit, by God! He was in the black.
Madelyn had gone into Billings with him when he conferred with his banker. He'd expected her to want to go shopping; though he realized more

every day how different Maddie was from April, he also wryly accepted that his wife was a clotheshorse. The fact that she loved clothes was evident in the way she dressed even while working at the ranch. It might be just jeans and a shirt, but the jeans would fit her in a way guaranteed to send his blood pressure up, and the shirt would look as stylish as if it had come straight from Paris. What really got to him was the way she would put on one of his white dress shirts, not button *any of* the buttons, and knot the tails at her waist. She wouldn't have a bra on under it, either. It was a style and a provocation that he couldn't resist, and she knew it. First his hand would be inside the shirt; then the shirt would be off; then they would be making love wherever they happened to be.

She did shop, but again she surprised him. She bought underwear and jeans for him; then she was ready to go home. "I don't know how I ever stood a city as large as New York," she said absently, looking around at the traffic.

"This is too noisy." He was astonished; Billings had less than seventy thousand inhabitants, and barroom brawls were far more the norm than any gang- or drug-related violence. No, Maddie wasn't like April, who had considered Billings nothing more than a backwater crossroads. To April, only cities like New York, London, Paris, Los Angeles and Hong Kong had been sophisticated enough for her enjoyment.

Madelyn was indeed glad to get back to the ranch. She was happiest there, she realized. It was quiet, with the peace that came only from being close to earth and nature. And it was her home now.

It was the middle of the afternoon when they got back, and Reese changed clothes to begin his chores. It was too early to start dinner, so Madelyn went out on the porch and sat in the swing. It was early autumn, and already the heat was leaving the day. Reese said it wasn't unusual to have snow in October, so the days when she would be able to sit out on the porch were limited. Still, she was looking forward to the winter, hard as it might be. The days would be short and the nights long, and she smiled as she thought of those long nights.

Reese came back downstairs from changing his clothes and found her there. The chores would wait a little while, he thought, and joined her on the swing. He put his arm around her and brought her closer, so that her head was nestled in the hollow of his shoulder.

"I was just thinking," she said, "It'll be winter soon."

"Sooner than you think."

"Christmas isn't that far away now. Could I invite Robert?"
"Of course. He's your family."
She smiled. "I know, but the warmth between you at our wedding wasn't exactly overwhelming."
"What did you expect, given the circumstances? Men are territorial. He didn't want to give you up, and I was determined to have you come hell or high water." He nudged her chin up with his thumb and gave her a slow kiss. "And I was a stranger who was going to be taking his sister to bed that night."
For a moment there was only the creaking of the swing. He kissed her again, then just held her. He hadn't known marriage could be like this, he thought with vague surprise. Both passion and contentment.
He said quietly, "Let's have a baby."
After a pause she said, "I'll stop taking the Pill." Then she reached for his hand and cradled it to her face.
The tenderness of the gesture was almost painful. He lifted her up and settled her astride his lap so he could see her expression. "Is that what you want?"
Her face looked as if it had been lit from within. "You know it is." She leaned forward and brushed his lips with hers, then suddenly laughed and threw her arms around his neck, fiercely hugging him. "Are there any twins in your family?"
"No!" he said explosively, then drew back and gave her a suspicious look. "Are there in yours?"
"Actually, yes. Grandma Lily was a twin."
Even the thought of twins was too much. He shook his head, denying the possibility. "Just one at a time, gal. No doubling up." He rubbed his hands up her thighs and under her skirt, then slid them inside her underpants to cup her bare buttocks. "You might be pregnant by Christmas."
"Umm, I'd like that."
His eyes glinted at her. "I'll do my best."
"But it'll probably take longer than that."
"Then I'll just have to try harder."
Her lips quirked. "I can't lose," she said in contentment.

* * *

The first snow did come in October, three inches of fine, dry powder. She learned that snow didn't stop a rancher's work, it only intensified it, though

three inches was nothing to worry about. In the dead of winter Reese would have to carry hay to the cattle and break the ice in the stock ponds so they could drink. He'd have to find lost calves before they froze to death and move the herd to more sheltered areas during the worst weather.

For the first time, winter began to worry her. "What if there are blizzard conditions?" she asked him one night.

"Then I hope for the best," he said flatly. "I'll lose some calves during any bad snowstorm, but if it doesn't last too long the biggest part of the herd will weather it. The danger is if blizzard conditions or extreme cold last for several days. Then the cattle start freezing to death, and during a blizzard I can't get feed out to them. I have hooks attached to the barn and the house. When it looks like a bad storm, I run a static line between them and hook myself to it so I can get back and forth to the barn."

She stared at him, appalled at the years he'd coped by himself and the danger he'd been in. It was testimony to his strength and intelligence that he was still alive, and characteristic of his stubbornness that he'd even tried.

The preparations for winter were ongoing and not to be taken lightly. He moved the herd to the closer pastures where they would winter. Cords of firewood were stacked close to the back door, and the pantry was well stocked with candles and batteries, while he cleaned and tested two big kerosene heaters in case they were needed. The truck and car were both filled with new antifreeze and given new batteries, and he began parking them in the garage to keep them out of the wind. During October the temperature steadily slipped lower, until the only time it was above freezing was at high noon.

"Does it stay below freezing for six months?" she asked, and he laughed.

"No. We'll have cold spells and warm spells. It may be sixty degrees or higher in January, but if we get blizzard conditions or a deep freeze the temperatures can go way below zero. We prepare for a blizzard and hope for the sixty degrees."

As if to bear him out, the weather then showed a warming trend and inched the temperatures upward into the fifties during the day. Madelyn felt more confident, because he'd been making preparations as if they were going into six months of darkness. That was how he'd made it by himself for seven years, by being cautious and prepared for anything. Still, by his own admission the winters could be hell. She would just have to make certain he didn't take any chances with his own safety.

Robert flew in the day before Christmas and spent three days with them. When he first saw Madelyn he gave her a hard, searching look, but whatever he saw must have reassured him, because he relaxed then and was an affable guest. She was amused at the way Reese and Robert related to each other, since they were so much alike, both very private and strong men. Their conversation consisted of sentence fragments, as if they were just throwing out random comments, but they both seemed comfortable with it. She was amazed at how much alike they were in manner, too. Robert was smoothly cosmopolitan, yet Reese's mannerisms were much like his, illustrating how prosperous the ranch had been before the divorce. They differed only in that she had never seen Robert lose his temper, while Reese's temper was like a volcano.

Robert was surprisingly interested in the working of the ranch and rode out with Reese every day he was there. They spent a lot of time talking about futures and stock options, the ratio of feed to pound of beef, interest rates, inflation and government subsidies. Robert looked thoughtful a lot, as if he were weighing everything Reese said.

The day before he left, Robert approached Madelyn. She was sprawled bonelessly across a big armchair, listening to the stereo with her eyes closed and one foot keeping time to the music. He said in amusement, "Never run if you can walk, never walk if you can stand, never stand if you can sit, and never sit if you can lie."

"Never talk if you can listen," Madelyn added without opening her eyes. "Then you listen, and I'll talk."

"This sounds serious. Are you going to tell me you're in love with someone and are thinking of marriage?"

"Good God, no," he said, his amusement deepening.

"Is there a new woman on the horizon?"

"A bit closer than that."

"Why didn't you bring her? Is it anyone I know?"

"This is a family Christmas," he replied, telling her with that one short sentence that his new lover hadn't touched him any deeper than any of the others. "Her name is Natalie VanWein."

"Nope. I don't know her."

"You're supposed to listen while I talk, not ask questions about my love life." He drew up a hassock and sat down on it, smiling a little as he noticed that she hadn't even opened her eyes during their conversation.

"So talk."
"I've never met anyone with a clearer head for business than Reese – excepting myself, of course," he said mockingly.
"Oh, of course."
"Listen, don't talk. He sees what has to be done and he does it, without regard to obstacles. He has the kind of determination that won't give up, no matter what the odds. He'll make a go of this ranch. He'll fight like hell until he has it the way it used to be."
Madelyn opened one eye. "And the point of this is?"
"I'm a businessman. He strikes me as a better risk than a lot of ventures I've bet on. He doesn't have to wait to build this place up. He could accept an investor and start right now."
"The investor, of course, being yourself."
He nodded. "I look for a profit. He'd make one. I want to invest in it personally, without involving Cannon Companies."
"Have you already talked to him about it?"
"I wanted to talk to you first. You're his wife, you know him better than I do. Would he go for it, or would I be wasting my time?"
"Well, I won't give you an opinion either way. You're on your own. Like you said, he knows the business, so let him make up his own mind without having to consider anything I might have said either pro or con."
"It's your home, too."
"I'm still learning to help, but I don't know enough about the business of ranching to even begin to make an educated decision. And when it comes down to it, my home is based on my marriage, not where we live. We could live anywhere and I'd be content."
He looked down at her, and a strangely tender look entered his pale eyes. "You're really in love with him, aren't you?"
"I have been from the beginning. I never would have married him otherwise."
He examined her face closely, in much the same way he'd looked at her when he had first arrived, as if satisfying himself of the truth of her answer. Then he gave a brusque nod and got to his feet. "Then I'll put the proposition to Reese and see what he thinks."
Reese turned it down, as Madelyn had expected he would. The ranch was his; it might take longer and be a harder fight to do it on his own, but every tree and every speck of dirt on the ranch belonged to him, and he refused to

risk even one square inch of it with an outside investor. Robert took the refusal in good humor, because business was business, and his emotions were never involved any more than they were with women.
Reese talked to her about it that night, lying in the darkness with her head pillowed on his shoulder. "Robert made me an offer today. If I took him as an investor, I could double the ranch's operation, hire enough hands to work it and probably get back most of the former acreage within five years."
"I know. He talked to me about it, too."
He stiffened. "What did you tell him?"
"To talk to you. It's your ranch, and you know more about running it than anyone else."
"Would you rather I took his offer?"
"Why should I care?"
"Money," he said succinctly.
"I'm not doing without anything." Her voice had a warm, amused tone to it.
"You could have a lot more."
"I could have a lot less, too. I'm happy, Reese. If you took the offer I'd still be happy, and I'll still be happy if you don't take it."
"He said you wouldn't take sides."
"That's right, I won't. It would be a no-win situation for me, and I don't waste my energy."
He lay awake long after she was sleeping quietly in his arms. It was a way to instant financial security, but it would require that he do something he'd sworn never to do: risk ownership of the ranch. He already had a mortgage, but he was managing to make the payments. If he took an investor he would be paying off the bank but taking on another debtor, at a price he might not be able to meet. The big lure of it was that, perversely, he wanted to give Madelyn all the luxuries he would have been able to provide before. To take care of his wife as he wanted, he'd have to risk his ranch. He didn't miss the irony of it.

* * *

The day after Robert left, a big weather system swept in from Canada and it began snowing. At first it was just snow, but it didn't stop. The temperature began dropping like a rock, and the wind picked up. Reese watched the weather build into something nasty, and the weather reports said it would get worse. While he still could, he herded the cattle into the most sheltered

area and put out as much hay as possible, but he wasn't certain he'd had enough time to get out as much as would be needed.
On the way back to the barn it started snowing so heavily that visibility dropped to about ten feet, and the wind began piling up drifts that masked the shape of the land. His own ranch became an alien landscape to him, without any familiar landmarks to guide him. All he could go on was his own sense of direction, and he had to fight to ignore the disorienting swirl of snow. His horse picked its way carefully, trying to avoid the snow-covered holes and indentations that could easily cause it to fall and perhaps break a leg. Icicles began to form on the horse's nose as the warm vapor of its breath froze. Reese put a gloved hand to his own face and found it coated with ice crystals.
A ride that normally took twenty minutes stretched into an hour. He began to wonder if he had missed the barn entirely when it materialized out of the blowing snow, and even then he would have missed it if the door hadn't been open revealing the gleam of yellow light. A brief frown creased his face; he knew he'd closed the door, and he certainly hadn't left a light on. But it had been too close a call for him to be anything but grateful; another half hour and he wouldn't have made it.
He ducked his head and rode straight into the barn. It wasn't until he caught movement out of the corner of his eye that he realized Madelyn had come out to the barn and was waiting for him, literally with a light in the window. She struggled against the wind to close the big doors, her slender body leaning into the teeth of the gale. The cow bawled restlessly, and the cats leaped for the loft. Reese slid out of the saddle and added his weight to Madelyn's, closing the doors and dropping the big two-by-eight bar into the brackets.
"What the hell are you doing out here?" he asked in a raspy voice as he grabbed her to him. "Damn it, Maddie, you can get lost going from the house to the barn in a blow like this!"
"I hooked up to the tension line," she said, clinging to him. Her voice was thin, "How did you get back? You can't see out there."
He felt the panic in her, because he'd begun feeling some of it himself. If he'd been five feet farther away, he wouldn't have seen the light. "Sheer blind luck," he said grimly.
She looked up at his ice-crusted face. "You have to get warm before frostbite starts."

"The horse first."
"I'll do it." She pointed toward the tack room, where he kept a small space heater. "I turned on the heater so it would be warm in there. Now, go on."
Actually, the barn felt warm to him after being outside; the animals gave off enough heat that the temperature inside the barn was above freezing, which was all that he required right now. Still, he went into the tack room and felt the heat envelop him almost unbearably. He didn't try to brush the ice from his face; he let it melt, so it wouldn't damage his skin. It had actually insulated his face from the wind, but too much longer would have resulted in frostbite. He'd had mild cases before, and it was painful enough that he'd rather not go through it again.
Madelyn unsaddled the horse and rubbed it down. The big animal sighed with pleasure in a way that was almost human. Then she threw a warm blanket over it and gave it feed and water, patting the muscled neck in appreciation. The animal had earned it.
She hurried to Reese and found him knocking chunks of snow off his heavy shearling coat. That shocking white layer of ice and snow was gone from his face; what was almost as shocking was that he already seemed to have recovered his strength, as if the ordeal had been nothing out of the ordinary. She had been in torment since the howling wind had started, pacing the house and trying not to weep uncontrollably, and finally fighting her way out to the barn so she would be there to help him if – no, *when* – he made it back. Her heart was still pounding. She didn't have to be told how easily he might not have made it back, even though she couldn't bear to let the thought form.
"It won't be easy getting back to the house," he said grimly. "The wind is probably gusting up to sixty miles an hour. We'll both hook on to the line, but I'm going to tie you to me as a safeguard."
He knotted a rope around his waist, then looped and knotted it around her, with no more than four feet of slack between them. "I want you within reach. I'm going to try to hold on to you, but I damn sure don't want you getting any farther away from me than this."
He put his coat back on and settled his hat firmly on his head. He eyed Madelyn sternly. "Don't you have a hat?"
She produced a thick woolen scarf from her pocket and draped it over her head, then wound the ends around her neck. They each got a length of nylon cord with heavy metal clips on each end and attached one end to their belts,

leaving the other end free to clip to the line. They left the barn by the small side door; though the line was anchored right beside it, Reese had to grab Madelyn by the waist to keep the wind from tumbling her head over heels. Still holding her, he grabbed her line and hooked it overhead, then secured his own.

It was almost impossible to make headway. For every yard they progressed, stumbling and fighting, the wind would knock them back two feet. It tore her out of his grasp and knocked her feet out from under her, hanging her in the air from the line at her waist. Reese lunged for her, yelling something that she couldn't understand, and hauled her against him. It was obvious she wasn't going to be able to stay on her feet. He locked her against his side with a grip that compressed her ribs, almost shutting off her breath. She gasped for air, but couldn't manage more than a painful wheeze. She couldn't have yelled to make him understand, even if she'd had the breath, because the howling wind drowned out everything else. She dangled in his grip like a rag doll, her sight fading and her struggles becoming weaker.

Reese stumbled against the back steps, then up onto the porch. The house blocked some of the wind, and he managed to open the back door, then reach up and unhook both their lines. He staggered into the house and fell to the floor of the utility room with Madelyn still in his arms, but managed to turn so that he took most of the shock. "Are you all right?" He gasped the question, breathing hard from exertion. The wind had gotten worse just since he'd made it back to the barn.

She didn't answer, and sudden fear brought him up on his knees beside her. Her eyes were closed, her lips blue. He grabbed her shoulder, shouting at her. "Maddie! Madelyn, damn it, what's wrong? Are you hurt – wake up and answer me!"

She coughed, then moaned a little and tried to curl on her side, her arms coming up to hug herself. She coughed again, then went into a paroxysm of convulsive coughing and gagging, writhing from the force of it. Reese pulled her up into his arms and held her, his face white.

Finally she managed to wheeze, "Shut the door," and he lashed out with his boot, kicking the door shut with a force that rattled it on its frame.

He unwound the scarf from her head and began opening her coat. The rope around their waists still tied them together and he hastily pulled the knots out. "Are you hurt?" he asked again, his face a grim mask.

Coughing had brought color to her face, but it was quickly fading, leaving her deathly pale. "I'm all right," she said, her voice so hoarse she could barely make a sound. "I just couldn't breathe."
Realization hit him like a kick by a mule. He'd almost smothered her with the force of his grip. His face grim, vicious curses coming from between his tightly clenched teeth, he laid her back on the floor as gently as possible and stretched out his leg so he could get his knife out of his pocket. Her eyes widened as he snapped the blade open and began slicing through the pullover sweater she wore under the coat. Beneath the sweater was a shirt, but it buttoned down the front and therefore escaped being cut off. When her torso was bare he began carefully feeling her ribs, his face intent as he searched for any sign of give, his eyes locked on her face to see the least hint of discomfort. She flinched several times, but the ribs felt all right. Her pale skin was already becoming discolored with bruises.
"I almost killed you," he said harshly as he lifted her in his arms and got to his feet.
"It wasn't that bad," she managed to say.
He gave her a violent look. "You were unconscious." He carried her up the stairs and to their bedroom, where he laid her on the bed. He shrugged out of his own coat and let it fall to the floor; then he very gently but implacably stripped her of every stitch and examined her from head to toe. Except for the bruising across her ribs, she was fine. He bent his head and brushed his lips across the dark band as if he would absorb the pain.
Madelyn put her hand on his hair, threading her fingers through the dark strands. "Reese, I'm okay, I promise."
He got to his feet. "I'll put a cold compress on it to stop the bruising from getting any worse."
She made a disbelieving sound. "Trust me, I can't just lie here and let you put an ice bag on my side! You know how ice down your shirt feels, and besides, I'm cold. I'd rather have a cup of hot chocolate, or coffee."
The strength of her tone reassured him, and another critical look told him that the color was coming back into her face. She sat up, rather gingerly holding her side but without any real pain, and gave him a wifely survey. "You're soaking wet from riding in that blizzard. You need to get out of those clothes, and then we'll both have something hot to drink."
She got dry clothes out for both Reese and herself and began dressing while he stripped and toweled off. She looked at her ruined sweater with disbelief,

then tossed it into the trash. Reese saw her expression and smiled faintly. "I didn't want to move you any more than I had to until I knew what was wrong," he explained, rubbing a towel over his shoulders.
"Actually, I was a little relieved when the sweater was all you cut. For a split second I was afraid you were going to do a tracheotomy."
"You were talking and breathing, so I ruled that out. I've done one before, though."
"You've actually taken your pocketknife and cut someone's throat open?" she demanded incredulously, her voice rising.
"I had to. One of the hands got kicked in the throat, and he was choking to death. I slit his trachea and held it open with my finger until someone brought a drinking straw to insert for him to breathe through. We got him to a hospital, they put in a regular trach tube until the swelling went down enough for him to breathe again, and he did just fine."
"How did you know what to do?"
"Every rancher absorbs a lot of medical knowledge just in the ordinary workday. I've set broken bones, sewn up cuts, given injections. It's a rough life, sweetheart." His face darkened as he said it. It had almost been too rough for her. He could so easily have crushed her ribs.
He pulled on the dry underwear and jeans she had put out for him, watching as she brushed her hair and swung it back over her shoulder with a practiced toss of her head, every movement as graceful as a ballet. How could she still look elegant after what she'd been through? How could she be so casual about it? He was still shaking.
When she started past him on the way downstairs, he caught her and wrapped his arms around her, holding her to him for a long minute with his cheek resting on top of her pale hair. Madelyn circled his waist with her arms and let herself revel in his closeness; he was home, and he was all right. Nothing was said, because nothing needed saying. It was enough just to hold each other.
Reese paced the house that day like a restless cougar, periodically looking out the window to monitor the weather. He tried a radio station, but nothing came through the static. Around dusk the electricity went off, and he built a roaring fire in the fireplace, then put one of the kerosene heaters in the kitchen. Madelyn lit candles and lamps, and thanked the stars that the water heater and stove were gas-operated.

They ate soup and sandwiches by candlelight, then brought down quilts and blankets and pillows to sleep in front of the fireplace. They sat on their bed of quilts with their backs resting against the front of the couch and their legs stretched toward the fire. Madelyn's head was on his shoulder. He could almost hear her mind working as she stared at the fire, and he decided he might as well get it started before she did. "A flag with a swallow-tail end is called a burgee."

She gave him a quick look of delight. "The small flag carried in front or to the right of marchers to guide them is called a guidon."

"You want to do flags? Okay, we'll do flags. The study of flags is called vexillology."

"The United States flag has seven red stripes and six white."

"That one's so easy it's cheating."

"A fact is a fact. Carry on."

"Bamboo is the fastest growing plant in the world."

"Cleopatra was Macedonian, not Egyptian."

They played the game for several more minutes, laughing at the more ridiculous items they pulled out. Then they got a deck of cards and played strip poker, which wasn't much of a challenge, since she was wearing only his shirt and a pair of socks, and he was wearing only jeans. Once she had him naked, she lost interest in playing cards and moved on to a more rewarding occupation. With flame-burnished skin they moved together and for a long while forgot about the swirling white storm that enveloped them.

The blizzard conditions had subsided by the next morning, though deep drifts had been piled up by the wind. The electricity came back on, and the weather report predicted slowly moderating temperatures. Reese checked on the herd and found that the cattle had withstood the storm in good condition; he lost only one calf, which had gotten lost from its mother.

He found the little animal lying in a snowbank, while its mother bawled mournfully, calling it.

They had been lucky this time. He looked up at the gray sky, where patches of blue were just starting to show through. All he needed was a mild winter, or at least one where the bad spells didn't last long enough to endanger the herd.

He was pulling his way out of the morass of debt, but one year of profit was a long way from being home free. He needed the mortgage paid off, he needed an expanded herd and the money to hire cowhands to work that

herd. When he could expand his capital into other areas so he wasn't entirely dependent on the weather and the market for beef, then he would feel more secure about their future.
The next few years wouldn't be easy. Madelyn wasn't pregnant yet, but as soon as she was they would have medical bills to consider, as well as the cost of providing for a growing baby. Maybe he should take Robert's offer despite his disinclination to allow anyone else any authority over the ranch. It would give him a financial cushion, the means of putting his plans into operation sooner, as well as taking care of Madelyn and their child, or children.
But he had been through too much, fought too hard and too long, to change his mind now. The ranch was his, as much a part of him as bone and blood. He could easier lose his own life than the ranch. He loved every foot of it with the same fierce, independent possessiveness that had kept his ancestors there despite Indian attacks, weather and disease. Reese had grown up with the sun on his face and the scent of cattle in his nostrils, as much a part of this land as the purple-tinged mountains and enormous sky.
"I'll make it yet," he said aloud to the white, silent land. It wasn't in him to give up, but the land had required men like him from the beginning. It had broken weaker men, and the ones who had survived were tougher and stronger than most. The land had needed strong women, too, and if Madelyn wasn't quite what he'd planned on, he was too satisfied to care.

Chapter 9

At the end of January another big weather system began moving in from the Arctic, and this one looked bad. They had a couple of days' warning, and they worked together to do everything they could to safeguard the herd. The cold front moved in during the night, and they woke the next morning to steady snow and a temperature that was ten below zero, but at least the wind wasn't as bad as it had been before.
Reese made a couple of forays out to break the ice in the troughs and stock ponds so the cattle could drink, and Madelyn was terrified every time he went out. This kind of cold was the killing kind, and the weather reports said it would get worse.

It did. The temperature dropped all that day, and by nightfall it was twenty-three below zero.
When morning came it was forty-one degrees below zero, and the wind was blowing.
If Reese had been restless before, he was like a caged animal now. They wore layers of clothing even in the house, and he kept a fire in the fireplace even though the electricity was still on. They constantly drank hot coffee or chocolate to keep their temperatures up, and they moved down to the living room to sleep before the fire.
The third day he just sat, his eyes black with inner rage. His cattle were dying out there, and he was helpless to do a damn thing about it; the blowing snow kept him from getting to them. The killing temperatures would kill him even faster than they would the cattle. The wind chill was seventy below zero.
Lying before the fire that night, Madelyn put her hand on his chest and felt the tautness of his body. His eyes were open, and he was staring at the ceiling. She rose up on her elbow. "No matter what happens," she said quietly, "we'll make it."
His voice was harsh. "We can't make it without the cattle."
"Then you're just giving up?"
The look he gave her was violent. He didn't know how to give up; the words were obscene to him.
"We'll work harder," she said. "Last spring you didn't have me here to help you. We'll be able to do more."
His face softened, and he lifted her hand in his, holding it up in the firelight and studying it, slim and femininely graceful. She was willing to turn her hands to any job, no matter how rough or dirty, so he didn't have the heart to tell her that whenever she was with him, he was so concerned for her safety that he spent most of his time watching after her. She wouldn't understand it; they had been married for seven months, and she hadn't backed down from anything that had been thrown at her. She certainly hadn't backed down from him. Remembering some of their fights made him smile, and remembering others made him get hard. It hadn't been a dull seven months.
"You're right," he said, holding her hand to his face. "We'll just work harder."
It was the fourth day before they could get out. The wind had died, and the sky was a clear blue bowl, making a mockery of the bitter cold. They had to

wrap their faces to even breathe, it was so cold, and it taxed their endurance just to get to the barn to care for the animals there. The cow was in abject misery, her udder so swollen and sore she kicked every time Reese tried to milk her. It took over an hour of starts and stops before she would stand still and let him finish the job. Madelyn took care of the horses while he attended to the milking, carrying water and feed, and then shoveling out the stalls and putting down fresh straw.

The animals seemed nervous and glad to see them; tears stung her eyes as she rubbed Reese's favorite mount on the forehead. These animals had had the protection of the barn; she couldn't bear to even think about the cattle.

Reese got the truck started and loaded it and a small trailer with hay. Madelyn climbed into the cab and gave him a steady look when he frowned at her. There was no way she would let him go out on the range by himself in such bitter cold; if anything happened to him, if he fell and couldn't get back to the truck or lost consciousness, he would die in a short while.

He drove carefully to the protected area where he had herded the cattle and stopped, his face bleak. There was nothing there, just a blank white landscape. The sun glittered on the snow, and he reached for his sunglasses. Without a word Madelyn followed suit.

He began driving, looking for any sign of the herd, if indeed any of them had survived. That white blanket could be covering their frozen carcasses. Finally it was the pitiful bawling that led them to some of the cattle. They had gone in search of food, or perhaps more shelter, but they were in a stand of trees where the snow had blown an enormous snowbank up against the tree trunks, blocking some of the wind and perhaps saving them.

Reese's face was still shuttered as he got out to toss some bales of hay down from the trailer, and Madelyn knew how he felt. He was afraid to hope, afraid that only a few head had survived. He cut the twine on the bales and loosened the hay, then took a shovel and dug an opening in the snowbank. The anxious cattle crowded out of what had become a pen to them and headed for the hay. Reese counted them, and his face tightened. Madelyn could tell that this was only a fraction of the number there should have been.

He got back into the truck and sat with his gloved hands clenched on the steering wheel.

"If these survived, there could be more," Madelyn said. "We have to keep looking."

By a frozen pond they found more, but these were lying on their sides in pathetic, snow-covered humps. Reese counted again. Thirty-six were dead, and there could be calves too small to find under all the snow.
One cow had become trapped in a tangle of brush and wire, and her calf was lying on the snow beside her, watching with innocent brown eyes as its mother. weakly struggled. Reese cut her free, and she scrambled to her feet, but then was too weak to do anything else. The calf got up too, stumbling on shaky legs to seek her milk. Reese put out hay for her to eat and continued the search for more.
They found seven survivors in a gully, and ten more carcasses not five hundred feet away. That was how it went for the rest of the day: as many as they found alive, they found that many dead. He put out hay, used an axe to chop holes in the ice-covered ponds, and kept a tally of both his losses and the ones that had survived. Half of the herd was dead, and more could die. The grimness of the situation weighed down on him. He'd been so close – and now this!
The next day they rounded up the strays, trying to get the herd together. Reese rode, and Madelyn drove the truck, pulling another trailer of hay. The temperature was moderating, if you could call ten below zero moderate, but it was too late.
One yearling objected to rejoining the herd and darted to the left, with the horse immediately following suit and getting in front of the impetuous young animal, herding it back the way it had come. The young bull stubbornly stopped, its head swinging back and forth, looking for all the world like a recalcitrant teenager. Then it made another break for freedom and bolted across a pond, but it was a pond where Reese had chopped holes in the ice near the bank, and it hadn't refrozen solid enough to hold the yearling's weight, which was already considerable. Its rear feet broke through, and it fell backward, great eyes rolling while it bawled in terror. Cussing a blue streak, Reese got his rope and approached the bank. Madelyn pulled the truck up and got out. "Don't go out on the ice," she warned.
"Don't worry, I'm not as stupid as he is," he muttered, shaking loose a loop and twirling it a few times. He missed the first throw because the young bull was struggling frantically, and its struggles were breaking off more ice; it slipped backward and went completely under the icy water just as Reese

made his throw. Still swearing, he quickly recoiled the rope as Madelyn joined him.
The second throw settled neatly around the tossing head, and Reese quickly wound the rope around the saddle horn. The horse began backing up under his quiet instructions and the pressure of his hand, dragging the yearling from the water.
As soon as the yearling was free of the water the horse stopped and Reese kept his hand on the rope as he worked to loosen the loop around the bull's neck. As soon as it was free, the animal gave a panicked bawl and bolted into Reese, its muscled shoulder knocking him sideways into the water.
Madelyn bit back a scream as she ran forward, waiting for him to surface. He did, only about ten feet out, but they were ten feet he couldn't negotiate. The numbing cold of the water was almost immediately paralyzing. All he could do was drape his arms over the edge of the broken ice and hang on.
She grabbed the rope and urged the horse forward, but she couldn't swing a loop and in any case wouldn't drag him out by his neck. "Can you catch the rope?" she called urgently, and one gloved hand moved in what she hoped was an affirmative answer. She slung the rope across the water toward him, and he made an effort to raise his arm and catch it, but his movement was slow and clumsy, and the rope fell into the water.
She had to get him out of there *now.* Two minutes from now might be too late. Her heart was slamming against her rib cage, and her face was paper-white. There was no help for him except herself, and no time for indecision. She pulled the rope back to her and ran to the pond, edging out on the ice herself.
He raised his head, his eyes filling with horror as he saw her inching toward him. "No!" he said hoarsely.
She went down on her belly and began snaking toward him, distributing her weight over as much of the ice as she could, but even so she felt it cracking beneath her. Ten feet. Just ten feet. It sounded so close in theory, and in practice it was forever.
The edge of the ice he'd been holding crumbled, and he went under. She scrambled forward, forsaking safety for speed. Just as he broke the surface again she grabbed the collar of his coat and pulled him upward; the combined pressure of their weight caused more ice to fracture and she almost fell in with him but she scrambled back just enough.

"I have the rope," she said, her teeth chattering in terror. "I'm going to slip it over your head and under your arms. Then the horse will drag you out. Okay?"
He nodded. His lips were blue, but he managed to raise one arm at a time so she could get the rope on him. She leaned forward to tighten the slip knot, and the ice beneath her gave with a sharp crack, dropping her straight downward.

* * *

Cold. She had never known such cold. It took her breath, and her limbs immediately went numb. Her eyes were open, and she saw her hair float in front of her face. She was under the water. Odd that it didn't matter. Up above she could see a white blanket with dark spots in it, and a strange disturbance. Reese... maybe it was Reese.
The thought of Reese was what focused her splintered thoughts. Somehow she managed to begin flailing her arms and legs, fighting her way to the surface, aiming for one of those dark spots that represented breaks in the ice.
Her face broke the surface just as the horse, working on its own, hauled Reese up on the bank. It was trained to pull when it felt weight on the end of the rope, so it had. She reached for the edge of the ice as Reese struggled to his hands and knees.
"Maddie!" His voice was a hoarse cry as he fought to free himself of the rope, his coordination almost gone.
Hold on. All she had to do was hold on. It was what she had been praying he would be able to do, and now it was what she had to do. She tried, but she didn't have his strength. Her weight began dragging her down, and she couldn't stop it. The water closed over her head again.
She had to fight upward, had to swim. Her thoughts were sluggish, but they directed her movements enough so that just when she thought her tortured lungs would give out and she would have to inhale, she broke through to the surface again.
"Grab the ice. Maddie, grab the ice!" He barked out the command in a tone of voice that made her reach outward in a blind motion, one that by chance laid her arm across the ice.
The wet rope was freezing, making it stiff. Reese fought the cold, fought his own clumsiness as he swung the loop. "Hold your other arm up so I can get the loop over it. Maddie, hold – your – other – arm – *up!"*

She couldn't. She had already been in the water too long. All she could do was lift the arm that had been holding on to the ice and hope that he could snare it before she went completely under.
He swung the loop out as her face disappeared under the water. It settled around her outstretched arm, and with a frantic jerk he tightened it, the loop shrinking to almost nothing as it closed around her slender wrist. "Back, back!" he yelled at the horse, which was already bracing itself against the weight it could feel.
She was dragged underwater toward the bank, and finally up on it. Reese fell to his knees beside her, screaming hell in his eyes until she began choking and retching. "We'll be all right," he said fiercely as he fumbled with the slip knot around her wrist, trying to free her. "All we have to do is get to the house and we'll be all right." He didn't even let himself think that they might not make it. Even though they weren't that far, it would take all his strength.
He was too cold to lift her, so he dragged her to the truck. Her eyes kept closing. "Don't go to sleep," he said harshly. "Open your eyes. Fight, damn it! Fight!"
Her gray eyes opened, but there was no real comprehension in them. To his astonishment, her fist doubled, and she tried to swing at him as she obeyed his rough command.
He got the truck door open and half boosted, half pushed her up onto the seat. She sprawled across it, dripping water.
The horse nudged him. If the animal hadn't been so close he would have left it behind, but a lifetime of taking care of his livestock prompted him to tie the reins to the rear bumper. He wouldn't be able to drive so fast that the horse couldn't easily keep pace, even though every instinct screamed that he had to get to the house and get both of them warm.
He pulled himself onto the seat behind the steering wheel and turned on the ignition, then struggled to slide the knob that turned the heater on high. Hot air poured out of the vents, but he was too numb to feel it.
They had to get out of their clothes. The icy wetness was just leaching more heat away from their bodies. He began fighting out of his coat as he barked orders at Madelyn to do the same.
She managed to sit up somehow, but she had almost no coordination. She had been in the water even longer than he had. He didn't have an easy time

of it, but by the time he was naked she was weakly pushing her heavy shearling coat onto the floorboard. Ice crystals had already caked it.
He reached for her buttons. "Come on, sweetheart, we have to get you naked. The clothes will just make you that much colder. Can you talk to me? Say something, Maddie. Talk to me."
She slowly lifted one hand, with all the fingers folded down except the middle one. He looked at the obscene, or suggestive, gesture – it all depended on how he took it – and despite the gravity of the situation a rough laugh burst from his throat. "I'll take you up on that, sweetheart, just as soon as we get warm." A sparkle came into her eyes, giving him hope.
His teeth began chattering, and convulsive shudders racked him. Maddie wasn't shivering, and that was a bad sign. There were always a blanket and a thermos of coffee in the truck when he went out in the winter, and he pulled the blanket out from behind the seat. Even the simplest movement was a battle requiring all his strength, but he finally got it out and roughly dried them with it as best he could, then wrapped it around her.
With shaking hands he opened the thermos and poured a small amount of steaming coffee into the top, then held it to her lips. "Drink, baby. It's nice and hot."
She managed to swallow a little of it, and he drank the rest himself, then poured more into the cup. He could feel it burning down into his stomach. If he didn't get himself into shape to drive to the ranch, neither one of them would make it. He fought the shaking of his hands until he had downed the entire cup, then poured more and coaxed Madelyn into taking it. That was all he could do for now. He focused his attention and put the truck in gear.
It was slow going. He was shaking so hard that his body wouldn't obey. He was a little disoriented, sometimes unable to tell where they were. Beside him, Madelyn finally began shivering as the heat blasting from the vents combined with the coffee to revive her a little.
The house had never looked so good to him as it did when it finally came into view and he nursed the truck across the rough ground toward it. He parked as close to the back door as possible and walked naked around the truck to haul Madelyn out the passenger door. He couldn't feel the snow under his bare feet.
She could walk a little now, and that helped. With their arms around each other they half crawled up the steps to the porch, then into the utility room. The downstairs bathroom was directly across from the utility room; he

dragged Madelyn into it and propped her against the wall while he turned on the water in the tub to let it get hot. When steam began rising he turned the cold water tap and hoped he adjusted it right, or they would be scalded. His hands were so cold he simply couldn't tell.

"Come on, into the tub."

She struggled to her knees, and Reese pulled her up the rest of the way, but in the end it was simpler for both of them to literally crawl over the edge of the tub into the rising water. She sat in front of him and between his legs, lying back against his chest. Tears ran down her face as the warm water lapped against her cold flesh, bringing it painfully back to life. Reese let his head tilt back until it rested on the wall, his teeth gritted. They had to endure it because it was necessary; they didn't have anyone else here to take care of them. This was the fastest way to get warm, but it wasn't pleasant.

Slowly the pain in their extremities eased. When the water was so high that it was lapping out the overflow drain, he turned off the tap and sank deeper until his shoulders were covered. Madelyn's hair floated on the surface like wet gold.

He tightened his arms around her, trying to absorb her shivering into him. "Better?"

"Yes." Her voice was low and even huskier than usual. "That was close."

He turned her in his arms and hugged her to him with barely controlled desperation. "I was planning to keep that bull for breeding," he said tightly, "but the sonofabitch is going to be a steer now – if he lives through this."

She managed a laugh, her lips moving against his throat. The water lapped her chin. "Don't ever get rid of that horse. He saved our bacon."

"I'll give him the biggest stall for the rest of his life."

They lay in the water until it began to cool; then he pulled the plug and urged her to her feet. She was still looking sleepy, so he held her to him while he closed the shower curtain and turned on the shower, letting the water beat down on their heads. She just stood in his arms with her head on his chest, the way she had stood so many times, but this time was infinitely precious. This time they had cheated death.

The water rained over them. He turned her face up and took her mouth, needing her taste, her touch, to reassure himself that they were really okay. He had come incredibly close to losing her, even closer than he had come to dying himself.

When the hot water began to go he snapped off the tap and reached for towels, wrapping one around her dripping hair and using another to dry her. Though her lips and nails had color now, she was still shivering a little, and he supported her as she stepped carefully from the tub. He took another towel and began rubbing his own head, all the while watching every move she made.

Madelyn felt warm, but incredibly lethargic. She had no more energy than if she had been recovering from a monster case of the flu. More than anything she wanted to lie down in front of the fire and sleep for a week, but she knew enough about hypothermia to be afraid to. She sat on the toilet seat and watched him towel dry, focusing on the magnificent strength made more evident by his nakedness. He gave her a reason to fight her lethargy now, just as he had when she had been on the bottom of the pond.

He cupped her face, making certain she was paying attention. "Don't go to sleep," he warned. "Stay in here where it's hot while I go upstairs to get your robe. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

"I won't be but a minute."

She managed a smile, just to reassure him. "Bring my brush and comb, too."

It took several minutes, but he came back with her robe toasty warm from the clothes dryer, and she shuddered with pleasure as he wrapped it around her. He had taken the time to almost dress, too; he had on socks, unsnapped jeans and a flannel shirt left unbuttoned. He had brought socks for her, and he knelt to slip them on her feet.

He kept his arm around her waist as they went into the kitchen. He pulled out a chair and placed her in it. "Open your mouth," he said, and when she did he slid the thermometer, which he'd brought from the upstairs bathroom, under her tongue. "Now sit there and be still while I make a pot of coffee."

That wasn't hard to do. The only thing she wanted to do more than sit still was to lie down.

When the digital thermometer twittered its alarm, he pulled it out of her mouth and frowned at it. "Ninety six point four. I want it up at least another degree."

"What about you?"

"I'm more alert than you are. I'm bigger, and I wasn't in the water as long."

He could still feel a deep inner chill, but nothing like the bone-numbing

cold he had felt before. The first cup of coffee almost completely dispelled the rest of the coldness, as both the heat and the caffeine did their work. He made Madelyn drink three cups of coffee, even though she had revived enough to caustically point out that, as usual, he'd made it so strong she was likely to go into caffeine overdose. He watered it down for her, his mouth wry.

When he felt safer about leaving her, he deposited her on the quilts in front of the fire. "I have to go back out," he said, and he saw panic flare in her eyes. "Not to the range," he added quickly. "I have to put the horse back in the barn and take care of him. I'll be back as soon as I'm finished."

"I'm not going anywhere," she reassured him.

She was still afraid to lie down and go to sleep, even though so much caffeine was humming through her system that she wasn't certain she would be able to go to sleep that night. She pulled the towel off her head and began combing the tangles out of her hair.

By the time he got back, her hair was dry and she was brushing it into order. He stopped in the doorway, struck as always by the intensely female beauty of the ritual. Her sleeves dropped away from her arms as she lifted them, revealing pale, slender forearms. Her neck was gracefully bent, like a flower nodding in the breeze. His throat tightened, and blood rushed to his loins as he watched her; seven months of marriage and he was still reacting to her like a stallion scenting a mare.

"How are you feeling?" The words were raspy. He had to force them out.

She looked up, her slow smile heating his blood even more. "Better. Warm and awake. How *are you* after going back out into the cold?"

"I'm okay." More than okay. They were both alive, and there wasn't a cell in his body that was cold.

He insisted on taking her temperature again and waited impatiently until the thermometer twittered. "Ninety-seven point six. Good."

"My normal temperature isn't much more than that. It usually hovers in the low ninety-eights."

"Mine is usually around ninety-nine or a little higher."

"I'm not surprised. Sleeping with you is like sleeping with a furnace."

"Complaining?"

She shook her head. "Bragging." Her smile faded, and her gray eyes darkened to charcoal as she reached out to touch his face. "I almost lost

you." He saw the flash of sheer terror in her eyes just before she closed them, and he grabbed her to him with almost desperate relief.
"Baby, I came a lot closer to losing you than you did to losing me," he said roughly, moving his lips against her hair.
Madelyn wound her arms around his neck. She didn't often cry; her moods were too even and generally upbeat. The two times she had cried since their marriage had both been the result of pain, once on their wedding night and again just an hour before when the warm water in the tub had begun bringing life back into her frozen skin. But suddenly the enormity and strain of what they had been through swept over her, and her chest tightened. She tried to fight it, tried to keep her composure, but it was a losing battle. With a wrenching sob she buried her face against his throat and clung to him while her body shook with the force of her weeping.
He was more than surprised by her sudden tears, he was astounded. His Maddie was a fighter, one who met his strength with her own and didn't flinch even from his worst tempers. But now she was sobbing as if she would never stop, and the depth of her distress punched him in the chest. He crooned to her and rubbed her back, whispering reassurances as he lowered her to the quilts.
It took a long time for her sobs to quiet. He didn't try to get her to stop, sensing that she needed the release, just as he had needed the release of savagely kicking a feed bucket the length of the barn after he had taken care of his horse. He just held her until the storm was over, then gave her his handkerchief for mopping up.
Her eyelids were swollen, and she looked exhausted, but there was no more tightly wound tension in her eyes as she lay quietly in the aftermath. Reese propped himself up on an elbow and tugged at the belt of her robe, pulling it loose and then spreading the lapels to expose her nude body.
He trailed his fingers across the hollow of her throat, then over to her slender collarbone. "Have I ever told you," he asked musingly, "that just looking at you gets me so hard it hurts?"
Her voice was husky. "No, but you've demonstrated it a few times."
"It does hurt. I feel like I'm going to explode. Then, when I get inside you, the hurt changes to pleasure." He stroked his hand down to her breast, covering it with the warmth of his palm and feeling her nipple softly pushing at him. Gently he caressed her, circling the nipple with his thumb until it stood upright and darkened in color; then he bent over her to kiss the

enticing little nub. Her breathing had changed, getting deeper, and a delicate flush was warming her skin. When he looked up he saw how heavy-lidded her eyes had become, and he was flooded with fiercely masculine satisfaction that he could make her look like that.

Once he had tried to deny himself the sensual pleasure of feasting on her, but no longer. He let himself be absorbed as he stroked his hand down her body, savoring the silky texture of her skin, shaping his hand to the curves and indentations that flowed from one to the other, the swell of her breast to the flat of her stomach, the flare of her hips, the notch between her legs. He watched his tanned, powerful fingers slide through the little triangle of curls and then probe between her soft folds, fascinated by the contrast between his hand and her pale feminine body.

And the taste of her. There was the heated sweetness of her mouth; he sampled it, then tasted again more deeply, making love to her with his tongue. Then there was the warm, fragrant hollow of her throat, and the rose-and-milk taste of her breasts. He lingered there for a long time, until her hands were knotting and twisting in the quilt, and her hips were lifting against him.

Her belly was cool against his lips, and silky smooth. Her tight little navel invited exploration, and he circled it with his tongue. Her hands moved into his hair and tightly pressed against his skull as he moved downward, parting her thighs and draping them over his shoulders.

She was breathing hard, her body twisting and straining. He held her hips and loved her, not stopping until she heaved upward and cried out as the waves of completion overtook her.

She felt drained, more exhausted than before. She lay limply as he knelt between her legs and tore at his clothes, throwing them aside. She could barely open her eyes as he positioned himself and then invaded her with a slow, heavy thrust that carried him into her to the hilt. As always, she was faintly startled by the overwhelming sense of fullness as she adjusted to him.

His full weight was on her, crushing her downward. There was nothing gentlemanly about him now, only the need to enter her as deeply as possible, to carry the embrace to the fullest so that there was no part of her that didn't feel his possession. His lovemaking was often dominant, but she could usually meet it with her own strength. She couldn't now; there was a savagery in him that had to be appeased, a hunger that had to be fed. Even

though he restrained himself so that he never hurt her, she was helpless to do anything but lie there and accept him, and feel her passion rising within her again with a beating rhythm.
He paused when his tension reached the critical level, not wanting it to end just yet. His green eyes glittered as he framed her face in his hands and measured the strength of her arousal.
He brushed his mouth against her ear. "Did you know that a man normally has..."
She listened to the words rustling in her ear, her hands tightening on his back as she struggled for control. Though she loved their trivia game, she wasn't in the mood for it now. Finally she gasped, "I wonder why there are so many, when one will do."
In his best big-bad-wolf voice, admittedly ragged, he said, "The better to get you pregnant, my dear," and he began moving again, hard and fast. And, sometime within the next hour, he did.

Chapter 10

Reese went over the figures again, but the totals didn't change. He got to his feet and looked out the window, his hands knotted into fists and his jaw set. All those years of work. All those *damn* years of work, for nothing.
He had done everything he could think of, cut down on every expense until there was nothing left that could be cut, and still those figures spelled it out in black and white: he had lost. The January blizzard that had killed half of his herd had pushed him so far under that the bank couldn't carry him any longer. He couldn't make the mortgage, and there would be no more extensions.
He had three options: one, he could let the bank foreclose, and they would lose everything; two, he could file chapter eleven bankruptcy and keep the ranch but ruin his credit; and three, he could accept Robert's offer to be an investor. He smiled grimly. Number three was an option only if Robert's offer was still open, considering that he had made it when the ranch was profitable and now it was going under fast.
He had been so close to making it. He thought that was what made the final defeat so bitter, that he had been close enough to see the end of debt. What April had started almost eight years before was finally coming to fruition:

the destruction of his ranch. Who knew what her reasoning had been? Maybe she had done it because he had loved the ranch so much, more than he had ever even thought he loved her. It was his lifeblood, and he was losing it, unless Robert Cannon still wanted to invest. Reese went over the options again, but Robert was his only chance, and a slim one at that, because when Robert saw the figures he would have to be a hell of a gambler to go through with the deal. Reese didn't hold out much hope, but he would make the effort, because he couldn't do otherwise. He didn't have just himself to consider now; he had Madelyn, and he would do what he could to keep her home for her. She hadn't married him expecting bankruptcy or foreclosure.

It was March; snow was still on the ground, but the throbbing promise of spring was in the air. In another week or so buds would begin to swell on the trees and bushes; the land was alive, but the taste of ashes was in his mouth, because this might be the last spring he would ever see on his ranch. He could hear Maddie in the kitchen, humming along with the radio as she gathered the ingredients for baking a cake. She'd gotten good at baking, so good that his mouth began watering every time those warm smells drifted his way. She was happy here. He hadn't married her expecting anything more than a work partner, but instead he'd gotten a warm, intelligent, amusing and sexy woman who loved him. She never seemed embarrassed about it, never tried to pressure him into giving her more than he could; she simply loved him and didn't try to hide it.

He didn't know how he would tell her, but she had a right to know.

She was licking cake batter from a wooden spoon when he walked in, and she gave him a wink as she held the spoon out. "Wanna lick?"

The batter was on her fingers, too. He started at her fingers and worked his way up the handle of the spoon, his tongue scooping up the sweet batter. When the spoon was clean he turned to her fingers to make certain he'd gotten it all. "Any more?"

She produced the bowl and swiped her finger around the edge, then popped it in her mouth laden with batter. "Your turn."

They cleaned the bowl like two children. That was probably Maddie's most endearing trait, the ease with which she found enjoyment in life, and she had taught him how to have fun again. It was just simple things, like their trivia game or licking a bowl, but he had lost the knack for having fun until she had entered his life and taken over.

He hated having to tell her that they might lose their home. A man was supposed to take care of his wife. Maybe that was old-fashioned and chauvinistic, but that was the way he felt. It ate at his pride like acid not to be able to provide for her.
He sighed and put his hands on her waist, his face grim. "We have to talk."
She eyed him cautiously. "I've never liked conversations that begin with that phrase."
"You won't like this one, either. It's serious."
She searched his face, her eyes becoming somber as she read his expression. "What is it?"
"When we lost half the herd, it put us under. I can't make the mortgage."
That was it in a nutshell, as succinct and bald as he could make it.
"Can we get an extension – "
"No. If I had the full herd as collateral, then it would be possible, but I don't have enough beef on the hoof to cover the outstanding debt."
"Robert said you have the best head for business he's ever seen. What do we have to do, and what can we do?"
He outlined the three things that could happen, and she listened to him with an intent expression. When he had finished she asked, "Why don't you think Robert's offer would still stand?"
"Because the ranch is a losing proposition now."
"You're still here, and it was you he was willing to bet on, not X number of cows." Then she said, "There's another option you haven't mentioned."
"What's that?"
"I told you before, I have some money – "
He dropped his hands. "No. I've *told you* before."
"Why not?" she asked calmly.
"I've told you that before, too. It hasn't changed."
"Do you mean you'd actually give up the ranch before you would let me put my money in it?"
His eyes looked like flint. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean." Maddie had changed a lot of his attitudes, but that one was still intact and as strong as ever. A business partner was one thing, because rights were limited by contract. A marriage was something else, subject to the whims of a judge with little regard to fairness. April had proved that to him.
Madelyn turned away before her expression betrayed her. Not for anything would she let him see how that hurt her. With perfect control she said, "It's

your ranch, your decision."
"Exactly, and it will stay my ranch, my decision, until the day I get thrown off."
Her mind was busy as she cooked dinner, and determination grew in her. If he thought she would stand by and see the ranch go under when she had the means to save it, he would learn differently. She didn't know how much the mortgage was, and she had told him the truth when she'd said that her trust fund was far from being a fortune, but surely it was enough to buy them some time until the ranch was on a firmer footing.
He'd never said he loved her. Maybe he didn't, but Madelyn thought he was at least fond of her. He certainly desired her, though it was true that a man could physically desire a woman without caring for her as a person. If he had lived with her for nine months and still thought she was capable of doing the sort of thing April had done, then perhaps he didn't care for her as much as she'd thought. She had been happy, but now her balloon was fast going flat.
Now wasn't the time to tell him she was pregnant. Or maybe it was. Maybe knowing about the baby would bring him to his senses, reassure him that she wasn't going anywhere, and that they had to use whatever means were at their disposal to save their child's inheritance.
But she didn't tell him. His mood varied from taciturn to biting sarcasm, the way it did when he was angry, and she didn't feel like prodding him into a full-scale blowup. Though she was only two months along, she was already beginning to feel the effects of pregnancy in lower energy levels and a slightly upset stomach – not the best time to battle with her husband.
He was still in a bad mood when he left the next morning, and he took a lunch with him, which meant he wouldn't be back until it was time for dinner. Madelyn hesitated for maybe five minutes.
She didn't like going behind his back, but if that was the way it had to be, then she would face the music later. It was a long drive to Billings; she might not make it back before he did, but that was another bridge she would cross when she came to it. While she was there she would also phone around for an obstetrician, because there wasn't any sort of doctor in Crook, and she didn't know of one any closer than Billings. It could get interesting around her delivery time, she thought, with her doctor a three-hour drive away.

She hastily dressed, got her checkbook and the necessary documents, and ran out to the car. It had snow tires on it if she needed them, but the highways were clear, so she hoped she would make good time.
She drove quickly but carefully, thankful that there wasn't much traffic to contend with, and reached the bank at eleven-thirty. She knew who Reese dealt with, having accompanied him before, and she only had to wait about fifteen minutes before the man could see her.
He was smiling the way bankers do, his hand outstretched. "Good morning, Mrs. Duncan. What can we do for you?"
"Good morning, Mr. VanRoden. I'd like to know the amount of our outstanding mortgage."
He stroked his upper lip as if he had a mustache, which he didn't, and looked thoughtful. "Well, I'm not certain I can tell you. You see, the mortgage is only in your husband's name."
She didn't bother trying to argue with bureaucracy or banking rules and went straight to the point. "If it's under two hundred thousand dollars, I want to pay it off."
There was nothing that got a banker's attention like money. He chewed his lip, studying her. She sat very calmly and let him try to pick up what clues he could from her appearance, though she had deliberately dressed that morning in one of her New York suits and twisted her hair up. If he could read anything in a charcoal suit with a pink silk blouse under it and an iridescent peacock pinned to the lapel, he was welcome to draw any conclusions he could.
He made up his mind with a minimum of dithering. "Let me check the file," he said. "I'll be right back."
She waited, certain of the outcome. No bank would refuse the repayment of a loan, regardless of who was doing the paying. She supposed a rank stranger could walk in off the street and pay off any loan he chose, as long as he had the means to do it.
VanRoden was back in less than five minutes with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "I believe we're ready to talk business, Mrs. Duncan. Mr. Duncan doesn't have enough in his checking account to cover the loan, so how were you proposing to pay it?"
"I have a trust fund, Mr. VanRoden. I transferred it from New York to another bank here in Billings. First, is the outstanding debt on the mortgage less than two hundred thousand?" He coughed. "Yes, it is."

"Then I'll be back. I'm going to my bank now to have the trust fund transferred into my checking account. I've had full access to it since I was twenty-five, so there's no problem."
He pushed the telephone toward her. "Call them, so they'll let you in. They'll be closing for lunch shortly."
She smiled at him as she reached for the phone. "By the way, do you know a good obstetrician?"
A phone call later, it had been arranged for her to enter the other bank by a side door. An hour later she was back at the first bank, cashier's check in hand for the amount VanRoden had given her before she left.
She signed the necessary papers and walked out of the bank with the deed to the ranch and the papers that said the debt had been paid in full. She also had an appointment the following week with the obstetrician VanRoden's wife had used. She grinned as she got into the car. Contacts had their uses, even unlikely ones. Poor Mr. VanRoden had looked startled at being asked to recommend an obstetrician, then had offered his congratulations.
She had no illusions that everything was going to be fine now just because she had paid the mortgage. She hadn't done it lightly; she had done it with the full knowledge that Reese would be furious, but she was willing to fight for their future, their child's future. She had to deal with the scars left by Reese's first marriage, and this was far more serious than painting the house. As a matter of fact, he *had* drawn up a note stating that he would repay her for the cost of the paint and estimated labor, which she thought was ridiculous, but was a fair measure of how determined he was in the matter.
But knowing she had to tell him and knowing how to tell him were two different things. She couldn't just say, "I went into Billings today to make an appointment with an obstetrician because I'm pregnant, and by the way, while I was there I paid off the mortgage." On the other hand, that was certainly a good example of killing two birds with one stone.
She was still worrying it over in her mind when she got home at about four-thirty. There was no sign of Reese's truck, so perhaps she had made it without him even knowing she'd been gone. If he had come back to the house for any reason during the day, he'd ask questions as soon as he got back, and one thing she wouldn't do was lie to him. Delaying telling him about the mortgage was different from lying to him about it.

It was amazing how tired she was, and equally amazing how she could feel so exhausted but still feel well.

She would be having his baby sometime late in October or early in November, if she had figured correctly. The knowledge of it was like a great inner warmth, and she had never wanted anything more than to share it with him. Only the worry he had been enduring over the ranch had kept her from telling him, because she didn't want to give him something else to worry about. The stern lines in his face were deeper, and his eyes were habitually grim these days, as he faced losing everything he had worked so hard for, for so long. How could she burden him with the knowledge that now they had medical bills to consider, as well?

How could she *not* tell him?

As she changed clothes, her fatigue suddenly became overwhelming. She fought it, knowing that it was time to begin cooking dinner, but the thought of all that preparation made the fatigue even worse, and her stomach suddenly rolled. She broke out in a sweat and sank weakly onto the bed. What a great time for morning sickness to hit – late in the afternoon on a day when she needed all her wits about her. She sat there for a minute, and the nausea faded, but the fatigue was worse. There was no way she could summon the energy even to go downstairs; exhaustion pulled on her limbs and eyelids, dragging both down. With a sigh she stretched out on the bed, her eyes already closing. Just a short nap; that was all she needed.

Reese found her there. He had noticed that the kitchen light wasn't on when he got home, but he had taken care of the evening chores before going into the house. The kitchen was empty, with no sign of meal preparations in progress, and the house was strangely silent. "Maddie?" When there was no answer, a worried frown creased his forehead, and he searched the downstairs, then started up the stairs. "Maddie?"

He turned on the light in the bedroom, and there she was, curled on her side on the bed. She didn't stir even when the light came on. He'd never known her to nap during the day, and he was instantly alarmed. Was she sick? She had seemed okay that morning. He was dirty from the day's work, but he didn't care about that as he sat down on the side of the bed and turned her onto her back. She felt warm under his hands, but not unusually so. He shook her, and worry sharpened his tone. "Maddie, wake up!"

Slowly her lids drifted upward, and she sighed. "Reese," she murmured, but she couldn't keep her eyes open.

He shook her again. "Are you all right? Wake up." Reluctantly she roused, lifting one hand to rub her eyes. "What time is it?" Then she looked at him again as realization sank in and said, "Oh my God, dinner!"
"Dinner can wait. Are you all right?" Her heart lurched as she stared up at him. His face was lined and grayish with fatigue, but there was worry in his eyes, not irritation. Automatically she reached up to touch his cheek, stroking her fingers over the high ridge of his cheekbone. She loved everything about this man, even his stubborn temper. She took his hand and placed it on her belly. "I'm pregnant," she whispered. "We're having a baby."
His pupils dilated, and he looked down at his hand on her slender body. From the time she had stopped taking the birth control pills, every time he had made love to her he had been aware that he might impregnate her, but the reality of having her say she was pregnant was still almost a physical shock. His baby was growing under his hand, utterly protected in her flat little belly.
He slid off the bed onto his knees beside it, still dazed. "When?" he asked in a strained tone.
"The last week in October, or the first week in November."
He unsnapped her jeans and slid the zipper down, then spread the fly open so he could touch her skin. He pushed her sweatshirt up out of the way and slowly leaned forward, first pressing a light kiss to her belly, then resting his cheek against it. Madelyn stroked his hair and wondered if the baby would have dark coloring like him or her fairness. It was such a new, wonderful consideration, their child, created from the raw passion that still burned between them. Seven more months suddenly seemed too long to wait to hold it, to see Reese's powerful hands turn gentle as he cradled his child. "Do you want a boy or a girl?" she asked, still whispering, as if normal speech might spoil the sweetness of this moment.
"Does it matter?" He rubbed his rough cheek against her belly, his eyes closing as he luxuriated in the caress.
"Not to me."
"Or to me." Silence grew in the room as he fully absorbed the news; then finally he lifted his head. "Are you feeling sick?"
"I was a little nauseated, but mostly I was incredibly tired. I tried, but I just couldn't keep my eyes open," she said apologetically.
"Are you all right now?"

She thought about it, mentally taking stock of herself, then nodded. "All systems are go."
He moved back and let her get to her feet, then caught her to him and tilted her mouth up. The expression in his eyes was intense as he gave her a hard, brief kiss. "Are you certain?"
"I'm certain." She smiled and looped her arms around his neck, letting her weight swing from them. "You'll know if I'm feeling sick. I'll turn green and keel over."
He cupped her bottom and held her against him as he kissed her again, and this time there was nothing brief about it. Madelyn held him tightly, her eyes closing as his familiar nearness sent warmth through her. She loved him so much it sometimes frightened her; she hoped he would remember that.
His lovemaking that night was achingly tender and incredibly prolonged. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, taking her again and again, staying inside her for a long time afterward. They finally went to sleep like that, with her leg thrown over his hip, and she thought it had never been more perfect than it was then, with Reese in her arms and his child in her womb.

* * *

A week later Reese walked back to the house from the barn with a defeated expression on his face. Madelyn watched him from the kitchen window and knew she couldn't put it off any longer. She simply couldn't let him worry any longer; better to enrage him than watch the lines settle deeper in his face every day. He would sit in his office for hours every night, going over and over the books, pacing and running his hands through his hair, then trying it again, only to come up with the same figures and no hope.
She heard him come in and take off his muddy boots; then he came into the kitchen in his sock feet. "The truck needs a new oil pump," he said tiredly.
She twisted the hand towel she was holding. "Then buy one." Tension was tightening her muscles, and she swallowed the faint rise of nausea.
His mouth was bitter. "Why bother? We won't be here another month anyway."
Slowly she hung up the towel then turned to face him, leaning back against the cabinet for support. "Yes, we will."
He thought he knew what she meant. He could call Robert – but Robert would have to be a fool to invest in the ranch now. He had put it off as long as he could, and now he didn't see anything else he could do. Madelyn was

pregnant; she had her first doctor's appointment the next day, and money would be required up front. Then they were facing bills from the hospital, and he didn't have medical insurance. That had been one of the first things to go.
"I'll call Robert," he said gently. "But don't hope too much."
She put her shoulders back and took a deep breath. "Call Robert if you want, after I tell you what I have to tell you. You'll be in a different situation then and – " She stopped, looking at him helplessly, and began again. "I paid off the mortgage with my trust fund."
For a moment he didn't react at all, just watched her silently, and she started to hope. Then his eyes began to chill, and she braced herself.
"What?" he asked very softly.
"I paid off the mortgage. The papers are in my underwear drawer."
Without a word he turned and went upstairs. Madelyn followed, her heart pounding. She had faced his anger before without turning a hair, but this was different. This was striking at the very basis of his feelings.
He jerked her underwear drawer open just as she entered the bedroom. She hadn't stuffed the papers in the bottom; they were lying right there in plain sight. He picked them up and flipped through them, noting the amount and date on the documents.
He didn't look up. "How did you arrange it?"
"I went to Billings last week, the day you told me about the mortgage. Banks don't care who pays off loans so long as they get their money, and since I'm your wife they didn't question it."
"Did you think presenting me with a fait accompli would change my mind?"
She wished that he would stop using that soft voice. When Reese was angry he roared, and she could handle that, but this was something new.
His head came up, and she flinched. His eyes were like green ice. "Answer me."
She stood very still. "No, I didn't think anything would change your mind, and that's why I did it behind your back."
"You were right. Nothing would change my mind. I'll see you in hell before you get any part of this ranch."
"I don't want to take the ranch away from you. I've never wanted that."
"You've played your part well, Maddie, I'll give you that. You haven't complained, you've acted like a perfect wife. You even carried it so far as to

pretend you love me."
"I do love you." She took a step toward him, her hands outstretched. "Listen _ "
Suddenly the rage in him erupted, and he threw the sheaf of papers at her. They separated and swirled around her, then drifted to the floor. "That's what I think of your so-called 'love'," he said with gritted teeth. "If you think doing something you knew I couldn't bear is an expression of 'love', then you don't have any idea what the real thing is."
"I didn't want you to lose the ranch – "
"So you just took care of the mortgage. Any divorce court now would consider you a co-owner, wouldn't they? They'd figure I talked you into investing your inheritance and the prenuptial agreement wouldn't mean a damn. Hell, why should you get less than April? This isn't the operation it once was, but the land is worth a hell of a lot."
"I don't want a divorce, I haven't even thought of divorce," she said desperately. "I wanted to keep the ranch for you. At least this way you have a chance to rebuild it, if you'll just take it!"
He said sarcastically, "Yeah, if it's worth more, you'll get more."
"For the last time, I don't want a divorce!" He reached out and pinched her chin, the gesture savagely playful. "You just might get one anyway, doll face, because I sure as hell don't want a wife who'd knife me in the back like that. You weren't my first choice, and I should have listened to my instincts, but you had me as hot as a sixteen-year-old after my first piece in the back seat. April was a bitch, but you're worse, Maddie, because you played along and pretended this was just what you wanted. Then you slipped the blade between my ribs so slick I never even saw it coming."
"This *is* what I want." She was pale, her eyes darkening.
"Well, you're not what I want. You're hot between the sheets, but you don't have what it takes to be a ranch wife," he said cruelly.
"Reese Duncan, if you're trying to run me off," you're doing a good job of it," she warned shakily.
He raised his eyebrows. His tone was icily polite. "Where would you like to go? I'll give you a ride."
"If you'll climb down off that mountain of pride you'll see how wrong you are! I don't want to take the ranch away. I want to live here and raise our children here. You and I aren't the only ones involved in this. I'm carrying your baby, and it's his heritage, too!"

His eyes went black as he remembered the baby, and his gaze swept down her slender figure. "On second thought, you aren't going anywhere. You're staying right here until that baby's born. Then I don't care what the hell *you* do, but my kid is staying with me."

Coldness settled inside her, pushing away the hurt and anger that had been building with every word he said. Understanding could go only so far. Sympathy held out only so long. He didn't love her, and he didn't believe in her love for him, so exactly how much of a marriage did they have? One made of mirrors and moonshine, and held together by sex. She stared at him, her eyes going blank. Later there would be pain, but not now.

She said very carefully, "When you calm down you'll regret saying this."

"The only thing I regret is marrying you." He took her purse from the top of the dresser and opened it.

"What are you looking for?" She made no effort to grab it from him. In any test of strength against him she would be humiliated.

He held up the car keys. "These." He dropped her purse and shoved the keys into his pocket. "Like I said, you're not going anywhere with my kid inside you. The only moving you're doing is out of my bed. There are three other bedrooms. Pick one, and keep your butt in it."

He stalked from the room, being very careful not to touch her. Madelyn sank down on the bed, her legs folding under her like spaghetti. She could barely breathe, and dark spots swam in front of her eyes. Cold chills made her shake.

She didn't know how long it was before her mind began to function again, but finally it did, slowly at first, then with gathering speed. She began to get angry, a calm, deep, slow-burning anger that grew until it had destroyed all the numbness.

She got up and began methodically moving her things out of Reese's bedroom and into the room where she had slept the night she had visited him. She didn't move a few token things in the hope that he would get over his temper, reconsider and tell her to stay put; she purged the bedroom of all signs of her presence. She left the mortgage papers lying where they were in the middle of the room. Let him walk over them if he didn't want to pick them up.

If he wanted war, she'd give him war.

Pride prompted her to stay in her bedroom and not speak to him; pregnancy insisted that she eat. She went downstairs and cooked a full meal in an

effort to rub a little salt in his wounds. If he didn't want to eat what she had prepared, then he could either do it himself or do without.
But he came to the table when she called him and ate his usual hearty meal. As she was clearing the dishes away she said, "Don't forget the doctor's appointment in the morning."
He didn't look at her. "I'll drive you. You aren't getting the keys back."
"Fine."
Then she went upstairs, showered and went to bed.
The next morning they didn't speak a word all the way to Billings. When her name was called in the doctor's office, which was filled with women in various stages of pregnancy, she got up and walked past him to follow the nurse. He turned his head, watching the graceful sway of her retreating figure. In a few months she would lose her grace and the sway would become a waddle. His hand tightened into a fist, and it was all he could do to keep from swearing aloud. *How could she have done that to him?*
Madelyn was questioned, stuck, checked, probed and measured. When she had dressed she was directed into the doctor's office, and in a moment Reese joined her, followed shortly by the doctor.
"Well, everything looks normal," the doctor said, consulting his charts. "You're in good physical shape, Mrs. Duncan. Your uterus is enlarged more like thirteen or fourteen weeks than the nine or ten you think it should be, so you may be off on your conception date. We'll do an ultrasound when you're further along to get a better idea of the baby's maturity. It could just be a large baby, or twins. I see that your maternal grandmother was a twin, and multiple births usually follow the female line."
Reese sat up straight, his eyes sharpening. "Is there any danger in having twins?"
"Not much. They usually come a little early, and we have to be careful about that. At this stage of the game, I'm more worried about a large baby than I am twins. Your wife should be able to have twins without a problem, as their birth weight is usually lower than that of a single baby. The total is more, but the individual weights are less. How much did you weigh when you were born, Mr. Duncan?"
"Ten pounds, two ounces." His mouth was grim.
"I'll want to keep a very close eye on your wife if this baby approaches a birth weight of anything over eight pounds. She has a narrow pelvis, not drastically so, but a ten-pound baby would probably require a C-section."

That said, he began talking to Madelyn about her diet, vitamins and rest, and he gave her several booklets about prenatal care. When they left half an hour later, Madelyn was weighted down with prescriptions and reading material. Reese drove to a pharmacy, where he had the prescriptions filled, then headed home again. Madelyn sat straight and silent beside him. When they got home, he realized that she hadn't looked at him once all day.

Chapter 11

The next morning as he started to leave she asked coolly, "Can you hear the car horn blow from anywhere on the ranch?"

He looked startled. "Of course not." He eyed her questioningly, but she still wasn't looking at him.

"Then how am I supposed to find you or contact you?"

"Why would you want to?" he asked sarcastically.

"I'm pregnant. I could fall, or start to miscarry. Any number of things."

It was an argument he couldn't refute. He set his jaw, faced with the choice between giving her the means to leave or endangering both her life and that of his baby. When it came down to it, he didn't have a choice. He took the keys from his pocket and slammed them down on the cabinet, but he kept his hand on them.

"Do I have your word you won't run?"

She looked at him finally, but her eyes were cool and blank. "No. Why should I waste my breath making promises when you wouldn't believe me anyway?"

"Just what is it you want me to believe? That you haven't worked it so you have just as much claim to the ranch as I have? A woman made a fool of me once and walked away with half of everything I owned, but it won't happen again, even if I have to burn this house to the ground and sell the land for a loss, is that clear?" He was shouting by the time he finished, and he looked at her as if he hated the sight of her.

Madelyn didn't show any expression or move. "If that was all I'd wanted, I could have paid off the mortgage at any time."

Her point scored; she saw it in his eyes. She could have followed it up, but she held her peace. She had given him something to think about. She would give him a lot more to think about before this was over.

He banged out of the house, leaving the car keys on the cabinet. She picked them up, tossing them in her hand as she went upstairs to the bedroom, where she already had some clothes packed. In the two nights she had spent alone in this room, she had thought through what she was going to do and where she was going to go. Reese would expect her to go running back to New York now that she had a claim on the ranch, but she had never even considered that. To teach him the lesson he needed, she had to be close by.

It would be just like him to deliberately work close by in case she tried to leave, so she didn't, and felt fierce satisfaction when he came home for lunch after telling her that he would be out all day. Since she hadn't cooked anything, she made a plate of sandwiches and put it in front of him, then continued with what she had been doing before, which was cleaning the oven.

He asked, "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I've already eaten."

A few minutes later he asked, "Should you be doing work like that?"

"It isn't hard."

Her cool tone discouraged any more conversational overtures. She wasn't letting him off that easy. She had told him twice that she wasn't going to pay for April's sins, but it evidently hadn't sunk in; now she was going to show him.

When he left again she waited half an hour, then carried her suitcase out to the car. She didn't have far to go, and it wouldn't take him long to find her, a few days at the most. Then he could take the car back if he wanted, so she didn't feel guilty about it. Besides, she didn't need it. She fully expected to be back at the ranch before her next doctor's appointment, but if she wasn't, then she would inform Reese that he had to take her. Her plan had nothing to do with staying away from him.

There was a room above Floris's cafe that was always for rent, because there was never anyone in Crook who needed to rent it. It would do for her for as long as she needed it. She drove to Crook and parked the car in front of the cafe. The idea wasn't to hide from Reese; she wanted him to know exactly where she was.

She went into the cafe, but there wasn't anyone behind the counter. "Floris? Is anyone here?"

"Hold your water," came Floris's unmistakable sour voice from the kitchen.

A few minutes later she came through the door. "You want coffee, or something to eat?" "I want to rent the room upstairs." Floris stopped and narrowed her eyes at Madelyn. "What do you want to do that for?"

"Because I need a place to stay." "You've got a big house back on that ranch, and a big man to keep you warm at night, if that's all you need."

"What I have," Madelyn said very clearly, "is a pigheaded husband who needs to be taught a lesson."

"Hmmph. Never seen a man yet wasn't pigheaded."

"I'm pregnant, too." "Does he know?" "He does." "He knows where you are?" "He will soon. I'm not hiding from him. He'll probably come through the door breathing fire and raising hell, but I'm not going back until he understands a few things." "Such as?"
"Such as I'm not his first wife. He got a dirty deal, but I'm not the one who gave it to him, and I'm tired of paying for someone else's dirt."
Floris looked her up and down, then nodded, and a pleased expression for once lit her sour face. "All right, the room's yours. I always did like to see a man get his comeuppance," she muttered as she turned to go back into the kitchen. Then she stopped and looked back at Madelyn. "You got any experience as a short-order cook?"
"No. Do you need one?"
"Wouldn't have asked if I didn't. I'm doing the cooking and waitressing, too. That sorry Lundy got mad because I told him his eggs were like rubber and quit on me last week."
Madelyn considered the situation and found she liked it. "I could wait on tables."
"You ever done that before?"
"No, but I've taken care of Reese for nine months."
Floris grunted. "I guess that qualifies you. He don't strike me as an easy man to satisfy. Well, you in good health? I don't want you on your feet if you're having trouble keeping that baby."
"Perfect health. I saw a doctor yesterday."
"Then the job's yours. I'll show you the room. It's nothing fancy, but it's warm during the winter."
The room was clean and snug, and that was about the limit of its virtues, but Madelyn didn't mind. There was a single bed, a couch, a card table with two chairs, a hot plate and a minuscule bathroom with cracking tile. Floris turned on the heat so it would get warm and returned to the kitchen while Madelyn carried her suitcases in. After hanging up her clothes in the small closet, she went downstairs to the cafe, tied an apron around her and took up her duties as waitress.

* * *

When Reese got home that night he was dead tired; he'd been kicked, stepped on and had a rope burn on his arm. The cows would begin dropping their spring calves any time, and that would be even more work, especially if a cold front moved in.

When he saw that the car was gone and the house was dark, it was like taking a kick in the chest, punching the air out of him. He stared at the dark windows, filled with a paralyzing mixture of pain and rage. He hadn't really thought she would leave. Deep down, he had expected her to stay and fight it out, toe-to-toe and chin to chin, the way she'd done so many times. Instead she'd left, and he closed his eyes at the piercing realization that she was exactly what he'd most feared: a grasping, shallow woman who wasn't able to take the hard times. She'd run back to the city and her cushy life-style, the stylish clothes.

And she'd taken his baby with her.

It was a betrayal ten times worse than anything April had done to him. He had begun to trust Maddie, begun to let himself think of their future in terms of years rather than just an unknown number of months. She had lain beneath him and willingly let him get her pregnant; for most of a year she had lived with him, cooked for him, washed his clothes, laughed and teased and worked alongside him, slept in his arms.

Then she had stabbed him in the back. It was a living nightmare, and he was living it for the second time.

He walked slowly into the house, his steps dragging. There were no warm, welcoming smells in the kitchen, no sound except for the hum of the refrigerator and the ticking of the clock. Despite everything, he had a desperate, useless hope that she'd had to go somewhere, that there was a note of explanation somewhere in the house. He searched all the rooms, but there was no note. He went into the bedroom where she had spent the past two nights and found the dresser drawers empty, the bathroom swept clean of the fragrant female paraphernalia. He was still trying to get used to not seeing her clothes in the closet beside his; to find them nowhere in the house was staggering.

It was like pouring salt into an open wound, but he went into the other bedroom where she had stored her "New York" clothes. It was as if he had to check every missing sign of her inhabitance to verify her absence, a wounded and bewildered animal sniffing around for his mate before he sat down and howled his anger and loss at the world.

But when he opened the closet door he stared at the row of silk blouses, hung on satin-padded hangers and protected by plastic covers, the chic suits and lounging pajamas, the high-heeled shoes in a dozen colors and styles. A

faint hint of her perfume wafted from the clothes, and he broke out in a sweat, staring at them.
Swiftly he went downstairs. Her books were still here, and her stereo system. She might be gone now, but she had left a lot of her things here, and that meant she would be back. She would probably come back during the day, when she would expect him to be gone, so she could pack the rest and leave without ever seeing him.
But if she were going back to New York, as she almost certainly had been planning, why had she taken her ranch clothes and left the city clothes? Who knew why Madelyn did anything? he thought wearily. Why had she paid off the mortgage with her trust fund when she knew that was the one thing, given his past, that he would be unable to bear?
He'd never in his life been angrier, not even when he had sat in a courtroom and heard a judge hand over half his ranch to April. He hadn't expected anything better from April, who had given him ample demonstration of just how vindictive and callous she could be. But when Maddie had blindsided him like that, she had really hit him hard and low, and he was still reeling. Every time he tried to think about it, the pain and anger were so great that they crowded out everything else.
Well, she was gone, so he'd have plenty of time to think about it now. But she would have a hell of a time getting back in to get her things while he was gone, because the first chance he got he was going to change the locks on the house.
For now, however, he was going to do something he hadn't done even when April had done such a good job of wrecking his life. He was going to get the bottle of whiskey that had been in the cupboard for so many years and get dead drunk. Maybe then he would be able to sleep without Maddie beside him.
He felt like hell the next day, with a pounding head and a heaving stomach, but he dragged himself up and took care of the animals; it wasn't their fault he was a damn fool. By the time his headache began to fade and he began to feel halfway human again, it was too late to go to the general store to buy new locks.
The next day the cows began dropping their calves. It was the same every time: when the first one went into labor and drifted away to find a quiet place to calve, the others one by one followed suit. And they could pick some of the damnedest places to have their calves. It was an almost

impossible task for one man to track down the cows in their hiding places, make certain the little newborns were all right, help the cows who were in difficulty and take care of the calves who were born dead or sickly. Instinct always went wrong with at least one cow, and she would refuse to have anything to do with her new baby, meaning Reese had to either get another cow to adopt it or take it to the barn for hand-feeding.

It was three days before he had a minute to rest, and when he did he dropped down on the couch in an exhausted stupor and slept for sixteen hours.

It was almost a week after Madelyn had left before he finally got time to drive to Crook. The pain and anger had become an empty, numb feeling in his chest.

The first thing he saw as he passed Floris's cafe was the white Ford station wagon parked out front.

His heart lurched wildly, and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. She was back, probably on her way to get the rest of her things. He parked next door in front of the general store and stared at the car, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel. The familiar anger exploded into the numb vacuum, and something became immediately, blindingly clear to him.

He wasn't going to let her go. If he had to fight her in every court in the country, he was going to keep his ranch intact and she was going to stay his wife. He'd been glad to see the last of April, but there was no way he was going to let Maddie just walk out. She was carrying his baby, a baby that was going to grow up in his house if he had to tie Maddie to the bed every day when he left.

He got out of the truck and strode toward the cafe, his boot heels thudding on the wooden sidewalk, his face set.

He pushed open the door and walked inside, standing in the middle of the room as he surveyed the booths and tables. There was no long-legged blonde with a lazy smile at any of them, though two lean and bandy-legged cowboys straddled stools at the counter.

Then the kitchen door opened and his long-legged blonde came through it, wrapped in an apron and carrying two plates covered with enormous hamburgers and mounds of steaming French fries. She flicked a glance at him and neither changed expression or missed a beat as she set the plates in front of the cowboys. "Here you go. Let me know if you want any pie.

Floris baked an apple cobbler this morning that'll make you cry, it tastes so good."
Then she looked at him with those blank, cool eyes and said, "What can I get for you?"
The cowboys looked around, and one coughed when he saw who Madelyn was talking to; Reese pretty well knew everybody in a hundred-mile range, and they knew him, too, by sight if not personally. Everyone also knew Madelyn; a woman with her looks and style didn't go unnoticed, so it was damn certain those two cowboys realized it was her husband standing behind them looking like a thunderstorm about to spit lightning and hail all over them.
In a calm, deadly voice Reese said, "Bring me a cup of coffee," and went over to fold his long length into one of the booths.
She brought it immediately, sliding the coffee and a glass of water in front of him. Then she gave him an impersonal smile that didn't reach her eyes and said, "Anything else?" She was already turning to go as she said it.
He snapped his hand out, catching her wrist and pulling her to a halt. He felt the slenderness of her bones under his fingers and was suddenly, shockingly aware of how physically overmatched she was with him, yet she had never backed away from him. Even in bed, when he had held her slim hips in his hands and thrust heavily into her, she had wrapped those legs around him and taken everything he could give her. Maddie wasn't the type to run, unless leaving was something she had planned from the beginning. But if that were so, why was she here? Why hadn't she gone back to New York, out of his reach?
"Sit down," he said in a low, dangerous voice.
"I have work to do."
"I said to sit down." Using his grip on her wrist, he pulled her down into the booth. She was still watching him with those cool, distant eyes.
"What are you doing here?" he snapped, ignoring the looks the two cowboys were giving him.
"I work here."
"That's what I meant. What the *hell* are you doing working here?"
"Supporting myself. What did you expect me to do?"
"I expected you to keep your little butt on the ranch like I told you to."
"Why should I stay where I'm not wanted? By the way, if you can figure out a way to get the car home, feel free to take it. I don't need it."

With an effort he controlled the anger and impatience building in him. It might be just what she wanted, for him to lose his temper in a public place. "Where are you staying?" he asked in a voice that showed the strain he was under.
"Upstairs."
"Get your clothes. You're going home with me."
"No."
"What did you say?"
"I said no. N-O. It's a two-letter word signifying refusal."
He flattened his hands on the table to keep himself from grabbing her and giving her a good shaking, or from pulling her onto his lap and kissing her senseless. Right at the moment, he wasn't certain which it would be. "I'm not putting up with this, Maddie. Get upstairs and get your clothes." Despite himself, he couldn't keep his voice down, and the two cowboys were openly staring at him.
She slid out of the booth and was on her feet before he could grab her, and he was reminded that, when she chose, Maddie could move like the wind.
"Give me one good reason why I should!" she fired back at him, the chill in her eyes beginning to heat now.
"Because you're carrying my baby!" he roared, surging to his own feet.
"You're the one who said, quote, that you didn't care what the hell I did and that you regret marrying me, unquote. I was carrying the baby then, too, so what's different now?"
"I changed my mind."
"Well, bully for you! You also told me that I'm not what you want and I don't have what it takes to be a ranch wife. That's another quote."
One of the cowboys cleared his throat. "You sure look like you've got what it takes to me, Miss Maddie."
Reese rounded on the cowboy with death in his eyes and his fist clenched. "Do you want to wear your teeth or carry them?" he asked in an almost soundless voice.
The cowboy still seemed to be having trouble with his throat. He cleared it again, but it took him two tries before he managed to say, "Just making a comment."
"Then make it outside. This is between me and my wife."
In the West, a man broke his own horses and killed his own snakes, and everybody else kept their nose the hell out of his business. The cowboy

fumbled in his pocket for a couple of bills and laid them on the counter.
"Let's go," he said to his friend.
"You go on." The other cowboy forked up a fry covered in ketchup. "I'm not through eating." *Or watching the show, either.*
Floris came through the kitchen door, her sour expression intact and a spatula in her hand. "Who's making all the noise out here?" she demanded; then her gaze fell on Reese. "Oh, it's you." She made it sound as if he were about as welcome as the plague.
"I've come to take Maddie home," he said.
"Don't see why she'd want to go, you being so sweet-tempered and all."
"She's my wife."
"She can wait on men here and get paid for it." She shook the spatula at him. "What have you got to offer her besides that log in your pants?"
Reese's jaw was like granite. He could toss Madelyn over his shoulder and carry her home, but even though he was willing to bully her, he didn't want to physically force her. For one thing, she was pregnant, but more importantly, he wanted her to go home with him because she wanted to. One look at her face told him that she wasn't going to willingly take a step toward the ranch.
Well, he knew where she was now. She hadn't gone back to New York. She was within reach, and he wasn't giving up. With one last violent look at her, he threw his money on the table and stomped out.
Madelyn slowly let out the breath she'd been holding. That had been close. He was evidently as determined to take her back to the ranch as he was to believe she was a clone of his first wife. And if she knew one thing about Reese Duncan, it was that he was as stubborn as any mule, and he didn't give up. He'd be back.
She picked up his untouched coffee and carried it back to the counter. Floris looked at the door that was still quivering from the force with which Reese had slammed it, then turned to Madelyn with the most incredible expression on her face. It was like watching the desert floor crack as her leathered skin moved and rearranged itself, and a look of unholy glee came into her eyes. The two cowboys watched in shock as Floris actually smiled.
The older woman held out her hand, palm up and fingers stiffly extended. Madelyn slapped her own hand down on it in victory, then reversed the position for Floris's slap as they gave each other a congratulatory low five.
"Wife one, husband zero," Floris said with immense satisfaction.

* * *

He was back the next day, sliding into a booth and watching her with hooded eyes as she took care of the customers. The little cafe was unusually busy today, and he wondered with a sourness that would have done credit to Floris if it was because word of their confrontation the day before had spread. There was nothing like a free floorshow to draw people in.

She looked tired today, and he wondered if she'd been sick. She'd had a few bouts of nausea before she'd left, but her morning sickness hadn't been full-blown. From the way she looked now, it was getting there. It made him even angrier, because if she'd been at home where she belonged she would have been able to lie down and rest.

Without asking, she brought a cup of coffee to him and turned to go. Like a replay of the day before, his hand shot out and caught her. He could almost feel everyone's attention fastening on them like magnets. "Have you been sick?" he asked roughly.

"This morning. It passed when Floris fed me some dry toast. Excuse me, I have other customers."

He let her go because he didn't want another scene like yesterday's. He sipped the coffee and watched her as she moved among the customers, dispensing a smile here and a teasing word there, drawing laughter and making faces light up. That was a talent of hers, finding amusement in little things and inviting others to share it with her, almost enticing them. She had done the same thing to him, he realized. The nine months she'd spent with him had been the most contented of his life, emotionally and physically.

He wanted her back. He wanted to watch the lazy way she strolled around the house and accomplished miracles without seeming to put forth much effort at all. He wanted her teasing him, waking him up with some outlandish bit of trivia and expecting him to match it. He wanted to pull her beneath him, spread her legs and penetrate her body with his, make her admit that she still loved him and would rather be with him than anywhere else.

He didn't understand why she wasn't in New York, why she had only come as far as Crook and stopped, knowing he would soon find her. Hell, running to Crook wasn't running away at all, it was simply moving a little piece down the road.

The only answer was that she had never intended to go back to New York. She hadn't wanted the big city; she had just wanted to get away from him.

The memory of all he'd said to her played in his mind, and he almost flinched. She remembered every word of it, too; she had even quoted some of them back to him. She'd told him at the time that he would regret saying them, but he'd been too enraged, feeling too betrayed, to pay any attention to her. He should have remembered that Maddie gave as good as she got. She could so easily have gone to New York; she had the money in her checking account to do whatever she wanted, and Robert would welcome her back without question. So if she had stayed it had to be because she liked living in Montana. Even the question of revenge could just as easily have been played out from New York as from Crook, because it was her absence from his house that was punishing him. The emptiness of it was driving him crazy.

Eventually she came back by with the coffeepot to refill his cup and ask, "Do you want some pie with that? It's fresh coconut today."

"Sure." It would give him an excuse to stay longer.

The cafe eventually had to clear out some. The customers had other things they had to do, and Reese hadn't done anything interesting enough to make them stay. When Madelyn coasted by to pick up his empty dessert saucer and refill his cup she asked, "Don't you have any work to do?"

"Plenty. The cows dropped their spring calves."

Just for a second her eyes lit; then she shrugged and turned away. He said, "Wait. Sit down a minute and rest. You haven't been off your feet since I got here and that's been – " he stopped to check his watch " – two hours ago."

"It's been busy this morning. You don't stop working a herd just because you want to rest, do you?"

Despite himself, he couldn't help grinning at her comparison between a herd of cattle and her customers. "Sit down anyway. I'm not going to yell at you."

"Well, that's a change," she muttered, but she sat down across from him and propped her feet on the seat beside him, stretching her legs out. He lifted her feet and placed them on his knee, rubbing the calves of her legs under the table and holding her firmly in place when she automatically tried to pull away.

"Just relax," he said quietly. "Should you be on your feet this much?"

"I'd be on my feet if I were still at the ranch. I didn't cook sitting down, you know. I feel fine. I'm just pregnant, not incapacitated." But she closed her

eyes as his kneading fingers worked at her tired muscles; he had a good touch, one learned from years of working with animals.
He had a good touch in bed, too. Every woman should have a lover like Reese, wild and hungry, as generous with his own body as he was demanding of hers. The memories pooled in her stomach like lava, raising her temperature, and her eyes popped open. If she let herself think about it too much, she would be in his lap before she knew what she was doing.
Reese said, "I want you to come home with me."
If he had been angrily demanding she could have met him with her own anger, but his quiet tone invited instead of demanded. She sighed and leaned her elbows on the table. "My answer is still the same. Give me one good reason why I should."
"And my answer is still the same. You're carrying my baby. It deserves to have its heritage, to grow up on the ranch. You even told me that was one of the reasons you paid the mortgage, to preserve the ranch for our children."
"I haven't taken the baby away from Montana," she pointed out. "I haven't even gone far from the ranch. The baby will have you and the ranch, but I don't have to live there for that to be possible."
"Miss Maddie, you got any more of that coffee?" a customer called, and she pulled her feet down from his lap without another word, going about her business with a smile.
Reese finally gave up and went home, but he tossed in the big bed all night, thinking of her breasts and the way she tasted, the way it felt to slide into her and feel her tight inner clinging, hear the soft sounds she made as he brought her to pleasure.
He had to mend fences the next day, and he worked automatically, his mind still on Maddie, trying to figure out how to get her back.
She'd made a telling point when she had asked him why she hadn't paid the mortgage before, if all she'd wanted had been a legal interest in the ranch that would override any prenuptial agreement, and now he had to ask himself the same thing. If that was all she'd wanted, why had she waited nine months? Why had she chased chickens and cows, fought blizzards and risked her own life to save his if she'd been planning on getting out? Even more telling, why had she gone off her birth control pills and let him get her pregnant? That baby she carried was a planned baby, one they had talked about and agreed to have. A woman didn't deliberately get pregnant if she'd been planning to spend only a few months and then get out. The land was

worth a fortune; if money had been all she wanted, paying off the mortgage had entitled her to a great deal without the added, admittedly powerful, asset of a pregnancy. No, she had gotten pregnant only because she'd wanted this baby, and she had paid off the mortgage for one reason: to save the ranch for him, Reese Duncan. She might say she was saving her child's heritage, but the baby was still an abstract, an unknown person, however powerful her budding maternal instincts were. She had saved the ranch for her husband, not her child.

Beyond that, Maddie didn't need money. With Robert Cannon for a stepbrother, she could have anything she wanted just by asking. Robert Cannon had money that made April's family look like two-bit pikers.

It all kept coming back to the same thing, the same question. Why had she paid the mortgage, knowing how dead set he was against it, if she hadn't been planning to file for divorce? The answer was always the same, and she had given it to him. She had never tried to hide it. She loved him.

The realization staggered him anew, and he had to stop to wipe the sweat from his face, even though the temperature was only in the thirties. Maddie loved him. She had tried to tell him when he'd been yelling all those insults at her, and he hadn't listened.

Savagely he jerked the wire tight and hammered in the staple to hold it. Crow had a bitter taste to it, but he was going to have to eat a lot of it if he wanted Maddie to come back to him. He'd gone off the deep end and acted as if she were just like April, even though he knew better. April had never enjoyed living in Montana, while Maddie had wallowed in it like a delighted child. This was the life she wanted.

She loved him enough to take the chance on paying off the mortgage, knowing how angry he would be but doing it anyway because it would save the ranch for him. She had put him before herself, and that was the true measure of love, but he'd been too much of a blind, stubborn ass to admit it. His temper had gotten him into a hell of a mess, and he didn't have anyone to blame but himself. He had to stop letting April's greed blight his life; he had to stop seeing other people through April-embittered eyes. That was the worst thing she had done to him, not ruining him financially, but ruining the way he had seen other people. He'd even admitted it to himself the day he had met Maddie; if he had run across her before marrying April, he would have been after her with every means at his disposal, and he would have gotten her, too. He would have chased her across every state in the country

if necessary, and put her in his bed before she could get away. As it was, he hadn't been able to resist her for long. Even if the schoolteacher – he couldn't even remember her name – had said yes, he would have found some way of getting out of it. Maddie had been the only one he'd wanted wearing his name from the minute he'd seen her.

Damn. If only foresight were as clear as hindsight, he could have saved himself a big helping of crow.

Chapter 12

He walked into the cafe and immediately every eye turned toward him. He was beginning to feel like a damn outcast, the way everyone stopped talking and stared at him whenever he showed his face in town. Floris had come out of the kitchen and was arguing with one of the customers, who had ordered something she thought was stupid, from what he could hear, but she stopped yammering and stared at him, too. Then she abruptly turned and went back into the kitchen, probably to get her spatula.

Madelyn didn't acknowledge him, but no more than a minute had passed before a cup of hot coffee was steaming in front of him. She looked so good it was all he could do to keep from grabbing her. Her hair was in a loose French braid down her back, she wore those loose, chic, pleated jeans and a pair of deck shoes, and an oversize khaki shirt with the shirttails knotted at her waist, the collar turned up and the sleeves rolled, an outfit that looked impossibly stylish even under the apron she wore. He took a closer look at the shirt and scowled. It was *his* shirt! Damn it, when she'd left him she'd taken some of his clothes!

No doubt about it. He had to get that woman back, if only for the sake of his wardrobe.

A few minutes later she put a slice of chocolate pie on the table, and he picked up his fork with a hidden smile. They might be separated, but she was still trying to feed him. He'd always been a little startled by the way she had fussed over him and seen to his comfort, as if she had to protect him. Since he was a great deal bigger than she, it had always seemed incongruous to him. His own protective instincts worked overtime where she was concerned, too, so he supposed it evened out.

Finally he caught her eye and indicated the seat across from him with a jerk of his chin. Her eyebrows lifted at the arrogant summons, and she ignored him. He sighed. Well, what had he expected? He should have learned by now that Maddie didn't respond well to orders – unless she wanted to, for her own reasons.

There was evidently a rush hour in Crook now, at least judging by the number of customers who found it necessary to stop by the cafe. He wondered dourly if there was an alert system to signal everyone in the county when his truck was parked out front. It was over an hour before the place began to empty, but he waited patiently. The next time she came over with a refill of coffee he said, "Talk to me, Maddie. Please."

Perhaps it was the "please" that got to her, because she gave him a startled look and sat down. Floris came out of the kitchen and surveyed Reese with her hands on her hips, as if wondering why he was still there. He winked at her, the first time he'd ever done anything that playful, and her face filled with outrage just before she whirled to go back to the kitchen.

Maddie laughed softly, having seen the byplay. "You're in her bad books now, listed under 'Sorry Low-Down Husbands Who Play Around'."

He grunted. "What was I listed under before, 'Sorry Low-Down Husbands Who Don't Play Around'?"

"'Yet,'" she added. "Floris doesn't have a high opinion of men."

"I've noticed." He looked her over closely, examining her face. "How do you feel today?"

"Fine. That's the first thing everyone asks me every day. Being pregnant is a fairly common occurrence, you know, but you'd think no other woman in this county had ever had a baby."

"No one's ever had *my* baby before, so I'm entitled to be interested." He reached across the table and took her hand, gently folding her fingers over his. She was still wearing her wedding ring. For that matter, he was still wearing his. It was the only jewelry he'd ever worn in his life, but he'd liked the looks of that thin gold band on his hand almost as much as he had liked the way his ring looked on Maddie. He played with the ring, twisting it on her finger, reminding her of its presence. "Come home with me, Maddie."

Same tune, same lyrics. She smiled sadly as she repeated her line. "Give me one good reason why I should."

"Because you love me." He said it gently, his fingers tightening on hers. That was the most powerful argument he could think of, the one she

couldn't deny.
"I've always loved you. That isn't new. I loved you when I packed my clothes and walked out the door. If it wasn't reason enough to stay, why should it be reason enough to go back?"
Her gray, gray eyes were calm as she looked at him. His chest tightened as he realized it wasn't going to work. She wasn't going to come back to him no matter what argument he used. He'd been on a rollercoaster of hope since the day he had seen the station wagon parked out front, but suddenly he was plunging down a deep drop that didn't have an end. Dear God, had he ruined the best thing that had ever happened to him because he hadn't been able to accept it?
There was a thick knot in his throat; he had to swallow before he could speak again. "Do you... do you mind if I check up on you every day or so? Just to make sure you're feeling okay. And I'd like to go with you when you have a doctor's appointment, if you don't mind."
Now Maddie had to swallow at her sudden impulse to cry. She had never seen Reese diffident before, and she didn't like it. He was bold and arrogant and quick-tempered, and that was just the way she wanted him, as long as he realized a few important facts about their marriage. "This is your baby, too, Reese. I'd never try to cut you out."
He sighed, still playing with her fingers. "I was wrong, sweetheart. I have a phobia about the ranch after what April did to me – I know, you're not April, and I shouldn't take it out on you for what she did eight years ago. You told me, but I didn't listen. So tell me now what I can do to make it up to you."
"Oh, Reese, it isn't a matter of making anything up to me," she cried softly. "I don't have a scorecard with points on it, and after you tally up so many I'll move back to the ranch. It's about us, our relationship, and whether we have any future together."
"Then tell me what you're still worried about. Baby, I can't fix it if I don't know what it is."
"If you don't know what it is, then nothing *can* fix it."
"Are we down to riddles now? I'm not any good at mind reading," he warned. "Whatever you want, just say it right out. I can deal with reality, but guessing games aren't my strong suit."
"I'm not jerking you around. I'm not happy with this situation, either, but I'm not going back until I know for certain we have a future. That's the way

it is, and I won't change my mind."
Slowly he stood up and pulled some bills out of his pocket. Maddie held up her hand dismissively. "Never mind, this one's on me. I get good tips," she said with a crooked smile.
He looked down at her with a surge of hunger that almost took him apart, and he didn't try to resist it. He leaned down and covered her mouth with his, tilting her head back so he could slant his lips more firmly over hers, his tongue sliding between her automatically parted lips. They had made love too often, their senses were too attuned to each other, for it to be anything but overwhelmingly right. She made one of her soft little sounds, and her tongue played with his, her mouth responding. If they had been alone the kiss would have ended in lovemaking; it was that simple, that powerful. No other woman in his life had ever gotten to him the way Maddie did.
The cafe was totally silent as the few customers still there watched with bated breath. The situation between Reese Duncan and his spirited wife was the best entertainment the county had seen in years.
"Harrummph!"
Reese lifted his head, his lips still shiny from the kiss. The loud interruption had come from Floris, who had left the sanctuary of the kitchen to protect her waitress. At least that was what Reese thought, since she had bypassed the spatula in favor of a butcher knife.
"I don't hold with none of that carrying-on in my place," she said, scowling at him.
He straightened and said softly but very clearly, "Floris, what you need is a good man to give you some loving and cure that sour disposition."
The smile she gave him was truly evil in intent. She gestured with the butcher knife. "The last fool that tried drew back a nub."
It always happened. Some people just didn't know when to keep out of something. The cowboy who had gotten in the argument with her the first time Reese had brought Maddie in just had to stick his oar in now. "Yeah, when was that, Floris?" he asked. "Before or after the Civil War?"
She turned on him like a she-bear on fresh meat. "Hell, boy, it was your daddy, and you're the best he could do with what he had left!"

* * *

It was the end of April. Spring was coming on fast, but Reese couldn't take the pleasure in the rebirth of the land that he usually did. He rattled around

in the house, more acutely aware of its emptiness now than he had ever been before. He was busy, but he wasn't content. Maddie still wasn't home.
She had given him financial security with her legacy from her grandmother. Without the remaining payments of the huge mortgage hanging over him, he could use the money from the sale of last year's beef to expand, just as he had originally planned. For that matter, he could take out another loan with the ranch as collateral and start large-scale ranching again, with enough cowhands to help him do it right. Because of Maddie, he could now put the ranch back on a par with what it used to be, even with the reduced acreage.
She had never seen it as it had been, probably couldn't imagine the bustle and life in a large, profitable cattle ranch.
He needed to make some sort of decision and make it soon. If he were going to expand, he needed to get working on it right now.
But his heart wasn't in it. As much as he had always loved ranching, as deeply as his soul was planted in this majestically beautiful range, he didn't have the enthusiasm for it that he'd always had before. Without Maddie, he didn't much care.
But she was right; it was their baby's heritage. For that reason he had to take care of it to the best of his ability.
Life was always a fluid series of options. The circumstances and options might change from day to day, but there was always a set of choices to be made, and now he had to make a very important one.
If he expanded on his own it would take all his capital and leave him without anything in reserve if another killing blizzard nearly wiped him out. If he went to the bank for another loan, using the ranch as collateral, he would be putting himself back in the same position Maddie had just gotten him out of. He had no doubt he could make it, given that he would be able to reinvest all of the money in the ranch instead of paying it out to a grasping ex-wife, but he'd had enough of bank loans.
That left an investor. Robert Cannon was brilliant; he'd make one hell of a partner. And Reese did have a very clear business mind, so he could see all the advantages of a partnership. Not only would it broaden his financial base, he would be able to diversify, so the survival of the ranch wouldn't come down to a matter of how severe the winter was. The land was his own legacy to his child.
He picked up the telephone and punched the numbers on the card Robert had given him at Christmas.

When he put the receiver down half an hour later, it was all over except the paperwork. He and Robert dealt very well together, two astute men who were able to hammer out a satisfactory deal with a minimum of words. He felt strange, a little light-headed, and it took him a while to realize what had happened. He had voluntarily put his trust in someone else, surrendering his totalitarian control of the ranch; moreover, his new partner was a member of his wife's family, something he never could have imagined a year before. It was as if he had finally pulled free of the morass of hatred and resentment that had been dragging on him for years. April, finally, was in the past. He had made a mistake in his first choice of a wife; smart people learned from their mistakes and went on with their lives. He had learned, all right, but he hadn't gotten on with living until Maddie had taught him how. Even then he had clung to his bitter preconceptions until he had ruined his marriage. God, he'd crawl on his hands and knees if it would convince her to come back.

As the days passed he slowly became desperate enough to do just that, but before the need inside him became uncontrollable, he received a phone call that knocked the wind out of him. The call was from April's sister, Erica. April was dead, and he was the main beneficiary in her will; would he please come?

Erica met him at JFK. She was a tall, lean, reserved woman, only two years older than April, but she had always seemed more like an aunt than a sister. Already there was a startling streak of gray in the dark hair waving back from her forehead, one she made no attempt to hide. She held out her hand to him in a cool, distant manner. "Thank you for coming, Reese. Given the circumstances, it's more than I expected and certainly more than we deserve."

He shrugged as he shook her hand. "A year ago I would have agreed with you."

"What's happened in the past year?" Her gaze was direct.'

"I remarried. I got back on my feet financially."

Her eyes darkened. She had gray eyes, too, he noticed, though not that soft, slumberous dove gray of Maddie's eyes. "I'm sorry about what happened in the divorce. April was, too, after it was over, but there didn't seem to be any way to make amends. And I'm glad you remarried. I hope you're very happy with your wife."

He would be, he thought, if he could only get her to live with him, but he didn't say that to Erica. "Thank you. We're expecting a baby around the end of October."
"Congratulations." Her severe face lightened for a moment, and she actually smiled, but when the smile faded he saw the tiredness of her soul. She was grieving for her sister, and it couldn't have been easy for her to call him.
"What happened to April?" he asked. "Was she ill?"
"No, not unless you want to call it an illness of the spirit. She remarried, too, you know, less than a year after your divorce, but she was never happy and divorced him a couple of years ago."
It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if she'd taken Number Two to the cleaners, too, but he bit it back. It would be petty of him in the face of Erica's grief. Once he would have said it, once he had been bitter enough that he wouldn't have cared who he wounded. Maddie had changed that.
"She had started drinking heavily," Erica continued. "We tried to convince her to get therapy, to control it, and for a while she tried to stop on her own. But she was sad, Reese, so sad. You could see it in her eyes. She was tired of living."
He drew in a sharp breath. "Suicide?"
"Not technically. Not intentionally. At least, I don't think so. I can't let myself think it was. But she couldn't stop drinking, because it was the only solace she had. The night she died, she'd been drinking heavily and was driving back from Cape Cod. She went to sleep, or at least they think that's what happened, and she became one more statistic on drunk driving."
Erica's voice was calm and unemotional, but the pain was in her eyes. She reached out and awkwardly touched his arm, a woman who found it as difficult to receive comfort as she did to give it.
On the taxi ride into the city he asked, "Why did she make me her main beneficiary?"
"Guilt, I think. Maybe love. She was so wild about you in the beginning, and so bitter after the divorce. She was jealous of the ranch, you know. After the divorce, she told me she would rather you'd had a mistress than own that ranch, because she could fight another woman, but that chunk of ground had a hold on you that no woman could equal. That's why she went after the ranch in the divorce, to punish you." She gave him a wry smile. "God, how vindictive people can be. She couldn't see that she simply wasn't the type of wife you needed. You didn't like the same things, didn't want the

same things out of life. When you didn't love her as much as you loved the ranch, she thought it was a flaw in her rather than accepting it as the difference between two very different people."

Reese had never thought of April in that light, never seen their marriage and subsequent divorce through her eyes. The only thing he had seen in her had been the bitterness, and that was what he had allowed to color his life. It was a blow to learn the color had been false, as if he had been wearing tinted lenses that had distorted everything.

He spent the night in a hotel, the sort of hotel he had once taken for granted. It felt strange to be back on firm financial ground again, and he wondered if he had ever truly missed the trappings of wealth. It was nice to be able to afford the posh mini-suite, but he wouldn't have minded a plain motel. The years without money had rearranged his priorities.

The reading of the will the next day didn't take much time. April's family, too caught up in their grief to be hostile, was subdued. So was her father. April had thoroughly thought out the disposal of her possessions, as if she had anticipated her death. She divided her jewelry and personal possessions among family members, likewise the small fortune in stocks and bonds she had owned. It was her bequest to him that left him stunned.

"To Gideon Reese Duncan, my former husband, I leave the amount of his divorce settlement to me. Should he precede me in death, the same amount shall be given to his heirs in a gesture of fairness too long delayed."

The lawyer droned on, but Reese didn't hear any of it. He couldn't take it in. He was in shock. He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees, staring at the Oriental rug under his feet. She had given it all back, and in doing so had shown him the stark futility of the years of hatred.

The most ironic thing was that he had already let go of it. The inner darkness hadn't been able to withstand Maddie's determination. Even if he had never been able to rebuild the ranch to its former size, he would have been happy as long as he had Maddie. He had laughed with her and made love with her, and somewhere along the way his obsession had changed into a love so powerful that now he couldn't live without her, he could only exist.

His heart suddenly squeezed so painfully that he almost grabbed his chest. Hell! How could he have been so stupid?

Come home with me.

Give me one good reason why I should.

That was all she'd asked for, one good reason, but he hadn't given it to her. He'd thrown out reasons, all right, but not the one she'd been asking for, the one she needed. She'd all but told him what it was, but he'd been so caught up in what he needed that he hadn't paid any attention to what *she* needed. How simple it was, and now he knew what to say.

Give me one good reason why I should.

Because I love you.

* * *

He strode through the door of Floris's cafe and stood in the middle of the room. The increase in customers was still going strong, maybe because Floris was safely isolated in the kitchen and Maddie was out on the floor charming everyone with her lazy drawl and sexy walk.

As usual, silence fell when he entered and everyone turned to look at him. Maddie was behind the counter, wiping up a coffee spill while she exchanged some good-natured quips with Glenna Kinnaird. She looked up, saw him and went still, her eyes locked on him.

He hooked his thumbs in his belt and winked at her. "Riddle me this, sweetheart. What has two legs, a hard head and acts like a jackass?"

"That's easy," she scoffed. "Reese Duncan."

There was a muffled explosion of suppressed snickers all around them. He could see the amusement in her eyes and had to grin. "How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice dropping to a low, intimate tone that excluded everyone else in the cafe and made several women draw in their breath.

Her mouth quirked in that self-amusement that made him want to grab her to him. "This isn't one of my good days. The only thing holding me together is static cling."

"Come home with me, and I'll take care of you."

She looked him in the eye and said quietly, "Give me one good reason why I should."

Right there in front of God and most of Crook, Montana, he drew in a deep breath and took the gamble of a lifetime, his words plain and heard by all, because no one was making even the pretense of not listening.

"Because I love you."

Maddie blinked, and to his surprise he saw her eyes glitter with tears. Before he could start forward, however, her smile broke through like sunshine through a cloud bank. She didn't take the time to go around the

counter; she climbed on top of it and slid off on the other side. "It's about time," she said as she went into his arms.
The customers broke into applause, and Floris came out of the kitchen. She sniffed and looked displeased when she saw Madelyn hanging in Reese's arms with her feet off the floor. "I suppose this means I've got to get another waitress," she muttered.
Someone muttered back, "Hell, Floris, if you'll just stay in the kitchen we'll find you another waitress."
"It's a deal," she said, and startled everyone in the cafe by actually smiling.

* * *

He didn't wait to get back to the house before he made love to her; as soon as they were on Duncan land he stopped the truck and pulled her astride him. Madelyn thought her heart would burst as she listened to his roughly muttered words of love and lust and need. She couldn't get enough of touching him; she wanted to sink into his skin, and she tried to.
When they finally got to the house he carried her inside and up the stairs to their bedroom, where he placed her on the big bed and began stripping her. She laughed, a drugged, wanton sound, as she stretched languidly. "Again?"
"I want to see you," he said, his voice strained. When she was naked he was silent, struck dumb and enchanted by the changes in her body. They were still slight, but obvious to him because he knew every inch of her. There was just beginning to be a faint curve to her belly, and her breasts were a little rounder, even firmer than before, her nipples darkened to a lush reddish brown. He leaned forward and circled one with his tongue, and her entire body quivered. "God, I love you," he said, and laid his head on her belly, his arms locked around her hips.
Madelyn slid her fingers into his hair. "It took you long enough," she said gently.
"What I lack in quickness, I make up in staying power."
"Meaning?"
"That I'll still be telling you that fifty years from now." He paused and turned his head to kiss her stomach. "I have something else to tell you."
"Is it good?"
"I think so. Things are going to be changing around here pretty soon."
"How?" She looked suspicious. "I'm not sure I want things to change."
"I have a new partner. I called Robert a week or so ago, and he bought in. We'll be expanding in a big way as soon as I can get started on it. This is

now the Duncan and Cannon ranch."
Madelyn burst into laughter, startling him into lifting his head from her stomach. "Whatever you do," she said, "don't call it the D and C. I don't think I could live on a ranch named after a surgical procedure!"
He grinned, feeling everything in him come alive under the magic spell of her laughter. "It'll keep the same name," he said.
"Good." Slowly her laughter faded, and she gave him a somber look. "Why did you call him?"
"Because I trust you," he said simply. "Through you, I can trust him. Because it was a good business decision. Because I wanted to show you how a really good ranch operates. Because we're having a baby. Because, damn it, I'm too damn proud to be satisfied with a second-rate operation. Is that enough reasons?"
"The first one was good enough." She put her hands on his face and stared at him, her heart in his eyes. It rattled him, even while it made him feel as if he could conquer the world, to see how much Maddie loved him. He started to lean down to kiss her when she said seriously, "Did you know that a ten-gallon hat will really only hold about three quarts?"

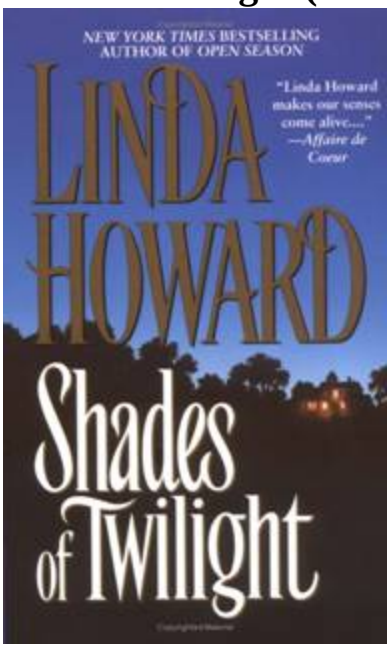
* * *

On the third of November, Madelyn lay in a labor room in Billings, holding Reese's hand and trying to concentrate on her breathing. She had been there over twenty-four hours and she was exhausted, but the nurses kept telling her everything was fine. Reese was unshaven and had dark circles under his eyes. Robert was somewhere outside, wearing a rut in the tile of the hall.
"Give me another one," she said. Reese was looking desperate, but she needed something to get her mind off herself.
"India ink really comes from China."
"You're really scraping the bottom of the barrel, aren't you? Let's see." A contraction interrupted her, and she squeezed his hand as it surged and peaked, then fell off. When she could speak again she said, "The sounds of stomach growling are called borborygmus." She gave him a triumphant look.
He cradled her hand against his cheek. "You've been reading the dictionary again, and that's cheating. I've got a good one. The San Diego Chargers got their name because the original owner also owned the Carte Blanche credit card company. 'Charge' is what he wanted the cardholders to say."

She laughed, but the sound was abruptly cut off as another contraction seized her. This one was a little different in intensity, and in the way it made her feel. She panted her way through it, staring at the monitor with blurring eyes so she could see the mechanical confirmation of what she felt. She lay back against his arm and said weakly, "I don't think it's going to be much longer."
"Thank God." He didn't know if he could hold out much longer. Watching her in pain was the hardest thing he had ever done, and he was seriously considering limiting the number of their children to one. He kissed her sweaty temple. "I love you, sweetheart."
That earned him one of her slow smiles. "I love you, too." Another contraction.
The nurse checked her and smiled. "You're right, Mrs. Duncan, it won't be much longer. We'd better get you into delivery."
He was with her during delivery. The doctor had kept careful watch on the growing baby and didn't think she'd have any trouble delivering it. Reese wondered violently if the doctor's idea of trouble differed from his. It was thirty-six hours since her labor had begun. Less than half an hour after he'd told her about the San Diego Chargers, Reese was holding his red, squalling son in his hands.
Madelyn watched him through tear-blurred eyes, smiling giddily. The expression on Reese's face was so intense and tender and possessive that she could barely stand it. "Eight pounds, two ounces," he murmured to the infant. "You just barely made it under the wire."
Madelyn laughed and reached for both husband and son. Reese settled the baby in her arms and cradled her in his, unable to take his eyes from the both of them. He'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life, even if her hair was matted with sweat and coming loose from her braid. God, he felt good! Exhausted but good.
She yawned and rested her head against his shoulder. "I think we did a good job," she announced, examining the baby's tiny fingers and damp dark hair. "I also think I'm going to sleep for a week."
When she was in her room, just before she did go to sleep, she heard Reese say it again. "I love you, sweetheart." She was too sleepy to answer, but she reached out and felt him take her hand. Those were three words she never got tired of hearing, though she'd heard them often during the past months.

Reese sat and watched her as she slept, a smile in his eyes. Slowly his eyelids drooped as he succumbed to his weariness, but not once during his sleep did he turn loose of her hand.

Shades of Twilight (1996)



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TO
Beverly Beaver, a wonderful woman and dearly loved friend, for all the years of camaraderie and support, as well as taking the time to escort me around Tuscumbia and Florence, tell me who is sleeping with whom, and show me where all the bodies are buried. (Just joking, folks ... you hope.)
And to Joyce B. R. Farley, sister extraordinaire. Here's to dolls, both blond and redheaded; tricycles with no brakes; attack roosters; graveyards for socks; hair rollers and bonfires; makeup and Molotov cocktails. You're the only other person I know who understands the reason behind wearing a Groucho mask and a tiara in public and the only other person I know who's done it.
(For the curious: if you wear a Groucho mask and a tiara, people will figure you're either important, or crazy. Either way, they'll leave you alone. Try it some day when you're feeling grouchy and don't want to be bothered.)

Prologue

She heard her own soft cries, but the pleasure exploding in her body made everything else seem unreal, distanced somehow from the hot magic of what he was doing to her. The noon sunlight wormed its way through the rustling leaves overhead, blinding her, dazzling her as she arched upward against him.
He wasn't gentle with her. He didn't treat her like a hothouse flower, the way the other boys did. Until she'd met him, she hadn't known how boring it was to always be treated like a princess. To the others, the Davenport name had made her a prize to be sought but never sullied; to him, she was just a woman.
With him, she was a woman. Though she was nineteen, her family treated her as if she were still a child. The protectiveness had never chafed her, until two weeks ago when she'd met him for the first time.
Naive and innocent she might be; stupid she wasn't. She knew when he'd introduced himself that his family was little better than white trash, and that her family would be horrified that she had even spoken to him. But the way his muscled torso had strained the fabric of his too-tight T-shirt had made her mouth go dry, and the swaggering masculinity of his walk had started a strange tighening deep in her abdomen. His voice had lowered seductively

when he spoke to her, and his blue eyes had been hot with promise. She'd known then that he wouldn't limit himself to hand-holding or necking. She knew what he'd wanted of her. But the wild response of her body was out of her experience, beyond her control, and when he asked her to meet him, she had agreed.

She couldn't get away at night without everyone knowing where she went, but it was easy to go out alone for a ride during the day and easy to arrange a meeting place. He had seduced her that very first time, stripping her naked beneath this very same oak tree-no, she couldn't pretend that it was a seduction. She had come here knowing what would happen, and she had been willing. Despite the pain of the first time, he had also shown her a wild pleasure she hadn't known existed. And every day, she came back for more. He was crude sometimes, but even that excited her. He had been proud that he was the one to "bust her cherry," as he'd put it. Sometimes he said something, with a sneer in his voice, about a Neeley screwing a Davenport. Her family would be horrified if they knew. But still she dreamed, dreamed of how he would look in a nice suit and with his hair freshly cut and neatly combed as they stood together and informed the family that they were going to get married. She dreamed of him going to work at one of the family businesses and showing everyone how smart he was, that he could rise above the rest of his family. He would be a gentleman in public, but in private he would roll her on the bed and do these nasty, delicious things to her. She didn't want that part to change at all, He finished, groaning with his climax, and almost immediately rolled off of her. She wished he would hold her for a moment before withdrawing, but he didn't like to cuddle when the weather was so hot. He stretched out on his back, the sunlight dappling his naked body, and almost immediately began dozing. She didn't mind. With two weeks' experience, she knew that he would awaken ready to make love again. In the meantime, she was content to simply watch him.

He was so exciting that he made her breath catch. She lifted herself onto her elbow beside him and reached out with one lightly exploring finger to trace the cleft in his chin. The corners of his mouth twitched, but he didn't awaken.

The family would have a collective conniption fit if they knew about him. The family! She sighed. Being a Davenport had ruled her life from the day she was born. It hadn't all been onerous. She loved the clothes and jewelry, the luxury of Davencourt, the prestigious schools, the sheer snobbery of it

all. But the rules of behavior had chafed; sometimes she wanted to do something wild, just for the hell of it. She wanted to drive fast, she wanted to jump fences that were too high, she wanted ... this. The rough, the dangerous, the forbidden. She loved the way he would tear her delicate, expensive silk underwear in his hurry to get to her. That perfectly symbolized all she wanted in this life, both the luxury and the danger.
That wasn't what the family wanted for her, however. It was assumed that she would marry the Heir, as she thought of him, and take her place in Colbert County society, with lunches at the yacht club, endless dinner parties for business and political associates, the dutiful production of two little heirs.
She didn't want to marry the Heir. She wanted this instead, this hot, reckless excitement, the thrill of knowing that she flirted with the forbidden.
She ran her hand down his body, sliding her fingers into the thatch of pubic hair that surrounded his sex. As she had expected, he stirred, wakening, and his sex did, too. He gave a low, rough laugh as he lunged upward, rolling her down to the blanket and settling on top of her.
"You're the greediest little bitch I've ever screwed," he said and shoved roughly into her.
She flinched, more from the deliberate crudity of his words than the force of his entry. She was still wet from the last time, so her body accepted him easily enough. But he seemed to like saying things that he knew would sting her, his eyes narrowed as he watched her reaction. She knew what it was, she thought, and forgave him. She knew he wasn't entirely comfortable being her lover, he was too aware of the social distance between them, and this was his way of trying to bring her nearer to his own level. But he didn't have to bring her down, she thought; she was going to bring him up.
She tightened her thighs around him, slowing his strokes so she could tell him before the growing heat in her loins made her forget what she wanted to say.
"Let's get married next week. I don't care about a big wedding, we can elope if-" He paused, his blue eyes flashing down at her.
"Married?" he asked and laughed.
"Where'd you get a stupid idea like that? I'm already married."
He resumed thrusting. She lay beneath him, numb with shock. A light breeze stirred the leaves overhead, and the sunlight pierced through,

blinding her. Married? Granted, she didn't know much about him or his family, only that they weren't respectable, but a wife?
Fury and pain roared through her, and she struck out at him, her palm lashing across his cheek. He slapped her in return and caught her wrists, pinning them to the ground on each side of her head.
"Goddamn, what's wrong with you?" he snapped, temper flaring hotly in his eyes.
She heaved beneath him, trying to throw him off, but he was far too heavy. Tears stung her eyes and ran down her temples into her hair. His presence inside her was suddenly unbearable, and each stroke seemed to rasp her like a rusty file. In her paroxysm of pain, she thought she would die if he continued.
"You liar!" she shrieked, trying to jerk her hands free.
"Cheat! Get off me! Go-go screw your wife!"
"She won't let me," he panted, hammering at her with cruel enjoyment of her struggles plain in his expression.
"She just had a kid."
She screamed with rage and managed to jerk one hand free, clawing him across the face before he could grab her. Cursing, he slapped her again, then drew back and swiftly flipped her onto her stomach. He was on her before she could scramble away, and she screamed again as she felt him plunge deep into her. She was helpless, flattened by his weight, unable to reach him to either hit or kick. He used her, hurting her with his roughness. Not five minutes before, the rough handling had excited her, but now she wanted to vomit, and she had to clench her teeth hard against the hot, rising nausea. She pressed her face into the blanket, wishing she could smother herself, that she could do anything other than simply endure. But worse than the pain of betrayal, of realizing that she was nothing more than a convenience to him was the bitter knowledge that it was her fault. She had brought this on herself, eagerly sought him out and not only let him treat her like a piece of trash, but enjoyed it! What a fool she was, spinning fairy tales of love and marriage to justify what was nothing more than a walk on the wild side.
He finished, grunting with his climax, and pulled out of her to fall heavily beside her. She lay where she was, trying desperately to pull the shattered pieces of herself back into some semblance of humanity. Wildly, she thought of revenge. With her torn. clothes and the marks of his hand on her

face, she could hurry home in very real hysterics, charge him with rape. She could make it stick, too; after all, she was a Davenport.
But it would be a lie. The fault, the weakness, was hers. She had welcomed him into her body. These last few minutes after she had changed her mind were little enough punishment for her monumental stupidity. It was a lesson she would never forget, the humiliation and sense of worthlessness a mental hair shirt she would wear for the rest of her life.
The burden of guilt pressed down on her. She had willingly traveled down this path, but now she had had enough. She would marry the Heir, the way everyone expected her to do, and spend the rest of her life being a dutiful Davenport.
Silently she sat up and began dressing. He watched her with drowsy malice in his blue, blue eyes.
"What's the matter?" he sneered.
"Did you think you were something special to me? Let me tell you something, baby: snatch is snatch, and your fancy name don't make yours anything special. What I got from you, I can get from any other bitch."
She put on her shoes and stood up. The pain of his words lashed at her, but she didn't let herself react to them. Instead she merely replied, "I won't be back."
"Sure you will," he said lazily, stretching and rubbing his chest.
"Because what you got from me, you can't get anywhere else."
She didn't look back at him as she walked to where her horse was tied and painfully hauled herself into the saddle, the motion accomplished without her usual grace. The thought of returning to be used like a whore made the nausea rise hot and bitter in her throat again, and she wanted to kick him for his malicious, supreme confidence. She would forget the heated, soul-destroying pleasure he had given her and content herself with the life that had been planned for her. She could think of nothing worse than to come crawling to him and see the triumph in his eyes as he took her.
No, she thought as she rode away, I won't come back. Id rather die than be Harper Neeley's whore again.

BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

What are we going to do with her?"
"God knows. We certainly can't take her."
The voices were hushed, but Roanna heard them anyway and knew they were talking about her. She curled her skinny little body into a tighter knot, hugging her knees to her chest as she stared stolidly out the window at the manicured lawn of Davencourt, her grandmother's home. Other people had yards, but Grandmother had a lawn. The lawn was a deep, rich green, and she had always loved the feel of her bare feet sinking into the thick grass, like walking on a live carpet. Now, however, she had no desire to go outside and play. She just wanted to sit here in the bay window, the one she had always thought of as her "dreaming window," and pretend that nothing had changed, that Mama and Daddy hadn't died and she'd never see them again.
"It's different with Jessamine," the first voice continued.
"She's a young lady, not still a child like Roanna. We're simply too old to take on someone that young."
They wanted her cousin Jessie, but they didn't want her. Roanna stubbornly blinked to hold back the tears as she listened to her aunts and uncles discuss the problem of what to "do" with her and list the reasons why they'd each be glad to take Jessie into their homes, but Roanna would simply be too much trouble.
"I'll be good!" she wanted to cry but held the words inside just as she held the tears. What had she done that was so terrible they didn't want her? She tried to be a good girl, she said "ma'am" and "sir" when she talked to them. Was it because she had sneaked a ride on Thunderbolt? No one ever would have known if she hadn't fallen off and torn her new dress and gotten it dirty, and on Easter Sunday, at that. Mama had had to take her home to change clothes, and she'd had to wear an old dress to church. Well, it hadn't exactly been old, it had been one of her regular church dresses, but it hadn't been her gorgeous new Easter dress. One of the other girls at church had asked her why she hadn't worn an Easter dress, and Jessie had laughed and said because she'd fallen in a pile of horse doo-doo. Only Jessie hadn't said doo-doo, she'd used the bad word, and some boys had heard, and soon it was all over church that Roanna Davenport had said she'd fallen in a pile of horse shit.
Grandmother had gotten that disapproving look on her face, and Aunt Gloria's mouth had pursed up like she'd bitten into a green persimmon. Aunt

Janet had looked down at her and just shook her head. But Daddy had laughed and hugged her shoulder and said that a little horse shit never hurt anybody. Besides, his Little Bit needed some fertilizer to grow.

Daddy. The lump in her chest swelled until she could barely breathe around it. Daddy and Mama were gone forever, and so was Aunt Janet. Roanna had always liked Aunt Janet, even though she'd always seemed so sad and hadn't liked to cuddle much. Still, she'd been a lot nicer than Aunt Gloria. Aunt Janet was Jessie's mama. Roanna wondered if Jessie's chest hurt the way hers did, if she'd cried so much that the insides of her eyelids felt like sand. Maybe. It was hard to tell what Jessie thought. She didn't think a grubby kid like Roanna was worth paying any attention to; Roanna had heard her say so.

As Roanna stared unblinkingly out the window, she saw Jessie and their cousin Webb come into view, as if she had dreamed them into being. They walked slowly across the yard toward the huge old oak tree with the bench swing hanging from one of the massive lower limbs. Jessie looked beautiful, Roanna thought, with all the unabashed admiration of a seven-year-old. She was as slim and graceful as Cinderella at the ball, with her dark hair twisted into a knot at the back of her head and her neck rising swanlike above the dark blue of her dress. The gap between seven and thirteen was huge; to Roanna, Jessie was grown, a member of that mysterious, authoritative group who could give orders. That had happened only within the last year or so, because though Jessie had always before been classified as a "big girl" to Roanna's "little girl," Jessie had still played dolls and indulged in the occasional game of hide-and-seek. No longer, though. Jessie now disdained all games except Monopoly and spent a lot of time playing with her hair and begging Aunt Janet for cosmetics.

Webb had changed, too. He had always been Roanna's favorite cousin, always willing to get down on the floor and wrestle with her, or help her hold the bat so she could hit the softball. Webb loved horses the way she did, too, and could occasionally be begged into riding with her. He got impatient with that, though, because she was only allowed to ride her old slowpoke pony. Lately, Webb hadn't wanted to spend any time with her at all; he was too busy with other things, he'd say, but he sure seemed to have a lot of time to spend with Jessie. That was why she'd tried to ride Thunderbolt on Easter morning, so she could show Daddy that she was old enough for a real horse.

Roanna watched as Webb and Jessie sat down in the swing, their fingers laced together. Webb had gotten a lot bigger in the past year; Jessie looked little sitting beside him. He was playing football, and his shoulders were twice as wide as Jessie's. Grandmother, she'd heard one of the aunts say, doted on the boy. Webb and his mama, Aunt Yvonne, lived here at Davencourt with Grandmother, because Webb's daddy was dead, too. Webb was a Tallant, from Grandmother's side of the family; she was his great-aunt. Roanna was only seven, but she knew the intricacies of kinship, having practically absorbed it through her skin during the hours she'd spent listening to the grown-ups talk about family. Grandmother had been a Tallant until she'd married Grandpa and turned into a Davenport. Webb's grandfather, who had also been named Webb, was Grandmother's favorite brother. She had loved him a whole lot, just as she had loved his son, who had been Webb's father. Now there was only Webb, and she loved him a whole lot, too.

Webb was only Roanna's second cousin, while Jessie was her first cousin, which was a lot closer. Roanna wished it were the other way around, because she would rather be close kin to Webb than to Jessie. Second cousins weren't much more than kissing cousins, was what Aunt Gloria had said once. The concept had so intrigued Roanna that at the last family reunion she had stare' and at all her relatives, trying to see who kissed who, so she would know who wasn't really kin. She had figured out that the people they saw only once a year, at the reunion, were the ones who did the most kissing. That made her feel better. She saw Webb all the time, and he didn't kiss her, so they were closer than kissing cousins.

"Don't be ridiculous," Grandmother said now, her voice cutting sharply through the muted arguments over who would be stuck with Roanna, and jerking Roanna's attention back to her eavesdropping.

"Jessie and Roanna are both Davenports. They'll live here, of course."

Live at Davencourt! Equal parts of terror and relief displaced the misery in Roanna's chest. Relief that someone wanted her after all, and she wouldn't have to go to the Orphans' Home like Jessie had said she would. The terror came from the prospect of being under Grandmother's thumb all day, every day. Roanna loved her grandmother, but she was a little afraid of her, too, and she knew she'd never be able to be as perfect as Grandmother expected. She was always getting dirty, or tearing her clothes, or dropping something and breaking it. Food somehow always managed to fall off her fork and into

her lap, and sometimes she forgot to pay attention when reaching for her milk, and knocked the glass over. Jessie said she was a clumsy clod.
Roanna sighed. She always felt clumsy, fumbling around under Grandmother's eagle eye. The only time she wasn't clumsy was when she was on a horse. Well, she had fallen off Thunderbolt, but she was used to her pony and Thunderbolt was so fat she hadn't been able to get a good grip with her legs. But usually she stuck to the saddle like a cocklebur, that's what Loyal always said, and he took care of all Grandmother's horses so he should know. Roanna loved riding almost as much as she had loved Mama and Daddy. The upper part of her felt like she was flying, but with her legs she could feel the horse's strength and muscles, as if she was that strong.
That was one good part about living with Grandmother; she would be able to ride every day, and Loyal could teach her how to stay on the bigger horses.
But the best part was that Webb and his mama lived here, too, and she'd see him every day.
Suddenly she jumped down from the window seat and raced through the house, forgetting that she was wearing her slick-soled Sunday shoes instead of her sneakers until she skidded on the hardwood floor and almost slid into a table. Aunt Gloria's sharp admonition rang in the air behind her, but Roanna ignored it as she wrestled with the heavy front door, using all of her slight weight to tug it open enough that she could slip through. Then she was running across the lawn toward Webb and Jessie, her knees kicking up the skirt of her dress with every step.
Halfway there the knot of misery in her chest suddenly unwound, and she began sobbing. Webb watched her coming, and his expression changed. He let go of Jessie's hand and held his arms out to Roanna. She hurled herself into his lap, setting the swing to bumping. Jessie said sharply, "You're making a mess, Roanna. Go blow your nose."
But Webb said, "Here's my handkerchief," and wiped Roanna's face himself. Then he simply held her, her face buried against his shoulder, while she sobbed so violently that her entire little body heaved.
"Oh, God," Jessie said in disgust.
"Shut up," Webb replied, holding Roanna closer.
"She's lost her parents."
"Well, I lost my mama, too," Jessie pointed out.
"You don't see me squalling all over everybody."

"She's just seven," Webb said while he smoothed Roanna's tousled mop of hair. She was a pest most of the time, tagging along after her older cousins, but she was just a little kid, and he thought Jessie should be more sympathetic. The late afternoon sun slanted across the lawn and through the trees, catching in Roanna's hair and highlighting the glossy chestnut, making the strands glitter with gold and red. Earlier in the afternoon they had buried three members of their family, Roanna's parents and Jessie's mother. Aunt Lucinda had suffered the most, he thought, because she had lost both of her children at once: David, Roanna's daddy, and Janet, Jessie's mama. The huge weight of grief had bowed her down under the past three days, but it hadn't broken her. She was still the backbone of the family, lending her strength to others.

Roanna was quieting down, her sobs dwindling into occasional hiccups. Her round little head bounced against his collarbone as, without looking up, she scrubbed her face with his handkerchief. She felt frail in his strong young arms, her bones not much bigger than matchsticks, her back only about nine inches wide. Roanna was skinny, all pipestem arms and legs, and small for her age. He kept patting her while Jessie wore a long-suffering expression, and eventually one slanted, tear-wet eye peeped out from the security of his shoulder.

"Grandmother said that Jessie and I are going to live here, too," she said.

"Well, of course," Jessie replied, as if any other place would be unacceptable.

"Where else would I live? But if I were them, I'd send you to the Orphans' Home."

Tears welled in that eye again and Roanna promptly reburied her face in Webb's shoulder. He glared at Jessie, and she flushed and looked away. Jessie was spoiled. Lately, at least half the time he thought she needed a good spanking. The other half of the time he was enthralled by those new curves to her body. She knew it, too. Once this summer, when they were swimming, she had let the strap of her bathing suit top fall down her arm, baring the upper part of one breast almost to the nipple. Webb's body had reacted with all the painful intensity of recent adolescence, but he hadn't been able to look away. He had just stood there, thanking God that the water was higher than his waist, but the part of him that had been above water had been dark red with mingled embarrassment, arousal, and frustration.

But she was beautiful. God, Jessie was beautiful. She looked like a princess, with her sleek dark hair and dark blue eyes. Her features were perfect, her skin flawless. And now she would be living here at Davencourt with Aunt Lucinda ... and with him.
He returned his attention to Roanna, jostling her.
"Don't listen to Jessie," he said.
"She's just spouting off without knowing what she's talking about. You won't ever have to go anywhere. I don't think there are any orphanages anymore."
She peeked out again. Her eyes were brown, almost chestnut colored like her hair, just without the red. She was the only person on either the Davenport or Tallant sides of the family who had brown eyes; everyone else had either blue or green eyes or a mixture of the two. Jessie had teased her once, telling her that she wasn't really a Davenport because her eyes were the wrong color, that she'd been adopted. Roanna had been in tears until Webb had put a stop to that, too, telling her that she had her mother's eyes, and he knew she was a Davenport because he remembered going to see her in the hospital nursery when she'd just been born.
"Was Jessie just teasing?" she asked now.
"That's all it was," he replied soothingly.
"Just teasing." Roanna didn't turn her head to look at Jessie, but one small fist darted out and hammered Jessie on the shoulder, then was quickly retracted back into the safety of his embrace.
Webb had to swallow a laugh, but Jessie erupted into fury.
"She hit me!" she shrieked, lifting her hand to slap Roanna. Webb shot his hand out, catching Jessie's wrist.
"No, you don't," he said.
"You deserved it for telling her that."
She tried to jerk away but Webb held her, his grip tightening and his darkened eyes telling Jessie that he meant business. She went still, glaring at him, but he ruthlessly exerted his will and superior strength, and after a few seconds she sullenly subsided. He released her wrist, and she rubbed it as if he had really hurt her. He knew better, though, and didn't feel guilty as she intended. Jessie was good at manipulating people, but Webb had seen through her a long time ago. Knowing her for the little witch she was, though, only made it more satisfying that he had forced her to back down.

His face flushed as he felt himself getting hard, and he shifted Roanna slightly away from him. His heart was beating faster, with excitement and triumph. It was just a little thing, but suddenly he knew that he could handle Jessie. In those few seconds their entire relationship had changed, the casually close ties of kinship and childhood becoming the past, while the more intricate, volatile passions of male and female took their place. The process had been happening all summer long, but now it was completed. He looked at Jessie's sulky face, her lower lip pouting, and he wanted to kiss her until she forgot why she was pouting. Maybe she didn't quite understand yet, but he did.

Jessie was going to be his. She was spoiled and sulky, her emotions volcanic in intensity. It would take a lot of skill and energy to stay on top of her, but someday he would be there physically as well as mentally. He had two trump cards that Jessie didn't yet know about: the power of sex, and the lure of Davencourt. Aunt Lucinda had talked to him a lot the night of the car wreck. They had been sitting up alone, Aunt Lucinda rocking and quietly weeping as she dealt with the death of her children, and finally Webb had worked up the courage to approach and put his arms around her. She had broken down then, sobbing as if her heart would break-the only time she had so completely given in to her grief.

But when she had composed herself, they had sat alone far into the early hours of the morning, talking in hushed tones. Aunt Lucinda had a great reservoir of strength, and she had brought it to bear on the task of securing Davencourt's safety. Her beloved David, heir to Davencourt, was dead. Janet, her only daughter, was equally beloved but had not been suited in either nature or desire to handle the massive responsibilities involved. Janet had been quiet and withdrawn, her eyes dark with an inner pain that never quite went away. Webb suspected it was because of Jessie's father-whoever he was. Jessie was illegitimate, and Janet had never said who had fathered her. Mama said it had been a huge scandal, but the Davenports had closed ranks and the upper echelon of Tuscumbia society had been forced to accept both mother and child or face Davenport retaliation. Since the Davenports were the wealthiest family in the northwest quarter of Alabama, they had been able to carry it off.

But now, with both her children dead, Aunt Lucinda had to safeguard the family properties. It wasn't just Davencourt, the center jewel; it was stocks and bonds, real estate, factories, timber and mineral rights, banks, even

restaurants. The sum total of Davenport holdings required an agile brain to understand it and a certain quality of ruthlessness to oversee it.
Webb was fourteen, but the morning after that long midnight talk with Aunt Lucinda, she had taken the family lawyer into the study, closed the door, and designated Webb as the heir apparent. He was a Tallant, not a Davenport, but he was her adored brother's grandson, and she herself had been a Tallant, so that wasn't a great hindrance in her eyes. Perhaps because Jessie had started life with such a huge strike against her, Aunt Lucinda had always shown a marked preference for Jessie over Roanna, but Aunt Lucinda's love was never blind. As much as she might wish otherwise, she knew Jessie was too volatile to take up the reins of such a huge enterprise; given a free hand, Jessie would have the family bankrupt within five years of attaining her majority.
Roanna, the only other direct descendant, wasn't even considered. She was only seven, for one thing, and completely unruly. It wasn't that the child was disobedient, exactly, but she had a definite talent for finding disaster. If there was a mud puddle within a quarter mile, Roanna would somehow manage to fall in it-but only if she was wearing her best dress. If she was wearing expensive new slippers, she would accidentally step into a horse pile. She constantly turned over, dropped, or spilled whatever was in her hands or merely nearby. The only talent she had, apparently, was an affinity for horses. That was a big plus in Aunt Lucinda's eyes, as she, too, loved the animals, but unfortunately didn't make Roanna any more acceptable in the role of main heiress.
Davencourt was going to be his, Davencourt and all the vast holdings.
Webb looked up at the huge white house sitting like a crown in the middle of the lush green velvet of the lawn. Deep, wide verandas completely encircled the house on both stories, the railings laced with delicate ironwork. Six enormous white columns framed the front portico, where the veranda widened at the entrance. The house had an air of graciousness and comfort, imparted by the cool shade promised by the verandas, and the airy spaciousness, indicated by the vast expanse of windows. Double French doors graced each bedroom on the upper Shades (-,)f Twilight story, and a Palladian window arched majestically over the center entrance.
Davencourt was a hundred and twenty years old, built in the decade before the war. That was why there was a gently curving staircase on the left side, to provide a discreet entrance to the house for carousing young men, back

when the bachelors of the family had slept in a separate wing. At Davencourt, that wing had been the left one. Various remodelings over the past century had done away with the separate sleeping quarters, but the outside entrance to the second floor remained. Lately, Webb had used the staircase a time or two himself.

And it was all going to be his.

He didn't feel guilty over being chosen to inherit. Even at fourteen, Webb was aware of the force of driving ambition within him. He wanted the pressure, the power of all that Davencourt entailed. It would be like riding the wildest stallion alive but mastering it with his own force of will.

It wasn't as if Jessie and Roanna had been disinherited, far from it. They would still both be wealthy women in their own right when they came of age. But the majority of the stocks, the majority of the power-and all the responsibility-would be his. Rather than being intimidated by the years of hard work that lay before him, Webb felt a fierce joy at the prospect. Not only would he own Davencourt, but Jessie came with the deal. Aunt Lucinda had hinted as much, but it wasn't until a few moments ago that he'd realized fully what she meant.

She wanted him to marry Jessie.

He almost laughed aloud in exultation. Oh, he knew his Jessie, and so did Aunt Lucinda. When it became known that he was going to inherit Davencourt, Jessie would instantly decide that she, and no one else, would marry him. He didn't mind; he knew how to handle her, and he had no illusions about her. Most of Jessie's unpleasantness was due to that massive chip on her shoulder, the burden of her illegitimacy. She deeply resented Roanna's legitimate status and was hateful to the kid because of it. That would change, though, when they married. He would see to it, because now he had Jessie's number.

Lucinda Davenport ignored the ongoing chatter behind her as she stood at the window and watched the three young people sitting in the swing. They belonged to her; her blood ran in all three of them. They were the future, the hope of Davencourt, all that was left.

When she had first been told of the car accident, for a few dark hours the burden of grief had been so massive that she had felt crushed beneath it, unable to function, to care. She still felt as if the best part of herself had been torn away, with huge gaping wounds left behind. Their names echoed in her mother's heart. David. Janet. Memories swam through her mind, so

that she saw them as tiny infants at her breast, rambunctious toddlers, romping children, awkward adolescents, wonderful adults. She was sixty-three and had lost many people whom she had loved, but this latest blow was almost a killing one. A mother should never outlive her children.
But in the darkest hour, Webb had been there, offering her silent comfort. He was only fourteen, but already the man was taking shape in the boy's body. He reminded her a lot of her brother, the first Webb; there was the same core of hard, almost reckless strength, and an inner maturity that made him seem far older than his years. He hadn't flinched from her grief but had shared it with her, letting her know that despite this massive loss, she wasn't alone. It was in that dark hour that she had seen the glimmer of light and known what she would do. When she had first broached to him the idea of training to take over the Davenport enterprises, of eventually owning Davencourt itself, he hadn't been intimidated. Instead his green eyes had gleamed at the prospect, at the very challenge of it.
She had made a good choice. Some of the others would howl; Gloria and her bunch would be outraged that Webb had been chosen over any of the Ameses, when after all they were the same degree of kin to Lucinda. Jessie would have good cause to be angry, for she was a Davenport and direct kin, but as much as she loved the girl, Lucinda knew Davencourt wouldn't be in good hands with her. Webb was the best choice, and he would take care of Jessie.
She watched the small tableau in the swing play itself out in silence and knew that Webb had won that battle. The boy already had the instincts of a man, and a dominant man at that. Jessie was sulking, but he didn't give in to her. He continued comforting Roanna, who as usual had managed to cause some sort of trouble.
Roanna. Lucinda sighed. She didn't feel up to assuming the care of a seven-year-old, but the child was David's daughter, and she simply couldn't allow her to go anywhere else. She had tried, out of fairness, but she couldn't love Roanna as much as she loved Jessie, or Webb, who wasn't even her grandchild, but a great-nephew.
Despite her fierce support for her daughter when Janet was pregnant without benefit of a husband, Lucinda had expected to, at best, tolerate the baby when it came. She had been very much afraid that she would actively dislike it, because of the disgrace it represented. Instead she had taken one look at the tiny, flowerlike face of her granddaughter and fallen in love. Oh,

Jessie was a high-spirited handful with her share of faults, but Lucinda's love had never wavered. Jessie needed love, so much love, soaking up every snippet of affection and praise that came her way. It hadn't been a starvation diet; from her birth, she had been cuddled and kissed and made over, but for some reason it had never been quite enough. Children sensed early when something about their lives was out of kilter, and Jessie was particularly bright; she had been about two when she had started asking why she didn't have a daddy.

And then there was Roanna. Lucinda sighed again. It had been as difficult to love Roanna as it was easy to love Jessie. The two cousins were total opposites. Roanna had never been still long enough for anyone to cuddle her. Pick her up for a hug, and she was squirming to get down. Nor was she pretty the way Jessie was. Roanna's odd mix of features didn't fit her small face. Her nose was too long, her mouth too wide, her eyes narrow and slanted. Her hair, with its un Davenport-like tinge of red, was always untidy. No matter what she wore, give her five minutes and the garment would be dirty and likely torn. She favored her mother's people, of course, but she was definitely a weed in the Davenport garden. Lucinda had looked hard, but she couldn't see anything of David in the child, and now any resemblance would have been doubly precious had it existed.

But she would do her duty by Roanna, and try to mold her into some sort of civilized being, one who would be a credit to the Davenports.

Her hope, though, and the future, lay with Jessie and Webb.

Chapter 2

Lucinda wiped away the tears as she sat in Janet's bedroom and slowly folded and packed away her daughter's clothing. Both Yvonne and Sandra had offered to do this for her, but she had insisted on doing it alone. She didn't want anyone to witness her tears, her grief-, and only she would know which items were precious, because of the memories, and which could be discarded. She had already performed this last task at David's house, tenderly folding away shirts that still faintly carried the scent of his cologne. She had wept, too, for her daughter-in4aw; Karen had been well liked, a cheerful, loving young woman who had made David very happy. Their things had been stored in trunks at Davencourt for Roanna to have when she was older.

It had been a month since the accident. The legal formalities had promptly been taken care of, with Jessie and Roanna permanently installed at Davencourt and Lucinda as their legal guardian. Jessie, of course, had settled right in, commandeering the prettiest bedroom as her own and cajoling Lucinda into redecorating it to her specifications. Lucinda admitted that she hadn't needed much cajoling, because she understood Jessie's fierce need to regain control of her life, impose order on her surroundings again. The bedroom was only a symbol. She had spoiled Jessie shamelessly, letting her know that even though her mother had died, she still had a family who supported and loved her, that security hadn't vanished from her world.

Roanna, however, hadn't settled in at all. Lucinda sighed, holding one of Janet's blouses to her cheek as she pondered David's daughter. She simply didn't know how to get close to the child. Roanna had resisted all efforts to get her to choose a bedroom, and finally Lucinda had given up and chosen for her. A sense of fairness had insisted that Roanna's bedroom be at least as big as Jessie's, and it was, but the little girl had merely looked lost and overwhelmed in it. She had slept there the first night. The second night, she had slept in one of the other bedrooms, dragging her blanket with her and curling up on the bare mattress. The third night, it had been yet another empty bedroom, another bare mattress. She had slept in a chair in the den, on the rug in the library, even huddled on the floor of a bathroom. She was a restless, forlorn little spirit, drifting around in search of a place of her own.

Lucinda estimated that the child had now slept in every room of the house except for the bedrooms occupied by others.

When Webb got up every morning, the first thing he did was go on a Roanna hunt, tracking her down in whichever nook or cranny she had chosen for the night, coaxing her out of her blanket cocoon. She was sullen and withdrawn, except with Webb, and had no interest in anything but the horses. Frustrated, not knowing what else to do, Lucinda had given her unlimited access to the horses, at least for the summer. Loyal would look out for the child, and Roanna had an uncommonly good touch with the animals anyway.

Lucinda folded the blouse, the last one, and put it away. Only the contents of the nightstand remained, and she hesitated before opening the drawers. When that was finished, it would all be finished; the townhouse would be emptied, closed, and sold. All traces of Janet would be gone.

Except for Jessie, Janet had left precious little of herself.

After she'd gotten pregnant, most of her laughter had died, and there had always been sadness in her eyes. Though she'd never said who fathered Jessie, Lucinda suspected it was the oldest Leath boy, Dwight. He and Janet had dated, but then he'd gotten in an argument with his father and enlisted and somehow ended up in Vietnam in the early days of the war. Within two weeks of setting foot in that miserable little country, he'd been killed. Over the years Lucinda had often looked at Jessie's face, searching for some resemblance to the Leaths but instead saw only' pure Davenport beauty. If Dwight was Janet's lover, then he had been mourned until the day of her death, because she had never dated anyone else after Jessie's birth. It wasn't that she hadn't had the opportunity either; despite the awkwardness of Jessie's illegitimacy, Janet was still a Davenport, and there were plenty of men who would have wanted her. The lack of interest had all been on Janet's part.

Lucinda had hoped for more for her daughter. She herself had known deep love with Marshall Davenport and had wished the same for her children. David had found it with Karen; Janet had known only pain and disappointment. Lucinda didn't like to admit it, but she had always sensed a certain restraint in Janet's manner toward Jessie, as if she were ashamed. It was the way Lucinda had expected to feel but hadn't. She wished Janet could have gotten past the pain, but she never had, Well, putting off an unpleasant chore wouldn't make it any less unpleasant, Lucinda thought,

unconsciously straightening her spine. She could sit here all day musing over the intricacies of life, or she could get on with it. Lucinda Tallant Davenport wasn't one to sit around whining; right or wrong, she got things done.

She pulled open the top drawer of the nightstand, and tears filled her eyes again at the neatness of the contents. That was Janet, tidy to the bone. There was the book she'd been reading, a small flashlight, a box of tissues, a decorative tin of her favorite peppermint candy, and a leather25
bound journal with the pen still stuck between the pages. Curious, Lucinda wiped away her tears and pulled out the journal. She hadn't known that Janet kept one.

She smoothed her hand over the journal, knowing full well what information might be on the pages. It could be only private comments on day-to-day life, but there was the possibility that here Janet had divulged the secret she'd carried to her grave. At this late date, did it really matter who Jessie's father was?

Not really, Lucinda thought. She would love Jessie no matter whose blood ran in her veins.

But still, after so many years of wondering and not knowing, the temptation was impossible to resist. She opened the journal to the first page and began reading.

Half an hour later, she blotted her eyes with a tissue and slowly closed the journal, then placed it on top of the pile of clothes in the last box. There hadn't been all that much to read: several anguished pages, written fourteen years ago, then very little after that. Janet had made a few notations, marking Jessie's first tooth, first step, first day in school, but for the most part the pages were blank. It was as if Janet had stopped living fourteen years ago, rather than just a month. Poor Janet, to have hoped for much and settled for so little.

Lucinda smoothed her hand over the journal's leather cover. Well, now she knew. And she had been right: it didn't make any difference at all.

She picked up the roll of masking tape and briskly sealed the box.

BOOK TWO

Torn Asunder

Chapter 3

Roanna bounced out of bed with the dawn, hurrying to brush her teeth and drag her hands through her hair, then scrambling into jeans and a T-shirt. She grabbed her boots and socks on the way out the door and ran barefoot down the stairs. Webb was driving up to Nashville, and she wanted to see him before he left. She didn't have any particular reason other than that she seized every opportunity to have a few private minutes with him, precious seconds when his attention, his smiles, were only for her.

Even at five o'clock in the morning, Grandmother would have had her breakfast in the morning room, but Roanna didn't even pause there on her way to the kitchen. Webb, while thoroughly comfortable with the wealth that was at his disposal, didn't give a snap of his finger for appearances. He would be scrounging around in the kitchen, preparing his own breakfast since Tansy didn't come to work until six, then eating it at the kitchen table.

She burst through the door, and as she bad expected, Webb was there. He hadn't bothered with the table and was instead leaning against the cabinet while he munched on a jelly-spread slice of toast. A cup of coffee steamed gently beside his hand. As soon as he saw her, he turned and dropped another slice of bread into the toaster.

"I'm not hungry," she said, poking her head into the huge double-doored refrigerator to find the orange Juice.

"You never are," he returned equably.

"Eat anyway." Her lack of appetite was why, at seventeen, she was still skinny and barely developed. That and the fact that Roanna never simply walked anywhere. She was a perpetual motion machine: she skipped, she bounded, occasionally she even turned cartwheels. At least, over the years, she had finally settled down enough to sleep in the same bed every night, and he no longer had to search for her every morning.

Because it was Webb who'd made the toast, she ate it, though she rejected the jelly. He poured a cup of coffee for her, and she stood beside him, munching dry toast and alternately sipping orange juice and coffee, and felt contentment glowing warmly deep in her middle. This was all she asked out of life: to be alone with Webb. And to work with the horses, of course.

She gently inhaled, drawing in the delicious scents of his understated cologne and the clean, slight muskiness of his skin, all mingled with the aroma of the coffee. Her awareness of him was so intense it was almost painful, but she lived for these moments.

She eyed him over the rim of her cup, her whiskey brown eyes glinting with mischief.
"The timing of this trip to Nashville is pretty suspicious," she teased. "I think you just want to get away from the house."
He grinned, and her heart flip-flopped. She seldom saw that cheerful grin any more; he was so busy that he didn't have time for anything but work, as Jessie consistently, relentlessly complained. His cool green eyes warmed when he smiled, and the lazy charm of his grin could stop traffic. The laziness was deceptive, though; Webb worked hours that would have exhausted most men.
"I didn't plan it," he protested, then admitted, "but I jumped at the chance. I guess you're going to stay in the stables all day."
She nodded. Grandmother's sister and her husband, Aunt Gloria and Uncle Harlan, were moving in today, and Roanna wanted to be as far from the house as possible. Aunt Gloria was her least favorite of aunts, and she didn't care much for Uncle Harlan either.
"He's a know-it-all," she grumbled, "And she's a pain in the-"
"Ro," he said warningly, drawing out the single syllable. Only he ever called her by the abbreviation of her name. It was one more tiny connection between them for her to savor, for she thought of herself as Ro. Roanna was the girl who was skinny and unattractive, clumsy and gauche. Ro was the part of herself who could ride like the wind, her thin body blending with the horse's and becoming part of its rhythm; the girl who, while in the stables, never put a foot wrong. If she had her way, she'd have lived in the stables.
"Neck," she finished, with a look of innocence that made him chuckle.
"When Davencourt is yours, are you going to throw them out?"
"Of course not, you little heathen. They're family."
"Well, it isn't as if they don't have a place to live. Why don't they stay in their own house?"
"Since Uncle Harlan retired, they've been having trouble making ends meet. There's plenty of space here, so their moving in is the logical solution, even if you don't like it." He ruffled her untidy hair.
She sighed. It was true that there were ten bedrooms in Davencourt, and since Jessie and Webb had gotten married and now used only one room, and since Aunt Yvonne had decided to move out last year and get a place of her own, that meant seven of those bedrooms were empty. Still, she didn't like it.

"Well, what about when you and Jessie have kids? You'll need the other rooms then."
"I don't think we'll need seven of them," he said drily, and a grim look entered his eyes.
"We may not have any kids anyway."
Her heart jumped at that. She had been down in the dumps since he and Jessie had married two years ago, but she had really dreaded the idea of Jessie having his babies. Somehow that would have been the final blow to a heart that hadn't had much hope to begin with; she knew she'd never had a chance with Webb, but still a tiny glimmer lingered. As long as he and Jessie didn't have any children, it was as if he wasn't totally, finally hers. For Webb, she thought, children would be an unbreakable bond. As long as there were no babies, she could still hope, however futilely.
It was no secret in the house that their marriage wasn't all roses. Jessie never kept it a secret when she was unhappy, because she made a concerted effort to make certain e'eryone else was just as miserable as she was. Knowing Jessie, and Roanna knew Jessie very well, she had probably planned to use sex, after they were married, to control Webb. Roanna would have been surprised if Jessie had let Webb make love to her before they were married. Well, maybe once, to keep his interest keen. Roanna never underestimated the depths of Jessie's calculation. The thing was, neither did Webb, and Jessie's little plan hadn't worked. No matter what tricks she tried, Webb seldota changed his mind, and when he did it was for reasons of his own. No, Jessie was not happy.
Roanna loved it. She couldn't begin to understand their relationship, but Jessie didn't appear to have a clue about the type of man Webb was. You could appeal to him with logic, but manipulation left him unswayed. It had given Roanna many secretly gleeful moments over the years to watch Jessie try her feminine wiles on Webb and then throwing fits when they didn't work. Jessie just couldn't understand it; after all, it worked on everyone else.
Webb checked his watch.
"I have to go." He swiftly gulped the rest of his coffee, then bent to kiss her forehead.
"Stay out of trouble today."
"I'll try," she promised, then added glumly, "I always try." And somehow seldom succeeded. Despite her best efforts, she was always doing

something that displeased Grandmother.
Webb gave her a rueful grin on his way out the door, and their eyes met for a moment in a way that made her feel as i they were co-conspirators. Then he was gone, closing the door behind him, and with a sigh she sat down in one of the chairs to pull on her socks and boots. The dawn had dimmed with his leaving.
In a way, she thought, they really were co-conspirators. She was relaxed and unguarded with Webb in a way she never was with the rest of the family, and she never saw disapproval in his eyes when he looked at her. Webb accepted her as she was and didn't try to make her into something she wasn't.
But there was one other place where she found approval, and her heart lightened as she ran to the stables.
When the moving van drove up at eight-thirty, Roanna barely noticed it. She and Loyal were working with a frisky yearling colt, patiently getting him accustomed to human handling. He was fearless, but he wanted to play rather than learn anything new, and the gentle lesson required a lot of patience.
"You're wearing me out," she panted and fondly stroked the animal's glossy neck. The colt responded by shoving her with his head, sending her staggering several paces backward.
"There has to be an easier way," she said to Loyal, who was sitting on the fence, giving her directions, and grinning as the colt romped like an oversized dog.
"Like what?" he asked. He was always willing to listen to Roanna's ideas.
"Why don't we start handling them as soon as they're born? Then they'd be too little to shove me all over the corral," she grumbled.
"And they'd grow up used to humans and the things we do to them."
"Well, now." Loyal stroked his jaw as he thought about it. He was a lean, hard fifty and had already spent almost thirty of those years working at Davencourt, the long hours outside turning his brown face into a network of fine wrinkles. He ate, lived, and breathed horses and couldn't imagine any job more suited to him than the one he had. Just because it was customary to wait until the foals were yearlings before beginning their training didn't mean it had to be that way. Roanna might have something there. Horses had to get used to people fooling around with [heir mouths and feet, and it might be easier on both horses and humans if the process started when they

were foaled rather than after a year of running wild. It should cut down on a lot of skittishness as well as making it easier on the farriers and the vets.
"Tell you what," he said.
"We won't have another foal until Lightness drops hers in March. We'll start with that one and see how it works."
Roanna's face lit up, her brown eyes turning almost golden with delight, and for a moment Loyal was struck by how pretty she was. He was startled, because Roanna was really a plain little thing, her features too big and masculine for her thin face, but for a fleeting moment he'd gotten a glimpse of how she would look when maturity had worked its full magic on her. She'd never be the beauty Miss Jessie was, he thought realistically, but when she got older, she'd surprise a few people. The idea made him happy, because Roanna was his favorite. Miss Jessie was a competent rider, but she didn't love his babies the way Roanna did and therefore wasn't as careful of her mount's welfare as she could have boen. In Loyal's eyes, that was an unforgivable sin.
At eleven-thirty, Roanna reluctantly returned to the house for lunch. She would much rather have skipped the meal entirely, but Grandmother would send someone after her if she didn't show up, so she figured she might as well save everyone the trouble. But she had cut it too close, as usual, and didn't have time for more than a quick shower and change of clothes. She dragged a comb through her wet hair, then raced down the stairs, sliding to a halt just before she opened the door to the dining room and entered at a more decorous pace, Everyone else was already seated. Aunt Gloria looked up at Roanna's entrance, and her mouth drew into the familiar disapproving line. Grand mother took in Roanna's wet hair-Shades of Twilight and sighed but didn't comment. tJnc!e Harlan gave her one of his insincere used-car-salesynan smiled. but at least he never scolded her, so Roanna forgave him for having all the depth of a pie pan. Jessie, however, went straight on the attack.
"At least you could have taken the time to dry your hair," she drawled'.
"Though I suppose we should all be grateful you showered and didn't come to the table smelling like a horse."
Roanna slid into her seat and fastened her gaze on her plate. She didn't bother responding to Jessie's malice, To do so would only provoke even more nastiness, and Aunt Gloria would seize the chance to put in her two cents' worth. Roanna was used to Jessie's zingers, but she wasn't happy at

all that Aunt Gloria and Uncle Harlan had moved into Davencourt, and she felt she would doubly resent anything Aunt Gloria said.
Tansy served the first course, a cold cucumber soup. Roanna hated cucumber soup and merely dabbled her spoon around in it, trying to sink the tiny green pieces of herb that floated on top. She did nibble on one of Tansy's homemade poppy seed rolls and gladly relinquished her soup bowl when the next course, tuna-stuffed tomato, was served. She liked tuna-stuffed tomato. She devoted the first few mmutes to painstakingly removing the bits of celery and onion from the tuna mixture, pushing the rejects into a small pile at the edge of her plate.
"Your manners are deplorable," Aunt Gloria announced as she delicately forked up a bite of tuna.
"For heaven's sake, Roanna, you're seventeen, plenty old enough to stop playing with your food like a two-year-old."
koanna's scant appetite died, the familiar tension and nausea tightening her stomach, and she cast a resentful glance at Aunt Gloria.
"Oh, she always does that," Jessie said airily.
"She's like a hog rooting around for the best pieces of slop."
Just to show them she didn't care, Roanna forced herself to swallow two bites of the tuna, washing them down with most of her glass of tea to make certain they didn't lodge halfway.
She doubted it was tact on his part, but she was grateful anyway when Uncle Harlan began talking about the repairs needed on their car and weighing the advantages of buying a new one. If they could afford a new car, Roanna thought, they could certainly have afforded staying in their own house, then she wouldn't have to put up with Aunt Gloria every day. Jessie mentioned that she would like a new car, too; she was bored with that boxy four-door Mercedes Webb had insisted on buying for her, when she'd told him at least a thousand times she wanted a sports car, something with style.
Roanna didn't have a car. Jessie had gotten her first car when she was sixteen, but Roanna was a rotten driver, forever drifting off into daydreams, and Grandmother had stated that, in the interest of the safety of the citizens of Colbert County, it was best not to let Roanna out on the roads by herself. She hadn't resented it all that much, because she would much rather ride than drive, but now one of her demon imps raised its head.
"I'd like to have a sports car, too," she said, the first words she'd spoken since entering the dining room. Her eyes were round with innocence.

"I've got my heart set on one of those Pontiac Grand Pricks."
Aunt Gloria's eyes rounded with horror, and her fork dropped into her plate with a clatter. Uncle Harlan choked on his tuna, then began laughing helplessly.
"Young lady!" Grandmother's hand slammed against the table, making Roanna jump guiltily. Some people might think her mispronunciation of Grand Prix had been the result of ignorance, but Grandmother knew better.
"Your behavior is inexcusable," Grandmother said icily, her blue eyes snapping.
"Leave this table. I'll speak to you later."
Roanna slipped from her chair, her cheeks red with embarrassment.
"I'm sorry," she whispered and ran from the dining room but not fast enough to keep from hearing Jessie's amused, malicious question: "Do you think she'll ever be civilized enough to eat with people?"
"I'd rather be with the horses," Roanna muttered as she slammed out the front door. She knew she should go back upstairs and change into boots again, but she desperately needed to get back to the stables, where she never felt inadequate.
Loyal was eating his own lunch in his office, while he read one of the thirty horse care publications that he received each month. He caught sight of her through the window as she slipped inside the stable and shook his head in resignation. Either she hadn't eaten anything, which wouldn't surprise him, or she was in trouble again, which wouldn't surprise him either. It was probably both. Poor Roanna was a square peg who stubbornly resisted all efforts to whittle down her corners so she would fit into the round hole, and never mind that most people happily whittled on their own corners. Burdened with almost constant disapproval, she merely hunkered down and resisted until the frustration grew too strong to be repressed, then struck out, usually in a way that only brought more disapproval. If she'd had even one-half of Miss Jessie's meanness, she could have really fought back and forced everyone to accept her on her own terms. But Roanna didn't have a mean bone in her body, which was probably why animals loved her so much. She was chock-full of mischief, though, and that only caused more trouble.
He watched as she drifted from stall to stall, trailing her fingers over the smooth wood. There was only one horse in the stable, Mrs. Davenport's favorite mount, a gray gelding who had injured his right foreleg. Loyal was

keeping him quiet today, with cold packs on the leg to ease the swelling. He heard Roanna's crooning voice as she stroked the gelding's face, and he smiled as the horse's eyes almost closed with ecstasy. If her family gave her half the acceptance the horses did, he thought, she would stop fighting them at every turn and settle into the life into which she had been born.

Jessie drifted down to the stables after lunch and ordered one of the hands to saddle a horse for her. Roanna rolled her eyes at Jessie's lady-of-the-manor airs; she always caught and saddled her own horse, and it wouldn't hurt Jessie to do the same. To be honest, she never had any trouble catching a horse, but Jessie didn't have that knack. It only showed how smart horses were, Roanna thought.

Jessie caught her expression out of the corner of her eye and turned a cool, malicious look on her cousin.

"Grandmother's furious with you. It was important to her that Aunt Gloria be made to feel welcome, and instead you went into your hick act." She paused ever so slightly and let her gaze drift over Roanna.

"If it is an act." Having delivered that zinger, so subtly sharp that it slid between Roanna's ribs with barely a twinge, she smiled faintly and walked away, leaving only the miasma of her expensive perfume behind.

"Hateful witch," Roanna muttered, waving her hand to disperse the too-heavy scent while she stared resentfully at her cousin's slim, elegant back. It wasn't fair that Jessie should be so beautiful, know how to get along in public so perfectly, be Grandmother's favorite, and have Webb, too. It just wasn't fair.

Roanna wasn't the only one feeling resentful. Jessie seethed with it as she rode away from Davencourt. Damn Webb! She wished she'd never married him, even though it was what she'd set her sights on from girlhood, what everyone had taken for granted would happen. And Webb had taken it more for granted than anyone else, but then he'd always been so damn cocksure of himself that sometimes she nearly died with the urge to slap him. That she never had was due to two things: one, she hadn't wanted to do anything that would hurt her chances Of ruling supreme at Davencourt when Grandmother finally died; and two, she had the uneasy suspicion that Webb wouldn't be a gentleman about it. NO, it was more than a suspicion. He might pull the wool over everyone else's eyes, but she knew what a ruthless bastard he was.

She had been a fool to marry him. Surely she could have gotten Grandmother to change her will and leave Davencourt to her instead of to Webb. After all, she was a Davenport, not Webb. It should have been hers by right. Instead she'd had to marry that damn tyrant, and she'd made a big mistake in doing so. Chagrined, she had to admit that she'd overestimated her own charms and her ability to influence him. She thought she'd been so smart, refusing to sleep with him before marriage; she'd liked the idea of keeping him frustrated, liked the image of him panting after her like a dog after a bitch in heat. It had never been quite that way, but she'd cherished the image anyway. Instead, she'd been infuriated to learn that, rather than suffering because he couldn't have her, the bastard had simply been sleeping with other women-while he insisted she be faithful to him!

Well, she'd shown him. He was an even bigger fool than she was if he really believed she'd kept herself "pure" for him all those years while he was out screwing those bitches he met in college and at work. She knew better than to mess up her own playground, but whenever she could get away for a day or a weekend, she quickly found some lucky guy to take the edge off, so to speak. Attracting men was disgustingly easy-just give them a whiff and they came running. She'd done it the first time at the age of sixteen and had immediately discovered a delicious source of power over men. Oh, she'd had to do some pretending when she and Webb had finally married, whimpering and actually squeezing out a tear or two so he'd think his big bad pecker was actually hurting her poor little virginal pussy, but inside she'd been gloating that he'd been so easy to fool.

She'd also been gloating because now she was finally going to have the power in their relationship. After years of having to sweetly kowtow to him, she'd thought she had him where she wanted him. It was humiliating to remember how she'd thought he'd be more easily handled once they were married and she had him in bed with her every night. God knows, most men thought with their peckers. All of her discreet liaisons over the years had told her that she wore them out, that they couldn't keep up with her, but they'd all said it with big smiles. Jessie took pride in her ability to screw a man into limp exhaustion. She'd had it all planned: screw Webb's brains out every night, and he'd be putty in her hands during the day.

But it hadn't worked out that way at all. Her cheeks burned with humiliation as she guided her horse across a shallow creek, taking care that the water didn't splash on her shiny boots. For one thing, more often than not she was

the one who was left exhausted. Webb could go at it for hours, his eyes remaining cool and watchful no matter how she panted and jerked her hips and worked him over, as if he knew she regarded it as a competition and was damned if he'd let her win. It hadn't taken her long to learn that he could outlast her, and she would be the one left lying exhausted on the twisted sheets, her loins throbbing painfully from such hard use. And no matter how hot the sex, no matter how she sucked or stroked or did anything else, once it was finished and Webb was out of bed, he went about his business as if nothing had happened, and she could just make the best of it. Well, damned if she would!

Her biggest weapon, sex, had proven to be ineffective against him, and she wanted to scream at the injustice of it. He treated her as if she were a disobedient child rather than an adult, and his wife. He was nicer to that brat, Roanna, than he was to her. She was sick and tired of being left at home every day while he roamed all over the nation, for God's sake. He said it was business, but she was certain that at least half of his "urgent" trips were conceived at the last moment just to prevent her from doing something fun. Just last month he'd had to fly to Chicago the morning before they were supposed to go on vacation in the Bahamas. And then there was the trip to New York last week. He'd been gone for three days. She'd begged to go with him, dying with excitement at the thought of the shops and theaters and restaurants, but he'd said he wouldn't have time for her and left without her. Just like that. The arrogant bastard; he was probably screwing some silly little secretary and didn't want his wife around to mess up his plans.

But she had her revenge. A smile broke across her face as she reined in the horse and spotted the man who was already lying stretched out on the blanket beneath the big tree, almost hidden in the secluded little cove. It was the most delicious revenge she could have imagined, made all the sweeter by her own uncontrolled response. It frightened her sometimes that she desired him so savagely. He was an animal, totally amoral, as ruthless in his way as Webb was, though without the cool, precise intellect.

She remembered the first time she'd met him. It hadn't been long after Mama's funeral, after she had moved into Davencourt and wheedled Grandmother into letting her redecorate the bedroom she'd chosen. She and Grandmother had been in town to choose fabrics, but Grandmother had run into one of her cronies in the fabric shop and Jessie had quickly gotten bored. She had already chosen the fabric she liked, so there was no reason

to hang around listening to two old biddies gossip. She had told Grandmother she was going to the restaurant next door to get a Coke and made her escape.

She had gone there; she had learned early that she could get away with a lot more if she simply did what she really wanted to do after she'd done what she'd said she was going to do. That way she couldn't be accused of lying, for heaven's sake. And people knew how impulsive teenagers were. So, icy Coke in hand, Jessie had then whisked herself down to the newsstand where dirty magazines were sold.

It wasn't really a newsstand, but a grimy little store that sold hobby kits, a smattering of makeup and toiletries, some "hygienic" items such as rubbers, as well as newspapers, paperbacks, and a wide selection of magazines. The Newsweeks and Good Housekeepings were prominently displayed up front with all the other acceptable magazines, but the forbidden ones were kept on a rack behind a counter in back, and kids weren't supposed to go back there. But old main McElroy had arthritis real bad, and he spent most of his time sitting on a stool behind the checkout counter. He couldn't really see who was in the back area unless he stood up, and he didn't stand up very often.

Jessie gave old man McElroy a sweet smile and wandered over to the cosmetic section, where she leisurely inspected a few lipsticks and selected a sheer pink lip gloss, her reason for being there should she get caught. When a customer claimed his attention, she whisked herself out of sight and slipped into the back area.

Naked women cavorted on various covers, but Jessie spared them only a brief disdainful glance. If she wanted to see a naked woman, all she had to do was strip off her clothes. What she liked were the nudist magazines, where she could see naked men. Most of the time their peckers were small and limp, which didn't interest her at all, but sometimes there would be a picture of a man with a nice, long, fat one sticking out. The nudists said there was nothing sexy about running around naked, but Jessie figured they lied. Otherwise, why would those men be getting hard like Grandmother's stallion did when he was about to mount a mare? She had sneaked into the stables to watch whenever she could, though everyone would have been horrified, just horrified, if they'd known.

Jessie smirked. They didn't know, and they wouldn't. She was too smart for them. She was two different people, and they didn't even suspect. There was

the public Jessie, the princess of the Davenports, the most popular girl in school who charmed everyone with her high spirits and who refused to experiment with alcohol and cigarettes the way all the other kids did. Then there was the real Jessie, the one she kept hidden, the one who slipped the paperback porn books under her clothes and smiled sweetly at Mr. McElroy as she left his store. The real Jessie stole money from her grandmother's purse, not because there was something she couldn't have -just for the asking, but because-she liked the thrill of it.

The real Jessie loved tormenting that little brat, Roanna, loved pinching her when no one could see, loved making her cry. Roanna was a safe target, because no one really liked her anyway and they would always believe Jessie rather than her if she carried tales. Lately, Jessie had begun to really hate the brat, rather than just disliking her. Webb was always taking up for her, for some reason, and that made Jessie furious. How dare he take Roanna's side instead of hers?

A secret little smile curved her mouth. She'd show him who was boss. Lately she had discovered a new weapon, as her body had grown and changed. She had been fascinated by sex for years, but now physically she was beginning to match her mental maturity. All she had to do was arch her back and take a deep breath, thrusting out her breasts, and Webb would stare so fixedly at them that it was all she could do to keep from laughing, He'd kissed her, too, and when t, she rubbed her front against him, he had started breathing real deep, and his pecker had gotten hard. She had thought about letting him do it to her, but an innate cunning had stopped her. She and Webb lived in the same house; she would be taking too much of a chance that others would find out, and that might change the image they had of her.

She had just reached out for one of the nudist magazines when a man spoke behind her, his voice low and raspy.

"What's a pretty little gal like you doin' back here?"

Alarmed, Jessie snatched her hand back and whirled to face him. She was always so careful not to let anyone see her in this section, but she hadn't heard him approach. She stared up at him, blinking wide, startled eyes at him as she prepared to go into her act of the innocent young girl who had wandered back here by accident. What she saw in the hot, impossibly blue eyes looking down at her made her hesitate. This man didn't look as if he would believe any explanation she could make.

"You're Janet Davenport's kid, ain't you?" he asked, still keeping his voice low.
Slowly, Jessie nodded, Now that she'd had a good look at him, a strange thrill ran through her. He was probably in his thirties, way too old, but he was really muscular and the expression in those hot blue eyes made her think he must know some really nasty things.
He grunted.
"Thought so. Sorry about your mama." But even as he said the conventional words, Jessie had the feeling that he didn't really care one way or the other. He was looking her up and down in a way that made her feel peculiar, as if she belonged to him.
"Who are you?" she whispered, casting a weather eye toward the front of the store.
A feral grin bared his white teeth.
"The name's Harper Neeley, little darling'. Mean anything to you?"
She caught her breath, because she knew the name. She had snooped through Mama's things on a regular basis.
"Yes," she said, so excited she could barely stand still.
"You're my daddy."
He'd been surprised that she'd known who he was, she thought now, watching him as he lazed beneath the tree while he waited for her. But as excited as she'd been at meeting him, he really hadn't given a damn that she was his daughter. Harper Neeley had a bunch of kids, at least half of them bastards. One more, even if that one was a Davenport, didn't mean anything to him. He'd approached her just for the hell of it, not because he really cared.
Somehow, that had excited her. It was like meeting the secret Jessie, walking around in her father's body.
He fascinated her. She had made a point of meeting with him occasionally over the years. He was rough and totally selfish, and she often felt as if he were laughing at-her. It infuriated her, but whenever she saw him, she still felt that same electric excitement. He was so nasty, so totally unacceptable to her social circle ... and he was hers.
Jessie couldn't remember exactly when the excitement had turned sexual. Maybe it had always been like that, butShodes of'Ttvilight she just hadn't been ready to recognize it. She had been so focused on bringing Webb to

heel, so careful to indulge herself only when she was safely away from her home area, that it simply hadn't occurred to her.
But one day, about a year ago, when she had seen him, the usual excitement had suddenly sharpened, turned almost feral in its intensity. She had been furious with Webbwhat was new about that?-and Harper had been right there, his thickly muscled body enticing her, his hot blue eyes drifting down her body in a way no father should ever look at his daughter.
She had hugged him, cuddled against him, sweetly called him "Daddy," and all the while she had been rubbing her breasts against him, rolling her hips against his pecker. That was all it had taken. He'd laughed down at her, then crudely grabbed her crotch and shoved her to the ground, where they had gone at each other like animals.
She couldn't stay away from him. She had tried, knowing how dangerous he was, knowing that she had no power to control him, but he drew her like a lodestone. There were no games she could play with him, because he knew her exactly for what she was. There was nothing he could give her and nothing that she wanted from him, except for the mindless, heated sex. No one had ever screwed her the way her daddy did. She didn't have to gauge her every reaction or try to manipulate his response; all she could do was simply lose herself in the hot nastiness of the sex. Whatever he wanted to do to her, she was willing. He was trash, and she loved it, because he was the best revenge she could ever have chosen. When Webb got into bed beside her at night, it served him right that he was sleeping with a woman who, only hours before, had been sticky with Harper Neeley's leavings.

Chapter 4

Roanna stared after Jessie as she rode away from Davencourt, up toward the hilly part of the Davenport lands. Jessie usually preferred a less demanding ride, over fields or level pastures. Why would she deviate from custom? Come to think of it, she had ridden that way a couple of times before, and Roanna had noticed it but not paid attention to it. For some reason, this time she was puzzled.
Maybe it was because she still felt resentful at Jessie's last zinger, though God knows it hadn't been any worse than the usual cut at her fragile self-esteem. Maybe it was because she, unlike everyone else, expected Jessie to

be up to no good. Maybe it was that damn perfume. She hadn't been wearing it at lunch, Roanna thought. A scent that strong would have been noticed. So why had she doused herself with perfume before going for a ride by herself?

The answer dawned on her with blinding clarity.

"She's got a boyfriend!" she whispered to herself, almost overcome with shock. Jessie was slipping around behind Webb's back and seeing someone! Roanna almost suffocated on her indignation on Webb's behalf. How could any woman, even Jessie, be fool enough to jeopardize her marriage to him?

Quickly she saddled Buckley, her current favorite, and set out in the same direction she'd seen Jessie take. The big gelding had a long, slightly uneven gait that would have been Jarring to a less experienced rider but covered distance at a fast clip. Roanna was used to his stride and settled herself into his rhythm, moving fluidly with the motion as she kept her eyes on the ground, following the fresh imprints of Jessie's horse.

Part of her didn't believe Jessie really had a boyfriend-it was just too good to be true, and besides, Jessie was too smart to drop her bread butter-side down-but she couldn't resist the tantalizing possibility that she might be right. Gleefully she began plotting some vague revenge against Jessie for the years of hurts and slights, though she didn't know exactly what she could do. Real revenge wasn't part of Roanna's makeup. She was far more likely to punch Jessie in the nose than she was to plot and carry through some long-term plan, and she would get a lot more enjoyment out of it. But she simply couldn't pass up the opportunity to catch Jessie doing something she shouldn't; it was usually she who was goofing up and Jessie who was pointing it out.

She didn't want to overtake Jessie too quickly, so she reined Buckley to a walk. The July sun broiled down so white and merciless that it should have washed out the colors of the trees, but it didn't. The top of her head burned from the heat. Usually she crammed a baseball cap on her head, but she was still dressed in the silk blend stacks and shirt she had worn to lunch, and the baseball cap, like her boots, was in her bedroom.

Dawdling was easy in that heat. She stopped and let Buckley drink from a small stream, then resumed her leisurely tracking. There was a slight breeze blowing into her face, which was why Buckley caught the scent of Jessie's mount and gave a soft whicker, alerting her. She immediately backtracked, not wanting the other horse to alert Jessie to her presence.

After tethering Buckley to a small pine, she quietly made her way through the trees and up a small hill. Her thin-soled sandals slipped on the pine needles, and she impatiently kicked them off, then clambered barefooted the rest of the way to the top.

Jessie's mount was about forty yards below and to the left, calmly cropping a small patch of grass. A large, moss covered rock jutted up just over the crest of the hill, and Roanna crept over to crouch behind its bulk. Carefully she peeked around it, trying to locate Jessie. She could hear voices, she thought, but the sounds were odd, not really words.

Then she saw them, almost directly below her, and sank weakly against the hot surface of the rock, shock clanging through her body. She had thought to catch Jessie meeting with one of her friends from the country club, maybe necking a little, but not this. Her own sexual experience was so severely limited that she couldn't have formed the images in her mind.

A bush partially concealed them, but still she could see the blanket, Jessie's pale, slim body, and the darker, more muscled form of the man on top of her. They were both stark naked, he was moving, and she was clinging to him, and they were both making sounds that made Roanna. cringe. She couldn't tell who he was, could only see the top and back of his dark head. But then he moved off Jessie, rising up on his knees, and Roanna swallowed hard as she stared at him, her eyes huge. She had never seen a naked man before, and the shock was jarring. He pulled Jessie up on her hands and knees and slapped her rear, laughing harshly at the hot, guttural sound she made, then he was driving into her again the way Roanna had once glimpsed two horses doing it, and dainty, fastidious Jessie was clawing at the blanket and arching her back and rotating her butt against him.

Bile rose hotly in Roanna's throat, and she ducked down behind the rock, pressing her cheek against the rough stone. She closed her eyes tight, trying to control the urge to vomit. She felt numb and sick with despair. My God, what would Webb do?

She had followed Jessie out of a perverse, mischievous desire to cause trouble for her hateful cousin, but she had expected something minor: teasing kisses, if another man was involved at all, maybe meeting some of her friends and slipping away to a bar or something. Years ago, after she and Jessie had first come to live at Davencourt, Webb had sternly neutralized Jessie's spitefulness by threatening to spank her if she didn't stop tormenting Roanna, a threat Roanna had found so delicious that she had

spent days trying to provoke Jessie, just so she could watch her hateful cousin get her rear end warmed. Amused, Webb had finally taken her aside and warned her that the punishment could come her way, too, if she didn't behave herself. That same impish impulse had prompted her today, but what she had found was far more serious than she had anticipated.

Roanna's chest burned with impotent rage, and she swallowed convulsively. As much as she disliked and resented her cousin, she had never thought Jessie was stupid enough to actually be unfaithful to Webb. Nausea rose again, and she quickly turned around to drape her arms across her drawn-up knees and rest her head on them. Her movements scraped against some small gravel, but she was too far away for them to hear the slight noises she was making, and at tho moment she was too sick to care. They weren't paying much attention to anything around them anyway. They were too husk pumping and humping. God, how silly it looked ... and no tn; gross, all at the same time. Roanna was glad she wasn't tn closer, glad that the bush had hid at least part of them.

She could just kill Jessie for doing this to Webb.

If Webb knew, he might kill Jessie himself, Roanna thought, and a chill ran through her. Though he normally controlled it, everyone who knew Webb well was aware of his temper and took care not to arouse it. Jessie was a fool, a stupid, malicious fool.

But she probably thought she was safe from discovery, since Webb wouldn't be back from Nashville until tonight. By then, Roanna thought sickly, Jessie would be all freshly bathed and perfumed, waiting for him and wearing both a pretty dress and a smile, and silently making fun of him because only a few hours earlier she'd been screwing in the woods with someone else. Webb deserved better than that. But she couldn't tell him, Roanna thought. She could never tell anyone. If she did, the most likely outcome would be that Jessie would lie her way out of it, saying that Roanna was just jealous and trying to make trouble, and everyone would believe her because Roanna was jealous, and everyone knew it. Then both Webb and Grandmother would be angry with her rather than with Jessie. Grandmother stayed exasperated at her most of the time anyway for one reason or the other, but she couldn't bear for Webb to be mad at her.

The other possibility would be that Webb did believe her. He might really kill Jessie, and then he would be in trouble. She couldn't bear for anything to happen to him. He might find out some other way, but she couldn't do

anything to prevent that. All she could do was not say anything herself and pray that if he did find out, he wouldn't do anything to get himself arrested.
Roanna slipped from her place of concealment behind the rock and quickly made her way back over the hill and through the stand of pine trees to where she had tethered Buckley. He blew a soft greeting and shoved his nose at her. Obediently she stroked the big head, scratching behind his ears, but her mind wasn't on what she was doing. She mounted him and quietly walked him away from the scene of Jessie's adultery, heading back to the stables. Misery weighed heavily on her thin shoulders.
She couldn't understand what she'd seen. How could any woman, even Jessie, not be satisfied with Webb? Roanna's childhood hero worship had only intensified in the ten years she had been living at Davencourt. At seventeen, she was painfully aware of other women's response to him, so she knew it wasn't just her opinion. Women stared at Webb with unconscious, or maybe not so unconscious, yearning in their eyes. Roanna tried not to look at him that way, but she knew she wasn't always successful. because Jessie sometimes said something sharp to her about mooning around Webb and making a pest of herself. She couldn't help it. Every time she saw him, it was as if her heart gave a great big leap before starting to beat so fast that sometimes she couldn't breathe, and she would get warm and tingly all over. Lack of oxygen, most likely. She didn't think love caused tingles.
Because she did love him, so much, in a way Jessie never would or could. Webb. His dark hair and cool green eyes, the slow grin that made her dizzy with delight. The tall, muscled body that made her go both hot and cold, as if she had a fever; that particular reaction had been bothering her for a couple of years now, and it got worse whenever she watched him swimming and he was wearing only those tight brief trunks. His deep, lazy voice, and the way' he scowled at everyone until he'd had his morning coffee. He was only twenty-four, but he ran Davencourt, and even Grandmother listened to him. When he was displeased, his green eyes would get so cold that they looked like glacier ice, and the laziness of his tone would abruptly vanish, leaving his words clipped and cutting.
She knew his moods, how he looked when he was tired, how he liked his laundry done. She knew his favorite foods, his favorite colors, which professional sports teams he liked, what made him laugh, what made him frown. She knew what he read, how he voted. For ten years she had

absorbed every little detail about him, turning toward him like a shy little violet reaching for the light. Since her parents had died, Webb had been both her defender and her confidant. It was to him that she had poured out all her childish fears and fantasies, he who had comforted her after nightmares or when she felt so alone and frightened.

But for all her love, she had never had a chance with him
and she knew it. It had always been Jessie. That was what hurt most of all, that she could offer herself to him body and soul, and he would still have married Jessie. Jessie, who sometimes seemed to hate him. Jessie, who was unfaithful.

Tears burned Roanna's eyes, and she dashed them away. There was no point in crying about it, though she couldn't help resenting it.

From the time she and Jessie had come to live at Davencourt, Webb had watched Jessie with a cool, possessive look in his eyes. Jessie had dated other boys, and he had dated other girls, but it was as if he allowed her only so much rope, and when she reached the end of it, he would haul her back in. He had been in control of their relationship from the start. Webb was the one man Jessie had never been able to wrap around her finger or intimidate with her temper. A single word from him could make her back down, a feat even Grandmother couldn't match.

Roanna's only hope had been that Jessie would refuse to marry him, but that hope had been so slim as to be almost nonexistent. Once Grandmother had announced that Webb would inherit Davencourt itself plus her own share of the Davenport business concerns, which was fifty percent, it had been a foregone conclusion that Jessie would have married him even if he'd been the meanest, ugliest man on the earth, which he wasn't. Jessie had inherited Janet's twenty-five percent, and Roanna had her father's twenty five percent. Jessie saw herself as the princess of Davencourt, with the promise of becoming its queen by marrying Webb. There was no way she would have accepted a lesser role by marrying someone else.

But Jessie had been fascinated by Webb, too. The fact that she couldn't control him as she did other boys had both irritated and entranced her, keeping her dancing around his flame and to his tune. Probably, with her overweening conceit, she had thought that once they were married she'd be able to control him with sex by bestowing or withholding her favors according to how he pleased her.

If so, she had been disappointed in that, too. RoannaShades of I'wilight knew that their marriage wasn't happy and had been secretly pleased. Suddenly she was ashamed of herself for that, because Webb deserved to be happy even if Jessie didn't.
But how she had gloated every time Jessie hadn't gotten her way! She always knew, because although Webb might control his temper, Jessie never made any attempt to do so. When she was angry, she raged, she pouted, she sulked. In the two years they had been married, the fights had come more and more frequently, with Jessie's yelling heard all over the house, to Grandmother's distress.
Nothing Jessie did, however, could sway Webb from whatever decision happened to displease her. They were locked in almost constant battle, with Webb determined to oversee Davencourt and do his best by their investments, a job that was grinding and often kept him working eighteen hours a day. To Roanna, Webb was obviously adult and responsible, but he was still only twenty-four and had told her once that his age worked against him, that he had to work twice as hard as others to prove himself to older, more established businessmen. That was his primary concern, and she loved him for it.
A workaholic husband, however, wasn't what Jessie wanted in life. She wanted to vacation in Europe, but he had business meetings scheduled. She wanted to go to Aspen at the height of the ski season; he thought it was a waste of time and money because she didn't ski and wasn't interested in learning. All she wanted was to see and be seen. When she lost her driver's license due to four speeding tickets within six months, she would have blithely continued driving and counted on the Davenport influence to keep her out of trouble, but Webb had confiscated all of her car keys, sternly ordered everyone not to let her borrow theirs, and made her sit at home for a month before hiring a driver for her. What had enraged her even more was that she had tried to hire a driver herself, but Webb had anticipated her and stymied that. It hadn't been difficult; there weren't that many limousine services in the Shoals area, and none who would cross him. Only Grandmother hadn't received the rough end of Jessie's tongue during that hellish month when she'd been grounded like a rebellious teenager.
Maybe sleeping with other men was Jessie's revenge against Webb for not letting her have her way, Roanna thought. She was willful enough and spiteful enough to do it.

Bitterly, Roanna knew that she would have made Webb a much better wife than Jessie had, but no one had ever considered it, least of all Webb. Roanna was abnormally observant, a trait developed from a lifetime of being shoved to the side. She loved Webb, but she didn't underestimate his ambition. If Grandmother had made it plain that she would be very pleased if he married Roanna, the way she had with Jessie, then very probably they would now be engaged. Granted, Webb had never looked at her the way he'd looked at Jessie, but she'd always been too young. With Davencourt in the balance, he would have chosen her, she knew he would. She wouldn't have cared that he'd wanted Davencourt more than he wanted her. She would have married Webb on any terms at all, grateful just to get any part of his attention. Why couldn't it have been her? Why Jessie?

Because Jessie was beautiful, and had always been Grandmother's favorite. Roanna had tried hard at first, but she had never been as graceful or as socially adept, or had Jessie's good taste in clothing and decorating. She would certainly never be as pretty. Roanna's mirror wasn't rose tinted; she could plainly see her straight, heavy, untidy hair, more brown than red, and her bony, angular face with her weird, slanted brown eyes, the bump on the bridge of her long nose, and her too-big mouth. She was rail thin and clumsy, and her breasts were just barely there. Despairing, she knew that no one, especially no man, would ever willingly choose her over Jessie. At seventeen, Jessie had been the most popular girl in school, while Roanna, at the same age, had never had a real date. Grandmother had arranged for her to have "escorts" to various functions she'd been forced to attend, but the boys had obviously been shanghaied by their mothers for the duty, and Roanna had always been embarrassed and tongue-tied. None of the draftees had ever volunteered for another opportunity for her company.

But since Webb's marriage, Roanna had tried less and less to fit herself into the mold Grandmother had chosen for her, the appropriate social mold of a Davenport. What was the point? Webb was lost to her. She had begun withdrawing, spending as much time as she could with the horses. She was relaxed with them in a way she never was with people, because the horses didn't care how she looked or if she'd knocked over yet another glass at dinner. The horses responded to her light, gentle touch, to the special crooning note in her voice when she talked to them, to the love and care she lavished on them. She was never clumsy on a horse. Somehow her thin body would move into the rhythm of the powerful animal beneath her, and

she would become one with it, part of the strength and grace. Loyal said he'd never seen anyone ride as good as she did, not even Mr. Webb, and he rode as if he'd been born in a saddle. Her riding ability was the only thing about her that Grandmother ever praised.

But she would give up her horses if she could only have Webb. Here was her chance to break up his marriage, and she couldn't take it, didn't dare take it. She couldn't hurt him that way, couldn't take the chance that he would lose his temper and do something irrevocable.

Buckley sensed her agitation, the way horses do, and began to prance nervously. Roanna jerked her attention back to what she was doing and tried to soothe him, patting his neck and talking to him, but she couldn't give him her full attention. Despite the heat, cold chills roughened her skin, and again she felt as if she might vomit.

Loyal was far more attuned to horses than he was to people, but he frowned when he saw her face and came over to take Buckley's reins as she swung down from the saddle.

"What's wrong?" he asked bluntly.

"Nothing," she said, then rubbed a shaky hand over her face.

"I think maybe I got too hot, that's all. I forgot my cap. 11 "You know better'n that," he scolded.

"Go on up to the house and drink some cold lemonade, then rest up for a while. I'll take care of Buck."

"You told me to always take care of my own horse," she said, protesting, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"And now I'm tellin' you to go on. Scat. If you don't have enough sense to take care of yourself, I don't know that you can take care of Buck."

"All right. Thanks." She managed a weak smile, because she knew she must really look sick for Loyal to bend his rule about the horses, and she wanted to reassure him. She was sick, all right, sick at heart, and so full of impotent rage that she thought she might explode. She hated this, hated what she'd seen, hated Jessie for doing it, hated Webb for letting her love him and putting her in this situation.

No, she thought as she hurried up to the house, stricken by the idea. She didn't hate Webb, could never hate him. It would be better for her if she didn't love him, but she could no more stop that than she could stop the sun from rising the next morning.

No one saw her when she slipped in the front door. The huge hall was empty, though she could hear Tansy singing in the kitchen, and a television played in the den. Probably Uncle Harlan was watching one of the game shows he liked so much. Roanna moved silently up the stairs, not wanting to talk to anyone right now.

Grandmother's suite was at the front of the house, the first door on the right. Jessie and Webb's suite was the front one on the left side. Over the years, Roanna had finally settled on one of the back bedrooms, away from everyone else, but to her dismay she saw that Aunt Gloria and Uncle Harlan had chosen the middle suite on the right side of the house, and the door was standing open, Grandmother's and Aunt Gloria's voices coming from within. Listening, Roanna could also make out the voice of the housekeeper, Bessie, as she worked to unpack their clothes, She didn't want to see any of them, especially didn't want to give Aunt Gloria the opportunity to start in on her, so she reversed her steps and went out the double French doors onto the upper story gallery that completely encircled the house. Using the gallery, she went around the house in the opposite direction until she came to the French doors that opened into her own bedroom and gained sanctuary.

She didn't know how she could ever look at Jessie again without screaming at her and slapping her stupid, hateful face. Tears dripped down her cheeks, and angrily she dashed them away. Crying never had done any good; it hadn't brought back Mama and Daddy, it hadn't made anyone like her any better, it hadn't kept Webb from marrying Jessie. For a long time now she had fought back her tears and pretended that things didn't hurt her even when she felt as if she would choke on her hidden pain and humiliation. But it had been such a shock, seeing Jessie and that man actually doing it. She wasn't stupid, she'd been to an Rrated movie a couple of times, but that really never showed anything except the woman's boobs and everything was all prettied up, with dreamy music playing in the background. And once she'd glimpsed the horses doing it, but she hadn't really been able to see anything because she'd sneaked out to the stables for that very purpose and hadn't been able to find a good vantage point. The noises had scared her, though, and she'd never tried that again.

Reality was nothing like the movies. It hadn't been romantic at all. What she'd seen had been raw and brutal, and she wanted to blot it out of her memory.

She took another shower, then collapsed across the bed, exhausted from her emotional upheaval. Perhaps she dozed; she wasn't certain, but all of a sudden the room was darker as twilight gathered, and she realized she had missed supper. Another black mark against her, she thought, and sighed. She felt calmer now, almost numb. To her surprise she was even hungry. She pulled on some clean clothes and trudged down the back stairs to the kitchen. Tansy had already cleaned up the dishes and gone home, but the industrial-size stainless-steel refrigerator would be full of leftovers.

She was nibbling at a cold chicken leg and a roll, with a glass of tea at her elbow, when the kitchen door opened and Webb strolled in. He looked tired, and he'd removed both coat and tie, the coat slung over his shoulder and hanging from one crooked finger. The top two buttons on his shirt were open. Roanna's heart gave its customary jump when she saw him. Even when he was tired and disheveled, he looked like heaven. The sickness roiled in her stomach again at the thought of what Jessie was doing to him.

"Are you still eating?" he teased with mock amazement, green eyes twinkling.

"Got to keep my strength up," she said, striving for her usual flippancy, but she couldn't quite achieve it. There was a somberness in her tone that she couldn't hide, and Webb gave her a sharp glance.

"What've you done now?" he asked, taking a glass down from the cabinet and opening the refrigerator door to pour himself some iced tea.

"Nothing unusual," she assured him, and even managed a wry, crooked smile.

"I opened my big mouth at lunch, and both Grandmother and Aunt Gloria are mad at me."

"So what did you say this time?"

"We were talking about cars, and I said that I wanted one of the Pontiac Grand Pricks."

His broad shoulders heaved as he controlled a spasm of laughter, turning it into a cough. He dropped into the chair beside her.

"My God, Ro."

"I know." She sighed.

"It just popped out. Aunt Gloria made one of her snide remarks about the way I eat, and I wanted to get her goat." She paused.

"It worked."

"What did Aunt Lucinda do?"

"She sent me from the table. I haven't seen her since." She picked at the roll, reducing it to a pile of crumbs, until Webb's strong hand suddenly covered hers and stilled the movements.
"Had you eaten anything before you left the table?" he asked, and there was a stern tone in his voice now.
She made a face, knowing what was coming.
"Sure. I had a roll and some tuna."
"A whole roll? How much tuna?"
"Well, probably not an entire roll."
"More than you've eaten of this one?"
She eyed the demolished bread on her plate, as if judiciously weighing each crumb, and was relieved to be able to say, "More than that."
It wasn't much more, but more was more. His expression told her he wasn't fooled, but he let that slide for now.
"All right. How much tuna? How many bites?"
"I didn't count them!"
"More than two?"
She tried to remember. She knew she'd taken a couple of bites just to show Aunt Gloria that her verbal swipe had fallen short of the mark. She might try to evade the truth, but she wouldn't lie outright to Webb, and he knew it, so he would continue to pin her down with explicitness. With a little sigh she said, "About two, I guess."
"Did you eat anything afterward? Until now, that is?" She shook her head.
"Ro." He turned his chair toward hers and put his arm around her thin shoulders, hugging her to him. His heat and strength enveloped her the way it always had. Roanna burrowed her untidy head against that broad shoulder, bliss overtaking her. When she'd been young, Webb's hugs had been a haven for a terrified, unwanted little girl. She was older now, and the quality of her delight had changed. There was a heady, faintly musky scent to his skin that made her heart beat faster, and made her want to cling to him.
"You have to eat, baby," he said cajolingly, but with a firm undertone.
"I know you get upset and lose your appetite, but I can tell that you've lost even more weight. You're going to damage your health if you don't start eating more."
"I know what you're thinking," she charged, lifting her head from his shoulder to scowl at him.

"But I don't make myself throw up or anything like that."
"My God, how could you? There's never anything in your stomach to be thrown up. If you don't eat, soon you won't have the strength to work with the horses. Is that what you want?"
"No!"
"Then eat."
She looked at the chicken leg, her expression miserable.
"I try, but I don't like the taste of most food, and p-people are always criticizing how I eat and the food turns into this big wad that I can't swallow."
"You ate toast this morning with me and swallowed just fine."
"You don't yell at me or make fun of me," she muttered. He stroked her hair, pushing the dark chestnut strands away from her face. Poor little Ro. She had always hungered for Aunt Lucinda's approval, but was too rebellious to modify her behavior to get it. Maybe she was right; it wasn't as if she was a juvenile delinquent or anything like that. She was just different, a quirky wildflower growing in the middle of a sedate, well-ordered southern rose garden, and no one knew quite what to make of her. She shouldn't have to beg for her family's love or approval; Aunt Lucinda should just love her for what she was. But for Aunt Lucinda, perfection was her other granddaughter, Jessie, and she had always made it plain that Roanna fell short in every category. Webb's mouth tightened. In his opinion, Jessie was far from perfect, and he was sick and tired of waiting for her to grow out of some of that selfishness.
Jessie's attitude, too, had a lot to do with Roanna's inability to eat. He had let this rock on for years while he devoted himself to the herculean task of learning how to run Davencourt and all the Davenport business concerns, packing four years of college into three and then going after his master's degree in business, but it was obvious now that the situation wasn't going to resolve itself. For Roanna's sake, he was going to have to put his foot down, with Aunt Lucinda as well as Jessie.
Roanna needed calm, peaceful surroundings where her nerves could settle down and her stomach relax. If Aunt Lucinda and Jessie-and now Aunt Gloria, too-wouldn't or couldn't let up on the criticism that they constantly leveled at Roanna, then he wouldn't let Roanna eat with them. Aunt Lucinda had always insisted that they be at the table together, that Roanna conform to social standards, but he was going to override her on this. If she

would eat better with her meals served on a tray in the peacefulness of her bedroom, or even out in the stables if she preferred, then that was where she'd have them. If being separated from the family made her feel exiled, rather than the relief he thought it would be, then he'd eat out in the stable with her. This simply couldn't go on, because Roanna was starving herself to death.

Impulsively he scooped her onto his lap, the way he'd done when she was a youngster. She was about five-seven now, but not a lot heavier, and fear clutched at him as he encircled her alarmingly frail wrist with his long fingers. This little cousin had always appealed to his protective side, and what he had always loved best about her was her pluckiness, her willingness to fight back without regard for the consequences. She was full of wit and mischief, if only Aunt Lucinda would stop trying to obliterate those very traits.

She had always snuggled up to him like a kitten and did so now automatically, rubbing her cheek against his shirt. A faint twinge of physical awareness surprised him, making his dark eyebrows draw together in a puzzled frown.

He looked down at her. Roanna was woefully immature for her age, without the normal social skills and defenses teenagers developed in the course of interacting with each other. Faced with disapproval and rejection at home as well as at school, Roanna had responded by withdrawing, so she had never learned how to interact with the kids in her age group. Because of that, subconsciously he had always thought of her as still being a child in need of his protection, and maybe she did still need it. But even if she wasn't quite an adult, physically she was no longer a child either.

He could see the curve of her cheek, her long, dark lashes, the translucence of her temple where the fragile blue veins lay just beneath the surface. The texture of her skin was smooth, silky, and carried the sweet warm scent of womanhood. Her breasts were very small but very firm, and he could feel the nipple, as small and hard as a pencil eraser, of the breast that was nestled against him in her half-turned position. The twinge of awareness intensified into a sudden, definite throb in his loins, and he was abruptly conscious of how round her buttocks were and how they nestled so sweetly on his thighs.

He barely bit back a growl as he shifted her a little, just enough that the side of her hip wasn't rubbing against his hardening penis. Roanna was

remarkably innocent for her age, having never dated; he doubted she had ever even been kissed. She had no idea what she was doing to him, and he didn't want to embarrass her. It was his fault for taking her on his lap as if she were still a kid. He'd just have to be more careful from now on, though this was probably a fluke. It had been over four months since he'd had sex with Jessie, because he'd gotten so damn sick and tired of her trying to manipulate him with her body. Their encounters weren't about making love; they were a contest of domination. Hell, he doubted Jessie even understood the concept of making love, of the mutual giving of pleasure. But he was young and healthy, and four months of denial had left him extremely edgy, so much so that even Roanna's skinny body could arouse him.

He jerked his mind back to the issue at hand.

"Let's make a deal," he said.

"I promise that no one else will say anything to you about how you eat, and if anyone does, you tell me and I'll take care of it. And you, sugar, will start eating regular meals. Just for me. Promise."

She looked up at him, and her whiskey brown eyes held that soft, adoring glow she reserved for him.

"All right," she whispered.

"For you." Before he had any inkling what she was going to do, she curved her arm around his neck and pressed her sweet, soft, innocent mouth against his.

From the moment he'd scooped her onto his lap, Roanna had been almost breathless with longing and intense excitement. Her love for him flooded her, making her want to moan with pleasure at his touch, at the way he was holding her so close. She rubbed her cheek against his shirt, and felt the heat and resilience of his flesh beneath the fabric. Her nipples throbbed, and blindly she pressed hard against his chest. The resulting sensation was so acute that it shot straight down between her legs, and she had to clench her thighs against the heat.

Then she felt it, that sudden hardness against her hip, and with a thrill she realized what it was. She had seen a naked man for the first time that afternoon, and the shock of the act she'd witnessed had left her weak and nauseated, but this was different. This was Webb. And this meant he wanted her.

The realization shattered her with delight. She stopped thinking. He moved her so that she couldn't feel him against her hip anymore, and he was

talking. She watched him, her gaze fastened on his beautiful mouth, barely absorbing his words. He wanted her to eat, just for him.
"All right," she whispered.
"For you." She would do anything for him. Then the longing grew so intense she couldn't hold it back any longer, and she did what she had wanted to do for so long that it seemed like her entire life had been spent craving this. She put her arm around his neck and kissed him.
His lips were firm and warm, and hinted of a tantalizing taste that made her quiver with need. She felt him jerk, as if startled, felt his hands move to her waist and tighten as if he would lift her away from him.
"No," she sobbed, suddenly terrified that he would push her away.
"Webb, please. Hold me." And she tightened her hold on him and kissed him even harder, shyly daring to lick his lips the way she'd seen it done in a movie.
He quivered, a long shudder running through his muscled body, and his hands clenched on her.
"Ro-" he began, and her tongue slipped in between his opened lips.
He groaned, his entire body tensing. Then suddenly his mouth opened and moved, and control of the kiss was no longer hers. His arms closed around her, hard, and his tongue moved deep into her mouth. Roanna's neck bent back under the pressure, and her senses dimmed under the onslaught. She had thought about kissing, even practiced it on her pillow at night, but she hadn't realized a kiss could make her feel so hot and weak, or that his taste would be so delicious, or that the feel of him against her would unleash such terrible longing. She twisted on his lap, seeking to get closer, and fiercely he turned her so that her breasts were against his chest.
"You two-timing bastard!"
The shriek battered Roanna's ears. She leaped from Webb's lap, her face white as she pivoted to face her cousin. Jessie's features were twisted with rage as she stood just inside the door, glaring at them, her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.
Webb got to his feet. Dull red stained his cheeks, but his gaze was steady as he too faced his wife.
"Calm down," he said in an even tone.
"I can explain."
"I just bet you can," she sneered.

"This should be good. Damn you, no wonder you haven't been interested in touching me! All this time you've been fucking this stupid little whore!"
A red mist edged Roanna's vision. After what Jessie had been doing this afternoon, how dare she talk to Webb like this over a kiss! Without realizing she even moved, suddenly she found herself in front of Jessie, and she shoved her against the wall so hard that her head slammed against it.
"Roanna, stop it!" Webb said sharply, catching her and roughly setting her aside.
Jessie straightened and shoved her hair out of her eyes. Quick as a cat, she lunged past Webb and slapped Roanna across the face with all the strength in her arm. Webb grabbed her and swung her to one side, holding her with a firm grip on the collar of her blouse while he caught Roanna by the nape of her neck.
"That's enough, God damn it," he said with clenched teeth. Webb didn't normally swear in front of women, and the fact that he did now was a measure of his anger.
"Jessie, there's no sense in letting the whole house in on this. We'll talk about it upstairs."
"We'll talk about it upstairs," she mimicked.
"We'll talk about it right here, damn you! You want to keep it quiet? Tough shit! By tomorrow night, everyone in Tuscumbia is going to know you've got a taste for young ass, because I'm going to yell it on every corner!"
"Shut up," Roanna growled, ignoring her burning cheek and glaring her hate at Jessie. She tried to wriggle free of Webb's punishing hold on her neck, but he merely tightened his grip.
Jessie spat at her.
"You've always been after him, you slut," she hissed.
"You set it up for me to find you two together like this, didn't you? You knew I was coming down to the kitchen. You weren't content to fuck him behind my back, you wanted to lord it over me for once."
The scope of the lie stunned Roanna. She darted a glance at Webb and saw the sudden suspicious, condemning glare in his eyes.
"Both of you shut up," he growled, his voice so low and icy that chills ran down her back.
"Jessie. Upstairs. Now." He released Roanna and all but frog-marched Jessie to the door. He paused there to flick Roanna with a glacier gaze that cut like a whip.

"I'll take care of you later."
The door swung shut behind them. Roanna sank weakly against the cabinets and covered her face with her hands.
Oh, God, she'd never meant for anything like this to happen. Now Webb hated her, and she didn't think she could bear it. Pain welled in her, tightening her throat, choking her. She had never been a match for Jessie in slyness and cunning, and Jessie had proved it once again, effortlessly spewing out the lie that would turn Webb against her. Now he thought she'd caused all this deliberately, and he would never, never love her.
Grandmother wouldn't forgive her for this ruckus. She rocked back and forth, overwhelmed with misery, wondering if she'd be sent away. Jessie had been telling Grandmother that Roanna should go away to some girl's college up north, but Roanna hadn't wanted to go and Webb had supported her, but now she doubted Webb would lift a finger if they wanted to send her to the Gobi Desert. She had caused him so much trouble he'd never forgive her, even if she could convince him that Jessie lied, which she doubted. In her experience, they always believed Jessie.
In the space of a few minutes, her entire world had crumbled around her. She had been so happy, those few, sweet moments in his arms, and then it had turned to hell. She would likely have to go away, and she'd lost Webb forever.
It wasn't fair. Jessie was the one who was the whore. But Roanna didn't dare tell, couldn't tell, no matter what happened. She couldn't defend herself against the vicious lies Jessie was even now telling about her.
"I hate you," she whispered thinly to her absent cousin She cowered against the cabinets like a frightened little animal, her heart pounding against her ribs with a force that almost made her faint.
"I wish you would die."

Chapter 5

Roanna lay huddled tensely in her bed. She was cold with misery despite the heat of the summer night, and sleep was as distant now as it had been when she had first escaped upstairs to her room.
The hours since Jessie had caught her kissing Webb had been a nightmare. The uproar had, of course, brought the rest of the household running. There

was no need for questions, because Jessie had screamed curses at both Webb and Roanna the entire time he was dragging her upstairs, but both Grandmother and Aunt Gloria had hammered Roanna with endless queries and accusations anyway.

"How dare you do such a thing?" Grandmother had asked, glaring at Roanna with eyes as cold as Webb's had been, but Roanna remained mute. What could she say? She shouldn't have kissed him; she knew it. Loving him was no excuse, at least not one that would matter to the unanimous condemnation she faced.

She couldn't defend herself by pointing to Jessie's behavior. Webb might hate her now, but still she couldn't tell something that would so hurt him and might cause him to do something rash. She would rather take all the blame herself than risk anything bad happening to him. And in the final analysis, Jessie's actions didn't excuse her own. Webb was a married man; she shouldn't have kissed him. She writhed inside with shame at what her heedless, impulsive act had caused.

The battle raging upstairs had been clearly audible to everyone else. Jessie had always been unreasonable when thwarted and doubly so when her vanity was involved. Her screams had sliced over the deep rumble of Webb's voice. She'd called him every filthy name imaginable, using words that Roanna had never heard spoken aloud before. Grandmother was usually able to overlook anything Jessie did, but even she winced at the language being used. Roanna heard herself called a whore, a horse-faced little slut, and a stupid animal good only for barnyard screwing. Jessie had threatened to have Grandmother cut Webb out of her will hearing this, Roanna had darted a terrified look at Grandmother, because she would die if she'd cost Webb his inheritance, but Grandmother had lifted her elegant brows in surprise at hearing this threat-and to have Webb arrested for statutory rape.

Of course, Grandmother and Aunt Gloria had instantly believed that Roanna had been sleeping with Webb, and this brought their hard glares and recriminations down on her again, though Uncle Harlan had merely lifted his thick gray brows and looked amused. Embarrassed, miserable, Roanna had shaken her head dumbly, not knowing any way to defend herself that they would believe.

Webb wasn't a man to take threats lying down. Until then, he'd been furious but kept his temper under control. Now there was a crash, and the sound of

glass breaking, and he roared: "Get a goddamn divorce! I'll do whatever it takes to get rid of you!"
He'd come down the stairs then, his face hard and set, his eyes burning cold and green. His furious gaze touched on Roanna, and his eyes narrowed, making her shudder with dread, but he didn't stop.
"Webb, wait," Grandmother said, reaching out a staying hand. He ignored her, slamming out of the house. A moment later they saw the headlights of his car slice across the lawn.
Roanna didn't know if he'd returned yet, because only loud vehicles could be heard from inside the house. Her eyes burned as she stared up at the ceiling, darkness weighing down on her like a blanket, suffocating her. What hurt most of all was that Webb hadn't trusted in her; even knowing Jessie, he'd believed her lies. How could he think for one moment that she would deliberately do anything that would cause him any trouble? Webb was the center of her existence, her one champion; if he turned away from her, then she had no foundation, no security in this world.
But fury and disgust had been in his eyes when he'd looked at her, as if he couldn't stand the sight of her now. Roanna curled in a ball, whimpering with the pain that seemed so overwhelming she thought she could never recover from it. She loved him; she wouldn't have turned away from him, no matter what he did. But he had turned away from her, and she shrank in on herself as she realized what the difference was: he didn't love her. She hurt all over, as if she'd bruised herself in this headlong crash into the brick wall of reality. He'd liked her, been amused by her, maybe felt some sort of family tie with her, but he hadn't loved her the way she wanted him to love her. With sudden, shattering clarity, she saw that he'd felt sorry for her, and the humiliation of it scoured her raw inside. Pity was never what she'd wanted from Webb or from anyone else.
She'd lost him. Even if he gave her the chance to defend herself and if he then believed her, it would still never be the same again. He thought she had betrayed him, and his lack of trust was a betrayal of her. That knowledge would always be there in her heart, an icy, burning knot to mark her loss. She had always clung fiercely to Davencourt and to Webb, resisting any effort to pry her loose. Now, for the first time, she thought about going away. There was nothing left here,
"Godawmighty," and for once the too-smooth, too-hearty tone was absent from his voice.

Her hands stuffed into her mouth as if to keep another scream from escaping, Roanna slowly backed away from Jessie's body. Her brown eyes were wide and unblinking, the expression in them curiously blind.
Aunt Gloria rushed into the room despite Uncle Harlan's belated attempt to stop her, with Lucinda close behind. Both women stumbled to a halt, horror and disbelief stunning them to immobility as they took in the gory scene.
Lucinda stared at the tableau presented by her two granddaughters, and every vestige of color washed out of her face. She began to tremble.
Aunt Gloria put her arms around her sister, all the while staring wildly at Roanna.
"My God, you've killed her," she blurted, each word rising with hysteria. "Harlan, call the sheriff!"
The driveway and courtyard were a snarl of vehicles parked at random angles, bar lights flashing eerie blue strobes through the night. Every window in Davencourt blazed with light, and the house was crowded with people, most of them wearing brown uniforms, some of them wearing white.
All of the family, except for Webb, sat in the spacious living room. Grandmother was weeping softly, her hands ceaselessly twisting a delicately embroidered handkerchief as she sat with slumped shoulders. Her face was ravaged with grief. Aunt Gloria sat beside her, patting her, murmuring soothing but meaningless words. Uncle Harlan stood just behind them, rocking back and forth on his toes, importantly answering questions and offering his own opinions on every theory or detail, soaking in the limelight currently shining on him because of his luck in being the first one on the scene-discounting Roanna, of course.
Roanna sat alone on the opposite side of the room from everyone else. A deputy stood nearby. She was dully aware that he was a guard, but she couldn't bring herself to care.
She might as well go away to college the way everyone wanted her to and start fresh, where people didn't know her and have preconceived ideas about how she should look and act. Before, the very thought of leaving Davencourt had brought panic, but now she felt only relief Yes, she wanted to get away from everyone and everything.
But first, she would fix things for Webb. One last gesture of love, and then she would put all this behind her and move on.

She glanced at the clock as she got out of bed. It was after two; the house was silent. Jessie was probably asleep, but Roanna frankly didn't give a damn. She could just wake up and listen, for once, to what Roanna had to say.
She didn't know what she would do if Webb were there, but she didn't really expect him to be. He'd been in such a temper when he'd left that he probably hadn't returned yet, and even if he had, he wouldn't crawl into bed with Jessie. He'd either be downstairs in the study or asleep in one of the other bedrooms.
She didn't need a light; she had wandered Davencourt so much at night that she knew all of its shadows. Silently she drifted down the hallway, her long white nightgown making her look like a ghost. She felt like a ghost, she thought, as if no one ever really saw her.
She paused in front of the door to Webb and Jessie's suite. A light was still on inside; a thin bright ribbon was visible at the base of the door. Deciding not to knock, Roanna turned the knob.
"Jessie, are you awake?" she asked softly.
"I want to talk to you."
The shrill scream tore through the soft fabric of the night, a long, raw sound that seemed to go on and on, straining, until it broke on a hoarse note.
Lights flared in various bedrooms, even down in the stables where Loyal had his Own apartment. There was a gabble of sleepy, confused voices crying out, asking questions, and the thud of running feet.
Uncle Harlan was first to reach the suite. He said,

She was motionless, her eyes dark pools in a colorless face, her gaze both unseeing and yet encompassing as she stared unblinkingly across the room at her family.
Sheriff Samuel "Booley" Watts paused just inside the doorway and watched her, wondering uncomfortably what she was thinking, how she felt about this silent but implacable rejection. He assessed the thin frailty of her bare arms, noted how insubstantial she looked in that white nightgown, which wasn't much whiter than her face. The pulse at the base of her throat beat visibly, the rhythm too fast and weak. With the experience of thirty years in law enforcement behind him, he turned to one of his deputies and said quietly, "Get one of the paramedics in here to see about the girl. She looks shocky." He needed her lucid and responsive.

The sheriff had known Lucinda for most of his life. The Davenports had always been hefty contributors to his campaign funds when election time rolled around. Politics being what they were, he'd done a lot of favors for the family over the years, but at the base of their longtime relationship was genuine liking. Marshall Davenport had been a tough, shrewd son of a bitch but a decent one. Booley had nothing but respect for Lucinda, for her inner toughness, her refusal to relax her standards in the face of modern decline, her business acumen. In the long years after David's death, until Webb had become old enough to begin taking over some of the burden, she had run an empire, overseen a huge estate, and raised her two orphaned granddaughters. Granted, she'd had the benefit of immense wealth to smooth the way for her, but the emotional burden had been the same on her as it would have been on anyone else.

Lucinda had lost too many loved ones, he thought. Both the Davenport and Tallant families had suffered untimely deaths, people taken too young. Lucinda's beloved brother, the first Webb, had died in his forties after being kicked in the head by a bull. His son, Hunter, had died at the age of thirty-one when his small plane crashed in a violent thunderstorm in Tennessee. Marshall Davenport had been only sixty when he died from a burst appendix that he ignored, thinking it was just an intestinal upset, until the infection had become so massive his system couldn't fight it off. Then both David and Janet, as well as David's wife, had been killed in that car wreck ten years ago. That had nearly broken Lucinda, but she'd stiffened her spine and soldiered on.

Now this; he didn't know if she could bear up under this latest bereavement. She'd always adored Jessie, and the girl had been mighty popular in the elite society of Colbert County, though Booley himself had had his own reservations about her. Sometimes her expression had seemed cold, emotionless, like that of some of the killers he'd seen through the years. Not that he'd ever had any trouble with her, never been called on to cover up any minor scandals; whatever Jessie was really like, under the flirtatiousness and party manners, she'd kept her nose clean. Jessie and Webb had been the sparks in Lucinda's eyes, and the old girl had been nearly bursting a seam with pride when the two kids had gotten married a couple of years ago. Booley hated what he had to do; it was bad enough that she'd lost Jessie, without involving Webb, but it was his job. Politics or not, this couldn't be swept under the carpet.

A stocky paramedic, Turkey MacInnis, entered the room and crossed to where Roanna was sitting, hunkering down in front of her. Turkey, so called because of his ability to imitate a turkey call without benefit of any gizmos, was both competent and soothing, one of the better paramedics in the county. Booley listened to the casual matter-of-fact voice as he asked the girl a few questions, assessing her responsiveness as he flicked a tiny penlight in her eyes, then took her blood pressure and counted her pulse. Roanna answered the questions in a flat, almost inaudible tone, her voice sounding strained and raw. She regarded the paramedic at her feet with a total lack of interest.

A blanket was fetched and wrapped around her, and the paramedic urged her to lie down on the sofa. Then he brought her a cup of coffee, which Booley guessed to be heavily sweetened, and cajoled her into drinking it. Booley sighed. Satisfied that Roanna was being taken care of, he couldn't put off his onerous duty any longer. He rubbed the back of his head as he walked over to the small group on the other side of the room. For at least the tenth time, Harlan Ames was recounting the event as he interpreted it, and Booley was getting heartily sick of that greasy, too-loud voice.

He sat down beside Lucinda.

"Have you found Webb yet?" she asked in a strangled tone, as more tears slipped down her cheeks. For the first time, he thought, Lucinda looked her age of seventy-three. She had always given the impression of being lean and strong, like the finest stainless steel, but now she looked shrunken in her nightgown and robe.

"Not yet," he said uncomfortably.

"We're looking for him," That was an understatement if he'd ever made one. There was a slight disturbance at the door, and Booley looked around, frowning, but relaxed when Yvonne Tallant, Webb's mother, strode into the living room. Technically no one was supposed to be allowed in, but Yvonne was family, even though she had 4istanced herself several years back by moving out of Davencourt into her own little house across the river in Florence. Yvonne had always been a woman with an independent streak. Just now, though, Booley wished she hadn't shown up, and he wondered how she'd found out about the trouble here tonight. Ah, hell, no use worrying about it. That was the trouble with small towns. Someone in dispatch, maybe, had called home and said something to a family member, who'd called a friend, who'd called a cousin who knew Yvonne personally

and had taken it upon herself to let her know. That was always how it worked.
Yvonne's green eyes swept the room. She was a tall, slim woman with streaks of gray in her dark hair, the type described more as handsome than pretty. Even at this hour, she was impeccably clad in tailored slacks and a crisp white blouse. Her gaze lit on Booley.
"Is it true?" she asked, her voice cracking a little.
"About Jessie?" Despite Booley's own reservations about Jessie, she had always seemed to get along with her mother-in-law. Besides, the Davenport and Tallant families were so close that Yvonne had known Jessie from the cradle.
Beside him, Lucinda gulped on a sob, her entire body trembling. Booley nodded an answer at Yvonne, who closed her eyes against welling tears.
"Roanna did it," Gloria hissed, glaring across the room at the small, blanket-wrapped figuro lying on the sofa. Yvonne's eyes flew open, and she gave Gloria an incredulous look.
"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped, and purposefully strode over to Roanna, crouching down beside her and stroking the tumbled hair back from the colorless face, murmuring softly to her as she did. Booley's opinion of Yvonne jumped up several notches, though he doubted, from the look on her face, that Gloria shared it.
Lucinda bowed her head, as if unable to look across the room at her other granddaughter.
"Are you going to arrest her?" she whispered.
Booley took one of her hands in his, feeling like a meaty, clumsy ox as his thick fingers folded around her cold, slender ones.
"No, I'm not," he said.
Lucinda shuddered slightly, some of the tension leaving her body.
"Thank God," she whispered, her eyes squeezing shut.
"I'd like to know why not!" Gloria shrilled from Lucinda's other side, rearing up like a wet hen. Booley had never liked Gloria nearly as much as he did Lucinda. She'd always been prettier, but Lucinda had been the one who'd caught Marshall Davenport's eye, Lucinda who had married the richest man in northwest Alabama, and envy had nearly eaten Gloria alive.
"Because I don't think she did it," he said flatly.
"We saw her standing right over the body! Why, her feet were in the blood!"

Irritably, Booley wondered why that was supposed to have any significance. He reached for patience.
"From what we can tell, Jessie had already been dead for several hours before Roanna found her." He didn't go into the technical details about the progression rate of rigor mortis, figuring Lucinda didn't need to hear it. It wasn't possible to pin down the exact time of a death unless it was witnessed, but it was still a sure thing that Jessie had died at least a couple of hours before midnight. He didn't know why Roanna had paid her cousin a visit at two in the morning-and he'd definitely find out-but Jessie had already been dead.
The little family group was frozen, staring at him-as if they couldn't comprehend this latest twist. He took out his little notebook. One of the county detectives normally would have done the interviewing, but this was the Davenport family, and he was going to give the case his personal attention.
"Mr. Ames said that Webb and Jessie had a lulu of a fight tonight," he began, and saw the sharp look that Lucinda gave her brother-in-law.
Then she took a deep breath and squared her shoulders as she mopped a, her face with the mangled handkerchief.
"They argued, yes."
"What about?"
Lucinda hesitated, and Gloria stepped into the breach.
"Jessie caught Webb and Roanna carrying on in the kitchen."
Booley's gray eyebrows rose. Not much surprised him anymore, but he felt mildly astonished at this. Dubiously, he glanced at the frail, huddled little form across the room. Roanna seemed, if not childish, still oddly childlike, and he wouldn't have figured Webb for being a man who was turned on by that.
"Carrying on, how?"
"Carrying on, that's how," Gloria said, her voice rising.
"My God, Booley, do you want me to draw you a picture?" The idea of Webb having sex with Roanna in the kitchen struck him as even more unlikely. He was never surprised at the depth of stupidity supposedly smart people could exhibit, but this didn't ring true. Odd, that he could see Webb Shades ol'Twilight committing murder, but not fooling around with his little cousin.

Well, he'd get the true story about the kitchen episode from Roanna. He wanted something else from these three.
"So they were arguing. Did the argument turn violent?"
"Sure did," Harlan replied, only too eager to take the spotlight again. "They were upstairs, but Jessie was screaming so loud we could hear every word. Then Webb yelled at her to get a divorce, that he'd do anything to get rid of her, and there was the sound of glass breaking. Then Webb came storming downstairs and left."
"Did any of you see Jessie after that, or maybe hear her in the bathroom?"
"Nope, not a sound," Harlan said, and Gloria shook her head. No one had tried to talk to Jessie, knowing from experience that it was better to let her cool down first or her fury would erupt on the erstwhile mediator. Lucinda's expression was one of growing disbelief and horror as she realized where Booley's questioning was headed.
"No," she said violently, shaking her head in denial.
"Booley, no! You can't suspect Webb!"
"I have to," he replied, trying to keep his voice gentle.
"They were arguing, violently. Now, we all know Webb has quite a temper when he's stirred up. No one saw or heard a peep out of Jessie after he left. It's a sad fact, but any time a woman's killed, it's usually her husband or a boyfriend who does it. This hurts me bad, Lucinda, but the truth is Webb is the most likely suspect."
She was still shaking her head, and tears were dribbling down her wrinkled cheeks again.
"He couldn't. Not Webb." Her voice was pleading.
"I hope not, but I have to check it out. Now, what time was it when Webb left, as near as you can remember?" Lucinda was silent. Harlan and Gloria looked at each other.
"Eight?" Gloria finally offered, uncertainty in her voice.
"About that," Harlan said, nodding.
"That movie I wanted to watch just had come on."
Eight o'clock. Booley considered that, chewing on his lower lip as he did so. e1yde O'Dell, the coroner, had been doing his job for just about as long as Booley had been doing his, and was damn good at guessing the time of death. He had both the experience and the knack for adding the degree of rigor with the temperature factor and coming up with pretty close to the right answer. Clyde had put the time of Jessie's death at "Oh, ten o'clock or

thereabouts," with a rocking motion of his hand to indicate the actual time could slip either way. Eight o'clock was a mite early, and though it was still within the realm of possibility, that did throw a bit of doubt into the mix. He had to make damn sure of his case before he presented it to the county prosecutor, because old Simmons was too slick a politician to take on a case involving the Davenports and Tallants unless he was sure he could make it stick.
"Did anyone hear a car or anything later on? Did Webb maybe come back?"
"I didn't hear anything," Harlan said.
"I didn't either," Gloria confirmed.
"You'd have to be driving a transfer truck before we could hear it in here, unless maybe we were in bed and the balcony doors were open."
Lucinda rubbed her eyes. Booley had the feeling she wished her sister and brother-in-law would shut the hell up.
"We can't normally hear anyone driving up," she said.
"The house is very well insulated, and the shrubbery deadens the sound, too."
"So he could have returned and you wouldn't necessarily have known it."
Lucinda opened her mouth, then closed it without replying. The answer was obvious. The upstairs balcony that circled the huge, elegant old house was accessible from the outside stairs on Webb and Jessie's side of the house. Moreover, each bedroom had double French doors that opened onto the balcony; it would have been ridiculously easy for anyone to go up those stairs and enter the bedroom without anyone else in the house seeing them. From a security standpoint, Davencourt was a nightmare.
Well, maybe Loyal had heard something. His apartment in the stables probably wasn't as soundproof as this massive old house.
Yvonne left Roanna's side and came to stand right in front of Booley.
"I heard what you've been saying," she said quietly, her tone even despite the way her green eyes were boring a hole in him.
"You're barking up the wrong tree, Booley Watts. My son didn't kill Jessie. No matter how mad he was, he wouldn't have hurt her."
"Under normal circumstances, I'd agree with you," Booley replied.
"But she was threatening to have Lucinda cut him out of her will, and we all know what Davencourt means to-" "Bullshit," Yvonne said firmly, ignoring the way Gloria's mouth tightened like a prune.

"Webb wouldn't believe that for a second. Jessie always exaggerated when she was mad."
Booley looked at Lucinda. She wiped her eyes and said faintly, "No, I would never have disinherited him."
"Even if they divorced?" he pressed.
Her lips trembled.
"No. Davencourt needs him."
Well, that undercut a damn good motive, Booley thought. He wasn't exactly sorry. He would hate like hell to have to arrest Webb Tallant. He'd do it, if he could build a strong enough case, but he'd hate it.
At that moment a flurry of voices came from the front entrance, and they all recognized Webb's deep voice as he said something curt to one of the deputies. Every head in the room, except Roanna's, swiveled to watch as he strode into the room, flanked by two deputies.
"I want to see her," he said sharply.
"I want to see my wife."
Booley got to his feet.
"I'm sorry about this, Webb," he said, his voice as tired as he felt.
"But we need to ask you some questions."

Chapter 6

Jessie was dead.
They hadn't let him see her, and he desperately needed to, because until he saw it for a fact himself, Webb found it impossible to truly believe it. He felt disoriented, unable to sort out his thoughts or feelings because so many of them were contradictory. When Jessie had yelled at him that she wanted a divorce, he'd felt nothing but relief at the prospect of being rid of her, but ... dead? Jessie? Spoiled, vibrant, passionate Jessie? He couldn't remember a day of his life when Jessie hadn't been there. They had grown up together, cousins and childhood playmates, then the fever of puberty and sexual passion had locked them together in an endless game of domination. Marrying her had been a mistake, but the shock of losing her was numbing. Grief and relief warred, tearing him apart inside.
Guilt was there, too, in spades. Guilt, first and foremost, because he could feel relief at all, never mind that for the past two years she had done her

best to make his life hell, systematically destroying everything he'd ever felt for her in her relentless quest for the fawning adoration she'd thought she wanted.

And then there was the guilt over Roanna.

He shouldn't have kissed her. She was only seventeen, damn it, and an immature seventeen at that. He shouldn't have held her on his lap. When she had suddenly thrown her arms around his neck and kissed him, he should have gently pushed her away, but he hadn't. Instead he'd felt the soft, shy bloom of her mouth under his, and her very innocence had aroused him. Hell, he'd already been aroused by the feel of her round bottom on his lap. Instead of breaking the kiss, he had deepened it, taking control, thrusting his tongue into her mouth for an explicitly sexual kiss. He'd turned her in his arms, wanting to feel those slight, delicate breasts against him. If Jessie hadn't walked in at that point, he probably would have had his hand on those breasts and his mouth on the sweetly pebbled nipples. Roanna had been aroused, too. He'd thought she was too innocent to know what she was doing, but now he saw it differently. Inexperienced wasn't the same as innocent.

No matter what he'd done, he doubted Roanna would have lifted a hand or spoken a word to stop him. He could have taken her there on the kitchen table, or sitting astride his lap, and she would have let him.

There was nothing Roanna wouldn't do for him. He knew it. And that was the most horrible thought of all.

Had Roanna killed Jessie?

He'd been furious with both of them, and with himself for allowing the situation to happen. Jessie had been screaming her filthy insults, and abruptly he'd been so fed up with her that he knew it was the end of their marriage for him. As for Roanna-he never would have thought she was devious enough to set up the scene in the kitchen, but when he'd looked at her after Jessie's vicious accusation, he hadn't seen shock on Roanna's too-open, too-expressive face; he'd seen guilt. Maybe it was caused by the same dismay he'd been feeling, because they shouldn't have been kissing, but maybe ... maybe it was more. For an instant he had seen something else, too: hate.

They all knew that Roanna and Jessie didn't get along, but he'd also known for quite some time that, for Roanna, the animosity had been very bitter. The reason for it had been obvious, too; only a blind fool could have missed

seeing how much Roanna adored him. He hadn't done anything to encourage her, romantically speaking, but neither had he discouraged her. He was fond of the little brat, and that unquestioning hero worship of hers had definitely stroked his ego, especially after one of the endless battles with Jess. Hell, he supposed he loved Ro, but not in the way she wanted; he loved her with the amused exasperation of an older brother, he worried about her lack of appetite, and he felt sorry for her when she was humiliated by her own social awkwardness. It hadn't been easy for her, forever being cast as the ugly duckling to Jessie's beautiful swan.

Could she have believed that ridiculous threat Jessie had made, about having him cut out of Aunt Lucinda's will? He'd known it was nonsense, but had Roanna? What would she have done to protect him? Would she have gone to Jessie, tried to reason with her? He knew from experience that reasoning with Jessie was wasted effort. She would have turned on Roanna like a bear on fresh meat, dredging up even more hateful things to say, vicious threats to make. Would Roanna have gone to such extreme lengths to stop Jess? Before that episode in the kitchen, he would have said no way, but then he'd seen the expression on Roanna's face when Jessie burst in on them, and now he wasn't certain.

They said she'd been the one to find Jessie's body. His wife was dead, murdered. Someone had bashed her head in with one of the andirons from the fireplace in their suite. Had Roanna done it? Could she have done it deliberately? Everything he knew about her said no, at least to the second question. Roanna wasn't cold-blooded. But if Jessie had taunted her, made fun of her looks and her feelings for him, made more of those stupid threats, maybe then she could have lost her temper and hit Jessie.

He sat alone in Booley's office, bent over with his head cradled in his hands as he tried to bring some sort of order to the turmoil of his thoughts. Evidently he was the prime suspect. After the fight he and Jess had had, he supposed that was logical. It made him so angry he wanted to punch someone, but it was logical.

He hadn't been arrested, and he wasn't particularly worried, at least not about that. He hadn't killed Jess, so unless some evidence was fabricated against him, there was no way to prove that he had. He was needed at home to take care of things. From the brief glimpse he'd had of her, Aunt Lucinda had been devastated; she wouldn't be up to making the funeral arrangements. And Jess was his wife; he wanted to do this last service for

her, mourn her, grieve for the girl she had been, the wife he had hoped for. It hadn't worked out for them, but still she hadn't deserved to die like that. Tears burned his eyes, dripped through his fingers. Jess. Beautiful, unhappy Jess. He had wanted her to be a partner rather than a parasite that constantly demanded more and more, but it hadn't been in her nature to give. There hadn't been enough love in the world to satisfy her, and eventually he had stopped even trying.

She was gone. He couldn't bring her back, couldn't protect her.

But what about Roanna? Had she killed his wife?

What should he do now? Tell Booley his suspicions? Throw Roanna to the wolves?

He couldn't do it. He didn't, couldn't, believe that Roanna would deliberately have killed Jessie. Hit her, yes. The blow might even have been struck in self-defense, because Jessie was-had been-perfectly capable of physically attacking Roanna. Ro was only seventeen, a juvenile; if she were arrested and tried and found guilty, her sentence would be light, for the crime. But even a light sentence would be a death sentence for her. Webb knew as sure as he was sitting there that Roanna wouldn't survive so much as a year's sentence to a juvenile detention hall. She was too frail, too vulnerable. She would stop eating altogether. And she would die.

He thought of the scene at the house. He'd been hustled out of the house before he'd been able to speak with anyone, though his mother had tried. But what he'd seen in that brief moment was branded on his mind: Yvonne, fiercely protective, ready to do battle for him, but then he'd expected nothing else from his stalwart mother; Aunt Lucinda, staring at him with numb grief, Aunt Gloria and Uncle Harlan, horrified, fascinated accusation in their eyes. No doubt about it, they thought he was guilty, damn them. And Roanna, in pale and frozen isolation on the other side of the room, not even lifting her head to look at him.

He'd spent the past ten years protecting her. It had become second nature to him. Even now, as angry as he was at her, he couldn't stop the instinct to shield her, If he thought she'd done it deliberately, that would be different, but he didn't. So here he was, protecting with his silence the girl who had probably killed his wife, and the bitterness of the choice filled his gut.

The office door opened behind him and he straightened, brusquely wiping the remaining dampness from his eyes. Booley walked around the desk and

sank heavily into the creaky leather chair, his shrewd eyes on Webb's face, taking note of the evidence of tears.
"I'm sorry about this, Webb. I know it's a shock."
"Yeah." His voice was rough.
"I got a job to do, though. You were heard telling Jessie you'd do anything to get rid of her."
The best way through this minefield, Webb figured, was to tell the truth-up to a point, when it would be best to say nothing at all.
"Yeah, I said it. Right after I told her to get a divorce. I meant I'd agree to any settlement."
"Even giving up Davencourt?"
"Davencourt isn't mine to give, it's Aunt Lucinda's. That decision would be hers."
"Jessie threatened to have Lucinda cut you out of her will."
Webb gave an abrupt shake of his head.
"Aunt Lucinda wouldn't do anything like that just because of a divorce."
Booley crossed his arms behind his head, linking his fingers to form a cradle for his skull. He studied the young man before him. Webb was big and strong, a natural athlete; he had the strength to crush Jessie's skull with one blow, but had he done so? He abruptly changed the subject.
"Supposedly Jessie caught you and Roanna at some hanky-panky in the kitchen. Want to tell me about it?"
Webb's eyes flashed with a hint of the cold, ferocious fury he was holding bottled up inside.
"I was never unfaithful to Jess," he said shortly.
"Never?" Booley let a little doubt slide into his tone.
"Then just what did Jessie see that set her off?"
"A kiss." Let Booley have the unvarnished truth, as far as it went.
"You kissed Roanna? For God's sake, Webb, don't you think she's a mite young for you?"
"Damn it, of course she's too young!" Webb snapped. "it wasn't like that."
"Wasn't like what? What do you have going with her?"
"I don't have anything going with her." Unable to contain himself any longer, Webb lunged to his feet, causing Booley to tense and automatically lay his big hand on the butt of his pistol, but he relaxed when Webb began pacing the confines of the small office.
"Then why did you kiss her?"

"I didn't. She kissed me." Initially, that is. Booley didn't need to know the rest of it.
"Why'd she do that?"
Webb rubbed the back of his neck.
"Roanna's like a kid sister to me. She was upset-"
"Why?"
"Aunt Gloria and Uncle Harlan moved in today. She doesn't get along with Aunt Gloria."
Booley made a grunting sound, as if he could understand that.
"And you were ... comforting her?"
"That, and trying to get her to eat. If she's upset or
nervous, she can't eat, and I was worried about what this would do to her."
"You think she's-what's the word-aner-something? Starving herself to deathr, "Anorexic. Maybe. I don't know. I told her that I'd talk to Aunt Lucinda and make the others stay off her back, if she would promise to eat. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me, Jessie walked in, and all hell broke loose."
"is that the first time Roanna's kissed you?"
"Except for pecks on the cheek, yes."
"So there's nothing at all romantic going on between the two of you?"
"No," Webb said, the word clipped.
"I heard she's got a crush on you. A sweet young girl like that, a lot of men would be tempted."
"She depends on me a lot, has since her folks died. It's no big secret."
"Was Jessie jealous of Roan naT "Not to my knowledge. She had no reason to be."
"Even though you get along real good with Roanna? From what I hear, you and Jessie hadn't been getting along at a. Maybe she was jealous about that."
"You hear a lot, Booley," Webb said tiredly.
"Jessie wasn't jealous. She threw temper tantrums whenever she didn't get her way. She was mad at me for going to Nashville this morning, and when she saw Roanna kissing me, that was just an excuse to raise hell."
"The argument turned violent, didn't it?"
"I threw a glass and broke it."
"Did you hit Jessie?"
6"No."

"Have you ever hit her?"
"No." He paused, and shook his head.
"I spanked her ass once when she was sixteen, if that counts."
Booley restrained a grin. Now wasn't the time for amusement, but Jessie getting her rear end tanned was something he'd liked to have seen. A lot of kids nowadays, boys and girls both, would benefit greatly from the same treatment.
Webb would have been just seventeen at the time, but he'd always been older than his years.
"What happened then?"
"Jessie was getting more and more out of control. I left before things could get out of hand."
"What time did you leave?"
"Hell, I don't know. Eight, eight-thirty."
"Did you go back?"
"No."
"Where did you go?"
"I drove around a while, over to Florence."
"Did anybody you know see you, so they can verify it?"
"I don't know."
"What did you do? Just drive around?"
"For a while, like I said. Then I went to the Waffle Hut on Jackson Highway."
"What time did you get there?"
"Ten o'clock, maybe."
"What time did you leave?"
"After two. I didn't want to come home until I'd cooled down."
"So you were there about four hours? I reckon the daitress would remember that, don't you?"
Webb didn't reply. He thought it likely, because she had tried several times to strike up a conversation, but he hadn't been in the mood for chitchat.
Booley would check it out, the waitress would verify his presence, and that would be the end of it. But who would Booley look at as a suspect then? Roanna?
"You can go on home," Booley said after a minute.
"Don't guess I have to tell you to stick close. No going out of town on business trips or anything like that."

Webb's gaze was cold and hard.
"I'd hardly be scheduling a business trip when I have to bury my wife."
"Well, as to that. Considering the nature of her death, there's gotta be an autopsy. Normally that only delays the funeral a day or two, but sometimes it can be longer. I'll have to let you know." Booley leaned forward, his jowly face earnest.
"Webb, son, I'll tell you plain, I don't know about this. It's a sorry fact that when a woman gets killed, it's usually her husband or boyfriend who did it. Now, you've never struck me as the type, but then neither have a lot of other folks I've wound up arresting. I gotta suspect you, and I gotta check everything out. On the other hand, if you have any suspicions yourself, I'd appreciate hearing about them. Families always have their little twists and secrets. Why, your folks were sure Roanna had killed Jessie, and they were treating her like she was poison or something, until I told them that I didn't think she'd done it."
Booley was a country-plain, unsophisticated good old boy, but he'd been in law enforcement for a long time, and he knew how to read people. In his way, he used the same tactics Columbo had made famous on television, just kind of easing around and carrying on casual conversations and putting the pieces together. Webb resisted the invitation to confide in the sheriff, instead saying, "May I go now?"
Booley waved a meaty hand.
"Sure. But like I said, stick close to home." He heaved his bulk out of the chair.
"I might as well drive you home myself. It's already morning, so I'm not going to get any sleep anyway."
Roanna was hiding, not the way she had when she was little by crawling under furniture or burrowing deep in a closet, but nevertheless she had removed herself from the grim, hushed activity in the house. She had retreated to the bay window where once she had watched Webb and Jessie sit in the garden swing, while behind her the rest of the family had discussed what to do with her. She was still wrapped tight in the blanket the paramedic had put around her, holding the edges together with cold, bloodless fingers. She sat watching the slowly arriving dawn, ignoring the hum of voices behind her, shutting it all out.
She tried not to think about Jessie, but no amount of effort could erase that bloody scene from her mind. She didn't have to actively think about it, it

was just there, like the window. Death had so altered Jessie that at first Roanna had simply stood there, gaping at the body without quite realizing that it was real, or even recognizing her cousin. Her head had been oddly misshapen, flattened around a huge open wound where her skull had literally been cracked open. She had been awkwardly sprawled with her neck bent as her head rested against the raised rock hearth.

Roanna had turned on the light when she'd entered the suite, blinking her eyes as she tried to adjust her vision, and walked around the sofa on her way to the bedroom to wake Jessie and talk to her. She had literally stumbled on Jessie's sprawled legs, and stared down in silent stupefaction for a long moment before she realized what she was seeing and began to scream.

It wasn't until later that she realized she'd been standing on blood-soaked carpet and that her bare feet were stained red. She didn't remember how they had gotten clean, if she had washed them or someone else had.

The window reflected the scene behind her, the swarm of people coming and going. The rest of the family had arrived, singly and in pairs, adding their questions and tears to the confusion.

There was Aunt Sandra, Webb's aunt on his father's side, which made her Grandmother's niece. Aunt Sandra was a tall, dark-haired woman with the Tallant good looks. She had never married, instead pursuing an advanced education in physics, and now worked for NASA in Huntsville.

Aunt Gloria's daughter and her husband, Lanette and Greg Spence, had arrived with their two teenagers, Brock and Corliss. Corliss was Roanna's age, but they had never gotten along. No sooner had they arrived than Corliss had slipped up to Roanna and whispered, "Were you really standing in her blood? What did she look like? I heard Mama tell Daddy that her head was cracked open like a watermelon."

Roanna had ignored the avid, insistent voice, keeping her face turned toward the window.

"Tell me!" Corliss insisted.

A vicious pinch on the back of her arm made Roanna's eyes sting with tears, but she stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge her cousin in any way. Eventually Corliss had given up and left to badger someone else for the gory details she craved.

Aunt Gloria's son, Baron, lived in Charlotte; he and his wife and three kids were expected to arrive later in the day. Even without them, that meant ten

family members were grouped in the living room or around a comforting pot of coffee in the kitchen, with the makeup of the groups changing as people shifted back and forth.

No one was allowed to go upstairs yet, though Jessie had long since been taken away, because the investigators were still taking pictures and gathering evidence. With the deputies and all the others there in various official capacities, the big house was teeming with people, but still Roanna managed to shut them all out. She felt very cold inside, a strange chill that had spread to every cell of her body and formed a protective shell, keeping her inside and everyone else outside.

The sheriff had taken Webb away, and she had nearly choked on her guilt. This was all her fault. If only she hadn't kissed him! She hadn't done it on purpose, but then none of the messes she caused were on purpose.

He hadn't killed Jessie. She knew it. She'd wanted to scream at them for even thinking something so ugly about him. Now that was all Aunt Gloria and Uncle Harlan were talking about, how shocking it was, as if he'd already been tried and convicted. Only a few hours before, they had been equally convinced that Roanna was the killer.

Webb couldn't do something like that. He could kill; somehow Roanna knew that Webb would do whatever was necessary to protect those he loved, but killing under those circumstances wasn't the same as murder. No matter how nasty Jessie had been, no matter what she'd said or even if she'd attacked him with a poker or something, he wouldn't have harmed her. Roanna had seen him tenderly helping a foal into the world, sitting up all night with a sick animal, taking turns with Loyal walking a colicky horse for hours on end. Webb took care of his own.

It wasn't her fault Jessie was dead, but because Roanna loved Webb and hadn't been able to control her stupid impulses, it had set in motion a chain of circumstances that caused Webb to be blamed for Jessie's death. She had no idea who had killed Jessie, her thoughts hadn't gone that far; she only knew that it wasn't Webb. With every cell in her body, she knew he couldn't have done it, just as she knew this was all her fault and he'd never forgive her.

When Sheriff Watts had taken Webb away for questioning, Roanna had been paralyzed with shame. She hadn't even been able to lift her head and look at him, sure that she would see nothing but hatred and contempt in his

eyes if he happened to look at her, and she knew that she couldn't have borne it.
She had never felt so alone, as if there was an invisible bubble around her, preventing anyone from getting close. She could hear Grandmother behind her, softly weeping again, and hear Aunt Gloria's murmured attempts at consolation, but it didn't quite touch her. She didn't know where Uncle Harlan was; she didn't care. She would never forget the way they had accused her of killing Jessie, the way they had pulled back from her as if she had the plague. Even when Sheriff Watts had said he didn't think she'd done it, none of them had approached or apologized. Not even Grandmother, though Roanna had heard the soft "Thank God" she'd uttered when the sheriff had said he thought she was innocent.
All her life she'd tried so hard to earn these people's love, to be good enough, bvt she had never succeeded. Nothing about her had ever equaled the standards of the Davenports and Tallants. She wasn't pretty, she wasn't even presentable. She was clumsy, untidy, and had the unfortunate habit of saying the most appalling things at the most inappropriate time.
Deep inside her, something had given up. These people had never loved her, never would. Only Webb had cared, and now she had messed that up, too. She was alone in a fundamental way that left a huge, aching void inside. There was something devastating in knowing that if she simply walked out of this house and never came back, no one would care. The despair that she had faced earlier, when she realized that Webb didn't love her or trust her, had settled into mute acceptance.
All right, so they didn't love her; that didn't mean she had no love to give. She loved Webb with every fiber in her body, something that wasn't going to change no matter how he felt about her. There was also love for Grandmother, despite her obvious preference for Jessie, because after all it had been Grandmother who had firmly said, "Roanna will live here, of course," easing the terror of a seven-year-old who had abruptly lost everything. Even though she had more often found disapproval than approval from Grandmother, she still felt enormous respect and affection for the indomitable old woman. She hoped that someday she could be as strong as Grandmother, rather than the bumbling, unwanted fool she was now.
Both of the people Roanna loved had lost someone dear to them. All right, so she herself had despised Jessie; Grandmother and Webb hadn't. It wasn't

her fault that Jessie was dead, but if Webb were blamed for it, that definitely would be her fault because of that kiss. Who really had killed Jessie? The only person who readily sprang to mind was the man she had seen with Jess the day before, but she had no idea who he was and wasn't certain she could either describe him now or even identify him if he walked in the door. Her shock had been so great that she hadn't paid a great deal of attention to his face, If she had decided before to keep quiet about what she'd seen, her reasons now were even more crucial. If Sheriff Watts found out that Jessie had been having an affair, he would see that as a motive for Webb to kill her. No, Roanna decided dazedly, she would only hurt Webb by disclosing what Jessie had been doing.

A murderer would go free. Roanna thought about that, but her reasoning was simple: telling the sheriff about it wouldn't guarantee that the murderer was caught, because she couldn't give him any more information than that, and Webb would be harmed. For Roanna, there was no question of justice or truth, and she was too young and unsophisticated for subtleties of philosophy. The only thing that mattered was protecting Webb. Right or wrong, she would keep her mouth shut.

She watched as a county car silently rolled up the long driveway and stopped. Webb and Sheriff Watts got out and walked toward the house. Roanna watched Webb; her gaze stuck to him like a magnet to steel. He was still dressed in the clothes he'd worn yesterday, and he looked exhausted, his hard face shadowed with both fatigue and a day's growth of beard. At least he was home, she thought, her heart leaping, and he wasn't in handcuffs. That must mean the sheriff wasn't going to arrest him.

As the two men walked up the semicircle of brick-paved sidewalk, Webb glanced up to where she sat in the big bay window, outlined by the lights behind her. Though it still wasn't full daylight, Roanna saw the way his face hardened, then he looked away from her.

She listened to the confused, awkward flurry of family members behind her when Webb entered the house. Most of them didn't speak to him, but instead made an effort to make their own conversations seem casual. Under the circumstances, the effort was ridiculous, and they merely sounded stilted. Only Yvonne and Sandra rushed to him, and were gathered into his strong arms. In her reflective window, Roanna watched him bend his dark head down to them.

He released them and turned to Sheriff Watts.

"I need to shower and shave," he said.
"Upstairs is off-limits for now," the sheriff replied.
"There's a bath with a shower next to the kitchen. Would you have a deputy bring me some clean clothes?"
"Sure." The arrangements were made, and Webb left to
clean up. The voices behind her resumed a more normal rhythm. Watching them, Roanna could tell that both Aunt Yvonne and Aunt Sandra were furious with the others.
Then suddenly her view of the room was blotted out as Sheriff Watts appeared directly behind her.
"Roanna, do you feel up to answering some questions?" he asked in a tone so gentle it seemed out of place, coming from such a rough, burly man.
She clutched the blanket even tighter and silently turned around.
His huge hand closed over her elbow.
"Let's go where it's quieter," he said, helping her to slide from the window seat. He wasn't quite as tall as Webb but was easily twice as wide. He was built like a wrestler, with a barrel chest and thick belly, and without any jiggle to his middle.
He led her into Webb's study, seating her on the sofa rather than in one of the big leather armchairs, and eased down beside her.
"I know it's hard for you to talk about it, but I need to know what happened tonight, and this morning."
She nodded.
"Webb and Jessie were arguing," Sheriff Watts said, watching her carefully. "Do you know-"
"It was my fault," Roanna interrupted, her voice flat and hollow and strangely raspy. Her brown eyes, usually so lively and full of golden lights, were dull and haunted.
"I was in the kitchen trying to eat when Webb came home from Nashville. I-I'd missed supper. I was upset ... Anyway, I k-kissed him, and that's when Jessie came in."
"You kissed him? He didn't kiss you?"
Miserably Roanna nodded. It didn't matter that, after a few seconds, Webb had held her tight and returned her kiss. She had initiated it.
"Has Webb ever kissed you?"
"Some. Mostly he ruffles my hair."
The sheriff's lips twitched.

"I mean on the mouth."
"No."
"Do you have a crush on him, Roanna?"
She went still, even the breath halting in her chest. Then she squared her thin shoulders and gave him a took of such naked despair that he swallowed.
"No," she said with pitiful dignity.
"I love him." She paused.
"He doesn't love me, though. Not like that."
"Is that why you kissed him?"
She began to rock back and forth, the movement slight but significant as she fought to control her pain.
"I know I shouldn't have done it," she whispered.
"I knew it then. I never would have done anything to cause Webb so much trouble. Jessie said I'd done it on purpose, that I knew she was coming down, but I didn't. I swear I didn't. He was being so sweet to me, and all of a sudden I couldn't resist it. I just grabbed him. He never had a chance."
"What did Jessie do?"
"She just started screaming at us. She called me all sorts of ugly names, and Webb, too. She accused us of-you know. Webb tried to tell her it wasn't like that, but Jessie never listened to anybody when she was pitching one of her fits."
The sheriff put his hand over hers, patting it.
"Roanna, I have to ask you this, and I want you to tell me the truth. Are you sure there's nothing between you and Webb? Have you ever had sex with him? This is a serious situation, honey, and nothing but the truth will do."
She gave him a blank look, then hot color washed into her white face.
"No!" she sputtered, and turned an even darker red.
"I've never-with anyone! I mean-" He patted her hand again, mercifully interrupting her mangled reply.
"There's no need to be embarrassed," he said kindly.
"You're doing the smart thing, placing such a high value on yourself."
Miserably Roanna thought that she didn't have a high value on herself at all; if at any time Webb had so much as crooked his finger at her, she would have come running and let him do whatever he wanted to her. Her virginity was due to his lack of interest, not her own morals.
"What happened then?" he prompted.

"They went upstairs, still arguing. Or rather, Jessie was. She was screaming at him, and Webb was trying to calm her down, but she wouldn't listen."
"Did she threaten to have him cut out of Lucinda's will?" Roanna nodded.
"But Grandmother just looked surprised. I was so relieved, because I couldn't have stood it if I caused Webb to lose Davencourt."
"Did you hear anything violent happening in their room?"
"Some glass breaking, then Webb yelled at her to go ahead and get a divorce, and he left."
"Did he tell her he'd do anything to get rid of her?"
"I think so," Roanna answered readily, knowing that the others had likely confirmed this.
"I don't blame him. I'd have added my allowance to her alimony, if that would have helped."
The sheriff's lips twitched again.
"You didn't like Jessie?" She shook her head.
"She was always hateful to me."
"Were you jealous of her?"
Roanna's lips trembled.
"She had Webb. But even if she hadn't, I know that he wouldn't be interested in m-me. He never has been. He was nice to me because he felt sorry for me. After she caused such a ruckus last night-I mean after I caused it-I decided I might as well go away to college the way they'd been wanting me to do. Maybe then I could make some friends."
"Did you hear anything from their room last night after Webb left?"
Roanna shuddered, an image of Jessie as she'd last seen her flashing through her brain. She gulped.
"I don't know. Everybody was mad at me, even Webb. I was upset and went to my room. It's at the back of the house."
"All right now, Roanna, I want you to think carefully. When you go up the stairs, their rooms are across the front hall to the left. If there's a light on in the room, you can see it under the door. I checked that myself. When you went to your room, did you look in that direction?"
She remembered that very well. She had cast a fearful glance at Jessie's door, afraid she would come storming out of it like the Wicked Witch in The Wizard of Oz, and she had tried to be very quiet so Jessie wouldn't hear her. She nodded.
"Was there a light on?"

"Yes." She was certain of it, because otherwise she would have thought Jessie had gone on into the connecting bedroom and thus wouldn't hear her.
"Okay, now tell me about later, when you found her. What time was it?"
"After two. I hadn't been asleep. I kept thinking how I'd messed everything up and caused Webb so much trouble."
"You were awake the entire time?" the sheriff asked sharply.
"Did you hear anything?"
She shook her head.
"I told you, my bedroom's on the back, away from everyone else. It's real quiet back there. That's why I like it."
"Could you tell when the others came up to bed?"
"I heard Aunt Gloria in the hall about nine-thirty, but my door was closed and I couldn't tell what she was saying."
"Harlan said that he started watching a movie about eight. It shouldn't have been off at nine-thirty."
"Maybe he finished watching it in their room. I know they have a television in there, because Grandmother had a connection run for them before they moved in."
He pulled out his notebook and scribbled a few words, then said, "Okay, let's go back to when you went to Jessie's room this morning. Was the light on then?"
"No. I turned it on when I went in. I thought Jessie was in bed, and I was going in there to wake her up so I could talk to her. The light was bright, and I couldn't see good for a few minutes, and I-I stumbled over h-her."
She shuddered again and started shaking. The bright color of a moment before leached out of her face, leaving it chalky again.
"Why were you going to talk to her?"
"I was going to tell her that it wasn't Webb's fault, that he didn't do anything wrong. It was just me-being stupid, as usual," she said dully.
"I never meant to cause him any trouble."
"Why not wait until morning?"
"Because I wanted to fix it before then."
"Then why didn't you talk to her before you went to bed?"
"I was a coward." She gave him an ashamed took.
"You don't know how nasty Jessie could be."
"I don't think you're a coward at all, honey. It takes guts to say something's your fault. A lot of grown-ups never do learn how to do it."

She began rocking again, and the haunted look came back.
"I didn't want anything bad to happen to Jessie, not bad like that. I'd have laughed if her hair fell out or something. But when I saw her head ... and the blood ... I didn't even recognize her at first. She was always so beautiful."
Her voice trailed off, and Booley sat in silence beside her, thinking hard. Roanna said she'd turned on the light. All doorknobs and light switches had already been dusted for fingerprints, so it should be her print on that particular switch, something easy enough to check. If the light had been on when she'd gone to her room, and off when she went to talk to Jessie, then that meant either Jessie had turned off the light herself after Webb had gone, or someone else had. Either way, Jessie had been alive when Webb had left the house.
That didn't mean he couldn't have returned later and gone up the outside stairs. If his alibi at the Waffle Hut checked out, though, that meant they likely didn't have enough circumstantial evidence to charge him. Hell, there was no motive anyway. He wasn't having an affair with Roanna, not that Booley had pinned much credence to that theory to begin with. It had been a shot in the dark, nothing more. The hard facts were, Webb and Jessie had argued over something Roanna said was her fault while totally absolving Webb. Jessie had threatened him with the loss of Davencourt, but no one had believed her, so that didn't count. In a temper, Webb had yelled at her to go ahead and get a divorce, and slammed out of the house. Jessie had been alive then, according to both Roanna's testimony and the coroner's estimate of time of death, based on the degree of rigor mortis and the temperature of Jessie's body. No one had seen or heard anything. Webb had been at the Waffle Hut close to the time of Jessie's death. Now, they weren't talking about any great distance here, nothing that couldn't be driven in about fifteen or twenty minutes, so it was still within the realm of possibility that he could have returned, bashed her in the head, and then calmly driven to the Waffle Hut to establish his alibi, but the odds of convincing any jury of that were pretty slim. Hell, the odds of convincing the county prosecutor to press charges on that basis were even slimmer.
Someone had killed Jessie Tallant. Not Roanna. The girl was so painfully open and vulnerable, he doubted she knew how to lie. Besides, he'd have bet money she didn't have the strength to pick up that andiron, which was one of the heaviest he'd ever seen, specially made for the oversize fireplaces here in Davencourt. Someone strong had killed Jessie, pointing to a man.

The two other men at Davencourt, Harlan Ames and the stableman, Loyal Wise, had no motive.
So, the killer was either Webb-and unless Webb confessed, Booley knew there was no way of proving it-or a stranger. There was no sign of forced entry, but to his amazement he'd discovered that none of the people here locked their balcony doors, so force wouldn't have been necessary. Nor was there anything stolen, which would have given them robbery as a motive.
The plain fact was, Jessie was dead for no good reason that he could tell, and it was damn hard to make a murder charge stick without giving a jury a motive it could believe.
This was one murder that wasn't going to be solved. He could feel it in his bones, and it made him sick. He didn't like for law-breaking slime to get away with so much as stealing a pack of chewing gum, much less murder. It didn't make any difference that Jessie had evidently been a bitch of the first water; she still hadn't deserved to have her head bashed in.
Well, he'd try. He'd check out all the angles, verify Webb's alibi, and present what he had to Simmons, but he knew the prosecutor was going to say they didn't have a case.
He sighed, got to his feet, and looked down at the forlorn little figure still on the sofa, and he was moved to offer her some comfort.
"I don't think you give yourself enough credit, honey. You aren't stupid, and you aren't a coward. You're a sweet, smart girl, and I like you fine."
She didn't reply, and he wondered if she'd even heard him. She'd been through so much in the last twelve hours, it was a wonder she hadn't cracked under the strain. He patted her on the shoulder and quietly left the room, leaving her alone with her regrets, and her nightmare images.

Chapter 7

The next few days were hell.

The entire Shoals area, which consisted of Tuscumbia, Muscle Shoals, Sheffield, and Florence, the four towns that butted together where Colbert and Lauderdale Counties met at the Tennessee River, were riveted by the spectacle of the bloody murder of a member of Colbert County's premier family and the ensuing investigation of her husband as the killer. Webb was as well known, if not quite as respected yet, as Marshall Davenport had been, and of course everyone who was anyone had known Jessie, the star of the local top society. Gossip ran rampant. Webb hadn't been arrested, and Sheriff Watts would say only that he had been questioned and released, but as far as everyone was concerned that was as good as saying he'd done it. Why, look at how his only family treated him, the whispers ran. Lucinda cried every time she saw him, and she couldn't bring herself to talk to him yet. Gloria and Harlan Ames were convinced Webb had killed Jessie, and though publicly they didn't say anything, they had made a few comments to their closest friends, the "just between you and me" kind. The more moral souls were disapproving when the confidential gossip was spread, but that didn't stop it from growing like kudzu.

Gloria and Harlan's two children, Baron and Lanette, kept their respective families as far away from Webb as they could.

Only Webb's mother, Yvonne, and his aunt Sandra seemed convinced of his innocence, but of course they would be. He'd always been Sandra's favorite, while she practically ignored Gloria's grandchildren. A definite rift was growing in the family. And as for Roanna, who had discovered the body, she was said to be suffering from shock and had all but sequestered herself. She had always been like a puppy dog at Webb's heels, but not even she had anything to do with him. Word was that they hadn't spoken since Jessie's death.

The insidious vines of gossip spread the rumor that Jessie had been savagely beaten before she'd been killed; someone else said she'd been mutilated. They said that Webb had been caught in flagrante delicto with Roanna, the little cousin, but credulity stopped short of actually believing that. Maybe he'd been caught, but with Roanna? Why, she was skinny as a rail, unattractive, and had no idea how to make herself appealing to a man.

Anyway, obviously Webb had been caught with someone, and gossip ran hot with speculation on the unknown woman's identity.
The autopsy on Jessie's body was completed, but the results weren't released pending the results of the investigation. Funeral arrangements were made, and so many people attended the service that the church couldn't hold everyone. Even people who hadn't known her personally attended out of curiosity. Webb stood alone, an island around which everyone else moved but never quite touched. The minister extended his sympathies. No one else did.
At the cemetery, it was much the same thing. Lucinda was heartbroken, weeping uncontrollably as she stared at Jessie's flower-laden casket, supported on brass rails over the raw, open mouth of the grave. It was a hot summer day, without a cloud to mar the sky, and the white-molten sun soon had everyone dripping with sweat. Handkerchiefs and miscellaneous bits of paper were used to languidly fan perspiring faces.
Webb sat on one end of the first row of folding chairs that had been placed under the canopy for the immediate family. Yvonne sat beside him, firmly holding his hand, and Sandra sat beside her. The rest of the family had taken the other chairs, though no one seemed eager to be the one sitting directly behind Webb. Finally Roanna. slipped into that chair, a frail wraith who had grown even thinner in the days since Jessie's murder. For once, she didn,t stumble or drop anything. Her face was white and remote. Her dark chestnut hair, usually so untidy, was pulled sternly back from her face and tied with a black bow. She had always jittered around, as if she had too much energy to control, but now she was oddly still. Several people gave her curious glances, as if not quite certain of her identity. Her too-big features, so unsuited for the thinness of her face, somehow looked better suited to the remote severity that now swathed her. She still wasn't pretty, but there was some. thing ... The prayers were said, and the mourners tactfully steered away from the gravesite so the casket could be lowered and the grave filled. No one actually left the cemetery, except for a few who had other things to do and couldn't wait around any longer for something to happen. The rest milled around, pressing Lucinda's hand, kissing her cheek. No one approached Webb. He stood alone, just as he had at the funeral home and then the church, his expression hard and closed.
Roanna stood it as long as she could. She had avoided him, knowing how he must hate her, but the way people were treating him made her bleed

inside. She moved to his side and slipped her hand into his, her cold, frail fingers clinging to the hard, warm strength of his. He glanced down at her, his green eyes as welcoming as ice.
"I'm sorry," she whispered, her words audible only to him. She was acutely aware of all the avid eyes trained on them, speculating on her gesture.
"It's all my fault people are treating you like this." Tears swam in her eyes, blurring his outline as she looked up at him.
"I just wanted you to know that I didn't ... I didn't do it on purpose. I didn't know Jessie was coming downstairs. I hadn't talked to her since lunch that day."
Something flickered in his eyes, and he drew in a long, controlled breath.
"It doesn't matter," he said, and gently but firmly removed his hand from her grip.
The rejection was like a blow to the face. Roanna swayed under the impact, her expression stark with despair. Webb muttered a curse under his breath and reluctantly lifted his hand to steady her, but Roanna stepped back.
"I understand," she said, still in a whisper.
"I won't bother you anymore." Then she slipped away, as insubstantial as a black-clad ghost.
Somehow she kept her control. It was easier now, as if the layer of ice that encased her kept everything from spilling out. Webb's rejection had almost cracked the ice, but after the initial blow, the layer had thickened in self-defense, becoming even stronger. The hot sun beat down on her, but Roanna wondered if she would ever be warm again.
She had scarcely slept since the night she'd found Jessie's body. Every time she closed her eyes, the bloody image seemed to be painted on the inside of her eyelids, where she couldn't escape it. Guilt and misery kept her from eating more than a few bites, and she had lost even more weight, The family was being kinder to her, perhaps because of their own guilt about the way they had treated her immediately after she'd found Jessie's body, when they had thought Roanna had killed her cousin, but it didn't matter. It was too little, too late. Roanna felt so distant from them, from everything, that sometimes it was as if she wasn't even there.
After the grave had been filled and the multitude of flowers positioned to cover the raw earth, all of the family and a good many others drove back to Davencourt. The upstairs had been off-limits for two days, then Sheriff Watts had simply sealed off the murder scene and let the remainder of the

floor be used, though everyone had felt strange at first. Only Cousin Baron and his family were staying at the house, though, since all of the other relatives lived close by. Webb hadn't slept at Davencourt since Jessie's murder. He spent his days there, but at night he went to a motel. Aunt Gloria had said that she was relieved, because she wouldn't have felt safe with him in the house at night, and Roanna had wanted to slap her. Only a desire not to cause Grandmother more stress had restrained her.

Tansy had prepared huge amounts of food to feed the expected crowd and had been glad of the opportunity to keep herself busy. People wandered in and out of the dining room where the buffet had been arranged, filling plates and returning to gather in small groups where they discussed the situation in hushed voices.

Webb shut himself in the study. Roanna walked down to the stables and stood at the fence, finding comfort in watching the horses graze. Buckley saw her and trotted over, thrusting his head over the fence to be patted. Roanna hadn't been riding since Jessie's death; in fact, this was her first visit to the stables. She scratched behind Buckley's ears and crooned soothingly to him, but her mind wasn't on what she was saying, it was just automatic noise. He didn't seem to mind, though; his eyes half closed in delight, and he made a grunting noise.

"He's missed you," Loyal said, coming up behind her. He had changed out of the suit he'd worn to the funeral and was now clad in his more familiar khakis and boots.

"I've missed him, too."

Loyal propped his arms on the top railing and surveyed his kingdom, his gaze warming as he watched the sleek, healthy animals he loved.

"You don't look too good," he said bluntly.

"You need to take better care of yourself. The horses need you."

"It's been a bad time," she replied, her voice lifeless.

"Sure has," he agreed.

"It still don't seem real. And it's a
shame how folks are treating Mr. Webb. Why, he no more killed Miss Jessie than I did. Anybody who knows anything about him would know that."

Loyal had been extensively questioned about the night of the murder. He'd heard Webb leave and agreed with everyone else that the time was between eight and eight-thirty, but hadn't heard any cars after that until the sheriff had been called and the county vehicles arrived on the scene. He'd been

awakened from a sound sleep by Roanna's scream, a sound that could still make him wince when he remembered it.
"People only see what they want to see," Roanna said.
"Uncle Harlan just likes the sound of his own voice, and Aunt Gloria's a fool."
"What do you reckon will happen now? With them living here, I mean."
"I don't know."
"How's Miss Lucinda holding up?"
Roanna shook her head.
"Dr. Graves is keeping her on mild sedatives. She loved Jessie a lot. She still cries all the time." Lucinda had been frighteningly diminished by Jessie's death, as if this had been one blow too many for even her nature. She had pinned all her hopes for the future on Webb and Jessie, and now it looked as if her plans had been destroyed, with Jessie dead and Webb suspected of her murder. Roanna. had kept waiting for Grandmother to go to Webb and put her arms around him, tell him that she believed in him. But for whatever reason, whether Grandmother was too paralyzed with grief or maybe because she did think Webb could have killed Jessie, it hadn't happened. Couldn't Grandmother see how much Webb needed her? Or was she in so much pain that she couldn't see his?
Roanna felt nothing but dread for the coming days.
"We got the results of the autopsy back," Booley said to Webb the day after the funeral. They were in Booley's office again. Webb felt as if he'd spent more time there since Jessie's death than he had anywhere else.
The initial shock had passed, but the grief and anger were still bottled up inside him, all the more potent for having to be kept under restraint. He didn't dare let his control slip, or his rage would explode over everyone: his so-called friends, who had stayed as far away from him as if he'd been a leper; his business associates, some of whom had seemed secretly pleased at his trouble, the bastards; and most of all his loving family, who all apparently thought him a murderer. Only Roanna had approached him and said she was sorry. Because she'd accidentally killed Jessie herself, and was afraid to say so? He couldn't know for certain, no matter what he suspected. What he did know was that she too had avoided him, Roanna who had always done her best to stay right at his heels, and that she was definitely feeling guilty about something.

He couldn't help worrying about her. He could tell that she wasn't eating, and she was alarmingly pale. She had changed in other, more subtle ways, too, ways he couldn't analyze because he was still so angry he couldn't focus on those tiny differences.

"Did you know Jessie was pregnant?" Booley asked.

If he hadn't already been sitting, Webb's legs would have folded beneath him. He stared at Booley in silent shock.

"I guess not," Booley said. Damn, this case had as many hidden little twists as a maze. Webb was still the best bet for Jessie's killer, which -wasn't saying much, but the evidence wasn't there. There wasn't much evidence, period; no witnesses and no known motive. He couldn't convict a gnat on the evidence he had. Webb's alibi had checked out, Roanna's testimony had established that Jessie had been alive when Webb had stormed out, so they had nothing but a corpse. A pregnant corpse, as it turned out.

"She was about seven weeks along, according to the report. Had she been puking or anything?"

Webb shook his head. His lips felt numb. Seven weeks. The baby wasn't his. Jessie had been cheating on him. He swallowed the lump in his throat, trying to consider what this meant. He'd had no indication she'd been unfaithful, and there hadn't been any gossip either; in a small town, there would have been gossip, and Booley's investigation would have turned up something. If he told Booley that the baby wasn't his, that would be considered a believable motive for killing her. But what if her lover had killed her? Without even a guess as to who the man might be, there was no way of finding out, even assuming Booley would listen to him.

He had kept quiet when he thought Roanna might have killed Jessie, and now he found himself forced into the same position again. For whatever reason, because he couldn't bring himself to destroy Ro or because disclosing that Jessie's baby wasn't his and bringing even more suspicion down on his own head, his wife's murderer was going to go unpunished. The impotent rage welled up again, eating him alive like acid; rage at Jessie, at Roanna, at everyone, and most of all at himself.

"If she knew," he finally said, his voice hoarse, "she hadn't told me."

"Well, some women know right off, and some don't. My wife didn't miss a period for four months with our first; we had no idea why she was throwing up all the time. Don't know why they call it morning sickness, because Bethalyn puked all hours of the day and night. We never knew what would

set it off. But now, with the others, she knew pretty soon. Guess she learned how to spot it. Anyway, I'm sorry about this, Webb. About the baby and all. And, uh, we'll keep the case open, but frankly we don't have jack shit to go on.”
Webb sat for a moment, staring at the whiteness of his knuckles as he gripped the arms of the chair.
"Does this mean you're not investigating me anymore?"
"I guess it does."
"I can leave town?"
"Can't stop you."
Webb stood up. He was still pale. He stopped at the door and looked back at Booley.
"I didn't kill her," he said. Booley sighed.
"It was a possibility. I had to check it out."
"I know."
"I wish I could find the killer for you, but it don't look good."
"I know," Webb said again and quietly closed the door behind him.
Sometime during the short drive to the motel, he made his decision.
He packed his clothes, checked out of the motel, and drove back to Davencourt. His gaze was bitter as he surveyed the grand old house, crowning a slight rise with its graceful and gracious wings spread wide, like welcoming arms. He had loved it here, a prince in his own kingdom, knowing that one day it would all be his. He had been willing to work himself into the ground for the sake of his kingdom. He had married the chosen princess. Hell, he had been more than willing to marry her. Jessie had been his since that long ago day when they had sat in the swing beneath the huge old oak and fought their first battle for dominance.
Had he married her out of pure ego, determined to show her that she couldn't play her little games with him? If he were honest, then yes, that had been part of the reason. But the other part had been love, a strange love compounded of a shared childhood, a shared role in life, and the sexual fascination that had existed between them since puberty. Not a great foundation for marriage, he knew now. The sex had burned itself out pretty damn fast, and their old bonds hadn't been strong enough to hold them together after the attraction was gone.
Jessie had been sleeping with another man. Men, for all he knew. Knowing Jessie as he did, he realized she had probably done it out of revenge,

because he hadn't kowtowed to her every whim. She'd been capable of just about anything when thwarted, but somehow he'd never expected her to cheat on him. Her reputation in Tuscumbia and Colbert County had been too important to her, and this wasn't some fast-lane big city where lovers came and went and no one paid much attention to it. This was the South, and in some ways still the Old South, where appearances and genteel manners held sway, at least in the middle and upper echelons of society. But she'd not only slept with someone else, she had neglected to use birth control. Again, out of revenge? Had she thought it would be a delicious joke on him to present him with a child not his own?

In one short, hellish week, his wife had been murdered, his entire life and reputation had been destroyed, and his family had turned on him. He had gone from prince to pariah.

He was fed up with it all. Booley's bombshell today had just topped it off. He had worked like hell for years to keep the family in the manner to which they'd become accustomed, meaning the lap of luxury, sacrificing his private life and any chance he might have had of making a real marriage with Jessie. But when he'd needed his family in a united front, supporting him, they hadn't been there. Lucinda hadn't accused him but neither had she backed him, and he was tired of dancing to her tune. As for Gloria and Harlan and their bunch, to hell with them. Only Mother and Aunt Sandra had believed in him.

Roanna. What about her? Had she set this entire nightmare in motion, striking out at Jessie without any regard to the damage she would do to him? Somehow, on a different level, Roanna's betrayal was more bitter than the others. He'd gotten so accustomed to her adoration, to the comfortable companionship he'd had with her. Her quirky personality and unruly tongue had amused him, made him laugh even when he was so dead tired he was about to fall on his face. Grand Pricks, indeed, the little imp.

At the funeral, she'd said that she hadn't deliberately set up that scene in the kitchen, but guilt and misery had been written all over that thin face. Maybe she had, maybe she hadn't. But she too had avoided him, when he'd have sold his soul for comfort. Booley didn't consider Roanna a suspect in Jessie's murder, but Webb couldn't forget the look of hate he'd seen in Roanna's eyes, or the fact that she'd had the chance. Everyone in the house had had the chance to do it, but Roanna was the only one who'd hated Jessie.

He just didn't know. He'd kept his mouth shut to protect her even though she hadn't supported him. He'd kept his mouth shut about Jessie's baby not being his, letting another possible murderer off scot-free, because he himself would have been the more likely suspect. He was goddamn tired of being caught in the middle, To hell with them all.
He stopped the car in the driveway and stared at the house, Davencourt. It was the embodiment of his ambition, a symbol of his life, the heart of the Davenport family. It had a personality all its own, an old house that had sheltered generations of Davenports within its graceful wings. Whenever he was away on a business trip and thought of Davencourt, in his mind's eye he always saw it surrounded by flowers. In spring, the azalea bushes rioted with color. In summer, the roses and old maids took their bow. In fall there were the chrysanthemums, and in winter the pink and white camellia bushes. Davencourt was always in bloom. He'd loved it with a passion he'd never felt for Jessie. He couldn't put the blame for this totally on the others, because he too was guilty, in the final analysis marrying for the legacy rather than the woman.
To hell with Davencourt, too.
He parked at the walk and went in the front door. The conversation in the living room stilled abruptly, as it had been doing for the past week. He didn't even glance into the room as he strode into the study and seated himself behind the desk.
He worked for hours, completing paperwork, drawing up forms, returning active control of all the far-flung Davenport enterprises into Lucinda's hands. When it was finished, he got up and walked out of the house, and drove away without looking back.

BOOK THREE

The Return

Chapter 8

Bring Webb back for me," Lucinda said to Roanna.
"I want you to convince him to come home."
Roanna's face didn't show her shock, though it reverberated through her entire body. With controlled grace she replaced her tea glass on the dainty

coaster without even the tiniest betraying rattle. Webb! Just the sound of his name still had the power to slice through her, bringing up the old painful longing and guilt, even though it had been ten years since she'd last seen him, since anyone had seen him.

"Do you know where he is?" she asked composedly. Unlike Roanna's, Lucinda's hand did shake as she set down her glass. Her eighty-three years sat heavily on Lucinda, and the constant tremor in her hands was just another of the tiny ways her own body was failing her. Lucinda was dying, in fact. She knew it, they all knew it. Not immediately, not even soon, but it was summer now and it wasn't likely she'd see another one. Her iron will had stood up to a lot, but had slowly bowed under the inexorable crush of time.

"Of course. I hired a private investigator to find him. Yvonne and Sandra have known all along, but they wouldn't tell me," Lucinda said with a mixture of anger and exasperation.

"He's kept in touch with them, and both of them have visited him occasionally."

Roanna veiled her eyes with her lashes, careful not to let any expression show through. So they had known all this time. Unlike Lucinda, she didn't blame them. Webb had made it perfectly plain he had no use for the rest of the family; he had to despise them, and herself most of all. She didn't blame him, considering. Still, it hurt. Her love for him was the one emotion she hadn't been able to block. His absence had been like a slow-bleeding wound, and in ten years it hadn't healed but still seeped pain and remorse. But she had survived. Somehow, by locking away all other emotions, she had survived. Gone was the coltish, exuberant girl, brimming over with energy and mischief, that she'd been. In her place was a cool, remote young woman who never hurried, never lost her temper, and seldom even smiled, much less laughed aloud. Emotions were paid for with pain; she had learned a bitter lesson when her impulsiveness, her stupid emotionalism, had ruined Webb's life.

She had been worthless and unlovable the way she'd been, so she had destroyed herself and built a new person from the ashes, a woman who would never know the heights but would no longer sink to the depths either. Somehow she had set in motion the chain of events that had cost Jessie her life and banished Webb from theirs, so she had grimly set herself to the task

of atonement. She couldn't replace Jessie in Lucinda's affection, but at least she could stop being such a burden and disappointment.
She had gone to college-at the University of Alabama, as it happened, rather than the exclusive all-girl's college that had previously been considered-and gotten a degree in business management so she could be of some help to Lucinda in running things, since Webb was no longer there to take care of everything. Roanna didn't like anything about her courses but forced herself to study hard and get good grades. So what if she found it boring? It was a small enough price to pay.
She had forced herself to learn how to dress, so Lucinda wouldn't be embarrassed by her. She had taken a course to improve her poor driving skills, she had learned how to dance, how to apply makeup, to make polite conversation, to be socially acceptable. She had learned how to control the wild exuberance that had so often gotten her into trouble as a child, but that hadn't been difficult. After Webb had disappeared, her problem had been in working up any enthusiasm for life rather than the opposite.
She could think of nothing she dreaded more than having to face Webb again.
"What if he doesn't want to come back? 11 she murmured.
"Convince him," Lucinda snapped. Then she sighed, and her voice gentled. "He always had a soft spot for you. I need him back here. We need him. You and I together have managed to keep things going, but I don't have much time left and your heart and soul isn't in it the way Webb's was. When it came to business, Webb had the brain of a computer and the heart of a shark. He was honorable but ruthless. Those are rare qualities, Roanna, the kind that aren't easily replaced."
"That's why he may not forgive us." Roanna didn't react to Lucinda's dismissal of her competence in managing the family empire. It was nothing less than the truth; that was why the burden of decision-making rested, for the most part, on Lucinda's increasingly frail shoulders, while Roanna implemented them. She had trained herself, disciplined herself, to do what she could, but her best would never be good enough. She accepted that and protected herself by not letting it matter. Nothing had really mattered anyway for the past ten years.
Pain flickered across Lucinda's lined face.
"I've missed him every day that he's been gone," she said softly.

"I'll never forgive myself for what I let happen to him. I should have let folks know that I believed in him, trusted him, but instead I wallowed in my own grief and didn't see what my neglect was doing to him. I don't mind dying, but I can't go easy until I make things right with Webb. If anyone can bring him back, Roanna, you can."

Roanna didn't tell Lucinda that she had reached out to Webb at Jessie's funeral, and been coldly rebuffed. Privately she thought that she had less chance of convincing Webb to come home than anyone else did, but that was something else she'd taught herself. if she couldn't manage to block out her feelings, then her private pain and fears were just that, private. If she kept them inside, then no one but she knew they were there.

It didn't matter what she felt; if Lucinda wanted Webb home, she would do what she could, no matter the cost to herself.

"Where is he?"

"in some godforsaken little town in Arizona. I'll give you the folder of information the investigator gathered for me. He's ... done well for himself. He owns a ranch, nothing on the scale of Davencourt, but it isn't in Webb to fail."

"When do you want me to leave?"

"As soon as possible. We need him here. I need him. I want to make my peace with him before I die."

"I'll try," Roanna said.

Lucinda looked at her granddaughter for a long moment, then a tired smile quirked her mouth.

"You're the only one who doesn't put on that fake cheerfulness and tell me I'll five to be a hundred," she said, a hint of acerbic approval in her voice. "Damn fools. Do they think I don't know that I'm dying? I have cancer, and I'm too old to waste my time and money on treatment when old age is going to get me pretty soon anyway. I live in this body, for God's sake. I can tell that it's slowly shutting down."

There was no response that wouldn't sound either falsely cheerful or callous, so Roanna made none. She was often silent, letting conversation flow around her, not thrusting out any verbal oars to deflect the tide her way. It was true that everyone else in the household tried their best to ignore the situation, as if it would go away if they didn't acknowledge it. It wasn't just Gloria and Harlan now; somehow, within a year of Jessie's death and Webb's departure, Gloria had managed to move more of her family into

Davencourt. Their son, Baron, had decided to remain in Charlotte, but everyone else was there. Gloria's daughter, Lanette, had moved in her entire family: husband Greg and children Corliss and Brock. Not that they were children; Brock was thirty, and Corliss was Roanna's age. Lucinda had let the house fill, perhaps in an effort to banish the emptiness left by losing both Jessie and Webb. Assuming Roanna could convince Webb to re turn-a major assumption-she wondered what he would make of all this. True, they were all his cousins, but somehow she thought he might be rather impatient with them for taking advantage of Lucinda's grief.

"You know that I changed my will after Webb left," Lucinda continued after a moment, taking another sip of tea. She gazed out the window at the profusion of peach colored roses, her favorite, and squared her shoulders as if bracing herself.

"I made you the main heir; Davencourt and most of the money would go to you. I think it's only fair to tell you that if you can convince Webb to come back, I'll redo it in his favor."

Roanna. nodded. That wouldn't make any difference to her efforts; nothing would. She would do her best to talk Webb into coming back but not let herself feel any personal loss when Lucinda changed her will. Roanna accepted that no matter how hard she tried, she simply didn't have the knack for business that Lucinda and Webb possessed. She wasn't a risk taker, and she couldn't muster any enthusiasm for the game of big business. Davencourt would be better off with him in charge and so would the myriad financial investments and interests.

"That was the deal I made with him when he was fourteen," Lucinda continued, her voice abrupt and her shoulders still held stiffly erect.

"If he would work hard, study, and train himself to take care of Davencourt, it would all be his."

"I understand," Roanna murmured.

"Davencourt .. ." Lucinda stared out over the perfectly manicured lawn, the flower gardens, the pastures beyond where her beloved horses bent their sleek, muscular necks to
graze.

"Davencourt deserves to be in the best hands. It isn't just a house, it's a legacy. There aren't many like it left, and I have to choose who I think will be the best caretaker for it."

"I'll try to bring him back," Roanna promised, her face as still as a pond on a hot summer day, when no breeze existed to ripple the surface. It was the face she lived behind, a face of indifference, unreadable and serene. Nothing could pierce the safe cocoon she had woven for herself, except Webb, her only weakness. Despite herself, her thoughts drifted. To have him back ... it would be heaven and hell combined. To be able to see him every day, listen to his voice, secretly hug his nearness to her in the long, dark nights when all her nightmares became real ... that was the heaven. The hell was in knowing that he despised her now, that every look he gave her would be one of condemnation and disgust.

But, no, she had to be realistic. She wouldn't be here. When Lucinda-she never thought of her as Grandmother anymore-died, Davencourt would no longer be her home. It would be Webb's, and he wouldn't want her here. She wouldn't see him every day, perhaps not at all. She would have to move out, get a job, face the real world. Well, at least with her degree and experience, she should be able to get a decent job. Maybe not in the Shoals area; she might have to move, in which case it was certain she'd never see Webb. That, too, didn't matter. His place was here. Her thoughtless actions had cost him his inheritance, so it was only right that she do what she could to return it to him.

"Doesn't it matter to you?" Lucinda asked abruptly.

"That you'll lose Davencourt if you do this for me?" Nothing matters. That had been her mantra, her curse, for ten years.

"It's yours to leave to whomever you want. Webb was your chosen heir. And you're right; he'll do a much better job than I ever could."

She could tell that her quiet, even voice disturbed Lucinda in some way, but injecting any passion in her words was beyond her.

"But you're a Davenport," Lucinda argued, as if she wanted Roanna to justify her own decision for her.

"Some folks would say Davencourt should be yours by right, because Webb is a Tallant. He's my blood relative, but he isn't a Davenport, and he isn't nearly as closely related to me as you are."

"But he's the better choice."

Gloria came into the living room in time to hear Roanna's last comment. "Who's the better choice?" she demanded, sinking into the depths of her favorite chair. Gloria was seventy-three, ten years younger than Lucinda,

but while Lucinda's hair was unabashedly white, Gloria still stubbornly resisted nature and kept her fluffy curls tinted a delicate blond.
"Webb," Lucinda answered tersely.
"Webb!" Shocked, Gloria stared at her sister.
"For goodness sake, what could he possibly be the better choice for, except the electric chair?"
"To run Davencourt, and the business side of things."
"You have to be joking! Why, no one would deal with him-"
"Yes, they would," Lucinda said, steel in her voice.
"If he's in charge, everyone will deal with him, or wish they hadn't been so stupid."
"I don't see why you even brought up his name anyway, since no one knows where he-"
"I found him," Lucinda interrupted.
"And Roanna is going to talk him into coming back."
Gloria rounded on Roanna as if she had suddenly sprouted two heads.
"Are you out of your mind?" she breathed.
"You can't mean to bring a murderer among us! Why, I'd never be able to close my eyes at night!"
"Webb isn't a murderer," Roanna said, sipping her tea and not even glancing at Gloria. She had stopped thinking of Gloria as Aunt, too. Sometime during the awful night after Webb had walked out of their lives, the titles of kinship had faded from the way she thought of people, as if her emotional distance couldn't accommodate them anymore.
The people in her family now were simply Lucinda, Gloria, Harlan.
"Then why did he disappear like that? Only someone with a guilty conscience would run away."
"Stop that!" Lucinda snapped.
"He didn't run, he got fed up and left. There's a difference. We let him down, so I can't blame him for turning his back on us. But Roanna's right; Webb didn't kill Jessie. I never thought he did."
"Well, Booley Watts certainly did!"
Lucinda dismissed Booley's thoughts with a wave of her hand.
"It doesn't matter. I think Webb's innocent, there was no evidence against him, so as far as the law's concerned he's innocent, and I want him back."
"Lucinda, don't be an old fool!"
Lucinda's eyes glittered with a sudden ferocity that belied her age.

"I think it's safe to say," she drawled, "that no one has ever considered me a fool, old or otherwise." And lived to tell it, was the unspoken message in her tone. Eighty-three or not, dying or not, Lucinda still knew the full range of her power as matriarch of the Davenport fortune, and she wasn't shy about letting other folks know it, too.
Gloria backed down and turned on Roanna, the easier target.
"You can't mean to do it. Tell her it's crazy."
"I agree with her."
Fury sparked in Gloria's eyes at the murmured statement.
"You would!" she snapped.
"Don't think I've forgotten that you were crawling into bed with him when-"
"Stop it!" Lucinda said fiercely, half rising from her chair as if she would physically attack her sister.
"Booley explained what really happened between them, and I won't let it be blown out of proportion. I won't let you badger Roanna either. She's only doing what I asked her to do."
"But why would you even think of bringing him back? Gloria moaned, dropping her aggressiveness, and Lucinda sank back into her chair.
"Because we need him. It takes both Roanna and me to handle things now, and when I die, she'll be buried in work."
"Oh, pish tosh, Lucinda, you're going to outlive-"
"No," Lucinda said briskly, cutting through the statement she'd heard so many times before.
"I am not going to outlive all of you. I don't want to even if I could. We need Webb. Roanna's going to get him and bring him home, and that's that."
The next night, Roanna sat in the shadows of a small, dingy cantina, her back to the wall as she silently watched a man lounging on one of the stools around the bar. She had been watching him for so long and so hard that her eyes ached from the strain of peering through the dim, smoky interior. For the most part anything she might have heard him say was drowned out by the ancient jukebox in the corner, the clatter of billiard balls striking together, the hum of curses and conversation, but every so often she could discern a certain tone, a drawl, that she knew beyond doubt was his as he made some casual comment to either the man beside him or to the bartender.
Webb. It had been ten years since she'd seen him, ten years since she had felt alive. She had known, accepted, that she still loved him, was still

vulnerable to him, but somehow the dreary procession of ten years' worth of days had dulled her memory of how sharp her response to him had always been. All it had taken was that first glimpse of him to remind her. The flood of sensation was so intense that it bordered on pain, as if the cells of her body had been jolted back to life. Nothing had changed. She still reacted just the way she had before, her heart beating faster and excitement zinging through every nerve ending. Her skin felt tight and hot, the flesh beneath it pulsing, aching. The hunger to touch him, to be close enough that she could smell the unique, never-forgotten male muskiness of his scent, was so strong that she was almost paralyzed with need.

But for all her longing, she couldn't work up the courage to walk to his side and get his attention. Despite Lucinda's determined confidence that she could convince him to come home, Roanna didn't expect to see anything in that

green gaze except dislike-and dismissal. The anticipation of pain kept her in her chair. She had lived with the pain of his loss every day for the past ten years, but that ache was familiar, and she had learned to live with it. She wasn't certain she had the endurance to bear up under any new pain, however. A new blow would crush her, perhaps beyond recovery.

She wasn't the only woman in the bar, but there were enough curious male glances her way to make her nervous. Webb's wasn't one of them; he was oblivious to her presence. It was only because she deliberately didn't attract attention that she had so far been left alone. She had dressed plainly, conservatively, in dark green slacks and a cream camp shirt, hardly the costume of a woman out on the town and looking for trouble. She didn't look anyone in the eye and didn't gaze around with interest. Over the years she had developed the knack of being as unobtrusive as possible, and it had stood her in good stead tonight. Sooner or later, though, some cowboy was going to work up enough nerve to ignore her "stay away" signals and approach her.

She was tired. It was ten o'clock at night, and her plane had left Huntsville at six o'clock that morning. From Huntsville she had flown to Birmingham, then from Birmingham to Dallas-with a stop at Jackson, Mississippi. In Dallas, she had endured a four-hour layover. She had arrived in Tucson at four twenty-seven, mountain time, rented a car, and driven south on Interstate 19 to Tumacacori, where Lucinda's private detective said Webb

now lived. According to the information in the file, he owned a small but prosperous cattle ranch in the area.
She hadn't been able to find him. Directions notwithstanding, she had wandered around looking for the correct road, returning time and again to the interstate to get her bearings. She had almost been in tears when she had finally run across a local who not only knew Webb personally, but had directed Roanna to this seedy little bar just outside Nogales, where Webb was in the habit of stopping whenever he had to go to town, which he'd done this particular day.
The desert night had fallen with color and drama on the drive to Nogales, and when the kaleidoscope of hues had faded, it had left behind a black velvet sky full of the biggest, brightest stars she'd ever seen. The starkly beautiful desolation had calmed her, so that by the time she managed to find the bar, her usual remote expression was firmly in place.
Webb had been there when she'd walked in; he was the first person she'd seen. The shock had almost felled her. His head was turned away from her and he hadn't so much as glanced around, but she knew it was him, because every cell in her body screamed in recognition. She had gone quietly to one of the few empty tables, automatically choosing the one in the darkest corner, and here she still sat. The waitress, a tired-looking Hispanic woman in her late thirties, came by every so often. Roanna had ordered a beer the first time, nursed it until it was warm, then ordered another. She didn't like beer, didn't normally drink at all, but thought she should probably order or she'd be asked to leave the table to make room for customers who did.
She looked down at the scarred surface of the table, where numerous knife blades had carved a multitude of initials and designs as well as random scratches and gouges. Waiting wasn't going to make it any easier. She should just get up and walk over to him and get it over with.
But still she didn't move. Hungrily her gaze moved back to him, drinking in the changes ten years had made.
He'd been twenty-four when he'd left Tascumbia, a young man, mature for his age and burdened with responsibilities that would have felled a lesser person, but still young. At twenty-four he hadn't yet learned the full range of his own strengths, his personality had still been a bit malleable. Jessie's death and the ensuing investigation, and the way he'd been ostracized by both family and friends, had hardened him. The ten years since had hardened him even more. It was evident in the grim line of his mouth and

the cool, level way he surveyed the world around him, marking him as a man who was prepared to take on the world and
bend it to his will. Whatever challenges he had faced, he had been the victor.
Roanna knew some of those challenges, because the file on him was thorough. When rustlers had been decimating his herd of cattle and the local law enforcement hadn't been able to stop it, Webb had single-handedly tracked the four rustlers and followed them into Mexico. The rustlers had spotted him and started shooting. Webb had shot back. They had kept each other pinned down for two days. At the end of those two days, one rustler had been dead, one severely injured, and another suffered a concussion after falling off a rock. Webb had been slightly wounded, a crease that burned along his thigh, and suffered from dehydration. But the rustlers had decided to cut their losses and get away the best they could, and Webb had grimly herded his stolen cattle back across the border. He hadn't been bothered by rustlers since.
There was an air of danger about him now that hadn't been there before, the look of a man who meant what he said and was willing to back it up with action. His character had been honed down to its steel core. Webb had no weaknesses now, certainly not any leftover ones for the silly, careless cousin who had caused him so much trouble.
He wasn't the man she had known before. He was harder, rougher, perhaps even brutal. She realized that ten years had wrought a lot of changes, in both of them, but one thing had remained constant, and that was her love for him.
Physically, he looked tougher and bigger than he had before. He'd always had the muscular build of a natural athlete, but years of grueling physical work had toughened him to whipcord leanness, coiled steel waiting to spring. His shoulders had broadened and his chest deepened. His forearms, exposed by his turned-back cuffs, were thick with muscle and roped with veins.
He was darkly tanned, with lines bracketing his mouth and radiating out from the corners of his eyes. His hair was longer, shaggier, the hair of a man who didn't get into town for a haircut on a regular basis. That was another difference:
it was no longer "styled," it was simply cut. His face was darkened by a shadow of beard, but it couldn't hide a newly ealed cut that ran along the

underside of his right jaw, h from ear to chin. Roanna swallowed hard, wondering what had happened to him, if the injury had been dangerous. The investigator's file said that Webb had not only bought the small ranch and quickly turned it into a profit-making enterprise, but that he had been systematically buying other parcels of land, not, as it turned out, to expand his ranch, but for mining. Arizona was rich in minerals, and Webb was investing in those minerals. Leaving Davencourt hadn't impoverished him; he'd had some money of his own, and he'd used it wisely. As Lucinda had pointed out, Webb had a rare talent for business and finance, and he'd been using it.

As prosperous as he was, though, you couldn't tell it from his clothes. His boots were worn and scuffed, his jeans faded, and his thin chambray shirt had been washed so many times it was almost white. He was wearing a hat, a dark brown, dusty one. Nogales had a reputation for toughness, but all in all, he fit right in with the rough crowd here in this dingy bar in the small desert border town that was as different from Tuscumbia as the Amazon was from the Arctic.

He had the power to destroy her. With a few cold, cutting words he could annihilate her. She felt sick at the risk she would be taking in approaching him, but she kept seeing the hope that had been in Lucinda's eyes when she'd kissed Roanna good-bye that morning. Lucinda, shrunken with age, diminished by grief and regrets, indomitable but no longer invincible. The end, perhaps, was closer than she wanted them to know. This might be her last chance to heal the rift with Webb.

Roanna knew exactly what she was risking, financially, if she could talk Webb into coming home. As Lucinda's will stood now, she was the major heir of Davencourt and the family financial empire, with some modest bequests going to Gloria and her offspring, some to Yvonne and Sandra, and pensions as well as lump sum amounts settled on the long-time domestic staff: Loyal, Tansy, and Bessie. But Webb had been groomed to be the heir, and if he returned, it would be his again.

She would lose Davencourt. She had blocked her emotions, hadn't let Lucinda see the pain and panic that had threatened to break through her protective barrier. She was human; she would regret losing the money. But Davencourt was worth more to her than any fortune. Davencourt was home, sanctuary, dearly beloved, and every inch familiar. It would tear her heart

out to lose Davencourt, but she had no illusion that she would be welcome there if Webb inherited. He would want all of them out, including her.
But he could better care for it than she could. He had been raised with the understanding that, through his alliance with Jessie, Davencourt would be his. He had spent his youth and his young manhood training himself to be the best custodian possible for it, and it was Roanna's fault that he'd lost it.
What price atonement?
She knew the price, knew exactly what it would cost her. But there was Lucinda, desperately wanting to see him before she died. And there was Webb himself, the exiled prince. Davencourt was his rightful place, his legacy. She owed him a debt she could never repay. She would give up Davencourt to get him to return. She would give up anything she had.
Somehow, her body moving without conscious will, she found herself on her feet and walking through the swirling smoke. She stopped behind him and to the right, her gaze fevered and hungry as she stared at the hard line of his cheekbone, his jaw. Hesitantly, both yearning for the contact but dreading it, she lifted her hand to touch his shoulder and draw his attention. Before she could, however, he sensed her presence and turned his head toward her.
Green eyes, narrowed and cool, looking her up and down. One dark eyebrow lifted in silent question. It was the look of a man on the prowl assessing a woman for availability, and desirability.
He didn't recognize her.
Her breath was rapid and shallow, but she felt as if she wasn't drawing in enough air. She dropped her hand, and ached because the brief contact she had so dreaded had been denied her. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to go into his arms the way she had when she was little, lay her head on his broad shoulder, and find refuge from the world. instead she reached for her hard-won composure and said quietly, "Hello, Webb. May I talk to you?"
His eyes widened a little, and he swiveled on the bar stool so that he faced her. There was a brief flare of recognition, then incredulity, in his expression. Then it was gone, and his gaze hardened. He looked her over again, this time with slow deliberation.
He didn't say anything, just kept staring at her. Roanna's heart pounded against her ribs with sickening force.
"Please," she said.

He shrugged, the movement straining his powerful shoulders against his shirt. He pulled a few bills from his pocket and tossed them on the bar, then stood, towering over her, forcing her to step back. Without a word he took her arm and steered her toward the entrance, his long fingers wrapped around her elbow like iron laces. Roanna braced herself against the tingle of delight caused by even that impersonal contact, and she wished she had worn a sleeveless blouse so she could feel his hand on her bare skin.

The door of the squat building slammed shut behind them. The lighting inside had been dim, but still she had to blink her eyes to accustom them to the darkness. Haphazardly parked vehicles crouched in the darkness, bumpers and windshields reflecting the blinking red neon of the BAR sign in the window. After the close, smoky atmosphere of the bar, the clear night air felt cold and thin. Roanna shivered with a sudden chill. He didn't release her but pulled her across tie grit and sand of the parking lot to a pickup truck. Taking his keys out of his pocket, he unlocked the driver's side door, opened it, and thrust her forward.

"Get in."

She obeyed, sliding across the seat until she was on the passenger side. Webb got in beside her, folding his long legs beneath the steering wheel and pulling the door shut.

Every time the sign blinked, she could see the iron set of his jaw. In the enclosed cab she could smell the fresh, hard odor of the tequila he'd been drinking. He sat silently, staring out the windshield. Hugging her arms against the chill, she too was silent.

"Well?" he snapped after a long moment when it became evident she wasn't exactly rushing into speech.

She thought of all the things she could say, all the excuses and apologies, all the reasons why Lucinda had sent her, but everything boiled down into two simple words, and she said, "Come home."

He gave a harsh crack of laughter and turned so that his shoulders were comfortably wedged against the door and the seat.

"I am home, or near enough."

Roanna was silent again, as she often was. The stronger her feelings, the more silent she became, as if her inner shell tightened against any outbreak that would leave her vulnerable. His nearness, just hearing his voice again, made her feel as if she would shatter inside. She wasn't even able to return

his gaze. Instead she looked down at her lap, fighting to control her shivering.
He muttered a curse, then shoved the key into the ignition and turned it. The motor caught immediately and settled into a powerful, well-tuned hum. He pushed the temperature control lever all the way over into the heat zone, then twisted his torso to reach behind the seat. He pulled out a denim jacket and tossed it into her lap.
"Put that around you before you turn blue."
The jacket smelled of dust and sweat and horses and ineffably of Webb. Roanna wanted to bury her face in the fabric; instead she pulled it around her shoulders, grateful for the protection.
"How did you find me?" he finally asked.
"Did Mother tell you?"
She shook her head.
"Aunt Sandra?"
She shook her head again.
"Damn it, I'm not in the mood for guessing games," he snapped.
"Either talk or get out of the truck."
Roanna's hands tightened on the edges of the jacket.
"Lucinda hired a private detective to find you. Then she sent me out here."
She could feel his hostility radiating from him, a palpable force that seared her skin. She'd known she didn't have much chance of convincing him to return, but she hadn't realized how violently he disliked her now. Her stomach twisted sickeningly, and her chest felt hollow, as if her heart no longer lived there.
"So you didn't come on your own?" he asked sharply.
"No."
Unexpectedly he reached out and caught her jaw, his fingers biting into the softness of her skin as he wrenched her head around. A purr of soft menace entered his voice.
"Look at me when you're talking to me."
Helplessly she did so, her eyes eating him, tracing every beloved outline and committing it to memory. This might be the last time she ever saw him, and when he sent her away, another piece of her would die.
"What does she want?" he asked, still holding her face in his grip. His big hand covered her jaw from ear to ear.

"If she simply missed my smiling face, she wouldn't have waited ten years to find me. So what is it she wants from me?"
His bitterness was deeper than she'd expected, his anger still as hot as it had been the day he'd walked out of their lives. She should have known, though, and Lucinda should have, too. They'd always been aware of the force of his character; that was why, when he'd been only fourteen, Lucinda had picked him as her heir and the custodian of Davencourt. Their betrayal of him had been like pulling a tiger's tail, and now they had to face his fangs and claws.
"She wants you to come home and take over again."
"Sure she does. The good people of Colbert County
wouldn't dirty themselves by doing business with an accused murderer."
"Yes, they would. With Davencourt and everything else belonging to you, they'd have to, or lose a lot of their own income."
He gave a harsh bark of laughter.
"My God, she must really want me back if she's willing to buy me! I know she's changed her will, presumably in your favor. What's gone wrong? Has she made a few bad decisions, and now she needs me to pull the family's financial ass out of the fire?"
Her fingers ached to reach out and smooth away the anger that lined his forehead, but she restrained herself, and the effort it cost her was reflected in her voice.
"She wants you to come home because she loves you and regrets what happened. She needs you to come home because she's dying. She has cancer."
He glared at her in the darkness.. then abruptly released her jaw and turned his head away. After a moment he said, "God damn it," and viciously slammed his fist against the steering wheel.
"She's always been good at manipulating people. God knows, Jessie came by it honestly."
"Then you'll come?" Roanna. asked hesitantly, unable to believe that was what he meant.
Instead of answering, he turned back to her and caught her face in his hand again. He leaned closer, so close she could see the glitter of his eyes and smell the alcohol on his breath. Dismayed, she abruptly realized he wasn't exactly sober. She should have known, she'd watched him drinking, but she just hadn't thought' What about you?" he demanded, his voice low and hard.

"All I've heard is what Lucinda wants. What do you want? Do you want me to come home, little-Roanna-all grown-up? How did she get you to do her dirty work for her, knowing that you'll lose a lot of money and property if you succeed?" He paused.
"I assume that's what you meant, that if I go back she'll change her will again, leaving it all to me?"
"Yes," she whispered.
"Then you're a fool," he whispered derisively in return, and released her face.
"Look, why don't you trot on back, like the good little lapdog you're turned into, and tell her you gave it your best shot but I'm not interested."
She absorbed the pain of that blow, too, and shoved it into her inner shell where the damage wouldn't show. The expression she turned to him was as smooth and blank as a doll's.
"I want you to come home, too. Please."
She could feel his intensifying focus as it settled on her, like a laser beam finding its target.
"Now, why would you want that?" he asked softly.
"Unless you really are a fool. Are you a fool, Roanna?"
She opened her mouth to answer but he laid one callused finger across her lips.
"Ten years ago you started it all by offering me a taste of that skinny little body. At the time, I thought you were too innocent to know what you were doing, but I've thought about it a lot since then, and now I think you knew exactly how I was reacting, didn't you?"
His finger was still covering her lips, lightly tracing the sensitive outline. This was what she had dreaded most, having to face his bitter accusations. She closed her eyes and nodded.
"Did you know Jessie was coming down?"
"No!" Her denial moved her lips against his finger, making her mouth tingle.
"So you kissed me because you wanted me?"
What did pride matter? she thought. She had loved him, in some form, her entire life. First she had loved him with a child's hero worship, then with an adolescent's violent crush, and finally with a woman's passion. The last change had, perhaps, taken place when she had watched Jessie cheating on him with another man and knew she couldn't tell, because to do so would

hurt Webb. When she'd been younger, she would have been gleeful at the prospect of getting Jessie in trouble, and told immediately. That time she had put Webb's welfare above her own impulses, but then she had surrendered to another impulse when she kissed him, and he had ended up paying the price anyway.

His finger pressed harder.

"Did you?" he insisted.

"Did you want me?"

"Yes," she breathed, abandoning any scrap of pride or self-protection.

"I always wanted you."

"What about now?" His voice was hard, inexorable, pushing her toward an end she couldn't see.

"Do you want me now?"

What did he want her to say? Maybe he just wanted her complete humiliation. If he blamed her for everything that had happened, perhaps this was the price he wanted her to pay.

She nodded.

"How much do you want me?" Abruptly his hand slipped inside the jacket and closed over her breast.

"Just enough to give me a feel, tease me? Or enough to give me what you offered ten years ago?"

Roanna's breath wheezed to a stop in her chest, frozen with shock. She stared helplessly at him, her dark eyes so huge that they dominated her pale face.

"Tell you what," he murmured, his big hand still burning her breast, lightly squeezing as if testing the firm resilience of her flesh.

"I paid for this ten years ago, but I never got it. I'll go back and take care of business for Lucinda-if you'll give me what everyone thought I'd had then."

Numbly, she realized what he meant, realized that the years had made him even harder than she'd suspected. The old Webb never would have done such a thing-or perhaps he'd always had the capability for such ruthlessness but hadn't needed to use it. The iron was much closer to the surface now. This, then, was his revenge against her for her juvenile romantic ambush, which had cost him so much. If he went back home he would have Davencourt as his payment, but he wanted Roanna's personal payment, too, and his price was her body.

She looked at him, at this man she had loved forever.

"All right," she whispered.

Chapter 9

The motel room was small and dingy, with a chill that went all the way to her bones. Roanna was certain there had to be better motels in Nogales, so why had he brought her here? Because it was closest or to show her how little she meant to him?

It would take a great deal of ego to think she meant anything to him at all, and ego was one thing Roanna didn't have. She felt small and shriveled inside, and a new guilt had been added to the burden she already carried: he thought he was punishing her, and in a way he was, but a secret part of her was suddenly, dizzily ecstatic that soon she would be lying in his arms.

The secret part was small, and deeply buried. She felt the shame he meant her to feel, and the humiliation. She didn't know if she'd have the courage to go through with it, and desperately she thought of Luchada, ill and diminished with age, needing Webb's forgiveness before she could die in peace. Could she do this, lie down and let him coldly use her body, even for Lucinda?

But it wasn't just for Lucinda. Webb needed revenge just as much as Lucinda needed forgiveness. If this would help

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Chapter 10

The motel room was small and dingy, with a chill that went all the way to her bones. Roanna was certain there had to be better motels in Nogales, so why had he brought her here? Because it was closest or to show her how little she meant to him?
It would take a great deal of ego to think she meant anything to him at all, and ego was on-, thing Roanna didn't have. She felt small and shriveled inside, and a new guilt had been added to the burden she already carried: he thought he was punishing her, and in a way he was, but a secret part of her was suddenly, dizzily ecstatic that soon she would be lying in his arms.
The secret part was small, and deeply buried. She felt the shame he meant her to feel, and the humiliation. She didn't know if she'd have the courage to go through with it, and desperately she thought of Lucinda, ill and diminished with age, needing Webb's forgiveness before she could die in

peace. Could she do this, lie down and let him coldly use her body, even for Lucinda?
But it wasn't just for Lucinda. Webb needed revenge just as much as Lucinda needed forgiveness. If this would help
him even the scales, if he could then return to Davencourt, then Roanna was willing to do it. And deep inside, that secret little part of her was giddy with selfish delight. No matter what his reasoning, for a brief time he would be hers, the experience held to her heart and savored during the empty years ahead.
He tossed his hat onto the chair and sprawled on his back on the bed, bunching the pillow up behind his head for support. His narrowed green eyes raked down her body.
"Take off your clothes."
Stunned again, she stood there with her arms hanging at her sides. He wanted her to strip down naked, just like that, with him lying there watching?
"I guess you've changed your mind," he drawled, sitting up and reaching for his hat.
Roanna pulled herself together and reached for the buttons of her shirt. She had decided to do it, so what did it matter if he wanted to look at her first? Shortly he would be doing much more than looking. The enormity of what she was doing was what shook her, and her hands trembled as she struggled with the buttons. Odd how difficult this was, to bare herself for him, when she had dreamed of it for years. Was it because she had always dreamed he came to her in love, and in reality it was the opposite?
But it didn't matter, she told herself over and over, using the litany as protection against thinking too much. It didn't matter, it didn't matter.
The buttons were finally undone, and the shirt hung open. She had to keep moving or she'd lose her nerve entirely. With a quick, nervous movement she pulled the cloth off her shoulders and let it drop down her arms. She couldn't look at him, but she felt his gaze on her, narrowed and intense, waiting.
Her bra had a front clasp. Briefly, trembling with cold and embarrassment, she wished it was a sexy, lacy thing, but instead it was plain white, designed for concealment rather than enticement. She unhooked it and pushed the straps down, so that this garment too dropped to the floor at her feet. The cold air swirled around her breasts, making her nipples pucker into tight

buds. She knew her breasts were small. Was he looking at them? She didn't dare glance at him to see, because she was terrified she would see disappointment in his gaze.
She didn't know how to undress to please a man. Mortified at her own awkwardness, she knew that there had to be a way to do it gracefully, to tease and interest a man with the slowly revealed promise of her flesh, but she didn't know what that way was. All she knew how to do was unbutton, unhook, unzip, like a schoolgirl changing clothes for gym class.
The best thing to do then was to get it over with before she lost her nerve. Hurriedly she kicked off her sandals, unzipped her slacks, and bent over to push them down. It was icy in the room now, her skin rough with chills. Only her panties remained now, and her meager supply of nerve was almost gone. Not giving herself time to think, she hooked her thumbs in the waistband and pushed this last garment down to her feet and stepped out of them.
Still he didn't speak, didn't move. Her hands made a brief, aborted motion, as if she would cover herself, but then she let her arms fall to her side again and she simply stood there, staring blindly at the worn carpet beneath her bare feet, wondering if it was possible to die of embarrassment. She forced herself to eat these days but she was still thin, a meager offering on the altar of revenge. What if her naked body wasn't desirable enough for him to have an erection? What if he laughed?
He was completely silent. She couldn't even hear him breathing. Darkness edged her vision, and she fought to drag oxygen into her constricted lungs. She couldn't look at him, but she had the sudden panicked thought that he might have had more to drink than she'd imagined, and gone to sleep while she'd been undressing. What a comment that would be on her practically nonexistent charms!
Then the whisper came, low and rough, and she realized he hadn't fallen asleep, after all: "C'mere."
She closed her eyes, trembling as relief threatened to buckle her knees, and edged toward the whisper.
"Closer," he said, and she moved until her knees bumped the side of the bed.
He touched her then, his hand sliding up the outside of her left thigh, callused fingertips sliding over the softness of her skin and rasping nerve endings to life, leaving a trail of heat behind. Up, up, he moved his hand

over the column of her thigh and around to the roundness of her bottom, his long fingers cupping the cool under curve of both cheeks and burning them with his heat. She quivered, and tried to control the sudden, fierce need to rub her bottom against his hand. She didn't quite succeed; her hips moved in a barely perceptible shimmy.

He gave a low laugh, his fingers tightening on the flesh beneath him. He stroked her buttocks, shaping his palm to the underside of each one as if he could imprint the soft female shape on his hand, and running his thumb down the crease between them.

Roanna began to tremble violently under the combined lash of pleasure and shock, and no amount of willpower could stop the betraying tremors. No one had ever touched her there. She hadn't known that this slow caress could make an empty ache begin between her legs, or make her breasts feel hard and tight. She squeezed her eyes even more tightly together, wondering if he would touch her breast again and if she could bear it if he did.

But it wasn't her breasts that he touched.

"Spread your legs."

His voice now was so low and raspy that she wasn't certain she'd heard him, and yet part of her knew she had. A dull roaring began in her ears, even as she felt herself shifting her stance so that her thighs were open enough to admit his exploration, and felt his hand slipping between her legs.

He ran his fingers along the closed, tender folds, feeling their softness, gently squeezing. Roanna stopped breathing. Tension stretched in her body, pulling tight in an agony of waiting that threatened to shatter her. Then one long finger boldly slipped into the closed slit, opening her, probing with unerring skill, and pushed deep up into her body.

Roanna couldn't stop the cry that broke from her lips, though she quickly choked it off. Her knees trembled and threatened again to buckle. She felt as if she was held erect only by his hand between her legs, his finger inside her. Oh, God, the sensation was almost unbearable, his finger big and rough, rasping against her tender inner flesh. He withdrew it, then quickly pushed it into her again. Over and over he stabbed the finger inside her, and rubbed his thumb against the little nub at the top of her sex.

Helplessly she felt her hips begin to move against his hand, heard breathy little moans forming in her throat and slipping free. In the quietness of the room she could hear his breathing, heard how hard and fast it was coming.

She wasn't cold now; great waves of heat were breaking over her, and the pleasure was so acute it was almost painful. Desperately she reached down and seized his wrist, trying to pull his hand away from her, because it was too much, she couldn't bear it. Something drastic was happening to her, something even more drastic was about to happen, and she cried out in sudden fear.

He ignored her efforts as if she were holding his hand rather than trying to push it away. She could feel him probing at her, trying to work a second finger into her alongside the other, felt her body's sudden panicked resistance. He tried again, and she flinched.

He went still, and his low curse exploded in the silence. Then everything turned upside down as he grabbed her and pulled her down onto the bed, turning her, dragging her across his body to lie beside him. Roanna's eyes flew open to combat the sudden dizziness, then she wished she'd kept them closed.

He leaned over her so close she could see the black striations in his green eyes, so close she could feel the heat of his breath on her face, smell the tequila. She was sprawled on her back with her right leg draped over his hip. His hand

still rested between her open thighs, one fingertip moving restlessly around and around the tender opening that had grown moist for him.

She felt another wave of mortification, that she was naked while he was still fully clothed, that he was touching her in her most private place and watching her face while he did so. She felt her cheeks and breasts heat, turn pink.

He moved his finger back into her again, probing deep, and all the while he held her gaze with his. Roanna couldn't hold back another moan, and she yearned for the dubious comfort of her closed eyes, but she couldn't look away. His dark brows drew together over the fierce green glitter of his eyes. He was angry, she realized in confusion, but it was a hot anger instead of the cold disgust she would have expected.

"You're a virgin," he said flatly.

It sounded like an accusation. Roanna stared up at him, wondering how he'd guessed, wondering why he sounded so angry.

"Yes," she admitted, and blushed again.

He watched the flush pin ken her breasts, and she saw the way the glitter in his eyes deepened. His gaze focused intently on her breasts, on her

hardened nipples. He removed his hand from between her legs, his finger damp from her body. Slowly, still staring fixedly at her breasts, he stroked her nipple with that wet finger, spreading her own juices on the tightly puckered nub. A rough, hungry sound rumbled in his throat. He leaned over her and fastened his lips around the nipple he had just anointed, sucking hard on it, taking her taste into his mouth.

The pleasure almost shattered her. The fierce pressure, the rasp of his tongue and teeth, sent pure fire racing through her. Roanna arched in his arms, crying out, and her hands clenched in his hair to hold his head in place. He moved to her other breast and sucked just as hard on that nipple until it too was dark red and wet, and painfully erect.

Reluctantly he lifted his head, staring at his handiwork with feral concentration and hunger. His lips, like her nipples, were red and wet, and slightly parted as his breath moved hard and fast between them. The heat radiating from his big body dispelled any lingering chill she might have felt.

"You don't have to do this," he said, the words so harsh they sounded as if they'd been ripped from his throat.

"It's your first time ... I'll go back anyway."

Disappointment pierced her, sliding like a dagger straight into her heart. All color faded from her face, and she stared at him with a stricken expression in her eyes. Taking off her clothes had been difficult, but once he'd touched her, she had been gradually losing herself in a rising tide of sensual delight, despite the shock she felt at every new caress. The secret part of her had been delirious with ecstasy, savoring every touch of those hard hands, waiting with barely restrained eagerness for more.

Now he wanted to stop. She didn't entice him enough for him to continue. Her throat closed. A strained whisper was 0 that could escape the sudden constriction.

"Don't-don't you want me?"

The plea was faint, but he heard it. His eyes dilated until only a thin circle of green shimmered around the fierce pools of black. He caught her hand and dragged it down his body, pressed it hard over his straining penis despite her instinctive effort to pull away, an action that underscored her innocence.

Roanna froze in wonder. She felt the hard ridge under the denim. It was long and thick, the heat of it burning through the heavy fabric, and it pulsed with a life of its own. She turned her hand, grasping him through his jeans.

"Please, Webb. I want you to do it," she gasped.
For a terrifying moment she thought he would still refuse, but then with a sudden, violent motion he jackknifed off the bed and began stripping off his clothes. She was only dimly aware that he watched her as she watched him. She couldn't keep the fascination from her face as she stared at his body, the broad shoulders and hairy, muscled chest, the ridged abdomen. Carefully he maneuvered the zipper down, then
pushed his shorts and jeans off with one motion. She blinked, startled, at his pulsing erection as it thrust forward when freed from the restraint of his jeans. Another blush warmed her cheeks.
He paused, sucking in deep breaths.
Suddenly terrified of doing anything that would make him stop, Roanna held herself still and quiet, forcing herself to look away from his body. She thought she would die if he turned away from her now. But he wanted to do it; she knew he did. She was inexperienced, but that wasn't the same as ignorant. He was very hard, and he wouldn't be if he wasn't interested.
The glare of the light was right in her eyes. She wished he'd turned it off, but didn't ask. The mattress dipped under his weight, and she spread her hands to balance herself, because the cheap mattress didn't give much support.
He didn't give her any time to think, to perhaps change her mind, not even time to panic. He moved on top of her, his hard thighs pushing between hers and spreading them, and his shoulders blotted out the light. Roanna barely sucked in a deep breath before he set his hands on either side of her skull, holding her head as he leaned down and covered her mouth with his. His tongue probed, and she parted her lips to accept it. Simultaneously she felt his hot, rock-hard penis begin pushing at the soft entrance between her legs. Her heart jumped violently, banging against her ribs. She made a faint sound of apprehension, but his mouth smothered it as he deepened the kiss, penetrating her with both tongue and penis.
It wasn't easy, despite her arousal, despite the dampness that readied her for him. Somehow she had thought he would simply slip into her, but it didn't work that way. He rocked his hips back and forth, forcing himself a little deeper into her with each motion. Her body resisted the increasing pressure; the pain surprised her, dismayed her. She tried to endure it without reaction, but it grew progressively worse with each inward thrust.

She groaned, her breath catching. If she had expected him to stop, she was mistaken. Webb merely tightened his arms and held her firmly beneath him, controlling her with weight and strength, all of his intent and attention focused on penetrating her. She dug her nails into his back, weeping now from the pain. He pushed harder and her tender flesh gave under the pressure, stretching around his thick length as he surged deep inside. Finally he was in her to the hilt, and she writhed helplessly beneath him as she tried to find some level of ease.

Now that his masculine goal was accomplished, he set about soothing her, not withdrawing, but using touch and voice to reassure and calm her. He continued to hold her head in his hands, and he crooned to her as he kissed the salty tears from her cheeks.

"Shh, shh," he murmured.

"Just lie still, sweetheart. I know it hurts, but it'll ease off in a minute."

The endearment soothed her as nothing else could have. He couldn't truly hate her, could he, if he called her "sweetheart"? Slowly she calmed, relaxing from her frantic struggle to accommodate him. Some of his own tenseness eased, and until then she hadn't realized how tightly drawn his muscles had been. Panting, she softened around him, beneath him.

Her breathing calmed, became deeper. Now that she wasn't in such distress some of her pleasure returned. With growing wonder she felt him deep inside her, pulsing with arousal. This was Webb who penetrated her so intimately, Webb who cradled her in his arms. Only an hour before she had watched him from across a dimly lit bar, dreading the moment when she had to approach him, and now she was naked under his powerful body. She looked up at him and met his brilliant green gaze, studying her as intently as if he could see through her to the bone.

He kissed her, quick, hard kisses that had her mouth trying to catch his, begging for more, preparing her fbi more.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She didn't know what he meant. She gave him a bewildered took, and a tight smile twitched his lips.

"For what?"

"To make love She looked even more confused.

"Isn't that what we're doing?" she whispered.

"Not quite. Almost."

"But you're ... inside me."

"There's more."
Confusion changed to alarm.
"More?" She tried to draw back from him, pressing herself into the mattress.
He grinned, though it looked as if the effort cost him.
"Not more of me. More to do."
"Oh." The word was drawn out, filled with wonder. She relaxed beneath him again, and her thighs flexed around his hips. The movement caused a reaction inside her; his sex jumped, and her enveloping sheath tightened around the thick intruder, caressing him. Webb's breath hissed between his teeth. Roanna's eyes grew heavy lidded, slumberous, and her cheeks pinkened.
"Show me," she breathed.
He did, beginning to move, at first thrusting into her in a slow, delicious rhythm, then gradually quickening his pace. Hesitantly she responded, her body lifting to his as her excitement soared. He shifted his weight to one elbow and reached down between their bodies. She gasped as he stroked her tightly stretched entrance, her flesh so sensitive that the slightest touch jolted through her like lightning. Then he moved his attention to the nodule he'd touched before, rubbing his fingertip back and forth across it, and Roanna felt herself begin to dissolve.
It happened fast under his ruthless, sensual assault. He didn't ease her into climax, he hurled her into it. He gave her no mercy, even when she bucked under his hand in an effort to escape the intensity of it. The fierce, rapidly increasing sensation burned her, melted her. He rode her harder, thrusting deep, and the friction was almost unbearable. But he was touching her deep inside in a way that made her cling to him and cry out in a pleasure so strong she couldn't control it. It spiraled inside her, growing stronger and stronger, and when it finally shattered, she arched wildly beneath him, her slender body shuddering as her hips undulated, working herself on his invading shaft. She heard herself screaming, and didn't care.
His heavy weight crushed her into the mattress. His hands pushed beneath her and gripped her buttocks, hard. His hips pistoned back and forth between her widespread, straining thighs. Then he convulsed, slamming into her again and again while harsh sounds tore from his throat, and she felt the wetness of his release.

In the silence afterward, Roanna lay limply beneath him. She was exhausted, her body so heavy and weak that all she could do was breathe. She lapsed into a doze, barely aware of when he carefully separated their bodies and moved to lie beside her. Sometime later the light blinked off, and she was aware of cool darkness, of him stripping the bedspread down and positioning her between the sheets.

She turned instinctively into his arms, and felt them close around her. Her head settled into the hollow of his shoulder, and her hand rested on his chest, feeling the crisp hair beneath her fingers. For the first time in ten years she felt a small measure of peace, of rightness.

She had no idea how long it was before she became aware of his hands moving on her with increasing purpose.

"Can you do it again?" he asked, the words low and intense.

"Yes, please," she said politely, and heard a low chuckle as he rolled atop her.

Roanna. Webb lay in the darkness, feeling her slight weight nestled against his left side. She was asleep, her head on his shoulder, her breath sighing across his chest. Her breasts, small and perfectly shaped, pressed firmly against his ribs. Gently, unable to resist, he rubbed the back of one finger over the satiny outer curve of the breast he could reach. Oh, God, Roanna. He hadn't recognized her at first. Though ten years had passed and logically he knew she had grown up, in his mind's eye she had still been the skinny, underdeveloped, immature teenager with the urchin's grin. He hadn't seen any trace of her in the woman who had approached him in the grubby little bar. Instead he'd seen a woman who looked so buttoned-down he'd been surprised that she'd spoken to him. Women like her might go to a bar if they were looking for revenge against a straying husband, but that was about the only reason he could think of.

But there she'd been, too thin for his taste, but severely stylish in an expensive silk camp shirt and tailored slacks. Her thick hair, dark in the uncertain light, was cut in a stylish bob that swung just below chin length. Her mouth, though ... he'd liked her mouth, wide and full, and had the thought that it would feel good to kiss her and feel the softness of those lips. She'd looked totally out of place, a country-club woman lost in a low-rent district. But she'd been reaching out to touch him, and when he'd turned, she had dropped her hand and looked at him, her face still and strangely sad, her

wide mouth unsmiling, and her brown eyes so solemn he wondered if she ever smiled.

And then she'd said, "Hello, Webb. May I talk to you?" and the shock had nearly felled him. For a split second he wondered if he'd had more to drink than he'd thought, because not only had she called him by name when he would have sworn he'd never seen her before, but she had used Roanna's voice, and the brown eyes were suddenly Roanna's whiskey-colored eyes. Reality had shifted and adjusted, and he'd seen the girl in the woman.

Odd. He hadn't spent the past ten years sulking about what had happened. When he'd walked out of Davencourt that day, he'd intended it to be forever, and he'd gotten on with his life. He'd chosen southern Arizona because it was starkly beautiful, not because it was about as far as it could get from lush, green, northwestern Alabama and still be inhabitable. Ranching was hard, but he enjoyed the physical work as much as he'd enjoyed the cutthroat world of business and finance. Always a horseman, he'd made the transition easily. His family had narrowed to include only his mother and Aunt Sandra, but he was content with that.

At first he'd felt dead inside. Despite the imminent breakup, despite the fact that she'd cheated on him, he'd mourned Jessie with surprising depth. She'd been a part of his life for so long that he woke up mornings feeling strangely incomplete. Then, gradually, he had surprised himself by remembering what a bitch she had been and laughing fondly.

He could have let the uncertainty eat him alive, knowing that her killer was still out there and wasn't likely to be discovered, but in the end he'd accepted that there was nothing he could do about it. Her affair had been so secret that there had been no hints, no leads. It was a dead end. He could let it destroy his life or he could go on. Webb was a survivor. He'd gone on. There had been days, even weeks, when he hadn't thought about his old life at all. He'd put Lucinda and the others behind him ... all except for Roanna. Sometimes he'd hear something that sounded like her laugh, and instinctively turn to see what mischief she was in before he remembered she was no longer there. Or he'd be doctoring a cut on a horse's leg, and he'd remember the concern that had darkened her thin face whenever she'd tended a hurt mount, Somehow she had wormed her way deeper into his heart than the others had, and it was harder to forget her. He'd catch himself worrying about her, wondering what latest trouble she had managed to get

herself into. And over the years, it was the memory of her that still had the power to make him angry.
He couldn't forget Jessie's accusation that Roanna had deliberately made trouble between them that last night. Had Jessie lied? She certainly hadn't been above it, but Roanna's transparent face had clearly revealed her guilt. Over the years, given Jessie's pregnancy by another man, he'd come to the conclusion that Roanna hadn't had anything to do with Jessie's death and the murderer had instead been Jessie's unknown lover, but he still couldn't shake his anger. Somehow Roanna's behavior, though it paled in importance when compared with the other events of that night, retained the power to make him furious.
Maybe it was because he'd always been so dead certain of her love. Maybe it had stroked his ego to be worshipped so openly, so unconditionally. No one else on earth had loved him that way. Yvonne's mother-love was unyielding, but she was the woman who had spanked him when he misbehaved as a child, so she saw his flaws. In Roanna's eyes, he'd been perfect, or so he had thought until she had deliberately caused trouble just so she could get one up on Jessie. He wondered now if he'd ever been anything other than a symbol to her, a possession that Jessie had and she wanted.
He'd had women since Jessie's death. He'd even had one or two lengthy relationships, though he'd never been inclined to remarry. But no matter how hot the sex he enjoyed in other women's beds, it was dreams of Roanna that woke him in the cool early mornings before dawn, drenched in sweat and his dick standing up like an iron spike.
He was never able to remember the dreams clearly, just bits and pieces, like the way her bottom had rubbed against his erection, the way her nipples had pebbled just from kissing him, the way they'd felt when she pressed them against his chest. His lust for Jessie had been a boy's lust, a young man's hormone-crazed lust, a game of dominance. His lust for Roanna, disgusted as it made him with himself, always had an undertone of tenderness, at least in his dreams.
But she was no dream, standing there in the bar.
His first impulse had been to get her out of there, where she didn't belong. She had gone with him without protest or question, as silent now as she had once been mouthy. He was aware that he'd had too much to drink, known

that he wasn't in complete control of himself, but putting her off until tomorrow hadn't seemed like a viable option.
At first he'd barely been able to concentrate on what she was saying. She hadn't even wanted to look at him. She bad sat there, shivering, looking every place but at him, and he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her. She'd changed. God, how she'd changed. He didn't like it, didn't like her silence where once she'd been a chatterbox, didn't like the stillness of her expression where once every emotion she had felt had been written plainly on her little face. There was no mischief or laughter in her eyes, no vibrant energy in her movements. It was as if someone had stolen Roanna and left a doll in her place.
The ugly little girl had turned into a plain teenager, and the plain teenager into a woman who was, if not exactly pretty, striking in her own way. Her face had filled out so that her too-big features had assumed a more pleasing proportion. Her long, high-bridged, slightly crooked nose now looked aristocratic, and her too-wide mouth could only be described as lush. Complete maturity had refined her face so that high, chiseled cheekbones had been revealed, and her almond-shaped, whiskey-colored eyes were exotic. She had put on a little weight, maybe fifteen pounds, that softened her body and made her look less like a refugee from a World War II prison camp, though she could easily carry another fifteen pounds and still be slim. Memories of the girl had haunted him. The reality of the woman had stirred his long-simmering lust to a hard boil.
But, on a personal level, she had seemed oblivious to him. She had asked him to return to Alabama because Lucinda needed him. Lucinda loved him, regretted their estrangement. Lucinda would give him back everything he'd lost. Lucinda was ill, dying. Lucinda, Lucinda, Lucinda. Every word out of her mouth had been about Lucinda. Nothing about herself, whether or not she wanted him to return, as if that long-ago hero worship had never existed.
That had made him even angrier, that he'd spent years dreaming about her while she seemed to have completely cut him out of her life. His temper had soared out of control, and the tequila had loosened any restraint he might

have felt. He'd heard himself demand that she go to bed with him as the price for his return. He'd seen the shock on her face, seen it quickly controlled. He had waited for her rejection. And then she'd said yes.

He was angry enough, drunk enough, to follow through. By God, if she was willing to give herself to him for Lucinda's benefit, then he'd damn sure take her up on it. He cranked the truck and drove quickly to the nearest motel before she could change her mind.

Once inside the cheap little room, he had sprawled on the bed because his head had been spinning a little, and ordered her to strip. Once again he'd expected her to refuse. He'd waited for her to back out, or at least lose her temper and tell him to kiss her ass. He wanted to see fire break through the barrier of that blank doll's face, he wanted to see the old Roanna.

Instead she had silently begun to take off her clothes. She did it neatly, without fuss, and from the moment the first button had slipped free he hadn't been able to think of anything else but the soft skin being revealed by each movement of her fingers. She hadn't tried to be coy; she hadn't needed to. His dick was pressing so hard against his fly that it probably had the imprint of his zipper running down it.

She had lovely skin, a little golden, with the faintest dusting of freckles across those classic cheekbones. She slipped out of her shirt, and her shoulders had a soft, mellow sheen to them. Then she had unhooked that plain, serviceable white bra and removed it, and her breasts had taken his breath. They didn't stick out a lot but were surprisingly round and upright, exquisitely formed, with her nipples drawn into tight, rosy buds that made his mouth water.

Silently she had removed her slacks and panties, standing naked before him. Her waist and hips were narrow, but the cheeks of her ass were as deliciously round as her breasts. The need to touch her was painful.

Hoarsely he had ordered her to come to him, and she had silently obeyed, moving to stand beside the bed.

He'd touched her then, and felt her quiver under his hand. The column of her thigh was sleek and cool, her skin delicate in contrast with his tanned, work-roughened hand. Slowly, savoring the texture of her skin, he stroked upward and around to her buttocks; she had moved a little, rubbing herself against his hand, and mingled excitement and delight had roared through him. He had cupped the firm mounds and felt them flex, and she had begun to shake even harder. He teased her with a daring caress and sensed her shock, and he'd looked up to find that her eyes were tightly closed.

Somehow he couldn't quite believe it was Roanna who stood naked before him, yielding her body to his exploration, and yet everything about her was

infinitely familiar, and far more exciting than ten years' worth of frustrating dreams.

He didn't have to imagine the physical details now; they were laid out before him. Her pubic hair was a neat, curly little triangle. It had drawn his gaze, and he'd been entranced by the delicate folds, shyly closed, that he could glimpse under the curls. The mysteries of her body had made him ache with need. Roughly he'd told her to spread her legs so he could touch her, and she had.

He'd put his hand on the most private part of her body, and felt her startled response. He'd petted her, stroked her, opened her, and eased one finger into her startlingly tight sheath. He was so hard he thought he might explode, but he held back, because here was the proof that the lust wasn't all on his part. She was slick and damp, and her soft, low moans of arousal had nearly driven him crazy. She seemed shyly bewildered by what he was doing, what she was feeling. Then he'd tried to slip another finger into her, and couldn't. He'd felt her instinctive withdrawal, and a sudden suspicion flared in his tequila-fogged brain.

She'd never done this before. He was abruptly certain of it.

Swiftly he tumbled her down onto the bed, dragging her body across his. With more deliberation he'd probed her body, watching her reaction, fighting the alcohol as he tried to think clearly. He'd been the first with a couple of girls, back in high school and college, and even once since he'd left Alabama, so he noticed the way she blushed, her slight flinch as he pushed his rough finger even deeper. If it hadn't been for her years of horseback riding, he doubted he would have been able to even get his finger inside her.

He should stop this, now. The knowledge seared him. His body damn near revolted. He hadn't meant to let it go this far anyway, but he'd been undone by the tequila, and by his own arousal. He'd had just the wrong amount to drink, enough to slow his thoughts and make him not give a damn, but not enough to soften his dick. He was disgusted with himself for making her do this, and he'd opened his mouth to tell her to put on her clothes when, for an instant, he saw how terribly vulnerable she was, and how he could destroy her with a careless word even if it was for her own good.

Roanna had grown up in Jessie's shadow. Jessie had been the pretty one, Roanna the plain one. Her physical selfconfidence, except where horses were concerned, had always been close to zero. How could it not be, when

rejection had been more the norm for her than acceptance? For a split second he saw the raw, desperate courage it had taken for her to do this. She had stripped naked for him, something he was certain she'd never done with any other man, and offered herself to him. He couldn't imagine what it had cost her. If he rejected her now, it would devastate her.

"You're a virgin," he'd said, his voice hard and flat with frustration.

She hadn't denied it. Instead she had blushed, a delicate rose tinting her breasts, and the delectable sight had been irresistible. He'd known he shouldn't do it, but he'd had to touch her nipple, and then he'd had to taste her, and he'd felt the answering need in her slender body as it arched to his touch.

He'd offered to stop. It took every ounce of willpower he had to rein himself in and make that offer, but he'd done it. And Roanna had looked as if he'd slapped her in the face. She had gone white, and her lips had trembled.

"Don't you want me?" she'd whispered, the plea so faint that his heart had squeezed. His own defenses, already weakened by the tequila, went down with a crash. Rather than answering, he had simply caught her hand and dragged it down to his groin, pressed it over his erection. He hadn't said anything even then, staying silent as he watched the sense of wonder creep into her eyes, chase away the pain. It was like watching a flower bloom. Then she had turned her hand to hold him and had said, "Please," and he was lost.

Still, he had tried grimly for control. Even as he shucked off his clothes, he had been sucking in deep breaths, trying to cool the fire inside him. It hadn't worked. God, he was so ready he'd probably come as soon as he put it in her.

He had damn sure wanted to find out.

Somehow, he managed to hold himself back. His control hadn't extended to prolonged foreplay. He had simply mounted her, tucking her delicate body under his much more powerful one, and kissed her while he forced his erection in her to the hilt.

He'd known he was hurting her, but he couldn't stop. All he could do, once he was inside her, was make it good for her.

"Ladies first" had always been his motto, and he had experience in achieving his objective. Roanna was startlingly, overwhelmingly responsive to his every touch, her hips moving, her back arching, hot little cries breaking from her lips. Jessie had always held back, but Roanna gave

herself without restraint, without pretension. She had climaxed fast, and then his own orgasm had seized him and he had come violently, more violently than he'd ever experienced before, pounding into her and flooding her with semen.
She hadn't pulled away, hadn't jumped up to run into the bathroom and clean herself. She had simply dozed off with her arms still looped around his neck.
Maybe he had dozed, too. He didn't know. But eventually he had roused himself and slid off her, turned out the light, tucked her under the covers, and joined her there.
It hadn't been long before his cock had stirred insistently, lured by the silken body in his arms. And Roanna had welcomed him without hesitation, as she had every other time during the night that he'd reached for her.
It was almost dawn now.
The effects of the tequila had faded from his system, and he had to face the facts. Like it or not, he had blackmailed Roanna into this. The hell of it was, he hadn't needed to. She would have fain down for him without it being a condition for his return.
Something had happened to her, something that had robbed her of her zest, her spontaneity. It was as if she had finally been defeated by all the efforts to force her into a certain mold, and had surrendered herself.
He didn't like it. It made him furious.
He wanted to kick himself for becoming just one more person in a long line of people who had forced her to do something. It didn't matter that she had responded to him. He had to make it plain that his return didn't depend on her giving him the use of her body. He wanted her-hell, yes, he wanted her-but without any conditions or threats between them, and it was his own damn fault that he was in this situation.
He wanted to make his peace with Lucinda. It was time, and the thought of her dying made him regret the lost years. Davencourt and all the money didn't matter, not now. Mending fences mattered. Finding out what had extinguished the light in Roanna's eyes mattered.
He wondered if they were prepared for the man he'd become.
Yeah, he'd go back.

Chapter 11

Roanna seldom slept well, but she was so exhausted from the day of hard travel and emotional stress that when Webb finally let her sleep, she dropped immediately into a hard, deep slumber. She was groggy when she woke, unable for a moment to remember where she was, but over the years she had become accustomed to waking in places where she hadn't gone to sleep, so she didn't panic.

Instead she lay quietly while reality reassembled itself in her mind. She became aware of some unusual things: One, this wasn't Davencourt. Two, she was naked. Three, she was very sore in all her tender places.

It all clicked into place then, and she bolted upright in bed, looking for Webb. She knew immediately that he wasn't there.

He'd gotten up, dressed, and left her alone in this cheesy motel. During the night his heat had melted some of the ice that had encased her for so many years, but as she sat there naked in a tangle of dingy sheets, she felt the cold layer slowly solidify again.

It was the story of her life, it seemed. She had always felt that she could offer herself to him body and soul, and he still wouldn't love her. Now she knew for certain. Along with

her body, she'd given him her heart, while he'd simply been screwing.

Had she really been silly enough to think he cared for her? Why should he? She'd done nothing but cause him trouble. He probably hadn't even been particularly attracted to her. Webb had always been able to get any woman he wanted, even the prettiest ones. She couldn't compare with the type he was accustomed to, in either face or body; she had simply been handy, and he'd been horny. He'd seen an opportunity to get his rocks off and taken it. Case closed.

Her face was expressionless as she slowly crawled out of bed, ignoring the discomfort between her legs. She noticed then the note on the other pillow, scribbled on the scratch pad stamped with the motel's name. She picked it up, recognizing the black slash of Webb's handwriting immediately.

"Be back at ten," it read. The note wasn't signed, but then that wasn't necessary. Roanna smoothed her fingers over the writing, then tore the note from the pad and carefully folded it and slipped it into her purse.

She looked at her wristwatch: eight-thirty. An hour and a half to kill. An hour and a half of grace before she had to listen to him tell her that last

night had been a mistake, one he didn't intend to repeat.
The least she could do was crawl back into her severely stylish shell, so she wouldn't look pitiful when he gave her the old heave-ho. She could bear a lot, but she didn't think she could stand it if he felt sorry for her.
Her clothes were as limp and wrinkled as she felt. First she washed out her underwear and draped it over the noisy climate control unit to dry, then turned the temperature control to heat and set the fan on high. She carried her slacks and blouse into the tiny bathroom with her, and hung them over the door while she took a shower in the minuscule stall that sported a cracked floor and yellowed water stains. The cubicle quickly filled with steam, and by the time she finished, both blouse and slacks looked fresher.
The climate control unit was a lot louder than it was efficient, but still the room quickly became stuffy. She shut it off and checked her panties; they were dry except for a lingering bit of dampness in the waistband. She pulled them on anyway, then quickly dressed in case Webb came back earlier than he'd said. Not that he hadn't already seen everything she had, she thought, and touched it as well, but that was last night. By leaving the way he had, he'd made it plain that last night hadn't meant anything to him beyond physical release.
She combed her straight, heavy hair back and left it to dry. That was the major benefit of a good cut: it didn't require much maintenance. The small amount of luggage she'd brought was locked in the trunk of her rental car, which was presumably still parked outside that grimy little bar just off the highway, but she wasn't certain exactly where she was in relation to it. The only makeup she had in her purse was a powder compact and a neutral-colored lipstick. She made quick use of it, not looking at her reflection in the mirror any longer than was required to get the lipstick on straight.
She opened the door to let in the freshness of the dry desert morning, turned on the small television that was bolted to the wall, and sat down in the lone chair in the room, an uncomfortable number with a torn vinyl seat, which looked as if it had been stolen from a hospital waiting room.
She didn't pay much attention to what was on, some morning talk show. It was noise, and that was all she required. Sometimes when she couldn't sleep, she would turn her own television on so the voices could give her the illusion of not being utterly alone in the night.
She was still sitting there when a vehicle pulled up right outside the door. The motor cut off as a cloud of dust blew in. Then a door opened and was

slammed shut, there was the sound of booted feet on the concrete walk, and Webb filled the doorway. He was silhouetted against the bright sunlight, his broad shoulders almost stretching from one side of the door frame to the other.

He didn't come any farther inside. All he said was, "Are
you ready?" and she silently got up, turned off the light and the television, and picked up her purse.

He opened the truck door for her, his southern manners still holding sway despite a decade of self-imposed exile. Roanna climbed inside, concentrating on not giving any flinches that betrayed her physical discomfort, and settled herself. Now that it was daylight, she could tell that the truck was gunmetal gray.. with a gray interior, and was fairly new. There was an extra stick shift on the floor, meaning it was four-wheel drive, probably a necessity for taking it across the range.

As Webb slid behind the wheel, he slanted her an unreadable glance. She wondered if he expected her to either start planning a wedding or pitch a fit because he'd left her alone this morning. She did neither. She sat silently.

"Hungry? She shook her head, then remembered that he liked verbal answers.

"No, thank you."

His lips thinned as he started the motor and reversed out of the parking spot. "You're going to eat. You've gained a little weight, and it looks good on you. I'm not going to let you catch your flight without eating."

She hadn't booked a return flight, because she hadn't known how long she would be staying. She opened her mouth to say so, then caught the flinty expression in his eyes and realized he had booked one for her.

"When am I leaving?"

"One o'clock. I managed to get you on a direct flight from Tucson to Dallas. Your connection in Dallas is a bit tight, forty-five minutes, but it'll get you into Huntsville at a reasonable hour. You should get home around ten, ten thirty tonight. Do you have to call anyone to pick you up in Huntsville?"

"No." She had driven herself to the airport, because no one else had been willing to get up at three-thirty to perform the service. No, that wasn't fair. She hadn't asked anyone to do it. She never asked anyone to do anything for her.

By the time she ate, as he seemed determined for her to do, she would have to leave almost immediately in order to turn in her rental car at the airport

and make it to the gate in time to board. He hadn't left her any breathing space, probably by design. He didn't want to talk to her, didn't want to spend any more time in her company than necessary.
"There's a little place not far from here that serves breakfast until eleven. The food's plain, but good."
"Just drop me off at the bar so I can pick up my car," she said as she looked out the window, anywhere but at him.
"I'll stop at a fast-food place."
"I doubt it," he said grimly.
"I'm going to watch every bite go into your mouth."
"I eat now and then," she replied in a mild tone.
"I learned how."
"Then you won't mind if I watch."
She recognized that tone, the one he used when he'd made up his mind that you were going to do something, so you might as well not argue. When she'd been younger, that tone had been of infinite comfort, symbolizing the rock steadiness and security she had so desperately needed after her parents' death. In an odd way it was still comforting; he might not like her, might not desire her, but at least he didn't want her to starve to death.
The little restaurant he took her to wasn't much bigger than the kitchen at Davencourt, with a couple of booths, a couple of tiny tables, and four stools lined up at the counter. The rich scent of frying bacon and sausage was in the air, underlaid with that of coffee and the spiciness of chili peppers. Two sun-baked old men were in the back booth, and they both looked up with interest as Webb escorted Roanna to the other booth.
A thin woman of indeterminate age, her skin baked as hard and brown as that of the two old men, approached the booth. She pulled a green order pad out of the hip pocket of her jeans and held a stubby pencil at the ready. Evidently there was no menu. Roanna looked at Webb in question.
"I'll have the short stack, ham and eggs on the side, sunny side up," he said, "and she'll have an egg, plain scrambled, with dry toast, bacon, and hash browns. Coffee for both of us."
"We can't do eggs sunny side up no more. Health Department rules," the waitress said.
"Then I want them well done but take them up early."
"Gotcha." The waitress tore the top sheet off the pad as she walked over to an opening cut out in the wall. She laid the ticket on the sill.

"Betts! Got an order."
"You must eat here often," Roanna said.
6'1 usually stop by whenever I'm in town."
"What does plain scrambled mean?"
"No peppers."
it was on the tip of her tongue to ask if they called that fancy scrambled but bit the comment back. How easy it would be to fall into the old habits with him! she thought sadly. But she had learned to curb her quips, because most people didn't appreciate even the milder ones. Webb had once seemed to, but perhaps he'd been kind.
The waitress set two steaming cups of coffee in front of them.
"CreamT' she asked, and Webb said, "No," answering for both of them.
"It'll take me at least a week, maybe two, to get things squared away here," he said abruptly.
"I'm keeping my ranch, so I'll be flying back and forth. Davencourt won't be my sole concern."
She sipped her coffee to hide her relief. He was still coming home! He'd said he would if she'd sleep with him, but until now she hadn't been certain he'd meant it. It wouldn't have made any difference if she'd known for sure he was lying; no matter what the day had brought, last night had been a dream come true for her, and she had grabbed at it with both hands.
"Lucinda wouldn't expect you to sell the ranch," she said.
"Bullshit. She thinks the universe revolves around Davencourt. There's nothing she wouldn't do to safeguard it." He leaned back and stretched out his long legs, carefully avoiding contact with hers.
"Tell me what's been going on there. Mother tells me some of the news, and so does Aunt Sandra, but neither of them know anything about the day to-day operations. I do know that Gloria has managed to move her entire family into Davencourt,"
"Not all of them. Baron and his family still live in Charlotte."
"Being under the same roof with Lanette and Corliss is enough to make me think about buying my own place in town."
Roanna didn't voice her agreement, but she knew exactly what he meant.
"What about you?" he continued.
"I know you went to college in Tuscaloosa. What changed your mind? I thought you wanted to attend college locally."

She had gone away because for a long time that had been easier than staying home. Her sleeping problems hadn't been as bad while she was away, the memories hadn't been as acute. But it had been over a year after he'd left before she had started college, and it had been a year of hell.
She didn't tell him any of that. Instead she shrugged and said, "You know how it is. A person can get along without it, but to have all the right contacts you have to attend the university." She didn't have to elaborate on which university, because Webb had gone to the same one.
"Did you do the sorority bit?"
"It was expected."
A reluctant grin tugged at his mouth.
"I can't see you as a Greek. How did you get along with the little society snobs?"
"Fine." They had, in fact, been kind to her. It was they who had taught her how to dress, how to apply makeup, how to make social chitchat. She rather thought they had seen her as a challenge and taken her on as a makeover project.
The waitress approached with three plates of steaming hot food. She slid two plates in front of Webb and the remaining one in front of Roanna.
"Yell when you need a refill," she said comfortably, and left them alone.
Webb applied himself to his food, buttering the pancakes
and soaking them in syrup, then liberally salting and peppering his eggs. The slab of ham covered half the plate. Roanna looked at the mountain of food, then at his steely body. She tried to imagine the amount of physical labor that required that many calories, and felt an even deeper sense of respect for him.
"Eat," he growled.
She picked up her fork and obeyed. Once she couldn't have managed it, but keeping her emotions controlled had allowed her stomach to settle down. The trick was to take her time and take tiny bites. Usually, by the time everyone else had finished their meal she had managed to eat half of hers, and that was enough.
That was the case this time, too. When Webb leaned back, replete, Roanna laid her fork aside. He gave her plate a long, hard look as if calculating exactly how much she'd eaten, but to her relief he decided not to push it.
Breakfast taken care of, he drove her to the bar. The rental car sat forlornly in the parking lot, looking abandoned and out of place. A CLOSED sign

hung lopsidedly on the front door of the bar. In daylight, the building was even more ramshackle than it had appeared the night before.
Dust flew around the truck as he braked to a stop, and Roanna allowed the gritty cloud to settle while she fished the ignition key out of her purse.
"Thanks for breakfast," she said as she opened the door and slid out.
"I'll tell Lucinda to expect you."
He got out of the truck and walked over to the rental car with her, standing right beside the door so she couldn't open it.
"About last night," he said.
Dread filled her. God, she couldn't listen to this. She put the key in the lock and turned it, hoping he would take the hint and move. He didn't.
"What about it?" she managed to say without any expression in her voice.
"It shouldn't have happened."
She bent her head. It was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and he wished it hadn't.
"God damn it, look at me!" Just as he had the night before, he cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her head so that she faced him. His hat was pulled low on his forehead, shadowing his eyes, but she could still see the grimness in them and in the line of his mouth. Very gently, he touched her lips with his thumb.
"I wasn't exactly drunk, but I'd had too much to drink. You were a virgin. I shouldn't have made that a condition to going back, and I regret what I did to you."
Roanna held her spine very straight and still.
"It was as much my responsibility as yours."
"Not quite. You didn't know exactly what you were getting into. On the other hand, I did know that you wouldn't turn me down."
She couldn't escape that hard, green gaze. This was very like the night before when she had stripped herself naked in front of him, except now she was emotionally naked. Her lower lip trembled, and she quickly controlled it. There was no point in denying what he'd said, because her actions had already proved him right. When he had given her the opportunity to call a stop to what was happening, she had begged him to continue.
"It's never been a secret how I feel about you," she finally said.
"All you had to do at any time was snap your fingers, and I'd have come running and let you do anything you wanted to me." She managed a smile. It wasn't much of one, but it was better than weeping.

"That hasn't changed."
He searched her face, trying to pierce the remoteness of her expression. A kind of angry frustration flashed in his eyes.
"I just wanted you to know that my return doesn't depend on your sleeping with me. You don't have to turn yourself into a whore to make sure Lucinda gets what she wants."
This time she couldn't control her flinch. She pulled away from him and gave him another smile, this one even more strained than the first one.
"I understand," she forced herself to say with fragile cam-L "I won't bother you."
"The hell you won't," he snapped.
"You've been bothering me for most of your life." He leaned forward, scowling at her.
"You bother me by being in the same room. You bother me by breathing."
Furiously he pulled her against him and ground his mouth down on hers. Roanna was too startled to react. All she could do was hang there in his hard grasp and open her mouth to the demand of his. The kiss was deep and intimate, his tongue moving against hers, and down below she could feel the iron ridge of his erection pressing into her belly.
He pushed her away as suddenly as he had grabbed her.
"Now trot on back to Lucinda and tell her mission accomplished. Whether or not you tell her how you did it is up to you." He opened the car door and ushered her inside, then stood for a moment looking down at her.
"And you don't understand a damn thing," he said evenly, before closing the door and striding back to his truck.

Chapter 12

When Roanna reached the long driveway to Davencourt that night, as exhausted from the second day of hard travel as she had been from the first, she groaned aloud at the lights still shining like a beacon from the big house. She'd hoped everyone would have gone to bed, so she could regroup before having to face the inquisition she knew was coming. She'd even hoped she could manage to get as much sleep as she had the night before, though that was unlikely. If she couldn't sleep, then at least she could relive those tumultuous hours, savor the memory of his naked body against hers,

the kisses, the touches, the shattering, unending moments when he'd actually been inside her. And when she felt calmer, she would think about the rest of it, the hurtful things he'd said and the fact that he didn't want her again ... But then why had he kissed her? She was too tired to think straight, so the analysis could wait.

She used the automatic opener for the garage, then braked when her headlights swept across a car already parked in her space. She sighed. Corliss again, taking advantage of Roanna's absence to park her own car inside. The detached garage had only five bays, and those bays were allotted to Lucinda, though she no longer drove herself, Roanna, Gloria and Harlan, and Lanette and Greg, who each had a car. Brock and Corliss were supposed to park their cars outside, but Corliss had a habit of ignoring that and parking her car in any empty space.

Roanna parked her car beside Brock's and wearily climbed out, hauling her small overnight case with her. She thought about slipping up the outside stairway and around the, balcony to her room on the back, but she had locked the French doors before leaving and couldn't get in that way. Instead she would go in through the kitchen and hope she could make it to the stairs unnoticed.

Luck wasn't with her. When she unlocked the kitchen door and opened it, Harlan and Gloria were both sitting at the kitchen table, demolishing thick slices of Tansy's coconut cake. Neither of them were in their nightclothes yet, which meant they had been watching television on the large set in the den.

Gloria hastily swallowed.

"You couldn't find him!" she exclaimed, openly gleeful of the fact that Roanna was alone. Then she gave Roanna a sly, conspiratorial look.

"Not that you tried very hard, did you? Well, I won't say anything. I thought Lucinda had lost her mind anyway. Why on earth would she want to bring him back here? I know Booley didn't arrest him, but everyone knew he was guilty, there was just no way to prove it-" "I found him," Roanna interrupted. She felt fuzzy headed with fatigue, and wanted to cut the interrogation short.

"He had some business to take care of, but he'll be coming home within the next two weeks."

Gloria's color faded, and she gaped openmouthed at Roanna. The cake crumbs thus revealed were unappetizing. Then she said, "Roanna, how

could you be so stupid?" Each word rose until she was fairly shrieking. "Don't you know what you stand to lose? All of this could have been yours, but Lucinda will give it back to him, you mark my words! And what about us? Why, we could all be murdered in our beds, the way poor Jessie-"
"Jessie wasn't murdered in her bed," Roanna said tiredly.
"Don't split hairs with me, you know what I mean!"
"Webb didn't kill her."
"Well, the sheriff thought he did, and I'm sure he knows more about it than you do! We all heard him say he'd do anything to get rid of her."
"We all heard him tell her to get a divorce, too."
"Gloria's right," Harlan weighed in, knitting his bushy brows with concern. "There's no telling what he's capable of doing."
Normally Roanna didn't argue, but she was exhausted, and every nerve in her body felt raw from her encounter with Webb.
"What you're really worried about," she said in a colorless voice, "is that he'll remember how you turned your backs on him when he needed our support, and tell you to find somewhere else to live."
"Roanna!" Gloria gasped, outraged.
"How can you say such a thing to us? What were we supposed to do, shelter a killer from the law?"
There was nothing she could say to alter their position, and she was too tired to try any longer. Let Webb handle it when he got back. She had just enough energy to feel a flicker of interest at the prospect. If they thought he'd been intimidating before, wait until they saw what they had to deal with now. He was much harder and more forceful.
Leaving Gloria and Harlan still sputtering their rage into the coconut cake, Roanna dragged herself up the stairs. Lucinda was already in bed; she tired easily these days, another indication of her failing health, and was often asleep by nine. Morning would be plenty of time to tell her that Webb was coming home.
Roanna hoped' that she would be able to get some sleep herself.
If wishes were horses ... Several hours later, she glanced at the lighted dial of her clock and saw the hour hand creeping toward the two. Her eyes felt grainy from lack of sleep, and her mind was so dulled by fatigue she could barely think, but sleep was as far away as it had ever been.
She'd endured a lot of nights like this, waiting through the endless darkness for morning to come. All of the books on insomnia advised the sufferer to

get out of bed, not to make the bed the site of their frustration. Roanna had already developed that habit, so the book hadn't helped any. Sometimes she read to pass the hours, sometimes she played endless card games for one, but for the most part she would sit in the darkness and wait.
That was what she was doing now, because she was too tired for anything else. She sat curled in a huge, overstuffed easy chair, large enough for two. The chair had been a Christmas present to herself five years ago, and she didn't know what she would do without it. When she did manage to doze off, as likely or not it was in the chair. In winter she would wrap up in her softest, thickest afghan and watch the night slowly creep past her windows, but this was summer and she wore only a thin, sleeveless nightgown, though the hem was tucked over her bare feet. She'd opened the French doors so she could hear the comforting sounds of the warm night. A thunderstorm was passing by in the distance; she could see the flashes of lightning, revealing dark purple clouds, but the storm was so far away that the thunder, when she heard it, was only a faint rumble.
If she had to be awake, summer nights were the best. And between insomnia and the other, she preferred insomnia. When she slept, she never knew where she would wake up.
She didn't think she'd ever left the house. She'd always been inside, and her feet were never dirty, but still it frightened her to think of herself roaming around unknowing. She'd read about sleepwalkers, too. People could evidently negotiate stairs, drive, even carry on a conversation while still asleep. That wasn't much comfort, because she didn't want to do any of that. She wanted to wake up exactly where she'd been when she went to sleep.
If anyone had ever seen her on her nocturnal strolls, they hadn't mentioned it. She didn't think she did it every time she slept, but of course she had no way of knowing and she didn't want to alert the family to her problem. They did know she was troubled with insomnia, so perhaps if anyone did see her outside her room in the middle of the night, VaqMwntly perfectly awake, they assumed she was having trouble sleeping and forgot about it.
If it became known that she alyed in her sleep ... She didn't like to think ill of pecwi, Ithout proof, but she i IDP didn't think she would trust seve members of the household if they knew she was so vulnitrable. The possibility for mischief was too great, especially with Corliss. In some ways Corliss reminded Roanna a lot of Jessie, though the relationship was only that of second cousin, which meant they didn't share a lot of genetic

material. Jessie had been cooler of thought but hotter of temper. Corliss didn't plan, she acted on impulse, and she wasn't prone to temper tantrums. For the most part she seemed restless and unhappy, and liked to make other people unhappy. Whatever it was she wanted out of life, she hadn't gotten it. Roanna didn't think Webb would get along with Corliss at all.

Thinking of Webb brought her back full circle to how she had begun the day, not that her thoughts had been off of him for long at any one time. She didn't know what to think. She was no good at analyzing a man-woman relationship, because she'd never had one. All she knew was that Webb had been angry, and a little drunk. If he hadn't been drinking he probably wouldn't have put the pressure on her that he had, but the fact remained that she had fallen into bed with him without the slightest resistance. The circumstances had been humiliating, but that secret little part of her had reveled in the opportunity.

She wasn't sorry she'd done it. If nothing good ever happened to her for the rest of her life, at least she'd lain in Webb's arms and known what it was like to make love with him. The pain had been more severe than she'd imagined, but it hadn't been able to overshadow the joy she'd felt, and ultimately the satisfaction.

The tequila might account for the first time, and maybe the second, but what about the other times? Surely he'd sobered by the third time he'd reached for her, in the middle of the night, and the fourth, just before dawn. She still ached from his lovemaking, with a tenderness deep inside her body that she cherished because it reminded her of those moments.

He hadn't been a selfish lover. He might have been angry, but still he had satisfied her, sometimes more than once, before allowing himself release. His hands and mouth had been tender on her body, careful not to add to the pain she'd already experienced just in accepting him.

But then he'd slipped out of bed and left her alone in the cheap little motel, as if she were a coyote woman. Wasn't that what the wild, drinking crowd called a woman who was so ugly that, when a man woke up and looked over at her asleep on his arm, he gnawed off his own arm rather than wake her up? At least Webb had left a note. At least he had come back, and she hadn't been forced to get back to her rental car as best she could.

He'd said she acted like a whore for Lucinda. He'd said that she'd been a bother to him all her life, and that hurt more than the other comment. No

matter what, she had always managed to hold on to the thought of those years before Jessie's death as the sweet years, because she'd had him as a friend and hero. The awful night Jessie had been killed, she'd realized that he felt sorry for her and that had nearly killed her, but still the sweet memories had been there. Now she was mortified to think she'd been fooling herself from the beginning. Kindness wasn't the same as love, patience wasn't the same as caring.

He'd made it plain that she shouldn't expect any continuance of their lovemaking when he returned to Davencourt. It had been a one-night stand, pure and simple. There was no ongoing relationship between them, except that of distant cousins.

But then he'd kissed her, and told her she didn't understand anything. He'd been unmistakably aroused; after the night she'd just spent, she was very familiar with his erections. If he didn't want her, why had he been hard? One thing was for cc%&in though: he'd still been angry. She sat curled in her cTW, watching the lightning and thinking of Webb, and sometime close to dawn she finally dropped into a doze.

Gloria marshaled her entire family to the breakfast table at the same time, a rare happening, but evidently she thought she needed reinforcements. After a restless night in which sleep had been as elusive as ever, Roanna had gone to Lucinda's room and given her the good news. Buoyed by that, there was more energy in Lucinda's movements that morning, more color in her face, than there had been in a long time. She lifted her eyebrows in surprise at the crowd seated at the table, then grinned and gave Roanna an I know-what-they're-up-to wink.

Breakfast was a buffet, an efficient setup since more than two of them eating at the same time was pure chance. Roanna filled plates for Lucinda and herself and took her place at the table.

Gloria waited until they had food in their mouths before launching the beginning salvo.

"Lucinda, we've all talked about it, and we wish you would reconsider this harebrained idea to put Webb in charge of the business concerns again. Roanna has been doing a fine job, and we really don't need him."

"We?" Lucinda queried, staring down the table at her sister.

"Gloria, I've been grateful for and enjoyed your company for the past ten years, but I think I need to remind you that this is Davenport business, and

Roanna and I are the only Davenports here. We talked it over and agreed that we want Webb to resume his rightful place in the family."
"Webb isn't a Davenport," Gloria pointed out, pouncing on this detail. "He's a Tallant, one of our family. Davencourt and the Davenport money should be Roanna's. Why, it's only right that it go to her."
Anything to keep Webb out of the picture, Roanna
thought. Gloria would much prefer that her immediate family have the inheritance, but Roanna was evidently the second-best choice. Gloria figured she could manipulate and dominate Roanna, but Webb was a different story. That was the crux of the matter, she realized, not any exaggerated fear that Webb was a killer. It all came down to money, and comfort.
"As I said," Lucinda repeated, "Roanna and I are in agreement on this."
"Roanna's never been logical where Webb's concerned." Harlan weighed in on his wife's side.
"We all know you can't trust her judgment in this."
Corliss leaned forward, her eyes bright as she scented trouble.
"Why, that's right. Don't I remember something about Jessie catching them ca noodling in the kitchen?"
Brock looked up from his breakfast and frowned at his sister. Roanna liked him best of all Gloria's brood. Brock was generally good-natured and was a steady worker. He didn't intend to stay at Davencourt forever but was using the opportunity to save as much money as he could so he could build his own house. He and his long-time girlfriend were planning to marry within the year. He was more forceful than his father, Greg, who let Lanette set the agenda for the family, "I think that was blown all out of proportion," Brock said.
"What makes you think so?" Lanette asked, leaning forward to look at her son. Corliss smiled with satisfaction at having stirred up the waters.
"Because Webb wasn't a cheater, and I'm glad he's coming back."
Gloria and Lanette both glared at this traitor in their midst. Brock ignored them and returned to his meal. Roanna concentrated on her own breakfast and did her best to tune out the conversation. Nothing would please Corliss more than provoking her into a response or to see her visibly upset. Corliss lacked Jessie's genius for cuttingShedes of Twilight % remarks, or perhaps it was Roanna's kwtion that had changed, but she found Corliss merely annoying.

The verbal battering went on the entire meal, with Gloria and Harlan and Lanette taking turns coming up with what they obviously thought were good arguments against Webb's return. Greg frankly wasn't interested and left the protests to Lanette. Brock finished eating and excused himself to go to work.

Roanna concentrated on the chore of eating, saying little, and Lucinda was as immovable as a mountain. Having Webb home was more important to her than anything her sister could say, so Roanna didn't have any worries that Lucinda would change her mind.

Lucinda had lit up like a Christmas tree that morning when Roanna had given her the good news. She had asked question after question about him, how he looked, if he'd changed, what he'd said.

She had seemed undisturbed when Roanna told her that he still bore a grudge.

"Well, of course he does," Lucinda had said readily.

"Webb's never been anyone's lapdog. I imagine he'll have plenty to say to me when he gets here, and it'll stick in my craw, but I guess I'll have to listen. I'm really surprised he gave in so easily, though. I knew you were the one who could make him listen."

He hadn't listened as much as he'd made a deal with her, and when she had followed through, he'd felt bound to do the same. For the first time, she wondered if he had expected her to flatly refuse, if he'd offered the deal without any expectation of having to keep it.

"Tell me how he looked," Lucinda said again, and Roanna described him as best she could. Was it accurate, when she saw him through eyes of love? Would others find him less dominant, less powerful? She didn't think so.

Certainly Gloria wasn't sanguine about his return. It was hypocritical of her, Roanna thought, because before Jessie's death Gloria had always made a point of fussing over Webb,

declaring him her favorite nephew. But then she'd made the mistake of turning on him instead of defending him, and she knew he hadn't forgotten it.

"Where will he sleep?" Corliss drawled, interrupting her grandmother to throw another firebomb into the already volatile conversation.

"I'm not giving up the suite, even if it did used to be his."

It had the opposite effect of what she'd expected. Silence fell around the table. After Jessie's death, Lucinda had eventually roused herself to have the

suite completely redone, from the carpets to the ceilings. When Lanette and her family moved in, Corliss had immediately claimed the suite as her own, carelessly remarking that it didn't bother her at all to sleep there. It was typical of her callousness that she could even think of Webb reclaiming his old quarters.

Nevertheless, Lucinda's suite was the only one that equaled it in size. Gloria and Harlan occupied a smaller set of rooms, as did Lanette and Greg. Roanna's room was just one room, a spacious one, but not a suite. Brock's room was the same. There were four remaining single bedrooms. It was a picayune problem, but status was a subtle thing. Roanna knew Webb wasn't fixated on it, but he did realize the implications and how to use the symbols of status in order to dominate.

"Even if he doesn't want it, he may not like anyone else sleeping there," Lanette said, eyeing her daughter with a troubled expression.

Corliss scowled.

"I'm not giving up my suite!"

"You will if Webb says you will," Lucinda said firmly.

"I doubt he'll care, but I want it understood that what he says goes, without any argument. Is that clear?"

"No!" Corliss said petulantly, flinging her napkin to the table.

"He killed his wife! It isn't fair that he can just waltz back in here and take over-" Lucinda's voice cracked like a whip.

"Another thing I want understood is that Webb did not kill Jessie. If I hear such a thing mentioned again, I will ask the person who said it to leave this house immediately. We didn't support him m f. know y."

d of when he needed it most, and I'm deeply as hame He will be welcomed back into his home, or I'll Silence followed this flat statement. To Roanna's sure knowledge, this was the first time Lucinda had ever said anything about evicting any of the current residents of Davencourt. Family was so important to her that her threat demonstrated how strongly she felt about Webb's return. For guilt or for love, or for both, Webb had her unqualified support.

Satisfied that her point had been taken, Lucinda daintily patted her napkin to her mouth.

"The bedroom situation is difficult. What do you think, Roanna?"

"Let Webb decide when he gets here," Roanna replied.

"We can't anticipate what he'll want."

"That's true. It's just that I want everything to be perfect for him."
"I don't think that's possible. He would probably prefer that we carry on as normal and not make a fuss."
"We're hardly likely to throw a party," Gloria sniped.
"I can't think what everyone in town is going to say."
"Nothing, if they know what side their bread is buttered on," Lucinda said. "I'll begin immediately making it clear to our friends and associates that if they value our continued friendship, they'll make certain Webb is treated politely."
"Webb, Webb, Webb," Corliss said violently.
"What makes him so special? What about us? Why don't you leave everything to Brock, if you're so certain that Roanna can't handle things? We're just as much kin to you as Webb is!"
She jumped up and ran from the room, leaving silence behind. Even Gloria, who generally had the hide of a rhinoceros, looked uncomfortable at such a blatantly materialistic outburst.
Roanna forced herself to eat one more bite before giving up the effort. It looked as if Webb's "welcome" was going to be even more strained than his departure had been.

Chapter 13

Ten days later, Webb walked in the front door as if he owned the place, which to all intents and purposes he did.
It was eight o'clock in the morning, and the sunlight poured brilliantly through the windows, giving the cream colored tiles in the foyer a mellow golden glow. Roanna. was just coming down the stairs. She had a nine o'clock meeting with their broker, who was driving in from Huntsville, and was going to go over the particulars with Lucinda prior to the broker's arrival. She had already dressed for the meeting, in a summer-weight peach silk sheath with a matching tunic jacket, and afterward she was scheduled for a county commissioner's meeting. Beige snakeskin pumps were on her feet, and creamy pearl earrings dangled from her ears. She seldom wore jewelry other than her wristwatch, but her sorority sisters had taught her the value of wearing good, understated pieces for business occasions.

The front door opened, and she paused on the stairs, momentarily blinded by the dazzling sunlight reflected on the polished tiles. She blinked at the dark figure whose wide shoulders and wide-brimmed hat filled most of the doorway. Then he stepped inside and closed the door, letting aleather satchel drop to the floor, and her heart nearly stopped as realization dawned. it had been ten days since he'd sent her home, and he hadn't sent advance word of his arrival. She had begun to fear that he wouldn't come after all, though Webb had always kept his word before. Maybe he'd decided the Davenports weren't worth the trouble; she wouldn't have blamed him if he had.

But he was here, taking off his hat and looking around with narrowed eyes as if assessing the changes made during the gap of ten years. They were few, but she had the feeling he noted every one. His gaze even lingered momentarily on the carpet that covered the stairs. When he'd left, it had been beige; now it was oatmeal, with a thicker and tighter weave.

The physical impact of his presence nearly staggered her. To see him standing there with the same natural assumption of authority, as if he'd never left, gave her an eerie sense of time having stood still.

But the differences in him were sharp. It wasn't just that he was older or that he was dressed in jeans and boots instead of linen slacks and loafers. Before, he had tempered the force of his personality with southern good-old-boy geniality, the way business was done down here. Now, however, he tempered it with nothing. It was there, sharp and hard, and he didn't give a damn if anyone didn't like it.

Her chest felt oddly restricted, and she struggled to breathe. She had seen him naked, had lain naked in his arms. He'd sucked her nipples, penetrated her. The sense of unreality made her dizzy again. In the week and a half since she had seen him, their lovemaking had begun to seem like a dream, but at the sight of him, her body began throbbing anew as if he had just withdrawn from her and her flesh still tingled from the contact.

She found her voice.

"Why didn't you call? Someone would have met you at the airport. You did fly in, didn't you?"

"Yesterday. I rented a car at the airport. Mother and I spent the night in Huntsville with Aunt Sandra, then drove back this morning."

The intense green gaze was on her now, taking inventory of the suit and pearls, perhaps comparing the sleek stylishness of her clothes with the

fashion failure she'd been as a teenager. Or perhaps he was comparing her now to the naked woman who had writhed beneath him, screaming as he brought her to climax. He'd rejected her fast enough, so the vision couldn't have been an enticing one.
She flushed hotly, then felt the color fade as fast as it had come.
She couldn't continue to stand there like an idiot. Carefully regulating her breathing, Roanna came down the last few steps to pause at his side.
"Lucinda's in the study. We were going to go over some papers, but I'm sure she'll want to talk to you instead."
"I came back to take care of business," he said briefly, already striding down the hall to the study.
"Bring me up to speed. The homecoming party can wait."
Somehow she kept her unruffled facade in place as she followed him. She didn't throw her arms around him, brokenly crying, "You're home, you're home," though that had been her first impulse. She didn't shriek with joy or cry. She merely said to his back, "I'm glad you came. Welcome home."
Lucinda seldom sat at the huge desk that had been her husband's, finding the overstuffed sofa more comfortable to her old bones. She was there now, leafing through several printouts of recent stock performances. She looked up when Webb entered, and Roanna, right behind him, saw the bewilderment in the faded blue eyes as she stared at this big, rough stranger who had invaded her domain. Then she blinked, and recognition dawned as brilliantly as the sunrise, bringing with it a flush of excitement that chased away the grayness of ill health. She struggled to her feet, printouts scattering across the thick Aubusson rug.
"Webb! Webb!"
This was the enthusiastic, tearfully gleeful welcome Roanna had been longing to give him and couldn't. Lucinda rushed toward him with her hands out held either not seeing or ignoring his shuttered expression. He didn't open his arms to her, but that didn't stop her from throwing her own arms around him and hugging him tightly, her eyes swimming with tears.
Roanna turned toward the door, intending to give them some privacy; if she and Webb had had a special relationship when she was younger, at least in her own mind, he had definitely had a strong, special relationship with Lucinda that rivaled his feelings for his mother. Even though Webb had come back for Lucinda's sake, there were hard feelings between them that needed to be settled.

"No, stay," Webb said when he noticed Roanna's movement. He put gentle hands on Lucinda's fragile old arms and eased her away but continued to hold her as he looked down at her.
"We'll talk later," he promised.
"For now, I have a lot of catching up to do. We can start with those." He nodded to the papers on the carpet.
If there was anything Lucinda understood, it was the concept of taking care of business. She wiped her eyes and nodded briskly.
"Of course. Our broker will be here at nine for a meeting. Roanna and I have made it a practice of going over our stock performances beforehand, so we are in agreement on any actions before he arrives."
He nodded and bent down to pick up the papers.
"Are we still using Lipscomb?"
"No, dear, he died, about ... oh, three years ago, wasn't it, Roanna? Heart trouble ran in his family, you know. Our broker now is Sage Whitten, of the Birmingham Whittens. We've been pleased with him, for the most part, but he does tend to be conservative."
Roanna saw the wry expression cross Webb's face as he readjusted to the nuances of southern business, where everything was tinged with personal information and family relationships. Probably he had become accustomed to a much more straightforward method of doing things.
He was already studying the papers in his hand as he strolled over to the desk and started to drop into the massive leather chair. He halted and gave Roanna an inquiring glance, as if checking her reaction to this abrupt takeover of both territory and authority.
She didn't know whether to cry or shout. She had never really enjoyed business but had nevertheless staked out her own territory. Because this was the only thing in her life for which she had ever been needed, by Lucinda or anyone else, she had worked doggedly to understand and master the concepts and applications. With Webb's return she was losing that territory, and her usefulness. On the other hand, it would be a relief not to have to sit through any more interminable meetings or deal with businessmen and politicians who questioned her decisions with barely veiled condescension. She was glad to be rid of the duty but had no idea how she was going to replace it.
She allowed none of her ambivalence to show in her expression, however, maintaining the blank wall of indifference she presented to the world.

Lucinda resumed her seat on the sofa and Roanna walked over to one of the file cabinets to extract a thick folder.
The fax machine beeped and began to whir as a document printed. Webb glanced at it, then at the rest of the electronic equipment that had been installed since he'd left.
"Looks like we're on the information highway."
"It was either that or spend most of my time traveling," Roanna replied. She indicated the computer on the desk.
"We have two discrete systems. This computer and printer are for our private records. The other one"-she pointed to the electronic setup in the corner, arranged on a custom built oak computer desk--is for communication." The second computer was hooked up to a modern.
"We have the dedicated fax line, e-mail, and two laser printers. I'll show you the programs any time you want. There's also a laptop for traveling."
"Even Loyal is on computer now," Lucinda said, smiling.
"The bloodlines are thoroughly cross-referenced, and his files include breeding times, results, medical history, and identification tattoos. He'd as proud of the system as he would be if it had four legs and neighed."
He glanced at Roanna.
"Do you still ride as much as before?"
"There isn't time."
"You'll have more time now."
She hadn't thought of this benefit to Webb's return, and her heart gave an excited leap. She missed the horses with painful intensity, but her statement had been the flat truth: there simply hadn't been time. She rode when she could, which was enough to keep her muscles accustomed to the exercise, but not nearly enough to satisfy her. For now she had to devote herself to the intricacies of handing over the reins to Webb, but soon-soon!-she would be able to begin helping Loyal again.
"If I know you," Webb said lazily, "you're already planning to spend your days in the stable. Don't think you're going to dump everything in my lap and play hooky. I'll have my hands full with all this and my Arizona properties too, so you're still going to have to handle some of the work."
Work with Webb? She hadn't considered that he'd want her around, or that she would still be of any use. Her heart gave that little leap again at the prospect of being with him every day.

He concentrated then on studying the diagrams and analysis of stock performances and considering the projections. By the time Sage Whitten arrived, Webb knew exactly where they stood in the stock market.
Mr. Whitten had never met Webb before, but by his startled expression when he was introduced, he'd heard the gossip. If he was dismayed by Lucinda's explanation that Webb would henceforth be handling 0 the Davenport concerns, he hid it well. But no matter what people suspected, Webb Tallant had never been charged with the murder of his wife, and business was business.
The meeting was concluded faster than usual. Scarcely
had Mr. Whitten left than Lanette breezed into the study.
"Aunt Lucinda, there's a bag of some sort in the foyer. Did Mr. Whitten-?"
She stopped dead, staring at Webb seated behind the desk.
"The bag belongs to me." He scarcely glanced up from the computer, where he was reviewing the history of a stock's dividends.
"I'll take it up later."
Lanette's cheeks were blanched, but she rallied with a forced laugh.
"Webb! I didn't know you'd arrived. No one told us you were expected today."
"I wasn't."
"Oh. Well, welcome home." Her tone was as false as her laugh.
"I'll tell Mama and Daddy. They've just finished breakfast, and I know they'll want to welcome you themselves."
Webb's eyebrows lifted sardonically.
"Is that so?"
"I'll get them," she said, and fled.
"About the bag." Webb leaned back in the chair and swiveled so he was facing Lucinda, who was still on the sofa.
"Where do I put it?"
"Wherever you want," Lucinda firmly replied.
"Your old suite has been completely redecorated. Corliss has taken it over, but if you want it she can move into another room."
He rejected the offer with a slight shake of his head.
"I suppose Gloria and Harlan have one of the other suites, and Lanette and Greg the fourth one." He slanted an unreadable look at Roanna.
"You, of course, are still in your old room on the back."

He seemed to disapprove of that, but Roanna couldn't imagine why. Left uncertain of what to say, she said nothing.
"And Brock has one of the regular bedrooms on the left side," Lucinda said, confirming his supposition.
"It isn't a problem, though. I've been considering what can be done, and it would be a simple matter to connect two of the remaining bedrooms by opening a door between them, and converting one of the rooms into a sitting room. The remodeling could be done within a week."
"That isn't necessary. I'll take one of the bedrooms on the back. The one next to Roanna will do fine. It still has a king size bed, doesn't it?"
"All of the rooms have king beds now, except Roanna's." He gave her a hooded look.
"Don't you like big beds?" The motel bed where they'd made love had been a double. It should have been too small for the two of them, but when one person was lying on top of the other it reduced the need for space. Roanna barely controlled a blush.
"I don't need anything bigger." She glanced at her watch and gratefully got to her feet when she saw the time.
"I have to go to the county commissioner's meeting, then I'm having lunch with the hospital administrator in Florence. I'll be back by three."
She leaned over to kiss the wrinkled cheek Lucinda presented to her.
"Drive carefully," Lucinda said, as she always did.
"I will." There was an element of escape in her departure, and from the way Webb was looking at her, she was sure he'd noticed it as well.
After lunch, Webb and Lucinda returned to the study. He had endured Gloria and Harlan's effusive, embarrassingly false welcomes, ignored Corliss's sulky bad manners, and been fussed over by Tansy and Bessie. It was plain as hell that only Roanna and Lucinda had wanted him back; the rest of his family obviously wished he'd stayed in Arizona. The reason for that was pretty plain, too: they'd been mooching off Lucinda for years and were afraid he'd boot them out on their asses. It was a thought. Oh, not Gloria and Harlan. As much as he knew he'd dislike having them around, they were in their seventies, and the reasons he'd given Roanna ten years ago for their moving in were even more valid now. But as for the others ... He didn't plan to do anything right away. He didn't know the details of their individual situations, and it was a lot easier to get his facts straight before he acted than it would be to repair the damage done by a wrong decision.

"I suppose you want to have your say," Lucinda said
crisply, taking her seat on the sofa.
"God knows you deserve it. This is your chance to get it off your chest, so go to it. I'll sit here, listen, and keep my mouth shut."
She was as indomitable as ever in spirit, he thought, but dangerously frail. When she'd hugged him, he'd felt the fragility of her brittle bones, seen the crepey thinness of her skin. Her color wasn't good, and her energy level was low. He'd known, from his letters from Yvonne, that Lucinda's health wasn't good these days, but he hadn't realized the imminence of her death. It was a matter of months; he doubted she would even see spring.
She'd been a cornerstone of his life. She had let him down when he'd needed her, but now she was willing to face his ire. It was a measure of her strength that he had tested his budding manhood against her, measured his growth by how well he held his own with her. Damn her, he wasn't ready to let her go.
He hitched one hip onto the edge of the desk.
"I'll get to that," he said evenly, then continued with soft violence: "But first I want to know what in hell y'all have done to Roanna."
Lucinda sat in silence for a long time, Webb's accusation hovering in the air between them. She stared out the window, looking out over the sweep of sundrenched land, dotted here and there with the shadows of the fat, fluffy clouds drifting overhead. Davenport land, as far as she could see. She had always taken comfort in this vista, and she still loved to see it, but now that her life was nearing an end she was finding other things of far more importance.
"I didn't notice at first," she finally said, her gaze still far away.
"Jessie's death was-well, we'll talk about that later. I was so preoccupied with my own grief that I didn't notice Roanna until she'd almost drifted away. "Drifted away, how?" His tone was hard, sharp.
"She nearly died," Lucinda said baldly. Her chin trembled, and she sternly controlled it.
"I'd always thought Jessie was the one who so desperately needed to be loved, to make up for her circumstances ... I didn't see that Roanna needed love even more, but she didn't demand it the way Jessie did. Strange, isn't it? I loved Jessie from the cradle, but she would never have helped me the way Roanna. has, or become as important to me. Roanna's more than my right hand; these past few years, I couldn't have managed without her."

Webb waved all of that away, focusing on the one statement that had his attention.
"How did she nearly die?" The thought of Roanna dying shocked him to the bone, and he felt a cold sense of dread when he remembered her guilty, miserable expression the day of Jessie's funeral. She hadn't tried to kill herself, had she?
"She stopped eating. She never ate much anyway, so I didn't notice for a long time, almost too long. Everything was so disrupted, there were seldom any routine meals, and I suppose I thought she was snacking at odd hours the way we all were. She stayed in her room a lot, too. She didn't do it deliberately," Lucinda explained softly.
"She just ... lost interest. When you left, she totally withdrew. She blames herself for everything, you know."
"Why?" Webb asked. Roanna had told him she hadn't deliberately caused trouble, but maybe she really had, and confessed to Lucinda.
"It was a long time before she could talk about it, but several years ago she told me what happened in the kitchen, that she caught you by surprise when she impulsively kissed you. She didn't know Jessie was coming down, and of course, it was just like Jessie to make a huge scene, but to Roanna's way of thinking she caused all the trouble with that kiss. If she hadn't kissed you, you and Jessie wouldn't have argued, you wouldn't have been blamed for Jessie's death, and you wouldn't have left town. With you gone .. ." Lucinda shook her head.
"She's always loved you so much. We laughed about it when she was little, thought it was hero worship and puppy love, but it wasn't, was it?"
"I don't know." But he did, he thought. Roanna. had never had any self-protection where he was concerned. Hell,
she'd never been good at any kind of subterfuge. Her feelings had been right out in the open, her pride as totally vulnerable as her heart. Her adoration had always been there, like a piece of sunshine in his life, and he'd depended on its being there though he seldom paid much attention to it. Like the sunshine, it was something he'd taken for granted. That was why he'd been so damn mad when he thought she had betrayed him just to get back at Jessie.
Lucinda gave him a shrewd look that told him she wasn't taken in by his denial.

"After David and Karen died, you and I became the center posts of Roanna's life. She needed our love and support, but for the most part we didn't give it to her. No, let me rephrase that, because most of the blame is mine: I didn't give her my love and support. As long as you were here to love her, though, she got by. When you left, there was no one here for her, and she gave up. She was almost gone before I noticed," Lucinda said sadly. A tear rolled down her wrinkled cheek, and she wiped it away.
"She was down to eighty pounds. Eighty pounds! She's five seven she should weigh at least a hundred and thirty. I can't describe to you how pitiful she looked. But one day I saw her, really saw her, and realized that I had to do something or I'd lose her, too."
Webb couldn't say anything. He stood up and walked over to the window, his fists jammed deep into his pockets. His shoulders were rigid as he stood with his back to Lucinda, and it was hard for him to breathe. Waves of panic washed over him. My God, she'd almost died, and he hadn't known anything about it.
"Just saying "You need to eat' wouldn't have done the trick," Lucinda continued, the words spilling out of her as if she'd held them in for too long, and she had to share the pair. "She needed a reason for living, something to hold on to. So I told her I needed her help."
She stopped and swallowed hard before resuming.
"No one had ever said they needed her. I hadn't realized ... Anyway, I told her I couldn't manage without her, that everything was too much for me to handle by myself. IS hades of Twilight didn't realize how true that was," Lucinda said wryly.
"She pulled herself back. It was a long fight, and for a while I was terrified that I'd left it too late, but she did it. It was a year before her health recovered enough that she could go to college, a year before she stopped waking us up at night with her screams."
-Screams?" Webb asked.
"Nightmares?"
"About Jessie." Lucinda's voice was soft, shredded with pain.
"She found her, you know. And that was the way she screamed, the same sound, as if she'd just walked in and and stepped in Jessie's blood." The words trembled, then firmed as if Lucinda wouldn't allow that weakness in herself.

"The nightmares developed into insomnia, as if staying awake was the only way she could escape them. She still suffers from it, and some nights she doesn't sleep at all. She catnaps, for the most part. If you see her dozing during the day, whatever you do, don't wake her up because that's probably the only sleep she's had, I've made it a rule that no one wakes her, for any reason. Corliss is the only one who does. She'll drop something or let a door slam, and she always pretends it's an accident."
Webb turned from the window. His eyes were like green frost.
"She might do it once more, but that'll be the last time," he said flatly.
Lucinda gave a faint smile.
"Good. I hate to say it of my own family, but Corliss has a mean, trashy streak in her. It'll be good for Roanna, having you here again."
But he hadn't been here when she'd needed him most, Webb thought. He'd walked out, leaving her to face the horror, and the nightmares, alone. What was it Lucinda had said? Roanna had stepped in Jessie's blood. He hadn't known, hadn't thought about the strain she must have been under. His wife had been murdered and he'd been accused of the crime; he'd been undergoing his own crisis, and he'd assigned her stress to guilt. He should have known better, because he'd been closer to Roanna than anyone else. He remembered the way she had ignored the united condemnation of the town and slipped her little hand into
his at Jessie's funeral, to give him comfort and support. Considering the wild tales that had been going around about Jessie catching him screwing Roanna, it had taken a great deal of courage for her to approach him. But she'd done it, not counting the cost to her reputation, because she'd thought he needed her. Instead of squeezing her hand, doing any little thing at all to show his trust in her, he'd rebuffed her.
She'd been there for him, but he hadn't be there for her. She had survived, but at what cost?
"I didn't recognize her at first," he mused almost absently. His gaze never left Lucinda's.
"It isn't just that she's older. She's all shut down inside."
"That was how she coped. She's stronger; I think it frightened her when she realized how weak and ill she had become. She's never let herself get in that condition again. But she coped by shutting everything out, and holding herself in. It's as if she's afraid to feel too much, so she doesn't let herself

feel anything. I can't reach her, and God knows I've tried, but that's my fault, too."
Lucinda squared her shoulders as if settling an old burden, one she had become so used to that she seldom noticed it now.
"When she found Jessie and screamed, we all went running into the bedroom and found her standing over the body. Gloria jumped to the conclusion that Roanna had killed Jessie, and that's what she and Harlan told the sheriff. Booley had a deputy guarding her while he checked it out. We were all on one side of the room, and Roanna was on the other, all by herself except for the deputy. I'll never forget the way she looked at us, as if we had walked up and stabbed her. I should have gone to her, the way I should have gone to you, but I didn't. She hasn't called me Grandmother since," Lucinda said softly.
"I can't reach her. She goes through the motions, but she doesn't even care about Davencourt. When I told her I was going to change my will to benefit you, if she could get you to come home, she didn't even blink. I wanted her to argue, to get angry, to care, but she doesn't." The in comprehensibility of Shades '-Twilight it rang in Lucinda's voice, for how cOnt straight back to about her beloved Davencourt? % on Roanna's Then she sighed.
"Do yoi remember how she w-like a windup toy that never wound down? Running up down the stairs, banging doors, yelling ... I swear, she had no sense of decorum at all. Well, now I'd give anything to see her skip, just once. She was always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, and now she hardly talks at all. It's impossible to tell what she's thinking." no. He missed "Does she laugh?" he asked in a rough to her laughter, the infectious giggle when she was up to some mischief, the belly laughs when he told her jokes, the joyous chuckle as she watched foals romping in the pastures.
Lucinda's eyes were sad.
"No. She almost never smiles, and she doesn't laugh at all. She hasn't laughed in ten years."

Chapter 14

Roanna glanced at her watch. The county commissioner's meeting was taking longer than usual, and she would have to leave soon or be late for her lunch in Florence. The Davenports had no official authority in county

matters, but it was almost traditional that a family representative attend the meetings. Davenport support, or lack of it, often meant life or death to county projects.
When Roanna had first begun attending the meetings in Lucinda's stead, she had been largely ignored, or at best treated to a figurative pat on the head. She had merely listened, and reported to Lucinda; to a large degree, that was still what she did. But Lucinda, when she had taken action on the matters that interested her, had made a point of saying, "Roanna thinks" or "Roanna's impression was," and soon the commissioners had realized that they had better pay attention to the solemn young woman who seldom spoke. Lucinda hadn't lied; Roanna did relay her thoughts and impressions. She had always been observant but so active that she had often missed details, much as a speeder can see a highway sign but pass it too fast to read the message. Now Roanna was still and silent, and her brown eyes roamed from face to face, absorbing nuances of expression tones, reactions. All of this went straight back to Lucinda, who then made her decisions based on Roanna's impressions.
Now that Webb had returned, he would be attending the meetings just as he had used to do. This was likely the last time she would be sitting here, listening and assessing, another place where her usefulness was at an end. In some distant part of her psyche she was aware of hurt, and fear, but she refused to allow them to surface.
The meeting was finally dawdling to an end. She checked her watch once again and saw that she had perhaps five minutes before she had to leave or be late. Normally she took the time to chat with everyone, but today she had time only for a quick word with the commissioner.
He was coming toward her, a short, stocky, balding man with a deeply lined face. The creases rearranged themselves into a smile as he approached her in her usual position close to the back of the room.
"How are you today, Roanna?"
"Fine, thank you, Chet," Roanna replied, thinking that she might as well tell him about Webb's return.
"And you?"
"Can't complain. Well, I could, but my wife tells me no one's interested in listening." He laughed at his own joke, his eyes twinkling.
"And how's Miss Lucinda feeling?"

"Much better, now that Webb's home," she said calmly. He gaped at her in astonishment, and for a second, dismay was written plainly on his face. He blurted, "My God, what are ya'll going to do?" before the rest of her statement sank in and he realized that commiseration wasn't appropriate. He turned beet red and started to sputter in his attempt to retrench.
"I-ah, that is-" Roanna lifted her hand to stop his verbal stumbling.
"He'll be taking up the reins again, of course," she said as if Webb's return was the most natural thing in the world.
"It will take him a few weeks to review everything, but I'm certain he'll be contacting you soon."
The commissioner sucked in a deep breath. He looked faintly ill, but he had recovered his composure.
"Roanna, 1 -191
don't think that's such a good idea. You've been handling things just fine for Miss Lucinda, and folks around here will be more comfortable with you-
Roanna's eyes were very clear and direct.
"Webb is taking over again," she said softly.
"It would distress Lucinda if anyone chose not to do business with us, but of course that's their choice."
His windpipe bobbed as he swallowed. Roanna had just made it very plain that anyone who didn't accept Webb would find themselves without Davenport support or patronization. She never got angry, never yelled, never insisted on a point, and seldom even voiced an opinion, but folks in the county had learned not to discount the influence this somber-eyed woman had with Lucinda Davenport. Moreover, most people liked Roanna; it was as simple as that. No one would want an open rift with the Davenports.
"This will probably be the last monthly meeting that I'll attend," she continued.
"Don't be too sure of that," a deep, lazy voice said from the doorway just behind her.
Startled, Roanna turned to face Webb as he stepped into the room.
"What?" she said. What was he doing here? He hadn't even changed clothes. Had he been so afraid she would mess up something that he'd rushed down to the commissioner's meeting without even taking the time to unpack?

"Hello, Chet," Webb was saying easily, holding out his hand to the commissioner.
The commissioner's face turned red. He hesitated, then his Politician's instincts took over and he shook Webb's hand.
"Webb! Speak of the devil! Roanna Was just telling me you were back at Davencourt. You're looking good, real good,"
"Thanks. You're looking Prosperous yourself."
Chet patted his belly and gave a hearty laugh. Too Prosperous! Willadean says I'm on a seafood diet-I eat everything I see!"
People milling about in the room had noticed Webb, and an agitated buzz was growing in volume. Roanna glanced at Webb, and the glint in his green eyes told her that he was well aware of the stir his presence was causing and wasn't the least concerned about it.
"Don't think you're off the hook," he said to Roanna, turning a smite on her. "Just because I'm home doesn't mean you get to goof off from now on. We'll probably come to the meetings together."
Despite her shock, Roanna nodded gravely.
Webb looked at his watch.
"Don't you have a lunch engagement in Florence? You're going to be late if you don't hurry."
"I'm on my way.
"Bye, Chet."
"See you at the next meeting," the commissioner said, still in that falsely jovial tone as she maneuvered past him and into the hallway.
"I'll walk you to your car." Webb nodded at the commissioner and turned to fall into step with Roanna.
She was acutely aware of him just at her elbow as they walked down the hall. His tall form easily dominated her even though she was wearing high heels. She didn't know what to think about what had just happened, so she didn't let herself jump to any conclusions. Maybe he truly intended they should work together, maybe he'd just been saying that to smooth the way. Only time would tell, and she wouldn't let herself hope. If she didn't hope, then she couldn't be disappointed.
A wave of double takes followed them down the hall as people recognized Webb and turned to stare. Roanna walked faster, wanting to get out of the building before a confrontation could develop. She reached the end of the

hall, and Webb's arm extended in front of her to open the door. She felt the brush of his body against her back.
They exited into the glare and sticky humidity of the hot summer morning. Roanna fished her keys out of purse and slipped her sunglasses on her nose.
"What made you come to town?" she asked.
"I wasn't expecting you."
"I figured now was as good a time to break the ice as any."
1 193
His long legs easily kept up with her hurried pace.
"Slow down, it's too hot for a race."
Obediently she slacked her pace. Her car was parked close to the end of a row, and if she hurried all that distance, she "Were would be drenched in sweat by the time she got to it.
you serious about the meetings?" she asked.
"Dead serious." He had put on his own sunglasses, and the dark lenses kept her from reading his expression. "You already know "Lucinda has been singing your praises. Y what's going on, so I'd be a fool if I didn't use you."
One thing Webb wasn't, particularly where business was concerned, was a fool. Roanna felt a wave of dizziness at the thought of actually working with him. She had been prepared for anything, she'd thought, from being ignored to being evicted, but she hadn't considered that he would want her help.
They reached her car, and Webb plucked the keys from her hand. He unlocked the door and opened it, then handed the keys back. She waited a moment for the wave of pent-up heat in the car to dissipate, then slipped behind the wheel.
"Be careful," he said, and closed the door.
Roanna glanced in the rearview mirror as she pulled out of the parking lot. He was striding back toward the building; perhaps he was parked up that way, or he was going back inside. She let her gaze move hungrily over that wide, muscled back and long legs, just for a second's delight, then she forced her attention back to her driving and merged into traffic.
Webb unlocked his own car and got inside. The impulse that had sent him into town had been a simple one, but strong. He had wanted to see Roanna. That was all, just see her. After the disturbing things Lucinda had told him, the old protective instincts had taken over and he'd wanted to see for himself that she was all right.

She was, of course, more than all right. He had seen for himself how deftly she had handled Chet Forrister, her composure unruffled by the commissioner's opposition194
and on Webb's own behalf. Now he understood exactly what Lucinda had been telling him when she'd said Roanna was stronger, that she'd changed. Roanna no longer needed him to fight her battles.
The realization left him feeling oddly bereft.
He should have been glad, for her sake. The young Roanna had been so painfully vulnerable, an easy target for ed to take a verbal potshot at her tender anyone who want emotions. He had constantly been stepping in to shield her, and his reward had been her unflagging adoration Now she had forged her own armor. She was cool and self-contained, almost emotionless, keeping people at a distance so their slings and arrows couldn't reach her. She had paid for that armor with pain and despair, almost with her own life, but the steel was strong. She still suffered, in the form of insomnia and nightmares when she did manage to sleep, but she handled her own problems now When he had walked into Davencourt today and seen her standing there on the stairs, wearing that elegantly understated silk dress and creamy pearls, with her dark chestnut hair in a sleek, sophisticated style, he had been rendered almost speechless at the contrast between the rowdy, untidy girl she had been and the classy, classic woman she was now. She was still Roanna, but she was different. When he looked at her now, he didn't see the urchin with the unruly tongue, the awkward teenager, He looked at her and thought of the slender body beneath the silk dress, the texture of her skin that rivaled the dress in luxurious silkiness, the way her nipples had peaked at his slightest touch during those long hours in the motel in Nogales.
He had covered her naked body with his own, pulled her legs wide open, and taken her virginity. Even now, sitting in the contained, roasting heat of the car, he shivered with the power of the memory- God, he remembered every little detail-how it had felt pushing into her, the hot, soft tightness of her body as he sheathed himself inside her. He remembered how delicate she had felt beneath him, her .195
smaller body dominated by his size, his weight, his strength. He had wanted to cradle her in his arms, protect her, soothe her, pleasure her-everything but stop. There was no way he could have stopped.

Those memories had been driving him crazy for the past ten days, depriving him of sleep, interrupting his work. When he'd seen her again today, he had been shaken by a wave of pure possessiveness. She was his. She was his, and he wanted her. He wanted her so much that his hands had -control not to started shaking. It had taken all of his self climb the stairs to where she stood, take her arm, and march her the rest of the way upstairs to one of the bedrooms, any bedroom, where he could lift her skirt and bury himself inside her once more.

He had restrained himself for one reason, and one reason only. Roanna had carefully built her inner fortress, but every fortress had a weakness, and he knew exactly what her weakness was.

Him. She could protect herself against everyone but him.

She hadn't tried to hide it, or deny it. She had told him with devastating honesty that all he had to do was snap his fingers and she would come running. She would have gone up those stairs with him and let him do anything he wanted to her.

Webb drummed his fingers on the hot steering wheel. It seemed there was one more dragon Roanna needed him to fight, and that was his own sexual desire for her.

He had told her that he would come home if she would let him use her sexually, and she hadn't hesitated. If that was what he wanted, then she would do it. If he needed a sexual outlet, she would be available. She would do it for Lucinda, for Davencourt, for him-but what about herself?

He knew he could walk into Roanna's bedroom at any time and have her, and the temptation was already eating at him. But he didn't want Roanna to give herself to him out of guilt, or duty, or even because of her misguided hero worship. He was no hero, damn it, he was a man. He wanted Shades oj'7vilight her to want him as a man, male to her female. If she slipped into his bed merely because she was horny and wanted the relief he could give her, he would be delighted even by that, because it was simple and uncomplicated by other people's motives, or even her own God what about his own motives?

Sweat dripped into his eye, stinging, and with a muffled ignition switch, starting the motor SO curse he turned the d blast into life. He was going to the air conditioner would give himself a heat stroke, sittilig in a closed car in the sort through a tangle of middle of summer while he tried to emotions.

He loved Roanna; he'd loved her all her life, but as a sister, with an amused,

protective indulgence. eat of the He hadn't been prepared for the force and h physical desire that had flared when she had thrown her arms around his neck and kissed him, ten long Years ago. It had come from nowhere, like swirling gases that had been compressed until they reached critical mass, then exploded de him feel into a white hot star. It had shaken him, ma guilty. Everything about it had felt wrong. She'd been too young; he'd always thought of her as a sister; he'd been married, for God's sake. The guilt in that situation had been all his. Even though his marriage had been. collapsing, he had still been married. He'd been the experienced one; he should have gently turned the kiss into a gesture of imPulsive affection, something that wouldn't have embarrassed her. instead, he'd pulled her tighter and turned the kiss into something quite different, a deeper, adult kiss, laden with Sexuality. What had happened had been his fault, not Roanna's, but she was still trying to pay the price.

Most of the original barriers to a sexual relationship were gone anna was a woman now, he between them we Ro ei at all brotherly toward wasn't married, and he didn't fe s of family, her. But other barriers remained: the pressure Roanna's own sense of duty, his pride.. . God, yes, He snorted at himself as he put the car in gear let's not forget his male pride. He didn't want her to give 197

herself to him for Davencourt, family, any of those unimportant reasons. He wanted her to lie hot and panting beneath him for no other reason than she wanted him. Nothing else would do.

The bastard was back. The news was all over the county and reached the bars that night. Harper Neeley shook with rage every time Webb Tallant's name was mentioned. Tallant had gotten away with killing Jessie, and now he was back to start lording it over everyone again as if nothing had ever happened. Oh, that stupid fat-ass sheriff hadn't arrested him, said there wasn't enough evidence for a conviction, but everyone knew he'd been bought off. The Davenports and the Tallants of this world never had to pay for the shit they committed. It was the ordinary people who did time, not the la-di-dah rich folks who lived in their big, fancy house and thought the rules didn't apply to them.

Webb Tallant had bashed Jessie's head in with an andiron. He still wept when he thought about it, his beautiful Jessie with her hair all matted with blood and brains, one side of her head flattened. Somehow the bastard had found out about him and Jessie, and killed her for it. Or maybe Tallant

found out that the little bun in the oven hadn't been his. Jessie had said she'd handle it, and she was a slick one if he'd ever seen one, but this time she hadn't been slick enough.

No one had ever belonged to him the way Jessie had. She'd been wild, that girl, wild and wicked, and it had excited him so much he'd nearly creamed his pants the first time she'd come on to him. She'd been excited, too, her eyes bright and hot. She'd loved the danger of it, the thrill of doing the forbidden. That first time she had been like an animal, clawing and bucking, but she hadn't come. It had taken him a while to figure it out. Jessie had liked to screw for a lot of reasons, but pleasure hadn't been one of them. She'd used her body to mess with men's heads, to pin power over them. She'd fucked him to get back at her son of-a-bitch husband, to get back at everyone and show them she didn't give a damn. She'd never meant for anyone else to know, but she knew, and that was how she got her rocks off. But once he'd figured it out, he hadn't let her get away with it, Nobody used him, not even Jessie. Especially not Jessie. He knew her the way no one else ever had or ever would, because inside she was like him.

He started her out with kinky little games, never Pushing her too far at once. She'd taken to it like a cat to cream, something even a little more forbidden for her to gloat over when she was sitting up at the big house, acting like a perfect lady and laughing at how easily she fooled everybody because she'd just spent the afternoon screwing her brains out with the one man guaranteed to make them all piss in their lace drawers.

They'd had to be careful; they couldn't go to any local motel, and it wasn't always possible for her to come up with an excuse for being absent and unreachable for several hours at a time. Usually they'd just meet in the woods somewhere. They'd been in the woods when he'd decided held had enough of her game playing and finally showed her who was boss.

By the time he'd let her go, she'd been covered with bruises and bites, but she'd come so many times she'd barely been able to sit her horse. She'd complained bitterly about having to be careful and not let anyone see the marks on her body, but her eyes had been shining. He'd fucked her so long d dry and she'd , and so hard that he'd been pumPe en had been raw, and she had loved it. Always before worn whined and blubbered when he got rough with them, but not Jessie. She came back for more, and dished out her own medicine. He'd gone home with his back clawed bloody more times than

once, and every burning weal had reminded him of her and fed his hunger for more.
There'd never been another woman like his girl. She'd come back for more, too, and pushed for rougher and more kinky games, the dirtier the better. They'd gone on to butt fucking, and that had given her a real thrill, the most forbidden thing she could do with the most forbidden man. Wicked, wicked Jessie. He'd loved her so much.
There wasn't a day that had gone by that he hadn't thought about her, missed her. No other woman could turn him on the way she had.
That goddamn Webb Rdlant had killed her, killed both her and the kid. Then he'd waltzed away, free as a jaybird, and left town before he could be made to pay.
But he was back.
And this time, he was going to pay.
He'd have to be careful not to be seen, but he'd sneaked around out at Davencourt enough, back when he was meeting Jessie, that he knew his way around on the property. It was big enough, hundreds of acres, that he could approach the house from any angle he chose. It had been a while since he'd been there; ten years, as a matter of fact. He'd have to make sure the old lady hadn't gotten a guard dog and that no alarm system had been installed. He knew there hadn't been one before, because Jessie had tried more than once to talk him into sneaking into her bedroom while her husband was away on a trip. She'd liked the idea of screwing him under her grandmother's roof and in her husband's bed. He'd had sense enough to refuse, but damn, it had been tempting.
Assuming there was no alarm system, there were a hundred ways to get into that old house. All those doors and windows ... It would be child's play. He'd gotten into houses a lot better guarded than Davencourt. The fools probably felt safe, as far out of town as they were. Country folks just never got in the habit of taking the precautions that townspeople did automatically.
Oh, yes. Webb Tallant was going to pay.

Chapter 15

“I think we'll have a welcome-home party for Webb," Lucinda mused the next day, tapping her teeth with one fingernail.
"No one would dare not accept, because then I'd That way they'd be forced to know exactly who they were d get all those uncomfortable be polite to him, and it would same time."
first meetings over with at the forcibly re There were moments when Roanna was minded that, though Lucinda had married into the Davenport family over sixty years before and had, in her own mind, thoroughly become a Davenport, if you scratched the surface you found a Tallant. The Tallants, were nothing if not strong-willed and audacious. They might not always be right, but it didn't always matter, either. Put them on a path and point them at a target, and they rolled over every obstacle you Put in their way. Lucinda's goal was to reinstate Webb's standing in the county, and she didn't mind twisting arms to achieve that goal.
Belonging to the best circles in the Quad Cities didn't necessarily depend on how much money you had, though it dest means were acknowlhelped. Some families of very m0 t social strata, by dint of edged as belonging to that selec 1y fought in The War, and having an ancestor who had actual it wasn't either of the World Wars that was meant. Some of the younger set actually referred to it as the Civil War, but the more genteel called it the War of Northern Aggression, and the most genteel of all would delicately refer to the Late Unpleasantness.
Business associates would immediately see how things stood with the Davenports and would treat Webb as if nothing had ever happened. After all, he'd never been arrested, so why should his wife's death be allowed to cut into the bottom line?
Those who ruled the social calendar, however, adhered to a stricter standard. Webb would find himself uninvited to the dinners and parties where so much business was disCussed, which would be a disadvantage for the Davenport interests. Lucinda cared about the money, but she cared about Webb even more, and she was determined that he wouldn't be shunned. She would invite everyone to her home, and they would come because they were her friends. She was ill, and it might be the last party she ever gave. Leave it to Lucinda to use her own approaching death as a means of getting her way. Her friends might not like it, but they would come. They would also be polite to Webb under his own roof, though it was technically still Lucinda's roof, everyone would assume that Webb had returned home

to claim his inheritance, which he had, so it would soon be his. And having accepted his hospitality, they would then be obliged to extend their own to him.
Once that had happened, they would pretend they'd never had any doubts about him at all, and he would be welcome everywhere. After all, You could hardly vilify someone you had invited into your home. That just wasn't done.
"Are You out of your mind?" Gloria demanded.
"No one will come. We'll be humiliated."
"Don't be silly. Of course people will come, they wouldn't dare not to. It went well yesterday with Mr. Whitten, didn't it, Roanna?"
-Mr. Whitten lives in Huntsville, " Gloria replied, saving Roanna the necessity of a reply.
"What would he know?"
"He knew what happened, that much was obvious from his face. But being an intelligent man, he decided that if we have faith in Webb, then those horrible accusations couldn't be true. Which they weren't," Lucinda said firmly.
611 agree with Mother," Lanette said.
"Think of the embarrassment."
"Yo always agree with her," Lucinda replied, her eyes glittering with the light of battle. She had set her course and wasn't about to be swayed from it.
"If you ever disagreed, then your opinion would carry more weight, my dear. Now, if Roanna told me my party was a bad idea, I'd be a lot more likely to listen."
Gloria snorted.
"As if Roanna ever disagrees with you.
"Well, she does, on a regular basis. We seldom see eye to eye on every detail of a business decision. It pains me to admit that she's right more often than not."
That wasn't perhaps a blatant lie, Roanna thought, but it wasn't exactly the truth either. She never argued with Lucinda; she occasionally saw things differently, but she would simply present her case and Lucinda would make the final decision. That was a far cry from open disagreement.
The three of them turned to her, Lucinda with open triumph, Gloria and Lanette disgruntled at having her opinion valued over theirs.
"I think it should be Webb's decision," she said quietly.

"He's the one who'll have to be on display."
Lucinda scowled.
"True. If he isn't willing, there's no point in even talking about it. Why don't you ask him, dear. Maybe you can get his attention off that computer screen for five minutes."
They had taken a break for lunch and had finished eating but were now lingering over their iced tea. Webb had requested a couple of sandwiches and coffee while he continued to work. He'd been in the study until eleven the night before and had gotten up at six to resume his reading. Roanna knew because she had been awake at both times. '203
silently curled in her big chair and counting down the hours It had been a Particularly bad night; she hadn't slept at all' and she was so tired now she was afraid she would fall into deep sleep when she did go to bed. Those were the times when she was most likely to wake up somewhere else in the house and not remember how she'd gotten there.
It was Webb's presence that had unsettled her to the point she couldn't even doze. Both she and Lucinda had worked with him last night, going over reports, until Lucinda had become tired and gone to bed. After that, alone with him in the study, Roanna had become increasingly uneasy. Did he prefer not being alone with her, after what had happened? Did he think she was pushing herself at him, by' staying there without Lucinda's buffering presence?
After less than an hour she had excused herself and gone to her room. She'd taken a bath to calm her frazzled nerves, then settled in her chair to read. The words on the page hadn't made sense, though; she couldn't concentrate on them. Webb was in the house. He'd moved his clothes into the room next to hers. Why had he done that? He'd made it plain, back in Nogales, that he wasn't interested in having an affair with her. There were three other bedrooms he could have used, but he'd chosen that one. The only explanation she could think of was that it simply didn't matter to him if she was next door; her proximity was of no interest, one way or the other.
She would try to stay out Of his way as much as possible, she'd thought. Show him all the current files, answer any questions he had, but otherwise she wouldn't bother him.
At eleven she heard him in the room next door, saw the spill Of light onto the veranda. She had reached up and turned off her lamp so he wouldn't see her own light and know she was still awake after pleading fatigue an hour

and a half before. In the darkness she had leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and listened to him moving around, picturing in her mind what he was doing.

She heard the shower, and knew he was naked. Her heart thumped at the thought of his tall, steely muscled body, and her breasts tightened. She could scarcely believe that she'd actually made love with him, that she'd lost her virginity in a cheap motel room on the Mexican border, and that it was the closest to heaven she was ever likely to get. She thought of the crisp hair on his chest and the tightness of his buttocks. She remembered how his hard, hair-roughened thighs had held her own thighs spread wide, how she had dug her fingers into the deep valley of muscle down the middle of his back. For one wonderful night she'd lain in his arms and known both desire and fulfillment.

The shower cut off, and about ten minutes later the splash of light on the veranda was extinguished. Through her own open veranda doors she had heard the click as he opened his doors to let in the fresh night air. Was he still naked? Did he sleep raw, or in his underwear? Maybe he wore pajama bottoms. It struck her as odd that she had lived in the same house with him from age seven to seventeen, and didn't know if he wore anything to bed.

Then there was silence. Was he in bed, or was he standing there looking out at the peaceful night? Had he stepped out onto the veranda? He would be barefoot; she wouldn't be able to hear him. Was he standing there even now? Had he glanced to the right and noticed that her doors were open?

Finally, her nerves raw, Roanna had crept to the window and peeked out. No one, naked or otherwise, stood on the veranda enjoying the night. As quietly as possible she had closed her doors and gone back to her chair. Sleep had escaped her, though, and once again she had endured the slow passage of time.

"Roanna?" Lucinda prodded, and Roanna realized she'd been sitting there daydreaming.

Murmuring a vague apology, Roanna pushed back her chair. She had a meeting at two with the organizers of this year's W. C. Handy Festival in August, so she would just stick her head in the study door, ask Webb his opinion of Lucinda's plan, then escape upstairs to change clothes. Perhaps, by the time she returned, he would have tired of paperwork and she wouldn't have to endure another evening of exquisite torture, sitting at his elbow, listening to his deep voice, marveling at the speed with which he

assimilated information-in short, reveling in his presence while at the same time wondering if he thought she was sitting too close, or making too much of every opportunity to bend over him. Even worse, had he wished she would simply go away and get out of his hair?
When she opened the door, he looked up inquiringly from the papers in his hand. He was leaned back in his chair, the master of his space, his booted feet propped comfortably on the desk.
"I'm sorry," she blurted.
"I should have knocked."
He stared at her in silence for a long moment, his dark brows drawing together over his nose.
"Why?" he finally asked.
"This is yours now." Her reply was simply made, without inflection.
He took his feet off the desk.
"Come in and close the door."
She did but remained standing there by the door. Webb stood and came around the desk, then leaned against the edge of it with his arms crossed over his chest and his legs stretched out. It was a negligent position, but if his body was relaxed, his gaze was sharp as it raked over her.
"You don't ever have to knock on that door," he finally said.
"And let's get one thing straight right now: I'm not taking your place, I'm taking Lucinda's. You've done a good job, Ro. I told you yesterday that I'd be a fool if I shut you out of the decision-making process. Maybe you thought you'd get to spend your days with the horses now that I'm back, and you will have more time for yourself, I promise, but you're still needed here, too," Roanna blinked, dazed by this turn of events. Despite what he'd said to her after the commissioner's meeting, she hadn't thought he had really meant it. A part of her had automatically dismissed it as the type of thing Webb had done when she was little, reassuring her to keep her from being upset, pretending that she was important to anything or anyone. She had stopped letting herself believe in fairy tales on the night she had stumbled into a pool of blood. Very likely, she had thought, she would bring Webb up to speed, and then her usefulness would be at an end. He'd handled everything by himself before Her mind stopped, startled. No, that wasn't true. He had taken most of the work on his shoulders, but Lucinda had still been involved. And that was before he'd had his property in Arizona to oversee as well. Silent joy spread through her, warming the corners of her

heart that had already begun to chill as she prepared herself for being replaced. He really did need her.
He'd said she had done a good job. And he'd called her Ro.
He was watching her with a sharply intent gaze.
"If you doll,t smite," he said softly, "then I can't tell if you're pleased or not."
she stared at him, perplexed, searching his face for a clue to what he really meant. Smile? why would he want her to smile?
"Smite," he prompted.
"You remember what a smile is, don't you? The corners of your mouth turn up, like this." He pushed the corners of his mouth up with his flugers, demonstrating. It what people do when they're happy. Do you hate paperwork, is that it? Don't you want to help me?"
Tentatively she stretched the corners of her mouth, curling them upward. It was a hesitant, fleeting little smile, barely forming before it was gone and she was regarding him solemnly once more.
But evidently that was what he'd wanted, "Good," he said, straightening from his relaxed perch on the desk.
"Are you ready to get back to work?"
"I have a meeting at two. I'm sorry."
"What kind of meeting?"
"With the organizers of the Handy Festival." .207
He shrugged, losing interest. Webb wasn't a jazz fan. Roanna remembered why she was there.
"Lucinda sent me to ask what you think of having a welcome-home party."
He gave a short laugh, immediately realizing the implications.
"She's going on the attack, huh? Are Gloria and Lanette trying to talk her out of it?"
He didn't seem to need an answer, either that or her silence was answer enough. He thought it over for all of five seconds.
"Sure, why the hell not? I don't give a damn if it makes everyone uncomfortable. I stopped caring ten years ago what people think of me. If anyone thinks I'm not good enough to deal with them, then I'll take Davencourt's business elsewhere; it's up to them."
She nodded and reached for the door handle, slipping out before he could make any more strange demands that she smile.

Webb returned to his chair, but he didn't immediately pick up the file he'd been studying before Roanna's entrance. He stared at where she'd been standing, poised like a doe on the verge of fleeing. His chest still hurt as he remembered that pathetic excuse for a smile, and the look almost of fright that had been in her eyes. It was difficult to read her now, she kept so much hidden and gave so little response to the world around her. It grated at him, because the Roanna he remembered had been as open as anyone he'd ever known. If he wanted to know how she felt about anything now, he had to pay intensely close attention to every nuance of her expression and body language, before she managed to stifle them.

She had been stunned when he'd told her that he still needed her help. He silently thanked Lucinda for giving him the key to handling Roanna. The idea of anyone needing her got to her faster than anything else, and she couldn't help responding to it. For a Split second he'd seen the wonder, the pure joy, that had lit the depths of her eyes, and then it had been so quickly hidden that if he hadn't been deliberately watching her he wouldn't have seen it at all.

He'd lied. He could handle everything without her help, Shades o Twilight If even with the added burden of his properties in Arizona. He thrived on pressure, his energy level seeming to increase with the demands made on his time. But she needed to feel needed, and he needed her to be close by. He wanted her.

The phrase beat like a refrain through his mind, his veins, every cell of his body. Want. He hadn't taken her in Nogales out of revenge or because of that damned bargain he'd made with her, or even to keep from hurting her feelings by pulling back after going that far. The simple fact was he'd taken her because he wanted her and was ruthless enough to use whatever means necessary to get her. The tequila was no excuse, though it had relaxed his control over his more uncivilized instincts.

He'd lain awake in his bed last night, thinking of her in the next room, wondering if she was awake, his damned imagination driving him crazy. Knowing that he could have Roanna any time he wanted was more powerful than any chemical aphrodisiac ever discovered or invented. All he had to do was get out of bed and walk out onto the veranda, then slip through the French doors into her room. She had insomnia; she would be awake, watching him come toward her. He could simply get into bed with

her and she would take him into her arms, her body, without question or hesitation.
Erotic dreams of that one kiss they'd shared so long ago had haunted his sleep for years. That had been bad enough, but the dreams had been only imagination. Now that he knew exactly how it felt to make love to her, now that reality had taken the place of imagination, the temptation was a constant, gnawing hunger that threatened to shred his selfcontrol.
God, she'd been so sweet, so shy, and so damn tight he broke out in a sweat remembering how it had felt when he'd entered her. He had looked down at her as he made love to her and watched the expression on her face, watched the delicate pink of her nipples darken with arousal. Even though he'd hurt her, she had clung to him, arching her hips up to take him even deeper. It had been so easy to bring her to climax that he'd been enchanted, wanting to do it time and again so he could watch her face as she convulsed, feel her body flexing and throbbing around him.
The night had been exquisite torture, and he knew he would be fighting the same battle every night, with his frustration growing by the minute. He didn't know how long he could endure it before his self-control broke, but for Roanna's sake he had to try.
He'd been back at Davencourt a little over twenty-four hours, and he'd had a hard-on for what seemed like most of that time, certainly for the hours he'd spent in her company. If she'd seemed even the least inclined to flirt with him, in any way signal that she wanted him, too, he probably couldn't have withstood the temptation. But Roanna Seemed totally unaware of him as a man, despite the hours they had spent in bed together. The idea was infuriating, but it seemed likely that she had indeed slept with him just to get him to come back to Davencourt.
Even that thought, instead of dampening his ardor, only intensified it. He wanted to toss her over his shoulder and carry her away for some hot, lazy sex on a sun-drenched bed, prove to her that she wanted him, that Davencourt and Lucinda had nothing to do with it. The fact was, where Roanna was concerned, his sexual instincts were so damn primitive he expected to start grunting and swinging clubs any minute now, And that was after only one day.
The grudge he'd held against her all those years was gone. Maybe it had been destroyed during the night they'd spent together, and he just hadn't noticed it at the time. Habit was a powerful thing; You got so used to

something that you expected it to be there even when it wasn't. If any vestige had been left, she had demolished it the next morning with her quiet dignity and the utter defenselessness with which she had said, "All you had to do was snap your fingers, and I'd have come running," Not many women would have laid themselves on the line like that; none that he knew, in fact, except for Roanna. He'd been staggered by the courage it had taken for her to say that, knowing what a weapon she had put in his hands if he'd been inclined to use it.

He wasn't. He lifted his hand and snapped his fingers, watching the motion. Like that. He could have her just like that. He wanted her, God knows he wanted her so much he ached. But what he wanted more than anything, even more than he wanted to make love to her, was to see her smile again.

By the time she drove home late that afternoon, Roanna was aching with fatigue. She usually found organizational meetings deadly dull anyway, and this one had dragged on with hours of debate on insignificant details. As usual, she had sat quietly, though this time she had been concentrating more on holding her head upright and her eyes open than she had been on what people were saying.

By the time she turned south onto Highway 43, the sun and heat were almost more than she could fight. She blinked drowsily, glad that she was so close to home. It was almost time for supper, but she planned to lie down for a nap instead. She could eat whenever she chose, but sleep was a lot harder to achieve and far more precious.

She made a right turn off the highway onto a secondary road, and a mile or so after that she turned left onto Davencourt's private road. If she hadn't been so sleepy, she would have been driving faster, and she might have missed the blur of motion in her peripheral vision. She slowed even more, turning her head to see what had caught her attention.

At first she saw only the horse, plunging and rearing, and her first thought was that it had lost its rider and bolted, and now the trailing reins were caught on some underbrush. She forgot her tiredness as urgency flooded her muscles. She slammed on the brakes, shoved the gear shift into park, and jumped out of the car, leaving the motor running and the door open. She could hear the horse's squeals of fear and pain as it reared again.

Roanna didn't think about her expensive shoes or her silk dress. She didn't think of anything except reaching the horse before it hurt itself. She leaped

the shallow ditch on the opposite side of the road, then ran awkwardly across the small field toward the trees, her high heels sinking into the earth with each step. She plunged through knee-high weeds that stung her legs, snagged her hosiery on some green briers, turned her ankle when she stepped in a hole. She ignored all of that as she ran as fast as she could, intent only on getting to the horse.

Then the horse sidled sideways, and she saw the man. She hadn't noticed him before because he'd been on the other side of the horse, and the undergrowth had partially blocked her view.

The horse's reins weren't caught on anything. The man was holding them in one fist, and in the other fist he held a small tree limb that he was using to beat the horse.

Fury roared through her, pumping strength into her muscles. She heard herself yell, saw the man took in her direction with a startled expression on his face, then she surged through the undergrowth and threw her weight against him, knocking him to the side. She couldn't have done it if he'd been expecting it and braced himself, but she caught him by surprise.

"Stop it!" she stormed, placing herself between him and the frightened horse.

"Don't you dare hit this animal again!"

He regained his balance and swung toward her, gripping the limb as if he would use it on her. Roanna registered the danger in his face, the venomous anger in his eyes, but she stood her ground. Her detachment didn't include standing by and watching any animal in general, but horses in particular, being abused. She braced herself, waiting for him to swing at her. If she charged him, she could get inside the blow and maybe knock him off balance again. If she could, she wouldn't waste any more time but get on the horse and get away from him as fast as she could.

His eyes were a hot electric blue as he advanced a step toward her, his arm drawn back ready to strike. His face was
dark red, his lips drawn back over his teeth in a snarl.

"You damn little bitch-"

"Who are you?" Roanna demanded, taking a half step toward him herself to show that she wasn't afraid. It was a bluff-she was suddenly very much afraid-but the anger inside her was still so strong she stood her ground. "What are you doing on our land?"

Maybe he thought better of hitting her. For whatever reason, he halted, though he was slow to let his arm drop. He stood a few feet away, breathing hard and glaring at her.
"Who are you?" she demanded again. Something about him was eerily familiar, as if she'd seen that expression before. But she knew she'd never seen him before, and she thought she would remember if she had, because those vivid blue eyes and thick shock of gray hair were very distinctive. He was a thickly built man, probably in his fifties, whose wide shoulders and barrel chest gave the impression of an almost brutish strength. What disturbed her the most, though, was the sense almost of evil that emanated from him. No, not evil. It was more impersonal than that, a simple and total lack of conscience or morals. That was it. His eyes, for all their hot color, were cold and flat.
"Who I am ain't none of your business," he sneered.
"And neither is what I'm doing."
"When you do it on Davenport land, it is. Don't you dare hit this horse again, do you hear?"
"It's my horse, and I'll do whatever I damn well please to it. The bastard threw me."
"Then maybe you should learn how to ride better," she retorted hotly. She turned to catch the dangling reins and murmur soothingly to the horse, then patted its neck. It snorted nervously but calmed down as she continued to gently stroke it. The horse wasn't a valuable purebred like Lucinda's babied darlings; it was of an indeterminate breed with indifferent formation, but Roanna couldn't see any reason why it should be mistreated.
"Why don't you just go about your own business, missy, and I'll forget about teaching you some manners."
The menacing voice made her whirl. He was closer, and there was a feral look in his expression now. Swiftly Roanna stepped back, maneuvering so that the horse was between her and the man.
"Get off our land," she said coldly.
"Or I'll have you arrested."
His heavily sensual mouth twisted in another sneer.
"I guess you would. The sheriff's an ass-ticker, especially when it comes to a Davenport ass. It wouldn't make any difference to you that I didn't know I was on your precious property, would it?"
"Not when you're beating your horse," Roanna replied, her tone still cold.

"Now leave."
He smirked.
"I can't. You're holding my horse." Roanna dropped the reins and took another cautious step back.
"There. Now get off our property, and if I ever see you mistreating an animal again, I'll have you brought up on charges of cruelty. Maybe I don't know your name, but I can describe you, and probably not too many people look the way you do." None that she knew of-, his eyes were very distinctive.
He turned dark with temper again, and violence moved in those eyes, but he evidently thought better once more of what he had been about to do and merely reached for the reins. He swung himself into the saddle with the minimum of effort that revealed him to be an experienced rider.
"I'll see you again some day," he mocked, and dug his heels into the horse's sides. The startled animal leaped forward, brushing by her so closely that its massive shoulder would have knocked her down if she hadn't jumped aside. He rode in the direction of the highway, leaning down to avoid low-hanging branches. He was out of sight in only a moment, though it took longer than that for the thud of the horse's hooves to fade from her hearing.
Roanna made her way over to a sturdy oak and leaned against it, closing her eyes and shaking.
That had been one of the most foolish, foolhardy things she'd ever done. She had been extremely lucky and she knew it. That man could have seriously hurt her, raped her, maybe even killed her-anything. She had charged headlong into a dangerous situation without stopping to think. Such impulsiveness had been the main cause of trouble in her childhood and had been the trigger for the tragedy of Jessie's death and Webb's leaving.
She had thought that the reckless streak had been destroyed forever, but now she found, to her distress, that it still lurked deep inside, ready to leap to the fore. She probably would have found it before, if anything had made her angry. But horses weren't abused at Davencourt, and it had been a long time since she had allowed herself to care about much of anything at all. Webb had been gone, and the endless procession of days had all been flat and dreary.
She was still shaking in the aftermath of fear and rage, and her legs wobbled beneath her. She drew in deep breaths, trying to will herself to calmness. She couldn't go home like this, with her self-control so paper-

thin. Anyone who saw her would know that something had happened, and she didn't want to rehash the whole thing and listen to the recriminations. She knew she'd been stupid, and lucky.
But more than that, she didn't want anyone to see the break in her composure. She was embarrassed and terrified by this unexpected vulnerability. She had to protect herself better than that. She couldn't do anything about her permanent weakness where Webb was concerned, but neither could her internal wall withstand any additional weaknesses.
When her legs felt steady enough, she left the woods and waded back across the field of weeds, this time taking care to avoid the briers. Her right ankle twinged with pain, reminding her that she had twisted it.
When she reached her car, she sat down sideways in the driver's seat, with her legs outside. Bending down, she took off her shoes and shook the dirt out of them. After a quick look around assured her that there were no cars on the road, she swiftly reached under her skirt and peeled off her shredded panty hose. She used the ruined garment to wipe
off her shoes as best she could, then slipped them back on her bare feet.
There were tissues in her purse. She got one, wet it with her tongue, and rubbed at the scratches on her legs until the tiny beads of blood were gone. That, and a passage of a brush through her hair, was the best she could do. To be on the safe side, however, she would use her old childhood trick of going up the outside stairs to the second floor and circling around to her room.
She didn't know who that man was, but she hoped she never saw him again.

Chapter 16

It was just like old times, trying to slip into her room without anyone seeing her. Back then, though, she had usually been trying to hide after committing some mischief or social faux pas. The confrontation with that unknown brute was far more serious. There was also the difference that now she was mature enough to admit her foolishness rather than tell whoppers to try to hide it. She wouldn't lie if asked, but still she had no intention of blurting out what had happened.
Roanna made it into her room without incident. Quickly she stripped and stepped into the shower, wincing as the water stung the scratches on her

legs. After thoroughly washing, the best protection against any possible encounter with poison ivy that might have been lurking in the weeds and among the trees, she dabbed the scratches with an antiseptic, then followed that with a soothing application of pure aloe gel. The stinging stopped almost immediately, and without that constant reminder of the unsettling encounter, her nerves began to calm.

A few flips of the brush restored her hair to order, and three minutes spent applying an array of cosmetics hid any lingering sign of upset. Roanna stared in the mirror at the sophisticated reflection; sometimes she was surprised by the image that looked back, as if it wasn't really her. Thank God for her sorority sisters, she thought. Most of the passages of her life had been marked by loss: the death of her parents, Jessie's murder, Webb's departure. College had been one passage, however, that had been good, and the credit for that belonged solely to those drawling, sharp-eyed, and saber-tongued young women who had taken the misfit under their protection and used their expertise in things social and cosmetic to turn her into an acceptable debutante. Funny how the competent application of mascara had translated itself into a smidgen of self-confidence, how the mastering of a graceful dance step had somehow untied her tongue and allowed her to carry on a social conversation.

She slipped the wires of plain gold hoops into her pierced ears, turning her head to check her appearance. She liked the way they looked, the way the ends of her slightly, purposely tousled hair curled through the hoops, as if her hair had been specifically cut to do so. That was another thing the sorority sisters had taught her, how to appreciate certain things about her own appearance. The greatest gift they had given her was constructed out of the small accomplishments of lea ming to dance, to apply makeup, to dress well, to function socially. The foundation had taken shape so slowly that she hadn't noticed it, a brick going into place every so often, but now it was suddenly large enough for her to see it, and she was puzzled by it.

Self-confidence. How she had always envied people who had it! Webb and Lucinda both had dynamic, aggressive self-confidence, the type that founded nations and built empires. Gloria was frequently blind to anything but herself, but certain in any case that she knew better than anyone else. Jessie s selfconfidence had been monumental. Loyal was confident in his dealings with the animals in his care, and Tansy ruled the kitchen. Even the

mechanics at the dealership where she'd bought her car were certain of their ability to fix any mechanical problem.
That slow-forming structure was her own self-confidence. The realization made her eyes widen with mild surprise. She was sure of herself when it came to horses; that had always been true. She'd had the self-confidence, or pure foolhardiness, to confront that awful man in the woods today and force him to stop mistreating that horse.
The sheer force of shock and anger had propelled her into action, a spirit she hadn't realized still lived inside her. The horse had been the catalyst, of course; she loved the animals so much, and it had always sent her into pure rage to see any one of them mistreated. Even so, her own actions shocked her, bringing her face-to-face with a part of herself she had thought long dead, or at least safely dormant. She no longer threw temper tantrums or insisted on having her way about things, but she did make her opinions known when it suited her. She kept a great deal of herself private, but that was her own decision, her own way of dealing with heartbreak and keeping pain at bay. Sheprotected herself by not letting herself care, or at least not letting anyone know that she cared, and most of the time the appearance of indifference was enough.
She continued staring into the mirror at the face she knew so well, and yet the things she saw beyond it were new, as if she had just opened a door to a different outlook.
People in town treated her with respect, listening when she spoke, however seldom that was. There was even a group of young businesswomen in the Shoals area who regularly invited her for Saturday lunches at Callahan's, not to talk business, but to laugh and joke and ... be friends. Friends. They didn't ask her to go with them because she was Lucinda's stand-in, or because they wanted to pitch ideas or ask favors of her. They asked her simply because they liked her.
She hadn't realized. Roanna's lips parted in surprise. She was so accustomed to thinking of herself as Lucinda's proxy that she hadn't considered she could be invited somewhere on her own account.
When had this happened? She thought, but couldn't
pinpoint a time. The process had been so gradual that there was no single outstanding incident to mark the occasion. A sense of peace began to glow deep inside. Webb was going to have Davencourt, just as Lucinda had always planned, but the deep-seated fear Roanna had felt at having to leave

its sheltering confines began to fade. She would still leave; she loved him so much that she wasn't sure of her own control where he was concerned. If she stayed, she would likely end up creeping into his bed some night and begging him to take her again.

She didn't want that. She didn't want to embarrass him, or herself. This newfound sense of worth was too new, too fragile, to survive another devastating rejection.

She began to think of where she would go, what she would do. She wanted to stay in the Shoals area, of course; her roots were generations deep, centuries strong. She had money of her own, inherited from her parents, and she would still inherit part of Lucinda's estate even though the bulk of it would go to Webb. She could do anything she wanted. The thought was liberating.

She wanted to raise and train horses.

When Lucinda died, the debt of gratitude that had been incurred when a terrified, grief-stricken seven-year-old had heard her grandmother say that she could come live with her would be paid. It was a debt of love, too, as strong as that of gratitude. It bad kept her at her grandmother's side, gradually becoming Lucinda's legs and ears and eyes as her health grew fragile with age. But when Lucinda was gone, and Davencourt safely in Webb's capable hands, Roanna would be free.

Free. The word whispered through her, as gossamer as a butterfly's wing when it is newly emerged from the cocoon. She could have her own home, something that was solely hers, and she would never again be dependent on anyone else for the roof over her head. Thanks to Lucinda's training, she now understood investments and finances; she felt confident that she was capable of managing her own money, so that she would always be secure. She would raise her own horses, but that would only be a sideline. She would go into business for herself as a trainer; people would bring their horses to her for schooling. Even Loyal said that he'd never seen anyone better able to gentle a frightened or misused animal, or even one that was just plain cussed.

She could do it. She could make a go of it. And for the first time in her life, she would be living for herself.

The grandfather clock in the foyer gonged softly, the sound barely audible here at the back of the huge house. Startled, she glanced at her own clock and saw that it was supper time, and she still wasn't dressed. The nap she

had planned to take was impossible now with adrenaline still humming through her veins, so she might as well eat.
Hurriedly she went to her closet and took out the first outfit that came to hand, silk slacks and a matching sleeveless tunic. The pants would hide the scratches on her legs, and that was all she cared about. She knew how to choose flattering and appropriate clothes now, but had never learned to take pleasure in clothing.
"I'm sorry I'm late," she said as she entered the dining room. Everyone was already seated; Brock and Corliss were the only ones absent, but then they seldom ate supper at home. Brock spent what time he could with his fiancde, and God only knew where Corliss spent her time.
"What time did you get home?" Webb asked.
"I didn't hear you come in." His eyes were narrowed on her just the way he'd looked at her when she was a kid and he'd caught her trying to slip in unnoticed.
"About five-thirty, I think." She hadn't noted the exact time, because she had still been so upset.
"I went straight upstairs to take a shower before supper."
"The heat is so sticky, I have to shower twice a day," Lanette agreed. "Greg's company wanted to transfer him to Tampa. Can you imagine how much worse the humidity is down there? I simply couldn't face it."
Greg glanced briefly at his wife, then returned his attention to his plate. He was a tall, spare man who seldom spoke, wore his graying hair in a crew cut, and to Roanna's
knowledge did nothing for fun or relaxation. Greg went to work, came home with more work in his bulging briefcase, and spent the hours between supper and bedtime hunched over paperwork. So far as she knew, he was one of a horde of pencil pushers in middle management, but suddenly she realized that she didn't really know what he did at work. Greg never talked about his job, never related funny stories about his co-workers. He was simply there, a dinghy dragged along in Lanette's wake.
"A lateral transfer?" Webb asked, his cool green gaze flicking from Greg to Lanette and back again.
"Or a promotion?"
"Promotion," Greg said briefly.
"But it meant moving," Lanette explained.

"And the living expenses would be so much higher that we'd have been losing money on that so-called promotion. He turned it down, of course."
Meaning she had flatly refused to move, Roanna thought as she methodically applied herself to the chore of eating. Living here at Davencourt, they had no housing expenses, and Lanette used the extra money to swan around in the best social circles. If they moved, they would then have to provide their own roof, and Lanette's standard of living would suffer.
Greg should have gone and left Lanette to follow or not, Roanna thought. Like herself, he needed to break away from Davencourt and have a place of his own. Maybe Davencourt was too beautiful; it was more than just a house to the people who lived here, it was almost a being in and of itself. They wanted to possess it, and instead it possessed them, holding them captive with the knowledge that, after Davencourt, no other home could be as grand.
But she would break away, she promised herself. She had never thought she could possess Davencourt, so she wasn't bound here by envy's chains. Fear had held her here, and duty, and love. The fast reason was already gone, and the remaining two would soon follow, and she would be free.
After supper, Webb said to Lucinda, "If you aren't too tired, I want to talk to you about an investment I've been considering."
"Of course," she said, and they walked together to the dining room door.
Roanna remained at the table, her expression blank. She forked up one last bite of the strawberry shortcake Tansy had served for dessert, forcing herself to eat that one even though she wanted it no more than she had the ones preceding it.
Webb paused at the door and looked around, a slight frown pulling his dark brows together as if he'd just realized she wasn't with them.
"Aren't you coming?"
Silently she got up and followed them, wondering if he'd really expected her to automatically assume she was included, or if she was an afterthought. Probably the latter; Webb had always been accustomed to discussing his business decisions with Lucinda, but for all the things he'd said about wanting Roanna to continue with her present responsibilities, he didn't think of her as having any authority.
He was right, she thought, ruthlessly facing the truth. She had no authority beyond what either he or Lucinda granted her, which wasn't true authority.

Either of them could pull her up short at any time, divest her of even the semblance of power.
They entered the study and took their accustomed seats: Webb at the desk that had so recently been hers, Roanna in one of the wing chairs, Lucinda on the sofa. Roanna felt jittery inside, as if everything had been jostled, switched around. The past couple of hours had been filled with a series of insights into her own character, nothing great and dramatic but nevertheless small explosions that left her feeling as if nothing was the same, and hadn't even been as she had always perceived it.
Webb was talking, but for the first time in her life Roanna wasn't hanging on his every word as if it came from the lips of God Almighty himself. She barely even heard him. Today she had faced down a brute, and realized that people liked her for herself. She had made a decision concerning the rest
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of her life. As a child she had been helpless to control her life, and for the past ten long years she had let life pass her by, withdrawing to a safe place where she couldn't be hurt. But now she could control her life; she didn't have to let things happen as other people dictated, she could set her own course, make her own rules. The feeling of power was both heady and frightening, but the excitement of it was undeniable.
11 -a sizable investment on our part," Webb was saying, "but Mayfield has always been reliable."
Roanna's interest suddenly focused, caught by the name Webb had just mentioned, and she remembered the gossip she had heard just that afternoon.
Lucinda nodded.
"It sounds interesting, though of course-"
"No," Roanna said.
Silence settled over the room, complete except for the muted ticking of the old mantel clock.
It was difficult to tell who was the most startled, Lucinda, Webb, or Roanna herself. She had sometimes thought Lucinda should rethink a decision, and quietly given her reasoning, but she had never openly, flatly disagreed. The no had just popped out. She hadn't even couched it in let'sthink-it-over terms, but stated it definitely, firmly.
Lucinda sat back on the sofa, blinking a little in surprise. Webb swiveled his chair a little so he was looking directly at Roanna and merely stared at her

for a long moment that strained every nerve in her body. There was a strange glitter in his eyes, bright and hot.
"Why?" he finally asked, his tone soft.
Roanna desperately wished that she'd kept her mouth shut. That impulsive no had been based on gossip she'd heard that afternoon at the music festival organizational meeting. What if Webb listened to her, then gave her the condescending smile of an adult listening to a child's improbable but amusing scenario, and turned back to his discussion with Lucinda? The precious new sense of confidence would wither inside her.
Lucinda had grown accustomed to listening to Roanna's observations, but Roanna had always offered them as simply that, and left the final decision to her grandmother. Never before had she flatly said, "No."
"Come on, Ro," Webb coaxed.
"You watch people, you notice things we don't. What do you know about Mayfield?" She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.
"It's just what I heard today. Mayfield desperately needs money. Naomi left him yesterday, and the word is she's asking for a huge settlement, because she caught him in the laundry room with one of Amelia's college friends who's been visiting for a couple of weeks. Moreover, according to gossip, the hanky-panky has been going on since Christmas, and it appears that the college friend, who is all of nineteen, is four months pregnant."
There was an oasis of silence, then Lucinda said, "As I remember, Amelia did have her friend over for the Easter holidays."
Webb snorted, a grin widening his mouth.
"Sounds as if Mayfield had his own personal arising, doesn't it?"
"Webb! Don't be blasphemous!" But for all her genuine shock at the comment, Lucinda's sense of humor had a bawdy streak, and she fought a smile as she cast a quick, concerned glance at Roanna.
"Sorry," Webb promptly apologized, though his eyes continued to sparkle. He had caught the look Lucinda gave Roanna, as if she were alarmed that Roanna should hear something off-color. It was an old-fashioned attitude, that a virgin, no matter what her age, should be shielded from sexual innuendo. That Lucinda still considered Roanna a virgin meant that there hadn't been any romantic interests at all in Roanna's life, even in college.
Lucinda had been absolutely correct, Webb thought, his heart beating fast as an image of that night in Nogales flashed through his mind. Roanna had been a virgin, until roughly one hour after she had walked up to him in that

bar. It had taken him about that long to have her stripped, spread, and penetrated.
The memory shimmered through him like soft lightning, heating every nerve ending, making him ache. The feel of her soft, slender body beneath him had been ... perfect. Her breasts, round and delicious and so delicately formed ... perfect. The hot, tight sheathing of his cock ... perfect. And the way her arms had wound so trustingly around his neck, the way her back had arched, the blind, exalted expression on her face as she came.. . God, it had been so perfect it left him breathless.
His dick was hard as a spike. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair, glad that he was sitting behind the desk. That's what he got for letting himself think of that night, of the utter ecstasy of coming inside her. Which he had, he realized. Several times, in fact. And not once had he used a rubber.
He'd never before in his life been so careless, no matter how much he'd had to drink. The fine hairs stood up on his body as an almost electrical thrill ran through him. The thought of birth control hadn't once entered his mind that night; with primal male instinct he had taken her time and again, imprinting himself on her flesh, and in the most primitive claiming he had spurted his semen into her. During those long hours, his body had taken control from his mind, not that his mind had been in top form anyway. The flesh had no conscience; with instincts formed over thousands of years, he had claimed her as his own and sought to forge an unbreakable bond by making her pregnant, so that their two selves would mingle into one.
It was an effort to keep his face impassive, not to leap up and grab her, demand to know if she carried his child. Hell, it hadn't even been two weeks yet; how could she know?
"Webb?"
Lucinda's voice intruded on his consciousness, and he wrested his thoughts from the shattering direction they had taken. Both Lucinda and Roanna were watching him. Roanna's expression was as calm and remote as usual, but at that moment he was so acutely attuned to her that he thought he could see a hint of anxiety in her eyes. Did she expect him to dismiss what she'd said as mere gossip? Was she waiting so impassively for one more blow to her selfesteem?
He rubbed his chin as he regarded her.
"What you're saying is that Mayfield's personal life is a mess, and you think he's so desperate for money that he isn't using good judgment."

She held his gaze.
"That's right."
"And you heard all this at your meeting today?" Solemnly she nodded.
He grinned.
"Then thank God for gossip. You've probably saved us from a big loss-Mayfield, too, come to that, because he needs our backing to swing the deal."
Lucinda sniffed.
"I doubt Burt Mayfield will feel very grateful, but his personal mess is his own fault."
Roanna sat back, a little dizzy at the ease with which they had both accepted her analysis. Her emotions were so unsteady that she didn't know how to act, what to do, so she sat quietly and did nothing. Occasionally she could feel Webb look at her, but she didn't let herself meet his gaze. Her feelings were too close to the surface right now, her control too tenuous; she didn't want to harass him and embarrass herself by staring at him with doglike devotion. The stress of the past few hours was taking its toll on her anyway; the adrenaline high had faded, and she was dreadfully tired. She didn't know if she could sleep; in fact she was so tired that she was afraid she would sleep, because it was when she was most exhausted and finally fell into a deep sleep that the sleepwalking episodes occurred. But sleep or not, she very much wanted to lie down, just for a while.
Then suddenly Webb was beside her, his hand on her arm as he lifted her to her feet.
"You're so tired you're wobbling in your chair," he said in an abrupt tone. "Go on up to bed. Mayfield's proposal was all we needed to discuss."
Just that small touch was enough to make Roanna want to lean into him, rest against his strength, feel the heat and hardness of his body against her one more time. To keep
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from giving in to the impulse, she made herself move away from him.
"I am tired," she admitted quietly.
"If you're sure that's all, I'll go upstairs now."
"That's all," Webb said, a frown pulling his eyebrows together.
Roanna murmured a good-night to Lucinda and left the room. Webb watched her go with narrowed eyes. She had pulled away from him. For the first time in his memory, Roanna had avoided his touch.

"Will she sleep?" he asked aloud, not looking at Lucinda, "Probably not." She sighed.
"Not much, anyway. She seems ... oh, I don't know, a bit edgy. That's the most she's put herself forward in years. I'm glad you listened to her instead of just shrugging it off. I had to teach myself to pay attention to what she says. It's just that she notices so much about people, because they do all the talking and she just listens. Roanna picks up on the little things."
They chatted for a few minutes longer, then Lucinda carefully rose from the couch, proudly refusing to reveal the difficulty of the movement.
"I'm a bit tired, too," she said.
"My days of dancing 'til dawn are over."
"I never had any," Webb replied wryly.
"There was always work to be done."
She paused, watching him with a troubled look.
"Was it too much?" she asked suddenly.
"You were so young when I gave Davencourt to you. You didn't have time to just be a boy. 11 "It was hard work," he said, shrugging.
"But it was what I wanted. I don't regret it." He had never regretted the work. He'd regretted a lot of other things but never the sheer exhilaration of pushing himself, learning, accomplishing. He hadn't done it just for Davencourt, he'd done it for himself, because he'd gotten off on the power and excitement of it. He'd been the golden boy, the crown prince, and he'd reveled in the role. He'd even married the princess, and what a disaster that had turned out to be. He couldn't blame Lucinda for that even though she had happily promoted his
and Jessie's marriage. It was his own blind ambition that had led him willingly to the altar.
Lucinda patted his arm as she passed, and he watched her, too, as she left the room, noting the care with which she took each step. She was either in pain or far weaker than she wanted anyone to guess. Because she wouldn't want anyone to fuss over her, he let her go without comment.
He sighed, the sound soft in the quiet of the room. Once this room had been his own domain, and bore the uncompromising signs of purely masculine use. Not much had been changed other than the addition of the computers and fax, because Davencourt wasn't a house given to swift or dramatic changes. It aged subtly, with small and gradual differences. This room, however, now seemed softer, more feminine. The curtains were different,

lighter in color, but it was more than that. The very scent of the room had changed, as if it had absorbed the inherent sweetness of female flesh, the perfumes and lotions Lucinda and Roanna had used. He could detect very plainly Lucinda's Chanel; it was all she had worn in his entire memory. Roanna's scent was lighter, sweeter, and was strongest when he was sitting at the desk.

The faint perfume lured him. He resumed his seat at the desk and shuffled through some papers but after a few minutes gave up the pretense and instead leaned back, frowning as his thoughts settled on Roanna.

She had never pulled away from him before. He couldn't get that out of his mind. It disturbed him deep inside, as if he'd lost something precious. He'd sworn he wouldn't take advantage of her; hell, he'd even felt a bit noble about it, because he'd been denying himself something he really wanted: her. But she was so damn remote, as if that night in Nogales had never happened, as if she hadn't spent her childhood years tagging along at his heels and beaming worshipfully up at him.

She was so self-contained, so closed in on herself. He kept looking at her with a grin, expecting her to grin back in one

of those moments of humor they had always shared, but her smooth, still face remained as solemn as always, as if she had no more laughter in her.

His thoughts moved back to their lovemaking. He wanted to see Roanna smile again, but even more than that, he wanted to know if his baby was inside her. As soon as he could manage it, he was going to have a private conversation with her-something that might prove to be more difficult than he'd ever imagined, given the way she'd begun avoiding him.

The next afternoon, Roanna sighed as she leaned back in the big leather chair, massaging her neck to relieve the stiffness. A neat stack of addressed invitations was on one corner of the desk, but a glance at the guest list told her that there was at least a third of the envelopes still to be addressed.

Once Lucinda had gotten Webb's okay for the party, she had begun making her battle plans. Everyone who was anyone had to be invited, which put the guest list at a staggering five hundred people. A crowd that size simply wouldn't fit into the house, not even a house as large as Davencourt, unless they wanted to open up the bedrooms. Lucinda had been unfazed; they would simply throw open the French doors onto the patio, string lights in the trees and shrubbery, and let people wander in and out as they chose. The patio was better for dancing anyway.

Roanna had begun work immediately. There was no way Tansy could handle preparing food for that many people, so she had set herself to locating a caterer who could handle that size party on such short notice, because the date Lucinda had selected was less than two weeks away. She had chosen that date intentionally, not wanting to give people time to deliberate too much, but time enough to buy new dresses and schedule appointments with hairdressers. The few caterers in the Shoals area were already booked for that date, so Roanna had been forced to hire a firm from Huntsville that she'd never dealt with before. She only hoped everything worked out okay.

There was a ton of decorations stored in the attic and hundreds of strands of lights, but Lucinda had decided that only peach-colored lights would do because it would be such a mellow, flattering color for everyone. There were no peach lights in the attic. After a dozen phone calls, Roanna had tracked some down at a specialty store in Birmingham, and they were shipping the lights overnight.

There weren't enough chairs, even allowing for the people who would be dancing or milling around rather than sitting. More chairs had to be brought in, a band had to be hired, flowers had to be ordered, and a printer had to be found who could print the invitations immediately. That last accomplished, Roanna was now occupied with addressing the envelopes. She had been doing it for the past three hours, and she was exhausted.

She could remember Lucinda doing this chore years ago. Once she had asked why Lucinda didn't hire someone to do it, because it had seemed so horribly boring, having to sit for hours and address hundreds of envelopes. Lucinda had replied haughtily that a lady took the trouble to personally invite her guests, which Roanna had taken to mean it was one of those old southern customs that would continue no matter how illogical. She had promised herself at the time that she would never do something so boring. Now she patiently worked through the guest list. The job was still boring, but she understood now why customs continued; it gave one a sense of continuity, of kinship with those who had gone before. Her grandmother had done this, as had her great-grandmother, her great-great-grandmother, going back an unknown number of generations. Those women were a part of her, their genes still living in her, though it looked as if she would be the end of the line. There had only ever been one man for her, and he wasn't interested. End of story, end of family.

Roanna resolutely pushed all thoughts of Webb out of her mind so she could concentrate on the job at hand. She was accustomed to doing any paperwork at the desk, but Webb had been working there that morning. She still felt a tiny shock whenever she saw him sitting in the chair she had come to regard as hers, a shock that had nothing to do with the surge of joy she always felt at the very sight of him.

She had retreated to the small, sunny sitting room at the back of the house, because it was the most private, and began writing at the escritoire there. The chair had proven to be an instrument of torture to one sitting in it for longer than fifteen minutes, so she had gotten a lap desk and moved to the sofa. Her legs had gone to sleep. When Webb had left after lunch to visit Yvonne, with relief Roanna had taken advantage of his absence to work in the study. She settled into the chair, and everything felt just right. The desk was the right height, the chair was comfortable and familiar.

She had belonged in this chair, she thought. She refused to let herself feel resentment, however. She had felt needed here for the first time in her life, but soon she would have something that belonged solely to her. Lucinda's death would be the end of one part of her life and the beginning of another. Why fret over this symbol of power when she would soon be moving on anyway? Only to Webb could she have given it up without heartbreak, she thought, because all of this had been promised to him long before she assumed, by default, the stewardship of Davencourt.

There was a great deal of difference between handling financial paperwork and addressing envelopes, at least in the significance of it, but the physical requirements were the same. Working at last in relative comfort, she let her mind slip into neutral as she worked through the invitations.

At first she was scarcely aware of the fatigue creeping through her body, she was so accustomed to it. She forced herself to ignore it and carefully wrote out a few more addresses, but suddenly her eyelids were so heavy she could barely hold them open. Her fears for the past two nights that she would fall deeply asleep and sleepwalk had been groundless; despite the fatigue that dragged at her, she had merely dozed in fits and starts, managing to get perhaps a total of two hours' steep each night. Last night, again, she had been almost painfully aware of Webb's presence next door, and she had awakened herself several times listening for his movements.

Now she became aware of how quiet the house was. Webb was gone, and Lucinda was napping. Greg and Brock were both at work. Gloria and Lanette might be against having the party, but they had both gone shopping for new dresses, and Harlan had gone with them. Corliss had left right after breakfast, with a careless "I'll be back later," and no indication where she was going.

Despite the efforts of the air-conditioning, the study was warm from the fierce summer sunlight pouring through the windows. Roanna's eyelids drooped even more and closed completely. She always tried not to nap during the day because that only made it more difficult for her to sleep at night, but sometimes the fatigue was overpowering. Sitting there in the warm, quiet room, she lost the battle to stay awake.

Webb noticed when he pulled into the garage that Roanna's car was in its bay, and Corliss had returned as well, but Gloria and Lanette were still out shopping. It was the presence of Roanna's car, however, that caused a hot little thrill of anticipation to shoot through him. She'd had afternoon meetings both days since he'd come home, and he had half-expected her to be gone this afternoon, too, even though she hadn't said anything about an appointment. In the tightly knit structure of small towns, business and social obligations often overlapped, with the former being conducted at the latter. Until he was fully integrated into county society again, Roanna would have to fulfill those obligations by herself.

Somehow he hadn't expected that he would see so little of her. In the past, Roanna had always been right on his heels no matter what he was doing. When she'd been seven or

eight, he'd actually had to keep her from following him into the bathroom, and even then she had huddled in the hallway waiting for him. Back then, of course, she had just lost her parents and he had been her only security; the frantic clinging had gradually ceased as she adjusted. But even when she'd been a teenager, she'd always been right there, her homely little face turned up to him like a sunflower to the sun.

But she wasn't homely now; she had grown into a striking woman with the sort of strong, chiseled bone structure that wouldn't yield much to age. He'd braced himself to resist constant temptation; he couldn't take advantage of her heartbreaking vulnerability just to satisfy his lust. Damn it all to hell, though, instead of being vulnerable she was downright remote with him, and most of the time she wasn't even around. It was as if she actively

avoided him, and the realization jolted him deep inside. Was she embarrassed because she'd slept with him? He remembered how closed her expression had been the next morning. Or did she resent it because he was going to inherit Davencourt instead of her?

Lucinda said Roanna had no interest in running Davencourt, but what if she was wrong? Roanna hid so much behind that calm, remote face. Once he'd been able to read her like a book, and now he found himself watching her whenever he could, trying to decipher any flicker of expression that might hint at her feelings. For the most part, though, all he saw was the fatigue that drained her, and the mute patience with which she endured it.

If he'd realized how much trouble this damn party would be for her, he never would have agreed to it. If she was still working on it when he got inside, he was going to put his foot down. Her face had been drawn and wan, and dark circles lay under her eyes, evidence that she hadn't been sleeping. Insomnia was one thing; staying awake at night and working incessantly during the day was something else. She needed to do something she enjoyed, and he thought a long, leisurely ride was just the ticket. Not only did she love riding, but the physical exercise might force her body into sleep that night. He was getting antsy himself-, he'd gotten accustomed to spending long hours in the saddle almost every day, and he missed the exercise as well as the soothing company of the horses.

He entered the kitchen and smiled at Tansy, who was humming happily as she meandered around the kitchen, never getting in a hurry or seeming to have any design in her movements, but nevertheless putting together huge, scrumptious meals. Tansy hadn't changed much in all the years he'd known her, he thought. She had to be in her sixties, but her hair was still the same salt and pepper it had been since he'd come to live at Davencourt. She was short and plump, and her kindhearted nature shone out of her blue eyes.

"Lemon icebox pie for dessert tonight," she said, grinning, knowing that it was his favorite.

"Be sure you save enough room for it."

"I'll make a point of it." Tansy's icebox pie was so good he could make a meal of it by itself.

"Do you know where Roanna is?"

"Sure do. Bessie was just here, and she said Miss Roanna's asleep in the study. I'm not surprised, I'll say that. You could tell just by looking at the poor child that the last few nights have been bad, even worse than usual."

She was asleep. Relief warred with disappointment, because he'd been looking forward to that ride with her.
"I won't disturb her," he promised.
"Is Lucinda awake from her nap yet?"
"I imagine so, but she hasn't come downstairs." Tansy sadly shook her head. "Time's weighing heavy on Miss Lucinda. You can always tell when old folks start going, Icause they stop eating food they used to love. It's nature's way of winding down, I guess. My mama, rest her soul, loved kraut and wienies better'n anything, but a few months before she passed on she said they just didn't taste good no more, and she wouldn't eat 'em."
Lucinda's all-time favorite food was okra. She loved it fried, boiled, pickled, any way it could be prepared.
"Is Lucinda still eating her okra?" he asked quietly.
Tansy shook her head, her eyes sad.
"Said it don't have much taste this year."
Webb left the kitchen and walked silently down the hall. He turned the corner and stopped when he saw Corliss with her back to him, opening the study door and peeking inside. He knew immediately what she was about to do; the little bitch was going to slam the door and awaken Roanna. Fury shot through him, and he was already moving as she stepped back and opened the door wide, as wide as her arm would allow. He saw the muscles in her forearm tighten as she prepared to slam the door with all her strength, and then he was on her, his steely fingers biting into the nape of her neck. She gave a stifled little squeak and froze.
Webb eased the door shut, then dragged her away from the study, still holding her neck in a tight grip. He hauled her head around so that she was looking at him. He'd seldom in his life been more angry, and he wanted to shake her as if she were a rag. On the scale of things, waking Roanna from a nap was nothing more than petty and spiteful, no matter how desperately she needed the sleep. But he didn't give a damn about the scale of things, because Roanna did need that nap, and the spitefulness angered him all the more because it was so senseless. Corliss wouldn't accomplish or gain a damn thing by disturbing Roanna; she was simply a bitch, and he wasn't going to put up with it.
Her face was a picture of alarm as she stared up at him, still with her neck arched back in an uncomfortable position. Her blue eyes were rounded with startlement at being caught when she had thought herself alone, but already

a sly look was creeping into them as she began trying to figure out a way to slither out of this predicament.
"Don't bother with the excuses," he said bluntly, keeping his voice low so Roanna wouldn't be disturbed.
"Maybe I'd better spell things out, so you'll know exactly where you stand. You'd better pray that the wind never catches a door and slams it while Roanna's asleep, or that a stray cat never knocks anything over, and God forbid you should actually forget to be quiet. Because no matter what happens, if you're anywhere on the property, I'm going to blame it on you. And do you know what will happen then?"
Her face twisted as she realized he wasn't going to listen to any of her excuses.
"What?" she taunted.
"You'll get out your trusty andiron?"
His hand tightened on her neck, making her wince.
"Worse than that," he said in a silky tone.
"At least from your point of view. I'll throw you out of this house so fast your ass will leave skid marks on the stairs. Is that clear? I have a real low tolerance for parasites, and you're so close to the limit that I'm already reaching for the flea powder."
She flushed a dark, ugly color and tried to jerk away from him. Webb held her, lifting his eyebrows at her as he waited for a response.
"You bastard," she spat.
"Aunt Lucinda thinks she can force people to accept you, but they won't ever. They'll be nice to you for her sake, but as soon as she's dead, you'll find out what they think of you. You only came back because you know she's dying, and you want Davencourt and all the money."
"I'll have it, too," he said, and smiled. It wasn't a nice smile, but he didn't feel nice. Contemptuously he released her.
"Lucinda said she would change her will if I'd come back. Davencourt will belong to me, and you'll be out on your ass. But you're not only a bitch, you're a stupid one. As it stood before, Roanna was going to inherit instead of me, but you've acted like a malicious spoiled brat to her. Do you think she'd have let you go on living here, either?"
Corliss tossed her head.
"Roanna's a wimp. I can handle her."

"Like I said: stupid. She doesn't say anything now because Lucinda's important to her, and she doesn't want her upset. But one way or the other, you'd better be looking for somewhere else to live." 237
"Grandmother won't let you throw me out."
Webb snorted.
"Davencourt doesn't belong to Gloria. It isn't her decision."
"It doesn't belong to you yet, either! There's a lot that can happen between now and when Aunt Lucinda dies." She made the words sound like a threat, and he wondered what mischief she was considering.
He was tired of dealing with the little bitch.
"Then maybe I'd better add another condition: If you start shooting off your mouth and causing trouble, you're outta here. Now get out of my sight before I decide you're already more trouble than you're worth."
She flounced away from him, sashaying her ass to show him she wasn't scared. Maybe she wasn't, but she should damn sure take him at his word.
He quietly opened the study door to make certain they hadn't awakened Roanna with their argument. He'd tried to keep his voice low, but Corliss hadn't had any such concern, and grimly he promised himself that she'd be out on the street tonight if Roanna's eyes were open.
But she still slept, curled in the big office chair with her head tucked into the wing. He stood in the doorway, watching her. Her dark chestnut hair was tousled around her face, and sleep had brought a delicate flush to her cheeks. Her breasts moved up and down in a slow, deep rhythm.
She had slept like that the night they'd spent together what time he'd let her sleep. If he'd know then how rare real, restful sleep was for her, he wouldn't have awakened her all those times. But afterward, each time, she had curled in his arms just that way, with her head pillowed on his shoulder.
A sharp pang of longing went through him. He'd like to hold her that way again, he thought. She could sleep in his arms for as long as she wanted.

Chapter 17

Corliss was shaking as she climbed the stairs, but the trembling was as much inside as out. She needed something, fast. She hurried into her suite and locked the door, then began to frenziedly search all of her favorite hiding places: inside the tiny rip in the lining on the bottom of the sofa, the empty cold cream jar, the bottom of the lamp, the toe-shapers for her shoes. She found exactly what she'd known she would find, nothing, but she needed a fix bad enough that she looked anyway.

How dare he talk to her like that? She'd always hated him, hated Jessie, hated Roanna. It simply wasn't fair! Why should they get to live at Davencourt while she had to live in that stupid little house? All of her life she'd been looked down on at school as the Davenports' poor relation. But sometimes good things did happen, like when Jessie was killed and Webb blamed for it. Corliss had silently celebrated; God, it had been so hard to keep from laughing at that turn of events! But she had made all the proper noises, looked properly sad, and when Webb had left, pretty soon things had fallen into place and her family had moved into Davencourt, where they should have been all those years anyway.

She'd had a lot of friends then, people who knew how to really party, not the snooty my-great-great-granddaddy fought-in-the-War crowd, the ones who wore pearls and the men didn't cuss in the ladies' presence. What bullshit. Her friends knew how to have fun.

She'd been smart, she'd stayed away from the hard drugs. No mainlining for her, no sirree. That shit would kill you. She liked booze, but she loooved that sweet white powder. One snort, and no worries; she felt on top of the world, the best, the prettiest, the sexiest. Once she'd been so damn sexy that she'd taken on three guys, one after the other, then all three together, and worn them all out. It'd been great, she'd been fantastic, she'd never had sex like that since. She'd like to do it again, but it took more to fly now, and really she'd rather enjoy that than concentrate on screwing. Besides, a couple of times she'd had a little problem a month or so later, and she'd had to go to Memphis where no one knew her to have it taken care of. Wouldn't do to have a bun in the oven ruining her fun.

But all of her little hiding places were empty. She didn't have any coke, and she didn't have any money. Desperately she roamed the suite, trying to think. Aunt Lucinda always kept a good bit of money in her purse, but the

purse was in her bedroom and the old lady was still in her suite, so she couldn't get at it. Grandmother and Mama had gone shopping, so they would have taken all their cash with them. But Roanna was asleep in the study ... Corliss laughed to herself as she slipped from her rooms and hurried down the hallway to Roanna's room. Guess it was a good thing Webb had kept her from slamming that door after all. Let dear little Roanna sleep, the stupid bitch.

Silently she entered Roanna's bedroom. Roanna always put her purses away in the closet like a good little girl. It took Corliss only a moment to filch Roanna's wallet and count the money. Only eighty-three bucks, damn it. Even someone as dense as Roanna would notice if a couple of twenties went missing. She seldom bothered searching

Roanna's purse for that reason, because Roa.,auty sleep normally carry much cash. I all she She eyed the credit cards but resisted the temptation. , she would have to sign for a cash advance on them, and anyway the bank teller might know she wasn't Roanna. That was the trouble with hick towns, too many people knew your business.

The automatic teller bank card was something else, though. If she could just find Roanna's PIN ... Swiftly she began pulling scraps of paper out of the little pockets of the wallet. No one was supposed to write down their PIN, but everyone did. She found a slip of paper, neatly folded, with four numbers on it. She snickered to herself as she took an ink pen from the bottom of Roanna's purse and scribbled the numbers on her palm. Maybe it wasn't the PIN, but so what? All the machine would do was not give her the money, it wasn't as if it would call Roanna and tell on her.

Smiling, she slipped the bank card into her pocket. This was better than sneaking a twenty here and a twenty there. She'd get a couple of hundred, put the card back before Roanna missed it, and have some fun tonight. Hell, she'd even put the transaction slip in the folder where Roanna kept things like that; that way, there wouldn't be a discrepancy when the bank statement came out. This was a good plan; she'd have to use it again, though it would be smart to use Aunt Lucinda's card occasionally, if she could get it, and alternate rather than using the same one all the time. Variety was the spice of life. It also cut down on her chances of getting caught, which was the most important thing; that, and getting money.

By eight o'clock that night, Corliss felt much better. After hitting the automatic bank machine, it had taken her some time to find her regular

supplier, but at last she had located him. The white powder beckoned, and she wanted to sniff it all up at once, but she knew it would be smarter if she rationed it, because there was no telling how often she would be able to sneak a bank card. She allowed herself just a single line, enough to take the edge off.

Then she was in the mood for fun. She hit her favorite bar, but none of her friends were there, and she sat by herself, humming a little. She ordered her favorite drink, a strawberry daiquiri, which she liked because it packed quite a punch the way the bartender made them for her but still looked like one of those cute drinks it was okay for a nice girl to drink.

The longer she sat there, though, the more her mood darkened. She tried to hang on to the drug-induced euphoria, but it faded as it always did, and she wanted to cry. The daiquiri was good, but the alcohol didn't work the same way coke did. Maybe if she got a real buzz on, it would help.

The hour dragged past, and still none of her friends came in. Had they gone somewhere else tonight and not told her? She felt a sense of panic at being abandoned. Surely no one had heard that Webb had threatened to throw her out of Davencourt, not yet.

Desperately she sipped the daiquiri, trying not to stick herself in the eye with the stupid little turquoise paper parasol. Either the straw was shorter than usual, or that damn parasol had grown. She hadn't had this kind of trouble with the first two drinks. She glared at the bartender, wondering if he was playing a practical joke on her, but he wasn't even looking at her, so she decided he wasn't.

The carcasses of the other two little paper parasols lay in front of her. One was yellow, the other was pink. Put them all together and she'd have a pretty little parasol bouquet, Whoopee. Maybe she'd save them to put on Aunt Lucinda's grave. That was a thought; by the time the old bat kicked off, she should have enough little parasols collected to make a real pretty wreath. Or maybe she could stuff them down Webb Tallant's throat. Death by parasol; that had a nice ring to it.

The bastard had scared her half to death this afternoon when he'd grabbed her like that. And the look in his eyes God That was the coldest, meanest look she'd ever seen,

and for nothing! Little Miss Mealy-Mouth's beauty sleep hadn't been disturbed, and God knows she needed all she could get. Corliss snickered, but her mirth died when she remembered the threats Webb had made.

She hated him. Why did he have everything? He didn't deserve it. It had always galled her that he was the chosen favorite when he wasn't any closer kin to Aunt Lucinda than she was. He was mean and selfish, the old bitch was going to give Davencourt to him, and he wasn't going to let her live there after Aunt Lucinda died. It just wasn't fair!
As much as she disliked Roanna, at least Roanna was a real Davenport, and she wouldn't feel as bad if Davencourt went to her. Like hell, she wouldn't. Roanna was a stupid wimp, and she didn't deserve Davencourt either. The only good thing about Roanna having the house was that Corliss knew she could handle Roanna with one hand tied behind her back. She'd have that little mouse so buffaloed Roanna would be handing over money instead of forcing Corliss to sneak it.
But if Aunt Lucinda wasn't going to leave Davencourt to Roanna, then it just wasn't fair that Webb should get it! Aunt Lucinda might not think that Webb had killed Jessie, but Corliss had her own opinion, and it was even stronger after the look she'd seen on his face that afternoon. She had no doubts that he could kill. Why, for a minute she'd thought he was going to kill her, and over a little joke she'd been about to play. She'd only been thinking about slamming the door, she hadn't actually done it. But he'd grabbed her and hurt her neck, the bastard.
Someone slid onto the stool beside her.
"You look like you need another drink," a smooth masculine voice purred in her ear.
Corliss cast a dismissive glance at the man beside her. He was good-looking enough, she supposed, but way too old.
"Get lost, Pops."
He chuckled.
"Don't let the gray hair fool you. Just because there's snow on the roof doesn't mean there's no fire ii) the furnace."
T_
"Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before," she said, bored. She took another draw on the daiquiri.
"You may be too old to cut the mustard, but you can still spread the mayonnaise, Big deal. Beat it-and you can take that any way you like.,"
"I'm not interested in fucking you," he said, sounding as bored as she had.
She was so shocked by the bluntness that she looked at him then, really looked at him. She saw the thick hair that had gone mostly gray, and a body

that was still powerful and in shape even though he had to be in his fifties. It was his eyes that riveted her, though; they were the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, and looking into them was like looking into a snake's eyes: flat, totally devoid of feeling. Corliss shivered, but couldn't help feeling fascinated.
He nodded at the parasols littering the bar.
"You've been pouring the booze down pretty fast. Have a bad day?"
"You don't know the half of it," she said, but then laughed.
"Things are looking up, though."
"So why don't you tell me about it," he invited.
"You're Corliss Spence, aren't you? Don't you live out at Davencourt?"
That was often one of the first questions people asked when meeting her for the first time. Corliss loved the distinction it gave her, the sense of being someone special. Webb was going to take that away from her, and she hated him for it.
"Yeah, I live there," she said.
"For a while longer, anyway. 91 The man lifted his glass to his mouth. From the color of the liquid, it looked like straight bourbon. He sipped it as he stared at her with those cold blue eyes.
"Looks to me like you'd already be hauling ass out of there. It must be pretty uncomfortable living with a killer."
Corliss thought of Webb's hand biting into the back of her neck, and she shivered.
"He's a bastard," she said.
"I'll be moving out soon. He attacked me today for no reason!"
"Tell me about it," he urged again, and held out his hand.
"By the way, my name's Harper Neeley."
Corliss shook hands with him and felt a little thrill of fascination. He might be an old guy, but there was something about him that gave her the shivers. For now, though, she was more than willing to tell her new friend anything he wanted to know about how hateful Webb Tallant was.
Roanna wished she hadn't succumbed to the nap that afternoon. It had helped immeasurably at the time, but now she faced another long night. She had come upstairs at ten and gone through the ritual of showering, putting on her nightgown, brushing her teeth, getting in bed, all for nothing. She had known immediately that sleep would be a long time coming, if at all, so she had gotten out of bed and curled up in her chair. She picked up the book

she'd been trying to read for the past two nights and finally managed to get interested in it.
Webb came up at eleven, and she snapped off her reading light while she listened to him showering. She watched the splash of light from his room, wondering if he would back between it and the windows so she could see his shadow on the veranda. He didn't; his light went out, and there was silence from the other room.
The light from her lamp attracted mosquitoes, so Roanna always kept her veranda doors closed while she was reading, and she wasn't able to hear if he opened his own doors that night. She sat quietly in the dark, waiting until he'd had time to fall asleep, hoping she might become sleepy herself. She watched the fluorescent hands of her clock move past midnight; only then did she turn her lamp back on and resume reading.
An hour later she yawned and let the book drop into her lap. Even if she couldn't actually sleep, she was so tired that, she wanted to lie down. She glanced outside and saw that an evening storm was building; she could see the red are of lightning, but it was so far away she couldn't hear any thunder. Perhaps if she opened her doors and got into bed, the storm would sweep nearer, bringing the sweet rain with it. Rain was the best sedative, soothing her into what was usually her most restful sleep. 245
She was so tired that it was a long moment before she realized that lightning wasn't red. There was no storm. Someone was on the balcony, his darker form barely discernible in the shadows.
He was watching her. Webb.
She recognized him immediately, so swiftly that she didn't have time to panic at the thought of a stranger on the veranda. He was smoking, and the cigarette glowed in a red arc as he lifted it to his lips. The fiery end burned even brighter when he inhaled, and in the brief flare she could make out the hard outline of his face, the slash of his high cheekbones.
He was leaning against the veranda railing, just outside the frame of light from her windows. A faint, silver light gleamed on his naked shoulders, cast from the stars dotting the night sky. He was wearing dark pants, perhaps jeans, but nothing else.
She had no idea how long he'd been out there, smoking and silently watching her through the glass French doors. She inhaled deeply, her physical awareness of him suddenly so intense that she ached with the force of it. Slowly she nestled her head against the back of the chair and stared

back at him. She was acutely aware of her bare flesh beneath the fabric of the modest nightgown: the breasts he had kissed, the thighs he had parted. Was he remembering that night, too?
Why wasn't he asleep? It was almost one-thirty.
He turned and flicked the cigarette over the railing, into the dew-wet grass below. Roanna's gaze automatically followed the movement, the arc of fire, and when she looked back, he was gone.
She didn't hear his doors close. Had he gone back inside, or was he strolling around on the veranda? With her own doors closed, she wouldn't have heard his open or close. She reached up and turned off the lamp, plunging her room into darkness again. Without the light on she could clearly see Shades of' Twilight the balcony, bathed in that faint, silvery starlight. He wasn't there.
She was shaking a little as she crawled into bed. Why had he been watching her? Had there been any intent to it, or had he simply been outside smoking and looked through her windows because her light was on. Her body ached, and she hugged her arms over her throbbing breasts. It had been two weeks since that night in Nogales, and she yearned to feel his hot, naked flesh against her again, his weight pressing her down into the mattress, moving over her, into her. The soreness left by the loss of her virginity had long since faded, and she wanted to feel him there again. She wanted to go to him in the silence of the night, slip into bed beside him, give him the gift of her own flesh.
Sleep had never been further away.
He gave her a sharp glance when she entered the study the next morning. She had used makeup to mask the dark circles beneath her eyes, but he immediately noted the effort.
"It was a bad night for you, wasn't it?" he asked brusquely.
"Did you get any sleep at all?"
She shook her head but kept her expression blank so he wouldn't guess at her physical torment.
"No, but eventually I'll get tired enough to sleep. I'm used to it."
He closed the file that had been open on the desk, punched the exit key on the keyboard, and turned off the computer. He got to his feet with an air of decision.
"Go change clothes," he ordered.
"Jeans and boots. We're going for a ride."

At the word ride her whole body was consumed with eagerness and renewed energy. Even as tired as she was, a ride sounded like heaven. A horse moving smoothly beneath her, the breeze flowing over her face, the fresh, heated air soothing her lungs. No meetings, no schedule, no pressure. But then she remembered that there was a schedule, and a meeting, and she sighed.
"I can't. There's a-"
"I don't care what kind of meeting you have," he interrupted.
"Call and tell them you won't be there. Today, you're going to do nothing but relax, and that's an order."
Still she hesitated. For ten years her entire existence had been focused on duty, on taking care of business, on helping fill the gap left by his departure. It was difficult to abruptly turn her back on the foundation of those ten years.
He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her toward the door.
"That's an order," he repeated firmly, and gave her a light swat on the rump to send her on her way. It was supposed to be a swat, but instead his touch gentled the motion to a pat. He drew his hand back before it could linger, before his fingers could cup the firm buttock he had just touched.
She stopped at the door and looked back at him. He noted that she was blushing a little. Because he'd patted her ass?
"I didn't know you smoked," she said.
"I usually don't. A pack lasts me a month or longer. I end up throwing most of them away because they've gone stale." She started to ask him why he'd been smoking last night if he didn't normally smoke any more than that but held the words back. She didn't want to pester him with personal questions the way she had when she was a kid. He'd had a lot of patience with her, but now she knew that she'd been a bother to him.
Instead she quietly went upstairs to change clothes, and her heart lifted as she did. An entire day to herself with nothing to do but ride! Pure heaven.
Webb must have called down to the stable, because Loyal was waiting with two horses already saddled. Roanna gave him a shocked look. She'd always taken care of her own horse from the time she'd been big enough to lift a saddle.
"I would have saddled him myself," she protested.
Loyal grinned at her.

"I know you would, but I thought I'd save you some time. You don't get to ride nearly enough, so I wanted you to have a few extra minutes."
Buckley, her old favorite, was fifteen years old now, and she rode him only on more leisurely trails, over easy terrain.
The horse Loyal had chosen for her today was a sturdy bay, not a streak of lightning, but with legs like iron and a lot of stamina. Webb's horse, she noticed, had much the same characteristics. Loyal evidently figured they were going out for more than a Sunday trot.
Webb came out of one of the stalls where he'd been patting the inhabitant, a frisky yearling who had gotten into rough play with some other yearlings and a kick had opened up a cut on his leg.
"Your salve still works magic," he said to Loyal.
"That cut looks like it's a week old instead of just two days."
He took the reins from Loyal, and they swung into their saddles. Roanna felt her body change, the old magic sweeping over her muscles the way it always had. Instinctively she aligned herself with the horse's rhythm from the first step he took, his strength flowing upward into her lithe, graceful limbs.
Webb held his horse a pace back from hers, mainly for the pleasure of watching her, She was the best rider he'd ever seen, period. His own horsemanship was of the quality that, had he had the desire, he could have competed successfully in either of the opposing equestrian poles, show jumping or rodeo, but Roanna was better. Sometimes, every decade or so, there would be an athlete on the scene whose grace of movement transcended the sport, turning every meet, game, or competition into a work of art, and that was what it was like to watch Roanna ride. Even when the pace was easy, as it was now, and they were riding simply for the pleasure of it, her body was fluid as she adjusted to and controlled every nuance of the animal's motion beneath her.
Would she look like that if she were riding him? Webb's breath caught. Would her sleek thighs tighten and relax, lifting her, then letting her slide down onto his erection, so that she enveloped him with one smooth motion while her torso moved in that graceful sway He cut the thought off as blood rushed to his loins, and he shifted uncomfortably. Getting a hard-on while horseback 249
riding wasn't a good idea, but it was difficult to dispel the image. Every time he looked at her he saw the curve of her buttocks, and he remembered

touching them, caressing her, driving deep and hard, and coming inside her with a force that made him feel as if he were exploding.
He was going to do himself a serious injury if he didn't stop thinking about it. He wiped the beads of sweat from his brow and deliberately wrenched his gaze away from her bottom. He looked instead at the trees, the horse's ears, anything except her, until his erection had subsided and he was comfortable again.
They didn't talk. Roanna was so often silent anyway, and now she seemed totally absorbed in the pleasure of the ride and he didn't want to disturb her. He enjoyed the freedom himself. He'd been working almost from the minute he set foot back on Davencourt land, and he hadn't taken the time to acclimate himself. His eyes were accustomed to stark, dramatic mountains and an endless sweep of sky, to cactus and scrub bushes, to clouds of dust and air so clear you could see for fifty miles. He was used to dry, searing heat, to arroyos that would abruptly flood from a rain the day before, far upstream.
He'd forgotten how damn green this place was, every shade of green in creation. It soaked into his eyes, into the pores of his skin. The air was thick and hazy with humidity. Hardwoods and evergreens rustled softly in a breeze so slight he couldn't feel it, wildflowers nodded their technicolor heads, birds darted and soared and sang, insects buzzed.
It hit him hard, low down in the gut. He'd developed a real love for Arizona and would never give up that part of his life, but this was home. This was where his roots were, sunk generations deep into the rich soil. Tallants had lived here for almost two hundred years, and hundreds of years longer than that if you counted the Cherokee and Choctaw heritage that ran in his family.
He hadn't let himself miss Alabama when he left. He had concentrated solely on the future and what he could build with his own two hands in the new home he'd chosen. ButT
now that he was back, it was as if his soul had revived. He'd handle his family, ill-tempered and ungrateful as some of them were. He didn't like having so many Tallants living off the Davenports and not doing a damn thing to earn their keep. Lucinda was the tie between the Davenports and the Tallants, and when she died ... He looked at the slim figure riding in front of him. The family hadn't been prolific, and untimely deaths had

decimated their ranks. Roanna. would be the only surviving Davenport, the last of the line.
No matter what he had to do, he would hold the Davenport legacy intact for her.
They rode for hours, even skipping lunch. He didn't like for her to miss any meals, but she looked so relaxed, with a flush on her cheeks, that he decided it was an acceptable trade-off. He would make certain from now on that she had time for a ride every day if she wanted, and it wouldn't be a bad idea if he applied the same decision to himself.
She didn't bubble over with enthusiasm the way she once would have done, talking nonstop and making him laugh with her quirky, sometimes rowdy observations. That Roanna would never return, he thought with a pang. It wasn't just trauma that had changed her into this controlled, reserved woman; she had grown up. She would have changed anyway, though not to this extent; time and responsibility had a way of transforming people. He missed the mischievous imp, but the woman got to him in a way no one else ever had. This volatile mixture of lust and protectiveness was driving him crazy, the two instincts warring with each other.
He'd stood on the balcony the night before and watched her through the windows while she read. She'd been isolated in a soft pool of light, curled in a huge chair that dwarfed her slender body. The light had picked up the red in her chestnut hair, making it gleam with rich, dark tones. A modest white nightgown had swathed her to her ankles, but he could see the faint shadow of her nipples beneath the cloth, the darkness at the junction of her thighs, and he knew that the gown was all she wore.
He'd known that he could go into her room and kneel down in front of that chair, and she wouldn't protest. He could slide his hands under the gown to cup her bottom and pull her forward. He'd been hard as rock, thinking of it, imagining the feel of her sliding down onto him.
Then she had looked up, as if she'd felt the heat of his thoughts. Her whiskey-brown eyes had been mysterious, shadowed pools as she stared back at him through the glass. Beneath the white cloth, her nipples had hardened into tiny peaks.
Just like that, her body had responded to him. A look. A memory. He could have had her then. He could have her now, he thought, watching her.
Was she pregnant?

It was too soon for her body to show any sign, but he wanted to strip her naked anyway, turn her this way and that with his big hands so he could minutely examine every inch of her in the bright sun, memorize her so that in the future he would be able to tell even the smallest change in her.
He was going to go out of his mind.
Roanna reined in. She felt exhilarated from the ride, but her muscles were telling her that it had been a while since she'd been in the saddle for such a long time.
"I need to walk for a while," she said, dismounting.
"I'm getting a little stiff. You can go on if you want."
She almost hoped that he would; it was a strain, being alone with him, riding with him in such perfect accord, the way they had before. Relaxed, with her guard down, several times she had almost turned to him with a teasing comment. She had caught herself each time, but the close calls made her nervous. It would be a relief to be alone.
But he dismounted as well and fell into step beside her. Roanna glanced at his expression and just as quickly looked away. His jaw was set, and he was staring straight ahead as if he couldn't bear to even look at her.
Stricken, she wondered what she had done wrong. They walked in silence, the horses clopping along behind them.
She hadn't done anything wrong, she realized. They had barely spoken. She had no idea what was bothering him, but she refused to automatically take the blame on herself the way she had always done before.
He put his hand on her arm and drew her to a halt. The horses stopped, shifting behind them. She gave him a questioning look and went still. His eyes were a deep, intense green, glittering with a heat that had nothing to do with anger. He stood very close to her, so close that she could feel the damp heat of his sweaty body, and his broad chest was rising and falling with hard, deep breaths.
The impact of male lust hit her like a blow, and she swayed. Dazedly she tried to think, to pull back, but something inside her responded of its own volition. He wanted her! Happiness bloomed inside her, an internal golden glow that blotted out years of sadness. The reins dropped from her limp fingers, and she surged forward as if pulled by an invisible chain, rising on tiptoe as her arms went around his neck and her soft mouth lifted to his.
He stiffened in her embrace, just for a second, then he too dropped his reins, and his arms went around her, crushing her hard against him. His mouth

was just as hard on hers, his tongue plunging deep. He was almost savaging her, the pressure of the kiss bruising her lips, his grip compressing her ribs. She could feel the ridge of his erection grinding against the soft juncture of her thighs.
She couldn't breathe; a giddy blackness began to creep over her consciousness. Desperately she wrenched her mouth away from him, her head falling back like a flower too heavy for its fragile stem. Her body was on fire and she didn't care, didn't care what he did to her, let him take her here, now, on the ground without even a blanket to cover the earth. She had craved his touch, ached for him' No he said hoarsely, putting his hands on her hips and forcing her away from him.
"God damn it, no!"
The shock was as staggering as that blatant look of lust had been. Roanna stumbled, her knees too wobbly to hold her upright. She grabbed her horse's mane, clenching her
fingers on the coarse hair and letting the big animal take her weight as she leaned against him. All color washed out of her face as she stared at Webb.
"What?" she gasped.
"I told you," he said in a savage tone.
"What happened in Nogales won't happen again."
An icy hollow formed in the pit of her stomach. My God, she had misunderstood. She'd misread that expression on his face. He hadn't wanted her at all, he'd been angry about something. She had wanted so desperately for him to want her that she had ignored everything he'd said and listened only to her own eternal, hopeless longing. She had just made a colossal fool of herself, and she thought she would die of shame.
"I'm sorry," she managed to choke out, backing away from him. The well-trained horse backed up, too, keeping pace with her.
"I didn't mean-I know I promised-Oh, God!" With that despairing wail, she threw herself onto the horse's back and kicked him into a gallop.
She heard him yell something, but she didn't stop. Tears blurred her eyes as she bent over the horse's neck. She didn't think she would ever be able to face him again, and she didn't know if she would ever be able to recover from this final rejection.
Webb stared after her, his own face white, his hands knotted into fists at his side. He cursed himself, using every vicious term he'd ever heard. God, he couldn't have handled that any worse! But he'd been in an agony of desire

all day, and when she had thrown herself against him like that, he'd lost it. The red tide of lust had swamped him, and he'd stopped thinking, plain and simply. He'd have pushed her to the ground and taken her right there, pounded her into the dirt, but she had pulled away from him and her head had fallen back as limply as any rag doll's, and he'd realized how roughly he was treating her.

He'd forced her into bed with him in Nogales, using blackmail as a means of slaking his lust for her. This time he'd been about to use brute force. He'd hauled himself back from the edge, but just barely. God, just barely. He had only kissed her, hadn't even touched her breasts or taken off any of her clothes, and he'd been on the verge of orgasm. He could feel the dampness of preliminary semen on his underwear.

And then he'd pushed her away-Roanna, who had already suffered so much rejection that she had withdrawn from everyone rather than give them the power to hurt her again. Only he retained that power, he was her only vulnerability, and with raw, savage frustration blinding him, he had pushed her away. He'd wanted to explain, to say that he didn't want to take advantage of her the way he had in Nogales. He wanted to talk to her about that night; he wanted to ask when her period was due, if she was already late. But the clumsy words that had come out of his mouth had been like a blow to her, and she had fled before he could say anything else.

There was no point in trying to catch her. Her horse wasn't the fastest thing on four legs, but then neither was his. She had the advantage of weighing about half what he did, and being the better rider to boot. Chasing after her would be a wasted effort, and hard on his mount in this heat.

But he had to talk to her, had to say something, anything, that would chase the haunted, empty look from her eyes.

Roanna didn't go back to the house. She wanted only to hide and never have to face Webb again. She felt shredded inside, and the pain was so new and raw that she simply couldn't face anyone.

She knew she couldn't avoid him forever. She was bound to Davencourt for as long as Lucinda lived. Somehow, tomorrow, she would find the strength to see him and pretend that nothing had ever happened, that she hadn't literally thrown herself at him again. Tomorrow she would have her protective shell rebuilt; maybe some cracks would show where she had mended it, but the walls would hold. She would apologize, preteud it hadn't been important. And she would endure.

She stayed away for the rest of the afternoon, stopping at a shady creek to water the horse and let him graze on the soft, fresh grasses nearby. She sat in the shade and blanked her mind, letting the time drip away as she did at night when she was alone and the sleepless hours stretched before her. Anything could be gotten through, one second at a time, if she refused to let herself feel.

But when the purple and lavender shades of twilight began to darken the world around her, she knew she couldn't delay any longer and reluctantly mounted the horse and turned his head toward Davencourt. An anxious Loyal came out to meet her.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Webb must have been in a black mood when he returned, but Loyal didn't ask what had happened; that was her business, and she'd tell him if she wanted. But he did want to know if she was physically okay, and Roanna managed to nod.

"I'm fine," she said, and her voice was steady, if a trifle husky sounding. Odd; she hadn't cried, but still the strain was evident in her tone.

"You go on up to the house," he said, his brow still furrowed with concern. "I'll take care of the horse."

Well, that was twice in one day. Her protective shell must not be as far along in reconstruction as she'd hoped. She was tired enough, devastated enough, that she simply said, "Thanks," and dragged herself toward the house.

She thought about sneaking up the outside stairs again, but somehow that seemed like too much effort. She had sneaked up those stairs too often in her life, she thought, instead of facing things. So she walked up the front steps, opened the front door, took the main stairs. She was halfway up them when she heard the thud of boot heels and Webb said from the foyer, "Roanna, we need to talk."

It took every ounce of strength she had, but she turned to face him. If anything, he looked as strained as she felt. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, his hand on the newel post and one foot on the first step, as if prepared to come after her if she didn't obey. His eyes were hooded, his mouth a grim line.

"Tomorrow," she said, her voice soft, and turned away . and he let her go. With every step she expected to hear him coming after her, but she reached the top of the stairs and then her room, unhindered.

She took a shower, dressed, went down for supper. Her instinct was to hide away in her room, just as it had been to take the back stairs, but the time for that was past. No more hiding, she thought. She would face what she had to face, handle what she had to handle, and soon she would be free.
Webb watched her broodingly during supper, but afterward he didn't try to maneuver her into a private conversation. She was tired, more exhausted than she thought she'd ever been before, and though with what had happened weighing on her mind she doubted she would even doze that night, still she wanted to lie down, had to lie down. She said good-night to everyone and returned to her room.
As soon as she stretched out in her comfortable bed, she felt the odd, limp weightiness of drowsiness come over her. Whether it was the ride, the accumulated lack of sleep, the stress, or a combination of all of it, she fell deeply asleep.
She didn't know when Webb silently entered the room through the balcony doors and checked on her, listening to her deep, even breathing to make certain she was asleep, watching her for a while, then leaving as quietly as he had entered. On this night, she wasn't awake to watch the hands on the clock sweep inexorably around.
She didn't remember dreaming; she never did.
In the deepest hour of the night she left her bed. Her eyes were open but strangely unseeing. She walked without haste, without hesitation, to her door and opened it. Her bare feet were sure and silent on the carpet as she drifted down the hall, ghostly in her white nightgown.
She wasn't aware of anything until a sudden bursting pain shot through her head. She heard a strangely distant cry, and then there was only darkness.

Chapter 18

Webb bolted out of bed, instantly awake and horribly certain that he'd heard Roanna crying out, but the sound hadn't come from her room. He grabbed up his pants and jerked them on, fastening them as he ran out the door. The cry had sounded as if it came from the direction of the stairs. God, what if she'd fallen down them The rest of the family had been awakened, too. He heard a babble of voices, saw lights coming on, doors opening. Gloria poked her head out just as he ran past.

"What's going on?" she asked fretfully.
He didn't bother to answer, all his attention focused on getting to the stairs. Then he saw her, lying crumpled like a broken doll in the front hall that ran at a right angle to the stairs. He turned on the overhead light, the chandelier almost blinding in its brilliance, and his heart almost stopped. Blood, wet and dark, matted her hair and stained the carpet beneath her head.
He heard a clatter downstairs, as if someone had stumbled into something. Webb looked up and saw Brock standing there blinking sleep from his eyes, not quite understanding what was going on.
"Brock," he snapped.
"There's someone downstairs."
His cousin blinked again, then comprehens, her gaze. Without a word he ran down the stairs, hesitate as he followed his son.
Webb knelt beside Roanna and gently pres sec to her neck, hardly daring to breathe. Panic swel ."M like a balloon, suffocating him. Then he felt ncr pulse throbbing under his fingertips, reassuringly strong, and he went weak with relief. He ignored the rising crescendo of voices around him and gently turned her over. Harlan was blustering, Gloria and Lanette were clinging to each other and making moaning sounds. Corliss stood frozen just outside her bedroom door, her eyes wide with terror as she stared down at Roanna's limp form.
Lucinda struggled through the press of bodies and sank heavily to her knees beside him. Her color was pasty, and her trembling hand dug into his arm.
"Roanna," she whispered, her voice catching.
"Webb, is she-T' "No, she's alive." He wanted to say she'd just been knocked out, but her injury could be more serious than that. She hadn't regained consciousness, and the fear was growing in him again. Impatiently he looked at Gloria and Lanette, driving each other into higher levels of hysteria, and dismissed them as useless. His gaze snapped over to Corliss.
"Corliss! Call 911. Get the paramedics out here, and the sheriff." She just stared at him, not moving, and he barked, "Now!" She swallowed convulsively and darted back into her suite. Webb heard her voice, high and trembling, as she talked to the 911 operator.
"What happened?" Lucinda moaned, stroking Roanna's face with shaking fingers.
"Did she fall?"

"I think she surprised a burglar," Webb said, his voice tight with anger and anxiety, and the fear he was barely holding at bay. He wanted to pick Roanna up in his arms, cradle her against his chest, but common sense told him to let her lie still.
She was still bleeding, her blood soaking into the carpet. A dark red stain was spreading out from where her head lay. 259
"Corliss!" he yelled.
"Bring a blanket and a clean towel!" She was there in just a moment, stumbling over the blanket she was dragging, and simultaneously struggling to pull on a robe over her rather skimpy silk sleep shirt Webb took the blanket and carefully tucked it around Roanna, then folded the towel and as gently as possible slipped it under her head, cushioning it from the floor and positioning the pad so that it pressed against the bleeding wound.
"W-will she be all right?" Corliss asked, her teeth chattering from shock.
"I hope so," he said grimly. There was a savage pain in his chest. What if she wasn't all right? What would he do? Lucinda collapsed backward, her legs folding under her.
She buried her face in her hands and began sobbing brokenly.
Gloria stopped wailing, the sound ceasing as if it had been cut with a knife. She dropped to her knees beside her sister and put her arms around her.
"She'll be all right, she'll be fine," she crooned in reassurance, smoothing Lucinda's white hair.
Roanna stirred, moaning a little as she tried to lift her hand to her head. She didn't have the strength or the coordination, and her arm fell limply back to the carpet. Webb's heart leaped wildly. He picked up her hand and cradled it in his.
"Roanna?"
At his tone, Lucinda pulled away from Gloria, frantically scrambling closer. Her expression was both terrified and hopeful.
Roanna took two deep breaths, and her eyelids fluttered open. Her gaze was unfocused, confused, but she was regaining consciousness, and that was what mattered.
Webb had to swallow a lump in his throat.
"Roanna," he said again, leaning over her, and with an obvious effort she looked at him, blinking as she tried to clear her vision.
"You're fuzzy," she mumbled.

He could hardly breathe, his heart was pounding so violently. He placed her fingers against his rough cheek.
"Yeah, I need to shave." Shades of 'wilight "Not that," she said, her words slurred. She took another deep breath, as if exhausted.
"Four eyes."
Lucinda gulped back her sobs, choked laughter mingling with the tears as she reached for Roanna's other hand.
A tiny frown pulled at Roanna's brow.
"My head hurts," she announced in confusion, and closed her eyes again.
Her speech was clearer. She tried again to touch her head, but Webb and Lucinda were each holding a hand, and neither of them was inclined to let go.
"I imagine it does," Webb said, forcing himself to speak calmly.
"You've got a hell of a bump back there."
"Did I fail?" she murmured.
"I guess so," he replied, not wanting to alarm her until he knew something for certain, Brock and Greg came panting back up the stairs. Brock was wearing only a pair of jeans, zipped but not snapped, and his sturdy chest gleamed with sweat. He had picked up a poker from somewhere, and Greg had taken the time to get the .22 squirrel rifle from its rack over the fireplace in the den. Webb looked inquiringly at them, and they shook their heads.
"He got away," Greg mouthed silently.
Sirens were wailing in the distance. Greg said, "I'd better put this up before the sheriff gets here. I'll let them in." He went back downstairs to return the rifle to its rack, lest he alarm a deputy already on edge with adrenaline.
Roanna tried to sit up. Webb put his hand on her shoulder and pressed her back down, alarmed at how little effort it took to do so.
"No you don't. You're going to stay right here until a medic says it's all right for you to move."
"My head hurts," she said again, a bit truculently.
It had been so long since he'd heard that tone in her voice that he couldn't help grinning, despite the terror that had been clawing at his insides and was only now beginning to truly subside.
"I know it does, honey. Sitting up will only make it worse. Just lie still."
"I want to get up."

"In a minute. Let the paramedics take a look at you first." She gave an impatient sigh.
"All right." But before the
sirens had wound to a stop outside, she was trying again to sit up, and he knew she was disoriented. He'd seen it before in injured people; the instinct was a primitive one, to get up, keep moving, put distance between yourself and whatever had caused the injury.
He could hear Greg explaining as he led a veritable parade of people up the stairs. There were six paramedics and at least that many deputies, with more arriving, from the sound of the sirens as additional vehicles speeded up the road.
Webb and Lucinda were shouldered to the side as the paramedics, four men and two women, gathered around Roanna. Webb backed against the wall. Lucinda clung weakly to him, trembling, and he put a supporting arm around her. She leaned heavily against him, using his strength, and with dismay he felt how fragile her once strong body felt in his grip.
More deputies arrived, and the sheriff. Booley Watts was retired now, but the new sheriff, Carl Beshears, had been Booley's chief deputy for nine years before being elected sheriff, and he had worked on Jessie's case. He was a compactly muscular man with iron gray hair and cold, suspicious eyes. Booley had operated with a sort of good old-boy Andy Taylor kind of manner; Beshears was more brusque, straight to the point, though he had learned to temper the bulldog, straight-ahead tactics he'd learned in the marines. He began gathering the family together, ushering them to the side.
"Folks, let's get out of the medics' way now, and let them take care of Miss Roanna." His steely gaze lit on Webb.
"Now, what happened here?"
Until then, Webb hadn't realized the similarities between what had happened to Roanna tonight and Jessie's death ten years earlier. He had been concentrating on Roanna, terrified for her, taking care of her. The old, cold fury began to build in him as he realized Beshears suspected him of attacking Roanna, perhaps trying to kill her.
He ruthlessly suppressed his anger, though, because now wasn't the time for it.
"I heard Roanna scream," he said in as even a tone as he could manage. "The sound came from the front of the house, and I was afraid she'd gotten up without turning on any lights and fallen down the stairs. But when I got

here, I saw her lying just where she is now."
"How did you know it was Roanna screaming?"
"I just did," he said flatly.
"You didn't think it could be anyone else in the house who'd gotten up?"
Lucinda gathered herself, galvanized by the obvious suspicion in Beshears's voice.
"Not usually," she said in a firm tone.
"Roanna suffers from insomnia. If anyone is wandering around the house at night, it's likely to be her."
"But you were awake," Beshears said to Webb.
"No. I woke up when I heard her scream."
"We all did," Gloria put in.
" Roanna used to have nightmares, you know, and that's what I thought was happening. Webb ran past my door just as I opened it."
"You're sure it was Webb."
"I know it was," Brock put in, squarely facing the sheriff.
"I was right behind him."
Beshears looked frustrated, then shrugged, evidently deciding he didn't have a tie between the two events after all.
"So, did she fall or what? The dispatcher said it was a call for the paramedics and the sheriff's department."
"Just as I got to her," Webb said, "I heard something downstairs."
"Like what?" Beshears's eyes sharpened again.
"I don't know. A crash." Webb looked at Brock and Greg.
"Brock and I went downstairs to take a look," Greg said.
"A lamp had been knocked over in the den. I went outside while Brock checked the rest of the house." He hesitated.
"I think I saw someone running, but I couldn't swear to it. My eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark."
"What direction?" Beshears asked briefly, already beckoning to one of his deputies.
"To the right, toward the highway."
The deputy approached, and Beshears turned to him.
"Y'all get some lights and check the yard on the other side 263
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of the driveway. There's a heavy dew tonight, so if anybody's been through there, it'll show on the grass. There may have been an intruder in the

house." The deputy nodded and departed, taking several of his fellows with him.
One of the paramedics came over. He had obviously leaped out of bed to answer the call; a ball cap covered his uncombed hair, and his eyes were puffy from sleep. But he was alert, his gaze sharp.
"I'm pretty sure she's going to be all right, but I want to transport her to the hospital to be checked out and to have that cut in her head stitched up. Looks like she's got a mild concussion, too. They'll probably want to keep her for twenty-four hours, just to make certain she's okay."
"I'll go with her," Lucinda said, but suddenly staggered. Webb grabbed her.
"Lay her down on the floor," the paramedic said, reaching for her, too.
But Lucinda batted their hands away and pulled herself erect once more. Her color still wasn't good, but she glared fiercely at them.
"Young man, I will not lie down on the floor. I'm old and upset, that's all. You tend to Roanna and don't pay any attention to me."
He couldn't treat her without her permission, and she knew it. Webb looked down at her and thought about picking her up and carrying her to the hospital himself, bullying her into letting a doctor check her. She must have known what he was thinking, because she looked up and managed a smile.
"It's nothing to fret about," she said.
"Roanna's the one who needs seeing to."
"I'll go with her to the hospital, Aunt Lucinda," Lanette said, surprising everyone.
"You need to rest. You and Mama stay here. I'll go put on some clothes if y'all will gather up the things she'll need."
"I'll drive," Webb said. Lucinda started to protest again, but Webb put his arm around her.
"Lanette's right, you need to rest. You heard what the paramedic said, Roanna will be all right. It would be different if she were in danger, but she isn't. Lanette and I will be there with her." Lucinda clutched his hand.
"You'll call me from the hospital, let me talk to her?"
"Just as soon as she's settled," he promised.
"They'll have to do X-rays first, I imagine, so it could take a while. And she might not feel like talking," he warned.
"She'll have a hell of a headache."
"Just let me know she's all right."

With that, Lucinda and Gloria went down the long hall to the back bedrooms, to gather the personal items Roanna would need for even a short stay in the hospital. Webb and Lanette went to their own rooms to dress. It took him less than two minutes, and he reached Roanna's side just as they were transferring her to a stretcher to carry her downstairs.
She was fully conscious now, and her eyes were wide with alarm as she looked up at him. He took her hand again, folding her cold, slender fingers against his rough, warm palm.
"I don't like this," she said fretfully.
"If I need stitches, why can't I just drive to the emergency room? I don't want to be carried. "
"You have a concussion," he replied.
"It's not safe for you to drive."
She sighed and gave in. He squeezed her hand.
"Lanette and I are going to be with you. We'll be right behind the ambulance."
She didn't protest again, and he almost wished she had. Every time he looked at her, he was hit by another wave of panic. She was paper white, what part of her face that wasn't covered by blood. The dark, rusty stain was spread over her face and neck, where it had run down from the laceration on her scalp.
Lanette came hurrying down, carrying a small overnight case, just as they were sliding the stretcher into the ambulance.
"I'm ready," she said to Webb, already moving past him toward the garage.
Sheriff Beshears fell into step beside Weob.
"The boys 265
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found marks in the dew," he said.
"Looks like someone took out running across the yard. Somebody's been messing with the lock on the kitchen door, too, there's some scratches on the metal. Miss Roanna's lucky, if she came face-to-face with a burglar and a bump on the head's all she got."
Remembering how she had looked like a crumpled little doll lying in the hall, with blood spreading around her, Webb thought Beshears's definition of lucky was different from his own.
"I'll be at the hospital later on to ask her some questions," the sheriff continued.

"We'll do some more checking around here."
The ambulance was pulling out. Webb turned away and strode to the garage, where Lanette was waiting for him. It took several hours and a shift change at Helen Keller Hospital before Roanna had been scanned, stitched, and settled into a private room. Webb impatiently waited in the hallway while Lanette helped her to clean up and get dressed in a fresh nightgown. The bright morning sun was shining through the windows when he was finally allowed to reenter the room. She was lying in bed, looking almost normal now that most of the blood had been washed away. Her hair was still matted with it, but that would have to be taken care of later. A white pad covered the stitches in the back of her head, and stretchy gauze had been wrapped around her head to hold the bandage in place. She was very pale, but all in all she looked much better.
He eased down on the side of the bed, careful not to jar her.
"The doctor told us to wake you up every hour. That's a helluva thing to do to an insomniac, isn't it?" he teased.
She didn't smile as he'd hoped.
"I think I'll save you the trouble and just stay awake."
"Do you feel like talking on the phone? Lucinda was frantic."
Carefully she pushed herself higher in the bed.
"I'm okay, it's just a headache, Will you dial the number for me?"
Just a headache from a bruised brain, he thought grimly as he picked up the receiver and punched the number for an outside line, then the number at Davencourt. She still thought she'd fallen, and no one had told her any differently. Sheriff Beshears wasn't going to get a lot of information from her.
Roanna talked briefly to Lucinda, just long enough to reassure her that she felt all right, a blatant lie, then gave the phone back to Webb. He was going to give Lucinda his own reassurances, but to his surprise it was Gloria who came on the line.
"Lucinda had another spell after y'all left," she said.
"She's too stubborn to go to the hospital, but I've called her doctor and he's going to stop by this morning."
He glanced at Roanna; the last thing she needed to hear right now was that Lucinda was ill.
"Keep her in line," he said briefly, and lowered his voice as he turned away so Roanna wouldn't be able to hear him.

"I'm not going to say anything to the others now, so don't mention it to them just yet. I'll call in a couple of hours and check on her."
He got off the phone just as Sheriff Beshears came in and tiredly settled himself into one of the two chairs in the room. Lanette was in the other, but Webb wasn't inclined to sit anyway. He wanted to be closer to Roanna's side.
"Well, you're looking better than the last time I saw you," Beshears said to Roanna.
"How do you feel?"
"I don't believe I'll go dancing tonight," she said in that solemn way of hers, and he laughed.
"Don't guess you will. I want to ask you a few questions if you feel up to it."
A puzzled look crossed her face.
"Of course."
"What do you remember about last night?"
"When I fell? Nothing. I don't know how it happened." Beshears shot a quick look at Webb, who gave a tiny shake of his head. The sheriff cleared his throat.
"The thing is, you didn't fall. It looks like someone broke into Davencourt last night, and we figure you walked right up on him."
If Roanna had been pale before, now she was absolutely
white. Her face took on a pinched, frightened expression.
"Someone hit me," she murmured. She didn't say anything else, didn't move. Webb, watching her closely, had the distinct impression she was drawing in on herself, holding everything inside, and he didn't like it. Deliberately he reached out and took her hand, squeezing it to let her know she wasn't alone, and he didn't give a damn what conclusions Beshears drew about his action.
"You don't remember anything?" the sheriff persisted, though his gaze flickered briefly to their clasped hands.
"I know everything's confused now, but maybe you caught a glimpse of him and you just haven't realized it yet. Let's take it step by step. Do you remember leaving your room?"
"No," she said tonelessly. Her hand was motionless in Webb's grip. Once she would have been clinging to him, but now she didn't hold on to him at all. It wasn't just that she didn't seem to need him anymore, but that she

didn't want to even be around him. For a while, when she had been so confused, all the barriers had been down and she had seemed to be comforted by his presence, to need him. But now she was pulling away from him again, putting emotional distance between them even though she made no effort to physically pull away. Because of what had happened between them yesterday, or was it something else, a detail about her injury? Did she remember something after all? Why didn't she want to tell the sheriff?

"What's the last thing you remember?" Beshears asked.

"Going to bed."

"Your folks say you have insomnia. Maybe you were awake, and you heard something and went to see what it was."

"I don't remember," she said. The pinched look was more pronounced.

He sighed and got to his feet.

"Well, don't fret about it. A lot of folks don't remember at first what happened right before they took a bump on the noggin, but sometimes it comes back to them after a while. I'll be checking back with you, Miss Roanna. Webb, come on out in the hall with me, and I'll tell you what we've done so far."

Webb went with him, and Beshears strolled down the hall toward the elevators.

"We followed the trail through the weeds all the way to that pasture road that cuts off from the highway, just past the turnoff going up to Davencourt," he said.

"I figure he left his car parked there, but it's been a couple of weeks since we've had any rain and the ground was too hard for us to get any tread marks. Just to be sure, we brought in a couple of dogs, and they followed the trail as far as the pasture road, too, but nothing after that. It's a good place to hide a car; the brush is so thick anything parked even twenty yards up the road would be damn hard to see even in the daylight, much less at night."

"He got in through the kitchen door?"

"That's what it looks like. We couldn't find any other sign of entry."

Beshears snorted.

"I thought he was a fool at first, for not going in through some of those fancy glass doors y'all got all over the house, but maybe he was pretty smart. You think about it, the kitchen is the best place. Everyone should be

upstairs in bed at that time of night, so he don't want to risk waking anyone by going through any of the upper veranda doors. The doors on the patio are on the side of the house, visible from the stables. But the kitchen door is on the back, and you can't see it from the driveway, the stables, or anywhere else."
They had reached the elevators, but Beshears didn't stop to punch the button to call it. He and Webb strolled on to the end of the hall, out of earshot of anyone getting off the elevator on that floor.
"Was anything taken?" Webb asked.
"Not that anyone can tell. That lamp's knocked over in the den, but except for that and the lock on the kitchen door nothing looks like it was touched. Don't know what he was doing in the den, unless he got rattled when Miss Roanna screamed. I suppose he ran back downstairs, looking for a quick way out, but the front door has a double lock on it and
he couldn't figure it out in the dark. He ran into the den, saw it doesn't have an outside door, and accidentally blundered into the lamp. Looks like he finally went out the kitchen door, same as he got in."
Webb roughly ran his hand through his hair.
"This won't happen again," he said.
"I'll have a security system installed this week."
"Y'all should already have had one." Beshears gave him a look of disapproval.
"Booley used to go on and on about how easy it would be to break into that house, but he never could talk Miss Lucinda into doing anything about it. You know how old folks are. With the house so far out of town, she felt safe."
"She didn't want to feel like she was in a fortress," Webb said, remembering the comments Lucinda had made over the years.
"This will probably change her mind. Don't bother with one of the systems that automatically call for help, because y'all are so far out of town it would be a waste of money. Put in a loud alarm that'll wake everyone up, if you want, but remember that wires can be cut. Your best bet is to put good locks on the doors and windows, and get a dog. Everybody should have a dog."
"Lucinda's allergic to dogs," Webb said wryly. He wasn't about to get one now and make her miserable for the few remaining months of her life.
Beshears sighed.

"Guess that's why you never had one. Nell, forget that idea." They turned and walked back toward the elevators.
"Miss Lucinda had another spell after y'all left."
"I know. Gloria told me."
"Stubborn old woman," Beshears commented. They reached the elevators, and this time he punched the button.
"Call me if Roanna remembers anything, 'cause otherwise we don't have jack shit.
Roanna rested quietly the remainder of the day, though she was troubled by nausea. The doctor ordered a mild medication to remedy that, and she ate most of her lunch, a light meal of soup and fruit. Lanette was surprisingly good in a sickroom, making sure Roanna had plenty of ice water in the bedside pitcher where she could reach it, and helping her to the bathroom when she needed to go. Otherwise she sat patiently, reading a magazine she'd bought in the gift shop, or watching television with the sound turned low.
Webb was restless. He wandered in and out of the room, moodily watching Roanna's face whenever he was there. Something about her manner bothered him more and more. She was too quiet. She had reason to be upset and alarmed, but instead she was showing very little response to anything. She avoided meeting his gaze and pleaded a headache when he tried to talk to her. The nurses checked on her regularly and said she was doing okay, her pupil responses were normal, but still he was uneasy.
He called back twice to check on Lucinda, but both times Lucinda answered the phone herself and wouldn't let him talk to Gloria.
"I'm fine," she said crossly.
"Don't you think the doctor would have put me in the hospital if anything serious was wrong? I'm old, I have cancer, and my heart isn't what it used to be. What else do you think could be wrong? Frankly, I can't think why I'd bother even taking medicine for a cold."
Both times she asked to talk to Roanna, and both times Roanna insisted that she felt well enough to talk. Webb listened to her side of the conversation and realized how guarded she sounded, as if she were trying to hide something.
Had she seen her assailant after all?
If so, why hadn't she told Beshears? There was no reason he could think of for her to -keep something like that secret, no one she would be protecting.

She was definitely hiding something, though, and he was determined to find out what. Not right now, not while she was still rocky, but as soon as she was home, he was going to sit her down in a private place for a little talk.
Lanette said she would stay overnight, and Webb finally 271
left at nine that night. He was back at six-thirty the next morning, though, ready to take Roanna home as soon as she was released. She was ready, already dressed in street clothes and looking much better than she had the day before. Twenty-four hours of enforced rest had done her a lot of good, even under the circumstances.
"Did you sleep any?" he asked.
She shrugged.
"As much as anyone does in a hospital, I suppose."
Behind her, Lanette met his eyes and shook her head.
It was after eight when the doctor came in and checked her pupil responses, then smiled and told her to go home.
"Take it easy for about a week," he said, "then see your family doctor for a checkup."
Webb drove them home then, easing over every bump and railroad track in an effort not to jar her head. Everyone at home at the time came out to meet her, and his plan to have a private talk with her was soon demolished. He didn't have a chance to be alone with her all day long. She was promptly put to bed, though she complained a bit irritably that she would rather be in her chair, but nothing would satisfy Lucinda except bed rest. Lucinda and Gloria fussed over her, Bessie was in and out at least ten times asking if she was comfortable, and Tansy left her kitchen domain to personally bring up the meal trays she had prepared with Roanna's favorites. Even Corliss stirred herself to visit and uncomfortably ask if she was all right.
Webb kept watch, knowing he'd get his chance.
It didn't come until late that night, when everyone else had gone to bed. He waited in the darkness, watching the veranda, and as he had expected, it wasn't long before a light came on in the next room.
He knew her veranda doors were locked, because he'd locked them himself before leaving her room the last time. He went out into the hallway, where the lights had been left burning at night since Roanna had been hurt, and quietly entered her room.
She had gotten out of bed and was once again ensconced

in that huge, soft-looking chair, though she wasn't reading. He supposed her head still hurt too much for her to do any reading. Instead she'd turned on her television, with the sound so low he could barely hear it.
She looked around with a guilty expression when the door opened.
"Caught you," he said softly, shutting the door behind him.
Immediately he caught a hint of uneasiness in her face, before she smoothed her expression to blankness.
"I'm tired of being in bed," she explained.
"I've rested so much I'm not in the least bit sleepy."
"I understand," he said. She'd been in bed for two days, no wonder she was sick of it.
"That isn't what I wanted to talk about."
"I know." She looked down at her hands.
"I made a fool of myself day before yesterday. It won't happen again."
So much had happened since then that for a moment he stared blankly at her, then realized she was talking about what had happened when they were riding. He'd been a clumsy idiot, and typicCy, Roanna was taking the blame for it.
"You didn't make a fool of yourself," he said harshly, walking over to the veranda doors to check them again, just to make certain they were locked.
"I didn't want to take advantage of you, and I handled it all wrong." He stood there, watching her reflection in the glass.
"But that's something we'll talk about later. Right now, I want to know what it is you aren't telling the sheriff."
She kept her gaze on her hands, but he saw how still she went.
"Nothing." He could see the guilt, the discomfort, even in the reflection.
"Roanna." He turned around and went over to her, squatting down in front of the chair and taking her hands in his. She was sitting in what was evidently her favorite position, with her feet pulled up onto the seat and tucked her under nightgown. He looked at the bandage on her head rather than the shadowy peaks of her nipples poking against the white cloth, because he didn't want anything to distract
him from what he wanted to find out, and just being close to her was bad enough.
"You can fool the others, but they don't know you the way I do. I can tell when you're hiding something. Did you see who hit you? Do you remember more than you're telling?"

"No," she said miserably.
"Then what is it?"
"Nothing-"
"Ro," he said warningly.
"Don't lie to me. I know you too well. What are you hiding?"
She bit her lip, worrying it between her teeth, and her golden brown eyes lifted to him, filled with a distress so intense he almost reached out for her in comfort.
"I walk in my sleep," she said.
He stared at her, astounded. Whatever he'd been expecting, that wasn't it.
"What?"
"I'm a sleepwalker. I guess that's part of the reason I have insomnia," she explained in a soft tone, looking down again.
"I hate waking up in strange places, not knowing how I got there, what I've done, if anyone has seen me. I only do it when I'm in a deep sleep, so-"
"So you don't sleep," he finished. He felt himself shattering inside as he realized the sheer enormity of the burden she carried, the pressure under which she lived. God, how did she stand it? How did she function? For the first time, he sensed the slender core of pure steel in her. She wasn't little, needy, insecure Roanna any longer. She was a woman, a Davenport, Lucinda's granddaughter, with her share of the Davenport strength.
"You were sleepwalking night before last."
She inhaled deeply.
"I must have been. I was so tired, I went to sleep as soon as I got in bed. I don't remember anything until I woke up in the hall with a splitting headache and you and Lucinda leaning over me. I thought I had fallen, though I've never had any accidents before when I was sleepwalking."
"Jesus." He stared at her, shaken by the image that came to mind. She had walked up to the burglar like a lamb to slaughter, not seeing him even though her eyes had been open. Sleepwalkers looked awake, but they weren't. Possibly the burglar even thought she could identify him. Attempted burglary and assault weren't crimes that warranted murder to avoid arrest, but she could be in danger anyway. Not only were new locks going on everywhere, as well as an alarm system that would wake the dead if there was an unauthorized intrusion, but he would make damn certain everyone in the county knew she had a concussion and didn't remember anything about the incident. An article about the attempted burglary had

been in the paper, and as a followup, he would have that information printed as well.
"Why didn't you tell the sheriff that you walk in your sleep?"
"Lanette was there," she said, as if that were reason enough, It was, but it took him a moment to think it through.
"No one knows, do they?"
She gave a slight shake of her head, then winced and stopped the motion.
"It's embarrassing, knowing that I wander around in my nightgown, but it's more than that. If anyone knew.. ."
Again, it didn't take a genius to follow her thoughts.
"Corliss," he said grimly.
"You're afraid the little bitch would play nasty tricks on you." He rubbed his thumbs over the backs of her hands, feeling the slender, elegant bones just under the skin.
She didn't respond to that, just said, "It's better if no one knows."
"She won't be here much longer." He was glad he could make that promise.
Roanna looked startled.
"She won't? Why?"
"Because I told her she'd have to move out. She can stay until Lucinda ... She can stay for a few more months if she behaves herself. If she doesn't, she'll have to leave before then. Lanette and Greg will have to find another place to live, too. Greg makes good money, there's no excuse for them to be sponging off Lucinda the way they have."
"I think living here was Lanette's decision, hers and Gloria's."
"Probably, but Greg could have said no. I don't know about Brock. I've always liked him, but I didn't expect him to be a moocher."
"Brock has a plan," Roanna explained, and unexpectedly a faint smile touched her pale lips.
"He's living here so he can save as much money as possible before he gets married. He's going to build his own house. He and his fiancde have already had an architect draw up the blueprints."
Webb stared at her mouth, enchanted by that tiny, spontaneous smile. He hadn't had to coax that one out of her.
"Well, at least that's a plan," he grumbled to hide his reaction.
"Gloria and Harlan are in their seventies; I'm not going to make them move. They can live here the rest of their lives if they want."
"I know you don't want the house crammed with relatives," she said.

"I'll be moving out, too-"
"You aren't going anywhere," he interrupted harshly, rising to his feet.
She looked at him in bewilderment.
"This is your home, damn it. Did you think I was trying to tell you to get out?" He couldn't keep the anger out of his voice, not just at the thought of her leaving, but that she had thought he would want her to.
"I'm just a distant cousin, too," she reminded him.
"How would it look for us to be living here together, even with Gloria and Harlan here? It's different now, because the house is so full, but when the others move out people will gossip if I don't, too. You'll want to get married again someday, and-"
"This is your home," he repeated, grinding his teeth together in an effort to keep his voice down.
"If one of us has to move out, I will."
"You can't do that," she said, shocked.
"Davencourt will be yours. It wouldn't be right for you to leave just so I'll have a place to stay."
"Haven't you ever thought that it should be yours?" he snapped, goaded beyond endurance.
"You're the Davenport. Don't you resent the hell out of me for being here?"
"No. Yes." She watched him for a moment, her eyes shadowed and unreadable as the words lay between them.
"I don't resent you, but I envy you, because Davencourt is going to be yours. You were raised with that promise. You shaped your life around taking care of this family, this house. Because of that, you've earned it, and it should be yours. I knew when I went to find you in Arizona that Lucinda would change her will, giving everything to you again; we discussed it beforehand. But even though I envy you, I've never thought of Davencourt as mine. It's been home since I was seven years old, but it wasn't mine. It was Lucinda's, and soon it'll be yours."
She sighed, and gingerly rested her head back against the chair.
"I have a degree in business administration, but I got it only because Lucinda needed help. I've never been interested in business and finance, while you thrive on it. The only kind of work I've ever wanted to do is train horses. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in business meetings; you take that part of it, and welcome to it. I won't be left destitute, and you know it. I have my own inheritance."

He opened his mouth and she held up her hand to stop him.
"I'm not finished. When I'm no longer needed here" She paused, and he knew she was thinking of Lucinda's death, as he did. It was always there, looming in their future whether they could bring themselves to speak openly of it or not.
"VFhen it's over, I'm going to set up my own stables, my own house. For the first time something will belong to me, and no one else will ever be able to take it away."
Webb's fists clenched. Her gaze was very clear, yet somehow distant, as if she, looked back at all the things and people that had been taken from her when she'd been too young and helpless to have any control over her life: her parents, her home, the very center of her existence. Her selfesteem had been systematically stripped from her by Jessie, with Lucinda's unknowing assistance. But she had had him 277
as her bulwark until he, too, had turned from her, and since then Roanna had allowed herself to have no one, to care for nothing. She had in effect put herself in dormancy. While her life was on hold she had devoted herself to Lucinda, but that time was coming to an end.
When Lucinda died, Roanna planned to leave.
He glued down at her. Everyone else wanted Davencourt, and they weren't entitled to it. Roanna was legitimately entitled to it, and she didnt want it. She wanted to leave.
He was so pissed off that he decided he'd better go back to his room before he really lost his temper, something she wasn't in any shape to endure and that he didn't want to do anyway, He stalked to the door, but paused there for the last word.
"We'll work all that out later," he said.
"But you are not moving out of this house."

Chapter 19

It was the day of Lucinda's welcome-home party for him, and as Webb drove home he wondered how big of a disaster it would be. He didn't care, but it would disturb Lucinda a great deal if things didn't go exactly as she had planned. From what he'd experienced that afternoon, things weren't looking good.

It hadn't been much, not even a confrontation, but as a barometer of public sentiment it had been fairly accurate. He'd had lunch at the Painted Lady with the chairman of the agricultural commission, and the comments of the two women behind him had been easily overheard.
"He certainly has a lot of brass on his face," one of the women had said. She hadn't raised her voice, but neither had she lowered it enough to ensure she couldn't be heard.
"If he thinks ten years is long enough for us to forget what happened ... Well, he has another think coming."
"Lucinda Davenport never could see any fault in her favorites," the other woman commented.
Webb had looked across at the commissioner's face, which was turning dark red as the man studiously applied himself to his lunch and pretended he couldn't hear a thing.
"You'd think even the Davenports would balk at trying to force a murderer down our throats," the first woman said.
Webb's eyes had narrowed, but he hadn't turned around and confronted the women. Suspected murderer or not, he'd been raised to be a southern gentleman, and that meant he wouldn't deliberately embarrass the ladies in public. If men had been saying the same things he would have reacted differently, but not only were the two verbal snipers female, they were rather elderly, from the sound of their voices. Let them talk; his hide was tough enough to take it.
But the social matriarchs wielded a lot of power, and if they all felt the same way, Lucinda's party would be ruined. He didn't care for himself; if people didn't want to do business with him, fine, he'd find someone who did. But Lucinda would be both hurt and disappointed, and blame herself for not defending him ten years ago. For her sake, he hoped The windshield shattered, spraying Webb with tiny bits of glass. Something hot hummed by his ear, but he didn't have time to worry about it. His reflexive dodge had jerked the steering wheel in his hand, and the right wheels of the car bumped violently as the car veered onto the shoulder of the road. Grimly he fought for control, trying to ease the car back onto the pavement before he hit a hole or a culvert that would send him careening into the ditch. He was effectively blinded by the shattered windshield, which had held together but turned white with a thick webbing of fractures. A rock, he thought, though the truck in front of him had been far enough away that he wouldn't have

expected the tires to throw a rock that far. Maybe a bird, but he would have seen something that big.
He got all four wheels back onto the pavement, and the car's handling smoothed. Automatically he braked, looking out the relatively undamaged right side of the windshield in an effort to judge his distance to the shoulder of the road and whether or not he would have enough room to pull off. He was almost to the side road that led to Davencourt's
private road. If he could rez, be as much traffic The windshield shattered right. Part of the broken glass sag, diamond bits held together by the
the glass from splintering. Rock, heft, Someone was shooting at him.
Quickly he leaned forward and punch with his fist, tearing it down so he could seL then he pushed the gas pedal to the floor. He rocketed forward, the force jerking him back in the seat. If he stopped and gave the shooter a stationary target, he'd be dead, but it was damn hard to make an accurate shot at someone going eighty-five miles an hour.
Remembering that hot humming he'd heard just beside his right ear after the first shot, he made a rough estimate of the trajectory of the first bullet and mentally placed the gunman on a high bank just past the cutoff for the side road. He was almost to the road now, and if he turned onto it, the gunman would have a broadside shot at him. Webb kept the gas pedal down and roared past the cutoff, then past the thickly wooded pasture road where Beshears thought the burglar had hidden his car Webb narrowed his eyes against the whistling wind and stood on the brakes, spinning the steering wheel as he threw the car into a state-trooper-turnaround, a maneuver he'd mastered when he'd been a wild-ass teenager running this same road, with its long, flat straightaway. Smoke boiled from his tires as they left rubber on the pavement. Another car blew past him, horn blaring. His car rocked and skidded, then straightened out with its hood pointing back in the direction from which he'd come. This was a four-lane divided highway, so that meant he was going the wrong way, against traffic. Two cars were headed straight toward him. He hit the gas again.
He reached the pasture road just before he would have collided head-on with one of those cars, and took the turn on two wheels. He braked immediately and threw the
transmission into park. He jumped out of the car before it stopped rocking, dodging into the thick cover to the side and leaving the car to block the exit from the pasture road, just in ease this was where the shooter had left his

car. Was it the same man who had broken into the house, or coincidence? Anyone who used this highway on a regular basis, which was thousands of people, could have noticed the pasture road. It looked like it was a hunting road leading up into the woods, but the trees and bushes cleared out after about a quarter of a mile and opened up onto a wide field that butted up against Davencourt land.

"Fuck coincidence," he whispered to himself as he weaved his way silently through the trees, taking advantage of the natural cover to keep anyone from getting a clear shot at him.

He didn't know what he'd do if he came face-to-face with someone carrying a hunting rifle while he himself was barehanded, but he didn't intend for that to happen. His had been a fairly typical rural upbringing in spite of, or perhaps because of, the advantage of living at Davencourt. Lucinda and Yvonne had made certain he fit in with his classmates, and the people he'd be dealing with the rest of his life. He'd hunted squirrel and deer and possum, learning early how to slip through thick woods without making a sound, how to stalk game that had eyes and ears a lot better than his. The rustlers who had taken his cattle and hightailed it into Mexico had found out how good he was at tracking and at not being seen if he didn't want to be. If the gunman was in here, he'd find him, and the man wouldn't know he was anywhere around until it was too late.

There was no other vehicle parked on the pasture road. Once he'd established that, Webb hunkered down and listened to the sounds around him. Five minutes later, he knew that he was stalking the wind. No one was there. If he'd figured the trajectory correctly, then the shooter had taken another route off that high bank.

He stood up and walked back to his car. He looked at the demolished windshield, with those two small holes punched in it, and got seriously pissed off. Those had been good shots; either one or both of them could have killed him if the angle of fire had been corrected just a hair. He opened the door and leaned in, examining the seats. There was a ragged hole in the back of the driver's headrest, just about an inch from where his right ear had been. The bullet had had enough power, even after going through the windshield, to completely pierce the seat and make an exit hole in the back windshield. The second bullet had torn a hole in the back seat where it entered.

He picked up the cellular phone, flipped it open, and called Carl Beshears.

Carl drove out without lights or sirens, at Webb's request. He didn't even bring a deputy with him.
"Keep it quiet," Webb had said.
"The fewer people who know about this, the better."
Now Carl walked around the car, looking at every detail.
"Damn, Webb," he finally said.
"Someone's got a real hardon for you."
"Tough. I'm not in the mood to get fucked."
Carl cast a quick look at Webb. There was a cold, dangerous look on his face, an expression that boded ill for anyone who crossed him. Everyone knew Webb Taant had a temper, but this wasn't temper: this was something else, something deliberate and ruthless.
"Got any ideas?" he asked.
"You've been back in town what a week and a half? You're making enemies real fast, serious ones.
"I think it s the same man who broke into the house," Webb said,
"Interesting theory." Carl thought about it, stroking his jaw.
"So you don't think it was just a burglar?"
"Not now, I don't. Nothing has happened at Davencourt for the past ten years, until I came home."
Carl grunted, and stroked his jaw some more as he studied Webb.
"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"
"I didn't kill Jessie," Webb growled.
"That means someone else did, someone who was in our rooms. Normally, I would have been there. I never did go in for the late-night bar scene, and I didn't fool around with other women. Maybe Jessie surprised him, the way Roanna did. Roanna met up with him in the front hall; mine and Jessie's rooms were on the front left side, remember? Corliss has the rooms now, I sleep in a bedroom on the back, But the so-called burglar wouldn't have known that, would he?"
Carl whistled softly between his teeth.
"That would make you the intended victim all along, which means this is the third attempt to kill you. I tend to believe you, son, mainly because there wasn't a reason for you to kill Miss Jessie. That's what had us so buffaloed ten years ago. Whoever did it must have thought it was real funny, you being blamed for killing her. That would be better than killing you himself.

Now, who hated you enough to try to kill you ten years ago, and stay mad this long?"
"Damn if I know," Webb said softly. For years he'd thought Jessie's secret lover must have killed her, but with these new developments that didn't make sense. It would have made sense for the murderer to try to kill him, but not for him to kill Jessie. It would even have been reasonable, if he wanted to think of murder as reasonable, for the two of them to plot to kill him. That would get him out of the way, and Jessie would have inherited more of the Davenport fortune. If she had simply divorced him, her inheritance wouldn't have been as much, because despite Jessie's threats she had to have known that Lucinda wouldn't have disinherited him just because they'd divorced. To her credit, he didn't think Jessie had been involved in a plot to murder him. Like Roanna, she had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but for Jessie the bad timing had been fatal.
Carl took a length of string from his pocket and tied one end of it around a pen.
"Come hold this windshield up as straight as you can," he said, and Webb complied. Carl passed the free end of the string through the first bullet hole, threading it through until the pen caught on the outside and held. Then he tied the other end around another pen, this time securing the string under the pen's clip, and passed that pen through the holes in the back of the headrest. He looked at the trajectory and whistled softly again.
"At the distance he was shooting from, if he'd adjusted his sights just a teeny bit to the right, that bullet would have caught you smack between the eyes."
"I noticed it was a fine shot," Webb said sarcastically. Carl grinned.
"Thought you might be a man who appreciated good marksmanship. How about the second bullet?"
"It went on through the trunk."
"Well, any good deer rifle would shoot a bullet with that much power over that distance. No way of tracing it, even if we could have found one of the slugs." He eyed Webb.
"You took a chance, stopping here like this."
"I was mad."
"Yeah, well, if there's a next time, cool off before you decide to go after someone who's armed. I'll have the car towed in, and my boys will go over it, but I don't think we'll find anything that will help us."

"In that case, I'd just as soon no one else knows about this. I'll take care of the car."
"Mind telling me why you want to keep it quiet?"
"Number one, I don't want him on guard. If he's relaxed, maybe he'll make a mistake. Number two, you can't do a whole hell of a lot anyway. You can't give me an escort everywhere I go, and you can't keep a twenty-four-hour watch on Davencourt. Number three, if Lucinda finds out, it just might kill her."
Carl grunted.
"Webb, your folks need to know to be careful."
"They do. The so-called burglar spooked them. We have new deadbolt locks now, more secure windows, and we're wired to an alarm that, if it goes off, will set every dog inside a thirty-mile radius to howling. it's not any secret in Tuscumbia that we've done this, either."
"So you think he knows, and isn't likely to try getting into the house again?"
"He's gotten in twice before without any trouble. Instead of trying it again, this time he tried to shoot me off the road. Sounds as if he heard the news."
Carl crossed his arms and stared at him.
"Miss Lucinda's big party is tonight."
"You think he could be among the guests," Webb said. He'd already thought of that himself.
"I'd say there's a good chance. You might want to take a look at the guest list and see if you recognize the name of someone you didn't get along with, somebody who came out on the short end of some business deal. Hell, he wouldn't even have to be invited; from what I hear, so many people will be there that he could waltz right in and no one would notice."
"You were invited, Carl. Are you coming?"
"Couldn't keep me away. Booley will be there, too. Is it okay if I ran all of this by him? That old dog is still pretty sly, and if he knows to be watching, he might see something."
"Sure, tell Booley. But no one else, you hear?"
"All right, all right," Carl grumbled. He looked at Webb's car again.
"You want me to give you a ride up to the house?"
"No, everyone would ask questions. Take me back to town. I have to get something else to drive anyway, and I'll arrange to have this one taken care of. As far as anyone is concerned, I had car trouble." He looked at his watch.

"I'll be pushing it to get home in time for the party."
The guests were due to arrive in only half an hour, and Webb was nowhere around. All of the family was already there, including his mother and Aunt Sandra. Yvonne was beginning to pace, because it wasn't like Webb to be late to anything, and Lucinda was growing increasingly fretful.
Roanna sat very still, holding her own worry inside. She didn't let herself think about car accidents, because she couldn't bear it. Her own parents had died that way, and since then she shrank from the very idea of an automobile accident. If she passed one on the highway, she never rubbernecked but carefully kept her gaze averted and got past the accident site as soon as she could. Webb couldn't have been in an accident, he simply couldn't Then they heard the front door open, and Yvonne rushed to the door.
"Where have you been?" Roanna heard her demand with a mother's asperity.
"I had car trouble," Webb replied as he took the stairs two at a time. He was back downstairs in fifteen minutes, freshly shaved and wearing the black-tie apparel on which Lucinda had insisted.
"Sorry I'm late," he said to everyone as he crossed to the liquor cabinet and opened the doors. He poured himself a shot of tequila and tossed it back, then set the glass down and gave them a reckless grin.
"Let the games begin."
Roanna couldn't take her eyes off him. He looked like a buccaneer despite the fineness of his clothes. His thick dark hair was still black with dampness and brushed into a severe style. He moved with the lithe grace of a man accustomed to formal clothes, without a trace of self-consciousness. The jacket sat perfectly on his broad shoulders, and the trousers were just snug enough to look trim without being binding. Webb had always worn his clothes well, no matter what they were. She had thought no one could took better than he did in jeans and boots and chambray work shirt, and now she thought no one looked better in black tie. Jet studs marched down the front of his snow white shirt, which had rows of tiny tucks, and matching jet cuff links gleamed darkly at his thick wrists.
She hadn't talked privately with him since the night he'd come to her room, and she had told him why she hadn't seen the burglar. Webb had forbidden her to work at all until the family doctor had checked her and given her the all clear, which he'd done just the day before. Truth to tell, for the first

several days after she'd gotten home from the hospital, she hadn't felt like working or doing anything except sitting very still. The headache had been persistent, and if she had moved around much, she suffered a recurrence of that nausea that went with concussion. It was only 287
in the past two days that the headache had gone away, and the nausea with it. She didn't think she would risk dancing tonight, though.
Webb had been busy, and not just with work. He had overseen the installation of steel-reinforced doors on the main entrances, dead-bolt locks on even the French doors, and an alarm system that had made her pull a pillow over her head to buffer the sound when it was tested. If she couldn't sleep and wanted the veranda doors open so she could enjoy the fresh air, first she had to punch in a code on a small box installed by the window of every room. If she opened the doors without entering the code, the resulting blast would jolt everyone out of their beds.
Between her headache and his work, there simply hadn't been time for a private talk. In the drama of her injury, most of her embarrassment had faded away. After his midnight visit to her room, the subject hadn't come up again, as if they both wanted to avoid it.
"My, you look handsome," Lucinda said now, eyeing Webb up and down. "Better than you did before, if you don't mind my saying so. Wrestling cows, or whatever it was you did in Arizona, certainly kept you in shape."
"Steers," he corrected, his eyes gleaming with amusement.
"And, yes, I wrestled a few of them."
"You said you had car trouble," Yvonne said.
"What's wrong with it?"
"The transmission went out," he said smoothly.
"I had to have it towed."
"What are you driving then?"
"A pickup truck." His eyes gleamed greenly as he said it, and Roanna saw the fine tension in him, a sort of heightened state of alertness, as if he were poised for some sort of crisis that only -he anticipated. At the same time there was an obvious amusement in the line of his mouth, and she saw him glance expectantly at Gloria.
"A truck," Gloria said with disdain.
"I hope it doesn't take long to get your car repaired."
The amusement became even more pronounced, though Roanna wondered if she was the only one who saw it.

"Doesn't matter," he said, and grinned in wicked relish.
"I bought the truck."
If he'd expected a tirade, Gloria didn't disappoint him. She launched into a lecture on "how it looks for one of our family to drive such a common vehicle."
When she segued into the part about the image they had to uphold, Webb's eyes gleamed even brighter. He said, "It's four-wheel drive, too. Big tires, like the kind bootleggers use so they can get into the woods." Gloria stared at him, aghast and momentarily silenced, as her face turned red.
Lucinda was hiding her smile behind her hand. Greg coughed and turned away to look out the window.
Corliss was also looking out the window. She said, "My God, it looks like that scene in Field of Dreams. " Lucinda, understanding exactly what she meant, stood up and said with evident satisfaction, "Of course it does. If I give a party, they will come."
That remark elicited laughter from everyone except Roanna, but Webb noticed that a smile briefly touched her lips. That was the third one, he thought.
Soon the house was brimming over with laughing, chattering people. Some of the men wore black tie, but most of them were in dark suits. The women were arrayed in a variety of styles ranging from above-the-knee cocktail dresses to tea length to more formal long gowns. Everyone in the Davenport and Tallant families wore long gowns, again at Lucinda's direction. She knew exactly how to make an impression and set the tone.
Lucinda looked good, better than she had in a long time. Her white hair was in a queenly twist on the back of her head, and her pale peach gown, aided by a skillful application of cosmetics, lent its delicate color to her face. She had known what she was doing by insisting on peach-colored lights.
While Lucinda held court with her friends, Roanna
quietly saw to it that everything ran smoothly. The caterer was very efficient, but disaster had been known to strike even the most rigidly organized of parties. Waiters hired for the evening moved through the crowd with trays laden with glasses of pale gold champagne or with a dazzling array of hors d'oeuvres. For those who had heartier appetites, a huge buffet had been set up. Out on the patio, the band had already begun playing old standards, luring people outside to dance under the peach fairy lights.

Roanna noticed Webb moving through the crowd, talking easily with people, stopping to tell a joke or make a few remarks about politics, then going on to another group. He seemed perfectly relaxed, as if it hadn't occurred to him that anyone might look askance at him, but still she could see his increased tension in the hard, bright glitter of his eyes. No one would say anything derogatory about him in his presence, she realized. There was a power about him that made him stand out even in this crowd of social elites, a personal assurance that not many people had. He really didn't give a damn what any of them thought. Not for his own sake, at least. He came across as both relaxed and self-assured but ready to act if necessary.
Around ten o'clock, when the party had been going strong for over two hours, he came up behind her as she was surveying the buffet table to make certain nothing needed replenishing. He stood so close that she felt the heat of his big body, and he rested his right hand on her waist.
"Are you feeling all right?" he asked in a low voice.
"Yes, I'm fine," she said automatically as she turned to face him, repeating the same words she had used at least a hundred times that night in answer to the same question. Everyone had heard about the burglar, and her concussion, and wanted to know about it.
"You look fine," everyone else had said, but Webb didn't. Instead he was looking at her hair.
The stitches in her scalp had been removed just the day before when she had gone to the family doctor. Today, in preparation for the party, she had gone to her hairdresser,
who had gently arranged her hair in a sophisticated twist that concealed the small shaved patch.
"Can you tell?" she asked anxiously.
He knew what she meant.
"No, not at all. Is your head still sore?"
"Just a little. It's tender rather than actually sore."
He lifted his hand from her waist and flicked one of her dangling earrings, setting the gold stars to dancing.
"You look good enough to eat," he said quietly.
She blushed, because she had hoped she looked attractive tonight. The creamy gold of her gown complemented her warm complexion and the dark chestnut of her hair.

She looked up at him, and her breath caught in her chest. He was looking down at her with a hard, intense, hungry cast on his face. Time suddenly seemed to stand still around them, people fading from her consciousness, the noise and music muted. Her blood throbbed through her veins, slowly, powerfully.
This was the way he had looked the day they'd gone riding together. She had mistaken it for lust .. . or had she been mistaken?
They were utterly alone there in the middle of the crowd. Her body quickened, her breath coming fast and shallow, her breasts rising as if to his touch. The ache of wanting him was so intense that she thought she would die.
"Don't," she whispered.
"If you don't mean it ... don't."
He didn't reply. Instead his gaze moved slowly down to her breasts, lingered, and she knew her nipples were visibly erect. A muscle twitched in his jaw.
"I want to make a toast."
Lucinda knew how to make herself heard in a crowd without appearing to raise her voice. Slowly the chatter of hundreds of voices stilled, and everyone turned toward her as she stood slightly alone, frail but still queen. The spell that had held Roanna and Webb in its grip was shattered, and Roanna shuddered in reaction as they both turned to face Lucinda.
"To my grand-nephew, Webb Tallant," Lucinda said
clearly, and lifted her glass of champagne to Webb.
"I missed you desperately while you were away, and I'm the happiest old lady in Colbert County now that you're back."
It was another of her masterful strokes, forcing people to toast him, acknowledge him, accept him. All over the room glasses were lifted to Webb, champagne was drunk to his return, and a chorus of "Welcome home" filled the room. Roanna, whose hands were empty, gave him a fleeting, rueful smile.
Number four, he thought. That was two in one night. Her nerves felt raw from the silently charged interval that had passed between them. She slipped away into the crowd and worked her way outside to make certain everything was okay on the patio. Couples strolled over the grounds, their way lit by the thousands of lights woven into the trees and bushes, the maze of electrical cords carefully covered with foam stripping and taped over so

no one would trip over them. The band had moved out of old standards, having sufficiently warmed up the dancing crowd, and was now playing more lively tunes, specifically "Rock Around the Clock." At least fifty people were bopping their hearts out on the dance floor.
The tune ended to applause and laughter, and then there was one of those errant little pockets of silence in which the words "killed his wife" were clearly heard.
Roanna stopped, her expression freezing. The silence spread as people looked uncomfortably at her. Even the band members stood still, not knowing what was going on but aware that something had happened. The woman who had been talking turned around, her face dark red with embarrassment.
Roanna stared steadily at the woman, who was a Cofelt, a member of one of the oldest families in the county. Then she looked around at all the other faces, frozen in the lovely peach light as they watched her. These people had come to Webb's home, enjoyed his hospitality, and still talked about him behind his back. It wasn't just Cora Cofelt, who had been unlucky enough to be heard. All of these faces were guilty because they too had been saying the same thing she had. If they had possessed any good judgment to begin with, she thought with growing fury, they would have realized ten years ago that Webb couldn't possibly have killed his wife.
It was common courtesy that a hostess do nothing to embarrass one of her guests, but Roanna felt anger move through her. She trembled with the rush of emotion, the sheer energy. It flowed through her until even her fingertips tingled.
She had endured a lot on her own account. But, by God, she wasn't going to stand there and let them slander Webb.
"You people were supposed to have been Webb's friends," she said in a clear, strong voice. She had seldom in her life been angrier, except at Jessie, but this was a different kind of anger. She felt cool, perfectly in control of herself.
"You should have known ten years ago that he would never have harmed Jessie, you should have supported him instead of putting your heads together and whispering about him. Not one of you-not one-expressed any sympathy to him at Jessie's funeral. Not one of you spoke up in his behalf. But you've come to his house tonight as guests, you've eaten his food, you've danced ... and you're still talking about him."

She paused, looking from face to face, then continued.
"Perhaps I should make my family's position clear to everyone, in case there's been any misunderstanding. We support Webb. Full stop, period. If anyone of you here feels you can't associate with him, then please leave now, and your association with the Davenports and the Tallants will be at an end."
The silence on the patio was thick, embarrassed. No one moved. Roanna turned to the band.
"Play-"something slow," Webb said from behind her. His hand, hard and warm, curled around her elbow.
"I want to dance with my cousin, and her head is still too sore for bopping."
A spatter of self-conscious laughter ran around the patio. The band began playing "Blue Moon," and Webb turned
her into his arms. Other couples moved together and began swaying to the music, and the crisis was over.
He held her with the distance of cousins, not the closeness of a man and a woman who had lain naked together amid tangled sheets. Roanna stared at his throat as they danced.
"How much did you hear?" she asked, her voice quiet and level once more.
"Everything," he said carelessly.
"You were wrong about one thing, though."
"What was that?"
A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, and he looked up at the dark sky as a sudden cool breeze arrived with the promise of rain. After days of teasing, it looked as if a storm was finally coming. When he glanced back down at her, his green eyes were glittering, "There was one person who offered me sympathy at Jessie's funeral."

Chapter 20

The party was over, the guests gone home. The band ha(I unplugged and loaded up, and they, too, were gone. The caterer and her staff had cleaned, washed, and efficiently stored everything in two vans and driven away, tired but well paid.
Lucinda, exhausted by the superhuman effort she had made that night, had gone immediately up to bed, and everyone else had soon followed.

The storm had lived up to its promise, arriving with great sheets of lightning, window-rattling thunder, and torrents of rain. Roanna watched 0 the drama from the dark safety of her room, snugly curled in her chair. The veranda doors were thrown open so she could get the full effect of it, smell the freshness of the rain and watch the wind sweep it across the land in battering waves. She was cuddled under a light, baby-soft afghan, deliciously chilled by the dampness in the air. She was relaxed and a little drowsy, hypnotized by the rain, her body sinking into the chair's comforting depths in utter relaxation.

The worst of the storm had already passed, and the rain had settled down into a steady, heavy downpour accompanied by an occasional flash of lightning. She was content to 295

sit there, remembering-not the scene on the patio, but that moment before Lucinda's toast when she and Webb had been caught in a private bubble of suspended time, desire pulsing thickly between them.

It had been desire, hadn't it? Sweet, hot. His gaze had drifted, as heated as a torch, down to her breasts. They had throbbed, her nipples lifting to him. She hadn't been mistaken in his intent, she couldn't have been. Webb had wanted her.

Once she would have gone to him, heedless of everything except her desire to be with him. Now she remained in her own room, watching the rain. She wouldn't chase after him again. He knew that she loved him, he'd known it all her life. The ball was now in his court, for him to hit it back or let it go by. She didn't know what he would do or if he would do anything at all, but she had meant what she'd told him at the party. If he wasn't serious in his attentions, then she didn't want them.

Her eyes drifted shut as she listened to the rain. It was so soothing, so peaceful; she felt at rest, whether or not she slept that night.

A faint scent of cigarette smoke came to her. She opened her eyes, and he was there, standing in the open doors, watching her. His gaze bored through the darkness of the room. The sporadic flashes of lightning revealed her to him, her eyes shadowed and calm, her body relaxed and waiting ... waiting. In the same brief moments of illumination she could see the way he lounged there with one shoulder against the door frame, a negligent posture that in no way concealed the tension in his coiled muscles, the intensity of the way he watched her, like a predator focusing on its prey.

He had partially undressed. His coat was gone and his black tie. The snowy white shirt was unbuttoned and pulled free of his pants, and it hung open across his broad chest. A half-smoked cigarette was in his hand. He turned and flicked it over the veranda railing, out into the rain, and then he was silently crossing the room to her, his tread lithe and pantherish.
Roanna didn't move, didn't say anything in either welcome or rejection. This move was his.
He knelt in front of the chair and put his hands on her legs, smoothing the afghan across her knees. The heat of his touch burned her through the covering.
"God knows, I've tried to stay away from you," he muttered.
"Why?" she asked, her voice low, the question simple. He gave a rough laugh.
"God knows," he said again. Then he tugged gently on the afghan, pulling it away from her and dropping it to the floor beside the chair. Just as gently he slipped his hands under the hem of her nightgown and caught her ankles. He pulled her legs out of their tucked position, straightening them, and spread them so that he was between them.
Roanna caught a deep, shuddering breath.
"Are your nipples hard?" he whispered. She could barely speak.
"I don't know.. .
"Let me see." And he slid his hands all the way up her body, under the nightgown, and closed his fingers over her breasts. Until he touched them, she hadn't realized how desperate she had been for this. She moaned aloud at the relief, the pleasure. Her nipples stabbed his palms. He rubbed his thumbs over them and laughed softly.
"I do believe they are," he whispered.
"I remember the way they taste, the way they feel in my mouth."
Her breasts lifted into his hands with every quick, sighing breath. Desire was coiling hotly in her loins, loosening her, turning her flesh warm and pliable to his touch.
He lifted the nightgown up and over her head, pulling it away and dropping it to the floor as he had the afghan. She sat naked before him in the huge chair, her slender body dwarfed by its bulk. Lightning flickered again, briefly revealing the details of breast and loin, tightly puckered nipples and opened thighs. His breath hissed through his teeth, his broad chest expanding. Slowly he stroked his;9 7

hands up her legs, pushing her thighs wider and wider apart until she was fully exposed to him.
The damp night air washed over her, the breeze cooling the heated flesh between her legs. The feeling of exposure, of vulnerability, was too sharp to be borne, and with a soft, panicked sound she tried to close her legs.
His hands tightened on her thighs.
"No," he said. Slowly he leaned forward, letting his body touch her, lightly press down on her, and his mouth closed over hers with a sweetness, a tenderness, that was devastating. The kiss was as gentle as a butterfly's wings, as leisurely as summer. With the utmost delicacy he cherished her mouth, lingered over the kiss. At the same time his wicked fingers moved boldly between her legs, opening the secret folds that protected the soft opening of her body. One big finger probed at her, making her squirm, then it pushed deep inside. Roanna arched helplessly, moaning into his mouth, overcome by the startling sense of being penetrated.
He kept on kissing her, the sweetness of his mouth gentling her for the marauding thrust of his fingers. It was almost diabolical, that contrast of intensity, arousing every aspect of her sensuality. She was both seduced and ravished, enticed and taken.
His lips left her mouth, slid hotly down her throat, then were at her breasts. He sipped delicately, sucked hard. Roanna sank into a dark, whirling storm of pure desire, trembling with need. She put her hands on his head, feeling the thick, cool silk of his hair between her fingers. She felt dizzy, drunk with arousal, with the heated musky scent of his skin. He was hot, so hot, his body heat burning through his shirt.
His mouth moved downward, over her trembling stomach muscles. His tongue probed her shallow navel, making her loins clench wildly as a bolt of pleasure shot through her. Down, down ... He gripped her buttocks hard, pulling them forward so that her bottom was right on the edge of the chair, then draped her legs over his shoulders. She made an incoherent sound of panic, of helpless anticipation.
"I told you," he muttered.
"Good enough to eat."
Then he kissed her, his mouth hot and wet, his tongue swirling around her straining, yearning nub. Her hips lifted wildly, her heels digging into his back. She cried out, muffling the sound with her own hand. She couldn't stand it, it was too intense, it was torture and ecstasy all at once, and her

hips bucked in an effort to escape the sensation. He gripped her bottom tighter, pulling her harder against his mouth, and his tongue stabbed deep into her. She climaxed violently, shuddering, biting her hand to keep from screaming from the force of it.

When the sensations finally ebbed and released her from their dark whirlpool, she lay sprawled limply in the chair with her legs still spread on his wide shoulders. She couldn't move. She had no strength, not even enough to open her eyes. Whatever he wanted to do to her now, she was open, compliant, completely vulnerable to his desire.

He lifted her thighs off his shoulders and she felt him moving, felt the brush of bare skin against her as he stripped out of his shirt. She forced her heavy eyelids open as he undid his pants and pushed them down. His urgency was a hot, wild thing. He hooked one arm around her bottom and dragged her forward even more, off the chair and onto his thighs, onto his thick, thrusting penis. It speared upward into her, so hard that she felt bruised, so hot that she felt burned. Her weight aided in her own penetration, pushing her down so that he went even deeper, and she choked on a soft scream. Webb groaned, leaning back on his hands so that his body arched powerfully beneath her.

"You know what to do," he said from between clenched teeth.

"Ride."

She did. Automatically her body responded, rising and falling, her thighs clasping his hips, flexing as she lifted herself almost completely off him only to slide back down. She rode him slowly, so that she took him by increments.

Her body was magic, moving with the fluid grace that had always captivated him; she enveloped him with a downward glide, then tormented him with the threat of release as she moved upward again, almost off of him ... no, no ... then back down, and he groaned at the wet heated relief of being surrounded by her flesh, held, caressed. He was stallion hard inside her, and finally she rode him hard, moving fast, slamming herself down onto him. Sensation built unbearably, and he thrust upward, hard. Helplessly she cried out, her sweet inner flesh pulsing and hugging him as she came again.

A harsh cry tore out of his throat and he reared up, throwing her back against the chair. He pinned her to it with his weight as he plunged and bucked, spurting hotly into her.

He lay heavily on her, trembling and sweating. His release had been so powerful that he couldn't speak, couldn't think. Sometime later a measure of strength returned to his muscles and he withdrew from her, bringing a wordless murmur of protest from her lips. He stood and kicked his pants off, then lifted her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. He stretched out on the bed beside her, and she curled into his embrace and went to sleep. Webb buried his face against her hair and let the darkness claim him, too.

Some unknown time later she moved out of his arms and got up from the bed. Webb awoke at once, disturbed by her absence. He blinked sleepily at the pale form of her naked body.

"Ro?" he murmured.

She didn't answer but walked calmly, deliberately toward the door. Her bare feet were silent. It almost looked as if she were drifting over the floor.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck and he shot out of bed. His hand slapped against the door just as she reached out for the doorknob. He peered at her face. Her eyes were open, her expression as serene as a statue's.

"Ro," he said, his voice rough. He put his arms around her and pulled her against him.

"Wake up, darling'. Come on, baby, wake up." He shook her a little.

She blinked once or twice and yawned as she cuddled closer. He held her tighter and felt tension slowly rob her body of pliancy as she realized that she was out of bed, standing at the door.

"Webb?" Her voice was choked, shaken. She shivered, her skin roughening with a chill. He picked her up and carried her back to the bed, sliding her beneath the warm covers and getting in beside her. He held her close to the warmth of his own body, held her as the shivers became shudders.

"Oh, my God," she said against his shoulder, the words almost toneless with strain.

"I did it again. I don't have any clothes on. I almost walked out of here naked. " She began pushing against him, trying to squirm away.

"I need my nightgown," she said frantically.

"I can't sleep like this."

He controlled her struggles, pressing her down into the mattress.

"Listen to me," he said, but she kept trying to pull away from him, and finally he rolled on top of her, ruthlessly controlling her delicate body with his much bigger, stronger one.

"Shh, shh," he murmured against her ear.
"You're safe with me, baby. I woke up as soon as you moved away from me. You don't have to worry; I won't let you leave this room. 11 Her breath was coming in gasps, and two tears rolled out of the corners of her eyes into the hair at her temple. He rubbed the wet tracks with his beard-stub bled cheek, then kissed the last traces away. She was soft beneath him; his penis was stiff and urgent. He tugged her thighs apart.
"Hush, now," he said, and stabbed deeply into her.
She gasped again, but stilled at his penetration. He lay on her and felt her slowly calm. It was a gradual process, her body changing beneath him, around him, as her distress faded and her physical awareness of him, and what he was doing, increased.
"I won't let you leave," he whispered in reassurance as he began to move inside her.
At first she was simply quiescent, accepting his possession, and that was enough. Then his hunger grew and he * 301
wanted more than her compliance, and he began stroking her in ways that made her cry out, made her flesh heat and begin to press urgently against him. She began to climax and he pressed deep into her, pulsing with his own release.
Afterward she tried again to get up, to put on her nightgown, but he held her tightly. She needed to trust him, to be able to fall asleep knowing that he would wake up if she tried to leave, that he wouldn't let her roam the house in defenseless sleep. Until she had that assurance, sleep would remain difficult for her.
Roanna huddled against him, devastated by what had almost happened. She began to cry again, choked sobs that she tried to stifle. She hadn't cried in years, but she was helpless to stop, as if the very fierceness of the pleasure she received from his lovemaking had battered down the walls of her defenses, so that she couldn't hold any emotion at bay.
It was too much, all of it, everything that had happened since Lucinda had sent her to Arizona in search of Webb. Within an hour of finding him, she had been lying beneath him, and nothing had been the same since. How long had it been? Three weeks? Three weeks that comprised shattering ecstasy and devastating pain, three weeks of tension and sleepless nights and fear, and the more recent days when she had felt herself changing inside, facing life and in the process beginning to live again.

She loved Webb, loved him so much that she felt it in every pore of her body, every particle of her soul. Tonight he had made love to her, not with anger, but with a breathtaking possessiveness and sensuality. She hadn't gone to him, he had come to her, and he was holding her as if he never intended to let her go.

But if he did-if, when morning came, he said it had been a mistake-she would survive. It would hurt, but she would go on. She had learned that she could endure almost anything, that her future was still out there.

Oddly, realizing that she could live without him made his presence all the sweeter. She cried until she couldn't any302

more, and he held her the entire time, stroking her hair, murmuring to her. Exhausted both emotionally and physically, she slept.

It was six o'clock when she woke, the morning already bright and sweet, the storm long gone and the birds singing with mad abandon. The veranda doors were still standing open, and Webb was leaning over her.

"Thank God," he muttered roughly as he saw her eyes flutter open.

"I don't know how much longer I could have waited." Then he mounted her, and she forgot about the morning, about the household awakening around them. For all his impatience, he made love to her with a lingering enjoyment they hadn't been able to savor the night before.

When it was over, he gathered her trembling body close and wiped the tears, this time of ecstasy, from her eyes.

"I think we've found the cure for your insomnia," he teased, his voice still hoarse and strained from his own climax.

She gave a hiccupping little laugh and buried her face against his shoulder. Webb closed his eyes, that small, happy sound reverberating through his entire body. His throat clogged, and his eyes burned. She had laughed. Roanna had laughed.

Her small laugh died away. She kept her face pressed to him, and her fingers moved along his ribcage.

"I can handle not sleeping," she said quietly.

"But knowing that I walk in my sleep ... terrifies me."

He moved his hand down her spine, stroking each vertebrae.

"I promise you," he said, "that if you're in bed with me, I won't let you leave the room."

She shivered, but it was from the delicious sensations his stroking fingers were causing as they moved along her spine, probing and caressing. She

arched inward, the movement pressing her body more firmly against him.
"Don't try to distract me," she said.
"I really would feel more secure if I wore my nightgown."
He shifted so that he was lying to face her, gathering her in.
"But I don't want a nightgown between us," he murmured, coaxing her.
"I want to feel your skin, your breasts. I want you to go to sleep and know that I won't let anything happen to you-unless I'm the one doing it."
She was silent, and he knew that he hadn't convinced her, but for now she wasn't going to argue the point. Slowly he combed his fingers through her tangled curls, letting the strands drift down so that the sunlight caught them, highlighting the reds and golds and richest browns. He thought of the night he had first taken her, and damned himself for his callousness. He thought of the empty nights since then, when he could have been making love to her, and damned himself for his stupidity.
"I thought I was being noble by not taking advantage of you," he said in lazy amusement.
"Stupid," she said, rubbing her cheek against his hairy chest. She nuzzled one of his flat nipples and caught it with her teeth, lightly biting. He sucked in his breath, undone by her uncomplicated sensuality.
He tried to explain further.
"I blackmailed you into that first night. I didn't want you to think you had no choice."
"Dumb." She tilted her head back and looked up at him, whiskey eyes drowsy with sensual completion.
"I thought you didn't want me."
"Ye gods," he muttered.
"And you called me dumb." She smiled and returned her head to its resting place on his chest. Number five. They were coming more often now, he thought, but were just as precious.
He thought of the shots that someone had taken at him the day before, of the danger she had already faced because of him. He should get the hell away from Davencourt, out of her life, for her safety and that of everyone else in the house. But he couldn't, because he had already been careless of her safety even before returning to Davencourt.
He put his hand on her belly, spanning the narrow distance between her hipbones. For a moment he studied the contrast between his big, rough, sun-browned hand and the silky smoothness of her stomach. He had made it a

principle a his life to protect a woman from pregnancy, and AIDS had made the practice even more sensible. All his fine principles had flown out the window when he'd had Roanna beneath him; not once had he worn a rubber when he was making love to her, not in Nogales and not last night. He flattened his palm on her belly.
"Have you had a period since that night in Nogales?"
His tone was soft, even, but the words hung between them as if he had shouted. She went very still in that way of hers, motionless except for her breathing. Finally she replied with caution, "No, but I've never been regular. A lot of times I'll completely skip a month."
He'd wanted certainty but realized he wasn't going to find it yet. He rubbed his hand over her stomach, then up to lightly cup a breast. He loved her breasts, so firm and high and elegantly shaped. He watched in sensual delight as the nipple immediately began to pucker, standing up as if begging for attention. Were her nipples slightly darker than they had been that first night? God, he loved her reaction, the immediate response to him.
"Have your breasts always been this sensitive?"
"Yes," she whispered, her breath catching as pleasure flooded through her. At least they were whenever he looked at them, or touched them. She could no more stop her reaction to him than she could halt the tides.
He wasn't immune himself. Though it hadn't been long since they'd made love, his sex stirred as he watched color flush her breasts and cheeks.
"How did you manage to stay virgin for twenty-seven years?" he marveled, thrusting himself against the cleft of her bare thighs.
"You weren't here," she said simply, and the open honesty of her love humbled him.
He nuzzled her hair, feeling himself grow more urgent.
"Can you take me again?" To make his meaning plain, he pushed his erection even harder against her.
For answer she lifted her thigh, sliding it along his hip, up to his waist. Webb reached down and guided himself to the soft, swollen opening and pushed inside.
He didn't feel any urgent need for orgasm, just the need for her. They lay together, gently rocking to keep the level of305
sensation. The morning was getting older, and the chances were increasing that they would be caught naked in bed together. Of course, everyone was more likely to sleep late today after the party last night, so he judged it

fairly safe to indulge themselves for a while longer. He didn't want to embarrass her, but neither did he want to let her go.
He loved being inside her, loved the tight clasp of her body. They began to slip apart, and he put his hand on her bottom to anchor her to him. She might not think so, but he'd bet the ranch that she was pregnant, and the thought of her carrying his baby at once thrilled him to his bones and scared him half to death.
Maybe it wasn't the most romantic conversation to be having while they were making love, but he tilted her chin up and looked square into her eyes, so she would know he meant it.
"You have to eat more. I want you to put on another fifteen pounds, minimum."
A shadow of insecurity darkened her eyes, and he cursed aloud even as he thrust deeper into her.
"Don't took like that, damn it. After last night, there's no way you can doubt how much you turn me on. Hell, what about right now? I wanted you when you were seventeen, and I sure as hell want you now. But I also want you strong and healthy enough to carry my baby."
It took her a moment to catch her breath after that strong thrust. She moved against him, an enticing wiggle to make herself more comfortable.
"I don't think I'm-" she began, then stopped, and her whiskey eyes widened.
"You wanted me then?" she whispered.
"You were sitting on my lap," he said wryly.
"What did you think, that I was carrying a lead pipe around in my pocket?"
He thrust again, letting her feel every inch of him.
"And after the way I kissed you-" "I kissed you," she corrected. Her face was growing flushed, and she clung tighter to him.
"You started it, but I didn't push you away, did I? As I remember, it took about five seconds before I had my tongue halfway down your throat."
She made a little hum of pleasure, perhaps at the memory, more likely at what he was doing to her now. A hard surge of sensation brought him to the realization that the need for orgasm was abruptly urgent, for both of them.
He stroked her bottom, trailing his fingers down the cleft until he reached the point of their union. Gently he rubbed her, feeling how stretched and tight her soft flesh was around him. She whimpered, arched, and dissolved.
It took only two thrusts for him to join her, and they strained together in completion.

He was still sweating a long time later, when he maneuvered out of her arms and out of bed.
"We have to stop before someone comes looking for us," he muttered.
Swiftly he dressed, stepping into wrinkled black pants and picking up his equally wrinkled shirt. He leaned down to kiss her.
"I'll be back tonight." He kissed her again, then straightened, winked at her, and sauntered out onto the veranda as casually as if it were perfectly natural for him to be leaving her room, half naked, at eight o'clock in the morning.
She didn't know if anyone saw him or not because she jumped up, grabbed her nightgown, and darted into the bathroom.
She was still quivering with excitement and pleasure as she showered. Her skin was so sensitive from his lovemaking that even the act of bathing felt sexual. She couldn't believe the raw sexuality of the night, but her body had no such difficulty.
Her hands moved over her wet abdomen. Was she pregnant? It had been three weeks since Nogales. She didn't feel any different, she didn't think, but then it had been an eventful three weeks and her attention hadn't been on her menses. Her periods were so irregular anyway that she never paid much attention to the calendar or how she felt. He seemed oddly certain, though, and she closed her eyes as sweet weakness made her tremble.
She was glowing when she went down to breakfast. Webb was already there, halfway finished with his usual hefty meal, but he paused with his fork in midair when she307
entered the room. She saw his eyes linger on her face, then slip down her body. Tonight, she thought. Tonight, he'd promised. She filled her plate with more than she usually took and made an effort to eat most of it.
It was Saturday, but there was still work to be done. Webb had already gone into the study, and Roanna was lingering over her second cup of coffee when Gloria came down.
"Lucinda isn't feeling well," she said fretfully as she began dipping scrambled eggs onto a plate.
"Last night was too hard on her."
"She wanted to do it," Roanna said.
"It was important to her."
Gloria looked up, and her eyes were sheened with tears. Her chin wobbled a bit before she controlled it.
"It was silly," she grumbled.

"All that trouble for a party."
But Gloria knew, as they all did: that had been Lucinda's last party, and she had wanted to make it memorable. It had been her effort to set aright the wrong she felt she had done to Webb ten years ago by not standing up for him.
Lucinda had been holding her decline at bay by sheer willpower, because there had still been things she wanted to accomplish. Those things were done now, and she had no more reason to fight. The snowball was rolling downhill now, picking up speed and hurtling toward its inevitable end.
From long, quiet talks with Lucinda, Roanna knew this was what she wanted, but it wasn't easy to let go of the woman who had been the family's bulwark for so long.
Booley Watts called Webb that afternoon.
"Carl told me what happened," he drawled.
"Interesting as hell."
"Thanks," Webb said.
Booley chuckled, the sound ending in a wheeze.
"Carl and I both watched the crowd last night, but we didn't see anything out of the way except for that little scene on the patio. Roanna was something, wasn't she?"
"She took my breath away," Webb murmured, and he wasn't thinking just of the lovemaking that had happened later. She had been standing in the middle of the crowd like a pure, golden candle, her head high, her voice loud and clear. She hadn't hesitated to wade into battle on his behalf, and the last part of him that had held on to the image of -little Roanna" had faded away. She was a woman, stronger than she knew and perhaps beginning to realize that strength. She was a Davenport and, in her own way, every bit as queenly as Lucinda.
Booley's voice intruded into his thoughts.
"Have you thought of anybody who would carry a grudge against you for that long, a grudge serious enough that Jessie was killed because of it?"
Webb sighed tiredly.
"No, and I've wracked my brain trying to come up with something. I've even gone over old files, hoping I'll notice a detail, remember something that would make sense out of all this."
"Well, keep thinking. That's what bothered me about Jessie's murder from the beginning: there just didn't seem to be any sense to it, no reason that I

could see. Hell, even drive-by shootings have a reason behind them. So whoever killed Jessie-and I'm saying now that I don't believe you did it-killed her for a reason no one else knows. If your theory's right, then the reason didn't apply to her anyway. Someone was after you, and she got in the way."
"Come up with the motive," Webb said, "and we come up with the killer."
"That's the way it's always worked for me."
"Then let's hope we can figure it out before he takes another shot at me ... or someone else gets in his way." He hung up and rubbed his eyes, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together but they simply refused to fit. He stretched and stood up. He had to go into town on an errand, so he had a decision to make: play it safe and take a roundabout route, or drive his usual route and hope he got shot at so he'd have another chance at catching the gunman-assuming the shot missed. Some choice.
Lucinda came down for supper that evening, the first time all day she'd been out of her room. Her color was waxy, and
the palsy in her hands was worse than it had been before, but she was jubilant over the success of the party. Several of her friends had called her during the course of the day and told her it had been simply wonderful, which meant she had accomplished her aim.
They were all at the table except for Corliss, who had gone out earlier in the day and hadn't yet returned. After chattering excitedly for several minutes, Lucinda looked at Roanna and said, "Dear, I'm so proud of you. What you said last night really made a difference."
Everyone else, except for Webb and Roanna, looked confused. Lucinda had never missed much that was going on, though probably it was one or more of her cronies who had filled her in on what had happened on the patio.
"What?" Gloria asked, looking from Lucinda to Roanna and back.
"Oh, Cora Cofelt made a snide remark about Webb, and Roanna took up for him. She managed to make everyone feel ashamed of themselves."
"Cora Cofelt?" Lanette was aghast.
"Oh, no! She'll never forgive Roanna for embarrassing her."
"On the contrary, Cora herself called me today and apologized for her own bad manners. Admitting when you're wrong is the mark of a lady."
Roanna didn't know if that was a dig at Gloria or not, for Gloria had certainly never admitted being wrong about anything. Lucinda and Gloria

loved each other, and in a crisis they could each be relied on to support the other, but their relationship had its sharp edges.
Webb's eyes met hers, and he smiled. Slowly, blushing a little, she smiled in return.
Number six, he thought triumphantly.
The front door slammed, and heels clattered unsteadily across the foyer tile.
"Yoo-hoof" Corliss yelled.
"Where is everybody? Yoo-" "Damn it!" Webb said violently, shoving his chair back from the table. The alarm went off, shrieking like all the fiends in hell. Everyone jumped and covered their ears. Webb ran from the room, and after a second Brock followed him.
"Oh, no, the horses," Roanna cried, and darted for the door. When the alarm had been tested, the horses had all panicked. Webb had debated changing the alarm to one less shrill but had opted for the safety of his family over the nervousness of the horses.
The godawful racket stopped as she reached the hall, and instead she heard Corliss whooping with uncontrollable laughter and Webb cussing with every breath he drew. Brock turned on Corliss and yelled, "Shut up!"
Everyone else piled into the hall behind Roanna as Corliss straightened from where she was clinging to the huge, carved newel post at the bottom of the stairway. Corliss's face twisted with fury. She worked her mouth and spat a gob of saliva at her brother.
"Don't tell me to shut up," she sneered. The spit missed Brock, but he looked down at the wet splatter on the floor with disgust etched on his face.
Lanette stared at her daughter in horror.
"You're drunk!" she gasped.
"So?" Corliss demanded belligerently.
"Just having a IN fun, nothin' wrong with that."
Webb gave her a look that would have frozen antifreeze.
"Then you can have your fun somewhere else. I warned you, Corliss. You have a week to find somewhere else to live, then I want you out."
"Oh, yeah?" She laughed.
"You can't throw me out, big boy. Aunt Lucinda might have one foot in the grave, but until they're both there, this place isn't yours."
Lanette covered her mouth with her hand, staring at Corliss as if she didn't recognize her. Greg took a threatening step forward, but Webb stopped him

with a look. Lucinda drew herself up, her expression hardening as she waited for Webb to handle the situation.
"Three days," he grimly said to Corliss.
"And if you open 311
your mouth again, the deadline will be tomorrow morning. He glanced at Roanna.
"Come on, we'd better go help get the horses settled down."
They went out the front door and around the house; they could hear the horses' frightened whinnies as soon as they stepped outside, and the thuds as the ones in the stable kicked frantically at their stalls. Webb's long legs made one stride for every two of hers, and Roanna was practically running to keep up with him. Loyal and the few stable hands who were still at work at that hour were doing their best to soothe the terrified animals, crooning to them, trying to hold them still. True, most of the words they were using were lurid curse words, but they were uttered in the softest of tones.
Roanna ran into the stable and added her own special croon to the lullaby. The horses outside were just as frightened as the animals in the stable, but they weren't as likely to hurt themselves because they had room to run. The horses in the stable were mostly animals with injuries or illnesses, and they could damage themselves even more in their panic to escape.
"Hush," Loyal said to the hands, and they fell silent, letting Roanna sing. They all continued their petting, but Roanna's voice had a unique quality to it that caught the attention of every animal in the stable. She'd had the gift from childhood, and Loyal had used it more than once to settle a frightened, nervous horse.
Webb moved down the rows of stalls, stroking sleek, sweating necks, just as they all were doing. Roanna sang softly, going from stall to stall, her voice pitched at just the right tone so that the horses' ears pricked forward as if trying to catch every note. Within five minutes, all the occupants of the stalls were calm, if still sweating.
"Get some cloths, boys," Loyal murmured.
"Let's get my babies dried off."
Roanna and Webb helped with that, too, while Loyal checked each animal for any new injury. They all seemed to be all right, except for their original ailments, but Loyal
shook his head at Webb.
"I don't like that damn squeal," he said flatly.

"And the horses ain't going to get used to it, it's too high pitched. Hurts their ears. Hurts mine too, come to that. What the hell happened?"
"Corliss," Webb said disgustedly.
"She's shit faced and didn't enter the code when she came in."
Loyal scowled.
"What Miss Lucinda was thinking to let that little bitch, pardon my French, move into Davencourt, I don't know."
"Neither do I, but she's moving out within three days.
"Not soon enough if you ask me."
Webb looked around and located Roanna at the far end of the stable.
"There's some trouble going on, Loyal. Until it's settled, I'm keeping the alarm because it's loud enough to wake you even down here, and we may need your help."
"What kind of trouble, boss?"
"Someone shot at me yesterday. I think it's the same person who broke into the house last week and maybe even the same person who killed Jessie. After Corliss leaves, if that alarm goes off, then it's a real emergency. In a worse case scenario, you may be the only one who can help us."
Loyal eyed him consideringly, then gave one abbreviated nod.
"Reckon I'll make sure my rifle's cleaned and loaded," he said.
"I'd appreciate it."
"Miss Roanna doesn't know, does she?"
"No one does except for me, Sheriff Beshears, and Booley Watts. And now you. It's hard to catch someone if they're looking for the trap."
"Well, I hope this varmint gets caught real soon, because I'm not going to rest easy as long as I know that damn siren can go off at any time and make every horse here go wild."

Chapter 21

The house was still in an uproar when Webb and Roanna returned to it, with Corliss now sitting on the stairs weeping hysterically and begging Lucinda not to let Webb throw her out. Not even her own mother was taking her side this time; drunkenness was bad enough, but to spit at her brother was totally unacceptable.

Brock was nowhere in sight, probably having removed himself from the temptation to do physical damage to his sister.
To Corliss's sobbing entreaties, Lucinda merely gave her a cold look.
"You're right, Corliss. Despite my own foot in the grave, I am still the owner of this house. And as the owner, I give Webb full authority to act on my behalf, no questions asked."
"No, no," Corliss moaned.
"I can't leave, you don't understand-"I understand that you're leaving," Lucinda replied, not bending an inch.
"You're disgusting. I suggest you go to your room now, before Webb's threat to make you leave in the morning begins to sound even more delightful than it already does."
"Mama!" Corliss turned to Lanette, a pleading expression on her tear-blotched face.
"Tell her to let me stay!"
"I'm very disappointed in you," Lanette said softly and stepped past her daughter on her way upstairs.
Greg leaned down and hauled Corliss to her feet.
"Upstairs," he said sternly, turning her around and bodily forcing her upward. They all watched until the pair reached the top of the stairs and turned toward Corliss's suite. They could hear her sobbing until a door closed firmly behind her.
Lucinda sagged.
"The ungrateful little wretch," she muttered. Her skin tone was even more waxy than before.
"Are the horses all right?" she asked Roanna.
"None of them were injured, and they're quiet now."
"Good." Lucinda put a trembling hand to her eyes, then took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders once more.
"Webb, could I talk to you, please? We need to go over some details."
"Of course." He put a supporting hand under her arm to steady her as they walked to the study. He glanced over his shoulder at Roanna, and their eyes met. His were steady and warm with promise.
"Go finish your supper," he said.
When he and Lucinda were alone in the study, she dropped heavily onto the couch. She was breathing hard and perspiring.
"The doctor said that my heart's giving out, too, damn it," she muttered.

"There, I've used a cuss word." She peeped up at Webb to see his reaction. He couldn't help grinning at her.
"You've used them before, Lucinda. I've heard you cuss that roan mare you used to ride until it was a wonder her ears didn't singe and drop off."
"She was a bitch, wasn't she?" The words were fondly uttered. As hardheaded as the mare had been, Lucinda had always gotten the best of her. Until just a few years before, Lucinda had been strong enough to handle almost any horse she straddled.
"Now, what details do you want to discuss?"
"My will," she said baldly.
"I'm having the lawyer in tomorrow. I'd better get that chore taken care of, because it's beginning to look like my time's a bit shorter than I expected."
Webb sat down beside her and took her frail, palsied hand in his. She was too shrewd and mentally tough for him to even consider trying to comfort her with platitudes, but damn it, he hated to let her go.
"I love you," he said.
"I was damn mad at you for not defending me after Jessie was killed. It hurt like hell that you thought I could have done it. I still hold a grudge about that, but I love you anyway."
Tears swam briefly in her eyes, then she blinked them away.
"Of course you hold a grudge. I never thought you'd totally forgive me, God knows I don't deserve that consideration. But I love you, too, Webb. I always knew you were the best choice for Davencourt."
"Leave it to Roanna," he said. His own words took him by surprise. He'd always thought of Davencourt as his, always expected to have it. He'd worked hard for it. But as soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew they were right. Davencourt should be Roanna's. Despite what Lucinda thought, despite even what Roanna. thought, she was more than capable of handling it.
Roanna was tougher and smarter than any of them knew, even including herself. Webb was only now beginning to understand the strength of her character. For years everyone had thought of her as fragile, irreparably damaged emotionally by the trauma of Jessie's death, but instead Roanna had been protecting herself, and enduring. It took a special kind of strength to endure, to accept what couldn't be changed and simply hunker down and wait it out. More and more lately Roanna was coming out of her shell,

showing her strength, standing up for herself with a quiet maturity that didn't attract much attention, but was there.
Startled, Lucinda blinked several times.
"Roanna? Don't you think I've talked this over with her? She doesn't want it."
"She doesn't want to spend her life reading financial statements and watching stock reports," he corrected.
"But she loves Davencourt. Give it to her."
"You mean split the inheritance?" Lucinda asked in bewilderment.
"Give the house to her and the financial holdings to you?" She sounded shocked; that had never been done. Davencourt and all it entailed had always been kept intact.
"No, I mean leave it all to her. It should be hers anyway." Roanna needed a home. She had told him so herself-, she needed something that was hers, that could never be taken away from her.
"She's never really felt as if she belonged anywhere, and if you leave everything to me, she'll feel as if she wasn't good enough to have Davencourt, even if she did agree to the terms of the will. She needs her home, Lucinda. Davencourt should have Davenports living here, and she's the last one."
"But ... of course she would live here." Lucinda looked at him uncertainly. "I never thought that you would make her leave. Oh, dear. That would look funny, wouldn't it? People would talk."
"She told me that she plans to buy her own place."
"Leave Davencourt?" The very idea shocked Lucinda.
"But this is her home."
"Exactly," Webb said softly.
"Well." Lucinda sat back, mulling over this change in her plans. Except it wasn't a change, she realized. It was simply leaving everything as it already stood, with Roanna as her heir.
"But ... what will you do?"
He smiled, a slow smile that lit his entire face.
"She can hire me to handle the financial dealings for her," he said lightly. Suddenly he knew exactly what he wanted, and it was like a light being turned on inside him, "Better yet, I'm going to marry her."
Lucinda was truly speechless now. It was an entire minute before she could manage a squeaky "What?"

"I'm going to marry her," Webb repeated with growing determination.
"I haven't asked her yet, so keep it quiet." Yes, he was going to marry her, one way or the other. It felt
as if a piece of the puzzle had suddenly been placed in its correct position. It felt right. Nothing else would ever be as right. Roanna had always been his- and he had always ften Roanna's.
"Webb, are you sure?" Lucinda asked anxiously. ,"Roanna loves you, but she deserves to be loved in reJuril- 11 He gave her a level look, his eyes very green, and she fell isi lent in astonishment.
"Well," she said again.
He tried to explain.
"Jessie-I was obsessed with her, I up pose and in a way I loved her because we grew up together, but it was mostly ego on my part. I never should 11ave married her, but I was so locked into the idea of inheriting Davencourt and marrying the crown princess that I didn't realize what a disaster our marriage would be. #Zoanna, now ... I've loved her for as long as she's been jilive, I reckon. When she was little I loved her like a Mother, but now she's all grown up, and I'm damn sure not tier brother." He sighed, looking back over the years at how felationships had gotten tangled up with inheritances.
"If Jessie hadn't been killed, we'd have gotten divorced. I meant what I said that night. I was fed up, through with her. And if we'd been divorced, instead of things happening the way they did, I'd have been married to Roanna for a long time now. The way Jessie died split us all apart, and I've vas ted ten years because of a grudge."
Lucinda searched his face, looking for the truth, and what he found made her sigh with relief.
"You really do love per. 11 "So much it hurts." Gently he squeezed Lucinda's fingers taking care not to hurt her.
"She's smiled at me six times," he confided.
"And laughed once."
"Laughed!" Tears welled again in Lucinda's eyes, and this time she let them fall. Her lips trembled.
"I'd like to hear per laugh again, just once more."
"I'm going to try real hard to make her happy," Webb laid.
"When do you plan to get married?"

"As soon as possible, if I can talk her into it." He knew Roanna loved him, but convincing her that he loved her in return might take some doing. Once she would have married him under any circumstances, but now she would quietly turn stubborn if she thought something wasn't right. On the other hand, he wanted Lucinda to be at their wedding, so that meant it had to happen quickly, while she was still able to attend. And there might be another, more private reason for a quick wedding.
"Oh, posh!" Lucinda scoffed.
"You know she would walk through fire to marry you!"
"I know she loves me, but I've learned not to think she'll automatically do anything I ask. Those days are long gone. I wouldn't like having a doormat for a wife anyway. I want her to have the confidence to stand up for what she wants."
"The way she stood up for you."
"The way she's always stood up for me." When no one else had been there, Roanna had been at his side, slipping her little hand into his and offering what comfort she could. She had been far stronger than he, strong enough to make the first move, to reach out.
"She deserves the inheritance," he said.
"But besides that, I don't want her to ever feel that she had to please me in order to stay in her home."
"She might feel the same way about you," Lucinda pointed out.
"Whenever you're nice to her, she might think it's only because she holds the purse strings. I've been in that situation," she added dryly, no doubt thinking of Corliss.
Webb shrugged.
"I'm not a pauper, Lucinda, as you know damned well, since you had me investigated. I have my Arizona holdings, and they're going to be worth a good sized fortune before I get through with them. I assume Roanna read the same report you did, so she knows my financial situation. We'll be equals, and she'll know that I'm with her because I love her. I'll take care of the financial dealings if she really isn't interested; I don't know if she'll .319 want to stay involved with that part of it or not. She says she doesn't like it, but she has the Davenport knack, doesn't she?"
"In a different way." Lucinda smiled.
"She pays more attention to people than she does to numbers on a sheet of paper."

"You know what she really wants to do, don't you?"
"No, what?"
"Train horses."
She laughed softly.
"I might have known! Loyal has been using some of her training ideas for years now, and I have to say we have some of the best-behaved horses I've ever been around."
"She's magic with a horse. They're where her heart is, so that's what I want her to do. You've always had horses just for the pleasure of it, becausc you love them, but Roanna wants to get into it as a business."
"You have it all planned out, don't you?" She smiled fondly at him, because even as a boy Webb had mapped out his strategy, then followed through on it.
"No one else around here knows about your properties out west. People will talk, you know."
"That I married Roanna for her money? That I was determined to get Davencourt any way I could? That I'd married Jessie for it and then, when she died, moved on to Roanna?"
"I see you've thought of all the angles."
He shrugged.
"I don't give a damn about the angles as long as Roanna doesn't believe any of them."
"She won't. She's loved you for twenty years, and she'll love you for another twenty."
"Longer than that, I hope."
"Do you know how lucky you are?"
"Oh, I've got an idea," he said softly. He was surprised it had taken him so long to get that idea, though. Even though he'd known that he loved Roanna, he hadn't thought of it as a romantic, erotic love; he'd been stuck in the big-brother mode even after they had kissed the first time and he'd almost lost control. He hadn't been jolted out of it until she had walked up to him in the bar in Nogales, a woman, with a gap of ten years between their meetings so he hadn't seen her grow up. That night was burned in his memory, and still he'd struggled with the misapprehension that he had to protect Roanna from his own lust. God, what a dope. She positively reveled in his lust, which made him about the luckiest man alive.

Now, all he had to do was convince her to marry him, and clear up the small matter of attempted murder-his own.

Roanna was standing out on the veranda watching the sunset when he entered her room. She turned and glanced over her shoulder when she heard the door open. She was gilded by the last rays of the sun, turning her skin golden, her hair glinting red and gold. He came on through and out onto the veranda with her, turning to lean against the railing so that he faced the house, and her. Looking at her was so damn easy. He kept rediscovering the angles of those chiseled cheekbones, seeing anew the golden lights in her whiskey-colored eyes. The open collar of her shirt let him see enough of her silken skin to remind him how silky she was all over.

He felt the beginning twinges of lust in his groin but nevertheless asked an utterly prosaic question.

"Did you finish your supper?"

She wrinkled her nose.

"No, it was cold, so I ate a slice of lemon icebox pie instead."

He scowled.

"Tansy made another pie? She didn't tell me.

"I'm sure there's some left," she said comfortingly. She looked up at the ver million streaks in the sky.

"Are you really going to make Corliss leave?"

"Oh, yes." He let both his satisfaction and determination come through in those two words.

She started to speak, then hesitated.

"Go on," he urged.

"Tell me, even if you think I'm Wrong." '321

"I don't think you're wrong. Lucinda needs peace now, not constant turmoil." Her expression was distant, somber.

"It's just that I remember what it's like to be terrified of having nowhere to live."

He reached out and caught a tendril of her hair, winding it around his finger.

"When your parents died?"

"Then, and later, until-until I was seventeen." Until Jessie died, she meant, but she didn't say it.

"I was always afraid that if I didn't measure up, I'd be sent away."

"That would never have happened," he said firmly.

"This is your home. Lucinda wouldn't have made you leave." She shrugged.

"They were talking about it. Lucinda and Jessie, that is. They were going to send me away to college. Not just to Tuscaloosa; they wanted me to go to some women's college, in Virginia, I think. It was someplace far enough away that I couldn't come home regularly."
"That wasn't why." He sounded shocked. He remembered the arguments. Lucinda had thought it would be good for Roanna to be away from them, force her to mature, and Jessie, of course, had egged her on. He saw now that, to Roanna, it must have seemed that they didn't want her around.
"That's what it sounded like to me," she said.
"Why did it change when you were seventeen? Was it because Jessie was dead and wasn't there to keep bringing up the subject?"
"No." That remote look was still in her eyes.
"It was because I didn't care anymore. Going away seemed like the best thing to do. I wanted to get away from Davencourt, from people who knew me and felt sorry for me because I wasn't pretty, because I was clumsy, because I was so socially graceless." Her tone was matter-of-fact, as if she were discussing a menu.
"Hell," he said wearily.
"Jessie made a career out of making you miserable, didn't she? Damn her. It should be against the law for people under the age of twenty-five to get married. I thought I was king of the mountain when I was in my early twenties, so damn sure I could tame Jessie and turn her into a suitable wife-my idea of suitable, of course. But there was something missing in Jessie, maybe the ability to love, because she didn't love anyone. Not me, not Lucinda, not even herself. I was too young to see it, though." He rubbed his forehead, remembering those last horrible days after her murder.
"Maybe she did love someone, though. Maybe she loved the man whose baby she carried. I'll never know."
Roanna gasped, shock running through her. She turned to face him.
"You knew about him?" she asked incredulously. Webb straightened away from the railing, his gaze sharpening.
"I found out after she was killed." He caught her shoulders, his grip urgent. "How did you know?"
"1-I saw them together in the woods." She wished she had controlled her reaction to finding out he knew about Jessie's lover, but it had been such a shock. She had protected that secret all these years, and he'd known

anyway. But she hadn't known that Jessie was pregnant when she was killed, and that made her feel sick.
"Who was it?" His tone was hard.
"I don't know, I'd never seen him before."
"Can you describe him?"
"Not really." She bit her lip, remembering that day.
"I only saw him once, the afternoon of the day Jessie was killed, and I didn't get a good look at him. I didn't tell you then because I was afraid .. ." She paused, a look of unutterable sadness crossing her face.
"I was afraid you'd fly off the handle and do something dumb and get in trouble. So I kept quiet."
"And after Jessie was killed, you didn't say anything because you thought I would be arrested, that they'd say I killed her because I'd found out she was cheating on me." He'd kept his silence on the same subject and nearly choked on his bitterness. It made him ache inside to know that Roanna had kept the same secret and for the same reason. She had been so young, already traumatized by finding Jessie's body and briefly being suspected of murder herself, hurt by his own rejection of her, and still she'd kept quiet.
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Roanna nodded, searching his face. The sunlight was fading fast, and the shades of twilight were veiling them in mysteriously shadowed blues and purples, wrapping them in that brief moment when the earth hovered between day and night, when time seems to stop and everything seems richer, sweeter. His expression was guarded, and she couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling.
"So you kept it to yourself," he said softly.
"To protect me. I'll bet you nearly choked on it, with Jessie accusing us of sleeping together when you'd just seen her with another man."
"Yes," she said, her voice strained as she remembered that horrible day and night.
"Did she know you'd seen her."
"No, I was quiet. In those days I was good at sneaking around." The glance she gave him was full of wry acknowledgment of what an undisciplined handful she had been.
"I know," he said, his tone as wry as her look.
"Do you remember where they met?"

"It was just a clearing in the woods. I could take you to the area but not to the exact spot. It's been ten years; it's probably grown over by now."
"If it was a clearing, why couldn't you see the man?"
"I didn't say I couldn't see him." Feeling uncomfortable, Roanna moved restlessly under his hands.
"I said I couldn't describe him."
Webb frowned.
"But if you saw him, why can't you describe him?"
"Because they were having sex!" she said in stifled exasperation.
"He was naked. I'd never seen a naked man before. Frankly, I didn't look at his face!"
Webb dropped his hands in astonishment, peering at her through the fading twilight. Then he began to laugh. He didn't just chuckle, he roared with mirth, his entire frame shaking. He tried to stop, took one look at her, and started again.
She punched him on the shoulder.
"Hush," she muttered.
"I can just hear you telling Booley about it," he chortled,
almost choking with laughter.
"S-sorry, Sheriff, I didn't notice his f-face because I was looking at his-
Woof!" This time she punched him in the belly. The breath rushed out of him and he bent over, clutching his stomach and still laughing.
Roanna lifted her chin.
"I was not," she said with dignity, "looking at his woof" She strode into her room and started to close the veranda doors in his face. He barely slipped through the rapidly shrinking opening. Roanna set the alarm for the doors, then pulled the curtains closed over them.
He slipped his arms around her before she could move away, pulling her snugly back against him.
"I'm sorry," he apologized.
"I know you were upset."
"It made me sick" she said fiercely.
"I hated her for cheating on you."
He bent to rub his cheek against her hair.
"I think she must have been planning to have the baby and pretend it was mine. But first she had to get me to have sex with her, and I hadn't touched her in four months. There was no way in hell she could pass it off as mine

as things stood. When she caught us kissing, she probably thought all her plans had gone up in smoke. She knew damn well I wouldn't pretend the baby was mine just to prevent a scandal. I'd have divorced her so fast her head would spin. She was crazy jealous of you anyway. She wouldn't have been nearly as furious if she had caught me with anyone else."
"Me?" Roanna asked incredulously, turning her head to stare at him. "She was jealous of me? Why? She had everything."
"But you were the one I protected-from her, most of the time. I took your side, and she couldn't stand that. She had to be first in everything and with everybody."
"No wonder she was always trying to talk Lucinda into sending me away to college!"
"She wanted you out of the way." He brushed her hair to one side and lightly kissed her neck.
"Are you certain you can't describe the man you saw her with?"
LINDA HOWABD
Shades (f Twilight "I'd never seen him before. And since they were lying down, I couldn't really see his face. I got the impression that he was older, but I was only seventeen. Thirty seemed old to me then." His teeth nipped at her neck, and she shivered. She could feel him losing interest in his questions; quite literally, in fact. His growing erection pushed at her bottom, and she leaned back against him, closing her eyes as warm pleasure began to fill her.
Slowly he slid his hands up her body and put his palms over her breasts.
"Just what I thought," he murmured, moving his love bites to her earlobe.
"What?" she gasped, reaching back to brace her hands on his thighs.
"Your nipples are already hard."
"Are you fixated on my breasts?"
"I must be," he murmured.
"And assorted other body parts, too."
He was very hard now. Roanna turned into his arms, and he walked her backward to the bed. They fell down upon it, Webb bracing his weight on his arms to keep from crushing her, and in the cool darkness their bodies came together with a fire and intensity that left her weak and shaking in his arms.
He held her close to his side, her head cradled on his shoulder. Left weak and boneless, utterly relaxed, Roanna felt drowsiness begin to ease over her.

Evidently he was right about her insomnia: tension had kept her sleepless for ten years, but after his lovemaking she was too relaxed to resist. But sleep was one thing; the sleepwalking was something else entirely and disturbed her on a much deeper level. She said, "I need to put on my nightgown."
"No." His refusal was instant and emphatic. His arms tightened around her as if he would prevent her from moving.
"But if I walk in my sleep-" "You won't. I'm going to hold you all night long. You won't be able to get out of bed without waking me up." He kissed her long and slow.
"Go to kat time, and her eyes watch over you."
"Recause I don't But she couldn't. She could feel the tension co.
invading her muscles. A habit of ten years' duration couldn't be broken in a single night, or even two. WebL, might understand the dread she felt at the thought of walking through the night so defenselessly, but he couldn't feel the panic and helplessness of not waking up in the same place where she'd gone to sleep, not knowing how she'd gotten there or anything that had happened.
He felt the tension that kept her from relaxing. He held her closer, tried to soothe her with reassurances, but finally he evidently came to the conclusion that nothing would help except complete exhaustion.
She had thought she was accustomed to his lovemaking, that she already knew the extent of his sensuality. She found that she was wrong.
He brought her to climax with his hands, with his mouth. He put her astride his hard, muscled thigh and rocked her to completion, though she clutched at him and begged him to fill her. Finally he did, pulling her off the bed and turning her so that she was on her knees, bent over with her face buried in the covers. He drove into her from behind, slamming into her buttocks with the force of his thrusts, reaching around to the front of her sex to caress her at the same time. She cried out hoarsely and stifled the sound against the mattress as she climaxed a fourth time, and still he wasn't finished. She was dissolving, going beyond peaks to a state where the pleasure simply went on and on, like the waves of the tide. It happened again, fast, and she reached back to grab his hips and pull him hard into her as she pulsed around him. Her action caught him by surprise and with a low, savage cry he joined her, shuddering and jerking as he came.

They were both shaking violently, so weak they could barely crawl back onto the bed. Sweat dripped from their bodies, and they clung together like shipwreck survivors.
This time there was no way to fight off the sleep that claimed her as surely as he had.
She woke once, only enough to be aware that he was still holding her, just as he had promised, and she drifted back to sleep.
The next time she awoke she was sitting up in bed, and Webb's fingers were hard around her wrist.
"No," he said softly, implacably.
"You aren't going anywhere."
She went back into his arms, and began to believe.
She woke for the last time at dawn, when he got out of bed.
"Where are you going?" she asked, yawning and sitting up.
"To my room," he replied, pulling on his pants. He smiled at her, and she felt herself melting inside all over again. He looked tough and sexy, with his dark hair tousled and his jaw darkened with beard stubble. His voice was still rough with sleep, and his eyelids were a little puffy, giving him a heavy-lidded, just-had-sex look.
"I have to get something," he said.
"Stay right there, and I mean right there. Don't get out of bed."
"All right, I won't." He left by the hallway door, and she lay back down and cuddled under the sheet. She wasn't certain she could get out of bed. She remembered the night that had just passed, the things that had happened between them. She ached deep inside, and her thighs felt weak, sore. That hadn't been mere lovemaking, that had been a melding that went beyond the mere physical. There were deeper levels of intimacy than she had ever imagined, and yet she knew there were still delights as yet untasted.
He was back in only a moment, carrying a plastic bag with a pharmacist's name on it. He placed the bag on the bedside table.
"What's that?" she asked.
He shucked off his pants again and got into bed beside her, tucking her close to his side.
"An early pregnancy test." She stiffened.
"Webb, I really don't think-" "It's possible," he interrupted.
"Why don't you want to know for certain?"

"Because I-" She stopped herself that time, and her eyes were somber when she looked up at him.
"Because I don't want you to feel obligated."
He went still.
"Obligated?" he asked carefully.
"If I'm pregnant, you'll feel responsible."
He snorted.
"Damn right. I'd be responsible."
"I know, but I don't want ... I want you to want me for myself," she said softly, trying to hide the longing but knowing that she hadn't quite succeeded.
"Not because we were careless and made a baby."
"Want you for yourself," he repeated just as softly.
"Haven't the last two nights given you an idea about that?"
"I know you want me physically."
"I want you, period." He cupped her face in his hand, stroking his thumb over the soft curve of her mouth. His eyes were very serious.
"I love you, Roanna Frances. Will you marry me?"
Her lips trembled under his touch. When she'd been seventeen, she had loved him so desperately that she would have jumped at any chance to marry him, under any conditions. She was twenty-seven now, and she still loved him desperately-loved him enough that she didn't want to trap him into another marriage in which he would be miserable. She knew Webb, knew the depths of his sense of responsibility. If she were pregnant, he would do anything to take care of his child, and that included lying to the mother about his feelings for her.
"No," she said, her voice almost soundless as she refused what she wanted most on this earth. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye.
He didn't insist, didn't lose his temper, though she had halfway expected that. His expression remained serious, intent, as he caught the tear with a gentle thumb.
"Why not?"
"Because you're asking in case I'm pregnant."
"Wrong. I'm asking because I love you."
"You're just saying that." And she wished he would stop Saying it. In how many dreams had she heard him whisper

those words? It wasn't fair that now he should say it, now when she didn't dare let herself believe him. Oh, God, she loved him, but she deserved to be loved for herself. At last she knew the truth of that, and she couldn't cheat herself of that final dream.
"I'm not 'just' saying anything. I love you, Ro, and you have to marry me." Under the serious expression was a certain smugness. She studied him, looking beneath the surface with her somber brown gaze that saw so much. There was a self-satisfied glint deep in his green eyes, a fierce triumph, the way he had always looked when he'd pulled off a difficult deal.
"What have you done?" she asked, her eyes widening with alarm.
Amusement curled the edges of his mouth.
"When Lucinda and I talked last night, we agreed that it would be better to leave the terms of her will as they stand. Davencourt will be better off in your hands."
She went white.
"What?" she whispered, something almost like panic edging into her tone. She tried to pull away from him but he forestalled the movement, cuddling her even closer so that her next protest was muffled against his neck.
"But it's been promised to you since you were fourteen! You worked for it, you even-"
"I even married Jessie for it," he finished calmly.
"I know."
"That was the bargain. You'd come back if Lucinda changed her will in your favor again." She felt a great hollow fear growing in the pit of her stomach. Davencourt was the lure that had brought him back, but she and Lucinda had both been aware that he had built his own life in Arizona. Maybe he preferred Arizona to Alabama. Without Davencourt to keep him here, after Lucinda died he would leave again, and after these past two nights she didn't know if she could stand it.
"That's not quite true. I didn't come back because of the bargain. I came back because I needed to tie up old loose Shades of Tuilight ends. I needed to make my peace with Lucinda; she was a big part of my life, and I owe her a lot. I didn't want her to die before we cleared the air between us. Davencourt is special, but I've done all right in Arizona," he said in calm understatement.
"I don't need Davencourt, and Lucinda thought you didn't want it-"
"I don't," she said firmly.

"I told you, I don't want to spend my life in business meetings and studying stock reports. " He gave her a lazy smile.
"Pity, when you're so good at it. I guess you'll have to marry me, and I'll do it for you. Unlike you, I get my kicks making money. If you marry me, you can very happily spend your time raising kids and training horses, which is what you would have been doing even if Lucinda had left Davencourt to me. The only difference now is that it will all belong to you, lock, stock, and barrel, and you'll be the boss."
Her head was whirling. She wasn't quite certain that she'd heard what she thought she'd heard. Davencourt was going to be hers, and he was staying anyway? Davencourt was going to be hers ... "I can hear those wheels turning," he murmured. He tilted her head up so that she was looking at him.
"I came back for one final reason, the most important one. I came back because of you."
She swallowed.
"Me?"
"You." Very gently he stroked one finger down her spine to the cleft of her buttocks, then retraced the caress up her back. She shivered delicately, melting against him. He knew what he was doing with that small, delicate touch. His purpose wasn't to arouse her but to soothe her, reassure her, reestablish the trust with which she gave her body over to him during lovemaking. The very fact that he wasn't making love to her now was proof of how intent he was on accomplishing his aim.
"Let me see if I can make this any clearer," he mused softly, brushing his lips against her forehead.
"I loved you when you were a snot-nosed kid, into so much mischief it's a wonder my hair didn't turn prematurely gray. I loved you when you were a teenager with long, skinny legs and eyes that broke my heart every time I looked at you. I love you now that you're a woman who makes my brain go soft, my legs go weak, and my dick get hard. When you walk into a room, my heart damn near jumps out of my chest. When you smile, I feel as if I've won a Nobel Prize. And your eyes still break my heart."
The soft litany washed over like the sweetest of songs, soaking into her flesh, her soul, her very being. She wanted so much to believe him, and that was why she was afraid to, afraid she would let her own desires convince her.

When she didn't speak, he began those gentling caresses again.
"Jessie really did a number on you, didn't she? She made you feel so unloved and unwanted that you still haven't gotten over it. Haven't you figured out yet that Jessie lied? Her whole life was a lie. Don't you know that Lucinda dotes on you? With Jessie dead, she was finally able to get to know you without Jessie's poison ruining everything, and she adores you."
He picked up her hand and carried it to his lips, where he kissed each fingertip, then began nibbling on the sensitive pads.
"Jessie's been dead ten years. How long are you going to continue letting her ruin things for you?"
Roanna tilted her head back, searching his expression with solemn, wondering eyes. With a sense of amazement, she realized she had never seen him look more determined, or more intent. That hard face looking back at her was the face of a man who had made up his mind and was damn sure going to get what he wanted. He meant it. He didn't want to marry her because she would have Davencourt, because he could have had it without any strings. Lucinda would have honored her bargain. He didn't want to marry her because she might be pregnant As if he were reading her mind, and perhaps he was, he said, "I love you. I can't tell you how much, because the words don't exist. I've tried to count the ways, but I'm no Browning. It doesn't matter if you're pregnant or not, I want to marry you because I love you. Period."
"All right," she whispered, and trembled at the enormity of the step she was taking, and from the joy that was blooming inside her.
Her breath whooshed out of her as he crushed her to his chest.
"You know how to make a man sweat," he said fiercely.
"I was getting desperate. What do you think about getting married next week?"
"Next week?" She all but shouted the words, at least as much as she was able to, crushed against his chest the way she was.
"You didn't think I was going to give you time to change your mind, did you?" She could hear the smile in his voice.
"If you have your heart set on a big church wedding, I suppose I can wait if it doesn't take too long to arrange. Lucinda ... Well, I think we should be married within a month, at the most."
Tears sprang to her eyes.

"That soon? I hoped she ... I hoped she would last through the winter, maybe see another spring."
"I don't think so. The doctor told her that her heart is failing, too." He rubbed his face against her hair, seeking comfort.
"She's a tough old bird," he said roughly.
"But she's ready to go. You can see it in her eyes."
They held each other quietly for a moment, already grieving for the woman around whom the entire family revolved. But Webb wasn't a man to be deterred for long from his set course, and he leaned back from her, giving her an inquiring look.
"About that wedding-"
"I don't want a big church wedding," she said forcefully, shuddering at the idea.
"You did that with Jessie, and I don't want to repeat it. I was miserable that day."
"Then what kind of wedding do you want? We could have it here, in the garden, or at the country club. Do you want just family present, or invite our friends, too? I know you have some, and maybe I can scare up a couple."
She pinched him for that remark.
"You know darn well you have friends, if you can bring yourself to forgive them and let them be friends again. I want to get married in the garden. I want our friends to be here. And I want Lucinda to walk with me down the aisle, if she's able. A big wedding would be too much for her, too."
One corner of his lip quirked at all of those decisive "I wants." He suspected that before long, even though she professed not to be interested in Davencourt's business concerns, she would be poking her nose into it, butting heads with him over some of his decisions. He couldn't wait. The thought of Roanna arguing with him made him weak with delight. Roanna had always been stubborn, and she still was, even though her methods had changed.
"We'll work out the details," he said.
"We'll get married next week if we can, two weeks max, all right?"
She nodded, smiling a little mistily.
Number seven, he thought triumphantly. And this one had been open, natural, as if she were no longer wary about showing joy.

Twisting, he reached for the plastic bag on the bedside table and withdrew the contents. He opened the box, read the instructions, then gave her the small plastic wand with a wide slot on the side.
"Now," he said, with a determined glint in his green eyes, "go pee-pee on the stick."
Ten minutes later he knocked on the bathroom door.
"What are you doing?" he asked impatiently.
"Are you- all right?"
"Yes," she said in a muffled voice.
He opened the door. She was standing nude in front of the sink, her face blank with shock. The plastic stick lay on the rim of the bowl.
Webb looked at the stick. The slot had been white; now it was blue. It was a simple test: if the color of the slot changed, the test was positive. He eased his arms around her, pulling her into the comforting warmth of his body. She was pregnant. She was going to have his baby.
"You really didn't think you were, did you?" he asked curiously.
She shook her head, her expression still stunned.
"I don't-I don't feel any different."
"I imagine that will start changing soon." His big hands slid down to her flat belly, gently massaging. She could feel his heart thumping hard and fast against her back. His penis rose to jut insistently against her hip.
He was excited. He was aroused. She was stunned at the realization. She had been thinking he would feel only responsibility for the baby; she hadn't considered that he would be excited at the prospect of being a father.
"You want the baby," she said, her amazement plain in both face and voice. "You wanted me to be pregnant."
"I sure as hell did." His voice was rough, and he tightened his arms around her.
"Don't you want it?"
Her hand drifted downward, lightly settling over the place where her child, his child, was forming inside her. Radiant wonder lit her face, and her gaze met Webb's in the mirror.
"Oh, yes," she said softly.

Chapter 22

Corliss slipped into Roanna's bedroom. She was alone upstairs, because all the others had either gone to work or were down stairs at breakfast. She had been trying to eat, but with her pounding headache and upset stomach, it had been more of a pretense than anything else. She needed some coke, just a little of it to make her feel better, but all the money she'd gotten before was already gone.

When Webb and Roanna had entered the breakfast room, she had made a point of getting up and leaving in dignified, offended silence, but they hadn't cared, the bastards. She had stopped just outside the door and listened, waiting to hear what they said about her. They hadn't mentioned her at all, as if she weren't important enough for discussion. Webb had told her to leave Davencourt and poof! just like that she didn't matter any more. Instead, Webb had announced that he and Roanna were getting married. Married! Corliss couldn't believe it. The thought made her mind fog with rage. Why would anyone, especially someone like Webb, want to marry a mealy mouth like Roanna? Corliss hated the bastard, but she didn't underestimate him. Despite what he'd said, she could have handled Roanna, she was sure of it. She couldn't handle Webb, though. He was too hard, too mean. He was going to throw her out of Davencourt. And that's why she had to get rid of him.

She couldn't leave Davencourt. She felt sick with panic at the prospect. Nobody seemed to care that she needed to live here. She couldn't go back to that dinky little house in Sheffield, back to being just a poor relation to the rich Davenports. She was somebody now, Miss Corliss Spence, of Davencourt. If Webb threw her out, she'd become a nobody again. She wouldn't have any means of getting money for her expensive little habit. The thought was unbearable. She had to get rid of Webb.

She prowled through Roanna's room. She'd get to the money, but first she wanted to poke around a little. She'd gone first into Webb's room, hoping to find something of his she could use, but-surprise, surprise! It didn't look as if he'd slept there. His bed was perfectly made, not a wrinkle in it. Somehow she couldn't see him making his own bed, not the arrogant Webb Tallant. Well, wasn't he the sly one? No wonder he hadn't wanted his old suite. He'd chosen this room beside Roanna's so they would have a cozy little arrangement, alone here at the back of the house.

She'd gone then into Roanna's room, and sure enough, the bed was a wreck, and both pillows bore the imprint of a head. Who ever would have thought it of prissy Roanna, who didn't even date? But she sure didn't mind screwing, from the looks of that bed. Smart of her, too. Corliss hated to admit it, but this was one time Roanna had been the smart one. She'd made certain Webb wouldn't tell her to leave, by setting herself up as a convenient source of sex, and somehow she'd convinced him to marry her. Maybe she was better in bed than she looked. Corliss would have slept with him herself if she'd thought of it. It pissed her off that she hadn't.

She wandered into the bathroom and opened the mirrored door to the medicine cabinet. Roanna never kept

anything interesting in there, no birth control pills or condoms, no diaphragm, just toothpaste and boring shit like that. She didn't even have any good cosmetics Corliss could borrow.

She glanced down at the small trash can and went still.

"Well, well," she said softly, bending down to pick up the box. A do-it-yourself pregnancy test.

So that was how Roanna had done it.

She was a fast worker, Corliss had to give her that. She must have made her plans and gotten in bed with him first thing, when she'd gone to Arizona. She probably hadn't expected to get pregnant so fast, but what the hell, sometimes you took a chance and hit the jackpot.

Wouldn't Harper Neeley be interested in hearing about this?

She didn't bother with the money after all. This was too good to wait. Quickly she slipped out of Roanna's room and went back to her own. Harper was her only hope. He was one strange dude; he seared her, but he excited her, too. He looked like there was nothing too low or raunchy for him to do, nothing he would balk at. It was weird the way he hated Webb, almost to the point he couldn't think about anything else, but that was to her advantage. Harper had messed up twice, but he would keep trying. He was like a gun; all she had to do was point him and fire.

She called him to set up a meeting.

Harper's eyes gleamed with a cold, feral light that made Corliss shiver inside with both fear and satisfaction. His reaction had been more than she'd expected.

"Are you sure she's pregnant?" he asked softly, leaning back in his chair so that the front legs came off the floor. He was poised on the back legs of the

chair like an animal preparing to spring.
"I saw the damn test," Corliss replied.
"It was on top in the trash can, so she must have done it just this morning. Then they came downstairs all smiley-faced and Webb said they're getting married. What about my money?" Harper smiled at her, his eyes so very blue and empty, "Money?"
Panic nibbled at her nerves. She needed some money; she'd been in too much of a hurry to get out of Roanna's room, and now she really needed a line or two to hold her steady. She was really on edge; she only had two days left before Webb made her move. Harper had to do something, but the waiting was killing her. She wouldn't be able to hold it together unless she could get just a little coke to tide her over.
"You never said anything about money," he drawled, and his smile made cold shivers go over her again. Nervously she looked around. She didn't like this place. She met Harper at a different place every time, but always before, the locations had been public: a truck stop, a bar, places like that. After the first time, they'd always met out of town, too.
This time he'd given her directions to a ratty little trailer out in the middle of nowhere. There were junk cars in the yard and discarded carcasses of old chairs and box springs piled haphazardly against the trailer, as if they'd just been tossed outside and never thought of again. The trailer was tiny, consisting of a cramped little kitchen with a cramped little table and two chairs as the dining area, a cracked Naugahyde couch and a nineteen-inch television sitting on a rickety end table, and beyond that she could see a closet sized bathroom and a bedroom in which the double bed took up most of the floor space. Dirty dishes, beer bottles, crumpled cigarette packs, overflowing ashtrays, and dirty clothes littered every surface.
This wasn't where Harper lived. There had been a different name, crudely lettered, on the mailbox, but she couldn't remember what it was. He'd said the trailer belonged to a friend. Now she wondered if the "friend" had ever heard of Harper Neeley.
"I've got to have money," she blurted.
"That was the deal."
"Nope. The deal was you'd pass along information about Tallant, and I'd take care of your problem for you."
"Well, you've done a piss-poor job of it!" she snapped. He blinked slowly, his cold blue gaze growing even colder, and belatedly she wished she'd kept

her mouth shut..
"It's taking longer than I expected," she said, moderating her tone to a plea. "I'm broke, and I need things. You know how girls are-"
"I know how coke heads are," he said indifferently.
"I'm not a cokehead!" she flared.
"I just use a little every now and then to settle my nerves."
"Sure, and your shit don't stink either."
She flushed, but something in the way he was looking at her made her afraid to push him any further. Nervously she got up from the couch, peeling her thighs from the Naugahyde where sweat had made her stick to the damn thing. She saw his gaze drop down to her legs, and she wished she hadn't worn shorts. It was just so damn hot, and she hadn't expected to be sitting on Naugahyde, for God's sake. She wished she hadn't worn these shorts especially, but they were her favorites because they were so short and tight, and they were white besides, which really showed off her tan.
"I got to go," she said, trying to hide her agitation. Harper had never tried anything with her, but then they'd never been in a place where he could. It wasn't that he was ugly, far from it, for an old dude, but he scared the living shit out of her. Maybe if they'd been someplace where she wasn't so alone, like a motel, where someone would hear if she screamed, because Harper looked like a man who made women scream.
"You ain't wearing any panties," he observed, never moving from his balanced position on the back legs of the chair.
"I can see your pussy hair through your shorts."
She knew that; that was one reason she liked the shorts so much. She loved the way men glanced at her, then did a double take and looked again, with their eyes all bugged out and their tongues all but flapping like a dog's. It made her feel sexy, hot. But when Harper looked at her, she didn't feel hot, she felt scared.
He tilted even further back in the chair and reached into the right pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a Baggie filled with about an ounce of white powder, twisted into a little pouch and secured with red yarn tied around the neck of the pouch. The yarn drew her gaze, held it. She'd never seen a cocaine bag tied up with red yarn before. It looked exotic, unreal.
He swung the little bag back and forth.
"Would you rather have this, or money?"

Money, she tried to say, but her lips wouldn't form the words. Back and forth the little bag went, back and forth. She stared at it, hypnotized, fascinated. There was snow in that little bag, a Christmas present all tied up with red yarn.
I'M-maybe just a taste," she whispered. Just a taste. That was all she needed. A little snort to chase away the edginess. Carelessly he turned and swiped everything off the surface of the dirty little table, knocking newspapers and ashtrays and dirty dishes to the floor where it joined the rest of the litter and looked right at home. The owner of the trailer might not even notice. Then he untied the red yarn and carefully poured a portion of the white powder onto the table. Eagerly Corliss started forward, but he gave her a cold look that stopped her in her tracks.
"Just wait," he said.
"It's not ready for you yet."
A magazine insert, one of the stupid little cards that magazines stuck all through the pages, giving the reader an opportunity to become a subscriber, was lying on the floor. Harper picked it up and began to divide the tiny white mound into uniform lines on the table. Corliss watched his quick, sure movements. He'd done this before, many times. That puzzled her, because she thought she knew how to spot the cokers, and Harper didn't have any of the signs.
The little lines were perfect now, four of them. They weren't very long, but they would do. She quivered, staring at them, waiting for the word that would release her from her position.
Harper took a piece of straw from his pocket. It was a regular soda straw, cut down to not much longer than an inch. It was shorter than she liked, so short she'd have to '341
bend down right over the table and take care that her hand didn't brush the lines and disturb them. But it was a straw, and when he held it out to her, she eagerly took it.
He pointed to a place on the floor.
"You can stand there." The trailer was so tiny that it was only one step forward. She took it, then looked at the table and back at him. She would have to bend all the way forward and stretch to reach the lines.
"That's too far," she said.
He shrugged.
"You'll manage."

She reached out and braced her left hand on the table and carefully held the little straw in her right. She bent forward, inching, hoping she wouldn't fall and turn the table over. The lines came closer and she lifted the straw to her nose, already anticipating the rush, the sizzle of ecstasy as her head expanded, the glow' You not doing it right," he said.
She froze, her gaze still on those sweet little lines. She had to have them. She couldn't wait much longer. But she was afraid to move, afraid of what would happen if she moved before Harper said she could.
"You have to drop your drawers first."
His voice was expressionless, as if they were playing May I? But now she knew what he wanted, and relief almost made her knees sag. It was just screwing, nothing important. So what if he was older than anyone else she'd ever screwed? The little lines beckoned, and how old he was didn't matter. Hastily she straightened and unbuttoned her shorts, let them drop to her ankles. She started to step out of them, but he stopped her again.
"Leave them there. I don't want your legs spread, it's tighter when they're together."
She shrugged.
"Whatever cranks your tractor."
She didn't pay any more attention to him as he moved behind her. She bent forward, eagerly focused on the cocaine, left hand braced on the table, right hand holding the straw. The tip of the straw touched the white powder, and she inhaled sharply just as he shoved into her, driving deep, the force of his thrust making the straw skid across the table and knock the cocaine out of its neat lines. She was dry, and he hurt her. She chased after the coke with the straw and he shoved again, making her miss. She whimpered, frantically adjusting her Position and inhaling as hard as she could to suck up any particle the tip of the straw might touch.
The coke was scattered all over the table. There was no point in trying to aim, only to time her inhalations as his thrusts rhythmically pushed her forward. Corliss held the short straw to her nose, avidly sweeping the tip across the table, sucking hard through her nose as she went back and forth, back and forth, and it didn't matter any more that he was hurting her, damn him, because she was managing to inhale enough, and the glow, the rush, was spreading through her. She didn't care what he did as long as he could get the coke for her, and as long as he took care of Webb Tallant before the bastard kicked her out of Davencourt.

That afternoon when Roanna returned from a meeting of the Historical Society, she opened the garage door and saw that Corliss had returned before her and taken advantage of her absence to take her parking slot again. Sighing, she pressed the button on the remote control to lower the garage door again, and parked her car to the side. Corliss would be gone in two days; she could be patient that long. If she said anything about the parking space, there would be another big scene that would upset Lucinda, something she wanted to avoid.

She was walking across the yard to the back door when something moved softly in her heart, and she stopped and looked around. It was one of the most beautiful days she'd ever seen. The sky was a deep, pure blue and the air was unusually clear, without the usual haze of humidity. The heat was so intense it was like a touch, releasing the rich, heavy fragrance from the rose bushes, which had been carefully cultivated over decades and were laden with blooms. Down at the stables, the horses were prancing around and tossing their glossy heads, full of energy. That
morning, Webb had asked her to marry him. And above all that, she was carrying his child.

Pregnant. She was actually pregnant. She was still a little stunned, as if it couldn't possibly be happening to her, and she had been so distracted she had no idea what had been discussed at the Historical Society meeting. She was accustomed to being the only person inhabiting her body. How did she get used to the concept of someone else living inside her? It was alien, and it was frightening. How could something so strange be so precious? She was so happy she wanted to weep.

That, too, felt alien. She was happy. She examined the emotion cautiously. She was going to marry Webb. She was going to raise kids and horses. She looked up at the huge old house and felt a wave of pure elation and possessiveness sweep over her. Davencourt was hers. It was her home now, truly and for real. Yes, she was happy. Even with Lucinda's inevitable passing coming closer and closer, she was filled with a rich contentment. Webb was right; Jessie had poisoned enough of her life, convinced her that she was too ugly and clumsy for anyone to love her. Well, Jessie had been a spiteful bitch, and she'd been lying. Roanna felt the knowledge seep into her pores. She was a capable, likable human being, and she had a special talent with horses. She was loved; Lucinda loved her, Loyal loved her, Bessie and Tansy loved her. Gloria and Lanette had been concerned when she'd been

injured, and Lanette had been surprisingly helpful. Brock and Greg liked her. Harlan-well, who knew about Harlan? But most of all, Webb loved her. Sometime during the day, the certainty of that had penetrated the layers of her soul. Webb loved her. He'd loved her all her life, just as he'd said. He was certainly aroused by her, which meant that her looks weren't all that odd either.

She smiled a private little smile as she remembered how he'd made love to her the night before, and again that morning, after the pregnancy test had shown positive. There was no doubting his physical reaction to her, any more than he could doubt her desire for him.

"I saw that," he said from where he lounged in the kitchen doorway. She hadn't heard him open the door.

"You've been standing there daydreaming for five minutes, and you just got a mysterious little smile on your face. What are you thinking about?"

Still smiling, Roanna walked toward him, her brown eyes heavy lidded and filled with an expression that made him catch his breath.

"Riding," she murmured as she walked past, deliberately brushing her body against his.

"And woofs."

His own eyes grew heavy, and color stained his cheekbones. It was the first seductive move Roanna had made toward him, and it had brought him to a full, immediate erection. Tansy was behind him in the kitchen, cheerfully going about her daily baking and concocting. He didn't care if she noticed his aroused state. He turned around and silently, purposefully followed Roanna.

She glanced over her shoulder at him as they went up the stairs, her face glowing with promise. She walked faster. The bedroom door was barely closed behind them before Webb had her in his arms.

Getting married involved running a lot of errands, Roanna thought the next morning as she drove down the long, winding private road. The guest list for the wedding was much smaller than the one for Lucinda's party had been, with a total of forty people, including family, but there were still details to be taken care of.

She and Webb were to have their blood tests later that afternoon. This morning, she had arranged for the flowers and the caterer and the wedding cake. Normally wedding cakes took weeks to prepare, but Mrs. Turner, who specialized in wedding cakes, had said she could do an "elegantly simple"

one in the eleven days left until the chosen wedding date. Roanna understood that "elegantly simple" was a
tactful way of saying less elaborate, but that was what she preferred anyway. She had to stop by Mrs. Turner's house and pick out the design she liked best.
She also had to shop for a wedding gown. If she couldn't find anything she liked in the Quad Cities on such short notice, she would have to go to Huntsville or Birmingham.
Fortunately, Yvonne had been ecstatic about the prospect of Webb's second marriage. She had tolerated Jessie but never really liked her. Roanna suited her to a T, and she had even said that she'd always wished Webb had waited for Roanna to grow up rather than marrying Jessie. Yvonne had thrown herself into the preparations, taking over the onerous chore of invitations and volunteering to handle the logistics of everything else once Roanna had made her choices.
Roanna reached the side road and stopped, waiting for an oncoming car to pass. Her brakes felt mushy when she applied them, and she frowned, experimentally pumping the pedal again. This time it felt fine. Perhaps the level of brake fluid was low, though she kept the car well maintained. She made a mental note to stop at a service station and have it checked.
She turned right onto the side road, traveling toward the highway. The car that had just passed was at least a hundred yards ahead of her. Roanna gradually accelerated, her thoughts drifting to the style of gown she wanted: something simple, in ivory rather than pure white. She had some gold hued pearls that would look gorgeous with an ivory gown. And a fairly slim skirt in the Empire style would suit her far better than a full-skirted, fairy princess gown.
There was a curve in the road, then a stop sign where the road intersected with Highway 43, a busy four-lane highway, with traffic continually zooming past. Roanna rounded the curve and saw the car ahead of her halted at the stop sign, left turn signal blinking, waiting for an opening in the traffic to enter the highway.
A car turned onto the side road, coming toward her, but the traffic was too heavy for the car stopped at the intersection to make it across to the other side, Roanna put her foot on the brake pedal to slow down, and the pedal went to the floorboard without any resistance at all.

Alarm shot through her. She pumped the pedal again, but there was no response the way there had been the first time. If anything, the car seemed to pick up speed. She had no brakes, and both lanes of the road were occupied.

Time warped, stretching like elastic. The road elongated in front of her, while the oncoming car loomed tV, 7iCe its normal size. Thoughts flashed through her mind, lightning fast: Webb, the baby. A deep ditch was to the right, and the shoulder was narrow; there was no room for her to swing past the car stopped at the intersection, even if there hadn't beer, the danger of shooting across four lanes of traffic.

Webb! Dear God, Webb. She gripped the steering wheel, anguish almost choking her as the seconds churned past and she ran out of time. She couldn't die now, not now when she had Webb, when his child was just beginning its life inside her. She had to do son ething ... But she already knew what to do, she realized, memory gleaming like a bright thread through the terror that threatened to engulf her. She'd been a terrible driver, so she had taken a driving course when she was in college. She knew how to handle skids and lousy road conditions; she knew what to do in case of brake failure.

She knew what to do!

The car was shooting forward, as if it were on a downhill course and the roadway was greased.

The driving instructor's voice sounded in her head, calm and prosaic: Don't take a solid hit if you can help it. Don't let yourself hit anything head on, that's when the worst damage occurs. Turn the car, slide into a collision, dissipate the force

She reached for the gear shift. Don't try to put it into park, she thought, remembering those long-ago lessons. The instructor had said it likely wouldn't go into park anyway. She could hear his voice as clearly as if he was sitting beside

her: Put the gear into low range and pull the emergency brakes. The emergency brakes work on a cable, not on pneumatic pressure. A loss of brake fluid won't affect them.

The stopped car was just fifty yards ahead now. The oncoming car was less than that.

She pulled the gear shift into low and reached for the emergency brake lever, pulling it with all her strength. Metal shrieked as the transmission

ground down, and black smoke boiled up from her tires. The stench of burning rubber filled the car.
The rear end of the car will likely come around. Steer out of the skid if you can. If you don't have room, and you see you're going to hit someone or be hit, try to maneuver so it's an indirect collision. Both of you will be more likely to walk away.
The rear end swung into the other lane, in front of the oncoming car. A horn blared, and Roanna caught a glimpse of a furious, terrified face, just a blur in the windshield. She turned into the skid, felt the car began to slide in the other direction, and quickly spun the steering wheel to correct that skid, too. The oncoming car swept past with inches to spare, horn still blaring. That left only the car in her lane, still sitting patiently at the stop sign, turn signal blinking.
Twenty yards. No more room, no more time. With the left lane clear now, Roanna sent the car into a spinning slide across it. A cornfield stretched out on the other side of the road, nice and flat. She left the road and plunged across the shoulder, the car still skidding sideways. She crashed into the fencing, wood splintering, and a whole section came down. The car plowed down head-high stalks of corn as it bumped and thudded across the furrows, clods of dirt flying in all directions. She was thrown forward, and the seat belt bit hard into her hips and torso, jerking her back as the car shuddered to a stop.
She sat there with her head resting on the steering wheel, too weak and dazed to get out of the car. Numbly she took stock of herself. Everything seemed to be all right.
Shades of' Twilight She became aware that she was trembling uncontrollably. She'd done it!
She heard someone yelling, then there was a tapping on the window beside her.
"Ma'am? Ma'am? Are you all right?"
Roanna lifted her head and stared into the scared face of a teenage girl. Willing her shaking limbs to obey, she unclipped the seat belt and tried to get out. The door didn't want to open. She shoved, and the girl pulled from the outside, and together they forced it open enough for Roanna to climb out.
"I'm okay," she managed to say.

"I saw you run off the road. Are you sure you're okay? You hit that fence pretty hard."
"The fence got the worst of it." Roanna's teeth began chattering, and she had to lean against the car or sink to the ground.
"My brakes failed."
The girl's eyes widened.
"Oh, gosh! You ran off the road to keep from hitting me, didn't you?"
"It seemed like a better idea," she said, and her knees sagged.
The girl sprang forward, sliding an arm around her.
"You are hurt!"
Roanna shook her head, forcing her knees to stiffen as the girl showed signs of bursting into tears.
"No, I'm just scared, that's all. My legs feel like limp noodles." She took a few deep, steadying breaths.
"I have a cell phone in the car, I'll just call someone to come-"
"I'll get it for you," the girl said, wrenching the door open wider and scrambling inside to find the cellular phone. After a brief search she located it under the right front seat.
Roanna took some more calming breaths before she called home. The last thing she wanted to do was unduly alarm Webb or Lucinda, so that meant she had to steady her voice.
Bessie answered the phone, and Roanna asked for Webb. He came on the line a moment later.
"You haven't been gone five minutes," he teased.
"What else have you thought of T,
"Nothing," she said, and was proud of how calm she sounded.
"Come down to the intersection and get me. I had trouble with the brakes on my car and ran off the road."
He didn't reply. She heard a violent, muffled curse, then there was a clatter and the phone went dead.
"He's on his way," she said to the girl, and pressed the END button on the phone.
Webb bundled Roanna into his truck, thanked the teenager for checking on her, and drove back to Davencourt so fast that Roanna clung to the overhead strap to steady herself. When they reached the house, he insisted on carrying her inside.
"Put me down!" she hissed as he swung her up into his arms.

"You'll have everyone 'worried to death."
"Hush," he said, and kissed her, hard.
"I love you and you're pregnant. Carrying you makes me feel better."
She looped her arm around his neck and hushed. She had to admit, the warmth and strength of his big body was very soothing, as if she were absorbing some of it through her skin. But as she had predicted, the fact that she wasn't walking on her own brought everyone scurrying, frightened questions on their lips.
Webb carried her into the living room and placed her on one of the couches as carefully as if she were made of fine crystal.
"I'm all right, I'm all right," she kept saying to the chorus of questions. "I'm not even bruised."
"Get her something hot and sweet to drink," Webb said to Tansy, who rushed to obey.
"Decaffeinated!" Roanna called after her, thinking of the baby.
After assuring himself for the tenth time that she was unhurt, Webb stood up and told her he was going out to have a look at her car.
"I'll go with you," she said in relief at the prospect of escaping from all the cosseting, getting up, but she was immediately drowned out by a chorus of protests from the women in the household.
"You most certainly will not, young lady," Lucinda said, at her most autocratic.
"You've had a shock to Your system, and you need to rest."
"I'm not hurt," Roanna said again, wondering if anyone was actually listening to what she said.
"Then I need for you to rest. It would fret me no end if you went off gallivanting, when common sense says you should give yourself time to get over the shock."
Roanna gave Webb a speaking glance. He lifted one eyebrow and shrugged, not at all sympathetically.
"Can't have you gallivanting," he murmured, and dropped his gaze lower, to her belly, Roanna sat back down, warmed by the silent communication, the shared thought about their child. And while Lucinda was blatantly using emotional blackmail to get her way, it was done out of genuine concern, and Roanna decided there wouldn't be any harm in letting herself be fussed over for the rest of the day.

Webb went outside to get into his truck, and stared thoughtfully at the spot where Roanna's car had been parked. There was a dark, wet stain on the ground, visible even from where he was. He walked over and hunkered down, examining the stain for a moment before touching it with his finger, then sniffing the oily residue. Definitely brake fluid, a lot of it. She must have had only a little fluid left in the lines, and it would have been pumped out the first time she used her brakes.
She could have been killed. If she had gone across the highway instead of into a cornfield, she very likely would have been seriously injured, at the least, if not killed outright.
A cold sense of dread touched him. The shadowy, unknown assailant could have struck again, but this time at Roanna. Why not? Hadn't he done it before with Jessie? And with more success, too.
He didn't use the cellular phone, with its insecure channels, or go back inside to face the inevitable questions.
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Instead he walked down to the stables and used Loyal's phone. The trainer listened to the conversation, his thick, graying brows pulling together as his eyes began to snap with anger.
"You think somebody tried to hurt Miss Roanna?" be demanded as soon as Webb hung up.
"I don't know. It's possible."
"The same person who broke into the house?"
"If her brakes have been sabotaged, then I'd have to say Yes."
"That would mean he was here last night, messing around with her car."
Webb nodded, his expression stony. He tried not to let his imagination run away with him until he knew for certain if Roanna's car had been tampered with, but he couldn't stop the stomach-tightening panic and anger at the thought of the man being so close.
He drove out to the intersection, all the while carefully scanning around him. He didn't think this would be a trap designed to get him out in the open, because there was no way to predict exactly where Roanna's accident would happen. Though he was acutely aware that this was roughly the same location where he had been shot at from ambush, he was more afraid that this hadn't been aimed at him, but specifically at Roanna. Maybe she hadn't simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time the night she'd been hit on

the head. Maybe she'd been lucky instead, that she'd managed to scream and alert the household before the bastard had been able to finish the job. Jessie had been killed, but by God, he wouldn't let anything happen to Roanna. No matter what he had to do, he'd keep her safe.

He parked the truck on the shoulder next to the downed section of fencing and waited for the sheriff. It wasn't long before Beshears drove up, and Booley was riding in the front seat with him. The two men got out and joined Webb, and together they waded through the flattened cornstalks to where the car sat. They were all grim and silent. After the other two incidents, it was asking a bit much to believe that Roanna's brakes had failed on their own, and they all knew it.

Webb lay down on his back and wormed his way under the car. Broken corn stalks scraped his back, and tiny insects buzzed around his ears. The smell of grease and brake fluid filled his nostrils.

"Carl, hand me your flashlight," he said, and the big flashlight was passed under the car to him.

He turned it on and directed the beam to the brake line, He spotted the cut almost immediately.

"Yall want to take a look at this?" he invited.

Carl lay down and grunted as he squirmed under the car to join Webb, cussing as the cornstalks gouged his skin.

"I'm too old for this," he muttered.

"Ouch!" Booley declined to join them, as the weight he'd added since retirement would have made it a tight fit for him.

Carl hauled himself into position next to Webb and scowled when he saw the line.

"The son of a bitch," he growled, lifting his head to examine the line as close as he could without touching it.

"Cut almost through. A nice fresh, clean cut. Even if she'd managed to make it onto the highway okay, she'd have wrecked when she got to the stop light on 157. Guess it was pure luck she ran into this field the way she did."

"Skill, not luck," Webt, said.

"She took some driving courses in college."

"No fooling. Wish more folks would take something like that, then we would ri have to pick pieces of them up off the highway," He glanced at Webb, saw the tightening of his mouth, and said, "Sorry."

Carefully they wormed their way out from under the car, though Carl cussed again when a stalk caught his shirt and tore a small hole in it.
"Did you check the other cars at the house?" Booley asked.
"I took a quick look under all of them. Roanna's was the only one touched. She usually parks in the garage, but she left her car outside last night."
"Now, that's a bit coincidental." Carl scratched his chin, a sign that he was thinking.
"Why didn't she park in the garage?"
"Corliss was parked in her slot. We've had some trouble with Corliss lately, and I told her she had to move out. I started to make her move her car, but Ro told me to leave it alone and not cause a fuss that would upset Lucinda."
"Maybe you should've made that fuss anyway. You reckon Corliss would do something like this?"
"I'd be surprised if she knew a brake line from a fishing line."
"She got any friends who would do it for her?"
"I've been away for ten years," Webb replied.
"I don't know who she hangs out with. But if she had anyone tamper with a brake line, it would be mine, not Roanna's."
"But yours was in the garage."
"Corliss has a control for the doors. We all do. If she was behind it, it wouldn't matter if the car was inside the garage or not."
Carl scratched his chin again.
"None of this ties together, does it? It's like we've got pieces from ten different puzzles, and nothing goes together. It just don't make a lick of sense."
"Oh, it all fits," Booley said grimly.
"We just don't know how."

Chapter 23

The house was quiet that night when Webb finally entered Roanna's room. As usual, she was curled up in her chair with a book in her lap, but she looked around with a warm welcome in her eyes.
"What took you so long?"
"I had some last-minute paperwork I needed to do. With all the excitement today, I'd forgotten about it." He knelt in front of her, searching her eyes

with his.
"Are you honestly okay? You aren't hiding anything from me?"
I'm fine. Not a single bruise. Do you want me to pull off my clothes and show you?"
His eyes turned smoky, and his gaze dropped to her breasts.
"Yes."
She felt herself begin to warm and soften inside, and her nipples beaded the way they always did when he looked at her. He laughed softly, but got to his feet and caught her hands, pulling her up.
"Come on."
She thought they were going to the bed, but instead he directed her to the door. She gave him a confused look.
"Where are we going?"
"To another bedroom."
"Why?" she asked, bewildered.
"What's wrong with this one?"
"Because I want to try another bed."
"Yours?"
"No," he said briefly.
Roanna resisted the pressure on her back as he urged her toward the door. She turned and gave him a long, steady regard.
"Something's wrong." She said it as a statement, not a question. She knew Webb too well; she'd seen him angry and she'd seen him amused. She knew when he was tired, when he was worried, when he was aggravated as all hell. She thought she'd seen him in all his moods, but this one was new. His eyes were hard and cool, with an alertness that made her think of a hungry cat stalking prey.
"Let's just say I'd feel better if you were in a different room tonight."
"If I go, will you tell me why?"
That blade like gaze sharpened even more.
"Oh, you'll go," he said softly.
She drew herself up and faced him, not backing down an inch.
"You can reason with me, Webb Tallant, but you can't order me around. I'm not a fool or a child. Tell me what's going on." Just because she loved him to distraction didn't mean she couldn't think for herself.
He looked briefly frustrated, because once she wouldn't have balked at doing anything he told her. But she'd been a child then, and now she was a

woman; he needed to be reminded of that every so often. He made a rapid decision.
"All right, but come on. And be as quiet as you can; I don't want to wake anyone. When we get to the other room, don't turn on any lights either."
"The bed won't have any sheets on it," she warned.
"Then bring something to put around you in case you get cold."
She picked up her afghan and went quietly with him down the hall to one of the unoccupied bedrooms, the last one on the left side. The curtains were open, letting in enough light from the quarter moon that they could see how to maneuver. Webb went over to the windows and looked out, while Roanna sat down on the bed.
"Tell me," she said.
He didn't turn away from the windows. -I suspect we might have a visitor tonight."
She thought about it for a few seconds, and her stomach knotted at the obvious answer.
"You think the burglar will come back?"
He gave her a brief glance.
"You're quick, you know that? I don't think he was a burglar. But, yes, I think he'll come. He could see the side lawn from this room, she realized, while from either of their rooms he could have seen only the back.
"If he isn't a burglar, why would he come back?" Webb was silent a moment, then said, "Jessie's killer was never caught."
She was suddenly chilled, and pulled the afghan around her shoulders.
"You think ... you think whoever killed Jessie was in the house again that night, and hit me?"
"I think it's possible. Your accident today wasn't an accident, Ro. Your brake line had been cut. And someone took a couple of shots at me the other day when I was late getting here for the party. I didn't have car trouble; my windshield was shot out."
Roanna sucked in a deep, shocked breath, her mind reeling. She wanted to jump up and yell at him for not having said something before, she wanted to throw something, she wanted to get her hands on whoever had tried to shoot him. She couldn't do any of that, however. If she wanted him to finish telling her what was going on, she had to sit there and not make a lot of noise. She pulled herself together and tried to reason it out.
"But ... why would whoever killed Jessie want to kill you? And me?"

"I don't know," he said in frustration.
"I've gone over and over everything that happened before Jessie died, and I can't think of anything. I didn't know she had a lover until Booley told me she was pregnant when she died, but why would he have killed Jessie? It would have made sense if he'd tried to kill me, but not Jessie. And if Jessie was killed because of something else she was doing, there wouldn't be a reason for the killer to come after you and me. We don't know who he is, and after ten years he should feel safe from discovery, so why take the risk of starting it all again?"
"So you don't think her lover is the one?"
"I don't know. There's no reason for it. On the other hand, if I'm the real target and have been all along, that means Jessie died because she was my wife. I thought she might have surprised the killer, the same way you did, and he killed her so she couldn't identify him. I made sure it's common knowledge that you can't remember anything about the night you were attacked, so he wouldn't have that as a reason for coming back. But when your brake line was cut, I knew it had to be more than that. Tampering with your car was directed specifically at you."
"Because we're getting married," she said, feeling sick inside.
"But how could he have found out so fast? We just decided yesterday morning!"
"You started making arrangements yesterday," Webb said, shrugging.
"Think of the people you called, all the people they must have told. News travels. Whoever it is must hate me a lot, to go after first Jessie, then you."
"But Jessie's death had to be unplanned," Roanna argued.
"No one could have known that y'all would argue that night or that you would have gone to a bar. Normally you would have been at home."
"I know," he said, exhaling hard in frustration.
"I can't think of a reason for any of it. No matter how I look at it, some of the details don't fit."
She got up from the bed and went over to him, needing his closeness. He put his arms around her and hugged her to him, tucking the afghan more securely around her shoulders. She laid her head on his chest, softly breathing in the warm, musky scent of his skin. It was unthinkable that anything should happen to him.
"Why do you think he'll come back tonight?"

"Because he's made several attempts in a short period of time. He keeps coming back, trying something different. Loyal is watching from the stables. If he sees anything, he'll call me on the cellular phone, then notify the sheriff."
"Are you armed?"
He tilted his head toward the dresser.
"There."
She turned her head and in the dimness could see a darker shape lying on top of the dresser. Abruptly she knew what was different about his mood. This was how he must have been when he'd tracked the rustlers into Mexico: the hunter, the predator. Webb was a man not normally inclined to violence, but he would kill to protect his own. He wasn't excited or on edge; the thud of his heart beneath her head was steady. He was coolly, ruthlessly determined.
"What if nothing happens tonight?" she asked.
"Then we'll watch again tomorrow night. Eventually, we'll get him."
She stood with him for a long time, staring out at the moonlit night until her eyes ached. Nothing moved, and the crickets chirped undisturbed.
"You're sure the alarm is on?"
He pointed to the code box beside the veranda doors. A tiny green light was steadily shining. A red light flashed if a door was opened, and if the code wasn't entered within fifteen seconds, the alarm sounded.
Webb appeared to have the patience of Job and the stamina of a marathoner. He stood unmoving, keeping watch, but Roanna couldn't manage to stand still for that length of time. She paced slowly around the dark bedroom, hugging the afghan around her, until Webb said softly, "Why don't you lie down and get some sleep?"
"I have insomnia, remember?" she shot back.
"I only sleep after-" She stopped, and he chuckled.
"I could say something crude, but I won't. I kind of like this strange type of insomnia," he teased.
"It gives me incentive."
"I haven't noticed that you needed any."
"After we've been married thirty years or so, I might-" He broke off, every line of his big body tensing.
Roanna didn't hurry to the window, though that was her first urge. She was wearing a white nightgown; her appearance at the window might be spotted.

Instead she whispered, "Do you see someone?"
"The son of a bitch is slipping up the outside stairs," he murmured.
"I didn't see him until just now. Probably Loyal didn't either." He took the cellular phone from his pocket and punched the numbers for Loyal's private line. A few seconds later he said quietly, "He's here, coming up to the veranda by the outside stairs." That was all. He closed the phone and returned it to his pocket.
"What do we do?" she whispered.
"Wait and see what he does. Loyal is calling the sheriff, then he's coming over as backup." He shifted his position a little, so he had a better angle to watch the silent intruder. The moonlight slanted across his face. " He's going around to the front ... He's out of sight now."
A red light blinked, catching Roanna's attention. She stared at the code box. "Webb, he's in the house! The light's blinking."
He swore softly and moved across the room to get the pistol from the top of the dresser.
Still watching the light, Roanna said, startled, "It's stopped blinking. It's green again."
He swung around and stared at the code box.
"Someone let him in." His voice was almost soundless, but laden with a quiet menace that didn't bode well for someone.
"Corliss.
He kicked off his shoes and silently went to the door.
"What are you going to do?" Roanna asked fiercely, trying to keep her voice down. It was difficult, with anger and fear rushing through her veins with every beat of her heart. She trembled with the need to go with him, but she forced herself to stand still. She had no means of protecting herself, and the last thing he needed was to have to worry about her.
"Try to get behind him." He opened the door the tiniest crack, looking down the hallway for the intruder. He couldn't see anything. He decided to wait, hoping the man would give away his position. He thought he heard a faint whisper of sound but couldn't be certain.
Seconds ticked past, and Webb took the risk of opening the door a bit more. He could see all the way to the front of the house now, on this side of the house, and the hallway was empty. He slipped out of the room and down the back hallway, his bare feet soundless on the carpet, keeping close to the wall. When he approached the corner he slowed, lifting the pistol and

pulling the hammer back. With his back flattened against the wall, he took a quick look around the corner. A dark figure loomed at the other end of the hallway. Webb jerked back, but not in time-he'd been seen. A thunderous shot reverberated through the house, and plaster flew from the wall.
Webb swore viciously even as he threw himself into the open, rolling, bringing his own weapon around. He squeezed off a shot, the heavy pistol bucking in his hand, but the dark figure at the other end darted toward Lucinda's door. Smoke filled the hallway, and the stench of cordite burned in his nostrils as Webb scrambled to his feet and threw himself forward.
As he'd expected, the shots had the entire family opening their doors, poking their heads out.
"God damn it, get back in your rooms," he yelled furiously.
Gloria ignored him and stepped completely out into the hallway.
"Don't swear at me!" she snapped.
"What on earth is going on?"
Behind her, the assailant stepped out into the hallway, but Gloria was between them and Webb couldn't get off a shot. Roughly he shoved her, and with a cry she sprawled to the floor.
And he froze, suddenly helpless. The man had one arm hooked around Lucinda's neck, holding the frail old woman in front of him as a shield. The gun was steady in his other hand, the barrel laid against Lucinda's temple, and a savage grin was on his face.
"Unload the gun real slow," he ordered, backing toward the front hallway.
Webb didn't hesitate. There was an expression on the man's face that told him Lucinda would be dead if he didn't obey. With deliberate movements he flipped open the cylinder and removed all the bullets.
"Throw them behind you," the man said, and Webb obeyed, tossing the bullets down the hallway.
"Now kick the gun toward me."
Carefully he bent and placed the empty weapon on the carpet, then took his foot and shoved it toward the man, who made no move to pick it up. He didn't have to; he had separated the bullets from the weapon, so there was no way anyone could pick up a bullet, get to the pistol and reload it, then fire, before he could shoot them.
Lucinda was standing very still in his grip, as colorless as her nightgown. Her white hair was rumpled as if he had dragged her from her bed, and

perhaps he had, though more likely she had jumped up at the first shot and was coming to see what had happened when he grabbed her.
The man looked around, his savage grin growing even bigger as he saw all the people standing frozen in their bedroom doors, except for Gloria, who was still lying on the carpet and whimpering softly.
"Everybody!" he suddenly bellowed.
"I want to see everybody! I know who you all are, so if anybody tries to hide, I'll put a bullet in the old biddy's head. You got five seconds! One-two-three-" Harlan stepped out of the bedroom and bent to help Gloria to her feet. She clung to him, still whimpering. Greg and Lanette came out of their rooms, ashen faced.
11four-" Webb saw Corliss and Brock appear from the other hallway.
The man looked around.
"There's one more," he said, sneering.
"We're missing your little brood mare, Tallant. Where is she? You think I'm fooling around about killing this old bitch?"
No, Webb thought. No. As much as he loved Lucinda, he couldn't bear the thought of risking Roanna. Run, he silently pleaded with her. Run, darling. Get help. Run!
The man looked to the left and gave a pleased laugh.
"There she is. Come on out, darling. Join the happy crowd." Roanna slipped forward, moving to stand between Corliss and the front double doors of the veranda. She was as pale as Lucinda, her slender figure almost insubstantial. She stared at the man and gasped, going even whiter.
"Well, ain't this nice?" the man crowed, grinning at Roanna.
"I see you remember me."
"Yes," she said faintly.
"That's good, because I remember you real well. Me and you got some unfinished business. You gave me a scare when you walked up on me here in the hall that night, but I heard tell that little bump on the head gave you a concussion, and you don't remember nothing about it. That right?"
"Yes," she said again, her eyes huge and dark in her white face.
He laughed, evidently pleased by the irony, His cold eyes swept over them all.
"A real family reunion. All of you get together, over here in the front hall, under the light so I can see all of you real good." He moved back, out of

reach, holding Lucinda's head arched back as Webb silently shepherded the others forward, grouping them together with Corliss, Brock, and Roanna. Webb spared a single murderous look at Corliss. She was watching the man as if fascinated, but there wasn't a single flicker of fear on her face. She had let him in, and she was too stupid to realize he would kill her, too. All of them were dead, unless he did something.
He tried to move closer to Roanna, hoping that perhaps he could shield her with his body, that somehow she might survive.
"Uh-uh," the man said, shaking his head.
"You stand still, you bastard. "
"Who are you?" Gloria shrilled.
"Turn loose of my sister."
"Shut up, bitch, or I'll feed the first bullet to you."
"It's a good question," Webb said. He stared at the man with a cool, hard gaze.
"Who the bell are you?"
Lucinda spoke, her bloodless lips moving.
"His name," she said clearly, "is Harper Neeley."
The man gave a rough, feral laugh.
"I see you've heard of me."
"I know who you are. I made it a point to find out."
"Did you, now? That's real interesting. Wonder why you never visited. We're family, after all." He laughed again.
Webb didn't want his attention on Lucinda, didn't want him watching any of them except himself.
"Why, God damn it?" he snarled.
"What do you want? I don't know you, I've never even heard of you." If he could stall long enough, Loyal might be able to work himself into position and do something, or the sheriff would arrive. All he had to do was stall.
"Because you killed her," Neeley said viciously.
"You killed my girl, you fucking bastard."
"Jessie?" Webb stared at him, astonished.
"I didn't kill Jessie."
"God damn you, don't lie!" Neeley roared, jerking the pistol from Lucinda's temple to point it at Webb.
"You found out about us, and you killed her!"
"No," Webb said sharply.

"I didn't. I didn't have any idea she was cheating on me. I didn't know until after the autopsy when the sheriff told me she was pregnant. I knew it couldn't be mine."
"You knew! You knew and you killed her! You killed my girl and you killed my baby, and I'm going to make you watch while I kill your baby. I'm going to shoot this little bitch right in the stomach and you're going to stand there and watch her die, and then I'm going to do you-"
"He didn't kill Jessie!" Lucinda's voice rang out over Neeley's. She lifted her white head high.
"I did."
The pistol wavered slightly.
"Don't try to mess with me, old woman," Neeley panted.
Webb kept his attention glued to Neeley; the man's eyes were gleaming hotly, sweat beading on his face as he worked himself into a frenzy. He was planning to kill nine people. He'd already wasted one shot. The pistol was an automatic;
how many bullets did it have in the clip? Some carried as many as seventeen, but still, after the first shot he could hardly expect them all to stand there like sheep waiting for the slaughter. He had to realize that he was in an almost impossible situation, but that made him all the more unstable. He had nothing to lose.
"I killed her," Lucinda repeated.
"You're lying. It was him, everybody knows it was him."
"I didn't mean to kill her," Lucinda said calmly. "it was an accident. I was scared, I didn't know what to do. if Webb had actually been arrested, I would have confessed, but Booley couldn't find any evidence because there wasn't any. Webb didn't do it." She gave Webb a look of sorrow, of love, of regret.
"I'm sorry," she whispered.
"You're lying!" Neeley howled, jerking her hard against him and tightening his arm around her throat.
"I'll break your goddamn neck if you don't shut up!"
Greg jumped for him. Quiet, unassuming Greg, who had let Lanette run their lives without even opening his mouth to give an opinion. Lanette screamed, and Neeley jerked back, firing once. Greg stumbled and fell forward, all of his coordination suddenly gone, his legs and arms moving spasmodically. He sprawled on the floor, his chest heaving and his eyes

wide with surprise. Then he gave a funny little cough that turned into a moan, as blood slowly spread beneath him.
Lanette stuffed her fingers into her mouth, staring in horror at her husband. She started forward, instinctively going to him.
"Don't move!" Neeley screamed, waving the pistol erratically.
"I'll kill the next one who moves!"
Corliss was staring down at her father, her mouth open, her expression stunned.
"You shot my daddy," she said in amazement.
"Shut up, you fucking bitch. Stupid," he sneered.
"You're so fucking stupid."
Webb caught the faintest movement out of the corner of his eyes. He didn't dare move, didn't dare turn his head, as
terror seized him. Roanna shifted again, just the slightest of movements, taking her a fraction of an inch closer to the doors.
On the code box to the left of the doors, Webb saw the green light change to red.
Roanna had opened the door.
Fifteen seconds. The deafening blare would be all the diversion he would get. He began counting, hoping he could time it right.
Tears streamed down Corliss's face as she stared down at Greg, feebly writhing on the floor.
"Daddy," she said. She looked back at Neeley and her face twisted with rage, and something else.
"You shot my daddy!" she screamed, lunging at Neeley, her hands extended like claws.
He pulled the trigger again.
Corliss skidded, her torso jerked backward even as her feet tried to keep moving. Lanette screamed hoarsely, and the pistol swung unevenly toward her.
The alarm went off, the shrill, deafening sound painful in its intensity.
Neeley's finger tightened on the trigger even as Webb was moving, and the bullet plowed into the wall right over Lanette's head. Neeley shoved Lucinda to the side, his free hand coming up to cover one ear as he tried to bring the pistol around. Webb hit him, driving one shoulder hard into the man's stomach, slamming him back against the wall. With his left hand he

grabbed Neeley's right wrist, holding it up so he couldn't shoot anyone else even if he pulled the trigger.
Neeley shoved back, gathering himself. He was enraged, and as strong as an ox. Brock threw himself into the fray, adding his strength to Webb's as they both forced Neeley's arm back, pinning it to the wall, but still the man pushed back against them. Webb drove his knee upward, slamming it into Neeley's groin. A choked, guttural sound exploded from him, then he gasped soundlessly, his mouth working. He began sliding down the wall, taking them with him, and the movement wrenched his arm free of their grasp.
Webb grabbed for the gun as the three of them sprawled on the floor in a tangle. Neeley got his breath back with a high-pitched shriek of laughter, and only then did Webb realize that the shriek of the alarm had stopped, that Roanna had silenced it as quickly as she had set it off.
Neeley was scrabbling around, turning his body, still laughing in that shrill, maniacal tone that made the hair stand up on Webb's neck. He was staring at something, and laughing as he struggled, squirming on the floor, trying to bring the pistol around one more timeRoanna. She was kneeling beside Lucinda, tears running down her face as she looked from her grandmother to where Webb was struggling with Neeley, obviously torn between the two of them.
Roanna. She was a perfect target, a little isolated from everyone else because Lanette, Gloria, and Harlan had rushed to Greg and Corliss. Her nightgown was a pristine white, perfect, impossible to miss at this range. The gray metal of the barrel inched around, despite his and Brock's best efforts to hold Neeley's arm still, to wrestle the gun away from him.
Webb roared with fury, a great rush of it that surged through his muscles, his brain, obscuring everything in a red tide. He lunged forward that extra inch, his hand clamping down on Neeley's, slowly forcing the gun back, back, until he literally broke it free as the bones in Neeley's thick fingers popped under the pressure.
He screamed, writhing on the floor, his eyes going blank with pain.
Webb staggered to his feet, still holding the gun.
"Brock," he said in a low, harsh voice.
"Move. 91 Brock scrambled away from Neeley.
Webb's face was cold, and Neeley must have read his death there. He tried to surge upward, reaching for the gun, and Webb pulled the trigger.

Shades ol-I'wilight At almost point blank range, one shot was all he needed. The reverberation faded away, and in the distance he could hear the faint wail of sirens.
Lucinda was trying feebly to sit up. Roanna helped her, bracing the old woman with her own body. Lucinda was gasping for breath, her color absolutely gray as she pressed her hand to her chest.
"He-he was her father," she gasped desperately, reaching out to Webb, trying to make him understand.
"I couldn't-I couldn't let her h-have that baby." She choked and grimaced, pressing harder on her chest with her other hand. She collapsed back against Roanna, her body going limp and sagging to the floor.
Webb looked around at his family, at the blood and destruction and grief. Over the groans of pain, the sobs, he said in a steely voice, "This stays in the family, do you understand? I'll do the talking. Neeley was Jessie's father. He thought I killed her, and he was out for revenge. That's it, do you understand? All of you, do you understand? No one knows who really killed Jessie."
They looked back at him, the survivors, and they understood. Lucinda's terrible secret remained just that, a secret.
Three days later, Roanna sat by Lucinda's bed in the cardiac intensive care unit, holding the old lady's hand and gently stroking it as she talked to her. Her grandmother had suffered a massive heart attack, and her body was already so frail that the doctors hadn't expected her to live through the night. Roanna had been by her bedside all that night, whispering to her, telling her of the great-grandchild that was on its way, and despite all logic and medical knowledge, Lucinda had rallied. Roanna stayed until Webb had forced her to go home and rest, but was back as soon as he would, allow it. They all marched to Webb's orders, the family closing ranks behind him. There was so much to get through that they were all numb. They had buried Corliss the day before. Greg was in intensive care in Birmingham. The bullet had clipped his spine and the doctors expected him to have some paralysis, but they thought he would be able to walk with the aid of a cane. Only time would tell.
Lanette was like a zombie, moving silently between her daughter's funeral and her husband's hospital bed. Gloria and Harlan were in almost the same state, shocked and bewildered. Brock handled the funeral arrangements and

took care of the others, his good-looking face lined with grief and fatigue, but his fianede was at his side the entire time, and he took comfort from her.
Roanna looked up when Webb came into the small cubicle. Lucinda's eyes brightened when she saw him, then filmed with tears. It was the first time she had been awake when he'd been to visit. She groped for his hand, and he reached out to gently take her fingers in his.
"So sorry," she whispered, gasping for breath.
"I should have ... said something. I never meant for you ... to take the blame."
"I know," he murmured.
"I was so scared," she continued, determined to get it said now after all the years of silence.
"I went to your rooms ... after you left ... try to talk some sense into her. She was ... wild. Wouldn't listen. Said she was ... going to teach you ... a lesson."
The confession came hard. She had to gasp for breath between every few words, and the effort was making perspiration shine on her face, but she focused her gaze on Webb's face and refused to rest.
"She said she would ... have Harper Neeley's baby ... and pass it off ... as yours. I couldn't ... let her do it. Knew who he was ... her own father ... abomination."
She drew a deep breath, shuddering with the effort. On her other side, Roanna held tightly to her hand.
"I told her ... no. Told her she had to ... get rid of it. Abortion. She laughed ... and I slapped her. She went wild ... knocked me down ... kicked me. I think ... trying to kill me. I got away ... picked up the andiron ... She came at me again. I hit her," she said, tears rolling down her face.
"I ... loved her," she said weakly, closing her eyes.
"But I couldn't ... let her have that baby."
There was a soft scraping sound at the sliding glass doors. Webb turned his head to see Booley standing there, his expression weary. He gave Booley a hard stare and turned back to Lucinda.
"I know," he murmured as he bent over her.
"I understand. You just get well now. You have to be at our wedding, or I'll be mighty disappointed, and I won't forgive you for that. " He glanced at Roanna. She too was staring at Booley, a cool look in those brown eyes that dared him to do or say anything that would upset Lucinda.

Booley jerked his head at Webb, indicating that he wanted to talk to him outside. Webb patted Lucinda's hand, carefully placed it on the bed, and joined the former sheriff.
Silently they walked out of the CICU and down the long hall, past the waiting room where relatives kept endless vigils. Booley glanced into the crowded room and continued strolling.
"Guess it all makes sense now," he finally said. Webb remained silent.
"No point in it going any further," Booley mused.
"Neeley's dead, and there wouldn't be any use in pressing any sort of charges against Lucinda. No evidence anyway, just the ramblings of a dying old woman. No point in stirring up a lot of talk, all for nothing."
"I appreciate it, Booley," said Webb.
The old man clapped him on the back and gave him a level, knowing look.
"It's over, son," he said.
"Get on with your life." Then he turned and walked slowly to the elevator, and Webb retraced his steps to the CICU. He knew what Booley had been telling him. Beshears hadn't asked too many questions about Neeley's death, had in fact skirted around some things that were fairly obvious.
Beshears had been around. He knew an execution when he saw one.
Webb quietly reentered the cubicle, where Roanna was once again talking softly to Lucinda, who seemed to be dozing. She looked up, and he felt his breath catch in his chest as he stared at her. He wanted to grab her in his arms and never let her go, because he had come so close to losing her.
When she had explained about her confrontation with Neeley over his treatment of his horse, Webb's blood had run cold. It had been just after that when Neeley had broken into the house for the first time, and when Roanna walked up on him, he had to have thought she would recognize him. He would have killed her then, Webb was certain, if Roanna hadn't awakened enough to scream when Neeley hit her. His idea of putting it about that the concussion had caused her to lose her memory about that night, just as a precaution, had undoubtedly saved her life, because otherwise Neeley would have tried to get to her sooner, before Webb managed to have the alarm installed.
As it was, Neeley had been within a hair's breadth of settling that pistol sight on her, and that had signed his death warrant.
Webb went to her, gently touching her chestnut hair, stroking one finger down her cheek. She rested her head on him, sighing as she rubbed her

cheek against his shirt. She knew. She had been watching. And as she had knelt beside Lucinda, when he had turned back to her after pulling the trigger, she had given him a tiny nod.
"She's asleep," Roanna said now, keeping her voice to a whisper.
"But she's going to come home again. I know it." She paused.
"I told her about the baby."
Webb knelt on the floor and put his arms around her, and she bent her head down to him, and he knew that he held his entire world there in his arms.
Their wedding was very quiet, very small, and took place over a month later than they had originally planned.
It was held in the garden, just after sunset. The gentle shades of twilight lay softly over the land. Peach lights glowed in the arbor where Webb waited beside the minister.
A few rows of white chairs had been set up on each side of
the aisle, and every face was turned toward Roanna as she walked down the carpet laid out on the grass. Every face was beaming.
Greg and Lanette sat in the first row; Greg was in a wheelchair, but his prognosis was good. With physical therapy, the doctors said, he would likely regain most of the use of his left leg, though he would always limp.
Lanette had cared for her husband with a fierce devotion that refused to let him give up, even when his grief over Corliss had almost defeated him.
Gloria and Harlan were also in the first row, both of them looking much older as they held hands, but they too were smiling.
Brock pushed Lucinda's wheelchair to keep pace with Roanna's stately stride. Lucinda was dressed in her favorite peach, and she wore her pearls and makeup. She smiled at everyone as they passed. Her frail, gnarled fingers were linked with the slender ones of her granddaughter, and they went together up the aisle, just as Roanna had wanted.
They reached the arbor and Webb reached out for Roanna's hand, drawing her to his side. Brock positioned Lucinda's wheelchair so that she was in the traditional place as matron of honor, then took up his own position as best man.
Webb's gaze briefly met Lucinda's. There was a serene, almost translucent quality to her. The doctors had said she wouldn't have long, but she had confounded them once again, and it was beginning to look as if she might make it through the winter after all. She was saying now that she wanted to wait until she knew if her great-grandchild was a boy or a girl. Roanna had

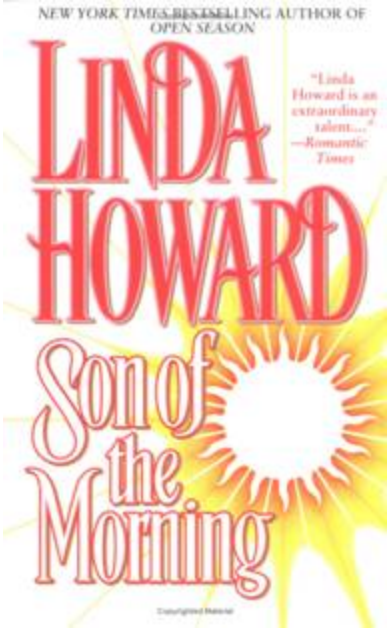
immediately stated that she had no intention of letting the doctor or ultrasound technician tell her the baby's sex before its birth, and Lucinda had laughed.

Forgive me, she had said, and he had. He couldn't hold on to anger, to hurt, when he had so much to look forward to. Roanna turned her radiant face up to him, and he almost kissed her right then, before the ceremony even started.

"Woof," he whispered, so low that only she could hear him, and he felt her stifle a giggle at what had turned into their private code for "I want you." She smiled more readily these days. He'd lost count, at least in his mind. His heart still noted each and every curve of her lips.

Their fingers twined together, and he lost himself in her whiskey-colored eyes as the words began, washing over them in the soft purple twilight: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together ..

Son of the Morning (1997)



Part One - Grace

Prologue

December 1307, France

THE STONE WALLS OF THE SECRET UNDERGROUND CHAMBER were cold and dank, the chill penetrating wool and linen and leather, going straight to the bone. Two smoking torches provided the only illumination, and too little heat to make any difference. The pair of men revealed by the flickering light paid no attention to the cold, however, for such discomfort was of small matter.

The first man was standing, the other kneeling before him in a posture that should have been submissive, had it not been obvious that such an attitude was alien to that proud head, those broad shoulders. The man who was standing looked frail in contrast with the vitality of the other, and in fact the kneeling man's head was level with the chest of the first. Valcour was, indeed, frail in comparison to the warrior he had once been, and to the man who knelt before him, but age and despair had taken their toll. He was fifty-

one, long past the age of vigor. His hair and beard were more gray than brown, his thin face lined from the burdens he had endured. It was time to pass along the responsibility, the duty, that had been his for all these long years. They would be safe with this fierce young lion, he thought. There was no better warrior in the Order, which was the same as saying there was no better warrior in Christendom, for they were-had been-a brotherhood of warriors, the best of the best, the cream skimmed from Europe's battlefields and tourneys.

No more. Just two months past, on Friday, the thirteenth of October in this year of Our Lord 1307, a day that would surely be remembered through the ages as a day of darkness, Philip IV of France and his puppet, Pope Clement V, had given in to their greed and in one fell swoop effected the destruction of the greatest military order ever to exist: the Knights of the Temple. Some of the brethren had escaped, but others had already died horrible deaths, and more deaths would follow as those captured refused to recant their beliefs. The Grand Master had received mere moments of warning, and had chosen to use those moments to secure the safety of the Treasure rather than of himself. Perhaps Jacques de Molay had sensed the approach of catastrophe, for he had already spoken with Valcour several times about keeping their enormous fleet of ships out of Philip's hands, but above all his concern, and that of the great warrior Geoffroy de Charnay, had been the safekeeping of the Treasure. After long hours of consideration the Guardian had been chosen: the true and fierce warrior, Niall of Scotland. He had been chosen very carefully, not just for his prowess with a sword, which was unrivaled, but for the protection that came with his very name. The Treasure would be safe in Scotland.

The Grand Master hadn't been certain his choice was the correct one, even given Niall's connections. There was something untamed and ruthless about the Scot, despite his unswerving loyalty to God and the Brotherhood, and the oaths he had sworn to both. Some of those oaths had been given unwillingly, the Grand Master was certain, especially the oath of chastity. Niall had been forced into the Brotherhood, for of course a monk could never be king; a king must have at least the possibility of children, for kingdoms were built on continuity. His illegitimacy should have been an insurmountable barrier, but even at a young age Niall had been tall and proud, intelligent, cunning, ruthless, a born leader; in short, he had all the characteristics of a great king. The choices had been simple: kill him, or

make it impossible for him to be king. Niall was loved by his father and half-brother, so there had really been no choice. The young man would be a servant of God.
It was a master stroke. Should Niall renounce his vows to the Temple, that too would render him unacceptable for the crown, for he would be dishonored. No, putting young Niall into the protection of the Temple had at once saved his life and now and forever removed him from consideration for the Scots throne-such as it was.
But if Niall had been unsuited for the life of a monk, he had been perfectly suited for that of a warrior. He had taken his lust for female flesh and turned it into fierceness on the battlefield, and if his eyes sometimes lingered overlong on that which was forbidden to him, still, to the Grand Master's sure knowledge he had never broken his vows. He was a man of his word. That, and his fighting ability, was what had finally convinced de Chamay to choose Niall as the next Guardian, and though the Grand Master was the head of the Order, de Chamay was undoubt edly the most powerful Knight. Moreover, de Charnay had borne the responsibility for the safety of the Treasure for many years, and his was the final say. His choice was Niall of Scotland, and Valcour agreed wholeheartedly. The Scot would safeguard the Treasure with his life.
"Take them," Valcour whispered now to that bent black head, feeling the younger man's bitter rage and knowing no way to ease it. "No matter what happens, the Treasure must never fall into the hands of others. The Brotherhood has devoted itself to the protection of our God and His followers, and we must not falter in our duty."
The cold stone floor was hard beneath Niall's knees, but he scarcely noticed it. His thick black hair, cut short as was required, gleamed with sweat despite the chill of the underground chamber. Stearn drifted from his body. Slowly he lifted his head, his eyes stark, and as black as night with bitterness. "Even now?" he asked, the bite of betrayal in the deep, softly burred tones of his voice.
Valcour smiled thinly. "Especially now. We serve God, not Rome. Methinks the Holy Father has forgotten there is a difference."
"The concept should come easily to him," Niall all but snarled. "He does not serve God, but rather licks Philip's arse every time the king presents it." His night-dark gaze wandered over the collection of artifacts that had been spirited out of the Temple in Jerusalem more than a century before. He

studied them, and felt his bitterness growing. Good men had died horrible deaths protecting these. . . things. The King of France and the Holy Father were so intent on stripping the Order of its more earthly treasures, of gold and silver, but the Brotherhood's secretiveness centered around these things rather than mere gold. Oh, there was gold aplenty-Niall had it. But its only purpose was to provide for the safekeeping of the real Treasure, this disturbing and powerful group of Things. A cup, plain and scarred. A shroud, with its secrets embedded in the very fabric. A throne, unsettling and pagan-,--or was it? A banner, rich and compelling despite its age, reputed to hold strange powers in its frayed threads. And an ancient text, written in a mixture of Hebrew and Greek, which told of a secret, and of a power beyond belief.

"I could go back," Niall said, thinking of the text. He lifted his merciless warrior's gaze to Valcour. "Both Philip and Clement could fall under my sword, and this could be undone as if it never was, and our brothers would live."

"Nay," said Valcour. His face had the drawn, exalted look of someone who has gone beyond horror, beyond fatigue. "We must not risk discovery for our own sakes. Only for the sake of God may the secret be used."

"Is there a God?" Niall asked bitterly. "Or are we but fools?"

Valcour's thin, bloodless hand lifted, gently touched Niall's head in both a benediction and a restraint. He felt the steamy heat emanating from the warrior's muscled body, for Niall had just discarded his helm and still wore heavy armor. Would that he had a fraction of Niall's great strength, Valcour thought tiredly. The Scot was like iron, neither breaking nor wearing down no matter the hardships he faced. His sword arm was tireless, his will unswerving. There was no greater warrior in the Lord's service than this formidable Scot with royal blood running through his bastard veins. Not just noble, but royal. 'Twas that blood that had won him entrance into the Order, for legitimacy was a requirement. Wisely, the Grand Master had decided that, in this case, blood ties were more important than rules.

And because of that blood, Niall would be protected. Clement would not be able to lay his bloody, greedy hands on the Scot, for he would be safe in his homeland, among the craggy mountains of the Highlands.

"We believe," Valcour finally said, in simple response to Niall's question. "And, believing, we've sworn our lives to protect. You are released from all

your other vows, but on the blood of your brothers, you must swear to devote your life to the guardianship of these holy relics."
"I swear," Niall said fiercely. "But for *them*. Never again for *Him*. "
Valcour's eyes were troubled. Loss of faith was a terrible thing-and a common one, in these days of horror. More men would lose their faith, or their lives. Not all Brothers had remained true; some of them had turned their backs on the Order, and the God, they had served so faithfully but who had allowed this ungodly thing to happen to them. Friends, brothers, had been tortured, dismembered; burned at the stake, the Order shattered-all for the love of gold. It was difficult to believe in anything except betrayal, and vengeance.
And yet Valcour tried to keep a small, central part of himself pure, to keep his belief enshrined there, for without belief there was nothing. If he didn't believe, then he had to accept that so many good men had died in vain, and that he could not do, could not live with. So, because the alternative was so unbearable, he believed. He wished Niall could have that comfort, but the Scot was too uncompromising, his warrior's heart seeing only black and white. He had been on too many battlefields where the choices were simple: kill, or be killed. Valcour had fought for the Lord, but he had never been the soldier Niall was. The heat of battle did tend to make one's vision very clear, to distill life down to the simplest of choices.
The Order needed Niall, to fulfill its greatest, most secret vow. The Brotherhood was at an end, at least in this incarnation, but its sacred duty would continue, and Niall was the chosen protector.
"For whatever reason, then," Valcour murmured. "Guard them well, for they are the true treasures of our Lord. Should they fall into the hands of evil, then the blood of our brothers will have been shed in vain. So shall it be, then: if not for *Him*, for *them*."
"With my life," said Niall of Scotland.

December 1309
Creag Dhu, Scotland
"Three more Knights have found their way here since last you visited," Niall murmured to his brother as the two men sat before a crackling fire in Niall's private chamber. A tall, thick tallow candle sat on the table where they had recently filled their bellies, its flame adding to the golden glow of the hearth fire. Except for that, the chamber was in shadows, and

delightfully warm. No drafts crept through the stone walls to stir the air with icy breaths; the cracks and crevices had been carefully daubed with clay, and the tapestries were thick and heavy. The door to Niall's chamber was stout, and securely barred. For all that, the two men kept their voices low, and spoke in French, so that if they were somehow overheard they wouldn't be understood. None of the Scots servants spoke the language; most of the nobility did, but here in this impregnable fortress, in a remote comer of the Highlands, they had only the servants and men-at-arms with whom they had to concern themselves.

Both held heavy goblets filled with fine French wine, and now Robert sipped his in contemplation. He had seated himself in a huge, carved wooden chair, while Niall had drawn up a heavy bench and placed it at an angle to the fire, so that he faced his visitor rather than the flames. Robert watched the dancing flames as he drank his wine; when he glanced back at Niall, it took a moment for his vision to adjust, and suddenly he realized that was why Niall had placed the bench as he had. Even here, in his own castle, secure in his own chamber with his brother, Niall's instincts were those of a warrior and he had protected his vision. Should an enemy somehow take him unawares, he would not be hampered by limited sight.

The realization made Robert's mouth curl wryly. After years of battle with the English, he too had learned to protect his night vision, but here in this safe place he had allowed himself to relax. Not so Niall. He never relaxed; he was eternally vigilant.

"Have any of the Knights sought other refuge?"

"Nay. They remain here, for there is no other certain refuge. Yet they know they must go, soon, or by their very number they could bring to Creag Dhu the attention they wish to avoid." Niall's black gaze was piercing as he stared at his brother. "I have not asked for myself, for I have no wish to add to your troubles, but for them I must know: do you intend to enforce Clement's edict against us?"

Stung, Robert drew back. "Ye ask that!" he growled, angered enough to speak in Gaelic, but Niall's gaze didn't waver and after a moment he reined in his temper.

"You need the alliance with France," Niall said calmly. "Should Philip discover my identity, he would stop at nothing to capture me, including joining his forces to Edward's. You cannot risk that." What he didn't say

was, Scotland needed the alliance; the distinction wasn't needed, for his brother was Scotland, all her hopes and dreams personified.
Robert drew in a deep, calming breath. "Aye," he admitted, returning to French. "It would be a crippling blow. But already I've lost three brothers to England's butchery; my wife and daughter, and our sisters, have been captives for three years already and I know not if I'll ever see them alive again. I'll not lose you, too."
"You scarcely know me."
""Tis true that we were not much in each other's company, but I do know you," Robert disagreed. Know him, and love him. It was that simple. None of his other brothers could have challenged him for the crown, but he and his father had known from the time Niall had been a tall, sturdy lad of ten that this illegitimate half-brother had the stuff of kings, uncommonly gifted with the boldness and intelligence that were Robert's own characteristics. For Scotland's sake, they could not risk an internal struggle between the brothers, and even had Niall grown up to prove loyal, such was his personality that folk would have flocked to him anyway. The circumstances of his birth had been kept secret, but secrets had a way of outing, as Niall himself had proven at that time by boldly approaching Robert and asking if 'twas true they were brothers.
It wasn't unusual for aspirants to the throne to clear the way by killing those who might challenge them, but neither Robert nor his father, the Earl of Carrick, had been able to tolerate the thought. It would have been like extinguishing a bright flame, leaving them in darkness. Niall burned with life's force, full of joy and deviltry, drawing people to him like a lodestone. He had always been the leader among the younger lads, fearlessly taking his followers into mischief and then just as fearlessly taking the blame onto his own shoulders whenever they were caught.
By the time he was fourteen, the lasses had begun following him, too, with their bright eyes and lissome bodies. Already his voice had deepened, his shoulders widened, his chest broadened as manhood settled easily on his tall frame. He had proven himself unusually adept at arms, and the constant practice with heavy swords had further strengthened him. Robert doubted the lad had spent many nights alone, for it wasn't just the young lasses who had pursued him, but the older ones as well, including some who were wed.

He had changed, though. Robert wasn't surprised, given the treachery that had befallen the Templars. His magnetism hadn't lessened, but it was harsher now, his black eyes remaining grim even if his lips smiled. As a lad he had been restless with inexhaustible energy, but now he was a man grown, and a fearsome warrior. He had learned the art of patience, and his stillness was like that predator waiting for its next meal.

Now Robert said deliberately, "Scotland will not join in the persecution of the Templars." Again Niall's gaze bored into him, like a black sword in its sharpness. "You have my gratitude. . . and more, should you care to use it."

What Niall had left unspoken hung heavily in the shadowed room. The watchful black gaze never wavered, and Robert lifted his eyebrows.

"More?" he asked, sipping again at the wine. He was curious about what "more" would entail. He scarcely dared to hope. . . perhaps Niall was offering *gold*. More than anything, Scotland needed gold to finance its battle to resist English domination.

"The Brethren are the best soldiers in the world. They must not gather here, yet I see no need for their skills to go unused."

"Ah." Thoughtfully, Robert stared into the fire again. Now he knew Niall's goal, and it was tempting indeed. Not gold, but something almost as valuable: training, and experience. The arrogant, excommunicated Knights no longer wore their red crosses, but essentially they were still exactly what they had been before the Pope and the King of France had conspired to destroy them: the best military men in the world. This endless war with England was stretching Scotland's poor resources so thin that they were, at times, literally fighting with their bare hands. As gallant as his people were, especially the wild Highlanders, Robert knew they indeed needed more: more funds, more weapons, more training.

"Blend them in with your armies," Niall murmured. "Give them the responsibility of training your men. Consult with them in strategy. Use them. In repayment, they will become Scots. They will fight to the death for you, and for Scotland."

The Templars! The very idea was dizzying. Robert's fighting blood sang through his veins at the idea of having such soldiers under his command. Still, how much could a handful of men do, no matter how well trained?

"How many are there?" he asked doubtfully. "Five?"

"Five here," Niall said. "But hundreds in need of refuge." Hundreds. Niall was proposing to make Scotland a place of sanctuary for the Knights who

had escaped and gone into hiding allover Europe. If they were caught, they had the choice of betraying their Brethren, or enduring torture before being burned at the stake. Some had cooperated and lost their lives anyway.
"You can bring them here?"
"I can." Niall rose from the bench and stood with his broad back to the fire, his massive shoulders throwing a huge shadow across the floor. His thick black hair flowed over his shoulders, and in the Celtic fashion he had plaited a small braid to hang on each side of his face. In his hunting plaid kilt and white shirt, with a knife thrust in his wide belt, he looked every inch the wild Highlander. His expression was grim. "What I cannot do is join them."
"I know," Robert said softly. "Nor would I ask it of you. I seek no details, yet I know that you are in greater danger than those you wish to aid, and not just because you are my brother. Whatever mission the Temple has charged you with is one no lesser man could accomplish. If ever you need my aid, or that of the Knights you wish to put at my service, you have only to send word."
Niall inclined his head with a motion that conveyed acceptance, and yet Robert knew that day would never come. Niall had forged a stronghold here in the wildest, most remote part of the Highlands, the rugged northwest mountains, and he would defend it against all threats. He had gathered about him a strong force of disciplined knights and men-at-arms, and turned Creag Dhu into an impregnable fortress.
Already the country folk whispered about him, even as they gathered closer to Creag Dhu for his protection. They called him Black Niall. The Scots tended to name as black anyone with dark coloring, but the whispers about Niall said that it was his heart so described, not just his mane of hair and midnight eyes.
Robert, who knew Niall's ancestry, could see the resemblance between his half-brother and his own best friend, Jamie Douglas, the infamous Black Douglas, and the coincidence of coloring and name made him uneasy. Niall's mother had been a Douglas; he and Jamie were first cousins. Jamie was tall and broad-shouldered, though not as tall or strongly built as Niall. Should anyone see them together, would the resemblance be noted? Would it then also be noticed that Niall had the great physical strength of the Bruces, as well as the almost unholy handsomeness for which Nigel, another of Niall's half-brothers, had been so famous? Bruce and Douglas

blood had combined in Niall to form a man of unusual looks and force, the type of man who strode the earth only once every hundred years or so. He did not go unnoticed. For his own safety, and for the sake of the mission charged to him by the ravaged Order, no one must ever know that the infamous Black Niall was the beloved half-brother of the King of Scotland, and the bastard son of the lovely Catriona Douglas, for Catriona's husband still lived and would stop at nothing to kill the result of his wife's infidelity.

Niall was also a Templar, excommunicated, and by order of the Pope under a penalty of death should he ever be captured. On the surface, his existence was precarious indeed.

On the other hand, it would take a fool to try to breach Creag Dhu's defenses. The Order had chosen its champion well.

Robert sighed. There was naught he could do for his brother except respect his secrecy, and offer his kingdom as sanctuary to the scattered, persecuted Knights. Little enough, given what Scotland would gain in return.

" 'Tis time I take my leave," he said, draining his goblet and setting it aside. "The hour grows late, and the lovely wench waiting for you below may become impatient, and seek another's bed." Niall had completely discarded his Templar's vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but most particularly chastity. Robert wondered now how his brother had ever endured eight years without a woman, for even though he was a man himself, he could still see the burning, intense sexuality of Niall's nature. If there had ever been a man less suited to monkhood, Robert couldn't imagine it.

Niall's mouth quirked. "Perhaps," he said placidly, without a shred of either jealousy or doubt, for there was no likelihood Meg would do so; she was thoroughly enjoying her current status as his favorite, though by no means only, bedmate.

Robert laughed and clapped his hand to the broad shoulder. "As I ride through the cold night, I will envy you your ride between warm thighs. God be with you."

Niall's expression didn't change, but Robert was instantly aware of a sudden coldness, and intuitively he knew his last remark was what had elicited that reaction. Troubled, he tightened his hand on his brother's shoulder. Sometimes faith was all folk, be they common or king, had to sustain them,

and Niall had turned his back on that bulwark as the Church had turned her back on him.
But there was nothing to be said, no comfort to be offered except the promise he had already made. "Bring them here," he said softly. "I will make them welcome." Then Robert the Bruce, King of the Scots, pressed on a certain stone to the left of the great hearth, and a whole section opened inward. He took up the torch he had left just inside the hidden way, and held it into the fire until it was once more flaring brightly. He left Creag Dhu as he had entered it, in secret.
Niall watched as the door closed, immediately becoming invisible within the stonework. His face was impassive as he took the goblet his brother had used and wiped the rim clean, then filled it again with the fine wine. His own goblet was still nearly full; he set both of them beside the bed, then unbarred his door and went in search of Meg. His mood had darkened, despite the sanctuary Robert had offered to the fugitive Templars. The rage was always there, controlled after two years but never weakening. Damn Clement, damn Philip, and most of all, damn the God whom the Knights had served so faithfully, but who had abandoned them when they needed Him most. If he went to hell for such blasphemy, so be it, but Niall no longer believed in hell; he didn't believe in anything.
He would work out his black mood on Meg's lush, willing body, wrapped tight by her arms and legs. The rougher the love play, the more she liked it. Finding Meg was no effort; she was lurking near the bottom of the huge, curving stone stairway, and came forward with a smile when he appeared at the top. Niall halted, merely standing there, waiting. Meg lifted her skirts and hurried up the stairs, the flickering torchlight intensifying the flush in her cheeks. Niall turned before she reached him, striding back to his chamber. Her quick, light footsteps followed, and he could hear her breathing as it too quickened, both from her exertion and from anticipation.

She was already shrugging out of her shawl, tugging at the laces to her bodice, as she followed him through the door to his chamber. He shut it and watched as she feverishly shed her clothes, revealing the lushness of her body to him. His shaft rose hard and pulsing, tenting the front of his kilt. She spied the two wine goblets and a pleased smile curved her lips. He'd known she would take it as an expression of his besottedness with her, but let her think what she liked, rather than suspect he'd had a secret visitor, or

that it was none other than the King himself. Though he was willing to soothe her ego with small gestures, and more than willing to return twofold the physical ease she gave him, his only interest in her was for the pleasure he found in her soft, bountiful body.

Naked, she took up one of the goblets and sipped the wine, doubly gratified to find it contained a fine vintage rather than the sour, watery ones to which she was more accustomed. The firelight played over the full curves of her bosom, turning her dark nipples to the color of fine wine themselves, deepening the shadows of her navel and the full nest of curls between her thighs.

He didn't want to wait. He approached and took the goblet from her hand, setting it down with a thud that sloshed some of the red liquid over the rim. She gave a little squeal of surprise as he lifted her and tossed her onto the big bed, but the squeal turned into laughter as he landed on top of her.

He kneed her thighs apart. "Are ye no going to remove yer boots, at least?" she asked, giggling. She reached up to tug at the laces of his shirt.

The smell of her was dark and rich, female. His thin nostrils flared, drinking in the scent. "Why?" he asked in a reasonable tone.

"They're on my feet, not my cock." The giggles turned into full-scale laughter. Niall reached beneath his kilt and grasped his erect rod, guiding it to her wet cleft.

He surged forward, sheathing himself, shuddering with relief, and Meg's laughter died a quick, strangled death as her body absorbed the force of the thrust.

The darkness within him receded, pushed back by sheer delight. So long as he had a woman in his arms, he could forget the betrayal, and the crushing burden of responsibility that weighed on his shoulders.

Chapter 1

April 27, 1996

A COUGHING RUMBLE ANNOUNCED TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD that Kristian Sieber was home from school. He drove a 1966 Chevelle, lovingly restored to all its original gas guzzling, eight-cylinder power. The body was a patchwork of different colors, as the parts had been taken from the corpses of other Chevelles, but whenever someone commented on the

multicolored car, Kristian would grumpily say that he was "working on it." The truth was, the exterior didn't bother him. He cared only that the car ran the way it had when it was new, when some lucky, macho guy had thrilled every girl around with its growling power. In the instinctive, primal, murky way of males, he was certain all that horsepower would overcome his image as a nerd, and all the girls would flock to his side, wanting to ride in his supercar. So far it hadn't happened, but Kristian hadn't given up hope.

As the rumbling car passed her house and turned at the comer, Grace St. John hastily took one last bite of the stew she had prepared for supper.

"Kristian's home," she said, jumping up from the table.

"No kidding," Ford teased. He winked at her as she grabbed up the case that contained her laptop computer and the multitude of papers she had been translating. The sides of the supple leather case bulged outward, so crammed was it with notes and disks. She had unplugged her modem earlier, wrapped the cords around it, and placed it on top of the case. She cradled case and modem in her arms as she leaned over to reach Ford's mouth. Their kiss was brief, but warm.

"It'll probably take a couple of hours, at least," she said. "After he finds out what the problem is, he wants to show me a few new programs he has."

"It used to be etchings," her brother Bryant murmured. "Now it's programs."

The three of them took most of their meals together, a convenience they all liked. When Bryant and Grace had inherited the house from their parents, they turned it into a duplex; Grace and Ford lived in one side, and Bryant in the other. The three of them not only worked for the same archaeological foundation, but Ford and Bryant had been best friends since college. Bryant had introduced Ford and Grace, and still patted himself on the back for the outcome of that introduction.

"You're just jealous because you can't hack it," Grace said, poker-faced, and Bryant groaned at the pun.

Her hands were full, so Ford got up to open the kitchen door for her. He leaned down to kiss her again. "Don't get lost in Kristian's programs and lose track of time," he cautioned, his hazel eyes sending her a very private message that, after almost eight years of marriage, still thrilled her to her toes.

"I won't," she promised, and started out the door, only to halt on the top step. "I forgot my purse."

Ford picked it up from the cabinet and looped the strap over her head. "Why do you need your purse?"
"The checkbook's in it," she said, blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes. She always paid Kristian for his repair services, though he would gladly have done it for free just for the joy of fooling around with someone else's computer.
His equipment was expensive, and his skill better than any she had seen at computer or software companies. He deserved to be paid. "Plus I'll probably buy him a pizza."
"As much as that kid eats, he should weigh four hundred pounds," Bryant observed.
"He's nineteen. Of course he eats a lot."
"I don't think I ever ate that much. What do you think, Ford? When we were in college, did we eat as much as Kristian?"
Ford gave him a disbelieving look. "You actually asking me, when you're the guy who once ate thirteen pancakes and a pound of sausage for breakfast?"
"I did?" Bryant frowned. "I don't remember that. And what about you? I've seen you down four Big Macs and four large fries at one sitting."
"Both of you ate as if you had tapeworms," Grace said, settling the discussion as she went down the steps. Ford closed the door behind her, his chuckle rich in her ears.
Thick, resilient grass cushioned her steps as she walked across their backyard, then angled her steps in a shortcut through the Murchisons' overgrown lawn. They had taken a month's vacation in South Carolina, and weren't due to return until the end of the week. It was a shame; in seeking warm weather, and spring, they had missed it at home.
It had been an unusually warm April, and spring had exploded in Minneapolis. The grass was green and lush, the trees leafed out, flowers were in bloom. Even though the sun had set and only the last bits of twilight remained, the evening air was warm and fragrant. Grace inhaled with deep delight. She loved spring. Actually, she loved every season, for they all had their joys.
Kristian stood in the Siebers' back door, waiting for her. "Hi," he said in cheerful greeting. He was always cheerful at the prospect of getting his hands on her laptop.

He hadn't turned on a light. Grace entered through the dark laundry room, passing through the kitchen. Audra Sieber, Kristian's mother, was sliding a tray of rolls into the oven. She looked up with a smile. "Hello, Grace. We're having lamb chops tonight; would you like to join us?"

"Thanks, but I've just finished eating." She liked Audra, who was comfortably fifty, slightly overweight, and completely understanding of her son's obsession with gigabytes and motherboards. Physically, Kristian was just like his father, Errol: tall, thin, with dark hair, myopic blue eyes, and a prominent Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. Kristian couldn't have looked more like the prototypical computer nerd if he'd had the words stenciled on his forehead.

Remembering his appetite, Grace said, "Kris, this can wait until after you eat."

"I'll fix a plate and carry it up," he said, taking the case from her arms and cradling it lovingly in his. "That's okay with you, isn't it, Mom?"

"Of course. Go on and have fun." Audra aimed her serene smile between the two of them, and Kristian immediately loped out of the kitchen and up the stairs, carrying his prize to his electronics-laden lair.

Grace followed him at a slower pace, thinking as she climbed the stairs that she really needed to shed the twenty extra pounds she'd gained since she and Ford had married. The problem was, her work was so sedentary; a specialist and translator of old languages, she spent a lot of her time with a magnifying glass going over photos of old documents, and very occasionally the actual papers themselves, but for the most part they were too fragile to be handled. The rest of the time she was working on the computer, using a translation program that she and Kristian had enhanced. It was difficult to burn many calories doing brain work.

Earlier that day she had been doing just that, trying to access the university's library to download some information, but the computer hadn't obeyed her commands. She wasn't certain if it was a problem with the laptop itself, or with the modem. She had caught Kristian at home for lunch, and arranged for him to take a look at it when his classes were finished for the day.

The delay had almost driven her mad with frustration. She was fascinated by the batch of documents she'd been translating for her employer, the Amaranthine Potere Foundation, a huge archaeological and antiquities foundation. She loved her work anyway, but this was special, so special that

she was almost afraid to believe her translations were correct. She felt almost. . . pulled, drawn into the documents in a way that had never happened before. The night before, Ford had asked her what the documents contained, and she had reluctantly told him a little about them-just the topic. Usually she talked freely with Ford about her work, but this time it was different. She felt so strongly about these strange old documents that it was difficult to put it into words, and so she had been rather casual about the whole thing, as if it wasn't even particularly interesting.

Instead, it was . . . special, in ways she didn't fully understand yet. She had translated less than a tenth of the whole, and already the possibilities were driving her half mad with anticipation, swirling just beyond comprehension, like a jigsaw puzzle with only the border assembled. In this case, though, she had no idea what the finished product would look like, only that she couldn't stop until she knew.

She reached the top of the stairs and entered Kristian's bedroom. It was a maze of electronic equipment and cords, with just enough room for his bed. He had four separate phone lines, one each to the one laptop and two desktop computers he owned, and another to a fax machine. Two printers shared the duty among the three computers. One of the desktops was on, with a chess game displayed on the monitor. Kristian glanced at it, grunted, and used the mouse to move a bishop. He studied the results for a moment, before clicking the mouse and turning back to the puzzle at hand. He pushed a stack of papers to one side and moved another onto the bed.

"What's it doing?" he asked as he opened the case and removed her laptop.

"Nothing," Grace said, taking another chair and watching as he swiftly unhooked the other desktop's electrical umbilical cords from power port and modem, and plugged in hers. He turned it on and it whirred to life, the screen flickering to a pale blue. "I tried to get into the university's library this morning, and nothing happened. I don't know if it's the unit or the modem."

"We'll find out right now." He knew his way around her menu as well as she did; he clicked onto the one he wanted, then double-clicked on the telephone icon. He dialed the number for the university's electronic library, and ten seconds later was in. "Modem," he announced. His fingers were practically quivering as they hovered over the keys. "What did you want?"

She leaned closer. "Medieval history. The Crusades, specifically. "

He scrolled down the list of offerings. "That one," Grace said, and he clicked the mouse. The table of contents filled the screen.
He scooted away. "Here, you take over while I try to find out what's wrong with the modem."
She took his place in front of the computer, and he switched on a lamp on the desk, automatically pushing his glasses up on his nose before he began dismantling the modem.
There were several references to the military religious orders of the time, the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar. It was the Templars she wanted. She clicked onto the appropriate chapter, and lines of information filled the screen.
She read intently, looking for one certain name. It didn't appear. The text was a chronicle and analysis of the Templars' contribution to the Crusades, but except for a few grand masters none was mentioned by name.
They were interrupted briefly when Audra brought a filled plate up to Kristian. He positioned it next to the disassembled modem and happily munched as he worked. Grace went back to the main list and chose another text.
Sometime later she became aware that Kristian had evidently either repaired her modem or given up on it, for he was reading over her shoulder. It was difficult to pull herself out of medieval intrigue and danger, and back into the modem world of computers. She blinked to orient herself, aware of the strangely potent lure of that long-ago time. "Could you fix it?"
"Sure," he replied absently, still reading. "It was just a loose connection. Who were these Templar guys?"
"They were a military religious order in the Middle Ages; don't you know your history?"
He pushed his glasses up on his nose and flashed her an unrepentant grin. "Time began in nineteen forty-six."
"There was life before computers."
"Analog life, you mean. Prehistoric."
"What kind of gauges are in that muscle-bound thing you call a car?"
He looked chagrined, caught in the shameful knowledge that his beloved chariot was hopelessly old-fashioned, with analog gauges instead of digital readouts. "I'm working on it," he mumbled, hunching his thin shoulders. "Anyway, about these Templar guys. If they were so religious, why were they burned at the stake like witches or something?"

"Heresy," she murmured, turning her attention back to the screen. "Fire was the punishment for a lot of crimes, not just for witchcraft."
"Guess people back then took their religion seriously." Kristian wrinkled his nose at the electronic display of a crude drawing of three men bound to a center pole while flames licked around their knees. All three men were dressed in white tunics with crosses emblazoned on their chests. Their mouths were little black holes, opened in screams of agony.
"People are still executed because of religion today," Grace said, shuddering a little as she stared at the small drawing, imagining the sheer horror of being burned alive. "In the Middle Ages, religion was the center of people's lives, and anyone who went against it was a threat to them. Religion gave them the rules of civilization, but it was more than that. There was so much that wasn't known, or understood; they were terrified by eclipses, by comets, by sicknesses that struck without warning, by things we know now are normal but which they had no way of understanding. Imagine how frightening, and deadly, appendicitis must have been to them, or a stroke or heart attack. They didn't know what was happening, what caused it, or how to prevent it. Magic was very real to them, and religion gave them a sort of protection against these unknown, frightening forces. Even if they died, God was still taking care of them, and the evil spirits didn't win."
His brow furrowed as he tried to imagine living in such ignorance. It was almost beyond him, this child of the computer age. "I guess television would've given them a real spasm, huh?"
"Especially if they saw a talk show," she muttered. "Now there are some evil spirits."
Kristian giggled, sending his glasses slipping down his nose. He pushed them up again and squinted at the screen. "Did you find what you want?"
"No. I'm looking for mention of one particular Templar-at least, I think he was a Templar."
"Any cross-references you can check?" She shook her head. "I don't know his last name." *Niall of Scotland*. She had already found his name several times in the portion of the documents written in Old French. Why wasn't his surname recorded, in a time when family and heritage were so important? From what she had gleaned from her translations so far, he'd been a man of immense importance to the Templars, a Knight himself, which meant he was well born and not a serf. Part of the documents were also in Gaelic, strengthening the unknown tie with Scotland. She'd read up on Scotland's

history in her encyclopedia, but there hadn't been any mention of a mysterious Niall at all, much less one in the time frame of the Templars' existence.
"Dead end, then," Kristian said cheerfully, evidently deciding they had wasted enough time on someone who had died even before the age of analog. His blue eyes sparkled as he moved his chair a little closer. "Want to see this cool accounting program I've worked up?"
"I don't think the words cool and *accounting* go together," Grace observed, keeping her expression deadpan.
Shocked, Kristian stared at her. He blinked several times, making him look like a myopic crane. "Are you kidding?" he blurted. "It's the greatest! Wait until you see-wait. You *are* kidding. I can tell."
Grace's lips curved as she deftly tapped keys, backing out of the university's library system. "Oh, yeah? How?"

"You always tighten your mouth to keep from smiling. " He glanced at her mouth, then quickly looked away, blushing a little.
Grace felt her own cheeks heating and carefully glued her eyes to the screen. Kristian had a tiny crush on her, based mostly on his enthusiasm for her expensive, powerful laptop, but on a few rare occasions he had said or done something that bespoke a physical awareness of her as well.
It always disconcerted her; she was thirty years old, for heaven's sake, and was certainly not a femme fatale by any stretch of the imagination. She considered herself very ordinary, with nothing about her to inspire lust in a nineteen-year-old-though God knows, almost anything female and breathing could inspire lust in a nineteen-year old boy. If Kristian was the stereotypical image of a computer nerd, she'd always thought she looked the typical shy academic type: dark brown hair, impossibly straight, which she had long ago given up trying to coax into curls and now wore pulled back into a single thick braid; light blue eyes, almost gray, usually framed by reading glasses; no makeup, because she didn't know how to apply it; sensible clothes, tending toward corduroy slacks and denim skirts. She was hardly the stuff of an erotic dream.
But Ford had always said she had the most kissable mouth he'd ever seen, and it flustered her that Kristian had looked so pointedly at her lips. To distract him, she said, "Okay, let's see this hotshot program." She hoped the

Chevelle would work its macho magic soon, and lure into Kristian's orbit some smart girl who appreciated both horsepower and multitasking.
Looking grateful for the change of subject, he opened a plastic case and removed the diskette, then inserted it into the disk drive. Grace scooted to the side, giving him better access to the keys. He directed the computer to access the disk in the A drive, there was some electronic whirring, and a menu appeared on the screen.
"What bank do you use?" Kristian asked. Grace told him, frowning as she scanned down the menu. Kristian zipped the cursor to the item he wanted, clicked on it, and the screen changed again. "Bingo," he crowed as a new menu appeared, this time of bank services. "Am I slick, or what?"
"You're illegal, is what you are!" Appalled, Grace watched as he chose another item, clicked on it, then typed "St. John, Grace." Instantly a record of her checking account transactions appeared on the screen. "You've hacked into the bank's computers! Get out of there before you get in big trouble. I mean it, Kris! This is a felony. You told me you had an accounting program, not a back door into every bank in the area."
"Don't you want to know how I did it?" he asked, clearly disappointed that she didn't share his enthusiasm for the deed. "I'm not stealing or anything. This lets you see how long it takes each check to clear, so you can establish a pattern. Some places only deposit once a week. You can get a better handle on your cash flow if you know how long it takes for a particular check to clear. That way, if you have an interest-bearing checking account, you can time your payments so your average balance doesn't dip below the minimum."
Grace simply stared at him, amazed at the wiring of his brain. To her, money matters were a straightforward affair: you had X amount of money coming in, and you had to keep your expenses below that amount. Simple. She had long ago decided there were two types of people on earth: math people, and non-math people. She was an intelligent woman; she had a doctoral degree. But the intricacies of math, whether it dealt with finance or quantum physics, had simply never appealed to her. Words, now. . . she reveled in words, wallowed deliriously in the nuances of meaning, delighted in the magic of them. Ford was even less interested in math than she was, which was why she took care of the checkbook. Bryant tried; he read the financial section of the newspaper, subscribed to investment magazines-in case he ever had enough money to invest-but he didn't have a real grasp of

the dynamics. After fifteen minutes of wading through one of his investment magazines, he was tossing it aside and reaching for something, anything, on archaeology.

But Kristian was a math person. Grace had no doubt he'd be a billionaire by the time he was thirty. He would write some brilliant computer program, wisely invest the profits, and retire happily to tinker away at more innovative programs.

"I'm sure it's a real boon to depositors," she said dryly, "but it's still illegal. You can't market it."

"Oh, it's not for public knowledge, it's just goofing around. You'd think banks would have better security programs, but I haven't found one yet that's much of a challenge."

Grace propped her chin on her hand and eyed him. "My boy, you're either going to be famous, or in jail."

He ducked his head, grinning. "I've got something else to show you," he said enthusiastically, his fingers darting over the keyboard as he exited the bank's accounting records.

Grace watched as the screen changed rapidly, flickering from one display to another. "Won't they be able to tell you've been in their files?"

"Not with this baby. See, I got in through a legitimate password. Basically, I put on an electronic sheepskin, and they never knew a wolf was prowling around."

"How did you get the password?" "Snooping. No matter how coded the info, there's always a back door. Not that your bank has very good computer security," he said with obvious disapproval. "If I were you, I'd consider moving my account."

"I'll think about it," she assured him, with a baleful glare that had him grinning again.

"That's just part of the program. Here's the accounting system." He pulled up another screen and motioned Grace closer. She obligingly scooted her chair forward an inch or so, and he launched into the intricacies of his digitalized baby. Grace paid attention, because she could easily see it was a good system, deceptively simple to execute. He had programmed it to compare the current entry against past entries in the same account, so if anyone accidentally typed in, say, "$115.00" instead of "$ 15.00," the program alerted the user that the amount wasn't within the previously established range, and to check for an input error.

"I like that," she mused. She had always paid bills and done her bookkeeping the old-fashioned way, by hand and on paper. However, she was completely at home with computers, so there was no reason for her not to do their household finances electronically.
Kristian beamed. "I knew you would." His long fingers stroked the keys, downloading the program into her hard disk. "Its name is Go Figure."
She groaned at the sly corniness of it, the groan changing midway into a laugh. "Do me a favor. When you get busted for playing around in the bank's computers, don't tell the feds that I have a copy of the program, okay?"
"I'm telling you, it's safe, at least until the banks change all their passwords. Then you simply won't be able to get in. I could get in," he boasted, "but most people couldn't. Here, let me give you a list of the passwords."
"I don't want it," she said quickly, but Kristian ignored her. He rifled through a stack of papers and plucked out three sheets of closely printed material, which he stuck in her computer case.
"There. Now you'll have it if you need it." He paused, staring at the computer with the ongoing chess game. His opponent had made a move. He studied the board, head cocked slightly to one side, then he chortled. "Aha! I know that gambit, and it won't work." Gleefully he moved a knight and clicked the mouse.
"Who are you playing with?"
"I dunno," he said absently. "He calls himself the Fishman."
Grace blinked, staring at the screen. Naw, it couldn't be. Kristian was playing with someone who had probably chosen that Net name with malice aforethought, to trick people into making just that assumption. The real Bobby Fischer wouldn't be surfing the Net looking for games; he could play anyone, anywhere, and get paid huge amounts of money for doing it.
"Who usually wins?"
"We're about even. He's good," Kristian allowed as he rehooked his other desktop.
Grace opened her purse and pulled out her checkbook. "Want a pizza?" she asked.
His head cocked as he pulled his mind back from cyberspace to check the status of his stomach. "Boy, do I ever," he declared. "I'm starving."
"Then call it in; this one's on me."

"Are you going to stay and split it with me?" She shook her head. "I can't. I have things waiting for me at home." She barely controlled a blush. Ford would have roared with laughter if he'd heard her.
She wrote out a check for fifty dollars, then pulled out a twenty to pay for the pizza. "Thanks, buddy. You're a lifesaver."
Kristian took the check and tip, grinning as he looked at it. "This is going to be a good career, isn't it?" he asked, beaming.
Grace had to laugh. "If you can stay out of jail." She placed the laptop in the case and balanced the repaired modem on top of. her unzipped purse.
Kristian gallantly took the heavy case from her and carried it downstairs for her. Neither of his parents was in sight, but the sounds of gunshots and a car chase drifted from the den and pinpointed their location; both of the older Siebers unabashedly loved Arnold Schwarzenegger's action movies.
Kristian's gallantry lasted only as far as the kitchen, where the proximity to food reminded him of the pizza he hadn't yet ordered. Grace retrieved the computer case from him as he halted at the wall phone. "Thanks, Kris," she said, and left the same way she had entered, through the darkened laundry room and out the back door. She paused for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. During the time she had been with Kristian, clouds had rolled in to block most of the starlight, though here and there was a clear patch of sky. Crickets chirped, and a cool breeze stirred around her, bringing with it the scent of rain.
The light from her kitchen window, fifty yards to the right, was like a beacon. Ford was there, waiting for her. Warmth filled her and she smiled, thinking of him. She began walking toward her home, stepping carefully in the darkness so she wouldn't stumble over some unevenness in the ground, the soft spring grass cushioning her movements in silence.
She was in the Murchisons' backyard when she saw someone in her kitchen, briefly framed by the window as he moved past it. Grace paused, frowning a little; that hadn't looked like either Ford or Bryant.
Oh, Lord, they had company. Her frown deepened. It was probably someone interested in archaeology or associated with the Foundation. College kids pondering a career in archaeology sometimes dropped by to talk, and sometimes she was the one they wanted to see, if they were having a problem with Latin or Greek terms. It didn't matter. She didn't want to talk shop, she wanted to go to bed with her husband.

She was reluctant to go in, though of course she would have to; she couldn't stand out there in the dark waiting for whoever it was to leave, which could be hours. She edged to the right, trying to see if she recognized the visitor's car, hoping that it belonged to one of Bryant's friends. If so, she could signal her brother to take his friend into his side of the house.

Her familiar Buick sat in the carport, and beside it was Bryant's black Jeep Cherokee. Ford's scratched and dented Chevrolet four-wheel-drive pickup, which was used for field work, was parked off to the side. No other vehicle occupied their driveway.

That was strange. She knew they had company, because the man she'd so briefly glimpsed had had sandy-colored hair, and both Ford and Bryant were dark-haired. But unless it was a neighbor who had walked over, she had no idea how he had arrived. She knew most of their neighbors, though, and none of them fit the description of the man she'd seen.

Well, she wouldn't find out who he was until she went inside. She took a step toward the house and suddenly stopped again, squinting through the darkness. Something had moved between her and the house, something dark and furtive.

A chill ran down her spine. Icy shards of alarm ran through her veins, freezing her in place. Wild possibilities darted through her mind: a gorilla had escaped from a zoo. . . or there was a really, really big dog in her backyard.

Then it moved again, ghosting silently up to her back door. It was a man. She blinked in astonishment, wondering why someone was skulking around in her yard, and going to the back door instead of the front. A robbery? Why would any thief with half a brain break into a house where the lights were still on and the occupants were obviously at homer

Then the back door opened, and she realized the men must have knocked on it, though softly, because she hadn't heard anything. Another man stood in the door, a man she knew. There was a pistol, the barrel long and curiously thickened, in his hand.

"Nothing," the first man said, his voice low, but the night air carried the sound.

"God damn it," the other man muttered, stepping aside to let the first man enter. "I can't stop now. We'll have to go ahead and do it."

The door closed behind them. Grace stared across the dark yard at the blank expanse of her back door. Why was Parrish Sawyer there, and why did he

have a pistol? He was their boss, and if he'd called to let them know he was coming over, for whatever reason, Ford would have called her to come home. They were on cordial terms with Parrish, but they had never socialized; Parrish played in the more rarefied stratosphere of the rich and well connected, qualifications Grace's family didn't have.
"Do it"-that was what he'd said. Do what? And why couldn't he stop? Puzzled and uneasy, Grace left the shadows of the Murchisons' yard and walked across her own. She didn't know what was going on, but she was definitely going to find out.
While she had been cooking earlier she had opened the kitchen window so she could enjoy the freshness of the spring day, and it was still raised. She plainly heard Ford say, "Damn it, Parrish, what's this about?"
Ford's voice was rough, angry, with a tone in it she'd never heard before. Grace froze again with one foot lifted to the first step.
"Where is she?" Parrish asked, ignoring Ford's question. His voice was indifferent and cold, and the sound of it made the hairs lift on the back of her neck.
"I told you, the library." A lie. Ford was deliberately lying. Grace stood still, staring at the open window and trying to picture what was happening on the other side of the wall. She couldn't see anyone, but she knew there were at least four people inside. Where was Bryant, and the man she'd seen enter the kitchen?
"Don't give me that shit. Her car's here."
"She went with a friend."

"What's this friend's name?"
"Serena, Sabrina, something like that. Tonight's the first time I've met her."
Ford had always thought fast on his feet. The names were enough out of the ordinary that it gave the lie a bit of credence, where a plain Sally wouldn't. She didn't know why Ford was lying, but the fact that he was doing it was enough for Grace. Parrish had a pistol, and Ford didn't want him to know where Grace was; something was very wrong.
"All right." It sounded as if Parrish exhaled through his teeth. "What time will she be back?"
"She didn't know. She said they had a lot of work to do."
"When the library closes, I guess. And she carried all of the documents with her."

"They were in her computer case."
"Does this Serena-Sabrina know about the documents?";:
"I don't know."
"It doesn't matter." Now Parrish sounded a little bored. "I can't take the chance. All right, stand up, both of you."
She heard chairs being scraped back, and she moved silently to the right, so she could see inside the window. She was careful to stand back, so if anyone glanced out the window she wouldn't be framed in the pool of light. She saw Bryant, shirtless, his hair damp; he must have just gotten out of the shower, which told her that Parrish and the other man had arrived not long before. Her brother's face was drawn and pale, his eyes curiously blank. Grace moved another step, and saw four more people.
There was Ford, as pale as Bryant, though his eyes glittered with a kind of anger she'd never seen before. Parrish, tall and sophisticated, his blond hair expensively styled, stood with his back to the window. The man she'd seen earlier stood beside him, and another man stood just inside the interior kitchen doorway. The man at the doorway was armed; his pistol, like Parrish's, was silenced. The third man would also be armed, Grace thought, since the other two were.
She didn't know what was going on, but she was sure of one thing: she needed the police. She would call them from the Siebers' house. She took a cautious step backward.
"Go into the bedroom, both of you," she heard Parrish say. "And don't do anything stupid, like trying to jump one of us. I can't tell you how very painful it is to be shot, but I'll be forced to demonstrate if you don't cooperate."
Why was he making them go to the bedroom? She had heard enough to know that she was the one he really wanted, and he seemed to be concerned about the documents she carried.
If Parrish wanted the documents, all he had to do was say so; he was her boss, and she worked on the assignments he gave her. It would break her heart to give up the tantalizing papers, but she couldn't stop him from taking them. Why hadn't he just called, and told her to turn them over tomorrow morning? Why had he come to her house with a gun in his hand, and brought two armed thugs with him? None of this made sense.
She started to walk quickly back to the Siebers' house, but impulse led her around the comer of the house to where she could look into the bedroom

window. She waited for the light to come on, waited to hear voices in the room, but nothing happened, and abruptly she realized Parrish had taken them to Bryant's bedroom, on the other side of the house. Given the configuration of the house when they had divided it, Bryant's bedroom was at the back of the house with the kitchen. Parrish would have had to take them up the hallway to the front of the house, then through the connecting door into Bryant's part of the house and back to the bedroom.

As quickly as possible Grace retraced her steps, taking care to remain in the deepest shadows. A water hose was curled like a long, skinny snake around the protruding outside faucet; she skirted it, and also sidestepped a big sifting board one of the men had propped against the house. This was her home; she knew all its idiosyncrasies, the little traps for the unwary. She knew where the squeaks in the floor were, the cracks in the ceiling, the ruts in the yard.

Light was already shining from Bryant's window. She pressed her back against the wall and sidestepped until she was right beside it. She moved her head around, slowly, trying to move just enough that she could see inside.

One of the men stepped to the window. Grace jerked her head back and stood rigidly still, not even daring to breathe. He jerked the curtains together, shielding the window and darkening the spill of light.

Blood thundered in her ears, and sheer terror made her weak. She still couldn't breathe; her heart felt as if it were literally in her throat, suffocating her. If the man had seen her she would have been caught, for she couldn't possibly have moved.

"Sit on the bed," she heard Parrish say over her pounding heartbeat.

Grace's lungs were finally working again. She gulped in deep breaths to steady her nerves, then once again shifted position.

The curtain hadn't quite fallen together. She moved so she could see through the slit, see Ford and Bryant

Parrish calmly lifted his silenced pistol and shot Ford in the head, then quickly shifted his aim and shot Bryant. Her brother was dead before her husband's body had toppled to the side.

No. No! She hung there, paralyzed. Somehow her body was gone, vanished; she couldn't feel anything, couldn't think. A dark mist swam over her vision and the unbelievable scene receded until it was as if she saw it at the end of a long tunnel. She heard them talking, their voices oddly distorted.

"Shouldn't you have waited? There'll be a discrepancy in the times of death."
"That isn't a concern." Parrish's voice; she knew it. "In a murder-suicide, sometimes the killer waits awhile before killing himself - or herself, in this case. The shock, you understand. Such a pity, her husband and brother conducting a homosexual affair right under her nose. No wonder the poor dear got upset and went a little berserk."
"What about the friend?"
"Ah, yes. Serena - Sabrina. Bad luck for her; she'll have an unfortunate accident on the way home. I'll wait here for Grace, and you two wait in the car, follow Serena - Sabrina."
Slowly the mist cleared from Grace's vision. She wished it hadn't. She wished she had died right there, wished her heart had stopped. Through the gap in the curtains she could see her husband sprawled on his back, his eyes open and unseeing, his dark hair matted with. . . with…The sound rose from her chest, an almost silent keening that reverberated in her throat. It was like the distant howl of the wind, dark and soulless. The pain ripped out of her. She tried to hold it back with her teeth, but it boiled out anyway, primitive, wild. Parrish's head snapped around. For a tenth of a second-no more-she thought that their gazes met, that somehow he could see through that small gap into the night. He said something, sharply, and lunged for the window.
Grace plunged into the night.

Chapter 2

SHE NEEDED MONEY. Grace stared through the rainy night at the ATM; it was lit like a shrine, inviting her to cross the street and perform its electronic ritual. It was thirty yards away, at most. It would take her only a couple of minutes to reach it, punch in the necessary numbers, and she would have cash in her hand.

She needed to empty out the checking account, and probably a single ATM wouldn't have enough cash on hand to give her that amount, which meant she would have to find another ATM, then another, and every time she did the odds that she would be spotted would increase-as well as the odds of being mugged.

The ATM cameras would all film her, and the police would know where she had been, and when. A sudden image of Ford blasted into her brain, paralyzing her anew with shattering pain. God. oh God. The inhuman, involuntary keen rose in her throat again, rattled eerily against her clenched teeth. The sound that leaked out made a prowling cat freeze with one paw uplifted, its hair standing out. Then the animal turned and leaped and vanished into the rainwashed darkness, away from the crouched creature who emitted such a ghostly, anguished sound.

Grace rocked back and forth, pushing the pain deep inside, forcing herself to think. Ford had bought her safety with his life, and it would be a betrayal beyond bearing if she wasted his sacrifice by making bad decisions.

A slew of late-night withdrawals, all after the estimated times of death, would cement her appearance of guilt. Kristian would know what time she had left the Siebers' house, and Ford and Bryant had been killed at roughly that time. They had both been partially undressed, and in Bryant's bedroom.. Parrish had set up the situation with his usual thoroughness; any cop alive would believe she had walked in on a homosexual encounter between her husband and her brother, and killed them both. Her subsequent disappearance was another point against her.

The men with Parrish had been professional in their manner; they wouldn't have done anything sloppy like leave fingerprints. No neighbors would have seen strange cars parked at the house, because they had parked elsewhere and walked to the house. There were no witnesses, no evidence to point to anyone except her.

And even if by some miracle she convinced the police she was innocent, she had no proof Parrish had killed them. She had *seen* him do it, but she couldn't prove she had. Moreover, to the cops' way of thinking, he wouldn't have had a motive, while she obviously had plenty of motive. What could she offer as proof? A batch of papers written in a tangle of ancient languages, which she hadn't even deciphered yet, and which Parrish could have gotten from her at any time simply by telling her to turn them over to him?

There was no motive, at least none she could prove. And if she turned herself in, Parrish would get the papers, and she would end up dead. He would make certain of it. It would be made to look as if she'd hung herself, or perhaps a drug overdose would cause a brief scandal about the presence of drugs in jails and prisons, but the end result would be the same.

She had to stay alive, and out of police hands. It was the only chance she had of finding out why Parrish had killed Ford and Bryant-and avenging them.

To stay alive, to stay free, she had to have money. To get money, she had to use the ATMs no matter how guilty it made her look.

Would the police freeze her bank account? She didn't know, but if they did they would probably need a court order to do it. That should give her a little time - time she was wasting by huddling behind a trash bin, instead of walking across the street to the ATM and getting out what she could, while she could.

But she felt numb, almost incapable of functioning. The thirty yards might as well have been a hundred miles.

The shiny black surface of the wet pavement reflected the distorted, surreal image of the lights: the brightly colored hues of neon, the stark white of the streetlights, the never ending, monotonous progression of the traffic light through green, yellow, red, over and over, exerting its control over nonexistent traffic. At two A.M. there was only an occasional car, and none at all for the past five minutes. No one was in sight. Now was the time to approach the ATM.

But still she crouched there, hidden from view and partially protected from the rain by the overhang of the building and the bulk of the trash bin. Her hair was plastered to her head, her sodden braid hanging limp and rain-heavy down her back. Her clothes were soaked, and even though the night

was still unusually warm by Minneapolis standards, the dampness had leached the heat from her body so that she shivered with cold.
She clutched a garbage bag to her chest; it was a small bag, the type sometimes used to line the trash cans in public buildings. She had liberated it from just such a can in the ladies' rest room of the public library. The computer and the precious papers were protected inside the case, but when it had started raining she had panicked at the possibility of them getting wet, and all she could think of using to protect them was a plastic bag.
Maybe it hadn't been smart, going to the library. It was, after all, a public place, and one she frequented. On the other hand, how often did the police search libraries for suspected murderers? It was impossible for Parrish to have gotten a good look at her through that tiny slit in the bedroom curtains, but he certainly guessed she was the one lurking outside the window and had seen everything. He and his men were searching for her, but even though Ford had told them she'd gone to the library she doubted they would think she had gone back to one to hide.
The police might not even have been notified of the murders yet. Parrish couldn't report them without bringing himself into the picture, which he wouldn't want to do. The neighbors wouldn't have heard anything, since the shots had been silenced.
No. The police knew. Parrish wouldn't take the chance of letting days go by before the bodies-her mind stumbled on the word, but she forced herself to finish the thought-were discovered. Was there any way for forensics to tell if the pistol had been fitted with a silencer? She didn't think so. All Parrish would have to do would be to call in a "suspicious noise, like gunshots," at their address, and use a pay phone so nothing would show up on the 911 records.
Both Parrish and his henchmen, and the police, were looking for her. Still, she had gone to the main branch of the library. Instinct had led her there. She was numb with shock and horror, and the library, as familiar to her as her own house, had seemed like a haven. The smell of books, that wonderful mingling of paper and leather and ink, had been the scent of sanctuary. Dazed, at first she had simply wandered among the shelves, looking at the books that had defined the boundaries of her life until a few short hours ago, trying to recapture that sense of safety, of normalcy. It hadn't worked. Nothing would ever be normal again. Finally she had gone into the rest room, and stared in bewilderment at the reflection in the mirror.

That white faced, blank-eyed woman wasn't *her*, couldn't possibly be Grace St. John, who had spent her life in academia and who specialized in deciphering and translating ancient languages. The Grace St. John she was familiar with, the one whose face she had seen countless times in other mirrors, had happy blue eyes and a cheerful expression, the face of a woman who loved and was loved in return. Content. Yes, she had been content. So what if she was just a little too plump, so what if she could have been the poster girl for Bookworms Anonymous? Ford had loved her, and that WBS" what had counted in her life. "

Ford was dead. It couldn't be. It wasn't real. Nothing that had happened was real. Maybe if she closed her eyes, when she opened them she would find herself in her own bed, and realize it had only been a ghastly nightmare, or that she was having some sort of mental breakdown. That would be a good trade, she thought as she squeezed her eyes shut. Her sanity for Ford's life. She'd go for that any day of the week.

She tried it. She squeezed her eyes really tight, concentrated on the idea that it was just a nightmare and that she was about to wake up, and everything would be all right. But when she opened her eyes, everything was the same. She still stared back at herself in the stark fluorescent light, and Ford was still dead. Ford and Bryant. Husband and brother, the only two people on earth whom she loved, and who loved her in return. They were both gone, irrevocably, finally, definitely gone. Nothing would bring them back, and she felt as if the essence of her own being had died with them. She was only a shell, and she wondered why the framework of bone and skin that she saw in the mirror didn't collapse from its own emptiness.

Then, looking into her own eyes, she'd known why she didn't collapse. She wasn't empty, as she'd thought. There was something inside after all, something wild and bottomless, a feral tangle of terror and rage and hate. She had to fight Parrish, somehow. If either he or the police caught her, then he would have won, and she couldn't bear that.

He wanted the papers. She had only begun to translate them; she didn't know what they contained, or what Parrish thought they contained. She didn't know what was so important about them that he had killed Ford and Bryant, and intended to kill her, merely because they knew these particular papers existed. Maybe Parrish thought she had deciphered more than she actually had. He didn't just want physical possession of the papers, he

wanted to erase all knowledge of their existence, and their content. What was in them that her
Husband and brother had died because of them? That was why she had to protect the laptop. Her computer held all her notes, her journal entries, her language programs that aided her in her work. Give her access to a modem, and she could connect to any resource on-line that she needed in her work, and she could continue her translations. She would find out why. Why.
To have any chance of successfully hiding, she had to have cash. Good, untraceable cash.
She had to make herself walk to that ATM. And when she'd emptied it-assuming there was any cash left in it, given the hour-she would have to find another one.
Her fingers were numb, and bloodless. The temperature had remained in the sixties, but she had been wet for hours.
She didn't know where she found the surge of energy that carried her to her feet. Perhaps it wasn't energy at all, but desperation. But suddenly she was standing, even though her knees were so stiff and weak she had to lean against the wet wall for support. She pushed away from the wall, and momentum propelled her several unsteady steps before panic and fatigue dragged at her again, slowing her to a standstill. She clutched the garbage bag to her chest, feeling the reassuring weight of the laptop within the plastic. Rain dripped down her face, and a massive black weight pressed on her chest. *Ford. Bryant.*

Damn everything. Somehow her feet were moving again, clumsily shuffling, but moving. That was all she required, that they move.
Her purse swung awkwardly from her shoulder, banging against her hip. Her steps slowed, stopped. Stupid! It was a miracle she hadn't already been mugged, wandering back alleys at this time of night with her purse plainly in sight.
She edged back into the shadows, her heart thumping from a surge of panic. For a moment she stood paralyzed, afraid to move as her gaze darted around the dark alley, searching for any of the night predators who prowled the city. The narrow alley remained silent, and her breath sighed out of her. She was alone. Perhaps the rain had worked in her favor, and the homeless, the druggies, the hoodlums, had decided to take shelter somewhere.

She laughed in the darkness, the sound small and humorless. She had grown up in Minneapolis, and she had no real idea which sections of the city she should avoid. She knew her neighborhood, her routes to the university, the libraries, the post office and grocery, doctor and dentist. In the course of her work, and Ford's, she had traveled to six continents and God knows how many countries; she had thought herself well traveled, but suddenly she realized how little she knew of her own city because she had been encapsulated in her own little safe, familiar world. .

To survive, she would have to be a lot smarter, a lot more aware. Street smarts meant a lot more than locking your car doors as soon as you were inside. She would have to be ready for anything, an attack from any quarter, and she would have to be ready to fight. She would have to learn to think like the night predators, or she wouldn't make it a week on the street.

Carefully she slipped the ATM card into her pocket, then huddled once again under the overhanging roof. After depositing the precious, plastic-wrapped computer on her feet, she opened her purse and began ruthlessly sorting through the contents. She took out what cash she had, stuffing it into a pocket of the computer case without bothering to count it; she knew it wasn't much, maybe forty or fifty dollars, because she didn't normally carry much cash. She hesitated over the checkbook, but decided to take it; she might be able to use it, though a paper trail was dangerous. Ditto for the American Express card. She dropped both of them into the plastic bag. Any use they had, though, would be immediate and short-term. She would have to leave Minneapolis, and after she did, using either checks or a credit card would lead the police right to her.

There were several photos in the plastic pockets. She didn't have to see them to know what they were. Her fingers trembling, she pulled the entire photo protector out of her wallet and slipped it too into the bag.

Okay, what else? There were her driver's license and social security card, but what good were they now? The license would only identify her, which she wanted to avoid, and as for the social security card-a hollow laugh escaped her. She didn't think she had much chance of living to collect social security.

Any identification she left behind would undoubtedly be found and used by the street scavengers, which might help dilute the police search for her if they had to run down leads that had nothing to do with her. She left the cards, and on impulse dug the checkbook out of the plastic bag. After

carefully tearing out one check and storing it in the same pocket with her cash, she dropped the checkbook back into her purse.
She left the tube of lip balm, but couldn't bear not having a comb. Another eerie, hollow laugh sounded in her throat; her husband and brother had just been murdered, the police were after her, and she was worried about being *unkempt*? Nevertheless, the comb went into the bag.
Her scrabbling fingers touched several pens and mechanical pencils, and without thought she took two of them. They were as essential to her work as the computer, because sometimes, when she was stumped on deciphering a particularly obscure passage or word, actually rewriting the words in her own hand would form a link of recognition between her brain and her eyes, and suddenly she would understand at least some of the words as she saw similarities to other languages, other alphabets. She had to have the pens.
There was her bulky appointment book. She ignored it, shutting it out of her thoughts. It held the minutiae of a life that no longer existed: the appointments and lists and reminders. She didn't want to see the scribbled notation for Ford's next dental cleaning, or the sappy heart he'd drawn on the calendar on her birthdate.
She left her business cards - she'd never used them much, anyway. She left the small pack of tissues, the spray bottle of eyeglass cleaner, the roll of antacid tablets, the breath mints. She took the metal nail file, tucking it into her pocket. It wasn't much, but it was the only thing she possessed in the way of a weapon. She hesitated over her car keys, wondering if perhaps she could sneak back and get either her car or Ford's truck. No. That was stupid. She left the keys. With both the keys and her address, perhaps whoever found the purse would steal either the car or the truck, or both, and lead the police astray even more.
Chewing gum, rubber bands, a magnifying glass . . . she identified all of those by feel, and removed only the magnifying glass, which she needed for work. Why had she been carrying so much *junk* around? A flicker of impatience licked at her, the first emotion other than grief and despair that had seeped through the numbness that surrounded her. It wasn't just her purse; she couldn't afford to make any mistakes, carry any excess baggage, let anything interfere with her focus. From this second forward, she would have to do whatever was necessary. There couldn't be any more wasting of precious time and energy because she was paralyzed by fear. She had to act, without hesitation, or Parrish would win.

Grimly she tossed the purse on top of the trash bin, and heard a faint squeak and scrabble as a scavenging rat was disturbed. Somehow she made her feet begin moving again, shuffling across the littered alley, painfully inching from safety to exposure.

The headlights of an approaching car made her freeze just before stepping onto the sidewalk. It passed, tires swishing on the wet pavement, the driver not even bothering to glance at the bedraggled figure standing between two buildings.

The car turned right at the next intersection, and disappeared from view. Grace focused on the ATM, took a deep breath, and walked. She was staring so hard at the brightly lit machine that she missed the curb and stumbled, twisting her right ankle. She ignored the pain, not letting herself stop. Athletes walked off pain all the time; she could do the same.

The ATM loomed closer and closer, brighter and brighter. She wanted to run, to return to the safety of the trash bin. She might as well have been naked; the sensation of being exposed was so powerful that she shuddered, fighting for control. Anyone could be watching her, waiting for her to finish the transaction before mugging her, taking the money, and perhaps killing her in the process. The ATM camera would be watching her now, recording every move.

She tried to recall how much money was in the checking account. Damn it, she'd thrown away the checkbook without looking at the balance! There was no way she was going to go back to that alley and climb into the trash bin to search for her purse, even assuming she could manage the exertion. She would simply withdraw money until the machine stopped her.

The machine stopped her at three hundred dollars.

She stared at the computer screen in bewilderment. "Transaction Denied." She knew there was more than that in the account, there was more than two thousand-not a great amount, but it could mean the difference between death and survival for her. She knew there was a limit on what she could withdraw in a single transaction, but why had the machine balked at the second one?

Maybe there wasn't enough cash left in the ATM to fill the request. She started over, punching in her code, and this time she requested only one hundred.

"Transaction Denied." Panic shot through her stomach, twisting it into knots. Oh, God, the police couldn't have frozen the account so soon, could

they?
No. No. It was impossible. The banks were closed. Something might be done first thing in the morning, but nothing could have happened yet. The machine was just out of money. That was all it was.
Hurriedly, she stuffed the three hundred dollars into her pockets, dividing it up so that if she were mugged, she might be able to get away with emptying out only one pocket. She only hoped nothing would happen to the computer; she would hand over the money without argument, but she would fight for the computer and those precious files. Without them, she would never know why Ford and Bryant had died, and she had to know. It wouldn't be enough to avenge them; she had to know *why*.
She began walking hurriedly, desperation driving her numb feet. She had to find another ATM, get more money. But where was another one? Until now, she had used only the one located at her local bank branch, but she knew she had seen others. They were located at malls, but malls were closed at this hour. She tried to think of places that were open twenty-four hours a day, and also had ATMs. Grocery stores, maybe? She remembered when she had opened the account, the bank had given her a booklet listing all its ATM "convenient locations," but she wasn't finding them all that damn convenient.
"Gimme the money." They materialized in front of her, lunging out of an alley so fast she had no time to react. There were two of them, one white, one black, both feral. The white guy jabbed a knife at her, the blade glinting ghostly pale in the rain filtered streetlight. "Don't fuck with me, bitch," he breathed, his breath more lethal than the weapon. "Just gimme the money." He was short a few teeth and a lot of intelligence.
Wordlessly she stuck her hand into her pocket and took out the fold of money. She knew she should be scared, but evidently the human mind could sustain fear only to a certain level, and anything after that simply didn't register.
The black guy grabbed the money, and the other one jabbed the knife closer, this time at her face. Grace jerked her head back just in time to keep the blade from slicing across her chin. "I saw you, bitch. Gimme the rest of it." So much for her grand scheme; they had probably been watching her from the time she crossed the street. She reached into her other pocket, and managed to wedge her fingers inside the fold so that she brought out only half of it. The black guy snatched it, too.

Then they were gone, pelting back into the alley, melting into the darkness. They hadn't even asked about the plastic bag she carried. They'd been after cash, not something that required extra trouble. At least she still had the computer. Grace closed her eyes, and fought to keep her knees from buckling under the crushing weight of despair. At least she still had the computer. She didn't have her husband, or her brother, but at least she still had. . . the. . . *damn*. . . computer. The harsh, howling sound startled her. It was a moment before she realized it came from her own throat, another moment before she realized that she was walking again, somehow, somewhere. Rain dripped down at her face, or at least she thought it was rain. She couldn't feel herself crying, but then she couldn't feel herself walking, either; she was simply moving. Maybe she *was* crying, useless as that would be. Rain, tears, what difference did it make?

She still had the computer. Computer. Kristian.

Oh, God. Kristian. She had to warn him. If Parrish had any inkling Kristian knew about the files, much less part of their content, he wouldn't hesitate to kill the boy.

Pay telephones, thank God, were far more plentiful and convenient than ATMs. She fished some change out of the bag, desperately clutching the coins in her wet palm as she crossed one comer and hurried up the block, then turned at another street, wanting to put plenty of distance between her and the two muggers before she stopped. God, the streets were so deserted, something she would never have imagined in a metro area the size of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Her footsteps echoed; her breathing sounded ragged and uneven, unnaturally loud. The rain dripped from eaves and awnings, and the buildings towered high and close over her, with the occasional lighted window indicating some poor office prisoner pulling an all-nighter. She was a world removed from them, all dry and warm in their steel and glass cocoons, while she hurried through the rain and tried to be invisible. Finally, panting, she stopped at a pay phone. It wasn't in a booth, they seldom were now, just a phone with three small pieces of clear plastic forming shelters on each side and overhead. At least it had a shelf for her to rest the bag on, propping it in place with her body while she held the receiver between her head and shoulder and fumbled a quarter into the slot. She couldn't remember Kristian's number but her fingers did, dancing in the familiar pattern without direction from her brain.

The first ring was still buzzing in her ear when it abruptly stopped and Kristian's voice said, "Hello?" He sounded tense, unusually alert for this time of night-or rather, morning.
"Kris." The word was nothing more than a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Kris, it's Grace."
"Grace, my God! Cops are everywhere, and they said-" He stopped suddenly and lowered his voice, his whisper forceful and almost fierce. "Are you all right? Where are you?"
All right? How could she be all right? Ford and Bryant were dead, and there was a great empty hole in her chest. She would never be all right again. She was, however, physically unharmed, and she knew that was what he was asking. From his question, she also knew that Parrish had indeed called the police; the quiet neighborhood must be in a turmoil.
"I saw it happen," she said, her throat so constricted that her voice sounded like a stranger's, flat and empty. "They're going to say I did it, but I didn't, I swear. Parrish did. I saw him."
"Parrish? Parrish Sawyer, your boss? That Parrish? Are you sure? What happened?"
She waited until the barrage of questions had halted. "I *saw* him," she repeated. "Listen, have they questioned you yet?"
"A little. They wanted to know what time you left here."
"Did you mention the documents I'm working on?"
"No." His voice was positive. "They asked why you were here, and I said you brought your modem over for me to repair. That's it."
"Good. Whatever you do, don't mention the documents. If anyone asks, just say you didn't see any papers at all."
"Okay, but why?"
"So Parrish won't kill you, too." Her teeth began to chatter. Oh, God, she was so cold, the light wind cutting through her wet clothes. "I'm not kidding. Promise me you won't let anyone know you have any idea I was working on anything. I don't know what's in these papers, but he intends to get rid of everyone who knows of their existence."
There was silence on the line, then Kristian said in bewilderment, "You mean he doesn't want us to know about that Knight Templar guy you were trying to track down? He lived seven centuries ago, if he existed at all! Who the hell cares?"

"Parrish does." She didn't know why, but she intended to find out. "Parrish does," she repeated, her voice trailing off.
She listened to his breathing, the sound quick and shallow, amplified by the phone. "Okay, I'll keep my mouth shut. I promise." He paused. "Do you need any help? You can borrow my car-"
She almost laughed. Despite everything, the sound bubbled up in her throat and hung there, unable to work its way past restricted muscles. Kristian's mechanical monument to testosterone was a sure attention-getter, the one thing she most wanted to avoid. "No, thanks," she managed to say. "What I need is money, but the ATM I just tried ran out of cash, and I was mugged as soon as I walked away from it anyway."
"I doubt it," he said. He doubted that she was mugged? "What?" She was so tired she could barely move or think, but surely he couldn't mean that.
"I doubt it was out of money," he said. Suddenly his voice sounded older, taking on the cool intensity that meant he was thinking of computers. "How much did you take out?"
"Three hundred. Isn't that the limit for each transaction? I remember the banker said something about three hundred dollars when we set up our account."
"Not three hundred per transaction," Kristian patiently explained. "Three hundred per *day*. You could make as many transactions as you wanted, until the total reached three hundred for that twenty-four-hour period. Each bank sets its own limit, and the limit for your bank is three hundred."
His explanation fell on her like words of doom. Even if she found another ATM, she wouldn’t be able to get more money until this time tomorrow morning. She couldn’t wait that long. If the police could freeze her account, they would definitely have it done by then. And she needed to get out of Minneapolis, to find some safe hiding place where she could work on the documents and find out just why Parrish had killed Ford and Bryant. To do that, she had to have money; she had to have access to a phone, to resource material.
"I'm sunk," she said, her tone leaden. "No!" He almost yelled the word. More softly he repeated, "No. I can fix that. How much is your balance?"
"I don't know exactly. A couple of thousand."
"Find another ATM," he instructed. "I'll get into your bank's computer, change the limit to . . . say, five thousand. Empty out your account, then I'll

change the limit back to the original amount. They'll never know how it happened, I promise. "
Hope bloomed inside her, a strange sensation after those past nightmare hours. All she had to do was find another ATM, something easier said than done when she was on foot.
"Look in the phone directory," he was saying. "Every branch of your bank will have an ATM. Pick the closest one and go there."
Of course. How simple. Normally she would have thought of that herself, and the fact that she hadn't was a measure of her shock and exhaustion.
"Okay." Thank heavens, there was still a directory chained to the shelf. She opened the protective cover. Well, there was part of a directory, at least, and it contained the most important part, the Yellow Pages. She thumbed through them until she reached "Banks," and located her own bank, which had sixteen of those so-called convenient locations.
She estimated it would take her half an hour to get to the nearest one. "I'm going now," she said. "I'll be there in thirty to forty-five minutes, unless something happens." She could be picked up by the police, or mugged again, or Parrish and his goons might be out cruising the city, looking for her. None of the things that could happen to her would be pleasant.
"Call me," Kristian said urgently. "I'll get into the bank's computer now, but call me and let me know if everything went okay."
"I will," she promised. The thirty-minute walk took almost an hour. She was exhausted, and the laptop gained weight with each step she took. She had to hide every time a car went past, and once a patrol car sped through an intersection just ahead of her, lights whirring in eerie silence. The spurt of panic left her weak and shaking, her heart pounding.
Her familiarity with the downtown area was limited to specific destinations. She had lived, gone to school, and shopped in the suburbs. She took a wrong turn and went several blocks out of her way before she realized what she had done, and had to backtrack. She was acutely aware of the seconds ticking away toward dawn, when people would be getting up and turning on their televisions, and learning about the double murder in her quiet neighborhood. The police would have photographs of her, taken from the house, and her face might be on hundreds of thousands of screens. She needed to be somewhere safe before then.
Finally she reached the branch bank, with the lovely ATM on the front of it, all lit up and watched over by the security camera. so if someone got killed

right there they'd have a tape of the murder to show on the evening news. She was too tired to worry about the camera, or the possibility that another couple of jerks might be watching her. Just let someone else try to mug her. The next time, she would fight; she had nothing to lose, because the money meant her life. She walked right up to the machine, took out her bank card, and followed the instructions, asking for a full two thousand.

The obedient machine began regurgitating twenty-dollar bills. It coughed up a hundred of them before it stopped. Oh, blessed automation!

What with the three hundred she had already withdrawn, she didn't think there could be much left. She didn't try to find out the exact amount, not with two thousand dollars in her hand and time pressing hard on her. She darted around the corner and hid herself in the shadows, hunkering down against the wall and hurriedly stuffing bills inside the computer case, in her pockets, in the cups of her bra, inside her shoes. All the while she scanned the area for movement, but the streets were quiet and empty. The night predators would be heading for their lairs now, turning the city back over to the day denizens.

Maybe. She couldn't afford to take any chances now. She needed some kind of weapon, anything, no matter how primitive, with which she could protect herself. She looked around, hoping to find a sturdy stick, but the only things littering the ground were small pieces of glass and a few rocks.

Well, weapons didn't get much more primitive than rocks, did they?

She picked up the biggest ones, slipping all but one into her pocket. That one, the biggest one, she kept clutched in her hand. She was aware of how pitiful this defense was, but at the same time she felt oddly comforted. Any defense was better than none.

She had to call Kristian, and she had to get out of Minneapolis. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep, to be able to forget for just a few hours, but the luxury of rest would have to wait. Instead Grace hurried through the streets as the sky began to lighten, and the sun began to rise on her first day as a widow.

Chapter 3

"IT SHOULDN'T BE DIFFICULT TO FIND HER," PARRISH SAWYER murmured, leaning back in his chair and tapping his immaculately

manicured nails against the wooden arm. "I'm sadly disappointed in the Minneapolis Police Department. Little Grace has no car, no survival skills, yet still she's managed to elude them. That really surprises me; I expected her to run screaming to a neighbor, or to the first policeman she could find, but no, instead she's gone to earth somewhere. Annoying of her, but all she's doing is delaying the inevitable. If the police can't find her, I'm confident you can."

"Yes," Conrad said. He didn't elaborate. He was a man of few words, but over the years Parrish had found him extremely reliable. Conrad could have been either his first or last name; no one knew. He was stocky and muscular and didn't look very bright; his bullet-shaped head was covered by short dark hair that grew low on his forehead, an unfortunate apelike resemblance that was only heightened by his small dark eyes and prominent brow ridges. His appearance, however, was deceiving. His chunky body could move with amazing speed and finesse, and behind his stolid expression was a brain that was both astute and concise. Best of all, Parrish had never seen Conrad exhibit any distressing signs of conscience. He carried out orders with admirable, machinelike precision, and what he thought of them no one but himself ever knew.

"When you find her," Parrish continued, "bring the computer and the papers to me immediately." He didn't give any instructions on how to deal with Grace St. John; Conrad wouldn't need direction on anything that simple. There was a sharp, slight incline of the bullet head, and Conrad silently left the room. Alone, Parrish sighed, his fingers still drumming out his frustration with the situation.

It had turned unaccountably messy. Nothing had gone as planned. They should have been there, all three of them; he had made certain all three vehicles had been present before going in. But Grace hadn't been there, and neither had her computer or the documents. Moreover, Ford and Bryant had been remarkably good liars; Parrish hadn't expected it of them, and he didn't like being surprised. Who would have thought two nerdish archaeologists would have sized up the situation so accurately, and in an instant formulated a very believable lie?

But they had, and he'd made a very bad mistake in believing them. Such gullibility wasn't at all like him, and the sense of having been made a fool of was irritating.

Unfortunately, it seemed Grace had been just outside the house, watching and listening. That strange little sound he'd heard outside the window had probably been her; leaving a gap in the curtains, even a tiny one, had been another uncharacteristic mistake. Some days were just a bitch.
He and Conrad's team had quickly withdrawn, leaving no fingerprints or other sign of their presence behind, and the scene in the bedroom had looked pretty much as they had planned. Any cop walking in on that, two men half-naked together in a bedroom, both of them shot in the head, and one's wife missing - well, it wouldn't take a genius to figure it out. Minneapolis's finest had reacted just as he had expected; they were being circumspect, keeping details from the media, but Grace was their prime suspect.
He had thought she would seek help immediately, so he had returned to his luxurious home in Wayzata to wait. He wasn't worried about her accusations; after all, why would he kill two people in order to steal some documents he could obtain by simply asking for them? He was a respected and well-connected member of the community. He was on two hospital boards, he gave regularly and generously to all the politically correct charities, and several of the richest families in Minnesota had hopes - useless ones, of course - of enticing him into the fold by way of marriage. Moreover, he had an alibi in the form of his housekeeper, Antonetta Dolk. She would swear he had been working in his study all evening, that she had even taken coffee to him. Antonetta could pass any lie-detector test devised by man, a useful ability in a housekeeper, and one he valued far more than dusting. She worked, of course, for the Foundation; he had surrounded himself with people loyal only to him.
To think that the documents had surfaced after so long! They had come out of an insignificant dig in southern France, a dig that had produced so little, and nothing that appeared of any great age, that the documents hadn't drawn any attention. Certainly no one whose job it was to evaluate all finds and report anything interesting to him had found anything intriguing in documents that seemed to be only a few centuries old. He would have to take care of the bungler-another job for Conrad. If the documents had been correctly evaluated, they would never have been photographed, stored, and the photographs sent to Grace St. John for routine translation. None of this would have happened, and the information would be in his hands instead of Grace's.

It was Ford who had alerted him to the content of the obscure documents, and therefore caused his own death. Life could be so ironic, Parrish thought. Ford's chance comment about Grace's latest project, something about the Knights Templar, had set events into motion.

Parrish had quickly checked the assignment records and traced the original documents to their storage location in Paris. The French could be so difficult about allowing artifacts, even not-so-old ones, out of the country. Parrish had sent his people in to retrieve the papers, only to find that they had been destroyed, apparently by fire-though nothing else in the vault had been damaged. Nothing remained of the documents except a fine, white ash. Grace St. John had the only existing copies. And according to the assignment record, she had been working on the translation for three days. Grace was good at her job; in fact, she was the best language expert on staff. He couldn't take the chance that she had already deciphered enough of the documents to know what she had; she, and everyone else who knew what she'd been working on, had to be eliminated.

Strange that Grace should prove more difficult than either Ford or Bryant. How long had he known her? Almost ten years? She had always seemed such ashy, mousy type, no makeup, her hair scraped back in an unflattering braid, slightly overweight. Her complete lack of style was an affront to his sensibilities. For all that, several times over the years he had been tempted to seduce her. Likely he had been bored, between women; little Grace presented something of a challenge, with her ridiculous middle-class morals. She "loved" her husband, and was faithful to him. But she had perfect skin, like translucent porcelain, and the most astonishingly carnal mouth he'd ever seen. Parrish smiled, feeling the blood pool in his groin as he considered the uses to which he could put that mouth, so wide and soft and pouty. Poor old Ford had certainly lacked the imagination to enjoy her as he could have!

She would be as helpless in the streets as any child. Anything could have happened to her during the night. She might already be dead.

If so, one problem would be conveniently solved, but he sincerely hoped she was still alive. She would keep the papers with her, and when Conrad found her, he would find the papers. If any of the human trash that prowled the streets at night killed her, however, her computer would be taken and fenced, and the papers thrown away. Once the copied documents disappeared into the maw of the night world, they would likely never

surface again. They would be gone, and with them the long-search ed-for, critical information. There would no longer be a purpose in the Foundation, and his plans would be reduced to so much ash, just like the original documents.

That couldn't be allowed to happen. One way or another, he would get those papers.

Grace couldn't sleep. She was exhausted, but every time she closed her eyes she saw Ford, the sudden, horrible blankness of his eyes as the bullet snuffed out his life, saw him toppling over on the bed.

It was still raining. She sat huddled in a metal storage building, hidden behind a lawn mower that was missing a wheel, a greasy tool box, some rusting cans of paint, and several moldy cardboard boxes marked "Xmas Decorations." The eight-by-ten building hadn't been locked, but then there wasn't anything in it worth stealing, except for a few wrenches and screwdrivers.

She wasn't certain exactly where she was. She had simply walked north until she was too tired to walk any farther, then taken refuge in the storage building behind a fifties style ranch house. The neighborhood was showing signs of raggedness as its lower-middle-class respectability slowly deteriorated. No cars were parked in the carport, so she had taken the chance that no one was there. If any neighbors were at home, the rain had kept them indoors, and no one shouted at her as she walked slowly across the backyard and opened the flimsy metal door.

She had scrambled over the clutter until she reached a back comer, then settled down on the dirty cement. She had sat in a stupor, staring at nothing. Time passed, but she had no grasp of it. After a while she heard a car drive up, and several car doors slammed. Kids yelled and argued, and a woman's voice irritably told them to shut up. There was the squeak of a storm door opening, then the slam of another door, and the human clatter was silenced behind walls that held warmth and normalcy.

Grace leaned her head on her knees. She was so tired, and so hungry. She didn't know what to do next.

Ford and Bryant would be buried, and she wouldn't be there to see them one last time, to touch them, to put flowers on their graves.

Her throat worked, closing tight on the surge of grief that made her rock back and forth. She felt herself flying apart, felt her control shredding, and

she hugged her arms tightly as if she could hold everything together that way.

She had never even taken Ford's name, Wessner, as her own. She had kept her maiden name, St. John. The reasons had been so practical, so modem; her degree had been awarded to Grace St. John, and there was her driver's license, her social security, so much paperwork to be changed if she changed her name. And, of course, Minneapolis was in the vanguard of political correctness; it would have been considered hopelessly gauche by the academic crowd if she had taken Ford's name.

The pain was almost unbearable. Ford had been willing to die for her, but she hadn't been willing to use his surname as her own. He'd never asked, never even mentioned it; knowing Ford, it hadn't been important to him. He'd been so *grounded*; their marriage had mat tered to him, not what name she used. But suddenly, to her, it mattered. She yearned for that link to him, a link she would never have now, any more than she would ever have his children.

They had planned to have two. They had talked about it, but put parenthood off while they both built their careers. After this past Christmas, they had decided to wait another year, and Grace had continued taking her birth control pills.

Now Ford was dead, and the useless pills had been left behind in a house to which she would never return.

Oh, God, Ford! She couldn't bear-this. The pain was too great. She had to do something or she would lose her mind, run screaming from this filthy little metal building and stand in the middle of the street until she was either arrested or killed.

Jerkily she pulled the computer case from the plastic bag. The light in the building was a dim, muted green, too poor to do any translation work off the copies themselves, but she had already had some of them transferred to disk and she could work on the computer. She was too tired to get much accomplished, but she desperately needed a few minutes of distraction. She had always been able to lose herself in her work; maybe this time it would save her sanity.

She didn't have much room, crammed in the corner the way she was. She repositioned the boxes of Christmas decorations, sliding one in front of her to use as a desk; she knew from experience that the laptop generated too much heat to rest it on her legs. She slapped down the mouse pad, then

opened the top of the computer and pushed the switch on the side. The screen lit and the machine made its musical electronic noises as it went through the booting process. When the menu appeared on the screen, she moved the cursor down to the program she wanted and clicked the mouse. She already knew which disk she wanted, and had it ready to slide into the A drive.

The disk contained the section she had been working on before, when curiosity had led her to do more research on the Knights Templar. The language was Old French, something she was so familiar with that she should be able to work even with her mind so numb.

She accessed the file, and the words filled the screen. The letters were indistinct with age, strangely formed, and medieval people had been very creative spellers. There hadn't been any standardized spellings back then, so people had used whatever sounded right to them.

Grace stared at the screen, slowly scrolling as she read and reestablished herself in the work. Despite everything, she could feel her concentration gathering, her focus narrowing as the documents pulled her into their power. The name popped out at her again, "Niall of Scotland," and she took a deep breath. She eased down into a cross-legged position on the concrete, moving closer to the computer as she automatically fished out a pen and the pad that was always in the computer case for taking notes.

Whoever this Niall of Scotland had been before joining the Order, he had quickly become renowned as its greatest warrior. She skimmed over the cramped lines on the screen, jotting down notes on sections she couldn't quite make out, or on words that were unfamiliar to her. She didn't notice her heartbeat speeding, or feel the increased oxygen boosting her concentration. Instead she felt as if she were being sucked into the screen, into the epic account of a monk who had lived and died almost seven hundred years before.

Niall had been "of great size, three *elles* and five more." Since this document was in French, Grace decided the measurement would more likely have been a Flemish ell, twenty-seven inches, rather than an English one of thirty-seven inches. And though Niall had been Scots, the Scots ell was something like forty-five inches, which meant that by Scots measurement three ells and five inches would have placed him close to twelve feet tall. The Flemish ell was more reasonable, making the man stand about six feet four, tall for his time but not freakishly so. Medieval

people had been of varying sizes, depending on their nutrition during childhood. Some knights had been ridiculously small, their suits of armor looking as if they had been made for children, while others had been big even by modem standards.

According to this paean, Niall had been unsurpassed in swordsmanship and the other arts of war. There was account after account of battles he had fought, Saracens he had killed, fellow Knights he had saved. Grace felt as if she were reading a tale of a mythical hero along the lines of Hercules, rather than a Middle Ages record of an actual Templar. Granted, the Templars had been superb soldiers, the best of their time and the equivalent of modem-day special forces.

But if the Templars had been such good soldiers, why had Niall of Scotland been singled out for excessive praise? She assumed she was reading actual records of the Knights Templar, and while outsiders would understandably be impressed by the great Knights, the Knights themselves would take such exploits for granted. It seemed unlikely they would aggrandize the accomplishments of one.

She scrolled down, and there was a break in the narrative. The text picked up on what seemed to be a letter, signed by someone named Valcour. He expressed concerns about the safety of "the Treasure," and the importance of protecting this, which had worth "greater than gold."

Treasure. Grace stretched her back, rotating her shoulders to ease the kinks. She didn't know how long she had been staring at the computer, but her feet were asleep and her neck and shoulder muscles tight with strain. There had been something about a treasure in the material she had read on Kristian's computer, but she had been skimming, looking for any mention of Niall of Scotland, and she hadn't read it closely. She did remember that the Knights Templar had been an extremely wealthy order, so much so that kings and popes had borrowed gold from them. Their treasure had been gold, so how could its worth be "greater than gold"?

She had been holding fatigue at bay by the sheer force of her concentration, but now it hit her again, pulling at her limbs and eyelids. Her hands were suddenly clumsy as she exited the program and removed the disk, fumbling it back into its protective sleeve. She turned off the computer and scooted back, almost groaning aloud as she stretched out her numb legs and renewed blood flow surged painfully through her veins.

Clumsily she edged herself around, propping herself up against the boxes of decorations. She could feel sleep coming, rushing toward her like a black tide of unconsciousness. She welcomed it, desperately needing the surcease. Her eyelids were too heavy to remain open a second longer. Her last thought was "Niall," and she had a brief picture of him, tall and powerful, swinging a six-foot sword with one iron-hewn arm while enemies fell dead all about him, before she slipped completely beneath the tide.

1322

Six hundred and seventy-five years away, Niall awoke with every nerve alert, his head lifting from his pillow. A single candle guttered in its holder, and the fire in the hearth had almost burned out. He had been asleep for almost an hour, he estimated, relaxed by some energetic love play. He had heard-what? Only the slightest whisper of sound, different but somehow non-threatening. Normally, if he was awakened suddenly he had a dagger in one hand and a sword in the other even before his eyes were fully opened. He hadn't reached for his weapons, which meant his battle trained senses hadn't detected any danger.

But something had awakened him, and the sound had been near. He looked at the woman sleeping beside him, softly snoring, the noise little more than a snuffle. That wasn't what had disturbed him.

They were alone in the chamber, the thick door securely barred, and the secret door beside the hearth was closed. Robert never came without first sending a message. But Niall felt as if someone had been there, and the sudden presence of a stranger had jerked him awake.

He got out of bed, his movements so silent and controlled that Eara slept on undisturbed. Though he could see no one was in the chamber with him except for the woman in bed, still he prowled the perimeter, trying to detect a scent, a whisper of sound, anything.

There was nothing. Finally he went back to bed and lay awake, staring into the night. Eara still snored beside him, and he began to feel irritated. He should have sent her to her own pallet after they had finished. He liked sleeping with women, liked the warmth and softness of their bodies beside him, but tonight he would have preferred being alone. He felt a vague need to concentrate on the elusive sound that had awakened him, and Eara's presence was distracting.

He tried to remember exactly how the noise had sounded. It had been soft, almost like a sigh.

Someone had called his name.

1996

Conrad gripped the punk's greasy hair, jerking his lolling head back. He studied the effects of his work. Both of the punk's eyes were swollen nearly shut, his nose was a bleeding mass of crushed cartilage, and instead of missing just a few teeth he now had few left. That had been nothing more than the softening up, though. The real persuasion had taken the form of broken ribs and fingers.

"You saw her," he said softly. "You robbed her."

"No, man," The words were mushy, almost unintelligible.

That wasn't the answer Conrad wanted. He sighed, and twisted one of the broken fingers. The punk screamed, his body arching against the tape that held his ankles strapped to the chair legs and his wrists lashed to the wooden arms.

"You saw her," he repeated patiently. "We don't have the money no more!" the punk sobbed, his minuscule store of courage already depleted.

"I am not interested in the money. Where did the woman go?"

"We got the hell outta' there, man! We din' hang around, y'know?"

Conrad thought about it. The punk was probably telling the truth. He glanced at the crumpled body behind the chair. Too bad the young black man had used very bad judgment and pulled a knife on him. Perhaps he would have noticed something this cretin hadn't.

To be certain, he twisted another finger, and waited until the screams subsided. "Where did the woman go?" he asked again.

"I don' know, I don' know, I don' know!" Satisfied, Conrad nodded. "What was she wearing?"

"I don' know-"

Conrad reached for a finger, and the punk shrieked. "No, don't, stop!" he screamed, blood and mucus streaming from his broken nose. "It was raining', all her clothes was dark."

"Pants or a dress?" Conrad asked. It had been raining, and if the woman had been out in it all the time she would have been soaked. He wasn't unreasonable; he didn't expect this idiot to notice colors at night, and in the rain.

"I don'-pants. Yeah. Maybe jeans, I dunno."

"Did she have a coat, a jacket?" The weather had turned colder, which wasn't unexpected. It was the warmth that had been unusual for

Minneapolis, not this more seasonable chill.
"I don' think so."
"Short sleeves or long?"
"Sh-short, I think. Not sure." He gulped in air through his mouth. "She was carrying a garbage bag, kinda hid her arms."
No jacket, and short sleeves. She had been wet to the skin, and she would now be very cold. Conrad didn't wonder what was in the garbage bag; it was a commonsense solution to keeping papers dry. Mr. Sawyer would be pleased.
She had gotten money from an ATM, and this piece of excrement had promptly robbed her. She was without funds, without any means of coping. Conrad thought he should be able to find her within a day, if she hadn't sought out the police by then. Though Mr. Sawyer had everything under control even if she made accusations against him, Conrad preferred to find her himself. It would be easier that way.
He looked at the human trash in the chair. The punk had no redeeming qualities. He had no skills, no morals, no value.
A bullet was too expensive for exterminating vermin, and too quick. Conrad reached out his gloved hand and closed it on the punk's throat, and expertly crushed his trachea. Leaving him suffocating in the chair, Conrad walked out of the abandoned house in the worst part of the city. He moved silently, unhurriedly. Screams were common in the neighborhood. No one paid him any attention.

Chapter 4

DISTANCE, GRACE LEARNED, WAS RELATIVE. EAU CLAIRE, Wisconsin, wasn't all that far from Minneapolis if you were driving, a matter of an hour or two, depending on where you were in Minneapolis when you began and how fast you drove. In a plane, it was nothing more than a hop. On foot, and having to hide during the day, it took her three days.
She didn't dare take a bus; with her long hair and carrying a computer case she would be too easily recognized. She didn't know, but she thought it would only be common sense for the police, knowing she didn't have her car, to check all public transportation leaving the city. Parrish would likely

be hunting her, too, and he wouldn't have to compare her appearance to a photo in order to recognize her.
She operated in a vacuum, because that was the only way she could manage. Things she had always taken for granted, basics such as food, water, warmth, a toilet, were now an effort to obtain. At least she had money, and there were always convenience stores, though she knew she should avoid them because of their surveillance cameras. Food wasn't much of a problem; she simply wasn't hungry.
She looked homeless; she was homeless. She walked north for a while, then cut east, paralleling state roads whenever she could rather than walking on the shoulder where she would more easily be seen. She hadn't realized before how little human presence there was between Minneapolis and Eau Claire; if she had been on the interstate, there would at least have been a motel or truck stop every few exits, but away from the interstate there was nothing but a few houses and the occasional service station.
At ten-thirty on her second night on the run, she went into a service station and asked for the key to the rest room. The attendant looked up with bored, hostile eyes and said, "Get lost." It took her more than an hour to find another station. The second attendant wasn't as polite, and threatened to call the cops if she didn't leave.
The need to urinate was excruciating, exacerbated by her constant shivering. Grace's face was blank as she silently turned and left the station. She walked across the parking lot, aware of the attendant watching every step she made. Just as she was about to step onto the shoulder of the highway, she looked back and saw that the man had returned to the magazine he'd been reading when she went in to ask for the key. She made a sharp turn, skirting the edge of the parking lot, and circled around behind the station. She had to relieve herself, and she wasn't about to do it on the side of the road.
Gravel crunched as a customer drove up, and she heard a man saying something to the attendant, then the answer, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. Sheltered by the back wall, she carefully placed her precious trash bag out of the splash area, and unzipped her jeans.
Footsteps approached, scraping on the gravel. There was no place to hide. A dim bulb over each of the rest-room doors stole even the advantage of darkness from her. There was nothing to do but run, and hope the approaching customer wouldn't get too good a look at her.

She grabbed for the trash bag and her gaze swept over the rest-room door, the one with "Ladies" painted on it in big block letters. There was a hasp attached to the door, and an open padlock hung from it. The door wasn't even locked!

The footsteps were close, almost to the comer. She didn't hesitate. Leaving the trash bag where it was, she darted into the dark little room, and pressed herself against the painted block wall. She didn't even have time to close the door. The customer walked past, and a second later a brighter light came on as he flipped the switch in the other rest room. The door slammed.

Grace sagged against the wall. The rest room was nothing more than a tiny cubicle, just large enough to accommodate a toilet and a washbasin. The walls were concrete block, the floor was cement. The smell wasn't pleasant. She didn't dare turn on the light, though she closed the door until only a two-inch crack remained. Jerking down her jeans, she perched over the stained porcelain toilet just as her mother had taught her to do, and then she couldn't hold back any longer. Crouched there like an awkward bird, her legs aching from the unnatural position, tears of relief sprang into her eyes and she stifled a humorless laugh at the ridiculousness of what she was doing.

In the rest room next door there was a long, explosive sound of gas releasing, then a contented "Ahhh." Grace clapped a hand over her mouth to hold back the hysterical giggle that rose in her throat. She had to finish before he did, or he might hear her. The competition was the strangest in which she'd ever engaged, and no less stressful because she was the only one who knew it was in progress.

She finished just as a loud, gurgling flush sounded. Quickly she reached for the handle and pushed it down, the noise of the second covered by that of the first. Then she didn't dare move, because the man didn't pause to wash his hands but immediately left the rest room. She froze, not even daring to take a breath. He walked right by without noticing that the door that had been standing open when he'd gone into the rest room was now almost closed.

Grace inhaled a shaky breath and stood for a moment in the dark, smelly little rest room, trying to calm her nerves.

The rest room wasn't the only thing that smelled. She could smell herself, the stink of fear added to almost three days without a shower. Her clothes were sour, the effect of being rain-soaked and drying on her body.

Her stomach rolled. She didn't mind being dirty; she did mind being unclean, which was something else entirely. She was an archaeologist's wife-widow, an insidious little voice whispered before she could silence the thought-and had often accompanied him on digs, where dust and sweat had ruled the day. They had always cleaned up at night, however. She didn't think she had ever before gone so long without bathing, and she couldn't bear it.

She opened the restroom door another inch or so, letting in more light. The sink was as stained as the toilet, but above the basin hung a towel dispenser, and beside the faucet sat a pump bottle of liquid soap.

The temptation was irresistible. Perhaps she couldn't do anything about the smell of her clothes, but she could do something about the smell of her body. Turning the faucet so a small stream of water came out, being as quiet as possible, she washed as best she could. She didn't dare undress, and she had only the rough brown paper towels to use for both washing and drying, but she felt much fresher when she had finished. Now that her hands were clean, she cupped them and filled them with water, and bent over to drink. The water was cold and fresh on her tongue, sliding down her dry throat and soothing the parched tissues.

"What's this shit?" The irritable words speared her with shards of panic. Grace whirled, forgetting to turn off the water. It was the attendant's voice, and next she heard the unmistakable rustle of plastic as he picked up the trash bag containing her computer and all the documents.

A low growl sounded in her throat and she jerked the door open. He was standing with his back to her, holding the bag open as he looked inside it, but at her movement he turned. A mean look entered his eyes as he recognized her.

"I told you to get the fuck off this property." He reached out and grabbed her arm, roughly hauling her out of the rest-room doorway and shoving her several feet forward. Grace stumbled and almost fell, going down hard on one knee before she regained her balance. A rock dug sharply into her knee, making her gasp with pain. Another hard shove in the middle of her back sent her sprawling on the ground.

"Worthless piece of shit," the man said, drawing back his booted foot. "You won't leave when you're told, I'll kick your ass off."

He was skinny, but with the wiry, hardscrabble strength and meanness of a junkyard dog. Grace scrambled away from the swinging boot, knowing that

it would break her ribs if the kick landed. He missed and staggered, and that made him even angrier. She crawled frantically to the side and he followed, drawing back his leg for another kick.
He was too close; she knew she couldn't move fast enough to escape this time. Desperately she lashed out with her own foot, catching him on the knee. He was standing on one leg, the other drawn back, and the blow sent him lurching off balance. He fell heavily on his side, and he dropped the plastic bag with a thud.
Grace bounced to her feet but she wasn't fast enough; cursing, he regained his own feet, looming over her and the bag between them. She spared a quick look at the bag, gauging her distance to it.
"You little bitch," he spat, his face drawn tight with rage. "I'll kill you for this."
He lunged forward, his hands outstretched to grab her. Desperately Grace tried what had worked before: she dropped to the ground and kicked with both feet. One foot landed harmlessly on his thigh, but the other connected solidly with the spongy tissue of his testicles. He stopped as if he'd hit a wall, a strange, high-pitched wheezing sound escaping from his throat as he folded over, both hands clasping his crotch. She grabbed the plastic bag, scrambling away even before she was upright, and then she ran. Her feet pounded on the hard parking lot as she circled the building and raced across the highway. She didn't stop even when darkness swallowed her and the gas station was nothing more than a pinpoint of light far behind.
Gradually she slowed, her heart pounding in her chest, her breath rasping painfully in her throat. She had to assume the attendant would call the cops, but she doubted they would look very hard for a vagrant, since nothing had been taken and the only damage was to the man's family jewels. Still, if a county deputy was cruising the highway and saw her, he wouldn't just drive on by. She would have to leave the highway whenever she saw a car coming, and hide until it was gone.
She had been relatively clean. Now dirt smeared her hands and face again, and her clothes were coated with it. She stopped, dusting herself off as best she could, but she was aware that, if anything, she looked even worse than before.
The situation had to be corrected. She didn't need a public rest room as much for the toilet as she did for water, and the opportunity to clean herself up, though she hadn't yet been able to bring herself to squat in a field or a

ditch to relieve herself. That time would probably come, she thought numbly. The next time she had the opportunity she would steal some toilet paper, just in case. Still, if she wasn't to encounter over and over the same reaction she'd met with tonight, she would have to look, if not respectable, at least as if she had a place to live. The plastic trash bag was great for protecting the computer from rain, but it marked her as a homeless person, a vagrant, and store owners wouldn't want her on their property.

She would have to find another place to wash off, to make herself as presentable as possible, and then she would brave a discount store to buy a few clothes and a cheap bag of some sort. Simple things, but they would make life much easier; she would be able to use public rest rooms without attracting notice, for one thing. What she really needed was a car, but that was out of the question unless she stole one, and common sense said that stealing a car would attract just the kind of attention she most wanted to avoid. No, for right now she was better off walking.

The struggle and flight had sent adrenaline pumping through her system, warming her, but she felt shaky in the aftermath. Her knees wobbled as she marched along the dark highway, carefully holding the bag to her chest with both arms. She couldn't believe what she'd done. She had never hit another person before in her life, never even considered fighting. But she had not only fought, she had won. Dark, feral triumph filled her. She had won purely by luck, but she'd learned something tonight: how to use whatever weapon was available, and that she could win. The boundary she'd crossed had been a subtle, internal one, but she could feel the change deep inside, a strength growing where there had been only numbness, and fear.

Light shifted in the leaves of the trees ahead, signaling the approach of a car around a curve. Grace made a sharp turn away from the highway, unable to run because the darkness kept her from seeing the unevenness of the ground, and even a sprained ankle now could mean the difference between living and dying. She hurried toward the shelter of the tree line, but it was farther away than she'd thought, and the car was moving fast. The lights became brighter and brighter. The ground rose sharply, unexpectedly, and her feet slipped on the wet weeds. She fell facedown, landing hard on the computer case, jarring her shoulder. She glanced to her right, urgency pumping through her, and the car rushed into sight.

Grace dropped her head to the ground and lay still, hoping the sparse weeds were enough to hide her.

She felt as if the headlights pinned her to the earth like spotlights, so bright were they. But the car sped past without even slowing, and she was left behind in the blessed darkness, her clothes growing cold and wet, weeds stinging her face, her chest hurting from hard contact with the computer case. Once again she climbed to her feet, her movements clumsy as the various hurts she'd absorbed began to make themselves felt.

But every step took her farther from Minneapolis, from her home, her life- no, she had no home, no life. Every step was taking her closer to safety, away from Parrish. She would come back and face him, but on her own terms, when she was better able to fight him.

She ignored the cold, and the aches. She ignored the bruises, the strained muscles, the great empty place where her heart had once been.

She walked.

Scanners were wonderful inventions. Conrad learned a great deal from listening to the police bands. He knew all the codes, understood the cop slang. It was to his advantage to understand how cops think, so he had invested a great deal of time in studying them. Beyond that, a well-informed person had to know what was happening in the law enforcement world, for so much of what happened in any given day was never reported by the media, which went after only the dramatic or the weird, or whatever bolstered the current politically correct causes. He recognized addresses of trouble spots to which the cops returned time and again to referee domestic problems, he knew where the drug deals went down, which street comers the whores worked. He also listened, with increased attention, whenever they answered calls to places that were out of the ordinary; their voices would be tighter, the adrenaline pumping because this was different.

The metro area was never quiet, never still. There was always trouble working. It was more peaceful out in the rural areas, and the county scanners picked up much more routine radio messages. Those scanners had to reach out for greater distances, and even though the payback in information was much less than what he gleaned from the city scanner, he was a prudent man, and had invested in more powerful scanners with special boosters for the rural areas. If anything happened within a sixty-mile radius, he wanted to know about it.

Conrad liked to lie in bed with all the scanners on, listening to the flow of information. The constant sound was soothing, connecting him to the dark underbelly of life that he'd deliberately chosen. He left the scanners on all

night, and sometimes he thought he absorbed the crackle of words even in his sleep, because any urgent code would bring him immediately awake. Not that he slept a lot, anyway. He rested, in a sort of suspended twilight state, but he didn't need much real sleep. He found physical rest more satisfying than mere unconsciousness; half dozing, he could enjoy his own total relaxation, the feel of the sheets beneath him, the gentle stirring of air on his hairy body. That was the only caress he enjoyed, perhaps because it wasn't sexual. Conrad was totally uninterested in sex; he didn't like waking with erections, didn't like feeling as if his body was not under his control. He considered sexual activity a weakness; neither women nor men appealed to him, and he disliked the sleazy promiscuity that seemed to pervade society. He never watched sexy thrillers on television, though he very much enjoyed reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show.* It was good, clean entertainment. Perhaps there were still places like Mayberry in the world; he would like to visit one someday, though of course he could never live there. Mayberrys were not for him; he just wanted perhaps to sit on a bench on the courthouse square, and breathe the air of goodness for a minute or two.

Conrad closed his eyes, and routed his thoughts from Mayberry to Grace St. John. She belonged in a Mayberry. Poor woman, she had no idea how to function in the world he listened to on the scanners, night after night. Where had she gone, after that witless vermin had robbed her? Had she found a hiding place, or had she fallen victim to someone else? He hadn't been able to pick up the thread of her movements, but he had no doubt that he would eventually succeed. He had feelers out allover Minneapolis, and he would find her. Conrad had no doubt in his ability; sooner or later, all those he sought fell into his hands.

He was surprised by a slight sense of concern for her. She was just an ordinary woman, like millions of other women; she had lived quietly, loved her husband and her job, done the laundry, the grocery shopping. She should have no problems too serious to be solved with anything more than a dose of Mayberry common sense. Unfortunately, she had become involved in something that was far outside her experience, and she would die. Conrad regretted it, but there was no alternative.

One of the county scanners crackled to life. "Ah, attendant at Brasher's service station reports a vagrant who refused to leave the premises and attacked him when he tried to make her leave."

Her? Conrad's attention perked. After a moment, a county deputy somewhere in the night clicked his radio. "This is one-twelve, I'm in the area. Is the vagrant still there?"
"Negative. The guy isn't hurt much, didn't want any medics. "
"Ah, did he give a description?" "Female, dark-haired, approximate age twenty-five. Dark pants, blue shirt. Height five-ten, weight one-eighty,"
"Big woman," the deputy commented. "I'll swing by Brasher's and take his statement, but it's probably nothing more than a scuffle."
And the attendant had probably lied, Conrad thought, throwing back the sheet and getting out of bed. He switched on a lamp, the light mellow and soothing, and unhurriedly began dressing. He wanted to give the deputy plenty of time to dutifully take the attendant's statement and leave.
Five-ten, one-eighty? Possible, but it was equally likely the attendant had been the loser in the encounter, and he didn't want to admit he'd been bested by a woman who wasn't quite five-foot-four, and who weighed a hundred thirty-five pounds. It looked better if he added six inches and forty-five pounds to her size. The hair, the age, the clothes, were about right, so it was worth checking out.
He arrived at the service station an hour later. It was quiet, well after midnight, no other customers. Conrad pulled up to the gas pump with the sign "Pay Before Pumping" posted on the side, and walked toward the small, well-lit office. The attendant was on his feet, watching, the expression on his thin, ferrety face an incongruous mixture of suspicion and anticipation. He didn't like Conrad's looks, few people did, but at the same time he wanted an audience to listen to a retelling of his adventure.
Conrad took out his wallet as he walked, fishing out a twenty. He wanted information, not gas.
Seeing the money come out, the attendant relaxed. Conrad stepped inside and laid the twenty on the counter, but kept his hand on the bill when the attendant reached for it. "A woman was here tonight," he said. "The twenty is for answers to a few questions."
The attendant eyed the bill, then darted a glance back up at Conrad. "A twenty ain't much."
"Neither are my questions." Another glance, and the attendant decided it wouldn't be smart to try to get more out of this ape. "What about her?" he mumbled sullenly, -"Describe her hair."
"Her hair?" He shrugged. "It was dark. I already told the deputy all this."

"How long?"
"About an hour ago, I guess."
Conrad controlled an impulse to crush another trachea. Unfortunately, this idiot wasn't street trash; if he were killed, questions would definitely be asked, and Conrad didn't want to lead the cops in Grace St. John's direction.
"Her hair. How long was her hair?"
"Oh. Well, it was in one of them twisted things, you know, whaddaya call it?"
"A braid?" Conrad offered helpfully.
"Yeah, that's the word."
"Thank you." Taking his hand off the twenty, Conrad left the office and walked calmly back to his car. No other questions were needed. The woman had definitely been Grace St. John. She needed to get out of Minneapolis, out of the state. She was headed east, probably to Eau Claire. It was the next city of any size in that direction. She would feel more anonymous in a city, attract less attention.
He might be able to find her en route, but at night she would have the advantage of being better able to hide when a car approached. Perhaps she was moving during the day, but he thought not. She had to rest, and she would be afraid to go out in the daylight. Would she try to hitch a ride to Eau Claire? Again, he didn't think so. She was middleclass, suburban cautious, taught from childhood how dangerous it was to pick up a hitcher or thumb a ride herself. She was also smart; a hitcher was noticeable, and being noticed was the last thing she would want.
The gas station attendant must have hassled her in some way, or she would never have risked drawing attention by scuffling with him. She would be cold, upset, possibly hurt. Perhaps she had gone to ground somewhere nearby, trying to get warm, crying a little, too discouraged to go on. She was close, he knew, but he had no way of finding her right now short of bringing in tracking dogs, and wouldn't that draw attention! He wanted this kept as quiet as she did. It would be better all around if no cops or media were involved beyond the present level. He estimated how long it would take her to reach Eau Claire. At least two more days, and that was if nothing else happened to her. She was staying off the interstate highway, and secondary roads would give her more points of entry into the city. That made his job more difficult, but not impossible. He could narrow down her most likely routes to two, and two was a very manageable number. He

would need backup, though. He wanted someone who wasn't trigger-happy, someone who could adjust without panic if things didn't go according to plan. He thought over the men who were available, and settled on Paglione. He could be a bit thickheaded, but he was steady, and Conrad would be doing all the thinking anyway.
Poor Ms. St. John. Poor little woman.

Chapter 5

BY THE TIME SHE REACHED THE OUTSKIRTS OF EAU CLAIRE, Grace knew she had to find something to eat. She wasn't hungry, hadn't been hungry, but she could feel herself getting increasingly weaker.
The cold wasn't helping. Spring had flipped her skirts to show her petticoats of flowers and greenery, luring everyone into a giddy hope they had seen the last of winter, but as usual she had just been teasing, the bitch. Grace couldn't look at weather's vagaries with her usual complacency. She shivered constantly, though now her shivers were weakening, another indication of her body's need for fuel. At least it wasn't snowing. She had fought off hypothermia the way all the street people did, with newspapers and plastic bags, anything to hold in her lessening output of body heat. Evidently the pitiful measures weren't so pitiful, because they had worked; she was still alive.
Alive, but increasingly uneasy. She couldn't go on like this. Even more than her precarious survival, a lack of opportunity to work was gnawing at her. If she couldn't work, she couldn't learn for what Parrish had been willing to kill them all. She had always believed the old adage that knowledge was power, and in this case knowledge was also her best path to vengeance. She needed a stable base, long hours without interruption, electricity. Her computer batteries were good for about four hours, and she had already used them for two. She craved work, craved the one part of her former life she had brought with her. To get that, she had to reenter the civilized world, or at least the fringes of it. It was time to put her strategy into effect.
She needed to clean up again before appearing in any store. She sought out another service station, but she'd learned to bypass the attendant altogether. Instead she left the road and approached from the back; if the rest-room doors were padlocked, she moved on until she found a station where they

weren't. At least half of them were left unlocked, perhaps because the attendants didn't want to be bothered with having to keep track of the keys. Of course, most of the rest rooms left unlocked were incredibly grungy, but that no longer bothered her. All she needed was a flushing toilet and a sink with running water.

Finding such a station didn't take long. She stepped into the dank little cubicle and turned on the light, a low-watt naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, out of reach of anyone inclined to steal the bulb unless they brought a ladder with them into the rest room. Her image floated in the streaked, spotted mirror, and she stared dispassionately at the unkempt, hollow-eyed woman who bore so little resemblance to the real person. After taking care of necessities, she took off her clothes and washed. The rest room had no towels or soap, but after encountering that lack of amenities the first time she had solved the problem by taking a supply of paper towels from the next station, and lifting a half-used bar of soap from another. Most places used liquid soap in a dispenser attached to the wall, to prevent what was evidently rampant soap theft, so she felt lucky to have found the bar.

She neatened her hair, undoing the braid and vigorously combing the long length, almost shuddering with relief as the teeth dug into her scalp. Her hair was so dirty she hated to touch it, but washing it would have to wait until another day. She rebraided it with the speed of experience, securing the end with a clip and tossing the thick rope of hair over her shoulder to bang against her back.

There wasn't much she could do with her clothes. She wet a paper towel and sponged the dirtiest places, but the results were minimal. Shrugging mentally in a way she couldn't have done three days before, she tossed the paper towel into the overflowing trash can. She had done what she could. There were worse things in life than dirty clothes, like being mugged, or a snarly man trying to kick in her ribs, or being chased by neighborhood dogs-or watching her husband and brother being shot to death.

Grace had learned how to shut off those last memories whenever they sneaked in and threatened to destroy her, and she did so now, turning her thoughts to practical matters. What would be the best place to buy a change of clothes? A Kmart or a Wal-Mart, maybe; they would still be open, and no one would notice what she bought.

The problem was, she knew absolutely nothing about Eau Claire, and even if she had the address of a store she wouldn't know how to get there.

She dismissed taking a cab as too expensive. The only other alternative was to ask directions. The idea made her stomach tighten with panic. She hadn't had any contact with people since her encounter with the service station attendant. Alone, concentrating on survival, she hadn't spoken a word in two days. There wasn't anyone to speak to, and she'd never been one to talk to herself.

Time to break the silence, though. She worked her way around the station, watched the attendant for a while, and decided that he wouldn't be the one with whom the silence was broken. She didn't like his looks. Though pudgy where the other man had been lean, there was something about him that reminded her of the look in the man's eyes when he'd tried to kick her. Birds of a feather, perhaps. She wasn't going to take the chance.

Instead she cut across a field toward another road, taking care in the darkness. She ran into a wire fence, but she was lucky: it was neither barbed nor electrified. It was falling down, and wobbled precariously under her weight when she scrambled over it. The condition of the fence meant there were no cattle in the field, though she really wouldn't have expected cattle so close to town. Still, it was reassuring to know she wouldn't suddenly find herself facing an irritated bull.

As she climbed the fence on the other side of the field, a dog began barking off to her right. As soon as her feet hit the ground she immediately angled to the left, because sometimes dogs shut up and lost interest if she moved away from their territory. The maneuver didn't work this time. The dog barked even more frantically, and the sound came closer.

She leaned down and swept her hand over the ground until she located a few rocks. The dog was innocent, performing its instinctual duties by barking at an intruder; she didn't intend to hurt the animal, but neither did she want to be bitten. A rock bouncing nearby was usually enough to send the animal in retreat. She threw one at the sound and said "Git!" in a voice as low and fierce as she could make it, stomping her foot for added emphasis.

She could barely make out the movement in the dark as the animal skittered back, away from the abruptly aggressive motion she had made. She took another step and said "Git!" again, and the dog evidently decided retreat was the best course of action. It went one way, and Grace went the other. Well, at least she had broken her silence, even if it had been to a dog.

"I think I saw her," Paglione reported by cellular phone. "I'm pretty sure it was her. I just caught a glimpse of someone kinda slipping around behind a service station, you know?"
"Did you see where she went?" Conrad started his car. He had chosen highways 12 and 40 as the most likely for her to enter Eau Claire; he had elected to watch highway 12 because it was the busiest, leaving Paglione to cover 40. The two highways would intersect only a few miles from his present position.
"I lost her. I think she cut through a field. I haven't been able to pick her up again."
"She's headed for Eau Claire. Work in that direction. She has to hit a highway or street again somewhere."
Conrad folded the phone and laid it beside him on the car seat. Excitement hummed through him. He was close to her, he knew it. He could feel her, an interesting prey because her elusiveness was so unexpected. But soon he would have her, and his job would be done. He would have triumphed once again. He let himself feel the thrill for a sweet moment, then firmly put the emotion aside. He didn't let anything interfere with the job.
A Kmart sign soared into the night sky, drawing Grace toward it. She had crossed fields and vacant lots, negotiated backyards, and faced down several more dogs. The animals had been pets, rather than watchdogs, but still it had been tricky to work her way through the ever-thickening maze of houses without drawing undue attention to herself.
At the back of the Kmart parking lot loomed a Salvation Army collection container, piled around with discarded furniture and broken odds and ends. She skirted the container, having learned that a surprising number of people routinely went through the donations and took the best of the discards, leaving only the junk. She needed a safe place to stash her bag, but hiding it in the heap of donations was out of the question.
She walked around to the back of the building, taking care to stay in the darkest shadows. Beside the shipping and receiving bay was a pile of empty cardboard boxes, but the area was brightly lit with vapor lights. That would be an ideal hiding place, except for the lights. She continued on around the building to the lawn and garden section, with flowerpots and bags of grass seed stacked high against a chain-link fence. The exit gate was closed for the night, but a few people still braved the chill to pick out the latest in imitation earthenware plastic pots.

Ducking down behind a stack of grass seed, Grace carefully placed the plastic bag against the fence. The pavement was black, and the shadows dense enough that the bag was virtually invisible unless someone stumbled over it. Panic twisted her insides at the thought of letting her computer out of her possession, and she crouched there, taking another long look around to make sure no one was watching her. There was a small copse of trees behind her, and the crickets were setting up their usual racket, which told her no one was moving about in the trees.

Eau Claire wasn't Minneapolis, she told herself. It was less than one-sixth the size of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The city would have its share of bums, drug addicts, and homeless, but she was far less likely to be observed here. The Kmart parking lot wasn't exactly a hotbed of intrigue, especially this close to closing time.

She couldn't wait any longer. She got up and walked purposefully around the fenced-in area, not looking back, taking strong strides as if she had every right in the world to be there, which she did. She wasn't going to steal anything, she was going to pay for it with the cash she had in her pocket. An employee had been stationed at the doors to watch the customers as they entered. He gave Grace a hard look and turned to the service desk, and she suspected he would have her followed by another employee to make certain she didn't steal anything.

She pulled a shopping cart free of the line. Let someone follow her; she didn't care.

"Attention, shoppers." The announcement rang out over the loudspeakers. "The store will close in fifteen minutes."

Walking as fast as she could, she pushed the cart toward women's clothing. She grabbed a pair of jeans in her size, a sweatshirt, a denim jacket, then darted over to the underwear section. A pack of panties went into the cart, followed by a pack of socks. Looking at the overhead signs in the store, she located the shoe department, and set off for the back of the store; on the way she passed through the men's clothing section, and she grabbed a baseball cap as she went by. When she reached the shoe department, she swiftly selected a pair of white athletic shoes. They would be better for walking than her loafers, which were much the worse for wear.

Okay, now for a bag. Luggage was at the front of the store, sandwiched between the sports department and the pharmacy. Grace gave the selection a quick survey and chose the cheapest of the medium-sized duffel bags

offered. On her way to the checkout counters, she also tossed in a toothbrush, toothpaste, and shampoo.
Five minutes after entering the store, she wheeled the cart up to a checkout counter. She didn't look around to see if anyone was watching. The counter was lined with boxes of chewing gum and candy bars. Her stomach growled, and she stared at the selection. She had to eat something, and she loved chocolate, but somehow the thought of candy was sickening. Nausea twisted her stomach, making her swallow the mini-flood of saliva that threatened to overflow.
Peanuts weren't sweet. Peanuts were nice and salty. The customer ahead of her finished checking out, and Grace shoved the cart forward. She grabbed a pack of peanuts and tossed it onto the counter, then began unloading her selections.
The bored, sleepy-looking cashier rang up the items, stuffing them in crinkly plastic bags. ..One thirty-two seventeen," she muttered.
Grace gulped. A hundred and thirty-two dollars! She looked at the two plastic bags and the duffel. If she were to be more efficient in hiding, in traveling, she needed every item there. Grimly she dug in her pocket and pulled out the wad of bills, counting out seven twenties. When her change was returned, she took the duffel in one hand and the two plastic bags in the other, and used her body to nudge the cart toward the lines of nested carts waiting for another day's flood of shoppers.
There was a vending machine in front of the store. Grace got a soft drink from it and dropped it into one of the bags.
Her heart was pounding as she strode back around the lawn and garden section. It was empty now, except for an employee covering plants for the night. When his back was turned she quickly ducked down behind the stacked bags of seed. Releasing the duffel, she swept her free hand over the dark, cold pavement, searching for her trash bag. Her fingers encountered only grit and dampness. Sheer horror immobilized her. Had someone been watching her after all, and stolen the bag as soon as she'd disappeared into the store? She crouched in the shadows, eyes dilated, her breathing hard and fast as she tried to think. If someone had been watching her, he must have been hidden in the woods.
Had he gone back there? Could she manage to find him? What would she do, attack anyone she saw carrying a bag? The answer was yes, if she had to. She couldn't give up now.

But had she come far enough down the fence? Was she in the right location? The store's bright lights had ruined her night vision, and perhaps she had underestimated how far from the comer she'd left the bag. Carefully setting aside the rustly Kmart bag containing her new clothes, she crawled along the fence, not really daring to hope she had simply miscalculated the distance but making the effort anyway.

Her outstretched hand touched plastic. Relief poured through her, making her weak. She sank down on the pavement, gathering the reassuring weight into her arms. Everything was still there, the computer, the disks, the papers. She hadn't lost them, after all.

She shook the weakness away. Hastily she collected the duffel and unzipped it, stuffing both her new clothes and the computer into it. Then she melted into the trees, losing herself in the night before she dared stop to eat the bag of peanuts and drink the soft drink.

After she'd eaten and rested, she stared through the trees at the bright signs that beckoned her. Kmart had closed, but down the street shone the lights of a fast-food joint and a grocery store. The thought of a hamburger made her feel queasy, but a grocery store. . . she could buy a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter, the makings of many meals, the purchases themselves so ordinary no one would remember her or what she'd bought.

Do it all tonight, she thought. She had already done so much: spoken, if only to a dog, gone among people again, bought clothes. The customers who frequented grocery stores at night were stranger on average than the day crowd; she'd often heard cashiers talking about the weird things that happened at night. She would be just another of the weirdos, and no one would pay much attention to her. Resolutely Grace lifted the duffel and began walking up the street to the grocery store.

Obviously she couldn't enter the store carrying the bag, though. She stood across the street and surveyed the situation. The street behind the store was residential, lined with houses and cars. A ten-foot-high chain-link fence ran around three sides of the store. On the left side of the store was a receiving bay and a huge, jumbled stack of empty cardboard boxes, prefab housing for a wino, or for a woman on the run. Even a cardboard shelter felt good during the cold nights.

She thought of the denim jacket in the suitcase, and laughed silently, humorlessly, at herself. She was cold; why hadn't she put on the jacket? A silly reason came to mind. She was dirty, and the jacket was new. She didn't

want to put it on until she'd had a bath and changed into her new, clean clothes. The teachings of a lifetime were holding sway even though she'd been shivering for three days.

Tomorrow, she told herself. Somehow she would manage a bath, a real bath, and wash her hair. Tomorrow she would put on her new clothes.

For tonight, she just had to buy sandwich makings, and be on her way.

Some odd caution kept her from crossing the street right then; instead she went up to the corner, crossed with the light, then worked her way back. She kept to the back edge of parking lots, worming her way around smelly trash bins, slipping into the shadows of trees whenever she could. Finally she was behind the grocery store, but something about it made her uneasy. Maybe it was the fence, restricting her choice of escape direction, if escape became necessary. She had planned to leave the bag there but changed her mind, instead carrying it toward the front. There weren't any cars parked in back, which meant the employees all parked in front too, probably along one side of the lot in order to leave the most desirable center-aisle spots for the customers.

Grace lurked at the side of the building, waiting until the lot was momentarily empty of customers either arriving or leaving, before bending down until her head was just below the level of a car hood and darting to the side row of parked cars. Crouched in front of the first car, she put her hand on the hood and found it cold; the vehicle had been there for hours, so she'd guessed right about where the employees would park. She slid the bag beneath the car, between the front tires. The store hadn't closed at nine so it should be open at least until ten, if not all night, and the employees would stay later than that. She would be back long before the owner of the car.

As an added caution, she didn't immediately straighten up and walk toward the store. Instead she crab-walked down the line of cars until she reached the last two. Then she moved between them, stood, took a deep breath, and braved the public exposure of a grocery store.

"Got her," Paglione reported. "I thought I spotted her walking down the street, but then I lost sight and all of a sudden she popped up in a grocery store parking lot. She's in there now."

"Give me the directions," Conrad said calmly. By this time, he and Paglione knew Eau Claire fairly well, having spent more than a day simply driving the streets, studying maps, memorizing the layout of the city. As he listened

to Pallone’s voice in his ear, he realized he was less than a minute from the grocery store.
He smiled.
Grace moved swiftly through the brightly lit aisles, focused on two things and two things only: bread and peanut butter. Her appetite was nonexistent, and none of the calculated displays caught her attention. She would buy food because she had to eat, but that was the only reason.
The peanut butter was, as always, on the same aisle with the ketchup and mustard. She grabbed the biggest jar available, then set out for the bakery section, only to be sidetracked by a sudden realization that she needed a knife to spread the peanut butter. A box of plastic utensils sprang to mind; that's what she would have bought before, but fragile plastic, designed to be disposable, would soon break and she would have to buy more. It would be cheaper simply to buy a real knife. She backtracked to the previous aisle, where she found the kitchen supplies. There was a row of plastic-sealed knives hanging from hooks. She took the first one she came to that wasn't serrated, because cleaning peanut butter from all the little teeth would be a pain. Her choice was a paring knife with a four-inch blade, and the print on the cardboard backing guaranteed its sharpness.
Knife and peanut butter in hand, she hurried to the bakery section and grabbed a giant-size loaf of bread.
Looking at her watch, she saw that she had been in the store for one minute and twenty seconds, a personal record for her, but that was eighty seconds her computer had been left unguarded.
There were two checkout counters open. At one, a bachelor was unloading a couple of microwave dinners, a six-pack of beer, and an economy-size bag of potato chips, standard fare for the unclaimed male. At the other, a bent old gent was carefully counting out his money for a bottle of aspirin. Grace chose the second counter, placing her items on the belt just as the clerk gave the receipt to the old guy, who smiled sweetly.
"Wife's got a headache," he explained, a product of an earlier age when friendliness to strangers was something to be expected, not feared. "Not an aspirin in the house. Can't understand it, she's usually got a bottle for this and a bottle for that, something for any ailment a body could produce, but tonight there's not a single aspirin." He turned his head and winked at Grace, his eyes twinkling cheerfully. He didn't mind the errand, the usefulness.

The swift-moving clerk rang up Grace's three items while the old man fumbled his wallet into his pocket. "Twelve thirty-seven. Kill a tree or choke a bird?"
Grace blinked. "I-what?" She handed over thirteen dollars.
"Paper or plastic?" the clerk translated, grinning a little, and the old man chuckled as he toddled off.
"Plastic," Grace said. The night shift was definitely a little off kilter. She felt a tiny spurt of amusement, a hint of life in the desolation of her heart and mind like a faint, fragile heartbeat to show she still lived, after a fashion. Her lips curved involuntarily, the elusive smile fading almost as soon as it had formed, but for a moment the life had been there. She turned her head to watch the old gentleman as he approached the automatic doors, and through the big plate glass windows she saw two men getting out of a beige Dodge sedan parked in the center of the lot.
The man nearest the store paused and waited for the other to come around the car, then they walked together toward the store. One was dark, powerfully built, vaguely simian in the shape of his head; the other was of medium height and build, ordinary brown hair, just. . . ordinary. Slacks and jackets, neither natty nor threadbare. Neither of them would stand out in a crowd, not even the ape-man. He was just another guy who was a little too hairy, a little too bulky, nothing unusual.
But they were walking together in a subtle sort of lockstep, as if they had a definite goal, a mission.
"Your change is sixty-three cents." Absently Grace took the change and slid it into her pocket. Archaeologists picked up a lot of anthropology stuff, because the two went hand-in-hand in understanding how people had lived, and Grace had lived with two archaeologists, brother and husband, absorbing a lot of their conversations over the years.
Two men, walking together in a purposeful manner. Men didn't do that unless they were working together as a team, to some definite end. This was different from the more casual, *walking-in-company-but-not-together* gait of males who didn't want to send the wrong signal to any watching females.
She grabbed the bag from the startled clerk and darted back into the store. The clerk said "Hey!" but Grace didn't hesitate, merely took a quick glance not at the clerk but at the two men, who must have been watching her, because they broke into a run.

She dropped to the floor and scrambled down an aisle, knowing the two men couldn't see directly down it from their angle of approach. Her heart rate increased, but oddly she didn't feel panic, only an elevated state of urgency. She was caught in an enclosed area, stalked by two men who could catch her in a pincers movement unless she moved fast. Her chances of outrunning them were small, because they had to be Parrish's men, and Parrish wouldn't hesitate at giving the order to shoot her in the back.

A woman pushed a shopping cart into the aisle at the far end, her attention focused on the stacks of soft drinks. Her purse was unguarded in the cart's child seat, a red sweater draped over it.

Grace moved down the aisle, not running but walking fast. The woman wasn't paying any attention; she turned to pick up a carton of soft drinks, and as Grace walked by she snagged the red sweater from its resting place. Quickly she turned the comer into the next aisle and pulled on the sweater, leaving her hair caught beneath the fabric. Her long braid was too identifiable, but the red sweater worked in reverse, because she hadn't been wearing one and the men's gazes would, she hoped, slide over anything so attention-getting.

She hooked the plastic bag over her arm like a purse and walked calmly toward the front of the store. She schooled her expression to the absorbed passivity of the grocery shopper, seeming to examine the contents of the shelves as she walked past them.

Up front, she could hear the checker telling someone, probably the night supervisor, that a woman had gone back into the store instead of out as shoppers were expected to do.

A man, the average-looking, brown-haired one, crossed in front of the aisle. His gaze barely touched on Grace, sliding right past the red sweater. Her heart jumped into her throat, but she kept a steady, unhurried pace. Her skin felt tight, fragile, no barrier at all to a bullet. The man had crossed out of sight but perhaps he was sharp, perhaps he had seen through her improvised disguise and was simply waiting for her at the front of the aisle, just out of sight. Perhaps she was walking right into a death trap.

Her legs felt weak; her knees shook. Three more steps took her out of the aisle, into the front checkout area. She didn't turn her head, but her peripheral vision caught the movement of the man, walking away from her as he looked down every aisle. Run! Her instinct was to bolt, but her legs were too shaky. Her mind held her back, whispering to hold on, that every

second without being noticed was an extra second for hiding. Shopping carts had been pushed up to block the entrances to the checkout counters that weren't open, and she nudged one aside, slipping into the narrow space that funneled customers to the exit. She angled to the left, to the set of doors nearest the line of cars where she'd left the computer. The automatic doors opened with a pneumatic sigh and she walked out into the night chill, heart pounding, unable to believe it had worked. But she had gained, at best, only a minute.

She ran for the row of employees' cars, diving for their shelter. Lying down on the pavement, she crawled under the car, wedging herself with her computer between the front wheels.

Sharp, loose gravel bit into her, even through her clothes. The smell of oil and gasoline, of things mechanical, seemed to coat her nostrils with a greasy film. She lay very still, listening for two pairs of footsteps.

They came within ten seconds, moving a bit fast, but the men were professional. They weren't doing anything to attract undue attention. They weren't yelling, they apparently didn't have weapons drawn, they were simply searching. Grace listened to the steps coming close and then retreating, and she huddled closer to the wheel, tucked into as small a ball as she could manage. They were quartering the parking lot, she realized, trying to spot her among the scattered cars.

"I can't believe she slipped past us," one voice said, the tone rather aggrieved.

"She has proven surprisingly elusive," a second, deeper voice replied. There was a subtle formality to the phrasing, a mild deliberateness as if the speaker thought of every word he spoke.

Something else was said but the words were indistinct, as if the speaker were walking away from her. After a few moments the voices grew plainer.

"She made us. Man, I can't believe that. She took one look and bolted. She musta slipped out through the receiving bay, no matter what that kid said about nobody coming by."

"Perhaps, perhaps not." The second voice was still mild, almost indifferent. "You said she had a suitcase when you saw her on the street."

"Yeah."

"She didn't have it just now."

"She must've stashed it somewhere. You figure she's gone back for it?"

"Undoubtedly. She would have hidden it fairly close by, but the location would be secure enough that she felt safe leaving it while she went into the store."
"Whadda we do now?"
"Fall back to our observation points, and refrain from' discussing our plans in public."
"Uh, yeah." A car started close by, presumably the beige Dodge, but Grace didn't move. Their withdrawal could be a trick; they could park somewhere close by and return on foot, waiting for her to show herself. She lay on the cold pavement, listening to the sporadic comings and goings of customers. The adrenaline level in her body began to drop, leaving her lethargic. The sweater was a thick one; she felt warmer now than she had in three days, and with warmth came drowsiness. Her eyelids were heavy, a heaviness that she fought. She could afford rest, but not inattention.
Her body had its own agenda. Three days and nights of struggle, of little or no rest, no food, and moments of sheer terror that overlaid a base of profound despair, had taken their toll on her. She was exhausted and weak, strained to the breaking point. One moment she was awake, fighting sleep, and in the next moment the fight was lost.
The grocery store closed at midnight, and it was the sudden dousing of the parking lot lights that woke her. She lay very still, jolted from sleep but unaware of where she was. Her surroundings were totally alien, she was crowded against something massive and dark and the smell was awful, like motor oil . . . she was under a car. Awareness hit her and in panic she looked around, but no one was leaving the store. The employees would have to close up, perhaps do some cleaning, before they would leave.
Though a peek at her watch told her the time, she had no idea how long she'd slept, because she didn't know how long she'd lain there before dozing. Her carelessness frightened her. What if whoever owned the car had left work early?
Don't borrow trouble. she told herself as she gathered her possessions and inched out from under the car. She had enough problems without worrying about something that hadn't happened.
She hoped that while she had slept, enough time had lapsed that her two pursuers had given up hope of spotting her in this area. She didn't dare stay any longer; she had to risk being seen. But the night was darker now as fewer cars were on the street, houses had darkened, stores had closed.

She was stiff from the cold and her cramped position under the car. She moved slowly, staying in a crouch to keep out of sight behind the parked cars. But finally there were no more cars, only a naked expanse of parking lot. She moved fast, then, almost running as she scuttled along the edge of the pavement, the duffel banging against her left hip and her food supply bouncing against her right. As soon as she cleared the fence she swerved into deeper shadows, and was swallowed by the night.

Chapter 6

GRACE BROKE INTO A HOUSE. She had chosen a hiding place well before dawn, in a lower-middle-class neighborhood where there weren't likely to be security systems, only nosy neighbors. She had watched the houses, picking out the ones that didn't have toys, bicycles, or swing sets in the yards. She wanted a house without children, a house where both husband and wife worked and no one was at home during the day. Children would complicate the issue; they got sick at inconvenient times and disrupted schedules.

The darkness had barely begun to lessen when the houses began coming alive, windows brightening with lights, the muted sounds of radios and televisions seeping through the walls. The scents of coffee and bacon teased her. She didn't know what day it was, weekday or weekend, if children would be going to school or playing in the yards and street all day. She prayed for a weekday.

People began leaving, the exhaust of cars and pickup trucks leaving plumes behind in the chill morning air.

Carefully Grace took note of how many people left each house.

Finally she selected her target. The husband left first, and about twenty minutes later the wife drove off with a clatter of lifters marking her progress.

Still Grace waited, and her prayers were answered. Children began appearing, carrying books and backpacks, their voices loud with a shrill giddiness induced by the approaching summer vacation. These past few days of chilly weather hadn't cooled their enthusiasm. Soon school would be out, the weather would be warm, and a long summer stretched before them. Grace envied them the simplicity of their joy.

The bus arrived, the street emptied. Silence ruled the neighborhood again, except for the occasional departure of a few whose workdays didn't start until at least eight o'clock.

Now was the time, when the street was mostly empty but there was still enough customary noise in the neighborhood that people were less likely to notice the little extra noise made by the breaking of glass.

Grace slipped around to the back of her targeted house, concealed by the neatly clipped hedgerow that separated the property from its neighbors.

As she'd hoped, the upper half of the back door was glass panes. Someone was still home in the house on the left, but the curtains were drawn so no one from that side was likely to see her. The house on the right was a 'fifties-style ranch, with a longer length but shallower depth than this one; anyone looking out a window wouldn't be able to see the back of this house.

Hoping for an easy way in, she looked around for a convenient place to hide a key. There weren't any flowerpots, and the doormat yielded nothing.

Breaking the glass was more difficult than she'd expected. Television and the movies made it look so easy, panes shattering at a tap from a pistol or a blow from an elbow. It didn't work that way in real life. After bruising her elbow, she looked around for a harder weapon, but the yard was neatly kept and no handy rocks were left lying around. There were bricks, however, carefully laid to form the border of a flower bed.

With the red sweater held over the glass to muffle the noise, Grace pounded the brick against the pane until it shattered. After replacing the brick, she took a deep breath, then reached in and unlocked the door. It took every nerve she had. Walking into that strange, silent house shook her. When she put her foot over that threshold, she officially became guilty of breaking and entering, she who had always been so conscientious that she'd actually obeyed the speed limit.

She wasn't there to steal anything, except hot water and a little electricity.

The close call in the grocery store had made it imperative that she begin blending in with the population, and also work up some disguises. She could no longer look homeless; she had to look. . . homogeneous. Blend in *or* die.

Her heart pounded as she stripped out of her filthy clothes and put them in the unknown lady's washing machine. What if she had miscalculated, what if either the lady *or* her husband *hadn't* left for the day, hadn't gone to jobs, but instead one of them was just on an errand and would return any minute?

At the very least the cops would be called, if a strange woman was found naked, and showering, in their house.
But she hadn't dared try to rent a motel room, assuming no one would let her take a room the way she looked and smelled, even if she paid cash. And perhaps Parrish's men were checking motels; a clerk would definitely remember her. Just this once she needed to take a bath and wash her clothes where she couldn't be seen, where no one would notice her, and after this she would look more respectable. She would be able to go into a laundromat and wash her clothes, to go into stores and buy the things she needed to disguise her appearance, to lose herself in the immense sea of respectability.
She should have hurried through the shower. She knew she should, but she didn't. She stood under the spray of water, feeling the grit wash off her skin, feeling her greasy hair soak up the moisture. She shampooed twice, and scrubbed herself until her skin was bright pink allover, and still she didn't want to get out of the shower. She stood there even when the hot water began to go and the spray grew chilly. She didn't turn off the water until it was so cold she'd begun shivering, and she did so then only because she'd been cold for three days and she was tired of it.
It was such a relief to feel clean again that she almost wept. Almost, because somehow the tears wouldn't quite come. Had she cried for Ford, for Bryant? She couldn't remember. She had crystal-clear memories of a lot of things about that horrible night, but she couldn't remember tears. Surely she had cried. But if she hadn't. . . if she hadn't cried for them, then she couldn't cry for something as ultimately mundane as being clean. Crying for less would minimize them, and that she couldn't bear.
Roughly she rubbed the towel over her bare skin, then wrapped the damp fabric around her head. She didn't want to abuse the owners' unknowing hospitality any more than necessary, and using two towels instead of one was a definite luxury.
Then, almost trembling with eagerness, she unzipped the duffel and took out her new clothes. The jeans and sweatshirt were very wrinkled, the denim jacket less so. Grace peeled the hard plastic bubble away from her kitchen knife and tested its sharpness by cutting the tags off her purchases. The knife easily sliced through the plastic loops and she thoughtfully regarded the shiny blade. Not bad.

She tossed the garments into the clothes dryer to get out the wrinkles, and brushed her teeth while the dryer did its thing. She eyed her reflection in the mirror, a little puzzled. She looked different, somehow, and it wasn't just the exhausted starkness of her expression. The pallor was expected, as were the circles under her eyes. No, it was something else, something elusive. Shrugging aside her puzzlement, she turned her attention to more practical matters. Her long hair took forever to dry on its own, so she used the blow dryer lying next to the sink.

Her thick braid was too identifiable. She should cut her hair. She thought of looking for scissors, but the thought didn't transfer itself into action. Ford had loved her long hair, he had played with it

The pain was like a mule kick in the chest, destroying her. She sagged against the wall, her teeth clenched against a keening wail as her body doubled over from the impact. *Oh, God oh God.*

She could feel herself shattering inside, the enormity of loss so overwhelming that surely she couldn't keep living, surely her heart would simply stop beating from the stress. Except for the savage need for vengeance against Parrish, she had no reason to live. But her heart, that sturdy, oblivious muscle, didn't feel her grief and continued without pause its preordained pumping mission.

No. No. She couldn't do this. Grieving was a luxury she couldn't afford; she had known from the beginning it would tear her apart. She had to put it away until after she had taken care of Parrish, when she could approach Ford's memory, and Bryant's, and say, "I didn't let him get away with it."

Drawing in deep, shuddering breaths, she straightened her aching body. The pain was real, so intense it actually permeated her muscles. With shaking hands she finished drying her hair, though she was at a loss what to do with the thick mass except rebraid it. For the time being she left it loose, hanging down her back, and retrieved her clothes from the dryer.

The garments were hot, almost too hot, but she relished the heat. Quickly she pulled on clean panties and socks, then dressed before all the heat could dissipate. The sweatshirt felt like heaven; she sighed as the warmth enfolded her. Her bra was in the washer, but she didn't really need one. She'd never been bosomy, and the sweatshirt was thick.

The jeans were loose, almost too loose to stay up. She'd chosen her usual size, but perhaps the label was wrong. Frowning, she unzipped the fly to check the inside tag. Nope, the size was right. The cut must be unusually

large, unless she'd somehow lost about ten pounds. Realization dawned. After four days without food, without much sleep, walking all night long, under constant stress, of course she had lost weight.

Reminded of the need to eat, she got her loaf of bread, now sadly mashed, and the jar of peanut butter. After resetting the washer to put her filthy clothes through one more sudsing, she sat down at the battered kitchen table and smeared the peanut butter on one slice of bread. An entire sandwich would probably be wasteful, because her throat was closing up at the prospect of eating half of one.

With the help of a glass of water, she doggedly began eating. Swallowing was an effort, and her stomach, accustomed to emptiness, lurched in sudden nausea. Grace sat very still and concentrated on not vomiting. She had to eat or she wouldn't be able to function, period.

After a minute or so she took a sip of water, and another small bite.

By the time the washer had gone through its cycle again, she had managed to eat the half sandwich.

She washed the glass and returned it to the cabinet, cleaned the table of any crumbs, washed her knife, and put the bread and peanut butter back into the duffel. The knife. . . she tried putting it in her belt loop, but the handle wasn't big enough to prevent it from sliding through. She didn't want to put a naked blade in her pocket, but neither did she want to wrap it up so securely that she'd have to waste precious time unwrapping it if she needed the knife in an emergency, such as fighting for her life.

She needed one of those knife scabbards, the kind that slipped over a belt. Come to that, she needed a belt with or without a scabbard, because the jeans were seriously loose.

What she really needed was a switchblade, so she wouldn't have to worry about belts or scabbards.

It struck her that she had come a long way in four days, and not just the distance between Minneapolis and Eau Claire. Four days ago she couldn't even have thought of using a knife on anyone, even to defend herself. Today she wouldn't hesitate.

Going back into the kitchen, she unrolled a couple of paper towels and folded them twice before wrapping the bulk around the knife blade and sliding it into her front right pocket, leaving the handle sticking out and covered by the sweatshirt. If she needed the knife, it would slide right out.

She'd have to be careful and not puncture herself before she could get something safer, but for now she felt better.

That done, she put her clothes in the dryer along with the bath towel she had used, threw in a sheet of fabric softener, then returned to the bathroom to do something with her hair. As she passed the open duffel she automatically glanced at it to reassure herself of the computer's safety, and the sight of the bulging bag stopped her cold. A hunger grew in her, a need that had nothing to do with food or warmth. It wasn't physical at all, but it gnawed at her just the same. She *wanted* to work. She wanted to sit for hours poring over text, making notes, referring to her language programs, tapping in information. She wanted to find out what had happened to Niall of Scotland, all those centuries ago.

The battery pack was weak, almost depleted. She could have been recharging it while she showered, but she'd let an hour go by. Still, she could set up the computer and work on the household current, just until her clothes were dry.

She resisted the urge. She might have to leave in a hurry, and she didn't want to make things more difficult by having her belongings scattered about. If she began working she might lose track of time, which had happened more than once, and she had things to do today. She had been traveling at night and hiding during the day, but that had to change. They were hunting her at night, they knew that was when she'd been moving, so she had to alter her habits as well as her appearance.

Using some bobby pins she found in the bathroom, she twisted her hair up and pinned it on top of her head. Knowing from experience that the slippery strands would soon slide right out of the pins, she jammed the baseball cap on her head to hold everything in place.

It wasn't much of a disguise, but added to the change of clothes it just might do. She needed sunglasses and a wig, two items she intended to acquire as soon as possible, and she would be able to vary her appearance. She made a mental note to look for a knife scabbard, too.

The men following her would expect her to keep moving, to follow her previous pattern. She didn't intend to do so. After bettering her disguise with a wig, she would rent a cheap motel room there in Eau Claire and stay for a couple of days. She needed to rest, she needed to stabilize, and she needed to work. More than anything, she needed to lose herself in work.

The plan worked. After tidying the house, removing all signs of her invasion, she let herself out and locked the door, then tossed a rock through the window to provide an explanation for the broken glass. It took her a while to find a store that sold cheap wigs, and an equally long time trying them on before she managed to slip the frizzy blond one under her sweatshirt. She bought one, a dark red pageboy, and while the clerk was ringing up the sale she slid the money for the blond wig under the edge of the cash register. If the men following her were really good, they might connect her to the red wig, but no one would know about the blond one.
She was wearing the blond wig when she rented a room. The motel was only a step above sleazy, officially in the rundown category, but the plumbing worked and the bed, though the mattress was lumpy and the sheets dingy, was still a bed. Except for her nap under the car she hadn't had any sleep, but she resisted the urge to lie down. Instead she took off the itchy wig and set up the laptop on the rickety table and forced herself to stay awake by plunging into the intricacies of language use that had died out before Christopher Columbus was born.
Grace loved her work. She loved losing herself in the challenge of accurately putting together the torn or shattered remnants of early man's painstaking efforts to communicate thoughts, customs, dreams-reaching out to the future with hammer and chisel, or with quills dipped in dye, and in the act of creation going beyond the forever now of time, setting down the past for the sake of the future, uniting the three dimensions of existence. Writing had begun when mankind began thinking in abstracts, rather than just physically existing. Whenever she studied a worn, broken piece of stone, puzzling over the figures so roughly etched into the surface and almost worn away by time and the elements, she always wondered about the writers: who had they been, what had they been thinking that was important enough for them to crouch for hours over a bit of stone, legs cramping, back and arms aching, as they cut the images into the stone with little more than the sharpened edge of another piece of stone?
These documents about the mysterious Niall of Scotland were much more sophisticated than that. They had been written with -ink on parchment, parchment that had survived the centuries remarkably intact, though not unscathed. She would love to get her hands on the originals, she thought. Not because they would be any plainer; no, it was always best to work with reproductions, to avoid additional damage to the ancient parchment. There

was just something unusual about these papers, though in archaeological terms they were far too recent to be of interest. Seven hundred years was nothing to a science devoted to deciphering life from millions of years ago. There was such a hodgepodge of languages here! Latin, Greek, Old French, Old English, Hebrew, even Gaelic, yet; the documents all seemed to be connected in some way. She wasn't proficient in Gaelic, and deciphering the documents written in that language would take considerable research and study on her part. She was better in Hebrew, better still in Greek, and completely at ease in the other three languages.

She had worked before In the Old French sections; this time, after inserting the CD, she pulled up a section in Latin. Latin was such a tidy, structured language, extremely efficient; easy reading, for her.

Five minutes later she was rapidly making notes, her: brow furrowed in concentration. She had underestimated the age of the documents by about two centuries. The oldest of the Latin papers seemed to have been written in the twelfth century, which would make them almost nine hundred years old. She whispered a phrase, testing it on her tongue: "Pauperes Commilitones Christi Templique Salomonis." The syllables rolled with a measured cadence, and a chill ran up her back. *The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon*. The Knights of the Temple. Templars.

What she'd read in the library's files came back to her. The Templars had been the richest organization in medieval society. Their wealth had exceeded that of kings and popes; they had, indeed, operated the first rudimentary banking system in Europe, handling the transfer of funds and extending loans to kings. Their original reason for existence had been to protect the Christian pilgrims on their way to the Holy Lands, and the warrior monks had become the best-trained, best-equipped fighting force of their time. They had been so feared and respected on the battlefield that they were never ransomed when taken prisoner by the Muslims, but put to death immediately.

They had, for a time, been quartered on the site of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. During that time, they had evidently done extensive excavation on the site, and from that time until the Order had been destroyed, they had been the most powerful and wealthy force in Europe. Their treasure, supposedly taken from the ruins of the great Temple, had been rumored to be enormous.

Their treasure had been their downfall. Philip of France, in debt to the Templars, had devised a unique way of repaying the debt: he and Pope Clement V conspired to have all the Templars arrested and condemned for heresy, a charge that allowed the property of the charged to be confiscated. In a surprise move against the Knights on Friday the thirteenth, in October of 1307, thousands of Knights and their retainers had been arrested, but no treasure was found-or had ever been found. Moreover, shortly before that, the Grand Master of the Knights had ordered many of their records destroyed.

Or had he? She seemed to be looking at some of them right now. The name jumped at her again. Niall of Scotland. Her pen dug into the paper as she wrote out the translation. "It has been ordained that Niall of Scotland, of Royal blood, shall be the Guardian."

Of royal blood? She hadn't been able to find a Niall in Scotland's history, so how could he be of royal blood? And what had he been guardian? Had it been a political position or a military one?

She needed a library. She would prefer the Library of Congress. She could get into it with her modem and computer if the motel room had a phone, which it didn't. Tomorrow she would find a library in Eau Claire and do what research she could, make notes of the books she would need. She would like to find a Gaelic/English dictionary, because the papers written in Gaelic would likely be the most informative about this Niall of Scotland, but the Eau Claire public library might not have such an exotic item in its inventory.

The Chicago library system probably would, though, given the Irish heritage of such a large part of the city's population. New York, Boston. . . those were other likely places accessible by computer.

She ejected the CD and carefully stored it, then exited the program. The computer was great, but she wanted the feel of paper in her hands, to give her the illusion of handling the originals. She pulled out the thick sheaf of copies, tracing her finger over the slick, smooth texture of modern paper. These too would fade over the centuries; sometime in the future other people would puzzle over the remaining scraps, trying to piece together what twentieth-century life had been like. They would try to restore videotape and retrieve the images from it, they would have CDs, books, disks, but only portions of the vast number would survive the centuries. Languages would have changed, and technology would be vastly different.

Who knew what present time would look like from a distance of seven hundred years?

She stopped at a sheet written in Old French. Taking her magnifying glass to help her see the faded marks more clearly, she began reading. This page was an account of a battle; the handwriting was thin, spidery, the words crammed together as if the writer had wanted to make use of every inch of paper.

"Though the enemy numbered five and Brother Niall was but one, yet he slew them all. His mastery of the sword is unequaled among the Brethren. He fought his way to the side of Brother Ambrose, who lay sorely wounded, and lifted his fallen fellow Knight onto his shoulder. Burdened by Brother Ambrose, he slew three more of the enemy before escaping, and bearing the wounded Knight to a place of safety."

Grace sat back, restlessly running her fingers through her freed hair. Her heart was pounding. How could an ordinary man have done that? Outnumbered five to one, Niall had nevertheless killed all five opponents and rescued his fellow Knight. Then, carrying a grown man who had been wearing chain mail and probably weighed, armor and all, more than two hundred fifty pounds, he had still managed to kill three more opponents and escape with his burden.

What kind of man had he been? A powerful one, both in battle and in authority, but had he been mean-spirited or generous, jolly or dour, quiet or boisterous? How had he died, and, more important, how had he lived? What had led him to become a warrior monk, and had he survived the destruction of his Order?

She wanted to keep reading but a yawn took her by surprise, and weariness swamped her. She checked her watch, expecting to see that about an hour had elapsed, but instead more than three hours had gone by. It was late afternoon, and she didn't know how much longer she could stay awake. Why should she? This was the safest she had been in four days, hidden behind the disguise of a blond wig and a fake name. She was clean and warm; there was water to drink, food to eat, and a working bathroom. There was a bolted door between her and the rest of the world. The sheer luxury of it made her almost boneless with relief.

The temptation was more than she could withstand. After carefully repacking the laptop and the papers, and making certain her money was secure, she turned out the lights and slipped off her shoes. She couldn't

relax her guard more than that, not after four days of only fitful naps, but that was enough.

A sigh shuddered from her lips as she stretched out on the bed. Every muscle in her body ached from the release of tension, the chance to relax and rest. Turning on her side, she curled into a ball and hugged the pillow to her, and then she slept.

She dreamed of Niall. The dreams were chaotic, turbulent, full of swords and battlefields. She dreamed of a castle, a great dark one, and the sight of it sent shivers of dread through her. The people whispered about the castle, and about the lord who lived there. He was a ruthless, brutal warrior who slew all who dared cross him. Decent folk kept their daughters away from the castle, for otherwise the lasses lost their virtue to him, and he wed none of them.

She dreamed of him sitting sprawled before the huge fire in the great central hall, black eyes narrowed and unreadable as he watched his men drink and eat. His hair was long and thick. braided at the temples.

A saucy wench plopped herself in his lap, and in her dream Grace held her breath, afraid of what this dream Niall might do. He merely smiled at the serving wench, a slow curve of his mouth that made Grace's breath catch yet again. Then, in the way of dreams, the image shifted and moved on, and she slept more peacefully.

He felt it again, that sensation of being watched. Niall lifted the wench from his lap with a promise of more attention when they were abed that night, but his alert gaze was moving around the hall. Who watched him, and why? He was lord of this castle and as such was accustomed to people looking to him for answers, for approval, or just to measure his mood. A lot of people looked at him, and to him, but this was different.

This was . . . watching. There seemed nothing amiss in the hall. The air was smoky, the men loud. Laughter spilled from one bench and others turned to hear the jest. The serving wenches moved about, filling cups, fielding advances, bestowing smiles or frowns depending on how welcome was each advance. All was normal.

But still he felt that presence, the same one that had pulled him from his bed a few nights past. There was a softness that made him think it was a woman who watched him. Perhaps she found him to her liking, but she was shy. She couldn't come to him boldly as most of the wenches did when they wanted a night of hard riding. She merely watched, and yearned.

But, looking around, he could find no lass who fit that description, and he scowled in frustration. If indeed a woman watched him, he would know her identity. Perhaps she had no reason other than a lass's soft feelings, but Niall never forgot the Treasure he had sworn to protect. Any unusual occurrence heightened his alertness, and his hand unconsciously sought the blade at his belt. His black eyes narrowed as they swept the smoky hall, probing the shadows, reading men's expressions in an instant, and passing on if nothing was amiss. The women, too, were carefully judged.

Again, he found nothing unusual. But twice now he had felt himself watched, felt that other presence. He did not think it mere imagination. Niall had fought too many battles against foes both open and unseen, and he trusted his warrior's instincts which had grown even more acute over the years.

His probing regard of the hall had been noticed, and the noise of many voices was quieting, uneasy glances sliding his way. Niall was aware of the whispered tales that had spread over the years. He was Black Niall, a warrior so fearsome he'd never been defeated in open fight, so canny he'd never been taken unawares. His own men trained with him, knew he bruised when hit, bled when cut, knew he sweated and groaned and cursed just as they did, but still. . . why was he so vigorous at an age when most men were losing their teeth and becoming graybeards? It was as if the hand of time had left him untouched. His hair remained black, his body strong, and illness didn't touch him.

He sometimes wondered, uneasily, if Valcour had damned him to immortality by appointing him Guardian of the Treasure for which so many of his brothers-in-arms had died.

He didn't like to think so. He would do his duty, uphold his vow, but he did it with bitterness. He guarded God's treasures, but God had not guarded the guardians. Niall had not prayed, had not been to mass or confession, in more than thirteen years. His belief had died on a black night in October, along with so many of his friends, his brethren. It was for them he remained on guard, for otherwise they would have died in vain.

But he did not want to spend eternity guarding the secrets of a God whom he no longer worshipped. What a bitter joke that would be!

His mouth twisted with cold amusement, and restlessly he rose from his chair. His gaze sought and found the wench who had whispered so naughtily in his ear, and with a motion of his head he directed her toward

the stair, and his chamber. As always, when the blackness of spirit was upon him, the relief he sought was in a woman's body.
As soon as he'd stood, a woman had moved forward to remove his cup, and now he heard a hissing sound from her.
"What ails you, Alice?" he asked without looking around. "Have a care with that lass," she grumbled, earning an amused glance from him.
"Why is that?" He was fond of Alice. She had worked in the castle from the time of his return, a widow who had desperately needed even the most sinister of shelters for herself and her bairns. She was roughly his age, but was now a grandmother. Having been blessed with rather stringent common sense, over the years she had gradually assumed responsibility for household matters, and he was pleased with the situation. "
She settled her cap more firmly over her springy gray hair. "She says ye'll wed 'er, if she catches yer bairn in her belly." Niall's eyes grew cold. Marriage and children were not for him, not with his life dedicated to guarding the Treasure. The women who shared his bed knew from the outset that he would not wed them, that he was interested only in bed sport, and he had always taken care that they were experienced in the ways of avoiding conception. It annoyed him that a woman, no matter how saucy or pretty, should try to trap him in such a way. With Alice's warning, however, he wouldn't let it happen.
He nodded briefly, then took himself up the stairs to rid his bedchamber of the untrustworthy wench. Before he left the hall, however, he took one last look around, hoping to espy the woman who had been watching him, whose feminine concentration he had felt. There was nothing, but he knew she had been there. He had felt her. He would find her.

Chapter 7

THERE WAS NOTHING UNUSUAL ABOUT THE WOMAN WHO GOT OFF the bus in Chicago. No one had paid her any attention, not the agent who had sold her the ticket, not the driver, not the other passengers who sat absorbed in their own lives, their own troubles, their own reasons for being on the bus.

Her hair was blond and curly, one of those frizz jobs that didn't look good on anyone but required no maintenance beyond washing. Her clothes were clean but nondescript, the kind that could be bought at any discount store: baggy jeans, inexpensive athletic shoes, a navy blue sweatshirt. Nothing about her luggage attracted attention, either. It was a cheap nylon model, in a particularly unappealing shade of brown that the designer had tried to brighten by adding a red stripe down one side. It hadn't worked.

Maybe it was a little unusual that she'd worn sunglasses the entire trip, because, after all, the bus windows were tinted, but there was one other passenger who also wore sunglasses, so overall there was nothing about her that would make anyone look twice.

When the bus lurched to a stop at the depot in Chicago, Grace silently produced her luggage receipt and took possession of the ugly brown duffel. She would have preferred keeping the laptop with her, but people tended to notice if someone carried a computer everywhere. With that in mind, she had packed the computer in its protective case, then further buffered it in the duffel with her meager supply of clothing. It had been a week since her world had shattered, a week exactly.

Her life then had ended, and another had begun. She didn't feel the same, didn't look the same, didn't think the same way she had before she had lost everything and been thrown into a life in the streets and on the run. The sharp paring knife rode in a scabbard on her belt, and was covered by the sweatshirt. The screwdriver she had taken from the storage building on that horrible first day was tucked into her right sock; it wasn't as good a weapon as the knife, but she had honed it against a rock until she was satisfied with its sharpness.

She had exhausted the Eau Claire library's fund of knowledge about the Templars. She had learned a lot, including the significance of the date on which the Order had been destroyed: Friday the thirteenth, giving birth to the superstition about the combination of day and date. Interesting, but not

what she had wanted. She had searched in vain for any reference, in either the Templars' recorded history or in Scotland's history, to Niall of Scotland. She had to dig deeper, and Chicago, with its vast library on things Gaelic, was a good place to start. Remaining another day in Eau Claire would have been risky, anyway. Parrish's men would have tried to pick up her trail outside Eau Claire, but when they didn't find anything they would return to the town. Any halfway competent goon would begin checking the motels, and though she'd been careful to alter her appearance by either wearing the blond wig or tucking her hair up under the baseball cap, eventually they would find her.

She felt stronger now, no longer operating in a barely controlled panic, but at the same time she was alert. She had slept, and she had forced herself to eat a peanut butter sandwich at least once a day. Eating was still difficult, and her jeans were even looser now than they had been before. The belt she wore, bought at another Kmart, was a necessity. She had even washed the jeans in hot water in an effort to shrink them, but any shrinkage must have been in length instead of width, because they still hung on her. If she lost much more weight, even the belt wouldn't help. She didn't intend to spend any more of her precious store of money on new clothes, so what she already had would have to do.

She had formulated a plan. Rather than living off her cash until it was all gone, she had to have a job. There were underground jobs in Chicago, washing dishes or cleaning houses, and those suited her perfectly. No one would become concerned if one day she didn't show. On the other hand, those types of jobs would be low-paying, and while they would tide her over for now, she would soon need something better. For that, she would need to develop another identity, and back it up with documentation. Being what she was, a researcher, that was the approach she had used to find out how to establish a new identity. In this instance, the Eau Claire library had provided her with the information she needed.

It seemed relatively simple, though it would take time. First she would need a dead person, someone who had been born about the same time she had, but who had died young enough that there wouldn't be a job history, school records, or traffic violations to follow Grace around after she assumed the girl's identity. Once she had a name, she could write to the proper department at the state capital and get a copy of the birth certificate. With

the birth certificate, she could get a social security number; with that, she could get a driver's license, establish credit, become a new person.
She stored the duffel in a locker and carefully tucked the key in her front pants pocket. Then she located a phone book and flipped through the directory until she found the listing for cemeteries. After jotting down the names, she stopped a maintenance worker and asked which cemetery was the nearest, then went to someone else, a ticket agent, and asked for directions.
Two hours later, after having ridden on five different buses, she arrived back at the bus depot.
She bought a newspaper, found a seat, put on her glasses, and began looking through the tiny, densely printed classifieds for a place to stay. She didn't want crummy and couldn't afford comfortable, so run-down was the best alternative. By comparing prices, she eliminated both ends of the scale, and that left several places that fell in the middle. Two were boardinghouses, and she put those at the top of her list. Two phone calls later, she had a place to stay and directions on how to get there, including which train and buses to take.
The best thing about a large city, she thought as she walked toward the EI station, was the intracity transportation system. The buses had made getting to the cemetery easy enough. She could have walked to the boardinghouse; a week ago the distance would have daunted her, but now five miles seemed like nothing. She could easily walk five miles in an hour and a half. But the trains and buses were cheap and fast, so why should she? Half an hour later she got off the train, walked a block just in time to get on the bus she needed, and five minutes after that was walking down the street looking at house numbers.
The boardinghouse was a square, lumpish three-story building that hadn't seen a new coat of pain in several years. A three-foot-high picket fence, sagging in places, separated the scraggly, minuscule patch of lawn from the broken sidewalk. There was no gate. Grace walked up to the door and pushed the buzzer.
"Yeah." The voice was the same one that had answered the telephone: deep and raspy, but somehow female.
"I called about the room for rent?"
"Yeah, okay," the voice interrupted brusquely. Grace waited, and heard heavy steps clomping toward the door.

Grace had put on her sunglasses again as soon as she'd finished reading the classifieds, and was deeply grateful for that protection when the door was unlocked and swung open to reveal one of the most astonishing creatures she'd ever seen. At least the woman couldn't see her gawking.

"Well, don't just stand there," the landlady said impatiently, and in silence Grace entered the house. Without another word the woman-and now Grace wasn't so certain of the gender-closed and locked the door, then clomped back the way she'd come. Grace followed, bag in hand.

The woman was easily six feet tall, rangy and loose limbed. Her hair was bleached lemony white, and cut in short spikes. Her skin was a smooth, pale brown, like heavily creamed coffee, hinting at some exotic ancestry. A huge sunflower earring dangled from one ear, while a row of studs marched up the outer rim of the other. Her shoulders were broad and bony, her feet and hands big. Her feet looked bigger than they probably were because she was wearing hiking boots and thick socks. Her ensemble was completed by a black T-shirt with a loose yellow tank top layered over it, and tight black bicycle shorts with narrow lime-green stripes on the sides. She managed to look both ominous and festive.

"You a working girl?" The question was fired at her as the landlady led her into an office so tiny it had to be a converted closet. There was a small, scarred wooden desk, an ancient office chair behind it, a two-drawer filing cabinet, and what looked like a kitchen chair. It was scrupulously neat, the two pens, stapler, receipt book, and telephone lined up like soldiers for inspection. The woman took a seat behind the desk.

"Not yet," Grace replied, taking off her sunglasses now that she had her reaction under control. She would have preferred leaving them on, but that would look suspicious. She sat in the other chair, and placed the bag beside her. "I just got into town, but I intend to look for a job tomorrow."

The landlady lit a long, thin cigarette and eyed Grace through the billow of blue smoke. Every finger was decorated with an ornate ring, and Grace found herself watching the movements of those big, oddly graceful hands. Suddenly the woman snorted. "I guess not," she said shrewdly. "Honey, a working girl is a whore. Didn't think you looked the type, despite the cheap wig. No makeup, and you're wearing a wedding ring. You on the run from your old man?"

Grace looked down at her hands, and gently turned the plain gold band Ford had given her when they married. "No," she murmured.

"He's dead, huh?" Surprised, Grace looked up. "You ain't divorced, or you wouldn't be wearing the ring. First thing, you split from an asshole, the ring comes off." Sharp green eyes flicked over Grace's clothes. "Your clothes are too big, too; looks like you've lost some weight. Misery takes away the appetite, don't it?"
She understood, Grace realized, both terrified and comforted. In less than two minutes this strange, tough, disturbingly astute woman had sized her up and accurately read details no one else had even noticed. "Yes," she said, because some answer seemed indicated.
Whatever she saw in Grace's face, whatever deductions she drew from it, the woman abruptly seemed to make up her mind. "M'name's Harmony," she said, leaning over the desk and holding out her hand. "Harmony Johnson. More people named Johnson than Smith or Brown or Jones, you know that?"
Grace shook it; it was like shaking a man's bigger, rougher hand. "Julia Wynne," she said, using the name she'd taken from a small marker on an unkempt grave. The girl, born five years before Grace, had died just after her eleventh birthday. The marker had read: "Our Angel."
"Rooms are seventy a week," Harmony Johnson said. "They're damn clean. I don't allow no drugs, no parties, no whores. I got outta that, and I don't want it in my house. You clean up after yourself in the bathroom. I'll clean your room if you want, but that's another ten bucks a week. Most people do for themselves."
"I'll do the cleaning," Grace said.
"Thought so. You can have a hot plate, coffeemaker in your room, but no major cooking. I like to cook a big breakfast. Most of my people eat breakfast with me. How you feed yourself the rest of the time is your problem." She gave Grace another once-over. "Don't guess you're too worried about food right now, but time'll take care of that."
"Are there phones in the rooms?"
"Get a grip. Do I look like a fool?"
"No," Grace said, and had to stifle a sudden urge to laugh. Harmony Johnson looked like a lot of things, but fool wasn't on the list. "Do you mind if I have my own line installed? I do some computer work, and use a modem sometimes."
Harmony shrugged. "It's your money."
"When can I move in?"

"As soon as you pay me a deposit and haul your bag upstairs."
* * *
"Tell me, Conrad," Parrish said lazily, tipping his chair back. "How can Grace St. John, of all people, elude you for a week?" He wasn't at all pleased. Conrad had never failed him before, and though the Minneapolis police had bought the setup with a gratifying completeness and issued warrants for her arrest, no one had managed to find her. A nerd, an *ancient languages specialist*, of all people, had somehow managed to outsmart them all. "Mind, I don't give a shit about Grace, but she has the papers and I really do want them, Conrad. I really do."
Conrad's face was impassive. "She managed to empty out their bank account, so she has cash. The police figure she overrode the bank's computer system, but the bank's systems analyst hasn't determined how."
Parrish waved that aside with a languid movement of his hand. "The how doesn't matter. All that matters is finding her, and you haven't accomplished that."
Fool, Conrad thought dispassionately. The how always mattered, because when something worked once, people invariably repeated it. That was how patterns were established, and patterns were detectable.
"She had been traveling at night, but I think that's changed now. She had a bag when Paglione saw her in Eau Claire, so it follows that she has accumulated more clothing and now we have no idea what she's wearing."
There were notes in his thick, brutish hand, but he didn't need to consult them. "A woman roughly answering her description bought a red wig in Eau Claire."
"A redhead should be easy to find." "Unless it was a decoy." Conrad was of the opinion that the red wig was exactly that, and his admiration for Ms. St. John had risen sharply. She was proving to be very interesting quarry.
"There haven't been any leads on a redhead. She could have stolen another wig, one the proprietor didn't know anything about. She could also have cut her hair, colored it, done any number of things to change her appearance."
"Well then, damn it, how do you intend to find her?" Parrish snapped, his patience at an end.
"Her most likely destination, after Eau Claire, would be Chicago. A big city would give her a sense of security. Even though she has money, she's cautious; she will try to save that money in case she has to run again. She'll get a job, but it will have to be off the books, because she can't use her

social security number. The kind of job she will be able to get will be low-skill, low-paying. I will put men in the streets, put out the word that there is a cash reward for information on her. I will find her."
"See that you do." Parrish rose and walked to the window, indicating the interview was ended. Conrad left, his movements as noiseless as always. The garden was looking good, Parrish thought, eyeing the prize-winning roses beneath his window. The cold snap hadn't been a severe one; the temperature had remained above freezing. The days were growing warmer as spring settled in again, perhaps for good this time. The cold had to have been a trial for poor little Grace, though she had some extra padding on her bones for warmth. How soft she had looked! A man on top of her wouldn't feel as if he were lying on a skeleton.
What a strange attraction, he mused, setting his fingertips against the cool panes. He'd always preferred sleek women, but little Gracie was so unconsciously, unaccountably sensual, despite her weight. She wasn't much overweight, just enough to look rounded.
Perhaps he should instruct Conrad to keep her alive, just for a while. One day, perhaps, long enough for him to satisfy a particular fantasy.
He smiled, thinking about it.

Chapter 8

WEARILY GRACE UNTIED THE APRON FROM HER WAIST AND tossed it into the hamper. This was her sixth day on the job, as part-time dishwasher and general slave in Orel Hectors pizza and pasta restaurant. Sometimes she thought she'd never get the smell of garlic out of her hair, off her skin. The constant exposure to spicy food had, if anything, depressed her appetite even more. The workers were allowed to have anything in the restaurant for lunch, free, but so far she hadn't eaten anything. Just the thought of sitting down to a hearty pasta meal made her stomach clench.
"You comin' back tomorrow?" Orel asked as he took the cash box out of a locked drawer and opened it to pay her. There were three part-time workers in the restaurant, and none of them was on a payroll list. About a third of each day's take went into the cash box instead of being rung up on the cash register. He paid them in cash at the end of each day, and if one of them

didn't show up the next day, he'd find someone else. Cut way down on the damn federal paperwork, he said.
"I'll be here," she said. It was exhausting work, but it suited her to be part of the underground economy. Orel handed over three tens, thirty dollars for seven hours of work, but it worked out to a hundred eighty dollars for the six days she'd been working. After paying Harmony seventy dollars a week, she'd have a hundred and ten left over. Her expenses were minimal, just the bus fare to work every day, and a few more clothes. She had bought two more pairs of cheap jeans, a size smaller this time, and a couple of T-shirts. Washing dishes was hot work. The new jeans were loose, too, and growing baggier by the day.
She folded the bills and slid them into her front pocket, then retrieved her computer case from under the cabinet where she'd stored it safely away from spills and drips. She'd told Orel she was going to school nights, and everyone accepted the explanation. Her coworkers didn't ask many personal questions, content to go their own way and not get involved with anyone. She preferred it that way, too.
She left through the back door, stepping out into a littered alley. The wind wound its way even down this narrow little space, freshening the air. She inhaled deeply, thankful for a breath that didn't bring the scent of garlic with it.
Cautiously she looked both left and right, the computer case clutched tightly in one hand and her other hand on her knife. So far she hadn't had any trouble, but she was prepared.
She walked two blocks to a bus stop, where the next bus was due in about ten minutes. The late-afternoon sky was a clear, dark blue; the day was fresh and sweet, and there was a jauntiness to everyone's step even this late in the day. Spring had definitely arrived, sending the temperature into the high seventies. Grace remembered her joy in the spring as she had walked across the Murchisons' backyard-how long ago had it been? Two weeks? Three? Closer to three, she thought. It had been the twenty-seventh of April, the last day she had felt joy in life. She could see the clearness of the day, but it didn't touch her heart. Inside, everything was bleak and barren, colorless.
The bus arrived and she got on, paid her fare. The bus driver nodded to her. This was the sixth day in a row she'd She got off at the Newberry Library, one of the world's foremost historical research libraries. She had waded

through text after text of medieval history, in both books and computer files, looking for some mention of Niall of Scotland. So far she had learned a lot about medieval times, but hadn't turned up one iota of information on the warrior Knight. She wasn't discouraged, though, because she had barely scratched the surface of the available material.

She went straight to the appropriate aisle and picked up where she had left off the night before, selecting several books and carrying them to an isolated table. Then she put on her glasses and began skimming, page by page, looking for any mention of anyone named Niall who had been connected to the Templars.

She almost missed it. She had been reading for more than two hours and her mind had gone on automatic. The reference didn't register for a moment, and she continued down the page. Then the similarity between the names caught her attention and she reread the paragraph:

"*Chosen as Guardian was a Knight proude and fierse, a Scot of Royal blude, Niel Robertsoune*."

Excitement flared, and her heartbeat kicked into a faster rhythm. It had to be Niall! The names were too similar, and the reference to the Guardian was the clincher.

Had she read anything before about a Niel, and passed over it because she hadn't connected the names? She knew how erratic spelling had been; she should have paid particular attention to any name that began with an N. And at last she had a surname! Robertsoune, or Robertson. Quickly she began rechecking the references for any variation of Niall, such as Niel, Neil, Neal, and also for anything remotely close to Robertson.

There was nothing. There were Robertses and Robertsons, even a couple of Neals, but nothing within the time frame she needed. Her hands trembled as she closed the book, and she had to restrain herself from pounding on the table in frustration. The wildness of her disappointment took her aback. She had been thwarted in her studies before, and taken it in stride. This fierce sense of desperation burned through her protective numbness, frightening her with its intensity. She didn't want to feel anything except rage and the unquenchable thirst for revenge, because she was afraid she would shatter if she ever began feeling again. The few times grief had managed to leak past the numbness had almost destroyed her.

But she *did* feel, she realized, had felt this intense interest in Niall of Scotland from the first moment she'd received the copies of old parchments

and glanced through them. All that had happened to her since hadn't changed that, or even lessened it. If anything, her fascination grew with each day, with every page she read.
She had begun to think Niall of Scotland only a myth, though why his fictional exploits should be included in a history of the Knights Templar was something she couldn't fathom. This one mention of "Niel Robertsoune" being chosen as Guardian was the only confirmation of his existence she'd been able to find, but it was enough. He had existed, had been a real man who lived and breathed and ate and slept as all men did. Perhaps, after the Order had been destroyed, he had escaped persecution and had lived a normal life, had found happiness with a wife, had children, died an old man. The real Niall of Scotland had likely been nothing similar to the black-haired warrior who haunted her dreams, but the fantasy was one she needed emotionally, so she couldn't regret it. The dreams were proof that her inner self hadn't completely died; shreds of Grace St. John still existed deep inside her.
And Niall of Scotland had existed. Briskly, with renewed determination, she pushed the heavy reference books aside. She wouldn't find him there. As one of the notorious Knights, his life would have depended on remaining as anonymous as possible. Anything she discovered about him would be in the pages of documents to be deciphered, the exquisite photographed copies. Copies. Her mind stumbled to a halt for a moment, then began racing. Why did Parrish want this copy of the documents, when he could have the real McCoy? Why was he so desperate to get his hands on this copy that he would kill Ford and Bryant, and try to kill her?
Logically, there were only two explanations, both of them requiring a degree of coincidence that strained her credulity. One was that he didn't know where the originals were now, but obviously they had been recorded and photographed, and the copies sent to her. Could someone have stolen the originals, for some unfathomable reason-the same reason Parrish wanted them? If so, what about the negatives? Other copies could be made from them. The other explanation was that the originals had somehow been destroyed; accidents happened. Again, what about the film negatives?
That led her to two other possibilities. One was that the negatives had also been destroyed or stolen, and the other was that Parrish not only wanted this copy, he wanted to erase all knowledge of its contents, which would mean killing anyone who knew about it.

Her reasoning brought her full circle, back to what she had known from the beginning; Parrish meant to kill her. And the why of it was hidden in the mystery of those pages.

She had been wasting her time looking through reference books. From now on, she had to concentrate on translating the crabbed, tightly crowded text of the documents, and that was a task better accomplished in the privacy of her room at Harmony's rather than in a public library.

Quickly she returned the books to the shelves and gathered her things. By habit she carefully looked around for anyone unusual, or anyone watching her, but the people seated at the desks and tables seemed to be lost in their own studies. The Newberry attracted serious scholars more than the average high-schooler researching a term paper.

When carrying the computer, she looped the strap of the carrying case around her neck and over her shoulder, and also clutched the handle tightly in her left hand. When she walked, her right hand was always on the knife at her belt. The bus fare was in her right jeans pocket, so she never had to release the computer to fish out money.

It was almost dark when she left the library and hurried to the bus stop. That wasn't unusual; several times she had stayed much later. A cool evening breeze fanned her face as she joined the two people waiting at the comer, a plump young black woman with a round, pleasant face, who clutched the hand of a wide-eyed and energetic two-year old. The little boy repeatedly climbed on and off the bench, not much hampered by his mother's determined grip on him. He crawled over and under and between her legs, and she merely adjusted her hold to whatever part of him she could reach. Grace thought that being a mother must be something akin to wrestling an octopus, but the young woman rode herd on her rambunctious offspring with remarkable calmness.

There was no warning, no sudden footsteps behind her. Someone slammed into her, hard, and Grace stumbled off balance. Her neck wrenched to the left as violent hands jerked at the computer case. The young woman uttered a startled scream, grabbed her child into her arms, and began running. The attacker, frustrated when the case didn't come free, uttered a foul curse on a cloud of equally foul breath. Desperately Grace tightened her grip on the handle and managed to get her feet under her, letting the man's own tugging efforts pull her upright. He cursed again and slashed a knife at her, trying to slice the strap around her neck. She twisted, protecting the strap, and cold

fire burned along her forearm. She saw his eyes, narrow and vicious under a grimy fall of hair, as he jabbed the knife at her again.
In sheer reaction Grace swung the heavy case at him. Startled, he jerked back and the case caught him on the arm, jarring the knife free. It sailed through the air and clattered on the sidewalk. "Shit!" he said between clenched teeth, and turned to run.
And then fury arrived, surging through her veins like a flash flood. He hadn't even completed his turn to escape before she was on him, a foot thrust between his ankles to trip him. He yelled as he sprawled on the rough sidewalk, taking Grace down with him in a furious, punching tangle. Her hands were balled into fists and she used them, going for his eyes, his nose, his ears, any part of him that was momentarily unprotected as he tried to shove her away. Remembering the service station attendant, she tried to jab a knee into his groin, but he rolled aside. Growling in frustration, Grace grabbed his greasy hair with both hands and jerked as hard as she could. He howled with pain and struck back, punching her in the belly. Her breath exploded out of her and she gagged, momentarily paralyzed, but somehow she hung on. He hit her again, and one of her hands loosened. His fist jabbed at her face, caught her a glancing blow on the chin. The blow jarred her, made her eyes water, and he took advantage of her momentary weakness to shove free of her and lurch to his feet. Grace scrambled onto her hands and knees but he was already gone, running down the sidewalk, shoving his way past pedestrians who paid him little attention.
Groaning, Grace got to her own feet and stood swaying. The computer case still hung around her neck. The battle fury left as suddenly as it had arrived and almost unbearable fatigue dragged at her. A small crowd of about ten people had gathered, watching, and their faces swam before her like balloons. She took a deep breath, then another, then still another when the first two didn't work.
The mugger's knife still lay on the sidewalk. The handle was black, wrapped in electrician's tape, and the blade was a good six inches long. It looked much more lethal than her kitchen paring knife. She hobbled over to it, abruptly aware of bruises and scrapes she hadn't noticed during the heat of struggle. Bending over with effort, she picked it up and stared with some surprise at the red stain on the blade. Only then did she notice the blood dripping down her arm to splash scarlet dots on the sidewalk, and feel the bum of the two-inch gash that slanted across her forearm. The wound

needed stitches, she thought rather dispassionately, examining it as best she could for the welling blood. Tough. She wasn't inclined to spend two or three hundred dollars of her precious cash for emergency room care, in addition to probably being questioned by the cops. So long as she didn't get an infection, she could take care of the cut herself. Shrugging, she slipped the knife into one of the outside pockets of the case.

At least the mugger had been only that, a mugger. Probably he made a good living, or at least supported a drug habit, by snatching laptop computers. If he had been one of Parrish's men he would have sliced her throat first, then made off with the computer. But she had attracted attention, even if none of the bystanders had been inclined to help her, so the first thing she had to do now was get out of sight. The bus she had intended to take turned the comer then and stopped with a wheeze of hydraulics, but Grace didn't board it. The bus driver would be too likely to remember the passenger with the bleeding arm, and the stop where she got off, which would lead any followers that much closer to Harmony's house. Instead Grace quickly crossed the street and walked in the opposite direction.

Her arm began to ache, and blood was dripping on the computer case. Scowling, Grace pressed her right hand over the wound. She had acted with a disgusting lack of presence of mind, she thought as she strode along. She had felt so tough and well prepared because she'd had a kitchen paring knife on her belt, and instead she was so far from being street smart she hadn't even thought of the knife.

Look at me now, she thought furiously. She was walking openly down a busy sidewalk, dripping blood marking her every step. She could walk smack into a cop at any second, and that was only the most immediate danger. Any number of people were taking note of her, and Parrish was capable of putting a small army on the streets to locate her. Surely the search had moved to Chicago by now, it being the most logical place for her to hide, not to mention affording her the resources she needed to work. She had to assume the worst, and that meant she had to get off the street and change her appearance, immediately.

Just ahead of her, a couple entered a busy bar and grill. Grace barely slowed down, darting through the closing' door. She stood close to them, angled so that the man's body hid her bleeding arm from the hostess, who smiled as she asked, "Smoking or non?" and plucked three menus from a stack.

"Non," replied the man. The hostess checked her seating chart, made a notation, then led them through the maze of close-crowded tables and booths. Grace spied the sign indicating the location of the rest rooms down a narrow hall, and she walked swiftly in that direction.
The ladies' room was small, dark, and empty. The didn't invite people to linger. The lighting was dim, and swallowed by the dark glazed tiles of the floor and walls. A pink and purple neon flamingo was poised over the upper right comer of the mirror, casting a decidedly unnatural tint on the face of anyone repairing her makeup or admiring herself. Grace did neither. Instead she pulled several paper towels out of the holder and swiftly washed her hands and arm. Blood welled from the cut as fast as the water rinsed it away.
"Damn, damn, damn," she whispered. Glancing in the mirror, she saw that the blond wig was askew. Hastily, using one hand, she removed the pins that still halfway anchored the wig in place, then snatched it from her head. Her long, matted hair tumbled down her back.
She needed the use of both hands, if only for a minute. Taking one of the folded brown paper towels, she pressed it over the bleeding wound, holding it until the paper adhered to her arm. The red stain immediately began spreading, but for the moment she wasn't dripping. She stuffed the wig into the computer case, wound her hair into a knot on top of her head, and pinned it in place. Pulling out her baseball cap, she jammed it on and pulled the bill down low over her eyes.
Using her arm made it ache even worse. The makeshift pad was soaked with blood already, and coming loose. She peeled it off and tossed it into the trash, then pressed another towel over the wound. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she stared at her pale, sickly reflection in the mirror. Essentially the wound was negligible; she wasn't likely to bleed to death, and she still had the use of her arm. Niall wouldn't even have paused for so paltry a wound, but continued the battle.
And so had she, Grace realized with a spurt of surprise. Granted, her counterattack hadn't been well thought out, but she hadn't even realized she'd been cut until the fight was over. Niall would be proud of her, after he got over his murderous rage that she'd been hurt at all.
"I'm losing it," Grace said aloud, blinking. She must have lost more blood than she had realized, to be thinking of Niall as if he were someone she actually knew, instead of an obscure medieval warrior who had been dead

for hundreds of years. She would be better off figuring out how to bandage her arm, and with what.
The answer followed on the heels of the thought. Holding the pad of towels in place with her right hand, she used her left to untie her shoe. Slipping out of it, she removed her sock, then shoved her bare foot back into the shoe. The sock had considerable stretch in the fabric. She laid the sock on the vanity top, then positioned her arm across it. Using her teeth and her free hand, she knotted the sock around her arm, pulling it as tight as possible over the pad of towels and then knotting it again for security.
The makeshift bandage wouldn't last long, but it should do to get her home. The effect was pretty noticeable, so she pulled off her other shoe and sock, and tied the remaining sock around her right arm. At least now it looked as if she'd done it for some reason other than necessity, maybe insanity, or membership in a gang. Socks around the arms weren't exactly in the same class as 'do rags, but there were a lot of crazies in Chicago.
An hour later, Grace let herself into the boardinghouse. She intended to slip quietly up the stairs, but as luck would have it she met Harmony herself in the hallway.
"That's some getup," Harmony drawled, taking in the baseball cap, the absence of the blond wig, and the socks tied around Grace's arms.
"Thanks," Grace muttered.
"Arm's bleeding," Harmony observed. "I know." Grace started up the stairs. "No point in running. Anybody in my house gets in trouble, I want to know what it's about, in case the cops gonna beat my door down in the middle of the night." Her green eyes narrowed, Harmony was right on Grace's heels as they climbed the stairs.
"I was mugged," Grace briefly explained. "Or rather, someone tried to mug me."
"No shit. Whadja do, scare 'im off with that wussy little knife you carry?"
"I didn't even think about it," she confessed ruefully, wondering how Harmony knew about the knife.
"Good thing. Any self-respecting mugger would've laughed, then made you eat it." Harmony waited while Grace unlocked the door, then followed ,her inside. After eyeing the spartan neatness of the room, the tall woman turned her attention back to Grace. "Okay, Wynne, let's see the arm."
After two weeks, Grace had accustomed herself to her pseudonym enough that she no longer hesitated at the name. Two weeks was also long enough

for her to learn that Harmony Johnson considered her home her castle, over which she had a dictator's authority, and anything that went on in her house was her business.
Silently she untied the bloodstained sock. Beneath it, the pad of paper towel was completely soaked. She removed that, too, and Harmony studied the sullenly oozing cut.
"Needs stitches," she pronounced. "And when was your last tetanus shot?"
"Not quite two years ago," Grace replied after a little thought, and with some relief. She hadn't even considered tetanus. Fortunately she'd updated all her vaccinations before going with Ford on a dig in Mexico. "No stitches, though. I can't afford an emergency room."
"Sure you can't," Harmony said shrewdly. "Any street bum can see a doctor for a cut, but you can't? More likely you don't want to answer no questions. Anyway, forget about a hospital. You want, I can sew that up for you, if you don't mind not having nothing for pain."
"You can?" Grace asked, astonished.
"Sure. I useta do it for the other girls all the time. Wait here while I get my kit."
While Harmony was gone, Grace pondered her landlady's undoubtedly colorful past. She wondered how successful a streetwalker Harmony would have been, with her brusque manner, unusual height, and equally unusual looks. Today she was wearing scarlet leotards and a sleeveless scarlet T-shirt, which revealed remarkably well-muscled legs and arms. Men who frequented prostitutes were looking for sexual gratification rather than sexual attraction, but still, how many would choose a woman who was not only taller than most men, but more masculine? Grace would have thought Harmony a cross-dresser or even a transsexual, if it hadn't been for a throwaway comment she had once made about having a miscarriage when she was fifteen and never getting pregnant again. Modern surgical procedure could outwardly change someone's sex, but it couldn't retain fertility for the patient.
Awkwardly, because her left arm was really aching now and she used only her right hand, she retrieved the tangled wig and bloodstained knife from the computer case. She laid the knife on the tiny round table she used for eating, and gave the frizzy wig a shake before placing it on the bed. Remembering it was supposed to be bad luck to put a hat on a bed, she wondered wryly if a wig qualified for equal status in the superstition.

Harmony returned, carrying a bottle of whiskey, a small black box, and an aerosol can. A clean white towel was draped over her arm. She set the first three items on the table, and eyed the bloody knife before pushing it aside and placing the towel over the clear space. "Yours?" she asked, nodding toward the knife.

"I guess it is now. I knocked it out of his hand." Exhausted, Grace sank into one of the chairs and laid her left arm across the towel.

Harmony's eyebrows rose. "No shit? He musta been surprised." Taking the other chair, she opened the bottle of whiskey and shoved it toward Grace. "Take a few good swallows. Won't stop it from hurting as bad, but you won't care as much."

Grace warily eyed the bottle. It was an expensive Scotch whiskey, but she had never drunk whiskey before and had no idea how it would sit. Given her exhaustion, and the fact she hadn't eaten since breakfast, it was likely to knock her on her butt. Shrugging, she seized the bottle and tipped it to her mouth. She could get her arm stitched while on her butt as well as she could sitting in a chair.

The smoky taste of the whiskey lay smooth and rich on her tongue, but when she swallowed, it was like swallowing fire. The liquid flame seared its way down her esophagus and into her stomach, stealing her breath along the way. Her face turned red and she began gasping and wheezing, trying to draw enough oxygen into her lungs to cough. Everything inside her was in revolt. Her eyes watered; her nose ran. She coughed violently, bent over at the waist while spasms wracked her. Finally, when she could breathe half normally again, she tilted the bottle and took another healthy swallow.

When the second bout had ended, she straightened to find Harmony watching and waiting with unruffled patience. "Not much of a drinker, are you?" she observed neutrally.

"No," Grace said, and drank again. Perhaps the nerves in her esophagus had already been burned out, or perhaps they were merely numb. For whatever reason, this time she didn't choke. The fire was spreading through her entire body, making her head swim. She broke out in a sweat. "Should I take another one?"

No smile cracked Harmony's angular face, but the corners of her green eyes crinkled in a subtle expression of amusement. "Depends on whether or not you want to be conscious."

Suspecting that she had only begun to feel the effects of the whiskey, Grace pushed the bottle aside and capped it. "Okay, I'm ready."
"Let's wait another few minutes." Harmony leaned back in the chair and crossed her long legs. "Guess the guy was after that computer you tote around like it was a baby."
Grace nodded, unaware that her head bobbed unsteadily. "Right outside the library. People saw what was happening, but no one did anything."
"Guess not. He'd already proved he meant business with the knife."
"But even after I'd knocked the knife out of his hand, and tripped him, and was punching him in the face, no one tried to help." Grace's voice rose indignantly.
Harmony blinked, and blinked again. She threw her head back and a deep, full-bodied laugh erupted from her throat. Rocking back and forth, she whooped until tears ran down her face and she was gasping for breath, much as if she had been into the whiskey bottle herself. When she could breathe, she hunched first one shoulder and then the other to dry her wet cheeks on her shirt. "Hell, girl!" she said, still giggling a little. "By that time they were probably more scared of you than they were of that stupid son of a bitch!"
Startled, Grace considered that. She was much taken by the possibility. Her face brightened. "I did good, didn't I?"
"You did good to come out of it alive," Harmony scolded, despite the grin on her face. "Girl, if you're gonna get in fights, somebody's gotta teach you how to fight. I would, but I ain't got time. Tell you what. I'll fix you up with this guy I know, meanest little greaser son of a bitch on God's green earth. He'll teach you how to fight dirty, and that's what you need. Somebody as little as you don't need to be doing something as dumb as fighting fair."
Maybe it was the whiskey thinking for her, but that sounded like a fine idea to Grace. "No more fighting fair," she agreed. Parrish certainly wouldn't fight fair, and neither did the street scum she would have to deal with. She needed to learn how to stay alive, by whatever means possible.
Harmony tore open another antiseptic pad and carefully washed Grace's arm, examining the cut from every angle. "Not too deep," she finally said. She opened a small brown bottle of antiseptic and poured it directly into the wound. Grace caught her breath, expecting it to bum like the whiskey, but all it did was sting a little. Then Harmony took up the aerosol can and sprayed a cold mist on the wound. "Topical analgesic," she muttered, the

medical terminology somehow fitting right in with her street slang. Grace wouldn't have been surprised if her landlady had begun quoting Shakespeare, or conjugating Latin verbs. Whatever Harmony was now or had been in the past, she certainly was not ordinary.

With perfect calm she watched Harmony thread a small, curved suturing needle and bend over her arm. Delicately squeezing with her left hand, Harmony held the edges of the wound together and deftly began stitching with her right. Each puncture stung, but the pain was endurable, thanks to the whiskey and the analgesic spray.

Grace's eyelids drooped as she fought the fatigue dragging at her. All she wanted was to lie down and sleep.

"There," Harmony announced, tying off the last stitch. "Keep it dry, and take some aspirin if it hurts." Grace studied the neat row of tiny stitches, counting ten of them. "You should have been a doctor."

"Don't have the patience for dealing with nitwits." She began repacking her small first aid kit, then slid a sideways glance at Grace. "You gonna tell me why you don't want nothing to do with the cops? You kill somebody or something?"

"No," Grace said, shaking her head, which was a mistake. She waited a minute for the world to stop spinning. "No, I haven't killed anyone."

"But you're running." It was a statement, not a question. Denying it would be a waste of her breath. Other people might be fooled, but Harmony knew too much about people who were running from something, whether the law or their past or themselves. "I'm running," she finally said, her voice soft. "And if they find me, they'll kill me."

"Who's this 'they'?" Grace hesitated; not even the stout whiskey was enough to loosen her tongue to that extent. "The less you know about it, the safer *you'll* be," she finally said. "If anyone asks, you don't know much about me. You never saw a computer, didn't know I was working on anything. Okay?"

Harmony's eyes narrowed, a spark of anger lighting them. Grace sat very still, waiting for this newfound friend to become an ex-friend, and wondering if she would have to find a new place to live. Harmony didn't like being thwarted, and she hated, with reason, being left in the dark about anything concerning herself and the sanctity of her home. She pondered the situation in silence for a very long minute, before finally making a decision and giving one brisk nod of her lemony-white head. "Okay. I don't like it, but okay. You don't trust me, or anyone else, that much. Right?"

"I can't," Grace said softly. "It could mean your life, too, if he even suspected you knew anything about me."
"So you're gonna protect me, huh? Girl, I think you got that backwards, because if I've ever seen a babe in the woods, you're it. The average eight-year-old here is tougher than you are. You look like you lived your whole life in a convent or something. Know it's not your style, but you'd make a helluva lot of money on the street, with looks like yours."
Grace blinked, startled by the abrupt, and ridiculous, change of subject. Her, a successful prostitute? Plain, quiet, nerdy Grace St. John? She almost laughed in Harmony's face, which would never do.
"Yeah, I know," Harmony said, evidently reading her mind. "You got no sense of style, you don't wear makeup. Stuff like that's easy to change. Wear clothes that fit, instead of hanging on you like a bag. You don't want loose clothes no way, gives people something to grab, understand? And your face looks so damn innocent it probably drives a lot of men crazy, thinking how much they'd like to be the one to teach you all the nasty stuff. Men are simple sons of bitches about stuff like that. A little makeup would throw them off, make 'em think you're not so innocent after all. Plus you got one of those pouty mouths all the models pay good money for, having fat or silicone shots in their lips. Damn idiots. And that hair of yours. Men like long hair. I guess I know why you're wearin' that tacky wig, though."
Harmony's speech was a fast-moving mix of accents and vocabulary, from Chicago street to Southern drawl, with the occasional flash of higher education. It was impossible to tell her origin, but no one listening to her for more than thirty seconds would have any doubts about her mental acuity. Sprinkled among the comments on Grace's appearance had been a nugget or two of sharp advice.
"Is the wig that noticeable?" she asked.
"Not to most men, I don't guess. But it's blond. Blond and red stand out. Get a brown wig, light brown, in a medium length and a so-so style. And get one that's better quality. It'll last longer and look more natural." Abruptly she got to her feet, first aid kit in hand, and walked to the door. "Get some sleep, girl. You look like you about to fall outta that chair."
As exhausted as she was, and with the effects of the whiskey thrown in, Grace expected sleep was all she would be able to manage. She was wrong. Several hours later, her head finally clear of alcohol but her body still heavy

with fatigue, she still hadn't managed to doze. She sat propped against the headboard, her left arm dully throbbing, with the laptop balanced on her blanket-covered legs. She had tried to work, but the intricacies of ancient languages, written in an archaic penmanship style, seemed to be beyond her. Instead she logged on to her personal journal and read her past entries. She couldn't remember some of the entries, and that disturbed her. It was as if she were reading someone else's diary, about someone else's life. Was that life so completely gone? She didn't want it to be, and yet she was afraid that she couldn't survive if she held on to it.

The loving but casual references to Ford and their life together, to Bryant, almost undid her. She felt the rush of pain and hastily scrolled down, closing her mind to the memories. She reached the last entry, made April twenty-sixth, and with relief saw that the entire entry was about the intriguing documents she'd been deciphering and translating. She had typed "NIALL OF SCOTLAND" in capital letters, and followed it with "real or myth?"

She knew the answer to that. He'd been real, a man who strode boldly through history, but behind the scenes, so that few traces remained of his passing. He'd been entrusted with the enormous Treasure of the Templars, but what had he done with it? With the means at his disposal, he could have accomplished anything, toppled kings, but instead he'd vanished.

Her fingers moved over the keys. "What were you, Niall? Where did you go, what did you do? What is so special about these papers that men have died just for knowing they existed? Why can't I stop thinking about you, dreaming about you? What would you do if you were here?"

A strange question, she thought, looking at what she had typed. Why would she even think of him in modem times? Dreaming about him was at least understandable, because immersing herself in her research, trying so hard to find any mention of him, had indelibly imprinted him in her mind. Because of Ford's and Bryant's deaths, there was nothing more important to her now than finding out why, so naturally she dreamed about the research.

But she hadn't, she realized. She hadn't dreamed about the Templars, about ancient documents, or even about libraries or computers. She had dreamed only of Niall, her imagination assigning him a face, a form, a voice, a presence. Since the murders she hadn't dreamed much at all, as if her subconscious tried to give her a respite from the terrible reality she faced every day, but when she had dreamed it had been of Niall.

What *would* he do if he were there? He'd been a highly trained warrior, the medieval equivalent of the modern military's special forces. Would he have run and hidden, or would he have stood his ground and fought?
"*Whatever was best to achieve my goal."* Her head snapped around, her heart racing. Someone had spoken, someone in the room. Her panicked gaze searched out every comer of the small room, and though her eyes told her she was alone, her instincts didn't believe it. Her body felt electrified, every nerve alert and tingling. She breathed shallowly, her head cocked as she sat very still and listened, straining to hear a faint rustle of fabric, a scrape of a shoe, an indrawn breath. Nothing. The room was silent. She was alone.
But she'd *heard* it, a deep, slightly raspy voice with a burred inflection. It hadn't been in her head, but something external. She shivered, her skin roughening with chill bumps. Beneath her T-shirt, her nipples were tight and hard.
"Niall?" she whispered into the empty room, but there was only silence, and she felt foolish.
It had been only her imagination, after all, producing yet another manifestation of her obsession with those papers. Still, her fingers tapped on the keys again, the words spilling out of her: "I'll learn how to fight. I can't be passive about this, I can't merely react to what others do. I have to make things happen, have to take the initiative away from Parrish. That's what you would do, Niall. It's what I will do."

Chapter 9

PARRISH SIPPED THE MERLOT, AND GAVE A BRIEF NOD OF appreciation. Though merlot usually wasn't to his taste, this one was unexpectedly fine, very dark and dry. Bayard "Skip" Saunders, his host, considered himself a connoisseur of wine and had gone to great lengths to impress Parrish by trotting out his best and rarest vintages. Parrish was accustomed to members of the Foundation becoming slightly giddy whenever he visited; though he would have preferred a fine champagne or a biting martini, or even a properly aged bourbon, he was publicly never less than gracious about his underlings' efforts.

Skip - a ridiculous nickname for a grown man - was one of the more wealthy and influential members of the Foundation. He also lived in Chicago, which was the sole reason for Parrish's presence. Though Conrad had been unable to find a definite trail, he was nevertheless certain Grace had made her way to Chicago, and Parrish had faith in his henchman. Skip Saunders would be able to provide support in the search, in the form of both logistics and influence. Should Grace's capture be too messy - in other words, too public - Skip would be able to whisper a few words into an ear or two and the matter would simply go away, as if it had never existed. Parrish appreciated the convenience.

What he would appreciate more, he thought idly as his gaze briefly met that of Saunders's wife, Calla, was half an hour alone with the lovely Mrs. Saunders. What a superb trophy she was, a glorious testament to the seductiveness of money and power. Wife number one, the recipient of Saunders's youthful seed and vigor and the bearer of his two exceedingly spoiled children, was unfortunately fifty and therefore no longer young enough or glamorous enough to satisfy his ego. Parrish had met the first Mrs. Saunders, when she had still been Mrs. Saunders, and had been charmed by her wit. At any dull social affair he would have much preferred to have number one beside him - but if the position were changed to under him, he would definitely choose the lovely Calla. Saunders was a fool. He should have kept the wonderful companion as his wife, the main course, and enjoyed Calla as a side dish. Ah, well. Men who thought with their genitals often made poor choices.

Calla was certainly tempting. Parrish's manners were too polished to allow him to stare openly at her, but nevertheless each look was thoroughly assessing. She was about five six, willowy, impeccably dressed in a simple, midnight-blue sheath that lovingly hugged every siliconed and liposuctioned curve and provided ample bare flesh on which to display the multitude of diamonds and sapphires she wore. She was a striking woman, with warmly golden skin and big, china-blue eyes, but what interested him most was her long, straight swath of hair, which she let hang freely down her back. Smart woman. She knew her hair was a magnet for male attention, the way it lifted and swung with every graceful movement she made. It wasn't as long as Grace's, he thought dispassionately, or as dark, but still. . . She was taller than Grace, and more slender. She probably hadn't blushed with shyness since the age of eight, and the expression in her eyes was

knowing, completely lacking Grace's innocence and trust. Her mouth wasn't thin, but neither did it have the lush, unconscious sexuality of Grace's lips. Her hair, though. . . he wanted to wrap his fist in that hair, hold it tight while he used her. He would close his eyes and pretend she was shorter, softer, that the hair he gripped was as sleek and thick as dark mink.

Perhaps later, he thought, and gave her a long, cool, deliberate look he knew she wouldn't misunderstand. One elegantly arched brow lifted as she caught his intent, and her lips curved in both invitation and satisfaction. Once again she had attracted the most powerful male present, and she was obviously pleased.

That minor detail taken care of, Parrish turned his attention back to her husband. "Very good," he said, seeing that Skip was anxiously awaiting verbal approval of his choice of wine. "I don't usually care for merlot, but this is exceptional. "

A flush of pleasure warmed Skip's tanned face. "There are only three bottles of that particular vintage left in the world. I have two of them," he couldn't resist adding.

"Excellent. Perhaps you should acquire the third bottle as well," Parrish suggested and hid his perverse amusement at the knowledge that Skip would now spend an untold amount of time and money trying to do just that. The three bottles could turn to vinegar for all Parrish cared.

He clapped a friendly hand to Skip's shoulder. "I want to have a private word with you, if I may, whenever you are free from playing host."

As he'd expected, Skip immediately straightened. "We can go to my study now. Calla won't mind, will you, darling?"

"Of course not," she calmly replied, knowing her role and in truth not giving a damn where her husband was or what he did. She immediately turned away to see to the needs of her other guests, a select fifty or so of Chicago's wealthiest citizens.

Skip led the way down a wide corridor to a set of double doors which he opened inward, admitting them into a mahogany-paneled office with a huge expanse of window overlooking Lake Michigan. "Magnificent view, isn't it?" Skip asked with obvious pleasure, crossing to the window.

"Magnificent," Parrish agreed. The view was more spectacular than his view of Lake Minnetonka, but he wasn't envious. He could have had such a view, had he chosen.

Instead he was well pleased with the more staid but equally moneyed Wayzata; it suited him to be slightly out of the mainstream of the larger cities, tucked away in Minnesota. His neighbors were incurious, and so long as he gave the impression of being socially and politically correct, no one ever looked beneath the surface.

The two men stepped out onto the balcony, and the brisk wind off the lake still carried a chill even though summer had truly arrived. Parrish looked both left and right to make certain they were completely alone. "We're searching for a woman, Grace St. John. She's been accused of murdering her husband." He didn't bother to explain that he himself was responsible for both the accusation and the murder. "I believe she has information we would find of vital importance, so of course I would prefer finding her before the' police do."

"Of course," Skip murmured. "Anything I can do?"

"My men have the search operation in hand, but should things go wrong, I want you on hand to turn any interest away. I hope requiring your presence here won't interfere with any vacation plans you've made." Parrish said it knowing Skip and Calla were scheduled to leave shortly for a month-long stay in Europe, not that it mattered; Skip would cancel an audience with the Pope to be of service to the Foundation. Of the two, the Foundation was more powerful, though its power and influence were far less noticeable.

"No problem," Skip hastily assured him. "Good. I'll call you if I need you."

As Parrish turned to enter the study he saw Calla standing ... just inside the doors, and he paused, wondering what she knew and how much she'd overheard. It would be a pity if she fell over the balcony; such a tragic accident, but accidents happened.

"Dear," Calla said to Skip as she glided onto the balcony. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but Senator Trikoris has just arrived, and you know how he is."

The senator was notorious for expecting a great deal of ass-licking in exchange for legislative favors. The Foundation was working to develop a file on the senator, one that would bring him in line so that the favors he did were for the Foundation's benefit. When that happened, the senator would be the one doing the ass-licking, and Parrish's would be the ass being licked. The senator wasn't yet aware of the future direction of his legislative efforts, and until he was, Parrish was content to let Skip keep him happy. He nodded a dismissal, and Skip hastily left.

Calla leaned against the wall, her gaze cool and brilliant and calculating as she watched him. The wind lifted the silky ends of her hair, playing with it. Out here in the night, her hair looked dark, as dark as Grace's. Perhaps he would fuck her before assisting her over the balcony, Parrish thought, and felt his body respond to the excitement of the idea.

"Yes, I know about the Foundation," Calla murmured, her gaze never wavering from his face. "Skip's a fool. He leaves paperwork lying around in his office where anyone can see it. You would be better off to get rid of him and work with me."

Parrish lifted his eyebrows. She was right; Skip was a fool, and an unforgivably careless one. He would have to be taken care of. Dear Calla wasn't a fool, however, and the problem of what to do about her was one that demanded an immediate decision.

He leaned against the balcony railing, slim and elegant in his black silk trousers and white evening coat. His debonair image was both carefully cultivated and entirely natural to him, blinding people to the cold reality that lay beneath the silk. He sensed that Calla, unlike most people, had read him correctly and knew how close she was to death. Instead of being dismayed, she was excited by the danger. Beneath the clingy midnight fabric of her dress, her nipples were erect.

"It's Skip who has the contacts, the money," he said neutrally, but he was becoming more excited, too. Grace was the only other woman who had instinctively sensed the reality of him, and she had resisted his charm. Calla made no effort to resist him, but the similarity was enough to make him hot. It wouldn't be like having Grace; Grace had an innocence, a shining incorruptibility, that would drive him to new heights in his efforts to sully her. He doubted there was any sullying in which Calla had not already indulged. But in a way Calla was a twisted, corrupted version of Grace, and he wanted her.

Calla grimaced at his statement. "He has the power, you mean, because he controls the money. But does the true power lie with the man who controls the money, or with the woman who controls the man? What I know about the movers and shakers in this city is ten times more useful than Skip's social contacts."

"You use the word know in the biblical sense, I presume?" Her lips curved in a slight smile but she didn't answer the charge. "The Foundation is real power. Forget the trade unions, the political parties; they all have ties to the

Foundation, don't they? No matter which party is in the White House, you have a private line to the Oval Office."

In most cases, he thought, but not all. The Foundation hadn't had good luck with the past two Republican presidents, or the Democratic one before them. Their luck had changed four years earlier, however, and he had moved swiftly to make the gains denied the Foundation for sixteen long years. He was also working hard to make certain he maintained guaranteed access for another four years, at least. Politics was boring, but necessary, at least for now. If he could get his hands on the documents Grace held, he wouldn't have to bother with manipulating politics to try and ensure a reasonable occupant of the White House; the president would be coming to him, as would all the world's ostensible leaders.

The Foundation had been poised for centuries, ready to act when the papers were found. How wonderful that the discovery had been made on *his* watch, Parrish thought, but less wonderful that a bungling fool in France had let the documents slip out of his hands. Those papers meant power. Unimaginable power. The world would be in the palm of his hand, to be manipulated as he willed. Oh, the money and the power would *technically* belong to the Foundation, to be passed on to his successor, but his to use as he wished for his lifetime. A man of limited imagination wouldn't see the possibilities, but Parrish had no such limitations.

He had no interest in holding office as president or prime minister, or in waging war. War was so gauche, so much effort for so little gain. The time had passed when nations could be won; now war meant little but destruction. Real power lay in money, as Calla had observed, and whoever controlled the money controlled the world as well as the puppets who stood onstage, in the limelight, and pretended to be the ones in power.

The documents in Grace's possession led to such power, to unlimited wealth. Over the centuries legends and superstitions had formed about some magical source of power the Templars had controlled, much like the ridiculous claims about the Ark of the Covenant, but unlike some in the Foundation, Parrish secretly scoffed at the idea. If the Templars had controlled some magical power, how could they have been so easily destroyed by treachery? Obviously the only power they had possessed had been a material one, an enormous treasury that had attracted the envy of a king and caused their downfall. No, the Templars' power had been wealth, more than could be imagined. There was nothing magical about it, though

to the fourteenth-century mind the sheer magnitude of the treasury must have been beyond comprehension, and thus had to be magic. They had been nothing but superstitious fools. Parrish, however, was not.
Nor was he sentimental. If Calla thought to enslave him with her considerable charm, she was doomed to disappointment.
"I'm interested in working with the Foundation," Calla said when he remained silent, his cold gaze fixed on her face. "My assets are considerably more useful than Skip's."
"No one works *with* the Foundation," Parrish corrected. "The proper term is *for*. "
"Not even you?" she delicately needled. He shrugged. For his lifetime he *was* the Foundation, but it wasn't necessary for her to know that. It wasn't necessary to talk to her at all. As delightful as it would undoubtedly be to let her into the Foundation, to have her at his beck and call until he was bored with her, he wasn't about to let someone of her intellect and daring, as well as complete lack of scruples, get that close to the center of power. He would have to watch his back every minute.
She moistened her lips, staring at him. "Do you know what I think?" Her voice was a purr. "I think you're the center of it all. A man with your kind of power - why, you can do anything, have anything you want. And I can help you get it."
Oh, she was definitely too smart for her own good. He reached her in three steps, smiling slightly in the semi-darkness as he looked down at her. Calla stood very still, her perfectly chiseled face illuminated by the light from the study behind her. She licked her lips again, the action unconscious, feline.
"Here?" she whispered. "People with telescopes watch, you know."
He paused. If he were merely going to screw her, he wouldn't care who watched. But since she would be going for a long, vertical walk afterward, he didn't want witnesses.
Smiling, he stepped back and gestured to the door. She laughed as she walked ahead of him into the study. "Somehow I expected you to be more adventurous."
"There's a difference, my dear, between adventurous and stupid." He went to the wall switch and turned out the lights, then locked the door. Calla stood calmly waiting for him, the city lights spilling through the windows, glittering on the jewels at her ears and throat.

He took off his dinner jacket and draped it over the back of a chair, not caring to have it smeared with telltale makeup. His shirt would likely bear the marks, but it would be covered by the jacket, and he would dispose of it as soon as he returned to his own hotel. As a last precaution he took his handkerchief from the jacket and put it in his pants pocket.

Arousal coursed through him as he stood in front of her and worked the tight sheath of her skirt up about her waist. She didn't have on any underwear, but then he hadn't expected any. He lifted her onto the desk and she leaned back until she was lying flat across the polished surface. They both knew what this was, and it wasn't lovemaking. She didn't pretend to have any romantic feelings, or demand foreplay. This was power sex, a gambit involving bodies, though she hadn't yet realized the true game or that she wouldn't survive it.

He unfastened his pants and stepped between her spread thighs, entering her with a smooth thrust that had her humming with pleasure. *Good*, he thought as he began thrusting. It would be nice if she enjoyed her last time.

Calla's long hair fanned across the desk. Parrish closed his eyes and thought of Grace, of her luscious mouth. He imagined that the heat surrounding him was Grace's heat, and he pumped steadily into it. She too would die afterward, but perhaps not immediately. Perhaps he would play with her for a while.

Calla gasped, arching. The response struck him as too theatrical, and he paused to consider her. Her eyes were half closed, her head tilted back, her lips open and moist. It was a lovely picture she made, and a totally false one. Why, she was faking, damn her, pandering to his ego. She probably faked it with all her rich lovers, twisting and moaning so they thought they were great in the sack, while all the time she was smirking inside and feeling nothing but contempt because men were so easily manipulated with sex.

Not this time. He slipped one of her shoes off, dropping it to the floor. Deliberately he reached down between their bodies and pinched her clitoris, rubbing his thumb across it in a repeated motion. She gasped again, and tried to twist away from him. Parrish dragged her back, thrusting into her to the hilt and recapturing her hardened nub. "What's the matter?" he softly taunted, his voice coming in soft pants in rhythm with his thrusts. "Don't tell me you like faking it better than actually coming. Can't you feel superior if you let yourself enjoy being fucked?"

"Bastard," she hissed at him, digging her claws into his sleeved arms. Her breath was coming faster, her eyes furious and gleaming in the darkness. "You like the power you have over men, don't you? You like knowing you can turn them into panting beasts. Is that what makes your nipples get so hard, or do you fake that too, pinching them when no one's looking?"
The glitter of her eyes almost matched that of her jewels. "I pinch them. Did you think a *man* could turn me on? Don't be funny!"
"What does turn you on? A woman?" He kept his rhythm steady, his thumb moving ceaselessly back and forth while he thrust. Her hostility was far more exciting than her compliance had been; if it hadn't been for her superficial resemblance to Grace, he would simply have pushed her over the railing without giving her a tumble first. But he liked her venom, her contempt; at least she wasn't faking that.
"That would please your ego, wouldn't it, if I were a lesbian? No wonder you couldn't make me enjoy it, I'm a man-hater! No such luck," she jeered. "I please myself, a lot better than a man can."
"Until now." He openly gloated as he felt how wet she was getting. Her breath was getting faster and faster, her nipples standing upright without being pinched. He read the signs and thrust harder and deeper, driving into her, and with a choked cry she began climaxing. Triumphant, he rode her to the end, until his own climax began boiling upward. He snatched the handkerchief out of his pocket as he jerked out of her, coming into the silk square while he stroked himself in the final pleasure.
Her features twisted with rage as she sat up. It wasn't just that he'd made her climax, but that he had pulled away from her at the last and accomplished his own pleasure without her, taunting her with the reversal of her usual role with men.
Calmly Parrish folded the handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket, to be disposed of when he could safely do so. He straightened his clothing, tucking and zipping, then assisted her off the desk. She stood silently as he restored her dress to its proper position. "Don't sulk," he advised. "It isn't becoming. You should learn, my dear, to be a better loser. And to be a better judge of the men you play your power games with, because I fear you badly misjudged the situation this time."
She glared at him, not ready to give him any sort of victory, and bent down to retrieve her shoe. Parrish stayed her with a hand under her elbow. "Not yet," he said, smiling, and clipped her under the chin with his fist.

She obligingly sagged forward, and he lifted her in his arms. She wasn't unconscious, Just stunned, and she blinked owlishly at him as he swiftly carried her out onto the balcony. "I would apologize for the little bruise you'll have," he told her as he stood her up at the waist-high wall, "but really, my dear, no one will notice." Then he bent and caught her ankles, and tipped her over.

She didn't scream at all, or if she did, the sound was stifled by terror. Parrish didn't linger to watch; after all, they were fifty-six stories up, and it would take her several seconds to hit the street. He went back into the study and picked up her shoe, then returned to the balcony.

Crouching, he pressed the heel of the shoe against the polished marble until the high, sharp heel snapped off. He thought about tossing the shoe over too, but someone might notice its arrival on the street several seconds after its wearer, so instead he left it lying on the marble. All that remained to do was to retrieve his jacket and rejoin the guests, and wait for the cops to arrive and tell Skip his wife had apparently taken a header off the balcony. That should take long enough for everyone to be hazy about the time he rejoined them, especially since the wine and cocktails had been freely flowing for at least an hour now.

He did regret having to soil his handkerchief.

Chapter 10

GAELIC WAS A BITCH. GRACE HAD SPENT TWO WEEKS WORKING on the Gaelic section, and made very little headway. The language wasn't in her computer programs, so she had no electronic aid in deciphering the faint chicken scratches. Whoever had copied the originals had tried to darken the copy to bring out more detail, with little success. She could see the tattered edges of the originals on the copy, telling her that the Gaelic sections hadn't fared as well as those written in Latin. Perhaps the paper hadn't been of as good a quality, or the pages had gotten damp at some time. Not that a good, clear copy would have helped much.

She had bought a Gaelic/English dictionary, and several guides to speaking Gaelic to aid her in figuring out syntax. The problem, however, was that she hadn't been able to find any guides to Gaelic as it had been spoken in the fourteenth century. She thought she would go mad with frustration. There

were only eighteen letters in the Gaelic alphabet, but the Scots and Irish had overcome that restriction by using wildly creative spelling. Add to that the archaic styles of handwriting, word usage, and no standard spelling anyway, and the effort involved in translating one sentence was twice what it would have taken her to do an entire page of Latin or Old English.

But even with all the difficulties, eventually she pieced together sentences that made sense. The Gaelic section detailed the exploits of a Highland renegade called Black Niall. Though the section's inclusion with the rest of the papers made it likely Black Niall was the same man as Niall of Scotland, Grace didn't automatically assume they were one. She had already dealt with the complication of different spellings of the same name, so it was just as possible that the spelling could be the same but refer to someone else. After all, any number of Nialls had lived in Scotland. *Her* Niall was Niall of Scotland, of royal blood; what connection would royalty have with a Highland renegade? These chronicles were different from the others; different handwriting, different paper. They could have been mixed by accident with the others, simply because of the name.

Black Niall was an entertaining rogue, though. Deciphering his exploits occupied all her free time, except for the hours she spent with Harmony's "mean little greaser son of a bitch," one Mateo Boyatzis, a delicate and deadly young man of Mexican and Polish heritage. Matty knew more dirty tricks than a political ad man, and as a favor to Harmony he had agreed to teach "Julia" a few basics of fighting to win. She had no illusions about her slowly growing skill; she was not and never would be anything approaching expert. All she hoped to do was to be able to use the advantage of surprise to protect herself and the papers.

Not that she had anything to worry about, she thought, rubbing eyes grown weary from hours of wading through incomprehensible spellings and unlikely pronunciations. Any minute now, Gaelic was going to reduce her to drooling insanity, and then she wouldn't care what happened.

To give herself a break, she put the Gaelic section aside and turned on the computer, then scrolled through until she came to a section in Old French. The papers weren't in any chronological order; putting the story together was like placing pieces of a puzzle, an ancient one in many languages.

She saw the name almost at once, so attuned to it that her eyes picked up the familiar pattern of letters almost before she'd brought the words into focus. *Black Niall.*

"Whaddaya know," she murmured, leaning forward. It looked as if Black Niall and Niall of Scotland were indeed one and the same. Why would papers written in French detail the exploits of an obscure Scots rogue, unless he wasn't so obscure after all? A Templar of royal blood, excommunicated, under the penalty of death should he ever be taken outside Scotland, and Guardian of the Treasure to boot - obscure perhaps by design, but certainly not unimportant. There had been people, perhaps remnants of the Order, who had known who and what Black Niall was, and made a point to keep track of where.

But royal? She had gone over and over the genealogical charts in the Newberry Library, and there hadn't been a Niall recorded during that era.

"Who were you?" she whispered, seeking that elusive wisp of contact, almost like touching the mind of a man who was centuries dead. She had never before realized how powerful her imagination could be, but she took comfort in the sense of connection. She didn't dare let anyone else too close, not even Harmony, but there were no limits with the man who lived now only in her dreams. She didn't have to be wary with him, didn't have to hide her identity, didn't have to disguise herself.

These papers were yet another account of his exploits, where he had searched out a band of raiders and destroyed them, leaving no man alive. Niall had evidently gone to a great deal of trouble to protect his stronghold, dealing swiftly and harshly with any threat. This was another sticking point: if he were royal, he would have a title, and legal claim to his stronghold. The Gaelic papers, however, called him a renegade, a man who had taken by force a remote castle in the western Highlands, and held it without title or deed, without anything except the power of his sword. Could a royal be a renegade, and if he had indeed been outcast from the family to such an extent that his name had been stricken from all records, would or could Robert the Bruce have tolerated such insolence within his own borders?

The Gaelic papers would probably be more enlightening, but her brain simply couldn't absorb any more of it that night. Putting aside the French papers, she thumbed through until she found the pages in Old English. Again, the name almost jumped off the page at her: Black Niall, a Scots warrior so bold and ruthless he was feared throughout the Highlands. His stronghold, Creag Dhu, was never breached, except once by "a layde who entered bye wicked trickery." Grace felt a tiny spurt of amusement when

she read that, for of course a woman couldn't have accomplished the seemingly impossible without using "wicked trickery."
"She fooled you, didn't she," she murmured to Niall, almost smiling as she imagined his disbelief, his outrage at finding his castle's protection breached by a lone woman. He would have been in an absolute fury, the kind! that had the castle guards hiding from him.
Grace stopped her thoughts, grimacing as she realized her imagination had kicked in again. She might dream about him, he might seem so real that sometimes she thought she could turn her head and actually see him standing there, but in ; reality he had turned to dust a good six centuries before she'd ever been born. Reading on, she found that Black Niall had captured the woman, so the "layde's" trickery had gained her nothing, except his attention, and perhaps that was what she had wanted. The papers didn't indicate what he had done with her after capturing her. Bedded her, probably, Grace thought. He'd been a lusty man, ill suited for monkhood.
Another account began: "Black Niall, the MacRobert-" and Grace sat upright as all the tumblers clicked into place. Niel Robertsoune - son of Robert, and a great warrior in an order renowned for its warriors. Niall MacRobert again, son of Robert, and a warrior so great his stronghold was never breached, save by that unnamed enterprising lady. "A Scot of Royal blude" . . . son of Robert. . . son of Robert the Bruce?
Electrified, she quickly checked the dates, only to sag back in disappointment. She could only guess at Black Niall's age, since she knew neither his birthdate nor the date he had died, but he had been a grown man when the Order had been condemned in 1307. King Robert I of Scotland, the most famous Bruce, had been too young to be Black Niall's father.
Quickly Grace rechecked her notes on the chronology of Scotland's royal line. Robert the Bruce's father, the Earl of Carrick, had also been named Robert.
Was Black Niall *brother* to Robert the Bruce? How? The Bruce's four brothers, Edward, Nigel, Thomas, and Alexander, had been well documented as they fought with their brother and king to push the English out of Scotland. The only way Niall could be connected, but left in obscurity, would be if he were illegitimate.
"That's it," Grace breathed, sitting back. The ramifications, the possibilities, made sitting still impossible. She jumped up and began pacing the confines of her small room as detail after detail fell into place to complete the puzzle.

A bastard half-brother, in medieval times, wouldn't have been that unusual or even that important - unless the legitimate heir happened to be aiming for a throne. Scotland had always been different from the rest of Europe in the way it looked at kinship, and while Niall's bastardy would normally have put him beyond the pale, in Scotland the crown had been up for grabs by the one who wielded the most power. The Bruce had been an undeniably powerful warrior and foe, but Niall's skills in warfare had been legendary. His very existence would have been a threat to Robert.

The wonder was that he hadn't been murdered, to remove that threat. The fact that he hadn't suggested that he had been held in some affection. Then, too, he had joined the Templars, so perhaps his ambitions had been churchly rather than political. Not remembering what she'd already read about Black Niall, he hadn't been the churchly sort at all. So why had he been a Templar? Adventure, wealth? She could see where the promise of both might have lured Black Niall to the Order, but overall his nature seemed far too fierce and earthy for him to accept the restrictions.

Whatever his reasons for becoming a Templar, his doing so had been convenient for the future King of Scotland. The Bruce wouldn't have had to worry about a monk gaining the crown, because his vows of chastity would have precluded heirs to the throne.

His chastity had ended with the destruction of the Order, Grace thought, if she had translated some of the passages correctly. The references to sexual activity hadn't been explicit, but fairly plain for all that. However Niall had honored his vows while a Templar, after the Order had been destroyed he had embraced life - and women - to the fullest. He still would not have been a threat to the throne, because as an ex-Templar he would have shunned exposure.

But it explained so much - why Niall had been able to take Creag Dhu and hold it without interference from the King, even why the Bruce had been the one European monarch who had not only not enforced the papal death sentence against the Templars, but whose country had become a sanctuary of sorts for the hunted men. Robert had refused to sign his half-brother's death sentence. It even explained why Niall had been chosen as Guardian; the Temple Masters had known his lineage, known he and the Treasure would be safer in Scotland than anywhere else in the world.

She inhaled suddenly, and the room turned dark around her as knowledge struck with the force of a blow. The Treasure. Ford and Bryant had died

because these stupid papers told the location of the famed, lost Treasure of the Templars: *Creag Dhu*.

Money. That was what it came down to. They had died because of money, money that Parrish Sawyer wanted. Because she had the papers, he had either assumed she had already translated enough to know what they were about and also told Ford and Bryant, or he had wanted to wipe out all knowledge of them regardless.

She had thought the grief would be easier to bear if she just knew *why.*

It wasn't.

Conrad lay quietly in bed, lights off, but the city was never dark and the bland hotel walls were washed with muted, flickering colors from a plethora of neon. The latest computer list lay on the desk, put aside for now. Some things were best reserved for the night, but others had to wait for busy daylight and normal office hours. The delay didn't bother him; he was a patient man. Grace wasn't going anywhere, at least not yet. She had gone to ground somewhere in the massive urban sprawl, and she would stay there as long as she felt safe. She was a scholar, a researcher; she would research. The libraries in Chicago were very good. Yes, he was confident she would remain in Chicago for a while, and all the time he would be looking for her. She wouldn't know he was close until he was ready to pounce.

Mr. Sawyer had a small army of men out combing the streets, but Conrad didn't put any faith in that tactic. The people who operated in the underground economy weren't about to answer any questions truthfully, for one thing, and for another, Grace had proven herself capable of quite a few disguises. By now she could have shaven her head and dressed in leather, so relying on description was a waste of time.

Conrad preferred his own methods. To him it was simple: if anyone on the run remained in one place for long, he or she would have to establish an identity. For some it would be as uncomplicated as selecting a name. That worked so long as there was no need for credit, or a driver's license, or you didn't try to work in a legitimate place that demanded a social security number. In the long run it was smarter to establish a documented identity, and Grace St. John had impressed him with her intelligence.

The process was simple, but slow. To document an identity, one had to have a birth certificate. To get a birth certificate, one had to have a real name. Obviously, using a living person's name could be complicated when the two identities began colliding with each other, as would inevitably happen, so

the best thing was to go to a cemetery and read tombstones. Find someone who had been born at approximately the same time as you were, within a couple of years either way, but who had died young. Sometimes the parents' names were on the tombstone, too: something along the lines of "Beloved Daughter of John and Jane Doe." Bingo, you had the information you needed to get a birth certificate.

Requests for birth certificates would go to the state capital, in this case Springfield. Getting a birth certificate was fairly easy; it was getting a full set of identification papers that would take time. Next she would have to get a social security number, and the federal government was slow. He had time to focus on the birth certificate requests.

With the Foundation's resources, gaining access to the Illinois state computer system had taken a mere phone call. He had been surprised, however, by the volume of requests. It was amazing how many people needed to prove their existence, whether for social security claims, passport applications, or whatever. The sheer numbers involved were what was slowing him down.

He could automatically delete those requests for men, but again there were a lot of people with ambiguous names. Shelley, for instance. Male or female? And what about Lynn, or Marion, or Terry? Those people had to remain on his list until he could check them out.

Nor did he have a specific date of request, which made his task more difficult. She couldn't have made a request any sooner than the day after he had almost caught her in Eau Claire, but what if she waited a few days, a week, maybe even a couple of weeks? That uncertainty added literally hundreds of people to the list, from allover the state. He narrowed the focus to the Chicago area, but that still left hundreds because he figured at least a fourth of the state's entire population lived in the metro area.

Checking out that many people took time, and the list grew every day. Some of the people who requested birth certificates had moved in the meantime; they had to be located, and sometimes they had moved out of state. Some had gone on vacation, but until he had traced them he didn't dare eliminate them from his list. Grace could be hiding behind any of those names, even the most improbable. He would not underestimate her again.

"Girl, you look like shit," Matty said genially, uncoiling his compact, graceful body from the tattered sofa in his apartment.

"Thanks," Grace muttered. She was tired from sitting up nights trying to decipher Gaelic. Her eyes felt gritty, she had the energy of a slug, and she had burned her hand that day when she picked up a pan to wash and discovered it had just been taken from the oven. Harmony had tended the bum, scowling the entire time, and then had insisted on accompanying Grace to Matty's for another "lesson," just to make certain something else didn't happen to her.

"Just skin hangin' on a rack of bones," Harmony pronounced, still scowling. "I can't get her to eat, no matter what I cook. She's done lost ten pounds or more since she's been living in my house, which ain't exactly the best advertisement I could have."

Grace looked down at herself. She was used to Harmony's complaints that she didn't eat enough, but still she was surprised now when she really *looked* at herself, and saw her bony wrists, her body lost within the baggy folds of clothes that had once been the right size. She knew she'd lost weight, a lot of weight, that first horrible week after the murders, but she hadn't realized she was still losing weight. She was *thin* and verging on downright skinny. She had to use a safety pin to tighten the waistband of her jeans so that they didn't slide right off. Even her underwear was too big these days, and loose panties weren't comfortable.

"I told her she don't need to be wearing those baggy clothes," Harmony continued, folding bonelessly onto the couch and crossing her long legs. "But does she listen to me? You tell her."

"Harmony's right," Matty said, frowning at Grace. "Don't give no sum bitch nothing to grab. You ain't got no size to you, Julia, and you ain't got no meanness. You'll fight if you're cornered, but the thing is, you gotta keep from gettin' cornered, 'cause then your chances go way down. Are you listenin' to me?" It wasn't like him to give a shit about anybody, but he worried about Julia. Something bad had happened to her, and she was still on the run. She didn't talk about it, but he could see it in her eyes. Hell, he was used to shootings and stabbings, drug overdoses, gang violence, little kids with big, scared, uncomprehending eyes, so he didn't know exactly what it was about Julia that got to him, but something did. Maybe it was because she looked so frail, so that sometimes he thought he could almost see right through her, or maybe it was the sadness that wrapped around her like a coat. She never smiled, and her big blue eyes just looked. . . empty. The look in her eyes made him hurt inside, and Matty was a man who made

a point of not letting people close enough to him that he'd be hurt if anything happened to them. He'd failed with Julia.
"I'm listening," Grace said obediently. "I listen to Harmony, too. I just can't afford a bunch of new clothes."
"You heard of yard sales?" Harmony asked. "Take your nose outta your books once in a while and look around. People sell old jeans for four or five dollars, and usually you can get 'em for a dollar if you stand around long enough complainin' that five bucks is too much."
"I'll look," Grace promised. Yard sales. She'd never been to one in her life, but if she could get jeans in her size for a dollar, she was about to become a yard-sale fanatic. She was getting tired of holding her clothes up with safety pins, and tired of her underwear wandering around inside her jeans.
"Okay, enough of shoppin'," Matty said impatiently. "I'm tryin' to teach you how to stay alive. Pay attention here."
Matty's method of teaching didn't involve gyms or dojos, because he said fights generally didn't happen there. They happened on the streets, in houses, where people went about their business and lived their lives. A couple of times he'd taken her down to an alley for her lesson, which involved him attacking her from a variety of directions, tackling her or simply wrapping his arms around her and throwing her to the ground, and she had to get away from him. He'd shown her where to kick, where to punch, and what items commonly found in an alley could be used as a weapon, from a wooden slat to a broken bottle. He'd taught her how to carry her knife, the one she'd taken from the mugger, how to hold it and how to use it.
Matty saw weapons everywhere. In his hands, a pencil was lethal, a book could do serious damage, and a salt or pepper shaker presented a priceless opportunity. Flashlights, paperweights, matches, pillows, a sheet, a jacket-all those could be used. Such a ridiculous notion as a fair fight never entered his head. Chairs were battering rams. A baseball bat or a golf club was for beating people in the head, ice skates were for slicing them open-the possibilities were endless. Grace didn't think she would ever be able to look at a room the same way again. Before, rooms had been just. . . rooms. Now they were weapons repositories.
He fell on her without warning, wrapping his surprisingly strong arms around her and dragging her to the floor. The fall stunned her, rattled her brain, but she remembered her earlier lessons and promptly raked the sole

of her shoe down his shin, and simultaneously got enough leverage with one arm to hit him under the chin with the heel of her palm. His teeth snapped together with an audible pop, and he shook his head to clear it. Grace didn't stop. She wiggled, she butted him with her head, she tried to punch him in the testicles, she gouged for his eyes.

Matty didn't just let her beat up on him, because that wouldn't teach her much, he said. She had to work to get in her licks. He deftly turned aside most of her efforts, but he'd explained to her that he was expecting her to fight and had a good idea what she'd do; a stranger wouldn't have that advantage. Still, she landed some of her attempts, enough to make him grunt occasionally, or swear when she managed to hit him in the chin again and he bit his tongue. Harmony sat on the couch and didn't exactly smile, but she looked pleased.

The effort quickly exhausted Grace. She collapsed on the floor, breathing heavily. Matty stood up and frowned down at her. "You're too weak," he pronounced. "Weaker than last week. I don't know what's eatin' at you, Julia, but you gotta eat, 'cause you ain't got no stamina." He wiped his mouth, and looked with interest at the blood that smeared his hand. "Guts, but no stamina."

Grace struggled to her feet. She truly hadn't realized how weak she had become; she had simply attributed her fatigue to staying up late trying to decipher all the papers. Once she had enjoyed food, but now she had no interest in it; everything was tasteless, as if her taste buds had been dulled by shock and never recovered.

"I'll eat," she said simply, realizing now that she didn't have a choice. Because it was such a struggle now to work up any appetite at all, what she did eat would have to be nutritious. She had no idea how long this time of sanctuary would last; she had to be ready to leave at any time, and she had to be healthy. Suddenly she felt a little edgy; perhaps she shouldn't wait until something happened, perhaps she should leave now, and find another brief sanctuary. She had Julia Wynne's birth certificate; she had filed for a social security number, and when she got that she would be able to get a driver's license. With a driver's license she could risk driving, and not worry if a cop stopped her for speeding, or for a blown taillight. She could buy a cheap car, risk driving, go anywhere she wished whether there was a bus route there or not.

Harmony stood and stretched. "I'll start feedin' her tonight," she told Matty ."Maybe some strengthening excercises, too, whaddaya think?"
"Food first," Matty said. "Poke some meat down her throat. You gotta have the brick before you can build the wall. A nice steak, or some spaghetti and meatballs, stuff like that."
Grace tried not to gag at the mention of spaghetti. After working at Hector's, she couldn't stand the smell of garlic and tomato sauce.
"I'll think of something," Harmony promised, noticing the look of revulsion on Grace's face. She understood, because she'd once worked three months at a seafood joint down south; she still couldn't stand the smell of hush puppies frying, but thank God she'd never even caught a whiff of one in Chicago. Pissed her off when she thought about it; she'd always liked hush puppies before, and now she'd lost that pleasure.
Grace and Harmony walked down three blocks to a bus stop. Grace had developed the habit of looking all around her, and Harmony watched with approval as she checked out her surroundings. "You learning," she said. "Now, what made you so uptight all of a sudden, there at Matty's?"
Harmony was the most observant person Grace had ever met. She didn't even try to blow smoke. "I was thinking of leaving."
Harmony's eyebrows slowly climbed toward her yellow white hair. "Was it something I said? Maybe you don't like my cooking? Or maybe something's got you scared."
"Nothing has happened to make me nervous," Grace tried to explain. "It's just. . . I don't know. Intuition, maybe."

"Then I guess you'd better be packing," Harmony said calmly. "It don't pay to go against your gut feeling." She looked up the street. "Here comes the bus."
Grace bit her lip. Though Harmony hadn't asked her to stay, and wouldn't, suddenly she felt the other woman's loneliness. They hadn't been intimates; both of them had too much to hide. But they had been friends, and Grace realized that she would miss Harmony's tough unconventionality.
"You need to stay a couple more days, if you can," Harmony continued, still watching the bus. "Let me get some food in you, build up your strength a little. And get
you some clothes that fit, damn it. Plus I got a few things I can show you, too, things that might come in handy."

She could live with the edginess for a day or two, Grace thought. Anything Harmony wanted to teach her was bound to be worth the stress. "Okay. I'll stay until the weekend." , Harmony's only reaction was a brief nod, but again Grace felt her pleasure. That night, sitting in the kitchen while Harmony worked a small miracle with a wok, Grace idly leafed through an impressive stack of newspapers. Harmony read the morning paper while sitting at the kitchen table and methodically emptying a pot of coffee, and tended to toss the paper onto an unused chair rather than into the trash. It had been so long since Grace had read a paper or listened to the news that she had no idea what was happening on a national level, and it felt strange to read the headlines and peek into an unknown past.

She had flipped through about half the stack when a grainy newsprint photograph caught her attention, and her gaze flew back to it. Suddenly she couldn't breathe, her lungs stilled in her chest, and her ears buzzed. Parrish. Parrish was one of the men in that photo.

Dimly she heard Harmony say something, then a hand was on the back of her neck, pushing her head down until it rested on her knees. Gradually the buzzing in her ears began to fade, and her lungs began working again. "I'm all right," she said, the words muffled against her knees.

"Izzat so? Coulda' fooled me," Harmony said sarcastically, but she released Grace's neck and plucked the news-paper from her nerveless fingers. "Let's see. What did you read that made you keel over? 'Peace Talks Resume'? Don't think so. How 'bout this: 'Graft in City Hall Costs City Millions.' Makes my blood pressure go up, but it ain't never made me faint. Maybe it was 'Industrialist's Wife Dies.' There's even a picture of the poor grievin' husband to tweak your emotions. Yep, that looks like something would hit you hard." She slapped the paper down on the table, staring at the photo. "So, which one of these guys do you know?"

Still breathing deeply, Grace looked again at the photo. It was still a shock to see Parrish's handsome face, but now she noticed there were other people there as well. The husband, for one, his face stark with grief. Beside him stood a man who looked vaguely familiar, and a quick look at the caption beneath the photo identified them as Bayard "Skip" Saunders, wealthy industrialist, and Senator Trikoris. Three other men were in the background, Parrish among them, none of them identified by name. Parrish's expression was suitably somber, but knowing what she did about him, she didn't trust the impression he gave.

Swiftly she read the four inches of column space. Calla Saunders had apparently fallen to her death from her penthouse balcony. There was no evidence of foul play. One of Mrs. Saunders's high-heeled shoes, with the heel broken off, had been found on the balcony. Investigators surmised she had fallen off balance when the heel broke, and gone over the railing; flecks of white paint from the railing had been found on her evening dress. She had evidently been alone on the balcony.

The investigators didn't know Parrish Sawyer the way she did, Grace thought, shivering. If he was anywhere near a death scene, she doubted the death was accidental.

She had forgotten how handsome he was. In her mind he had taken on a demonic aspect, his features shaped by the evil within, but the black-and-white photo captured his smooth, blond good looks, the chiseled face and slim, athletic body. As usual, he was impeccably attired. He looked completely civilized and cosmopolitan, a gentleman to his manicured fingertips.

His expression had been just as pleasant when he shot Ford in the head.

He was in Chicago. She checked the date on the newspaper, saw that it was almost two weeks old. Parrish was here. She wasn't safe, as she'd thought. Her instincts were right; it was time to leave.

"Let's see," Harmony mused when Grace didn't answer. "Wouldn't be the senator; he's all bullshit. Forget that Saunders guy; he's a complete wuss, just look at him. The other three. . . hmm . . . one looks like a cop, see the bad suit?"

Harmony was systematically, and with irritating accuracy, summing up every person in the photo. In another few seconds she would arrive unerringly at the correct conclusion. To save her the time and trouble, Grace tapped her fingernail once on Parrish's face.

"Now forget you ever saw him," she advised, her face and voice tense. "If he even thinks you might know something about me, he'll kill you."

Harmony's lashes shielded her eyes as she studied the photo. When she finally looked up at Grace, her green gaze was hard and clear. "That man's evil," she said flatly. "You gotta get out of here."

The next two days were a flurry of activity. Grace worked furiously on translating as much of the Gaelic as possible, because she wouldn't have time to work while she was traveling. Harmony made the rounds of yard sales, and came up with some jeans that actually fit Grace, as well as some

tight knit tops and a pair of sturdy hiking boots. When they were together, Harmony talked. Grace felt like Luke Skywalker listening to Yoda, but instead of imparting pearls of mystical wisdom Harmony discussed ways of losing a tail, how to travel without leaving tracks, how to get a fake driver's license and even a fake passport if she didn't have time or it was too dangerous to acquire the real thing. Harmony knew a lot about how to survive on the streets, and on the run, and that was her gift to Grace.

Her final gift was borrowing a car and driving Grace to Michigan City, Indiana, where she planned to catch a bus. Grace didn't tell Harmony her intended destination, and Harmony didn't ask; it was safer for both of them.

"Watch your back," Harmony said gruffly, hugging Grace to her. "And remember everything Matty and I showed you."

"I will," Grace said. "I do." She hugged Harmony in return, then gathered her bags and trudged into the bus station. Harmony watched the slight figure disappear inside, and blinked twice to dispel the blur from her eyes. "God, you watch over her," she whispered, giving her orders to the Almighty, then Harmony Johnson got back into the borrowed Pontiac and drove away.

Grace watched from the window, her eyes dry despite the tight ache in her chest. She didn't know how many more good-byes she could say; maybe it would be best to stay on the go, not staying in anyone place long enough to get attached to people.

But she still had a lot of work to do on the papers, and she needed a safe place in which to do it. She studied a map of the bus routes, then bought a ticket to Indianapolis. Once there, she would decide her next destination, but it had to be something totally unexpected. Parrish hadn't been in Chicago by accident, she was certain. Somehow, he'd known she was there. His men had been searching for her. She must have been utterly predictable, and soon they would have found her.

That wouldn't happen again, she promised herself. She was going to ground, in a place where they would never expect to find her, and suddenly she knew exactly where she was going. It was the one place they wouldn't think to look, the one place where she could keep tabs on Parrish and his movements: Minneapolis.

Chapter 11

THE NAME GRACE TOOK FROM THE CEMETERY IN MINNEAPOLIS was Louisa Patricia Croley. This time she didn't get a birth certificate. Instead, armed with Harmony's pearls of illegal wisdom, by that afternoon she had a social security number, an address, and a driver's license. The last two were fake. The social security number was real, because it had belonged to the real Louisa Patricia Croley. Getting the number had been a snap, and she didn't need an actual card, just the number.

The next morning she was the owner of a pickup truck, a beige, rusted-out Dodge that nevertheless shifted gears smoothly and did not emit either any strange noises or telltale puffs of smoke. By paying cash, she got the owner to knock four hundred off his asking price. With the title and bill of sale in her possession, she then stood in line to get the title switched to her name - or rather, to Louisa Croley's name.

Grace was grimly satisfied as she walked back out to the truck. She had wheels now. She could leave any time she wished, and she didn't have to buy a ticket or worry about disguising herself in case the ticket agent remembered her if anyone came around asking questions. The truck meant liberation.

She rented a cheap room close to downtown, and after a little research applied for a job with the cleaning service that cleaned some of the lavish homes in Wayzata. There was no better pipeline of information than a cleaning service, because no one paid any attention to the cleaners. She knew that Parrish employed a full-time housekeeper, as did some of the other home owners on the lake, but enough of them used an outside service to make the business very lucrative. Not enough of the lucre made it down to the hands of those who did the cleaning, however, so the turnover was fairly high. She was hired immediately.

That night, in her drab little room, she lay in the lumpy bed and thought drowsily of the papers she had just finished translating. In 1321, a man named Morvan of Hay had tried to kill Black Niall, but lost his own head. His father, a clan chieftain whose lands lay to the east, had then launched the entire clan into open warfare with the renegades of Creag Dhu. Niall had been captured during one battle and locked in the Hays' dungeon, but escaped by unknown means that same night.

Niall. Grace kept her thoughts focused on him, afraid to let them wander. Being in Minneapolis was more difficult than she'd thought-not because of

the danger, but because this was the city where she had lived with Ford, the city where her husband and brother were buried. She wanted desperately to go to their graves, but knew she didn't dare. Not only would it be an extremely risky move on her part, but she didn't think she could bear it. Seeing their graves would destroy her, shred the paper-thin wall she had built around her emotions. How long had it been now? Two months? Yes, two months and three days, almost to the hour. Not long enough. Not nearly long enough.

She would think of Niall instead. Concentrating on him was what kept her sane.

He was loving her.

On the periphery of her consciousness, Grace knew she was dreaming, but that awareness wasn't enough to stop the images. Always before when she had dreamed of Niall she had been an observer, but that night she was a participant.

The dream was vague, shifting, but she knew she was in bed with him. The bed was huge, piled high with furs; she would have felt lost and insignificant in such a bed, but with him there she was only vaguely aware of the vast expanse on which they lay. He mounted her, and the intense heat of his body startled her. Surprised, she realized they were both naked, his bare skin scorching hers. He was heavy, and the pressure of his weight almost crushed her, but it felt so wonderful to have a man on top of her again that she held him close. She had missed that so much, the weight of a man on her, the strength of a man's arms around her, his smell in her nostrils, his taste on her mouth.

She ran her hands over his back, feeling the layers of hard muscle under his taut skin. His mane of black hair was damp with sweat, his body was sheened with it. His scent was raw and hot and wild, that of a man aroused beyond control. She had caused this wildness in him and she loved it, she reveled in it, she wanted everything he could give her.

Then he entered her, and in her dream she cried out from the unbearable pleasure of it. He was so big she felt stretched, so hot she felt seared. Her body gathered and focused and tightened, and she began climaxing.

The spasms awoke her and at first she lay there awash in voluptuous sensation, breathing deeply and feeling the tremors subside. Niall must have just left her, she thought sleepily, because she could still feel in her loins the

lingering throb caused by his thrusts. She wanted to curl in his arms, and she reached out her hand and touched

Nothing. Grace came sharply awake, her breath suddenly harsh in her lungs. She sat up, staring wildly around the dark, empty room. Horror filled her at what she had done, and she clenched her teeth against a howl of rage, of despair, of violent rejection.

No.

She hated herself, hated her stupid hungry body for letting a figment of her imagination tempt it to pleasure. How dare she dream of Niall, how dare she let the dream Niall invade her body, give her pleasure? He wasn't Ford. Only Ford had ever touched her, made love to her, explored with her the intense sexuality of her nature. She had lain naked only with Ford, loved only Ford, yet only two months after his death she dreamed of another man, a *dead* man, and found sexual pleasure in the dream.

She huddled on the bed, keening softly to herself. She had betrayed Ford. It didn't matter that she had done so only in imagination, in her subconscious. Betrayal was betrayal. It should have been Ford she'd been dreaming about, Ford who had died protecting her.

But if her dreams were of Ford. . . she would have gone insane by now. His death, Bryant's death, was a great internal wound she didn't dare touch because it was still bleeding, still too painful to bear. She had focused on studying the documents about Black Niall because that was the only way she could function, and her subconscious had thrown her a curve ball by continuing to focus on him during her sleep.

Damn her body, damn her own nature. When she was awake it was as if her sensuality had died with Ford; she felt no desire, no frustration, no attraction. But when she slept, her body remembered, and yearned. She had loved making love, loved everything about it - the smells, the sounds, the delicious rub of his body against hers, the way he had stroked her while she arched and purred, the sweet, startling moment of entry when their bodies linked. When Ford was off on a dig and she hadn't been able to join him, she had been tormented by sexual frustration until he returned. He had always walked into the house grinning, because he knew that within five minutes they would be locked in their bedroom.

Grace locked her arms around her knees and stared at nothing. Perhaps, now that she had calmed down, she could understand how she had come to dream about Niall, but she didn't want it to happen again. She wouldn't

think about the papers when she was in bed. Instead she would think about Parrish. That would be safe, because she didn't find him remotely attractive; she could see the evil beneath the beauty of his form. She would try to devise some means of revenge. She didn't just want him dead, she wanted justice, she wanted the world to know the truth about him. She wanted it known he had killed two wonderful men, and why. But if justice eluded her, she would settle for vengeance.

Finally she lay back down, half afraid to sleep again but knowing she had to try; she started work at seven in the morning, and cleaning houses was hard work. She needed to sleep, she needed to remember to eat, she needed. . . oh, God, she needed Ford, and Bryant, she needed everything to be the way it was before.

Instead she lay alone in a narrow, lumpy bed, and watched the night pass while she tried to think of some way to use the papers against Parrish.

* * *

Niall jerked himself out of sleep, cursing as he carefully rolled onto his back and pushed the bedcovers away from his straining, jutting penis, unable to tolerate even the slightest touch lest he spill his seed in the bed. He hadn't done such a thing since he was an untried lad of thirteen, not even during his eight years of sexual deprivation as a Knight.

He had dreamed of a woman, dreamed he was plowing deep into her belly. He couldn't fathom why he should be dreaming of such, when only a few hours earlier he had enjoyed a lusty encounter with Jean, a widow who had sought the safety of living within castle walls and traded her skills in the kitchen for a pallet in Creag Dhu.

He hadn't dreamed of Jean, or of any other woman he knew. But the woman in his dreams had been familiar, somehow, though in his dream they had coupled in darkness and he hadn't been able to see her face. She was small in his arms, as most women were, but there had also been a certain frailty, a slightness that made him want to take care with her. She hadn't wanted careful tenderness, however; she had been hot and wanton, clinging to him, her hunger as fierce as his. Her hips had lifted to meet him and as soon as he had entered her, groaning at the perfect, silky tightness that gloved him, her spasms of pleasure had begun. The intensity of her response to him had made him hum hotter and faster than he ever had before, and he'd been on the verge of joining her in climax when he abruptly woke to an empty bed, empty arms, and furious frustration.

He judged the hour to be near dawn, too near to seek sleep again. Scowling, he groped for flint and lit a candle, then strode to the fireplace to stir the banked embers and add a few small sticks to catch fire. The chill air washed around his naked body, but he didn't feel cold; he was hot, almost steaming from the force of his arousal. His penis was still thick and erect, aching from the loss of that tight internal clasp. He could feel her on his flesh as vividly as if he had indeed just left her body.

She had smelled. . . sweet. The memory was elusive, fleeting, but his thin nostrils flared as he instinctively tried to catch it again. Clean and sweet, not the overpowering sweetness of a flowery perfume but something light, tantalizing, and underlying it had been the exciting muskiness that signaled her arousal.

Ah, it had been a great dream, despite the frustrating aftermath. He seldom laughed, for life did not much amuse him, but his lips curved upward as he stared down at his rebellious manly parts. The dream woman had aroused him more than any real woman ever had, and he had greatly enjoyed many women. If he should ever truly lay his hands on one such as his dream woman, he would no doubt kill himself rutting on her. Even now, when he remembered how it had felt to enter her, the heat and wetness and tight, perfect fit.

The throb in his loins intensified, and his smile grew to a grin, one that none of his people had ever seen, for it was free and lighthearted, and he hadn't been that since the age of sixteen. He grinned at his own foolishness, and at remembered pleasure, real or not. He tormented himself by letting his thoughts linger on the dream, yet it was too arousing to forget.

Small tongues of flame were licking at the sticks now, so he added a larger log, and pulled his shirt on over his head. After wrapping his plaid about his hips and belting it, then draping the excess around his shoulders, he put on his thick --wool stockings and shoved his feet into the soft leather boots that he preferred over the short, rough *brogaich* worn by his men. He never went unarmed, even in his own castle, so next he slipped a slender dagger into his boot, a larger one into his belt, then buckled on his sword. He had just finished when a hard knock sounded on his door.

His dark brows snapped together. It wasn't yet dawn; a knock at this hour could mean only trouble. "Come," he barked.

The door opened and Eilig Wishart, captain of the night guards, poked his ugly head inside the chamber. He looked relieved at seeing Niall already

dressed.
"Raiders," he said briefly, in Scots. He was a broken man from Clan Keith, a man separated from his clan by will or by expulsion, and the Lowlanders more normally spoke Scots than Gaelic. Eilig always did so when he was excited.
"Where?" “From the east. 'Twill like be the Hays." Niall grunted as he strode from the chamber. "Rouse the men," he ordered. He agreed with Eilig; over the years Huwe of Hay had come to bitterly hate the renegades of Creag Dhu, for they controlled a large area he had previously regarded as his to plunder. He had made bleating protests to the Bruce, for such a large gathering of broken men from allover Scotland could only mean trouble. Robert, during one of his midnight visits, had warned Niall to be wary of his neighbor to the east. The warning had been unnecessary. Niall was wary of everyone.
He himself saw to having the horses readied, and invaded the kitchens to have provisions gathered for himself and the men. Big loaves of coarse bread were already baking in the ovens for the evening meal, and a huge pot of porridge was beginning to bubble over the fire.
He tore off a hunk of stale bread from yesterday's loaf, and washed it down with ale. Between bites, he gave orders. Jean and the others scurried around, gathering bags of oats and wrapping bread, cheese, and smoked fish in cloth. The women's eyes were large and frightened, but they regarded him with confidence, trusting him to see to the matter as he'd done for the past fourteen years.
When he went down into the inner bailer he found it teeming with terrified crofters who had been allowed into the castle for protection. Torches burned brightly on the turmoil, as the horses were brought around and his men descended to take their bags of food and make the many small preparations for going to war. The wounded lay where they had fallen, and others scurried around them, sometimes stepping over them. One sturdy old woman was making an effort to gather the wounded into one area so they could be cared for. Men cursed and snarled, and some women wept inconsolably for loved ones they had lost, husbands and children, and perhaps for what they had endured at the hands of the raiders. Some women were silent, closed in on themselves, their tom clothing telling the tale that their closed lips refused to speak. Children huddled close to their mothers, or stood alone and wailed.

It was war. Niall had seen its image many times, been hardened to it. That did not mean he would ignore such an attack on what was his. He strode over to the old woman who was trying to bring order to chaos, recognizing in her the hallmarks of a leader. He put his hand on he. plump arm and pulled her aside. "How many hours have passed?" he asked curtly. "How many were they?"

She gaped up at the big man who towered over her, his black mane swirling about his broad shoulders, his eyes as cold and black as the gates of hell. She knew immediately who he was. "It canna' ha' been more than an hour or two. 'Twas a fair party, thirty or more."

Thirty. That was a large raiding party, for raiding was something best accomplished by stealth. In fourteen years he had never left Creag Dhu guarded by fewer than half his men-at-arms, but if he pursued and engaged that many men he would need more than his usual force.

Such a large raiding party was a challenge, an affront, that couldn't be ignored. Huwe of Hay must know that Niall would retaliate immediately, so it followed that he would have prepared for such an event. Perhaps he had even planned it deliberately, to draw Niall and most of his men away from the castle.

Niall beckoned to Artair, who left his horse with a lad and obeyed the summons immediately. The two men walked a little away from the noise and chaos. Artair was the only other former Templar left at Creag Dhu, a solitary and devout man who had never lost faith even when the Grand Master had gone to his fiery death seven years before. Artair was forty-eight and gray-haired, but his shoulders were still straight and, like Niall, he trained every day with the men. He'd forgotten none of the battle strategies they had learned in the Order.

"I suspect this to be a ruse to draw most of the men away from the castle," Niall said quietly. His mouth was a grim, thin line, his eyes narrowed and cold. "The Hay will likely attack as soon as he thinks us well away. I canna' think he's close enough to watch, nor do I think the clumsy oaf that canny. I will take fifteen with me; the others will remain here, under your command. Be watchful."

Artair nodded, but his gaze was worried. "Only fifteen? I heard the woman say thirty-"

"Aye, but we've had the training of these lads, have we not? Two to one are not fair odds, for we've still the advantage."

Artair smiled wryly. The Hay clansmen would be fighting against unknowing, unsworn Templars, for Niall, with his help, had trained them well. Most Scots roared into battle with little thought other than to slash or stab whoever was in front of them, but the clanless men at Creag Dhu attacked with a discipline that would have done a Roman legion proud. They had been taught strategy and technique, had it hammered into them by the most fearsome warrior in Christendom, if they but knew it. They knew only that since he had appeared in the Highlands none had defeated Black Niall, and they were proud to serve under him. All their clan loyalty, their sense of kinship and belonging, had been transferred to him, and they would unhesitatingly fight to the death for him.

Satisfied that Creag Dhu was well defended, Niall chose fifteen of his men and led them out of the gates, then rode hard into the dawn. He pushed both man and beast hard to overtake the raiders, for he suspected their intent was to lead him as far away from Creag Dhu as possible. His face was grim and hard as he rode. The Hay clansmen had made a fatal mistake by committing their thieving, raping, and murdering on land Niall considered his own. He had taken Creag Dhu, fortified it, remade it for his purposes; the Treasure was safe there, and no one was going to take it from him.

Huwe was a fool, but a dangerous one. He was a blustering bull of a man, quick to take offense and too stubborn to admit when he was outmatched. Niall was a soldier by both nature and training, and despised the heedlessness that cost unnecessary clan lives. Though he usually tried not to cause such an uproar in the Highlands that Robert would be called upon to intervene, for he knew it would mean trouble for his brother when he refused to oust the renegades and broken men from Creag Dhu, Niall's patience was at an end. By threatening Creag Dhu, the Hay now threatened the Treasure - and he would die because of his foolishness.

A good horse could make the difference between victory and defeat, and Niall had made a point over the years of providing the best mounts possible for his men. By stopping only to water the sturdy beasts and allow them a moment's rest, he overtook the raiders at mid-morning.

The raiders were in the middle of a glen, laden with the goods they had stolen and driving a straggling herd of stolen kind before them. The morning sun glittered on the mist that still hung overhead like a veil. There was no place for them to take shelter, and when Niall and his men first

thundered out of the wood toward them the raiders milled about in a moment of panicked confusion.
The old granny had guessed aright, Niall saw; the enemy numbered more than forty, making the odds close to three to one, but almost half the forty were on foot. His teeth bared in a savage grin. Seeing the relatively small number of pursuers, the raiders would no doubt turn to meet them-a move they would have leisure to regret for only a short time.
As he had expected, there was a flurry of shouts and the company gathered, then charged across the glen, shouting and waving a variety of weapons, claymores and axes and hammers, even a scythe.
"Hold," Niall said. "Let them come to us." His men ranged on either side of him, spreading out so that they weren't clumped together and thus couldn't be flanked. They held, the horses stamping restlessly and tossing their heads, while the screaming attackers poured across the misty, sun-dappled glen.
But a good three hundred yards had separated the two groups, and three hundred yards is a long way for a weary man to charge, especially when he has been about the tiring business of raiding all night and has not slept, and has been traveling hard to evade pursuers. Those on foot soon slowed, and some stopped altogether. Those who pushed stubbornly on were no longer shouting, no longer borne onward by battle fever.
So the host of horsemen who charged ahead of the stragglers barely outnumbered Niall and his men. Niall's gaze targeted a bullish young man who rode in front, his wild tangle of sandy hair flying behind him. That would be Morvan, the Hay's ill-tempered, brutish elder son, and the spit of his father. Morvan's small, mean eyes were likewise locked on Niall.
Niall raised his sword. The claymore was, for most men, a two-handed weapon, but his strength and size gave him the power to swing the six-foot blade one-handed, freeing his left hand for yet another blade, or a Lochaber axe. Seizing the reins with his teeth, he took up an axe. His well-trained horse quivered beneath him, muscles bunching. When Morvan and his men were a mere thirty yards away, Niall and his men charged.
The impact was swift and staggering. Once he had fought with shield and armor, a hundred pounds of mail weighing him down, but now Niall fought free and wild and savage, his eyes burning with a fierce light as he blocked a sword with his axe and then went in under the man's defenses with his own sword, spitting him. He always fought silently, without the yells and

grunts of other men, instinctively sensing the next attack while he was still dealing with the present one.
Before his sword was free he turned, swinging the axe up to block another blow. Metal clanged as a sword struck the axe head, and the force of it jarred his arm. One powerful leg pressed and his horse turned, bringing him around to face this new challenge. Morvan of Hay pressed forward, using all his considerable weight in an effort to unhorse Niall.
Niall shifted his horse back, away from Morvan's weight. With a curse the younger man straightened, his yellowed teeth bared as he drew back the claymore for another attack. "*Diolain*!" Morvan hissed.
Niall didn't even blink at being called a bastard. He simply swung his own sword to parry, then buried his axe in the oars head, cleaving it almost in two. With a jerk he freed his weapon and turned for another adversary, but there was none. His men had worked as efficiently as he, and the Hay clansmen who had been mounted were no longer astride their horses, but lay sprawled in the indignity of death, limbs exposed, their blood turning the sweet earth to mud. The familiar stench of blood and waste marked their death.
Niall's black gaze swept over his men. Two were wounded, one seriously. "Clennan," he said sharply, drawing the attention of the man who had taken a wound in the thigh. "Care for Leod." Then he and his thirteen remaining men charged to meet the Hay clansmen who were on foot.
It was a rout, for a man on horseback had an enormous advantage over one afoot. The animals themselves were weapons, their steel-shod hooves and massive weight simply crushing those who could not move out of the way. Niall vaulted from his horse's back, the blood lust singing through him as he swung sword and axe, twisting. parrying, thrusting. He was a dark blade of death, unutterably graceful as he moved in his lethal dance. Five men fell before him, one beheaded by a massive sweep of the claymore, and Niall did not even feel the shock in his sword arm as the blade sliced through bone.
The carnage lasted two minutes, no more. Then quiet fell across the glen, the clash of swords replaced by an occasional moan. Swiftly Niall took stock, not expecting his men to have escaped unscathed. Young Odar was dead, lying sprawled beneath the body of a Hay clansman. His clear blue eyes stared sightlessly upward. Sim had taken a sword cut in the side and

was cursing luridly as he tried to stanch the flow of blood. Niall judged him well enough to ride.
Goraidh, however, was unconscious, his forehead bloody. All suffered from small cuts and bruises, himself included, but those wounds were as nothing. With two wounded in the first attack, he had ten healthy men remaining, and two would have to stay behind to help with the wounded and herding the cattle back to Creag Dhu.
"Muir and Crannog, remain with Sim and Clennan to help with the wounded, and the cattle." The two he had named did not look pleased at having to remain behind, but knew it was necessary.
They could not ride as hard as they had before, for the horses were tired. Niall kept them to a steady pace. his warrior's heart beating fierce and wild in his chest as he rode to another fight. The wind lifted his long hair, drying the sweat of battle. His thighs were clamped to the powerful animal beneath him, heat meeting heat, flesh against flesh. The thick wool plaid kilted about his waist gave him a freedom that braies and hose and hot sheepskin undergarment had denied him, and he exulted in his unfettered wildness. He had easily cast aside the physical accoutrements of the Knights, let his hair grow long, shaved his beard, discarded the hated sheepskin. Though he had become one of them, there had always been a place in his soul that yearned for Scotland, for the wildness and freedom, the mountains and mists, the sheer lustiness of youth. The life of warfare offered by the Knights had appealed to him, and as he had grown older he had learned what they did and accepted the burden, the sheer faith, but still Scotland had lived within him.
He was home, and though he reveled in his physical freedom he was bound now by a far heavier burden, one that ruled his life far more rigidly than before. Why had Valcour chosen him, an unwilling though faithful Knight? Had Valcour suspected how easily and eagerly he would rejoin his former land and life, giving no hint that he'd once been a Templar and thereby better protecting the Treasure? Had Valcour guessed the secret relief with which Niall had accepted his freedom from all his vows, save one? But that one was the greatest of all, and the most bitter, for it served to protect those who had destroyed the Order.
Why could not Artair have been chosen? Of necessity he had shaved his beard and grown his hair, for to do otherwise would have been courting death, but other than that he held still to the vows he had taken, to chastity

and service. Artair never doubted, never cursed God for what had happened, never turned from the faith to which he had sworn. If he had hated, at first, he had long since found peace and released his hatred, finding solace in prayer and war. Artair was a good soldier, a good companion.
He would not have been a good Guardian. Niall had not forgiven either the Church or God. He hated, he doubted, he cursed himself and Valcour and his own vow, but in the end he always came back to the same truth: he was the Guardian. Valcour had chosen well.
To protect the Treasure, Niall rode to face Huwe of Hay, well aware that a blood feud had started that day and determined that most of the blood would leak from Hay clansmen. Huwe wanted war? Very well, then, there would be war.

Part Two - Niall

Chapter 12

"*FEAR-GLEIDHIDH*," GRACE MUTTERED TO HERSELF, moving the words around on the computer screen and trying to make sense of the sentence. *Fear-gleidhidh* meant "guardian"; she was familiar enough with that word to recognize it at a glance. Over the past several months she'd spent so much time with these blasted Gaelic papers that she'd learned to recognize a lot of the nouns, though sometimes the spelling threw her off. Even with the help of a two hundred dollar set of tapes that promised to teach her how to speak Gaelic, and which she'd bought in a useless hope that it would help clarify the murky medieval Gaelic syntax, it could still take hours to translate a few sentences.

But what on earth did *cunhachd* mean? Running her finger down the page of the Gaelic/English dictionary, she couldn't find any such word. Could it be cunbhalach, which meant "steady," or *cunbhalachd*, which was "judgment"? No, it wouldn't be the first, for if she was reading it correctly the sentence was "The Guardian has the Cunhachd." The capitalization didn't necessarily mean anything, but the sentence certainly wouldn't be "The Guardian has the Steady."

"The Guardian has the Judgment"? Grace rearranged the words on the screen once again, wondering if she had misread the verb or tangled the syntax for what seemed like the millionth time. Without the benefit of classes, it was taking her more time to learn Gaelic than any other language she had studied. She was getting better at it, though.

She rechecked the paper, bending close and using her magnifying glass to study the faded letters. No, the verb was definitely "has." *Cunhachd* was the stumbling block. She turned her attention to it, and noticed that the n was smeared. Could it be an m instead? Returning to the dictionary, she looked up *cumhachd*, and a surge of triumph went through her. C*umhachd* meant "power."

"The Guardian has the Power." She raked her hands through her hair, lifting the long strands and letting them sift through her fingers. What were some synonyms for *power*? *Authority, right, might, will.* All of those would fit, yet each differed somewhat in meaning. If she interpreted the sentence literally, then what power did the Guardian have? Power over the Treasure, absolute control of it? Money was power, as the old saying went, but the chronicles had also said that the Treasure was "greater than gold." It

followed, then, that though there had likely been a monetary treasury, that wasn't the Treasure referred to so reverentially.
So what had the Treasure been, and what sort of power had the Guardian wielded because of it? If Black Niall had been the possessor of such mighty power, why had he spent his life as a renegade in the remote western Highlands? How had a Templar, supposedly a religious man, become a man as renowned for his sexual appetite as he was for his skill with a claymore?
Two more hours of work still left her in the dark. The Treasure was either "a knowing of God's will," something that was certainly ambiguous enough, or "proof of God's will," which was equally unenlightening. It possessed the power to "bow kings and nations before it," and "vanquish evil."
She read aloud the words on the screen. "The Guardian shall pass-or travel, or walk-beyond the bounds of time, or season-in the way of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to do His battle with the Serpent." That sounded as if the Guardian would emulate Jesus's struggle with Satan, which hardly translated into any great power, but rather an effort to live an honorable, blameless life - something difficult enough, and from what she'd read about Black Niall he hadn't even *tried*.
So what was the Treasure, and what was the Power? Religious myth? Parrish evidently believed the gold was real; on the surface that was motive enough, yet she kept coming back to the Treasure that was greater than gold, and wondering if more than wealth was involved. If so, what? No Templar had ever betrayed the secret of the Treasure, though some of them had been hideously tortured. Perhaps most of them hadn't known anything to tell, but certainly the Grand Master had known, and he had gone to the stake with the secret untold. Instead he had cursed the King of France and the Pope, and within a year both Philip and Clement had died, giving credence to the superstition of the time that the Templars had been in league with the devil.
Slowly Grace paraphrased the unwieldy sentence. "The Guardian shall walk beyond time to vanquish evil." Sometimes putting the words in a more modem context helped her see through the lapsed centuries to find the most logical translation. She tried again. "The Guardian shall pass the season in battle against evil." What season? The years following the destruction of the Order? Was the Guardian supposed to fight Philip and Clement on behalf of the Order? If so, Black Niall had instead fought his skirmishes in bed and in the mountains and moors of Scotland.

It didn't make sense, and she was too tired to keep at it. Grace saved the file, then turned off the computer. In six months she had translated all the tales of Black Niall's battles and conquests, the Latin and French and English, but parts of the Gaelic still defeated her. Come to that, some of the Latin didn't make sense, because for some reason a diet had been included. What did a carefully regulated consumption of salt have to do with a history of the Templars? And why was the amount of water they drank based on their weight? But there it was, right in the middle of a long passage on the duties of a Guardian: *Victus Rationem Temporis*, the diet of time, or for time.

She paused in the act of removing her sweatshirt. Time. What was this about time, that it cropped up in both Latin and Gaelic? Come to think of it, there had been something similar in the French documents. Swiftly she returned to the rickety table she used as a desk, flipping through the documents until she found the page she sought. "He shall be unbound by the chains of time."

Walking beyond time. Unbound by the chains of time. Diet for time. There was a common thread here, but she couldn't make sense of it. They had all been fixated on time, but was it in a metaphorical sense, or a conceptual thing? And what did time have to do with the Templars?

Well, it wasn't a puzzle she was going to solve by worrying at it; she would have to complete her translations, a project she could see the end of now. Another three weeks, perhaps a month, and she would have the Gaelic section completed. Gaelic was so difficult she'd saved it for last and she couldn't be certain of her translation, but she'd done the best she could. Whether it would tell her anything beyond the supposed location of the Templars' gold remained to be seen.

After undressing for bed, she neatly placed the computer and all her papers in the computer case, and set it within easy reach beside the bed. If she had to leave abruptly, she didn't want to waste time gathering everything together.

She turned out the light and lay on the narrow, lumpy bed, staring out the dingy window at the softly falling snow. The seasons had changed, summer giving way to fall, color dulling into the monochromatic shades of winter. It had been eight months since her old life had ended. She survived, but she couldn't say that she lived.

Her heart felt as bleak and stark as the winter. Her hatred for Parrish kept the pain at bay, untouched and undiminished. She knew it was there, knew

she would someday lose control over it, but she would pay that price when the time came.

She blessed Harmony every day. She had a passport in Louisa Croley's name, in case she had to get out of the country in a hurry. After obtaining that, she had left Louisa behind and taken another name, as well as another job. Marjorie Flynn had existed for two months, then she'd moved on and become Paulette Bottoms. Another low paying job, another cheap room. The Minneapolis-St. Paul area was large enough that she could lose herself in it, never meeting anyone she knew from before, so she had no difficulty in changing names. She made no friends, on Harmony's advice. She saved every penny she could and had amassed almost four thousand dollars, counting what she'd had left after buying the truck. She would never again be as helpless as she'd been after the murders.

Not that she ever *could* be, even without the assets of cash and transportation. Part of her helplessness had been her own total lack of knowledge about survival on the streets, and she was no longer ignorant. Her face was a cool, expressionless mask, and she walked with an alertness, a readiness, that told seasoned street predators she wouldn't be easy prey. At night, alone, she practiced the moves Mateo had taught her, and she carefully arranged her grim little rooms to provide the maximum in protection and opportunity for herself.

She was never unarmed. She had bought a cheap revolver and kept it with her, but she also had the knife in its sheath, tucked out of sight under her shirt. She had a sharpened screwdriver in her boot, a hatpin threaded in her shirt cuff, a pencil in her pocket. Finding a place to practice her nonexistent marksmanship hadn't been easy; she'd had to drive far out into the country, but she had achieved, if not true skill, at least a degree of efficiency and familiarity with the weapon, so she could carry it with some confidence.

She doubted anyone from her former life would recognize her now, even if she came face-to-face with a friend. Her long, thick hair was let down only in the privacy of her room; she wore a cheap, light brown wig to work, and at other times she twisted her hair into a knot on top of her head and covered it with a baseball cap. She was thin, weighing barely a hundred pounds, her cheekbones prominent over hollow cheeks. She had managed not to lose any more weight, but she had to make a deliberate effort to eat, and she exercised faithfully to stay strong. She wore tight jeans and sturdy black boots, and a fur-lined denim jacket as protection against the frigid

Minnesota winter. On Harmony's excellent advice she'd bought some cheap cosmetics and learned how to use mascara, blusher, and lipstick so she didn't look as if she were fresh out of a convent.

A couple of men had hit on her, but a blank, frozen expression and a terse "No" were enough to turn them away. She couldn't imagine even having a cup of coffee with a man. Only in her dreams did her sexuality reawaken, and she couldn't control that. Black Niall was so firmly in her thoughts, preoccupied her so many hours of the day, that she had found it impossible to shut him out of her subconscious. He was there, living in her dreams, fighting and loving, grim and beautiful and terrifyingly male, and so lethal she sometimes woke shivering with fear. She never dreamed that he threatened her, but the Black Niall of her imagination was not a man one crossed with impunity.

She felt alive, painfully so, when she dreamed of him. She couldn't preserve the vast emptiness that protected her when she was awake; she ached, and yearned, and trembled at his touch. Only twice more had she dreamed of actual lovemaking, but both times had been shattering.

It was a mistake to remember those dreams now, when she was trying to sleep. She knew that, and turned restlessly on her side. She was all but inviting a recurrence. But the dreams of lovemaking were more welcome than the dreams of battle, which had been occurring incessantly for the past four months. He hacked and slashed his way through her sleep, wading through blood and body parts, the images so intense she could hear the clang of swords striking together, see the men slip and stumble, hear them grunt with effort, hear the screams of pain and watch their faces distort in death throes. Given a choice between carnage and sex, she would definitely choose sex, were it not for the guilt that haunted her afterward.

After an hour of lying there she sighed, resigning herself to a sleepless night. She was tired but her brain refused to stop working, going over and over the papers, thinking about Niall, trying to piece together some feasible means of revenge against Parrish. She had hoped to find something in the papers to use against him, but if she'd been thinking straight she would have realized there couldn't be anything incriminating about him in papers that were almost seven hundred years old. The papers fascinated her so much that she hadn't been able to see past her own obsession. No, if she could manage any sort of revenge against Parrish it would have to be something much more straightforward, like killing him herself.

She got out of bed and turned on the light, her eyes stark, her soft mouth set in a grim line. Over the past eight months she had learned she could fight to protect herself, perhaps even kill in self-defense, but she didn't know if she could kill in cold blood. She paced back and forth, hugging her arms around her to ward off the night chill. Could she kill Parrish? Could she walk up, stick the revolver to his head, and pull the trigger?

She closed her eyes, but the vision that came to mind wasn't of herself shooting Parrish, but of the utter disregard, almost boredom, with which he had shot Ford and Bryant. She saw the sudden blankness on Ford's face, the bonelessness of his body as he slumped over.

Her teeth clenched, her hands knotted into fists. Oh, yes, she could kill Parrish.

Why didn't she just do it, then? She had driven by his house a few times when she'd been working for the cleaning service; she had never seen him or his car, but then she hadn't expected to. If he were at home, his car would be in the garage, and Parrish wasn't the type of man who enjoyed gardening. She knew nothing of his schedule, hadn't spent her days watching his house in order to follow him. She had taken self-protective measures, but in reality she had done nothing to avenge her family. Instead she had concentrated on the papers, persuaded herself that there could be something useful in them, deluded herself so she could merely mark time and lose herself in the translations.

But self-delusion was at an end. She needed either to do something about Parrish or to go away quietly and spend the rest of her life grieving and hiding.

All right. She would do it. She would track Parrish down, and kill him.

Grace felt the weight of the decision settle on her. She didn't have the stuff of which killers were made, and she knew it. On the other hand, she hadn't sought any of this; Parrish had begun the dance. The Old Testament said, "Thou shalt not kill," but it also said, "An eye for an eye." Perhaps she was rationalizing, but she took that to mean that once a murder was committed, society or the wronged family had a right to put an end to the murderer's existence.

No matter. Tomorrow she would begin tracking him down like the animal he was.

Morning, however, brought a new reality: she had to work. She couldn't spend all day sitting in some hidden place and watching Parrish's house.

Her old truck would be out of place, and very noticeable, in any case. Physically watching for him, following him, seizing an opportunity, simply wasn't feasible. She had to know in advance where he would be, and be there before him.
For all she knew, he wasn't even in town. During the winter he often took long vacations in warmer climes, staying away for as long as a month at a stretch.
There was only one way to find out. During her lunch break with another cleaning service, she stopped at a fast food joint and used a pay phone to call the Foundation.
Her fingers moved without volition, punching in the! familiar numbers. It wasn't until the first ring buzzed in her ear that she realized what she was doing, and her heart thumped wildly in her chest. Before she could slam down the receiver the flat, impersonal voice of the receptionist answered.
"Amaranthine Potere Foundation. How may I direct your call?"
"cc Grace swallowed. "Is Mr. Sawyer in the office today?" One moment."

"No, don't ring-" she started to say, but the line had already clicked and another ring was sounding. She took a deep breath and prepared to ask the question again of Parrish's secretary; she would need to disguise her voice a little, because Annalise had once been fairly familiar with
"Parrish Sawyer." The smooth, cultured tones stunned her, panicked her. She froze in place, her mind going blank at actually hearing that hated voice again.
"Hello?" he said, more sharply. . Grace gasped.
"Is this an obscene call?" he asked, sounding both bored and annoyed. "I really don't-" Then he stopped, and she could hear his own breathing for a few endless seconds. "Gracie," he said, purring her name. "How nice of you to call."
She felt wrapped in ice, a coldness that had nothing to do with the fifteen-degree weather. She couldn't speak, couldn't move, could only clench the receiver with white, bloodless fingers.
"Can't you speak, darling? I want to talk to you, clear up this dreadful misunderstanding. You know I wouldn't let anything happen to you. There's always been something between us, but I didn't realize how potent it was until you ran away. Let me help you, darling. I'll take care of everything."

He was a wonderful liar, she thought dimly. His warm, seductive voice oozed sympathy, trustworthiness; if she hadn't seen him commit the murders, she would have believed every word out of his mouth.
"Gracie," he said, cajoling, whispering. "Tell me where to meet you. I'll take you away, just the two of us, to someplace safe. You won't have to worry about anything."
He *wasn't* lying. It was lust she heard in his voice. Horrified, sickened, she finally managed to hang up the phone and blindly made her way back to the truck. She felt filthy, as if he'd actually touched her.
My God, how could he have the utter gall, how could he possibly think she would let him touch her? But there wasn't any *letting* involved, she realized. She started the truck and drove carefully away, not doing anything to attract attention, but her heart was beating so rapidly she felt faint. He didn't know for certain she'd seen him that night, so he'd taken the chance that she hadn't and tried to talk her into coming to him. She had never had any doubts he would kill her; now she knew he would rape her first.
Wispy snowflakes drifted across her windshield, just a few at first, but by the time she got to the next house on her list the snow was coming down fast enough to begin collecting on the hood of the truck. This was one of her least favorite houses to clean; Mrs. Eriksson was always there, carefully watching every move Grace made as though she expected her to walk off with a television or something. But she didn't chatter, as some people did, and today Grace was grateful for the silence. She moved in a daze through the cleaning, her mind spinning while she carefully mopped and dusted and vacuumed.
Mrs. Eriksson dumped a load of clothing on the sofa. "My bridge club is coming over tonight and I have to bake a cake; it would help me a lot if you'd fold the laundry while I start the baking."
The woman was tireless in trying to get the cleaning service to perform extra, unpaid tasks. Grace made a show of looking at her watch. "I'm sorry," she said politely. "I have to be at another house in half an hour. I have just enough time to finish your floors." It was a lie; today was a light day for her, and she had only one more house to do, at four o'clock. But Mrs. Eriksson was probably lying about the bridge club, too, and perhaps even about the cake.
"You're very uncooperative," the woman said sharply. "You've refused my requests before, and I'm thinking of changing services. If your attitude

doesn't change, I'm going to have to speak to your supervisor."
"I'm sure she'll be happy to schedule laundry services for you."
"Why should I use her service for that, when you've been so unsatisfactory in everything else?"
"She can assign someone else, if you like." Grace didn't look up, but stuffed her dusting cloth back into the canvas bag in which she carried all her cleaning products, then deftly plugged in the vacuum cleaner and turned it on. The noise drowned out anything Mrs. Eriksson might have said, and Grace industriously shoved the machine back and forth across the carpet. The service owner had Mrs. Eriksson's number; she might assign someone else to clean the house, but Mrs. Eriksson still wouldn't get her laundry folded or her dishes washed unless she paid for it.
Mrs. Eriksson sat down on the sofa and began folding clothes, snapping the garments and glaring all the while, but Grace's mind immediately went back to Parrish.
Everything inside her recoiled in revulsion. She couldn't even imagine the horror of being in his hands. He wouldn't have to kill her, because she would go mad if he touched her, her mind would shut down completely. How had he known? How had he guessed it was her on the phone? What kind of feral instincts did he have that had led him so swiftly and unerringly to her identity? More important, had he immediately phoned the Minneapolis police and told them she was in the area?
Parrish did place an immediate phone call, but it was to Conrad instead of the police department. "Ms. St. John just called my office," he said smoothly, pleasure and exhilaration in his voice. "Doubtless she only wanted to know if I am here, and she would have expected Annalise to answer the phone. Get to our source with the phone company immediately and find out where that call came from." He glanced at his Rolex. "The call came in to me at twelve twenty-three. "
He hung up without waiting for Conrad's reply, if he had intended to make one. Parrish leaned back in his massive leather chair, breathing hard from the excitement pouring like water through him. Grace! After six damnably frustrating months, in which she had seemed simply to disappear from Chicago, who would have thought she would make contact herself? Conrad was sure he'd found where she'd been working in Chicago, at an Italian dump where most of the employees were paid under the table. The woman had been thinner but she had sometimes carried a small case, had

kept to herself, and had a blond, frizzy hairdo. The blond frizz job had also been reported involved in a peculiar altercation outside the Newberry Library. The Newberry happened to be one of the foremost research libraries in the country, something Grace would know, and a resource she would need. Parrish knew by that she was working on the papers, and Grace was very good at her work. She would have a very good idea of why he wanted the papers.

But then she'd vanished again, simply not returning to the restaurant, and no one there had known where she lived. Conrad had checked the bus lines, the trains, airlines, but no one had noticed a woman with frizzy blond hair carrying a computer case. She had disappeared, and not even Conrad had been able to find a trace of her.

Where was she now? In Minneapolis, or hiding in some backwater? Why had she called? She hadn't said anything but he was almost positive, just from that one tiny betraying gasp, that she was the caller.

Soon he would know, if not her present location, at least where she'd been when she made the call. The police had to have a court order to access those kinds of records at the phone company, but he wasn't hindered by their ridiculous regulations. Conrad would at least know where to begin searching for her, and his pride was at stake now; he was still smarting from letting a little nobody like Grace St. John escape from him.

Why would she want to know if he was in the office? He laughed softly to himself. Was little Grace planning some sort of revenge? What did she think she could do, walk into his office and point a pistol at him? She knew the security of the building, knew she wouldn't get past the lobby.

Perhaps he should let her, though, draw her to him. He could overpower her easily enough, and then he'd have her.

He could work late; the building would be deserted, and she would feel more confident. He could arrange for the guards to be looking conveniently the other way, but not make it so easy that she became suspicious. He would wait by the door for her, ready to disarm her of whatever weapon she carried; he wouldn't want to give her an opportunity for a lucky shot.

Perhaps he wouldn't wait for a more comfortable, convenient place in which to take her. Perhaps he would have her right on the desk, stretched across the glassy surface. She would struggle and kick and he would soothe her, whisper to her, and kiss her astonishingly carnal mouth. She would feel so soft beneath him, so helpless.

He was fully aroused, almost panting. Once wouldn't be enough, he knew that now. He wanted to come in her mouth, and he wanted to feel her come. He wanted to hear her cry out his name in pleasure.
Then he would kill her. What a waste, but it had to be done.
* * *
"She called from a pay phone at a McDonald's in Roseville," Conrad reported. "No one noticed her, but the only other calls received around that time originated from legitimate contacts."
"Roseville." Parrish considered the location. It was a suburb just northeast of downtown. "Do you have men watching the place in case she returns?"
"Yes." Conrad had taken care of that detail immediately. People were generally creatures of habit, adhering to the same routine for months, years. Grace had shown herself to be unusually unpredictable, but he couldn't afford to assume she would immediately take off for parts unknown. If she remained in the city, sooner or later she would at least pass by that McDonald's - if not today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then perhaps on this same day next week. He was a patient man; he would wait.
"So she came back here," Parrish mused. "Gutsy of her don't you think? I never would have expected it. Do you think she's going to try to kill me?"
"Yes," Conrad said impassively. Otherwise, there was no logical reason for her to return to Minneapolis. The danger was too great.
"Perhaps we should let her try." Parrish smiled, his eyes bright with anticipation. "Let her come to us, Conrad. We'll be ready."

Chapter 13

"NIALL, I DREAMED ABOUT YOU AGAIN LAST NIGHT. FOR ONCE, you weren't either fighting or having sex, just sitting quietly in front of a fire, cleaning your sword. You looked - not sad, but grim, as if you carried a burden that would break most men. What were you thinking about? What makes you so alone? Do you think about the Templars, all the friends who died, or is there something else that made you so hard? Do you resent being a renegade, when your brother is a king?"
Grace lifted her hands from the keys, disturbed by what she had just typed. Dreaming about him was one thing, writing to him was another. It was unsettling, the way she felt as if she were truly communicating with him, as

if he would read her words and reply. She knew the constant stress of the past eight months had taken a toll on her, but she hoped she hadn't totally flipped out.

She had tried to resume writing in her electronic journal, but somehow her brain refused to seize on the everyday detail that she had recorded before. For one thing, she had no routine life, and without a routine there couldn't be anything unroutine. She would stare at the empty screen, her fingers poised over the keys, but in the end she had no comment to make about the day. She had no appointments to keep, no news to share, no one to share it with in any case. She went through the days silent and numb, coming alive only with hatred for Parrish or when she was translating the papers.

But however illusory Niall was, he was far more vivid than anything else in the grayness of her life. He seemed real, as if he were just on the other side of the door, unseen but undeniably there. His myth, his history, was her one bit of color. Through him, she still lived, still felt the hot rush of vitality and passion. She could talk to him as she would never again be able to talk to anyone living. The division between before and now was too deep, too drastic; there was too little left of the shy, bookish, rather innocent woman she had been. In her own way, she was as unreal as Niall.

She felt her aloneness all the way to the bone. Not loneliness; she didn't pine for company, for a sympathetic ear, for gossip and chatter and laughter. She was alone in a way she'd never before imagined, as solitary as if she were an astronaut come untethered from the mother ship, drifting unnoticed in an emptiness so vast it was beyond comprehension. She had found a whisper of companionship with Harmony Johnson, but remaining would have been too dangerous to Harmony, and during the six months she'd been back in Minneapolis she hadn't truly talked with anyone. She woke up alone, she worked in mental if not physical isolation, and she went to sleep alone. Alone. What a desolate, empty word.

In her dream, Niall had been alone. Alone inside, as she was. He could be surrounded by people and still be alone, because there was something untouchable in him; something no one else even knew existed. The golden glow of the fire had outlined the hard, pure lines of his face, shadowed the deep-set eyes and high cheekbones. His movements had been deft as he saw to the cleaning and repair of his weapon, his long fingers tracing over the razor edge to find any chips that dulled its effectiveness. His manner had been absorbed, deliberate, remote.

Once his head had lifted and he sat very still, as if listening for or to something that hadn't registered in the dream. Black mane flowing over his broad shoulders, his black eyes narrowed, he had been the picture of animal alertness, on guard and wary. No threat had materialized and gradually he had relaxed, but she had the impression of a man who could never truly ease his vigilance. He was the Guardian.

She had wanted to touch his shoulder, and sit silently beside him by the fire while he tended his tools of war, giving him the comfort of her warmth and presence so that he knew he wasn't alone after all-and perhaps, in doing so, she too would find comfort and companionship. But in this dream she had been locked into the role of observer, unable to go closer, and in the end she had awakened without touching him.

"If I were with you.. ." Startled, she stared at what she had typed. The words hadn't been consciously planned; her fingers had simply moved on the keyboard and they had appeared. Suddenly frightened, she closed the file on her journal. Her hands were shaking. *She had to stop thinking of Niall as if he were alive*. The fixation on him was too vivid, too powerful. At first concentrating on him had seemed reasonable, a way of keeping herself sane, but what if it were having the opposite effect and she was losing herself in fantasy? After reading her journal entries, any psychiatrist would be forgiven for thinking she had lost contact with reality.

But reality was seeing her husband and brother murdered, crouching in a cold rain too terrified to cross a street, going hungry and being cold, sleeping in storage buildings and fighting off attackers. Reality was freezing in horror at the sound of Parrish's voice. What did she have left except the escape she found in her dreams?

She looked at the stack of documents, at the pages and pages of notes she had scribbled. "I have work," she murmured, and the sound of her own voice was reassuringly normal. She might feel as if she were coming apart at the seams, but she still had the work. It had saved her for eight months and would continue to save her for a few days yet, though that damn Gaelic had nearly defeated her.

Just another week or two of work, and then the tales of the Knights Templar and the Guardian, of Black Niall, would be ended. When she wasn't spending hours struggling with the translations every night before bed, the dreams of him would stop.

Unexpected desolation swamped her at the thought. Without Niall, the spark that made her feel alive, even if only in her dreams, would be extinguished. There would be no more translations, because she was too well known by sight in her field to get a job with another archaeological foundation, even under an assumed name. There would be no more intriguing puzzles, not that any other work she had done had come close to fascinating her as much as did Niall and the Templars.

She would have nothing but vengeance. The need for it burned inside her, but she sensed that beyond vengeance there was nothing but bleak, gray nothingness, assuming she survived. She would be on the run for the rest of her life, her identity gone, nothing to look forward to, and never knowing the joy of having Ford's children and growing old with him, cradling their grandchildren, perhaps watching Bryant succumb at last to love and matrimony.

Being insane was better. She pulled the Gaelic papers to her, opened the Gaelic/English dictionary, and picked up her pen.

As usual, she was drawn almost immediately into the magic of the papers, the sense of reading something enormously compelling and important.

"Mankind shall not know the True Power," she read some minutes later. "The Cup and the Winding Cloth shall blind them to the sun, the Throne and Banner denied, but the True Power shall be used by the Guardian in the Lord's stead, to pass through the Veil of Time and protect the Treasure from Evil.

"None save the Treasure can defeat Evil, and none save the Guardian shall use the Power."

It read like a Bible passage, but she was certain nothing like this had ever been in the Bible. The Cup. . . that could refer to the Chalice, and the Winding Cloth could well be the shroud in which Jesus had been wrapped after the crucifixion. The Shroud of Turin was supposed to be Jesus's shroud, but it was surrounded by controversy; there were references to its existence long before the fourteenth century, which was when carbon dating had placed its origin. Of course, the earlier references could have been to another shroud, perhaps the real one. . . which did nothing to explain how a fourteenth-century forger could have created a cloth bearing an impregnable negative image of a crucified man, five centuries before photography had been invented.

"The Cup and the Winding Cloth shall blind them to the sun," she read again. If the Chalice still existed, it had never been found. But perhaps the arguments about the validity of the shroud did indeed blind people to the true nature of faith; they were so busy making points and counter points that the argument became the focus and they couldn't see the whole picture.

The Templars were irrevocably connected to the shroud. They had battled the Moors and won Jerusalem for the Crusaders for a time, and themselves occupied the Temple on the Mount for longer than that. During their occupation, they had determinedly excavated as much of the Temple as possible, perhaps finding many artifacts dating back to the early years of the Temple, to the very beginning of Judaism. What treasures indeed had they found. . . what Treasure?

One of the charges against the Templars was that they had worshipped false gods, for in every chapel the Templars had built after occupying the Temple on the Mount, there had been the face of a man, a stem, strong-boned face- the same face that had been revealed centuries later on the Shroud of Turin. It followed that they had unearthed the shroud; it also followed that its location in the Temple gave it validity. But what else had they found? The "Cup" and the "Winding Cloth" were listed, as well as the "Throne" and the "Banner," but the "True Power" was something else, something so far left undescribed.

"The Guardian shall defend the world from the Foundation of Evil."

Grace sighed at the continued ambiguity. The Foundation of Evil was obviously Satan, but why hadn't the writer simply said so? Evidently even medieval scribes had been afflicted by wordiness.

Just the word Foundation made her think of better days, with Ford and Bryant delicately and happily sifting mounds of dirt through screens, looking for the smallest shard of pottery; or sitting on the ground whisking a small brush over a half-buried bone. The three of them had loved their work, and the Amaranthine Potere Foundation had been one of the few places in the world where an archaeologist could be permanently employed. Independently funded, the Foundation hadn't concentrated just on the hugely important digs, but on the smaller ones that would provide detail rather than drama. Bryant had once said that the Foundation seemed determined to leave no dirt in the world unsifted.

Grace stiffened, her pupils contracting with shock. Potere . . . Power. *Amaranthine Potere Foundation*, the Foundation of Unending Power.

Why hadn't she made the connection before? Languages and translations were her field of expertise. She should have seen it, should have realized
It was a stretch, a real stretch. It was ridiculous. A huge foundation committed to unearthing the Templar Treasure? The money spent would surely far exceed the worth of any gold found.
"The Treasure's worth is greater than gold," she whispered. Not money, then; the documents had made that plain. Power. The Templars had possessed some mysterious power, had dedicated their lives to protecting it.
She got up and paced, mentally feeling her way through the puzzle. Was it possible the Foundation existed to prevent people from learning about the Power, whatever it was? Could Parrish, in some twisted way, think he had to kill everyone who learned of the papers in order to keep the Power secret? Was he acting as Guardian?
No, she could drive a truck through the holes in that theory. For one thing, the Foundation hadn't had anything to guard. The papers had disappeared centuries before and anyone who knew anything about archaeology could not have reasonably expected the documents would survive. Paper deteriorated rapidly; that was why there were relatively few original documents left from even two centuries before, much less almost seven.
No, forget about any mystic power, any great struggle between right and wrong. She was tired, and fatigue was fogging her brain. The most likely motive was money, pure and simple. Parrish must have reason to believe the Templars' Treasure was enormous beyond belief, and as director of the Foundation he could expend any amount of effort he wanted in finding it. He must have devised some way of appropriating the gold for his own use.
The Foundation was probably exactly what it seemed, an archaeological foundation, without any sinister motive behind its existence. Parrish was the villain, not the Foundation itself.
But the Foundation had been founded in 1802, and named "Unending Power," long before Parrish's arrival on earth.
Where had the funding come from, all these decades? Who had originally founded Amaranthine Potere? How was it sustained now? As far as she knew, there hadn't been any fundraisers.
She did know that the Foundation had a very sophisticated computer system, far more sophisticated than she might have expected an archaeological foundation to have; after all, why should a list of contributors, assuming there was one, be either secret or sensitive? The

Foundation was supposed to be nonprofit; presumably donations would be tax-deductible, so any list of contributors would be public anyway.
It would be nice if she could get into the system, just to see what she could find.
Doing so would require a hacker's skills, though, and she wasn't that good. Kristian Sieber was. As soon as the idea registered she discarded it. Not only was it dangerous to let anyone know where she was, but to involve Kris again was dangerous to him.
What could she possibly learn, anyway? A list of contributors, that's all. That wouldn't help her. It would be nice if she could learn Parrish's schedule. . .
She bit her lip. No. She wasn't going to call Kris. Grace sat down and forced herself to return to the documents. After a moment, she was engrossed again.
There had always come a time, while she was studying a language, when suddenly her brain seemed to "get" it. She would struggle with syntax and verbs for months, then the accumulated knowledge and familiarity would reach critical mass, the synapses would connect, and presto! From one moment to the next she would pass from struggling to reading, the language opening up to her as if the letters had rearranged themselves from gibberish into real words.
Three minutes after she sat down, the old language synapses connected.
"The Guardian holds the Knowledge to bring down the Mother Church, and he Shall hold it Close, for the Power of our Lord God is Greater than the thought of Man, and so he Shall serve our Lord God all his days.
"To this End Shall he Journey through Time, his body Prepared by food and drink, and the Years shall be as nothing to him. Be it a Thousand years, yea, still he Shall go forth to Battle the Foundation of Evil, for he alone may wield the Power."
Journey through time? Grace blinked at the words. What was the Guardian supposed to be, a time traveler? She hadn't realized that bit of silliness had existed for so long. Medieval scholars hadn't even been able to grasp the concept of a round earth; they had still pictured dragons lurking around the edges, waiting to devour anyone foolish enough to falloff.
But evidently the Templars had not only believed it, they had devised a special diet to prepare the body for the trip. What else could the Diet of Time be?

Curiously, she pulled out the sheet on which she had translated the diet. At first glance, or second or third, there wasn't anything magical about it. First one precisely calculated one's weight by sitting in a barrel of water; ingenious of them, using water displacement as a measure. Then, according to one's weight, there was a formula for working out how much salt, calf's liver, and various other foods one must consume, and exactly how much water to drink.

It was a diet rich in sodium, iron, and all the trace minerals, she noted. Not a bad diet, except for the liver; that would be hell on a time traveler's cholesterol level.

She kept that page in her hand, and returned to the Gaelic documents.

"His body prepared then by striking Steel to Stone find the Spark of Lightning that will Carry him to the Chosen Time."

Grace almost choked. "What were you idiots trying to do?" she blurted, staring at the page. "Electrocute yourselves?" They had deliberately flooded their bodies with iron and water, then worked up some source of electricity. Who had been the guinea pigs for this experiment, and had anyone survived?

The rest of the page was mathematical formulas. Evidently, they had thought to control the number of years traveled by the amount of water drunk and the force of electricity applied. Interesting concept, but what had they known about electricity, much less controlling it?

She turned to the next page, and her blood ran cold. "And the Evil one shall be called Parrish."

"Oh, my God," she whispered.

"Kris, this is Grace."

There was silence on the end of the line, then he said explosively, "Grace!"

"Shh," she cautioned. Nervously she twisted the steel cord of the pay phone, wondering once again if she had any right to involve Kris in this mess. She had been up most of the night, reading and rereading the documents, trying to apply common sense to the situation, but finally coming to the conclusion that extraordinary events called for extraordinary actions. Nothing about her life in the past eight months had been ordinary. Perhaps she would find something in the Foundation's computers, perhaps not, but she couldn't afford to leave any avenue unexplored. '

"It's okay. Mom and Dad are in Florida. Where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said Automatically. *Fine* was a relative term. She wasn't dead, she wasn't injured, she wasn't hungry. Physically, she supposed she was fine; emotionally was another story. "Did you have any trouble. . . after talking to me that time? Did Parrish or any of his men question you?"
"Maybe. I don't know," he said. "A detective came to the house that day, but he wasn't the one I'd talked to before. He showed me a badge, y'know, but how would I know if it looked the way it should? He asked me a lot of questions I'd already answered, and I stuck to the story. I'd worked on your modem, showed you a program I was working on, you paid me and left. That was all. You didn't mention anything about your work."
She breathed a sigh of relief. The "detective" could have been legitimate, and could also have been one of Parrish's men rechecking Kris's story. Kristian had pulled it off, protected by his computer wonk persona. No one meeting him would think him involved in anything beyond bytes and programs.
"Where are you?" he asked again.
"It's safer for you if you don't know."
"Yeah, well, so what?" He sounded older than before, tougher and more assured.
"I know you didn't do it, so if you need help, all you have to do is ask."
His unquestioning faith hit her so hard that it was a moment before she could speak past the knot that formed in her throat.
"You'll be breaking the law if you help me." She felt compelled to warn him, because her conscience was still nagging at her for calling. .
'I know," he said calmly. "I broke the law by not telling them everything I knew about that night, and I broke the law when I got into the bank's computers so you could get your money out. What's one more felony between friends?"
She took a deep breath. "All right. Is there any way you can get into the Foundation's computer system without setting off any alarms?"
"Sure," he said, completely confident. "I told you, there's always a back door. All I have to do is find it. But if it's a closed system, I'll have to go on-site to get in. Any problem there?"
Grace took a deep breath, trying to remember what she'd seen of the computer system the times she'd been in the Foundation's offices, which actually hadn't been that often. "I think it's a closed system."

"Are we going to do some midnight breaking and entering?" He sounded eager; Kris was a true hacker, willing to go to any lengths to perform his illegal art.
"No." Harmony hadn't given her any advice on getting into a secured professional building without setting off its alarm system, but she had given her some pointers about hiding in plain sight. "We'll go in during the day, as part of the maintenance crew. I don't know how we'll get onto the floor without being seen, but we'll think of something."
"I keep telling you," Kris said. "There's always a back door."

Chapter 14

WHEN NIALL RODE IN FROM PATROL, SIM MET HIM WITH A worried expression. "Artair and Tearlach haven't returned from hunting," he reported.
Niall looked at the darkening sky. The short winter day was fading fast, and the lowering gray clouds promised more snow. The wind whipped at his hair, blowing it across his face, and impatiently he tossed it back as he jumped from the horse.
"Bring Cinnteach," he ordered. The gelding was as steady as his name, and had the stamina of two horses.
"Done." Sim nodded to a stable lad approaching with the big bay. "I've had the other lads make ready, should ye want them also."
"Only you and Iver," Niall said. The two men were Creag Dhu's best archers, save himself. Perhaps he was foolhardy to take only two with him, but he was always mindful of leaving the castle well protected. Winter had cooled the Hay's raging blood feud with Creag Dhu; over a month had passed without attack. Still, Artair and Tearlach were both accomplished hunters, and could read the weather well; if naught was amiss, they would have returned by now.
Artair and Tearlach had gone out with the dawn, intent on a *fiadh*, a deer, whose tracks they had cut in the snow twice before, but the wily beast had escaped each time. Tearlach had slowed with age but was still the castle's best tracker. Artair had a gift for silence, Tearlach one for patience; they worked well together. Niall suspected Artair liked to hunt in winter because the wild, empty, snowdusted mountains somehow reminded him of a

cathedral, vaulted and holy. Creag Dhu had a chapel but no priest, for holy men sought safer duty than being confessor to wild renegades, and the chapel had long stood empty. Niall preferred no reminder of the Church or God, but Artair deeply felt the absence and sought his sanctuary in nature. He had thought it safe enough to replenish the castle's larder.

Niall rode out again five minutes later, having taken only enough time to wolf down a bit of bread and meat, and drink a cup of hot ale. The cold snapped at his face, but he : was warm enough in wool and fur.

They rode in a slow circle about the castle, picking up Artair's and Tearlach's tracks where they went into the wood. The tracks were plain enough in the snow, and were easily followed.

Niall's head lifted, his nostrils flaring and his mouth grim as he surveyed the stark black and white wood. The snow deadened sound, so that they were surrounded by a silence unbroken except by the noise of their own passing, and that was slight enough. He sensed trouble, and there was a prickling between his shoulder blades.

"Ware," he said softly, and Sim and Iver moved apart from him, spreading out so that an ambush would be less likely to trap all three of them, and also that they might better use the cover available to them.

The day's patrolling had not revealed the tracks of either man or Highland pony coming onto Creag Dhu land, but if the Hay were determined enough, and sly enough, he could have sent in his men a day or more before the snow, and had them wait for their best opportunity. Given a small cave, Highlanders could easily survive the cold and snow in relative comfort. Hiding their mounts would be more difficult, and not even the Hay was stupid enough to send out his men afoot. They would also need running water.

"If any Hays are aboot, they'll be hard by the bum." He kept his voice low, but pitched it so both Sim and Iver could hear. They both nodded, their eyes moving restlessly, not pausing on any detail for more than a split second. But Niall didn't sense any presence in the wood, despite his feeling of danger. He knew well when someone watched him, for he'd felt it often enough these past months. At times the eyes on him belonged to a Hay; other times, he knew it was she. the woman, the spirit. He didn't know why she watched or what she wanted, but ofttimes he could feel her gaze on him as he fought, feel her anxiety at his danger and her relief when he emerged victorious, and unscathed. Be damned if that wasn't less unsettling than

sensing her near while he was abed with, and most like atop, a warm, willing woman. He was growing more and more irritable with her; if he ever got his hands on the wench, he'd be tempted to throttle her.
She watched him at the most inconvenient times, but now he rode through the darkening wood alone. Snowflakes swirled downward, brushing his face with their icy kiss. He could barely make out the tracks in the snow. Cinnteach's ears pricked forward, and Niall held up a warning hand, slowing their approach. Naught moved before them, but the wind brought a scent, faint and unmistakable. Sim's mount shifted restlessly, tossing his head.
Niall dismounted, his right hand closing around the hilt of his sword. His acute senses felt the sudden brush of a gaze upon him, as definite as a touch, and he whirled to the side just as his ears caught the singing whisper of an arrow and sharp metal bit into his left shoulder with solid force.
He went down on his knee behind cover of a large tree. Looking around, he saw both Sim and Iver also behind cover, their faces grim as they watched him. He signaled that he was all right and motioned for them to change positions, moving out and forward to catch the intruders between them.
His shoulder burned like seven hells, but he had taken the precaution of wearing a silk undertunic, something he insisted all his men do. An arrow couldn't pierce silk, something all Templars knew. The most damage from an arrow didn't occur on entry, but when it was removed. If one was wearing silk, the fabric went into the wound and twisted around the arrowhead, preventing debris from entering the wound and causing infection, and also allowing the arrow to be safely removed by covering the barbs.
He reached inside his shirt, grasped the silk around the arrow, and jerked. The weapon popped free of his flesh, though not without effort. He ground his teeth against the pain; silk might lessen the severity of an arrow wound, but he reflected that it still wasn't pleasant. Fresh blood streamed down his shoulder, wetting his shirt.
Pain had always made him angry. His eyes narrowed until they were nothing more than midnight slits as he slid to the ground and crawled forward behind a fallen log. Every move jarred his shoulder and he became even angrier. The snow was falling faster, almost obliterating what little light remained. Both Sim and Iver were in position now, waiting for a target, but nothing moved. Niall dug his fingers under the snow, searching

for a cone or rock. A pebble would suffice, for a subtle noise would be more effective than a great crashing. And there; a cone, mushy with wet and rot. Without rising from behind the log he tossed the cone in the direction from whence the arrow had come and it landed with a soft scraping noise, as if a careless shoulder had brushed against a snow-laden branch and caused it to spill its burden.

An archer rose swiftly from behind a rock, bow drawn, hunter's eyes locked on the target area. That singing whisper came again, and Iver's arrow pierced the archer's neck. His nerveless fingers released the bow tension and the arrow sank into the dirt before him. Eyes widened, teetering on tiptoe, he clawed at his throat. A choked, gurgling sound issued from his mouth, followed by a rush of blood, and he collapsed in the snow.

From the other side Sim released an arrow. He had no definite target so he sent it flying into a thick bush capable of providing concealment. His guess was correct, because a cry of pain split the cold air.

--Niall took advantage of the distraction to move yet again, sliding behind another tree, much closer than he had been when caught by the arrow. His white teeth gleamed as he tilted back his head and loosed a bloodcurdling roar. He erupted from his cover like a lion springing for its prey. Four men sprang from concealment, startled by the bloody apparition that was suddenly upon them, huge sword flashing. One man managed to get his own sword up and metal rang against metal, but he went down under Niall's greater weight.

Sim and Iver each loosed one more arrow, then sprang forward screaming their own cries. Niall thrust his dagger up under his man's ribs and slashed sideways until he hit bone. The man arched and convulsed and Niall swung away from him, dropping to one knee under the rushing attack of a second foe and jabbing upward with the bloody dagger. The sharp metal sliced into the soft belly and Niall held the dagger steady while the man's momentum hurled him forward, eviscerating himself with his own motion.

Niall surged to his feet, but Sim and Iver had taken down their own men and only the three of them remained standing, panting softly, wisps of steam rising from their heads.

"Yer shoulder?" Iver asked, nodding at the wound.

"Tis' minor enough." That was true, but it burned like hell for all that. Niall strode furiously to reclaim his horse. He was certain now that he'd not find Artair and Tearlach alive. The Hay clansmen had planned well, skulking

close and hiding until they could ambush those fewer in number than they, the whoreson cowards.
He found his men a minute later. Artair lay on his back, his blue eyes open and empty as he stared sightlessly upward. Niall dismounted and knelt beside his old friend, touching his face, lifting his hand. He was already cold, his limbs stiffening. The arrow had entered his heart.
He had not suffered, Niall thought, drawing Artair's plaid up to cover his face. His expression was almost peaceful, as if he'd at last quit a life in which he had no place.
”Adieu, mon ami," he whispered. French was the language in which he had been schooled as a Templar, and it was in that tongue he bid good-bye to his last friend from that time. They were all gone now, all the Knights who had had taken wives, had children; some still held to their vows. But they were Knights no longer; only he remained in service to the Order. It had been so for fourteen years, and yet so long as Artair had been with him he had felt the kinship. Now there was no one left at Creag Dhu who had even a glimmer of understanding.
"Tearlach lives," Sim said, pressing his tough, blunt fingers deep into the wounded man's neck. Surveying the amount of blood on the snowy ground, he shook his shaggy head. "He's near bled out, though. He'll no last 'til mom."
Niall stood and lifted Artair's body over his shoulder. "Perhaps," he said. "But if he dies, 'twill be among friends. "
He sat alone in his chamber that night, unable to sleep, drinking raw spirits that burned down his throat. He was drunk, but the raw ale had done nothing to lift his mood. His shoulder throbbed; it had been rinsed with the same ale he drank, and bound with a poultice to draw out any putrefaction. He was hot with fever, but he didn't fear it; the fever had come soon after each wound he'd ever received, and he had noted that he seemed to heal faster than those whose fevers came on later. The wound had been clean, the ale fierce; in two days, he'd scarce feel a twinge in the shoulder.
The heat from the fireplace washed his bare shoulders and back. His plaid was draped about his hips, but except for that he was naked.
He stared across the chamber at nothing, his expression grim. Damn the Hays; if he had to wipe out the entire clan, rid the Highlands of their stinking presence, he would have vengeance for Artair. The time would come soon enough, when winter lifted its icy hand from the mountains.

But for now he was drunk, feverish, and alone with his thoughts. There was no one watching, no one near, when he needed to feel her with him.
He closed his eyes, aching inside with the loneliness. For all his life he had been forced to hide parts of himself from the world. Always his kinship with the Bruce had been hidden as he had taken wives, had children; some still held to their vows. But they were Knights no longer; only he remained in service to the Order. It had been so for fourteen years, and yet so long as Artair had been with him he had felt the kinship. Now there was no one left at Creag Dhu who had even a glimmer of understanding.
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But for now he was drunk, feverish, and alone with his thoughts. There was no one watching, no one near, when he needed to feel her with him.
He closed his eyes, aching inside with the loneliness. For all his life he had been forced to hide parts of himself from the world. Always his kinship with the Bruce had been hidden, even before the Bruce was king. Later, with the Knights, he had been forced to deny his own nature, though he had gone to sleep every night with his arms and loins aching with need. Now he could give free rein to his lusts, but he must hold secret his years as a

Knight, though those eight years had done much to shape him into the man he was now. Even from Robert, who knew all those things, he must conceal his true role as Guardian, and the cursed vow that ruled his life.
Only with *her* was there nothing to hide. Whoever and whatever she was, he sensed that she knew him as no one else had ever done, knew his body bone-deep and his mind even when he slept. When he took her in his arms, when she came to him in the dark silence of the night, she knew all of the man he was and still she clung to him, offering her body and herself.
Niall inhaled through his teeth as lust hit him hard. He wanted her, but not in a dream. He wanted her real and warm under his hands, her sweet scent fresh in his nostrils as he took her. He could almost feel her, his longing was so sharp. His hands curled into fists, trying to capture the sensation of her silky skin under his palms.
The fever and ale and longing combined, and suddenly she was there, her hands sliding lightly over his bare shoulders. He felt her concern as she touched the pad covering his wound, but her concern wasn't what he wanted. Fiercely he caught her to him, and held her on his lap while he stripped away the small scraps of clothing that were all she wore. He couldn't quite see her face, but she was here and that was all that mattered. He put his hand on her cool belly, warming her with his touch, feeling the muscles beneath contract as she drew in her breath. Her small nipples beaded, as he had known they would. She responded to his slightest touch; he knew that if he slid his fingers between her legs to the delicate opening hidden there, he would find it wet, ready for him.
Instead he smoothed his hand up to her breasts, cupping them, rubbing his thumb over her nipples, then bending his dark head to take the tightened buds in his mouth and gently suck. She shivered in his arms, trying to press closer to him. Such lovely, plump little things her breasts were, small and delightfully round, so delicate and sensitive he knew it would pain her if he handled them roughly as some women liked. She was more finely made than any woman he had ever known, both fragile and strong, her skin like translucent silk.
He couldn't wait any longer. He needed her too much. Swiftly he turned her, laying her back on the bench. He shoved his plaid aside and straddled the bench, spreading her thighs open and moving between them. He watched as he entered her, his thick shaft too large, too brutish, for the soft flesh that stretched under his pressure, but she took him, her back arching, her cries

those of pleasure. He gritted his teeth as the tightness of her sheath enveloped him and he crouched over her, thrusting long and slow and deep, almost delirious with fever and drink and the sensations boiling through him, but needing her so much he couldn't stop. Her arms curled around his neck and he felt her passion matching his, her need as great as his, her acceptance of everything he was; and he knew he wasn't alone anymore. But he was.

His eyes opened and the fantasy shattered. He sat there breathing hard as he silently cursed her. Damn her for taunting him like this, tantalizing him with a whisper of her presence, then disappearing when he needed her most. His aloneness crashed down on him and he hunched his shoulders against the burden. His head dropped down on his chest and he closed his eyes, trying to regain her presence but it was gone as if she had never been there at all. "So where are ye now, lass?" he murmured.

Grace bolted out of bed, grabbing for the pistol. Someone had spoken right beside her, the voice almost in her ear. She stood with her back against the wall and the pistol locked in a two-handed grip, swinging from point to point in search of a target, but nothing was there. The room was empty, dark, lit only by the streetlights filtering through the drawn curtains. She sagged back, gasping. A dream. Only a dream, and for once not of Niall - or was it? The voice that had jerked her awake had been deep, burred, and she'd heard the word lass.

Yes. Niall. She closed her eyes, breathing deep and slow in an effort to calm her racing heart. After a few moments she was more relaxed, but far from drowsy, and she mentally replayed that voice in her ear.

Deep, whiskey-rough, burred. Not the smooth voice of a practiced seducer, but that of a man used to command: completely self-assured, determined. And yet he'd asked, very quietly, "So where are ye now, lass?" as if he truly needed her.

Grace's eyes opened again, widening. She had been dreaming, after all; she remembered a snippet now, of Black Niall sitting quietly before a fire. But something was different, as if it wasn't her dream at all, something outside herself that had drawn her in.

More and more of the dream unfolded itself. She saw him alone, half naked, with only his plaid draped loosely about his hips. He had evidently been injured, for a rough bandage was wrapped about his left shoulder, the linen

pale against his olive-toned skin. Fear licked at her and she wanted to go to him, assure herself he was all right.
A metal cup was in his hand. He was drinking, staring at nothing, his expression somber. His loneliness, his absolute *aloneness* made her ache inside. Then he closed his eyes and abruptly she was there, in his arms, lying naked on his lap while he fondled and sucked gently at her breasts.
Grace trembled at the memory that wasn't quite a memory, was more than a memory. Somehow she was lying on the bench and he was crouched over her, his face tense as he thrust again and again. The pleasure rose beating inside her, and she reached up to twine her arms around his strong neck, almost weeping with joy.
And then, nothing. He was gone, the dream ended, with only his murmured, "So where are ye now, lass?" echoing in her mind, as if she should have been there, tending his wound, offering him the comfort women have always offered warriors.
She felt a wrench of regret that she hadn't been there. The image of him was sharp and clear in her mind. He sat with his back to the fire and the golden light had glistened on his bare shoulders, broad and powerful with muscle, and a halo limned his long black hair. Equally black hair spread across his chest, and a thin, silky line of it ran down his washboard stomach to the small, taut circle of his navel. His long legs were thick with muscle, the most powerful legs she had ever seen on a human, the delineation of his musculature built on the rock-solid strength produced by a lifetime of swordplay and battle, of controlling a huge stallion with the strength in his thighs, wearing more than a hundred pounds of armor and actually fighting in it. His was the body of a warrior, honed into a weapon, a tool.
But he was still just a man, she thought with aching tenderness. He bled, he ached, he sat alone and got drunk and grumpily wondered why some woman wasn't dancing attendance on him. It was her imagination that made her dream he'd been speaking only to her.
If he had been. . . if she were actually with him. . . She would get him to lie down in bed, make him more comfortable. He was probably a bit feverish; a cold cloth on his brow would make him feel better. She didn't doubt, however, that he would be a terrible patient. Instead of resting, he would insist she lie down with him, and soon his hands would be roaming under her shirt.

"*Damn* it!" Grace moaned, pressing her hands to her eyes. Her breath was coming soft and fast, and she felt warm, liquid. Her nipples were tight and erect, pushing against the thin fabric of her T-shirt. It was bad enough that she sometimes had erotic dreams about him, but it was a far, worse betrayal of Ford that she daydreamed about Black Niall, too.

The pistol was still in her hand, cold against her temple. Carefully she replaced it and thought about getting back into bed, but she was wide awake. She glanced at the clock. Why, it wasn't even eleven o'clock yet; she'd been asleep, less than an hour. Long enough, however, for Niall to take over her subconscious. For eight months she had been dead inside, and she wanted to remain that way. There hadn't been any laughter, any sunshine, any appreciation of a deep blue sky or the drama of a storm. It was safer that way, easier; if she hadn't been numb, she couldn't have survived. She didn't want an sign of returning life because it would only weaken her. In eight months she hadn't yet been able to weep, even tears held at bay by the bleak ice surrounding her. Niall was a crack in that wall of ice; one day it would collapse, and so would she.

She couldn't afford the weakness he represented. She had to hurry with those damn Gaelic papers, get them finished and out of her mind so Black Niall would cease to plague her. If she could get some measure of revenge against Parrish, perhaps her mind would ease and she could begin to heal, and her subconscious would then no longer need to cling to the dream image.

Well, sleep was definitely out of the question. Groaning, knowing she needed to rest because tomorrow she and Kris planned to break into the Foundation's computer system; instead she turned on a light. Her mind was racing; until she calmed, she might as well use the time to work.

She didn't bother getting out the laptop, just took her notepad and the remaining Gaelic papers and curled up in the room's one armchair, a cracked vinyl job she had made more comfortable by throwing a sheet over it. She could still hear the creaking and crackling of the vinyl, but at least now the chair didn't stick to her.

She picked up a page and groaned. More mathematical formulas, though, thank God, they were in Latin. Her brows rose in surprise. This was the first time two languages had been mixed in one section. The handwriting was different, too, heavier, plainer. She scribbled the formulas on her notepad, translating them into English. "For twenty years, the proportion of water to

weight shall be . . ." On and on it went, giving the precise fractions for, supposedly, targeting the year to which one wanted to travel. Also included was the voltage of energy required, or at least she thought that was what it was; they hadn't had any knowledge of electricity other than watching lightning bolts, so what exactly had they been measuring? Energy, yes, but what kind?

Still, she copied it all down, yawning as she did so. It was like copying down a complicated recipe, though not half as interesting. If anything was going to put her to sleep, this would do it.

She began reading aloud to herself, droning the words.

'For DCLXXV years' - let's see, D is five hundred years, the C is after it so that adds another hundred, L is fifty, the two X's after it add ten years each, and then a V; which is five. Six hundred and seventy-five years. Getting pretty precise there, aren't you,' she muttered to the long-ago writer.

Absently, she subtracted six hundred seventy-five from 1997, just to see what year a current time traveler would end up in, using this exact formula: 1322. "A wonderful year," she said, yawning. "I remember it well." What a coincidence; 1322 would have been in Black Niall's time.

She turned the page, ready for more math. She blinked at the words, wondering if she was sleepier than she had thought, or perhaps had somehow gotten a sheet that didn't belong mixed up with the Gaelic papers. She read the words again, and chills ran over her entire body. "No," she said softly. "It's impossible."

But there it was, in Gaelic, and in the same heavy hand that had written the mathematical formulas:

"Require ye proof? In the Year of Our Lord 1945, the Guardian slew the German beast, and so came Grace to Creag Dhu. - Niall MacRobert, y. 1322."

She became aware she was panting, and a shudder wracked her. The page swam before her eyes, the words blurring. The term *German* hadn't existed in the thirteen hundreds. How could someone who lived in the fourteenth century have knowledge of something that happened in the twentieth? It was impossible - unless the formula truly worked.

Unless they had known how to travel through time.

Chapter 15

KRIS DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HER. THEY HAD ARRANGED TO MEET outside a supermarket late the next afternoon, and Grace had arrived more than an hour early so she could watch for anything suspicious. She hated not feeling able to trust Kris completely, but there was too much at stake for her to take anything for granted.

She watched Kris arrive in his beloved '66 Chevelle, the engine rumbling with a muscular cough that had a couple of middle-aged men throwing envious glances his way. Poor Kris. He wanted female attention, but instead his car was attracting the male variety. At least he'd done some additional work on the Chevelle since she had last seen it; it was actually painted now, a bright fire-engine red.

He parked at the end of a lane and waited. There hadn't been any suspicious, repetitious traffic during the hour Grace had been watching, but still she waited. After fifteen more minutes had passed she slid out of the truck and crunched across the thin layer of snow that had fallen on the parking lot since she arrived, It was still snowing lightly, lacy flakes swirling and dancing in the wind, She went up to the Chevelle and tapped on the window.

Kris rolled the window down a couple of inches. "Yeah, what is it?" he asked, a little impatiently.

"Hi, Kris," she said, and his eyes widened with shock. He scrambled out of the car, slipping a little and grabbing the door to right himself. "My God," he mumbled. "My God."

"It's a wig," she said. She wore a blond one, plus a baseball cap and sunglasses. Add losing more than thirty pounds, and no one who had known her before would have recognized her.

Kris's stupefied gaze started at her booted feet, went up her tight jeans, took in the denim jacket, and ended once again on her face. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. The tip of his nose turned red. "My God," he said again. Abruptly he lunged at her and wrapped both arms around her, holding her tight and rocking her back and forth. Grace's nerves had been on edge for too long; her first instinct, barely restrained, was to kick his feet out from under him. But then he made a strangled sound, his shoulders shook, and she realized he was crying.

"Shh," she said gently, putting her own arms around him. "It's all right." It felt odd to let someone touch her, and to touch someone in return. She had

gone so long without physical contact that she felt both awkward and starved, "I've been so scared," he said into her baseball cap, his voice shaking. "Not knowing if you were okay, if you had a place to stay-"
"Sometimes yes, sometimes no," she said, patting his back. "The first week was the worst. Do you think we can get in the car? I don't want to attract attention."
"What? Oh! Sure." He trudged around the car to open the passenger door for her, a courtesy that touched her. He was still thin and gangly, his glasses still slid toward the end of his nose, but in several small ways she could see the advance of maturity. His shoulders looked a tad heavier, his voice had lost some of its boyishness, even his stubble was a little thicker. Manhood would suit him a lot better than boyhood; when other men his age were fighting middle-age spread, Kris would still be lean.
He slid under the wheel and slammed the door, then turned to survey her. His eyes were still wet, but now he shook his head in wonderment. "I wouldn't have known you," he admitted in awe. "You-you're tiny."
"Thin," she corrected. "I'm as tall as I always was. Taller," she said, pointing at the inch-and-a-half heels of her boots.
"Cool," he said, eyeing them and blinking hard. He glanced at his own feet, and she thought he might soon become a boot man. There was nothing like boots to give a man attitude. Or a woman, come to that; she definitely walked with more authority when she wore the boots.
Then he looked back at her face, and she saw his lower lip wobble again. "You look tired," he blurted.
"I couldn't sleep last night." That was the unvarnished truth. She hadn't been able to close her eyes after reading that little note from Black Niall. Every time she thought of it she felt her spine prickle, and chills would roughen her skin. But after the initial shock, it wasn't the bit about 1945 that was so eerie, it was the phrase "and so came Grace to Creag Dhu." Surely he meant a state of grace, but it felt so - personal, somehow, something written specifically to her. She felt as if he were inviting her to use the formula, to step through the layers of time energy. His calculations had been very specific, for exactly six hundred seventy-five years; back to the year 1322, the year the message had been written.
Kris reached out and took her gloved hand, squeezed it. "Where have you been?"
"On the move. I haven't stayed in one place for long."

"The police-"
"It isn't the police I worry about so much as Parrish's men. At least the police aren't actively hunting me, not after this length of time. Sure, they'll follow a lead, but that's about it. Parrish's men nearly caught me once."
"It's so weird," he said, shaking his head. "Do you still think it's because of those papers you had?"
"I *know* it was." She stared out the window, which was fogging up from their breathing. "I translated them. I know exactly why he wants them."
Kris clenched his hands into fists, staring at her delicate profile. He wanted to take her somewhere and feed her, he wanted to tuck a blanket around her, he wanted-he wanted to punch something. She looked so frail. Yeah, that was it. Frail. Grace had always been a special person to him; he'd known her most of his life, had a crush on her since he was seventeen. She had always been so nice to him, treating him as an equal when most adults didn't. Grace was a genuinely good person, smart and kind, and her mouth, oh her mouth made him feel all hot and dizzy-headed. He'd dreamed of kissing her but never worked up the nerve. It was lousy of him, but when she had called the day before, he had thought again of kissing her, and even thought that it would be okay now because Ford was dead. But looking at her he knew it wasn't okay, might never be okay. She was quiet and sad and distant, and that mouth didn't look as if it ever smiled. He pulled himself away from his thoughts and reached into the backseat to grab a computer printout. "Here," he said, placing it on her lap. He might not ever kiss her, but he would do what he could to help her. "It's a blueprint of the building where the Foundation is headquartered."
Grace pulled off her sunglasses and put them on the dash. "Where did you get this?" she asked in surprise, flipping through the pages.
"Well, it's a fairly new building," he explained. "A copy of the plans are on file with the city planners, I guess in case of emergencies and stuff."
She gave him a sideways glance. "So you went to city hall and got a copy?"
"Not exactly. I got it out of their computers," he said " blithely.
"Without setting off any alarms, I hope."
"Ah, please," he scoffed. "It was a joke." There was no point in scolding him about it; after all, she was asking him to commit a much more serious crime than computer hacking. "Getting into the Foundation's computers won't be as easy," she warned. "No, but I've already got it figured out. Your idea about the maintenance crew was great. We steal a couple of the

uniforms, waltz right in. But all we need is to get into the building, we don't need to actually get into the Foundation's offices. Look," he said, pointing to the blueprint. "Here is the service elevator. We take it to the floor below, then use this access panel in the ceiling to get to the electronic panel. I tap into a line, pull up a file list, and we go from there."
"What about alarms?"
"Well, it's a self-contained system, so they don't have to worry about anyone hacking in; certain files may be security-coded, but not the system itself. My job is to get the coded files."
He made it sound so easy, but she didn't expect the Foundation's files to be as vulnerable as the city's. Parrish was too smart, too wily, and he had too much to hide. "There has to be a list of the passwords for any coded files, but it could be anywhere. Parrish may keep it in his house, or there could be a safe in the offices where it would be kept. Either way, we won't be able to get it."
He shook his head, grinning. "You'd be surprised how many people keep a list of passwords in their desk. It's worth a look, anyway, once we're certain everyone has gone home."
"I have some ideas about the passwords," she said. "We'll try those first."
She shuddered at the idea of going into the empty offices and finding they weren't empty after all, but that Parrish had worked late. Hearing his voice on the telephone had been bad enough; she didn't think she could bear actually seeing him. Still, if it became necessary to break into his private office, she would do it. Kris would be willing, but she wasn't willing to let him; she had already involved him enough.
"Okay," he said, practically twitching in his enthusiasm. "Let's go."
"Now?"
"Why not?" Why not, indeed. There was no reason to wait, not if they could manage to liberate a couple of uniforms from the maintenance service. "Do you have your laptop?" she asked.
"In the backseat."
She shrugged. "Then we might as well give it a try. We'll go in my truck."
"Why?" He looked a bit affronted at her reluctance to travel in the Chevelle.
"This car is a little noticeable," she pointed out, her tone dry. A grin broke across his face. "Yeah, it is, isn't it?" he said, giving the dash a fond pat.
"Okay." He got the laptop out of the backseat and took the keys from the

ignition. Grace grabbed her sunglasses. They got out and locked the doors, and they trudged across the slippery parking lot to her pickup.
They were silent as Grace drove. She tried to come up with some feasible plan for getting the maintenance uniforms, but none occurred to her. And there was still security at the building after office hours; perhaps the maintenance service had a key to the rear service door, perhaps not. After cleaning houses for six months, she knew some people without thought turned over a spare key to the cleaning service so they wouldn't be inconvenienced by having to be at home when their houses were cleaned. Grace was always amazed at their lack of caution. Still, it happened. Unless Parrish owned the entire building, the chances were fifty-fifty the maintenance crew could enter without ringing for a guard. If Parrish owned the building, no way; he wouldn't care if the crew had to wait, or that a guard had to trudge from wherever he was in the building to let them in. He wouldn't even consider their inconvenience in the security scheme.
With what she had learned in the past eight months, Grace had to admit he was right. If you had something worth protecting, you protected it, and you didn't compromise security by fretting about whether or not the maintenance crew had to wait a couple of minutes. Of course, a sophisticated system would use closed-circuit cameras to identify the crew, and the door would be opened by remote control
Cameras. She drew in her breath with a hiss. "We're going about this all wrong."
"We are?" Kris asked blankly. "What do you mean?"
"There may be security cameras at the maintenance entrance. How are we going to waltz up to the truck and search it for extra uniforms?"
He rubbed his chin, his long, skinny fingers rasping over his beard stubble as he went into his thinking mode. "Let's see.... okay. First thing, you let me out a block away and I'll check it out. If there *are* cameras, then we have to find out if they're closed-circuit and are being monitored, or if they're just the kind that tapes so someone can watch the tape after a crime has already been committed."
"Either way, if there are cameras, that means you need a disguise too," Grace said firmly.
He looked taken with that idea, and her heart ached at his youth.
"You'll have to take off your glasses," she decided. "I'll wear them instead. And we'll beef you up by stuffing towels in your uniform."

He looked doubtful. "I won't be able to see," he objected. "And neither will you."
That made sense. One of them had to be able to navigate. She plucked her sunglasses out of her pocket and handed them to him. "Pop the lenses." She had paid fifty cents for them at a yard sale, so she didn't hesitate to ruin them.
Kris obediently popped out the plastic lenses, and gave the frames back to her. Grace slid them on, and glanced at herself in the rearview mirror. At close range it was fairly obvious there was no glass in the frames, but a security camera wouldn't detect it.
"We really should have scouted this out and maybe taken the time to buy our own maintenance uniforms," she said, shrugging. "But it might work anyway."
It worked. Kris came jogging back to the truck, his face red from both excitement and exposure to the cold. He climbed in, gasping, and his glasses immediately fogged up. He snatched them off and absently held them in front of the heat vent while he gave her a myopically triumphant smile. "There's a camera," he reported breathlessly. "But it isn't closed-circuit."
"How do you know?"
"I checked it out."
"Kris!"
"No problem. It's in a corner, aimed at the maintenance door. I slipped around the side of the building and stayed out of its range. I didn't see any cable wires running from the camera into the building. And even better-" He paused, grinning at her.
"*What*?" she demanded impatiently when he let the pause drag out, and he laughed delightedly.
"The door is propped open!"
It was obvious Parrish and the Foundation didn't own the building, Grace thought.
"It's the kind of door that locks every time it closes," Kris explained. "I guess the maintenance crew gets tired of having to unlock it every time, so they dragged one of those rubber-backed mats over the threshold, and it keeps the door from completely closing."
Oh, the simple, elegant ingenuity of people trying to get out of a little inconvenience. With that one act, they had negated the building's security.

"We still need uniforms."
He grinned triumphantly at her. "There's a big van parked there. I checked it out. The front doors are locked, and there's a steel screen separating the cab from the back of the van, I guess so they can leave the back doors open and not have to worry about the van being stolen. Anyway, there's lots of stuff in the back, and some dirty coveralls." He slid his glasses into place. "What more do we need?"
What more, indeed?
The camera outside the service door wasn't closed circuit. The one in the hallway was.
Parrish watched as two more maintenance people entered the building. His eyebrows had lifted a fraction when the first crew had propped open the door. For now it suited his purposes to let it remain open, to give Grace an easy access should she take the bait, but as soon as he had her he would make certain the owners of the building found a new maintenance service. Of course, the Foundation's offices had far more stringent security measures, but that didn't excuse the sloppiness of the present crew.
These two latest arrivals carried tool boxes, and wore tool belts strapped over their shapeless coveralls. One was a skinny woman, wearing an unattractive baseball cap over her unattractive frizzy hair. Oversized glasses dominated her face. The man was tall, pudgy, clumsy. He wore gloves and a weird fur hat with ear flaps, and he didn't seem to know where he was going. The woman led the way as they trudged down the short hall to the service elevator.
He wasn't interested in them. He watched carefully for the little mouse he hoped would nibble at his bait. Perhaps she wouldn't come; if she had seen him do the shooting, she wouldn't want to be anywhere near him, unless of course she planned to shoot him in revenge, but he was certain Grace wasn't a woman who could kill. He could recognize the killer instinct in certain people; Conrad, for instance. Grace didn't have it.
On the other hand, she had surprised him and everyone else by being able to elude both the cops and his best men for more than eight months. She had proven herself to be unusually resourceful. If she hadn't called the Foundation, no one would have had any idea she was back in Minneapolis. Shocking mistake. But then, felons often tripped themselves up by returning to the scene of their crime, perhaps to gloat at their own cleverness.

But Grace had called the Foundation, himself specifically, and since she hadn't spoken, the only reason would have been to find out if he was in town. Now that she knew he was, what would she do? Show up at his house to talk to him? She could have talked on the phone, unless she suddenly panicked at the thought of giving away her whereabouts.

So had she seen him or not? Did she want to talk or shoot? Perverse of him, but he rather hoped it was the latter. The thought of Grace with a gun in her hand was strangely exciting. She would never get to use it, of course, but he didn't want her weepy and weak in his arms; he wanted her furious, fighting, so that his victory was all the sweeter when, as with Calla, his skill overrode her anger. His little interlude with Calla had been unusually satisfying; surely with Grace his pleasure would be even more intense.

Would she come or not? The service door was conveniently propped open, but perhaps she would try to enter during the day, when she could more easily mix with the flow of people coming and going.

He waited patiently.

"Here we are," Kris whispered excitedly as he opened the access panel in the ceiling of the Foundation's main computer room. It was quiet, dim, with only the hum of electronics breaking the silence.

It had taken them an hour to work their way into place. Nothing was ever as easy as it looked on paper. First they had had to dodge the real maintenance crew, finally climbing seventeen flights of stairs instead of using the service elevator. After locating the access panel to the overhead heating ducts, they climbed onto a high stool and managed to hoist themselves inside, putting the panel back in place so no one would know they were there. Then, using a flashlight taken from her glove box, they navigated the miles of ductwork only to find they had to go into the Foundation's offices after all. They located the computer room and listened for a while, but the room seemed empty. Carefully they removed the ceiling access panel.

Kris leaned his head and shoulders out of the opening and looked around. "There aren't any cameras," he whispered. "But there's a window in the door, so we'll need to sit where anyone passing by can't see us."

"If we happen to be climbing in or out when someone walks by, we're sunk," Grace said. It couldn't be helped, though; they had no access through any of the doors, so it had to be the ceiling.

Kris braced his arms on each side of the opening and slowly lowered himself through it until he was hanging by his fingers. The ceilings were

standard eight feet, for easy heating; with his arms outstretched, he had little more than a foot to drop. He landed quietly on the tile floor, then turned for Grace to hand down the laptop. With that safely stored, he held up his arms for her as she swung down from the ceiling, catching her around the waist and carefully setting her on the floor.

He looked swiftly around, sizing up the setup. This was his milieu, and his thin face glowed with eagerness. "Sit over there, behind that desk," he said, pointing. "Let me get this hooked up and I'll join you." As he spoke he was busy removing cords and wires from a terminal, and rehooking them to his laptop. That done, he repositioned some operating manuals to block any view of their heads, which would be sticking up above the edge of the desk. He flopped down beside her and drew his long legs up, cradling the laptop between them. He fingered a switch and the powerful little machine began to hum and make discreet little chirps as it booted up. They had been crossing their fingers on this, because Kris used the Windows 95 operating system; if the Foundation used DOS, he wouldn't be able to use his laptop. Instead he would have to sit at a monitor, and given the window in the door that would be risky. But . the Foundation used the same operating system, and the menu flashed on the screen.

"Okay, let's see the files," he murmured, rubbing his fingertip across the little mouse tucked in the middle of the keyboard and directing the cursor to the correct icon. He clicked once, and the screen filled with file names.

He scrolled down while they looked for something interesting. "Let's look at the financial statement and tax returns," she said, and he pulled up those files. They were incredibly complicated; they didn't have time to decipher everything, so he copied the files onto a floppy and returned to the list.

"Donor list," Grace directed, and he copied that file too. There was little else that looked interesting; they looked into the payroll file, and Grace gasped at what Parrish was paid. Millions. The Foundation paid him millions every year. Just for directing the Foundation? She was certain the Foundation could find an able overseer for much less money, if that was all that was needed.

"Nothing much here," Kris said after an hour of pulling up individual files and checking their contents. "What were those ideas you had on passwords? Let's try a few of them and see what happens."

"Treasure," she directed, and he gave her a sharp glance as he obediently typed in the word and clicked on "Retrieve."

File Not Found. "Temple."
File Not Found. "Knight."
File Not Found. "Templar."
"You mean those bad-ass monks you were reading about at my house that night?" Kris asked, typing the word.
"The very same." File Not Found.
"Damn," she breathed. She was running out of likely passwords.
"Guardian."
File Not Found.
"Niall. . . Pope. . . Temple Treasure. Whose bright idea was it to allow unlimited space in naming files? Let's see. . . he's egotistical enough to name a file after himself. Try Parrish and Sawyer."
File Not Found popped up on the screen after every entry. Kris had been silent except for asking her how to spell Niall.
"Power," she suggested.. He typed. "Nope."
"Shroud. . . Turin. . . Covenant. . . Ark."
He shook his head after each entry. "Nope."
Grace rubbed the back of her neck. The Ark of the Covenant had been way out in left field anyway. She had only thought of it because of the Indiana Jones movie, where the Nazis had been trying to find the Ark and conquer the world. There had been a seed of truth in the movie, because Hitler had indeed been obsessed with acquiring ancient religious artifacts.
"In the Year of Our Lord 1945, the Guardian slew the German beast, and so came Grace to Creag Dhu. "
She remembered the entry, and once again chills roughened her skin. Creag Dhu couldn't be the password, because the location of the Treasure was what Parrish didn't know. "Hitler," she suggested.
Again Kris gave her a startled look, but he typed in the name.
The screen filled with words.
She sat back, stunned. It couldn't be. She hadn't even considered a connection, despite the document's warnings about the Foundation of Evil.
"My God," Kris whispered. Hastily he shoved another floppy into the disk drive and copied the file without taking time to read it. Only when the file was copied and the disk safely stored did he slowly scroll downward.
"They really think they can rule the world if they find this so-called treasure," he whispered. What they were reading was nothing less than a manifesto, a declaration of intent. "The papers you have supposedly give

the location of it, right? And he's actually killed Ford and Bryant just because they knew about the papers?" Outrage and disbelief warred in his tone.
She looked at him. Her gaze was glassy from shock. "They do," she said dazedly. "Give the location, that is."
"Holy shit," he whispered. Then his eyes widened and he looked nervously at the screen. "I guess I shouldn't say that, huh?"
A door closed in the hallway. They froze. After a split second, Kris hurriedly pulled the lid down so the computer was almost closed, to hide the glow of the screen. There was only a whisper of sound outside the door; whoever it was moved very quietly. But the footsteps moved on without pause, and after a moment came the sound of another door closing in the hallway.
"We gotta get out of here," Kris muttered. "You got any more ideas on passwords?"
She shook her head. He swiftly exited the file, backed out of the program, and shut off the laptop. Within a minute he had reconnected the other terminal and replaced the manuals in their original position.
He crawled over to the door and poked his head up just enough to peer out the window, checking in both directions. "It's clear," he whispered, standing up and hurriedly crossing the room.
Grace dragged a chair beneath the access panel and climbed onto the seat. First she stowed the laptop and the disks in the duct, then she levered herself through the hole. Kris assisted with a boost from beneath.
She turned to reach down and grab the collar of his coveralls, half dragging him through the hole. They were both panting as they replaced the access panel and switched on the flashlight. In silence they retraced their path, both of them thinking about what they had read.
"She isn't coming tonight," Parrish told Conrad, disappointment evident in his tone. "It's midnight; she wouldn't expect me to work this late."
Conrad didn't reply. He watched the screen as two of the maintenance crew came down the hallway and left by the propped-open door. They appeared to be hurrying, and the woman was carrying some kind of satchel.
She was small, and had frizzy blond hair. The angle of the camera wasn't good, but something about her jawline was familiar.
A growl rumbled in his throat, and Parrish lifted questioning eyebrows.
"That was her," Conrad said, already running when he hit the door.

Parrish was right behind him when he burst out the service door and ran down the short alley to the street. He looked both ways, but the sidewalks were empty. A car went by; the driver was a suited young black man, probably a junior executive who had been burning the midnight oil.
A block or so away, an engine coughed to life. Conrad ran down the sidewalk toward the sound, his shoes slipping on the snowy sidewalk. His breath fogged in the frigid air. He reached the corner in time to see a set of taillights disappear around another corner.
"Did you see her?" Parrish gasped, coming to a stop beside him. "What kind of car was it?"
"I couldn't tell," Conrad said. "But the woman was Grace St. John. She was carrying a small satchel, perhaps a computer case."
"Computer" Parrish felt his blood pressure rise. "God damn it, the bitch has been in our files!" He and Conrad hurried back to the office, shivering as the cold bit through their clothes. She wouldn't have been able to get into his password files, but it infuriated him that she had slipped past his guard, that she had been so close all that time and he hadn't known it. Damn the little bitch, how did she do it?
"Who was her friend, I wonder?" Who could she have found to help her? She wouldn't contact people who had known her before, because she couldn't be certain their first phone call wouldn't be to the police. It had to have been someone she had met afterward.
"Perhaps that is why we couldn't find her," Conrad suggested. "We have been looking for a woman alone, instead of a couple."
The idea infuriated Parrish. He ground his teeth as they walked swiftly to the computer room and he opened the door. Everything looked normal, except for a chair that was out of place.
Conrad pointed at the ceiling. Directly over the chair, a panel was slightly out of place.
"Find her," Parrish said in an almost soundless whisper. She had been there, so close; she had taunted him, coming there with another man. He didn't know yet if she had actually found anything of use in his computer system, but just the fact that she had dared invade it made him shake with rage.
"Find both of them. And kill them."

Chapter 16

GRACE'S SECOND SLEEPLESS NIGHT IN A ROW MADE HER EYESIGHT blur, but she couldn't stop reading parts of the Hitler file over and over, couldn't get it out of her mind even when she laid it aside. She kept coming back to it, rereading it to assure herself she hadn't imagined any of it.

The Foundation had been founded in 1802 by a strange assortment of men; Napoleon Bonaparte had been one of the original members, perhaps the most important one and the moving force behind the forming of the organization. Certainly he had been the only one at that time who had ambitions to conquer the world. A grandiose scheme, on the surface of things, but not so unexpected when the entire picture was seen.

The Hitler file gave a different and disturbing look at well known history. In 1799, Napoleon invaded Turkish Syria, advancing as far as the fortress of Acre. He hadn't managed to take the fortress, which the Templars had built in 1240, but perhaps he had heard something there, or found something. It was after he returned from Acre that his ambition lad become full-blown; he had immediately made himself dictator of France, and then Emperor. He conquered Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, Poland, attacked Russia and Austria.

Perhaps a lot of men wanted to rule the world, but few, luckily, really tried to do it or even thought they could. Napoleon had thought it possible; his intention was plainly stated in the Hitler file. He had launched an all-out search for the lost Templar Treasure, certain that when he found it e would be unstoppable, for it was promised in the papers: e who controls the Power controls the world. What was the power? Not gold, but certainly something tangible, such as the Ark of the Covenant. Whatever it was, the Foundation believed it controlled unimaginable power, and for almost two centuries the Foundation had devoted all its resources finding the Treasure.

There were three distinct levels within the Foundation. At the lower level were the employees, paper pushers or hired muscle. The center tier was made up of "contributors," people who were members of the Foundation and who contributed large amounts of money to it, whether by choice r coercion. From what she read, coercion was most common. At the top level were relatively few names; she recognized most of them. Napoleon. Stalin. Hitler. Two American residents. A Middle East dictator. A French general. A British prime minister. A famous labor leader. Tycoons, both male and

female. One name particularly surprised her, for he was an extremely wealthy man known for his humanitarian works. And Parrish Sawyer. His name seemed minor compared to the fame of the others, but they hadn't been famous t the beginning of their careers, either. The presence of his name on the list was a testament to his ruthlessness.

The power to rule the world. The concept was far more ridiculous now than it had been no more than fifty years before. How could anyone person, or Foundation, rule the entire world? But when she looked at it in terms of national :power and influence, something most nations lacked, it was indeed possible to control the world by controlling key institutions. A political takeover wouldn't even be necessary, so long as the politicians obeyed the money men. Media, inking, commerce - take control of those three element and one did indeed control the world. World rule wasn't measured in terms of military conquest, but in economic ones.

To rule the world was a strange ambition, reasonable only to the megalomaniac personality. What was unusual was that so many of these men had joined the Foundation, for by their very personalities each would have thought himself smarter or greater than all the others. But each one had been drawn in, and in his way served the Foundation while he thought he was serving himself.

The Foundation of Evil. Hitler and Stalin had been overtly evil, their twisted, conscienceless psyches exposed to world view. Most of the others on the list appeared, or had appeared, normal, but she knew from Parrish's example how misleading appearances could be. All of these people had pursued unlimited power and ambition, their actions guided by the Foundation. Did they use the Foundation, or did the Foundation use them? What was the nature of evil? What face did it wear? Was the capability to do evil in every person, and like any seed it flourished in some places but not in others? Or did the impetus for evil come from without? Was evil itself a separate entity, or nothing more than a result?

Was the Foundation evil because evil people served it, or was it evil in and of itself? Had the Foundation existed, in some other guise, far longer than a mere two centuries?

When had the Guardian been created? Had the Templars created the post, or served it? Had the Order been destroyed by the servants of the Foundation? Certainly the motives of Philip IV and Clement V were suspect, greed and jealousy and a thirst for power.

Evil. In the silence of predawn, exhausted beyond sleep, Grace paced and thought, wondering if sleep deprivation was making her crazy or if she was indeed battling nothing less than Satan.

Just when she would decide she was definitely crazy, she would remember the Gaelic papers. "The Evil one shall be called Parrish." And "In the Year of Our Lord 1945, the Guardian slew the German beast." The words had been written more than six hundred years before the event actually happened, and were accompanied by a recipe for time travel. The papers were either masterpieces of prophecy, or the Templars had known the secret of time travel.

Perhaps that was the Power the Foundation sought. Time travel! The possibilities were endless. One could zip around in history and make enormous profits by using prior knowledge. What if someone made a large bet against enormous odds that the Titanic would sink, or invested heavily in munitions manufacturing before the onset of World War II? Why, just knowing who would win the World Series would make someone rich beyond belief. The possibilities were endless: take out life insurance policies on someone who would soon die, lotteries, horse races, political elections. On the other hand, it seemed the Guardian had used time travel to protect the Power, so she was still in the dark.

Finally dawn lightened the sky, and she watched it through her dingy window. A sane person would call in sick and try to get some sleep, but instead she showered and drank a pot of coffee. She felt strangely restless, and it wasn't caffeine jumpiness. Instead there was a growing sense of urgency, as if she should be doing something but she didn't know what. Perhaps it was time to pack up and move on, find another job, another room. She had been Paulette Bottoms for a couple of months now, as long as she had kept any identity. Her instincts had kept her alive this long, so she saw no reason to ignore them now.

She hadn't made the mistake of accumulating a lot of possessions. A few clothes, the truck, the revolver. The coffeemaker was a two-dollar yard-sale find. It took her exactly ten minutes to have everything she owned packed and loaded in the truck. The room was paid for through Saturday, so she dropped the key in the super's mailbox and walked away.

The day was Friday. She would work, collect her pay that afternoon, and quit; that would be the end of Paulette Bottoms. She would pick another name, find another room, get another job. Perhaps she would even leave

Minneapolis. She had come back because it seemed the best hiding place, under Parrish's nose, and with a fierce need for vengeance. She had never managed to come up with a reasonable plan, but neither had she devoted herself to it; instead she had concentrated all her energies on translating the papers. That task was finished. With Kris's help, she now knew more than she'd ever imagined about the Foundation. She didn't know yet what she could do with the information, but she felt she should leave and she could barely control the urge to get in the truck and drive until she couldn't stay awake any longer.

Leave Minneapolis. The realization eased through her, bringing a sense of relief. Yes, that's what she should do. Get away from Parrish, from the memories that always hovered at the edge of her control, threatening to crush her if she ever relaxed her guard. She didn't know yet what she was going to do with the information she had, but she wanted to get away from the snow and cold, from the short winter days. She would drive south, and not stop until she found warmth and sunshine.

All she had to do was this one day of work. Clean a few houses, collect her pay, and then she would get on 1-35 and head due south.

Paglione sipped on the last of the coffee in his thermos. Winter stakeouts were the worst. You had to drink coffee to stay warm, and then you had to piss all the time. Took two people to do a decent stakeout, because one of you was always off somewhere taking a leak.

At least staking out a McDonald's wasn't so bad. He could always get something to eat, more coffee, and there was a toilet handy. He had been there three days, though, and he was getting damn tired of Big Macs. Maybe he'd try those chicken things next time.

A car pulled in beside him, interrupting him, and he glanced over. The shape of Conrad's head was instantly recognizable. Despite his years of working amicably with the man, Paglione always felt a little uneasy when he first saw Conrad each time, as if he had somehow forgotten exactly how cold and ruthless he was. Paglione had known stone killers before; he had killed a few people himself. But Conrad was different. Paglione could never guess what went on behind those emotionless eyes. Conrad didn't panic, and he didn't give up. He was like a machine, never tiring, wired to pick up on details everyone else missed. Of all the people Paglione knew, and that included Mr. Sawyer himself, Conrad was the only one he truly feared.

On a rush of cold air Conrad slid into the passenger seat. He wore an expensive wool overcoat that failed to impart any stylishness to his stocky frame.

"Glad you're here," Paglione said. "I been drinking coffee all day and I gotta piss. You want me to get you something while I'm in there?"

"No. Has anyone used the pay phone?"

"A couple of people. I wrote down their descriptions." Paglione took a small notebook off the dash and laid it beside Conrad, then heaved the door open and hurried across the parking lot to the restaurant.

The car windows were beginning to fog. Without looking away from the pay phone, Conrad leaned over and turned the ignition key to start the engine. He picked up the notebook but didn't begin reading it. That would wait until Paglione returned. Reading was too distracting; before you knew it an entire minute could pass, and a lot can happen in a minute.

He was still annoyed with himself. Grace had probably still been in the computer room when he walked by; he had glanced in and seen nothing out of the ordinary. But when he and Parrish had gone back, Conrad had noticed immediately that a stack of manuals had been moved.

So close. He could have gotten her then, and all this would be over.

She had changed. He discounted what was obviously a wig. He no longer looked for any particular length or color of hair, because that was too easily changed. She had lost a lot of weight; when they watched the film again, trying to get some clues to the identity of her companion, Parrish had remarked disappointedly on how thin she was now.

But the biggest change wasn't even the weight loss; it was how she walked. He had watched a lot of clips on her over the months, and he knew her walk as well as he knew his own. She had strolled instead of strode, and there had been something completely feminine in the subtle sway of her hips. Even he could see the sensuality that had Parrish so obsessed. But she had walked like an innocent, with no street awareness, her balance that of someone completely at ease and off guard.

That innocence was gone. Now she walked purposefully, her slight weight balanced on each foot so she could move immediately in any direction. Her head had been up, her attitude alert. Her shoulders were squared, the muscles prepared to swivel. Sometime during her eight months on the run, Grace St. John had gotten street smart, and learned how to fight.

He regretted her lost innocence. She hadn't been insipidly sweet; she was too witty, too sharp. But she had been radiant; that was the quality that had come through in the videotapes he had watched. Both husband and brother had adored her, and she had passionately loved them in return. Parrish had compulsively watched over and over one tape made at Christmas, when her husband had pulled her down on his lap and thoroughly kissed her, and been thoroughly kissed in return. There had been a lot of laughter and teasing in those tapes. The little family had been happy.

A lot could happen in eight months on the run. She could have been beaten, robbed, raped. He didn't like to think of her being brutalized, but he was realistic. Parrish wanted to use her before he killed her, drag her soul in the dirt, humiliate her, and Conrad strongly disapproved. She deserved more respect than that.

Paglione trudged back to the car, carrying a paper sack. He slid behind the wheel and the greasy aroma of french fries and chicken filled the car. He opened the plastic lid on the coffee cup and set it on the dash, then dug out his fries and little cardboard container of poultry pieces.

Now that Paglione had returned, Conrad opened the notebook. Six people had used the pay phone. A black woman at 7:16. A teenage boy, about fourteen, had used it at 9:24, when he should have been in school. An elderly man had approached, fumbled with some change, then left without making a call. An Asian-American male driving an electric utilities truck had placed a call at 10:47. Two young men had arrived at 12:02 and camped on the phone for almost an hour. Damn! When Grace called before, it had been during the lunch hour, so if she had needed to make another call those two idiots would have forced her to go elsewhere.

"Melker's watching the drive-through," Paglione said.

'Bayne's inside. Melker's been bitching because he don't mow what kind of car to look for. Just look for frizzy blond lair, I told him." Conrad sighed softly. If he had been a step faster, he would have seen more than a split-second flash of tail lights, almost more of a reflection than the actual lights. Not that he would necessarily be in the same vehicle; it could belong ;0 her companion. The important thing was that she was no longer dependent on public transportation, making her much harder to track. But he was patient. She had been here before. She would be here again.

Grace finished her last house early, a little after two. She stopped by the cramped little office of the cleaning service and collected her pay, and told

the owner she wouldn't be back. Personnel turned over so regularly that her departure didn't elicit more than a grunt.
She needed to call Kris; he would go crazy with worry if she disappeared without a word. She regretted leaving him behind once again. His company, his friendship, had been like a warm cocoon; actual conversation was rare in her life now but for a brief time she had been able to talk to Kris and not feel so isolated.
She pulled into the McDonald's parking lot to use the pay phone, but someone was already using it. She didn't stop, but swung the steering wheel to go around the cars lined up for the drive-through window. One of the cars in line abruptly pulled out in front of her and she slammed on the brakes to keep from rear-ending it. Her computer case was on the seat beside her, and the abrupt stop sent it pitching off the seat. The zippered section was open and several pages of her notes came out, scattering on the floorboard.
"Damn it," she muttered, pulling to the side. Computers weren't delicate, but neither were they meant to be tossed around, either. The case was padded, but still she leaned over and picked up the case, but some of the scattered papers had slid under the seat and, with her possessions stacked in the way, she couldn't reach that far. Swearing again, she left the truck running and got out, walking around to the passenger side.
She opened the door and began gathering the papers. She had just reached for one on which she plainly saw the words "Creag Dhu" when a gust of wind swirled into the truck and sent the sheet flying over her head. She whirled to catch it, and saw the man almost on her.
She didn't stop to think. Instantly she dropped to the ground, lashing out with a booted foot and catching him solidly on the kneecap. His leg went out from under him as if he'd been shot, and he fell on his face.
Grace rolled away from him, coming to her feet and swinging herself into the cab of the truck. Another man was suddenly there, a man with a simian head and cold, expressionless eyes. She tried to slam the door and he knocked it open, his heavyset body crowding into the opening. Grace heaved herself back but one meaty hand closed around her ankle, inexorably drawing her forward. She kicked at his face. He jerked his head back, and seized her other ankle.
The knife hissed as she drew it out of the scabbard, the blade glinting as she jackknifed to a sitting position and slashed at his hands. She held the knife the way Mateo had shown her, palm down, blade jutting outward so that the

attack came from her midsection and was much harder to block than a wide, sweeping slash. The knife sliced across the back of one hand and he jerked back, releasing one ankle.

The first man was slowly climbing to his feet, groaning and favoring his knee, but within seconds he would be able to help. She could hear someone running, a third attacker hurrying to the truck. She wouldn't be able to fight off three at once, or even two.

Oh, God, the one holding her ankle was as strong as a bull. He pulled her forward, ignoring the pain in his cut hand, blocking her efforts to kick him. The pistol was stuck under her stack of clothing, easily reached if she were in the driver's seat, but now she was lying on top of it.

She threw the knife. He saw the blade coming at his face and no training in the world was strong enough to override the instinct to duck. He threw himself to the side, but even so he retained his grip on her ankle, pulling her partially out of the truck. Desperately she scrabbled under the pile of clothing, her hand striking the pistol and knocking it away. She grabbed again, and this time found it.

She bolted up, both hands folded around the butt, firing as soon as the barrel was clear of her own feet. She heard the shots but they sounded far away, muffled. In slow motion she saw the gorilla-man flinch, then falter. She heard the strange wet thud of a bullet hitting human flesh. She saw the eyes flicker with both surprise and annoyance, as if he shouldn't have let himself underestimate her.

But he didn't let go of her ankle. He set his teeth and pulled.

"I'll kill you," she said, her voice barely audible. She held the barrel centered between his eyes. Her hands were steady. She began taking out the slack in the trigger, and the hammer moved back, poising for the strike.

Their eyes met, and he saw his death in hers. She saw a cold, dark intelligence in his, an awareness that went beyond the moment, as if he knew her down to her soul. There was a flash of acknowledgment, then his hand loosened and he slumped to the ground.

The man she had kicked in the knee began to back away, his hands held up to indicate he was unarmed. She didn't believe that for a minute.

She jerked her head around to locate the third man, and heard the driver's door opening behind her. She threw herself on her back, held the pistol over her head, and shot through the door. Sitting up again, she shot at the first

man as he pulled his pistol from under his jacket. She missed, but he dived for cover.
She had two shots left; she couldn't keep shooting back and forth, she had to make them count. She clambered over her jumbled possessions and settled behind the steering wheel, and jerked the transmission into gear as she jammed her foot onto the gas pedal. The old truck shuddered as it leaped forward, tires slipping on the icy patches in the parking lot. The third man's face appeared in the window beside her as he grabbed for the door handle. She shoved the pistol at the window and he ducked, letting go of the door. The truck shook as the first man jumped up on the rear bumper, trying to climb into the bed.
Grace jerked the steering wheel hard to the right, then to the left. It was like playing crack the whip, except the stakes were a lot higher. His feet slipped off the bumper but he managed to hold on. Watching in the rearview mirror, she barreled out through the parking lot entrance into the path of a car turning in. A horn blared, she jerked the wheel again, and the man lost his grip on the tailgate. He went rolling across the parking lot, and fetched up hard against the rear tire of a parked car.
The passenger door still swung open, but she couldn't take the time to stop and close it. Stepping on the gas, she took a hard left at the first comer, then a right at the next one. The door slammed itself.
She tried to think what she should do. They had a description of the truck, and probably the tag number as well. The truck was registered under Louisa Croley's name, the same name that was on her passport and her driver's license. She should ditch the truck, steal a car somewhere, and get as far from Minneapolis as she could. The police would be looking for her within minutes; a shoot-out at a McDonald's was bound to attract attention.
But she didn't ditch the truck. She didn't take the time to drive to a mall and look for a car with the keys left in it, though Harmony had assured her there were at least two fools shopping at any mall at any given time. Instead she hit 36 and drove west until she got to 1-35. Then she got on the southbound lane and headed for Iowa.
"A mysterious shoot-out at a McDonald's in Roseville has police puzzled," the talking head earnestly announced. "Witnesses say several shots were fired, and at least six people were involved, with two seriously injured. But by the time police arrived, all those involved had vanished, including the wounded. Witnesses said one person, perhaps a woman, was driving a

brown pickup truck. By law, all doctors and hospitals are required to report all gunshot wounds to police, but thus far no one has requested treatment."
Parrish paced back and forth, furious. Conrad sat silently on the sofa, his shoulder bound and his arm supported by a sling. A doctor who belonged to the Foundation had removed the bullet, which luckily had struck his collarbone instead of tearing through the complicated system of cartilage and ligaments in his shoulder. His collarbone was cracked, and the insistent throb seemed to pound through his entire body, but he had refused any pain medication. The cut on his hand, though it had required eight stitches, was minimal.
"Four men couldn't catch one woman," Parrish said, seething. "Bayne didn't even know anything was going on until it was too late for him to help. I'm very disappointed in the quality of your men, Conrad, and in you. She caught you with your pants down, and now she's gone to ground again. With all the people we have in this city, no one has seen her. She's one inexperienced woman; how in hell can she keep getting away from me?" He roared the last sentence, his face flushed dark red, his neck corded with rage.
Conrad sat silently. He didn't make excuses, but as soon as he was able, he would personally take care of Melker. As soon as he spotted her, the fool had run up to the truck without waiting for the others to get in place. If they had all come at her at once, taken her by surprise, she wouldn't have escaped. Instead Melker had tried to take her by himself, and she'd kicked the hell out of him.
Conrad was deeply annoyed at himself, too; he should have expected her to have armed herself by this time, but instead he had allowed himself to be caught off guard, first by the knife, then by that unwavering pistol. She hadn't hesitated, hadn't panicked. She had said, "I'll kill you," and the warning was sincere. She would have done it. In that moment, looking deep into her pure blue eyes, he saw the strength none of them had suspected. He could have held on. She would have killed him, but the delay, and the hindrance of his body dragging on her, would likely have resulted in her capture. He had chosen to let go and pretend to lose consciousness, to save himself. He didn't want to die, he had too much left undone. He didn't want anyone except himself to capture Grace St. John, and he wanted to be alone when he did it. Parrish would never know what happened to her. To that

end, though he had noted her license plate number, Conrad kept it to himself.
Rather than get involved in a tedious police investigation, they had all gotten into their cars and left. Despite his pain and blood loss, Conrad had managed to drive to a secure place and arrange for medical care. Parrish was in a rage, not yet paying attention to the sheet of paper Paglione had picked up in the parking lot, the paper that had blown out of Grace's truck. The paper lay on the table. Conrad hadn't yet looked at it, but his gaze kept going to it. After all these months, searching for both Grace and the papers, a sheet had virtually fallen into their hands. How important could one sheet be, out of all those papers? But it drew him, and he couldn't stop glancing at it in a mixture of dread and anticipation.
At last Parrish noticed that his temper tantrum was being mostly ignored. He followed Conrad's look and stalked over to snatch up the sheet of paper. "What's this?"
"Paglione picked it up," Conrad said. "It blew out of her truck."
"It's some notes she's made," Parrish said, his tone growing thoughtful. He walked over to the desk and sat down, turning on the lamp. "I don't know this language. 'C-u-n-b-h-a-I-a-c-h' means 'steady,' 'c-u-n-b-h-a-I-a-c-h-d' means 'judgment.' I'm so glad to know that. This is gibberish. It must be a code that's in the papers. 'Creag Dhu' this doesn't have any interpretation beside it. Then there's 'fear,' and beside it 'gleidhidh.' This looks like Welsh without all the y's and w's."
Conrad didn't comment, but the feeling of dread was growing stronger. He stared at the paper, hearing his heartbeat pounding in his ears, throbbing in his shoulder. Perhaps he had lost more blood than he had thought, and was about to lose consciousness for real.
Parrish lapsed into silence, his head bent over the paper. He was an educated, sophisticated man, well traveled. He had seen this language before.
"It's Gaelic," he said after a moment, his tone soft. "It isn't a code. Dhu means 'black,' and I think creag means 'rock,' or 'rocky.' Black rock." He stood abruptly, his eyes narrow and intent. "Get some rest, Conrad. I'll have this translated. Grace's little slip may be just the break I've been needing."

Chapter 17

ONE OF HER PAGES OF NOTES HAD BLOWN OUT. GRACE COULDN'T stop thinking about it, her insides clenched tight with dread. She had made a dreadful mistake.

She drove carefully through the snow-dusted Iowa night, well aware she was long past exhaustion and operating on sheer instinct. She needed to sleep, but she couldn't make herself stop. She felt driven, somehow, and so she drove.

She had lost one of the sheets. It was just a sheet of her notes, not one of the document sheets, but still she clearly remembered seeing "Creag Dhu" on it as she reached for it. What were the odds against one of those men picking it up? Not very good. They had to know they weren't just after her, but some papers as well.

She had given Parrish the location of the Treasure; all he had to do was figure out what it was. She had to assume he would. After all, the Foundation's business was archaeology. Parrish had access to any number of old maps, files, cross-references. He would learn Creag Dhu had been a fourteenth-century castle, and with a little effort he would be able to pinpoint its location. He could throw the Foundation's enormous resources into excavating the site-and he would find the Treasure.

Her fault. Her fault. The words drummed ceaselessly through her head. She had failed Ford and Bryant, letting Parrish attain the knowledge for which he had killed them.

She had failed Niall. She should have done something, should have shot both the other men if necessary, and chased down that errant sheet. But all she had been thinking about had been escape, survival; she hadn't remembered the paper until she was already in Iowa.

She had actually shot a man. All of Matty's advice had worked, and she had functioned well enough to do something, instead of simply flailing in terror and hoping for a lucky blow. Eight months ago she wouldn't have had any idea how to use a pistol, and would have been horrified at the thought of doing so; this afternoon she had used both knife and pistol. Thinking of the moment when she had pulled the trigger, Grace wondered numbly if she was still the same person at all.

But what good had all of it done? She was alive, yes, but still she had failed Niall. She had failed to protect the papers. Parrish had won, through her

own negligence.
Eaten alive by guilt, sick in the aftermath of battlefield adrenaline, it was almost ten when she thought of Kris. Swearing softly to herself at her lack of consideration, she began looking for an exit occupied by people and equipped with a pay phone. Perhaps she simply hadn't been paying attention, but it seemed as if most of the exits were nothing more than lonely intersections, access to empty roads leading off into empty night.
She must not have been paying attention. There was a brightly lit truck stop at the next exit. She pulled into the crowded parking lot, her truck dwarfed by the huge tractor trailer rigs that sat idling, their motors rumbling like enormous sleeping beasts. She decided she might as well gas up while she was there, so she pulled up to one of the islands and stood shivering in the icy wind as the tank filled. At least the cold woke her up; she had sunk almost into a stupor, her eyes half closed, hypnotized by the endless zipper of stripes between twin banks of dirty snow, where the snowplows had cleared the highway.
It had started snowing again, she realized, seeing the white flakes blowing through the bright vapor lights of the truck stop. She couldn't go much farther; she was too exhausted to battle snow too. She paid the attendant for the gas, then got in the truck and moved it to the restaurant.
The warmth inside went right through her, making her shudder with relief. Truckers sat at a long counter, or in pairs in the booths that lined the wall. A jukebox played some rollicking honky-tonk song, and a cloud of blue cigarette smoke hovered against the ceiling. There was a tiny hallway to the left, decorated with an arrow and a sign that said "Rest Rooms," and two pay phones were crowded into it. One of the phones was in use by an enormous bearded fellow whose gut strained his thermal-knit shirt. He looked like a cross between Paul Bunyan and a Hell's Angel, but when she neared she heard him say, "I'll call you tomorrow, honey. Love you."
Grace squeezed past him and dug change out of her pocket. A quarter bought her a dial tone. She punched in the numbers, then waited until a recorded voice told her how much more change to feed the beast.
Kris answered immediately, his voice anxious. She turned her back on the big guy, and lowered her voice. "I'm okay," she said, not giving her name. "But they almost caught me this afternoon, and I had to leave. I just wanted you to know. Is everything okay on your end?"
"Yeah." She could hear him gulp. "Are you hurt, or anything?"

"No, I'm fine."
"That was you, wasn't it?" His voice shook. "That shooting at the McDonald's. They said on television a woman in a brown truck. I knew it was you."
"Yes."
"The police don't know what happened. All those men vanished before the cops got there."
Grace blinked. That was surprising news. She had expected the cops to be hot on her trail, too. Evidently Parrish didn't want the cops to catch her, preferring to do so himself. She didn't know why; she had seen about half the city's muckety-mucks on the donor list, so she had no doubt he could pull enough strings to get the papers out of the evidence room, or whatever they called it. He could also have her killed in her cell, and she would be just one more jail violence statistic.
The implication was startling. Parrish wanted her alive, and he wanted her as his prisoner. A wave of revulsion swept her at the thought, but she didn't analyze it.
"I have to go now," she told Kris. "I just wanted you to know I'm okay, and tell you how much I appreciate what you did."
"Grace-" His voice cracked on her name. "Take care.' Stay alive." He paused, and his next words came out quiet and strained. "I love you."
The simple words almost shattered her. She had been too alone; too many months had passed since she had heard them. She gripped the receiver so tightly her knuckles turned white, and the plastic creaked under the strain. She couldn't blow off his youthful devotion as an adolescent crush; he deserved more respect than that. "Thank you," she whispered. "I love you, too. You're a wonderful person." Then she gently hung up, and pressed her forehead against the wall.
Beside her, the trucker was saying his own good-byes, more "I love yous" and "I'll be carefuls." He hung up and glanced at her.
A meaty paw patted her shoulder with surprising delicacy. "Don't cry, little bit," he said comfortingly. "You'll get used to it. How long you been on the road?"
He thought she was a truck driver. Amazement chased away all other emotion. Did she look like a truck driver? Her, the poster girl for academia? She looked down. He wore boots; she wore boots. He had on jeans; she bad on jeans. Baseball caps topped their heads.

She looked like a truck driver. She was so tired she was giddy, and nothing seemed quite real. For the first time in eight months, her lips quivered with amusement. She didn't laugh, but she was astonished at the impulse. Quelling it, she cleared her throat and looked up at Paul Bunyan. "Eight months. I've been driving for eight months."

He gave her another pat. "Well, give it a little more time. It's tough, being away from your family so much, but the freight has to move and some body's gonna get paid for hauling it. Might as well be us, huh?"

"Might as well," she echoed. She nodded to him and escaped out to her truck. She hoped he didn't see her driving off in an ordinary pickup, instead of one of the snoozing behemoths; she didn't want to destroy his illusions about her.

The snow was falling faster, and more trucks were leaving the interstate, rumbling up the exit ramp to take overnight refuge at the truck stop. There was a small, ratty-looking motel next door, and its "Vacancy" sign was lit. Grace decided not to chance driving any farther, and to take a room before the new arrivals got them all.

The room was just as ratty-looking as the exterior. The carpet was worn and stained, the walls were brown, the bedspreads were brown, the lavatory bowl was brown-and it wasn't supposed to be. But the heating unit worked, and so did everything in the bathroom; good enough.

She stuck the pistol in the waistband of her jeans and dragged out the computer case, and a change of clothes for the next day. If the rest of her clothes weren't safe in the truck overnight, well, she hoped the thief was small enough to wear them, because she didn't have the energy to cart everything inside.

She undressed, then reloaded the pistol. Her hands trembled, and she fumbled the bullets. She thrust the gun under her pillow, then climbed into the lumpy bed and was unconscious even before her head hit the pillow. She dreamed.

"And so came Grace to Creag Dhu." Niall wrote the words, the pen scratching across the page. He signed it, dated it, then turned to face her. "Aye, lass, that will bring ye to me." His intent black gaze moved over her, starting at her feet and lingering at hips and breasts before reaching her face. She drew a deep breath, knowing what that look meant. He was the most intensely sexual man she had ever met, and the challenge of that

burning appetite only fed her own sensuality. She could feel her body readying itself for him, growing warm, softening, her nipples standing upright and her cheeks flushing. Excited desire began coiling deep in her belly.

He knew it, saw it. His hard mouth took on a sensual curve and he dropped the quill onto the table, turning on the high wooden stool to face her. He held out his hand. "Dinna wait near seven hundred bluidy years," he said softly. "I want ye now."

Grace took the five steps that carried her to him, her hands lifting to sift through the thick black silk of his hair. He bent his head, and his mouth covered hers. No one else kissed like Niall, she thought dazedly. His taste was as potent as fiery whisky, his kiss was both dominating and seductive, taking what he wanted but giving pleasure in return.

His big hand covered her breast, his thumb rubbing gently over her extended nipple. Her hands clenched in his hair and she crowded closer to him, shivering.

They had already made love so many times he knew exactly how aroused she was, knew there was no need for love play. With a soothing murmur he pulled up both her skirts and his kilt, and lifted her astride him as he sat propped on the high stool. Their loins came together with ease, and she gave a little whimper of relief as his thick erection slipped up into her. Niall gasped, his teeth set, then he gathered her close and they clung together, their need deeper and sharper than physical desire.

'Twas her. Niall awoke, fiercely aroused and aching, but grimly triumphant. This time he had seen her face, this damned wench who tormented his sleep, who watched him from hidden places. He sat up in bed and thrust both hands through his hair, pushing it out of his face as he tried to firm his memories of the dream.

He had been sitting on a stool at a high table, writing something, while she stood off to the side. He couldn't remember what he had said, he just remembered looking at her, and the wench looking back at him, and lust abruptly burning through him. He held out his hand to her and she came to him, into his arms, and he had not even carried her to bed but taken her there, lifting her skirts and hoisting her onto his shaft. She was like liquid fire, flowing over him, lovely blue eyes closed and her face tilted back, exalted, as she pleasured him and he pleasured her.

She felt fragile in his arms, her body tender, her skin silky. She had a great swath of dark hair hanging down her back, thick and sleek, and her eyes were as pure a blue as a Highland lake under a clear summer sky. Her face. . . . a chill ran over him. Her face looked like an angel's, solemn and slightly distant, as if she had some greater purpose. Her brow was clear and white, her delicate jawline slightly squared, and her mouth. . . .. Ah, weel, perhaps not an angel after all," he said aloud, relieved. That mouth put him in mind of a number of things, all of them very carnal.

Still and all, there was something about her that made him uneasy, and Niall was a man who trusted his instincts. He snorted to himself. Aye, and so he should be uneasy, for she was likely a witch; how else could she watch him without being seen, and slip into his dreams whenever she wished? Witch or no, should she ever appear in the flesh he would be glad to give her the measure of his shaft in truth as well as dream, but he would not trust her. She had to have some purpose for watching him; perhaps she had somehow learned of the Treasure.

It would be her ill fortune if that was what she sought, for he was sworn to guard the Treasure against all threat, be that threat from male or female. He had yet to kill a woman for it, but her sex would not save her. If she came for the Treasure, though he ached at the necessity, she would have to die.

Grace slept past the eleven o'clock checkout, awakening only when the maid pounded on the door. She stumbled to her feet, told the maid to come back later, and fell back into bed. She woke for good at three, groggy from so much sleep.

She stood in the shower for a long time, alternating hot and cold water in an effort to dispel the mental fog. She fell physically rested but mentally tired, as if her brain hadn't shut down all night. She had dreamed endlessly, it seemed, her mind going over the short, violent scene in the McDonald's parking lot, replaying it like a loop of film. Time after time she saw herself reach for the sheet of paper, saw "Creag Dhu" on it. She would feel the wind coming, know what was going to happen, and over and over she grabbed for the paper but every time it sailed out of her grasp, straight into Parrish's hands. He had looked at it, smiled, and said, "Why, thank you, Grace." Then he pointed a pistol at her and fired, and the dream would start allover again.

She had also dreamed of Niall, of making love with him. His black gaze had pierced straight through her, as if he knew she had failed to protect the

precious papers given to her. But he had held out his hand to her, demanding she come to him, and she had gone.

"Come to me," he had said. "Now." A violent shudder wracked her, starting at her feet and moving upward until her entire body shook. Her knees gave out and she leaned against the shower wall, her mouth open and little whimpers coming from it. She couldn't stop shaking, couldn't control the sensation of flying apart. Some external force pulled at her, tore at her, compelled her. Her eyes dilated and the dingy shower walls suddenly looked very bright, as if they were glowing.

Come to me. Travel the years, six hundred and seventy-five of them. I have given you the knowledge. Come to me.

The voice boomed inside her head, and yet it was from without. It was Niall speaking, but the voice that was low and devastatingly sexual in her dreams now sternly demanded, Come to me.

The glow began to fade, and the quaking in her muscles gradually weakened until she was standing upright and steady. Cold water pelted down on her and hastily she shut it off, grabbing a thin towel to wrap around her head. She used another to roughly dry herself. God, she was freezing! How long had she been standing like a dope, hallucinating, under the cold water? She had almost given herself hypothermia.

But she hadn't been hallucinating. She knew it. It had been real. There really was a Power; she had felt it from the first moment she had seen those old documents. That was why she had been driven to keep translating them, lugging both them and the laptop around when doing so had been a lot of trouble. She had protected them when common sense should have led her to abandon both.

Everything that had happened in the past eight months had led her inexorably to this moment, standing naked and cold in a dingy little shower in a truck-stop motel somewhere in Iowa, facing an unbelievable but suddenly crystal clear conclusion.

If it were possible, she had to travel through time. Parrish had the sheet; perhaps that was preordained, and there was nothing she could have done about it. But now that he knew, she had to prevent him from getting the Treasure, and the only way to do that was to force Niall to hide it somewhere else. Or perhaps - silly thought, because she wasn't made of heroic material, but still - just perhaps, she was meant to find the Treasure, and use the Power to destroy the Foundation.

She had to go to Creag Dhu - six hundred and seventy-five years ago.

Chapter 18

SPRING CAME SOFTLY TO THE HIGHLANDS. IT WAS MAY, AND THE mountains were carpeted with green. The cool, misty days could suddenly give way to bright sunshine and air so clear it hurt her eyes to see it. From somewhere would come a fragment of sound, the faint echo of a bagpipe, and the haunting sound made her soul weep.

It had taken her four months to get here. At first she had simply kept on driving, going south, angling toward the east. The seasons changed as she drove, winter loosening its grip more and more the farther south she went, and it was in Tennessee, in mid-February, that she saw the first flower blooming. It seemed like such a miracle, in the form of a cheerful yellow jonquil, that she stopped driving then, and rested, and planned.

An early spring, the locals said, after a mild winter. The jonquils were blooming a couple of weeks earlier than usual. The winter hadn't been mild in Minnesota, but eight hundred miles farther south put her in a different climate, a different world.

She had quickly realized she couldn't do this alone, and there was only one person she could think of to call. Harmony had listened silently to Grace's request to travel with her to Scotland for an unspecified length of time.

"Scotland," she finally said. "They don't still paint their faces blue, do they?"

"Only in movies."

"I don't have no passport."

"That's easy to get, if you have your birth certificate."

"You said you need my help doin' something. Reckon you can bring yourself to tell me exactly what it is I'd be doin'?" "If you go," Grace said. "I'll think about it. Call me in a couple of days."

Grace gave her three days, then called again. "Okay," Harmony said. "If I go, would I be doin' anything illegal?"

"No. I don't think." Given that she had to expect the unexpected, Grace couldn't swear that she would stay on the side of the law.

"Dangerous?"

"Yes."

Harmony sighed. "Well, hell," she drawled. "You do make it hard to resist, don't you? How long would I be gone? I got my house to look after, you know."
"I don't know. A couple of days, a couple of weeks. I'll pay all your expenses-"
"I'll pay my own way, if I go. That way, if I get pissed, I won't feel beholden to stay." She was silent for a moment, and Grace could hear her tapping her nails on the phone. "I got one more question."
"Okay."
"What's your real name?"
Grace hesitated. It felt strange to say her own name. The only time she had heard it spoken in months was when Kris had said it. She had gone by so many names that sometimes she felt as if she had no identity. "Grace," she said softly. "Grace St. John. But I'll be traveling under the name Louisa Croley; that's the name on my passport and driver's license."
"Grace." Harmony sighed. "Shit. If you'd lied to me, I coulda said no."
* * *
Finding where Creag Dhu had stood took some time, Grace and Harmony had been in Edinburgh more than a I week before Grace managed to track down the name, and then it was in such a remote section of the western Highlands that it was almost inaccessible. While Grace researched, Harmony did Edinburgh. She toured the castle, she toured Holyrood House, she took day trips to St. Andrews and Perth. It wasn't until Grace actually found Creag Dhu that she told Harmony what she was going to do, Harmony laughed in her face, but when Grace quietly went about her preparations, Harmony sighed and pitched in. She didn't laugh when she heard about Ford and Bryant.
When she had everything gathered, Grace rented a car and they drove to a small Highland village five miles from where Creag Dhu had supposedly stood. The only accommodation in the village was a small bed-and-breakfast, which they took, but the local tavern was a hotbed of gossip. Harmony could stand elbow-to-elbow with hard-drinking Scotsmen and hold her own with them, whether it was beer or whisky, and as a reward they answered all her questions.
Aye, a fancy American had arrived some two months ago, bent on digging up a great pile of rock. A storm had delayed him a bit, turning the ground to

mud and making getting to the site a bit difficult, but the weather had since turned fair and word was he was making a great deal of progress.
"It won't take him long to find it," Grace said when Harmony reported back to her. "I can't wait any longer; I have to go."
"You talk like this is a guaranteed trip," Harmony said j irritably. "Like as not all you're gonna do is give your ass a major shock."
"Maybe," Grace replied. During her own more reasonable moments, she knew that was exactly what was likely to happen. But then she would think of the documents and the things she had read, and the dreams, the sense of compulsion, and she knew she had to try no matter how crazy it sounded. She hadn't had any dreams since arriving in Scotland. Everything felt so strange, as if a veil were hanging between her and everyone else. Nothing quite touched her, not fear or anger or even the more mundane things such as hunger. An essential part of her was already gone, turned away from this time. She knew she was going, and she had prepared as thoroughly as she could.
They set out just after lunch the next day, driving as far as possible, then they got out and walked. Storm clouds hovered to the west, out over the ocean, and the mountain shadows were purple under a gaudy blue and golden sky.
Grace had carefully considered the logistics. The documents had given the formula for time, but not for location. She decided that location didn't change; where she was when she went back would be where she arrived. Standing in the middle of Creag Dhu's ruins would have been perfect, but she hadn't dared go close enough even to see it. She had to settle for getting as close as possible, then walking the rest of the way to the castle when she arrived in that time.
The narrow road they had chosen was little more than a path, and it gave out while they were still some three miles from the ruins. Gathering Grace's things, the two women left the car and walked higher into the mountains. The air was sweet and fresh, a bird's cry high and lonely, Grace could already feel something tugging at her, a quiet anticipation, a need.
"Why don't we just shoot the son of a bitch?" Harmony suggested suddenly, lifting her lemon-white head into the wind. Her nostrils flared, her pale green eyes narrowed. She looked like some exotic goddess of war, ready to slay her enemies. "It's easier, neater, and a hell of a lot more likely to get the job done."

"Because it isn't just Parrish, it's the Foundation. Even if we kill him, another will take his place." She had finally reached that conclusion, and found a measure of peace in it. She would love simply to kill Parrish and be done with it, claim her vengeance, walk away. She couldn't do it. The Foundation of Evil. . . she couldn't let the Foundation get control of the Treasure.

She spotted the place where she wanted to be, and pointed it out to Harmony. The nest of rocks was almost al the peak of the mountain. Carefully they climbed up, their feet alternately sinking into damp sod and slipping on loose -rock. When they reached their goal, they stood quietly looking at the empty glen below, at the mist blowing in from the ocean. The Creag Dhu site wasn't visible; it lay beyond the next mountain. The local folk said it was a bed of black rock, jutting against the ocean. Grace tried to picture it in her mind, but even though she had seen numerous archaeological sites, the image that formed was of the great castle when it was whole, looming dark against an angry gray sea.

"Are you sure you have everything?" Harmony asked, placing her bundle on the ground and quickly arranging the items.

"I'm sure." She had made a list while still in the States, and had begun making her preparations even then. According to the instructions, she had altered her diet more than a week ago, tailoring it to the specifications. She bent down and attached the electrodes to her ankles, taping them in place. She sensed that her detachment worried Harmony. "I'm all right," she said in answer to an unvoiced concern. "If this doesn't work-well, it just won't work. I'll get a shock, , but it won't be enough to kill me."

"You hope," Harmony snarled, her irritation growing. "If it does work-I don't know if any of this stuff will go with me, or if I'll suddenly appear there stark naked. If it doesn't go, carry it back to the village and do what you want with it."

"Sure. I've always wanted a velvet dress that's three sizes too little and a foot too short." ."I'm leaving the laptop anyway. I've deleted all my notes from the hard disk, but my journal is still on there. I've put everything down. If anything happens to me and I don't make it back. . ." She shrugged. "At least there will be a record of what happened."

"How long am I supposed to wait?" Harmony asked furiously.

"I don't know. I'll leave that up to you."

"Damn it, Grace!" Harmony turned on her, face red with fury, but she bit back her angry words and merely shook her head. "I can't reach you, can I? In your head, you're already there."
"I know you don't understand it. I don't, either." The wind plastered her gown to her form and lifted her hair, streaming it behind her. The glen stretched below her but she didn't see it, her eyes looking beyond. "It's been a year since Ford and Bryant were murdered. I haven't been able to cry for them yet. It's as if I don't deserve to, because I haven't done anything to avenge them."
"You haven't had time to cry." Harmony's voice was rough. "You've been busy just stayin' alive."
"I haven't been to their graves. I was back in Minneapolis for six months, and I didn't look for their graves. I didn't put flowers on them."
"Damn good thing. From what you've told me, this Parrish bastard would have men watching the cemetery. They'da nailed you for sure."
"Maybe. But I couldn't have gone even if I had known it was safe. Not yet. Maybe when I get back."
After that, there didn't seem to be anything left to say. Harmony hugged her, green eyes wet, then walked quickly away.
Grace sat down on the rocks and opened the laptop, turning it on. She logged into her journal and tried to gather her thoughts. It was useless; they darted about like swallows. Finally she stopped trying and simply began typing.
"May 17th - revenge takes over your life. I never realized this before, but then I've never hated before. One moment my life was ordinary and secure, happy-and the next moment everything was gone. My husband, my brother. . . I lost them both.
"Odd how things change, how in the blink of an eye one's life goes from the ordinary-even mundane-to a nightmare landscape of horror, disbelief, and almost crippling grief. No, I haven't cried. I've held the grief locked inside me, a wound that can't heal, because I don't dare let it out. I have to concentrate on what must be done, rather than allow myself the luxury of mourning those I've lost. If I falter, if I let my guard down even the slightest, then I'll be dead too.
"My life feels as if it belongs to someone else. Something is wrong, discordant, but what: before-or now? It's as if the two halves don't match,

that one or the other simply isn't my life. Sometimes I can't feel any connection at all with the woman I was, before that night.
"Before, I was a wife. Now, I'm a widow. I had a family, small but familiar, and achingly dear. Gone. ."
"I had a career, one of those obscure, intellectually challenging jobs in which I could, and did, lose myself in dusty old parchment and precious, unknown little books, where I mentally wandered in the past for so long that Ford sometimes teased me about having been born in the wrong century . That too is gone. Now I have to run, to hide, or I too will be killed. I've spent the months scurrying from hole to hole like a rat, lugging around some stolen manuscripts and ancient translations. I've learned how to change my appearance, how to get a fake ID, how to steal a car if necessary. I eat occasionally, though not well. Ford wouldn't recognize me. My husband wouldn't know me! But I can't let myself think about that."
"How did I come to this? A rhetorical question. I know how it happened. I watched it happen. I saw Parrish kill them both. There was no transition between before and now, no time to adjust. I went from respectable to fugitive in the space of a few shattering minutes. From wife to widow, from sister to survivor, from normal to . . . this."

"Only hatred keeps me going. It's a hate so strong and hot and pure that sometimes I feel incandescent with it. Can hate purify? Can it burn out all the little obstacles that might keep you from acting on it? I think it can. I think mine has. I want Parrish to pay for what he's done to my life, pay for the deaths of those I love. I want him to die. But I don't want Ford and Bryant to have died for nothing, so I have to go after the Foundation too, not just Parrish."
"I don't know how long it will take me to reach my destination. I don't know if I can do it in time (a bad pun) or if I'll die in the effort. All I can do is try, because hate, and revenge, are all I have left."
"I must find Black Niall." She stopped typing, staring at the words on the screen. When she was in college she had kept a paper journal, with a butter-soft leather cover. Ford had given it to her the first Christmas after they started dating. She had intended it to be a record of her work, her thoughts on it, how the research and translations were going; instead it had become a diary of her private life, and when she switched to a laptop computer the habit had carried over to the electronic page.

In the journal she had recorded her flight from Parrish Sawyer. In it, too, was the only relief she had from the grief she kept bottled inside, for only there had she mourned Ford and Bryant. She had also chronicled her deepening fascination, and her warring senses of disbelief and awe, with what she had discovered in the old manuscripts for which Parrish had killed. She had wanted to dismiss them, but she couldn't; there were too many details that tied together, too many coincidences for them to be mere coincidences after all. Certainly Parrish didn't dismiss the secrets contained in the documents. And in the end, she too had believed.

Carefully she closed the file and turned off the laptop, setting it safely aside. She didn't know if any of the articles she had gathered would make the trip with her, or if she would arrive there - or was it when - without anything, even a stitch of clothing. She hadn't been joking about being stark naked. She didn't know anything for certain, not even if the whole damn procedure would work. If it didn't, at least only Harmony would be a witness to what a colossal fool she made of herself. And if it didn't work, she would find some other way to stop Parrish and the Foundation. But if it did…

She took a deep breath. She had everything ready. She had checked and rechecked her figures, then checked them again. She had found the correct mineral surroundings, the rocks, for better conductivity. She had drunk the correct amount of water, calculated according to her weight and the time she needed to travel, so much that she felt bloated. She had eaten the correct things, subtly altering her body chemistry. She had prepared herself mentally, rehearsing what she would do, the sequence in which she would do it. Even the weather was cooperating, with the offshore storm advancing nearer and nearer, so that the air was crisp and crackling with electricity. The storm wasn't needed, but its presence seemed like a blessing.

It was time. Grace picked up the big, rough burlap bag she had sewn herself, and hugged it to her chest. She and Harmony had also handmade the heavy, old-fashioned garments she wore, though neither of them was particularly skillful at sewing. At least early-fourteenth-century fashions had been simple. She wore a plain cotton gown, with long sleeves and a scoop neck, not formfitting at all. Over it was another gown, a sleeveless one, of good, soft wool. The undergown was called a kirtle, the overgown a surcoat. In the bag was a heavy velvet surcoat, should she need to convey a bit of status. A length of wool was folded in the bag, to be used as a shawl should she need it.

She had taken the precaution of buying a pair of handmade moccasins while she was in Tennessee, and the soft leather molded to her feet. She wore long white stockings, secured with old-fashioned ribbon garters which she tied above her knees. She wore no bra or panties, for there hadn't been any such thing as underwear back then.

There were no elastic bands or garment tags to make anyone suspicious. Her long hair was secured in a single thick braid, in the style she had worn a long time ago-before. She covered her head with a thick cotton scarf, tying the ends behind her neck. The only thing she carried in the way of money was a few pieces of jewelry, the earrings and wedding band set she had been wearing when it all happened. There was nothing about her appearance, she hoped, that would be glaringly out of place. What she carried in the burlap bag would be enough to get her burned for witchcraft if she were caught. The storm was growing closer, thunder echoing like a brass gong. Now or never, she thought. She had to hurry so Harmony could collect the laptop; rain wouldn't do it any good.

Carefully she placed her foot on the pressure switch she had rigged, holding her weight just short of tripping it. She could feel the electrodes where she had taped them to her ankles, and wondered how they had managed this in the days before electrodes and batteries existed.

Closing her eyes, she began breathing deeply, slowly, and forced herself to focus on Black Niall. She had done all the right things so she should go back exactly six hundred seventy-five years, but she felt as if she needed a target. He was the only target she had, this man who had lived almost seven hundred years before. There were no portraits of him, not even a crude drawing such as had been common back then, for her to bring to mind. All she could do was concentrate on him, the man, the essence of him.

She knew him. Oh, she knew him. He had haunted her for months, owning her waking mind while she struggled to decipher the ancient documents, then invading her dreams with images so vivid that sometimes she woke herself talking to him in her sleep, and always-always-she felt as if he'd just been there. He had made love to her in her dreams, tormenting her with her subconscious's sensuality. Black Niall had in some ways been her savior, for he had given her hope. The force of his personality, of the bigger-than-life man he had been, had reached out to her across the span of seven centuries. He drew her, somehow, and kept her from sinking into the tar pit of despair.

There were times, during these past months, when he had been more real than the world around her.

His image began to fill her mind, forming against the darkness of her closed eyelids: a man as vivid as the lightning, as forceful as the thunder. Dimly she was aware that it was dangerous to focus on her imaginary picture of him, rather than on facts, but she couldn't change her mind to a blank screen. She could feel him, drawing closer. He was there, he was there. . . Breathe. deep and slow. Draw the air in one nostril, circle it around. expel it out the other nostril. Complete the circle, again and again. Breathe. Breathe. . .

She saw his eyes, black and piercing, burning through the fog of time until it was as if he glared straight into her eyes. She saw the high, thin blade of his nose, the thick mane of his black hair as it swung against his muscled shoulders, the small braids that hung on each side of his face in ancient Gaelic fashion.

She saw his mouth open as he roared a command. She faintly perceived around him the din and horror of battle, but he was the only clear figure. She saw the glint of a weak, watery sun on his sword blade as he swung the massive weapon with one powerful arm. The other arm wielded a fearsome axe, rather than a shield, and both weapons were stained with blood as he hacked and parried, felling one foe after another.

In. Out. The air circled around and around inside her, drawing ever smaller, tighter, her mind fastening ever more firmly on the man who was her target. The spiral began to shrink, hugging around her, creating a sense of suction, and she knew she was almost ready to go.

Niall! Black Niall! Mentally she called to him, screaming his name, her yearning so fierce and intense that it ached in every cell of her body. There was a sensation of being compressed, condensed, concentrated. In her mind she saw his head jerk around in surprise, as if he heard the distant echo of her cry, and then his image too began condensing, tugging on her, pulling her down into a pit of darkness. She fastened on the pure beacon of his essence, like a pilot surely guiding an airplane down on a beacon of radio waves. With her last remnant of consciousness she let her foot relax on the pressure switch, and the world exploded in a flash of blinding heat and light.

Chapter 19

GRACE LAY ON HER SIDE IN THE COOL GRASS. SHE FELT DAZED and bruised. Around her she heard a confusion of noises but they came from a great distance, and she couldn't quite tell what any of them were. Her mind, lingering between times, struggled to grasp any detail of existence. She felt as if she were waking up from anesthesia, aware first of external details but with no clue of who or where she was. Then details began seeping back; first was a vague "Oh, yeah, I'm Grace" moment of self-recognition. After a moment, or an hour, she wondered drowsily if the procedure had worked or if she had merely succeeded in shocking her ass, as Harmony had phrased it. She became aware of various aches, as if she had been beaten, or had rolled down a hill.

The noise was steadily growing louder. The din became annoying, and she struggled to open her eyes, to gain control of her body so she could sit up and tell whoever was yelling like that to shut up. Then the smell hit her, and she gagged.

That involuntary reaction seemed to complete the transition from unconsciousness to complete awareness. The noise exploded into a roar, a horrifying din of what seemed like hundreds of men yelling in battle, screaming in pain. The discordant clash of metal against metal hurt her ears. Horses thudded the ground with steel-shod hooves, neighing shrilly. And the smell was an unholy combination of hot, fresh blood, urine, and emptied bowels.

She sat up, then gasped and hurled herself to the side as two dirty, long-haired, plaid-wrapped Scotsmen clashed almost on top of her. A bloodstained blade swiped through the air, barely missing her.

Dear God. She had landed in the middle of a battle. Her breath caught. She had seen Black Niall in a battle, focused on him, and the procedure carried her directly to the place in her mind.

He was here. Somewhere. An almost painful excitement seized her insides. Clutching her bag, she scrambled farther away from the clash of bodies. She stumbled over something soft and heavy and pitched hard onto her back. Winded, she sat up and saw that her legs were draped over a bloody dead man. A shriek caught in her throat, hung there unvoiced. Instead she hastily jerked herself away and came to her feet, swaying unsteadily as she swiveled her head, trying to orient herself.

They were in the glen, just below the rocks where she had gone through the procedure. The scene was madness, some men on horseback but most were running, attacking, pivoting, slashing. Panic seized her. she couldn't see Black Niall anywhere, couldn't find a big man with a flowing mane of black hair, who effortlessly swung a huge sword with one hand. God, oh God, was he lying somewhere in the middle of this carnage, his own blood adding to the red flow?

Reality asserted itself with a thud. Despite her dreams and imaginings, she had no idea what he really looked like. The Guardian wouldn't glow like an archangel with a fiery sword; he would look just like everyone else. He could have been one of the grimy combatants who had almost steppe4 on her and she wouldn't have known him.

So how was she to find him? Climb the hill and scream "Black Niall!" at the top of her lungs?

"Niall Dhu! Niall Dhu!" She heard the screaming, the sudden roar from one end of the battlefield, and all the seething bodies seemed to surge in that direction. Grace backed up, climbing a little way up the hill so she could have a better view.

"Niall Dhu!" She started, the hoarsely screamed words suddenly making sense. Dhu meant "black." They were yelling his name.

Blood drained from her head. Had he fallen under a sword? She stumbled forward, her feet slipping in the red mud created by many feet churning a blood-soaked ground, driven by an insane need to reach his side. He couldn't be dead. No. Not Niall. He was invincible, the most fearsome warrior in Christendom.

The surge abruptly reversed, coming back to her. Grace halted, transfixed by the sight of all those screaming, dirty, long-haired men, bare legs flashing as they ran toward her. Hard reality slapped her. She was in the middle of a fourteenth-century battle, and if any of these men got their hands on her she would likely be raped and killed.

She turned and ran. It was like waving a cape at a bull. They were already in a blood lust, and a collective roar burst from a hundred throats when they saw her. Grace pulled up her skirts and hurdled bodies, the bag she clutched in one hand banging heavily against her legs. She struggled to draw breath but panic clutched her throat, squeezing, threatening to cut off her breathing altogether.

The ground shook under a horse's thundering impact and a beefy, bloodstained arm swept around her. Grace shrieked as the world abruptly whirled off kilter and she was jerked into the air, flailing, to land heavily across a stinking, wool covered lap. The man roared with laughter, roughly fondled her rump, then kneed the horse around. He yelled something, his tone obviously gloating, but she couldn't understand anything he said except "Niall Dhu."

Helpless, upside-down over a horse, all she could do was hang on to the bag and hope against hope that the ruffian who had captured her was Niall himself. She had caught a glimpse of a beefy face with a dirty beard, a dreadful disappointment compared to her dreams, but if he were Niall at least that would save her the trouble of hunting him down.

She didn't think she was that lucky. The bastard was in high spirits, laughing and yelling as he rode. Others on horseback were around them, but most of the men were afoot. There was a great deal of activity in a group just out of her limited view, more yelling and laughter.

The man holding her put his hand between her legs, roughly feeling her through her skirts. Fury swept over Grace in an abrupt, unthinking tide, and swift as a snake she turned her head and sank her teeth into his bare, dirty calf. He roared in surprised pain and jerked on the reins. The horse half reared, neighing, and its hooves hit the ground again with a bone-jarring thud, jerking her teeth out of the man's leg. She gagged at the taste, and nausea overwhelmed her. She began to heave, and vomited over his foot. Laughter rose around them, men pointing and howling with glee. Her captor seized her and furiously jerked her upright, his fetid breath hitting her full in the face as he roared at her. She couldn't understand a word he said, but his breath made her gag again. Hastily he pushed her off the horse and she sprawled in the dirt, landing with the bag under her stomach and knocking the air out of her.

She was jerked upright, held then while she swayed and gasped for breath, and a rope was tied around her waist. The beefy man tied the other end around his own waist and kicked his heels to the horse's sides, and she had to walk or be dragged. She walked, wheezing, desperately clutching her bag in both hands.

She expected the bag to be taken from her at any moment, but the men evidently didn't see any need to carry anything extra when she could do it.

She wasn't going anywhere, and they could relieve her of her possessions whenever they reached their destination.
At least now she could look around. She didn't know if it was morning or afternoon, so she had no way of telling in what direction they were traveling. Not north or south, though, because the sun was behind them. If it was morning, they were traveling west; if afternoon, they were going east.
Behind her, a group of men were carrying a long bundle, completely wrapped and tied in a motley collection of dirty plaids. The bundle heaved occasionally, and was rewarded by a thump from one or more of the men. She looked around and one of the men met her gaze, grinning to display a few remaining teeth, the rest rotted to mere stumps. " "Niall Dhu," he said proudly, indicating the bundle.
Aghast, she stopped walking, and was jerked forward when the slack was taken out of the rope. Niall! She looked over her shoulder at the bundle, struggling to make sense of the situation. These couldn't be his men, or they wouldn't be hitting him. Obviously he had been captured, and his own men hadn't been able to pursue for fear he would be killed.
Her mind buzzed with possibilities. He might be ransomed, or his captors might take pleasure in torturing and killing him. If he were held for ransom, he would likely be well taken care of; she thought she remembered reading that medieval Scots had practiced kidnapping as a fairly normal means of income, which of course would work only so long as the captive was returned unharmed. If killing them had been routine, obviously no one would have been willing to pay their hard-earned gold to no avail. The Scots were too practical for that. '
But if they intended to kill him. . . She had to find some way to help him. The problem was that she was a captive herself, and whenever they reached their destination she was likely to find herself in much more dire straits than she was in now. She was a captured woman, vulnerable, nothing more than a piece of meat to these men. Grace knew she was facing rape, probably multiple rapes, unless she could come up with some miraculous plan. Fear chilled her, but she forced it away. She was here. She had actually traveled through time. The circumstances weren't good, but she had found Black Niall almost immediately. Whatever happened later, she had to keep her mind focused on her objective. If necessary, she would endure. She would survive. She was here. The amazement of it suddenly pushed out all other concerns, and her head swiveled from left to right, trying to take everything

in. Her heart pounded in her chest. There was nothing really different to see; odd how little the Highlands had changed. Even in the twentieth century they were still mostly deserted, as if time had passed them by. The craggy mountains looked the same, perhaps a bit rougher, with patches of mist clinging to them.

She looked around her at the men, curiously examining their faces. Even under tangled thatches of dirty, uncombed hair, and sometimes an equally dirty, untidy beard, they looked so identifiably Scottish. She saw a long, thin nose here, high slanted cheekbones there, over there a cheerfully round cheek.

The men weren't in a good mood, despite their success in capturing Black Niall. Their losses had been heavy, and none of them had escaped completely unscathed. They laughed whenever one of them punched Niall, but the laughter was mean.

They talked among themselves, but she couldn't understand them. Learning to read Gaelic was a far cry from speaking it, and she doubted any of them could read even if they were inclined to let her write notes to communicate.

The bearded beast who had captured her looked around and scowled at her, and snapped something in Gaelic. Grace started to shrug her shoulders, but a risky plan popped into her head. She didn't give herself time to think about it. She found herself smiling a d saying, "I'm sorry, I can't understand you," in the soft, sweetest voice she possessed.

His eyes popped wide open. The men around her gave her startled looks. Until then they had probably thought she was one of Black Niall's crofters, perhaps his woman or belonging to one of his men, but when she spoke in a foreign language they all realized she wasn't what they had assumed.

The beast's small, piggy eyes roamed over her clothes, and for the first time he noticed she wasn't wearing the rough, shapeless clothing of a crofter. He reined his horse to a stop and said something else. Everyone was watching her now. Even the bundle that held Black Niall had stopped wriggling.

Grace didn't stop, but walked up beside the horse and gave the beast, the mounted one, another smile. She hadn't smiled in so long that the movement of her face felt strange, but if the beast noticed how false it was his stupefied expression didn't change.

"You stink as if you haven't bathed in your entire life," Grace said pleasantly. "And your breath would knock this horse down if he got a good whiff of it. But you seem to be the leader of this war party, so if being nice

to you will protect me from them, I'll take my chances with just one man instead of a crowd any day of the week." She accompanied this with the sweetest smile she could manage, and held her arms up to him.
He was so startled that he automatically leaned down and lifted her onto the horse in front of him. The beast was strong as an ox, she thought, daintily settling herself in a proper position and arranging her skirts. She tried not to breathe through her nose so she wouldn't smell either his body stench or his breath, but she didn't let herself flinch. She acted as if it were her right to ride instead of walk, gave him a regal nod, and said, "Thank you."
They were all gaping at her, and they began gabbling excitedly among themselves, pointing at her clothes. She hadn't realized what good quality her plain cotton and wool garments were, until she compared them to the rough woven fabric the men wore.
The beast lifted her hand, fingering her rings, and Grace held her breath. She expected him to tear them off her fingers, but instead he grunted and turned her hand over to look at her palm. She looked down, and saw the difference in their hands. His was thick and beefy, callused, the ragged nails black with encrusted dirt. In contrast her hand was soft and pale, the skin smooth, her nails well shaped. Her hands didn't look as if she did any physical labor; in this age, that meant she was at least nobility. She could almost see the ponderous thoughts forming in his brain. She was foreign, and wealthy, and of value to someone somewhere. Perhaps he didn't intend to ransom Black Niall, but here was a little godsend who could add considerable weight to his purse.
He prodded her bag and said something. Guessing he wanted to know what was in the bag, Grace obligingly opened it. The men crowded close, craning their necks in curiosity. She took out one of the books she had brought, flipping the pages to show him the paper and words, then shoving it back into the bag. She hoped no one would be very interested in it, because books didn't exist yet. Priests and monks did illuminated manuscripts, but the printing press wouldn't be invented for another hundred years or so.
The beast wasn't interested in the book, waving his beefy hand in dismissal. She pulled out the velvet surcoat, just enough to let him see the fabric. He murmured in pleasure, rubbing his dirty hand over the plush texture, and grinned in anticipation of riches. Next she showed him a larger book, hoping he wouldn't want her to flip the pages in it too, because this book

had photographs. He grunted, shaking his head, and she shoved it back into the bag.
She had brought several books, chosen with care. There were also several kinds of drugs in the bag, but she didn't want to display the pills. She had gotten prescriptions for them and gone through customs without any problem, but the beast would either eat them or scatter them on the ground. So she pulled out another book, and he looked impatient. He probably wanted to see something he recognized as valuable.
Perplexed, she pulled out the length of wool. Again, he fingered the fine weave, then shoved it aside. She pulled out another book. He said something rude, causing the men to laugh. She shrugged, and brought out still another one, hoping that would allay any suspicions he might have about the weight of the bag, should he investigate. Abruptly he decided to do just that, grabbing the bag and shoving his hand inside. Grace held her breath. The pills were carefully rolled in a handkerchief, then placed in a small wooden box to keep them from getting crushed, and the box secured in a pocket she had sewn into the inside of the bag.
He didn't notice the pocket or the box. His searching fingers found the Swiss Army knife, and he pulled it out with a triumphant expression that swiftly changed to puzzlement as he stared at it. With all the blades and utensils folded in, it didn't look like much. She didn't want to lose the knife, but if he figured out the blades she knew she would. She drew a quick breath and reached for the knife.
He drew it back, scowling. Grace made her expression impatient. She untied the scarf from her head and unbound her hair, letting it fall free. He blinked at the long, thick mass. She reached for the knife again and this time he let her have it. She closed her hand around it so the blades didn't show, and turned it so he could see the head of the small tweezers. Delicately she plucked it out, and he blinked in astonishment. She held the tweezers in the palm of her hand, letting him look at it, then she quickly gathered her hair and began rolling it up around the knife, forming an oblong bun. When the roll was tight against her nape, she stuck the tweezers into her hair to secure it, and gave the beast a beatific smile.
He looked at her, then at her hair. He blinked again. Then he evidently decided ladies' hairstyles were beyond him, and turned his attention back to the bag.

Next he found a small penlight, luckily the kind that came on when the top was twisted instead of one with a button. Grace sighed, pulled the tweezers out of her hair, and started to unroll the bun, but he got the idea and dropped the penlight back into the bag without examining it very closely. He missed the book of matches, but it had probably gotten stuck between the pages of one of the books.
Next he found an extra pair of stockings, rolled into a ball. To her relief, she didn't have to put them in her hair. He found her comb, and exclaimed over how well made it was. She had searched for a wooden one that wouldn't cause comment, then carefully scratched off the maker's name. The comb was one thing he really could have used, but he dropped it back into the bag without further interest. A few more half-hearted pawings, and he decided she didn't have any valuables hidden from him. He gathered the horse's reins, and with a click of his tongue and a touch of his heels they rode on, with her held carefully in front of him like a queen-a queen with a Swiss Army knife rolled up in her hair.

Chapter 20

THE GRIMY GROUP OF MEN AND THEIR TWO CAPTIVES REACHED A castle just before nightfall. The setting sun had given Grace their direction of travel, and she had carefully noted what landmarks she could. Luckily, they seemed to be traveling due east, so if – when - she managed to free Niall and they escaped, she knew they should go due west. The castle was surprisingly small, little more than a keep with a great hall added, and in ill repair at that. Grace was ushered into the dark, smelly interior, but at least she walked on her own. She watched, trying to hide her anxiety, as Niall was carried in. The bundle had stopped squirming a couple of hours before, and she wondered if they had inadvertently smothered him. Evidently the same thought occurred to the beast, because he shouted something and one of the four men carrying Niall cuffed him on the side of the head. A muffled growl reassured them, and Grace.
Securing Niall was much more important than dealing with her, at least for the moment. A smoky torch was fetched, and Niall was carried down a narrow, winding stone staircase, deep into the bowels of the castle. Grace trailed along because she didn't know what else to do, and the dirty, sullen

women who had watched her arrival didn't seem welcoming. Besides, she needed to know where Niall would be held.
The dungeon was creepy. It was dank and dark, with moisture oozing from the slimy stone walls. The air was noticeably colder. There were three cells dug into the earth, each of them secured by an enormous wooden door. There weren't any grilles in the door; the prisoners in this dungeon would live in total darkness, cold and damp, and likely die of pneumonia within a week or two.
The beast cut the ropes that bound the plaids about Black Niall; he and his men all stood with weapons ready, should Niall try to escape. Grace stood on tiptoe, her eyes wide as she tried to get a glimpse of the man who had haunted her for so long. Her movement drew the beast's attention and he scowled at her. He barked an order, and one of the men reluctantly took her arm and forced her to the stairs. She tried to resist, slow him down, but he wasn't happy to be missing the fun and he literally hauled her up the stairs, wrenching her arm in the process. Below, yells burst from male throats and she twisted her head, trying to see, but she was already too far up the curving stairs. There was a crash, and curses, and the sounds of a scuffle, feet scraping on stone and the thud of fists into flesh.
She flinched, wondering if they intended to beat him to death. Her guard jerked at her arm, scowling at her. She gave him a frustrated glare. Yelling at him wouldn't do any good, because no one understood her.
They reached the great hall and he shoved her toward another flight of stairs, this one curving upward into the keep. This staircase was just as dark and narrow. Grace glanced down and saw the sullen faces watching her.
The guard paused in front of a crude wooden door, opened it, and shoved her inside. Immediately she whirled but he closed the door in her face, with a snarled order that she took to mean "Stay there!"
There was no keyhole in the door and the bar was positioned on this side of the door, meaning she wasn't -locked in, but when she laid her ear against the wood she heard the guard settling himself on the other side.
She turned and looked at her jail. The room was small and dark, lit by a single smoking torch whose light didn't quite reach all the comers of the room despite its lack of size. The only window was a narrow slit, cut so an arrow could be shot from it at any angle. The floor was covered with rushes gone black and smelly with age, and the only furniture was a roughly made bed that was about the size of a modem double, a single chair, and a wobbly

table. A small chest sat against the far wall, and a single candle stood on the table. There was a fireplace, but no fire. A leather bottle stood on the table beside the candle, and a single metal cup.

Grace took advantage of her privacy, which she was sure was only temporary. Unless she missed her guess, this was the beast's bedchamber. Hastily she removed the tweezers from her hair, which had held up remarkably well, and unrolled the knife. After replacing the tweezers in their slot, she thrust the knife inside her stocking and retied the garter, determined to keep the combination weapon and tool with her from now on.

Taking the small wooden box from its pocket inside the burlap bag, she opened it and removed the handkerchief, carefully unrolling it so she didn't lose any of the precious pills. She had brought a full course of antibiotics, and prescriptions of painkillers and Seconals, in addition to picking up some over-the-counter stuff in Edinburgh. The Seconals were an impulse, an effort to cover all bases; it was strange that they would be the first drug she would need to use.

The reddish capsules were hundred-milligram doses, enough to put someone to sleep. What she had to figure out was the delivery system, because she couldn't hand one to the beast and say, "Here, take this."

She looked at the leather bottle, thinking. Alcohol intensified the effects of Seconal; what wasn't a lethal dose of the drug could become lethal if the user also drank. She didn't want to kill the beast, just knock him out. Two or three pills were enough to put someone to sleep; the pharmacist had The beast was a heavy man, not very tall but she guessed his weight at two hundred pounds. She picked out three capsules, and returned her drug stash to the burlap bag.

She opened the leather bottle and sniffed the contents. Her eyes watered at the smell of raw, strong ale. He wouldn't notice anything wrong with the taste if she dissolved the entire thirty capsules in his cup.

Three should do the trick, however. Carefully she pulled the capsules apart, pouring the powder into the battered metal cup. Then she poured a little ale into the cup and swished the liquid around until the powder dissolved. She peered into the cup. The color of the ale looked a little cloudy, but in this light he wasn't likely to notice.

Then, forcing herself to calm and patience, Grace sat down in the chair with the cup in her hand.

She waited a long time. The noise that drifted up made her think there was a revelry going on downstairs. She was hungry, but she wasn't anxious to join them. If someone thought to send food, fine. If not, she had been hungry before.
She grew drowsy. The flickering torch was as sedative as watching a fire in a fireplace, and gave off enough warmth that she wasn't cold. She thought of Niall, and knew that he was neither warm nor comfortable enough to sleep. He would be hungry, too; if they hadn't fed her, they certainly' hadn't fed him. That was assuming he was even still alive, but she didn't think they had killed him yet. If the beast intended to kill him, he would want to gloat a bit first. He struck her as that kind of man.
Finally she heard voices outside the door. She didn't jump up, but continued sitting relaxed in the chair, or at least as relaxed as she could be on something as hard as) rock. The door opened and the beast came in, his shaggy ; head lowered and his small, mean eyes bright with anticipation. He looked at the cup, at the open bottle of ale on the table, and his lips spread in a big grin, displaying terrible teeth and remnants of the dinner he had eaten.
Grace yawned and leisurely came to her feet. She pretended to sip the ale, then looked at him and raised the cup in a silent question, nodding at the bottle. He rumbled what she took to be agreement, and she filled the cup, then passed it to him.
He downed the ale in two gulps, then wiped the back of his hand across his wet mouth. His eyes never left her, and lust burned hotly in them.
She fought the impulse to gag even as relief filled her. Dear Lord, how long would it take the Seconals to work? He had eaten, which would slow the effect, but from the look of him he had also had a good deal to drink. She had to stall for time, anything that would keep him from assaulting her now.
Genius struck, and she made an eating gesture, her brows lifted, and then she rubbed her stomach to indicate hunger. He scowled, but went to the door and bellowed something, she hoped a call for food. Evidently he didn't intend to starve her, but had merely forgotten.
He stomped to the chair and sat down, and poured himself another cup of ale. Grace smiled at him, pointed to herself, and said, "Grace St. John."
"Eh?" At least she understood that sound, she thought in relief. She said again, "Grace St. John," then she pointed at him and waited.
He caught on now. He thumped his bull-like chest. "Huwe the Hay."

"Huwe," she repeated. She tried another smile. "Well, Huwe, I don't wish you any harm, but I hope the Seconal knocks you flat on your butt. I know you have big plans for tonight, but so do I, and you aren't included. As soon as everyone is asleep, I'm going to see what kind of damage you and your goons have done to you-know-who, and then I'm going to get him out of here."

Huwe listened to her speech with growing impatience, and he cut her short with an impatient wave of his hand. Then he spouted something involved at her. She made a helpless gesture, spreading her hands and shaking her head.

A brief thud sounded at the door and it swung open. A plump, slatternly woman with wiry dark hair came in, carrying a small platter on which rested a thick piece of coarse bread and a hunk of cheese. She set the platter down with a thunk, glaring at Grace all the while. Either no one here liked outsiders on principle, or the woman had a thing for Huwe, which gave her a new appreciation of the old saying that power was an aphrodisiac.

The woman left, and Grace pinched off a piece of bread. She sauntered around the room, nibbling daintily at the bread and making an occasional comment to Huwe. His gaze still followed her, but after ten or fifteen minutes she noticed he was blinking owlishly. She continued to pace, her manner completely relaxed, returning to the table to taste a tiny bit of the cheese. It wasn't bad.

Huwe's eyelids were drooping heavily. Grace walked over to the narrow window and stood still, looking out at the night while she pretended still to eat. In the shadows as she was, as drugged as Huwe was, he likely couldn't tell her hand was empty.

The night was bright with starlight, and a soft mist was gathering in the glens. Grace quietly watched, listening for Huwe's snores, but the inaction gnawed at her. She felt she felt as if her body couldn't contain the force of her blood, pounding through her veins. She felt excited, anxious, burning with energy. The constant wariness with which she had lived the past year, the sense of doom hovering over her, was gone. Parrish couldn't reach her here. There were very real dangers she might face but still she felt oddly light, as if a weight had been lifted from her.

She felt alive. The realization shocked her. She had become so accustomed to the numb bleakness inside her that she hadn't even noticed its absence. Until today, all she had felt for a year had been fear and rage and hate, punctuated by moments of a pain so sharp the numbness had been welcome.

But today she had felt excitement, and interest; she had even smiled like mad at Huwe! The smiles were totally false, but they were more than she had managed in a year.
She was really here. She ached in every muscle, she felt sore inside, but she was here and Black Niall was just two floors below her. They were both captives, he was likely wounded, by their captors' fists if not their swords and daggers, but she could feel his presence like an energy field, making her fingertips tingle.
A soft rumble reached her ears. She looked over at the table, where Huwe was slumped across the surface, his head pillowed on one outstretched arm. She tiptoed over to the table and moved the bottle to a safer location. A swipe of his arm would have dislodged it, and perhaps awakened him, though she thought likely not even a cannon would do the job tonight. She wasn't going to take the chance.
She had no idea of the time, so she gingerly sat down on the bed and forced herself to wait. The ale would have flowed freely that evening; the men would be tired and sore from the battle earlier, and the ale would ease their aches. They would sleep early that night, and deeply.
Still she waited, until she was in danger of falling asleep herself. When she jerked herself to attention for the second time, she knew she had to go now. She picked up her bag and walked silently to the door. She eased the door open, peering through the crack to see if a guard stood outside. Empty darkness greeted her, lightened only by a dim glow from down below.
She slipped out of the chamber and eased down the stairs. Men slept in the great hall, snoring lumps rolled in their plaids. She didn't tiptoe; she walked quietly, as if she had a right to be there. Anyone who woke and saw her in the dim light might think her nothing more than a serving wench, but if she were sneaking about, her furtiveness would rouse suspicions. Harmony had told her that: "Walk as if you have a right to the entire sidewalk, and the bad dudes will leave you alone."
A big iron candlestick was set on a table, the thick candle burned half down. Grace picked it up in case there was no light below; she didn't want to use her penlight and try to explain it to Niall, at least not yet.
The staircase to the dungeon was at the back of the great hall, hidden behind a door so dark she almost didn't see it. She set both candlestick and bag on the floor, and eased the door open by increments, taking care the

leather hinges didn't creak. A light came from below; there would be a guard, then, for a prisoner wouldn't need light.
She eased her body into the opening, holding the door while she retrieved both bag and candlestick. She didn't need the candle, but she did need a weapon. She blew out the candle and pinched the wick with spit-dampened fingers, then removed the candle from the spike atop the stick and placed it in the bag. Carefully setting the bag down on the top step, she took a deep breath, then another, and silently prayed.
The stone wall of the dungeon was cold and damp against her back as Grace eased down the narrow, uneven steps. There was no railing, and the flicker of the torch below didn't penetrate up the inky, curving stairs. She had to feel her way down, wishing for the candle after all, but it would have alerted the guard to her presence.
The weight of the heavy iron candlestick pulled at her arm. When she was halfway down the curve of steps she could see the single guard, sitting below on a crude bench with his back resting against the wall, a rough skin of wine at his elbow. Good; if she were lucky, he had drunk himself into a stupor. Even if he had a Scotsman's hard head for spirits, at least the liquor would have slowed his reflexes. She hoped he was asleep because given where he was sitting, she would have to approach him almost head-on. The light was poor and she could hide the candlestick against her leg, but if he stood up it would be much more difficult for her to hit him hard enough to knock him out. She was so sore and battered from the trip through time that she didn't trust her strength; better if she could simply lift the heavy candlestick and swing it downward, letting gravity aid her.
Grace cautiously edged her foot forward, searching for the edge of each step while trying not to scrape her shoe against the stone. The air was cold, and fetid; the smell assaulted her nose, making it wrinkle in disgust. The odor was composed of unmistakable human waste, but beneath that lay the sharper, more unpleasant odors of blood, and fear, and the sour sweat of pain. Men had been tortured, and died, in these foul depths that never saw the sun. It was up to her to make certain Black Niall didn't join their ranks.
She had a guilty thought: was it her fault he had been captured? Common sense told her that was ridiculous; it was impossible for Niall to have heard her mental call to him. She couldn't have caused a split second of inattention that could have resulted in his capture. She hadn't actually seen what had happened, anyway, so it was silly to feel guilty. But then, her very

presence here was evidence that the impossible was possible, so she couldn't say for certain that Niall hadn't heard her call him.
She didn't know how much time she had. Huwe of Hay would sleep until late morning, under the double influence of alcohol and Seconal. Given how much he had drunk, she only hoped she hadn't overdosed him. Crude and disgusting as he was, she didn't want to kill him. But she was heartily grateful she had brought those drugs; without the Seconal, she could never have escaped from Huwe at all, much less avoided being raped.
Her searching foot found no more steps. The floor was nothing more than hard-packed dirt, uneven and treacherous. She stood still for a moment, taking deep, silent breaths as she tried to steady her nerves. The guard still sat slumped on the bench, his head nodded forward onto his chest. Was he truly asleep, or drunk, or merely playing possum? As careful as she had been, had he still heard some betraying rustle, and was now trying to lure her closer?
It didn't matter; she didn't have any choice. Even if his capture wasn't her fault, she couldn't leave Black Niall here for Huwe to kill. Niall was the Guardian, the only person alive who knew both the secrets and the location of the Templars' Treasure. Unless she could find the Treasure herself, she needed his knowledge, his cooperation, to prevent Parrish from getting his hands on the Treasure. She wanted Parrish stopped, and she wanted Parrish dead; for that, she needed Black Niall alive.
She considered the guard. If he were awake and merely being crafty, then she would arouse less suspicion by approaching him directly, as if she had nothing to hide. Harmony's theory, again. Moreover, if he saw her, he wouldn't expect any threat from a woman. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest, and for a moment black spots swam before her eyes. Panic made her stomach lurch, and she thought she might throw up. Desperately she sucked in more air, fighting back both nausea and weakness. She refused to let herself falter now, after all she had already been through.
Cold sweat broke out on her body, trickled down her spine. Grace forced her feet to move, to take easy, measured strides that carried her across the rough floor as if she had nothing at all to hide. The torchlight danced and swayed, as if under the spell of some unheard music, casting huge, wavering shadows on the damp stone walls. The guard didn't move.
Ten feet. Five. Then she stood directly in front of the guard, so close she could smell the stench of his unwashed body, sharp and sour. Grace

swallowed, and steeled herself for the blow she had to deliver. She sent up a quick prayer that she wouldn't cause him any lasting damage, and used both aching arms to raise the heavy candlestick high.
Her clothing rustled with her movements. He stirred, opening bleary eyes and peering up at her. His mouth gaped open. Grace swung downward, and the massive iron candlestick crashed against the side of his head with a solid thud that made her cringe. Anything he might have said, any alarm he might have given, dissolved into a grunt as he slid sideways, his eyes closing once more.
Blood trickled down the side of his head, matting in his filthy hair. Looking down at him she saw that he was younger than she had thought, surely not much more than twenty. His grimy cheeks still held a certain childish curve. Tears stung her eyes, but she turned sharply away, need shouldering aside regret.
Of the three cells, only one was barred. "Niall!" she whispered urgently as she grasped the massive bar. How was she best to communicate with him? Today had taught her that Gaelic wasn't a possibility. He was a Templar, though; he would almost certainly speak French. She felt capable in either Old English or Old French, but Latin hadn't changed at all since his time, so that was the language she chose.
"I have come to free you," she said softly as she struggled with the bar. My God, it was heavy! It was like wrestling with a tree trunk, six feet long and a good ten inches wide. Her hands slipped on the wood, and a splinter dug deep into her little finger. Grace bit off an involuntary cry of pain as she jerked her hand back.
"Are you hurt?" The question was voiced in a deep, calm, softly burred voice, and came very clear to her ears as if he stood close against the other side of the door. Hearing it, Grace froze, her eyes closing as she struggled once more with tears and an electrifying surge of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. It was really Black Niall, and oh, God, he sounded just as he had in her dreams. That voice was like thunder and velvet, capable of a roar that would freeze his enemies or a warm purr that would melt a woman into his arms.
"Only. . . only a little," she managed to say, her voice shaking. She struggled to remember the correct words. "A splinter. . . the bar is very heavy, and it slipped."

"Are you alone?" Concern was there now. "The bar is too big for a mere woman."
"I can do it!" she said fiercely. Mere? Mere? What did he know? She had survived on the run for a year; she had managed to get here, against all odds, and moreover she was the one on the free side of the door. Anger mixed with exhilaration, surging through her veins, making her feel as if she would burst through her skin. She wanted to scream, she wanted to hit something, she wanted to dance. Instead she turned her attention back to the bar.
Abandoning any attempt to lift it with her hands, she bent her knees and lodged her shoulder under it, driving upward with all the strength in her back and legs.
The weight of the bar bit into her shoulder, nearly drove her downward again. Gritting her teeth, Grace braced her legs and strained. She could feel blood rush to her face, feel her heart and lungs labor. Her knees wobbled. Damn it, she wouldn't let this stupid piece of wood defeat her, not after all she had already gone through!
A growl of refusal burst past her lips and she summoned every ounce of strength in her aching body, gathering it for one final effort. Her thigh muscles screamed in pain, her back burned. Desperately she shoved upward, forcing her legs to straighten, and one end of the bar slowly rose inch by inch. It teetered for a moment and she shoved again, and the bar began sliding down through the other bracket. The rough wood scraped her cheek, snagged her clothes. Using both hands, ignoring the need for quiet, she shoved the bar forward until it was free of the right bracket.
Instead of continuing its slide through the other bracket, the heavy bar slowed, its weight tipping it back toward her. Grace scrambled out of the way as one end hit the dirt floor with a reverberating thud. The bar stood braced there, one end on the floor and the other balanced against the second bracket.
She stood still, breathing hard, trembling in every muscle, but triumph roared through her, fierce and sweet. Heat radiated from her, banishing the cold as if she stood close to a fire, and she couldn't feel any pain in her injured hand. She felt invigorated, invincible, and her breasts rose tight and aroused beneath her clothing.
"Open the door," she invited, the words coming out breathlessly despite her efforts to steady her voice. Then she couldn't resist a taunt: "If you can."

A low laugh came to her ears, and slowly the massive door began to open, pushing the huge bar before it. Grace took a step back, her gaze fastened hungrily on the black space yawning open between the door and the frame, waiting for her first glimpse of Black Niall in the flesh.

He came through the door as casually as if he were on vacation, but there was nothing casual in the black gaze that swept over the unconscious guard and then leaped to her, raking her from head to foot in a single suspicious, encompassing look. His vitality seared her like a blast, an almost palpable force, and she felt the blood drain from her face.

He could have stepped straight from her dreams. He was there, just as he had been in the images that had plagued her for endless nights, as he had been when his essence had pulled her across nigh seven centuries. Slowly, like a lover's hand drifting over the face of a beloved, barely touching as if too strong a contact would destroy the spell, her gaze traced his features. Yes, it was he. She knew him well, his face memorized in countless dreams. The broad, clear forehead; the eyes, as black as night, as old as sin. The thin, high-bridged Celtic nose, and chiseled cheekbones; the firm and unsmiling lips, the uncompromising chin and jaw. He was big. Mercy, she hadn't realized how big he was, but he stood more than a foot taller than she, at least six-four. His long black hair swung past his shoulders, shoulders that were at least a two foot span of solid muscle. The hair at his temples was secured in a thin braid on each side of his face.

His shirt and plaid were dirty, and dark with dried blood. Bruises mottled his face; one eye was swollen almost shut. But for all that, he was strong and vital, impervious to the cold that was making her shiver, or at least she told herself it was the cold. He was wilder than she could have imagined, and yet he was exactly as she had dreamed. The reality of him was like a blow, and she swayed.

He looked around, his face hard and set, every muscle poised for action. "You are alone?" he asked again, evidently doubting that she had managed the bar by herself.

"Yes," she whispered. No enemies rushed from the inky shadows, no alarm was raised. Slowly he returned his gaze to her, and with the torch behind her outlining her form she knew he could see how violently she was trembling.

"Frail but valiant," he murmured, coming closer. Despite herself, she would have shrunk back, but he moved with the deceptive speed of an attacking

tiger. One hard arm passed around her waist, both supporting and capturing her, drawing her against him. "No, don't fear me, sweetings. Who are you? No relation of Huwe's, I'll wager, not with such a pretty face - and a command of Latin."
"N-no," she stammered. The contact with him was going to her head, making her feel giddy. Oh, God. His voice had taken on a deep, unmistakable note. Her stomach clenched in panic. She lifted her right hand to brace against his chest; the touch jammed the splinter deeper into her finger, and she flinched from the sudden pain.
Instantly he caught her hand, hard fingers wrapping gently around it and turning it toward the light. Her stomach clenched again at the contrast of her hand lying in that callused palm. Like Huwe's, his hand was dirty from the battle he'd fought that day, but that was the only resemblance between the two men. Black Niall's big hand was lean and powerful, the long fingers well shaped, the nails tended. For all the obvious strength in that hand, it cradled her much smaller one as delicately as if he held a baby bird.
She glanced at the small, burning wound on her hand. The long, jagged splinter had entered her finger lengthwise, and the end protruded just above the bend of the first knuckle. He made a softly sympathetic sound, almost a croon, and lifted her hand to his mouth. With delicate precision he caught the end of the splinter in his animal white teeth, and steadily drew it out. Grace flinched again at the pain, sucking in a hissing breath and rising on tiptoe against him, but he held her hand steady in his powerful grip. He spat the splinter out, then sucked hard at the sullenly bleeding wound. She felt his tongue flicking against her skin, laving her hurt, and a moan that had nothing to do with pain slipped from her lips.
That black gaze moved back to her face, so close to his now, and his eyes grew heavy-lidded as he sensed how it was with her. His thin nostrils flared like a stallion's, drawing in her female scent. And then his expression changed, shifting into furious recognition.
"You!" He spat the word as if it were an epithet. His hands bit into her shoulders as he whirled her toward the light. She hadn't put her hair back up after removing the knife, and he sank one hand deep into the heavy mass, lifting it as if to measure its length. His. olive-toned face was savage.
"M-me?" she squeaked ungrammatically, in English. She caught herself and returned to Latin. "I?"

"Who are you?" he asked again, and this time the question was hard with barely contained fury. "It was you, screaming my name, who distracted me today and caused me to be captured. You have watched me for months, never showing your face until you invaded my dreams. Are you a spy, a witch?"
Grace went white, staring at him in horrified dismay. He had felt her dreams, shared them with her? Oh, no. She felt a fiery blush begin to heat her cheeks. Then she jerked as his last words registered. "No! I'm not a spy, or a witch!"
"Then why have you watched me?" he asked grimly, releasing her to cross swiftly to the unconscious guard. He looked briefly at the young man's bleeding head, then at the iron candlestick lying beside him, before taking both sword and dagger as if he felt the need to be armed in her presence. The dagger disappeared inside his soft leather boot, and he turned to face her, eyes narrowed and watchful. "How have you come to my bed so often I know the very smell of you? How came you to be with Huwe today? I heard your voice, I know you were there."
"They c-captured me, too." The unsteadiness of her voice annoyed her, and she took a deep, irritated breath. She was mortified that he had shared those erotic dreams with her; she didn't know how it had happened, but everything about this went beyond the normal and there was nothing she could do about it.
"A likely tale. You hardly bear the look of mistreatment."
"Huwe intended to ransom me, I think."
"That would not keep him from rutting on you, sweetings."
She blushed again, unable to control the heat in her cheeks, but it seemed as much in response to the rather biting endearment than to his crude words.
"No. I kept him from that."
"How did you accomplish that feat? A spell?"
"I am not a witch! I gave him a drink that made him sleep. He was drunk, anyway."
"And all the others?"
"They are all asleep from drink. They think you safely locked away, and that your men will not dare attack while they have you."
"No, but they will be nearby." He didn't seem as angry now, though his gaze was still hard when he looked at her. "You have not yet answered my question. Who are you?"

"Grace St. John." She said it in English, because she didn't know the specific Latin applications.
He repeated her name as she had said it, slowly duplicating the pronunciation, his tongue sure on the syllables with the deftness of someone who spoke several languages. Then he stepped closer to her, the sword still in his hand, so close that his big body blotted out the light of the flickering torch. "And how have you watched me?"
"I haven't." She made a helpless gesture. "I dreamed."
"Ah. More dreams." He was still angry, she could feel it, but his voice had taken on that low, seductive note again, making her shiver as she fought the pull of it. "In your dreams, sweetings, was I inside you?" he whispered, moving even closer, his left arm sliding about her waist and slowly, inexorably, pulling her against him. "Were you beneath me in my bed, did I ride you hard?"
Grace struggled to breathe. Her lungs weren't working properly, only drawing in fast, shallow breaths. She braced her hands against his chest, feeling the incredible heat of his body through his rough linen shirt. She felt hot, too, restless and panicky, her skin almost painfully sensitive.
His gaze was sharp and hot, startlingly aware. His lips parted slightly, his own breathing coming a little too fast as the hard arm around her waist urged her even closer, closer, until her breasts touched him. "I'm a fool," he murmured, this time in Scots, but somehow she understood him. "I've no time for more, but I'll at least have the taste of ye."
He lifted her, turning to pin her against one of the cell doors. His big, iron-muscled body ground against her from shoulder to knee, and her breath snagged at the fullness of his arousal. Instantly he took advantage of her parted lips and set his mouth to hers. His kiss was ravaging, not in force but in effect. Her blood surged wildly in response, and her body instinctively molded to him. His taste was hot, tart and uncivilized, shatteringly familiar. He used his tongue with soul-searing skill, demanding her response, then deepening his advantage when she helplessly gave it. His hands moved over her body, cupping her breasts, her bottom, moving her against him. His long fingers slipped between her legs, feeling her through her gown. Grace had a second of warning, an almost painful inner tightening, and frantically she pushed against him but it was too late. Sensation splintered into a thousand piercing shards, and with a hoarse cry she arched into him.

She felt his surprise as his mouth muffled her cry, then he gathered her tighter while her climax pulsed through her, those devilishly knowledgeable fingers gently rubbing to give her a full measure of satisfaction. The spasms finally slowed, diminishing to tremors, and she sank weakly against him.
She jerked her mouth from his and pressed her head hard against his shoulder, her face hot with mortification. She had never been so embarrassed and humiliated in her life.
Reaching climax in a dream was unsettling enough, but to do it in front of him, with no more stimulation than a kiss and a bold caress-she burned with shame.
"Lass," he said, his voice low and husky, almost a whisper. His lips pressed briefly to the exposed curve of her neck, the touch hot and tender. His breath came in soft, short pants as he let her slide to her feet, all down the length of his body.
She would have kept her head down but he cupped her chin, lifting her face so he could see it. His thumb swept over the soft bloom of her mouth. His own lips were swollen and shiny, his eyes narrow with lust. "A pity I must go," he whispered in Scots. "Ye burn a man to a fair crisp, but I'd turn to ash wi' a smile on my face." He bent and brushed her mouth with his, then patted her bottom and set her away from him.
Shaking, Grace leaned against the door, her mind a blank and her knees like water. He moved so fast that he had already reached the stairs before realization sank into her brain. She struggled upright, her eyes wide. "No, wait!" she cried. "Take me with you!"
He didn't even pause, his powerful legs taking the stairs two at a time. He tossed her a grin. "I give you thanks for my liberty, but gratitude doesn't make me a fool," he said, returning to Latin, and he disappeared upward into the darkness.
Oh, damn! She didn't dare call out again. She launched herself after him but her legs were still shaking, and she barely had the strength to climb the stairs. There was no sign of him when she emerged from the dungeon.
She couldn't sound an alarm, for after all she didn't want him recaptured. Nor did she herself dare to remain. She collected her bag and tiptoed toward the kitchen, thinking that the most likely avenue of his escape. If there were a guard there, Niall would have taken care of him. She had to get out of this grimy hold and find him again. He wasn't a hero, damn him, no knight in

shining armor. He was just a man, though bigger than most, more bold and vital. He was arrogant and rude, and he was her only hope.

Chapter 21

GRACE WAS A LITTLE GRATIFIED TO REALIZE SHE HAD GUESSED RIGHT. Outside the kitchens she found a guard's body, slumped on the ground in the boneless attitude of death. There was an uproar in the stables, torches being lit, men running and cursing. Niall must have stolen a horse and escaped through the postern gate. There was no chance of her stealing a horse now, and the keep was coming awake behind her. She dodged into a small storeroom, little more than a shed built against the side of the keep. It was evidently the granary, for the dusty smell of oats made her stifle a sneeze.

She heard rustlings in the oats that made her grit her teeth. Where there was grain, there were rats. She was acutely aware of the vulnerability of her legs beneath the long skirts. What she wouldn't give for her jeans and boots!

But she stood grimly still, even when the noisy search discovered the guard's body just outside her hiding place. Even though she couldn't understand the words, she could grasp their anger and agitation. Their chieftain couldn't be roused; the dungeon guard was injured, perhaps dead; both captives were gone, though only one horse was missing. She only hoped they would assume she was with Niall, that somehow they had simply failed to see her, because other. wise they would begin a thorough search of the keep.

Damn Niall, she thought violently. Why couldn't he have taken her with him? Even if he refused to take her to Creag Dhu, he could at least have gotten her away from Huwe. Gratitude didn't make him a fool, indeed!

The uproar eventually died down. They couldn't pursue Niall in the dark, and without Huwe they weren't inclined to take action anyway. She waited, rustling her feet when. ever the munching rats seemed to get too close, sending them squealing and scurrying. She would never forgive Niall for this.

At least security would be lax, now that their prisoner was gone. The Hay stronghold wasn't very strong anyway, from what she had seen. There had once been a wall around it, but it hadn't been maintained and the mortar had

crumbled, leaving big gaps. Unfortunately, someone would still be watching the horses.

His tough luck, she thought when she finally crept out of her hiding place. She didn't know the time, so she didn't dare wait much longer. Dawn could come at any time, and with it her only opportunity to escape.

A soft mist was falling, not much more than a heavy fog. Her heart sank. That was probably why they hadn't pursued Niall, because they couldn't see in this pea soup. Unfortunately, she didn't have any choice, even though she didn't know where she was. She had carefully noted the direction from which they had come the day before, but the fog greatly increased her chances of getting totally turned around. She walked quietly into the stable. A guard snoozed against a pile of hay, a small candle with a protective globe over it guttering by his side. What was she supposed to bash *him* with? She looked around and spied a rough pitchfork, its handle made of a sturdy length of wood. She picked it up, gripped it like a bat, and gave it a healthy swing. The wood swatted him in the side of his head and he jerked once, then fell heavily limp.

"I'm going to go to hell," she whispered into the night. That made two innocent men she had knocked in the head tonight, and for all she knew she had killed both of them. Severe head injuries in medieval times likely resulted in death. If Niall had taken her with him, hitting this last guard wouldn't have been necessary.

She bit her lip, looking at the curious equine heads surveying her. She knew how to ride, because it was a convenient skill to have when out on a dig, but she wasn't an expert and in any case hadn't been on a horse in more than two years, except for being held in front of Huwe on his horse yesterday, and that didn't count.

"Pick a horse, any horse," she muttered to herself. Geldings were always less fractious than stallions or even mares, but in the darkness she couldn't tell anything about her available choices except their size. She settled on a brown horse that was neither the largest nor the smallest, hoping that moderation was the key to success.

The horse stood quietly as she saddled it, and followed obediently when she led it to a keg. She stepped up on the keg, then mounted the horse. After tying her bag securely to the saddle, she clicked her tongue to the animal and carefully rode it out of the stable. Behind her, she heard a quiet groan as

the guard began reviving. She was glad he wasn't dead, but that meant she had only a minute or so to get away before the alarm was raised.
She rode the horse at a walk to one of the gaps in the wall, and let it pick its own way over the tumbled rock. In the dark and the fog, the run-down keep was soon out of sight.
The safest course would be to find a place to hide, and wait until dawn when both she and the horse would be able to see. But if she remained close by, that increased the chances the Hays would recapture her and she doubted she would escape abuse so easily again.
When she saw Black Niall again, she was going to throttle him, even if she had to climb on a stool to do it.
She clicked to the horse and nudged it with her heels, but she let it pick its way at its own cautious speed. She could barely see past the horse's nose, so it seemed wiser to trust the animal's instincts; it at least had its feet on the ground. Still, she hoped sunrise wasn't several hours away.
To be fair to Niall, she hadn't tried to explain herself or her presence. Part of her reticence was pure caution, be. cause as Guardian his duty was to protect the Treasure from all threats, including herself. If he discovered she knew the procedure for time travel, he might feel it necessary to kill her. If she could get the Treasure herself, without his assistance, she preferred to do so. If she found she needed him, then would be the time to confess.
But all the logical reasons for remaining quiet weren't what had kept her from telling him. She had simply been too shocked, first by the embarrassing discovery that he had shared the dreams with her and then by the way she had, humiliated herself in his arms. She had been hard put even to speak, much less launch into a detailed explanation.
Her cheeks burned again as she remembered what had happened, and she lifted her face to the chilly mist.
She had been agitated from the moment she had arrived back in time, nervous, excited. She hadn't thought that agitation could so swiftly convert into sexual response, but it had. It was as if her body had been numb for a year, but something had happened to her during the time transition and now she felt everything too much.
Niall had fascinated her from the moment she had first read his name. She had spent so much time concentrating on him, dreaming about him, it was no wonder all her senses had been so acutely focused on him. All those hours she had been so aware of his actual presence that it had been difficult

for her to think of anything else, her skin hypersensitive, prickly. She should have recognized the sexual charge underlying her jitters, but she hadn't. While she had accepted and rationalized the sexual aspect of her dreams, it hadn't occurred to her the physical attraction would be as strong in reality.

It wasn't. It was stronger. She had been unfaithful to Ford in every way except the actual act, but she couldn't find any solace in that detail. If circumstances had been different, if they had been alone in a safe place, she had no doubt Niall would have had her. But now that she recognized her weakness, she could safeguard against giving in to it. She must never let Niall so much as kiss her again.

But as she rode through the night, she was uncomfortably aware that if Niall wished to kiss her or do anything else to her, her defenses were very weak indeed.

Creag Dhu was a massive stone castle, the rock from which it was built as dark as a stormy sky. Unlike the Hay keep it was in excellent repair, with thick stone walls surrounding four huge towers. The big main entrance was guarded by two sets of gates twenty feet apart, and the men who guarded it looked healthy, well clothed and armed, and well trained. Everyone who entered was stopped and questioned, and no carts or bundles went through those gates without being thoroughly inspected.

Grace knew she should have expected as much, given Niall's military background, but when she looked at Creag Dhu she felt overwhelmed by the task she had set herself. Just getting in looked impossible; how on earth would she manage searching it?

She had to stay hidden, because a stranger would be immediately noticed. The castle was busy, having attracted its own small village as people moved closer to safety, but everyone would know everyone else. She was hungry, and tired from having ridden for two days. She had wandered off course in the fog, and a joumey that shouldn't have taken an entire day had instead taken two.

At least the horse was content, because there was plenty of grass and water. The animal was a gelding, blessed with a calm and forgiving nature. If it hadn't been, Grace was certain she never would have survived. She ached from head to foot, and her bottom was so sore she didn't think she would be able to climb back into the saddle even if Huwe of Hay suddenly appeared in front of her.

She had tethered the horse in a copse of forest, while she assessed the situation, which wasn't promising. Perhaps she should just walk up to the gates and ask to see him. He might not be pleased, but she had freed him from the dungeon; if she told him she was hungry, could he turn her away? Of course he could, she thought. He was the Guardian. He wouldn't let anything as paltry as gratitude stand in the way of his duty. She had to think of some way to get inside the castle. She couldn't smuggle herself inside by hiding in any of the carts she saw going in; all the carts were searched, even when the guards obviously knew the owner and they chatted genially together while the goods or produce were inspected. She didn't even speak the language, so when they asked questions she wouldn't be able to answer. She could try speaking Old English, but that wouldn't win her any friends here in Scotland; the two countries had been at war for years. She could understand most of the Scots dialect, but speaking it was useless because the parts of it she understood were English, so she wouldn't gain anything. Even if she did manage to get into Creag Dhu, what then? The castle inhabitants would certainly know one another far better than they knew the village folk, so there wouldn't be any way she could escape notice by mingling with the crowd. Exploring the castle would take time; she needed to be able to come and go without being questioned. Grimly she arrived back at one inescapable conclusion: even if she got into the castle, she would need Niall's permission to stay.

She decided to face one problem at a time, and found herself back at the beginning: how to get into Creag Dhu?

She began making her way back to the horse, stumbling over rocks and roots, catching her skirts on bushes and twigs and having to jerk them free. She was becoming more and more irritated with the nuisance of a long gown. To tell the truth, she was irritated with everything, but at least her ill humor had distracted her from the humiliation of what had happened with Niall.

By the time she reached the horse, she was sweating from the effort of fighting her way through brambles and bushes. The wool surcoat, which felt good on cold nights, now suffocated her. Irritably she stripped it off and tossed it over the saddle, sighing in relief as air seeped through the lighter cotton kirtle. She loosened the laces that held the neckline and sleeves tight, pulling the neckline completely open and then pushing up the sleeves as far as she could, which was only to the middle of her forearms. Under the scarf,

her hair was wet with sweat. Off came the scarf, and she unwound the heavy knot of her hair, running her fingers through it and letting fresh air reach her scalp. She had expected Scotland to be uniformly chilly even in May, but that wasn't the case today.

There was no way she was putting that heavy wool gown back on, and the velvet one would be just as hot. Grace looked down, checking the kirtle for modesty. She was dismayed to find it failed miserably, unless she didn't mind any casual observer being able to see both her nipples and the darkness of her pubic hair. Inspiration struck, and she shook out the big scarf, then tied it around her waist so that it draped strategically over both front and back. Then she bloused the kirtle out from the waist so the fullness gave her a bit of modesty up top, too. Satisfied with her effort, she stuffed the dirty wool surcoat in the bag and remounted the horse. She hadn't solved any of her problems, but at least now she was comfortable.

Five minutes later, as she watched a group of five women trudge along the rutted road, obviously heading to Creag Dhu, inspiration struck again.

The business of the women wasn't in any doubt. Their skirts were hiked up farther than any Grace had seen since arriving, and their bodices were pulled low. They hadn't bothered with long-sleeved, high-necked kirtles; their undergarments were short-sleeved and loose. No kerchiefs covered their heads, and though their hair was for the most part unkempt, as Grace watched they began finger-combing the tangles, pulling strands over their shoulders to curl flirtatiously around their breasts. They pinched their cheeks and bit their lips, and there was a good deal of laughter and obviously naughty observations.

Whores, or at least loose women, on their way to the castle for a night of recreation or commerce, or both. And Grace now looked remarkably like them, with her scanty clothing and loose hair. She kneed the horse into a walk, approaching the group from an angle.

"Good afternoon," she said pleasantly when she neared, trying to alter her accent so the "good" sounded like "guid." No help for it; she would have to speak Old English, which was at least close enough to Scots for her to be largely understood.

The whores watched her suspiciously, no hint of welcome in their faces.

"My man left me," she said baldly. "I've no coins, no food for two days, and I have no place to sleep."

An overblown redhead who had seen better days looked her up and down. "Aye?" she said in a tone that clearly meant, "So what?"
"If you are going to the castle, could I go with you? A night's work would bring me a coin or two, and at least food for my belly."
"Ye have yer beast," the redhead pointed out, nodding at the horse. A horse was a valuable animal, worth more than all their possessions put together. They weren't likely to have any sympathy for her so long as she possessed him.
Grace thought quickly. "You can have him," she promised, "if you will take me with you."
The five women put their heads together, and a swarm of Gaelic buzzed around her ears. Finally the redhead held up her hand and nodded to Grace. ""Tis a bargain." She waited expectantly, and Grace climbed down from the horse, not without a great deal of relief. Her bottom was so sore after two days of riding that she was much happier walking. She untied her bag from the saddle, and presented the reins to the redhead, who looked triumphantly around at her friends.
They resumed their trek up the road. As they trudged around a bend and the castle came into sight, the redhead said, "What's yer name?"
"Grace."
"I am Wynda." She nodded in turn at the four other women. "Nairne, Coira, Sile, and Eilidh." Introductions accomplished, they completed the walk to the castle.
Both guards stepped forward to meet them stubbled cheeks stretched in huge grins. A great deal of giggling, pinching, and butt patting went on, then both guards looked questioningly at Grace. Evidently the other five were well known by the men-at-arms.
"Grace," Wynda said in reply to their questions. "She's a Sassenach hoor."
The guard took the bag from Grace and opened it, thrusting his big hand within. He pawed through the articles of clothing and pulled out a book, looking at it in puzzlement. Grace was too tired and hungry to do anything but stand there. Wynda repeated Grace's tale of her man leaving her behind. Perhaps it was the explanation, Grace's lack of anxiety, or that the bag obviously held no weapons, but with a shrug the guard handed the bag back to her. He called out to the guards on the other side of the double gate, and the six women walked through.

She was in. Her heart began pounding with excitement, the rush of adrenaline dispelling her fatigue.
Wynda proudly led her horse to the stable, while the others made their way toward the barracks. Grace fell behind them, slowing her steps until they were well ahead of her. They were chatting, laughing, paying her no mind. Calmly she changed direction, looking around with interest.
The inner ward was neat and busy, people going about the daily business involved in running a castle. To the left were the stables and barracks, to the right a training ground where a number of men, stripped to the waist, practiced their swordplay. She could see a well-shaped head with long black hair, towering over all the others, and quickly she looked away as if he might feel her gaze.
Black Niall was there, so she wanted to go in a different direction. Now that she was inside she could see that in addition to the four tall towers which stood at each comer, there were two smaller inner towers, one on each end of the center great hall. The entire thing was huge; she couldn't begin to guess how many rooms the castle contained.
She walked into the great hall, and a wave of dizziness swept over her. The hall was just as she had seen it in her dreams. She knew where Niall sat, and exactly where the kitchens were. The smell of roasting meat filled the air, and she wondered if her dizziness was caused by hunger.
Men and women alike were looking at her strangely, and she ducked her head, walking quickly toward the kitchens. Perhaps she could beg a piece of bread; if not, perhaps she could steal it. She had already stolen a horse, so why worry about bread? She doubted either was as serious a sin as the rash of head bashing in which she had recently indulged.
Her appearance in the kitchen went unnoticed for a few moments, largely because there were so many people bustling about, chopping and stirring and pounding. A young boy slowly cranked a spit on which turned what looked like an entire pig. Fat dripped sizzling into the fire, sending out a wonderful smell to mingle with the yeasty scent of baking bread.
Finally a buxom woman spotted her, and snapped out a question in Gaelic.
"I've come a very long way," Grace said. "I've had no food for over two days-"
"Sassenach!" the cook spat in disgust, and made a shooing motion with the cloth tied around her waist.

Evidently being thought an Englishwoman was more to her discredit than being dressed like a whore. Grace shook her head and said, "French." Then she abruptly turned white as another wave of dizziness hit her, and she swayed, reaching out to the wall to support herself.
The dizziness was all too real. Gasping, Grace bent over from the waist, trying not to faint. The need for food was becoming more pressing by the minute.
Perhaps it was the reassurance that she wasn't English, but supporting arms were suddenly around her, leading her to a bench. The buxom woman pressed a piece of bread into her shaking hand, and poured ale into a shallow bowl for her to drink. Slowly Grace chewed on the bread, which was of much better quality than that she'd had at the Hay keep. She didn't dare take more than a few sips of the ale, not after being so long without food.
The work went on around her, though the buxom woman kept looking in her direction, perhaps assessing the return of color to her face. After a bit, when the bread stayed down, another piece was placed before her, along with some cheese and a few slivers of cold pork. Feeling stronger now, Grace ate as greedily as good manners allowed, and drank more ale.
The cook clucked her tongue approvingly and put even more meat and bread in front of her. "Ye're scarce as thick as a strae, lass. Ha' a bit more. Ye'll need yer strength tonight."
Grace tried, but she was full. After a few more bites she sighed, replete, and smiled at the woman. "Thank you. I was very hungry."
"Ye're welcome. Go on wi' ye, now." Charity served, the woman made shooing motions with her cloth again, and Grace went.
Her first priority now was to find a secure hiding place, at least until she decided what to do. When everyone's attention seemed to be elsewhere, she dodged into a curtained alcove and gingerly sat down on the floor, prepared to wait.
She leaned her head back against the cold stone wall. What had she gotten herself into? Coming back had seemed reasonable when she was still in her own time, but in the three days since her arrival she had accomplished exactly nothing toward her goal. What had seemed fairly simple find the Treasure and return to her own time had taken on gargantuan proportions. Now that she had seen the size of the castle, she knew it would take days, weeks, to search it thoroughly. She certainly couldn't stay hidden the entire

time. Unless she enlisted Niall's help, which didn't seem a viable alternative, she needed an excuse to stay in the castle. To do that, she had to have Niall's permission.

She had to face him again. She didn't look forward to it, but she had done more difficult things than this during the past year. What was humiliation, after all, compared to seeing her husband and brother murdered, to being hunted like an animal?

She was very tired. Now that she had eaten, she was so sleepy she couldn't keep her eyes open. She hauled the heavy burlap bag around behind her back and reclined in a more comfortable position, her head pillowed on books and clothing. She slept within minutes.

After declining enthusiastic offers of company from both Jean and Fenella, a lusty serving wench, Niall climbed the stairs that curved along the outside wall of the tower, leading to his private chamber. He was in a foul mood. He ached for a woman, but not one with Fenella's overripe charms. Not even Jean tempted him, and over the months she had become his favorite, if not only, bedmate.

"Damn the witch!" He swore viciously as he slammed the door to his bedchamber. He strode to the table and lifted the bottle of wine that sat there, then thumped it down unpoured. He didn't want wine; he'd had wine when he supped. What he wanted was what he had left to Huwe's untender mercies.

Witch or spy, still he should have taken her with him. At least then he wouldn't feel this gnawing discontent, this sharp-clawed lust that refused to be slaked on other women's bodies.

The feel of her was still in his arms, along his body. No woman in his life had ever responded as she had, so swiftly and completely, her body pulsing to his touch as if she had been made for him alone. It had been like holding fire, delicate fire, and he wanted it again. He wanted more. He wanted to push deep into her and hold himself there while she spasmed around him, arms and legs clinging, hips pumping.

He groaned aloud. He had done so in his dreams, their dreams, but when at last he'd had his hands on her, like a fool he had left her behind. He had been so angry to find her with the Hays that all he could think was that she was somehow in league with them, and had spied on him a purpose. His sense of betrayal had made him furious with her.

Later, when he had found his men and was well away from the Hay keep, logic had returned. She wasn't a Hay; one look at her had told him that. He should have discovered why she was there, who she was, where she was from. She had said her name was Grace St. John, a name he didn't like repeating even in his own mind. It was somehow mocking, a reminder of the faith he had lost. Her clothing had been uncommonly fine, her accent strange. She spoke Latin; that alone was so unusual it raised an internal alarm. Why would a woman speak the language of the Church?

The hour had grown late while he sat downstairs, trying to work up a bit of interest in any of the women available to him, but he wasn't inclined to sleep. He paced around the chamber, thinking of clear blue eyes and a swath of shiny dark hair. She had smelled as sweet as in his dream, and her mouth. . . he closed his eyes, whispering a strained profanity under his breath as he helplessly imagined her mouth sliding down his body, closing over his shaft, and his entire body jerked in reaction.

Furiously he threw off his clothes. He was fully erect, aching. All he had to do was open the door and call for one of the women, or two, and he could ease the ache. He didn't open the door. Instead he paced, and he wondered what had happened to her. She had helped him escape, after all; had anyone seen her? He had initially thought his escape a trap, to what end he couldn't imagine since Huwe could have killed him at any time anyway, but perhaps he had overlooked something. But nothing had happened, and he had soon found his men. What had happened to her? Had she suffered for aiding him? Huwe wasn't gentle with women at the best of times; if he knew the lass had released Niall, he would kill her.

Even if no one had seen her aid him, by now Huwe would have taken her to his filthy bed, used her harshly. Niall ground his teeth. The thought of that delicate, fine-skinned body lying beneath Huwe enraged him. He would take his men and ride on the Hay keep, take her from that pigsty, care for her, gently bring her to trust and respond to him again.

The door began to creak slowly open. Niall whirled, automatically grabbing his sword, the woman forgotten as he balanced his weight on his bare feet and began the lethal swing of the blade.

Pure blue eyes peeked around the door. They flared wide in alarm as she saw the naked warrior and the shining blade whistling toward her, but she didn't scream. Instead she ducked, dropping to the floor, and at the last split

second Niall deflected his aim so that the blade bit deep into the edge of the door just above where her head had been.
Cursing viciously in every language he knew, Niall worked the blade free of the wood and leaned down, gripping her arm and dragging her on her bottom into the bedchamber. She gasped, and then somehow she turned in his grasp, her legs whipping out. One dainty foot hooked behind his ankle, the other foot kicked hard at his knee, and he went down on his back. His body reacted even before he landed, flowing into the momentum, tucking, rolling, and with a lithe backward flip he came to his feet in a perfectly balanced crouch, sword in his hand.
She was still sitting on the floor, glaring at him, her skirts above her knees. He glowered down at her in silence for a moment, then with very deliberate movements walked to the table and laid the sword on it. Calmly he wrapped his plaid about his hips and turned back to face her.
She hadn't moved. Her gaze jerked up to his, and with primitive satisfaction he realized where she had been looking.
"If ye wished to see my arse, lass, ye had only to ask," he said rather mildly, considering he was so furious with her for nearly causing him to kill her that his hands ached to give her a good shaking. He approached her, reaching over her head to slam the door and flip the bar into place, then he leaned down and hauled her to her feet, standing her before him. "Now. How in hell did ye get here?"
"I stole a horse and rode," she replied, lifting her chin. His brows lifted. "So ye speak English as well as Latin. What other accomplishments have ye?"
"French," she said readily enough. "And Greek."
"Then we may converse in any of four languages," he observed in French, as if to test her. "Given that, there should be no misunderstandings between us."
"No, there should not," she said in the same language. He reverted to English. "Then perhaps you will tell me now how you evaded my guards and come to be in my castle, in my bedchamber."
She squared her shoulders, facing him as steadily as if he weren't more than a foot taller and easily twice her weight. "I freed you from Huwe's dungeon," she stated. "I am alone, and have no home. I came to ask you for shelter."
"Ah." His voice was soft. "You've told me the why, but what I asked was the how."

"I came in with the whores, and hid." His teeth ground together. "And no one saw you? Asked your cause for being here?"
"I told you, I came with the whores. My cause seemed obvious enough, given the way I'm dressed." With her hand she indicated the thin cotton garment she wore, laces loosened, the shadow of her small nipples dark against the fabric. Her hair flowed sleekly down her back, hanging below her hips.
For all the provocation of her dress, no one with eyes should have mistaken her for a whore. She had none of the look about her; her skin was too fine, her hands soft and pampered. Nor was there any vulgarity in her speech or her manner. Remembering her searing response to him, he thought she was a woman who had been well loved, not well used. But that night in the dungeon her eyes had been fierce with excitement, her awareness of him plain on her face. Tonight she was guarded, wary, despite the way she had looked at his nakedness.
There were depths and shadows in her eyes that made him wonder what she had left unsaid. A simple request for shelter? No. She had watched him for months, caused his capture, then conveniently rescued him from the dungeon. There must be a deeper purpose behind her actions, and he knew he could not risk trusting her.
His loins throbbed. He wanted to toss her onto the bed and sink himself into her. He wanted it with a ferocity that knotted his gut. He knew what it was like, knew how she felt beneath him, how she moaned with that little catch in her throat as he slowly pushed all his swollen length into her. He knew it with his mind; he wanted to know it with his flesh.
But because he wanted her so violently, he didn't dare relax his own guard. He unbarred the door and opened it, bellowing Sim's name, then stood watching her while the castle came awake and running feet thundered up the stairs. Sim arrived gasping, clutching his sword, and behind him were ten more men.
”Aye?" Sim fought for breath, relieved at seeing Niall standing there unhurt and apparently unalarmed.
Niall opened the door wider, allowing them to see the woman standing in the middle of his bedchamber. "Put her in a bedchamber and post two guards at the door. If ye canna keep her out, perhaps ye can keep her in."
Sim gawked at her. "Wha-?" Then he recovered and grabbed her arm.

"Mind her feet," Niall advised, stepping aside so Sim could lead her from the chamber. She went easily enough, though she gave him a long, quiet look over her shoulder. The guards thrust her into the small chamber next to his and locked her in, then two of them took up position on each side of the door.

The chamber was dark and chilly. The only light was a thin sliver of starlight coming through the narrow, cross-cut window. Grace fumbled around, searching for a candle and flint, but found nothing. If she had kept her bag with her she could have struck a match and briefly surveyed her surroundings, but she had thought it safer to leave the bag hidden.

The room was unfurnished. There weren't even rushes on the stone floor. Her skin roughened with chill bumps, and she hugged her arms.

Abruptly the door was opened, banging against the wall. One of the guards thrust a burning candle into one hand and a thick plaid into the other. Without a word he closed the door again, and she heard the massive key turning in the lock.

She dropped the plaid onto the floor and carefully shielded the flickering candle with her hand as she set it down. She looked around. The room was small, empty, but she had already discerned that.

At least she had light, and a plaid to keep her warm. She was in Creag Dhu. Sighing, she wrapped herself in the plaid and lay down on the hard floor. Things could have been worse.

Chapter 22

GRACE WOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO THE SOUND OF THE KEY grating in the lock. She sat up in her plaid nest, pushing her hair out of her face. She had merely dozed for most of the night, until fatigue had finally taken its toll and toward dawn she had finally slept. Niall stood in the doorway watching her, his face expressionless, and she rose creaking to her feet. She was stiff and sore in every muscle but her legs in particular didn't want to cooperate.

"Come wi' me," he said, holding out his hand, and she limped to the door. She reflected that if he had only said those same words the night in Huwe's dungeon, she wouldn't now be aching allover.

He led her to his chamber, ushering her inside with a big, warm hand on the small of her back. A fire leaped merrily in the big fireplace, dispelling the early-morning chill. A large round wooden tub had been placed before the fire, and steam rose gently from the water that filled it.
"For you," he said, indicating the tub. "For all ye knocked my feet from under me last night, I saw ye moved with care. Ye've a sore arse, I suspect."
She took a deep breath, staring at that wonderful hot water. "I do."
"Then get ye in the water, lass, afore it cools." He reached out and untied the scarf from about her waist. Grace slapped his hand, back ing away. "I can undress myself," she said warily. "But I won't do it with you in the room."
Those expressive black brows rose. "Ye saw me naked," he pointed out. "And it isna as if there's no been any intimacy between us."
She flushed. Having a sword swung at her head the night before had distracted her from the embarrassment she expected to feel, but now he'd been kind enough to remind her. "That was a mistake," she said evenly. "It won't happen again."
"I'm no of the same opinion," he said softly, his gaze sliding down her body. Remembering how thin the kirtle was, she turned away from him, her blush growing hotter. He chuckled, and though she didn't hear him approach he was suddenly right behind her, so close she could feel his heat. With one fingertip he lightly stroked the side of her neck, the tender underside of her jaw.
"I'll give ye privacy to bathe," he murmured. "Then Alice will bring your porridge, and we'll talk."
Grace shivered as he left the room. The first two things sounded wonderful; the last terrified her. Talk? Seduction had been in his voice, in the small touches, the way he had stood so close to her. For whatever reason he hadn't tried to take her to bed last night-anger, surprise, suspicion - this morning he had evidently decided that reason no longer held sway.
He wanted her. The thought made her knees watery as she quickly undressed and slid into the hot water, moaning aloud as the heat soaked into her sore muscles. Underlying all his suspicious questions was that sharp animal awareness between them, forged during months of shared dreaming. He had been fully aroused during that devastating kiss. He had the same memories she did, of those dreams. Just as she knew how it was to lie beneath him, he knew how it was to mount her. Yin and yang, she knew the

inward thrust that stretched her around his erection, he knew the hot, moist inner slide and clasping. She knew the hardness of his hands; he, the softness of her breasts.
How could she resist that? For Ford's sake, how could she not?
She distracted herself by vigorously washing, first her hair and then the rest of herself. Just as he finished, the door opened and a sturdy gray-haired woman came in, carrying a wooden platter on which rested a covered bowl, a spoon, and a cup.
"Such hair!" she exclaimed, hurrying to the table and setting the platter on it. Lifting a heavy ewer, she came to the side of the tub. "My name is Alice; I manage the household for Lord Niall. Stand up, then, lass, and I'll pour the clean water o'er ye."
Grace felt her face heat again, but she stood up out of the protective water. Alice poured the water over her head, rinsing away the last of the soap. She was given a sheet of linen with which to dry herself, and another, smaller one to wrap about her head.
Alice made a clicking sound with her tongue. "Ye need meat on yer bones, lass. I'll keep ye fed, now ye're here. Sit ye down, now, and eat while the porritch is hot."
Wrapped in the linen cloth, Grace sat down on the bench and dipped the spoon into the porridge. It tasted nothing like the oatmeal she had eaten before, being rich with butter and milk, and having a salty taste. She ate all of it, and drank the water in the cup. "That was wonderful." She sighed. After a year's absence, her appetite seemed to be making a reappearance.
Alice had sat quietly while Grace ate, but now she bustled into action. Soon Grace found herself dressed in a soft linen smock, looser than the cotton kirtle and with short sleeves, and then a plain brown overdress was dropped over her head.
Clean stockings were provided, and ill-fitting leather shoes that had been made to fit either foot. Her hand-sewn moccasins were set aside to be cleaned. Then Alice set to work on Grace's hair, sitting her down on the bench before the fire and slowly drawing a wooden comb through the wet strands. "What's yer name, lass?" she asked comfortably.
"Grace." The motion of the comb in her hair was soothing. Grace's eyelids drooped almost shut.
"Ye've lovely hair, so thick and shiny and smooth. Takes a bit to dry, though, aye?"

"I braid it while it's still wet, sometimes," she said in answer.
The door opened behind her, and she recognized the booted footsteps. "I'll finish, Alice," Niall said, taking the comb from her hand. Alice took the wet linens and the platter with her when she left.
"Turn," Niall said, and Grace swiveled on the bench, turning her other side to the fire. He was as skilled as Alice with the comb, sliding his muscular forearm under her hair and lifting it, letting the heat of the fire dry it more evenly.
Her heartbeat had speeded when he entered. Though she sat quietly while he combed her hair, the sedative effect had vanished. Instead that feeling of being hypersensitive had seized her again, tightening her skin, sending twinges through her nerve endings.
Panic began to tighten her stomach. She had been braced for a full-scale seduction. This subtle gentling was far more dangerous to her resolve.
"Ye asked for food yesterday, in the kitchens," Niall said conversationally. "Ye were weak wi' hunger, having not eaten for two days, ye said. Then ye vanished, and no one saw ye for hours, until ye came into my chamber. Where were ye?"
"I told you last night," she said, her tone as even and without heat as his. "I hid, and I fell asleep."
"Where did ye hide?"
"In an alcove." She turned her head to glance at him over her shoulder. "Or did you think I turned myself into a bat and perched in your belfry?"
"Creag Dhu doesna have a belfry," he said in amusement. "Tell me where ye've been for two days, if ye left Hay Keep hard on my heels. Why did ye come here? Creag Dhu is for broken men and outlaws, not lovely lasses with hands soft as a bairn's."
"I couldn't escape right away," Grace explained. "I had to hide in the granary for several hours, until everyone slept again. I stole a horse, but there was fog. . . I got lost." She turned around again, this time to glare at him. "If you hadn't left me behind, I wouldn't have gotten lost."
"Sit still," he commanded, turning her back. "Ye'll pull your hair." The comb resumed its strokes through her hair. "As for why I didna’ bring ye with me, the reason is the question I just asked, and ye didna’ answer. Why did ye come here? Last night ye said for food, and shelter, but when ye got here ye didna’ even try to ask those things of me."

She was silent, searching for a plausible answer. She couldn't say because of the dreams, because for the most part they had been so blatantly sexual in nature, and yet she had rebuffed him not an hour ago.
"Also," he continued softly, "there was other shelter, closer than two days' ride, if that is truly what ye wanted. And once ye were here, all ye had to do was ask for me, instead of tricking your way into the castle. If ye thought I would refuse ye, lass, then your insistence on coming here is no verra logical. I still have the same question. Why Creag Dhu?"
He was relentless, and he hadn't missed any of the holes in her logic. She hadn't come to this time expecting everyone to be ignorant barbarians, easily outwitted, but still she was dismayed by the sophisticated nature of his reasoning. Niall wasn't at the disadvantage here; she was, tripped up by her own actions. He was right; simply approaching the gates and asking for him would have been far less suspicious.
She bowed her head, looking at her hands twisting together in her lap. She fingered her wedding ring, and for once deliberately tried to bring up Ford's image in her mind. She needed him now, sitting here before the fire with Black Niall's hands gentle in her hair. But it was difficult to concentrate, and she couldn't pull the details together.
"I was too embarrassed," she blurted. The comb paused. "Were ye, now?" The deep voice was little more than a murmur. He slid his hand around her neck, under her hair, and she jumped in surprise. He crooned something soothing in Gaelic, and his thumb began to rub the nape of her neck.
"Because I gave ye pleasure, in the dungeon? I'll admit to a bit of surprise, but then I greatly enjoyed it. A man likes for a lass to shiver and moan in his arms."
She shivered now, in response to both the memory and the caress of his thumb on her neck. He moved his hand just a little, so that he rubbed and massaged the cords that joined neck and shoulder, and she bit back a moan. Desire pooled deep in her belly, between her legs, and her breasts tightened. It was a dangerous man who knew the sensitivity of a woman's neck, where a caress was like a bolt of lightning through her body. A touch on her breast was more intimate - but a touch on her neck was more seductive. Niall knew well what he was doing.
She tried to control her breathing, which was coming in short, erratic spurts. "I haven't – I mean, there's been only. . . we had just met!"

He laughed, the soft sound totally male and self-confident. "That isna true. Ye've been in my bed many times."
She gathered herself, tried to inject a note of firmness into her tone. "Those were dreams, not reality."
"Were they not? When I wake wi' my seed spurting from me, it feels verra damn real to me." The words were full of masculine wryness.
Her breath caught on a surge of yearning so abrupt and intense it felt like pain. She wanted to feel him come inside her, wanted to feel that powerful body surge and convulse while she held him close, wanted to watch his face.
"Ye like that thought, do ye? Your wee nipples ha' gone as hard as berries."
She wasn't the only one aroused; she could hear it in the slight thickening of his accent. She closed her eyes and for a moment the only sound was that of their breathing, fast and erratic.
The comb was tossed aside and he stepped over the bench to stand in front of her. His hands slid down her arms, lifting her to her feet. She stared at the pulse throbbing in the base of his strong throat.
"Come lie wi' me on the bed," he murmured, rubbing her back now, each caress subtly urging her closer and closer to him. Her nipples tingled in anticipation. Closer. . . their bodies touched, and she swallowed a gasp.
"No-I. . ." Her disjointed refusal trailed off, lost as his arms closed around her, lifted her on her toes to bring them together more firmly.
"I willna hurt ye." His breath was hot on her ear as he nibbled the lobe, and licked the small hollow beneath.
She knew he likely would, though not deliberately. She had seen him naked, though she had tried not to dwell on it; she had felt him in their dreams. His size wasn't limited to his height. To her dismay, the thought of such intimate discomfort wasn't the deterrent she would have preferred.
Her hands were flattened against his chest, and she had to clench them into fists to keep them from sliding around his neck. Even that small a surrender would be the one step too far, because they were both trembling, Amazed, she felt the quivering of that strong body, the result of fierce need tightly leashed.
"Lass. . ." His mouth slid across the underside of her jaw, planting small kisses as it went. His hands knew no boundaries; they cupped her bottom, lifting her to even closer contact. His erection pushed hard against the juncture of her thighs.

Ford. In despair Grace wrenched herself away and fled to the other side of the table, a flimsy barrier he could dispose of with one flick of his hand if he chose, but she knew he wouldn't force her. Seduce her, yes, with his devastatingly successful technique of alternating subtlety with boldness. He wasn't a man who found force either desirable or necessary.

He was very still, watching her from beneath heavy lids. She clenched her hands together, turning her wedding ring around and around, using the small symbol to remind her of both loyalty and betrayal. The ring was so loose now she worried about losing it, and had developed the habit of checking to make certain it was still there.

He was waiting. "I'm a widow," she said, forcing out the word. Her throat constricted, and she swallowed. "My husband is the only man I've ever-" She stopped, and couldn't say more. She didn't need to.

"Did ye love him, then?" She swallowed again at his swift understanding. "Yes, I do." The words were almost inaudible.

He walked around the table. She stood her ground, though she wanted to flee. Niall cupped her face, a hint of a smile on his firmly molded lips, understanding in his dark eyes. '"Tis new to ye, wanting another man. Ye think it a betrayal of him that yer body, which has known only him, should quicken against mine."

"It is," she whispered. "And yet ye came here, knowing how it is between us. Your body is ready. Your mind needs a bit more time." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I'll not force ye, lass, but I'll no leave ye for long in an empty bed. Ye like my kisses, and my touch, while your thoughts settle."

She thought he would kiss her then. Her lips parted in anticipation of the pressure, the taste, the wildness. Instead he dropped his hand and strolled to the door, his tall, muscular body as graceful as a dancer's. "I would like to think you came to Creag Dhu because of me, and what we both want." He spoke now in precise English, the easy burr of his Scots accent gone. "But gratitude did not make me a fool, nor does lust. Until I know your true reason for being here, you'll not be allowed freedom within my castle. Someone will be with you at all times during the day, and at night you will be locked in either your chamber-" He paused, black eyes glittering. "Or mine."

Chapter 23

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO DO ANY SEARCHING AT ALL. ALICE WAS with her every moment of the day, except when she used the garderobe. Rather than intensify Niall's suspicions, Grace willingly followed in Alice's busy footsteps, listening to the chatter and increasing her understanding of both the Scots dialect and a little of Gaelic, as her mind began to associate pronunciation of a few words with the spelling she knew.

The advantage of being with Alice was that the woman's duties carried her allover the castle. Without having to sneak about, Grace quickly became familiar with the different rooms. She tried to think where the most secure hiding place for the Treasure would be; Creag Dhu had a dungeon, much larger than the one at Hay Keep, but the dungeon was such an obvious choice she doubted it would be correct. Nevertheless she would have liked to inspect it, but could hardly ask Alice for a tour.

The wine cellar was an interesting possibility, dark and cool, with casks and racks that could conceal a hiding place.

"Are there any hidden tunnels?" she asked Alice. "A way to escape if the castle is under attack?"

"Aye," Alice said readily enough. "There's a passage leads to the sea, should it be needed, but my thinking is that 'tis safer in the castle than without. Lord Niall has built the best defenses in Scotland," she boasted. "We could withstand a siege for a year or more."

As she followed Alice about, Grace was struck by how natural everything seemed. Of course, she had the advantage of her education in medieval languages and culture so that she was at least technically familiar with much about the normal lifestyle, but not even when she first awoke was she disoriented. It was as if her mind had neatly slotted itself into the time. Why, yes, of course meat was salted for preservation, and milk had to be churned, and herbs had to be scattered on the floor rushes to keep them sweet smelling. Her taste buds had adjusted immediately to the plain fare, accepting that there was little seasoning to be had. When Alice sat her down with a needle and a linen sheet that needed mending, Grace didn't even think of how easy it would be to go to a department store and simply buy new sheets instead of mending the old ones. Instead she took pains to make tiny, even stitches.

She had made a mistake in her clothing, she realized. Cotton wouldn't make an appearance in Europe for quite some time, and velvet was reserved for royalty. No wonder Huwe had been impressed by her velvet gown! He had probably thought her a foreign princess, and anticipated a huge ransom for her return. Luckily her cotton kirtle was unbleached and the finish wasn't shiny, so at least it didn't look rich. Since Grace obviously wasn't a Scot, her strange clothing hadn't elicited any suspicion from Alice, who had taken the garment to be washed, or from the woman who washed it. She would keep the velvet surcoat hidden, though. She wanted to check her hiding place and make certain the bag was still safely tucked away, but she reasoned that if it had been found she would have beard, and it was more likely to remain hidden if she didn't attract attention to the area.

Niall trained with his men all day, or hunted, or patrolled the area around the castle. If he returned for a noon meal, Grace didn't see him. She heard the clash of swords in the courtyard but didn't go to watch. The sight of his muscled body, sweaty and half naked, would not help shore her resolve. She hadn't known lust could be so powerful, so consuming. Even though Alice kept her busy, her thoughts went time and again to that expert, devilishly knowing touch on her neck, to his kiss, the silky brush of his long hair against her face. He was so wonderfully barbaric and untamed, yet astonishingly well educated and sophisticated. She managed in his time with prior knowledge and training; she suspected he would manage as well in hers without those benefits, by the sheer determination of his character and the force of his intellect.

She tried to think of Ford, but he seemed so far away. A year had passed, a year in which she had had none of his things to touch and hold and weep over. She hadn't dared let herself think of him too much, and now when she needed to she couldn't quite capture his face, or the quality of his voice.

It had been easier before she came back, as if the distance of time was a veil that blurred her other life now, making it seem like a dream. This was real, now was real. Niall was all too real, too vital and dominating. Everyone in the castle bowed to his wishes, obeyed his slightest command.

The men returned for the evening meal, disturbing the efficient peace of the castle with their boisterous, chaotic masculinity. There were shouts, curses, rumbling voices, the clang of swords and shields, the stomping of feet and excited barking of dogs, the sharp muskiness of male sweat. When Niall

appeared all eyes went to him; he looked around and located Grace immediately, nodding his head toward the table where he sat.
She hesitated, and Alice gave her a nudge. "He wants ye to sit wi' him," the older woman said, stating the obvious. "Best do as he says."
Grace hadn't had any thought of disobeying, only a reluctance to be so close to him again. She wanted to, too much, and there was where the danger lay. With slow steps she walked across the great hall to where the head table was set. Niall stood beside his chair, waiting for her.
He had either dunked his head in a barrel of water or taken time to bathe, for his long hair was wet and sleeked back. His simple linen shirt was clean, his plaid belted about his lean waist. A knife was thrust into his belt, and another into his right boot. The huge claymore was slung in a scabbard over his back; he removed that, hanging it on the back of his chair. Even here, in his own hall, he kept his fearsome weapons to hand.

Looking around, Grace saw that all the men did. Niall had called them broken men and outlaws; they were hard men who had lived hard lives, yet they chose to be governed by Niall. They were the castoffs of clans allover Scotland, but here they had formed their own clan, with Niall the unelected but undisputed chieftain, and he had transformed them into a prime fighting unit with pride and discipline. These men would willingly die for him.
A smaller chair had been placed beside Niall's. Those were the only two chairs there; everyone else sat on benches. Grace was burningly aware of all the curious glances coming her way, especially from the men. The women of the household had gotten accustomed to her during the day; some of their glances were hostile.
Niall cupped her elbow as he seated her, his hand very warm on her bare arm. "Ye asked Alice about the escape tunnel," he said, his tone mild, his eyes sharp.
Grace blinked in amazement. She had been by Alice's side almost every minute of the day; she was certain Niall had had no opportunity to speak to her since the morning. "Yes, I did, " she admitted without pause. "But how did you know?"
"I was displeased that ye managed to enter Creag Dhu on false pretenses, and no one questioned ye or even saw ye for the rest of the day. Nothing ye do now goes unobserved." He leaned back in his chair as the meal was set before him, roasted pork, turnips, fresh bread, cheese, and stewed apples.

Taking the knife from his belt, he carved several slices of tender ham from the haunch and placed them on the trencher set on the table between him and Grace.
"Have ye a knife?" he asked Grace. She thought of the Swiss Army knife in the bag she had hidden, and shook her head. Niall drew the smaller dagger from his boot and surveyed it, then thrust it back into his boot. "I dinna think I trust ye with something so wicked sharp. I'll cut your meat for ye."
"I wouldn't stab you," she said, shocked.
One eyebrow lifted. "No? When first I met ye, ye were with the Hays."
"You know I was captured! You could hear what they were saying."
"It could have been arranged, aye? I was half smothered with plaids, as ye remember; I couldna see anything. Ye might have been captured, or ye might have been with them from the start. Ye released me from the dungeon, then followed me here to Creag Dhu, knowing I wouldna cast ye out. Now ye've asked about the tunnel. Do ye plan to tell the Hays, and let them into my castle to murder us in our beds?"
Furious, Grace turned on him. "Huwe already had you at his mercy. Why would he scheme to help you escape, when he could kill you and be done with it?"
"As to why, if Huwe wanted only to kill me then, aye, he could ha' done it then. But he wants Creag Dhu as well, and he kens well he couldna take it from without. To take the castle, he must find a way inside." Expertly he cut a small piece of meat and offered it to her.
She ignored it. "I only asked about a tunnel because I was curious. I didn't even ask where it is, as you should know since you've obviously had my every word reported to you!"
Niall eyed her flushed face, and saw that her eyes had gone as dark as a stormy sea. "And will continue to do so," he said. He offered the meat again. "Eat, lass. A good wind would blow ye away."
Grace took the meat with her fingers and neatly popped it into her mouth, then deliberately turned her head from him to watch the others. He paid no attention to her ire or her efforts to ignore him. He fed himself and her, alternating between the two of them, and patiently holding each bite until she took it. She could see people watching them, and good manners prompted her not to make a public scene.
His consideration undermined her efforts to remain angry. He didn't try to force her to talk, didn't belabor his point; having made it, he was content.

She knew now how closely she was watched, which had been his intention. His leg pressed against hers. Instantly she moved away, then glanced at him to see if the contact had been deliberate. It was. He was watching her, his gaze steady. He took a drink of spiced wine, then put the cup in her hand so she too could drink. "Do ye remember a time," he said in a low voice, "when I was sitting on a stool, and ye came to me, and I lifted ye astride-"
Her hand shook, and she hastily set the cup down before she spilled the wine. She didn't reply, but the hot color in her cheeks gave him his answer.
"How can it be?" he wondered.
She shook her head, and whispered, "I don't know."
"At times I wasna asleep, and still I could feel ye watching me." He lifted her hand, holding it in his palm and tracing his fingertip over the slender bones that fanned in the back of her hand.
"Sometimes when I was awake, I thought I heard you speaking." She couldn't look at him as she made the confession. The words felt tom out of her, a reluctant acknowledgment of the awareness between them that had tormented her for months, and tempted her now. It would be so easy to turn her hand in his, lace their fingers together. He would know what she wanted. He wouldn't ask any questions, simply lead her up the stairs to his chamber.
She stared at the saltcellar. She had once had this unspoken intimacy with Ford; they had known each other, so well that a lot of times words hadn't been needed. When he died, she thought that wonder, that sense of belonging, had died with him and she would never know it again. How could it be duplicated? They had forged that mutual knowledge during years of dating and marriage, of making love, of quiet talks in the darkness as they lay together, of working and laughing and worrying, of living together. She couldn't feel it now, with Niall. Her imagination was, working overtime again, making her think the link was there when it couldn't be. From the moment he had walked out of that dungeon cell until now, the total time she had spent with him was less than two hours. He couldn't possibly know what she wanted, nor could she predict what he would do.
"All ye have to do is take my hand," he murmured, watching her, drawing her gaze. "My bed is big, and warm, and ye won't be alone."
A chill ran over her, and her eyes went blank with shock. No. It wasn't possible.

"Such big, sad eyes. What do ye see, lass, when ye look through me as if I'm not here, when ye go away in your mind? Does Huwe hold someone ye love, a child perhaps? Does he force ye to do his bidding?"
Her throat felt tight. "No," she managed. "I have no one, and I'm not in league with Huwe."
An expression passed over his face, tightening his flesh over the chiseled bone structure, giving him a remote, austere expression as old as the one in his eyes. So must the ancient saints have looked, stripped down to the essentials of character by the burdens they had borne. "Tell me," he said. "And I will aid ye."
How matter-of-fact he was about assuming yet another responsibility! His friends had been tortured and burned to death, he was excommunicated and under a death sentence should he venture outside Scotland; as a young man he had been made Guardian of the Treasure, his entire life dedicated to and dominated by the burden he had accepted. He had created a disciplined fighting force out of loners and misfits and outlaws, then extended his protection to the crofters and villagers living around Creag Dhu. The burdens he had accepted onto those broad shoulders would have crushed most men, but not even knowing how he could help her, he offered to assume responsibility for her, too. Her throat tightened even more, this time with unshed tears. Silently she shook her head.
He sighed as he stood, lifting her to her feet too. "Ye will tell me," he assured her, walking with her to the stairs. At a nod from him, two men rose from their benches and followed. "Ye will tell me, willingly or no. Ye'll come to my bed, too, and lie soft and yielding beneath me. I'm a verra patient man, lass, but never forget I hold all the power here."
Her mouth went dry. Was that a warning that he suspected she knew about the Treasure and wanted to find it? Her heart hammered painfully against her breastbone. She was struggling with him on both a personal and an impersonal plane, and uncannily he sensed it. Viewing him as a man, she desired him with a ferocity that terrified her; seeing him as the Guardian, she feared him. Defeat on either level could destroy her.
He opened the door to the small chamber where she had been locked the night before, and ushered her inside. She paused in surprise. Sometime during the day a small bed, not much more than a cot, had been moved into the chamber. A small fire crackled in the hearth, dispelling the chill, and two thick candles appeared to have been lit only moments before, for the

tallow was only now beginning to melt down the columns. To her relief there was also a chamber pot, and a small basin and ewer of water.
"Thank you," she said, turning to him. The small chamber felt almost luxurious to her after some of the places she had slept in this past year.
"I dinna intend to freeze ye to death," he replied, his brows quirking in amusement. He smoothed his hand up her arm. "I like ye warm and tender."
He kissed her, his arms folding around her and molding her to his body. Grace gripped his biceps, concentrating on holding tight to her self-control even though she could feel the foundation of resolve crumbling beneath her. He slanted his firm mouth so that it fit perfectly to the soft contours of her lips, and despite her best intentions her mouth parted under the pressure. His tongue gently penetrated, cajoling rather than demanding.
Desire clawed at her, hot and sharp. She jerked her mouth from his and buried her face against his chest, breathing hard. The question of loyalty to Ford aside, how could she even consider making love with Niall? She intended to be in this time only for as long as it took her to find the Treasure and discover if she could somehow use the mysterious Power herself, to stop Parrish and the Foundation. If she could, she would steal the Treasure and return to her own time, leaving Niall behind.
Success or failure, she would not be staying. Any relationship she had with Niall would only be casual - God, she thought, could making love with Niall ever be considered casual? - and even were the circumstances different she wasn't a woman who had casual affairs. Perhaps he would be content with only sex, but she knew she wouldn't be; for her, making love was a commitment, something she couldn't make.
He cradled her so carefully in his arms, rocking slightly back and forth as he stroked her back, that she wanted to weep. She had never met a man like him before, and never would again; he was extraordinary in any century. Just for a moment she gave in to temptation and slid her hands around him, flattening her palms on his back and absorbing the vital heat and power of his body. His muscles subtly flexed with every breath he took, and his heart beat strong and steady under her ear.
"When a woman has been wed," he said low, into her hair, "she becomes accustomed to her man in bed beside her at night, and if aught happens to him, she loses not only her husband but that comfort of no being alone in the dark. I offer ye that, lass. I'll hold ye close against the dark and the chill, give ye the comfort of my body."

She almost groaned aloud against him, aching from temptation. To sleep with his arms around her, to wake and be able to reach out and touch him, stroke his hairy chest, slide her hand down the flatness of his belly, hold his penis while he slept and feel it soft in her hand-how had he known the way she hungered for that, for the intimacy that went beyond sex? He was in her mind again, reading her with uncanny accuracy.
"No," she whispered, and knew that she wanted to say yes.
His lips brushed her forehead. "I wish ye a good night, then. If ye decide ye need comforting in the night, ye've only to knock on the door, and the guards will bring ye to me."
When he was gone, Grace pressed her shaking hands to her lips. She was walking a tightrope between passion and danger, but the knowledge didn't lessen the need. If she gave in to him, would that incline him toward a greater indulgence than he would normally show, if he discovered her true aim?
No, it would not. She knew from the documents that Black Niall was ruthless in his protection of the Treasure. Perhaps he had merely meant he held all the authority here, but he had said "power," and that could be a warning. Being a woman, and moreover a woman he wanted to bed, wouldn't protect her if he should discover she was after the Treasure. He would kill her, and she knew it.

Chapter 24

THE NEXT DAY DAWNED COOL AND RAINY, THE MOUNTAINTOPS to the east lost in mist. There was no hot bath waiting for Grace that morning, only a basin of cold water and a hasty scrubbing in front of the fire. Breakfast was porridge again, and then Alice swept her up in another whirlwind of activity. Then men trained in the courtyard despite the rain -"Lord Niall says trouble doesna wait for a fair day," Alice explained - and clotted the rushes with mud when they all tromped in, soaking wet and grousing.
Alice warmed them up from the inside with cocannon, a cabbage stew, and the men occupied themselves with games of dice, flirting with the serving women, sharpening their swords and daggers, and swapping tales that grew

both louder and taller. Not all the men were there; Niall and ten others patrolled around Creag Dhu.

The rain dripped monotonously, and the dark gray sky made torches necessary for light. Grace yawned, thinking that a rainy day was better suited for napping in front of a fire than anything else. She wasn't the only one yawning; a few of the men sought the darker corners and nodded off. Others' thoughts turned to bed for a different reason. Grace saw hairy masculine arms wrapping about plump waists here and there, and soon there were noticeably fewer women going about their work.

They were all startled by the shouts from the gate, the sudden alarm. Sim had Alice on his knee, teasingly pinching her bottom and trying to cajole her away from her work; he jumped upright at the shouts, dumping Alice on the floor. His hand closed over his sword and he was running before his plaid had settled around his knees.

Alice scrambled up and ran to the huge ten-foot-high double doors that opened into the great hall. Her heart in her throat, Grace ran too. Niall was outside the safety of the gates; had something happened to him?

The scene was chaotic, confusing. A crowd of people rushed toward the gates, yelling in alarm, their heads covered against the pelting rain. Behind them was the sullen red glow of burning huts. "The Hay!" they howled. "The Hay!" Men surged on horseback, waving axes and swords.

"Open the gates!" Sim yelled. Men roughly pushed Alice and Grace aside as they rushed to their posts in a well-ordered drill, some going to the top of the walls with their crossbows, some to the stable to get the horses, others falling in behind Sim.

Grace ran into the courtyard, heedless of the rain. The Hays were attacking, and Niall was somewhere outside. Had he and his men been attacked by a much larger force? Her chest clenched, panic welling. No. No! She couldn't bear it again, couldn't lose.

Alice grabbed her arm, jerking her around. "Come inside! Arrows-"

The gates were open, the pounding crowd only yards away. Grace gave them an agonized look as Alice dragged her toward the doors, and her gaze fell on the beefy man who ran in front of all the others, his plaid pulled over his head. She saw him grin suddenly, saw his rotted teeth, and she jerked away from Alice, running forward as she screamed, "Close the gates! It's a trick!"

Sim's head jerked around and he gaped at her, then her words sank in and he spun back toward the gates. "Close the gates!" he roared, rushing forward. The guards began pushing the massive doors closed but it was too late. The Hays poured into the narrow gatehouse, shoving the gates open. Swords and axes were pulled from beneath plaids, and the "victims" attacked.

"Run!" Alice screamed, pulling on Grace's arm again and hauling her back inside the great hall. Women were screaming and rushing about, excited dogs barking and leaping about their feet, getting in the way. "The doors!" Alice gasped, and she and Grace turned to throw their weight against them, closing them so the massive bar could be dropped in place. Alice outweighed Grace by fifty pounds or more, and she got the right door closed first, then darted over to aid Grace. They almost made it.

Heavy bodies thudded against the doors, bursting them wide, and the fighting spilled into the hall. The impact knocked Grace to the floor. Alice ducked under a slashing blade and grabbed Grace again, bodily lifting her and shoving her down the hallway toward the kitchens. "Run!" she screamed again, and Grace lifted her skirts and ran.

From in front of them came thundering feet and the rattle of metal. Grace skidded to a halt just outside the larder. "They're in here, too!" she yelled, trying to reverse her direction. Then the door to the larder slammed open and Niall came through it at a dead run, claymore in hand, black hair flying around his head and his eyes like murder. He was followed by the ten men who had been on patrol with him.

Grace flattened herself against the wall to keep from being smashed to the floor. Niall didn't even glance at her as he ran past but he barked to Alice, "Get to safety!" Then with a roar he ran into the hall and threw himself into the battle, pushing Hays back a few steps with the sheer force of his size and the swing of his blade. Screaming, his men followed him.

"Come!" Alice screamed to make herself heard over the din of battle, and she dashed into the kitchen without looking behind her.

Grace started to follow, then looked at the larder. That had to be the secret passageway, for otherwise how could Niall and his men have gotten back into the castle? She hesitated only a second, and plunged into the cool, dark room. There was a small store of candles just inside the door and she grabbed one, her hands shaking as she took up the stone and flint lying beside the candles and struck a spark to light the candle. When the small flame flickered to life, she hastily shut the larder door and looked around.

A whole section of the back wall had been swung open. Blackness yawned beyond the opening.
Her breath came in quick spurts as she approached the open section. This might lead to the Treasure's hiding place; it might not. But this was the first time she had been alone to search, and in the chaos of battle it would be some time before she was missed. She thought of Niall hurling himself into the fight with terrifying abandon and she bit her bottom lip until blood welled. He might be hurt, even killed.
And there was nothing she could do. Here was her chance, likely her only chance, to accomplish what she had come to Creag Dhu for.
The deafening roar of battle was only slightly mulled in here. Men screamed, in fury and in agony, sword clashed on sword, wood splintered. She had come into this time in the middle of a battle; perhaps she was meant to leave during one, too.
Niall. Her heart whispered the name, and her hands shook, making the candle flame dance. Then she thought of Ford and closed her eyes, trying to see his face. The only image that came to mind was the last one, his eyes blank in death as he toppled over.
A wordless sound of pain vibrated in her throat, and she stepped through the opening.
The air was immediately colder, danker, and had a faint smell of salt water. Steep, narrow stairs plunged straight down into complete darkness. She took them cautiously, guarding her candle so the flame didn't go out. Everyone knew of the secret passage, she thought. Was it likely Niall would hide the Treasure there?
But where there was one passageway, perhaps there were others.
She reached the bottom of the stairway and found herself in a narrow, rock-lined tunnel. The smell of the sea was stronger there, and she could hear the muted thunder of crashing waves. The passageway was a short one, then, leading straight out to the rocky shoreline.
Her supposition was right. Though she moved slowly, she reached the end of the tunnel within two minutes. A jumble of boulders before her almost completely filled the opening, so that only a sliver of gray, rain-washed light filtered through.
No Treasure there. She retraced her steps, and began to climb the treacherous stairs. She held the candle in her right hand and put her left against the wall to steady herself. She had never had claustrophobia, but the

inky darkness seemed to clutch at her feet, trying to pull her down. She shivered and moved closer to the wall, and her fingers slid over a section of rock that jutted out a quarter inch from the other stones.

She stopped, lifting the candle higher to enlarge the pool of light. She could hear her own breath eerily echo as she examined the section that was out of alignment. Could there be a secret passage within a secret passage?

She pressed around the edges of the rock, feeling foolish but doing it anyway. Nothing happened. She held the candle nearer to see if there was a minute seam in the mortar, or if she was wasting her time.

The mortar was cracked, but when she examined the rock around that particular section she found hairline cracks in that mortar, too. There were no hinges that she could see, no way of opening the door-if it was a door.

Archaeology and translations had taught her to approach the unknown logically. If this were a hidden door, there had to be an easy way to open it, easy because a method that took a lot of time or trouble would increase one's chances of being discovered in the act of opening it. A hidden door would be silent and fast.

The easiest method would be to put an opening mechanism behind one of the other stones, but given the steepness and narrowness of the steps, it stood to reason almost anyone going up or down them would put a balancing hand against the wall, making it too likely a hidden door would be opened by accident.

She climbed a few steps and surveyed the section of rock from above. Yes, a rectangular section definitely jutted out a fraction of an inch. Where could a mechanism be hidden? It had to be someplace accessible, easily reached.

Easily reached. Grace's eyes widened. In this time, she was of average height for a woman, with most of the men she had seen in the range of five-five to five-eight, with very few taller than five-ten. Sim was a large man, perhaps reaching six feet; only Niall was taller. Niall was six-foot four. He could reach higher than anyone else in the castle.

She looked up. If this was a door, and there was a mechanism to open it hidden behind one of these rocks, logically it would be behind one of the higher rocks, one that only Niall could comfortably reach.

She stretched on tiptoe, pressing every rock she could reach. The rectangular section remained stubbornly stationary and rocklike. There was a flat stone that looked promising, being slightly smoother than those surrounding it, but it was half a foot out of her reach. She climbed another

step and leaned to the side, balancing precariously on the edge of the step as she stretched, her fingers scrabbling on the rock, trying to pull herself just a fraction of an inch farther. She almost lost her balance and quickly flattened herself against the wall, gasping in fright. A fall down these steps would break her neck. Cautiously she lifted herself on her toes again, perched on the very edge of the step. Her extended fingers couldn't quite brush the edge of the rock.

Swearing in frustration under her breath, Grace sat down on the step and removed her left shoe. Once more she stood on tiptoe, stretching outward, and she slapped her shoe against the flat rock.

Silently the rectangular section slid inward, leaving a black hole in the wall. Holding the candle before her, she leaned in, not setting a foot inside that hole until she knew what was in there.

The blackness was Stygian, swallowing the feeble light of her small candle. She could see a solid stone floor, and nothing else, not even walls.

She stepped inside, squeezing past the stone door. She waited, ready to throw herself back through the opening if the door began to close on its own, but it remained reassuringly open. Probably there was another mechanism on this side of the wall that one had to press to close the door, which she had no intention of doing.

Warily she moved forward a few feet. and made out a wall three or four yards in front of her. She turned to her left, squinting her eyes at a darker patch. She went closer, and saw that it was another door, this one made of a very dark wood, and the bar that lay through the brackets was attached like a lever on one end so it could be lifted up and swung over to unbar the door, but not removed.

A breeze from somewhere made her candle flicker, and she quickly cupped her hand around the flame to steady it. She glanced over her shoulder at the opening in the wall, but the breeze didn't seem to be coming from there. It was coming from the direction of that dark, closed door, which didn't make sense. The air must be coming in through the rock opening and swirling around the antechamber, confusing her.

Grace approached the door and tried to lift the bar, but though it was a small bar compared to the massive ones in other parts of Creag Dhu, it was heavier than it looked and she couldn't manage it with one hand. She set the candle on the floor, and seized the lever with both hands. By bracing her weight below the bar and shoving, she slowly inched it upward. The

pivoting connection was smooth, but the action was incredibly difficult for so slender a bar. There was a definite mechanical click when she forced the bar straight up, and it locked in the upright position.
The door itself swung silently inward, and more stairs yawned at her feet, a stone wall on one side and black emptiness on the other. The breeze was more pronounced now, and the candle flickered wildly, almost going out. Grace crouched and cupped her hands around the flame again until it steadied, picked up the candle, and stood with one hand still held in front of it.
How much time had passed? she wondered as she went down the stairs into nothingness. Had the battle ended? Was Niall unhurt? The compulsion to turn around and return to the upper reaches of the castle stopped her with one foot poised to take another step downward. Niall, she thought in despair, terrified for him. He was a fearsome warrior; she had seen him fighting in skirmishes and in pitched battles, and understood why his name had struck terror into the hearts of his foes, but still he was human. He bled if cut, he bruised if struck. He could be overwhelmed, as he had been when Huwe's men had captured him.
There was nothing she could do to affect the outcome of the battle overhead. If she found the Treasure, then according to the documents for which Parrish was so willing to kill, she could affect the outcome of events in her own time. Her choice was simple, but more difficult than she had ever imagined. She had been in this time less than a week; how could Niall have so quickly become important to her?
Because she had known him much longer than a week, her inner soul whispered. She had known him for a year, through the documents given into her safekeeping, and she had been fascinated, obsessed, beguiled by him even before her world had been destroyed by two bullets. If she hadn't been so anxious to have her modem repaired so she could access files and learn more about Niall, she would have been at home when Parrish and his men came, and she too would be dead now.
She wanted to go back. Instead she went forward, step by cautious step.
"Ahhhhh!" Mouth open, screaming, Huwe rushed at Niall, claymore held over his head with both hands. For a split-second Niall jerked his attention away from the Hay clansman on the other end of his sword; Huwe was behind him, the other in front, and he had only one more second in which to keep Huwe from splitting him from gullet to arse. He ducked under the

swinging sword of the Hay clansman, grabbed him by the arm, and slung him into Huwe's path. Huwe's great sword was already arcing down and it bit deep into his clansman's shoulder and neck. A great spray of blood drenched his clothes, but Huwe kept coming, his small eyes mad with rage. "Bastard!" he howled. "Bastard!" He lifted the sword again and brought it whistling down, intent on separating Niall's head from his shoulders.
Niall parried the blow with his axe, the force of it numbing his arm. He went in low with his own sword but Huwe was more nimble than he expected, jerking away from the long blade. "Ye kilt my son," he roared. "Ye bastard, I'll have yer head!"
Niall didn't waste his breath on speech; aye, he had killed Morvan, and would again had he the opportunity. He was filled with a cold, merciless rage, that the Hay filth had dared invade Creag Dhu, his home. Not only was the Treasure endangered, but Grace; he remembered the terror plain on her face as he raced by her, and he knew the fate that would befall her, and all the women of Creag Dhu, if he and his men failed to repel the invaders. He would not allow that to happen. He seized the offensive, attacking with silent ferocity, the steel of his sword clanging as it met Huwe's. He advanced steadily, axe and sword swinging, driving Huwe before them. A Hay clansman ran screaming at him from the left and he hurled the axe, burying it in the man's chest. The man gave a strange gurgle and dropped like a stone, his heart stilled by the massive blade that had cleaved it in two. Niall had only the sword now, but he hadn't dared let the man engage him. He gripped the hilt with both hands to better balance himself, holding the weight centered with his body. Huwe rushed forward, heartened by Niall's loss of the axe. Niall parried the downward arc of Huwe's sword, steel sliding along steel with a hissing sound, disengaging, slashing in from his left and burying the blade deep in Huwe's right side, in the kidney. Huwe jerked, his face turning gray. His sword clattered to the floor. He rose on his toes, convulsing as his body reacted to the massiveness of the injury. Niall jerked his blade free and struck again, straight into the heart, a death stroke. A howl rose above the roar of battle as Huwe's clansmen saw their chieftain slain. Disconcerted for a moment, it was a moment that cost them dearly, for Niall's men took swift advantage, their training bringing the struggle to a swift finish.
Niall leaned on his bloody sword, panting. Slowly he surveyed the ruin of his great hall, noting which of his men lay sprawled in death. There was a

moment of eerie silence; then moans began to rise, the sobs and curses of wounded men. Here and there he saw a tangle of longer skirts, gently rounded limbs, and he knew some of the women had not found safety. What of Grace? She had been with Alice, fleeing to the kitchens.
Sim slowly walked toward him, his face so covered with gore Niall almost didn't recognize him. The big man limped, his entire left hip wet with blood. "What do we do with the Hays who live?" he asked.
Niall's first impulse was to kill them all, but he stilled it. 'Twould cause Robert difficulty if he destroyed the clan. There were Hay women and children, too; they would need what men survived. The clan would not recover for many years of Huwe's stubborn stupidity. "Turn them out," he said.
The women were creeping from their hiding places. There were tears, of both joy and sorrow, as they identified both the survivors and the dead, and then as women do they set about restoring order, tending to the wounded, laying out the dead, bringing drink for those who wanted it, sweeping out the bloodstained rushes. Alice took charge, her manner brisk and capable, though her cheeks were still pale with fright.
Niall's black gaze darted from one woman to another, searching for a dainty form, a long, thick fall of hair. He listened, but could not catch that voice with its strange accent, the emphasis on all the wrong syllables. "Alice!" he called. "Where's the lass?"
Alice had no doubt which lass he meant. She looked around in puzzlement, but reached the same conclusion as had he. Grace was not there.
"She didna follow me," Alice said slowly. "But she was there behind me when ye came from the larder. Perhaps she hid there." She paused. "The lass saved us, gave us warning. She recognized Huwe."
So she had not been in league with Huwe. The thought brought him relief, but another worry sent him striding rapidly from the great hall. Inside the escape passage was yet another passage, one that he had sworn to protect with his life. There was something mysterious about the lass, something she kept hidden. What if she were the most serious threat to the Treasure he had yet encountered? Could he keep his vow, if it meant killing her?
Cold sweat beaded on his brow as he took a candle and ducked into the escape passage. Halfway down the long, narrow stairs an area of the wall was even darker, as if a hole had been knocked in the stone. Niall felt his heart still, his skin going cold with dread. Then rage came, saving rage.

Silently he took his bloody sword and followed her.
The stairs ended. Grace lifted the candle but couldn't see anything except cold stone walls, made of the same dark rock as the rest of the castle. It was very cold down there, and she began shivering. An odd pulse hummed through the air, not a sound but a sensation, brushing against her skin.
Her skin prickled, but not from the cold. Slowly she paced around the walls, looking for any indication of a door. Blank stone was all that met her searching fingers.
The subtle pulsing was mildly disorienting. She must be below sea level, and what she felt was the force of waves battering against the rock.
Beneath the stairs was a deeper darkness. Her heart pounding in her throat, Grace stepped forward, and the frail light of her candle illuminated another opening, a black hole leading. . . where?
The pulsing was stronger. She could feel it on her face. It was coming from the dark opening.
She stopped, the small hairs on the back of her neck lifting. Dear God, what was in there?
She could do this, she told herself. For Ford, and for Bryant, she could do anything. She had proven that to herself time and again during this past year of hell.
Bone-aching cold seeped from the stone straight through the thin soles of her shoes, crept beneath her skirts to curl its icy fingers around her legs. She had to act quickly, before the dangerous cold began to sap her strength. Her small candle wouldn't last much longer, and she didn't want to be caught down there without light. Calmer now, driven by necessity, she moved toward the black hole in the wall.
It engulfed her as soon as she stepped through, the darkness, the sensation of trembling on the edge of. . . something.
Was that warmth she felt? She went deeper, her candle fluttering madly. The light picked out the dim shape of what looked like a large chair. . . a throne? . . . carved with lions. A tattered banner, the sort carried into battle and woven with fire in the strands, hung over the throne and in it golden lion eyes shimmered in the candle's light. Beside the throne was something else, something she couldn't quite see, and she took another step forward.
"Ah, lass." The deep voice was low, regretful, controlled. It came from no more than a few feet behind her. "I dinna want to kill ye."

The fine hairs on her body lifted in sheer terror, and for a moment Grace felt herself sway as the blood left her head.
Blood. She could smell it now, hot and metallic. The blood of battle was on him, the fierceness of it singing through his veins, intensifying the rage she could feel blasting from him in waves.
He was going to kill her. She could feel his intent, the cold resolve that had guarded the Treasure all these years. Underlying that, however, was his barely restrained rage at . . . what? Her trickery? How close she had come to succeeding? It was the rage she felt most, a fire burning beneath ice, and it ignited her own rage.
She couldn't let him kill her. If she died now, then Parrish would win. There would be no vengeance for Ford, for Bryant; their courage in death would have been in vain. She would die knowing she had failed them, and that, more than anything, was unbearable.
Niall's hand closed on her shoulder, turning her, his fingers gripping like iron. Grace dropped the candle and it rolled away, its fragile flame glinting on the sword in his hand, wavering, almost extinguishing before flaring to renewed life. She turned into his grip,
stepping closer, whirling. Warrior that he was, he began reacting even before she could complete the move, turning his hip to the side to catch the brunt of her knee. But it wasn't her knee she used, it was her elbow. She jabbed it hard into his midsection, aiming for his solar plexus. The impact with his hard stomach jarred her arm all the way to her shoulder. She missed her target but the force was enough to make him grunt and bend forward a little, his grip on her shoulder loosening for a fraction of a second.
It was enough. She jerked backward, wrenching herself from his grasp. His fingers caught in the cloth of her bodice and a seam gave, the ripping sound almost unbearably loud in this deep, silent sepulcher. The fabric tore loose and she stumbled at the sudden release, going down almost to her knees before literally throwing herself back to her feet, panic lending her strength. She pulled her skirts high and raced into the darkness beyond the candlelight, instinct guiding her to the stairs.
Her chances of outdistancing him were slim, and getting out of the castle even more unlikely. Still, she had to try. The soles of her shoes slipped on the stones and she banged into the wall, hard. The light of the candle behind

her was no more than a faint glimmer, of no use in finding her way, but now she had the wall for guidance. She put one hand on it and ran.
She tripped on the bottom stair and fell, hard. Instantly she bounded up, knowing he was right behind her, feeling his presence even though she couldn't see him, couldn't hear him over the thunder of her own heartbeat, the harsh gasps of her breathing. He was close, that terrible bloody sword in his powerful hand, his rage pulsing through him.
Grace ran up the stairs, hurling herself upward into the inky darkness. If she missed one step she would plunge off the side, down onto the stone floor, maiming if not killing herself outright. If she faltered, he would be on her. There was certain death behind her, possible death waiting at every step. She could do nothing but throw herself forward, hoping she had that one extra step on him that would allow her to gain the top of the stairs and bar the door before he could reach it.
Just one extra step. She had barely been able to move the bar, but she would manage, somehow. If she could get the bar in place, she would make it. Niall would hack his way through but that would take time, time enough that she could flee the castle. One step.
No. She couldn't flee, not now, not when she was so close. She would have to hide. . . and return.
There were no more stairs. She staggered off balance when her lifted foot came down hard on a level surface. She reached desperately for the door. And she heard him, heard his breath, felt it hot on her neck. ' " No time for the door.
Her scrabbling hands had barely closed on the frame when his weight hit her in the back, overwhelming her, driving her forward and down and crushing her beneath him.
Grace put out her hands to break her fall but still landed heavily. Stunned, she lay helplessly beneath him, her cheek ground into the grit covering the cold stone floor. He was so heavy she could barely breathe, and so big that he surrounded her, his heat burning her back, scorching through her clothing. His hot breath stirred her hair. She inhaled his pungent scent, the hot, mingled odors of sweat and blood and man, primitive and dangerous. The smell of him filled her, warming her within as his body warmed her without.
Caught. Captured. This was the end, then. He could snap her neck with one hand, and perhaps he would, for she could feel the great rage seething

within him. She was down, and helpless. He would kill her now.
He didn't move, didn't lift his heavy weight from her. She couldn't see him; the darkness was almost total. Far away there seemed to be some lessening of the darkness, perhaps a torch set in a sconce on the outer stairs, but it was too dim to be of use. He didn't speak. All she could do was feel him, his body stretched on top of hers, his iron-muscled limbs controlling her. She could feel his chest move with his controlled breathing, feel the strong thudding of his heartbeat against her back. He wasn't even winded, damn him. She wanted to scream at him, claw at him in her own frustrated rage, but all she could do was press her face against the icy stone and wait.
The silence grew as they lay there, and then she felt the prod of his stiffened penis against her buttocks, the slow and deliberate movement of his legs, pushing between hers.
Grace's breath stopped. She had known great emotions; she had thrilled to love, been devastated by grief, ridden the sharp blade of hatred. The riptide of lust that seized her body now went beyond the force of even those things, smashing through her barriers as if they had never existed, sweeping everything away in the sudden, blindingly intense need for him that overtook her. She had known she was weak where he was concerned; the first time he kissed her, her lonely, yearning flesh had exploded into climax at his touch. He aroused her as no other man ever had, ever could, aroused her to a response so overwhelming she couldn't control it.
He wasn't Ford. . . *he wasn't Ford*! How could she want him so much, this big, violent man who held the key to her desperate quest in his powerful hands? He was sworn to protect the Treasure, he had killed in its defense, and he would kill her. . . afterward. For now, lying there on the cold stone floor in the darkness, there was only the sound of his breathing, and hers, coming faster and harsher as his rage transmuted itself into lust.
A low moan slipped past her lips, a husky, helpless sound of want. *Yes. Oh, God; yes.* Even if he killed her afterward, before she died she wanted to feel him within her, absorb his driving force, cool this insane, inexorable fever that burned in her flesh for him.
Her hips lifted the scant inch they could, instinctively pushing upward against him, grinding her buttocks harder against his rigid shaft. Just that, a slight movement at best, but it sent shards of pleasure spearing through her. Her breasts hardened in painful need of his touch, her loins moistened and clenched, aching with desire and frustration and emptiness.

"Damn you," she whispered into the silence, almost weeping. Damn him for being a man like no other, for being hard and ruthless, for being more dominant in the flesh than she could have ever imagined. Other men paled beside him; he was too vital, the force of his personality and the strength of his sword arm smashing any resistance to his will. And damn herself, for how could she resist him, when he had only to touch her and her weak, traitorous body instantly began preparing itself to yield to him?

"Damn me, then, if ye must," he murmured against her hair, accepting her despair. Subtle, instinctive bastard that he was, he knew she was his for the taking now, all resistance gone, and he moved to claim her willing flesh.

He slid her skirts up, bunching the fabric on her back, and the cold air washed over her bare legs and bottom. Her skirts were still caught under the pressure of his knees, anchoring her in place. Grace quivered, fear and desire twisting sharply together until she couldn't separate them. The coarse wool of his kilted plaid scratched the tender backs of her thighs. His hand moved between them, pulling his plaid up and to the side, and his naked flesh was suddenly against her own, thighs to thighs, groin to buttocks. His heat was startling, almost unbearable, as if she touched fire.

He slid his right arm under her, curving around her belly, and lifted her up and back, onto her knees, raising her hips and positioning her for him. Grace squeezed her eyelids tightly shut as she struggled with the abrupt, startling exposure and vulnerability of her sex. His rigid penis stabbed at her soft folds but he wasn't trying to enter her, not yet. Her loins pulsed, throbbing as she waited in paralyzed agony for the thrust that would carry him deep inside her, and at last this terrible need would be eased.

His sustaining arm slipped from around her but she maintained her position, on her knees with her bottom lifted. Her fingers scraped against the icy stone, trying to sink into it. Why was he waiting? Why didn't he just do it, before she went mad?

He touched her then, his warm palm shaping itself over the curves of her buttocks, learning her. His hand slid between her legs and he cupped her sex, his hard fingers opening the closed, secretive folds. He searched out her small, exquisitely firm nub, pushing back the protective hood of flesh and exposing her to the rasp of his callused fingertips. A soft cry exploded from her, and her hips writhed. Oh, God, another touch and she would explode, just as she had before. But he didn't give her that touch. Those damnably knowing fingers withdrew after the brief caress, dragging through

her swollen folds to find and stroke the entrance to her body. He circled her soft opening with one finger, spreading her moisture but not probing inside her even though he had to feel the convulsive clench of her loins. He touched between her buttocks, exploring, and murmured a soft reassurance when her entire body jolted in shock.

He bent forward, his entire body covering hers, his weight supported on his left elbow and forearm. "Lay your head on my arm, lass," he whispered, and blindly she did so, pressing her forehead against the hard muscles of his forearm, her right hand entwining and clinging to his while her left hand curled around the iron swell of his biceps, anchoring herself against what she knew was to come. With his free hand he guided his jutting penis to her prepared opening, and slowly pressed within.

Grace couldn't prevent her sudden intake of breath, her involuntary whimper of feminine distress. She had known he was big; she had seen him naked. But until she felt him pushing into her, her body hadn't known the true measure of him. He was thick, and hot, and so hard she felt bruised by the inexorable advance of his shaft into her. He wasn't brutal, just relentless. Her hips undulated, instinctively trying to ease her clasp of him as inch by slow inch he completed his penetration.

Her fingers dug into his biceps, and she pressed her forehead harder against his arm. Surely she couldn't take any more; he was too big, he was hurting her, and helpless little cries broke from her throat. But he continued to push, and her hips rocked back and forth, adjusting, taking. Then he was in her to the hilt, seated hard, his pubic hair coarse against her bottom, his heavy testicles swaying between her spread legs and brushing against the burning nub he had exposed.

He moved carefully within her, just a little, the sensation setting off tiny explosions in her nerve endings. "Here?" he asked softly, his deep voice rustling against her ear. "Or. . . *here*?" He moved again, his swollen shaft nudging a place inside her she hadn't known existed, and her wild, helpless cry gave him his answer.

Slowly he began moving, a subtle flexing of his hips that wasn't a thrust at all, but instead a tenderly ruthless internal stroking of that place deep inside her. Grace cried out again, her entire body clenching under the lash of a pleasure so intense she couldn't bear it. She shuddered convulsively, her loins shivering around the thick intrusion of his penis. Oh, God, she had climaxed before with less arousal than this, but somehow she couldn't quite

reach that blessed relief. This was exquisite torment, paralyzing pleasure, and she couldn't fight it. She couldn't pump her hips faster to gain her peak, for his body too completely controlled hers. All she could do was quiver just short of fulfillment, each slow rub of his cock taking her almost there, but not quite. Low, rhythmic cries wrenched from her with each inward movement he made, and her arousal grew even more intense, until she thought she would faint. She heard herself pleading with him, wild, disjointed words of need. "Niall please! *More - do it!* Please. . . I can't-no!"
"No?" he panted softly in her ear, his voice low and raw. The next incremental movement tore a groan from him. "Ye'll bear it, lass, for I say ye must."
"I can't," she said again, moaning. She tried to move, tried to end this delicious torture, but he locked his right arm around her hips and held her still for yet another deep stroking. She strained against that warm, iron-muscled band, knowing it was useless, that his strength was far greater than her own. In this sensual battle she was helpless to take anything except what he gave her, her body too slight and delicate to resist being overwhelmed by a man who was a foot taller than she, and who had spent his life either in battle or training for battle, so that he was stronger than anyone she had ever known before.
Tiny red sparks exploded behind her closed eyelids. Her heart thundered, reverberating against her rib cage. She couldn't drag in enough air; her lungs strained, her entire body strained, and with a thin cry of despair, of pleasure taken beyond bearing, she turned her face into the crook of his arm and wildly sank her teeth into the bulge of his biceps. She heard his answering growl, and his big body flexed, a guttural sound rattling in his throat as his control shattered.
Like a stallion he set his teeth into the curve of her neck and shoulder, gripping the sensitive cord that ran there, and his hips plunged. She screamed, electrified by the primitive bite, the sudden hard thrust, and everything in her body gathered, concentrating, pushing, clamping down until she broke apart in cataclysmic upheaval. The sensual fury that seized her was so intense she was only dimly aware of the power of his own convulsions as he pumped violently into her, and the contractions went on and on, deep and hard, gripping him, shattering her.
The silence afterward was like death, black and complete. Perhaps she lost consciousness; she didn't know. Reality returned in bits and pieces, first the

awareness of the cold, gritty stone floor beneath her, and the heat of his body above her. His arm was wet, from her bites and her tears. There was the smell of sex, sharp and musky, added to the other scents of man and battle. The cord in her neck throbbed, an echo of pleasure like the lingering pulse in her loins. She felt the wetness of his semen. He was still inside her, not as large or as hard as before, but still firm, still there. Her vagina contracted in a sated, gentle caress and he grunted, shifting a bit upon her as he dealt with his own final wave of orgasm.

Perhaps he would kill her now. The thought formed out of the nothingness of exhaustion. So be it. She couldn't fight him, couldn't even move.

Slowly he withdrew from her body, taking away his support, his warmth, leaving her sprawled half naked and exposed on the floor. She could hear the hard rush of his breathing, the scrape of steel as he picked up his sword, and she waited to feel the cold bite of death.

Then he picked her up too, standing her upright for the barest second before he dipped and set his left shoulder to her belly, then stood with her draped like a limp bundle of rags over that broad shelf. At least her skirts had fallen into their proper position, she thought vaguely, so that her bottom wasn't exposed as he carried her to. . . where?

He strode through the darkness, his step sure and strong as he effortlessly carried her on one shoulder and his huge sword in his other hand, climbing steps as easily as if he hadn't just fought a battle and then emptied his body's seed into her in a shatteringly intense coupling.

He was still furious. Not just angry, but raging. She could feel the force of it inside him, controlled but unabated, and she knew their personal battle wasn't over.

Chapter 25

GRACE LET HER EYES CLOSE, UNABLE TO DEAL WITH ANYTHING right then, unable even to worry. She felt disconnected, drifting apart from reality. Her world had just been shattered, again, and she couldn't quite accept what had just happened between them.

She had never before made love without love; she had slept only with Ford, known only his touch, and known that when he took her it was with love. With Niall, what was there? Lust, definitely. Lust beyond measure, beyond

comprehension. Desperation on her part, rage on his. And yet he had forced from her a response deeper and far more powerful than any of the joyous loving she had felt with Ford. She hated him for that, hated him for taking s0mething that should have been Ford's, but which she hadn't known was within her for the giving.
Lights danced beyond her closed eyelids, and the icy cold of the hidden passageway changed to the greater warmth of the castle.
"Alice!" Niall called, his deep voice like thunder. "Bring hot water."
"Is the lass hurt, then?" asked Alice, her tone startled. "Nay," he curtly replied, then he was going up more steps. After a moment she heard a door creak on its leather hinges as it was opened, then closed again with a thud. A few more steps and he stopped and dragged her off his shoulder, holding her briefly while she found her balance.
Startled, she opened her eyes, swaying a bit as he moved away from her. They were in his chamber. She looked around as if she had never seen it before, for she couldn't grasp why he had brought her there. She looked at the sturdy table, and the carved, massive chair that sat to one side of the fireplace, in which a fire was springing to life as Niall bent and struck a spark to it. On the other side was a bench, large and heavy. A big wooden trunk occupied the space at the end of the bed. . . the bed. It was at least four feet high, and looked to be seven feet square. A huge bed, more than large enough for the man who slept there. It was piled high with furs and rugs, and looked as if she would sink out of sight in it.
The fire grew, chasing the shadows to the farthest reaches of the chamber, sending its waves of heat out to flow over her chilled body. She looked out the narrow window and saw that night had fallen while she had been below. The castle was quiet, the intruders repelled or killed, repairs and recovery going on in the hush that follows a battle.
Niall unbuckled his sword belt and dropped it across the bench; the sword he kept in his hand, however, as he took a piece of straw and stuck it in the fire, then used the flaming twig to light the tall tallow candles on the table. Grace stood where he had deposited her, afraid to move lest he wield that wicked, bloodstained blade against her.
In the flickering mellow light of fire and candle she could see now the signs of battle on him, see the dark patches of dried blood. His shirt was splattered with it, there were dark splotches on his kilt, and smeared on the leather of his boots. The blood of many others adorned him, this warrior,

and she wondered if hers would soon join the stains. His black hair swung about his shoulders, freed from even the small braids that were usually at his temples.

Without glancing at her he sat down on the bench and took an oiled rag to the stained surface of his sword, meticulously cleaning it, inspecting the edges for ragged chips. He would sharpen it himself, as she had seen him do before in her dreams, not trusting the weapon to anyone else's care.

The sword restored to its previous gleam, he laid it on the table. Then he stood and began to strip.

The bloody shirt had been pulled off over his head and dropped on the floor when Alice softly knocked on the door, and at his growled permission she entered with a pitcher of steaming water, and cloths for washing. As she set the water and cloths on the table beside the sword, Alice cast a curious glance at Grace, who stood white-faced and silent.

Alice picked up Niall's bloody shirt. "Will ye be wantin' food, and wine?" she asked.

"Nay," he said, then changed his mind. "Aye, bring bread and cheese, and wine."

Alice left with another furtive glance at Grace. It hadn't happened to Lord Niall before, but mayhap the strange lass was less willing than others, and he thought to soften her resistance with wine. He was angry. Alice knew his mood, knew he was in a rare rage, and it was centered on the young woman whose eyes made one want to weep.

Niall moved to the table and poured some water into the washbowl. Wetting one of the cloths, he scrubbed it over his face and shoulders. By the time his chest and arms were clean, Alice was back with the wine and food, curiosity having given her feet wings. He denied her the opportunity for observation, however, by going to the door and opening it only enough to take the platter, then closing the door and dropping the heavy bar in its brackets.

Now he stripped completely, removing his boots and stockings, dropping his plaid. Splendidly naked, he stood in front of the fire and washed himself clean of the grime and blood and sweat of battle. He gave Grace no more attention than if she were part of the furniture, unconcernedly washing his armpits, his muscled legs, his genitals.

She had been blessedly numb, but this last act brought reality intruding again, making her sharply aware of his body and hers, of the aches from

fight and flight, of the throbbing tenderness deep inside and the stickiness between her thighs as his semen dried on her skin.
Firelight played across his powerful muscles. She stared as if mesmerized at the gleam of his shoulders, the flat ridges of his stomach, the round hard buttocks, the long, brawny muscles of thigh and calf. Black hair grew in a thick patch on his chest, around his genitals, and to a much lesser extent decorated his forearms and lower legs. Sheer perfection. She had never before seen a man so acutely male, his body as God had surely meant His creation to be formed. The beauty of bone and muscle and sinew, honed by a lifetime of work and battle, made her weak.
Warmth began to pool deep in her belly as she stared at him, and in despair she recognized the return of sexual desire. This unreasoning need felt like the deepest betrayal of all Ford had meant to her but she couldn't stop it and, it seemed, couldn't sate it. How could she possibly want him again, so soon after that soul-searing upheaval of body and mind? But she did. She wanted to know it again, take him within her, milk him with the internal caress of her body. Even when he came to her covered in the blood of battle, she wanted him. Should he take up that sword now, and take her life from her, she would die with her flesh aching for him.
Her gaze dropped to his groin. His testicles swung heavy against his thighs, evidence of his recent climax, but her heart jolted in her chest when she saw his penis jutting out, thick and erect. She remembered the tales she had read, the whispers she had heard since coming there, of how he could ride a woman all night long when a hungry mood was upon him, of how he sometimes required two women before his appetite was slaked. Suddenly she knew that his moods weren't hungry, they were savage. She could see it in him now, feel it pulsating beneath his skin. He gave no outward sign of it, except for his erection, but she felt .the rage that still burned in him and manifested itself in the stiffness of his cock - a rage that somehow didn't feel as if it were directed at her.
He poured the bowl of red-stained water into the chamber pot, then refilled the bowl with fresh water. He looked at her for the first time since carrying her into the chamber, and the expression in his black eyes made her shudder with both dread and anticipation.
"Remove your clothing," he said quietly, but she heard the underlying iron. If she didn't undress voluntarily, he would perform the service for her.

She obeyed in silence, removing shoes and stockings, her bare toes curling with nervousness. Next came the overgown, then the kirtle. As that garment dropped to the floor, she stood in complete nakedness. Twentieth-century clothing revealed more, she thought irrelevantly, but it provided much more protection. A man had to deal with hooks and snaps and zippers, had to peel off layers of formfitting clothing before he could get to a woman's private parts. Medieval clothing, all-covering as it was, offered a woman little protection. All a man had to do was lift a woman's skirts and he could take her. The Scots had simplified matters even further, for a man had only to do the same to his own garments.

He looked at her, leisurely inspecting her breasts, the narrow curve of her waist, the dark curls at her pubis, her trembling legs. Then he held out his hand and said, "Come," and those trembling legs moved, carrying her to him.

He dipped a clean cloth in the warm water and began cleaning her as gently as a mother would a babe. He bathed the grime from her face, the smears of blood from her skinned palms and knees. His callused hands were careful with her, easing over the dark bruises forming under her pale skin. He knelt down and parted her legs, steadying her with a warm palm on her bottom as he gently wiped the cloth between her thighs, washing away his dried semen. Her thighs quivered, and she gasped for breath. The cloth felt raspy on her oversensitive flesh as he moved it along and between her folds. He even covered his fingers with the cloth and washed inside her, gently probing. He was very slow, very thorough with his washing, and the warmth in her belly grew into a fire. Her hips arched, seeking. Without a word he tossed the cloth aside, leaned forward, and set his mouth on her. He knew exactly how to handle her, how to drive her insane. He sucked at her clitoris, drawing it forth, then licked it until she writhed and could barely stand up. All the while his long fingers probed, sliding into her, withdrawing, circling her tender opening. Then he kissed her, holding her hips with his iron hands and arching her forward while his tongue moved in and out of her, and helplessly she gave in to her exploding senses.

She went boneless, collapsing over him. He lifted her and sat down in the chair, and she lay limply across his lap, unable even to lift her head.

With his free hand he reached to pour the wine, holding the goblet to her lips, and she sipped. He drank after her, the expression in his black eyes shielded by his lashes. Grace relaxed against his chest, feeling warm and

hollowed out, and oddly reassured. He might have taken her while still planning to kill her, but she doubted he would have pleasured her the way he just had if he intended to kill her afterward. It wasn't just his manner of pleasing her, but the fact that he'd done it at all; executioners generally weren't concerned with their victims' pleasure.

The heat of the fire licked over her bare body, chasing away the last of the chill. His thighs were hard and warm under her bottom, his shoulder a wonderful resting place for her head. He fed her bits of bread and cheese, feeding himself, too, and held the goblet to her mouth again. Again she drank, more deeply this time. When he raised the goblet to his mouth again he turned it so that he drank from where her lips had been, and the subtly erotic action squeezed at her heart.

"I have to tell you-" She stumbled into speech, not at all certain what she would say, but he pressed the back of his knuckles to her mouth.

"Nay. We'll not speak of it tonight. In the morn will be time enough." His voice was low and quiet, his Scots accent gone. He spoke now in the precise, measured tones of the Guardian. "For now - I like the taste of you, and I mean to have more of it." He leaned over and set the goblet on the floor, and then he kissed her as he had not since the night she had freed him from the Hay's dungeon, as he had not even during those other kisses they had shared.

The kiss was wild and deep and she put both hands in his hair and held him, almost moaning with delight and arousal. He could licks and kiss, she thought dimly. What woman wouldn't give her gold to experience such sweet, wild mastery, such play of lips and tongue, such a blend of teasing and promising and authority? He kissed like an angel, or perhaps it was the devil, for surely an angel wouldn't know such carnal delights.

Swiftly he carried her to the bed and placed her on it, then joined her there, his broad shoulders blotting out the light as he came up over her. Panting, Grace opened her legs and took him between them, gripping his hips with her thighs even as she pushed hard on his shoulders. Willingly he rolled onto his back, and Grace sat astride him, gripping his penis in both hands and lowering herself onto it.

The penetration was just as shocking, just as full. She braced her hands on his belly and pressed her hips down, taking all of him. Her breath shuddered between her lips. God, oh God, she felt frenzied, unable to get enough of him. Her body had been starved for a man's hardness, the hunger shoved

into her subconscious where it could surface only in her sleep, and now that hunger was released in an ungovernable flood. She rode him hard, and he squeezed her breasts, and she came again.

And still it wasn't enough. He hadn't climaxed, he was still iron-hard within her. The hunger built again even before she had the energy to deal with it. Lying on his chest, his hands moving comfortingly over her bottom, stroking her back, she felt her inner muscles tighten around him.

He laughed, the sound rough and male, his white teeth gleaming in the golden firelight. She sat up, the motion pushing him deep inside her once more. She rode him hard again and this time he came before she did, his powerful body arching between her thighs, his hands gripping her hips and grinding her down on him. Wet with his spurting seed, she climaxed again.

They dozed a bit, with her lying on top of him and one of his hands threaded through her hair. Grace woke to find the fire still warmly blazing, so she knew not much time had passed. He slept, his penis soft. She slithered down his body and took him in her mouth, feeling him wake, feeling him grow hard. And then she mounted him again.

The hours blurred together. He gave his body generously, letting her do as she would with him. He gritted his teeth and fought his own climax, not letting himself reach pleasure again so he would remain hard until she was sated. She didn't know if the frenzy would ever stop, if her body, so long denied, would ever tire of her almost intoxicated enjoyment of his body. She stroked every inch of him, her hands shaking with delight at the textures of his skin. She kissed his jaw, his ears, his wonderful mouth. At the last, when finally she was exhausted and emptied out and at peace, she tormented him by taking him deep in her mouth. Knowing how he fought to control himself, she swirled her tongue around his shaft and sucked at the swollen head, and with a strained, hoarse sound he bolted upright, lifting her away from him and tumbling her onto her back.

He mounted her, pushing her thighs wide. "You've put me to hard use tonight," he whispered, sliding into her. "Now 'tis my time."

He should have been beyond control, but she discovered that wasn't so. When he climaxed again, he should have been beyond arousal, but that wasn't true either. His use of her was as devastatingly thorough as hers had been of him, and the sensations blended together. His thrusts hammered deep in her belly, over and over, and she held him when he shuddered and convulsed. The fire burned down, the candle guttered, and in the darkness

he did things to her she had never imagined she would let a man do, but instead she reveled in his raw sexuality.
And in the darkness, finally, quiet came. She lay against him, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her body heavy and limp. His hand covered her breast, his thumb absently stroking her velvety nipple. She inhaled his scent, the musky, unique smell of him, and she realized she could no longer recall how Ford had smelled.
Agony rushed out of the darkness, and she had no defenses left. It boiled out of her, deep and wrenching, sharp claws shredding her insides. A guttural cry ripped out of her throat. Niall's arms closed hard around her, and she came apart.
She didn't know how long she wept. Endlessly, unceasingly. The grief had been kept bottled up too long and now there was no holding it back. She cried in deep, wrenching sobs, her entire body shaking. She cried until her chest hurt and her eyes were swollen almost shut, until her throat was raw and the sounds she made sounded like an animal's.
He held her through it all, not letting her go even when she fought him, kicking and scratching. She raged silently against the two senseless deaths that had devastated her, against the terror and fury of the past year. She pounded Niall's chest with her fists until he caught them and held them, rolling over on top of her and using his weight to control her.
She began gagging, and he swiftly dragged her to the chamber pot and held her while she vomited. Then he gave her more wine and carried her back to bed, and held her until she could cry no more.
Dawn's faint gray light was creeping through the narrow window. “You loved him," Niall said quietly, smoothing her tangled hair away from her hot, grief-ravaged face. “You have not wept for him before, have you?"
"No." Her voice was a croak. The sound shocked her. "I couldn't."
The wine was warm in her belly, and her mind was fuzzy from both alcohol and fatigue. His hands were on her body, her breasts and thighs and loins, ensuring she acknowledged his claim on her even as he comforted her. She was so sore from the night's excesses that she flinched when he entered her again, but she didn't resist. He pressed deep, nudging her womb, and held himself deep and still until all the tension eased from her muscles and she lay limply beneath him, breathing deeply.
He didn't climax, didn't even thrust, just maintained the link. After a time he maneuvered them onto their sides, and put his hand on her bottom to keep

her anchored to him.
Grace put her hand on his face, her fingers tracing the slope of his brow, the high curve of his cheekbone. I know who you are," she said numbly, all emotion exhausted except for the uneroded joy of touching him. "I know what you are, Guardian. I came from the year nineteen ninety-seven to find the Treasure, and use it to destroy the man who killed my husband and my brother."

Chapter 26

NIALL SAT AT THE TABLE, QUIETLY LOOKING AT THE BOOKS Grace had brought. Thinking to convince him she was telling the truth, she had told him where her sack was hidden and he had fetched it, but she realized now he hadn't required proof. He looked at the books out of curiosity, and for knowledge, not for confirmation.
He rapidly absorbed the changes in the language, saying once, "I knew the rhythm of your speech was odd, even though you spoke English." Another time: "So there are other lands across the ocean. I have always wondered." He wasn't shocked, he wasn't disbelieving. He was highly educated; he spoke seven languages, and he dealt daily with the fantastic. But he was unnervingly calm, and it was destroying what little of her nerves were left.
"These papers you translated," he finally said, turning to face her. "You say I wrote part of them.'
"Yes. You signed your name, and dated them. Thirteen twenty-two. "
"I have not written any papers," he said.
"But I saw them-"
"Perhaps you are the cause of their existence." She digested that, and bit her lip. "You mean they wouldn't have been written if I hadn't come back? But I came back because of what you wrote!"
A bitter smile touched his lips. "I have hated God for what He allowed to happen to my brethren," he said calmly, "but I cannot doubt His existence. How could I, when I guard His power on earth? Who knows what the hand of God does?" He shrugged. "I have ceased trying to understand Him, I only do my duty."
"You hate God?" Stunned, she could only stare at him.

"How could I not? I did not want to be a Knight; I was forced into the Order. I have a talent for killing," he said in unflinching acceptance of his skill. "I became the Knights' best warrior. I learned the secrets we protected - in service of God! - and He allowed his servants to be butchered in defense of those secrets.. No Knight betrayed his greater oath, not one talked even with the flames of the stake licking up his legs, devouring his entrails. They suffered and died, and He let it happen. Perhaps He directed it, to destroy those who knew. Only I am left, and fool that I am, I have kept my oath all these years, because my last oath was not to God but to my friends who died for Him."

His tone was unemotional, his eyes remote. Grace wanted to go to him but somehow she couldn't, he was too distant.

"Look at me," he said. "I have thirty-nine years. I should be growing old, but my hair remains black and my teeth stay in my head. I never sicken, and if I am wounded I quickly heal. He has cursed me to guard His damned Treasure even after I should be dead."

"No," she said softly. "You're just a healthy man." She could reassure him on this, for she was all too piercingly aware of his humanity, his mortality. "In my time, people easily live into their seventies and eighties, sometimes even over a hundred. I'm thirty-one."

His brows lifted and he looked a little surprised. He surveyed her, noting her smooth, clear skin and lack of wrinkles, her shiny hair. "You look a mere girl."

She didn't want to think of her looks, with her eyes red and swollen from her emotional storm, her face drawn with fatigue from the long night of nothing less than debauchery. She sat down on the bench, wanting to be close to him even if she didn't dare touch him.

"Tell me of this Foundation," he ordered. She told him what she knew. She had already choked out the details of what had happened to her, how Ford and Bryant had died, and why. He listened, his long fingers drumming on the table.

"I wonder how they discovered the Treasure's existence," he murmured at one point.

"An archaeological discovery, probably, " Grace said. She hesitated. "This Power - what exactly is it?"

"It is God's power," he said. "With it, all things are possible."

"But power isn't something you can leave in a chest and take it out when you need it! God can't store His power in the basement of a Scottish castle and-"
He shook his head. "Nay, 'tis not that. Though He could, if He wished. The Knights understood that, the fact that mortal man cannot understand God, that we must not say a thing is impossible, because all things are possible to Him, and our understanding too paltry. God is not limited by our imagination or our small minds. The Church makes rules and says they come from God, but they come only from man and his attempt to interpret God."
Believing God was so powerful, how indeed could he not hate Him? Grace wondered. Niall had long since reached the conclusion that God had deliberately destroyed the Templars, for had He wished to save them they would still be flourishing.
"But why would He want to destroy the Order?" she whispered, and Niall's black eyes flashed.
"To protect the Church," he said tiredly. "Flawed as it is, still the good outweighs the bad. The Church gives the framework of civilization, lass. Rules. Limits."

"How were the Knights a threat to the Church?" He stood and walked away from her to the window, where he looked out over the wild and beautiful land he ruled. "We knew."
"Knew what?"
"Everything."
She waited, and the minutes passed. Without looking at her he said, "Did you note I never called you by name? Your name! Grace Saint-John. I want you until I think I shall be alive, but your name eats at me. There is no state of grace, there is only one of ignorance."
She hadn't noticed, but now she felt a pang, as if he had rejected her. Perhaps he had; he hadn't touched her since her confession. "What did you know?" she whispered.
"They found it all in the Temple, in Jerusalem. The Lion Throne, that great barbaric throne on which are carved both Yahweh and Ashara, god and goddess, male and female. They were two, and they were one; the ancient Israelites worshipped them both. Then the priests deliberately destroyed all

the altars built to Ashara, and tried to erase knowledge of her. Yahweh became Jehovah, the one God."
"Yes, I know," she said. Archaeology had uncovered all that, eliciting a storm of conjecture among the scholars of ancient Jewish history.
"There were other things," he said. "The Cup. 'Tis a plain thing, and despite the quest for the Holy Grail it gives no powers. The Banner. The army it flies over is never defeated, its firebirds rising again and again from the ashes. It plainly depicts the same lions of the Throne, though legend has it that it isn't that old, and that only the Knights had it " He sighed softly. "And there is the Oath."
Her mouth went dry. "The Shroud?" He made an impatient gesture. "So it would be called, but that is false."
"Then what is it?"
"The cloth in which Jesus was wrapped when he was taken from the cross," Niall explained. "Then it is the Shroud. He was entombed in it" Niall's eyes were blacker than she had ever seen them before, looking through her. His mouth had a bitter line. "No, not a shroud, because he lived. He was God's son in spirit and the cross could not defeat him. The Church built itself around the preposterous tales of the resurrection even though its own writings plainly state he did not die, and afterward the truth could not be told without destroying the Church. So we remained silent to protect the Church, to serve God - and He destroyed us in return.
"His face." The words were pulled out of him, taut with fury. "We had his face from the Cloth. We revered it, because he was proof of God's power. Jesus lived! God reached down and saved him, because his duty was fulfilled, and then he left in an explosion of light and heat. We found the record of it! *We know how*! But when our duty was fulfilled, He broke us, He destroyed us. And still. . . still I serve."
Grace couldn't speak. Her lips tingled, and she realized she had stopped breathing. The explosion of heat and light. . . she had felt something like that, when she had come back
"We knew the *how* didn't matter. The method He used did not matter; we trusted Him, worshipped Him. Others wouldn't understand, though, with their small minds and rigid superstitions. They try to limit God to their own understanding, their own imaginations. They would have turned from the Church. *We* didn't."

The bitterness spewed out of him, his lips drawn back in a snarl. She swallowed her fear, and crossed to the window to stand beside him. She didn't dare touch him, though, not when his anger was like a force field blasting from him. "But you're doing it, Niall. Trying to fit His reasons and methods into your own understanding." She paused, trying to work through her thoughts. She believed in basic goodness and when it came down to it she believed in God, sensed a higher power, a deeper meaning, but she was no theologian. "I think. . . I don't believe God causes all things to happen. I think He gives us the freedom to be either good or bad, because if there is no choice then our actions have no worth, and no blame. I think when people do bad things it's because they have chosen to do so, and we should blame them, not God."

"Why did He not stop Philip? Why did He not strike Clement dead? He could have, but instead He let them act."

"He let them choose, and they'll be judged by their actions."

"Then I'll meet them in hell."

"Oh, Niall." She did touch him now, leaning her head against his arm. She felt overwhelmed with tenderness for him, and admiration. "You won't go to hell. How could you? Even with all your pain and anger you've kept your oath, and served God. Don't you think your service is more valuable to Him than the service of those who have never suffered, never been tested?"

He turned on her, gripping her arms so tightly he hurt her. "I would have preferred not to have served Him at all!" he ground out.

"But you did anyway."

"Aye, and my entire bedamned life is tied to this castle, to His cursed Treasure I am sworn to protect! Do ye not think I would have preferred to live a normal life, with a wife, and bairns?" His Scots accent was back, and thick with his anger. "I could not! The burden, and the danger, have been too great. And now-"

"Now?" she prompted, when he broke off. He gave her a bitter smile. "Why, now He's sent Grace to me, but only as a means to lead me to another battle I must fight for Him."

She blinked, startled. "I didn't come back for that. If I could find the Treasure I was going to use it myself; if not, I knew I would have to ask for your help, but I only need your knowledge."

"Ah, no, lass," he said gently. "Ye need me. I'm the Guardian, and no other may use the Power."

"How does it work?" Grace asked nervously, clinging to his hand as he led her into the hidden passage. The castle slept around them. They had spent the day arguing, sometimes heatedly, over the course they would take. Huwe was dead and that threat ended, so Niall felt he could relax his defenses somewhat, and now was the perfect time for him to go. Remembering the violence of the procedure, Grace couldn't look forward to going through it again. "How do you get the electricity?"
"Electricity?" He repeated the word slowly, feeling his way along the syllables. "What is that?"
"A form of energy. Power."

"Power." He laughed, the sound humorless. "We use God's Power. The procedure is a means of *returning*. "
He walked with confidence, as if he had no need for the candle he held. Grace was less certain. She felt surrounded by the nothingness of space, of emptiness, as if the reality of Creag Dhu was already dissolving around her. Her heart pounded wildly, the pressure high in her throat. She swallowed to contain the panic, the unreasonable fear. She had been there before, and with less trepidation.
But still, now she knew. She felt the breeze, and the subtle throb of the very air against her skin. Niall led her down, down, to the deeper darkness beneath the stairs. He left the candle outside and walked into the darkness, his arm hard around her now to keep her with him.
It lay in the blacker depths, hidden from view but pulsing with that silent energy. The air should have felt dead, empty. It didn't. Though cold and dark, the chamber felt fresh, vibrant with the secrets it concealed. Treasures. Things. And yet the real treasure lay not in what they were, but what they represented.
"We have drunk the water and eaten the salt," Niall said in a low voice. "Take us."
The flash was blinding, the force like a giant blow that knocked her flat. She lay senseless for a time, deafened and blind, not even thinking. When the fog began to clear, she groaned and tried to rollover.
"Let me help you, my love," a voice crooned, and she was lifted to her feet, held upright by strong arms. Grace's head lolled back on her neck. She fought for control, won it. She opened her eyes, and stared up into Parrish's smiling face.

"Imagine my surprise when the workers found you lying in the rubble," he said conversationally. "I sent them all away, except for a few trusted men. I believe you've met Conrad, and perhaps you remember Paglione, too. "
Dazed, Grace found herself staring into the cold, emotionless eyes of the man she had shot in the McDonald's parking lot. He didn't so much as blink. The other man, Paglione, looked familiar, but she couldn't quite place which assailant he had been.
A chilly wind stirred her hair, and she turned her face into it. A sea wind, blowing over where Creag Dhu had once stood. All that remained now were a few ruined stone walls, and the rubble that had been unearthed by the workers. Where was Niall? Had they already found him? Had he survived the journey?
"Looking for the gold yourself, were you?" Parrish asked. He pinched her breast, cruelly twisting the tender flesh. Grace bit off a scream, though tears started to her eyes. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of making her cry out.
"There isn't any gold," she blurted. He stiffened, and his eyes narrowed.
"What?"
"The Treasure isn't gold. It's artifacts. There isn't any gold!"
"You're lying," he said violently, and slapped her. The force of the blow would have knocked her down if he hadn't been holding her arm. He drew back his arm again, and this time his fist was doubled.
"Aye, there's gold." The softly burred words made them spin, Parrish dragging Grace about, wrenching her arm. She bit her lip, and tasted blood where Parrish's blow had cut her. Niall stood relaxed, the wind lifting his hair, ruffling the ends of his plaid. A faint smile was on his lips, and he leaned negligently on the claymore which he had driven into the ground. He looked wild and barbaric and wonderful, a splendid savage who possessed a sophistication of manner and experience most modem men would never come close to achieving.
"Who are you?" Parrish asked. "Not that it matters." Conrad and Paglione had already spread out, one going wide on each side of Niall, and both of them had guns in their hands.
"Niall of Scotland. And I fear it does matter, for the gold is mine."
Parrish's eyes narrowed. "You've already found it, haven't you?"
Niall looked amused. "It was never lost." He glanced at Grace, and his glance lingered on her bloody mouth, hardened.

"Well, you are a complication, " Parrish admitted. "But I don't think you've spent it all, or you wouldn't be dressed like a bag lady. Maybe you don't have it at all."
"But I do." Niall reached into his shirt, the movement prompting both Conrad and Pagiione to lift their weapons. Niall's eyebrows rose, and he smiled as if they were no more than presumptuous children. "Easy, lads." He drew out his hand and slowly opened it, palm upward. A crude golden coin lay there, gleaming bright in the sun.
Parrish smiled, too, his handsome face creasing in a benevolent expression that made Grace want to vomit. "Where is the rest of it?';
"It isna here. I moved it long ago, against such a day as this."
"A pity." Parrish shrugged. "You'll tell me; Conrad will see to that. But you won't like his methods, and unfortunately you look like the stubborn type." He jerked his head at Conrad, and Paglione anticipated the order, moving toward Niall.
Something wild flared in Grace's eyes. She had watched two men she loved die; she couldn't watch another. A low, animal sound tore out of her throat and she jerked to the left so that she half faced Parrish, and drove the palm of her hand hard against his nose. Cartilage crunched, and blood poured out of both his nostrils. He staggered back, his grip on her loosening, and Grace tore free. Paglione whirled on her, the pistol rising in his hand.
Calmly Conrad tightened the slack in the trigger and fired. Grace screamed, surging forward, only to be jerked back as Parrish recovered and grabbed her again.
Paglione hung there in surprise, not even blinking. The small round hole in his forehead was neat, bluish around the edges. He dropped bonelessly to the ground and didn't even twitch.
Parrish gaped in disbelief. "Are you fucking crazy?" he screamed at Conrad, his voice high and cracking.
"No," Conrad said, and turned to face Niall. Slowly his simian head bowed. "I serve you, Guardian," he said.
Niall acknowledged him with a single nod. Parrish pulled out a pistol and pressed the barrel to Grace's temple. He began backing away, stumbling over the raw dirt and tumbled rocks, dragging her with him. "I'll kill her," he said viciously, the words thickened by the blood streaming from his broken nose. "I'll fucking kill her."

Niall pulled the tip of the claymore out of the ground and rested the blade on his shoulder, his hand draped negligently over the hilt. "No," he said. "You will not." He looked at Grace and smiled, a smile so sweet and strangely radiant that her heart stopped in her chest. "Grace. . . move."
She dropped immediately, lifting her feet and simply falling out of Parrish's grip. He grabbed for her and stumbled off balance, going down on one knee in the dirt. Grace rolled, throwing herself away from him, and he fired the pistol. The bullet burned along the top of her right thigh and she cried out, grabbing her leg.
Parrish scrambled to his feet, aiming the pistol first at Niall, then at Conrad, daring either of them to make a move. Niall lifted the claymore off his shoulder, the smile on his face changing to something deadly. "Are you sorely wounded, love?" he asked in the most gentle voice Grace had ever heard him use.
"No," she said, though her voice wobbled and her thigh burned like hell. Blood seeped through her fingers, and she pressed her hand hard against the wound.
Parrish fired at him, the shot echoing with a flat metallic sound across the sea. Niall began walking toward him. Parrish fired again, and still Niall advanced.
"Ye canna kill me, servant of evil," Niall whispered. "God damn you, you bastard," Parrish screamed, and fired again. Niall was so close Parrish couldn't have missed, yet his hand must have been shaking, the shots going wide.
Niall's gaze was distant, fixed on something both beyond Parrish and yet inside himself. He turned his head and smiled at Grace, that piercingly sweet smile again. "My own Grace," he said. "I found heaven wi' ye, lass, but that time is gone." Then he lifted the heavy claymore and rested the tip against Parrish's chest. Grace saw Parrish's handsome face go slack with shock, and a bolt of lightning split the cloudless sky. The blinding light enveloped Niall, arcing along the long blade of the claymore, and shot straight through Parrish. He screamed, lifting on his tiptoes as if hauled there by an invisible hand. He trembled and shook, and the lightning arced again. The front of Parrish's trousers went wet and dark, and steam rose from his crotch. His eyes rolled back in his head, until only the whites showed. His lips split, and his hands began to scorch. His blond hair was singed, turned to gray ash. He tried to scream, his mouth open, but no sound

emerged over the roar and blast of light. The skin on his face shriveled, pulling away from his bones. Through it all Niall stood motionless, wrapped in brightness. Then with a thunderous boom it was over and Parrish collapsed like a sack of rags, lying motionless on the scorched earth.
"Niall!" Grace struggled to her feet, ignoring the pain in her leg. "Niall!"
He strode rapidly across the ruins to her, catching her as her leg went out from under her and she started to fall. Gently he lowered her to the cool ground, lifting her skirts to bare her thigh and expose the wound.
The man called Conrad went down on one knee beside
Parrish's smoking, stinking corpse. What he saw must have satisfied him, for he gave a brief nod of his apelike head, then rose and came to Niall's side.
Deftly Niall tore a strip of fabric off the hem of Grace's undergown and wrapped it around the long gouge on the top of her thigh. He glanced briefly up at Conrad. "You are of the Society?"
"Yes. We have known of the Foundation's existence for many years. Someone from the Society has always belonged to the Foundation, to monitor its activities. Only twice has it come close to finding the Power; in 1945, and today."
"You were going to kill me," Grace said, her teeth chattering with shock. She couldn't quite take in that this roan with the cold, dead eyes was somehow on Niall's side, at Niall's service.
"If necessary," Conrad said unemotionally. "My concern was the papers, to retrieve them at all cost and prevent Parrish from acquiring them. Then I began to think that. . . perhaps. . . you were meant to have them. You are one of only a few people in the world who could understand what they were, who would know to go to the Guardian and bring him here."
"Be verra happy ye didna harm her," Niall said softly as he glanced up from tying the cloth around Grace's thigh. His eyes were as cold as Conrad's.
"We do what we must," Conrad replied. "As do you." Niall's mouth twisted bitterly. "Aye." He looked down at Grace's bare thigh, at his rough hands on the silkiness of her flesh. He smoothed her skirts down, his fingers gentle.
"Ye'll be all right, lass. Can ye stand?"
"I think so," she said shakily. Her leg throbbed like blue blazes now, but she had seen for herself that the wound wasn't deep. Niall helped her to her feet, holding her until her balance steadied.

He looked around, lifting his head into the breeze. His gaze lit on the two cars, English rental cars parked near where the stables had once stood. "Automobiles," he said on a note of wonder. "Before, I didna see anything, just that damnable dark little dungeon, and the madman."
"Bunker," Conrad said.
Niall shrugged his indifference at the terminology. "I think there must be many wonders now to see," he said absently. "But many evils, too."
"Yes." Conrad's eyes locked on Niall, and for once they weren't cold. Grace couldn't read his expression, but suddenly she knew that Conrad would give his life unhesitatingly for Niall, and in that moment she forgave him for everything.
Niall tilted his head down, his face calm as he studied Grace. "I must go," he said.
"Go?" She realized even as she said the word how stupid she sounded. Of course he had to go; he was the Guardian.
"I couldna stay here, even if I wished." He cupped her face in his hands, his fingers tenderly tracing her cheekbones, her lips. "My duty is there." He bent and kissed her, his lips soft, barely touching hers. Then he released her and strode away from them, and she heard him repeat the words about water and salt. She took a step forward, trying to scream his name, but panic closed her throat. The flash of light blinded her, and when she could see again; Niall was gone.
"Niall!" Too late, she had voice. She stumbled toward the spot where he had stood, a great fear welling inside her, a fear that had no name.
Conrad caught her arm. "He is gone. He is the Guardian." To him, that explained everything.
"He's a man!" Grace whirled on him, her eyes wild. "He's just like every other man!" She felt hysteria building in her, a sense of loss so sharp it was staggering. "He eats and sleeps and breathes and bleeds, he doesn't have supernatural powers or anything like that-"
"No," Conrad said, turning her away from the ruins. "But God does." He began to lead her toward one of the rental cars. "The Guardian has his work there - and we have ours here."
She stumbled, her leg crumpling under her again, and without a word Conrad lifted her in his powerful arms and carried her to the car. She sat numbly as he drove them away from the scene, but inside she was coming apart, because Niall was gone.

"That man gives me the willies," Harmony muttered, watching Conrad as he sat beside Kris, the two of them patiently pulling up Foundation files and destroying them. It was night, the building deserted except for the four of them. Conrad and Kris could have done the work on their own, but Grace had to be there, her nerves not letting her be anywhere else. Harmony had come along because she was worried about Grace, who looked as if she would shatter at the slightest touch.

"He's strange," Grace conceded. She had spent a little more than a month in Conrad's company, and she still knew little more about him than she had the day Parrish had died. He didn't talk about himself. She knew he was ruthless, that some might call him a stone killer and perhaps be right.

He had been invaluable, making arrangements, contacting Harmony to more thoroughly tend the wound on Grace's leg, doing away with Paglione's body. Parrish's body he left to be found, the victim of a freak lightning strike. Grace had moved like a marionette to his orders, so numb she wondered if she would ever feel alive again. Niall was gone. She woke in the night weeping, reaching out for him. She had spent so little time with him, and yet she felt as if he were imprinted on every cell of her body.

"There!" Kris announced in triumph, his hacker's blood excited by what he had been doing. "We can't kill the Foundation, but it's going to be in the dark for a while. All their records are gone."

Conrad nodded, and for a moment there was a gleam in his dead eyes. "Good," he said, the word filled with satisfaction.

They hadn't told Kris anything more about the situation, except that Parrish was dead, but what he knew was enough to make him willing to help out. Harmony, who still hadn't Recovered from the shock of watching Grace vanish in an explosion of light the month before, was even more protective than normal;

Conrad stood, looking at the blank computer screen. "Are you certain an expert can't retrieve the files from the hard disk?"

"I'm positive. Trust me. The hard disk is wiped clean. If you're sure no floppies exist anywhere, or a hard copy, then there's no way all that information can be compiled again."

Conrad grunted. The possibility of a floppy disk floating around out there worried him. He had personally searched Parrish's house and found nothing, but such a valuable disk, if it existed, would likely be in a bank vault somewhere.

Grace had burned the papers she had worked on for so long, and ached as the flames destroyed her link to Niall. She would never again read about him, marvel at his exploits. The written accounts paled in comparison to the real man, anyway. But she didn't want anyone else to find those papers, and use them to threaten the Treasure Niall had dedicated his life to protecting.
The four of them left together but separated when they reached the street. No one talked much; there wasn't much left to say. Kris departed in his Chevelle. Conrad gave Grace an oddly old-fashioned bow, and walked off down the street. Harmony and Grace slowly walked to Grace's truck.
"What now?" Harmony asked. "No more running, no more bad guys chasing you and trying to kill you. Well, the cops are still after you, but from what I see they can't find their ass with both hands and a flashlight, so I guess you're safe enough. I'd live somewhere else, though. Take up some boring stuff, like skydiving."
Grace managed a ghost of a smile. "I don't have any plans after tomorrow," she said.
"So what's on for tomorrow?" "I'm going to my husband's grave."
* * *
The June morning was bright and sunny, the flowers in full bloom. Grace carried two bouquets of spring flowers, daisies and lilies and bright yellow primroses making a gay splash of color in her arms. Harmony walked silently beside her through the rows of grave markers.
Grace knew exactly where the graves were. Bryant was buried beside their parents, and Ford in the plot nearby that he and Grace had chosen. The day they had bought the plots she had looked at them and thought how many decades it would be before they were used. She had been wrong.
The two graves had markers on them. The life insurance policies would have paid for the markers, but she wondered who had ordered them. Friends, perhaps, or colleagues. It was possible Parrish had done it; he would have found the idea amusing. She didn't mind. If he had, in this case, the end did justify the means. She was glad they had markers, that these two wonderful, precious men hadn't lain for a year in unmarked graves.
Bryant's marker was simply inscribed. "Bryant Joseph St. John. Born Nov. 11, 1962 - Died April 27, 1996." That said so little. He had been thirty-three years old. Never married, but engaged once. Several serious girlfriends. Loved his work, doing crossword puzzles, an ice-cold beer and salty popcorn when he was watching a ball game. His second toes had been

longer than his big toes, and he hadn't liked anything starched. She couldn't have asked for a better brother.
She placed one of the bouquets on the grave, and numbly walked on. She stumbled a little, and Harmony placed a strong supporting hand under her arm.
"Are you all right?"
"No, not really," Grace whispered. "But I have to do this."
Bryant's grave had been in partial shade; Ford's was in full sun, and the grass that covered it was thick and lush. "William Ford Wessner," the marker read. "Born Sept. 27, 1961 - Died April 27, 1996." One more line had been added: "Married with Love to Grace Elizabeth St. John."
Grace's knees buckled and she sank slowly to the grass, despite Harmony's alarmed efforts to keep her upright. She reached out a trembling hand and traced the engraved letters of his name, trying to reach the essence of the man. She missed him so much, ached to see his crooked smile, or the humor in his twinkling eyes. He had died for her, and done it willingly.
"I'll always love you," she promised him, though she could no longer read his name in the stone; everything was blurred. He was a man worth loving, and that feeling for him would never die out of her heart, any more than her love for her parents had died.
The human heart had the capacity to love many people, and none of those loves diminished it for the others. Niall had been in her heart even before Ford died, a tiny burning kernel of interest and respect. Losing Ford hadn't extinguished that spark. Instead it had grown during the long months when she was alone, giving her the strength to go on. At first she had loved him as a person, and later she had loved him as a man. It had been a banked fire when she had gone back to his time, and when he stirred the coals the fire had blazed into an inferno. How many women were so lucky as to have two such loves? They were nothing alike in personality. Ford had been cheerful, good-natured; she suspected Niall could be the very devil to live with, as accustomed to command as he was. Different times, different men-and they *were* both men, in the best sense of the word.
Harmony knelt down beside her, disregarding the effects of grass on her white pants. "Would he have minded?" she asked softly, nodding at the grave. "Or would he have wanted you to love again?"
"He would want me to love again," Grace replied, brushing her hand lightly over the grass. As she would want the same for him. She couldn't help the

small spurt of jealousy she felt, ridiculous under the circumstances, but she would want him to be happy, and he had been more generous and openhearted than she was.
She laid the bouquet on the grave and touched the marker again. Since his death she had been able to see only one image of him, that horrible last one, but the words on the marker summoned another, happier memory, that of their wedding day. She saw him in her mind, nervous and excited, the way he repeatedly swallowed, the way his voice shook when he said his vows. When the ceremony was finished a wide grin broke across his face, and it was that grin she saw, relieved and happy all at once.
Tears dripped down her cheeks, and her mouth trembled. "Oh, Ford," she said, her voice shattered. "I miss you so much; and I love you, but I have to go now."
Harmony helped her to her feet and gently led her away. Grace stumbled; the grass was springy beneath her feet, and wet with early-morning dew. She stopped, tilting her head back. It was a beautiful day. She took a deep breath, inhaling all the fresh scents, and with swimming eyes looked at the wide expanse of blue sky.
"You look like you gonna pass out any minute now," Harmony said sternly. "You eat anything yet?"
"No, not yet." Grace gathered herself and smiled. It was wobbly, but it was a real smile. She ached, but she felt at peace. She hadn't had vengeance, but Ford and Bryant had had justice, and it was enough.
"Did you even try to eat, or did you just start gagging?"
"Gagging." Morning sickness had started three days ago, hitting her early and hard. Harmony had said the worse the morning sickness was, the less likely a woman was to miscarry; if that old wives' tale was true, then Grace figured she could play ice hockey in her ninth month without any harm coming to the baby.
She touched her flat stomach. She was five weeks pregnant; she knew the exact date of conception. She would have the longest pregnancy in history, a baby conceived in 1322 and born in 1998. That was one for the record books.
At first it had seemed so unreal, that one night would result in a pregnancy, but when she remembered the night, she wondered how she couldn't have *expected* to get pregnant.

She thought of what Niall had said, of wanting a normal life, a wife and babies. Perhaps a normal life would never be his, but she carried his child and he didn't even know it. He had isolated himself, allowing himself nothing but the burden of his responsibility. Would he want his child; or would he turn away? He would want it, she thought. There was a great tenderness in him, and great passion. He had shown both of them to her. A man like that would adore his children. It would be criminal to keep such joy from him.

"Are you going back?" Harmony asked as they drove away from the cemetery.

"I think I have to. It may be a wasted trip, he may send me here again, but if he wants me I'll stay."

"Man," Harmony breathed. "That must be luuuvvv. I mean, a woman givin' up hot water and central heat, *Chicago Hope* and Sean Connery, pizza and enchiladas - a man better have somethin' more to offer than a hot love stick, if you get my drift."

"I get it," Grace said, and found herself laughing. "He has a castle, too."

"Yeah, but it's drafty. Better make that a big, hot love stick. I dunno about leaving Sean Connery, but at least you're tradin' him for another Scotsman, and one you can lay hands on at that. Must be something in the water up there, growin' men like that. So, when you gonna do the deed?"

"As soon as I can get back to Scotland, and Creag Dhu."

"Reckon it'll hurt the baby?"

Grace touched her stomach again, something she often did these days. "I've thought about that. I can't think why it would. It's low voltage, and the only effect I noticed was a little muscle soreness."

"Want me to go with you to Scotland?"

"I'd like that. Have you thought about really going with me?"

"No way. I'll miss you, Gracie; you lead a damn interestin' life. But no way in hell am I givin' up my modem conveniences for no love stick, I don't care how big it is."

Chapter 27

"HOLY CHRIST!" Grace heard the yelp, the sound muted, far away. She tried to think, tried to swallow, but not even her throat seemed to work. She

drifted away into darkness for an unknown time, then slowly became aware of noise again, of being gently lifted and carried. Her limbs were heavy, useless. Her head lolled like a child's.
She was placed on a bed, and she felt the softness under her. Her fingers moved, rubbing the cool linen beneath her. She managed to open her eyes a little, and a face swam before her, a strong-boned, frowning face with little braids of hair at his temples. A piercing joy spread through her. Niall. She didn't know what would happen in the next ten minutes but for right now she could see him, touch him, and she was happy for the first time in - how long? Had she been happy when she was there before? She frowned slightly; this seemed very important. No, she decided, she hadn't been happy the time before. She had felt tom, frantic, captivated, and many other things she couldn't quite name. Now, this moment, she was finally happy again.
"Lass?" He stroked her hair back from her face. "Can ye speak?"
The Scots accent was back, she noticed. That meant he was Niall the Scot now, not Niall the Guardian. Like Harmony, he varied accents with his mood, the effect of having seen too much and knowing too many languages. A small smile quivered on her lips.
"If ye can smile, ye can speak." The words were stem, but she heard a smile under them, and another, more serious note.
"Perhaps," she murmured, not opening her eyes.
He grunted with satisfaction. "Ye sound awake enough."
"Awake enough for what?" But even before the words were completely spoken she felt his hands moving on her, loosening laces, sliding over her legs, and lifting her gown. Her heart gave an enormous leap but she lay still, enjoying his remarkable expertise with women's clothing. In little more than fifteen seconds she was completely naked.
His own clothing took even less time. Trembling in joy and her own abrupt urgency, she opened her legs and he crawled up to settle between them, pausing along the way to distribute kisses on her stomach and gently suck both her nipples. She gasped, her fingers digging into his back, electrified by the increased sensitivity of her breasts.
"I've been more than a month without ye," he muttered reaching down and guiding himself to her. "I canna be slow, this first time."
"I don't want you to be." She had been more than a month without him, too. She held herself still as the heavy invasion began, startled anew at the initial

difficulty that wasn't quite pain, the pressure, the sense of being stretched. She breathed deeply, gripping his shoulders hard until her body adjusted. He paused, his own breathing as deep as hers. He braced himself above her, his expression drawn, urgent. He pulled back, pushed inside her again, and shuddered as he began to climax. Grace held him, her own urgency not quite at the same peak as his and grateful that, with Niall, the second I time wasn't long after the first.

He sank down heavily on her, sweating, his heart pounding against her breast and his breath catching on occasional small groans at the last small twitches of his orgasm. She slid her hands into his hair, sifting the long black strands through her fingers. "Does this mean you haven't had any ah . . . relief - since you came back from my time?" She braced herself for his answer, trying to control the ferocious jealousy that began to bum inside her. They had parted without promises or even the expectation of being together again so she couldn't expect him to have been faithful, but she thought she might skin him alive anyway.

"If by relief ye mean have I had a woman," he answered irritably, "then nay, I have not." He lifted his head from her shoulder and glared down at her, as if his deprivation were her fault.

"Good," she said, with intense satisfaction. A reluctant smile eased his frown. "Ye like that, do ye?"

"Very much." She arched beneath him, delighting in the rub of his belly against hers, and the way her movement made him harden slightly inside her. She stroked her hands down his back, feeling the powerful muscles flex. His buttocks were cool to the touch, and she cupped her palms over them.

He slid his arms under her and rolled, reversing their positions. Grace sat up, her face glowing with soft sensuality. How freely he gave his body for her pleasure!

He put his hands over both her breasts, tenderly fondling them, rubbing his thumbs around her nipples and making them harden. "I'm verra glad of it, but why did ye come back?"

"Because of you," she said simply. "Because I love you. If you want me, I want to stay." She took one of his hands and moved it down to her belly, flattening it over her womb. "If you want us." Her voice wobbled then, because there were no promises between them and she had taken such a huge chance in corning back. There hadn't been any talk of love between

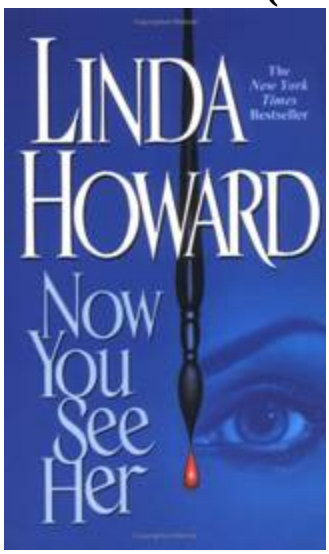
them, but when she thought of the night they had spent together and his tender care when she had expected much less, she had hope.
He looked at her stomach and his pupils flared wide. His expression went completely blank, as if he had been hit in the head and had no idea what had happened. He tried to speak and nothing emerged. He tried again, his voice so hoarse it was nothing more than a croak. "A bairn?" He shook his head, as if the words made no sense.
"Are you surprised, after that night?" She surprised herself by blushing, hot color rushing to her cheeks as she remembered the raw, frenzied mating.
He began to laugh, gripping her hips to hold her in place. His head arched back and he howled with laughter.
"What's so funny?" Grace demanded, frowning down at him. She was glad she was pregnant, but she didn't think it was *amusing*.
"All these years," he gasped, tears of mirth shining in his eyes. "I've held to my oath, hating the responsibility, holding myself apart from the things another man would expect - and now I've no choice! Thank God!"
The words echoed in the room and he stilled, the laughter gone as if it had never been. "Grace," he whispered.
She touched his face, her fingers tracing the beloved lines. "I don't know," she whispered in reply. "You told me yourself, we can't know." Perhaps she had been sent to him, the pain in both their lives healed by the magic that brought them together, the fever and obsession and devotion neither of them could resist.
He pulled her down, cupping her face in both hands as he kissed her, long and slow and very thoroughly. "I won't question fate," he murmured. "Mayhap I question your sanity, leaving behind the life ye did - I read the books ye left. It is a truly wondrous time."
"So is this time, in a different way. You are here, and that's wondrous enough for me. You're the Guardian; you had to come back, you have to remain. So I came back too. It was an easy decision, once - once I had said good-bye."
"To your husband?" His tone was understanding. Niall knew what it was to lose those he loved.
"To him, and my brother. I've no family left there. But the start of a new family is growing inside me, and I want to be with you... if you want me."
"Want ye?" he growled. "Grace - I wanted ye months before ye finally came to me. I burned for ye. How could I defend myself against a lass who wasn't

there? If 'tis the words you want, then aye, I love you. Did ye doubt it? After I found ye wi' the Treasure, instead of killing ye as was my duty, I came near to killing myself loving ye! I'm glad ye came to stay, because I willna let ye go again no matter your wishes."
Startled, she realized that Niall's dereliction of duty was indeed unprecedented; why hadn't she realized that at the time? "You loved me then?"
"Of course," he said calmly. "Now, lass, I think ye should have your way wi' me."
Having her way with him took quite a long time. Alice brought food to them that night, grinning at the way Niall sprawled in his big chair, modestly covered by his plaid, but his eyes heavy-lidded and drowsy with an absolute surfeit of physical satisfaction.
Grace lay on his lap, wearing only his shirt. The garment would have reached her knees, if Niall had left it alone, but he seemed to be incapable of doing so. If he wasn't feeding her or holding a cup of wine to her lips, he was stroking her thighs, sometimes reaching a bit higher.
Her stomach was peaceful now, lulled by the plain, unseasoned food. She had had one bout with nausea, right after Niall had dragged her down to the great hall and they had pledged themselves in marriage to each other in front of all the residents of Creag Dhu, and everyone had insisted on toasting them. The second cup of spicy mulled wine had been too much. And after that, of course everyone had to toast the coming bairn.
The wine she drank now was weak and sweet, but added to the events and exertions of the day, she was exhausted and sleepy. She rested her head on his shoulder, her heart peaceful.
When a section of the wall beside the fireplace began moving, Grace merely blinked at it, thinking the wine must be stronger than she had thought. Then a man strode through the opening and stopped still, his pupils flaring. "I sent you a message," he said in French.
"Aye," Niall said drowsily in Scots. "Ye did. Ye waste your time speaking French, for she does too. And Latin. And Greek. If ye've something private to say, best do so in Gaelic; she can't speak that yet."
"Why is she here?"
"Why, because I married her." Niall smiled at Grace, his thumb tracing her lower lip. "Sweetings, my brother Robert. He's king of Scots. Robert, this is Grace, my wife and the mother of my bairn."

Robert looked startled, Grace even more so. She scrambled off Niall's lap and stood before the king of Scotland wearing nothing more than her husband's shirt, her legs and feet bare, her hair hanging loose past her hips. She blushed.
Robert the Bruce was a big, powerfully built man, though not as tall as Niall. He was ruggedly attractive, probably approaching fifty in age, and wore the look of a warrior. He eyed Grace with some appreciation, his gaze lingering on her legs. Niall scowled and came to his feet, placing himself in front of her.
"Ye've told her everything?" Robert asked disapprovingly.
"Nay, she already knew." Niall reached back and made certain Grace was still modestly tucked behind him. "Would ye like wine?"
Robert began to laugh. "Ye rogue," he said with exasperated fondness. "Ye kill a clan chieftain, decimate the clan, and ask me would I like wine? The nobles are demanding that I raise an army to rid Scotland of the renegades of Creag Dhu."
"Huwe attacked me," Niall said, his voice hardening. "And I freed all those Hays who survived the battle,"
"Aye, I know. I came only to ask - to beg, and me a king! - that ye try not to shed more blood for a time,"
"If 'tis in my power, I'll live a verra peaceful life from this day onward," Niall said. "Will ye wish me happiness?"
"Always." Robert stepped forward and hugged his brother, and the glimpse Grace had of his face made her love him forever, for it was filled with love and an aching relief. He winked at her over Niall's shoulder, and she blushed again.
"Can ye speak, lass?" he asked. "Yes, of course," she said, pleased that her voice was steady. "I'm pleased to meet you-" She stopped, suddenly unsure of what to call him. Sire? Your Highness? Your Majesty?
"Robert," said the king. "With family, I am Robert." He cocked his head. "Your accent is strange, not English, and not French either. Where are ye from?"
"Creag Dhu," Niall said firmly. "This is her home." Robert nodded, accepting that here would be yet another mystery about his brother. "When did ye wed?"
"Today."

"Today!" Robert laughed again. "Then there's no wonder ye had the lass half naked on your lap! I'll leave ye to your wedding night, then, and may ye enjoy it well!"
"I will," Niall said firmly. "As soon as ye leave." Robert was still laughing as he stepped back into the hidden passage, though he tried to muffle the noise. Grace watched as the section closed behind him. "Just how many hidden passageways does Creag Dhu have?"
"It's fair riddled with them," Niall replied, lifting her in his arms and carrying her to the bed. He lay down beside her, cradling her close against his side as if he would never let her go. "Ye feel so perfect," he whispered into her hair. As if ye are part of me, as if ye could be nowhere else."
"I don't want to be anywhere else."
"Then tomorrow morning, love, I think I should write those papers that brought ye to me. I dinna want to chance anything going wrong." He put his hand on her belly, where his child grew, and held her close as they slept, and dreamed.

Now You See Her (1998)



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PROLOGUE

Clayton, New York

It was the third of September, one of those cloudless, perfect days nestled between the heat of summer and the approaching winter chill. The sky was so blue that Sweeney, getting out of her car in the supermarket parking lot, went stock-still and gawked upward at that amazing blue bowl as if she had never seen sky before. She hadn't-not like this.

If there was one thing in life she knew, it was colors, and she had never before seen that particular shade of blue. It was incredible, deeper and darker, richer than any sky had the right to be. Just for today, this perfect day, the haze of atmosphere between heaven and earth had thinned, and she stood closer to the edge of the universe than she ever had before, so close that she felt almost as if she might be sucked into that blue, right away from earth.

Could she reproduce it? Mentally she mixed the pigments, automatically discarding some as her internal eye judged the results. No, that touch of white would make the shade too babyish. This wasn't a wimpy blue-it was the most kick-ass blue she had ever seen. This was pure and dramatic, pulling her in and overwhelming her with the richness of its beauty. She stood with her face upturned, errand forgotten, and felt exalted by color, filled to overflowing, her heart swollen and aching with ecstasy.

When she finally remembered to drag her gaze back to earth, her eyes were dazzled. She saw a flash of ... something, and though she hadn't been looking at the sun, she thought the sky must be brighter than she'd thought, because her eyes needed to adjust. She blinked, then squinted. It was something solid, and yet not quite. . . . It was a child, oddly twodimensional.

She looked at the child, blinked, then looked again. Shock hit her like a sledgehammer, congealing her blood, numbing her fingertips.

The child was dead. She had attended his funeral a month before. But on this perfect day, while performing a perfectly ordinary errand, she saw a dead child walking across the parking lot.

Speechless, Sweeney darted her gaze to the woman the boy was following: his mother. Sue Beresford was carrying a bag of groceries in one arm, her other hand clutching the little paw of her rambunctious four-year-old, Corbin. Her face was drawn, her eyes shadowed with the sharp grief of a mother who had lost her older son to leukemia only a month before.

.. But there was little Sam, dead a month, following along behind her.

Sweeney's feet were frozen to the pavement, her entire body numb and incapable of movement as she watched the little boy desperately trailing behind his mother, trying to get her attention. "Mom," ten-year-old Samuel Beresford kept saying, his voice thin with anxiety. "Mom!" But Sue didn't respond, just kept walking, towing little Corbin behind her. Sam tried to catch her shirt, but the fabric slipped through his insubstantial grasp. He looked at Sweeney and she plainly saw his frustration, his bewilderment and fear. "She can't hear me," he said, the words wavering as if she heard them through an imperfect sound system. He hurried to catch up, his thin legs flashing under the loud plaid of his baggy shorts.

Sweeney swayed with shock and put her hand on the hood of the car to brace herself. The sun-warmed metal felt slightly gritty under her fingers. The blue bowl of the sky pressed down as if it would swallow her, and she stared mutely after the dead child.

The thin figure clambered into the backseat beside Corbin, moving quickly before his mother could shut the door. Sue got behind the steering wheel and drove out of the parking lot. Sam's pale, translucent face shone briefly in the rear window as he looked back at Sweeney; his hand lifted in a forlorn little wave. Automatically she waved back.

Her mind formed one word: Ghost.

CHAPTER ONE

New York City
One Year Later

It was one thing to believe in ghosts, it Was another to actually see them. Sweeney had discovered though, that the kicker was whether or not she knew the ghost. In the small village of Clayton, New York, where she had lived until almost a year ago, she'd had at least a nodding acquaintance with most of the inhabitants, including the dead ones. In New York City, she didn't know any of them, so she could look past the translucent faces in the crowd and pretend not to see them. Back in Clayton, after she had seen the ghost of Sam Beresford, she had never known when another ghost would stop and speak, and she had never been sharp enough to play it cool and pretend nothing had happened. No, she'd just had to react, and before long people were giving her those looks that said they

suspected she was losing her marbles. She had packed up and moved before they began pointing at her on the street.
Yeah, the city was better. Warmer, too. About the time she began seeing the ghosts, her internal heat regulator seemed to go on the fritz, too. She always felt chilled these days, had for the past year. Maybe the cold had started even before she saw little Sam Beresford; she couldn't remember, because who paid attention to things like that? It wasn't exactly something anyone would mark on their calendars: August 29: Felt cold. Yeah, sure.
Sweeney didn't know what had brought the ghosts to mind this bright September morning, but they were the first things she thoughtofwhen shewoke. That, and the cold, which seemedworse. She got out of bed, hurriedly changed her pajamas for sweats, and went into the kitchen to get that first cup of coffee, thanking God for automatic timers as she went. It was so nice to have the coffee waiting for her when she got up, because she thought she'd probably freeze to death if she had to wait for it to brew.
The first sip warmed her insides on the way down, and she sighed with relief. She actually tasted the second sip, and was going back for the third when the phone rang.
Phones were a necessary nuisance, but a nuisance still. Who the hell would be calling her at-she checked the clockseven-forty-three in the morning? Irritably, she set her cup down and walked over to snag the receiver off the wall.
"Candra here," a warm voice replied to her cautious greeting. 41 m sorry to call you so early, but I don't know your schedule and wanted to be certain I caught you."
"You got me on the first cast," Sweeney replied, her irritation fading. Candra Worth owned the gallery where Sweeney sold her work.
"Beg pardon?"
"Never mind. It's a fishing term. I don't suppose you've ever been fishing?"
"God, no." Like her voice, Candra's laugh was warm and intimate. "The reason I called was to ask if you could be here at about one to meet some potential clients. We were talking at a party last night and they mentioned they're thinking of having their portraits done. I immediately thought of you, of course. Mrs. McMillan wanted to come by the gallery to look at a particular piece I've just gotten in, so I thought it would be convenient for them to,meet you while they're here."

"I'll be there," Sweeney promised, though she had looked forward to a day of uninterrupted work.
"Good. See you then."
Sweeney shivered as she hung up and hurried back to her coffee. She didn't like meeting prospective clients, but she did like doing portraits-and she needed the work. About the time she had started seeing ghosts, her work had gone to hell in a handbasket. The trademark delicacy of her landscapes and stilllife studies had given way to an uncharacteristic boisterousness, and she didn't like it. Her colors had always been transparent, as if they were watercolors instead of oils, but now, no matter how hard she tried, she found herself gravitating toward deep, passionate, unrealistic shades. She hadn't carried anything to Candra's gallery in months, and though her old pieces were still selling, there couldn't be many left.
She owed it to Candra to take the job, if the couple liked her work. Sweeney was aware that she was not now and probably would never be a hot commodity, because her art was considered too traditional, but nevertheless Candra had always steered her way those customers who preferred the traditional approach, thereby providing Sweeney with a fairly steady, moderately lucrative income. Above that, last year when Sweeney had announced her intention of leaving Clayton, it was Candra who had scouted out this apartment for her.
Not that New York City would have been Sweeney's first choice; she had been thinking of someplace warmer. Of course, New York was warmer than Clayton, which sat on the St. Lawrence River, just east of Lake Ontario, and every winter was the recipient of lake-effect snows. New York City was coastal; it snowed during the winter, but not as often and not as much, and the temperatures were more moderate. Not moderate enough; Sweeney had been thinking more along the lines of Miami, but Candra had talked her into coming to the city and Sweeney didn't regret it. There was always something going on, which provided her with plenty of distraction whenever she thought she was going to scream from frustration.
Above all, New York was big enough that she didn't know any of the dead people, didn't feel compelled by good manners to acknowledge them. The city also provided a steady supply of faces-live ones. She loved faces, loved studying them, which was why her portrait work was steadily increasing-thank God, because otherwise her bank account would have been in serious trouble, instead of just in trouble.

The city suited her, for now, and by New York standards the rent was reasonable. Candra had known about the apartment because her husband, Richard Worth, owned the building. He was some sort of Wall Street whiz, a self-made market millionaire; Sweeney had met him a couple of times, and tried to stay as far away from him as possible. He had an interesting but intimidating face, and she thought he must be the type of man who steamrollered over everyone in his path. She made it a point not to be in his way.

The neighborhood wasn't the best, nor was the building, but the apartment was a corner one, with huge windows. She could happily have lived in a barn, if it had as good a light-and central heat.

The coffee had stopped her shivering. She always felt a little chilled now, but mornings were the worst. She would have gone to a doctor, but whenever she imagined talking to someone about what as going on, her common sense stopped her. 'Ahout ayear ago I started seeing ghosts, Doctor, and that's when I got cold. Oh, hy the way, traffic signals turn green wheneper I approach, too. And my plants hloom out of season. So what's wrong with me?" Sure. Not in this lifetime. She'd been pointed at enough when she was a kid. Being an artist was uncommon enough; she wasn't about to let herself be labeled as wacko, too.

The past year had been trying for more reasons than just seeing ghosts. Sweeney resisted change with a stubborn determination that was no less unyielding for its lack of ferocity. She wasn't ferocious about anything but painting. Still, over the years those who knew her well had learned how tenacious she was. She liked routine, liked her life to have an even tenor. She could get along just fine without drama, despair, and excitement, having had a surfeit of it in her childhood. For her, sameness and normality equaled security. But how could she feel secure when she had changed, when she knew she was no longer normal, even if she had managed to hide it from the rest of the world? And now she seemed to have lost her direction, if not her talent; but what good was talent if she didn't know what she was doing with it?

She turned on the television to keep her company while she rustled up breakfast, though cereal didn't require much rustling. She ate the corn flakes dry, without milk, because the milk was cold and she had just gotten rid of the chill, so she wasn't eager to reacquire it. As she ate, the sexy Diet Coke

commercial came on, and she paused, spoon halfway to her mouth, eyes widening as her lips formed a silent "wow."
By the time the commercial ended, she felt almost sweaty. Maybe watching more television ads was the key to feeling warm.
After putting in several hours of work in the studio, Sweeney realized it was almost one o'clock and she had to get ready to go over to the gallery. She hated dressing up, but she found herself reaching for a skirt and top instead of her usual jeans and sweatshirt. A flash of scarlet caught her eye, and she slid clothes hangers to the side to extract a red sweater she had never worn that someone had given her for Christmas several years before. The tags were still on it. Studying the bright, rich color, she decided that was just what she wanted today.
She supposed she should take some pains with her hair, too. Standing in front of the mirror, she frowned. She had been blessed, or cursed, with very curly, very unruly hair, and she kept it longer than shoulder length because the weight helped hold it down. Her options were limited; she could pull it back and look like a schoolgirl, try to pin it up and hope she didn't end up with stray curls sticking out like corkscrews, or leave it loose. She opted for loose; the possibility of humiliation was less.
She took a comb and tidied the more unruly parts. When she was little, she had hated her hair. She had inherited the wild curls from her mother, only her mother had gloried in having an untarnable mane of hair, bringing even more attention to it by coloring it every shade of red imaginable. She had wanted to color Sweeney's hair, too, but even as a child Sweeney had clung to the small bits of normalcy in her life. Her hair was brown, and she was going to keep it brown. Not red, not black, not platinum. Brown. The color was ordinary, even if the curls were a bit flamboyant.
Putting down the comb, she critically surveyed herself.
There. Except for the hair, there was nothing about her that would draw attention. Trim, medium height-well, almost. She would have liked another inch or two. Blue eyes, curly brown hair. Good skin. She was thirty-one, and still no wrinkles had appeared. The black skirt stopped right above her knees, her shoes were sensible enough to walk to the gallery in but didn't look seriously grandmotherly, and the scarlet sweater was ... great. She almost took it off, but was too beguiled by the color.
Some makeup seemed called for. She was never certain she knew what she was doing with the stuff, so she limited herself to the most basic: mascara

and lipstick. This was her insurance against looking like a clown. Or Mom, her almost-subconscious jibed. Sweeney always made a real effort to avoid looking or acting like her mother. Being an artist was already enough of a family resemblance.

Because she was fairly certain that all Candra had left of her paintings at the gallery were a couple of landscapes, she sorted through the stack of sketches she'd made of people, selecting the ones that were closest to being finished and put them in a portfolio to show to the McMillans. She didn't have any finished portraits to show, because they were all commissioned and went to the subject as soon as they were completed.

Portfolio tucked under her arm, she left the apartment for the walk to the gallery. The warm September sun beamed down on her as soon as she stepped onto the sidewalk, and she drew a deep sigh of pleasure at the heat. Most of the people she passed, except for the business types who probably wore suits and ties to bed, were in short sleeves. A sign alternating with the time and temperature announced that the temperature was eighty-four degrees.

It was a nice day, the kind of day when walking was a joy.

She came to the corner where her favorite hot dog vendor worked his stand and stopped.

The old man had one of the sweetest faces she had ever seen. He was always smiling, his teeth bright and even in his dark-skinned face. Dentures, probably; people his age seldom had their own teeth. He was sixty-eight, he'd once told her; time to retire. Old folks like him needed to get out of the way and let some youngster make a living. He'd laughed when he said that, and Sweeney knew he had no intention of retiring. He kept selling his hot dogs and smiling his sweet smile at his customers. She had noticed him the first week she'd been in New York and made it a point to pass by his stand as often as possible so she could study his face.

His expression fascinated her. She had sketched it a few times, the work quick and rudimentary because she didn't want him to notice what she was doing and become self-conscious. She hadn't quite gotten it right yet, the look of a man who had no quarrel with the world. He simply enjoyed life. It was that, the total lack of cynicism in his eyes, like a child's, that made her fingers itch to capture him on paper and canvas -

"Here ya go, Sweeney." He swapped the hot dog for the money in her hand, and she tucked the portfolio safely between her calves while she slathered a

ton of mustard on the dog. "You look all spiffy today. Hot date?"
Yeah, sure. She hadn't had a date in ... in so long she couldn't remember exactly how long it had been. At least a couple of years. Probably several. She hadn't missed it. "Business," she said, and took a bite of the dog.
"That's a shame, lookin" as hot as you do today." He winked at her and Sweeney winked back, though she was a bit startled by the compliment. Hot? Her? She was the least hot person she knew, in any sense of the word. She would rather work any day, lose herself in color and form, light and texture, than waste time worrying what some man thought about her hair or if he was dating others, too.
During college she had gone through the motions because it had seemed to be expected of her, but aside from a couple of rare crushes in high school she had never cared much about any guy. She hadn't felt even a frisson of lasciviousness since ... well, since that morning, come to think of it. She was more than a little surprised at herself, letting the Diet Coke commercial get to her like that. This late-blooming lust took her aback. She had thought herself safe from the insane hormonal urges that wrecked the creative careers of so many women, or at least diluted them.
"You'll knock 'em dead in that outfit," the vendor said, winking at her again. Funny, she hadn't thought the simple skirt and sweater that fetching. It had to be the color, she thought. New Yorkers always wore black; sometimes she thought no one in the city owned a single bright-colored garment. She must look like a cardinal among crows, decked out in her scarlet sweater. And combing her hair had been a definite plus. Hell, she was even wearing earrings.
She retrieved the portfolio from between her legs and continued down the sidewalk, hot dog in hand. The gallery was four more blocks, plenty of time to finish the dog and wipe the mustard from her mouth. Greeting the McMillans with goo smeared on her face wouldn't leave a good impression. It had been nice of Candra to set up the meeting. Other gallery owners probably wouldn't have overly concerned themselves with her. The big bucks were in primitive and modern art, not in the traditional style she preferred, but Candra was always looking out for Sweeney's interests, guiding business her way. She did that for all the artists whose work she displayed, from the lowest seller to the highest, with a natural warmth that attracted customers, probably making the gallery a ton of money every year.

Not that Candra had to worry about money; Richard's wealth made the gallery's profit, or lack of one, unimportant.
At the thought of Richard Worth, his face sprang to her mind, accompanied by the usual uneasiness. She would have liked to paint him, but couldn't see herself asking. His face was all hard angles and sharp eyes. She would never portray him in one of the double-breasted, three-thousand dollar Italian silk suits he liked, though; she would put that face on the docks, or behind the wheel of a big truck. Richard Worth looked like a sweaty T-shirt kinda guy, not a Wall Street wizard.
He and Candra seemed like such opposites. Candra was lovely, aristocratic, with her sleek dark hair and chocolate eyes, but it was a bland sort of loveliness, the type possessed by thousands of women: attractive, but not remarkable. Her true charm lay in her friendly personality, which, like the vendor's sweetness, came from what lay behind the face. Richard's nature seemed molded in his bones, his tough, angled face a testament to the man. As a couple they seemed mismatched, though their marriage had lasted ten years. The times Sweeney had seen them together, she had gotten the impression that though they were standing side by side, it was merely by chance. Richard seemed too cold, too much a workaholic, to appeal to a woman of Candra's warmth, but who knew what went on between a couple in their private moments? Maybe he sometimes actually relaxed.
As Sweeney approached a corner, the traffic signal changed and the Walk sign lit. She had become accustomed to the convenience of never having to linger on any corners waiting for the signals to change. A few drivers seemed bewildered by the brevity of the green light, but that wasn't her problem. She almost smirked at them as she crossed the street. She hated wasting time, and standing around on a street corner sure qualified as wasted time. She begrudged every moment away from her painting, so much so that even eating almost qualified as wasted time.
Not sleeping, though. She loved to sleep. One of her favorite things was to work late into the night, until she was exhausted, then to fall into bed, feeling that delicious heaviness as she lost consciousness, like falling into a hole. The only thing that made it better was if it was raining, too. The pleasure of going to sleep while listening to the rain was almost sensual. These days, sleeping was an adventure, because with sleep came dreams. She had always dreamed in color, but now her dreams were almost painfully vivid, in lush, brilliant Technicolor. She was fascinated by the

hues of her dreams, so intense and vibrant. When she woke she tried to reproduce those colors, only to find they didn't fit her work and she could never get them quite right anyway. They were wrong for the delicacy of her technique, for the precise brushwork that was her trademark. She loved the colors, though, and was disappointed on those mornings when her memory failed to dredge up any dreams at all.

She finished the hot dog, tossed the paper in the trash can, and ran a finger around her mouth to remove any leftover mustard. She didn't much like hot dogs, so she had to smother the taste with a lot of mustard. She supposed she could eat something she did like, but, we'll, the vendor was always there and she enjoyed his face, and she didn't have to go out of her way, so getting a hot dog saved time. Not only that, now she wouldn't have to waste time eating once she got home.

People marched along the sidewalks, not talking-unless it was on their cell phones-and seldom making eye contact. Sweeney openly studied their faces, knowing they weren't likely to look at her and thus catch her looking at them. She ignored the occasional face that was too transparent. It was easy; being New Yorkers, even the ghosts tended to avoid eye contact.

The huge variety of faces in the city was a constant source of wonder and inspiration to her. Paris ... well, Paris was okay, but even its name made her uncomfortable. She had seen too many pretentious artists, like her mother, make a big deal about painting in Paris, and Sweeney just didn't fit in with the art crowd there. Not that she fit in with the art crowd here, either, she reflected, but somehow in New York, she had more room, more a sense of being unseen. Candra's idea to relocate to the city had been brilliant. Though Sweeney could foresee a day when she would leave, for now she loved it.

Someday, the city would pall; all the places she had lived in had eventually bored her. She had never done any tropical landscapes and figured one day she'd feel the urge to go to Bora Bora, though on her budget she'd probably settle for Florida. After all, a palm tree was a palm tree. But for now she was still fascinated with faces, and right here was the best place to be.

The gallery was discreetly ensconced behind two double sets of glass doors, the outside set the bulletproof variety, at Richard's insistence. The lettering on the door was small and plain, announcing "Worth Gallery" and leaving it at that. There wasn't a curlicue in sight, which Sweeney appreciated. Ornate gilt lettering would have turned her stomach.

As usual, the first sight to greet anyone entering the gallery was Kai, which in Sweeney's opinion was a sight indeed. He was beautiful; that was the only word for him. She supposed he filled the function of a receptionist, but she wasn't quite certain what his official title was, or if he even had one. Judging from the way some of the female customers stared at him, it was enough for him just to be there; no other function was required. He had glossy, shoulder-length black hair and narrow dark eyes set above chiseled cheekbones, with lush lips that made her think he must have a Polynesian heritage, and strengthened her urge to paint palm trees. He did some modeling on the side and took art classes at night, which made Kai a very busy boy.

She suspected Kai and Candra had had, if not a full-fledged affair, at least a fling. Sweeney could be amazingly oblivious to everything around her when she was working, but painting portraits had made her acutely observant of faces and expressions, and a few times there had been a hint of intimacy between him and Candra. Nothing overt, just a flicker of expression, a brief meeting of gazes, a momentary possessiveness in Kai's manner. Candra would never wear her heart on her sleeve, but Kai wasn't as sophisticated. Sweeney hoped he wasn't emotionally involved, because Candra would certainly never allow herself to reciprocate those feelings. Richard's bucks far outweighed Kai's beauty.

Kai left his seat behind the elegant Queen Anne desk from which he oversaw all entr6es, coming toward her with a white smile and raised dark eyebrows. "Sweeney. Wow." His gaze slid down her. "You're looking hot." He had a faint accent, a melodious singsong quality that had to be Hawaiian. His expression was openly admiring.

A bit concerned, Sweeney glanced down at herself. This made two men who had, within the space of ten minutes, told her she looked "hot." The simple scarlet sweater must pack more punch than she had realized. From now on, she would be more careful about wearing it. On the other hand, she adored the color.

"The McMillans aren't here yet," Kai said, touching her elbow, his fingertips lingering on the inside of her arm. "Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?"

This was the treatment he gave customers. Her concern edged toward alarm. V"atever mysterious power the color scarlet had, she didn't like all this male attention. Men were trouble, capital T, italicized, underlined. She

didn't have time for men, especially not a smooth, twenty-four-year-old high-maintenance boy toy like Kai. She hadn't lived seven years longer than he had without learning a few things about herself, namely that she was one of those people who function better alone.
The tea sounded good, though.
"Earl Grey, one lump of brown." Candra used the European custom of offering both brown and white lumps of sugar with the tea she kept brewed for her customers. Sweeney considered it an immensely civilized thing for her to do.
"Coming right up." Kai flashed his brilliant smile at her again and disappeared into the small alcove where the tea service was kept. Sweeney looked around, wondering where Candra was. If the McMillans were due, then Candra. should already be here; she was extremely punctual, always there to greet the customers with whom she had appointments.
Standing where she was, Sweeney could see most of the gallery. It was two stories high, with regal, curving stairs arching like ribbons up both sides of the room, but the space was mostly open and wonderfully lit, which gave her an excellent overall view, and Candra wasn't in sight.
Kai returned, bearing tea fragrantly steaming in a translucent china cup. "Is Candra here?" Sweeney asked, taking the cup from him and inhaling the steam with unconscious delight.
"She's in her office, with Richard." He glanced over his shoulder at the closed door. "I gather the amicable proceedings aren't proceeding very amicably."
Sweeney frowned into her cup, pondering that opaque statement. "What proceedings?"
Kai blinked at her. "The divorce, of course."
"Divorce?" Sweeney was startled, and disappointed. She had suspected Candra's marriage wasn't perfect, but still, she hated to see people she knew break up. It always distressed her, reminding her of how many divorces she had lived through as a child.
"My God, don't tell me you didn't know. It's been in the
works for almost a year, since right after you moved to the city. I can't believe you haven't heard anything about it."
Despite her shock, Sweeney almost snorted. She had lost track of national elections when she was working; why would a divorce blip on her radar? She didn't move in Candra's circles, and though they were friendly

acquaintances and had a mutually profitable arrangement-usually profitable, that is-they weren't ex-actly bosom buddies. Or maybe Candra didn't think the divorce was important; it was so common in the art world Sweeney wondered why people bothered going through the motions of getting married.

Her own parents had each been married four times, twice to each other. Sweeney had one younger brother, after whose birth her mother had decided motherhood distracted her from her devotion to her art and had herself spayed. Her father, though, just kept on begetting with his various wives and had produced two half-brothers and three half-sisters for Sweeney, none of whom she saw more than once every couple of years. There had never been any question of fatherhood being allowed to distract him from his art, which was filmmaking. The last Sweeney had heard, he was about to take wife number five, but that had been at least two years ago, so he might well be on number six by now. Or maybe he had gone back to number four. For all she knew, he might be back with her mother. Sweeney didn't exactly stay in touch.

"Candra moved out of the town house just after last Thanksgiving, I think." Kai's eyes shone with the joy of gossip. "I know it was before Christmas, because she had a Twelve Days of Christmas party in her new apartment on the Upper East Side. It's totally swank. She called the party her Twelve Days of Freedom. Don't you remember?"

"I don't do parties," she said, as politely as possible. The last party she had attended had been her own eighth birthday party. She had escaped to her room before the ice cream was served, leaving the little hooligans her mother had invited to scream and fight without her. The ice cream had been Neapolitan, anyway, which she hated, but which her mother always served on the theory that this was the easiest way to satisfy all the children's ice cream preferences.

The truth was, Sweeney didn't do well in crowds, period. Socializing wasn't her strong point, and she was acutely aware of her shortcomings. She never relaxed, and she was always afraid of doing something totally stupid. Her mother, a great egobuilder, was fond of saying Sweeney had the social grace of a Tibetan goatherd.

"You should have done this one." Kai moved closer to her, his fingertips once again touching the inside of her elbow. "The food was fantastic, the

champagne never ran out, and so many people were there you couldn't move. It was great."
K ai's idea of great differed considerably from hers. She was deeply grateful she hadn't been invited, though she had to admit that she might have been and promptly forgotten about it. Parties were her idea of hell-and speaking of which, what the hell was K ai doing to her elbow?
Scowling, she lifted her arm away from his touch. She knew Kai was a lover-boy, but he'd never before turned his attentions to her, and she didn't like it. She made a mental note to return the damn sweater to the back of the closet when she got home.
"Sorry." He was astute enough to know his subtle attentions weren't having the desired effect. He smiled down at her. "Like I said, you look hot. It was worth a try"
"Thanks," she growled. "I've always wanted to be worth a try."
He laughed, his amusement genuine. "Sure. That's why your 'Don't Touch Me' sign is high, wide, and flashing bright neon. Ah, well, if you're ever lonely, give me a call." He shrugged. "So, what've you been up to? Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen you at all for a few months. How's the work going?"
She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm producing, but I'm not sure what I'm producing. I'm trying some techniques." That wasn't the truth, but she wasn't about to cry on Kai's shoulder. He didn't need to know how deeply disturbed she was by the direction her painting had been taking or that she was helpless to stop it. She tried to do the same delicate, almost ethereal work she had done before, but she seemed to have lost the knack. Those damn vivid colors kept getting in her way, and even though she cursed them, she was losing herself in them. And not only were her colors changing, but it seemed as if her perspective was, too. She didn't know what was going on, but the result was jarring, somehow discordant. She had always been confident about her talent, if nothing else, but now she was so paralyzed by insecurity about her new work that she hadn't been able to show it to anyone.
"Oh, really." He looked interested. Of course, he was paid to look interested, so she didn't read a whole lot into his expression. "Do you have anything ready to hang? I'd like to see what you're doing."
"I have several canvases ready to hang, but I'm not sure I'm ready."

"I think you have only one piece left on display; everything else has sold. You need to bring something in."
"I will." She had to, reluctant though she was. If her new work didn't sell, she didn't eat; it was that simple. And they couldn't sell if she never allowed anyone else to see them.
Kai glanced at his watch. "The McMillans should be here soon. I hope Richard leaves before then. Candra doesn't like him coming here at all; she prefers to meet him in the lawyer's office, so she'll be furious if he delays her. She's furious anyway, because he keeps balking."
"He doesn't want the divorce?"
Kai gave another graceful shrug. "Who knows what Richard wants? All I know is, he isn't being very conciliatory. Candra seems to have two moods these days: worried or infuriated."
Infufiated sounded like normal behavior during a divorce; wonled didn't.
"Maybe she's changed her mind and wants to back out of the divorce, but doesn't know how to smooth things over. "
"Oh, she didn't want it at all." His eyes sparkled with the glee of delivering juicy gossip. "From what I gather, Richard's the one who filed. Candra's putting a good face on things, acting as if the decision was mutual, but she isn't at all happy with the split. "
Abruptly Sweeney felt ashamed of herself, and irritated, too. Candra had supported her professionally, promoted her, steered clients her way. It went against her grain to gossip like this. If only gossip weren't so titillating. Sweeney tried to control an avid desire to know more, to dig for all the dirty details.
The temptation was great. Dirt was like fat; it made life more delicious.
She was saved from herself by the opening of Candra's office door. She turned and for a brief moment found herself looking directly into Richard Worth's eyes. It was like being touched with a cattle prod, an unwanted but electric connection. Then Candra appeared, her face pale with fury, gripping his arm and pulling him around as the door slammed shut again, closing out the sight and sound of marital disintegration.
"Uh-oh," Kai said with malicious satisfaction. "There's gonna be murder."

CHAPTER TWO

Sweeney was numb with shock. She wasn't certain what had just happened, but she knew something had. For a moment, just a split second, it had been as if she and Richard Worth were linked. She didn't like the sensation, didn't want that uncomfortable intimacy. She had always enjoyed her sense of being alone, envisioning herself as a ball that rolled through life, bumping into other lives but not stopping. For a moment, just for a moment, the roll had been halted, and she didn't know why. He was only an acquaintance, little more than a stranger. There was no reason for him to look at her as if he knew her. There was no reason for her to feel that funny jolt in her stomach, akin to the pleasure she had gotten from the Diet Coke commercial.

If this was another one of the weird changes that had been going on in her life for the past year, she didn't like this one any more than she did all the others. Damn it, she wanted things back the way they had been!

Before she could gather herself, the front doors opened behind her. Kai's face lit with the smile he reserved for buyers. To her surprise, he didn't seem to have noticed anything unusual. "Senator and Mrs. McMillan," he exclaimed, strolling toward them. "How nice to see you. May I get you anything? Tea, coffee? Something stronger?"

Sweeney swung around as a tall, thin, impossibly stylish woman said, "Tea," in a languid tone that was almost drowned by her husband's stronger voice as he said, "Coffee, black." His tone was as forceful as hers had been die-away.

To her surprise, Sweeney recognized him. She was notoriously oblivious to current events, but even so, this face had been on television often enough that she knew who he was. If Kai had said "Senator McMillan" before, instead of "the McMillans," she would have known. Senator Carson McMillan had a charisma that had carried him from city government to the state house, and from there to Washington, where he was in his second term. He had money, charm, intelligence, and ambition-in short, the qualities expected to eventually carry him to the presidency.

She disliked him on sight.

Maybe it was the career politician's practiced suavity that put her off. It wasn't the ruthlessness she read in him; she understood ruthlessness, having her share of it when it came to clearing out the space and time for her painting. It could have been the hint of disdain that seeped through his charm like the occasional whiff of sewer gas coming from a drainage grate.

He was the type of politician who secretly thought his constituents were either dim-witted or hayseeds, or both.
On the other hand, he was undeniably striking in looks: about six feet tall, with a certain beefiness through the chest and shoulders that nevertheless struck her as muscular rather than fat, and gave him the impression of power. His brown hair was still thick, and attractively grayed at the temples. His hair stylist did a good job with that. His eyes were a clear hazel, his facial structure strong and almost classical, though his jaw and chin were too pugnacious for true classic beauty.
She immediately knew she didn't want to paint his portrait. She didn't want to spend another minute in his presence. But still ... what a challenge. Could she portray the essential good looks and still catch that expression of condescending superiority, like a transparent overlay? The expression was everything. Senator McMillan had learned, for the most part, to put on a congenial face for the benefit of the public. In this situation, with only K ai and herself as witnesses and with both of them in what he would consider a subservient position, the public face slipped a bit. Sweeney didn't doubt that if she had been dressed in designer clothes and expensive jewelry, rather than a simple skirt and sweater, the reaction she had gotten from him would have been something other than the glance that was both dismissive and insulting, lingering on her breasts as it did.
She almost sniffed her own disdain, but caught herself in time. Candra had put herself out for this, so the least Sweeney could do was be polite. She switched her gaze to Mrs. McMillan, already inclined to feel sorry for the woman.
Her inclination was wasted. Mrs. McMillan obviously considered herself so superior that sympathy from lesser beings was unthinkable. The senator had worked on his public persona; his wife hadn't bothered. She was utterly secure in her position; there wouldn't be any young trophy wife taking her place, unless her husband wanted to risk losing his career. Any divorce proceedings involving this woman, Sweeney thought, would be messy, bitter, and extremely public. Mrs. McMillan would personally see to it.
The senator's wife was fashionably thin, stylish, bored. Her hair was champagne blond, at least this week, and cut in a classic bob that dipped just short of her shoulders and was swept back from her face to reveal ornate gold earrings studded with tiny diamonds. A good New Yorker, she wore a simple black sheath that made her seem thin to the point of

emaciation, and which probably cost more than Sweeney's entire wardrobe as well as part of her furniture.
Kai returned with a tray bearing tea and coffee, and noticed Sweeney standing there, joining the McMillans in silence. "I'm sorry, I didn't introduce you," he exclaimed. "Senator, Mrs. McMillan, this is Sweeney, the portrait artist Candra wanted you to meet. Sweeney, Senator Carson McMillan and his wife, Margo."
Sweeney held out her hand to Mrs. McMillan, feeling like a dog offering its paw, and from the look the senator's wife gave her, she might as well have been. Mrs. McMillan offered only her fingertips, probably to lessen the risk of contagion. If the senator ever did run for the presidency, his handlers would have to do some heavy-duty work with his wife to make her constituentfriendly and keep her from being a hindrance to the campaign.
The senator's handshake, on the other hand, was both brisk and firm without being crushing. He had a very nice handshake. It was probably one of the first things a career politician worked to achieve. She had a sudden vision of a classroom full of deadly earnest young politicians, with a sign on the door saying "Handshakes 10 1. " He ruined the effect, however, by eyeing her breasts again. She was beginning to think the scarlet sweater was more than just dangerous; the damn thing was cursed. Maybe she shouldn't have combed her hair or put on lipstick, either, though the lipstick probably hadn't survived the hot dog.
Candra's office door opened once more, and Sweeney turned, glad of the interruption. Candra swept out, her face tight with fury, but the expression in her eyes, oddly, was almost frightened. The expression was fleeting; as soon as she saw the McMillans, her face changed into its usual warm, friendly lines.
Richard loomed in the doorway behind her. Sweeney didn't want to look at him, in case that odd thing happened again, but curiosity and compulsion switched her gaze to him. To her relief, this time he didn't return her gaze. His face was much more controlled, as if Candra's upset in no way touched him. His eyes were hooded as he took in the small group with one glance, then leisurely walked toward them. He was a tall man, but he didn't shamble; like an athlete, he was in control of his height and his body. Remembering the Diet Coke commercial, Sweeney wondered how Richard would look without his shirt.

That funny little jolt tightened her stomach again. She wasn't in the least hungry, but her mouth began watering as if she hadn't eaten at all that day and had just caught the scent of freshbaked bread. A woman could feast all day on Richard. Don't go there, she silently warned herself, both alarmed and embarrassed, but she had taken too many art classes not to be able to accurately picture him without his clothes. From the way his clothes fit, she could tell he was a muscular man who hadn't let himself get soft. In her mind's eye she saw him naked and flat on his back, and it was a fine sight indeed. The disturbing part was seeing herself crawling over him, intent on kissing him from head to toe and not missing an inch in between. He would have several very interesting inches that would require a lot of attention.
"Carson, Margo, how good of you to come." Candra's voice jerked Sweeney out of her lascivious little daydream. Hastily she looked away from Richard, aware that she had been staring at him. She felt her cheeks heat and hoped her entire face wasn't red, to match the accursed sweater.
Candra. came toward them, her lovely legs showcased by the short skirt of a tailored suit in a beautiful shade of coppery beige that made her complexion glow. Distracting herself, Sweeney studied the color, noting the richness of the material. She couldn't tell one designer's clothes from another's, but she never forgot a color.
Candra and Margo exchanged air kisses, then Candra turned her megawatt charm on the senator. He took both her hands and leaned forward to kiss her cheek, and there was nothing airish about it. Standing where she was, Sweeney saw the senator's hands tighten on Candra's before she subtly freed herself and turned to Sweeney.
"I see Kai has already offered refreshments-"
"Richard," the senator said heartily, his rounded, speechtherapist moderated tones completely overpowering Candra's lighter voice, just as they had hiswife's. Sweeney wondered if he made a habit of interrupting women. He held out his hand; she saw the flicker of Richard's eyes that said he was reluctant to stop and chat, but good manners compelled him to accept the senator's hand.
Senator McMillan put everything he had into the handshake, even covering their clasped hands with his free one in a gesture his handlers had no doubt told him imparted a sense of empathy. It didn't work with Richard. If anything, his face became even more impassive. "You're looking great."

"Senator." The one-word greeting, if it could be called that, was terse. No great friendship there, Sweeney surmised. Watching them as closely as she was, she saw the senator's knuckles whiten, and an instant later Richard's knuckles did the same.
A pissing contest, she thought, fascinated. For whatever reason, dislike or competition or simple male aggression, the senator had tried to crush Richard's hand. It wasn't a smart move. He quickly became the crushee when Richard turned the tables.
"How's business?" the senator asked, trying to keep his expression neutral as he continued to grip Richard's hand, or maybe he simply couldn't let go now even if he wanted. "It has to be good, with this economy. Amazing, isn't it?"
"I don't have any complaints."
A bead of sweat appeared on the senator's forehead. Tiring of the game, Richard abruptly ended the handshake. Senator McMillan gamely managed not to massage his aching hand, though the impulse must have been strong.
Well, Sweeney thought. She wouldn't have been surprised if the senator had challenged Richard to an arm-wrestling contest. She wondered if the animosity existed because of what she had seen in the senator's eyes when he kissed Candra, or if he just didn't like it because Richard could piss farther than he could. Richard, she thought, didn't much give a damn one way or the other, which was very adult of him. In any contest between him and the senator, she was on his side; she might not like Richard, exactlyshe didn't know him well enough one way or the other-but she had detested the senator on sight.
"I hear you're off to Rome." Candra turned to Margo, her voice as easy as if it didn't bother her at all that they had witnessed the discord between her and Richard, but Sweeney knew better. Her habit of studying faces made her alert to the most fleeting expression, and the tension around Candra's eyes was as telling as a neon sign.
"No, that's been delayed. Carson has an emergency meeting in the morning, with the president." Top that, said the smugness of her tone. "We've postponed the trip-"
The senator began speaking to Richard again, his voice overriding his wife's, so that Candra had to lean closer to Margo to hear her. Maybe the senator deliberately interrupted women as a way of showing his dominance,

or perhaps he simply didn't notice when they were talking, which was even more insulting.
Sweeney tuned out, hearing the four clashing voices but not the individual words. She wasn't interested in the McMillans" trip to Rome, or in stock options, whatever they were. She shifted restlessly, bored, ready to dispense with the business at hand and get back to her apartment and her painting. Why was Richard hanging around, anyway? He couldn't give two hoots in hell about the senator's opinions on the stock market. Surely he knew Candra would feel more relaxed if he left. And so would she, Sweeney admitted. She deliberately kept her gaze away from him, afraid of triggering that weird connection again.
"I'm so glad you had this chance to meet Sweeney," Candra said. The mention of her name brought Sweeney's attention back with a rush, and she found Candra smiling warmly at her. "I have an example of her work here if you'd like to see it, but unfortunately not any of her portrait work, as that's done only on commission."
Sweeney kept her mouth shut, and the portfolio firn-dy under her arm. She had no intention of showing any of her work now.
"It isn't important," Margo said, bored. "I'm sure she'll do, if you recommend her. What I'm really interested in is the new VanDern you mentioned. I'm sure the colors will go marvelously in the living room."
Sweeney refrained from rolling her eyes, but it was difficult. She couldn't fault the woman for wanting her wall decor to complement the room, because color was vital to Sweeney's own sense of well-being, but ... a VanDern? He was a hot commodity right now, but he was a sly, talentless clod who daubed huge clumps of color on a canvas and called it art.
"I'm sure they will," Candra agreed, indicating with a graceful wave of her hand the direction of the VanDern.
Sweeney had no intention of trailing along, behind them. "I have to go," she said, gripping her portfolio. She needed the job, she really, really needed the job, and she steeled herself to say something polite and make arrangements to begin after the couple returned from Rome. She opened her mouth and heard, "I, In sorry, but I can't do your portraits, Mrs. McMillan. I'm booked."
The words surprised even herself. So much for good intentions, but at least she had given a polite lie instead of saying she had despised the couple on sight and the only way she would paint them would be if she could add

horns, goatees, and pitchforks. She was a little proud of herself; a Tibetan goatherd couldn't have come up with such a good lie.
"What?" Margo looked startled. Candra's lovely face looked first amazed, then alarmed, as if she had begun imagining all the responses Sweeney could make to Margo's incredulous question. Sweeney didn't give herself time to think of any. She had to get out of there before her thin layer of tolerance for fools and jerks was worn through and she said something that would really embarrass Candra. She swung around and headed for the door, going as fast as she could without actually running.
She switched the portfolio to her left hand and reached out with her right to grab the door handle, but a tall body was suddenly right next to her and a dark-clad arm shot out in front of her, blocking her way. Over her head a deep voice said, 'Allow me. I was just leaving, too. Good-bye, Senator, Mrs. McMillan. Kai."
Startled by the novelty of having a door opened for her,
Sweeney didn't think to call her own good-byes. To be honest, it wasn't just Richard's courtesy that had startled her, but his closeness. Her stomach jittered again. It was unsettling to have him right next to her when only moments before she had been mentally stripping him.
Richard let the door close behind them and for a moment they were enclosed in the silence of the small vestibule, the smoked glass of the outer door dimming the sunshine outside. Then he stepped past her and opened that door, too, his movement bringing him so close that his suit jacket brushed her arm and the quiet scent of expensive cologne drifted to her nose. Another jolt hit her, accompanied by a sudden wave of physical awareness.
This wouldn't do. This wouldn't do at all. Bemused, she stepped out onto the sidewalk. First the Diet Coke commercial this morning and now Richard, of all people. Maybe there was a full moon or something, though lunar cycles had never before affected her hormones. Not much of anything had. Maybe she should make a doctor's appointment, make sure her ovaries hadn't suddenly gone into overdrive, flooding her with an overdose of unruly hormones. If they were going to do that, they should have done it when she was a teenager and didn't know any better. She was thirty-one now and didn't have either the time or the inclination to indulge in any hormonal frivolity.

"Sweeney?" Richard waved his hand in front of her face, and she snapped back to the present, flushing as she realized she had been staring at him while she pondered the state of her ovaries.
"Sorry," she muttered. "What did you say? The corners of his mouth curled a little, as if he was suppressing a smile. "I asked if you wanted a lift home. It's starting to rain."
So it was. It hadn't been just the smoked glass of the doors making the day look dreary; the bright sunshine was gone and the sky had turned cloudy while she was in the gallery She looked up as raindrops began to spatter on the sidewalk.
Instantly she hugged the portfolio closer to her, as if she could protect it with her body. There was no decision to it, not when the choice was between keeping her drawings dry or letting the rain ruin them. "Thanks, I would. Where's your car?" she asked, looking around.
"Right here." He raised his hand, and a dark gray Mercedes rolled forward to stop at the curb in front of him. That struck her as a lot handier than standing on the curb waving frantically at passing cabs, as she knew hundreds of people had started doing as soon as the first raindrop fell.
He put his hand on her back as he leaned forward to open the car door. The contact was so unexpected, and so unexpectedly pleasurable, that she almost stumbled. Recovering, she juggled the portfolio out of the way as she bent down to slide into the car, continuing across the buttery leather seats to give him room to get in. Her insides were doing the rumba: heart pounding, lungs heaving, stomach clenching. It was the most amazing thing she'd ever felt. Too bad it undoubtedly meant she was losing her mind.
Richard folded his tall body into the seat beside her. "We're giving Sweeney a lift home, Edward," he said to his driver.
"Very good, sir." The accent was faintly British, the word choice even more so. "What is Miss Sweeney's address?" Richard gave it, and Sweeney stared at him in surprise for a moment before remembering that he owned the building where she lived. She was surprised he had remembered, but probably stock-market geniuses had to be able to remember the tiniest detail. Forcing herself to relax, she settled back into the ultra-comfortable embrace of dead cows' hides. She stroked the seat, delighted in the smooth, soft texture of the leather, and the delicious smell. Nothing rivaled good-quality leather in its richness, its utter luxury.

Then temptation got the better of her, and she glanced at Richard, to find him watching her and smiling slightly. Funny, she had never associated him with smiles; he was too controlled, even remote, but this smile looked as natural as if he'd had a lot of practice. She felt a moment of kinship, and her lips curved upward, too. "I guess your tolerance for bullshit is as low as mine," she said, her smile widening into a grin, and he laughed. It was an honest-to-God, throw-your-head-back laugh, and damn it, even that made her insides start jumping around again.

"I thought you were going to run right through the glass, you were in such a hurry to get out of there."

"I don't know who is worse, the senator or his wife. They both gave me the creeps."

"That was pretty obvious, to everyone but them. Kai was trying to make himself invisible, but at the same time he didn't want to leave in case he missed some fireworks." Richard's tone turned neutral when he mentioned Kai, and Sweeney wondered if he knew about Candra's affair with her assistant. That could certainly be the reason for the divorce; Richard didn't look like a man who would tolerate infidelity or try to "work through it" with marriage counseling sessions.

The first warning sprinkles of rain abruptly turned into a downpour, sending pedestrians scurrying for doorways or taxis; umbrellas bloomed like mushrooms. Sweeney loved the sound of rain anyway, but today it was particularly evocative, making her heart pound the way it did whenever she heard cello music or taps. A delicious chill suddenly prickled her skin, and she hugged herself.

"Edward, turn on the heat, please. Sweeney is cold."

"Of course, sir."

"I'm not really cold," Sweeney denied, without knowing why. Her constant coldness was somehow embarrassing, a weakness she didn't want to acknowledge. "Listening to the rain gave me goose bumps."

"You were shivering. Do you want to put my coat around you?"

There it was again, shaking her insides as if the San Andreas Fault ran right through her. He had been watching her closely enough to notice a small shiver. She didn't know which was more disturbing, that realization or the flood of warmth she felt at the thought of being draped in his coat, his body heat being transferred to her, his scent surrounding her. The warmth was welcome, but the reason behind it wasn't. At least her fascination with the

commercial had ended when the ad was over. This strange awareness would end, surely, as soon as she got out of the car and away from Richard, but until then she had to guard against doing something stupid, like throwing herself into his arms. Wouldn't that raise Edward's eyebrows! It would probably raise her own, because if anything was out of character for her, throwing herself at a man ranked at the top of the list. I
"Sweeney?" Richard prompted, waving his hand in front of her again. He was smiling again, too. She wished he would stop doing both. One was annoying, and the other was downright disturbing.
“What?"
"Do you want my coat?" He was already shrugging out of it. "Oh-no, thank you. I'm sorry, my thoughts wandered."
"I noticed." He smiled again, his dark eyes slightly heavy-lidded. Despite her refusal, he draped the coat over her.
She almost moaned in delight. it was just as she had imagined, so toasty warm she thought she might melt. She snuggled into the coat, pulling the fabric high around her face and unconsciously inhaling, drawing his scent into her lungs like a smoker taking the morning's first drag.
"I had to do something to cover up that sweater," he said by way of explanation, his tone amused.
"It's cursed. I'm going to burn it when I get home
"Don't bother. it's what's underneath that's doing the damage.”
Oh, God. He felt it, too.
The realization was like a punch in the stomach. She froze, unable to look at him, afraid of what she would see in his eyes. This wasn't just an aberration inspired by the red sweater. This wasn't a strange moon cycle. She couldn't say how she knew; it certainly couldn't be experience telling her, because she had made it a point through the years to avoid letting messy relationships clutter her life. Richard was the third man in an hour to look at her with appreciation-well, the fourth, if she counted the senator, but his look had been more insulting than appreciative-but in Richard's case, it was something more. Not even Kai's knee-jerk attempt at casual seduction had been like this, but then Kai was a lightweight, and Richard ... Richard was not.
Still, she would have been tempted, if he hadn't been embroiled in a divorce; a divorce, moreover, from a woman very much involved in Sweeney's career. No, be honest. She was tempted, beyond a doubt, and

against every grain of common sense in her body. But being tempted didn't mean she had to act on that temptation; a woman who could see ghosts and make traffic lights change when she approached sure didn't need a man in her life to complicate things. She could handle the ghosts; she couldn't handle a man, especially not Richard. Just why she thought he was more trouble than any other man was an issue she didn't want to explore.

Still, the urge to look at him, watch him, study him, was almost overpowering. To keep her gaze away from those intense, knowing dark eyes, she looked down, and found herself staring at his hands. They were rather elegant hands, she thought in surprise, in a rough way. She had always thought of him as an expensively dressed dockworker, but she had never before noticed his hands, and now she wondered why. Their shape was beautiful, with the beauty of strength, like Michelangelo's David, long-fingered and sinewy. She saw the roughness of calluses, a few scars, manicured nails. Senator McMillan had been a fool to pit his strength against this man's.

She chuckled at the memory. "I'll bet the senator won't try to squeeze your hand again," she said with relish.

Bold dark eyebrows slanted upward. "You saw that juvenile stunt?"

"Um. It was fun. His knuckles turned white, then yours did, and he broke out in a sweat. I almost cheered."

He laughed. "You wear your civilization very lightly, don't you? I never noticed before."

"I wasn't the one in the pissing contest," she pointed out,, a little irritated that he obviously thought she was a savage. She considered herself a very civilized person. She'd never squeezed anyone's hand, because she was afraid of hurting her own hands. Maybe that wasn't the same as not wanting to hurt someone else, but the outcome was the same, so surely she got points for that.

"No, you weren't." He was smiling again, very faintly. Glancing up, he saw that they were almost at her apartment building. "The trip didn't take very long," he noted, and didn't sound pleased.

She didn't tell him why all the traffic lights had turned green or traffic mysteriously detoured out of their way.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?" He turned back to her, and somehow he was closer than he had been before, his shoulder touching hers, his left leg against her right one. She felt his body heat like a lodestone all

down her right side, triggering an insane impulse to get closer and see just how warm he could get her. Plenty warm, she bet. On fire. Melting.
"Good God, no!"
He laughed. "Please, don't spare my feelings."
Sweeney blushed like a teenager. One day, maybe when she was ninety years old, she might learn the art of the polite lie. She had done well enough with the McMillans, but obviously that was her quota for about a year.
"I didn't mean ... It's just that you'd be a big complication, demanding time and sex and things like that, and I have all I can handle right now." Great. He was laughing again, and when she realized what she had just said, she wanted to bury her face in her hands. Instead she doggedly plowed on. 'And then there's Candra. She's been good to me, promoting me when a lot of other gallery owners wouldn't. Even though you've been separated for almost a year ... Anyway, I don't think it would be a good idea."
He didn't say anything for a long time, just watched her with a, completely unreadable expression on his face. "I'll ask again," he finally said.
She wasn't sure how those three words could sound almost like a threat, but they did. Richard Worth wasn't a man who was used to being turned down
"You do that," she said, as the Mercedes slid to a stop in front of her apartment building. 'And I'll turn you down again." She removed his coat and gave it back to him, and reached for the door handle.
"Don't be ridiculous he said, staying her hand. "There's no point in getting wet. I have an umbrella, and I'll walk you to the door."
"I can manage, thanks."
"What about your portfolio?"
There was that, damn it. The rain was really coming down. She scowled at him. "You don't have to look so satisfied," she growled, knowing he had her.
His mouth quirked as he reached for the umbrella. "Honey, you don't have any idea how I look when I'm satisfied."
No, but she could imagine, and her mental image knotted her stomach. He bent his head and kissed her sulky mouth, the contact light and warm and devastating. "Think about it," he whispered, then opened the door and extended the umbrella out, opening it so it provided a circle of protection. He climbed out and held it for her as she slid from the car.
"Think about it," she mimicked savagely, making him laugh. "Damn you. "
She was so annoyed she didn't care that sliding across the seat made her

skirt ride high on her thighs. Let him look; that was all he was going to do. Together they dashed across the sidewalk to the sheltered doorway. He took care that her portfolio didn't get splashed, and she appreciated his concern, even though she wanted to give him a good swift kick. He left her there and strode quickly back to the waiting car. She didn't wait until he left, but went inside immediately. He didn't need any ego stroking, and she definitely needed to get back to her safe, isolated world, away from temptation.
She needed order, not disorder; peace, not excitement. Most of all, she needed to paint. With a brush in her hand, she could shut out the world.

CHAPTER THREE

??? about it. Well, she had. Despite her best efforts, and to the point where she was about to have a screaming fit, she had. With hours stretching before her in which she could paint, instead she continually found herself standing in front of the canvas with an idle brush in her hand while she stared off into space like some giddy adolescent. The problem, of course, wasn't so much Richard's attraction to her as her attraction to him. What disturbed her most was her inability to stop thinking about him. Other men had been distinguished by their total lack of distinction; she could put them out of her mind, if indeed they had ever entered it, and go on with her life as usual. None of them had ever tempted her. She couldn't say that about Richard. She felt silly, obsessing about a man. Nothing was ever going to come of her attraction, she would see to that, so it was stupid to waste time mooning over him. Not that any other man would have had a better chance, but the fact that this was Richard kept stunning her over and over again, hitting her right between the eyes. Of all the men in the world she might have expected to appeal to her hitherto nonexistent libido, Richard wasn't even on the list. Richard was married, he was married to a business associate of hers, and now the two were involved in an acrimonious divorce, which was an even better reason to stay the hell away from him.
Okay. Her mind got the message. Now, if the word would just seep farther down, she might be able to get some work done. The rain had stopped but the day remained cloudy, and though she had installed bright lights in her studio, it wasn't the same as sunlight. Normally that wouldn't have bothered her, but today it did. She wanted bright sunlight. She had been working

from a photo she'd taken of the St. Lawrence, which remained one of her favorite subjects, but without sunlight she couldn't get the colors right. Disgusted, she thrust the brush into the can of turpentine and swished it around. Who was she kidding? She couldn't get the colors right anyway. She hadn't been able to get the colors right for a year.

She wished she could put her finger on any one event that had obviously triggered the change, but she couldn't. Nothing stood out in her mind. Why would she have noticed Clayton's lone traffic light turning green? It did on a regular basis. She had noticed that her plants looked unusually happy, but at first had simply written that off as acclimation or her having stumbled across some hardy plants that could withstand her haphazard care. Maybe that was still all it was. Before, though, she had had to replace them on a fairly regular basis, but now, no matter what she did, they were thriving. Not even the move to the city had disturbed them. The Christmas cactus was blooming merrily as it already had several times this year, her bromehads were fat and succulent, her ferns lush, and the finicky ficus kept its leaves no matter how often she moved it around the apartment.

She didn't want to be different. She had seen her parents use their talent as an excuse for all sorts of god-awful, selfish, selfaggrandizing behavior, and seen the havoc they had wrought in other people's lives. She didn't want to be like that. She wanted to be a perfectly normal person who happened to have a talent for painting; that was different enough, but she could handle that. But an artist who screwed up electronic timers, affected nature, and saw ghosts-whoa, that was way out there. Not even her mother had gone that far, though she had gone through a period when she sought inspiration in the metaphysical. As Sweeney remembered it, that had consisted mostly of toking on a joint. Excuses were where you found them.

She sighed as she cleaned her brushes. The St. Lawrence was out of the question today, not that she had been making much progress anyway. The river didn't fascinate her the way it once had, didn't hold the lure of even the most ordinary face.

The hot dog vendor's face popped into her mind, complete with sweet smile. Sweeney cocked her head, considering the image. He looked so young in her mind, despite the gray hair. How had he looked when he was twenty? Or ten? She thought of him as a six-year-old with here-and-there teeth, beaming at the world.

Absently whistling through her teeth, Sweeney reached for her sketch pad. It would be interesting to do him at different ages, a collage of faces on the same canvas and all of them his.

Some artists only did rough blocking to get the right proportions, but Sweeney was a good sketch artist, too. She usually spent more time than she should on the preliminary sketches because she couldn't resist adding in shadings and details. To her delight, the vendor's sweet expression didn't elude her pencil this time. Everything fell into place, in a way it hadn't done in a long time.

The vendor's name was Elijah Stokes. Today he closed his stand at the usual time, counted the day's take, and made out a deposit slip, then walked to the bank and stood in line for maybe fifteen minutes. He could have dropped the deposit in the overnight slot, but he liked to deal with humans, not holes. He liked to walk away with the stamped deposit receipt in his pocket, and the first thing he did when he got home was put the receipt in a file. He was real careful with his paperwork, partly because his mama had been that way, but mostly because, as he grew older, he saw that being careful with the details always saved him some trouble on down the line.

Elijah had been married to the same woman for forty-four years, until her death five years before. They had raised two fine boys, put them through college, and had the pleasure of seeing them become fine men, get good jobs, marry, and begin raising their own families as they had been raised. There was a lot of satisfaction in knowing you had done something right, and Elijah knew he had done right by his boys.

He could have closed his stand a long time ago; he had saved his money, made some small but careful investments, and seen them prosper. He didn't need the money; with Social Security and his dividends, he could live just as he was living now, because most of what he made still went into savings. But every time he thought about retiring, he'd think about his boys, and the five beautiful grandchildren he had, and how every penny he saved now would help pay for their education later. It wouldn't hurt him to work a couple of more years; seventy seemed like a good age to retire.

The rain began again as he walked home, driving people off the sidewalks. He just pulled his cap down more snugly on his head and trudged on. A little rain never hurt nobody. The clouds had brought on an early twilight, making the streetlights wink on. Summer was leaving in a hurry; he could smell the crispness of fall in the rain, as if it had come straight down from

Canada. Spring and fall were his favorite seasons, because the weather was better, not too hot and not too cold. He hated winter; the cold made his bones ache. Sometimes he thought about going south to retire, but he knew he wouldn't leave his boys and those grandkids.

He was still three blocks from home when the neighborhood began to deteriorate. Some rough characters hung around the streets these days. His kids wanted him to move, but he had lived there since the oldest was only a year old, and it was hard to leave all those memories. His wife had cooked thousands of mouthwatering meals in that old kitchen, and he had listened to his kids running across those worn floors. His wife had fixed the place up nice over the years, though he hadn't done anything to it since she died and everything was beginning to look shabby. He just hadn't wanted to make any changes. Somehow he could remember her better if he left things just the way she'd wanted.

Normally he paid more attention when he was walking, but this time, this one time, he let his guard down. A punk slid out of an alley to block his way, feral eyes gleaming. Elijah barely had time to notice the pimply complexion and bad teeth before the left side of his head exploded with pain.

The force of the blow knocked Elijah to the ground. The punk leaned down and grabbed the old man, dragged him back into the shadows. Maybe four seconds had lapsed since he had stepped out of the alley. He swung the club two more times, just because it felt good, even though the old man hadn't struggled at all. Then he leaned down and grabbed the wallet from the old guy's pocket and fumbled the money out, shoving it into his own pocket without bothering to count it. There weren't any credit cards. Shit. In disgust he tossed the wallet aside and pelted out of the alley, head down. The whole operation, refined by practice, took about twenty seconds.

Elijah Stokes, a careful man, never carried much cash on him. The punk's take was twenty-seven dollars. Elijah lay in the twilight shadows of the alley and felt the light rain on his face, but the sensation was oddly distant. In a brief flash of clarity he knew he was dying, and he wanted to think about his kids, but his brain felt funny and their faces just wouldn't form. His wife, though ... ah, there she was, smiling her angel's smile, and that was good enough for Elijah.

"This is Jeopardy!" the announcer crowed, dragging out each word.

Sweeney sat down in her ultracomfortable, overstuffed chair and curled up

with a big bowl of popcorn in her lap. The three contestants were identified, and as usual she watched their faces, not even hearing their names. The one in the middle, she thought. He would win. He looked quick, his eyes lively with intelligence. She liked to play a game with herself, trying to guess beforehand which contestant would win. Lately it hadn't been much of a challenge.

The streak of luck was getting on her nerves. Traffic signals were one thing, but if the weird stuff started affecting Jeopardy she was going to get testy. She loved the show.

Alex Trebek came out and began the game by reading the categories.

"Mysteg Wfiters.

"Dick Francis," said Sweeney, popping a salty kernel in her mouth.

"Potent Potables."

"Absinthe," she responded. "Btitish Royalty."

"Charles the Second. This is too easy"

"Science"'

"Cold fusion-you wish."

"The States."

"Delaware. Try not to be so obvious."

"And finally, Deep Space."

"Quasars, of course." It was another little game she played, trying to guess what the questions would be before she heard the clues. Lately she had been doing really well at that, too.

The defending champion began with Potent Potables. Alex read the clue. Stumped, the contestant star'ed at the board as if he could force it to give him the answer. The buzzer sounded, and the contestant in the middle rang in. "What is absinthe," he said.

Sweeney reached for the remote control and turned off the television without waiting to hear Alex confirm that was the correct question. She knew it was right. These days she was always right.

She felt jittery, more unsettled than she could remember ever feeling before. Getting to her feet, she walked to the window and stared out at the rain. She loved rain; normally it soothed her. Tonight the magic wasn't working. Surely falling in lust with Richard hadn't upset her to this extent. She was surprised, sure, because such a thing normally didn't happen to her, but after all it wasn't such a big deal. Women lusted after men all the time. She chose not to act on it, and that was that. The excitement had been heady, though.

She could understand how people came to act irrationally while they were under the influence, so to speak. Hormones were as potent as whiskey, and twice as sneaky.

No, she thought, it wasn't Richard and her unusually strong reaction to him. She had made her decision on that and put it out of her mind, sort of. This was something else, a bone-deep uneasiness that had nothing to do with the state of her ovaries. She felt sad, almost grief-stricken, and she didn't know why,

She tried to do some more sketches, but couldn't concentrate. Television held no appeal, but finally she settled down with a book, wrapped up in a blanket, and managed to get in a good hour of reading before she became so sleepy her head kept drooping. It was only nine o'clock, but Sweeney figured if she was that sleepy, then she needed to be in bed.

The on-and-off rain was on again, and she crawled under the covers with a sigh of pure pleasure. The electric blanket had her bed nice and warm; crawling into it was like crawling into a cocoon. It wasn't as nice as Richard's coat, but it was still wonderful. She stretched out, wriggling her cold toes against the warm blanket, and in minutes was asleep.

A little after midnight she began to toss restlessly under the covers, making pushing motions with her hands. She muttered sounds that weren't quite words. Her head moved back and forth on the pillow, and her eyelids fluttered. Her breath rushed in and out of her lungs as if she had been running.

Then she stilled. Even her breathing stopped for a long moment.

Her breathing started again. Her eyes opened, the expression in them was distant. She got out of bed and silently, without turning on any lights, walked barefoot through the apartment to her studio. She didn't turn on any lights, but the wash of colorless light from the street was enough for her to make her way through the big, cluttered room without bumping into anything.

Several easels stood around the room, all wearing canvases in varying stages of completion. She took one canvas down and laid it on a table, then put a blank one in its place on the easel.

Her movements were precise as she took a tube and squeezed a glob of bright red onto her palette. The first brushstroke on the blank expanse of canvas left behind a violent streak of red. Next she reached for the black. There was a lot of black.

She stood there for two hours, her brush moving with silent skill. She didn't hear the sirens as a fire truck raced down the street beneath her window. She didn't feel the chill on her bare feet. Not once did she shiver.
Suddenly she sagged, like a balloon going flat. She dipped a brush into the black one more time and added a touch down at the bottom. Then she carefully placed the brushes in the turpentine and left the studio as silently as she had entered it, retracing her steps through the dark apartment, a slim, barefoot woman in pajamas, with curly hair rioting around her shoulders. She moved as quietly as a ghost, back to her bedroom and the warm nest of her bed.
The alarm went off at six-thirty. Sweeney fumbled a hand out from under the cover and swatted the clock, stopping the obnoxious noise. The smell of coffee teased her out of bed. Dragging on a pair of thick socks, she lumbered like Frankenstein's monster into the kitchen. As she did every morning, she sent up a silent thank-you to God for electronic miracles and waiting coffee. With the first cup in hand, the first too-hot sip warming her on its way down her throat, she was sufficiently awake not to spill any of it on her way to the shower.
Ten minutes later, awake and warm, dressed in sweats, and with the now-drinkable coffee in her hand, she went into the studio, her most favorite place in the world. The room was in a corner of the building, which meant it had windows on two walls. Actually, the two walls were windows, great big tall ones that looked like factory windows, though she didn't think the building had ever been used for manufacturing. On sunny days, the light was fantastic.
It was still too early for that, though, so she flipped the light switch, flooding the room with almost blinding light. The lights she had installed were huge round metal fixtures that hung from the ceiling and beamed down an incredible amount of wattage. Shadows were nonexistent in the room, which was great, but she preferred natural light.
She knew her studio intimately. The first thing she noticed was the canvas on the table. Frowning, she walked over. It was the St. Lawrence canvas, and she knew she hadn't put it on the table; she had left it on the easel. A chill went through her. Who had moved the canvas, and when? Another canvas stood in its place now, and Sweeney stared at it for a moment, strangely uneasy, before walking around the easel to see what it was.

She went very still, blue eyes wide as she stared at the canvas. Her lips were white, her fingers clenched on the coffee cup. It was ugly. It was the ugliest thing she had ever seen. A man sprawled in the dirty, garbage-filled space between two buildings. She knew exactly what she was looking at, even though the buildings were nothing more than black hulks on either side that somehow gave the appearance of height. Something was wrong with the man's head. There was a little blood pooled around his nostrils, and a thin line of it ran from his left ear, curving under the ear to drip into his gray hair.

For a moment she stared at the painted face without recognition. The eyes were open, blank, glazed with the film of death.

But then she saw the facial structure she knew so well, having sketched it so often.

It was the old hot dog vendor.

Her first irrational thought, rushing through her brain on a flood of rage, was that someone had broken into her apartment and painted the disturbing picture. Logic pointed out the idiocy of that scenario. For one thing, the style, though not as detailed as usual, was her own. That, and her signature scribbled in the lower right corner of the canvas, told her she had done the painting.

The only problem was, she didn't remember any of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

At nine, the telephone rang. Sweeney was numb with shock, and so cold she couldn't seem to get warm no matter how much coffee she drank. She'd kept edging the thermostat upward until it was sitting on eighty, and she refused to turn it higher. The local weather forecast, delivered by a woman so chirpy Sweeney felt like smacking her, had told her the day would be beautiful, with highs in the mid-seventies. People outside were walking around in short sleeves, children were still wearing shorts, and she was freezing. She felt as if her inner core was pure ice, the cold coming from inside rather than out.

She couldn't settle down to paint anything, not even something unsatisfactory. Every time she saw that ugly painting of the old hot dog vendor, she wanted to weep, and she wasn't a leakyeye type of woman. But

she felt so sad, almost as if she were in mourning, and when the phone rang, she grabbed it up, glad for a change, for the distraction.
"Candra here. Is this a good time?" Candra's warm voice sounded in her ear.
“As good as any." Sweeney pushed an unruly curl out of her eyes. “About yesterday-"
"Don't apologize," Candra interrupted, laughing. "I should be apologizing to you. If I had stopped to think, I would have known immediately you wouldn't be able to stand them. A little of Margo goes a long way, though in her defense, Carson is enough to give a saint a bad attitude."
"He has the hots for you." Damn, she hadn't meant to say that. She liked Candra, but they had never crossed the line between friendly business associates andfiIends. Intimate conversation wasn't her strong point, anyway.
Candra evidently had no such hang-ups. She laughed dismissively. "Carson has the hots for anything female. To say he's like a dog would insult the dog community. He has his uses, though, which is why Margo stays with him."
Sweeney didn't say anything, because she knew anything that came out of her mouth would be uncomplimentary, and the McMillans were not only in Candra's social circle, they were her clients. Insulting them wouldn't be diplomatic. Keeping silent was a strain, but she managed.
"I saw you get in the car with Richard yesterday," Candra said after a slight pause, and there was a faint hesitancy in her tone.
Oh, boy. Sweeney's radar began beeping an alarm. "It was starting to rain and I had the portfolio, so he gave me a lift
home." She clutched the phone, hoping Candra would leave it there and go on to another subject.
No such luck. "He can be very courteous. It's that countryboy Virginia upbringing."
"I didn't know he was from Virginia." That seemed like a safe thing to say.
"He still has the accent. No matter how I begged, he absolutely refused to have speech lessons to help him get rid of it." Sweeney didn't think she had ever noticed his accent, though now that she thought about it, his speech did have a certain lazy quality about it. Virginia wasn't exactly the Deep South, though Candra made it sound as if Richard talked like the Beverly Hillbillies. Sweeney didn't want to talk about him; just thinking about him made her uncomfortable. She especially didn't want to talk about him with his soon-to-be ex-wife.

"You know we're getting divorced," Candra said casually. "It's a mutual decision. Richard and I had been drifting apart for some time, and shortly after you moved to the city last year, we separated and filed for divorce. He's being a bastard about the settlement, but I suppose that's to be expected. A divorce isn't exactly a friendly proceeding, is it?"
"Not usually." Maybe if her responses gave Candra no encouragement, the other woman would tire of the subject and move on.
“Ah ... did Richard say anything yesterday?"
The hesitancy was back in Candra's tone. Sweeney got the feeling this was the real reason behind the call. "About what?" She actually managed to sound blank. She was proud of herself, and irritated at the same time. She had no reason to feel guilty, because even though Richard had asked her to dinner, she had turned him down, but evidently logic had nothing to do with guilt.
"About the divorce."
"No, he didn't mention it." Relief crawled through Sweeney at being able to say something that was totally, one hundred percent true. She wasn't good at this subterfuge stuff, even though everything she had said was accurate in letter, if not in spirit.
"I didn't really think he would, he's so damn discreet." The words sounded bitter. Candra paused again. "I noticed when we were in the gallery, he barely took his eyes off you."
The uncomfortable feeling intensified as it inched like a worm up Sweeney's back. She didn't want this. She didn't want to get caught in the middle during their divorce. All she wanted was to forget she had been bushwhacked by some malfunctioning hormones and for a moment responded to his attractiveness.
"He's been so damn careful since we separated that if he's had any lovers, I haven't been able to find out about it," Candra continued. "When I saw the way he watched you yesterday ... well, I was curious."
Yeah, sure. There was definite bitterness there, Sweeney thought. And she definitely wanted to end this conversation. "Maybe there haven't been any."
Candra laughed. "What, Richard go without sex? Not likely. Anyway, what I wanted to say is, if you and Richard have something going, I wouldn't mind. We've been separated for almost a year, so of course I've gotten on with my life. I've met someone I'm very fond of, and he's far more comfortable to be with than Richard ever was."

Sweeney couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. nankyou was out of the question. Why on earth would Candra call about this, anyway? Was she concerned that if Sweeney actually did begin seeing Richard, she would try to find another art dealer to handle her sales? That didn't make sense, because Sweeney had no illusions about her worth to Candra; the gallery handled artists who made a lot more sales than she. No, this call was prompted by sheer nosiness, the curious inability of estranged couples to let go even though they were embroiled in the legal surgery that would sever them.

Well, she didn't want any part of it. She shivered and reached for a blanket to wrap around her while she tried to think of a way to tiptoe through this conversational minefield. But a response seemed called for, so at last she said, "I hope you'll be very happy." There! That was innocuous enough.

Candra laughed, and sounded genuinely amused. "Oh, I doubt this is anything permanent. Life's too short and too full of men to chance making another mistake. But I admit I was hoping Richard was interested in you."

"What?" The word was faint with surprise.

Candra laughed again. "Don't sound so shocked. I don't care if he has a lover, or ten lovers. I don't hate him; I don't wish him ill. I just want him to stop being so stubborn about the settlement so we can be finished with this and move on. If he were interested in someone, he might want to get the divorce finalized and out of the way so he would be free. I know Richard, I know how he is when he focuses on one woman." For a moment Candra's voice softened, warmed with memory, and then she gave a little chuckle. "I had some vety good times."

Sweeney almost said Richard had asked her out. She wanted to ask exactly how good a time Richard showed a woman. For a moment the words lay on her tongue like ball bearings, ready to roll out. Caution made her swallow them. She had turned Richard down, so there was no point now in putting herself in the middle of this situation. Nor did she want to exchange girly talk on how good a lover Richard was, not that she knew or had any intention of knowing. She couldn't bear any more of this weird conversation, so she subtly changed the subject.

"I thought I would bring some new pieces to the gallery." Then she grimaced; damn, why had she blurted that out? Why couldn't she have come up with something else? She didn't want anyone to see the mess her work had turned into.

Candra laughed. "Enough of Richard, huh?" She shifted into business mode. "I'd love to see your new work. I've been so worried about you; you haven't been producing the way you were before. "
"Oh, I've been producing," Sweeney muttered.
"I know, you think it's crap. I admit, I've been consumed by curiosity, but I didn't want to push you. When can you bring them by? I want to be certain I'm here."
She was committed, damn it. She glanced out the window to check the weather. "If it doesn't start raining again, how about this afternoon?"
"Wonderful. I don't have any appointments, so I'll be here. See you then."
Sweeney hung up the phone, then hugged the blanket tighter around her. Damn it, damn it, damn it. This was it, then. She had to take some canvases in, let someone else see them. She cringed at the thought, but at least now she would know if what she was doing was awful, or salable. This uncertainty about her work was dreadful, paralyzing.
She shivered violently and swore under her breath. Damn, why couldn't she get warm?
Candra stretched to hang up the phone, then lay with her head pillowed on her arms. A large warm hand stroked her naked bottom. "No luck, huh?" Kai said. "I told you." He bent to press
kisses down her spine, more interested in his libido than her financial worries.
Normally she loved having sex with Kai. He was young enough to still be obsessed with sex, but old enough to have acquired some skill. There was a certain freedom in being with him, because he was so innately self-centered she had no qualms about focusing totally on herself, which intensified her pleasure. Now, however, she felt annoyed that he couldn't seem to grasp how important it was that Richard stop being such a hard-ass about the divorce settlement. She shrugged away from his kisses and buried her face in the pillow.
He merely shifted closer, pushing the damp head of his erection against her leg. The hand on her bottom curved downward, fingers probing.,
"Stop it," she said irritably, shaking her ass to dislodge his hand. "I don't feel like doing it again. You should be worried, too," she added spitefully. "If Richard doesn't back down on the money, you'll be out of a job."
"There are other jobs," he said, so blissfully unworried she wanted to slap him. He slipped his hand back between her legs, this time sliding two

fingers right in. Despite herself she couldn't stop her indrawn breath or the automatic arch of her back.
"Not at what I'm paying you-"
"I'll get by." Slowly he began moving his fingers in and out, and Candra. bit the pillow to hold back her moan. His ego was big enough as it was. Because she was so irritated with him, she wriggled once more, dislodging him again. "You were staring at Sweeney yesterday, too. I thought she wasn't your type."
A slow smile curved his lush mouth. "I'm not her type. Sweeney's cool, and all that hair gives a man ideas. Besides, the way that red sweater hugged her tits was something else."
"I didn't notice," Candra said frigidly.
"That relieves me, darling." K-ai leaned over and began kissing her spine again, this time down close to the twin dimples set high on her buttocks. He liked the idea of Candra being jealous, and that was what he was hearing in her voice. "But take it from me, her tits are fine." Candra went rigid with rage, and he chose that moment to push his fingers into her again, knowing her stiffness would make her less receptive, make the penetration rougher. Sometimes Candra liked being handled a little roughly. She stifled a moan, and he knew he had her.
The bedroom was silent for several minutes, except for her heavier breathing and the rustle of the sheets from their movements. Kai continued to work her with his fingers, until her thighs loosened and spread. "Do it," she ordered angrily, and immediately he moved behind her. She raised up a little on her knees, lifting her buttocks and giving him better access. His fingers were replaced by the hard, smooth thrust of his dick. She sighed and pushed her worries away to better concentrate on the physical pleasure. K Cai wouldn't stay around if she went out of business, damn his shallow hide, but for now he was here, so she might as well use him while she had him.
As soon as they had finished and she got her breath back, however, all her worries returned with a rush. She had so hoped she hadn't misread Richard yesterday afternoon. If he were involved with Sweeney, he might be more amenable to meeting her terms, just to get the divorce out of the way so he could concentrate on his new relationship.
She sighed. It had been a long shot, but at this point she was desperate enough to grasp at straws. Unfortunately, Sweeney was so oblivious to

everything but her work, she probably wouldn't notice that a man was attracted to her until he took off his clothes, and even then she might think he wanted her to sketch him. Richard wasn't a man who would play second fiddle in a woman's life, not even to talent, and Sweeney was undeniably talented.

Worry gnawed at her insides. If only Richard would back down-no, there was no sense in fretting about if onvs. That was like planning your future if you won the lottery: useless.

She knew she hadn't managed her money well; she had never had to. There had always been plenty of it, first her father's money, and by the time that was gone, there had been Richard's. But she wasn't stupid, she had learned from her mistakes. With the profit from the gallery and the lump-sum alimony Richard had agreed to pay, she would be able to manage-not as well as she would like, but she could manage-if she could pay off the mountain of debt hanging over her.

That was the real problem. When she thought ofwhat she owed, she broke out in a sweat. The amount was staggering to her now that she was on her own. After the split she had gone on a spending binge, furnishing her apartment with top-of-the-line everything, and she had taken several very expensive trips and bought new clothes. Somehow she hadn't thought Richard was serious about the divorce, and she'd spent all that money as a means of punishing him for scaring her so. But he was deadly serious about the divorce and had no intention of covering her new debts, even though he could probably pay them out of petty cash and never know the difference, if he just would.

Candra squashed a tinge of regret. There was no point in rehashing the past, and Richard was irretrievably in the past. All her attempts to smooth things over with him had been rebuffed. She imagined a tiny part of her would always miss him. It wasn't just the sex, though God knows that had been hot, at least for the first five years. None of her other lovers had ever matched Richard in bed.

What she missed most, though, was the security. Richard was a very secure man, a rock on which she could always depend. His attributes sounded like an ad in a singles column: reliable, intelligent, good sense of humor, great lover, honorable. By all means, don't forget "honorable." His damn standards were so high you'd think he'd been born in Buckingham Palace instead of on some little dirt farm in western Virginia.

It was her fault, though. She'd always known how he would react if he found out about the abortion. She had been so careful paying for it in cash so there was no chance of him finding a canceled check or a credit card slip. She hadn't liked having an abortion, but she hadn't seen another option. She didn't want a child; she had never wanted children,'not even when she was young and just married and wildly in love with him. Nor was having the child and giving it up for adoption a possibility, because Richard would have died before he let that happen. And it wasn't so much raising a child that she found so distasteful as actually being pregnant, having it wriggling around inside her like some larva, distorting her body and wrecking her life. No, abortion had been the only answer. The bloom had long since been off their marriage, had been ever since Richard discovered that little fling with ... what was his name? He hadn't been important, just a moment's entertainment. It had taken all her persuasiveness to keep their marriage together then, and she had been extremely cautious about her affairs after that; they weren't serious to her, but she had known Richard wouldn't see it that way. Still, she had no doubt they would have made the best of things and continued to rock along if she hadn't had too much to drink, if they hadn't been arguing, if she hadn't gotten so angry she had thrown the words at him like rocks, just for the satisfaction of hurting him. If, if, if. The mistake had been final.

Their marriage, in all but-the legal sense of the word, had ended on the spot. She accepted the blame. That didn't mean she would meekly accept whatever Richard deigned to give her. She had hoped he would become involved with Sweeney, because Sweeney, for all her quirkiness, had a soft heart. Moreover, Candra genuinely liked Sweeney and thought the regard was returned. Richard would do a lot to please a woman he wanted, as she had reason to know. If he wanted Sweeney, and she thought he did, and Sweeney urged him to generosity, there was a good chance he would do as she asked.

After speaking with Sweeney, though, Candra thought that scenario was shot. Her thought% jumped to the other plan she had formulated. She didn't like it, it wasn't without risk, but at this point it looked as if her best bet was Carson McMillan.

When you danced with the devil, or slept with him, it was a good idea to find out all you could about him and take steps to protect yourself. She knew a lot about Carson, things he wouldn't want known, though maybe she

wouldn't have to use them. Perhaps she could get him to believe the child had been his; the timing made it roughly possible, though of course she had no doubt Richard was the father. Yes, that might work. Tell him about the abortion, that it had been his, but when Richard found out about the child, he had assumed it was his and that was why they were being divorced. That would obligate Carson to cover some of her financial obligations. Yes, she would prefer doing it that way, if he balked, then she would bring out the big guns.

CHAPTER FIVE

The chill was worse. Sweeney sat huddled in the blanket, shivering continually. She felt as if she might die from the cold and had some fun imagining the medical examiner's perplexity at someone's dying of hypothermia in an eighty-degree apartment on a warm September day. She thought of going back to bed and getting under the electric blanket, but if she did that, she would have to admit she was sick, and she didn't want to do that. When the doorbell rang, she ignored it, because by staying huddled she could conserve what little heat she generated, and moving around made her even colder.

But it rang again, and again, and at last she struggled to her feet. "What!" she snapped as she neared the door.

There was a curiously muffled sound, and she stopped in her tracks, sufficiently city-smart not to go any closer. "Who is it?"

"Richard." Stunned, she stared at the wood panels. "Richard?"

"Richard Worth," he added helpfully. She thought she could hear laughter in his voice.

She thought of not opening the door. She thought of simply walking away and pretending she hadn't said anything. The thing was, he owned the building, and even though it wasn't the ritziest place in the world, she suspected he could get a lot more in rent than what she had been paying. And right now, she couldn't afford to pay more, so it behooved her to be polite to the landlord. That was the excuse she gave herself as she fumbled with the locks, and of course it was the cold that made her fingers tremble.

He stood in the hallway with its dingy, worn carpeting. He would have looked totally out of place, in his expensive Italian suit, if it hadn't been for those stevedore shoulders and that hard, almost-craggy face. Her artist's eye noted every detail, almost hungrily drinking them in; if she had hoped yesterday had been an aberration, the sight of him disillusioned her. Her stomach fluttered, her mouth watered just as it did when she saw cheesecake. This couldn't be a good sign.

He was smiling, but the smile quickly faded at the sight of her standing there swaddled in a blanket. His dark gaze went* swiftly down her, then returned to her face. 'Are you sick?" he asked in a brusque tone, stepping forward so that he crowded her back, and that easily he was inside her apartment. He closed the door and reset the locks.

"No, just cold." She moved away from the dangerously close proximity to him, scowling. "What are you doing here?" She felt terribly off-balance; she wasn't prepared to see Richard at all, much less be alone with him in her apartment. This was her sanctuary, where she could let down the guard she always kept between herself and the rest of the world, where she could relax and paint and be herself. Closing the door behind her often felt as if she had left a ton of chains in the hallway. Here she was free, but she could be free only if she was alone.
"I came to take you to lunch."
"I told you no yesterday afternoon." She hugged the blanket around her, suddenly self-conscious about how she must look. She was still wearing sweats, and she hadn't brushed her hair, so she knew it was bushed around her head in a wild tan0e. A lonLy curl hung in her eyes; she pushed it back and blushed, then scowled. She didn't like the feeling of embarrassment. She couldn't remember the last time she had cared what someone thought of how she looked, but ... but Richard was different. She didn't want him to be, but he was.
"That was for dinner." He eyed her critically, moving forward even more, frowning as he registered the heat in the apartment. "Why do you have it so hot in here?"
"I told you, I'm cold." Despite herself, her voice sounded querulous. He reached out and placed a warm hand on her forehead. She would have jerked back, but the warmth felt so good she felt herself lean a little into his hand.
A slight frown knit his forehead. "You don't seem to be feverish."
"Of course I'm not. I just told you, I'm cold."
"Then something is wrong, because it's hot in here."
"Says the man wearing a jacket." She sniffed in disdain and moved away from him to reclaim her seat in the corner of the couch, curling into herself for warmth.
He wasn't the least put off by her snappishness. "It's called a suit," he said, sitting down beside her. "Do you feel ill in any other way?"
"I don't feel ill at all. I'm just cold."
He regarded her stubbornly set face for a moment. "You know that isn't normal."
"Maybe my internal thermostat's messed up," she muttered, though she didn't really think so. The coldness had begun with the change, so she had

thought there was nothing she could do about it. On the other hand, the thought that she might actually be ill wasn't any more welcome. She didn't have time for illness, so she refused to be ill. It was that simple.
His dark eyes were sharp and probing as he continued to study her. "How long has this been going on?"
If she hadn't been so cold, she could have asserted herself, but it was difficult to sound assertive when anything she said was filtered through chattering teeth. Rather than appear ridiculous, she said, "I stay cold, most of the time, but this is the worst it's been."
"You need to see a doctor," he said decisively. "Come on, get dressed and I'll take you."
"Forget it." Pulling the blanket closer, Sweeney rested her head on her knees. Deciding to turn the pressure on him, she said, "You should have called before you came over."
"So you could tell me not to come? That's why I didn't call." He touched her hand and frowned at the iciness of her fingers. "Well, I can't go out, and you can bet your last penny I'm not going to cook for you. "
"I don't expect you to." He was still frowning as he watched her, half turned toward her with one arm resting along the back of the couch. She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering, wishing he would go. He was too close, and she was too cold. A woman couldn't muster her defenses when she had to concentrate on shivering.
"Okay," he said, getting to his feet as if he had made a decision. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and shrugged out of it. "What are you doing?" Sweeney demanded, sitting up in alarm. Even as she said it, the question struck her as stupid, since obviously she could see what he was doing. It was the why that alarmed her.
"Getting you warm." He plucked the blanket from her grasp and pulled it away. Before she could protest, he settled his jacket around her shoulders. The warmth was almost shocking. She inhaled sharply in relief as the heat sank into her spine. My God, the man must be like a furnace, for his jacket to absorb that much of his body heat. The sensation was so delicious she didn't notice him sitting down again until he scooped her onto his lap.
She went rigid with a brief moment of panic, then pushed hard at him as she swung one foot to the floor so she could stand. To her astonishment, he simply wrapped his arms around her and gathered her in as if she were a

child, lifting her feet onto the couch and holding her close. He tucked the blanket around both of them, making sure her feet were covered.
"Body heat," he said calmly. "That's one of the first things they taught us in army survival courses, to huddle together when we got cold."
Sweeney stilled, lured both by the incredible warmth wrapping around her and by the image his words brought up in her mind. She couldn't help smiling. "I can just see all you tough young soldiers cuddling together."
"Not cuddling, huddling. There's a difference." He laid his hand over her feet; she was struck by the fact that his hand was big enough to cover both of her feet. Heat began seeping through her socks to her icy toes.
Convulsive shivering suddenly shook her, despite the warmth of coat, blanket, and body, and Richard gathered her closer, tucking her head under his chin and pulling the blanket up so that her nose was covered, warming the air she breathed. "You're going to smother me," she protested.
"Not for a while yet." There was that note of laughter in his voice again, though when she rolled her head back to see, his mouth was perfectly straight. No, not straight; she paused, mesmerized by the clear cut of his lips. He had a good mouth, not too thin, not too full. Not so wide that a woman would feel as if she might fall in, and not so small it looked as if he'd just sucked a lemon like Ronald Trump's, or whatever his name was. All in all, Richard's lips looked just right.
"You're staring," he said.
Over the years she had been caught staring at people more times than she could remember, and usually it didn't bother her, but this time she blushed.
"I do that," she mumbled. "Stare at people. I'm sorry."
"It doesn't bother me. Stare away."
There was a warm, soft, indulgent tone in his voice that gave her another one of those alarming, exciting stomach flutters It occurred to her that sitting in a man's lap was not a good way to discourage his attentions, or flatten her own interest. On the other hand, pot only did she doubt he would let her get up, the warmth was so marvelous she didn't want to get up, at least not now. Though she still shivered, she could tell the body heat thing was working, because the shivers were lessening in intensity.
"When were you in the army?" She felt she' had to say something, because just sitting there was awkward, and if you
couldn't talk to a man when you were in his lap, then when could you?
“A long time ago, when I was young and macho."

"Why did you join? Or were you drafted?" She had no idea when the draft had been abolished.
"I joined. I didn't have any money for college, so that seemed like the best way to get an education. Turned out I had a knack for things military I would probably still be in if I hadn't stumbled on a knack for the stock market, too. The stock market is a lot more lucrative, and I wanted money."
"Well, you have it now."
"Yes, I do."
His body heat was seductive, melting her bones, leaching strength from her muscles. She felt herself sinking into him, molding to him like soft gelatin. The departing chill left her limp and sleepy, utterly relaxed. Not even the hard ridge forming under her bottom could alarm her. She yawned and stuck her cold nose into the warm curve where jaw joined neck. She felt him give a little jump, but then his arms tightened.
She should get up. She knew she should. This was asking for trouble. She wasn't a child, and she knew how sexual this situation was, and how much more sexual it could become. But the warmth ... ah, God, the warmth! She was comfortable for the first time since getting out of bed that morning, more comfortable, truly, than she had been in a long time, at least a year. An electric blanket didn't provide the same kind of heat as another body, didn't reach all the way down to the marrow of her bones. The army knew what it was about, making its young soldiers cuddle.
She yawned again and felt a chuckle rumble in his chest, his throat, though it never actually made it out. "Go to sleep," he murmured, deep voice soothing. "I'll take care of you."
Sweeney wasn't a trusting soul; a solitary woman couldn't afford to be. But she didn't have a moment's doubt that Pichard was a man of his word. She could feel sleep coming, heavy and delicious, and she gave herself up to it with a little sigh. "Don't let me sleep past one o'clock," she said, the words slurred, and closed her eyes.
One o'clock? Richard stifled his laughter. A glance at his wristwatch told him the time wasn't yet eleven-thirty. Sweeney evidently saw nothing wrong in expecting him to hold her in his lap for an hour and a half and let her sleep, disregarding all concern for any cramps he might develop or appointments he might have. The thing was, she was right. He would rather be right where he was than any other place he could think of.

His cell phone was in his coat pocket. Using his free hand, he carefully reached inside the jacket without disturbing her, though the back of his hand brushed her breast, which disturbed him. He ignored his aching erection and flipped open the flat little phone, pressing the buttons with his thumb. "I won't be going out to lunch," he said quietly when Edward answered. "Pick me up at one-fifteen."

"Very good, sir."

Richard ended the call and folded the phone. Sweeney stirred and nudged her nose against his neck, but didn't open her eyes. She was truly, deeply, asleep.

He shifted into a more comfortable position, settling his shoulders and easing his head back against the couch. He was going to be here awhile, so he might as well relax and enjoy it. Holding Sweeney on his lap was definitely enjoyable. He had a sneaking idea she had no clue how appealing she was, with her big blue eyes and curly mass of hair, but he had always thought she was one of the most attractive women he'd ever met. Not beautiful-attractive. People liked to look at her, talk to her. Men would have been swarming all over her if she had ever given any indication she was aware of them as men, not just sexless acquaintances. She was an expert at keeping people at a distance, blocking any but the most superficial contact. Until yesterday. He didn't know what had happened, but suddenly he had known her blinders were gone and she was aware of him personally, emotionally, sexually. God knows he had been aware of her, standing there with that red sweater molded to her breasts and those blue eyes getting wider and wider as she listened to the McMillans. He had almost been able to see some irrepressibly scathing comment welling up in her throat, because she was known for saying what was on her mind. In the world he moved in, such spontaneous honesty was so rare as to be almost nonexistent. People guarded their words and stuck to the polite, the politically correct, the inane. He knew Sweeney tried to be polite, but as she had said yesterday, her tolerance level for bullshit was really low.

She made him grin. Hell, she made him laugh. He had the feeling he could spend every day with her for twenty years and not know all of her quirks or exactly how her mind worked.

He liked her. He had dated other women since he and Candra had separated, but he had been careful to keep any relationships casual, and in fact hadn't really liked any of the women. Enjoyed them, yes, even been aroused by

them, but he had never felt any of them could be a friend. Maybe that was why he hadn't slept with any of them, which Candra would never believe, and in fact he astonished himself with his reticence. He missed sex. He wanted sex. He was so horny he was going through the torments of the damned, holding Sweeney on his lap, but the truth was he had turned down a lot of opportunities.

Legally, he was still married. He couldn't forget that. The marriage was over-he could barely tolerate being in the same room with Candra-but until a judge ruled the marriage was dissolved, he wasn't a free man. It wouldn't be fair to any woman to start a sexual relationship with her knowing he wasn't able to offer more. Until yesterday, when he had met Sweeney's eyes and felt that zing of attraction, it hadn't mattered. Now it did.

Gently he touched one of her curls, picking it up and stretching it out, marveling at its length. Straightened, her hair would reach over halfway down her back. He released the tension on the strand and it wrapped around his finger like a loose spring.

The chill she'd had worried him. The apartment's heat, added to the warmth of both her and the blanket draped over him, had sweat running down his face. Her face had been pale, her skin clammy. She had looked shocky, as if she had lost a lot of blood. Since that obviously wasn't the case, something else was wrong. Glancing down at her now, though, he saw a tinge of delicate color in her cheeks, and her face had lost the drawn look of hypothermia.

One unrestrained breast pressed against his rib cage. She was definitely braless, a detail he had immediately noted, with her chill pinching her nipples into tight little points. They had plumped out now, though, because he couldn't feel them pushing at him.

Not today, but one day soon, he would hold her naked breasts in his hands and rub his thumbs over her nipples and watch them pucker. He closed his eyes as he let himself imagine how it would feel to hold her beneath him and push deep into her. Making love to Sweeney would be a challenge; despite the startled awareness in her eyes, she was resisting doing anything about it. Part of it was scruples, yes; he understood that. But part of it was sheer stubbornness, an unwillingness to open herself up to him. She wanted her life just the way it was, without a man

around to distract her. She was good at keeping it that way, too, because judging from the comments Candra had dropped over the years, Sweeney

was practically a nun.
Not for much longer, though.
He closed his eyes and forced himself to relax, but as he began to doze, he remembered her charge-he would demand time and sex and things like that, he thought was the way she'd put it. She was right on the money. He went to sleep with a slight smile on his face.
In the army, he had trained himself to sleep for a specified length of time, no matter how brief, and wake up when he wanted. Now they were called power naps, but then he had called it staying alive. He shut out of his mind the uncomfortable heat, ignored it as if it didn't exist, another trick he had learned in training. When he woke half an hour later, he felt rested despite the fact that his shirt was wet with sweat. Sweeney was warm, too; she had pushed the blanket down from around her face, and her fingertips were pink. As he had expected, she began stirring just a few moments later, rather than the hour and a half she had given herself; sleep was the body's reaction to cold, and once warmth was restored, the sleepiness was gone.
He was looking down at her, so he saw her eyes pop open. Like flashes of lightning, her expression was startled, then flickered to alarm. She sat up suddenly, catching his balls beneath her and pinning them. He barely restrained a yelp and swiftly shifted her weight in his lap.
"Oh, God, I can't believe I did that," she muttered, scrambling off his lap in a tangle of blanket and coat.
"I can." Wincing, he eased into a different position.
She looked down, and her eyes widened. "I didn't mean that," she blurted. "I was talking about going to sleep in your lap. I'm so sorry" She bit her lip. “Are you all right?"
A chuckle burst through his clenched teeth. Gingerly he moved again, and the pain began to fade. "I don't know," he said, deliberately pitching his voice high.
She threw herself back against the couch, shrieking with laughter.
Richard bent over her, framed her face with his hands, and kissed her laughing mouth.
She went still, like a small animal trying to hide from a predator. Her hands came up to clasp his wrists, clever hands, the skin soft and sensitive over delicate bones. He wanted to crush her mouth with his, but he gentled his kiss, treasuring rather than taking. Her lips trembled, just a little. He opened them and sought her tongue with his. Heat roared through him, white-hot

and urgent. His entire body tightened with the need to cover and enter. Ruthlessly he restrained himself, knowing she was far from acceptance. Then she kissed him back. The movement of her lips and tongue were tentative, almost shy at first, and then a low moan vibrated in her throat and her grip tightened on his wrists. He felt tension invade her body, felt her strain upward even though she never left her seat beside him. He deepened the kiss, his tongue slow and sure, both taking and inviting.

She tore away from him, launching herself to her feet and stomping several feet away. When she whirled to face him, her expression was tight with anger. "No," she said, voice clipped. "You're married."

He got to his feet, gaze locked on her face. "Not for much longer."

She made an abrupt motion. "You're married now, and that's what counts. You're in the middle of an unfriendly divorce-"

"Is there any other kind?" he interrupted, tone as mild as if he were asking the time.

"You know what I mean. Candra's my business associate, and on top of that I like her."

"Most people do."

"Getting involved with you would be messy. It wouldn't be right."

His dark eyes narrowed. "Okay."

Her eyebrows arched in surprise. "Okay?"

"For now. Until the divorce is final. Then. . . He shrugged, letting the word trail off, but from the way he still watched her, shecouldfi re out what "then" entailed. "One question: What's gu

your first name?"

She gaped at him. "What?"

"Your first name. What is it? I refuse to call a woman I've slept with by her last name."

"We didn't-" she began, then scowled, because sleeping together was exactly what they had done. "You have to call me by my last name," she snapped. "Because it's the only name I'll answer to."

"Maybe. You might as well tell me," he said maddeningly "You had to fill out an application when you moved into the apartment. I can find out from that."

Her scowl deepened. "Paris," she said abruptly. He didn't follow. "What about it?"

"That's my name," she growled. "Paris. With one r Like the city, Like the dead Greek guy. Paris Samille, if you want the whole enchilada. And if you ever--ever-call me either one, I'll hurt you. "

Richard checked the time as he stood and picked up his jacket. He wasn't an idiot, so he didn't so much as smile. “All right," he agreed. "I promise I'll never call you anything you don't like." Before she could evade him, he bent and kissed her again.

"I'll lay off," he said softly. "For now. But when this divorce is final, I'll be back."

Sweeney didn't say anything, just watched silently as he let himself out of the apartment. Was that a promise, or a threat? The decision was up to her, and she had no idea which it would be. The only thing she knew for certain was that when he kissed her, she had left safety far behind.

Sweeney picked up first one canvas and then another, trying to decide which she should take to the gallery. She didn't like any of them, and the thought of anyone else seeing them embarrassed her. The bright colors looked childish to her, garish. Twice she started to call Candra and tell her she wouldn't be bringing anything over after all, but both times she stopped herself. If what she was doing was crap, she needed to find out for certain now before she wasted any more time. She didn't know what she would do if it was crap; therapy, maybe? If writers could have writer's block, the equivalent had to be possible for artists.

She could just hear it now; a therapist would solemnly tell her she was trying to resolve her childhood issues by hecoming a child again, seeing things through a child's eyes. Uh-huh. She had resolved her childhood issues a long time ago. She had resolved never to be like her parents, never to use her talent as an excuse for selfish, juvenile behavior, never to have children and then shunt them aside while she pursued her art. Her mother advocated free love and went through a period of trying to "free" Sweeney from her inhibitions by openly making love with her various lovers in front of her young daughter. These days, she would have been arrested. She should have been then, too.

The wonder, Sweeney thought grimly, was that she had had the courage to paint at all, that she hadn't gone into something like data processing or accounting, to get as far away from the art world as possible. But she had never considered not painting; it had been too much a part of her for as long as she could remember. As a little girl she had eschewed dolls, choosing

colored pencils and sketch pads as her favorite toys. By the time she was six, she had been using oils, snitching the tubes from her mother whenever she could. She could lose herself in color for hours, stand enraptured staring not just at rainbows but at rain, seeing clouds as well as sky, individual blades of grass, the sheen of a ripe red apple.

No, there had never been any question about her talent, or her obsession. So she had tried to be the best artist she could, and at the same time to be normal. Okay, so she sometimes slipped and forgot to comb her hair, and sometimes when she was working, she forgot and shoved her hands through said hair, leaving bright streaks of paint behind. That was minor. She wasn't promiscuous; she paid her bills on time; she didn't do drugs even on a recreational basis; she didn't smoke; she didn't drink. There wasn't a swag of beads anywhere in her apartment, and she was a regular June Cleaver in her personal life.

The most abnormal thing about her was that she saw ghosts, which really wasn't so bad, was it? Like maybe a sixtyseven on a scale of one to ten. Sweeney snorted. She could stand there and philosophize all day, or she could pack up some canvases and get them over to the gallery.

Because she had said she would, and because it didn't matter which she chose, finally she just picked three at random. She thought they were all equally bad, so what difference did it make?

As an afterthought, she picked up the sketch she had done of the hot dog vendor. She was pleased with that, at least. She had just guessed at how he would have looked at six years of age, as a teenager, as a young man, but she had kept that same sweetness of expression in all the sketches in the collage. She hoped he would like it.

Her mind made up, she left the apartment before she could talk herself into dithering further. The rain the day before had left the air fresh and sweet; after a moment, surprised, Sweeney had to admit the weather forecast had been accurate: it was a beautiful day. That weird chill was gone, chased away by Richard's body heat, and she felt warmer than she had in a long time. If it wasn't for the anxiety that kept gnawing at her, she would have felt great. She decided to enjoy being warm and forget about how she had gotten that way.

The hot dog vendor wasn't in his usual spot. Sweeney stopped, disappointed and unaccountably uneasy. As if she could will it into appearing, she stared

at the location where the cart was usually parked. He must be sick, because she had never before walked down this street without seeing him.
Worried, she walked on to the gallery. Kai rose from his desk and came forward to take the wrapped canvases from her. "Great! Candra and I have been talking about you. I can't wait to see what you're doing now."
"Neither can L" Candra said, coming out of her office and smiling warmly at Sweeney. "Don't look so worried. I don't think you're capable of doing a bad painting."
"You'd be surprised what I can do," Sweeney muttered. "Oh, I don't know," drawled a thin, black-clad man with stringy blond hair, sauntering out of Candra's office. "I don't think you've surprised any of us in a long time, darling."
Sweeney stifled a disgusted groan. VanDern. just the person she least wanted to see.
"Leo, behave yourself," Candra admonished, giving him a stern look.
At least, Sweeney thought, seeing VanDern chased away her anxiety. Hostility overrode anxiety any day of the week. Her eyes narrowed warningly as she looked at him.
Like her mother, he epitomized what she despised most, dramatizing himself by wearing black leather pants, black turtleneck, black Cossack boots. Instead of a belt, a hammered silver chain was draped around his skinny waist. He wore three studs in one ear and a hoop in the other. He was never clean-shaven, but cultivated the three-day-stubble look, expending more energy on appearing not to shave than he would have on shaving. She suspected he went months, certainly weeks, without washing his hair. He could go on for hours about symbolism and the hopelessness of modern society, about how man had raped the universe and how his single glob of paint on a canvas captured the pain and despair of all mankind. In his own opinion, he was as profound as the Dalai Lama. In hers, he was as profound as a turd.
Candra unwrapped the canvases and in silence set them on some empty easels. Sweeney deliberately didn't look at them, though her stomach knotted.
"Wow," Kai said softly. He had said the same thing about her red sweater the day before, but this time the tone was different.
Candra was silent, tilting her head a little as she studied the paintings.

VanDern stepped forward, glancing at the paintings and dismissing them with a sneer. "Trite," he pronounced. "Landscapes.
How original. I've never seen trees and water before." He examined his nails. "I may faint from the excitement. 11
"Leo," Candra said in warning. She was still looking at the canvases.
"Don't tell me you like this stuff," he scoffed. "You can buy pitchers' like this in any discount store in the country Oh, I know there's a market for it, people who don't know anything about art and just want something that's 'purty" but let's be honest, shall we?"
"By all means," Sweeney said in a low, dangerous voice, stepping closer to him. Hearing that tone, Candra snapped her head around, but she was too late to preserve the peace. Sweeney poked VanDern in the middle of his sunken chest. "If we're being honest, any monkey can throw a glob of paint on a canvas, and any idiot can call it art, but the fact is, it doesn't take any talent to do either one. It takes talent and skill to reproduce an object so the observer actually recognizes it."
He rolled his eyes. "What it takes, darling, is a total lack of imagination and interpretive skills to do the same old thing over and over again."
He had underestimated his target. Sweeney had been raised in the art world and by the queen of sly, savage remarks. She gave him a sweet smile.
"What it takes, darling"-her tone was an almost exact mimicry of his-"is a lot of gall to pass your kind of con off on the public. Of course, I guess you have to have something to offset your total lack of talent."
"There's no point in this," Candra interjected, trying to pour oil on the waters.
"Oh, let her talk," VanDern said, languidly waving a dismissive hand. "If she could do what I do, she would be doing it, making real money instead of peddling her stuff to the Wal-Mart crowd.
Candra stiffened. Her gallery was her pride, and she
resented the implication that her clientele was anything but the creme de la creme.
"I can do what you do," Sweeney said, lifting her eyebrows in exaggerated surprise. "But I outgrew it somewhere around the age of three. Would you like to make a small bet? I bet I can duplicate any of your works you choose, but you can't duplicate any of mine, and the loser has to kiss the winner's ass."

A low rumble sounded in Kai's throat. He turned his head, pretending to cough.
VanDern gave him a furious look, then turned his attention back to Sweeney. "How childish," he sneered.
"Afraid to take the bet, huh?" she said. "Of course not!"
"Then do it. I tell you what: I won't limit you to just my work. Pick a classic; duplicate a Whistler, a Monet, a van Gogh. I'm sure they would be worthy of your great talent."
His cheeks turned a dull red. He glared at her, unable to win the argument and equally unable to think of a graceful way of getting out of the bet. He glanced at Candra. "I'll come back later," he said stiffly, "when you have more time."
"Do that," she said, her tone clipped. Her annoyance was obvious. When the doors closed behind him, she turned to Sweeney. "I'm sorry He can be an arrogant jerk sometimes."
"Without straining," Sweeney agreed.
Candra smiled. "You more than held your own. He'll think twice before he challenges you again. He's hot right now, but fads pass, and I'm sure he knows his day in the sun won't last very long."
In Sweeney's opinion, VanDern thought he was the center of the universe, but she shrugged and let the subject drop. Candra returned her attention to the paintings, tapping one elegant nail on her bottom lip as she considered them. Sweeney's stomach knotted again.
"They're almost surreal," Candra murmured, talking to herself. "Your use of color is striking. Several shades seem to glow, like light coming through stained glass. A river, a mountain, flowers, but not like any you've done before."
Sweeney was silent. She had spent hours, days, staring worriedly at those canvases; she knew every brushstroke on them. But she looked at them again, wondering what she had missed, and saw that nothing had changed. The colors still looked strangely intense, the composition was a little off in some way she couldn't explain, the brushstrokes were a touch blurred. She couldn't tell if it was surreal, as Candra said, or exuberant. Maybe both. Maybe neither.
"I want more," Candra said. "If this is an example of what you've been doing, I want every canvas you've completed. I'm doubling your prices. I may have to come down in price, but I think I'm judging it right."

K-ai nodded in agreement. "There's energy here, a lot more than I've ever seen in your work. People will go nuts over these." Sweeney dismissed the bit about energy; that was just a buzzword. His last statement was more honest, an assessment of their marketability. Relief swamped her. Maybe she hadn't lost her talent, just her ability to judge it.
"What's that?" Candra said, indicating the folder holding the sketch of the hot dog vendor.
"A sketch I made of a street vendor," Sweeney said. "I want to give it to him." She shivered suddenly, a chill roughening her skin. Damn it, she had been enjoying feeling warm, but the warmth hadn't lasted long.
"I'll have these framed immediately," Candra said, turning back to the paintings. 'And bring the others. I'd like to make a
full display of them, place them close to the front so the light is better and they're the first thing clients see when they come in. I promise, these are going to fly out the door."
Walking back home, Sweeney hugged herself against the cold. She was relieved at Candra's reaction to the paintings, but for some reason she couldn't enjoy her relief. The uneasy feeling was growing stronger.
She reached the corner where the old vendor had always been, but it was still empty. She stopped, a great sadness welling in her as she wondered if she would ever see him again. She wanted to give him the sketch, wanted to know if she had accurately deduced his childhood features from the facial structure of an old man. She wanted to see that sweet smile.
"Hi, Sweeney," said a soft voice at her elbow.
She looked around, and delight speared through her. "There you are," she said joyfully. "I thought you must be sick-" She halted, shock replacing delight. He was faintly translucent, oddly two-dimensional.
He shook his head. "I'm all right. Don't be worryin" about me." The sweet smile bloomed in his dark face. "You got it right, Sweeney. That's just how I used to look."
She didn't say anything else. She couldn't. She wanted to weep, she wanted to say she was sorry she hadn't gotten it right sooner, so she could have given him the sketch.
"Do me a favor," he said. "Send it to my boys. Daniel and Jacob Stokes. They're lawyers, my boys, both of them. Fine men. Send it to them."
"I will," she whispered, and he nodded.

"Go on now," he said. "I'll be fine. I just had some loose ends needed takin" care of."
"I'll miss you," she managed to say. She was aware of people giving her a wide berth, but they were New Yorkers; no one stopped, or even slowed.
"I'll miss you, too. You always brought the sunshine with you. Smile now, and let me see how pretty you are. My, my, your eyes are as blue as heaven. That's a mighty nice sight. . . "
His voice became gradually fainter, as if he were walking away from her. Sweeney watched him fade, becoming more and more transparent until there was nothing left except a faint 9101; where he had stood.
The chill was gone. She felt warm again, but frightened and sad. She wanted to be held the way Richard had held her that morning, but he wasn't here, and he wasn't hers. She didn't have him. She was alone, and for the first time in her life she didn't like it.

CHAPTER SIX

Chandra took the early shuttle from New York to D.C. the next morning. The capital suited her purposes better, so she didn't mind the inconvenience. For one, seeing him in D.C. was easier than seeing him in New York, where he was seldom in his office. She would have had to either go to his house or call him there for an outside meeting, and she preferred not to.
Perhaps Margo knew about her affair with the senator, but perhaps not. Despite her own stupidity in telling Richard about the abortion when she should have kept her mouth shut, Candra didn't believe in unnecessarily hurting or humiliating anyone.
Margo might not care how many women Carson banged, but she definitely wouldn't want him banging them in her house. Knowing what she knew about him, Candra wouldn't be surprised if he insisted on having sex right there in the office, before he even knew why she was there. She smiled thinly, humorlessly First he would fuck her, then she would fuck him; she thought that was fair.
She had taken extra pains with her appearance that morning, not to attract attention but to avoid it. On went the black business suit, the staid black pumps with one-and-a-halfinch heels. Her earrings were plain gold hoops; she left off all rings and exchanged her wafer-thin, impossibly elegant

Piaget wristwatch for an old Rolex, one her father had given her when she was sixteen. She doubted it had cost more than a couple of thousand. A Rolex wouldn't stand out in the capital, where status was everything and Rolexes were as common as embassy plates.
She brushed her hair more severely and toned down her makeup. She wouldn't stand out; she would look like thousands of businesswomen or lobbyists. She didn't want to be memorable, should anyone see her. It was, perhaps, a foolish precaution on her part, but then she had never before blackmailed anyone and she thought some discretion was needed.
Today was Margo's regular day at Elizabeth Arden; since the trip to Rome had been postponed, she would go about her normal routine, and Margo was a fanatic about pampering her looks. With Margo safely in New York, Candra didn't worry that Carson had told her to come to his town house in the capital. Doing so actually suited her better, because she wouldn't have enjoyed the crassness, the utter distastefulness, of being screwed on an office desk with a troop of aides just outside the door.
At the airport, she hailed a taxi and sat quietly in the backseat, not encouraging the driver's occasional attempts at conversation. To her surprise, she felt the beginning flutters of excitement and anticipation she normally felt when she knew she was going to have sex. Until now her mind had been completely on what she would say afterward, but now she began to think about the act itself. Carson had little technique but a lot of vigor, and sometimes, when she was feeling a little nasty, that was just what she wanted.
He had to be in his office at ten-thirty. She would have an hour with him. That would be sufficient.
Carson met her at the door himself, smiling and saying all the inane social things in case anyone was listening. He had staff here, of course, at least a cook and a housekeeper. He was very good looking, Candra. thought, smiling up into that almost classical face. How odd that she actually preferred Richard's more rugged looks. Richard was one of those men who was so overtly male a woman couldn't help looking at him. She gave herself a small mental shake; she had to stop thinking about him, because she had lost him. That part of her life was over, and she had to make a success of this new chapter or lose everything.
"You said there was something urgent you needed to discuss with me," Carson said for the benefit of anyone listening, smiling smugly as he

escorted her into his office and shut the door, locking it behind him. He thought he was being smooth about it, but Candra was listening for that small click. She was glad he was taking care they wouldn't be interrupted, and if he hadn't locked the door, she would have done it herself.
He grabbed her breasts the moment he turned around, and maneuvered her toward the large sofa. She barely had time to place her bag on the floor before he bore her down on the expensively upholstered cushions, already tugging her skirt up and his zipper down. "We have to hurry," he panted, shoving into her and immediately moving into a fast, pounding rhythm. "Before Margo comes down."
"What?" Candra gasped, instinctively pushing against his shoulders. All her initial excitement was gone. Ugly scenes didn't appeal to her, and she had no doubt Margo could enact the ugliest of ugly scenes.
The senator pulled her hands away from his shoulders and pinned them to the sofa, his face set. He didn't intend to let a little thing like his wife's presence in the house keep him from doing what he wanted. Candra held herself still and silent, not wanting to either slow him down or draw attention to the office. Mentally she urged him to hurry God, the stupid arrogance of the man! Regardless of how much Margo enjoyed the status of being a senator's wife, or how much she looked forward to the White House, there was a limit to what she would turn a blind eye to. Knowing about Carson"s indiscretions was one thing; seeing them for herself was very different.
Clinically she watched as his face turned red from effort, and the veins in his neck stood out. He hadn't even loosened his tie. His thrusts moved her back and forth on the sofa.
If he noticed her lack of response, he didn't care. Within two minutes he stiffened, his pelvis jerking and his face twisting into a carnal parody of pain. Odd, she thought, how something that was exciting when she was turned on was distasteful when she wasn't.
He pulled out of her, panting, and took out- a handkerchief to wipe himself clean. "Do you have another of those?" she murmured, and seeing his blank look, added, "The handkerchief."
"No, this is the only one." He started to fold it and return it to his pocket-disgusting-but Candra took it from him and folded it herself, touching it as little as possible, and tucked it between her legs.
He looked uneasy. "It's monogrammed."

"I'll give it back to you," she said impatiently. "Or would you rather I destroy it?"
"Burn it," he said, but he still looked unhappy about her having his handkerchief. Too bad he didn't apply that caution to the rest of his behavior, she thought.
She sat up and straightened her clothing, within moments looking as if nothing had happened. Nothing had, for her, she thought.
"Sit down," she said. "I do have something to discuss with you. 11
"Of course, anything I can do to help." His own clothing restored to respectability, he sat down behind his desk, made of good old American oak. He was always careful not to flaunt his wealth where his constituents might see, here in his D.C. home and in his office. His home in New York, however, was as luxurious as a palace, with imported everything.
He smiled at her now, the smooth, urbane smile of a man who knows he has power. In coming to him like this, he thought she was going to ask him for a favor. His hazel eyes glittered; during their sporadic relationship, Candra had firmly refused to do anything more than occasionally accommodate him. Carson was accustomed to calling the shots, accustomed to having women do his bidding, and her cool distance both annoyed and challenged him. Of course, she had further annoyed him by making their encounters as memorable as possible.
"Two years ago," she said, "I had an abortion."
"I trust you had good care. I've always supported legislation to-"
"I'm not interested in what you've supported," she interrupted. "Carson, the child was yours. But when Richard found out I'd had the abortion, he thought it was his. That's the basis of the trouble between us."
"Really." He leaned back in his huge leather chair, steepling his fingertips together. "How interesting. But why are you telling me this?"
His expression hadn't even flickered at the news that she had supposedly aborted his child. That wasn't the reaction she had hoped for. "Richard is being difficult about the settlements, and without going into detail, he's in a position to win. I could use some financial help, just this one time."
"To the tune of how much?" he asked mildly.
Unease prickled her spine. This wasn't going quite as she had imagined. A million would take care of all her debts, letting her start fresh, but because she was uneasy she said, "Half a million."
"That's a lot of money." He shrugged. "Your pussy isn't that good."

She didn't react to the crudity. She was aware, after all, of just how crude he could be.
"I wonder just how you managed to get pregnant," he mused. "You always told me you were on birth control pills." "An accident. I had a respiratory illness, and the antibiotic I took affected the pills."
"Unfortunate. However, I sincerely doubt the child was mine. I had a vasectomy some years ago."
Anger curled in her stomach, but she controlled it. He thought he had just played her for a fool. If, however, he thought that was her only approach, he would be unpleasantly surprised. "Did you? You never mentioned it to me."
"Why would I? You were on the pill anyway, and I've never been fool enough to think I was the only man fucking you. The vasectomy was insurance against this kind of blackmail."
"Now, that's interesting," she said smoothly. "I took out a form of insurance, too. I've never underestimated you, Carson, but I do believe you've underestimated me."
"In what way?" To her gratification, he did look a little wary.
She leaned over and took an envelope and a tiny tape player from the large bag she had carried. His face went stony when he saw the tape player.
"Oh, it isn't on," she said. "It doesn't record, anyway; it's just a player. Our little tryst was private. Others, however, weren't." She punched the "play" button and sat back.
With satisfaction she watched his face blanch as voices filled the room, scratchy but recognizable. She had made the tape at a raunchy little orgy she had staged at the beginning of their relationship, while Richard was in Europe for several days and she had plenty of time. She had done it deliberately, of course, because she had never had any illusions about Carson and suspected that one day she might need a club with which to bludgeon him.
She turned the tape player off, ejected the cassette, and tossed it to him, then placed the envelope on his desk. "Keep it," she said. "It's your personal copy. The accompanying pictures are in the envelope."
His jaw bulged with rage, and he flushed a dark red. "You bitch." The words were low, as if he couldn't manage anything more.
"I don't suppose I have to tell you I have the originals, in a very safe place."
"You're incriminated by these tapes, too." He was breathing hard.

"Yes, but I don't have a career to lose. Of course, your constituents are pretty liberal, they might say live and let live. I don't think the other senators would agree, though, especially those you've fucked over the years. They would enjoy having evidence of their esteemed colleague's illegal behavior." Her tone was rich with irony.
Murderous hatred was in his eyes. Candra controlled a shiver. It was a risk, crossing Carson like this, and she had walked in here knowing it. That was why she had made certain her weapon against him was so powerful he couldn't ignore it.
"This won't be an ongoing thing," she said impatiently "Just this once. You can afford the money, and I need it."
"Sure," he said sarcastically. "I'm supposed to take your word for it."
"I'll send you the originals as soon as I have the money." She meant it. What she wouldn't send him was the videotape she hadn't mentioned. She would use that only if he tried to get revenge.
Of course, he had no way of being positive anything she gave him was the original, no way of ever being sure there were no more copies in existence. Blackmail was forever.
She placed a small piece of paper on his desk. "This is my bank and account number. Wire the money into it. I opened the account just for this, and I'll close it after I get the money. I trust I won't be audited by the IRS either, so you really should hope the random audits miss me."
He didn't pick up the paper. Candra got to her feet and looped her purse strap on her shoulder. "I had the cab wait.
Don't bother seeing me out." When she got to the door, she unlocked it, then paused and looked over her shoulder at him. "By the way ... make it a million."
The front door had barely closed behind Candra when Margo entered Carson"s office. Her face was white and rigid. You fool , she said scathingly. "You stupid, goddamn fool, always thinking with your dick instead of your head."
"Shut up," he snarled, erupting from his chair. "What were you doing, listening at the door?"
She walked over and punched a button on the intercom console. "I opened the intercom when I found out she was coming here. You think you're so damn smart, but you never check to see if the intercom is open."

He grabbed her by the arm, his powerful fingers biting into her flesh. "Don't take that tone with me," he warned.
"Or you'll what? Divorce me? I don't think so." She jerked her arm free and picked up the envelope Candra had left. Carson made a move for it, but Margo stepped away and opened it, removing the pictures.
She looked at them, and ugly red color splotched her cheeks. She flipped through the photographs, and her mouth contorted. She whirled, her hand lashing out with all the strength in her arm behind it, catching him full across the face. His headerked around under the impact.
Slowly he looked at her. His face was white except for the imprint of her hand. His eyes burned like coals.
Margo was shaking. "You're worse than a fool; you're the most imbecilic egomaniac I've ever known, and it takes some doing to top my father. I haven't put up with you all these years to let you fuck things up now, with everything in place for the next election. You have to do something."
"I'll pay the goddamn money. I don't have any choice."
"What if she wants more?"
"I'll handle it. Just shut the fuck up. I'm not in any mood for your shit. "
"Tough." She threw the pictures at him. They hit him in the face and fluttered to the floor, eight-by-ten glossies. "I hope you've had an AIDS test."
"Don't be stupid. How long do you think that would stay confidential?"
She almost screamed with rage. "You'd risk my life rather than risk having someone find out you'd taken an AIDS test," she said, her voice trembling. "You fret about a stupid handkerchief. How in hell can you be careful about a handkerchief but let yourself be photographed having sex with a man? Those are great pictures, by the way. The only thing more ridiculous than your expression while you screw him is the look on your face while he's screwing you! Face red, mouth open-"
He backhanded her, knocking her against the desk. The contact was so satisfying he wanted to hit her again. "Shut up," he said between clenched teeth. "We had snorted some coke, or it never would have happened!"
Slowly Margo straightened, hand to her aching cheek. Her hip throbbed where she had hit the desk. Hatred and disgust congealed in her stomach. "I don't suppose it ever occurred to you not to take illegal drugs. There's a picture of that, too. Won't that look lovely on the evening news?"

"She won't release the pictures. If she does, she won't have any means of getting more money from me." He was confident of that, at least. You never went wrong betting that someone would protect their own interests.
"You don't know what she'll do," Margo said sharply. "Your track record so far isn't anything to brag about. You have to take care of this, and you have to do it now. Offer her two million for the originals."
"And you call me a fool," he sneered. "There's no way to tell if she gave me the originals. And even if there were, she could have any number of copies made."
"Then you'd better think of something." She was breathing hard, her nostrils flared. 'And you'd better think fast."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Richard didn't have a downtown office.
Instead he had converted the bottom floor of his town house into a small office complex: an office for him, with the state-of-the-art computer with which he worked his market magic; small offices for his two assistants; a tiny kitchen; two bathrooms, one connecting to his office and the other shared by his assistants; and two rooms for storage and files. The arrangement was extremely convenient should he want to work late into the night or even all night.
Every day, he had one objective: to make as much money as possible.
He had spent most of his adult life amassing wealth. He enjoyed the challenge of anticipating and outguessing the market, but the pleasure was only moderate. He had known poverty and he hadn't liked it, so when he was old enough to do something about it, he left home, joined the army, and set about learning skills that would enable him to make money. He hadn't learned quite fast enough. Pops, his grandfather, had died before Richard could do much to alleviate the grinding poverty of the little farm in western Virginia where he had been born and raised. At least his mother's last years had been better; if she planted a garden, it was because she wanted to, not because she had to in order to eat.
Poverty ground you down, turned you into a social parasite, or it made you tough. Pops had eschewed welfare as charity, and instead worked his small acreage as well as taking any other work he could find. Richard's mother

had taken in sewing and ironing. When he himself was old enough he had not only helped with the farming chores but hired himself out for small jobs such as cutting the grass, helping cut and haul hay, the odd carpentry job where function mattered more than appearance.
He had only a vague, maybe wishful image of his father, and a grave in the small country graveyard to visit a few times a year, but from his grandfather he had learned that men didn't lie around all day drinking beer and collecting what the old man called "damn government handouts" once a month, men got out and worked. So Richard worked, and worked hard. Survival of the fittest. You either surrendered, or you fought like hell to better your position.
He'd never been ashamed of his poor country roots, the roots that made him strong, though Candra was embarrassed enough by his origins to insist he say only that he was "from Virginia. " If he had let her, she would have invented an antebellum mansion in his background and had one of his ancestors signing the Declaration of Independence.
He had taken steps to ensure he was never poor again. His investments were varied, to weather the hiccups and burps of the market, and he had put money into gems and precious metals as a hedge against a market crash. It was a high, a challenge, a game, to gather tiny details of information and decide which stocks would increase in value and which were in trouble. He seemed to have a sixth sense for it, and he had long ago gained the amount he had set in his mind as "enough," but he kept playing the market, and kept getting richer.
It was eating at Candra's soul that she couldn't get a bigger share of his wealth.
The thought of her brought a bitter taste to his mouth. He supposed he had loved her, in the beginning, though she might have been just a challenge, like the market. From a distance of over ten years he couldn't remember exactly how he had felt about her, though he knew what had attracted him. Candra had been-still was-very attractive, with impeccable social credentials backed by old money, and blessed with an outgoing, friendly personality. If anything, she was too friendly, especially with other men. Their marriage had already been in trouble when he first learned about her affairs, and by that time he simply hadn't cared enough about her infidelities to do anything about them. She thought he knew about only one lover, but he was far from a fool. He had made it his business, over the years, to find

out about all her lovers. He knew about Kai. He knew about Carson McMillan. He knew about all the artists she slept with, which social acquaintances found their way into her bed. After he stopped caring, he used her occasionally for sex, and used a condom, even though she was on birth control pills. She had never asked why. He supposed she knew. Unfortunately, condoms sometimes tore. Two years ago, one had, and combined with some antibiotics she had been taking, that had been enough for her to get pregnant. Not that she had told him, not at the time. Instead she had gotten an abortion.

He wanted children, had always wanted them. When they were first married, Candra had wanted to wait, and he had agreed because his financial position hadn't been as strong as he wanted it to be before he had any children. By the time he felt prosperous enough, Candra had already begun taking lovers and he had lost all desire to have any children with her. But when she told him what she had done, threw the words at him like weapons, everything inside him had hurt at the thought of that small lost life, and from that second on he hated her.

He hadn't spent another night under the same roof with her, but packed her bags and carried her to a hotel, with her crying and cursing, and swearing that she hadn't really done it, that she had only said so because she wanted to hurt him. And he had rousted a locksmith out in the middle of the night and had the locks changed on the town house. Candra had been forced to make appointments to pick up the rest of her belongings, a humiliation that had galled her soul.

He knew she had told all her friends and acquaintances that the decision to divorce was mutual. He didn't care what she said. All he wanted was to get the divorce finalized and never see her again. This was something he should have done years ago, rather than burying himself in the pursuit of wealth. He had known for quite a while, in the back of his mind, that the time would come when he would look at her and realize he couldn't bear living in their sham of a marriage a moment longer. He had stayed with her for his own reasons, using her sexually with little emotion, as if she were a stranger, and because of that his child had died. He should have left her long before that tiny lost life had been conceived.

Lately he had been restless, consumed by the sense it was time to move on. He had made his millions sifting through stock information, but he sure as hell didn't want to spend the rest of his life staring at a computer screen

analyzing profit margins and product demand. There was no challenge in it any longer, and he was a man who thrived on challenge. He had enjoyed his army years because of the sheer challenge of the specialized training in the rangers, the sense of testing himself in life-and-death situations. He could have made a career of the military, if he hadn't been driven by the need to make a lot of money, enough so his mother and grandfather would never have to worry about money again.

Mission accomplished. It was time to move on.

Sweeney's face flashed in his mind, and he leaned back in his chair, grinning. Now, there was a challenge.

After Candra's laxity in the morals department, Sweeney's refusal to go out with him because the divorce wasn't final and he was still legally married gave him the feeling of having held something clean and fresh in his arms. His mother and grandfather had possessed that same stringent attitude, seeing behaviors as black and white. The concept of doing whatever you wanted, because you wanted, was foreign to them. That was common enough in their generations, in that part of the country How had Sweeney come by those standards?

Because he wanted to know everything about her, he'd had a copy of her application for the apartment faxed to him. Paris Samille Sweeney, age thirty-one, artist. She hadn't lied about her name, though he bet she cringed at the pretentiousness of being an artist and having Paris as a first name. Anyone else would have played it up for all it was worth, but instead she ignored her given names, to the extent that she was known exclusively by her surname.

Her mother's occupation was also listed as artist, but he didn't recognize her name, and after ten years of marriage to Candra he was very familiar with the art world. He did recognize Sweeney's father's name; the man was moderately successful in Hollywood. A brother was down as next of kin. Richard wondered why she hadn't listed either of her parents.

Bare facts weren't enough. He wanted to know her, what she liked to eat for breakfast, her favorite books and movies, whether she slept sprawled out or curled in a ball. He wanted to strip her naked and spend all night on top of her, inside her. He knew she wanted him, too, though she seemed surprised by her own lust. He grinned again, remembering the look on her face when she jumped away from him as if he were a lit stick of dynamite. This was going to be fun, and frustrating as hell. He'd had a hard-on for two days,

and it didn't show any signs of going away soon. All he had to do was think about Sweeney and his dick started throbbing, and he hadn't been able to think about anything else. The abstinence of the past year had been a bitch anyway, and now -it was becoming unbearable.
In attitude, she was Candra's polar opposite. Candra was very conscious of her beauty, her appearance, and dressed according to the image she wanted to project. Sweeney had no idea how pretty she was, and from what he could tell, she threw on whatever was closest to hand. Candra was socially adept; Sweeney was constitutionally unable to play social games, assuming she even recognized them. Candra was social, period; Sweeney was a loner. Getting her to admit him into her life was going to take perseverance and careful planning-perseverance more than anything else. Most of all, Candra's attitude toward sex was casual and permissive, while Sweeney was so exclusive she was startled by a kiss.
He wanted her. In bed, out of bed, it didn't matter. If he couldn't coax her into a relationship so he could seduce her, then he would have to seduce her in order to coax her into a relationship. He didn't want her just for sex; he wanted to spend time with her; she was the only woman with whom he had ever wanted to watch the evening news, just to get her take on things. Sweeney might be in the same parade, but she was definitely marching along to a different rhythm.
And Candra. was in the way.
He picked up the phone and called his lawyer, Gavin Welles. He was put through immediately. "This has been going on long enough," he said without preamble. "Get it finished."
"Considering the amount of your assets, a year isn't a long time. Be patient," Gavin advised. "Your position is strong. and sooner or later Candra will realize she's throwing away a fortune in legal fees. She'll cut her losses."
"I'm going to make her losses bigger every day she delays. Call her lawyer and tell her I'm reducing the settlement offer by ten thousand every day. After five days, if she hasn't signed the papers, I'm rescinding my offer to sign over the gallery to her."
Gavin was silent a moment. "She'll fight to the bitter end for the gallery, and you know it."
"And she knows that in the bitter end she'll lose. I want her out of my life. This isn't a bluff, Gavin. I should have forced her hand months ago, but I

wanted to do what I thought was right. That's over. Give her lawyer the message." He hung up and sat back, his expression grim.
In his downtown office, Gavin Welles shrugged and placed a call to Olivia Yu, Candra's attorney. When she heard Richard's ultimatum, her responding blast nearly ruined Gavin's eardrums. "That bastard! Was he serious?"
"Serious as a heart attack," Gavin said.
"What the hell brought this on? I could have eventually convinced Candra she had the best offer she was likely to get, but she's going to hit the ceiling over this. He must have her replacement waiting in the wings."
Gavin had already thought of that possibility, but he was too discreet to say so. "Not to my knowledge."
"Bullshit. He has a little honey lined up and you know it."
"So what if he does?" Richard could have slept with a different woman every night, in the middle of Times Square, and his position wouldn't have been weakened.
Olivia knew it. Only Candra's reluctance to settle for what she thought was an unfairly minuscule amount had kept her from signing the papers before now. Olivia had tried to make her see she couldn't hope for anything more, but Candra had seemed almost desperate for more money. 'All right, I'll call her. You'd better take cover under your desk."
"What?"
Contrary to Olivia's expectations, Candra's reaction was a horrified whisper, not an outraged shriek. Olivia repeated the terms.
"He can't do that! We've already agreed-"
"You haven't signed the papers," Olivia said pointedly. "Legally, he isn't bound by his offer because you refused it. He can do anything he likes."
"But the gallery is mine. I'm the one who searched out artists, who built their reputations and made the gallery profitable. He can't take it!"
"His money bought the building. His money backed the
gallery, got it started. His name is on all the checks paying all the bills. A smart lawyer-and believe me, Gavin Welles is smartcould make the argument that Richard is the driving force behind the gallery and you were little more than window dressing. You should have incorporated the gallery in your name, but that's hindsight." In Olivia's profession, she saw incredible financial stupidity every day.
"I would have if I'd had any warning," Candra said. Her voice was wretched. "One day we were fine, then we had that argument and the next

day he filed for divorce. I didn't have time to do anything to protect myself."
The time to protect yourself, in Olivia's opinion, was while everything was still fine. The point was moot, the water long since passed under the bridge. She wondered what the argument had been about; Candra had never said, but it must have been total war, to have triggered such an abrupt and final break. Whatever the reason, in their meetings Richard had been cold, ruthlessly controlled, and absolutely unyielding. He hadn't compromised on a single issue, and now he was taking an even more hard-ass position.
"I'll talk to him," Candra said. She sounded on the verge of tears.
Candra . Olivia sighed. "What good can it do? Name one tiny detail he's budged on. Sign the papers, before you lose another ten thousand
"I'll get him to reinstate that ten thousand. promise to sign the papers if he does."
Candra hung up and closed her eyes. She felt sick to her stomach, so ill she thought she might actually throw up. A year ago ten thousand had seemed like pocket change to her, but now it was essential. She hadn't heard from Carson, but then she
hadn't expected to so soon. Blackmail wasn't a sure thing, and until Carson came through with the money, she couldn't afford to let a penny slip away. After all, what could she do if he refused to pay blackmail? Making the photos public would ruin his career, perhaps even initiate a criminal investigation because of the drug use, but that wouldn't put any money in her pocket. It would, in fact, totally negate that threat. Her only hope was that he feared exposure enough to pay the money
God, what had set Richard off? When he had come to the gallery two days before, he had been as cold and stubborn as ever, but though he had tried to convince her to sign the papers then, he hadn't issued any threats. She didn't have any choice about signing, of course, not now. Why hadn't he done this then?
He had to have a reason. Richard always had a reason. He was the least emotional, most logical person she had ever met, something that had made her feel very secure when they were married. No matter what, she had always been able to count on Richard to figure out the best way to handle any situation.
This ultimatum wasn't a bluff; he would do exactly what he, said. He wanted the papers signed and the divorce expedited. The question was:

Why now? Why not two days ago, or two months ago? He could have done this at any time and the outcome would have been the same.
He had an urgent reason now, one that he hadn't had two days before. It had to be a woman. Just because she hadn't found out about any women he'd had since they separated didn't mean he'd been living like a monk. She knew Richard's sexual appetite, and she also knew women automatically gravitated to him, as if he gave off subliminal signals that said he liked it slow, and often. He also held some ridiculously old-fashioned opinions; if he had accidentally gotten some woman pregnant, he would insist on marrying her. That was another thing she knew about Richard, she thought bitterly: He didn't take a pregnancy lightly.
On the other hand, neither did he tend to repeat his mistakes. Accidents happened, but he would be doubly careful now. No, more than likely he was interested in another woman.
Candra thought of someone taking her place, sleeping in her bed, waking up with Richard, eating breakfast with him, and she wanted to scream. She would have done anything to be able to turn back the clock, undo this past year, but she couldn't and she had to stop wasting time with useless regrets. She had to think. Sweene Of course!
A flash of intuition told her she was right. She hadn't been wrong about that flare of attraction, or the way Richard had stared at Sweeney. Maybe Sweeney was oblivious to Richard-if any woman could be, Sweeney was that woman-but that didn't mean he was oblivious to her. On the contrary, he would enjoy the challenge of enticing her into a relationship.
Candra could work this to her advantage. She knew she could.
"You're plotting something," Kai said, coming into her office without knocking. She frowned; he was becoming entirely too cocky. She would have to trim his wings soon.
On the other hand, at least she could talk to him. "I think I was right about Richard and Sweeney. All of a sudden he's in a hurry to finalize the divorce."
"He's agreed to your terms?" Kai's eyes glittered. The thought of money did that to him.
"No, he's still playing hardball, but now I think I can at least get in the game."
"You're playing with fire," he warned. "Richard won't tolerate threats."

"Then he shouldn't make them," she snapped. "Oh? What threats has he made?"
"Never mind." Kai didn't know Richard owned the gallery If he did, he might well quit on the spot and leave her in the lurch. She had no illusions about his loyalty. He was, however, a valuable asset; many of her female clientele were blunt about his attractions and abilities.
"'What are you going to do?"
"Talk to him." Rising, Candra. picked up her expensive leather tote that doubled as briefcase and purse. Luckily she hadn't gone home to change; she was still wearing the conservative suit she had worn to D.C. that morning. She would take any edge she could get, no matter how tiny.
"Why not just call?" K ai suggested.
"I'd rather talk to him in person." If she called, Kai wasn't above listening in, and he would find out about the gallery. "What makes you think he'll see you?"
A couple of times Richard had refused to let her in, to Kai's malicious amusement and Candra's fury "Oh, I think he's expecting me this time Richard's gaze flickered immediately over the suit. "Trying out for a part on Broadway?" he asked, letting her know he saw through the little subterfuge. She controlled her irritation. She should have remembered how detail-oriented he was, noticing everything.
"I had a business appointment this morning," she said, which wasn't a lie. Rather than take her upstairs to the living area, he led her to his bottom-floor office, telling her without words she no longer belonged here, if the notion needed to be reinforced. To him, she was nothing more than unfinished business-unpleasant business, at that.
he was always surprised at how small and spartan his office was, though of course he had been limited in space by the size of the town house. He could have done more with the furnishings or let her do more. Everything in the office was utilitarian, even his big, custom-made leather chair.
"I see your lawyer told you about my new terms," he said coolly, taking a seat and leaning back, hooking his hands behind his head. His dark eyes were unreadable.
She took a seat across the desk from him and cut right to the chase. "Sweeney's been having problems with her painting for quite a while now," she said. "She finally brought some of her new work in yesterday, but she's

very uncertain about it. I told her it was wonderful, of course, but the truth is, I may have a difficult time selling any of it."
His expression didn't so much as flicker. 'And you're telling me this because ... “
Damn him, could she have been wrong? No, she couldn't have been, and she hated him for making her feel uncertain.
"I know you, darling. I saw how you were looking at her. "As if he wanted to fuck her right then, right in front of everyone, Candra thought with sudden viciousness. Jealousy seared her, and she pushed it away.
"With my eyes?" he suggested mildly.
"Don't be witty, please. I can destroy her career. I wouldn't enjoy doing it-I really like Sweeney-but if it's necessary . . She shrugged.
"And I can replace you at the gallery tomorrow, if necessary" Eyes narrowed, he leaned forward. His expression wasn't impassive now; it was so grim she found herself drawing back from him. "If you do the slightest thing to harm Sweeney's career, hell will freeze over before you get a dime from me."
"So I was right," she managed to say, but inwardly she was alarmed. Somehow, she hadn't expected him to counter her threats with more of his own.
"Are you?"
"Why else would you care?"
"I can think of several reasons why I wouldn't give in to blackmail, he said. She wished he hadn't used that word. She paled slightly. "I wouldn't call it that. "
"N"at would you call it? If I pay up, you'll refrain from ruining a career. That sounds remarkably like extortion to me." He got up and seized her by the arm, forcing her up from the chair. "Get out."
"Richard, wait!"
"I said get out." He propelled her toward the door, past the astonished faces of his two assistants. Embarrassment turned her
face dark red.
She jerked her arm free and whirled to face him. "I'll make you regret treating me like this," she said in a voice clogged with angry tears.
"Sign the papers," he said, opening the door and ushering her out. "Or you'll regret it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

She moved restlessly around her studio, studying canvases without really seeing them. What did it matter anyway? She seemed to have lost the ability to judge her own work, but Candra was enthusiastic, so all she could do at this point was take the completed pieces to the gallery and go from there. She had looked up the address for David and Jacob Stokes, attorneys-at-law, and mailed the sketch of their father to them, along with a n ote of condolence. Then she had spent the rest of the day working, just working, automatically applying paint to canvas and not even thinking about what she was doing.

A lot of disturbing things had happened to her in the past year, and for the most part, she thought she had handled them with remarkable composure. Though she hadn't been able to find any logical explanation, such as having a near-death experience or being struck by lightning, for why she had suddenly become able to see ghosts, at least she had found references to countless other people who claimed the same ability. She had to believe them, because why would anyone claim to see spirits if they didn't? It wasn't exactly something you wanted on an application for employment. But in all the books on paranormal subjects she had read, she hadn't found anything to explain that death scene she had painted. She didn't remember painting it, so she had to assume she had been sleepwalking and had done the painting in her sleep. When she had gone out to mail the sketch she had stopped by the library and checked out some books on sleepwalking, but she hadn't had a chance to read them yet. She had flipped through one, though, and found the explanation that people who walked in their sleep were often under stress.

Well, duh. Like seeing ghosts was supposed to be relaxing. But she had been seeing ghosts for a year, and the night the old vendor died was the first time she had ever sleepwalked. The books didn't even have chapters on sleep-painting.

But that wasn't even what bothered her most. Guessing the questions to the Jeopardy! answers before she knew anything more than the categories was a little annoying, but not alarming. Anyone who had watched the show for years, as she had, was familiar with the categories and possible answers,

and could guess right occasionally. Her success rate was a lot higher than that, like one hundred percent, but at least she could rationalize that.
She couldn't rationalize painting in her sleep, especially not the death scene of a man she hadn't known had died. That wasn't just chance, that was ... weird. Strange. Spooky.
Who was she kidding? She knew the word that applied, having come across it a lot in her research on ghosts. Clairvoyant.
She kept fighting down a sense of panic. This frightened her more than anything else that had ever happened to her. She had thought her situation was static, but instead it seemed to be intensifying, with new situations being thrown at her just as she thought she had a handle on the old ones. She had even adjusted to seeing ghosts, though that was neither amusing nor enjoyable, like her effect on traffic signals and the growth of plants. The constant cold wasn't enjoyable either, but she had decided that came with the ghosts.
Jeopardy! she realized, had probably just signaled the beginning of clairvoyance. She was terrified that the ugly death-scene painting was just the next step in a progression that would have her foreseeing massacres, plane crashes, famines, and plagues. What did it matter that her plants were beautiful, when mentally she would live with constant death and suffering? The part of painting she loved most was the creation of beauty, and this development threatened to take that away from her.
She had always enjoyed her solitude, but now for the first time she wished she didn't live alone. Even a. cat or a dog would be better than this sense of being completely on her own, with no one to turn to for help.
She could always call Richard.
The temptation was almost overpowering. He would hold her as he had before, and she could sleep, warm and safe, in his arms. She had never before felt that way with anyone, certainly not her parents. She had grown up knowing she had to handle things herself, that there was no soft, comforting lap in which she could rest. Not that Richard's lap had been soft; she had a very clear memoryof exactly how hard he had been. Nor had his lap been particularly comforting. But she had felt secure, and ... and cherished. Or at least desired.
She couldn't call him. She had been right to send him away, and her reasons for doing so still existed. She knew her views on morality were much more stringent than was generally held to be normal, but after seeing the harm

done by her parents' indiscriminate infidelities, the wonder was she hadn't entered a convent. She was more than a little startled by Richard's desire for her, but she was absolutely astounded by her own desire for him. That had never happened before, and she wasn't certain of her ability to resist it. The urge to lie down with him was so potent she could feel her insides tighten now, just thinking about him. With Richard around, she thought, she would never be cold again. Every time she felt a chill, she could crawl into his lap and let him warm her, maybe from the inside out.

Whoa! She had to stop that line of thinking right now, or she'd be on the phone before she knew it. But she had a very clear vision of herself astride him, his mouth spreading kisses over her breasts and his big hands gripping her hips as he moved her up and down.

Oh, damn. Stop it, she admonished herself. There were serious problems in her life, and she was letting herself get distracted into thinking about Richard. Mother Nature had rigged the game in her favor, making sexual attraction so damn fascinating that once you felt it, you couldn't tune it out. On the other hand, thinking about Richard, picturing him naked, was a lot more pleasant than thinking about death and clairvoyance.

She admitted to herself that she had half-expected him to call or stop by that day. If she read him correctly, and she thought. she did, his middle name was persistence. Even though he had agreed to lay off, he had also promised that this thing between them, whatever it was, wasn't over. I'll be back, he'd said, and she knew he meant it. The question was, how long would he lay off and when would he be back? To her shame, she had hoped to see him today.

But no one had rung her doorbell all day long,and bedtime was fast approaching. She hadn't slept well the night beforeshe'd been edgy after the morning's encounter with Richard and the afternoon's encounter with the vendor's ghost-but even though she was tired, she didn't want to go to bed. She was afraid to sleep, she realized, afraid she would sleepwalk or go into a trance, or whatever had happened, and paint another death scene. She had always loved sleeping, and now that pleasure was being stolen from her. That thought made her mad as hell, and it scared her. Most of all, it scared her.

Fear was something she had seldom known in her life, at least as an adult. Once as a child she had spent two days alone, because her father had taken her brother with him on some shoot and her mother had gone to a party and

forgotten to come home, and she had been very scared then. She had been only nine years old and afraid they had all left her behind and were never coming home. And once, when she was fourteen, one of her mother's many lovers-his name was Raz, she would never forget that name-had agreed with her mother that Sweeney was old enough to learn about sex.

Fortunately they had both been so drunk that Sweeney was able to pull away and run, her heart pounding so hard in her chest that she had been afraid she would pass out and then they would have her. She had run down to the basement of the apartment building and hidden in the laundry, knowing her mother would never think of looking there, having never set foot in the place. She huddled between a washing machine and the wall for what seemed like hours, afraid to go back go the apartment in case Raz was waiting for her. Finally, growing more disgusted than afraid, she had loosed the handle from a mop and, armed with the handle, returned to the apartment. She didn't like hiding in the laundry; she was going back to her room and the comfort of her books and paints, and if anyone bothered her, she would hit them on the head as hard as she could.

Over the years she had developed the habit of confronting problems rather than hiding from them, but in the current case neither seemed to do any good. How could you confront something so nebulous? Clairvoyance wasn't something you could see, or touch. It was just there, like blue eyes; you either had them or you didn't. Same with clairvoyance.

Having blue eyes didn't frighten her, but clairvoyance did. In itself it was scary enough, but now, looking back, she saw everything that had happened in the past year as a progression, from plants to red lights to ghosts to clairvoyance. Looking at it that way, she didn't dare try to guess what would be next. Levitation? Or maybe she would start setting things on fire just by looking at them.

She tried to be amused, but for once her sense of humor wasn't working. But wandering around the studio afraid to go to bed did remind her of hiding in the laundry when she was fourteen, and she growled aloud at herself. Nothing had happened the night before, and just because the more she thought about the trance painting the more worried she became didn't mean it would happen every night. It might not happen again for a long time, until someone else she knew died.

That was it. A lot of people died every day in New York, but none of their deaths had caused sleepwalking forays. She had known the hot dog vendor,

however, so his death had disturbed her on a subconscious level.
For the first time, she wondered how he had died. After she had seen him yesterday, she had been too shocked to think about it, and he had looked as healthy as any ghost she had ever seen. But in the scene she had painted, blood had been coming from his nostrils, and he had clearly suffered a head injury. Had he been, hit by a car or maybe fallen down some steps? Just how accurate was that painting?
Sweeney shivered. She didn't want to know the answer to that last question. She shivered again and realized how cold she was. She was also very tired, very sleepy, and she was not going to stay awake a minute longer worrying about things she couldn't control. She put on her pajamas and crawled into the warm bed, curling into a ball and waiting for the heat from the electric blanket to seep into her flesh.
Just before she slept, she had the drowsy thought that if Richard were in bed with her, she wouldn't need an electric blanket to keep her warm.
Just after midnight she gasped, pulling in a hard, fast breath. She pushed restlessly at the covers, fighting the blankets. She muttered, the sounds indistinct, and rolled her head as if trying to escape something.
In the silence of the night her sudden cessation of breathing was as noticeable as her gasping had been. For a long moment she lay utterly still, then breath returned on a long, slow, gentle inhalation.
She opened her eyes and sat up. Pushing the heavy cover aside, she got out of bed and walked soundlessly through the apartment. When she reached her studio, she put a blank canvas on an easel, stood for a moment with her head cocked to the side as if pondering her next step, then selected a tube of paint and began.
It was the cold that woke her. She huddled under the covers, wondering if her electric blanket was malfunctioning. Even so, the nest she had made for herself should have contained the heat. She fought her way out of the tangle of blankets and rolled over until she could see the blanket control. To her surprise, the little amber light was on, so the blanket should have been warm. She found a coil and pressed her fingers to it. She could feel the heat, but it didn't seem to be transferring to her.
Next she looked at the clock and lifted her eyebrows in surprise. It was almost nine, and she seldom slept past dawn. She didn't have any appointments, though, so it was the cold, not urgency, that drove her from the bed. She paused to turn the thermostat up as high as it would go, then

went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, setting the water as hot as she could bear it. By the time she stripped off her pajamas and stepped under the spray, she was shuddering with cold.

She stood with the hot water beating down on her head and back, warming her spine. The shudders stopped, the fading tension unlocking her taut muscles as it drained away. Maybe there was something physically wrong with her, she thought, almost sagging as her body relaxed. The chills had started about the same time the other stuff had started happening, but that didn't mean they were related. She wouldn't have to tell a doctor everything, just that she was cold all the time. The realization that she was actually considering seeing a doctor startled her.

As she toweled off, her skin roughened as another chill seized her. Swearing under her breath, she hurriedly got dressed. Getting her head wet hadn't been the brightest idea, she thought,

because she didn't own a hair dryer. One disastrous attempt at blow-drying her hair, which resulted in something resembling a hairy explosion, had persuaded her to let her curls dry naturally rather than outrage them with heat. Wrapping a towel around her head, she went into the kitchen for that first cup of coffee.

The light on the coffeemaker wasn't on, but the pot was full. Frowning, she touched the pot and found it cold. "Damn it," she muttered. The coffee had brewed right on time, but she hadn't been up to drink it and the heat pad turned itself off after two hours, one more example of a manufacturer trying to protect itself from lawsuits by careless or forgetful customers who left their coffeemakers turned on and perhaps caused fires.

She poured a cup of coffee and popped it into the microwave, then dumped the rest of the pot down the sink and put some fresh coffee on to brew. By the time she finished that, the buzzer on the microwave had sounded. The warmed-up coffee tasted terrible, sort of like old socks, but it was hot, and at the moment that was more important.

The apartment wasn't getting any warmer. She'd have to call Richard about getting the heating system repaired, she thought desperately. She leaned down and held her hand over the vent, and felt the warm air pouring out. Okay, so the heating system was working. She went to the thermostat to check the temperature; it was already eighty-two degrees, and the thermostat registered only up to eighty-five.

She would just have to tough it out until her hair dried, she thought. That was what was making her so cold this morning. She was loath to unwrap the towel covering her head, but common sense told her that the heat in the apartment would dry her hair much faster if it wasn't wrapped in a towel. Gritting her teeth and bracing for the chill, she ditched the towel. The air on her wet head didn't feel cold, though. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.
Taking the cup of coffee with her into the bathroom, she sprayed some detangler on her curls and then finger-combed them, noting that most of the moisture had already evaporated. The mirror reflected a face that was white and pinched with cold. Her teeth chattered. "V"at a lovely sight," she told her reflection.
She poured more coffee and went into the studio. Her hands were shaking so much she wouldn't be able to paint, but the habit was ingrained, so she went.
There was a new canvas on the easel.
Sweeney stood just inside the door, dread congealing in her stomach like cold grease. Her body felt leaden. Not again. Not another one. Who had she killed this time?
No, she thought fiercely. She hadn't killed anyone. Her painting hadn't caused the old vendor to die, rather his death had caused the painting. But if this only happened when someone she knew had died - - . She didn't want to see who was in the painting this time; she didn't want to lose someone else she liked. VVhat if-what if it was Richard?
She was unprepared for the violence of the pain that seized her chest, freezing her lungs, constricting her heart. Not Richard, she prayed. Dear God, not Richard.
Somehow she made her feet move, though she wasn't aware of crossing the floor. Somehow she steeled herself to walk around the easel, positioned so the bright morning light fell directly on the canvas. And somehow she made herself look.
The canvas was almost totally blank. She stared at it, the relief so sudden and total she almost couldn't take it in. Not a death scene, then. Not Richard. Maybe ... maybe this meant her supposition had been totally wrong, that the sleepwalking and painting didn't necessarily have anything to do with death. That one time had been a coincidence, just one more part of the weird stuff that had been happening to her.

She had painted shoes. Two shoes, one a man's and the other a woman's. The man's shoe was the most complete, and it looked as if she had started on the foot inside it. She hadn't finished the woman's shoe, a high-heeled pump from the look of it, stopping before she got to the heel. There was no background, no sense of location, nothing but shoes. just shoes.

She laughed softly, giddy with relief and happiness. She had let all this funny business get to her, make her imagination go wild. She had almost made herself sick, thinking that Richard was dead when she had no reason to jump to such a hysterical conclusion.

Humming, clutching her coffee cup with both hands in an effort to warm her fingers, she went back into the kitchen to rustle up some breakfast and drink more coffee. Surely she would be warm soon, and then she would get some work done.

But the chill intensified, shaking her so violently she barely managed to eat a slice of toast and it became dangerous to try to drink the hot coffee. She hurt, her muscles were so tight. She grabbed a blanket and sat down on one of the vents, making a tent with the blanket to trap the warm air around her. Why was this happening again? Why now, why not yesterday morning? The only other time the chill had been this intense was the morning after she had done the death painting of the old vendor. No, this was worse. This was the coldest she had ever been in her life.

It had to be linked to the sleepwalking episodes. Once could be coincidence, but not twice. She couldn't imagine what she could be doing to trigger such an extreme reaction, but at the moment all she cared about was getting warm. Afterward she would worry about the why and hows.

A vicious cramp knotted her left thigh. Sweeney moaned, folding double with the agony as she massaged the muscle. She got the muscle unknotted, but moments later another cramp hit. She panted as she rubbed it out, then gingerly stretched out her legs. The constant shivering was causing, her muscles to knot. She ached in every joint now, every muscle.

Miserably she began to cry. She felt like a weak crybaby for doing so, but she hurt so much she couldn't help it. She hadn't known being cold was so painful. Why didn't the tears freeze on her cheeks? She felt as if they should, even though she knew the room was warm.

Richard had gotten her warm before. She couldn't bear the pain much longer; with everything in her, she wanted him here with her now.

Keeping the blanket around her, she crawled to the phone and lifted the cordless unit from its stand. She was surprised at how much energy it took to move, how sluggish she was, and she felt the first twinge of fear that her condition was truly serious, rather than being just a major inconvenience. She didn't know the number. She had never called Candra at home, and she vaguely remembered being told the private line was unlisted. Richard's business line was listed, though, and unless he had an appointment somewhere, he should be in his office now. She wrestled the heavy white pages into her lap and clumsily flipped through to the Ws. "Richard Worth, Richard Worth," she mumbled to herself. In a city the size of New York there were a lot of duplicated names, but she could pinpoint her Richard Worth with his address. Ali, there it was. She punched in the numbers, then huddled deeper into the blanket.

A female voice answered and recited the number. "May I help you?" she pleasantly inquired.

"May I speak to Richard, please?" Maybe she should have called him Mr. Worth instead of Richard.

"Your name?"

"Sweeney."

"S-w-e-?"

"S-w-e-e-n-e-y" Her name wasn't difficult, she thought irritably. Why would anyone have any trouble spelling it? Of course, her teeth were chattering so hard she might be difficult to understand, so she gave the woman the benefit of the doubt.

"Sweeney." Richard's voice sounded in her ear only a few seconds later. "What's wrong?"

"How did you know?" she asked weakly

"That something was wrong? Why else would you be calling me?"

She tried to laugh but couldn't. "I'm cold," she said, and was appalled to hear a whimper in her voice. "Oh, God, Richard, I'm so cold I think I might die."

"I'll be right there." His tone was quiet and calm. "You'll be okay. "

Because he had said it, she clung to the idea while she waited for him. She would be okay. He would arrive soon and get her warm with that miraculous body heat of his. "I'll be okay," she whispered, though her legs began cramping again and she couldn't even crawl back to the vent. Tears

wet her face again, and she dried them with the blanket. She didn't want to be crying like a sissy when he got here.
She would have to unlock the door. She tried to get up and fell back with a cry when her thigh seized in a cramp. She knew she should wait until he arrived, that it was dangerous to leave an entry door unlocked, but damn it, what if by then she wasn't able to move at all? She massaged the knotted muscle, digging her fingers deep in a savage effort to buy herself a few relatively comfortable minutes. One minute would be enough, just long enough for her to get to the door and unlock it.
If she couldn't walk, she could crawl. If she couldn't crawl, she would drag herself on her elbows. She Nould get to the door. She drew her right leg beneath her, pushing herself up, and breathed a sigh of relief when it didn't cramp. Her entire body was trembling violently, both from the cold and in reaction to the incessant shivering. She was unbelievably weak. How could shivering be so debilitating? Wasn't it the body's means of producing heat?
She couldn't stand. Even though her legs weren't cramping at the moment, she simply didn't have the energy to get to her feet. She crawled a few feet, then collapsed on her side, breathing hard from the exertion. After a few moments she rolled, blanket and all, like a large human sausage. If babies could use rolling as a means of locomotion, so could she.
She laughed aloud at the picture she must have made, and then cried because she ached so badly in every muscle. When she reached the door, she stretched to reach the doorknob, then hauled herself up on her knees. In that position she could reach, just barely, the two dead-bolt locks on the door. She fumbled them open, then curled into a ball beside the door to wait for Richard.

CHAPTER NINE

The ringing of the doorbell, when it came, startled her. She had no idea how much time had lapsed. "R-Richard?"
The bell rang again, and she realized her voice had been too weak to penetrate the wood. She took a deep breath, holding it to buy herself a few seconds free from shivering. "Richard," she called, not letting herself think what she would do if someone else was at the door.
"I'm here. Open the door."

"It's u-unlocked."
He opened the door, looked down, and saw her curled on the floor and said, "Shit," in a very quiet, very controlled tone.
He closed and locked the door, then bent down and effortlessly lifted her in his arms.
"How long has this been going on?" he asked as he swiftly carried her to the couch.
"S-since I woke up. A-about n-nine."
"It feels like the Sahara in here," he said grimly. He placed her on the couch and unwrapped the blanket, then with sure, brisk movements unfastened her jeans and stripped them down her legs.
"H-hey!" Sounding indignant and outraged was difficult when your teeth were chattering, she discovered.
"Don't argue," he said, and pulled her sweatshirt off over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra, because she never did when she was at home. Her nipples had pinched into tight little points. She started to cover her breasts with her hands, then abandoned that idea in favor of wrapping her arms around herself to conserve heat. Her eyelids drooped heavily.
"Don't let yourself go to sleep," he ordered.
"I w-won't," she promised, and hoped she wasn't lying.
He left her socks on and went to work on his own clothes. He wasn't wearing a suit today, she noticed, just slacks and a silk shirt. He unbuttoned the shirt, his fingers moving swiftly, and dropped it to the floor. He kicked off his shoes and unbuckled his belt at the same time, stripping himself as efficiently as he had her. His pants hit the floor, he jerked off his socks, and then he was with her, wrapping her in his arms and all but crushing her against the back of the couch. "Easy," he murmured, feeling her convulsive shaking, and pulled the blanket over them.
He pushed his feet under hers and placed one big hand on the back of her head, tucking her face into the hollow between his neck and shoulder, forcing her to breathe air heated by his body.
The shock of his heat was so intense she thought she might
faint. At first all she was aware of was warmth, surrounding her, seeping through her skin and penetrating down to her marrow. He held her tightly against him, helping her contain the shivering, adding his strength to hers.
"Don't cry," he whispered, making her aware that she still was, and wiped her face with the blanket.

After what seemed like hours but could have been as little as five minutes, the shivering eased for a moment, allowing her to relax. She lay bonelessly in his arms, breathing heavily, then the monster seized her in its jaws again and shook her until her teeth rattled.

The next respite lasted a little longer, long enough that she began to hope it was over. Richard's body heat continued to pour over her, through her, reaching that central core of ice that no amount of coffee, hot water, or heated air had been able to touch. He was sweating; she could feel the moisture on his skin. She tried to stretch, ease her tired and cramped muscles, but the movement triggered more shivering.

He held her through that, too, whispering reassurances in her ear. She didn't need to be reassured, she thought fuzzily. Richard was here, so of course he would get her warm. Funny how she was so positive of that.

She stilled again, lying quietly in his arms. The minutes ticked by, the room silent except for the sound of their breathing and the strong, steady thumping of his heart under her ear.

She was all but naked, wearing only panties and socks. He had on even less, nothing but a pair of tight boxers. The crisp hair on his chest rasped her nipples, keeping them puckered even though she was no longer cold. He was very hard, she thought drowsily, brushing her lips against his shoulder without quite realizing what she was doing. Muscular, too. Her fingers moved over his shoulder, feeling the power beneath his sleek, warm skin as she stroked down to the hard bulge of his triceps. Even his belly was hard, and his legs were heavy with muscle.

His erection prodded her stomach. A different kind of heat gathered in her, pooled between her legs. Instinctively she shifted, pushing her hips against him in an acceptance she knew was dangerous, but the knowledge came a split second after the action. Even then she didn't withdraw. The contact felt too good, too right.

He kissed her forehead, the caress slow and tender. "Warm now?" he asked, and she nodded.

"Good." His breath sighed over her closed eyelids. "Sleepy?"

"Um hmm."

"Go to sleep then, Sweeney." At least she thought he said Sweeney. Something about her name sounded different-, but she couldn't quite place what it was. She inhaled with slow, deep precision, drawing his heated scent into her lungs and feeling something deep inside loosen and give way.

His hand covered her breast, his callus-roughened thumb rubbing over her nipple. She had never thought breasts were the great source of pleasure portrayed in books and movies, having never felt more than irritation when some boy grabbed hers and pulled the nipples and expected her to become incoherent with pleasure when what she really felt like doing was punching him in the face. She didn't feel like punching Richard. His circling thumb produced a prickling sort of heat in her nipple, then there was an almost unbearable tightening, and a hot wire of sensation ran from her breast straight to her loins, exploding there and spreading a different kind of heat throughout her body. She moaned, a quiet little whimper of delight.

He repeated the motion over and over, the pleasure building with every second until it seemed to take over her body. She was glowing with heat now, inside and out. She surged against him, back and forth like the gentle, inexorable wash of the tide. A faint remnant of caution was swamped by the flood of pure physical delight.

He tugged on her hair, pulling her head back. His mouth closed over hers, leisurely intensifying the pressure until her lips parted. He slanted his head then and kissed her, deep and hard, taking her with rhythmic thrusts of his tongue. Sweeney didn't open her eyes, couldn't open them, lost in a combination of fatigue and desire that both demanded and beguiled. Her fingers dug into the deep ridge of his back, slippery with sweat.

He moved a little, adjusting his position so that the hard ridge of his penis nestled against her mound. She felt the soft folds between her legs open, just a little, and he rested between them. She started, a sliver of alarm working through the haze of desire, and that small movement rubbed her against his shaft in a way that sent pleasure rioting along her nerve endings. If the two layers of their underwear hadn't been between them, he would have been inside her then, because she couldn't stop the convulsive thrust of her hips. He groaned, deep in his throat, the sound vibrating in her own mouth.

She felt as if her body were a bow, the hot wire of sensation pulling her tighter and tighter, arching her against him. She made a small, desperate mewling sound, all but clawing at him in her urgency, her thighs opening as she tried to ride the ridge of his erection. She was in pain again, a different kind of pain, hot and empty, almost mindless with need. Richard gripped her bottom and rubbed her against him, and everything inside her tightened, holding her on the verge of shattering for one long, unbearable moment

before the tension released and she convulsed on great waves of pleasure. She heard her own cries, thin and wild, muffled by his kiss, and then for a while she didn't know anything. Her dazed senses gradually regained their function. She was sweating, she realized with astonishment; her body sheened with moisture. As her heartbeat slowed, she realized that his hadn't, but his touch was gentle as he settled her so that her head was pillowed on his arm. "Go to sleep," he whispered.

She didn't have any other choice. Her muscles were like water, unable to function. I had a climax," she managed to say, and heard her own surprise.

I know," he said on a low chuckle, his amusement strained but genuine. She nestled her face against him, breathed deeply, and like a child, was asleep.

Richard pushed the sweltering blanket down a little. He didn't want to trigger another of those alarming chills, but neither did he want either one of them to have a heatstroke. The apartment was so hot he could barely breathe. Sweat poured off him, and he hadn't helped the situation by what he had just done. Foreplay with Sweeney was more erotic than any full sex act he had ever experienced; her response was swift and intense, and utterly beguiling. He had never before enjoyed so much something that left him so frustrated; he thought one touch of her hand would take him over the edge. He could have had her. She wouldn't have accused him afterward of taking advantage of her, because she had the kind of bedrock honesty that made her take responsibility for her own actions. But he would have been taking advantage, and he knew it. She had been alarmingly weak, all her energy sapped by that constant, convulsive shivering. Her defenses had been do", and he could have done anything with her he wanted.

What he had wanted most, it turned out, was to take care of her.

He didn't know how he had managed to control himself. He closed his eyes as he remembered the sight of her high, round breasts with the delicate blue tracery of veins and her small, tightly puckered nipples. Those soft mounds were flattened against his chest now, her nipples plumped but still firm enough that he could feel both of them.

Her cheek was flushed now with warm color, her skin smooth and supple instead of roughened with chills. Something was very, very wrong, but he couldn't begin to imagine what it was. There was no medical condition he knew of that would let body heat warm her but prevent any other means of heat from doing the same thing. Her condition this time had seemed far more extreme than it had during the other episode; she'd had all the

symptoms of hypothermia, including the slurred speech. That was why he had stripped their clothes off, knowing she would get warm faster without the buffer of clothing between them. He had also known the other likely outcome and fought to keep himself under control while he deliberately aroused her.

When she woke, and got some clothes on, he intended to hustle her pretty little ass into the car and get her to a doctor. He knew a couple of very good diagnosticians who would see her without an appointment, as a favor to him. Though he had been acquainted with her for several years, he was only now beginning to know her, to plumb the treasure chest of her personality, and he refused to let anything endanger his intoxicating discovery.

She was damp with sweat, her own as well as his. The crisis, whatever it was, was over for now, and he was about to pass out from the heat. He eased away from her and got up, tucking the blanket around her as a safeguard, then went in search of the thermostat. When he found it, he winced at the setting and nudged it down to seventy-five.

The heat had made him thirsty. He opened cabinet doors until he found the drinking glasses, then stood in front of the sink and guzzled two full glasses of water. He wanted a cool shower, but didn't want to leave her alone in case her nap was a short one. She deserved to be held when she woke up after her first orgasm.

He didn't know what made him so certain that had been her first. Her surprise, maybe. He had always thought her totally oblivious to men, so focused on her work that there wasn't room in her life for anything else, and now he knew his supposition had been right. Her experiences were probably few and a long time ago, very likely with boys her age, and had produced damn little pleasure for her. She had probably said to hell with the whole process; she had better things to do. He didn't know why she had suddenly responded to him, but he wasn't about to question his good luck.

He went back into the living room, where he could keep an eye on her. The sweat was evaporating on his body, but he still felt too hot to put on his clothes.

When he had been here before, he hadn't paid much attention to his surroundings; he had been almost totally focused on her. Now he looked around, relieved beyond measure that everything wasn't stark white, or black lacquer. Her furniture was traditional, and functional. Her artistry was revealed in her use of color, a deep blue bowl placed where the sunshine

would fall on it and make it glow, a light green vase filled with red flowers, a purple afghan thrown across a chair. He noticed the abundance of plants and thought she must have a very green thumb, because all of them had glossy, abundant leaves and several of them were blooming in a riot of color, yellows and pinks and reds.

She had a lot of books, too, most of them on shelves but some stacked on the coffee table. He picked one up, his eyebrows lifting as he read the title, The Ghost Detectives. He picked up another book, Paranormal Phenomena. Funny, he wouldn't have thought she was the type to be hooked on this paranormal stuff, but he enjoyed The X-Files himself and he wasn't normally a science fiction fan, so he couldn't knock her interests.

A third book was Spifit Sightings. Another was Ghosts Among Us. She was evidently fascinated by ghosts.

He was a little interested himself. When his grandfather died, Richard had gone home for the funeral and stayed for a week with his mother in the tiny run-down house where he had grown up. The entire time he was there, he kept sensing his grandfather's presence, catching a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye and then, when he turned, finding no one there. He was a logical man, but logic didn't mean rejecting everything he couldn't touch or see or taste. He couldn't see electricity, but he could see its effects, and maybe in death the body left behind a lingering energy field. He thought it must be at least possible, though he admitted it was equally possible his brain had been playing tricks on him, because he was so accustomed to his grandfather being in that house that he expected to see him.

Richard put the books down and checked on Sweeney. She was still sleeping soundly, one hand tucked under her cheek, her lips rosy and her finger-tips pink.

Her entire body had been icy when he first arrived. He frowned. He had thought, the first time, that she seemed almost to be in shock, and the impression was stronger now. Had anything happened both times to trigger such an extreme reaction? Or was her blood pressure dropping suddenly because of some physical condition? One way or another, when she woke, he was going to get to the bottom of this.

She slept for over an hour. VVhen she began stirring, he slipped back under the blanket with her, crowding her against the back of the couch. Her legs

felt like silk; her breasts flattened gently against him, making his head spin. Gently he rubbed the
back of one finger against the underside of a plumped-out breast, reveling in the satiny smoothness. He wanted to taste her, suck her, but his frustration level was so high he knew if he did, there wouldn't be any stopping.
She stirred again, wrinkling her nose and making a disgusted sound, as if she hated waking up. Richard watched her closely, anticipating that moment when her eyes opened and awareness hit her. He couldn't wait to hear what her first words would be.
She stretched, the movement rubbing her body all along his and making him grit his teeth. Her eyelashes fluttered, and sleepy blue eyes looked at him. "Hi," she murmured, an incredibly sweet, drowsy smile curving her lips. She blinked a couple more times, focused, and he saw her eyes widen. She froze in his arms. "Oh my God," she said.
He laughed quietly and kissed her temple. "Don't panic." He didn't think his balls could survive another attack from her knee, even an inadvertent one.
Her face was crimson. "We-I-" she stammered, unable to look at him. She put her hand on his chest and then snatched it away, as if startled by the feel of bare skin.
"It's okay, sweetie. Nothing happened."
"The hell it didn't," she blurted, then blushed even more. "I made you come." He kept his voice calm. "I did it deliberately, to get you warm."
"I would call that something," she snapped.
"Then call it heavy petting, to use a high-school term. I sure as hell wouldn't call it anything more, or I wouldn't be as damn frustrated as I am." Gently he- brushed a curl back from her flushed face. "We need to talk."
She paused, looking truculent, but finally sighed. "Okay.
Let me get up and get dressed, and put on a fresh pot of coffee-"
"I like you right where you are." Once she put some distance between them, she would throw up her defenses again, and he wanted some answers. Until he had them, he intended to keep her mostly naked and half under him.
Touch was a powerful force, making babies thrive and gentling the most fractious of women. It had a powerful effect on him, too. Slowly he stroked his hand over her back, feeling the delicate vertebrae of her spine, the smooth warmth of her skin.

She must have sensed his determination, because she was motionless in his arms, waiting. "Unless you have an explanation for what's causing you to go into shock this way, I'm taking you to a doctor," he said. "Today. Even if I have to wrap you in this blanket and carry you the way you are. "
She exhaled through her nose, huffing her displeasure. She didn't look at him but stared over his shoulder. Her evasion made him think there was indeed something going on that was causing her to have such drastic reactions. "Richard-"
"Sweetie," he countered, with the exact level of impatience she had used.
She darted a suspicious glance at him, not quite certain what he had said.
He managed not to smile.
"All right," she said abruptly. "I'm usually cold, but not like-not like today."
"Or day before yesterday?"
"Or then," she agreed. "Both times, I walked in my sleep the night before."
She pressed her lips together, looking both mutinous and worried.
She evidently thought that was explanation enough, but Richard didn't. "I've never heard of sleepwalking causing anyone to go into shock."
Mutiny began to override worry in her expression. "Well, that's what happened, whether you believe it or not."
There was more, and she was determined not to tell it. Without another word Richard got up and tucked the blanket around her, wrapping it tight so she couldn't get even her arms free. Then he picked up his pants from the floor and stepped into them.
"Hey!" She began wiggling frantically, trying to fight her way out of the blanket.
"Don't bother." He zipped his fly and buckled his belt. "I'd just have to wrap you up again before I take you to a doctor, and you know I can do it. I'm a helluva lot bigger than you, and a helluva lot stronger."
"Bully!" she threw at him.
"Yep, but a concerned one." He leaned down and kissed her forehead.
Whether it was the concern or the kiss that did it, or maybe her realization that he meant what he said, he saw her expression change. The look she gave him was almost frightened. "It isn't just sleepwalking," she said, her voice so low he could barely hear her. "Both times I've painted something in my sleep, too."
Sleep-painting? Interested, he sat down on the edge of the couch, trapping her between his hip and the couch back. "Why would that be such a shock

to your system?"
She bit her lip. "There was an old hot dog vendor who worked a corner about four blocks from the gallery He had the sweetest expression of anyone I've ever seen. Day before yesterday, when I got up I noticed the canvas I'd been working on had been moved, and another one was on the easel in its place. The ppainting on the easel was of the hot dog vendor, with blood coming out his nose and pooled around his head. In the painting he was.dead. That was the first time it happened."
"Painting in your sleep, or being so cold?"
"Both. That afternoon, I found out the vendor really was dead, though I had seen him just the day before."
He didn't know what to say to that. Bad coincidence? That was stretching the boundaries of logic, but unless she had a lot more to tell him, he couldn't think of anything else it could be but coincidence. "And this morning?"
She gave a low, harsh laugh. "This morning, when I saw the canvas had been moved again and another was in its place, all I could think was that someone else I knew had died. I was too scared to look at it, because I was afraid-terTified-that I had paintedyou."
The meaning behind that admission went through him like a bolt of lightning. He clenched his fists to keep himself from reaching for heL He didn't dare touch her now, or they wouldn't get out of bed until sometime tomorrow. The look she gave him was stripped bare of the layers of prickly defenses she usually kept between her and the world.
"Did you?" he asked, and managed to keep his voice calm. He had the feeling she was grateful he hadn't pounced on that telling admission.
She laughed again, this time with real amusement. "No. I painted shoes. Two of them. One man's, and one woman's."
He grinned at the incongruity "Shoes, huh? This may start a new trend. Some people would be able to read all sorts of deep meaning into two lonely, mismatched shoes."
She snorted. "Yeah, the same people who buy a VanDern and think they've bought anything a monkey couldn't reproduce."
The disdain in her voice made him laugh. Now he felt able to touch her again, so he lifted another curl and watched it wrap around his fingeL He examined the curl, rubbed his thumb over it to separate the silky strands, and carefully considered his next question. Maybe it shouldn't be a question

at all. "Now tell me why you were convinced that if you had painted me, I would be dead."
He glanced at her in time to see the panic in her eyes. "You'll think I'm crazy," she said.
"Try me. I'm not leaving you alone until I know what's going on."
She wiggled again, frowning impatiently at the blanket. "Let me out of this thing. I feel as if I'm in a straitjacket, and considering what I just said, it's making me very uncomfortable."
Smiling, he tugged hard on the blanket, loosening it She started to push it aside, then remembered she was almost naked and settled for tucking it under her arms. She sighed. 'About a year ago, weird things began happening."
"Weird, how?"
She waved her hand. "Oh, traffic lights turning green whenever I approached, parking spaces at the front of the row emptying just as I got there, that sort of thing."
His eyebrows lifted. "Convenient." He remembered how fast the trip from the gallery to here had been. It had been almost miraculous, the way traffic had cleared out of their way. It had irritated the hell out of him, because he had been looking forward to spending more time with her.
“Yeah, I kind of like that part. And I like the way the plants look. Before, they tended to die on me, but now, no matter what I do, they just keep growing and blooming." She pointed at a plant with delicate pink blossoms. "That's a Christmas cactus. This is the sixth time already it has bloomed this year."
He rubbed his jaw. "I assume it isn't supposed to do that."
"Well, it never has before."
"What else?" There had to be something else. Traffic signals and parking spaces wouldn't make her this uneasy.
She shivered suddenly, alarming him. But her skin remained smooth, and he realized it was her thoughts that had made her shiver. She stared at him, blue eyes stark and haunted. "I began seeing ghosts," she whispered.

CHAPTER TEN

Sweeney couldn't tell if he believed her or not and for a moment it didn't matter. The relief at having told someone else was enormous, and until now she hadn't realized how much strain she had been under, facing this alone. His dark gaze never wavered from her face, and his hand remained gentle in her hair.

Then she realized that it did matter what he thought. It mattered very much. Three days before she wouldn't have believed she could respond to any man the way she did to him. She was uncertain how he had become so important to her so fast, but she couldn't argue with the truth. And it was because he was important to her that she cared about his opinion. What if he thought she was a crackpot and decided she was more trouble than she was worth? Suddenly she couldn't look at him, and she felt her face heating again. Oh, God, where had her sense of caution gone? How had she let a threat to take her to the doctor, of all things, convince her to spill her guts like that? She had even been thinking of going to a doctor herself, just to see if her constant chill was in any way caused by a physical ailment. As threats went, that one was a real wimp.

"I don't know why I told you all that," she mumbled.

He merely looked at her and continued to play with her hair. "Yes, you do," he finally said in a mild tone. "How do you know they're ghosts?"

"Because they're dead," she said irritably, and scowled at him. "When you go to someone's funeral and then see hi -min the supermarket parking lot a month later, you pretty well know something strange is going on." She didn't know what to make of that cryptic "Yes, you do," so she ignored it.

"Yeah, I'd say that's a given." His mouth quirked as if he was struggling to hide a grin, and she wondered just what it was about her that he thought was so funny. He frequently looked as if he was trying not to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You are. You're so busy trying to rebuild your fences to keep me out you haven't realized I'm already in the pasture with you."

"We agreed not to get involved-"

"That's not exactly how I recall it," he drawled. "We're already 'involved.' We agreed not to have sex. We haven't, though I have to tell you, sweetie, it was mighty tempting."

He was doing something funny to her name, she thought, fluttering the n or something like that. Maybe it was caused by that remnant of a Virginia drawl that she had never before noticed, though she didn't know how she could have missed it. And he really should put on his shirt, instead of leaning over her halfnaked like that. The guy in the Diet Coke commercial didn't have anything on Richard in the chest department. His chest was broad, and muscled, and wonderfully hairy, and she wanted to lay her hands on his pecs, feel his heart beating against her palm, somehow bank his heat against the cold hours when he wasn't there.
"Tell me more about the ghosts," he coaxed.
Well, she had already let the cat out of the bag, so she might as well tell him everything. He looked as if he had settled in for the duration, determined not to move until he heard the whole story. "The first time was in Clayton, a year ago. A little boy named Sam Beresford died of leukemia, and a month after that I saw him in the supermarket parking lot, trying to get his mom to see him, talk to him, anything."
"Sad," he commented, and she nodded.
"Then I began seeing more and more, and Clayton is such a small town I knew most of them by sight, even if I wasn't actually acquainted with them. They'd wave, and I'd catch myself waving back, or saying hello, and people were beginning to give me really strange looks, so I knew I had to leave. There are a lot of ghosts here, but they're New Yorkers; they rarely speak."
He almost grinned again, but caught that one, too. "I guess seeing ghosts would be a problem in a small town," he murmured.
"You don't believe me, do you?" She sighed, her eyes somber. "I wouldn't believe me either, if it wasn't happening to me."
"I didn't say that." He stopped playing with her hair and cupped her cheek. "I'm open on the subject of ghosts. Tell me more."
She shrugged. "They're sort of translucent, and twodimensional. When they speak, the sound is tinny. And they always know I can see them. I don't know how, but they do."
"You saw the vendor, the one you painted? That's how you know he's dead?"
"He came up behind me on the street. He asked me to send a sketch I'd made of him to his sons. But how did he know I had made a sketch? I did it the night he died. I never had a chance to show him."
"Did you send the sketch to them?" She nodded. "Yesterday."

"Do you still have the painting?" She looked startled. "Sure. Why?"
"I'd like to see it. Just curiosity."
She started to sit up and remembered her state of undress. Considering he had already seen her breasts, and touched-- them, and considerim! everythin else they had done together, if she J 9
had been sophisticated, she would have nonchalantly gotten up and gotten dressed. "I guess this is proof I'm not sophisticated," she said, looking up with a rueful smile to find his dark gaze already locked on her. Her heart fluttered, or maybe it was her stomach. Something fluttered. He really shouldn't look at her that way, there was no telling what sort of damage he was doing to her internal organs.
"What is?"
She gestured to her clothes. "Turn your back."
"Ah." He nodded in understanding, but he didn't get up. That dark gaze was so intense she was afraid to try to read what was in it, though she didn't know if she was afraid he wanted too much from her, or too little.
He rubbed his thumb over her lips, then lightly over one cheekbone. They looked at each other in silence for a moment, then he said, "I'm expediting the divorce."
So he could he with her She couldn't play games and pretend she didn't understand the meaning behind that statement. He wanted her, and he was moving legal mountains to get her. It was exhilarating to be the object of such determination, but it was a little-a lot-frightening, too.
She was comfortable alone, comfortable with her life, but in that moment she accepted that things were going to change. He was going to change them. More important, she wanted them to change. For the first time in her life, she wanted to be part of a couple. She wanted to give this relationship thing a shot. Life was a lot more predictable when she had only herself to consider, but she wasn't the island she had always thought herself to be. She couldn't always be totally self-sufficient. Twice now she had needed him, and twice he had been there to help. Having someone else on whom she could depend was novel, but intensely comforting. She had never known that kind of security before, not even as a child. Especially not as a child.
"Get dressed," he said softly, standing up and turning his back.
Dressing was only a matter of pulling on her sweatshirt and stepping into her jeans, accomplished in seconds. She pushed her hair back from her face,

relaxed and still a little drowsy, wonderfully warm. She didn't feel any chill at all. All she felt was a sense of well-being, of physical contentment.
"This way." She led the way to the studio, though in a four-room apartment it wouldn't have been difficult to find. The studio was actually supposed to be the main bedroom, but her bed fit into the smaller room, so there was never any doubt about where she would sleep and where she would work. She had put the painting of the vendor in the closet. She couldn't bring herself to throw it away, but neither could she bear to have it out where she could see it. She went to the closet, but instead of following her, Richard walked around the room, pausing before each of the canvases she had already completed. Tension suddenly knotted her shoulders. Candra's opinion of her new work had been important to her career, but Richard's opinion was important to her
"You've changed," he said abruptly, stopping before a particularly vivid landscape she had propped against the wall. He squatted down so he was at eye level with it.
"I didn't know you knew anything about my work," she said, surprised, and still uneasy. She stared at the long line of his tanned back, well-defined muscles delineating the furrow of his spine. Why hadn't he put on his shirt? He should have put i ,t on, for her peace of mind if nothing else.
"Sure. I met a lot of artists through Candra, but I paid attention to the ones I liked."
That could be taken two ways. "Professionally or personally?" she asked, her tone wary.
He glanced over his shoulder at her, a smile in his dark eyes. "In your case, both." He turned his attention back to the landscape, reaching out to run a fingertip over a stream of water swirling around a rock in its path. Running water was difficult to execute, because you had to convey motion and energy as well as capture the play of light on the surface. Water that wasn't muddy took its color from its surroundings; it would look blue under a clear sky, green in the shadow of a mountain, dull on a gray day. She had spent years painting the St. Lawrence and never tired of it because the water was always different.
"How did you do this?" he murmured. "It looks threedimensional. And the color. . . " He fell silent, moving on to the next painting, a sunset in Manhattan with the dark, faceless buildings silhouetted against a brilliant sky. She had painted the sky a glowing pinkish orange, and what could have

been an ordinary skyline was turned into something exuberant. It had taken her two days of experimentation to get that exact shade.
He didn't say anything, and finally she couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Well?" she demanded, the word tart with impatience.
He turned to face her, eyeing her taut stance. "You've always been good, and you know it. Now you're better."
Her shoulders relaxed and she ran a hand through her hair. "I can't paint the way I used to," she confessed. "Like everything else, my style changed a year ago. I look at what I'm doing now and it's almost as if a stranger painted it. 11
"You've changed, and that's what changed your style. Maybe all of this is linked, maybe it isn't, but I'm damn glad it happened."
She gave him a curious look. "Why?"
"Because you never saw me before. Now you do."
He was serious, his gaze intent and unwavering. He could probably hypnotize a cobra with that look, she thought. It was certainly working on her, because she couldn't look away. She started to protest that of course she had seen him before, but then she realized what he meant. She hadn't seen him as a man before. In her mind men had been desexed, neutralized, of no importance to her. She hadn't wanted to deal with the messy complications of sex and emotional demands, so she had closed herself off from them. With her parents' example of what not to do always before her, and her own desire to concentrate on her painting, she had turned herself into an emotional nun.
Whether the weird changes had something to do with the shift in her attitude or the simple passage of time had healed her fears, that phase of her life was over and she didn't think it would ever be possible for her to return to it. Her eyes were open, and she would never again be oblivious to Richard's sexual nature, to the male hunger in his eyes when he looked at her.
"Did you see me?" she asked. "Before, I mean. We met ... what? Three times?"
"Four. Yes, I saw you." He smiled. "I've always known you're a woman. The way he looked at her then made her nipples tingle, and she suspected that if she glanced down, she would see they were nothing more than tight little points poking at her sweatshirt. She didn't look. She didn't want to draw his attention, in case he had missed it.

"Are you turned on, or cold?" he asked softly and she knew he hadn't missed a thing.
She cleared her throat. "I guess I'm turned on, because I'm sure not cold."
He threw back his head and laughed. She wondered if she should have feigned ignorance, or maybe played it cute and flirted with him. She had a lot to learn about this comehither stuff, but for the first time she realized the process could be fun.
But not now. Not yet. She cleared her throat again and turned to the closet behind her. "The painting's in here." She had to steel herself to open the door, reluctant to face the ugliness of death. She couldn't avoid looking at it; because the paint hadn't been dry when she put the canvas in the closet, it was turned facing out. The artist in her wouldn't let her do anything to deface even this painting, though ordinarily she would never put anything in the closet to dry.
Hurriedly she reached in and got the canvas, then propped it on the wall next to the closet. Richard walked over and stared down at the painting, his expression hard and shielded. Sweeney went over to the window and stood looking out.
"You did this before you knew he was dead." It was a statement, not a question, but then in any case, she had already said so. "Do you know what happened to him?"
No, he looked okay to me." She bit her lip. "But they all do, you know?" All the ghosts looked in the pink of health. Talk about ridiculous.
"What was his name?"
"Stokes. I don't know his first name. But his sons are David and Jacob Stokes. They're both attorneys."
"I think I'll check into this, if you don't mind."
"Check into what?" Curiosity made her turn to look at him. "How he died."
He rubbed his thumb against the underside of his jaw. "Maybe it was an accident."
"Because of the blood? I don't know how realistic that painting is; he could have had a stroke, or a heart attack. Maybe the blood's there because-I don't know-I associate blood with death. Or maybe he fell down a flight of stairs."
"I'll check into it," Richard repeated. He turned toward the door. She followed him as he went into the living room and picked up his shirt. She watched him shrug into it, feeling a pang of regret as he covered that broad

chest. Without a hint of self-consciousness, he unfastened his pants and began tucking in the shirt. A wave of warmth washed over her. She actually felt flushed.
"I have an appointment I can't put off," he said as he rebuckled his belt. "Get a pen and paper; I'm going to give you my private number."
She didn't have to search for either one; she was an orderly creature, so both were right beside the phone. "Okay, shoot."
He recited the number. "Don't wait until you're so cold you can't function. Call me immediately. If you're right about it only happening when you've had an episode of sleepwalking, then you'll know as soon as you check the studio whether or not you need to call."
"There's no way to tell how often that will be. You can't take the time to come over here every time I get cold. "
"The hell I can't. It isn't just a chill; it's more serious than that and you know it. Look, for my peace of mind, call me every morning when you get up, okay?" He took her chin in his hand and bent down to kiss her. The kiss was light, his lips soft and barely moving on hers. Sweeney kept herself from clinging to him, but it was a struggle; the man was addictive. She wanted more of him, all of him.
He paused at the door. "Does the gallery have exclusive rights to sell your work, except for your portrait commissions?"
"Except for any directly commissioned work, yes."
He nodded. "I want that one with the running water. Take it to the gallery to be framed, and I'll arrange the purchase through another person so Candra won't sell it to someone else just to keep me from getting it."
And so Candra wouldn't know there was anything between them, she thought. She had been right to be reluctant to get involved with him; even though he and Candra had split, the situation was awkward, and finalizing the divorce probably wouldn't help a lot. In that moment she made the decision to dissolve the agreement between herself and Candra and begin the search for another gallery to represent her.
"I'll call you," he said, and hesitated for a moment, looking back at her. She had the impression he wanted to kiss her again. Evidently he thought better of it, though, and he stepped out into the hall. He had probably made the right decision, she
thought wistfully, as she shut the door and locked it, but the right decision wasn't always the most pleasurable. They had already become far more

involved than was right, but at least he'd had the self-control to keep from taking things any further. Until his divorce was final, she thought, they couldn't risk a repeat of today's situation, because the temptation was too great to resist many times.
Richard frowned as he left the building. Edward saw him come out of the door, and within seconds the car slid to a halt in front of him.
"Just a minute, Edward, let me make a call." He dialed directory assistance, and asked for the number of David Stokes, attorney, then asked to be connected.
A young male voice answered on the second ring. "Mr. Stokes isn't in," he said in answer to Richard's request. "There was a death in the family, and he'll be out of the office for the rest of the week."
"This is about his father's death," Richard replied, taking the chance that Sweeney had been right about the vendor. Her story defied logic, but he wasn't inclined to dismiss it out of hand as nonsense. Something was going on, something that was causing her to go into shock, or something resembling shock, and everything she had said could be verified either by investigation or observation.
"Oh, are you a cop?"
"I'm investigating the death," Richard replied easily. "Everyone is shaken up by this. Have you found out anything?"
"I can't discuss that. Give me Mr. Stokes's home number."
Richard scribbled down the number. He saw Edward watching him in the rearview mirror and their eyes met. Edward was normally the most impassive of men, but he looked interested in this new development.
Richard dialed David Stokes's number. A child answered, and when Richard asked for Mr. Stokes, the little voice said, "Just a minute," then yelled, "Daddy!
"Hello."
"Mr. Stokes, my name is Richard Worth. I'm sorry to bother you at a time like this, but if you feel up to it, I'd like to ask you some questions about your father's death."
"His murder, you mean," said David Stokes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elijah Stokes had been murdered, the victim of a violent mugging. He had been attacked, dragged between two buildings, and beaten to death. He had died from severe head injuries, inflicted by a blunt object. A reluctant witness had finally told police she had seen a young man running from the alley on the afternoon in question.

Richard pondered on the details he had learned from the bitter, grief-stricken David Stokes. He didn't like any of them. His daytime staff had long since gone home, and he was alone in the town house, his favorite time of the day. He usually worked at night, and in fact, he needed to study some reports that he should have read that morning, but he wasn't in the mood for profit margins and stock options.

He snagged a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and sat down in front of the television. His fondness for the occasional beer had always reminded Candra of his peasant origins. Though she seldom said anything about it, he had always been aware of her mingled distress and disdain. When they were first married, when he had cared what she thought, he had restricted himself to her approved list of wines, mixed drinks, and whiskeys. Projecting the right image hadn't been important to him, then or now, but it had been to her. When she started cheating, he stopped caring, and from then on there had always been beer in the refrigerator.

He suspected Sweeney wouldn't know one wine from another, and furthermore wouldn't care to know. It was a refreshing attitude.

He propped his feet on the coffee table and turned to a news channel, but he already knew the Dow Jones, and Standard and Poor's averages. He knew the latest price of gold; he knew what the Asian markets were doing, what the money markets were doing, what the Chicago futures were doing, and he didn't give a shit. Work would wait. He had more important things on his mind.

Sweeney's claim to see ghosts and affect electronics didn't bother him. He didn't necessarily believe- it, but it didn't bother him. She was patently sane, so at worst her convictions were eccentric. The electronics effect was easily explained; some people couldn't wear battery-operated watches because their personal energy field made the watches go haywire. If she really did affect traffic signals, that was fine with him.

Several things did bother him, though. Those severe chills she was having, whether caused by shock or something else, were serious enough to incapacitate her. He didn't know if she was in

any true physical danger, but judging from what he had seen that morning, he thought it was more than a little possible. Whether triggered by her imagination or some physical condition, the events were real.

He wanted to believe there was some underlying physical cause, something easily adjusted with medication. That would be the simplest, most logical cause and solution.

Unfortunately, there was that painting of Elijah Stokes. He couldn't find any possible explanation for its existence.

As soon as he had seen the painting, he had known it depicted a violent death. Sweeney didn't seem to realize quite what she had painted, but then she hadn't seen a lot of death and violence. He had. In the army, he had been trained to be efficiently violent, to perform his mission and avoid capture, and to kill. He had been good at it, and not just in exercises. The rangers, like all other special-forces groups, were often sent on clandestine missions that were never reported in the news. He knew what death looked like, what blunt-force trauma looked like, so he had been expecting David Stokes to say his father had been murdered.

Sweeney didn't live in Elijah Stokes's neighborhood; she hadn't even known his name until she learned the names of his sons. Nor could she have found out about his death afterward and done the painting, because the paint had been completely dry today. While Sweeney's back was turned, he had touched the paint, especially the thick red of the blood, and it hadn't been sticky. No, she didn't know Elijah Stokes had been murdered, and he didn't intend to tell her. She was already upset about the painting, and he didn't want to do anything that might trigger another episode of hypothermia or shock.

If anyone had told him a month ago, even a week ago, that he would, be entertaining the notion such psychic phenomena could be real, he'd have laughed in his face; that was tabloid fodder. But this was Sweeney; she wasn't a good liar, wasn't good at any sort of deception. Watching her reaction to the McMillans had made him want to laugh out loud, because her growing repulsion and desperation to get out of there had been plain on her face. When she didn't want to tell him something, she didn't pretend not to know the answers he wanted; she just got a mutinous, stubborn expression. She didn't play games, didn't know how.

After Candra's deceptiveness, after the social snobbery he had observed for ten years, some of which he had endured, Sweeney was like a drink of fresh

water. She was direct and honest, so even if he didn't believe some of the things she had told him, he had to believe that she did. And he had to believe she had painted Elijah Stokes's death scene without having seen it, without having known the old man was dead.

So, with the evidence at hand, he had to discard logic and take a leap of faith. She wasn't crazy and she wasn't deceptive. He had to believe she'd had at least one true psychic experience. If he loved her, he had to believe her.

Son of a bitch. Shocked by the thought, Richard surged to his feet and restlessly paced the room. Wanting her was one thing, a healthy sexual reaction to a desirable woman. He liked her. When he first asked her out, only a few days before, he had known he would like to have a steady, exclusive, and very sexual relationship with her. He hadn't thought about love. He was just getting out of a bad marriage, though the divorce was only the legal epitaph on the tombstone of something that had been dead a long time. Loving Sweeney wasn't convenient. The timing was bad, and he suspected she could be a real pain in the ass'. She was difficult and prickly, and probably didn't compromise worth a damn.

But she was honorable, and this morning when she woke in his arms, the smile she had given him had been as sweet as an angel's. His heart had literally skipped a beat. He had known then he was in real trouble. A man would do a lot for a woman who smiled at him that way, all warm and drowsy and satisfied. He would move mountains for the privilege of making love to her, of watching her face while he brought her to orgasm. Having had a taste of Sweeney's passion, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. One way or the other, Candra would sign those papers, and he would call in every favor owed to him to get a hearing before a judge as soon as possible. Sooner. Within a week. Money could work miracles, and he had a lot of money. He couldn't think of a better way to spend it. It was time he did something satisfying with his money, and he couldn't think of anything more satisfying than getting Sweeney in his hands, in his bed, in his life.

He was going to make some drastic changes in his life, and he was going to make them soon. Sweeney was the most drastic change, but the others weren't minor. He was tired of playing the market, tired of the life he led here. It had never been what he wanted on a permanent basis, just the means to an end. He didn't like what he was seeing in the market, and it was time

to get out. He thought he'd have at least a year, but liquidating his assets would take time, and he didn't intend to wait until the last minute to do it. The computer problem looming at the end of 1999 looked like a bitch. From the information that passed through his hands, he knew a lot of companies weren't going to have their computer programs fixed by that time. What that would do to the market was anyone's guess, but if enough companies shut down, the market would crash. If he had been satisfied with what he was doing, with his life here, he might have tried to ride it out. Under the circumstances, though, it was time to get out.

He didn't want to try to predict what would happen, or shift his investments to companies with computer systems that were millennium compliant. He had never intended to spend his whole life playing the market and amassing wealth, anyway. All along he'd had other plans, and now it was time to put them into action.

Sweeney complicated matters, and not just because the timing was inconvenient. He didn't want a long-distance romance. He wanted her with him, and he had no idea how she felt about relocating.

Big plans, he thought in self-mockery He tilted back his head and killed the rest of the beer. He was planning her future without even asking if she wanted to spend it with him. Hell, why not? She had disrupted his life, so turnabout was fair play. He thought he had a good chance of success, considering what she had given away that morning with her comment about being terrified something had happened to him. He grinned to himself. He wasn't above taking ruthless advantage of her feelings for him; hell, he needed any advantage he could get.

It was almost two A.M. when Sweeney stirred slightly in her sleep, a frown puckering her brow. A barely audible whimper sounded in her throat, a quiet protest from her subconscious. A few moments later she slipped out of bed, her movements so calm the covers were scarcely disturbed; one second she had been lying beneath them, the next she wasn't. She stood beside the bed for some time, her head cocked as if she were listening to something. Then she sighed, and walked silently through the dark apartment to her studio.

She had stood the canvas with two shoes painted on it against the right wall, where it was out of the way but she could still look at it. The shoes had puzzled her. Why had she painted shoes? After her initial relief that she hadn't done another portrait of death, she had gotten more uneasy as the day

had gone on. The shoes weren't finished; they needed more work. Knowing that had made her dread the night, for the first time in her life.
Now she went straight to the shoe canvas and placed it on an easel. Her expression was smooth and blank as she selected her tubes of paint and began to work. Her brushstrokes were fast and precise, the narrow, tapered bristles adding detail.
She didn't work for long, no more than an hour. Suddenly she shuddered, her entire body drooping as if overwhelmed with fatigue. She capped the tubes of paint and dropped the brush in a jar of turpentine, and silently returned to bed.
She slept late again, until almost eight, but knew as soon as she woke that she had done it again. She was cold, the heat from the electric blanket somehow not transferring to her flesh, even though she knew it should. When she had gone to bed the night before, the bed had been toasty warm, such a delicious sensation she had almost purred as she crawled between the sheets. It would still be toasty warm, she knew, to anyone else, but she couldn't feel it.
Not being an idiot who couldn't face reality, she hurriedly dressed and went into the living room, where she had left the pad with Richard's number on it. As she picked up the cordless phone and punched numbers, she noticed that her hands were colorless except for her fingernails, which had an interesting bluish tint to them.
Richard answered the phone himself, and something tense inside her relaxed a little at the sound of that deep, calm voice. "This is Sweeney," she said, trying to sound cheerful, but at that moment a violent shiver seized her and her voice shook. "It happened again."
"I'll be right there."
Just like that, she marveled as he hung up. No questions, no "I'm tied up right now, but I'll be there as soon as I can." She needed him, and he was dropping everything else to be there with her. The sheer wonder of it made her chest feel tight, as if she were catching a cold. Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them back, determined not to be such a sissy again.
She went into the kitchen. The coffee was made and already cold. She poured a cup and put it in the microwave to heat, waiting impatiently for the ding. Chills raced down her spine, roughened her skin. She felt her muscles tensing with another shudder.

She gulped down the first cup of coffee and heated another one. She had to hold it with both hands to keep the coffee from sloshing out, but still she was shaking so hard she risked scalding herself.
The attacks were getting worse, she realized; she was getting colder, faster. Maybe she should move the coffeemaker into the bedroom, put it right there on the nightstand so she wouldn't even have to get out of bed. Not that the coffee seemed to be helping much; nothing helped, except for Richard. Just the thought of him caused a small spurt of warmth deep inside. That's the ticket, she thought. Just think of Richard. She had thought about him incessantly the day before, constantly replaying those remarkably carnal moments in his arms. The fact that they hadn't had sex was a tribute to his self-control, not hers, and she was still astounded at herself, astounded at the heat that had poured through her, the blind physical drive for fulfillment. She had never experienced that before, and now that she had, she was no longer so certain of her ability to keep their relationship platonic.
She snorted into the cup of coffee. Who was she kidding? They hadn't consummated their relationship, but it was far from platonic. All these years she had felt so smug about her imperviousness to sexual temptation, but with one look Richard could get inside her defenses and have her insides jumping around. Face it, she thought. With Richard, she was a pushover. Shivering, she looked at the clock. How much longer would he be? He should be here any time.
Her shoulders were hunched against the cold, but abruptly she straightened, her eyes going wide. She shot out of the kitchen chair and raced for the bathroom. Hastily she rinsed her mouth with mouthwash, then grabbed a comb and attacked her hair, which stood out from her head like a bush. Her efforts only made it wilder. She threw down the comb, squirted a dab of something that was supposed to control the frizzies into her hand, and rubbed it over the worst spots. Makeup? Should she put on lipstick? She stared at herself in the mirror, wondering what shade looked best on blue lips. Perfume, maybe. Damn it, she didn't have any.
"Oh, I've got it bad," she whispered. Here she stood, shivering so hard she was beginning to hurt, worrying about makeup and perfume. In horror, she realized she was pretfing up.
The doorbell rang. Hurriedly she wiped her hands and ran to the door. Her teeth were chattering as she jerked it open. "I've lost my mind," she told him

grimly, walking into his arms. "I'm freezing to death, and I was worrying about lipstick. Then I opened the door without checking first. This is all your fault."
"I know," he murmured, lifting her off her feet and stepping inside. He hugged her tight, helping her brace against the shudders that wracked her. She buried her face against his neck, seeking to breathe in his warmth, and her nose was so cold he jumped. An exuberant curl tickled his lips as he turned and locked the door.
"It isn't as bad today. I c-c-called you as soon as I got up."
Since she'd lost control of her teeth in the middle of the sentence and they'd done their castanet imitation again, her statement wasn't as believable as it could have been.
"Good." He carried her to the couch. "V"ere's the blanket?"
"On the ch-chair in my bedroom." He set her down. "I'll get it."
He was back in seconds, guiding her to lie down on the couch and lying down beside her, then gathering her full length against him and covering them both with the blanket. Then he sat up again and shucked his lightweight crewneck off over his head, carelessly dropping it to the floor; then he lay down beside her and tucked her hands between them, warming them on his torso.
His skin felt hot against her cold fingers. He put his hands on her back and pressed them against her spine, and she shuddered with relief as his heat began sinking into her. "It's already easing," she said against his throat, feeling her tight muscles slowly relax as a sense of profound well-being spread through her. She breathed in slowly, deeply, filling her lungs with the scent of him. He smelled warm and musky, undeniably male. The aroma of testosterone, she thought, and smiled to herself.
"Better?" he asked. His voice was low, deeper than usual. The bass notes reverberated under her ear.
"Mmm. This wasn't bad at all."
"Because you didn't wait." His lips brushed her ear, moved over her temple. His hand slowly stroked down her back, urging her even closer. Their legs tangled, and one hard-muscled thigh slid between hers.
Her breath caught as she felt his erection. "I can't keep calling you over to get me warm," she murmured. "This is too tempting."
"You're telling me," he said ruefully. She felt his lips curve against her temple as he smiled, then he pressed another kiss there. He smoothed her

curls back, gently traced a fingertip around the sworl of her ear. "I couldn't take a repeat of yesterday. If I'd had to take your clothes off today, I'd be fucking you right now."

His voice was low and intimate, impossibly tender. The graphic promise invoked a breathtaking image, making her loins clench with almost unbearable anticipation. She couldn't protest, not when she wanted nothing more than for him to do exactly what he had said. She slipped her hand around his bare back, feeling the strength of the muscles there and the way they tightened under her touch. "I want you to," she whispered, unable to pretend, as if he didn't know exactly how she reacted to him. He had known from the first, before she was willing to admit it to herself.

His entire body flexed and surged, pressing her hard into the couch. His thigh wedged higher between her legs. A ragged breath shuddered out of him. "I feel like a teenager making out on the living room couch. I'd forgotten how damn frustrating it is."

Sweeney brushed her lips over the underside of his jaw. She was inexperienced, but not naive or ignorant. There were several ways they could satisfy each other, without actually having sex, and the temptation was strong to suggest one or more, or all. She didn't. Not only did she doubt her willpower would stand the test, but to do so seemed like cheating-getting off on a technicality, so to speak. It would be delicious, and wonderfully satisfying, and wrong. Until his divorce was final, it was wrong. Maybe most women wouldn't feel that way, but then they hadn't grown up with her parents as examples.

She didn't dare even kiss him, though she hungered for his taste. She could feel the tension humming through his big body, feel her own flesh throbbing in response. It would take so little to push them both over the edge that she was afraid to move.

But there was pleasure in just lying there with him, his arms around her, feeling his chest expand with each breath, hearing his heart beating. There was animal comfort in sharing his heat. Above all, there was a sense of belonging that she had never before known, the startling realization that she was not alone in the world, that somehow she had become part of a couple. It was a heady sensation, to know that he cared for her, that she was important to him. Sweeney couldn't remember ever being important to anyone before. She didn't know how this sense of connection had formed so

fast, or how she had so quickly come to trust and rely on him, but it had and she did.
"What did you paint this time?" he asked, after ten minutes had passed without a return of the chill. She was warm and drowsy, almost in a daze.
"I don't know," she said, a little surprised. "I didn't even go in the studio. I have an electric blanket on my bed, and when I woke up cold anyway, I just assumed I had been sleepwalking again. What if I called you for nothing?"
"I would rather you call me whenever you have - 'the least chill, than let things get as bad as they were yesterday morning. You worried the hell out of me."
"I worried the hell out of myself," she said wryly, and listened to his laughter rumble in his chest. It was nice, the way his voice was so deep. The hair on his chest was rough under her cheek, and that was nice, too. Everything about him was so damn masculine she could barely control herself.
"Are you warm?"
"Toasty."
"Then we need to get up."
"Why? I'm so comfortable." Stokes died late in the after"Because I'm not a saint. Cortil that night."
painted." relieved but as if there were She wanted to groan and moan dy she could think what they but for his sake she decided to be)und his waist and was comright." vas so solid and strong. Had
He grabbed his sweater from thced him and stroked her hand feet, then headed toward the studio. 3he had actually put her arms kitchen and nuked another cup of dence twinged. She had been offer of coffee and leaned against tleen doing all the giving, but crossed while he pulled the sweater (d. She had always considered think she'd ever had a man in h(she had needed him.
sneaked a couple of admiring glance!could peer down at her face. tled in place, she stifled a sigh of reg cover a chest that looked like his. e managed a smile, pushing "Come on, quit stalling," he saigry Have you had breakfast?" realized she was. Yesterday she hacat again. Would you like to go what she had painted last night, if iniate. "
With his hand resting comfoirta" if we should do that." She they went into the studio. Sweeney hings they had done-and the the shoe canvas wasn't leaning again!

it. "Looks like I worked on shoes agar amused and rueful. "My day ing inside. She didn't like walking iiget you flat on your back, just ings that she didn't remember doinpup frustration that will have subjects a lot more upsetting than st
An easel had been moved, posies," she purred, and laughed ing the north wall of windows. dnd of love play before, never Together they went over to s(r her like a tidal wave about to
ied the details she had added duringand exciting, and ... and woning the brush strokes. The details that the painting looked like a porti(nd urged her on with a small her usual technique, but the work.
She had added another shoe to the painting, a high heel that matched the other one. Last night's shoe was still being worn; she had completed a woman's foot to the ankle. And she had painted a woman's bare foot and part of that leg, up to the knee, lying close to the empty shoe. All in all there was nothing horrible about the painting, not in what she had done so far, but still she felt her stomach knot in dread, and she shivered.
"Great," she muttered. "I added some body parts." Despite her flippancy, her voice was tight.
Richard felt her shiver and gathered her close, hugging her to him. His expression was grim as he stared at the painting. "It's going to be like the hot dog vendor, isn't it? She's dead.
She's lying down; she's lost one shoe. Or if she isn't dead now, she will be soon, and it feels as if it's my fault." Sweeney tried to pull away, but Richard turned her to him and held her tighter, cradling the back of her head in one big hand and pressing her face into his chest.
"It isn't your fault and you know it."
Her voice muffled, she said, "Logically I do, but emotionally--" She waved a hand. "You know how emotions are."
"Yeah, they're unruly as hell." He kissed the top of her head. "I wonder what would happen if I destroyed the canvas."
"Nothing. Whether or not you paint the scene will have no effect on this person. Get that straight, svi;eetie. Whatever ... vibes, or whatever the hell they are, that you're picking up,you're the one being affected, not the other way around."
"I wish I could be sure of that."
"You can, because you painted Elijah Stokes after he was dead, not before."
Startled, she jerked her head back to stare at him. "How do you know?"

I talked to his son David. Mr. Stokes died late in the afternoon. You didn't do the painting until that night."
She mulled that over, feeling relieved but as if there were some questions she should ask, if only she could think what they were. Sighing, she slid her arms around his waist and was comforted by the feel of his body. He was so solid and strong. Had she held him before? She had touched him and stroked her hand up his back, but she didn't know if she had actually put her arms around him before now. her conscience twinged. She had been taking and taking, while he had been doing all the giving, but even strong people needed to be held. She had always considered herself strong, and look how much she had needed him.
He leaned back a little so he could peer down at her face. "Feel better about it?"
"Relieved. Still worried." She managed a smile, pushing away her uneasy feelings. "And hungry. Have you had breakfast?" 'A long time ago, but I could eat again. Would you like to go out for breakfast? It'll be our first date."
"Wow, a date. I don't know if we should do that." She grinned at him, thinking of all the things they had done-and the things they had yet to do.
His answering grin was both amused and rueful. "My day will come, sweetie. When I finally get you flat on your back, just remember that I have a lot of built-up frustration that will have to be worked off."
"You say the sweetest things," she purred, and laughed because she had never done this kind of love play before, never teased a man and felt his desire for her like a tidal wave about to break over her head. It was heady, and exciting, and ... and wonderful.
He turned her to the door and urged her on with a small
push. "Put on some shoes-and a bra, while you're at it. That little jiggle is hell on my self-control."
She did more than put on shoes and a bra. She exchanged her gray sweatshirt for a blue sweater and did the mascara-andlipstick thing. She frowned at her hair, blew a curl out of her eyes, and decided to leave it alone. Grabbing her purse, she went out into the living room, where Richard sat reading one of the books on ghosts.
"I've been researching ghosts since all this started," she said. "I keep hoping I'll find some explanation of what caused me to start seeing them, but so far

all the books are just about the ghosts themselves. Some spirits leave immediately; some hang around for a little while; some never leave at all."
"So why would any of them hang around?" He stood up and walked with her to the door.
"There are all sorts of theories. Maybe there are loose ends to be tied up, maybe they're just confused and don't cooperatewho knows? One book said that only unhappy spirits become ghosts, so technically the ones who stay just a little longer aren't really ghosts, they're just on a layover."
"That's one way of looking at it," he murmured.
Sweeney locked the door behind them, and they walked to the elevator. She noticed Richard looking around him, studying the building for signs of decay. The apartments weren't luxurious, or even upscale, but everything was usually in good repaif. If the elevator malfunctioned, the tenants didn't have to wait weeks for it to be repaired. Lightbulbs were replaced and the plumbing was maintained. The building was old, but the tenants, herself included, generally considered themselves lucky.
They stood waiting for the elevator, watching the oldfashioned dial at the top with the needle that indicated at which floor the car was stopped. The needle was coming up. Richard
put his hand on her waist, his fingers flexing slightly as if he savored the feel of her. Sweeney tilted her head to smile at him just as the elevator chimed and the doors slid open, and Candra stepped out.
She froze when she saw them, her face blanching of color. She took in Richard's hand on Sweeney's waist, the way they were standing close together, and angry color flooded back into her face. "Fancy meeting you here," she said to Richard, her hands clenched into bloodless fists.
The elevator closed behind her. Richard leaned forward and punched the button again, and the doors obediently reopened. "N"ere wouldyou like to go for breakfast?" he calmly asked Sweeney, ushering her into the car and hitting the button for the lobby. Sweeney blinked at him, admiring his cool unconcern; she felt almost paralyzed by the awkwardness of the situation.
Infuriated, Candra stepped back into the elevator as the doors began to close. "Don't you dare try to ignore me!"
"What Sweeney and I do is none of your business." His voice was still calm, his demeanor completely unruffled. His hand was firmer on Sweeney's waist, however, keeping her anchored at his side.

Sweeney noted the linking of her name with him, and so did Candra. "The hell it isn't! " She was so furious her voice was shaking. "You're still my husband-"
Standing so closely to him, Sweeney felt the sudden tension in his body, and his eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. For the first time in his presence she felt a frisson of fear, and that look wasn't even directed at her. "You don't want to go there," he told Candra, very softly.
"Don't tell me where I want to go or what I want to do." Trembling, Candra reached out to steady herself as the car
descended. Her chocolate gaze switched to Sweeney. "You! I asked you if anything was going on between you and Richard, and you lied to me, you little bitch-"
"That's enough," Richard snapped, wrapping his arm around Sweeney and bodily moving her out of Candra's reach. He moved so his own body completely blocked hers.
"Oh, don't worry," Candra sneered. "I'm too adult to brawl over a man, though that's probably what you were used to before you met me. Isn't that what your beer-swilling, country-fried little southern girls do?"
Sweeney cleared her throat. 'Actually," she said to Richard's back, "I was born in Italy."
"Who gives a fuck where you were born!" Candra screamed. Sweeney peeked around Richard's back and saw tears running down Candra's face, ruining her perfect makeup. "You're an unsophisticated hayseed, so he should feel very comfortable with you! But I promise you, you'll never sell another piece of work at my gallery, and no one else in town will touch you either after I-"
Sweeney felt Richard's temper snap. He took a single step toward Candra as the elevator lurched to a stop and the doors slid open. Her face blanching, Candra backed away from him.
"You're damn right I feel comfortable with her," he said in a tone so low Sweeney could barely hear him. "You don't know how great it feels to be with a woman who doesn't crawl into bed with every swinging dick she meets, the way you did. Yeah, I knew about all your men, every one of them, but you know what? I didn't give a damn, because I didn't give a damn about you. I do give a damn that you aborted my baby, though. Do you know what hate means, Candra? That's the best I feel about you. I

warned you what I would do if you did anything to harm Sweeney's career, and I meant it, so you'd better think long and hard about any step you take."
He towed Sweeney out of the elevator and clamped his arm around her waist again. He had taken two steps when he halted and swung back to Candra. "By the way, I've just added another condition to the settlement. Sweeney is released from any agreement with the gallery, without penalty, effective immediately."
"Damn you, you can't keep adding conditions-"
"I can, and I have. Your only hope of getting the gallery is if you meet those conditions. If not, within three days you won't have to worry about Sweeney's career, because I'll replace you at the gallery and bar you from the premises."
"I'll kill you if you do," Candra shrieked, sobbing. The only other people in the small Jobby were the super and a guy who lived on the second floor, but they were staring, not wanting to miss a second of the excitement. "The gallery is mine-"
"No," Richard interrupted. "The gallery is mine. Until you sign those papers the gallery is mine, and if you wait much longer, it will always be mine."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Richard ushered Sweeney out onto the sidewalk, leaving Candra weeping in the lobby.
He had driven himself, she saw as he led her down the street to where he had parked the Mercedes. The neighborhood wasn't the best, sort of residential going-toseed, but neither was it the sort where such a car left parked on the street would be stripped bare within ten minutes.
They were both silent as he unlocked the car and opened the passenger door for her. She got in, trying to think what she could say. She had just learned more about Candra, and the reasons for their divorce, than she had ever wanted to know. She was a little shaken, but more for Richard's sake than her own.
He pulled the car out into traffic. "I'm sorry," he said gruffly, after -another minute of silence. "I know one of the reasons you didn't want to get involved with me was because you wanted to avoid scenes like that."

"It wasn't your fault; it was hers." The traffic light ahead of them turned green. She looked down at her hands. "I'm sorry, too. About-about the abortion. I didn't know."
"She did it over two years ago," His mouth was a grim line. "I didn't find out about it until right after you moved to the city. I put her out of the town house right then, and filed for divorce the next day."
"You wanted children?" Stupid, she berated herself. Of course he had wanted the child, even after the fact, or he wouldn't have been so upset on learning about the abortion.
"Not by then. Not with her. Her pregnancy was an accident. But once she was pregnant-that was different. It existed. It was my child."
Sweeney couldn't imagine being Richard's wife and aborting his child. She had never thought of children in relation to herself, period. She especially couldn't imagine her father caring what happened to any of his offspring, unborn or born. "How did you find out?"
"She told me. We were arguing, she was drinking-she told me."
The second traffic light turned green as they approached. He glanced at her. "I think I need you in the car with me from now on."
Understanding that he needed to change the subject, she relaxed back against the seat. "Where are we going?"
"To a little diner I know, nothing fancy."
"Good. I don't do fancy very well."
The little diner was across the river in New Jersey. They made it to and through the Holland tunnel in record time, which made Sweeney feel a little smug. If he had doubted her about the traffic lights, he couldn't now.
They managed to snag a booth in the diner, which couldn't have changed much since the 1950s. Over eggs and coffee she said, "I thought the gallery was Candra's.
"She ran it. I own it."
"You were going to buy one of my paintings from your own gallery? And pay commission?"
He shrugged. "If Candra doesn't sign the papers by the deadline and I keep the gallery, commission doesn't come into it. She'll sign, though. It's in her best interest."
"What if she doesn't? She was furious to find you with me, and she might make the divorce as difficult as possible."

"I'd break her," he said softly. "She wouldn't have a dime left, and she knows it."
Something else occurred to her. "I wonder why she was going to MY apartment."
" She isn't stupid, and she knows me too well. She could tell I was interested in you, that day in the gallery, and she figured it out almost immediately. A few days ago she came to the town house and made an offer: if I upped the settlement amount, she wouldn't prevent any future sales of your work. She didn't like my counteroffer."
"I can imagine." And she could; Richard would make a dangerous enemy.
"But still, why come to me?"
"To ask you to convince me to raise the settlement. ,y
"Then why act so shocked to see us together, if she already thought we were involved?"
"Until then, she was just guessing. And thinking I was interested in you isn't the same as seeing us together so early in the morning, at your apartment.
Not to mention Candra had immediately realized Richard's presence thwarted her plan to ask Sweeney for assistance. Sweeney said, "I've made things more difficult for you, haven't P"
"By existing? Yeah, you have." He eyed her over the table. "You keep me awake nights, you worry me, you drive me crazy." She nudged his leg with her toe. "I'm serious."
"So am 1, sweetie."
She frowned at him, diverted. "You're saying my name funny. What're you doing to it?”
"Nothing," he said, but he smiled.
Deciding she wasn't going to get anything out of him right now, Sweeney looked out the window of the diner, -indulging herself for a moment by watching faces. A stooped old man, with tufts of hair on his ears and in his nostrils, walked by holding the hand of a chattering preschooler, a little girl wearing a dainty yellow sundress and a perky ponytail. The indulgent smile on his face shouted "grandfather." Or maybe "great-grandfather." Next was a young woman carrying her toddler in a backpack. She strode along as if she had a world to conquer, but she had tied a red balloon to the frame of the backpack and the baby's chubby little hand had managed to grab the string; he was staring in wonder at the balloon, which bobbed every time he moved. His eyes were round, his lips a perfect pink bow, and his cornsilk

hair stood straight out like a dandelion. Sweeney watched until they were out of sight.
She applied herself to her eggs for a moment, then snorted as she remembered something.
"What?" Richard said, and she marveled at how fast they had settled into the shorthand communication of longtime couples.
"'Beer-swilling, country-fried little southern girls,' " she said, and they both began laughing.
Candra couldn't stop crying, even though she knew it was stupid. She caught a taxi to the gallery, blubbering all the while. The cabdriver kept eyeing her in the mirror, but he didn't speak in much English and she made it a point not to encourage chatty cabdrivers anyway.
She had one tissue in her purse, and it was inadequate for the repair job needed. She blotted her eyes instead of wiping them, to keep from destroying the remnants of her makeup, but more damn tears kept falling. Damn him. Damn Sweeney. Damn both of them, for looking so ... so together. She couldn't believe Sweeney, of all people, could be so sly and sneaky, or could lie so effectively. When Candra remembered her phone call to Sweeney the morning after the McMillan fiasco, she burned with humiliation. Richard had probably been with her then; they might have just gotten out of bed, and afterward they had laughed probably about the phone call.
Candra hurt, in a way she had never imagined she could hurt. Until now, though she had known she had lost him, in a way he had still been hers, because no one else had taken her place. Now someone had, and she knew, finally, irrevocably, deep in her bones, that Richard was gone. She had lost him, thrown him away, and she would never love anyone else the way she loved him. Still loved him, even now. He was the strongest person she had ever known and she couldn't stop admiring him even when that strength was turned against her. Was Sweeney capable of understanding, of appreciating what she had, or was she so damn inexperienced she had no idea?
That inexperience was what had drawn Richard to her, of course, because God knows she had no style, and her conversation often bordered on the absurd. He had even admitted as much. Candra couldn't understand what men saw in her, but even Kai said Sweeney was "cool." She was pretty

enough, Candra supposed, if you could overlook the fact that she often had paint in her hair and didn't know what day of the week it was.
She couldn't imagine Richard finding that attractive. He was so organized, so logical and work-oriented, she would have thought Sweeney would drive him mad within two days.
Her nails dug into her palms. Today Sweeney had . . . glowed. Candra closed her eyes against the remembered shock of stepping out of the elevator and seeing Richard and Sweeney together. Sweeney wore the look of a woman who had been well and truly loved the night before, and perhaps that morning, too-and, knowing Richard, several times during the night.
Candra couldn't believe she had made such a fool of herself. Screaming like a fishwife, cging, for God's sake. Richard had known why she was there, of course. Now she wouldn't have any chance of getting to Sweeney, not that Sweeney was likely to listen to her after that little scene. She had blown her last chance to get the settlement reinstated. Now her only hope was Cargon, and it looked as if he needed nudging.
Kai had just opened the gallery when she got there; no customers had come in yet, thank God. She paid the cab and hurried through the door before anyone she knew saw her.
Kai stared at her, eyebrows lifted. "Rough morning?" he silkily inquired.
"Go to hell." She sailed past him into her office and got her cosmetic bag from the desk, then went into the bathroom. She winced when she looked in the mirror. Her face was blotched, her nose red, and her eyes looked like raccoon eyes. She needed to completely remove her makeup and start over, but she didn't have any cream with her. She did the best she could with wet paper napkins, and applied cool compresses to her eyes and face to take down the swelling and even out her color.
Kai sauntered in as she was reapplying her foundation. "Do you mind?" she snapped.
He ignored her protest and propped his rear end beside her on the vanity, crossing his arms over his chest. "There, there. What's Richard done now?"
"What makes you think this is about Richard?" She blew her nose and threw the tissue in the trash, then repaired the smudges.
He watched her take out her compact and dab powder over her face. "Because he's been making you dance to his tune for a year now, and you have a temper tantrum every time things don't go your way.

"I do not 'dance to his tune,' or anyone else's, " she said furiously.
"Of course not, darling."
"I'm not your darling, and don't forget it. You're just an occasional lay."
"My, we are in a snit, aren't we? He must have refused to reinstate the settlement."
She whirled on him, mouth working with rage. "How do you know anything about the settlement?"
"There was a message from your lawyer on the answering machine. She strongly advises you to sign the papers posthaste, before you lose your ass and can't pay her. She didn't say so in so many words, of course, but that's what she means - "
"How dare you listen to my messages!" She sounded like a Victorian maiden, she thought in disgust.
"It was on your business machine, darling, not your home machine. Perhaps you should instruct your attorney not to leave personal messages at work- assuming you'll be here much longer, that is."
"If I am, you can bet you won't be, pretty boy," she snarled. She jerked open the door. "Get out."
He went, with a sulky look on his pretty face. Candra took a deep breath, fighting the urge to sit down on the toilet lid and bawl. She had to get control of herself. She had totally ruined things this morning by being emotional, and now she would have to pacify Kai. She didn't feel like having sex, but it would probably take that to get him over his pout.
She took several deep breaths, and when she felt steady again, she finished her makeup. When she was finished, she critically studied herself in the mirror and dabbed more powder on a blotch. There. Her makeup wasn't perfect, but she knew she still looked better than most women would after a day at a salon.
She had to call Olivia, she realized; she had been a fool to put off signing the papers these few days, thinking she could somehow recoup what Richard had already deducted. She couldn't. She accepted that now. Richard had known, of course, that she would rage and protest against his conditions, but in the end accept them; he had left her no other choice. He didn't bluff and she knew it. Richard was one of those say-what-youmean and mean-what-you-say people, the bastard.
She almost started crying again, but took a deep breath and controlled the urge. Walking briskly, she went into her office, closed the door, and called

her attorney.
"Set up an appointment," she said calmly. "I'll sign. I assume the punitive action stops as soon as you call Gavin Welles?"
"I'll make certain it does, if I can't get an appointment for today. The papers will have to be redone and that will take some time, so it might be put off until tomorrow."
"Tomorrow is fine," Candra said. Of course a new agreement would have to be drawn up, to reflect the deduction in the settlement amount. She had no doubt Richard had already called his attorney instructing him to draw up papers concerning his new condition about Sweeney. That wouldn't go in the divorce agreement, but some sort of legal agreement would be reached allowing Sweeney a clean break from the gallery.
After hanging up with Olivia, Candra flipped through her Rolodex and found the McMillans" number. A maid answered, of course. "Has the senator returned from Washington yet?"
"Yes, ma'am, he has. May I say who is calling?"
" Candra Worth." There was no point in hiding her identity, she thought. Carson was more likely to take the call if he knew who she was; he wouldn't like it, but he would do it.
She was on hold for several minutes, long enough that she was beginning to get angry when Carson"s richly modulated voice finally came on, except today it wasn't so modulated. It sounded rather tight, she thought with satisfaction. Good. That meant he was worried.
"What do you want?" he said abruptly.
Candra managed a light laugh. Actually, it felt good to be the one in control for a change. "Really, Carson, that's a silly question. "
"Raising that kind of money in cash isn't easy."
"How difficult can it be? Sell a few stocks, cash in a few bonds, dip into a few accounts. You can't put me off with that excuse. If you don't have the money by tomorrow afternoon, a photograph will be at ne Washington Post first thing the next morning. Let's see, which picture should I choose? The one of you snorting coke, I think."
"I want you to know this conversation is being taped," he said, his voice full of satisfaction. "You are now on record
attempting blackmail. Is that a felony? You know, I rather think it is. I believe, my dear, we now have each other by the short hairs."

"Do we?" Carson would have benefited from having encountered Richard's style of negotiating, Candra thought grimly. Make the stakes too high for the other person to tolerate, and don't back down. It was a brutally effective tactic. "You don't quite understand my position. If I don't get that money, I lose everything, so I don't give a damn what you've taped. You have heard the old saw about desperate people and desperate measures, haven't you?"
"You fucking-"
"Now, now, let's be civilized." She'd had enough scenes for one day.
"Civilized, my ass." He was breathing heavily, the sound echoing in her ear. "Face it, Carson; the only way you can use that tape is if those photographs have been made public, which is too late for you. Your career would be in the toilet. We would both lose, but if you don't come through with the money, I've lost anyway, so I might as well take you down with me." Her voice was cool, controlled. She meant every word.
He knew it, too. There was more heavy breathing before he accepted the inevitable. 'All right, goddamn you. But tomorrow is too soon. It'll take at least two days to get that kind of cash."
"Day after tomorrow, then, but not a day longer."
At his desk, Kai smiled, and carefully timed his disconnect to coincide with Candra's so she wouldn't see the telltale light above her line stay on a second too long. He had perfected the art of eavesdropping over the years he had worked for her, just to keep the upper hand. She thought she had control, of course, but only because he had allowed her to think it.
So the little bitch was trying her hand at blackmail. He shouldn't be surprised, because he knew Richard had her over a barrel and Candra wasn't a woman who could do without money.
When she signed the divorce agreement, the gallery would become hers. She would probably fire him as she had threatened, he thought. Things were fine with her as long as he kept his mouth shut and performed on cue in bed, but he was tired of being her whore.
She sailed out of her office, all smiles now. "Darling," she said, coming over to his desk and lightly placing her hand on the back of his neck. "I'm so sorry I snapped at you. You were right; I had a fight with Richard and I took it out on you."
Now she would offer sex to pacify him, he thought cynically. She lightly stroked her fingers through his hair. "Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?" Her tone was light, teasing, seductive.

He stood, moving away from her touch. "That isn't necessary, " he said, at his most polite. He would have taken her up on the offer if he hadn't had an appointment at lunchtime and needed to be fresh for that. Too bad, he thought. He would have enjoyed being rough with her, maybe even rougher than she liked.
"Don't pout, darling; it isn't attractive."
He shrugged his disinterest. "I'm not in the mood."
Nonsense, you're always in the mood."
"Maybe I'm getting picky," he said, and watched her temper flare. Candra didn't deal well with rejection. She was truly a beautiful woman, he thought, so beautiful she had always been able to get any man she wanted. Richard's rejection of her had startled her, shaken her out of her complacency, and now her lowly assistant was refusing her offer. Her world must be wobbling off its axis.
"Then enjoy your sulk," she said, her lips tight. "Oh, by the way. Get Sweeney's new pieces back from the framer. We won't be displaying her work anymore."
"Really." Interested in this latest development, he raised his eyebrows. "That's a shame, since her new stuff is better than anything she's ever done before. What's the problem?"
Her perfect fingernails tapped a tattoo on his desk. "Just a small complication. I found her and Richard together this morning."
Oho! Kai threw back his head and laughed. It wasn't the most politic thing to do, but the image was just so delicious. "So that's what ruffled your feathers! Did you catch them doing the nasty?"
She was annoyed that he'd laughed, he could tell. If her lips got any tighter, they would disappear. "I caught him coming out of her apartment. He must have spent the night. "
Kai whistled. "He's a fast worker. I wouldn't tag Sweeney as an easy lay, so he must have put some effort into getting her." He put admiration into his tone, knowing Candra would be infuriated. "I wouldn't mind taking her for a ride myself."
"I don't see the attraction." The words were so stiff, they would barely come out of her mouth.
"You mean other than those big blue eyes and all that hair? Well, her tits are nice. They aren't very big, but they don't sag at all, and her ass is fine-"

"I don't need a rundown," Candra snapped, whirling away from the desk and going back into her office. Kai laughed softly. He was turned on, he realized. He liked baiting Candra, and envisioning Sweeney's body, imaging her naked, was exciting.

He kept that pleasant heat all during the morning, even while he was assisting some tourists from Omaha who wanted some "real art," in their words, to take back to Nebraska with them. Knowing instinctively what they wouldn't like, he steered them away from the abstract and modern, and smiled to himself as he showed them the last piece Sweeney had in the gallery. Candra would be furious if they bought it.

They did, to his delight.

At twelve-thirty he left the gallery and walked the eleven blocks to his apartment. A hotel would have been more convenient, but the woman he was meeting was afraid she would be recognized at a hotel. He had given her his key and knew she would be waiting for him. He would probably be late getting back to work, he thought.

She was cautious; she had relocked the door. He knocked once, and watched the peephole darken as she put her eye to it. She opened the door. "Kai, darling, you're late."

Kai smiled. She had already taken off her clothes and was wearing his robe, the one he himself never wore but kept because women seemed to think they looked sexy in it. The belt was loosely tied, of course, and the robe open just enough to show most of one breast. She was in good shape, for a woman old enough to be his mother. There was no telling how many lifts and tucks a cosmetic surgeon had done on her.

"You look beautiful," he said as he took her in his arms and undid the robe, pushing it off her shoulders. Margo McMillan arched her fashionably thin body, offering him her breasts, and Kai performed as expected.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The damn painting was calling her. It wasn't anything as overt as "Here, Sweeney Sweeney Sweeney," but nevertheless, she couldn't get it out of her mind.

She'd had a wonderful afternoon. Breakfast with Richard had been so relaxing she was able to push the ugly scene with Candra out of her mind,

Not being a dummy, she realized Richard had intended exactly that. It was almost eerie, the way he seemed to read her every mood and anticipate exactly what she needed, but at the same time she couldn't stop reveling in his care. Having someone take care of her was such a novelty she wanted to enjoy every minute.

After Richard had brought her home from the diner and left her at the building entrance with a quick, domestic peck on the lips, having made a date for breakfast again tomorrow, Sweeney had gone humming up to her apartment. The scene with Candra, despite its awkwardness and nasty drama, had been a relief Breaking her ties with Candra. and the gallery would be so much easier now, with no regrets. She made a mental note to call the gallery and make arrangements to pick up the new pieces she had left there a few days before, as well as whatever old paintings were left. Then she began to paint.

For the first time in a long while, it was joyous. She didn't worry about the colors being too lavish for reality; she simply let her instincts carry her. After doing a quick charcoal sketch on a canvas and brushing it off so that only the outline was left behind, she lost herself in the creation of a chubby toddler with dandelion hair, staring in awe up at a brilliant red balloon. She played with technique, completely smoothing and blending the colors she used for the baby, softening the outlines, so that he took on the realism of a snapshot. Everything around him, though, was an explosion of color and movement, intensified, slightly exaggerated, so that his surrounding world was a fantastical place begging for exploration.

It was the technique she used for the baby that jarred a memory of the shoes. She had used the same realistic technique on the shoe painting. Her concentration broken, she stepped back and wiped her hands on a cloth, frowning as she glanced over at the other canvas. She didn't want to think about it, but now all her former feelings about it came roaring back, like water that had been seeking a crack in the dam so it could burst through. The woman the legs and shoes belonged to was dead, or would soon be dead. Sweeney knew that with every cell in her body. Her theory that these paintings were triggered only when someone she knew died was a bit thin, since she had only one instance on which to base it, but instinctively she knew she was on the right track. She would know this woman. But perhaps she wasn't dead yet, perhaps that was why Sweeney hadn't finished the painting, hadn't put a face to the woman. If she could hurry and finish the

painting, anticipate the future, maybe she could do something to prevent the woman's death. Warn her against crossing the street, maybe. There weren't enough details in the painting yet to give any hint of location, not even whether it was indoors or out, but if she could consciousp finish the painting instead of waiting for the night muse to move her.

The responsibilities of this new gift hit her like a runaway bus. Yes, gift. Not inconvenience, though it was damned inconvenient. Not a nuisance, though it could be annoying. For whatever reason, she had changed or been changed, and been given gifts. The traffic lights, the lush plants, the ability to know lines of dialogue on a television show before they were spoken, even seeing the ghosts-all that had been a prelude, a sort of building up, to this. It was as if the door to another world had opened slowly, perhaps because she wouldn't have been able to handle everything rushing at her at once.

The door probably still wasn't open all the way. The painting of Elijah Stokes had been done after the fact. This new painting, she was sure, was anticipating the future. As the door opened wider, her gifts would expand as her view of that new world widened. She would be able to warn people, prevent their deaths. She had no idea what the limits would be, because they seemed to be expanding all the time. Perhaps this gift wouldn't be limited to people she knew; perhaps there were other gifts waiting to manifest themselves.

She hadn't wanted this. She had been perfectly content in her self-contained world, isolating herself from people and not letting anyone really touch her. She knew analysts would say that in her childhood she had learned to protect herself by mentally distancing herself from the people in her world, and she knew they would be right. But the change had opened her up, made her really see people, made her feel, and she didn't know if she would return to the old way even if she could. There was Richard now; she didn't know what she felt for him; she was afraid to even try to put a name to it, but she knew her life would be poorer without him in it. There was passion growing in her, passion he was carefully feeding, and she could never be content now if she didn't discover the full reach of it.

There was no going back. Instead of fighting the changes, or at best trying to ignore them, she should be opening herself up to the experience. For the first time in her life, she should live.

As much as she loved the painting of the baby and the balloon, she could no longer focus on it. She could see, from the corner of her eye, the other canvas. Waiting. Waiting for the night, when sleep lowered all her mental barriers, or perhaps just waiting. Perhaps she could do it now.

She approached the easel as one would a snake, cautiously, ready to run, Her heart hammered, and her breathing was quick and shallow. What was wrong with her? This was just a painting, even if it was a weird one. Okay, maybe not just a painting, but neither was it a snake. She knew art, knew the techniques, knew how to scale and shadow and foreshorten, how to manipulate light with the thickness of the paint, how to highlight or downplay with her choice of colors. Since art was the medium in which this particular gift was expressing herself, perhaps she could look at the painting strictly on that level: assess it on its artistic merits, and go from there.

Yes. She could do that. Calm descended on her. She took several deep breaths, just as insurance, and forced herself to study the composition objectively.

The composition and scale were good. The position of the woman's feet looked as if she had just fallen. The shoe lying on its side would have come off when she fell. They were nice black pumps, three-inch heels, and light gleamed on the rich leather. But they weren't right, she thought, frowning at them. The shoes weren't right. Something was missing.

She had no idea what it could be. All the basic parts of a pump were there: heel, sole, upper. There were endless designs and decorations one could put on shoes, however. This might be something she would have to do in her sleep, when she was open to suggestions.

The man's shoe disturbed her, not because there was just one, but because of the way it was positioned. He would be looking directly down at the woman. He was too close. A bystander wouldn't be so close. Anyone running up to give aid would be crouched beside her. A cop ... Where would a cop be? An investigator would be crouched, she thought. Medics would be crouched. The way this shoe was positioned, the man was just ... looking at her.

He had killed her

The thought was a flash, electrifying in its surety. She was painting a murder scene.

She hurried to the phone, called Richard. When he answered she said, without preamble, "Was Elijah Stokes murdered?"

He hesitated. "Why do you ask?"
Sweeney gripped the phone tighter. "Because I think this shoe thing is the beginning of a murder scene. Don't try to protect me or humor me; just tell me the truth: was he murdered? Did you see something in the painting I missed? Is that why you contacted his son?"
"Yes," he said. "Look-I'm scheduled for a business dinner tonight, but I'll cancel it and be right over."
"No, don't do that. I'm okay, I've just been doing a lot of thinking. Besides, I'm working."
Another pause, then he gave a low laugh. 'And don't bother you, right?"
"Right." She stopped, frowning. Having to consider someone else's feelings when she wanted to work was a new concern for her. "Did that hurt your feelings?"
"Of course not." There was a hint of tenderness now. "Good." She took a deep breath. "What made you think Mr. Stokes had been murdered? What did you see?"
"The head injury. You didn't paint any stairs, and he was obviously lying between two buildings. It looked like blunt-force trauma to me."
" 'Blunt-force trauma,' " she repeated. That wasn't laymen's lingo. She had the exciting sense of discovering a facet of Richard she hadn't suspected existed. "Do you have medical training?"
"Only in the rough first-aid stuff we needed in the field. I can set a simple fracture, rotate a dislocated joint back into place, stop bleeding. Things like that."
"But you know what blunt-force trauma looks like."
"I've seen it."
Somehow she had absorbed enough information about the military to know that, in general, only medics were given that kind of training. Of course, her information came from books and movies, so her impression might be wrong. But a medic would have had much more extensive training than what Richard
had described. "Just what kind of army were you in?" she asked curiously.
"The United States Army," he said, amused again. She could almost see his lips curving. "But I was in a special unit. I was a Ranger."
She knew about forest rangers. She knew about the Lone Ranger. Other than that, her memory bank was empty of information on rangers. "My military experience is kind of limited. What do Rangers do?"

"They wear really snazzy black berets."
"Other than that."
"Rough stuff. It's a specialized infantry organization."
"Specialized in what?"
He sighed. "Raids."
"Raids."
"You sound like a parrot."
"You were a commando, weren't you?" Her voice rang with astonishment. She had known nothing but gentleness from him. No, not gentleness. That was the wrong word. Tender was more accurate. But determined, too. And she had seen firsthand how he could affect people with just a look, seen how easily he dominated Senator McMillan.
"That's one term for it, yes. Honey, I'm thirty-nine years old. I've been out of the army for fifteen years. What I did back then doesn't matter."
"In a way it does. You knew what blunt-force trauma to the head looked like, knew to ask questions. K nowing Mr. Stokes was murdered gives me a different view of what I'm doing now. I think the murderer is standing looking down at her."
He followed her thoughts with ease. "Because of the way the man's shoe is positioned?"
"If he were there to help her, or investigate, wouldn't he be crouched down? A bystander wouldn't stand so close. I'm going to try working on the painting while I'm awake, see what happens. I don't think she's dead yet; I think I'm picking up on something in the future and that's why I'm doing just a little at a time. If I can finish it, see who she is, then maybe I can stop it from happening."
He said, very gently, "I don't think you'll be able to finish the painting until it's too late."
His concern furled around her like tender arms. "But I have to try," she whispered, her throat suddenly tight. She swallowed. She refused to cry in front of him again. VVhen she cried, she wanted it to be about something real important, like being cold. "I know. Got a pen?"
She reached for the pen and pad beside the phone. "Got it."
"Here's my cell phone number." He rattled it off. "I'll have the phone with me tonight. Call me if anything happens and you go into shock again."
"How many numbers do you have?" she muttered. "That's three. "

"Well, there's the fax number, too, if you want it.- "I don't think I'll be sending you any faxes."
He chuckled, then said, "Take care of yourself. The last few days have been rough on you. Don't let this get the upper hand."
"I'll be careful," she promised, and went back to the studio warmed by the ease with which they communicated, the sense of being linked. No matter how upsetting this situation got, she wasn't alone.
She stared at the painting for a long time. Assuming she was looking at a murder scene changed her perspective. Picking up a stick of charcoal, she lightly sketched in the logical position of the woman's body, given the position of her legs. And if the man's right foot was here, then his left foot would be here. No, that was wrong. The angle was too severe. She needed a more direct angle, not exactly head-on but close to it.
She knew instinctively when she got it right. Her fingers moved rapidly over the canvas, sketching a rough outline of two people around the details she had already painted.
When she finished, she was trembling, as exhausted as if she had worked for days instead of-of however long she had worked. Glancing out the window, she saw night had fallen. She had no idea what time it was, but her stomach growled a warning that it was a long time past supper. She was a little chilly, but nothing unusual. Her efforts hadn't triggered that scary, bonedeep cold, at least not immediately. She had no idea how she would feel in a few hours.
She rubbed her eyes, then remembered her hands were black with charcoal. Muttering under her breath, she went into the bathroom and peered in the mirror. The black smudges all over her face weren't a surprise. She washed her face and hands, then went into the kitchen.
Soup was always good. It was fast and hot. She opened a can of chicken noodle soup and nuked it. What did Richard eat at business dinners? she wondered. More to the point, would he ever expect her to eat with him at those business dinners? The prospect wasn't a pleasant one. She would manage, she decided. If necessary, she would even buy some high heels. Good God, this was serious. She should be running as far and fast as she could. Instead she sipped her chicken noodle soup and smiled a little at the lengths to which she was willing to go for Richard, should he ask.
She showered and went to bed, and woke a little after dawn feeling warm and relaxed. She was almost disappointed; lying in Richard's arms wasn't

exactly a hardship, no matter how cold she was.
She lay there for a while, enjoying the warmth. An electric blanket wasn't as good as Richard, but she would have to make do. She daydreamed for a while, smiling, before noticing that the sunlight wasn't getting any brighter. She sat up and looked out the window. Fog pressed against the panes, white and a little luminous, as if it were just thin enough to allow a little sunshine through. The light was strangely reflective, filling all the shadows in the room the way sunshine on snow did.
Afterward, she didn't remember getting out of bed. She got dressed, in her usual thick socks, sweatshirt, and jeans. The coffee hadn't started brewing yet-she had got up too early-so she turned off the timer and turned on the maker herself. Then she went into the studio, because this white light was too unusual to miss.
She knew exactly what was missing from the high-heeled pumps.
Twenty minutes later she stepped back, blinking. The heels weren't solid. A small gold ball formed the middle of each heel. The shoes were very distinctive, impossibly stylish. If she had ever seen a pair like them before, she would have remembered.
And the skirt ... the skirt was fuller than she had sketched it last night. Flirty Black. The woman was wearing a black dress. In some corner of her mind, she laughed. This was New
York City; what else would the woman be wearing but black? Hours later, the ringing of the phone jerked her out of her trance. She shuddered and stepped back, for a moment unsure of where she was or what that noise meant. Then she realized it was the phone and raced to answer it.
"Are you all right?" Richard demanded, and she realized she should have called him.
"I was," she said, still more in a daze than out of it. "Nothing happened last night. But this morning-I was painting. I just knew how it should look. VVhat time is it?"
"Nine-thirty." She had been working for almost four hours. She remembered very little of it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She was wrapped in a blanket when Richard arrived, a freshly nuked cup of coffee in her hand. She was cold, but the cold wasn't unbearable, at least not yet. He bent down for a quick kiss, then started to take her in his arms to battle the chill.
"Wait," she said. I want you to see the painting first."
He went with her into the studio and in silence studied the canvas. The scene was graphic in its violence. The woman's body was sprawled in a pool of blood, which had soaked into a pale carpet. Her chic black dress had been slashed to pieces, and one arm, the only one Sweeney had completed, was covered with wounds.
The man standing over her was relaxed, the knife he had used in his right hand, which was hanging at his side. Working from his shoes up, she had completed him to just above the waist. He wore black pants, perhaps jeans, though jeans were a bit incongruous with the wing tips. She had also painted the beginnings of a black shirt.
"A burglar, maybe," Richard said with the cool distance in his voice that said he had switched into his analytical mode. "They're both in black, but she looks as if she's been to a party. The shoes are wrong, though; a burglar would wear track shoes, or something else with a soft sole."
"I thought there was something strange about the shoes, too. They look awkward." She didn't like the way she had done the feet; they were vaguely out of proportion. But when she had begun studying how she could correct them, the mental image refused to form. Perhaps she was just exhausted and she would be able to think better after she had rested.
"I need to get this finished," she said, and even though she heard the fretful tone, she couldn't do anything about it. She was just about an inch short of whining. "I have to know who she is."
"Honeys" He clasped her shoulders and turned her toward him. "You have to assume you won't know until after the fact. That's the way it was with Elijah Stokes-"
"But this thing, whatever it is, is getting stronger all the time. Or maybe I'm just getting better at it. What I'm painting now is in the future, so why shouldn't the scope broaden and let me see her identity before it's too late?"
"This might not be a burglary that went sour. This might be a planned murder."
She didn't follow him. "What difference would that make?"

"The plan could already be formed. If I were going to commit murder, I'd have it planned down to the ground. So what you're picking up on could be a plan that exists now, not in the future. "
She gave him a sour look, or at least as sour as she could make it when she was shaking like a leaf "Don't be so analytical , she said, even though she knew he was right.
"Being analytical is how I got rich. Come on; there's nothing you can do about this right now. At least when the painting is complete, you'll also have the murderer's face. You probably can't save her, but you can help in other ways." With her firmly clamped against his side, he began easing her toward the door.
"You're handling me, right? I hate being handled. I'm not one of those temperamental artistes who get hysterical if the least thing goes wrong."
"I know," he said soothingly, and smiled at the ferocious look she threw him.
He got her settled on the couch, in his lap, with the blanket wrapped around them. He wasn't going to take his shirt off today, she thought, disappointed. Nor was he going to lie down with her. She understood; the temptation was just too great. The transfer of body heat wasn't as efficient with their clothes on, but neither was the need as great.
He held her locked tivht azainst him, absorbing the force of her shivering. "I didn't think it would happen this time," she said, with her face buried against his chest. "I was awake. I worked on the painting last night and felt fine, so why am I cold this morning?"
"Depth of involvement, maybe, or the length of time you worked."
Trust Richard, she thought, to come up with a reasonable, logical explanation for what was innately illogical. At least he
took her seriously and didn't assume she was having panic attacks or was hysterical. He believed her, about something she herself had a difficult time believing.
She lay quietly for a time, letting his heat soak through her skin, and felt herself begin to grow drowsy as she warmed. With this to look forward to, she was beginning to think getting severe chills wasn't such a bad thing. Remembering the time he had stripped them both down to their underwear made her breasts tighten and caused an ache deep inside. Maybe, she thought mischievously, if she put off calling him until she was really, really cold, he would do that again. Her entire body flushed as she remembered

the explosion of pleasure she had experienced just rocking against him. She wanted to do that again. Often.
Sitting in his lap, she discovered, wasn't much better than lying down with him, in terms of temptation. She ached with a physical need that shook her with its intensity. His erection was rock hard against her hip, and only sheer determination kept her from squirming around until she was astride him. "Sheer" described her determination very well. It was gossamer thin, and getting thinner every day.
He stroked her hair back from her temple and pressed his lips to the fragile skin. "Good news," he murmured. "Candra has an appointment to sign the papers tomorrow. She would have done it today, but there had to be some additions and corrections made. I've already arranged to have the petition come before a judge next week."
She tilted her head back a little, staring at him. Considering the well-known backlog in New York City"s civil court, she was astounded. He had "arranged" a small miracle. "How did you manage that?"
"Money." His tone was careless. "I have it, so people come to me for favors. I collected on a lot of debts." His hand on the back of her head, he settled her against him once more. His mouth lightly brushed her temple, and over to her eyelid. 'After next week, when you get cold, I'll be able to warm you from the inside out."
Oh, God, he managed it now. Her heart leaped, and her pulse rate jumped to double time. "You're doing just fine as it is," she gasped.
"The way you shake and shudder, I won't even have to do any work. All I'll have to do is set you in place, then lie back and enjoy the ride."
Laughter burst out of her. Her arms were confined by the blanket he had wrapped around her, but she punched him with as much force as she could muster. Grinning, he subdued her by the simple method of kissing her.
She had never before had so much fun, she thought as she relaxed in his arms, her head cradled on his shoulder. Even under the circumstances, she enjoyed every moment with him. She managed to work one hand free and curled it around the back of his neck, nestling her fingers in his hair. The sensation was delicious; his hair, silky soft, was warm close to his scalp and cool on the outside. Evidently he detected some remnant of rebellion, because he kept on kissing her.
She wanted him to deepen the kisses. She waited for him to do so. But he pulled back with a sigh, his face taut, and she knew his determination was

in the same shape as hers. His dark eyes were heavy-lidded, and a faint flush rode his high cheekbones. "If this keeps up, I won't be able to even kiss you," he said gruffly.
"Keeps up, or stays up?" She meant to tease, but her voice came out too husky for that.
The sound he made was more growl than laugh. "Either. Both. " He breathed hard through his nostrils. "Talk. Distract me. "
"What do you want to talk about?" Her mind felt mushy.
She didn't know if she could muster a conversation, at least not a detailed one.
"Anything. Wereyou really horn in Italy?"
"Really. Florence, to be exact. My mother felt the need to make some sort of pilgrimage-for her art, you understand. I was two weeks early, which evidently really fouled up her itinerary. I couldn't keep the formula down and was losing weight, so I stayed in the hospital while she salvaged as much of her trip as she could. Hardy woman, my mother. She was back on the road two days after having me. When she was ready to come home, she swung by the hospital to pick me up, but when she tried to leave the country, there was a problem with the paperwork-she hadn't done any of it-so I ended up staying another week until everything was straightened out."
She said it humorously, because she had long since become accustomed to her mother's lack of concern for her offspringnot just for Sweeney, but for her brother, too. Richard didn't laugh, though. He didn't even smile. His gaze turned flinty. "Do you mean," he said in an almost toneless voice, "that your mother left her sick baby in the hospital while she resumed her vacation?"
"Yeah, well, that's Mom." Sweeney tried to lighten the mood with an awkward laugh. It didn't work.
"Where was your father?"
"Working on a movie somewhere, I guess. I don't think I've ever heard."
Fascinated, she watched his jaw set. If it got any harder, it would probably shatter under the pressure. His reaction startled her. She had long since stopped worrying about her parents' behavior; she neither justified or analyzed. "Hey," she said mildly, "they didn't beat me. They didn't pay any attention to us, period, but there are worse things."
"I have one full brother, and several half-brothers and -sisters from my father's various marriages. It's possible he's added to the total since I last

heard from him."
"Are you close to your brother?"
"No. He went by the 'if you can't beat them' philosophy. His goal in life is to be stoned and trendy. I haven't heard from him in ... oh, I guess it's been three years or longer."
"Jesus," he muttered.
"I sent everyone a postcard when I moved, so they would have my current address and telephone number, but I haven't heard from anyone. I don't know if their addresses were current. What about your family?"
"I don't have any immediate family. My father died when I was three, and my mother and I lived with my grandfather. He died eight years ago, and Mom's been dead five years. I have two uncles and an aunt on my father's side, and a lot of cousins, most of them in Virginia. I get home for family reunions and the odd Christmas every now and then, but Candra hated being around my relatives, so I always went alone."
Just from the way he talked, she could tell he enjoyed being with his relatives. She tried to imagine a big, noisy family reunion where everyone was glad to see each other. "Excuse me while my mind boggles," she said. "I can't imagine a family reunion in my family."
"What do you do for Thanksgiving and Christmas?"
"Nothing." She shrugged. "Work. We aren't big on holidays, either."
"We'll spend the holidays in Virginia, then," he said.
She sat up, surprised. "You mean you want to take me with you?"
“I sure as hell don't mean to leave you here alone."
Now she was more than surprised; she was downright astonished. She hadn't thought about their relationship in terms of the future. She was so new-to this relationship business that she had no idea what the normal expectations would be; she certainly hadn't thought about where she would spend the holidays.
"Do you think we'll still be ... you know?" she said hesitantly.
"Oh, yeah." His tone was as confident as hers was hesitant. "Well." She rubbed her nose. "Okay."
He grinned. "Don't overwhelm me with your enthusiasm." He glanced at his watch. "I have an appointment I need to cancel if-"
"No, go ahead," she said swiftly, sitting up. "I'm toasty warm; I was just enjoying sitting here."

He eyed her, judging her color for himself. He took her hand to feel if her fingers were cold. They weren't, and he dropped a quick kiss on them. "Okay. You know how to reach me if you need me. I have business dinners tonight and tomorrow night, but after that my week is clear." He winked at her. "I think it's time for a second date."

At eleven-thirty that night, Candra let herself into her apartment. She usually loved parties, but she hadn't been able to enjoy the one tonight, even though it had been attended by a lot of her favorite people. She couldn't stop thinking about the coming day. Tomorrow, she would sign the papers on the divorce settlement, and she couldn't help thinking that the best part of her life was over. She would likely never see Richard again. Perhaps someday she would meet another man who could compare with him, but she didn't really think so.

He had won. If there was a winner, there had to be a loser, and she was it. She had played him all wrong, because her mistake was in trying to play him at all. If she had simply given him his freedom with the least fuss possible, and tried to salvage some dignity for herself, he would likely have been more generous. Richard couldn't be coerced; it was that simple.

She felt ineffably weary. Even though she had no doubt Carson would come through with the money, at the moment she couldn't summon up much enthusiasm for the future.

She had left lamps on in the living room and foyer because she didn't like walking into a dark apartment. Once she hadn't worried about anything like that, because Richard had been with her. Sometimes, when she couldn't bear the thought of being alone, she would have Kai spend the night, but tonight she would rather be alone than be with him. He seemed to enjoy seeing Richard get the best of her. She would fire him, she thought. His looks were undoubtedly an asset to the gallery, but there were a lot of good-looking young men in New York who were looking for an in to the art world, and a side door was as good as a front one.

She dropped her tiny antique beaded purse on the hall table and set the locks. Her heels tapped on the faux marble tiles as she crossed the foyer and stepped onto the plush oatmeal-colored Berber pile of the living room carpet. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and whirled, panic momentarily robbing her of her voice. Pressing her hand to her chest as if she could calm her racing heart, she said, "How in hell did you get into the building?"

"I have a key. Convenient, isn't it?"
"A key! I don't believe you. How would you get a key to my apartment?"
"You know the old saying, it isn't what you know, it's who you know."
"I don't care who you know; no one has a key to this apartment but4me."
"Obviously, my dear, you're wrong."
The smugness rasped on Candra's nerves. She let her gaze drift downward, and put a hint of contempt in her tone. 'Are you going to a costume party, or have you* mistaken the date for Halloween?"
"I'm not the one who's made a mistake. You are."
There didn't seem to be any point in pretending ignorance. Candra was too tired and too angry to try, anyway. "This is because of the money. Look, it isn't personal. I need money, a lot of it, and this is the only way I can think of to get it. It's a onetime thing."
Her assurance seemed to pass unheard. "Did you really think I'd let you wreck what I've worked so hard for?"
"You knew what you were getting into, so don't play the victim."
"What I know is that if there's a victim, I won't be it." The words were soft, almost serene. The approach was not.
Suddenly alarmed, Candra backed up. "Get away from me! Get out of my apartment."
"You aren't giving the orders now, darling." A gloved hand lifted, and in it was a long-bladed kitchen knife.
Candra made an instant decision, feinting to her left as if she would make a break for the door. Immediately she cut back right and dived for the telephone. It wasn't a cordless; she had gone for style over convenience and chosen an ornate European desk model. She had time to punch in the 9 before the blade slashed downward, catching her on the arm. She screamed and threw herself backward, catching her right heel on the leg of the telephone table and sprawling on her back. She rolled, still screaming, and managed to gain her feet before the knife plunged into her back. An agony that was both icy and burning-hot speared through her, almost making her faint.
Desperately, her vision dimming, Candra threw herself forward, away from that searing blade. "No no no," she heard herself babbling. She lurched to the side, trying to throw herself over the back of the sofa to gain some time, but she was clumsy from shock. Her elegant high heel caught on the carpet and her ankle turned with a sickening wrench that almost overrode the pain

in her back. The shoe twisted off, and she fell on her hands and knees. Another tongue of cold fire pierced her, below her right shoulder blade. And again, farther down in her side.

The pain convulsed her, drew her body tight with agony. She couldn't even scream. Her mouth gaped open in a silent battle for air, but her lungs refused to cooperate. Somehow she rolled again, gained her hands and knees, and crawled. The effort was superhuman, and yet she knew it wasn't enough. She knew.

She toppled over onto the thick carpet and feebly kicked out. Through a dark haze she saw the blade flashing down again, and she managed to raise her left arm. She felt the shock of the blow, but no pain. Then there was another thud, this time in her chest; her ribs gave under the force of the impact. Another blow, into the soft flesh of her belly.

She gasped, flopping on the carpet like a landed fish. Time slowed to a feeble crawl, or perhaps it only seemed as if a long time passed. The terrible pain ebbed, to be replaced by a growing lassitude. Something must have happened to all the lamps; all she could see was a faint glimmer of light coming through the darkness. She needed to move ... The knife ... but the knife wasn't there anymore. She could just lie there, in the dark, feeling an odd coldness spread through her body, feeling her heartbeat slow ... slow ... slow ... stop.

Her assailant watched the moment of death. The disgusting release of bladder and bowels was somehow pleasing; the bitch deserved0to be found in her own embarrassing waste.

The scene had already been set. The apartment had been thoroughly searched, but no interesting packet had turned up, damn it. That was a problem, a big one. It was a good thing they had been smart enough to take precautions.

Thank God for the phone call warning that Candra had left the party early and was on her way home, otherwise the outcome could have been very different. What money Candra kept in the apartment, as well as her jewelry, had been gathered. The refrigerator door was open, which would suggest a burglar had been in the kitchen when Candra surprised him. That would also explain the use of one of the knives from the expensive set Candra. kept next to the cutting board: a weapon of opportunity.

The gloved fingers opened, let the knife drop to the floor beside the body. The knife belonged here; it couldn't be tied to anyone but the victim.

A screwdriver was taken from a hip pocket. A few minutes at the door with the tool made the lock look as if it had been carefully jimmied. No real damage done, not enough for a woman coming home to a dimly lit hallway to notice, but the police certainly would. An unforced entry would mean she either opened the door herself, which would imply she knew the person, or that a key had been used. A forced entry would indicate a stranger.
The money and the jewelrymostly jewelry, very little cash-were in a small black bag. That bag would be put in a very, very safe place-just in case it were ever needed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She left her bed a little after three A.M. made the trip through the dark apartment without stumbling or hesitating. Her expression was calmly distant; she scarcely blinked. Her heartbeat was slow and regular.
When she reached the unfinished painting, still propped on the easel, she stood before it for a long time with her head slightly tilted, as if listening to some unseen voice.
Her movements were slow, dreamy, as she mixed a rich brown pigment and then darkened it with black. When the shade was that of dark, lustrous mink, she began to paint, her precise brushstrokes re-creating a fan of dark hair, spread in disarray across an oatmeal carpet.
The face was much more difficult, the expression not one she had ever seen. The late sum4ler dawn crept closer as she painstakingly filled in a lovely face that had turned ashen, dark eyes open and glazed in death, lipsticked mouth slack. The studio was already filling with light when she methodically put her brushes into a can of turpentine, capped the tubes of paint, and returned to bed as quietly as she had left it.
The sun was streaming brightly in the window when Sweeney woke. She was huddled in a tight ball, her arms wrapped around herself in an unconscious effort to conserve heat. The chill was incredible, colder and deeper than it had ever been before. She was shaking so violently the bed trembled.
Richard. She needed Richard.
Whimpering, she managed to crawl to the side of the bed. The red numerals on the digital clock were dimmed by the bright light, but they were

undoubtedly a one, a zero, a three, and a four. Ten-thirty-four.
Why hadn't Richard called?
He should have called. If she didn't call him, then he called her. How fast their routine had been established! She had come to rely on him even faster. His absence shook her, rattled a newborn security that she was just beginning to believe.
"Richard," she whispered, as if she could call him to her. Her voice was thin and weak.
Don't panic, don't panic, she thought. She could do this. She wasn't likely to die, she reassured herself; she just thought that she would. Whatever weird rules governed this psychic stuff, she had never heard that practicing it killed off the practitioner. Not that she'd had time to research clairvoyance or anything like that; she had concentrated on ghosts. Maybe a psychic only got one shot, like a male praying mantis.
Call Richard. Maybe he overslept. He had probably been out late on that business dinner.
She reached for the bedside phone, but as she did a sickening certainty shot through her. The painting. She was beginning to notice a trend: the more work she did, the colder she was when the reaction hit her. This was the coldest she had been.
During the night, she had put a face on the victim. Urgency drove her to her feet. She stumbled to the studio, her coordination slow and clumsy. She had to know, she had to know now. Every second could count. Richard thought she did the work after the fact, but deep inside she wasn't certain, and that uncertainty kept her feet moving, even though they felt as if they didn't belong to her and didn't go quite where she wanted to place them. She wobbled across the room, wincing at the effort it took to move, at the deep internal aches that were beginning to make themselves felt.
Then she reached the painting, and wished she hadn't. She hung in front of it, blood roaring in her ears, shaking so hard she clenched her teeth to keep from breaking them.
Candra.
She stared at the canvas until her eyes hurt, hoping the features would suddenly rearrange themselves into someone else's. She was mistaken. She was seeing only a superficial likeness, and because Candra was so prominent in her life these days, naturally she jumped to that conclusion.

But the face was eerily accurate, with the photographic quality of a Gerhard Richter painting. And Sweeney knew she was very, very good at portraits. Candra.
Oh God, oh God.
She didn't know Candra's number. It would be unlisted, because Candra had once said she never allowed her number to be published. The gallery. She slould be at the gallery, and Sweeney knew that number.
She made it to the living room and the cordless phone. But the phone rang and rang, and finally an answering machine picked up. Frustrated, Sweeney disconnected. Her hands shook so violently she dropped the phone, and when she bent to pick it up, her strength seemed to give out and she just kept going, down to the floor.
She landed on the phone, a hard plastic corner digging into her ribs. Groaning, she managed to sit up and cradled the phone in her lap while she punched in Richard's number.
One of his assistants answered, her voice strangely muted. "This is S-Sweeney Is Richard in?"
"I'm sorry, Ms. Sweeney, but he won't be in today." She hesitated, then said, "Mrs. Worth-Candra-has been killed."
"No," Sweeney moaned, almost weeping.
"The housekeeper found the ... the body when she arrived this morning. Mr. Worth is with the police right now."
She was crying after all, Sweeney discovered. She gulped, and in a thick voice said, "Tell Richard I c-called.
"I will, Ms. Sweeney, as soon as possible."
So Richard had been right; she couldn't help, couldn't stop anything. Sobbing, Sweeney rested her head on her drawn-up knees. What good was any of this, then, if she couldn't do anything about the horrors she painted? V"y suffer this savage chill, when there was no opportunity to keep bad things from happening? There should be a payback, something to make this pain worthwhile.
Her leg muscles suddenly protested their prolonged tension and knotted into cramps so vicious she cried out. Panting, crying, she dug the heels of her hands into her thighs and stroked toward her knees, trying to knead the muscles into relaxing. Over and over she did it, but her muscles seem to knot again just behind the stroking motion.

Once she had seen a trainer rub a cramp out of the calf of a football player. He had used both hands in a back-and-forth motion. She held her breath to steady herself and placed both hands on one thigh. She could feel the knotted muscle between her palms. A half-cry of pain burst from her throat as she began that brisk washing motion, but within seconds the pain began to ebb, at least in that thigh.

With that leg finally relaxed, she did the same thing to her right thigh. That cramp was more stubborn, returning as soon as she stopped the massage. She kept at it for five minutes and finally her thigh relaxed. Her entire body felt like a balloon with a leak; she toppled over, going boneless, without the strength to sit up any longer.

Heat. She had to have heat. Richard wouldn't be coming. He was still legally Candra's husband; he would be giving information to the police, filling out reports, probably identifying Candra's body, making arrangements. Sweeney had his cell phone number, but calling him was out of the question. She had to take care of this herself.

The electric blanket wouldn't help. Hot coffee would help a little, but not enough. Body heat was moist heat, because the body was mostly water. That was what she needed: moist heat. The shower wouldn't be enough. She needed to immerse herself in hot water.

She crawled into the bathroom, dragging herself like a wounded animal. Her arms and legs barely functioned, and she could feel her thoughts slowing.

She never took a tub bath; she always showered. She stared at the lever that closed the drain for several long moments before she figured out how to work it, though of course she knew. The cold was making her stupid.

She turned the hot water on full blast and watched steam begin to fill the air. A remnant of common sense kicked in, and she turned on the cold water, too. If she got the water too hot, she would scald herself, and even if it wasn't hot enough to scald, it could still kill; a lot of people had died in hot tubs when prolonged immersion caused heart failure. She had to be careful.

She put her hand under the faucet, and blessed heat poured over her fingers. It felt so good she put the other hand under the faucet, too, lying with her body draped over the edge of the tub because she didn't have the strength to sit up.

When the water was deep enough to reach the overflow drain, she turned off the faucet and crawled into the tub without bothering to take off her

pajamas. She almost howled as she sank into the hot water, the heat was so intense. Her toes throbbed. She stared at her bare feet through the clear water; they looked white with cold, almost shrunken.
She sank down until her chin touched the surface of the water. Tendrils of hair floated around her shoulders. Her trembling sent little wavelets sloshing to-and-fro. "Please please please," she heard herself saying, over and over. Please let this work. If it didn't, she would have to call 911. Probably she should already have done it, but a part of her just couldn't believe a chill was serious.
She began to warm. It was a gradual process, the heat of the water transferring to her flesh. The shivering began to dwindle, so that it wasn't ceaseless, letting her relax between the episodes. Exhausted, she laid her head against the sloping back of the tub. Always before, when she was warm, she got sleepy, and the colder she had been the sleepier she got. She would have to be careful not to fall asleep in the tub.
The water began to cool. Her fingers and toes grew pink and wrinkled. She let out some of the water, then turned on the hot water to refill the tub, but she forced herself to sit up. The danger of falling asleep was a real one, and so was staying in the water too long. Just a few more minutes, she promised herself.
Sometime during those few minutes she began crying again. Like most people, Candra had been neither wholly good nor wholly bad. Until she had seen Sweeney and Richard together, she had always been warm and friendly. Candra's support had meant a lot to Sweeney's career.
Sweeney regretted the way they had parted. She didn't, couldn't, regret her involvement with Richard, but the timing could have been better. If the divorce had been final, if Candra hadn't been bitter about the settlement- There were so many things to which she could tack an "if," and not one of them could be changed.
She didn't dare stay in the water any longer. She opened the drain and hauled herself, trembling, to a standing position. Her muscles felt like boiled noodles. She removed her dripping pajamas, peeling them off and hanging them over the shower curtain rod to drip. Toweling off required immense effort. She finally had to sit down on the toilet lid to finish drying her legs and feet.
She blotted the dripping ends of her hair. She had to go back to bed, at least for a while, but she didn't want to do it with wet hair. That seemed to be

asking for another chill. Her eyelids drooped, and she sagged sideways, catching herself at the last moment. She couldn't wait for her hair to dry, either. She could always cut it off, she thought, and then shook her head as a measure of common sense kicked in again. She plucked a dry towel from the stack and wrapped it around her head, tucking all the wet ends up under the cloth. That was the best she could do. She wobbled her way to bed. The electric blanket was still on. Naked, she crawled between the blissfully warm sheets and was asleep as soon as her muscles relaxed.

Detective Joseph Aquino was a burly guy with shrewd eyes and a homely, lived-in face that invited confidences. Detective H. E. Ritenour was lean and more pugnacious, his sandy hair cut military short, and he had a habit of fixing his pale gaze on suspects and not blinking until they began to squirm.

Richard didn't play games. He didn't fidget, and he would bet the discipline trained into him would outlast the detective's technique. He wondered if Ritenour would stare until his eyes dried out.

When they had come to his house early that morning to tell him of Candra's death, he had known immediately he was at the top of their list of most-likely suspects. He kept his behavior lowkey and cooperated with everything they asked of him, functioning despite the shock that tried to numb his brain.

He hadn't loved Candra in a long time, and for the past year had actively hated her, but he had never wanted her dead. He just wanted her out of his life. Now she was, in the most final way. The death of someone you knew well was always a shock, like a wound in your concept of reality. The world had changed, and for a while you had to struggle with the abrupt alteration. Because their divorce wasn't final, he was still legally responsible for the arrangements. He identified her body, and though he had seen bodies before, that had been in military action, undeclared war, where they had gone in knowing there could be casualties and accepted the risk, doing it anyway. This was different. This was the woman with whom he had shared his life, even if only superficially, for ten years. He had slept with her, made love to her, and, in the beginning at least, loved her. All he could feel now was regret, but it was genuine.

He called her parents, who had moved from Manhattan when her father lost almost every penny he had in some bad stock decisions. Now Charles and Helene Maxson lived just outside Ithaca, their circumstances so reduced

Candra had always invited them to the city rather than spend a night in what she called "little more than a shack," though Richard thought the brick ranch house was upper-middle-class and a lot better than what most people had. But Candra had grown up in wealth, while Richard had a different perspective.

Because of the circumstances, Richard quietly told Charles he. would defer to him and Helene in the necessary decisions. Candra was their daughter; their grief was sharp. The location and means of interment would be their choice, as would the service.

Every step he took, Richard was aware of the pair of detectives. One or both of them was always within earshot when he was on the phone. Any resentment he felt was immediately controlled, because they had a job to do and murder statistics showed that any time a woman was murdered, either her husband or boyfriend was the one most likely to have done the deed. Because he and Candra had been embroiled in a divorce, that tipped the percentages heavily against him. So he remained calm, even when the detectives finally took the step of taking him into precinct headquarters and sat down with him in an interrogation room, a small, dingy square space occupied by three chairs and a beat-up table that wobbled.

He was read his rights and asked if he wanted to call his attorney. "No," he said, surprising both of them.

"You want a cup of coffee, some water?" Ritenour asked.

"No, thank you," Richard said, and managed to hide a small spurt of amusement. That was a basic trick; offer the suspect anything he wanted to drink, keep the coffee coming, and pretty soon he would be squirming with the need to piss. Only they wouldn't let him go; they would keep him there, asking the same questions over and over, maybe phrased a little differently, while the sap's bladder got more and more uncomfortable.

He made himself as comfortable as possible in the chair to which they had steered him, which made him wonder if the front legs had been shortened a little so he would slide forward every time he tried to relax. He put both feet solidly on the floor and kept them there.

Detective Ritenour started. "The housekeeper says you and Mrs. Worth were divorcing."

"That's right." Richard kept his tone neutral. "We've been separated a year."

"Divorces are messy things. I've been through two of them myself."

"They aren It pleasant, no."

"People get all upset. It's understandable. You'd have a lot to lose, wouldn't you, Mr. Worth?"
"In what way?"
"C'mon, you're worth a lot of money, no pun intended. A woman can take a man to the cleaners, get everything he's worked for, unless he's smart enough to protect himself from the beginning. You didn't have much money when you and Mrs. Worth married, though, did you?"
"No."
"So there wouldn't have been any need for a prenup then."
"Gentlemen." Richard said it quietly, because he sympathized with them. He wanted them to succeed. "If you're asking if I stood to lose half of everything I own, the answer is no. When we married, my wife's family was wealthy. Her father insisted on a prenuptial agreement. His intent was to protect his money from me in case of divorce, but the agreement went both ways. She kept what was hers; I kept what was mine. Candra couldn't touch anything."
He saw the quick glance that went between the two detectives. One of their motives had just gone down the drain.
"You'll have a copy of that agreement, of course."
"My lawyer has it...Gavin Welles. Candra's attorney, Olivia Yu, also has a copy."
They made a note of the names.
"The housekeeper said you and Mrs. Worth had been having some trouble coming to an agreement about the settlement."
The housekeeper had said a lot, Richard thought. "Candra wasn't happy with the settlement. She wanted more. We had several arguments about it, but she had agreed to sign the papers. We had an appointment with the attorneys today, at one o'clock, to sign the papers." Automatically Richard glanced at his watch and saw that it was after two already. He hadn't called Gavin to cancel the appointment, but Gavin would know. Someone would have called him. Olivia, probably. One of Candra's friends would have called Olivia immediately, in the guise of passing along the news but really trying to find out some of the details.
The news that Candra had agreed to a settlement took away another of their motives. The two detectives looked thoughtful. "Did you have a key to her new apartment?" Detective

Aquino asked, the first words he had spoken since they entered the interrogation room.
Richard shook his head. "No, not likely. I've never been in her apartment."
"Never?"
"Never." Never was an absolute term, difficult to support. K'nowing they were now thinking along the lines of fiber samples, he said, "She came to my town house a couple of times to talk, and to collect her belongings, but I never went to her place. "
They hid their disappointment well. Any crosscontamination of fiber samples between the two dwellings now had an explanation. Everything Richard had said was something that could be easily verified, and they knew it.
"Mrs. Worth was a popular woman. Were you jealous of her male friends?"
Richard couldn't help it. He laughed. The sound wasn't particularly humorous. "No."
"When she filed for divorce-"
"She didn't file. I did."
"You did?" Another quick look between them. "Why was that?"
Richard had never told another soul why his break with Candra had been so abrupt and final. Sweeney knew, but only because she had been present during that last argument. He didn't want to say anything against Candra. now, especially not anything that would get back to her parents.
"I don't want her family to know," he finally said. "It would hurt them."
"Know what, Mr. Worth?"
"I found out she had an abortion two years ago. She hadn't told me she was pregnant."
Both men sat back, frowning.
"I guess you were upset," Detective Aquino said.
Richard flashed him a disbelieving look. "A little." He couldn't hold back the sarcastic edge. "Our marriage was over right then. I never wanted to see her again. I threw her out, changed the locks on the town house, and filed for divorce the next day."
"Were you still angry with her?"
"Bitter. Regretful."
"Where were you last night, Mr. Worth?"
"I had a business dinner at the Four Seasons." That too would be easily verified.

"What time did you leave?"
"Ten-thirty."
"Where did you go then?"
"Home."
"Were you alone?"
"Yes."
"Did you make any calls, talk to anyone?"
"No. I did some stock analysis on my computer, cleared up E-mail messages, that kind of thing. The time will be on the computer log."
"What time did you stop work?"
"After midnight. Closer to one, I guess." He had no idea what time they thought Candra had been killed, though he had heard someone remark she had still been wearing the dress she wore to a party. Logically, that would put the time of death close to when she arrived home. Candra had been known to stay until a party died, whether that was midnight or dawn.
"What did you do then?"
"Went to bed."
"Alone?"
"Yes."
Detective Aquino sighed. Detective Ritenour looked tired.
Richard knew he was their best bet, and he had taken away all the usual motives. What had probably looked like a fairly simple case had become more complicated.
"We'd like you to stay while we verify a few things," Detective Ritenour said.
"I understand." Richard flashed a level look at them, one that said he was well aware of everything that had been going on. 'And I'll take you up on that coffee now, if I'll be allowed near a bathroom."
Rueful smiles flashed across their faces, quickly erased. "Sure thing. How do you want it?"
"Black."
"Not a good choice," Aquino said on his way out. "This stuff needs diluting with something, even if it's paint thinner."
"I'll take my chances." He thought of Sweeney, wondering, fearing, how she had weathered the night. The painting she had been doing was, he was certain now, of Candra. Had she completed it last night? Was she in shock? Did she need him?

He wanted to call her. The urge was so powerful he could barely contain it, but he fought it down. Bringing her to the detectives' notice would only involve her in this. He hadn't been to the death scene, but if Sweeney's painting was in any way accurate in the details, he could see that any detective would find that suspicious. And he wondered if the other face, the killer's, was still blank.
"May I call my office?" he asked. Sweeney would have called there if she needed him.
"Sure. Use the telephone on my desk," Ritenour offered. He would be able to listen to every word Richard said. Their suspicion had eased, but not completely disappeared. It wouldn't until everything Richard told them had been verified.
Richard stood beside the desk and dialed the office number. Tabitha Hamrick, budding financial genius, answered the phone. "Tab, it's Richard. Any messages?"
"Thousands of them." She sighed. "Richard, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?"
"No, I've notified her family, and I'm giving them their
choice in everything. They should be here soon. Ah, hell, I forgot to make their hotel reservations. Would you do that for me? The Plaza. I'll pick up the tab."
"Sure thing. Oh, Ms. Sweeney called this morning. I told her I'd tell you."
"Thanks." He wanted to ask how Sweeney had sounded, but couldn't. "What time was that?"
"I think it was close to eleven. I made a note.... Here it is. Ten-fifty-seven."
Fairly late in the morning. She should have been okay by then. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay. Thanks."
"Will you be in this afternoon?"
Richard glanced over at Ritenour. "This will take another couple of hours, right?"
"Right." Ritenour gave a faintly apologetic shrug. He wasn't nearly as pugnacious as he had been before the interview.
"No, I won't make it in. I'll see you in the morning."
He hung up and worked his shoulders, shrugging the kinks out of them. Aquino appeared with three cups of coffee sandwiched in his hands. Richard took the one that was black. Aquino and Ritenour both drank theirs with so much cream the liquid was barely brown. After the first sip, Richard

knew why. But in the military he had gotten accustomed to drinking coffee this strong, for the caffeine kick.
The coffee made him think of Sweeney again, and her need for it. He needed her as he had never needed anyone, and right now he didn't dare go anywhere near her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Richard kept tight control of himself as the afternoon dragged on. He didn't fidget; he didn't protest; he didn't threaten. The detectives were doing their job, and it wasn't their fault the things he had told them took longer to verify than he had expected. He wasn't officially under arrest; judging from the detectives' attitude, they no longer suspected him, or at least not much. He could have left. But they kept coming back to him with questions that would help them put together a picture, questions about Candra's habits and friends. Though he and Candra had been separated for a year, they had lived together for ten, and he knew her better than even her parents did.

Tabitha had canceled all his appointments. Candra's parents had arrived and were installed in the Plaza; he had spoken to them on the phone-with Detective Ritenour listening-and apologized for not being able to see them that evening. The Maxson's weren't alone; in the background he could hear the rise and fall of several voices, and knew they had called some of their old friends as soon as they checked into the hotel.

The urge to call Sweeney was almost overwhelming, and that was the one urge he had to resist. In his shock at Candra's murder, he had left his cell phone at home; he had no way of knowing if Sweeney had tried to contact him by that number. The sense of being out of touch with her gnawed at him, as if part of him were missing. He needed her, needed to feel the freshness of her personality, see the clear honesty of her gaze. It was unfair of him, now that Candra was dead, but he couldn't help comparing the two women. Candra had come from a privileged background; she had been pampered and adored, her every whim satisfied, always certain she was loved-and she had grown up to be innately selfish, unable to handle situations in which she didn't get what she wanted. She had been undeniably charming and friendlyGod, it was jarring to think of her in the past tense!-so those situations hadn't come about very often, but when they did, she erupted.

On the other hand, from what little Sweeney had told him, she had been mostly ignored by her parents. Her mother's lack of feeling for her own children was appalling. He knew Sweeney's mother, though he had never met her. He had met her type. Because she was artistic, she thought that excused her from responsible behavior. She probably indulged in

indiscriminate sex and drugs, and had exposed her children to God knows what.
Sweeney had grown up without love and had closed herself off from the pain by simply not letting herself form attachments.
Richard strongly suspected he wouldn't have been able to get to her so fast if he hadn't caught her at this particular time, when the shock of those psychic episodes was sending her into a form of shock. Otherwise, she would have kept him at a distance for months. But despite her parents' example, or maybe because of it, she shunned their dangerous, juvenile lifestyle and had made herself into a woman of strong moral fiber.
He didn't want her touched by this, not any more than she already was. The painting involved her; if she eventually painted the face of the man standing over Candra's body-and he had no reason to doubt she would-then that knowledge would have to be shared with the detectives. It wasn't proof; the painting would in no way be admissible in court. But, if the detectives gave the information any credence, it would point them in the right direction. If they knew where to look, they would probably find the proof they needed. Perhaps he could steer them in that direction without mentioning the painting or involving Sweeney at all.
"Did Mrs. Worth have a will?" Detective Aquino asked abruptly.
"I don't know," Richard replied, dragging his thoughts away from Sweeney. "We had one when we were together, but as soon as we separated, I made a new one. She didn't have a lot of assets, though. I own the gallery, and from what I gather, she ran up a lot of debt in the past year. I had agreed to give her the gallery as part of the settlement, but that wouldn't have been included in any new will she made, if she made one at all."
"Why?" Aquino asked curiously. "Why give her the gallery? With your prenup, you didn't have to give her anything." Richard shrugged and said simply, "So she would have the means to live."
"Mr. Worth . Ritenour tapped his pen on the desk, his brow furrowed as he framed his question. I know you've been separated a long time, but would you know any of the men she's been with lately? The housekeeper didn't know any names. She said when Mrs. Worth had company, she tried to stay out of the way and do her job as quietly as possible."
Richard didn't make any comment on Candra's sexual habits. "How far back do you want to go?"
They looked at each other. Aquino shrugged. "Since you separated."

"My attorney has a list." Seeing their surprise, he said, "I made it a point to know, in case I needed the information." They both perked up. "Did you have her watched?" An investigator's report could be an invaluable aid, telling them where she went and when, whom she saw.
"Yes, but I don't think it will help. There wasn't anyone. she saw more than any of the others. Candra didn't have long-term affairs. Her attractions were of the moment, and more concerned with satisfying her own appetite than with her partner. K-ai, her assistant at the gallery, was probably her most frequent partner, but only because he was convenient."
There was another perking of investigative ears. "How do you spell that name?" Ritenour asked.
K-a-i. Last name Stengel, as in Casey."
"Was he in love with her, do you think?"
"Kai doesn't love anyone but himself. I can't see him killing her, because it wouldn't be in his best interest. I gave Candra. a free hand with the gallery and she hired whom she pleased, but her death before the divorce was final means the gallery remains mine, and Kai would know he was out of a job in that event."
"Because of his involvement with your wife?" Richard shook his head. "Because he's an alley cat."
"Mr. Worth, pardon me for asking," Detective Aquino said, "but a man like you-How did you stand it, knowing your wife had all these affairs?"
Richard's eyes were cold. 'After the first time, I didn't give a damn what she did."
"But you stayed married to her."
"I took vows." And he had taken them seriously. He would have remained married to her, making the best of a bad situation, if she hadn't had the abortion. He had taken her for better or for worse, but "worse" didn't include aborting his child.
He called Gavin and had the entire investigator's report faxed to the precinct station. Gavin offered to come down in case Richard needed his legal protection, but Richard told him there was no need. He had put in an electronic buy order with his broker just before he disconnected last night, his entry coded with his password, and his Internet provider could also verify the time he was on-line, so he was covered in case the detectives had any lingering doubt. He had no motive or opportunity, and he had cooperated with them to the fullest extent.

The next time he checked the clock, the hands had ticked past seven-thirty. He was tired and hungry having refused their offer of stale cookies or peanut-butter crackers from a vending machine. The detectives looked more tired than he felt, but they doggedly kept at it. He appreciated their persistence, but the need to reassure himself Sweeney was all right was growing more urgent with every passing minute.

He had been containing his emotions all day, until he felt like a pressure cooker with the release valve stuck in the closed position. Candra's murder had stirred a cauldron of emotions; first he had been shocked by the violent death. Next came a cold fury, one so strong he could feel it surging inside him, demanding action. He had been intimate with violence, but his military missions had been against other militaries or terrorist groups, people who signed on knowing what the risks were and were armed and ready to kill him if they had the chance. Candra had been a noncombatant, unarmed, untrained, unaware. She hadn't had a prayer, and the unfairness of the attack revolted him.

He didn't resent being questioned. He did resent, bitterly, not being able to see Sweeney, or at least contact her. The choice was his own, an effort to protect her from this same sort of suspicion and questioning, but that didn't make him resent any less the necessity of making that choice. If the detectives saw that painting, they might even arrest her, and he would do whatever he could to prevent that.

Because he was growing desperate to see her, he locked himself down even tighter. If he revealed any hint of what he was feeling, the detectives' suspicions would be refueled and this would drag on longer.

At last, a little after eight, Detective Aquino stretched tiredly and said, "You've been a lot of help, Mr. Worth. Thanks for your patience. Most people would have gotten upset, but we had to ask the questions."

"I know the statistics," Richard said. "I understood. I assume I'm no longer a suspect?"

"Everything you told us checked out. Your Internet server verified the times you were on-line last night at the crucial timeand thank you for giving them permission to give us that information without having to get papers on it. That saved us a lot of time."

"She didn't deserve what happened," Richard said. "No matter what our differences were, she didn't deserve that." He stood and stretched his tired back muscles. "I'll be at home if you have any more questions."

"I'll get a patrolman to take you home," Detective Ritenour offered.
"Thanks, that isn't necessary I'll catch a cab." Calling Edward to pick him up would be a waste of time; by the time Edward got here, he could be home.
Leaving the precinct, he walked down to the corner to catch a cab, but traffic seemed to be light on that street. Two blocks over was a busier street, so he kept walking. The tension in him was building. Home. In less than thirty minutes now he would be home. He would talk to Sweeney. He thought about taking the cab directly to her place, but caution kept him from it. Any direct contact with her now could bring unwanted attention down on her. The detectives would probably find out about her anyway, eventually-depending on whom Candra had told about seeing Richard and Sweeney together-but every minute he could hold off the inevitable was important. She might paint the killer's face tonight, and then he would have a direction in which to steer the detectives.
He needed to shower and shave and go to the Plaza, to see Helene and Charles. Respect and common courtesy demanded that he do so, but he didn't know if he had any common courtesy left in him. He was tired, and relations between them would be awkward because of the divorce. When people were grieving, they could lash out, trying to ease their pain by placing the blame on someone or something, and he could easily see Helene making a tearful charge that if only Candra had still been living with him, this wouldn't have happened, because she wouldn't have been coming home alone. He didn't have the patience to deal with that right now. He would call them, after he talked to Sweeney, and tell them he would be over first thing in the morning.
But Sweeney came first. Until he knew she was all right, he couldn't think of anything else.
"Son of a bitch," Detective Joseph Aquino said, tiredly closing a folder and leaning back in his chair. He was actually the more impatient, rougher-edged of the two detectives, but his looks inclined people to trust him, so Ritenour usually played the hard-ass. "Nine times outta ten, it's gonna be the estranged husband kills his wife. This looked like a perfect setup, but what have we got?"
"We've got 'jack shit, is what we've got." Ritenour ticked the points off on his fingers. They both knew the points, but saying them out loud always helped. "Worth is the one who wanted the divorce. He has a prenup

agreement protecting all his assets, so he doesn't have to worry about that. She had been giving him a hard time about the settlement, but she had an appointment today to sign the papers, so that wasn't an issue. He was on his computer last night at the time we estimate she got home from the party, and the M.E.'s preliminary time of death puts the murder roughly at that same time. You know the first thing a woman does when she walks in the door? She kicks off the spike heels. Mrs. Worth still had on her shoes."
"You ever run across a customer that cool, though?" Aquino rubbed his eyes. He had taken the call for the Worth murder a little before seven that morning, and had been working nonstop since. "Nothing got to him. He showed, us only what he wanted us to see."
"Joey," Ritenour said. "He didn't do it."
"The scene looked fishy, though. It looks like she surprised a burglar, but-"
"But it looks like someone wanted it to look that way."
"Yeah. The place wasn't messed up much. And those scratches on the lock. Looks like they were deliberately made. They sure as hell didn't have anything to do with popping the lock."
"Another point in Mr. Worth's favor," Ritenour said. "Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggestin" this as something he could have done. But he struck me as the kinda guy, if he wanted to make a scene look like a burglary, then it would look like a fucking burglary"
"Yeah, I know. But whoever it was knew her, and was pissed as hell. A burglar wouldn't have hacked her up like that. " Aquino drew a preliminary report to him. "He got her three times in the back, so she was running from him. Defense wounds on her arm; she was trying to fight him off. Then when she was down, he kept stabbing her."
"No signs of sexual assault. Underwear was in place; prelim shows no semen present. Her friends say she left the party last night unusually early, so the timing couldn't have been planned. She left alone." Ritenour yawned, bleary eyes focused on his notes. "The knife was from a set in her kitchen and was left at the scene. No prints. We have a lot of smears on the doorknob, a partial of Mrs. Worth's right thumb, and a good set of the housekeeper's prints."
"Doesn't look like a disgruntled boyfriend, either. She spread her joy around. There were a lot of men, but no one in particular."
"But maybe one of them wanted to be particular. You know, the sour grapes thing. If I can't have you, blah blah blah. Anybody on that list she was

seeing regularly, then stopped seeing?" Ritenour doodled on his pad. Like all detectives, 'he and Joe kicked things back and forth between them. The give-and-take sometimes triggered a new insight.
"Nobody that recent." Aquino paused. "Senator McMilIan's name on that list was interesting, but while he might not want his wife to know about it, I don't think he'd kill to Ikeep it secret. "
"Not to mention he doesn't know this list exists."
"Not to mention. Has the insurance company come through with a list of the jewelry she had insured, so we can tell what's missing?"
"Not yet. They're supposed to fax it over in the morning."
"Let's walk through this."
"We've walked through it twice already, Joe."
"Humor me." Aquino leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. "Guy breaks in. He's already got the jewelry. Maybe he plans on taking the television and stereo, too, but it's just one guy, so I doubt it. He's in the kitchen, looking in the refrigerator. Lot of people hide stuff in their refrigerators and freezers; they think it's an original hiding place, so of course a good thief always checks the fridge."
Ritenour picked up the narrative. "When she comes in, catches him, he panics. He grabs one of the knives. But he already has the jewelry, and he's stronger than she is; he can get away any time he wants. There wasn't any reason to kill her, unless she knew him."
"Like an acquaintance trying to feed a drug habit? That might fly, except for the overkill. The punk enjoyed it. That brings me back to the setup. I think the murder was deliberate, and the rest of it is just stage setting. I don't think there was a burglar."
"Then the guys on this list are our best possibilities." Sourly, Ritenour surveyed the names. "Jesus, the lady saw a lot of action. The problem is, I don't think any of these names are on the security log."
"What, you think a guy planning to commit murder is going to sign his real name for the guard?"
"Then how did he get in? Somebody would have to okay him,
or the guard wouldn't let him go up. So he would have had to use his real name."
"Or somebody in the building was in on it with him." Glumly they stared at each other. They were getting into wild territory with a conspiracy theory, and they knew it. The murder had been too personal. So they were left with

the puzzle of how the killer got into an upscale apartment building with round-the-clock security. They kept staring at each other. Ritenour arched his eyebrows. "We need a list of recent tenants."
"Yeah, we sure as hell do."
"The name won't be right, but we'll be looking for a single man, and odds are if we get photos of all the guys on this list, the guards will be able to match one of them to the new tenant."
Suddenly energized, they hit the phones. The late hour was working against them, though. There was no one in the office of the apartment building to give them a list of recent applicants. Getting photos of the men on the list would also take time; the photos of the ones who had driver's licenses could be got from the DMV, but a lot of people who lived in the city didn't drive because owning a car was such a bitch of a hassle. There was also the possibility that the guy could live across the river in New Jersey, or in Connecticut. Both were easy commutes.
"Jesus," Aquino muttered, looking at the list of Mrs. Worth's lovers. "This could take the rest of the year. Have you counted how many guys are here? The woman must have had the brains of a flea, what with AIDS and everything. Look at this. I count twenty-three new guys in the past year; then there were all the repeaters. She was in the sack with somebody at least twice a week, on average."
"My love life should be so active," Ritenour said mournfully. "The strain would kill you. Ah, hell, we aren't going to get anything accomplished tonight." Aquino stood and stretched. "I'm going home. See ya in the morning."
"Going home's the best idea you've had all day." Following suit, Ritenour grabbed his coat. "You wanna stop off for a couple of beers?"
"Nah, you go on. I'm whacked." They were both divorced, and all either of them had waiting for them at home was laundry. The beers sounded tempting. But something was nibbling at Aquino, and he couldn't quite figure out what it was - Something about Richard Worth. It wasn't that he thought Worth was the killer; the man had no motive, and no opportunity. But he was too controlled; there hadn't been any shakes, any fidgeting, any show of temper, no visible emotion when he identified his wife's body-okay, soon-to-be ex-wife, and considering the abortion thing and all the other men, he could understand why Worth wouldn't give a damn-nothing. No sign he had a single nerve in his body. He had been patient and helpful,

giving them access to his records so they could get the information a lot faster than if they had to go through legal channels. Aquino knew he had no reason to be suspicious of Worth, and he wasn't, not really. It was just a gut feeling that the guy was hiding something, that there was some loose end that needed to be secured.

He waved a careless good-bye to Ritenour, then slid his bulk behind the wheel of the nondescript tan sedan the city provided for his use. On impulse, he decided to drive by Richard Worth's town house, just to see what he could see. Hell, he might even park and keep an eye on the place for a while. In a detective, a little healthy curiosity was a good thing.

Richard gave the cabdriver a twenty and didn't wait for the change, just bounded up the steps to the town house. When he renovated the bottom floor for his offices, he had added a separate entrance for them tucked under the steps that went up to the main part of the house. The office floor was half underground, with the windows at street level protected by steel bars. He entered into a foyer, a ten-by-ten square laid with imported slate tiles. The rug centered on the tiles was a two-hundred-yearold Turkish rug so tightly woven it didn't depress under his weight as he strode across it.

He checked the answering machine in the den for messages. There were eleven of them, and he listened impatiently, fastforwarding to the next one as soon as he identified each voice. Sweeney's wasn't one of them. He dialed her number and listened to the rings, counting them in his head. On the sixth ring, her machine picked up. Her voice recited the number; then she ended with a terse, "Leave a message." Normally he would have been amused. Now he was worried sick. Goddamn it, where was she?

Sweeney hadn't meant to walk so far. The severe episode that morning had left her feeling dazed and dopey, even after she woke from the deathlike, three-hour nap. She had wandered around the apartment for hours, not expecting Richard to call but hanging around anyway, just in case he did. He would be so busy with the arrangements that she didn't expect to hear from him for a couple of days, at least.

Around sundown, though, she began to feel as if she couldn't stay inside another moment. Her thought processes felt slow and clumsy, as if she had been drugged, and she thought some fresh air might help clear her mind. Not trusting the chirpy weather lady who said the temperature was a pleasant sixty-four degrees, she pulled on a denim jacket and hit the street.

She didn't have any destination in mind. She just walked. She lived on the fringes of the Lower East Side, and the area was full of color, especially the human variety. The relatively low rents attracted artists and students by the thousands. Actors and musicians mostly gravitated to Greenwich Village, but scome of the overflow ended up in the Lower East Side. The faces were fascinating, young and old. A young couple were out for a stroll, pushing their infant in a stroller, pride and contentment shining on their faces. She caught a glimpse of the baby's tiny, flowerlike face and its minuscule hands curled on the edge of the blanket, and her hands ached to touch the fuzz that covered its head.

A teenager was walking a tangle of dogs, ranging in size from an English sheepdog, peeping through its mop of hair, down to a dachshund, trotting along in double time. A big grin lit the boy's face as he was literally towed along the sidewalk: he was on roller skates. The dogs looked happy to be of use.

Gradually the neighborhood changed. Sweeney looked at window displays, stopped in a tiny bakery for a cinnamon roll with thick icing on top, then had to have a cup of coffee to wash it down. She strolled along, hands in the pockets of her jacket, a light breeze flirting with her curls.

She tried not to think about Candra. She deliberately did not allow the image of the painting to form in her mind. She didn't think about much of anything, just kept walking.

Still, it wasn't a surprise when she looked around her and recognized the luxurious town houses and high-rise apartment buildings of the Upper East Side. She had walked at least a couple of miles, maybe more; she didn't know how many blocks constituted a mile. Richard lived here, in a town house off of Park Avenue. Candra had lived somewhere near here; Sweeney remembered Kai telling her that Candra's new apartment was in the upper somethings; she didn't remember which block.

Sweeney hadn't watched the news, just the weather. The local news would probably be full of the murder; such things didn't happen every day in one of the swank apartment buildings, and Candra was socially prominent, which made her murder even more newsworthy' Sweeney hadn't wanted to see anything about it, or hear any of the speculation.

All she wanted was to see Richard.

She walked up the street and stood looking up at the town house for several moments. She had been here once, three or four years ago, when she had

briefly been in town and had stopped by at Candra's invitation while a party was in progress. Sweeney had stayed just long enough to pretend to sip some champagne, tell Candra hello, then she escaped.
Light shone through the fantail window above the door. She stared at the window, wondering if he was at home or if the light was on to make people think someone was there.
This was a bad idea. If he was home, surely there were other people with him. Friends would be offering their condolencesor perhaps not, considering the circumstances. But they would definitely be trying to get all the gory details, hot gossip they could share over coffee with other friends the next day.
She wouldn't have to go in. Just ring the doorbell, tell him ... tell him something inane, such as she was thinking about him, or offer her sympathy, something like that. Maybe he had staff and didn't answer the door himself. In that case, she would leave a message. He would know she had been there, and that was the important thing.
She climbed the steps and punched the doorbell, then stuffed her hands back in her pockets, standing with her head down and the night breeze ruffling her hair while she waited for the door to open.
It was jerked open so abruptly she jumped, startled. Richard loomed over her, glaring. "Where in hell have you been?" he barked.
She blinked. "Walking."
"Walking," he repeated in disbelief "From your apartment?"
"Yeah. I just took a walk and ... ended up here."
He stared down at her, his face expressionless but his dark eyes glittering with some unreadable emotion. "Come in," he said, stepping back so she could pass by him, and after a slight hesitation, she did.
Sitting in his car thirty yards down the block, Detective Aquino raised his eyebrows, and made note of the woman's time of arrival. No particular reason why, he thought, just a cop's general nosiness.
They hadn't touched, but there had been that indefinable air of connection between them. So Worth had himself a honey; there was no law against it. In fact, after being separated for a year, the man would have had to be a damn saint not to have a lady friend.
What puzzled Aquino was why, in answering all the questions they had asked that day, not once had another woman's name been mentioned. Worth was a private man-Aquino had gathered that much-but when the issue came

up, he had, reluctantly, told them about his wife's abortion. Having a lady friend was a lot less sensitive than that information. In fact, being involved with another woman would have been another point in his favor, making him even less likely to care what his estranged wife did.
But Worth hadn't mentioned his friend, and Aquino found that interesting.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The foyer floor was some kind of dark gray tile, covered by a thick rug in the richest colors
Sweeney had ever seen. She would have paused there, but Richard held out his hand, indicating she should precede him, and uncomfortably she did so. His expression was at its most stony, as if he didn't want her there but was too polite to say so. She jammed her hands deeper into her jacket pockets, feeling like an interloper.
She had felt like an interloper the other time she had been here, too. Of course, then she had been under the strain of trying to socialize-brieflyw-but she wasn't any more comfortable this time. Luxury made her nervous. As a child, she had always been the one who spilled the Kool-Aid on the irreplaceable lace tablecloth, or inadvertently smeared paint on a silk blouse, or stepped on a dropped ink pen and cracked it so the ink ran all over a gazillion-dollar rug. Her mother had always put on that dramatie tone of voice and said the world would be safer if she could only keep Paris in a cage, and then she always profusely apologized for the child's clumsiness. For a while Sweeney had been terrified her mother really would put her in a cage.
She had gotten over that fear, but the fact was she actually had been that accident prone. There was something about expensive stuff that brought out the klutz in her. She walked in the middle of the foyer, staying well away from that beautiful lamp.
The spacious living room was on the right. She went there, with Richard walking silently behind her. She had a vague sense of being herded. She shouldn't be here; not only was she out of place, but now certainly wasn't the time. She had presumed too much on their relationship, which was far too new and unformed for her to presume anything.

Despite her unease, Sweeney was, as always, aware of colors, and she immediately noticed that the room was different. Candra had liked a lot of neutral, light tones; everything now was more colorful, more substantial. Nothing looked any cheaper than what it had replaced.
She stood in the middle of the room, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "Sit down," Richard said.
"I can't stay." Damn, she hadn't gotten any better at social lies. She could hear the bright falseness of her own tone. "I know I shouldn't be here. This is a private time and I'm intruding-"
"Sit down," he said again, only this time the words sounded as if he growled them.
She chose a big leather wing chair and perched on the edge of the cushion. There was some sort of statuette on the table next to the chair. She put both hands between her knees so she wouldn't accidently knock the thing over. She didn't like feeling uncomfortable with Richard. She was totally at ease with him in her own apartment, or on neutral territory. Here, for the first time, she was painfully aware of the huge financial gap between them. She had never seen anything snobbish about him, so the distinction had to be within herself, and reverse snobbery was as irrational as the other.
"I don't know what you're thinking, but I don't like the expression on your face." At least this time his tone was wry, instead of a growl. He was still standing, looking down at her with an unreadable expression.
"I'm thinking I don't belong here." That was the unvarnished truth, whether he liked it or not. She pinned her gaze on a flower arrangement, comforting herself by studying the colors. He shrugged. "I don't either."
Startled, she looked up. "But you own it."
"I'm an old country boy at heart. This isn't where I want to be; it's just a place to live."
She couldn't seem to look away from him. His dark eyes were black in the low, soothing light of the lamps, and he wasn't looking away from her, either. Physical awareness, never far from the surface when she was with him, shimmered through her. Instantly she tried to tamp it down; now wasn't the time.
"I've been with the police all day long," he said in a low, controlled tone. "I've been worried sick about you, but I couldn't call."
She said quickly, "I understand. I didn't expect you to call. And I'm all right. I finally figured out I can crawl into a tub of hot water and soak until the

chill is gone."
"I'd rather you crawl into a hot bed with me whenever you need warming up."
The words lay between them like a live wire. She felt her insides jolt as if she had actually been shocked, and realization clicked into place. He wasn't looking at her and thinking she shouldn't be here; he was watching her with the intense focus of a man who intends to have sex. Here. Now.
She found herself on her feet, pulled there by a tension so acute it was almost painful. Nerves and need warred inside her. With just that blunt statement from him she was aroused, her body readying itself for him. Her breasts ached, and without looking down, she knew her nipples had hardened. Liquid heat, sweetly painful, pooled between her legs. She clenched her inner muscles against the pain and found she had only intensified the hurt.
She had accepted, and enjoyed, the force of her attraction to him. She loved those wildly frustrating kisses, the tempting touch of bare skin, the intoxicating blend of feeling on the edge of danger and at the same time utterly safe in his arms. As much as she wanted the completion of actually making love with him, she had also felt comforted by his restraint. Commitment wasn't easy for her, and what he wanted from her right now was the most basic commitment of all. What she had enjoyed so much in theory was a little scary in reality.
I think I should go," she blurted, turning to do exactly that. His hands closed around her waist, catching her before she could take a step. I think you should stay." He pulled her solidly against him, hips to hips, thighs to thighs, nestling the hard ridge of his erection against the softness of her belly. "Don't you want me?" he murmured, bending his head to nuzzle her temple, and lower to the sensitive hollow just below her ear.
Her breath caught. Want him? She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything or anyone in her life. She was only beginning to realize just how much she did want him, and not only in a physical sense. That was the scariest part about this, acknowledging how emotionally important he was to her. As a child she had loved her family and desperately needed for them to love her in return, but that love hadn't been forthcoming, and since then she hadn't allowed herself to be so vulnerable.
But it was too late for caution, she thought wildly. She already loved him. Her body was already melting against his, seeking the heady pleasure he

had given her once before.
She couldn't give him the permission he had asked for, at least not in words. Panic and excitement mingled in a wild rush that closed her throat. So she slid her hands up his chest and locked them around his neck, going on tiptoe to cradle his erection at the junction of her thighs, and that was all the permission he needed.
His arms closed around her and his mouth covered hers, hard and voracious. His tongue moved deep into her mouth, taking her, shaking her with the sudden awareness that until now he had always held himself back. He wasn't holding anything back now. Sweeney had the sensation of being crushed and devoured, except he wasn't hurting her at all, the only pain she felt was the pain of emptiness.
He stripped her jacket down her arms and let it drop to the floor. He delved his hands under her shirt and closed them over her breasts, his palms hot and rough against her tightened nipples. Her whole body arched into his touch, and she heard herself making soft, panting sounds. Everything was spinning out of control, going too fast. "Richard," she gasped, a weak cry, or a plea, she never knew which.
He jerked her shirt off over her head, and the next second she was lying sprawled on her back on the oversized couch. Ten seconds later she was naked, her shoes and socks gone, her jeans and panties tugged down and off. His hands were on her thighs, pulling them open.
Dazedly she stared at him as he knelt between her legs, oneknee on the couch and his other foot planted on the floor, tearing at the fastening of his pants. She felt as if her entire body was throbbing with anticipation, the blood running hot and thick through her veins, gathering in her loins. He leaned over her and she braced her hands on his chest, his heartbeat pounding under her right palm. Their eyes met, hers wide, his fiercely narrowed, and their gazes locked and held as he entered her, thrusting hard and deep.
The pain ambushed her. It was sharp and burning, just as if she were virgin again. She caught her breath on a cry, stiffening beneath him. He muttered an indistinct curse as he withdrew a little and more slowly worked himself back in to the hilt. The pain was only momentary, her body's reaction to the unaccustomed invasion; his second thrust wrung another cry from her, this time sharp with pleasure.

"God," he said, his voice stifled, his body held still and tight, as if one more thrust would shatter his control and he wouldn't stop until he climaxed. Sweeney hooked her legs around his waist, tilting her pelvis up to take him deeper inside. Her breath came in short, choppy pants. He felt so thick and hard inside her she thought she couldn't bear it if he moved, and yet she thought she would explode if he didn't. She felt hot, glowing, the heat boiling through her veins. She tightened her inner muscles around him, trying to pull him deeper. His entire body flexed, and with a guttural sound he surged forward, plunging so deep she almost screamed; then he held himself motionless once more. She
arched upward, her nails digging into his chest muscles. "Damn you," she choked. "Do it!"

He caught her wrists in his hands and peeled them off his chest, slamming them down to the cushion and anchoring them over her head. He leaned over her, sweat gleaming on his face, and in the fierce dark depths of his eyes she saw his control shatter.

He took her then with powerful thrusts that made her entire body shudder under the impact. His grip on her hands arched her into him, lifted her for him. With each inward thrust the heat and tension inside her increased, her loins throbbing, her hips rocking back and forth and taking everything he had to give her. She climaxed hard and fast, sobbing and crying out, and without mercy he rode her through it, so that the tension began rebuilding as soon as the spasms ended. His big body stiffened over her, then he shuddered and bucked from the force of his own orgasm.

In the silence afterward, she heard her own breathing, rapid and jerky. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel it thudding against her rib cage. Every muscle in her felt like butter, mushy and helpless. He lay heavily on her, crushing her into the couch, and she could happily have lain there forever. The pleasure she'd had with him before didn't compare to actually making love. She felt exhilarated, and exhausted, as if she could move mountains if only she could manage to move herself, but at the moment, she wanted nothing more than to just lie there with Richard's weight on her, feeling the tremor in those powerful muscles, and know that she had been enough for him, that he was satisfied.

This was, she realized, what women had always felt at these times, with the men they loved. It was sweeter than she had imagined, in those brief, rare moments when she had allowed herself to think of what she might be

missing in her solitary state. Richard lifted his head. His dark hair was black with sweat, his face stark with triumph and possessiveness and a very male satisfaction. 'Are you okay?" His voice was low and rough.
She swallowed. "You tell me," she managed to say. "I haven't had much practice."
A quick grin lit the hard places of his face. "I'd say you're damn wonderful." He released her wrists to balance his weight on his elbows, framing her face with his hands and kissing her with slow, deep deliberation, mimicking with his tongue the small strokes between her legs that kept him semierect and inside her. She quivered beneath him, her swollen inner tissues almost too sensitive to bear even that gentle stimulation.
He knew, and withdrew from her so gently she wanted to weep. He drew back on his knees and restored his pants to rough order, then stood and scooped her up. She lay draped in his arms like a naked offering, clinging to his shoulders as he carried her out of the living room and up the stairs. "I hope you can stay the night," he murmured, "because I'm not even close to being through with you."
"No ... Candra's bed-"
"She never slept in this bed," he reassured her, gentle but implacable. "Or in this room. I had the house renovated and redecorated." He shouldered open a set of double doors and carried her across a large expanse of gleaming hardwood floors, strewn with rugs the colors of jewels, to a bed that looked large enough to sleep six. He let her legs drop, so that she was standing, but kept her clamped to his side as he bent and stripped back the covers.
Her knees wobbled. "I need to wash," she said. She needed to find a robe, or a towel, or even a couple of washcloths she could hold over strategic places. She had never felt more naked than she did right now, or more aware of her body.
He stiffened. "I'll be damned," he said softly. "I didn't wear a rubber."
They stared at each other, and Sweeney became acutely aware of the wetness between her legs. She did some fast counting. "I think we're safe. It's been almost three weeks since my last period." She had a brief moment of insanity, a flash of regret that the timing hadn't been better---or worse. At the moment she couldn't decide which it would be.
He opened a drawer in the bedside table and took out a box of condoms, placing it on the tabletop. He extracted one from the box. "We both need a

shower. The bathroom's through there." He turned her and pointed her in the direction of two white louvered doors.
He intended to shower with her. He intended to do more than that, considering the condom in his hand. Sweeney's heartbeat speeded up as she walked to the bathroom with as much poise as she could muster, though she could feel her cheeks heating. By the time they reached the bathroom, he had shed all his clothes except for his pants and shorts, leaving them strewn in a trail from bed to bath.
She stopped in the doorway. His bathroom was bigger than her bedroom. A square whirlpool tub sat directly in front of her, with thick white towels stacked on the ceramic tile ledge beside it, next to a crystal container filled with small, round, multicolored soaps. To the right a glass door opened into a large shower. The floor was laid with glossy tiles in a soft, rosy brown color that seemed to glow under the bright lights. To the left was a small private enclosure for the toilet, and at her left hand stretched a long, long double vanity in some sort of shiny, rich brown. Gold faucets arched over the bowls. Thick, soft rugs were spread in front of the shower and bathtub.
"This is decadent," she pronounced.
A large warm hand moved over the bare curves of her bot-tom. "Glad you like it."
She didn't just like it; she loved it. The colors were wonderful. A dull brown would have been awful, but this brown was so deep and rich she felt as if she could sink into it. The gold of the faucets seemed to pick up gold flecks in the vanity top, making it glow.
She opened the shower door and peered in. "Wow." The shower stall was at least eight by five feet, fashioned in marble streaked with brown and rose. There was a showerhead at each end of the enclosure, positioned so one would be rinsed front and back simultaneously
The hand on her bottom became more insistent, urging her into the shower. She turned, and faced a very naked man. Her breath caught. She had already seen him mostly naked and had imagined him completely so, but the reality was so much better than her imagination. He was in marvelous shape, but it was more than that; he looked exactly the way a man should look, in her opinion, mature and muscular and interested. Impulsively she reached out and closed her hand around his stiffened penis, only half-hearing his involuntary hum of pleasure, and concentrating instead on how the thick shaft jumped in her hand.

He said, "If you aren't careful, you won't get that shower just yet."
"Is that important?" she murmured.
"I,In trying to be considerate and romantic."
She tilted her head back, lifting her brows in interest. "Romantic?"
"I've been thinking about this for a solid week, planning what I would do."
One hand remained at his crotch. The other stroked over his hairy chest. Her breath panted softly between her parted lips. "What romantic plans have you made?"
"Well, there's really only one."
"One? What is it?"
"Fucking your brains out," he said matter-of-factly, and when she fell back shrieking with laughter, he prudently removed her hand from his sex. While she was helpless, he herded her completely into the shower and turned on the water.
He had showered with a woman before, she realized; he adjusted the showerheads so the streams of water hit close to her waist, leaving her hair mostly dry. A few minutes later, with his soap-slick hands roaming all over her body, she conceded that he also knew a good bit about bathing a woman. A few minutes after that, condom in place, he demonstrated what he knew about having sex in the shower. It was fast and hard and carnal, with her pinned against the marble wall while he hammered into her. She came fast, writhing and bucking in his arms. Afterward she could barely stand, and he supported her as he dried both of them. He was still hard, not having climaxed, and the realization dawned on her that he would be much, much slower to climax the second time, and that she could look forward to a long session of lovemaking. She didn't know whether to rejoice or plead for mercy.
Then he carried her to the bed, and all thoughts of pleading for mercy went right out of her head. He spent a long time kissing her, from head to foot. He sucked her nipples until she was almost sobbing with pleasure and frustration; his finger probed and stroked between her legs, and then he replaced his fingers with his tongue and she climaxed again, screaming from the intensity of the sensations. He let her rest for a little while, then rolled her over on her stomach and took her from behind. She was so swollen that he felt impossibly huge, barely able to fit inside her; she was acutely aware of every inch of him, probing deep into her. His slow thrusts rubbed her body against the sheets, and against the hand he had tucked

under her so that every movement moved her on his wickedly knowledgeable fingers.
The fourth time she climaxed, he was with her, and afterward they lay close together, her head cradled on his shoulder and his hands leisurely stroking her buttocks, her breasts, her hips and belly and thighs, as if he couldn't get enough of the feel of her. Closing her eyes, she listened to his heartbeat, and her own, as they gradually slowed and adjusted until they were beating in time, two hearts, one rhythm.
"Tell me if you need to sleep," he murmured after a while, rolling on top of her.
She felt him probing, but not yet entering, and knew he wouldn't if she told him she was tired. "No," she whispered, clutching his back and tilting her hips so that he slipped inside her a tantalizing couple of inches. "Don't let me sleep tonight. 11 She had had enough of murders and paintings and feeling as if her life was subject to the whim of an unseen, unknown power. She wanted to drown her senses with Richard, lose herself in the purely physical.
He did just as she asked. A couple of times she thought she dozed, but perhaps not, perhaps she was in a daze of completion. He made love to her endlessly, and even when they rested, he was inside her. When she became too dry to take him, he used lubricant to ease his way into her. He pushed her hard, and a couple of times she cried because she didn't think she could take any more, but she always found that she could, and for that night he kept the cold away.
They were lying quietly together when the sky began to lighten. He stroked her hair back from her face, his touch infinitely tender. "Tell me about the painting."
She tensed, momentarily resisting the ugly intrusion into the happiness of the moment. Then she sighed, accepting the return of reality. I finished her face." She found she had to swallow. "V"en I woke up and saw it, I tried to call the gallery, but there wasn't any answer. I didn't have her number, so I called you and-and I found out I was too late."
"Don't blame yourself," he said fiercely, cupping her chin in his hand and turning her face up to his. "The detectives think she was killed around midnight. By the time you finished her face, it was already too late."
"l-" Her throat closed. She knew he was right. Given the time she had gone to bed and the length of time it would have taken her to finish the face,

Candra had already been dead. The artist in her knew that. The woman, the human being, felt as if there should have been something, anything, that she could have done.
She could feel the tension in him, thrumming through his muscles and communicating itself to her through his hands. "God, I was so worried about you," he said in a tone of stifled violence, crushing her against him.
"I,m okay." She kissed his collarbone and thought how wonderful it was to be safe and warm, and so thoroughly satisfied. Love for him filled her, making her heart swell. She wrenched her thoughts back to the subject. I won't lie to you; it was pretty rough, but I managed. You don't have to worry-, this proves I can handle it on my own."
His dark eyes glittered. "You shouldn't have to do it on your own. I should have been there."
"You couldn't. You had to-you had to take care of Candra." Her throat tightened again. "She was your wife for ten years. I know you must be upset-"
He made a harsh sound in his throat and released hef, rolling over onto his back. He stared up at the ceiling. "I don't mourn her, if that's what you're asking. I can't be a hypocrite and fake grief. Maybe people think I should, but I'm not going to put on a show for them."
Sweeney felt the power and frustrated rage in him and gave him the same comfort he had given her, putting her arms around him and gently stroking his face, his chest. "Of course not. It wouldn't be honest."
He glanced down at her. "You didn't do any work on the man's face?"
She shook her head. She tried to be nonchalant, but her eyes filled with dread for what was coming, and he knew that yesterday morning's episode had been the roughest yet.
It was his turn to stroke. "I wanted to call you," he whispered. "I spent all day with the police."
“I know. I knew you had to make arrangements-"
"Not to mention being the prime suspect."
Her pupils flared. "What?" She would have bolted up in bed, but he controlled the surge of her body, keeping her clamped to him.
"I was the most logical person. NNben a woman is murdered, it's usually the husband or boyfriend who did it. We were getting divorced. They had to eliminate me as a suspect."
"Are you? Eliminated, I mean."

"Yeah, I'm eliminated." His smile was crooked. "I didn't have a motive, and I could prove I was here."
"How?"
"The computer. I was on-line, and my server had a record of the time."
Sweeney closed her eyes in relief. She tilted her head a little, rubbing her cheek against his chest. "I need to go," she murmured. "I know you have a million things to do today. And ... shouldn't I take the painting to the police?"
"No," he said forcefully. "Promise me you won't do that."
"Why?" she asked, bewildered.
"Do you really think they'll believe you painted it in your sleep? Honey, you'll become their prime suspect, at least for a while. I don't want you to have to go through that; plus if they're concentrating on you, they're wasting time when they could be looking for the real killer. When you finish the painting, and we see who you paint, then I'll think of some way to point the cops in the right direction." He rubbed his thumbs under her chin. "Promise me."
"Okay." Her smile was wobbly. "I guess the whole thing is a little out there, isn't it?"
"No more so than your average Twilight Zone episode."
Her smile widened, became more genuine. "That bad, huh?"
"That bad. When you paint the killer's face, then I'll think of some way to point the cops in the right direction, but other than that, I don't want you involved at all."
Outside in his car, Detective Aquino yawned and stretched, battling the need for sleep. He really, really needed to take a leak, and he really, really needed some coffee. Staying awake today was gonna be hell. He should have gone home, and he knew it. It didn't mean a damn thing that Worth had a girlfriend.
But curiosity was his besetting sin, and he wanted to know more about the woman. He wanted to know who she was and where she lived, and why she had arrived on foot, apparently unexpected, then stayed all night.
Maybe it was nothing, but then again, his hunches hact worked out before. He intended to see what happened with this one.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Richard sent her home in a taxi. Sweeney had been prepared to walk home, since she hadn't carried her purse with her the evening before when she set out for a stroll. All she had in her jeans pocket was a couple of crumpled ones and some change, but that was enough for a bus if she got tired of walking. He glared at her as he called a cab, and that was that. He paid the driver, kissed her, and handed her into the cab as if she were royalty.

It was nice not to have to walk home, she admitted as she let herself into her apartment. Her knees felt dangerously wobbly and all her muscles were weak. She thought about taking a nap,

but dread kept her awake. She couldn't face another episode of sleep-painting and the awful cold that came afterward, not now. Both physically and emotionally, she wasn't up to the strain. She thought about the painting, with the big blank space where the killer's head would be, and her head began to hurt, sharp pains stabbing through her temples. She didn't even want to go into the studio to work on other paintings, where she would see the murder scene. She didn't want to think about Candra being dead or imagine the terror she must have felt in those last horrible minutes of her life. She wanted to be at peace for a little while, to gather strength for the finish. She wanted to think about Richard, remember his lovemaking and the incredible night she had just spent with him.

She wanted to revel in, and marvel at, the miracle of loving him. She loved, fully and wholeheartedly, when she hadn't thought she ever would. She had felt so smug about her ability to concentrate wholly on her work, confident she was immune to the emotional uproar called love. Hah! She was not,only not immune, where Richard was concerned she was downright easy.

Even more, she was eager for an opportunity to demonstrate to him again just how easy she was.

But for now, she faced a day of doing nothing, or at least nothing much. She didn't dare nap and couldn't work. She was too tired to go out for a day of sketching. That left watching television, reading, or doing the laundry She leaned toward reading, but the need to do laundry nagged at her conscience. Promising herself she would do the laundry after an hour of reading, she put on a pot of coffee and settled down with an oversized book about the use of acrylic paints.

The doorbell jerked her out of a study of brilliant colors. Muttering to herself, because she knew it couldn't possibly be Richard and therefore had

to be a nuisance, she went to the door and looked through the peephole. Two men in suits stood in the hallway. "Who is it?" she asked, keeping her eye to the lens.
"Detectives Aquino and Ritenour, New York Police Department." The beefy man closest to the lens was the one who answered, and he used the entire phrase rather than the initials. Both men held out badges to the lens, as if she could read them through a fish-eye.
There was no way they could know about the painting, as only she and Richard knew she was doing it, but evidently someone had told them she was involved with Richard. She sighed as she opened the door. They were only doing their job, checking out all possibilities, but still she felt uneasy.
"Ms. Paris Sweeney?" the burly cop asked.
Her brows snapped together in a ferocious scowl. "Just Sweeney," she growled.
He looked a little startled, then his expression smoothed into impassivity. "May we come in?"
He looked more tired than she felt, with dark circles under his eyes and his complexion gray. He looked freshly shaved and his hair was still the teeniest bit damp, indicating he had showered and probably changed clothes, but that couldn't hide his exhaustion. The other detective, lean and sandy-haired, looked much more rested but not nearly as friendly.
"Would you like a pot of coffee?" she asked as they both sat down, because the burly guy really looked as if he could use a caffeine kick. I mean, a cup of coffee."
The sandy-haired detective got that stony, wild-eyed look of someone trying not to laugh. Detective Aquino shot him a dirty look. "That would be appreciated. Sugar and cream. A lot of both."
"Same here," Detective Ritenour said.
She freshened her own cup, and prepared two more, loading them down with enough sugar to send the average kid bouncing off the walls for ten hours, and enough cream to raise their cholesterol levels several points. They must drink a lot of bad coffee, she thought, for both of them to disguise the taste this way.
She put the cups on a small tray and carried it through to the living room, setting it down on the coffee table. Telling herself there was no reason to be nervous, she sat down and lifted her own cup. What was the procedure for interrogation? Should she invite them to begin?

The burly cop, after an appreciative sip of the coffee, began without her help. "Ms. Sweeney, are you acquainted with Richard Worth?"
She gave him a disbelieving look. "Well, of course I am, otherwise you wouldn't be here."
He coughed. "You're aware that his estranged wife was murdered night before last." That was a statement, not a question. "Yes."
"Were you also acquainted with Mrs. Worth?"
Sweeney's eyes darkened. "Yes," she repeated, softly. "I've known her for years. I exhibited at the gallery"
"Oh, so you're an artist."
"Yes."
"No kidding." He looked at a large landscape on the wall. "Did you do that?"
"No." She didn't hang her own work. When she relaxed, she liked to look at something someone else had done.
That conversational gambit exhausted, he returned to the subject at hand. "Mrs. Worth wasn't happy about your involvement with Mr. Worth, was she?"
The super, Sweeney thought. That scene in the entrance lobby. "She told me she didn't care, but then when she came here one morning to see me and Richard was here, she was upset." She was pleased with that masterful understatement.
"When was this?"
They already knew, she thought. They had already talked to the super. They were asking questions to which they already knew the answers, to see if she would tell the truth. "A few days ago."
"How long have you been involved with Mr. Worth?"
She blinked at him, more taken aback by the question than most people would have been. "I don't know. What day of the week is it?"
They shared a quick glance Thursday," Detective Ritenour said.
"Then it's been a week. I think. I lose track of days."
"A week," Detective Aquino echoed. He made a note in his little book.
"You stayed at Mr. Worth's town house last night." Sweeney blushed. Great. Now they knew how easy she was. "Yes."
"Where were you night before last, Ms. Sweeney?"
Ah, now they were getting down to the meat of their questions. Sweeney felt a flicker of alarm. She had been alone here, with no calls, no witnesses-

no alibis. "Here."
"Alone?"
"Yes."
"All night?"
"Yes."
"Did you maybe step out for some fresh air, a walk before bedtime, anything like that?"
"No. I didn't leave the apartment."
Ritenour rubbed his nose. "Did you make any calls, talk to anyone?"
"No."
"Have you ever been to Mrs. Worth's apartment?"
"No. I don't know exactly where she lived."
"Did you have any contact with Mrs. Worth after the sccne a few days ago? Since she was so upset, did she call you afterwards and maybe make a couple of threats, you know, the way people do when affairs of the heart are concerned?"
His phraseology was charming. She lost herself in a moment of bernusement at hearing a cop actually say "affairs of the heart." Then she shook herself. "No. That was the last time I either saw her or heard from her."
"Do you have any knowledge of someone, say, holding a grudge against Mrs. Worth?"
Only Richard, she started to say. Thank God he had cleared himself. "No. Candra and I were business associates, not friends. But I liked her," she said softly, looking down. "Until that scene the other day, I had never seen her be anything but polite and friendly to everyone."
They both smiled at her. "That's all the questions I have," Detective Aquino said, closing his little notebook. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Sweeney."
"You're welcome." She went with them to the door.
As they started to leave, Aquino stopped and turned back. 'Are you planning on going out of town, Ms. Sweeney? In case we have more questions."
"No," she said. "I'm not going anywhere."
As soon as they were gone, Sweeney picked up the phone to call Richard, then put it down without dialing. There was no point in worrying him with this. The detectives had asked a few questions; that was all. Granted, she had no way of proving she hadn't left the apartment all night, but neither

had she ever been in Candra's apartment, so there couldn't be any evidence tying her in any way to the murder. She had nothing to worry about.
Despite her best intentions to stay out of the studio, after lunch and laundry she began to think about the painting. She hadn't really examined it yesterday, looking at it only long enough to recognize Candra. She didn't want to look at it again, and yet she knew she must. She had to finish it. The cops didn't seem to have any solid leads, or they wouldn't have been questioning her, so unless she finished the painting, the killer would probably get away with the murder.
The other day-two days ago? three?-she had worked on the painting while awake. If she could do that again, the shock to her system wouldn't be as severe and the chill wouldn't be as bad. She didn't want to go through a repeat of yesterday morning, even though she now knew she could get through it on her own.
When she went into the studio, though, she couldn't bring herself to walk right up to the painting. She wandered around looking at other works in progress, other things she had done, recalling what had been difficult or fascinating about each subject. For her, looking at her work was what looking at a photo album was to other people, calling up memories of times past.
But eventually she came to the unfinished painting, and she stopped cold, struck by the stark power of the work. The terror of Candra's last minutes seemed to leap off the canvas, as well as the nothingness of death. And there was menace as well, in the stance of the man standing over her, a sort of gloating satisfaction that was sickening.
She stared at the blank space where the man's face would be, and she felt a sort of floating sensation, faint but detectable. Her vision seemed to narrow, her focus tightening on the canvas.
The ringing of the doorbell was a jarring intrusion, making her jump. She lost the focus, the growing sense of seeing something that wasn't yet there. Muttering to herself, she went to the door.
Her unexpected visitor was Kai, his arms loaded with wrapped canvases. " Hi, " he said when Sweeney opened the door. "I brought these by. The framer tried to deliver them to the gallery, but of course it isn't open, so he called me. Candra told me to send them back to you, but I thought, what the hell, why not bring them to you myself? Who knows if or when the gallery will open again."

He looked at her as if expecting her to tell him Richard's plans for the gallery, but since she had no idea, she merely shrugged.
"In here," she said, leading the way to the studio. "By the way, the last of your old work sold."
"That's good." She cleared some space where she could stand the canvases against the wall. "Put them here."
He did as she directed, looking around at the other things she had completed. "Hey, these are really great. You're gonna make a fortune; wait and see."
"I hope," she said, smiling at him.
"The light is great in here." He walked over to the huge windows and looked out at the street below. Then he turned, and saw the painting.
All color leached out of his face. He stared at it, mouth agape, eyes blank with shock. "My God," he blurted.
"Don't tell anyone." Uncomfortable, she shifted her feet, unable to look him in the eye.
"When did you-You did all this in a day and a half?"
She cringed inside, but she had to come up with some reasonable explanation for the painting, and she couldn't think of one. "No, I've been working on it several days."
"What? How?"
-" Her mind went blank. Furious with herself for not being able to lie, she said, "I swear to God, Kai, if you spill the beans on this, I'll pull every hair out of your head."
"Spill the beans?" He was looking back and forth from the painting to her, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.
"I'm sort of psychic," she snapped. "Sort of-?"
"I do paintings of things that haven't happened yet. When I finish this, it will show who killed her. " She glared at him. 'And I don't want you to ever mention any of this to anyone. "
He was all but backing away from her, inching toward the door. "I won't," he said.
"I mean it, Kai. I don't want the cops to know; not yet."
He drew a deep breath. "I understand," he said. "I won't tell the cops, I promise." Then he laughed, the sound shaky. "Son of a bitch," he said. "No one would ever expect this' would he?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"I'm telling you, I saw it."
"That's impossible. You must be mistaken."
"That isn't something I'd be mistaken about," Kai said, annoyed.
"There's no such thing as a psychic; that's all just parlor games. She must have already done the painting, and when she heard about Candra, she just painted in her face."
"Then explain how Sweeney knew what Candra was wearing. I saw Candra at the party, remember? I know how she was dressed. Sweeney had the dress, the shoes, the jewelry, everything, down right."
"This is unbelievable. She had to have found out some other way."
"There is no other way," Kai insisted. "I don't care if you believe real psychics exist or not; the painting exists-becatise I've seen it. And you have to decide what in hell you're going to do about it."
"Do? What is there to do? I don't know anything about what's going on. You, on the other hand, are going to do your civic duty and tell the police about this very interesting painting Sweeney has, which couldn't possibly exist unless she saw the killing or did the killing. At the very least they'll take the painting, and she won't be able to finish it."
"You don't think the cops would be interested in letting her finish the face?"
"Why should they?"
Kai felt as if he were beating his head against a rock. He began ticking off points on his fingers. 'A: Initially, the cops will think she did it, but unfortunately there isn't any evidence except the painting to tie her to the murder. B: She'll demonstrate how she did the painting, and once they're believers, they'll be watching every brushstroke she makes."
"That would never hold up in court."
"No, but once they know where to look, do you honestly think they won't find some little shred of evidence to tie you up like a Christmas turkey?"
"No, I don't. Anything they find will point to someone else and you know it."
"But what about your fuckingface?" he said from between gritted teeth. "Once they have it, don't you think it will occur to the cops to show your picture to the guard? What's going to happen then?"

Finally, the danger of the situation began to sink in. They stared at each other in silence for a moment. "Okay, we have to contain the damage. I still think you should go to the police; it will take suspicion off you. And they won't allow her to work on the painting because if they do, then it's inadmissible as evidence against her, if they can make the case, and they wouldn't take that chance."
"What if they do?"
"Then we'll fall back on our safety net. With hard physical evidence, and the tape as motive, do you think the cops are really going to believe a kooky painting? He'd have to die, of course, and leave a suicide note telling why. Such a shame."
Kai relaxed. The logic of the plan was comforting. For the first time since seeing the painting in Sweeney's apartment, he felt as if he might slip out of this trap after all.
"And there's always the most obvious step."
"What?" he asked.
"Why, killing Sweeney, of course. Before she finishes the painting."
Late that afternoon, Sweeney opened the door once again to Detectives Aquino and Ritenour. As soon as she saw their cold eyes and impassive faces, the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She knew exactly what Kai had done. "That rotten tattletale," she muttered.
"Ms. Sweeney," said Detective Aquino, "with your permission, we'd like to search your apartment. If you insist, we can get a search warrant within the hour, but things will go much smoother if you cooperate." Smoother for them, he meant. Right now smooth was probably very important to him; he didn't look as if he had gotten any sleep that day, either.
She sighed. "The painting's in the studio. I'll get it."
"If you don't mind, we'll go with you," Ritenour said immediately, and they both fell in step just behind her.
She was so tired she didn't care, or almost didn't care. She had been fighting the need for sleep all day, hoping she would get to spend the night with Richard again and he would somehow protect her from whatever happened when she slept. If she was at his town house, then she couldn't work on the painting, could she? But her conscience hurt her whenever she thought of avoiding the completion of the painting, as if she were planning to let a murderer go free. She had to do the painting. But she would very much

prefer that Richard be with her when she did, to help her through the aftermath. That meant he needed to be here.
But now where she was going to sleep was a moot question, because it looked as if she wasn't going to be getting any sleep for quite a while. That was assuming her next bed wasn't in a jail cell.
"Here," she said, going over to the painting. The two detectives ranged themselves slightly behind and on either side of her, in case she tried to do something stupid, like run. She didn't look at them as they studied the painting. She knew exactly what they were seeing, and what they were thinking.
"Ms. Sweeney." Detective Ritenour's tone was flat. "Would you like to tell us how you knew the details of the murder scene?"
"You won't believe me," she said helplessly. "Try us. "
"I didn't." She stood as still as a small animal with a wolf sniffing at the entrance to its lair. "I painted it in my sleep." Fleeting Yeah, sure expressions went over their faces. "We'd like you to come down to the precinct with us. This painting will be taken as evidence . . . " Aquino's voice droned on, but Sweeney didn't listen. She tried to beat down the panic that threatened to choke her. They couldn't prove she killed Candra, because she hadn't done it. She tried to hang on to that thought.
"I painted it in my sleep," she repeated stubbornly. "I walk in my sleep sometimes, and when I wake up, I find that I've painted something. Wait- there's another painting I did, of a hot dog vendor who was killed several days ago. His name was Elijah Stokes. There was a witness who saw a man running away, so I couldn't have had anything to do with that murder." She hurried to the closet and took out the painting, carefully not looking at the face that had always worn the sweetest expression God had ever put on a human being, and now never would again.
Ritenour took that canvas and grimly examined it. "I'm not familiar with this case," he said. "We'll have to check it out." They didn't believe anything she said. Belatedly she realized she might find herself charged as an accessory in Elijah Stokes's murder, if she didn't manage to do something. She had been deliciously warm all day, but now a faint chill raced up her back. Automatically she hugged her arms, rubbing them.
"This isn't the only weird thing that's been happening." They weren't listening, their minds closed off to any explanation she could give except

the obvious: she had been at the scenes. Panic congealed into a cold lump and settled in the pit of her stomach. She had to keep trying anyway.
"Please get your shoes and purse," Detective Aquino requested.
She did, and a coat to go over her sweatshirt, though they gave her disbelieving glances. The high that day had been in the eighties, and the late afternoon was still warm. She couldn't feel any internal heat, though, just the spreading chill of terror. She tried to control it, tried to keep calm, because that was the only way she had of helping herself.
Aquino took her purse and looked through it, then gave it back to her and took her arm.
"Listen to me," she said in as calm a tone as she could manage. "When we get in the car, pay attention to the traffic signals."
"We always do," Ritenour said with heavy irony as they escorted her from the apartment.
"No, I mean to what happens." She was trembling like a leaf, her breath hitching. "You won't have to stop. The lights will turn green when we get close. They always do for me. And there'll be an empty parking space right in front of the station for you." She felt as if she were babbling, but she couldn't stop.
“If that's so," said Aquino politely, "then people would pay you a for-tune just to ride around in their cars with them."
They put her in the backseat of a nondescript sedan. She noticed there weren't any door handles in back, but at least there wasn't a wire cage in front of her. The paintings were placed in the trunk. She forced herself to stillness, imposing a tiny bit of control on a world that was coming apart around her. Had she been officially arrested, or were they just taking her in for questioning? She didn't know the procedure, didn't know what came next. She should probably call a lawyer, she thought, but who she wanted to call was Richard. She needed him. But the cops had already had him in for questioning, and calling him would just drag him back into this mess.
The traffic light at the corner turned green. "Did you see that?" she asked. "It turned green."
"Yeah, they do that occasionally," Aquino said sarcastically. The next one turned green, too. And the next one. Sweeney sat very quietly, not pointing out the obvious again. They would notice every light now.
The traffic cleared from in front of them, cars switching lanes, turning down other streets. The sedan didn't have to slow, but kept a steady pace. As the

seventh traffic light turned green at their approach, Ritenour turned in his seat and gave her an unreadable look, but neither he nor Aquino remarked on the phenomena.
As they drove up to the precinct house, a car pulled out of a parking space directly in front of the building. She thought Aquino said, "Shit," under his breath, but she wasn't certain.
The precinct was boiling with humanity. Peeling green paint, metal desks and filing cabinets, shouts and curses and laughter all running together, armed men and women in blue uniforms: Sweeney's impression of all this was a blur. Soon she was sitting in a very uncomfortable chair in a dingy little room, thoughts roiling in her mind, but no bright ideas on how to prove herself popped out of the cauldron.
Chills roughened her skin, and she began shivering. She pulled her coat on and huddled in it. So it was shock, just as Richard thought, her body's reaction to something upsetting. Probably when she painted the scenes she was at least partially protected by sleep, but when she woke up, the reaction hit with a bang.
"Ms. Sweeney, where were you night before last?" Ritenour was staring at her, pale eyes hard, his tone cold.
"At home." Her teeth chattered. "The weird stuff started happening about a year ago. Little things. Traffic lights changing, the parking spaces, things like that. I didn't notice at first. Like you said, lights turn green all the time. Everyone catches a green light occasionally. And my plants began to bloom out of season."
"Ms. Sweeney." Ritenour's voice had gone as hard as his eyes. "Do I look like I care about your plants?"
No, he looked as if he had wanted to add a copulatory adjective in front of "plants."
She opened her mouth to tell him about the ghosts, then shut it. That wouldn't help her case at all. "I began the painting several days ago; I don't know exactly when. I don't keep track of days. When I woke up, I found I had painted shoes. Two of them, a man's and a woman's. Every morning I'd find s-som@thing new added." She clamped her teeth together to control their chattering.
"Would you like some coffee?" Aquino asked, and she nodded gratefully. He left the little room. Sweeney looked back to Ritenour.

"After a c-couple of days, I knew I was p-painting a murder scene, but I didn't know who-I hadn't gotten to the f-faces. Yesterday m-morning, when I got up, I saw I had painted C-Candra. I tried to c-call her, to warn her-at the gallery, but no one answered. Her home number is unlisted. S-so I called Richard's office, to get her number, and his assistant told me Candra was ddead." She was shaking violently, teeth chattering. Her bones and muscles began to ache. Her hands, resting on the table, had turned a transparent bluish white, as if she had no blood in her body.

"If all that's so, why didn't you tell us about it this morning? " Despite himself, Ritenour was interested. People came forward all the time claiming to have special, prior knowledge of crimes, calling themselves psychic and looking to get their names in the news. In his experience, they were usually the perps. People were weird.

"I knew you wouldn't believe m-me."

No shit, he started to say, but controlled himself. What in hell was wrong with her? She acted like they had her in a freezer, huddling in that damn coat when it had to be at least seventy-five degrees in here. She wasn't faking, though; even her lips were blue.

He frowned and left the room without explanation. Aquino was just coming back with the coffee. "Something's going on with her," Ritenour said to his partner. "She's freezing cold. I'm beginning to think we might have to get the medics to treat her for hypothermia. " He was only half-joking.

"Shit." A medical condition would bring the questioning to a halt. Of course, all she had to do was ask to see a lawyer and they wouldn't be able to ask her any more questions unless the lawyer was present, but for some reason she hadn't done that. "Maybe the coffee will warm her up."

They reentered the room. She was sitting exactly as Ritenour had left her. Aquino put the coffee down in front of her. She tried to lift the cup, but her hands were shaking so violently the hot liquid slopped over on her fingers.

"We got any drinking straws around here?" Ritenour muttered. Aquino shrugged. They both watched as she wrapped her hands around the polystyrene cup and leaned forward, awkwardly trying to sip the coffee with the cup still sitting on the table. Aquino was a real hard-ass, but, glancing at him, Ritenour saw that his partner was looking a little concerned.

The coffee seemed to help her a little. After a couple of sips she was able to lift the cup without sloshing the coffee all over her. Ritenour began again.
"Ms. Sweeney, were you aware that Mr. and Mrs. Worth had signed a prenuptial agreement?"
"No," she said, bewildered. "Why would I be?"
"You're involved with Mr. Worth. A man's financial situation would normally be of interest to a woman, especially if she thought he stood to lose half of everything in a divorce."
"I-We-" Sweeney stammered. "We've just begun seeing each other. We haven't-"
"You're involved enough that you spent last night with him," Aquino said. "Money's the reason behind a lot of things people do."
"But Candra had agreed to sign the papers." Sweeney looked up at them. "I knew she wasn't happy about the settlement because she wanted me to get Richard to increase the amount, so even though I don't know the exact amountof the settlement, it c-couldn't have been half of everything he has."
That at least was logical. She could see them acknowledge the point.
Ritenour rubbed his jaw. He wore an interesting wristwatch, the kind that let you check the local time in Timbuktu, with all sorts of buttons and gadgets. Sweeney stared at it, an idea glimmering.
"What time is it?"
Ritenour glanced at the watch. "Six forty-three.
"I can prove I'm-" She couldn't say psychic. She shrank from it herself, and she could tell they automatically rejected anything connected with the word. "You saw what happened with the traffic lights. You saw. And it happens every time. But there's another way I can show you I ... know things ahead of time."
"Yeah? How?" They looked skeptical, but at least they hadn't rejected the notion out of hand.
"Is there a television here? Jeopardy! will soon be on."
"So?" Aquino asked.
"So it isn't a rerun. There's no way I could already have seen it. Agreed?"
Ritenour shrugged. "Agreed."
"What if I can tell you everything that's going to happen before it does?"
She drained the last of the coffee. She was still shivering, but at least her teeth had stopped chattering. "Will you at least admit then that there's a

possibility I could have done the painting without having actually been at the scene?"
"You want to demonstrate your 'psychic abilities,' huh?
Her temper flared. She was tired and cold and sick with worry, and almost at the end of her rope. "No, I don't," she snapped. "What I want is to go home and go to bed, but I'm afraid when I do, I'll get up in my sleep and paint something else. I'm tired of dealing with this. If you want to know who killed Candra, you'll give back that damn painting and let me finish it, maybe tonight."
They looked at her in silence. Defiantly she stared back. Then Aquino jerked his head toward the door and they left again. Sweeney leaned her head on her hands, wondering how much longer she could hold out.
Aquino and Ritenour stood outside the door. "Whaddaya think?" Aquino asked.
"What will it hurt? Let's watch Jeopardy!
"What will that prove? That she's a good guesser?"
"Like she said, it'll prove whether or not it's at least possible she has some psychic ability. I'm not saying I believe in the crap. I'm saying ... I'm saying this is interesting. We don't have to accept everything she tells us, but we do need to check it out. It isn't as if the painting is all we have to go on; the lab's working on the fiber analysis, and once we have that, we can tell for certain whether or not any of the fibers came from her apartment. 11
"So what you're saying is, you like Jeopardy! and want to watch it."
Ritenour shrugged. "I'm saying, it won't hurt anything to let her watch it. Let's see what she can do."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The three contestants filed out and took their places, with the voice-over giving names and their places of residence. Alex Trebek came out and announced that all three contestants were newcomers, as a five-time champion had retired on yesterday's show. "Number three," Sweeney said, holding another cup of coffee under her nose and inhaling the steam. "She'll win."
The two detectives merely glanced at her. They were seated on dilapidated office chairs with pieces of foam padding coming out of the cracked vinyl

seats, in a small, messy, dingy room littered with coffee cups and soft drink cans. A coffee machine, candy machine, and soft drink machine took up a lot of space and underlaid the silence with an incessant humming. The television was a thirteen-incher, receiving only off its bunny ears, but the picture and audio were fairly clear.
They weren't the only three in the room. Cops being a naturally nosy bunch, whoever had a few minutes free found an excuse to see what was going on. Three uniforms and two more suits had joined them. When Aquino growled that this wasn't a damn circus, one of the suits shrugged and said, "Hey, we like jeopardy! too."
Alex read off the categories. "Inventors."
"Cyrus McCormick," said Sweeney.
“Little Movies”, and the quotation marks mean the word 'little' will appear in each answer."
" 'Little Women,'" Sweeney said.
"I coulda guessed that," said a uniformed officer. "Then why didn't you?" asked someone else. "Quiet!" Aquino barked.
"Colleges and Universities."
"Tulane," Sweeney said. She gripped the cup tighter. Doing this in her apartment wasn't the same thing as getting it right this time, when it was important. Maybe she had just been making lucky guesses.
"Business and Industry.”
"Three-M."
"Math."
"Prime numbers."
"And finally, Highways and Byways."
"I-Ten, and I-Ninety," said Sweeney, and waited tensely for the first contestant to make her choice.
"Math, for a hundred," said contestant number one.
Alex read the clue. "These numbers are evenly divisible by only the number one and themselves."
Number three was hot with the button, ringing in even though the other two were frantically pushing theirs, too. "What are prime numbers," she said.
Silence fell in the dingy little room in the police station. One by one other choices were made, and each time Sweeney gave the correct answer. Sometimes she barely had time to get the answer out before the clue popped up on-screen, but she always made it. Contestant number three was on a

roll; even if she didn't ring first, she was always ready in case one of the other two stumbled. By the time the first commercial break rolled around, she had twice as much money as the other two combined.
"I think we've seen enough," said Aquino, getting to his feet.
"Maybe you have," replied one of the other detectives. "I want to see the rest of the show."
Shakily Sweeney rose and followed Aquino out of the room, with Ritenour right behind her.
"All right." Aquino growled when they were once again in the interrogation room. "So you can do that. And that thing with the traffic lights. I'm impressed, but I ain't convinced. Convince me."
She stared helplessly at him. "Convince you, how? I can barely believe it myself, and I'm living it. I can't tell you what's going to happen tomorrow, and I can't read your mind. I paint in my sleep and I see ghosts-oh, damn," she finished weakly, seeing those looks they were giving her again. She hadn't meant to mention the ghosts. There was no way to prove she saw them, because she was the only one who did. If she hadn't been so tired, she would have had better self-control.
"Ghosts," repeated Ritenour. "Forget I said that."
"Uh-huh. I'm going to forget to eat for the next week, too." She wished he hadn't mentioned eating. She had been trying to ignore her hunger, which was just one more discomfort added on to being cold and exhausted. She made a dismissive gesture. "No one else sees them, so it doesn't matter. They don't bother anyone; most of the time they don't even say hi. Although Elijah Stokes did tell me his sons' names so I could send a sketch to them."
"Elijah Stokes."
"The hot dog vendor who was killed. The other painting. Have you checked on that yet?"
see what I can find. Some other precinct probably handled it. Where was he killed?" asked Ritenour.
"I don't know, but one of his sons could tell you. Their names were . . ." She searched her memory "Daniel ... no, David. David and Jacob Stokes. They're both attorneys."
Ritenour left the room. She leaned back in the uncomfortable chair and closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead where a headache was beginning to form.

"Does anyone else know about that painting?" Aquino asked, and she opened her eyes to find his shrewd gaze on her. "Besides Mr. Stengel."
"Ste-? Oh, Kai. " She had heard his last name only a couple of times, and most of the time it escaped her.
"What about Mr. Worth? He's been in your apartment. Has he seen the painting?"
Not mentioning Richard was one thing; lying to a cop was something else entirely,
"Yes," she said, her voice so weary it was almost inaudible. "He's known about it from the beginning."
Aquino's eyebrows rose. "From the beginning ... as in several days ago?"
"That's right."
"I wonder why he didn't see fit to mention this to us yesterday."
"He didn't want to implicate me. He knew this would happen," she whispered. "He said that when I finished the painting and we knew who the murderer is, or at least have a description, he would somehow point you in the right direction."
"Big of him," said Aquino furiously. "I don't like civilians deciding for me how I should do my job."
Sweeney slapped her hand down on the table, suddenly as furious as he. "Just what would you have said, Detective, if Richard had come to you and said, 'Oh, by the way, the woman I'm seeing has some psychic ability and she's doing a painting of the murder'? Would you have believed him, any more than you believe me?"
He put both hands on the table and leaned toward her, aggressiveness in every line of his burly body. "It isn't my job to believe everything I'm told."
"No, but it is your job to recognize the truth when it's staring you in the face!" She leaned forward, too, bringing her nose as close as possible to his.
To her surprise, he raised his eyebrows. 'As far as that goes," he said mildly, "I'm inclined to believe you."
Talk about taking the wind out of her sails. Sweeney sat back, feeling herself go flat without the puff of indignation. "You do?"
"You proved the possibility to me," he said. "I didn't think you could, but you proved everything you said. Traffic lights turn green, parking spaces open up, and you could make a killing playingJeopardy! What you did is way beyond the law of averages. So if you can do all that, then . He shrugged. "The painting is possible.

She couldn't think of anything to say. For a second she thought she might cry, but the urge went away. She was too tired to make the effort.
"Tell me something. Why didn't you call a lawyer?
"I would have, if you actually arrested me. I haven't been arrested, have l?"
"No, but if it hadn't been for that Jeopardy! thing ... prob ably. "
"I would like to make a call, though."
"You want a lawyer now?"
"No," she said. "I want to call Richard."
"I think I'll place the call myself," he said.
While they were waiting for Richard, Ritenour returned with a copy of the investigative report on Elijah Stokes's murder, complete with a diagram of the scene. The clothing description matched that in Sweeney's painting, as did the head wound, and the body's location and position. A nineteen-year-old punk had been arrested, and blood splatters matching Elijah Stokes's blood type had been found on a shirt under the kid's bed.
The painting was eerily accurate, and there was no way Sweeney could have come by the knowledge other than the way she described.
Richard didn't arrive making angry comments had loud demands; he was too smart for that. Nor did he bring in a highpowered lawyer with him, though Sweeney had no doubt he could have one there on a moment's notice. He was dressed in suit and tie, which at that hour made her think he must have been with Candra's parents, making the final arrangements or perhaps even receiving friends who came to offer their condolences.
He shook hands with both detectives, but the entire time
his gaze was on Sweeney, and when he saw how she was bundled in her coat, he made no effort to hide his worry She had stood when she saw him, and now he stepped toward her, unobtrusively opening his suit jacket. When he folded her in his arms, she was wrapped inside the warmth of the garment, her cold hands sliding around to rest on his back at waist level. She buried her face in the curve of his shoulder, so relieved by his warmth and presence, the knowledge she was no longer alone, that she almost sagged against him.
"You should have called," he murmured.
"And you should have told us about the painting yesterday," Aquino pointed out.
"I would have, if I had thought it would spare her this."

"Do you verify you saw the painting in progress, days before Mrs. Worth was murdered?"
"Yes. I saw it from the first, when she had completed only two shoes." He glanced up at the detectives' "I wasn't at the scene, and you still have what Candra was wearing that night, so you'll have to tell me if the clothing Sweeney painted was accurate. The dress was black, full-skirted, and the shoes were black pumps with little gold balls set in the heels. Right?"
“Right."
He had just verified everything she had told them, Sweeney realized. He hadn't been to her apartment since Candra's death, so there was no way he could have seen the painting after the murder. What he had just described had been painted prior to the murder. They knew he hadn't seen the clothing anywhere else.
"Okay, okay," Aquino said, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. "Unless you two conspired to commit murder, for God only knows what reason, since you have no motive that I've been able to find, Ms. Sweeney is clear."
"What about the painting?" Richard asked. "Do you want her to finish it?" She felt his arms tighten around her as he asked the quesfion, and knew he worried about what she went through but couldn't see any other option.
"By all means," Ritenour said, after an agreeing nod from Aquino. "The painting is in no way admissible as evidence, but we do have some trace evidence that would provide the link, if we can identify the guy."
"What if neither of us recognizes him?" Sweeney asked. "With a good physical description, we should be able to match him to the surveillance tape, which shows the date and time. By matching the time to the guard's signature log, we'd have him cold."
Richard looked thoughtful. "I might recognize someone, if I saw the tape."
"We didn't," Aquino said. "We've managed to get photos of most of the guys on the list-"
"What list?" asked Sweeney.
They ignored her. "-but the guard didn't recognize any of them, and we couldn't match any of them to the tape. We're still tracking down the people who did register as visitors, but so far they've all checked out."
"The painting's our best bet right now," Ritenour said. Richard nodded. "I'll stay with her tonight. I don't want her to be alone. Kai has probably spread the news about the painting all over town, and whoever killed Candra could

already know about it. Not only that, I can call you immediately if she finishes the face."
Something in Richard's voice must have alerted the detectives. "Mr. Worth," said Aquino, "if you're thinking about any heroics, I have to tell you I don't think that's such a good idea. If by any chance Ms. Sweeney should be in any danger, you should concentrate on Lyettingy her to safety and leaving the apprehension of a criminal to us."
"Taking care of her is my prime consideration," said Richard, and Sweeney wondered if they noticed he hadn't necessarily agreed with them.
Edward was driving that night. "We're taking Ms. Sweeney home."
"Very good, sir."
The detectives had given both paintings back to her, and Edward stored them up front with him. The paintings startled him enough that he actually looked taken aback for a moment, then his expression smoothed out and he handled them as matter-offactly as if they had been landscapes.
When they were seated, Richard reached for Sweeney's hand and twined his fingers with hers. "You're cold," he said.
"I was scared." She squeezed his hand. "This wasn't as bad as the other episodes. As long as they kept the coffee coming, I managed."
"If you had called me immediately, a lot of this could have been avoided."
"On the other hand, once they witnessed my prowess at jeopardy 11 they were a lot more inclined to believe me."
He gave her a puzzled look. "Jeopardy!?"
"One of my new skills. I'll show you someday."
Their entwined hands were resting on her right thigh. His knuckles rubbed lightly back and forth. "Candra's parents and some of their friends are at the house," he said. "We've settled on the arrangements for the service-they want her buried close to where they live-but they're ready to go back to the hotel. I'll have Edward drive them, and I'll grab a change of clothes then take a taxi to your place."
If she were noble, she thought, she would tell him she knew he had a lot to do and she would be perfectly all right by herself. She must not be the least bit noble, because she was tired of facing the nights by herself and she wanted him with her.
Besides, Richard's comment that Candra's killer could now know about the painting hadn't gone unnoticed. Part of her couldn't believe she was in any danger, but the logical part of her pointed out it would be smarter not to

take any unnecessary chances. She slept very soundly; she might not hear anyone breaking into the apartment, unless they crashed, movie-style, through the window beside her bed. After being awake all the night before, she was so exhausted now even a crashing window might not wake her.
As if he followed her thoughts, the way he so often did, Richard said, "Did you get any sleep today?"
"No. Did you?"
"I caught a couple of hours after lunch."
She envied him both the nap and his stamina; he looked untouched by fatigue, as alert as he always was.
"You can sleep tonight," he promised softly.
She squeezed his hand and pitched her voice low enough that Edward couldn't hear. "Not all night, I hope."
"I think I can guarantee that." He squeezed her hand in return, and Sweeney sat in contented silence for the rest of the drive.
A tiny Italian restaurant was located across the street and several doors down from Sweeney's apartment building. The restaurant was popular in the neighborhood, with a steady stream of nearby residents stopping by for takeout. Kai managed to snag a table by the window, seating himself so he could see anyone entering the apartment building.
Letting himself get involved in the plan to kill Candra had been partly impulse, because she'd been such a bitch and was planning to fire him anyway. The biggest consideration, however, had been the money. A hundred thousand dollars wasn't a lot of money to some people, and it was a hell of a lot less than the million Candra. had asked for in blackmail, but it would mean the difference between several years more spent taking penny-ante jobs and supplementing his income with infrequent modeling gigs for sleazy underwear catalogs, which usually included having to fuck some bony, middle-aged hag who thought she was hot because she wielded a lot of power over young men who needed the jobs she provided.
With a hundred thou, he could quit work, finish his art classes, and begin making a name for himself with his paintings. Kai had no doubt he was talented. He knew his stuff was a lot better than most of the crap he had helped sell at the gallery, and now he would be backed by a very influential name that would get him displayed in the most prestigious gallery in the city. He wasn't going to start low and gradually increase his prices; he was going to ask a small fucking fortune right from the beginning; there were a

lot of rich fools who would buy paintings carrying a high sticker just because they liked the idea that not everyone could afford to buy them. Everything would be perfect, if it weren't for that damn painting of Sweeney's.

He regretted that. He liked Sweeney. She was funny and honest, and she had never looked at him as if he were nothing but a piece of meat. She was also genuinely talented, with a knack for realism that meant any portrait she painted would be a faithful re-creation of the subject. Too bad she'd turned out to be a fucking psychic, too.

So he waited, watching for her to come home. Unlike a certain other party, who wasn't the most realistic person he'd ever met, he didn't expect the cops to book her on the basis of that painting. They weren't idiots; without physical evidence at the scene to back it up, they'd have a hard time convincing any D.A. to take the case to court. On the other hand, if she managed to convince them she was for real, they would be checking with her every day to see if she had finished the damn thing yet. just getting rid of the painting wouldn't be enough; its existence didn't matter, just whether or not the other face was revealed. Sweeney would recognize it instantly, and then all hell would break loose. That couldn't be allowed to happen.

Getting into her apartment had been easy. He had watched until the cops arrived; then after they took her away, he waited for his chance and slipped in with a crowd of people returning home from work, while the dumb-ass super was busy watching some dumb-ass game show and seldom looked up. He took his time checking out the building. There wasn't a hallway window on Sweeney's floor that opened onto the fire escape, but there was such an access on the floor below hers. After ascertaining that, he took the elevator to the floor above Sweeney's, just in case anyone noticed at what floor he got off, then bounded down the stairs to her floor.

Getting into her apartment hadn't been easy, because she had locked both dead bolts. He listened at her neighbor's door, and when he didn't hear any noise from inside, he risked ringing the doorbell. Nothing, and these people hadn't bothered with the dead bolt, trusting in the doorknob lock, which took him about ten seconds to open.

He slipped inside, and stood listening for a moment to make certain no one was in the shower or something like that. Reassured that the apartment was empty, though it might not be for much longer, he turned the flimsy little

lock on the doorknob just in case the tenant showed up before Kai did what needed doing.
He had gone to a tiny bedroom on the side adjoining Sweeney's apartment and climbed out the window onto the fire escape. Crouching beside one of the huge windows in her studio, he used a glass cutter to cut a hole in the window right next to the lock. Just in case anyone noticed him, he pretended to do some work in the fire escape, checking the joints and shit like that.
The lock on the window was stuck. Using his knife, he jimmied it open. Then he lowered the fire escape ladder down to the next level and left it. Someone might notice, but since it didn't go down to street level no one would be very alarmed.
Once everything was set, he slipped back into the neighboring apartment and left as unobtrusively as he had entered. Then all he had to do was wait for Sweeney to come home.
He flirted with the waitress in the little restaurant, pretended to read a newspaper, dawdled over his pasta, and then ordered a dessert and coffee. His patience was rewarded a little after nine, when Richard Worth's Mercedes rolled to a smooth stop outside the apartment building and both Sweeney and Richard got out. Richard took two canvases from the front seat and went inside with Sweeney. A few minutes later, he came out alone, and without the canvases.
Kai paid his bill and left the waitress with both a good tip and a slow, wicked smile that did more for her self-esteem than a good haircut. Then he crossed the street and walked around the block until he could see the big corner windows of Sweeney's studio. The lights came on in there, but the angle was too acute for him to see what she was doing. Then the lights went out again; she wasn't working on the painting. That was good.
It was still too early for her to go to bed, but he decided to get back into the building while he could. He had to wait about twenty minutes before a young couple entered the building, and he caught the door before it could close. The super glanced around when he heard the buzzer, but saw the young couple, and turned back to his television without seeing Kai.
Everything went smooth as silk. He went up to the roof and sat patiently, watching the lights and the traffic, listening to the car horns honking and the sirens blaring, distant voices carrying up to him. The city was never silent, never still. He loved the energy of it. The longer he waited, the legs likely

he was to run into trouble. People would be sleeping in their beds, peaceful and secure, and if anyone happened to wake up when he lowered the sections of fire escape ladders between the floors, so he could work his way down to the street, they would get to the window too late to see him. They would sure as hell be too late to help Sweeney.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

She was so tired she could barely think, but a hot shower revived her enough that was able to concentrate on feeding herself. After hot soup and half a peanut butter sandwich, she felt almost human-almost. Only the fact that she was waiting for Richard to return kept her awake. She thought about relaxing on the couch until he arrived, but knew if she did she would be down for the count and might not even hear the doorbell.

She wandered into the studio, not bothering to turn on any lights. With the huge windows, enough light from streetlights, neon signs, and other buildings poured into the room to make it easy to negotiate the clutter. She strolled around the room, pausing before some canvases, touching others, like a mother putting her children to bed at night. She stopped in front of the painting of Candra, positioned on an easel, and stared at it for a long time. She tried to get a sense of the killer; what had he been thinking, standing over Candra like that? What kind of man was he, to gloat over a woman's violent death?

She had intuitively known other things about the painting, such as how the shoes should look, but she felt as if she were hitting a brick wall when she tried to grasp the essence of the killer. Something was there, on the other side of the wall, but she couldn't reach it.

Perhaps she would never finish the painting, she thought. Perhaps she could trance-paint only those people she knew, whose images were already in her memory bank. If the killer was a stranger, he might forever remain so.

Richard returned in little more than an hour. He dropped a small bag on the floor and turned to lock the door. Sweeney stood motionless, staring at him. He had changed from his suit into jeans and a black T-shirt, and Sweeney instantly forgot about being tired as she took in every detail. This was how she had always seen him in her mind's eye, without the disguise of an expensive suit. The short tight sleeves clung to his muscled arms, his jaw was shadowed with beard stubble, and he was the toughest, sexiest-looking man she had ever seen.

"That's it," she muttered, a little distracted as she framed the sketch in her mind. "I need to paint you just like this."

She looked around as if searching for her sketch pad. She had actually taken two steps toward the studio when he hooked an arm around her from behind

and lifted her off her feet, drawing her back against him. "Not tonight, sweetie. It's bedtime for you." He began carrying her toward the bedroom. Maybe it was because his mouth was so close to her ear.
Maybe something finally clicked in her brain. She twisted her head to stare up at him. "You called me 'sweetie,'" she accused.
He lifted his eyebrows. "Of course. What did you think I was calling you?"
"My name. Sweeney."
He planted a quick kiss on her sulky mouth. "I told you, I refuse to call the woman I'm sleeping with by her last name. That goes double for the woman I love. If you don't like 'sweetie,'we'll think of something else."
He said it so smoothly, and she was so tired, that it almost slipped by. "I guess 'sweetie' is okay," she began to mumble, then went rigid in his arms. He almost dropped her. He stopped, set her down, then turned her so she was facing him and wrapped both arms around her, lifting her again.
She put her hands on his shoulders to brace herself. "Did you say you love me, or was that just something to throw into the conversation?"
"No, I definitely said it."
This was a defining moment in her life. After thirty-one years of living she had finally fallen in love, and not with any ordinary guy. No, she had fallen head over heels for a tough, sexy rich guy, and he had just told her he loved her. No one else in her life had ever said those words to her. She felt as if they should be doing something romantic and dramatic, like drinking champagne and shooting off fireworks, to mark the moment.
"Oh," she said, and blinked sleepily at him. "I love you, too."
"I know," he said, and gently kissed her. He set her on her feet beside the bed and undressed her as if she were a child. She wished she had a sexy nightgown to put on for him, but all she owned was flannel pajamas. With him in bed beside her, she wouldn't need the pajamas to keep her warm.
He put her between the sheets and stripped off his own clothes, then got into bed beside her. She wished she had a kingsize bed, so he would be more comfortable. Hers was a queen, but she suspected his feet hung off the end.
They turned toward each other like a magnet and steel, the force irresistible. He stroked her breasts, making her nipples tingle and her breath shorten.
"You need to sleep," he muttered, but he was rock hard.
She closed her hand around his erection, stroking him with the same slow touch he was using on her breasts. "I need you more," she said.

He put on a condom and rolled on top of her. Sweeney spread her legs, taking him between them. He prodded the entrance to her body, his shaft thick and hot.

Sweeney didn't wait, couldn't wait. She clasped her legs around his and lifted her hips so that he slipped inside her. Pleasure seemed to spread smoothly through her body, without the sharpness and urgency of the night before. His strokes were slow and deep, as if he wanted to savor every inch of her. She found the rhythm and joined him in it, and despite the lack of urgency, it seemed only moments before the heat and friction grew to intolerable levels. She clung to him, her nails digging into his back, small cries breaking from her throat with each move he made into her. He hooked his arms under her legs, bending over her with his weight braced on his hands, holding her legs spread wide so that he had full access to her and she could control neither the speed nor the depth of his thrusts. She felt as if he went straight into the heart of her, and she climaxed on the third deep stroke. He held himself there and shuddered violently as his own release took him apart.

Sweeney dozed, but roused a little when he carefully withdrew from her and rolled out of bed.

"Where are you going?" she murmured, reaching out to caress his back.

"To the bathroom, to get my bag, and to turn out the lights," he replied, and the answer seemed so prosaic she chuckled, turning her face into the pillow as lassitude claimed her again.

Still, she wasn't quite asleep when he returned. She went into his arms, shivering a little at the wash of cool air on her bare shoulders despite the heat that surrounded her everywhere below. "Let me wear your T-shirt," she said sleepily, and he leaned over the side of the bed to pluck it from the floor.

She sat up and pulled it on, then settled back into his arms. "Okay, now I can sleep."

"It's about time," he grumbled, but she heard the amusement and physical satisfaction underlying his tone, and she went to sleep feeling more secure than she ever had before.

She came awake with a jolt, heart hammering, every muscle tense.

She couldn't have been asleep long. She had the sense that very little time had passed, certainly no more than an hour. Something had wakened her, something that made her skin prickle, her reaction much as it would have

been had she slept in a cave thousands of years ago and woke to the sound of a tiger prowling at the cave entrance. She listened intently, wondering if the comparison was apt. Was someone in the apartment?

Her mind replayed the undefined, unfamiliar noise. She hadn't imagined it. It hadn't been loud, nothing more than a scrape, a whisper of a sound. Like a footstep. Like a window sliding up. Either of those, or both. Coming from the studio.

She shook Richard and felt his instant alertness. "I heard something," she whispered.

He moved like oiled silk, rolling naked, soundlessly, out of bed. As he stooped down, he motioned for her to join him, holding a finger to his lips to indicate silence, both gestures plainly visible in the colorless light coming through the window.

She tried to imitate how he moved, without any jumps or jerks that would make noise. She got out of bed without any betraying squeaks from the mattress, only the whisper of the sheet marking her departure. His T-shirt, which had been bunched around her waist, settled down over her hips but did nothing to protect her from the cool night air washing around her bare legs. She noticed the chill and then promptly forgot it, her attention riveted on the open door of the bedroom, expecting at any moment to see a dark, menacing form come through it.

Richard stooped down to the small bag he had brought, never looking away from the door as he reached inside the bag. When he straightened, light glinted dully on the big weapon in his right hand. With his left, he reached out and tucked her behind him.

Gripping her wrist to make sure she stayed with him, and behind him, he glided soundlessly to a position behind the door, but not so close that it would hit him if someone shoved it completely open. Then they waited.

She couldn't hear him breathing, but her own breath seemed to echo in her ears and surely her heart was pounding hard enough to be audible. Carefully she breathed through her mouth, to eliminate even that small sound. And she listened.

She could hear the clock ticking in the living room. She heard the distant wail of a siren. She didn't hear a repeat of that scraping sound.

But Richard didn't relax, didn't move from his alert stance. He was closer to the door, his body blocking her; did he hear something she couldn't? Then

she felt, sensed, someone just on the other side of the doorway, not stepping into the bedroom but looking into it.
The door opened back toward the wall against which the bed was positioned. Because of that, he couldn't see the complete bed, just the foot of it, unless he came further into the doorway. Sweeney was acutely aware of the empty bed. Would he look at it and know they had heard him and were somewhere in the apartment, or would he assume no one was at home and she simply didn't make her bed? Would he stroll into the bedroom, or--
The door crashed back against the wall, the sound exploding in the dark silence.
Richard dropped, already moving before the door hit the wall, his grip on her wrist dragging her down with him. An explosion deafened her, blinded her. Another one, nearer, came so close on the heels of the first one the sounds almost blended into one. A strange percussion hit her, a small burst of air blasted against her skin.
Gun shots.
Her realization was immediate, but by that time there was nothing but the tinny ringing in her ears and the sharp smell of cordite burning her nostrils. Her hearing and sight began to clear. She saw him now, flopping in the door-way. She heard him, a guttural, inhuman groan. The air fluttered out of his lungs like a balloon going flat, and then she smelled him.
She gagged, but fought back the bile that rose in her throat. 'Are you all right?" Richard demanded, his voice harsh with urgency as he spun on his bare heel to face her.
"Yes," she managed to croak. He stood from his crouched position and went to the bed, switching on the bedside lamp. She squinted, almost blinded again. Before her eyes adjusted to the light, Richard was on the phone, his gaze locked on the body sprawled in the doorway. "This is Richard Worth," he said quietly, to whoever was on the other end of the line. "IC-ai Stengel just broke into Sweeney's apartment and tried to kill us." Kai?
Stunned, Sweeney blinked several times and looked at the body, then wished she hadn't. Kai sprawled facedown in the bedroom doorway, his head turned toward her and his eyes open, set in the emptiness of death. There was a small, almost neat pool of blood under him, but the doorframe and the wall behind him were splattered with blood and gore.
"Don't bother," said Richard. "I shot him. He's dead."

As he replaced the receiver on the hook, Sweeney rose shakily to her feet and turned to him, instinctively wanting to go into his arms. She froze. Dark red rivulets streaked down his arm and chest, streaming from the top of his left shoulder.
"Oh, my God, you're shot!"
He glanced down at his shoulder. "Just a little," he said calmly, catching her as she launched herself at him.
She fought free of his grasp and pushed him down to sit on the edge of the bed. "You can't be just a little shot," she said fiercely. "It's like being pregnant; you either are or you aren, t. Stay here."
She whirled and ran. Her first aid supplies were in the bathroom vanity cabinet. She had to step over Kai's body to get out of the room, but she hesitated only a fraction of a second. Richard was bleeding, and the urgent need to take care of him overrode everything else. She was careful where she put her feet, but she didn't slow down.
When she returned, laden with her first aid kit and a towel and washcloth, Richard had pulled on his jeans and was stepping into his shoes. "I told you to sit down! " she all but roared at him.
"No, you didn't. You told me to stay here. I'm here."
His mild tone infuriated her. But he sat down on the bed again and let her press a gauze pad to the top of his shoulder. "It's just a burn; it won't even need stitches."
He sounded so remote that she gave him a sharp glance. His face was expressionless, his eyes cool and watchful as he looked at Kai. She remembered that he had been an army ranger, and suddenly she knew that he had killed before, that this was the way he operated in a firefight.
After a moment she lifted the pad and saw that he was right; the wound across the top of his shoulder was a raw streak that sullenly oozed blood.
Sirens wailed, coming closer and closer; they sounded as if they were right outside, then the noise abruptly stopped. Sweeney picked up the wet washcloth and bezan cleaninLy the wound. Richard took the cloth away from her. It I'll do it," he said, and slipped his free hand under the T-shirt to pat her bare butt. "You'd better get some clothes on, unless you want the cops to see this pretty ass of yours."
She scowled at him, but went to the closet and took out a pair of jeans, pulling them on without bothering to put on underwear. She was just in time; it took the first responding cops only a minute to get inside the

building and up to her apartment. Richard made his escape while she was zipping and snapping, stepping past Kai to get to the front door before the thunderous pounding broke it down.
Four uniformed cops poured into the apartment. Sweeney had a glimpse of avid expressions on the faces of her neighboring tenants as they milled in the hall outside her door, then Richard pulled her into the kitchen, removing both of them from the scene so the cops could do their work.
The next few hours were a tumult. Detective Ritenour arrived hard on the heels of the uniformed cops, beating the
EMTs by a couple of minutes. He was dressed, but his shirt was wrinkled and his tie hung crookedly. Richard had called the detectives instead of 911.
More uniformed cops arrived, and the emergency medical team, and Detective Aquino. Her apartment was full of people. Radios crackled. More people arrived.
Richard kept her in the kitchen, seated with her back to the door so she couldn't see any of what went on behind her. Two of the medical team looked at the wound on his shoulder and applied an antibiotic salve and a bandage. He finished cleaning himself up at the sink, scrubbing away the blood with a wet paper towel, and refused any further medical treatment.
Aquino and Ritenour took their statements. They found the window in her studio where Kai had entered. There was no question about Richard firing in self-defense.
"I think we'll find he killed Mrs. Worth," said Aquino".-- "When he saw the painting Ms. Sweeney was doing, it must have been a real shock to him. Took him by surprise, otherwise he would have tried to do away with you then," he said, looking at Sweeney. "Then I guess he thought he could pin the whole thing on you by telling us about the painting."
"But how did he know you didn't arrest me?" she asked, bewildered.
Aquino shrugged. Ritenour answered. "He could have called the precinct, or maybe he was watching. How doesn't matter. He obviously came here tonight intending to kill you, only you heard him raise the window, and you weren't alone."
Aquino said sourly to Richard, "It's illegal to own a handgun without a license in the city of New York."
Richard shrugged, not a flicker of discomfort from his wounded shoulder showing on his face. "I have a license," he said.

Aquino looked even more sour. "It figures. You did a damn good job. That was a clean hit to the heart. You've had training, haven't you?"
"Military," Richard replied. "Army."
"Yeah?" Ritenour said. "What unit? I was in the army."
"Rangers."
Sweeney saw their expressions change, and they sat back in their chairs.
"The bastard didn't have a chance," Ritenour said softly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"You're at the end of your rope," he said roughly, tilting her face up. She was paper white, as much from fatigue as stress and shock; her eyes were dull and circled by shadows so dark they looked like bruises. "Get some clothes; I'm taking you home with me."

Aquino got to his feet. "I'll take care of that. She don't want to go into the bedroom. Is there anything in particular you want?"

She shook her head. Normally she would never have allowed a stranger to paw through her clothes, but right now she didn't care. He was right; she didn't want to go into the bedroom. She might never go into it again.

"There's a satchel on the top shelf in the closet. just throw some things in it."

"You'll need to sign a statement," Ritenour said to. Richard, "but that can wait a few hours. Get some sleep if you can." He paused. "The media will be all over this, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Richard rubbed his jaw. "Is there any way we can keep the painting out of the news?"

So Sweeney wouldn't be a tabloid sensation, he meant. "Maybe. I don't see any need to mention it. The reporters will probably play up the lover angle, make it sound like some sort of lovers' quarrel."

Candra's parents had already been hurt enough by her death, but now the sensationalism would double, and her relationship with Kai would be analyzed and dissected in public. 1wonder why he killed her," Ritenour said, almost to himself. "We may never know."

"If he did," said Sweeney, speaking through a blur of exhaustion.

Both men gave her sharp looks, Richard's lingering longer than Ritenour's.

"What makes you say that?" asked the dctective. "If he didn't kill Mrs. Worth, then he had no reason to worry about the painting, and no reason other than that to try to kill you."

She shrugged. She didn't know why she had said it. She tried to imagine Kai's face in the painting, but that brick wall was still there, refusing to allow the image to form.

A few minutes later Aquino returned with the bag. "One of the policewomen packed it," he said, as if he wanted her to know he hadn't been

handling her underwear. "I thought a woman would know better what another woman needed."
"Thank you," she said. She reached out to take it, but Richard's hand was there first. If the weight of the bag bothered his shoulder, he didn't show any sign of it.
"No sense in calling a taxi. One of the patrolmen can drop you off at your house."
Richard nodded and cupped Sweeney's elbow. "I'll call you later in the morning."
"Make it real late," Aquino replied, and yawned. "I'm going to try to get some sleep. My advice is take the phone off the hook and get as much sleep as you can."
"I need the painting," Sweeney said as Richard began steering her toward the door.
"Sweetheart, there's no need-"
"I need the painting," she repeated, digging in her heels and dragging him to a halt. She couldn't think straight; she was swaying on her feet, but she knew she couldn't leave the painting behind.
"There are reporters outside-"
"I'll wrap it in a cloth." Tugging free, she trudged into the studio and took the painting down from the easel. She always kept lengths of cheesecloth for cleaning up and for covering the paintings, and she wrapped the painting in that. Richard was right beside her every step she took, watching her worriedly, but she was too tired to reassure him. She had just enough strength to do what was necessary, and getting the painting was necessary.
A policeman escorted them through the crowd of onlookers and reporters who clogged the hall. Flashbulbs went off in her face and a tangle of questions were hurled at them, but she made no effort to sort out individual words, nor did Richard answer. He was recognized; someone called him by name. He didn't respond, keeping all his attention on her and on getting out of there. He did swear under his breath, but she was the only one who heard him.
The policeman managed to evade the couple of reporters who tried to follow them and dropped Richard and Sweeney off at Richard's town house without incident. She clutched the painting and stared at the steps, wondering if she wou4d be able to make it up them, much less the full flight of stairs inside.

"Come on, sweetie." Richard's voice was gentle, cajoling. "I'm not a baby," she said, scowling at him. "I'm all right."
"Of course you are."
Now he was soothing her. She hated being soothed. And she was pretty certain she could have made it up the steps without his help. She didn't want to seem ungrateful, however, so she leaned against him as they climbed the steps.
He unlocked the door and let them in, then reset the alarm system. "Just leave the painting here."
"No, I want it upstairs."
Evidently he decided that trying to argue with her would take a lot more time than going along with her. He dropped the bag at the foot of the stairs and lifted her in his arms, painting and all.
"Your shoulder!" she protested, trying to wiggle out of his arms.
"Be still, before you hurt me."
She froze, blinking up at him with big owl eyes and not moving a muscle as he climbed the stairs. If she hadn't looked so utterly exhausted, he would have laughed.
He put her on the bed, and she was asleep before he got her shoes off.
He peeled her out of the jeans but left her in his T-shirt. By the time he'd removed his own clothes and got her under the covers, he was ready to collapse beside her. Getting in on the other side of the bed, he cradled her against his right side and determinedly shut out the ache in his left shoulder, concentrating instead on the joy of having her alive, in his arms and in his bed.
The sun was up and shining brightly when Sweeney woke him with her restless movements. He opened one eye and looked at the clock. Seven-thirty. "Go back to sleep," he muttered. She didn't reply, just kept rolling her head and pushing at the covers. A chill went through him as he realized she was asleep.
She slipped out of bed, moving so smoothly she was out of his grasp before he could react. She stood beside the bed, her eyes open but strangely blank. She seemed bewildered, as if she wanted to go somewhere but didn't know how to get there.
Richard got out of bed and put his arms around her, shaking her gently to wake her. "Sweetie. Wake up, honey. You don't need to paint today. Come back to bed."

It was a long time before she responded, blinking and looking up at him with bleary eyes. "What?" she mumbled.
"You were sleepwalking." He kept his tone calm and got her back into bed. She immediately dropped into a deep sleep again, lying still in his arms. He allowed himself to doze, but didn't relax his guard. She was in an unfamiliar place and might fall down the stairs if she began wandering around in her sleep. He woke every time she turned over, bringing her back into his arms and keeping her safe.
Because he didn't want to leave her alone in bed, he woke her at ten-thirty. She managed to glare at him through only one eye, but to his relief she was fully alert. "You had better be waking me to have sex, because otherwise there's no excuse," she growled.
His eyes glinted, giving her maybe half a second of warning before he turned her on her back and mounted her. "I was only kid-" she began, then gasped as he pushed into her with a hard thrust that took him to the hilt. She half-screamed, and her nipples pinched into tight little buds. Her swift arousal turned him on even more, his erection hardening to the point of pain. "Jesus," he ground out, his voice hoarse almost beyond sound. He thrust a few more times and began coming; his body arching and shuddering as he spurted into her. She cried out again and her inner muscles clamped convulsively around his cock, milking him with her orgasm.
He felt like a human wreck afterward, lying sprawled on his back, incapable of moving. He couldn't remember ever before coming that fast or that hard, not even as a teenager, when he had still thought of sex as a race to the finish line. She stirred before he did, pushing a tangled curl out of her eyes and sitting up.
"That wasn't fair," she accused, but her voice was husky with satisfaction. "Do it again, and do it right this time."
"In your dreams," he managed to growl, delighting her intoa laugh. "Well, maybe tonight."
"It's a date." She bounced out of bed, moving him to a sour mental observation about being the one who had done all the work. She pulled off his T-shirt and headed for the bathroom, and the view of that curvy butt was enough to get him out of bed and into the shower with her.
He put on a suit and tie, knowing he would face a battery of reporters at the police station. They hadn't been bottfered so far, only because his private number was unlisted, but he figured it wouldn't take some enterprising

reporter much longer to get it. The phone downstairs 'in the office was probably ringing nonstop.
He buzzed Tabitha and found that he had guessed exactly right. "Tell them I'll be giving a statement at the precinct in two hours, and that you don't know anything else."
"I don't," she said, disgruntled.
"And take a long lunch," he added.
"Now you're talking."
He called Edward and asked him to bring the car around, and then he kissed Sweeney, who had put on her usual jeans-andsweatshirt combination and was sitting cross-legged on the bed watching him. "I'll have the cell phone with me," he said.
"The number's at my apartment."
He scribbled it down again. "If the phone rings, don't answer it. If I call, I'll let it ring once, then I'll hang up and call right back."
"Got it."
"I hope this won't take long, but I'll be back as soon as I can."
"Why are you so worried?" she asked. "K-ai's dead." It didn't seem real. The terror of the night felt as if it had happened to someone else.
He gave her a long, searching look. "Maybe because of what you said, about if he did it. I don't want to take any chances until the lab tests on the trace evidence are in."
She thought of that wall in her mind and of the blank space on the painting where the killer's face would be, if she ever finished it. "I'll be careful," she promised.
He had been gone almost an hour when his assistant called on the intercom. "We're going out to lunch. Would you like me to bring back something for you?"
"No, I'll rustle up something in the kitchen."
"Too bad Richard gave Violet the day off; she makes the most wonderful omelettes you've ever tasted. But he was supposed to be out of town today, and she had made plans to visit her son in Chicago. When all of this came up and he had to cancel, he insisted she go on."
"I'll find something," Sweeney said. She had been feeding herself for most of her life.
She made toast and scrambled an egg, though the simple meal took much longer than usual to prepare in anunfamiliar kitchen. She had to search for

everything, including the toaster and coffeemaker, which weren't sitting out on the counter where all toasters and coffeemakers were supposed to sit. Eventually she found all the necessities, and after the simple meal, found herself at loose ends. If she had been at home, she would have been working, but here she had nothing to do. She explored the house, poking her head into every door and ending up back in the bedroom. She felt much better than she had the day before, but she still hadn't had nearly enough sleep and was considering a nap when her gaze fell on the wrapped canvas, sitting propped on the chair.

She was reluctant to unwrap it, after all that had happened. She didn't want to gaze on that scene of violence again. But some nameless compulsion drove her, and she pulled the cheesecloth away

Nothing had changed. The blank space still taunted her inability to finish the painting. She was never without a supply of charcoal pencils, so she dug one out of her purse and made a few preliminary lines on the canvas, trying to block in K'ai's head. Her fingers felt clumsy, and the lines looked all wrong. Kai's hair had been thick and glossy, almost Asian in texture but with just a hint of wave. She tried to capture that look, but the lines that emerged were far too smooth and the style was all wrong.

She stepped back, staring at the painting. The charcoal lines looked rough in comparison with the precision of the oil paint, but the image was clear. The hair was smooth and pale, curving under into a chic bob. There was something familiar about it, something nagging at her, but she couldn't place what it was.

Abruptly she stiffened, staring at the canvas. She whirled and went to the phone, punching in Richard's cell phone number.

He answered immediately There was a lot of noise in the background, and she wondered if she had caught him in the middle of his press statement.

"It's a woman," she said shakily.

"What?" he demanded.

"It's a woman. I've done the hair-just a rough sketch, but I can tell. And ... I've seen this hairstyle before."

"Goddamn it," he swore. "I never thought-I have to tell Aquino; he's only looked at the men on the surveillance tape. Keep the door locked and don't let anyone in until I get home."

"I won't," she started to say, but a hint of sound startled her, cut her off. "Sweeney!

"I think I heard something," she said. "Something downstairs. "
"Are the doors locked?"
"Yes, of course."
"Where are Tabitha and Martin?"
"Gone to lunch." .
"Son of a bitch." The urgency in his voice sizzled through the telephone line. "Honey, lock the bedroom door. Shove furniture against it; anything to buy some time, do you understand?"
"Yes."
"Don't hang up the phone. Keep the line open. I'm on MY way. "
She laid the receiver down and went to the door. She wasn't certain she had heard anything, and she would feel like a fool if the house was empty or if the sound she thought she had heard was Tabitha or Martin returning from lunch. No one was in sight; the hallway was empty, and from where she stood she could tell no one was on the stairs.
She tiptoed to the railing to look down into- the foyer. Nothing.
Then she heard a faint rasping sound, coming from downstairs, perhaps in the kitchen.
She pictured the knife in the gloved hand, in the figure standing over Candra, and she knew beyond a doubt what that sound was: one of the big knives being drawn from the butcher block in the kitchen.
A blond head came into view below.
It was Margo McMillan.
Sweeney jerked back, shock numbing her to her toes. She stumbled toward the bedroom door, not caring how much noise she made, and slammed the door shut. The lock turned easily. She dragged a chair over and wedged it under the door handle, but it seemed shaky and she wasn't certain it would hold against any force. How much force could Margo exert? She was thin, but perhaps she was stronger than she looked, and interior doors weren't equipped to withstand the kind of force exterior doors were.
"Damn damn damn," she breathed, and ran to the phone. "Richard!"
"I'm here." He sounded breathless, and a siren almost drowned him out. He was in a squad car, she thought, she hoped. "It's Margo." Her teeth suddenly chattered as a chill swept her. "M-Margo McMillan. She's here."
"She's inside the house?" he asked sharply.
"Yes. She has one of the kitchen knives. The door is locked, but-"

"If necessary, go into the bathroom and lock that door, too. Get some towels and wrap them around your arms. Use anything you can to hinder her. Throw towels on her, and try to get them around the knife so she can't use it. Spray deodorant in her face. There are weapons in the bathroom, baby; all you have to do is use them."
"I understand," she said, whispering, unable to speak louder, though he probably couldn't hear her over the siren.
The door handle rattled. She jumped and put down the phone to go stand by the bathroom door.
Something scratched the lock. Margo was picking the lock. The bathroom lock wouldn't be any more substantial than the bedroom lock. Sweeney ran into the bathroom and grabbed an armful of towels, as well as the can of spray deodorant. Doing as Richard had said, she wrapped a thick towel around each arm. She knew why. She was supposed to use her wrapped arms to deflect the knife. She remembered the wounds on Candra's arms.
The door opened, shoving the chair aside. Margo didn't say anything, just entered the room in a rush, the knife gleaming in her hand.
Sweeney grabbed a thick towel and lunged at the woman, throwing all her weight at her in an effort to knock her off balance. Margo screamed as the towel entangled her arm, but she struck anyway, and the knife bit through the thick fabric. Sweeney felt the kiss of it burn on her left triceps.
She didn't know how to fight. She had never fought anyone in her life. But she twisted, getting inside the arc of the knife, and hammered her fist into Margo's nose. Blood spurted, and she saw the look of shock in Margo's infuriated eyes, as if she couldn't believe anyone would dare strike her. The whole thing struck Sweeney as so ridiculous that she hit her again, and again, digging her feet against the thick carpet and pushing, using all her strength and weight to push Margo backwards.
"Bitch!" Margo shrieked, trying to wrench the knife free. Sweeney saw the stair railing behind Margo and pushed harder, pushing, driving for the edge. The knife bit through the towel wrapped around her left arm, and the searing pain ignited a firestorm of rage. She heard herself screaming, over and over, and she pushed harder. A startled look crossed Margo's bloody face, just for a second; then the resistance of her body fell out from under Sweeney and she tumbled over the railing to land on the slate tiles below.
Panting, Sweeney dropped to her hands and knees next to the railing, heart hammering, and for a moment she thought she would faint. Blood streamed

in rivulets down her left arm, soaking the towel. She would need stitches, she thought, absurdly irritated by the thought. She had never had stitches before. It would probably hurt. Her lower lip trembled at the thought.
That small tremble made her realize she was close to hysteria. She took several deep breaths, trying to focus, though it was incredibly difficult to think. The deep breaths helped, and she sat on the floor. She couldn't bring herself to look over the railing; Margo had landed with a sickening, squashy sort of thud. Slate tiles weren't forgiving of bones and flesh.
Richard. His name spread through her brain, the thought of him galvanizing her into action, pouring energy back into her legs. She scrambled to her feet and ran-stumbled, actually-into the bedroom to snatch up the receiver.
She fumbled with it, banging it against her cheekbone. "Damn it," she mumbled, and even thought she didn't have it pressed to her ear yet, she heard Richard's roar.
"Sweeng!"
"I'm okay," she said hastily. "Well, almost. Margo fell over the stair railing. I haven't looked yet."
"Don't," he said, sounding strangled. "My God-" He broke off, and even over the sound of the siren coming through his cell phone, she heard his labored breathing. "We'll be there in about five minutes. Other patrol cars are on their way. Are you hurt?"
"A little. A couple of cuts on my arm, nothing serious." I don't think. She hadn't looked at the cut on her triceps or the one on her forearm, where the knife had sliced through the towel. She didn't intend to unwrap that towel, either; she didn't want to see the damage. She knew it hurt, and that was enough. "I'm going to hang up now, okay? I think I need to vomit." She didn't wait for an answer, just hung up, and then put her head between her knees, taking deep breaths and fighting the nausea that threatened to overwhelm her.
The sound was so low she wasn't certain she heard it. Her head came up, blood leaping through her veins as she prepared to fight again, but no one was there. She blinked, bewildered, then heard it again: a low moan, from downstairs.
Gingerly Sweeney crept out of the bedroom to the stairs and looked over the railing. Margo lay on her stomach, her left leg bent at an impossible angle under her torso, jagged edges of bone showing white through the torn flesh. Her arms ... oh, God, she must have tried to brace herself. Margo

moved feebly, trying to roll over, and another of those low moans echoed through the house.
Her legs trembling, Sweeney went down the stairs. No matter what, she couldn't leave Margo in that condition without trying to offer aid, though she had no idea what she could do for injuries so severe.
She knelt beside Margo, and to her shock the woman focused dazed eyes on her. "I fell," Margo whispered.
"Don't talk. People are coming-"
"I want to ... tell you. So someone knows." She coughed, and blood dribbled from her mouth onto the floor. "Candra ... Candra was blackmailing ... Carson. I ... I had to stop her. Kai had a ... key ... to her apartment. I ... rented an apartment in the ... building, and waited for her." She winced and coughed again. "Couldn't ... find the ... tape, or pictures. I wore Caison's clothes ... so if anything surfaced, he ... would be blamed. Her blood ... on his shoes. Then you ... painting-"
Sweeney understood. "Kai saw the painting and told you."
"He was ... so beautiful," Margo whispered, her gaze losing its focus and growing more distant. "I ... loved him. Silly. Old enough ... to be his mother. Because of Carson ... he's dead. Tell them ... Tell them about Carson. Find ... the pictures." Her lips twitched in a ghastly, bitter smile. "Nail ... his ass."
"You can tell them yourself," Sweeney said urgently, but Margo's eyes were already fixed, her expression fading, and her last breath sighed out of her lungs, never to be replaced.
A distant siren got louder and louder as it neared. Numbly Sweeney got to her feet and went to open the door as two patrol cars squealed to a stop in front of the house.
She was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs when Richard and Detectives Aquino and Ritenour burst in a few moments later. Richard's face was paper white, his skin drawn brutally tight across his cheekbones. His gaze went straight to her. He didn't even glance at Margo. With a rigidly controlled stride, he crossed to the stairs and, without a word, bent and lifted her into his arms, holding her to his chest.
"I'm taking her to a hospital," he said hoarsely. His entire big body was trembling.
Aquino said, "The medics will be here in just a minute-" Richard ignored him and carried Sweeney outside. She blinked like a mole at the bright sunshine. Evidently Edward had followed hard in the wake of the

detectives' car, because the Mercedes was parked right behind it. He got into the backseat with Sweeney, holding her on his lap, and barked instructions at Edward.
Her voice shaking, Sweeney began telling him what Margo had said, just before she died. He stopped her with two fingers laid across her mouth. "I don't care," he said fiercely. "Just-just shut up and let me hold you. God, I was so scared-" His voice broke and he buried his face in her hair.
He stayed with her the entire time her arm was being stitched. The cut in her forearm was the worst, requiring twentysix stitches, but neither cut was deep enough to have damaged nerves or tendons. "Because of the towels," she told him, her eyes wide and her lips trembling now that shock had set in. "If you hadn't told me about the towels-"
"I'll give you a prescription for pain medication," the doctor said, easing off her stool. She smiled at Sweeney. "Go to your regular doctor in a week to get the stitches removed." Then she went on to her next casualty, and Richard scooped Sweeney onto his lap again.
"I love you," he said, his voice still shaken. "I was so afraid I was going to lose you. Will you marry me?"
That question rattled her almost as much as Margo's attack. "M-marry?" she stuttered.
"Marry." He framed her face with his hands, searching her features with dark eyes stark and naked, letting her see every emotion. "I know you're wary; I understand that. But I would never try to get in the way of your painting; you're too talented for anyone to try to stifle. I've made some tentative plans to liquidate and get out of the market, buy a ranch somewhere, but if you-"
"Where?" she asked, interrupting.
"I haven't really looked yet; either the South or Southwest. As I was saying, if you prefer living in the city, I'll forget about the ranch and-"
"As long as it's somewhere warmer I don't care," she interrupted again. "Though a palm tree or two would be nice.'"
He went still, looking down at her. She looked back at him, then said, "Tick-tick-tick."
"What's that?"
"That's my biological clock. I think it's about to alarm." His face changed, filling with such heat and passion for a moment she thought she might be

ravished right there in the hospital. 'Are you certain?" he asked, and he sounded shaken all' over again.
"I'm terrified," she admitted, her own voice shaking now that she had time to think about what she had just said. "I mean, I might be as lousy a mother as my mother was. But I want-" She swallowed. "I want you, and I want your children."
He laughed softly. "Then, sweetie, we're all yours."

EPILOGUE

A Year Later

Richard looked up from the book he was reading.

"What time of day were you born?" he asked curiously.

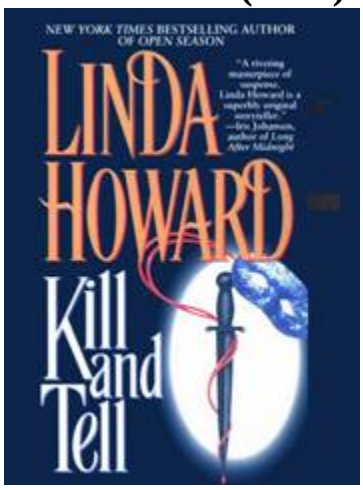
Surprised, she gave him a questioning glance. "What are you reading?" she asked suspiciously.

"Just answer the question."

"I don't know exactly. I think I remember Mom saying I was born a little after sundown, whatever time sundown was. Why?" I He smiled and held up the book. She read the title: Ghosts and Other Spirits. "So?"

He looked down at the page and softly quoted, "And there are those who are born on the twilight of certain days who shall be blessed with magic, and have the ability to see spirits.

Kill and Tell (1998)



POCKET BOOKS
New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons; living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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This book is dedicated to John Kramer, and to cops everywhere. Thanks, John, for taking me around New Orleans, telling me the interesting stuff and showing me the interesting sights.

Chapter 1

February 13, Washington, D.C.

Dexter Whitlaw carefully sealed the box, securing every seam with a roll of masking tape he had stolen from WalMart the day before. While he was at it, he had also stolen a black marker, and he used it now to print an address neatly on the box. Leaving the marker and roll of tape on the ground, he tucked the box under his arm and walked to the nearest post office. It was only a block, and the weather wasn't all that cold for D.C. in February, mid-forties maybe.

If he were a congressman, he thought sourly, he wouldn't have to pay any freaking postage.

Thin winter sunshine washed the sidewalks. Earnest-looking government workers hurried by, black or gray overcoats flapping, certain of their importance. If anyone asked their occupation, they never said, "I'm an accountant," or "I'm an office manager," though they might be exactly that. No, in this town, where status was everything, people said, "I work for State," or "I work for Treasury," or, if they were really full of themselves, they used initials, as in "DOD," and everyone was expected to know that meant Department of Defense. Personally, Dexter thought they should all have IDs stating they worked for the DOB, the Department of Bullshit.

Ah, the nation's capital! Power was in the air here, perfuming it like the bouquet of some rare wine, and all these fools were giddy with it. Dexter studied them with a cold, distant eye. They thought they knew everything, but they didn't know anything.

They didn't know what real power was, distilled down to its purest form. The man in the White House could give orders that would cause a war, he could fiddle with the football, the locked briefcase carried by an aide who was always close by, and cause bombs to be dropped and millions killed, but he would view those deaths with the detachment of distance. Dexter had known real power, back in Nam, had felt it in his finger as he slowly

tightened the slack on a trigger. He had tracked his prey for days, lying motionless in mud or stinging weeds, ignoring bugs and snakes and rain and hunger, waiting for that perfect moment when his target loomed huge in his scope and the crosshairs delicately settled just where Dexter wanted them, and all the power was his, the ability to give life or end it, pull the trigger or not, with all the world narrowed down to only two people, himself and his target.

The biggest thrill of his life had been the day his spotter had directed him to a certain patch of leaves in a certain tree. When his scope had settled, he had found himself looking at another sniper, Russian from the looks of him, rifle to his shoulder and scope to his eye as he tried to acquire them. Dexter was ahead of him by about a second, and he got his shot squeezed off first. One second, a heartbeat longer, and the Russian would have gotten off the first shot, and old Dexter Whitlaw wouldn't be here admiring the scenery in Washington, D.C.

He wondered if the Russian had ever seen him, if there had been a split second of knowledge before the bullet blasted out all awareness. No way he could have seen the bullet, despite all the fancy special effects Hollywood put in the movies showing just that. No one ever saw the bullet.

Dexter entered the warm post office and connected to the end of the line waiting for service at the counter. He had chosen lunch hour, the busiest time, to cut down on the chance of any harried postal clerks remembering him. Not that there was anything particularly memorable about him, except for the cold eyes, but he didn't like taking chances. Being careful had kept him alive in Nam and had worked for the twenty-five years since he had returned to the real world and left the green hell behind.

He didn't look prosperous, but neither did he look like a street bum. His coat was reversible. One side, which he now wore on the outside, was a sturdy brown tweed, slightly shabby. The other side, which he wore when he was out on the street, was patched and torn, a typical street bum's coat. The coat was good, simple camouflage. Snipers learned how to blend with their surroundings.

When his turn came, he placed the box on the counter to be weighed and fished some loose bills out of his pocket. The box was addressed to Jeanette Whitlaw, Columbus, Ohio. His wife.

He wondered why she hadn't divorced him. Hell, maybe she had; he hadn't called her in a couple of years now, maybe longer. He tried to think when

was the last time—
"Dollar forty-three," the clerk said, not even glancing at him, and Dexter laid two ones on the counter. Pocketing the change, he left the post office as unobtrusively as he had entered it.
When *had* he last talked to Jeanette? Maybe three years. Maybe five. He didn't pay much attention to calendars. He tried to think how old the kid would be now. Twenty? She'd been born the year of the Tet offensive, he thought, but maybe not. 'Sixty-eight or 'sixty-nine, somewhere along through there. That made her… damn, she was twenty-nine! His little girl was pushing thirty! She was probably married, with a couple of kids, which made him a grandpa.
He couldn't imagine her grown. He hadn't seen her for at least fifteen years, maybe longer, and in his mind he always pictured her as she had been at seven or eight, skinny and shy, with big brown eyes and a habit of biting her bottom lip. She had spoken to him only in whispers, and then only when he asked her a direct question.
He should've been a better daddy to her, a better husband to Jeanette. He should have done a lot of things in his life, but looking back and seeing them didn't give a man the chance to go back and change any of them. It just let him regret not doing them.
But Jeanette had kept on loving him, even when he came back from Nam so cold and distant, forever changed. In her eyes, he had remained the edgy, sharp-eyed West Virginia boy she had loved and married, never mind that the boy had died in a bug-infested jungle and the man who returned home to her was a stranger in all but face and form.
The only time he felt alive since then was when he had a rifle in his hands, sighting through the scope and feeling that rush of adrenaline, the heightening of all his senses. Funny that the thing that had killed him was the only thing that could make him feel alive. Not the rifle; the rifle, as true and faithful a tool as had ever been fashioned by man, was still just a tool. No, what made him feel alive was the skill, the hunt, the power. He'd been a sniper, a damn good one. He could have come back to Jeanette if it had been only that, he sometimes thought, though he was years past trying to analyze things.
He'd killed a lot of men, and murdered one.
The distinction was clear in his mind. War was war. Murder was something else.

He stopped at a pay phone and fished some change out of his pocket. He had already memorized the number. He fed in the change and listened to the ring. When the call was answered on the other end, he said clearly, "My name is Dexter Whitlaw."
He had wasted his life paying for the crime he had committed. Now it was someone else's turn to pick up the tab.

Chapter 2

February 17, Columbus, Ohio

The package was lying on the small front porch when Karen Whitlaw got home from work that February night. Her headlights flashed briefly on it as she pulled into the driveway, but she was so tired she couldn't work up any curiosity over the contents. Wearily, she lifted her tote bag, crammed full with her purse and papers and the paraphernalia of her job, and endured the usual struggle of climbing out of the car with the heavy bag. It caught on the console, then on the steering wheel; swearing under her breath, Karen jerked the bag free, and it banged painfully against her hip. She slogged through the snow to the porch, gritting her teeth as the icy mush slid down inside her shoes. She should have put on her boots, she knew, but she had been too tired when her shift ended to do anything but drive home.
The box was propped against the raised threshold, between the screen door and the front door. She unlocked the door and reached in to flip on the lights, then leaned down to lift the box. She hadn't ordered anything; the box had probably been delivered to the wrong address.
The house was chilly and silent. She had forgotten to leave a light on again that morning. She didn't like coming home to darkness; it reminded her all over again that her mother was no longer there, that she wouldn't unlock the door and smell the delicious smells of supper cooking or hear Jeanette humming in the kitchen. The television would be on even though no one was watching it, because Jeanette liked the background noise. No matter how late Karen worked or how tired she was when she got home, she had always known her mother would have a hot meal and a quick smile waiting for her.
Until three weeks ago.

It had happened fast. Jeanette had complained one morning of feeling achy and feverish and diagnosed herself as having caught a cold. She sounded a little congested, and when Karen took her temperature it was only ninety-nine degrees, so a cold seemed like a reasonable assumption. At noon, Karen called to check on her, and though Jeanette's cough was worse, she kept saying it was just a cold.

When Karen got home that night, she took one look at her mother, huddled in a blanket on the sofa and shaking with chills, and knew it was influenza instead of just a cold. Her temperature was a hundred and three. The stethoscope relayed alarming sounds to Karen's trained ears: both lungs were severely congested.

Karen had always thought the best benefit of being a nurse was learning how to bully people gently and inexorably into doing what you wanted. While Jeanette argued that she had only a cold and it was silly to go to a hospital with a *cold*, Karen made swift, competent preparations and within fifteen minutes had Jeanette, warmly wrapped, in the car.

It had been snowing heavily. Karen had always enjoyed snow, but now the sight of it brought back that night, when she had driven, white-knuckled, through the swirling, blinding sheets of white and listened to her mother fight an increasingly desperate battle for oxygen. She made it to the hospital where she worked, driving up to the emergency entrance and blowing the horn until help came, but other than the snow, her only clear memory of that night was of Jeanette lying on the white sheets, small and somehow shrunken, rapidly fading into unresponsiveness no matter how much Karen talked to her.

Acute viral pneumonia, the doctors said. It worked fast, shutting down all the internal organs one by one as they starved for oxygen. Jeanette died a mere four hours after arriving at the hospital, though the medical team had worked frantically in their efforts to defeat the virus.

There were so many details to dying. There were forms to fill out, forms to sign, forms to take to other people. Calls and decisions had to be made. She had to choose a funeral home, a service, a coffin, the dress her mother was to be buried in. There were people to be entertained—God!—her mother's friends who called and came over and brought more food than Karen would ever be able to eat, her own colleagues from work, a couple of neighbors. Her throat felt permanently closed, her eyes gritty. She couldn't cry in front

of all those people, but at night, when she was alone, she couldn't *stop* crying.

She got through the funeral service, and though she had always thought them barbaric, she now understood the sense of closure ritual brought, a ceremony to mark the passing of a sweet woman who had never asked much from life, who was content with the ordinary. Prayer and song marked the end of that life and paid homage to it.

Since then, Karen had gotten through the days, but that was all. Her grief was still raw and fresh, her interest in work nonexistent. For so long, she and Jeanette had been united, the two of them against the world. First Jeanette had worked, and worked hard at any job she could get, to keep a roof over their heads and give Karen the opportunity for a good education. Then it had been Karen's turn to work and Jeanette's time to rest, to do what she enjoyed most: puttering around their small house, cooking, doing the laundry, creating the nest necessity had always denied her.

But that was gone now, and there was no getting it back. All Karen had left was this empty house, and she knew she couldn't live here much longer. Today she had taken the step of calling a real estate agent and putting the house on the market. Living in an apartment would be better than facing the empty house, and her memories, day after day after day.

The box wasn't heavy. Karen held it tucked under one arm while she closed and locked the door, then let the heavy bag slip off her shoulder onto a chair. She tilted the box toward the light to read the label. There was no return address, but her mother's name hit her. "JEANETTE WHITLAW" was printed on the box in plain block letters. Pain squeezed her chest. Jeanette had seldom ordered anything, but when she did, she had been like a child at Christmas, eagerly awaiting the mail or a delivery service, beaming when the expected package finally arrived.

Karen carried the box into the kitchen and used a knife to slit the sealing tape. She opened the flaps and looked inside. There were some papers and a small book bound together with rubber bands, and on top lay a folded sheet of paper. She took the letter out of the box and unfolded it, glancing automatically at the bottom to see who had sent it. The scrawled name, "Dex," made her drop the letter, unread, back into the box.

Dear old Dad. Jeanette hadn't heard from him in at least four years. Karen hadn't actually spoken to him since she was thirteen and he had called to wish her a happy birthday. He had been drunk, it hadn't even been close to

her birthday, and Jeanette had cried softly all night long after talking to her husband. That was the day all Karen's resentment and confusion and bitterness had congealed into hatred, and if she was at home the few times he had called after that, she had refused to speak to him. Jeanette had been distressed, but Karen figured that on the scale of things holding a grudge weighed a lot less than abandoning your wife and daughter, so she hadn't relented.

Leaving the box on the table, she trudged into the bedroom and peeled off her clothes, dropping the crumpled green uniform on the floor. Her feet ached, her head ached, her heart ached. The overtime she was working, in at six a.m. and off at six p.m., kept her mind occupied but added to her depression. She felt as if she hadn't seen sunlight in weeks.

She slipped her cold feet out of her wet shoes and hurriedly pulled on a pair of sweats, then some thick socks. She was cold and tired. She thought longingly of heat and sunshine. Once, when she was only two years old, they had been stationed at a base in Florida. Karen didn't really remember it, but when she closed her eyes, she still had the impression of wonderful heat, of long days under a brilliant sun. Jeanette had often talked of Florida, with longing in her voice, because those days had been relatively happy. Then Dexter had gone to Vietnam and never really came home. Jeanette had moved back to the mountains of West Virginia, where they were originally from, to be close to their families while she waited for her husband's tour of duty to be over and prayed for his safety.

But one tour had turned into another, then another, and the man who finally showed up on their doorstep wasn't the same one who had left. Karen had clear memories of those days, of his sullenness, his long bouts of drinking, tiptoeing around him lest she set off his temper. He had turned mean, and not even Jeanette's unwavering love could hold him. He began disappearing, at first just for a day or two, then the days became weeks and the weeks turned into months, and then one day Jeanette realized he was gone for good. She cried into her pillow a lot of nights; Karen could remember that, too.

They had moved from West Virginia to Ohio so Jeanette could get a better job. There had been those few phone calls, a couple of letters, and once Dexter had actually come to visit. Karen hadn't seen him; he was gone before she got home from her classes. But Jeanette had been glowing, softly excited, and at nineteen Karen was adult enough to realize her parents had

spent the visit in Jeanette's bedroom. That was ten years ago, and Jeanette hadn't seen him since. She hadn't stopped loving him, though. Karen couldn't understand it, but she accepted her mother's constancy. Jeanette had been infinitely loving, even with the husband who had abandoned her.
After a lonely meal of cold cereal, Karen made herself pick up the letter again.
"Jeanie—Here are some old papers of mine. Put them in a safe deposit box and keep them for me. They may be worth some money someday—Dex."
That was it. No salutation, no "dear," not signed with love. He had just mailed his junk to her mother and expected her to keep it for him.
And she would have. Jeanette would have carefully followed his instructions and even kept that curt note, placing it with the pitifully small stack of letters she had saved from when he was in Vietnam.
Karen's instinct was to toss the box into the trash. Out of respect for her mother, she didn't. Instead, she carried it into Jeanette's empty bedroom and placed it in one of the boxes that held her mother's things. She couldn't bring herself to get rid of anything yet; she had rented storage space and would keep it all there until that day came.
The packing was all but complete. There were only a few items left, sitting on top of the dresser. Karen added them to the box and sealed it with several strips of masking tape across the cardboard.
With luck, the house would sell soon, and spring would come, and she would be able to see sunshine again.

Chapter 3

August 5, New Orleans, Louisiana

Almost midnight. Someone was following him. Again. Dexter Whitlaw turned his head just enough to see the flash of movement with his peripheral vision. Excitement pumped through his veins, and he almost grinned. There was nothing like the hunt, even when he was the prey. They had been after him for almost six months, and he delighted in using his old skills to evade them. He had led them on quite a chase, zigzagging back and forth across the country, surfacing in the larger cities to place another call. He hadn't

expected it to be easy, and he hadn't been disappointed, but he knew his man.

After the initial "Go to hell" had sounded in his ear, Dexter had begun his game of cat and mouse. Blackmail could be as brutal as an amputation or as delicate as reeling in a world-record trout on gossamer line. First, he had established his evidence—just a little of it, just a taste of what *could* be released if certain conditions weren't met.

As he had expected, the pigeon had reacted with fury. Far from being intimidated, he had called all his dogs and sicced them on Dexter. Most men would have been dead by now, but Dexter had spent a three-year lifetime crawling on his belly in Nam, learning patience and strategy and the ability to conceal himself so well that the unsuspecting dogs had several times walked right past him, just as Charlie and the North Vietnamese had done in Nam.

Dexter was having a hell of a time. He hadn't felt so blazingly alive since he had looked down his scope into that Russian's scope and known one of them had only a split second to live.

The dog following him now was better than the others. Not as good as ol' Dex, he thought exuberantly, but good enough to give him a thrill. Hell, he even knew this one; unless he missed his guess, he was being dogged this time by no less than Rick Medina, one of the CIA's best wet men back in their old green hunting grounds, twenty-five years ago. Another time, another world, but here they were, the same old players playing the same old game of hide and seek.

Dexter blended into the shadows, hunkering down for a minute while he waited for his follower to make another move. A less cautious man would have shot first and checked his identity afterward, but this guy was smart. Assume Dexter didn't know he was being followed; a hasty killing of the wrong guy would send the real prey so far underground it might be weeks before they could pick him up again. And don't forget to factor in the unwanted attention of the cops. True, for the most part, the cops didn't worry much about the unexpected demise of a street bum, even when said demise was caused by a bullet in the brain. But you could never tell; they might be having a slow day and want some excitement, or a TV news crew might happen on the scene, and the bright lights would prod the cops to reluctant activity—the random occurrence of feces, as one erudite patron of a soup kitchen in Chicago had put it.

Dexter waited. Slowly, his movements ghostly, he smeared dirt on his face and hands to disguise their relative paleness. Then he ducked his head down and remained motionless, comfortable in the knowledge that he was virtually invisible to anyone peering into the deeply shadowed alley.

After several minutes, he listened to the shuffle of footsteps as they moved closer. Maybe it was the hunter; maybe it was just another bum. Dexter didn't move.

The footsteps paused. Dexter pictured what anyone looking down this alley would see: scattered trash, broken bottles, a pile of malodorous refuse too small to conceal a man, except that it did. It had rained earlier; the street lights shimmered on puddles of water. Any empty cardboard boxes that had littered the alley a few hours ago had been taken to provide shelter from the rain. To the average hunting dog, the alley would look empty and unproductive, but Medina wasn't the average dog; he, too, had trained in Vietnam, so he knew how to be patient and wait for the prey to make a mistake.

Well, in this case, Dexter thought happily, he would have a long wait. Dexter Whitlaw didn't make mistakes, not in this. He might have screwed up everything else in his life, but he'd been a first-class hunter. So he waited, long after the shuffling footsteps moved away, long after other sounds of other footsteps took their place. A rat sniffed around his shoes, and he waited, motionless. After a while, he was rewarded when those same shuffling footsteps made a return visit, once again pausing at the alley. The hunter was comparing the way the alley looked now to the way it had looked earlier. Nothing had changed. Satisfied now that his prey wasn't there, the hunter moved on, still using the shuffle because a good hunter never broke his disguise.

The deceptive gait might have worked, if Dexter hadn't once seen Medina use the same drunken shuffle to bait two bully boys in a Saigon dive, drawing them in with the false assurance that the Yankee was too shit-faced to put up much of a fight. The two specialized in drunk American soldiers and had fun beating the helpless boys to bloody pulps after stealing their money. The week before, one of the boys had died of internal injuries, and a certain American faction had begun a ruthless search for the two Vietnamese.

As the man who had found and identified them, Rick Medina had the honor of taking them out. Two clean shots to the head would have done it, but

Medina had wanted to play with them first.
Medina was a neat, all-American type guy, good-looking and slim, with his brown hair cut in a short crew and his clothes pressed and creased even in the oppressive heat. He was intelligent and affable—for the most part. When he was pissed, or when he was working, the affability disappeared as if it had never existed, and in his blue eyes was the cold light of a killer.
Medina had lured the two Vietnamese out into a dark alley; they hadn't even tried to conceal the fact that they were following him, so certain were they of his helplessness. They closed on him like hounds on a rabbit, but at the last second, the rabbit had whirled, all signs of drunkenness gone. The knife in his hand had a dull black blade, so it wouldn't reflect light. The two Vietnamese likely never even saw it. All they knew was that suddenly their bodies were licked with fire, Medina's hands darting and leaving behind slashes that never went quite deep enough to kill—not yet, at least. Medina had shredded the two, all the while whispering to them in their own language, so that they would have no doubts about what was happening and why.
They tried to get away but found the alley blocked by several blank-faced Americans, all holding pistols. Trapped, hysterical, they reckoned Medina the least threat and turned to fight him. Big mistake.
Rick Medina was a regular Veg-o-Matic that night. He sliced and diced with mechanical precision. He weaved and darted, and each flick of the knife relieved someone of a body part—an ear, a finger, a nose. The two were hoarsely screaming before he finished them, neatly slicing their throats and letting them drop. Stepping over the bodies, he rejoined the silent group at the head of the alley, his face set and expressionless.
Medina had gone off by himself, shrugging away the offers of company, and when he surfaced the next day, he was his old affable self again, the killings handled and put behind him.
That was it about Medina, Dexter thought. He was a stone killer when the occasion called for it, but not a murderer. As brutal as the executions had been, they were just that: executions. A lesson taught. After that, the young American soldiers had enjoyed a bit more safety when carousing in the Saigon bars and whorehouses. Medina had known he would pay a personal price for doing the two kills and accepted the cost.
Whatever line was drawn in Medina's soul, he had never crossed it. All of his kills had been righteous.

When Dexter considered it, he realized he probably respected Rick Medina more than any other person in the world. Medina had held to his code; Dexter himself had not, and he had spent all these years paying for his lapse.

If anyone could catch him, Medina could.

Knowing that gave extra life to the game.

Dexter finally rose silently to his feet. A glance at the stars told him roughly two hours had passed.

It was time to lose the street bum disguise. It had worked for a long time, but Medina was on the scent now. The alleys and soup kitchens would be the first place he looked, so Dexter would have to make it a point not to be there. Too bad; street bums had an anonymity that almost no other group possessed, because people actively avoided looking at them. The cops didn't waste any time on them, and they in turn weren't likely to talk to cops about anything they saw. But there were other disguises that would serve him almost as well; the trick was to blend in with his background, whatever that background might be.

New Orleans offered a rich variety of possibilities, and Dexter considered several of them as he took a circuitous route to the Quarter, which was always awake no matter the hour or the day. After crisscrossing St. Charles a couple of times, doubling back, always checking, he finally reached Carondelet. All the time, he watched his flank, alert to any sign of a tail, but saw nothing suspicious.

He now went straight down Carondelet and crossed Canal, where Carondelet became Bourbon Street. Tourists still strolled the uneven pavements, newly emerged from the restaurants and bars and strip joints. Some were obviously drunk, holding plastic cups sloshing with beer or Hurricanes. More than a few wore cheap plastic necklaces in a variety of colors, and sequined masks were evident as well, though Mardi Gras was months past.

The bar lights glittered on the wet pavement, and jazz wailed out of the open doors of the bars, colliding with the more discordant, driving beats coming from the strip joints, where bored-looking dancers, both male and female, gyrated their hips and humped poles and pretended to be sexy. Laughter rippled from one group of tourists, three prosperous-looking young men whose arms were clutched by glittering young women in cocktail dresses. As Dexter watched, a briskly walking man brushed past

the group and went on his way, turning at the next street and disappearing from view, with at least one of the young men's wallets inside his shirt. Not one of the tourists realized anything had happened.

It was like watching a movie, as if he didn't inhabit the same world as the tourists. They were oblivious to him, looking past him, through him. Dexter shivered suddenly, despite the thick heat of a New Orleans summer night. He had been disconnected since Nam, but abruptly he felt even more distant, as if the tourists wouldn't be able to hear him even if he shouted.

It was a peculiar feeling, making him shiver again. He walked down Bourbon, glancing in the open doors as he passed, the music and laughter echoing as if from a distance. The foot traffic was heavier here, and cops on horseback clopped by, steel horseshoes ringing on the pavement. Dexter walked faster, looking for a dark alley where he could hunker down for a minute and shake this spooky feeling. This wasn't downtown, though, this was the Quarter, and alleys were usually entrances to courtyards. If they were private courtyards, the entrances were gated and locked. If the courtyard belonged to a restaurant, he wouldn't find any privacy there.

He reminded himself that he hadn't come to the Quarter for privacy; he had come precisely because Bourbon Street was so active, and he could lose himself in the foot traffic. All he needed to do was ignore the weird feeling and get on with business. Maybe leave New Orleans entirely, now that Medina was on his trail.

Medina. Dexter thought about it and realized what felt so wrong, what had spooked him. Medina wasn't *anybody's* dog. The man had principles. Things happened to people over the years, changed them, but it would take a real sea change to turn Rick Medina into a kill-for-hire man.

Three alternative possibilities presented themselves. One: Medina had been lied to. That was the easiest explanation but possibly the most implausible because of Medina's personality. He wouldn't take kindly to being used, and if he ever found out, there would be hell to pay.

Two: Medina was definitely hunting him, but for a third, unknown party. Perhaps the secret wasn't as well kept as he had thought. God knows it would make great ammunition. This possibility was way out there on the edge of conspiracy, but as someone had said, even paranoids have real enemies.

Three: Medina was here for another reason entirely. It was mere chance that Dexter had seen and recognized him.

Yeah, sure.
Dexter reached St. Ann Street and turned down it, not looking in the windows of the voodoo shop as he walked past. That was some weird shit, and he had all the weirdness he could handle right now. Maybe he should have stayed on Bourbon; St. Ann was empty—
Medina stepped out in front of him, silenced .22 in hand.
Dexter stopped, looking into those calm blue eyes. His own pistol was stuck in the back of his waistband, and he knew he'd never be able to get to it in time. Death stared at him, and strangely he thought of Jeanette. He saw her sweet face, clearly remembered how she had hugged him so tightly the last time he'd seen her, and was humbled to realize how much she loved him. And, looking behind Medina, he realized abruptly how it was set up. There was a fourth scenario, one he had overlooked.
"Look ou—" he began, but Medina's finger had already tightened delicately on the trigger, and the bullet punched neatly into his forehead, shutting off thought and speech and life.
Rick Medina whirled, going down on one knee, warned by the last words out of Dexter Whitlaw's mouth. He had the strong, lithe grace of a ballet dancer, but he was fifty-six years old, and his reflexes had slowed just a bit. He got off only one shot before two slugs hit him in the chest like sledgehammers. He collapsed on the uneven sidewalk, his body no longer responsive, his eyesight going even as he stared at the three shadowy figures looming over him. *Used*, he thought savagely. *Set up and used*. He felt a burst of fury, and then nothing.
A car pulled up to the curb, and the trunk was popped open. Quickly, the three men lifted Medina's body and stuffed it into the trunk. One remembered to scoop up the silenced .22 and toss it into the trunk with the body; one swiftly patted Dexter Whitlaw's pockets and shook his head at the other two. Then they all got into the car and drove sedately away, just as a man and a woman turned the corner from Bourbon Street and began walking toward Dexter Whitlaw's body.
The couple saw the man on the sidewalk, and the woman tugged on her husband's arm. "Let's not walk by that drunk," she said. Mellowed by a couple of Hurricanes, the man agreed, and they crossed the street to avoid coming so close to unpleasantness.
It was another twenty-three seconds before four young women, teetering on high heels, clutching sequined purses so tiny as to be useless, and giggling

together over the male stripper they had just watched, wobbled their merry way down St. Ann and made the discovery that the man lying on the sidewalk had a hole in his forehead.
Their shrill screams tore through the music and laughter drifting over from Bourbon. Curious heads turned. A few men broke into a run, responding automatically to the sounds of female distress. More people followed, drawing the attention of a pair of patrolmen on horseback.
Had he been alive, Dexter Whitlaw could have told them that when the action is going down, twenty-three seconds is an eon. Witnesses disappear, cars vanish, opportunities are lost, and the wash of time continues its endless scrubbing of the ineffectual marks people made.

Chapter 4

"Shit."
Detective Marc Chastain rubbed his unshaven face, feeling the bristly whiskers rasping against his hand. He yawned and sipped the hot coffee one of the patrolmen had handed him. It was three o'clock in the morning, which meant he'd had not quite three hours of sleep. He was inclined to feel grumpy but pushed the mood away. He was too controlled to let lack of sleep keep him from giving his full attention to the job. He could catch up on his sleep the next night, or the next; the poor bum lying on the uneven sidewalk didn't have that option.
One of the disadvantages of living in the Quarter—other than ancient wiring and even more ancient plumbing—was that if anything happened there, he was usually first on the scene, which meant it became his case. Hell, he had *walked* to the scene and still beat the next detective who had shown up, Shannon, by a good two minutes.
As bad as he felt, however, he was better off than the homeless man stiffening on the sidewalk. Blinking his gritty eyes, Marc surveyed the scene, scribbling notes on his pad.
The victim was approximately six feet tall, a hundred and eighty-five pounds. Age fifty to fifty-five. Gray hair, brown eyes. He lay twisted half onto his right side, his right arm having caught behind him when he fell; the arm braced him, kept him from falling over. There was a small, neat black hole in the center of his forehead but no corresponding wound in the back

of his head, meaning the bullet hadn't exited. A .22, Marc thought. Without the power to punch through the skull twice, the lead had wallowed around in the brain, destroying tissue as it went. No blood to speak of, meaning the victim had died instantly. Professionals used .22s, but they were also the cheapest and most readily available handgun, making them the favorites, the "Saturday night specials" used by punk stickup kids. Despite all the outcry to ban guns completely, Marc figured he had a better chance against a poorly aimed .22 bullet than he would against an eight-inch blade or a studded baseball bat, because when a bad guy got close enough to use one of those, he was dead serious and the results far more brutal.

He couldn't rule out drugs as the motive here, but generally pushers, whether individuals or gangs, preferred greater fire power. They liked street-sweepers because they thought it was impressive to throw out all that hot lead in a couple of seconds. A single neat round in the head wasn't their style, wasn't dramatic enough.

Marc lifted his head and looked around. The blindingly bright lights of television cameras glared at him, and he narrowed his eyes to filter out the light as he surveyed the crowd that had gathered. Four young women, dressed for a night on the town, had been segregated from everyone else; one of the women was weeping hysterically, and a medic was trying to calm her. Those four had discovered the body. A patrolman was talking to the three who were coherent, getting names, taking notes. Marc would get to the witnesses in a few minutes.

All the other people had been drawn by the screams of the young women, and the crowd had drawn the television cameras. He sighed. Usually, the murder of a homeless man barely rated a mention in the newspaper, much less television coverage. If a patrolman had discovered the body, there wouldn't be any circus. But New Orleans was a tourist town, and anything that involved tourists was news. Now the newspapers and television stations would be full of more stories about New Orleans's horrific murder rate. Never mind that most of the murders were in the drug community, that the average citizen was as safe in New Orleans as anywhere else, assuming said citizen had brains enough to stay out of certain neighborhoods; a statistic was a statistic and therefore worthy of being intoned again and again by solemn talking heads. Under pressure from a now-frightened citizenry, perhaps more frightened by the threat of losing tourist dollars than any perceived danger to their own lives, the mayor would come down hard on

the police commissioner. The commissioner would then come down hard on the chief, and the shit would filter down to every detective and patrolman in the city.
Wonderful.
He looked back down at the victim, committing every detail to memory. This time, he noticed a strange fold in the victim's shirt, a funny lump in the small of his back. Squatting beside the body, he used his pen to carefuly lift the shirt tail and expose the weapon tucked into the bum's waistband.
"Jesus," Shannon said, standing beside him. "Looks like an awful expensive piece for a bum to be carryin' around. Wonder where he stole it."
Marc shifted his body to block the television cameras. He took the evidence bag and, again using his pen, eased the pistol from the victim's waistband.
"Glock 17," he murmured, studying the beautiful weapon. If a Glock had been stolen locally, the owner would have reported the theft, assuming he even knew one had occurred. A lot of people bought guns and put them up, and months would go by before they took the gun out again. Careless shits. If people were going to own a weapon, they owed it to themselves and their family to become proficient with the weapon, to practice regularly and keep the weapon in good condition, and to know where the hell it was.
He lifted the weapon and sniffed. It hadn't been fired; he didn't smell the stench of burned gunpowder, only the sharp, clean scents of metal, plastic, and gun oil. The weapon was in excellent condition, well cared for and maintained. He didn't check the clip, because he didn't want to blur any fingerprints, but he would bet it was full.
"Has it been fired?" Shannon asked.
"No." Marc deposited the weapon in the evidence bag, all the while studying the victim for other interesting details.
Possessing a Glock definitely raised the victim's status from ordinary street bum to unordinary street bum, which raised Marc's curiosity in direct proportion. Why would an ordinary street bum be packing a Glock? Drugs? Not likely. Street bums were users, not dealers. That was how they got to be street bums in the first place. So, say he stole the Glock, maybe to sell for drugs; why was he still packing it around? A Glock would be easy to unload. Maybe he had felt he needed the protection, for all the good it had done him.
Why would he need protection? People who were worried about their safety made an effort not to live in the streets.

As he studied the victim, something… a memory… some sense of recognition… nagged at him. It wasn't the victim himself, but something about him. He let his eyes unfocus a little so he was seeing the entire body, not one detail at a time, and it hit him. Dirt.
The victim was dirty, the normal condition for street bums. But his face and hands looked as if they had been deliberately smeared. An image flashed in Marc's mind, and his head lifted sharply.
"What?" Shannon asked. He squatted beside Marc, dark eyebrows pinching together. He was a lean young black man, recently promoted to detective, sharp and tough and eager to learn.
"I think he's ex-military." Carefully, he began patting the victim's pockets, feeling for identification, but all the pockets were empty.
"Why's that?"
"Take a look at his face and hands."
Shannon studied the victim. He had done four years in the Army, so he had some experience himself. "Camouflage," he said with faint astonishment. "He was hiding."
"Probably from whoever did him." Marc studied the sidewalk and street around them. Nothing in the Quarter was new; everything was stained with age. If the television cameras hadn't been there, he might not have seen it, but the bright lights lit up the scene like daylight. Even so, the dark splotches some ten feet away blended in with the wet sidewalk so that they were barely distinguishable.
"Take a look at this." He stood and moved over to the spots, and Shannon followed.
"More blood," Shannon said.
"Yeah, but I doubt it's the victim's. The head shot killed him instantly; he didn't bleed enough to fill a thimble."
Shannon looked over at the body. "But you said his weapon hadn't been fired. Where did this blood come from?"
"Did you read the patrolmen's notes?"
"Yeah, what about them?"
"They found four shell casings, all twenty-two caliber. And the victim has how many holes in him?"
"One. But he could have been *fired* at four times and been hit the last time."
"He had a Glock seventeen in his waistband. If someone was shooting at him and had already missed three times, don't you think he would at least

have tried to shoot back? He wouldn't have just stood there while the first three shots were fired, so he was killed by the first one, second one for sure; any more than that, and he would have had time to react."
"So we have two, maybe three shots unaccounted for, and blood in another location."
"Right. It follows that whoever did our victim also shot the unknown blood donor, who may or may not be dead. Another body may turn up somewhere, though I don't see the logic in carrying one body away and leaving the second one here, unless the perps just didn't have enough time to grab the second body."
"Perps? Not one guy, then?"
"He would have to be pretty damn strong to pick up a dead guy. You know how it is. They flop all over the place."
"Plus they're dead weight," Shannon said, his face straight.
Marc hid a chuckle, turning it into a cough so the television cameras wouldn't pick up the image of a callous cop laughing over the body. Cops had to laugh, otherwise they wouldn't be able to bear the carnage they saw.
"Maybe the blood donor walked away under his own steam," Shannon suggested. "There's not much blood."
"Neither is there a blood trail that I can see, though drops would be hard to spot on a wet sidewalk in the dark. What did he do, administer first aid to himself quickly enough, cleanly enough, that not even one drop hit the ground?"
Shannon shook his head in answer to Marc's question. Even a cut finger tended to drip before the blood could be staunched. "So… you think there were two or more perps, and the missing guy was loaded up and carried away."
"You catch on fast."
"What do you think it was, a drug deal gone bad or some bums arguing over a cardboard house?"
"I don't know. There would be at least three parties involved, and that doesn't feel right. Our victim, who was armed, didn't get a chance to protect himself, so that means he was taken by surprise. There aren't any witnesses, any weapons, any known motive."
Shannon glanced at the crowd. "So what do we do?"
"Go through the motions." It was a hard fact of life, but no police department in the country would expend a lot of effort on catching the

murderer of a street bum. Marc was ruthlessly pragmatic; the city's resources were limited, so the money and effort should be spent where it would do the most good, protecting the normal, law-abiding citizens who worked and paid taxes and went to their kids' ball games. "If he's ex-military, the way we think, at least we should be able to ID him."
"Yeah." Shannon stood. "Too bad it had to be tourists who found him."
Without the tourists, this would all have been handled without fuss. With the pressure on to keep the murder rate down, there were occasional rumors that a body had been quietly taken across the river to Jefferson Parish and dumped there, so the murder wouldn't show up on New Orleans's statistics. Marc had personally never done that, never asked, so he couldn't say if it really happened or not. In New Orleans, anything was possible. It was just as possible that the rumor was the result of someone overhearing a couple of cops saying they *wished* they could dump a body somewhere. But the rumor added to New Orleans's reputation and, true or not, had become part of the local lore.
"The fuss will die down," he said briefly. "The press will make a big deal of it on the morning news, we'll identify him as homeless, there'll be a mention of it on the evening news, and then it's history."
Shannon shrugged, accepting reality as readily as Marc did. He looked around at the shabby old buildings. "You live in the Quarter, don't you?"
They walked back to the body. "Yeah, I've got a house on St. Louis."
"How'd you manage that, man?"
"Inherited it from my grandmother."
"No shit? So you're from one of those old Creole families?"
"My grandmother was. My father was shanty Irish." Marc didn't add that he had grown up in the house on St. Louis; he didn't flaunt his background. Making a big deal of his heritage would be stupid. Besides, there was nothing to flaunt. His father hadn't been able to keep a job, so, rather than see her daughter and grandson live in progressively worse dumps until they were finally homeless, his grandmother had taken them in and tolerated, reluctantly, her son-in-law's presence as the price she must pay for peace of mind. His grandmother had always acted like a dethroned queen, but the family money had long since dwindled away, and all that was left was the big house in the Quarter.
Marc didn't think of himself as Creole; he was simply an American. More than that, he was a damn good cop, hard-nosed enough to recognize there

were times when he could make a difference and times when he couldn't. This was one of the times when he couldn't, and he didn't waste time beating himself up over it.

Still, as he looked down at the victim, he couldn't help wondering if the guy had any family, where they were, if they would even care that he was dead. Most of the street bums were trash, too lazy to work, into drugs and petty crimes. But some of them were mentally incapacitated, incapable of looking out for themselves, and Marc didn't have any patience with the families who simply turned these people out to shift for themselves. Yes, they were a lot of trouble, a hell of a lot of trouble, but they couldn't help it, and families were supposed to take care of their own. Maybe he was old-fashioned, but his grandmother had put family above everything, and her example had stuck.

Marc squatted by the body again, studying the dead eyes, wondering at the scenario that had been played out here in the middle of the Quarter without anyone hearing or seeing anything suspicious. No gunshots had been reported, though at least four had been fired. Silencer? That made him think pro, and pro made him think organized crime, not street drug dealer. This guy didn't have the look of a user, anyway; under the dirt, he looked to be fairly muscular and well fed. Street bums could eat as well as anyone these days, with all the shelters and soup kitchens, but users weren't much interested in food. And dealers usually weren't homeless; they needed a base of operations.

He rubbed his nose. This didn't feel like drugs. Maybe the guy just pissed off the wrong party; maybe he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and some wiseguy took him down. Likely he'd never know, but damn, he hated mysteries.

The meat wagon boys came over. "You through here, Detective?"

Marc stood. "Yeah." There was nothing else he could do, no other details to glean from the scene. Maybe the medical examiner could come up with a name, but other than that, they likely knew as much about the victim as they were ever going to know.

In the meantime, he had four young women to interview. After watching the body being loaded and carried away, he glanced at Shannon. "You want to do some interviewing?"

The young detective looked over at the women. "As long as I don't have to talk to the one who's squalling. Man, she hasn't shut up since I got here."

"Just do some preliminaries. I'll get in touch with them tomorrow." He could request that they come down to the Eighth District, but he didn't want to make things tougher for them than he had to. The young ladies, all of whom looked to be in their early twenties, had come to the Quarter for a good time. The brutality of murder had never touched them before; he could forgive them a few tears.

"Take it easy on them," he advised Shannon under his breath as they approached. "They need a little petting."

Shannon darted a startled glance at Marc; in case the senior detective hadn't noticed, he was black, and the witnesses weren't. Pet them? Was he crazy? But though Shannon had been a detective for only a few months, he had heard some things. Chastain kind of kept to himself, but he was well liked in the department. The word was he was the best at interrogating witnesses and suspects alike, because when he needed to be, he was cool and low-key and could calm the most hysterical witness, but he was also a real hard-ass with the bad guys.

"Chastain," one detective had said, "is the type of guy who carries a blade." By that, Shannon deduced, he was referring not to the utility pocket knife almost every man carried but to a knife whose sole function was as a weapon.

Yeah, that described Chastain, all right. A good knife fighter was smooth and controlled, sneaky and lethal.

Shannon also admired Chastain's sense of style. Man, look at him; obviously just out of bed, unshaven, his eyes heavy-lidded, but he was wearing pleated linen slacks, some kind of drapey pullover shirt, and a cream-colored jacket. Even his sockless feet looked cool, as if he'd planned it. Now, that was style.

They reached the knot of young women and introduced themselves. Shannon noticed that Chastain's voice changed, became lower, more gentle. The women subtly moved closer to him, dazed, frightened eyes fastening on his face. Even the one who kept sobbing tried to get control of herself. Smoothly, Chastain separated the group, directing two of the women a few steps away with Shannon. The girl kept weeping, though more quietly now. He heard Chastain making some low, soothing sounds, little more than rumbly whispers in his throat. Before Shannon could gather his thoughts to do more than ask names, he was aware of the girl wiping her eyes and

answering Chastain's questions in a clogged, wavering, but much calmer manner.
It was a little after five before the scene was finally cleared. The witnesses were escorted to their hotel by a patrolman, the crowd dispersed, the media fed enough information for them to have their stories without giving them any salacious details, the street tidied for the next human wave. Morning brought a different set of people to the Quarter: shoppers, delivery men, tourists who felt safer during the day or simply weren't interested in nightlife.
Marc silently cursed when he thought of the paperwork he had to do. He would like to go home and fall into bed, but he'd already had all the sleep he was going to get today. He rubbed his hand over his face, beard stubble rasping. The paperwork could wait until he had showered and shaved.
"No sense walking when my car is here," Shannon said, falling into step beside him. "You going home or to the station?"
"Home first, then to the station. Thanks for the ride." They reached Shannon's car, and Marc slid into the passenger seat.
"So, did you do a hitch in the Army?" Shannon asked. "I mean, you noticed the camo."
"Marines. Right out of high school. That way I could go to college."
"Yeah." Shannon had enlisted for the same end purpose. It felt strange for them to have that in common, a tough young black dude from a bad neighborhood and a smoothly sophisticated white guy from one of the old French Creole families.
There was no traffic to contend with, so in less than a minute they reached St. Louis. Shannon slowed. "Left," Chastain said. "That's it on the right, in the middle of the block. The blue gate."
Shannon stopped in front of the blue gate. In typical Quarter fashion, the big gate was set in a solid wall that provided privacy for the courtyard beyond. The old Creole houses were built around a center courtyard, facing inward to their own gardens rather than out toward the streets. Long wrought-iron balconies extended over the sidewalk, the third-floor balcony providing a roof for the one on the second floor. Tall white shutters framed two sets of double french doors opening onto the balcony, and Shannon could see a couple of garden chairs and a small table up there. Two lush ferns hung from the overhang.

"Ferns?" Shannon couldn't quite keep the disbelief from his tone. Chastain wasn't married. Ferns weren't normal for a heterosexual single guy.
Chastain chuckled. "Relax. They were a gift from an old girlfriend. Women like them, so I keep them. They aren't much trouble, I just water them now and then."
Shannon's mama kept ferns, so he knew there was more involved in their upkeep than occasional water. He grinned a little, imagining a slow parade of women keeping Chastain's ferns in good condition, feeding and pruning and watering. Maybe he should get some ferns.
"You want some coffee?" Chastain asked. "Or are you heading home?"
"Naw, there's no point in it now. Coffee sounds good."
"Come on in, then."
A little surprised by the invitation but anxious for a chance to do some more brain picking, Shannon slid out of the car. Chastain unlocked the gate, and they walked into a long, narrow, bricked entry. A single light fixture set into the wall lit their way. A courtyard opened up beyond them, and in the predawn darkness, Shannon got the impression of lush vegetation, and the sweet scent of flowers teased him.
Chastain turned to the right and went up a flight of stairs. "I turned the house into four apartments," he said. "It was the only way I could afford the upkeep. This one's mine."
When he reached the upper balcony, he unlocked another door, reached in to turn on a light, and motioned for Shannon to enter.
Shannon looked around, his interest keen. The ceilings were high, at least twelve feet, the floors bare hardwood except for a few scattered rugs. A lazily whirling ceiling fan hung in the center. Most of Chastain's furniture was so old-fashioned and shabby Shannon thought it had to have been his grandmother's, though here and there a few new pieces had been added. The place was clean and fairly uncluttered, though there were newspapers on the floor beside a big easy chair, a coffee cup left on a lamp table, books scattered around. "No television?" he blurted.
"It's in the armoire," Chastain said, nodding toward an immense piece of furniture. "My grandmother loved watching soaps, but she refused to leave the television out where her friends could see that she had one. The kitchen's through here."
He led the way past a small inset dining room on the left, pushing open folding doors to enter the kitchen. It was a square, functional room,

surprising in its normality. Stove, refrigerator, microwave, toaster, coffeemaker—Shannon had kind of expected a food processor or something, because it seemed Chastain was a man who appreciated fine food and would want to have all the appliances on hand for his girlfriends to cook for him. A wooden table for two was set against the wall.
Chastain expertly measured coffee and water and turned on the maker. "Make yourself at home," he said. "I'll be out by the time the coffee's done. You hungry?"
"I could eat."
"There're some pastry things in the freezer. Pop a couple in the toaster."
A moment later, Shannon heard the shower come on. He didn't want to put the pastries in the toaster too soon, so he walked over to the french doors and stepped out onto the balcony. His car was parked just below. To his left, lights were coming from the other set of doors, so he imagined that was Chastain's bedroom.
Shannon thought of his own place, with dirty clothes on the floor and dishes in the sink and dust all over everything. If he had a girl over, he had to rush around shoving clothes under the bed or in the closet, hide the dishes in the oven, try to blow the worst of the dust off, and it took a can of air freshener to cover the smell of dirty socks for a while. Chastain could bring a babe here anytime without worrying about how his place looked.
Man, this was the way to live. Nothing fancy, and just about everything was old as hell, but he bet Chastain drew babes like a magnet. The way he dressed, the way he lived… women liked this stuff.
Shannon settled against the railing, thinking. Maybe he couldn't own a house in the Quarter, but he could take better care of his place, clean it up, maybe buy a few plants or something. No one would have to know he got them himself instead of a girlfriend giving them to him. And he needed some new threads; nothing flashy like the drug dealers, just maybe some good shirts and a nice jacket or two. And maybe a food processor. Hell, why not?
He was so involved with his plans that he didn't hear the shower cut off. A few minutes later, he was startled when Chastain walked out onto the balcony, freshly shaven, his short black hair plastered to his skull. He was buttoning a short-sleeved white dress shirt made out of some kind of gauzy stuff.

"Ah, hell," Shannon said, disgusted with himself. "I forgot about the Pop-Tarts."
"I put them in," Chastain said.
Shannon felt embarrassed into speech. "I was just—man, this is nice, y'know? The house and everything. And I noticed the way you were with the witnesses, like you were gonna put your arms around them and say, 'Now, now,' any minute. Women like that shit, don't they? I mean, thirty seconds of that stuff, and that girl turned off the spigot and started talking. I thought she was gonna throw herself at you."
"They deserved to be taken care of," Chastain said calmly. "They hadn't done anything wrong, and they were upset. They don't see the things you and I see every day." From inside came the sound of a toaster ejecting its contents, and the two men walked in.
Chastain got two cups down from a cabinet and poured coffee into them. He had made it strong, the way almost everyone in New Orleans did, and the kitchen was fragrant with chicory. Next, he placed the pastries on two small plates, dusted them with powdered sugar, and handed them to Shannon while he got two forks out of a drawer. Shannon put the plates on the small wooden table. "These aren't Pop-Tarts," he blurted.
"A girlfriend—"
"—makes them for you," Shannon finished, and sighed.
"Yeah. They're pretty damn good when I don't have the time for a regular breakfast."
"How many girlfriends you got?"
"I have a lot of friends who are women. I don't date all of them."
Shannon got the message. A gentleman didn't brag about his girlfriends. These few hours with Chastain had been a revelation, Shannon thought. Watching him work, seeing how he was with witnesses, how he lived and dressed and comported himself, struck Shannon all of a sudden as how a man should be. "I bet you open doors for women, don't you?"
"Of course."
Of course. That was it. The attitude. The attitude was everything. Shannon felt almost breathless. When he made a few changes, he could almost see the women lining up to be with him.
"What's your first name?" Chastain asked when the pastry on his plate was almost gone.
"Antonio."

"Well, Antonio, you have to figure witnesses are already rattled; they don't need anyone coming on tough to them. Calm them down so they can think, go low-key so they don't feel threatened and keep things to themselves." He paused to take a bite. "Say you've got a couple of kids who were someplace they shouldn't have been, and they saw something. If they're scared, they'll lie to cover their asses because they know their parents are going to be pissed. Reassure them. Talk to the parents yourself if you have to, so they don't scare the kid into shutting up entirely. You won't get anything if they do."

Shannon knew interrogation techniques: present yourself as understanding, even sympathetic. Maybe you're talking to a guy you know beat his wife to death. You say, "Man, I know how you feel. Sometimes my wife gets in my face, and I just want to punch a hole in something, you know?" Never mind that you're lying; the perp doesn't know that. He's scared, he's upset, he lost control and killed his wife, and he's looking at nothing but trouble. A friendly voice is maybe all he needs to spill his guts. Chastain gave that same friendly, sympathetic ear to witnesses, too. People probably tripped over their own feet to get to him and start talking.

"How much follow-up do you normally do on a case like this?" he asked Chastain curiously.

"As much as the lieutenant wants me to do." Chastain's voice was neutral. "If we can get an ID, I'll notify his family. They probably won't care, but at least they can take care of his burial."

"You think he was a mental?"

Chastain shrugged, indicating the odds were even. "He didn't look like a doper, didn't have that wasted look. Some of the homeless have families who send money to them. It's a lot easier than trying to take care of someone with a mental condition. Just turn 'em out on the streets."

Shannon nodded. The situation wasn't that unusual. Back in the seventies or early eighties, a bunch of do-gooders had gone to court to get patients released from mental institutions on the grounds that they were perfectly capable of functioning in society. Well, they were, as long as they took their medication. Problem was, crazy people took their medication only when they lived in a controlled environment, like a mental institution. Put them in the real world, a lot of them went off their meds and became more than their families could handle. When the stress became too much, a lot of the mentals ended up on the street, unable to hold a job or even carry on a

decent conversation. They shuffled around talking to themselves, cursing people, relieving themselves in public. They were sitting ducks for mindless street violence, thrown in as they were with the dopers and the criminal element.

Something in Chastain's voice alerted Shannon, a cold undertone. "You're pissed, huh?"

"Not yet. If it turns out he had a family that could have been taking care of him, *then* I'll be pissed."

It was said mildly enough, but a chill ran down Shannon's spine. It struck him that despite Chastain's polite sophistication, when he was pissed he could be one mean son of a bitch.

Chastain gathered the dishes, rinsed them, and placed them in the dishwasher. After refilling both their cups with coffee, he said, "We'll take the coffee with us. Let's go do some paperwork." They both sighed.

Marc made a mental note. If he had time, he'd follow through on this case maybe a little more than he normally would. For one thing, he wanted to find out where this guy had got hold of a Glock .17. Little oddities like that annoyed the hell out of him.

Chapter 5

"How did you dispose of the body?"

"Drove his rental car over into Mississippi, put him in it, wiped it down. We made it look like a robbery. Someone will find him in a day or so."

"What?" The first man sat forward in his huge leather chair, which had cost almost as much as the average car. "Why in hell didn't you dump him in a bayou so a gator could get him?" He was incensed.

The man standing before him patiently shook his head. "You don't want a bunch of spooks losing one of their guys and starting to nose around looking for him. Strange shit can happen."

"Medina was CIA. The Agency isn't allowed to operate inside the country."

Like rules—and laws—weren't broken every day, the second man thought wearily. Sure, the Agency wasn't supposed to operate within its own borders. Did anyone who wasn't naive as hell think it didn't happen anyway? Unofficially, of course. He didn't even bother to reply to that nonsense, just said soothingly, "Looking for Medina isn't the same thing as

running an operation. And Medina was a contract agent, not a Company guy, so he worked for other people, too. The CIA is the least of my worries. Give them the body so they know what happened to him. You said Medina was a real hard-ass, but from what I've heard, he didn't hold a candle to his son. I'd just as soon not have Junior snooping around looking for his old man."

"I haven't heard anything about a son," the first man said, frowning in concern. He glanced at the framed photo sitting on his desk, at the beloved, smiling faces. His own family was of paramount importance to him. As a young man, he had wanted nothing more than to win his father's approval and make him proud. He didn't dare expect less from Rick Medina's son.

"Not many people have. I've only heard a few whispers about him myself, and that's because I've done some work in the business."

"Can you find out where he lives, what he looks like?"

"No can do." The second man shook his head. "I don't have the contacts, and even if I did, a request like that would have me dead within an hour. I'm telling you, let it drop here. Don't do anything that will draw attention to us."

"What if you made a mistake, missed a fingerprint or something?"

"I didn't. We wore gloves, got rid of the guns, burned our clothes. There's nothing to tie anyone to Medina. If you're that nervous about it, you should have used someone else to make the hit on Whitlaw."

"No one else was even getting close to him. He was too good. I needed someone just as good." That someone had been Rick Medina. Pity. An unencumbered piece of muscle would have been much simpler—no family who cared much; no cops who cared. Medina came with complications, but that couldn't be helped, especially now. At least he had gotten the job done, something all those other clowns hadn't managed to do. He had concocted a good story to put Medina on the hunt, but once the kill was made, Medina had had to be removed, because if he ever found out he had been used—well, it would have been nasty.

The first man sighed, getting up to pace slowly over to the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the carefully manicured lawn. There was nothing in this visit to excite interest, because he normally had a constant stream of visitors, people coming and going, asking favors, performing duties. Still, this whole business made him uneasy. He had thought it was finished years ago. He had learned a lesson, though: tie up all the loose

ends. Medina had been a loose end; he regretted the necessity but didn't back down from it.
"What about the men you used?" he asked, wondering if they were more loose ends.
"I can vouch for them. None of them even knew a name; they were just doing a job. I've kept everything quiet."
"Good. What about the book?"
"No sign of it."
"Damn." The word was softly breathed. As long as that book was unaccounted for, he couldn't feel safe. What sort of madness had prompted Dexter Whitlaw to record the hit, anyway? It was evidence against himself, and it wasn't as if he could include it in his body count. But Whitlaw had evidently decided he had less to lose than someone else if the truth came out, and that the someone else would pay any amount to get that book. He had almost been right. When one had other options, one wasn't bound by the rules. "Where could he have put it?"
"I doubt he would have used a safe deposit box," the second man said, thinking. His name was Hayes. He was big, stocky, unremarkable in looks, just one more slightly overweight, slightly unkempt man who hadn't kept in shape. His gaze was remote and intelligent. "He moved around too much, and he would have wanted it where he could get to it fairly easily, plus you have to pay for the boxes every year. Same thing with lockers in bus stations. Most likely, he left it with someone he trusted, maybe a friend but probably someone in his family."
"Whitlaw was estranged from his family." This was said with distinct disapproval. "He walked out on his wife and daughter twenty years ago."
"What was their last known address?" Hayes asked promptly.
"Someplace in West Virginia, but they're no longer there. I learned they moved to Ohio years ago, but I haven't located them yet."
"Whitlaw might have known where they live. He could have sent the book to them before he started trying to blackmail you. Set everything up in advance."
"That's true, that's true." Clearly disturbed by that possibility, the first man turned back from the windows.
"Have you traced their social security numbers, checked for tax records?"
"That would leave tracks—"

Hayes sighed. Yes, it would—if done officially, through the proper channels, which was the stupid way to do anything. "Give me their names and birthdays. I'll get the information—and I won't leave tracks."
"If you're certain—"
"I'm certain."
"Don't take any action without talking to me first. I don't want two women to be needlessly killed."
After Hayes had left, Senator Stephen Lake left his office and climbed the wide, curving staircase that swept in a graceful arch up to the second floor. The luxurious thickness of the carpeting silenced his steps; the polished ebony banister gleamed like jet in the summer sunlight. The air was sweet with fresh flowers cut from his own lovingly tended gardens—lovingly tended by the gardener, that is—and he paused a moment to inhale the wonderful, indefinable essence of gracious living.
He loved this house, had from the moment he was old enough to appreciate the beauty of it and everything it represented. He remembered, as a child, watching his father stoop and trail his fingers across the glossy, newly inlaid marble in the foyer, relishing the stone for both its own beauty and its testimony to his wealth and, more subtly, his power. Stephen's chest had felt full and tight with emotion as he'd absorbed his father's emotions and known he felt exactly the same way. He still did. He appreciated the lead crystal chandeliers, the exquisite furniture handmade by Europe's finest, the exotic woods from Africa and South America, the paintings in their gold-leaf frames, the ankle-thick carpeting that kept the chill of the Minnesota winters from his feet.
He had grown up playing on the beautifully manicured lawn, he and his older brother, William, taking turns being cowboys and Indians, pretending long sticks were rifles, and yelling "Bang bang!" at each other until they were hoarse. Those had been great days. The cook had always had fresh, cold lemonade to refresh them after a day of hard play in the hot summer, or hot chocolate to warm them after romping in the snow. Inside, there had been the rich smell of their father's cigars, a smell the senator still associated with power; the sweet fragrance of his mother's perfume as she hugged him and William and kissed their cheeks, and he had wriggled with delight. "My little princes," she had called them.
Their mother had loved them unconditionally. Their father had been more stern, harder to please. A frown from him could ruin the boys' day. William

had found it easier to please their father than Stephen had. William was older, of course, but he was naturally more careful, more responsible. Stephen had been a little shy, more intelligent than his confident brother but less able to show that intelligence. William had often stepped between Stephen and punishment, deflecting the scoldings and loss of privileges that would have come his brother's way, because their father had often been impatient with Stephen's shyness.

Stephen had grown up wanting nothing more than to please his father, to be the kind of man of whom he could be proud. He wanted to *be* his father, a man people both feared and respected, whose smallest frown brought instant obedience but whose word could be trusted implicitly. William, however, had always been the crown prince, the heir, and so William had garnered most of their father's coveted attention. Stephen couldn't say their father's trust was misplaced, because William had been… wonderful. That was the only word for him. There hadn't been a mean, nasty bone in his body, and he worked doggedly to overcome his perceived failings. Even with all the responsibility on his shoulders, he had always been cheerful, smiling, ready to enjoy a joke or to play one.

William's death at the age of twenty-seven had devastated the family. Stephen's mother had never recovered from the shock, and her health began to deteriorate steadily; she died four years later. As for his father, he was shattered. Pushing aside his own grief, Stephen had tried even harder to make his father proud of him. He drove himself all through law school, studying longer and harder than his classmates, and graduated first in his class. He married a sweet, lovely young woman from an extremely wealthy New Hampshire family and devoted himself to being a faithful, considerate, loving husband. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and Stephen watched his stern father totally melt over his grandchildren.

Stephen began his political career by running for local office, as his father advised; that was how to build a base of loyal constituents. After serving a term as district attorney, he ran for the state legislature as a representative, then for the state senate. With twelve years of state and local politics under his belt, he seized the opportunity when a U.S. representative from the state retired, and he ran for his office. He discharged his duties as conscientiously as possible, and bided his time, watching the senators from his state for signs of weakness. When one became involved in a sex scandal, Stephen made his move and ran against him in the next election. He became a

United States Senator at the age of forty-one and steadily built his power base and his reputation.

Shaking himself from his reverie, Senator Lake climbed the remaining stairs and walked down the wide upper hall to the suite of rooms at the back of the house. He knocked lightly, then opened the door. "How is he today?"

"He ate well," said the nurse with a soft smile. Cinda Blockett was a sweet creature, as tender with his father as she would be with a newborn. Her husband, James, also a registered nurse, worked the first shift with her and provided the muscle necessary for caring for a total invalid.

James had carried Walter William Lake to the huge, overstuffed recliner positioned in front of the windows, with a perfect view of the sweeping grounds and the glittering blue lake beyond, patrolled by majestic peacocks. Stephen pulled up a chair beside his father and took a gnarled, wasted hand in his. "Good morning, Father," he said gently, waited a second to see if there would be any signal of recognition such as a blink of the eye, then began to talk about the latest news, both on television and in the newspaper. He didn't restrict himself to politics but talked business, too, and science. Every time a space shuttle went up, Stephen kept his father informed. He didn't know if any of what he was saying was actually received and processed in the working portions of his father's brain, but he never gave up.

He sat with his father for more than an hour, spelling Cinda and James so they could have a leisurely meal. His father was never left alone. Three shifts of nurses cared for him, kept him fed, exercised his wasted muscles, turned and moved him so his fragile skin didn't rot with bedsores. They made his existence as comfortable as possible, playing his favorite music, turning on the television to the programs he had liked, reading aloud to him or playing books on tape. If there were any cognitive parts of his father's brain still functioning after the massive stroke that had felled him eleven years before, Stephen hoped he was doing enough to keep those parts stimulated, to make his father as happy as possible under the circumstances. He was now one of the most powerful, most respected people in Washington, and he would never know if his father was proud of him.

When Cinda and James returned, and Stephen left his father's suite, Raymond was waiting for him just as the senator had known he would be. Raymond Hilley, sixty-nine years old, had worked for the Lake family for fifty years. Stephen couldn't remember a time when Raymond hadn't been

there, his father's right-hand man, almost an uncle to him and William when they were growing up. When William died, Raymond had sat down on the floor and cried, huge tears running down his battered face.
Eleven years ago, when the stroke incapacitated Walter William Lake and Stephen became the head of the family, Raymond's skills and unswerving loyalty had transferred to him.
"Let's go down to my office," the senator said, clapping his hand on Raymond's shoulder as his father had always done, a sign of friendship and acceptance.
Coffee was waiting for them, brought in when Cinda and James finished their lunch and returned to the suite. With Hayes, the senator had sat behind his desk while Hayes took one of the chairs opposite, but with Raymond, he went over to the sitting area, and they took chairs as friends, as family. He poured Raymond's coffee first, putting in three teaspoons of sugar and diluting it with milk until the coffee barely had a tan color. He took his own coffee with a little cream, just a drop really; his father had drank it black, but even after all this time, Stephen couldn't give up that tiny drop of rich cream to mellow the bite of the coffee. Sometimes he was embarrassed by his weakness for cream in his coffee; it seemed to say he was a watered-down version of his father, a milquetoast—yes, that was a better comparison, both in sound and in image. He knew better, of course. He had made some hard decisions in his life, not the least of which concerned Dexter Whitlaw and Rick Medina. He didn't feel good about what he had done, but neither did he doubt the necessity.
Raymond sipped the excessively sweet brew in his cup, sighing in pleasure. "I followed him to the airport," he reported in his gravelly voice, which sounded as if he had once eaten glass—and liked it. "He didn't stop, didn't use his cell phone, just went straight to the check-in counter and then to the gate."
"He could have called someone from the gate."
"He wouldn't do that. Too much chance of being overheard."
That made sense, and Stephen accepted the statement from Raymond as he would not have from anyone else.
"If you don't trust him…" Raymond said slowly, letting his words trail off, inviting the senator to pick up the thought just as he had done forty years ago when he was teaching the boys how to hunt and they had to anticipate what a big elk would do.

"Then don't use him," the senator said, and sighed. "I wouldn't, but I need his contacts. He's a good buffer, and I don't believe he would talk. After all, his livelihood depends on his reputation. If he couldn't keep a confidence, no one would use him."
"He has the situation handled?"
"The blackmailer has been taken care of; there are still, however, certain loose ends."
"Loose ends are like loose shoestrings; they'll trip you up every time."
Raymond sipped his coffee again, his big hands handling the transparent china cup with a certain delicacy.
"Steps are being taken."
"Good. Mr. Walter… well, I wouldn't want anything to come out that might hurt him. He's a great man. He did some things people might not understand, not knowing the whole story. He doesn't deserve to have people saying bad things about him, especially now when he can't protect himself."
"No," the senator said, and sighed. "He doesn't."
"Caucasian male, seventy-one and three-quarter inches tall, weight one hundred eighty-two pounds, age fifty to fifty-five. Gray hair, brown eyes. Distinguishing marks: a 'Semper Fi' tattoo on the left forearm, a surgical scar four inches in length on his lower right abdomen, a two-inch keloid scar diagonally on the right quadriceps—"
Marc tuned out the assistant medical examiner's detailing, for the record, of the victim's many scars. None of the scars looked like a bullet wound, but several of them did look as if he'd had some close encounters with sharp blades. Most of the scars, though, were the sort people collected just going through life: childhood falls that cut the knees, various nicks and scrapes. The most important detail, for purposes of identification, was the tattoo. Not only had he been in the military, but the tattoo narrowed down the branch of service for them. They would soon have a real name for this John Doe.
As predicted, the morning television news announcers had waxed eloquent, and in rounded funereal tones so listeners would know how serious the issue was, about the early-morning murder in the Quarter. The New Orleans murder statistics were trotted out again, followed by a noncommittal statement from the police department, followed by a passionate statement from the mayor to the effect that the citizens—and tourists—of New Orleans *must* and *would* feel safe in the city. It was a good campaign slogan; he had used it before.

Marc dispassionately watched the autopsy. He had a strong stomach and had never puked the way some detectives did. Like the medical examiners, he could ignore the smells and concentrate on what the body told them. Working homicides, it was a handy knack to have.

This body wouldn't have much to say. A bullet in the brain was pretty obvious. The where, when, and how weren't in question, just the who and why.

The young women who had discovered the body hadn't been any help. None of them could remember seeing anyone else, period, either walking or driving. The shooting had to have happened just minutes before, but no one, not even anyone living close by, had heard a thing.

The victim's personal effects, such as they were, hadn't yielded anything except a wedding ring, carefully sewn inside the cuff of his pants. Maybe he had stolen it, but it had fit his ring finger, and he had kept it carefully hidden, which told Marc he had valued the ring beyond what money it would bring in a pawn shop. The guy had once been married, maybe still was.

"You're getting on my nerves, Chastain," the doctor said testily, clicking off the microphone so he could speak off the record. He was a busy man, impatient and harried, and he seldom spoke personally to the detectives who attended the autopsies.

Marc lifted one eyebrow in silent question.

"That's what you're doing." A stained scalpel was jabbed in his direction. "You just stand there, quiet as a rock and about as active. You don't interrupt me to ask questions, you don't turn green and gag, you just watch. Damn it, you hardly even blink. What do you do, go into a trance?"

"If I have any questions, I ask them when you're finished," Marc said mildly.

The scalpel jabbed once more. "You're still doing it. You didn't even change expressions. Do me a favor; do something human before I start thinking you're a robot." Behind him, his assistant smothered a laugh.

"If you're in doubt, when you're finished, I'll let you watch me piss." The offer was made totally deadpan, and this time the assistant didn't manage to control the laugh.

"Thanks, but I'll pass on that wonderful opportunity."

"I don't make the offer to just anyone. You're the only man who's ever heard it, so you might want to reconsider. Just don't get any wrong ideas about my

sexual orientation."
Behind her mask, the assistant's eyes were sparkling. The doctor shot her a sour look. "Don't even think about volunteering for the job."
"Too late," she admitted cheerfully.
Marc winked at her.
"Forget I said anything," the doctor muttered, and switched the microphone on again, putting an end to the discussion. Pity. Marc had enjoyed needling him, and evidently the assistant had enjoyed the exchange, too. It was the first time Marc had seen the brusque doctor interrupt any autopsy to make a personal remark.
Just for the pure hell of it, he stuck his hands in his pockets and began jingling the change. After two minutes, the microphone was clicked off again. "Forget I said anything," the doctor snapped again. "And stop jingling your change, damn it! You sound like Santa Claus."
Marc shrugged and took his hands out of his pockets, but his eyes were glittering with amusement.
Sometime later, the body of the victim had told them that except for being dead, he was in remarkably good shape. No sign of disease in any of the major organs, no blockage in his veins, good muscle definition, no needle marks on his arms or between his toes to indicate intravenous drug use. The toxicology report wasn't back, and it might indicate some other type of drug use, but overall the victim looked too healthy to have been a user.
Cause of death was a gunshot wound to the head, fired at medium range, no exit wound. The penetrating missile was a .22-caliber bullet, which had also sent several bone fragments through the soft brain tissue. The kinetic energy of the tumbling projectiles had destroyed massive amounts of tissue, like a tidal wave rolling through the brain and smashing everything it touched.
X rays and photographs of the victim's teeth had been sent to the Marine Corps for identification. Depending on how efficient they were, the victim's identity should be forthcoming within a few days. Marc would begin trying to locate any family, and maybe, just maybe, within a week or two the poor guy could have a burial.
He was surprised when the identification came back the next day. Someone in the vast tangle of military and civilian bureaucracy was on the ball; either that, or by pure chance the victim's teeth had been in the first batch checked for a cross-match. There was a name now: Dexter Alvin Whitlaw, from Keysburg, West Virginia. Next of kin was a wife, Shirley Jeanette Allen

Whitlaw, and a daughter, Karen Simone Whitlaw. Marc had their social security numbers and their last known address. He could find them.

The message light was blinking when Karen got home from work. She was tempted not to listen to the messages, just to take a quick shower and fall into bed. Since she'd sold the house and moved into an apartment four months ago, the nights had seemed even more lonely; after working all day, she hadn't had either the energy or the interest to do much unpacking, and a lot of her things were still in boxes, which made her feel as if she were living in a sparsely furnished motel room—or a warehouse. The rooms seemed to echo, intensifying her sense of being alone, of missing Jeanette. She hadn't been sleeping or eating well, either, and was losing weight. In an effort to jar herself out of her depression, she had switched shifts with one of the other nurses and was now working nights. The strategy had worked, to some degree. She was so tired when she dragged home early in the mornings that she literally fell into bed and slept like a log. After the first disastrous day, when she had been awakened eleven times by telemarketers and wrong numbers, she learned to turn off the phone.

Lately, she had been trying to stay up for several hours after getting home, to mimic the routine of daytime jobs, but not today. This was the morning after the night from hell. She wanted nothing more than to get off her aching feet and just sleep.

She worked on the surgical floor, where noncritical patients were placed after surgery. They were all in pain, but everyone had a different tolerance for pain. Some were so stoic only their blood pressure would indicate whether or not they were hurting; others screamed bloody murder at the least discomfort. Tonight had been a night for the screamers. They *hurt*, damn it, and wanted something *now*: another pill, turn up the morphine drip, anything. Of course, the nurses couldn't exceed the doctors' prescribed dosages without authorization; all they could do was take the heat. Tracking down a doctor in the middle of the night to authorize more pain medication was usually an exercise in futility; the nurses practically needed a team of bloodhounds to track down the doctor on duty, who had a genius for being somewhere else and not hearing his page.

Then a patient, a thirty-two-year-old mother of two, had gone sour on them. She was in for a ruptured appendix and had been very sick for several days but was recovering. Tonight, just after supper, she had been walking to the bathroom and suddenly slumped to the floor. A blood clot had lodged in her

pulmonary artery, and she was gone, despite all their efforts. It happened sometimes, but the shock never really lessened. The only thing that had changed was that Karen had learned how to work through the shock, to keep going, to push it away. All nurses and doctors had to learn that, or they couldn't function.

But the kicker was when some idiot let a nineteen-year-old boy, wacked out on drugs, escape from the psych unit, where he had been taken because of the security. Some security. And where had the kid headed? Straight to the surgical floor, where all the good dope could be found.

He had shed his hospital gown somewhere along the way. Stark naked, his pupils so contracted he looked like an alien, hair standing out in wild tangles, he had wrecked the desk looking for drugs. Finally, he had found the locked cabinet, but Judy Camliffe, the floor charge nurse, had the key in her pocket. Security got there as he was trying to tear the metal doors apart. Unfortunately, subduing a naked man is tricky; there are no clothes to grab, and bare skin is slippery. The kid fought free so many times Karen lost count. They wrestled in the halls, upsetting carts, dumping files and charts everywhere, waking patients who then either became alarmed or decided they needed more pain medication. By the time the kid was finally subdued, the surgical floor was a wreck. By the time the nurses finished with their shift, so were they.

The message was probably from a salesman or a charity; she hadn't had time yet to make friends with any of her new neighbors, and all of her other friends were nurses who knew what shift she worked and wouldn't call to chat. She couldn't think of any remotely urgent reason she should listen to her messages, but still she dropped her bag and went over to the machine. She wouldn't be able to sleep knowing that red light was blinking.

Out of habit, she picked up the notepad and pen she always kept by the phone, just in case there might actually be a call she needed to return. She punched the play button and listened to the tape rewinding.

After some whirring and a couple of clicks, a drawling baritone voice broke the quiet of the room. For some reason, her breath gave a little hitch. The voice was somehow beguiling, with warm, dark, pure masculine tones that quivered along her nerve endings, almost as if she had been touched. Even disguised by the drawl, there was a hard edge of authority evident as well. He said, "Miss Whitlaw, this is Detective Marc Chastain with the New

Orleans Police Department. I need to talk to you concerning your father. You can reach me at—"

He recited the number, but Karen was so taken aback she didn't write down a single digit. Hastily, she punched the stop button, then replay. When the whirring and clicking stopped, she listened again to the brief message and once again was so distracted by his voice that she almost missed the number a second time. She scribbled it down, then stared at the pad in a fog of fatigue and bemusement.

Dexter was evidently in trouble and thought she would bail him out. No, he thought *Jeanette* would bail him out; he couldn't know his wife had been dead for six months. Had the detective said "*Miss* Whitlaw" or "*Mrs*. Whitlaw"? His drawl had slurred the word.

She couldn't resist. She replayed the message one more time, as much to hear that voice as to determine if he had thought he was calling her or her mother. Listening closely, she thought he said "Miss," which was politically incorrect of him, but she still wasn't certain.

She didn't want to call. She didn't want to hear about Dexter's troubles, and she had no intention of bailing him out of anything, anyway. All she wanted to do was get off her feet and go to sleep.

She thought of her mother, how Jeanette had taken him back time and again, how she was always there if he needed her. *He* had never been there for *them*, but Jeanette had never wavered in her devotion.

Suddenly, Karen felt swamped by an exhaustion that had nothing to do with physical tiredness and everything to do with a lifetime of bitterness, of wariness, and these last lonely six months of grieving for her mother. She was tired of being dragged down by her father's desertion. It was done, and nothing she could do would change it. She didn't want to be one of those people who spent their entire lives whining about their past troubles, as if that excused them from responsible behavior in the present. She had loved her mother dearly, still loved her and would continue to grieve for her, but it was time to get on with life. Instead of letting the empty apartment depress her, she should get her things out of the boxes she had packed them in to move, and make a home here.

Maybe she would take more classes, get her master's degree in nursing. She might go into the critical care field. It was challenging but fascinating for those who could stand the pressure. She was calm during emergencies, able

to think fast on her feet, both necessary characteristics in a good critical care nurse.
She took a deep breath. For the first time since Jeanette's death, she felt in control of herself, of her life. She had to deal with Dexter, if only for her mother's sake, so she might as well make the call. Without giving herself any time perhaps to change her mind, she picked up the receiver and punched Detective Chastain's number.
Unconsciously, she held her breath, bracing herself to hear his voice. How silly of her, to let herself to be affected by a man's voice on the telephone, but recognizing the ridiculousness of her reaction didn't mitigate the strength of it.
The phone rang several times, but no one answered it. Surely detectives didn't keep bankers' hours, she thought.
She glanced at her wristwatch. Seven forty-five. "Idiot," she muttered under her breath, and hung up. Louisiana was in the central time zone, an hour behind Ohio. Detective Marc Chastain was definitely not in his office at six forty-five in the morning.
She couldn't stay awake until a reasonable time for him to be there. She couldn't stay vertical another five minutes. Dexter would have to wait.
But she would call. When she woke up this afternoon, she would call.
That decision made, she stumbled into the bedroom. Fatigue made her clumsy as she undressed. Yawning again, she stretched out between the cool sheets and sighed with bliss, arching her aching feet and wriggling her toes.
She tried to imagine how Detective Chastain looked. Voices almost never matched appearances; the detective was probably a pot-bellied good old boy, edging toward retirement, with a couple of grown kids. But he had a voice like dark honey, and it was with her as she drifted to sleep.
The shrill ringing of the telephone jarred her awake. Confused, startled, Karen bolted upright in bed, then groaned as she realized she had forgotten to turn off the ringer before she went to sleep. The digital clock taunted her with big red numerals: nine-thirty.
She grabbed the receiver just to silence the obnoxious noise. "Hello," she said, her voice foggy with sleep.
"Miss Whitlaw?"
That voice. Just two words, but recognition tingled down her spine. She cleared her throat. "Yes."

"This is Detective Chastain, New Orleans Police Department. I left a message for you yesterday concerning your father."
"Yes." She started to say she had intended to return his call this afternoon, but he was already speaking again, the warm tones noticeably cooler.
"I'm sorry, Miss, but your father was killed two days ago in a street shooting."
Shock made her go numb. Her hand tightened on the receiver until her knuckles turned white. "Two days?" Why hadn't someone called before?
"He didn't have any ID on him. We identified him by his military dental records." He kept talking, saying something about her coming to New Orleans and verifying Dexter's identity. He was brisk, businesslike, and Karen fought to organize her scattered wits.
"I'll try to catch a flight today," she finally said. "If not—"
"The airlines have special arrangements for emergencies," he cut in. "You can be here this afternoon."
If you want to. She heard his unspoken accusation in his clipped tone, and resentment stirred. This man didn't know anything about her; who was he to stand in judgment on her relationship, or lack of it, with her father?
"I'll call you when I get there," she said, anger making her voice tight.
"Just come to the Eighth District on Royal Street."
Karen repeated the address, then said, "Thank you for calling." She hung up before he could say anything else.
She pulled her legs up and rested her head on her knees. Dexter was dead. She tried to absorb the news, but it was too unreal. She knew she should be feeling something other than shock, but she was empty. How could she mourn a man she barely knew? It was his absence, not his presence, that had shaped her life.
Throwing the sheet back, she got out of bed. She felt like a walking zombie, but she had to make some calls, arrange a flight, pack a bag. Only duty drove her, but duty carried a big whip.
Her father was dead. The thought kept reverberating in her mind as she stood under a cold shower. She hadn't really known him, and now she never would.

Chapter 6

"Karen Whitlaw, Karen Whitlaw." A man named Carl Clancy stood at the pay phone—it had taken forever to find one with a directory—and ran his finger down the tissue-thin page. It was just after noon, and the sun was baking him. He shifted position so his body blocked the glare from the paper. No Karen Whitlaw was listed, but he found a K. S. Whitlaw. He would bet that was her. Single women always used their initials; the practice was so common they might as well go ahead and have their full names printed, except for the simple precaution of protecting their full names.

He dropped some change into the slot and dialed the number. After four rings, he heard the click of an answering machine, and a pleasant female voice said, "You've reached 555-0677. Please leave a message."

Smart girl, he thought with approval. She hadn't given out her name to any jackass who happened to dial her number. People did that all the time, gave out their names on their answering machine messages, even put signs on their mailboxes or in their yards announcing "The Hendersons," or whatever. Fools. All some burglar had to do then was look up Henderson in the phone book until he came to that address, then call to see if anyone was home. If no one answered, he could waltz right in, secure in the knowledge he was alone.

In this case, however, Carl already knew her name. The call had just verified her address. She was probably at work; the information he'd received on her said she was a nurse. He could take his time, give the house a thorough toss, find the book Hayes wanted. If he couldn't find it, Hayes said, torch the house, just to be on the safe side. Maybe the book was in a safe deposit box, but people were seldom that cautious with valuable items; they just found what they thought was a clever hiding place somewhere in their home.

Returning to his car, he took out the city map he had bought and located Karen Whitlaw's street. He could be there in fifteen minutes, max; plenty of time to do the job and catch his late-afternoon flight.

He drove through the neighborhood, looking for Neighborhood Watch signs and neighbors who were out gardening or mowing their lawns. The houses were smallish and past their prime. He saw only a few children playing, and most of the cars in the driveways were older sedans, which told him that the majority of the houses were owned by old people whose kids had long since grown up and left or young couples who had bought their first houses and

hadn't yet started their families. The houses with no cars in the driveway would belong to the young couples, who were at work.
That was both good and bad. There weren't many people at home in the neighborhood, but those who were would likely be old people. Old folks were nosy. They knew what cars belonged in the neighborhood and what cars didn't, and they didn't have anything better to do with their time than peer out windows.
Well, a few old folks couldn't keep him out of a house he wanted into. The trick, if he was seen, was to look as average as possible and to act as if he had every right to be there. Even better was if no one saw him. He was good at not being seen; that was why Hayes had picked him for the job.
He drove around until he found a convenience store and parked the rental car as far to the side as he could. In case the clerk was watching out the window, he went inside and bought a soft drink, taking care not to make eye contact or do anything that would make him memorable. Leaving the car there, he briskly walked the three blocks to Karen Whitlaw's house.
When he reached her street, he began cutting through backyards, using shrubbery and fences for cover. People put all sorts of junk in their backyards, which was great for concealment. Generally, his biggest problem was dogs. Dogs were a pain in the ass. He could hear one of the little bastards now, yapping its head off inside the house he was now behind. Carl settled into place behind a bush, remaining motionless until the yapping ceased.
Finally, he reached the Whitlaw house. Getting in was a piece of cake. The lock on the back door wouldn't keep out a determined ten-year-old; he opened it within seconds. God, if people only knew.
He did a walk-through of the house first, checking the most obvious hiding places: the freezer compartment of the refrigerator, on top of cabinets, under chairs. He didn't know exactly what the book looked like; no one did. Just look for a little notebook, Hayes had said. It'll be old and dirty.
There weren't any old, dirty notebooks in any of the obvious hiding places. Methodically, Carl began tossing the house. He looked in every drawer, took every drawer out and checked for anything taped behind or underneath. He felt the curtains to see if anything had been sewn into the hems, examined all the cushions and pillows for a resewn seam or any suspicious lumps. He didn't wreck the place; that was for malicious amateurs. The real art was to get in and out without leaving a trace of his

presence. He didn't slash the furniture, and he put everything back in place after he had examined it.
There were framed photos sitting around, some of them of a smiling young couple. He assumed the pretty little blonde in the pictures was Miss Whitlaw. He wouldn't mind having her as his nurse, especially if she sat on his lap the way she was doing with some grinning idiot in one of the photos. The grinning idiot was the guy in the other pictures; evidently, he was the man of the moment.
In the bedroom, he found men's clothing in the closet and shaving gear in the bathroom. He clucked his tongue. Miss Karen had a live-in boyfriend, or at least one who stayed over regularly enough to leave some of his clothes here. Maybe she had even married him, recently enough that the number in the phone book was still listed in her name.
The house was small; he was efficient. Within two hours, he had covered it, and the book wasn't there unless she had gotten real clever and hidden it under the house or, somehow, in the ceiling. He found the trap door into the attic area and peered around, but everything was dark and dusty, and it was more than a hundred degrees up there. Nor was he inclined to crawl around under the house; that wasn't a good hiding place, because it was so dank. The moisture ruined everything.
He was certain the book wasn't on the premises, but Hayes's orders had been to burn the place if he didn't find the book. He shrugged. Orders were orders, and Hayes was a careful man. Carl set about following those orders. In his opinion, the best way to burn down a house was a grease fire in the kitchen; there weren't any accelerants to raise suspicion, and it always looked like an accident. Fires started in kitchens all the time.
He whistled softly as he set to work. Bless her, Miss Karen had fried up some bacon that morning and left the pan of grease sitting out to cool. Using a towel, he turned on the gas burner and set the pan on top of it, then arranged the towel so that it was close enough to catch fire when the grease blazed up. He made a silent bet with himself, then opened the cabinet door closest to the stove. Yep, that was where she kept the cooking oil, in both bottles and spray cans, right where they were closest to the heat and were most likely to catch fire. She couldn't have made it any easier for him if she had tried.
Professional that he was, he didn't leave without knowing he had done his job. While he waited for the grease to flame up, he took a battery out of the

smoke detector and reversed it, then put the detector back in place. He hated listening to that damn shrill noise.

Smoke was filling up the kitchen pretty good now. He opened all the doors in the house so the fire could get good air flow and spread more quickly. He didn't enjoy burning the house; he even regretted upsetting the pretty little blonde. It would hurt her to lose all her pictures and things. But a job was a job, and this wasn't personal.

Crouching on the floor to stay out of the deadly smoke, he waited until the pan on the stove flamed with a sudden *whoosh*. The towel caught fire immediately, and tongues of flame leaped up the cabinet. Carl quickly left the house then and took his usual precautions returning to the car. He glanced back occasionally and at last was rewarded by the gust of black smoke that meant either the roof or a wall had been breached by the flames. It was tempting to drive by the house to make certain it was engulfed, but that was a bad idea, and he knew it. Never go back. As old as the house was, and the way he had opened up all the rooms, the fire would spread too quickly for anything to be saved.

He checked his watch when he heard the first siren in the distance: ten minutes. Too long. Houses burned much faster than people realized; they thought they would have several minutes in which to rescue their treasured possessions. Wrong. By the time most fires were noticed, the people inside had about thirty seconds in which to get out. The only way he had been able to remain as long as he had was because he had been aware of the fire from the beginning, he had stayed low, and he had been near the door. By the time the fire department actually got to the house, every room would be involved. They would concentrate on keeping the flames from catching the trees on fire and spreading to the other houses.

He gave a mental shrug as he drove away. He had both failed and succeeded. He didn't have the book, but if it had been anywhere in that house, it was now totally destroyed. He had carried out Hayes's instructions, though they seemed excessive to him. He'd tell Hayes he didn't think the book was there, and what Hayes did then was his own business. Carl had done his job.

The dented, rusted pickup rolled to a stop at the end of the narrow dirt road, and two lanky teenage boys bailed out. The dead end widened into a large open area, the left side of which was a rocky pit. Two rough-hewn sawhorses were positioned in front of the pit, a plank placed across them.

On the plank sat an assortment of tin cans, and the ground beyond was littered with more.
From the gun rack behind the seat, the two boys took a pair of .22 rifles.
"Man, Shavon was all over Justin last night," one said, shaking his sandy head. "She was so shit-faced I bet she ain't woke up yet."
"And if she has, I bet she wishes she hadn't," the other boy replied, and they both laughed as they expertly slotted .22 longs into their rifles. "Does her daddy know she drinks?"
"I don't see how he can help it, considering she goes home from her dates drunk all the time." Disapproval colored the boy's voice. "I ain't got nothing against drinking, but Shavon stays drunk as much as she does sober. She's gonna wreck that car of hers one day and kill somebody, and then there's gonna be trouble."
"Her daddy's just as bad. I guess she comes by it honest."
The two positioned themselves, their sneakers toeing a shallow rut in the dusty red ground that revealed how often they indulged in tin can plinking. They began firing methodically, and one by one the tin cans went spinning. When all of the cans were down, the two trudged to the sawhorses and began resetting the cans for another round. As they walked back, the sunlight glared on something shiny just beyond the clearing, making one boy squint his eyes. "Damn, that's bright! There's something behind that big bush."
"Looks like a car," the other replied, craning his neck. He was the taller of the two. "Let's go see."
"Reckon somebody's back there making out?"
"If there is, bet his pecker lost its starch when we started shooting." They snickered at the idea. A quick look darted between them, and the taller boy held a finger to his lips. They tiptoed toward the bush, barely containing their snorts of laughter at the thought of catching some of their friends doing something they shouldn't be doing. Or maybe it was some of their friends' *parents*, which would be even better.
The two boys moved with the silence of longtime hunters. When they got closer to the huge bush, they could make out the roof outline of a car, and the tall boy made a motion with his hand indicating they should slip around to the rear. They did, and when the rear of the car came into view, they stared in disappointment at the Louisiana plates. Even more disappointing, no one was visible in the car.

"Shit, all this sneaking for nothing."
"Shh! Maybe they're layin' down in the seat."
"No way." The boy straightened. "Look, the windows are rolled up. Ain't nobody making out in a car in this heat with the windows up."
"Maybe the car's stolen, and somebody stashed it out here."
They looked around, strong young hands tightening on their rifles. Making no effort at stealth now, they walked up to the car. It was a white Pontiac four-door, coated with a layer of red dust. The tall boy leaned down and peered in the driver's-side window, then jerked back so violently he stumbled and almost fell. "Shit! There's a dead man in there!"

Karen felt the heat as soon as she stepped from the jet into the extended accordion of the jetway. The air was heavy with humidity, and sweat popped out on her forehead as she lugged her carry-on bag up the slight slope. She had dressed in a short-sleeved summer suit that felt too cool while she was on the plane, but now she was sweltering. Her legs were baking inside her panty hose, and sweat trickled down her back.
Detective Chastain had been right about the airlines; she had made one call, spoken to a sympathetic, calmly efficient reservations agent, and found herself scurrying in order to get packed and to the airport in time to catch the flight. She hadn't had time to eat before getting on the plane, and her stomach had clenched in revolt at the thought of eating the turkey sandwich served during the flight. She disliked turkey anyway; there was no way she could eat it with her stomach tied in knots and her head throbbing with tension.
The headache was still with her. It throbbed in time with every step she took as she followed the signs to the baggage claim area. She had never felt the way she felt now, not even when her mother died. Her grief then had been sharp, overwhelming. She didn't know what she felt now. If it was grief, then it was a different variety. She felt numbed, distant, oddly fragile, as if she had crystallized inside and the least bump would shatter her.
The weight of the bag pulled at her arm, making her shoulder ache. The air felt clammy even inside the terminal, as if the humidity seeped through the walls. She realized she hadn't called ahead to reserve a room. She stood in front of the baggage carousel, watching it whirl around with everyone's bags except hers, and wondered if she had the energy to move from the spot.

Finally, the conveyor spit out her bag. Keeping a tight grip on her carry-on, she leaned over to grab the other bag as it trundled past. A portly, balding man standing beside her said, "I'll get it for you," and deftly swung the bag off the belt.
"Thank you," Karen said, her heartfelt gratitude evident in her voice as he set the bag at her feet.
"My pleasure, Ma'am." Nodding his head, he turned back to watch for his own bags.
She tried to remember the last time a stranger had been so courteous, but nothing came to mind. The small act of kindness almost broke through the numbness that encased her.
Her taxi driver was a lean young black man wearing dreadlocks and an infectious smile. "Where you goin' this fine day?" he asked in a musical voice as he got behind the wheel after stowing her bags in the trunk.
Fine day? Ninety-eight degrees with a matching percentage of humidity was a fine day? Still, the sky was bright blue, unclouded, and even over the reek of exhaust in this island of concrete, she could catch the scent of vegetation, fresh and sweet.
"I don't have a room yet," she explained. "I need to go to the Eighth District police department on Royal Street."
"You don't wanna be carryin' your bags around in no police station," he said, shaking his head. "There's a bunch of hotels on Canal, just a few blocks from where you want to go. Why not check into one first, then walk on down to Royal? Or I can take you to a hotel right in the Quarter, but it might be hard to get a room there if you don't have a reservation."
"I don't," she said. Maybe all taxi drivers gave advice to weary travelers; she didn't know, not having traveled much. But he was right; she didn't want to lug her bags around.
"The bigger hotels, like the Sheraton or the Marriott, are more likely to have vacancies, but they're gonna be more expensive."
Karen was so exhausted that she cared more about convenience than cost.
"The Marriott," she said. She could afford a few nights in a good hotel.
"That's just two blocks from Royal. When you come out of the hotel, turn right. When you get to Royal, turn right again. The police department's a few blocks down, you can't miss it. Big yellowish place with white columns and all the patrol cars parked out by the fence. It's in all the TV shows about

New Orleans, looks like one of them old Southern mansions. I reckon cops still work there, since the cars are still there."
She leaned back and closed her eyes, letting the flow of words wash over her. If she could make it through the next few hours, she would go to bed early and get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow she would feel normal again instead of so unnervingly fragile. She didn't like the feeling. She was a healthy, energetic, calm, and competent young woman, known on the surgical floor for her level head. She was *not* an emotional basket case.
Within the hour, she was installed in a room with a huge king-size bed and a view of the Mississippi River and the French Quarter, which to her disappointment looked ramshackle, at least from the vantage point of fifteen floors up. She didn't take the time to unpack but did splash cold water on her face and brush her hair. It must be fatigue making her so pale, she thought, staring at her reflection over the sink. Her dark brown eyes looked black in comparison with the pallor of her cheeks.
The taxi driver's directions made it sound easy enough to get to the police station, no more than five or six blocks, too short a distance to bother with another taxi. The walk would help clear her head.
She almost changed her mind about walking when she stepped out into the heat. The afternoon sun burned her skin, and the thick air was difficult to breathe. She would have taken a taxi after all if the sidewalks hadn't been buzzing with people who didn't seem to notice the heat. Usually, heat didn't bother her this much, either, and the nineties weren't uncommon in Ohio during late summer.
Her stomach roiled, and she fought back a rise of nausea. Maybe she was coming down with something, she thought. That would explain how awful she felt.
But even with all her present stress, practically from the very moment she turned right off Canal onto Royal Street, she felt the charm for which the French Quarter was famous. The streets were narrow, and Royal was clogged with cars parked on both sides. The sidewalks were cracked and uneven, the buildings old and, for the most part, dilapidated. But the doors were painted with bright, festive colors, flowers bloomed in boxes, ferns and palms turned second-and third-story balconies into gardens. Intricate wrought-iron railings and gates drew the eye, and alleys were lined with lush vegetation, hinting at the gardens beyond. She caught a variety of accents and languages as she passed other people. If the circumstances had

been different, she would have loved to go into some of the exotic-looking shops.
But today she didn't have the energy to do more than place one foot in front of the other and hope the police station wasn't much farther down the street. Even on the shady side of the street, the sidewalks held the day's heat, and it was burning through the soles of her shoes.
Finally, she saw several police cars parked in front of a stately mansion; when she got close enough, she saw the sign on one of the white columns: "New Orleans Police 8th District." The building was a creamy shade that was too golden to be salmon and too pinkish to be tan. Black wrought-iron fencing surrounded the building and its immaculate landscaping. A genteel garden party wouldn't have looked out of place there.
Karen went inside the open gates and up a couple of wide, shallow steps. A massive door opened into an enormous room with blue walls and a ceiling that looked at least fifty feet high. Globed lighting fixtures, pamphlets for tourist attractions, and the general air of a museum made her wonder if she was in the right place after all.
A female police officer was sitting behind a raised desk. She seemed to be the only other person there. Karen looked up at her. "Does a Detective Chastain work here?"
"Yes, Ma'am, he does. I'll call and see if he's in. What's your name?"
"Karen Whitlaw."
The officer spoke quietly into the phone, then said to Karen, "He's in, and he said to come to his office." She pointed in the appropriate direction and recited instructions. "Take a right, and it's the third door on the left."
Ceiling fans whirled overhead as Karen followed directions; the stirring air raised chills on her arms after the furnace of the streets. She had never been in a police department before. She expected something approaching mayhem; what she found was ringing phones, people sprawled in chairs, clouds of cigarette smoke, and the odor of strong coffee. It could have been any busy, disorganized office, except for the fact that most of the people there were armed.
She found the appropriate door and knocked on it. That smooth, dark voice she remembered so well said, "Come in."
She opened the door, and her stomach twisted again, this time with pure nervousness, as she looked at the man rising to his feet. Detective Chastain wasn't what she had expected. He wasn't middle-aged, pot-bellied, or

balding. Mid-thirties, she guessed. He looked like a man who had seen too much ever to be surprised by anything again. Thick black hair was worn cropped close to his head, and he had thick eyebrows arching over narrow, glittering eyes. His skin was olive-toned, and his five o'clock shadow was heavy. A couple of inches over six feet, broad-shouldered, muscled forearms; he looked tough, maybe even mean. Something about him scared her, and she wanted to run. Only the years of discipline learned on the job kept her from doing so.

Marc stood as Karen Whitlaw stepped into his cramped office. He had the usual cop's talent for sizing up people, and he used it now, studying her with eyes that gave nothing away while he noted every detail about her. If she was distressed in any way by her father's death, she didn't show it. Her expression said that she thought this was all bullshit, but she'd get through it and then get on with her life.

Pity, he thought, assessing her again, and this time with a man's eye instead of a cop's. He didn't have much use for coldhearted people, but she was a pretty woman. Mid- to late twenties, with a face that managed to be both exotic and all-American, clearly shaped but with a slant to her cheekbones, an intriguing sultriness to her dark, slightly deep-set eyes. Better than pretty, he thought, revising his opinion. She was understated, so her looks didn't jump out at a man, but she was definitely worth a second look.

Nice shape, too; medium height, slim, with high round breasts that hadn't jiggled at all when she walked. That meant they were either very firm or she wore a killer bra. On a purely physical level, he would like to find out which it was. Steadily increasing pressure in his groin told him he would like that very much. He gave a mental shrug. It happened sometimes; he'd have a strong sexual reaction to a woman he didn't even like. Mostly he ignored the urge, because the payoff wasn't worth the cost.

He held out his hand to her. "I'm Detective Chastain."

"Karen Whitlaw." Her voice was a little throaty but as composed as her face. Her fingers were cool, her hand delicate in his, her handshake brief and firm. She had beautiful hands, he noticed, with long tapered fingers and short, unpolished, oval-shaped nails. No rings. No jewelry at all except for a serviceable wristwatch and a pair of small gold balls stuck in her earlobes. Miss Whitlaw obviously didn't believe in gilding the lily, but then she really didn't have to.

Her hair was as dark as her eyes, brushed back simply from her face. It hit her shoulders with a slight undercurl. She was neat. Businesslike. Unemotional.

It was the unemotional part he didn't like. He hadn't expected her to be sobbing, but people usually exhibited some sign of grief or shock, however controlled, at the death of a family member, estranged or not. Regret usually caused a few tears even if there was no genuine grief. He couldn't see either in this self-possessed woman.

"Sit down, please." He indicated a chair, the only chair in the tiny office other than his. It was straight-backed and didn't invite people to relax and linger.

She sat, her skirt positioned to fall at the middle of her knee. She kept both feet on the floor. She was so still she reminded him of a porcelain doll. "You said on the phone that my father's death appeared to be the result of random street violence."

"Not random," he corrected, sitting down and closing a file that had been open in front of him. "Whoever killed him meant to do it. But the reason—" He shrugged. The reason could be anything, from drugs to a dispute over a cardboard box. With no witnesses, no murder weapon, no leads of any kind, the case was dead, and no one was going to put out any more effort on it.

She sat in silence for a moment. Though he would have respected at least some show of emotion or remorse, at least she wasn't yelling at him, demanding that he find her father's killer, as if she really cared what had happened to him. Marc toyed with the idea of finding out if by chance she had taken out a large insurance policy on her father. The possibility wasn't remote; money was at the bottom of a lot of murders, though it could just as easily be over something as mundane as how a steak was cooked.

"How long has it been since you saw your father or heard from him?"

"Years." She looked as if she were about to say something else, but instead, she pressed her lips firmly together and let the single word stand.

"Are there any life insurance policies on him?"

"Not that I know of." Shocked, she realized what he was thinking.

"You didn't know where, or how, he was living?"

Karen sensed his hostility, though he kept his face impassive, his eyes hooded. Detective Marc Chastain definitely disapproved of her for some reason, but if he pursued the insurance angle, he would hit a dead end. Maybe he expected her to start screaming at him because he obviously

wasn't working very hard to find out who had murdered her father. But she hadn't expected an all-out effort. She was a nurse; she saw all too often what happened when a homeless person was the victim of a crime. Police departments nationwide worked with limited resources, and they couldn't waste their precious time or money on useless causes. Hospitals did it all the time. Triage was necessary, or everyone lost.

She could have told him that, but she was too hot, too tired, and too stressed to care what he thought. Her head was pounding. She felt as if she were about to fly apart in all directions, her emotions roiling, and the only way to handle it was to stay in control. That was the way she did it at work, when a patient died no matter how conscientious she was in her care, no matter how good the doctor was, no matter that it was a sweet-faced child or a lively old lady with a sparkle in her eye. People died all the time. She had learned how to handle it.

"He didn't keep in touch," she finally said.

"He was a Vietnam vet." Statement, not a question.

"Yes." She knew where this was leading. The disturbed vet, in need of psych care, cast out and ignored by his family because he was too much trouble, too much of an embarrassment with his moods and rages and unpredictability.

But Detective Chastain didn't say it; he didn't have to. Karen read it in his cool, narrow-eyed gaze.

"He walked out on us when I was a child," she said sharply, more sharply than she had intended. She could feel her control frazzling, feel the jagged edge of some pain she refused to let herself identify, and sternly fought her emotions back in line. There would be time enough for that later, when she was alone and this hard-faced, dark-browed man wasn't looking at her with veiled contempt.

She didn't owe him any explanations. She didn't have to reveal the pain and anger and fear of her childhood, just so he would think better of her. All she had to do was get through the next couple of days, then return to Ohio and go back to work, to the silent, empty apartment that wasn't home yet despite having lived there for four months.

"What do I have to do to claim the body?" she asked after a moment, her voice once more cool and composed.

"You have to identify him, sign some papers. I'll walk you through it. Have you made arrangements to take him back to Ohio?"

Karen sat there, stunned. She hadn't thought of that. She had been focused on getting through the funeral, but not *where* the funeral would be. She didn't have a plot in Ohio where she could bury Dexter. There wasn't room next to her mother's grave—not that she wanted that, anyway, but Jeanette would have.

Karen's hands twisted together as she tried to control the sharp jab of pain. She had let her mother down. Jeanette had asked very little from her and had given everything, but Karen had let her own resentment of her father prevent her from doing what her mother would have wanted.

"I—I didn't even think—" she said, then wished she hadn't. His expression was as lively as a rock's, but again she sensed that wave of disapproval. Regret speared through her, not because of what Detective Chastain thought of her but because she had wasted so much time feeling bitter, letting it cloud her thinking. No more.

Chastain gave a brief shrug, broad shoulders moving in a gesture that was oddly Gallic. Karen thought that maybe because she was in New Orleans, she expected everything to have a French flavor. And maybe she was even more stressed than she had realized, if she was letting unimportant details distract her. She had been trained to keep her mind on the job in front of her, not on trivia such as how a New Orleans cop shrugged.

"If you can't handle the expense of taking him back, I can help you find a burial plot here," he offered, though she could tell he hoped she would refuse. "Not in the city, that would be impossible, but a few miles out of town. Or you might consider cremation. It would be cheaper."

Cheaper. He thought she would have her father cremated because it was cheaper. She didn't have anything against cremation, if that was what someone wanted, but she couldn't help thinking of Jeanette again. Dexter should be buried beside her. She had to deal with this now, but when she got back to Ohio, she would start making arrangements to have her parents buried together. She would have to locate two plots side by side, deal with the legalities and technicalities of moving the bodies—oh, God, she couldn't think of her mother as a *body*.

She couldn't think at all; her mind was growing number by the minute. And whatever Detective Chastain's private opinion of her, he had at least offered his assistance. She was uncomfortable accepting his help, knowing he didn't like her, but right now she desperately needed it. "Thank you," she forced herself to say, her voice unusually husky. "I'm not usually so disorganized.

My mother died just a few months ago, and I'm still not—" She stopped, looking away, appalled that she was making excuses for herself.
He stood and retrieved his jacket from the back of his chair. "I'll drive you to the morgue now, if you feel up to it."
She didn't, but she stood anyway. She stared at him, wondering how he could stand wearing a jacket in this heat. She felt dizzy, both too hot and too cold at the same time, sweat trickling down her spine and raising a chill. The lazily turning ceiling fan merely stirred the warm air. She didn't understand it; she had dressed in the coolest suit she owned, but she might as well have been muffled in wool instead of cotton.
Then Detective Chastain's hand was on her arm, a warm, hard hand. She felt the calluses on his fingers, smelled the light lemony tang of his aftershave, and she had the blurred impression of a big body standing very close to her, too close, almost as if she were leaning on him. An arm was around her back, and the hand holding her arm forced her back down onto the chair, the strength in his grip somehow reassuring. "Sit here," he ordered quietly. "Put your head down, and take deep breaths. I'll get you something cold to drink."
She did take the deep breaths, but she thought that if she bent over to put her head down, she would just keep going until she was on the floor. So she sat motionless, her eyes closed, as he left the small office. From beyond the open door, she could hear people talking, telephones ringing, papers rustling. There was a lot of cursing, some of it sharp and angry, some uttered in lazy, liquid accents that almost made her forget the content of the words.
Cops. Nurses who worked the emergency and trauma units were around a lot of cops, but except for some periods of training, she had always been a floor nurse, so the world of a cop was alien to her. Her mind drifting, she listened to them talk: hard, profane, callous, and yet curiously concerned. Cops and nurses had a lot in common, she thought sleepily. They had to harden themselves against heartbreaking details but still care about the overall situation.
"Here you go."
She hadn't heard him return, but suddenly an icy soft drink can was pressed into her hand. She opened her eyes and blinked at it. Usually, she drank decaffeinated diet soda, but this was the real stuff, chock full of sugar and caffeine.

"Drink it," he said. Evidently, it was an order, not a suggestion, because he lifted her hand and tipped the can to her mouth.
She was forced to swallow, childlike, and flashed him a look of resentment. He met it with a sort of bland insistence that once again made her think of a rock. Detective Chastain was about as yielding. With a flash of insight, she thought that he would be relentless when going after something he wanted. She would hate to be a criminal with Chastain on her trail.
The soda fizzed on her tongue, tart and sweet at the same time, and it was so cold she could feel it slide down her esophagus. He made her take another swallow before deciding she could manage on her own, but even then, he moved less than a foot away to prop against the edge of his desk. He stretched out long, muscular legs clad in lightweight olive slacks, his loafer-shod feet just inches from her own much smaller shoes. She pulled her feet back a little, oddly disturbed, her stomach clenching in a reaction that was almost like fear, which was ridiculous. She didn't fear Chastain; despite his attitude, she was even grateful to him.
"Drink all of it. The humidity's kind of like altitude," he said easily. "Both of them can sneak up on you and knock you flat. For a minute there, your eyes weren't focused. Feeling better now?"
She was. Karen realized she had almost fainted at his feet. She was a nurse; she should have recognized the signs. By not eating that day, she had all but set herself up for a faint, and the heat and humidity certainly hadn't helped. Every thread on her felt clammy. How embarrassing it would have been if she had sprawled on her face.
Given his veiled dislike, she wondered why Detective Chastain hadn't let her do just that. But he'd been both alert and unexpectedly kind, and she remembered that swift sense of security she had felt at his supporting touch.
"Thank you," she said, looking up at him again. This close to him, she realized with surprise that his eyes were a pale, crystalline gray, with dark charcoal rings around the outer rims of his irises. Given the darkness of his hair and brows, his olive complexion, she had thought his eyes would be dark, too. Or maybe she had been on the verge of fainting before she walked into his office, because how else could she not have noticed such a glittering color? Her stomach clenched again, and she took a deep breath to calm herself. "I'm ready to go to the morgue now."
Whatever his thoughts, she couldn't read them on his face. "You don't have to actually view the body," he explained. "The medical examiner's office

uses videotape for identification purposes. It's easier on families."
Evidently, he thought the prospect of the morgue, of viewing her father's body, had gotten to her as much as the heat and humidity. "I'm a nurse," she heard herself saying. "The sight of a body isn't likely to make me go to pieces, but still—" Still, she was glad it would be on videotape.
He put his hand on her arm again, cupping her elbow in an old-fashioned gesture. "Then we might as well get it over with, hadn't we?"

Chapter 7

Dr. Pargannas, the assistant medical examiner, slid the cassette into the VCR. While Karen watched the small television screen, Marc watched her. It wasn't a hardship; her profile was delicate and clear-cut, completely feminine. Viewed from the side, her mouth looked tender and tremulous. He settled back, his lids lowering over his eyes as he studied her, analyzing her as intently as if she were the prime suspect in a murder.
Dr. Pargannas spoke quietly to her. Marc knew the drill, so he didn't bother listening. Sometimes shaken family members needed to be prepared, bolstered, for what they were about to see. Miss Whitlaw squared her shoulders and in her cool, calm voice said, "I'm ready." No squeamishness about her, no sir.
He gave a mental shrug. Of course, she wasn't squeamish; she couldn't be, and do her job. He'd bet she was a real treasure in an emergency, but he had doubts about her bedside manner afterward. He'd been a patient in a hospital twice, both times courtesy of the job, and he thought it must be a hospital rule that one nurse per shift, per floor, had to be a coldhearted bitch. Maybe Miss Whitlaw wasn't a bitch, but he sure hadn't seen any signs of warmth in her. He wouldn't want her jabbing needles into *his* ass.
No doubt about it, though, she turned him on, with those dark bedroom eyes and that deceptively tender mouth. He shouldn't have touched her, but hell, he couldn't let her pass out at his feet. So he had held her against him, supported her, felt the softness of her body under his hands, smelled the sweet musk of her skin—and he wanted her. He didn't know if there was any passion in her at all, but he'd sure like to get her in bed and find out.
Get your mind out of her pants and back on business, Chastain, he chided himself. This wasn't the time or the place for horny thoughts, and besides,

he was getting hard thinking about it.
Dr. Pargannas clicked on the tape, and the victim's pallid, waxy face filled the screen.
If he hadn't been watching Miss Whitlaw so closely, Marc would have missed her reaction. He saw the barely perceptible flinch, quickly controlled, and her graceful hands twisted together in her lap. "Yes, that's my father," she said, still calm, but her knuckles were white.
Marc looked from those betraying hands to her calm face, and the shock was like a slap in the face. Abruptly all the little details clicked into place. God, how could he have missed it? He felt like a fool, because he should have seen it from the beginning. His gaze sharpened as he studied her.
No, she wasn't as untouched by this as she wanted to be. He had noticed in his office that every time her composure cracked, she would quickly recover, her shoulders squaring, her chin going up. She didn't like being out of control, and she definitely wouldn't like breaking down in front of strangers, but suddenly he knew she was far from being unfeeling.
Maybe she felt too much. His gaze went again to her hands, locked together as she literally held herself in a tight grip. Maybe she had learned to protect herself by pretending she didn't care, by holding people at a distance so she wouldn't be hurt. In a flash of insight, he thought she must be lonely, aching with grief, but at some time in her life she had learned to hide behind a mask of unconcern, maybe when her father had walked out on his wife and daughter. Kids learned to act tough even when they were terrified inside.
If he read the signs right, she was just trying to hold herself together right now but would cry her eyes out when she was alone.
That wasn't good. A woman needed a shoulder to cry on. In this case, a man's shoulder. His, to be specific.
His reluctant sexual attraction suddenly coalesced into something much sharper, more urgent, and this time he didn't even try to talk himself out of it.
Without conceit, Marc knew he was a damn good cop. He made his living taking snippets of information and piecing them together to form a picture. His instincts were usually on target, but in this case he'd let a few misconceptions get in the way, and she had picked up on his initial hostility. Hell, if he was right about her, she was so sensitive she had probably felt blasted by his attitude. She had reacted, typically, by pulling even deeper inside herself. To get her to trust him now, and he fully intended to, he

would have to overcome not just her normal wariness but her protective reaction to his wrong impression and his initial coolness.

But he wanted her, and the wanting increased every time he looked at her, every time she breathed. Getting her was something else; doing it would take all his skill. She was skittish and, given her father's example, probably didn't trust men very much. Still, there had never been a woman he'd wanted whom he hadn't gotten, and he had no intention of letting Miss Karen Whitlaw be the exception.

Marc had two big advantages when dealing with women. First of all, he respected their differences from men, and whenever he became involved with a woman, he devoted himself to discovering what she needed. Of course, the needs varied from woman to woman, but for the most part they all wanted the attention and caring that said they were important to him. When Marc was with a woman, he was hers; it was that simple. He gave each one the respect of fidelity while their affair lasted, he learned their moods and quirks, and he lavished them with attention—in short, babying them. He loved doing it, loved seeing a woman glow with happiness.

Given her background, he thought Karen was desperately in need of babying. She had spent her life being a tough little soldier, and she deserved the chance to relax, to let someone take care of her for a change. He was just the man for the job.

His second big advantage was that he was both ruthless and relentless.

He would have to move fast, because she wouldn't be here long, probably no more than a couple of days.

He didn't have time for a leisurely seduction, disguised as dinner and dancing, stretched out over several weeks. She had a job and a home to return to, and unless he forced the issue before she left, she wouldn't have any reason for continuing the relationship.

He had no doubt there would *be* a relationship. He was absolutely certain, more certain than he had ever been before. The shock he had felt a moment before had gone all the way through him, deep into his bones. And he was, suddenly, uneasy in a way he had never been before, because having a woman had never before felt this important, this *necessary*.

He didn't know how they would work out the details, with her in Ohio and him in Louisiana, but they could settle all that later. The most important thing right now was to stake his claim, and to do that he had to win her trust.

Beginning now, he thought, flicking a glance from her hands to her composed expression, then to the television screen. Despite her immediate identification of her father, Dr. Pargannas was painstakingly showing her the "Semper fi" tattoo and other identifying marks, perhaps wanting to make certain she hadn't spoken hastily, perhaps because Marc had been lost in his thoughts and hadn't moved to end the session. He swore silently to himself; he should have stopped this the second she spoke.

"Thanks, Doc," he said now, putting one hand on the back of her chair and bracing the other on the table in front of her, effectively embracing her without touching her. He saw her stiffen a little, an instinctive reaction to the subtle possessiveness of his position, but she was too upset to be consciously aware of what he had just done. Those somber dark eyes glanced at him, then quickly averted when they made eye contact, but not before he saw the relief in them.

She hid it well, managing to shift so she could slide out of the chair away from him, standing and saying briskly, "What do I have to do now?"

"Sign some papers so we can release the body," Dr. Pargannas replied, then blinked at the narrow look Marc gave him. "Ah… that is, your father's remains." The doctor seemed bewildered; if she had been more visibly upset, he could have understood such tact, but he plainly considered it a waste of time with such a businesslike woman.

Marc had stood when she did. Noting the tension in her shoulders, he quietly said, "I'll call a funeral home for you, then take you to a couple of small cemeteries so you can pick out a plot—if that's what you want?"

"Yes, thank you," she said quickly.

"Okay, we'll get the paperwork wrapped up here. Doctor?" Damn, those dark eyes of hers were really getting to him, twisting his guts into knots. He wanted to cradle her, hold her close so she would know she wasn't alone in this, but it was too soon; such a blatant move would panic her. He had to keep it low-key until she relaxed enough with him.

Instead, he put his hand on the small of her back, feeling her warmth through her dress, knowing the heat of his hand on such a sensitive area would comfort her. On a normal day, she would probably jump away and give him a frosty look, but this wasn't a normal day. She was tired, heat-stressed, and was going through an emotional wringer. She was too tense even to notice the touch, except perhaps to feel relief that he was there and that he was helping her.

Dr. Pargannas was staring bemusedly at him. "Hmm? Oh—of course. Take Miss Whitlaw to my office, and I'll be there in a minute. Would either of you like a cup of coffee?"
Marc felt Karen's small shudder at the thought. "I'll get us something cold from the drink machine," he said as he ushered her out of the conference room and into the cramped, cluttered office across the hall.
Thirty minutes later, he was walking her back to the car. The second soft drink had steadied her once again, but the effects of the sugar would wear off soon; she needed food. He thought for a second. A leisurely sit-down meal in a cool restaurant would be best, but likely she would balk at the idea. Not only would she consider it an intolerable delay when they had so much to do, but the surroundings would make her feel as if they were on a date. Less beneficial but more likely to be accepted would be if he picked up something in a drive-through and they ate as he drove.
"Would you mind if we got something to eat?" he asked in an easy tone. "I didn't get a chance to eat lunch." That was a lie, but so what, if it accomplished his purpose. In retrospect, he was angry with himself for missing the signs when she first walked into his office. She was brittle with stress, on the verge of shattering, and only her self-discipline held her together. He wanted to kick his own ass; he usually read people better than that.
"Eat?" Her tone was vague, as if she had only the faintest idea what the word meant. Then she visibly shook herself and said, "Of course, I don't mind."
"We'll pick up something from a drive-through. Do you like Mexican, hamburgers, fried chicken, red beans and rice, pizza—"
"Mexican is fine," she said, because it was the first thing he had listed.
A cop knew every restaurant in town, and he drove to a tiny, ramshackle place that had once been a barbecue hut. There were no tables inside, just the drive-up window through which the owner dispensed tasty burritos and enchiladas. Soon they were on their way again, and he watched the color seep into her face as she slowly chewed on a burrito.
"How long is the drive?" she asked.
"About half an hour, in traffic." A half-smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "I could put the blue light on the dash, but I try not to use it unless I'm hungry, or really need a bathroom."

A startled little laugh spurted out of her. She covered her mouth with her hand, blinking as if she couldn't believe he'd actually joked with her, and she had laughed in any case. Those big dark eyes were owlish with surprise. Because of those eyes, he decided to push it a little further. "You'll notice that I cleaned up my language in deference to you, instead of saying something about really needing to take a piss."

She laughed again and looked just as startled as she had the first time. "Ah… yes, I noticed," she managed to say. "Thank you."

Marc veiled his satisfaction. That harmless, teasing little exchange had firmly shifted their relationship from strictly business to subtly personal, relaxing her. She needed to relax; from the looks of her, she needed to *sleep*.

When she had finished eating the burrito, he took the wrapper from her, brushing her fingers in the process, and stuffed it in the bag with his own discarded wrapper. "Why don't you lean back and close your eyes until we get there?"

"I'm afraid I'll go to sleep if I do." She watched the traffic. "I work third shift, so I—"

She stopped, and he continued the sentence. "So you hadn't had more than a couple of hours' sleep when I called." That explained a lot. She was truly exhausted.

"I returned your call when I got home, but it was too early for you to be in."

"Didn't the voice mail pick up?"

She shook her head. "No, and I let it ring for a long time."

He smothered a curse and reached for his cellular phone, jabbing in a number with his thumb. Karen watched nervously; she constantly saw patients who had been in car accidents because their attention wandered while talking on the phone while they were driving. Detective Chastain kept his eye on the traffic and his left hand firm on the wheel. He was a very good driver, she thought, his driving style so smooth she scarcely noticed how fast they were moving.

He broke the connection with another jab of his thumb. "Voice mail isn't working. Sorry about that. I'll check into it when we get back; a detective can't afford to be unreachable. In the meantime, grab a nap if you want. I'll wake you up when we get there."

She wanted to refuse, but she was too tired, and the temptation too irresistible. She leaned her head back on the headrest of the seat and closed her eyes against the late-afternoon sun, which was glaring through the

windshield straight into her eyes. Cold air poured out of the air-conditioning vents, though, washing over her wrists and throat, and she felt her tight muscles slowly ease.

Sleep evaded her, but still it felt good to rest. Though she had been braced to endure the identification process, she hadn't expected it to be so difficult. Surely the years of separation and the lifetime of desertion and broken promises should have given her as much emotional detachment as if she had been identifying, say, a neighbor. It hadn't worked that way.

Though she hadn't seen Dexter in several years, she had recognized him immediately, without a single doubt. His hair had grayed more, but his face, which should have been craggier, had been smoothed by death. She had seen that before, as if the end of life erased some of the lines it had worn into the flesh, giving death a peaceful mien. His broken nose hadn't changed, still listing slightly to the right. That was his jaw, long and narrow, and the straight line of his brows. There were the deep-set eyes and high cheekbones she had inherited, as well as the tapering fingers.

The neat hole in his forehead was new.

She had tried to look at it clinically, but everything in her had recoiled. She had wanted to bolt from her chair, get out of that room, go somewhere, anywhere. Instead, she had clenched her hands hard enough to dig her nails into her palms and forced herself to speak calmly. She had hoped identifying him would bring the session to an end, but instead, the doctor continued running the videotape, making comments in a dry monotone. Thank God Detective Chastain had stopped him. The tape couldn't have gone on more than a couple of minutes, but it had felt like hours to her. She had been frozen in her seat, unable to speak or move, until Chastain broke the spell by speaking. Dizzied by a flood of relief, she had actually leaned toward him; she hadn't been aware of swaying, but suddenly his face was much closer, his arms opened to catch her if she toppled out of the chair. After she had almost fainted in his office, he apparently wasn't taking any chances. Embarrassed, she had scrambled to her feet to show him she was perfectly all right.

He must not have been convinced, though, since he had poured yet another soft drink down her. She wondered if she had completely misread him before, if her own frazzled state had led her to see dislike where none had existed, because now he seemed like a perfectly nice man. If he disliked her, he was hiding it well now, and she was so tired she didn't care. She had

needed to eat, and she needed to sleep. Tomorrow, after she had done both, she would be her old self again, but for now she was grateful for Chastain's help.

Burying Dexter here was the most logical thing to do, until she could get everything arranged back home. She supposed there were places where his body could be stored, but whatever Dexter's failings, and they had been many, he had still been a person, a man, a husband, and a father, not just a lump of dead flesh. He deserved the ritual of a funeral, the prayers said over his remains.

She felt a sense of relief and knew she was doing the right thing.

The detective's radio crackled, rousing her from her drifting, half-asleep reverie, though she didn't open her eyes. He spoke quietly into the radio, and it was like hearing his voice again for the first time. She didn't notice his voice as much when she was looking at him, she realized; he was a physically compelling man, not so much because of his looks as because of the forcefulness of his character. He controlled his intensity, but it was revealed in those narrow, glittering eyes.

Now, though, his voice poured over her like dark honey. She didn't listen to the words, just the tone. The slur of his drawl was relaxing, as if there was no hurry to go anywhere or do anything. The way he said "where" gave the word two, perhaps three, syllables.

If he took as much time making love as he did talking, he must be—The sexual thought shocked her, and her eyes flared open. She didn't dare glance at him, though she was abruptly, acutely aware of him sitting no more than a foot away.

Her cheeks felt hot. Where had *that* thought come from, and now, of all times? She wasn't in the habit of speculating about a man's sexual skills. She wasn't in the habit of speculating about men, period. In her view, sexual freedom was stupid from the beginning, and now it was dangerous as well. She had never dated much, and not at all since Jeanette's death.

The truth was, she had always avoided getting emotionally involved with a man because she hadn't trusted any of them. She had been afraid to risk her heart the way her mother had done; she didn't want to waste her life loving a man who never returned that love. Instead, she had been wasting her life not loving a man at all.

She felt stupid and angry at herself. All men weren't alike; she *knew* that. Yes, her father had abandoned them, but she also knew men who loved their

wives and families, who were faithful and dependable. But emotionally she hadn't moved beyond the quiet fear and desperation of her childhood. Only yesterday… no, this morning—God, the day felt as if it had been a year long, and it wasn't over yet—she had decided not to let the past drag her down. She had started making plans for the apartment, for her career, but those plans hadn't included a man.

How dumb could she be? Why hadn't she seen this before? She refused to cheat herself out of a husband, a family, just because of her father's miserable example. When this was over and she was home again, she would start accepting some of those invitations that occasionally came her way. She knew some nice men, and it was time to give one of them a chance to be more than just a casual friend.

In retrospect, she was glad she'd had such a spicy little thought about Detective Chastain, because it had sparked that burst of self-examination. And he probably *was* good in bed, she thought, feeling defiant. Whatever his personal opinion of her, he was going out of his way to smooth the path for her. One of her friends on the surgical floor, Piper Lloyd, said you could always tell if a man was a good lover or not just by watching him at work. Some of the male doctors—okay, most of the male doctors—thought they were God's gift to women, but according to Piper's theory, they were too arrogant and in too much of a hurry. If they didn't pay attention to their patients, they weren't likely to pay attention to a lover.

Piper would approve of the detective, Karen thought drowsily. She would already be batting her eyes at him and fluffing her cap of black curls, but then Piper was a battle-scarred veteran of the love wars. She was careful about sex but not shy about going after what she wanted.

Karen wasn't anywhere in Piper's league. Just dating occasionally, giving a guy a chance, would be a big step for her.

"Are you married?" Her eyes popped open when she heard the words come out of her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that; she hadn't intended to say anything at all, because it had felt too good to sit there with her eyes closed. Instead of looking at him, she stared at the passing scenery, where Burger Kings had given way to trees and grass as they left the city behind.

"No, never have been," he replied, his tone easy, surprising her. "How about you?"

"No, I—no." She had started to go into a long explanation about being too busy but decided to leave the answer as it stood. She hadn't been too busy,

she had been too wary.
"Engaged?"
Well, one nosy question deserved another, she thought. "No."
"I was, once, but we both thought better of it." He flashed her an oddly veiled look. "Cops have the highest divorce rate in the country. Some women can't handle kissing their husbands good-bye in the mornings, knowing it might be the last time."
Karen clucked her tongue, irrationally amused instead of sympathetic. "Shallow," she pronounced in judgment. "Imagine being upset over a little thing like that."
A quick grin lightened his expression. He had what she thought of as the typical cop look, slightly remote, definitely cynical. The military-short black hair made him look even harder, so the flicker of amusement was as brilliant as a jag of lightning in a sullen sky.
"You could marry another cop," she suggested.
He grunted as he turned on his left signal, slowing as he approached an intersection, then taking a secondary road. "Yeah. Like you'd marry a doctor or another nurse."
She made a face. Some people married within the profession and made it work, but Karen wanted some freedom from the hospital. She immersed herself in the work while she was there, and she loved her job, but she didn't want to take it home with her.
"What type of nursing do you do?"
She gave him points for actually knowing there were different types. "I work on a hospital surgical floor, but I'm thinking about going back to school and getting my master's, maybe specializing in trauma."
Saying the words aloud, however, seemed to solidify them, and she knew she was going to do it.
One eyebrow quirked. "Isn't that like ditching a desk job for front-line duty?"
"You're in the trenches yourself," she pointed out. "Besides, I want to know more, do more." She tucked a curve of hair behind her ear, half turning toward him, her normally serious expression bright with intensity. "I want to know what the latest procedures are, the newest drugs and treatments. I don't want to change a surgical dressing, I want to apply the pressure that stops the bleeding." She didn't know why she was telling him, a virtual stranger, all of this, but there was something about him that made it easy to

talk. Odd, because they certainly hadn't started off in a buddy-buddy mode. Maybe it was because he seemed really interested, or maybe it was just a relief to get her mind off Dexter. Maybe she was punch-drunk with fatigue or riding a sugar high from all the soft drinks he had poured down her.

He pulled into the parking lot of a small country church, empty and dozing in the fierce afternoon heat. To the side, beneath the sheltering limbs of massive live oaks, was a well-tended cemetery. Karen looked at the graves and felt her insides tighten again. She had managed to forget for a few minutes, but the respite was over. She squared her shoulders and got out of the car.

"Someone will be here in a few minutes," Chastain said, slipping on a pair of sunglasses as he walked beside her toward the cemetery. "If you like the plots, you can do the paperwork this afternoon."

She drew in the thick, heavy air, feeling as if there wasn't enough oxygen in it. She was already dewed with sweat, and she thought longingly of another one of those icy soft drinks, sugar overload or no. Chickens *cooked* at a lower temperature than this. She was at least half done herself.

Chastain's hand settled on her back again, as hot as a brand. This wasn't real, she thought, staring at the fuzzy tangle of Spanish moss draped from the trees, swaying in a nonexistent breeze. Just this morning, she had been sleeping in her darkened, air-conditioned bedroom. Now she was roasting in New Orleans, picking out a burial plot for the father she hadn't seen in years until the ME had popped in a video of him on an autopsy slab, and she was being baby-sat by a tough-looking cop who didn't like her but who, for reasons of his own, was being very helpful.

No, it wasn't real. It was a nightmare, but nightmares, like all dreams, eventually came to an end.

Langley, Virginia

Franklin Vinay, the deputy director of operations, habitually worked late. He enjoyed the hours at his desk when his staff had gone home, the phone mostly stopped ringing, the demands on his time lightened. It was then that he plowed through the mountain of papers that landed on his desk every day, trying to stay one step ahead of the country's adversaries—whoever the hell they were.

It had been easier during the Cold War; everything had been clear-cut, the enemy known. He was afraid the fragmented former Soviet Union was

more dangerous now than it had been before, without experienced hands at the many helms. China worried the shit out of him, but the current administration was more interested in making money than in protecting the country's security. Any jackass with half a brain now could find out how to make a bomb, America's so-called allies were happily selling arms and technology to anyone who could raise the money, and military capability was at an all-time low. It was a recipe for disaster, and he spent the long hours at his desk trying to keep the mixture from boiling over.

A quiet knock on his door interrupted him, and he sighed, closing the file he was reading. "Come in."

He expected the door to be opened by a junior staffer pulling long hours, too, but instead, a familiar homely face poked into view. "Thought you'd still be here," Jess McPherson said, easing into the room and closing the door behind him. "I've got some bad news."

Jess and the DDO went back a long ways, so long that there was no formality between them. He knew the look on Jess's face, and his guts tightened. "What happened?"

"Rick Medina's dead. His body was found in Mississippi," McPherson folded his long, lanky body into a chair.

"Ah, shit." Profound sadness was in Vinay's voice. Rick Medina was a legend in CIA circles, but more than that, he had been a personal friend. There weren't many of the old group left; everyone now was into technology, forgetting that the best satellite and the best computer couldn't replace that most basic of sources, a man in place. Human intelligence, HUMINT, was at the core of every good decision Vinay had made. "What happened? Was he working?"

He hoped to hell not. Rick had never been regular CIA; instead, he had been a contract agent, which meant he regularly hired his services out to other customers, meaning other countries. With Rick, though, Vinay had always had faith none of his other jobs had jeopardized the security of his country. Other agents weren't as particular, but Rick Medina was, simply, a patriot. Then, too, there were other considerations.

"Nothing for us," McPherson said. "The buzz I'm getting was that he was handling something personal. The local cops have tagged it as a robbery/murder, but shit, I can't see Rick getting caught flat-footed by a punk with a cheap twenty-two."

"That's what killed him? A twenty-two?"

"According to the report. Two shots in the heart. A couple of kids found him in his car, hidden behind some bushes in an old abandoned quarry. His wallet was lying on the seat beside him, empty. Cash and credit cards gone."
"Convenient, for identification purposes." Vinay chewed on his lip. "Almost too convenient."
"Yeah, I know. It doesn't feel right to me, either, but like I said, he wasn't working for us, so I don't have a clue what he was really doing. For all we know, this was nothing more than pure damn bad luck, and a sorry-ass punk accidentally got off some good shots."
"What about Rick's weapon? Was it found?"
McPherson shook his head. Vinay hadn't really expected an affirmative answer. No piece of street shit would pass up an expensive weapon such as Rick Medina carried. Nor would they be able to pick up a thread on the serial number, because Rick would have made certain no weapon could be traced back to him.
"Where's John?" McPherson asked softly.
"On assignment."
"You gonna tell him or leave him in place?" Any assignment John Medina was on was, by definition, crucial.
"Tell him. I trust his judgment." Not only that, only a fool would withhold from John the news of his father's death.
"Tell him to give me a call," McPherson said, rising to his feet.
Vinay gave his old friend a searching look. "Jess? You know something you haven't told me?"
"No, but John might. And if he goes after whoever did Rick, well, I'd consider it an honor to help."

Chapter 8

Karen slept so deeply that when she woke the next morning, she felt slow and thick-headed, unable to get stirring. Her eyes felt gritty, and her pillowcase was damp. Dimly, she remembered crying during the night, surfacing briefly from sleep and feeling overwhelmed with despair and loss. Finally, she dragged herself out of bed and stretched, feeling every muscle pull and reluctantly come awake. She opened the curtains and stared out at a blindingly bright day; she could already feel the heat pulsing against the window. Thanking God for the efficiency of the Marriott's air conditioning, she stumbled to the shower and let cool water pelt down on her, dispelling more of the mental cobwebs.

She had just finished blow-drying her hair when she heard the phone ringing. Pulling her robe around her, she dashed into the bedroom. "Hello?"

"Good mornin'." The warm, dark voice in her ear instantly identified the caller. "I hope I didn't wake you?"

"Good morning, Detective. No, I was already awake. I just got out of the shower." Twisting, Karen peeked at the digital alarm/radio bolted to the night-stand. She blinked, but the red numbers remained the same: ten twenty-three. "I can't believe I slept so late," she blurted, surprised. "Is it really almost ten-thirty?"

He chuckled, the sound so warm her stomach began to melt. "Yes, ma'am. You were so tired yesterday, I thought you might sleep late, so I waited to call. I need to turn over your father's effects to you, if you feel like doing it today. If not, it can wait."

It could wait until tomorrow, he meant, but she had scheduled the funeral for tomorrow, and she didn't think she could handle both ordeals in the same day. "No, I'll come down there as soon as I've eaten."

"If I have to leave on a call, I'll let you know, save you the walk down here."

"Okay," she agreed. After breaking the connection, she called room service and placed her order, pushing away the dread that settled in the pit of her stomach like cold oatmeal. Dexter's effects would be shabby clothing and worn shoes, perhaps with holes in them. She hated to think of him without adequate clothing, without a safe place to sleep or shelter from the weather. She had always imagined him living a carefree, rootless life without his

wife and daughter; she had never imagined him in need of the most basic requirements of life.

It hurt. He could have lived a normal life with his family, but he had rejected them in favor of… *nothing*. No home, no job, sleeping in cardboard boxes, getting his meals in missions and soup kitchens or what he could dig out of a garbage can. Had he stolen a shopping cart from a supermarket and trundled his worldly goods around in it? He had turned his back on them for *that*?

How could a man do that? Didn't he feel any connection, any responsibility, to his family? How could he have hurt her mother that way and still feel free to show up or call her whenever he got the urge? What was it about him that Jeanette had loved until her last breath?

"Oh, Mom," Karen whispered, aching for her mother, whose pain had been the greatest. She, at least, had never known her father that well, and so she hadn't suffered so much on her own account but rather in sympathy for her mother. She was grateful Jeanette hadn't had to see that videotape and wouldn't have to claim a pitifully small pile of possessions.

She had just dressed, as comfortably as possible, in a sleeveless peach sheath and sandals, when room service arrived with her breakfast. Her appetite had faded, but she forced herself to eat. The coffee was scalding hot and impossibly strong; after one sip, she pushed it aside and drank the glass of ice water instead. Perhaps if she cooled her insides, the heat wouldn't seem so oppressive.

At least Dexter hadn't been cold. At least he hadn't died somewhere in the dead of winter, with snow on the ground and holes in his shoes, newspapers stuffed inside his shirt for warmth.

Her stomach heaved, and Karen pushed the thought away, along with the tray. Swiftly, she brushed her teeth, put on lipstick, and secured the room key in the zippered section of her shoulder bag. "Ready as I'm going to be," she whispered, and left the room.

The morning was hot but fresh. New Orleans was a city of food, and a multitude of scents filled the air: pastries baking, spices simmering, chicory-flavored coffee brewing. The aroma was especially strong when she walked past Brennan's, renowned for its exotic breakfasts. Everything was so different from what she was accustomed to in Columbus that she could have been in another country. Even the people looked more exotic, more dramatic in both coloring and dress, almost gypsyish. She heard a multitude

of accents and languages around her as she briskly walked past strolling tourists and lingering shoppers. She saw sequined Mardi Gras masks in shop windows and glittering harlequin faces draped with strands of colorful beads. An enormous leopard, carved from a single piece of wood, watched from one shop window as she passed.

The ambience of New Orleans sucked at her, trying to slow her steps to the accustomed pace. Sweat beaded between her breasts, trickled downward, telling her how silly she was to hurry. Everything would wait, would still be there if she stopped to look in a shop window. She resisted the urge.

She could see the Eighth District ahead on the right, the mellow, gracious building drawing her with its promise of coolness. She knew there were the ordinary municipal buildings in the city, she had seen some of them yesterday when Detective Chastain had taken her to the morgue, but the Eighth District building was like New Orleans itself: seductive, stylishly old and gracious, lazily sinful. What had those old walls seen? What scandals and murders had been unraveled under that roof, what torrid love affairs had been conducted there? One didn't normally associate a police department with love affairs, but this was New Orleans, this was the Quarter, and anything was possible.

A different police officer sat at the desk in the huge front room, where the ceiling fans ceaselessly paddled in circles in the thick air. Karen gave her name and was allowed to proceed past the desk. She wound her way through the warren, the old floor creaking under her feet.

Detective Chastain was on the phone when she reached the tiny, cluttered office. He looked up when he saw her standing in the doorway and motioned her inside.

Her heartbeat jumped, then settled into a rapid tattoo. Karen sank onto the straight-backed chair, clutching her shoulder bag on her lap. There was a sack on his desk, an ordinary brown grocery sack, and she tried not to look at it. Instead, she looked at him, desperately focusing on details such as the contrast of his gold wristwatch against his tanned wrist, the short dark hairs on his forearms, revealed by his rolled-up sleeves. He was wearing a plain white collarless shirt and black slacks, a simple, stark outfit that made him look more like a choreographer than a cop, except for the holstered pistol he wore on his belt at his right hip.

She consciously tried not to listen to his conversation, but she was nevertheless aware of his growing impatience. He began scowling, his dark

brows pulling together. He glanced at her, then abruptly switched languages, unleashing a barrage in Creole French that she was glad she didn't understand, because the tone of curses was unmistakable no matter what language he used.
Finally, he growled something and slammed down the phone. Gray eyes narrowed to slits, and he swiveled his chair to face her fully. "I hope you don't speak French."
"I don't," she assured him.
"I know all the cuss words. Most of the time, that's enough." He ran his hand over his close-cropped hair, the abrupt gesture revealing his irritation. He took a deep breath and let it go. "Do you want a cup of coffee or a Coke?"
"No, thank you." She essayed a smile. "I just ate, so I'm not in danger of collapsing at your feet. You don't have to pour sodas down me today."
"Our motto is 'Serve and protect,' so it was in my job description." The corners of his eyes crinkled in a smile that almost reached his mouth, then faded as he gestured toward the brown grocery sack. "I wouldn't normally handle this, but something you said yesterday made me think… well, this might hit you harder than you anticipate."
The dread she had felt earlier passed from the consistency of cold oatmeal to that of set concrete. Her hands clenched on her purse. "In what way?" She kept her voice calm, but the stiff upper lip she was maintaining took more and more effort.
He was silent a moment, then he left his chair and came around to sit on the edge of his desk, the way he had the day before. "You were very close to your mother, weren't you?"
The question took her off balance. "Yes, of course. When my father left us, she was… devastated. He had left the military, so she didn't get a monthly check anymore. She had me to take care of, and she didn't have any job skills, so she took any job she could get: cleaning houses, taking in ironing, waiting tables."
"Those don't pay much," he commented. His gaze never left her face.
"No. She worked two or three jobs, until I was old enough to get a job and help. The day I was hired at the hospital, she quit work. She had worked herself into the ground all those years, so it was my time to take care of her."

He regarded her silently for a moment, his expression enigmatic. "Not many people would feel that way," he finally said.
"Then something's wrong with them." Karen flared. She would have done anything she could to make her mother's life easier.
He held up his hand in a calming gesture. "I agree, I agree."
"Why are you asking? What does my mother have to do with you turning over my father's effects?"
He hesitated. "He kept something that was important to him. He could have hocked it, but instead it was sewn into the hem of his pants leg."
Puzzled, she stared up at him, trying to think what on earth could have been important to her father, certainly his wife or daughter hadn't been.
Detective Chastain reached behind him and took a small brown envelope out of the sack containing her father's clothes. He opened it and poured the contents into his hand. "It meant something to him," he said quietly, squatting down in front of her and opening his hand, palm up so she could see what he held.
Karen stared at the gold ring lying on the detective's callused palm. For a moment, she didn't recognize it for what it was, then she went numb all over. Her mind somehow separated from her body as if reality had abruptly altered. His wedding ring. He had kept his wedding ring. The simple presence of that plain gold band challenged everything she had thought she knew about her father. "That isn't fair," she whispered, and she didn't mean the detective's perception but instead her father's unexpected sentimentality. She didn't want to know this about him; she didn't want to think that perhaps he had regrets, and pain, and broken dreams. It was easier just to think of him as unfeeling.
But nothing was ever easy. Not death, and certainly not life.
Chastain didn't say anything, just continued squatting there with the ring lying on his palm like an offering.
What would have happened if she had been on her own? Surely there was a list of items, and she would have signed a receipt stating that she had received everything on the list, but she wouldn't have known her father had kept the ring sewn into the hem of his pants to keep it safe. The busy medical examiner wouldn't have done this personally, a clerk would have handled the chore, and she would never have known. Detective Chastain had gone out of his way to do this, as he had gone out of his way the day before to help her.

She saw herself reach out, the movement involuntary, as if her hand didn't belong to her. Her fingers were trembling. Slowly, she touched the ring, tracing the circle with one fingertip, then withdrew her hand to rest it once again in her lap.
Detective Chastain took her hand in his, his touch gentle as he opened her hand and placed the ring on her palm, then folded her fingers over it. The ring was warm, his hand even warmer. "He cared," he said. "I don't know why he left, but he didn't stop caring."
She couldn't look up at him. Instead, she stared at their hands, his hard and strong, tanned, much bigger than hers. His clasp was light, as if he were aware of his strength, as many men were not, and took care not to hurt her inadvertently.
Desperately, she struggled to hang on to her control, but his nearness and understanding undermined her. And he seemed to understand that, too, because he released her hand and stood, returning to his seat behind the battered desk.
"Thank you," she said, almost inaudibly. His distance was a relief, yet she found herself yearning for his support.
"You're welcome," he said, and left it at that.
"The rest of his things… are just clothes?"
"Yes. There's a list."
"At least I'll know what size suit to buy for him," she said, though she cringed at the idea of going through the shabby garments looking for tags. It was too much, too soon.
Detective Chastain paused a moment, watching her, then said quietly, "Forty-four long."
She swallowed and nodded, looking down at her hands. She had to ask him something, just to be certain, and though the answer would be difficult for a cop, she somehow knew he would be honest with her. "Detective…"
"What?" he asked gently after a moment, when she didn't continue.
She raised her eyes to him, squarely meeting his gaze. "Are—are you still working on the case?"
He paused, then said, "No."
Karen flinched, though it was exactly what she had expected. He squatted down in front of her again and took her hand in his, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles. The slight roughness of his callused skin scraped her, a warmly masculine sensation.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.
"I understand," she said, though with difficulty. "You have to put your effort where it will do the most good. It's the same in an emergency department."
"Reality's a bitch."
His tough sympathy, his honesty, meant more to her than if he had mouthed all the right platitudes, if he had tried to soothe her with well-meant lies.
She squeezed his hand, then straightened her shoulders. "I have a lot to do today, so I'll get out of your way." He moved back, giving her room to stand. "Thank you," she said as she left.
Marc sighed as Karen left his office, her face colorless but calm. His chest felt tight. Damn it, her father had been murdered, and he couldn't do anything about it. As soon as he had gotten an ID on the body, the word had come down to move on to a more productive case. There wasn't any percentage in trying to solve a homeless murder, not that he had jack shit to go on anyway. It was just so damn frustrating.
God, he had wanted to hold her, just pick her up and hold her on his lap and let her know she didn't have to do this alone. But he hadn't, both because it was too soon and because to do so would have shattered her hard-won calm. She had probably been acting calm and responsible since she was a child, forcing herself to become a little adult when she should have been carefree, playing with dolls and skipping rope. He saw it all the time: when there was only one parent left, and the child saw that parent struggling, the child would in effect *become* the parent, taking on responsibilities far beyond the child's age. She had probably taken over the housekeeping chores, made sure her tired mother had food waiting for her when she got home from work, done everything she could to lighten the load.
Karen had even gone into nursing, taking on even more responsibility. It was telling that she had then become her mother's sole support, completing the role reversal. She had probably called her mother by her given name rather than "Mom," at least part of the time, for the little girl had become the mother, and the mother had become the dependent. It was obvious she had adored her mother and so had been that much more protective.
She had spent her life taking care of others, and now he wanted to take care of her, wanted it with a fierceness that shook him. He was normally protective of women, but he had never before felt like this. Something inside him had altered, shifted, and he couldn't regret the change.

Did she have any idea how valiant she was? Her dry comment the day before about women being shallow for having trouble committing to a cop because of the danger factor had been amusing, but she had meant it. Karen Whitlaw wouldn't walk away from a commitment because she was scared; she would be there, through the bad times as well as the good.
Whenever he had been in a relationship, Marc had kept his work out of it. Being called away on a case was unavoidable, but he hadn't brought the details home. He had always shielded his lady friends from the ugliness he saw, partly because of his own protective nature but also because he had never thought they would understand or be able to accept the part of his nature that made it possible for him to deal with the things he did. Perhaps he had underestimated the ladies in his life, but he had seen a lot of relationships destroyed by the pressures of the job, and he hadn't wanted to take the chance.
He *knew* Karen wouldn't flinch. She would brace her shoulders and lift her chin, as he had seen her do several times when the pain and stress would almost overwhelm her. Most people would have broken down under the emotional burden she was carrying, but she had faced the situation squarely and controlled her tears until she was alone.
He knew she had cried; her eyelids were swollen. She had cried, and he hadn't been there to hold her.
He would be, he thought fiercely. From now on, he would be.

Chapter 9

The day was overcast, with rain threatening any minute, and so muggy Karen felt as if she would melt. Sweat gathered in a pool between her breasts, trickled down her sides. Her dress was thin and short-sleeved but still *black;* she could feel the fabric absorbing the heat. She concentrated on her physical misery and on the distant sullen rumble of thunder. She thought about how lush the grass was, listened to the birds singing, and let herself be annoyed because her heels kept sinking into the soft black dirt. She'd never before seen dirt so black, and she marveled at its richness.
She looked at the massive trees, the flowers. This small country cemetery was prettier and more peaceful than the large, manicured "garden of rest" where Jeanette was buried. Perhaps she should move her mother down here,

rather than have Dexter taken Her stomach clenched. She had tried so hard not to think about what was happening, but her wayward thoughts had led her to the funeral anyway. She didn't want to think about the man in the casket. Dexter Whitlaw. Her father. Whatever his failings, whatever devils had driven him, at this moment she admitted that her memories of him weren't all bad.

There had been a few times when he sat on the floor and played dolls with her, folding his long legs as if he didn't even notice his cramped position, listening with apparent raptness as she spun elaborate stories about what the dolls were doing. Usually, they were sick, and she was taking care of them, an early manifestation of her nursing tendencies. And a couple of times, Dexter had taken her with him on walks in the woods and showed her how to hide in a bush and sit very still so that even the squirrels and the birds forgot they were there. Did those few bright moments outweigh a lifetime of darkness? Was she supposed to remember only them and forget the nights when her mother sobbed into her pillow, longing for a man who wasn't there?

What a waste of life, both Jeanette's and Dexter's. Regret swelled in her chest, suffocating her, or maybe it was just this damnable humidity making it impossible for her to breathe. It couldn't be regret; why should she cry for a man who had never given her a second thought, who bothered to call or visit only when *he* needed something? And yet he had kept his wedding ring, sewed it into his cuff to keep it safe. It had been important to him, as Detective Chastain had pointed out. Whether it was the life the ring represented, the normal life he had walked away from, or the people in that life, she couldn't begin to imagine.

She wouldn't cry for him. She refused to. But the outline of the casket was blurred, the minister's words were nothing more than background noise, and the pressure in her chest was so great she could barely contain it.

The trees stirred and rattled, breathing. A surprisingly cool gust of wind hit the backs of her legs, breathed down her neck. A chill rippled down her spine. The sensation was refreshing, though, and she sighed as the sweat evaporated on her body. She was grateful for the reprieve from the heat, even when a fine mist of rain closely followed the wind.

In only moments, she went from overheated to downright chilly, as the wind picked up and the rain began to pelt down. Detective Chastain opened an umbrella and held it over their heads, moving closer so they were both

sheltered. She didn't know what she would have done without his assistance these past two days, she thought numbly. He had done more than walk her through the necessary procedures, much more; he had stepped in and taken care of arrangements, cut through red tape, smoothed over glitches before they became real obstacles. He had even remembered the flowers for the casket and helped her arrange for them.

She couldn't think why he had done it. She was a commonsense person, but she was beginning to think she had imagined his dislike the first time they met, because not even a glimmer of hostility had shown since then. Maybe fatigue and shock had made her hallucinate. Still, Chastain had gone above and beyond duty, even if she had been mistaken in her initial impression of him. Maybe this was an example of the courtesy toward women for which Southern men were so famous, but he had gone a great deal farther than opening doors for her or standing when she entered the room.

Yes, that was it. Think about the detective, or about regional differences in general; think about anything but the fact that the minister was pressing her hand and murmuring condolences, and the funeral director was waiting for her to leave so they could lower the casket into the grave and begin shoveling dirt over it. The grave was even disguised by a green felt carpet, as if the sight of it would be too much for the bereaved.

But she couldn't leave. She couldn't walk away from Dexter now, not in his last moment above ground. He deserved to have someone there for him, someone whose memory would record these details, so that he wouldn't vanish without a trace. Whatever his failings, he was her father, forever linked to her through shared genes.

"Go ahead," she said hoarsely. It was an effort to speak. Her arms roughened with chill bumps, and she hugged them against the bite of the wind, wondering where the heat had gone. The rain drummed down on the umbrella, spattered her legs and her back, and a shiver seized her.

She saw the funeral director glance at Detective Chastain, as if the final decision was his. Perhaps it was. If he chose to drag her away from the graveside, she didn't know if she would be able to protest, or to resist. If she tried to argue, the tenuous control she was maintaining would shatter, and she would collapse into a sobbing heap. A sobbing heap was not a good position from which to assert authority.

But he gave a brief nod, and she tried to tell him with her eyes how grateful she was, not just for this but for everything. The funeral director turned

aside with a quiet word to the waiting men. Chains creaked, and the casket was slowly lowered into the grave.
Karen shivered again and found she couldn't stop. Was she shivering or trembling? She couldn't tell, didn't care. All she knew was that she was shaking from the inside out, her teeth clenched hard to hold back the sob that was choking her.
Silently, Chastain stepped behind her, blocking the wind and rain from her with his body. She stood stiffly, locked rigid with the effort of control, but he moved closer, so close that he pressed against her, strong and solid and warm. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, he opened his jacket and enfolded her inside the sheltering wings. The cloth draped over her shoulders, her bare arms, wrapping her in warmth. He still held the umbrella in his left hand, but his right arm slid around her and held her anchored to him, tight against his hard chest.
The gesture stunned her. Except for her mother, no one had ever put themselves between her and the world. Chastain's action was so unexpected and intimate… and protective. The protectiveness was what destroyed her, even while it supported her.
Hot tears blurred her vision once more, washing out the images of the men bending and digging their shovels into the mound of dirt, but she heard the sound of dirt spilling into metal. They worked methodically, despite the pouring rain, as if the job was too somber to be hurried. She stood until they were finished, and all the while Chastain stood at her back, warming her, lending her his strength so she could continue to stand upright.
Karen was accustomed to standing alone. Even as a child, she had tried not to bother her mother with her problems, because she had always sensed Jeanette carried enough burdens. Nursing school had only enhanced her independence by giving her even greater responsibilities. She hadn't leaned on anyone in years, and she was shattered to find herself doing so both emotionally and physically with a man who had been a total stranger a mere two days before. She tried to blink away the tears that kept burning her eyes. She tried to say something and found the pressure in her chest was too great to allow the words to escape. She straightened, though something in her cried out at the sudden cold, the loss of contact. She turned to face him, but his face swam before her eyes, and suddenly she couldn't bear it any longer.

The sob that tore out of her throat sounded like the wail of a wounded animal. She didn't know if she collapsed against him or if he reached for her, but abruptly she was in his arms, her face buried in the curve of his shoulder. She wept convulsively, her entire body shuddering as she clung to him, her fingers digging into his back.

Chastain let the umbrella drop to the soggy ground. He bent his head over hers, murmuring soft, consoling sounds that didn't seem to be words at all, but just the sound was enough. She tried to burrow closer, vaguely appalled at her own neediness yet helpless to stop herself. One big hand closed over the nape of her neck, massaging, cradling, hot on her tender bare skin.

The pain was almost more than she could bear, grief and regret and a piercing sense of loneliness tearing at her. Despite her deep resentment, while Dexter lived, there had always been the possibility that one day he would work out whatever problems he had, get rid of the demons that rode his shoulder, and want to forge a relationship with her. That couldn't happen now. He had died still largely unknown to her, all the bright possibilities at an end. She mourned that loss of hope as much as she mourned him, a father she had never really known but whose absence had shaped her life. Now she would never be able to tell him how angry she was, how hurt, never reach out to him and feel the connection of family. She wept for that, and for her mother, and for him.

But such extreme emotion was exhausting, and gradually she quieted, still held securely in Detective Chastain's arms, her wet face still buried in his shoulder. She heard him speaking quietly over her head to someone, perhaps the minister, and a few moments later, she heard footsteps moving away, squishing on the wet ground. They were alone, and now she was grateful to him for yet one more thing; she needed privacy and he had provided it.

The rain had stopped beating down, dwindling to nothing more than a lukewarm mist as the storm moved on. The wind had died, and already she could feel the heat of the day rebuilding, steam forming on the ground. His heart thumped steadily under her ear, his chest rose and fell with the cadence of his breathing, and the warm, musky odor of his body mingled with the faint, fresh, lemony fragrance of his aftershave. He smelled delicious, she thought dimly, just the way a man should smell.

Her mind drifted. She tried to think of the last time she had been this close to a man, but the memory eluded her, and somehow she didn't think she had

ever before been so close. Other men had held her, of course, but not like this. She had never accepted comfort from a man, never let any of her few boyfriends see her weep. She had never let herself need them, but somehow, in this moment, she needed Chastain. She needed to feel his arms around her, just for now. She needed the physical strength so evident in his tall, muscular body, a strength that effortlessly supported her weight, and she needed to be held as tightly as he was holding her. She needed to hear his dark-honey voice murmuring to her, needed the reassurance that right now, just for a few minutes, she wasn't alone.

The emotional storm had left her drained, exhausted, oddly detached. "I'm sorry," she said in a sodden voice, muffled against his shoulder.

"You're entitled." He shifted a bit, holding her with one arm while he reached into his pocket. "Here's a handkerchief."

She groped for it without lifting her head, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, and then wondered in acute embarrassment how she could possibly give it back to him after blowing her nose on it. She crushed the cloth in her hand. "I'll wash it," she mumbled.

He gave a quiet chuckle, then wrapped his arms around her again. She resettled her head on his shoulder, sighing, feeling the dampness of his coat under her cheek. In the trees overhead, birds began to twitter and sing again with the passing of the rain.

"I never really knew him," she whispered, feeling compelled to talk. "He'd drift back into our lives every other year or so, and Mom would start hoping this time he would stay, but then he'd leave again, and she would cry for days. I hated him for that."

Those strong, comforting arms tightened, squeezing. "Did *you* want him to stay?"

"At first. Every time he came back, I ran to my room and prayed as hard as I could that he wouldn't leave again, and that Mom would be happy and not cry anymore. That never worked for long. Then I started making wishes. I wished on falling stars, on wishbones, I tossed pennies into any pool of water I could find. I didn't know any officially designated wishing wells, but I figured any water would do."

He chuckled again, and she found herself somehow smiling into his coat. The smile was wavery, but it was there. He rocked her back and forth a little, as if she were a child. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. "Crying causes endorphins to be released into the body, automatically lifting the mood."
"Then you must be slap full of endorphins right now," he teased, and this time she laughed. It shocked her, and she went still. How could she laugh? She was standing by her father's grave.
"Don't worry about it," he said, shaking her a little, understanding without being told why she had gone rigid in his arms. "People always laugh at funerals, sometimes even the families. My grandmother always said it was the angels' way of easing the burden. It isn't disrespectful, it's healing."
He was right. She thought back to other funerals she had attended, the bouts of muffled laughter, and she relaxed again. "When I was about eleven, we went back to West Virginia for my grandfather's funeral—my father's father. I remember Granny sitting in a rocker, holding this little lace handkerchief, reminiscing about Gramps with some of the older people. They all started laughing at some tale, trying to hold it back at first, but then Granny started actually *whooping*, rocking back and forth, holding her stomach and laughing 'til she could barely breathe. They all laughed like maniacs."
"It helps to remember the good times. So, you're really a West Virginia girl? I thought I heard a drawl sneak into that Ohio accent a few times." He imitated her accent, saying "Oh-Hi-uh," instead of "Oh-Hi-oh" the way Southerners did. As he spoke, he subtly released himself from her clutches, though not her from his. Moving to her side, he started her walking by the simple means of walking himself, holding her close with an arm around her waist. She had to walk or be dragged.
Karen hadn't wanted to show her face yet. She knew her eyes were swollen, her nose red, her makeup ruined. She only hoped she had been able to blot up the worst of the destruction. But Detective Chastain had decided it was time for her to leave, so, willy-nilly, she was leaving. Perhaps he had work to do and had to get back to New Orleans. She felt guilty about the way she had monopolized his time.
"Am I keeping you from something?" she asked, embarrassed all over again. He had offered his help, but perhaps it had only been a courtesy offer and he hadn't really expected her to accept.
"Of course not." He squeezed her a little as they reached the graveled little path that led to the car. "I'm off duty, and I don't have any appointments."
"Or a date?" she asked, disliking even the idea. She was surprised at herself. Had she suddenly become so needy that she couldn't bear losing his

support? She had better snap out of it fast, because she was flying home the next morning.
"No date," he said easily. "Why don't we walk around the Quarter for a while, then have dinner? You haven't seen anything of New Orleans, really, and you need to relax."
Her sudden tension seeped out of her. He wanted to spend the rest of the day and the evening with her. Well, perhaps he didn't really *want* to, perhaps he merely felt responsible for her, but she was too grateful for the chance to avoid a long evening spent alone with only her melancholy thoughts for company that she felt a flood of relief at the invitation. "Thanks. I'd like that."
The afternoon sun suddenly blazed full on her face, the rain clouds gone for now, though ominous dark clouds were building again in the southwest. The heat and brightness of the sun were incredible, and she felt herself beginning to sweat again, as rapidly as she had grown chilled before. Squinting her swollen eyes against the glare, she misjudged her distance from the edge of the path and brushed against a shrub. The stubby branches snagged her hose and held fast.
"Darn it!" She stopped, looking down to assess the damage. The nylon was tangled on one of the branches. A hole the size of a half-dollar had been torn in the fabric, and an ugly run laddered both upward and downward from the hole. A run in black hose was particularly ugly, she thought, looking down at her pale leg peeking through.
She started to lean down and release herself, but he squatted beside her and curved one hand around her calf, using the other to work the nylon free. A small red scratch from the branch marred her skin, shining brightly through the gaping hole in her panty hose. He rubbed his thumb over the scratch, soothing the sting.
"You can take them off at the car," he said, rising, his task accomplished. He smiled down at her with those brilliant gray eyes. "I'll stand on the other side and not look, I promise."
The prospect of taking off her panty hose in his presence, even when he was on the other side of the car, seemed almost too daring and intimate.
Intimate. There was that word again. All day—well, actually since the first day—it seemed as if he had wrapped her in a blanket of intimacy without actually doing anything sexual. He had touched her constantly; he put his hand on her arm or her back, held her, supported her, and perhaps she

couldn't have made it through the ordeal without those touches that let her know she wasn't alone.
Perhaps the sense of intimacy was all on her part; perhaps Southern men were normally this solicitous toward women. She hadn't known any Southerners before, since they didn't exactly flock to Columbus, Ohio, so she had no means of comparison. If Detective Marc Chastain was typical of the Southern male, she thought, then the women in the rest of the country didn't know what they were missing.
They reached the car, and Marc went to the driver's side and turned his back, just as he had promised. The brutal sun beat down on their heads, and he shrugged out of his jacket, holding it in one hand while he waited.
His black hair was rain-wet and gleamed in the sun. His white shirt was thin, letting the warmth of his skin show through the fabric as it draped across his broad shoulders. Karen looked across the car at him, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. For a moment, she stood paralyzed, unable to look away from him. Every detail was suddenly overwhelming in its clarity: the size of him, the set of his head on his shoulders, the neatness of his ears, the black hair that tapered to a point on the back of his neck. That big pistol was still clipped to his belt, and she wondered if he ever went anywhere without it.
She had never before been so acutely, physically aware of a man as she was in that moment, almost breathless from the impact on her senses.
"May I turn around now?" he asked lazily, and the moment passed.
"Not yet," she said. He settled against the side of the car, still patient.
Karen looked down at her leg. The torn nylon sagged, looking much worse than bare legs would. Vanity, if nothing else, inclined her to do as he said. Faintly amused, at both him and herself, she lifted her skirt and hurriedly peeled off the ruined panty hose, then wadded the nylon into a ball and stuffed it in her purse.
To her surprise, she instantly felt better. As hot and muggy as the air was, she was immeasurably more comfortable without the hot nylon wrapping her from waist to toe.
Almost as soon as she straightened, he was around the car, opening the door for her. There was that touch again, this time on her back, gently guiding her into the car. From out of nowhere surged a longing to be in his arms again, comforted and protected, to be able to rest her head on his shoulder. Such weakness was so alien to her that Karen automatically straightened

her shoulders, mentally recoiling. Yes, she had been under a lot of stress, and while maybe it was okay to lean on that strong shoulder for a little while, she wouldn't allow herself to make a habit of it.
As he slid behind the wheel, he gave her his habitual half-smile, the one that crinkled the corners of his eyes and just barely curled his lips, the one that made him look sleepy and… something else; she wasn't certain just what.
"On second thought, it looks like it's going to rain again, so walking in the Quarter is out," he said. "We'll go to my house. We can sit on the balcony, drink a glass of wine, people-watch. You don't need to mope around a hotel room all by yourself."
An afternoon walk and dinner were one thing, but going to his house was quite another. "I've imposed enough—" she began.
"Don't argue."
"It's your day off, and I—"
"I said don't argue."
The easiness of his tone kept her from taking umbrage but didn't blind her to his determination. He had decided she was going to his house, so go she would.
It was because he was a cop, she thought, letting her head drop back against the seat. When he gave an order, he expected it to be obeyed. Doctors were like that, too. A nurse didn't have to agree with the order, as long as she carried it out. But that was her job, and this wasn't. Nor was it police business. She could tell him no. The problem was, she didn't want to. She wanted to sit on his balcony and sip a glass of wine; it seemed so Southern, so *New Orleans*. She wanted to amuse herself with a little people-watching. She definitely didn't want to face that empty hotel room right now.
They didn't talk much during the half-hour drive back to the city. She felt limp, oddly detached, almost dreamy. She recognized it as the aftermath of her emotional storm and relief that the funeral was over, as if she had accomplished some herculean task and now could rest. The sense of drifting was pleasant.
She didn't realize he lived in the Quarter until he turned onto St. Louis. Until then, she had just thought he was taking a shortcut through the Quarter, though when she looked at it logically, she knew that was ridiculous. Why wind his way through the narrow, crowded streets of the Quarter to get anywhere except *in* the Quarter? He slowed and punched the button on his garage door opener, and a wide blue door began sliding

upward. He wheeled the car into the opening when there was barely enough room for it to fit under, making her gasp and duck her head.
He chuckled. "Sorry. When you pull in here enough times, you learn how to judge it down to the inch." He cut off the car engine, got out, and walked around to her side of the car. Karen felt awkward just sitting there and making no attempt to open the car door herself, but she waited anyway. It took only a few seconds, and he seemed to expect to perform the courtesy. He opened the door, and she got out. He put his hand on her back again, a warm, light pressure that guided her toward a flight of stairs. At the top of the stairs, he unlocked a wooden door and opened it outward, ushering her through.
She stepped out onto a wide balcony that overlooked a luxurious courtyard. An old stone fountain occupied the middle, serving as a focal point around which plants of all kinds flourished. Enormous ferns and tall palms waved their lacy fronds; roses and geraniums and other flowers she couldn't name filled the air with perfume. She was certain she caught the scent of jasmine, though she didn't see any of the little starry white flowers. Enchanted, she stepped forward and rested her hands on the wrought-iron railing. This was wonderful. She looked down at a stone bench almost hidden among the foliage and wondered if he used the garden to escape from the stresses of his job.
"It's beautiful." She drew the delicious scent deep into her lungs.
"Thanks. One of the tenants keeps the place looking like a greenhouse, and I give her a break on the rent. The courtyard's nice, but I don't have time to take care of the plants. It would be just rock and dirt down there if it wasn't for Mrs. Fox."
"Then bless Mrs. Fox," she said, reluctant to leave the small paradise.
"Amen." He unlocked a door as he spoke, opening it inward and holding out his hand to her. She left the railing and walked inside, and felt as if she had also left the twentieth century behind. This house was from a different era, a different world. The plastered ceilings were at least twelve feet high, and the furniture was antique, but it was the kind of antique that was used every day, not put behind glass. The faded rug beneath her feet was still thick and luxurious, marvelously cushiony. The only modern note was a big easy chair, large enough to accommodate his height.
She started to ask how he could afford a place like this on a cop's salary, but the question was too rude, and she bit it back.

"I inherited the house from my grandmother," he said, watching her look around. "The attic is full of pieces of furniture that are two hundred years old. The fabric rots, of course, but I take care of the wood and every so often have a piece reupholstered."
"It must be wonderful, living in a place like this."
"I grew up here, so sometimes I take it for granted, but yeah, it's great." He held out his hand again, beckoning her forward. "This way." He led her through a small dining room and into the kitchen, then through double French doors leading out onto another balcony, this one overlooking the street. "Have a seat," he invited. "I'll get us something to drink. Are you hungry?"
"No, I—"
"I bet you didn't eat lunch," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Did you?"
"No," she admitted.
"You're a nurse," he said evenly. "You should know better. Sit."
Karen sat. He went inside, and she relaxed in the cushioned wrought-iron chair, watching the activity in the street below with a sort of fuzzy curiosity. She was tired and empty and still a little numb. Sitting here was just about all she felt she could manage right now. She looked at the hanging baskets of ferns, at the French doors on either side of her, and again felt herself in another world. The hot afternoon sun had cranked the temperature up into the nineties again, making steam rise from pockets of rainwater on the sidewalks, but the shade kept the heat tolerable. She needed a fan, though, just to be in keeping with the atmosphere. Smiling at the thought, she closed her eyes.
She must have dozed, rousing only when he set a tray on the table beside her. The tray held sandwiches of shaved ham, a plate of cookies, two empty glasses, and a bottle of red wine. "A domesticated man," she said, and heard the dreaminess of her tone as if she hadn't quite awakened yet.
"Don't give me too many points," he said in the lazy tone he seemed to have patented, sitting down on the other side of the little table. "The cookies are from a bakery, and any fool can make a sandwich."
He had changed clothes, she noticed, shedding the tie and exchanging his slacks for a pair of threadbare jeans. He was barefoot, and though he still wore the white shirt, he had left the tails hanging out, wrinkled from where it had been tucked in before. He had also opened a couple of buttons, so that

it was fastened only to the middle of his chest. A broad, hairy chest, she noticed, still drowsy. Nice.
He propped his bare feet on the balcony railing, sighing as he relaxed. "Kick your shoes off," he invited.
She did, because the idea of being barefoot in this steamy weather sounded so wonderful. And she propped her feet on the railing, too, reasoning that passersby below wouldn't be able to see more than a few inches up her skirt, assuming anyone even looked. There was too much going on at street level for anyone to be concerned with whether or not she showed a little leg. She sighed just as he had, because it felt wonderful to be free of the hot, restricting shoes, to put her feet up, to feel her spine loosening. She so seldom just *sat* that this was a luxury.
Without sitting up from his relaxed position, Marc stretched out an arm and expertly poured two glasses of wine. "Eat," he said, and waited until she took one of the sandwiches before snagging the other for himself.
Silently, she munched on the sandwich, sipped the wine, and watched the tourists strolling below. From somewhere drifted the sound of a street band, and she could also hear someone expertly playing show tunes on a piano. Snippets of conversation floated upward, mere background to the moment. She couldn't imagine any other place in the world like New Orleans, with its casual, exotic magic.
Their feet were propped side by side on the railing, and she surveyed them with interest, struck by the differences. Hers were much smaller and more slender, delicately formed, definitely feminine. His feet were big, bony, a little hairy on top: masculine. Interesting.
"Do you know," she murmured, still dreamy, "why men's feet look so different from women's?"
He moved his left foot over so it was touching her right one, eyeing them. Cocking his head a little, he said, "Nail polish."
If he had been within reach, she would have elbowed him. "Nooo. It was all that running around barefoot, chasing antelope and woolly mammoths."
He laughed, actually laughed aloud, a deep and deliciously male sound that made her toes curl. "So women's feet stayed dainty because all they had to do was wander around and pick berries."
"*And* carry the kids around." She wanted to hear him laugh again. She almost shivered again, this time with delight.

He settled his broad shoulders more comfortably in the chair. "Well, it would have been tough chasing woolly mammoths while carrying the papoose as well as spears."
"Excuses, excuses. Anything to get out of babysitting." The wine was good, she thought. She usually didn't care for red wine, but this was mellow and rich. She finished the glass and set it on the table, sighing with contentment.
Nothing was said for quite a while. The sizzling heat made conversation somehow unnecessary. A bass rumble of thunder announced the approach of more rain, and clouds began inching their purplish mass over the blaze of the setting sun. Marc carried the tray inside but left the plate of cookies on the table. He returned after several minutes. Music drifted from inside, a lazy blues instrumental. Everything drifted down here, she thought, closing her eyes. Anything else required too much effort.
"More wine?"
"Mmm, yes."
"Then eat a cookie."
"Slave driver." But she smiled as she picked up a cookie and bit into it. The flavor exploded on her tongue. "Ohh, that's good," she moaned. "What is it?"
"White chocolate. Pecans: Other stuff. They're my favorite kind." He ate one with gusto, then another.
What a mixture he was, she thought in amusement. Almost Old World in some ways, typical modern American male in others. He would feel perfectly at ease stretched out in his chair in that marvelous old living room, wearing jeans and a T-shirt and watching a ball game. Plus, he was a cop, adding to his complexity. What other qualities would surface on longer acquaintance? It didn't matter, she realized; she wouldn't have a chance to find out, because she was leaving tomorrow morning. An odd pang tightened her stomach.
They killed the plate of cookies and their second glasses of wine. Thunder rumbled again, edging closer. Rain began to spatter on the street, and the tourists below began hurrying for shelter. Within minutes, the street was deserted, and the silvery rain increased in steadiness, hurrying twilight. Karen felt slightly chilled on the outside, but the wine had created a warm glow inside. A single saxophone mourned, the pure notes reaching to her soul. She hugged herself, aching inside.

"Dance with me," he said softly, standing up and holding out his hand to her.
She stood and went silently into his arms. She closed her eyes, and her head found her personal resting place on his shoulder. There couldn't be anything more perfect, she thought, than slow dancing, barefoot, on a balcony in New Orleans, while the rain poured down and twilight wrapped around them. He was so marvelously warm, she wanted to sink into him, and she actually caught herself pressing closer. Immediately, she started to pull back, but he stopped her with a firm hand on the small of her back, urging her even closer.
"It's okay. Just rest against me." The words were barely a murmur, as if he didn't want them to intrude on the moment.
So she relaxed again, so readily that she felt a flicker of guilt in the far recesses of her brain. She was shamelessly using him, for comfort, for support, for… for pleasure. Yes, this was pure pleasure: the strength of his arms around her, the hardness of his chest and belly rubbing against her breasts, her own belly, as they swayed to the hypnotic wail of the sax. His thighs slid along hers, his feet brushed hers, and occasionally she even felt the bulge of his genitals, though she thought he was being careful about that —his perfect manners again. She found herself waiting, almost breathless, for the next time their movements brought her hip against him. She wanted to curl into him, press herself fully to that intriguing bulge.
Her heartbeat was slow, heavy. The chill was gone; she felt deliciously warm, almost boneless, all thought suspended.
One strong hand slid up her back to close lightly over the nape of her neck, and the other moved down to her bottom. She didn't think of protesting. Somehow the touch wasn't demanding anything of her. He was just gently kneading her bottom, that was all. She had never before realized how good that could feel.
He tilted her head back, his hand firm on her neck. She saw the sensuous curve of his mouth, then he was kissing her, and even that wasn't demanding. Her eyes drifted shut again. His lips were soft, shaping hers, and he didn't use his tongue.
Abruptly, she wished he would. She wanted more of his taste. But she enjoyed what he was giving her, more than she had ever enjoyed any other man's kisses, so she let herself get lost in those light, brushing kisses. And she realized she had curled into him, after all, her hips arched toward him.

His hand left her bottom, almost drawing a protesting moan from her. But she heard the click of the door handle behind her and realized he was guiding her back into the kitchen. It was dark inside; he hadn't left a light on. She didn't bother opening her eyes, merely sighed with dreamy pleasure as he continued kissing her and his hand returned to her buttocks. Both hands, she dimly realized, and she was clinging to his shoulders with both hands. Her breasts were tight, achy; her loins were full. It felt good, better than good. She wanted his tongue, she wanted it so much that she rose on tiptoe and deepened the kiss herself, tentatively probing. And she wanted to stretch against him, so she did that, too, pressing her breasts to him and feeling her nipples pinch with pleasure.

He gave a low growl, deep in his throat, and took the initiative from her. This time, the pleasure was sharp, splintering, and she moaned aloud. Oh, yes. He tasted wonderful, like cookies and wine and himself. His tongue moved deep and sure, taking, and hers danced around it, softly teasing. She had never before realized kisses could be so subtle, so full of meaning, so varied.

He grasped her skirt and worked it up to her waist, then slid his hands beneath the waistband of her panties to clasp her bare bottom. Her buttocks were cool, his hands hot; the contrast had her arching forward, gasping. Her breasts throbbed; her hips undulated a little, reaching for and finding the hard ridge of his penis, rocking against him, instinctively seeking relief. She had gone beyond warm; she felt feverish, her skin too tight, her clothes too binding.

He stooped a little, tugging at her panties. They slid down her thighs, dropped to her ankles. "Step out of them," he whispered, and mindlessly she did so. Her heart was pounding, her body caught in a fever of need.

"Open your eyes."

She did that, too, staring up at him in the rain-washed dimness of the room, his face lit by the watery light seeping through the french doors. His expression was set, his eyes narrow and piercing, his mouth fiercely sensual.

They weren't in the kitchen after all, she realized with a sort of distant surprise; he had danced her through the other set of doors. They were in his bedroom.

The bed hit the backs of her knees, and he eased her down onto it, his hands firm and sure. She barely had time to register the coolness of the sheets

beneath her bare bottom, then he was on her, heavy and solid, kneeing her thighs apart while he opened his jeans.
She breathed deeply, her eyes half closed, watching him through the fringe of her lashes. She still felt dreamy, as if none of this were real, yet she had never wanted so intensely as she did now, never hungered for another man as she did for him. The power of her need surprised her; she wasn't quite certain how she had come to this moment, lying on a bed with a man she barely knew, her panties on the floor and her skirt around her waist.
The first touch of his penis to her was startling, a stark intrusion of reality. Her eyes flared with shock, and her fingers dug into his shoulders. He held her gaze, his big body pressing her into the mattress, and entered her with a hard, steady thrust, sheathing himself to the root with one movement. Her body arched in feminine shock at the force of his penetration, at this searing invasion. His penis was smooth and hard, thick, impossibly deep, and she writhed around him.
He steadied her, holding her firmly as he withdrew a little and thrust again, his gaze intent on her face. She couldn't stop her gasping cry at the resulting sensation, the pleasure that was almost torment. Her heart pounded violently against her ribs. She clung to him with desperate hands, feeling as if she were about to be torn apart by an internal force she couldn't contain.
He whispered soothingly to her, words of masculine reassurance she couldn't quite grasp, but the dark honey of his voice was more effective than any words.
"Please." She heard herself begging, for mercy, for relief, for anything and everything.
He understood her urgency even better than she. He pulled back and thrust deep, hard, then again, and she began climaxing.
He rode her hard through the waves of sensation, pounding into her, holding her thighs spread wide so she had no control, no protection. He showed her no mercy as she convulsed and arched, nor did she want any. She wanted only him, the fierce intimacy of his body locked into hers.
When her spasms eased, she lay sprawled limply beneath him. She was exhausted, emptied out, barely conscious. His powerful body bucked when he came, and her flesh quivered from the impact of his thrusts.
He lay heavily on her, his chest heaving as he gasped for breath, his heart thundering against her own. He felt damp with sweat through his clothes, but a slight, cooling breeze wafted through the open French doors, bringing

with it the freshness of the rain. Karen turned her face into his neck, breathing in the hot odor of his skin, and felt herself sink toward sleep.
She roused a little when he withdrew, instinctively protesting the loss of his weight, the comfort of his animal warmth in the rain-cooled night. "Shh," he murmured, soothing her.
Enough light came through the windows and open doors that she could sleepily watch him remove and discard a condom, and she was alert just enough to ask, "When did you put that on?" She would swear his hands had never left her after they had entered the bedroom.
"When I put on the music." He turned back to her, still kneeling between her spread thighs. His eyes were heavy-lidded with concentration as he began removing her clothes. Karen let him unzip her dress, his hands working under her; her sluggish thoughts still centered on the condom. He had planned this, then. Even before they had begun dancing, he had intended to make love to her.
The significance of this seemed important, but why eluded her. He tugged her dress off over her head and tossed it aside, then deftly undipped her bra and removed it, too. Her attention was caught by her nudity, which, despite the intimacy of the act they had just shared, made her feel far too vulnerable. She shocked herself, lying there naked and spread in front of a man who was still clothed, even though his jeans were down around his thighs. He should have been soft, but his swollen penis jutted out from under his shirt, twitching with arousal.
Her hands moved; perhaps he sensed her intention to cover herself, for he caught her wrists and pinned them to the pillow beside her head, and took his time looking her over. Her nipples drew into tight little points under his inspection, and he smiled. Leaning over her, he licked her left nipple, circling the point with his tongue before gently catching it between his teeth and applying delicate pressure.
Prickles of heat shot through her. She gasped, fruitlessly wrenching her arms in an effort to free them—not to push him away but to hold him close. He sucked at her, pressing the nipple hard against the roof of his mouth while his tongue worked at it, and she writhed helplessly. She hadn't known her breasts were so sensitive, but the way he was sucking her aroused her so sharply she felt herself, impossibly, building toward another climax.
Bending forward as he was, the tip of his penis nudged at her swollen folds, prodding her opening. Her breath snagged, caught. Her hips arched.

He swore softly, his breath ragged, and reared back from her. He fought his way out of the shirt, tossing it aside, and quickly sheathed himself with another condom. Leaning over her again, he caught her wrists in one hand and stretched her arms over her head, arching her breasts upward in tender offering. He took full advantage of her position, sucking both nipples, gentle and ruthless at once.

His free hand moved over her belly, down between her spread legs. She was swollen and sensitive from their lovemaking, barely able to take the two big fingers he worked up inside her. She quivered, gasping, and her head tossed restlessly back and forth within the frame of her upstretched arms.

A shudder of arousal rippled over him. "You're tight," he murmured, kissing her throat. "Am I hurting you?"

"N-no." She could barely speak. His fingers reached deep inside her, pressing upward. His thumb rasped over her clitoris, circled it enticingly.

"Oh, my God." She cried the words, arching tautly. Heat poured through her, drawing her upward like a bow. She could feel another climax building, even stronger than the last. Her shaking thighs were spread achingly wide again as he shifted close to her, taking his fingers out of her and replacing them with the long stroke of his shaft.

The spasms boiled swiftly upward. He felt them begin and pressed himself deep. Rhythmic cries shook from her, and her body convulsed. He controlled his own urges and slowly, carefully, rebuilt her desire until she climaxed yet again, and only then did he let himself come.

She slept, and woke to his hands on her again.

Night had completely fallen, and he had removed his jeans. Rain still pattered down outside, and the French doors were still open, letting in the damp air. Nothing else in the universe existed but the confines of the bed and man who held her close to his heat and hardness. She didn't think, simply *was*, for the first time in her life, lost to pure physical pleasure. He could have done anything to her, and she wouldn't have protested.

He slid down her body and pressed his mouth to her, the caress so tender and intimate she almost wept, would have if desire hadn't risen again, throbbing insistently in her loins. He mounted her, said, "I'm going to do you hard this time," and did, ruthlessly driving for his own pleasure and making her come, too. She thought she would faint this time, the spasms were so intense. She clutched his sweaty sides and completely gave herself up to him. This savage lovemaking in the dark, rainy New Orleans night

was more intensely carnal than anything she could have imagined doing, and she didn't want it to end.
This time, he slept, too, holding her so close that sweat formed between their bodies, sealing them together.
The night felt endless. She woke to the same rain and darkness, the hot damp air, the contrasting coolness of the rain-laden breezes. She couldn't see a clock anywhere, wouldn't have looked at it in any case. She kissed her way down his body. By the time she reached his groin, he was awake, erect, groaning. She kissed his shaft, licked the length of it, and felt it grow even more, then she took him fully in her mouth. Torment was a two-way street, and she wanted him to enjoy it as much as she had.
She didn't know how many times they made love that night. Her mind was in a fog, her body completely turned over to him. When she was so exhausted she simply couldn't respond again, he cradled her in his arms and brushed a tender kiss across her eyes. "Sleep, darlin'," he whispered in that black magic voice, and it was as if she only needed to hear the words before she let go of consciousness.

Chapter 10

Hayes was a careful man. He hired competent people, but when someone told him a job was done, he didn't necessarily take it for granted that the job had been done to his satisfaction.
He made it a point to double-check everything. His caution paid off, letting him catch and deal with irritants before they became major problems. The people who worked for him considered him a major pain in the ass, but the people for whom *he* worked were eternally grateful for his attention to detail.
When Clancy called and reported he had taken care of his assignment, Hayes believed him; Clancy was damn good at what he did. But he still contacted another source to have a copy of the police report on the house fire, as well as the newspaper account, faxed to him on a private, untraceable line. He was competent with computers but more comfortable with older technology; he thought the security was better. With computers, who knew what little puke in Hoboken or somewhere was taking a peek at everything he sent or received?

His source called back the next day. "I can't find anything about a Karen Whitlaw's house burning," he said. "There was a house fire, but the house belonged to a couple named Hoerske."
Hayes cursed. It wasn't like Clancy to burn the wrong house. "Do me a favor," he said. "Look in the phone book, and see what Karen Whitlaw's address is."
"Okay. Just a minute." The sound of riffling pages came through the phone line. "Whitfield… Whitfield… Whitlaw. There's no Karen Whitlaw listed, but there is a K. S. Whitlaw."
"Hold on." Hayes checked the file he had on Dexter Whitlaw's wife and daughter. The daughter's middle name was Simone. "That would be her."
"Okay. The address is… hell, the address is the same as the Hoerskes' house."
Hayes felt a headache forming behind his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fax everything you have to me."
"Sure."
Twenty seconds later, the fax machine was humming as it spit out the requested documents. Hayes didn't bother with the police report; he picked up the copy of the newspaper account: "A fire yesterday morning destroyed the residence of Nathan and Lindsey Hoerske. According to the fire marshall, the flame began in the kitchen. The Hoerskes, who bought the home only four months before, were not at home at the time of the blaze."
Hayes tossed the sheet down. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened; the Whitlaw woman had sold the house. Probably Clancy had looked up her address in the phone book, but phone books were only updated once a year.
He called Clancy. As always, he got voice mail. "Leave a number," Clancy's voice instructed, without identifying himself. "If I know you, I'll call back."
"You fucked up," Hayes said, also not identifying himself.
"The hell I did," Clancy said, picking up the phone. He sounded pissed; he wasn't used to customer dissatisfaction.
"She didn't live there, asshole. She sold the house four months ago."
"Well, sonofabitch. I hate that, burning down a house for nothing."
"Find her. And this time, do the job right."
Senator Stephen Lake expected to be the next president; a lot of other people expected the same thing. He and his older brother, William, had been groomed for public office from the time they were born, but when William

died, Stephen had become the heir apparent. The Lakes were lawyers and judges and politicians, and Stephen was the fourth generation to follow that path.

Senator Lake had always been acutely aware that William was his father's first choice, the apple of the old man's eye, and after William's death, Stephen had tried even harder to be the perfect politician, to make up to his father in some small way for the pain of losing his favorite son. He had set a sure and steady career course, building a reputation over the years as a man who always took the high road; an admirable position, Franklin Vinay thought, but the chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, not to mention the agencies involved, would be better served by pragmatism than idealism.

The DDO didn't like being summoned to the senator's office like a schoolboy ordered before the principal. He went anyway, and none of his distaste was revealed in his expression as he sat in the beautifully appointed office. He did wonder, though, what had brought the senator back to the capital during August; the last Vinay had heard, Senator Lake had been happily settled at the Minnesota estate he so loved. Vinay couldn't imagine anything less than a national emergency luring any of the politicians from their vacations during the worst of the summer heat. Since he would have known before any congressman if there was a national emergency, perhaps even before the president, Vinay knew that wasn't the case.

That made Senator Lake's presence all the more curious, and Franklin Vinay wasn't a man who ignored curiosities.

"Coffee, Frank?" the senator asked, gesturing toward a pot.

"No, thanks. I'm not tough enough to drink coffee during this heat."

The senator laughed genially and helped himself to a cup, perhaps to prove *he* was tough enough. Vinay smiled, watching as the senator poured a single drop of cream into his coffee, wondering how many cups the senator would drink before he felt his manhood sufficiently established.

He didn't ask why the senator had summoned him. Vinay had been in the game a long time; he knew the power of silence, how to play the subtle game of position: force the other side to come out first. He didn't betray any anxiety, or any secrets, by rushing into speech. That they were ostensibly on the same side didn't matter; Vinay let no one force him into unguarded speech. When he knew what the senator wanted, then he would know how to react.

Unfortunately, Senator Lake was a great one for small talk, rather than getting to the point. "This is the hottest summer I can remember," he said, leaning back in his butter-soft leather chair. "Miserably hot. Normally, I take August for vacation—"
Like every politician in D.C. didn't, Vinay thought.
"—maybe get in a little trout fishing. Do you fish, Frank?"
"Not in years." He'd been too busy trying to contain some noxious *isms*, such as communism and terrorism.
"You really should try to get away more. Fishing puts a man back in touch with nature. You get to see unspoiled parts of the country, and you remember that most of America doesn't live in big cities. Our media is so dominated by what happens in the cities that we tend to forget the concerns of the rest of the country."
Vinay opened his mouth to agree, but the senator waved a hand. "Here I am rambling on, and I know you're busy. I'll get to the point. One of my aides informed me that one of your contract agents has been killed in Mississippi. Reassure me, Frank, that he wasn't on an assignment for you, and don't give me the standard quote that the CIA is forbidden to operate within our own borders. Being forbidden to do something and *not* doing it are two different things."
Vinay looked blank, but inside he was furious. The only way one of the senator's aides could find out about Rick Medina was from an inside source in Vinay's department. "Senator, there are no operations inside our borders, period. If a contract agent has been killed—and I haven't heard anything about it—then it was something unconnected to us."
"You haven't heard?" Now the senator looked blank. "But—"
"We use a lot of contract agents. They also work for other countries, as you well know, whenever they aren't working for us. Perhaps this person was on assignment, but not for us, and if that were the case, I wouldn't have any information on him or her. Which is it, by the way?"
"Which—?"
"A man or a woman?"
"Oh—a man. You truly haven't heard?"
"Like I said, if it doesn't concern the Agency, I would have no reason to be informed."
"I was informed this man's son is one of your people."

The senator had been informed of too goddamned much, Vinay thought grimly. And if he really thought Vinay would identify one of his most important operatives, then the senator also expected too goddamned much.
"It's possible, but unless the death affected operations…" He shrugged, to show how unimportant it was to him that a contract agent had been killed.
Senator Lake consulted a file. "The agent was Rick Medina. Does the name ring a bell?"
"Rick Medina!" Vinay managed a credible look of shock. "Are you sure of that?"
"My source is very reliable," the senator said stiffly. He wasn't accustomed to having his word questioned.
"I've known Rick for years—not well, no one knew him well, but he was one of our most reliable contract agents. Damn!"
"Are you also acquainted with his son?"
"Rick didn't have a family," Vinay lied. "He was a complete loner."
"I see." For some reason, Senator Lake seemed nonplussed. "Well."
Vinay stood, his patience at an end. He was glad he was able to tell the truth about Medina not being on assignment for them when he was killed, but the senator knew too much, details of information that should not have come his way. Already, the deputy director was planning how he would bring the mole in his department out into the sunlight—and then fire his ass.
"Was that all you wanted, Senator?" he asked politely. "I assure you Medina wasn't running anything for us. If you want more detail, I'll be happy to check into his death and get back with you on anything I find."
"Oh, no, that won't be necessary. I was just worried about—well, you know the situation in the country these days, with militia groups looking for any detail, no matter how far-fetched, that they can find to prove our government has run amok. It's best to head these things off at the pass."
It was a fairly legitimate concern, but something about the way it was stated struck Vinay as a little too pat, as if the answer had been rehearsed. "Yes, sir," he said. Something wasn't right here; he couldn't put his finger on it, but he trusted his instinct. Why would Senator Lake feel he had to come up with a plausible excuse for asking about Rick Medina?
Maybe Rick wasn't the focus of his questions. Maybe he had really been trying to get information on John. Suspicion struck Vinay hard in the gut. He couldn't think of any good reason why the senator would want or need to know anything about John Medina, but several bad reasons occurred to

him, and they all needed to be investigated. He hadn't reached his present position by being gullible.
After Vinay had gone, Senator Lake sat down at his wide, hideously expensive desk, absently rubbing his fingers along the glassy finish while he stared thoughtfully at the door through which Vinay had passed. Something very disturbing had happened in that meeting. There were two possibilities, and he didn't like either of them. Either Hayes was mistaken in his information, or the deputy director of operations had just lied to him. Slowly, Senator Lake reached for the phone, then with swift decision punched in the number for a private line in his house. It was answered on the second ring, and a comfortingly familiar, nimbly voice soothed his sudden anxiety. "Raymond, could you catch the next flight to D.C.? I may need you."

Chapter 11

Dragging her suitcase, Karen let herself into her apartment. Grimly, without letting herself look at the answering machine because she knew the little red light would be blinking like a caution light, she went into the bedroom and completely unpacked. She took her time about it, hanging what she hadn't worn back in the closet and separating everything else into two piles, one for the laundry and one for the dry cleaner.
She watered her plants, put the laundry in the washing machine, then called her floor supervisor. "Judy, hi, it's Karen. I'm home, and I can go back to work tonight if you need me."
"If I need you?" Judy Camliffe echoed in heartfelt relief. "Marietta's been out with strep throat for two days, and Ashley called in sick today, too."
"What's wrong with Ashley?"
"The brown flu. So hell, yes, I need you. The question is, do you need to come back so soon? I'll manage tonight, somehow, if you need another day."
"Thanks," Karen said, meaning it. Judy was under a lot of pressure to keep her floor running smoothly with fewer nurses than ever, since the hospital wasn't immune to cutbacks. Five years ago, there were twelve registered nurses on the surgical floor, four per shift. Now there were eight whom Judy had to juggle among three shifts and two off days per nurse each week.

Some nights there was only one RN on duty. The rumor was they would be going on twelve-hour shifts before the end of the year. "But I'm okay; the funeral was yesterday, and I flew home this morning."
"Really? I looked for the obituary, but I didn't see it."
"He's buried in Louisiana. I didn't have a plot for him here, and one of the detectives suggested I bury him there for the time being. Mom would have wanted them to be buried together, and there's no room beside her, so I'll have to find another place and have them both moved…" Her voice trailed off. She was vaguely surprised at herself. She liked Judy, considered her a friend, but she wasn't in the habit of rambling on about her private problems even to Piper, who was her closest friend. But mentioning Marc even indirectly rattled her so much she could barely think coherently; her heartbeat jumped into overdrive, her stomach clenched, her breasts tightened, her mouth watered. The symptoms of panic and sexual desire jumbled together, just as they had that morning when she had awakened in bed with him.
"Gee, that's tough," Judy said. "Uh, I hate to ask, but did you get a copy of the death certificate or maybe an obituary in the New Orleans paper? You have to have one of them to get paid for the days you were off."
"I have a copy of his death certificate." Marc had gotten it for her. She didn't know how long it would normally have taken, but he had sweet-talked someone in the medical examiner's office into processing the paperwork. Her heartbeat did another sprint. He wouldn't have had to do any sweet-talking; all he had to do was ask, in that midnight voice, and if the clerk was a woman, he would have his paperwork.
"Good. That'll minimize any hassle with payroll. Are you sure you feel like working?"
"I'm sure."
"Then I can definitely use you tonight. Come in at your regular time."
That settled, Karen looked around for something else to do. When she went into the living room, the message light flashed insistently at her. She ignored it, went into the kitchen, and made a sandwich, then did something she rarely had time for: she sat down in front of the television and put up her feet. There was an interior decorating show on Discovery. Since her apartment was badly in need of decorating—unpacking would help—she watched the show while she ate her sandwich.

She had run. Literally. Like the biggest coward on earth, she had sneaked out of the house while Marc was in the shower. Her feet still ached from running in high heels the nine or so blocks to the hotel. She had thrown her clothes in the suitcase, called the desk, and checked out, then prayed he wouldn't be waiting in the lobby for her. She couldn't face him; she had never been more embarrassed. Of course, there was a strong possibility he might not bother to come after her, that he would be relieved to get her off his hands, but she didn't want to take that chance.

She got off the elevator on the mezzanine, then carried her bag down the final flight of stairs so she wouldn't run into him at the bank of elevators. She went out the side door of the hotel, into the big parking bay, and got into a taxi.

She was lucky; he didn't know what airline she was flying. He also had to work. Still, when the loudspeaker at the airport requested that Karen Whitlaw please pick up one of the courtesy phones, she didn't, just in case he was actually in the airport instead of at work.

She didn't breathe a sigh of relief until the plane backed away from the gate. Not that Marc would use his badge to get on board the plane for a face-to-face; after all, she wasn't a criminal, just a woman he had slept with the night before.

It wasn't the sleeping part that embarrassed her. It was what they had done when they weren't asleep.

She wasn't a prude, or frigid, or innocent—two of those were an impossibility in her profession, as far as she was concerned—but nothing like last night had ever before happened to her. She thought of herself as careful and responsible, two qualities that precluded sleeping around. Piper said she was picky and paranoid, which wasn't as flattering but had the same result. She had never, *never*, been as reckless, as thoughtless, as she had been last night. Whatever Marc had wanted to do to her, she had let him, and he had wanted to do a lot. Let him? She had actively participated, and climaxed more times than she could remember. She had been like a bitch in heat.

She stared sightlessly at a demonstration of a painting technique that involved dabbing a ball of plastic wrap in paint, then blotting it on the wall. God, how stupid could she be? Maybe if she'd had more hands-on experience, so to speak, she would have seen him coming.

She winced at the pun, her cheeks burning. The truth was, she had been humiliatingly easy for him. She had been seduced, and by a master. He hadn't made a single wrong move.

The cheerful woman on television was single-handedly turning a blank wall into a masterpiece of designer painting. Karen scowled at her and clicked the television off. She was fairly certain she was never going to paint her walls with a wad of plastic wrap. How could she concentrate on decorating, anyway, when she had some serious brooding to do?

There was no single point she could use to salvage any pride. She had been very willing, and she couldn't salve her conscience by pretending otherwise. On the other hand, there was no denying his skill. The degree of her willingness was testimony to that.

She leaned her head back on the sofa, staring at the plain white ceiling. Marc's ceilings were high, with fancy crown molding, and yummy ceiling fans everywhere.

She punched the cushion. Damn it, she did *not* want to think about him! How could she stop, though, when her insides still throbbed? If any of her friends at the hospital had bragged about having sex that many times in one night—with one man—Karen wouldn't have believed her. Well, now she knew there really were men who could get it up that often. She felt raw and swollen between her legs, proof of the excesses of the night in case she doubted her own memory.

Looking back, she saw how he had led her, inevitably and without a pause, straight to his bed. Hindsight wasn't worth a damn, though. She hadn't felt even a tingle of warning at the time. Using means both swift and subtle, he had fostered a sense of intimacy between them and then capitalized on it. The man knew his stuff.

The day before had been one long seduction. Her entire acquaintance with him had been a seduction. She had studied human sexuality, knew the signals, and still she had missed them; only in retrospect were they crystal clear.

First had come the concern, the solicitousness for her well-being, the touches disguised as courtesy. She remembered his hand on her arm, sliding down her back, resting on her waist. He had won her trust, lulled her into accepting his constant touch without suspecting the sexuality behind it, and then aroused her to the point where she hadn't even thought about calling a halt to their lovemaking.

And yesterday… oh, yesterday. She remembered the way he had put his hand on the back of her neck while she wept, a gesture so sexually possessive she didn't know how it had slipped under her radar, but at the time she had been aware only of being comforted. By then, she was so used to having his hands on her that it had felt… right.

He had even managed, with perfect logic, to talk her into taking off part of her own clothing, and she had felt relaxed enough with him to do it. He couldn't have arranged for her to snag her panty hose, but he had been quick to take advantage of it. Just her panty hose, just her shoes… it had all felt so casual, so relaxed, and had set the stage for her to lose all her clothes.

He had further softened her with wine, though she couldn't use even that to excuse herself. She hadn't been tipsy. He had seen to that, carefully feeding her, not giving her any grounds on which she could later excuse herself, or accuse him. She had been sober but wanned by the wine and his care, his touch. She remembered the brush of his bare feet against hers while they danced, and her toes curled, her nipples tightened.

What could be more romantic than a hot sax and a slow dance on a balcony in New Orleans on a rainy summer night? She had been completely in his arms then, under his spell, so subtly aroused she had been almost at fever pitch and hadn't even realized it. She remembered the fleeting contact with his erection while they danced, and knew now it hadn't been accidental. He had teased her with it, letting her surreptitiously seek out another brief touch, making her feel everything was still casual while subtly intensifying her arousal.

He had orchestrated every touch, gentling her, bringing her to the point where she not only would accept him sexually but was eager for the act. He hadn't put one step wrong; he hadn't grabbed her breasts or shoved his hand between her legs, moves that would have startled her into pulling away. She didn't know why having his hands on her bottom hadn't warned her, but all her alarms had been silent. Maybe she had already been past the point of no return. He had bypassed all the usual foreplay, except for those wonderful kisses; when he was ready, he had simply tossed her skirt up and taken her, except that the entire day had been foreplay and she had been more than ready for him, climaxing with embarrassing speed.

The memory of it had her face hot, her breath rushing in and out of her lungs. Damn it! One night with him had turned her into a sex kitten, evidently. She wanted him. Still. Now.

The man knew more about sex, and women, than should be legal. He had been so sure of himself, and of her, that he had put on a condom even before asking her to dance. She should be grateful for that, at least, because she had been so far gone that the thought of protection had never crossed her mind, and she was a nurse, for God's sake. She hadn't thought of pregnancy or disease, only of completing the act for which her body was clamoring.

He had certainly destroyed another of her assumptions, because she had always thought people who claimed to be swept away by passion were exaggerating to cover their own stupidity and carelessness. Now she was the newest member of the Stupid and Careless Club.

So much for her vaunted caution and self-control; Marc Chastain just hadn't gotten his hands on her, yet. Well, now he had, and now she knew that she had no caution or self-control where he was concerned.

There were so many levels of foolishness to her behavior that she could scarcely believe what she had done. She had gone straight from her father's grave to a stranger's bed. She didn't think she could have made it through the ordeal of the past few days without Marc's aid, but he was still, essentially, a stranger. She didn't know anything about him except that he was a cop, he could seduce a statue, and he had screwed her brains out. The deliberate crudity of the thought didn't make her feel better, it made her feel like crying.

If she thought he had been wildly attracted to her from the beginning, she would still be embarrassed by having slept with him, still be mortified by her carelessness, but she wouldn't have run like a scared rabbit. But he *hadn't* been attracted to her, in fact, he had taken an instant dislike to her. Lying in the cool of the early morning, pinned to the mattress by his muscular arm, all she could remember was when she had first met him, and she knew she hadn't been mistaken. So, if he disliked her so much, why had he immediately launched his seduction tactics? The awful possibility that occurred to her was what sent her running.

Maybe he was guilty of nothing more than horniness. Maybe he had made love to her casually but not maliciously, taking the opportunity when it presented itself. Maybe. She didn't believe it. For one thing, he hadn't left anything to chance, not even the condoms. He had set out to take her and accomplished his aim with ridiculous ease. His actions bespoke a deliberation that frightened her, and hurt her beyond measure.

Given his immediate dislike, what if his entire seduction campaign had been aimed at taking her down a peg? Screw her, use her, walk away from her. One of the residents at the hospital had even said something like that to her, after she had turned down his invitation for the third time. "One of these days, some slick stud is going to get your panties off," he had said, sneering, "and when he gets through with you and walks off, you'll find out you're not any better than the rest of us."

She didn't imagine studs came any slicker than Marc Chastain.

She winced, wishing she would stop thinking in those awful puns.

Now she thought of an even worse possibility. What if his actions had been motivated by *pity*?

She groaned, covering her eyes. Great. Just great. She was that most pitiable of creatures, a mercy fuck.

Karen rolled her head and looked at the blinking light on the answering machine. She didn't have to listen to the messages; she could walk over there and erase them. She wouldn't have to hear that dark velvet drawl again or, worse, *not* hear it. Maybe he had just said to hell with it and walked away, and there was no message from him to erase.

"Damn it." She said the words aloud. "Damn it, damn it, *damn* it." The repetition didn't help. She had to face the truth she had been trying hard to avoid, but her own inability to stop thinking about him made avoidance impossible. She had done something far more stupid than sleeping with him; sometime during the past three days, she had fallen in love with him. She had told herself it was only because he was being so helpful at a time when she really needed it, but her heart had given a big thump every time she saw him. She had told herself it was just his voice, that marvelous, deliciously male voice, that attracted her. She had told herself a lot of things, but the truth was her insides had jolted in primitive recognition the first time she had seen him. Call it chemistry, call it biology—hell, call it voodoo—for whatever reason, she had gravitated to him like a nail to a magnet, and everything he had done after that had only intensified her feelings.

How could she not love him? He had fed her, sheltered her with his own body, warmed her; such simple, even primitive actions, things a caveman might have done for his cavewoman of choice when he wanted to get under her bearskin with her. Funny that they were as effective now as they had been thousands of years ago.

She couldn't put her finger on any one moment when her initial feelings had crystallized into something more serious, but neither could she discount what she was feeling. It was real, it was fierce, it was terrifying—and it was painful.

If all he had wanted was casual sex to while away a rainy night, then he shouldn't have been so damn courteous and gallant, she thought furiously, tears stinging her eyes. And if he disliked her so much that he had deliberately tried to make her care, so her hurt would be worse—

She didn't know what to do. She didn't have the experience to deal with this kind of situation. She had never loved a man before, never let herself even get close to loving one. It was ironic that she had just decided to begin giving men more of a chance in the romance field, and then Marc had come in under her radar and laid her flat, quite literally.

She should have stayed and faced him. It would have been the smart, dignified thing to do. Just lay it all out, like an adult—no game playing, just honest talk.

Well, it was too late to act like an adult. The least she could do now was apologize for her behavior and let him worry about his own.

The blinking light on the answering machine was driving her crazy. Swearing, tears burning her eyes again, she stalked over to the machine and punched the play button.

There was a hang-up, then a recorded message trying to sell her cleaning products, three more hangups, a message from Piper saying, "God, Karen, I'm so sorry about your father. Why didn't you call?" The next message was an aluminum siding salesman, then another hang-up, and all at once a deep, furious voice: "God damn it, Karen—" He stopped, and when he spoke again, it sounded as if his teeth were clenched. "What the *hell* did you mean, running away like that? You call me the fucking minute you get home, or by God I'll—"

She didn't get to hear the rest of the threat, because he slammed down the phone. Her knees went weak, and she grabbed the edge of the desk for support. No velvet in his voice now; all she could hear was steely rage. The force of it took her aback. She hadn't expected rage. Disgruntlement, maybe, but she had expected the phone call to be something along the lines of "Are you all right? Running away wasn't necessary." She had expected him to *check* on her, nothing more, and the very mildness of his response would make her feel even more cowardly for running.

She hadn't heard him curse before—those perfect manners again. She hadn't been naive enough to think he didn't swear at all; she had heard him, though he had been speaking French. He was a cop, after all, and under the courtesy was a toughness that in normal circumstances would have made her keep as far away from him as possible. Her father had been a tough man, too. But she had needed Marc, and she had never in her life felt safer than she had with him. It wasn't just the pistol in his belt holster, it was the man himself, big and confident, with his hard, glittering eyes. He was tough, all right, and she didn't doubt he could be mean when the situation warranted.

With her, however, he had been gentle. Courteous. He had used sex words in bed with her, of course; she closed her eyes as she remembered some of the things he had said, and done. Arousal curled low and warm inside her, making her squeeze her legs together. She shivered and groaned aloud.

Just as she had the first time he called, she rewound the tape and played his message again. She winced as the force of his fury hit her ears. She had run from him as if he were a rapist, insulting him after he had gone to a great deal of trouble on her behalf, regardless of what his private opinion of her was. Being a cop, he would also have tried to catch her, to make certain nothing was wrong. She hadn't even had the courtesy to answer his page.

No wonder he was furious; she was furious with herself. Yes, she'd had a rough few days, a rough *year*, but she couldn't excuse herself on those grounds. She couldn't excuse herself at all.

She picked up the phone and dialed before she could do something else childish, such as chicken out.

"This is Chastain. Leave a message."

Voice mail. Damn voice mail. Karen clenched her teeth. He deserved a personal apology, deserved the chance to swear at her some more, but it might take her days to catch him in the office. "This is Karen. I'm at home. I'm sorry for running out on you this morning. It was childish of me, and I —I don't have any excuse. I thought—never mind. I acted like an idiot, and I'm sorry."

There didn't seem to be anything else to say. She bit her lip and hung up. The pit of her stomach felt cold. Maybe he would call so he could tell her she was a jerk and an idiot, but likely she would never hear from him again.

On impulse, she took the microcassette out of the answering machine and put it in a drawer. Even if he was swearing at her on the tape, at least it was

his voice. She could listen to it occasionally to remind herself she was a fool.

She put a new tape in the machine, then stood uncertainly. She could sit waiting for the phone to ring, or she could finish the laundry, do some chores, and try to get some sleep. She had to work that night, and she hadn't had much sleep the night before. Marc had been on top of her, and inside her, most of the night.

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply as memory curled around her. No matter what, it had been a night to remember. She regretted a lot of things about what had happened, but for a few hours she had been lost in sheer physical ecstasy. Marc had given her more pleasure than she had known it was possible to feel. It was impossible to regret that.

And she loved. She, who thought she had blocked out all love except that for her mother, found that she hadn't blocked anything. Despite everything, she loved her father. There was peace in finally admitting it, in no longer fighting to keep herself closed off. She loved him, ached for the life he had wasted, the love *he* had rejected. She was more like him than she had ever thought, in her reactions, her efforts to seal herself off, and like her mother in that despite all her efforts, she loved anyway.

She suspected this meant she would love Marc for the rest of her life.

Marc was still in a savage mood late that afternoon when he entered his office. He was hot, sweaty, tired, and so pissed off he wanted to tear something apart with his bare hands.

Karen had run from him.

He had expected her to be nervous this morning, maybe a little shy, a little embarrassed. Knowing he was short of time and opportunity, he had taken their intimacy to deeper levels, faster, than he had ever done with a woman before. There wasn't an inch of her body he hadn't touched or kissed in his effort to stake a claim on her that she wouldn't be able to easily dismiss. He had left her asleep in the bed and taken a shower, intending to waken her with kisses, hold her on his lap and pet her, tease her, bring a smile to those too-serious dark eyes—and then make love to her again. But she hadn't been asleep after all; instead, when he came out of the bathroom, she was gone.

She must have run all the way to the hotel; that was the only way she could have avoided him. By the time he got there, she had already checked out by phone, and he hadn't been able to cover all the exits. She had slipped past

him again, and a valet in the transportation bay remembered getting her a cab to the airport.

He paged her at the airport, but she hadn't answered. By then, he was so angry she was lucky he *hadn't* been able to catch her. Instead, he called her home phone and left a blistering message; probably not a smart thing to do when he was trying to gentle her out of her skittishness, but her running had rattled him.

The relative coolness of his office washed over his damp skin, wringing a sigh of relief from him. He shed his jacket and rolled his shoulders, unsticking his shirt from his back and raising chill bumps at the sensation. He ran an impatient hand over his hair and the back of his neck. God, he hated child murders. He would rather work a hundred other cases than investigate the death of a child. The helplessness and fragility of the little bodies got to him, hit him hard.

He had a five-year-old little boy in the morgue, dead from a fall down the stairs. An accident, his mother said. But the kid's legs had been covered with small, half-healed burns that she had tried to pass off as mosquito bites, and yellowish bruises had blotched his skin. Yellow bruises were old bruises, healing bruises. He had had an accident on his bicycle, his mother said.

The woman had been terrified. She had sat motionless at the kitchen table, as if she were afraid to move. Once she did turn her head, when her husband said something, and Marc thought he had seen a dark mark on her neck, just under the edge of her collar.

He knew the signs: the blouse buttoned up to the throat, the long sleeves even in sweltering weather, slacks instead of shorts.

Marc no longer wasted time wondering why a woman would stay with an abusive man, or how a mother could be cowed into silence even when her child was killed. He'd been a cop long enough that nothing surprised him. He did know he had to be careful on this case, because the husband was a lawyer and would know if there was a *t* left uncrossed or an *i* undotted. He was also a criminal defense lawyer, which made Marc all the more determined to nail his ass.

The ME would likely discover other evidence of abuse, such as previous fractures. He would determine the marks on the child's legs were from cigarette burns, not mosquito bites, and his report would provide reasonable grounds for arrest. Marc only hoped he would be able to get a warrant

before the son of a bitch panicked, knowing his wife would be able to testify against him, and killed her, too.

Marc sat down to listen to his voice mail and leafed through the pile of papers that had accumulated on his desk during his absence. Most of it was routine stuff, notices, memos, reports he had requested.

He had a lot of contacts in the city, a lot of snitches who would gladly roll over on their buddies rather than get on his bad side. Most of the stuff he heard was penny-ante, but sometimes all it took was a detail that fit into an overall picture he already had, and his case was made.

He didn't expect Karen to call, because of the message he had left rather than despite it. It was probably for the best, at this point. When he was completely calm again, he would call her and try to get this courtship back on track.

Her message took him by surprise. He stopped and leaned back in his chair, listening grimly. She sounded subdued. "… I thought—never mind. I acted like an idiot, and I'm sorry."

She thought… what? She thought too damn much, that was the problem. He could almost hear the worry going on behind the words. The woman didn't know how to relax and have fun, she had to shoulder the responsibility for everything—

"Shit," he growled, puffing out his cheeks. He should have guessed she would wake up kicking herself for what she would consider wildly irresponsible behavior. He'd been so careful not to spook her before he could get her into bed, she had no idea he was planning anything more than a one-night stand. Leaving her alone in bed while he showered had been a major tactical error, one he would remember.

The sexual chemistry between them was so hot it took his breath, and it was even more bewitching because he had known immediately she wasn't very experienced. Not ignorant, not virgin, but not… accustomed to making love. He suspected she controlled her sexuality as fiercely as she controlled her emotions. But last night, she had relaxed her control and turned into the sweetest, hottest woman he'd ever had in his bed. He hadn't known he could get a hard-on that often, but hell, he hadn't had any choice. She had been in dire need of loving, and he had risen to the occasion.

He *was* experienced, and their lovemaking had been more intense than anything he'd known before. The night must have seemed like nothing less than debauchery to her.

He reached for the phone to call her, then stopped. His temper had cooled, but he was still angry, and his own control was a little shaky after dealing with that little boy's murder. He needed to talk to her as soon as possible, so she wouldn't have time to buttress her resistance to him, but that need was balanced by caution. He wanted to yell at her, and yelling wasn't a good idea right now. She would withdraw even further and maybe refuse to talk to him again.

He forced himself to continue reading the notices from other police forces, flipping through the computer printouts. He paused when he saw the Mississippi state police had reported a body found just across the state line from Louisiana. The victim, a white male age fifty-seven, name of Rick Medina, had been shot twice with a .22; his money and credit cards had been stolen.

People were shot with .22s all the time; it was the most common of handguns. It was instinct alone that made him pull the report out of the stack. Maybe it was nothing, but this victim was approximately the same age as Karen's father, and Mississippi wasn't that far away.

He had his hands full with the little boy's case right now; he didn't have time to chase down such a tenuous, and probably nonexistent, connection. Still, he couldn't ignore it.

He found Shannon standing by the cold drink machine, flirting with one of the clerks. "Hey, Antonio."

Shannon straightened, his dark eyes alert. "See you later," he said to the woman, touching her arm as he left her. "What's up?" he asked, ranging himself beside Marc and tilting his head to read the sheet.

Marc handed it to him. "I've got to stay with the Gable case—"

"Oh, yeah, the little boy. His sonofabitch father killed the kid, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but I've got to do everything by the book, or he'll walk. Do you have time to do some checking for me?"

"Sure." Shannon read the report. "You got something on this Rick Medina?"

"No, it's just a hunch. See if you can find any connection between Dexter Whitlaw and Rick Medina. They're about the same age; maybe they were in the military together. If they knew each other, it's coincidental as hell that they would both be killed with a .22 at about the same time."

"It's a long shot," Shannon said.

"Sure is," Marc agreed. "Just check to see if Medina was in the military, maybe served somewhere the same time Whitlaw did. Who knows what

will turn up?"

Chapter 12

The patient in 11-A had survived an auto accident and extensive surgery to repair the damage, losing a kidney and his spleen in the process. His surgeon had deemed him well enough to be transferred out of SICU to the regular surgical floor, the patient being alert and stable, eating light but solid foods, his remaining kidney producing urine at a normal rate. His temperature was climbing, however, and he had declined to eat his evening meal.

The surgeon on duty had managed to hide himself where no one could find him, and he wasn't answering his page. Karen put in a call to Mr. Gibbons's surgeon and kept a close watch on the patient. If he had picked up a post-op infection, the sooner they caught it, the better. Concern over Mr. Gibbons kept her from brooding. It felt good to be back on the floor, in the familiar world of tile floors, medicinal smells, and beeping monitors. Her name tag was pinned to her short-sleeved tunic, the pockets of which were jammed with various bits of paraphernalia that might or might not come in handy. Her stethoscope was slung around her neck, and her rubber-soled shoes squeaked on the tile as she walked. Familiar. Good.

Despite her expectations, she had managed to grab several hours' sleep before coming to work. She didn't know whether to be glad of the sleep or sorry Marc hadn't called and disturbed her. Evidently, he had decided just to drop the matter, which, when she thought about it, was the most sensible thing to do. They had slept together, she had made a fool of herself, but it was over. He was in Louisiana. She was back home in Ohio, where she belonged. Maybe one day she would be in a reminiscent mood and tell Piper about the hot night she had spent with a New Orleans detective. Piper would be vastly relieved; in her opinion, Karen's love life was a contradiction in terms, because where there was life, there had to be activity.

Mr. Gibbons's surgeon finally called right before Karen went on break. As expected, he was grumpy. In the general opinion of nurses, all surgeons were assholes, but Dr. Pierini was a logical asshole. "Mr. Gibbons's temp is

a hundred point eight," she said. "At midnight, it was ninety-nine point seven."
"Shit." He yawned. "Okay. I want a culture so we can see what's going on here. Tell the lab I want the results when I do morning rounds." He rattled off more instructions, then said, "Where the hell is Dailey?"
"Dr. Dailey isn't answering his page."
"Well, find him, god damn it, instead of calling me."
He slammed the phone down, but Karen shrugged as she hung up. She had gotten what she wanted, and whenever she woke someone up at three o'clock in the morning, she was inclined to cut him a little slack. She would be more than happy to find Dr. Dailey, if it were possible. No nurse on the surgical floor had ever performed that miracle, however.
She would be even happier if someone shoved a wire up Dr. Dailey's patootie, so she could hit a buzzer whenever she needed him and light up his life. He could then be found by following the yelps.
The nurses' break room was habitually strewn with newspapers and magazines, and the refrigerator harbored new life forms that no one wanted to investigate too closely. Four folding chairs sat around a small round table, and a lumpy sofa, covered in noxious orange vinyl, completed the furniture. A nineteen-inch television hung on the wall, but the video portion had been lost for several months, and the nurses had a lot of fun trying to figure out what was happening by listening to the dialogue and special effects.
Karen took a diet soda from the refrigerator and plopped down on Big Val, short for Valencia, as the orange sofa was not so affectionately known. Sighing with relief, she arched her feet and stretched her tired Achilles tendons and wished she had a basin of cold water in which to soak them. She would have liked to pull off her shoes but knew better; the feet would swell immediately, then she would have trouble getting her shoes back on, and they would be too tight for the rest of the shift.
Several days' worth of newspapers were scattered on the floor. Leaning over, Karen grabbed up several sections to see if anything exciting had happened while she had been gone. She doubted it, but maybe "Dilbert" hadn't been clipped out of the comic page. The cartoons had a way of winding up on bulletin boards in the hospital, with hospital employees' names penciled in. Administration didn't think it was funny.

She leafed through the papers, scanning headlines and photo captions. One photograph grabbed her attention because something about the burned shell of a house looked familiar. "A fire yesterday morning destroyed the residence of Nathan and Lindsey Hoerske—" Why, that was *her* house! Shocked, she stared at the blackened ruins in the photograph. It *had been* her house, rather. She had lived in that house for fifteen years. Oh, the poor Hoerskes, just married and so happy to have their own house. They had lost everything they owned, from the look of it. The newspaper said the fire started in the kitchen.

Almost as rattled as if she had lost an old friend, Karen laid the newspaper aside. House fires were never just about lost property, they were about memories and dreams. The fabrics of lives were woven together within the protective walls that provided sanctuary from the rest of the world. She had liked Nathan and Lindsey; though she had made up her mind to sell the house anyway, she was glad they were the ones who bought it. They had seemed so much in love, but settled, as if they had found their groove in life and nothing could jar them out of it. Karen had imagined them having a couple of kids, the rooms cluttered with toys and resounding with the happy, high-pitched shrieks of children at play. Now they would have to start over, find another place to think of as home.

Piper breezed onto the floor at six-thirty. She put her hands on her ample hips when she saw Karen. "Why didn't you call me?" she demanded, scowling.

"I didn't have time." Impulsively, Karen put down the chart she was notating and hugged Piper in apology. "The airline could only get me on a flight that was leaving in an hour. I just grabbed my clothes, called Judy, and ran."

"Well, I guess I'll excuse you," Piper grumbled, returning the hug. "I'm sorry, honey. It had to be rough, even though I know you weren't close to your father. What happened?"

"He was murdered. Shot."

Piper gasped, shocked, and the two other nurses at the station turned around with arrested expressions on their faces. Karen swallowed the lump in her throat. "It was a street shooting. There weren't any witnesses."

Piper blew out a breath. "Jeez, that's tough. Maybe you should have taken off another couple of days."

"No, working is easier." It always had been. If she could keep herself occupied, she could handle anything.
"Why don't you come stay with me for a few days—"
Karen rolled her eyes, then laughed. "You work days; I work nights. What would be the point?"
"Yeah, guess you're right." Piper pondered the situation. She was big-boned with a mop of short black curls and the most friendly face in creation. Just looking at her could make a patient feel better, not because she was a great beauty but because her good humor literally shone out of her. Her love life, unlike Karen's, was more active than Mauna Loa volcano. "Until you transfer back to days, you're on your own."
"Gee, thanks." Karen chuckled at the blithe callousness and hummed a familiar tune.
"I'll be there for youuuu," the two nurses behind her sang in unison.
Piper picked up a stapler and brandished it at them.
"You *can* be attached to those chairs for another shift, you know."
Judy Camliffe walked up, her stride brisk. "Hi, guys. Karen, you all right?"
Only a few days before, such concern, even from Piper, would have made Karen uncomfortable. Now, however, there didn't seem to be much point in trying to wall herself off; her defenses already had been breached. Despite all her caution and efforts, Marc had slipped through them like a hot knife through butter. And despite all the years she had spent building a wall of anger against her father, she had learned that she wouldn't have been so angry if she hadn't loved him.
She smiled at her friends. "I don't know if I'm all right, exactly, but working is better than not working." She paused. "Thanks for asking."
Judy nodded her dark head, then turned to the pile of charts. "Okay, what's cooking?"
Karen filled her in on Mr. Gibbons's worrisome fever, which was now up to a hundred one point three. Lab hadn't called with results of the blood tests, and Dr. Pierini was due to start his rounds in half an hour.
"I'll goose them a little," Judy said, reaching for the phone. "Oh, I found out what was wrong with Ashley."
"Diarrhea, you said."
"Yeah, but what caused it." She turned her attention to the phone. "Oh, hi, this is Judy on the surgical floor. Do you have anything yet on the Gibbons culture? Sure." On hold, she turned her attention back to them. "She thought

it was food poisoning the first time it happened, and she raised hell in the cafeteria, but no one else had been sick, so they ignored her. This time, she narrowed it down. Jelly beans."
"*Jelly beans*?" Piper looked aghast. She loved popcorn Jelly Bellies.
"She's on a diet, so she bought some sugar-free jelly beans for a snack when she went to a movie. Four hours later, the runs started." Judy snuggled the phone more comfortably between her neck and shoulder. "She went shopping yesterday, bought some more jelly beans, the same thing happened. This time, the jelly beans were all she had eaten. She said she bloated with gas and the cramps were awful."
"On the other hand," Piper said practically, "she probably did lose weight."
They all laughed. "Yeah," Judy said, "but she said it wasn't worth it." She turned her attention back to the phone. "Look, is there anything you can do to rush this along? The patient's temp is climbing. This may be staph. Okay. Thanks. I'll call back." She hung up and said to Karen, "They promised to have the results in another fifteen minutes."
"It usually takes them double the time they promise. They *might* have the results before Dr. Pierini starts his rounds, if he's running late." Karen glanced up the hallway as a doctor appeared, frowning as he studied a chart. It was the elusive Dr. Dailey, appearing for all the world as if he had been working hard all night. "What brand were those jelly beans?"
"Karen, honey, you don't want to go there," Judy warned.
"Oh, they're not for me. I was thinking of giving some to Dr. Dailey—for therapeutic reasons, of course."
"Of course," they all chorused, smiling, because the unanimous diagnosis among the nursing staff was that Dr. Dailey was full of shit.
Karen looked at her answering machine as soon as she entered the apartment. The little red light wasn't blinking. Well, it wouldn't be, she scolded herself. Marc knew she worked nights. If he hadn't called earlier, he certainly wouldn't have called in the middle of the night.
Sighing, she locked the door and headed for the shower. He had no reason to call, anyway, unless he wanted to swear at her some more. It was over. It had never even really started. There hadn't been any comments about seeing her again, only that relentless seduction. He had achieved his purpose, and now she had to let go of it, stop worrying the situation in her mind. It was over, she told herself emphatically.

But it didn't feel over. Marc had changed her view of herself. Standing in the shower, she was acutely aware of her body, in a way she hadn't been before. She felt… sensual. Female. Her nipples beaded under the pelting water, and she thought of Marc's mouth on them. She remembered the way his hard, callused hands had curved around her waist, her bottom, effortlessly lifting and turning her, positioning her for his pleasure, and hers. Her insides clenched on the swell of sexual arousal, and she could almost feel him there, thrusting into her.

Wow. She blew out a breath. Every woman should have a lover like him, just once in her life.

But she didn't want it to be just once. She wanted him again, every night for the rest of her life.

The question was, what should she do about it? It was hell, not knowing where she stood. She had doubts about his motives, about his feelings, about everything concerning that night except her own emotions, and in her experience emotions weren't a stable foundation on which to base important decisions.

Her experience—hah! Her experience in this man/woman stuff was nil. She had never loved a man before Marc.

The water had been getting progressively less warm, but all of a sudden there was nothing but cold water pouring from the showerhead. Stifling a shriek, Karen jumped out of the spray. She didn't know how long she had been standing there mooning over Marc, but it was long enough to exhaust the hot water supply. Hastily, she turned off the water, then wrapped a towel around her. She shivered as she dried off and hurried into a robe.

The inadvertent cold shower had dispelled her sleepiness, which was good; she handled night shift better if she waited several hours after getting home before she went to bed. She could watch the morning news, catch up on her mail, pay bills, do all the normal stuff. And just for fun, she might paint her toenails a daring scarlet, instead of the discreet pink she normally used.

Carl Clancy wasn't in any hurry. He had checked further than the phone book this time. Hell, how was he to have known the Whitlaw woman had sold the house but the new phone book wouldn't be issued until December with her corrected address in it? But he had found where she was living now, even discovered that she was a nurse at one of the local hospitals.

The question was, was she at home or not? Hospitals were twenty-four-hour operations, but he hadn't been able to find out what shift she worked, not

without bringing a lot of attention to himself. People tended to remember someone asking specific questions about a particular person.
He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. If she worked first shift, she was now at the hospital. If she worked second, she should be getting up; third, going to bed.
He called the hospital, asked for her. He didn't have enough information about her, didn't know what floor she worked, but it didn't matter. The bitch who answered the phone replied in a frosty voice that nurses weren't allowed personal phone calls while on duty, except in case of an emergency. That was bullshit. Every floor had its own number, and the nurses made and received personal phone calls all the time. But rather than make a stink, he apologized and hung up. Dead end.
Next, he called her. After the screw-up in burning the wrong house, he had checked with the phone company and found that the number in the book was still the correct number; her new digs were within the same exchange area, so the number had simply been transferred with her. She might have the phone turned off so it wouldn't disturb her if she was trying to sleep, but that was a chance he had to take.
The rings sounded in his ear.
Karen's head came up when the phone rang. Her heart leaped, and she started to grab the phone, but then she remembered Marc knew she worked nights. He wouldn't be calling now, would he? Or maybe he would, thinking this was a good time to catch her at home, and it was still early enough that she might not have gone to bed yet.
She hesitated long enough that the answering machine picked up. Almost immediately, the caller hung up, and the message stopped. Not Marc, then. He would have left a message. Disappointment made her sick, but she shrugged it away. She wasn't going to spend her life waiting for him to call. If he hadn't called by tomorrow, she would call him. By running out the way she had, she had put herself in this quandary of not knowing if they'd had a simple one-night stand or if there could be something more between them. It was her fault, so she shouldn't balk at taking the first step.
Modern courtship was the pits, she decided, assuming this even *was* a courtship. Things had been much simpler when men declared their intentions, and the women then stepped out with them or not, signaling their own acceptance or rejection of the suit. She liked the orderliness of that, the emotional safety. Women's liberation had been great in terms of opening up

jobs and beginning to equal out pay, but darned if the old social rituals didn't seem a lot better than the confused mess they had now.
Karen regarded her toes. Scarlet polish just did something for a woman's feet, she decided. A woman with red toenails wouldn't hesitate to call a man if they had an important, unresolved situation. Tonight, she decided. She didn't want to call him now and get all upset or excited, then not be able to sleep. If he didn't call today, she would call him tonight. And if he told her to take a long walk off a short pier—well, at least she would know and would be able to move on with her life.
Carl Clancy sighed. Okay, she hadn't answered the phone. She was either gone or asleep. If he had another day, he would be able to find out everything he needed to know, but Hayes was pushing him to get the apartment searched *now*.
He hoped she was at work. If she was at home, he would have to kill her.

Chapter 13

"You Antonio Shannon?"
Shannon looked up from his desk at the big, homely man who stood in front of him. "Yeah, I'm Shannon. What can I do for you?"
"My name's McPherson." He reached into his jacket and produced a leather ID folder, snapping it open with the practiced flip of the wrist that said Fed.
Shannon took his time studying the ID. It looked official, but why would an FBI agent want to talk to him?
"First off," McPherson said quietly, "I'm not here in any official capacity. This is purely personal. A friend of mine got killed in Mississippi, and you put in a request for information about him. Rick Medina. Do you have any leads on who might have killed him?"
Shannon rubbed his jaw. Whatever response he might have expected to his request about information on the Mississippi murder victim, he sure hadn't expected an in-the-flesh visit from a Fed. That meant his little request had set off alarms somewhere. McPherson might or might not be acting in an official capacity, regardless of what he said. The victim in Mississippi might or might not have been this man's friend. It didn't matter. Rick Medina, whoever he had been, had some hot-shit connections.

"We don't know anything about that murder," he said slowly. "We were actually looking for something that would help us with one of our murder cases." He stood. "I think you need to talk to Detective Chastain."
Marc was on the phone with the ME. The child's autopsy was scheduled in an hour. His stomach tightened with anger at the thought of it, at the memory of the child's frail little body and matchstick bones. This was one of the times he wished he didn't have to adhere to the law; he would like nothing better than to kill the child's father with his bare hands, slowly, bone by bone and burn by burn, as he had tortured that child.
He had just hung up when Shannon entered with a tall, lanky, middle-aged man who nevertheless looked in remarkably good shape for his age. "This is Mr. McPherson with the FBI," Shannon said.
Marc shook hands, feeling the strength in the older man's grip. "I doubt it," he said mildly.
Shannon looked startled. McPherson gave a faint smile. "I have an ID that says so."
Marc shrugged. "I imagine you do. But if I call the local FBI office and have you checked out, what will they tell me?" If this man was an FBI agent, he was the first one Marc had ever seen who lacked that spit-and-polished look, an image the older agents clung to even more strongly than the younger ones. The differences were subtle: a haircut that wasn't quite short enough, a tie that was a little too individual and stylish. And his shoes were black Gucci loafers, which was a little out of the price range of most FBI agents. On the other hand, he was wearing a shoulder piece, though the cut of his jacket was good enough that it almost hid the bulge of the weapon.
The smile on that homely face grew to a grin. "I would tell you to go ahead and make that call, but hell, you'd probably do it. What gave me away? The shoes?"
"Among other things. The shoes were the clincher."
"It was worth a shot. Most people, even cops, aren't going to notice the shoes."
Shannon was looking in bewilderment at the shoes in question. "What's wrong with them?"
"They're Guccis," Marc explained.
Shannon still looked bewildered. "They're expensive," Marc enlarged. "Federal agents normally couldn't afford them." He looked back at his

visitor. "So who are you, and why are you impersonating a federal agent?" He didn't add that doing so was against the law; this man already knew that quite well.
"My name really is McPherson."
"Then you won't mind if I check it out."
The older man sighed. "Son, have you always been such a bulldog? Do you mind if I sit down? I can see this is going to take longer than I planned."
"Please, have a seat," Marc invited, with a sardonic bite to his tone.
"Thanks, don't mind if I do." He folded his long length onto one of the chairs.
"You too, Antonio," Marc said. "But shut the door first."
Shannon shut the door and took the other seat, but he positioned it so he was at an angle to McPherson. He was sharp; he might not know Guccis, but he had definitely spotted the weapon.
"Okay, I'm not with the FBI," McPherson said easily. Marc noted that he didn't seem worried—grimly amused, maybe, but not worried. "But I do work for the federal government, and the rest of what I told Detective Shannon is the truth. He requested information on the murder of Rick Medina in Mississippi, and that made me think he might know something about the case that the cops there weren't telling me. Rick was a friend of mine. I'm not here in any official capacity. It's personal. If you have any information concerning his murder, I'd appreciate it if you would tell me what it is."
Picking up a pen, Marc turned it end over end while he considered what the man had said. If he wasn't worried about impersonating a federal agent, which was a crime and he had just admitted doing so to a cop, then likely he did indeed work for the federal government in another capacity, one that he was certain would give him immunity from prosecution. National Security Agency, maybe, or CIA.
"Which agency?" he asked, still watching the pen.
The man smothered a curse and a sigh. "You know, this isn't something that generally comes out in conversation."
"No, I don't expect so. Satellites or pickles?"
"Are you speaking English?" Shannon wondered aloud.
McPherson answered. "What he means is, he thinks I must work for either National Security or the CIA. The National Security Agency deals mostly

with satellites, that kind of stuff. The CIA is known, sometimes affectionately, as the pickle factory. He knows a lot, for a local cop."
Marc waited. He didn't have anything to tell McPherson about his friend's murder, and he did think McPherson was telling the truth about Medina being his friend. But something was niggling at him, an uneasiness or maybe even an awareness, as if he were about to put a piece of the puzzle in place if only he could turn it the right way.
"Was Medina one of you?" he asked.
"In a way. He did some jobs for us. He wasn't, however, working for us when he was killed."
"You would say that anyway." CIA, then, Marc figured. Otherwise, he wouldn't have bothered making a point about the victim not working for them at the time, since he had been murdered in the States.
"Of course I would. But it's true. We're in the dark on this, and Rick wasn't just a friend, he was a good friend." McPherson's eyes darkened. "It's damn hard to believe some punk wanting some quick cash for drugs could have gotten the drop on him like that and then not even take the car. It just doesn't feel right."
No, it didn't. Medina had evidently been very good at his job. Marc thought of what he had learned from Dexter Whitlaw's military records: Whitlaw had been a Marine sniper in Vietnam, and he had evidently been very good at his job, too.
"Did you," he said slowly, watching McPherson's face, "also know Dexter Whitlaw?"
McPherson stiffened, his eyes going flat and unreadable. "I know him. Are you saying you suspect him of killing Medina?"
"No. He was killed over on St. Ann the same day as Medina. Whitlaw was shot with a twenty-two. Did Medina and Whitlaw know each other?"
"Yeah. We all were in Vietnam at the same time." McPherson leaned back in the uncomfortable chair, pulling at his lower lip while he stared unseeingly at a spot on the floor. "So Dex is dead, too. Rick and Dex both. Same day, same caliber weapon."
"That's pushing coincidence a little too far," Marc said. "They know each other, they die the same day only a short distance apart, both killed with a twenty-two. Were they, say, maybe in the same line of work in Vietnam? And who would want both of them dead?"

"That's an interesting question." McPherson worried at his lip some more. "I'd like to know the answer to that myself. But, yeah, in a way they were in the same line of work. Both of 'em were damn good at it, too."
"Mr. Whitlaw was living on the streets, but he wasn't a bum; he was healthy, well fed, not on drugs or booze, so he had some means of income that I haven't been able to discover. Did Mr. Medina come down here to meet him, and if so, why?"
"No one knows what Rick was doing here. Personal business, he said."
"Then we still don't know anything. We can compare the slugs, see if they were killed with the same weapon, but unless you know something you aren't telling us, we're still at a dead end."
"I wish I did know something," McPherson said heavily. "Anything. Because this does smell real bad, but damn if I know why."
The noise was slight, little more than a rustle. Karen paused, her head tilting as she listened for a repeat of the small, odd sound. She was in the bedroom, plucking yellowed leaves off the potted ficus tree she had placed in front of the window.
There. A whisper, like fabric. And from a different location.
Someone was in the apartment.
Her scalp prickled, and a jolt of sheer terror made her heart almost freeze in her chest. She didn't move, couldn't move.
The bedroom door was open. She stood to the side, out of a direct line of vision, but if anyone came into the bedroom, he would see her immediately, and she was trapped against the wall. The only way out of the bedroom was that door. Her apartment was on the second floor, so she couldn't even climb out the window. It was a sheer drop to the ground, too far to jump.
He came to the bedroom door. She couldn't see him, just the faint shadow he threw across the floor. If she hadn't been looking, she never would have noticed. Karen's chest constricted, preventing her from doing more than draw in quick, shallow breaths. She couldn't move, couldn't even have screamed.
He didn't come in. After standing there for a moment, looking in, he walked on toward the kitchen, this time making much more noise, as if he thought there was no need now to be quiet.
Her ears rang, and her bedroom tilted oddly. Karen forced herself to take a deep breath, silently dragging in oxygen past the tightness in her lungs.
Why had he gone on? Why was he making so much noise now?

She stared at her neatly made bed, and slowly it dawned on her: he thought the apartment was empty. The curtains were open, since she hadn't yet gone to bed, so the room was flooded with sunlight, and she had no need to turn on a lamp. There were, she realized, no lights on in the apartment at all for that very reason. The television wasn't on; she had watched it for a little while, but the morning shows hadn't been very interesting, so she had turned it off again after a few minutes. She hadn't been making any noise while she plucked the dying leaves from the ficus tree; to all intents and purposes, the apartment must seem empty to the invader.

She heard him systematically opening and closing drawers in the kitchen, prowling in the refrigerator—God, was he *hungry*? She should get out of the apartment, that's what all the experts said. Don't confront a burglar, just get out if you could, and call the cops once you were safe.

The eating area of the kitchen had a clear view of the living room. If he were there, he would be able to see her making for the door. What if he had a gun? He could shoot her where she stood.

All of a sudden, she felt calm—or at least much calmer. Whether or not he was armed, she had a better chance of getting through this unharmed if she got out of the apartment. She eased toward the bedroom door, her bare feet silent on the carpet.

Just as she came even with the door, she heard his footsteps approach the eating area. She froze one step short of stepping into view. Once again, her breath hung in her chest, caught on the icy shards of terror. If he came on into the living room—

But furniture scraped across tile, and she knew he was still in the eating area. Her brow furrowed. It sounded as if he were turning all the chairs upside down.

Surely that wasn't normal behavior for a burglar. Look for valuables, take the television and small stereo, and get out. But he hadn't even come into the bedroom to look for jewelry, which was where most women kept their valuable bits and pieces.

She slid that one step more, framed in the doorway but staying far enough back that she could see only a small portion of the eating area. She saw the legs of a chair sticking out. He *was* turning them all upside down.

He was looking for something… something in particular.

Get out and then call, the advice went. She looked at the phone by the bed. The apartment was too quiet; the only sounds were that of the refrigerator

running and the noises he was making. If she called 911, she would have to whisper, and he might be able to hear even that. If she didn't say anything, would they send someone out anyway? Could 911 pinpoint individual apartments?

It didn't matter if they could or not, she realized, so long as they came with sirens blasting.

Damn him, he was *searching* her apartment. Abruptly, the terror left her, and other emotions flooded through her. She felt outraged, violated. He was looking through her things, disturbing the tentative feelings of home she was beginning to form. This was the only home she had now; the house she had always considered home, still thought of as home, was nothing but a burned-out shell. She wasn't going to abandon her home to this bastard.

Karen took a step back, away from the doorway. Gently, so gently, moving slow and easy the way her father had taught her to walk in the woods, she eased toward the telephone. Not turning her back on the doorway, she carefully lifted the receiver out of the cradle and shoved it under her pillow to muffle the noise of the dial tone. Then she punched 911, wincing at the faint click of the buttons.

A weapon. She needed a weapon. But she didn't own a handgun, and the knives were all in the kitchen. When he finished the rest of the apartment and came into the bedroom, he would see the phone under the pillow and know someone was there, hiding. She would lose the element of surprise, which was the only advantage she had, so she had to find something before then.

There was nothing in the bedroom she could use, unless she wanted to hit him with her purse, which was sitting beside the chair in the corner—another dead giveaway of her presence, if he happened to see it.

Quickly, she did a mental inventory of the bathroom. The disposable shavers she used wouldn't send him screaming in fright, unless he had a phobia about being shaved. The worst damage one of those shavers could do was a shallow slice. She had perfume, hairspray… hairspray. That was it. He would have to get close, but a gun was the only weapon that afforded distance. She wouldn't have had that luxury even with a knife.

The bathroom door was open only halfway. Karen sidled toward it, taking care not to brush against anything. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel her pulse throbbing in her fingertips, but she felt calmer now, more purposeful.

The door hinges creaked at the least movement, she remembered. She couldn't touch the door.
The carpet seemed to drag at her feet. The distance was only a few steps, but it felt like yards. She was in full view of the open bedroom door if the man came far enough into the living room to look through it. How much longer would he be occupied in the kitchen? How many places in a kitchen were there to search? He had already looked in the cabinets and drawers, the refrigerator, under the chairs and table. The only place now to occupy him before he came back into the living room was a small closet to the right of the doorway before you went into the kitchen. If he was methodical, that would be the next place he would search.
Please, let him be methodical, she prayed.
The bathroom door wasn't open as much as she had hoped. She eyed the narrow opening. It looked *too* narrow, large enough to let a child slip through, but she wasn't a child. Still, she had lost weight. Maybe she could do it—maybe.
Have a plan, just in case.
In the kitchen, he began putting the chairs upright again, sliding them into place. He was a neat burglar, as if he didn't want her to know he had been inside her home. His neatness gave her a few seconds of warning.
She took several quick, silent breaths, visualizing what she was going to do. The hairspray was sitting on the left side of the vanity. The towel hung on a bar on the right. Grab the towel with her right hand, pick up the hairspray can with her left, use the towel to muffle the sound of the cap coming off. She wished *she* were less neat and had tossed the cap as soon as she bought the spray. She never threw away any cap, though, until the container was empty.
She exhaled to collapse her chest and sucked in her stomach. Pressing her back hard against the doorway, so hard the edge scraped her skin, she sidled through.
Her breast just brushed the door; the hinges gave a single, small squeal. She didn't stop. Freezing now could be disastrous, if he had heard that betraying squeak. She slipped into the small, dark bathroom, grabbing the towel with her right hand and the hairspray can with her left. She didn't bang against anything, just moved smoothly and quietly. After wrapping the towel around the cap, she twisted it off. That, too, made a slight sound, less carrying than the creak of the hinges.

Turning around, she faced the bathroom door, standing just where she wouldn't be visible through either the opening or the crack. Quickly, she checked behind her, to make certain the mirror couldn't be seen, but from the angle of the open door, all that was visible was the tub and shower enclosure.

Holding the can in her left hand with the nozzle pointed outward, she waited. She didn't like being caught in this tiny space, but after the squeak of the hinges, she didn't dare step out into the bedroom again. She already knew he could move quietly, because she hadn't heard him enter the apartment. He could be standing on the other side of the door, playing cat and mouse, silently waiting for her to come out.

Her scalp prickled again. She could almost feel him there, a patient, malevolent presence.

But she could be patient, too. The one who moves first is the one who loses, her father had said. How could she remember all this? She had been only a child, and he was a scary stranger, though she knew he was her father. But he had talked, showing her how to be a successful sniper, and she had listened. She didn't have a gun in her hand, only a can of hairspray, but that knowledge had been her father's legacy to her, and perhaps now it would save her life.

She didn't hear any sounds coming from the living room. If he hadn't heard the hinges, he would be searching as he had before, moving about normally, making noise. The apartment was silent; he had heard her.

She gauged the distance to the door. If he shoved it open, it would hit her, knocking her off balance and ruining her aim. Silently, she stepped back against the vanity, hoping that would be enough clearance. She raised the can and waited.

She had a slight advantage in that she *knew* he was there. He suspected her presence, but he didn't know—unless he had noticed her purse. Or the telephone under the pillow. *Oh, God.*

Picture what you're going to do, Dexter had said. Be prepared to do it without warning. Don't hesitate, or your ass is dead.

Karen didn't want her ass to be dead. She wanted to live a long, long time—

The door crashed violently inward. Instantly, she extended her arm and sprayed at the head of the menacing shape silhouetted in the doorway.

"Aghh!" He staggered back, his hands going to his eyes. One of those hands held a gun.

Karen hit him in a rush, shoving him with all her strength and sending him sprawling backward across the bed. He grabbed at her, catching her gown and pulling her with him. She screamed, hoping the sound would go through the pillow and that the 911 operator was still on the line. He rolled, pinning her down; she saw his contorted face, his red and streaming eyes, and she hit him with another blast of the hairspray. She missed his eyes, and the spray went up his nose. He choked, gagging. She sprayed him again, kicking violently, squirming, hitting him in the face with her right fist. Her foot hit the lamp and knocked it off with a crash, the ceramic base shattering.

"You… bitch!" he howled. Blinded, he struck out with his fist and caught her on the cheekbone. The impact bounced her head on the mattress, blurred her vision. She wasn't aware of pain, only of the stunning force of the blow. She hit him across the nose with the can, splitting the skin and sending blood spraying across her and the bed. She managed to get her legs up and kicked out with both of them as hard as she could, one foot hitting him in the stomach and the other lower, almost in the groin. He staggered back, his breath exploding out of him. Karen rolled off the bed, scrambling on her hands and knees for the door. He pulled the trigger then, enraged, cursing, but he couldn't see, and the bullet punched a hole in the wall above her head, sending plaster flying.

The carpet burned her knees as she lunged through the door. Panting, her vision still blurred, she staggered to her feet and lurched for the front door. Another shot exploded through the wall.

She wrenched the door open as he stumbled out of the bedroom. Wiping his sleeve across his streaming eyes, he raised his arm. Karen dove out the door, sprawling in the hallway and rolling as she hit. The shot splintered the door. She surged to her feet, stumbled for the stairs, and ran into two policemen who were coming up the steps with their weapons drawn, faces white.

Dizzily, she sank to the floor. Down the hall, she saw a blurred face in the doorway of one of the other three apartments on this floor. "Get down!" she gasped.

Hearing her voice, the burglar staggered through the door, arms extended, pistol in a two-handed grip. Both policemen reacted instantly, firing so close together that the two shots sounded like one. The impact of the bullets slammed the burglar back against the wall, and for an instant a look of mild

surprise crossed his face. He looked down at the red stain spreading across his chest, blinking his streaming eyes as he tried to focus them.
"Drop the gun! Drop it!" both policemen yelled.
The burglar laughed. The sound gurgled in his throat, but it was a laugh.
"Fuck you," he said, and lifted his pistol, pointing it in Karen's direction. He pulled the trigger just as both policemen fired again.

Chapter 14

McPherson punched in a number on his secure cell phone. "This thing is getting curiouser and curiouser," he said when the call was answered. "Dexter Whitlaw was killed the same day in New Orleans, which isn't all that far from where Rick's body was found, same caliber weapon. The detective working the case is a sharp son of a bitch; he made me the minute I walked in his office. He put in the request for info on Rick on a hunch. I'd say he's got a hell of an instinct."

"Who's Dexter Whitlaw?" said the voice on the other end. "I don't know him."

"He was a Marine sniper in Vietnam, damn good one. Sneaky son of a bitch. Patient. He could outwait the second coming of Christ. Anyway, we got acquainted with Dex in Saigon, and he and Rick were… well, I don't know that I'd go so far as to say friends, but they respected each other, you know?"

"So he and Dad met up in New Orleans."

"Seems like it. Don't know why, though. But it made someone nervous, someone who didn't want the two of them together."

"That means it was someone who knew both of them." The voice was cool, unemotional.

"I'd even say it was someone who knew them from Nam. As far as I know, Dex dropped out of sight after he got back from Nam. Couldn't handle it; went native. The detective said he'd been living on the streets but evidently had a source of income because he was healthy and well fed."

"His family probably sent money to him. I'll check out his next of kin. Has Vinay found his leak yet?"

"No, and he's damn pissed."

"I'll stay outside channels when I talk to him. About this detective. He made you. Does this need taking care of?"

"Only if you're thinking of recruiting him—which wouldn't be a bad idea, by the way. He looked at my shoes and pegged me for NSA or the Company. He's that sharp, that quick. He doesn't need two twos to come up with four."

A sigh came over the line. "Those damn Guccis."

"I couldn't see buying wingtips for the occasion."

"So you think we should use him as an asset?"

"Unless you recruit him outright."
"He might be more valuable where he is."
"Agreed."
The Gulf Coast cities were prime gun-running ports. Knowing when and where the weapons were going could give their analysts valuable insight on where the next brush-fire war was going to pop up. Sometimes the fire needed to be lit, sometimes it didn't. Sometimes the shipments would be intercepted, sometimes they wouldn't.
"The funeral is at two tomorrow. Will you be here?"
"Unless you need me to do something else." With John, you never knew. He was like a spider, pulling on six invisible threads at the same time.
"It will be interesting to see who's around."
Meaning who would be surveilling the funeral to ID John. Just getting a photograph of him would be worth a lot of money to a lot of people and quite a few governments. There was always the possibility that Rick had been killed for no other reason than to draw John into a public situation. Not that any photograph of him tomorrow would be worth a shit. McPherson had known John most of his life, and he probably wouldn't recognize him tomorrow even if he was standing right next to him.
"Will Vinay have a net on the area?"
"I'd like an extra set of eyes. Someone closer in."
And *that* meant John hadn't ruled out an inside job. At this point, he hadn't ruled out anything, though the information about Dex Whitlaw meant the possibility that Rick had simply been the victim of a robbery/murder was just about down the tubes. As Detective Chastain had said, that was straining coincidence a little too far.
But John was a cool, subtle thinker, which was what made him so dangerous and so valuable. He weighed probabilities, percentages, possibilities, saw shadows and details others missed. Jess McPherson didn't completely trust many people, but John Medina was one of them. Frank Vinay was another. And Rick Medina had been on that list as well. Losing him hurt.
"I'll be there," he said gruffly, and disconnected.

Marc checked his watch: nine forty-five. The small, pitiful body on the autopsy table was telling a tale of horror, of a short life spent in pain and terror. He had checked the area hospitals and come up with a list of visits to

the emergency departments that made him cringe. Little James Blake Gable had already had ten "accidents" this year, accidents serious enough to warrant medical attention. The Gables had avoided attention by using a different hospital each time. One of the doctors should have picked up on the signs of systematic abuse, but no one had.

What about the families? Hadn't either Mr. or Mrs. Gable's family noticed something was wrong? Hadn't they noticed their grandson was slowly being murdered or that Mrs. Gable had become reclusive? Sure they had. What Marc couldn't understand was how they had just let it go, ignored it, probably hoping things would get better. Well, things never got better unless someone *did* step in. Now it was too late for the little boy, and Marc had a sinking feeling that time was running out for Mrs. Gable, too.

He checked his watch again. Even with everything he had going on right now, he needed to call Karen. The urge to do so tightened his stomach, knotted his nerves. It wasn't just that he wanted to get things settled between them; he felt uneasy, restless.

He hadn't talked to her in twenty-four hours, and suddenly, he thought it was twenty-four hours too long. He wanted to know she was all right, tell her how he felt, get her back to New Orleans, somehow. Maybe it was because the CIA, in the form of Mr. McPherson, had come sniffing around after he had Shannon put out the feeler on Medina. All the details about Dexter Whitlaw's murder that had struck him as unusual—the neatness of the hit, the lack of noise that indicated silencers, the expensive pistol in Whitlaw's possession—took on a lot more importance when teamed with the information that he had known the other murder victim, who just happened to have worked for the CIA. A simple street murder had become complicated.

No, it wasn't that. He struggled to pay attention to the autopsy, but the tension in his gut wouldn't go away. As soon as this was over, he would call her. He should already have done it. Never mind needing to calm down; what he needed was to talk to her. This was two mistakes he'd made, he thought grimly. The first was leaving her alone yesterday morning, the second was not calling until he finally got her instead of the answering machine.

His radio crackled to life. Dr. Pargannas looked up and scowled at the interruption. Marc listened to the code for a suspected murder in the Garden

District. The address was very familiar to him. "Ah, shit! The son of a bitch has killed his wife!" He spat the words out as he ran from the autopsy room. Defeat was a bitter taste in his mouth. He'd been afraid of this. He had been caught between the need to have everything right so the bastard couldn't get off on a technicality and the need to hurry, to do something *now*. In another two hours, he would have had an arrest warrant, and Mr. Gable would be safely locked away. For Mrs. Gable, two hours was now a lifetime too long.
When he got to the house, the wide, tree-lined street was choked with patrol cars. The heat and humidity wrapped around him like a blanket as he walked up the sidewalk and into the cool, high-ceilinged elegance of the house. He was sick with fury and helplessness, but he shoved his feelings aside so he could do his job—for all the good that would do Mrs. Gable now.
"Where?" he asked one of the patrol officers.
"Upstairs." The woman looked rattled.
He climbed the wide, curving stairs and followed the commotion to a bedroom. The room was huge, probably thirty by thirty, and decorated like Hollywood's idea of European royalty. The big bed was draped with white net that hung from the ceiling. Ornate mirrors and original oil paintings decorated the walls, and furniture was arranged into two formal conversation areas. Tall alabaster vases held arrangements of irises coordinated with the color scheme of the room, which was white and gold with accents of peach and blue. A new color had recently been added to the room: red.
A lot of red. Red that sprayed, red that pooled, red that was turning rust-colored as it dried.
Mrs. Gable sat on one of the sofas. The back of her head was gone. She hadn't fallen over, simply slumped back against the cushions as if now she could relax. Her eyes were open, empty with death. Death wasn't peaceful; it was just nothing. Everything gone. No more sunrises, no more hopes, no more fears. Nothing.
She wore a white silk gown and negligee, low-cut, sheer. Sexy. Marc crouched in front of her, his gaze cataloging the mottled bruise on her neck he had glimpsed yesterday, as well as all the other marks. There was a small purplish mark on the upper curve of her breast, the sort of mark lovers left on each other. He suspected that the autopsy would find Mrs. Gable had had sex not long before her death. The bastard had probably thought making

love to her, treating her tenderly for a change, would keep her quiet about how their little boy had died.
Maybe that was what had pushed her over, the fact that he had killed her son and then come to her for sex. Maybe she had planned it anyway.
Marc turned his head and looked at Mr. Gable's body, or what was left of it, sprawled in the bathroom doorway. She must have waited until he was about to step into the shower, then walked into the ornate bathroom and emptied a pistol into him. From the looks of it, she had then reloaded and kept shooting until the gun was empty again. The remnants of body parts were splattered around him. She had been very particular in what parts she shot off. Then she had reloaded once more, walked to the sofa, sat down, put the gun barrel in her mouth, and pulled the trigger.
The letter of the law was not always the same thing as justice. Mrs. Gable had sought justice for her son and achieved it by her own ends. Perhaps she had then killed herself because she couldn't face prosecution, or because she couldn't face life without her child—or in atonement for acting too late to save him.
Marc stood, his expression grim and set. All that was left for him to do was the paperwork.

Karen sat curled on a bed in one of the emergency department cubicles. She didn't know why she was here, but she was too numb to protest, even to care. She couldn't go to the apartment; the police had it roped off until they finished their investigation. She didn't *want* to go to the apartment. She wouldn't ever be able to sleep there again, even after that man's blood and gray matter were cleaned from the door… the carpet…
The medics had been insistent that she have medical attention, though she told them she was a nurse and was capable of assessing her own injuries, none of which required hospitalization or even emergency care. Her face was bruised, she had carpet burns on her knees and a small cut, too minor to require stitches, on her foot, and her ribs were sore, probably from the struggle. None of the shots had hit her, though the last one had been close enough that bits of Sheetrock had gotten in her eye, but eyewash had taken care of that problem.
All in all, she was in good shape, considering that man had been trying his damnedest to kill her.

She had no doubt about his intention. Once he had known she was in the apartment, he hadn't fled, which was what the run-of-the-mill burglar would have done. Instead, he had come after her, pistol in hand.
But why? That was what the policemen had asked, and she had asked it herself. Violent home intrusions happened. She was a woman living alone, a prime target. She hadn't lived in the apartment long; perhaps the man had thought someone else lived there. But he hadn't ransacked her apartment looking for valuables. He had carefully searched it and neatly returned everything to its place. And then he had tried to kill her.
Bad things happened in groups of three, the old saying went. Dexter had been shot. Her old house had burned. And now this. If the old saw was accurate, her life should be peachy keen now.
But she hugged a blanket around her shoulders to fight off the chill she couldn't shake and tried to control a sense of impending doom. What else was going to happen?
"Ms. Whitlaw?"
It was one of the detectives, standing outside the drawn curtain of her cubicle. Her apartment had been swarming with detectives, uniformed policemen, medics, and people from IA, since any shooting by a police officer was automatically investigated. Outside the building, reporters and spectators had gathered. Every local television station had been represented.
"Yes, come in," she said.
He parted the curtain and stepped inside. He was middle-aged, his face shiny with sweat. How could he be sweating? It was so cold in here, the air conditioning must be turned on maximum. He sat down in the single chair in the cubicle, and Karen pulled the blanket tighter around her, shivering.
He watched her with that cool, assessing cop look, as if he didn't believe anything anyone told him. Marc had that look, too, she thought, and she wanted him here so much she ached inside. She had never felt safer than when she had been with Marc, and just now she needed that security.
"Detective Suter," he said by way of introduction. "Do you feel like answering some questions?"
They had taken a brief statement from her at the apartment, but since there was no question about the manner of the man's death, her importance to them was as a witness, not a suspect. The medics had wanted to transport her to be checked out, so they had let her go and taken care of more pressing matters.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said automatically.
He gave her an assessing look but didn't argue. He flipped open a small notebook. "Okay, in your previous statement, you said you were in the bedroom when you heard the suspect enter the apartment—"
"No, he was already inside. I didn't hear him enter. I heard him stop outside my bedroom door and look in." She knew what she had said, and it wasn't that she had heard him enter.
He looked back at the notebook and didn't comment. Maybe he had been testing her, to see if the details still matched.
"But he didn't see you?"
"No. He didn't come into the bedroom. I was standing off to the right, next to the window. The bedroom door opens to the right, so I was hidden from view unless he came all the way into the room."
"What did he do then?"
"After that, he wasn't as quiet. Since he didn't see me, he must have thought no one was at home. He went into the kitchen and began… searching."
"Searching?" He seized on the word.
"That's what it seemed like. He looked in the cabinets, because I could hear the drawers and doors opening and closing. He even looked in the refrigerator."
"What for?"
She raised her hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't know."
"Okay, what did he do then?"
"He turned the kitchen chairs upside down and looked under them." Her voice mirrored her bewilderment.
He wrote in his little notebook. "What did you do?"
"I—I didn't think I could get out of the apartment; from where he was, he had a clear view of the door. I tiptoed to the phone by the bed and put the receiver under a pillow to muffle the noise, then dialed nine-one-one."
"Good thing you did," he said. "The responding officers were less than a block away. They didn't know what apartment, but the street address was enough to get them there."
"They figured out what apartment," she said, staring blindly at the floor. "It was the one where shots were being fired."
He cleared his throat. "Uh—yeah. What happened then?"
"I tried to sneak into the bathroom, because that's where I keep my hairspray."

He gave a brief smile, and for a moment he was a man instead of a cop. "Smart. That stuff gets in your eyes, it burns like hell."
"I know. It was all I had." She swallowed, trying not to remember the terror of facing an armed burglar with nothing more than a can of hairspray. "The bathroom door squeaked a little. He heard it. I—" She took a deep breath. "I thought he must have, because the noise from the kitchen stopped. I just stood there in the bathroom with the can in my hand, watching the door to see if it moved. He shoved it open, and I sprayed him in the face. He had the gun in his hand," she finished, and fell silent.
"Did you know him?"
She shook her head.
"Maybe seen him around?"
"No."
"So what happened then?"
"I shoved him, but he caught my gown, and we both fell on the bed. I sprayed him again, and he hit me." Unconsciously, she touched her cheekbone. "I hit him on the nose, with the can of hairspray. I remember kicking him with both feet… then I rolled off the bed and crawled to the door, and he started shooting." She fell silent, remembering the blur of details, the terror, the rage.
Detective Suter didn't ask any more questions, didn't prompt her, but she could feel him waiting for the rest of the story, for what happened after the police officers arrived. She rubbed her forehead, trying to get the details straight. "I made it out the door of the apartment… the officers were just coming up the stairs. I almost ran into them. The man came out of the apartment and aimed his gun at me, and they shot him. He didn't fall. He… he *laughed* and shot at me again, and they shot him again."
"Did anyone say anything?"
"Both officers yelled at him to drop the gun. That's when he laughed and said… ah—" She looked at the detective and cleared her throat. Funny, she normally wasn't such a prude, but she simply couldn't say the word in front of this man who was old enough to be her father. "To paraphrase, he said, 'Screw you.' Then he shot at me the last time."
He looked down at his notes and nodded, as if she had corroborated something he already knew. He closed the notebook and slipped it inside his jacket. "That's all for now. Where can I get in touch with you, if I need to talk to you again?"

She stared at him. "I don't know," she said blankly. "You won't let me back into my apartment."
"Do you have family here?"
"No." Her throat closed. "No family."
"Friends?"
"Yes, but I don't—" Piper had offered her house, her company. "Maybe Piper Lloyd. She's a nurse here at the hospital, too." She gave him Piper's number. "Even if I'm not staying there, Piper will know where I am. Or you can reach me here at the hospital. I work nights."
He gave her a shrewd look. "I bet you won't work tonight."
"Of course I will," she said, automatically rejecting the notion that she wasn't fit. Why did everyone keep acting as if she had suffered more than some minor bruising and a small cut?
He sighed and rubbed the back of his head. "Ms. Whitlaw, it's none of my business, but I think you should cut yourself some slack. You handled the situation just about as well as possible, under the circumstances. You kept your head, didn't panic, alerted nine-one-one, and defended yourself with the means you had at hand. But you haven't had any sleep, you've been in a fight—and believe me, you're going to start feeling all sorts of bruises and aches. Look at you. You're shivering and huddling under that blanket, but it isn't cold in here. You're a nurse. What does that tell you?"
Shock. Her mind immediately supplied the diagnosis. Her blood pressure had dropped after the surge of adrenaline that allowed her to fight off the burglar. Karen was annoyed. She should have recognized the symptoms and been lying down. This was twice she had been oblivious to what her own body was telling her, she who was one of the best on the surgical floor at looking at patients and quickly summing up their overall condition.
"All right, so maybe I won't work tonight," she admitted. "I need a uniform, anyway. How do I get my things from the apartment?"
"Make a list of what you need, and I'll have a policewoman pack a bag for you."
"How long will it be before I can get back in?"
"A couple of days. I'll try to hurry things along."
"I can't live there again."
He sighed and reached out as if he would pat her knee, then paused without making the gesture of comfort. She diagnosed his hesitation as fear of lawsuits. "No," he said, "I don't guess you can."

The sound of running feet caught her attention, and a moment later Piper burst into the cubicle. She was red-faced and panting. "Karen! My God, are you all right? One of the emergency nurses called upstairs and told us you were here. You were *mugged*?"
"Not exactly."
Detective Suter got to his feet. It looked like an effort. "I'll be in touch, Ms. Whitlaw. And I'll get your things to you."
"Thank you," she barely had time to say, before Piper shifted from concerned friend mode to nurse mode and pushed her down on the bed.
He hadn't heard from Clancy, who was always prompt about reporting. Hayes waited, growing more annoyed and worried by the minute. Finally, he called his source in Columbus.
"Anything interesting happened today?"
"Ah, yeah. The good guys killed a burglar in a lady's apartment. She was at home, surprised him, put up a good fight and got away. The word is he was a pro; the piece he was carrying had the serial number filed off."
"No shit. Did he have anything else on him?"
"Nothing on him, but a rental vehicle was located in the parking lot, and a wallet with his license and credit cards was found in the glovebox."
Hayes hung up and sat drumming his fingers on the desk. Clancy was dead. How in hell had that happened? He'd been one of the best.
Moreover, nothing had been found on him, so that meant he hadn't found the book. Hayes spared a moment for regret that the book hadn't been on him; it would now be in police possession, but he would know where it was, and getting it *out* of police possession was child's play.
Karen Whitlaw was beginning to worry him. This was twice things had gone wrong. The first time was a logical mistake, but now he wondered *why* she had moved. To make herself harder to find? How much had her father told her?
Hayes's preference was to find the book, not kill the woman. But, logically, she was the only one who would know where the damn thing was hidden. If he couldn't find the book, then obviously he had to get rid of her.

Chapter 15

"You see what a problem it is, Raymond," Senator Lake said. The big, gray-haired man nodded in acknowledgment. They sat in the parlor of the senator's Washington townhouse, lingering over their morning coffee. Raymond had gotten a late flight out of Minneapolis the day before and arrived in Washington well after midnight, so the senator had left word for him to get a good night's sleep, and they would talk in the morning.
The senator had gotten, for him, a late start; he had slept until eight, and now it was ten-thirty, the morning sun bright and hot. "I had my doubts about the way Hayes handled the matter of Medina," he said slowly, "and now it looks as if he lied in order to get me to do things his way. I can't imagine any reason why Frank Vinay would deny knowing about Medina's death, if he already knew, or any reason for him to say Medina had no family if in fact he did. I wasn't asking for classified data, and I *am* chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee."
"Hayes must have his own agenda," Raymond said, his thick brows furrowed as he thought. He looked like a boxer who had gone one round too many, but there was an agile brain behind the battered appearance.
"That's what I thought, too. I wonder if perhaps he is gathering ammunition with which to blackmail me. Whitlaw could have given him the idea." The one good thing about that scenario, the senator thought, was that it proved Hayes's minions hadn't discovered the notebook and he had kept it himself. If Hayes had the notebook, he wouldn't need any other means of blackmail.
"You know what I think about loose ends." Raymond shook his head. "They're dangerous. You don't use people you can't trust. You said Hayes used people you didn't know to take care of Medina?"
"Yes. He swore they knew nothing about me, that they thought he was the head, but if he's lied in one thing, then nothing he says is trustworthy."
"Get their names from him," Raymond said. "I'll take care of it."
Raymond had always taken care of things. Senator Lake could remember, as a child, hearing the burly man quietly say to his father, "I'll take care of it," and his father had always smiled and nodded, and it was done. It was reassuring now to hear him say the words, to know his affairs were being handled by someone he could trust with his life.
"Do you have Hayes's address?"
"Yes, of course." The senator had made it a point to find out. He had not, however, written it down in his address book or had his secretary add it to his computer files. No, anything to do with Hayes was stored only in his

head. In his position, he knew too much about the capabilities of current technology to believe anything in his computer was private, and though he took the security precautions any sane man would take, he didn't assume his system was inviolate. If it wasn't written down, then it wasn't accessible; that was the most secure any information could be. He rattled off the street number to Raymond, whose lips moved slightly as he memorized it.
"I'll get right on it," Raymond said, and the senator knew everything was going to be all right.
"Are you sure you're all right?" Piper asked for the tenth time as she and Karen walked across the hospital parking lot to Piper's car. There was a parking deck, but it was reserved for the doctors and administrative staff, so they wouldn't get wet or have to walk very far. The nurses and other peons, who were evidently all in good shape and not allergic to water, had to use a parking lot that was half a block away from the hospital.
Karen squinted into the hot afternoon sun and wished she had her sunglasses. "I'm fine," she said, for more than the tenth time. Piper had insisted on taking Karen home with her. Several of her friends and colleagues had stopped by the emergency department to check on her. Ice had been applied to her various bruises, the cut on her foot had been anointed with antiseptic and covered with a bandage, and she had been made to lie down for several unnecessary hours while they plied her with food and fruit juices. She didn't feel shocky any longer, she just felt tired and harassed.
Piper carried her suitcase, having refused to let Karen lift it because of her sore ribs. Detective Suter had been prompt about having her things collected, earning Karen's undying gratitude. Her options until then had been wearing either her own blood-splattered gown or a hospital gown. The hospital gown had won the contest, but just barely. Now she was dressed comfortably and securely in the all-American uniform of jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers.
"It's too hot to cook," Piper said. "Let's get some take-out on the way home. What are we in the mood for? Mexican or Mexican?"
"I don't know. I think I'd rather have Mexican."
"Say, that's a good idea. Do you want Taco Pete's or—"
A car pulled out of a parking slot and headed down the aisle straight toward them. Karen stopped listening to Piper rattling on and watched the car. A man, probably one of the maintenance workers, was driving. There wasn't

anything unusual about the car; it was a beige Pontiac, several years old. But it was going too fast, and she edged Piper more to the side to give the car plenty of room to pass.
If she hadn't been attacked that day in her own home, she probably wouldn't have paid the car more than cursory attention, but she was on edge, something deep inside her still frightened and outraged that the sanctuary of her home had been violated. She didn't feel safe. And so she watched the car, watched it gaining speed as it came down the aisle of the parking lot. The driver was wearing sunglasses. She saw him clearly through the windshield as the car bore down on them, and she had the impression he was looking at her.
Piper broke off her running list of Mexican restaurants and said, "He's going too fast."
The fine hairs on Karen's arms stood up. She stopped, staring at the driver. Closer, closer. He gunned the engine, and the car rocketed toward them. Karen turned and drove her shoulder into Piper, knocking her sideways into the space between two parked cars. There was a loud crash, and metal screamed as it tore and bent. They both hit the pavement hard, sprawling on the grit, Piper under her and the suitcase tangled between them. The car beside them rocked wildly on its suspension as it was hit, the rear end skidding around toward them. The front end of the car crashed into the car on the other side of it and bounced back, coming to rest with the rear tire only an inch from Piper's head.
Tires squealed in the parking lot. Someone shouted, and they heard running feet. Then tires squealed again, and there was the sound of a car engine roaring as it turned its maximum rpms, rapidly growing fainter with distance.
Gingerly, Karen sat up. She was already sore, and this latest insult to skin and muscle only aggravated the previous injuries. Now her hands were bleeding as well, from sliding on the pavement, and her right knee throbbed.
Piper sat up also, a hand on her head. She leaned against a tire and looked at Karen.
"Are you all right?" they both said together.
They stared at each other another second. "Yeah," Karen finally said. "How about you?"
"Oh, your standard contusions and abrasions. That car almost hit us!"

"Are you two all right?" Another nurse practically vaulted over the fender to reach them. "He didn't even stop!" She knelt down beside them, dragging things from the pockets of her tunic. Her name tag announced her name was Angela, and the tiny koala clinging to her stethoscope with Velcro paws announced she worked in pediatrics.
Most of the nurses on first shift had already left; Piper was running late because she had swung by emergency to collect Karen. But there were still a few people around, and they all came over. "Go get some gurneys from emergency," Angela said to an orderly, her voice crisp and calm.
"We're all right," Karen and Piper said in unison.
"Don't be silly. You both need to be checked out. You know, sometimes people can't tell if they're injured until several hours later, because of the shock." Angela would have made a good general; maybe it came from dealing with kids all day long.
"Here," another nurse said, tearing open a disposable package containing an antiseptic wipe and handing the package to Angela.
"Do you have any more of these?" Angela asked, taking Karen's hands and wiping her raw, bleeding palms.
"No, just that one. Let's see." The second nurse dug in her pocket again. "Here's a gauze pad, but that's it." She climbed over the bumper, since the car was now sitting at such an angle that its front end was almost touching the bumper of the car beside it. Karen and Piper were sitting in the slight V-shaped space between the two cars, with Piper in the wider part of the V. The nurse crouched beside Piper and pressed the pad to a cut on her forehead, which was sullenly oozing blood. "Someone needs to call the police," she said positively. "That creep not only almost hit you, he left the scene. The owners of these two cars will need an accident report for their insurance companies."
"I've got a cell phone," someone else said. "I'll go call."
Within minutes, the parking lot was swarming with emergency personnel, both the medics who happened to have been in the department at the time and one of the emergency department doctors as well as two of the nurses. Two gurneys were brought, despite Karen's and Piper's groaning objections. Piper tried to stand and sank back to the pavement with a startled exclamation. "I think I must have sprained my ankle," she said sheepishly. "I guess I'll need that gurney after all, unless someone wants to lend me a pair of crutches."

A patrol car pulled into the parking lot then, and they all got to tell their stories to the policemen. The orderly said, "Man, he didn't even have license plates on the car. I got a good look when he was leaving the parking lot, because by then it was obvious he wasn't going to stop."
No one recognized him, but it was a big hospital; it was impossible for everyone to know everyone else. And since there was no security at the parking lot, anyone who wanted to could park there regardless of whether or not they worked at the hospital. All the cars were supposed to have employee decals on them, but no one ever checked, so the decals were useless.
Angela said, "I was standing just over there. It looked to me as if he *tried* to hit them." She didn't speculate about what sort of chemicals might be zipping around the driver's bloodstream, but several others did.
Karen knew better. When she could, she said quietly to one of the police officers, "I'd appreciate it if you would notify Detective Suter about this."
He gave her a "Get real" look, and she added, "This is the second time today someone has tried to kill me. I'm sure you heard about what happened this morning, when two officers shot and killed the burglar. That was my apartment."
He got serious fast. "You think this was deliberate?"
"I know it was. He aimed for us." She managed to keep her voice even, but she was trembling inside with rage. The driver hadn't cared that Piper would have been seriously injured, possibly killed, too. Anyone with Karen was apparently as expendable as she was.
She couldn't say just when she had arrived at the conclusion that someone was trying to kill her—maybe while she had been airborne between the two cars, hearing the impact behind her. But she wasn't stupid, and she wasn't paranoid. As improbable as it seemed, someone really was trying to kill her.
Detective Suter thoughtfully tapped his notebook against his knee. Karen sat quietly, having finished what she had to say. She had outlined her father's murder and the burning of her old house. Added to both of that day's incidents, it was enough to make anyone thoughtful.
Piper's ankle had been X-rayed, revealing a hairline fracture. No cast was necessary, but the ankle was securely wrapped, and she was under orders to stay off it for a week. Karen's scrapes had been cleaned and bandaged, but she was free to go. The question was, where?

"Ms. Whitlaw," Detective Suter said slowly, choosing his words so as not to give offense, "you've had a very rough day. Anyone who has endured what you have could be forgiven for thinking there's a conspiracy against her. I'm sorry about your father, too, but from what you tell me, he was living on the streets, and those types of crimes are all too common. As for the house fire —" He looked helpless. "How can you tie that in with anything else that's happened?"

"I looked in the phone book," she said. "The new ones don't come out until December. My address is still listed as the house that burned."

"Still—"

Karen leaned forward. "Someone knew I was still at the hospital this afternoon, that I would be going home with Piper. Why else would he have been waiting in the parking lot? I work third shift; I wouldn't normally be there this time of day. *You* knew I was going with Piper, because you were here when she asked me. Who else knew?"

The detective's face went hard and blank. He said slowly, "I see what you mean. I guess I'm glad you're not accusing me of anything."

She didn't entirely trust him, either, but she didn't tell him that. She thought he was a straight, honest cop, which was why she had asked for him, but at this point she wasn't taking anything for granted.

"Your whereabouts weren't a secret," he said slowly. "Several people asked your condition, and I told them you were okay and would be going home with one of the other nurses when her shift ended. For that matter, maybe someone called the hospital and checked."

"Only a condition report would be given, not my plans for the evening."

He looked distinctly unhappy. "Ms. Whitlaw, looking at things in that light, I agree that something unusual is going on here. But why would someone be trying to kill you? Do you owe a lot of money to someone? Did you witness something you shouldn't have? Do you know a terrible secret?"

Karen shook her head to all those questions. "No, none of that. I don't *know* why anyone would want to kill me, but all the indications are that someone is trying to. And that man who tried to run me down in his car wasn't concerned that he might hit Piper, too. My friends are in danger, Detective. I can't stay with anyone without worrying they might die in a house fire or get shot if they step in front of me at the wrong time. What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know." He turned the notebook around and around. "I can't help. I can't even justify investigating, because there's nothing to go on. The only dead person is the guy who broke into your apartment. If we run across a beige Pontiac with no license plate, a damaged right fender, and paint scrapes, we can get the owner for leaving the scene of an accident, but that's all. Not attempted murder. I don't know what to tell you, except that you should take a leave of absence and go somewhere safe. Don't tell anyone where you're going, either."

A leave of absence? She sighed. At the hospital, there was no such thing as a leave of absence unless you had a medical reason. Administration would grant her request for a leave, but whether or not there would be an opening for her when she came back was the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. It would also have to be an *unpaid* leave of absence, which would eat up her savings. Because of the life insurance policy on her mother and the proceeds from the sale of the house, she had more money in the bank than she had ever thought she would have, but by no means could she simply quit work.

"Just think about it," Detective Suter said.

This time, Karen walked alone to the parking lot, to retrieve Piper's car and then pick Piper up at the emergency department. Night had almost fallen; twi-light was still hanging in there, but the street lights had come on. She would have asked an orderly or another nurse to walk with her, but after the hit-and-run, she didn't want to take chances with anyone else's life.

The entire situation felt like a *Twilight Zone* episode, with danger lurking all around her, and she didn't know what form it would take or why she had been targeted.

Leave. That's what Detective Suter wanted her to do. Hide. But if she didn't know what she was hiding from, how would she know when it was safe to come *out* of hiding?

It all tied together somehow. All of it. From her father's murder to the two attacks today, they were all for the same reason.

She was so tired, too tired to think clearly. Surely, when she was rested, she would be able to see a picture that eluded her now. But she'd had very little sleep in two days, and today had been a shock to her nervous system from start to finish.

She could think clearly enough, however, to know she couldn't go home with Piper. Her conscience hurt her, because Piper was on crutches and *she*

needed someone. But Karen's presence brought danger, and she was too tired tonight to stay awake and alert.
On the other hand, Piper couldn't go home, either, because *he* had known Karen planned to go home with her. Having missed once, the logical thing would be for him to try to get to her at Piper's house. He might already be there, inside, waiting for them.
Chill bumps roughened her skin at the thought of walking into a dark house, to be met by a stranger with a gun.
A motel, that was the ticket. Just for tonight, for both of them. Piper wasn't dumb; she would see that the only logical thing to do was not take the chance of going home. Tomorrow—well, tomorrow she would think of something else. Piper had a sister with whom she could stay.
And Karen knew where she was going. If she had to hide out, then she intended to hide out in the one place she really wanted to be. She was going to New Orleans. To Marc. All she had to do was stay alive until then.

Marc replaced the phone, frowning. Karen still wasn't at home. He had called twice, even though he was still royally pissed, because after the blood bath in the Garden District, talking to her had suddenly seemed more important than cooling down. Even if he was angry, she needed to know that he cared enough to get in touch. In trying not to spook her, he thought, he had made the mistake of not letting her know she meant more to him than just a hot time between the sheets. He usually wasn't that clumsy in love affairs, but hell—
He ran his hand over his face. The operative word before had been *affair*. Now the emphasis was on the other word.
Love. He'd never been in love before. He had greatly cared for some of his lovers but never before felt this fascination, this obsession, with a woman. He loved her, and it scared the shit out of him. What if he did the wrong thing? He seemed to be walking a delicate tightrope between not coming on so strong that he scared her off, and holding back so much that she thought he didn't care at all.
To hell with it, he thought. From now on, he was going to go with his instinct, which was to move as fast as possible and make damn sure she and everyone else knew his intentions. The primitive urge to stake his claim went beyond the physical; making love to her was wonderful, but he wanted all the legal ties, he wanted his ring on her finger for all to see.

But where in hell was she?
If he knew Karen, she had worked last night, never mind having gotten very little sleep the night before, never mind the hassle of navigating airports and wrestling luggage. He hadn't called earlier because he figured she would be asleep, but it was late enough now that she should be awake. Night had fallen, and the Quarter was alive with tourists looking for good food, hot music, cheesy strip joints, all of which were readily available.
It occurred to him that she didn't know his home phone number, and she couldn't get it by calling information because it was unlisted. He dialed her number again and left a third message, giving her the number and ending with, "Call me, sweetie. No matter what time you get home, call me."
She did have his voice-mail number, though. Just on the off chance she had called it, he punched in some more numbers and listened to his messages. There were only two, one from a gutter punk trying to make points by feeding him some info he'd already had for two days, but the second message was from Karen. His heart thumped against his ribs when he heard her voice.
"This is Karen. Someone is trying to kill me. I'll be on flight sixteen twenty-one, American, arriving at ten-thirty in the morning."
Every hair on his body stood up. Swearing, sweating, Marc waited to see if there was an addition to the message telling him where to reach her now, but the line clicked off, and nothing but silence followed.
God *damn* it! He stood and slowly paced around the living room, thinking. This had to be tied to her father, just like the Medina murder. But how? Why? A comparison of the slugs taken from Rick Medina hadn't matched the one that had killed Dexter Whitlaw, but just because they hadn't been killed with the same weapon, that didn't mean the murders were unconnected. Neither was this. Every cop instinct he had developed after years on the job told him Karen was in danger for the exact same reason her father had been killed. The problem was, he didn't know why, he didn't have a clue who was behind it, and Karen was evidently in hiding somewhere and he didn't know how to get in touch with her.
"Son of a bitch," he muttered, and picked up the phone one more time. He had some instructions for Shannon.
The only seat available on the flight was a window seat, in the very last row. Karen stared down at the blue bowl of Lake Pontchartrain and the brown coil of the Mississippi River, with New Orleans sandwiched between

them. It had all started here, with Dexter. Even if Marc wasn't interested in her personally, he would still help her, because he was a good cop, and Dexter had been murdered in his territory.

She still hadn't talked to him. When she called from a pay phone last night, she had gotten his voice mail again. The message she left was to the point: "This is Karen. Someone is trying to kill me." Then she gave him her flight number and arrival time and was too tired to think of anything else to say, so she hung up.

Maybe going to Marc wasn't such a bright idea, but he was the only person she could think of who might help, and she would certainly be safer in New Orleans than she had been in Columbus. She had had to use her real name to get the airline ticket, since passengers were now required to show a photo ID when checking in for the flight. Assuming her pursuer had the expertise, contacts, and funds, he would be able to trace her movements to New Orleans, but once she was there, she planned to check into a motel under a false name and pay cash, so there wouldn't be a paper or electronic trail for him to follow. New Orleans was a big city, a tourist city, with thousands of tourists every week and a lot of hotels and motels to accommodate those tourists. She could easily hide.

It occurred to her now, after she had gotten some sleep and could think again, that she could just as easily have remained in a Columbus motel under the same conditions. Columbus was more dangerous, though, because people knew her, could, if anyone asked, say, "Oh, yeah, I saw her a couple of days ago. She was in the supermarket on Such-and-such Street." A lot of people passed through the hospital, and a lot of them remembered her. Strangers were constantly speaking to her, telling her of their stay in the hospital, and she always smiled and nodded, but she seldom remembered anything about them.

She didn't want to be in Columbus. She wanted to be in New Orleans, with its heavy, sticky heat and air of casual, cheerful wickedness. And so she was here, though she had no idea if Marc would be at the airport or what sort of welcome he would give her even if he *was* there. If he wasn't, she would take a cab to the city. He had a job, a busy one. Just because he had made time for her before didn't mean he could, or would, do so again.

The plane landed with a slight bounce, and they taxied to the terminal. As soon as the plane lurched to a stop at the jetway, passengers ignored the instructions to remain seated until the captain turned off the seat-belt sign

and crowded into the narrow aisle, taking down bags from the overhead bins, dragging them out from under seats. Karen remained seated; the rear of the plane was always the last to empty, and she was in the very last row. Except for stretching her legs, standing up would serve no purpose because she certainly wasn't going anywhere for a while.

But eventually, the line began to snake forward, and the plane emptied in fits and starts. Karen crawled out of the cramped seat, wincing at her sore ribs, her sore knee, her sore hands. She ached all over. This morning, she and Piper had solemnly bandaged each other, then hugged good-bye and laughed and cried at the same time. Piper had argued at first against the entire preposterous idea that someone was trying to kill Karen, but the more she thought about it, the more worried she became, and finally she had agreed the safest thing to do was get out of Dodge.

Piper had been right about something, too. With her hands bandaged, people rushed to handle her one suitcase for her.

Though her wardrobe was limited to what the policewoman had packed, when Karen finally stepped off the plane into the heat and humidity of the jetway, she realized she was better dressed for New Orleans weather now than she had been before. Other than a couple of uniforms, her wardrobe currently consisted of two pairs of jeans, a lightweight flowered skirt that fell to mid-calf, three cotton tops, some socks and underwear, sneakers, and a pair of sandals. She wore the skirt and sandals and felt much cooler than she had before.

Marc nabbed her as soon as she set foot in the terminal. That was the only word for it. A hard hand closed over her nape, dragging her to a halt, and he said with suppressed violence, "What the *hell* is going on?"

Chapter 16

He was still angry, Karen thought. No, *angry* wasn't an adequate word; he was furious, his eyes glittering, his lips a thin grim line, pale around the eyes and nose. She was so glad to see him that she closed her eyes as a sigh of relief soughed out of her lungs. "Hi," she said, another inadequate word.

Then she was in his arms. He eased her there, as if afraid of hurting her. She felt his heart hammering under her cheek, his breath soft on her hair, the

hard bulge of his gun in the holster at his waist, and it felt so wonderful to be where she was that the cessation of solitude was almost painful. She had never felt this connection with anyone else, this lightness as her body touched his, this pure, delicious sense of homecoming.
"You look like hell," he said, the blunt statement so far from his usual courtesy that she thought he must be rattled. She did look rather battered: limping, both hands bandaged, a bruise on her cheek, and that overall pinched, pale look that came from too little sleep and too much stress.
"Yesterday was an eventful day."
"Are there any injuries I can't see?" The words were tight.
"Ribs. Sore, but not cracked."
He muttered another curse under his breath. "Let's get out of here. Any bags?"
"One."
"Do you need a wheelchair?"
She leaned her head back and gave him an appalled look. "No! That would make me more conspicuous. My knee is stiff, but I can walk perfectly well. Let's just get my suitcase and get out of here."
The line of his mouth didn't relax, and the hard glitter in his eyes didn't soften, but he slowed his long stride to match her much more leisurely gait, his arm around her waist as if he felt she needed steadying. The more she walked, the more her knee loosened, and if she went slowly, she didn't limp.
She said, "If someone had the means, how long would it take him to find out I took a flight here?"
"If someone had the means, he could have someone here waiting for you or be here himself." He looked as if he wanted to do something violent.
She stopped, her heart jumping with panic. "Get away from me," she said fiercely. "If you're with me, then you're in danger, too."
He turned to face her. "You're going with me," he said between clenched teeth, "if I have to pick you up and carry you. *Then* you'll be conspicuous."
He took her arm and steered her toward the escalator. "After your message, I took precautions. I'm not here alone."
She decided not to push him any further. From what she could tell, his temper hadn't subsided at all during the past two days. He looked dangerous, his gaze hard and restless as he surveyed the people around them, and she suspected he would welcome the chance to unleash that temper on someone.

Getting off the plane had taken so long that the luggage was already being unloaded. After a few minutes, the carousel chugged her suitcase around; she pointed it out, and Marc snagged it.

He was parked at the curb. Another car had pulled up close behind him, and a lean, good-looking young black man stood on the sidewalk beside them, his eyes shielded by sunglasses. "See anything?" Marc asked as he stowed the suitcase in the trunk. He had put on sunglasses, too, making him look hard and expressionless.

"Nothing out of place. Everything's calm as a convent."

"Good. Karen, this is Antonio Shannon. Antonio, Karen Whitlaw."

"Pleased to meet you," Karen said. "Are you a detective, too?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Shannon smiled at her. Like Marc, he wore a jacket despite the heat.

Marc opened the passenger door and ushered her into the car, his hand warm on the small of her back. The touch was so familiar, so possessive, that she shivered.

"I'll watch your six and make sure you aren't followed," Shannon said quietly to Marc.

"Thanks. I've put in a call to McPherson, but I'm routing everything through you so there won't be any direct connection to my house or my home phone."

Shannon nodded. "Got it. Go on, get her stashed. I'll handle things."

Marc clapped Shannon on the shoulder in appreciation and slid behind the wheel. As he pulled away from the curb, he watched in the rearview mirror as Shannon did the same, falling back far enough that he could see if anyone tried to follow Marc. Shannon had good instincts, maybe a result of his military training, maybe because he was naturally sharp.

Karen cleared her throat. "Is Detective Shannon your partner?"

"Detectives in New Orleans aren't teamed. But he worked with me on your father's case, and we get along. I trust him."

"Who's McPherson?"

"Someone who might be able to give us some information. Now—" His tone was measured, but she still heard that suppressed violence beneath the control. "Tell me what happened yesterday."

She did, as calmly and concisely as possible. She also told him about her previous home burning to the ground. He digested everything in silence for

a minute. "Do you know the name of the bastard who entered your apartment?"
"Carl Clancy." Detective Suter had told her his name, to see if she recognized it.
He indicated the bruise on her face. "He did that?"
"Yes, but the hands and the knee are courtesy of the other bastard, the hit-and-run one. Actually, my hands are just scraped. Piper put these impressive bandages on them so people would help me with my suitcase. With my sore ribs, it was difficult for me to handle it."
He said something under his breath again, something vile and inventive.
Karen stared straight ahead. If Marc was swearing like that, he was a volcano waiting to blow.
"I know it sounds far-fetched," she blurted. "Maybe I panicked. But twice in one day seemed a little too much for coincidence, and when I added it to my father being murdered and my old home burning, I—what's the legal term? A preponderance of evidence? That's what it felt like. Or am I being paranoid?"
"No, I don't think you're paranoid. Something else turned up on your father's case that makes me real uneasy." He checked his rearview again.
"What?" She turned around and checked behind them herself. "Is anyone following us?"
"Just Antonio."
"Tell me what turned up."
"Another body, in Mississippi. The other man and your father knew each other, and they were probably killed at the same time. The other man was in a car in the hot sun, so the coroner can't pin his time of death down as accurately as we could with your father, but it's close enough."
"What was the other man's name?"
"Rick Medina. Your father knew him in Vietnam. Did you ever hear of him?"
She shook her head.
"He worked for the CIA."
Startled, she said, "Dad wasn't CIA."
"I know, but they knew each other anyway. At first, when I found out about Medina, I thought maybe he had been the primary target and your father got in the way. But now…"
Now, with the attacks on her, it seemed likely the situation was reversed.

She rubbed her forehead. "Why come after me? I don't know anything about what he did."
"Someone evidently thinks otherwise."
"Do you think this has anything to do with the CIA?"
He shook his head. "They seem to be as much in the dark as we are. Medina did occasional work for them, but he wasn't in their employ at the time. No one knows why he was here."
"Another dead end."
"Or a lead. Whoever dumped Medina's body did it across the state line, probably thinking we wouldn't link the two murders. Medina's murder looked like a robbery, except they left the car, which was worth a lot of money if that was what they were after. It was as if they wanted him to be identified without any trouble."
"Why would they want him identified?"
"Because they wanted someone to know he was dead. Who and why?"
"We keep saying *they*."
"I don't think one person could have managed both murders so cleanly, with no witnesses."
So what were they dealing with? she wondered. An army of assassins? People she wouldn't recognize, who could walk up to her door at any time, perhaps wearing a police officer's uniform, and kill her when she opened the door? Would she ever feel free to cross a street again without wondering if one of the cars waiting at the traffic light was going to make an early start and run her down?
Now she *was* being paranoid, but where did it end?
She stirred, realizing they had been silent for some time and were almost in New Orleans. "If you don't mind, take me to a nice, quiet motel that's within walking distance of a supermarket. I'm paying for everything with cash, so if I check in under an assumed name, I should be safe enough."
His jaw tightened. "I'm taking you to my house," he said evenly.
His house. Her stomach clenched in a rush of mingled desire and terror. "I can't stay with you. If they find me, you'll be in danger, too."
"And if they find you, you'll be a hell of a lot safer with me than you would alone in some motel room."
It was blind instinct that had sent her back to New Orleans, a panicked need to be near Marc, but now that she was here, she knew she couldn't live with herself if anything happened to him because of her. "I can't take that chance.

Once they trace me to New Orleans, wouldn't your house be the first place they would look?"
"Why would they? Contrary to what you seem to think, no one except the two of us knows we spent the last night you were here screwing all night long like a couple of minks."
He said it so smoothly, the rich, dark tones of his voice shaping the words almost into a caress. If he meant to shock her, he succeeded. If he meant to forcibly remind her of the intimacy they had shared, he succeeded in that, too. She felt her face get hot as a blush spread from her breasts upward.
She tried to ignore both her blush and his comment, doggedly sticking to her guns. "You're the one who investigated Dad's murder. Of course, they would watch you—"
"I would almost welcome them," he said, very gently. "I'm armed, and I'm pissed."
Yes, he was—royally pissed. Again. Or still. She stared blindly out the window.
He exited off I-10 and worked his way over to Canal Street, then down Chartres, then left on St. Louis. He hit the garage door opening, and Karen managed not to duck as he drove under the yawning door with inches to spare.
"How long are you going to pretend it didn't happen?" he asked, getting out and opening her door, then collecting her suitcase from the trunk.
She bit her lip as she preceded him up the stairs.
She felt herded, as if she had no choice but to go in the direction he had chosen. "I'm not pretending. I know very well what I did. You have a right to be angry, and I apologize. I acted like a fool, running away the way I did. I'm not used to—well, anyway, I'm sorry."
"You're not used to sleeping with a man," he finished, unlocking the door and stepping aside for her to enter. He followed, locking the door behind him and setting her suitcase down with a thud. "Now, tell me *why* you ran."
Uneasily, she moved away from him, embarrassed all over again. "The main reason was lack of nerve. I didn't know—I couldn't figure out why you'd done it."
For once, he looked totally flabbergasted. "What?" he asked blankly.
To give herself something to do, she began unwrapping the enormous bandages covering her hands, concentrating on making a neat roll of the

gauze as she unwound it. "The least upsetting reason I could come up with was that you were just horny, and I was handy."
"You were right about the horny part." He reached for her hands and took over the job. "But I didn't use you as a substitute for my fist. I wanted *you*. If that was the least upsetting reason, I'm not sure I want to hear the other one."
"Other two."
"God. All right, what was the next one?"
"That you felt sorry for me."
His hands stilled at their task. Slowly, his head came up, disbelief written on his face. "You thought I kept a hard-on all night because I felt *sorry* for you?"
"You had been so kind," she tried to explain, feeling helplessly inadequate for the task. "I couldn't have managed without your help. But then I broke down at the funeral, and I thought you felt you couldn't leave me alone at the hotel—"
"Karen." He shook his head a little, as if trying to clear it. "That's carrying sympathy a little far, don't you think? My bed isn't a charity ward."
She bit her lip again and fell silent. He bared one of her hands, turning up her raw palm so he could inspect it. He got that grim look on his face again but took her other hand without comment and began the unwrapping process on it. "Okay, what's the third reason you thought of?"
This one was the tough one, but she owed him a full explanation. It was an effort to keep her voice even. "That first day—I knew you didn't like me. I wasn't imagining that, was I?" Despite her best try, she couldn't keep the pain from showing.
He kept his black head bent over her hand. "No," he finally said. "You didn't imagine it."
Karen swallowed, feeling her insides shred. "I didn't think so," she whispered, then said in a stronger voice, "So, anyway, the most likely reason I could think of was that you'd done it for… oh, not revenge, but as a sort of put-down."
"Use you, then kick you out?" He still wasn't looking at her, but she saw the muscle in the side of his jaw clench.
"Something like that. Because you didn't like me." She said it again, trying to impress it on herself, trying to face it head-on so she wouldn't crumple under the hurt of it.

"Not at first, no." He paused, and his big hands tenderly cradled her sore one. "Or rather, I was angry, but it didn't take me long to figure out you weren't what I'd first thought. Within an hour, actually. I began to get the idea when you almost passed out on me, but then when you watched that video and tried to act so calm, so untouched… you were falling apart, and I knew it."
"How?" she demanded, feeling a little truculent. She had tried hard to remain in control, a technique she had perfected over the years. She didn't like thinking she had been so transparent.
"You were clenching your fists so tight they were almost bloodless. You're a marshmallow, sweetie. Instead of not feeling enough, you feel too much. You try to take care of everything and everyone, and then beat yourself up when you can't do it." He slanted a glittering look at her from under his lashes. "By the way, did you get any of my messages?"
"Of course I did. 'God damn it, Karen,'" she quoted, and watched his olive skin darken as blood ran into his cheeks. She was almost glad he was embarrassed, because it balanced her own sense of vulnerability. He saw too much; she felt stripped naked, even more so than when he had actually removed her clothes. She was accustomed to shielding herself emotionally, and it knocked her off balance to realize how transparent she was to him.
"I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "I was so mad I—anyway, I left three messages yesterday."
"Oh. With everything that was happening, I didn't think to call the machine and check messages. What did you say?"
"To call me. Please. Then I got *your* message, and I was scared shitless until you got off that plane." He took a deep breath and shuddered as he let it out. "We need to talk."
"We're talking," she pointed out.
"Not like this." Abruptly, he leaned down and lifted her in his arms. Startled, she grabbed his neck for balance. "What are you doing?" she half shrieked as he carried her into the bedroom and set her on the bed.
"Checking you out," he replied, going down on one knee beside her and taking her hand again to finish the unveiling. He inspected that hand, too, then folded her skirt back to look at her knees. Both were skinned and bruised, but he could see for himself none of her injuries was serious. Lifting each foot, he slipped off her sandals. "So, on the basis of a first impression, you ignored three days of intensive courting?" He flashed her

another of those glittering looks. "Well, as intensive as I could make it, under the circumstances."
"When I thought about it, everything seemed so… orchestrated. Planned." She gave him an angry look of her own. "You were already wearing a condom while we were dancing!"
"And kept it on the whole time we were dancing, too, by God, which should tell you something about how turned on I was." He stood and removed his jacket, tossing it aside. Then he started unbuttoning his shirt, his movements jerky, his nostrils flaring with anger. "I was *trying* to be *considerate*. I didn't think you'd appreciate having to worry about a pregnancy or disease at the beginning of our relationship."
Karen watched him, her eyes big, her mouth dry. She didn't say, "What are you doing?" which would be stupid because it was obvious what he was doing. She didn't say, "What relationship?" because she didn't want to inquire too closely in case she had heard wrong. She wanted to say she *did* appreciate his consideration in wearing a condom, but she didn't say that, either.
She just watched him, her heart pounding, her nipples tightening. Greedily, she took in his sleek, strongly muscled shoulders and nice, broad, hairy chest. Clothed, he looked broad-shouldered and trim; naked, he was more muscular, with a flat, ridged stomach and a line of downy hair running down the center of it straight to his groin. She thought of following that line with her tongue and taking him in her mouth; his entire body would go rigid, and he would give that wonderful, deep, gut-wrenching groan. She wanted him. Oh, God, she wanted him now and forever.
He dropped his shirt to the floor and kicked out of his shoes, then peeled off his socks. "I can't believe you were mad about the rubber," he muttered, glancing up at her, and for a moment his gaze was so blazing hot she felt scorched.
She reached out and touched his stomach, feeling his hot, smooth skin and the hard pad of muscle underneath. "It wasn't the condom, it was that everything felt so *deliberate*, as if you were following a plan."
"I was," he said bluntly. "I'd been working for three days to get you in bed, and I was afraid stopping to put on a condom would give you a chance to think twice about what we were doing and back out. So I put the condom on first."

"And kept it on, too, by God," she teased him, smiling. Her fingers trailed down his belly to the waistband of his pants, following the line of silky hair. His eyes were brilliant as he looked down at her. "Take off your clothes." The words were low and rough, almost a whisper.
Her heart pounded harder. She stood and began removing her clothes, her breath rushing in and out in excitement. She felt the clenching of desire deep inside, the twin yielding and demand of utter need. She dropped her blouse to the floor, then unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it. His gaze was locked on her breasts as she undipped the front clasp of her bra and let it fall, and she noticed his breath was coming faster, too.
Critically, he eyed her ribcage as he dropped his pants, trousers and underwear going down in one smooth movement. Her ribs were marked with bluish splotches, and his hands clenched into fists before he deliberately relaxed them, reaching out to touch the bruises. "Are you too sore for this?"
"No," she said softly, eyeing his thick erection and appreciating his concern even more because it was obvious he was urgently aroused. But then, so was she. She removed her panties and sat down on the bed.
Instantly he was there, a strong arm wrapped around her, supporting her as he eased her down and in the same fluid motion mounted her. Lying between her legs, he carefully propped his weight on one elbow and fondled her breasts with his free hand, lightly rubbing her nipples until they were throbbing. Her own hands were on his chest, stroking, delivering pleasure. His erection nudged between her folds, but he didn't enter her.
"I'm not wearing a condom now," he said, kissing her.
"I know." Karen wrapped her arms around his neck as ancient instincts surged to the fore. Their gazes locked, his fierce and bright, hers soft and darkly mysterious, yielding. She didn't make this decision lightly; she knew full well what she was doing. "I don't want you to," she murmured, arching her hips a little. She wanted all of him, now. She wanted his seed, the possibility of his child. She felt unbearably aroused, though he had scarcely touched her.
"We're taking a risk." His voice was thick. His mouth moved down her neck.
"Yes. Please." She arched again, desperate, hungry, aching.
He pushed into her, hard and urgent, as if he couldn't hold back a moment longer. The head of his penis was already slick and eased his penetration.

She cried out as satisfaction replaced desperation, pleasure replaced pain. He groaned, and sweat beaded on his forehead, dampened his close-cropped black hair. "Have mercy," he whispered. "I haven't done this since I was a teenager."

She clung to his shoulders, her hips rising eagerly to meet his restrained thrusts, enveloping every inch and trying to hold him. "Making love? I know better." Speaking was an effort when everything in her was concentrating on the tightening spiral of desire. She was almost there, trembling on the edge, hanging on a point of pleasure so sharp it was exquisite, wonderful pain.

"Not wearing a rubber." He shuddered at the tight internal clasp of her. Suddenly, he gripped her shoulders and began thrusting hard, fast, deeper with every stroke. "I can't wait," he said tightly.

He didn't need to. Her nails dug into his shoulders, and she arched, crying out in the intense grip of orgasm. He made a rough, helpless sound and began coming, spurting into her, milked dry by the rhythmic pulse of her climax.

He hung over her for a few moments, his head down, his arms trembling as he supported himself rather than letting his weight down onto her. Karen managed to stroke his shoulder with one hand, but even that small effort exhausted her, and her arm fell to the bed. Finally, he eased out of her and collapsed on the bed beside her, breathing hard, his eyes closed.

Drowsily, she turned on her side and nestled against him, sighing at the pleasure that was quite apart from the sharp need of sex. Tears prickled her closed eyelids as she tried to contain a happiness so acute she ached with it.

He groaned. The sound was that of an unconscious man struggling toward awareness, and it startled her into laughing.

A smile tugged at his lips, and he rolled onto his side to face her, sliding his arm under her neck and draping his other arm over her hips to anchor her close. "You need to laugh more often." He kissed the tip of her nose. "Every time I see your solemn brown eyes, it's like being kicked in the gut."

"I laugh," she protested sleepily.

"Not enough. And before your fertile imagination comes up with any more off-base scenarios about what just happened here, we are deeply involved in a serious relationship. Is that clear?"

"Clear," she whispered, barely able to get the word out over the pressure in her chest. She felt shaky inside, as if she might crumble. She loved him so

much it actually hurt, but it felt good at the same time.
"If you get pregnant, we get married. I refuse to let a child of mine grow up illegitimate. I don't care how many actresses do it or whether or not a woman really needs a man around now to help her raise their children."
"You're damn right we'll get married," she said with sharp force. "The odds are I didn't get pregnant this time, but if you don't plan to stay around, we'd better decide on a method of birth control and stick to it. I don't want a broken marriage." Knowing what being abandoned by her father had been like for both her mother and herself, she was determined her own children would never know that pain if she could possibly help it.
He caught her hand and carried it to his lips, being careful not to hurt her raw palms. She snuggled against him, unable to decide which she wanted to do most: turn cartwheels or sleep. She didn't do either, because she'd never been a head-in-the-sand type of person, and reality at present was a bit dicey.
"It all comes back to here," she murmured, unable to hold the thoughts at bay any longer. "To Dad. His murder is at the center of it, because otherwise why would I be targeted? But I don't know anything about what he was doing. I hadn't seen or talked to him in years."
"What about your mother? Did she have any contact with him?" Marc brushed her hair back from her face, kissed her forehead, and held her closer as if he couldn't get her quite close enough.
"More often than I did. After I grew up, I refused to see him when he blew in for a couple of days, usually when he was out of money, but I know he called her sometimes, though not very often. She didn't tell me much about his calls because she knew how angry I was at him."
"Had there been any calls from him since she died?"
"If he called, he didn't leave a message, but then he wouldn't." A memory surfaced, pulled out by his questions. Marc thought like a cop, looking at angles she hadn't considered. "Wait. She died at the end of January. A few weeks after that, I got a package he'd mailed to her. I was still in shock and hurting a lot, and getting that package made me so angry because she loved him all of her life and he didn't stay in close enough touch that he would know she was dead. I almost threw the package away."
A subtle tension had invaded the muscled arm under her neck. "Did you open it?"

"I opened it, but I didn't go through it. I remember the box had some papers in it. I closed it up and put it in with the rest of her things I had boxed up for storage."
"Where is it stored? Your apartment?"
"No, I don't have room there. I rented a storage unit. That's it, isn't it? The reason why he was murdered is in that box."
"Maybe. It's a lead, and God knows we've been short of those. I want to hear from McPherson first—"
"Who's McPherson?" she asked, as she had before. His earlier answer hadn't been very informative.
"CIA."
"Are you going to tell him about the package?"
He didn't hesitate. "Hell no."
"So you don't trust him, either?"
"I don't know him. He may be who and what he says he is. I'll give him a little information, see what he gives me in return, but I sure as hell won't tell him you're here with me or anything about the package until I've checked it out."
"So what do we do in the meantime?"
"What do you think?"

Chapter 17

"Your people are incompetent fools," Senator Lake said coldly, hiding the fear that twisted his stomach. "The woman has disappeared, and you still haven't found the book. She could use that information at any time, thanks to your bungling!"
Hayes lowered his eyelids. He didn't protest or make excuses. The hard truth was that he hadn't performed his task; though the people he used were normally reliable, things had gone wrong. Clancy had gone into an occupied apartment, and the Whitlaw woman had somehow managed both to call the cops and to escape, and now Clancy was dead. Yamatani had missed completely in his attempt to run her down. Not only had he failed, but the Whitlaw woman would have to be a fool not to have figured out something was going on, whether or not she knew where the book was. She had gone into hiding, and he hadn't been able to find a trace of her yet. He

could, but not without setting off alarms at the sources he would have to use, and Hayes wasn't willing to stick his neck out that far for the senator. The last thing he needed in this operation was to draw the attention of certain people.
"What do you plan to do now? I would like to remind you that the more people brought into this, the more likelihood there is of a leak."
"They're professionals. They don't talk."
"But they haven't proven themselves completely reliable, have they? I'd like their names, please. I seem to be in an undesirable position, with these people knowing about me while I know nothing about them."
"They don't know about you," Hayes reassured him, his tone weary. "Senator, I've kept you completely out of this. So far as anyone knows, the trail ends with me."
"So you say, but then you haven't been completely reliable, either, Mr. Hayes. Even your information about Rick Medina was in error."
Hayes kept his eyes hooded, but his interest sharpened. "In what way?"
"About his son. Medina didn't have any children."
"Who said so?"
"Franklin Vinay, the DDO. I'm sure he would know."
Hayes felt a chill run from his head all the way to his toes. Even his blood felt cold. "You asked Vinay about Medina?"
"It was a way of finding out what they knew. In my position, it's perfectly normal for me to hear about such things and ask about them."
Except that it wasn't perfectly normal for him to ask about Medina's *son*, whose existence and activities were so closely guarded that his name wouldn't turn up on any data file of employees. For the senator to ask about him would elicit any number of reactions from Vinay. First and foremost, he would deny that Medina had any children. Then, assuredly, he would try to uncover the senator's source. He would look first in his own office, but when that failed, he would begin looking at the other end of the equation and asking himself how the senator could have gotten any information about Rick Medina in the first place. A cop would say that knowledge indicated involvement; the senator had laid a trail right to his own door. Discovery was just a matter of time. Not only had the senator involved Franklin Vinay, he had brought the son's attention down on them, and Hayes had heard enough about that shadowy figure to know the game was up. The best thing he could do now was cover his ass, his tracks, and disappear.

"I'll take care of the notebook personally," he said, feeling no compunction about lying. A man who would do something as stupid as arousing the suspicions of the deputy director of operations at the CIA wasn't a man for whom it was safe to work.

"Do that," Senator Lake said.

After Hayes left the office, the senator sat where he was for some time, thinking. He drummed his fingers on the desk. He didn't like these personal meetings with Hayes, but at the same time, he didn't trust the telephones. He could have *his* office swept for bugs, but who was to say Hayes didn't have one of those tiny tape recorders in his pocket, recording everything they said?

Something about Hayes had been… different, there at the end. He knew Hayes underestimated him; a lot of people had made that mistake. In fact, he sometimes deliberately encouraged such errors in judgment, giving himself an advantage.

He didn't consider himself an evil man, though it was true that in his lifetime he had been forced to make some difficult decisions. He didn't like the idea of harming the Whitlaw woman, but the book contained information he could not allow to be made public. The good of the few must not outweigh the good of the many. If she stood in the way, she would simply have to be removed.

And as for Hayes… the senator narrowed his eyes as he thought. Dexter Whitlaw had taught him an important lesson about tying up loose ends, a lesson Raymond had reiterated. Hayes would have to be dealt with. Perhaps, if he could make it look as if Hayes were in the employ of a nation hostile to the United States, and arrange things so it seemed as if Rick Medina had been involved… or maybe it would play better if Medina had been trying to *stop* Hayes. After all, Frank Vinay said Medina had been a patriot. Yes, that sounded better, more in character.

Of course, it wouldn't do for Hayes to be picked up and questioned. No, unfortunately, Mr. Hayes would have to die. All the loose ends had to be tidied. Of course, he would allow Mr. Hayes to take care of Miss Whitlaw first, and find the notebook; then he could take action.

He had depended on Hayes to arrange such matters, but now he would have to use other means. Thank God he had Raymond. This time, he would make certain there weren't any loose ends.

There was nothing about Frank Vinay's house that would call attention to itself. It was neither more ostentatious nor plainer than most of the other houses in the upper-middle-class neighborhood. He didn't drive a fancy car, preferring a slightly used domestic model. His neighbors assumed he was one of the thousands of faceless bureaucrats who battled D.C. traffic every morning for forty-five thousand dollars a year and a nice pension.

The house, however, did have certain modifications that made it different from the others. There was a very good security system, for one thing, backed up by a black and tan German Shepherd named Kaiser and a .9mm named H&K. Every morning and every night, the phones were checked for taps and the house swept for bugs. A parabolic mike aimed at the house would pick up only an annoying buzz instead of any sensitive conversations, because of the sophisticated electronic system designed to thwart such eavesdropping.

Jess McPherson felt safe in Frank Vinay's house, more because of Kaiser and the .9mm than the electronic stuff. Satellites and computers were great shit, but he was at heart an old-fashioned guy. When he retired, he planned to get him a dog. When he walked into Frank's den, he glanced at Kaiser, lying contentedly on the rug at Frank's feet. Kaiser returned the regard and gave a wag of his tail, as if saying, "Relax, everything's okay."

"I haven't been able to find a leak in the office yet," Vinay was telling John. "Damn, this has me worried. Have a seat, Jess, and add your brain to ours."

McPherson chose a comfortable armchair, folding into it and stretching out his long legs. "I can add something better than that. I got a call from that New Orleans detective. I returned it and didn't get to talk to him, but I did talk to the younger guy, Shannon, who put in the first request for info on Rick. Seems the detective got a call from Dex Whitlaw's daughter, in Ohio. She knows him because she flew down to ID Dex's body. Anyway, two attempts have been made on her life since she got back to Ohio, and, not being an idiot, she figures this has to tie in with her father's murder and wants to know if the detective has found out anything."

"Hmm. That means Whitlaw was the main target, then, not Rick." Vinay frowned. "What information do we have on Whitlaw since he got out of the Marines?"

"Not much," Jess said. "He bummed around the country, did some short time in Maryland for some penny-ante stuff about ten years ago, nothing since."

"Any indication he contacted Rick during that time, or vice versa? Were they ever in the same part of the country at the same time after Vietnam?"
"We'll have to do some deep digging to find out."
"While you're at it," John said from the corner, "see what acquaintances they had in common."
Vinay looked thoughtful. Exploring common acquaintances that far back would require major searches that went far beyond tracing the movements of both men. On the other hand, John's instincts were uncanny. "I'll put someone on it immediately."
"I don't believe," John continued, "that Whitlaw's daughter has any idea what's going on, or she wouldn't be calling the detective to ask him about it. On the other hand, someone else definitely thinks she *does* know. It might be interesting to put a tail on her, see who turns up."
"And step in if anyone tries to dispose of her?" McPherson asked.
"Yes, of course." John said it casually but without hesitation. He was like his father, McPherson thought. John spent his life in the shadows, constantly putting his life on the line in a world where people were assets and nothing was ever what it really seemed. Everything was fluid, shaded with gray. And yet John, like Rick, had kept a few absolutes. He was, first and foremost, a patriot. He loved his country.
Beyond that, he would back his people to the death. And underlying all that was his belief that for an employee of his country as he was, the ordinary citizen was his real benefactor. His job, boiled down to its essence, was to protect them.
"We'll shift our focus," Vinay said, "to Whitlaw's daughter. With Whitlaw dead, she's now the center of whatever's going on. John, how long are you stateside?"
"I cleared myself a week, max. I may have to leave at any time."
"But you're officially on leave. Jess, as of right now, you're officially on leave, too. This isn't a Company operation, and I don't want to fuzz the legal lines."
"Do I pass anything along to Detective Chastain?"
"Is there any need?" Vinay asked. That was what it always boiled down to: need to know. "If we agree Ms. Whitlaw is the center of it, and she's in Ohio, then any benefit a New Orleans detective would be to us is negligible."

"But she called him," John said. "She evidently trusts him. If she's hiding, he might be our only link to her."
"I've been up front with him so far," McPherson put in.
"Have you run a check on him?"
"A-one citizen," Vinay answered. "Excellent military record, did time in the Marines. He's from an old New Orleans family, the kind with a mile-long pedigree but no money. He got his college degree on the GI Bill, majored in criminology, started work on the NOPD as a patrol officer, worked his way up to detective. He'll make lieutenant easy, if politics don't get in his way. Or he might switch over to the state police."
"My take on him is he's tough but honest, the kind of cop a cop should be." McPherson spread his hands. "So is it quid pro quo or not?"
"I vote yes," John said.
Vinay considered the situation. "Okay, keep him briefed on what we know and what we're doing, so long as what you tell him doesn't touch Company business. If this veers into some old operation Rick was running in Vietnam, then that information stays in-house."
"At first, that's what I thought it would be." Hands in his pockets, John strolled over to the bookshelves and studied Vinay's reading material. "But now we know the focus was on Whitlaw from the beginning, so that theory doesn't hold. Our best bet is to find Ms. Whitlaw, and for that we may need Detective Chastain."
Marc watched Karen sleep, curled up in his bed, her shiny dark hair tousled around her head and her face delicately flushed with contentment. When she had stepped off the plane that morning, her face was white with tension. He knew he was part of that tension, but he hadn't been able to control his reaction at seeing her frightened and bruised. Pure, savage rage had seized him; in that moment, if he could have gotten his hands on whoever did that to her, he would have killed him without hesitation or remorse.
His woman was in danger. Every protective, primitive instinct in him was working overtime, fueled by fear and anger. If he hadn't had to deal with the sheer tragedy of little James Gable's murder, he likely would have flown to Columbus to settle things between them once and for all, and he would have been there to protect her. He wished he *had* been there when that son of a bitch broke into her apartment and tried to kill her. If she hadn't kept her head, he would have succeeded.

She had defeated the would-be killer, using nothing more than a can of hairspray. The thought made him cold all over, thinking of her facing a gun with such a puny weapon. When she had told him about it, she seemed almost apologetic for not having something more serious at hand for self-defense. Her sheer guts awed him, and the too-detailed knowledge of a cop told him how close he had come to losing her.

On a remote level, Marc was amused at himself. He had lightly loved before; he had argued with women, been angry at them. What he had never before done was lose control, but he had lost it with Karen. There was nothing light about the way he felt. It was dark and powerful and startlingly primitive. He, who had never before treated a woman with anything but the utmost courtesy, had been torn between the simultaneous and uncivilized urges either to spank her bare ass for leaving him, and therefore putting herself in danger, or to throw her on the bed and make love to her until she knew deep down in her bones she belonged to him and would never leave again.

He couldn't do the first because he couldn't lift a hand to her, and he knew it. His primary instinct had always been to protect, not abuse. The only way he would ever be able to strike any woman would be to protect Karen herself, or a child, from attack. His second urge had been abated by Karen's physical condition; she wasn't in any shape to be thrown on the bed. But having to restrain the force of his lovemaking had made it, in a way, even sweeter.

Until she went into his arms, he had been afraid. Afraid he hadn't read her correctly, afraid she didn't feel the way he did. He didn't know how she would take the suggestion, the question, the demand, but one way or another, he was going to marry this woman.

He hadn't worn a condom. Sweat beaded on his forehead as a wave of pure lust seized him. He had been in relationships where the lady was on birth control pills and it hadn't been necessary for him to wear a condom, and the sex was good; but today was the first time he had ever made love knowing there were no barriers, chemical, latex, or hormonal, against pregnancy. It had been incredibly arousing. He wanted to make her pregnant, wanted to come inside her, time and again, until his child began growing within her.

The bedroom was warm and darkened, the blinds closed. She had pulled the sheet over her before going to sleep, but she was beginning to perspire. Gently, Marc folded the sheet down. This was better anyway, he thought.

This way, he could see all of her. He supposed he knew, rationally, that she wasn't the prettiest woman in the world, but if his eyes saw any imperfections, his heart didn't care. The things that made her different made her Karen. He loved the way she looked. She turned him on—God, did she turn him on. She was neatly formed, trim, toned. Her breasts were high and round, and he had satisfied his curiosity about how firm they were. They were very firm, with scarcely any jiggle even when she wasn't wearing a bra. Her flat stomach flowed into curvy hips, curvy hips into smooth, nicely muscled legs. Nothing about her was flashy, but Lord have mercy, she was sexy. He'd never known a woman more responsive, and her pleasure increased his.

She was lying on her side, one breast plumped by her arm. Gently, Marc rubbed a knuckle over the velvety, slightly swollen texture of her nipple and watched, fascinated, as it immediately tightened and elongated, the pinkish beige color darkening almost to red.

Her heavy eyelids fluttered open, and a sleepy smile curved her lips. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to wake you."

She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his swollen penis. "Oh, I think you did." Her voice was drowsy, sensual. Lazily, she stroked him up and down, bringing him to full erection.

He laughed and moved her hand away from him before she aroused him to the point where all he cared about was orgasm. She shifted closer until they were lying pressed together and lifted her mouth to his. "How long before you expect to hear from that McPherson man?"

"I'll give him until tomorrow afternoon."

She looked wide-eyed and solemn. "Are we going to spend the entire time in bed?"

"Probably."

"Don't you have to work?" She traced his lips with one fingertip, then trailed it down his chest to circle his flat nipples.

"I took some personal time off. A case I was working cleared yesterday, and I didn't have anything else urgent." He didn't let himself think about *how* the case had cleared.

"So we can stay right here?" She hadn't lost the solemn look. Marc inhaled deeply as that slender finger worked its way down his torso, bypassing his erection to reach beyond and stroke his testicles.

"Right here." He did a little of his own stroking, down her spine to the crease of her buttocks, back up, down again. Each time his fingers stroked farther down. She gasped and arched against him, her buttocks tightening. Her nipples were pebble hard.
"What do we do if he doesn't call?"
"Proceed on our own." He squeezed her bottom, then eased one finger into her. She felt like warm, wet satin inside, tight on his finger, shivering delicately with arousal. He thought it was Henry Miller who had said entering life by way of the vagina was as good a way as any, and he heartily agreed. He could happily spend the rest of his life with some part of his body inserted into Karen, feeling her excitement, watching her little squirms.
She didn't have much patience. Her brown eyes were almost black as she suddenly put both hands on his chest and shoved him onto his back. He laughed as she straddled him, using both hands to position his penis and sliding down onto him so completely that his laugh changed to a groan. Oh, yes, he was definitely'going to marry this woman.
His beeper sounded.
"You said you're off duty," she accused, frowning.
"I am. That would be Antonio." He stretched to reach his beeper and checked the number. "Bingo."
"He can wait five minutes," Karen said firmly.
"And you can't?" He was teasing. He didn't think he could, either.
"No," she said, and proved it.
"You sound as if you've been running," Shannon observed when Marc called him, ten minutes later.
"I was downstairs," Marc replied. It wasn't a lie. He *had* been downstairs—about two hours ago.
"McPherson just called back. They're looking into any acquaintances Whitlaw and Medina had in common, but right now they don't have anything. Ah, he did say they were going to put a tail on Karen, to see if they can spot anyone else following her and also to step in if she's in danger. I didn't tell him she's here."
"Good. Hold off on telling him for a while. I might change my mind later, but for now I don't want anyone but the two of us to know."
Marc wanted to think more about the situation before he gave away Karen's location. Involvement by the CIA, even peripherally, made him uneasy. He

didn't assume, as a lot of people did, that they were either bad guys or assholes, but by nature of the Agency they dealt with a lot of bad guys. On the other hand, it could be handy to have McPherson's shadow following them when he and Karen went to Columbus, to that storage unit. Tomorrow should be interesting.

Chapter 18

He couldn't just walk away. Hayes came to that realization during the night, in the middle of his plans to do just that. He had kept careful records of each meeting, what was required, and the results. The records incriminated him, but they also incriminated the senator, who had much more to lose. It followed that if *he* had kept records, so had the senator, the mistrustful son of a bitch.

Hayes had no doubt Vinay would come snooping around. There were two ways to play it. The smart way, he decided, would be if he could arrange for it to seem as if he were on the senator's staff in, say, a security position. Everything above board. Vinay might have some snooping done by his own guys, though if he went by the book, he would involve the FBI in the investigation. CIA or FBI, that didn't matter, so long as his name popped up easily before they really began digging. Any half-assed check would turn up the information that he had done some work for the Company himself, a couple of decades ago. His name would shoot to the top of Vinay's list. When questioned, he would say, yeah, he told Senator Lake about Rick Medina's death and also mentioned that the word was he had a son who was also a Company man. That was logical, because he had been in a position to know those things. Bingo, mystery solved, no further investigation needed. That was the smart way. The problem was, the senator would balk at having himself linked to Hayes. Maybe he could convince the senator otherwise. He decided to give it a shot, though he didn't have much faith in the outcome.

The second way, the dumb way, the risky way, was to find the senator's records and destroy them.

That would be a job. Hayes hoped to hell the senator didn't have the records in his congressional office; that was the most dangerous place to keep them, where they were most likely to be turned up by accident.

In his Georgetown townhouse? Possible. His estate in Minnesota was more likely; it was larger, more hiding places, plus the senator had grown up there. He knew the house, the grounds, intimately. Then there was the summer house in Cape Cod, but the senator hadn't been there this summer, so Hayes thought he could dismiss that possibility.

If he had stashed the records in a safe deposit box somewhere, which was what Hayes had done, then they were beyond reach. He would have to find out which bank and what name the box was rented under, get the key, and learn how to copy the senator's signature. Hayes had a lot of talents, but forgery wasn't among them. Then there was the possibility that rather than deposit the papers himself and take the chance of being recognized, the senator had had his wife do it under her name. Mrs. Lake was a sweet, cheerful, uninquisitive person, and she adored her husband. She would do whatever he told her.

The possibilities were endless. The one place the records wouldn't be was in a computer. The senator was computer-illiterate; hell, he had never even learned to type. From birth, he had been surrounded by wealth, and if he wanted to send a letter, he simply dictated it to a secretary or scrawled it by hand if he wanted it to be personal. From the beginning, Hayes had been relieved to know that; his personal opinion was that if you wanted sensitive information to get out, you put it in a computer. They were notoriously unconfidential. He wondered how many people would use accounting programs in their online computers if they knew the information could be accessed. Using the bank account number, a thief could then wipe out the account.

Bank accounts. Something about bank accounts niggled at him. Something he should have thought about days ago.

Suddenly, he knew what it was, and he wanted to kick his own ass. He had overlooked something so obvious that he shook his head in disgust.

He had been thinking only about covering his ass when Vinay came looking, so the DDO wouldn't link him to Rick Medina's death. Instead, now he was pretty sure he had figured out how to find the book.

He had wondered about the damn book, wondered exactly what was in it that the senator wanted kept quiet. Wouldn't it be a bitch for the senator if the man he sent after it kept it and used it against him the way Whitlaw had done?

Hayes almost laughed aloud. He didn't like Senator Lake, and he sure as hell didn't trust the lying, sanctimonious, murderous bastard. On the other hand, he definitely liked the idea of a neat little double-cross. Why, it made him glad all over.

If Whitlaw had hidden the book somewhere that only he knew, then the book was gone. Hell, maybe he had buried it somewhere. At any rate, under those circumstances, the senator was reasonably safe, because what were the odds it would turn up during his lifetime?

On the other hand, if Whitlaw had sent the book to his wife or daughter…

The wife had died in January. She and the daughter had lived together; the daughter would have her mother's effects. Then, only a couple of months later, the daughter had moved, from a house into an apartment. She would have been pushed for space. Where would the excess stuff go?

Into storage.

Columbus was a city of about six hundred thousand people. A city that size would have hundreds of storage companies, but there was a simple way to narrow the search: canceled checks.

She would pay the monthly storage fee with a check. She might even write the unit number on the check, but if she didn't, that wasn't a big obstacle. All he would have to do would be to break into the company's office and locate her name in their files, then break into the unit. Most people just put small padlocks on the things anyway; bolt cutters would clip them right off. She was in hiding; no one would be at her apartment. The police would have it sealed off with crime-scene tape anyway, until they finished their internal investigation into Clancy's death. Any IA investigation could take days, even one as cut-and-dried as this one.

All he had to do was find her bank statement and go through the canceled checks. Even if she only got photocopies from the bank, he would have the information he needed.

Hayes chuckled, feeling very pleased with himself. In the morning, he would make a phone call to the senator to tell him he had a lead on the book, to calm him down, and then he was going on a little trip to Ohio.

Jess McPherson was tired. It was four-thirty in the morning. His eyes burned, and every time he blinked, a pound of sand scratched across his eyeballs. The lines of data on the computer screen kept blurring, and he kept blinking. He had personally drunk two pots of coffee, and his stomach

was burning worse than his eyes. He needed to take a piss, and he needed to sleep, in that order.

He wondered how John held up the way he did. The stamina, the absolute concentration, amazed McPherson, and he wasn't a man who was easily impressed. But the younger man had been sitting in front of a computer screen even longer than McPherson had, so totally focused he scarcely blinked. He had flown thousands of miles, crossed about eight time zones, and dealt with his father's funeral. He had to be both jet-lagged and stressed out, but none of that showed in his face. Looking at him, no one would suspect what he was.

His brown hair was neatly cut and combed, his white oxford shirt neatly pressed, his slacks unwrinkled. He wore a pair of wire-frame glasses to ease eye strain from working at the computer for so many hours. He had a manicure, for God's sake. He could be any Ivy Leaguer, any lawyer or banker, or an investment broker, the guy next door.

But he wasn't. His long fingers danced over the keyboard, agile testimony to his complete familiarity with computers and their workings. McPherson was competent, but John was a master at ferreting out information.

He was also the most dangerous man McPherson had ever known.

He loved John like a son, but he knew no one *knew* him completely. It was anyone's guess what went on behind those calm eyes, the thoughtful manner. No, it wasn't just a manner; John really was thoughtful. Most people saw only the surface; John saw multiple layers and intuitively knew how to manipulate those layers so people reacted the way he wanted, causing certain events to unfold.

He also knew how to kill in more ways than most people knew even existed. He had trained with the Navy SEALs, going through the rigorous physical conditioning as well as the classroom stuff. He had learned about computers from some legendary techno-wizard. He could fly a plane, sail a ship, set a bone, and probably sew a dress.

The CIA gathered information on roughly a hundred and fifty countries. John Medina had been in all of them.

He had been married once, in his early twenties. The young woman had died. Rumor had it she was a double agent and John had killed her himself rather than let her compromise a highly placed mole in the Kremlin. McPherson never met the young woman, and he didn't necessarily believe the rumor, because there were other ways to prevent her from passing along

information, and John didn't kill unnecessarily; nevertheless, he admitted John was capable of the action.
The computer screen blurred again, and McPherson leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out and yawning. "Damn, whoever would have thought they would know so many of the same people?"
"They were in Vietnam," John murmured, his fingers skimming the keys. "Hundreds of thousands of troops were over there at any one time. Dad was in and out of the country several times, multiplying the possibilities. Whitlaw did multiple tours of duty. They met a lot of people, not necessarily at the same time."
"Jesus, some of these people have been dead over twenty years. Can't you weed out the dead guys, shorten the list a little?"
"Sure." John tapped some keys, then paused with his finger poised over the mouse. He typed in another command. A hard copy began spitting out of the laser printer beside McPherson.
"What's this?" McPherson reached over and picked up the first sheet lying in the tray.
"A list of the dead guys."
Squinting at the names, McPherson said, "Why?"
"Because the answer may be in someone who's already dead. Maybe Dad and Whitlaw were just next on someone's list." John shrugged to show the endless possibilities. "The wider the search area, the more likely I am to see a pattern."
"So you're looking for people who have recently died."
"I'm looking for anything. If I see anything interesting, then I'll run a match to see if any of the people on the deceased list also knew any of the people on the present list. There has to be a link."
The printer stopped printing. McPherson gathered up the sheets and handed them to John, who tilted back in his chair and began scanning the list of names and the dates of their deaths. Ten minutes later, he paused, his gaze returning to one name, and he stared at it thoughtfully for a moment. Then he leaned forward, pulled up another file on the screen, and typed in a name.
"Hmm."
"Did you find something?"
"Maybe. It's… interesting. I'll check further."

McPherson rolled his chair over beside John's and read the information on the computer screen. "Huh."
"Did you know him?"
"No, but we sure as hell know his brother, don't we?"

"Wake up, honey." Marc smoothed his hand over Karen's shoulder, cupping his palm over the smooth, cool ball of the joint. "Here's a cup of coffee."
She blinked sleepily. "What time is it?" she mumbled.
"Not late. Seven-thirty."
"Then why are you up? You said you don't have to go to work." She pushed herself up in bed, yawning as she reached for the cup of steaming, fragrant coffee. The sheet slid to her waist, and Marc's hand almost automatically went to her bare breasts, stroking, rubbing her nipples. Karen leaned against him and nestled her head on his shoulder as she sipped the coffee, enjoying his fondling.
"I don't, but we do have to go to Columbus. I called the airline and got two seats on the ten-thirty flight."
She was silent, a little frightened at the thought of returning to the city she had fled in fear only the day before. It had to be done, though. Marc could go alone, but she didn't want to be separated from him, and he seemed to feel the same way.
He tilted her head up and kissed her, long and slow. She was amazed at how relaxed she felt with him, how comfortable and secure. It didn't bother her that she was naked and he was clothed. They had just spent roughly eighteen hours in bed together, making love, dozing, making love. He had let her get up only to go to the bathroom. When she got hungry, he brought food to her.
The pampering had worked. She felt much better than she had the day before, not nearly as sore. She was well rested, and she was happy. She felt guilty for being so happy, because her father had been murdered a week before and her own situation was serious, but the giddy, light hearted sensation that filled her chest was undoubtedly happiness.
After all her anxious, uncertain over-analyzing before, she felt calm now, and confident. They had committed to each other, and she trusted him. She had no doubt they would soon be getting married; otherwise, he would never have made love to her without using birth control, no matter how good the lack of barrier felt or how tempted he was. Marc was infinitely

responsible and reliable. He had shown her that in a hundred small, different ways from the moment she first met him. For the rest of his life, he would be there.

The strong coffee hit her system with a jolt of caffeine, stirring her brain to activity. She needed to shower and wash her hair; she wanted to put down the coffee cup and pull Marc down on the bed with her again, but she wasn't certain they had enough time. She slid her hand up his thigh to check out the situation.

"You're wasting your time," he said ruefully. "After last night, I couldn't get a hard-on now if my life depended on it."

"Are you certain?" She found what she was looking for and began stroking him.

"Not one hundred percent certain, but fairly confident." He grinned. "Trust me, the two nights we've spent together are aberrations."

Tilting her head back against his shoulder, Karen smiled at him. "So what is your usual—ah—level of performance?"

He laughed. "Twice a day is plenty. Once is normal."

"*Every* day?"

"If I say yes, are you going to hold me to that?"

"Rain or shine."

"In that case, yes. But if I'm tired, you'll have to do the work."

"Oh, all right, if I have to." She stopped teasing him and took her hand away. "I'd better get ready. Want to shower with me?"

"I have breakfast ready. Eat first, then we'll shower."

After breakfast, he called Shannon to let him know where they were going.

"I'm going to let McPherson know, too," he said.

"Are you on to something?"

"Karen remembers getting a box in the mail from her father. We're going to see what's in it."

"When will you be back?"

"Tonight, if we can get a flight. I didn't book a return ticket because I don't know how long this will take. Tomorrow for sure."

"Okay. I'll keep an eye on your house while you're gone, in case any suspicious characters start nosing around." He paused. "Watch your ass."

"I will. I'll let you know when we get back."

Then he called the number McPherson had given him, having decided to go with his instincts and trust the man. McPherson picked up on the second

ring. "Yeah."
"This is Chastain. Miss Whitlaw is with me, and we're going to Columbus this morning to look at some papers of her father's that are in storage. I've notified Shannon, and he knows I'm calling you."
McPherson snorted. "Cautious soul, aren't you?"
"Cautious enough."
"It's a smart thing to be. I'll get someone there to tag along behind you."
"Tell me what he looks like, so I won't get nervous."
McPherson paused. Marc had the impression he covered the mouthpiece. Then he said, "Ah, okay. Tall, early to mid-thirties, dark brown hair, glasses."
"Got it."
"He—urn, he'll be wearing a Cincinnati baseball cap. Red. And, um, change the glasses to sunglasses."
Either the man who would be following them was standing right there in front of McPherson telling him what he was going to wear, or McPherson was making a list of instructions. Marc suspected the former, otherwise why cover the mouthpiece of the phone?
"Can he get there ahead of us?"
"No problem."
"How will he spot us?"
"We have ID photographs of both of you."
"That was quick."
"As a fox," McPherson said.
"Have you turned up anything yet?"
"An interesting possibility, but no way to verify it. I hope you find something in that box that will help."

Chapter 19

Columbus, Ohio

Hayes studied the setup of the apartment building. It was an older building, in a good neighborhood, only four stories, probably two to four apartments on each floor. It was the kind of building where the residents knew one another and kept track of what was going on. That wasn't good. On the other hand, there wasn't much in the way of security: lights on each corner, and the glass double doors to the small foyer were certainly locked at night, but if they were supposed to be locked during the day, then someone wasn't following the rules, because people came and went without hindrance. Not many people, true, but enough that he was cautious.

Her apartment was on the second floor, 2A. That should mean it was the closest to the stairs.

He paused before he entered the building, taking a casual look around to make certain no one was watching him. A car turned into the small parking lot, and Hayes calmly opened the door and went inside, for to stand outside the door watching the car would get him noticed.

A small elevator in the rear of the foyer serviced the upper floors; the mailboxes were on the right wall, the stairs on the left. Hayes took the stairs.

As he had surmised, apartment 2A was at the top of the stairs, the door just to the right of the steps. Yellow crime-scene tape was attached to the hand rail and stretched across the hall to the wall, creating a small alcove. Tape also had been placed across the door.

Looking down, he saw the large rusty stains in the beige carpet. The door had holes in it, jagged, messy holes. The smell of death, of blood and urine and feces, still lingered, and would until the carpet was cleaned.

Hayes took a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and pulled them on. Ducking under the crime-scene tape, he tried the door. As expected, it was locked. Otherwise, the scene would have been an irresistible lure to teenagers and the morbid; they might even have gotten up the nerve to ignore the warning on the tape and go inside. People were incredibly nosy. The locked door was a minor barrier. He had it open within fifteen seconds. If anyone came out of the other apartments and saw him, they would think he was a police detective. After all, he wore a suit and latex gloves. The suit

was a definite sacrifice in ninety-degree weather; obviously, no one would be wearing one unless his job required it. That made him official; he doubted he would even have to show a badge, though he had one with him just in case. It wasn't a bad fake, either, considering how fast he had gotten it.

The inside of the door was covered with the same rusty stain, streaks smeared across the white surface, on the door jamb, part of the wall. Other than that, the apartment was neat. Clancy always had been particular about how he did a job. He was neat. No one would ever know their place had been searched; everything was back in its previous location, nothing taken, nothing sliced up. Clancy had claimed he could tell if anything had been hidden inside a cushion without taking it apart, by carefully studying the seams.

Yeah, Clancy had been an artist. Hayes had watched him toss a room before. He had tapped walls, gotten down on his hands and knees and studied the floor, inspected books and lamps and bric-a-brac. *Nothing* in that room had escaped his notice. And he had found the file for which he had been searching, hidden in the bottom of an upholstered chair. The particle-board bottom had been unscrewed from the frame and the file placed inside, then the bottom screwed back on. Clancy had noticed the small scratch marks on the particle-board where the screws had been removed and then replaced.

Not many people had that kind of patience or eye for detail. Hayes would miss having his services.

Hayes closed the door behind him, then stood for a minute looking around, getting oriented. He didn't want to disturb anything unnecessarily, either, because the cops undoubtedly had photographs of the scene, and some sharp cookie might notice if anything was moved.

He was in the living room. There was a nice twenty-seven-inch television set in the entertainment center, and a small stereo system. Against the wall just as you came in the door was a small desk where an answering machine blinked and a cordless phone sat in its cradle. Hayes resisted the urge to listen to her messages, because if a detective was here later and noticed the messages had been played, he would wonder who had been in the apartment.

He opened the center drawer of the desk. There were pens in there, notepads, rubber bands, stubs of movie tickets, but no bank statements. A

couple of magazines had been tossed onto the desk. He picked them up; there was nothing under them. Carefully, he put them down in the same location.
Okay, nothing there. Some people did all their paperwork at the kitchen table. Hayes walked in there, checked the drawers, but came up empty. Ditto the small closet on the right just before entering the kitchen.
Okay, that left the bedroom. Again, he was struck by how *neat* everything was. The bed was made, there hadn't been any dishes in the sink, no clothes lying tossed around. Hell, no wonder Clancy had thought no one was home. There were three taped and sealed cardboard boxes stacked in the corner near the window. So she hadn't yet got everything unpacked after moving in; that made Hayes like her a little better, made her seem more human. It also gave him an excellent place to look, because if he were lucky, the book would be in one of those boxes, and he wouldn't have to dig around in a metal storage unit in this heat.
"Winter clothes" had been written on the sealing tape on the top box. Hayes took the box down and opened it. Sure enough, it was full of clothes. He took each item out, taking care not to disturb the folds, and felt to make certain nothing had been inserted between them. Nothing. Not a single stray item was in that box, nothing that wasn't an article of winter clothing.
The second box had "Insurance papers, books, photographs" written on the tape. That looked promising. The box had been carefully packed with the heaviest items, the books, on the bottom, then the photographs, then the insurance papers. The insurance papers were in a manila file folder, but when he flipped through them, he found nothing but… insurance papers. The photographs were framed and few. Hayes inspected the books. Fiction, nonfiction, medical books, books about nursing. Nothing was hidden inside any of them.
The tape on the third box said "Christmas decorations, wrapping paper, bows." Hayes groaned. Damn, he didn't want to look through a box of fucking Christmas decorations, but he didn't dare leave it unexplored just because the other boxes had contained exactly what the labeling said. There were Christmas decorations. And wrapping paper. And bows.
A woman that organized needed killing.
He opened the dresser drawers. Underwear, neatly separated and folded. Pajamas. Nightgowns. Socks. Nothing.

In the closet, a few dresses hung on one side, pants and jeans and tops on the other, with crisply starched uniforms hanging in the middle. A name tag had already been clipped to a uniform, the one she had chosen to wear next, and a stethoscope was secured around the crook of the clothes hanger. Below it were thick-soled white walking shoes.

There were some boxes on the top shelf of the closet. Hayes took down the closest one. Written on top were the words "Bank statements."

Bless her neat little heart.

Laughing to himself, Hayes took out the top envelope. An adding machine tape had been stapled to the statement, to show that her figures matched the bank's. He unfolded the sheets of photocopied checks and ran his finger down each column until he found one that read "Buckeye Stockit and Lockit." The notation on the check read: "Unit 152, July." Just what he wanted to know.

He put the statement back into the envelope, the envelope back into the box, and the box back on the shelf. All he needed now was an address. He found the telephone book and looked up Buckeye Stockit and Lockit, writing down both the address and the phone number. The storage company would be fairly close by, he was certain, because Ms. Whitlaw was too organized to have it otherwise.

Raymond Hilley waited in a parked car across the street from the apartment building Hayes had entered. He had cut the engine off and slumped down in the seat; even though he had managed to park the car in partial shade, the heat was intense. He rolled down the window but didn't start the engine; people would notice a seemingly empty car left with its motor running. He had waited a lot longer, and in a lot tougher conditions, during the years he had worked for Mr. Walter.

Mr. Stephen wasn't half the man his father had been, or even the man William had promised to be, but Raymond loved him, would do anything for him. Mr. Stephen *tried*. No matter what, he never shirked his duty, and Raymond respected that. Just look at the way Mr. Stephen took care of his father, spending time with him every day, making certain Mr. Walter was as comfortable as possible. It broke Raymond's heart to see Mr. Walter in such shape, a living vegetable instead of the forceful, dynamic man he had once been; at least Mr. Stephen honored his father instead of dumping him somewhere and forgetting about him, just waiting for him to die.

But Mr. Stephen had always adored his father and tried so hard to please him. Mr. Walter had known that and had been patient with Mr. Stephen's shortcomings; in the end, he had also been proud of him. Mr. Stephen hadn't set the world on fire, but he had accomplished a lot in his cautious, methodical way.

Following Hayes to Columbus had been pathetically easy; he had always taken care, the few times Hayes had been to the Minnesota estate, to stay out of sight. Raymond knew exactly what his role was in the Lake household: he was a weapon, an enforcer. A weapon was most effective when it was unexpected.

He had simply gotten a seat on the same flight with Hayes—two rows behind, as a matter of fact. Senator Lake had taken the next flight, using a fake driver's license Raymond had procured for him. He had even given the senator a disguise, and the photo on the license had shown a man with a full gray mustache and completely gray hair. Raymond had achieved the effect with an authentic-looking fake mustache and a can of gray hairspray such as makeup people in Hollywood used to give actors an interesting touch of gray at the temples when it was needed. The stuff washed off with shampoo, adding to its convenience. The name on the license was one he had taken out of the D.C. phone book. He had even established a debit card in that name, so the senator could rent a car and get a hotel room without a hassle. He had done everything he could to smooth the way for the senator, though he still had no idea why Mr. Stephen had insisted on coming along. It wasn't as if Raymond was a novice at this.

Raymond had a pistol shoved into his belt. Mr. Stephen had wanted a weapon, too, "and one of those big silencers," so, against his better judgment, Raymond had provided him with a .22 pistol. Mr. Stephen had protested, wanting something more macho, until Raymond had pointed out that only a subsonic round could be effectively silenced, and the larger calibers had too much power.

He had been cautious about the weapon he had procured for Mr. Stephen. A .22 pistol was cheap, readily available anywhere, regardless of what laws were on the books, because people who sold firearms illegally didn't give a shit about the law. The pistol he had given Mr. Stephen would be impossible to trace. Mr. Stephen had been a little shocked at how easy it was to get a weapon, because he honestly thought all his efforts to make the streets safer for American citizens had had some effect. Mr. Stephen said he

intended to write and begin pushing legislation that would go after the manufacturers of Saturday night specials. If no more were made, they would certainly become more difficult to obtain.
Such innocence made Raymond feel both sad and protective.
One of the glass doors opened, and Hayes came out of the apartment building. Raymond slid farther down in the seat, so that even if Hayes noticed the car, it would look empty.
He heard a car start and sneaked a quick look over the dashboard. Quickly, he started his own car, sighing with relief as cool air washed from the vents, and watched as Hayes drove out of the parking lot. Raymond waited a few seconds, let another vehicle get between them, then pulled out behind Hayes's rental car.
Ahead of Raymond, Hayes checked his mirrors. There were two cars behind him. One was the car that had been approaching when he pulled out into the street, the other was one he hadn't seen before. That didn't necessarily mean anything. The car could have pulled out of a side street while he wasn't watching, but safe was better than sorry.
He speeded up and kept careful watch behind him. The second car made no attempt to pass the first car and catch up with him. Naw, there was nothing to it, just old habits and jumpy nerves. Still, it wouldn't hurt anything to take a leisurely drive before going to Buckeye Stockit and Lockit, just to make certain he didn't have a tail.
Raymond flipped open his secure cell phone and dialed the senator's cellular. "He searched the apartment, and I'm following him now."
"Where are you?"
Patiently, Raymond gave the street and direction. "Just one street over from you, but don't fall in behind me. Don't let him see your car. He may take some evasive action whether or not he thinks he has a tail, just as a matter of course. I'll hang back, keep him from getting a good look at me, let him do some ducking and weaving. He hasn't spotted me yet, and I followed him all day yesterday."
"For all the good it did," Senator Lake said fretfully.
Raymond didn't reply. Mr. Stephen had been very disappointed when Raymond's search of Hayes's home hadn't turned up anything interesting. In Raymond's estimation, Hayes was a careful man. He wouldn't keep any incriminating papers in his home.

Up ahead, Hayes took an abrupt right turn. Raymond fell out to pass the car ahead of him, putting that vehicle between him and Hayes's line of sight as they drove past the bisecting street. If Hayes followed his previous pattern, the right turn would be followed by two lefts, then a right back into this street. Child's play, Raymond thought.

"Did you see anyone?" Karen asked as she and Marc climbed into their rental car.
"I spotted a red cap. I suspect he let me see him, because I haven't been able to pick him up since." He shrugged out of his lightweight jacket, which he had worn only to cover the pistol clipped to his belt, and tossed it into the backseat. Otherwise, he was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, and so was Karen. She didn't remember exactly which box she had placed the papers in; they were going to have to dig around in the storage unit in the hot sun, and it had seemed wise to dress as comfortably as possible.
"While we're here, I want to call Detective Suter. Maybe I can pick up some more of my clothes. I need to check on Piper, too, and let my supervisor know—how long will I be gone, by the way?"
Marc reached for her hand. "We'll talk about this after we find that box, okay?"
He didn't think even that much contact would be safe, until this was over. She squeezed his hand. She had been trying to hide how nervous she was, but she didn't know how good a job she was doing. Logically, she knew she probably hadn't even been traced to New Orleans yet, much less back to Columbus. She had the key to the storage unit on her keychain, so she didn't have to retrieve it from her apartment—or, rather, Marc didn't have to retrieve it. If the police hadn't completed their investigation, the apartment would still be secured. He probably wouldn't ask the CPD for permission, but neither would he have let her be the one to go in.
They were safe. She tried to tell herself that. They could slip in and out of the city without anyone knowing she was there, except for Mr. McPherson and the man he had following them.
"You're worrying," Marc said. "Stop it."
"I shouldn't have dragged you into this. I've put you in danger—"
He gave a bark of laughter. "Darlin'," he drawled, "if you hadn't turned up in New Orleans yesterday, I would already be at your apartment this morning. Not only would I be very upset, but if anyone was watching your apartment,

he would have made me for sure. Get the tag number, call the rental company, and he would not only have my name but my address."
Despite her worry, Karen caught her breath at the way "Nooawlins" sounded when said in that black magic voice of his. If Piper ever heard him, she might bump Karen off herself just to clear out the competition.
The traffic was heavy, the pace slow. The summer sun glared at them from a milky sky. She watched Marc drive, marveling at how physically fascinating she found him. She felt almost sick with apprehension, and yet that somehow intensified her fascination. She studied his hands, strong and well shaped, the way he gripped the steering wheel. His wrists were twice as thick as hers, and small, almost colorless hairs glinted in the sun. What if something happened to him? What if this were the last time she would be able to watch his hands move, study his profile, reach out and touch him? She couldn't let herself think such things. He was a cop, though, thank God, he wasn't in narcotics or on the SWAT team, where his life would be at risk on a daily basis. But as a cop, a homicide detective, he obviously dealt with people who were capable of killing other people. Murder was what he saw every day, and at any time a suspect could turn on him. She couldn't hamper him emotionally by letting herself get paralyzed with fear every time he went out the door.
"On the other hand," he said, "maybe we should talk about it now."
"What?" She blinked at him, not quite following.
"The entire situation. Your job. Let's get this out in the open. I don't want you living in Columbus while I live in New Orleans, not even for a little while." He slanted a quick look at her, gray eyes brilliant. "And maybe I should wait until I can get down on one knee, but I think now is the time. Karen, will you marry me?"
Her heart leaped into her throat. "Yes," she said. Then, "Take this exit."
He obeyed, glancing over his shoulder to check the traffic before easing into the right lane and then taking the exit ramp. "I know I'm rushing you, not giving you time to get used to me, to the idea of a steady relationship. But I don't want room for any misunderstanding, either. We can have a long engagement, if you want—but I don't want you to live here. I want you in New Orleans. Specifically, my house."
"Okay." She could barely speak. Funny. She had expected they would get married eventually, perhaps even soon, but hearing him actually say it out loud was a shocker.

"Okay?" he echoed, giving her another of those fast glances. "Is that all you have to say?"
"Well, I could say I love you."
He muttered a curse under his breath, then very evenly said, "Yes, why don't you?"
"I love you."
Another curse, one that turned into a laugh. He looked at her. She was grinning. "I love you, too."
She touched his arm, wanting to throw herself at him. He was the most considerate man she'd ever met, and the hell of it was he was so damn *alpha*. She hadn't known the two qualities could blend together so wonderfully. There he was, brimming over with testosterone, a gun-toting macho cop, who danced with her on a balcony and prepared breakfast for her.
"Do you mind moving to New Orleans?" he asked.
"No," she gently reassured him. "I'll miss my friends, but I don't have any family here, or a house. I can be a nurse just as well in Louisiana as in Ohio. You have roots and that marvelous old house in New Orleans. Of course, I'll move there. Besides, I would hate for you to lose your accent. Turn left at the next traffic light."
"I don't have an accent, honey. You do."
"If you say so. But if you by chance meet Piper, don't open your mouth, or your chances of getting out of Ohio go down drastically."
He smiled and winked at her. "You'll protect me."
The words reminded them both of why they were here, and the smile faded from his face. Karen blew out a deep breath. "What if we don't find anything here? What if the papers are just… papers, with nothing important in them?"
"Then I'll keep working on the case, and so will McPherson. Between the two of us, we'll figure this out. In the meantime, however, *you* will be in a safe place. Not my house, not for much longer. I'm not in the phone book, but hell, there are a hundred different ways of getting someone's address if you really want it, and most of them aren't that difficult."
"How reassuring. Turn right two blocks down, at the McDonald's. The storage company is about five miles down that road, on the right. Buckeye Stockit and Lockit. There's a sign. Turn just past the sign, into the center alley." She paused. "Is that guy following us?"

"I haven't seen him." Their shadow would have removed his baseball cap, because red was so noticeable, but Marc hadn't been able to pick up a particular car behind them, either—and he had been watching. He hadn't been driving fast, hadn't made any sudden turns, so he should have been able to spot him. Either he was remarkably good, or Marc had inadvertently lost him.

They didn't speak again until Marc turned at the Buckeye Stockit and Lockit sign. The gravel alley separated twelve sections of storage units, six sections on each side. Chain-link fencing surrounded each section, accessible by a numbered gate secured by a combination lock. "Gate number three," Karen said, pointing. She opened her wallet and looked at the combination, which was changed each month and which she always wrote down and stuck in her wallet. "Six-four-three-eight."

"I'll get it," Marc said, stopping in front of gate three and getting out of the car.

He unlocked the padlock and swung the gate open, then slowly drove down the row of storage units. "Number one fifty-two." Karen pointed at it and took out the padlock key.

They both got out of the car, and Marc took the key from her. After opening the lock, he slid back the lever that kept the door from being raised, then bent and caught the handle and lifted the overhead door with a rattle of metal.

The smell was musty but not, she was thankful, mildewed. Her throat caught as she looked at the boxes, the pieces of furniture. Her mother's bedroom suite, all her clothing, the other things Karen hadn't had room for when she moved.

Marc lifted one of the boxes down. Taking out his pocket knife, he neatly sliced through the sealing tape.

Hayes checked his rearview mirror, then, at the next intersection, made a hard left turn, barely missing the oncoming traffic. Behind him, nothing happened.

He grunted in satisfaction. If there had been a tail, he'd lost it for certain. There was no way he could have been followed after that turn, not without a lot of tires squealing, horns blowing, and maybe some metal contact.

Time to find this storage place.

Chapter 20

All the packing boxes were neatly labeled, but Karen couldn't remember in which one she had placed the smaller box. The first box Marc opened held Jeanette's clothing. She carefully took out each garment, trying not to think of her mother, blinking fast when her vision blurred, and then folding and replacing all the clothing when the search came up empty.

"I think—I think I already had the boxes packed, and all I did was set the other box on top of the stuff already there."

"Then we won't have to dig through the entire box. All we have to do is open each one and see if the small box is there."

"Theoretically. I was still pretty much in shock at the time. I'm not certain what I did."

He was patient, and the heat wasn't as dreadful as she had feared. In fact, the shade inside the storage unit made their work more bearable than if they had been in the broiling sun. Occasionally, a small breeze managed to work its way among the row of units, further cooling them. Still, Marc's T-shirt began to show damp patches and cling. Clinging was good. She eyed him appreciatively.

He sliced open the fifth box and grunted. "Here we go, I think." He lifted out a small cardboard box, not much bigger than a shoe box. Karen saw her mother's name printed on top.

"That's it."

She took the box and opened it. Inside were some papers and a small black-bound notebook, the type available in every discount store in the country, secured with a rubber band. She slipped off the rubber band and flipped through the papers. Seeing some letters in her mother's handwriting, she took a deep breath and handed the papers to Marc, keeping the notebook for herself.

"You look through those," she said, taking a seat on an end table.

He gave her a searching look, then glanced at the papers and nodded in understanding. He scanned the letter Dexter had sent with the box. "He says the papers might be worth some money someday." He propped himself against the dresser and crossed his feet at the ankles. "I thought he was being sarcastic." Karen flipped open the book and stared at her father's handwriting, unusually neat for a man. He had used a small, square style, almost like printing, very legible.

"January 3, 1968," was listed on the first page. Bewildered, she read a description of the terrain, the weather conditions including wind velocity and direction, distance to target, spotter's name—Rodney Grotting—and other information such as the make and model of rifle he used, technical details about the ammunition, and the final notation: "Head shot. Kill made at 6:43 a.m. Viet Cong colonel." Below, Rodney Grotting had scribbled a verification and signed it.

Blinking, Karen turned the page. Another date, another description of conditions, ending with the casual, chilling outcome.

More pages. Most of the time, he took a heart shot, but sometimes he went for the head. Once it was the throat. She had seen such a wound once: the high-caliber slug had torn out half the throat, and the victim had bled to death. For such a terrible wound, with the jugular destroyed, there was nothing that could have been done even if medical personnel had been there when it happened.

She couldn't read any more. Her face white, she closed the book and handed it to Marc. "Take a look at this."

He eyed her sharply, consideringly, then turned his attention to the book. Watching him, Karen didn't see any expressions of shock or distaste at such a sick record.

"It's his kill book," he said.

"Good God, do you mean *everyone* kept them?"

"The snipers did. I was a Marine, too, you know. The snipers in the Vietnam war were legendary. The best ones could take out a target at a thousand yards. Their kills had to be verified, so they kept track in their kill books."

The idea still made her feel ill. "But wouldn't the Marine Corps have kept the books?"

"I don't know. I wasn't a sniper, so I never asked. Maybe they did. Maybe he kept two books, one for his own records. It was a bad war, honey. It messed up a lot of good men."

He continued flipping through the pages, scanning each one. When he reached the last one, he said, "Sixty-one kills. He was good at his job." He started to close the notebook, and *the* pages fluttered; there was some writing on the last page, though about forty pages had been skipped and left clean. Frowning, Marc opened the small notebook to the last page.

"Holy shit," he said slowly.

Karen had been watching him, had seen the way his pupils flared, the quick compression of his lips. "What is it?"
"Another kill," he answered, then lifted his gaze to hers. "An American soldier. He was paid twenty thousand dollars to do it."
Karen's stomach twisted. Dear God. Her father was a murderer, a paid assassin. Killing the enemy in war was one thing, but killing a fellow soldier was hideous.
"I'll take that, thank you," a strange voice said, and a man stepped in front of the open unit. He was burly, middle-aged, but hard looking; the pistol in his hand was aimed straight at Marc's head. He was in his sock feet, which explained why they hadn't heard him approach. "I've been wondering what was in that little book that was so damn interesting. I suppose I should thank you for saving me the trouble of looking for it. Just put it down on the box, there." His tone was easy, his manner anything but. "You, cowboy, ease that piece out of the holster and toss it on the ground. Gently, now. Two fingers."
Karen sat frozen. Marc's face was expressionless, but a slight shake of his head told her he didn't want her to move a muscle. Carefully, he did as the burly man said, using his thumb and finger to ease his pistol from the holster. He tossed it to the ground at the man's feet.
"Good boy.'" The man didn't even glance at the pistol, didn't take his eyes off Marc. "Who the hell are you? Boyfriend? Cop?"
"Cop," Marc answered, leaving it at that. If he admitted to a personal relationship with Karen, the man would know he could force him to do anything by threatening her.
"I was afraid of that." The man sighed. "Okay, toss over your backup piece."
Silently, Marc removed a small pistol from his ankle holster and tossed it to the ground beside the other.
"Shit," the man said. "I really don't like killing a cop. It causes all sorts of trouble."
"Then rethink your position," Marc said. He started to straighten, and the man shook his head warningly.
"Just stay where you are. Sorry about this, Cowboy, Ma'am." Oddly, his regret seemed genuine. It didn't matter. He was going to kill them anyway.
Karen watched his finger tighten on the trigger, horror slowing her perception so that the tiny movement seemed to take forever. Without

thinking, she cried, "No!" as she reached out as if she could catch the bullet in her hand and prevent it from striking Marc.
The man jerked, just a little, his attention fragmented by her sudden cry. Marc uncoiled like a snake striking, shoving Karen to the ground with his left hand while his right one whipped down and out. There was a blur of something shiny, then the man made one of the worst noises she had ever heard, a mixture of a cry and a gurgle, and with his free hand he clawed at the knife sticking in his throat, the knife Marc had been using to open the boxes.
He was a professional. He pulled the trigger anyway.
There was only a coughing sort of noise. Marc staggered back, caught his balance, launched himself forward. He hit the man in the chest and drove him backward to the ground. There was another coughing sound, and the mirror in the dresser shattered.
Scrambling up, Karen dived for Marc's pistol. The two men sprawled, struggling, in the rough gravel. Marc's left hand was locked around the other man's right wrist, forcing the weapon upward. With his right hand, he jerked the knife blade sideways.
The man choked, gagging. Blood spurted from the gaping wound in his neck. His face took on a bluish tinge. Rolling so he straddled him, Marc slammed the man's gun hand hard against the ground, twice, three times. Finally, the thick fingers loosened, and the pistol dropped from his grasp. He coughed, a rattling sound, and his legs quivered. He clawed at his throat. Marc slumped forward, breathing hard, his head down.
"Oh, God," Karen whispered as she skidded to the ground beside him, ignoring the pain in her already abused knees. She forgot about the pistol in her right hand as she put both arms around him, easing him upright so she could assess the wound and his condition.
The front of his T-shirt was already soaked bright red. There was no exit wound in his back.
She spared only a glance for the man on the ground. He wasn't dead yet, but he would be shortly. His chest heaved as he tried and failed to suck in oxygen; his face was turning darker and darker, it was almost purple now. Marc pressed his hand hard over the wound. The bullet had hit him high in the left chest, so high it had missed his heart but hit his lung. Karen heard the terrifying whistle from his chest as air escaped from his lung. The blood seeping through his fingers had bubbles in it, and a pink froth lined his lips.

"It's okay, sweetheart, you're going to be okay," she heard herself murmuring as her mind raced. Plastic. She needed some thin plastic, like Saran Wrap, to seal the wound and keep the lung from collapsing.
Sucking chest wounds were critical, and God only knew what kind of collateral damage the bullet had done tumbling around inside his body. He would die if she didn't seal the wound and get him to a hospital, quick.
The man he was sitting on began to spasm. Marc's teeth clenched as the movements jarred him, but the "Unnnhh" of pain escaped anyway.
"Don't bother," another voice said behind her. "I regret the necessity of this, but I really can't let either of you live."

Chapter 21

Marc sagged in Karen's arms, and she struggled to hold his weight. His head turned toward two newcomers, a trim, good-looking man, in his fifties perhaps, with a gray mustache and gray hair, and an older, heavier man who looked as battered as some old fighter. Both were standing slightly behind them, each holding a silenced pistol in his right hand. The pistols were aimed at them.
They couldn't see the gun she held, Karen realized, staring at the weapon in her right hand. And where in *hell* was the man McPherson had sent to follow them? Unless—horrible thought—he was the man who had just tried to kill them.
"Hello, Senator Lake," Marc said in a strained voice, and coughed.
The younger man looked startled and aggravated. "How did you recognize me?" he snapped.
"I was… kind of… expecting you. I… read the book."
"Don't talk," Karen begged him. Painfully, he dragged his left arm up so he could touch the pistol. She knew he was telling her to let him have it. But he was too weak, she thought, in too much pain; he would never be able to handle the heavy weapon. She tightened her grip on the gun, her jaw locking as she stared at this new threat.
Marc closed his hand around the pistol, groping. His shaking finger found the safety, clicked it off. The sound was a tiny snick. Karen barely heard it, but she knew what he had done.

Senator Lake's gaze went to the small, stained notebook lying on top of the box. "Keep them covered," he said to the bigger man, and quickly stepped into the storage unit to retrieve it. He flipped through the pages, then tucked the book into his shirt. "Yes, this is it," he said, and smiled at Karen. "How gratifying that someone has *finally* found it." He sneered at the dead man on the ground. "Hayes certainly couldn't manage to do the job, though he finally figured out where to look and led us here. He thought he was so sharp, with all his evasive maneuvers, but once again he underestimated my, ah, capabilities."

Senator Lake was very pleased with himself and the way the day had turned out. Not only was Hayes out of the way, but the notebook had been found. This whole aggravating nightmare was almost over with. He was especially pleased with the weapon in his hand; the pistol itself wasn't much, but the best silencer made anywhere in the world was screwed onto the barrel. Nothing more than a slight cough would be heard when he fired it. Hayes had told him once about walking up to a target on a busy street, shooting him with a silenced .22, and no one around them paid any attention until the target keeled over on the sidewalk. By then, Hayes was already several steps beyond the target, blending with the crowd. He should have known then that Hayes couldn't be trusted, because what sort of man would brag about something like that?

He was amazed sometimes at how well things worked out. How convenient of Hayes to leave town at just the right time. Disposing of him in D.C. would have been a problem, even for Raymond. For one thing, reporters were always snooping around. For another, Hayes would have been missed. That was where he lived; he had associates, neighbors, people who would have been able to identify him. Here… well. This was all working out very nicely. There would be three bodies here, and nothing to tie any of them to him.

All in all, he was rather proud of himself. He seemed to have a knack for this type of thing. All one had to do was plan carefully, but really, he had found most people too stupid for such meticulous thinking.

"Shoot them," he said to Raymond.

Karen tensed, her gaze locked on the big man's pistol. She started to lift her right hand, knowing even as she did so that she wouldn't be fast enough, not with the big man already aiming at her. She felt Marc gather himself.

"How much… are you paying… for our murders?" Marc gasped between phrases, his chest moving in jerks as he tried to breathe. The froth at his mouth dripped down his chin. "As much as… you paid Whitlaw… to kill… your brother?"
The big man froze. "What?"
The revelation rocked through Karen. Horrified, she stared at the man she had seen so many times on television, a man known for his integrity. So that was what Marc had read, what he hadn't had time to tell her. That was why her father had been killed.
"You had your own brother killed," she said slowly. "You hired my father to do it. He was blackmailing you, wasn't he?"
"Don't be ridiculous," the senator said, his tone uneasy as he glanced at the big man beside him.
"Mr. Stephen." The big man was white, haggard. "Mr. Stephen, let me see that book."
"Don't be ridiculous," the senator said again. "Don't tell me you believe this… this pack of lies!"
"It was in Vietnam," Karen said.
"Shut up!" The senator rounded on her, pointed his pistol at her.
"My father was a Marine sniper," she continued, though she was shaking in every limb. "You paid him twenty thousand dollars to kill your brother."
"Kill her, Raymond," the senator said, infuriated.
The older man, Raymond, still looked stunned, but he was recovering. He said, sadly, "Mr. Stephen," as he turned his weapon on the senator.
Senator Lake calmly turned and fired. Raymond staggered back, a look of astonishment and sorrow on his face. Senator Lake fired again, with no sound except that ominous little cough Karen knew would haunt her dreams, and Raymond fell.
"Damn you," the senator said furiously, wheeling on Karen. "Why couldn't you keep your stupid mouth shut?"
Marc lifted his bloodstained hand, pulling the senator's attention to him. "What about… Medina?"
Marc's entire body was trembling with effort. Karen gripped him tighter with her left arm, thinking fast. If she tugged him to the ground, it would get him out of the line of fire, but the sudden motion might cause the bullet to shift, causing even more damage. She couldn't see that she had any other choice.

"Whitlaw thought he could blackmail me with the book. No one else could track him down, so I called in Medina for the job. I told him Whitlaw had killed another contract agent in Vietnam, one of Medina's friends. It was a lie, of course, but Medina had some troublesome morals. I needed him, and that was the only way I could get him. He knew Whitlaw, so he had an advantage the others lacked."

Karen felt her breathing slow, get deeper. Her vision narrowed as she stared at the stylishly dressed man, until she could see only him. This man was the one who was the cause of everything. He had paid to have his own brother killed, then had her father hunted down and executed.

"Medina?" Marc gasped again. He sagged to the left, away from her. Desperately, she locked her fingers in his shirt, holding him upright. The muscles in her left arm strained and shook.

"Oh, well, obviously I had to have him taken care of, too. He wouldn't have liked finding out I lied to him. Those pesky morals of his again."

"Tell me… something."

The eyebrows rose. "As a sort of last request? Of course."

"What kind of… shithead… brags about… murder?"

The senator jerked a little, outrage flaring in his eyes as if he couldn't believe Marc had called him a shithead. His hand came up. Something erupted in Karen's chest, an inhuman sound that was very close to a growl. She felt as if she were moving in slow motion, but so was he. Using her grip on Marc's shirt, she dragged him down and at the same time lifted his pistol. She had fired a pistol before, and a rifle. Her father had taught her those things, too, during those walks in the woods, crouching behind her and helping her hold the heavy weapons steady. She had been only a child, six or seven years old, but the memory was suddenly clear and bright, every image sharp. When Jeanette found out, she was frightened and angry, and they quarreled.

Odd how quiet everything was, how still. She centered the sights on his chest and pulled the trigger. The boom was muffled. The recoil jarred her arm.

The slug hit him in the chest, right where she had aimed it. She saw the bloom of red on his white shirt, between the open lapels of the linen jacket he wore. Why, then, did his head kind of explode? Blood and brain matter sprayed out of a large hole on the left side of his head. His eyes bulged a little, and he dropped in a boneless heap.

Abruptly, everything kicked back to normal time. She could hear again, though her ears were ringing. She could see everything in color, with a full field of vision. The harsh smell of cordite burned her nose. And Marc was collapsed on his side in the dirt and gravel.

She dropped the gun and seized him with both hands, hauling him over onto his back. She pressed her fingers into the base of his neck; his pulse was fast, thready. His eyes were half open, watching her, but she knew he was slipping out of consciousness. "I'll… make it," he promised, his voice barely audible.

"You're damn right you will," she said fiercely, tearing his T-shirt open. The edges of the dark hole were blue tinged, and bright red blood continued to bubble and froth as it left his body.

She had to get the wound sealed, now. As she turned toward the burly man's body to search it for something usable, a flash of red caught her eye. She whirled back, grabbing up the pistol, crouching over Marc.

"Easy, there," a tall, lean man said, stepping fully into view. He wore a red baseball cap and sunglasses, and he held a pistol in the expert, two-handed grip of cops and other warriors. He surveyed the remains of the senator, then stepped over the body and approached Karen, tucking the pistol into his waistband at the small of his back as he did so.

McPherson's man. "Where have you been, damn it?" she said furiously, dropping the pistol again and scrambling to the other body. She patted all his pockets, searching for a pack of cigarettes. The cellophane wrapper around the pack would make a good seal. Her frantic fingers found only a wallet. "Damn it, damn it, *damn it*! Doesn't anyone smoke anymore?"

"Do you need a cigarette?" the baseball cap man asked politely but with mild puzzlement.

She whirled on him with a snarl. "I need a thin piece of plastic to seal that wound."

His eyebrows arched over the rims of the sunglasses. Silently, he reached into his front jeans pocket and pulled out a pair of thin latex gloves. "Will these do?"

She snatched them from him. Some gloves were too thick, the latex not pliable enough to do the job, but these were almost paper thin, like the ones put in boxes of hair coloring. "Perfect." Hastily, she slapped a glove down on Marc's chest, covering the hole and holding it tightly in place. He gasped but immediately began to breathe better as air stopped leaking from his

damaged lung. "I need something to wrap around him, to hold this tight," she said. "There are some clothes in a box in there." She jerked her head toward the storage unit behind her. "Cut something up."
"Yes, Ma'am." Baseball Cap looked around for a second, spied the knife in the burly man's throat. "Jesus Christ, Hoss, you play rough," he said to Marc, a certain amount of admiration in his tone, and stepped over him to lean down and pull the knife free.
Karen looked at the bloody blade and thought of AIDS. She thought of means of sterilization, none of which she had with her. Looking back at Marc, she decided he was in far greater danger of dying from that wound than he was from catching AIDS from a strip of cloth cut with a bloody knife.
Baseball Cap was almost frighteningly efficient, plucking a shirt from the box and slitting the seam, then tearing off strips of fabric. The first two he folded before he handed them to Karen, and she pressed them over the wound. He pulled out a dress and repeated the steps, first slitting, then tearing. The resulting strips of cloth were sufficiently long for Karen to wrap around Marc's chest. Baseball Cap helped her do that, holding him upright while she worked. She pulled the fabric as tight as possible, and tied it off with the knot right on top of the wound to apply even more pressure.
"Phone," she said harshly, switching her attention to the next priority.
"I'll take care of it." Baseball Cap jogged down the row of storage units and disappeared out the gate. His progress was silent; he didn't seem to make any noise when he moved.
Karen checked Marc's pulse again, watching the second hand of her watch. One thirty-two, way too fast. He was going into shock, his body fighting both blood loss and lack of oxygen, as well as the trauma it had suffered. She dragged his legs up, propping them on the burly man's chest, then positioned herself so her body blocked the sun from Marc's eyes.
"Are you still with me?" she asked, forcing her voice to calmness.
He slowly blinked and managed a faint smile. "Yes, *Ma'am,*" he murmured, duplicating Baseball Cap's sardonic tone. "Status report?"
"The bullet hit your left lung. You've lost a lot of blood, and you're shocky, pulse rapid and thready—"
He took a quick, painful breath. "Serious… but survivable."
"Yes." She admitted her fear of the one, her hope for the other. "Stop talking. Baseball Cap has gone to call nine-one-one."

"I need… to talk to him."
"He'll be back." At least, she thought so. He might clear out while the clearing was good.
But he returned within a couple of minutes, approaching as silently as he had left, going down on one knee beside Marc. The cap was pulled low, and his sunglasses were very dark, effectively hiding his eyes. His hair was dark brown, Karen noticed that much. She knew, however, that if she walked past him within the next five minutes, minus the cap and sunglasses, she wouldn't recognize him.
"Here." He pulled the pistol from his waistband and reversed it, handed it to Karen. "You'll need this, to match the ballistics. We don't want the cops to come up with any strange bullets, do we? Let's see, what would be a logical sequence of events to account for three dead guys, one wounded, and *six* weapons, not counting the knife?" He paused. "This is going to get complicated."
"I'll handle it," Marc rasped.
Baseball Cap smiled grimly, little more than a quirk of his lips. Standing, he walked over to the senator's body and stood looking down at it for a moment. "You son of a bitch," he said to the dead man.
"Did you… hear?" Marc asked, gasping again.
"I heard."
Something in the grimness of the tone caught her. Karen looked at the senator's body, then at Baseball Cap. "We both shot him," she said. "At the same time."
The bill of the cap dipped once. "Both shots were kills," he said briefly.
"He had my father hunted down and killed." She was surprised at the fierceness of her tone.
"I know." He started to say something else but changed his mind, pressing his lips together.
Marc gathered himself. "Can… this man… be linked to you?" He tapped the burly man's body with his heel. Karen understood what he was asking. McPherson had stuck his neck out offering his aid; Marc didn't want anything brought out that would bring the CIA into the situation.
"No. We're clear."
"The… kill book."
"Make it public." Baseball Cap's mouth twisted. "Let everyone know what a bastard Stephen Lake was. It's proof of his motive." His head shifted a little,

and Karen knew he was looking at her. "Is he going to be all right?"
"I think so. Yes." She touched Marc's face, and he turned his head against her palm. "But he's not going to be very happy with things for a while."
"You'll keep him in line." In the distance, sirens began to wail. "Jess was right," he murmured. "You're a natural, Chastain. If you ever get bored with local work, give m—give McPherson a call."
"I'll do… that," Marc said, and waved his hand. "Leave, before they… get here. I'll… handle things."
Baseball Cap pulled a card out of his pocket. It was a plain white card with a number scribbled on it in pencil. He gave it to Karen. "Call this number, and let us know how he is."
"All right." She slipped it into her jeans pocket.
He raised two fingers to the bill of the cap in brief salute, then walked away, his stride fluid but unhurried, eerily silent.
Karen knelt in the dirt, the bright sun glaring down on her head, and held Marc. He clasped his long fingers around her wrist, and they waited together, listening to the sirens draw closer and closer.
Ten hours later, Karen slipped out of Marc's SICU cubicle and went to the pay phone. The surgery had gone well, actually better than she had expected, and feared. The bullet hadn't done as much damage as it could have, because, after piercing Marc's lung, it had lodged in a rib, preventing it from tumbling around. He had required two units of blood, but he was now stable, actually awake, and as unhappy as she had predicted.
She took the white card out of her pocket and punched in the phone number, then her own calling card number. The call was answered on the first ring.
"Yes?" was all he said, but she knew it was Baseball Cap.
"The surgery went well," she reported. "He's stable, will probably be in SICU for another day, and home in a week to ten days."
"Good. Thanks for calling."
Sensing he was about to hang up, she said, "Wait!"
He paused.
Fury bubbled up in her. "What *did* take you so long to get there, damn it?" she said fiercely, spitting the words out between her teeth.
He sighed, and in the long moment of silence that followed, she thought he wasn't going to answer her. Then he said, "I wanted to know why. I didn't know about the kill book, so… I listened."

"What difference did the why of it make?" she demanded, so angry she was shaking. Marc could have been killed while this man *listened*.
There was another long pause, then he said, very quietly, "Yours wasn't the only father killed, Miss Whitlaw."
He hung up so gently she barely heard the click on the line, then the dial tone buzzed in her ear. Slowly, she returned the receiver to the cradle and made her way back to SICU.
Marc was still awake, his face as white as the pillow beneath his head. He lay very still, not wanting to disturb any of the tubes running into his body in various locations, especially not the ones for which special holes had been made. But his mouth curved into a smile, and he cautiously moved his hand to reach for hers.
She cupped both of her hands around his. "Medina was his father," she blurted. "Baseball Cap, that is."
Marc considered it, his eyelids drooping sleepily as the morphine drip worked on him. "Then I'm glad they were both kill shots," he said simply.
Yes. Karen caught her breath. If it was possible for anyone to be killed twice, she and Rick Medina's son had both avenged their fathers.
"I love you," Marc murmured. "Have I told you how damn wonderful you were, snarling 'Doesn't anyone smoke anymore?' You'll make a great trauma nurse."
Somehow, despite everything, he was actually smiling. Karen bent her head and pressed her lips to his hand. "Don't get smart with me," she warned tenderly. "Don't forget, this is my hospital, and I can get the nurses to do all sorts of nasty stuff to you."
He winced and kept on smiling. "They've already done some of it. I think I've lost my virginity."
"I'm sure of it," she replied. "Go to sleep now, sweetheart. I love you, and I'll be here when you wake up."
"I know," he said. "You won't ever leave." Then his eyes drifted shut, and he slept while Karen held his hand, and watched over him, and stayed. As she had promised, and as he expected, she was there when he woke.

John Medina sat with his steepled fingertips pressed to his lips, staring thoughtfully into space. It was good that Detective Chastain was going to be all right; Jess had been right in his assessment of the man. A man who could

take a bullet in the chest and still cut his assailant's throat was a man to be respected.

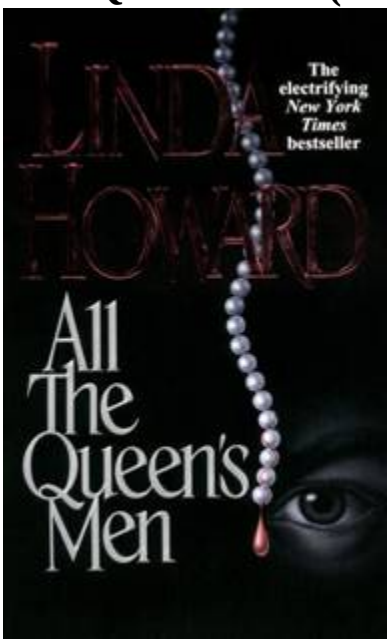
He had to leave shortly, return to his assignment, but John allowed himself a few minutes of reflection. He had kept it all inside, because only then could he function at his peak, but his father's murder had hit him hard, harder than anything since Venetia's death. Now that it was over, now that justice—and vengeance—had been served, he could let loose the grief, the rage.

The press was in an uproar, of course. Dexter Whitlaw's kill book was in police custody, and the section of it pertaining to William Lake's death had been released. The news reports were rampant with speculation about Stephen Lake's motive for having his brother killed, but John was fairly certain the late, unlamented senator had regarded it as nothing more than a career move. He had killed the heir apparent and then smoothly stepped in to take his place.

John checked his watch. Time was getting away from him. He stood, tossing the red baseball cap into the garbage and running his hand through his dark hair. A plane was waiting for him, and he had to be on it.

He'd have Jess send Miss Whitlaw and her detective a very nice wedding gift.

All The Queen's Men (1999)



PART ONE

Chapter One

1994, Iran

It was cold in the rough little hut. Despite the blankets hung over the one window and the ill-fitting door, to block the escape of any telltale light, frigid air still seeped through. Niema Burdock blew on her fingers to warm them, her breath fogging slightly in the one dim battery-operated light that was all Tucker, the team leader, allowed.

Her husband, Dallas, seemed perfectly comfortable in his T-shirt as he calmly packed the Semtex blocks into secure sections of his web gear. Niema watched him, trying to hide her anxiety. It wasn't the explosive she worried about; plastique was so stable soldiers in Vietnam had burned it as fuel. But Dallas and Sayyed had to plant the explosives in the manufacturing facility, and that was the most dangerous part of a job that was already hair-raising enough. Though her husband was as matter-of-fact about it as he would be about crossing the street, Niema wasn't that blase about the job. The radio detonator wasn't state-of-the art; far from it. This was deliberate, a precaution in case any of their equipment fell into the

wrong hands. Nothing they were using could be traced to the United States, which was why Dallas was using Semtex instead of C-4. But because their equipment wasn't the best available, Niema had gone to great pains to make sure it was reliable. It was *her* husband's finger, after all, that would be on the switch.

Dallas caught her gaze on him and winked at her, his strong face relaxing from its normal impassiveness into a warm smile that he reserved only for her. "Hey," he said mildly, "I'm good at this. Don't worry."

So much for trying to hide her anxiety. The other three men turned to look at her. Not wanting them to think she couldn't handle the stress of the job, she shrugged. "So sue me. I'm new at this wife business. I thought I was *supposed* to worry."

Sayyed laughed as he packed his own gear. "Heck of a way to spend your honeymoon." He was a native Iranian who was now an American citizen, a tough, wiry man in his late forties. He spoke English with a Midwestern accent, the result of both hard work and almost thirty years in the United States. "Personally, I'd have picked Hawaii for my wedding trip. At least it would be warm there."

"Or Australia," Hadi said wistfully. "It's summer there now." Hadi Santana was of Arabic and Mexican heritage, but an American by birth. He had grown up in the heat of southern Arizona and didn't like the cold Iranian mountains in mid-winter any better than did Niema. He would stand guard while Dallas and Sayyed planted the charges and was occupying himself by checking and rechecking his rifle and ammunition.

"We spent two weeks in Aruba after we got married," Dallas said. "Great place." He winked at Niema again, and she had to smile. Unless Dallas had been to Aruba another time, he hadn't seen much of it during their honeymoon, three months before. They had spent the entire two weeks lost in each other's company, making love, sleeping late. Bliss.

Tucker didn't join in the conversation, but his cool, dark eyes lingered on Niema as if assessing her; wondering if he had made a mistake including her on the team. She wasn't as experienced as the others, but neither was she a novice. Not only that, she could put a bug on a telephone line with her eyes closed. If Tucker had any doubts about her ability, she wished he would just come out and say so.

But if Tucker had doubts about her, then turnabout was fair play, she thought wryly, because she sure as hell wasn't certain about *him.* Not that

he'd said or done anything wrong; the uneasiness that kept her on edge around him was instinctive, without any concrete reason. She wished he was one of the three men going into the plant, rather than remaining behind with her. The thought of spending the hours alone with him wasn't nearly as nerve-racking as knowing Dallas would be in danger, but she didn't need the added tension when her nerves already felt stretched and raw.

Tucker originally had planned to go in, but Dallas was the one who had argued against it. "Look, boss," he had said in that calm way of his. "It isn't that you can't do the job, because you're as good as I am, but it isn't necessary that you take the risk. If you had to, that would be different, but you don't." An indecipherable look had flashed between the two men, and Tucker had given a brief nod.

Dallas and Tucker had known each other before Tucker put this team together, had worked together before. The only thing that reassured Niema about the team leader was that her husband trusted and respected him, and Dallas Burdock was no one's pushover-to the contrary, in fact. Dallas was one of the toughest, most dangerous men she had ever met. She had thought he was *the* most dangerous, until she met Tucker.

That in itself was scary, because Dallas was something else. Until five months ago, she hadn't really believed men like him existed. Now, she knew differently. Her throat tightened as she watched her husband, his dark head bent as he once again focused all his attention on his supplies and equipment. Just like that, he could tune out everything but the job; his power of concentration was awesome. She had seen that level of concentration in only one other man: Tucker.

She felt a sudden little ping of disbelief, almost a suspension of reality, that she was actually *married,* especially to a man like Dallas. She had known him for just five months, loved him for almost as long, and in so many ways he was still a stranger to her. They were slowly learning each other, settling down into the routine of marriage-well, as routine as it could get, given their jobs as contract agents for various concerns, principally the CIA.

Dallas was calm and steady and capable. Once she would have described those characteristics as desirable, if you were the domestic suburban type, but basically unexciting. Not now. There was nothing staid about Dallas. Need a cat out of a tree? Dallas could climb that tree as if *he* were a cat. Need the plumbing fixed? Dallas could fix it. Need to be dragged out of the surf? He was a superior swimmer. Need someone to make a difficult shot?

He was an expert marksman. Need to blow up a building in Iran? Dallas was your man.
So it took some doing to be tougher and more dangerous than Dallas, but Tucker ... somehow was. She didn't know why she was so certain. It wasn't Tucker's physical appearance; he was tall and lean, but not as muscular as Dallas. He wasn't edgy; if anything, he was even more low-key than Dallas. But there was something in his eyes, in his characteristic stillness, that told her Tucker was lethal.
She kept her doubts about the team leader to herself. She wanted to trust Dallas's opinion of Tucker because she trusted her husband so much. Besides, she was the one who had really wanted to take this job, while Dallas had been leaning toward a diving trip to Australia. Maybe she was just letting the tension of the situation get to her. They were, after all, on a job that would get them all killed if they were discovered, but success was even more important than escaping detection.
The small facility buried deep in these cold mountains was manufacturing a biological agent scheduled to be shipped to a terrorist base in Sudan. An air strike would be the fastest, most efficient way to destroy it, but that would also trigger an international crisis and destroy the delicate balance of the Middle East along with the factory. A full-scale war wasn't what anyone wanted.
With an air strike ruled out, the plant had to be destroyed from the ground, and that meant the explosives had to be hand-placed, as well as powerful. Dallas wasn't relying just on Semtex to do the job; there were fuels and accelerants in the factory that he planned to use to make certain the plant didn't just go boom, but that it burned to the ground.
They had been in Iran five days, traveling openly, boldly. She had worn the traditional Muslim robes, with only her eyes revealed, and sometimes they had been veiled, too. She didn't speak Farsi-she had studied French, Spanish, and Russian, but not Farsi-but that didn't matter because, as a woman, she wasn't expected to speak. Sayyed was a native, but from what she could tell, Tucker was as fluent as Sayyed, Dallas nearly so, and Hadi less than Dallas. She was sometimes amused by the fact that all five of them were dark-eyed and dark-haired, and she wondered if her coloring hadn't played nearly as large a part in her having been chosen to be a team member as had her skill with electronics.

"Ready." Dallas hooked the radio transmitter to his web gear and shouldered the knapsack of plastique. He and Sayyed had identical gear. Niema had practically assembled the transmitters from spare parts, because the transmitters they had acquired had all been damaged in some way. She had cannibalized them and built two she had tested and retested, until she was certain they wouldn't fail. She had also tapped into the factory's phone lines, a dead-easy job because their equipment was of early-seventies vintage. They hadn't gotten much information from that, but enough to know their intel was accurate, and the small facility had developed a supply of anthrax for terrorists in Sudan. Anthrax wasn't exotic, but it was sure as hell effective.

Sayyed had slipped into the facility the night before and reconnoitered, returning to draw a rough floor plan showing where the testing and incubation was done, as well as the storage facility, where he and Dallas would concentrate most of their explosives. As soon as the factory blew, Tucker and Niema would destroy their equipment-not that much of it was worth anything-and be ready to move as soon as the three men returned. They would split up and each make their own way out of the country, rendezvousing in Paris to debrief. Niema, of course, would be traveling with Dallas.

Tucker extinguished the light, and the three men slipped silently out the door and into the darkness. Niema immediately wished she had at least hugged Dallas, or kissed him good luck, no matter what the other three thought. She felt colder without his bracing presence.

After making certain the blankets were in place, Tucker switched on the light again, then began swiftly packing the things they would take with them. There wasn't much; a few provisions, a change of clothes, some money; nothing that would arouse suspicion if they were stopped. Niema moved to help him, and in silence they divided the provisions into five equal packs.

Then there was nothing to do but wait. She moved over to the radio and checked the settings, though she had checked them before; there was nothing coming over the single speaker because the men weren't talking. She sat down in front of the radio and hugged herself against the cold. Nothing about this job had been a picnic, but the waiting was the worst. It always had been, but now that Dallas was in danger, the anxiety was magnified tenfold. It gnawed at her, that internal demon. She checked her

cheap wristwatch; only fifteen minutes had lapsed. They hadn't had time to reach the facility yet.
A thin blanket settled over her shoulders. Startled, she looked up at Tucker, who stood beside her. "You were shivering," he said in explanation of his unusual act and moved away again.
"Thanks." She pulled the blanket around her, uncomfortable with the gesture, considerate though it was. She wished she could ignore her uneasiness about Tucker, or at least figure out *why* she was so wary of him. She had tried to hide her wariness and concentrate only on the job, but Tucker was no one's fool; he knew she was uncomfortable with him. Sometimes she felt as if they were in a silent battle no one else knew about, those rare times when their gazes would accidentally meet and distrust would be plain in hers, a slightly mocking awareness in his.
He never put a foot wrong, though, never did anything that would bring their discord into the open. His relationship with all three of the other men was both easy and professional. With her, he was unfailingly polite and impersonal, and even that was a measure of his professionalism. Tucker respected Dallas and certainly wasn't going to disrupt the team or endanger the job by openly antagonizing his wife. That should have reassured Niema on a couple of levels-but it didn't.
Until he put the blanket around her shoulders, there hadn't been a word spoken between them since the others left. She wished it had remained that way; keeping Tucker at a distance, she thought, was the safest place for him.
He sat down, as relaxed and graceful as a cat. He seemed impervious to the cold, comfortable in a black T-shirt and fatigue pants. Dallas had the same sort of internal furnace, because he seldom felt the cold either. What was it about men like them that made them bum so much hotter than the rest of the human race? Maybe it was their physical conditioning, but she herself was in very good shape and she had been cold the entire time they had been in Iran. She didn't wish they were cold, too, just that the damn anthrax facility had been built in the warm desert, instead of these chilly mountains.
"You're afraid of me."
The comment, coming out of the blue, startled her more than it had when he put the blanket around her, but not enough that she lost her composure. His voice had been calm, as if he were discussing the weather. She gave him a cool look. "Wary," she corrected. If he thought she would hasten to deny her

uneasiness, the way most people would do when cornered, he was mistaken. As Dallas had learned, to his amusement more often than not, there wasn't much that could make Niema back down.
Tucker leaned his dark head back against the cold stone wall and drew one leg up, draping his arm loosely over his knee. Unreadable brown eyes studied her. "Wary, then," he conceded. "Why?"
She shrugged. "Feminine intuition?"
He began to laugh. Laughter wasn't something she had associated with Tucker, but he did it easily, his dark head tilted back against the wall. The sound was genuinely amused, as if he couldn't help himself.
Niema watched him, one eyebrow tilted as she waited for him to stop. She didn't feel the least impulse to join in his laughter, or even to smile. Nothing about this situation was funny. They were deep in Iran on a job that could get them all killed, and oh, by the way, she didn't trust the team leader one inch, ha ha ha. Yeah, right.
"Jesus," he groaned, wiping his eyes. "All this because of feminine intuition?" A shade of incredulousness colored his tone.
Niema gave him a stony look. "You make it sound as if I've been attacking you left and right."
"Not overtly, at least." He paused, a smile still curving his mouth. "Dallas and I have worked together before, you know. What does he say about your suspicions?"
He was utterly relaxed as he waited for her answer, as if he already knew what Dallas would have said- if she had mentioned her feelings to him, that is. She hadn't uttered a word of misgiving to him, though. For one thing, she had nothing concrete to offer, and she wasn't about to stir up trouble without proof other than her feminine intuition. She didn't discount her uneasiness, but Dallas was a man who dealt in hard realities, who had learned to disconnect his emotions so he could function in the dangerous field he had chosen. Moreover, he obviously liked, trusted, and respected Tucker.
"I haven't talked to him about it."
"No? Why not?"
She shrugged. Other than not having proof, her main reason for not talking to Dallas about Tucker was that her husband hadn't been wild about her coming on this job anyway, and she didn't want to give him an opportunity to say I told you so. She was good at what she did, but she didn't have the field experience the others had, so she was reluctant to cause trouble. And,

she admitted, even had she known she wouldn't be comfortable with Tucker, she would have come anyway. Something primitive in her thrilled to the tension, the danger, the utter importance of what she did. She had never wanted a nine-to-five; she wanted adventure, she wanted to work on the front line. She wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize a job she had worked hard to attain.

"Why not?" Tucker said again, and a hint of steel underlay the easiness of his tone. He wanted an answer, and she suspected he usually got what he wanted.

Oddly, though, she wasn't intimidated. Part of her even relished this little showdown, getting their animosity out into the open and going one-on-one with Tucker.

"What difference does it make?" She returned his cool look with one of her own. "Regardless of my suspicions about you, I'm doing my job and keeping my mouth shut. My reasons aren't any of your business. But I'd bet the farm your real name isn't Darren Tucker."

He grinned suddenly, surprising her. "Dallas said you were stubborn. Not much of a reverse gear, was the way he put it," he said, settling his shoulders more comfortably against the wall.

Because Niema had heard Dallas mutter something very close to that, after one of the few times they had gone head to head about something, she found herself smiling, too.

In that more relaxed atmosphere he said, "What makes you think my name isn't Tucker?"

"I don't know. Darrell Tucker is a good-old-boy Texas name, and every so often I hear a little bit of Texas in your accent, so the accent and the name fit- but you don't, somehow."

"I've traveled a bit since I left home," he drawled.

She clapped her hands twice in mocking applause. "That was very well done. A homey piece of phrasing, the accent a little heavier."

"But you don't buy it."

"I bet you're very good with a lot of accents."

Amused, he said, "Okay, you aren't going to believe me. That's fine. I don't have any way of proving who I am. But believe me in this: My priorities are getting that building blown and all of us safely home."

"How can you get us home? We're splitting up, remember?"

"By doing all my preliminary work right, by anticipating as many problems as I can and taking steps to counteract them."
"You can't anticipate everything, though."
"I try. That's why my hair is going gray, I sit up nights worrying."
His hair was as dark as her own, without a silver thread showing. His sense of humor was wry, tending toward the ironic; she wished he hadn't shown it to her, wished he had maintained the silence between them. Why hadn't he? Why now, of all times, had he suddenly breached the armed truce?
"We're in."
She whirled to the radio set as the whispered words came plainly through the speaker. Incredulously she checked the time; thirty minutes had passed since she had last looked. She had been so focused on her confrontation with Tucker that she had forgotten to fret.
Like a flash, she knew: That was why he had done it. He had distracted her, using the one subject he knew she wouldn't be able to ignore.
Tucker was already at the radio, slipping on a Motorola headset. "Any problems?"
"Negative."
That was all, just three whispered words, but they were in her husband's voice and Niema knew that for now, at least, he was all right. She leaned back and focused on her breathing, in, out, keeping the rhythm regular. There was nothing Tucker could do now to distract her, short of physical violence, so he left her alone. She checked the radio settings, though she knew they were right. She wished she had checked the radio detonator one more time, just to be certain. No-she knew it was working perfectly. And Dallas knew what he was doing.
"Has Dallas ever told you about his training?"
She flicked an impatient glance at Tucker. "I don't need distracting. Thanks for doing it before, but not now, please."
A faint quirk of his brows betrayed his surprise. "So you figured it out," he said easily, and she immediately wondered if distracting her had indeed been his intention. Tucker was so damn *elusive* that even when you thought you had him read, it was possible you were reading only what he intended you to read. "But this is more in the way of reassurance. Do you know about his training?"
"That he took BUD/S? Yes." BUD/S was Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training: extensive, and so grueling only a tiny

percentage of men who tried actually completed the course.
"But has he told you what that training entailed?"
"No, not in detail."
"Then take my word for it, Dallas can do things no ordinary man would ever dream of doing."
"I know. And-thanks. But he's still human, and plans can go wrong-"
"He knows that. They all do. They're prepared."
"Why didn't he want you to go in?"
There was an infinitesimal pause, so brief she wasn't certain she had heard it. "Despite what he said, Dallas doesn't think I'm as good as he is," Tucker said with wry humor.
She didn't believe him. For one thing, Dallas respected him too much. For another, that tiny pause before he spoke told her he had been weighing his response, and his answer wasn't one that had required any weighing.
Whoever he was, whatever he was hiding, Niema accepted that she wasn't going to get any straight answers from him. He was probably one of those paranoid spooks everyone read about, who saw spies and enemies everywhere, and, if you asked him if it was supposed to rain the next day, would wonder what you were planning that required bad weather.
Sayyed's voice whispered over the radio. *"Trouble. Activity in the warehouse. Looks like they're getting ready to make a shipment."*
Tucker swore, his attention immediately focused on the situation. It was imperative the warehoused store of bacteria be completely destroyed before a shipment was made. The warehouse was usually deserted at night, with guards posted outside, but now there was activity that prevented Sayyed from planting his charges.
"How many?" Tucker asked.
"*I make it. . . eight. . . no, nine. I took cover behind some barrels, but I can't move around any."*
They couldn't let that shipment leave the warehouse.
"Dallas." Tucker spoke the name quietly into his headset.
"I'm on the way, Boss. My charges are set."
Niema's nails dug into her palms. Dallas was going to Sayyed's aid, but they would still be badly outnumbered, and by moving, Dallas was risking exposure. She reached for the second headset; she didn't know what she was going to say to her husband, but she didn't have the chance. Tucker's hand

shot out; he jerked the plug out of the radio set and tossed the headset aside, his dark gaze cool and hard as he met her stunned look.
She found herself on her feet, her shoulders braced, hands knotted into fists. "He's my husband," she said fiercely.
Tucker put his hand over the tiny microphone. "And he doesn't need the distraction of hearing you now." He added deliberately, "If you try anything, I'll tie and gag you."
She wasn't without some training herself, and Dallas, once he realized he couldn't convince her to play it safe and sit home like a good little wife, had been teaching her how to fight in ways her self-defense class had never covered. Still, her level of expertise in no way matched his, or Tucker's. The only way she could take him, she thought, was to catch him totally by surprise, from behind.
But he was right. Damn it, he was right. She didn't dare say anything that could break Dallas's concentration.
She held up her hands in a brief gesture of surrender and moved three steps away. The hut was so small she couldn't go much farther anyway. She sat down on a pack of provisions and tried to beat down the suffocating waves of anxiety.
The minutes crawled by. She knew Dallas was creeping toward the warehouse section, using every bit of cover available to him, trying not to take chances. She also knew that every passing second put the terrorists that much closer to leaving with the shipment of bacteria. Dallas would be balancing caution with expediency.
Tucker spoke into the headset. "Sayyed. Report."
"I can't budge an inch. The truck is almost loaded."
"Two minutes," Dallas said.
Two minutes. Niema closed her eyes. Cold sweat trickled down her back. Please, she found herself praying. Please. She couldn't form any words other than that.
Two minutes could be a lifetime. Time itself could be strangely elastic, stretching until every second was ponderous, until the second hand on her watch seemed almost motionless.
"I'm in position."
The words almost broke her control. She bit her lip until the taste of blood filled her mouth.
"How does it look?"

"Sayyed's got his ass in a crack, all right. Hey, buddy, how many charges did you get set?"
"One."
"Shit."
One wasn't enough. Niema had listened to them, knew how many charges Dallas estimated it would take to completely destroy the facility.
"Hadi?"
"In position. Can't help you much."
"Start pulling back." Dallas's voice was even. *"Sayyed, arm all the charges."*
There was another silence, then Sayyed's, *"Done."*
"Get ready. Throw the pack under the truck, then run tike hell. I'll lay down covering fire. I'm gonna give us Jive seconds to get outta here before I hit the button."
"Damn. Maybe you should make it six," Sayyed said.
"Ready." Dallas was still utterly calm. *"Go!"*

Chapter Two

The staccato thunder of gunfire blasted from the radio speaker. Niema jerked as if some of the bullets had hit her, her hands pressed hard to her mouth to hold back the scream that clogged her throat. Tucker swung around to face her, as if he didn't trust her to keep silent. He needn't have worried; she was frozen in place. There was an animal-like sound, cut short.
"Son of a bitch! Sayyed bought it."
"Pull out," Tucker said, but there was a renewed burst of gunfire that drowned out his words.
And from the tinny speaker came a sound that made the hair on Niema's neck stand on end, a kind of hollowed-out grunt, underlaid by gunfire and a thudding sound.
"Ah . . . shit." The words were strained, thin; she could barely recognize Dallas's voice.
"Hadi!" Tucker barked. "Dallas is down. Get him-"
"No." The word came on an exhalation, long and deep.
"Hang on, buddy, I can be there-" Urgency was plain in Hadi's voice.
"Save yourself. . . the trouble. I'm gut shot."

The world went gray around her. Niema fought back the shock, fought back the sensation of her entire body falling apart as the bottom dropped out of her stomach and her lungs seized, unable to pump. Gut shot. Even if he had been in the States, with a trauma unit nearby, the injury was critical. Here in these cold, isolated mountains, with safety and cutting-edge medical help days away, it was a death sentence. She knew this; her mind knew it. But she rejected it anyway, recoiling from the knowledge.

There were more shots, very close. Dallas was still shooting, still holding them off.

"Boss ..." The whisper floated around the hut.

"I'm here." Tucker was still facing Niema, his gaze locked on her.

"Is . . . Can Niema hear?"

Dallas had to be going into shock, or he would never have asked, would have realized she could hear everything. She had wired the switch open.

Tucker's gaze never wavered from her. "No," he said.

More shots. The sound of Dallas's breathing, shallow and quick. *"Good. I. . . I've still got the detonator. Can't let them leave with . . . that shit."*

"No," Tucker said again. "You can't." His voice was almost gentle.

"Take . . . take care of her."

Tucker's face was a mask, his gaze locked on her face. "I will." He paused, and said, "Do it."

The explosion shook the hut, sending dirt cascading down from the cracks in the ceiling, rattling the door on its frame. The blast wave hadn't passed before Tucker was moving, ripping the headset from his ears and tossing it down. He picked up a hammer and began methodically destroying the radio; even though it was old and obsolete, it was functional, and their plan was to leave nothing that could be used. Reducing the radio to rubble took half a minute.

That done, he pulled Niema away from the packs of provisions and swiftly began repacking them, redistributing what they would carry. She stood numbly in the middle of the hut, unable to move, her brain frozen with shock. She was aware of pain; there was a great, clawing pain in her chest, as if her heart were exploding, and even that was somehow felt as if from a distance.

Tucker thrust a heavy coat at her. Niema stared at it, unable to comprehend what he wanted her to do with it. Silently he bundled her into it, putting her arms into the sleeves as if she were a toddler, zipping it up, tucking her hair

under the collar as an extra buffer for her neck. He tugged gloves on her hands, and put a warm fur hat on her head.
He pulled a heavy sweater on over his head, then shrugged into his own coat. As he was pulling on his gloves, a low whistle sounded outside the hut, and he extinguished the light. Hadi slid in the door, and Tucker turned the light on again.
Even in the weakness of the single light, Hadi's face was drawn and white. He looked immediately at Niema. "God-" he began, only to be silenced by a quick motion from Tucker.
"Not now. We have to move." He shoved one of the consolidated packs into Hadi's arms, and slung the other two onto his own shoulders. He picked up a rifle, took Niema's arm, and led her into the night.
Their transportation, an old Renault, had died on them the first night, and all of Tucker's mechanical expertise could not repair a broken axle. Hadi glanced worriedly at Niema. She hadn't faltered during the two days they had been moving; she was like a robot, keeping pace with them no matter how hard Tucker pushed them. She spoke when they asked her a direct question; she ate when Tucker gave her food, drank when he gave her water. What she hadn't done was sleep. She would lie down when he told her to, but she hadn't slept, and her eyes were swollen with fatigue. Both men knew she couldn't go on much longer.
"What are you going to do?" Hadi asked Tucker, keeping his voice low. "Do we split up as originally planned, or stay together? You may need help getting her out."
"We split up," Tucker said. "It's safer that way. A woman traveling with two men would attract more attention than a man and his wife."
They were traveling northwest, through Iran's most populated area, but that was the only way to get to Turkey, and safety. Iraq was due west, Afghanistan and Pakistan were to the east, the splinter nations left by the breakup of the Soviet Union to the northeast, the Caspian Sea to the north and the Persian Gulf to the south, through very inhospitable desert. Turkey was their only feasible destination. From here on out, Niema would have to wear the traditional Muslim chador.
They had traveled at night at first, the better to avoid detection if there was any pursuit, though it was possible Sayyed and Dallas were thought to be the only saboteurs. It was even possible, Tucker thought, that no word of intruders had gotten out. The facility had been remote, with only one phone

line going in. Dallas could well have pushed the button before anyone got to the phone, assuming any of the workers thought to make a call anyway.
The building was charred rubble. Tucker himself had reconnoitered, leaving Niema under Hadi's worried and watchful eye. As always, Dallas had been thorough; what the plastique hadn't destroyed, the fire had.
That was the one time Niema had spoken without first being asked something. When Tucker returned she stared at him, her dark eyes fathomless, haunted, somehow hopeful. "Did you find him?" she asked.
Startled, keeping it hidden, he said, "No."
"But-his body . . ."
She wasn't clinging to an irrational hope that Dallas was still alive. She wanted his body for burial.
"Niema . . . there's nothing left." He said it as gently as he could, knowing there was nothing he could do to cushion the blow but trying anyway. She had been a trooper all through the job, but now she looked so *damn fragile. Nothing left.* He saw the words hit her, saw her reel with the shock. She hadn't asked anything since, not even for water. His own stamina was so great he could go for long periods before he was aware of thirst, so he couldn't rely on his own needs to remind him of hers. He set a time limit: Every two hours, he made her drink. Every four, he made her eat. Not that there was any *making* to it; she accepted whatever he gave her, without protest.
Now it was time for them to split up, as planned, but instead of Niema going with Dallas she would now be staying with him, while Hadi made his own way out of the country.
Tomorrow they would be in Tehran, where they would blend in with the population. Tucker would then make secure contact and, if there was no trouble, acquire transportation. Another day after that, and they would be just across the border from Turkey. He would abandon the vehicle and they would walk across during the night, in a remote location he had already scouted. Hadi would cross over at another point.
Hadi scratched his beard. Neither of them had shaved for two weeks, so they were decidedly scruffy. "Maybe I could scrounge around tomorrow when we get to Tehran, find a pharmacy, buy some sleeping pills or something. She's got to sleep."
They had stopped for a brief rest, sheltered by the lone remaining wall of a small mud house that had long since been abandoned. Niema sat a little way

off to the side, alone in a way that went far beyond the slight distance between her and them. She didn't fidget. She just sat. Maybe if she cried, Tucker thought. Maybe if she let some of it out, exhausted herself, she would be able to sleep. But she hadn't cried; the shock had gone too deep, and she hadn't yet recovered from that enough for tears. The time for crying would come later.

He considered Hadi's suggestion, but didn't like the idea of drugging her, in case they had to move fast. Still.. . "Maybe," he said, and left it at that.

They had rested long enough. Tucker stood, signaling that the break was over. Niema stood too, and Hadi moved forward to help her over some loose, unbaked mud bricks. She didn't need the help, but Hadi had become as protective of her as a mother hen.

He stepped on a loose board. It tilted up and dislodged some of the bricks just as Niema stepped on them, shifting them out from under her feet. She staggered off balance, slipped, and landed on her right shoulder in the rubble.

She didn't cry out, her training not to make any unnecessary noise still holding. Hadi swore softly, apologizing as he helped her to her feet. "Damn, I'm sorry! Are you all right?"

She nodded, brushing at her clothes, her shoulder. Tucker saw the slight frown knit her brows as she brushed her shoulder again, and even that much expression was so alien to her face these past two days that he knew immediately something was wrong.

"You're hurt." He was beside her before he stopped speaking, pulling her away from the rubble.

"Did you jam your shoulder?" Hadi asked, frowning with concern.

"No." She sounded puzzled, no more, but she twisted her neck to look at the back of her shoulder. Tucker turned her around. There was a small tear in her shirt, and blood was welling from it.

"You must have fallen on something sharp," he said, and thought maybe the damage had been done by a shard of brick, but then he saw the rusty nail protruding about an inch out of a rotten board.

"It was a nail. Good thing you had a tetanus booster." He efficiently unbuttoned her shirt as he spoke. She wasn't wearing a bra, so he only undid the first few buttons, then pulled the shirt off the injured shoulder.

The puncture wound was purplish and already swelling, sullenly oozing blood. The nail had gone in high and right of her shoulder blade, in the

fleshy part just beside her arm. He pressed on it to make the blood run more freely. Hadi had already opened their meager first-aid kit and extracted some gauze pads, which he used to mop up the blood as it ran down.
Niema stood motionless, letting them tend to the wound, which Tucker supposed was minor in relation to the concern both he and Hadi were showing. Any wound or injury that caused a delay was dangerous, because it would force them to stay in Iran even longer, so their concern was based in logic; but the biggest part of it, Tucker admitted, was the male instinct to protect the female. Not only was she the only woman with them, but she was already wounded, emotionally if not physically. Add in the fact that she was a lovely young woman who had quickly endeared herself to the team with her guts and wit, and of course they were jumping to protect her.
Mentally, he knew all the reasons, instinctive as well as personal. On a gut level, he knew he would move mountains to prevent anything from adding to the load of pain she already carried. He had promised Dallas he would take care of her, and no matter what it cost, he would keep that promise.
Sunlight gleamed on her bare shoulder, turning her skin to pearl. She had a pale complexion, despite the darkness of her hair and eyes. The elegant slant of her collarbone was exposed, and even as he applied an antibiotic ointment to the wound, Tucker couldn't help admiring the graceful structure of her body. She was remarkably feminine, despite her rough clothing and the fact that she wore no makeup, her hair wasn't combed, and all of them really, really needed a bath. She looked so female and elegant, he had constantly been surprised by her toughness.
"She looks like someone you want to put on a pedestal and keep from ever getting dirty or hurt," Dallas had said, before Tucker had ever met Niema, when he was putting the team together. "But she'd kick you in the teeth if you tried." He'd said it with intense male satisfaction, because she was his, and Tucker had shaken his head in wonder at seeing Dallas Burdock so obviously, unabashedly in love.
Tucker plastered a large adhesive bandage over the wound, then drew her shirt back up onto her shoulder. He would have buttoned the garment for her but she did it herself, her head bent over the task, her fingers slow.
Her reaction time was way off, dulled by shock and fatigue. If anything happened that necessitated quick action, he didn't think she could function. She *had* to get some sleep, he thought, one way or another.

He motioned for Hadi to step aside with him. "I'm not going to push her any further. According to the map, there's a small village about fifteen miles north of here. Think you can liberate some wheels for us?"
"Is the Pope Catholic?"
"Don't take any chances. We can't risk any pursuit. Wait until late at night, if necessary."
Hadi nodded his assent.
"If you aren't back by dawn, we'll move on."
Hadi nodded again. "Don't worry about me. If I don't make it back, just get her out."
"I plan to."
Hadi took some food and water with him and soon was out of sight. Niema didn't ask where he was going; she simply sat down and stared emptily at nothing. No, not emptily, Tucker thought. That would be easier to bear than the bottomless well of suffering reflected in her eyes.
The day wore on. He spent the time constructing a meager shelter for them, something to block the sun during the day and the wind at night. As they worked their way out of the mountains, the temperature had risen, but the nights were still damn cold. They ate, or at least he did; Niema refused more than a couple of bites. She drank a good bit of water, though, more than usual.
By nightfall, her cheeks were a little flushed. Tucker felt her face and wasn't surprised to find it hot. "You're feverish," he told her. "From the nail." The fever wasn't especially high, so he wasn't worried on that account, but her body didn't need this fresh assault.
He ate by flashlight. The fever robbed her of what little appetite she had, and she didn't eat anything that night; again, she drank a lot of water. "Try to get some sleep," he said, and obediently she lay down on the blanket he had spread out for her, but he watched her breathing for a while and knew she didn't sleep. She was lying there staring into the shadows, aching for the husband who wasn't there and never would be again.
Tucker stared at her back. She and Dallas had been circumspect in their behavior, refraining from public displays of affection, but at night they had slept next to each other, with Dallas spooned protectively around her and his big arm draped around her waist. She had slept like a baby then, utterly secure.

Perhaps she couldn't sleep now because she was alone and could feel the chill on her back. It was a simple thing, the kind of routine married couples seemed to develop so easily: the comfort of human warmth in the night, the sound of a loved one's breathing. Perhaps it was the trust, the intimacy, that meant so much. Intimacy didn't come easily to Tucker, trust even less so, but he knew it had existed between Niema and Dallas. Dallas's death had left her bereft, and she no longer found comfort in the night.

Tucker sighed inwardly. The sigh was for himself, because he knew what he had to do, and knew the cost.

He got a bottle of water and silently went to her, lying down behind her on the blanket and placing the water nearby. "Shhh," he murmured when she stiffened. "Just go to sleep." He curved his body around her, giving her his heat, his strength. Pulling a second blanket over them to keep out the cold, he anchored her to him with his arm around her waist.

He could feel the fever inside her; the heat emanating from her body wrapping around them both like a third blanket. Still, she shivered a little, and he pulled her closer. She lay on her uninjured left shoulder and held her right arm very still so as not to jar it.

"The fever's fighting the infection," he said, keeping his voice low and soothing. "There's aspirin in the first-aid kit, if you get too uncomfortable, but unless the fever gets a lot higher I suggest letting it do its job."

"Yes." Her voice was thin with fatigue, listless.

He stroked her hair, his touch gentle and tried to think of some way to occupy her mind. Maybe if she could just stop *thinking* she could sleep. "I saw a solar eclipse once. I was in South America." He didn't get any more specific than that. "The weather was so hot the air felt sticky. Cold showers didn't do any good; I was sweaty again as soon as I got toweled off. Everyone wore as little clothing as possible."

He didn't know if she was listening; he didn't much care. He kept that soothing, gently monotonous tone, his voice just barely above a whisper. If he could bore her to sleep, so much the better.

"It had been on the radio that there would be a solar eclipse that day, but the heat was so miserable no one much cared. It was just a little village, not the type to attract any eclipse chasers. I had forgotten about it myself. It was a sunny day, so bright the light hurt my eyes, and I was wearing sunglasses. The eclipse slipped up on me. The sun was still shining, the sky was blue, but all of a sudden it was as if a cloud had passed over

the sun. The birds all stopped singing, and the village pets hid.
"One of the villagers looked up and said, 'Look at the sun,' and I remembered about the eclipse. I told them not to stare, that it would blind them if they looked too long. The light was eerie, if you can imagine dark sunshine. The sky turned a really deep shade of blue, and the temperature dropped at least twenty degrees. It kept getting darker and darker, but the sky was still blue. Finally the sun was completely covered, and the solar halo around the moon was . . . spectacular. On the ground we were in a strange, deep twilight, and everything was quiet, but overhead the sky glowed. The twilight lasted for a couple of minutes, and during that time the entire village stood still. Men, women, and children; none of them moved, or spoke.
"Then the light began to come back, and the birds started singing again. The chickens came off roost, and the dogs barked. The moon moved on, and it was as hot as it had been before, but no one bitched about the weather anymore." Two days later everyone in that little village was dead-massacred-but he kept that to himself.
He waited. Her breathing was too shallow for sleep, but at least she wasn't as stiff as she had been before. If she relaxed, her body might take over and let itself sleep.
Next he told her about a dog he'd had when he was a kid. There was no dog, but she didn't know that. The dog he made up was a Heinz 57, with a long, skinny body like a dachshund and a curly coat like a poodle. "Ugly little bastard," he said comfortably. "What was his name?"
Her voice startled him. It was low, almost hesitant. Something painful grabbed his chest and squeezed. "She," he said. "I named her Fifi, because I thought that was what poodles were named."
He told her tale after tale of Fifi's exploits. She'd been an amazing dog. She could climb trees, open most doors by herself, and her favorite meal had been-God, what was some kid's cereal?-Fruit Loops. Fifi slept with the cat, hid shoes under the couch, and once really did eat his homework.
Tucker embroidered on the fictional Fifi for half an hour, keeping his voice to a melodic rhythm, pausing every so often to check Niema's breathing. It got slower, deeper, until finally she slept.
He let himself sleep, but lightly. A part of him remained alert, listening for Hadi's return, or for any suspicious sound. He woke completely several times, to check on Niema and make certain her fever wasn't getting higher.

She was still too warm, but he was satisfied there was nothing critical about the fever, just her body healing itself. Still, to be on the safe side, he roused her enough each time that she could drink a little water. As he had suspected, once she let herself go to sleep nature got the upper hand, and though he woke her easily enough she went right back to sleep the moment she closed her eyes.

The hours passed and Hadi didn't return. Tucker was patient. People slept soundest in the hours before dawn, and Hadi would probably wait until then. Still, every time he woke from his doze, Tucker checked his watch and considered his options. The longer he let Niema sleep, the stronger she would be and the faster she would be able to travel. He couldn't, however, afford to wait too long.

At five o'clock he turned on the flashlight and drank some of the water himself, then gently roused Niema. She drank the water he held to her mouth, then snuggled against him and sighed drowsily. "Time to get up," he murmured.

She kept her eyes closed. "Not yet." She turned to face him, and slipped her arm around his neck. "Mmm." She nestled closer, pressing her face into his chest.

She thought he was Dallas. She was still drowsy, her mind dulled by the hard sleep, and perhaps she had been dreaming about him. She was accustomed to waking in her husband's arms, to cuddling even if they didn't make love, and given the short time they had been married Tucker bet there hadn't been many mornings when Dallas hadn't made love to her.

He should shake her completely awake, get her fed, check her shoulder, and have her ready to move whether or not Hadi returned. He knew exactly what he should do, but for once in his life Tucker ignored the job. He tightened his arms around her and held her, just for a moment, something in him desperately hungry for the feel of her hugging him in return.

No, not *him*. It was Dallas she was holding, her husband she was dreaming about.

It cost him more than he wanted, but he took a deep breath and eased away from her. "Niema, wake up," he said softly. "You're dreaming."

Slumberous dark eyes opened, as black as night in the dim glow of the flashlight. He saw the dawning of awareness, the flare of shock in her eyes, followed by horror. She pulled away from him, her lips trembling. "I-" she began, but no other words came.

The sob burst out of her as if it tore from her chest. She rolled away from him and lay on the blanket, her entire body heaving. She made a long, low, keening sound, chopped by the convulsive sobs that ripped out of her throat. The dam of her control, once breached, collapsed entirely. She cried until she gagged, until her throat closed and no more sound came out. She cried until he thought surely the spasm of grief had to ease, but it didn't. She was still weeping when he heard the sound of a vehicle approaching in the dark, cold dawn, and he stepped out to meet Hadi.

PART TWO

Chapter Three

1999, Atlanta, Georgia

*D*elta Flight 183, Atlanta to London, was full. The first-class passengers had already boarded and made themselves comfortable, choice of reading material or drink, or both, in hand. The flight attendants had taken coats and hung them in the closet, chatted with those passengers inclined to be friendly, checked with the cockpit to see if the guys up there needed anything.

Congressman Donald Brookes and his wife, Elaine, were taking a vacation, the first in so long Elaine could scarcely believe Donald had agreed to the downtime. He had regularly put in eighteen to twenty hours a day on the job since first being elected fifteen years before. Even after all this time in government, there was a thread of idealism in him that insisted he give the taxpayers their money's worth, and more. She had gotten accustomed to going to bed alone, but she always woke when he came to bed, and they would hold hands and talk In the early days they hadn't been on anyone's A list, so she had spent a lot of evenings alone with the kids.

Things had changed somewhat. Donald was chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Relations, and now they were A list; as often as not they were at some function somewhere, but at least they were together.

Oh, there had been times when they had gone back home to Illinois, when Congress was in recess, but though the pace slowed then, Donald had used that time to catch up with his constituency. They hadn't been on a real vacation since he was first elected.

Elaine looked forward to days of sleeping late, ordering room service, and leisurely exploring London. Five days in London, then a short hop to Paris for another five days, then Rome and Florence. It was her dream vacation.
Two rows behind them, Garvin Whittaker was already absorbed in the papers from his briefcase. He was CEO of a cutting-edge software firm that had exploded in value over the past seven years, edging toward fifty billion. Not in Microsoft's league, but then, what was? When his current projects hit the market, Garvin figured the firm would double in value within five years. At least, he hoped it would; he dreamed it would. He was biding his time, building his market and strength, taking care not to tread on any giant toes. But when he judged the time was right, he would unveil the operating system he had developed, a system so streamlined and simplified- and so bug free-it would leave everything else out there in the dust.
In the first row was a UN delegate from Germany, holding his icy drink against his head and hoping his headache would abate enough that he would be able to sleep on the long flight. In seat 2F was a World Bank official, her brow puckered as she studied the *Wall Street Journal.* Growing up, she had always dreamed of being something romantic, like a brain surgeon or a movie star, but she had learned that money was the most powerful kick available, far more potent than any drug. She traveled all over the world; she had dined in Paris, bought clothes in Hong Kong, skied in Switzerland. Life was good, and she intended to make it even better.
A career diplomat was in seat 4D. He had been ambassador to France in the Bush years, but since was relegated to more minor roles. He was newly married, to a Chicago socialite whose family's wealth provided considerable clout; he expected to be ambassador again soon, and not to any Podunk country no one could find on a map.
In the coach section, Charles Lansky wiped sweat from his brow and tried not to think of the impending takeoff. He didn't mind flying, once the plane was airborne, but he *was sick* with fear during takeoff and landing. After a brief stopover in London, he was flying on to Frankfurt, which meant two takeoffs and two landings. Only a vitally important meeting could have induced him to endure so much.
College students on a tour of England, Scotland, and Ireland crowded onto the plane, each of them carrying the ubiquitous backpack packed with essentials: a bottle of Evian, a portable CD player, a collection of fave CDs, makeup if the student was female, a handheld computer game if male;

perhaps an item or two of clothing. They were tanned, healthy, as alike as Teddy Roosevelt's teeth but still young enough to be convinced they were unique.

The usual assortment of business people and holiday-goers filed in, milled around, eventually took their seats. One young lady anxiously clasped an overnight bag on her lap, until the flight attendant told her it needed to be stowed and offered to find a place in the overhead bins for the bag. The young lady shook her head and managed to stuff the bag under the seat in front of her, though it was a tight fit and she then had nowhere to put her feet. Her complexion was pasty, and she was sweating despite the air pouring out of the overhead vents.

Finally the giant L-1011 pushed away from the gate and taxied out to get in line for takeoff. Seventeen other aircraft were ahead of them, inching toward the runway One of the pilots came on the intercom occasionally to give the passengers updates on their expected takeoff time. Most of the first-class passengers had already removed their shoes and put on the black travel socks provided in the gift bag Delta gave each first-class passenger on overseas flights. Magazines were thumbed through, books were hauled out, a few people already snored.

Finally it was Flight 183's turn. The big engines roared and the plane gathered speed and it rolled down the runway, faster and faster, until finally lift exceeded drag and they were airborne. There was some mechanical rumbling as the wheels lifted and folded and tucked into the belly of the aircraft. Flight 183 arrowed into the blue sky, steadily gaining altitude for the flight pattern that would take them up the east coast until, somewhere near New York, they would swing out over the Atlantic.

Thirty-three minutes into the flight, over the mountains of western North Carolina, Flight 183 disintegrated into a fiery ball that spewed flaming pieces of fuselage upward in a slow-motion arc, before the trajectory peaked and the pieces fell back to earth.

Chapter Four

Washington, D.C.

The two men sat companionably at a nineteenth-century walnut desk; the wood shone with a velvety sheen, and the top was inlaid with rose Italian

marble. A handsome chessboard, topped with hand-carved pieces, was between them. The library in which they sat was masculine, comfortable, slightly shabby; not because Franklin Vinay couldn't afford to spruce it up, but because he liked it the way it was. Mrs. Vinay had refurbished it the year before she died, and he found comfort among these things she had chosen for him.

She had also found the chess set at an estate sale in New Hampshire. Dodie had loved estate sales, Frank remembered fondly. She had kept the gift of enjoyment her entire life, finding pleasure in many small things. She had been gone ten years, and not a day passed that he didn't think of her, sometimes with lingering sorrow but more often with a smile, because they were good memories.

As always, he and John had flipped a coin to see who made the opening move. Frank drew white and had opened aggressively, if conventionally, by moving the pawn in front of his king two spaces forward. Sometimes he preferred the more popular moves, because sometimes doing the expected could be the most unexpected thing to do.

Frank knew he was a very good chess player. That said, it was difficult for him to best John at the game. The younger man was as analytical as a computer, as patient as Job, and, when the time was right, as aggressive as George Patton ever dreamed of being. In chess, as well as in his chosen field, that made John Medina a dangerous opponent.

Kaiser, an enormous German shepherd, snoozed contentedly at their feet, occasionally emitting puppylike yelps incongruous with his size as he chased rabbits in his dreams. Kaiser's peacefulness was reassuring.

The house had been swept for eavesdropping devices that morning and again that night when Frank arrived home. Electronic noise prevented their conversation from being picked up by a parabolic mike, should anyone try to eavesdrop using that method. The security system was state of the art, the door locks the strongest available, the windows protected by steel bars.

The house, which from the outside looked like the ordinary house of a moderately prosperous man, was a fortress. Even so, both men knew fortresses could be breached. Frank's 9mm was in his desk drawer. John's weapon was in his belt holster, tucked into the small of his back. Frank's position as deputy director of operations, CIA, made him a valuable commodity in the espionage community; for that reason, very few people knew where he lived. His name wasn't on any deed or any utility record.

Any calls to or from his private number were routed through several switching stations that made them untraceable.
For all that, Frank thought wryly, if any hostile government was given the choice between snatching him or snatching John Medina, he would be the one left behind.
John studied the board, idly stroking the rook while. he pondered his next move. Making his decision, he lifted his fingers off the rook and moved his queen's bishop. "How are my friends in New Orleans?"
Frank wasn't surprised by the question. Months, even a year or more, might go by without seeing John, but when he did, John always asked certain questions. "They're doing well. They have a baby now, a little boy born last month. And Detective Chastain is no longer with the NOPD, or a detective; he's a lieutenant with the state."
"And Karen?"
"Working in a trauma unit, or she was until the baby was born. She's taken a leave of absence, for at least a year, I think, maybe longer."
"I don't expect she'll have any trouble returning to her job when she's ready," John said, his tone mild, but Frank knew him well enough to read the request-or perhaps it was an order-underneath the tone. While he was formally John's superior, in truth John was pretty much autonomous.
"Not at all," Frank said, and it was a promise.
A couple of years before, both Karen's father and John's father had been murdered in a plot to cover up Senator Stephen Lake's hired killing of his own brother in Vietnam. In the process of uncovering the plot, John had become an admirer of both the plucky Karen and her tough-as-nails husband. Though they never knew his name, since then he had made a point of smoothing certain obstacles out of their way.
"And Mrs. Burdock?"
That question too was expected. "Niema's fine. She's developed a new surveillance device that's almost impossible to detect. The NSA has borrowed her for a couple of projects, too."
John looked interested. "An undetectable bug? When will it be available?"
"Soon. It piggybacks off existing wiring, but without causing a drop in power. Electronic sweeps can't find it."
"How did she manage that?" John nudged a pawn onto another square.
Frank scowled at the board. Such a small move, but it had moved the game in a different direction. "Something to do with frequency modulation. If I

understood it, I could get a real job."
John laughed. He was a surprisingly open man, during those rare times when he could relax with people he could trust, and who knew who he was. If he liked you, then you were never in doubt of his friendship, perhaps because the majority of his life was spent in danger, in deep shadows, answering to different names and wearing different faces. He treasured what was real, and what was reliable.
"Has she remarried yet?"
"Niema? No." The pawn's position had him worried, and he continued frowning at the board, only half his attention on his answer. "She doesn't see anyone on a regular basis. She dates occasionally, but that's all."
"It's been five years."
Something in John's tone alerted Frank. He looked up to see the younger man frowning slightly, as if he were unhappy to learn that Niema Burdock was still single.
"Does she seem happy?"
"Happy?" Startled by the question, Frank leaned back, the chess game forgotten. "She's busy. She likes her work, she's very well paid, she has a nice home, drives a new car. I can take care of those things, but I can't direct or know her emotions." Of all the people for whom John was an anonymous guardian angel,
Niema Burdock was the one he followed the closest. Since he brought her out of Iran after her husband was killed, he had taken an almost personal interest in her well-being.
In a flash of intuition, a leap of reasoning that had made Frank Vinay so good at his job, he said, "You want her yourself." He seldom blurted out his thoughts in such an unguarded way, but he was, abruptly, as certain of this as he had ever been of anything. He felt faintly embarrassed at making such an observation.
John glanced up, eyebrows lifted quizzically. "Of course," he said, as if it were a given. "For all the good wanting does."
"What do you mean?"
"I'm scarcely in a position to become involved with anyone. Not only am I gone for months at a time, there's always a good chance I won't come back." He said it coolly, unemotionally. He knew exactly what the risks were in his profession, accepted them, perhaps even sought them.

"That's true of other professions: the elite military teams, certain construction workers. They marry, have families. I did."
""four circumstances were different."
Because Frank hadn't worked in black ops, he meant. John was a specialist in those missions that never saw the light of day, financed by funds for which there was no accounting, no records. He took care of what needed to be handled without the government becoming involved, to preserve deniability.
Frank had been considering broaching a subject with John, and now seemed like a perfect time. "Your circumstances can be different, too."
"Can they."
"I don't plan to die in harness; retirement is looking more and more attractive. You could step into my place without ever losing a beat."
"DDO?" John shook his head. "I operate in the field; you know that."
"And you know that you can operate wherever you choose. You're a natural for the job. In fact, you're better suited for it than I was when I took over. Think about it for a while-" The phone rang, interrupting him, and he broke off. The call wasn't unexpected. He lifted the receiver, spoke briefly, then hung up. "An agent is bringing the report over."
The chess game was forgotten, the real reason for their meeting taking over. Since Flight 183 went down the week before, the FBI and NTSB had been combing the rugged Carolina mountains collecting fragments, trying to piece together what had happened. Two hundred sixty-three people had died, and they wanted to know the reason. There hadn't been any unusual radio traffic; the flight had been routine, until the plane fell from the sky. The flight recorder had been found and preliminary reports said that the pilots hadn't indicated anything was wrong. Whatever had happened had been instant, and catastrophic-and therefore suspicious.
From one of his untold shadowy sources, John had heard whispers there was a new type of explosive device that airport X-ray machines couldn't detect, not even the CTX-5000 machines such as were used in Atlanta. He notified Frank, who quietly set about getting all the information available on Flight 183 as soon as NTSB and the FBI gathered it.
The crash site was difficult to work. The terrain was mountainous, heavily wooded, without easy access. The wreckage was strewn over an enormous area. Bits and pieces, both metal and human, had been found in treetops. Teams had been working nonstop for a week, first gathering the human

remains and turning them over to forensic specialists for the almost impossible task of identification, then searching for even the smallest piece of the aircraft. The more pieces they found, the more complete the puzzle would be, and the more likely they were to discover what happened.
Fifteen minutes later an agent knocked on Vinay's door, rousing Kaiser. John remained in the library, out of sight, while Frank, with Kaiser beside him, collected the report.
Frank had requested two copies of the report, and on returning to the library he gave one to John. He sank back into his chair, his brow furrowed as he read. The report wasn't reassuring.
"Definitely an explosion. That wasn't really in doubt." People in the area had reported hearing an abrupt boom and seeing a bright flash. Whether or not anyone actually had seen anything was open to speculation, since the plane had gone down in the mountains where there wasn't a good line of sight in any direction. People generally didn't go around staring at the sky, though if the afternoon sun had glinted off the plane and caught someone's attention at just the right moment it was *possible* to have seen the actual explosion. More than likely, though, on hearing the noise, people had looked around, seen the smoke and arcing debris, and their imaginations took it from there and convinced them they had seen one hell of a fireball.
Rumors had immediately started that Flight 183 had been shot down by a missile. Congressman Donald Brookes, the House chairman of Foreign Relations, had been on Flight 183. Someone *had* to have wanted him dead for some reason, though all the reasons popping up on the Internet had been farfetched, to say the least. Proof of the plot, the missile theorists said, was that Congressman Brookes, who lived in Illinois, was reportedly going on vacation but for some reason was on a flight originating in Atlanta, instead of Chicago. That was obviously suspicious. Even after it was revealed that the Brookes's oldest son lived in Atlanta and they had visited him for a couple of days before leaving for Europe, the bring-down-a-plane-to-get-one-man theory persisted.
There was, however, no evidence of a missile. The pattern of rupture in the metal, plus the burn patterns and residue on the pieces of fuselage, all gave evidence that Flight 183 had been brought down by an internal explosion that had literally ripped the plane apart, blowing out a huge section of the fuselage and all of the left wing.

Preliminary chemical analysis indicated plastique. They had not, however, found any evidence of a detonator. Even in such a catastrophic explosion, microscopic and chemical evidence would have remained; if something existed, then it left its print.

"To have done this much damage, the bomb had to have been sizeable; the machines in Atlanta should have detected it." Frank was deeply worried; all luggage for the flight had been inspected, either by machines or humans. If, as John thought, the device was undetectable by their current technology, then they had a big problem on their hands.

Every piece of luggage, both checked and carry-ons, would have to be hand searched, but airlines weren't the only ones vulnerable. The possible applications of such a device were staggering. It could be used in mail bombs, to destroy federal buildings- any public building, actually-disrupt transportation and communication. No one in America paid much attention to the security of bridges, either, but let a few of them come down and traffic would grind to a standstill.

The explosive could have been disguised as something else and slipped through the machines in Atlanta. The system failed occasionally; nothing was foolproof. There should still, however, have been evidence of the detonator. They should have found a radio, or a mercury switch, or a simple timer-anything by which the explosion could be triggered. The detonator was actually how most bombs were spotted, because they were more easily detected when scanned.

John rubbed his lower lip and tossed the report onto Frank's desk. He had been most interested in the chemical analysis. The explosive found had some components in common with plastique, but there were some anomalies. "I'm thinking R.D.X." R.D.X. was cyclonite, or composition C-l. By itself it was too sensitive to handle, so it was usually mixed with a plasticiser, which would give it some of the same chemical elements as plastique. R.D.X. could be molded into any shape including shoelaces.

Frank looked up. "How? You know how luggage and packages are thrown around; an unstable explosive would have detonated on the ground."

"But what if it wasn't originally unstable? What if the compound deteriorates, and sets off a chemical reaction that causes it to explode? If you know the rate of deterioration, the explosion could easily be timed."

"Something that starts out as stable as plastique, but deteriorates and becomes its own detonator? Son of a bitch." Frank closed his eyes.

"There's always the chance some lone sociopath in a lab somewhere cooked this up, but what I'm hearing is that it came out of a top-secret lab in Europe."
"IRA?"
"I'm sure they would be standing in line to buy, but I haven't picked up any hints that they bankrolled the development."
"Who, then?"
"Take your pick; we aren't short on candidates." Terrorist groups proliferated all over the world. There were at least twenty-five hundred known organizations; some came and went, others had thousands of members and had been around for decades.
"And they'll all have this new stuff."
"Only if they have the money to buy it." The terrorist organizations might cooperate with one another, but it wasn't one big happy brotherhood. A new explosive would be a big moneymaker, closely controlled for as long as possible so there would be only one producer of it. Eventually, as happened to all new technology, everyone would have it; by then the means of detecting it would also have been developed. It was like a chess game, with moves and countermoves.
"If it's in Europe, and big money is behind it, then Louis Ronsard is our man," John said.
That in itself was a large problem. Ronsard was a shadowy Frenchman who gave his allegiance to no one group; he was the conduit, however, for many, and he had made an enormous fortune providing what was needed. He probably wasn't behind the development of the explosive, but he would be the logical person to approach as a middle man, one to handle payments and shipments-for a fee, of course.
Ronsard could be picked up, or eliminated; he wasn't in hiding. But his security was extremely tight, making a capture far more difficult than an elimination. Even if he were captured, John doubted he would give up any useful information. Sophisticated interrogation techniques could be countered by intensive training and mind control. Added to the problem of Ronsard was that he had powerful friends in the French government. He had been left alone, for all of the above reasons, but also because he was neither the source nor the user of all the nasty things he provided. He was the conduit, the controller, the valve. Eliminate him and another conduit would take his place.

Finding the source was the key, but John also had to discover to whom other shipments had already been delivered. To do that, he had to get to Ronsard.

Chapter Five

John Medina never stayed in the same place twice when he came to D.C. He had no home, literally. A home base gave anyone looking for him a starting point, and the thing about homes was that eventually, if you had one, you went there. So he lived in hotels and motels, condos, the occasional rented house-or a hut, a tent, a cave, a hole in the ground, whatever was available.

A condo was his preferred living quarters. They were more private than hotels, and, unlike a motel, had more than one exit. He didn't like sleeping in a place where he could be cornered.

The hotel he chose this time had wrought-iron balconies outside each room, which was what had made him decide in the hotel's favor. He had checked in earlier, checked for bugs, studied the security, then gone to meet Frank Vinay. Now, when he walked through the lobby to the elevators, no one who saw him would recognize him as the man who had checked in.

Disguise wasn't difficult. When he checked in he had been wearing glasses, had gray hair spray on his hair, cotton in his cheeks to fill out his face, and he had walked with a definite limp. He had also used a nasal Rochester, New York accent. His clothing had been the kind bought at a discount department store. There was no sign of that man now; he had removed the glasses and washed his hair, exchanged the gray polyester slacks for jeans, the plaid shirt for a white oxford, and the green windbreaker for a black jacket so exquisitely tailored it disguised the bulk of the weapon he wore and still looked fashionable.

He had hung the do not disturb sign on his door to keep hotel employees out. Most people would be surprised to find out how often during the day, while they were gone, the hotel staff was in and out of their rooms. Housekeeping, maintenance, management- they all had a master key and could get into any room. Plus there were professional thieves who hung around hotels and noticed the businesspeople-when they left, how long they were gone, etc. A good thief could always get into a locked room, so getting

into a room was nothing more than a matter of picking out the target, hanging near the desk to find out how long someone was staying, then discreetly following to see which room the person entered. Next morning, call the room to see if anyone answers. Then go on up, and, to be on the safe side, knock on the door. If there's still no response, go in.

A DO not disturb sign at least gives the impression someone was in the room. He had also dialed a certain untraceable number and left the phone off the hook, so if anyone called, he-or she; thieves were not gender specific-would get a busy signal.

Hanging on the inside door handle was a small battery-operated alarm. If anyone ignored the sign and opened the door anyway, an ear-piercing siren sounded, which was certain to attract attention. John turned off the alarm by pressing a button on the small remote he carried in his pocket. The alarm was just a gadget, but it amused him and would startle the hell out of anyone trying to get in. He wouldn't have bothered with it if he hadn't left his computer in the room.

The room was as he had left it. He scanned for bugs anyway, as a matter of routine, and thought of Niema's undetectable device. Technology was a leapfrog affair; something new was developed and for a while that side-whatever side it was-had the advantage. Then a countermeasure was developed and the other side had the advantage. Niema's bug would give them the advantage now, but technology couldn't be kept secret forever and eventually the bad guys-the terrorists and spies and hostile governments-would have the bug, too. It could be used against him, used to capture or kill him. Niema would probably be pleased if she knew her invention had led to his death. She wouldn't know, however; very few people would. He had no family, no network of friends or coworkers. Those people who worked with him didn't know who he was.

He didn't have to hide his identity with Frank Vinay, of course, or with Jess McPherson, an old friend of his father's. It was a relief to be able to drop his guard, those rare times when he was with one of them, and just be himself.

Sitting at the desk, he disconnected the call, then booted up the laptop and hooked it to the phone line. A few typed commands had him inside one of the CIA's data banks. He was one of the few people left in the world who still used the MS-DOS operating system, but when he was working he vastly preferred it over any system that required a mouse. A mouse was great for Net surfing or playing games, but he'd found that, when he was

working, a mouse slowed him down. He could type in the DOS commands much faster than he could take his hand off the keyboard, guide the mouse, click, and go back to the keyboard. In his world, seconds shaved off operating time could mean the difference between whether he got the information he needed and got out safely, or if he was caught.

There was a wealth of personal information on Louis Ronsard-his parents, where he lived growing up, his school records, his friends, his extracurricular activities. Louis hadn't been a deprived child; his father had been a wealthy industrialist, his mother a well-born beauty who had doted on her children- Louis, the oldest, and Mariette, three years younger. Louis was attending the Sorbonne when his mother died of ovarian cancer. His father was killed five years later in an accident on the Autobahn while on a business trip to Germany. Louis had taken over the reins of the family business, and, for reasons unknown, gone renegade. From that time to the present there was precious little personal information to be had about him, though he was far from a recluse.

Ronsard owned a heavily guarded estate in the south of France. He employed a small private army to ensure his security; to be hired, one had to meet stringent standards. The Company had planted one of their own, to no avail; the agent hadn't been able to discover anything useful, because his own activities were so regulated. He was still in place, though; John made a note of the agent's name and cover.

There was a recent photo; Ronsard was a striking man, with slightly exotic features and olive skin. He wore his dark hair long, usually secured at the nape, but for social occasions he left it loose. In this photograph he was emerging from some banquet, clad in a tuxedo, with a glowing blonde on his arm. She was smiling up at him with adoration in her eyes. She was Sophie Gerrard, briefly Ronsard's lover, but no longer in contact with him.

There was a long list of Ronsard's lovers. Women found him very attractive. His liaisons never lasted long, but he was evidently considerate and affectionate before his roving eye landed on some other lady.

There was a diagram of the mansions' grounds, but nothing of the house itself. Ronsard entertained occasionally, but the affairs were very exclusive, and the CIA hadn't yet been able to get anyone inside as either a guest or domestic help. True, Ronsard hadn't been at the top of their to-do list, so little effort had been expended on doing so.

That was going to change, however. Ronsard had just moved to the top of the list.

John maneuvered his way through a few more files, checking on Ronsard's known finances, who had designed and installed the mansion's security system, if there were any existing wiring plans. He found little information; Ronsard had either wiped his records, or they had never existed in the first place.

When he finished, it was two a.m. He stretched, suddenly aware of the kinks in his shoulders. He had another meeting with Frank the coming night, and maybe they would have more information on the crash. Until then, he could relax.

He showered and fell into bed. He had the warrior's knack of quickly and easily falling asleep, but tonight he found himself staring at the ceiling where the tiny red light on the smoke alarm blinked on and off. He didn't have to wonder about his sleeplessness; he knew the reason.

Niema.

Dallas had been dead five years. Why hadn't she remarried, or at least dated someone steadily? She was young-only twenty-five when Dallas died-and pretty. He hadn't let himself ask, these past five years, hadn't let himself personally check on her, but this time he had figured enough time had passed and it was safe to ask, to find out she had a hubby and a kid or two, and had gone on with her life.

She hadn't. She was still alone.

Had she changed? Put on weight, maybe gotten a few strands of gray in her hair? A lot of people began to go gray in their twenties. Did her big dark eyes still look so deep a man could drown in them, and not care?

He could see her. She would never know. He could satisfy his curiosity, smile a little at the physical pleasure seeing her gave him, and walk away. But he knew he wouldn't see her; some breaks were better made cleanly. He was still who he was and did what he did, so there was no point in daydreams, no matter how pleasurable.

Knowing that was one thing; turning off those desires was another. He would do what he had to do, but what he wanted to do was hold her, just once, and let her know it was him she was kissing, him making love to her. Just once he wanted to strip her naked and have her, and once would have to be enough because he couldn't dare risk more.

But he had a snowball's chance in hell of having that "once," so finally he turned off the daydream, rolled over, and went to sleep.

John arrived at Frank's house as he had the night before, in a car with blacked-out windows. He backed into the attached garage, the doors of which slid up as he approached and down as soon as his car was inside. He had spent the day digging out more details about Ronsard, trying to plot a course on getting inside Ronsard's mansion and getting the information he needed; nothing had immediately presented itself, but eventually it would.

Frank opened the door, an abstract expression on his face that was evidently due to the sheaf of papers he still clutched in one hand. Frank never quit working, it seemed, not even at home; he simply changed locations. While Dodie was alive he had made a real effort to put his job aside and just be with her, but more often than not he had become lost in his thoughts and she would laughingly shoo him into his office. Now, with Dodie gone, Frank often worked sixteen hours a day.

"I was just getting coffee," he said to John. "Go on into the library and I'll bring it in there."

John stopped in his tracks and quizzically regarded his old friend. Frank wasn't a domestic person; he tried, but he didn't have a coffee-making gene in his body. John had quickly learned, after Dodie's death, that if he wanted coffee in Frank's house he'd better make it himself if he wanted it to be drinkable.

Seeing the look, Frank said irritably, "I didn't make it, Bridget did." Bridget was his housekeeper, an Agency employee who had looked after Frank and Dodie since Frank became DDO. She went home after serving Frank his supper and cleaning up the kitchen, assuming he was eating at home that night; she must have made the coffee and put it in a thermos to keep it hot

"In that case, yes, I'd like a cup." Grinning, John strolled out of the kitchen, with Frank's muttered "Smart ass," following him.

The door to the library was open. John walked in and stopped just past the threshold, his mind blank for a moment except for a silent, savage curse. Damn Frank and his meddling!

Niema Burdock rose slowly out of the chair where she had been sitting, her face pale in the mellow lamplight. Her eyes were as big and dark as he remembered; darker, narrowing as she stared at him and said one word, tight with disbelief: "Tucker."

John forced himself to move, to step inside the library as casually as if he had known she was going to be there. He closed the door; let Frank make of *that* what he pleased. "Actually," he said, as if five years hadn't passed, "you were right. Tucker *isn't* my name. It's John Medina."

He was never at a loss; he had been trained not to panic, not to lose focus. But this was a shock, the impact of her sudden presence as powerful as if he had been punched in the gut. He hadn't realized, he thought, how hungry he had been for the sight of her, otherwise why blurt out something he had kept from her five years ago?

Almost no one who met him knew his real name. It was safer that way, for both parties. So why had he told her, this woman who had every reason, if not to actually hate him, to at least avoid him? She had heard him tell her husband to, in effect, kill himself. She had been standing there staring at him with her eyes black as night, her face paper white with shock, when he told Dallas to press the button that would end his life as well as complete the mission. That wasn't something a woman forgot, or forgave.

She was almost as pale now. For a moment he hoped she hadn't heard of him before. It was possible; he was in black ops, his name whispered among people in operations, but she worked on the technical side and would seldom, if ever, come into contact with field operatives.

Her throat worked. "John Medina is ... just a legend," she said, her voice strained, and he knew she had indeed heard of him.

"Thank you," he replied casually, "though I don't know if I like the word 'just.' I'm real enough. Want to bite me to prove it?" He sat down on the edge of Frank's desk, one foot swinging, his posture totally relaxed despite the tension screaming through him.

"I thought pinching was the proven method."

"I prefer biting."

Color tinged her cheeks, but she didn't look away "Your eyes were brown," she accused. "Now they're blue."

"Colored contacts. Blue is the real color of my eyes."

"Or you're wearing colored contacts now."

"Come look," he invited. As he had expected, though, she didn't want to get that dose to him.

She gathered her composure and sank back into her chair. She crossed her legs, her posture as relaxed as his. Maybe more so; her movement riveted his attention on her legs, on the few inches of thigh she had revealed. He

hadn't seen her legs before; she had worn pants, and often those had been modestly covered by the chador. They were very nice legs: slender, shapely, lightly tanned. She still looked to be in very good shape, as if she worked out regularly.

Abruptly aware of the response of his body, John snapped himself back under control. He glanced up and found her watching him, and automatically wondered if she had crossed her legs to distract him. If so, it had worked. He was irritated at himself, because sex was one of the oldest, most hackneyed distractions, and still he had let himself slip.

Frank opened the door, breaking the silence between them. He carried a tray on which there was a large thermos of coffee and three cups, but no sugar or cream. "Have you two introduced yourselves?" he asked smoothly, glancing at John so he could take the lead in giving Niema whatever name he chose.

"He says his name is really John Medina," Niema said. Her voice was cool and calm, and once again John had to admire her poise. "Five years ago I knew him as Darrell Tucker."

Frank flashed John another glance, this one full of surprise that he had so quickly revealed his true identity. "He goes by a lot of names; it's part of his job description."

"Then John Medina may be an alias, too."

"I can't give you any comfort there," Frank said with wry humor. "I've known him most of his life, and he's the real McCoy-or Medina, in this case."

John watched her absorb that, saw the quick suspicion in her eyes that Frank might be lying, as well. She wasn't a naive, trusting little soul, but neither was she experienced at completely hiding her thoughts and emotions.

"Why am I here?" she asked abruptly, switching her gaze to John.

Frank drew her attention back to him. "We have a ... situation." He poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her.

"How does that involve me? Could I have some cream and sugar, please?"

The simple question rattled Frank, unused as he was to domestic duties. He gave the tray a panicked glance, as if he hoped the requested items would materialize.

"Ah... I-"

"Never mind," she said, and composedly sipped her black coffee. "I can drink it like this. What's this situation?"

John restrained a bark of laughter. As he remembered very well, she *always* drank her coffee black. This was just Niema needling Frank a little, getting back at him for setting her up for such a shock. She had always been able to hold her own with the team, and the realization was still as surprising now as it had been then, because she looked like such a lady.
Frank looked at him as if asking for his help. John shrugged. This was Frank's little show, let him run it. He had no idea why Niema was there, except as Frank's heavy-handed attempt at a little matchmaking. He probably thought John needed some R and R, and since he had admitted being attracted to Niema-well, why not? Except Frank hadn't been in Iran, and he hadn't watched Niema's face while he ordered her husband to kill himself, or he would have known why not.
'Ah . . . we're very interested in the work you've been doing. An undetectable surveillance device will be invaluable. As it happens, we have an urgent need for it now. You know more about the device than anyone, since you designed it. You also have some field experience-"
"No," she interrupted. "I don't do fieldwork." She was pale again, her jaw set. She got to her feet. "If that's the only reason you wanted to talk to me, I'm sorry you wasted our mutual time. A phone call would have sufficed, and you could have saved yourself the trouble of bringing me here." She paused, then murmured ironically, "Wherever *here* is."
*"*You haven't heard all the details," Frank said, shooting another quick look at John. "And you are, might I add, an employee of the Agency, not a freelance contract agent."
"Are you going to fire her if she turns you down?" John asked interestedly, just to pin Frank down and make him squirm some more.
"No, of course not-"
"Then we have nothing more to discuss," she said firmly. "Please have me taken home."
Frank sighed, and gave up. "Of course. I apologize for the inconvenience, Mrs. Burdock." He wasn't a man accustomed to apology, but he did it well.
John let him reach for the phone before he interrupted. "Don't bother," he said easily, abandoning his lazy sprawl against the desk. "I'll drive her home."

Chapter Six

Niema got into the car and buckled her seat belt. "Shouldn't I be blindfolded or something?" she asked wryly, and she was only half joking. The garage door in front of them slid up and he pulled out, then turned left onto the street.

Tucker-no, she had to get used to thinking of him as Medina-actually smiled. "Only if you want. Don't tell me they blindfolded you to bring you here."

"No, but I kept my eyes closed." She wasn't kidding. She hadn't wanted to know where the deputy director of operations lived. She had lost her taste for adventure five years ago, and knowing where Frank Vinay lived came under the heading of information that could be dangerous.

Medina's smile turned into a grin. He was really a very good-looking man, she thought, watching his face in the dim green glow of the dash lights. In the past five years when she remembered him it had been in terms of what happened, not in how he looked, and his face had faded from her memory. Still, she had recognized him immediately, even without the heavy stubble of beard.

Seeing him was a bigger shock than she had ever thought it would be, but then again, she'd never imagined she *would* see him again, so there was no way she could have prepared for it. Tucker-no, *Medina*-was such an integral part of the worst thing that had ever happened to her that just hearing his voice had thrown her five years into the past.

"I should have known you were regular CIA, instead of a contract agent." In retrospect she felt like a gullible idiot, but then things were always clearer in the mind's rearview mirror.

"Why would you?" He sounded interested. "My cover was as a contract agent."

Looking back, she realized that Dallas had known, which was why he had urged Medina to stay behind rather than risk capture. And Dallas, an ex-SEAL accustomed to top security clearances and need-to-know, had kept the information to himself, not even telling her, his wife. But she worked for the Agency now, and she knew that was how things were. You kept things to yourself, you didn't tell friends or neighbors what you did for a living; discretion became second nature.

"Dallas knew, didn't he?" she asked, just for affirmation.

"He knew I wasn't a contract agent. He didn't know my real name, though. When I worked with him before, he knew me as Tucker."
"Why did you tell me? It wasn't necessary." She wished he hadn't. If even half the rumors she had heard whispered about the elusive, shadowy John Medina were true, then she didn't want to know who he really was. Ignorance, in this case, was safer than discretion.
"Perhaps it was."
His voice was reflective, and he didn't explain further.
"Why did you have a cover with us? We were a team. None of us were out to get you."
"If you didn't know my real name, then, if any of you were captured, you couldn't reveal it."
'And if you were captured?"
"I wouldn't be."
"Oh? How would you prevent it?"
"Poison," he said matter-of-factly.
Niema recoiled. She knew that some operatives, back in the tense Cold War days, had carried a suicide pill, usually cyanide, that they were to swallow rather than allow themselves to be captured. To know that John Medina did the same made her feel sick to her stomach.
"But- "
"It's better than being tortured to death." He shrugged. "Over the years, I've pissed off a lot of people. They would all like to have a turn removing my body parts."
From what she had heard about his exploits, he was understating the case. It was even rumored he had killed his own wife, because he discovered she was a double agent and was about to expose a highly placed mole. Niema didn't believe *that* particular rumor, but then neither had she believed John Medina was a real man. Not one of the people who talked about him had ever met him, seen him, or knew anyone who had. She had thought him a kind of... urban myth, though one restricted to intelligence circles.
She couldn't quite take in that not only was he real, but she knew him. And even more astounding was how *accepting* he was of everything entailed in being who he was, as if his notoriety was simply the price he had to pay to do what he wanted.
"Given your circumstances," she said with asperity, "you shouldn't have told me now, either." The fact that he had made her suspicious.

"Actually, I was so surprised to see you that I blurted it out without thinking."
The idea of him being taken off guard was so out of character that she snorted, and stretched out her left leg. "Here, pull this one, too."
"It's true," he murmured. "I didn't know you were going to be there."
"You had no idea Mr. Vinay wanted me to ... whatever it was he wanted me to do? And you just happened to show up? How likely is that?"
"Not very, but unlikely things happen every day."
"Does he expect you to talk me into taking the job?"
"Maybe. I don't know what he was thinking." Irritation colored his voice now. "I suspect, though, that he's working two angles. You'll have to ask him what those angles are."
"Since I'm not taking the job, whatever it is, it doesn't matter what the angles are, does it?"
He grinned suddenly. "I don't think he was expecting to be turned down, especially not so fast. Not many people can tell him no."
"Then he needed the experience."
He said admiringly, "No wonder Dallas was so crazy about you. Not many people stood up to him, either. He looked as tough as he was."
Yes, he had. Dallas had been almost six-four and weighed two hundred and thirty-five hard-muscled pounds. His biggest strength hadn't been his body, though, as superbly conditioned as it was; his mind, his determination and focus, were what had made him ... extraordinary.
She had never been able to talk about Dallas to anyone. For the past five years her memories of him had stayed bottled up inside; they hadn't been married very long, hadn't *known* each other very long, so they hadn't had time to develop a circle of friends. Because of their jobs they had traveled a lot; they had gotten married in a hurry in Reno, had that wonderful honeymoon in Aruba, then Dallas had been gone for six weeks and she had been in Seattle working on surveillance for Customs. With one thing or another, they hadn't even met each other's families.
After Dallas's death she had gone to Indiana and met his folks, held hands, and cried with them, but they had been too shocked, still too involved in the whys and hows to reminisce. She had written to them occasionally, but they hadn't had time to develop a relationship before Dallas's death, and after he was gone neither party seemed to have the spirit to develop one now.

Her own family, her nice, normal suburban family in Council Bluffs, Iowa, had been sympathetic and , caring, but neither were they completely able to hide their disapproval of her and Dallas being in Iran in the first place. Her entire family, parents, brothers Mason and Sam, sister Kiara, wanted nothing more than the familiar routine of nine-to-five, marriage, kids, living in the same town from cradle to grave, knowing everyone in the neighborhood, shopping at the same grocery store every week. They hadn't known what to do with the cuckoo in their nest, hadn't had any idea of the restlessness to see *more*, the urge to do *more,* that had driven Niema to leave her hometown and seek out adventure.

She had paid penance for the last five years and lived alone with memories that no one else shared. She might whisper Dallas's name in her thoughts, or sometimes when she was alone the grief would well up and she would say his name aloud, an aching, unanswered cry, but she hadn't been able to talk about him with anyone.

But Medina had known him, had been there. He would understand. He was, of all people, the only one who would fully understand.

She hadn't resisted letting him drive her home; her guilt wasn't his fault. Maybe she needed to talk to him, to put this part of the past behind her. She might have already done it, had she known how to contact him, but after they reached Paris he had vanished.

Lacing her hands in her lap, she stared out the windshield as the dark streets wound by. She wondered if Dallas would love her now, if he would even recognize the woman she had become. He had fallen in love with a gutsy young woman who'd had a taste for adventure. Those days were over, though. She was through taking risks.

"I never thanked you," she murmured. "For what you did."

His eyebrows lifted in surprise, and he slanted a quick look at her. *"Thank* me?"

She got the impression he wasn't just surprised, but astounded. "For getting me out of Iran," she explained and wondered why she needed to. "I know I was a liability coming out." *Basket case* was actually a better description. Long patches of those days were lost from her memory; she couldn't remember leaving the hut at all. She did remember walking through the cold, dark mountains, her emotional misery so intense that she hadn't felt any physical pain.

"I promised Dallas."

The words were simple, and ironclad.
It hurt to hear Dallas's name spoken aloud. In five years, not a day had gone by that she hadn't thought about her husband. The terrible pain was gone, replaced sometimes by an ache, a loneliness, but mostly she remembered the good times she'd had with him. She regretted that they hadn't had more time together, that they hadn't had the chance to learn all the little things about each other. Hearing his name brought back the ache, but it was softened now, gentled into something bearable, and she could hear the regret in Medina's voice. What time hadn't softened was her own guilt, the knowledge that Dallas wouldn't have been on that job if she hadn't wanted to take it.
And perhaps she wasn't the only one who felt guilty. Medina, under whatever guise, struck her as a man who would do what was expedient and then forget about it, but he hadn't. He had taken care of her, just as he had promised Dallas, when leaving her to freeze to death in the mountains would have been much easier. She couldn't imagine what had motivated him, but she was deeply grateful all the same. "Do you think I blamed *you?*'" she asked softly. "No. I never did."
Again she had surprised him. Looking at him, she saw the way his jaw tightened. "Maybe you should have," he replied.
"Why? What could you have done?" She had relived that night a thousand times on the hard journey to accepting reality. "We never could have gotten him out of the plant alive, much less out of Iran. You knew it. He knew it too. He chose to complete the mission and chose a quick death over a slow, terrible one." She managed a crooked smile. "Like you with your cyanide pill."
"I'm the one who told him to push the button."
"He would have done it no matter what you said. He was my husband, and I knew when I married him that he was a damn hero." She had known the type of man Dallas was, known that he would feel he had to complete the job at all costs, and that cost had included his life.
Medina fell silent, concentrating on his driving. She gave him directions on the next turn; she lived in McLean, on the same side of the river as Langley, so the commute was easy.
Once before she had sat beside him as he drove through the night, and he had been silent then, too. It was after Hadi had "liberated" a 1968 Ford Fairlane from the Iranian village, and they had driven into Tehran together.

Then Hadi had split off, and she and Medina had gone on alone. She had been feverish and aching, battered by grief and guilt, barely functional. Medina had taken care of her. When the nail wound in her arm became infected, from somewhere he procured a vial of antibiotic and gave her an injection. He made certain she ate and slept, and he got her across the border into Turkey. He had been there during the first awful paroxysm of grief and hadn't tried to comfort her, knowing that weeping was better than holding it in.

All in all, she owed this man her life.

Blaming Medina would have been easy, much easier than blaming herself. But the inner steel that had attracted Dallas to her in the first place made it impossible, after his death, for her to do anything but face the truth: When Medina approached her and Dallas about the job, Dallas wanted to decline. She was the one who wanted to take it. She could tell herself that the job had been important, and it had been, but there had been others Medina could have recruited if she and Dallas had turned him down.

Yes, Dallas had been very good at explosives. She was very good with electronics, whether it was putting together a functional radio or detonator or bugging a phone line. But other people were also good at those things, and they would have done the job just as well. She had wanted to go, not because she was indispensable, but because she craved the adventure.

As a child she had always been the one to climb highest in the tree, to tie bed sheets together and use them to slide down from a second-story window. She loved roller coasters and white-water rafting and had even toyed with the idea, during high school, of working on a bomb squad. To her parents' relief she had instead begun studying electronics and languages, only to find that her expertise took her farther away from home and into more danger than she ever would have gone with the local bomb squad.

Niema knew her own nature. She loved the thrill, the adrenaline rush, of danger. She had been seeking that thrill, though in pursuit of a legitimate goal, and she had gotten Dallas killed. If not for her, they would have been looking for a home on the North Carolina coast, as Dallas had wanted.

If not for her, Dallas would still be alive.

So she had given it up, that high-voltage life she had so loved. The cost was too high. Dallas's last thought had been for her, and that knowledge meant too much for her to carelessly put her life in jeopardy again.

Medina pulled up to the curb just past her driveway, then reversed into it so the car was heading out. House key in hand, she got out of the car. Dallas had also parked so the car was heading out, too, a simple precaution that allowed for faster movement and made it more difficult to be blocked in. Funny how she hadn't thought about that in years; she simply pulled into the garage, as millions of other people did. But Medina's method of parking brought so many things back to her in a rush: the sudden alertness, the clarity of her senses, the quickened pulse. She found herself looking around, examining shadows and searching with her peripheral vision for movement. Medina had done the same thing, his surveillance much faster and routine.
"Damn it," Niema said irritably and marched up the sidewalk to the curved archway that sheltered her front door.
" 'Damn it,' what?" He was beside her, moving silently, positioning himself so that he reached the archway first. No assailants lurked there, not that she had expected any. She just wished she hadn't noticed what he was doing.
"Damn it, I spend half an hour with you and already I'm looking for assassins in the bushes."
"There's nothing wrong with being alert and aware of your surroundings."
"Not if I were Secret Service, or even a cop, but I'm not. I just fiddle with gadgets. The only thing likely to be lurking in my bushes is a cat."
He started to reach for her house key, but she stopped him with a look.
"You're making me paranoid. Is there any reason for all this?" she asked as she unlocked the door herself and opened it. Nothing sinister happened; there were no shots, no explosions.
"Sorry. It's just a habit." She had left a couple of lights on and he looked inside, his expression interested.
"Would you like to come in? We didn't get around to drinking any of the coffee at Vinay's house." Until she heard the words, she hadn't known she was going to invite him in. They weren't exactly on easy terms, though to tell the truth she was surprised at how easy it had been to talk to him. Still, he was John Medina, not a steady, reliable, respectable bureaucrat who had just taken her out to dinner.
He stepped inside, his head up and alert, his gaze moving around, absorbing details, watching as she opened the hall closet door and disarmed the security system. She had the sudden impression that he could describe everything he had seen in that brief sweep, and perhaps even tell her the security code.

She started to close the closet door and he said, "Humor me. Reset the alarm."
Because he had good reason to be acutely security conscious, she did. Niema had bought the house three years before, when a hefty raise had given her the means to buy instead of rent, even with the outrageous property values around D.C. It was too big for one person, with three bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths, but she had justified the size by telling herself she would have space for her family to come visit, though they never had, and that the three bedrooms would make it easier to sell if she ever decided she wanted something else.
The house was vaguely Spanish in style, with arched doors and windows. She had painted the interior walls herself, choosing a soft peach for most of the house while her furnishings were dark green and turquoise. The carpet was an undistinguished beige, but it had been in good shape, so instead of replacing it she had covered it with a large rug in a geometric pattern of greens, blues, and peaches. The effect was cool and welcoming, feminine without being fussy.
"Nice," he said, and she wondered what conclusions he had drawn about her by seeing the way she had furnished her house.
"The kitchen is this way." She led the way, turning on the overhead light. She loved her kitchen. The room was long, with a bank of windows on the right wall. A long, narrow island topped with a mosaic of blue and terra-cotta tiles provided a wonderful work area for any cooking project, no matter how ambitious. Small pots of herbs grew on the window sills, lending their fragrance to the air. The far end of the room was a cozy breakfast nook, the small table and two chairs flanked by lush ferns.
She began making coffee, while Medina went to the windows and closed all the blinds. "Doesn't it get old?" she asked. "Having to always be on guard?"
"I don't even think about it now, I've done it for so long. And you should close the blinds anyway." Hands in his pockets, he strolled around the kitchen. Pausing in front of the block of oak that held her knife set, he pulled out the chef's knife and tested its edge on his thumb, then returned it to its slot. His next stop was the back door, the top half of which was glass; he closed the blinds there too and checked the lock.
"I usually do. I don't believe in inviting trouble." As soon as the words were out, she realized her own lie. Trouble didn't come any bigger than John Medina, and inviting him in was exactly what she had done.

"You need a stronger lock here," he said absently. "In fact, you need a new door. All anyone has to do is pop out one of these panes of glass, reach in, and unlock the door."
"I'll see to it first thing in the morning."
The dryness of her tone must have reached him, because he looked over at her and grinned. "Sorry. You already know all that, right?"
"Right." She took down two cups from the cabinets. "The crime rate in this neighborhood is low, and I *do* have the security system. I figure if anyone wanted in, they could break any number of windows and get in through them, not just the ones in the door."
He pulled one of the tall stools away from the island and propped one hip on it. He looked relaxed, she thought, though she wondered if he ever truly was, given who he was and what he did. She poured the coffee and set one cup in front of him, then faced him across the tiled island top. "Okay, now tell me why you drove me home, and don't say it was for old time's sake."
"Then I won't." He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment as he sipped his coffee, but whatever distracted him was quickly gone. "How undetectable is this new bug you've developed? Tell me about it."
She made a face. "Nothing is totally undetectable, you know. But it doesn't cause a fluctuation in voltage, so an oscilloscope can't pick it up. If anyone swept with a metal detector, though, that's a different story."
"Frank seemed excited about it."
Niema was immediately wary. "It isn't that big a deal, because like I said, it's good only in certain situations. If you know how someone routinely sweeps for surveillance devices, then you can tailor the bug to fit. Why would he even mention it to you?" The bug had useful applications, but it was far from being an earth-shattering discovery that was going to change the face of intelligence gathering. Why would the deputy director of operations even know about it, much less call her to a meeting at his private residence?
"I asked how you were doing. He told me what you've been working on."
Her wariness turned into outright suspicion. Okay, it was feasible that Medina would ask about her, but that didn't explain why Vinay would know anything at all about her, much less anything about her current project.
"Why would the DDO know anything about me? We work in totally different departments." The vast majority of CIA employees were not the glamorous operatives of Hollywood fame; they were clerks and analysts

and techno nerds. Until Iran, Niema had craved the thrill of fieldwork, but not now. Now she was content to work on the electronics side of intelligence gathering and come home to her own house every night.
"Because I asked him to keep tabs on you."
The bald admission astonished her. "Why would you do that?" She didn't like the idea of someone constantly checking up on her.
"I wanted to know if you were all right, plus I never lose track of someone whose expertise I might want to use again."
A chill ran up her spine. Now she knew why he'd driven her home; he wanted to draw her back into that world she had walked away from when Dallas died. He was going to figuratively wave a shot of whiskey under an alcoholic's nose, lure her away from the straight and narrow. He couldn't do it unless she still had the old urge to find that adrenaline rush, she thought in growing panic. If she had truly changed, nothing he could say would entice her away from the safe life she had built.
She thought she had changed. She thought the hunger for excitement was gone. Why, then, did she feel so panicky, as if the smell of adventure was going to make her fall off the wagon?
"Don't you dare ask-" she began.
"I need you, Niema."

Chapter Seven

Damn it, why hadn't she remarried? John thought savagely. Or at least gotten herself safely involved with some steady, nine-to-five bureaucrat?
He had stayed away from her for a lot of very good reasons. His job wasn't conducive to relationships. He had brief affairs, and nothing resembling an emotional attachment. He was away for months at a time, with no communication during those times. His life expectancy sucked.
Moreover, he had thought he would be the last person on earth she'd ever want to see. He was staggered to realize she didn't blame him for Dallas's death, had never blamed him. Even though she had never trusted him, she didn't lay that at his door. It took a person of excruciating fairness to absolve him of all blame as she had done.
He had learned not to agonize over the choices he had to make. Some of them were hard decisions, and every one of them had left their mark on his

soul, or what was left of it. But other people seldom saw things the same way, and that, too, he'd learned to shrug off. As his father's old friend Jess McPherson once said, he was hell on people. He used them, exploited them, and then either betrayed them or simply disappeared from their lives. The very nature of his job demanded that he not let anyone get dose enough to touch him emotionally. He had forgotten that once and let a woman get close to him; hell, he had even married her. Venetia had been a disaster, both professionally and personally, and in the fourteen years since he had been strictly solo.

Several times during the past five years he had been relieved that Niema Burdock probably hated his guts. That put her safely out of his range and killed the occasional temptation to get in touch with her. It was better that way. He would just check on her now and then, make certain she was all right-after all, he'd promised Dallas he would take care of her-and that would be that.

He had expected her to find someone else. She was young, only twenty-five when she was widowed, and both smart and pretty. He had *wanted* her to find someone else, because that would put her forever out of reach. But she hadn't, and he was through with being noble.

He wasn't giving her any more chances.

But she would run like hell if he simply asked her out. He would have to play her gently, like taking a world-record trout on gossamer line, never letting her feel the hook that was reeling her in until it was too late for escape. On his side was her own nature, the adventurousness she seemed determined to bury, and a very real situation that needed to be finessed. Weighed against him was the fact that, despite the uneasy bond forged between them in Iran, she didn't trust him; he'd always known she was smart.

Frank had asked her to his house on a bogus excuse, in a well-meant but awkward attempt to do a little matchmaking. Well, maybe it had worked. And maybe the excuse wasn't so bogus after all. John's mind raced, weighing risks and benefits. He decided to go for it.

"Delta Flight 183 was sabotaged. The FBI labs have turned up traces of explosive, but no detonator. The stuff seems to be a new, self-detonating compound, probably based on RDX and developed in Europe."

She put her hands over her ears. "I don't want to hear this."

John moved around the island and took her hands down, holding her with his fingers wrapped around her slender wrists. "Anything in Europe goes through an arms dealer named Louis Ronsard. He lives in the south of France."
"No," she said.
"I need you to help me get into his files and find out where the stuff is made and who has already gotten a shipment of it."
"No," she said again, but with a touch of desperation in her voice. She didn't try to pull away from him.
"Ronsard is susceptible to a pretty face-"
"Good God, you want me to *whore* for you?" she asked incredulously, dark eyes narrowing in dangerous warning.
"Of course not," he snapped. No way in hell would he let Ronsard, or anyone else, have her. "I want you to get an invitation to his villa so you can put a bug in his office."
"There are probably a thousand people in this city alone who could do that. You don't need me."
"I need *you*. Of those thousand people who could do the work, how many of them are women, because I can guarantee you no guy is going to catch Ronsard's interest and get invited to his villa. How many? Twenty, maybe? Say a hundred. Ronsard is thirty-five; how many women out of that hundred are roughly his age? And out of that number, how many of them are as attractive as you?"
She jerked on her wrists. John merely tightened his hold, while taking care not to hurt her. She was so close he could see the velvety texture of her skin.
"You speak French-"
"I'm rusty."
"You'd pick it up again in no time. I need someone who's young, pretty, speaks the language, and has the skill. You meet all the qualifications."
"Get someone else!" she said furiously. "Don't try to tell me you couldn't find a contract agent who met all your criteria, someone who wouldn't know your real name. You make it sound like I'm some Mata Hari, but I've never done any undercover work at all. I'd probably get us both killed-"
"No you wouldn't. You've been on other ops-"
"Five years ago. And I just did technical stuff, not any role-playing." She added coldly, "That's your forte."

He let the slam roll off his back. After all, she was right. "I need you," he repeated. "Just this once."
"This once until something else comes up and you decide you 'need' me again."
"Niema..." He rubbed his thumbs over the insides of her wrists in a subtle caress, then released her and stepped away to pick up his coffee cup. He had pushed her enough physically; now was the time to back off and give her back control of herself, so she wouldn't feel as threatened. "I've seen you work. You're fast, you're good, and you can build a transmitter from pieces of junk. You're perfect for the job."
"I went to pieces on the last job."
"You had just heard your husband die." He didn't mince words and saw her flinch. "You're allowed to be a little shell-shocked. And you kept up anyway, we didn't have to carry you."
She turned away, absently rubbing her wrists.
"Please."
Of all the words he could have used, that was the least expected. He saw her spine stiffen. "Don't try to sweet-talk me."
"I wouldn't dream of it," he murmured.
"You're so damn sneaky. I knew it the first time I saw you. You maneuver and manipulate and-" She stopped, and turned back to face him. Her throat worked, and her big dark eyes looked haunted. "Damn you," she whispered.
He was silent, letting the lure entice her. Danger was as addictive as any drug. Firemen, cops, special forces personnel, field operatives, even the emergency department staff in hospitals-they all knew the rush, the incredible thrill when your senses are heightened and your skin feels as if it won't be able to contain all the energy pulsing through your muscles. SWAT teams, DEA agents-they were adrenaline junkies. So was he. And so was Niema.
He did what he did partly because he loved his country, and someone had to be in the sewers taking care of the shit, but also because he loved walking on the knife edge of danger, continually poised on the brink of disaster, with only his skill and his wits to keep him alive. Niema was no different. She wanted to be, but she wasn't.
"Do you know how prevalent terrorism is?" he asked conversationally. "It isn't something that happens in other countries; it happens here, all the time. Flight 183 is just the latest episode. In 1970,

Orlando, Florida, was threatened with a nuclear device if it didn't cough up a million bucks. In 1977, Hanafi Muslims took hostages in the D.C. City Council offices, and a couple of other places. In 1985, the FBI caught three Sikh Indians sent over here with a list of assassination targets. There was the World Trade Center bombing. Lockerbie, Scotland. Hell, I could give you a list three feet long."
She bent her head, but he had her undivided attention.
"We catch most explosives because of the detonator, not the explosive itself. If the bastards have come up with an explosive that begins as a stable compound, then degrades and becomes unstable and detonates, we have a big problem. One bridge taken out can foul shipping over the entire eastern seaboard. A blown dam threatens our entire power grid. Airplanes are particularly vulnerable. So I need to find out where the stuff is being manufactured, and Ronsard is my best bet. I'll find out some other way, eventually, but how many people will die in the meantime?"
She still didn't respond. He said briskly, as if she had already agreed to work with him, "I'll be there under a different cover, using an identity I've been building for quite a while. I would take you in with me as an assistant or a girlfriend, but Ronsard doesn't issue 'invitee and guest' invitations. You have to get invited in separately."
"No. I won't do it."
"Once we're in, I'll have Ronsard introduce us. I'll pretend to be smitten. That'll give us an excuse to be together."
She shook her head. "I'm not going to do it."
"You have to. I've already told you too much."
"And now you have to kill me, right?"
He put his hands in his pockets, his blue eyes alive with amusement. "I wasn't thinking of anything quite that James Bondish."
"That's what this whole thing sounds like, something out of a James Bond movie. You need someone trained in cloak-and-dagger stuff, not me."
"You'll have time to brush up on basic handgun skills. That's all you'd need, though if everything goes right, you won't even need that. We get in, you place the bug, I get into his files and copy them, and we get out. That's it."
"You make it sound as easy as brushing your teeth. If it were that easy, you would already have done it. He-what was his name? Ronsard?-Ronsard must have a pretty good security system."
"Plus a private army guarding the place," John admitted.

"So the job would be a lot trickier than you're trying to make it sound."
"Not if it goes right."
"And if it goes wrong?"
He shrugged, smiling. "Fireworks."
She wavered. He saw it, saw the temptation in her eyes. Then she shook her head. "Get someone else."
"There is no one else with quite your qualifications. The fact that you haven't been active in five years is a plus, because no one is likely to know you. The intelligence community is a fairly small one. I can build you an identity that will stand up under any investigation Ronsard does."
"What about you? You haven't exactly been inactive."
"No, but I go to a lot of trouble to make sure no one knows what I look like, or who I am. Trust me. My cover is so deep sometimes I don't know who I am myself."
She gave a little laugh, shaking her head, and John knew he had her.
"Okay," she said. "I know I'm going to regret it, but... okay."
"John," Frank Vinay said carefully, "do you know what you're doing?"
"Probably not. But I'm doing it anyway."
"Ronsard isn't anyone's fool."
John was relaxed in one of the big leather chairs in Frank's library. He steepled his fingers under his chin while he studied the chessboard. They had resumed the game that had been interrupted two days before, when an agent brought over the preliminary report on the crash of Flight 183.
"You're the one who brought her into it," he pointed out.
Frank flushed. "I was being an interfering fool," he grumbled.
"And a sneaky one, or are you going to tell me you didn't have it in mind that I'd be a lot more willing to step into your shoes if I had an incentive to retire from field ops?" He moved a knight. "Check"
"Son of a bitch." Frank glared at the board for a minute, then looked up at John. "You have to retire some time, and I can't think of a better place for you to use your expertise than in my office."
" 'Some time' isn't now. Until I'm compromised, I can do more good in the field."
"Taking Niema Burdock into the field might make that sooner rather than later. For one thing, she knows who you are. For another"- Frank gave him a shrewd look-"could you leave her behind if necessary?"

John's eyes went flat and cold. "I can do whatever I have to do." How could Frank ask him that, after Venetia? "And Niema is probably the best choice I have available. I wouldn't use her if she wasn't. I need someone else in there with me, and she's the one most likely to get an invitation from Ronsard."
"What if he doesn't fall for it? What if he doesn't invite her?"
"Then I'll have to do what I can, but the risks go up. With her, I have a good chance of getting in and out without being detected."
"All right. I'll arrange for her to have an unspecified leave." Frank nudged a bishop into place.
"That's what I thought you'd do," John said, and moved a pawn. "Check and mate."
"Son of a bitch," Frank muttered.
"I'm crazy," Niema muttered to herself as she rolled out of bed before dawn. Yawning, she dressed: sweat pants and a T-shirt, then socks and athletic shoes. "Certified loony."
How had she let herself be convinced to help Medina on this job, when she had sworn she'd never let herself be sucked back into that life? Hadn't losing Dallas taught her anything?
But Medina was right about terrorism, right about the applications of such an explosive, right about the innocent people who would die. He was *right*, damn it. So, if she could help, then she had to do it.
She went into the bathroom and washed her face, then brushed her teeth and hair. The face that looked back at her from the mirror was still puffy from sleep, but there was color in her cheeks and a brightness to her eyes that made her hate herself. She was looking forward to this, for God's sake. Dallas had died, and she still hadn't learned anything.
"Niema! Get a move on."
She went rigid. Not quite believing what she'd heard, she opened the bathroom door and looked out into her bedroom. No one was there. She crossed over to the hall door and opened it. Light, along with the smell of freshly brewed coffee, spilled down the hall, coming from the direction of the kitchen.
"What in the *hell* are you doing in my house?" she snarled, stomping toward the kitchen. "And how did you get in?"
Medina sat at the island, a cup of coffee in his hand. He looked as if it were nine A.M. instead of four-thirty, his eyes alert, his lean body relaxed in

black sweat pants and black T-shirt. "I told you that you needed a new lock on the back door."
"What about the alarm? *I know* I set the alarm."
'And I bypassed it. With a pocketknife and six inches of wire. Have some coffee."
"No thanks." Furious, she contemplated dumping the coffee on him. She had always felt safe in her house, and now, thanks to him, she didn't. "Do you know how much I paid for that alarm system?"
"Too much. Get a dog instead." He stood up from the stool. "If you aren't going to have coffee, let's take a little run."
Thirty minutes later, she was still matching him stride for stride. Talking while jogging wasn't easy, but they hadn't even tried. They had run down the street to the park half a mile from her house, then along the silent path lit only by the occasional street light. The mood she was in, she almost hoped someone tried to mug them, not that muggings were a common occurrence in this neighborhood.
Gravel and dirt crunched under their pounding feet The early morning air was cool and fragrant. She was still breathing easily and there was still plenty of spring in her legs. She loved the feel of her muscles bunching and relaxing, and gradually she began to cool down and concentrate on nothing but the running.
Beside her, he ran as if they had just started. His stride was effortless, his breathing slow and even. Dallas had run that way, she remembered, as if he could go on at this pace for hours.
"You run like a SEAL," she said, irritated that she was panting a little.
"I should," he said easily. "If I don't, then I wasted the toughest six months of my life."
She was so surprised she almost stopped. "You went through BUD/S?"
"I *lived* through BUD/S," he corrected.
"Is that where you met Dallas?"
"No, I was a few classes ahead of him. But he ... ah, recognized some of the stuff I did the first time we worked together."
"Did you use your real name during training?"
"No. The Navy didn't do me any favors, either. They agreed to let me take the training only if I made the physical conditioning cut, and then I was in only as long as I could make the grade."
"What was the criteria for being accepted into the class?"

"A five hundred yard swim using a breast or side stroke, in twelve and a half minutes or less, then a ten minute rest, then forty-two pushups in two minutes. There was a two minute rest after the pushups, then fifty sit-ups in two minutes. Another two minute rest, then eight pull-ups, with no time limit. After a ten minute rest, then came a mile and a half run, wearing boots and fatigues, in eleven and a half minutes. Those were the *minimum* requirements. If a guy wasn't in a lot better shape than that, he didn't stand much chance making it through the real thing."

He had said all of that without gasping for breath. Impressed despite herself, she asked, "Why did you do it?"

He was silent for about fifty yards. Then he said, "The better I was trained, the better my chances were for staying alive. There was a particular job where I needed every edge I could get."

"How old were you?" He couldn't have been very old, not if he was a few classes ahead of Dallas, which meant he had begun black ops work at an early age.

"Twenty-one."

Twenty-one. Not long out of his teen years, and already so dedicated to his job that he had put himself through BUD/S, a training program so tough only about 5 percent of the men who began it made it all the way through. Now she knew why he and Dallas had been so much alike in so many ways.

"How much longer are we going to run?"

"We can stop whenever you want. You're in great shape; I don't have to worry about that."

She began slowing. "Are we likely to have to run for our lives?"

He dropped into step beside her. ""You never know."

That was when she knew she was crazy for real, because she wasn't scared.

Chapter Eight

How did you know I run every morning?" she asked as they returned to the house. The run had mellowed her considerably; early morning was her favorite time of the day. The sky was beginning to turn shades of pearl and pink, and the birds were awake and singing. She felt tired but also energized, the way she always did after a run.

"I told you, Frank kept tabs on you over the years."

"Bullshit."
He burst out laughing. She gave him an irritated look as she fished the house key out of her pocket and unlocked the door. "What's so funny?"
"Hearing you curse. You look like such a madonna-"
"What!" She stared at him in amazement.
"Angel, then. It's that sweet face of yours." Grinning, he stroked one finger down her cheek, then deftly maneuvered past and stepped into the house ahead of her. She hadn't seen him reach for it, but a pistol was in his hand.
"You look as if you wouldn't understand most swearwords if you heard them." He was moving, examining the house, as he spoke.
She rolled her eyes and followed him inside. "I'll try to stick to 'gosh' and 'darn,' then, so I won't shock you. And don't think you can change the subject Mr. Vinay hasn't just 'kept tabs' on me, has he? I've been under pretty dose surveillance. Tell me why."
"The surveillance isn't constant. It was at first, to establish your routine. Now it's just often enough to make certain you're okay and to see if anything's changed."
"Tell me why you've wasted Agency time and manpower like that." She had to raise her voice because he was down the hall checking the bedrooms.
"I haven't. Frank used a private agency."
Before, she had been irritated and disbelieving; now she was downright astounded. She slammed the door with a thud. ""You paid for a private agency to watch me? For God's sake, Tucker, if you wanted to know, why didn't you just pick up the phone and call?"
He was coming back up the dark hall toward her, Because he was wearing black, he was difficult to see; only his fade and bare arms and hands made him visible. Part of it was the way he moved, she thought absently. He was fluid, noiseless; you had to rely only on your eyes to detect him, because he was utterly silent.
"John," he said.
"What?"
"You called me Tucker. My name is John."
He stood directly in front of her, so close she could feel the animal heat generated by their run, smell the hot odors of sweat and man. She took a step back and tilted her head so she could look at his face. "I haven't quite adjusted yet. *You* were Tucker to me for five years, whether or not I ever saw you. You've been Medina for less than twelve hours."

"Not Medina. John. Call me by my first name."
He seemed strangely intent on this name business, standing motionless, his gaze fastened on her face. "All right, 'John' it is. I'll probably slip, though, especially when I get pissed at you-which so far is averaging at least once an hour."
He grinned, and she wondered if it was because he so easily irritated her or because she had said 'pissed.' What did the man think she was, a nun? He was going to make her uncomfortable if he kept laughing every time she said something the least bit blue.
She poked him in the chest with one finger. It was like poking a steel plate, with no give beneath the skin. "Since you'll be using another name when we get to France, shouldn't I be getting used to calling you that? What if I slip up then?"
"I'll be careful not to piss you off."
"You aren't going to tell me?" she asked incredulously.
"Not yet."
She pushed past him. "I'm going to take a shower. Lock the door behind you when you leave."
She fumed as she showered. There was no reason for him not to give her his cover name. He just loved being contrary and secretive, though it was such a habit for him now he probably didn't realize-no, of course he realized. He did everything deliberately; she had noticed that about him in Iran.
It followed, then, that he had intentionally revealed his own name, rather than being so surprised to see her that he blurted it out. John Medina didn't blurt out anything. He couldn't have lived this long if he did. The question was-why? He could have posed as Tucker, and she would never have known any differently. Mentally shrugging, she put the question aside. Who knew why Medina did anything?
She took her time in the bathroom, indulging in her morning ritual of moisturizing her skin, then smoothing on a body oil with a subtle scent that lingered all day. She didn't have to be at work until nine, so she didn't have to hurry. That was one reason she got up so early; she didn't like rushing around and arriving at work already frazzled. Of course, she usually got more sleep than she had last night, but Medina hadn't left until well past her normal bedtime.
Going into her bedroom, she took out a matching navy blue set of underwear, but only put on the panties. She wore a bra while she was

jogging and at work, but didn't bother while she was at home. She put on her terry-cloth robe and snugly belted it, pulled her wet hair out from under the shawl collar, and walked barefoot down the hall to the kitchen to see if the coffee Medina had made was still drinkable.
He was sitting at the island bar, drinking coffee, much as he had been before. She checked only briefly, then went to the coffee pot and poured herself a cup. "I thought you were leaving."
"Why?"
She turned to face him, leaning against the cabinet and cradling the cup in her hand. His hair was wet, she noticed.
"I used your other bathroom for a shower," he said. "Hope you don't mind. I had to put these clothes back on, though."
"No, I don't mind. But I still thought you were leaving. I have to go to work."
"No, you don't. You're on indefinite leave."
She sipped her coffee, hiding her shock-and, yes, her irritation. "That's news to me."
"Frank took care of it last night. Until this job is finished, you're mine."
She didn't know if she liked the sound of that. A funny little pang tightened her stomach. She took refuge in her coffee again, hiding her expression.
He looked so pantherish and male, dressed all in black, lounging at his ease in her cheerful kitchen.
The T-shirt he wore clung to him, revealing the breadth of his shoulders and the flatness of his stomach. He was tall and lean, but more muscular than he looked when wearing street clothes. He had meant his words one way, but his physical presence was so strong she couldn't stop herself from a brief sexual speculation. Did his stamina extend to lovemaking? If so ... wow.
Immediately she pulled her thoughts away from that direction; nothing but trouble there. "So what am I supposed to do with my time until we're ready to leave? When *do* we leave, anyway?" she asked briskly.
"About a week. It takes time to set up a cover as foolproof as yours will be. In the meantime, we train. How are you with a handgun and self-defense?"
"Rusty."
"Have you had any formal self-defense training?"
"No. Just a rape-prevention course, the usual self-defense stuff." And the rudimentary training Dallas had begun with her, but that was five years ago, and she hadn't kept it up.

"Okay. We won't have time for anything in-depth, but in a week's time I can have you at a level where you can hold your own with most men. You're in good shape already, so that helps."
Great. It looked as if she was going to be in his company nonstop for a week. She sighed and took a skillet out of the cabinet. "I'm not doing anything else until I eat. What do you want for breakfast?"
"Take your pick," Medina said, indicating the small arsenal he had laid out on a bench. They were in a private firing range, used by CIA personnel. The huge, barnlike building was empty except for the two of them.
It wasn't anything fancy, having been built more for use than looks. The far wall of the range was stacked with sand bags and bales of hay, so no rounds of ammunition went through the walls to do damage to anything or anyone outside. The walls themselves were lined with what looked like pegboard, to contain the noise. Big industrial lights hung overhead, but they were individually controlled so that the lighting conditions could be adjusted
He indicated the first weapon. "This is a Colt .45. It's a heavy-duty cannon, with a lot of stopping power. The next one is a Smith & Wesson .357 revolver. Again, it's pretty heavy. But they're both as reliable as the sun, so you might want to practice with them. I wouldn't recommend them for regular use, though, because of the weight. You need something lighter."
He indicated the other weapons. "The next one is a SIG Sauer P226, 9mm. It's my personal favorite. The other automatic is an H&K P9S. It's half a pound lighter than the Colt, and H&K makes a fine weapon. You can't go wrong with either one."
Niema studied the handguns, then picked each one up in turn. The two revolvers were so heavy she could barely aim them. The H&K was more manageable, but for sheer ease of handling the SIG suited her much better. "Looks like the SIG is going to be my favorite, too." She wasn't an expert with firearms, but neither was she a rank beginner. Dallas had been constitutionally unable to bear a wife who didn't know how to fire a weapon, so he had taught her the basics and insisted she practice. But that was five years ago, and she hadn't been on a firing range since.
"The SIG doesn't have a thumb safety," he said. "That lever on the left side of the frame is the decocking lever. Never, ever lower the hammer except with the decocking lever. Some SIGs are double-action and won't have the lever, but you need to get used to using it."

"It's awkward," she said after a minute spent familiarizing herself with the lever. "I can't work it without shifting my grip."
"Try using your left thumb. I learned to shoot it left-handed because I ran into the same problem."
She slid a glance at him. "Accurately?"
"Of course," he said coolly. "Or I wouldn't do it."
"Pardon me for insulting your manhood."
"My manhood isn't connected to my weapon, honey."
She bit the inside of her lip to hold back any rejoinders. That particular subject could rapidly get into dangerous waters.
A surprising amount of expertise returned as soon as she handled the weapon. She put a clip in the SIG, and Medina set the first man-shaped target at ten" yards.
"Is that all?" she asked, wondering whether or not she should be insulted.
"Most situations where you would use a handgun are fairly close quarters, and things happen fast, in five seconds or less. Work on your accuracy before you start worrying about distance. Anything much over thirty yards and you'd be better off with a rifle or shotgun, anyway."
"How do we get our weapons on board the plane?"
"We don't. I could, but it would attract too much attention. I'll get them once we're in France. By the way, we won't be traveling together."
She nodded, put on her headset, and raised the pistol. Dallas had taught her the point-and-shoot method; studies had found that people were very accurate in pointing at something, but when they tried to aim a weapon the mechanics of doing so somehow interfered with that natural ability. The idea was not to aim, but simply to point.
Medina's arms came around her from behind, his hands closing over hers and making minute adjustments in her grip. "Gently squeeze the trigger," he murmured, his voice coming through the headset.
She took a deep breath and slowly let it out, the way Dallas had taught her. When she had exhaled about half, she stopped and squeezed the trigger. The weapon jumped in her hands as if it was alive, the barrel recoiling upward from the released energy. With the headset protecting her ears, the shot was a flattened crack, like a board popping. Smoke and cordite burned her nostrils. Without a word she steadied the weapon, took a breath, and shot again.

This time Medina braced her wrists with his own hands, but this time she was more prepared for the recoil. She didn't fight it, but let her forearms absorb the shock.
"Good," Medina said, and let his arms drop from around her.
Taking her time, not rushing her shots, she emptied the clip at the target. When the clip was empty, per Medina's previous instructions, she removed the empty dip and slapped a new one in. While she was doing that he called up a new target and set this one at twenty yards. She shot all the bullets in that clip, too.
Afterward he pulled the targets up for examination. On the first target, out of a fifteen-shot clip, she had scored two rounds in the head, one in the neck, and five in the chest. "Only eight," she said in disgust. "Barely over fifty percent."
"This isn't a marksmanship competition, so don't try to be Annie Oakley. And look at it this way: With the other seven bullets, you probably scared the hell out of whoever was standing beside the target."
She had to laugh, even if it was ruefully. "Thanks a lot."
"You're welcome. Take a look at the second target."
The second target made her feel better. With both targets she had tried to divide her shots equally between the head and chest. It hadn't worked very well with the first target, and in one way she didn't approve much: only three shots went into the head. But eight shots were clustered in the chest area, meaning she had made all of those shots.
She told John what she'd been trying to do. "Forget the head," he advised. "In a tense situation, the chest is a much bigger target. You don't have to kill someone, just stop him. Now let's switch to another weapon."
"Why?"
"Because you never know what will be available. You need to be able to use whatever is at hand."
He made it sound like she was going to make a career of this, she thought grumpily. But she moved to the H&K as instructed and went through the same exercise. She ran into trouble with both the Colt and Smith & Wesson, though. The pistols were so heavy it took all her strength, using both hands, to hold her wrists steady. The first shot with the .357 jarred her teeth.
Medina stepped behind her then, wrapping his hands around her wrists and adding his strength to hers. "Unless you're with me, I'm not going to be much good with these," she said between gritted teeth.

"You're doing okay. Just take your time between shots."
She not only had to take her time, she had to work up her nerve. Now she knew why the big pistols were called hand cannons. She didn't make all her shots with them, either, but the ones that hit tore impressive holes in the cardboard targets. Afterward she had to massage her forearms to relax the muscles.
"That's enough for today," he said, taking note of her action, ""four arms will be sore if you keep on."
"Stopping suits me fine," she muttered. "I guess I'm not Rambo, either."
"Who is?" he asked dryly.
She laughed as she worked the kinks out of her shoulders. "What's next?"
"A workout, if you're up to it."
She gave him a wary look. "What kind of workout?"
"The kind where I teach you how to take care of yourself."
"I'll have you know I already take vitamins and moisturize my skin."
"Smart ass." He chuckled as he looped a companionable arm around her shoulders. "We're going to make a great team."
"A great *temporary* team," she corrected, ignoring the sudden thumping of her heart. No way was she going back into this full-time, or even part-time. This was a one-shot deal.
He let her have the last word, but she saw the self-satisfied quirk to his mouth, quickly smoothed out, that told her he planned otherwise. And that was almost as worrying as the job itself.
To her relief, he took it easy on her during the workout. The gym he took her to wasn't a gym at all, but an abandoned barn thirty miles south of D.C. Nevertheless, it was equipped with both weight machines and free weights, punching bags, what looked like gymnastic equipment, and a big, blue, three-inch thick foam mat.
"That isn't thick enough," she pronounced.
"It's thick enough. I'm not going to be dropping you on your head." He kicked off his shoes.
"It's my butt I'm worried about." Following his example, she took off her own shoes.
"I promise I'll take good care of your butt."
He was as good as his word. The workout didn't involve getting tossed around or twisted into a pretzel. "Rule one: Don't try to take anyone down," he said. "You aren't good enough. The best you can hope to do is get away,

so that's what we'll concentrate on. You have the advantage of surprise on your side, because you're small-"
"I am not."
He cast his eyes toward the cavernous ceiling. "You're smaller than most men," he amended.
"But I'm wiry."
He laughed then. "Okay, you're wiry. Where, I don't know, but I'll take your word for it. But you look-"
This time she was the one who rolled her eyes. "I know, like an angel."
"You don't like that, huh? Then let's say you look like a lady. You look as if you've never been dirty, never sweated, never swore."
"Strike three, you're out," she muttered.
"And you don't look nearly as contrary as you are."
"I'm not contrary, I'm *accurate*."
"As I was saying..." He grinned down at her. "You look like a cream puff. An angelic, ladylike cream puff. So any guy who grabs you isn't going to be expecting you to do anything except maybe cry."
Deciding she'd bedeviled him enough for now, she shrugged her shoulders back and forth, loosening them. "Okay, so teach me how to make *him* cry."
"I'll be satisfied with just teaching you how to get away."
Courtesy of the rape-prevention class she'd taken, she already knew some of the basic stuff. John refreshed her on many of the moves: how to break the hold of someone who grabbed you from the front-you brought your arms up hard and fast inside your assailant's. A quick, stiff-arm jab of the palm up and into someone's nose might not kill him, though it could if done hard enough, but it would certainly cause him pain. So would slapping your cupped palms over his ears, a move designed to rupture the ear drums. A jab of stiffened fingers into the eyes or throat was disabling.
He showed her the most vulnerable place on the throat for crushing the trachea. Without immediate help, someone with a crushed trachea would die. Even if she couldn't manage crushing power, the blow, done properly, would disable.
They moved around on the mat, into different positions and scenarios. By necessity, the drill was close contact. Niema forced herself to ignore the sensations generated by having John's tall, hard-muscled body against hers, his arms wrapped around her in various holds as he patiently instructed her on how to break those holds.

They both worked up a sweat, and he kept at it until she was panting for breath.
"Would it help if I cried uncle?" she finally asked.
"We can stop any time you want," he said, surprised.
"Great. Now you tell me."
"I don't want to make you sore. We need to train every day, to build up your strength and stamina, and we can't if your muscles are too sore to work."
He actually looked worried, so Niema said, "No, I don't think I'll be sore, but I'm still ready for a break."
"There's some water in the fridge over there. I'm going to work with the weights while you rest."
She fetched a bottle of cold water from the rusty refrigerator standing in the corner and settled down on the mat to watch. He stripped off his T-shirt and tossed it aside. Quickly she looked away and drank more water. Seeing a man without his shirt was nothing out of the ordinary, but still... this was John Medina, and he wasn't ordinary.
She stretched out on the mat and closed her eyes, so she wouldn't give in to the temptation to stare at him. There couldn't be anything between them except the job. He was black ops, she was nine-to-five, two totally opposite lifestyles. Still, for a dizzying moment she thought of indulging in a brief affair with him.
What would it be like? She had enjoyed being with him today, even when he annoyed her. He challenged her, just by being himself. She was tired, but she could feel life coursing through her veins in a way it hadn't done in a long, long time. Had he done that, or was it the prospect of being back in action? Or was he irrevocably bound up in that action, so that she couldn't separate the two?
Her entire body felt sensitized after that workout with him. His forearms had brushed her nipples several times. His hands had been on her legs, her hips. His body had slid against hers, and several times, while they grappled, one of his legs had been between hers.
She rolled over onto her stomach and cradled her head on her arms. John Medina had "Danger Zone" written all over him, and for her own sake she should pay attention to the sign. She was already risking more than she could afford to lose.
"Time to get back to work, cream puff," he called from where he was doing bench presses.

"Cream puff, my ass," she snapped, and rolled to her feet.

Chapter Nine

Villa de Ronsard, the South of France

Louis Ronsard trusted in nothing he couldn't see, and very little that he could. Trust, in his experience, was a commodity with too high a price. Even when he trusted, there were degrees: He trusted his sister, Mariette, to never deliberately do anything to hurt him, but she could sometimes be as foolish as she was lovely, so he trusted her with nothing that concerned his business. By necessity, he trusted a select few of his employees with some details of the business, but he made frequent checks on their financial and personal lives to detect any weakness that might pose a danger to him. His employees were forbidden to use drugs, for example, but Ronsard was under no delusion that just because he said it, it was so. So... drug tests for all the employees, from the lowest to the highest.

He was aware that he walked a knife edge of danger. The people with whom he dealt on a daily basis were not upstanding citizens. In his opinion, they were either fanatic or psychotic, or both. He had yet to be able to tell which was the most unstable.

There was only one way one could deal with such people: very cautiously. He would not accept commissions from just anyone. The maniac who wanted to explode a bomb in a school as a protest for world peace was not going to purchase that bomb or the materials through him. Even in the world of terrorists there must be standards, no? Ronsard required an established organization, which would need his services again and so was not likely to turn on him.

For his part, he was absolutely scrupulous in delivering what he had promised. He took nothing for himself except the agreed payment. His own value, he knew, depended on his reliability. To that end, he went to extraordinary lengths to make certain nothing went wrong with any shipment, no matter how small. His business had flourished as a result, and his bank accounts in Switzerland and the Cayman Islands were ... healthy.

Because he was so careful, anything out of the ordinary made him wary. Such was the phone call he received that morning on his private line, the number only a very few people knew.

"So," he murmured to himself as he leaned back in his chair and rolled a fragrant cigar, taken from an inlaid sandalwood box on his desk, in his fingers.
"So?" Cara Smith, his secretary and aide-his first aide, as she liked to call herself-looked up from the computer she was using to track his various investments. He had been surprised, when he had her investigated, to discover her name really was Smith, and that she was from the unlikely named Waterloo, Kansas, which had given her the opportunity over the years to make some dreadful puns at his expense.
"We have a request from an ... unexpected party."
Cara, of all people, knew how much he disliked the unexpected. But she also knew *him,* better than was sometimes comfortable, and immediately saw his interest. Something intrigued him, or he would have immediately refused the commission.
She swiveled her chair toward him and crossed her long legs. Since Cara was six feet tall, they were very long legs indeed. 'And the name is . . . ?"
"Temple."
Her cornflower blue eyes widened. "Wow."
She was so *American,* he thought, so adept in the inelegant phrase. "Wow, indeed."
Temple, known only by the one name, was a shadow in the already murky world of terrorists. His name had been whispered in connection with some assassinations, with certain bombings. He did not choose his targets at random, for the sake of creating terror. He might bring down an airplane, but one person on that flight was his specific target. It was unknown whether he belonged to some even more shadowy organization or if he worked for himself. If for himself, no one knew what his agenda was. Temple was an enigma.
Ronsard didn't like enigmas. He liked to know exactly with whom, and what, he was dealing.
"What does he want?"
"The RDX-a."
To his relief, she didn't say "wow" again. Nor did she ask the obvious: How did Temple even know about RDX-a? It had been tested only a week before, and though the compound had performed as it was supposed to, its existence was still known to only a few. There were a few problems in production that were currently being eliminated, such as the tendency of

some batches to decompose at an accelerated rate, with unpleasant results for the handler. It was a delicate balancing act, to stabilize an unstable compound just enough to be able to predict its rate of decomposition, without rendering it *too* stable to perform.

"Find every available bit of information on Temple," he said. "I want to know what he looks like, where he was born-everything."

"Are you going to accept the commission?"

"It depends." Ronsard lit the cigar, dedicating himself, for a few pleasurable seconds, to the ritual. When the end was glowing to his satisfaction he savored the subtle vanilla taste on his tongue. He would have to change his clothing before seeing Laure; she loved the smell of his cigars, but the smoke wasn't good for her.

Cara had already turned back to her computer and was rapidly typing in commands. Computers were something else he didn't trust, so none of his records were on the one Cara used, which was connected to that invisible electronic world the Americans called the Web. There were encryption programs, of course, but they were constantly being broken. Teenagers hacked into the Pentagon's most secure files; corporations spent billions in computer security that leaked like a sieve. The only secure computer, in his opinion, was one that wasn't connected to anything else-like the one on his desk, where he kept his records. As an added precaution he regularly changed his password, to a word chosen at random from the dog-eared volume of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* that he always kept on his desk. He actually read the thing from time to time, though more to keep Cara from being suspicious about its presence than from any actual interest in the book. He would turn down the page from which he had chosen his password and leave the book lying out in the open as if it were of no importance.

His system wasn't perfect. He changed the password so often that sometimes he forgot which word he had chosen, hence the turned-down page. He could always recognize the word once he saw it, if he was on the correct page.

"Where's Temple from?" Cara asked. "I'm not finding anything on him using a broad search. I need a closer focus."

"America, I think, but I've heard rumors he had lived in Europe for at least ten years. Try Scotland Yard."

She sighed as she tapped keys. "This is going to get me arrested some day," she grumbled.
Ronsard smiled. He did enjoy Cara; she knew exactly what his business entailed but managed to maintain the same attitude as if she worked in a corporate office somewhere. Nor was she intimidated by him, and though a certain amount of intimidation was necessary in his chosen field, sometimes it was wearying.
Nor had she fallen in love with him, which was fortunate. Ronsard knew women, knew the effect he had on them, but Cara had bluntly told him that though she liked him she wasn't interested in sleeping with him. That, too, had been a relief.
She slept with other men, most recently his Egyptian bodyguard, Hossam, who had been obsessed with the tall blonde woman from the day he first saw her. Ronsard only hoped Hossam wouldn't lose control of his Middle-Eastern temperament when his American Norse goddess lost interest in him.
"Damn," she muttered and typed furiously. The Scotland Yard computer was giving her problems, he concluded.
"Damn!" she shouted a minute later and slapped the monitor. "The bastards have added a wrinkle-"
She began muttering to herself as she tried to electronically wriggle into the Scotland Yard database. Ronsard waited, puffing on his cigar. Cara's mutterings were only half intelligible, thank God, because as she worked her language deteriorated alarmingly.
" Shitpissfuck-"
His eyebrows rose as she got up and stalked around the office, swearing under her breath and waving her hands in the air as she appeared to be having a conversation with herself.
"Okay, what if I try this," she finally muttered and resumed her seat to pound out another series of commands.
Ten minutes later she sat back with a blissful expression on her face.
"Outsmarted the sons of bitches," she crowed. "Okay, let's see what you have on 'Temple, first name unknown.'"
A file popped on the screen. Cara hit the print button, and the printer whirred to life, spitting out a single sheet of paper.
"That isn't much," Ronsard murmured as she got up and brought the sheet to him. "Try the FBI; if he's American, they may have more on him."

He began reading. Scotland Yard didn't have many hard facts on Temple. "Believed" to have worked with Baader-Meinhoff in Germany. "Believed" to have been associated with Basque Fatherland in Spain. "Believed" to have had contact with the IRA. Evidently Scotland Yard "believed" a lot of things about Temple and knew very little.

Temple was either American or Canadian, believed -that word again-to be between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five. No known place of residence. As sketchy as the information was, at least it gave him a place to begin, Ronsard thought. He had contacts throughout Europe. If anyone in either of the three organizations mentioned had any knowledge of Temple, he-Ronsard-would shortly be in possession of the same.

Cara was muttering and swearing her way through the process of gaining access to the FBI's database. When he heard the triumphant "Aha!" he knew she had succeeded.

"Well, kiss my ass, we got us a photo!" she said in astonishment. "Not a good one, his face is half-hidden, but it's something."

Ronsard left his desk to cross the room and lean over Cara's chair, peering at the computer screen. "Can you enhance it?" he asked, studying the grainy, blurred picture that showed a dark-haired man about to get into a car.

"I can enhance what we have, but nothing will show what the camera didn't get, which is half his face."

"He's wearing a ring on his left hand. A wedding band?" Interesting, Ronsard thought. Not that Temple might be married; things like that happened, even in the terrorists' world. But for him to wear such a conventional symbol as a wedding band was amusing.

The photo showed a dark-haired man, fairly tall, given the scale of the car beside him. His face was turned partially away from the camera, giving a good view of his left ear. The photograph could have been taken anywhere; no license plates were visible on any of the cars; even the make of the car was impossible to tell. The red brick building in the background was equally anonymous, without any helpful lettering or a convenient sign to give a hint of the location.

"I'll print out the information for you to read while I work on enhancing this," Cara said and set the printer to working.

The FBI had more information than Scotland Yard, which illustrated exactly how closely the two bureaus worked. What information the FBI had on an

international terrorist, Interpol was supposed to have. What Interpol had, Scotland Yard should have. That was the whole purpose of Interpol. The FBI had been holding back, and he wondered why.

"Temple," he silently read. "First name Josef, or Joseph. Birthplace unknown. First identified in Tucson, Arizona, in 1987. Disappeared, resurfaced in 1992 in Berlin. Brown hair, blue eyes. Identifying marks or scars: left scapula, a diagonal scar approximately four inches long, believed to have been made by a knife or other sharp object."

Knifed in the back, Ronsard thought. Mr. Temple had indeed lived an interesting life.

"Subject wanted for questioning regarding 1987 bombing of courthouse in Tucson, Arizona; 1992 hijacking of NATO munitions truck in Italy-"

Ronsard's eyebrows rose. He thought he had a sure finger on the pulse of his chosen world, but he hadn't heard anything about the NATO hijacking. The list went on. In all, the FBI wanted Temple for questioning in fifteen separate incidents.

Temple was thought to be an independent, with no known affiliation with any one organization. He was a hired weapon, Ronsard thought; he didn't kill for pleasure or for himself, but for whoever bought his services, which would not be cheap. From the list of incidents for which he was the main suspect, none of the targets were "soft." All of them were difficult, and the more difficult, the more expensive.

Who was paying him this time? Who had heard of RDX-a and hired Temple to procure it? Why hadn't he-or they-simply approached him themselves, instead of using Temple as a go-between? It had to be someone with a lot to lose if they became known.

"It isn't a wedding ring," Cara announced, printing out the photo.

Ronsard picked up the sheet as soon as the printer spat it out. She was correct; the ring seemed to have a peculiar braided design, like a dozen tiny entwined gold ropes. No, not ropes-snakes. That looked like a snake head on the ring.

And Mr. Temple's left ear was pierced. The gold hoop in it was discreet, but the photo enhancement plainly revealed it.

The people or person behind Mr. Temple were careful, sending him out to do their work while they remained safely in the background.

But Ronsard was just as wary, just as cautious. He didn't deal with anyone he didn't know.

"I think I want to meet the elusive Mr. Temple," he murmured.

Chapter Ten

McLean, Virginia

Niema hit the alarm on the clock before it could go off, got up, and dressed in her running outfit, did her usual routine in the bathroom, and sauntered into the kitchen. As she expected, Medina was sitting at his usual place at the island bar, sipping coffee. "Very funny," he growled, and she laughed. "Don't pout. You got in anyway, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I had to climb in through the laundry-room window. Very undignified."

And very silent, she thought; she was a light sleeper, but she hadn't heard a thing. "I suppose you bypassed the alarm on the window, too."

"No, I disabled the entire thing. Get one that works off infrared or motion, not contact."

She scowled at him. The alarm system had set her back over a thousand bucks, and now he was proposing she spend another two thousand. "Why don't I just do the same thing to all my windows and doors that I did to the back door? Low tech seems to work where high tech doesn't."

"Both would be good." He grinned and lifted his cup in salute. "That was a good idea."

"Low tech" was a good description of what she had done to her back door. She bought two ordinary hook and latch sets at a hardware store, installed the first one in the usual manner with the eye screwed into the frame while the hook was mounted on the door. Then she had turned the second one upside down, butted it up against the first one, and installed it with the eye screwed into the door and the hook mounted on the frame.

With only a single hook latched, anyone with a credit card, knife, or any other thin object could slip it in the crack and force the hook up, freeing it from the eye. With two hooks, one upside down, that method wouldn't work. If you slid the credit card up from the bottom, you hit the upside down latch and pushed the hook into the eye, instead of out of it. If you came down from the top, you were pushing down on the upper latch, with the same results.

Of course, someone who was very strong or who had a battering ram could knock the door off its hinges, but that wasn't a very quiet way of breaking and entering. She was inordinately pleased that her simple solution had stymied him.
When they left the house, instead of turning right, toward the park, Medina turned left.
"The park's in the other direction," Niema said as she caught up and fell into step beside him.
"We ran there yesterday."
"Does this mean you never run the same route twice, or just that you're easily bored?"
"Bored," he said easily. "I have the attention span of a gnat."
"Liar."
His only response was a grin, and they ran in silence then, down the deserted street. There were no stars visible overhead, and the weather felt damp, as if it might rain. Her forearms were a little sore from all that shooting the day before, but other than that she felt great. Her thigh muscles stretched as they ran, and she felt her blood begin to zing through her veins as her heartbeat increased.
They had been running for half an hour when a car turned a corner onto their street, heading straight for them. It was rolling slow, as if looking for something.
John looped his right arm around her waist and whirled her behind a tree. She bit back her instinctive cry and barely got her hands out to brace herself before he crushed her against the tree trunk, holding her there with the hard pressure of his body. She saw the dull glint of metal in his left hand. She held her breath and pressed her cheek even harder into the rough bark of the tree.
"Two men," he said in an almost inaudible whisper, his breath stirring the hair at her temple. "They're probably from the private agency Frank hired."
"Probably? Don't you know?"
"No, I don't know your surveillance schedule, and they don't know I'm here. They're probably looking for you since you aren't on your usual route."
The thought of having a "surveillance schedule" was annoying. Equally annoying was the realization of how many times over the past few years cars had passed by her in the early morning hours and she hadn't thought anything of it, except to watch, with a woman's natural wariness, until the

cars had turned the corner and disappeared. She had been so oblivious she was embarrassed. She should have been more alert.
The bark was scratching her cheek, and her breasts were being crushed. "Ease up," she panted. "You're squashing me."
He moved about an inch, but it helped. He remained behind the tree until the car was a block away, then lifted himself away from her. She grunted as she pushed away from the tree. "If they're ours, why don't we just let them see us?"
He resumed his steady stride, and she took up her place beside him. "Because I'm not positive they're ours, for one thing. For another, I don't want them to see me, much less see me with you."
"Some bodyguards they are anyway," she grumbled, "letting you break into my house two mornings in a row."
"They weren't there when I arrived. They must be on a drive-by."
"Why don't you just tell Mr. Vinay to call off the surveillance for now? That would be the most logical thing to do. Then, if anyone drove by, we'd know they aren't ours."
"I may do that."
The car must have just circled the block. It turned onto the street again. "Pretend to chase me and let's see if they'll shoot you," Niema said, and put on a burst of speed, knowing the car's headlights couldn't yet pick her out. She barely contained a giggle at Medina's soft curse behind her. She had taken three steps when a heavy weight hit her in the back and two arms wrapped around her, dragging her down. They landed on the soft grass beside the sidewalk, with her on her stomach and him on top of her. In the pre-dawn darkness, no one was likely to see them unless they were moving. He held her down, despite her wriggles and erupting giggles, until the car had passed by again. "You little *witch,"* he said breathlessly, as if he were trying to hold back his own laughter. "Are you trying to get me killed?"
"Just keeping you on your toes, Medina."
"On my belly is more like it," he grumbled, climbing to his feet and hauling her upright. "What if someone looked out their window and called the cops?"
"We'd be long gone. And if we weren't, I'd just say I stumbled and you tried to catch me. No problem."
"I hope you're having fun," he growled. A little startled, she realized she *was* having fun. For the first time in a long while she felt as if there was

some purpose to her life, as if she had something important to do. No matter how interesting her work with surveillance devices was, benchtesting circuits didn't give her a kick.

But she felt alive now, rejuvenated, as if she had been existing in some sort of half-life for the past five years. She had kept up her running all this time, but until yesterday she hadn't been aware of the workings of her muscles, the pumping of her blood. She enjoyed sparring with Medina, both verbally and physically. She wasn't a gun fanatic, but she had also enjoyed learning about the different handguns, learning how they felt in her hand, learning her own limits and then stretching those limits. She wanted to know more, do more, *be* more.

This was the danger of fieldwork. She had known the lure, resisted it for five years, but now the excitement was flowing through her veins like a potent drug. She didn't know whether to hate Medina or thank him for dragging her back into this.

Was five years' penance enough? Would a hundred years be enough to empty the guilt and anguish she felt over Dallas? Her stride faltered as she thought of the times they had jogged together; afterward they had showered together, then fallen into bed and made love.

Would Dallas have been attracted to the woman she had been for those five years, the woman she had made herself become? Or would he have been bored by the insistence on structure and security, the lack of risk? She was afraid she knew the answer. Dallas had been a risk taker; for all his low-key persona, he'd been a man who thrived on challenge and danger. Why else would he have become a SEAL, then a contract agent? What had attracted him most to her, and she to him, was the instinctive knowledge that they were alike.

Medina was the same type of man, only more so. Alarm bells, suddenly loud and clear, shrilled in her head. It was one thing to allow herself to be sucked back into the heady world of espionage and contract work, but letting herself develop feelings for another man in that same world was something else entirely.

She would have to keep her guard up, because emotions could boil over in such high-stress situations. And Medina was an attractive man; more than attractive, really. If he ever let his guard down, he'd be devastating. He seemed relaxed with her, but not once had he let any personal details slip. She knew nothing about him.

She had already felt warning twinges of physical attraction during the close contact required by training. A woman would have to be dead not to notice that lean, rock-hard body, especially when he was pressed against her.
Was that why she had teased him about making the surveillance team think he was chasing her, so he would catch her and hold her? In a flash of self-awareness, she realized she had *been flirting* with him. Uh-oh, she thought. She'd have to be more careful in the future.
What future? This was a one-time thing, wasn't it? They would work together briefly just this once, then she would return to her safe, familiar job and he would disappear again.
"Are you ready to pack it in?"
She glanced at the luminous dial of her wristwatch; they had already been running for over an hour. Luckily they hadn't gone in a straight line, or it would have taken them another hour to get back to her house; they had circled blocks and backtracked several times, so they were no more than half a mile from home. Dawn was dose, so close that details were clearly visible now. "What if the surveillance team is still looking for me?"
"They had better be, or-" He didn't finish the sentence, but she could guess what he had meant to say: Or they would be looking for another job.
"They'll see you," she pointed out.
"Ill split off and let you go home alone. Once they see you're safely home, they'll break off surveillance."
"What else is on the agenda today? More target practice?"
"That and more self-defense training."
With her new insight into herself, she didn't know if close-contact training with him was such a good idea. "I thought only the basics were necessary."
"We might as well do something with our time.
Who knows? It may come in handy some day. By the way, some boxes will be delivered to you today. It's a new wardrobe, jewelry, things you'll need."
"Why do I need a new wardrobe?"
"It's part of the cover. You'll be attending embassy parties, posing as the daughter of old friends of the ambassador."
She would be playing dress-up, Niema thought with amusement. She looked forward to that part of the job. Like most women, she liked good clothes and the thrill of knowing she looked good.
"Try everything on," he continued. "The clothes have to fit perfectly. What doesn't will be replaced or altered."

"They can't be returned if they're altered."
"Don't worry about it, you can keep them." He looked around. "This is where I leave you. See you in five minutes." He peeled off to the right, his stride lengthening as if he hadn't already been running for over an hour. He cut between two houses, jumped a fence, and disappeared from view.
Niema turned on the afterburners. Her thighs ached from the effort, but she pushed harder, her feet pounding. It was silly to compete with him when they weren't racing; all she had to do was leisurely jog back to her house and let the surveillance team see her, so they knew she was all right. She knew it was silly; she did it anyway. She fought to suck air deep into her lungs as she raced down the sidewalk. Anyone seeing her would think she was running for her
life, she thought, except there was no one behind her.
Up ahead she saw the surveillance car, or at least she thought it was. She hadn't gotten a good look at it in the dark, but the tail lights looked the same, and there were two men in it. The car was parked at the curb; she blew by it in a dead run, without giving the men so much as a glance. When she was twenty yards past them, she heard the car engine start.
She was two blocks from home. She ignored the messages her thigh muscles were screaming at her and forced herself to maintain her speed. When she reached her house she pounded across the small front yard and to the front door. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the car cruise past. She unlocked the door and practically fell inside, gulping in huge breaths.
She leaned against the wall beside the door, wondering if the goal had been worth the effort. Her heart was pounding so hard there was a roaring in her ears.
Or was there? She forced herself to breathe regularly, her head tilted as she listened.
The shower in the second bath was running.
Muttering to herself, she stomped off to take her own shower.
Niema faced Medina across the blue foam mat. "Today I'm going to show you some strike points," he said. "Done properly-and it takes a lot of practice to do them properly-these are death blows."
She drew back and put her hands on her hips, eyeing him suspiciously. "Why would I need to know anything like that? Am I going to be in hand-to-hand combat?"

"If I thought you were, I wouldn't take you. This is partly just in case and partly because I have time on my hands." He motioned her forward. "Come on."
"You want to turn me into a trained killer because you're bored?"
That drew a flashing smile. "You won't be a trained killer. At most, you'll be able to stun someone so you can get away. I told you it takes years of practice to do this properly. The only way you'll kill someone is if you accidentally get it right." Again he motioned for her.
Warily she approached, but still remained out of his reach.
"Relax, there's no hitting in this session. I'm just going to show you some of the points and the striking motions." He took a quick step forward, grabbed her wrist, and dragged her to the middle of the mat before she could retreat.
"This is part of t'ai chi. Actually, it's the basis. Dim-Mak is death-point striking, and it involves acupuncture points. Never, never use it unless it's a life and death situation, because like I said, you might accidentally get it right." He brought her hand up and caught her fingers, then held them against the outside corner of his eye.
"Here. This exact spot. Feel it."
"I'm feeling."
"Even a slight blow here can do major damage- nausea, memory loss, sometimes death." He showed her how to do the strike, using her fingertips. Positioning was important, to get the right angle. He made her go through the motion over and over, using himself as a dummy for her to aim at; she actually hit him once, nothing more than a touch. He whirled away from her, bent over from the waist, gagging.
"Oh God, I'm sorry!" She rushed over to him and put her arms around his waist as if she could hold him up. Panic surged in her as she remembered what he'd said about a slight blow. "Should I call 911?"
He shook his head and waved off that suggestion. He pressed under his nose, and rubbed from the corner of his eye back toward his ear. His eyes were watering a little. "I'm okay," he said, straightening.
'Are you sure? Maybe you should sit down."
"I'm fine. Things like this happen all the time in training."
"Let's do something else," she suggested uneasily.
"Okay, let's move on to the temple-"
"I meant like judo."

"Why, are you going into professional wrestling?" His blue eyes were like lasers, pinning her to the spot. He caught her hand and brought it to his temple. "Here. Hit hard, straight in. It's a knock-out point, and if a vein is ruptured the attacker will die in a day or so. CPR might revive him, but he could still die from the hemorrhage.

"Here." He moved her hand to just under his nipple. He showed her the exact spot, and the positioning of her hands. "This is instant death-"

"I'm not doing it," she said hotly. "I am *not* going to practice on you again."

"Good." He pressed her hand in the center of his chest, between the nipples. "A blow here makes the lower body spasm and go stiff, and the attacker falls down. Here-" He pulled her hand lower, just below his sternum. "A correct blow here stops the heart."

He was relentless. The gruesome lesson went on and on. He made her perform the motions until her hand positioning was correct, but she was adamant about not using him as a dummy again. She was still shaken that such a light touch had been able to produce such a strong reaction; what if she actually *hit* him?

Finally, he called a halt. He had just shown her a couple of strikes that caused instant diarrhea, and she thought she really should practice those on a live target. Medina stepped back, shaking his head and grinning.

"No way. You're mad enough at me to do it."

"Damn right I am."

"You'll thank me if you're ever in a tight spot and need to know how to bring someone down."

"If that ever happens, I'll make it a point to find you and let you say 'I told you so.' But I think I'll practice the diarrhea strikes instead of the death strikes."

He walked over to get one of the bottles of water they had brought with them. He twisted off the cap

and tilted it up, his strong throat working as he swallowed. Helplessly, Niema watched him. Even though she knew she should be wary and keep a mental, if not a physical, distance, he was a fine specimen of masculinity and everything in her that was female appreciated the scenery. His sweat pants were soft, clinging to his ass and thighs like a second skin, and that black T-shirt didn't do a thing to hide the muscular contours of his chest and arms.

Her nipples tingled an alert, and a wave of heat swept over her. Clearing her throat, she tore her gaze away from him and turned her back to do some stretching exercises. Her legs especially needed the stretching, after that run this morning. She would have stretched even if they hadn't, just to give herself something to do besides think about John Medina's body.
I have to be careful, she thought. Very, very careful.
"Ready for target practice?" he asked behind her.
She groaned and straightened. What on earth had she gotten herself into?
Later that night, after a stop at the hardware store where she purchased their entire stock of hook and eye latches and spent a couple of hours installing them-except on the window in the second bathroom, which was high and small and she wanted to see if he could get in that way-she tried on the boxes of clothes that had been delivered.
Everything had a designer label. The underwear
sets were silk, the hosiery was gossamer. Each pair of shoes had to have cost upward of two hundred dollars, and there were over a dozen pairs. There were cocktail dresses, evening gowns, smart little suits that showed more leg than she normally revealed; shorts, camp shirts, lacy camisoles, jeans, cashmere sweater sets, skirts. And there was the jewelry: pearl earrings and a matching necklace, a web of small diamonds that hung on an illusion chain, gold bracelets and chains, and an enormous, breathtakingly lovely black opal pendant with matching earrings. She carefully put the opal set back in its box and reached for a yellow diamond solitaire ring.
The phone rang. She stretched to reach the receiver, holding the ring in her hand. "Hello."
"Have you looked at the clothes yet?"
"I'm going through them now." Funny how he didn't need to identify himself, she thought. Though she had never talked to him on the phone before, she recognized his voice immediately. "Do they fit?"
"Most of them."
"I'll have that taken care of tomorrow. Have you gotten to the opal pendant yet?"
"I just put it away. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." There was a touch of awe in her voice.
"There's a transmitter behind the stone, hidden between the prongs of the set. Be careful and don't jostle it. See you in the morning."
The phone clicked as he hung up. Slowly she

replaced the receiver. His last words could be taken as a warning, considering his penchant for breaking into her house. She smiled, thinking of that small bathroom window.
"Oh, yes, Mr. Medina. I'll definitely see you."

Chapter Eleven

Bingo," John said softly, and hung up the phone. Ronsard had taken the bait. The message had gone to a computer in Brussels, as per his instructions; the message had then been relayed to a computer in Toronto, which he had accessed using a calling card. Calling cards were untraceable, assuming Ronsard would even make the effort. He wouldn't expect Temple's name and number to pop up on caller ID, or for the number to be traceable.
Now he had to finesse the timing. First he had to bring Niema to Ronsard's notice and see if she was invited to the villa. If not, he would have to adjust his plan. But if Niema bagged the invitation, he didn't want to arrive at the villa until after she was already there.
Niema. As much as he had enjoyed these past few days with her, she was driving him crazy. Teasing her, touching her during her self-defense "lessons"-he had to have lost his mind to subject himself to such torture. But she delighted him on so many levels, he couldn't bring himself to stop. She was so quick to learn, and so competitive she automatically rose to any challenge. He had quietly laughed to himself that morning while he showered in her guest bath, knowing she had raced full out in an effort to beat him back to the house-after already running for over an hour.
She was aware of him now, where she never had been before. She hadn't had a clue, in Iran, how much he had envied Dallas. But he had seen her watching him when he took off his T-shirt, seen the effort she made not to stare. It was still too soon to make a move, though, so he'd had to fiercely concentrate to keep from getting an erection every time he got close to her. She had just today fully realized her attraction to him, so she was nowhere ready for him to do anything about it.
It wasn't as if they had just met and begun seeing each other. Under those circumstances, he would have felt free to move at his own pace, or at least as free as he ever felt with a woman. But they had baggage in common, the

two of them; the manner of Dallas's death was something that both linked them and stood between them. No other man had been able to scale that wall because no other man had been able to understand it; *he* was the one who had been in that cold, dirty little hut with her, the one who watched her white, still face as she listened to her husband's last words, saw the screaming in her eyes. *He* was the one who held her when she at last was able to cry.

And he was the one who was going to break down that barrier of disinterest she had installed between herself and the male sex. He could do it because he understood her, because he knew that beneath her ladylike exterior beat the heart of an adventuress. He could give her the excitement she needed, both professionally and personally. God, the way she had come alive these past few days! She literally glowed. It took all his willpower not to grab her and let her know exactly how he felt.

But there was a time for that, and it wasn't now. She still wasn't comfortable with the idea of wanting anyone who wasn't Dallas, in general, and him in particular. But she would be; he would see to it.

Restlessly he got up and paced the room, automatically avoiding the window. He couldn't remember any woman's response being so important to him, not even Venetia's.

He stopped and stared sightlessly at the unremarkable framed print on the wall. After what had happened with Venetia, maybe he didn't deserve Niema. And maybe Niema wouldn't want anything to do with him, if she knew about Venetia. Maybe, hell; it was almost guaranteed. If he were honorable, he'd tell her about his dead wife.

His mouth quirked in a humorless smile. If he were honorable, he wouldn't have done a lot of the things he'd done in his life. He wanted Niema, wanted her with an intensity that continually took him off guard. And he was going to have her.

Ville de Ronsard

"Could you trace the message?" Ronsard asked Cara, who was staring at her monitor while she tapped out commands on the keyboard.

Absently she shook her head, her attention focused on the monitor. "Only to the first relay; after that, it disappeared into the ether. Temple has a damn good encryption and switch system."

Ronsard strolled around the office. The hour was early, very early, but he didn't need much sleep, and Cara adjusted her hours to his. "I thought you

told me that everything on a computer leaves its print."
"It does, but the print may be a dead end. He could have programmed the first relay with a self-destroy code after the message went through. The first relay may not even be a relay; it could be the destination, but you don't seem to think Temple would be that easy to find."
"No, he wouldn't be," Ronsard murmured. "Where was the first relay, by the way?"
"Brussels."
"Then he is likely in Europe?"
"Not necessarily. He could be anywhere there's a phone line."
Ronsard tilted his head, considering the situation. "Could you tell anything if you had the actual computer in your possession?"
Her eyes gleamed with interest. "You betcha. Unless the hard drive is destroyed."
"If this is his usual means of contact, then he wouldn't destroy the link. He would safeguard it with encryption, but not destroy it. If you can discover the location of the computer, I will have it brought here."
She turned back to the monitor and began typing furiously.
Satisfied that he would soon have the computer in his possession-or rather, in Cara's possession-Ronsard returned to his desk. Laure had had a difficult night, and he was tired. He had staff who saw to her care, of course, but when she was upset or didn't feel well she wanted her papa with her. No matter where he was or what he was doing, if Laure needed him he dropped everything and went to her.
He hadn't yet gone through the mail from the day before, though Cara had opened it and put the stack on his desk. He began leafing through the bills and invitations; as usual, the latter outnumbered the former. He was invited everywhere; connections were everything in the world of business, even when that business was not of the approved sort. A great many hostesses were thrilled to have him at their functions; he was single, handsome, and carried an air of danger about him. Ronsard was cynically aware of his own attractions, and of the use they could be to him.
"Ah," he said, taking a cream-colored vellum invitation from the stack. The prime minister cordially invited him to ... He didn't bother reading what function was involved, merely checked the date. Such social gatherings were invaluable. He had ceased being amazed at how many of the world's business, social, and political leaders found a need for his services. They

felt free to approach him at a charity ball or political dinner, for after all that was their world, and they felt safe and comfortable there. Once that had been his world too; he was still comfortable there, but now he knew that nowhere was safe, not really.

"Got it," Cara said and gave him the address.

Brussels

The middle-aged man looked like any other in Brussels; he was average in height, weight, coloring; there was nothing about him to cause interest. He walked at a normal pace, seemingly paying more attention to the newspaper in his hand than to where he was going, until he came to a certain apartment building. He mounted the two stone steps and let himself in the door, then took the stairs instead of the creaky elevator, so he wasn't likely to meet anyone.

On the top floor, the third one, he unlocked the door to a certain room. It was empty except for the computer humming quietly on a wooden crate, cables hooking it to the electrical outlet and phone jack. There was no printer.

The lights were programmed to go off and on at random times. The window was covered with shutters. Sometimes he came in the mornings and opened the shutters, then returned in the afternoon to shut them, so it looked as if someone was living there. He didn't think anyone ever had; there was only the computer.

Per that morning's instructions, he walked quickly over to the computer and tapped a few keys on the keyboard, entering the program called Norton Utilities. On that program was a feature called "government wipe." He pressed a few keys, waited a moment, then pressed another one. He watched briefly as the computer performed as instructed.

He took his handkerchief and wiped off the computer keyboard, then the doorknob as he was leaving. He wouldn't be back to this empty room with its electronic inhabitant.

No one saw him arrive or leave, but then, he was so very average looking.

Later that afternoon, a white van stopped down the street from the apartment building. Two men got out and walked up the narrow street; they were dressed as laborers, in paint-stained coveralls, though their van bore none of the accouterments of painters.

They went into the apartment building and took the stairs up to the third floor. Once in the narrow, dingy hallway, they each took heavy automatic

pistols from inside their coveralls and quietly approached the closed door to one of the apartments. One positioned himself to the side of the door, his pistol held ready. He nodded to his companion, who cautiously reached out and tried the knob. Surprise etched both their faces when the door swung open.

Quickly they peeked around the frame, automatically jerked back, then relaxed; the room was empty. Still, they held their pistols ready as they entered the room and quickly searched it. Nothing. Not only was the room uninhabited, it showed no signs that anyone had lived there in quite some time.

On the other hand, there was that computer. It sat on the crate, quietly humming. The screen was a pure blue.

The two men were professionals; they got down on their knees and inspected the computer, following the power and telephone cords to their outlets, looking for anything unusual. Not finding anything, one of them finally reached out and turned off the computer. The screen went blank and the quiet hum died.

They briskly unplugged the computer and carried it downstairs to their van. They didn't bother closing the door behind them when they left.

Ville de Ronsard

Cara was swimming when Ronsard sent word the computer had arrived. She hauled herself out of the pool and bent over from the waist to wring the water from her hair. She knew Hossam was watching her, his dark eyes hot with excitement. She ignored him and wrapped a towel around her head and another around her torso.

Poor Hossam. All that jealous lust was getting tiresome. *Hossam* was getting tiresome. Cara was quickly bored with her lovers, because once they got her in bed they all seemed to get possessive and territorial. Why couldn't they just be satisfied with good sex, the way she was? She didn't like hurting them because she cared for them all, just not the way they wanted. On the other hand, she wasn't going to spend her life with a man she didn't want just because she felt sorry for him.

Extricating herself from the relationship with Hossam could be tricky. She was well aware of the cultural differences; in the beginning, they had even been exciting. Now she felt stifled whenever she was with him.

What she needed, she supposed, was a nice boy toy for *her* to keep, someone who knew she was the boss, at least of herself. She wasn't into

dominance, just independence.
The truth was, no man she had ever met, with the exception of Ronsard, was as interesting as her computers-and she was smart enough to know Ronsard wasn't the settling-down type. Not ever. She liked him, but he wasn't for her. Maybe no one was. Maybe she was going to end up one of those eccentric, world-traveling old ladies. She kinda liked the image that brought to mind.
Hossam approached and laid his hand on her arm. "You will come to my room tonight?"
"Not tonight," she said, moving away as casually as possible. "Mr. Ronsard has brought in a computer he wants me to investigate, so I'll be working all night."
"Tomorrow, then."
"You know I can't promise that when I don't know what my schedule is."
"Marry me, and you will not have to work."
"I like working," she said. "Good night." She hurried away before he could stop her again. Yes, this situation with Hossam was definitely getting tricky. Perhaps she would ask Ronsard to reassign Hossam, though she hated to do that; after all, Hossam was only being himself. He shouldn't be punished for that.
She stopped in her room to get dressed and pin up her hair. In the States she would have hurried to the office in her bathing suit, but Ronsard was very European in his dress standards. She liked that, actually. It was nice to have standards.
He was waiting for her, his long dark hair pulled back in its usual style, giving his lean face a more exotic slant. He was dressed in black trousers and a white shirt, which was as informal as he got. "Your gift," he said, nodding to the unit that now occupied her desktop.
Quickly she hooked up the machine and sat down in front of it. She turned it on and waited for it to boot.
Nothing happened. She tried it again. The screen still remained a blank blue.
"Uh-oh."
"Is something wrong?" Ronsard asked as he approached.
"It's been wiped."
"Erased?"

"Yeah. Maybe he just used a C-prompt command. If he did, there should still be some information on the hard drive."
"And if he didn't?"
"If he used a government wipe, then there's nothing left."
'A government wipe ..."
"It's just what it sounds like. If there's anything you don't want the government to see, you use a government wipe. It's in Norton Utilities-"
He held up a hand. "Details aren't necessary. How long will it take you to find out which type of erasure he used?"
"Not long."
He waited patiently while she got into the hard drive and began searching for bits of data. There was nothing. The drive was as pristine as the day it came off the assembly line.
"Nothing," she said in disgust.
Ronsard put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "That is what I expected, really."
"Then why get the computer?"
"Because I want to know Mr. Temple. If he were careless enough to leave data on the computer, then perhaps I shouldn't deal with him. As it is-"
Ronsard hesitated and gave a thin smile. "I've learned that he is almost as careful as I."
'Almost."
"I'm not going to him," Ronsard said gently. "He is coming to me."

Chapter Twelve

Your name is Niema Jamieson," Medina said, handing over a passport, driver's license, and social security card.
She looked down at them in both interest and disbelief. "Niema?" she questioned.
"Your name is so unusual you'd probably slip up if you had to answer to anything else. It's always best to stay close to your real name."
"Is that so, Mr. Darrell Tucker?" she murmured.
He gave a faint smile in acknowledgment of the hit. "I've used so many names, I ran out of similars."

She opened the passport. Her photo was there, as well as several pages of stamps. According to her passport, within just the past year she had been to Great Britain twice, once to Italy, once to Switzerland, and once to Australia. Niema Jamieson was certainly well-traveled.
The driver's license looked just as authentic. She was a resident of New Hampshire, evidently. Niema Price Jamieson.
"My middle name is Price?" she asked in disbelief.
"That's your maiden name. Your family is old friends with the ambassador's wife's family."
"So I'm married?"
"Widowed." He gave her a steady, unyielding look, as if expecting her to object to a cover line so close to her own life. "Your husband, Craig, was killed in a boating accident two years ago. The ambassador's wife-her name is Eleanor, by the way-persuaded you to join them in Paris for a vacation."
She was silent. Of course so many of the details paralleled her own life; that way the story was easy to remember.
"And if Ronsard does invite me to his home and does a background check on me, he'll find. . . what?"
"He'll find that you're exactly who you say you are. He'll find society page articles mentioning you. He'll find an article on Craig Jamieson's death that mentions his grief-stricken widow, Niema. Don't worry; your cover will stand up to any scrutiny."
"But what about the ambassador and his wife? They obviously know I'm not an old family friend."
"Yes, but they're accustomed to covers. You know how many Agency personnel are in our embassies. It's standard."
"Then why won't Ronsard suspect me?"
"Because you aren't staff. Believe me, they know, or have a good idea, who is Agency and who isn't."
She took a deep breath. "When do I leave?"
He pulled a ticket folder from the inside pocket of his jacket. "Tomorrow, on the Concord."
"Cool." Her eyes lit. She had always wanted to fly on the supersonic jet.
"When will you get there?"
"You won't see me until we're both at Ronsard's villa. If he doesn't invite you-" He broke off and shrugged.

"Then I won't see you again." She tried to keep her tone matter-of-fact, but inside she didn't feel that way. In just a few days he seemed to have become the central element of the excitement she felt. But she had known from the beginning how things would be, known that he would leave as abruptly as he had appeared.
"I didn't say that."
"No, but I've worked with you before, remember? When the job's finished, you disappear. And now that I know who you are, I know why."
"Niema ..." He put his hands in his pockets, looking oddly ill at ease. Medina was always in such control of himself that his expression diverted her. "I'll be back. That's all I can say now."
She was immediately intrigued, and alarmed. Did he mean he wanted to use her on another job? Part of her wanted to shout "Hell, no!" but deep inside was a yearning, a craving for more.
Common sense took the upper hand. "This is a one-time deal, Medina; don't bank on sucking me into another job. I don't get hazardous-duty pay, you know."
"Of course you do."
Taken aback, she warily eyed him. "What do you mean?"
"I mean you get a hefty bonus for this."
"Oh, great! That means anyone in payroll-"
"Nope. This is black ops, remember? Everything comes out of an off-books account. And try to call me John, instead of Medina. John's a fairly common name, but there are a lot of people in this town who would perk up their ears if they heard you call me Medina."
Reluctantly she said, "John." She preferred thinking of him and referring to him as Medina; that kept him at a certain distance, at least in her mind. She was having a difficult enough time battling her attraction to him as it was.
"Back to my original statement: This is a one-time deal. It has to be."
Hands still in his pockets, he wandered over to the kitchen window and absently fingered the hook and eye latches she had installed. For the past two mornings he had been reduced to wriggling through a damn small bathroom window, and the fit was so tight he had to do some major contortions to get in. She was so pleased with those little latches that he didn't tell her he'd figured out a way to unlatch them. The average burglar wouldn't have the means of doing it, and anyone who really, really wanted to get into the house would simply break a window anyway. The ordinary

citizen usually couldn't afford the safety measures that would make a house truly burglar-proof, but then the ordinary citizen didn't need to go to *that effort and expense.* "Don't think you can ignore me," she warned. He gave her a brief, warm smile as he turned away from the window. "I've never thought that."

Both the smile and the statement rattled her. Deciding to change the subject, she took a deep breath. "Let's get back to the plan. What happens when-if- I wrangle an invitation to Ronsard's home? What if you aren't invited for the same time?"

"I've already received an invitation. Ronsard is hosting a formal party in ten days. He does it annually, as sort of a repayment to all the people who look the other way when delicate situations arise concerning his occupation. The security is extremely tight, even tighter than normal, because of so many people in the house. He would consider the meeting with me more controlled. If Ronsard invites you to the party, accept. If he merely invites you to his house for a visit, decline. That will only whet his interest."

"What I know about whetting interest would rattle around in a peanut shell," she muttered.

He grinned. "Don't worry, Mother Nature took care of that. We men are easy. We don't require much more than that a woman be breathing, and we're interested."

She tried to take umbrage, but instead found herself laughing. "That simple, huh?"

"Compared to women, we're amoebas. Our brains only have one cell, but it's dedicated."

So said the most complicated man she'd ever met. She shook her head. "I think we need to get to work, before your one cell goes completely haywire. What's on the agenda for today?"

"Nothing," he said. "Get some rest, pack, brush up on your French. I just came by to give you your papers."

She had become so accustomed to working out with him that the prospect of a day without that challenge seemed flat. "So this is it, huh? If I don't get that invitation, I won't see you again."

He hesitated, then reached out and lightly touched her cheek with his fingertips. He started to say something and stopped. Something like regret, only more complex, flickered briefly in his blue eyes. Without a word he

turned and left, letting himself out the back door, his movements so silent she wouldn't have known he was there if she hadn't been looking at him.
She stood in the kitchen, fighting the chill that raced over her at his touch. No, she wasn't cold. She was shivering, but she wasn't cold. Just that light touch of his fingertips had set her nerve endings to tingling. Holy cow. What would it be like to actually-"No," she ordered herself aloud. "Don't go there." Don't imagine what it would be like to make love with him. Men like John Medina didn't make love, they had sex; they didn't have relationships, just encounters.
Though one couldn't tell it from the way she had lived her life for the past five years, she had sometimes thought, in a vague way, of remarrying and having children. That was always in the nebulous future, and even though there hadn't been any candidates for the position of husband, still she had expected her life to eventually take that route. If she became involved with John, though, she could kiss that dream good-bye. She wouldn't be able to settle for an ordinary Joe if she ever let herself indulge in an affair with him. He might pass himself off as a sheep to most of the world, but she knew him for the wolf he was. And she knew her own nature, knew her craving for excitement. She'd never be able to get herself back, because sleeping with John would be going one step too far. That was the ultimate kick, and nothing else would ever equal it But if she didn't let herself taste him, she would never know what she missed. She might suspect, but she wouldn't know, and she would still be capable of happiness with that ordinary Joe who had to be somewhere in her future.
What difference did it make? she wondered, pressing a fist to the pit of her stomach in an effort to squash the butterflies that were fluttering there. He was gone. If this plan didn't work, she probably wouldn't see him again. Though he'd said he would be back, she didn't quite believe him. She couldn't let herself believe him, because if she did, she might start dreaming he was coming back for her, and that was the most dangerous fantasy of all.
Niema packed in the battered Vuitton luggage that had been delivered the day before. The luggage was a nice touch, she thought; it was expensive and fit with her supposedly well-heeled background, but still looked far from new. It looked, in fact, as if it had been around the world several times. The name tags carried her fictitious name and address.
She dressed in a stylish linen and cotton blend sage green dress for travel, a simple chemise style that she topped with a lightweight cardigan. On her

feet were sensible taupe flats. For all its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, the ensemble shrieked "money." Old money, at that.
The day was bright and sunny; there wouldn't be any bad weather delays. She felt jittery and couldn't tell if it was due to anticipation or dread. But she felt ready; she wanted to be in Paris right now. She wanted to meet this Louis Ronsard and see if breathing was, indeed, all she had to do to be come-hitherish. John needed her inside Ronsard's villa; he would continue on his own, but the job was less risky if he had backup. She had to get that invitation.
Uneasily she thought of a precaution John had insisted she take: birth control pills. It was standard for female operatives, he'd told her. Did he expect her to sleep with Ronsard? She knew that sex was often the route women used to get to the men they targeted, in real life as well as in espionage. Well, her devotion to the job didn't go that deep; she would not, could not, sleep with the arms dealer, no matter how good-looking he supposedly was.
The cab arrived on time, and the driver came to the door to carry her bags. As he went back down the sidewalk she looked around at her comfortable home, wondering at the weird sense of disconnection, as if she would never see it again. This wasn't much different from going on vacation. A week, two weeks at the most, and she would be home again, once more settled into the routine of work and chores. This episode wouldn't be repeated.
She carefully locked the door and set the alarm, which John had reactivated. He had definitely made her more safety conscious, though; even with the alarm, she found herself going around to every window and door and hooking the latches. She had bought a timer for the lamps and television, to give the house at least the appearance of being lived in. And John had promised that Agency people would keep an eye on the house for her, so she wasn't really worried.
The cab driver was looking impatient, so she hurried down the walk, and with every step her spirits lifted. She was finally in action again!
* * *
She was met in Paris by a uniformed chauffeur who loaded her luggage and solicitously handed her into a large Mercedes-Benz. She sank into the leather seats and closed her eyes with a sigh. Did the Concord eliminate jet lag, she wondered, or did the body automatically note the position of the sun and know something was wrong? The supersonic flight was much faster

than a regular jet, but she was still as exhausted as if the flight had taken the normal length of time. All she wanted was a long bath and a quiet place to lie down.

The Marine guards at the embassy checked the car and her passport before allowing her into the embassy grounds. As the car stopped out front, a tall, slender woman in her early sixties, with striking silver-white hair, came down the steps, her hands outstretched and her face wreathed in smiles.

"Niema!" she cried. "It's *so* good to see you!"

This must be Ambassador Theriot's wife, Eleanor, the old family friend. The chauffeur opened the door, and Niema climbed out, going straight to Mrs. The-riot with a warm hug.

"You look exhausted," Mrs. Theriot said, patting her cheek in a motherly way. "Jet lag is terrible, isn't it? Supposedly it's worse going west-or perhaps that's east, I can never remember which it is, but it doesn't matter because I get jet lag no matter what direction I'm traveling."

Mrs. Theriot was giving her recovery time by chattering, Niema realized. She managed a smile. "I *am* tired, but I don't want to waste my visit lying around."

"Don't worry about that," Mrs. Theriot cooed as she led her up the steps into the embassy. "A nap will do you a world of good. There's nothing you have to do, nowhere you have to go."

From that, Niema deduced that her presence not only wasn't expected at dinner that night, but for some reason would be a definite problem. "In that case, I would love a nap."

Still smiling, still chatting as if they had known each other for years, Eleanor Theriot led Niema to an elevator. They exited on the third floor.

"This is your room," she said, opening the door to a spacious bedchamber decorated in a gorgeous combination of antique and modern pieces, and in a soothing pale turquoise color with touches of peach and white. The bed was so high there was a footstool beside it, and the mattress looked thick enough for her to sink out of sight.

"There's a private bath through here," Mrs. Theriot continued, opening a white paneled door and giving Niema a glimpse of gleaming brass bathroom fixtures -or were they gold? "Your bags will be brought up, and if you'd like a maid will unpack for you."

Niema started to say that wasn't necessary, then realized that Niema Price Jamieson was probably accustomed to such help, even if Niema Burdock

wasn't. "A nap first, please," she said. "My bags can be unpacked later."
"Of course, dear. I'll tell everyone you're not to be disturbed." As she talked, Mrs. Theriot walked over to the desk and scribbled a brief note, which she gave to Niema. "When you're awake, we'll have a long talk just to catch up on gossip. I simply don't have the time to call all my friends the way I used to. Just tell me Jacqueline and Sid are all right, and I'll leave you to your nap."
"Jacqueline" and "Sid" were her make-believe parents. "Mom and Dad are fine," Niema replied. "They're in Australia now, for an extended vacation."
"How I envy them! But I won't ask any more questions now. Have a nice rest, dear." She gave Niema another hug, then let herself out.
Niema looked down at the note. "Don't assume you can trust everyone who works in the embassy," Mrs. Theriot had written. "Stick to your cover at all times."
She wadded up the note and started to toss it into the wastebasket, but on second thought tore the paper into tiny pieces and flushed it. She yawned mightily; that nap was becoming more necessary by the moment.
Her luggage arrived, carried by a serious young man who called her "ma'am." Once he was gone and the bedroom door was locked, Niema pulled the curtains closed, then stripped off her clothes and took a quick shower. Fighting to keep her eyes open, she toweled dry and stumbled to the bed, not bothering with a nightgown or pajamas. Using the two-step stool, she climbed upon the bed and stretched out between the cool, fragrant sheets. She groaned in relief as her tired muscles relaxed.
When was this ball at which she was supposed to meet Ronsard? She couldn't remember. Not tonight, for certain. Tomorrow?
Was she ready? She went over the details of her cover, even repeating "Niema Jamieson" to herself over and over, to make certain she responded when someone addressed her by that name. She couldn't just pretend to be Niema Jamieson, she had to become that person. Ronsard was sharp; he would notice if she appeared not to recognize her own name.
John had been thorough in building the cover identity. The documents would stand up to any inspection and investigation. She didn't have to worry about that aspect of her cover. No, what she worried about was her own ability; John might not have doubts about her, but she did. She had never played a role before, unless it was when they were in Iran, if wearing a chador and not speaking was the same as playing a role.

She didn't, however, doubt her ability to plant a listening device in Ronsard's office. When it came to that part of the job, she was confident she could handle it.
"Let the games begin," she murmured to herself, and went to sleep.

PART THREE

Chapter Thirteen

Paris

Louis! It is wonderful to see you. You are looking as handsome as always." The prime minister's wife beamed up her toothy smile at him as she took both his hands and planted kisses on each cheek.
Louis carried her hands to his lips and returned the salute, briefly kissing her knuckles. He was actually fond of Adeline, who was good-natured and inherently kind. Her strong features bore an unfortunate resemblance to a horse, but in the Parisian way she made the most of her best features, her eyes, and after one got to know her, one saw only her nature and didn't think of the long boniness of her face. "I would never miss the opportunity to see you, my dear."
"Flatterer." She beamed at him. "I must continue greeting the guests, but promise me you won't leave without speaking with me again. I don't see enough of you, you rogue."
He promised, an easy thing to do, then left her to the receiving line and mingled with the throng of guests crowding the ballroom and adjacent rooms. A small orchestra was discreetly installed in an alcove and partially blocked from view by a gauze curtain.
Black-clad waiters carried trays of delicate flutes half-filled with golden champagne, while others offered a dazzling array of hor d'oeuvres. Ronsard plucked a glass of champagne from one passing waiter and a delicate pastry from another. He had just taken his first sip of the rather mediocre wine-it was always mediocre at such parties-when he heard his name being called. He turned to see his sister, Mariette, bearing down on him with her husband in tow. Eduard Cassel's expression was indulgent, as always. Mariette was a bubbly froth of a woman, as giddy and harmless as a butterfly. She was three years younger than Ronsard and he had always been protective of the

pretty creature. When she married, she had chosen a man fifteen years her senior, and Eduard had taken over as her protector.
Eduard had been beneficial to Ronsard on several occasions. Positioned as he was in the Ministry, he often knew interesting little details about the government, the economy, and some high-ranking officials' personal lives, which he passed along to his brother-in-law. In return, Ronsard had set up and regularly added to a substantial trust in Mariette's name, allowing the Cassels to live in a level of comfort that far exceeded Eduard's salary.
"Louis!" Mariette flung her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "I didn't know you would be here tonight. This is wonderful. How is Laure?"
"She is well." Louis's voice was flat, his tone pitched so his words didn't carry. He didn't discuss Laure in public. Many of his acquaintances had no idea she existed.
Mariette wrinkled her nose in apology. "Forgive me," she said contritely. "I forgot."
"Of course," he said gently and kissed her forehead as he held out his hand to her husband. "How are you, Eduard?"
"Well, thank you." Eduard was slightly heavy, balding on top, and his features could best be described as "not ugly." His expression was usually bland, disguising the shrewdness that lurked in his eyes. "And you?"
"Well." Those social niceties out of the way, Ronsard settled his arm around his sister's waist. "You look stunning. That gown is very becoming."
She beamed and smoothed a hand down the shimmery pink fabric that brought out the color in her cheeks. "You don't think it too young?"
"My dear, you are young."
"And so I tell her," Eduard said. "She grows lovelier every day." As saccharine as the compliment was, he meant it. His devotion to Mariette always weighed heavily in his favor, in Ronsard's estimation.
"Oh, there is Juliet," Mariette cried, her attention instantly diverted. "I must speak to her." She darted away, her full skirt fluttering around her as if she would take flight.
Ronsard and Eduard drifted away from the crowd, strolling casually as if they had nothing more important to do than idly chat and look for acquaintances in the throng. "I think everyone in government is here tonight," Ronsard observed. "There must be something interesting in the air."

Eduard shrugged, his heavy lips set in a benign smile. "Elections, my friend. Everyone is courting everyone else. And commerce is always interesting, is it not? The Iraqis wish to buy a very expensive, sophisticated computer system from us, but the Americans, as always, are having a tantrum at the idea. Their economy is healthy, so they can't comprehend difficulty in other countries. Our industrial leaders don't like having the Americans intrude on their business; But if we tell them to leave-" He spread his hands. "The Americans have so many lovely dollars. What does one do?"

"Whatever one must, on the surface," Ronsard said dryly. No Frenchman liked the American presence that seemed to permeate the world. France was French, and would remain so. Whatever agreements the Americans forced, they could not be everywhere and oversee everything. France agreed, then did whatever was in France's best interests. Pragmatism was the cornerstone of the French character.

"The Russians, of course, are desperate for technology. Unfortunately they have no means to pay. Perhaps the Americans will pay for them. These are interesting times, are they not?"

"Very interesting." In the past ten years, old boundaries had been completely obliterated. Politics was in a state of flux, and such an atmosphere was very favorable to his business. Instability was the greatest of motivators to a certain type of person.

"The American ambassador is here, of course," Eduard continued. "His aide is drifting around with his ears on alert."

The ambassador's aide was an employee of their Central Intelligence Agency. Everyone knew who everyone was, but still an astonishing amount of information was passed around at these functions. Intelligence officers were often conduits of information that governments wanted to dispense to other governments, but by back channels. No one, after all, wanted to precipitate a crisis.

"A family friend is visiting the ambassador and his wife. She is the daughter of one of Madame Theriot's oldest friends. A lovely young woman, if I may say so. One always sees the same faces at these things, you know; anyone new is a welcome change."

Ronsard was a man. He was always interested in a lovely young woman, provided she wasn't too young.

He had no interest in giggly adolescents. "Point her out to me," he said idly

Eduard looked around. "There," he finally said. "By the windows. Brunette, dressed in white. She has the loveliest eyes."
Ronsard located the woman in question. She was not, he saw, an adolescent. She was standing beside Madame Theriot, a smile that managed to be both polite and warm on her face as she tilted her head, listening to a minister of finance who was probably expounding on his favorite subject, horse racing.
Ronsard exhaled in appreciation. Eduard had not exaggerated; she was indeed lovely. Not beautiful, not spectacular, but. . . lovely. She wasn't dressed in a manner calculated to draw attention, but somehow she did. Perhaps it was the quiet dignity of her manner, coupled with those stunning eyes. Even from there, Ronsard could appreciate Eduard's comment about her eyes. They were huge and night-dark, the type of eyes a man could look into and forget what he was saying.
Her gown was a simple, unadorned white, relying on its exquisite cut for its charm. Her complexion was pale, so pale he wouldn't have thought she could wear white without looking washed-out, but instead the color seemed to accentuate the faintest of pink flushes that made one think one could see the warmth of her blood under that delicate skin.
She was slender without being thin, as so many fashionable women were these days. The gown skimmed over nicely rounded hips, and her bosom, though not large, was enticingly shaped. She wore a single, gracefully long strand of pearls, which matched the bracelet on her right wrist and the earrings on her lobes. She turned as he watched, and the strand of pearls swung sideways to curl under and frame her left breast.
Unconsciously she touched the strand, restoring it to is previous graceful drape, but the brief image made Ronsard's loins pleasurably tighten.
"Is she married?" The French were sophisticated about such matters, but Americans remained, for the most part, annoyingly prudish.
"Widowed," Eduard supplied.
The orchestra at that moment began playing a gently stirring movement from Beethoven, as the dancing had not yet begun. As Ronsard watched, the lovely widow's head turned toward the orchestra, her expression arrested as she listened to the music. She became very still, and her eyes seemed to fill with an aching sadness. She turned to the ministry employee and said a few words, then inclined her head to Madame Theriot and seemed to whisper something. Madame Theriot looked sympathetic and

touched the young woman on the arm. Then the young woman slipped out the open patio doors into the night.
Ronsard had no idea how long she had been widowed, but obviously the music had just brought a painful memory to mind. Sad young women, in his opinion, should always be comforted. "Pardon me," he murmured to Eduard and strode across the ballroom floor.
It was a tedious passage; everyone wanted to speak to him. Women called his name and gave him slumbrous smiles. He shook hands, kissed cheeks, and made graceful escapes while he kept his eye on the patio doors. The minister of finance to whom she had been speaking seemed to dither, but finally found the courage to approach the doors. By that time Ronsard was there, and he deftly stepped in front of the man. "Your solicitude is much appreciated," he murmured, "but won't be necessary."
"Ah ..." The man blinked at him as Ronsard's identity registered. "Yes, of course."
Ronsard went outside into the warm Paris night. The flagstoned patio was lit only by indirect light, from the windows behind him and by the lights strung in the ornamental trees in the garden. Small tables and chairs had been scattered about the patio, providing guests with an opportunity to take fresh air and escape the noise of the ballroom.
The widow sat at one of those tables, her hands quiet in her lap as she looked out over the garden. She hadn't wept, Ronsard saw when he drew near, his footsteps slow and purposeful. She had kept her composure, though he thought he detected a sheen of tears in her eyes, and her mouth had that soft, sad curve that made him want to kiss a smile onto it. A mouth that delectable should always smile.
"Hello," he said gently in English, and the slight start she gave told him that she hadn't been aware of his approach. "Forgive me, I didn't intend to startle you."
She turned those big dark eyes on him, and again he felt that surge in his loins. She looked so sad, so alone and vulnerable. Even as he watched she gathered herself and sought refuge in the social face she had probably been taught to assume from the time she was out of the cradle.
"That's perfectly all right," she said, beginning to stand. Her voice was low and feminine, without the annoying nasal tones of so many Americans. "I was just about to return to the party-"

"No, don't let me displace you," he said quickly, reaching out to gently touch her arm. He was always gentle in his dealings with women, and so many of them were endearingly susceptible to that tenderness, as if they didn't get enough of it in their lives. The widow, however, looked mildly shocked that he had touched her, and she drew back just a little.
"I saw you come out and thought you looked ...upset" He had to be cautious here and ease her wariness.
For a moment she didn't say anything. She turned her head to look out into the garden, and he admired the graceful line of her neck, the curve of her cheekbone. Then she said, "The music reminded me of another time."
That was all. There were no forthcoming details, no expounding. He sensed her reluctance to give him any personal information. He was accustomed to women responding to him, trying to hold his attention; this woman's very lack of response was intriguing.
"My name is Louis Ronsard," he said, settling into the chair beside her.
"I'm pleased to meet you," she said politely. "I'm Niema Jamieson."
"Niema." He said the name slowly, tasting the sound of it. "What a lovely, unusual name."
She gave a small, quick smile. "Too unusual, sometimes. People seldom know how to pronounce it if they see it spelled out-they usually pronounce it 'Neema' instead of 'Nye-ema,' and if they hear it they don't know how to spell it. When I was a child I often wished my mother had named me Jane, or Susan, or anything straightforward."
"Is it a family name?"
"Nothing so dignified," she said, and the smile became a chuckle. He was delighted by the transformation of her face, from sadness to humor. "She liked the rhythm of the name Naomi, but not the name itself. So she substituted vowels until she found a combination she liked, and"-she spread her hands- "Niema was invented."
"I think it's lovely."
"Thank you. I've become accustomed to it." She glanced over her shoulder into the ballroom. "It's been nice talking to you. I think I should-"
"Of course," he said, getting to his feet. "You don't know me, and you're uncomfortable being alone with me." He paused a beat to give her an opportunity to demur, but she didn't, and he was amused. "Will you reserve a dance for me, Mademoiselle Jamieson?" He purposefully called her mademoiselle, to give her an opening to tell him she was widowed.

"Madame," she corrected, and he was pleasantly surprised by her accent. He was less pleased when she left it at that, withholding the fact of her widowhood; a woman who was interested would have made her marital status clear.
His own interest increased. Ronsard seldom had the opportunity these days to enjoy the chase. Women were all too willing, which was a nice state of affairs, but sometimes a man wished to be the predator.
His question hung in the air between them. Finally she said, "Yes, of course," but her tone held only politeness, not any eagerness for his company.
He was both piqued and amused. Perhaps he had become spoiled, but he knew he wasn't repulsive. Far from it, in fact. This woman, though, seemed totally unaware of him as a man.
Politely he offered his arm, and she laid a graceful hand on it. Her touch was barely perceptible; she didn't cling, didn't actually hold him. Together they walked back into the ballroom, drawing more than one pair of eyes.
Ronsard saw Madame Theriot frown and whisper something to her husband. So, she wasn't pleased that her young friend had become acquainted with the notorious arms dealer?
Ronsard smiled at Madame Theriot, then turned to his prey and made her a small, graceful bow. Something in his manner must have alerted her, because her eyes suddenly widened and her soft lips parted. Before she could pull away he pressed his lips to her hand, a brief salute that he didn't allow to linger, and caressed her with his eyes. "Until later," he murmured.

Chapter Fourteen

Niema took a deep breath as she walked across the ballroom. A major hurdle had been crossed, and so swiftly, so easily, she was astounded. The plan had been for Eleanor to introduce her to people who had spoken with Ronsard, but not to the arms dealer himself. Eventually their paths would have crossed, but it would have looked odd for Eleanor to be the one who made the introductions, as she naturally would not have liked for her best friend's daughter to associate with someone like Ronsard.
None of that had been necessary. Out of the corner of her eye, she had seen him speaking with someone she had already met-his name escaped her- and

both of them had been watching her. At that moment the orchestra had begun playing a particularly lovely piece of music and inspiration struck. She allowed sadness to play across her features for a moment, then excused herself to the gentleman who was something boring in the French government. She leaned over and whispered to Eleanor, "He's watching. I'm going to slip out onto the patio."

Eleanor, whose acting skills were worthy of Hollywood, immediately saw the opportunity and what Niema was doing. She put on a concerned face and touched Niema on the arm-nothing dramatic, but a touch of sympathy that wouldn't go unnoticed.

Then Niema had simply sat on the patio and waited. Within five minutes, Ronsard joined her.

He was remarkably good looking. The photos she'd seen of him didn't compare to the man in the flesh. He was tall, with dark blue eyes set on a slant above his exotic cheekbones, and he wore his long dark hair loose on his broad shoulders. The hint of savage in an elegant tuxedo was a devastating combination.

His voice was smooth and low, his manners impeccable, and his eyes managed to convey both his interest and his concern over her sadness. A romantic, handsome Frenchman at a formal party was enough to give any woman weak knees.

As soon as she reached Eleanor, the older woman gripped her wrist and leaned over to whisper in Niema's ear, all the while frowning at Ronsard, as if she were informing Niema of his reputation. "Mission accomplished?"

Niema put a startled look on her face, then an alarmed one. She darted a quick glance at Ronsard. Yes, he was watching. She quickly looked away. "He asked for a dance," she murmured.

Eleanor, who knew only the basic story and that Niema was to draw Ronsard's attention, turned away with a practiced smile as the prime minister's wife approached, and Niema's attention was claimed by a young staffer from the embassy who was from New Hampshire and was evidently suffering from homesickness. Since Niema had never been to the state, she hoped he didn't start asking specific questions.

The only formal party she had ever been to in her life was her high school prom. This was far out of her league, but to her surprise she felt comfortable. The clothes were better, the food more exotic, the people more serious and aware of their own importance, but all in all the same dynamics

applied: polite chitchat, polite laughter, the constant mingling. The politicians worked the room while the lobbyists worked the politicians. Everyone wanted something from someone else.

Her French had rapidly returned, once she heard it spoken again, but then French had been her best language. Ronsard had spoken in English, however, so that was how she had answered him. She doubted he was a man who ever let anything slip, but if he thought she didn't understand him he might be a little careless in what he said. It wasn't her intention to hide the fact that she spoke the language, though, as that was too easy to give away, and he would immediately be suspicious.

She had to avoid any appearance of being interested in him. Quite the opposite, in fact. He had to make all the moves, so he couldn't suspect her of maneuvering for an invitation to his villa. But at the same time she had to show she *liked* him, or she wouldn't have a reason for accepting.

In her favor was the fact that other women fawned over him. She would stand out in his mind because of her very lack of response. Men liked a challenge, and she was going to give him one.

The dancing started, and she let herself be steered around the floor by the first person who asked, who happened to be the boring gentleman she had been talking to earlier. He pumped her arm as if he expected her to spout water out of her mouth, and all the while he enthused about thoroughbred racing. She smiled and made an occasional comment, and he was happy.

Next the ambassador claimed a dance. He was a stately gentleman with silver hair and a sweet smile, a little shorter than his wife, but with a smooth tact that made her instantly comfortable. He spoke to her as if she were indeed an old friend of the family, chatting on about friends they supposedly had in common, a vacation their families had once spent together when she was a child. She wondered if one of the qualifications to an ambassadorship was to be a consummate liar, because he excelled.

After the dance with the ambassador ended, she excused herself and went to the ladies' room, where she killed as much time as she could. She didn't immediately return to the ballroom, but mingled in the other rooms, speaking to those people to whom she had already been introduced. If Ronsard really wanted to dance with her, he was going to have to find her.

He did. A warm hand closed around her elbow and he said, "You promised me a dance."

Niema hesitated. A small silence fell around them. Everyone knew who he was, of course, and waited to see if she would snub him. She saw his eyes begin to narrow, and into the silence she said, "Are you certain you want to risk your toes?"
Relieved chuckles rippled around them. His face relaxed, and a slight smile curved his lips. "My toes would be honored." He held out his hand, indicating the direction of the ballroom.
She walked calmly by his side, ignoring the hand that settled on the small of her back. The orchestra was just beginning a number slower than the others had been, and she realized that he had waited and chosen his moment-either that or bribed the orchestra.
"I thought you were going to refuse me," he said in a low voice as his arm closed about her waist and he swept her into a gliding circle. He held her closely enough that she could feel the warmth of his body, the movement of his legs against hers, but not so close that she would be alarmed and pull back.
"I was."
One dark eyebrow arched, his expression sardonic. "Why didn't you?"
"A dance won't hurt me," she said calmly.
"Neither will I." He looked down into her face, his tone gentle. "I assume Madame Theriot warned you against me."
"Understandable, don't you think?"
"Understandable, but unnecessary. I mean you no harm."
She didn't respond to that, her expression serene as he swept her around the floor. He danced with a grace that made the exercise effortless, and she thanked God that her parents had insisted she take dance lessons in high school even though she would much rather have learned how to hang glide; at least she wouldn't embarrass herself. A socialite would know how to dance, after all.
When she made no effort to pick up the conversational ball, he asked, "Are you just visiting, or have you been employed at the embassy?"
"Gracious, no!" She looked amused. "Visiting, only."
"For how long?"
"No definite time. A few weeks."
"That isn't much time," he complained softly, looking down at her with such apparent masculine interest that a woman would have to be blind to miss it.
"Monsieur Ronsard-"

"Please don't be alarmed. "You're a lovely woman, and I would like very much to see you while you're in Paris. That is all."
"There's no point in it." She looked away, staring at a point over his shoulder. She made her tone gentle and faintly sad.
He firmed the guiding touch of his hand on her back, pressing his palm against her. Her gown was fairly low cut in back, and his fingers brushed her bare skin. "There is always a point to pleasure."
"I don't seem to be very good at pleasure these days."
"Then you must learn how to enjoy yourself again."
Her lips trembled, and a look of pain haunted her eyes. He saw it, as she had meant for him to. "Forgive my clumsiness," he murmured, dipping his head so his mouth was close to her temple. "I never intended to distress you."
She firmed her lips and lifted her chin. "The orchestra is very good, isn't it? I love this piece."
He allowed her to steer the conversation into mundane waters, but she felt his unswerving gaze on her face the entire time. Louis Ronsard was definitely a man on the hunt. So far, she thought, she had done a credible job of appearing reluctant without insulting him.
The dance ended, she thanked him for it, and turned to leave. He fell into step beside her. "Have you been to Paris before?"
"Yes, of course."
"Ah. I had hoped to show you the city."
"Monsieur..." She hesitated, as if groping for words. "Forgive me if I sound presumptuous, but I'm not interested in any sort of romance. Even if your occupation wasn't a barrier I wouldn't-"
"Forgive *me,"* he interrupted, "if I've made you in any way uncomfortable. I would like to spend time with you, yes. I would like to make you smile again, as you did out on the patio. A lovely lady should not have such sad eyes. And even if you say that, no, I may not kiss you, or delight myself in other ways, I would still like to take you out to dinner."
For a moment Niema was so diverted and charmed by the phrase "delight myself" that she couldn't stop herself from smiling.
'Aha! I have achieved one goal already." He touched one finger to the corner of her smiling lips, "Your smile is as lovely as I remembered. Please say yes to dinner. My reputation is greatly exaggerated, I promise."

She searched his face, as if looking for the truth. Finally she said, a bit hesitantly, "I haven't dated since my husband-" She broke off and looked away.
"I understand you're a widow," he said. "Yes, I asked about you. I'm sorry for your loss. It has been . .. how long?"
Five. The word echoed in her brain, and this time the sadness that flashed across her face wasn't an act. Five long years. "Two years," she managed to say, her voice constricted. "Most people think that's long enough to grieve, but... it isn't."
His expression was somber. "I think the heart has its own calendar. You mustn't let anyone rush you, including me. I give you my word I would attach no expectations to a dinner together. It would just be a meal in pleasant company, no more. Or perhaps you would prefer lunch?"
She let herself waver, then said softly, "Yes, lunch sounds ..."
"Safer?" he suggested.
"More casual. Less like a date."
He chuckled. "I see. Then, Madame Jamieson, will you *not* go out to dinner with me? Let's just have lunch instead."
She smiled up at him. "That sounds very nice."
As soon as he was back in his town house, Ronsard placed a secure call to the villa. Cara answered immediately, though it was late, after one A.M.
"Consult that computer of yours," he said. "I want to know whatever you can find out about Niema Jamieson, from New Hampshire. She's a widow, a friend of the American ambassador, and she's visiting them now."
"How do you spell her name?"
Ronsard hesitated, then remembered what she had said about her mother modeling the name on 'Naomi.' "N-i-e-m-a," he said. "Late twenties, early thirties. Dark hair and eyes."
"Got it. When do you want this?"
"In the morning."
"I'll get right on it."
Ronsard hung up and paced slowly around his luxurious bedroom. It had been a long time since he had been so intrigued by a woman, but that didn't mean he was careless. If Niema Jamieson wasn't what she seemed, he'd know it soon enough. And if she was, then he looked forward to a pleasant chase and seduction. Most women could be had, eventually, and he doubted she would be any different.

He had forgotten how pleasurable it was to be the pursuer, to feel that triumphant thrill when she agreed to meet him for lunch. He laughed at himself; such a small victory, but he felt like a conqueror. He would put a satisfied smile on the widow's face yet.
She had been faithful to her husband's memory for two years. Such steadfastness was rare in his world. He found he respected her for that and envied her the love she must have known. Such a love had eluded him; he loved Mariette, of course, and Laure was his heart, but a sweeping, romantic love ... no, he hadn't known one. Passion, yes. Lust. Possession. But not love. He suspected he never would love anyone in such a manner, that he wasn't capable of that depth of emotion. Or perhaps he was simply too wary, too guarded, with too much at stake to let himself become vulnerable.
Not even for a woman like Niema Jamieson.

Chapter Fifteen

The telephone beside her bed rang at six A.M., jerking Niema out of a sound sleep. She rolled over and groped for the receiver. "Hello." She sounded as groggy as she felt.
She heard a stifled chuckle. "You certainly sound alert."
John. The sound of his voice did funny things to the pit of her stomach. She settled herself deeper into the pillow. "We social butterflies need our sleep."
"Has the fluttering attracted any attention?"
"It certainly has." She yawned. "Within minutes."
"Told you. We're amoebas."
"I hope this line is secure," she said in sudden alarm.
"If it isn't, then the Company isn't doing its job.
All lines into the embassy are secure, and I'm on a secure phone. Tell me everything about last night."
How did he know she'd met Ronsard last night? she wondered in annoyance. "Are you keeping tabs on me? How? Where are you?"
"Of course I'm keeping tabs on you," he said calmly. "You didn't think I'd bring you into this and just leave you on your own, did you? I'm nearby, for the moment."

And that was all he intended to tell her, she realized. Still, it was enough. Until she heard his voice, she hadn't realized how much she had missed him, missed the constant challenge of his presence. If he was nearby, that meant she had to be on her toes, because he could pop up at any second. She didn't want to step out of the shower, stark naked, and come face to face with him. On the other hand . . .

Whoa. She backed away from that thought without finishing it. Instead she began a recital of the previous night's events. "He followed me onto the patio and introduced himself and asked for a dance later. When we danced, he asked me out to dinner. I refused. We're having lunch today at one, at Le Cafe Marly. Do you know where that is?"

"It's in the Richelieu wing of the Louvre. It's where you go to see and be seen."

"And here I thought having lunch with him would be more discreet than dinner."

"Not at Cafe Marly. Why are you trying to be discreet?"

"If I'm this fine upstanding citizen and an old family friend of the ambassador's wife, it would seem more reasonable to at least *worry* about seeing an arms dealer."

"Ronsard is seen by every influential person in Paris," John said dryly.

"Yes, but I'm different." She said that with an airiness that had him chuckling.

"When will you give in and have dinner with him? With enough time, I can arrange to have some of our people placed around you, the table wired, things like that."

"I don't think I will. I'll have lunch with him, but other than that I don't want to encourage him too much."

"Just make certain you encourage him enough to be invited to his estate."

"I'll be friends with him, but that's all."

A pause stretched over the line. "If you're trying to tell me you won't sleep with him, I never intended for you to," he finally said, his tone flattening out.

"That's good to hear, because sex was never an option. Even though I did go on those damn birth control pills the way you ordered."

Silence again. "The pills weren't in case you wanted to have an affair; they're in case something goes wrong."

She understood, then. If anything went awry and she was captured, she could be raped. "Got it," she said softly The issue of birth control pills hadn't arisen on the job in Iran, because she had been taking the pills anyway. She and Dallas had wanted to wait a year or so, maybe longer, before starting a family.

"I'll be in touch," he said, and hung up.

Slowly she replaced the receiver and snuggled back in bed, but any chance of sleep was gone. Her brain felt alert, racing along the way it always did when she talked with John. What she needed was a good, long run. The more she thought about it, the better the plan sounded. She would ask Eleanor where the best place to jog was. She hopped out of bed and began digging out her sweats, which she had packed for a just-in-case occasion.

Not only did Eleanor know, she arranged for one of the off-duty Marines who was a dedicated jogger to run with her. Niema and the serious young man with the sidewall haircut raced side by side until they were both dripping with sweat. By the time they returned to the embassy, she had teased him out of his stiffness and he had spilled out his life story to her, as well as the details of his wedding, which would take place during his next long leave.

Feeling both energized and relaxed by the run, she showered and ate a light breakfast, then decided to get in a bit of shopping before meeting Ronsard for lunch. Eleanor gave her a list of interesting shops, and Niema ventured out into the French capital.

When the taxi let her out at Cafe Marly's terrace on Cour Napoleon at two minutes 'til one, she was carrying a large shopping bag. She looked at the cafe and for a moment a strong yearning swept over her. She would like to be meeting John for lunch in a place like this-*No,* she told herself sternly, cutting off the thought. She couldn't let herself lose focus on the job. She had to concentrate, not think about what John was or wasn't doing, and what it would be like to have lunch dates with him, and dinner dates-"I'm doing it again," she muttered.

Pushing all thoughts of him out of her mind, she entered the cafe and was immediately greeted. All she had to say was "Monsieur Ronsard" and she was whisked away to a table.

Ronsard was already there, smiling as he rose to his feet. He took her hand and briefly kissed it, then seated her in the chair beside him, rather than in

the one across the table. "You're even lovelier today than you were last night."
"Thank you." She was wearing a classic red sheath with a single-strand pearl necklace. If he had a discerning eye, and he seemed to, he would recognize the style and quality of Chanel. She looked around, intrigued by the cafe. Glass walls were all that separated the cafe from the stunning works of art in the Louvre.
"You're glowing. Boosting a nation's economy must agree with you." He nodded meaningfully at the shopping bag.
"A woman can never have too many pairs of shoes."
"Really? How many do you have?"
"Not enough," she said firmly, and he laughed.
Today his hair was gathered at the back of his neck with a simple, round gold clasp. But even though he was dressed in trousers and a linen jacket instead of a tuxedo, and his hair was confined, every woman in the cafe seemed to be staring at him just as they had at the ball last night. He had a natural, exotic flamboyance that drew the eye.
Evil should show on the face, she thought. It should twist and mar the features, give some indication of its presence within a person. But if Ronsard was evil, she hadn't seen any sign of it yet. So far he had been unfailingly polite and charming, with a tenderness to his manner that didn't seem at all feigned.
"So," he said, leaning back, perfectly at ease. "Tell me: Did Madame Theriot warn you about me again?"
"Of course. Eleanor cares about me."
"She thinks I'm a danger to you?"
"She thinks you're an unsavory character."
Taken by surprise by her candor, he blinked, then laughed aloud. "Then why are you here? Do you have a yearning for danger, or do you think you can rescue me from my wicked ways?"
"Neither." She regarded him with somber, dark eyes. "I think you may be a very nice man, but I can't rescue you from anything. And you're no danger to me at all."
"I think I'm insulted," he murmured. "I would like to be a danger to you, in one particular way. You must have loved him very, very much."
"More than I can say."
"What was he like?"

A smile broke across her face. "He was . .. oh, in some ways he was extraordinary, and in others he was like most men. He made faces when he shaved; he left his clothes on the floor when he took them off. He sailed, he flew his own plane, he took CPR courses and regularly donated blood, he voted in every election. We laughed and argued and made plans, like most couples."
"He was a lucky man, to be loved so completely."
"I was the lucky one. And you? Have you been married?"
"No, I haven't been so fortunate." He shrugged. "Perhaps one day." But it was obvious from his tone he thought marrying was as likely as the sun rising in the west.
"I don't think your wicked reputation scares off many women," she teased. "Every female in here has been staring at you."
He didn't even glance around, as most men would have done, to see if that were true. "If I'm alone, it's because I choose to be. I was thinking last night that I'd never felt anything like what you obviously felt- still feel-for your husband. Part of me thinks it would be pleasant to love someone that much, but a part of me is very grateful that I don't. But why am I saying this?" he asked ruefully. "Telling you I don't think I'll ever love you is not a good way to convince you to have an affair with me."
Niema laughed. "Relax," she advised, patting him on the hand. "An affair wasn't on the books anyway."
He gave her a crooked smile. "But I would very much like for it to be."
She shook her head, amusement still on her face. "It can't be. All I can offer is friendship."
"In that case, I would be honored to be your friend. And I'll keep hoping," he said, his eyes twinkling.
Later that afternoon, Ronsard picked up the sheaf of papers Cara had faxed to him. He had quickly read through them when they arrived, but now he studied them more closely. There was nothing suspicious about Niema Jamieson. She was from New Hampshire, had attended an exclusive women's college, married at the age of twenty-four, and was widowed at twenty-eight. Her husband had been killed in a yachting accident. They had been mentioned a few times in society columns, usually with a descriptive tag such as "devoted couple." She was exactly what she seemed to be, a rarity in his world.

He liked her. She could be surprisingly blunt, but without malice. In a way, he even liked that she wasn't romantically interested in him. He still wanted to take her to bed, but there was no pressure from her, no expectations to be met. She had simply had lunch with him, and that was that. Afterward she had taken a taxi back to the embassy, without hinting for another invitation-which, of course, made him even more determined to see her again. He had asked her out to dinner again, only to be gently refused. He persisted until she at least agreed to another lunch.

The telephone rang, his private line, and he absently answered it.

"Ronsard."

It was Cara. "Ernst Morrell has been in contact." Ronsard's lips thinned. He neither liked nor trusted Morrell. Though by the nature of his business he dealt on a daily basis with fanatics, madmen, or plain murderers, Morrell was probably the most vicious. He was the head of a small but particularly virulent terrorist organization and had a particular fondness for bombs. He had set explosives in a hospital in Germany, killing six patients in retaliation for Germany's cooperation with the United States on a military action against Iraq.

"What does he want?"

"He's heard about RDX-a. He wants it." Ronsard swore a lurid phrase. First Temple, and now Morrell. But Temple was one thing, and Morrell something else entirely; though he had expected information about RDX-a to leak, he hadn't expected it to happen quite so fast. He and the manufacturer had an agreement; he would be the lone conduit of the compound. Such exclusivity would be enormously profitable to both of them, at least until someone else was able to duplicate the compound. *He* had not told anyone, because the explosive still wasn't perfected; it would be much more in demand if it were reliable, rather than having an unfortunate reputation for early detonation. That meant the manufacturer was logically responsible for, as the Americans would say, everyone and his brother knowing about RDX-a.

But it seemed as if his partners had decided to sacrifice large future riches for immediate gain. He sighed. To hell with them. He would collect his percentage and issue a warning to the buyers that the compound wasn't yet reliable. He had to protect his business on that end, since the source had proven so short-sighted.

"When does he want it?" he asked in resignation, rubbing a sudden ache between his eyes.
"He didn't say. He wants to talk to you."
"Did he leave a number?"
"Yes, and he said you could reach him there only for another forty-five minutes."
That was common, at least among the more efficient organizations: They moved frequently and had only short windows of time during which they could be contacted. Such tactics greatly reduced their chances of being located.
Ronsard jotted down the number Cara recited, and as soon as their call was disconnected he began dialing. It was a London number, he saw. The rings *brrrd* in his ear, then stopped as the receiver was lifted. "Bakery." The one word was heavily accented.
Ronsard said only one word, his name. There was thirty seconds of silence, then a different voice said heartily, "You are prompt, my friend." Morrell was a stocky, barrel-chested man, but his voice was incongruously light. He always spoke as if he were throwing the words from his mouth, trying to counteract the lightness of his voice by sheer velocity.
He was not, and never would be, Morrell's friend. "You have an order, I believe."
"I hear such interesting rumors about a new recipe! I have use for one thousand kilograms."
A thousand kilograms! Ronsard's eyebrows arched. That was enough explosive to destroy London, not that Morrell would use it only in one place. No, he would wreak destruction all over the industrialized world, or perhaps sell some of it himself. "Such an amount will be very, very expensive."
"Some things are worth their cost."
"Did the rumors tell you that the recipe has not been perfected?"
"Not perfected, how?"
"The results are unreliable. Unstable."
'Ah." There was silence as Morrell processed this. No sane person wanted to work with an explosive that might go off during transport, but then, Ronsard thought with grim humor, sanity was not required with these people.
"What brings about these unfortunate results?"

"Rough handling. Being dropped, for instance."
Another "Ah." If one used RDX-a on an airplane, then it would have to be in a carry-on bag so one could control the motion-a suicide mission. Or one could always use an unsuspecting courier, as on Delta Flight 183.
"One must accept these risks," Morrell finally said, meaning that he himself would not be handling the explosive.
"There is one other problem."
"So many problems!" Now Morrell sounded petulant, as if a favorite toy had been broken.
"The recipe must be used within a certain amount of time or it will . . . perform unexpectedly. Timing must be precise."
"So I have heard, my friend, so I have heard! It is a most interesting recipe."
"A thousand kilograms is a considerable amount to be handled."
"But an organized person can handle such a task. When will the shipment be ready?"
From that statement, Ronsard deduced Morrell already had his targets selected, and that they would be hit almost simultaneously. He did not, however, have enough people in his organization to do it all himself. Different organizations occasionally cooperated with each other, especially if they had mutual enemies.
To Morrell he said, "I'm not certain. That's such a large amount; the manufacturer perhaps doesn't have that much available." In fact, Ronsard was certain of it.
"It is worth a great deal of money to me to have this recipe within two weeks."
"I'll give the manufacturer your order."
"Good, very good! I will call again tomorrow."
Ronsard hung up. He was extremely irritated; by precipitously putting RDX-a on the market, the manufacturer had increased not just their risk, but his. Such risk would have to be compensated, of course. *Highly* compensated.
Then he had an amusing thought. Production was, he knew, still very limited. An order of a thousand kilograms would be difficult to fill, and he didn't yet know how much of the compound Temple would want. Perhaps he should simply let Temple and Morrell settle between them who got the RDX-a. A showdown, as they said in the Westerns. Yes, that would definitely be amusing.

Chapter Sixteen

“I'm having a house party in three days," Ronsard said to Niema several days later as they strolled in a small, quiet park. "At my home in the Rhone-Alpes region, south of Lyon. The countryside is beautiful, and my home is comfortable. I would like very much for you to attend the party."

She was silent, her head dipped as she walked along beside him. The canopy of trees shaded them from the warm summer sun, and birds sang overhead. They were not the only people enjoying the little park. Young mothers and nannies supervised shrieking children of all ages as they dashed about, skipping and jumping, rolling in the grass. Joggers pounded up and down the paths, singly and in pairs. Lovers walked hand in hand, sometimes stopping to kiss. Older people occupied the benches, some of them playing board games, some of them just watching the activity that surrounded them. The sweet perfume of flowers lay on the warm air like the touch of a lover.

"You aren't saying anything," he observed after a moment. "Are you worried about Madame Theriot's disapproval?"

"That, and though you *say* you expect only friendship, somehow I don't think you've given up hope that. . . well, that I'll change my mind."

"Of course I hope," he said matter-of-factly. "I am a man-a Frenchman. I would like very much to sleep with you. But it's also nice just being with you. You don't want favors from me, and you don't want my money. Do you realize how few people like you I have in my life?"

"Your life is what you've made it." She glanced up at him. "I refuse to feel sorry for you."

Smiling, he caught her hand and swung it between them. "There, that is what I mean. You say what you think."

"Not always," Niema said. "I'm too polite for that."

The smile became a chuckle. "Are you insulting me?"

"Of course. You know what I think of your ... profession."

Something closed in his eyes, some expression that was shuttered before she could read it. "We all do what we must."

"Not everyone. Some people do what they can."

"And there is a difference between 'must' and 'can'?"

"There seems to be. People say they do what they must when what they've done has hurt someone. People who do what they can are usually helping."

"A matter of semantics." He shrugged. "But perhaps you're right. I made a choice, when I was a young man, and now I mustn't whine. Perhaps I had other options, but at the time, at that age, I didn't see them. Given the same circumstances, I would make the same choice again."
There was no regret in his voice, only a pragmatic acceptance of who and what he was. He didn't despair over the mistakes he had made; there was no angst, no wrestling with his conscience. He had set his feet on a certain path and never looked back.
She wanted to ask him why he had made the choice he had, but the answer seemed fairly obvious: money. He had needed money, and that was the means he had chosen to get it. The "why" didn't matter; by his own free will, he had put himself across the line that divided legal from illegal. She couldn't help liking him, but at the same time she had no qualms about presenting herself to him under false pretenses. Ronsard was an adversary, however friendly and charming he might be.
"My profession aside, I still want an answer to my invitation."
"A house party." That was exactly the function to which John had wanted her to get invited, but there was no enthusiasm in her voice. "How large a party?"
That question had him smiling again. "Are you wondering if it would be a party of two, which I would much prefer? I believe there are about a hundred people invited."
"Then your house must be more than just 'comfortable,' " she said dryly.
"Perhaps that was an understatement. But there are separate guest quarters that house half that number, so not everyone is staying under the same roof."
"That is still a large roof."
"Yes, it is. Don't hold my roof against me, please."
She laughed. "I'm sure it's a very nice roof. Would you mind if I ask who the other guests are?"
His eyes gleamed. "You wouldn't ask unless you were considering accepting," he said with satisfaction. "You met many of the same guests at the prime minister's ball that you'll meet at my home."
Many, but not all. Undoubtedly some of his guests were the sort who wouldn't be invited to government functions. It was a cynical world, when the lawmakers and the lawbreakers mingled together behind the scenes. John would be there, as one of the latter group. She wondered if he would

be surprised at any of the other guests, then dismissed the idea. No, he wouldn't be surprised. He probably knew of them all.
"Please say yes," he cajoled. "I won't be in Paris much longer, and your visit may end before I return."
"Yes," she said, and sighed. "I'll probably go home afterward. It would be awkward for me to visit you, then come back to the embassy. I don't want to do anything that would damage Albert's career."
He was silent as they walked along. Perhaps he didn't like being told associating with him had repercussions for others, but she wasn't going to sugarcoat anything for him. She had a job to do, and so far her instincts had been on target; so many people sucked up to him, and he was pursued by so many women that the very fact she didn't made her memorable to him.
"So I won't see you again after you leave the house party," he finally said.
He gave her a wry smile. "I don't think we normally travel in the same circles."
"No," she said. "We don't."
"Then it's all the more important for you to come. There's someone I'd like for you to meet."
"I got the invitation," she told John the next morning when he called.
"Good. When are you going?"
"Day after tomorrow."
"I won't be there until the next day. There's a fancy-dress party that night, and I'll probably schedule my arrival during the party."
"How do you know the schedule? And why in the middle of the party?"
"Everyone's attention will be splintered, including Ronsard's. It's just a small advantage for me, but every detail matters. We don't know his security arrangements, the floor plan, or his schedule, so we'll have to play that part by ear. Don't forget, I'll be smitten by you the first time I see you, so we'll have an excuse to be together."
"I'm turning into a love goddess," she muttered. "Men are being smitten left and right."
He laughed quietly. "Maybe you've found your niche in life."
"Smiting men?"
"I think you could get to like it."
"That depends on what I'm smiting them with."
"See you in three days, Mata."

Ronsard left that day for his villa, so she didn't have lunch with him for the first time since they had met. Glad of the downtime, she spent a good portion of the day assembling the things she would need once she got to Ronsard's house. The CIA station chief in the embassy was of great help in procuring the tiny transmitters, batteries, and wiring she needed. If he asked any questions, he didn't ask them of her. She knew he had to have cleared everything with Langley for him to be as cooperative as he was.

The station chief didn't know anything about the job she was doing, just that he was to get whatever she needed; the Paris-based CIA contingent didn't even know she had been meeting Ronsard, unless one of the case officers had taken it on himself to follow her one day, but she couldn't think why they would. So far as any of them had known until now, she had simply been a friend, visiting the ambassador and his wife.

Lyon was about three hundred kilometers from Paris, farther than she wanted to drive, so she booked a flight and called the number Ronsard had given her to arrange to be picked up at the airport.

She was eager to arrive, to look around and see what she had to deal with, so she could make concrete plans and decisions. Being a socialite, even a subdued one, wasn't her cup of tea. She wanted to do something besides shop and have lunch and attend parties.

The weather was beautiful the day she flew down to Lyon, the flight smooth. She was met at the airport by a man in a stylish gray suit, his blond hair cut military short and his eyes hidden by sunglasses. He didn't speak other than when it was necessary, but he was efficient. He collected her luggage and handed her into a silver Jaguar, and she settled back to enjoy the drive.

They went south on the expressway, then turned east, toward Grenoble. The region was beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful in France, with the French Alps rising in the east. The weather was warmer than it had been in Paris, the heat radiating through the expensive tinted glass of the Jaguar's windows.

Her first view of Ronsard's villa made her blink in astonishment, and she was glad she was wearing sunglasses to hide her expression. After all, she was supposed to be used to wealth and luxury. John should have warned her, she thought absently.

A sleekly paved drive, bordered with multi-colored flowers, led up to massive gates set in a twelve-foot-high gray stone wall that completely

encircled the estate. The stone in the wall alone had to have been an enormous expense. The gates slid smoothly open as the car approached; when they drove through, the gates started closing again almost immediately.

The estate itself was massive; she estimated at least forty acres had been enclosed, though the grounds had been so artfully landscaped there were sections where she couldn't see the wall at all. The house itself-though she doubted a structure that huge could be called a mere house-was four stories high, with wings stretching out on each side. It had been built with huge slabs of pale, luminous gray marble, with faint streaks of pink and gold running through the stone. The effect was stunning.

To the right was a long, two-story building that was rather barrackslike in style, though more of that incredible landscaping went a long way toward disguising it. To the left, set like a jewel on a picturesque pond, was what looked like another house. She guessed that this was the guest quarters Ronsard had mentioned. It was large enough to be a small hotel, and looked small only in comparison to the massive-ness of the main building.

Illegal arms-dealing had to be a very, very lucrative business.

Until now she hadn't had any grasp of Ronsard's wealth, but now she had a better idea why he was pursued for his money.

There were men in shades everywhere-his private army. There seemed to be a system of dress to designate authority. Most of the men wore a dark green uniform-type pants and shirt, and these men carried weapons openly. Next in number were those wearing dark green pants, but white shirts, and they wore only side arms. Fewest in number were those wearing light gray suits like her driver.

A number of guests had already arrived. They were wandering in the formal gardens, casually but expensively dressed in what she had always thought of as country-manor style. Some sat on a side patio, indulging in cocktails. Six industrious individuals were on the tennis courts, batting the chartreuse ball back and forth with increasing languor as the heat sapped their strength.

Ronsard himself came down the broad, shallow steps to meet her, smiling, and his hands extended as she got out of the car. He took her shoulders in a light grasp and, bending, brushed his lips across her cheek. Startled, she drew back and blinked up at him. That was the first time he had done more than kiss her hand, and she must have looked uneasy because he rolled his eyes.

"One would think, from your expression, that I had attempted to remove your dress," he said dryly. "If my ego had been inflated, it would now be as flat as yesterday's champagne." He gave a rueful shake of his head. "And to think I've missed this."
"I'm sorry, I was just startled."
"No, don't apologize and ruin the effect."
"Now you're making me feel guilty."
"I'm teasing." He smiled down at her, then said briefly to the two young staffers who stood behind him like sentinels. "Put Madame's luggage in the Garden room."
"The Garden room," she repeated. "That sounds lovely."
"It's actually a small suite. I want you to be comfortable. And before your suspicious nature rears its ugly head, no, it is not next to my private suite. None of the guest rooms are."
"Consider my suspicions headed off at the pass." She took his arm, and he led her inside, where delicious coolness and airy space replaced the heat of outside.
Marble columns soared to a painted ceiling three stories high. The floor was granite flagstones, in a darker hue than the pale gray of the columns, and dotted by enormous, richly colored rugs with tight, thick weaves. Twin marble staircases curved to the left and right, coming together at the top of the arch with hallways opening off each side.
"I hope you're providing tour maps to everyone, so they don't get lost," she said as he escorted her up the stairs.
"The design is basically simple," he began, and smiled at the disbelieving look she gave him. "There aren't any cul-de-sacs. All secondary hallways lead directly back to the main hallway. If you have a sense of direction, you can find your way back to here without any difficulty."
As they mounted the stairs she looked up at an enormous tapestry hung on the left wall. "How old is your house?"
"It isn't old at all. It was built in the seventies by one of the Middle-Eastern oil billionaires. When the price of oil dropped, he needed to raise cash, and I was in a position to provide it."
Upstairs, the marble stairs gave way to dove-gray carpeting so thick her feet sank into it. Light streamed through Palladian windows; walking over to look out, she saw an enormous swimming pool in the courtyard below; the pool was irregularly shaped so that it resembled a lake, exquisitely

landscaped, with a small waterfall sparkling over rocks before cascading back into the transparent turquoise water.
"The pool must be spectacular at night, like another world," she said.
"It's one of my pleasures. A long swim is relaxing after a difficult day."
He led her along the hallway, turned left down a secondary hallway, then opened a door on the right. "Here is the Garden room. I hope you will be comfortable."
Niema stepped inside, and her eyes lit with pleasure. "It's beautiful."
The reason it was called the Garden room was obvious: It was filled with greenery. Besides the lovely arrangements of cut flowers, there were eight-foot tall areca palms in strategic locations, succulent jade, rhododendrons. They were in a small sitting room; double doors to the right were opened to reveal a sumptuous bedroom. Straight ahead, glass doors opened onto a private balcony that was lush with potted trees and flowers. The balcony was the width of both the sitting room and bedroom, perhaps forty feet wide.
Ronsard was watching her move around the suite, touching the plants, smelling the flowers. "This is a peaceful place. I thought you would enjoy it; an escape from the social whirl."
"Thank you," she said sincerely. His thoughtful-ness in providing this retreat was touching. He was correct in thinking she enjoyed occasional solitude and serenity in which to recharge, but as she looked around she realized that the balcony would also provide an excellent means of clandestine entry, a la Medina. She would make certain the glass doors were always unlocked-not that they would provide much difficulty to someone as adept at breaking and entering as John was.
Her luggage had already been deposited on a padded bench at the foot of the bed. Ronsard took her arm. "A maid will unpack for you. If you aren't too tired, I have someone I'd like you to meet."
"No, I'm not tired," she said, remembering he had mentioned in Paris that he wanted her to meet someone. The electronic supplies she had brought were safely locked in her jewelry case, so she wasn't worried about the maid seeing them and reporting to Ronsard that one of his guests had brought some interesting equipment with her.
"My private wing is on the other side of the house," he said and smiled. "I wasn't lying when I said your suite wasn't next door to mine. I wish it was,

but I deliberately remodeled so that the guest rooms were somewhat distant."
"For privacy, or protection?"
"Both." A tender look swept his face, an expression all the more astonishing because it seemed to be directed elsewhere. "But not my privacy, and not my protection. Come. I told her I was bringing someone to see her, and she has been excited all day, waiting."
"She?"
"My daughter. Laure."

Chapter Seventeen

His daughter? John hadn't mentioned that Ronsard had a daughter. Niema tried to hide her surprise. ""You've never mentioned her before," she said. "I thought your sister was your only family."
"Ah, well, perhaps I'm paranoid. I do everything I can to safeguard her. As you pointed out, I'm an unsavory character; I have enemies."
"I said *Eleanor* thinks you're an unsavory character," she corrected.
"She's right, you know. I'm far too unsavory for a woman like you."
She rolled her eyes. "Smooth, Ronsard. Women probably fall all over you when you warn them that you're too dangerous for them."
"Have I ever mentioned you have this annoying habit of seeing through my ploys?" he asked conversationally, and they both laughed.
They weren't the only people in the hallway. They passed several guests, all of whom had to speak to their host. One gentleman looked familiar, and he swept her with a knowing look. It took her a moment to place him as the horse-racing afficionado she had met at the prime minister's ball. She smiled at him and asked how his horse had finished in the weekend's race.
"You have a slave for life," Ronsard said as they continued down the hall. "He bores everyone with his talk of horses and racing."
"I like horses," she replied serenely. "And it doesn't take any more effort to be nice to someone than it does to be nasty."
Getting from one side of the huge villa to the other took some time, especially when he was continually stopped. At last, however, they passed into his private wing, which was guarded by heavy wooden double doors.
"My suite is here," he said, indicating another set of double doors on the

left. He showed her a family dining room, a den that surprised her with its coziness, a small movie theater, an enormous playroom filled with all manner of toys and games, a library so packed with books she doubted he could get another volume on the shelves. The titles were both fiction and nonfiction, with an amazing variety of children's books mixed in.
"This is one of Laure's favorite rooms," he said.
"She loves to read. Of course, she has outgrown fairy tales and Dr. Seuss, but I make certain there is always a selection of reading material appropriate to her age."
"How old is she?"
"Twelve. It's a delightful age. She's hovering between childhood and adolescence, unable to decide if she wants to play with her dolls or experiment with lipstick. I've forbidden the lipstick for another year, at least," he said, his lips quirking.
He turned to her, a smile still on his lips, but his eyes were somehow looking beyond her. "Laure is small for her age," he said. "Very small. I want to prepare you. Her health is ... not good. Every moment I have her is a gift from God."
An odd thing for a man like Ronsard to say, but then again, perhaps it wasn't. He opened a door into a room so cheerful and charming Niema caught her breath, and they stepped inside.
"Papa!"
The voice was young, sweet, as pure as the finest crystal. There was a whirring sound and she came rolling toward them in a motorized wheelchair, a tiny doll with an animated face and a smile that lit the world. An oxygen tank was attached to the back of the wheelchair, and transparent tubing ran from the tank to her nostrils, held in place by a narrow band around her head.
"Laure." His voice was filled with an aching tenderness. He leaned down and kissed her. He spoke in English. "This is my friend, Madame Jamieson. Niema, this is my heart, my daughter, Laura."
Niema bent forward and extended her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you," she said, also in English.
"And I you, madame." The young girl shook Niema's hand; her fingers were painfully fragile in Niema's careful clasp. Ronsard had said his daughter was twelve; she was the size of a six-year-old, probably weighing only about fifty pounds. She was so very, very thin, her skin a bluish white. She

had Ronsard's eyes, dark blue and intelligent, and an angel's smile set in an alabaster face. Her hair was a silky light brown, brushed to a careful smoothness and tied back with a festive bow.
She was wearing lipstick.
Ronsard noticed it the same time Niema did. "Laure!" he exclaimed. He put his hands on his hips and gave her a stern look. "I forbade you to wear lipstick."
She gave him a long-suffering look, as if she despaired of ever making him understand. "I wanted to look nice, Papa. For Madame Jamieson."
"You are beautiful as you are; you don't need lipstick. You are too young for makeup."
"Yes, but you're my papa," she said with unassailable logic. "You *always* think I'm beautiful."
"I think the shade is very flattering," Niema said, because females should always stick together. She wasn't lying; Laure displayed an intelligence beyond her years by choosing a delicate shade of rose and using only a light application. Anything more would have looked garish in such an unearthly pale face. She ignored the girl's tiny size; what was important here was her mind, not her body.
Ronsard's eyebrows flew up in disbelief. "You're taking the part of this . . . this disobedient hoyden?"
Laure giggled at hearing herself described as a hoyden. Niema met Ronsard's accusing look with an innocent expression and a shrug. "Of course. What did you expect me to do?"
"'Agree with him," Laure said. "He expects *all* of his women to agree with him."
This time Ronsard's astonishment wasn't feigned. Stunned at hearing such a statement issuing from his innocent daughter's lips, he stared speechlessly at her.
"But I'm not one of his women," Niema pointed out. "I'm just a friend."
"He has never brought any of the others to meet me. Since he brought *you,* I thought perhaps he wants you to be my *maman."*
Ronsard made a little choking sound. Niema ignored him to grin at the child. "No, it's nothing like that. We aren't in love with each other, and besides, your papa is allergic to marriage."
"I know, but he would marry if he thought that was what I want. He spoils me terribly. He will get anything I ask for, so I try not to ask for very much,

or he would be too busy to do anything else."
She was an alarming blend of childlike innocence and trust, and an astuteness far beyond her years. Whatever her physical problems were, they had forced her to look inward much earlier than young people usually learned to do. "While he is recovering," she said, briskly turning the wheelchair, "I'll show you my rooms."
Niema strolled beside the chair while Laure gave her a guided tour of her suite. Everything had been specially outfitted so she could reach it from a wheelchair, and attached to one side of the chair was a long pair of tongs so she could pick up anything she dropped. A middle-aged woman came forward, smiling, to be introduced as Laure's nurse, Bernadette. Her bedroom opened off Laure's, so she was available during the night if she was needed.
Anything that could possibly interest a young girl had been made available. There were books, movies, dolls, games, samplers she had made, fashion magazines. Laure showed all of them to Niema, while Ronsard trailed behind, bewildered and bemused at being made to feel unnecessary.
Laure even showed Niema her makeup case. Ronsard made choking noises again. This was not a little girl's pretend makeup, but the real stuff from Dior, stunningly packaged in a silver train case. "I ordered it," Laure said, unperturbed by her father's horror. "But nothing looks right when I put it on. Even the lipstick is too . .. too much like a clown. Today, I rubbed my finger on the stick, then on my lips."
"That's good. It's called staining," Niema said, pulling a chair over to sit beside the girl and taking the train case on her lap. She began pulling out the sleek containers of makeup. "Makeup is like anything else, it takes practice to use. And some things will never look good because they don't flatter your coloring. You learn by experimenting. Would you like me to show you?"
"Oh, please," Laure said eagerly, leaning forward.
"I forbid it," Ronsard said, with more desperation than sternness. "She is too young-"
"Louis," Niema interrupted. "Go away. This is girl stuff."
He didn't go away. He sat down, a charmingly helpless expression on his face, watching as Niema demonstrated how to use each item.
A pink blush was much too dark for that white face. Niema took a tissue and wiped most of it off, leaving only a delicate tint. "Remember, none of

this sets into stone when you apply it. If it is too much, wipe part of it off. I always have a tissue and cotton swabs with me when I put on makeup, so I can make the effect more subtle. Do you see my eyeliner?" She leaned closer, and Laure nodded as she stared hard at Niema's eyes.
"I use a black pencil, like this-very soft, so it doesn't pull my skin. Then I use a swab to wipe most of it away, so it's barely noticeable. But my coloring is dark, while yours is fair, so black would be too harsh for you. When you are old enough to start wearing eyeliner, use a soft gray or taupe-
"
The makeup lesson went on, with Laure hanging on every word. Under Niema's tutelage, very little was actually applied to the small, skeletal face, just the merest hint of color. Laure peered in a mirror, studied herself, and smiled. "Now I don't look so ill," she said with satisfaction. "Thank you very much, Madame Jamieson. Were you watching, Papa?"
"Yes, I was watching. It looks very nice, but-"
"If I die, I want you to make certain someone puts makeup on me just like this. I do not want to look sick when I reach Heaven."
All the color drained out of Ronsard's face. Niema felt stricken on his behalf, but also for this little girl who had never in her life known what it was to enjoy good health, to run and play like other children.
"I won't wear it now, I promise," she said. "Not even lipstick, though I do like it. But... *if.* Promise me, Papa."
"I promise." His voice sounded hoarse, strained, unlike Ronsard's normal suave tones.
She reached over and patted his knee, the child comforting the parent. "You may take the case," she said, "and keep it safe for me. That way you will always know where it is."
He lifted her out of the wheelchair and settled her on his lap, taking care not to dislodge the oxygen tube. She was so frail, so tiny, her legs dangled like a kindergartner's. He couldn't speak for a moment, his dark head bent so that his cheek rested on the top of her head.
"You won't need it for a long, long time," he finally said.
"I know." Her eyes, though, held a different knowledge.
She seemed to be tiring. He touched her cheek. "Do you want to lie down for a while?"
"On the longue," she said. "There is a movie I wish to see."

Bemadette came over and pushed the wheelchair and its container of oxygen while he carried Laure to the plush chaise longue and carefully placed her on it. Under the rose stain, the child's lips held a tinge of blue. He covered her legs with a soft blanket while Bernadette arranged the pillows just so, propping her in a comfortable position.
"There!" she said, squirming back against the pillows. "I am in the perfect position for watching movies." She gave him a sly look. "It is a romance."
He had recovered his aplomb. "You will give me gray hair," he announced, feigning a scowl. "A romance!"
"With sex," she added mischievously.
"Tell me no more," he said, holding up his hands as if to ward off anything else she might say. "I don't want to know. A papa can bear only so much. Tell Madame Jamieson good day, and we'll leave you to your romance."
Laure held out her hand. "Good day, madame. That was fun! Will you visit me again?"
"Of course," Niema said, smiling despite the ache in her chest. "I've very much enjoyed meeting you, mademoiselle. Your papa is lucky to have you as his daughter."
Laure looked up at her father, and again the expression in her eyes was far too old for her years. "I am the one who is lucky," she said.
He kissed her, touched her cheek, and left her with a smile. His grip on Niema's hand, however, was almost bone-shattering.
When they were out in the hallway, he said, *"Dieu,"* in a stifled tone, and bent over from the waist, bracing his hands on his knees while he took deep breaths.
Niema automatically reached out to offer him comfort. She hesitated, her hand in midair, then lightly touched his back.
After a moment he straightened and walked farther down the hall away from Laure's rooms before he spoke again. "Sometimes it is more than I can bear," he said, his voice still constrained. "I apologize. I hadn't realized she- I've tried to keep from her how very ill she is, but she's so intelligent..." The words trailed off.
"What's wrong with her?" Niema asked gently. There was a decanter of liquor and a set of glasses on a side table. She went over to it and poured him a hefty portion of whatever liquor it was. He sat on a nearby chair and downed it without question.

"Too much," he said, turning the empty glass around and around in his hands. "If it was any one thing, there would be things that could be done. She has a defective heart, only one kidney, and cystic fibrosis. The CF seems to affect her digestive system more than her lungs, or she likely would have already-"

He broke off, his throat working. "There are new drugs that help, but it's still so difficult for her to get the nutrients she needs. She eats constantly, but she doesn't grow and doesn't gain weight. What growth she *has* had strains her heart. A heart transplant is out of the question because of the cystic fibrosis." He gave a bitter little smile that wasn't a smile at all. "Finding a suitable heart is almost impossible. She would have to have a young child's heart, because of her size, and donor hearts from children are rare. And her blood type is A negative, which narrows the chance of finding a heart almost to zero. Even if one came available, the opinion of the medical establishment is that a healthy heart shouldn't be wasted on someone who . .. who has so many other problems."

There was nothing to say. She couldn't offer meaningless phrases of hope when Laure's condition couldn't get much more hopeless.

"I've been trying to find a heart on the black market for years." He stared blindly at the glass in his hands. "I pour money into research on genetic treatments for CF, on new drugs, anything that will buy her some time. If I can fix just one thing-just one!" he said fiercely. "Then she will have a chance."

Realization slammed into her like a blow. "That's why you-" She stopped, not needing to finish the sentence.

He finished it for her. "Became an illegal arms dealer? Yes. I had to have enormous sums of money, and quickly. The choice was drugs or weapons. I chose weapons. If anything-*anything*-happens that will increase her chances, whether it's a heart miraculously coming available or a new treatment, I have to be ready immediately with the cash. The research is also hideously expensive." He shrugged. "She is my child," he said simply. "The devil may have my soul, but he's welcome to it if she can live."

She had known there were layers to him. Except for his occupation, he had seemed to be an honorable man, as if he completely separated the two halves of his life. What he did was abhorrent, but he did it out of his consuming love for his child. She ached for him, and for Laure.

"What of Laure's mother?"

"She was a ... passing fancy. She didn't want to have the baby, but I convinced her to carry it to term. I paid all of her expenses and gave her a large lump sum for her trouble. I don't believe she ever saw Laure. The doctors told her the baby probably would not live, and she left. I brought Laure home with me.

"I wasn't poor. My family was more than comfortable. But it wasn't enough, not if I wanted my baby to live. So I used my entree into the Parisian upper crust to both provide contacts and protect my efforts. Don't look at me with such heartbreak in your eyes, my dear. I'm not gallant or tragic, I'm ruthless and pragmatic. My one true vulnerability is my daughter, and for her I am putty, as you saw. She can be quite ruthless in handling me, a quality she doubtless inherited from me."

"The heartbreak is for her, not you," Niema said tartly. "You made your choice."

"I would make the same choice again, as I told you before. And you might do the same." He eyed her, a cynical smile hovering on his mouth. "You never know what you might do until your child is involved."

She couldn't argue with that, not if she were honest. She wasn't the type of person who could accept, without a fight, her child's death sentence. If possible she would move heaven and earth, and if it wasn't possible she would try anyway. That was what Ronsard had done. Though she didn't agree with his path, his reaction was the same as hers would have been.

He set the glass down with a decisive thunk and got to his feet. He ran his fingers through his loosened hair and worked his shoulders as if loosening tense muscles. "I have a hundred guests waiting for me," he said. "Perhaps I should begin fulfilling my duties as host. But I wanted you to meet Laure, and ... know that part of me. Thank you for taking the time to show her about the makeup. I had no idea."

"How could you?" Niema's heart broke all over again, thinking of the young girl who wanted to look her best when she died.

"I forbid you to cry."

She squared her shoulders. "I'm not crying. But I will if I want to, and you can't stop me."

He held up his hands. "I surrender. Come, let's rejoin the party."

As they left his private wing, a tall, blonde Valkyrie of a woman approached. "I hate to disturb you," she said to Ronsard. Her accent was pure American. "But several details have come up that need your attention."

He nodded. "Niema, this is Cara Smith, my secretary. Cara, Niema Jamieson. Will you excuse me, my dear?" he asked Niema. "Duty calls."
"Certainly." Niema watched him stride off down the stairs, with Cara half a step behind him. She noted the direction in which he went; his office must be on the first floor, then, and in the west wing.
She ached with sympathy for both him and Laure. That would not, however, get in the way of her doing her job.
She walked casually in the same direction, but by the time she crossed the huge central foyer he wasn't in sight. They had disappeared through one of several doors, and it would be too obvious if she walked through the villa opening all the doors.
But at least she now had a general idea of his office's location. She would try to get him to give her a guided tour of the main floor, and surely he would indicate which room was his office.
Tomorrow, John would arrive. If she already had the location, they could possibly plant the bug and copy Ronsard's files tomorrow night.
Anticipation zinged through her. John would be here tomorrow.

Chapter Eighteen

It was ten o'clock at night when John drove up to Ronsard's estate. The grounds were so well-lit that he could see the glow from several miles away. The curving drive led him to a set of double gates, which remained closed as he approached. When he stopped, a uniformed guard came out to shine a flashlight in John's face, ask his name, and see his identity. Silently John reached inside his tuxedo jacket and produced his ID. He didn't give his name verbally, an omission that made the guard glance sharply at him, then step away to speak into the two-way radio he carried.
A moment later, he gave a signal and the gates swung open. The signal, John surmised, meant that the guard on the outside couldn't open the gates himself. He had to give the okay to someone else inside, which eliminated the chance that he could be overpowered and access gained to the estate.
He gave John another hard look as he leaned down to return the identification to him. John returned the look without expression, then drove through the gates.

He stopped the car in front of a massive curving entry and got out. Immediately a pair of red-jacketed valets approached; one got out his luggage, while the other gave him a ticket, got into the car, and drove it away. It would probably receive a thorough search while it was in their possession, John thought. His luggage, too.

Let them search. They wouldn't get any information from it, not even his fingerprints. He had carefully sprayed his fingertips with a clear-coat gel that hardened and provided a smooth finish. It was thin and very nearly undetectable to the touch and would come off when he washed his hands with hot water. A cold-water wash wouldn't disturb the gel.

The spray was a vast improvement over the methods he had used in the past; sometimes he would dip his fingertips into puddles of melted wax, but the wax wasn't very durable. For a brief job or an emergency, however, it would do. Another trick was to paint his fingertips with a thick application of clear fingernail polish, but he had to have time for it to dry or that was useless. Band-Aids wrapped around each finger were a quick and effective method of hiding his prints, but someone with bandages on every finger was noticeable-at least, if that someone was over three years old.

As he mounted the steps, a tall, tuxedo-clad man approached. "Mr. Temple," he said in a crisp British accent. "Mr. Ronsard will see you now. Follow me, please."

John silently followed, not inclined to exchange pleasantries. He could hear music, and people in formal dress stood in small groups, laughing and chattering in a mix of languages. The women glittered in jewels, and so did some of the men. His own tuxedo was severely cut, without a frill or ruffle in sight, but the cut and fit shouted that it was custom made for him. Several women glanced his way, then looked again. When he wanted, he could pass through a crowd completely unnoticed, but tonight he wanted people to notice. He walked with a silent, graceful saunter, like a panther that has seen its prey but knows there's no need to hurry.

The elegant flunky led him to a small anteroom off the foyer. The room was comfortably furnished with a sofa and two wing-back chairs, a cozy little selection of books, a small fireplace, and a selection of spirits. Considering that the room was no more than eight feet square, and that the door had a sturdy lock, John guessed that it was there more for quick and furtive lovemaking than it was for any other purpose. A good host always provided for his guests, after all.

"Monsieur Temple." Ronsard rose to his feet as
John entered. He nodded a dismissal at the other man, who silently closed the door behind him as he left. "I am Louis Ronsard." He extended his hand, every inch a gracious host.
John let a fraction of a second lapse before he took Ronsard's hand. Not a flicker of expression crossed his face. "Why am I here?" he finally asked, his tone low and controlled. "This . . . meeting wasn't necessary."
"I think it is." Ronsard was slick about it, but he was carefully studying John's face. "I don't like dealing with unknown factors. Moreover, you knew about a compound that is very new and supposed to be unknown. Would you mind telling me how you came to hear of it?"
John regarded him silently, eyes at half-mast. "I don't like to be called by name in the middle of a crowd, and my definition of a crowd is any number greater than two." Let Ronsard wait for his answers; he wasn't in the mood to be cooperative.
"I assure you, no one here has any idea who you are."
"And I assure you, there's always at least one person at parties like this who is making a list of names, to be sold afterward."
"I deal harshly with betrayal," Ronsard said softly. Evidently deciding Temple wasn't a man who could be charmed, impressed, or intimidated, he indicated the chairs. "Please, be seated. Would you like a drink?"
John chose one of the wing-back chairs. "I don't drink."
Ronsard paused with his hand on a decanter, his eyebrows lifted, then moved his hand to a bottle and poured himself a small amount of wine.
"I apologize if you think coming here has jeopardized your cover. But I'm a cautious man too, and handling this compound is not without its own risk. I do so only when I am assured that this is a legitimate order and that I am not being set up. So, given the secrecy surrounding the compound, I think you understand why I am interested in learning how you heard of it."
John steepled his fingers, staring unblinkingly at Ronsard for a long moment. He saw Ronsard's gaze flicker to the ring of entwined snakes on his left hand. "Flight 183," he finally said.
"The plane crash? Yes, that was unfortunate. I suspected it was a ... test, shall we say? I wasn't aware beforehand."
"I don't care if it was a test or not. It worked."
"But how did you find what explosive was used?"

"I ... obtained a copy of the NTSB preliminary chemical analysis. I have access to a very good lab in Switzerland. The chemical fingerprint was similar to RDX. The NTSB found no evidence of a detonator. It's self explanatory," John said, his tone bored.
"Do you really think I would believe you put all this together by extrapolation?" Ronsard smiled gently. "No, someone told you. A second party has also approached me wanting to buy a quantity of the compound, someone who has no access to the NTSB. How could *he* know, unless by the same leak?"
"Ernst Morrell," John supplied. "I told him."
Ronsard stared at him a moment, then drank his wine. "You surprise me," he murmured.
"Morrell will provide a ... distraction. Anything that happens will be laid at his feet."
"So he is a decoy." Ronsard shook his head, smiling. "Mr. Temple, I salute you. That is truly devious."
John relaxed, subtly but visibly. The stony expression on his face eased. He let himself blink. "If I'm lucky, the bastard will blow himself up. If I'm not lucky, he'll still bring so much heat down on himself he'll be caught. Either way, he won't step on my toes again."
"So you've met Morrell before?"
"No, but he's a blundering idiot. He interfered in a job."
Ronsard laughed, his handsome face lit with real amusement. "Monsieur Temple, I think it will be a pleasure doing business with you. We'll talk more, but I've been away from my guests too long, and I must get back to them. Come, I'll introduce you around."
"Introduce me as Mr. Smith."
"Smith," Ronsard repeated. He still looked amused. "That's my secretary's last name as well."
"Maybe we're related."
They drew more than one interested gaze when they left the anteroom. John walked with his host across the huge foyer and into a glittering ballroom. They stopped at the top of three shallow steps, looking out over the crowd. Enormous crystal chandeliers hung overhead, glittering like diamonds, and a wall of French glass doors had been opened to the night. People moved around the room, out to the patio, back in, in a constant motion that reminded him of a hive.

He looked casually around, not letting his gaze rest on anyone in particular, but he spotted Niema almost immediately. An industrialist approached Ronsard and made polite chitchat for a moment, then waited expectantly for an introduction. John had met the man before, but he'd been using a different name at the time, and with his appearance altered; his hair had been gray and he had worn brown contacts. The industrialist thought he was shaking hands with a total stranger.
A voluptuous redhead, her breasts all but bared in a skintight emerald green gown, was the next to attach herself to Ronsard's arm and angle for an introduction. Ronsard, obviously amused, obliged. John became his most impassive, not responding to any of the woman's flirtatious remarks. For all her obviousness, she was no fool; after a few minutes she switched her flirtatiousness to Ronsard, who smiled and flattered her, all the while with that look of amusement still in his eyes.
After the woman left, they were briefly alone. John let his gaze sweep the ballroom once again, and he went still.
Ronsard noticed immediately, of course. "Do you see someone you know?" he asked, becoming subtly more alert as he looked around.
"No." The word sounded as if it were being dragged out of John's throat. "Someone I'm going to know. That woman-who is she?"
"Who?"
"Dark hair, blue gown. Wearing pearls. She's talking to the tall blonde woman."
Ronsard's search narrowed on Niema. His face hardened as he realized she was the woman John had noticed. "She's with me," he said in succinct warning.
John spared his host only a glance before once more focusing on her. He let himself greedily drink her in, admiring the way the soft light gleamed on her bare shoulders. "Are you going to marry her?" he asked almost absently.
Ronsard gave a short, hard laugh. "No, of course not."
"I am."
The soft words lay between them like stones. Anger darkened Ronsard's eyes. "She's a friend, one I've come to cherish. She isn't for the likes of us."
"Perhaps not for you. If you had some claim on her, I'd back off, but you've admitted you don't. She's free-but not for long."
Ronsard was a consummate businessman. He was also astute enough to realize the man called Temple wasn't someone who could be intimidated.

He took a deep breath, reaching for control. "I don't brawl over women," he said. "But neither will I allow you to force yourself on her. I say this because she . . . isn't receptive. She is a widow, and still very much in love with her dead husband. Even if she wasn't, she is one of the few principled people of my acquaintance. She frowns on people such as you and I."
"She turned you down," John stated.
"Flat." For a moment humor quirked Ronsard's mouth. "I like her. I won't have her hurt."
"Neither will I."
Into the silence that fell between them Ronsard said, "You've astonished me. I wouldn't have expected you to become enamored of any woman, especially at first sight. It seems out of character."
"It is." John drew a deep breath and let all the pent-up hunger of the past five years burn in his eyes. "It is," he repeated. "Introduce me."
"I think I will," Ronsard mused. "This should be amusing."
Niema saw the two tall, broad-shouldered men cutting their way through the crowd. Ronsard looked as dashing and debonair as usual, his long dark hair free on his shoulders, but it was the predator beside him who took her breath. John looked severe, dangerous, somehow different. His blue gaze was focused on her like a laser.
Startled, she actually took a step back, her hand lifting to the pearls around her neck.
She hadn't seen him in over a week. She wasn't prepared for the sudden impact of sensation, like a punch in the stomach. All the times before when she had seen him he had muted the dangerous power of his personality, she realized, because the full strength of it was blasting at her now.
His gaze swept down her and she felt as if he had stripped her naked, as if he were about to eat her alive. She tried to look away from him, tried to compose herself, but she couldn't. Excitement sang along her nerves. He was here, and the game had truly begun.
"Niema." They had reached her, so tall their shoulders blocked out the rest of the room, even though she was wearing heels. Ronsard took her hand and pressed a brief kiss on her knuckles. "My dear, this is Mr. Smith, who begged me for an introduction. Mr. Smith, Niema Jamieson."
"Niema." John said her name as if he tasted it.
"Mr.-Mr. Smith." She could barely speak. Her throat had inexplicably tightened. She flashed a helpless look at Ronsard, who didn't look at all

pleased by her reaction. She couldn't understand it herself. She knew it played well with John's plans, but.. . she wasn't acting.
"Joseph," said John.
"I-I beg your pardon?"
"My name is Joseph."
"Joseph .. . Joseph Smith?" She blinked, trying to swallow the sudden bubble of laughter. At least he hadn't chosen Brigham Young for a name.
"You're an American."
"Yes." Somehow he had her hand, his fingers hard and strong around hers.
"Dance with me." It was more command than invitation.
She gave Ronsard another dazed, helpless look, but this one was over her shoulder as John led her onto the dance floor. He didn't just put his hand on her back, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her close, anchoring her to him. He clasped her hand in his free one, holding it against his chest. He began moving in a smooth rhythm and she had no choice but to follow. He bent his head close to hers. "I fell in love with you on sight," he murmured.
"Did you?" She quivered as she fought back another laugh. *"Joseph Smith?"* She ducked her head against his shoulder to hide her expression. She had been bored, chatting with people with whom she had nothing in common, but now energy was flowing through every cell in her body.
"Joseph Temple, actually. I told him to introduce me as Mr. Smith."
"Temple," she repeated, burning the name in her brain cells. The one thing she couldn't do was slip up and call him John.
"Where's your room?"
"It's in the east wing. It's called the Garden room, and it has its own private balcony." She had counted the doors, so she could tell him exactly how to reach it. "Go up the stairs, take the hallway to the right. Go down ten doors, turn left, and it's the third door on the right."
"Leave the balcony doors unlocked."
"Why? Locks don't mean anything to you."
His arm tightened around her waist in a punishing squeeze for her teasing. Beneath the silk of his tuxedo, his chest was like iron. He was holding her so closely her breasts were flattened against him. The heat of his body seeped through the layers of clothing between them, and the scent of him wrapped around her, warm and masculine and flavored with some subtle cologne.

"You're holding me too close," she said, faint panic welling up in her, because the pleasure she felt was far from safe. Her hands pushed against his chest, not hard enough to be noticeable but enough to lever her upper body an inch away from him.

He simply gathered her back in, the strength in his arms overpowering her without effort. "I'm in love with you, remember? And you're helplessly fascinated by me."

How did he know? The question seared through her brain, a split second before she remembered the scenario they were enacting.

The pattern of the dance had brought them near the open French doors. He made a swooping turn and she found herself out on the patio. The night was warm, but still cooler, and much fresher, than the air inside, with so many people in one room. There were people sitting at the small tables scattered about the patio, talking and laughing, but the noise level dropped dramatically.

He stopped dancing and led her down the steps into the garden. The sweet, peppery scent of roses filled the air. Small gravel crunched under their shoes as they walked a little way down one of the paths. Though the grounds were too well-lit for there to be complete darkness, the garden provided at least some semblance of privacy.

"This is far enough," John said, stopping and turning to face her. "He can still see us." Before she had any idea what he was about to do, he framed her face with his hands and kissed her.

Automatically her hands came up and locked around his wrists. Her breath stopped for two long heartbeats, and her knees went weak. She felt as if he were supporting her only with the warm clasp of his hands on her face, though the pressure was too light to do any such thing.

His kiss was light at first, a tender tasting, an exploration. She stood motionless, dazzled by the pleasure of the simple caress, then returned it with gentle pressure. He slanted his head more and deepened the kiss, his tongue probing her mouth. Then something hot exploded inside her, and she sagged against him. He released her face and folded her in his arms, tighter than before, closer, so close she was welded to him from breast to thigh. His mouth was ravaging, devouring. He kissed her the way he shouldn't, the way she hadn't let herself imagine: deeply, intensely, the way a man kissed a woman right before he rolled her on her back and slid between her legs. And she accepted those kisses, welcomed them, returned them. Her tongue

played with his, her arms lifted to twine tightly around his neck. Her body reached to his, and she discovered he was rock hard, his erection pressed against her stomach.

The discovery so shocked her that she tore herself out of his arms, staggering back. He grabbed her arm to steady her, then immediately let his hand fall to his side. They faced each other in the scented garden, the dimness of the light not dim enough. She could see the cool, focused expression in his eyes, and the realization was another punch in the stomach. Those kisses had rocked her foundation, but John, despite the automatic response of his body, had only been doing his job. Working. Pretending to be smitten.

And Ronsard was watching them, weighing what had just happened. Niema swallowed, trying to decide what she should do. Slap John's-Temple's-face? She had been a willing participant, and Niema Jamieson wasn't a hypocrite.

Forget Niema Jamieson; she was too shattered to play a role right now. She reached down into who she really was, Niema Burdock, and found that the two women were much the same. Had John planned that deliberately, made Niema Jamieson's history so close to her own so she was essentially playing herself?

But it was Niema Burdock who gathered her dignity around her, turned, and walked quietly away. No histrionics. She made her way back up the path toward the patio and saw that Ronsard was indeed standing just outside the ballroom doors, watching them. With the bright light behind him, she couldn't read his expression, but she braced herself and approached him.

He was silent, looking down at her. She met his gaze, inwardly flinching at the cynical disillusionment she knew she would see there, but instead all she could find was concern. Her lips trembled, and suddenly tears blurred her vision.

"Oh, God," she whispered. *"How?"*

Ronsard extended his arm to her and she took it, and he walked her back inside as if nothing had happened. He didn't appear to hurry, but still their progress across the crowded room was mercifully fast. Her fingers dug into his arm as she dung for support. Her legs were shaking. Her entire body was shaking, fine tremors rocking her muscles.

A sumptuous buffet had been set out in another room, with tables set for those guests who wished to eat there, or they could take their plates out onto

the patio or into the pool courtyard. Ronsard settled her at one of the empty tables and went to the buffet, where he loaded two plates and brought them back. At a signal from him, a waiter appeared with two glasses of champagne.
"I noticed earlier you weren't drinking," he said.
"Try it; my champagne is infinitely superior to that swill the prime minister served. Besides"- he gave a crooked smile-"you need the sedative."
She drank the champagne and ate the strawberries on her plate. He cajoled her into trying the delicious pate, too, though her throat kept threatening to close.
"I see I was too much of a gentleman," he said, amusement rich in his voice and eyes. "I should have simply grabbed you and kissed you, overwhelmed you with my animal magnetism. But really, my dear, that isn't my style."
"I-I didn't think it was mine, either." She could barely speak.
"One can never predict chemistry, though somehow we always underestimate it." He patted her hand. "And now I'm going to do something I have never thought I would do. I'm so astonished at myself I may never recover."
"What?" Ronsard's humor had a steadying effect on her. So she had responded to John with a shattering intensity-that was what she was *supposed* to do. It was part of their scheme. John wouldn't, couldn't, know that there hadn't been anything deliberate about her response, that for a few searing moments she had been lost in the physical pleasure she had been trying to resist since the moment John Medina had reappeared in her life.
"Mr. Smith-"
"He told me his real name," she broke in, rubbing the spot between her eyebrows, partly to shield her expression and partly because tension was beginning to give her a slight headache.
"Then .. . you know he wouldn't be using a pseudonym if there wasn't good cause. He isn't a celebrity, my dear; quite the opposite. Every law enforcement agency in the world would love to have him in its custody."
She stared at him while she pretended to work it through. "He-he's a terrorist?" Her voice was almost soundless.
Ronsard let his silence answer for him.
She drank more champagne, but that didn't loosen the knot in her throat. "He's the only man I've kissed since my husband-" Five years. Five years since Dallas had died, and she hadn't been able to feel even a flicker of

response to any of the very nice men she had occasionally dated. She hadn't been able to let any of them kiss her, not because it felt like a betrayal, but because it hadn't seemed fair to them to pretend even that much. The lines between role and reality had blurred again, with Niema Burdock speaking, trying to work her way through what had happened to her in John Medina's arms.

"I can't stay here," she said, surging to her feet. "I'm going to my room. Louis-"

"I understand." He rose too, his handsome face full of concern. "I can't tell you want to do, my dear, the decision is yours. But make it with all the facts in your possession, and no matter what your answer is, I'll always cherish your friendship."

God, how could he be so nice in so many ways, and still be what he was? The puzzle of Louis Ronsard wasn't any closer to being solved than it was the day she met him. But for all the vividness of his character, she was losing her focus on him, had been from the moment she saw him walking toward her with John beside him.

Blindly she groped for his hand, squeezing it hard. "Thank you," she said, and fled.

Chapter Nineteen

It was three when she saw the curtains by the balcony doors flutter. Niema was lying in the dark, unable to sleep, waiting for John to appear. She didn't hear anything; there was only that small flutter to signal his arrival, then his black shape silhouetted against the faint light coming through the glass behind him.

She sat up and tugged her robe, the most substantial one she had, more tightly around her. The room was dark and he couldn't see her any better than she could see him, but she felt she needed every bit of protection she could muster. He crossed the room with eerie stealth and accuracy, approaching the high four-poster bed. He leaned over and put his mouth against her ear. "Have you swept the room?"

"I checked it when I got here," she whispered back. "I figured if the place was wired, it was part of the security system rather than a patch job. It's clean."

"Mine wasn't."
"Permanent or patched?"
"Permanent. He wants to keep tabs on whomever he puts in that room. Probably other guest rooms in this place are wired, too, and he decides who he wants to stay in them."
The mattress dipped as he sat down on the side of the bed. She felt a brief flare of panic and fought it down. After all, there wouldn't be any point in kissing her now, when there wasn't anyone else around to see.
"Are you okay with what happened this evening?" he asked, an edge of concern in his voice. ""You looked stunned. I thought you understood the plan."
"I guess I didn't quite get it," she managed to say and fought to keep her tone even. "Everything's okay, though; I can handle it." His face was a pale blur in the darkness, but still, now that he was this close, she could pick out his features and feel the heat from his leg even through the bed clothes as his thigh pressed against her hip.
"As it turned out, that was the perfect reaction. You played it just right."
Only she hadn't been playing. She had managed to keep her presence of mind, but she hadn't pretended anything. The power of her response to John had been real, and that was what was frightening. As long as he thought her distress was caused only by surprise, though, she didn't feel as exposed.
"Everything's okay," she repeated, and in quiet desperation changed the subject. "What's the plan for tomorrow?"
"Ronsard and I will talk business. If I'm lucky, it'll be in his office. If not, then I'll have to find it some other way."
"I can give you the general location. It's in the west wing, ground floor. And he has a secretary, Cara Smith, so she may be in the office even if he isn't."
"Then we'll have to keep track of both of them. I'll figure out some way to keep them occupied. I'll locate the office tomorrow, check out the security system, then we'll go in tomorrow night. "You plant the bug, I copy the files, and we're out without anyone knowing."
If everything went according to plan, that is. Anything could happen, as she had already learned far too well.
"I brought you a little present." There was a faint rustle of clothing, then metal, warm from his body, was pressed into her hand. Automatically she closed her fingers around the grip of the pistol. "It's a SIG .380 caliber,

smaller than the one you practiced with, but that just means it'll be easier to conceal."
"I'll tuck it in my bodice," she said dryly, because the thing still weighed over a pound and was at least six and a half inches long. Until the pistol was in her hand, she hadn't been aware of a nagging, low-level sense of alarm, but now she felt something inside her relaxing. She had never carried a weapon in her life, not even in Iran, because that would have given away her disguise; how had she become so rapidly accustomed to being armed?
He gave a low laugh. "That's my girl." There was warm approval in his voice. He patted her thigh. "I'll see you in a few hours. What are you doing tomorrow? What time do you get up?"
"I'm going to sleep as late as I can." Since she hadn't slept any yet that night, she figured she would need all she could get. "I don't have any plans beyond that, though."
"Meet me for lunch, then."
"Where?"
"The pool courtyard, one o'clock."
"Any reason for that particular place?" There had to be; John never did anything without a reason.
"See you, get in a swim, let Ronsard see the scar on my shoulder as a little extra reassurance."
"You don't have a scar on your shoulder," she said automatically, and wished she hadn't, because it revealed how closely she had looked at him when he took off his shirt that day they had been working out.
"No, but Joseph Temple does."
So he must have a fake scar, as part of his disguise. She remembered that he had looked different, too, when Ronsard introduced him, but she couldn't put her finger on exactly what the differences were. "What else have you done? You're not the same."
"I changed my hairline a little, made my brows straighter, put thin rolls of cotton in my jaw to change the shape."
"How long have you been building Joseph Temple's cover?"
"Years. At first he was only a name on a file, but gradually I circulated him more, and added a few details of description, a photo that didn't give away much. But it was enough to let Ronsard compare hairlines, and I imagine he has."

"But he'll have a photo of you now," she said. "You know he will. He wouldn't pass up an opportunity like this."
"It doesn't matter." He stood up. "Temple won't exist after he leaves here."
What was it like, she wondered, to build identities as if they were changes of clothing, putting them on for just a little while and then discarding them? Did he leave pieces of himself behind? Somehow lose just a little bit more of who he really was each time he became someone else?
As he moved toward the balcony, she thought of something. "How did you get up here?"
"I didn't. I got *down. I* came from the roof." With those words he slipped through the doors and disappeared.
Niema got up and locked the balcony doors, then returned to bed. She was so tired she ached, but despite her plans to sleep late she wasn't certain she could sleep at all. The next twenty-four hours were crucial, the reason she had agreed to this elaborate charade. She had to keep her mind on the job, and not on John. After this was over and she was back home, and he was gone from her life again, then she would let herself think about him because then it wouldn't matter-he would be gone.
Cara Smith always enjoyed Louis's house parties. She loved dressing up, loved the glitter and sophistication and sheer luxury. It was like something out of a fairy tale, watching men in tuxedos whirl women in jewels around a polished ballroom floor. Because she was so tall she seldom wore high heels, but for these posh occasions she put on three-inch pumps, which lifted her way over most people's heads, and eye-to-eye with Louis himself. Her legs looked as if they were six feet long, an illusion she heightened by wearing dresses that were slit up the side and exposed long, narrow strips of flesh when she walked.
But that was for night. During the day she still worked at keeping Louis's correspondence up to date, paying bills-it always surprised her that billionaires had bills, but she guessed some things were impossible to escape. She also had to handle the phones, and notify Louis of any business that cropped up, any problems that needed handling. But her hours were abbreviated, and for the most part she played with the guests. She swam, played tennis and billiards, and listened to gossip. She never failed to be amazed by the intimate details and government secrets people blabbed at parties, especially to tall, leggy blondes, as if she wasn't expected to have a

brain in her head- which was, of course, why Louis let her play instead of work. She'd learned a lot of interesting stuff during these house parties.
She was fascinated by that Temple man. Few males compared with Louis in terms of elegance and sophistication. But *he* did. And he looked so damned cool and contained-he was a very *still* man, his few gestures controlled and minimal, with little expression on his face. With that kind of control over his body, she bet he could last for hours in bed. She thought of being the woman on the receiving end of all that control and went all shivery.
On the other hand, Cara was astute about which men were attracted to her, and Temple wasn't. She and a bunch of other people, including Louis, had seen him in the garden putting the move on the Jamieson woman. She had wondered how Louis would handle that, considering he had shown more attention to Mrs. Jamieson than to any other woman she could remember, but Louis was Louis-one woman didn't mean that much to him. She knew for a fact he hadn't slept alone last night, while Mrs. Jamieson had chickened out and left the party early, to hide out in her room. Boy, if she'd been in Mrs. Jamieson's place, *she* wouldn't have chickened out. She'd have grabbed that man by the bow tie and ridden him for all he was worth.
But she had her eye on another guy, as a consolation prize. He was rich, he wasn't bad looking, and he did something in the French defense department, or whatever they called it. He'd have lots of interesting things to tell her. From the way his wife hung on to him, he had something of interest in his pants, too. She had seen him eyeing her, so she figured he'd find a way to escape from the little woman for a while.
She couldn't wait. She hadn't had sex in-well, she couldn't remember exactly how long, but she knew it was too long. Damn Hossam and his jealousy! She'd been trying to wean him away, let him down gently, but he just wouldn't go away. She hadn't slept with him, but in the interest of keeping things calm she hadn't slept with anyone else, either. She didn't want to stir up trouble among the guys in Louis's security guard, because Louis wouldn't thank her for it.
She played a game of tennis at nine, and Mr. Defense Department showed up, sans wifey. Cara flirted outrageously with him, until she noticed a tall, mustachioed man, wearing a suit and sunglasses, watching them from the west patio. Hossam. Damn it, if she took him to her room now, which was really the only safe place *to* take him, Hossam would know and was likely

to cause trouble. Louis would be majorly pissed if one of his guests was killed by her jealous ex-lover.
Fuming, she finished the game, then excused herself and stalked across the wide expanse of lawn to the west patio. She swished her racket angrily through the air, wishing it was connecting with Hossam's head. Why, he was *stalking* her. She had tried to be nice and not rub his nose in the fact that she was tired of him, but nice hadn't gotten her anywhere. It was time for some plain speaking.
He stood with his arms folded over his chest, stolidly watching as she steamed up to him. He was a big man, about six-five; she had enjoyed his size, because he wasn't big just in height, but now she wished he was normal sized so she could knock him on his ass.
"Stop it," she hissed, standing toe to toe with him and glaring up into his sunglasses. "It's over. Don't you get it? Over! O-v-e-r. Kaput. Finished. I would say it in Egyptian but I don't know the damn word. I had a good time but now I'm moving on-"
"Arabic." His voice was a deep rumble, reverberating in that big chest.
"What?"
"Egyptians speak Arabic. There's no such thing as an Egyptian language."
"Well, thank you for the lesson." She poked him in the chest. "Stop following me, stop spying on me- just stop. I don't want to cause trouble for you but I will if I have to, do you understand."
"I want only to be with you."
Gawd, she thought in despair. "Your head must be made of wood! *I* don't want to be with *you!* I've seen all your tricks, and now I want a new magician. Don't bother me again."
She pushed past him and went inside. She managed to smile at the people she passed on the way to her room, which was on the third floor facing the driveway, but inside she was furious. If Hossam messed up the best job she'd ever had, she would wring his thick neck with her bare hands. Men were enough to make a woman think of joining a convent, she thought, fuming. Maybe she didn't need another lover right now; maybe what she really needed was her head examined because she was even thinking about it.
If she saw Hossam so much as looking at her again, she'd tell Louis. Enough was more than enough.

Without appearing to, John studied the security system as Ronsard unlocked and opened the door to his office. The lock operated on a numeric code that translated to different tones, like a telephone. Ronsard was careful to keep his body between John and the control panel, so he couldn't see the numbers. John didn't even try to see them; he half-turned away, studying the hallway, noting the blinking eye of the camera that was mounted at the far end of the hall. Making sure his motion was hidden from the camera, he slipped his hand inside his jacket and triggered a powerful miniature recorder that picked up the small beep of the tones as Ronsard punched in the code.

"We won't be disturbed here," Ronsard said. "Please be seated. Would you like something to drink? Coffee?"

"No, thank you." Call him paranoid, but he was real careful about taking anything to eat or drink from someone else. A buffet was fine, if everyone else was eating, but when he was on a job he was always in control of his intake. If he had to set a drink down, he didn't pick it back up. It was a simple rule, but an effective one.

He looked around. There was a computer on Ronsard's large, antique desk, but no phone line going to it, which meant it was secure. If there were any files Ronsard didn't want compromised, they would be on that computer. Another unit sat on a Louis XIV desk across the room, and this one was hooked to a phone line, a printer, a scanner, the works.

Also on Ronsard's desk was a small monitor with an elaborate control attached to it, and from where he was sitting John could see just enough of the screen to tell it was surveillance of the hallway outside, so Ronsard knew in advance who was coming toward his office. There was probably a central surveillance control room somewhere in this massive building, but whether or not the entire building was under watch was something he'd have to find out. It could be that, like the listening devices, only certain rooms were involved. This part of the estate was, after all, Ronsard's private living quarters, and he probably wouldn't want his employees watching *him.*

"Who's making the compound?" he asked, deciding to at least ask. Sometimes people just blurted out what he wanted to know.

Ronsard smiled at him. "I have an agreement with the ... ah, developers. They don't use anyone else to distribute the compound, and I don't tell anyone who they are. Once it's known, you understand, then they'll be under siege. Opportunists would try to get the formula, perhaps resorting to

kidnap and torture in the process; the government might try to shut them down, but would at least take over the manufacturing. That's the way governments are, isn't it?" He sat down behind his desk, "I had thought they were dealing behind my back. Both you and Ernst Morrell were asking about the compound; what else could I think? But you've relieved my mind."
"I'm glad."
The total lack of expression in John's voice brought a smile to the arms dealer's face. "So I see. Well, Mr. Temple, shall we complete our business? I have guests, and you'll want to continue your pursuit of Mrs. Jamieson. Tell me-what would you do with a wife, assuming you succeed?"
John's eyes sharpened. "Keep her safe."
"Ah. Can you do that, though?" He indicated the computers in the office, specifically the fast, powerful one on his secretary's desk, "Computers have made the world very small. Eventually, one will be able to find out anything about anyone. It's almost possible now. You won't be able to disappear the way you do now."
"Information can be falsified or erased. If I need a social security number or a credit card, I use someone else's."
"Yes, but what about her? She can't disappear, you know. She has family, friends; she has a home, a routine, and a social security number, and those credit cards you disdain. I know the lady well enough to promise you she would balk at using a stolen credit card."
Still warning him away from Niema, John realized, inwardly amused. "If she doesn't want what I can give her, all she has to do is say no. Kidnapping somebody is too chancey; it draws a lot of attention."
"Something you want to avoid," Ronsard agreed. "But if she did go with you-what would you do?"
John regarded him silently, refusing to be drawn on the question. It was a nonissue, of course, but Ronsard didn't know that. Let him think that Temple was the most secretive bastard he'd ever met, and let it go at that. He stonewalled every attempt Ronsard made to talk about Niema, though he was actually beginning to like the guy. There was something both absurd and touching about someone as ruthless as Louis Ronsard displaying this kind of concern for a friend. Niema had gotten to him too, John thought, just the way she had Hadi and Sayyed, and himself, in Iran. The situation was almost funny. He should have been able to express an interest in

Niema, with her reciprocating, and that would have been that: a burgeoning affair. Instead Niema was rattled, Ronsard was protective, and he was having to pursue a reluctant target.

Of course, no one would ever think this was part of any plan. It was just too damn implausible, like a soap opera. Maybe that was why it seemed to be working so well.

Half an hour later, their business concluded- amount of explosive needed, when, how it would be delivered, how much it would cost him-John went to his room and changed into his swim trunks. The room had been searched again, he saw; he didn't know what they expected to find that they hadn't found the first time. The fact that they *hadn't* found anything probably disturbed Ronsard a little. Of course, they were looking in the wrong place. Since acquiring the weapons last night after arriving here, he had given one to Niema, taped another under one of the massive hall tables outside his room, and one was strapped to his ankle. The ankle holster would have to go in a secure place while he was swimming, though. Smiling, he stuffed it and the tiny recorder under the mattress. The maids had already been in and cleaned, and the room had been searched- twice. Looking in the most obvious place in the world was now the one place they were the least likely to look.

He pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of trousers over his swim trunks, then went down to the pool courtyard. It was a hot, sunny day, but still fairly early. The ladies didn't want to mess up their hair so close to lunch time, so they were sunbathing instead of swimming, and the pool wasn't crowded. Rather than putting his clothes in the large cabana, he shucked his shirt and dropped it over a chaise, then took off his pants and did the same with them. He didn't have anything in his pocket other than his room key, but if by leaving his clothes in the open he frustrated anyone wanting to go through his pockets, so much the better.

He dove into the pool in a long, shallow dive and began swimming laps, his arms stroking tirelessly. He was as at home in the water as he was on land, courtesy of his BUD/S training. Swimming in a pool was child's play, after swimming miles in the ocean. It was nice of Ronsard, he thought, to provide him a means of keeping up his physical conditioning. There was probably a weight room somewhere in this place, too, but he doubted he'd have time to use it.

The only thing about swimming in public was, after a while people began to notice. Not many people could swim nonstop for that length of time, even though he'd only been at it half an hour. He could have kept on, using one stroke or another, for hours, but it wasn't wise to draw that kind of attention. Already people around the pool were watching him, and he was pretty sure one woman had been counting the laps as he turned them.

He hauled himself out of the water and took a fluffy towel from the stacks Ronsard had put out for his guests, and which were constantly being replaced, and roughly swiped it over his torso. Though it wasn't one o'clock yet, he saw Niema coming toward him. She was dressed casually, in loose, drawstring natural linen pants and a blue camisole, with a gauzy white shirt worn loose over the camisole. She had pulled her thick dark hair back and secured it with a silver clasp at the nape of her neck. Her dark eyes looked huge and luminous.

She checked a little when she saw him, as if she hadn't known he was there. He stood still, staring at her, then lifted his hand and beckoned her to him. She hesitated for a long moment before obeying, just long enough for him to begin wondering if she was going to do something totally unexpected, like turning around and leaving, which would be taking the show of reluctance a little too far and might prod her unlikely protector into action. But then she began walking slowly to him, and he knotted the towel around his waist to hide his response as he waited for her to join him.

Chapter Twenty

Niema faltered as she approached John and slid her sunglasses on her nose to hide her expression from him. Good God, the man should put on some clothes before she had heart failure. Greedily she drank in the strong lines of his torso, the well-defined muscles of arms and shoulders, the ridges down his abdomen. His legs were the most powerful she had ever seen, the long muscles thick and sinewy in the way that showed he did it all, running and swimming as well as strength training.

Water still sparkled on his shoulders and in the hair on his chest. He had roughly towel-dried his hair and raked his hand over it to restore some semblance of order. He looked wild, and dangerous, and she ached inside with the need to touch him.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and stood like a redwood, waiting for her to reach him. At least the towel hid part of those legs. How could he look so lean when he was clothed, when he had muscles like this?
Then she reached him, and a tiny smile curved his hard mouth, a mouth that looked as if it never smiled at all and yet he made the effort for her. This was Temple, she thought, not John. John smiled and laughed. When he was himself, he was an expressive man- unless he was playing another part, unless he had been someone else for so long that even John Medina was just a role for him now.
"For a minute there, I thought you were going to turn and run," he said in a low voice. "Don't be *that* reluctant."
"I know what to do." She sat down in the chair he held out for her, not caring if she sounded irritable. She *was* irritable. She hadn't had much sleep, and her nerves were raw.
He stood behind her, looking down, and she felt his stillness. Then he put his hand inside her open shirt and lightly smoothed his palm over her bare shoulder, the movement slow and absorbed, as if he couldn't go a moment longer without touching her. Only the thin straps of her camisole obstructed him, and they might as well not have been there. She shivered as that warm hand moved over her, pushing the shirt away just enough that he could stroke that one shoulder and upper arm. It was the most restrained, sensuous touch she had ever experienced, and her entire body reacted, nipples pebbling, stomach tightening.
Then he gently restored the shirt to her shoulder and moved around to take the chair across from her. When his back was turned she saw the thin, four-inch scar on his left shoulder blade. Even knowing it wasn't real, she couldn't tell how it was applied. It certainly looked genuine.
Then he sat down facing her, and she blinked in astonishment at the small diamond stud in his left ear. His ear wasn't pierced; she would have noticed before if it had been. And he hadn't been wearing an earring last night.
Well, if the scar was fake, the pierced ear could be, too; he probably had the stud glued on. And the altered hairline looked real. All these small identifying characteristics were fake; with them removed, he would never be identified as Joseph Temple, despite having the same face. As long as there were no dental records tying them together, or DNA samples to compare, he was unidentifiable.

A waiter in black shorts and white shirt approached. "May I serve you anything from the bar?"
"We'd like to order lunch," John said, his French perfect.
"Of course, sir."
He ordered puff pastries filled with chicken in cream sauce for appetizers, potato soup, and a cheese and fruit tray afterward. Thankful she wouldn't be expected to choke down a full meal, including a meat course, Niema looked around at the beautifully landscaped courtyard. It was becoming more crowded now as others elected to have their lunch by the pool rather than inside. The murmur of conversation, punctuated by splashes, laughter, and the dink of silverware, made it reasonable that they would lean together over the small round table.
John adjusted the umbrella shading them to protect her from the sun, and also to partially block anyone's view of them from the house. Before he sat down he plucked his shirt from the chaise beside him and pulled it on over his head. She almost mourned as those pecs and abs disappeared from view, but admitted to herself that at least now she'd be able to concentrate better.
"I've been in Ronsard's office," he said, pitching his voice so that only she could hear. "I have the door code and got a good look at his security system. What's on the agenda for tonight?"
"It's fancy dress every night. Buffet dinner, dancing, just like last night."
"Good. People will be moving around, so it'll be difficult to keep track of us. We're going to dance every dance-"
"Not in high heels, I'm not. I'd be crippled."
"Then don't wear heels."
She gave him a dirty look, though of course he couldn't tell since she was still wearing the sunglasses. "You're the one who provided the wardrobe. Heels are the only suitable shoes I have with me."
"Okay, we'll dance a few dances." He looked in danger of smiling again. "I'm going to be making it pretty obvious we're together, putting some strong moves on you, so don't panic."
"Why the strong moves?" Her throat had gone dry. She wished the waiter would hurry up with the mineral water John had ordered.
"So, if anyone notices us going off together, they'll just think we're looking for someplace more private- such as your room."
And instead they would be going through files. "What about Ronsard? And Cara?"

"I'll take care of her. Ronsard's a bit trickier. We may have to take our chances and hope he'll be too occupied to come to his office." He paused. "Here comes the waiter." He leaned over and took her hand, thumb rubbing lightly across the backs of her fingers. "Walk with me after lunch," he was murmuring when the waiter set down the crystal goblets of mineral water. She drew back and picked up a goblet, sending a shaky smile in the waiter's direction.

"How much time do you need to plant the bug?" he asked when they were alone again.

"I'd like to have half an hour." She could probably do it in less time than that, but she wanted to be very, very careful with this one, because she was going to have to get into the wiring in the walls and she didn't want to leave any telltale marks. "What about the computer files? How long will it take on those?"

"Depends," he said helpfully.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Information."

He fought another smile. "I don't know what system he uses, if it's password protected or encrypted- though I'd be very surprised if he doesn't at least have a password. I have to get the password-"

"How on earth can you do that?"

"People usually write it down somewhere handy. Or it's something obvious, like their mother's name, or their kids-"

"Ronsard has a daughter," Niema said. "Laure."

"A daughter? That wasn't in our information," John murmured.

"She's an invalid. He adores her, and is very protective of her privacy. For security reasons, very few people know she exists. She's so ill, she may not live long." A lump rose in her throat as she remembered Laure's skeletal face, with those dark blue eyes so like her father's, and her mischievous, practical spirit.

"Then he'd take very seriously any incident involving her," John mused.

Niema sat up straight, and snatched her sunglasses off so he could get a good look at how furious she was. "Don't you dare," she said between clenched teeth. "If you involve that child I'll-I'll..." She couldn't think of anything bad enough, but her eyes promised severe retribution.

"I'll do whatever's necessary," he softly replied. "You know that. I don't put limitations on what I'm willing to do to get a job done."

"Yes, I heard that about you," she said just as softly, rage boiling through her veins with a suddenness that took her off guard. "They say you even killed your own wife, so why would you worry about upsetting a little girl?"
Leaden silence fell between them. John's face was absolutely expressionless, his eyes so cold and empty they looked dead. "Her name was Venetia," he finally said, the words a mere rustle of sound. "Why don't you ask me if I did it? How do you think it happened? Did I shoot her, or break her neck, or cut her throat? Maybe I just tossed her out a thirty-story window. I've heard all those scenarios. Which do you think is most likely?"
She couldn't breathe. She had wanted to hit him, say something that would make an impression on him, and she had evidently succeeded beyond anything she could have expected. She hadn't believed those wild stories, hadn't really believed he had ever even been married. *To* know that he had, to know that his wife's name was Venetia and she had existed, was to suddenly think that those stories could be true.
"Did you?" she managed to say, barely able to force the words out through her constricted throat. "Did you kill her?"
"Yes," he said and leaned back as the waiter approached with their meal.
She strolled with him across the lush, manicured lawn. She hadn't had a chance to recover, to ask him any more questions, after he dropped that bombshell at lunch. First the waiter had been there, setting out their lunch, refilling their water glasses, asking if they needed anything else, and by the time he left, Ronsard "happened" to walk by and stayed to chat.
Niema had scarcely been able to talk; she had managed a few short answers to Ronsard's questions, but her lips were numb and she kept seeking refuge in her water glass. She remembered eating a few bites of lunch, but she had no idea how it had tasted.
After lunch, John put his trousers on over his dry swim trunks, then took her hand and led her out here. The hot sun beat down on her, bringing welcome warmth to her cold skin. She felt as if her heart were breaking. Innocence was an invisible fortress, keeping one safe, and oblivious to some things that were too horrible to contemplate. But now she no longer had that innocence, that obliviousness; she was aware of the pain, the horror, the cost. What must it be like for him, to have lived through it?
"John, I'm so sorry," she whispered.
She saw his surprise. Evidently he had expected her to be repelled by who he was, what he had done, maybe even frightened of him. She searched for

the right words. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I hadn't believed the stories, or I never would have brought it up."
"Hurt me?" He sounded almost disinterested. She couldn't see his eyes behind the sunglasses, and she wanted to snatch them off his face. "The truth is the truth."
His hand was so warm and so strong, wrapped around hers, but the strength in his fingers was controlled so he wouldn't hurt her. He had never hurt her, she realized. Even when faced with her distrust and hostility in Iran, he had taken care of her, saved her life, held her in his arms while she grieved.
"Sometimes the truth is the truth, but sometimes it's something else. What really happened? Was she a double agent, the way I've heard?"
He made a noncommital sound. Growing exasperated, she squeezed his hand. "Tell me."
He stopped and turned to face her. "Or what?"
"Or nothing. Just tell me."
For a minute, she didn't think he would. Then he shrugged. "Yes, she was a double agent. She did it for the money. There weren't any extenuating circumstances; she didn't have family in the Soviet Union, or in East Germany, that was being threatened. All her family was American, and they weren't involved at all. She simply wanted the money."
So there was no excuse he could give his wife; he'd had to face the truth that she was, simply, a traitor.
That would have been devastating for almost anyone; what had it been like for him, after he had dedicated his entire life to the service of his country?
"How did you find out?"
He began walking again. "There wasn't any one big moment of truth, just a lot of little things that began adding up and made me suspicious. I set a trap for her, and she walked right into it."
"She didn't know you suspected?"
"Of course she did. She was good. But I baited the trap with something she couldn't resist: the names of our two highest-placed moles in the Kremlin. Aldrich Ames never came close to this information, it was so restricted."
His lips were a thin line. "I was almost too late springing the trap. This was during the height of the Cold War, and this information was so crucial, so valuable, that she decided not to route it by the usual method. She picked up the phone and called the Soviet embassy. She asked to be brought in,

because she knew I'd be after her, and she started to give them the names right there over the phone."
He took a long, controlled breath. "I shot her," he finally said, staring off at the massive wall that surrounded the estate. "I could have wounded her, but I didn't. What she knew was too important for me to take the chance, the moles too important to be brought in. They had to be left in place. She had already told her handler that she had the names; they would have moved heaven and earth to get to her, no matter what prison we put her in, no matter what security we put around her. So I killed her."
They walked in silence for a while, going from flower bed to flower bed like bees, ostensibly admiring the landscaping. Niema still clung to his hand while she tried to come to grips with the internal strength of this man. He had been forced to do something almost unthinkable, and he didn't make excuses for himself, didn't try to whitewash it or blur the facts. He lived with the burden of that day, and still he went on doing what he had to do. Some people would think he was a monster. They wouldn't be able to get beyond the surface fact that he had deliberately killed his wife, or they would say that no information, no matter how crucial, was that important. Those who lived on the front lines knew better. Dallas had given his own life for his country, in a different battle of the same war.
John had saved untold lives by his actions, not just of the two moles but of the ensuing events to which they had been critical. The Soviet Union had broken up, the Berlin Wall had come down, and for a while the world had been safer. He was still on the front lines, putting himself in the cannon's mouth, perhaps trying to balance his own internal scales of justice.
"Why didn't she sell you out?" Niema asked. ""You're worth a pretty penny, you know."
"Thank you," he said dryly. "But I wasn't worth that much back then. I had high-level security clearance, so I was of some use to her, but she had her own clearance and access to a lot of classified documents."
"I can't imagine what it must have been like for you." Ineffable sadness was in her voice. She squeezed his hand again, trying to tell him without words how sorry she was for ever opening that particular can of worms.
He glanced down at her, then his head tilted up and he looked beyond her. He drew her closer to a huge flowering shrub, as if he were trying to shield them from view. "Brace yourself," he warned and bent his head.

His mouth settled on hers, his lips opening, molding, fusing. She put her hands on his shoulders and clung to him, her pulse pounding in her ears, her heart racing. Her entire body quickened with painful urgency, and she stifled a moan. His tongue was doing a slow, erotic dance in her mouth, advancing and retreating. He put his hands on her hips and drew her to him, lifting her, holding her so that they were groin to groin. She felt him getting erect, and she shivered with pleasure even while her inner alarm began clanging insistently. She fought to keep her legs under her and not sag against him like a limp noodle, which *he* definitely wasn't.

He lifted his mouth, holding it poised over hers. She stared up at him, dazed, and wished he wasn't wearing sunglasses so she could see his eyes. Still clinging to him she whispered, "Who's there?"

This time he did smile, his mouth curling upward. "Nobody. I just wanted to kiss you for being so damn sweet."

Violently she shoved away from him. "Sneak!" She stood with her lungs heaving, glaring at him. She really, really wanted to punch him, but instead she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Guilty as charged." Taking her hand again, he resumed their walk across the lawn. "But what did you expect? I tell you something that proves I'm the ruthless bastard everyone says I am, and you apologize to me. Of course I had to kiss you."

"I thought it was for the job."

"Not always," he said, not looking at her. "Not everything."

Chapter Twenty-One

High heels would be a definite liability, Niema thought, going through her wardrobe in case she had overlooked a pair of shoes that was both dressy and flat-heeled, though she was certain she hadn't. High heels made too much noise, and it was impossible to run in them. A pair of ballet slippers would do nicely, but of all the different kinds of shoes John had had delivered to her, none of them were ballet slippers.

She stared at the gown she had planned to wear. It was a sleek black sheath with inch-wide straps that gradually widened to form the bodice, with the lowest point of the neckline squarely between her breasts. A sunburst of black cultured pearls was sewn at that strategic point, with strings of black

pearls swinging from the sunburst. She had other gowns, but she wanted to wear the black so she would blend better into the shadows, if necessary. Other than the sexy black heels, she had only one other pair of black shoes with her, and they were rather casual sandals, with stretchy straps. She pulled them out and stared at them, trying to think what she could do to dress them up. They would definitely be more comfortable to dance in than the high heels, but they looked like what they were: casual. Niema Jamieson wouldn't be that careless with her dress. She had classic taste in clothes and was never less than impeccably attired.

"Why couldn't you have been a slob?" she muttered to her alter ego.

She examined the gown again. It was sophisticated and understated, even with the dangling strings of black pearls, which glistened with a midnight iridescence that caught the eye. She reached up and flicked the strings with her finger, setting them to swaying. They would constantly call attention to her breasts.

She looked at the black sandals, then back up to the pearls. Curiously she examined the sunburst. The swaying strings weren't attached *to* the sunburst, but *under* it.

"Now we're cooking," she muttered and got up to get her tools. She knew why she was obsessing about her shoes, of course; so she wouldn't think about John and what he'd said about not everything being for the job. How was she supposed to take that? Was he referring to her or to something else entirely? There was so much in his past that he literally could have been talking about anything. Some guys led normal, open lives, with nothing more to hide than how many beers they had on the way home. John's past was so dosed and convoluted no one would ever know all the bits and pieces of what made him who he was.

Obsessing about the shoes had obviously failed in its purpose, because she *couldn't* stop thinking about him. Losing Dallas had been difficult enough, almost too much to bear; what must it have been like for John, to not only lose his wife but for it to be by his own hand? She tried to dredge up some feeling, some sympathy, for his wife, but nothing was there. The woman had been selling out her country, costing other people their lives. To Niema's way of thinking, that didn't make her much different from the terrorists who used poison gas or random bombs to kill. Dallas had died stopping people like her.

Tonight might be the last time she ever saw John.

That thought hovered in the back of her mind all the while she worked with the sandals, using glue from her tool kit to attach the pearls to the straps. There had been other times she'd known could be the last time: When he left just before she came to France; when he was only a voice on the phone and she knew she might not be invited to the villa. But this was somehow more definite. Once he got the computer files, he would leave immediately. She would stay until the end of the house party and leave as scheduled; by this time next week, she would be home and back at work, and this would be a fantastic story she could never tell anyone.

But for right now she felt vibrantly alive, more than she ever had before. Her very skin was more sensitive than she had ever before noticed. She took a long, relaxing bath in water scented with the bath crystals provided with her room, and washed her hair. She even took a nap, something she rarely did, but the events of the day had been taxing. She gave herself a manicure and pedicure, painting her nails a deep scarlet. If she never saw John again, by God, he'd remember how she looked.

She didn't want to have to come back to her room for her tools and equipment, but neither could she carry everything in the tiny excuse for a purse that was her evening bag. It had room for a credit card, a lipstick and compact, and a key. That was it. She tried to think of someplace to hide the tools and pistol, but she didn't know the estate well enough, plus it was crawling with people.

There was no way out of it; she had to come back to the room to retrieve the things. She wrapped everything, tools and pistol, in the black silk stole that matched the gown she was wearing and placed the parcel under her lingerie in the built-in drawers in the large closet. Then she took a deep breath, braced her shoulders, and prepared for a final act for the audience.

He was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs when she went down. He straightened, his blue gaze sweeping over her in a perfect imitation of an infatuated lover. Out of the corner of her eye Niema saw Ronsard watching them, his expression a mixture of ruefulness and concern. She waited until she caught his eye and gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. He spread his hands in an "I tried" gesture.

John followed her smile and his eyes narrowed, menace all but oozing from him. God, he was good. He should have gone to Hollywood; with his talent, he would already have a couple of Oscars to his credit and be making a lot more money than he was as a government employee.

She could do a little acting of her own, she thought. She slowed as she neared John, as if reluctant to take those last few steps. He frowned slightly and held out his hand to her in that arrogant gesture that demanded she come to him.
She did, silently putting her hand in his, and he led her into the ballroom where the same crowd as the night before was doing the same thing they had done the night before, only wearing different clothing. She went into his arms and he held her close, their feet barely moving, his head bent down to hers in the classic pose of a man who is totally absorbed in the woman in his arms.
"I had to leave the things in my room," she said in a low voice, the words muffled against his shoulder. "I couldn't carry them in this." She indicated the tiny evening bag.
"What? You couldn't put everything in your bodice with the SIG?" He glanced down at the fabric clinging to her breasts and the deep V of the neckline.
"Careful," she warned. "I've got a knife in there and I'll use it." She felt the movement of his lips against her temple as he smiled. "What kind of distraction did you arrange?"
"I didn't. I was afraid you'd scalp me. We'll take our chances."
"I'm good at taking chances." No sooner had the words left her mouth than she almost recoiled in shock. No, she *wasn't* good at all at taking chances. She used to be, but not now. Not any more.
He felt her stiffening in his arms and reacted by bringing her closer. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing," she said automatically.
"Nothing you're going to tell me," he corrected.
"Right."
Again there was that movement against her temple. After a moment he commented, "You're shorter than you were last night."
Trust him to notice something like that. "I'm not wearing heels. I doctored a pair of sandals so they match the gown." She stuck her foot out so he could see the pearls adorning the narrow straps.
He looked a little pained. "You butchered a Dior to decorate your shoes?"
"It's okay," she soothed. "Wearing sensible shoes was more important than the gown. Besides, black ops
is off-budget; you don't have to account for what's spent, do you?"

"No, thank God."
"So, what time do we do it?"
"No set time. We keep an eye on Ronsard, and make our move when it looks as if he's occupied."
"What about Cara?"
"Taken care of."
"I hate to tell you this, but she's standing just over there."
"She won't be for long."
Cara was wearing a dazzling white tube gown, with her long blonde hair hanging straight down her back and rhinestones dangling from her ears. She knew she looked Hollywood flashy, but there was no way she could compete with these people in terms of jewelry and couture gowns, so she didn't try. California sexy was the style she tried for and achieved.
She flirted with several men, but the sexy Frenchman with whom she had played tennis that morning was safely anchored by his wife. Deciding to troll, she began moving around the room, stopping only to talk to likely prospects. She wasn't going to worry about Hossam's feelings one minute longer; he had no claim on her.
She didn't see it coming. Someone turned too abruptly, and a glass of red wine sloshed all over her white gown. She looked down at the awful stain in dismay, knowing she would probably have to throw the garment away. "I'm so sorry," the woman who had splashed her apologized, her face contorted with dismay "I don't know how this happened; someone jostled me."
"It's perfectly all right," Cara soothed, even though it wasn't. She didn't want to upset any of *Louis's guests.* "I'm sure the stain will come right out. I'll just run to my room to change." She brushed away the woman's offer to pay for the dress and kept a smile on her face as she left the ballroom. She seldom used the elevator, preferring the stairs in order to get in some exercise, but tonight she chose the fastest route to her room.
The smile was gone and irritation in its place when she got off the elevator on the third floor. The long hallways were deserted, with only indirect lighting from the sconces, but she was glad no one was there to see what a mess she was. Taking the key from her tiny evening bag, she jammed it into the lock and pushed her door open, her hand unerringly finding the light switch and flipping it on.
Light flooded the room at the same time a large hand clamped over her mouth and an arm around her waist lifted her off her feet. The door was

kicked shut.
Panic screamed through her, making everything around her go dim for a moment. She heard her own muffled screams and knew the sound wouldn't carry beyond the room. She clawed at the hand over her mouth, kicking and squirming in an effort to escape.
"Hush, my love. There's no need to be frightened."
Hossam! Panic turned to rage in the space of a split second. She slammed her head backward in an effort to smash his mouth, but he only chuckled and tossed her onto the bed, then landed on top of her before she could control herself enough to scramble off the bed.
"You bastard," she hissed, no longer trying to scream.
He only laughed again, sitting astride her and capturing her fists. With no more effort than if he were handling a child, he looped a scarf around her wrists, then pulled her arms over her head and tied the scarf to the headboard.
"You bastard!" she said again, louder this time, shrieking it.
"Shhh, be quiet."
I'll kill you for this! Ill tear your balls off- ummmph!"
"I told you to be quiet," he murmured, tying another scarf over her mouth. He sat back, eyeing his handiwork, and a smile spread over his dark face. "Now, my love, let's see if the magician knows any new tricks."
He took a knife from his pocket and pressed a switch. A gleaming blade shot out, the light catching the razor-sharp edges. Cara's eyes widened as she stared at the knife, then at him. She began bucking, trying to throw him off, but he squeezed her body between his thighs and ruthlessly held her still.
Muffled screams came from behind the scarf as he slipped the blade under the clingy material covering her breasts and slashed downward. The two halves of the gown parted as if it had been unzipped, baring her breasts. Hossam paused to admire the view. Still holding the knife in one hand, he fondled her naked breasts, cupping them and stroking his thumb over her nipples, admiring the way they tightened. Then he levered himself off her.
"Be still," he commanded. "I might accidentally cut you."
She forced herself to stillness as he slit the dress all the way to the hem and pulled the rags away from her. She wore nothing underneath. Modesty wasn't her strong suit, but now she squeezed her legs together in a useless effort to protect herself. Oh, God, was he going to kill her?

He stepped back and began removing his clothes. Wildly she shook her head, hot tears burning her eyes.
"Don't be frightened," he repeated, stepping out of his pants and standing naked over her. His penis jutted out from his body, telling her how ready he was. Desperately she kicked at him, trying to catch him in the balls, though she had no idea what good that would do since she was still tied and gagged.
Clicking his tongue in reproval, he grabbed her by one ankle and gave it the same treatment he had her wrists. Another ten seconds and her other leg was bound, and she was lying with her hands stretched upward and her legs spread obscenely wide.
"What a wild thing you are," he crooned, crawling on the bed between her legs. "Sweet and wild and . . . mine. Never forget that. You're mine."
She expected to be swiftly, brutally raped and had already braced herself for the violation. It didn't happen. Instead he bent down and pressed his mouth between her legs, and began loving her.
The contrast between what she had expected and what he actually did was so great that she couldn't stop the soft moan that vibrated in her throat. She arched, and he cupped her bottom in his big hands to hold her still.
The bright overhead light *dazzled* her eyes. She stared upward as pleasure zinged through her body, unable to raise her head to see. This was ... this was so totally unexpected she couldn't quite grasp it was happening. He brought her to a hard, rapid climax that left her gasping, her eyes tearing from the force of it.
"That is just the first one," he murmured, leaning over her. *"'You* know I would never, never hurt you. Tonight we will discover all the ways I can pleasure you, as no other man can." His dark eyes twinkled at her. "And afterward, perhaps I will let you tie *me* to the bed."
She moaned and arched as his long fingers slid into her, stimulating nerve endings that were still sensitive from her climax. Her fear had faded, because his hands on her were loving instead of brutal, and in place of fear a deep excitement was blooming. This was different, and kinky. She had never been helpless before during sex. Usually she dominated, because that was how she liked it.
But she liked this too, she found. She was totally at his mercy, naked and exposed in the bright light. He could do anything to her he wanted, and her mind reeled at the possibilities. Hossam was so big and powerful, and he

tended to be slow at sex anyway. This was going to be a long night-wonderfully, deliciously long.
"It's time," John breathed into Niema's ear.
Her pulse leaped. She took a deep breath and felt herself steady. She tilted her head back and gave him such a vibrant smile that he physically checked, staring down at her.
Who was she kidding? The moment of clarity was almost blinding as they left the ballroom and climbed the curving staircase to the second floor. She *was* a risk-taker. She loved every minute of this. She didn't want to go home and resume her job; she wanted to stay in fieldwork, where she belonged. She had paid penance for five years, but John had wrenched her back into the life for which she was truly suited and she never wanted to leave it again.
She felt almost breathless with discovery, with an inner joy that spread through her as if she had finally returned to life, to being herself.
The long hallway was empty. With no one to watch them, they walked briskly down to her room. She retrieved the wrap from the closet and held it folded so the tools and pistol were in a pocket of fabric against her body, with the loose ends draped over her arm. "How about this?" she asked.
"Looks good. Come on."
They hurried back up the hall, but instead of going down the stairs they went straight across into the west wing. "I prowled around and found a back way," John explained.
"Ronsard's private quarters are in this direction, too."
"I know. The back way is through his rooms."
She rolled her eyes, but didn't bother asking how he'd gotten into Ronsard's rooms. Locks didn't mean anything to him.
This route wasn't without risk. There were fewer people to see them, but anyone who did would be staff who worked in the private section, and who would know immediately they didn't belong there. Guests or not, Ronsard wouldn't allow anyone to disturb his daughter.
John pulled her to a halt in front of a wooden door burnished to a high gloss. He turned the handle, and they slipped inside the room. It was a bedroom, she saw-a huge, lavish one. "Ronsard's," John whispered in unnecessary explanation. "There's a private elevator going down to the hallway where his office is located."

The elevator was small, but then it was meant to carry only one man. It was also surprisingly quiet and arrived without the customary "ding" of a commercial elevator.
The hallway they stepped into was also empty, which was good because there was no logical excuse for them to be there, especially stepping out of Ronsard's elevator. John strode to a door, pulled a small recorder out of his pocket and held it to the electronic lock. He pressed a button, and a series of tones sounded. A tiny green light on the lock lit up, there was a faint but audible click, and he opened the door.
They slipped inside and he silently closed the door behind them, then did something to the lock. "What are you doing?"
"Disabling the lock. If we're caught, the fact that the lock isn't working will at least cloud the issue in our favor a bit, but I'd still have to come up with some reason for our being here."
"Boy, you have this planned down to the last detail, don't you?"
"I don't intend to get caught. Come on, move your pretty butt and get to work."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Niema looked around while John sat down at Ronsard's desk and turned on the computer. Another setup, far more elaborate, was hooked up on a desk on the other side of the room, but he ignored that one. She checked the jacks on what must be Cara Smith's desk; there were three separate lines coming into the office, but the phones themselves were only two-line phones. The computer was on a line by itself, then. She looked at the phone on Ronsard's desk; it was identical to the other, with two lines coming in. The first line would be the business line, she guessed; the second, his private number.
There was a closed-circuit television on Ronsard's desk, also, showing the hallway outside. She followed the line on it to the wall, making sure where it connected. She liked to have a room's wiring laid out in her mind, so she knew exactly what she was looking for and at.
Ronsard's phone jack wasn't behind his desk, probably because he didn't want it in the way. She followed the lines again; the jack was behind a long

leather sofa that sat against the wall. Carefully she pulled the sofa out, lifting one end to make certain there were no telltale bangs and thumps. Kneeling down on the floor, she unfolded her evening wrap and removed the black velvet pouch that contained her tools. Laying aside the SIG, she quickly unscrewed the jack, then disconnected the wires and stripped the plastic coating to separate the wires.

The usual wiretap had a receiver or recorder close by. In this instance, that wouldn't do any good because she had no way of retrieving a tape or listening to the calls. The CIA operative in place here didn't have access to Ronsard's office. John had slipped a digital burst receiver to him; he would trigger a signal to retrieve the audio data, which he would then send by his usual route to Langley. Even if he were discovered with the receiver, nothing could be made of it because the information was digitalized. It looked like an ordinary pocket radio; it even worked as a radio.

Quickly she attached the inductive probe tip to only one of the line terminals, which didn't make a complete circuit and hence couldn't be picked up by an electronic sweep. She interfaced the leads to the junction, keeping the leads less than three inches long. The short leads made the phone bridge impossible to pick up by electrical deviations. Next she hooked up two nine-volt batteries as a power source for the receiver/transmitter and began putting everything together in the receptacle.

"Almost finished," she said. She estimated she had been working about twenty minutes. "Are you in yet?"

"Still working," John murmured absently. "The files are password protected."

"Did you try 'Laure'?"

"It was my first shot."

"Nothing in the desk?" She had been aware of him opening and closing drawers, but thought he might be looking for paper files, too.

"No." He was swiftly examining everything on top of the desk, looking for anything that might contain the password.

She screwed the jack plate into place, then repositioned the sofa. "What if it isn't written down?"

"Unless he's a fool, he changes the password on a regular basis. If he changes it, then the current one is written down somewhere. If you're finished there, look for a wall or floor safe."

"Don't tell me you're a safecracker, too."

"Okay, I won't tell you."
Swiftly she checked behind all the paintings hanging on the wall, but there was only wallpaper there. A
huge, thickly woven rug covered the floor and she threw back the edges, but again found nothing. She got out a screwdriver and, moving around the room, examined all the outlets, because sometimes dummy outlets concealed small hiding places. "Nothing," she reported. She gathered her tools and the pistol, slipping them back into the folds of her evening wrap.
John picked up a book and ruffled all the pages, holding it spine up to see if anything fell out. He paused, looking at the well-thumbed book. Niema walked over to look at the book, putting her tools down on top of the desk: *A Tale of Two Cities.*
John flipped to a page with a down-turned corner. "It's here. Nobody reads this more than once, unless they have to."
"It's a classic," she said, amused.
"I didn't say it wasn't good, but it isn't something you read over and over."
He ran his finger down the page, looking for anything that jumped out at him. "Guillotine."
Turning back to the keyboard, he typed in the word. ACCESS DENIED flashed on the screen.
He shrugged and consulted the book again. "Dickens was damn wordy," he grumbled. "This could take all day." He tried "monarchs." ACCESS DENIED.
"Monsters" was rejected, then "enchanter."
The file list opened on "tumbrils."
"How about that," John said softly. "I was just shooting in the dark."
"Lucky shot." Except he wasn't just lucky, he was so highly trained that instinct and experience put him several jumps ahead of almost everyone else, allowing him to see the significance of a battered copy of a classic lying in the open on Ronsard's desk.
He slid a disk into the A drive and began calling up files and copying them onto the disk. He didn't take time to read any of them, he just copied them as fast as possible, one eye on the closed-circuit monitor the entire time.
Niema moved around behind the desk. "I'll watch the monitor," she said. "You copy."
He nodded, and the A drive began whirring almost continuously.

A moment later, watching the monitor, Niema saw the door at the end of the hallway open.
"Someone's coming," she whispered.
John glanced at the screen, but didn't pause in what he was doing. "That's one of the security team," he replied.
"Do they do door checks?"
"Maybe." The reply was terse. Since he had disabled the lock on the door, it would open if anyone tried it.
Niema put her hand in the folds of the evening wrap. The pistol grip felt cool and heavy under her fingers. The guard began walking down the hallway toward the office. Her heartbeat picked up and her mouth went dry. The hallway was a long one; on the small screen, it seemed to stretch out endlessly, with the guard becoming *bigger and bigger as he approached.* Niema found herself counting his steps. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one-
"Don't lose your cool," John cautioned softly but didn't look up from the list of files. "Almost finished here."
The guard strode past, never even pausing outside the door. Watching him on the screen, hearing his footsteps pass by the office, gave her an odd sense of unreality because the sound came from a different direction than the activity she watched on the screen.
"That's it." Quickly he punched the release, and the disk popped out. He slipped it into a protective sleeve and put it in his inside jacket pocket. Then he turned off the computer, restored everything on the desk to its original position, and touched her elbow. "Ready?"
"I'll say."
She turned to go to the door, but suddenly he grabbed her arm, pulling her to a standstill. "More company."
She looked back at the monitor. The hallway door was opening again. Someone had stopped in the doorway, half turned away as if he were speaking to someone on the other side of the door. The tiny figure on the screen had long dark hair.
"Ronsard," she whispered, a cold twist of panic tightening her stomach. He wouldn't be in this long hallway unless he were coming to his office.
John exploded into motion, literally lifting her off her feet. In two long strides he was beside the sofa. He set her down and began stripping out of his tuxedo jacket, carelessly dropping it on the floor. "Take off your underwear and lie down," he ordered, his tone low and urgent.

They had only seconds, seconds before Ronsard would be coming through that door. Her hands shook as she pulled up her skirt and reached under it for the waistband of her panties. Pretending to have sex was such a cliche, trotted out in hundreds of movies, that no one would believe it, especially not someone as sophisticated and savvy as Ronsard. That was precisely why it just might work, because he wouldn't believe Temple would be so hokey. Of course John, being John, wouldn't depend on a torrid clinch to give the impression he wanted. No, he wanted underwear off, clothes disarrayed, as if they truly were just about to make love.

Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel her pulse throbbing under her skin. She skimmed her panties down her thighs and let them drop, then hurriedly kicked them away and lay down on the sofa.

Leaning forward, John tugged her skirt up to her waist and pulled her legs apart, kneeling between them with one knee on the sofa while he tore open his trousers. She went numb with shock. Only the cool air washing over her naked flesh told her this wasn't a weird dream, but it had to be. This was carrying pretense further than she was prepared to take it. She couldn't be lying here half-naked with him between her spread legs and witnesses likely to come through the door at any second.

He bent down and licked her, his hard hands pushing her thighs wider as his tongue probed inside her, depositing moisture. Niema's entire body jolted and he held her down, his mouth pressed between her legs. She swallowed a shriek, her breath strangling in her throat. Oh God, he was going down on her-Ronsard would . . . She couldn't let herself think of Ronsard walking in on them now but this must be what John had planned, to be caught in an act so intimate no one would dream it was pretense-

How could it be pretense when he was actually doing it?

She whimpered and reached down, her hands sliding through his hair. She wanted to push him away but couldn't, her hands simply wouldn't obey. Bolts of sensation shot through her body, arching her in his hands. How long would she have to endure this? How long? Five seconds? Ten?

Time had become elastic, stretching beyond recognition. She shook her head in wordless protest, helplessly speared under the dual lash of fear and pleasure. Something hot and wild spiraled in her. She couldn't do this, couldn't bear it, not with his mouth on her body making every muscle tighten past endurance.

She found the strength to push weakly at his shoulders. He slid upward, his tongue swirling around her clitoris in a quick caress that nearly shot her off the sofa, but he quickly controlled her and shifted into position between her legs.
"Easy," he whispered and pressed himself to her opening.
No. He couldn't actually be doing this. Not here, not like this. She didn't want their first time to be like this.
Everything was happening too fast; her body hadn't had time to prepare itself, even with the moisture he had given her with his tongue. How *could* she be prepared, when she couldn't believe what he was doing, not now, not like this?
He pushed slowly into her and she wasn't nearly wet enough, her inner tissues yielding reluctantly to his intrusion. "Scream," he said, the word almost soundless.
Scream? That would certainly bring Ronsard-but that was what John wanted. The realization seared through her dazed mind. Anyone up to no good wouldn't make that kind of noise, which was guaranteed to attract attention, or be doing what they were doing.
He put no limits on what he would do to get the job done.
He withdrew a little then thrust again, forcing himself deeper, inch by inch. "Scream," he repeated, demanding now.
She couldn't. She didn't have enough air, her lungs were paralyzed, her entire body arching under the almost brutal lash of sensation. Every nerve ending felt electrified, her loins clenching as she fought the relentless swell of pleasure. She fought him too, not with her fists but with every muscle inside her, clamping down, trying to hold him, prevent him from going deeper and pushing her beyond control.
She wasn't strong enough. He thrust slowly past her resistance, bracing his hands on either side of her rib cage and leaning over her. Quick, shallow breaths panted between his parted lips; his eyes were narrowed, brilliant, the blue more intense than she had ever seen it before. With one swift movement he pulled down the left strap of her gown, baring her breast. Her nipple was already tightly beaded, flushed with color. "Scream," he insisted, thrusting harder. "Scream!"
Her head thrashed back and forth on the cushion. She choked back a sob and desperately struck out at him, trying to squirm away. She couldn't, she didn't want to, dear God please don't let her be climaxing as Ronsard

walked through that door, she couldn't bear it. John caught her wrists and pinned them to the sofa, relentlessly probing ever deeper.
She couldn't stop it, couldn't contain it. She convulsed, waves of sensation pulsing through her loins. She sank into the climax, head thrown back and eyes closed, breath halted, everything fading around her until her only focus of existence was the searing pleasure. She did scream then, silently, beyond despair, as she waited for the door to open.
The door didn't open. There was nothing but silence in the hallway.
The sensual paroxysm began to ebb, the tension fading from her trembling flesh until she lay limp and pliant beneath him, her legs still open and her body still penetrated. She couldn't think, couldn't move. She felt hollow, emptied out, as if he had taken everything.
Humiliation crawled through her like lava. She turned her head aside, unable to look at him. How could she have climaxed in such a situation? What kind of person was she? What kind of man was *he*, to do this? Tears burned her eyes, but she couldn't wipe them away because he still held her wrists pinned.
Time stopped.
Ronsard wasn't coming into his office. She didn't know where he had gone, but he wasn't here. She waited for John to withdraw, waited for a moment that stretched on and on until the tension was more than she could bear and she had to look at him again, had to face him.
His expression was set in almost savage lines, his eyes so bright they seemed to burn her. He seemed to have been waiting for her to look at him. "I'm sorry," he said, and began moving-not away from her but inside her, thrusting, forging a deep, fast rhythm, and pierced her to her very core.
He came hard, gripping her hips while he plunged and bucked, his head thrown back and his teeth grinding together to hold back the hoarse sounds in his throat. He sank against her, panting, his chest heaving as he gulped in air.
She didn't say anything, couldn't think of anything *to* say. Her mind was emptied, dazed with shock. Nothing she'd ever read in Miss Manners covered this situation. The bizarreness of that thought almost made her laugh, but the laugh turned into a sob that she choked back.
Carefully he levered himself away from her; her breath caught at the drag of his flesh leaving hers. He pulled her to a sitting position. "Are you all right?"

She nodded silently, swinging her feet to the floor and pushing her skirt down to cover her thighs. He neatened himself with brisk movements, tucking in his shirt and fastening his trousers.
Her panties were lying on the floor in front of the desk. John picked them up and held them out to her. In silence she took them. Her legs felt too wobbly for her to trust them, so she sat on the sofa and worked the panties up her legs until she could lift her hips and tug the flimsy garment into place. She was very wet now, the moisture dampening her underwear and drying stickily on her inner thighs.
He walked around the desk until he could see the closed-circuit monitor. "The coast is clear," he said, as calmly as if nothing had happened. "I don't know where Ronsard went."
Shakily she got to her feet and gathered her evening wrap, fumbling with the folds to make certain they still held everything securely. John shrugged into his tuxedo jacket and straightened his tie, then raked his fingers through his hair. He looked cool and controlled.
"Are you ready?"
She nodded, and he checked the monitor again. "Here we go," he said, taking her arm and ushering her to the door.
Somehow she controlled her voice, and found the words. Somehow she sounded as casual as he did. "What about the lock? Are you going to fix it?"
"No, he'll just think it malfunctioned. This type does occasionally."
He opened the door and swiftly looked out, then ushered her into the empty hallway. He was pulling the office door shut, his hand still on the handle, when the hallway door abruptly swung open and a guard stepped through. He checked when he saw them, shouting something as he automatically reached for his weapon.
John was moving almost before the guard saw them. He pushed Niema against the wall as he went down on one knee, going for the weapon in his ankle rig. The guard panicked and fired too soon, the bullet plowing into the floor ten feet in front of him. John didn't panic. Niema saw his face, calm and expressionless, as his hand swept up. He fired twice, the first shot in the chest and the second, an insurance shot, in the head. The guard jerked like a puppet with broken strings as he crashed backward through the open door.
John gripped Niema's hand and with one motion pulled her to her feet. Screams rose beyond the open hallway door and running footsteps pounded

toward them. "Come on," he said and shoved her toward the left exit, and people poured through the door behind them.
Upstairs, the three shots froze Hossam. He leaped off the bed and grabbed his pants from the floor, jerking them on as he ran for the door. He grabbed his shoulder holster as well, sliding the weapon free.
"Hossam! Don't leave me like this!" Cara's voice was sharp with panic-he had long since taken off the gag-but he ignored her and ran out the door. He did have presence of mind to slam the door closed as he went out, but that was all he took the time to do.
Barefoot, he raced down the hall to the stairway at the end and instead of using the steps he put his hand on the rail and vaulted down to the next tier, again and again until he reached the ground floor. The shots seemed to have come from directly below and to the right, which meant they were near Ronsard's office.
The long hallway was jammed with people, some of them Ronsard's guests who were exclaiming in horror. The security personnel were trying to clear them out of the hall, but the arrival of a huge, half-naked, armed man had the guests shrinking back.
"Where?" Hossam shouted.
"Out this entrance," a guard replied, pointing to the door. "It was Temple and one of the women." Hossam wheeled and plunged into the night.
Where would Temple go? Hossam briefly paused, thinking. He would try to get transportation, rather than get away on foot, but the guests vehicles were secured in a fenced area. The estate vehicles, however, were not. Hossam ran barefoot across the damp lawn, heading for the garage area.
Bright emergency lights flashed on all over the estate, lighting up the area like a football field. Armed men swarmed the lawn. Hossam yelled, "The guest vehicles! Check them!"
A large group formed, racing for the secure area. Hossam ran on toward the garage, his weapon held ready. Damn, this guy Temple had piss-poor timing! He'd had Cara ready to come for about the tenth time when he heard the shots, but he'd had to jerk out of her and leave her on the brink, still helplessly tied to the bed.
The long, shadowed garage was silent as he moved down the row of cars and Land Rovers and Jeeps. "Are you here?" he whispered.
"Here."

Hossam whirled as Temple stepped out of the shadows, towing a woman behind him. "Go, man," he hissed, pulling a set of keys out of his pocket and tossing them to Temple, who released the woman to catch them with his left hand. "The green Mercedes there."
"Thanks. Turn around."
Sighing, Eric Covert turned around. He just hoped he wouldn't be out too long, or Cara would be hysterical with rage. He never heard Temple move or felt the blow that left him stretched out on the cold concrete floor.

hapter Twenty-Three

John bent down and scooped up the big man's weapon and tossed it to Niema. "Here, hold this."
She pushed that pistol, too, into the bundle of her evening wrap. It would look suspicious if they didn't take the weapon. He unlocked the car with the automatic lock release on the key ring and they got in. "Get down on the floor," he said, putting his hand on the back of her head and pushing to make sure she obeyed.
She crouched in the well of the floor as he started the car and hit the garage door opener. The door began to slide upward and the automatic light came on overhead. He glanced at her and smiled, and shifted into gear. The powerful car shot forward, tires grabbing traction so smoothly there was no squeal or burning rubber.
The first shot shattered the window above her head, spraying glass over the interior of the car. She bit back a startled cry, covering her head with her arms as a second shot went through the passenger door and the back of the seat not three inches from John's arm, the bullet making a funny *whfftt* sound as it passed through the leather and fabric.
He floored the gas pedal, smoothly shifting through the gears. With each new gear the increased G-force pushed her hard against the seat. "Stay down," he said, and ducked a split second before the drivers' side window shattered.
The gates. He was heading for those massive, steel-barred gates. She barely had time to brace her hands before the impact. Metal screamed and glass shattered, and she heard more shots, the rapid coughing of automatic fire.

She was thrown sideways, her head banging the gear shift. One of the heavy gates, torn off its hinges, landed half on the hood.
"Are you all right?" John shouted as he shifted into reverse. The gate spun and slid to the ground. He shifted gears again and the car shot forward, bumping over the gate, metal bars clanging.
"Yeah," she yelled, but she didn't know if he heard her over the gunfire. He wasn't returning the fire, using all his concentration to drive. She fumbled for the two weapons in the folds of her wrap; the first one she touched was the big one the Company man had been carrying. She got to her knees as she thumbed off the safety.
"God damn it, stay down!" John roared, reaching for her as if he would shove her back into the floor.
"Just drive!" She jerked away, wrapped both hands around the heavy weapon, and began firing out the window. Even if she didn't hit anyone, return fire would at least make them duck for cover. If she didn't do something, the car, with them in it, would be shot to pieces.
The heavy weapon bucked in her hand, the deep cough deafening her as hot casings ejected into the car. One bounced off her bare arm, leaving behind a sting.
The car wasn't running as smoothly as before; it jerked and hesitated, the engine cutting out. Some of the bullets had hit something critical but at least they were off the estate grounds. More shots zinged after them, but they sounded like handguns, which meant the shots didn't have their range. "We have to ditch the car," John said, turning his head to check behind them. The rearview mirror was nothing but a shattered metal frame, the mirror blasted into tiny pieces all over them.
"Where?"
"As soon as we're out of sight. With luck, they won't find the car until morning."
Niema peered over the shredded remains of the seat back. The estate was lit with so many lights it looked like a miniature city. Dozens of lights bloomed as she watched, neatly spaced apart in pairs-headlights. "They're coming," she said.
They went around a curve, and a thick stand of trees hid the estate from sight. He drove off the road, slowing so the tires wouldn't churn up the ground, easing the heavy vehicle into the trees. They bumped over limbs and rocks, and bushes scraped at the once-pristine paint job.

He didn't touch the brake pedal, just in case one of the taillights was still working. When they were far enough off the road that passing headlights wouldn't glint on metal, he stopped and killed the engine. They sat in silence broken only by the engine pinging and hissing, listening to the pursuing vehicles roar past their hiding spot.
They were less than a mile from the estate. "Now what?" she asked, her voice sounding funny, but then her ears were still ringing from the gunfire. The car interior stank of burnt gunpowder and hot metal.
"Do you feel like a nice run?"
"It's my favorite thing to do in the middle of the night, wearing sandals and a two-thousand dollar dress, with a hundred guys chasing and shooting at us."
"Just be glad the sandals aren't high-heeled." He rapped his pistol barrel on the inside lights, shattering covers and bulbs so there wouldn't be any betraying light when they opened the doors.
Gingerly she climbed up from the floor. Shards of glass dusted the seats, her shoulders, her hair. It was very dark under the trees. The door on her side wouldn't open; a bullet had probably hit the lock mechanism. She crawled over the gear shift, glass tinkling and gritting with every movement she made.
John got out and reached in, bodily lifting her out of the car and standing her on her feet. "Shake," he directed.
They both bent over, shaking their heads and flopping their arms and clothes to dislodge any clinging bits of glass. Her arms and shoulders were stinging a little, but when she cautiously felt them her fingers came away dry, so at least she wasn't bleeding. It was a wonder they were even alive; not being cut by that hail of glass went beyond wonder into miraculous.
But when they straightened, her eyes had adjusted more to the darkness and she saw that half of John's face was darker than the other half. Her stomach plummeted. "You're hit," she said, fighting to keep her voice even. He couldn't be shot. He couldn't. Something vital in her depended on his being okay.
"By glass, not a bullet." He sounded more irritated than anything else. He took the silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and held it to his forehead.
"Do you have both pistols?"
"They're in the car." She leaned forward into the car and retrieved both weapons. "What about my tools? Leave them?" She definitely didn't want to

lug them around.
"Hand them here."
She gave him the velvet pouch, heavy with tools. He took the tools out and threw them, one by one, as far as he could into the trees and underbrush. If the bag of tools was found, Ronsard would wonder what they had been used for, and since they had been spotted coming out of his office he would then no doubt have a complete physical search done of all the wiring, and he would find the bug. A physical search was the only way to find it, but then no bug could be hidden when the wires themselves were examined.
"Got your wrap?"
"Why do I need it?"
"Because it's black and will hide some of that skin you're showing." She got the wrap and her evening bag out of the car, though she had to gingerly feel around until she found them. The evening bag was useless; there wasn't anything in there they could use, not even money. All her money-passport, everything, were back in her room. She wasn't worried about the passport; the name on it was false, and John would get them back into the country even without one, but money would have come in handy.
John took the bag from her, but instead of throwing it away he tucked it in his pocket. "Come on."
Running in the woods in the dark was too dangerous; they risked turned ankles at least, and possibly broken bones, so they picked their way through the trees and underbrush, pausing every so often to listen for pursuit. They could hear traffic on the road, growing more and more distant as they angled away from it. They couldn't hope that Ronsard's men would be stymied for much longer, though.
They came out of the woods onto a secondary road. "We'll follow this for a while," he said. "It's easier traveling, and while it's dark we can see them a lot sooner than they can see us."
"Are we going anywhere in particular, or just running?"
"Nice."
"Why Nice? Why not Lyon? It's closer."
"Ronsard will be watching the airport in Lyon, and all the car rentals. He'll expect us to go there."
"Then how about Marseilles?"
"Our yacht is in Nice."
"Really. I didn't know we had a yacht."

"The *Company* has a yacht, and the yacht has a computer with a satellite uplink. I'll be able to get this information to Langley and let them start work on it immediately."
"Nice it is, then."
He took a knife from his pocket and knelt at her feet. Grasping a fistful of fabric in his hand, he inserted the knife about level with her knee and slit her gown sideways, cutting off the bottom half of the skirt. "You have more things in the pockets of that tuxedo than Snoopy has in his dog house," she commented. "I don't see how it fits as well as it does."
"I have a very good tailor."
Now that they were out from under the trees, she could see that his head was still bleeding. He cut a narrow strip off the swath he had just removed from her gown and tied it over the cut. His tuxedo was torn and dirty, and when she looked down she saw that what remained of her gorgeous Dior gown was in the same condition. The remnant of the fabric he draped around his neck.
They began running in an easy jog, because they weren't wearing running shoes and the impact of the hard asphalt through the thin soles of their evening shoes jarred every bone and muscle as it was.
"Are we going to run all the way to Nice?" she asked after about a mile.
"No, we're going to steal a car."
"When?"
"As soon as we find one."
She tried to find a stride that was easier on her feet and legs, and tried to keep her mind focused on the present. While they were being shot at she hadn't had any trouble focusing, but now there was nothing but the rhythmic slap of their shoes on the asphalt, the easy sound of their breathing, and the night sounds surrounding them. With nothing posing an immediate threat, her thoughts zeroed in on what had happened in Ronsard's office.
She didn't want to think about it, but couldn't stop. Maybe it had been inevitable, given the tug of sexual attraction she felt for him, had felt from the moment she set eyes on him in Frank Vinay's office. He struck sparks off her, made her feel so alive she sometimes thought her skin couldn't contain her. Those kisses they had shared-maybe the setup had been pretense, but her response hadn't. With every touch, every dance, every kiss her anticipation had built until it was a wonder she hadn't climaxed as soon as he licked her.

If only it hadn't happened that way. If only he had been making love to her, instead of setting a scene for their cover story. For her, their coming together had been a cataclysmic event. For him, it had been a job.
Maybe that was what hurt so much. She wanted to mean something to him other than just another job, another means to an end. She was afraid . .. dear God, she was afraid she loved him.
She would have to be a Grade A fool to love John Medina.
Loving a man who traveled was one thing; thousands of women did. Loving a man who drew in danger with every breath was something else thousands of women did. Cops, firemen, high-iron men, oil-well riggers-they all had dangerous jobs and they were gone for long stretches of time. But at least they lived in the sunlight. At least their lives were real. John was always setting a scene, doing a job, working an angle. He was almost always someone else. She would never know if he was dead or alive, or if he was coming back even if he was alive.
She couldn't love like that. She couldn't *live* like that.
"Car," he said, breaking the agonized chain of her thoughts, gripping her arm and urging her off the road. "Get down." Headlights speared toward them through the darkness, the car moving fast.
She lay flat on her face in the weeds, with the evening wrap draped over her arms and shoulders and the remnants of her skirt covering her bare legs. John lay beside her, between her and the road. The car zoomed past.
Slowly they sat up. Until they stopped running, she hadn't been aware of how her feet and legs were aching. She rubbed her hands up and down her shins. "Maybe barefoot would be better than these shoes."
"On the ground, yes, but not on asphalt."
The thin straps were rubbing blisters on her feet. She eased the straps to a different position. "I'm developing a problem here."
He squatted beside her. "Blisters?"
"Not yet, but getting there."
"Okay, running is out. We need to get transportation tonight, though, because we'll be a lot easier to spot on foot during the day. I wanted to get farther away before I liberated a car, but that can't be helped."
"What difference does it make?"
"If a car is stolen practically in Ronsard's backyard, do you think he won't hear about it and figure we're the ones who stole it? Then he'll know what kind of car we're in and can have people watching for us."

She sighed. "Then we walk."
His hand dosed gently over her foot. "I don't think that's an option, either. We'll come across a farm soon, or a village, and I'll get whatever's there, even if it's a tow truck."
"Until then," she said as she got to her feet, "we walk."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ronsard was more coldly furious than he'd ever been in his life, but more at himself than anyone else. After all, in his business one could expect treachery. What he hadn't expected was that he would have been so completely fooled. Nor had he expected that as many security personnel as were on the estate wouldn't be able to stop one car from leaving. They were supposedly professionals, but they hadn't performed as such.
He had one man dead, and another, Hossam, suffering from a concussion. Hossam had been found lying on the garage floor, only half-dressed and unconscious. Having correctly guessed that Temple would try for one of the estate vehicles, he had evidently been taken from behind. Why Hossam had been wearing only his pants when he was supposed to have been working was a *puzzle,* until he noticed that Cara was nowhere to be found and sent someone to investigate. She was found tied to her bed, naked and furious. He had been wondering if he would have to kill Hossam for assaulting her until her concern, when she found he had been injured, reassured him that whatever had been going on in her bedroom had been consensual.
Ronsard's guests were shocked and uneasy. The violence of the night's events had forcibly brought home to many of them exactly what sort of world their host lived in. It was all very well to flirt with danger, to boast to their friends that they had been guests at the notorious Louis Ronsard's luxurious estate, to give him information that made them feel wicked and notorious too, but the reality of it was more brutal than they could have guessed.
He imagined none of them had ever seen a man who had been shot in the head. Then all hell had broken loose outside as Temple made his escape, with a hail of automatic fire that sounded as if a small war was being waged on his front lawn, the car crashing through his front gates, his guards scattering as small-arms fire was returned at them. It wasn't just his security

that had been breached, but theirs. They no longer had the illusion of safety. Most of them were leaving come the morning.
As a host, his night had been a fiasco. As a businessman, it was worse than that.
Temple and Niema had been in his office. What Niema was doing there, he couldn't imagine. Perhaps she was Temple's partner, perhaps not. Witnesses to the shooting in the hallway had agreed he was manhandling her, shoving her around, dragging her outside. On the other hand, Temple had been driving the car; who other than Niema had been shooting at his guards? It was possible Temple had been both driving and shooting; difficult, but not impossible, and Temple was a trained assassin.
What had they been doing in his office? .
The lock wasn't working. It had been, however, when he left the office the last time, because he automatically, from ingrained habit, tried the handle every time he left.
He stood in his office looking around, trying to see what Temple could have seen. What would he have been interested in? The computers, of course. But there was nothing on Cara's that would have been of interest to him, and the information in Ronsard's computer was password protected.
The password. He walked to his desk and surveyed the items on top of it. Nothing looked disturbed; his copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* was exactly where he had left it.
And yet-
And yet, the instinct for survival that had stood him in such good stead told him that Temple had somehow breached the security in his computer as surely as he had breached the estate's security. Ronsard couldn't afford to assume otherwise. Nor could he afford to underestimate his opponent, a man who evidently appeared and disappeared at will, and who had access to government documents before they were made public. Such a man was a man with power either behind him, or in his own hands.
They had to be found. With one phone call to the authorities in Lyon he had immediately thrown a net over the airport, then, when one of his more observant men saw where a car had been driven off the road and found the Mercedes abandoned, extended that net to the car rental services also.
They were on foot, unless Temple stole another car. Ronsard arranged that he be told immediately if any thefts were reported.

He sat down at his desk, drumming his fingers on the wood. Lyon was the most logical immediate destination-but perhaps Temple would go in the opposite direction, for that reason. Do the unexpected. Keep your opponent off balance, guessing.
This would be like a game of chess, with moves and countermoves. The key to victory was planning ahead, anticipating every move his opponent could make.
Marseilles was to the south-a larger city than Lyon, with a huge, busy port. It was farther away, but once there, the chances of escaping went up dramatically.
The port. That was the key. Temple would escape by water.
* * *
The village was a small one, no more than fifteen houses loosely grouped on each side of the road. John selected an older model Renault that was parked in front of a cottage, as the older cars were easier to hotwire. Niema stood watch while he eased the car door open and felt under the dash for the wiring harness. The interior light was burning, but he didn't have a flashlight and had to take the chance of someone seeing the light. With his knife, he stripped the wires of their plastic sheath.
Three cottages away, a dog roused from its doggy dreams and barked once, then fell silent. No light came on in any of the cottage's windows.
"Get in," John whispered, moving aside so she could crawl in from that side and not make more noise by having to open and close the passenger door, too. She wasn't a four-year-old, and the Renault was small; she banged her knee on the gear shift, her head on the interior light, and her elbow on the steering wheel. Swearing under her breath, she finally maneuvered herself into the passenger seat.
John wasn't laughing, but his mouth wore a curve that said he wanted to. The small interior light gave her the first dear look at him since they left the estate, and her heart skipped a beat. The right side of his face was streaked with dried blood, despite his efforts to wipe it off. His once-snowy shirt was rusty with dirt and blood, his hair was tousled, and beard stubble darkened his jaw. With the black strip of silk tied around his head, he looked like a disreputable, Armani-dad pirate.
If anyone saw them the way they looked now, they were busted.
He twisted the wires together, and the engine began trying to crank. It coughed, the fan turning, and he slid into the seat and gently pressed the gas

pedal. With a high-pitched hum like a sewing machine, the car started. Without closing the door, he put in the clutch and shifted into low gear; the car began rolling as he let out the clutch. Fifty yards down the road, he closed the door.
"What time is it?" she asked, slumping in the seat. Her feet were throbbing. She eased them out of the sandals, knowing she might not be able to get her shoes back on and not caring. Sitting down was such a relief she almost groaned.
He glanced at his wristwatch. "A little after three. With luck, we have two or three hours before anyone notices the car is missing. Why don't you try to get some sleep?"
"I'm not sleepy." She wasn't. She was exhausted but not sleepy. She was both hungry and thirsty, and really, really needed to soak her aching feet in cold water.
"You will be. When your adrenaline drops, you'll crash."
"What about you? Don't you have adrenaline?" she snapped, though she didn't know why she was suddenly crabby.
"I'm used to it. I've learned how to work through the crash."
"I'm okay."
She wasn't, though. She glanced at him. His strong hands were steady on the wheel, his expression as calm as if he were out for a Sunday drive. Maybe she looked that calm, too, but inside she was shredded.
"Do you want to talk about it?"
"No," she said, appalled. There was no need to ask what "it" was. She didn't want him to be reasonable and logical and tell her to just look at what they'd done as part of the job. All she wanted was to get this over with and leave with some semblance of dignity still intact.
"We have to at some point."
"No, we don't. I just want to forget it."
He paused, and his jaw tightened. "Are you mad because you came, or because I did?"
She felt like screaming. God, why wouldn't he just leave it alone? "Neither. Both."
"That's certainly a definitive answer."
"If you want definitive answers, get a dictionary."
Another pause, as if he measured her resistance. "All right, I'll drop it for now, but we *will* talk."

She didn't reply. Didn't he understand? Talking about what happened was like touching a wound, keeping it fresh and bleeding. But, no, how could he understand, when it wasn't like that for him?
"How far is it to Nice?"
"A couple of hundred miles if we use the expressway, less if we go over the mountains. The direct route probably won't be the fastest, though, at least not in this car. It doesn't have the horses to climb the mountains at much more than a crawl."
"The expressway should get us there by six-thirty or seven, though."
"In the neighborhood. We have to stop and steal another car."
"Another one?"
"We're too close to Ronsard's estate. He'll hear about this as soon as it's reported. We need to ditch this one."
"Where?"
"Valence, I think. I'll look for something there."
They were serial car thieves, she mused. Well, she had wanted excitement. John Medina certainly filled the bill; there were no dull stretches while in his company. But home was looking better and better, as a refuge in which she could deal with the idiocy of having fallen in love with him. She thought of her peaceful house, with everything specifically arranged to her liking-except for the double hook-and-eye latches on every door and window.
"If I can get a flight out, I'll be home by this time tomorrow," she said, then remembered her passport. "No, scratch that. No passport. How am I going to get back into the States?"
"We'll probably take military transport home."
We? He intended to travel with her? That was news. "You're going back to Washington, too?"
"For the time being."
He didn't expand on that, and she didn't ask.
Instead she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Even if she couldn't sleep, she could rest.
"A baker reported his car was stolen early this morning. . . here." Ronsard put his finger on the map. The village was thirteen kilometers from the estate, on a small, narrow road that wound in a general southwest direction and eventually bisected the expressway. Several of his security people were

gathered around the desk while he spoke on the telephone to a friend with the local authorities.
If Temple went south, he would have been in the same rough area as the village. "What make and color is the car? Do you have the license?" He wrote as he listened. "Yes, thank you. Keep me informed."
He hung up and tore the sheet of paper off the pad. "Find this car," he said, handing the sheet to his men. "On the expressway to Marseilles. Bring him back alive, if possible. If not-" He broke off and shrugged.
"And the woman?"
Ronsard hesitated. He didn't know the extent of Niema's involvement. He had personally searched her room and there was nothing suspicious there. Could Temple have kidnapped her? There was one thing of which he was absolutely sure: The man was obsessed with her. The intensity with which he had watched her couldn't be feigned. He could still feel that way if they were partners, but if they weren't, Temple was the type of man who wouldn't balk at kidnapping if she wouldn't go willingly.
The Niema he knew was funny, a little sharp-tongued, and kind-hearted. He remembered the way she had shown Laure how to apply the makeup she had acquired, the gentleness, the way she didn't talk down to Laure as if being ill had somehow stunted his daughter's ability to understand.
For Laure, he said, "Try not to hurt her. Bring her to me:"

Chapter Twenty-Five

They reached Valence before dawn. John cruised down the streets, looking for a promising target. The city had a population of over sixty thousand, so he should be able to find another car without a lot of trouble.
He glanced over at Niema, sitting as erect as a soldier, and his lips compressed into a grim line. He'd almost gotten her killed tonight. He had been so certain this would be an in-and-out job, the sort he could do blindfolded, but instead they had barely escaped with their lives.
He was still taking risks with her life. He knew it, and yet he couldn't bring himself to make the call that would get them picked up, not now, not with what he'd done to her in Ronsard's office lying between them like a snake coiled ready to strike if he tried to move it.

One phone call. That was all it would take. They would be picked up within the hour and flown to Nice, where he would up-link the files and finish the job. But the way things were now, she would move heaven and earth to go home and get away from him. He couldn't let that happen, not with things the way they were between them.

He had gone to a lot of trouble to keep her from realizing how focused he was on her, and now that was working against him. She thought she was nothing more to him than a means to an end. What would she say if he told her the truth, that even though the love-making in Ronsard's office had started out as a cover, he had seen the opportunity to have her and ruthlessly used it. What was worse, he would do it again. He'd take her any way he could, whenever he could.

Everything he'd said at Ronsard's, everything he'd done, was the truth. That was why Ronsard had so easily believed the cover, because it was true. But Niema didn't seem to see it, even though he knew she wanted him, was so physically aware of him she had climaxed with startling speed. Maybe he was too damn good at his job, at playing a role. He was tired of role-playing; when he kissed her, damn it, he wanted her to know he was kissing her because he wanted to rather than because it was what was called for in some unwritten script.

A police car was coming toward them in the other lane. He was so preoccupied he almost missed how it slowed as it approached. Then instinct kicked in and reflexes took over. "We're made," he said, downshifting and taking the next right on two wheels. There was no point in being subtle; it didn't matter if they knew he'd seen them. What mattered was getting this car off the street before they were picked up. He jammed the gas pedal to the floor, needing to make the next turn before the police were able to turn around and fall in behind him.

Niema jerked to full attention. "That fast?" she asked incredulously.

"Ronsard has a lot of money. He can make a stolen vehicle a matter of prime importance." He pushed the little car as hard as he could, its motor whining. The next turn was a left, and that one too was made on two wheels. He killed the headlights and took the next left, which brought them back out on the street from which they had originally turned off.

Niema was trying to brace herself against the dash, the door, anything to keep from being slung all over the car.

He took a right. They were now, with luck, going away from the police car. The narrow street he was on was winding, and dark; unless he touched the brakes, they shouldn't be able to locate him.
He was good at driving without using the brakes. He downshifted whenever he needed to slow to take a curve, letting the engine do the work.
"What now?" she asked. She had given up on trying to brace herself and was on her knees on the floor. In spite of everything, a hint of cheerfulness had returned to her voice. He remembered the way she had grabbed the heavy pistol and returned fire as they were crashing the gates; far from getting hysterical, she thrived on excitement.
"We stay with the original plan. Dump this car, get another one."
"Is there any chance of getting a little food while we're doing all this?"
"If we can find a stream where we can clean up. We're too noticeable the way we are."
She looked down at her bare feet and tattered gown, then at his bloodstained tuxedo, and shrugged. "So we're a little overdressed. I don't think washing our faces and hands is going to help much."
She was right about that. They needed a change of clothes before they were seen in public; they were too noticeable. And he'd forgotten about the black strip tied around his head, but he couldn't remove it until they found some water, because the dried blood had stuck the material to the cut and if he pulled it off he'd start the damn thing bleeding again.
On the other hand, if the next car he stole had a full tank of gas, he could also steal some food and water and they wouldn't need to stop again until they reached Nice. They could shower on the yacht and have clothing delivered.
"We also need to find a secluded area for other reasons," she pointed out.
"Understood and obeyed."
He left the Renault parked behind a shop and removed its plates. The next car they came to, he removed those plates, replaced them with the Renault's, then they went back to the Renault and put the other car's plates on it. When the local police found the car and compared the plates to the ones on the car reported stolen, they would think it was a different car. They would eventually figure it out, but at least this would slow them down a little.
"Where to now?" Niema asked. She was tired, but at least John had found a bush behind which she had relieved herself, so she wasn't in any physical discomfort, other than her sore feet.

"We walk until we find another car."
"I was afraid you were going to say that. Why didn't we just take the car we put the Renault's plates on?"
"They were too close together. We would automatically be suspected. We need a car on the other side of town."
She sighed. The last thing she wanted to do right now was walk to the other side of town. No-the last thing she wanted to do was get caught. She bit her tongue to hold back any complaints that might slip out:
They walked for forty-five minutes before he spotted the car he wanted. It was a Fiat, parked at the top of a small slope, and it was unlocked. "Get in," he said, and she thankfully crawled in. Instead of hotwiring it, he put it in neutral, braced his hands on the frame, and started it rolling. He hopped in and they rolled silently down the slope, away from the owner's house. He let it roll as far as it would and then did the hot-wiring thing. The engine was another sewing machine, but it ran smoothly, and that was all they required.
Ronsard paced quietly. He didn't like leaving everything to his men. He understood Temple, he thought, at least he didn't underestimate him. His guests were gone; there was no reason for him to remain here.
The phone rang with another update. The Renault had been found in Valence, but there was no report of Temple or Madame Jamieson. The plates on the Renault had been switched with those from a Volvo, but the Volvo hadn't been stolen.
"What other cars have been reported stolen within the past twenty-four hours?"
"A Peugeot was taken from behind a house a kilometer from the Renault. A Fiat was also stolen, but that was some distance away. And a Mercedes was reported stolen, but the owner has been out of town and does not know how long the car has been gone."
The Peugeot was the most likely, Ronsard thought. It was the closest. And yet. . . perhaps that was what Temple wished him to think. "Concentrate on the
Mercedes and Fiat," he said. "I will be joining you by helicopter in two hours. Find those two cars."
"Yes, sir," came the brisk answer.
It was noon when they reached Nice. Niema was so tired she could barely think, but somehow her body kept moving. They were met at the dock by a

man in a small outboard, to take them out to the yacht that was moored in the harbor. He had to be Company, Niema thought. He was American, and he didn't ask any questions, just competently steered the boat across the harbor and brought it alongside a gleaming white sixty-footer.
She wasn't too tired to be amazed. She stared up at the yacht, with an impressive array of antennas bristling from its top. When John had said "yacht," she had expected something about twenty-five or thirty feet, with a tiny galley, a tinier head, and bunk beds in a cramped cabin. This thing was in an entirely different category.
John spoke quietly with the other man, giving him instructions on the disposition of the stolen Fiat. It was to disappear, immediately. There were other instructions as well. "Keep us under surveillance. Don't let anyone approach us without warning."
"Got it."
He turned to look at Niema. "Can you make it up the ladder?"
"Do I get to take a shower and go to bed if I do?"
"Absolutely."
"Then I can make it up the ladder." She suited action to words, setting her bare feet on the rungs and using the last of her energy to climb to the deck. John made it as easily as if he had just woke from a good night's sleep and started fresh. He looked terrible, but she couldn't see any sign of fatigue in him.
He opened the hatch door and led her inside. The interior was surprisingly spacious, with everything built in that could be built in, the design both sophisticated and luxurious. They were in the middle of the boat, in a large salon outfitted with pale golden wood and dark blue trim; a full galley lay beyond. John ushered her past the galley, into a narrow hallway, or whatever it was called on board a ship. If a kitchen was a galley, a bathroom was a head, and a bedroom was a cabin, then a hallway had to be something else too.
"Here's the head," he said, opening a door. "Everything you'll need is there. When you're finished, take either of these cabins." He indicated two doors in the hallway past the head.
"Where will you be?"
"In the office, up-linking to a satellite for a burst transmission. There are two other heads on board, so don't feel you have to hurry."
Hurry? He had to be joking.

The head was as luxuriously appointed as the rest of the boat. All of the cabinetry was built in, to save space. The glass-enclosed shower was spacious by anyone's standards, with gold-plated fixtures. A thick white terry cloth bathrobe hung on a hook behind the door, and a bath mat with a pile so thick her feet sank into it covered the glazed bronze tiles on the floor.

She investigated the contents of the vanity and found everything she could possibly need, as John had said: soap, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, a new toothbrush, moisturizer. In another drawer was a blow dryer and an assortment of brushes and combs.

She was so tired all she wanted to do was fall in bed and sleep for the rest of the day. They were safe, the job completed. She had done what she signed on to do.

She should feel satisfied, or at least relieved. All she felt was a great hollow pain that had started in her chest and now seemed to fill her entire body. It was finished. Over. John. The job. Everything.

"I can't let him go," she whispered, leaning her head on her hands. She loved him too much. She had tried to fight it for weeks now; loving a man like him was a tough thing to do. She had already loved one damn hero, and losing Dallas had nearly destroyed her. What she was risking now was too devastating to even contemplate, but there was no turning back.

Nor could she see any future for them. John was, essentially, a lobo. They had worked as a team on this job, but that wasn't likely to happen again. By necessity he had to limit the number of people who knew his real identity, and carefully control any contact with them. She still didn't understand why she was one of those few people, despite what he said about being taken by surprise and blurting out his real name. John Medina didn't blurt out anything: Everything he said, everything he did, was toward some aim.

So why had he told her? She was nobody, a low-level tech with a talent for electronic surveillance. He could have kept quiet and let her go on believing his name was Tucker, or he could have come up with some other name; God knows he had a list of them tucked away somewhere in that convoluted brain of his. She had no way of knowing the difference.

She would drive herself crazy wondering about him, what he was doing and why he was doing it. No sane woman could possibly love him, but if this job had taught her one thing, it was that she wasn't sane. She was an adrenaline junkie, a risk-taker, and though she had spent the past five years

fighting her own nature, punishing herself for Dallas's death and trying to shape her life, her personality, into a more conventional pattern, she could no longer maintain the illusion. All John had to do was walk through a door and beckon her, and she would go with him- anywhere, any time.

It angered her that she could be so defenseless against him. If he had shown any corresponding weakness, she wouldn't feel so hopeless. He liked her, she knew; physically he had responded when they kissed, and he had certainly risen to the occasion in Ronsard's office, but a physical response from a man was so automatic she couldn't let herself read any importance into it. Men were, as he himself had pointed out, simple creatures. All they required was a warm body. She had filled that requirement.

She could stand there all day running the details around and around in her mind, like a rat trying to escape from a maze, but she always came back to the same end: She couldn't see a future with John. He was what he was. He lived in the shadows and risked his life on a daily basis, and kept his personal life to a minimum. She even loved that part of him, because how many people in the world could do what he did, make the sacrifices he had made?

All she could do was hope she saw him now and again. Even every five years would be enough, if she could just know he was alive.

Shuddering, she pushed away that last thought and at last moved into action, stripping off her filthy clothes and stepping under the warm shower. She put her mind in neutral, soaping and scrubbing and shampooing, scrubbing away at a stubborn dark stain on her thigh until she realized it was a bruise.

Getting clean made her feel marginally better, though the face she saw in the mirror was still pale and strained, her eyes shadowed with exhaustion. She took full advantage of the amenities provided, brushing her teeth, smoothing moisturizer into her skin, blow-drying her hair. There was even a tube of medicated cream, and she dabbed that on the raw places on her feet. The grooming rituals had a sedative effect, easing the tightness of her nerves. She could sleep now, she thought, and even managed a smile to herself. As if sleeping had ever been in any doubt! She planned to spend at least ten hours horizontal, more if she could manage it.

She would deal with her dirty clothes later, she decided, and wrapped herself in the thick, soft robe. All she wanted to do now was sleep.

She opened the door and froze. John stood just outside the door, naked except for a damp towel wrapped around his waist. He had already showered; small beads of water still clung to the hair on his chest. Niema knotted her hands into fists, wrapping them with the robe sash to keep from touching him, flattening her palms against that warm, muscular wall and feeling his heart beat beneath her fingers.
"Are you finished?" she asked in surprise.
"It only took a couple of minutes. Load the disk in the computer, up-link to the satellite, and send a burst transmission. It's done."
"Good. You must be as tired as I am."
He blocked her exit from the head, looking down at her with an unreadable expression in his blue eyes. "Niema ..."
"Yes?" she prompted, when he didn't say anything else.
He held out his hand to her, palm upturned, utterly steady. "Will you sleep with me?"
Her heart gave a powerful thud that made her feel weak. She stared up at him, wondering what was going on behind that impenetrable blue gaze, and then realized it didn't matter. For now, nothing mattered but being with him. She put her hand in his and whispered, "Yes."
He put his arms around her and lifted her off her feet almost before the word was out of her mouth. His mouth closed over hers, hungry, devouring, hot. He tasted of the same toothpaste she had used. His tongue stroked urgently in her mouth and she met it with her own. She wrapped her arms around his neck and lost herself, pleasure and joy exploding through her veins.
He dropped the towel where he stood. She lost the robe somewhere on the short route to the nearest cabin. She didn't know exactly how he got her out of it, but he did. They fell on the bed. Before she could catch her breath he levered himself on top of her and pushed his legs between hers.
His penetration was abrupt and forceful. She cried out, her back arching, her nails digging into his shoulders. His penis was so hot and hard it felt like a thick, heated pipe pushing into her unprepared body. His whole body was hot with urgency, his muscles shaking as he probed deeper, working his entire length into her. His mouth covered hers, swallowing her moans as excitement swirled through her. This wasn't part of a job. This wasn't pretense. He wanted her.

He was in her to the hilt, a heavy, stretching presence. He buried his head against her shoulder, shuddering with relief as if he couldn't have borne another moment unconnected to her.
This wasn't the John Medina she knew, this man with his desperate need. He was always so controlled, but there was nothing controlled about him now.
She smoothed her hands down his back, feeling the powerful muscles rippling just under his skin. "There's a concept I want to introduce to you," she murmured. "It's called foreplay."
He lifted his head from her shoulder, smiling wryly. Propping himself on his elbows, settling more comfortably on her and in her, he framed her face in his hands and pressed a kiss to her mouth. "I'm a desperate man. Any time you let me touch you, I'm going to get inside you as fast as I can, before you have time to change your mind."
The words shocked her, hinting at a vulnerability, a need, she never would have suspected he felt.
He moved, a slow stroke that set off a small riot in her nerve endings. She gasped, her legs rising to clasp his hips. "Why would I change my mind?" she managed to ask.
"Things haven't always been . .. easy between us."
Things weren't easy between them now. There was tension and pain and uncertainty, an explosive sexual attraction, even a spark of hostility caused by the clash of two strong personalities. There was nothing serene about her relationship with him, never had been.
She slid her fingers into the damp strands of his hair, holding him as she lifted her hips and did her own stroking. "If I wanted an easy ride, I'd find a merry-go-round."
His entire body tightened, and his eyes burned laser blue. He seemed to lose his ability to breathe. She did it again, lifting to take him deep, then clamping all her internal muscles on him and holding him tight as she pulled back, milking him with her body. A harsh groan burst out of his throat. "Then hold on tight, honey, because it's gonna be long and hard."
'Actually," she purred, "it already is." The smothered sound he made was almost a laugh. "That wasn't what I meant."
"Then show me what you did mean." That look was back in his eyes again, that unreadable wall behind which something elusive moved. "A lot of

different things," he murmured. "But for now, we'll concentrate on this one."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Niema woke in his arms the next morning. She lay quietly, still drowsing, slipping back and forth between sleep and awareness. She was curled on her left side and he was a solid wall behind her, his legs tangled with hers and his arm a heavy weight over her hip. His breath was warm on her shoulder. She hadn't slept with a man like this since Dallas, she thought sleepily, the name resonating gently in her mind. *No-John* was the last man she had slept with. The realization was a shock. She remembered that awful time in Iran, the way he had held her and gentled her to sleep, then held her the next morning while she wept, when she woke and realized he wasn't Dallas, that Dallas would never again hold her in the night.

She couldn't see the clock, but it was almost dawn; the sky was beginning to lighten. They had been in bed-what, sixteen, seventeen hours? Making love, sleeping, making love again. He had gotten up once and brought back a tray of bread and cheese and fruit, and that had been their supper. Other than that they hadn't left the cabin except to visit the head.

She felt lethargic, content to be right where she was. Her entire body was relaxed, sated, well-used.

His lips brushed the back of her neck and she realized he was awake. She made a slight nestling movement, sighing with pleasure. How she enjoyed this, waking in the early morning, held close by the man she loved; there were few things in life more satisfying.

His morning erection prodded her, rising insistently against her bottom. She started to turn over but he stayed her with a murmur, adjusting his position and guiding himself to her opening. She arched her back, giving him a better angle. He put his hand on her stomach, bracing her, and pushed. He went slowly inside her; she was morning soft, morning wet, but their positions made her body yield reluctantly to his intrusion. She breathed through her mouth, trying to stay relaxed. With her legs together there wasn't much room inside her; he felt huge, stretching her to the limit.

The sensation bordered on pain, but was also its own turn-on. She pressed her head back against his shoulder, struggling to contain the feeling and yet

take more of him. Another inch pushed into her and she moaned.
He paused. "Are you all right?" His voice was low, smoky with sleep and desire.
She didn't know. Maybe. "Yes," she whispered.
He stroked his right hand up to her breasts, lightly rubbing his fingertips on the lower slope, the way he had learned she liked. The subtle caress lit a gentle glow of pleasure, prepared her nipples for more direct contact. That came from his thumb, slowly moving over them, circling them until they hardened and stabbed into his covering palm. It was scary how fast he had caught on to all the small subtleties of how she liked to be touched, scary that his attention had been so focused on her that he hadn't missed a single hitch in her breath. After just one night, he knew her body as well as she did.
He slipped his left arm under her, curving it around her waist and cupping his hand over her mound. His middle finger slid between her fold, pressing lightly on her clitoris. Not rubbing, just pressing, holding his finger there. Then he began to thrust, using long, slow strokes that moved her body back and forth against his finger.
She cried out, jerking under the lash of pleasure. He whispered something soothing and steadied her, then resumed the motion.
"I wanted you the first time I saw you," he murmured. "God, how I envied Dallas!" His right hand stroked up and down her torso, piling sensation on top of sensation. "I stayed away from you for five long, fucking years. I gave you every chance to settle down with Mr. Right, but you didn't take them and I'm through with waiting. You're mine now, Niema. *Mine."*
Her thoughts reeled with shock. He wasn't given to a lot of swearing: For him to say what he just had was a measure of the strength of his feelings. "J-John?" she stuttered, reaching back for him. She hadn't had any idea any of that had been going on inside him. How could she? He was too damn good an actor.
His hips recoiled and plunged in a steady, unhurried motion that was completely at odds with the way his heartbeat was hammering against her back. "I talked you into coming on this job because I couldn't let you go."
His mouth moved on her neck, finding that exact spot between neck and shoulder where the lightest touch made her go limp with pleasure, and a bite would light her up like a Christmas tree. He licked and kissed, holding her

quivering body as she strained against him. She tried to part her legs, to lift her thigh over his, but he anchored her leg and held it down.
Niema squirmed, almost frantic with need. As good as his finger felt between her legs, with her legs held together the contact wasn't quite enough; his strokes inside her weren't quite deep enough, or fast enough. He had brought her to the boiling point, with touch and words, but wouldn't let her go over it.
"You were right," he breathed, the words hot on her skin. "I could have found someone else to plant the bug. Hell, I could've planted it myself. But I wanted you with me. I wanted this chance to have you."
"Let me put my leg over yours," she pleaded, almost mad with frustration. "Move faster. Please. Just do *something!"*
"Not yet." He kissed her neck again. Her right hand, reaching behind to grab him, clenched hard on his butt. "In Ronsard's office-"
"For God's sake, confess afterward!"
He laughed and moved her hand, dislodging her nails from his ass. "I didn't mean to go that far. I've never lost control like that before." He nuzzled her ear. "I had to taste you, had to kiss you-and then I had to have you. I wanted our first time to be in a bed, with a lot of time to spend loving you, but I couldn't stop. I forgot about the job. All that mattered was having you."
He was saying things any woman in her right mind wanted to hear from the man she loved, Niema thought dimly. But, damn him, he was saying them when she was on the verge of dying. And maybe what he was saying was turning her on even more, because every word seemed to go straight to her very core.
"You seem to think the end of this job is the end of us. Not by a long shot, sweetheart. You're mine and you're going to stay mine."
"John," she gasped. "I love you. But if you don't start moving your ass this very minute-!"
He laughed, a deep-throated sound of pure pleasure, and obeyed her command. He lifted her thigh over his hip and moved hard and fast, going deep. She stiffened, her legs trembling, and erupted in a violent climax. He joined her before her tremors had ceased.
Afterward, she couldn't stop trembling. The pleasure had been too intense, too prolonged, and she still couldn't quite believe all the things he had said. She twisted around to face him. Immediately his expression became guarded.

She managed a smile, though her heart was pounding so violently she could barely speak. "Don't think you can get away with saying things like that only when my back is turned." She touched his face, cradling his cheek in her palm. "Did you mean them?"
A shudder wracked him. "Every word."
"So did I."
He caught her fingers and pressed them to his lips, then folded them in his hand. For a moment he seemed beyond words.
She kissed his chin. "I don't expect more from you than you can give. I know who you are, remember? You have a job to do, and I won't ask you to give it up. I'll probably go back into fieldwork myself-"
"Why am I not surprised?" he asked in a wry tone.
She couldn't seem to stop touching him. All those long hours in bed with him had only made the yearning worse, instead of sating it. She stroked her hand over his rock hard chest, pressed a kiss to his throat.
"We'll work it out. We don't have to make decisions now, or even tomorrow."
His eyebrows rose and he rolled, tucking her neatly beneath him. Propped over her on his elbows, he said in amusement, "You're being very gentle with me."
"I don't want to frighten you off."
"After waiting five years to have you? Sweetheart, you couldn't frighten me off with an elephant gun. But you're right about one thing: We don't have to make any decisions other than what to eat for breakfast. We can steal a few days just for ourselves before we go back to D.C."
"Can we?" That sounded like heaven-nothing to do but sleep late, make love, lie in the sun. No roles to play, no disks to steal. They could just be themselves. She still couldn't quite take in everything he'd said: How could she not have known, not sensed his attraction to her? But maybe she had; maybe that was what she had picked up on when they were in Iran that made her so uneasy. She hadn't been able to tell what it was, because John was so good at hiding what he was thinking, but she had known there was some tension there. Would she have been ready earlier to hear what he was saying? She didn't know.
They were together now, and that was all that mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

John made a call on the radio, and a couple of hours later the man with the outboard brought some clothes to the boat: jeans, T-shirts, underwear, socks, and sneakers. "Have you heard anything on Ronsard?" John asked as he took the bundle of clothes.

The man shook his head. He was dressed much as he had been the day before, in cotton pants and a pullover shirt, with dark sunglasses that prevented anyone from seeing his eyes. "Nothing since last night. His men were all over Marseilles. Looks like you lost them there. We'll keep tight surveillance on the yacht, though, just in case."

Niema waited until the Company man left, then went out on the deck. "Clothes," she said with satisfaction, taking the bundle from John's arms. "Thank God. Being naked when you have clothes to put on is one thing, but being naked when you have no choice is nerve-wracking."

He reached out and fingered the thick bathrobe she had tightly belted around her after showering a few moments ago. "You look clothed to me-too damn clothed for my taste."

"That's the point. If you have to work for something, you appreciate it more." She stepped away from that encroaching finger and headed back below deck.

"Then you should consider yourself the most appreciated woman in the civilized world," he growled.

Maybe he hadn't meant for her to hear him, but she did. Her knees went a little weak. Every time she thought of the things he'd said that morning her heart started thumping hard and fast. She was so happy she was afraid she might fly apart.

They would face problems in the future, probably in the near future. She didn't know what form their relationship would take, whether there would be any formal commitment or just an unspoken arrangement as lovers whenever they happened to be together-which might not be very often. But all of that was in the future. For right now, for these couple of stolen days before they caught a military transport back to the States, all they had to do was love each other.

He hadn't said he loved her, but he didn't have to.

She felt it every time he touched her, with a wrenching blend of tenderness and almost savage lust that made his hands tremble, or when he looked at

her with his emotions naked in his eyes. John was so controlled that the very fact he let her see what he was feeling told her more than words ever could.
She didn't have to have any promises, any plans. Not today. Not tomorrow. Maybe losing Dallas had made her afraid to count on the future; all she knew was that she was happy just having John now.
He came below deck and leaned against the door frame, watching as she took all the articles of clothing out of the bag and placed them on the bed, dividing them into his and hers stacks.
"Are you going somewhere?"
"No, I just want to get dressed. I guess I can't believe Ronsard has given up, and if there's trouble I want to be wearing more than a robe."
John strolled forward and hooked a finger in the belt around her waist, pulling her against him. She went willingly, looping her arms around his neck. "We're safe enough here on the boat," he said. "The only way anyone can get to us without being seen is from underwater. We're under constant surveillance, and the boat has electronic countermeasures in place in case anyone tries to eavesdrop."
"So we have to stay on board until we're picked up?"
"I wouldn't mind a couple of days of downtime." A slight smile curved his lips. "On the other hand,
I'm not Superman, either, so we might as well get dressed."
He stripped off his tuxedo pants, which was all he was wearing, and was in shorts and jeans by the time she stepped into a pair of underpants. He eyed her feet. "You need Band-Aids on those blisters before you put on socks and shoes. I'll get the first-aid kit."
Niema sat down on the bed and examined her feet. The blisters didn't look bad and weren't bothering her; the antibiotic cream she'd put on them the day before had helped a lot, plus she had been barefoot since coming on board the boat. Still, he was right: They needed protecting. Runners learned to take care of their feet.
He came back with a small white kit in his hand and sat down beside her. "Feet up," he said, patting his lap.
Smiling at the luxury, she turned around and lay back on the pillows, lifting her feet onto his lap and giving herself up entirely into his hands. These strong hands gently cradled her feet, dabbing cool ointment on the blisters

and covering them with adhesive strips. He performed the task with the same fearsome concentration he applied to everything.
Still holding her feet in his hands, he looked up at her: "Did you know the feet are an erogenous zone?"
Alarmed, she said, "I know they're a ticklish zone." She tried to regain custody of her feet but with very little effort he controlled the motion.
"Trust me." His tone was both soothing and cajoling. "I won't do anything to tickle you."
She was trying to jackknife into a sitting position when he pressed his mouth to her right instep. She fell back on the pillows, her breath tangling in her throat, spikes of pleasure shooting all the way to her groin. She sucked in a deep breath. "Do that again."
"My pleasure," he murmured, caressing her instep with his tongue and eyeing with interest her hardening nipples.
Niema closed her eyes. What he was doing was incredible: She didn't have the least inclination to laugh. His touch was firm, almost massaging. His tongue unerringly found the most sensitive spot on her instep, stroking it until she had to choke back moans of pleasure. Then he turned his attention to her left foot, shifting so he was facing her and a foot was in each hand. He divided his attention between them, kissing and licking and sucking until she could no longer hold back those moans. Her body twisted and arched, and her breathing became ragged.
She was scarcely aware of when he deftly slipped her panties down her legs, only that he was cupping her bottom in his hands and lifting her up to his mouth. His hair was cool on the insides of her thighs, his mouth hot as he stabbed his tongue into her. She was so aroused that she began climaxing in moments, the sensation so intense that blood roared in her ears and reality contracted until it existed only in the sensation between her legs.
When she finally managed to open her eyes, he was smiling at her. "See?"
"Wow." She stretched languidly. "Do you have any more tricks?"
He laughed as he stood up. "A few, but we'll work up to those."
He had taken the edge off her interest in getting dressed, but she did it anyway, then joined him on deck. The sun was bright on the water. She looked across at the crowded beach and the city beyond. "I wish we could go into the city," she said as she slipped her sunglasses on her nose.
"Maybe later. Let's see if we pick up anything else on Ronsard before we go into the city." He picked up a pair of binoculars and scanned the beach.

"Looking at the topless women?" she asked, pinching his butt. "I thought you were too sophisticated for that."
"A man never gets too sophisticated for that," he murmured and laughed when she pinched him again.
Late that afternoon he got another report from the Company men on shore. Ronsard seemed to have pulled his men; though there was still surveillance in place at the airports, no one was actively beating the bushes for them.
"Looks like we can do a little sightseeing," he said.
She was aware he was indulging her. "You've been to Nice before, haven't you?"
He shrugged. "I've been to most places before."
"What do you do for relaxation?"
He thought about that for a moment. "Hide away on a boat on the Riviera and make love to you," he finally answered.
"You mean . . . you never just get in a car and drive? Rent a cabin somewhere in the mountains, go fishing, look at the scenery?" She was aghast, wondering how anyone could live under such unrelenting stress.
"Like a normal person? No."
Mr. Medina, that's going to change, she thought staring at him. When he had downtime, she would make certain he relaxed some place where he didn't have to constantly watch his back or keep up a cover. That would probably be the only way they could be together, somewhere so isolated they would have to make an effort to see another human being.
John radioed in that they were going ashore.
"Do you want surveillance?"
He thought about it. "How many men do you have?"
"We can keep the yacht covered, or we can cover you, but we'll be stretched thin if we try to do both."
It was a calculated risk, Niema knew. Just because Ronsard's men hadn't been spotted didn't mean they weren't there. But everything in John's life was a calculated risk-and lately, so was everything in hers. This was how it would be, she thought; this was the life she was choosing, the life she wanted.
"Put one man on us," John finally said.
"Will do."
He tucked his pistol into his waistband at the small of his back, then put on a lightweight jacket. Niema had found a straw tote in the cabin and she

dropped her pistol into it.
The yacht had its own motorized dinghy, and they went ashore in it. The sun was low in the sky, the light mellowing, the shadows deepening. They walked for a while, strolling along with the other tourists. They stopped for a cup of coffee at a sidewalk cafe; she browsed through some lovely little shops and started to buy a six-foot long, sky blue scarf, only to realize she had no money. "I'm broke," she told John, laughing as she pulled him out of the shop.
He looked back. "I'll get the scarf for you."
"I don't want you to get the scarf. I want you to get some money for me."
"Independent hussy," he remarked, tugging free and going back into the shop.
She waited on the sidewalk, arms crossed and toe tapping, until he rejoined her with the scarf wrapped in tissue paper. He dropped the weightless package in her tote, and a kiss on her nose. "That's from me. As for operating money, I'll have more funds delivered to us tomorrow."
"Thank you." Over his shoulder she caught a glimpse of a man watching them. He quickly turned away and entered a shop. She said thoughtfully, "Do you know what our Company tail looks like?"
"I spotted him when we left the dinghy. Khaki pants, white shirt."
"A man wearing black pants, white shirt, and a tan jacket was watching us. He went in one of the shops when he saw me looking at him."
John moved immediately, though without haste, curving his arm around her waist and walking with her into the nearest shop. Once they were inside he walked quickly through the shop, with the owner sputtering after them, and out the rear entrance. They were in a narrow cobblestoned alley, dark with shadows, open at both ends. He turned to the right, so they were going toward the shop in which their unknown watcher had gone.
If the man followed them into the shop and out the back, he would instinctively turn left, in the opposite direction from which he had come. If they could get out of the alley before he decided he'd been made and came after them, they would shake him.
They almost made it. The man burst into the alley when they were two doors from the end. The shopkeeper was squawking in his wake, frustrated that people were using her shop as a shortcut. He ignored her as if she were no more than a mosquito, brushing her off as he drew a pistol from the shoulder rig beneath his jacket.

The shopkeeper screamed and rushed back into her shop. John shoved Niema into a recessed doorway and dove in the opposite direction, pulling out his pistol and rolling as he hit the ground. The first shot clanged into a metal trash can. The second shot was John's, but the man jerked back into the shop.

"Run!" John said, and fired another shot at the doorway of the shop. "I'll keep him pinned."

She was reaching in the tote for her pistol, but at his command she took off at a dead run, knowing any delay could hinder him. Ahead of her, people were scattering away from the mouth of the alley, screaming and rushing for cover.

She reached the end and whirled around the wall, flattening herself against it and peeking around. John was working his way back, firing carefully timed shots that chipped large chunks of brick off the building. When he was near he wheeled and grabbed her wrist and they ran down the street, dodging through confused and alarmed pedestrians.

"Do we head for the dinghy?" she gasped, setting into stride.

"Not until we shake them. I don't want that boat identified."

Meaning the boat wasn't just a place for them to crash. It had classified stuff on board; maybe the boat itself was classified.

As they ran she pulled the tote bag off her shoulder and dug in the bottom of it for her pistol.

"What are you doing?" he asked, taking a look behind them. "Right!"

She wheeled right. "Putting the pistol where I can get to it without having to dig," she growled, jamming the weapon under her waistband in back as he had done and pulling her T-shirt out to cover it.

A shout followed them. Unfortunately, the streets were still crowded with tourists, and heads turned to follow them as they ran and dodged. All anyone chasing had to do was follow the ripple of disturbance.

"Left," John said, and they turned left as smoothly as if they were joined at the hip. "Right." They took the next right. If they could get people looking in different directions it might create enough momentary confusion for them to gain some ground and slip away.

They dodged onto a small side street, bright with flowers growing in boxes and in pots set on narrow stoops; the doors were gaily painted, and children wrung the last moments of sunshine from the day. John increased his speed; they had to get off that street fast, before any kids got hurt.

They turned right, down an alley so narrow sunlight never penetrated it; they had to run single file. The street ahead of them was purple with shadows, alive with people. Lights were winking on.
Someone barreled into John as soon as he emerged from the alley and they went crashing to the ground. For a split second Niema thought it was an accident, then arms grabbed her from behind and she reacted automatically, driving her elbow back into a gut that wasn't as hard as it could have been. The guy whooshed out his breath in a violent explosion. She ducked out of his hold, whirled, and poked him in the little notch beside his eye. She didn't have the proper angle, back to front, but he went
down anyway, writhing on the ground and vomiting.
John grabbed her wrist and yanked her into a run. She looked back and saw her assailant lying unmoving on the ground. The man who had tackled John was kind of half sitting, half lying against the wall. He wasn't moving either.
"Don't look," John still towed her by the wrist, so fast her feet barely touched ground. "Just run."
Her stomach turned over. "I didn't mean-"
"He did," he said briefly.
They dodged down yet another street and found themselves in a part of town where the streets seemed to branch off each other like tangled spaghetti. Ahead of them a trio of men cut across an intersection, weapons drawn. One of the men spotted them and pointed. John pulled her down the nearest bisecting street.
"How many of them are there?" she panted.
"A lot." He sounded grim. He angled back toward where they had seen the three men, hoping to come out behind them. They ran up a narrow, picturesque street, with flower boxes in the windows and old women selling a few wares on their doorsteps, from tatted lace shawls to homemade potpourri. One woman shrieked at the gun in John's hand as he and Niema ran by. A sharp angle took them to the left, and a dead end. Niema whirled and started back, but John caught her arm and pulled her toward him.
She heard what he heard. The street behind them slowly fell silent as the old women grabbed up their wares and vanished into their houses. The sounds of traffic came from a distance, but here there was nothing.
Louis Ronsard strolled into view, a slight smile on his sculpted lips and a Glock-17 in his hand. The big pistol was leveled at Niema's head.

John immediately moved at a right angle away from her. The gun didn't waver from her head. "Stop right there," Ronsard said, and John obeyed.
"My friends," he said lightly, "you left without saying good-bye."
"Good-bye," John said, without expression. He made no move with the weapon in his hand, not with that big 9mm locked dead center on Niema's forehead.
"Drop your weapon," Ronsard said to John. His dark blue eyes were arctic.
John obeyed, letting the pistol drop to the street. "You abused my hospitality. If the guard hadn't surprised you, you would have gotten away with it. I never would have known you got into my computer. You did, didn't you? Otherwise you wouldn't have been leaving my office at that time, you would still have been in there working."
John shrugged. There was no point denying it. "I got what I went after. I copied everything; I know what you know."
"To what point, my friend? Blackmail? Or did you want exclusive access to the RDX-a?"
It was Temple who answered. As Niema watched, John's face altered ever so slightly, his eyes taking on a flat quality. "Whoever has the compound will make a lot of money in a very short time. Plus ... I have some uses for it."
"You could have bought whatever amount you needed."
"And *you* would make the money."
"So that's what this is all about? Just money?"
"It's always about money."
'And her?" Ronsard indicated Niema. "I assume she's your partner."
"I don't have partners."
"Then she is . . . ?"
"She isn't involved in this. Let her go," John said softly.
In a heartbeat Ronsard had the gun off Niema and on John, his finger already on the trigger. "Don't play me for a fool," he said, his voice low and deadly.
Niema slipped her right hand up behind her back and gripped the pistol tucked in her waistband. Ronsard caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and started to turn, but she already had the pistol out and leveled at his head.
"Perhaps," she murmured in her best Medina imitation, "you should be asking *me* the questions. Drop the pistol."

"I don't think so," Ronsard said, still holding his weapon on John. "Are you willing to risk your lover's life? He wasn't willing to risk yours."
She shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "Just move over there beside him."
Both men *froze*. John seemed to have stopped breathing, his face going white. Ronsard stared at her in astonishment, then began laughing mirthlessly. Niema didn't dare take her eyes off Ronsard, but she was almost paralyzed herself by the risk she was taking. With John's history, a wife he had killed rather than let her betray two men, for another lover to betray him would be devastating, so devastating that not even his superhuman control could hold. His reaction was crucial, because Ronsard had to believe it.
"My apologies, Monsieur Temple," Ronsard said to John. "It appears we were *both* used."
"Sorry, darling." She gave John an insincere smile. "I have the disk. While you were sleeping last night, I sort of confiscated it." He knew that was a lie. Not only had she not left the bed last night except to visit the head, getting the disk didn't mean anything now that the information had already been sent to Langley.
She looked back at Ronsard, to keep his attention on her instead of on John. "I would introduce myself, but it's better if I don't. I'd like to put a proposition to you, Louis-one that would benefit both of us."
"In what way?"
She smiled again. "The CIA is very interested in ... reaching an agreement with you. We don't want to put you out of business. You could be very valuable to us, and vice versa. You have access to a lot of very interesting information-and we're willing to pay you well for it."
"So would other governments," he said, his eyes still cold.
Niema kept an eye on John as well as Ronsard, willing him not to spoil the setup. "Not as much as we can. And there's an added bonus."
"Such as?"
“A heart."
The softly spoken words fell into a silence that seemed complete. John started, then halted himself. Ronsard's face twisted with hatred. "You dare," he whispered. "You dare bargain with my daughter's life?"
"I'm offering the services of the United States government in finding a heart for her. Those are services you can't match, no matter how much money you

have. Even a new heart might not save her, but at least she'll have a chance to hold on until other cures can be found."
He hung there, a father's anguish on his face. "Done," he said roughly, no haggling, no jockeying for position. His love for Laure was genuine and absolute. He would do anything, even sell his soul to the devil, to save her. Working with the CIA was nothing in comparison. He lowered his weapon and nodded toward John. "What about him?"
"Mr. Temple?" Niema shrugged as she lowered her own weapon. It was a risk, but one she felt she had to take to make this agreement work. "He's ... a bonus, so to speak. I wasn't expecting to have his aid in the job, but since he was there, and so good at it, I let him do it." She had to keep John's cover, she thought. His identity as Joseph Temple couldn't be questioned.
John bent down and scooped up his pistol. Niema couldn't read his expression. His face was still pale, his eyes as dead as she had ever seen them. He started toward Ronsard.
"Temple!" she said sharply, just as a sound drew her attention to the right. Two of Ronsard's men came around the corner. Their gazes locked immediately on John; he was the prime target of their hunt. They saw the pistol in his hand, saw him moving toward Ronsard. Niema knew, in a nanosecond of stark vision, what was going to happen. She saw their weapons train on him. He was momentarily too focused on Ronsard to react as quickly as he normally would have.
She didn't hear herself scream, a hoarse sound of rage and terror. She didn't know she was moving, didn't feel her hand holding the pistol as it began to rise. All she could hear was her heartbeat, slow and ponderous, as if it pumped molasses instead of blood. All she knew was-not again. She couldn't watch him die. She couldn't.
There was a distant roar. A blue haze of gun smoke. The stench of cordite burning her nostrils. The buck of the weapon in her hand as she fired, and kept firing. A crushing force hit her, knocked her down. She tried to stagger to her feet, but her legs wouldn't work. She fired again.
Someone else was shooting, she thought. There was a deeper roar . . . wasn't there? John. Yes, John was shooting. Good. He was still alive. . . .
The lights seemed to go out, though maybe not. She wasn't certain. There was a lot of formless noise that gradually reshaped itself into words. Something was tugging at her, and it hurt worse than anything she'd ever felt in her life, pain so sharp and all-consuming she almost couldn't breathe.

"-damn you, don't you die on me," John was raging as he tore at her clothes. "Do you hear? Don't you god damn die on me."
John rarely swore, she thought, fighting through the pain; he must be really upset. What on earth had happened?
She was hurt. She remembered now, remembered that crushing blow that knocked her down. Something had hit her.
Shot. She'd been shot. So this was what it felt like. It was worse than she had ever imagined.
"Don't die," John was snarling as he pressed down hard on her side.
She wet her lips, and managed to say, "I might not, if you'll hurry and get help."
His head jerked around and he stared at her. His pupils were pinpoints of shock, his face white and strained. "Just hold on," he said roughly. "I'll stop the bleeding." He looked beyond her, and his expression was savage. "You'd better use all the influence you have and get the best doctors in Europe, Ronsard," he said in a low, guttural tone, "because if she dies, I'll fillet you into fish bait."
Washington, D.C., three weeks later
Niema carefully got out of bed and made her way over to the lone chair in the hospital room. Her legs were steadier, she was walking more every day now, though "more" in this case meant a few minutes longer, not any great distance. She had come to hate that bed, though, and was spending as much time as she could in the chair. Sitting in a chair made her feel less like an invalid.
The last IV drip had come out that morning. She was scheduled to be dismissed from the hospital the next day. She would complete her recovery at home; Frank Vinay had visited and said it had been arranged for her to have help at home until she was strong enough to manage by herself again. Being home again would be nice, she thought. Excitement was one thing, but a woman needed peace and quiet when she was recovering from a gunshot wound. Too much of the past three weeks was a blur, at best, or a huge blank forever lost from her memory. She vaguely remembered being in intensive care in some hospital in France. Louis Ronsard might have been there. He had held her hand once, she thought.
Then she had been flown from France to the States, back to D.C., and brought here. She didn't remember the flight at all, but the nurses told her

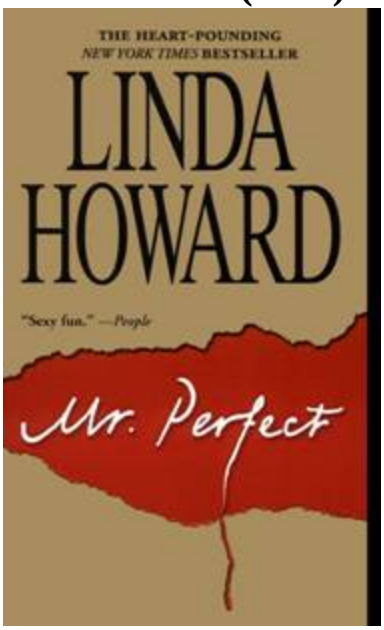
that was what had happened. She had gone to sleep in France and woke up in D.C. That was enough to disorient anyone.
Every time she surfaced it had been to incredible pain, but she had stopped taking any painkiller a week ago, when she was moved out of intensive care into a regular room. The first couple of days had been rough, but after that every day had been easier.
The last time she'd seen John was when she'd been lying in that narrow, dead-end street in Nice. He'd had to disappear, of course. He couldn't hang around, either as Joseph Temple or John Medina. She hadn't asked Mr. Vinay about him, either. John would either show up, or he wouldn't.
Only a small lamp was on in the room; after the bright lights of intensive care shining on her day and night, she wanted only dim lights now. She turned on the radio to an instrumental station and turned the volume low. Easing back in the chair, she closed her eyes and let her mind drift with the music.
She didn't hear any strange noise or feel a draft from the door opening, but slowly she became aware of John's presence. She opened her eyes and smiled at him, not at all surprised to find him standing in the shadows across the room.
"Finally," she said, holding out her hand to him.
He came to her so silently he might have been drifting on smoke, his gaze moving hungrily over her, darkening with pain as he catalogued each pound she had lost. He cupped her face, rubbing his thumb over her bloodless cheek as he bent down and lightly pressed his mouth to hers. She put her hand on the back of his neck, something in her easing as she felt him warm and vital under her touch.
"I couldn't stay away any longer," he said in a low, rough' tone. "Frank kept me informed, but I-it wasn't the same as being here."
"I understood." She tried to stroke away the new lines that bracketed his mouth.
"When you go home tomorrow, I'll be there."
"Someone is staying with me-"
"I know. I'm the someone." He crouched down in front of her and folded her hand in his.
"Good. You can help me get back on my feet. The physical therapists here won't let me do as much as I need to be doing."

"If you think *I'm* going to do anything more than let you sleep and eat, you're way off base."
"Really? I thought you'd have incentive to get me up to my fighting weight again."
"Why's that?"
"So you can show me the rest of your tricks." She grinned at him. "I can't wait. I've been lying here for the past week wondering what they are."
The tension in his face relaxed as a smile touched his mouth. "It'll be a while before you're in shape for any of that."
"Depends on how fast you *get* me into shape, doesn't it?"
"We're going to take it nice and easy. A ruptured liver isn't something you get over in a day or two."
She was also missing part of her spleen, and the bullet had shattered two ribs. On the other hand, John was still alive, and that was the most important thing. He'd have been shot down in front of her if she hadn't drawn their attention.
"What were you *doing?"* she asked, drawing back and frowning at him as she was finally able to ask the question that had been nagging at her since she'd regained consciousness. "Why were you going for Ronsard like that?"
"The bastard held a gun to your head," he said simply. "And I lost control. I do that a lot where you're concerned."
"This can't keep happening."
"I'll try to do better." The tone was dry now-very dry.
"The deal I made with Ronsard-I haven't talked to Mr. Vinay about it. Will it hold?"
"Hold? They're ecstatic."
"The whole thing seemed like a good idea at the time. All he wants is money to take care of Laure; he doesn't care where it comes from or how he gets it." She paused. *"Can* you find her a heart?"
"We're trying. The odds are against it, but we're trying." He sighed. "And if we find her a heart, that means a healthier child somewhere won't have that chance."
"With the information Ronsard can provide, a lot of other lives will be saved, though."
They were both silent, the ethical considerations weighing heavy on each side of the argument. Where one stood, she suspected, depended on whether or not one's child was involved. She understood Ronsard's single-minded

devotion to his daughter; someone else whose child was waiting on a heart wouldn't be at all understanding.
She put her hands on the arms of the chair and slowly pushed herself to a standing position. John stood also, his face anxious, his hands outstretched to catch her as if she were a toddler taking her first steps. She grinned up at him. "I'm not that fragile."
"You are to me," he said, and remembered terror swept over his face. "Damn you, no more heroics, do you hear me?"
"Leave them to you, is that it?" He took a deep breath.
"Yeah. Leave them to me."
"I can't." She put her arms around him, resting her head on his chest. "Heroes are few and far between. When you find one, you gotta take care of him." How fortunate she had been, she thought, to have loved and been loved by two such men as Dallas and John-extraordinary men by any standard.
Slowly his hands stroked up her back, his touch light so he wouldn't accidentally hurt her. "That's exactly what I was thinking."
Niema turned her lips against his chest, breathing in the hot male scent of his skin. She had lost the thread of conversation as soon as he touched her. "What's that?"
"When you find a hero, you gotta take care of her." He tilted her chin up with his hand. "Partners?"
A slow, delighted grin spread over her face, dispelling the aura of fragility. "Partners," she said, and they shook hands on the deal.

THE END

Mr. Perfect (2000)



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Many thanks to Sgt. Henry Piechowski of the Warren, Michigan, Police Department, for patiently and cheerfully answering all of my questions. He took my phone calls, gave me his time, and did his best to make sure I got it right. Any errors are strictly mine.
Thanks, Sergeant.

Prologue

Denver, 1975

"This is ridiculous!" Clutching her purse so tightly her knuckles were white, the woman glared across the desk at the school principal. "He said he didn't touch the hamster, and my child doesn't lie. The very idea!"

J. Clarence Cosgrove had been principal of Ellington Middle School for six years, and a teacher for twenty years before that. He was accustomed to dealing with irate parents, but the tall, thin woman seated before him and the child sitting so sedately beside her, unnerved him. He hated to use the vernacular, but they were weird. Though he knew it was a wasted effort, he tried to reason with her. "There was a witness – "

"Mrs. Whitcomb put him up to saying that. Corin would never, never have hurt that hamster, would you, darling?"

"No, Mother." The voice was almost unearthly sweet, but the child's eyes were cold and unblinking as they stared at Mr. Cosgrove, as if weighing the denial's effect on him. "See, I told you so!" the woman cried triumphantly.

Mr. Cosgrove tried again. "Mrs. Whitcomb – "

" – has disliked Corin from the first day of school. She's the one you need to be interrogating, not my child." The woman's lips were thin with fury. "I spoke with her two weeks ago about the filth she was putting in the children's heads, and told her that while I couldn't control what she told the other children, I absolutely would not have her speaking about" – she darted a glance at Corin – "s-e-x to my child. That's why she's done this."

"Mrs. Whitcomb has an excellent record as a teacher. She wouldn't – "

"She has! Don't tell me what that woman won't do when she obviously has! Why, I wouldn't put it beyond her to have killed the hamster herself!"

"The hamster was her personal pet, which she brought to school to teach the children about – "

"She could still have killed it. Good God, it was just a big rat," the woman said dismissively. "I don't understand what all the fuss is about even if Corin had killed it, which he didn't. He's being persecuted – persecuted – and I won't stand for it. Either you take care of that woman or I'll do it for you."

Mr. Cosgrove removed his glasses and wearily polished the lenses, just to give himself something to do while he tried to think of a way to neutralize this woman's poison before she ruined a good teacher's career. Reasoning with her was out; so far she hadn't let him complete a single sentence. He glanced at Corin; the child was still watching him, wearing an angelic expression totally at odds with those cold eyes.

"May I speak with you privately?" he asked the woman. She looked taken aback. "Why? If you think you can convince me my darling Corin – "

"Just for a moment," he interrupted, hiding his tiny spurt of relish at being the one doing the interrupting this time. From her expression, she didn't like it at all. "Please." He tacked that on, though he was almost beyond being polite. "Well, all right," she said reluctantly. "Corin, darling, go stand outside. Stay right by the door, where Mother can see you."

"Yes, Mother."

Mr. Cosgrove got up and firmly closed the door behind the child. She looked alarmed at this turn of events, at not being able to see her child, and half rose out of her chair. "Please," he said again. "Sit down."

"But Corin – "

" – will be all right." Another interruption scored on his side, he thought. He resumed his seat and picked up a pen, tapping it against his desk blotter as he tried to come up with a diplomatic way to broach his subject. There was no way diplomatic enough for this woman, he realized, and decided to jump right in. "Have you ever considered getting help for Corin? A good child psychologist – "

"Are you crazy?" she hissed, her face twisted with instant rage as she surged to her feet. "Corin doesn't need a psychologist! There's nothing wrong with him. The problem is with that bitch, not with my child. I should have known this meeting was a waste of time, that you'd take her side."

"I want what's best for Corin," he said, managing to keep his voice calm. "The hamster is just the latest incident, not the first one. There's been a pattern of disturbing behavior that goes beyond mischief – "

"The other children are jealous of him," she charged. "I know how the little bastards pick on him, and that bitch does nothing to stop it or protect him. He tells me everything. If you think I'll let him stay in this school and be hounded – "
"You're right," he said smoothly. On the Scoreboard her interruptions outnumbered his, but this was the important one. "Another school would probably be best, at this stage. Corin doesn't fit in here. I can recommend some good private schools – "
"Don't bother," she snapped as she strode to the door. "I can't imagine why you think I'd trust your recommendation." With that parting shot, she jerked open the door and grabbed Corin by the arm. "Come along, darling. You won't ever have to come back here again."
"Yes, Mother."
Mr. Cosgrove moved to his window and watched as the pair got into an old two-door Pontiac, yellow with brown rust spots pocking the left front fender. He had solved his immediate problem, that of protecting Mrs. Whitcomb, but he was well aware that the bigger problem had just walked out of his office. God help the faculty at whatever school Corin landed in next. Maybe, somewhere down the line, someone would step in and get Corin into counseling before too much damage was done… unless it was already too late.
Out in the car, the woman drove in stiff, furious silence until they were out of sight of the school. She stopped at a stop sign and, without warning, slapped Corin so hard his head banged against the window. "You little bastard," she said through gritted teeth. "How dare you humiliate me that way! To be called into the principal's office and talked to as if I were some idiot. You know what you're going to get when we get home, don't you? Don't you?" She screamed the last two words at him.
"Yes, Mother." The child's face was expressionless, but his eyes gleamed with something that could almost be anticipation.
She gripped the steering wheel with both hands, as if trying to throttle it. "You'll be perfect if I have to beat it into you. Do you hear me? My child will be perfect."
"Yes, Mother," Corin said.

CHAPTER ONE

Warren, Michigan, 2000

Jaine Bright woke up in a bad mood.

Her neighbor, the blight of the neighborhood, had just roared home at three A.M. If his car had a muffler, it had long since ceased functioning. Unfortunately, her bedroom was on the same side of the house as his driveway; not even pulling the pillow over her head could block out the sound of that eight-cylinder Pontiac. He slammed the car door, turned on his kitchen porch light – which by some evil design was positioned to shine directly into her eyes if she was lying facing the window, which she was – let his screen door slam three times as he went in, came back out a few minutes later, then went back in, and evidently forgot about the porch light, because a few minutes later the light in the kitchen blinked out but that damn porch light stayed on.

If she had known about her neighbor before she bought this house, she never, never would have closed on the sale. In the two weeks she had lived here, he had single- handedly managed to destroy all the joy she'd felt on buying her first house.

He was a drunk. Why couldn't he be a happy drunk? she wondered sourly. No, he had to be a surly, nasty drunk, the kind who made her afraid to let the cat go outside when he was home. BooBoo wasn't much of a cat – he wasn't even hers – but her mom loved him, so Jaine didn't want anything to happen to him while she had temporary custody. She would never be able to face her mom again if her parents returned from their dream vacation, touring Europe for six weeks, to find BooBoo dead or missing. Her neighbor already had it in for poor BooBoo anyway, because he'd found paw prints on the windshield and hood of his car. From the way he had reacted, you'd have thought he drove a new Rolls rather than a ten-year-old Pontiac with a bumper crop of dings down both sides. Just her luck, she had been leaving for work at the same time he did; at least, she'd assumed at the time he'd been going to work. Now she thought he'd probably been going to buy more booze. If he worked at all, then he had really weird hours, because so far she hadn't been able to discern a pattern in his arrivals and departures. Anyway, she had tried to be nice on the day he spotted the paw prints; she'd even smiled at him, which, considering how he had snapped at her because her housewarming party had woken him up – at two in the afternoon! – had been a real effort for her. But he hadn't paid any attention

to the peace-offering smile, instead erupting out of his car almost as soon as his butt hit the seat. "How about keeping your damn cat off my car, lady!"
The smile froze on her face. Jaine hated wasting a smile, especially on an unshaven, bloodshot-eyed, foul-tempered jerk. Several blistering comments sprang to mind, but she bit them back. After all, she was new to the neighborhood, and she had already gotten off on the wrong foot with this guy. The last thing she wanted was a war between them. She decided to give diplomacy one more shot, though it obviously hadn't worked during the housewarming party. "I'm sorry," she said, keeping her voice even. "I'll try to keep an eye on him. I'm baby-sitting him for my parents, so he won't be here much longer." Just five more weeks. He had snarled some indistinct reply and slammed back into his car, then roared off, the powerful engine rumbling like thunder. Jaine cocked her head, listening. The Pontiac's body looked like hell, but that motor ran smooth as silk. There were a lot of horses under that hood. Diplomacy evidently didn't work on this guy. Now, here he was, waking up the entire neighborhood at three A.M. with that blasted car. The injustice of it, after he had snapped at her for waking him up in the middle of the afternoon, made her want to march over to his house and hold her finger against his doorbell until he was up and as wide awake as everyone else.
There was just one little problem. She was the teeniest bit afraid of him. She didn't like it; Jaine wasn't accustomed to backing down from anyone, but this guy made her uneasy. She didn't even know his name, because the two times they'd met hadn't been the "hello, my name is so-and-so" type of encounters. All she knew was that he was a rough-looking character, and he didn't seem to hold down a regular job. At best, he was a drunk, and drunks could be mean and destructive. At worst, he was involved in illegal stuff, which added dangerous to the list.
He was a big, muscular guy, with dark hair cut so short he almost looked like a skinhead. Every time she had seen him, he looked as if he hadn't shaved in two or three days. Add that to the bloodshot eyes and bad temper, and she came up with drunk. The fact that he was big and muscular only added to her uneasiness. This had seemed like such a safe neighborhood, but she didn't feel safe with him as her next-door neighbor.
Grumbling to herself, she got out of bed and pulled down the window shade. She had learned over the years not to cover her windows, because an alarm clock might not wake her up, but sunlight always did. Dawn was

better than any clanging noise at getting her out of bed. Since she had, several times, found her clock knocked onto the floor, she assumed it had roused her enough to attack it, but not enough to completely wake her.
Her system now was sheer curtains over a shade; the sheers kept anyone from seeing inside unless a light was on, and she raised the shade only after she'd turned out the light for the night. If she was late to work today, it would be her neighbor's fault, for forcing her to rely on the clock instead of the sun.
She stumbled over BooBoo on the way back to bed. The cat jumped up with a startled yowl, and Jaine damn near had a heart attack. "Jesus! BooBoo, you scared the hell out of me." She wasn't used to having a pet in the house, and she was always forgetting to watch where she stepped. Why on earth her mother had wanted her to baby-sit the cat, instead of Shelley or Dave, was beyond her. They both had lads who could play with BooBoo and keep him entertained. Since school was out for summer vacation, that meant someone was home at both their houses almost all day, every day.
But, nooo. Jaine had to keep BooBoo. Never mind that she was single, was at work five days a week, and wasn't used to having a pet. If she did have a pet, it wouldn't be one like BooBoo, anyway. He'd been in a feline pout ever since he'd been neutered, and he took out his frustration on the furniture. In just one week, he had frayed the sofa to the point that she would have to have it reupholstered. And BooBoo didn't like her. He liked her well enough when he was in his home, coming around to be petted, but he didn't like being in her home at all. Every time she tried to pet him now, he arched his back and hissed at her. To top it off, Shelley was mad at her because Mom had chosen Jaine to baby-sit her precious BooBoo. After all, Shelley was the oldest, and obviously more settled. It didn't make sense that Jaine had been chosen over her. Jaine agreed with her, but that didn't soothe the hurt feelings.
No, what really topped it off was that David, who was a year younger than Shelley, was mad at her too. Not because of BooBoo; David was allergic to cats. No, what had him steamed was that Dad had stored his precious car in her garage – which meant she couldn't park in her own garage, since it was a single, and it was damned inconvenient. She wished David had the blasted car. She wished Dad had left it in his own garage, but he'd been afraid to leave it unattended for six weeks. She understood that, but she didn't understand why she'd been chosen to baby-sit both cat and car. Shelley

didn't understand the cat, David didn't understand the car, and Jaine didn't understand any of it.
So both her brother and sister were mad at her, BooBoo was systematically destroying her sofa, she was terrified something would happen to Dad's car while it was in her care, and her sot of a neighbor was making her life miserable.
God, why had she ever bought a house? If she had stayed in her apartment, none of this would be happening, because she hadn't had a garage and pets hadn't been allowed.
But she had fallen in love with the neighborhood, with its older, nineteen-forties-vintage houses and corresponding low prices. She had seen a good mix of people, from younger families with children to retired people whose families visited every Sunday. Some of the older folks actually sat on their porches during the cool of the evening, waving to passersby, and children played in their yards without worrying about drive-by shootings. She should have checked out all her neighbors, but at first blush this had seemed like a nice, safe area for a single woman to live, and she had been thrilled at finding a good, solid house at such a low price.
Because thinking about her neighbor was guaranteed to prevent her from going back to sleep, Jaine linked her hands behind her head and stared up at the dark ceiling as she thought about all the things she wanted to do with the house. The kitchen and bath both needed modernizing, which were big-ticket improvements and something she wasn't financially ready to tackle. But new paint and new shutters would go a long way toward improving the exterior, and she wanted to knock down the wall between the living and dining rooms, open it up so the dining room was more of an alcove than a separate room, with an arch that she could paint in one of those faux- stone paints so it looked like rock… She woke to the annoying beep of the alarm clock. At least the damn thing had woken her up this time, she thought as she rolled over to silence the alarm. The red numbers shining at her in the dim room made her blink, and look again. "Ah, hell," she groaned in disgust as she leaped out of bed. Six-fifty-eight; the alarm had been going off for almost an hour, which meant she was late. Way late.
"Damn it, damn it, damn it," she muttered as she jumped into the shower and, a minute later, jumped out again. As she brushed her teeth, she dashed into the kitchen and opened a can of food for BooBoo, who was already sitting beside his bowl glaring at her.

She spat into the sink and turned on the water to wash the toothpaste down the drain. "Of all days, why couldn't you have jumped on the bed when you got hungry? No, today you decided to wait, and now I don't have time to eat." BooBoo indicated that he didn't care whether she ate or not, so long as he had food.

She dashed back into the bathroom, did a hurried makeup job, slipped earrings into her earlobes and her watch onto her wrist, then grabbed the outfit she always grabbed when she was in a hurry because she didn't have to fuss with it: black trousers and a white silk shell, with a snazzy red jacket topping it off. She jammed her feet into her shoes, grabbed her purse, and was out the door. The first thing she saw was the little gray-haired lady who lived across the street, putting out her trash. It was trash-collection day.

"Hell, damn, shit, piss, and all those other words," Jaine muttered under her breath as she wheeled and rushed back into the house. "I'm trying to cut back on my swearing," she snapped at BooBoo as she pulled the trash bag out of the can and tied off the tapes, "but you and Mr. Congeniality are making it tough."

BooBoo turned his back on her.

She dashed out of the house again, remembered she hadn't locked the door, and dashed back, then dragged her big metal garbage can down to the curb and deposited the morning's offerings inside it, on top of the other two bags already in it. For once, she didn't try to be quiet; she hoped she woke up the inconsiderate jerk in the house next door.

She ran back to her car, a cherry red Dodge Viper that she loved, and just for good measure, when she started the engine, she revved it up a few times before putting it in reverse. The car shot backward and with an almighty clang collided with her garbage can. There was another clang as the can rolled into her next-door neighbor's can and knocked it over, sending the lid rolling down the street.

Jaine closed her eyes and tapped her head on the steering wheel – gently; she didn't want a concussion. Though maybe she should give herself a concussion; at least then she wouldn't have to worry about getting to work on time, which was now a physical impossibility. She didn't swear, though; the only words that came to mind were words she really didn't want to use.

She put the car in park and got out. What was needed now was control, not a temper tantrum. She righted her dented can and placed the spilled bags back inside it, then jammed the warped lid back on top. Next she returned

her neighbor's can to its full and upright position, gathered the trash – he wasn't nearly as neat with his trash collection as she was, but what did you expect from a drunk – then walked down the street to collect the lid.
It lay tilted against the curb in front of the next house down. As she bent to pick it up, she heard a screen door slam behind her.
Well, she had gotten her wish: the inconsiderate jerk was awake.
"What in hell are you doing?" he barked. He looked scary, in his sweatpants and torn, dirty T-shirt, a black scowl on his unshaven face.
She turned and marched back to the worse-for-wear pair of cans and slammed the lid down on top of his can. "Picking up your garbage," she snapped.
His eyes were shooting fire. Actually they were just bloodshot, as usual, but the effect was the same. "Just what is it you have against letting me get some sleep? You're the noisiest damn woman I've ever seen – " The injustice of that made her forget she was a little afraid of him. Jaine stalked up to him, glad she was wearing shoes with two-inch heels that lifted her up so she was level with his… chin. Almost.
So what if he was big? She was mad, and mad beat big any day of the week.
"I'm noisy?" she said through gritted teeth. It was tough to get much volume when her jaw was locked, but she tried. "I'm noisy?" She jabbed her finger at him. She didn't want to actually touch him, because his T-shirt was torn and stained with… something. "I'm not the one who woke the whole neighborhood at three o'clock this morning with that piece of junk you call a car. Buy a muffler, for God's sake! I'm not the one who slammed his car door once, the screen door three times – what, did you forget your bottle and have to go back for it? – and left his porch light on so it shone into my bedroom and kept me from sleeping." He opened his mouth to blast her in return, but Jaine wasn't finished. "Furthermore, it's a hell of a lot more reasonable to expect people to be sleeping at three o'clock in the morning than it is at two in the afternoon, or" – she checked her watch – "seven-twenty-three in the morning." God, she was so late. "So back off, buddy! Go crawl back into your bottle. If you drink enough, you'll sleep through anything."
He opened his mouth again. Jaine forgot herself and actually poked him. Oh, yuk. Now she'd have to boil her finger. "I'll buy you a new can tomorrow, so just shut up. And if you do anything to hurt my mom's cat, I'll take you apart cell by cell. I'll mutilate your DNA so it can never reproduce,

which would probably be a good thing for the world." She swept him with a blistering look that took in his ragged, dirty clothes and unshaven jaw. "Do you understand me?"
He nodded.
She took a deep breath, reaching for the rein on her temper. "Okay. All right, then. Damn it, you made me cuss; and I'm trying not to do that."
He gave her a strange look. "Yeah, you really need to watch that damn cussing."
She pushed her hair out of her face and tried to remember if she had brushed it this morning. "I'm late," she said. "I haven't had any sleep, any breakfast, or any coffee. I'd better leave before I hurt you."
He nodded. "That's a good idea. I'd hate to have to arrest you."
She stared at him, taken aback. "What?"
"I'm a cop," he said, then turned and walked back into his house.
Jaine stared after him, shocked. A cop?
"Well, fuck," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

Every Friday, Jaine and three friends from Hammerstead Technology, where they all worked, met after work at Ernie's, a local bar and grill, for a glass of wine, a meal they didn't have to prepare, and girl talk. After working all week in a male-dominated atmosphere, they really, really needed the girl talk.

Hammerstead was a satellite company supplying computer technology to the General Motors plants there in the Detroit area, and computers were still largely a male domain. The company was also fairly large, which meant the general atmosphere was a little weird, with its sometimes uneasy blending of computer geeks who didn't know the meaning of the words "appropriate for the office" and the usual corporate management types. If Jaine had worked in any of the research-and-development offices with the weirdos, no one would have noticed she was late to work that morning. Unfortunately, she was in charge of the payroll department, and her immediate supervising manager was a real clock watcher.

Because she had to make up the time she was late that morning, she was almost fifteen minutes late getting to Ernie's, but the other three had already gotten a table, thank God. Ernie's was already filling up, the way it always did on a weekend night, and she didn't like waiting in the bar for a table even when she was in a good mood, which she wasn't.

"What a day," she said as she dropped into the empty fourth chair. While she was thanking God, she'd add to the list her thanks that today was Friday. It had been a bitch, but it was the last bitch – at least until Monday. "Tell me about it," Marci muttered as she stubbed out a cigarette and promptly lit another one. "Brick's been on a tear lately. Is it possible for men to have PMS?"

"They don't need it," Jaine said, thinking of her jerk of a neighbor – a cop jerk. "They're born with testosterone poisoning."

"Oh, is that what's wrong?" Marci rolled her eyes. "I thought it was a full moon or something. You'll never guess – Kellman grabbed my ass today."

"Kellman?" the other three said in synchronized astonishment, their combined voices drawing the attention of everyone around them. They burst into laughter, because of all the possible offenders, he was the least likely.

Derek Kellman, age twenty-three, was the walking definition of nerd and geek. He was tall, gangly, and moved with all the grace of a drunken stork. His Adam's apple was so prominent in his thin neck that it looked as if he had swallowed a lemon that became permanently lodged in his throat. His red hair was a stranger to a brush; it would be matted flat in one place and standing out in spikes in another: a terminal case of bed head. But he was an absolute genius with computers, and in fact they were all sort of fond of him, in a protective, big-sisterly way. He was shy, awkward, and absolutely clueless about everything except computers. The office buzz was that he'd heard there were two sexes, but wasn't certain the rumor was true. Kellman was the last person anyone would suspect of being an ass grabber.

"No way," Luna said.

"You're making that up," T.J. accused.

Marci laughed her husky smoker's laugh and took a deep drag off her cigarette. "Swear to God, it's true. All I did was walk past him in the hallway. The next thing I know, he grabs me with both hands and just stands there, holding my ass like it's a basketball and he's about to start dribbling."

The mental image had them all giggling again. "What did you do?" Jaine asked.

"Well, nothing," Marci admitted. "The problem is, Bennett was watching, the jerk."

They groaned. Bennett Trotter thrived on picking on those he considered his subordinates, and poor Kellman was his favorite target. "What could I do?" Marci asked, shaking her head. "No way was I going to give the asshole more ammunition to use against the poor kid. So I patted Kellman on the cheek and said something flirty, along the lines of 'I didn't know you cared.' Kellman turned as red as his hair and dodged into the men's room."

"What did Bennett do?" Luna asked.

"He got that nasty smirk on his face and said that if he'd known I was so hard up I'd settle for Kellman, in the interest of charity he'd have offered his services a long time ago."

That set off an epidemic of eye-rolling. "In other words, he was his usual jerk self," Jaine said in disgust. There was political correctness, and then there was reality, and the reality was that people were people. Some of the guys they worked with at Hammerstead were nasty leeches, and no amount of sensitivity training was going to change that. Most of the guys were okay, though, and it all evened out because some of the women were

barbed- wire bitches. Jaine had stopped looking for perfection, in the workplace or anywhere else. Luna thought she was too cynical, but then Luna was the youngest of their group and her rose-tinted glasses were still intact – a bit faded now, but intact.

On the surface, the four friends had nothing in common other than their place of work. Marci Dean, the head of accounting, was forty-one, the oldest of the group. She had been married and divorced three times and, since the last trip through the courtroom, preferred less formal arrangements. Her hair was bleached platinum blond, her smoking was her ginning to take its toll on her skin, and her clothes were always just a bit too tight. She liked beer, blue-collar men, rowdy sex, and admitted to a fondness for bowling. "I'm a man's dream," she'd say, laughing. "I have beer tastes on a champagne budget."

Marci's current live-in boyfriend was a guy named Brick, a big, muscle-bound oaf whom none of the other three liked. Privately, Jaine thought his name was appropriate, because he was as dense as a brick. He was ten years younger than Marci, worked only occasionally, and spent most of his time drinking her beer and watching her television. According to Marci, though, he liked sex just the way she did and that was reason enough to keep him around for a while.

Luna Scissum, the youngest, was twenty-four and the wunderkind of the sales division. She was tall, willowy, and had both the grace and dignity of a cat. Her perfect skin was the color of pale, creamy caramel, her voice was gentle and lyrical, and men dropped at her feet like flies. She was, in effect, the direct opposite of Marci. Marci was blatant; Luna was remote and ladylike. The only time anyone had ever seen Luna angry was when someone referred to her as 'African-American'.

"I'm an American," she had snapped, whirling on the offender. "I've never even been to Africa. I was born in California, my father was a major in the Marine Corps, and I'm not a hyphenated anything. I have a black heritage, but I also have a white one." She had held out one slim arm and studied the color of it. "Looks to me like I'm brown. We're all just different shades of brown, so don't try to set me apart."

The guy had stammered an apology, and Luna, being Luna, had given him a gracious smile and forgave him so gently that he ended up asking her out on a date. She was currently dating a running back for the Detroit Lions football team; unfortunately, she had fallen hard for Shamal King, while he

was known for his wild partying with other women in every city where there was an NFL team. All too often Luna's dark hazel eyes held an unhappy expression, but she refused to give up on him. T.J. Yother worked in human resources, and she was the most traditional of the four. She was Jaine's age, thirty, and had been married to her high-school sweetheart for nine years. They lived in a nice suburban home with two cats, a parrot, and a cocker spaniel. The only obvious fly in T.J.'s ointment was that she wanted children and her husband, Galan, did not. Privately, Jaine thought T.J. could be a little more independent. Though Galan worked as a supervisor on the three-to-eleven shift at Chevrolet and wasn't at home anyway, T.J. was always checking her wristwatch, as though she had to be home at a certain time. From what Jaine gathered, Galan didn't approve of their Friday night get-together. All they did was meet at Ernie's and have dinner, and they were never out later than nine; it wasn't as if they were hitting all the bars and drinking until the wee hours.

Well, no one's life was perfect, Jaine thought. She hadn't done so great in the romance department herself. She'd been engaged three times but hadn't yet made it to the altar. After the third breakup, she had decided to give dating a rest for a while and concentrate on her career. Here she was, seven years later, still concentrating. She had a good credit record, a nice bank account, and had just bought her first very own house – not that she was enjoying the house as much as she had thought she would, what with that nasty-tempered, inconsiderate cretin next door. He might be a cop, but he still made her uneasy, because cop or not, he looked like the type who would burn down your house if you got on his bad side. She had been on his bad side from the day she moved in. "I had another episode with my neighbor this morning," she said, sighing as she propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her entwined fingers. "What did he do this time?" T.J. was sympathetic, because, as they all knew, Jaine was stuck, and bad neighbors could make your life a living hell. "I was in a hurry and backed into my trash can. You know how when you're running late you always do things that would never happen if you took your time? Everything went wrong this morning. Anyway, my can knocked his down, and the lid bounced into the street. You can imagine the noise. He came charging out the front door like a bear, yelling that I was the noisiest person he'd ever seen."

"You should have lacked his can over," Marci said. She wasn't a believer in turning the other cheek. "He'd have arrested me for disturbing the peace," Jaine said mournfully. "He's a cop."
"No way!" They all looked incredulous, but then, they had heard her describe him, and red eyes, beard stubble, and dirty clothes didn't sound very coplike.
"I guess cops are just as likely to be drunks as anyone else," T.J. said, a little hesitantly. "More so, I'd say." Jaine frowned, thinking back to the morning's encounter. "Come to think of it, I didn't smell anything on him. He looked like he'd been on a three-day drunk, but he didn't smell like it. Damn, I hate to think he can be that grouchy when he isn't hungover."
"Pay up," Marci said.
"Damn it!" Jaine said, exasperated with herself. She had made a deal with them that she'd pay each a quarter every time she cursed, figuring that would give her the incentive to quit.
"Double it," T.J. chortled, holding out her hand. Grumbling, but being careful not to swear, Jaine dug out fifty cents for each of them. She made certain she always had plenty of change these days.
"At least he's just a neighbor," Luna said soothingly. "You can avoid him."
"So far I'm not doing a very good job at it," Jaine admitted, scowling at the table. Then she straightened, determined to stop letting the jerk dominate her life and her thoughts the way he had for the past two weeks. "Enough about him. Anything interesting going on with you guys?" Luna bit her lip, and misery chased across her face. "I called Shamal last night, and a woman answered."
"Oh, damn." Marci leaned across the table to pat Luna's hand, and Jaine had a moment of envy at her friend's verbal freedom.
The waiter chose that moment to distribute menus that they didn't need, because they knew all the selections by heart. They gave him their orders, he collected the unopened menus, and when he left, they all leaned closer to the table.
"What are you going to do?" Jaine asked. She was an expert at breaking up, as well as at being dumped. Her second fiance, the bastard, had waited until the night before the wedding, the rehearsal night, to tell her he couldn't go through with it. Getting over that had taken a while – and she wasn't going to pay up for words she thought, but didn't say out loud. Was "bastard" a curse word, anyway? Was there an official list she could consult?

Luna shrugged. She was close to tears, and trying to be nonchalant. "We aren't engaged, or even seeing each other exclusively. I don't have any right to complain."
"No, but you can protect yourself and stop seeing him," T.J. said gently. "Is he worth this kind of pain?" Marci snorted. "No man is."
"Amen," Jaine said, still thinking of her three broken engagements.
Luna picked at her napkin, her long, slender fingers restless. "But when we're together, he… he acts as if he really cares. He's sweet, and loving, and so considerate –"
"They all are, until they get what they want." Marci stubbed out her third cigarette. "That's personal experience speaking, you understand. Have your fun with him, but don't expect him to change."
"Isn't that the truth," T.J. said ruefully. "They never change. They may put on an act for a while, but when they think they have you sewed up and tied down, they relax and Mr. Hyde shows his hairy face again."
Jaine laughed. "That sounds like something I would say."
"Except there weren't any curse words," Marci pointed out. T.J. waved a signal to cut the jokes. Luna looked even more miserable than before. "So I should either put up with being one of a herd, or stop seeing him?"
"Well… yeah."
"But it shouldn't be that way! If he cares for me, how can he be interested in all those other women?"
"Oh, that's easy," Jaine replied. "The one-eyed snake has no taste."
"Sweetheart," Marci said, her smoker's voice as kind as she could make it, "if you're looking for Mr. Perfect, you're going to spend your whole life being disappointed, because he doesn't exist. You have to get the best deal you can, but there will always be problems."
"I know he isn't perfect, but – "
"But you want him to be," T.J. finished.
Jaine shook her head. "Isn't going to happen," she announced. "The perfect man is pure science fiction. Not that we're perfect, either," she added, "but most women do at least try. Men don't try. That's why I gave up on them. Relationships just don't work out for me." She paused, then said thoughtfully, "I wouldn't mind having a sex slave, though."
The other three burst out laughing, even Luna. "I could get into that," Marci said. "I wonder where I can get one?"

"Try Sexslaves-R-Us," T.J. suggested, and they dissolved into laughter again.
"There's probably a Web site," Luna said, choking a little. "Of course there is." Jaine was totally deadpan. "It's on my Favorites list: www.sexslaves.com."
"Just type in your requirements and you can rent Mr. Perfect by the hour or the day." T.J. waved her glass of beer, carried away with enthusiasm.
"A day? Get real." Jaine hooted. "An hour is asking for a miracle."
"Besides, there is no Mr. Perfect, remember?" Marci said. "Not a real one, no, but a sex slave would have to pretend to be exactly what you wanted, wouldn't he?" Marci was never without her soft leather briefcase. She opened it and dug out a pad of paper and a pen, slapping them down on the table. "He most certainly would. Let's see, what would Mr. Perfect be like?"
"He'd have to do the dishes half the time without being asked," T.J. said, slapping her hand down on the table and drawing curious looks their way. When they managed to stop laughing long enough to be coherent, Marci scribbled on her pad. "Okay, number one: Do the dishes."
"No, hey, doing the dishes can't be number one," Jaine protested. "We have more serious issues to address first."
"Yeah," Luna said. "Seriously. What do we think a perfect man would be like? I've never thought about it in those terms. Maybe it would help if I had it clear in my mind what I like in a man."
They all paused. "The perfect man? Seriously?" Jaine wrinkled her nose.
"Seriously."
"This is going to take some thinking," Marci pronounced. "Not for me," T.J. said, the laughter fading from her face. "The most important thing is that he wants the same things out of life that you do."
They lapsed into a little pond of silence. The attention their laughter had gotten from the diners at the surrounding tables moved on to more promising targets.
"Wants the same things out of life," Marci repeated as she wrote it down. "That's number one? Are we agreed?"
"That's important," Jaine said. "But I'm not sure it's number one."
"Then what's number one for you?"
"Faithfulness." She thought of her second fiance, the bastard. "Life's too short to waste it on someone you can't trust. You should be able to depend

on the man you love not to lie to you or cheat on you. If you have that as a base, you can work on the other stuff."
"That's number one for me," Luna said quietly. T.J. thought about it.
"Okay," she finally said. "If Galan wasn't faithful, I wouldn't want to have a baby with him."
"I'll go along with that," Marci said. "I can't stand a two- timer. Number one: He's faithful. Doesn't cheat or lie." They all nodded.
"What else?" She sat with the pen poised over the pad. "He should be nice," T.J. offered.
"Nice?" Marci looked incredulous.
"Yes, nice. Who wants to spend her life with a jerk?"
"Or next door to one?" Jaine muttered. She nodded in agreement. "Nice is good. It doesn't sound exciting, but think about it. I think Mr. Perfect would be kind to kids and animals, help old ladies across the street, not insult you when your opinion is different from his. Being nice is so important it's close to being number one."
Luna nodded.
"Okay," Marci said. "Hell, you've even convinced me. I don't guess I've ever known a nice guy. Number two: Nice." She wrote it down. "Number three? I have my own idea on this one. I want a guy who's dependable. If he says he's going to do something, he should do it. If he's supposed to meet me somewhere at seven, he should be there at seven, not come strolling in at nine-thirty or maybe not at all. Is there a vote on this one?" They all four raised their hands in an aye vote, and "Dependable" went down in the number three slot. "Number four?"
"The obvious," Jaine said. "A steady job."
Marci winced. "Ouch. That one hurt." Brick was currently sitting on his butt instead of working.
"A steady job is part of being dependable," T.J. pointed out. "And I agree, it's important. Holding down a steady job shows maturity and a sense of responsibility."
"Steady job," Marci said as she wrote.
"He should have a sense of humor," Luna said. "Something more than an appreciation for The Three Stooges?" Jaine asked.
They began snickering. "What is it with men and The Three Stooges?" T.J. asked, rolling her eyes. "And bodily function jokes! Put that at number one, Marci – no toilet jokes!"

"Number five: Sense of humor." Marci chuckled as she wrote. "In the interest of fairness, I don't think we can dictate what form the humor takes."
"Sure we can," Jaine corrected. "He's going to be our sex slave, remember?"
"Number six." Marci called them to order by tapping her pen on the rim of her glass. "Let's get back to business, ladies. What's number six?"
They all looked at each other and shrugged. "Money's nice," T.J. finally offered. "It isn't a requirement, not in real life, but this is fantasy, right? The perfect man should have money."
"Filthy rich or comfortable?"
That called for more thought.
"I like filthy rich, myself," Marci said.
"But he would want to call all the shots if he was filthy rich. He'd be used to it."
"No way is that going to happen. Okay, money is nice, but not too much money. Comfortable. Mr. Perfect is financially comfortable."
Four hands went up, and "Money" was written in beside the number six.
"Since this is fantasy," Jaine said, "he should be good- looking. Not drop-dead gorgeous, because that could be a problem. Luna's the only one of us pretty enough to hold her own with a handsome guy."
"I'm not doing so good at it, am I?" Luna replied with a tinge of bitterness.
"But, yeah, for Mr. Perfect to be perfect, you should enjoy looking at him."
"Hear, hear. Number seven is: Good to look at." When she had finished writing, Marci looked up with a grin. "I'm going to be the one to say what we've all been thinking. He should be great in bed. Not just good; he should be great. He should be able to make my toes curl and my eyes roll back in my head. He should have the stamina of a Kentucky Derby winner and the enthusiasm of a sixteen- year-old."
They were still rolling with laughter when the waiter plunked their orders down on the table. "What's so funny?" he asked.
"You wouldn't understand," T.J. managed to gasp. "I get it," he said wisely. "You're talking about men."
"Nope, we're talking science fiction," Jaine said, which sent them off again. The people at the other tables were staring at them again, trying to overhear what was so funny.
The waiter left. Marci leaned over the table. "And while I'm at it, I want my Mr. Perfect to have a ten-incher!"

"Oh, my!" T.J. pretended to swoon, fanning herself. "What I couldn't do with ten inches – or rather, what I could do with ten inches!"
Jaine was laughing so hard she had to hold her sides. Keeping her voice down was an effort, and her words shook with hilarity. "C'mon! Anything over eight inches is strictly for show-and-tell. It's there, but you can't use it. It might look good in a locker room, but let's face it – those extra two inches are leftovers."
"Leftovers," Luna gasped, holding her stomach and shrieking with laughter. "Let's hear it for l-leftovers!"
"Oh, boy." Marci wiped her eyes as she scribbled rapidly. "Now we're cooking. What else does Mr. Perfect have?" T.J. weakly waved her hand.
"Me," she offered between giggles. "He can have me."
"If we don't trample you getting to him," Jaine said, and raised her glass. The other three lifted theirs, and they touched rims with ringing clinks. "To Mr. Perfect, wherever he is!"

CHAPTER THREE

Saturday morning dawned bright and early – way too bright, and way the hell too early. BooBoo woke Jaine at six A.M. by yowling in her ear. "Go away," she mumbled, pulling the pillow over her head.

BooBoo yowled again, and batted the pillow. She got the message: either get up, or he was going to unsheathe his claws. She pushed the pillow aside and sat up, glaring at him. "You're evil, y'know that? You couldn't do this yesterday morning, could you? No, you have to wait until my day off, when I don't have to get up early." He looked unimpressed with her outrage. That was the thing about cats; even the scruffiest one was convinced of its innate superiority. She scratched him behind his ears and a low rumble shivered through his entire body. His slanted yellow eyes closed in bliss. "You just wait," she told him. "I'm going to get you addicted to this scratching stuff, then I'm going to stop doing it. You're going to go cold turkey, pal."

He jumped down from the bed and padded to the open bedroom door, pausing to look back as if checking to make certain she was getting up. Jaine yawned and threw back the covers. At least she hadn't been disturbed by her neighbor's noisy car during the night, plus she had pulled down the window shade to keep out the morning light, so she had slept soundly until BooBoo's wake-up call. She raised the shade and peeked through the sheer curtains at the driveway running beside hers. The battered brown Pontiac was there. That meant she had either been exhausted and slept like the dead, or he'd gotten a new muffler on the thing. She thought the exhausted-and-dead part was more likely than him getting a new muffler. BooBoo evidently thought she was wasting time, because he gave a warning meow. Sighing, she pushed her hair out of her face and stumbled to the kitchen – stumbled being the operative word, because BooBoo helped her along by winding around her ankles as she walked. She desperately needed coffee, but knew from experience that BooBoo wouldn't leave her alone until he was fed. She opened a can of food, dumped it on a saucer, and set it on the floor. While he was occupied, she put on a pot of coffee, then headed for the shower.

Stripping off her summer sleepwear of T-shirt and panties – during winter she added socks to the ensemble – she stepped into a nice warm shower and let it pummel her awake. Some people were larks; some were owls; Jaine

was neither. She didn't function well until after a shower and a cup of coffee, and she liked to be in bed by ten at the latest. BooBoo was upsetting the natural order of things with his demands to be fed before anything else was done. How could her mom have done this to her? "Just four weeks and six days more," she muttered to herself. Who would have thought that a cat that was normally so loving would turn into such a tyrant when he wasn't in his regular environment?

After a long shower and two cups of coffee, her synapses started connecting and she began remembering all the things she needed to do. Buy the jerk next door a new trash can – check. Buy groceries – check. Do laundry – check. Mow the lawn – check.

She felt a little excited at the last item. She had grass to cut, her very own grass! She had lived in apartments since leaving home, none of which had come with lawns. There were usually some tiny patches of grass between the sidewalk and the building, but maintenance always took care of mowing them. Hell – heck, they were so tiny the job could have been done with scissors.

But her new home came with its very own lawn. In anticipation of this moment, she had invested in a brand- new lawn mower, self-propelled, state-of-the-art, guaranteed to make her brother, David, turn green with envy. He'd have to buy a riding mower to one-up her on this, and since his lawn wasn't any bigger than hers, a riding mower would be an expensive sop to his ego. Jaine figured his wife, Valerie, would step in before he did anything that foolish.

Today, she would have her inaugural grass-cutting. She could barely wait to feel the power of that red monster pulsing under her hands as it decapitated all those blades of grass. She had always been a sucker for red machinery.

First things first, though. She had to make a run to Wal- Mart and buy a new trash can for the jerk. A promise was a promise, and Jaine always tried to keep her word. A quick bowl of cereal later, she pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, stuck her feet in a pair of sandals, and was on her way.

Who knew a metal trash can would be so hard to find? Wal-Mart had only the plastic kind in stock. She invested in one for herself, but didn't feel she had the right to change her neighbor's type of trash can. From there she drove to a home-and-garden supply store, but struck out there, too. If she had bought her own metal can she would have known where to find another

one, but it had been a housewarming present from her mother – that was Mom, Queen of the Practical Gift.
By the time she finally located a large metal trash can, at a hardware store – well, duh- – it was nine o'clock and the temperature was already edging out of warm into uncomfortable. If she didn't get the grass mowed soon, she would have to wait until sundown for the heat to abate. Deciding that grocery shopping could wait, she wedged the can into her minuscule backseat and headed south on Van Dyke until she reached Ten Mile Road, then turned right. Minutes later she turned onto her street and smiled at the neat, older houses nestled under their mature shade trees.
A few of the houses had tricycles and bicycles on the front lawns. These older neighborhoods were seeing an influx of younger couples as they discovered the reasonable price of the aging houses. Instead of disintegrating, the houses were receiving face-lifts and remodels; in a few years, the price of real estate would shoot up again, but for now this area was just right for people just starting out. As she got out of the car, the neighbor on the other side of her house walked over to the waist-high white picket fence separating the properties and waved. "Good morning!" Mrs. Kulavich called.
"Good morning," Jaine replied. She had met the pleasant old couple the day she moved in, and Mrs. Kulavich had brought her a nice thick pot of stew the next day, with fragrant homemade rolls. If only the jerk on the other side could have been more like the Kulavichs, Jaine would have been in seventh heaven, though she couldn't even begin to picture him bringing her homemade rolls. She walked over to the fence for a neighborly chat. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" Thank God for weather, because the world would be hard up for a conversational gambit without it.
"Oh, my, it's going to be a scorcher." Mrs. Kulavich beamed at her and brandished a trowel in one gloved hand. "I have to do my gardening early, before it gets too hot."
"I had the same idea about mowing my lawn this morning." Others were of the same mind, she noticed. Now that she was paying attention, she could hear the roar of a lawn mower three doors up from Mrs. Kulavich and another across the street.
"Smart girl. Take care not to get too hot; my George always wets a towel and puts it on the back of his neck when he mows, though our grandsons help him with the mowing and he doesn't do it as often as he used to." She

winked. "I think he cranks up the old mower now just because he's in the mood to do something manly." Jaine smiled and started to excuse herself, but something occurred to her and she turned back to the old lady. "Mrs. Kulavich, do you know the man who lives on the other side of me?" What if the jerk had lied to her? What if he wasn't really a cop? She could just see him having a good laugh at her expense, while she tiptoed around and tried to be nice to him.
"Sam? My, yes, I've known him all his life. His grandparents used to live there, you know. Lovely people. I was so glad when Sam moved in after his grandmother finally passed last year. I feel much safer having a policeman so close by, don't you?"
Well, that shot that theory in the ass. Jaine managed a smile. "Yes, of course." She started to say something about the strange hours he kept, but saw the gleam in Mrs. Kulavich's bright blue eyes and bit back the words. The last thing she needed was for her elderly neighbor to think she had any interest in the jerk and maybe tell him, since Mrs. Kulavich was obviously on good terms with him. She took care of that by adding, "I thought he might be a drug dealer or something."
Mrs. Kulavich looked scandalized. "Sam, a drug dealer? Oh, my. No, he would never do anything like that."
"That's a relief." Jaine smiled again. "I suppose I'd better start mowing before it gets much hotter."
"Be sure to drink plenty of water," Mrs. Kulavich called after her.
"I will."
Well, drat, Jane thought as she wrestled the trash can out of her backseat. The jerk was a cop; he hadn't lied. There went her dream of seeing him hauled away in handcuffs. She deposited the can by his back porch, then released the plastic can she had bought for herself from the trunk. If the can hadn't been plastic, she never could have gotten it in there, but plastic compressed. When she opened the trunk, it sprang at her like something alive. She put the can behind her small kitchen stoop, neatly out of sight from the street, then went inside and quickly changed into shorts and a halter top. That was what suburban ladies wore to mow their lawns, wasn't it? Then she remembered her older neighbors, and changed the halter top for a T- shirt; she didn't want to give some old gent a heart attack. She felt a thrill of anticipation as she unlocked the padlock on the garage doors and slipped inside, fumbling until she reached the switch that turned on the

single overhead light. Her dad's pride and joy sat there, completely covered by a custom-made canvas tarp, lined with felt so it wouldn't scratch the paint. Damn, she wished he had left it at David's. The car wasn't as much trouble as BooBoo, but she worried about it a lot more.

The deciding factor in leaving it at her house, she thought, was that her garage still had the old-fashioned double doors rather than a modern garage door that slid up. Her dad worried about the car being seen from the street; she could get into her garage without opening the doors more than the twelve inches required for her to slip through, while everything in David's double garage was visible every time he raised his door. First chance she got, she was putting in an automatic garage door.

She had covered her new lawn mower with a sheet so it wouldn't get dusty. She removed the sheet and stroked her hand over the cool metal. Maybe her low-tech garage wasn't the deciding factor in her baby-sitting the car; maybe it was because she was the only one of her dad's children who shared his enthusiasm for cars. She was the one who had hung over the fender of their family sedan, staring into the mysterious mechanical bowels as her dad changed the oil and spark plugs. By the time she was ten, she had been helping him. By the time she was twelve, she had taken over the chore. For a while she had considered going into automotive mechanical engineering, but the training took years and she wasn't really that ambitious. All she wanted was a job that paid well and that she didn't hate, and she was as good with numbers as she was with motors. She enjoyed cars; she didn't want to turn them into a job.

She wheeled her lawn mower past her dad's car, taking care not to touch it. The canvas tarp protected it from the ground up, but she didn't take any chances where that car was concerned. Opening one of the garage doors only enough to let her get the lawn mower out, she ushered her new baby out into the sunlight. The red paint gleamed; the chrome handlebars glistened. Oh, it was pretty. At the last minute, she remembered something about the mowing ritual, and moved her car to the street; one had to be careful about accidentally slinging a rock that could break a window or chip a paint job. She looked at the jerk's car and shrugged; he might notice BooBoo's paw prints, but he'd never notice another dent in that thing. With a happy smile, she fired up the little motor. The thing about cutting grass, she discovered, was that you had an instant sense of achievement. You could see exactly where you had been and what you had accomplished. Her

dad and David had always taken care of that chore when she was growing up, much to her relief, because mowing the lawn had looked boring. Only as she had grown older had she seen the lure of having your own grass, and now she felt as if she had finally, at the age of thirty, stepped into full adulthood. She was a home owner. She mowed her lawn. Cool.
Something tapped her on the shoulder.
She shrieked and released the lawn mower handles, jumping to one side and whirling to face her attacker. The mower stopped in its tracks.
The jerk stood there, bloodshot eyes, snarl on his face, dirty clothes: his usual presentation. He reached over and slid the lever on the mower to the off position, and the efficient little engine growled to a stop.
Silence.
For about half a second.
"What in hell did you do that for?" she roared, her face turning red with temper as she stepped closer, unconsciously balling her right hand into a fist. "I thought you were trying to quit cussing," he taunted. "You'd drive a saint to cussing!"
"That let's you out, doesn't it?"
"You're damn right!"
He eyed her right hand. "Are you going to use that, or are you going to be reasonable?"
"What –?" She glanced down and saw that her arm was half-cocked, her fist already drawn back. With great effort she uncurled her fingers. They immediately assumed the fight position again. She really, really wanted to slug him, and she got even angrier because she couldn't. "Reasonable?" she yelled, stepping even closer. "You want me to be reasonable? You're the one who scared the hell out of me and turned off my mower!"
"I'm trying to sleep," he said, enunciating the words with clear pit stops between each one. "Is it asking too much for a little consideration?"
She gaped at him. "You act as if I'm out here mowing at dawn. It's almost ten o'clock! And I'm not the only one who's committing the high crime of cutting grass. Listen," she commanded, as the muted roar of neighborhood mowers hummed up and down the street.
"They aren't mowing right outside my bedroom window!"
"So get in bed at a decent hour. It isn't my fault you stay up most of the night!"

His face was getting as red as hers. "I'm on a task force, lady! Irregular hours are part of the job. I sleep when I can, which, since you moved in, hasn't been very damn often!" She threw up her hands. "All right! Fine! I'll finish the job tonight, when it cools down." She made a shooing motion. "Just stagger on back to bed. I'll go inside and sit for the next eleven hours. Or will that disturb your beauty rest, too?" she inquired sweetly.
"Not unless you have firecrackers in your ass," he snapped, and stalked back into his house.
There was probably a law against throwing rocks at someone's house, she thought. Fuming, she wheeled her lawn mower back into the garage, carefully padlocked the doors, then retrieved her car from the curb. She'd like to show him what she could do with a few firecrackers, and she sure wouldn't be sitting on them.
She stomped inside and glared at BooBoo, who ignored her while he washed his paws. "A task force," she growled. "I'm not unreasonable. All he had to do was explain, in a calm voice, and I'd have been glad to put off mowing until later. But woo, he'd rather make an ass of himself."
BooBoo looked at her.
"Ass isn't a swear word," she said defensively. "Besides, it isn't my fault. I'll let you in on a secret about our neighbor, BooBoo: Mr. Perfect, he's not!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Jaine managed to get through the weekend without another confrontation with her jerk neighbor and was at work fifteen minutes early in an effort to atone for her Friday lateness, even though she had worked overtime on Friday to make up for it. As she stopped at the gate, the watchman leaned out and eyed the Viper with disapproval. "When're you going to get rid of the piece of junk and buy a Chevrolet?"

She heard it almost every day. This was what happened when you worked in the Detroit area in anything remotely connected with the automotive industry. You had to show brand loyalty to whichever of the Big Three directly or indirectly employed you. "When I can afford it," she replied, as she always did. Never mind that the Viper had cost the earth, even though it was used and had over fifty thousand miles on it when she bought it. "I just bought a house, you know. If my dad hadn't given this to me, I wouldn't be driving it."

That last was a direct lie, but it tended to get people off her back for a while. Thank God no one here knew who her father was, or they would have known he was a Ford man through and through. He had been insulted when she bought the Viper and never failed to make a few derogatory remarks about it.

"Yeah, well, your dad should have known better."

"He doesn't know anything about cars." She tensed, expecting lightning to strike her dead for that whopper. She parked the Viper at a back corner of the lot, where it was less likely to get dinged. People at Hammerstead joked that the car was being shunned. She had to admit it was inconvenient, especially during bad weather, but getting wet was better than letting the Viper get injured. Just driving on I-696 to get to work was enough to give her gray hair.

Hammerstead occupied a four-story red-brick building with a gray arched portico and six curving steps leading up to impressive double doors. That entrance, however, was used exclusively by visitors. All the employees entered by a metal side door with an electronic lock into a narrow, puke green hallway, on which were the offices of maintenance and electrical, and a dark, dank room labeled "Storage." Just what was stored there, Jaine didn't want to know.

At the end of the puke green hallway were three steps that led up to another metal door. This one opened onto a gray-carpeted hall that ran the length of the building, front to back, and off which offices and other hallways branched like veins. The two lower floors were reserved for the computer nerds, those strange and irreverent beings who talked in a foreign language about bytes and USB ports. Access to these floors was limited; one had to have an employee's access card to get into the puke green hallway, then another to enter any of the offices and rooms. There were two elevators, and at the far end of the building, for the more energetic, were the stairs. As she entered the gray-carpeted hall, a large hand- lettered sign caught her attention. The sign was posted directly above the call buttons for the elevators. In green and purple crayon, outlined with black Magic Marker for emphasis, was a new company directive: EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, ALL EMPLOYEES WILL BE REQUIRED TO TAKE A COMBINATION OF GINKGO AND VIAGRA, SO YOU CAN REMEMBER WHAT THE FUCK YOU'RE DOING.

She began giggling. The nerds were in fine form today. By nature they rebelled against authority and structure; such signs were commonplace, at least until someone in management arrived and took them down. She imagined eyes all up and down the hallway were plastered to tiny cracks as the culprits enjoyed others' reactions to their latest attack on corporate dignity.

The door behind her opened, and Jaine turned to see who the next arrival was. She barely refrained from wrinkling her nose.

Leah Street worked in human resources, and she could be counted on to not see the humor in anything. She was a tall woman whose ambition was to rise into management, though she didn't seem to know how to go about doing so. She wore rather girlish clothes instead of the more businesslike suits that would have complemented her willowy build. She was an attractive woman, with feathery blond hair and good skin, but clueless when it came to fashion. Her best feature was her hands, which were slim and elegant, and which she always kept perfectly manicured.

True to form, Leah gasped when she read the sign, and began turning red.

"That's disgraceful," she snapped, reaching out to take it down.

"If you touch it, your fingerprints will be on it," Jaine said, totally deadpan.

Leah froze, her hand only a fraction of an inch from the paper.

"There's no telling how many people have already seen it," Jaine continued as she punched the up button. "Someone in management is bound to hear about it and investigate even if the sign isn't here any longer. Unless you plan on eating it – which I wouldn't, the germ count on that thing must be in the gazillions – how are you going to dispose of it without being seen?"
Leah flashed Jaine a look of dislike. "You probably think this disgusting trash is funny."
"As a matter of fact, I do."
"I wouldn't be surprised if you put it up yourself."
"Maybe you should tell on me," Jaine suggested as the elevator doors opened and she stepped inside. "Try calling 1-800-WHO-CARES."
The elevator doors closed, leaving Leah standing outside them glaring at her. That was the most acrimonious exchange they'd ever had, though Leah wasn't known for the ability to get along with others. How she had ever landed a job in HR was beyond Jaine. Most of the time, she simply felt sorry for the woman.
Today wasn't one of those times.
Mondays were always the busiest day of the week in the payroll department, because that was when all the time cards for the week before were turned in. Hammerstead worked at supplying computer technology to General Motors, not at putting its own payroll system on computer. They still did it the old-fashioned way, with time cards that were punched by a clock. It was a lot of paperwork, but so far payroll had not been stopped by a software glitch or a hard-drive crash. Maybe that was why Hammer-stead hadn't upgraded: the payroll, like the mail, had to go through.
By ten o'clock, she was ready for a break. Each floor had a snack room, with the usual assortment of vending machines, cheap cafeteria tables and metal chairs, a refrigerator, a coffeemaker, and a microwave oven. There were several women and one man grouped around a single table when Jaine entered, all of the women laughing their heads off and the guy looking indignant. Jaine poured herself a much-needed cup of coffee. "What's up?" she asked.
"A special edition of the newsletter," one of the women, Dominica Flores, answered. Her eyes were wet from laughing. "This one is going down in history."
"I don't see what's so funny" said the guy, scowling. "You wouldn't," a woman said, snickering. She held out the newsletter to Jaine. "Take a look."

The company newsletter wasn't officially sanctioned, not by any stretch of the imagination. It originated from the first two floors; give that many imaginations access to desktop publishing, and it was bound to happen. The newsletter appeared at irregular intervals, and there was usually something in it that had management trying to round up all the copies.

Jaine took another sip of coffee as she took the newsletter. The guys actually did a pretty professional job of it, though with the equipment and software at their disposal, it would have been a disgrace if they hadn't. The newsletter was named The Hammerhead and a nasty- looking shark was the logo. It wasn't a hammerhead shark, but that didn't matter. The articles were set in columns, there were good graphics, and a fairly witty cartoonist who signed his work "Mako" usually poked fun at some aspect of corporate life. Today the headline was set in huge boldface letters: DO YOU MEASURE UP? Below it read, "What Women Really Want," with a tape measure coiled like a cobra ready to strike.

"Forget about it, guys," the article began. "Most of us are nonstarters. For years we've been told it's not what we've got, it's how we use it, but now we know the truth. Our expert panel of four women, friends who work here at Hammerstead, have come up with a list of their requirements for the perfect man."

Uh-oh. Jaine almost groaned, but managed to bite back the sound and show nothing but interest in her expression. Damn it, what had Marci done with that list she had written down? They would all be teased unmercifully, and this was the kind of thing that stuck forever. She could just see tape measures by the dozen turning up on her desk every morning.

Hastily she skimmed down the article. Thank God; none of their names were mentioned. They were listed as A, B, C, and D. She was still going to wring Marci's neck, but now she wouldn't have to fold, spindle, and mutilate her. The entire list was there, starting with "faithful" in the number one spot. The list wasn't bad until it hit number eight, "great in bed," but after that it deteriorated rapidly. Number nine was Marci's ten-inch requirement, complete with all their accompanying comments, including her own about the last two inches being leftovers.

Number ten had to do with how long Mr. Perfect should be able to last in bed. "Definitely longer than a television commercial," had been T.J.'s – Ms. D's – rather scathing indictment. They had settled on half an hour as the optimum length of lovemaking, not counting foreplay. "Why not?" Ms. C –

that was Jaine – was quoted as saying. "This is a fantasy, right? And a fantasy is supposed to be exactly what you want it to be. My Mr. Perfect could give me thirty minutes of thrusting time – unless you're having a quickie, in which case thirty minutes would kind of defeat the purpose."
The women were all howling with laughter, so Jaine figured some expression must be on her face. She just hoped it looked like astonishment rather than horror. The guy – she thought his name was Gary or Craig, something like that – was turning redder by the minute. "You wouldn't think it was so funny if a bunch of men said that their ideal woman had to have big boobs," he snapped, getting to his feet.
"Oh, come off it," Dominica said, still grinning. "Like men haven't gone for big boobs since their knuckles still dragged the ground. It's nice to see a little payback." Oh, great. A battle between the sexes. Jaine could just imagine the conversations going on around the building. She forced a smile as she handed back the newsletter. "I guess we're going to hear about this for a while."
"Are you kidding?" Dominica asked, grinning. "I'm going to frame my copy and hang it where my husband sees it first thing in the morning when he wakes up and last thing at night when he goes to bed!"
As soon as Jaine got back to her office, she dialed Marci's extension.
"Guess what I just saw in the newsletter," she growled, keeping her voice low.
"Oh, damn." Marci groaned aloud. "How bad is it? I haven't seen a copy yet."
"From what I read, it's pretty much verbatim. Damn it, Marci, how could you?"
"That's a quarter," Marci said automatically. "And it was an accident. I don't want to say too much here in the office, but if you can meet me for lunch, I'll tell you what happened."
"Okay. Railroad Pizza at twelve. I'll call T.J. and Luna; they'll probably want to be there, too."
"This sounds like a lynch party," Marci said mournfully. "Could be," Jaine said, and hung up.
Railroad Pizza was about half a mile from Hammerstead, which made it a popular place with the employees. They did a booming take-out business, but they also had half a dozen booths and about that many tables. Jaine got the back booth, where they would have the most privacy. Within minutes,

the other three arrived and slid into the booth, T.J. next to Jaine, Marci and Luna across from them.
"God, I'm sorry," Marci said. She looked miserable. "I can't believe you showed the list to someone!" T.J. was horrified. "If Galan ever finds out – "
"I don't see why you're so upset," Luna said, puzzled. "I mean, yeah, it'd be a little embarrassing if people found out we're the ones who made the list, but it's really kind of funny."
"Would you still think it's funny six months from now when guys are still coming up to you offering to show you that they measure up?" Jaine asked.
"Galan wouldn't think it's funny at all," T.J. said, shaking her head. "He'd kill me."
"Yeah," Marci said glumly. "Brick isn't what you'd call sensitive, but he'd get pissed that I said I wanted ten inches." She gave a weak smile. "Guess you can say he'd come up short."
"How did it happen?" T.J. asked, burying her face in her hands.
"I went shopping Saturday, and I ran into Dawna what's- her-name, you know, that Elvira look-alike on the first floor," Marci said. "We got to talking, went for a late lunch, had a couple of beers. I showed her the list, we had a good laugh, and she asked for a copy. I didn't see why not. After a few beers, I don't see why not about a lot of things. She asked a few questions, and somehow I wound up writing down everything we'd said."
Marci had an almost photographic memory. Unfortunately, a few beers didn't seem to affect her memory, just her judgment.
"At least you didn't give her our names," T.J. said. "She knows who we are," Jaine pointed out. "Marci had the list, so any idiot can figure out she's one of the four friends. Take it from there."
T.J. covered her face with her hands again. "I'm dead. Or divorced."
"I don't think anything will come of it," Luna said soothingly. "If Dawna was going to spill the beans on us, she would already have told her pals on the first floor. We're safe. Galan will never know."

CHAPTER FIVE

Jaine was on edge the rest of the day, waiting for the other shoe to drop. She couldn't imagine how nervous T.J. must have felt, because if this ever got out and Galan found out about it, he'd deal T.J. misery for the rest of her life. When it came down to the bottom line, T.J. was the one who had the most to lose. Marci was in a relationship, but at least she wasn't married to Brick. The thing Luna had going with Shamal King was on-again, off-again at best, without commitment.

Of the four, Jaine was the one who would have the least difficulty if their identities became known. She wasn't in a relationship, having given up on men, and she answered to no one but herself. She'd have to endure the teasing, but that was all.

Once she analyzed the situation and came to that conclusion, she stopped worrying so much. So what if some office clown tried to show off his wit? She could hold her own with any bozo.

Her improved mood lasted until she got home and found that BooBoo, in an attempt to impress on her how upset he was at having to stay in a strange house, had completely shredded one of the cushions on her sofa. Tufts of stuffing were scattered all over the living room. She closed her eyes and counted to ten, then to twenty. There was no point in getting angry at the cat; he probably wouldn't understand, and wouldn't care even if he did. He was as much a victim of circumstance as she was. He hissed at her when she reached for him. She usually left him alone when he did that, but in a moment of pity she scooped him up anyway and burrowed her fingers into his fur, kneading the limber muscles of his back. "Poor kitty" she crooned. "You don't know what's going on, do you?" BooBoo snarled at her, then ruined the effect by lapsing into a rumbling purr.

"Just hold on for four weeks and five days. That's thirty- three days. You can put up with me that long, can't you?" He didn't look as if he agreed, but didn't care as long as she continued kneading his back. She carried him into the kitchen and gave him a treat, then put him on the floor with a fuzzy toy mouse to battle.

Okay. The cat was trashing her house. She could cope. Her mom would be horrified at the damage and pay for it, of course, so all in all Jaine was just being a little inconvenienced.

She was impressed by her own mellowness.
She got a drink of water, and as she stood at the sink, her neighbor arrived home. At the sight of that brown Pontiac she could feel her mellowness begin to circle the drain. But the car was quiet, so evidently he had replaced the muffler. If he was trying, so could she. Mentally she put a stopper in the drain.
She watched out the window as he got out of the car and unlocked his kitchen door, which faced hers. He was wearing slacks and a white dress shirt, with a tie hanging loose around his neck and a jacket slung over his shoulder. He looked tired, and when he turned to enter the house, she saw the big black pistol in the holster on his belt. This was the first time she had seen him wearing anything except old, dirty clothes, and she felt a bit disoriented, as if the world had shifted off center. Knowing he was a cop and seeing him as a cop were two different things. The fact that he was wearing street clothes instead of a uniform meant he wasn't a patrol officer, but was at least a detective in rank.
He was still a jerk, but he was a jerk with heavy responsibilities, so maybe she could be more understanding. She had no way of knowing when he was asleep, short of knocking on his door to ask him, which kind of defeated the purpose if she didn't want to disturb him when he was sleeping. She just wouldn't mow her lawn when he was at home, period. That didn't mean she wouldn't tear a strip off his rhinoceros hide whenever he disturbed her, because fair was fair, but she would try to get along with him. After all, they would probably be neighbors for years and years.
God, that thought was depressing.
Her mellowness and charity toward all lasted… oh, a couple of hours.
At seven-thirty she settled down in her big easy chair to watch some television and read for a while. She often did both simultaneously, figuring that if anything really interesting happened on the tube, it would get her attention. A cup of green tea steamed gently at her elbow, and she antioxidized herself with an occasional sip. A loud crash destroyed the quietness of her little neighborhood.
She surged out of the chair, sliding her feet into her sandals as she ran for the front door. She knew that sound, having heard it hundreds, thousands of times in her childhood, when her dad would take her to the test sites where she watched them crash car after car. Porch lights were coming on up and down the street; doors were opening and curious heads were popping out

like turtles peeking out of their shells. Five doors down, illuminated by the corner streetlight, was a tangle of crumpled metal.
Jaine ran down the street, her heart thumping, her stomach tightening as she braced herself for whatever she might see and tried to remember the basic first aid steps. Other people were pouring out of their houses now, mostly elderly people, the women wearing bedroom slippers and shapeless dresses or robes, the men in their sleeveless undershirts. There were a few high-pitched, excited children's voices, the sound of mothers trying to keep their kids corralled, fathers saying, "Keep back, keep back, it might explode." Having seen a lot of crashes, Jaine knew an explosion wasn't likely, but fire was always a possibility. Just before she reached the car in the street, the driver's side door was thrust open and a belligerent young man erupted from behind the steering wheel.
"What the fuck!" he yelled, staring at the crumpled front end of his car. He had rear-ended one of the cars parked along the curb.
A young woman came running from the house directly beside them, her eyes wide with horror. "Omigod, omigod! My car!"
The belligerent young man rounded on her. "This your car, bitch? What the fuck you doin' parking it in the street?" He was drunk. The fumes hit Jaine's nose, and she moved back a step. Around her, she could hear the collective neighborhood concern changing to disgust.
"Someone go get Sam," she heard an old man mutter. "I will." Mrs. Kulavich headed back down the street, shuffling as fast as she could in her terry-cloth bedroom slippers.
Yeah, where was he? Jaine wondered. Everyone else who lived on the street was out here.
The young woman whose car had been smashed was crying, her hands over her mouth as she stared at the wreckage. Behind her, two young children, about five and seven, stood uncertainly on the sidewalk.
"Goddamned bitch," the drunk snarled, starting toward the young woman.
"Hey," one of the older men piped up. "Watch your language."
"Fuck you, pops." He reached the crying woman and clamped a heavy hand on her shoulder, spinning her around.
Jaine started forward, pure anger flaring in her chest. "Hey, buddy," she said sharply. "Leave her alone."
"Yeah," a quavering elderly voice said from behind her. "Fuck you, too, bitch," he said. "This stupid bitch wrecked my car."

"You wrecked your own car. You're drunk and ran into a parked car."
She knew it was a losing effort; you couldn't reason with a drunk. The problem was, the guy was just drunk enough to be aggressive and not drunk enough to be staggering. He shoved the young woman, and she stumbled backward, caught her heel on a protruding root of one of the big trees that lined the street, and sprawled on the sidewalk. She cried out, and her children screamed and began crying. Jaine charged him, bulldozing into him from the side. The impact sent him staggering. He tried to regain his balance but instead fell on his butt, his feet in the air. He struggled up and with another lurid curse lunged for Jaine. She dodged to the side and stuck out her foot. He stumbled, but this time managed to stay on his feet. This time when he turned, his chin was lowered, tucked close to his chest, and there was blood in his eyes. Oh, shit, she'd done it now.
She automatically fell into a boxing stance, learned from many fights with her brother. Those fights were years in the past, and she figured she was about to get stomped, but maybe she'd get in a few good punches.
She heard excited, alarmed voices around her, but they were oddly distant as she focused on staying alive. "Somebody call nine-one-one."
"Sadie's getting Sam. He'll handle it."
"I've already called nine-one-one." That was a little girl's voice.
The drunk charged, and this time there was no evading him. She went down under his onslaught, kicking and punching and trying to block his punches all at the same time. One of his fists hit her in the rib cage, and the power behind it stunned her. Immediately they were surrounded by her neighbors, the few younger men trying to wrestle the drunk off her, the older guys helping by kicking him with their slippered feet. Jaine and the drunk rolled, and a few of the older guys were mowed down, collapsing on top of the heap.
Her head thudded against the ground, and a glancing blow stung her cheekbone. One arm was pinned by a fallen neighbor, but with her free hand she managed to grab a chunk of flesh at the guy's waist and twist it, pinching as hard as she could. He bellowed like a wounded water buffalo. Then abruptly he was gone, lifted from her as if he weighed no more than a pillow. Dazed, she saw him slam to the ground beside her, his face mashed into the dirt as his arms were wrenched behind him and handcuffs snapped around his wrists.

She struggled to a sitting position and found herself practically nose to nose with her neighbor the jerk. "Damn it, I might have known it was you," he snarled. "I should arrest both of you on drunk and disorderly charges."
"I'm not drunk!" she said indignantly.
"No, he's drunk, and you're disorderly!"
The unfairness of his charge made her choke with rage, which was a good thing, because the words that hung in her throat probably would have gotten her arrested for real.
Around her, anxious wives were helping doddering husbands to their feet, fussing over them and checking for scrapes or broken bones. No one seemed much the worse for the fracas, and she figured the excitement would keep their hearts beating for several more years, at least. Several women were clustered around the young woman who had been shoved down, clucking and fussing. The back of the woman's head was bleeding, and her kids were still crying. In sympathy, or maybe because they were feeling left out, a couple more kids began wailing. Sirens screeched in the distance, coming closer with every second.
Crouched beside the captive drunk, holding him down with one hand, Sam looked around in disbelief. "Jesus," he muttered, shaking his head.
The old lady from across the street, her gray hair in pin curls, leaned over Jaine. "Are you all right, dear? That was the bravest thing I ever saw! You should have been here, Sam. When that… that hoodlum shoved Amy down, this young lady knocked him flat on his butt. What's your name, dear?" she asked, turning back to Jaine. "I'm Eleanor Holland; I live across the street from you."
"Jaine," she supplied, and glared at her next-door neighbor. "Yeah, Sam, you should have been here."
"I was in the shower," he growled. He paused. "Are you all right?"
"I'm fine." She scrambled to her feet. She didn't know if she was fine or not, but she didn't seem to have any broken bones and she wasn't dizzy, so there couldn't be any major damage.
He was looking at her bare legs. "Your knee is bleeding." She looked down and noticed that the left pocket of her denim shorts was almost torn off. Blood trickled down her shin from a scrape on her right knee. She jerked the torn pocket the rest of the way off and pressed the cloth to her knee. "It's just a scrape."

The cavalry in the form of two patrol cars and a fire medic truck, arrived with flashing lights. Uniformed officers began wading through the crowd, while neighbors directed the medics to the injured.
Thirty minutes later, it was all over. Wreckers had hauled the two damaged cars away, and the uniforms had hauled the drunk away. The injured young woman, lads in tow, had been taken to an emergency room to have the cut on the back of her head stitched. Minor scrapes had been cleaned and bandaged, and the elderly warriors shepherded home.
Jaine waited until the medics were gone, then peeled the huge wad of gauze and tape off her knee. Now that the excitement was over, she was exhausted; all she wanted was a hot shower, a chocolate chip cookie, and bed. She yawned as she began trudging down the street to her house.
Sam the jerk fell into step beside her. She glanced up at him, then focused straight ahead. She didn't like the look on his face or the way he loomed over her like a dark cloud. Damn, the man was big, a couple of inches, maybe three, over six feet, and with shoulders that looked a yard wide.
"Do you always jump feet first into dangerous situations?" he asked in a conversational tone.
She thought about it. "Yeah," she finally said. "Figures."
She stopped in the middle of the street and turned to face him, her hands planted on her hips. "Look, what was I supposed to do, just stand there while he beat her to a pulp?"
"You might have let a couple of the men grab him."
"Yeah, well, no one was grabbing him, so I didn't wait around."
A car turned the corner, coming toward them. He took her arm and moved her out of the street. "You're, what, five- three?" he asked, assessing her.
She scowled at him. "Five-five."
He rolled his eyes, and his expression said, Yeah, right. She ground her teeth. She was five-five – almost. What did a tiny fraction of an inch matter?
"Amy, the woman he hurt, is a good three inches taller than you and probably outweighs you by almost thirty pounds. What made you think you could handle him?"
"I didn't," she admitted.
"Didn't what? Think? That was obvious."
I can't slug a cop, she thought. I can't slug a cop. She repeated that to herself several times. Finally she managed to say, in an admirably even tone, "I

didn't think I could handle him."
"But you jumped him anyway."
She shrugged. "It was a moment of insanity."
"No argument there."
That did it. She stopped again. "Look, I've had it with your snide remarks. I stopped him from beating that woman to a pulp in front of her lads. Jumping him like that wasn't a smart thing to do, and I fully realize I could have been hurt. I'd do it again. Now carry your ass on down the street, because I don't want to walk with you."
"Tough," he said, and latched on to her arm again. She had to walk, or be dragged. Since he wouldn't let her walk home by herself, she picked up her pace. The sooner they parted company, the better.
"You in a hurry?" he asked, his grip on her arm reeling her back in and forcing her to match his more leisurely stride. "Yeah. I'm missing – " She tried to think what was on television, but drew a blank. "BooBoo's due to cough up a hair ball, and I want to be there."
"You like hair balls, huh?"
"They're more interesting than my present company," she said sweetly.
He grimaced. "Ouch."
They drew even with her house, and he had to release her. "Put ice on the knee so it won't bruise," he said. She nodded, took a few steps, then turned back to find him still standing at the end of her walk, watching her. "Thanks for getting a new muffler."
He started to say something sarcastic, she could see it in his expression, but then he shrugged and merely said, "You're welcome." He paused. "Thank you for my new trash can."
"You're welcome." They stared at each other for a moment longer, as if waiting to see which one would start the battle anew, but Jaine put an end to the standoff by turning around and going inside. She locked the door behind her and stood for a moment, looking at the cozy, already familiar, feels-like-home living room. BooBoo had been at the cushion again; more stuffing was strewn on the carpet. She sighed. "Forget the chocolate chip cookie," she said aloud. "This calls for ice cream."

CHAPTER SIX

Jaine woke up early the next morning, without benefit of clock or sun. The simple act of rolling over woke her, because every muscle in her body screamed in protest. Her ribs ached, her knee stung, her arms ached every time she moved them; even her butt was sore. She hadn't had this many aches and pains since the first time she went roller-skating.

Groaning, she eased into a sitting position and inched her legs over the side of the bed. If she felt this bad, she wondered how the old guys felt. They hadn't been punched, but the fall would have been rougher on them. Cold was better for sore muscles than heat was, but she didn't think she was brave enough to face a cold shower. She'd rather tackle a belligerent drunk any time than stand naked under a freezing blast of water. She compromised by showering in tepid water, then gradually turned the hot water completely off. Gradually working up to the cold water didn't help; she stood it for about two seconds, then climbed out of the shower much faster than she had climbed in.

Shivering, she quickly dried off and stepped into her long, blue, front-zip robe. She seldom bothered with it during the summer, but today it felt good. Getting up early had one advantage: she got to wake up BooBoo, rather than the other way around.

He didn't take kindly to having his beauty rest disturbed. The disgruntled cat hissed at her, then stalked off to find a more private place to sleep. Jaine smiled.

She didn't have to hurry that morning, since she had gotten up too early, which was good, because her sore muscles made it plain hurrying wasn't on the agenda today. She lingered over her coffee, a rare weekday treat, and instead of making do with cold cereal the way she usually did, she popped a frozen waffle into the toaster and sliced up some strawberries to go on top. After all, a woman who had been in a brawl deserved a little extra treat.

After finishing the waffle, she drank another cup of coffee and pulled up the robe to examine her scraped knee. She had put ice on it as directed, but there was still a nice large bruise, and her entire knee was stiff and sore. She couldn't loll around all day on a pile of ice packs, so she popped a couple of aspirin and resigned herself to discomfort for a couple of days.

Her first real surprise of the day came when she began dressing and put on a bra. As soon as she fastened the front hook, tightening the band around her sore rib cage, she knew the bra had to go. Standing in front of her closet, naked except for her panties, she faced another dilemma: what did a braless woman wear if she didn't want anyone to know she was braless?

Even in an air-conditioned office, the weather was too hot for her to keep a jacket on all day. She had some pretty dresses, but her nipples would be plainly outlined beneath the thin fabrics. Hadn't she read something once about Band-Aids over the nipples? Anything was worth a try. She got two Band-Aids, plastered them over her nipples, then pulled on one of the dresses and examined herself in the mirror. The Band-Aids were clearly outlined. Okay, that didn't work. Plain surgical tape might do the trick, but she didn't have any. Besides, the dress revealed her scraped knee, and it looked gross. She peeled off the Band-Aids and went back to examining the contents of her closet.

In the end she settled on a long hunter green skirt and a white knit top that she covered with a cadet blue silk shirt. She knotted the shirttails at her waist, put on blue and green stretchy bead bracelets, and was rather impressed when she consulted her mirror.

"Not bad," she said, turning to examine the result. "Not bad at all."

Luckily her hair was no problem. It was thick and glossy, a nice dark reddish brown, and had plenty of body. Her current style was a sort of modified shag that required no more than brushing, which was good, because raising her arms made her ribs hurt. She made short work of the brushing.

But there was a bruise on her cheekbone. She scowled in the mirror and gingerly touched the small blue spot. It wasn't sore, but it was definitely blue. She seldom did a full makeup job – why waste it on work? – but today she would have to bring out the big guns.

By the time she sashayed out the door in her chic serendipitous outfit and with full battle paint in place, she thought she looked pretty damn good.

The jerk – Sam – was unlocking his car door when she stepped out. She turned and took her time locking the door behind her, hoping he would simply get into his car and leave, but no such luck.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice right behind her, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. Stifling a shriek, she whirled. Bad move. Her ribs protested; she gave an involuntary groan and dropped her keys.

"Damn it!" she shouted, when she could breathe again. "Stop sneaking up on me like that!"
"It's the only way I know," he said, his face expressionless. "If I waited until you turned around, I wouldn't be sneaking." He paused. "You cussed."
As if she needed him to point that out. Fuming, she dug in her purse for a quarter and slapped it in his hand. He blinked as he looked down at the quarter. "What's this for?"
"Because I swore. I have to pay a quarter when I'm caught. That's how I'm motivating myself to stop."
"Then you owe me a hell of a lot more than a quarter. You said a couple of words last night."
She curled her lip at him. "You can't go back into the past and collect. I'd have to empty out my bank account. You have to catch me at the time."
"Yeah, well, I did. Saturday, when you were mowing your lawn. You didn't pay me then."
Silently, her teeth gritted together, she dug out another quarter.
He looked extremely smug as he pocketed his fifty cents. Any other time she might have laughed, but she was still mad at him for scaring her. Her ribs hurt, and when she tried to stoop down to retrieve her keys, they hurt even more. Not only that, her knee refused to bend. She straightened and gave him a look of such frustrated fury that one corner of his mouth twitched. If he laughs, she thought, I'm going to lock him under the chin. Since she was still standing on her stoop, the angle was perfect. He didn't laugh. Cops were probably taught to be cautious. He bent down to pick up her keys. "The knee won't bend, huh?"
"Neither will the ribs," she said grumpily, taking the keys and easing down the three steps.
His brows lowered. "What's wrong with your ribs?"
"He landed a punch."
He blew out an exasperated breath. "Why didn't you say something last night?"
"Why? They're not broken, just bruised."
"You know this for a fact, huh? You don't think maybe they could be cracked?"
"They don't feel cracked."
"And you have so much experience with cracked ribs you know how they feel."

She set her jaw. "They're my ribs, and I say they're not cracked. End of discussion."
"Tell me something," he said conversationally, strolling beside her as she stalked, as best as she was able, to her car. "Is there ever a day when you don't pick a fight?"
"The days when I don't see you," she shot back. "And you started it! I was prepared to be a nice neighbor, but you snarled at me every time you saw me, even though I apologized when BooBoo got on your car. Besides, I thought you were a drunk."
He stopped, surprise etched on his face. "A drunk?"
"Bloodshot eyes, dirty clothes, getting home in the wee hours of the morning, making a lot of noise, grouchy all the time as if you had a hangover… what else was I to think?" He rubbed his face. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking. I should have showered, shaved, and dressed in a suit before I came out to tell you that you were making enough noise to raise the dead."
"Just grabbing a clean pair of jeans would have sufficed." She unlocked the Viper and began to consider another problem: how was she going to get into the low-slung little rocket?
"I'm refinishing my kitchen cabinets," he offered after a short pause. "With the hours I've been working lately, I'm having to do it a little at a time, and sometimes I fall asleep with my dirty clothes on."
"Did you ever think of leaving the cabinets until your off days and getting a little more sleep? It might help your disposition."
"There's nothing wrong with my disposition."
"No, not if it belongs to a rabid skunk." She opened the car door, stowed her purse inside, and tried to psych herself up for the effort of sliding behind the wheel. "Hot set of wheels," he said, looking the Viper over. "Thanks." She glanced at his Pontiac and didn't say anything. Sometimes silence was more charitable than words.
He saw the glance and grinned. She wished he hadn't done that; the grin made him look almost human. She wished they weren't standing out in the early morning sun, because she could see how dense his black eyelashes were and the rich brown striations in his dark eyes. Okay, so he wasn't a bad-looking man, when his eyes weren't red and he wasn't snarling.
Suddenly his eyes went cold. He reached out and gently rubbed his thumb along her cheekbone. "You have a bruise there."

"Da – " She caught herself before the word slipped out. "Darn it, I thought I had it covered."
"You did a good job. I didn't see it until you were standing in the sun." He crossed his arms and scowled down at her. "Any other injuries?"
"Just sore muscles." She looked ruefully at the car. "I've been dreading having to get in the car."
He looked at the car, then at her as she gripped the open door and slowly, painfully lifted her right leg and eased it inside. He blew out a breath, as if steeling himself to perform an unpleasant task, and held her arm to steady her as she inched her way under the wheel.
"Thanks," she said, relieved the task was over. "Sure." He crouched down in the open door. "You want to file charges for assault?"
She pursed her lips. "I hit him first."
She thought he might be fighting another grin. God, she hoped he won; she didn't want to see another one so soon. She might start thinking he was human. "There is that," he agreed. He stood up and started to close the car door for her. "A massage will help the soreness. And a steam bath."
She gave him an outraged look. "Steam? You mean I had a cold shower this morning for nothing?"
He began laughing, and she really, really wished he hadn't done that. He had a nice deep laugh and very white teeth. "Cold is good, too. Try alternating heat and cold to loosen up. And get a massage if you can."
She didn't think Hammerstead had a spa hidden anywhere on the premises, but she might call around and book one for this afternoon when she got off work. She nodded. "Good idea. Thanks."
He nodded and closed the door, stepping back. Lifting one hand in a wave, he walked to his car. Before he even got the door open, Jaine had the Viper purring down the street.
So maybe she could get along with him, she thought, smiling a little. He and his handcuffs had certainly come in handy the night before.
Despite lingering to talk to him, she was still early to work, which gave her time to ease out of the car. Today the sign above the elevator buttons said: FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION; IT'S BUNDLED WITH YOUR SOFTWARE. Somehow she thought management would frown more on that than on the sign from the day before, but all the geeks and nerds on the first two floors probably thought it was hilarious. The office gradually filled. The conversation that morning was exclusively about the article in

the newsletter, split fifty-fifty between the contents and speculation about the identity of the four women. Most were of the opinion the entire article was the brainchild of the author, that the four friends were fictitious, which suited Jaine just fine. She kept her mouth shut and her fingers crossed. "I scanned the article and sent it to my cousin in Chicago," she overheard someone say as he walked past in the hallway. She was fairly certain he wasn't talking about an article in the Detroit News.

Great. It was spreading.

Because she winced at just the thought of having to get into and out of the car several times to go to lunch, she made do with peanut butter crackers and a soft drink in the snack room. She could have asked T.J. or one of the others to bring her back something for lunch, but didn't feel like going into explanations of why she had problems getting into her car. Saying she tackled a drunk would sound like bragging, when in truth she had simply been too angry to think about what she was doing. Leah Street entered and took her neatly packed lunch out of the refrigerator. She had a sandwich (turkey breast and lettuce on whole wheat), a cup of vegetable soup (which she heated in the microwave), and an orange. Jaine sighed, torn between hate and envy. How could you like someone who was so organized? People like Leah, she thought, were put on earth to make everyone else look inefficient. If she had thought, she could have packed her own lunch instead of having to make do with peanut butter crackers and a diet soda.

"May I join you?" Leah asked, and Jaine felt a twinge of guilt. Since they were the only two people in the snack room, she should have asked Leah to sit down. Most people at Hammer-stead would simply have sat down, but maybe Leah had been made to feel unwelcome often enough that she felt she had to ask.

"Sure," Jaine said, trying to infuse some warmth into her voice. "I'd like the company." If she were Catholic, she'd definitely have to confess that one; it was an even bigger whopper than saying her father didn't know anything about cars.

Leah got her nutritious, attractive meal arranged and sat down at the table. She took a small bite of the sandwich and chewed daintily, blotted her mouth, then ate an equally small spoonful of soup, after which she blotted her mouth again. Jaine watched, mesmerized. She imagined the Victorians must have had the same table manners. Her own manners were good, but Leah made her feel like a barbarian.

After a moment Leah said, "I suppose you saw that disgusting newsletter yesterday."
Disgusting was one of Leah's favorite words, Jaine had noticed.
"I assume you mean that article," she said, because it seemed pointless to dance around. "I glanced at it. I didn't read the entire thing."
"People like that make me ashamed to be a woman." Well, that was going a little too far. Jaine knew she should leave it alone, because Leah was Leah and nothing was going to change her. But some little demon inside – okay, the same demon that always prompted her to open her mouth when she should keep it shut – made her say, "Why is that? I thought they were honest."
Leah put down her sandwich and gave Jaine an outraged look. "Honest? They sounded like whores. All they wanted in a man was money and a big… a big…"
"Penis," Jaine supplied, since Leah didn't seem to know the word. 'And I don't think that was all they wanted. I seem to remember something about fidelity and dependability, sense of humor – "
Leah dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "Believe that if you want, but the entire point of the whole article was sex and money. It was obvious. It was also vicious and cruel, because just think how it made men who didn't have a lot of money and a big… thing – "
"Penis," Jaine interrupted. "It's called a penis." Leah pressed her lips together. "Some things aren't meant to be discussed in public, but I've noticed before you have a potty mouth."
"I do not!" Jaine said heatedly. "I admit I swear sometimes, but I'm trying to stop, and penis isn't a dirty word; it's the correct word for a body part, just like saying 'leg.' Or do you have an objection to legs, too?"
Leah gripped the edge of the table with both hands, holding so tightly her knuckles turned white. She took a deep breath. "As I was saying, think how it made those men feel. They must think they aren't good enough, that they're somehow inferior."
"Some of them are," Jaine muttered. She should know. She had been engaged to three of the inferior ones, and she wasn't thinking about their genitals, either. "No one should be made to feel that way," Leah said, her voice rising. She took another bite of sandwich, and Jaine saw, to her surprise, that the other woman's hands were shaking. She was genuinely upset.

"Look, I think most people who read the article thought it was funny," she said in a conciliatory tone. "It was obviously meant to be a humorous piece."
"I don't feel that way at all. It was filthy, ugly, and mean- spirited."
So much for conciliation. "I don't agree," Jaine said flatly, gathering up her trash and depositing it in a can. "I think people see what they expect to see. Someone who's mean expects others to be just as mean, the way people with dirty minds see smut everywhere."
Leah went white, then red. "Are you saying I'm dirty- minded?"
"Take it any way you like." Jaine went back to her office before their little disagreement escalated into open warfare. What was wrong with her lately? First her neighbor, and now Leah. She didn't seem able to get along with anyone, not even BooBoo. Of course, no one got along with Leah, so she didn't know if that should count, but she was definitely going to make a bigger effort to get along with Sam. So he rubbed her the wrong way; she had evidently been doing a good job of rubbing him the wrong way, too. The problem was, she was out of practice in getting along with men; since the breakup of her third engagement, she had been off men in a big way. But what woman wouldn't be, with her history? Three engagements and three breakups by the time she was twenty-three wasn't a good track record. It wasn't that she was dog food; she had a mirror, and the mirror reflected a slim, pretty woman with almost-dimples in her cheeks and an almost-cleft in her chin. She had been popular in high school, so popular that she had gotten engaged to Brett, the star pitcher on the baseball team, in her senior year. But she had wanted to go to college and Brett had wanted to give baseball a shot, and somehow they had just drifted apart. Brett's baseball career had been a nonstarter, too. Then there was Alan. She had been twenty-one, fresh out of college. Alan had waited until the night before the wedding, rehearsal night, to let her know he was in love with an ex-girlfriend and he had only gone with Jaine to prove he was really over the ex, but it hadn't worked, sorry, no hard feelings.
Sure. In your dreams, bastard.
After Alan she had eventually become engaged to Warren, but maybe she had been too gun-shy by then to truly commit herself. For whatever reason, after he asked and she said yes, they both seemed to pull back and the relationship had kind of died a slow death. They had both been grateful to finally bury the thing.

She supposed she could have gone ahead and married Warren, despite the lack of heat on both their parts, but she was glad she hadn't. What if they had had children, then split? If she ever did have children, Jaine wanted it to be in a solid marriage, the land her parents had. She had never thought the demise of her engagements was her fault; two had been mutual decisions, and one had definitely been Alan's fault, but… was something wrong with her? She didn't seem to inspire lust, much less devotion, in the men she had dated.

She was jerked out of her unhappy thoughts when T.J. stuck her head in the office door. T.J. looked pale. "A reporter for the News is here talking to Dawna," she blurted. "God, you don't think –?"

T.J. looked at Jaine; Jaine looked at T.J.

"Ah, hell," Jaine said in disgust, and T.J. was so upset she didn't even demand her quarter.

That night, Corin stared at the newsletter, reading and rereading the article. It was filth, pure filth. His hands were shaking, making the little words dance. Didn't they know how this hurt? How could they laugh? He wanted to throw the newsletter away, but he couldn't. Anguish gnawed at him. He couldn't believe he actually worked with the people who had said all these hurtful things, who mocked and terrorized – He took a deep breath. He had to control himself. That was what the doctors said. Just take the pills, and control yourself. And he did. He had been good, very good, for a long time now. Sometimes he even managed to forget himself.

But not now. He couldn't forget now. This was too important.

Who were they?

He needed to know. He had to know.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was like having the Sword of Damocles hanging over her head, Jaine thought gloomily the next morning. It hadn't dropped yet, but she knew it would. The "when" depended on how long it took Dawna to spill the beans that she had gotten the list from Marci. Once Marci's identity was known, they might as well all start wearing signs that said, "I'm guilty."

Poor T.J. was worried sick, and if Jaine had been married to Galan Yother, she would probably have been worried sick, too. How could something that had been innocent fun between four friends have turned into something that might break up a marriage?

She hadn't slept well, again. She had taken more aspirin for her sore muscles, soaked in a hot tub, and by the time she went to bed, she was feeling much more comfortable. Fretting about that darn article kept her awake long past her usual bedtime, and woke her before dawn. She positively dreaded getting the morning paper, and as for going to work – she would rather wrestle another drunk. On loose gravel.

She drank coffee and watched the sky lighten. BooBoo had evidently forgiven her for waking him again, because he sat beside her washing his paws and purring whenever she absently scratched behind his ears.

What then happened wasn't her fault. She was standing at the sink rinsing out her cup when the kitchen light in the house across the way flicked on and Sam walked into view.

She stopped breathing. Her lungs seized, and she stopped breathing.

"Sweet baby Jesus," she croaked, and managed to inhale. She was seeing more of Sam than she had ever thought she would; everything, in fact. He stood in front of the refrigerator, stark naked. She barely had time to admire his buns before he took a bottle of orange juice from the fridge, twisting off the top and tilting it to his mouth as he turned around.

She forgot all about his buns. He was more impressive coming – no pun intended – than he was going, and that was saying something, because his butt was severely cute. The man was hung.

"My God, BooBoo," she gasped. "Take a look at that!" The fact was, Sam looked pretty damn good all over. He was tall, lean in the waist, hard-muscled. She wrenched her gaze north just a little and saw that he had a

nice, hairy chest. She already knew he had a good face, if a bit battered. Sexy dark eyes, white teeth, and a good laugh. And he was hung.
She pressed a hand to her chest. Her heart was doing more than pitter-pattering; it was trying to sledgehammer its way through her sternum. Other parts of her body were joining in the excitement. In a moment of insanity, she thought about running right over to audition as his mattress.
Oblivious of the tumult going on inside her, as well as the heart-stopping view across the way, BooBoo continued licking his feet. His priorities were obviously a real mess. Jaine gripped the sink to keep from folding in a limp heap on the floor. It was a good thing she was off men, or she really might have charged across the two driveways and right up to his kitchen door. But off men or not, she still appreciated art, and her neighbor was a work of art, hovering somewhere between classic Grecian statue and porn star.
She hated to do it, but she had to tell him to close his curtains; it was the neighborly thing to do, right? Blindly, not wanting to miss a moment of the show, she reached for the phone, then paused. Not only did she not know his number, she didn't even know his last name. Some neighbor she was; she had lived here two and a half weeks and still hadn't introduced herself to him, though if he was any kind of a cop, he had found out her name. Of course, he hadn't rushed over to introduce himself, either. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Kulavich, she wouldn't have known his first name was Sam.
She wasn't stymied, though. She had written down the Kulavich's phone number on the pad by the phone, and she managed to tear her gaze from the spectacle next door long enough to read it. She punched in their number, and belatedly worried that they might not be awake yet. Mrs. Kulavich answered on the first ring. "Hello!" she chirped so enthusiastically Jaine knew she hadn't woken them.
"Hi, Mrs. Kulavich, it's Jaine Bright, next door. How are you?" Social niceties had to be observed, after all, and with the older generation that could take a while. She was hoping for ten or fifteen minutes. She watched as Sam killed the bottle of orange juice and tossed the empty. "Oh, Jaine! It's so nice to hear from you!" Mrs. Kulavich said, as if she had been out of the country or something. Mrs. Kulavich was evidently one of those people who talked in exclamation points when she was on the phone. "We're fine, just fine! And you?"
"Fine," she answered automatically, not missing a minute of the action. Now he was getting out the milk. Eewwh! Surely he wasn't going to mix

orange juice and milk. He opened the milk and sniffed it. His biceps bulged as his arm lifted. "My, oh, my," she whispered. Evidently the milk didn't pass muster, because he jerked his head back and set the carton aside.
"What was that?" Mrs. Kulavich said.
"Uh – I said fine, just fine." Jaine wrenched her attention from its wayward path. "Mrs. Kulavich, what is Sam's last name? I need to call him about something." That was an understatement.
"Donovan, dear. Sam Donovan. But I have his number here. It's the same number his grandparents had. I'm so glad, because that way I can remember it. It's easier to get older than it is to get wiser, you know." She laughed at her own wit.
Jaine laughed, too, though she didn't know at what. She groped for a pencil. Mrs. Kulavich slowly recited the number, and Jaine jotted it down, which wasn't easy to do without looking at what she was writing. Her neck muscles were locked in the upright position, so she had no choice but to look through the kitchen window next door. She thanked Mrs. Kulavich and said good-bye, then took a deep breath. She had to do this. No matter how it hurt, how it would deprive her, she had to call him. She took another deep breath and dialed his number. She saw him cross the kitchen and pick up a cordless. He was standing in profile to her. Oh, wow. Double wow.
Saliva gathered in her mouth. The damn man had her all but slobbering.
"Donovan."
His deep voice was rusty, as if he wasn't truly awake yet, and the single word clipped with irritation. "Urn… Sam?"
"Yeah?"
Not the most welcoming of responses. She tried to swallow and found it was difficult to do when her tongue was hanging out. She reeled it in and sighed with regret. "This is Jaine, next door. I hate to tell you this, but you might want to… close your curtains."
He wheeled to face the window, and they stared at each other across the two driveways. He didn't dart to the side, or squat out of sight, or do anything else that might indicate embarrassment. Instead, he grinned. Damn, she wished he wouldn't do that.
"Got an eyeful, did you?" he asked as he walked to the window and reached for the curtains.
"Yes, I did." She hadn't blinked in five minutes, at least. "Thank you." He pulled the curtains together, and her whole body went into mourning.

"My pleasure." He chuckled. "Maybe you can return the favor sometime." He hung up before she could reply, which was a good thing, because she was speechless as she closed her blinds. Mentally she smacked her forehead. Duh! All she would have had to do at any time was close her own blinds.

"Yeah, like I'm stupid or something," she said to BooBoo. The image of taking her clothes off for him shook her – and excited her. What was she, an exhibitionist? She never had been in the past, but now… Her nipples were hard, standing out like raspberries, and as for the rest of her… Well. She had never gone in for casual sex, but this sudden lust for Sam the jerk, of all people, floored her. How could he go from jerk to tempting just by taking off his clothes?

"Am I so shallow?" she asked BooBoo, and considered the idea for a moment, then nodded. "You betcha." BooBoo meowed, evidently in agreement.

Oh, dear. How could she look at Sam again without remembering how he looked naked? How could she meet him without blushing or letting him see that she had a major case of the hots for his body? She was much more comfortable having him as an adversary than she was seeing him as an object of lust. She preferred her lust objects at a safer distance… say, on a movie screen. He hadn't been embarrassed, though, so why should she? They were both adults, right? She had seen naked men before. She just had never seen Sam naked before. Why couldn't he have had a beer belly and a shriveled wiener, instead of rock-hard abs and an impressive morning erection?

She began drooling again.

"This is disgusting," she said aloud. "I'm thirty years old, not a teenager screaming over… whoever it is they scream over now. I should at least be able to control my saliva glands."

Her saliva glands thought differently. Every time an image of Sam popped into her head, which was about every ten seconds – she had to enjoy the image for about nine seconds before she banished it – she would have to swallow. Repeatedly.

She had left for work early yesterday morning, when Sam had been leaving at the same time. If she left at her regular time today, he should already be gone, right? But he'd said he was on a task force and kept irregular hours, therefore he might leave at any time. She couldn't time her departure so it

didn't coincide with his; she would have to carry on as usual and keep her fingers crossed. Maybe tomorrow she would be able to face him with more composure, but not today, not with her body revved and her saliva glands working overtime. She should just forget about it and get ready for work.
She stood in front of her open closet door and found herself in a dilemma. What did one wear when she might meet her neighbor whom she had just seen naked? Thank God for the scrape on her knee, she finally decided. It was pants or long skirts until the knee healed, which prevented her from sashaying out in the black, above-the- knee sheath with spaghetti straps that she usually wore to parties when she wanted to look sleek and sophisticated. The black sheath made a statement, something along the lines of "Look at me, don't I look sexy," but was definitely inappropriate for work. The scraped knee saved her from a major faux pas.
Better to err on the side of caution, she finally decided, and chose the most severe man-tailored pants outfit she owned. Never mind that she had always liked the way the pants clung to her butt, or that it never failed to elicit a few admiring remarks from the male contingent at work; she wasn't going to see Sam today. He had to be even more uncomfortable about what had happened than she was. If anyone avoided anyone, he would avoid her. Would a man who was embarrassed have flashed her that wicked grin? He knew he looked good; better than good, damn it.
In an effort to get her mind off exactly how good he looked, she turned on the television to catch the morning news while she dressed and did her makeup.
She was applying cover-up stick to the bruise on her cheekbone when the female anchor of the local morning newscast said in a chirpy voice, "Freud never found out what it is that women want. If he had talked to four area women, however, he would have known the answer to his famous question. Find out if your husband or boyfriend is Mr. Perfect when we return, after these messages." Jaine was so stunned she couldn't even think of a curse word to say. Her legs suddenly weak, she sank down on the closed toilet seat. Dawna, the bitch, must have given them up immediately. No – if she had named names, the phone would have been ringing nonstop. So far they were still anonymous, but that was bound to change today. She hurried into the bedroom and dialed T.J.'s number, silently praying that her friend hadn't yet left for work. T.J. lived farther out than Jaine did, so she left home a little earlier.

"Hello." T.J. sounded rushed, and a little irritable. "It's Jaine. Have you seen the news yet this morning?"
"No, why?"
"Mr. Perfect made the news."
"Oh. My. God." T.J. sounded as if she might faint, or vomit, or both.
"They don't have our names yet, I don't think, since no one has called. Someone at Hammerstead will figure it out today, though, so that means by afternoon it'll be common knowledge."
"But it won't be on TV, will it? Galan always watches the news."
"Who knows?" Jaine rubbed her forehead. "I guess it depends on how slow news is today. But if I were you, I'd turn off all the phones and unplug the one that's hooked to the answering machine."
"Done," T.J. said. She paused and said bleakly, "I guess I'll find out if Galan and I have anything worth holding on to, won't I? I can't expect him to be happy about this, but I do expect him to be understanding. After we talked about our Mr. Perfect last week, I did some thinking, and, well…" And Galan hadn't compared very favorably, Jaine thought. "On second thought," T.J. said very quietly, "I'm not going to turn off the phones. If it's going to happen, I'd rather just get it over with."
After she hung up, Jaine hurried to finish getting ready. The quick phone call hadn't taken long, and the television commercials were just ending. The newscaster's perky voice made her flinch.
"Four area women have gone public with their list of requirements for the perfect man…"
Three minutes later, Jaine closed her eyes and sagged weakly against the vanity. Three minutes! Three minutes was an eternity of airtime. Of all the days for there to be no shootings or accidents blocking the freeways or a war, a famine – anything to keep such an insignificant story off the air!
The news story had stopped short of the raunchy requirements, but made sure the viewers knew they could get the List, as it was being called, and the accompanying article, in their entirety, on the station's Web site. Women and men had been interviewed for their reaction to items on the List. Everyone seemed to agree with the first five requirements, but after that opinions began to vary widely – usually with women taking one view and men the other. Maybe if she took a week's vacation, starting immediately, this would all have blown over by the time she got back from Outer Mongolia.

But that would be the coward's way out. If T.J. needed supporting, Jaine knew she had to be there for her. Marci could also be facing the end of a relationship, but in Jaine's opinion, losing Brickhead wouldn't be much of a loss, and besides, Marci deserved some flack for spilling this whole thing to Dawna in the first place. With dread weighting down her every step, she forced herself out to the car. As she unlocked it, she heard a door open behind her and automatically glanced over her shoulder. For a moment she stared blankly at Sam as he turned to lock his kitchen door; then memory came roaring back, and in panic she fumbled with the door handle.
Nothing like a little notoriety to make a woman forget she wanted to avoid a certain man, she thought savagely. Had he been watching for her?
"Are you feeling better today?" he asked as he strolled up. "Fine." She half-tossed her purse into the passenger seat and slid under the wheel.
"Don't put it there," he advised. "When you stop at traffic lights, anyone can come up, pop the window, grab the purse, and be gone before you know what's happening." She grabbed her sunglasses and slid them on, pathetically grateful for the protection they gave her as she dared to glance at him. "Where should I put it, then?"
"In the trunk is the safest place."
"That isn't very convenient."
He shrugged. The movement made her notice how broad his shoulders were, and that reminded her of other parts of his body. Heat began to build in her cheeks. Why couldn't he have been a drunk? Why wasn't he still wearing sweatpants and a stained, torn T-shirt, instead of oatmeal slacks and a midnight blue silk shirt? A cream-and-blue- and-crimson tie was knotted loosely at his strong throat, and he carried a jacket in one hand. That big black pistol rested in a holster against his right kidney. He looked tough and competent, and way too good for her peace of mind.
"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you this morning," he said. "I was still half-asleep and wasn't paying attention to the windows."
She managed a nonchalant shrug. "I wasn't embarrassed. Accidents happen." She wanted to leave, but he was standing so close she couldn't shut the door. He hunkered down in the V formed by the car and the open door. "Are you sure you're okay? You haven't insulted me yet, and we've been talking" – he glanced at his watch – "about thirty seconds already."
"I'm in a mellow mood," she said flatly. "I'm saving my energy in case something important comes along." He grinned. "That's my girl. I feel better

now." He reached out and lightly touched her cheekbone. "The bruise is gone."
"No, it isn't. Makeup is a wonderful thing."
"So it is." His finger trailed down to the dent in her chin and lightly tapped it before withdrawing. Jaine sat frozen, ambushed by the abrupt realization that he was flirting with her, for God's sake, and her heart was doing that sledgehammer thing again.
Oh, boy.
"Don't kiss me," she said warningly, because he seemed somehow closer, though she hadn't seen him move, and his gaze was centered on her face in that intent look men get before they make their move.
"I don't intend to," he replied, smiling a little. "I don't have my whip and chair with me." He stood up and stepped back, his hand on the car door to close it. He paused, looking down at her. "Besides, I don't have time right now. We both have to get to work, and I don't like rush jobs. I'll need a couple of hours, at least."
She knew she should keep her mouth shut. She knew she should just close the car door and drive away. Instead she said blankly, "A couple of hours?"
"Yeah." He gave her another of those slow, dangerous smiles. "Three hours would be even better, because I figure that when I do kiss you, we'll both end up naked."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Oh," Jaine muttered to herself as she drove to work on autopilot, which in Detroit traffic was more than a little hazardous. "Oh?" What kind of snappy comeback was that? Why hadn't she said something like "In your dreams, buddy," or "My goodness, did hell freeze over while I wasn't looking?" Why hadn't she said anything except oh, for cripes sake. She could do better than that in her sleep. She hadn't said it nonchalantly, as if she had been asking for information and the answer wasn't very interesting. No, that damn syllable had been so weak it didn't even register on the Wuss-O-Meter. Now he'd think all he had to do was waltz over to her house and she'd fall on her back for him. The worst part of it was, he might be right.

No. No, no, no, no, no. She didn't do casual, and she wasn't good at serious, so that pretty much took care of the romance department. No way was she going to have a fling with the next-door neighbor, whom only yesterday – or was it the day before? – she had thought of as "the jerk".

She didn't even like him. Well, not much. She definitely admired the way he had slammed that drunk facedown on the ground. There were times when brute force was the only satisfying response; she had felt extremely satisfied, seeing the drunk smashed into the dirt and handled as easily as if he'd been a child.

Was there anything else she liked about Sam, other than his body – that was a given – and his ability to manhandle drunks? She thought for a moment. There was also something appealing about a man who refinished his cabinets, though she couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was; a touch of domestication, maybe? He definitely needed something to offset all that macho swagger. Except he didn't swagger; he strolled. He didn't have to swagger when he wore a pistol as big as a hair dryer on his belt. As far as phallic symbols went, he pretty much had that aced – not that he needed a symbol with the real deal he had right there in his pants… She clenched her hands on the steering wheel, trying to control her breathing. She turned on the air-conditioning and adjusted the vents so the cold air blew on her face. Her nipples felt tight, and she knew if she checked, she'd find they were standing up like little soldiers. Okay. What she was dealing with here was a major case of the hots. The fact was there, and she had to face it, which meant she had to be a sane, intelligent adult about this and get on birth control pills as fast as possible. Her period was due any day, which was

good; she could get the pills and get started on them almost immediately. Not that she would tell him. The pills were just a precaution, in case her hormones overruled her gray matter. Such a silly thing had never happened before, but then she had never before practically had a meltdown at the sight of a man's sticky-out part, either.

What in hell was wrong with her? she wondered wrathfully. She'd seen sticky-out parts before. Granted, Sam's was impressive, but as an intensely curious young woman in college she'd seen a couple of porn films, flipped through the occasional Play-girl, so she'd seen bigger. Besides, for all the fun they'd had talking about their Mr. Perfect and how big his penis had to be, the penis wasn't nearly as important as the man to whom it was attached. Mr. Perfect. Memory returned like a slap in the face. Damn, how could she have forgotten?

The same way she had earlier forgotten about Sam and his Mr. Happy because she'd been preoccupied with the silly newscast, that was how. As distractions, both subjects ranked right up there with, say, her house burning down.

Today should be fairly quiet, she thought. Out of the eight hundred and forty-three people who worked at Hammerstead, the odds were several of the people who knew them had seen the newscast and would guess their identities. Someone would directly ask Dawna, she would spill the rest of the beans, and the information would flash over the entire building with the speed of E-mail. But as long as that information was contained to Hammerstead, T.J. had at least a chance of keeping Galan from finding out. He didn't socialize much with his wife's coworkers, except for his obligatory attendance at the company Christmas party, where he stood around looking bored. Surely there would be something more important that would happen today, locally if not nationally. These were the dreaded dog days of summer, when Congress wasn't in session and all the senators and representatives either had gone home or were junketing around the world, so there wasn't much national news unless there was some sort of catastrophe. She didn't want a plane to crash or anything like that, but maybe something that didn't involve loss of life could happen.

She began praying for a stomach-churning stock market dip – so long as the market began recovering by the end of the day, of course. Another roller-coaster ride before the market suddenly surged to an all-time high would be

nice. That should keep the newscasters occupied long enough for Mr. Perfect to be forgotten.
As soon as she pulled up to the gate at Hammerstead, though, she saw that her expectation of a quiet day had been optimistic. Three television news vans were parked off to the side. Three scruffy-looking men with Minicams were each filming one of three individuals, a man and two women, who stood in front of the fence with Hammerstead in the background. The three reporters were spaced far enough apart that they didn't intrude on each other's shots, and they were talking earnestly into their microphones.
Jaine's stomach made a dive. She still had hope, though; the stock market hadn't opened yet.
"What's going on?" were the first words she heard when she entered the building. Two men were walking down the hall ahead of her. "What's with the TV crews? Have we been bought out or closed down, or something?"
"Didn't you watch the news this morning?"
"Didn't have time."
"Seems some of the women who work here have come up with their own definition of Mr. Perfect. All of the television stations are running it as a human-interest feature, I guess."
"So what's their definition of Mr. Perfect? Someone who always puts the lid down on the John?"
Whoops, Jaine thought. They had forgotten that one. "No, from what I heard it was the usual Boy Scout junk: faithful and honest and helps old ladies across the street, shit like that."
"Hey, I can do that," the first man said in a tone of discovery.
"Then why don't you?"
"I didn't say I wanted to."
They laughed together. Jaine entertained herself with a wonderful fantasy of punting both of them through the door ahead, but was content with asking, "Are you saying you're unfaithful? What a winner!"
They both looked around as if startled to see her there, but they had to have heard the door opening and someone walking behind them, so she didn't fall for the innocent act. She knew their faces but not their names; they were junior management types, late twenties or early thirties, spiffed up in their French blue dress shirts and conservative ties. "Sorry," the first man said in insincere apology. "We didn't see you."

"Right," she said, rolling her eyes. Then she caught herself; she didn't need to get involved in these conversations. Let this particular battle of the sexes be waged without her; the less attention she and the other three drew, the better for them.

In silence she and the two men strode to the elevators. There was no sign posted there today, making her feel deprived. Marci, looking tense, was waiting for her in the office. "I guess you saw the news," she said to Jaine.

Jaine nodded. "I called T.J. and gave her a heads-up."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am this has happened," Marci said, lowering her voice as someone walked by the open door.

"I know," Jaine said, sighing. There wasn't any point in staying pissed at Marci; what was done was done. And this wasn't the end of the world, not even for T.J. If Galan found out about it and went so ballistic that he and T.J. ended up divorced, then the marriage wasn't very strong anyway.

"Dawna gave them my name," Marci continued. "The phone drove me nuts all morning. All the stations want interviews, and so does the News." She paused. "Did you see the article this morning?"

Jaine had totally forgotten about the morning paper; the peep show next door had been too distracting. She shook her head. "I haven't read the paper yet."

"It was actually pretty cute. It was in the section where they always put recipes and things like that, so maybe not many people read it."

That was good to hear; it was being treated as human interest rather than news, and a lot of people never read what was still thought of as the "women's section." Unless an animal was involved, or a baby, human-interest stories tended to fade fast. This one had already lived past its natural life span.

"Are you going to talk to them? The news people, I mean." Marci shook her head. "No way. If it was just me, yeah, I'd have a little fun – so what if Brick gets his drawers in a wad? But with you guys involved, it's different."

"T.J.'s the one with the big worry. I thought about it yesterday, and I don't have anything to lose if my name gets out there, so don't fret about me. Luna didn't seem worried, either. But T.J. – " Jaine shook her head. "That's a problem."

"Big time. Personally, I don't think it would be much of a loss if she and Galan split, but I'm not her, and she probably thinks the same about Brick."

Marci grinned. "Shit, most of the time I think the same about him." No argument there, Jaine thought.
Gina Landretti, who also worked in payroll, entered the office. Judging from the way her eyes lit when she saw Marci and Jaine talking, the penny had dropped. "Hey," she said, a big grin spreading across her face. "It's you! I mean, you're the four friends. I should have realized when I read Marci's name, but it just now clicked. The other two are that pretty girl in sales and the one in human resources, right? I've seen you go to lunch together."
There was no point in denying it. She and Marci looked at each other, and Jaine shrugged.
"This is so cool!" Gina enthused. "I showed the newsletter to my husband yesterday, and he got really pissed when he got to number eight on the list, like he isn't always turning around to look at women with big boobs, you know? I had to laugh. He still isn't speaking to me." She didn't look very worried.
"We were just having fun," Jaine said. "This has gotten out of hand."
"Oh, I don't think so. I think it's great. I told my sister in New York about it, and she wanted a copy of the whole article, not just the little bit that was in this morning's paper."
"Your sister?" Jaine's stomach got that sinking feeling again. "Your sister who works for one of the networks?"
"ABC. She's a staffer on Good Morning America." Marci began to look alarmed, too. "Uh – she just had a personal interest, right?"
"She thought it was hilarious. I wouldn't be surprised if you got a call from them, though. She mentioned what a great feature the List would make."
Gina sailed to her desk, happy with her part in providing them with publicity. Jaine dug a dollar out of her purse and gave it to Marci, then said four very pithy words.
"Wow." Marci looked impressed. "I've never heard you say that before."
"I save it for emergencies."
Her phone rang. Jaine eyed it. Since it wasn't yet eight o'clock, the phone had no business ringing. There could be nothing but bad news waiting if she answered. On the third ring, Marci scooped it up. "Payroll," she said briskly. "Oh – T.J. This is Marci. We were talking – Oh, damn, honey, I'm sorry," she said, her tone changing to helpless concern.
Jaine snatched the receiver from Marci. "What's happened?" she demanded.

"I'm outed," T.J. said bleakly. "I just picked up my voice mail messages, and there are seven calls from reporters. I bet you have the same calls on your voice mail, too." Jaine looked at the message light. It was blinking like it had a tic.
"Maybe if Marci and I talked to them, that would keep them off you and Luna," she suggested. "All they want is a story, right? They need a face to go with the story; then it's over with and they move on to something else."
"But they have all our names."
"That doesn't mean they need four interviews. Any comment should satisfy them."
Marci, having followed the conversation just by listening to Jaine's end of it, said, "I can do the interviews by myself, if you think it would work."
T.J. heard Marci's offer. "It's worth a shot, I suppose. But I'm not going to run from this. If they aren't satisfied after they talk to you and Marci, or just Marci, then we'll all four sit down and give them their interview, and whatever happens will happen. I refuse to feel guilty and worried because we were having fun and made up a silly list."
"Okay," Marci said when Jaine hung up. "I'll call Luna and fill her in, and then I'll call those reporters back and set up something for lunch. I'll take all the heat, downplay it as much as I can." She crossed her fingers. "This can work." All morning long people stuck their heads in the door and made laughing comments to her; at least, the women did. Jaine also received a couple of measuring offers, as she had expected, from two of the guys and a few sarcastic remarks from others. Leah Street gave her a horrified look and stayed far away, which suited Jaine just fine, though she expected to see a "whore of Babylon" sign appear on her desk at any time. Leah was having more problems with this than T.J. and that was saying a lot. All the messages on her voice mail were from reporters; she deleted them and didn't return any of the calls. Marci must have been busy doing her mop-up campaign, because there weren't any additional calls after about nine. The sharks, promised some chum, were now circling Marci.
Just in case the barbarians were still at the gate, Jaine chickened out and bought her lunch from the snack room vending machines again. If the diversion didn't work and this was only the quiet before the storm, she intended to make the most of it. As it turned out, there wasn't that much quiet, because the snack room was full of people who had brought their

lunches that day, including Leah Street, who was sitting alone at a table even though the other tables were crowded.
The buzz of conversation transformed into a mixture of catcalls and applause when Jaine appeared. The applause, predictably, came only from women. There was nothing she could do but take a bow, sweeping as low as her scraped knee and sore ribs would allow. "Thank you very much," she said in her best Elvis imitation.
She fed her money into the machines and escaped as fast as possible, trying to ignore the comments of "That was so funny!" and "Yeah, you women get bitchy if some guy makes a remark about – "
The snack room quickly became a battleground with the lines drawn between the sexes.
"Damn, damn, damn," Jaine muttered to herself as she went back to her office, diet soft drink and crackers in hand. Whom did she pay when she swore only to herself? she wondered. Should she put the money in a fund to pay for future transgressions?
Lunch had long been over and the time was closing in on two when Marci called. She sounded tired. "Interviews are over," she said. "Let's see if the heat dies down." The reporters were no longer camped at the gate when Jaine left work. She raced home to catch the local news, skidding to a stop in her driveway and slinging small gravel. She was glad Sam wasn't home, or he'd be coming out to read her the riot act.
BooBoo had been at the cushion again. Jaine ignored the clumps of stuffing scattered over the carpet and grabbed the remote, clicking on the television and sitting on the edge of her easy chair. She waited through the stock market report – no crashes or dramatic dips, damn it – the weather, and the sports. Just when she was beginning to hope Marci's interview wouldn't air, the newscaster said in a dramatic tone, "Coming up next: the List. Four local women tell what they want in a man."
She groaned and flopped back in her chair. BooBoo jumped into her lap, the first time he had done so since coming to stay with her. Automatically she scratched his ears, and he began to vibrate.
The commercials ended and the newscast resumed. "Four local women, Marci Dean, Jaine Bright, T.J. Yother, and Luna Scissum, have put together a list of desirable qualities for the perfect man. The four friends work at Hammerstead Technology, and the List, as it has become known, was the result of a recent lunchtime brainstorming session."

Wrong, Jaine thought. They'd been at Ernie's, after work. Either the reporter hadn't asked and just assumed they'd been having lunch together, or "lunchtime" sounded better than "met at a bar after work." Come to think of it, lunchtime would probably work better for T.J. since Galan didn't like those Friday after-work get-togethers. Marci's face flashed on the screen. She was smiling, relaxed, and at the reporter's question, threw back her head for a hearty laugh.

"Who doesn't want Mr. Perfect?" she asked. "Of course, each woman would have different requirements, so what we put on our list wouldn't necessarily be on someone else's list."

Okay, that was diplomatic, Jaine thought. This was good; nothing controversial so far.

Then Marci blew it. The reporter, politically correct down to her toenails, made a comment about the shallowness of the physical requirements on the List. Marci's eyebrows arched, and she got a beady look in her eyes. Watching, Jaine could only groan, because those were Marci's warning signs before she went on the attack. "Shallow?" Marci drawled. "I think it's honest. I think every woman daydreams about a man with, shall we say, certain generous parts, don't you?"

"You didn't edit that out!" Jaine shrieked at the television, jumping to her feet and dumping poor BooBoo to the floor. He leaped to safety barely in time, turning to glare at her. She ignored him. "This is in family time! How could you put something like that on the air?"

Ratings, that was how. With news at a premium, television stations across the country were scrambling for viewers. Sex sells, and Marci had just sold it for them.

CHAPTER NINE

The phone rang. Jaine hesitated, debating whether or not to answer it. No more reporters should be bothering to call, since Marci had given them their story, but considering the timing, the call was probably from someone who knew her and had just heard her name on television and wanted to talk to her, as if her fifteen minutes of dubious fame could somehow rub off on him/her by association. She didn't want to rehash anything about that damn list; she just wanted it to die. On the other hand, it might be Luna or T.J. or Marci. She finally answered on the seventh ring, prepared to lapse into an Italian accent and pretend to be someone else.

"How could you do this to me?" her brother, David, snapped.

Jaine blinked, trying to shift gears. God, would he never get over not being given temporary custody of their dad's car?

"I didn't do anything to you. It isn't my fault Dad wanted to leave the car here. I'd rather you have it, believe me, because now I have to park my car in the driveway instead of the garage."

"This isn't about the car!" he half-yelled. "That thing on television! How could you do that? How do you think it'll make me look?"

This was getting weird. She thought rapidly, trying to come up with some way this would affect David, but the only thing she could think of was perhaps he didn't meet all the list's criteria and he didn't want Valerie to know there were criteria. Discussing her brother's physical attributes wasn't something she wanted to do.

"I'm sure Valerie won't make any comparisons," she said as diplomatically as possible. "Uh, I have a pot boiling on the stove, and I need to – "

"Valerie?" he demanded. "What's she got to do with this? Are you saying she was in on this… this list thing?" Weirder and weirder. She scratched her head. "I don't think I know what you're talking about," she finally said.

"That thing on television!"

"What about it? How does it affect you?"

"You gave your name! If you'd ever gotten married, you wouldn't still have 'Bright' as your last name, but no, you have to stay single, so your name is the same as mine. It isn't a real common name, in case you've never noticed! Just think of the ribbing I'm going to take at work because of this!"

This was going a bit far, even for David. His paranoia was usually much less pronounced. She loved him, but he'd never quite gotten over his conviction that the universe revolved around him. His attitude had at least been understandable when he'd still been in high school, because he was tall and handsome and had been wildly popular with the girls, but he'd been out of high school for fifteen years.
"I don't think anyone will notice," she said as carefully as possible.
"That's your problem; you never think before you open your big mouth – "
She didn't think now; she just did what came naturally. "Kiss my ass," she said, and slammed down the phone. Not the most mature reaction, she thought, but a satisfying one.
The phone rang again. No way was she answering it, she thought, and for the first time wished she had Caller ID. Maybe she needed it.
The ringing went on and on. After she counted twenty, she snatched up the receiver and yelled, "What!" If David thought he could harass her like this, see what he thought when she called him at two in the morning. Brothers! It was Shelley. "Well, you've done it now," was her sisterly opening shot.
Jaine rubbed between her eyebrows; a definite headache was forming. After the exchange with David, she waited to see where this one was going.
"I won't be able to hold up my head in church."
"Really? Oh, Shelley, I'm so sorry," Jaine said sweetly. "I didn't realize you have the dreaded Limp Neck disease. When were you diagnosed?"
"You are such a show-off. You never think of anyone but yourself. Did it ever cross your mind, just once, how something like this would affect me, or the children? Stefanie is mortified. All her friends know you're her aunt – "
"How do they know? I've never met her friends." Shelley paused. "I suppose Stefanie told them."
"She's so mortified she owned up to the relation? Strange."
"Strange or not," Shelley said, regrouping, "that's a disgusting thing for you to put out there in public." Swiftly Jaine mentally reviewed Marci's television spot. It hadn't been that specific. "I didn't think Marci was that bad."
"Marci? What are you talking about?"
"The spot on television. Just now."
"Oh. You mean it's on television, too?" Shelley asked in rising horror. "Oh, no!"

"If you didn't see it on television, what are you talking about?"
"That thing on the Internet! Stefanie got it from there." The Internet? Her headache exploded into full bloom. One of the geeks at work had probably posted the newsletter article, in its entirety. Fourteen-year-old Stefanie had indeed had an education.
"I didn't put it on the Internet," she said tiredly. "Someone at work must have."
"Regardless of who did it, you're behind that… that list even existing!"
Suddenly Jaine was fed up past the gills; she felt as if she had been walking a tightrope for several days now, she was stressed to the max, and the people who should be most concerned and supportive were giving her hell. She couldn't take any more, and she couldn't even think of anything scathing to say. "You know," she said quietly, interrupting Shelley's harangue, "I'm tired of the way you and David automatically assume I'm to blame without even asking me how this whole thing happened. He's mad at me about the car and you're mad at me about the cat, so you attack without asking if I'm okay with all this attention about the list, which if you thought for one second, you'd know I'm not okay with it at all. I just told David to kiss my ass, and you know what, Shelley? You can kiss my ass, too." With that, she hung up on yet another sibling. Thank God, there weren't any more. "That was me at my peacemaking, mediating best," she said to BooBoo, then had to blink away an uncharacteristic dampness in the eyes.
The phone rang again. She turned it off. The numbers in the message window on the answering machine said she had way too many messages. She deleted them without listening to any of them and went to the bedroom to get out of her work clothes. BooBoo padded in her wake. The prospect of getting any comfort from BooBoo was dubious, but she picked him up anyway and rubbed her chin against the top of his head. He tolerated the caress for a minute – after all, she wasn't doing the good stuff, scratching behind his ears – then wiggled free and jumped lightly to the floor.
She was too tense and depressed to sit down and relax, or even eat. Washing the car would burn off some energy, she thought, and quickly changed into shorts and a T-shirt. The Viper wasn't very dirty – they hadn't had any rain in over two weeks – but she liked it to gleam. All that washing and polishing, besides burning off stress, was satisfying to her soul. She definitely needed some soul- satisfying right now.

She fumed as she collected the things she would need to make the Viper beautiful. It would serve Shelley right if Jaine took BooBoo over there and left him to destroy her cushions; since Shelley had new furniture – it seemed she always had new furniture – she likely wouldn't be as sanguine as Jaine about losing cushion stuffing. The only thing that kept her from transferring BooBoo was the fact that their mom had entrusted her beloved cat to her custody, not Shelley's.

As for David – well, it was pretty much the same situation. She would have transferred Dad's car to David's garage except for the fact her dad had asked her to take care of it, and if anything happened to it while it was in David's custody, she would feel doubly responsible. Any way she looked at it, she was stuck. After gathering her chamois cloths, pail, special car-washing soap that wouldn't make the paint job lose its luster, wax, and window cleaner, she let BooBoo out onto the kitchen porch so he could watch the proceedings. Since cats didn't like water, she didn't think he'd be very interested, but she wanted the company. He settled in a tiny patch of late afternoon sunshine and promptly took a kitty nap.

The driveway next door was bereft of dented brown Pontiac, so she didn't have to worry about accidentally spraying the thing and arousing Sam's ire, though in her opinion, a good wash job wouldn't hurt it. Probably wouldn't help much, either – it was too far gone for such surface beautifying to make much difference – but a dirty car offended her. Sam's car offended her a lot. She settled down to industriously washing and rinsing, one section at a time, so the soap didn't have time to dry and cause spots. This particular soap wasn't supposed to spot, but she didn't trust it. Her dad had taught her to wash a car this way, and she had never found a better method. "Hey." "Shit!" she shrieked, jumping a foot in the air and dropping her soapy cloth. Her heart nearly exploded out of her chest. She whirled, water hose in hand. Sam jumped back as water sprayed across his legs. "Watch what the hell you're doing," he snapped. Jaine was instantly incensed. "Okay," she said agreeably, and let him have it full in the face.

He yelped and dodged to the side. She stood braced, water hose in hand, watching as he rubbed a hand across his dripping face. The first water attack, accidental as it had been, had wet his jeans from the knees down. The second one had pretty much taken care of his T-shirt. The front of it was soaking wet, sticking to his skin like plaster. She tried not to notice the

hard planes of his chest. They faced each other like gunfighters, separated by no more than ten feet. "Are you fucking crazy?" he half- shouted.
She let him have it again. She sprayed with a vengeance, chasing him with the stream of water as he tried to dodge and dance out of its way.
"Don't tell me I'm crazy!" she shouted, putting her finger over the nozzle to narrow the opening and thus get more force, and distance. "I've had it with people blaming me for everything!" She got him in the face again. "I'm so damn sick of you, and Shelley, and David, and everyone at work, and all the stupid reporters, and BooBoo shredding my cushions! I'm fed up, do you hear?"
He abruptly switched tactics, from evade to attack. He came in low, like a linebacker, not trying to evade the blast of water she aimed at him. About half a second too late, she tried to dodge to the side. His shoulder crashed into her midriff, the impact driving her back against the Viper. Quick as a snake striking, he snatched the water hose from her grip. She lunged for the hose, and he wrestled her back into place, pinning her to the Viper with his weight.
They were both breathing hard. He was soaking wet from head to toe, water leaching out of his clothes into hers until she was almost as wet as he. She glared up at him, and he glared down at her, their noses only a few inches apart.
Water was clinging to his lashes. "You sprayed me," he accused, as if he couldn't believe she had done such a thing.
"You scared me," she accused in return. "It was an accident."
"That was when you sprayed me the first time. You did it on purpose the second time."
She nodded.
"And you said 'shit' and 'damn.' You owe me fifty cents."
"I'm putting in a new rule. You can't incite me to riot, then fine me for rioting."
"You're welshing on me?" he asked in disbelief. "You bet. It's all your fault."
"How's that?"
"You deliberately scared me, and don't try to deny it. That makes the first word your fault." She gave an experimental wiggle, trying to slide out from under the pressure of his weight. Damn, he was heavy, and about as unyielding as the sheet metal behind her.

He squelched her escape attempt by settling even more heavily against her. Water from his clothes dripped down her legs.
"What about the second one?"
"You said f – " She caught herself. "My two words added together aren't nearly as bad as your one word."
"What, they have a points system now?"
She gave him a withering look. "The point is, I wouldn't have said either word if (a) you hadn't scared me and (b) you hadn't cussed at me first."
"If we're assigning blame here, I wouldn't have cussed if you hadn't sprayed me."
"And I wouldn't have sprayed you if you hadn't scared me. See, I told you it was all your fault," she said triumphantly, tilting her chin at him.
He took a deep breath. The movement of his chest flattened her breasts even more than they already were, making her abruptly aware of her nipples. Her nipples were acutely aware of him. Uh-oh. Her eyes widened in sudden alarm.
He was looking down at her with an unreadable expression. "Let me go," she said, more nervous than she cared to reveal.
"No."
"No!" she repeated. "You can't say no. It's against the law to hold me against my will."
"I'm not holding you against your will; I'm holding you against your car."
"By force!"
He shrugged an admission. He didn't seem very alarmed at the prospect of violating any laws against manhandling neighbors.
"Let me go," she said again.
"I can't."
She eyed him suspiciously. "Why not?" Actually, she was afraid she knew why not. "Why not" had been growing in his wet jeans for a few minutes now. She was doing her dead level best to ignore it, and from the waist up – except for her rebellious nipples – she was mostly succeeding. From the waist down, she was an abject failure. "Because I'm going to do something I'll regret." He shook his head, as if he didn't understand it himself. "I still don't have a whip and chair, but what the hell, I'll risk it."
"Wait," she squeaked, but it was too late.
His dark head dipped.

The late afternoon spun away. From somewhere up the street she heard a child shriek with laughter. A car drove by. The faint sound of hedge clippers drifted to her ears. All of that seemed very far away and disconnected from reality. What was real was Sam's mouth on hers, his tongue tangling with hers, the warm male scent of his body in her nostrils and filling her lungs. And his taste – oh, his taste. He tasted like chocolate, as if he had just eaten a Hershey bar. She wanted to devour him. She realized she was clutching fistfuls of wet cotton fabric. One at a time, without breaking the kiss, he peeled her hands off his shirt and tucked them around his neck, allowing him to settle more completely against her, from knee to shoulder.

How could just a kiss arouse her so totally? But it wasn't just a kiss; he used his entire body, rubbing his chest against her nipples until the friction made them stand out, hard and aching, moving the bulge of his erection against her stomach with a slow, subtle rhythm that was nevertheless as powerful as a sea surge.

Jaine heard the wild, smothered sound that erupted from her throat, and she tried to climb him, tried to get high enough to position that bulge where it would do the most good. She was burning hot, dying with heat, half-mad from the sudden onslaught of sexual need and frustration. He was still holding the water hose in one hand. He locked both arms around her and lifted her the few inches needed. The stream of water arced wildly, splattering BooBoo and making him jump up with an outraged hiss, then splashing against the car and wetting them even more. She didn't care. His tongue was in her mouth, and her legs were wrapped around his hips and that bulge was right where she wanted it.

He moved – another of those subtle, rolling thrusts – and she damn near climaxed right there. Her nails bit into his back, and she made a guttural sound, arching in his arms. He tore his mouth free from hers. He was panting, the expression in his eyes hot and wild. "Let's go inside," he said, the words so low and rough they were almost unintelligible, not much more than a growl. "No," she moaned. "Don't stop!" Oh, God, she was close, so close. She arched against him again.

"Jesus Christ!" He closed his eyes, his expression savage with lust barely restrained. "Jaine, I can't fuck you out here. We have to go inside."

Fuck? Inside?

Oh my God, she was about to do it with him and she wasn't on the pill yet!

"Wait!" she yelled in panic, pushing against his shoulders, uncoiling her legs from around his hips and kicking wildly. "Stop! Let me go!"
"Stop?" he said in outraged disbelief. "You said 'don't stop' just a second ago."
"I changed my mind." She was still pushing on his shoulders. She was still accomplishing exactly nothing. "You can't change your mind!" He sounded desperate now.
"Yes, I can."
"Do you have herpes?"
"No."
"Syphilis?"
"No."
"Gonorrhea?"
"No."
"AIDS?"
"No!"
"Then you can't change your mind."
"What I have is a ripe egg." That was probably a lie. Almost positively a lie. She would probably start her period tomorrow, so the little ovum was long past viability, but she didn't take chances with potential offspring. If any life was left in the bundle of DNA, Sam's sperm would jump- start it. Some things were just a given.
The ripe-egg news gave him pause. He thought about it. Offered: "I can use a condom."
She gave him a withering look. At least, she hoped it withered him. So far, he was remarkably unwithered. "Condoms have only about a ninety to ninety-four percent success rate. That means, at best, their fail rate is six percent."
"Hey, those are good odds."
Another withering look. "Oh, yeah? Can you imagine what would happen if even one of your little marauders jumped my girl?"
"They'd tie up and fight like two wildcats in a sack."
"Yeah. Like we just did."
He looked horrified. He released her and stepped back. "They'd be in the sack before they even introduced themselves."
"We've never introduced ourselves," she felt compelled to point out.
"Shit." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm Sam Donovan."

"I know who you are. Mrs. Kulavich told me. I'm Jaine Bright."
"I know. She told me. She even told me how you spell your name."
Now, how on earth had Mrs. Kulavich known that? "It was supposed to be Janine," she explained. "But the first n got left off the birth certificate form, and Mom decided she liked it that way." Jaine wished she had been a Janine. "Shelley,"
"David,"
"Janine"; the names all fit. Jaine was a wild card, the odd one out.
"I like 'Jaine' better," he said. "It suits you. You aren't a Janine."
Yeah, she thought morosely. That was the problem. "So what's this problem you're having with… who was it? Oh, yeah. Shelley, David, everyone at work, the reporters, and BooBoo. Why are you having trouble with reporters?" She was impressed by his memory. She couldn't have rattled off a list of names that had been shouted at her while she was being sprayed with cold water. "Shelley is my older sister. She's mad at me because Mom asked me to baby-sit BooBoo and she wanted the honor herself. David's my brother. He's mad at me because Dad asked me instead of David to baby-sit his car. You know who BooBoo is."
He looked over her shoulder. "He's the cat on your car."
"On my – " She whirled in horror. BooBoo was pussyfooting across the Viper's hood. She snatched him off before he had time to evade, and indignantly returned him to the house. Then she rushed back to the Viper and bent down to inspect the hood for even the tiniest scratch. "Don't guess you like a cat on your car either," Sam said smugly.
She tried out another withering look on him, though she had noticed the egg news had done a good job of withering him anyway. "There's no comparison between my car and yours," she growled, then gave the empty driveway a startled look. No brown Pontiac. But here was Sam. "Where is your car?"
"The Pontiac isn't mine. It belongs to the city." She felt weak with relief. Thank God. It would have been a serious blow to her self-esteem if she'd slept with the owner of that wreck. On the other hand, maybe she needed the Pontiac as a mental brake on her sexual impulses. If it had been sitting there, the preceding episode probably wouldn't have gotten so out of hand.
"Then how did you get home?" she asked, looking around. "I keep my truck parked in the garage. Keeps the dust and pollen and bird deposits off it."
"Truck? What kind of truck?"

"Chevy."
"Four-wheel drive?" He looked like a four-wheel-drive kind of guy.
He gave her a superior sneer. "Is there any other kind?"
"Oh, man," she sighed. "Can I see it?"
"Not until we finish our negotiations."
"Negotiations?"
"Yeah. About when we're going to finish what we just started."
Her mouth fell open. "You mean you aren't going to let me see your truck until I agree to have sex with you?"
"You got it."
"You're crazy if you think I want to see your truck that bad!" she shouted.
"It's red."
"Oh, man," she whined.
He crossed his arms. "Put up or shut up."
"Don't you mean 'put out'?"
"I said we'd negotiate a date. I didn't say we'd do it now. You couldn't pay me to go anywhere near your egg." She gave him a speculative look. "I'll show you my power plant if you'll show me your truck."
He shook his head. "No deal."
She never told anyone about her dad's car. For all her friends knew, he was simply paranoid about the family sedan. But it was a bargaining chip to top all bargaining chips, the ace in the hole, the guaranteed result-getter. Besides, Sam was a cop; it probably wouldn't hurt to have him in the loop, so he would know that her garage needed protecting at all times. The car was insured for a fortune, but it was also irreplaceable.
"I'll let you see my dad's car if you let me see your truck," she said slyly.
Despite himself, he looked interested. Probably her expression told him that her dad's car was out of the ordinary.
"What kind is it?"
She shrugged. "I don't say the words out in public." He leaned down and offered his ear to her. "Whisper them."
She put her mouth against his ear and felt faint from the warm male scent that wafted to her nostrils again. She whispered two words.
He straightened so abruptly he bumped her nose. "Ouch!" She rubbed the aching tip.
"Let me see it," he said hoarsely.

She crossed her arms, mimicking his earlier position. "Do we have a deal? You see my dad's car, and I see your truck?"
"Hell, you can drive my truck!" He turned and looked at her garage as if it were the Holy Grail. "It's in there?"
"Safe and secure."
"It's an original? Not a kit?"
"Original."
"Man," he breathed, already striding to the garage. "I'll get the key." She dashed inside for the key to the padlock, and returned to find him waiting impatiently. "Be careful and open the door just enough to slide through," she cautioned. "I don't want it seen from the street."
"Yeah, yeah." He took the key from her and inserted it in the padlock. They entered the dark garage, and Jaine fumbled for the light switch. The overheads came on, illuminating the low- slung, tarp-covered hump.
"How did he get it?" Sam asked in a half whisper, as if he were in church. He reached for the edge of the tarp. "He was on the development team." He gave her a sharp look. "Your dad is Lyle Bright?" She nodded an admission.
"Man," he sighed, and lifted the tarp.
A low moan broke from his throat.
She knew how he felt. She always felt a little breathless herself when she looked at the car, and she had grown up with it.
It wasn't particularly flashy. The automobile paints back then hadn't had the shine of today's paints. It was a kind of silvery gray, spare, without the luxuries so taken for granted by today's consumer. There wasn't a cup holder in sight.
"Man," he said again, bending to look at the instrumentation. He was careful not to touch the car. Most people, ninety-nine out of a hundred, couldn't have resisted. Some would have been brash enough to swing a leg over the low frame and slide into the driver's seat. Sam treated the car with the reverence it deserved, and an odd sensation squeezed her heart. She felt a little light- headed, and everything in the garage began to fade out of focus except for his face. She concentrated on breathing, blinking fast, and in a moment the world clicked back into place.
Wow. What was that all about?
He re-covered the car as tenderly as a mother covers a sleeping infant. Wordlessly he fished his keys out of his jeans pocket and held them out to

her.
She took them, then looked down at her clothes. "I'm wet."
"I know," he replied. "I've been looking at your nipples." Her mouth fell open, and she quickly clamped her hands over the pertinent portions of her wet T-shirt. "Why didn't you say something?" she demanded hotly.
He made a scoffing noise in the back of his throat. "What, you think I'm crazy?"
"It would serve you right if I drove your truck without changing clothes!"
He shrugged. "After you let me see this, plus your nipples, I guess I owe you."
She started to argue that she hadn't let him see her nipples, that he had looked without her permission; then she remembered that she had seen a lot more than his nipples that morning and decided not to bring up the subject. Like he was going to give her the choice. "Besides," he pointed out, "you saw my cock. That has to be worth more points than nipples."
"Hah," she said. "Value is in the eye of the beholder. And I did tell you to cover up, if you'll remember."
"After you'd watched for how long?"
"Only long enough to call Mrs. Kulavich and get your number," she said self-righteously because it was the truth. So what if she'd had to chat with Mrs. Kulavich for a minute? "And you didn't seem to think it was important enough to cover up. No, you waved it around like you were starting a race with it."
"I was enticing you."
"You were not! You didn't know I was looking." He arched an eyebrow. She threw the keys back at him. "I wouldn't drive your truck now if you begged me! It probably has cooties in it! You lech, you disgusting… disgusting penis-waver – " He fielded the keys with one hand. "Are you saying you weren't enticed?"
She started to tell him she hadn't felt even a twinge of enticement, but her tongue refused to utter what would have been the biggest lie of her life.
He smirked. "Thought so."
There was only one way to recover the upper hand. Jaine put her hands on her hips, letting her nipples thrust against the thin wet layers of bra and T-shirt. Like a laser- guided missile, his gaze homed in on the front of her shirt. She saw him swallow.
"You don't play fair," he said thickly.

She smirked in retaliation for his smirk. "Remember that," she said, and turned to leave the garage.
He slipped past her. "I go first," he said. "I want to see you stepping into the sunlight."
Her hands clamped back in position over her breasts. "Spoilsport," he muttered, and slid sideways through the narrow opening. He stepped back inside so abruptly she collided with him.
"You have two problems," he said.
"I do?"
"Yeah. First, you left the water on. You're going to have a hell of a water bill."
She sighed. The driveway must be awash by now. Sam had obviously driven her insane, or she would never have been so careless.
"What's the second problem?"
"Your yard is full of those reporters you mentioned."
"Oh, shit," she moaned.

CHAPTER TEN

Sam handled the situation. He left the garage, locking the padlock behind him so no particularly nosy reporter could peek inside and see her – though she rather thought he was protecting the car more than he was her. She listened at the door as he walked over to the Viper and said, "Excuse me, but I need to get to that faucet to turn off the water. Would you move, please." He was extraordinarily polite. Jaine wondered why he was never that polite when he was talking to her. Of course, his tone was such that it was more of an order than a request, but still… "What can I do for you guys?"

"We want to interview Jaine Bright about the List," a strange voice said.

"I don't know a Jaine Bright," Sam lied.

"She lives here. According to public records, she bought this house a few weeks ago."

"Wrong. I bought this house a few weeks ago. Damn, there must have been an error when the deed was registered. I'll have to get this straightened out."

"Jaine Bright doesn't live here?"

"I told you, I don't know a Jaine Bright. Now, if you guys don't mind, I need to get back to washing my car."

"But – "

"Maybe I should introduce myself," Sam said, his tone suddenly soft. "I'm Detective Donovan, and this is private property. You're trespassing. Do we need to continue this discussion?"

Evidently they didn't. Jaine stood motionless as engines started and cars departed. It was a miracle the reporters hadn't heard her and Sam talking in the garage; they must have been talking among themselves, or they would have. Certainly she and Sam had been so engrossed in their own conversation they hadn't heard the reporters arrive. She waited for Sam to come unlock the garage. He didn't. She heard water splashing and tuneless whistling. The jerk was washing her car.

"You had better be doing it right," she said between clenched teeth. "If you let the soap dry, I'll skin you alive." Helplessly she waited, not daring to yell and bang on the door in case a reporter was still lurking. If any of them had half a brain, they'd know that while Sam might be able to squeeze into the Viper, no way would he spend that kind of money to buy a car he'd have to

drive with his knees jammed up around his ears. Vipers weren't made for tall, linebacker types. He was better suited to a truck. She thought of the red Chevy four-wheel drive and began to pout. She had almost bought one, before the Viper won her over.
She wasn't wearing her wristwatch, but she estimated it was over an hour, closer to an hour and a half, before he unlocked the door. Twilight was deepening into night and her T-shirt was dry, that was how long she had stood impatiently waiting to be freed.
"You took your sweet time," she hissed as she stalked out of the garage.
"You're welcome," he said. "I finished washing your car, then I waxed and buffed it."
"Thank you. Did you do it right?" She rushed over to the car, but there wasn't enough light left to tell if there were any streaks.
He didn't take umbrage at her lack of faith. Instead he said, "Want to tell me about the reporters?"
"No. I want to forget the whole thing."
"I don't think that's going to happen. They'll be back as soon as they check the records and find out I own the house next door, which will be first thing in the morning."
"I'll be at work by then."
"Jaine," he said, and this time he used his cop tone of voice.
She sighed and sat down on the porch steps. "It's that stupid list."
He settled beside her and stretched out his long legs. "What stupid list?"
"About the perfect man."
He came to attention. "That list? The one that was in the paper?"
She nodded.
"You wrote it?"
"Not exactly. I'm one of the four friends who came up with the list. All this hullabaloo about it is an accident. No one was ever supposed to see the list, but it got into the newsletter at work and it's even on the Internet, and everything has snowballed from there." She folded her arms on top of her drawn-up knees and rested her head on them. "It's a mess. There must be no other news at all for the list to be getting this land of attention. I've been praying for a stock market crash."
"Bite your tongue."
"Just a temporary one."

"I don't get it," he said after a minute. "What's so interesting about the list? 'Faithful, nice, employed.' Big deal."
"There's more than what was in the newspaper," she said miserably.
"More? What kind of more?"
"You know. More."
He thought about it, then said cautiously, "Physical more?"
"Physical more," she agreed.
Another pause. "How much more?"
"I don't want to talk about it."
"I'll just look it up on the Web."
"Fine. You do that. I don't want to talk about it." His big hand settled on the nape of her neck and squeezed. "It can't be that bad."
"Yes, it can. T.J. might end up divorced because of this. Shelley and David are both mad at me because I'm making them look bad."
"I thought they were mad about the cat and the car."
"They are. They're using the cat and the car as a springboard to get even angrier about the list."
"They sound like pains in the ass to me."
"But they're family, and I love them." She hunched her shoulders. "I'll go get your money."
"What money?"
"For the cuss words."
"You're gonna pay me?"
"It's the only honorable thing to do. But now that you know the new rule about making me swear, this is the only time I'll pay you when it's your fault. Seventy-five cents, right? Two earlier, then one when you saw the reporters."
"Sounds about right."
She went inside and dug out seventy-five cents. She was out of quarters; she had to pay him off in dimes and nickels. He was still sitting on the step when she returned, but he stood up to drop the change in his pocket. "Are you going to invite me in, maybe cook dinner for me?" She snorted. "Get real."
"Yeah, that's what I thought. Okay, then, do you want to go grab a bite to eat?"
She thought about it. There were definite pros and cons to accepting. The obvious benefit was not having to eat alone, if she had felt like going to the

trouble of preparing something, which she didn't. The biggest con was spending more time with him. Spending time with Sam could be dangerous. The only thing that had saved her earlier was that they hadn't been in a private place. If he got her alone in his truck, there's no telling what would happen. On the other hand, she would get to ride in the truck… "I'm not asking you to solve the meaning of life," he said irritably. "Do you want to grab a burger or not?"
"If I go, you can't touch me," she warned.
He held up both hands. "I swear. I've already said you couldn't pay me to go anywhere near that sperm-eating egg of yours. So when are you going on the pill?"
"Who said I was?"
"I'm saying you'd better."
"You stay away from me and you won't have to worry about it." No way would she tell him she'd already planned to go on the pill. She had forgotten to call the clinic today, but that would be her first call in the morning. He grinned. "You talk a good game, babe, but it's the bottom of the ninth and I'm ahead ten to nothing. The only thing left for you to do is lie down."
If any other man had said that to her, she'd have handed him his ego in shreds. The best she could do now was delay him. "Am I still at bat?"
"Yeah, but it's two down and a three-oh count."
"I can still hit a home run."
"Not likely."
She growled at his disparagement of her resistance. "We'll see about that."
"Oh, hell. You're making this a contest, aren't you?"
"You're the one who started it. Bottom of the ninth and you're ahead ten to nothing, my ass."
"That's another quarter."
" Ass' isn't a cuss word."
"Says who – " He stopped himself and heaved a big sigh. "Never mind. You sidetracked me from the subject. Do you want to go get something to eat or not?"
"I'd rather have Chinese than a burger."
Another sigh. "Fine. We'll eat Chinese."
"I like that place on Twelve Mile Road."
"All right," he yelled.
She gave him a brilliant smile. "I'll go change."

"So will I. Five minutes."
Jaine hurried into the house, well aware that he was hurrying as well. He didn't think she could change in five minutes, did he? She'd show him.
She stripped to the skin as she raced to the bedroom. BooBoo trailed after her, meowing plaintively. It was long past his dinnertime. She pulled on a pair of dry panties, hooked herself into a dry bra, pulled a red short-sleeved knit top over her head, jerked on a pair of white jeans, and stepped into sandals. She ran back into the kitchen and opened a can of food for BooBoo, dumped it into his plate, grabbed her purse, and was out the door just as Sam jumped off his kitchen porch and headed to his garage. "You're late," he said.
"I am not. Besides, you only had to change clothes. I changed clothes and fed the cat."
He had a modern garage door. He pressed the button on the control in his hand, and it slid up like oiled silk. She sighed, assailed by a bad case of garage-door envy. Then, in the light that came on automatically when the door opened, she saw the gleaming red monster. Chrome twin pipes. Chrome roll bar. Tires so big she would have had to vault into the seat if he hadn't also had chrome bars to aid those not blessed with his length of leg.
"Oh," she breathed, and clasped her hands. "This is just what I wanted until I saw the Viper."
"Bench seats," he said, and lifted a wicked eyebrow at her. "If you're really good, after you get on the pill and your eggs are under control, I'll let you seduce me in the truck." She managed not to react. Thank God he didn't realize how tenuous her self-control really was, though it was the thought of seducing him rather than the location that revved her up again.
"Nothing to say?" he asked.
She shook her head.
"Oh, damn," he said as he put both hands around her waist and effortlessly lifted her into the cab. "Now I'm worried."
Marci's plan hadn't worked. T.J. faced the inevitable after the third reporter called. God, why didn't this thing just go away? What was so fascinating about a funny list? Not that Galan would think it was at all funny, she thought, depressed. He didn't seem to think anything was funny anymore, unless it was something that happened at work. He had been so much fun when they were dating, full of laughter and jokes. Where had that cheerful boy gone? They didn't even see each other much anymore. She worked

eight to five, he worked three to eleven. By the time he got home, she was asleep. He didn't get up until after she had left for work. The most telling thing, she thought, was that he didn't have to work the three to eleven shift. He had chosen it. If his intention had been to get away from her, she thought, he had accomplished his aim.

Maybe their marriage was already over and she simply hadn't faced the fact. Maybe Galan didn't want to have children because he knew it was on the rocks. The thought made her chest hurt, deep inside. She loved him. Rather, she loved the person she knew he was, inside the surly exterior that was all she had seen for the past few years. If she were sleepy or thinking of something else and he popped into mind, the face she saw was the young, laughing Galan, the one she had loved so desperately in high school. She loved the clumsy, fumbling, eager, loving Galan who had made love to her, the first time for both of them, in the back of his dad's Oldsmobile. She loved the man who had brought her a single red rose on their first anniversary because he couldn't afford a dozen.

She didn't love the man who hadn't said "I love you" in so long she couldn't remember the last time.

T.J. felt so helpless, compared to her friends. If anyone tried to give Marci guff, she blew him off and looked for someone to fill his shoes – or rather, her bed. Luna was upset over Shamal, but she didn't sit at home waiting for him; she carried on with her life. And as for Jaine – Jaine was complete in a way T.J. knew she herself wasn't. Whatever life handed her, Jaine faced with humor and guts. Not one of the three would take the grief from Galan that she had been silently enduring for over two years. She hated her own weakness. What would happen if she and Galan split? They would have to sell the house, and she loved her house, but so what? She could live in an apartment. Jaine had lived in one for years. T.J. could live alone, though she never had. She would learn to handle everything herself. She would get a cat – no, a dog, for protection. And she would date again. What would it be like to spend time with a man who didn't insult her every time he opened his mouth?

When the phone rang, she knew it was Galan. Her hand was steady when she lifted the receiver.

"Have you lost your mind?" were his first words. He was breathing heavily, telling her he had worked himself into a rage.

"No, I don't believe so," she said calmly.

"You've made me a laughingstock here at the plant – "
"If anyone is laughing, it's because you let him," she interrupted. "I'm not going to talk to you about it on the phone. If you want to talk to me in a civil tone when you get home, I'll wait up for you. If you intend to rant and rave, I have better things to do than listen to you." He hung up on her.
Her hand was shaking a little now as she replaced the receiver. Tears blurred her eyes. If he thought she would beg him for forgiveness, he was sadly mistaken. She had lived the last two years on Galan's terms and been miserable. Maybe it was time she lived her life on her terms. If she lost Galan, at least she could hold on to her self-respect.
The phone rang again half an hour later.
T.J. frowned as she went to answer it. She didn't think Galan was likely to call back, but maybe he'd thought about what she said and realized she wasn't going to roll over and play dead this time when he raised his voice.
"Hello," she said. "Which one are you?"
She frowned at the ghostly whisper. "What? Who is this?"
"Are you Ms. A? B? Which one are you?"
"Get a life," snapped the new T.J. and she slammed down the phone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jaine jumped out of bed early the next morning, determined to leave for work before Sam was stirring. While her heartbeat accelerated with excitement at the thought of sparring with him again, her head told her he had likely pulled up the list on the Web last night after they returned home from pigging out on small Chinese doughnuts. He was worse than a pit bull in not letting go of anything, and he had bugged her about the rest of the list the entire time they were eating. She did not want to know his thoughts on anything after number seven on the list. She was on her way out the door at the ungodly time of seven A.M. when she saw that her answering machine was full of messages again. She started to hit the delete button, but hesitated. With her parents traveling, anything could happen: one of them could become ill, or there might be some other sort of emergency. Who knows? Shelley or David might even have called to apologize. "Fat chance," she muttered as she hit the play button. There were messages from three reporters, one print and two television, requesting interviews. Two hang-ups, back- to-back. The sixth call was from Pamela Morris, who introduced herself as Gina Landretti's sister. Her voice had the mellow, modulated tones of a television announcer as she informed Jaine she would love to book her on Good Morning America to talk about the List, which was absolutely sweeping the country. The seventh message was from People magazine, requesting the same. Jaine fought down rising hysteria as she listened to three more hang-ups. Whoever it was waited for a long time, silently, before hanging up. Idiot.

She cleared the calls; she had no intention of returning any of them. This whole situation had moved beyond silly into downright ridiculous.

She made it out of the driveway without sight of Sam, which meant her morning was off to an even-tempered start. She felt so good that she tuned the radio to a country station and listened to the Dixie Chicks singing that Earl had to die. She even sang along, and wondered if Sam the cop would think Earl's death was justifiable homicide. Maybe they could even argue about it. She knew she had it bad when the thought of arguing with Sam was more exciting than, say, winning the lottery. She had never before met anyone who not only didn't blink an eye at anything she said but could go toe-to-toe with her – verbally, that is – and not break a sweat. It was a very

freeing notion, that she could say anything and he wouldn't be shocked. Sometimes she had the feeling he enjoyed rousing her temper. He was cocky – in more ways than one – and irritating, macho, smart, and sexy as hell. And he had the proper reverence for her dad's car, plus he had done a pretty good job washing and waxing the Viper. She had to get those birth control pills, fast. There were more reporters at the Hammerstead gates. Someone must have tipped this bunch off about what she drove, because flashbulbs began exploding as she slowed for the guard to lift the barrier arm. He grinned down at her. "Wanna take me for a test drive and see if I meet the requirements?" he asked.

"Let me get back to you," she said. "I'm already booked for the next two and a half years."

"Figures," he said, and winked.

She was so early that the puke-green hallway was empty. She was not so early, however, that some of the nerds weren't ahead of her. She paused to read the new elevator sign: REMEMBER: FIRST YOU PILLAGE, THEN YOU BURN. THOSE WHO DO NOT COMPLY WILL BE SUSPENDED FROM THE RAIDING TEAM.

There, she felt better; a day without an elevator sign was a terrible thing to endure.

She was in her office before she realized the reporters and guard hadn't upset her. They weren't important. Her battle with Sam was far more interesting, especially since they both knew where it was heading. She had never had an affair before, but she figured the one she would have with Sam would singe the sheets. Not that she intended to be too easy for him; he was going to have to fight to get her, even after she was on birth control pills. It was the principle of the thing.

Besides, frustrating him would be fun.

Gina Landretti came into work early, too. "Oh, good," she said, her eyes lighting when she saw Jaine at her desk. "I need to talk to you, and I hoped you would be in early so we wouldn't have an audience."

Jaine gave an internal groan. She could see what was coming from a mile away.

"Pam called me last night," she began. "You know, my sister. Anyway, she's been trying to get in touch with you, and guess what? She wants to book you on the show! Good Morning America! Isn't that exciting? Well, all four of you, of course, but I told her you were probably the spokesperson."

"Ah… I don't think we have a spokesperson," Jaine said, a little nonplused by Gina's assumption.
"Oh. Well, if you did, you would be it. The spokesperson." Gina seemed so proud that Jaine cast about for a diplomatic way of saying, "No way."
"I didn't know your sister was a program booker."
"Oh, she isn't, but she spoke to the booker and she's very interested, too. This would be a feather in Pam's cap," Gina confided. "The word is out the other networks will probably contact you today, so Pam wanted to get the jump on them. This could really help her career." Meaning that if she, Jaine, didn't cooperate, any setbacks in Gina's sister's career would be laid directly on her doorstep.
"There might be a problem," Jaine said, looking as contrite as possible. "T.J.'s husband isn't happy with all this publicity – "
Gina shrugged. "So only three of you go on the show. Actually, it would probably be just fine if you were the only one – "
"Luna's much prettier – "
"Well, yeah, but she's so young. She doesn't have your authority."
Great. Now Jaine had "authority".
She tried to use some of that authority and infuse her tone with firmness. "I don't know. I don't like all this publicity, either. I'd rather the whole thing just faded away." Gina looked at her in horror. "You can't mean that! Don't you want to be rich and famous?"
"Rich, I wouldn't mind. Famous, no. And I don't see how going on Good Morning America would make me rich."
"You could get a book deal out of this! One of those multimillion-dollar advances, you know, like those women who wrote the book about rules."
"Gina!" Jaine half-shouted. "Reality check here! How could the List be a book, unless the preferred size of a man's penis is discussed for three hundred pages?"
"Three hundred?" Gina looked dubious. "I think a hundred and fifty would be plenty."
Jaine looked around for something against which to bang her head.
"Please, please say you'll say yes to Pam," Gina pleaded, folding her hands together in the classic supplicant pose. In a flash of inspiration, Jaine said, "I'll have to talk to the other three. It'll be a group deal, or nothing at all."
"But you said T.J. – "

"I'll talk to the other three," she repeated. Gina looked unhappy, but evidently recognized some of that mysterious authority she thought Jaine possessed. "I thought you'd be thrilled," she mumbled.
"I'm not. I like my privacy."
"Then why did you put the List in the newsletter?"
"I didn't. Marci got drunk and let it slip to Dawna what's- her-name."
"Oh." Gina looked even more unhappy, as if she realized Jaine was even less thrilled about the whole situation than she had previously thought.
"My whole family is mad at me about this," Jaine grumbled.
Despite her disappointment, Gina was a nice woman. She sat down on the edge of Jaine's desk, her expression changing to one of sympathy. "Why? What does it have to do with them?"
"My opinion exactly. My sister says I've embarrassed her and she won't be able to hold her head up in church, and my fourteen-year-old niece got the entire transcript off the Web, so Shelley's angry about that, too. My brother is angry because I've embarrassed him in front of the guys where he works _ "
"I don't see how, unless they've been comparing themselves in the rest room and he came up short," Gina commented, then giggled.
Jaine said, "I don't want to think about that"; then she began giggling, too. She and Gina looked at each other and burst into gales of laughter, laughing until tears welled and ruined their mascara. Sniffing, they giggled their way to the ladies' room to repair the damage.
At nine o'clock, Jaine was called into her immediate supervisor's office. His name was Ashford M. de Wynter. Every time she heard the name, she thought she was dreaming of Manderley She dearly wanted to ask if the M stood for "Max," but was afraid to find out. Maybe he was playing to the illusion, but he always dressed in a very European manner and had been known to say "shedult" instead of "schedule."
He was also an asshole.
Some people come by it naturally. Others work very hard at it. Ashford de Wynter did both.
He didn't ask Jaine to be seated. She sat anyway, earning a frown for her presumption. She suspected the reason for this little conference and wanted to be comfortable while he chewed her out.
"Ms. Bright," he began, looking as if he smelled something distasteful.
"Mr. de Wynter," she replied.

Another frown, from which she deduced it hadn't been her turn to speak.
"The situation at the gate has become untenable."
"I agree. Perhaps if you tried a court order…" She let the suggestion trail off, knowing he didn't have the authority to obtain one even if there was a basis for it, which she doubted. The "situation" wasn't endangering anyone, nor were the news people hindering the employees. The frown became a glare. "Your facetiousness is unappreciated. You know very well this situation is your doing. It's unseemly and distracting, and people are becoming unhappy."
For "people," she thought, read "his superiors."
"How is it my doing?" she asked mildly.
"That vulgar List of yours…"
Maybe he and Leah Street had been separated at birth, she mused. "The List isn't mine, any more than it's Marci Dean's. It was a collaborative effort."
What was it with everyone, holding her solely responsible for the List? Was it that mysterious "authority" again? If she had that kind of power, maybe she should start wielding it more often. She could make shoppers let her go to the head of the line, or have her street plowed first when it snowed. "Ms. Bright," Ashford de Wynter said in quelling tones. "Please."
Meaning, please don't take him for an idiot. He was too late; she already did.
"Your brand of humor is very recognizable," he added. "Perhaps you weren't the only one involved, but you were undeniably the chief instigator. Therefore it falls to you to rectify the situation."
Jaine might gripe about Dawna to her friends, but she wasn't about to mention anyone else's name to de Wynter. He already knew the other three names. If he chose to believe the majority of the fault was hers, nothing she could say would change his mind.
"Okay," she said. "I'll go to the gate at lunch and tell them you don't appreciate all this publicity and you want them to get off Hammerstead property or you'll have them arrested."
He looked as if he had swallowed a mackerel. "Ah… I don't think that would be the best way to handle things."
"What do you suggest?"
Now, there was a question. His expression went absolutely blank.
She hid her relief. It would have shredded her ego if de Wynter had been able to think of a workable solution when she hadn't been able to come up

with even an unworkable one.
"A staffer from Good Morning America has called," she continued. "I'll blow her off. People magazine is supposed to call, too, but I just won't take the call. All that free publicity can't be good for the company…"
"Television? National television?" he asked weakly. He stretched his neck like a turkey. "Ah… it would be a wonderful opportunity, wouldn't it?"
She shrugged. She didn't know if it was wonderful or not, but it was undeniably an opportunity. Of course, she had just talked herself into a corner; publicity was exactly what she didn't want. She undoubtedly had a serious character defect, since she couldn't bear to let Ashford de Wynter get the best of her in anything.
"Maybe you should run the idea by the powers that be," she suggested, getting to her feet. If she was lucky, someone in the upper echelons would veto the idea. He was torn between excitement and a reluctance to let her know that he had to ask anyone at all – as if she didn't know exactly what his position was and how much authority it entailed. He was in the middle of middle management, and that was as high as his cream was going to rise.
As soon as she got back to her desk, Jaine called a war council. Luna, Marci, and T.J. all agreed to meet for lunch in Marci's office.
She explained the current status to Gina and spent the rest of the morning, with Gina's aid, dodging calls. At lunch the four of them, fortified with a selection of crackers and diet sodas, gathered in Marci's office. "I think we can declare the situation officially out of control," Jaine said gloomily, and filled them in on Gina's sister and the calls that had come in that morning from NBC and People magazine, just as Gina had predicted. They all looked at T.J.
T.J. shrugged. "I don't see any point in trying to put out the fire now. Galan knows. He didn't come home last night."
"Oh, honey," Marci said sympathetically, reaching out to touch T.J.'s arm. "I'm so sorry."
T.J.'s eyes looked bruised, as if she had spent the night crying, but she seemed calm. "I'm not," she said. "This just brought things out in the open. He either loves me or he doesn't. If he doesn't, then he should get the hell out of my life and quit wasting my time."
"Wow," Luna said, blinking her lovely eyes at T.J. "You go, girl."
"What about you?" Jaine asked Marci. "Any trouble with Brick?"

Marci gave her wry, seen-everything-tried-most-of-it grin. "There's always trouble with Brick. Let's just say he reacted in typical Brick fashion, with a lot of yelling and a lot of beer drinking. He was still asleep when I left this morning."
They all looked at Luna.
"I haven't heard from him," she said, and grinned at Jaine. "You were right about all the measurement offers and jokes. I'm just telling all the guys that my vote was for twelve inches, but the rest of you wanted to downsize. That generally stops them cold."
When they stopped laughing, Marci said, "Okay, my giving the local guys an interview didn't do the trick. What the hell – whaddaya say we stop trying to unring the bell and have fun with this thing?"
"De Wynter is running the idea of free national publicity by the suits upstairs," Jaine said.
"Like they won't fall on this like a starving woman on a chocolate bar?" T.J. scoffed. "I'm with Marci. Let's punch up the list and really have some fun with it; you know, add some items to it, expand on our discussions and explanations."
David and Shelley were going to have cows, Jaine thought. Well, they probably needed the milk. "What the hell," she said.
"What the hell," Luna seconded.
They looked at each other, grinned, and Marci whipped out her pen and pad. "We might as well get started, give them a story worth printing."
T.J. gave a rueful shake of her head. "This will really bring the crazies out of the woodwork. Did any of you get any weird calls last night? Some guy – I think it was a guy, could have been a woman – whispered, 'Which one are you?' He wanted to know if I was Ms. A."
Luna looked startled. "Oh, I got one of those. And a couple of hang-ups that I thought might be him again. But you're right; the way he was whispering, you couldn't really tell if it was a man or a woman."
"I had about five hang-ups on my answering machine," Jaine said. "I had the phone turned off."
"I went out," Marci said. "And Brick threw the answering machine against the wall, so I'm temporarily messageless. I'll pick up a new one on the way home this afternoon."
"So probably all four of us got calls from the same guy" Jaine said, feeling a little uneasy and grateful that she had a cop living next door.

T.J. shrugged and grinned. "The price of fame," she said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jaine grumbled to herself all the way home, though she did remember to stop at the clinic and pick up a three- month supply of birth control pills. Upper management had decided that milking the situation for all the publicity they could was nothing but good, and things had happened fast after that. On behalf of the others she had accepted an interview on Good Morning America, though why a morning news show would be interested when it obviously couldn't get into the racier items on the list, she couldn't fathom. Maybe it was nothing more than network one- upmanship at work. She could understand the print organizations being interested – say, Cosmopolitan, or even one of the men's monthlies. But what could People print, other than a personal slant about the four of them and the impact the list had made on their lives? Evidently sex sold even when it couldn't be discussed. The four of them were supposed to go to the ABC affiliate there in Detroit at the supposedly reasonable hour of four A.M. and the interview would be taped. They were to be dressed, coifed, and mascaraed before they arrived. An ABC correspondent, not Diane or Charlie, was flying to Detroit to conduct the interview, rather than have them sit on an empty set with tiny plugs in their ears, talking to the air while someone back in New York asked the questions. Having an actual live person doing the interviewing was evidently a great honor. Jaine tried to feel honored, but merely felt tired in anticipation of having to get up at two A.M. in order to dress, coif, and mascara herself. There was no brown Pontiac in the driveway next door, no sign of life in the house.

Bummer.

BooBoo had cushion stuffing clinging to his whiskers when he greeted her. Jaine didn't even bother to glance into the living room. The only thing she could do at this point to protect what was left of her sofa was close the door so he couldn't get into the living room, but then he would transfer his frustration to some other piece of furniture. The sofa already had to be repaired; let him have it. A sudden suspicious feeling and a trip to the bathroom told her that her period had arrived, right on schedule. She heaved a sigh of relief. She was safe from her inexplicable weakness for Sam for a few days now. Maybe she should also give up shaving her legs; no way would she embark on an affair with bristly legs. She wanted to hold him off

for at least a couple more weeks, just to frustrate him. She liked the idea of Sam being frustrated.
Going into the kitchen, she peered out the window. Still no brown Pontiac, though she supposed he could be driving his truck as he had yesterday. The curtains were closed on his kitchen window.
It was difficult to frustrate a man who wasn't there. A car pulled into her driveway, parked behind the Viper. Two people got out, a man and a woman. The man had a camera slung around his neck and carried a variety of bags. The woman carried a tote bag and was wearing a blazer despite the heat.
There was no point in trying to evade any more reporters, but no way was she allowing anyone in her stuffing-strewn living room. Going to the kitchen door, she opened it and stepped onto the porch. "Come in," she said tiredly. "Would you like some coffee? I was just about to make a fresh pot."
Corin stared at the face in the mirror. Sometimes he disappeared for weeks, months, but there he was again in the reflection, as if he had never left. He hadn't been able to work today, afraid of what would happen if he saw them in the flesh. The four bitches. How dare they make fun of him, taunt him with their List? Who did they think they were? They didn't think he was perfect, but he knew better.
After all, his mother had trained him.
Galan was at home when T.J. arrived. For a moment her stomach knotted with nausea, but she didn't allow herself to hesitate. Her self-respect was on the line. She lowered the garage door and entered the house through the mudroom, as always. The mudroom opened into the kitchen, her beautiful kitchen, with its white cabinets and appliances and gleaming copper pots hanging on the rack over the center island. Her kitchen was right out of a decorator's book, and it was her favorite room in the entire house – not because she liked cooking, but because she loved the ambience. There was a small alcove full of ferns and herbs and small blooming flowers, filling the air with freshness and perfume. She had snuggled two easy chairs and a table into the alcove, plus an overstuffed footstool for weary feet and tired legs. The alcove was mostly glazed glass, letting in plenty of light but repelling the heat and cold. She loved to curl up there with a good book and a hot cup of tea, especially during the winter when outside the ground was blanketed in snow but inside she was all snug and comfortable, surrounded by her perpetual garden.

Galan wasn't in the kitchen. T.J. dropped her purse and keys in their usual place on the island, kicked off her shoes, and put on a pot of water to heat for tea. She didn't call his name, didn't go looking for him. She supposed he was in his den, watching television and nursing his grudge. If he wanted to talk to her, he could come out of his cave.

She changed into shorts and a clingy tank top. Her body was still good, though more muscular than she liked, the result of years on a girls' soccer team. She would have preferred Luna's willowy build, or Jaine's more delicate curviness, but all in all was satisfied with herself. Like most married women, though, she had gotten out of the habit of wearing formfitting clothes, usually wearing sweats during the winter and baggy T-shirts during the summer. Maybe it was time she started making the most of her looks, the way she had when she and Galan were still dating. She wasn't accustomed to having Galan home for supper. Her evening meal was usually either delivered or something she microwaved. Guessing that he wouldn't eat even if she cooked something – boy, that would show her if he went hungry, wouldn't it? – she went back to the kitchen and got out one of her frozen dinners. It was low in fat and calories, so she could indulge with an ice cream bar afterward.

Galan emerged from his den while she was licking the last of the ice cream from the stick. He stood watching her, as if waiting for her to jump in with an apology so he could proceed with his rehearsed rant.

T.J. didn't oblige. Instead she said, "You must be sick, since you aren't at work."

His lips thinned. He was still a good-looking man, she thought dispassionately. He was trim, tanned, his hair only a little thinner than when he was eighteen. He always dressed well, in stylish colors and silk blends, expensive leather loafers. "We need to talk," he said grimly. She lifted her brows in polite query, the way Jaine would have done. Jaine could accomplish more with the lift of a brow than most people could with a sledgehammer. "You didn't have to miss work just for that."

From his expression she could see that wasn't her scripted reply. She was supposed to attach more importance to their relationship – and his temper. Well, tough.

"I don't think you realize how seriously you've damaged me at work," he began. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you for making me a laughingstock. I'll tell you one thing, though: we don't have any chance of

working this out as long as you're still hanging around with those three bitches you call friends. I don't want you seeing them again, do you hear me?"
"Ah, so that's it," T.J. said in dawning realization. "You think you can use this to tell me who I can have as friends and who I can't. Okay. Let's see… if I give up Marci, you can give up Jason. For Luna… oh, how about Curt? As for Jaine – well, if I give up Jaine, you're going to have to give up Steve, at least; though, personally, I've never cared for Steve, so I think you should throw in an extra just to keep things even."
He stared at her as if she had grown two heads. He and Steve Rankin had been best buds since junior high. They went to see the Tigers during the summer and the Lions during winter. They did major male-bonding stuff.
"You're crazy!" he burst out.
"That I'd ask you to give up your friends? Fancy that. If I have to, you have to."
"I'm not the one tearing our marriage apart with stupid lists about who you think is the perfect man!" he yelled. "Not 'who'," she corrected. " 'What.' You know, things like consideration. And faithfulness." She watched him closely when she said the last, wondering suddenly if Galan's two- year suspension of affection had a more basic reason than simply growing apart. His gaze flickered away from her.
T.J. braced herself against the crippling pain. She pushed it into a little box and tucked it away deep inside so she could function through the next few minutes, and days, and weeks.
"Who is she?" she asked in a tone so casual she might have been asking if he had picked up the laundry. "Who is who? What she?"
"The famous other woman. The one you're always comparing me to in your head."
He flushed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I haven't been unfaithful to you," he muttered. "You're just trying to change the subject – "
"Even if you haven't been physically unfaithful, which I'm not certain I believe, there's still someone you're attracted to, isn't there?"
He turned even redder.
T.J. went to the cabinet and took out a cup and a tea bag. Placing the bag in the cup, she poured boiling water on it. After a minute she said, "I think you need to go to a motel."
"T.J. – "

She lifted a hand, not looking at him. "I'm not making any hasty decisions about divorce or even separation. I meant you need to go to a motel for tonight so I can think without you around trying to turn things around and blame everything on me."
"What about that goddamn list – "
She waved a hand. "The list isn't important."
"The hell it isn't! All of the guys at work are riding me about how you like monster cocks – "
"And all you had to do was say, yeah, you had me spoiled," she said impatiently. "So the list got a little risque. So what? I think it was pretty funny, and evidently so do most people. We're going to be on Good Morning America tomorrow morning. People magazine wants to do an interview. We decided we're going to talk to whoever asks, so the thing will die a quicker death. Some other story will come along in a few days, but until then we're going to have fun."
He stared at her, shaking his head. "You're not the woman I married," he said in heavy accusation.
"That's okay, because you're not the man I married." He turned and left the kitchen. T.J. looked down at the cup of tea in her hand, blinking back tears. Well, it was out in the open now. She should have seen what was going on a long time ago. After all, who knew better than she how Galan acted when he was in love?
Brick wasn't asleep on the sofa the way he usually was when Marci got home, though his old pickup was in the driveway. She went through into the bedroom and found him stuffing clothes in a duffel. "Going somewhere?" she asked.
"Yeah," he said sullenly.
She watched him pack. He was good-looking in a beer- drinking kind of way, with too-long dark hair, an unshaven jaw, slightly heavy features, and his usual costume of tight jeans, tight T-shirt, and scuffed boots. Ten years younger than her, never good at holding down a job, oblivious of anything that didn't involve sports – let's face it, he wasn't the catch of the century. She wasn't in love with him, thank God. She hadn't been in love with anyone in years. All she wanted was company and sex. Brick provided the sex, but he wasn't much company.
He zipped up the duffel, hefted it by the handles, and brushed past her.

"Are you coming back?" she asked. "Or should I forward the rest of your stuff to wherever you're going?" He glared at her. "Why're you asking? Maybe you got somebody else all lined up to take my place, huh? Somebody with a ten-inch dick, just the way you like." She rolled her eyes. "Oh, jeez," she muttered. "Lord save me from injured male egos."
"You wouldn't understand," he said, and to her surprise, she detected a note of hurt in his rough voice. Marci stood blinking as Brick stormed out of the house and slammed into his truck. He slung gravel as he peeled out of the driveway.
She was astounded. Brick, hurt? Whoever would have thought?
Well, either he would be back or he wouldn't. She gave a mental shrug and opened the box containing her new answering machine, deftly hooking it up. As she recorded an outgoing message, she wondered how many calls she had missed because Brick had thrown the other answering machine against the wall. Even if he had bothered to answer the phone, he wouldn't have taken any messages for her, not in the mood he was in.
If there was anything important, she thought, they would call back.
She had barely completed the thought when the phone rang. She lifted the receiver. "Hello."
"Which one are you?" whispered a ghostly voice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jaine cracked open one eye and glared at the clock, which was emitting an extremely annoying high-pitched beeping sound. Finally recognizing it as the alarm – after all, she'd never heard it at two A.M. before – she reached over and slapped it. She snuggled down in the renewed silence, wondering why in hell the alarm had gone off at that ungodly hour.

Because she had set it to go off at that ungodly hour, that was why.

"No," she moaned to the dark room. "I can't get up. I've only been in bed four hours!"

She got up anyway. She had had the presence of mind before going to bed to prepare the coffeemaker and set the timer for 1:50. The smell of coffee drew her, stumbling, to the kitchen.

She turned on the overhead light, then had to squint her eyes against the glaring brightness.

"Television people are aliens," she mumbled as she reached for a cup. "Real humans wouldn't do this on a regular basis."

With one cup of coffee in her, she managed to make it into the shower. As the water poured down on top of her head, she remembered that she hadn't intended to wash her hair. Since she hadn't factored in the time to wash and dry her hair when she calculated the time to get up, she was now officially behind schedule. She groaned and leaned against the wall. "I can't do this."

A minute later, she talked herself into trying. She rapidly shampooed and loofahed herself, and three minutes later jumped out of the shower. With another cup of coffee steaming close to hand, she blow-dried her hair, then used a dab of hair gloss to smooth down the flyaway tendrils. When one got up so early makeup was necessary to cover the automatic look of horror and sheer disbelief; she applied it with a fast but lavish hand, going for the glamorous, just-left-a-party look. What she got was closer to a hangover look, but she wasn't wasting any more time on a hopeless cause.

Don't wear white or black, the television lady had said. Jaine put on a long, narrow black skirt, figuring the lady had meant to avoid black on her top half, which was what would be seen. She paired a scoop-neck, three-quarter- length-sleeved red sweater with the black skirt, cinched a black belt around her waist, and slipped her feet into black pumps at the same time as she was fastening classic gold hoops in her ears.

She glanced at the clock. Three A.M. Damn, she was good at this!
She would bite her tongue off before she ever admitted it. Okay, what else? Food and water for BooBoo, who was staying out of sight. Smart kitty, she thought. That little chore taken care of, she let herself out at five after three. The driveway next door was still empty. No brown Pontiac sat there, nor had she heard any other vehicle enter the driveway during the night. Sam hadn't come home.
He probably had a girlfriend, she thought, gritting her teeth. Duh! She felt like an idiot. Of course he had a girlfriend. Men like Sam always had a woman or two, or three, on their strings. He hadn't been able to get anywhere with her, thanks to her lack of birth control, so he had simply buzzed on over to the next flower in line. "Jerk," she growled as she got into the Viper. She should have remembered her past experiences in the relationship wars and not let herself get so excited. Evidently her hormones had overruled her common sense and she had become drunk on ovarian wine, the most potent, sanity- destroying substance in the universe. In short, she had taken one look at his naked body and gone into heat. "Forget about that," she muttered to herself as she drove the dark, quiet residential streets. "Don't think about it." Sure. Like she was going to forget the sight of that joystick of his waving proud and free.
She felt like crying at the thought of having to give up that awe-inspiring, mouthwatering erection when she hadn't even had a crack at it yet, but pride demanded. She refused to be one of a crowd in a man's head, much less his bed.
His only excuse, she thought, was if he was lying in a hospital somewhere, too badly injured to dial a telephone. She knew he hadn't been shot or anything; that would have been in the news, if a cop had been wounded. Mrs. Kulavich would have told her if he'd been in a traffic accident. No, he was alive and well, somewhere. It was the where that was the problem.
Just to cover all bases, she tried to work up a teeny bit of worry over him, but all she could manage was a heartfelt desire to maim him.
She knew better than to lose her head over a man. That was what was so humiliating: she knew better. Three broken engagements had taught her that a woman needed to keep her wits about her when dealing with the male species, or she could get seriously hurt. Sam hadn't hurt her – not much, anyway – but she had been on the verge of making a really stupid mistake and she hated to think she was so gullible.

Damn him, why couldn't he at least have called? If she had a lock of his hair, she thought, she could put a curse on him, but she was willing to bet he wouldn't let her anywhere near him with a pair of scissors.
She entertained herself with thinking up imaginative curses just in case she did manage to get some of his hair. She particularly liked the one that gave him a bad case of wilt. Hah! Let him see how many women were impressed when his joystick became a joyless noodle. On the other hand, maybe she was overreacting. One kiss did not a relationship make. She had no claim on him, his time, or his erections.
Like hell she didn't.
Okay, so much for logic. She had to go with her gut feeling here, because it wasn't allowing room for anything else. Her feelings for Sam were way out of the norm, composed of almost equal parts fury and passion. He could make her angrier, faster, than anyone else she had ever known. He also hadn't been far off the mark with his assertion that when he kissed her, they would both end up naked. If he had chosen his location better, if they hadn't been standing in her driveway, she wouldn't have regained her senses in time to stop him.
While she was being honest with herself, she might as well admit that she was exhilarated by their conflicts. With all three of her fiancés – in fact, with most people – she had held herself back, pulled her verbal punches. She knew she was a smart-ass; Shelley and David had both gone out of their way to tell her so. Her mother had tried to get her to temper her responses and had partially succeeded. All through school she had struggled to keep her mouth shut, because the lightning-quick workings of her brain left her schoolmates bewildered, unable to keep up with her thought processes. Nor did she want to hurt anyone's feelings, which she had quickly learned she could do just by speaking her mind.
She treasured her friendships with Marci, T.J. and Luna because, as different as they all were, the other three accepted and weren't intimidated by her more caustic remarks. She felt the same sort of relief in her dealings with Sam, because he was as much of a smart-ass as she was, with the same verbal agility and speed. She didn't want to give that up. Once she admitted that, she realized she had two choices: she could walk away, which had been her first inclination, or she could teach him a lesson about… about trifling with her affections, damn it! If there was one thing she didn't want anyone trifling with, it was her affections. Well, okay, there were two things

– she didn't want anyone trifling with the Viper, either. But Sam… Sam was worth fighting for. If he had other women in his head and bed, then she would simply have to oust them, and make him pay for putting her to the trouble. There. She felt better now. Her course of action was decided. She arrived at the television station faster than she had anticipated, but then there wasn't much traffic on the freeways and streets that early in the morning. Luna was already there, climbing out of her white Camaro, looking as fresh and rested as if this were nine in the morning instead of not quite four. She was wearing a gold silk wrap dress that made her cream-and-coffee skin glow. "This is spooky, isn't it?" she said when Jaine joined her and they walked to the back door of the station, as they had been instructed.

"Weird," Jaine agreed. "It's unnatural for anyone to be awake and functioning at this hour."

Luna laughed. "I'm certain everyone else on the road was up to no good, because why else would they be out?"

"Drug dealers and perverts, every one of them."

"Prostitutes."

"Bank robbers."

"Murderers and wife-beaters."

"Television personalities."

They were still laughing when Marci drove up. As soon as she joined them she said, "Did you see all the weirdos on the street? They must come out at midnight or something."

"We've already had that conversation," Jaine said, grinning. "I guess it's safe to say none of us is a party animal, crawling home in the wee hours of the morning." "I've done my share of crawling," Marci said cheerfully. "Until I got tired of shoe prints on my hands." She looked around. "I can't believe I'm here before T.J.; she's always early, and I'm usually late."

"Maybe Galan had a tantrum and told her she couldn't come," Luna suggested.

"No, she would have called if she wasn't coming," Jaine replied. She checked her watch: five before four. "Let's go inside. They might have coffee, and I need a steady supply if I'm going to be coherent."

She had been in a television station before, so Jaine wasn't surprised by the cavernous space, the darkness, the snaking cables all over the floor. Cameras and lights stood like sentinels over the set, while monitors watched

over everything. There were people around, jean-and- sneaker clad, plus one woman wearing a chic peach suit. She came toward them with a bright, professional smile on her face and her hand outstretched.
"Hello, I'm Julia Belotti, with GMA. I assume you're the Ladies of the List?" She laughed at her own joke as she shook hands all around. "I'll be doing your interview. But aren't there four of you?"
Jaine refrained from making a show of counting noses and saying, "No, I think there are only three of us." That was smartass stuff, the sort she typically held back. "T.J. is late," Marci explained.
"T.J. Yother, right?" Ms. Belotti wanted to show she had done her homework. "I know you're Marci Dean; I caught the local bit that was aired." She looked at Jaine, her gaze assessing. "You are…?"
"Jaine Bright."
"The camera is going to love your face," Ms. Belotti said, then turned with a smile to Luna. "You must be Luna Scissum. I must say, if Ms. Yother is as attractive as the rest of you, this will be a real hit. You do know the buzz your List is getting in New York, don't you?"
"Not really," Luna said. "We're surprised at all the attention it's been getting."
"Be sure and say something to that effect when we're taping," Ms. Belotti instructed, checking her watch. A tiny frown of annoyance began to pleat her brow; then the door opened and T.J. entered, her hair and makeup flawless, her dress a rich blue that flattered her warm coloring. "Sorry I'm late," she said, joining the little group. She didn't offer any excuse, just the apology, and Jaine gave her a sharp look, seeing the fatigue under the makeup. They all had a good reason for looking fatigued, considering the hour, but T.J. had added stress.
"Where is the ladies' room?" Jaine asked. "I'd like to check my lipstick, if there's time, then find a cup of coffee if there is any."
Ms. Belotti laughed. "There's always coffee in a television station. The ladies' room is this way." She directed them down a hallway.
As soon as its door swung shut behind them, everyone turned to T.J. "Are you all right?" Jaine asked. "If you're asking about Galan, yeah, I'm all right. I sent him to a motel last night. Of course, he may have called his girlfriend to join him, but that's his choice."
"Girlfriend!" Luna echoed, her eyes widening in shock. "Son of a bitch," Marci said, leaving it to T.J. to decide if she was calling Galan that or just

using it as an expletive. Jaine said, "He doesn't have much leverage now to use against you on this list thing, does he?"
T.J. laughed. "None, and he knows it." She looked at their concerned faces. "Hey, I'm okay. If he wants out of the marriage, I'd rather know now before I waste more time trying to keep things going. Once I decided that, I stopped worrying."
"How long has he been having an affair?" Marci asked. "He swears he isn't, that he hasn't been physically unfaithful. Ask me if I believe that."
"Oh, sure," Jaine said. "I believe the sun rises in the west, too."
"He might be telling the truth," Luna put in. "Possible, but not likely," Marci said with the voice of experience. "Whatever they admit to is only the tip of the iceberg. It's human nature."
T.J. checked her lipstick. "I don't think it makes much difference. If he's in love with someone else, then what does it matter whether or not he's slept with her? Anyway, forget about him. I am; if there's any making up to do, he'll have to be the one to do it. I'm going to play this list thing up as big as it'll get. And if there's any sort of book offer, I say we go for it. We might as well get some money for all the trouble we've been through."
"Amen to that," Marci said, and added, "Brick left. His feelings were hurt." They gaped at that, trying to imagine Brick with feelings. "If he doesn't come back," she complained, "I'll have to do the dating thing again. Man, I hate the thought of that. Going out dancing, letting men buy me drinks… it's awful." They were laughing as they left the ladies' room. Ms. Belotti was waiting for them. She directed them to the coffee urn, where someone had procured four mugs for them. "We have a small set ready for taping whenever you get settled," she said, a subtle way of telling them to shut up and sit down. "The soundman needs to get you miked and sound-checked, and the lighting has to be adjusted. If you'll come this way…"
Their purses were stashed out of sight, and coffee mugs in hand, they settled on a set decorated to look like a cozy living room, with a sofa and two easy chairs, a couple of fake ferns, a discreet lamp that wasn't turned on. A guy who looked about twenty years old began attaching tiny microphones to them. Ms. Belotti clipped on her own microphone to the lapel of her jacket. None of them had been intelligent enough to wear a jacket. Luna's gold wrap dress was okay, as was the collar-bone slamming neckline of T.J.'s dress. Marci wore a sleeveless, mock-turtleneck sweater, which meant the only place the microphone could be attached was right on her throat. She

would have to be very careful moving her head or the resulting noise would blot out everything else. Then the soundman looked at Jaine's red scoop-neck sweater, and said, "Uh-oh."
Jaine grinned and held out her hand. "I'll clip it on. Do you want it to the side or right in the middle?" He grinned back at her. "I'd like it right in the middle, thanks."
"No flirting," she admonished as she slipped the mike under her sweater and clipped it to her neckline, between her breasts. "It's too early."
"I'll be good." With a wink, he taped the cord to her side, then returned to his equipment. "Okay, I need all of you to talk, one at a time, so I can check the sound." Ms. Belotti began an easy conversation, asking if they were all from the Detroit area. When the sound was duly checked and the cameras were set, Ms. Belotti looked at the producer, who then did the countdown, pointed to her, and she went smoothly into the lead-in comments about the famous – "or infamous, depending on your point of view" – List that had swept the country and was being discussed over breakfast tables in every state. Then she introduced them in turn, and said, "Do any of you have a Mr. Perfect in your lives?"
They all laughed. If only she knew!
Luna nudged Jaine's knee with her own. Taking the cue, Jaine said, "No one is perfect. We joked at the time that the list is really science fiction."
"Science fiction or not, people are taking it seriously."
"That's up to them," Marci put in. "The qualities we listed are our ideas of what would make the perfect man. A group of four other women would probably come up with different qualities, or list them in a different order."
"You do know that feminist groups are outraged at the physical and sexual requirements on the List. When women have struggled so long not to be judged by their looks or bust size, they feel you have damaged their position by judging men according to their physical attributes."
Luna raised one perfect eyebrow. "I thought part of the feminist movement was to give women the freedom to be honest about what they want. We listed what we want. We were honest." This line of questioning was her cup of tea; she thought political correctness was an abomination and never hesitated to say so.
"We also never thought the List would become public," T.J. put in. "Its release was accidental."

"You would have been less honest if you had known the List would be published?"
"No," Jaine cracked. "We would have upped the requirements." What the hell; why not have fun with it, as T.J. had suggested?
"You said you didn't have a Mr. Perfect in your life," Ms. Belotti said smoothly. "Do you have a man at all?" Well, that little dig had been slipped in with the ease of an expert, Jaine thought, wondering if the slant of the interview was to paint them as women who couldn't keep a man. Grinning a little, she had to admit that, given all their circumstances, the slant was pretty damn accurate. But if Ms. Belotti wanted a little controversy, why not give it to her? "Not really," she said. "Not many men can measure up."
Marci and T.J. laughed. Luna restricted herself to a smile. From offstage came a quickly smothered snicker. Ms. Belotti turned to T.J. "I understand you're the only one of the group who is married, Ms. Yother. What does your husband think about the List?"
"Not much," T.J. admitted cheerfully. "Any more than I liked it when he would turn around to ogle large breasts."
"So this is a bit of tit for tat?"
Too late she realized her choice of words wasn't the best in the world.
"More tit than tat," Marci said gravely. Good thing the interview was taped instead of live. "The thing is," Luna said, "most of the requirements are qualities all people should have. Number one was faithfulness, remember? If you're in a relationship, you should be faithful. Period."
"I've read the entire article about the List, and, if you're honest, you'll admit that most of your conversation wasn't about the qualities of faithfulness or dependability. The most intense discussion was about a man's physical characteristics."
"We were having fun," Jaine said calmly. "And we aren't crazy; of course we want men who look good to us." Ms. Belotti checked her notes. "In the article, you aren't identified by name. You're listed as A, B, C, and D. Which of you is A?"
"We don't intend to divulge that," Jaine said. Beside her, she felt Marci straighten a little.
"People are very interested in who said what," Marci said. "I've had anonymous phone calls asking which one I am."
"So have I," T.J. put in. "But we aren't going to say. Our opinions weren't unanimous; one might have felt more strongly about a particular point than

the other three did. We want to protect our privacy on that front." Another poor choice of words. When their laughter died down, Ms. Belotti turned once more to the personal. "Are you dating anyone?" she asked Luna.
"No one exclusively." Take that, Shamal.
She looked at Marci. "And you?"
"Not at the moment." Take that, Brick.
"So only Ms. Yother is in a relationship. Do you think this means you might be too exacting in your requirements?"
"Why should we lower our standards?" Jaine asked, eyes flashing, and the interview went downhill from there. "God, I'm sleepy," T.J. said, yawning, when they left the studio at six-thirty. Ms. Belotti had plenty of material to edit down for the short piece that would actually be aired. At one point she had abandoned her notes and passionately argued the feminist point of view. Jaine doubted any morning television show could use even a fraction of what had been said, but the studio crew had been fascinated. Whatever was used, it was supposed to be aired next Monday. Maybe then all the interest would die down. After all, how long could the List be discussed? People had lives to lead, and the List had already long outlived its allotted fifteen minutes.
"Those phone calls worry me a little," Marci said, frowning at the bright, cloudless morning sky. "People are weird. You never know whose chain we're pulling."
Jaine knew one person whose chain she hoped to pull. If some of what she had said was aired, Sam would probably take it as a personal challenge. She certainly hoped he did – because that was exactly how she had meant it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Okay," Marci said when they had been served their coffee and given their orders at the diner where they had all stopped for breakfast, "tell us about Galan."

"Nothing much to tell," T.J. replied, shrugging. "He was at home yesterday when I got home. He began with a demand that I give up my friends – three in particular, and guess who they are. I countered with a demand that he give up one of his friends for each one of mine I had to give up. Then – I guess it was feminine intuition, because all of a sudden I wondered if he'd been so cold for the past two years because of another woman."

"What's wrong with him?" Luna demanded indignantly. "Doesn't he have any idea how lucky he is to have you?" T.J. smiled. "Thanks for the vote. I'm not giving up, you know. We might be able to work this out, but I'm not going to let it destroy me if we don't. I did some heavy thinking last night, and this isn't all Galan's fault. I'm not Mrs. Perfect any more than he's Mr. Perfect."

"You haven't been seeing another man," Jaine said pointedly.

"I didn't say we were equally at fault. If he's interested in keeping our marriage going, he has a lot of making up to do. But I have some things to make up to him, too."

"Like what?" Marci asked.

"Oh… I haven't exactly let myself go, but neither have I made any special effort to attract him. I've also been caving in to everything he says in an effort to please him, and let's face it, on the surface that sounds good for him, but if he wants an equal partner, then it must be maddening. I bounce ideas off you guys the way I used to do with him, but now it's as if I keep all the interesting parts of myself away from him. I give him the cook and housekeeper instead of the lover and partner, and that isn't good for a marriage. No wonder he got bored."

"Do you know how typical that is?" Jaine said, her tone shaded with indignation. "Whatever happens, women take the blame for it." She stirred her coffee, glaring into the cup. "I know, I know, sometimes we need to. I hate being wrong, damn it."

"That's a quarter," said three voices.

She dug in her purse for the change, but came up with only forty-six cents. She laid a dollar on the table instead. "One of you can make change for the other two. I need to stock up on change again. Sam wiped me out." There was a long pause, with three pairs of eyes trained on her. Finally Luna said delicately, "Sam? Who's Sam?"
"You know. Sam. My neighbor."
Marci pursed her lips. "Would this be the same neighbor who turned out to be a cop but whom you've described at various times as a jerk, a drunk, a drug dealer, a bottom- feeding son of a bitch, a hulk who hasn't seen a razor or a shower in this millennium – "
"Okay, okay," Jaine said. "Yeah, it's the same guy."
"And you're now on a first-name basis with him?" T.J. asked, amazed.
Jaine's face heated. "Kind of."
"Oh my god." Luna's eyes were huge. "She's blushing."
"This is scary," Marci said, and the three pairs of eyes blinked in astonishment.
Jaine squirmed in the booth, feeling her face get even hotter. "It isn't my fault," she blurted defensively. "He has a red truck. A four-wheel drive."
"I can see where that would make a big difference," T.J. said, studying the ceiling.
"So he isn't that big a jerk," Jaine muttered. "So what? Actually, he is a jerk, but he has his good points."
"And the best one is in his pants, right?" quipped Marci, who, like a honey badger, always went straight for the groin.
Luna displayed a shocking lack of decorum by making a whooping sound and saying, "Dive! Dive! Dive!" just like in a submarine war movie.
"Stop it!" Jaine hissed. "I haven't done that!"
"Oh-ho!" T.J. leaned closer. "Just what have you done?"
"Exactly one kiss, smarty and that's all."
"One kiss does not a blush make," Marci said, grinning. "Especially not on your face."
Jaine sniffed. "Obviously you've never been kissed by Sam, or you wouldn't make such an erroneous statement."
"That good, huh?"
She couldn't help the sigh that heaved out of her lungs, or the way her lips curved. "Yeah. That good."
"So how long did it last?"

"I told you, we haven't had sex! It was just a kiss." Like the Viper was just a car, and Mount Everest was just a hill. "I meant the kiss," Marci said impatiently. "How long did it last?"
Jaine drew a blank on that. She hadn't exactly timed it, and besides, there had been a lot of other stuff going on, like an impending but ultimately denied climax, that had occupied most of her attention. "I don't know. Five minutes or so, I guess."
They all sat there blinking at her. "Five minutes?" T.J. asked weakly. "One kiss lasted five minutes?" There went that damn blush again; she could feel it creeping up her face.
Luna slowly shook her head in disbelief. "I hope you're on birth control pills, because you're definitely in the red zone. He could score at any time."
"That's what he thinks, too," Jaine said, and scowled. "As it happens, I renewed my prescription yesterday."
"Evidently he isn't the only one who thinks it," T.J. cracked, and broke into a big grin. "Hey, this is something to celebrate!"
"You're all acting as if I was a lost cause."
"Let's just say that your social life sucked," Marci said. "It did not."
"When was the last time you had a date?"
She had her there, because Jaine knew it had been a long time, so long she couldn't say exactly when. "So I don't date much. It's by choice, not necessity. My track record in picking men isn't exactly outstanding, remember."
"So what's different about this Sam cop person?"
"A lot," Jaine said vaguely, remembering him naked. After a moment of reverie she shook herself back to reality. "Half the time I want to strangle him."
"And the other half?"
She grinned. "I want to tear his clothes off."
"Sounds like the basis of a good relationship to me," Marci said. "That's certainly more than I had with Brick, and I kept him around for a year."
Jaine was relieved to have the topic shift away from Sam. How could she explain what she didn't understand herself? He was maddening, they rubbed sparks off each other, and he hadn't come home at all the night before. She should be running in the opposite direction instead of trying to plot ways to get him all for herself. "What did he say?"

"Not much, which was surprising. When Brick's mad, he's about as reasonable as a two-year-old having a tantrum." Marci propped her chin on her folded hands. "I admit, he took me off guard. I was prepared for yelling and cussing, but not hurt feelings."
"Maybe he cares more than you thought," Luna said, but even she sounded dubious.
Marci snorted. "What we had was convenient for both of us, but not exactly the affair of the century. What about you? Have you heard from Shamal?"
Marci's change of subject indicated she was as ready to abandon the subject of Brick as Jaine had been to talk about someone else other than Sam.
"As a matter of fact, I did." Luna looked thoughtful. "He was… I don't know… kind of impressed with all the publicity. As if I were suddenly a more valuable person, if you know what I mean. He asked me out for dinner, instead of saying he'd stop by the way he always has before."
A little pool of silence engulfed the booth. They all looked at each other, uneasy at Shamal's sudden change of attitude.
Luna's expression was still thoughtful. "I said no. If I wasn't interesting enough for him before, then I'm not interesting enough now."
"Way to go," Jaine said, immensely relieved. They exchanged high fives all around the booth. "So what now? Is Shamal officially in the past, or are you in a holding pattern?"
"A holding pattern. But I'm not calling him again; if he wants to see me, he can do the dialing."
"But you turned him down," Marci pointed out. "I didn't tell him to get lost; I just told him no, I had other plans." She shrugged. "If we're to have any kind of relationship, the ground rules are going to have to change, meaning I get to make some of them instead of playing everything his way."
"We're a mess," Jaine said, sighing, and sought refuge in her cup of coffee.
"We're normal," T.J. corrected.
"That's what I said."
They were giggling when the waitress brought their orders and plopped the plates in front of them. Their love lives were, collectively, a disaster, but so what? They had scrambled eggs and hash browns to make them feel better.
Because it was Friday, they kept to their tradition of eating at Ernie's after work. Jaine found it difficult to believe only a week had passed since they had so lightheartedly composed the List. In a week, a lot had changed. For one thing, the atmosphere at Ernie's: when they walked in, there was a

round of applause and a chorus of boos. Some women, undoubtedly the outraged feminist contingent, joined in the booing.
"Can you believe this?" T.J. muttered as they were seated. "If we were prophets, I'd say we were about to be stoned."
"It was fallen women who were stoned," Luna said. "That's us, too," Marci said, and laughed. "So we get a reaction from people. So what? If anyone wants to say something to our faces, I think we can hold our own." Their usual waiter brought their usual drinks. "Hey, you guys are famous now," he said cheerfully. If he was upset by certain items on the List, he didn't show it. Of course, it was possible he had no idea what the items were. Jaine said, "Just think, we came up with the idea last Friday night, sitting at that table right over there."
"You did? Wow." He looked at the table in question. "Just wait until I tell the boss."
"Yeah, maybe he can gild the table, or something." The waiter slowly shook his head, looking doubtful. "I don't think so. Isn't that what you do to horses?" She was tired, courtesy of getting up at the ungodly hour of two, so it took her a second to make the connection. "That's geld, not 'gild'."
"Oh." Relief washed over his face. "I was wondering how you could do that to a table."
"Well, it takes four people," Jaine said. "One to hold each leg."
T.J. had her head down on the table, her shoulders shaking as she tried to stifle her mirth. Marci's eyes were looking a little wild, but she managed to give her order with only a mild shake to her voice. Luna, the most composed of them all, waited until all the orders had been taken and he had disappeared into the kitchen before she clapped her hands over her mouth and laughed until tears ran down her face.
"One for each leg," she repeated, gasping, and went off into more whoops.
Their dinner wasn't as relaxed as usual, because people kept coming up to their table and making comments, both snide and complimentary. When their orders arrived, their food was burned; evidently the cook was among the booers.
"Let's get out of here," Marci finally said in disgust. "Even if we could eat this charcoal stuff, we wouldn't have a chance to with all the interruptions."
"Do we pay for it?" Luna asked, examining the hockey puck that was supposed to have been a hamburger patty. "Normally, I'd say no," Jaine

replied. "But if we make a fuss tonight, it's likely to be in the paper tomorrow morning."
Sighing, they agreed. Leaving their plates largely untouched, they paid the tab and left. They usually lingered over their meal, but this time when they left, it was just after six; the summer sun still hung low in the sky, and the heat was scorching.
They all retreated to their respective cars. Jaine started the Viper's engine and sat for a moment listening to the rumbling purr of a powerful, well-tuned machine. She turned the fan on "high" and adjusted the air vents so the cold air blew on her face.
She didn't want to go home and see the news, in case the List was featured again. Deciding to buy groceries instead of waiting until tomorrow, she turned north on Van Dyke, zooming past the GM plant on the left and resisting the urge to turn right, which would have taken her to the Warren Police Department. She didn't want to see if a red pickup truck or a battered brown Pontiac was in the parking lot. All she wanted to do was stock up on food and get home to BooBoo; she had been gone so long he had probably started on another cushion.
Jaine wasn't one who lingered over grocery shopping. She hated doing it, so she attacked a grocery store as if it were a racecourse. Piloting a buggy at high speed, she zipped through the produce department, tossing cabbage and lettuce and an assortment of fruit into the basket, then raced up and down the other aisles. She didn't cook much, because it was too much trouble for just one person, but occasionally she would prepare a roast or something similar, then eat sandwiches made from it for a week. BooBoo's cat food was a necessity, though – An arm wrapped around her waist and a deep voice said, "Miss me?"
She managed to strangle her shriek so it emerged as not much more than a squeak, but she jumped at least a foot straight up and almost crashed into a stack of Sheba cat food.
Whirling around, she quickly positioned the buggy between them and gave him a look of wide-eyed alarm. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I don't know you. You have me mixed up with someone else."
Sam scowled. Other shoppers were watching them with acute interest; at least one lady looked as if she intended to call the cops if he made one wrong move. "Very funny," he growled, and deliberately removed his jacket, revealing the holster on his belt and the big black pistol that resided

in it. Since his badge was also clipped to his belt, the wide-eyed tension on aisle seven melted away as murmurings of "He's a cop" reached them. "Go away," Jaine said. "I'm busy."
"So I see. What is this, the Produce Five Hundred? I've been chasing you up and down the aisles for the last five minutes."
"No you haven't," she returned, checking her watch. "I haven't been here five minutes."
"Okay, three. I saw this red streak heading up Van Dyke and turned around to follow it, figuring it was you."
"Is your car equipped with radar?"
"I'm in my truck, not a city car."
"Then you can't prove how fast I was going."
"Damn it, I wasn't going to give you a ticket," he said, annoyed. "Though if you don't slow down, I'm going to call a patrolman to do the honors."
"So you came in here just to harass me?"
"No," he said with exaggerated patience, "I came in here because I've been gone and I wanted to check in."
"Gone?" she repeated, opening her eyes as wide as they would go. "I had no idea."
He ground his teeth together. She knew because she could see his jaw working. "All right, I should have called." The words sounded as if they had been ripped, painfully, from his gut.
"Really? Why is that?"
"Because we're…"
"Neighbors?" she supplied, when he couldn't seem to find the word he wanted. She was beginning to enjoy herself, at least as much as was possible when she was bleary- eyed from lack of sleep.
"Because we have this thing going." He scowled down at her, looking not at all happy about their "thing." "Thing? I don't do things."
"You'll do mine," he said under his breath, but she heard him anyway and had just opened her mouth to blast him when a kid, maybe eight years old, ran up and poked her in the ribs with a plastic laser weapon, making electric zinging noises as he repeatedly pulled the trigger. "You're dead," he said victoriously.
His mother came hurrying up, looking harassed and helpless. "Damian, stop that!" She gave him a smile that was little more than a grimace. "Don't bother the nice people."

"Shut up," he said rudely. "Can't you see they're Terrons from Vaniot?"
"I'm sorry," the mother said, trying to drag her offspring away. "Damian, come on or you'll have to have a time-out when we get home."
Jaine barely refrained from rolling her eyes. The kid poked her in the ribs again. "Ouch!"
He made those zinging noises again, taking great pleasure in her discomfort.
She plastered a big smile on her face and leaned down closer to precious Damian, then cooed in her most alienlike voice, "Oh, look, a little earthling." She straightened and gave Sam a commanding look. "Kill it."
Damian's mouth fell open. His eyes went as round as quarters as he took in the big pistol on Sam's belt. From his open mouth began to issue a series of shrill noises that sounded like a fire alarm.
Sam cursed under his breath, grabbed Jaine by the arm, and began tugging her at a half-trot toward the front of the store. She managed to snag her purse from the buggy as she went past. "Hey, my groceries!" she protested.
"You can spend another three minutes in here tomorrow and get them," he said with pent-up violence. "Right now I'm trying to keep you from getting arrested."
"For what?" she asked indignantly as he dragged her out of the automatic doors. People were turning to look at them, but most were following the sounds of Damian's shrieks to aisle seven.
"How about threatening to kill that brat and causing a riot?"
"I didn't threaten to loll him! I just ordered you to." She had trouble keeping up with him; her long skirt wasn't made for running.
He whirled her around the side of the building, out of sight, and plastered her against the wall. "I can't believe I missed this," he said in a goaded tone.
She glared up at him and didn't say anything. "I was in Lansing," he snarled, bending down so close his nose nearly touched hers. "Interviewing for a state job."
"You don't owe me any explanations."
He straightened and looked skyward, as if seeking help from the Almighty.
She decided to give an inch. "All right, so a phone call wouldn't have been too pushy." He said something under his breath. She had a good idea what it was, but unfortunately, he wasn't paying out money for every cuss word. If he had been, she would have hit the jackpot. She grabbed his ears, pulled his head down, and kissed him. Just like that he had her pinned to the wall,

his arms so tight around her she could barely breathe, but breathing wasn't number one on her list of priorities right then. Feeling him against her, tasting him – that was important. His pistol was on his belt, so she knew that wasn't what was prodding her in the stomach. She wiggled against it just to make certain. Nope, definitely not a pistol.

He was breathing hard when he lifted his head. "You pick the damnedest places," he said, looking around. "I pick? I was in there minding my own business, doing a little grocery shopping, when I was attacked by not one but two maniacs – "

"Don't you like kids?"

She blinked. "What?"

"Don't you like kids? You wanted me to kill that one."

"I like most kids," she said impatiently, "but I didn't like that one. He poked me in the ribs."

"I'm poking you in the stomach."

She gave him a sweet smile, one that made him shudder. "Yeah, but you aren't using a plastic laser gun."

"Let's get out of here," he said, looking desperate, and hustled her to her car.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Do you want coffee?" Jaine asked as she unlocked the kitchen door and led him inside. "Or iced tea?" she added, thinking a tall, cool glass would be just the ticket right now, with the scorching heat outside.

"Tea," he said, ruining her image of cops living on coffee and doughnuts. He was looking around her kitchen. "How is it you've only lived here a couple of weeks and this place already looks more lived-in than mine?" She pretended to consider the matter. "I believe it's called unpacking."

He looked up at the ceiling. "I missed this?" he muttered at the plaster, still seeking enlightenment.

Jaine sneaked several glances at him as she got two glasses from the cabinet and filled them with ice. Her blood was zinging through her veins, the way it always did when she was around, whether from anger or exhilaration or lust, or a combination of all three. Confined by her cozy kitchen, he seemed even bigger, his shoulders filling the doorway and his size dwarfing her small, made-for-four table with the inlaid ceramic tile top.

"What kind of state job were you interviewing for?"

"State police, field detective division."

Taking the pitcher of tea from the refrigerator, she poured the two glasses full. "Lemon?"

"No, just straight." He took the glass from her, his fingers brushing hers. That was enough to make her nipples pucker and stand at attention. His gaze zeroed in on her mouth. "Congratulations," he said.

She blinked at him. "Have I done something?" She hoped he wasn't referring to all the publicity over the List – oh, God, the List. She had forgotten about it. Had he read the entire thing? Of course he had.

"You haven't cussed once, and we've been together half an hour. You didn't even swear when I dragged you out of the supermarket."

"Really?" She smiled, pleased with herself. Maybe having to pay all those fines was working on her subconscious. She was still thinking a lot of swear words, but the fines didn't kick in unless she said them out loud. Progress was being made.

He tilted the glass up and drank. She watched, mesmerized, as his strong throat worked. She struggled with a violent urge to tear his clothes off. What was wrong with her? She had watched men drink all her life, and it

had never before affected her like this, not even with any of her three ex-fiancés.
"More?" she asked when he drained the glass and set it down.
"No, thanks." That hot, dark gaze went over her, settled on her breasts. "You look extra spiffy today. Anything special going on?"
She wasn't going to avoid the subject, no matter how touchy it was. "We had an interview for Good Morning America this morning – at four A.M. if you can believe it! I had to get up at two," she complained, "and I've been comatose most of the day."
"The List is getting that much publicity?" he asked, surprised. "I'm afraid so," she said morosely, sitting down at the table. He didn't sit down across from her, but took the chair beside her. "I tracked it down on the Web. It was funny stuff – Ms. C." She gaped at him. "How did you know?" she demanded. He snorted. "Like I wouldn't recognize your smart-ass mouth even in print. 'Anything over eight is strictly for show-and-tell'," he quoted at her.
"I might have known you'd remember only the sex stuff."
"Sex is much on my mind these days. And just for the record – I don't have anything for show-and-tell." If he didn't, he hadn't missed it by much, Jaine thought, remembering with great fondness how he had looked in profile.
He continued, "I'm just happy I'm not in the point-and- laugh category."
Jaine shrieked with laughter and threw herself back in the chair so hard it tipped her out onto the floor. She sat there holding her ribs, which had pretty much stopped aching but now decided to resume at such rough treatment, but she couldn't stop laughing. BooBoo cautiously approached, but decided he didn't want to get within touching distance and instead sought refuge under Sam's chair.
Sam leaned down and scooped up the cat, settling him on his lap and stroking down the long, lean body. BooBoo closed his eyes and set up a buzz-saw purr. The cat purred, and Sam watched her, waiting until the gales of laughter had subsided to giggles and wheezing. She sat on the floor with her arms wrapped around her ribs and her eyes wet with tears. If she had any mascara left, it had to be running down her cheeks, she thought. "Need any help getting up?" he asked. "I should warn you that if I get my hands on you, I may have trouble taking them off again."
"I can manage, thanks." Carefully, and not without some difficulty because of her long skirt, she got to her feet and wiped her eyes with a napkin.

"Good. I'd hate to disturb… what's his name? BooBoo? What the hell kind of name for a cat is BooBoo?"
"Don't blame me; blame my mother."
'A cat should have a name it can live up to. Naming him BooBoo is like naming your son Alice. BooBoo shoulda been named Tiger, or Romeo – "
Jaine shook her head. "Romeo's out."
"You mean he's –?"
She nodded.
"In that case, I guess BooBoo's a pretty good name for him, though BooHoo would be more appropriate." She had to hold her ribs really, really tight to keep from bursting into more laughter. "You're such a guy."
"What the hell did you want me to be, a ballerina?" No, she didn't want him to be anything except what he was. No one else had ever made excitement fizz along her veins like champagne, and that was quite an achievement, considering that a week ago they hadn't exchanged anything except insults. Only two days had passed since their first kiss, two days that had seemed like an eternity because there hadn't been any more lasses until she grabbed his ears at the supermarket and pulled him down to her level.
"How's your egg?" he asked, lids heavy over his dark eyes, and she knew his thoughts weren't far from hers. "History," she replied.
"Then let's go to bed."
"You think all you have to do is say, 'Let's go to bed,' and I'll fall over on my back?" she asked indignantly. "No, I hoped I'd have a chance to do a bit more than that before you fell over on your back."
"I'm not falling anywhere."
"Why not?"
"Because I'm having my period." Funny, she couldn't remember ever saying that to a man before, especially without even a twinge of self-consciousness. His brows snapped down. "You're what?" he asked in growing anger.
"Having my period. Menstruating. Maybe you've heard about it. It's when – "
"I have two sisters; I think I know a little about periods. And one of the things I know is that the egg is fertile roughly in the middle of the cycle, not close to the end!" Busted. Jaine pursed her lips. "Okay, so I lied. There's always a slight chance the timing is off, and I wasn't willing to take that chance, all right?"

It evidently wasn't all right. "You stopped me," he groaned, closing his eyes as if he were in acute pain. "I was damn near dying, and you stopped me."
"You make it sound on a level with treason." He opened his eyes, glaring at her. "What about now?" He was about as romantic as a rock, she thought, so why was she so turned on? "Your idea of foreplay is probably @
"You awake?' " she grumbled.
He made an impatient gesture. "What about now?"
"No."
"Jeez!" He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes again. "What's wrong with now?"
"I told you, I'm having my period."
"So?"
"So… no."
"Why not?"
"Because I don't want to!" she yelled. "Give me a break!" He sighed. "I get it. PMS."
"PMS is before, you idiot."
"That's what you say. Ask any man and you'll hear a different story."
"Like they're experts," she scoffed.
"Honey, the only experts in PMS are men. That's why men are so good at fighting wars; they learned Escape and Evade at home."
She thought about throwing a frying pan at him, but BooBoo was in the line of fire, and anyway, she would have to find a frying pan first.
He grinned at the expression on her face. "Know why PMS is called PMS?"
"Don't you dare," she threatened. "Only women can tell PMS jokes."
"Because 'mad cow disease' was already taken." Forget the frying pan. She looked around for a knife. "Get out of my house."
He put BooBoo on the floor and stood up, evidently ready to Escape and Evade. "Settle down," he said, putting the chair between them.
"Settle down, my ass! Damn it, where's my butcher knife?" She looked around in frustration. If she had only lived here longer, she would know where she had put everything! He came out from behind the chair, around the table, and had a firm grip on both her wrists before she could remember which drawer held her cutting knives. "You owe me fifty cents," he said, grinning down at her as he pulled her against him.
"Don't hold your breath! I told you I wouldn't pay when it's your fault." She blew her bangs out of her eyes so she could glare at him more effectively.

He bent his head and kissed her.
Time stood still again. He must have released her wrists, because her arms slid around his neck. His mouth was hot and hungry, and he kissed the way no man should kiss and still be allowed to run free. His scent was as warm and musky as sex, filling her lungs, permeating her skin. He put one big hand on her bottom and lifted her off her feet, aligning their bodies more completely, groin to groin. The long skirt hampered her, preventing her from wrapping her legs around him. Jaine arched in frustration, almost ready to cry. "We can't," she whispered when he raised his mouth a fraction of an inch.
"We can do other things," he murmured in reply, sitting down with her across his lap, tilted back across his supporting arm. Deftly he slipped his hand inside the scooped neckline of her sweater.
She closed her eyes in delight as his rough palm scraped over her nipple. He exhaled, a long, sighing sound; then it was as if they both held their breath as his hand shaped itself over her breast, learning her size and softness, the texture of her skin.
In silence he withdrew his hand and pulled the sweater off over her head, then deftly unzipped her bra and pushed it off her shoulders to fall to the floor.
She lay half-naked across his lap, her breath coming fast and shallow as she watched him looking at her. She knew her own breasts, but what were they like from a man's point of view? They weren't big, but were firm and upright. Her nipples were small and pinkish-brown, velvety soft and delicate compared to the rough fingertip he used to lightly circle one, making the aureole pucker even more tightly.
Pleasure speared through her, making her clench her legs tightly together to contain it.
He lifted her, arching her even more across his arm, and bent his head to her breasts.
He was gentle, totally without haste. She was stunned by his caution now, given his rapacious kisses. He nuzzled his face against the underside of her breasts, kissing the curves, licking gently at her nipples until they were reddened and so tight they couldn't possibly get any tighter. When he finally began sucking her with slow, firm pressure, she was so ready it was as if he had touched her with a live wire. She couldn't control her body, couldn't stop herself from arching wildly in his arms; her heart was thundering, her

pulse racing so fast she was dizzy. She was helpless; she would have done virtually anything he wanted. When he stopped, it was by his own willpower, not hers. She could feel him shaking, his strong, powerful body quaking against her as if he were chilled, though his skin was hot to the touch. He sat her upright and pressed his forehead to hers, his eyes squeezed shut and his hands roughly stroking her hips, her bare back. "If I ever get inside you," he said in a strained tone, "I'll last, like, two seconds. Maybe."

She was crazy. She had to be, because two seconds of Sam sounded better than anything else she could bring to mind right now. She stared at him with glazed eyes and ripe, swollen mouth. She wanted those two seconds. She wanted them bad.

He looked down at her breasts and made a sound halfway between a whine and a groan. Muttering a curse, he leaned down and snagged her sweater from the floor, pressing it to her chest. "Maybe you'd better put this back on."

"Maybe I should," she said, and her voice sounded drugged even to herself. Her arms didn't seem to be working; they remained twined around Sam's neck. "Either you put on the sweater, or we go to the bedroom." That wasn't much of a threat, she thought, when every cell in her body was saying "Yes! Yes! Yes!" As long as she could keep her mouth from saying it, she was holding her own, but she was beginning to have serious doubts about holding him off for even a couple of days, much less a couple of weeks the way she had planned. Torturing him didn't sound like nearly as much fun as it had before, because now she knew just how much she would also be torturing herself.

He stuffed her arms inside the sweater and pulled it over her head, jerking the fabric into place. The sweater was inside out, she saw, but who cared? She didn't. "You're trying to kill me," he accused. "I'm going to make you pay, too."

"How?" she asked with interest, leaning against him. The same thing that was wrong with her arms was also wrong with her spine; it wouldn't hold her upright. "Instead of that half hour of thrusting time you claim you want, I'm going to stop at twenty-nine minutes." She snickered. "I thought you were holding out for two seconds."

"That's just the first time. The second time we're going to set the sheets on fire."

It behooved her, she thought, to get off his lap. His erection was like an iron bar prodding her hip, and talking about sex wasn't helping any. If she really, really didn't want to go to bed with him now, she should get up. But she really, really did want to go to bed with him, and only a small portion of her brain was still cautious. That small portion, however, was insistent. She had learned the hard way not to assume happily-ever-after would happen for her, and just because they were hot for each other didn't mean there was anything between them other than sex.
She cleared her throat. "I should get up, shouldn't I?"
"If you have to move at all, do it slowly."
"That close, huh?"
"Just call me Mount Etna."
"Who's Edna?"
He laughed, as she had intended, but the sound was strained. Gingerly she eased off his lap. He winced and awkwardly climbed to his feet. The front of his pants looked deformed, the way it was tented out. Jaine tried not to stare.
"Tell me about your family," she blurted.
"What?" He looked as if he was having trouble following the change of subject.
"Your family. Tell me about them."
"Why?"
"To get your mind off… you know." She indicated the "you know" in question. "You said you have two sisters."
"And four brothers."
She blinked. "Seven. Wow."
"Yeah. Unfortunately, my oldest sister, Dorothy, was the third child. My folks kept trying to have another girl so she wouldn't be the only one. They had three more boys trying to get Doro a sister."
"Where are you in the lineup?"
"Second."
"Are you a close family?"
"Fairly close. We all live here in the state except for Angie, the baby. She goes to college in Chicago."
The diversion had worked; he looked a little more relaxed than he had a moment before, though his gaze still had a tendency to settle on her braless

breasts. To give him something to do, she poured another glass of iced tea and handed it to him.
"Have you ever been married?"
"Once, about ten years ago."
"What happened?"
"Nosy, aren't you?" he said. "She didn't like being a cop's wife; I didn't like being a bitch's husband. End of story. She split for the West Coast as soon as the papers were signed. What about you?"
"Nosy, aren't you?" she threw back at him, then hesitated. "Do you think I'm a bitch?" God knows she hadn't always been on her best behavior with him. Come to think of it, she'd never been on her best behavior with him. "Nah. You're damn scary, but you aren't a bitch."
"Gee, thanks," she muttered; then, because fair was fair, she said, "No, I've never been married, but I've been engaged three times."
He paused with the glass halfway to his mouth and gave her a startled look. "Three times?"
She nodded. "I guess I'm not very good at the man- woman stuff."
His gaze went back to her breasts. "Oh, I don't know. You're doing pretty good at keeping me interested."
"So maybe you're a mutant." She shrugged helplessly. "My second fiance decided he was still in love with an ex- girlfriend, who I guess wasn't all that ex, but I don't know what happened with the other two."
He snorted. "They were probably scared."
"Scared!" For some reason, that hurt, just a little. She felt her lower lip wobble. "I'm not that bad, am I?"
"Worse," he said cheerfully. "You're hell on wheels. You're just lucky I like hot rods. Now, if you'll put your clothes on right side out, I'll take you out to dinner. How does a burger sound?"
"I'd rather have Chinese," she said as she went down the short hall to her bedroom.
"Figures."
He muttered the reply, but she heard him anyway, and she was smiling as she closed her bedroom door and pulled off the red sweater. Since he liked hot rods, she was going to show him just how fast she could go. The problem was, he had to catch her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Corin couldn't sleep. He got out of bed and turned on the light in the bathroom, checking in the mirror to make certain he was still there. The face that stared back at him was that of a stranger, but the eyes were familiar. He had seen those eyes look back at him for most of his life, but sometimes he was gone and they didn't see him. An array of yellow medicine bottles were lined up, according to size, on the vanity so he would see them every day when he got up and remember to take his medication. It had been several days now – he couldn't remember exactly how many – since he had taken the pills. He could see himself now, but when he took the pills, his thinking got clouded and he faded away in the mist. It was better, they had told him, if he stayed in the mist, hidden away. The pills worked so well that sometimes he even forgot he was there. But there was always a sense of something wrong, as if the universe were askew, and now he knew what it was. The pills might hide him, but they couldn't make him go away. He hadn't been able to sleep since he stopped taking the pills. Oh, he dozed, but real sleep eluded him. Sometimes he felt as if he were shaking apart inside, though when he held out his hands, they were steady. Was there something addictive in the pills? Had they lied to him? He didn't want to be a drug addict; addiction was a sign of weakness, his mother had always told him. He couldn't be addicted because he couldn't be weak. He had to be strong, he had to be perfect.

He heard an echo of her voice in his head. "My perfect little man," she had called him, stroking his cheek. Whenever he failed her, whenever he was less than perfect, her wrath had been so overwhelming his world would threaten to come apart at the seams. He would do anything to keep from disappointing his mother, but he had kept an awful secret from her: sometimes he had deliberately transgressed, just a little, so she would punish him. Even now the thought of those punishments sent a thrill through him. She would have been so disappointed if she had guessed his secret delight, so he had always struggled to keep his pleasure hidden. Sometimes he missed her so much. She always knew just what to do. She would know, for instance, what to do about those four bitches who mocked him with their list for being perfect. As if they knew what perfection was! He knew. His mother had known. He had always tried so

hard to be her perfect little man, her perfect son, but he had always fallen short, even on those times when he wasn't misbehaving just a little, on purpose, so she would punish him. He had always known there was an imperfection in him that he would never be able to correct, that he always disappointed his mother on a basic level just by being.

They thought they were so smart, the four bitches – he liked the way that sounded, the Four Bitches, like some perverted Roman deity. The Furies, the Graces, the Bitches. They tried to play it cute, hiding their identities by using A, B, C, and D instead of their names. There was one in particular he hated, the one who said, "If a man isn't perfect, he should try harder." What did they know? Had they ever tried to measure up to a standard so impossibly high only perfection could meet it, and fallen short every day of their lives? Had they?

Did they know what it was like for him to try and try, yet know deep inside he was going to fail, until finally he learned to enjoy the punishment because that was the only way he could live with it? Did they know? Bitches like them didn't deserve to live.

He could feel that inner shaking again, and he wrapped his arms around himself, holding himself together. It was their fault he couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop thinking about them, about what they said.

Which one was it? Was it that bleached blonde, Marci Dean, who swished her ass in front of all the men like she was some goddess and they were nothing but dogs who would come running whenever she wanted? He had heard she would sleep with anyone who asked, but that most of the time she beat them to the punch. His mother would have been appalled at such trashy behavior. "Some people don't deserve to live."

He could hear her whisper inside his head, the way she often did when he didn't take the pills. He wasn't the only one who disappeared when he took the medication the way they instructed; Mother disappeared, too. Maybe they went away together. He didn't know, but he hoped so. Maybe she punished him for taking the pills and making her disappear. Maybe that was why he took the pills, so he and Mother could go away and… No, that wasn't right. When he took the pills, it was as if he didn't exist. He felt the thought slipping away from him. All he knew was that he didn't want to take the pills. He wanted to find out which bitch was which. That sounded funny so he repeated it to himself, and silently laughed. Which bitch was which. That was good.

He knew where they all lived. He had gotten their addresses from their files at work. It was so easy, for anyone who knew how, and of course no one had questioned him.
He would go to her house and find out if she was the one who had said that awful, stupid thing. He was pretty sure it was Marci. He wanted to teach that stupid, vicious bitch a lesson. Mother would be so pleased.

Marci was a night owl, even during the workweek. She didn't need much sleep, so even though she didn't party nearly as hearty as she had when she was younger – say, in her thirties – she seldom went to bed before one A.M. She watched old movies on television; she read three or four books a week; she had even developed a fondness for cross-stitching. She had to laugh at herself whenever she picked up her cross-stitch hoop, because this had to be proof the party girl was getting old. But she could empty out her mind when she was working cross-stitch. Who needed meditation to gain inner serenity when she could get the same effect by duplicating with needle and thread a small colored pattern of Xs? At least when she had completed a pattern, she had something to show for it.
In her time she had tried a lot of stuff that people probably wouldn't expect of her, she thought. Meditation. Yoga. Self-hypnotism. Finally she had decided a beer worked just as well and her insides were as serene as they were going to get. She was what she was. If anyone didn't like it, screw 'em.
Usually, on a Friday night, she and Brick would hit a couple of bars, do some dancing, drink a few beers. Brick was a fine dancer, which was surprising because he looked like someone who would rather die than get on a dance floor, kind of a cross between a truck driver and a biker. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, but he sure had some moves.
She had thought about going out without him, but the idea wasn't very exciting. With all the hoopla this week about that damn List, she was a little tired. She wanted to settle down with a book and rest. Maybe tomorrow night she'd go out.
She missed Brick. She missed his presence, anyway, if not him in particular. When he wasn't in the sack or on a dance floor, he was pretty boring. He slept; he drank beer; he watched television. That was it. He wasn't a great lover, either, but he sure was an eager one. He was never too tired and was always willing to try anything she wanted.

Still, Brick was just further proof she wasn't any good at picking men. At least she wasn't stupid enough any longer to marry them. Three times was enough, thank you. Jaine fretted because she'd been engaged three times, but at least she hadn't actually married three times. Besides, Jaine just hadn't met anyone yet who could hold his own with her. Maybe that cop… Hell, probably not. Life had taught Marci that things seldom worked out just right. There was always a bump in the road, a glitch in the software.

It was after midnight when the doorbell rang. She placed a bookmark between the pages so she wouldn't lose her place and got up from the couch where she had been sprawled. Who on earth could that be? It wouldn't be Brick returning, because he had a key.

That reminded her: she needed to get her locks replaced. She was too cautious to simply get her key back and assume he hadn't made a duplicate. So far he hadn't displayed any thieving habits, but one never knew what a man might do when he was pissed at a woman. Because she was cautious, she looked through the peephole. She frowned and stepped back to unlock the door and remove the chain. "Hey," she said, opening the door. "Is something wrong?"

"No," said Corin, and hit her in the head with the hammer he had been holding against his leg.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On Monday, the elevator sign read: XEROX AND WURLITZER HAVE ANNOUNCED THEY WILL MERGE TO MARKET REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS.

Jaine was still chuckling when the elevator doors opened. She felt as if she were fizzing on the inside, a direct result of a weekend filled with Sam. She still hadn't been filled with Sam, but she had started on the birth control pills that morning. Not that she had told him she was going to, of course. Frustration was driving her crazy, but anticipation was lighting up her whole world. She couldn't remember ever feeling so alive, as if every cell in her body were awake and singing.

Derek Kellman stepped forward to exit the elevator as she was getting on. "Hi, Kellman," she said cheerfully. "How're things going?"

He turned bright red, and his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "Uh – okay," he mumbled as he ducked his head and hurried off the elevator.

Jaine smilingly shook her head and punched the button for the third floor. She couldn't imagine Kellman getting up enough nerve to grab Marci's ass; she and everyone else in the building would have paid good money to have seen it.

As usual, she was the first one in the office; she liked getting a jump on Monday mornings, with all the payroll to handle. If she could just keep her mind on the job, she was off to a good start.

The List thing was dying down, maybe. Everyone who wanted an interview had one, except for People magazine. She hadn't watched television that morning, so she had no idea what snippets of their Friday morning interview actually made it on air. Someone would be certain to tell her, though, and if she ever felt the urge to watch it, which wasn't likely, at least one of the other three would have taped the program.

Funny how she didn't much care. How could she worry about the List with Sam occupying so much of her time and thoughts? He was maddening, but he was funny and sexy and she wanted him.

After eating dinner together Friday night, he had awakened her at six-thirty Saturday morning by spraying her bedroom window with the water hose, then inviting her out to help him wash his truck. Figuring she owed him, since he had washed the Viper, she quickly pulled on some clothes, put on

some coffee, and joined him outside. He hadn't wanted to just wash the truck; he wanted it waxed and buffed, all the chrome cleaned and polished, the interior vacuumed, all the windows washed. After two hours of intense labor, the truck had gleamed. He had then pulled it into his garage and asked what she was cooking him for breakfast.

They had spent the day together, arguing and laughing, watching a ball game on television, and were getting ready to go out for dinner when his beeper went off. He used her phone to call in, and before she knew it, he was out the door with a quick lass and a "I don't know when I'll be back." He was a cop, she reminded herself. As long as he remained a cop – and he seemed set on making a career of it, given his interview with the state police – his life would be a series of interruptions and urgent summons. Broken dates would come with the package. She had thought about it and decided what the hell, she was tough, she could handle it. But if he were in danger… she didn't know if she could handle that nearly as well. Was he still working on that task force? Was it something he was permanently assigned to, or were things like that temporary? She knew so little about law enforcement, but she would definitely be finding out more.

He had returned Sunday afternoon, tired, grumpy, and not inclined to talk about what he'd been doing. Instead of badgering him with questions, she let him nap in her big easy chair while she read, curled up on one of the two remaining cushions on the couch.

Being with him like that, not on a date or anything, just being, had felt somehow… right. Watching him sleep. Enjoying the sound of his breathing. And not daring, not yet, to put the L-word to what she was feeling. It was too soon, and she was still too wary from past experiences to blindly trust that this excitement when she was with him would last forever. Her wariness was also the real basis for her reluctance to sleep with him. Yeah, frustrating him was fun and she enjoyed the heat in his eyes when he looked at her, but deep down she was still afraid to let him get too close to her. Maybe next week. "Hey, Jaine!" She looked up as Dominica Flores stuck her head in the door, her eyebrows raised in query.

"I just caught part of the thing on television this morning; I had to leave before it was finished, but I set the VCR. It was so cool! You looked hot, really hot. Everyone looked good, y'know, but, wow, you were great."

"I didn't see it," Jaine said.

"Really? Wow, if I were on national television, I'd stay out of work to watch myself."
Not if you were as sick of the whole thing as I am, Jaine thought. She managed a smile anyway.
At eight-thirty Luna called. "Have you heard from Marci?" she asked. "She hasn't come to work yet, but when I called her at home, there wasn't an answer."
"No, I haven't talked to her since Friday."
"It isn't like her to miss work." Luna sounded worried. She and Marci were pretty tight, surprisingly so considering the gap between their ages. "And she didn't call in late or sick or anything."
That really wasn't like Marci. She hadn't reached her position as head of accounting by being unreliable. Jaine frowned; now she was worried. "Have you tried her cell phone?"
"It isn't on."
The first thought that sprang to Jaine's mind was that there had been a traffic accident. The Detroit traffic was horrendous during rush hour. "I'll call around and see if I can find her," she said, not voicing her sudden concern to Luna.
"Okay. Let me know."
As she hung up, Jaine tried to think of who to call to find out if there had been a traffic accident somewhere on the freeway between Sterling Heights and Hammerstead. And did Marci come down Van Dyke to hit I-696 or avoid Van Dyke and take one of the Mile roads over to Troy where she could pick up I-75?
Sam would know whom to call.
Quickly she looked up the number of the Warren Police Department, dialed it, and asked for Detective Donovan. Then she was put on hold. She waited impatiently, tapping a pen against the desktop, for several minutes. Finally the voice came back to say that Detective Donovan wasn't available, would she like to leave a message? Jaine hesitated. She hated to bother him for something that could easily turn out to be nothing, but she didn't think anyone else at the department would take her concern seriously. So a friend was half an hour late to work; that wasn't generally cause enough to call out the troops. Sam might not take her seriously either, but he would at least make an effort to find out something. "Do you have his pager number?" she

finally asked. "It's important." It was important to her, though it might not be to them. "What does this concern?"
Irritated, she wondered if women regularly called Sam at work. "I'm one of his snitches," she said, crossing her fingers at the lie. "Then you should have his pager number."
"Oh, for God's sake! Someone could be hurt or dead – "
She caught herself. "Okay, so I'm pregnant, and I thought he'd like to know."
The voice laughed. "Is this Jaine?"
Oh, my God, he'd been talking about her! Her face flamed. "Um – yes," she mumbled. "Sorry."
"Not a problem. He said if you ever called to make sure you got in touch with him."
Yeah, but how had he described her? She refrained from asking and jotted down his pager number. "Thanks," she said. "You're welcome. Uh – about this pregnancy thing…"
"I lied," she said, and tried to work up a smidgen of shame in her tone. She didn't think she succeeded, because the woman laughed.
"You go, girl," said the woman, and hung up, leaving Jaine to wonder exactly what she meant.
She pressed the disconnect button on her desk phone, then dialed Sam's pager. It was one of the numerical pagers, so she left her number. Since it wasn't a number he would recognize, she wondered how long it would take him to return her call. In the meantime she called accounting. "Has Marci arrived yet?"
"No," was the worried reply. "We haven't heard from her."
"This is Jaine, extension three-six-two-one. If she comes in, tell her to call me immediately."
"Will do."
It was nine-thirty before her phone rang again. She snatched up the receiver, hoping Marci had finally shown up. "Jaine Bright."
"I hear we're going to be parents." Sam's deep voice purred over the telephone line.
Damn blabbermouth! she thought. "I had to say something. She didn't believe I was a snitch."
"Lucky I warned everyone about you," he said, then asked, "What's up?"
"Nothing, I hope. My friend Marci – "

"Marci Dean, one of the infamous List Ladies?" She might have known he'd have the details on all of them. "She hasn't come in to work, hasn't called, isn't answering her home phone or cell phone. I'm afraid she might have been in an accident on the way to work, but I don't know who to contact to find out. Can you steer me in the right direction?"
"No problem. I'll get in touch with our traffic division and get them to check reports. Let's see, she lives in Sterling Heights, doesn't she?"
"Yes." Quickly Jaine gave him the address, then paused as another awful thought struck her. "Sam… her boyfriend was really upset about the List. He left Thursday night, but he might have come back."
There was a slight pause; then his tone turned brisk and businesslike. "I'll contact both the sheriff's department and the Sterling Heights P.D. have her place checked out. It's probably nothing, but it won't hurt to be certain."
"Thanks," she whispered.
Sam didn't like what he was thinking, but he'd been a cop too long to write off Jaine's concern as overreacting. An irate boyfriend – one with a wounded ego, at that, over that damn List – and a missing woman were ingredients in far too many incidents of violence. Maybe Ms. Dean's car had broken down, but maybe not. Jaine wasn't the type to panic over nothing, and she had definitely been afraid. Maybe she had some feminine intuition going there, but he didn't discount that, either. Hell, his mom had eyes in the back of her head and had always, without fail, been waiting up for him and his brothers whenever they had been up to mischief. To this day he didn't know how she had known, but he accepted it nevertheless. He placed two calls, the first to the Sterling Heights P.D. the next to a pal in traffic who could check for victims in any morning traffic accident. The Sterling Heights sergeant he spoke to said they would immediately send a car to check out Ms. Dean's residence, so he held off on calling the sheriff's department. He left his cell phone number with both contacts.
His pal in traffic checked in first. "No major accidents this morning," he said. "A few fender benders is all, and a guy dumped his motorcycle in the middle of Gratiot Avenue, but that's it."
"Thanks for checking," Sam said.
"Any time."
At ten-fifteen, his cell phone rang again. It was the Sterling Heights sergeant. "You called it, Detective," he said, sounding weary.
"She's dead?"

"Yeah. It's pretty brutal. You got a name for that boyfriend? None of the neighbors are at home for us to ask, and I think we need to have a little talk with him."
"I can get it. My lady friend is – was – Ms. Dean's best friend."
"Appreciate the help."
Sam knew he was treading on someone else's territory, but he figured since he had tipped them to the scene, the sergeant would cut him some slack.
"Can you give me any details?"
The sergeant paused. "What land of cell phone are you using?"
"Digital."
"Secure?"
"Until the hackers figure out a way to get the signal."
"Okay. He used a hammer on her. Left it at the scene. We might get some prints off it, might not."
Sam winced. A hammer did a god-awful amount of damage.
"Not much of her face is left, plus she was stabbed multiple times. And she was sexually attacked." If the boyfriend had left his semen behind, he was nailed. "Any semen?"
"Don't know yet. The M.E. will have to do tests. He – ah – did her with the hammer."
Jesus. Sam took a deep breath. "Okay. Thanks, Sergeant."
"Appreciate the help. Your lady friend – is she who you intend to ask about the boyfriend?"
"Yeah. She called me because she was worried when Ms. Dean didn't show up for work this morning."
"Can you just ask her about the boyfriend, and stall her on the rest?"
Sam snorted. "I'd have a better chance of stalling sundown."
"One of those, huh? Can she keep it quiet? We're pretty sure this is Ms. Dean, but we haven't made a positive I.D. yet, and the family hasn't been contacted."
"I'll get her to leave work. She's going to be pretty upset." He wanted to be with her when he told her, anyway. "Okay. And, Detective – if we can't locate any family locally, we may need your friend to identify the body."
"You have my number," Sam said quietly. He sat for a minute after they hung up. He didn't have to imagine the gory details; he had seen too many murder scenes in all their bloody reality. He knew what a hammer or a baseball bat could do to the human head. He knew what multiple stab

wounds looked like. And, like the sergeant, he knew that this murder had been perpetrated by someone who knew the victim because the attack had been personal; the face had been attacked. The multiple stab wounds were indicative of rage. And since most female murder victims were killed by someone they knew, usually the husband or boyfriend, or the ex-whatever, the odds were overwhelming that Ms. Dean's boyfriend was the killer. He took a deep breath and dialed Jaine's number again. When she answered, he said, "Do you know Marci's boyfriend's name?"
She audibly inhaled. "Is she all right?"
"I don't know anything yet," he lied. "Her boyfriend –?"
"Oh. His name is Brick Geurin." She spelled the last name for him.
"Is 'Brick' his real name or a nickname?"
"I don't know. 'Brick' is all I ever heard her call him."
"Okay, that's enough. I'll get back with you when I hear something. Oh – want to meet me for lunch?"
"Sure. Where?"
She still sounded scared, but she was holding together the way he had known she would. "I'll pick you up, if you can get me through the gate."
"No problem. Twelve?"
He checked his watch. Ten-thirty-five. "Can you make it earlier, say eleven-fifteen or so?" That would just give him time to get to Hammerstead.
Maybe she knew, maybe she caught on then. "I'll meet you downstairs."
She was waiting for him at the front of the building when the guard let him through the gate. She was wearing another of those long, lean skirts that looked like a million bucks on her, which meant there was no way she could climb into his truck without help. He got out and walked around to open the door for her. Her eyes were anxious as she studied his expression. He knew he was wearing his cop face, as emotionless as a mask, but she went white. He put his hands around her slender waist and lifted her into the truck, then walked back around to get behind the wheel.
A tear slid down Jaine's cheek. "Tell me," she said, her voice choked.
He sighed, then reached out and drew her into his arms. "I'm so sorry," he said against her hair.
She clutched his shirt. He could feel her shaking, and held her even tighter.
"She's dead, isn't she," she said in a trembling whisper, and it wasn't a question. She knew.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jaine had cried so much her eyes were swollen almost shut. Sam had simply held her through the initial storm of weeping, parked in front of Hammerstead; then when she regained a bit of control, he asked, "Can you eat anything?"

She shook her head. "No." Her voice was thick. "I need to tell Luna… and T.J. – "

"Not yet, honey. Once you tell them, it'll be all over the building; then someone will call the newspaper or a radio or television station, and it'll be all over the news. Her family hasn't been notified yet, and they don't need to hear it that way."

"She doesn't have much family." Jaine fished a tissue out of her purse, then wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "She has a sister in Saginaw, and I think an elderly aunt and uncle in Florida. That's all I ever heard her mention."

"Do you know her sister's name?"

"Cheryl. I don't know her last name."

"It's probably in an address book at her house. I'll tell them to look for a Cheryl in Saginaw." He dialed a number on his cell phone, and spoke quietly to whoever answered on the other end, imparting the information about Marci's sister.

"I need to go home," Jaine said, staring through the windshield. She reached for the door handle, but Sam stopped her, holding her in place with a firm hand on her arm.

"No way are you driving right now," he said. "If you want to go home, I'll take you."

"But my car – "

"Isn't going anywhere. It's in a secure place. If you need to go anywhere, I'll drive you."

"But you might have to leave."

"I'll handle it," he said. "You aren't driving." If she hadn't been so shattered, she would have argued with him, but tears welled again and she knew she couldn't see to drive. Neither could she could go back inside; she couldn't handle facing anyone right now, couldn't handle the inevitable questions without breaking down. "I have to let the office know I'm going home," she said.

"Can you handle it, or do you want me to do it?"
"I can," she said, her voice trembling. "Just… not right now."
"Okay. Fasten your seat belt."
Obediently she buckled the belt around her and sat deathly still as Sam put the truck in gear and negotiated the freeway traffic. He drove silently, not intruding on her grief while she tried to accept that Marci was gone. "You – you think Brick did it, don't you?"
"He'll be questioned," Sam said neutrally. At this point, Geurin would be the number one suspect, but the evidence would have to support it. Even while you played the odds, you had to always be aware that the truth could go against the percentages. Who knows? They might find out Ms. Dean had been seeing someone else, too. Jaine began crying again. She put her hands over her face and sat hunched over, her shoulders shaking. "I can't believe this is happening," she managed to say, then wondered dully how many millions of other people said exactly the same thing during a crisis.
"I know, honey."
He did know, she realized. In his job, he probably saw way too many scenes of this sort.
"H-how did –? I mean, what happened?"
Sam hesitated, reluctant to tell her Marci had been both bludgeoned and stabbed. He didn't know the exact cause of death, hadn't seen the crime scene, so he didn't know if she had died from head trauma or if she had died from the stab wounds.
"I don't know all the details," he finally said. "I know she was stabbed. I don't know the time of death or anything." Those three statements were true, without being anywhere close to the whole truth.
"Stabbed," Jaine repeated, and closed her eyes as if trying to visualize the crime.
"Don't," he said.
She opened her eyes and looked questioningly at him. "You were trying to imagine what happened, how she looked, if it hurt," he said, more harshly than he intended. "Don't."
She took a deep breath, and he expected her to lash out at him, transferring the focus of her grief and anger to him, but instead she nodded, trusting that he knew best. "I'll try, but – how do I not think about it?"
"Think about her instead," he said, because he knew she would anyway. It was part of the grieving process. She tried to say something, her throat

working, but tears welled up again, and she settled for a jerky nod. She didn't say anything else all the way home to Warren. She felt old as she walked across their driveways to her house. Sam went with her, his arm around her, and she was grateful for his support as she ponderously climbed the steps to the kitchen door. BooBoo came meowing, tail twitching, as if asking why she was home so early. She leaned down to scratch behind his ears, taking comfort in the warmth of the sinuous body and the softness of his fur. She put her purse on the table and sank down in one of the kitchen chairs, holding BooBoo on her lap and stroking him while Sam called his sergeant and carried on a quiet conversation. She tried not to think about Marci, not yet. She did think about Luna and T.J. and the anxiety they must feel because they hadn't yet heard from Marci. She hoped Marci's sister was contacted soon, because when she reported off for the rest of the day, her friends would know something was dreadfully wrong. If they called here to check on her, she didn't know what she would say or if she could even manage to talk to them.

Sam set a glass of tea in front of her. "Drink it," he said. "You've leaked enough to be dehydrated."

Impossibly, that earned a shaky smile. He kissed the top of her head, then sat down beside her with his own glass of tea.

She put BooBoo down, sniffed, and blotted her eyes. "Exactly what did you tell everyone at the department about me?" she asked, just for something to talk about. He tried for an innocent look. On that rough-hewn face, it didn't work very well.

"Nothing much. Just that if you called, to tell you how to get in touch with me. I should have thought to give you my pager number anyway."

"Nice try," she commented.

"Did it work?"

"Nope."

"Okay, I told them you cuss like a sailor – "

"I do not!"

" – have the sweetest ass this side of the Rocky Mountains, and if you called, to get in touch with me pronto because I've been trying to get you into bed and you might be calling to say yes."

He was trying to cheer her up, she thought. She felt her chin wobble. "That's so sweet," she managed to say, and burst into tears again. She hugged

herself, rocking back and forth. This outburst was violent but short, as if mentally she couldn't sustain such anguish for a long period of time.
Sam scooped her onto his lap and held her head against his shoulder. "I told them you were special," he murmured, "and that if you called, I wanted to talk to you no matter where I was or what I was doing."
That was probably a lie, too, she thought, but it was as sweet as the other one. She gulped and managed to say, "Even if you're doing your task force stuff?" He paused. "Maybe not then."
Her head was aching from crying so much, and her face felt hot. She wanted very much to ask him to make love to her now, but she swallowed the words. As much as she needed the comfort and closeness, the affirmation of life, she wouldn't feel right; their first time shouldn't be under such circumstances. Instead she snuggled her face against his neck and inhaled his warm male scent, taking what comfort she could from his closeness. "What exactly does a task force do?"
"Depends. Task forces are formed for different reasons."
"What does your task force do?"
"It's a multidepartment violent crimes task force. We apprehend violent criminals."
She didn't like the sound of that. She was more comfortable thinking of him asking questions, writing stuff down in a little notebook; in short, detecting. Apprehending violent criminals sounded as if he was breaking down doors and stuff like that, and facing mean people who were likely to shoot at him.
"I want to ask you some questions about that," she said, lifting her head to frown at him. "But not right now. Later." He blew out a relieved breath.
He held her on his lap for quite a while. He held her close while she called the office and reported off for the rest of the day. She managed to keep her voice even, but Mr. de Wynter wasn't in and she had to talk to Gina, who was full of questions and also reported that both Luna and T.J. had called several times.
"I'll call them back," Jaine said, and hung up. Miserably she buried her face against Sam's shoulder again. "How long do I have to dodge them?"
"At least until they aren't at work. I'll check with the sergeant at Sterling Heights to see if her sister has been contacted yet. And just don't answer your phone; anyone who needs me will either page me or call on my cell phone."

Eventually she left the comfort of his lap and went to the bathroom to wash her face with cold water. She peered at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red, and her entire face was puffy from crying; she looked like hell, and didn't care. Wearily she changed into jeans and a T-shirt, and took two aspirin for her pounding head.
She was sitting on the side of the bed when Sam came looking for her. He loomed in the doorway, big and masculine and utterly comfortable even in the feminine environs of her bedroom. He sat down beside her. "You look tired. Why don't you take a nap?"
She was tired, almost overwhelmingly so, but at the same time she didn't think she could sleep.
"At least lie down," he said, seeing the doubt on her face. "And don't worry; if you do go to sleep and I learn something, I'll wake you up immediately."
"Scout's honor?"
"Scout's honor."
"Were you ever a scout?"
"Hell, no. I was too busy getting into trouble." He was being so sweet she wanted to hug him to pieces. Instead she kissed him and said, "Thanks, Sam. I don't know what I'd have done today without you."
"You'd have managed anyway," he said, and returned the kiss with interest, but drew back before it could heat into anything serious. "Sleep if you can," he said, and quietly left the room, closing the door behind him. She lay down and closed her burning eyes. Eventually the aspirin began to work on her headache, and when she opened her eyes, she realized that the afternoon had grown late. She looked at the clock in some astonishment; three hours had passed. She had slept after all. She had some treated eye pads for soothing tired and puffy eyes, so she placed two of them over her lids and rested for a little while longer, trying to muster some energy for the next few draining days. When she sat up and removed the eye pads, the puffiness was noticeably less. She brushed her hair and teeth, then wandered out to find Sam watching television with BooBoo asleep in his lap.
"Any news?"
He had considerably more details now than he had earlier, but none he wanted her to know. "The sister has been notified, and the press knows Marci's identity now. It'll probably be on the evening news."
Her face tightened with sorrow.
"Luna? T. J.?"

"I turned off your phones after you went to sleep. There are a couple of messages from them on your machine, though."
She checked the time again. "They're on their way home from work now. I'll try their numbers in a few minutes. I'd hate for them to hear it on television."
She had barely gotten the words out of her mouth when two cars pulled into her driveway: Luna's Camaro and T.J.'s Buick. Jaine briefly closed her eyes, trying to brace herself for the next few minutes, and walked barefoot out onto the front porch to meet her friends. Sam came out behind her.
"What's going on?" T.J. half-yelled, her pretty face haggard with tension.
"We can't find Marci, you left work and won't answer your telephone – damn it, Jaine…" Jaine felt her face start to crumple. She clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to hold back the sobs that convulsed her chest.
Luna stopped in her tracks, tears welling. "Jaine?" she asked in a shaky voice. "What's happened?"
Jaine took several deep breaths, fighting for control. "It – it's Marci," she managed to say.
T.J. paused with one foot on the first step. She clenched her hands, already beginning to cry even as she asked, "What is it? Is she hurt?"
Jaine shook her head. "No. She – she's dead. Someone killed her."
Luna and T.J. came to her in a rush, and they clung together, weeping for the friend they loved and had lost forever.
Corin sat in front of the television, rocking back and forth as he waited, waited. For three days he had caught every newscast, but so far no one knew what he had done and he thought he would burst. He wanted the world to know the first of the four bitches was dead.
But he didn't know if she was the right one. He didn't know if she was A, B, C, or D. He hoped she was C. C was the one who had said that awful thing about trying harder to be perfect. C was the one who really, really needed to die. But how could he make sure? He had called them, but one never answered her phone, and the other three wouldn't tell him anything.
But there was one he didn't have to worry about now. One down and three to go.
There! The newscaster, looking oh-so-serious, said, "A shocking murder in Sterling Heights takes the life of one of the Detroit area's latest celebrities. Details when we return."

At last! Relief filled him. Now everyone would know they shouldn't say such things about Mother's perfect little man. He rocked back and forth, singing softly to himself. "One down and three to go. One down and three to go…"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Finding Meldon Geurin, nickname "Brick," didn't take very long. A few questions led to his favorite bar, which led to the names of some of his friends, which led to the statement that, "Yeah, Brick, uh, he and his old lady, uh, had a fight or something, and I heard he's crashing with Victor."

"What's this Victor's last name?" Detective Roger Bernsen asked very nicely, but even when he asked nicely, it came out sounding somehow like a threat, because Detective Bernsen was about two hundred and fifty pounds tightly packed on a five-eleven frame, with a twenty-inch neck, a bullfrog voice, and an expression that said he was about an inch away from a road rage. He couldn't help his voice, didn't care about his weight, and practiced the expression. The total package was very intimidating.

"Uh – Abies. Victor Abies."

"Any idea where Victor lives?"

"In the city, man."

So the Sterling Heights detective contacted the Detroit P.D. and Meldon "Brick" Geurin was picked up and held for questioning.

Mr. Geurin was in a surly mood when Detective Bernsen sat down to talk with him. His eyes were bloodshot and he stank of stale booze, so his surliness could perhaps be attributed to the wrath of grapes.

"Mr. Geurin," said the detective in a polite tone that nevertheless made Mr. Geurin flinch, "when did you last see Ms. Marci Dean?"

Mr. Geurin's head snapped up, a movement he seemed to regret. When he could speak, he said sullenly, "Thursday night."

"Thursday? Are you certain of that?"

"Yeah, why? Did she say I stole something? She was there when I left, and if she says I took something of hers, she's lyin'."

Detective Bernsen didn't respond to that. Instead he said, "Where have you been since Thursday night?"

"In jail," Mr. Geurin said, even more sullenly than before. Detective Bernsen sat back, the only outward evidence of his astonishment. "Where were you in jail?" "Detroit."

"When were you picked up?"

"Thursday night sometime."

"And you were released when?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"So you spent three days as a guest of the city of Detroit?" Mr. Geurin smirked. "Guest. Yeah."
"What were the charges?"
"Drunk driving, and they said I resisted."
All of that could easily be checked out. Detective Bernsen offered a cup of coffee to Mr. Geurin but wasn't surprised when it was refused. Leaving Mr. Geurin alone, the detective stepped out to make a call to the Detroit P.D.
The facts were as Mr. Geurin had stated them. From 11:34 P.M. Thursday night until 3:41 P.M. Sunday afternoon, Mr. Geurin had been in jail.
As an alibi, it was tough to beat.
Ms. Dean had last been seen alive when she and her three friends left Ernie's on Friday night. Given the condition of the body and the progression of rigor mortis, factored in with the temperature in the climate-controlled house, Ms. Dean had been killed some time Friday night or Saturday morning.
Mr. Geurin, however, was not the killer.
That simple fact presented the detective with a more difficult puzzle than he had first assumed. If Mr. Geurin hadn't done it, who had? So far they hadn't turned up any other romantic relationships, no frustrated lover enraged by her refusal to leave Mr. Geurin. Since she and Mr. Geurin had, in effect, broken off their relationship on Thursday night, that theory didn't fly anyway. But the attack had been a very personal one, characterized by rage, overkill, and the attempt to blot out the victim's identity. The stab wounds were postmortem; the hammer blows had killed her, but the killer had still been in a rage and had resorted to the knife. The wounds had bled very little, indicating that her heart was no longer beating when she received them. The sexual attack had also been postmortem.
Marci Dean had known her killer, had probably let him into the house, since there were no signs of forced entry. With Mr. Geurin out of the picture, the detective was back to square one.
He would have to retrace her steps Friday night, he thought. Start at Ernie's. Where had she gone from there? Had she hit a bar or two, maybe picked up some guy and taken him home with her?
His brow creased in thought, he returned to Mr. Geurin, who was slumped in the chair with his eyes closed. He sat up when Detective Bernsen entered the room. "Thank you for your cooperation," Detective Bernsen said politely. "I'll arrange a ride for you if you need it."

"That's it? That's all you wanted to ask me? What's this about?"
Detective Bernsen hesitated. If there was one thing he hated doing, it was bearing the news of death. He could remember an army chaplain coming to the door in 1968 and advising the detective's mother that her husband wouldn't be returning alive from Vietnam. The memory of grief was seared on his brain.
But Mr. Geurin had been put to some trouble in this matter and deserved an explanation. "Ms. Dean was attacked in her home – "
"Marci?" Mr. Geurin sat upright, suddenly alert, his entire manner changed. "Is she hurt? Is she all right?" Detective Bernsen hesitated again, caught by one of those uncomfortable insights into human emotion. "I'm sorry," he said as gently as possible, knowing the news would be more upsetting than he had previously supposed. "Ms. Dean didn't survive the attack."
"Didn't survive? You mean she… she's dead?"
"I'm sorry," the detective said again.
Brick Geurin sat stunned for a moment, then slowly began to collapse. He buried his unshaven face in his hands and sobbed.
Her sister, Shelley, arrived on Jaine's doorstep before seven the next morning. "I wanted to catch you before you went to work," she said briskly when Jaine opened the kitchen door.
"I'm not going to work today." Jaine automatically took another cup from the cabinet and filled it with coffee, then passed it to Shelley. What now? She didn't feel up to dealing with sisterly outrage.
Shelley set the cup on the table and put her arms around Jaine, holding her close. "I didn't hear about Marci until I caught the morning news, and I came right over. Are you okay?" Tears stung Jaine's eyes again, when she had thought she couldn't possibly cry any more. She should have been all cried out. "I'm okay," she said. She hadn't slept much, hadn't eaten much, and felt as if only half her cylinders were firing, but she was dealing. As much as Marci's death hurt now, she knew she'd get through this. The old saw about time marching on was an old saw precisely because it was so true.
Shelley held her at arm's length, studying her colorless face and raw, swollen eyes. "I brought a cucumber," she said. "Sit down."
A cucumber?
"Why?" Jaine asked warily. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Put slices on your eyes, silly," Shelley said in exasperation. She often sounded exasperated when dealing with Jaine. "It'll make the swelling to down."
"I have some eye pads for that."
"Cucumbers are better. Sit down."
Because she was so tired, Jaine sat. She watched as Shelley took an enormous cucumber out of her shoulder bag and washed it, then looked around. "Where are your knives?"
"I don't know. One of the drawers."
"You don't know where your knives are?"
"Please. I haven't lived here even a month yet. How long did it take you to get unpacked when you and Al moved?"
"Well, let's see, we moved eight years ago, so… eight years." Humor sparkled in Shelley's eyes as she began methodically opening and closing cabinet drawers. There was one hard rap on the kitchen door; then it opened before she could get up. Sam stepped into the kitchen. "I saw a strange car and came over to make sure no reporters were bothering you," he said to Jaine. Legions of reporters had called the night before, including representatives from all four major television networks. Shelley turned around with the huge cucumber in her hand. "Who are you?" she asked bluntly.
"Her neighbor the cop," Sam said. He eyed the cucumber. "Have I interrupted something?"
Jaine wanted to hit him, but she didn't have the energy. Still, something in her lightened at his presence. "She's going to put it on my eyes."
He gave her a sideways, you-gotta-be-kidding look. "It'll roll off."
She decided she would definitely hit him. Later. "Cucumber slices."
His expression changed to skeptical, I-wanna-see-this. He went to the cabinet and took down another cup and poured himself some coffee. Lounging against the cabinets with his long legs crossed, he waited. Shelley turned to Jaine, more than a little bemused. "Who is this?" she demanded.
"My neighbor," Jaine said. "Shelley, this is Sam Donovan. Sam, my sister, Shelley."
He held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you." Shelley shook hands, but she looked as if she didn't want to. She resumed looking for a knife. "You live here three weeks, and you already have a neighbor who just walks in and knows where your coffee cups are?"

"I'm a detective," Sam told her, grinning. "It's my job to find out stuff."
Shelley gave him her Queen Victoria look, the one that said she was not amused.
Jaine thought about getting up and hugging him, just because he made her feel better. She didn't know what she would have done without him yesterday. He had been a rock, standing like a wall between her and all the phone calls, and when Sam told someone to stop calling, there was a note in his voice that made people pay attention. But he wouldn't be there today, she realized. He was dressed for work, in light tan slacks and a crisp white shirt. His pager was clipped to his belt, and his pistol rode on his right kidney. Shelley kept eyeing him as if he were some exotic species, only half her attention on finding a knife. She finally opened the correct drawer, though, and pulled out a paring knife.
"Oh," Jaine said with mild interest. "So that's where they are."
Shelley turned to face Sam, knife in one hand and cucumber in the other. "Are you sleeping together?" she asked in a hostile tone.
"Shelley!" Jaine said sharply.
"Not yet," Sam said with utter confidence.
Silence fell in the kitchen. Shelley began peeling the cucumber with short, vicious strokes of the knife. "You don't look much like sisters," Sam observed, as if he hadn't just stopped the conversation cold.
They had heard that comment, or a version of it, their entire lives. "Shelley looks like Dad but has Mom's coloring, and I look like Mom but have Dad's coloring," Jaine said automatically. Shelley was tall, almost five inches taller than Jaine, and lanky and blond. The blond hair was purchased, but looked good with Shelley's hazel brown eyes.
"Are you staying with her today?" Sam asked Shelley. "I don't need anyone to stay with me," Jaine said. "Yes," said Shelley.
"Run interference and keep the reporters away from her, okay?"
"I don't need anyone to stay with me," Jaine repeated. "Okay," Shelley said to Sam.
"Fine," Jaine said. "This is just my house. No one pay any attention to me."
Shelley whacked off two slices of cucumber. "Tilt your head back and close your eyes."
Jaine tilted and closed. "I thought I was supposed to lie down for this."
"Too late." Shelley plopped the cold green slices on Jaine's sore eyelids.

Oh, that felt good, cold and moist and incredibly soothing. She would probably need an entire grocery bag full of cucumbers before Marci's funeral was over, Jaine thought, and just like that the sadness was back. Sam and Shelley had pushed it away for a few moments, and she was grateful to them for the respite.
"I got a call from the investigating detective," Sam said. "Marci's boyfriend, Brick, was in jail in Detroit from Thursday night until late Sunday afternoon. He's in the clear."
"A stranger broke in and killed her?" Jaine asked, removing the cucumber slices and raising her head to look at him.
"Whoever it was, there was no sign of forced entry." She had read that much in the morning paper. "You know more than you're telling, don't you?"
He shrugged. "Cops always know more than they tell." And he wasn't going to divulge any details; she could tell by the way his expression slipped into his cop mask. She tried not to imagine what those details might be. He drained his coffee and rinsed out the cup, turning it upside down on the drainboard. Then he bent down and kissed her, the pressure on her mouth warm and brief. "You have both my pager and cell phone numbers, so if you need me, call."
"I'm okay," she told him, and meant it. "Oh – Do you know if Marci's sister is here?"
He shook his head. "She's gone back to Saginaw. There's nothing she can do here, yet. The house is still cordoned off, and an autopsy is required in murder cases. How long that will take depends on the M.E.'s workload. The funeral may not be until this weekend."
That was another detail she didn't want to think about, Marci's body lying on a refrigerated slab for several days. "I'll go to work tomorrow, then. I'd like to help her sister with the arrangements, if she wants, but I don't guess there's anything to do yet."
"Not yet." He kissed her again, then lifted her hands, still holding the cucumber slices, and replaced them on her eyelids. "Keep them there. You look like hell."
"Gee, thanks," she said dryly, and heard him chuckle as he left.
There was that silence again. Then Shelley said, "He's different."
Different from Jaine's three ex-fiances, she meant. No joke.
"Yeah," she agreed.

"This looks pretty serious. You haven't known him for long."
If Shelley only knew! She was probably counting the entire three weeks Jaine had lived here. There was no telling what she would say if she knew that for the first two of those weeks Jaine had thought Sam was either a drunk or a drug dealer.
"I don't know how serious it is," she said, knowing she was lying. "I'm not rushing into anything." For her part, she couldn't get much more serious. She was in love with the big jerk. Exactly how or what he felt was still open for discussion.
"That's good," Shelley said. "The last thing you want is another broken engagement."
She could have gone all day without mentioning Jaine's miserable track record, but then Shelley had never been noted for her tact. On the other hand, Jaine had never doubted that her sister loved her, which made up for a lot of tactlessness.
The phone rang. Jaine removed the cucumber slices and reached for the cordless at the same time Shelley did. "Sam said for me to answer the phone," Shelley hissed, as if whoever was calling could hear her.
Ring.
"Since when do you take orders from someone you just warned me against?" Jaine asked dryly.
Ring.
"I didn't exactly warn – "
Ring.
Knowing the mini-argument could go on for half an hour, Jaine punched the "talk" button before the answering machine could pick up. "Hello."
"Which one are you?"
"What?" she asked in astonishment.
"Which one are you?"
She disconnected and set the phone down, frowning. "Who was it?" Shelley asked.
"A crank call. Marci, T.J. and Luna have been getting them since the List came out." Her voice caught a little when she mentioned Marci. "It's the same guy, he always says the same thing."
"Have you reported to the phone company that you're getting obscene calls?"

"They aren't obscene. He says, 'Which one are you?' in this weird whisper. I guess it's a guy, because it's hard to tell when someone's whispering."
Shelley rolled her eyes. "A crank call about the List? You can bet it's a guy. Al says all the guys at work have been really ticked off about parts of it. I'll let you guess which parts they don't like."
"The parts having to do with their parts?" As if she had to guess.
"Men are so predictable, aren't they?" Shelley moved around the kitchen, opening drawers and doors. "What are you doing?"
"Finding out where everything is so I won't have to look for anything when I start cooking."
"You're cooking? What?" For a slightly disjointed moment, Jaine wondered if Shelley had brought over the ingredients of whatever she planned to cook for her family's supper that night. After all, she had pulled a gigantic cucumber out of her purse; God only knew what else was in there. A roast, maybe?
"Breakfast," Shelley said. "For us. And you're going to eat it, too."
Actually, Jaine was hungry this morning, having skipped supper the night before. Did Shelley think she was crazy? No way was she going to argue with food. "I'll try," she said meekly, and replaced the cucumber slices on her eyes while her sister bustled around preparing made-from- scratch pancakes.
Corin sat staring at the phone, feeling his disappointment wash through him in waves. She hadn't told, either. At least she hadn't snapped at him the way the others had. He had thought she would, had prepared himself for whatever she might say. She had a big mouth on her, as his mother would have said. He often disapproved of the way she talked at work, with all that cursing. His mother wouldn't have liked her at all.
He didn't know what to do now. Killing the first bitch had been… so overwhelming. He hadn't expected that wild, hot rush of joy, almost of ecstasy. He had gloried in it, but afterward he had been frightened. What would Mother do if she knew he enjoyed it? He had always been so afraid she would find out his secret pleasure at her punishments. But the killing… oh, the killing. He closed his eyes, swaying back and forth a little as he relived every moment of it in his mind. The shock in the bitch's eyes that split second before the hammer hit her, the sodden thudding sounds, then the joy that leapt through his veins and the feeling of being all-powerful, of knowing she was helpless to stop him because he was so strong – Tears

welled into his eyes, because he had enjoyed it so much and now it was over.
He hadn't enjoyed anything so much since the day he had killed Mother.
No – don't think about that. They said he shouldn't think about that. But they said he should take the pills, and they were wrong about that, weren't they? The pills made him go away. So maybe he should think about Mother.
He went into the bathroom and checked in the mirror. Yes, he was still there.
He had brought a tube of lipstick from the bitch's house. He didn't know why. After she was dead, he had walked around, looking at her things, and when he was in her bathroom checking himself in the mirror, he had noticed the ungodly amount of makeup strewn about the bathroom, covering every flat surface. The bitch had certainly believed in beautifying herself, hadn't she? Well, she wouldn't be needing this anymore, he had thought, and slipped the lipstick into his pocket. Since that night it had been sitting on the vanity in his bathroom. He uncapped the tube and twisted the bottom. The obscenely shaped crimson length poked out, like a dog's penis. He knew what a dog's penis looked like because he had – no, don't think of that.
Leaning forward, he carefully outlined his lips in bright red. He straightened and stared at himself in the mirror. He smiled, his red lips stretching over his teeth, and he said, "Hello, Mother."

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was amazing, Jaine thought the next morning when she stepped onto the elevator at work, how her world could be so altered while most of the people who worked at Hammerstead were unaffected by Marci's death. Of course Luna and T.J. were as grief-stricken as she, and the people in Marci's department were sad and shocked, but most of the people she met on the way in had either not mentioned it at all or said something along the lines of, "Yeah, I heard about that. Awful, isn't it?" The computer nerds, of course, were unaffected by anything that didn't involve gigabytes. The elevator sign this morning read: NEW PRESS RELEASE BY THE FDA: RED MEAT IS NOT BAD FOR YOU. RESULTS OF TESTS SHOW IT IS FUZZY GREEN MEAT THAT IS BAD FOR YOU.

Since fuzzy green meat sounded like the ordinary contents of the average computer nerd's refrigerator, that notice probably had deep personal meaning for most of them, Jaine thought. On any other day, she would have laughed. Today she couldn't summon up even a smile.

Neither T.J. nor Luna had worked the day before, either. They had arrived on her doorstep a little after eight A.M. their eyes in the same condition hers had been. Shelley had whacked off more slices from her cucumber, then set about making more pancakes, which were as comforting to her friends as they had been to Jaine.

Shelley had never met Marci, but she was willing to listen to them talk about her, which they had done all day long. They had cried a lot, laughed some, and wasted a lot of time hazarding theories about what had happened, since Brick was undeniably in the clear. They knew they weren't going to stumble on The Truth, but talking about it helped. Marci's death was so unbelievable that only by endlessly rehashing it could they gradually come to terms with losing her.

For once, she wasn't early. Mr. de Wynter was already there, and he immediately asked her to step into his office. Jaine sighed. She might be head of payroll, but unfortunately the position carried no power, only responsibility. By leaving work early on Monday and not working at all on Tuesday, she had left them shorthanded. De Wynter must have been sweating, wondering if they would get everything finished in time; people tended to get unreasonable when their paychecks didn't arrive on schedule.

She was prepared to accept his criticism, so she was taken aback when he said, "I want to tell you how sorry I am about your friend. That's an awful thing to happen." She had sworn she wouldn't cry at work today, but de Wynter's unexpected sympathy almost did her in. She blinked to hold back the tears. "Thank you," she said. "It is awful. And I want to apologize for leaving the department in the lurch on Monday – "
He shook his head. "I understand. We put in some extra hours, but no one complained. When is the funeral service scheduled?"
"It hasn't been, yet. The autopsy – "
"Oh, of course, of course. Please let me know when it will be; a lot of people here at Hammerstead would like to attend."
Jaine nodded her promise, and escaped back to her own desk and a pile of work.
She had known the day would be tough, but she hadn't anticipated quite how tough. Gina and all the others in her department had to extend their sympathies, of course, which almost had her weeping again. Since she didn't have a cucumber with her, she had to fight the tears all day long.
Without it being planned, both T.J. and Luna showed up at lunchtime. "Railroad Pizza?" T.J. asked, and they all got in T.J.'s car for the short drive. They had just received their vegetarian pizzas when Jaine remembered she hadn't told them about the crank phone call she had received just before they arrived they day before. "I finally got one of those 'Which one are you?' calls," she said.
"Aren't they creepy?" Luna took an unenthusiastic bite of pizza. Her lovely face looked as if she had aged ten years in the last two days. "Since the rest of us have had at least two of them, I'm surprised it took him so long to get to you."
"Well, I have had a lot of hang-ups on my answering machine, but I just assumed they were from reporters."
"Probably. God knows we've all had plenty of those." T.J. rubbed her forehead. "My head is pounding. I think it finally really hit me last night when I got home, and I cried until I was sick. Galan – "
Jaine looked up. "Yes, how is the Galan situation? Is he still bunking down in a motel?"
"No. He was at work Monday when we heard, of course, but he had called several times and left messages for me, and he came home that night. I guess the situation is still up in the air. What with Marci, I haven't felt like

hashing things out with him. He's been pretty quiet, but… considerate, too. Maybe he's hoping I'll forget." She took an almost vicious bite of pizza.
"Guess there's not much chance of that," Jaine said dryly, and Luna smiled.
"Not in this lifetime," T.J. said. "But let's talk about something interesting, like Sam." She got a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. "I can't believe you thought that sexy hunk was a drug-dealing drunk."
Jaine found that she, too, could smile today. "What can I say? He cleans up well. You should see him when he's wearing old, torn clothes, hasn't shaved, and is in a really bad mood."
"Those dark eyes… Wow." Luna fanned herself with her hand. "Plus he has a really nice set of shoulders, in case you haven't noticed."
Jaine refrained from saying that she had noticed everything about Sam. They didn't need to know about the kitchen-window episode. Funny, she thought, she had regaled them almost every day with tales about her fractious encounters with him when she still thought he was a drunken jerk, but once things started getting more personal between them, she had stopped talking about him.
"He's hot for you, too," T.J. added. "That man wants to jump your bones. Take my word for it."
"Maybe," Jaine said vaguely. She didn't want to discuss how badly her bones wanted to be jumped by him, or how close they had already been to making love. "You don't have to be psychic to know that," Luna told T.J. her tone wry. "He came right out and said so." T.J. laughed. "So he did. He isn't shy, is he?" No, shy was one thing Sam Donovan definitely wasn't. Brash, cocky, arrogant, smart, sexy, sweet – those words described him down to his bones. She doubted he had a single shy gene in his body, thank God.
T.J.'s cell phone rang. "It's probably Galan," she said, sighing as she fished it out of her purse. She flipped it open and punched the receive button. "Hello?" Jaine watched as her face turned red. "How did you get this number?" she snapped, and punched the off button. "Bastard," she muttered as she returned the phone to her purse.
"I take it that wasn't Galan," Jaine said.
"It was that creep." T.J.'s voice quivered with anger. "I'd like to know how he got my cell number, because I don't give it out a lot."
"Is there an information for cell numbers, maybe?" Luna asked.

"The account's in Galan's name, not mine, so how would he know I'm the one who carries the phone?"
"What did he say?" asked Jaine.
"The usual 'Which one are you?' crap. Then he said, 'Marci.' Just her name. Damn him, that's a sick thing to do."
Jaine put down her slice of pizza. She was suddenly cold all over, the fine hairs at the nape of her neck standing up. My God, what if those phone calls had something to do with Marci's murder? Maybe it was a stretch, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was some weirdo who really, really hated them because of the List, and now he was coming after them one by one – She was hyperventilating. T.J. and Luna were both staring at her. "What's wrong?" Luna asked in alarm. "I just had the most horrible thought," Jaine whispered. "What if he's the one who killed Marci? What if he's after us all?"
Twin expressions of pure shock crossed their faces. "No way," Luna said in instant rejection.
"Why not?"
"Because! That's so crazy. Things like that don't happen. Well, maybe to celebrities, but not to normal people."
"Marci was murdered," Jaine said, still unable to get much volume to her voice. "Was that normal?" She shivered. "The phone calls at home I didn't think much about, but you're right, T.J. how did he get your cell phone number? I'm sure there are ways, but most people wouldn't know how. Are we being stalked?"
Both of them stared at her again.
"Now I'm scared," Luna said after a moment. "You live alone, I live alone, Galan doesn't get home until almost midnight, and Marci was alone."
"But how would he know that? I mean, Brick was living with her until just the day before," T.J. protested. Her intuition gave Jaine another lock in the gut. She thought she was going to be ill. "It was in the newspaper – 'no sign of forced entry.' I heard Sam talking on the phone. They thought it was Brick because he was her boyfriend and he had a key, but it wasn't Brick, so they think it was someone else Marci knew. She let him in and he lulled her." She swallowed. "It's someone we all know."
"Oh, my God." Luna clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with horror.

T.J. dropped her slice of pizza. She looked sick, too, and suddenly afraid. She tried for a shaky laugh. "We're scaring ourselves, like little kids telling ghost stories around a campfire."
"Good. If we're scared, we'll be more careful. I'm going to call Sam as soon as I get back to the office – " T.J. took her cell phone out of her purse and turned it on. "Here," she said, extending it across the table to Jaine. "Call him now."
Jaine dug in her purse for the scrap of paper on which he had written both of his numbers. Her hands were shaking as she tried his cell phone first. The connection was made and a ring sounded in her ear. Twice. Three times – "Donovan."
She gripped the little phone hard with both hands. "This is Jaine. Sam – we're scared. We've all been getting crank calls since the List came out, but I haven't mentioned it because they weren't threatening or anything, he just asks which one we are – you know, A, B, C, or D – but he just called T.J. on her cell phone and said Marci's name. How did he get T.J.'s number? The phone's in her husband's name, so how would he know T.J. is the one with the phone instead of Galan? I heard you say Marci probably knew her killer and let him in the house, and whoever called T.J. knows her because otherwise how would he have her number, and I know I sound hysterical, but I'm scared and I wish you would tell me I'm letting my imagination run away with me – "
"Where are you?" he asked quietly.
"Railroad Pizza. Please tell me I'm letting my imagination run away with me."
"I think you need to get Caller ID," he said, his tone still too even. "If T.J. and Luna don't have it, tell them to get it. Today. Call the phone company from work to get it started, and stop on the way home to buy the units." She took a deep breath. "Okay. Caller ID."
"Do you have a cell phone? Or Luna?"
"No, just T.J."
"Both of you need to get one, and keep it with you, so you'll have a way to call for help if you can't get to a land line. And I mean with you, in a pocket, not in your purse or car."
"Cell phones. Check." They were going to have several stops on the way home, she thought.
"Did anything about his voice sound familiar?"

"No, he whispers, but it's kind of a loud whisper. It sounds funny."
"Any background noise that you can identify?" She relayed the question to T.J. and Luna. They shook their heads. "No, nothing."
"Okay. Where do T.J. and Luna live?"
She gave him their addresses. T.J. lived in Mount Clemens, Luna in Royal Oak, all towns on the north side of Detroit.
Sam swore. "Royal Oak is in Oakland County. That's four different departments in two different counties who need to get a heads-up on this."
"You were supposed to tell me I'm crazy," she said in a shaky voice, though somehow she had known he wouldn't.
"Marci's dead," he said bluntly. "All four of you have gotten the same crank call. Do you want to trust your life to coincidence?"
Put in those terms, maybe she wasn't crazy after all. She took a deep breath. "What should we do?"
"Tell T.J. and Luna that, until we find out who's making these calls, not to let anyone in their houses except family, don't get in a car with anyone except family, not even if they have a breakdown and someone offers a ride. Keep their doors and windows locked, and if either of them has an automatic garage door, make sure no one gets inside when the door raises."
"How long will it take to find this creep?"
"Depends. If he's just a dumb fuck making phone calls, the Caller ID may nab him, or the call return number. If not, we'll put a trace on your lines."
"But if he's a dumb f – " She caught herself before she said the word. "If he's a dumb you-know-what, how did he get T.J.'s cell phone number?"
"Like you said. He knows her."
As T.J. parked in front of Hammerstead, they all looked out at the big brick building. "It's probably someone who works here," Jaine said.
"It would almost have to be," Luna said. "Some jerk who thinks it's funny to scare us."
"Sam said we shouldn't trust our lives to coincidence. Until we know better, we should assume that the guy who's making the phone calls is the same guy who killed Marci."
"I can't believe we work with a murderer," T.J. said faintly. "I just can't. It's too unbelievable. Jerks, yes. Just look at Bennett Trotter. Marci hated his guts."
"So do we all." Bennett Trotter was the resident slimeball. A twinge of memory made Jaine frown as she tried to nail it down. "The night we came

up with the List… remember, Marci was telling us about Kellman grabbing her ass? Wasn't it Bennett who had something to say about it?"
"I think so," T.J. said, but doubtfully. "I don't really remember."
"I do," said Luna. "Bennett said something about taking Kellman's place if Marci was that hard up."
"He's a bottom feeder, but I can't see him killing anyone," T.J. said, shaking her head.
"The point is, we don't know, so we have to assume everyone is guilty. When Sam finds out who has been making the calls, if whoever it is has an alibi, then we can relax. Until then, we're on guard against everyone." Jaine wanted to shake T.J.; she just couldn't seem to grasp that they might be in danger, too. They probably weren't; she hoped they weren't. But the whole thing with the telephone call today took the crank calls to another level, and she was deeply uneasy. Part of her agreed with T.J.; the whole supposition was too fantastic, too unbelievable. She was simply letting her imagination run away with her. Another, more primal, part of her brain said that Marci was dead, murdered, and whoever killed her was still out there. That seemed even more unbelievable than the other, yet it was true.
She tried another tactic. "If Sam thinks we should be extra careful, that's good enough for me. He knows a lot more about these things than we do."
"That's true," T.J. said. "If he's worried, we should do what he said."
Jaine mentally rolled her eyes. After their first exposure to Sam, T.J. Luna, and even Shelley had all begun acting as if he were the Grand Pooh-Bah. Well, whatever worked; what mattered was that they were cautious.
They walked together into the building, then parted to go to their different departments. Mindful of Sam's instructions, she called the phone company to arrange for Caller ID and all the other bells and whistles, including call forwarding. It occurred to her that it might come in handy to be able to transfer her incoming calls to, say, Sam's house.
Sam called Detective Bernsen. "Roger, my gut tells me we have a bigger problem than we thought."
"How's that?"
"You know that Ms. Dean was one of the List Ladies, right?"
"Yeah, what about it, other than giving the reporters something to howl about?"
"Turns out all four of the ladies have been getting crank calls from the same guy. He asks them which one they are."

"Which one?"
"Yeah. Have you read the List?"
"I haven't had the pleasure. My wife has quoted parts of it to me, unfortunately."
"The four women are identified only as A, B, C, and D. So this guy asks them which one they are, like it's important to him. Today while they were at lunch, he called on T.J.'s cell phone and asked the usual question, then said Ms. Dean's name. No threats or anything like that, just her name."
"Huh," said Roger, which meant he was thinking. "T.J.'s cell phone is in her husband's name, so most people would think he's the one who carries it. This guy not only knew the number, he knew T.J. is the one with the phone."
"So he's either familiar with the ladies or he knows the husband."
"Why would a husband give his wife's cell phone number to another man?"
"Good point. Okay, the caller knows the ladies. Huh."
"The odds are Marci Dean knew the killer. She opened her door and let him in, right?"
"Right. She had a peephole in the door. She could see whoever came knocking."
"The crank caller disguises his voice, speaks only in a whisper."
"Meaning they might recognize his voice if he spoke normally. You think the killer and the crank caller are the same guy?"
"Either that or it's a big coincidence."
"Son of a bitch." Like most cops, Roger wasn't big on coincidence. "Where does this guy know all of them from? They work together or something?"
"Yeah, at Hammerstead Technology, just off I-696 at South-field. He probably works there, too."
"He's someone with access to their personal information. That should narrow it down."
"Hammerstead develops computer technology. A lot of people there would know how to access the personnel files."
"It couldn't be easy, could it?" Roger asked wearily. "My gut tells me something about the List set him off, and he's going to be coming after the other three."
"Jesus. You may be right. You got their names and addresses?"
"T.J. Yother, Mount Clemens, husband's name is Galan. Luna Scissum, Royal Oak, unmarried and lives alone." He gave Roger the street addresses.

"Jaine Bright, the third one, is my next-door neighbor. She's single, too."
"Huh. Is she your lady friend?"
"Yeah."
"So you're dating one of the List Ladies? Man, that takes balls." Roger caught his own joke and laughed. "You have no idea." Sam grinned, thinking of Jaine and her stubborn chin with that cute little dent in it, and her almost-dimples and sparkling blue eyes. She attacked life, rather than simply letting it happen; he'd never before met anyone so annoying and funny and sharp. He had major plans for her, the most immediate of which was getting her under him. No way would he let anything happen to her, even if he had to quit his job and become her twenty-four- hour-a-day bodyguard.
"Okay, if you're right, at least we have a place to start," Roger said, briskly returning to the subject. "Hammerstead Technology. I'll get the ball rolling on getting access to their personnel files, see what shakes out of the tree, but if you're right about the computer geeks, this could take a while. Officially, I don't know what we can do to keep the ladies safe. You're talking four different towns – "
"And two counties. I know." The administrative hassle would be a bitch. Sam got a headache just thinking about it.
"Unofficially, we'll work out something. We'll call in favors, maybe get some guys to volunteer for watchdog duty. The ladies do know to be cautious, right?"
"They're all supposed to get Caller ID and cell phones today. We might get lucky if he calls one of them again. I also told them not to let anyone in except family, not to accept rides from anyone. I don't want this son of a bitch to be able to get anywhere near them."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jaine found herself studying every man she saw at work that day, wondering if he was the one. That one of them could be a killer was almost beyond belief. They all seemed so normal, or at least as normal as any other large group of men who worked in the computer industry. Some of them she knew and liked, some of them she knew and didn't like, but she couldn't see any of them as killers. A lot of guys, particularly the ones on the first two floors, she knew by sight but not by name. Had Marci known one of them well enough that she had let him into her house?

Jaine tried to think what she would do if someone she recognized knocked on her door at night, maybe claiming to have had car trouble. Until today, she probably would have opened her door without hesitation, wanting only to be helpful. The killer, even if he turned out to be some stranger, had forever robbed her of that trust, that inner sense of security. She had liked to think she was smart and aware, that she didn't take chances, but how often had she opened her door at a knock without asking who was on the other side? She shuddered now to think of it. Her front door didn't even have a peephole in it. She could see who was at the door only if she climbed on her sofa and pulled back the curtain, then leaned far to the right. And the upper half of her kitchen door was nothing but nine small panes of glass, easily smashed; then all any intruder would have to do was reach in and unlock it. She had no alarm system, no means of protecting herself – nothing! The best she could hope to do if anyone broke into her house while she was there was escape out the window, assuming she could get it open.

She had a lot of work to do, she thought, before she would feel safe in her house again.

She worked half an hour later than usual, doing a little catch-up on the pile of paperwork that had accumulated during her absence. As she was crossing the parking lot, she noticed there were only a handful of cars remaining and, for the first time, realized how vulnerable she was leaving work late like this, alone. All three of them, she and Luna and T.J. should time their arrivals and departures with the crowd, to take advantage of the safety in numbers. She hadn't even told them she intended to work late.

There was so much she had to think about now, so much inherent danger in things she had never before had to consider.

"Jaine!"
As she crossed the parking lot, the sound of her name broke into her consciousness, leaving her aware that someone had called her at least twice, maybe more. She turned around, mildly surprised to see Leah Street hurrying after her.
"I'm sorry," she apologized, though she wondered what Leah wanted. "I was thinking and didn't hear you at first. Is something wrong?"
Leah stopped, her graceful hands fluttering, an uncomfortable expression on her face. "I just – I wanted to say I'm sorry about Marci. When is the funeral?"
"I don't know yet." She didn't feel up to explaining again about the autopsy. "Marci's sister is making the arrangements."
Leah nodded jerkily. "Let me know, please. I'd like to attend."
"Yes, of course."
Leah seemed to want to say something else or maybe didn't know what else to say; either condition was awkward. Finally she bobbed her head and turned to hurry to her own car. Her full skirt flew around her legs. Today's dress was particularly hopeless, a lavender print that did nothing for her coloring and with a small ruffle around the neckline. It looked like a yard-sale reject, though Leah pulled down a good salary – Jaine knew exactly how much – and probably shopped at nice department stores. She simply had no fashion sense.
"On the other hand," Jaine muttered to herself as she unlocked the Viper, "I have no people sense." Her judgment must be seriously off, because the two people from whom she would never have expected sympathy and sensitivity – Mr. de Wynter and Leah Street – were the two who had gone out of their way to tell her they were sorry about Marci.
Mindful of Sam's instructions, she drove to an electronics store and bought a Caller ID unit, signed up for cellular service, went through all the paperwork for that, then had to choose a phone. The selection engrossed her; did she want one of the little flip-tops or one that didn't flip? She decided on the non-flipper, figuring that if she were running for her life from a crazed murderer, she didn't want to have to deal with flipping up before dialing. Next she had to decide on a color. She immediately dismissed black as too basic. Neon yellow? It would be difficult to misplace. The blue one was cute; she didn't see many blue ones. On the other hand, there was nothing like red.

Once she selected the red phone, she had to wait for it to be programmed. By the time she left the electronics store, the late summer sun was almost down, clouds were sweeping in from the southwest, and she was starving. Because a cool wind was blowing in off those clouds, promising rain, and she still had two more stops to make before she went home, she got a fast-food burger and a soft drink and gulped them down as she drove. The burger wasn't very good, but it was food, and that was all her stomach required.

Her next stop was a firm that installed security systems, where she answered questions, selected the system she wanted, and wrote a large check. The system would be installed a week from the upcoming Saturday.

"But that's ten days!" Jaine said, frowning. The beefy man consulted an appointment book. "Sorry, but that's the earliest we can get to you." Deftly she reached over the desk and plucked her check from where it lay in front of him. "I'll call around and see if someone else can get to me sooner than that. Sorry I wasted your time."

"Hold on, hold on," he said hastily. "Is this some kind of emergency? If someone is having trouble, we move them to the top of the list. You shoulda said so."

"It's an emergency," she said firmly.

"Okay, let me see what I can do." He studied the appointment book again, scratched his head, tapped his pencil on the book, and said, "I can work you in this Saturday, since it's an emergency."

Careful not to let any triumph show in her expression, she returned the check to him. "Thank you," she said, and meant it.

Her next stop was a building materials store. It was a huge place, with everything one would need to build a house, except the money. She bought a peephole for the front door – the instructions said "Easy to install" – and a new kitchen door that wasn't half glass and two new deadbolts. After making arrangements for the door to be delivered on Saturday, and paying extra for the privilege, she heaved a sigh of relief and started home.

Rain began splattering on the windshield just as she turned onto her street. Darkness had fallen, deepened by the cloud cover. Lightning flashed briefly in the west, lighting up the belly of the storm system, and thunder rumbled. Her house was dark. She usually got home well before dark, so she didn't leave any lights on. Normally she wouldn't worry about stepping into a dark house, but tonight she felt a chill creep up her spine. She was edgy, more

aware of her vulnerability. She sat for a moment in the car, reluctant to turn off the motor and go inside. No vehicle was parked in Sam's driveway, but there was a light on in his kitchen; maybe he was at home. She wished he would leave his truck in the driveway instead of parking it in the garage, so she could tell when he was there and when he wasn't.

Just as she turned off the headlights and ignition, she saw movement to her left. Her heart jumped into her throat, then she realized it was Sam, coming down his front steps.

Relief flooded through her. She gathered her purse and plastic shopping bags and got out of the car. "Where the hell have you been?" he shouted, looming behind her as she locked the car door.

She hadn't expected him to start yelling; startled, she dropped one of the bags. "Damn it!" she said as she leaned down to pick it up. "Do you have to make a career out of scaring me?"

"Someone needs to scare you." He grabbed her upper arms and hauled her up to face him. He was shirtless, and she found herself nose-to-pectoral-muscle with him. "It's eight o'clock, you may have a killer stalking you, and you don't bother to call and let anyone know where you are? You deserve more than just being scared!"

She was tired, nervous, the rain was getting heavier by the minute, and she was in no mood to be yelled at. She lifted her head to glare at him, and water trickled down her face. "You told me to get Caller ID and a cell phone, so if I'm late, it was your idea!"

"It took you three goddamn hours to accomplish what a normal person can do in half an hour?"

Was he saying she wasn't normal? Incensed, she put both hands on his bare chest and shoved him as hard as she could. "Since when did I start answering to you?" He staggered back maybe an inch.

"Since about a week ago!" he said furiously, and kissed her.

His mouth was hard and angry, and his heart pounded like a sledgehammer beneath her hands. As always when he kissed her, it was as if time spun away, leaving only the here and now. The taste of him filled her; his bare skin was hot to the touch, despite the rain beating down on them. He locked her against him, his arms so tight she couldn't draw a deep breath, and against her belly she felt the thrust of his erection.

He was shaking, and suddenly she realized just how scared he had been on her behalf. He was big and rough- looking, and strong enough to hold his

own with an ox; every day he probably saw, without flinching, things that would make the average person cringe in horror. But tonight he had been afraid – afraid for her. Her chest ached suddenly, as if her heart squeezed. Her knees wobbled and she sank against him, melting into him, rising on tiptoe to meet his lass with equal force, equal passion. He groaned, deep in his throat; the kiss changed, the anger fading, to be replaced by violent hunger. She had surrendered totally, but that didn't seem to be enough for him because he sank his hand in her hair and pulled her head back, arching her neck and exposing her throat to his mouth. Rain spattered in her face, and she closed her eyes, helpless in his iron grip and not wanting to be anywhere else.

After the emotional upheaval of the past three days she needed to lose herself in the physical, to push all the grief and fear away and feel only Sam, think only of Sam. He lifted her off her feet and began walking with her, and she didn't protest except when he stopped kissing her, didn't struggle except to get closer.

"Damn it, would you stop wiggling?" he growled in a strained tone, shifting her to one side as he climbed his front steps.

"Why?" Her voice sounded smoky, sexy. She hadn't known her throat would do that.

"Because I'm going to come in my jeans if you don't," he half-shouted in raw frustration.

Jaine thought about his problem for maybe half a heartbeat. Since the only way she could be certain not to overexcite him was to tear herself out of his grip and not touch him at all, that meant she would be depriving herself.

"Suffer," she told him.

"Suffer?" He sounded outraged. He wrenched open his front door and carried her inside. It was dark in the living room, the only light filtering through from the kitchen. He smelled of heat and rain and wet hair. She tried to run her hands over those broad shoulders and found herself still encumbered by purse and shopping bags. Impatiently she dropped them to the floor, then attached herself to him like a limpet.

Cursing, he staggered a few steps and pinned her to the wall. He tugged at her slacks with rough hands, attacking the button and zipper until the button flew off and the zipper yielded. Her slacks slid down her legs and pooled around her feet. She kicked off her shoes, and he lifted her out of the circle of fabric. Immediately she wound her legs around his hips, feverishly trying

to get closer, to meld their bodies and ease this wildfire of need that was burning her up on the inside.
"Not yet!" Panting, he leaned his weight against her to keep her in place against the wall and unwrapped her legs from his waist. Her ribcage depressed by his weight, Jaine could manage only the first protesting moan before he hooked his fingers in the waistband of her panties and tugged them down her thighs.
Oh.
She tried to think why she had been going to make him wait another couple of weeks, at least, maybe even a whole menstrual cycle. Nothing reasonable came to mind, not when making him wait also meant making herself wait – not when she was so scared that the same person who had killed Marci might also be targeting the rest of them and she would kick herself if she died without knowing what it was like to make love with him. Right here, right now, there was nothing more important than trying this man on for size.
She kicked her panties away he lifted her high once again, and she coiled her legs around him. His knuckles brushed between her legs as he unfastened his jeans and let them drop. She caught her breath as the last barrier fell from between them and his penis pressed against her, naked and hot, searching. Pleasure zinged through her, making her nerve endings sizzle. She arched helplessly seeking more, needing more.
He swore softly, under his breath, and hitched her just a little higher to adjust her position. She felt the head of his penis probing at her, smooth and hard and hot, then an almost incredible sense of pressure as he eased his support and let her weight sink down on it. Her body resisted at first, then began to stretch and admit him, inch by searing inch. She felt everything in her begin to tighten as sensation roared through her – He stopped, breathing hard, his hot face buried against her neck. His voice muffled, he said rawly, "Did you go on the pill?"
Jaine dug her nails into his bare shoulders, almost sobbing with need. How could he stop now? Only the thick head of his penis was inside her, and it wasn't enough, wasn't nearly enough. Her inner muscles clenched around him, trying to draw him deeper, and an explosive curse tore from his throat. "Damn it, Jaine, did you go on the pill?"
"Yes," she finally managed to say, and her tone was just as raw as his.

He braced her against the wall and with one rough thrust pushed his entire length inside her.
She heard herself cry out, but the sound was distant. Every cell in her body focused on the thick shaft pounding back and forth inside her, his rhythm hard and fast, and she climaxed the same way. Sensation exploded in her, and she bucked against him, screaming, her hips jerking and her entire body shuddering. The rest of the world spun completely away.
He came a second later, driving into her with almost brutal force. She thudded against the wall with each deep thrust, her weight sliding down and forcing him even deeper, so deep that she stiffened convulsively and climaxed again. Afterward, he rested heavily against her, his skin damp with sweat and rain. He was breathing hard, his chest heaving as he sucked in air. The house was dark and silent except for the rain drumming on the roof and the gasping sounds of their overtaxed lungs. The wall was cool against her back, but uncomfortably hard. Jaine tried to think of something clever to say, but her mind refused to work. This was too serious, too damn important, for quips. So she closed her eyes and rested her cheek on his shoulder while her galloping heartbeat slowly began to calm and her loins relaxed around his shaft. He muttered something unintelligible and tightened his grip on her, holding her with one arm around her back and the other under her bottom as he stepped out of his jeans and unsteadily walked to the bedroom. He was still inside her, her body anchored to his, as he lowered them to the bed and settled on top of her.
The room was dark and cool, the bed wide. He stripped off her silk shirt and unzipped her bra, tossing both garments to the floor. Now they were both totally naked, his chest hair rasping her nipples as he began to move again. His rhythm this time was slower but no less powerful as each thrust took him in to the hilt.
To her surprise, the fever began to build again. She had thought she was too exhausted to be aroused again, but she found out differently. She hooked her legs around his and ground her pelvis up to meet each thrust, clinging to him, pulling him even deeper into her, and when she came, the paroxysm was even stronger than the others. He made a guttural sound, climaxing while she still shuddered beneath him.
A long time later, when pulses had slowed, sweat had dried, and muscles had become halfway responsive again, he levered himself off her and rolled onto his back, one arm draped over his eyes. "Shit," he said under his

breath. Because the room was so quiet, she heard him. A tiny flare of temper made her eyes narrow. She still felt like a limp, overcooked noodle, so a tiny flare was all she could manage. "Gee, that's romantic," she said sarcastically. The man hadn't been able to keep his hands off her for a week, and now that they had finally made love, "shit" was the best comment he could make, as if the whole experience had been a mistake?

He lifted the arm covering his eyes and turned his head to glare at her. "I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you."

"What do you mean, trouble?" She sat up, glaring back at him. "I am not trouble! I'm a very nice person except when I have to deal with jerks!"

"You're the worst kind of trouble," he snapped. "You're marrying trouble."

Considering three men had already found better things to do than marry her, that wasn't the most tactful comment he could have made. It was especially hurtful coming from a man who had just given her three explosive orgasms. She snatched up the pillow and whacked him on the head with it, then bolted out of bed. "I can take care of that problem for you," she said, fuming as she searched the dark bedroom for her bra and shirt. Damn it, where was the light switch? "Since I'm so much trouble, I'll stay on my side of the driveway and you can stay the hell on your side of the driveway!"

She was shouting by the time she was finished. There – that white blur might be her bra. She swooped down on it and picked it up, but it was a sock. A smelly sock. She threw it at him. He swatted it aside and lunged out of bed, reaching for her. "What did you do with my damn clothes!" she bellowed at him, evading his outstretched hand and storming around the room in the dark. "And where's the damn light switch?"

"Would you settle down!" he said, sounding suspiciously as if he were snorting with laughter.

He was laughing at her. Tears stung her eyes. "Hell, no, I won't settle down!" she shouted, and swung toward the door. "You can keep the damn clothes, I'll walk home naked before I stay here with you another minute, you insensitive jerk – "

A hard-muscled arm locked around her waist and sent her airborne. She shrieked, arms flailing; then she bounced on the bed and the air left her lungs with a "whoof." She had time to suck in just a little air before Sam landed on her, his heavy weight flattening her and forcing another exhalation. He was laughing as he subdued her with ridiculous ease; in five seconds flat she couldn't wiggle anything.

To her astonishment and rage, she discovered he had another erection; it throbbed against her closed thighs. If he thought she would open her legs for him again after – He shifted, expertly pressed with his knee, and her legs opened anyway. Another shift and he slid smoothly inside her, and she wanted to scream because he felt so good and she loved him and he was a jerk. Her lousy luck with men was still holding.
She burst into tears.
"Ah, babe, don't cry," he said soothingly, moving gently inside her.
"I will if I want to," she sobbed as she clung to him. "I love you, Jaine Bright. Will you marry me?"
"No way in hell!"
"You have to. You owe me your next paycheck for all the cussing you've done tonight. You won't have to pay up if we get married."
"There's no rule like that."
"I just made one." He framed her head with his big hands and stroked her cheeks with his thumbs, wiping away the tears.
"You said shit."
"What else is a man supposed to say when he sees his glorious bachelor days coming to a swift and ignominious end?"
"You've been married before."
"Yeah, but that didn't count. I was too young to know what I was doing. I thought fucking was the same as loving." She wished he would be still. How could he carry on a conversation while doing what he was doing to her? No – she wished he would shut up, and keep doing exactly what he was doing, except maybe a little faster. And a little harder.
He kissed her temple, her jaw, the almost-dent in her chin. "I always heard that sex was different with a woman you loved, but I didn't believe it. Sex was sex. Then I got inside you and it was like sticking my cock in an electrical outlet."
"Oh. Was that what all that shaking and yelling was about?" She sniffled, but she was paying attention. "Smart-ass. Yeah, that's what it was about, not that I was the only one doing some shaking and yelling. It was different. Hotter. Stronger. And when it was over, I wanted to do it all over again."
"You did do it all over again."
"That proves it, then. For God's sake, I've already come twice and here I am hard again. That's either a fucking miracle, no pun intended, or it's love."

He kissed her mouth, slowly and deeply, using his tongue. "Watching you throw a temper tantrum always gets me hard."
"I don't throw tantrums. Why is it when a man gets mad, he's aaangry, but when a woman gets mad, it's just a tantrum?" She paused, struck by what he'd said. "Always?"
"Always. Like when you knocked over my trash can, then yelled at me and poked me in the chest."
"You were hard?" she asked in astonishment. "As a rock."
She said wonderingly, "Well, son of a b – gun."
"So answer my question."
She opened her mouth to say "yes," but caution made her remind him, "I don't do really well with engagements. Gives the guy too much time to think."
"I'm skipping the engagement part. We're not getting engaged; we'll just get married."
"In that case, yes, I'll marry you." She turned her face into his throat and inhaled the heat and scent of his body, thinking that if the perfumers of the world could bottle whatever it was Sam had, the female population would be in perpetual heat.
He growled in frustration. "Because you love me?" he prompted.
She smiled, her lips moving against his skin. "Crazy, wild, absolutely, insanely in love with you," she affirmed. "We'll get married next week."
"I can't do that!" she said in horror, drawing back to stare up at him as he loomed over her, slowly moving back and forth, back and forth, like seaweed floating on the tide. "Why the hell not?"
"Because my parents won't be back from vacation for… I've lost count of the days. About three weeks, I think."
"Can't they come home early? Where are they, anyway?"
"Touring Europe. And this is Mom's dream vacation, because Dad has Parkinson's, and even though the medication really helps, he's gotten a little worse lately and she was afraid this would be their last chance. He was always too busy before he retired to get away for that length of time, so this is special to both of them, you know?"
"Okay, okay. We'll do it the day after they get home."
"Mom won't even be unpacked!"
"Tough. Since we aren't getting engaged, we can't do the big church wedding thing – "

"Thank God," she said feelingly. She had gone through that experience with number two, the bastard, with all the expense and planning and trouble, only to have him back out at the last minute.
He heaved a sigh of relief, as if he had been afraid she would say she wanted a big wedding. "We'll have everything ready to go. All your parents will have to do is show up."
Jaine had been doing a really good job concentrating on the conversation while he was doing what he was doing, and she was impressed out of her skull that he could keep up his side of the conversation under these circumstances, but her body suddenly reached the point of no return. She gasped, her hips rising convulsively against him.
"We'll talk later!" she said hoarsely, grabbed his butt, and pulled him hard into her.
They didn't talk at all for quite a while.
Jaine stirred, yawning. She would have been content to lie in his arms all night long, but a sudden thought made her bolt upright. "BooBoo!"
Sam made a noise halfway between a grunt and a groan. "What?"
"BooBoo. He must be starving! I can't believe I forgot about him." She scrambled out of bed. "Where's the light switch? And why don't you have any bedside lamps?"
"Beside the door, right side. Why would I need bedside lamps?"
"For reading." She swept her hand along the wall, found the switch, and flipped it up. Bright light flooded the room. Sam shielded his eyes, blinking, then flopped over on his stomach. "I read in the living room."
Her own eyes took a minute to adjust. When they did, her pupils widened at the wreck they had made of the bed. The covers were twisted and hanging off, the pillows were – where were the pillows? – and the bottom sheet was pulled free at one corner and wadded in the middle of the bed. "Holy cow," she said in astonishment, then shook herself and looked around for her clothes.
Sam opened his eyes and propped up on one elbow, his dark eyes both sleepy and intent as he watched her search the room. She found her shirt tangled in the bedcovers. She got down on her knees to peer under the bed for her bra; he scooted closer so he'd have a better view of her backside waving in the air.
"How on earth did it get under the bed?" she fussed, dragging the bra out of its hiding place.

"Crawled," he suggested.
She gave him a quick grin and looked around. "And my pants are…?"
"In the living room."
She went into the living room, turned on a lamp, and was in the process of untangling her pants when Sam wandered in, stark naked and carrying a pair of sneakers. Jaine didn't bother with her bra, but slipped into her panties, then pulled on her shirt and pants. Sam stepped into his jeans and pulled them up, then sat down and put on the sneakers.
"Where are you going?" she asked.
"Walking you to your door."
She opened her mouth to say that wasn't necessary; then she remembered it was necessary, at least for now. She put on her shoes, stuffed her bra in her purse, then gathered up her shopping bags. Sam slid his pistol out of its holster, holding it in his right hand. "Give me your key and stay behind me," he said.
She dug her key chain out of her purse, selected the house key for him, and handed it over.
The rain had stopped, leaving the night warm and humid. Crickets chirped, and at the end of the street the corner light wore a misty halo. They crossed both driveways and went up the steps to the kitchen door. Sam tucked the pistol in his waistband while he unlocked the door; then he returned the keys to her and drew the pistol once more. He opened the door, reached inside, and flipped on the light switch.
He uttered a vicious curse. Jaine blinked at the destruction illuminated by the overhead light, then she screamed, "BooBoo!" and tried to lunge past Sam.
He blocked her with an out-thrust arm, turning so that his big body barred the entrance. "Go to my house and call nine-one-one," he barked. "Now!"
"But BooBoo – "
"Go!" he yelled, giving her a shove that almost sent her flying off the stoop. Then he wheeled and stepped into the house.
He was a cop; she had to trust him in this. Her teeth chattering, she ran back to his house and into the kitchen, where she knew he had a cordless. Grabbing it up, she punched the talk button, then 911.
"Where are you calling from?" The voice was impersonal and almost uninterested.

"Uh – next door." Jaine closed her eyes. "I mean, I'm calling from my next door neighbor's. My house has been ransacked." She gave her own address. "My neighbor is a cop, and he's going through the house right now." Carrying the phone, she walked out on the front porch, staring across the driveways at her little house, where lights now blazed from two of the windows. As she watched, the light in her bedroom came on. "He's armed – "

"Who is?" The dispatcher sounded suddenly alarmed. "My neighbor is! Tell the police if they see a half-naked man with a gun, don't shoot, he's one of them!" She took a deep breath, her heart pounding so hard she thought she would be sick. "I'm going over there."

"No! Ma'am, don't go over there. If your neighbor is a policeman, stay out of his way. Ma'am, are you listening?"

"I'm here." She didn't say she was listening. Her hand was shaking, clattering the phone against her teeth. "Stay on the phone, ma'am, so I can keep the responding officers up-to-date on the status. Units have already been dispatched to your address; they'll be there in a few minutes. Just be patient, please."

She couldn't be patient, but she could be sensible. She waited on the porch, tears tracking down her face as she stared unblinkingly at her own house, where Sam was methodically searching it and putting his life in danger every time he entered a room. She didn't dare think about BooBoo. The dispatcher said something else but she had stopped listening, though she did make a noise to let the woman know she was still there. In the distance she could hear the shrill of sirens.

Sam stepped out on the kitchen stoop, BooBoo cradled in his left arm.

"BooBoo!" Jaine threw down the phone and ran across to them. Sam let her take the cat from him, then he tucked the pistol in his waistband.

"Whoever did it didn't hang around," he said, putting his arm around her and urging her back toward his house. With BooBoo safe and disgruntled in her arms, she dug in her heels. "I want to see – "

"Not yet. Let the techs do their job first, maybe find something that will give us a clue who this bastard is."

"You went in – "

"And I was careful not to disturb anything," he said, exasperated. "Come on, let's sit down. The guys will be here in a minute."

She remembered that she had thrown the phone aside. She picked it up and handed it to him. "Nine-one-one is still on the line."
He put it to his ear, but kept a firm grip on her while he succinctly outlined the situation and said the house was clear, then disconnected. He put both arms around Jaine – and BooBoo – and held her close.
"Where did you find BooBoo?"
"He was hiding under that shelf thing in the hallway." She stroked the cat's head, so grateful he was all right that she almost cried again. Her mom would never forgive her if anything happened to BooBoo.
"Do you think it was him?" she asked Sam, her voice low. He was silent for a moment. The sirens were much closer now, the sound growing louder and louder in the still night air. As two cars turned the corner onto their street, Sam said, "I can't afford not to think it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lights were coming on up and down the street, heads poking out of doors, as Sam and Jaine went to meet the patrolmen. "Detective Donovan," said one of the patrolmen, grinning. "So you're the half-naked man we were told not to shoot."

Sam scowled down at Jaine. She cuddled BooBoo closer. "You're carrying a pistol," she explained. "I didn't want them to shoot you by mistake."

Sadie and George Kulavich came down their sidewalk and stood peering at the flashing lights. They were both wearing robes over their nightclothes; Mr. Kulavich wore bedroom slippers, but Mrs. Kulavich had put on rain boots. Mrs. Kulavich craned her neck, then came closer. Across the street, Jaine could see Mrs. Holland come out her front door.

Sam heaved a sigh. "I checked the house," he said to the patrolmen. "It's been trashed, but no one is in there. You guys take over while I go put on a shirt."

Mrs. Kulavich had edged close enough to hear him. She beamed at him. "Don't bother on my account," she said. "Sadie!" Mr. Kulavich said in rebuke.

"Oh, hush, George! I'm old, not dead!"

"I'll remind you of that the next time I want to watch the Playboy Channel," he growled.

Sam coughed and strode into his house, keeping his pistol held low against his leg so their bright-eyed old neighbors wouldn't spot it and get too excited.

Jaine became aware of the speculation in the neighbors' eyes as they studied her. She remembered that she hadn't put on her bra, and her silk shirt probably made that fairly obvious. She didn't look down to check, just kept BooBoo cradled to her chest. She didn't reach up to check her hair, either, because she knew it was a mess. The rain had wet it, then she had wallowed in bed with Sam for a couple of hours; it was probably sticking out in spikes. Given Sam's state of undress… well. She imagined the conclusion they were jumping to was pretty damn accurate.

Thinking about the neighbors was easier than thinking about her house. After her first horrifying glimpse of the kitchen, she didn't know if she wanted to see the rest of the house. This, coming so soon after the trauma of

Marci's death, was almost more than she could bear, so she concentrated on other things, such as the way Mrs. Kulavich winked at her when Sam came out of the house wearing a neat oxford shirt with the tails tucked into his jeans and his badge clipped to his belt. She wondered if he had put on underwear.

"Are you official?" she asked, eyeing the badge. "Might as well be. I'm on the scene, and we're all on call after eleven."

She gaped at him. "After elev – what time is it, anyway?"

"Almost midnight."

"Poor BooBoo," she said in horror. "Could you try to find some of his food and let me have a can, so I can feed him?"

Sam looked down at her, the expression in his dark eyes telling her he knew she was avoiding facing the reality about her house, but also saying that he understood. "Okay, I'll find something for him." He glanced over at Mrs. Kulavich. "Sadie, why don't you and Eleanor take Jaine in my house and put on a pot of coffee, okay?"

"Of course, dear."

With Mrs. Kulavich and Mrs. Holland flanking her, Jaine went back inside Sam's house and into the kitchen. She put BooBoo down and looked around with interest, since this was the first time she had seen much of the house. Before, they hadn't bothered to turn on a light until she was getting dressed, so she had seen the bedroom and the living room, both of which were furnished with only the essentials. The kitchen, like hers, had a small table and four chairs occupying one end of it, and the stove was about twenty years old. The refrigerator, though, looked brand new, and so did the coffeemaker. Sam had his priorities.

Mrs. Kulavich efficiently prepared the coffee and turned on the machine. Jaine became aware of a pressing need. "Um… do you know where the bathroom is?"

"Of course, dear," said Mrs. Holland. "The big bathroom is the second door on the left in the hallway, and there's a small bathroom opening off Sam's bedroom."

Funny that they knew that when she hadn't, but then it was difficult to explore much when one was flat of her back with a two-hundred-pound man on top of her. She chose the big bathroom, because it was closer, and carried her purse with her. Hurriedly she stripped off her clothes, used the facilities, then found a washcloth and washed away the evidence of four

hours of sex. She used his deodorant, combed her hair – which was indeed sticking out in spikes all over her head – and this time when she dressed she put on her bra.
Feeling more in control, she returned to the kitchen for a much-needed cup of coffee.
"It's terrible about your house, dear," said Mrs. Holland, "but wonderful about Sam. I take it congratulations are in order?"
"Eleanor," admonished Mrs. Kulavich. "Times are different now. Young people don't get married just because they've been jumping each other's bones."
"That doesn't mean they shouldn't," said Mrs. Holland severely.
Jaine cleared her throat. So much had happened that she could barely comprehend it all, but the hours in bed with Sam stood out clearly in her mind. "He did ask me to marry him," she confided. "And I said yes." She didn't use the cursed word "engaged."
"Oh, my!" Mrs. Kulavich beamed at her.
"That's wonderful! When's the wedding?"
"In about three weeks, when my parents get back from vacation." She made a rash decision. "And everyone on the street is invited." So their small wedding just got a little bigger; so what?
'"You'll have to have a bridal shower," said Mrs. Holland. "Where's a pen and notepad? We have to make plans."
"But I don't need – " Jaine began, then saw the expressions on their faces and stopped in mid-sentence. Belatedly she realized that she did indeed need a bridal shower, to help replace what had just been destroyed. Her chin wobbled. She quickly firmed it as one of the patrolmen stepped into the kitchen carrying two cans of cat food. "Detective Donovan sent these over," he said. Grateful for the distraction, Jaine looked around for BooBoo. He wasn't anywhere in sight. Upset at being plopped down in a strange environment, he was probably hiding. She knew all his favorite hiding places in her house, but she had no idea where he would hide in Sam's. As bait, she opened one of the cans of food, then crawled through the house softly calling BooBoo's name, pushing the open can in front of her. She finally found him behind the couch, but even with the lure of food, it took her fifteen minutes to coax him out of his hiding place. He crept out and daintily began eating, while she stroked him and took comfort in his warm, sinuous body.

He would have to go to Shelley's house, she thought. She couldn't risk letting him stay with her now. Tears seared her eyes, and she bent her head to hide them, concentrating on the cat. When she hadn't been at home, the maniac had taken out his rage on her possessions. While she was grateful beyond telling that she had been in Sam's bed rather than her own, she couldn't risk BooBoo and her dad's car again – The car. Oh, my God, the car.

She sprang to her feet, startling BooBoo so much he darted back behind the couch. "I'll be right back," she called to Mrs. Kulavich and Mrs. Holland, then ran outside. "Sam!" she yelled. "The car! Did you check the car?" Her yard and Sam's were full of neighbors. Since the Viper was sitting right there in her driveway, startled faces turned toward her. She hadn't thought to check the Viper, but as much as she loved it, her dad's car was at least five times more valuable, and totally irreplaceable. Sam came out on the kitchen stoop. He glanced at the garage and jumped from the stoop. Together they ran to the garage.

The door was still padlocked. "He couldn't have gotten in, could he?" Jaine asked in an agonized whisper. "Maybe he wouldn't have tried, since your car was sitting in the driveway. He probably thought the garage was empty. Is there another way in?"

"No, not without knocking a hole in the wall."

"Then the car is okay." He put his arm around her and walked her back toward the house. "You don't want to open the door with all these people watching, do you?" She gave an emphatic shake of her head. "I'll have to move the car," she said, planning ahead. "David will have to take it. And Shelley will have to take BooBoo. Mom and Dad will understand, under the circumstances."

"We can put the car in my garage, if you want." She thought about it. At least it would be close to hand, and whoever was doing this didn't know about the car in the first place, so it should be safe. "Okay. We'll move it when everyone leaves."

She didn't look at the Viper as she walked by it, but she stopped. Staring hard at the blue lights on top of the patrol cars, she asked Sam, "Is my car okay? I can't look."

"It looks okay. I don't see any scratches or anything, and nothing's broken." She heaved a sigh of relief and sort of sagged against him. He hugged her, then sent her back to his kitchen and the care of Sadie and Eleanor.

It was dawn before she was allowed to enter her house. She was surprised at the amount of attention given to what was essentially vandalism, but she supposed Sam was responsible for that. Of course, he didn't think it was just vandalism.

Neither did she.

She couldn't. Walking through her house, looking at the destruction, she noticed immediately how personal it all was. Her television hadn't been touched – strange, since it was an expensive item – but all her dresses and underwear had been shredded. Her jeans and pants, however, hadn't been touched.

In the bedroom, her sheets and pillows and mattress had been hacked to pieces, her perfume bottles broken. In the kitchen, everything made of glass had been broken, all her plates and bowls, glasses, cups, even the heavy lead- crystal serving trays she had never used. And in the bathroom, her bath linen was untouched, but all her makeup was destroyed. Tubes were smashed, powder dumped, and all the compacts of eyeshadow and blush looked as if they had been stomped, then ground to pieces.

"He destroyed everything feminine," she whispered, looking around. The bed was kind of generic, but her bed linen was feminine, in soft pastels with lace-trimmed edges.

"He hates women," Sam agreed, coming to stand beside her. His face was grim. "A psychiatrist would have a field day with this."

She sighed, exhausted from lack of sleep and the sheer size of the task before her. She glanced at him; he hadn't had any more sleep than she had, which amounted to nothing more than a couple of short naps. "Are you going to work today?"

He gave her a startled look. "Sure. I have to get with the detective working Marci's case and bring him up to speed on this."

"I'm not even going to try to work. It'll take a week to get this mess cleaned up."

"No, it won't. Call a cleaning service." He put a thumb under her chin and tilted up her face, looking at the bruises of fatigue that shadowed her eyes. "Then go to sleep – in my bed – and let Mrs. Kulavich oversee the cleaning. She'll be thrilled."

"If she is, then she's in dire need of therapy," Jaine said, once more surveying the wreckage of what had been her home. She yawned. "I also need to go shopping, to replace my clothes and makeup."

He grinned. "The kitchen stuff can wait, huh?"
"Hey, I know what's important." She leaned against him and looped her arms around his waist, reveling in the freedom to do so, reveling also in the way his arms automatically went around her.
She suddenly stiffened. She couldn't believe she hadn't once thought about Luna and T.J. tonight. Her brain must be misfiring, that was the only explanation. "I forgot about Luna and T.J.! My God, I should have called them immediately, warned them – "
"I did," said Sam, folding her back in his arms. "I called them last night, on my cell phone. They're okay, just worried about you."
She yawned and relaxed against him once more, letting her head nestle on his chest. His heart thump-thumped in her ear. She was exhausted but couldn't stop her thoughts from circling like buzzards around a fresh kill. If she couldn't wind down, she would never be able to sleep. "How do you feel about medicinal sex?" she asked him. Interest lit his dark eyes. "Does it involve swallowing?" She chuckled against his shirt. "Not yet. Maybe tonight. What this involves now is relaxing me enough so I can sleep. Are you interested?"
For answer, he took her hand and placed it over the fly of his jeans. He had a long, thick growth under his zipper. She hummed with pleasure as she ran her fingers up and down the length of it, feeling the tiny, spasmodic movements of his body that he couldn't control. "God, you're easy," she said.
"Thinking about swallowing always gets me hard." Hand in hand, they walked back to his house, where he relaxed her.
"The evidence techs didn't find a usable fingerprint," Sam told Roger Bernsen a couple of hours later. "But they did find a partial shoe print. Looks like a running shoe; I'm trying to get a make on the brand by the tread pattern." Detective Bernsen said what Sam already knew: "He broke in intending to kill her, and trashed her place instead when she wasn't there. You got a fix on the time?" "Between eight P.M. and midnight, roughly." Mrs. Holland kept a close watch on the street, and she said she hadn't seen a strange car or anyone unknown to her before Sam himself had arrived home. After dark, everyone was inside.
"Lucky she wasn't at home."
"Yeah." Sam didn't want to think about the alternative. "We gotta start running down those personnel files at Hammerstead."

"The C.E.O. is my next call. I don't want anyone else knowing that we're checking the files. He can have them pulled without anyone questioning him. Maybe they can be copied to our computers so we don't have to risk going there."
Roger grunted. "By the way, the M.E. has released Ms. Dean's body. I've contacted her sister."
"Thanks. We need to have someone videotaping the funeral."
"You think he'll be there?"
"I'm betting on it," Sam said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Corin hadn't been able to sleep, but he didn't feel tired. Frustration gnawed at him. Where had she been? She would have told him, he thought. Sometimes, most of the time, he didn't like her at all, but sometimes she could be nice. If she had been feeling nice, she would have told him.

He didn't know what to think about her. She didn't dress like a whore the way Marci Dean had, but men always looked at her anyway, even when she was wearing pants. And when she was being nice, he liked her, but when she cut people to shreds with her tongue, he wanted to hit her and hit her, and just keep hitting her until her head was all soft and she couldn't do those things to him anymore…. But was that her, or Mother? He frowned, trying to remember. Sometimes things got so confused. Those pills must still be affecting him.

Men looked at Luna, too. She was always sweet to him, but she wore a lot of makeup and Mother thought her skirts were always too short. Short skirts made men think nasty thoughts, Mother said. No good woman ever wore short skirts.

Maybe Luna just acted sweet. Maybe she was really bad. Maybe she was the one who had said those things, and made fun of him, and caused Mother to hurt him. He closed his eyes and thought of how Mother had hurt him, and a tingle of excitement went through him. He ran his hand down his front, the way he wasn't supposed to, but it felt so good that sometimes he did it anyway. No. That was bad. And when Mother had hurt him, she had just been showing him how bad that thing was. He shouldn't enjoy it.

But the night hadn't been a total waste. He had a new lipstick. He took off the top and twisted the base so the vulgar thing slid out. It wasn't bright red like Marci's, it was more of a pinkish color, and he didn't like it nearly as well. He painted his lips, scowled at his reflection in the mirror, then wiped off the color in disgust.

Maybe one of the others would have a lipstick that suited him better.

Laurence Strawn, C.E.O. of Hammerstead Technology, was a man with a boisterous laugh and a knack for seeing the big picture. He wasn't good with details, but then, he didn't need to be.

That morning he had received a call from a Warren detective named Donovan. Detective Donovan had been very persuasive. No, they didn't

have a warrant to search Hammerstead's personnel records, and they preferred to keep this as quiet as possible. What he was asking for was cooperation in catching a murderer before he could kill again, and they had a hunch he worked at Hammerstead.

Why was that? Mr. Strawn had asked, and was told about the phone call to T.J. Yother's cell phone, whose number he wouldn't have known was hers unless he had access to certain information about her. Since they were fairly certain Marci Dean had known her killer and that the same man was the one who had called T.J.'s cell phone, then it followed that they both knew him, that, in fact, all four of the friends knew him. That made it highly probable that he worked at Hammerstead with them.

Mr. Strawn's immediate reaction was that he didn't want this leaking to the press. He was, after all, a C.E.O. His second, more thought-out reaction, was that he would do whatever possible to stop this maniac from killing more of his employees. "What do you want me to do?" he asked. "If we have to, we'll come to Hammerstead to go over the files, but we'd prefer not to alert anyone that we're looking. Can you access the files and attach them to an E-mail to me?"

"The files are on a separate system that isn't on-line. I'll have them copied to a CD for my files, then send it to you. What's your E-mail address?"

Unlike a lot of chief executive officers and corporate presidents, Laurence Strawn knew his way around computers. He'd had to become proficient just to understand what the loonies on the first two floors were doing.

"T.J. Yother works in human resources," he added as he copied down Detective Donovan's E-mail address, another talent he had, that of doing two things at once. "I'll have her do it. That way we know there won't be a leak."

"Good idea," said Sam. With that accomplished with surprising ease – he thought he'd like Laurence Strawn – he turned his attention to the partial shoe print the techs had lifted from Jaine's bathroom floor, where the bastard had stepped in the ruins of her makeup and left a pretty good imprint behind. He just hoped it was enough to identify the style. O. J. Simpson aside, when they caught this guy, it would help if they could prove he owned the type of shoe that had made the print, and in the same size. It would be even better if there were still little clumps of makeup caught in the treads.

He spent most of the morning on the phone. Who said detective work wasn't dangerous and exciting? Last night had been a little more dangerous and exciting than he liked, he thought grimly. He didn't like playing "what if," but in this case he couldn't help it. What if he had been called away? What if Jaine hadn't been late, he hadn't been worried, and they hadn't argued? They might have parted with a good-night kiss, Jaine going to her house alone. Considering the destruction of her house, he shuddered to think what would have happened if she had been there. Marci Dean had been both taller and heavier than Jaine, and she hadn't been able to fight off her attacker, so the chances of Jaine doing so were practically nil.

He sat back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head, staring at the ceiling and thinking. Something was getting by him here, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Not yet, anyway; sooner or later, it would come to him, because he wouldn't be able to stop worrying it until he found the answer. His sister Doro said he was a cross between a snapping turtle and a rat terrier: once he had his teeth in something, he never let go. Of course, Doro hadn't meant it as a compliment.

Thinking of his Doro reminded him of the rest of his family, and the news he had to break. He scribbled on his notepad: Tell Mom about Jaine. This was going to come as a big surprise to them, because the last they'd heard he wasn't even dating anyone regularly. He grinned; hell, he still wasn't. He was skipping that part, as well as the engagement, and just going straight to marriage, which was probably the best way to get Jaine there. But the family stuff would have to wait. Right now he had dual priorities: catch a killer, and keep Jaine safe. Those two tasks didn't leave time for anything else. Jaine woke up in Sam's bed a little after one P.M. not really rested but with her batteries recharged enough that she felt ready to take on the next crisis. After dressing in jeans and a T-shirt, she went next door to check on the cleaning progress. Mrs. Kulavich was there, walking from room to room to make certain no shortcuts were taken. The two women who were doing the cleaning seemed to take her supervision in stride.

They certainly were efficient, Jaine thought. The bedroom and bathroom were already clean; the savaged mattress and box spring were gone, the shreds of cloth swept up and put in trash bags that sat bulging beside the stoop. Before going to sleep, she had called her insurance agent and found that her homeowners' insurance, so recently converted from renters'

insurance, would cover part of the replacement cost of the household goods. Her clothes weren't covered at all.
"Your insurance agent was here not an hour ago," Mrs. Kulavich said. "He looked around and took pictures, and was going to the police department to get a copy of the report. He said he didn't think there would be any problem."
Thank goodness for that. She had been out a lot of money lately, and her bank account was seriously shriveled. The telephone rang. It was one of the nonfeminine things that hadn't been damaged, so Jaine picked it up. She never had gotten around to hooking up the Caller ID unit, she remembered, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach at the thought of answering without knowing in advance who was calling.
It could be Sam, though, so she hit the talk button and put the phone to her ear. "Hello?"
"Is this Jaine? Jaine Bright?"
It was a woman's voice, vaguely familiar.
Relieved, she said, "Yes, it is."
"This is Cheryl… Cheryl Lobello, Marci's sister." Pain shot through her. That was why the voice sounded familiar; it reminded her of Marci's. Cheryl's voice lacked the smoker's rasp, but the underlying tone was the same. Jaine gripped the phone tighter. "Marci talked about you a lot," she said, blinking back the tears that hadn't been very far away since Monday when Sam had told her about Marci's death.
"I was going to say the same thing to you," Cheryl said, managing a sad little laugh. "She was always calling to tell me some remark you had made that cracked her up. She talked about Luna a lot, too. God, this doesn't seem real, does it?"
"No," Jaine whispered.
After a choked silence, Cheryl marshaled her control and said, "Anyway the medical examiner has released her b- body to me, and I'm making the funeral arrangements. Our parents are buried in Taylor, and I think she would want to be close to them, don't you?"
"Yes, of course." Her voice didn't sound like Marci's, Jaine thought; it was too thick with tears.
"I've arranged for a graveside service Saturday at eleven." Cheryl gave her the name of the funeral home and instructions on how to get to the cemetery. Taylor was south of Detroit and just east of Detroit Metro airport.

Jaine wasn't familiar with the area, but she was really good at following instructions and stopping for directions. She tried to think of something to say that would lessen Cheryl's pain, but how could she when she couldn't even lessen her own?
Then it hit her, what she and Luna and T.J. should do. Marci would love it.
"We're going to hold a wake for her," she blurted. "Would you like to come?"
"Awake?" Cheryl sounded taken aback. "An Irish wake type of thing?"
"Kind of, though we aren't Irish. We're going to sit around and lift a beer or two in her honor, and tell all sorts of stories about her."
Cheryl laughed, this time a real laugh. "She would get a kick out of that. I'd love to come. When is it?" Since she hadn't talked to Luna and T.J. about it yet, she wasn't certain exactly when this wake would begin, but it would have to be Friday night. "Tomorrow night," she said. "Let me get back to you with the time and place – unless you think the funeral home would let us sit up with her and have it there?"
"I kind of don't think so," Cheryl said, and sounded so much like Marci that Jaine got a lump in her throat all over again.
After writing down Cheryl's number, Jaine went over to Sam's and got the bag containing her Caller ID unit and new cell phone, which she hadn't even turned on yet. She sat at the table and carefully read the instructions, frowned, then wadded them into a ball and threw them in the trash. "It can't be that complicated," she muttered. "Just hook this thing between the line and the phone. How else would it work?"
Looked at logically, it was simple enough. She unplugged the phone from the wall jack, took the phone wire provided with the unit, and hooked the unit to the jack, then connected the phone to the unit. Presto bingo. Then she went over to Sam's house and dialed her number to see if the thing worked.
It did. When she pressed the display button, Sam's name popped up in the little window, with his number under it. Man, technology rocked.
She had a list of calls to make, and the first one was to Shelley. "I need you to take BooBoo for the rest of Mom and Dad's vacation," she said.
"Why?" asked Shelley belligerently, her hurt feelings evident.
"Because my house was vandalized last night and I'm afraid BooBoo will be hurt."

"What?" Shelley fairly shrieked. "Someone broke into your house? Where were you? What happened?"
"I was with Sam," Jaine said, and left it at that. "And the house was pretty well trashed."
"Thank God you weren't at home!" Then she paused, and Jaine could hear her sister's thoughts churning. Shelley wasn't slow. "Wait a minute. The house has already been trashed and BooBoo wasn't hurt, was he?"
"No, but I'm afraid he might be."
"You expect them to come back and trash your house again?" Shelley was shrieking again. "It's that List, isn't it? You have a bunch of crazies after you!"
"Just one, I think," Jaine said, and her voice caught. "Oh, my God. You think the man who killed Marci broke into your house? That's what you think, isn't it? Jaine, my God, what are we going to do? You have to get out of there. Come stay with me. Stay in a hotel. Something!"
"Thanks for the offer, but Sam beat you to it, and I feel safe with him. He has a gun. A big one."
"I know; I saw it." Shelley was silent a moment. "I'm scared."
"So am I," Jaine admitted. "Sam's working on it, though, and he has a couple of leads. Oh, by the way, we're getting married."
Shelley began shrieking again. Jaine took the phone away from her ear. When there was silence again, she put the phone back and said, "The tentative date is the day after Mom and Dad get back."
"But that's only three weeks! We can't get everything done! What about the church? What about the reception? What about your gown?"
"No church, no reception," Jaine said firmly. "And I'll find a gown. I don't have to have one made for me; one off the rack will do fine. I have to go shopping anyway, because the creep cut up most of my clothes."
More shrieking. She waited until Shelley's outrage died down. "Hey, let me give you my new cell phone number," she said. "You're the first one."
"I am, huh?" Shelley sounded fatigued from all her shrieking. "What about Sam?"
"Even he doesn't have it."
"Wow, I'm honored. You forgot to give it to him, didn't you?"
"Yeah."
"Okay, let me get a pen." There were rustling noises. "I can't find one."
More noises. "Okay, shoot."

"You found a pen?"
"No, but I have a can of Cheez Whiz. I'll write your number on the counter with it, then find a pen and copy it." Jaine recited her number and listened to the spewing noise as Shelley Cheez-Whizzed it on her countertop. "Are you at home, or at work?"
"At home."
"I'll come pick up BooBoo now."
"Thanks," Jaine said, relieved that worry was taken off her hands.
Next she called Luna and T.J. at work, and did the three- way calling thing. They fussed over her, too, and she could hear the underlying knowledge in their voices that it could have happened to them. As Jaine had expected, they loved the idea of a wake for Marci. Luna immediately volunteered her apartment, and the time was set. She gave them her cell phone number, too.
"I have something to tell both of you," T.J. said, keeping her voice low. "But not while I'm here."
"Come by when you get off work," Jaine said. "Luna, can you make it?"
"Sure. Shamal called again, but I'm not in the mood to go out with him, not with Marci – " She stopped, and audibly swallowed.
"You shouldn't go out with him anyway," Jaine said. "Remember what Sam said: family only. That means no dates."
"But Shamal isn't – " Luna stopped herself again. "This is awful. I can't be certain, can I? I can't take the chance."
"No, you can't," T.J. said. "None of us can." No sooner had Jaine hung up from talking with her friends than the phone rang. Al's name and number popped up in the little window. She picked up the phone and said, "Hi, Shelley."
"You finally got Caller ID," Shelley said. "Listen, I think we should call Mom and Dad."
"If you want to tell them I'm getting married, fine, though I'd rather do it myself. But don't even think about telling them to come home because of this crazy guy."
"This crazy guy is a killer, and he's after you! You don't think they would want to be here?"
"What could they do? And I don't intend to let him get me. I'm having an alarm system installed, and I'm staying with Sam. Mom and Dad would just be worried, and you know how Mom has looked forward to this vacation."
"They should be here," Shelley insisted.

"No, they shouldn't. Let them enjoy this. You think I'd let a crazy guy stand between me and my wedding? This one is going to go through if I have to hog-tie him and drag him to the altar. Or whatever," she added, remembering that it wasn't going to be a church wedding.
"You're trying to distract me, and it isn't working. I want to call Mom and Dad."
"I don't, and it's my situation, so what I say goes."
"I'm going to tell David."
"You may tell David, but no one, absolutely no one, is to tell Mom and Dad. Promise me, Shel. No one in your family, no one in David's family, neither friend nor foe, is to tell Mom and Dad about this. Or send them an express letter. Or a telegram, E-mail, or any other form of communication, including skywriting. Have I covered all the bases?"
"I'm afraid so," Shelley said.
"Good. Let them enjoy their vacation. I promise I'll be careful."
Sam got a call from Laurence Strawn early in the afternoon. "I'm leaving myself wide open for a lawsuit for invasion of privacy," he said. "But a court order would take time and might alert the guy, so to hell with it. If this gives you an edge, then it's worth a hundred lawsuits." Sam definitely liked this guy.
"Check your E-mail," Strawn continued. "It's a hell of an attachment, it will probably take quite a while to download."
"That was fast."
"Ms. Yother has incentive," said Strawn, and hung up. Sam turned to his computer and downloaded his E-mail. When he saw how many Ks of RAM the attached file took, he winced. "I hope I have the memory," he muttered, then clicked on the attachment and opened the file. Thirty minutes later, it was still downloading. He drank some coffee, did some paperwork, called Bernsen and told him he had the personnel files, drank some more coffee. Bernsen was on his way over to get a copy, and Sam hoped the damn thing finished downloading before he arrived.
Finally the screen cleared. He loaded the paper tray in the printer and set it to printing. When the tray was empty, he loaded it again. Damn it, going through this many files would take forever, even if he and Bernsen didn't have other cases to work and could concentrate on this. It looked as if he would be doing a lot of night reading. The printer ran out of toner. Cursing, Sam stopped the task, hunted down a toner cartridge, and was doing battle

with it when one of the clerks took pity on him and popped it in place. The printer resumed spitting out pages. Bernsen arrived, and they sat together watching the printer. "I'm tired just looking at this," Bernsen said, eyeing the enormous stack of paper.
"You take half and I'll take half. We'll run the names, see what the computer spits out."
"Thank God we only have to do the men."
"Yeah, but the computer industry is heavily male. Most of these files are on men; it's not a fifty-fifty split." Bernsen sighed. "I wanted to watch the ball game tonight." He paused. "I got the M.E.'s report on Ms. Dean. No sperm."
Sam wasn't really surprised. In a lot of sexual abuse cases there weren't any sperm present, either because the perpetrator used a condom – some actually did – or because he didn't ejaculate. It would have been nice to have the DNA for positive identification, just in case they needed it.
"He did find a hair, though, that wasn't Ms. Dean's. I'm impressed he spotted it, because Ms. Dean was blond, and so is this guy."
A wolfish smile spread across Sam's face. A hair. Just a single hair, but it gave them the DNA they needed. The case was slowly coming together. A partial shoe print, a single hair; it wasn't much to go on, but they were making progress.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Sam got home that afternoon, both T.J. and Luna were just going in his front door. That meant Jaine was in his house, rather than hers. He liked that. He hoped she was making herself comfortable, because he didn't intend to let her sleep in her own house until after he had caught Marci's killer, and maybe not even then. Having her around was way too much fun to give up, even temporarily.

The day was miserably hot, and sweat crawled down his spine as he went inside. He put the heavy stack of paper, half of the printed-out personnel files from Hammerstead, on the coffee table, then stood for a minute inhaling the blessedly cool air. With his lungs rescued from heat damage, he shrugged out of his jacket and followed the noise into the kitchen.

Jaine was pouring four glasses of iced tea, which meant she had seen him drive up.

"You're just in time," she said.

He removed his pistol and badge and laid them on the counter next to the coffeemaker. "For what?" He took one of the glasses of tea and drank deeply, his throat working. "We're planning a wake for Marci. Her sister, Cheryl, is going to come."

"Where and when?" he asked briefly.

"Tomorrow night, at my apartment," said Luna. "Okay. I can be there."

Looking startled, Jaine said, "But if we're all together, aren't we safe?"

"Not necessarily. You could just be providing him with a golden opportunity to get all of you at once. I won't intrude, but I'll be there."

Jaine snorted. If Sam was anywhere around, he intruded. He was one of those people you couldn't ignore. T.J. slanted a meaningful look at him. "Before we get started, I have news."

"I have news," said Jaine.

"So do I," said Sam.

They all waited. No one said anything. Luna finally spoke up. "Since I'm the only one who doesn't have news, I'll direct this." She pointed at T.J. "You go first. You've had my curiosity up since we talked on the phone."

T.J. raised her eyebrows at Sam, and he knew she was asking if it was all right to tell the other two what she had been doing. Since she would have told them anyway if he hadn't shown up, he said, "Go ahead."

"I made copies of all the personnel files for Mr. Strawn," she said. "He said a certain detective had asked to see them, and he was granting permission."
Three sets of eyes turned in his direction. He made a face. "I brought a lot of paperwork home with me. We're running all the names for prior convictions or outstanding warrants, too."
"How long will that take?" Jaine asked.
"If nothing pops up on the computer to point us in the right direction, we'll have to go through all the files and see if something sticks out, maybe dig deeper."
"A day? Two days?" she prodded.
"You're an optimistic little cuss, aren't you?" He took a long swallow of the cold tea.
Luna made a T with her hands, signaling a time-out, then pointed at Sam. "Your turn."
"The M.E. found a blond hair on Marci that wasn't hers." The three women went very still, and he knew their minds were racing, trying to think of all the blond men at Hammer-stead. "Does anyone spring to mind?" he asked.
"Not really," Jaine said. "And what you call blond, we might call light brown." She looked at the others, who shrugged. "There are a lot of guys at work who qualify."
"Don't drop your guard," he warned. "She might have picked up the hair somewhere else. It's a lead, and when we catch him, if the DNA matches, then we have him nailed. Just be extra careful around the blond guys."
"That's a cheerful thought," Luna said glumly. "I think I'm the only brunette in sales."
"I'm going to go through the files by department, starting with accounting, since Marci was the first target. By the way," he said to T.J. "thanks for giving them to me broken down into the separate departments."
She gave him a wry look. "Anything I can do to help." Luna directed the conversation again, pointing at Jaine. "It's your turn."
Jaine took a deep breath. After three broken engagements, she had to brace herself to announce that she intended… again… to get married. She glanced at Sam, and he winked at her.
"Samandlaregettingmarried," she said in a rush, running the words together as if they would attract less attention that way. What the gods didn't notice, they couldn't squash.

Sam put his fingers in his ears to block out the squeals that erupted. T.J. hugged Jaine. Luna hugged Sam. Then they somehow all ended up hugging each other. The circle was too small without Marci, Jaine thought, but she refused to let tears ruin this little celebration. Life went on. It was sadder without Marci, emptier, but it went on nevertheless.
"How? I mean, when?" T.J. asked.
"In three weeks, when her folks get home," Sam replied. "I was thinking maybe in a judge's chambers, but my family would never fit, and they'll all want to be there."
"Maybe a park," Jaine said.
"Why a park? Someone's house should be large enough. My folks have a big place; they had to have, with seven kids."
She cleared her throat. "Well, there's my family, your family, T.J. and Luna, your cop friends, and I kind of… um… invited everyone on the street."
"Well, yeah," he said. "George and Sadie would have to come, and Eleanor, and… and, goddamn it, our small wedding is already up to about a hundred people, isn't it?" he finished in a frustrated tone.
"Afraid so, kemo sabe."
"That means food, and stuff like that."
"You got it."
"Who the hell is going to handle all this?" His expression clearly said he wasn't.
"Shelley will. She loves this kind of sh – stuff. Nothing fancy, though. I'm on a tight budget, with the house payment and new security system, the cell phone, and now I have to buy new clothes and a new mattress and box spring – "
"You don't need the mattress and box spring," he pointed out, and T.J. and Luna began hooting with laughter. T.J. got five bucks from her purse and slapped it in Luna's hand.
"Told you," Luna crowed.
Jaine narrowed her eyes at them. "You've been betting on my love life," she accused.
"Yes, and I have to say, I'm disappointed in you," T.J. said, trying for a severe tone. She was still laughing, so the attempt didn't quite come off. "I thought you'd hold him off for at least another couple of weeks."
"She couldn't resist me," Sam said smugly, pouring himself another glass of tea.

"I felt sorry for him," Jaine corrected. "All that whining and begging. It was pitiful."
His grin promised retribution. She felt a thrill of anticipation. She might have to make love with him, oh, three or four times to soothe his hurt feelings. What a sacrifice!
She loved the way he was so comfortable with her friends. He sat down at the table and helped them plan the wake, though his contribution was, "Beer and popcorn. What more do you need at a wake?" Which proved he had no understanding of women and food.
After T.J. and Luna left, they went out to move her dad's car from her garage to his. As he helped her fold the tarp back and uncover the little silver bullet of a car, he said, "Do you have the keys with you?"
She fished them out of her jeans pocket and dangled them in front of his eyes. "Wanna drive?"
"Are you trying to suck up to me, to make up for that crack about whining and begging?"
"No, I planned on making that up to you later." He grinned and swiped the keys out of her hand. "Oh, man," he sighed as he toed off his shoes and swung one long leg over the door, then the other, and slid down into the driver's seat. The little car fit him like a glove. He ran his hands over the steering wheel. "How did you say your dad got it?"
"He bought it, back in 1964, but he had an 'in.' You know: 'Built by Shelby, Powered by Ford.' Dad was on the production team that developed the motor. He fell in love with the car. Mom was furious with him for spending so much money on a car when they had a baby – Shelley – and needed to buy a house with more space. Only a thousand of them were built. One thousand and eleven, to be exact. So now Dad has one of the original Cobras, and it's worth more than they paid for their house." He glanced over his shoulder at the Viper sitting in her driveway. "Your dad isn't the only one who spends a fortune on cars."
"I'm a chip off the old block. Besides, I bought the Viper used, so it isn't like I shelled out the full sixty-nine grand for it. I lived off Hamburger Helper and tuna casserole for three years to pay for it."
He shuddered. "But it's paid for, right?"
"Free and clear. I couldn't have afforded the house if I still had to make those car payments. It's Dad's fault I bought it, anyway."
"How's that?"

She nodded at the Cobra. "What do you think he used to teach me to drive?"
Sam looked aghast. "He let a beginner drive it?"
"That's how he taught us all how to drive. He said if we could handle the Cobra, we could handle anything. But Shelley and David didn't really have the knack for it, they were more comfortable in Mom's Lincoln. Some people like comfort over speed, I guess." Her expression said she didn't understand it, but accepted it anyway. "Jesus." He was actually pale at the thought of three untutored teenagers behind the wheel of this car. "Dad hates my Viper," she confided, then grinned. "Part of it is because it isn't a Ford, but he really, really hates that the Viper has him beat at top-end speed. The Cobra has faster acceleration, but over any distance I can catch him."
"You've been racing?" he bellowed, looking as if he would jump out of the car.
"Just to see what the horses could do," she assured him. "And it wasn't street racing. We went to a test track." He closed his eyes. "You and your dad are a lot alike, aren't you?" he asked, his tone as filled with horror as if he had just discovered they were typhoid carriers. "Yeah, you'll like him."
"I can't wait."
When Luna arrived at her apartment, she was startled to see Shamal King sitting on the floor beside the door. He stood up when he saw her, and she stopped in her tracks, irrational fear flooding her. Shamal was big and well-muscled. For a terrified instant she thought he – but that was impossible. The killer was a blond, a white man. She swallowed, weak from panic and relief, one following so closely on the heels of the other.
"What are you doing here?" she asked, reaction making her blunt, and saw surprise in his eyes at her lack of welcome.
"I haven't seen you lately," he purred in the velvety voice that had women flocking to him, though the millions he made carrying a football didn't hurt. He usually had a small entourage of hangers-on around him; he loved his fame and the limelight, and made the most of it. "The last two weeks have been crazy," she said. "First there was the List, then Marci – " She stopped, her throat seizing. She still couldn't believe Marci was gone. No; she did believe it. She just hadn't accepted it. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. The two of you were tight, weren't you?"
He really didn't know much about her, she thought. Their relationship, such as it was, had always been about him. "She was my best friend," she said, and tears blurred her eyes. "Look, Shamal, I'm not in the mood for – "

"Hey, I didn't come here for that," he said, frowning as he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his tailored silk pants. "If it was just sex I wanted, I could get that from – " He stopped, evidently realizing that wasn't the wisest thing to say. "I've missed you," he said helplessly, ill at ease. That wasn't the type of thing Shamal King said to women. Luna stepped past him and unlocked her door. "Really," she said in a dry tone. It was funny; for almost a year, since the moment she met Shamal, she had dreamed about him saying something like that, indicating that she was, in any way, special to him. Now that he had, she wasn't inclined to give an inch. Maybe she had already given all she could, gone as far as possible. He shifted from one foot to the other. He didn't know what to say, she realized. He had always been too handsome, too gifted, and now he was too rich; girls had always chased him. He had been sought after and idolized and pandered to since junior high, when his running ability became obvious. This was new territory for Shamal King. "Would you like to come in?" she finally asked.
"Yeah, sure."
He looked around her small apartment, as if he was seeing it for the first time. Going over to the bookcase to examine the books she had there, and the family photographs. "Your dad?" he asked, picking up a photo of a stern, handsome Marine major.
"Yes, right before he retired."
"So you're an army brat?"
"A Marine brat," she corrected, concealing her wince at his failure to recognize the uniform.
He looked uncomfortable again. "I don't know anything about the military. All I've ever done is play football. I guess you've traveled all over the world, huh?"
"Parts of it."
"I could tell you're sophisticated." He returned the photograph to its place, precisely lined it up as she'd had it. "You know wines, and things like that."
Luna felt a twinge of surprise. He sounded a little insecure, an emotion she would never have associated with him. He was always so cocky and brash, as if he thought it only natural to receive as much attention as he did. He lived in a mansion, she thought, and he was intimidated because she had traveled some and been exposed to a lot of formal dinners.
"Would you like something to drink?" she offered. "I don't have anything stronger than beer. There's also fruit juice and milk."

"A beer," he said, relieved. Maybe he'd been afraid she would offer him a selection of white wines. She got two beers out of the refrigerator and twisted the tops off, then handed him one. He watched, fascinated, as she took a long swallow.
"I've never seen you drink beer."
She shrugged. "It's kind of endemic to a military base. I like it."
He sat down and rolled the frosty bottle between his hands. After a moment of gathering his courage, he said, "Luna – the reason I'm here – " He stopped, and did some more bottle rolling.
She sat down across from him and crossed her long legs. He eyed the elegant length of exposed skin, as she had meant for him to do. "Yes?"
He cleared his throat. "When you stopped coming around, I… well, it kind of surprised me. I thought we… that is – "
"We had sex," she said gently, deciding to help him along. At the rate he was going, he would still be trying at midnight to spit out whatever it was he wanted to say. "That's all it ever was to you, and all you seemed to want. I wanted more, but I guess you get that a lot from all your other girlfriends."
More discomfort. "It – uh… it was more than just sex."
"Um-hmm. That's why you have something like three girls for every day of the week, a party in every city you go to. Shamal, I'm not an idiot. I woke up and smelled the coffee. I wanted to be special to you, but I'm not."
"Yes, you are," he insisted. He examined the beer bottle again, a flush darkening his face. "More special than you know," he mumbled. "I don't want to lose you. What do I have to do?"
"Lose all the other girls," she said promptly. "If you can't be faithful, I'm not interested."
"Yeah, I know." He managed a faint grin. "I read the List. Parts of it I can't manage."
She smiled. "Parts of it were a joke. The first five items weren't."
"So if I… lose the other girlfriends, you'll come back?" She thought about it, thought about it for so long that he began to sweat, even in the air-conditioned apartment. She had already written him off in her mind, she realized, even if her heart hadn't quite been convinced. Turning things back around would take some effort.
"I'll give it a try," she finally said, and he collapsed back on the couch with a "whoosh" of relief. She held up a slender hand. "But – if you're unfaithful at all, that means even just groping a girl at a party the way I've seen you

do, then I'm history. No second chances, because you've already used them all up."
"I swear," he said, holding up his right hand. "No more fucking around."
"Screwing," she said.
"What?"
"Screwing around."
"That's what I said. Same thing."
"No, your language could use a little cleaning up. That's what I meant."
"Babe, I'm a football player. We swear."
"That's fine, when you're on a field, but you aren't on a field now."
"Man," he complained, but good-naturedly. "Already you're trying to change me."
She shrugged in a take-it-or-leave-it manner. "My dad can peel your skin off when he's swearing, but he watches his language around Mom because she doesn't like it. I don't care for it either. My friend Jaine is trying to stop swearing and has done a really good job. If she can do it, anyone can."
"Okay, okay. I'll try." Suddenly he grinned. "Hey, this is kind of homey, isn't it? Domesticated. You ragging on me, and me promising to do better. Like a couple." Luna laughed, and went into his arms. "Yes," she said. "Just like a couple."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Bleary-eyed at dawn on Saturday morning, Sam yawned and sat up on Luna's couch. Around midnight the women had decided he could watch the apartment just as well from inside as he could outside, and insisted he come in. He was tired, so he did. He hadn't had much sleep for two days and nights – he would have gotten more if there hadn't been a certain smart-ass lying under him, insisting on wiggling her pretty butt – and was disgusted after a day chasing leads that turned out to be nothing on another case he was working, plus not getting anywhere on the files from Hammerstead. The computers hadn't turned up anything so far on the names they had run, except for the odd unpaid ticket and a few domestic disturbances. By midnight, fueled by beer and chocolate, the four women were still going strong. Cheryl turned out to be a toned- down version of Marci, similar in looks and voice and with the same boisterous sense of humor. They had

talked until they were hoarse, laughed and cried, drunk beer and eaten everything they could get their hands on. It had been an amazing sight.
They moved the wake into the kitchen, and he stretched out on the couch. He had slept, but with one ear attuned to the noise from the kitchen. Nothing alarming had happened, except he discovered that Jaine sang a lot when she was tipsy.
When he woke, he noticed immediately that the noise had died down. In fact, it was downright quiet. Quietly he opened the kitchen door and peeked in. They were all asleep, breathing with the heaviness of fatigue and alcohol. T.J. was snoring slightly, a delicate sound that didn't qualify as a full-fledged snore. Having grown up in a house with four brothers and his dad, he knew exactly how a full-fledged snore sounded.
Jaine was under the table. Literally. She was curled up with her head pillowed on her folded hands, looking like an angel. He snorted; that was a real con. She had probably practiced sleeping like that since she was a little kid. Luna rested her head on her folded arms, like a child in grammar school. She was a sweet kid, he thought, though she had to have some grit to her to hold her own with the others. Cheryl's head was on the table, too, but she was using a pot holder as a pillow – a flat one. With enough beer inside you, a lot of things made sense that normally wouldn't.
He searched for and found the coffee and filters and put on a pot of coffee, not making any attempt to be quiet. They continued to sleep. When the coffee was ready, he hunted through the cabinets for the coffee cups, and got down five of them. He poured four of them only half full, in case there were some shaky hands, but his he filled to the rim. Then he said, "Okay, ladies, time to wake up." He might as well have been talking to the wall for all the effect his announcement had.
"Ladies!" he sounded, more loudly.
Nothing.
"Jaine! Luna! T.J.! Cheryl!"
Luna lifted her head an inch and looked blearily at him, then let her head drop back down on her arms. The other three didn't stir.
A grin spread over his face. He could shake them awake, he supposed, but that wouldn't be much fun. What was fun was finding a pot and a metal spoon and banging them together, then watching the four women bolt upright, wild- eyed. Jaine hit her head on the table and yelled, "Son of a bitch!"

His mission accomplished, Sam distributed the coffee cups, bending over to give Jaine hers; she was sitting under the table, rubbing her head and glaring. God, he loved that woman.
"C'mon, get it in gear," he said to the group at large. "The funeral is in roughly five hours."
"Five hours?" Luna groaned. "Are you sure?"
"I'm sure. That means you have to be at the funeral home in four hours."
"No way," T.J. pronounced, but she managed a sip of coffee.
"You have to sober up – "
"We aren't drunk," came a growl from beneath the table. " – eat something, if you can, shower, wash your hair, whatever it is you have to do. You don't have time to sit under the table growling."
"I'm not growling."
No, that was more like a snarl. Maybe some medicinal sex would sweeten her mood – if he lived through it. At the moment, he kinda knew how the male praying mantis felt when he was approaching Ms. Mantis, knowing the sex was going to be great but he was going to get his head bitten off.
Ah, well. Some things were worth losing your head. Cheryl stood up, very creakily. She had the imprint of the pot-holder loop on her cheek. She drank some coffee, cleared her throat, and said, "He's right. We have to get moving, or we'll be late."
A slender arm thrust out from under the table, holding an empty coffee cup. Sam got the carafe and refilled the cup. The arm was retracted.
God willing, he could look forward to forty or fifty years with her. It was scary. What was even scarier was that he liked the idea.
T.J. finished her coffee and got up for a refill, so she was functional. She said, "Okay. I can do this. Let me pee and wash my face, and I'm good to drive home." She stumbled down the short hall, and a sudden wail floated back: "God, I can't believe I told Sam I have to pee!"
Fifteen minutes later he had them all lined up, even Jaine, and they were all scowling at him. "I can't believe you're making us do this!" she snapped, but obediently blew into the Breathalyzer.
"I'm a cop. No way am I letting any of you drive until I've checked that you're okay." He looked at the reading and grinned, shaking his head. "It's a good thing I'm here, babe, because you aren't driving anywhere. You're slightly over the limit."
"I am not!"

"Yes, you are. Now drink some more coffee and be quiet while I check the others."
Cheryl was okay. T.J. was okay. Luna was okay, barely. "You cheated!" Jaine accused, her expression thunderous. "How in hell can I cheat? You're the one who blew into it!"
"Then it's wrong! It's defective. We all drank the same amount, so how can I be over the limit when no one else is?"
"They outweigh you," he said patiently. "Luna's pushing the edge, but she's legal. You aren't. I'll drive you home." Now she looked like a sulky kid.
"Which vehicle are we going to leave here, yours or mine?"
"Yours. Let it look as if Luna has company, if anyone checks the parking lot."
That argument got to her. She was still pouting, but after a minute she said, "Okay." With only a little more trouble he got her bundled into his truck, where she promptly went back to sleep.
She woke up enough to get into his house under her own power, but she stood glowering as he turned on the shower and began stripping himself, then her. "Did you intend to wash your hair?" he asked. "Yes."
"Good. Then it won't matter when I do this." He picked her up and swung her into the shower, directly under the stream of water. She sputtered and coughed, but didn't fight him. Instead she heaved a big sigh, as if the water felt good.
After her hair was shampooed and rinsed, she said, "I'm not in a good mood."
"I noticed."
"I'm always cranky when I haven't had enough sleep."
"Oh, is that the problem?" he asked dryly.
"The biggest part. I'm usually very happy when I've had a few beers."
"You were happy last night. This morning is a different story."
"You think I have a hangover. I don't. Well, a little headache, but not much. Just let this be a warning to you if you keep me from sleeping again tonight."
"I kept you from sleeping? I kept you from sleeping?" he repeated incredulously. "You are the same woman who shook me out of a sound sleep at two A.M. yesterday morning, aren't you?"
"I didn't shake you. I kind of bounced on you, but I didn't shake you."
"Bounced," he repeated.

"You had a hard-on. I couldn't let it go to waste, could I?"
"You could have woke me up before you started not letting it go to waste."
"Look," she said, exasperated, "if you don't want it used, don't lie on your back with it sticking up like that. If that isn't an invitation, I don't know what is."
"I was asleep. It does that on its own." It was doing it on its own right now, as a matter of fact. It poked her in the stomach.
She looked down… and smiled. It was a smile that made his testicles draw up in fear.
With a sniff, she turned her back on him and ignored him as she finished showering.
"Hey!" he said, to get her attention. Alarm was in his tone. "You aren't going to let this one go to waste, are you?" They made it to the funeral home on time, but it was close. He drove her back to Luna's to pick up her car, so if the killer was at the funeral, he wouldn't see her getting out of Sam's truck and figure out where she was staying. With the Cobra in his garage, he had to park the truck either in the driveway or in Jaine's garage, which was a pain in the ass, since she didn't have an automatic garage door opener.
He was relaxed, and Jaine was in an infinitely more mellow mood, too. Medicinal sex was great stuff. She had managed to resist him for a full five minutes, but just when he was beginning to really sweat, she cuddled up to him with a sparkle in those blue eyes and whispered, "I'm feeling tense. I think I need relaxing."
She looked great, he thought, watching her from across the room. She wore a neat little navy suit that hit right at her knees, and sexy pumps. She had let him watch while she put on what she called her "funeral face". Evidently women had a makeup strategy for every occasion. The eyeliner and mascara were waterproof, to head off smudges. No blush or foundation, just powder, because she would be hugging people and didn't want to leave smears on their clothing. And kiss-proof lipstick in what she called a "discreet mauve," though he had no idea what in hell mauve was. Her lipstick looked pinkish, but women couldn't just say "pink."
Women were a different species. Aliens. That was the only explanation.
Cheryl wore black and looked very dignified. Her husband had joined her, and stood beside her, holding her hand. T.J. wore a dark green suit, and her husband also attended with her. Mr. Yother was a trim, all-American type,

with neat brown hair and regular features. He didn't hold T.J.'s hand, and Sam noticed that T.J. didn't look at him very often. There was trouble there, he thought. Luna wore a form-fitting column of red that hit her at mid- calf. She was, simply, beautiful. She walked over to join Jaine, and Sam moved closer, to hear what they were saying.

"Marci loved red," Jaine said, smiling at Luna and reaching for her hand. "I wish I had thought of it." Luna's lips trembled. "I wanted to send her off in style. This isn't in bad taste, is it?"

"Are you kidding? It's great. Everyone who knew Marci will understand, and if they didn't know Marci, then they don't matter."

Roger Bernsen was there, trying to blend in. He didn't do it very well, but he was trying. He didn't come over to speak, but then, they weren't here to socialize. They moved around, studying the crowd, listening to conversations. There were several blond men in attendance, but Sam carefully studied each one of them and none seemed to be paying any special attention to Jaine or the others. Most of them were with their wives. The killer could be married, he knew, and live a very normal life on the surface, but unless he was a stone-cold serial killer he would show some kind of emotion when faced with his handiwork, and his other targets. Sam didn't think they were dealing with that land of killer; the attacks were too personal, and too emotional, like someone out of control.

He continued to watch all during the graveside service, which was mercifully brief. The heat was already stifling, though Cheryl had scheduled the service as early as possible to avoid the worst part of the day. He caught Bernsen's eye, and Roger slowly shook his head. He hadn't spotted anything either. Everything was being taped, and they would watch the film later, to see if there was anything they had missed, but Sam didn't think there was. Damn it, he'd been certain the killer would attend.

Cheryl was weeping a little, but mostly keeping it under control. Sam saw Jaine blot her eyes with the edge of a folded tissue: more female strategy to preserve the makeup. He didn't think his sisters knew all these tricks. A pretty, slender woman in a black dress approached Cheryl and was extending her condolences when she suddenly broke down and collapsed in Cheryl's startled arms, sobbing. "I just can't believe it," she wept. "The office isn't the same without her."

T.J. and Luna moved closer to Jaine, both of them eyeing the woman with "what's going on?" expressions. Sam walked over, too. People were

grouping in clusters, politely ignoring the emotional storm, so he wouldn't be conspicuous doing the same thing.
"I might have known Leah would play this for all she's worth," T.J. muttered in disgust. "She's a drama queen," she added, for Sam's benefit. "She's in my department, and she does this on a regular basis. Give her something the least bit upsetting and she turns it into a tragedy." Jaine was watching the display in disbelief, her eyes wide. She shook her head and said mournfully, "The wheel's still going around, but her hamster's dead."
T.J. choked on a bark of laughter and tried to turn it into a cough. She quickly turned her back, her face red as she tried to control herself. Luna was biting her lower lip, but a snicker broke through and she, too, had to turn her back to the scene. Sam covered his mouth with his hand, but his shoulders were shaking. Maybe people would think he was crying.
A red dress! The bitch wore a red dress. Corin couldn't believe his eyes. That was so shameful, so cheap. He wouldn't have believed it of her, and he was so shocked it was all he could do to keep his hands off her. Mother would be horrified.
Women like that didn't deserve to live. None of them did. They were dirty, filthy whores, and he would be doing the world a favor by getting rid of them.
Luna sighed with relief when she finally stepped into her apartment and could lock off her high heels. Her feet were killing her, but looking good for Marci was worth the pain. She would do it all again if she had to, but she was glad she didn't.
Now that the funeral was over, she felt numb, exhausted. The wake had helped immensely; talking about Marci, laughing, crying, had been a catharsis that had allowed her to get through the day. The funeral itself, the ritual, was its own comfort. Her dad had told her that military funerals, with all the pomp and protocol and the precisely orchestrated movements, were a comfort to the families. The rituals said: This person counted. This person was respected. And the services were sort of an emotional marker, a point at which the grieving could honor the dead and yet have a starting place for the rest of their lives. It was funny how they had all connected to Cheryl. It was like having Marci, but different, because Cheryl was definitely her own person. It would be nice to stay in touch with her.
Luna twisted her arms to reach the back zipper of her dress, and had it half unzipped when someone rang her doorbell.

She froze, sudden panic freezing her veins. Oh, my God. He was out there, she knew it. He had followed her home. He knew she was here alone.
She edged toward the phone, as if he could see through the door and know what she was doing. Would he break it down? He had broken into Jaine's house, by knocking out a pane of glass, but was he strong enough to break down a door? She had never even thought to find out if her door was reinforced, or a simple wooden door.
"Luna?" The voice was puzzled, low. "It's Leah. Leah Street. Are you okay?"
"Leah?" she said weakly, relief making her dizzy. She bent over at the waist, breathing deeply to fight off the shakes. "I tried to catch up with you, but you were in too much of a hurry," Leah called.
Yes, she had been. She had been desperate to get home and out of those shoes.
"Just a minute, I was about to change clothes." Why on earth was Leah here? she wondered as she crossed to the door and unchained it. Before she unlocked it, however, she put her eye to the peephole to make certain it was Leah, though she knew she had recognized the voice.
It was Leah, looking sad and tired, and suddenly Luna felt guilty about the way they had laughed at her at the funeral. She couldn't imagine why Leah wanted to talk to her, they had never exchanged more than a few words in passing, but she unlocked the door. "Come in," she invited. "It was miserably hot at the service, wasn't it? Would you like something cold to drink?"
"Yes, please," Leah said. She was carrying a large shoulder bag, and she eased its weight off her shoulder, clutching it in her arms like it was a baby.
As Luna turned to go to the kitchen, she noticed how Leah's blond hair glistened in the light. She checked, a tiny frown knitting her brow, and started to turn back. She was too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jaine woke up at ten-thirty Sunday morning. She woke up then only because the phone was ringing. She started to fumble for the receiver, remembered this was Sam's house, and snuggled back into the pillow. So what if it was on her side of the bed? His phone, his responsibility. He stirred beside her, all heat and hardness and musky male scent.

"Get the phone, will you?" he said sleepily. "It's for you," she mumbled.

"How d'you know?"

"It's your phone." She hated having to point out the obvious.

Muttering something under his breath, he heaved himself up on one elbow and leaned over her to reach the phone, squashing her into the mattress.

"Yeah," he said. "Donovan."

"Yeah," he said again, after a short pause. "She's here." He dropped the phone onto the pillow in front of her and smirked. "It's Shelley."

She thought a few swear words, but didn't say them. Sam still hadn't made her pay for the "son of a bitch" she'd yelled when she hit her head on the table, and she didn't want to remind him. Cradling the phone to her ear, she said, "Hello," as Sam lay down beside her again. "Long night?" Shelley asked sarcastically.

"About twelve, thirteen hours. The usual for this time of year."

A hard, warm body pressed against her back, and a hard, warm hand smoothed over her belly on a slow sweep up to her breasts. Something else that was hard and warm prodded her bottom.

"Ha, ha," said Shelley. "You have to come get this cat." She didn't sound like the point was negotiable. "BooBoo? Why?" Like she didn't know. Sam was rubbing her nipples, and she put her hand over his to still his fingers. She needed to concentrate, or she might get stuck with BooBoo again.

"He's destroying my furniture! He's always seemed like such a sweet cat, but he's a destructive demon!"

"He's just upset at being in a strange place." Deprived of her nipples, Sam moved his hand down to another interesting spot. She clamped her legs together to halt the slide of his fingers.

"He isn't nearly as upset as I am!" Shelley sounded more than upset; she sounded outraged. "Look, I can't take care of planning your wedding when I have to watch this demon cat every second of the day."

"Do you want to risk him getting killed? Do you want to tell Mom that you let a psycho nutcase killer mutilate her cat because you care more about your furniture than you do her feelings?" Boy, that was good, if she did say so herself. Masterful.
Shelley was breathing hard. "You fight dirty" she complained.
Sam tugged his hand free from the clamp of her thighs and chose another angle of attack: her rear guard. That thought-destroying hand stroked her bottom, then slid on down and around, finding just what he wanted and working two long fingers into her. She gasped and almost dropped the phone.
Shelley also chose another angle of attack. "You aren't even staying at your house, you're staying with Sam. BooBoo will be all right there."
Oh, no. She couldn't concentrate. His fingers were big and rough, and they were driving her out of her mind. It was his revenge for making him answer the phone, but if he didn't stop it he was going to have an outraged cat shredding everything in his house.
"Just pet him a lot," she managed to gasp. "He'll settle down." Yeah, in a couple of weeks. "He especially likes to have his ears scratched."
"Come get him."
"Shel, I can't just bring a cat into someone else's house!"
"Sure you can. Sam would put up with a herd of maniac demon cats just to get in your pants. Use your power now, while it lasts! In a few months he won't even bother to shave before crawling into bed with you."
Great. Shelley was trying to turn this into a male-female power issue. Sam's knuckle rubbed over her clitoris, and she almost mewed. She managed to say, "I can't," though she wasn't certain to whom she was saying it, Sam or Shelley.
Sam said, "Yes, you can," in a low, smoky voice, and Shelley shrieked in her ear, "Oh, my God, you're doing it right now, aren't you? I heard him! You're talking to me on the phone while Sam is boinking you!"
"No, no," Jaine babbled, and Sam promptly made a liar out of her by sliding out his fingers and replacing them with a hard thrust of his full-grown morning erection. She bit her lip, but a strangled sound escaped anyway.
"I can see I'm wasting my time talking to you now," Shelley said. "I'll call again when you aren't occupied. How long does it usually take him? Five minutes? Ten?" Now she wanted an appointment. Since biting her lip hadn't

worked, Jaine tried biting the pillow. Desperately reaching for a moment of control, just a moment, she managed to say, "A couple of hours."
"Two hours!" Shelley was shrieking again. She paused. "Does he have any brothers?"
"F-four."
"Man!" There was another pause as Shelley evidently weighed the advantages and disadvantages of dumping Al in favor of a Donovan. She finally sighed. "I'm going to have to rethink my strategy. You'd probably let BooBoo tear my house down, brick by brick, before you'd do anything to upset that particular applecart, wouldn't you?"
"You got it," Jaine agreed, her eyes closing. Sam shifted position, getting to his knees and straddling her right leg, with her left one hooked over his arm. Forking her that way, his penetration was deep and straight in, and his left thigh rubbed right where it did the most good. She had to bite the pillow again.
"Okay, I'll let you go." Shelley sounded defeated. "I tried."
"Bye," Jaine said thickly, and fumbled to return the phone to its hook, but couldn't quite reach it. Sam leaned forward to do the honors, and the movement pushed him so deeply inside her that she shrieked and climaxed. When she could speak, she pushed her hair out of her face and said, "You're evil." She was panting and weak, unable to do anything except lie there.
"No, babe, I'm good," he countered, and proved it. When he was lying beside her, sweaty and limp, he said sleepily, "I gather we almost got BooBoo back."
"Yeah, and you weren't helping matters," she grumbled. "She knew what you were doing, too. I'll probably never live this down."
The phone rang again. Jaine said, "If it's Shelley, I'm not here."
"Like she'll believe that," he said as he groped for the receiver.
"I don't care what she believes, as long as I don't have to talk to her right now."
"Hello," he said. "Yeah, she's here."
He extended the phone, and she took it, glaring at him. He mouthed, "Cheryl," and she sighed with relief. "Hi, Cheryl."
"Hi. Listen, I've been trying to call Luna. I have some photos of Marci that she wanted to have copied, and I wanted her address to mail them to her. I was just there yesterday, but who pays attention to street signs and

numbers? Anyway, she isn't answering her phone, so do you have the address?"
Jaine sat upright, a chill roughening her bare skin. "She isn't answering? How long have you been trying to call?" "Since eight, I guess. About three hours." Cheryl suddenly got it, and said, "Oh, God."
Sam was out of bed, pulling on his pants. "Who?" he asked sharply, and turned on his cell phone. "Luna," Jaine answered, her throat tight. "Listen, Cheryl, maybe it's nothing. Maybe she went to church, or out to breakfast with Shamal. Maybe she's with him. I'll check and have her call you when I find her. Okay?" Sam punched out numbers on the cell phone as he pulled a clean shirt out of the closet and shrugged into it. Carrying his socks and shoes, he left the bedroom, talking so quietly into the little phone she couldn't hear what he was saying.
To Cheryl she said, "Sam's calling some people. He'll find her." She hung up without saying good-bye, then vaulted out of bed and began fumbling for her own clothes. She was shaking, the tremors growing worse by the second. Just a few minutes ago she had been so blissed out, and now this awful terror was making her sick; the contrast was almost paralyzing.
She stumbled into the living room, fastening her jeans, as Sam was going out the door. He was wearing his pistol and his badge. "Wait!" she cried, panicked. "No." He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "You can't go." "Yes I can." Wildly she looked around for her shoes. They were in the bedroom, damn it. "Wait for me!"
"Jaine." It was his cop voice. "No. If anything has happened, you'll only be in the way. You wouldn't be allowed inside, and it's too damn hot to sit out in the truck. Go over to T.J.'s and wait there. I'll call you as soon as I know something."
She was still shaking, and now she was crying, too. No wonder he didn't want her along. She swiped her hand over her face. "P-promise?"
"I promise." His expression softened. "Be careful on the way to T.J.'s. And, babe – don't let anyone in the door, okay?"
She nodded, feeling worse than useless. "Okay."
"I'll call," he said again, and was gone.
Jaine slumped down on the sofa and cried in raw, ragged gulps. She couldn't do this again; she just couldn't. Not Luna. She was so young and beautiful, that bastard couldn't have hurt her. Luna had to be with Shamal; she had been so luminously happy at his sudden turnaround that they were probably

spending every spare moment together. Sam would find her. Shamal's number was unlisted, but cops had ways of getting unlisted numbers. Luna would be with Shamal, and then Jaine would feel silly for panicking this way.
Finally she stopped crying and mopped her face. She had to get to T.J.'s, to wait for Sam's call. She started to the bedroom, then abruptly turned back and locked the front door.
She arrived at T.J.'s twenty minutes later, having done nothing more than brush her teeth and hair and finish dressing. She leaned on the doorbell. "T.J. it's Jaine! Hurry!"
She heard running footsteps, the cocker spaniel barking; then the door was wrenched open and T.J. 's worried face swam before her. "What's wrong?" T.J. asked, jerking her inside the door, but Jaine couldn't tell her; she couldn't get the words out. Still barking hysterically, the cocker spaniel, Trilby, jumped up on their legs.
"Trilby, hush!" T.J. said. Her chin trembled, and she swallowed. "Luna?" Jaine nodded, still unable to talk. T.J. put her hand over her mouth as awful, gut-wrenching cries tore from her throat, and she fell back against the wall.
"No, no!" Jaine managed to say, putting her arms around T.J. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean – " She took a deep breath. "We don't know yet. Sam's on his way over there, and he's going to call here when he knows – "
"What's going on?" Galan asked in alarm, stepping into the foyer. A section of the Sunday paper was in his hand. Trilby ran over to him, her little stump of a tail wagging ferociously.
That damn shaking had started again. Jaine tried to control it. "Luna's missing. Cheryl hasn't been able to get her on the phone."
"So she's gone grocery shopping," Galan said, shrugging. T.J. gave him a look of such fury it should have scorched his skin. "He thinks we're hysterical and Marci was lolled by some doper."
"That makes a lot more sense than the bunch of you being stalked by a maniac," he shot back. "Stop dramatizing everything."
"If we're dramatizing it," Jaine said, "so are the police." Then she bit her lip. She didn't want to get in the middle of a domestic dispute. T.J. and Galan had enough trouble without her adding to it.
Galan shrugged again. "T.J. said you're marrying a cop, so he's probably humoring you. Come on, pooch." He turned and walked back to his den and his newspaper, Trilby scampering around his feet.

"Forget him," T.J. said. "Tell me what happened." Jaine related what Cheryl had said and the time frame. T.J. glanced at the clock; it was now just after noon. "Four hours, at least. She isn't grocery shopping. Has anyone called Shamal?"
"His number's unlisted, but Sam will take care of it." They went into the kitchen, where T.J. had been reading. Her open book lay in the alcove. T.J. put on a pot of coffee. They were each on their second cup, the cordless phone at T.J.'s elbow, when it finally rang. She snatched it up. "Sam?"
She listened for a moment, and watching her face, Jaine felt the hope die out of her. T.J. looked stunned, all color draining from her. Her lips moved, but no sound emerged. Jaine grabbed the phone. "Sam? Tell me."
His voice was heavy. "Baby, I'm sorry It looks like it happened last night, maybe as soon as she got home from the funeral."
T.J. laid her head on the table, weeping. Jaine reached to touch her shoulder, trying to offer comfort, but she could feel herself folding in, giving in to the grief, and she didn't know if she had any comfort to offer.
"Stay there," Sam said. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be there when I can get free. This isn't my jurisdiction, but we're all putting our heads together. It may be several hours, but don't go anywhere," he repeated.
"Okay," Jaine whispered, and hung up.
Galan came to the door and stood hovering, staring at T.J. as if he hoped she was still overreacting, but something in his face said that this time he knew better. He was pale. "What?" he croaked.
"That was Sam," Jaine said. "Luna's dead." Then her fragile control broke, and it was a long time before she could do anything except weep and hold on to T.J. It was sunset before Sam arrived. He looked tired and angry. He introduced himself to Galan, because neither Jaine nor T.J. thought to.
"You were at the funeral," Galan said suddenly, his gaze sharpening.
Sam nodded. "A Sterling Heights detective was, too. We hoped we could spot him, but he's either too slick or he wasn't there."
Galan glanced at his wife. T.J. was sitting quietly, absently stroking the black-and-white cocker spaniel. Yesterday Galan's gaze had been remote, but there was nothing remote about the way he was watching her now.
"Someone's really after them. It's so damn hard to believe."
"Believe it," Sam said briefly, his guts twisting with fury as he remembered what had been done to Luna. She had suffered the same vicious, personal attack, her face battered beyond recognition, the multiple stab wounds, the

sexual abuse. Unlike Marci, she had still been alive when he stabbed her; the apartment floor was awash in blood. Her clothes had also been shredded, just like Jaine's. When he thought how close Jaine had come to dying, what she would have suffered if she had been at home on Wednesday night, he could barely contain his rage. "Did you get in touch with her parents?" Jaine asked hoarsely. They lived in Toledo, so they weren't far away. "Yes, they're already here," Sam said. He sat down and put his arms around her, cradling her head on his shoulder.

His pager beeped. He reached for his belt and silenced it, then glanced at the number and cursed, rubbing his face. "I have to go."

"Jaine can stay here," T.J. said, before he could ask. "I don't have any clothes," Jaine said, but she wasn't protesting, just stating a problem.

"I'll drive you home," Galan said. "T.J. will go, too. You can pack whatever you need, stay as long as you want." Sam nodded in approval. "I'll call," he said as he went out the door.

Corin rocked back and forth. He couldn't sleep, couldn't sleep, couldn't sleep. He hummed to himself, the way he had done when he was little, but the magic song didn't work. He wondered when it had stopped working. He didn't remember.

The bitch in red was dead. Mother was so pleased. Two down and two to go.

He felt good. For the first time in his life, he was pleasing Mother. Nothing he had ever done before had been good enough for her because he had always been flawed, no matter how hard she tried to make him perfect. He was doing this right, though; she was very pleased. He was ridding the world of the whoring bitches, one by one by one. No. Too many "ones". He hadn't done three yet. He had tried, but one hadn't been at home.

He remembered seeing her at the funeral, though. She had laughed. Or was it the other one? He felt confused, because the faces kept swimming in his memory. One shouldn't laugh at funerals. It was very hurtful to the bereaved.

But which one had laughed? Why couldn't he remember? It didn't matter, he thought to himself, and felt better. They both had to die, and then it wouldn't matter which one had laughed, or which one was "Ms. C." It wouldn't matter, because finally – finally – Mother would be happy and she would never, never hurt him again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

On Monday morning, Sam sat in the Warren R D. with his head propped on his hands, wading through the Hammerstead files again and again. The NCIC computers hadn't given them a hit on any of the names, so he and Bernsen were simply reading and rereading, looking for something that would click in their heads and give them the clue they needed.

It was there; Sam knew it was. They just hadn't found it yet. He suspected he already knew what it was, because of that nagging gut feeling he had missed something. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there, and sooner or later the bell would chime. He just hoped it was sooner, like in the next minute.

This guy hated women. He wouldn't get along with them, wouldn't like working with them. There might be a note in his file about a complaint lodged by someone, maybe even a harassment charge. Something like that should have jumped out at them on the first once-over, but maybe the complaint had been worded in such a way that the charge wasn't actually spelled out.

Neither Jaine nor T.J. was working today. They were still together, though they had moved from T.J.'s house to Shelley's, along with that yappy little cocker spaniel that sounded the alarm at any kind of intrusion, whether it was a bird on the patio or someone coming up the walk. He had been afraid Jaine would want to spend the day at home, since her new alarm system had been installed – under the eagle eye of Mrs. Kulavich, who was taking her guardian duties seriously – on Saturday while they were attending Marci's funeral. An alarm system was fine, but it wouldn't stop a determined killer. But Jaine hadn't wanted to be alone. She and T.J. were clinging together, shocked and dazed at what had happened to their tight little circle of friends. There was no doubt in anyone's mind now that the List was what had triggered the violence, and the area police departments were putting together a task force to coordinate and work the cases, since no two of the friends lived in the same jurisdiction.

The national news organizations had been all over the story. "Who is killing the Ladies of the List?" one newscaster had intoned. "The Detroit area has been shocked by the violent murders of two of the women who authored the humorous and controversial Mr. Perfect List that took the nation by storm a

couple of weeks ago." Reporters were camped outside Hammerstead again, wanting to interview anyone who was acquainted with the two victims. The task force had arranged to get copies of any interview tapes the reporters might make, in case their guy gave in to his ego and wanted to see himself on national television, mourning his two "friends". Reporters had also been at Jaine's house, but left when they discovered no one was at home. He imagined they had checked out T.J.'s, too, which was why he had called Shelley and told her to ask Jaine and T.J. to spend the day with her. Shelley had been more than glad to comply. He figured that the snoops would talk to people who knew people and eventually find Shelley, but for today at least Jaine and T.J. weren't being bothered.

Sam rubbed his eyes. He had gotten maybe two hours sleep. The page last night had been to the scene of another homicide, a teenage boy. That had quickly wrapped up with the arrest of the kid's new girlfriend's ex, who had taken it personally that the kid had told him to eat shit and die. The paperwork, however, was always a bitch. Where was the report on the shoe tread they had found in Jaine's house? Getting an answer usually didn't take this long. He searched his desk, but no one had laid it there in his absence. Maybe it had gone to Bernsen, since they had cross-referenced each other on all the paperwork. Before Luna's death, not everyone had been convinced the break-in at Jaine's house had anything to do with Marci's murder, but he and Bernsen had been. Now, of course, there was no doubt in anyone's mind. He called Roger. "Did the report on that shoe tread come to you?"

"Haven't seen it. You mean you don't have it yet?"

"Not yet. The lab must have lost it. I'll shoot them another request." Damn it, he thought as he hung up. The one thing they didn't need was a delay. Maybe the shoe print wasn't important, but maybe the shoe was a rare one, so unusual that someone at Hammerstead would say, "Oh, yeah, so-and-so has a pair. Paid a fortune for them." He went back to the files, frustrated almost to the point of breaking something. It was right here under his nose; he knew it. All he had to do was figure it out. Galan left work early. Yesterday's events had left him so shaken he couldn't concentrate. All he wanted was to pick up T.J. at Jaine's sister's house and take her home where he could watch over her.

He didn't know how they had lost touch with each other. No – he knew, all right. The innocent flirting at work with Xandrea Conaway had started to

seem important, and maybe it had never been so innocent. When had he started comparing everything T.J. and everything she said and did, to Xandrea, who was always dressed up and never nagged?
Of course T.J. wasn't dressed up at home, he realized. Neither was he. That was what homes were for, relaxing and being comfortable. So what if she complained when he didn't take out the garbage? He complained if she left her makeup scattered all over the vanity. People who lived together inevitably got on each other's nerves sometimes. That was part of being married.
He had loved T.J. since he was fourteen years old. How had he lost sight of that, and of what they had together? Why had it taken the terror of realizing a killer actually was stalking T.J. and her friends for him to realize it would kill him to lose her?
He didn't know how he could make it up to her. He didn't know if she would even let him. For the past week or so, since she had guessed he was infatuated with Xandrea, she had pulled away from him. Maybe she believed he'd actually been unfaithful to her, though he had never let the situation between him and Xandrea get so far out of hand. They had kissed, yes, but nothing more.
He tried to imagine how he would feel if another man kissed T.J. and felt sick to his stomach. Maybe kisses weren't so forgivable.
He would crawl on his belly to her if she would smile at him again like he mattered to her.
Jaine's sister lived in a big, two-story Colonial in St. Clair Shores. The doors were down on the triple-bay garage, but Sam Donovan's red muscle-truck was parked in the driveway. He parked beside it and went up the curving walk to the double front doors, where he rang the bell and waited.
Donovan answered the door. Galan noticed Sam was still wearing his pistol. If he had one, he thought, he would probably wear it too, legal or not.
"How are they?" he asked softly, stepping inside. "Tired. Still in shock. Shelley said they slept off and on all day, so I guess they didn't get much sleep last night." Galan shook his head. "They sat up talking most of the night. Funny; they didn't talk much about the bastard who did this, or how close Jaine came the other night when he broke into her house. They just talked about Luna and Marci."
"It's like losing two family members so close together. It'll take them a while to recover from this." Sam dealt with grief on a regular basis; he

knew Jaine would recover, because that kick-ass spirit of hers just wouldn't stay down, but he also knew it could take weeks, maybe even months, before the shadow of pain left her eyes. In part of the house, things were normal. Shelley's husband, Al, watched television. Their teenage daughter, Stefanie, was upstairs on the phone, while eleven-year-old Nicholas played video games on the computer. The women had gathered in the kitchen – why was it always the kitchen? – to talk and drink diet sodas and eat whatever comfort food Shelley had on hand.

The ravages of grief had left both Jaine and T.J. pale, but they were dry-eyed. T.J. looked startled to see her husband.

"What are you doing here?" She didn't sound particularly glad to see him.

"I wanted to be with you," he replied. "I know you're tired, so I didn't want you to have to wait until midnight to go home. Not to mention Shelley and her family probably go to bed a lot earlier than that."

Shelley waved her hand dismissively. "Don't worry about that. We usually stay up late while the kids are out of school."

"What about the reporters?" T.J. asked. "We won't have any peace if they're still swarming the place."

"I doubt they would hang around forever," Sam said. "They'd like an interview, yeah, but they can get statements from other people. More than likely, since you weren't at home today, they'll call instead of camping out in your yard."

"Then I would like to go home," T.J. said, standing. She hugged Shelley. "Thanks a million. You were a lifesaver today."

Shelley returned the hug. "Any time. Come back tomorrow, if you don't go to work. Whatever you do, don't stay home alone!"

"Thanks. I may take you up on it, but… I think I'll go to work tomorrow. Getting back into the routine will help take my mind off things."

Jaine said, "I think Sam and I will go home, too. He looks as exhausted as I feel."

"Are you going to work tomorrow?" T.J. asked. "I don't know. Maybe. I'll call and let you know." "Trilby," T.J. called, and the dog jumped up, bright eyes sparkling and her entire body wagging in enthusiasm. "C'mon, girl, let's go home."

Trilby barked and scampered around T.J.'s legs. Galan leaned down to pet her, and she licked his hand. "Where's your leash?" he asked, and she

dashed off to find it. Usually the dog's antics could make T.J. laugh, but tonight she couldn't manage even a smile.
On the drive home, T.J. sat staring out the window. "You didn't have to leave work early," she said. "I'm fine."
"I wanted to be with you," he repeated, and drew a deep breath. He would prefer to have this talk once they were home, where he could put his arms around her, but maybe now was the best time. At least she couldn't walk away. "I'm sorry," he said softly.
She didn't glance at him. "For what?"
"For being an asshole; for being a stupid asshole. I love you more than anything or anyone else on earth, and I can't stand the thought of losing you."
"What about your girlfriend?" She made the word sound so immature, as if he were a horny teenager who couldn't see past the moment.
He winced. "I know you don't believe me, but I swear I haven't been that stupid."
"Exactly how stupid have you been?"
She had never let him get away with anything, he remembered. Even in high school, T.J. would pin him to the wall if he tried to evade telling her whatever she wanted to know.
Keeping his eyes on the road, because he was afraid to look at her, he said, "Flirting stupid. And kissing stupid. But no more than that. Not ever."
"Not even groping?" Her tone said she didn't believe him. "Not ever," he repeated firmly. "I… Damn it, T.J. it didn't feel right, and I don't mean anything physical. She wasn't you. I don't know; maybe I let my ego get the best of me, because I kind of liked the thrill, but it was wrong and I knew it."
"Who exactly is 'she'?" T.J. asked.
Saying her name took every ounce of courage he had, because putting an actual name to the woman personalized it, made it real. "Xandrea Conaway."
"Have I met her?"
Galan shook his head, then realized she still wasn't looking at him. "No, I don't think so."
"Xandrea," she repeated. "She sounds like a mixed drink." He knew better than to say anything the least bit nice about Xandrea. Instead he said, "I do love you. Yesterday when you found out about Luna and I realized – " His

voice cracked. He had to swallow before he could continue. "When I realized you're in danger, it was like a slap in the face."
"Being hunted by a psycho killer is kind of an attention getter," she said dryly.
"Yeah." He decided to go for broke and asked, "Will you give me another chance?"
"I don't know," she said, and his heart sank. "I told you I wouldn't be hasty or do anything drastic, and I won't. My attention is a little splintered right now, so I think we should just shelve this discussion for a while." Okay, he thought. That was a swing and a miss, but he hadn't struck out yet.
"May I sleep with you?"
"You mean have sex?"
"No. I mean sleep with you. In our bed. I'd like to make love with you, too, but if you won't do that, will you at least let me sleep with you?"
She thought about it for so long that he began to think he'd swung at and missed another ball. Finally she said, "Okay."
He heaved a sigh of relief. She wasn't brimming over with enthusiasm, but she wasn't kicking him out, either. It was a chance. They had a lot of years together, and that was holding them together when couples without much of a history might already have called it quits. He couldn't expect to undo in one night the accumulated damage he had wrought over the past two years. But she had hung in there with him, so he wasn't going to quit now, no matter how surly she got, or how long it took him to make her believe he loved her. The most important thing was keeping her alive, even if she walked out on him afterward. He didn't know if he could stand losing her, but he knew he sure as hell couldn't stand burying her.
"I'm so tired," Jaine said. "You must be exhausted."
"I've been running on coffee all day long," Sam replied. "The jolt is wearing off, though. Want to make it an early night?"
She yawned. "I don't think I have a choice. I doubt I could stay awake if I tried." She rubbed her forehead. "I've had a splitting headache all day, and nothing I've taken has been able to touch it."
"Damn," he said mildly. "We aren't even married yet, and already you're having headaches."
That earned a faint smile.
"Did Shelley whip out a giant cucumber today?" The smile grew a little, though it was tinged with sadness. "Yeah. Every time we closed our eyes,

she plastered us with cucumber slices. I don't know if they work, but they feel good." She paused. "Did you make any progress today?"
He grunted in disgust. "All I've done is tread water. The computer didn't turn up anything, so Bernsen and I have been going over the files to see if we missed something. Do you remember any harassment complaints, or any trouble between two employees?"
"I remember when Sada Whited caught her husband fooling around with Emily Hearst and they had a brawl in the parking lot, but I doubt that's what you're looking for." She yawned again. "Harassment complaints, huh? I can't remember any. Bennett Trotter probably should have a sexual harassment complaint filed against him every day, but I don't think anyone has. And he has dark hair."
"We haven't ruled out brunettes. We haven't ruled out anyone. Marci could have picked up that blond hair from someone she brushed against in the grocery store. Tell me more about Bennett Trotter."
"He's a jerk, always making comments that he thinks are sexy, but he's the only one who thinks they are. You know the type."
He did. He wondered if Bennett Trotter could provide proof of his whereabouts on the two days in question. "There are several people whom no one likes," Jaine continued. "My boss, Ashford de Wynter, is one. He was in a real snit over the List, until the company decided to go with the free publicity, then he mellowed out." Sam added Ashford de Wynter to his mental list. "Anyone else?"
"I don't know everyone. Let's see. No one likes Leah Street, but I don't guess she counts."
The name was familiar. It took him only a second to place it. "She's the drama queen."
"And a pain in the rear. I'm glad she's not in my department. T.J. has to put up with her every day."
"Anyone else besides Trotter and de Wynter?"
"No one that sticks out. I remember a guy named Gary or something like that who was really bent out of shape when the List first came out, because some of the women were ragging him about it, but he wasn't violent about it, just sulky."
"Can you find out his name for certain?"
"Sure. Dominica Flores was one of the women needling him. I'll call her in the morning."

It was strange how altered everything was, T.J. thought the next morning as she entered Hammerstead. Marci and Luna weren't here. They would never be here again. As difficult to accept as Marci's death was, Luna's was impossible. T.J. still couldn't get her mind around it. Luna had been so damn bright and sweet, how could anyone want to kill her over a stupid list?

The killer was here in this building, she thought. She might walk past him in the hallway. Maybe coming to work wasn't the smartest thing to do, but in a weird way she had wanted to be here because he was here. Maybe he would say something, though she knew that possibility was remote. Maybe she would catch an expression on his face – something, anything, that would help them figure out who he was. She wasn't any kind of Sherlock Holmes, but she wasn't stupid, either.

Jaine had always been the most intrepid of their group, but T.J. figured she could be a little daring, too. Coming to work today felt daring. Jaine wasn't coming in; the headache she'd had yesterday hadn't let up, and she was spending another day with Shelley, being pampered. T.J. had to admit she also liked the idea of Galan worrying about her. It was silly, maybe even stupid, to come to work when she knew he was alarmed about it, but he had taken her for granted for so long that his present intense concern was like balm to her hurt feelings. He had surprised her last night with what he said. Maybe they could make it together. She wasn't going to rush into accepting his apology any more than she had rushed into a divorce when their marriage first started crumbling, but she did love him, and for the first time in a long while, she thought he might love her, too.

Luna and Shamal had finally worked out their differences, too, right before she had been killed. She had had two days of happiness with him. Two days, when she should have had a lifetime.

T.J. felt a sudden chill. Did she herself have only two days with Galan, to work on their fragile truce? No. The killer was not going to get to her, the way he had to Marci and Luna. She couldn't imagine how Luna could have let him into her apartment the way the police thought. Maybe he had already been inside, waiting for her. Sam said they hadn't found any sign of forced entry, but maybe he could pick locks or something. Maybe he had somehow gotten his hands on a key. She didn't know how he could have, but he had to have gotten in somehow. If Galan was at work when she got home this afternoon, she thought, she wasn't going inside the house alone.

She would get a neighbor to walk through the house with her. And she had Trilby for added security; nothing got past the little dog. Cockers were very protective of their families. Sometimes her barking was a nuisance, but now T.J. was thankful she was so alert.

Leah Street looked up in surprise when T.J. entered the office. "I didn't expect you today," she said. T.J. hid her own surprise. Leah's clothing was never flattering, but she was at least neat. Today she looked as if she had grabbed something off the floor. She wore a skirt and blouse, but the skirt sagged on one side and the hem of her slip showed. T.J. hadn't realized anyone still wore slips when they didn't have to, especially in the late-summer heat. Leah's blouse was wrinkled, and there was a stain on the front. Even her hair, which was usually so immaculate, looked as if she hadn't combed it before coming to work.

Realizing Leah was watching her expectantly, T.J. pulled her mind back to what had been said.

"I thought working would help. You know, the routine of it."

"Routine." Leah nodded, as if the word was somehow profound.

Weird. But then, Leah had always been a couple of french fries short of a Happy Meal. Nothing drastic, just a little… off.

From what T.J. could tell, Leah was really off today, occupying her own little world. She hummed, she filed her nails, she answered a few calls. She sounded rational, at least, if not very effective. "I don't know, I'll get back to you," seemed to be her phrase of the day.

A little after nine she disappeared, and came back ten minutes later with dirt stains on her blouse. Coming over to T.J. she leaned down and whispered, "I'm having a problem getting to some files. Will you help me move some boxes?"

What files? What boxes? Almost all their files were on computer. T.J. started to ask what she was talking about, but Leah gave a quick, embarrassed look around the office as if she was in some difficulty that had nothing to do with files, and didn't want the others to know. Why me? T.J. thought, but sighed and said, "Sure." She followed Leah to the elevator.

"Where are these files?" she asked.

"Downstairs. In the Storage room."

"I didn't know anything was actually stored in 'Storage'," T.J. joked, but Leah didn't seem to get it. "Of course there is," she said, sounding bewildered. The elevator was empty, and they didn't meet anyone in the first

floor hallway, which wasn't surprising considering the time of morning. Everyone was in his or her office, the computer nerds were probably having a spitball war, and it wasn't time yet for the morning coffee break, when people started moving around more.

They went down the narrow, puke green hallway, and Leah opened the door marked "Storage," stepping aside for T.J. to enter ahead of her. T.J. wrinkled her nose at the smell, dank and sour, as if no one had been in there for quite a while. It was also dark.

"Where's the light switch?" she asked, not stepping inside. Something hard hit her in the back, shoving her forward into the dark, smelly room. T.J. sprawled on the rough concrete floor, scraping skin off her hands and knees. Sudden horrified realization exploded in her mind, and she managed to roll to the side and scramble to her feet as a long metal pipe came whistling down.

She screamed, or she thought she did. She wasn't certain, because her heartbeat was thunderous in her ears and she couldn't hear anything else. She tried to grab the pipe, and wrestled briefly for possession of it. But Leah was strong, very strong, and with a hard shove knocked T.J. off her feet again.

T.J. heard that whistling noise again; then lights exploded in her head and she didn't hear anything else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A door opened out in the hallway. Corin froze, listening to the heavy footsteps as they crossed the hall; then there was the sound of another door opening and closing. It was someone in maintenance, he realized. If the man had looked in this direction and seen the open door of the storage room, he would certainly have come to investigate.

Corin was agonized. Why hadn't he thought of the possibility that one of the maintenance workers could be nearby? He should have; he hadn't been careful enough, and Mother would be angry.

He looked at the woman lying on the dirty concrete floor, barely visible in the light coming through the open door of the storage room. Was she breathing? He couldn't tell, and he was afraid to make any noise now.

He hadn't done this right at all. He hadn't planned well, and that frightened him, because when he didn't do something perfectly, Mother was enraged. He had to please her, had to think of something he could do, some way he could make up for his mistakes.

The other one. The one with the smart mouth. He had made a mistake with her, too, but it wasn't his fault she hadn't been at home, was it? Would Mother understand? No. Mother never accepted excuses.

He would have to go back and get it right.

But what would he do if she wasn't at home, again? She wasn't here; he knew, because he had checked. Where could she be?

He would find her. He knew who her parents were and where they lived, he knew the names of her brother and sister, and their addresses. He knew a lot of things about her. He knew a lot of things about everyone who worked here, because he loved reading their private files. He could write down their social security numbers and dates of birth and find out all sorts of things about them on his computer at home.

She was the last one. He couldn't wait. He needed to find her now, needed to finish the task Mother had given him. Very quietly he laid down the pipe beside the unmoving woman, and crept out of the storage room. He closed the door as silently as possible, then tiptoed away. Detective Wayne Satran stopped by Sam's desk with a fax. "Here's the report on the shoe print you've been waiting for." He dropped the fax on top of a pile of reports and continued to his own desk.

Sam picked up the report and read the first line: "The tread does not match _ "
What the hell? All crime labs had books or databases on sneaker tread patterns, updated on a regular basis. Sometimes a manufacturer wouldn't get around to sending in an update whenever they changed their styles or refused to do so for reasons of their own. When that happened, usually a lab would simply buy a pair of the shoes in question to get the pattern.
Maybe the shoes had been bought in another country. Maybe they were an obscure off-brand, or maybe the guy was slick enough to have used a knife to change the tread pattern. He didn't think so, though. This was no organized killer; this guy operated on emotion and opportunity. He started to toss the report, but realized it was rather wordy for a simple "does not match." He couldn't afford to overlook a single detail, couldn't let his sense of urgency distract him. He began reading again. "The tread does not match that of any athletic shoe for men. The pattern does, however, match an exclusive style that is manufactured only for women. The section of tread pattern available is insufficient for determining exact size, but indicates probable size between eight and ten."
A woman's shoe? The guy was wearing women's shoes? Or… the guy was a woman.
"Son of a bitch!" Sam said between his teeth, lunging for the phone and punching in Bernsen's number. When Roger answered, he said, "I got the report back on the shoe. It's a woman's."
There was dead silence for a moment; then Roger said, "You're shitting me." He sounded as appalled as Sam felt. "We excluded the female employees from the NCIC search. We hog-tied ourselves. We have to go through their files, too."
"You're telling me a woman – " Roger fell silent, and Sam knew he was thinking of the things that had been done to Marci's body, and Luna's. "Jesus."
"Now we know why Luna opened her door. It didn't make sense that she would. But she was on guard against a man, not a woman." That feeling of having missed something was growing stronger.
A woman. Think of a blond woman. Immediately he flashed to Marci's funeral, and the tall blond woman who had broken down and wept in Cheryl's arms. A drama queen, T.J. had said, but Jaine had a different take on it: The wheel's still going around, but her hamster's dead. She thought

the woman had a loose screw, that there was something wrong there. Damn it! She had even mentioned her when he asked about employees who had experienced difficulty getting along with others at work. T.J. had said something else, something that hadn't clicked at the time: the woman was in her department, human resources. The woman had access to everything, all the information in all the files, including private phone numbers and the names and addresses of relatives to call in case of an emergency.

That was it. That was what had been nagging at him. Laurence Strawn had specifically told him the personnel files weren't on computers with Internet connections; it was impossible to hack into them. Whoever had called T.J.'s cell phone number had gotten it from her file, but that file, without specific authorization, was accessible only to those in H.R.

What was her name? What was her damn name?

He reached for the phone to call Jaine, but the name popped into his head before he could dial Shelley's number: Street. Leah Street.

He dialed Bernsen instead. "Leah Street," he rasped when Roger answered. "She's the one who was crying all over Marci's sister at the funeral."

"The blonde," Roger said. "Shit! She fit the profile, too." Right down to the ground, Sam thought. The nervousness, the excessive emotion, the inability to stay in the background.

"I've got the file here," Roger said. "There are several complaints about her attitude. She didn't get along with people. God, this is classic. We'll bring her in for questioning, see what we can shake loose."

"She'll be at work," Sam said, and alarm clawed his gut. "T.J. went to work today. They're in the same department, Human Resources."

"Get on the phone to T.J." Roger said. "I'm on my way." Sam quickly looked up the number at Hammerstead. An automated answering message picked up on the first ring, and he ground his teeth. He had to listen until the recording gave the appropriate extension for Human Resources, which took valuable time. Damn it! Why didn't companies use real people to answer the phone? Messages were cheaper, but in an emergency the delay could cause real trouble.

Finally the recorded message gave the extension he wanted, and he punched it in. A harried voice picked up on the fourth ring. "Human Resources, Fallon speaking."

"T.J. Yother, please."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Yother has stepped out of the office."

"How long has she been gone?" he asked sharply. Fallon wasn't a pushover.
"Who is this?" she asked just as sharply.
"Detective Donovan. It's important I find her. Listen to me: is Leah Street there?"
"Why, no." Fallon's tone had changed. She was a lot more cooperative now. "She and T.J. left together about half an hour ago, I guess. The phones have been ringing like crazy and with both of them gone we've been short-handed. They – "
Sam interrupted, "If T.J. returns, tell her to call me immediately, Detective Sam Donovan." He gave the number. He thought about alerting Fallon to the situation but quickly decided against it; if Leah hadn't bolted, he didn't want to alarm her. "Can you switch me to Mr. Strawn's office?" Only Laurence Strawn had the authority to do what he wanted.
"Yes – sure. Of course." She paused. "Do you want me to?"
Sam closed his eyes and bit back a raw curse. "Yes, please."
"Okay. Hold on."
A series of electronic tones sounded in his ear, then the smooth voice of Mr. Strawn's executive secretary. Sam cut into her practiced welcoming spiel. "This is Detective Donovan. Is Mr. Strawn available? It's an emergency."
The two words "detective" and "emergency" got him put through immediately to Strawn. Quickly Sam outlined the situation. "Call the gate and don't let anyone leave, and start searching for T.J. Check every broom closet and bathroom stall. Don't confront Ms. Street, but don't let her leave. Detective Bernsen is on the way."
"Hold on," Strawn said. "I'll call the gate right now." He was back on the line in about thirty seconds. "Ms. Street left the premises about twenty minutes ago."
"Was T.J. with her?"
"No. The guard said she was alone."
"Then find T.J." Sam said urgently. He simultaneously wrote a note and signaled Wayne Satran. Wayne took the note, read it, and jumped into action. "She's somewhere in the building, and maybe she's still alive."
Maybe. Marci had been dead from the first hammer blow. Luna hadn't died immediately, but she had also suffered head trauma so severe she died before she could completely bleed out from the stab wounds. The M.E. estimated, based purely on his personal experience, that she had lived,

maybe, a couple of minutes after the initial attack. The attacks were vicious and overwhelming.
"Should I be discreet about it?" Strawn asked. "At this point, finding her fast is what's most important. Leah Street has already escaped. Alert everyone in the building to assist in the search. When you find her, if she's alive, do whatever you can to help her. If she's dead, try to preserve the scene. Emergency personnel are on the way." That was what Wayne had been doing, getting the wheels rolling. Law enforcement officers from several different jurisdictions were converging on Hammerstead, as well as medics and evidence techs.
"We'll find her," Laurence Strawn said quietly. Sam's instinct, as a cop, was to go to the scene. He stayed where he was, knowing he could do more good right there.
Leah Street's file was on Roger's desk. Sam called the Sterling Heights P.D. and got the detective who answered to look in the file and give him Leah's home address and phone number, plus her social security number. After a minute the detective picked up the phone and said, "I don't find a Leah Street. 'There's a 'Corin Lee Street,' but no 'Leah'."
Corin Lee? Jesus. Sam rubbed his forehead, trying not to wonder what in hell that meant. Was Leah a man or a woman? The names were too similar for coincidence. "Is Corin Street a man or a woman?" he asked. "Let me see." A pause. "Here it is. Female." Maybe, Sam thought. "Okay, thanks. That's the one I want." The detective read off the information Sam had requested. He copied it down, accessed the motor vehicle department and got her license plate number and description of the car.
He then had a BOLO – "be on the lookout" – issued for the car. He didn't know if she was armed; so far, she hadn't used a firearm, but that didn't mean she didn't have one, and she might well have a knife with her. She was unstable as hell, like nitroglycerin; she had to be approached with caution.
Where had she gone? Home? Only a real looney-tunes would – but Leah Street was a real looney-tunes. He got officers en route to her house.
While he was getting everything in motion, he tried not to think about T.J. Had they found her yet? Were they too late?
How much time had lapsed? He checked his watch; ten minutes since he had talked to Strawn, so that was thirty minutes since Leah had left Hammerstead. She could hit the interstate highway system and in half an

hour could be anywhere in the Detroit area, or have crossed over into Windsor, Canada. That would be great; they already had four or five jurisdictions involved, so why not bring in another nation?

He thought about calling Jaine, but decided to wait. He didn't know anything definite about T.J. and couldn't put her through the ordeal of waiting to hear, not so soon after Luna.

Thank God Jaine was at Shelley's house. She wasn't alone, and she was safe, because Leah didn't know who Shelley was or where she lived – Unless Jaine had listed Shelley as her "contact in case of emergency." Because he and Roger had divided the personnel files alphabetically, with Sam taking the top half of the stack of printed sheets and Roger the bottom half, Roger had Leah Street's file – and he had Jaine's. There were more Bs than any other letter of the alphabet, and he hurriedly riffled through the stack. When he found Jaine's file, he jerked the pages out and quickly scanned them. Shelley was listed.

The bottom dropped out of his stomach. He didn't bother with a land line; he dialed Shelley's number on his cell phone and was running when he went out the door. The reporters had done some investigating and tracked down Shelley, looking for Jaine. The constantly ringing phone got on their nerves so much that Shelley had finally turned it off, and they went out on the patio in back to sit by the pool. Sam had been so insistent that Jaine keep her cell phone with her that she took it outside with her and laid it beside her hip on the cushion of the teak chaise.

A large umbrella was angled overhead to block the sun, and Jaine dozed a little while Shelley read. The house was blessedly quiet; knowing Jaine's nerves were raw, Shelley had sent Nicholas to a friend's house to play, and Stefanie had gone to the mall with her friends. A CD of classical piano pieces was playing softly in the background, and Jaine felt her headache finally begin to recede, like a wave pulling back from the shore.

She couldn't think any more about Marci and Luna, not right now. Her mind and emotions were exhausted. In her lightly dozing state, she thought about Sam, and what a rock he was. Was it only three weeks ago she had thought he was the blight of the neighborhood? So much had happened that she had lost her perspective of time; it seemed as if she had known him for months. They had been lovers for almost a week, and in another few weeks they would be married. She couldn't believe she was making such an important move so hastily, but it felt right. Sam felt right, as if they were interlocking

pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. She hadn't rushed into anything with her other three fiances, and look how well those engagements had turned out. This time she was just going to do it. To hell with caution; she was going to marry Sam Donovan.

There was so much to do, so many details to handle. Thank God for Shelley, because she was in charge of all the tactical problems, such as location and food, music, flowers, invitations, large awnings for shade and shelter. Never shy, Shelley had already talked to Sam's mother and oldest sister, Doro, and involved them in the preparations. Jaine was a little chagrined to realize she hadn't yet met any of Sam's family, but with Marci's death and funeral, and now Luna, she hadn't had the opportunity. She was just happy Sam had thought to tell his folks before Shelley called, or it would have been an even bigger shock.

The doorbell chimed softly in the background, pulling her from her drifting thoughts. She sighed as she glanced over at Shelley, who wasn't moving.

"Aren't you going to see who's at the door?"

"No way. It's probably just a reporter."

"It might be Sam."

"Sam would have called – Oh, right. I turned off the phones. Damn it," Shelley griped, putting her book facedown on the table between the two chaises. "I'm getting into a really good part. Just once I'd like to read a book without being interrupted. If it isn't the kids, it's the telephone. If it isn't the telephone, it's the doorbell. Wait until you and Sam have kids," she warned as she opened the glass patio door and stepped inside.

Sam alternated between cussing and praying as he wove between cars, his dash light flashing. There was no answer at Shelley's. He had left a message on the answering machine, but where could they be? Jaine wouldn't have gone anywhere without calling him, not under the current circumstances. He had never before in his life been so terrified. He had patrol cars on the way to Shelley's house, but, God, what if it was already too late? He remembered Jaine's cell phone. Driving with one hand, the gas pedal pressed to the floorboard, he glanced at his phone and pressed Jaine's speed-dial number. Then he waited for the connection to be made, and he prayed some more.

The patio gate rattled. The privacy fence around the pool was eight feet high, constructed of wooden slats in a solid lattice weave, but the gate was made of wrought-iron bars. Startled, Jaine sat up and glanced over.

"Jaine!"
It was Leah Street, of all people. She looked frantic, and with one hand she rattled the gate again as if she could shake it open.
"Leah! What's wrong? Is it T.J.?" Jaine bolted from the chaise and ran toward the gate. Her heart almost leaped from her chest, so strong was the panic that seized her. Leah blinked, as if Jaine's question surprised her. Her strangely intent gaze locked on Jaine. "Yes, it's T.J." she said, and shook the gate one more time. "Open the gate."
"What's happened? Is she all right?" Jaine skidded to a halt in front of the gate and reached to open it, then realized she didn't have a key to the lock.
"Open the gate," Leah repeated.
"I can't, I don't have the key! I'll get Shelley – " Jaine was almost weeping in terror as she turned away, but Leah reached through the gate and grabbed her arm. "Hey!" Startled out of her panic, Jaine jerked free and whirled to stare at Leah. "What the hell – " The words died in her throat. Leah's outstretched hand had blood on it, and two of her fingernails were broken. The woman pressed closer to the gate, and Jaine saw more red splotches on the baggy skirt.
Instinct had Jaine backing up a step.
"Open the goddamn gate!" Leah shrieked, shaking the gate with her left hand as if she were a crazed chimpanzee on the inside of a cage. Her feathery blond hair flew around her face.
Jaine stared at the blood, and the blond hair. She saw the weird glitter in Leah's eyes, the twisted expression on her face, and everything inside her went cold. "You murdering bitch," she half-whispered.
Leah was as quick as a striking snake. She whipped her right arm away from her side and thrust it through the bars of the gate, swinging something at Jaine's head. Jaine lurched backward and lost her balance, stumbling several more steps before falling. She twisted to the side as she fell, landing on her hip. Driven by adrenaline, she bounced to her feet before she felt any pain from the jarring impact. Leah swung again. It was a tire tool, Jaine saw. She backed farther away from the gate and screamed, "Shelley! Call the police! Hurry!"
On the chaise, her cell phone began to ring. Involuntarily she glanced toward it, just as Leah, on a surge of insane strength, began beating the gate with the tire tool. The metal rang under the force of the blows, and the lock gave way.

Leah shoved the gate open, an unholy expression twisting her face as she stepped inside. "You're a whore," she rasped, raising the tire tool. "You're a lewd, vulgar whore, and you don't deserve to live."

Not daring to take her gaze off Leah, even for a second, Jaine inched to the side, trying to get at least a chair between them. She knew what the blood on Leah's hands and clothing meant, knew that T.J. was dead, too. All of them were gone, now. All of her friends. This insane bitch had killed them. She had backed up too much. She was almost on the edge of the pool. Quickly she adjusted her direction, angling away from the pool.

Shelley stepped out of the house, her face white and her eyes wide. She carried one of Nicholas's hockey sticks. "I called the police," she said, her voice shaking as she stared at Leah like a mongoose watching a cobra. And like a cobra, Leah's attention swung to Shelley. No, Jaine thought, the word like a faint whisper in her mind. Not Shelley, too.

"No!" The roar burst out of her throat, and she literally felt herself expanding as a wildfire of rage burst through her, as if her skin couldn't contain it. A red mist swam in front of her eyes, and her vision narrowed, focused until she saw only Leah. She wasn't aware of lunging forward, but Leah wheeled back to face her, tire tool raised. Shelley swung the hockey stick, momentarily distracting Jaine. The thick wood hit Leah on the shoulder, and she screamed in rage, but didn't drop the tire tool. Instead she swung it in a broad, sideways arc that caught Shelley across the rib cage. Shelley screamed in pain and folded forward. Leah raised the heavy iron to hit Shelley on the back of the head, and Jaine crashed into her, all the force of her fury lending her strength.

Leah was taller, heavier. She gave way under Jaine's assault, banging Jane's back with the tire tool, but Jaine was too close for her to get in an effective blow. Leah stiffened and recovered her balance, and thrust Jaine away. She raised her weapon again and took two quick steps toward Jaine.

Shelley straightened, holding her ribs, her face suffused with rage. She lunged forward, too, and the three of them staggered back under her momentum.

Jaine's left foot slipped off the edge of the pool, and like dominoes, all three of them plunged into the water. Tangled together, struggling, they went to the bottom. Leah still gripped the tire tool, but the water impeded her swings and she couldn't get any force behind them. She twisted wildly, trying to break free.

Jaine hadn't had time to gulp in air before she went under. Her lungs burned, her chest convulsing, as she fought not to inhale water. She wrenched away and lunged for the surface, dragging in huge breaths of air as soon as her face was clear. She choked and sputtered, and looked wildly around. Neither Shelley nor Leah had surfaced. Jaine took a deep breath and ducked back underwater. Their struggle had taken them farther into the deep end of the pool. She saw the froth of bubbles, their twisting forms and floating hair, and Leah's full skirt billowing around them like a jellyfish. Jaine scissored her legs, kicking herself toward them.

Leah had one arm around Shelley's neck. Wildly, Jaine latched her hand in Leah's hair and pulled back as hard as she could, and Leah couldn't maintain her hold. Shelley shot upward like a balloon.

Leah twisted and got one hand on Jaine's throat, her fingers digging in. The incredible pressure made Jaine gag, and water rushed into her mouth.

She brought her legs up and braced them on Leah's stomach, and pushed. Nails clawed her neck as she tore free, and red stained the water in front of her face. Then Shelley was there again, pushing Leah down on the bottom of the pool. Jaine clawed her way through the water to add her strength to Shelley's, pushing and fighting and not daring to let go, needing air again, unable to breathe, unwilling to release Leah and surface. Leah's clawing hands fastened on her blouse and locked tight. Leah's struggles grew weaker. Her bulging eyes glared at them through the crystal clear water, then slowly glazed over.

The water exploded behind them. Weakly Jaine turned her head and saw a dark shape, then another, surging toward them in a stream of bubbles. Strong hands wrenched her out of Leah's death grip, while another pair pulled Shelley away and shoved her upward. Jaine saw her sister's bare legs kicking, and she tried to follow her, but she had been longer without air than Shelley and she no longer had the strength to kick. She felt herself sort of sink to the bottom, then one of the uniformed cops grabbed her and kicked strongly toward the surface, carrying them both up into life-giving air.

She was only half-aware of being dragged out of the pool, of being stretched out on the concrete. She gagged, coughing convulsively and curling in on herself as she fought to get air past her swollen throat. She heard Shelley's hoarse cries, and the cops were talking simultaneously, the words jumbling in her head. People were rushing around, and someone else

jumped into the water, droplets arcing upward in the bright sunshine and splashing in her face.
Then Sam was there, his face utterly white as he lifted her to a sitting position and braced her in his arms. "Don't panic," he said reassuringly, his voice steady though his arms trembled. "You can breathe. Don't fight so hard. Just take slow breaths. Easy, babe. That's the way. Breathe in nice and easy."
She concentrated on his voice, on doing what he said. When she stopped gulping so frantically, her throat relaxed and oxygen rushed past the swollen membranes. Weakly she let her head rest against his chest, but she managed to put a reassuring hand on his arm to let him know she was conscious.
"I couldn't get here in time," he said rawly. "My God, I couldn't get here in time. I tried to call, but you didn't answer. Why didn't you answer the goddamn phone?"
"Reporters kept calling," Shelley gasped. "I turned the phones off." She winced and clutched her ribs, her face colorless.
There seemed to be a thousand sirens piercing the air, the sound reverberating in Jaine's ears. Just when it became unbearably loud, the sound cut off in mid-shriek, and a moment later, or maybe it was several minutes later, white-shirted medics were surrounding her and Shelley, and she was taken from Sam's supporting arms. "No – wait!" She twisted frantically, screaming Sam's name, except the scream was a barely audible croak. He motioned for the medics to back off a minute, and put his arms around her again.
"T.J.?" she managed to ask, scalding tears burning her eyes.
"She's alive," Sam said, his own voice still raw with emotion. "I got the word on the way over. They found her in a storage room at work."
Jaine's eyes asked what had to be asked.
Sam hesitated. "She's hurt, honey. I don't know how bad it is, but the important thing is, she's alive." Sam didn't stay to watch Leah's – Corin Lee's – body being removed from the pool. There were enough officers present to handle everything, and this wasn't his jurisdiction anyway. He had more important things to do, such as be with Jaine. When she and Shelley were transported to a local hospital, he followed in his truck. They were whisked away to treatment cubicles. After making certain the hospital notified Al right away, Sam leaned against the wall. He was sick to his stomach; he had sworn to serve and protect, but he hadn't been able to

protect the woman he loved more than anyone else in the world. Until the day he died, he would never forget the feeling of helpless terror as he raced through the streets, knowing he was already too late and couldn't get to Jaine in time to save her.

He had put the pieces of the puzzle together, but too late to save her and T.J. from harm.

T.J. was in critical condition. According to Bernsen, the only thing that saved her was that when she fell, she somehow rolled so that her head was partially protected by the base of an old office chair. Something must have frightened Leah away before she could finish the job, and she had gone in search of Jaine.

Sam was slumped in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs in the waiting area when Bernsen came in. "Jesus, what a nightmare," Roger said, dropping into the chair beside Sam's. "I heard their injuries are minor. What's taking so long?"

"I guess no one's in a hurry. Shelley – Jaine's sister – is being x-rayed for a broken rib. They're checking Jaine's throat. That's all I know." He rubbed his face. "I damn near fucked up, Roger. I didn't put it together until it was almost too late, then I couldn't get to Jaine in time."

"Hey, you put it together in time to get other people to them. T.J.'s alive, which she wouldn't be if they hadn't found her when they did. The uniforms who dragged the women out of the pool said they all came close to drowning. If you hadn't alerted them, got the officers there ahead of you – " Roger broke off and shrugged. "Personally, I think you did a helluva job, but I'm just a detective, what the fuck do I know?"

The E.R. doctor finally came out of Jaine's cubicle. "We're going to admit her, keep her overnight for observation," he said. "Her throat is bruised and swollen, but the larynx isn't ruptured and the hyoid bone is intact, so she'll make a full recovery. We're admitting her just as a precaution."

"May I see her now?" Sam asked, standing.

"Sure. Oh – her sister has two cracked ribs, but she'll be all right, too." He paused. "Looks like it was one hell of a fight."

"It was," said Sam, and stepped into the treatment cubicle, where Jaine was sitting on a vinyl examination table. Her eyes brightened when she saw him, and though she didn't say a word, her expression was enough as she reached out her hand to him. Gently he took it in his, then used it to pull her closer and fold her in his arms.

Twenty-two hours later, T.J. managed to open one swollen eye a tiny slit, and move her fingers just enough to squeeze Galan's hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"I can't believe you haven't told your parents," T.J. said. Her voice was still weak and slightly slurred, but the scolding tone was clear. "No, wait – I can believe you didn't tell them, but I can't believe neither Shelley nor David did. How can you not tell your parents someone tried to kill both you and Shelley and almost succeeded?" Jaine rubbed her nose. "Remember when you were a kid and you'd do almost anything to keep your parents from finding out you were in trouble? It was kind of like that, but it…" She shrugged. "It was over. You were alive, and Shelley and I were both okay, and I didn't want to talk about it. There was all the media coverage driving me crazy, Luna's funeral to get through, and I couldn't handle anything else."

T.J. carefully turned her head, which was still swathed in bandages, to look out her hospital window. She had been out of I.C.U. for a week and change now, but much of the preceding week was forever lost to her. She remembered nothing about the day of the attack, so exactly what had happened was unknown. Sam and Detective Bernsen had put forth a logical theory, but no one would ever know for certain.

"I wish I had been able to go to her funeral," she said, her expression sad and distant.

Jaine didn't say anything, but inwardly she shuddered. No, you don't, she thought. She wished she didn't have that memory.

Two weeks had passed, and every night she had jerked awake from a sound sleep, drenched in sweat, her heart pounding in terror from a nightmare she couldn't remember. Of course, considering Sam's prescription for disturbed sleep, the experience hadn't been all bad. She might wake up in terror, but she went back to sleep with every muscle limp from an overdose of pleasure. Sam had had a few bad nights himself, especially at first. Hero that he was, it bothered him that he hadn't been able to reach her first. That lasted until she climbed into the shower one night, stuck her head under the water, and started yelling, "Help, help, I'm drowning!" Well, she had tried to yell, anyway, but her throat had still been bruised and swollen, and Sam said she sounded more like a bullfrog's mating croak. He had jerked the shower curtain back and stood there glaring at her while water splattered all over the floor.

"Are you making fun of my hero complex?"
"Yeah," she said, and stuck her head back under the stream of water for another drowning imitation. He turned the water off with a snap of his wrist, slapped her on the bare butt sharply enough to make her say, "Hey!" in indignation, then wrapped his arms around her and lifted her bodily from the tub.
"You have to pay for that," he growled, striding toward the bed and tossing her onto it, then stepping back to strip off his damp clothes.
"Oh, yeah?" Naked and wet, she stretched sinuously, arching her back. "What do you have in mind?" With one hand she reached out to stroke his bobbing erection, then rolled onto her stomach and captured him in her grip. He went very still.
Delicately, like a cat, she licked. He shuddered. She tasted the entire length. He groaned.
She licked again and ran her tongue along the underside. "I think I should really, really have to pay" she murmured. "And I think it should involve… swallowing." She took him in her mouth and suited actions to words.
Since then, at least once a day, Sam would put on a pitiful face and say, "I feel so guilty."
Hah.
His attitude, more than anything, had helped her through the trauma. He hadn't babied her. He had loved her, comforted her, made love to her so often she was sore, but that was it, and it was more than enough. She had been able to laugh again.
She had visited T.J. every day. Already T.J. was taking physical therapy daily to help her overcome the resultant disabilities from her head injuries. Her speech was slurred, but better every day; and her control over her right leg and arm was iffy at best, but that too, with work, would improve greatly. Galan had been constantly by T.J.'s side, and if the naked devotion in his eyes was any indication, their marital difficulties were behind them.
"Back to your parents," T.J. said now. "Are you going to tell them when you meet them at the airport today?"
"Not right away," Jaine said. "I have to introduce them to Sam first. And we have the wedding to talk about. Besides, I thought Shelley and I should tell them together."
"You'd better do it before they go home, because their neighbors are bound to rush straight over when they see your folks are back."

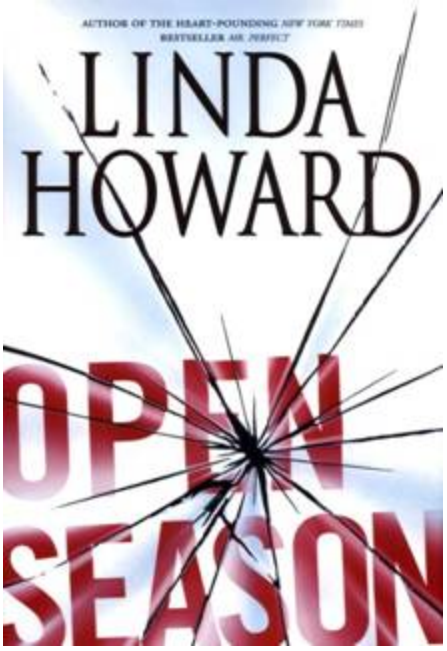
"Okay, okay. Ill tell them."
T.J. grinned. "And tell them they can thank me for delaying your wedding a week, which will give them time to rest." Jaine snorted. True, delaying the wedding a week would allow T.J. to attend, albeit in a wheelchair, but she doubted her dad, at least, would thank anyone. Having the wedding the next day would have suited him just fine, because there would be less hoopla for him to endure. She checked her watch. "I gotta go. I'm meeting Sam in an hour." She leaned over the bed and kissed T.J.'s cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow,"
Galan entered the room bearing a huge bouquet of lilies, filling the room with their perfume. "Just in time," Jaine said, winking at him as she sailed past.
"Yes," said J. Clarence Cosgrove, his voice reedy with age, "I remember Corin Street very well. The situation was very strange, but there was nothing we could do. We didn't even know Corin was a girl until she reached puberty. Oh, her sex was on her birth certificate, of course, but who checks that? Her mother said Corin was her son, so… we accepted it."
"She was raised as a boy?" Sam asked. He was at his desk, his long legs propped on an open drawer, the phone glued to his ear.
"To my knowledge, the mother never admitted or even acted as if she knew Corin was female. Corin was a badly disturbed child. Badly disturbed," Mr. Cosgrove repeated. "She was a constant discipline problem. She lolled a classroom pet, but Mrs. Street wouldn't accept that Corin could ever do anything like that. She made the statement, often and to anyone who would listen, that she had the perfect little boy."
Bingo, thought Sam. Mr. Perfect. That was the trigger that had set Corin Lee Street off like a bomb that had been slowly ticking down over the years. It wasn't the content of the List itself, but rather the title that she had found so unbearable.
"She took Corin out of my school," Mr. Cosgrove continued. "But I made a point of finding out what I could about the child. The behavioral problems worsened over the years, of course. When Corin was fifteen, she killed her mother. I remember it was a particularly brutal murder, though I can't recall the specific details. Corin spent several years in a mental institution and was never charged with the murder."
"Did the murder take place there in Denver?"
"Yes, it did."

"Thank you, Mr. Cosgrove. You've helped fill in a lot of the blanks."
After he hung up, Sam tapped his pen on his desk as he pondered what he had learned so far about Corin Lee Street. She had entered the mental institution as Corin, but she was Leah – evidently chosen because of the name's similarity to "Lee" – when she came out. The picture that had emerged was that of an extremely unstable and dangerous woman who had been abused both mentally and physically by her mother until the violence that had been leaking out all of her life finally burst out of control. The psychiatrists could argue all day about which came first, the abuse or the violent personality, but Sam didn't care. He just wanted a clear picture of the woman who had wreaked so much destruction.
After he talked to Mr. Cosgrove, Corin's middle-school principal, he called the Denver P.D. and eventually got to talk with the detective who had investigated Mrs. Street's gruesome murder. Corin had beaten her mother to death with a floor lamp, then poured rubbing alcohol on the woman's face and set it on fire. When the body was discovered, Corin was incoherent and obviously mentally unsound. She had been confined in a mental institution for seven years.
More digging turned up the psychiatrist who had treated Corin. On being informed of Corin's death and the circumstances, the woman sighed. "She was released against my better judgment," she said. "But she functioned better than I expected, if she went that many years before she began deteriorating. When she was on her medication, she was functional, but she was still – I hate to use labels, even when they're accurate – psychotic. In my opinion, it was only a matter of time before she began lolling. She had all the classic symptoms."
"How did she change from Corin into Leah?"
"Corin was her maternal grandfather's name. Her mother simply refused to accept that her child was female. Females were… 'Unworthy' and 'dirty' were the terms Corin used. Mrs. Street gave Corin a male name, she raised her as a boy, dressed her as a boy, told everyone Corin was her son. If Corin ever made any sort of mistake, even as a very small child, she was punished in a variety of ways: beaten, jabbed with pins, locked in dark closets. Then she reached puberty, and all hell figuratively broke out. Mrs. Street couldn't bear the changes in Corin's body. Menstruation particularly upset her."
"I bet," Sam said, feeling almost nauseated at this litany of abuse.

"After puberty, whenever Corin made a mistake, she was punished in a sexual manner. I leave the details to your imagination."
"Thanks," Sam said dryly.
"She hated her own body, hated female sexuality. With therapy and medication, she did finally develop a rather rudimentary female personality, and she named herself Leah. She worked hard at being a woman. I never had any hopes, though, of her having a normal sexual relationship, or a normal relationship of any land. She learned some female mannerisms, and the medication controlled her violent tendencies, but her grasp of reality was tenuous at best. I'm really surprised she was able to work at the same job for a number of years. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"
"No, Doctor, I think you've answered all my questions," Sam replied. He had needed to know. If Jaine ever wanted to know, he would have the answers for her, but so far she hadn't asked a single question about Leah Street. Maybe that was good. He had known Jaine was a fighter, but he had been surprised by how fiercely she tackled recovery, as if it were an adversary to be whipped into shape. She wasn't going to let Leah Street defeat her in anything.
He checked the time and saw he was running late. "Damn it," he muttered. She would never let him hear the end of it if they were late meeting her folks at the airport. He had some important news for her, news that couldn't wait, and he didn't want her to be angry when he told her. He drove like a maniac to meet her at her parents' house on time. Since all four of them and six weeks' worth of luggage couldn't fit in either her Viper or his truck, they were driving her mom's Lincoln to the airport. She was already in the driver's seat, motor running, when he skidded to a stop in the driveway and leaped out of the truck.
"You're late," she said, chirping the tires as soon as his butt hit the seat. He reached for his seat belt. "We'll make it," he said confidently. With Jaine at the wheel, he had no doubt. Maybe he should warn her about speeding, he thought, then thought better of it. "Remember that interview I had with the state a few weeks back?"
"You got the job," she said.
"How did you know?"
"Why else would you mention it?"
"I trained at the state police academy, so I won't have to do that again. I can go straight into detective work. The problem is, I'll have to relocate."

"So?" She rolled her eyes.
"Don't do that! Watch the road."
"I am watching!"
"It doesn't bother you that we'd have to move? You just bought your house."
"What would bother me," she said succinctly, "is if you lived in one city and I lived in another. That would suck." Oh, man, his favorite word.
She reached the airport in record time and parked the car. As they were hurrying to the arrival gate, she said, "Remember, Dad has Parkinson's, so if his arm is shaking, that's why."
"I remember," he said, his long legs easily keeping stride with her.
They had just reached the gate when passengers began pouring out. Her parents appeared almost immediately. Jaine squealed and ran to her mother, throwing her arms around her and hugging fiercely, then repeating the procedure with her dad.
"This is Sam!" she said, dragging him forward. Her folks already knew about the impending marriage, so her mother threw her arms around him and he got hugged, too.
Jaine's dad extended a wildly trembling right hand. "Here," he said. "You hold my hand while I take care of the shaking."
Sam burst into a roar of laughter. Jaine's mother said, "Lyle! Really!"
"What?" he asked, looking affronted at her rebuke. "If I can't have a little fun with it, what's the point in having it?" In those bright blue eyes, Sam saw a gleam that told him Jaine was a chip off the old engine block.
"We have a lot of news," Jaine said, linking arms with her mother and walking down the concourse. "You have to promise not to get mad."
That was guaranteed to keep them calm, Sam thought. Lyle Bright said, "Just as long as you haven't wrecked my car."

Open Season (2001)



POCKET BOOKS
New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

PROLOGUE

Carmela nervously clutched the burlap bag that held her other dress, some water, and the small package of food she had been able to save for the trip north, across the border. Orlando had told her that they wouldn't be able to stop, for food or water or anything, until they reached Los Angeles. She was locked in the back of an old truck that bounced and swayed, throwing her from side to side if she didn't manage to wedge herself into a corner and brace her back and legs in the small V, making sleep impossible because the moment she relaxed, she was sent tumbling across the rough wood bed of the truck.

Carmela was terrified, but determined. Enrique had gone across two years before, and he'd said he would send for her. Instead he had married an American, so he could never be deported, and she had been left with her dreams destroyed and her pride in shreds. There was nothing left for her in

Mexico; if Enrique could marry an American, then so could she! And she would marry a rich one. She was very pretty; everyone said so. When she married her rich norteamericano, she would find Enrique and thumb her nose at him, and he would be sorry he had lied and betrayed her.

She had big dreams, but she felt very small, bouncing around in the back of the truck as it charged across uneven ground. She heard grinding metal as Orlando changed gears, and a soft exclamation of pain as one of the other girls banged into the side of the truck. There were three others, all young like her, all wanting something better than what they had left behind in Mexico. They hadn't exchanged names, hadn't talked much at all. They were too preoccupied with the danger of what they were doing, and both sad and excited: sad at what they were leaving behind, and excited at the prospect of a better life. Anything had to be better than nothing, and nothing was what Carmela had.

She thought about her mother, dead for seven months, worn out by a lifetime of hard work and having babies. "Never let Enrique touch you between your legs," her mother had lectured, time and again. "Not until you are his wife. If you do, then he won't marry you, and you'll be left with a baby while he finds another pretty girl." Well, she hadn't let Enrique touch her between the legs, but he had found another girl anyway. At least she hadn't been left with a baby.

She had understood what her mother meant, though: Don't be like me. Her mother had wanted Carmela to have more than she'd had. She hadn't wanted her to grow old before her time, forever laden with a baby in her arms and another in the womb, and dying before the age of forty.

Carmela was seventeen. By the time her mother had been seventeen, she'd already had two babies. Enrique had never understood Carmela's insistence on remaining a virgin; he'd been, by turns, angry and sullen at her steadfast refusal to let him make love to her. Perhaps the woman he had married had let him do that to her. If that was all he wanted, then he had never truly loved her at all, Carmela thought. Good riddance! She wasn't going to waste her life mourning a ... a fool!

She tried to keep her spirits up by telling herself everything would be better in America; everyone said that in Los Angeles there were more jobs than there were people, that everyone had a car, and a television. She might even be in the movies, and become famous. Everyone said she was pretty so

perhaps it was possible. The fact, however, was that she was seventeen and alone, and she was frightened.
One of the other girls said something, her voice drowned out by the laboring engine, but the tension came through. In that moment, Carmela realized the other three were as frightened as she. So she wasn't alone, after all; the other three were just like her. It was a small thing, but she immediately felt braver.
Bracing herself against the lurching as the vehicle bounced from one rut to the next, she scooted across the rough wood of the truck bed until she was close enough to hear what the girl had said. It was daylight now, and enough light seeped through the cracks that she could make out the faces of the others. "What is it?" she asked.
The girl twisted her hands in the worn fabric of her skirt. "I have to relieve myself," she said, her voice thin with shame.
"We all do," Carmela said in sympathy Her own bladder was full to the point of pain. She had been ignoring it as best she could, unwilling to do what she knew they would eventually be forced to do.
Tears rolled down the girl's face. "I must."
Carmela looked around, but the other two seemed as helpless as the weeping girl. "Then we will do what we must do," she said, because she seemed to be the only one capable of making a decision. "We will designate a corner. . . that one." She pointed at the right rear corner. "There is a crack there, so it will drain. We will each relieve ourselves."
The girl wiped her face. "What about the other?"
"I hope we stop before then." Now that the sun was up, the heat inside the truck would climb steadily. It was summer; if Orlando didn't stop and let them out, they might well die from the heat. He had said they wouldn't stop until they reached their destination, so surely they would be in Los Angeles soon. She had paid Orlando only half of his usual fee; if she died, he wouldn't be able to collect the other half. Normally everyone had to pay in full before the coyote would take them across the border, but because she was so pretty, Orlando said, he would make an exception.
The other girls were pretty, too, she realized. Perhaps he had made an exception for all of them.
Relieving themselves was a group effort, because of the bouncing of the truck, and Carmela organized that effort. In turn, with herself going last, each squatted in the corner while the others wedged themselves around her

to hold her upright. At last, feeling exhausted but much better, they sank down on the truck bed to rest.
Abruptly, with one last bounce, the truck began rolling smoothly. They were on a highway, Carmela realized. A highway! Surely they were close to Los Angeles now.
But the morning hours ticked away, and the heat inside the truck grew stifling. Carmela tried to breathe normally, but the other girls were panting, as if drawing in extra air would help cool them. Since that air was hot, it didn't seem logical. At least, the way they were sweating, they wouldn't have to relieve themselves again very soon.
She waited as long as she could, because she had no idea how much farther they had to go, but finally her own thirst grew unbearable and she took her small flask of water from her burlap bag. "I have water," she said. "Just a little, so we must share equally." She gave each of them a hard look. "If you take more than one sip before passing the flask, I will slap you. And just a small sip, too."
Under her fierce dark gaze, each girl obediently took one small sip and passed the flask. Somehow, in organizing them to relieve themselves, she had gained the position of leader, and though she wasn't very tall, she had the force of will they all recognized. When the flask reached her, Carmela took her own one small sip, then passed the flask around again. When they had each had two sips, she capped the flask and put it back in her bag. "I know it isn't much," she said, "but I don't have much water and we must make it last."
There was, perhaps, enough water for them each to have another two sips. That wasn't much water, not when they were losing more than that in sweat every hour. Perhaps it would be enough to keep them alive. Why hadn't the other girls thought to bring food and water? she thought irritably, then forced the irritation away. It could be that they hadn't had anything to bring. As poor as she herself was, there were always others who had even less. She must be land, in thought as well as deed.
The truck began slowing, the difference in the sound of the motor signaling the change. They looked at each other with hope bright in their eyes.
The truck pulled off the highway and stopped. The motor wasn't turned off, but they heard the slam of the door as Orlando got out. Quickly Carmela grabbed her bag and stood; since he had said they wouldn't stop for anything until they reached Los Angeles, then they must have arrived. She

had expected more noise, though; she couldn't hear anything other than the sound of the truck's engine.
Then there came the sound of a chain rattling, and the roll-up door of the truck was shoved up on its tracks, letting in a blinding glare of sunlight and a blast of air that was both hot and fresh. Orlando was just a black shape, silhouetted against the white glare. Shielding their eyes, the girls all stumbled to the rear of the truck and awkwardly climbed out.
As her eyes adjusted to the sunlight, Carmela looked around, expecting. . . she didn't know quite what she expected, but at least a big city. There was nothing here but sky and sun and scrub bushes, and drifts of gritty gray soil. Her eyes wide, she looked at Orlando in question.
"This is as far as I take you," he announced. "The truck is too hot; you would die. My friend will take you the rest of the way. His truck has air-conditioning."
Air-conditioning! In Carmela's small village a few people had owned cars, but none of them had air-conditioning. Old Vasquez had pointed with pride to the controls on the dashboard of his car that had once made cold air come from the vents, but they no longer worked, and Carmela had never actually felt such a thing. She knew about it, though. She would ride in a truck with air-conditioning! Old Vasquez would be so jealous if he knew.
A tall, lean man wearing jeans and a plaid shirt came around the side of the truck. He carried four clear bottles of water, which he gave to the girls to drink. The water was cold, the bottles wet with condensation. The thirsty girls gulped the water while he talked to Orlando in English, which none of them spoke.
"This is Mitchell," Orlando finally said. "You are to do what he says. He speaks a little of our language, enough for you to understand what he wants you to do. If you disobey, the American policemen will find you, and throw you in jail, and you will never be freed. Do you understand?"
Solemnly, they all nodded. They were then swiftly hustled into the camper shell on Mitchell's large white pickup. There were two sleeping bags tossed on the truck bed, and a small stool with a hole on top, which on inspection turned out to be a toilet. There was no room to stand up; they had to either sit or lie, but after their sleepless night they didn't care. Cold air and music, both of which were incredibly soothing, were pouring into the camper shell through the open sliding rear window of the truck. After spreading out the

two sleeping bags so they could all lie down, the four girls quickly fell asleep.

She hadn't imagined Los Angeles to be so very far away, Carmela thought two days later. She was tired of riding in the camper, of not being able to stand up and move around. Stretching kept her muscles as limber as possible, but what she really wanted was just to walk. She had always been an active girl, and this restriction, though necessary, was maddening.

They were fed regularly and given water to drink. They hadn't been able to wash, however, and they all smelled really bad. Sometimes Mitchell would stop in a deserted area and raise the back gate of the camper shell, letting the camper air out, but the freshness was never complete, and never lasted long anyway

Peeking through the rear window of the truck, Carmela had watched the empty desert turn into flat grasslands. Then, gradually, wooded areas had appeared, and finally, this last day, there were mountains: lush, green, rolling. There were pastures dotted with cattle, and pretty valleys, and dark green rivers. The air felt thick and humid, and perfumed with the scent of a thousand different varieties of trees and flowers. And cars! There were more cars than she had ever thought to see in her life. They had passed through a city that had seemed enormous to her, but when she had asked Mitchell if this was Los Angeles, he had replied that, no, it was called Memphis. They were still a long way from Los Angeles.

America was unbelievably huge, Carmela thought, for them to have traveled for days and still be a long way from Los Angeles!

But late at night on the second day, they finally stopped. When Mitchell opened the back of the camper and let them out, they could barely walk from having been cooped up for so long. He had parked in front of a long trailer; Carmela looked around, searching for anything that would indicate a city, but they still seemed to be far from any such thing. Stars twinkled overhead, and the night was alive with insect chirps and birdcalls. He unlocked the trailer door and led them inside, and all four girls sighed at the luxury. There was furniture, and the most amazing kitchen with appliances they had no idea how to work, and a bathroom such as they hadn't imagined in their dreams. Mitchell told them they were all to take a bath, and he gave them each a loose, lightweight dress that was pulled on over the head. The dresses were theirs, he said.

They were amazed at such kindness, and thrilled by their new dresses. Carmela smoothed her hand over the fabric, which was smooth and light. Her dress was white with little red flowers all over it, and she thought it was beautiful.

They took baths in water that sprayed out of the wall, and used soap that smelled like perfume. There was special soap for their hair, liquid soap that foamed into mountains of suds. And brushes for their teeth! By the time Carmela left the bathroom, having waited until last because the other girls seemed at the end of their strength, she was cleaner than she had ever been in her life. She had been so enthralled by the richness of the soap that she had bathed twice, and washed her hair twice. Warm water stopped coming out of the spray—there was just cold water now—but she didn't care. It felt so good to be clean again.

She was barefoot, and she had no underthings to wear because they were all so dirty, but she pulled on her clean new dress and twisted her damp hair into a knot at the back of her neck. Looking in the mirror, she saw a pretty girl with smooth brown skin, lustrous dark eyes, and a full red mouth, much different from the bedraggled creature who had looked back at her before. The other girls were already asleep in the bedroom, snuggled under the covers, the air so cold that goose bumps raised on her arms. She went into the living room to tell Mitchell good night and thank him for all he had done for them. A television was on, and he was watching a game of American baseball. He looked up and smiled at her, and indicated two glasses filled with ice and a dark liquid, on the table beside him. "I fixed you something to drink," he said, or that was what she thought he said because his Spanish really wasn't very good. He picked up his own glass and sipped from it. "Coca-Cola."

Ah, that she understood! She took the glass he indicated and drank down the cold, sweet, biting cola. She loved the way it felt on the back of her throat. Mitchell indicated she should sit, so she did, but on the other end of the sofa the way her mother had taught her. She was very tired, but she would sit with him for a few minutes to be polite, and in truth she was grateful to him. He was a nice man, she thought, and he had sweet, faintly sad brown eyes.

He gave her some salty nuts to eat, and suddenly that was just what she wanted, as if her body needed to replace the salt she had lost during the first part of the trip. Then she needed more Coca-Cola, and he got up and fixed

another one for her. It felt strange, to have a man bringing things to her, but perhaps that was the way things were in America. Perhaps it was the men who waited on the women. If so, she only regretted she hadn't come sooner!
Her fatigue grew greater. She yawned, then apologized to him, but he only laughed and said it was okay. She couldn't keep her eyes open, or her head up. Several times her head bobbed forward and she would jerk it up, but then her neck muscles just wouldn't work anymore and instead of lifting her head, she felt herself sliding sideways. Mitchell was there, helping her to lie down, settling her head on the cushion and stretching out her legs. He was still touching her legs, she thought dimly, and she tried to tell him to stop, but her tongue wouldn't form the words. And he was touching her between her legs, where she had never let anyone touch her.
No, she thought.
And then the blackness came, and she thought no more.

One

Daisy! Breakfast is ready!"
Her mother's voice yodeled up the stairwell, the intonation exactly the same as it had been since Daisy was in first grade and had to be cajoled into getting out of bed.
Instead of getting up, Daisy Ann Minor continued to lie in bed, listening to the sound of steady rain pounding on the roof and dripping from the eaves. It was the morning of her thirty-fourth birthday, and she didn't want to get up. A gray mood as dreary as the rain pressed down on her. She was thirty-four years old, and there was nothing about this particular day to which she looked forward with anticipation.
The rain wasn't even a thunderstorm, which she enjoyed, with all the drama and sound effects. Nope, it was just rain, steady and miserable. The dreary day mirrored her mood. As she lay in bed watching the raindrops slide down her bedroom window, the unavoidable reality of her birthday settled on her like a wet quilt, heavy and clammy. She had been good all her life, and what had it gotten her? Nothing.
She had to face the facts, and they weren't pretty.
She was thirty-four, had never been married, never even been engaged. She had never had a hot love affair—or even a tepid one. A brief fling in

college, done mainly because everyone else was doing it and she hadn't wanted to be an oddball, didn't even qualify as a relationship. She lived with her mother and aunt, both widowed. The last date she'd had was on September 13, 1993, with Aunt Joella's best friend's nephew, Wally—because he hadn't had a date since at least 1988. What a hot date that had been, the hopeless going on a mercy date with the pitiful. To her intense relief, he hadn't even tried to kiss her. It had been the most boring evening of her life.

Boring. The word hit home with unexpected force. If anyone had to pick one word to describe her, she had a sinking feeling she knew what that word would be. Her clothes were modest—and boring. Her hair was boring, her face was boring, her entire life was boring. She was a thirty-four-year-old, small-town, barely-been-kissed spinster librarian, and she might as well be eighty-four for all the action she saw.

Daisy switched her gaze from the window to the ceiling, too depressed to get up and go downstairs, where her mother and Aunt Joella would wish her a happy birthday and she would have to smile and pretend to be pleased. She knew she had to get up; she had to be at work at nine. She just couldn't make herself do it, not yet.

Last night, as she did every night, she had laid out the outfit she would wear the next day. She didn't have to look at the chair to envision the navy skirt, which hovered a couple of inches below her knee, both too long and too short to be either fashionable or flattering, or the white, short-sleeved blouse. She could hardly have picked an outfit less exciting if she had tried—but then, she didn't have to try; her closet was full of clothes like that.

Abruptly she felt humiliated by her own lack of style. A woman should at least look a little sharper than usual on her birthday, shouldn't she? She would have to go shopping, then, because the word sharp didn't apply to anything in her entire wardrobe. She couldn't even take extra care with her makeup, because the only makeup she owned was a single tube of lipstick in an almost invisible shade called Blush. Most of the time she didn't bother with it. Why should she? A woman who had no need to shave her legs certainly didn't need lipstick. How on earth had she let herself get in this predicament?

Scowling, she sat up in bed and stared directly across the small room into her dresser mirror. Her mousy, limp, straight-as-a-board brown hair hung in

her face, and she pushed it back so she could have a clear view of the loser in the mirror.
She didn't like what she saw. She looked like a lump, sitting there swathed in blue seersucker pajamas that were a size too big for her. Her mother had given her the pajamas for Christmas, and it would have hurt her feelings if Daisy had exchanged them. In retrospect, Daisy's feelings were hurt because she was the sort of woman to whom anyone would give seersucker pajamas. Seersucker, for God's sake! It said a lot that she was a seersucker-pajamas kind of woman. No Victoria's Secret sexy nighties for her, no sirree. Just give her seersucker.
Why not? Her hair was drab, her face was drab, she was drab.
The inescapable facts were that she was boring, she was thirty-four years old, and her biological clock was ticking. No, it wasn't just ticking, it was doing a countdown, like a space shuttle about to be launched: ten . . . nine. . . eight...
She was in big trouble.
All she had ever wanted out of life was ... a life. A normal, traditional life. She wanted a husband, a baby, a house of her own. She wanted SEX. Hot, sweaty, grunting, rolling-around-naked-in-the-middle-of-the-afternoon sex. She wanted her breasts to be good for something besides supporting the makers of bras. She had nice breasts, she thought: firm, upright, pretty C-cups, and she was the only one who knew it because no one else ever saw them to appreciate them. It was sad.
What was even sadder was that she wasn't going to have any of those things she wanted. Plain, mousy, boring, spinster librarians weren't likely to have their breasts admired and appreciated. She was simply going to get older, and plainer, and more boring; her breasts would sag, and eventually she would die without ever sitting astride a naked man in the middle of the afternoon—unless something drastic happened . . . something like a miracle.
Daisy flopped back on her pillows and once more stared at the ceiling. A miracle? She might as well hope lightning would strike.
She waited expectantly, but there was no boom, no blinding flash of light. Evidently no help was coming from On High. Despair curled in her stomach. Okay, so it was up to her. After all, the Good Lord helped those who helped themselves. She had to do something. But what?
Desperation sparked inspiration, which came in the form of a revelation:

She had to stop being a good girl.
Her stomach clenched, and her heart started pounding. She began to breathe rapidly. The Good Lord couldn't have had that idea in mind when He/She/It decided to let her handle this on her own. Not only was it a very un-Good-Lord type of idea, but. . . she didn't know how. She had been a good girl her entire life; the rules and precepts were engraved on her DNA. Stop being a good girl? The idea was crazy. Logic dictated that if she wasn't going to be a good girl any longer, then she had to be a bad one, and that just wasn't in her. Bad girls smoked, drank, danced in bars, and slept around. She might be able to handle the dancing—she kind of liked the idea—but smoking was out, she didn't like the taste of alcohol, and as for sleeping around—No way. That would be monumentally stupid.
But—but bad girls get all the men! her subconscious whined, prodded by the urgency of her internal ticking clock.
"Not all of them," she said aloud. She knew plenty of good girls who had managed to marry and have kids: all her friends, in fact, plus her younger sister, Beth. It could be done. Unfortunately, they seemed to have taken all the men who were attracted to good girls in the first place.
So what was left?
Men who were attracted to bad girls, that's what.
The clenching in her stomach became a definite queasy feeling. Did she even want a man who liked bad girls?
Yeah! her hormones wailed, oblivious of common sense. They had a biological imperative going here, and nothing else mattered.
She, however, was a thinking woman. She definitely didn't want a man who spent more time in bars and honky-tonks than he did on the job or at home. She didn't want a man who slept with any road whore who came along.
But a man with experience . . . well, that was different. There was just something about an experienced man, a look in his eyes, a confidence in his walk, that gave her goose bumps at the thought of having a man like that all to herself. He might be an ordinary guy with an ordinary life, but he could still have that slightly wicked twinkle in his eyes, couldn't he?
Yes, of course he could. And that was just the kind of man she wanted, and she refused to believe there wasn't one somewhere out there for her.
Daisy sat up once more to stare at the woman in the mirror. If she was ever going to have what she wanted, then she had to act. She had to do something. Time was slipping away fast.

Okay, being a bad girl was out.
But what if she gave the appearance of being a bad girl? Or at least a party girl? Yeah, that sounded better: party girl. Someone who laughed and had fun, someone who flirted and danced and wore short skirts—she could handle that. Maybe.
Big maybe.
"Daisy!" her mother yodeled once more, the sound echoing up the stairs. This time her voice was arch with the tone that said she knew something Daisy didn't, as if there were any way on earth Daisy could have forgotten her own birthday. "You're going to be late!"
Daisy had never been late to work a day in her life. She sighed. A normal person with a normal life would be late at least once a year, right? Her unblemished record at the library was just one more indicator of how hopeless she was.
"I'm up!" she yelled back, which wasn't quite a lie. She was at least sitting up, even if she wasn't out of bed.
The lump in the mirror caught her eye, and she glared at it. "I'm never going to wear seersucker again," she vowed. Okay, so it wasn't quite as dramatic as Scarlett O'Hara's vow never to be hungry again, but she meant it just the same.
How did one go about being a bad girl—no, a party girl, the distinction was important—she wondered as she stripped off the hated seersucker pajamas and wadded them up, then defiantly stuffed them into the wastebasket. She hesitated a moment— what would she wear to bed tonight?—but forced herself to leave the pajamas in the trash. Thinking of her other sleepwear—seersucker for summer and flannel for winter—she had the wild thought of sleeping naked tonight. A little thrill ran through her. That was something a party girl would do, wasn't it? And there was nothing wrong with sleeping naked. She had never heard Reverend Bridges say anything at all about what one wore, or didn't wear, to bed.
She didn't have to shower, because she was one of those people who bathed at night. The world, she thought, was divided into two groups: those who showered at night, and those who showered in the morning. The latter group probably prided themselves on starting the day fresh and sparkling clean. She, on the other hand, didn't like the idea of crawling between sheets already dirtied by the previous day's accumulation of dust, germs, and dead skin cells. The only solution to that was to change the sheets every day, and

while she was sure there were some people obsessive enough to do just that, she wasn't one of them. Changing the sheets once a week was good enough for her, which meant she had to be clean when she went to bed. Besides, showering at night saved time in the morning.

Like she was ever rushed for time anyway, she thought gloomily.

She stared in the bathroom mirror, which confirmed what she had seen in the dresser mirror. Her hair was dull and shapeless, without style. It was healthy but limp, without any body at all. She pulled a long brown strand in front of her eyes to study it. The color wasn't golden brown, or red brown, or even a rich chocolate brown. It was just brown, as in mud. Maybe there was something she could put on it to give it a little bounce, a little oomph. God knows there were zillions of bottles and tubes and sprays in the health-and-beauty section of the Wal-Mart over on the highway, but that was fifteen miles away and she usually just picked up a bottle of shampoo at the grocery store. She had no idea what the products in those zillions of bottles and tubes did, anyway.

But she could learn, couldn't she? She was a librarian, for heaven's sake. She was a champion researcher. The secrets of the earth were open books to those who knew where and how to dig. How difficult could hair products be?

Okay. Hair was number one on her list of improvements. Daisy went back into her bedroom and got a pad and pen from her purse. She wrote the number one at the top of a page, and beside it wrote: HAIR. Below that she quickly scrawled MAKEUP, and below that CLOTHES.

There, she thought with satisfaction. What she had was the blueprint for the making of a party girl.

Returning to the bathroom, she quickly washed her face, then did something she almost never did. Opening the jar of Oil of Olay Aunt Joella had given her for her birthday last year, she moisturized her face. Maybe it didn't do any good, but it felt good, she decided. When she was finished, she thought that her face did look smoother, and a little brighter. Of course, anything that had been greased looked smoother, and all that rubbing was bound to have reddened her complexion, but one had to start somewhere.

Now what?

Nothing, that was what. She had nothing else to do, no other ointments, none of the mysterious and sexy little squares of color or dark-colored pencils with which other women lined their eyes and darkened their lids.

She could put on her lipstick, but why bother? It was virtually the same shade as her lips; the only way she could tell she had it on was by licking her lips and tasting. It had a slight bubble-gum flavor, just as it had when she was in junior high—"Oh, God!" she moaned aloud. She hadn't changed her shade of lipstick since junior high!

"You're pathetic," she told her reflection, and this time her tone was angry. Cosmetic changes weren't going to be enough.

She had to do something drastic.

Two gaily wrapped boxes were sitting on the kitchen table when Daisy went downstairs. Her mother had made Daisy's favorite breakfast, pecan pancakes; a cup of coffee gently steamed beside the plate, waiting for her, which meant her mother had listened for her footsteps on the stairs before pouring the coffee. Tears stung her eyes as she stared at her mother and aunt; they were really two of the sweetest people in the world, and she loved them dearly

"Happy birthday!" they both chimed, beaming at her.

"Thank you," she said, managing a smile. At their urging, she sat down in her usual place and quickly opened the boxes. Please, God, not more seersucker, she silently prayed as she folded back the white tissue from her mother's gift. She was almost afraid to look, afraid she wouldn't be able to control her expression if it was seersucker—or flannel. Flannel was almost as bad.

It was . . . well, it wasn't seersucker. Relief escaped in a quiet little gasp. She pulled the garment out of the box and held it up. "It's a robe," said her mother, as if she couldn't see what it was.

"I... it's so pretty," Daisy said, getting teary-eyed again because it really was pretty—well, prettier than she had expected. It was just cotton, but it was a nice shade of pink, with a touch of lace around the collar and sleeves.

"I thought you needed something pretty," her mother said, folding her hands.

"Here," said Aunt Joella, pushing the other box toward Daisy. "Hurry up, or your pancakes will get cold."

"Thank you, Mama," Daisy said as she obediently opened the other box and peered at the contents. No seersucker here, either. She touched the fabric, lightly stroking her fingertips over the cool, sleek finish.

"Real silk," Aunt Joella said proudly as Daisy pulled out the full-length slip. "Like I saw Marilyn Monroe wear in a movie once."

The slip looked like something from the nineteen forties, both modest and sexy, the kind of thing daring young women wore as party dresses these days. Daisy had a mental image of herself sitting at a dressing table brushing her hair and wearing nothing but this elegant slip; a tall man came up behind her and put his hand on her bare shoulder. She tilted her head back and smiled at him, and he slowly moved his hand down under the silk, touching her breast as he bent to kiss her . . .

"Well, what do you think?" Aunt Joella asked, jerking Daisy out of her fantasy.

"It's beautiful," Daisy said, and one of the tears she had been blinking back escaped to slide down her cheek. "You two are so sweet—"

"Not that sweet," Aunt Joella interrupted, frowning at the tear. "Why are you crying?"

"Is something wrong?" her mother asked, reaching over to touch her hand.

Daisy drew a deep breath. "Not wrong. Just—I had an epiphany."

Aunt Jo, who was sharper than any tack, shot her a narrow-eyed look. "Boy, I bet that hurt."

"Jo." Sending her sister an admonishing glance, Daisy's mother took her daughter's hands in hers. "Tell us what's wrong, honey."

Daisy took a deep breath, both to work up her courage and to control her tears. "I want to get married."

The two sisters both blinked, and looked at each other, then back at her.

"Well, that's wonderful," her mother said. "To whom?"

"That's the problem," Daisy said. "No one wants to marry me." Then the deep breath stopped working, and she had to bury her face in her hands to hide the way her unruly tear ducts were leaking.

There was a small silence, and she knew they were looking at each other again, communicating in that mental way sisters had.

Her mother cleared her throat. "I'm not quite certain I understand. Is there someone in particular to whom you're referring?"

Bless her mother's heart, she was an English teacher to the core. She was the only person Daisy knew who actually said whom—well, except for herself. The acorn hadn't fallen far from the mother oak. Even when her mother was upset, her phrasing remained exact.

Daisy shook her head, and wiped the tears away so she could face them again. "No, I'm not suffering from unrequited love. But I want to get

married and have babies before I get too old, and the only way that's going to happen is if I make some major changes."
"What sort of major changes?" Aunt Jo asked warily.
"Look at me!" Daisy indicated herself from head to foot. "I'm boring, and I'm mousy. Who's going to look at me twice? Even poor Wally Herndon wasn't interested. I have to make some major changes to me."
She took a deep breath. "I need to spruce myself up. I need to make men look at me. I need to start going places where I'm likely to meet single men, such as nightclubs and dances." She paused, expecting objections, but was met with only silence. She took another deep breath and blurted out the biggie: "I need to get my own place to live." Then she waited.
Another sisterly glance was exchanged. The moment stretched out, and Daisy's nerves stretched along with it. What would she do if they strenuously objected? Could she hold out against them? The problem was that she loved them and wanted them to be happy; she didn't want to upset them or make them ashamed of her.
They both turned back to her with identical broad smiles on their faces.
"Well, it's about time," Aunt Jo said.
"We'll help," her mother said, beaming.

TWO

Daisy drove to work on automatic pilot. Luckily she had no stop signs to worry about and only one traffic light: one of the benefits of small-town life. She lived only five blocks from the library and, to save the environment, often walked to work if the weather was good, but the rain was still pouring down and during the summer the heat always got the best of her conscience anyway Her brain fizzed with plans, and before she put her purse in the bottom drawer of her desk, she took out the sheet of paper on which she had scribbled the items she needed to tackle, to study them again. Her mother and Aunt Jo had been bubbling with excitement, adding their own ideas, and after careful thought they had all agreed that she should take care of the big-ticket items first. She had a healthy balance in her checking account, due to living with her mother and Aunt Jo and sharing expenses with them, not that the groceries and utilities ever amounted to that much, and the old house was long since paid for. Her car was an eight-

year-old Ford, financed for three years, so she hadn't even had a car payment for the past five years. The salary of a smalltown librarian wasn't great, even though she was director of the library, which was a glorified title that didn't amount to anything, since the mayor's office retained hiring and firing authority; she got to choose which books the library bought with its less-than-impressive budget, and that was about it. But when you put at least half, sometimes more, of even an unimpressive salary into savings every year, it added up. She had even begun investing in the stock market, after carefully researching her chosen companies on the Internet, and done very well, if she did say so herself. Not that Warren Buffett had any reason for jealousy, but she was proud of her nest egg.

The bottom line was, she could easily afford a place of her own. However, there weren't very many places available for rent in Hillsboro, Alabama. She could always move to one of the larger towns, Scottsboro or Fort Payne, but she wanted to stay close. Her sister had already moved to Huntsville, and though that wasn't really all that far, about an hour's drive, it still wasn't the same as living in the same town. Besides, Temple Nolan, the mayor, had a real obsession about hiring only Hillsboro citizens for municipal jobs, a policy that Daisy approved of. She could hardly ask him to make an exception in her case. She would just have to find some place here in Hillsboro to live.

Hillsboro had only a small weekly newspaper that came out every Friday, but last week's edition was still on her desk. She folded it open to the advertisement section—one page—and quickly scanned down the columns. She noticed that someone had found a calico cat over on Vine Street, and Mrs. Washburn was looking for someone to help take care of her father-in-law, who was ninety-eight and liked to take off his clothes at the oddest times, such as when anyone else was around. Rentals, rentals . . . She found the small section and quickly skimmed down it. There were eight listings, more than she had expected.

One address was familiar, and she dismissed that rental immediately; it was an upstairs room in Beulah Wilson's house, and everyone in town knew Beulah invaded her boarders' privacy whenever she liked, searching the rooms as if she were a drug dog sniffing out tons of cocaine, then gossiping with her cronies about whatever she found. That was how the whole town knew Miss Mavis Dixon had a box full of early Playgirl magazines, but

Miss Mavis was so hateful and generally disliked that everyone agreed that the centerfolds were as close as she was ever likely to get to male genitalia. No way would Daisy ever live in Beulah Wilson's house.

That left seven possibilities.

"Vine Street," she muttered, reading the next listing. That would probably be the Simmonses' small apartment over their detached garage. Hmm, that wouldn't be a bad choice at all. The rent would be very reasonable, it was a good neighborhood, and she would have privacy because Edith Simmons was a widow who had severe arthritis in her knees and could never climb the stairs to snoop. Everyone knew she hired someone to clean her house because she couldn't cope with all the stooping.

Daisy circled the ad, then quickly read the others. There were two empty condos in Forrest Hills over on the highway, but the rent was high and the condos were ugly. They were possibles, but she'd look at them only if Mrs. Simmons had already rented her garage apartment. There was a house on Lassiter Avenue, but the address wasn't familiar. She swiveled her chair to locate Lassiter Avenue on her city map, and immediately dropped that ad from consideration, because the address was in the rougher section of town. She didn't know exactly how rough, but imagined Hills-boro had its share of the criminal element.

The remaining three ads were also undesirable. One side of a duplex was available, but it was available on a regular basis, because the trashy Farris family lived in the other side and no one else could put up with the screaming and cussing for very long. Another house was too far away, almost at Fort Payne. The last ad was for a mobile home, and it, too, was on the bad side of town.

Quickly she dialed Mrs. Simmons's number, hoping the apartment was still available, since the newspaper was already four days old.

The phone rang and rang, but it took Mrs. Simmons a while to get anywhere, so Daisy was patient. Varney, the son, had given his mother a cordless phone once so she could keep it with her and wouldn't have to walk anywhere to answer it, but she was set in her ways and considered it a nuisance to carry the phone with her all day, so she accidentally dropped it in the toilet, and that was that. Mrs. Simmons resumed use of her land-line phone, and Varney saw the wisdom of not buying her another cordless to drown.

"Hello?" Mrs. Simmons's voice was as creaky as her knees.

"Hello, Mrs. Simmons. This is Daisy Minor. How are you today?"
"Just fine, dear. This rain makes my joints hurt, but we need it, so I guess I shouldn't complain. How's your mama, and your aunt Joella?"
"They're fine, too. They're busy canning tomatoes and okra from the garden."
"I don't do much canning anymore," Mrs. Simmons creaked. "Last year Timmie"—Timmie was Varney's wife—"brought me some pears and we made pear preserves, but I don't even try to have a garden. My old knees just aren't up to it."
"You might think about knee-replacement surgery," Daisy suggested. She felt honor-bound to try, though she knew Varney and Timmie had been making the same suggestion for years, to no avail.
"Why, Mertis Bainbridge had that done, and she said she'd never go through that again. She's had nothing but trouble with it."
Mertis Bainbridge was a hypochondriac, and a general com-plainer to boot. If someone gave her a car, she'd complain about having to buy gas for it. Daisy refrained from pointing that out, because Mertis was one of Mrs. Simmons's best friends.
"Everyone is different," she said diplomatically. "You're much tougher than Mertis, so you might have better results." Mrs. Simmons liked being told how strong she was, to be able to endure such pain.
"Well, I'll think about it."
She wouldn't do any such thing, but Daisy had satisfied the social requirements; she moved on to the purpose to her call. "The reason I called was to see about the apartment over your garage. Have you rented it yet?"
"Not yet, dear. Do you know someone who might be interested?"
"I'm interested for myself. Would it be all right if I came over at lunch and looked at it?"
"Why, I suppose. Let me just check with your mother. I'll call you right back. You're at work, aren't you?"
Daisy blinked. Had she just heard what she thought she'd heard? "Excuse me?" she said politely. "Why do you need to check with my mother?"
"Why to see if it's okay with her, of course. I couldn't let you rent my apartment without her permission."
The words slapped her in the face. "Her permission?" she choked. "I'm thirty-four years old. I don't need permission to live anywhere I choose."

"You may have argued with her, dear, but I couldn't hurt Evelyn's feelings that way."
"We didn't argue," Daisy protested. Her throat had grown so tight she could barely speak. My god, did the whole town consider her so hopeless that she couldn't do anything without her mother's permission? No wonder she never had any dates! Humiliation mingled with anger that Mrs. Simmons wouldn't even think Daisy would be insulted. "On second thought, Mrs. Simmons, I don't think the apartment would be right for me. I'm sorry to bother you." It was rude, but she hung up without the usual good-byes. Mrs. Simmons would probably tell all her friends how abrupt Daisy had been and that she was having a disagreement with her mother, but she couldn't help that. And Mrs. Simmons might not snoop in the apartment, but she would certainly monitor all of Daisy's comings and goings and feel obligated to report them back to her mother. Not that Daisy intended to do anything bad, but still.. . !
The humiliation burned inside her. Was this how all their friends and acquaintances saw her, as someone incapable of making a decision on her own? She had always considered herself an intelligent, responsible, self-supporting woman, but Mrs. Simmons, who had known her all her life, certainly didn't!
This move was way way too late. She should have done it ten years ago. Back then, changing her image would have been easy. Now she felt as if she needed an act of Congress—and a permission slip from her mother!—to change the way people saw her.
Maybe it would work out better not to live in Mrs. Simmons's garage apartment, anyway. She would be out of her mother's house, yes, but still under "supervision." If she wanted to change her image, she had to give the impression of complete freedom.
The ugly condos were looking better by the minute.
She dialed the number in the ad. Again, the phone rang and rang. She wondered if the condo manager had arthritic knees, too.
"Hello." The voice was male, and sleepy.
"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" Daisy glanced at the clock over her desk; ten after nine. What kind of manager slept this late?
"S' all right."
"I'm calling about the rental listing—"
"Sorry. The last one was rented yesterday." The man hung up.
Well, damn.

Frustrated, she stared down at the newspaper. She was left with the house on Lassiter Avenue, the duplex containing the Far-rises, and the mobile home on the bad side of town. The duplex was unthinkable.
She couldn't back down now, or she'd never be able to face herself in the mirror again. She had to see this through. Maybe the mobile home or the Lassiter Avenue house wouldn't be too bad. She didn't mind a run-down neighborhood, so long as it wasn't dangerous, with drug dealers lurking on every corner and shots ringing out in the night.
She was pretty sure if there had been any shots ringing out in Hillsboro, night or day, she'd have heard about it.
The discreet little bell over the door rang as someone entered the library. Daisy got up and smoothed her skirt, not that the action would help its looks any. She was the only one working until noon, because they seldom had anyone in during the morning. Most of their traffic was in the afternoon, after school was out, though of course during the summer that pattern changed. The bulk of people still came in the afternoon, maybe because they were too busy doing other stuff during the relatively cool mornings. Kendra Owens came in at twelve and worked until the library closed at nine, plus Shannon Ivey worked part-time from five until nine, so Kendra was never alone there at night. The only one who was alone for any length of time was Daisy, but she figured the greater responsibility was hers.
“Anyone here?" a deep voice boomed, before she could step out of her small office behind the checkout desk.
Daisy took two hurried steps into view, a little outraged that anyone would shout in a library, even if there weren't any other patrons present at the moment. Seeing who the newcomer was, she checked briefly, then said briskly, "Yes, of course. There's no need to yell."
Chief of Police Jack Russo stood on the other side of the scarred, wooden checkout desk, looking impatient. Daisy knew him by sight, but had never spoken to him before, and she wished she wasn't doing so now. Frankly, she didn't think much of Mayor Nolan's choice for chief. Something about him made her uneasy, but she didn't know exactly what. Why couldn't the mayor have chosen someone local, someone already on the force? Chief Russo was an outsider, and from what she'd seen in town meetings, he wasn't averse to throwing his weight around. It was easy to dislike a bully.
"I wouldn't have yelled if anyone had been in sight," he said tersely.

"The door wouldn't have been unlocked unless someone was here," she replied just as tersely.
Stalemate.
Physically, Chief Russo was a good-looking man, if one liked jocks with thick necks and broad, sloping shoulders. She wasn't silly enough to automatically assume anyone athletic was also stupid; still, Daisy had never cared for the type. There had to be something basically narcissistic about a man who worked out enough to maintain that sort of muscularity, didn't there? She didn't know how old he was; his face was unlined except for a few squint lines around his eyes, but his short-cut hair, while still mostly dark on top, was gray everywhere else. At any rate, he was too old to be devoting hours to lifting weights. Nor did she care for the cocky arrogance in his eyes, or the way his full lips always seemed to be on the verge of sneering. Who did he think he was, Elvis? Moreover, he was a Yankee—he had been a cop in either Chicago or New York, she had heard both—with a brusque, abrasive manner. If he'd had to run for office, as the county sheriff did, he would never have been elected.
Daisy stifled a sigh. She was in the minority in her opinion of the chief. Mayor Nolan liked him, the city council liked him, and from what she heard around town, most of the single women thought he was the cat's pajamas. So maybe she was wrong in her instinctive dislike of him. Maybe. She reminded herself it was only neighborly to keep an open mind, but she was still glad she had the checkout desk between them.
"May I help you?" she asked in her best librarian's voice, both brisk and friendly. Working with the public was a science, especially in a library. One had to encourage people, because of course you wanted them to read, but at the same time you had to impart a sense of respect for the library and other patrons.
"Yeah. I want to sign up for the virtual library."
He couldn't have said anything more likely to bring a beaming smile to her face. His stock automatically went up a few points. She was justifiably proud of the state's virtual library; Alabama led the nation in that category. Any citizen of the state could register at any library and have on-line home access to thousands of newspapers, magazines, articles, encyclopedias, research material, medical journals, and the like. Some of the categories were targeted to specific age groups of children, for work in the classroom

and for help with their homework, or as general interest. Other states had virtual libraries, but Alabama's was by far the most extensive.
"You'll love it," she said enthusiastically, lifting the hinged countertop that allowed her to step out from behind the security of the checkout desk. "Come with me."
She led him to the reference section, where their on-line computer sat quietly humming, always ready. She took the chair in front of the computer and gestured to him to pull up another. He hooked a chair over, positioning it much too close to hers, and settled his large frame on it. He immediately leaned back and hitched up one long leg, crossing his right knee with his left ankle. It was the automatic position of a dominant male, that of a man accustomed to physically commanding the space around him.
Daisy frowned and mentally deducted those points he had just gained. Didn't he know he shouldn't crowd people? She scooted her chair a couple of inches away and chalked up "bad manners" in his debit column.
She took the required information from him, entered it into the system, and gave him his password. All the time she was aware that he was still too close; she glanced several times at that muscular thigh right beside her. If she scooted any farther away, she wouldn't be able to reach the keyboard. Irritated, because he had to know he was crowding her personal space—cops in big cities studied things like that, didn't they?—she shot an exasperated look at him and almost jumped, because he was staring at her. He wasn't trying to hide it, either.
She felt a blush heating her face. Ordinarily she would have finished as soon as possible and scurried back to the safety of her office, but today was a new day, a turning point in her life, and she decided she'd be damned if she'd let herself be intimidated. She'd already been rude to Mrs. Simmons, so why not the chief of police, as well?
"You're staring," she said bluntly. "Do I have a smudge on my face, or do I look like a dangerous criminal?"
"Neither," he said. "Law enforcement officers stare at people; it's part of the job."
Oh. She supposed it was. She ratcheted her indignation down a few notches—but just a few. "Stop it anyway," she ordered. "It's rude, and you're making me uncomfortable."
"I apologize." He still didn't look away from her, though; he probably didn't respond well to orders. His eyes were land of an odd gray-green, more

green than gray, and a tad out of place with his olive skin. Of course, she didn't have any room to comment on anyone else's strange eyes, since her own were two different colors. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, Miss . . . Daisy, isn't it?" His full lips quirked. "May I drive you somewhere?"

Her face went way past blush, straight into tomato red. Since the movie Driving Miss Daisy had come out, countless people had thought it funny to make the same offer. She hadn't laughed yet. She gave him two more checks in the debit column, because making fun of someone's name was rude and deserved extra deductions.

"No, thank you," she said in such frigid tones he couldn't miss the fact that she didn't think he was amusing. She got to her feet and handed him his plastic card with his password written on it, then without another word marched back to the checkout desk and pulled down the countertop that closed her off from him. Thus barricaded, she faced him across the wooden expanse.

"Sorry," he said, which was the second time he had apologized in as many minutes. The problem was, she didn't think he'd meant it either time. He leaned on the checkout desk and flicked the plastic password card in his long fingers. "I guess you get that a lot, huh?"

“A lot," she echoed, keeping her tone deep in the arctic.

He flexed his shoulders, as if settling his shirt more comfortably, but she had read magazine articles about body language and thought he might be trying to impress her with his physique. If so, he had failed.

After a long moment in which she remained stubbornly silent, refusing to acknowledge or accept his apology, he gave another shrug and straightened. He tapped the plastic card on the desk— goodness, what kind of signal was that?; she tried to remember if tapping meant anything in body language— and said, "Thanks for your help."

Darn it, now she had to reply. "You're welcome," she muttered as she watched him leave. She was fairly certain she heard him snickering.

Damn Yankee! What was he doing down here, anyway? If he was such a hotshot big-city cop, why wasn't he in a big city? What was he doing here in Hillsboro, population nine thousand and something, tucked away in the north Alabama mountains? Maybe he was a dirty cop and had gotten caught. Maybe he'd made a terrible error in judgment and shot an unarmed

innocent. She imagined he was capable of all sorts of things that would have gotten him sacked.
Well, she wouldn't waste any more time fretting about him. In the grand scheme of things, rude patrons weren't important. Mentally she settled her ruffled feathers. She was a woman with a mission, and she wasn't going home today until she had found a place of her own to live in.
She sighed as she remembered her short list of choices. If she kept that vow, she might be sleeping in her car tonight.

THREE

Mayor Temple Nolan loved his little town. Hillsboro was unusually compact for the south, where land was cheap and plentiful, and spreading out was easy. Hillsboro had never spread out much, but remained mostly nestled in a small valley, surrounded by the foothills of the Appalachians. He even loved the approach into town: the main road, lined with cedar trees, wound its way up a hill, then you rounded a curve and there was the town spread out before you, looking more like it belonged in New England than in the sunny south.

There were white church spires piercing the sky, big oaks and hickory trees spreading their enormous green canopies, lawns bright with flowers; hell, there was even a town square. There wasn’t a courthouse, because Hillsboro wasn’t the county seat, but they had a square. It was only an acre, and they’d made it into a pretty little park with well-tended flower beds and benches for sitting, as well as the requisite cannon from the War Between the States, with a pile of rusted cannonballs stacked at its base. Enough of the citizens actually used the little park that he felt the cost was justified.
City hall, a two-story yellow brick building, sat on one side of the square, flanked by the police department and the white-columned city library—the first ruled by Chief Jack Russo, a brusque, hard-nosed Yankee who kept the mayor's town squeaky clean, and the latter by Miss Daisy Minor, as starchy an old maid as ever lived. Not that she was all that old, but she was definitely starchy. She was one of the mayor's favorite characters in a small town filled with characters, because she was so very stereotypical.
Various stores faced on the rest of the square, like the dry cleaners, the hardware store, a clothing store, several antique shops, the feed store, the

dime store, a hobby shop. Hillsboro didn't have fancy shopping, but the citizens could get everything they needed to survive and enjoy life right here. There were the usual assortment of fast food places in town, but none of them were on the square; they were all down the road toward Fort Payne. The only restaurant on the square was the Coffee Cup, which did a booming business for breakfast and lunch, but closed at six because the dinner business wasn't that great.

It was a peaceful town, as much as any gathering of more than nine thousand people could be peaceful. There weren't any bars or nightclubs in Hillsboro; the county was dry. If you wanted something alcoholic to drink —legally—then you had to go to either Scottsboro, which had separated itself from the rest of the county and voted wet, or over into Madison County. Oh, people were always trying to bring booze back home, and the police department tended to look the other way as long as they did indeed go home, but the department cracked down on people who wanted to do their drinking and driving at the same time, as well as kept a sharp eye out for teenagers who were trying to sneak cases of beer back for parties. And there were always people who wanted to smoke marijuana or pop some pills, but Temple Nolan worked hard to keep drugs out of Hillsboro.

That was one of the reasons he'd tapped Jack Russo as chief of police. Russo had worked in both Chicago and New York City; he had a lot of experience in the streets and alleys, and knew what to look for when it came to drug infestation. If his methods were sometimes a little rough for this part of the country. . . well, you had to take the bad with the good. The best thing about Russo was that he was an outsider. He could get the job done, but he wasn't hooked into the old-boy network by which an astonishing amount of information and favors were passed around. A favor received was a favor owed, and before you knew it, things were being done that shouldn't be done, information passed that should be kept quiet. By hiring an outsider, Temple had nipped that in the bud. Hillsboro was to stay peaceful and clean, the way he loved it, and the chief was too isolated to pick up on things he didn't need to know. So far, that had worked out well.

Temple had been mayor for nine years, having just won his third term of office the year before. He was only forty-five, a trim, good-looking man with blue eyes and neat dark hair. He'd grown up in Hillsboro, a popular boy who played all the sports—football, basketball, baseball—but never been the star of any of them. That hadn't affected his popularity, or his

plans. He'd never dreamed of making it big in the major league of any sport. And the star quarterback hadn't been the one who married the head cheerleader; Temple had that honor. Jennifer Whitehead, lithe and blond, had become Mrs. Temple Nolan, in June, after he received his college degree in business administration. The next year had seen the arrival of Jason, and three years after that blond little Paige had been born. Their family portraits looked idealized, like a brochure for family planning.

His kids had kept their noses clean, too; Jason had turned out to have a decent throwing arm, and attended college on the strength of it. But a life in the majors wasn't his dream any more than it had been Temple's, and he was currently in medical school in North Carolina. Paige, at age twenty, was also in college, with double majors in math and science; she wanted to work in the space program. They were great kids; thank God neither of them took after their mother.

Yep, Jennifer was the fly in his ointment. Good old Jennifer; he should have realized that if she was easy in high school and college, marriage wasn't going to change her. He reckoned she'd crawl into bed with just about anyone. If both his kids hadn't resembled him so much, he'd have had their DNA tested. But at first Jennifer had at least tried to limit herself to his bed; he didn't think she'd begun steadily cheating on him until Paige was about two.

His political career would probably withstand the shock if he divorced her, but he had no intentions of doing so. For one thing, the kids loved their mother, and he didn't want them upset. For another, Jennifer had her uses. He was certain she gained him some sympathy votes—the "poor Nolan, he does his best to hold the family together" type of thing—plus if he needed her to close a deal or pay a favor, Jennifer was always willing to drop her drawers and lie down.

Of course, that meant he had to go elsewhere for relief. No way would he stick his dick in her again, not after some of the trash she'd let crawl on top of her. He could have set up a liaison with any one of several available women in town—as well as some who weren't supposed to be—had he been so inclined, but a wise man never fouled his own nest. No, it was best that he keep his urges out of town, and it wasn't as if he ever had any trouble finding a woman when he needed one.

His private number, distinguished from the other office lines by its distinctive tone, began ringing. After first glancing to make certain his door

was closed, Temple answered the call. "Yes?" He never said his name, just in case—especially not on his cellular phone, but the habit had carried over to land lines, too.
"We have a little trouble with the shipment," said a voice he recognized.
"Will there be a delay in getting it out?"
"Yeah. You might want to see to this yourself."
Temple cursed to himself; he had a round of golf scheduled, if this damn rain ever let up. Now he had to drive almost to Huntsville. But Glenn Sykes was a capable man; he wouldn't have said Temple needed to oversee this problem personally if it wasn't something serious. "I'll take a long lunch," he said briefly.
"Come to the barn," said Sykes. "I'll be there waiting."
Both men disconnected, and Temple slowly replaced the receiver. So long as there hadn't been a successful escape, everything would be all right, and Glenn would have told him immediately if that had happened. But other problems sometimes cropped up, problems that had to be handled immediately before the situation became more complicated.
Three hours later, standing in a dilapidated old barn, he looked down at the problem and silently swore as he estimated the lost profits. "What happened?"
"Overdose," Glenn Sykes said succinctly.
It wasn't much of a stretch to guess what had happened, the mayor thought sourly. "GHB?"
"Yeah."
"Mitchell." Sykes didn't contradict him, and Temple sighed. "Mr. Mitchell is becoming a problem." This wasn't the first time Mitchell had dosed one of the girls with GHB. The sick bastard preferred them unconscious when he fucked them; Temple guessed it made him feel as if he was getting away with something. Or maybe he thought that if they didn't fight, then it wasn't rape. Whatever his reasoning, this was the second time he'd killed one of the girls with GHB. Using the merchandise was one thing, but when he started cutting into the profits, that was serious.
Sykes grunted. "Mitchell's been a problem. The fucking idiot's more trouble than he's worth."
"I agree."
"Want me to set something up?"
"I'm afraid we'll have to. Mitchell's fun and games are costing us money."

Sykes was relieved. He didn't like working with fuckups, and Mitchell was a Class-A fuckup. On the other hand, it was a pleasure working with a man like Temple Nolan; he never broke a sweat, but handled everything with a cool lack of emotion. Sykes indicated the bundle on the ground. "What do you want me to do with the body? Bury it? Or dump it?"
Temple considered. "How long has it been?"
“Almost four hours since I found out about it."
"Wait another couple of hours to be sure, then dump it." The chemical composition of GHB broke down after six hours, making it untraceable unless a body was found and tests were run within that time limit. After that, the authorities might suspect GHB, but there was no way of proving it.
"Any preferences as to where?"
"Not as long as there's no connection to us."
Sykes rubbed his jaw. "I think I'll take her to Marshall County, then; when she's found, they'll think she's just one of the migrant workers and no one will push very hard to identify her." He glanced up at the tin roof, where the steady rain was drumming. "The weather will help; there won't be any trace evidence left, even if the Marshall yahoos decide to make an effort."
"Good idea." He sighed, looking down at the small bundle. Death didn't just make a body motionless; it reduced it to a lump, devoid of the tension and inherent grace that the sheer force of life imparted to muscles. He didn't see how anyone could ever think a dead person was asleep, because the whole aspect of the body was so different. Alive, the girl had been a beauty, with an innocent spark that would have brought the money rolling in. Dead, she was nothing.
"I'll call Phillips, let him know what happened, and what we're doing about Mitchell." Temple didn't look forward to the call, because he hated to admit when he'd made a mistake, and the decision to hire Mitchell had been his. Well, it was a mistake that would soon be rectified. Mitchell had dosed his last girl with GHB.

FOUR

Daisy stood in the rain and stared at the small, shabby house on Lassiter Avenue that was her last hope. The white paint was peeling, the few scraggly shrubs desperately needed trimming, the weed-choked yard looked

as if it hadn't been mowed all summer, and the roof over the front porch sagged. The screen on the door was torn loose from the frame on one side, and one window sported a giant crack. On the plus side, the small backyard was fenced. She tried hard to find some more pluses, but came up blank. On the other hand, it was available.

"Let me find the key and we'll go inside," the owner, Mrs. Phipps, said as she dug in her voluminous shoulder bag. Mrs. Phipps wasn't quite five feet tall, was almost as big around, and her hair was arranged—or maybe it grew that way—in huge white puffs that looked like wispy clouds. She puffed as she made her way up the broken sidewalk, skirting one section that was completely gone.

"It's nothing fancy," she warned, though Daisy wondered why she thought any warning was necessary. "Just a living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom, but me and E. B. raised two kids here just fine. When E. B. passed on, my kids bought me a trailer and we put it in back of my oldest boy's house, so I have somebody close if I take sick or something. I didn't want to get rid of this old place, though. It was home for a long time. Plus the rent money helps out."

The sagging wooden porch seemed to give a little more under Mrs. Phipps's weight; Daisy hung back, in case she was needed to go for help in the event Mrs. Phipps fell through the floor. But she reached the door without incident, and wrestled with the recalcitrant lock. Finally the key turned, and Mrs. Phipps heaved a grunt of accomplishment. "Here we go. I cleaned up after the last bunch cleared out, so you don't have to worry about trash or anything like that."

The house was clean, Daisy saw with relief as she stepped inside. The smell was musty, of course, but it was the odor of emptiness, not of filth.

The rooms were small, the kitchen barely big enough to cram in a small table and two chairs, so she couldn't imagine how crowded it had been with a family of four. The floors were all cracked sheet linoleum, but they could be covered with area rugs. The bathroom was small, too, but at some point the tub had been replaced with a blue fiberglass tub and shower unit that didn't match the white toilet and sink. A small space heater jutted from the wall.

Silently she walked through the rooms again, trying to imagine them with lamps and curtains and cozy furniture. If she took the house, she would have to buy window units for air-conditioning, rugs for the floors, kitchen

appliances, and furniture for the living room. She already had her bedroom furniture, thank goodness, but unless she bought the cheapest stuff she could find, she could expect to spend about six thousand dollars getting the place habitable. Thank God she didn't live in a section of the country where the cost of living was high, or she would be looking at an expenditure of at least twice that amount. She had the money— that wasn't a problem—but she'd never spent such a large sum in her life. Her stomach clenched in panic at the very thought.

She could spend the money, or she could retreat to her mother's house and live there until she grew old and died. Alone.

"I'll take it," she said aloud, the words sounding strange and faraway, as if someone else had said them.

Mrs. Phipps's chubby pink face brightened. "You will? I didn't—that is, you didn't seem like the kind . . . This used to be a right nice street, but the neighborhood's gone down, and ..." She ran out of steam, unable to express her astonishment.

Daisy could sympathize. Only a week ago—goodness, even yesterday!—she couldn't have imagined herself living here, either.

She might be desperate, but she wasn't pathetic. She folded her arms and put on her best librarian's face. "The front porch badly needs repairs. I'll handle it for you, if you like, if you'll take the amount of the repairs in lieu of the same amount of rent."

Mrs. Phipps crossed her arms, too. "Why would I do that?"

"You'll be out that amount of ready cash, true, but in the long run your property will be worth more and you'll be able to charge more rent the next time." Daisy hoped Mrs. Phipps was one who could see the long-term benefit, rather than thinking of only the rent money. Daisy had no idea how much the repairs would cost, but the rent was just a hundred and twenty dollars a month, so Mrs. Phipps could be looking at several months without any rent income.

"I don't think I can go without the extra money for that long," Mrs. Phipps said doubtfully.

Daisy thought quickly. "How about every other month? Could you handle that? I pay for the repairs now; then I pay no rent every other month until I recoup my money. Or you pay for the repairs and raise the rent a little."

Mrs. Phipps shifted her weight. "I don't have that kind of cash to throw around. Okay, we'll do it your way. But I want it in writing. And I want the

first month's rent; then we'll start that every-other-month thing. None of the utilities are included, either."
For a hundred and twenty dollars a month, Daisy hadn't assumed they were. She beamed and held out her hand. "It's a deal," she said, and they shook hands on it.
"Kinda small," Aunt Jo commented early that evening as she and Daisy's mother inspected Daisy's new digs.
"It'll do just fine," Evelyn said stoutly. "A coat of paint and some nice curtains will work wonders. Anyway, it isn't as if she's going to live here for very long. She'll find someone special in no time at all. Daisy, honey, if there's anything in the attic you want, just take it." She took another look around the little house. "Just what sort of decor do you have in mind?" she asked doubtfully, as if she couldn't think of anything that would truly help the looks of the house.
"Cozy and comfortable," Daisy said. "It's too small to try for anything else. You know, overstuffed chairs with afghans thrown across them, that kind of thing."
"Hmmph," Aunt Jo said. "Only afghan I ever saw wouldn't stay put unless you tied him down. Stupidest dog in the world."
They all began giggling. Aunt Jo's sense of humor tended to the absurd, and both Daisy and her mother greatly enjoyed the flights of fancy.
"You will need a dog," Evelyn said suddenly, looking around. "Or burglar bars on the windows and an alarm system."
Burglar bars and an alarm system would add another thousand to her growing expenses. Daisy said, "I'll start looking for a dog." Besides, a dog would be company. She had never lived alone, so a dog would help ease the transition. Having a pet again would be nice; it had been eight years—my goodness, that long!— since the last family pet had died of old age.
"When do you think you'll move in?" Aunt Jo asked.
"I don't know." Doubtfully, Daisy looked around. "The utilities have to be turned on, but that won't take long. I'll have to buy kitchen appliances and have them delivered, shop for furniture and rugs, put up curtains. And paint. It definitely needs a new coat of paint."
Evelyn sniffed. "A good landlady would have repainted after the last tenants left."
"The rent is a hundred and twenty a month. Fresh paint doesn't come with the deal."

"I heard Buck Latham is taking paint jobs on the weekends for extra money," said Aunt Jo. "I'll call him tonight and see when he can do it."
Daisy heard another cha-ching in her bank account. "I can do the painting myself."
"No, you can't," Aunt Jo said firmly. "You'll be busy."
"Well, yes, but I'll still have time—"
"No, you won't. You'll be busy."
"What Jo means, dear, is that we've been thinking, and we think you need to see a fashion-and-beauty consultant."
Daisy gaped at them, then smothered a laugh. "Where am I supposed to find one of those?" She didn't think Wal-Mart had a fashion-and-beauty consultant on staff. “And why do I need someone to tell me how I want to look? I've already been thinking about that. I want Wilma to cut my hair, and maybe put in some highlights, and I'll buy some makeup—"
Both Evelyn and Joella slowly shook their heads. "That won't get it," Aunt Jo said.
"Get what?"
Evelyn took over. "Dear, if you're going to do this, then do it right. Yes, you can get a different hairstyle and start wearing some makeup, but what you need is style. You need to have a presence, something that will make people turn and look at you. It's presentation as much as anything else, and you aren't going to find that in the health and beauty section of the drugstore."
"But I'm already going to be spending so much money—"
"Don't be penny wise and pound foolish. Do you think General Eisenhower could have established a beachhead on Normandy if he'd said, 'Wait, we're spending too much money; let's only send half as many ships'? You've saved your money all these years, but what good is money if you never use it? It isn't as if you'll be spending everything you've saved."
Daisy could be convinced, but she couldn't be bulldozed. She gave their proposition a moment's thought. "I want to try it my way, first. Then, if I'm not satisfied, I'll find a consultant."
Having known her all her life, both mother and aunt knew when she'd made up her mind. “All right. But don't let Wilma do anything to your hair just yet," Aunt Jo warned. "The damage could be irreversible."
"Wilma does your hair!" Daisy said indignantly
"Honey, I don't let her anywhere near me with chemicals. The things I've seen in that beauty shop would make your blood run cold."

Daisy had a sudden vision of how she would look with green frizz, and decided she'd wait before booking an appointment with Wilma. Maybe she should go to one of the bigger cities to have her hair done, even though that would mean a trip every month for maintenance, and even more money. Wilma might be bad, but she was cheap.
On the other hand, Wilma might be cheap, but she was bad.
"Remember Normandy," she muttered.
"Exactly," said her mother in a tone of satisfaction.
Daisy was stubborn enough that she stopped by the drugstore on the way home and spent an astonishing amount on a small bag of makeup. Mascara, eyeshadow, blush, lip liner, and lipstick barely amounted to enough weight for her to feel them in the sack, but she was twenty-five dollars lighter in the pocket and she hadn't even bought the good stuff. This project of hers was turning into a real money pit.
She also spent some time researching the beauty magazines, and chose one that seemed to give the most instruction on makeup application. Anyone who could read could learn how to do this, she thought with satisfaction, and went home with her goody bag and instruction manual.
"What did you get?" Aunt Jo demanded as soon as Daisy walked into the house.
"Just the basics." Daisy listed the contents of the bag. "I don't want to try anything complicated, like eyeliner, until I get the hang of the other stuff. I'll put all of this on after supper, and we'll see how it looks."
Because it was her birthday, supper was one of her favorites: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans. She was too on-edge to do justice to the meal, though; a lot had happened that day, and her nerves wouldn't seem to settle down. After the kitchen was cleaned up, her mother and Aunt Jo settled down in front of the television to watch Wheel of Fortune, and Daisy went upstairs to put on her brave new face.
She studied the beauty magazine first, studying the correct way to apply eyeshadow: lightest shade under the brow, medium on the lid, dark in the crease. That sounded simple enough. There were diagrams using Audrey Hepburn-type doe eyes as an example. Daisy opened the little container and stared at the four shades of shadow, in various shades of brown. Brown was so dull; maybe she should have gotten the blues or greens, or even the purples. But if she'd gotten the blue, it wouldn't have matched her green

eye, and if she'd gotten the green, it wouldn't have matched her blue eye. She couldn't even imagine the purple, so she'd settled for brown.
It seemed as if she'd settled for brown a lot in her lifetime.
She carried her little trove into the bathroom and lined everything up on the vanity. The eyeshadow applicator was a tiny foam-tipped wand; she picked it out of the slot and swiped it across the lightest shade of shadow, then swabbed the color under her eyebrows as directed. She eyed the result in the mirror; well, that was practically unnoticeable. Relief warred with disappointment.
Okay, the next step was the medium shade. There were two medium shades, but she didn't suppose it mattered which one she chose. She swiped one of the medium shades across one lid and the other on her other lid, so she could compare the two. After a moment of critical examination, she decided she couldn't tell much difference between them. Her eyes looked more dramatic, though; kind of smoky. Feeling a little excited now, she used the darkest shade in the crease of her lids, but she misjudged the amount of shadow she needed; the resultant dark stripe looked like some kind of tribal marking. Blend. The magazine said to blend. Daisy blended for all she was worth, trying to spread that dark stuff around.
Okay, so now she looked more like Cleopatra than she did Audrey Hepburn. All in all, that had been fairly easy. She'd just take it easier with that dark shade the next time.
Mascara came next. Mascara, according to the magazine, gave eyes impact. Enthusiastically she twirled the wand around and around in the tube, then began swiping it on her lashes.
The end result looked as if caterpillars had crawled up on her eyelids and died.
"Oh, no!" she moaned, staring in the mirror. What had she done wrong? This didn't look anything like the models in the magazine! Her lashes stood out in thick, clumpy spikes, and whenever she blinked, her upper and lower lashes wanted to stick together. After she had pried them apart the second time, she did her best not to blink.
She would be a coward if she stopped now, wouldn't she? She had to see this through. Blusher couldn't be as bad as mascara. She swiped the small brush across the oblong of color, then carefully applied it to her cheeks.
"Gracious," she whispered, eyeing the little container of color. How could it look so much darker on her face than it did in the container? Her cheeks

looked sunburned, except sunburn never attained that exact shade of hot pink.
Grimly she applied the remaining items, the lip liner and lipstick, but she couldn't tell if it helped the situation or made it worse. All she knew was that the end result was hideous; she looked like a cross between a rodeo clown and something from a horror movie.
She definitely needed help.
Grimly she went downstairs, where Wheel of Fortune still spun. Evelyn and Jo stared at her, eyes round and mouths agape, stricken into silence.
"Holy shit," Aunt Jo finally blurted.
Daisy's cheeks burned under the blusher, making the color even brighter. "There has to be a trick to it."
"Don't be upset," her mother begged, getting up to put a comfining arm around her. "Most young girls learn by trial and error in their teens. You just never bothered, that's all."
"I don't have time to learn by trial and error. I need to get this nailed down, now."
"That's why we suggested a beauty consultant. Think about it, honey; that'll be the fastest way."
"Beth could show me how," Daisy said, inspired. Her younger sister didn't slather on the makeup, but she knew how to make the most of her looks. Besides, Beth wouldn't charge her anything.
"I don't think so," Evelyn said gently.
Daisy blinked. Big mistake. Prying her lashes apart, she said, "Why not?"
Evelyn hesitated, then sighed. "Honey, you've always been the smart one, so Beth staked out being pretty as her territory. I don't think she'd handle it very well if you asked her to help you be pretty as well as smart. Not that you aren't pretty," Evelyn added hastily, in case she'd hurt Daisy's feelings. "You are. You've just never learned how to show yourself to advantage."
The idea that Beth might be even the teensiest bit jealous of her was so alien that Daisy couldn't take it in. "But Beth always got good grades in school. She isn't a dummy. She's both smart and pretty, so why wouldn't she help me?"
"Beth doesn't feel as if she's as intelligent as you. She finished high school, but you have a master's degree."
"She didn't go to college because she married her high school sweetheart when she was eighteen and settled down to raising a beautiful family,"

Daisy pointed out. In fact, Beth had what she herself had always wanted.
"Not going was her choice."
"But you always wonder about the choice you didn't make," Aunt Jo pointed out, underlining Daisy's last thought. "Evelyn just means you shouldn't put Beth in that position. She'll feel bad if she turns you down, and if she helps you, it'll be like wearing wool during the summer: miserable and itchy."
So much for that idea. Luckily, she had another one. "I guess I could go to a department store in Chattanooga or Huntsville, and let them do my makeup."
"Actually," said Aunt Jo, "we thought of someone right here in Hillsboro."
"Here?" Puzzled, Daisy tried to think of anyone in Hillsboro who even remotely qualified as a beauty consultant. "Who? Has someone new moved into town?"
"Well, no." Aunt Jo cleared her throat. "We thought Todd Lawrence would do nicely."
"Todd Lawrence?" Daisy gaped at them. “Aunt Jo, just because a man's gay doesn't mean he qualifies as a beauty consultant. Besides, I don't know if Todd is 'out.' I'd hate to upset him by asking, if he isn't." Todd Lawrence was several years older than she, at least in his early forties, and a very dignified, reserved man. He had left Hillsboro when he was in his early twenties and, according to his doting widowed mother, did quite well for himself on Broadway, but since she never had any newspaper clippings or articles to show mentioning his name, everyone thought it was probably a mother's fond bias that led her to think he was so successful. Todd had returned to Hillsboro some fifteen years later, to take care of his mother during her last year of life, and since her death had lived quietly and alone in the old Victorian house on the edge of town.
"Oh, he's 'out,' " Evelyn replied. "For goodness' sake, he opened an antique and decorator store in Huntsville. And how many straight men know what color mauve is? At Easter, Todd told me how good I look in mauve; remember, that's what color my dress was this year? And he said it in front of several people. So he's out."
"I don't know," Aunt Jo said doubtfully. "Mauve isn't really a good test. What if a man's wife has had him looking at paint chips? He might know what mauve is. Now, puce would be a real test. Ask Todd about puce."
"I'm not asking him about puce!"

"Well, other than asking him outright if he's out, I don't see how else you're going to do it."
Daisy rubbed her forehead. "We're getting off track. Even if Todd is gay—"
"He is," both sisters said confidently.
"Okay, he is. That still doesn't mean he knows anything about makeup!"
"He was on Broadway, of course he knows about makeup. Everyone in the shows wears makeup, gay or not. Besides, I've already called him," Evelyn said.
Daisy groaned.
"Now, don't take on," her mother admonished. "He was as nice as he could be, and said of course he'd help you. Just give him a call when you're ready."
"I can't do it," Daisy said, shaking her head.
"Take another look in the mirror," Aunt Jo suggested.
Reluctantly Daisy turned her head to look in the mirror over the gas log fireplace. What she saw made her wince, and she surrendered without even another twinge of conscience. "I'll call him in the morning."
"Do it now," Evelyn urged.

FIVE

Daisy's insides jittered nonstop. Setting up an appointment with Todd Lawrence had been nerve-racking, even though he was just as nice as her mother had said. Not only was she still worried he was offended—though if he was, he hid it very well— but there was something so humiliating about having to ask for help in something as simple as applying a little bit of makeup. What had she done wrong? She knew she wasn't stupid, but was she so basically inept at this sort of thing that she was doomed to failure from the start? She could hear the jokes now: Daisy Minor get a husband? Hah-hah; she can't even put on mascara.
And did she really want a man who couldn't see the real her, just as she was, but who needed a layer of gloss before he even noticed her?
Well, yes. She'd tried the "real her" way and gained exactly nothing. Zippo. If she had to gloss herself in order to get what she wanted—namely, a family—then she would gloss as brightly as needed.

Her new awareness of how dowdy she was almost paralyzed her as she was getting ready for work. For once, she hadn't laid out her clothing the night before, and now she stood in front of the closet staring at the selection of boring skirts and blouses and dresses. She couldn't bear wearing those, not one more time. She dithered until, for the first time in her life, she ran the very real risk of being late to work. Finally she grabbed a pair of black slacks and pulled them on. She had never before worn pants to work, but that was because of her own stodginess, not any rule by the town council. This was yet another break with her old way of life, and her heart hammered in a combination of fear and excitement. She didn't have any stylish tops, of course, just her regular, boring white blouses, but she put one on and tucked the hem into the waistband of her slacks, then buckled the belt and slipped her feet into black loafers.

She didn't dare look in the mirror to check the result, just grabbed her purse and ran downstairs.

Aunt Jo raised her eyebrows when she saw her, but didn't say anything.

"Well?" Daisy demanded, even more nervous under that silent regard.

Evelyn came out of the kitchen and stared at her daughter. "Nice," she finally said, nodding her head. "Different. And the pants show the shape of your butt."

Ohmigod; now she wouldn't be able to turn her back to anyone all day long. Aghast, she swiftly checked her watch. There was no time to go change clothes. "Why did you have to say that?" she moaned.

Evelyn smiled. "It's okay, honey. If I remember correctly, men are partial to butts. See if you can remember to priss when you walk."

"Priss," Daisy repeated numbly, still unable to take in that her mother—her mother!—thought it was a good thing for her to show the shape of her butt.

"You know. . . back and forth." To demonstrate, her mother strolled across the room, her hips swaying in a gentle rhythm that drew attention to her own rear end. The movement was so astonishingly sexy that Daisy was shocked. Her mother? Her intellectual, unsophisticated mother?

"But not too much," Aunt Jo advised. "Or it'll look like two pigs fighting to get out of a sack."

That was all she could take. With a mumbled excuse about being late for work, Daisy fled.

She had barely got the key in the lock of the employees' door when a white car drove up behind her and Chief Russo got out. He might not be at the top

of her list of people she didn't want to see that day she thought in exasperation, but he was close. She tried to shift to the side so he couldn't see her butt, not that he was looking anyway. He was scowling as he strode up to her. "You're late."
Daisy checked her watch. It was twelve seconds to nine o'clock. "I'm right on time."
"You're always about half an hour early. Today, you aren't. Therefore you're late."
"How do you know what time I get to work?" she asked, feeling flushed and harassed. Just once she was almost late, and that would be the one day someone was waiting for her arrive. Besides, he was standing too close, crowding her again in that annoying way of his, as if he were trying to intimidate her with his size. Maybe it was working, since she felt flushed and harassed. She tried to squeeze closer to the door.
"The lights in the library are always on when I drive past."
Meaning she was always—well, almost always—at work before he was. She barely refrained from smirking and instead, with an effort, assumed her librarian's expression and tone. "May I help you with something, Chief?"
"Yeah," he said in that brusque Yankee way. "I tried to get into the on-line library last night, but it wouldn't open. You wrote down the wrong password or something."
Why was it always the woman's fault? she wondered, mentally raising her eyes to heaven. "If the page won't display, then you probably need to upgrade your browser."
He stared at her as if she were speaking a foreign language.
"Your browser," she repeated. "How old is your system?"
He shrugged. "Two or three years."
"Have you upgraded at all since you bought it?" She knew the answer even before she asked the question. She would love to leave him to figure it out on his own, but good manners and a lifetime of being helpful prodded her conscience. She was a librarian; it was her duty to help him with the virtual library. "Do you have a laptop or a desktop?" She bet on the laptop. He was the impatient sort who would want to move his computer around to where it was most convenient for him.
"Laptop."
She awarded herself two points. "If you'll bring it by, I'll show you how to upgrade. If you have enough memory, of course." Let him decide if she was

talking about his brain or his computer.
From the way his eyes narrowed, he must have suspected the former, but he let it pass. "It's in the car." He strode back to the city-owned Crown Victoria and got the laptop out of the front passenger seat, carrying it easily in one hand.
She unlocked the employees' entrance and turned to take the laptop. "You can pick it up at lunch," she said.
He retained possession of the machine. "Can't you do it now?"
"I intend to, but it'll take a few minutes."
"How many is a few?"
Her heart sinking, she realized he intended to wait. "Don't you have to go to work?"
He indicated the pager on his belt. "I'm always at work. How many is a few?" he repeated.
Damn modern electronics, she thought resentfully. The last thing she wanted was to have him hovering. "It depends." She tried to think how long might be too long. "Forty-five minutes or an hour."
“I’ll wait."
Double damn. Her only consolation was that updating the browser wouldn't take nearly that long; then he'd be on his way.
"Fine. Meet me at the front door." She stepped inside and almost hit him in the nose with the door as he stepped forward. He slapped his free hand up just in time to stop it.
"I'll come in this way," he said, glaring at her.
Daisy squared her shoulders. "You can't."
"Why not?"
She thought that should have been obvious. She pointed to the sign on the door, just inches from his nose. "This is the employees' entrance. You aren't an employee."
"I'm a city employee."
"You aren't a library employee, and that's what counts."
"Hell, lady, what's it going to hurt?" he asked impatiently.
More points on the bad side. His demerits were rivaling the score of an NBA game. "No. Go to the front door."
Her stubborn expression must have finally registered. He eyed her, as if considering simply bullying his way past her, but with a muttered curse he turned on his heel and stormed around to the front of the building.

She was left standing there with her eyes as big as saucers. He'd said the F word. She was fairly certain that was what she'd heard. She'd heard it before, of course; one couldn't watch many movies these days without hearing it. She'd also gone to college, where young people tried to impress each other with how cool and sophisticated they were by using all the foul words they knew; she'd even said it herself. But Hillsboro was a small southern town, and it was still considered ill-mannered for men to use such language in front of women. Women who wouldn't turn a hair at hearing anything from their husbands or boyfriends in private would poker up like Queen Victoria if it were said in public. And to say such a thing to a woman you didn't know well was a total no-no, indicative of a total lack of manners and respect—

A thunderous banging on the front door interrupted her indignant reverie; the beast was already at the door. Muttering to herself, she hurried through the darkened library to unlock the front door.

"What took you so long?" he snapped as he stepped inside.

"I was frozen in shock by your language," she coolly replied, taking the laptop from him and carrying it to the library's on-line computer, turning on lights as she went.

He muttered something again, but this time, thankfully, she couldn't tell what it was. She wasn't as lucky with his next sentence. "You're a little young to have a stick up your ass like the blue-hairs in this town."

To her credit, she didn't falter. "Manners have nothing to do with age, and everything to do with upbringing." She set the laptop down and swiftly began hooking it up to the power source and telephone outlet.

It took him a minute. “Are you insulting my mother?" he finally growled.

"I don't know, am I? Or are you simply ignoring what she taught you?"

"Shit!" he said explosively, then blew out a deep breath. "Okay, I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget I'm living in Mayberry."

If they were so boring and restrictive, maybe he should think about going back to wherever he came from, she thought resentfully, but kept her thoughts to herself before the situation developed into a full-fledged argument. "Apology accepted," she forced herself to say, though she could have used a more gracious tone if she had really, really tried. She sat down and went on-line, then typed in the browser's web address and waited until the site was found and the page displayed. Then she clicked on the update bar, and let technology handle the rest.

"That's it?" he asked, watching the little timer.
"That's it. You should do this regularly, at least every six months."
"You're good at this."
"I've had to do it a lot since we got the virtual library," she said wryly.
He sat down beside her; too close, of course. She inched her chair away.
"You know your way around computers."
"Not really. I know how to do this, but I had to learn. I can find my way around on the Web, I can hook up a system and load programs, but I'm not a computer geek or anything."
"City hall isn't even on-line. Water bills and payroll are computerized, but that's it."
He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees as he watched the screen, as if he could hurry the process.
"The police department is, though, isn't it? Aren't you hooked up with all those police networks?"
He grunted. "Yeah. One line, one computer." He looked disgusted.
"Hillsboro is a small town," she pointed out. "The budget isn't very big. On the other hand, our crime rate is low." She paused, suddenly unsure. "Isn't it?"
"Low enough. There hasn't been a murder in the city limits since I've been here. We have the usual burglaries and assaults, drunk driving, domestic troubles."
She would have loved to ask him who was having domestic trouble, but bit her tongue. He just might tell her, and then she'd tell her mother and Aunt Jo, and feel bad about gossiping.
Had he moved closer? She hadn't seen him do so, but she could feel his body heat, and smell him. What was it about men that made them smell different from women? Testosterone? More body hair? It wasn't an unpleasant smell; in fact, it was tantalizing. But it was different, as if he were an alien species. And he was definitely too darn close.
She had had enough. "You're crowding me," she pointed out, very politely.
Without moving, he glanced down; their chairs were separated by at least an inch. "I'm not touching you," he said just as politely.
"I didn't say you were touching me; I said you're too close."
He rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh, but hitched his chair another inch away. "Is this some other weird southern rule?"

"You're in law enforcement; you're supposed to have studied body language. Isn't that how you intimidate suspects, by invading their personal space?"
"No, I generally use a nine millimeter for intimidation purposes. Not much chance of missing the signal that way."
Oh, and wasn't that macho? He was such a typical man, bragging about the size of his weapon. She barely refrained from rolling her eyes, but he'd just done that and she didn't want to be a copycat.
A typical man . . . The conversation last night with her mother and Aunt Jo echoed in her mind, and a thought tickled her, but she pushed it away. No, she didn't want to get into that kind of discussion with him. She just wanted his browser to finish upgrading so he would go away—
"Do you know what color mauve is?" she blurted, the words leaping from her tongue before she could stop them.
The effect on him was almost electric. He jerked back, eyeing her as if she had suddenly sprouted fangs and tentacles. "What makes you ask?" he said warily.
"I just want to know." She paused. "Well, do you?"
"What makes you think I'd know?"
"I don't. I'm just asking."
"It sounds like one of those tests women use to find out if a man's gay or not. Why don't you just ask, if you're interested?"
"I'm not," she said, appalled that he might think she was. "It's just that someone else—never mind." She was blushing. She knew she was; her face felt hot. She stared very hard at the computer screen, trying to will the thing to go faster.
He scrubbed a rough hand over his short hair. "Pink," he mumbled.
"What?"
"Pink. Mauve is a fancy word for pink, right? I heard it often enough when my ex-wife was picking out stuff for our apartment, but it looked pink to me."
My goodness, Aunt Jo was right about mauve; it was no longer a definitive test. Wasn't that interesting? She couldn't wait to tell them.
"Puce," she said, and nearly smacked herself in the head. Why couldn't she leave well enough alone?
"What?" He acted as if he'd never heard the word before.
"Puce. What color is puce?"

"Spell it."
"P-u-c-e."
This time he scrubbed his hand over his face. "This is a trick question, right?"
"Why do you say that?"
"Puce. Who in hell would name a color 'puce'? It sounds like 'puke' and nobody would want something colored like puke."
"Puce is a very pretty color," she said.
He gave her a disbelieving look. "If you say so."
"Do you know what color it is, or not?"
"Hell, no, I don't know what color puce is," he barked. "I know real colors; I know blue and green and red, things like that. Puce, my ass. You just made that up."
She smirked. "I did not. Go look it up in the dictionary." She pointed to the reference section. "There are several right over there."
He snorted, then shoved back in his chair and all but stomped over to the reference section. He leafed through a dictionary, ran his finger down a couple of pages, then briefly read. "Reddish brown," he scoffed, shaking his head. "Not that I've ever seen anything that's reddish brown, but if I did, you can be damn sure I wouldn't point at it and say, 'That looks like puce'!"
"What would you call it?" she taunted. "Something really imaginative, like 'reddish brown'? Though I've always thought puce was more of a purple brown than anything else."
"At least people would know what the hell I was talking about if I said reddish brown, or even purplish brown. And who needs a color like that, anyway? Who in his right mind would go into a store and ask the clerk for a puce shirt? Or buy a puce car? I worry about people who buy purple cars, but puce? Give me a break. Puce is only good as a gay test."
It probably was, but she wasn't going to admit that. "You know what color puce is now," she couldn't resist pointing out. "From now on, when you see any brown that has the least hint of red or purple, you're going to think: That's puce.'"
"Oh, Jesus." He pinched the bridge of his nose between his eyes. "You give me a headache," he muttered, then looked up, his eyes narrow and gaze dangerous. "If you mention this to anyone, I'll deny it, then I'll have you hauled in if you so much as jaywalk. Is that understood?"

"I don't jaywalk," she said triumphantly. "I'm so law-abiding I could be the poster child for responsible citizens. I wouldn't even let you come in through the employees' door, would I?"
"People like you need counseling." He glanced at the computer screen, then heaved a sigh of relief. "It's finished." He checked his watch. "That didn't take anywhere near forty-five minutes. More like fifteen. So I guess you do have a fault, Miss Daisy."
She felt her back teeth lock together at the "Miss Daisy." If he made another joke about her name, she might just smack him. "What's that?" she asked as she quickly unhooked the computer. The faster he left, the better.
He took the laptop from her. "You lie like hell," he said, leaving her speechless, and he strode out before she could think of a good reply.

SIX

Jack Russo was in a good mood when he left the library. Sparring with Miss Daisy was a lot of fun; she pokered up, blushed, but didn't back down an inch. She reminded him a lot of his great-aunt Bessie, with whom he had spent many of his summers right here in Hillsboro. Aunt Bessie had been as straitlaced and starchy as they came, but remarkably tolerant of having an energetic boy with her for at least two months every summer.
Though at first he'd been agonized at being stuck in the sticks—as he'd thought of Hillsboro back then—he had grown to love both his great-aunt and his time here. His parents had thought it would be good for him to get out of Chicago and find out there was another type of world out there, and they'd been right.
At first he'd been bored to tears; he was ten years old and away from his parents and all his friends, all his stuff. Aunt Bessie had been able to get a grand total of four—four!—channels on her television, and she did things like crochet every afternoon while she sat in front of the tube and watched her "stories." She went to church twice on Sunday, washed her sheets on Monday, mopped on Tuesday, shopped for groceries on Thursday because that was double-coupon day. He didn't need a clock to tell time; all he had to do was check what Aunt Bessie was doing.
And it had been hot. God, had it been hot. And Aunt Bessie hadn't had air-conditioning; she didn't believe in such foolishness. She had a window fan

in each bedroom and a portable one she moved around the rest of the house as she needed it, and that was enough for her. Her screened windows were open to let breezes flow through the house.

But after he'd gotten over his tears and sullenness, he had gradually discovered the fun of lying in the sweet-smelling grass at sunset and watching the fireflies—or lightning bugs, as Aunt Bessie called them. He'd helped her in the small garden she tended every summer, learning to appreciate the taste of fresh vegetables and the work involved in getting them to the table. He had gradually gotten to know the neighborhood boys and spent many a long hot afternoon playing baseball or football; he had learned how to fish and hunt, taught by the dad of one of his new friends. Those six summers, beginning at age ten and ending when he was fifteen, became the best times of his life.

In a way, he had never become absorbed into Hillsboro culture; because he came only during the summer, he never met any of the kids other than the boys in the neighborhood. Since he'd been back in Hillsboro, he'd met only one man who remembered him, but over twenty years had passed since he'd stopped visiting Aunt Bessie except for lightning stops during the holidays, when people were busy with their own families and he hadn't had time to look up any of his old pals.

Aunt Bessie lived to be ninety-one, and when she died three years ago, he'd been both startled and touched to find she'd willed her old house to him. Almost immediately he'd made up his mind to make the move from New York City to Hillsboro; he'd just gotten divorced, and though he'd been steadily moving up the ranks in the NYPD, he was getting tired of the stress and bustle of the job. The Special Weapons and Tactics team was fun, but the danger associated with it was one of the reasons behind his divorce. Not the big reason, but one of them, and on this issue he figured his ex-wife was at least half right. Being a cop's wife was tough; being the wife of someone who went to work only when the situations were the most dangerous took nerves of steel. Besides, he was thirty-six; he'd started at the age of twenty-one, in Chicago, then moved to New York. It was time to get out, look for something a little less edgy.

He made a couple of trips to Hillsboro, to look over the old Victorian house and see what repairs were needed, and at the same time put out some feelers for a job. Before he knew it, he was being interviewed for chief of police, and after that it was a done deal. He put in his notice—amid ribbing about

being the Chief of Podunk—packed his stuff, and moved south. He had a staff of thirty, which was a joke compared to the size of the police force he'd just left, but Jack felt as if he'd found his niche.

Okay, so there wasn't a lot going on, but he liked protecting his adopted town. Hell, he even liked the city council meetings; he'd gotten a big kick out of the last one, with half the citizenry up in arms because the council had voted to install traffic lights around the square. It was ridiculous that a town of nine thousand people had only one traffic light, but to hear those people talk, all ten of the amendments in the Bill of Rights were being violated. If Jack had his way, traffic lights would be installed all over downtown, and at all the schools. Hillsboro lagged behind the times— he hadn't been joking when he called it Mayberry—but traffic was becoming more congested as people moved to the pretty little town, and he didn't want a schoolkid flattened by a car before the citizens woke up and decided maybe they did need more traffic lights.

Eva Fay Storie, his secretary, was on the phone when he entered his office, but she held up one finger to stop him, then handed him a cup of coffee and a sheaf of pink message slips. "Thanks," he said, sipping the coffee as he continued into his office. He didn't know how Eva Fay did it, but no matter what time he came into the office, she had a hot cup of fresh coffee waiting for him. Maybe she had his parking space wired, and a buzzer went off under her desk when he pulled in. One of these days he was going to park on the street just to see if he could throw her off. He'd inherited her from his predecessor, and both of them were satisfied with the status quo.

One of the calls was from a detective in Marshall County whom he'd become friendly with since moving to Hillsboro. Jack laid the other messages aside and immediately dialed the number on the slip.

"Petersen."

"What's up?" Jack knew he didn't have to identify himself. Even if Petersen didn't have Caller ID, Jack's accent was enough to give him away.

"Hey, Jack. Listen, we have an unidentified body on our hands, young, female, probably Mexican. Some kids found her last night."

Jack leaned back in his chair. There weren't any missing persons from Hillsboro who fit that description; they didn't have a large Hispanic population anyway, but no one at all had been reported missing in the past several months. "And?"

"Well, we don't have shit to go on. The rain washed away any tracks, and there's no obvious cause of death. No wounds, no strangulation marks, no lumps on the head, nothing."
"Overdose."
"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. What has me worried, though, are the cases of GHB that've been cropping up in Huntsville, Birmingham, all over, with more every day."
"You think she was raped?"
"No way of knowing for certain until we get the autopsy report back from Montgomery, but I'd say so. She had on a dress, but no underwear. Anyway, I remembered a case Huntsville had a couple of months ago—"
"Yeah, I remember. It was pretty much the same."
They were both silent. If a guy was willing to slip one woman GHB so he could have sex with her, it was stupid to think he'd balk at doing it again. The problem was, GHB was so damn common and easy to get; it was a cleaning solvent, for God's sake. And guys took it, too; it was a high, and bodybuilders used it. The odds of finding any one guy weren't good, because too damn many women woke up without any memory of where they'd spent the night, or with whom, but with their bodies showing the evidence of sexual activity. To make it even harder to track the slimeballs down, very few of the women reported it to the police.
"How do you think I can help?" he finally asked, because Pe-tersen had to have called him for a reason, and not just to tell him about the case. Jack would have found out about it when he read the reports, anyway.
"I was wondering, have you had any GHB cases in Hillsboro?"
"Not that I know of, but we're dry." GHB went hand-in-glove with the bar scene, because alcohol disguised the saltiness so well. Without any bars in Hillsboro, it wasn't unusual that he hadn't had any date-rape cases involving Ruffies or GHB—yet. Sooner or later, some local kid would die from it, or a bodybuilder would get caught with it, but so far his little town hadn't been hit. That didn't mean there weren't users in Hillsboro; it just meant that they'd been lucky in that none of them had died.
"I still don't know where you're going with this," he said.
"Do you hit many of the area bars? Off-duty, of course."
"Hell, I'm too busy and too old for that."
"You never get too old for it, buddy; just go in one someday and check out the gray hairs. Anyway, I was thinking: you're fairly new to the area, and if

you don't wander up to Scottsboro or over to Madison County in search of a little entertainment, then you aren't likely to be known outside of Hillsboro, are you? So you could maybe cruise the clubs and bars, listen to what's being said, maybe keep any eye out for someone slipping that shit into women's drinks. Go undercover, I guess."
"And strictly off-record and on my own," Jack said wryly.
"Hell, buddy, it's better that way. Nothing official. You're a single man with an active social life, so what could be more natural? And if, in the course of a night's entertainment, you notice something or accidentally overhear something, why, I do believe we have probable cause. Whaddaya say?"
"It's a long shot."
"Granted. But, damn it, I don't like having girls' bodies dumped in my county. I can work my usual sources and get some busts around here for possession, but that isn't going to stop the bastards who cruise the bars. We need an edge, and I think you might be the sharpest knife available to us."
"We don't want to get crossways with the DEA, maybe foul up an operation they have going."
"Fuck 'em," Petersen said cheerfully.
Jack had to laugh, because it really was a pretty good setup. If he did step on some toes, it would be purely accidental. What the hell, it wouldn't hurt him to spend some time in some clubs. His experience was in SWAT, not narcotics, but he'd seen enough to know what to look for. "Who else is going to know about this?"
"About what?" Petersen asked, with an immediate case of amnesia.
"I don't guess you can tell me what some good clubs in the area are, can you?"
"Not speaking from personal experience, you understand, but I hear the Hot Wing in Scottsboro has some action. You might check out the Buffalo Club in Madison County, and the Sawdust Palace in Huntsville. I can come up with some more names if you're interested."
"Get me a list," Jack said, and hung up.
He leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed as he ran the plan in his mind again. There weren't any rules, because he was on his own. Hell, there really wasn't a plan, just a see-what-you-can-see mission. He'd have to play it by ear if he did happen to run across something, but his training had taught him how to act with initiative in fluid situations.

He felt the old surge of adrenaline through his veins, the tightening of anticipation. Maybe he missed the action more than he'd realized. This wasn't the same as a hostage situation or an armed standoff, but it was every bit as important. Women were getting raped and were sometimes dying because of GHB; if he could catch just one son of a bitch slipping it into someone's drink, he'd gladly nail his balls to the wall.

That night Daisy hesitantly knocked on Todd Lawrence's elaborate leaded-glass front door. The door itself was a work of art, painted a shade of blue that matched the shutters, with the detailing pinstriped in a dark green that made one think of a forest; given the number of potted plants on the wide porch, that analogy wasn't far off. The leaded glass gleamed as if it had just that day been cleaned with vinegar. Two antique bronze lamps bracketed the door, casting a soft light that made the entrance feel cozy and inviting.

Through the glass she saw a blurred figure approach; then the door opened and Todd Lawrence himself smiled down at her. "Hello, Daisy, how are you? Come on in." He stepped back and gestured with his hand. "It seems like ages since I've seen you. I don't get by the library as much as I should. Since I opened the store in Huntsville, it seems as if it takes up all my spare time."

Todd had always had a way about him that made you feel as if you were his best friend. Daisy's own contact with him had been limited, but his easy manner dissipated some of her nervousness. He was a slim, neat man, clad in tan chinos and a chambray shirt with the cuffs rolled back. Todd was about five-eleven in height, with brown hair and eyes and an easy smile, one that made you automatically want to smile in return.

"Successful businesses have a way of doing that," she said, following him into the front parlor and taking a seat on the overstuffed floral couch he indicated.

"Do they ever." He smiled ruefully. "I spend a lot of my free time going to auctions. A lot of nights there's nothing but junk and reproductions, but every so often a real gem will show up. The other night I bought a hand-painted Oriental screen for less than a hundred dollars, and sold it the next day for three thousand. I had a client who had been looking for something exactly like that."

"It takes a good eye to be able to tell real antiques from reproduction stuff," she said. "And years of study, I guess."

He shrugged. "I picked it up here and there. I like old furniture, so it was only natural that I paid attention." He put his hands on his hips and studied her, his head to the side. Normally such an examination would have made her uneasy, but Todd had a twinkle in his eyes that said, Hey, isn't this fun? "So, you want a makeover, do you?"

“An all-over makeover," Daisy said honestly. "I'm a mess, and I don't know what to do to correct it. I bought some makeup and tried it, but there has to be a trick to it or something, because I looked awful."

He laughed. "Actually, there are several tricks to it."

"I knew it," she muttered, indignant. Would it have been too much trouble for the companies to have printed the real proper way to apply their products?

"Most of it, though, is just practice, and learning not to use too much." He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Makeup's easy; I can show you that in less than an hour. What else are you planning to do?"

She felt her face heat up at having to catalog her faults. For goodness' sake, weren't they obvious? "Well, my hair. I was thinking about having Wilma put in some highlights—"

"Good God, no!" he exclaimed, horrified.

Daisy sighed. "That was pretty much the same reaction I got from my family."

"Listen to them," he advised. "They know whereof they speak. Wilma hasn't kept up with the trends or the new developments in chemicals. I doubt she's been to a hair show since she got her license forty years ago. There are some good stylists in either Huntsville or Chattanooga who won't burn your hair off at the scalp."

Daisy shuddered at the mental picture of herself bald. Todd lifted a strand of her hair and fingered it. "Your hair's in good shape," he said. "There's no discernable style, but it's healthy."

"It doesn't have any body." Now that she had gotten started, she was determined not to leave out the slightest flaw.

"That's no problem. Getting some of this length cut off will help, and there are some marvelous products available now to give hair more body and make it more manageable, too. Lightening it will give it more body, too."

He studied her again. "Forget highlights. I think you should go blonde."

"B-blonde?" she squeaked. She couldn't even picture herself as a blonde. She could barely conceive of how she would look with a few highlights in

her hair.
"Nothing brassy," he said. "We'll have the stylist put in several shades, so it will look natural."
For someone who had never even put a temporary rinse on her hair, bleaching her hair to several shades of blond seemed at least as difficult as putting a man on the moon. "H-how long would that take?"
"Oh, several hours, I'd think. Your hair will have to be double-processed. "
"What's that?"
"Your own pigment will have to be bleached out, then blond pigment streaked in to replace it."
Well, at least that made sense. She didn't know if she'd ever have the nerve to do anything that drastic, but it was an option she could consider. "I'll think about it," she said dubiously.
"Think hard," he said. "What else?"
She sighed. "My clothes. I have no sense of style."
He looked at the skirt and blouse she wore. She had changed out of her pants as soon as she got home, because she couldn't stand another minute of worrying about whether or not people were looking at her butt. “Actually, you do,” he drawled. "Unfortunately, it's all bad."
Her cheeks turned red, and he laughed. "Don't worry," he said kindly, extending a hand to help her to her feet. "You just never learned how to make the most of yourself. You have a lot of potential."
"I do?"
"You do." He made a circling motion with his finger. "Turn around. Slowly."
Self-consciously she did so.
"You have a good figure," he said. "You should show it, instead of hiding it inside those old-lady clothes. Your skin is excellent, you have good teeth, and I like those odd eyes you have. I'll bet you’ve been embarrassed by your eyes all your life, haven't you?"
She almost squirmed, because as a child she'd been hideously aware of her different-colored eyes and always tried to blend into the background so no one would notice them. "For God's sake, play them up," Todd said. "They're different, special. It isn't as if you have one brown eye and one blue, which would really look weird, and I don't know if it's genetically possible anyway. You'll never be a ravishing beauty, but you can definitely be very, very nice to look at."

"That's all I want, anyway," she said. "I don't think I could handle ravishing."
"I've heard it's a burden," he said, smiling at her. "The best light is in my bathroom. So step into my boudoir, if you dare, and let's get started on this transformation."
Daisy extracted a small bag from her purse. "I brought my makeup."
"Let's see what you have." He took the bag from her and opened it. He didn't make a tsking sound, but she got the feeling he barely refrained.
"That will do for a start," he said with kind forbearance.
He lead the way through his bedroom to the bath, and if Daisy had ever harbored any doubts about Todd's sexual affiliation, his bedroom settled it. It was exquisitely furnished in Chippendale, with a huge four-poster bed that was swathed in graceful swags of netting, and with huge, lush potted plants artistically arranged around the room. She wished her own bedroom looked half as good.
My goodness, even his bathroom was decorated. He'd done it in green and white, with touches of peach and dusty blues. She'd never been in a man's bathroom before, she realized. She was faintly disappointed to see an ordinary toilet, though of course there was no reason for him to have a urinal hanging on the wall. Besides, it wouldn't have gone with the decor.
"I don't have a vanity chair, sorry," he said, smiling again. "Men don't sit down to shave."
She'd never thought of it before, but he was right; shaving was something else men didn't sit down to do.
"Okay, first get your hair away from your face. Do you have a headband or anything?"
She shook her head.
"Then tuck it behind your ears and brush it away from your forehead."
She did as he said. That awful self-conscious feeling was back; her fingers were clumsy, unable to manage the simple act of tucking her hair behind her ears without fumbling. She suspected she'd stumble over her own feet if she had to walk anywhere right now.
He opened a drawer in the built-in vanity and took out a box, about ten inches wide and five inches thick. He flicked the clasp, raised the lid, and trays unfolded—trays filled with all sorts of brushes and lipsticks, arrays of colors for the eyes and cheeks all displayed in little containers. "My goodness," she blurted. "You have more makeup than Wal-Mart."

He laughed. "Not quite. This box brings back memories, though. I was on Broadway for a while, and you have to slather on layers of makeup to keep from looking like a ghost when the lights hit you."
"That sounds like fun. I've never been to New York. I've never done much of anything."
"It was fun."
"Why did you come back?"
"It wasn't home," he said simply. "Besides, Mother needed someone to take care of her. That's the way it works: they take care of you when you're young, you take care of them when they're old."
"Family," she said, smiling, because her own was so close.
"Exactly Now," he said, his tone turning brisk, "let's get started."
Less than an hour later, entranced, Daisy stared into the mirror. Her lips parted in wonder. Oh, she wasn't a raving beauty, but the woman in the mirror was attractive, and she looked confident, lively. She didn't fade into the wallpaper. And most important, men would notice her!
The process hadn't been painless. First Todd had insisted she pluck her eyebrows: "You don't want Joan Crawford eyebrows, dear. She had one brow hair that grew to about three inches long, and she named it Oscar, or something like that." But thankfully he hadn't wanted her to have Bette Davis eyes, either, so she'd been able to limit the tweezing to a few stragglers.
Then he had walked her through the application of a full makeup job, and, to her relief, it wasn't very complicated. The main thing was not to use too much, and to always have a tissue and cotton tip at hand to repair any mistakes or wipe off excess. Even mascara was easy, once she had used the tissue to blot most of the goop off the little brush before applying it to her lashes.
"Heathens," she had muttered, surveying her lovely dark lashes in the mirror. There wasn't a caterpillar in sight.
"Beg pardon?"
"Mascara makers. They're heathens. Why don't they just tell you to blot most of the mascara off the brush before you start?"
"Honey, they have enough to worry about warning people not to poke it in their eyes, or eat it. I guess they figure if you really want to wear mascara, you'll learn how."
Well, she had wanted, and she had learned.

"I did it," she said numbly, staring at her reflection. Her complexion was smooth and bright, her cheeks softly flushed, her eyes mysterious and larger, her lips full and moist. It hadn't been difficult at all.
"Well, honey, of course you did. There's nothing to it; just practice and don't go overboard with the color. Now, let's think about style. Which would you rather shoot for: nature girl, old money, or sex kitten?"
Todd stood in his open front door and cheerfully waved a goodbye to Daisy. He couldn't help smiling. This was the first time he'd ever spent any time with her, though of course he'd known who she was, and he really liked her. She was touchingly naive for someone her age, but fresh and bright and honest, without a jaded bone in her body. She had absolutely no idea how to make the most of her looks, but, thank God, he did. When he was finished with her, she was going to be a knockout.
He strode to the phone and dialed a number. As soon as the call was answered on the other end, he said, "I have a candidate. Daisy Minor."

SEVEN

Glenn Sykes was a professional. He was careful, he paid attention to details, and he didn't let himself get emotionally involved. He'd never spent a day in jail; in fact, he even had a clean driving record, without so much as a speeding ticket to his name. Not that he hadn't had a speeding ticket, but the driver's license he'd presented had been in a different name, an alternate identity he'd prudently set up for himself some fifteen years previously
One of the reasons he was successful was that he didn't draw attention to himself. He wasn't loud, he seldom drank—and never when he was working, only when he was alone—and he always kept himself neat and clean, on the theory that law-abiding people were more likely to keep an eagle eye on anyone hanging around who looked dirty and unkempt, as if dirt somehow translated into shiftiness. Anyone who saw him would automatically categorize him as Joe Average, with a wife and a couple of kids, and a three-bedroom house in an older subdivision. He didn't wear an earring, or a chain, or have a tattoo; all those, however small, were things that people noticed. He kept his sandy brown hair cut fairly short, he wore an ordinary thirty-dollar wristwatch even though he could afford much

better, and he watched his mouth. He could and did go anywhere without drawing undue attention.
That was why he was so disgusted with Mitchell. The dead girl wasn't anyone important, but her body, when it was discovered, would still draw attention. The resultant investigation probably wouldn't amount to much, and he'd been careful to make certain the cops wouldn't have anything to go on, but mistakes happened and even cops got lucky occasionally. Mitchell was jeopardizing the entire enterprise; Sykes had no doubt that if Mitchell was ever arrested in connection with those girls' deaths, he'd drop every name he'd ever known in an effort to strike a deal with the D.A. Mitchell's stupidity could get every one of them a prison sentence.
The hell of it was, if Mitchell couldn't get it up with a conscious woman, there were other ways to do it. GHB was a crap shoot; you might take it one time and be okay, with just a gap in your memory. The next time, it could shut down your brain. There were other drugs that would work; hell, booze would work. But, no, Mitchell had to slip them GHB, like he was getting away with something and no one would notice when the girls didn't wake up.
So Mitchell had to go. If Mayor Nolan hadn't given the word, Sykes had already decided it was time for him to be moving on, before Mitchell brought them all down. But the mayor, for all his southern-fucking-gentleman manners, was as cold and ruthless as anyone Sykes had ever met; he didn't pretend that he couldn't sully his hands with murder—though Sykes didn't exactly call killing Mitchell murder. It was more of an extermination, like stepping on a cockroach.
First, though, he had to find the bastard. With a cockroach's talent for self-preservation, Mitchell had gone to ground and hadn't turned up at any of his usual haunts.
Since Mitchell was already spooked, Sykes decided to play this low-key While it would have been satisfying to simply walk up to the bastard's trailer and put a hole between his eyes as soon as he opened the door, again, things like that tended to attract attention. For one thing, Mitchell had neighbors, and in Sykes's experience neighbors were always looking out the window just when they shouldn't. He could dispose of Mitchell in far less dramatic ways. With luck, he could even make it look like an accident.
Mitchell knew his car, so Sykes borrowed one from a pal and cruised through Mitchell's neighborhood, if you could call two ramshackle trailers

and one dilapidated frame house, surrounded by junk, a neighborhood. They were the types of places inhabited by women with frizzy hair who wore tight, stained tank tops that showed their dirty bra straps, and by men with long, straggly hair, yellowed teeth, and an unshaken belief that life had done them wrong and owed them something. Sykes didn't openly look at any of the three places as he drove by; with his peripheral vision he searched for Mitchell's blue pickup, but it wasn't there. He'd drive by again after dark, see if any lights were on, but he didn't really expect the cockroach to turn up again so soon.

Seeing how Mitchell lived always reminded Sykes of how narrow his own escape had been. If he hadn't been smarter, made better decisions, he might be Mitchell. Now, that was a scary thought. But he came from the same trashy background; he knew exactly how Mitchell thought, how he operated. In his work that was a plus, but Sykes never wanted to actually live that way again. He wanted more. Hell, Mitchell probably wanted more, too, but he was never going to get more because he kept making those stupid decisions.

With an eye to the future, Sykes salted away every dollar he could. He lived simply, but cleanly. He had no expensive habits or vices. He even played the stock market a little, with conservative stocks that didn't perform spectacularly, but nevertheless always posted a gain. One day, when he had enough—though he wasn't certain exactly how much was enough—he would walk away from everything and move where no one knew him, start a small business, settle down as a respected member of the community. Hell, he might even get married, have a couple of rugrats. His imagination couldn't quite conjure up that picture, but nevertheless it was possible.

Mitchell wasn't jeopardizing just Sykes's immediate future, but all of his plans. Those plans were what had gotten him out of the trash dump of a house where he'd grown up, what had given him a goal when it would have been so much easier to just let himself drift in the sea of waste. It was always easier to do nothing. Don't worry about cleaning the house or cutting the grass, just drink another six-pack of beer and smoke another joint. Never mind there's no food in the house for the kids; when that monthly check comes in, first thing, you gotta get your booze and drugs, before the money gets gone. It was easy. It was always easier to blow the money rather than spend it on things like food and electricity. The tough ones, the smart ones like him, figured out that the hard road was the road out.

No matter what, Sykes would never go back.
Once he took on a project, Todd Lawrence was an unstoppable force. Between trying to get her house ready to move into and Todd commandeering every other spare minute she had, Daisy felt as if she had been caught up in a tornado that refused to let her drop. The only thing that kept her from collapsing was the visible change she could see in herself. She didn't have the nerve to try for the sex kitten image, and she had no idea what "old money" entailed, so she opted for the nature girl. She could handle that, she thought. Todd, however, had other ideas.
"I think we'll go for old money," he said lazily when she presented herself at his house on Saturday for their shopping expedition and trip to a beauty salon in Huntsville. Hands on his hips, he looked her up and down. "Your face will look better with that kind of hairstyle."
"Old money has a hairstyle?" she asked incredulously.
"Of course. Simple, uncluttered, very good cut. Never too long, just to the top of your shoulders, I think. I have something in mind that you'll like. Oh, by the way, we're going to get your ears pierced today, too."
Protectively she grabbed her earlobes. "Why? I don't think a makeover should include bloodshed."
"Because clip-on earrings are hideously uncomfortable, darling. Don't worry, it won't hurt."
She peered at his own earlobes, hoping they were hole-free so she could refuse on the basis that he didn't know what he was talking about. No such luck; both lobes sported small indentations. He smiled and patted her hand. "Be brave," he said cheerfully. "Beauty always comes at a price."
Daisy didn't think she was brave so much as totally unable to stop this train she had started in motion. She was still trying to come up with a compelling reason why she didn't need any body parts pierced when Todd bundled her into his car and they set off for Huntsville.
Their first stop was a beauty salon. Daisy had only ever been in Wilma's beauty shop, and there was a definite difference between a "shop" and a "salon." For one thing, she was asked what she wanted to drink. All Wilma ever asked was if you were in a hurry. She started to ask for a cup of coffee, but Todd, with a twinkle in his eyes, said, "Wine. She needs to relax."
The receptionist, a striking woman with short platinum hair and a pleasant smile, laughed as she fetched the wine. It was delivered into Daisy's hand in a real wineglass, instead of the plastic disposable glass she had expected.

On further reflection, though, she supposed Todd wouldn't give his patronage to any salon so gauche as to serve wine in plastic or Styrofoam.
The receptionist consulted her book. “Amie will be right with you. She's our top stylist, so you can just relax and put yourself in her hands. You'll look like a million dollars when she's finished."
"I'll just have a word with her before I leave," Todd said, and disappeared through a door.
Daisy gulped her wine. Leave? Todd was leaving her here alone? The bottom dropped out of her stomach. Oh, God, she couldn't do this.
She had to do this.
Three hours later, on her third glass of wine, she felt as if she had been tortured. Sharp-smelling chemicals had been swabbed on her hair, chemicals that bleached her a bright yellow-white and made her look like a punk rocker who had been frightened by a television evangelist. After that stuff was washed out, then more chemicals were applied with what looked like a paintbrush, on one strand at a time, and each strand was then wrapped to keep it from touching the other strands. She morphed from a punk rocker into something from outer space, wired to receive satellite transmissions. While this was happening, her eyebrows were waxed—ouch— and she was kept busy receiving both a manicure and a pedicure. Her nails were now all the same length, polished a transparent rose with pale tips. Her toenails, though, sported a wicked shade of red. Daisy tried to remember if she had ever painted her toe-nails before; she didn't think so, and even if she had, she would have chosen some pale pink shade that was barely noticeable. She would never, never have chosen look-at-me red. The effect was startling—and wonderfully sexy. She kept holding her bare feet up and staring at her red-tipped toes, thinking they didn't even look like her feet now. Too bad she didn't have any sandals to show them off. She had some flip-flops, but she couldn't wear those to work.
At last the torture part was over. She was unwrapped, washed, and deposited in the stylist's chair once more. After three glasses of wine, Daisy didn't even wince as Amie set to work with her scissors, snipping industriously away. Long strands of hair slithered to the floor. Daisy finished the last of the wine in her glass and held it out for more.
"Oh, I think you can do without reinforcing, now," said Todd in a lazily amused voice. "How much wine have you had?"
"That's just the third glass," she said righteously.

"Darling, I hope you ate this morning."
"Of course. And Amie gave me a croissant. Three glasses in three hours isn't too much, is it?" Her righteousness changed to anxiety. "I'm not tipsy, am I?"
"Maybe a little. Thanks," he said in an aside to Amie.
Amie, a tall, thin young woman who wore her black hair in a crew cut, smiled at him. "It's been a pleasure. It would be worth two croissants to see this kind of a change in someone's appearance."
Todd lounged against the workstation, dapper in his customary khakis and a blue silk shirt, and watched as Amie used a round brush to shape Daisy's hair as she dried it. Daisy watched too, terrified because she was going to have to do this on her own the next time. It didn't look complicated, but then neither had mascara.
She had breathed a sigh of relief when the last washing had revealed hair that seemed dark, though she'd been a bit indignant that three hours of torture had had such little result. Why, even the lemon white had at least shown that something had been done to her. As Amie's hair dryer worked, though, Daisy watched her hair become lighter and lighter. It wasn't lemon white, but it was definitely blond. Different shades shimmered through it, catching the light with gold here, a pale beige there.
When Amie was finished, she whisked away the cape while Daisy stared openmouthed at her reflection. Her dull, mousy brown hair was a distant memory. This hair was glossy, full of body. It swung when she moved her head, then settled back into place as if it knew exactly where to go. The style was simple, as Todd had promised; the length barely reached her shoulders, the ends were turned under, and the top swept elegantly away from a short side part.
Amie looked incredibly smug. Todd hugged her and kissed her cheek. "You did it. That's classic."
"She has good hair," Amie said, accepting Todd's tribute and giving him a return kiss on the cheek. "Not much body, but nice strong hair with a smooth cuticle. With the right styling products, there's no reason she can't look like this every day."
It was a good thing Todd was along, because Daisy was in a trance. He made certain she had the styling products Amie recommended, he reminded her to write a check for services rendered—she was so dazed she would have walked out without thinking—and, thank God, he was driving. Daisy

didn't know if it was the wine or just plain shock, but she wasn't certain her feet were touching the ground.
That was good, because their next stop was at a large mall where she got her ears pierced. It took only a minute—all she felt was a pinch—and the next thing she knew she was walking out with discreet gold hoops in her ears.
For the next four hours, Todd walked her into the ground.
She tried on clothes until she was exhausted, and began to see what he meant when he said "old money." The styles were simple, such as a plain beige skirt worn with a sleeveless white blouse. But the fit was slim, the skirt stopped at her knees, and a narrow belt drew attention to her waist.
"Old money is never frou-frou," he said. "It's sleek and classic and understated." She bought shoes, graceful sandals that showed her sexy red toenails, and classic pumps with two-inch heels, in black and taupe. "Never white, darling," he said firmly. "White is for casual shoes, not pumps."
"But— "
"No buts. Trust me."
Because his taste so far had been infallible, in the end, she could do nothing else. And maybe her own tastes had something to do with it, because invariably her own preferences had been his, too. She had just never before had the nerve, or the incentive, to do anything about the way she looked. She had stayed with what was familiar, what was comfortable, what was easy. Looking good was a lot of work, plus she had never really seen herself as pretty or stylish. Beth had always been the pretty one, while Daisy had accepted her own role as the smart, studious one. Maybe she couldn't be pretty as effortlessly as Beth could, but she was definitely pretty, and it was her own fault she was only now discovering that.
She didn't even try to keep track of the money she spent. This was all for a good cause: her own. She didn't just buy clothes, though that was the majority of her purchases. She bought perfume, and a couple of chic handbags, and earrings she liked. Todd talked her into an anklet, telling her, with a sly look in his eyes, "There's nothing sexier, darling."
At last they were on their way home. Daisy sat quietly, still numb from the entire experience. If there was such a thing as cosmetic war, today she had waged it. From today on, her life was changed. It wasn't just the way other people would see her, but the way she saw herself. She had always been content with the background, thinking that it was all she deserved. No

longer. From now on, regardless of what happened in her personal manhunt, she was going to make the most of herself for the sake of her own pride, if nothing else.
"If you don't mind my asking," Todd said after about ten miles of silence while she assimilated the day, "what was behind this sea change?"
Daisy sighed and rested her head against the seat, letting her eyes close. "My thirty-fourth birthday."
"Really? I would have guessed you're in your late twenties."
Despite her fatigue, that brought a smile to her face. "Really?"
"Cross my heart. Maybe it's your skin; you haven't been out in the sun much, have you?"
"Not a lot. I do tan, but I also burn easily." Plus she had always been inside with her nose in a book.
"That's good. You also have a charming air of innocence that makes you look younger."
Daisy opened her eyes, and felt her cheeks heat. "I don't get out much," she confessed. "That's another reason I wanted to change. I want to get married, and let's face it, the way I looked before no one paid any attention to me."
"That'll change now," he said, and smiled at her. "I guarantee it." He paused, then said, "Is there any certain man you're interested in?"
She shook her head, and felt the wonderful swing of her hair. Goodness, that was amazing! "No. I'm just going to go out looking. I've never been to a nightclub before, but I figure that's a good place to start. Do you know any good places?" Too late she realized that the clubs a gay man knew were probably not the clubs where she would have a good chance of success.
"I've heard the Buffalo Club is good," he said casually. "Do you dance?"
"I know how, though I haven't done it much since I took lessons. Dancing is a good way to break the ice, isn't it?"
"Very good." His tone was grave. "Do you think you might go out tonight?"
"I don't know." Going alone to a nightclub would take nerve, she thought, and after today she might have used up all her reserves.
Todd glanced at her, then returned his attention to the road. "Sometimes, once you get started, it's easier just to keep going than it is to stop and then start up again."
Meaning he thought she should go out tonight, after making the huge effort all day long to change her outward image.

"I'll think about it," she said. A thought occurred to her. "I don't know how to act like 'old money' though. Is there anything special—"
"No," he interrupted. "Old money is just a style. Don't get presentation and personality confused. Just be yourself, and then you don't have to worry."
"Being myself never got me noticed before," she said ruefully.
He laughed. "It will now, honey. It will now."

EIGHT

Have you found Mitchell yet?" Temple Nolan asked.
"Not yet." Sykes was annoyed that the mayor had even asked. If Sykes had found him, he'd have said so, wouldn't he? "I figure he'll hide out for a week or so, but then he'll either figure it's no problem that the girl died, or he'll get antsy and figure it'll be safe for him to find some action as long as he doesn't go to his regular places. I've got it covered. When he shows, I'll know about it within five minutes."
"Mr. Phillips wasn't a happy man. There was a big buyer lined up for the girl. Now the guy has found another source, and we're out the money. Mr. Phillips wants Mitchell dead."
"He will be. Just be patient. If I start beating the bushes for him, he'll hear about it and bolt like a rabbit."
"Mr. Phillips isn't in the mood to be patient. It was a lot of money."
Sykes shrugged. Virgins always commanded a high initial price anyway, but sometimes there was a special demand from someone willing to pay big bucks. Sykes couldn't see anyone paying that much just to have sex with a virgin, so maybe they had another reason. He didn't think there were any ritualistic sacrifices going on, but he'd lived long enough and seen enough that he didn't put anything beyond some people. Whatever happened to the girls after they were delivered didn't concern him, anyway. They were merchandise, nothing more.
"Like I said, he'll turn up, and I'll be waiting when he does." Sykes had to make an effort to keep the impatience out of his voice. How often did he have to say it? Mitchell was as good as handled. And in the meantime, business continued. "We have another shipment scheduled to come in next Tuesday night, five girls. I'd rather not take them to the usual place, just in case Mitchell has already talked to the wrong people. That's another reason

I don't want to push too hard in finding him; if he gets scared, he may go to the D.A. and try to cut a deal, our names in exchange for protection. You got any ideas for another holding pen, to be on the safe side?"

The mayor rubbed the back of his neck, frowning. The problem was that they had to find a place that was isolated enough to be private, but not so isolated that some traffic couldn't be expected. Rural folk were incurably nosy. If they saw headlights where there shouldn't be any, they'd investigate—and they'd usually be toting at least a .22 rifle. Neighbors looked out for neighbors. That was nice if you were one of the neighbors, but it was a pain in the ass when you were trying not to be noticed. The usual holding pen was an old travel trailer set well back from a dirt road. During dry weather, the road itself was a warning system, with any approaching vehicle sending up clouds of dust that could be seen well before any car came into sight.

"I'll find something," he said. "If nothing else, I'll rent a big U-Haul truck."

They'd done that before, in a pinch. It was amazing how little attention was paid to the rental trucks. The girls couldn't take a bath—and God knows they always needed a bath—the way they could in the travel trailer, but if the client had to take delivery of merchandise that was less than sweet-smelling, well, this wasn't exactly a dating service. But it was also a pain in the ass to use a rental, because if you parked the thing, sooner or later you could expect a deputy to come check it out. So you had to drive around until it was time for the clients to pick up the girls, then meet them somewhere and make a fast exchange. A rental just wasn't the best arrangement.

The mayor's pager began to beep. He silenced it and checked the number. "I have to go, but I'll get back to you about the alternate location. Just find Mitchell, for God's sake!"

Daisy paused at the closed double doors of the Buffalo Club. After much consideration, she had decided this was the place and now was the time to debut her new look and try her new approach to man-hunting. She was tired from the long day of shopping and being cosmetically tortured, but she was also still riding high on elation. When she had arrived home after the shopping trip, she hadn't called out a greeting as she usually did, just walked into the kitchen where her mother and Aunt Jo were busy putting up peach preserves for the winter. Her mother had glanced around, then whirled in alarm, sharply saying, "Who are you?"

Daisy had begun giggling. The other women had then squealed in delight and thrown themselves at her, exclaiming over the blond hair and the chic

haircut. The peach preserves hadn't been able to wait, so while they continued with their canning,
Daisy had fetched all her shopping bags out of the car and displayed her take, which reached truly amazing proportions.
When she carted all of it upstairs to her room and began hanging the garments in her closet, she couldn't resist trying everything on again. And though she was tired, when she put on one of her trim new skirts and that classic white sleeveless shirt, then the taupe heels, a thrill ran through her. That stylish, pretty woman was really her. She wasn't gorgeous, she never would be, but the uncluttered hairstyle made the most of her rather unremarkable features and made her look . . . oh, reserved, maybe, instead of just mousy. And Todd was right: that anklet gleaming on her right ankle was downright sexy.
It was a shame to waste this look. She might not be able to get her hair in exactly this style again. And she was already made up...
With that in mind, she drew in a deep breath and made a decision:
It was now or never.
So here she was at the Buffalo Club, a large, sprawling country music nightclub just over the Madison County line. It had live bands, a big dance floor, and sort of a reputation. The occasional stabbing and fight had been known to happen, but it wasn't so far gone that women didn't feel comfortable attending. Another plus was that the cover charge was just two dollars; after the money she had spent that day, economy seemed prudent.
If she gave herself time to think, she knew she'd chicken out, so she just forged ahead. She took her two bucks out of the slim envelope purse swinging from her shoulder on a narrow strap. Her everyday purse was big enough to hold a month's rations, but Todd had insisted she carry something more elegant. "Don't carry a lot when you go out," he'd instructed. "Just enough cash to get by, a tissue, a lipstick, and stick a credit card in your bra."
That was good, because that was about all she could get in the slim little excuse for a purse anyway.
A big guy wearing blue jeans, boots, and a black T-shirt collected her two dollars at the door; then he allowed her to pass and she stepped into a din of colored lights, loud music, and even louder conversation. Voices competed with the band and each other to be heard. The place was jammed. She was

bumped from behind, shoving her into a tall redhead with big hair who gave her an irritated look.
Daisy started to mumble an apology, then remembered that she didn't mumble anymore. Besides, a mumble couldn't possibly be heard in here.
"Pardon me," she said clearly, her head high as she moved away. Her hair looked better than the redhead's, she thought with a little thrill. She couldn't remember ever thinking her hair looked better than someone else's before.
She squirmed her way to a relatively sheltered spot where she could take stock. The bar, a big square, was lined with stools, and people stood three deep around it. Couples swayed on the dance floor, with colored lights flickering around them, while the lead singer of the band crooned a love song. The band was situated on a small stage behind a protective netting of chicken wire.
The chicken wire worried her. Maybe the Buffalo Club was a little rougher than she'd heard.
There were a multitude of tables arranged willy-nilly around the dance floor, but they were all taken. Sawdust and peanut shells littered the floor, while jeans-clad waitresses dipped and wove with deftly balanced trays through the swarming crowd.
She was overdressed, Daisy thought. Jeans seemed to be the dress code, on men and women alike, though every now and then she spotted a short skirt paired with a halter and cowboy boots. Todd would have sniffed and pronounced such an ensemble "tacky."
Daisy had kept on the pumps and the khaki skirt, and the sleeveless white shirt with the first two buttons unbuttoned. The gold anklet drew attention to her slim, bare legs. She looked cool and classic, not quite the usual thing at the Buffalo Club.
"Well, hello!" A hard male arm clasped around her waist and swung her around. She found herself blinking up at a smiling dark-haired man with a beer bottle in his hand.
"Hello," Daisy replied. She had to almost yell to make herself heard.
“Are you here with someone?" he asked, bending so his mouth was close to her ear.
Why, he was flirting. The realization zinged through her. This was a pickup! A man was actually trying to pick her up!
"Some friends," she lied, because it seemed prudent to do so. She didn't know him, after all.

"Would the friends mind if you danced with me?" he asked.
Because he was smiling and his eyes were friendly, she said, "Not at all," and with a grin he set down his beer, took her hand, and led her to the dance floor.
My goodness, that was easy! Daisy thought giddily as she slipped into the man's arms. He held her close, but not so close that she would have been embarrassed. For a moment she was terrified her dancing skills would desert her—after all, it wasn't as if she'd had a lot of practice—but he was fairly smooth and she found that, if she didn't think about it, her feet seemed to do what they were supposed to do.
"My name's Jeff," he said, again putting his mouth next to her ear so she could hear him.
"Daisy," she supplied.
"Have you been here before? I don't think I've seen you, and believe me, I would have noticed."
She shook her head, just to feel her hair swing and settle. "First time."
"Don't let it be the last—" He broke off, turning his head to glare in annoyance at a man who had tapped him on the shoulder.
"May I break in?"
"No," Jeff said rudely. "What the hell do you think this is, a prom? Go away. I saw her first."
The other man, lean and blond, also clad in the de rigueur jeans and T-shirt, grinned. "C'mon, Jeff, don't be selfish." Deftly he unhooked Daisy's hand from Jeff's and spun her away from him.
Daisy looked over her shoulder at Jeff, her eyes a little wide as she wondered what would happen. Jeff grinned and shrugged, then motioned to the table where he would be.
“Are you friends?" she asked the blond man.
"Yeah, we work together. I'm Denny, by the way."
"Daisy," she said again.
The love song ended and the band immediately swung into a foot-stomper. Lines formed, and Denny pulled Daisy into position. "Wait!" she protested frantically. "I don't know how to do this!"
"It's easy," he yelled back. "Just follow my lead."
The line dance involved some stomping and whirling, and she managed to stomp and whirl not too far behind the rest of them. She and Denny bumped into each other at one point and she began laughing at herself. She was so

out of place here, in her old-money classic clothes, surrounded by jeans and tube tops, but this was fun. She hadn't been here ten minutes yet, and already two men had come on to her. That was more attention than she'd had in ... oh, thirty-four years.

The line dance ended, and the band segued into another slow song, for a breather. Denny had barely gotten his arm around her waist when another guy cut in on him, and he surrendered her to yet another man. This one was older, probably in his fifties, with a close-cropped gray-and-brown beard, and not much taller than she was. He could dance, though. He grinned at her, said, "My name's Howard," and expertly twirled her. Daisy laughed, giddy with excitement and joy as their hands caught and he twirled her back into his arms.

Howard didn't mind showing off his expertise, so Daisy polished up her rusty skills as fast as possible and did a credible job, she thought. She was nowhere near as good as he was, but at least she didn't stumble, and she didn't step on his toes.

After Howard came Steven, and after Steven was a guy named Mitchell who had big brown eyes and a shy smile. By that time Daisy was breathless and more than a little warm. "I need to sit this one out," she gasped, fanning herself with her hand.

Mitchell slipped his hand under her elbow. "I'll get you something to drink," he said. "Beer? Wine?"

"Just water, for now," she said as she walked off the dance floor and looked around for a place to sit. The tables were just as crowded now as they had been five dances ago.

"Ah, c'mon, have some wine," Mitchell cajoled.

"Maybe later. I'm really thirsty now, and water's best for that." Besides, she had to drive home.

"A Coke, then."

His big brown eyes said he wanted to buy her a drink, and she was thwarting him by insisting on water. She relented. "Okay, a Coke."

His shy smile bloomed. "Wait right here," he said, and plunged into the crowd.

That was easier said than done. The swarming, shifting crowd constantly forced her to move this way and that, and within five minutes she was quite a distance from where Mitchell had left her. She peered toward the bar, trying to pick him out of the mass of bodies, but she didn't know him well

enough to recognize him in a crowd and, besides, it might take him a long time to get the drinks. The new shoes fit very well, but they were still new, she had danced five dances, and her feet hurt. She wanted to sit down. She rose on tiptoe, trying to spot an empty chair.
"Looking for a place to sit?" a burly guy yelled, and looped a beefy arm around her waist before she could react, hauling her down on his lap. Alarmed, Daisy immediately tried to jump up. He laughed and tightened his arm, pulling her back, and instinctively she put her hand down to brace herself. Unfortunately, she braced herself on his crotch, all of her weight bearing down on her hand.
He yelped, a high-pitched sound that rose above the din of music and voices. Suddenly aware of where her hand was and what she was feeling, Daisy squeaked and tried to leap up again, and her downward shove brought an even higher sound from the burly guy. Actually, it was now approaching a scream, one that brought heads turning their way.
Her face heated and she began struggling in earnest, but she couldn't find her balance or purchase, and wherever she put her hand seemed to be wrong. She felt something soft grind under her knuckles, and the burly guy turned purple.
My goodness, it was amazing how things escalated. Distracted by the steam-whistle noise coming from the burly guy, a man ac-cidently walked into a woman and made her spill her drink down her dress. She screamed, and her boyfriend swung at the other man. A chair overturned, a table was shoved, and there was the sound of breaking glass. People scattered. Well, some people scattered; others seemed to leap in their eagerness to join in the fray.
The melee was like a tidal wave, sweeping toward her, and she couldn't get to her feet to escape it.
An iron clamp suddenly wrapped around her waist and hauled her off the poor guy's lap. He collapsed on the floor, wheezing and holding his privates with both hands. Daisy squealed and clutched at the clamp, surprised to find it was merely flesh, but there was no way she could wiggle free. Her feet didn't even touch the floor as she was swiftly carried away from the tangle of heaving bodies and swinging fists. The nightclub's bouncers were wading in now, cracking heads left and right and roughly restoring order, but Daisy didn't get to see what happened because the bouncer who carried her waded through the throng as if it were water, moving people out of his way with

his free arm, and before she knew it she was bundled out the door and deposited on her feet with a thud.
How humiliating. Her first time in a nightclub, and she was thrown out. Her face burning, she turned to apologize and found herself staring up at Chief Russo. The apology froze on her tongue.
There was the sound of more breaking glass inside, and a stream of people suddenly erupted out the door as the more prudent decided to leave while the leaving was good. The chief caught Daisy's wrist and hauled her to the side, out of the way The yellow neon sign spelling out the club's name spilled light down on them, not even giving her the protection of darkness. Maybe he wouldn't recognize her, Daisy thought in panic. Her own mother hadn't even recognized her—
"Well, if it isn't Miss Daisy" he drawled, in a very good imitation of a southern accent, and her hope of not being recognized was blown out of the water. "Do you come here often?".
"No, this is my first time. I can explain," she blurted, feeling her face turn red.
He stared down at her with narrowed eyes. "I can't wait to hear it. In the space of thirty seconds you castrated a guy and started a brawl. Not bad for your first time here. Let me know when you're planning on coming back, and I'll stay home that night."
Well, no way was he going to make her the blame for that fiasco inside, she thought indignantly. "It wasn't my fault. That man grabbed me, and when I put my hand down to brace myself, I..." Her voice trailed off as she tried to find a delicate way to describe what had happened.
"Grabbed his balls and smashed them flat against the chair seat," Chief Russo finished for her. "I was about to step in, but when he began hitting those high notes, I figured you had the situation well in hand, so to speak."
"I didn't mean to! It was an accident."
Suddenly he grinned. "Forget about it. He'll think twice before he grabs a strange woman again. Come on, I'll walk you to your car."
She didn't want to be walked to her car. She didn't want to go to her car at all. Wistfully she looked at the door. "I don't suppose I could—"
"No, your dancing is over for the night, twinkle toes. You need to get out of here before the sheriff's deputies show up."
She sighed, because she had been having such fun—until she had accidentally castrated the burly guy, of course—but she supposed the chief

was right. The deputies might just arrest everyone and sort things out later, and she could just imagine what everyone would say if she got arrested. He took her arm and forcefully turned her toward the parking lot. "Where's your car?"
She sighed again. "Over there." She crunched over the gravel to her car, with Chief Russo looming beside her and his hard hand never loosening its grip on her elbow, as if she were a prisoner he expected to bolt. She was glad he hadn't handcuffed her.
Cars were leaving the parking lot in every direction, and the two of them had to weave their way through the traffic. When they reached her car, he released her arm, and she got her keys out of her bag, then unlocked the car. The chief opened the door for her and Daisy slid behind the wheel. "Have you had anything to drink?" he asked suddenly.
"No, not even a Coke," she said, forlornly remembering the brown-eyed man who hadn't made it back to her in time. She was so thirsty; starting a brawl was almost as much exertion as dancing.
He braced one arm on the top of the open door and the other on car's roof, leaning down to study her in the glare of the dome light. "You've been sandbagging," he finally said, his eyes narrowed again. He seemed to be studying the open collar of her shirt. "Hiding under those god-awful granny clothes you usually wear."
Even the chief of police had noticed how unstylish her clothes were, Daisy thought. How humiliating. "I'm turning over a new leaf," she explained.
He grunted and straightened, stepping back so she could close the door. She started the car, hesitated, then lowered the window. "Thank you for getting me out of there," she said.
"It seemed the smart thing to do. The way you were going, that poor guy was looking at dismemberment." He lifted his head, listening intently. "I think I hear sirens. Go home before the deputies get here."
Still she hesitated. "What about you?"
"I'll help them sort things out."
That's right; he didn't have to worry about being arrested. She started to ask him to keep quiet about her being there, but realized she had just as much right to go to a nightclub as he did. Besides, maybe she wanted people to know she'd been at the Buffalo Club. That would certainly change the way people saw her. She wanted men to think of her as approachable and available, and just improving her appearance wouldn't accomplish that.

"Will I have to give a statement?" she asked.
Exasperated, he snapped, "Not unless you keep hanging around. Now get your ass out of here while you still can."
Well! Without another word, Daisy stomped on the gas pedal, slinging gravel and making her tires squall as she fishtailed out of the parking lot. Startled, she fought the steering wheel for a panicked moment before she remembered to take her foot off the gas. The tires stopped squalling as they gripped the road, and much more sedately, she continued down the road. She had never made her tires squall before in her life. Oh, my goodness, what if the chief had been hit by some of the gravel? She started to go back and apologize, but flashing lights appeared in her rearview mirror and she decided it would be best to get her ass out of there, just as he had said.

NINE

It wasn't everyone who could go out for a night of honky-tonking, dance until she was ready to drop, start a brawl, and be home by nine o'clock, Daisy told herself the next morning. So the night hadn't been an unqualified success; the first part of it had been very successful. What's more, she'd had fun and she was going to do it again. Not the brawl part—at least, she hoped not—but definitely the dancing and attracting men part.
After church, where she endured the blatant curiosity of all her fellow churchgoers—people who should have known better than to stare at someone—she ate a quick lunch and changed into one of her new pairs of jeans, intending to drive over to Lassiter Avenue to see how Buck Latham had progressed on painting her house. Now that she was well and truly launched on her new path, she was eager to move out on her own. As she walked out on the porch with her purse and car keys in hand, however, a white Crown Victoria pulled to the curb in front of the house.
Her heart sank as she watched Chief Russo unfold his big frame from the driver's seat. She had glossed over the previous night's episode to her mother, thinking it best not to let on that she'd smashed a man's testicles. She suspected Chief Russo was here to spill the beans and read her the riot act, as if he had any room to talk, because he certainly hadn't been at the Buffalo Club in any official capacity. He'd been out trolling, the same as she, but at least her intentions were honorable.

He was dressed in jeans, too, and a black T-shirt that clung to his broad, sloping shoulders. He looked more like a weight lifter than ever, she thought with a sniff. Remembering how easily, with one arm, he had carried her out of the Buffalo Club last night, she knew she had accurately pegged him.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, standing on their short, flower-lined sidewalk and looking up at her as she stood on the shady porch.

"Yes," she said baldly. Good manners dictated she should say something like, Oh, I was just going to run to the supermarket for a minute, but that can wait. Why don't you come in and have coffee? She limited her reply to that one word. There was just something about him that made her forget her raising.

“Aren't you going to ask me in?" he asked, eyes glinting in a way that said he was more amused than put out.

"No."

He jerked his head toward the car. "Then come for a ride with me. I don't think you want to have this discussion outside where all your neighbors can listen in."

Her heart lurched. "Oh, my God, are you taking me downtown?" She hurried down the steps as a horrible thought occurred to her. "That man last night—he didn't die, did he? It was an accident! And even if he did, wouldn't that be justifiable homicide?"

He scrubbed a hand down his face, and she stared suspiciously at him. It looked as if he'd been hiding a grin. For goodness' sake, this was nothing to laugh about!

"As far as I know, your boyfriend is all right; probably sore and walking a little funny, but alive."

She blew out a big breath. "Well, that's a relief. Then why are you taking me downtown?"

He did that face-rubbing thing again. No doubt about it, this time: he was laughing at her. Well!

He reached out and took her arm, his grip warm and too firm, as if he were accustomed to handling miscreants who didn't want to go with him. "Don't poker up on me, Miss Daisy," he said, stifling an audible snicker. "It's just. . . Downtown doesn't have quite the same ring to it in Hillsboro as it does in New York."

Well, that was true, considering they were already practically downtown, only a few blocks from the police station and the business section. He still could have been nicer about it.
As he opened the front passenger door of his car and put her inside, the front door opened again and Evelyn came out. "Chief Russo! Where are you taking Daisy?"
"Just for a ride, ma'am. We'll be back within an hour, I promise."
Evelyn hesitated, then smiled. "Y'all have a good time."
"Yes, ma'am," the chief said gravely.
"Oh, great," Daisy muttered as he got in the car. "Now she thinks we're seeing each other."
"We can go back and set her straight, tell her what's really going on," he offered as he pulled away from the curb, not even waiting for her answer. That was so annoying; of course she didn't want to do that, but he knew it before he even made the offer. He was just being a smart aleck.
"I had just as much right to be at that club as you did," she said, crossing her arms and sticking her nose in the air.
"Agreed."
She lowered her nose down to give him a startled look. "Then why are you interrogating me? I didn't do anything wrong. The brawl wasn't my fault, and I truly didn't mean to smash that man's testicles."
"I know." He was grinning again, darn him. Just what was so funny?
"Then what's wrong?"
"Nothing's wrong. And I'm not 'interrogating' you. I asked you to come for a ride; that's a helluva lot different from taking you to an interview room and grilling you for hours."
Relieved, she let out a whoosh of air and relaxed in the seat, then immediately sat upright again. "You didn't ask me, you told me, so what else was I to think? 'Let's take a ride.' Cops say that all the time on television, and it always means they're taking you downtown to be booked."
"So the scriptwriters need to learn some new dialogue."
A new thought, an appalling one, occurred to her. My goodness, the chief wasn't courting her, was he? Their encounters had always been bristly, but last night had shown her what a difference her new appearance made in the way men treated her. Her stomach knotted; she wasn't at all practiced in telling a man to shove off, she just wasn't interested. He couldn't be interested, could he? Maybe she didn't look as much better as she thought.

Swiftly she flipped down the sun visor and peered into the mirror attached there, then just as swiftly flipped it back up. Oh, dear.
"What was that about?" he asked curiously. "You didn't look long enough even to check your lipstick."
She'd forgotten all about her lipstick. Anyway, a quick peek was all it took to tell her that, no, she wasn't mistaken about the change.
"I was just wondering if cop cars had visor mirrors, too," she blurted. "It seems kind of... sissy."
"Sissy?" He looked as if he were biting the inside of his jaw.
"Not that I'm questioning your masculinity," she said hastily. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel he had to prove his masculinity to her. Men, she had read, tended to take such comments personally. Their egos were all tied up with their virility, or something like that.
He sighed. "No offense, Miss Daisy, but following your train of thought is like trying to catch a jackrabbit hopped up on speed."
She didn't take offense, because she was too thankful he hadn't been able to follow that particular train. Instead she said, "I wish you wouldn't call me Miss Daisy. It makes me sound like an—" She started to say old maid, but that description hit too close to home. "—a fuddy-duddy."
He was biting the inside of his jaw again. "If the hairnet fits ..."
"I do not wear a hairnet!" she shouted, then sank back in the seat in surprise. She never shouted. She never lost her temper. She hadn't always been exactly polite to him, but neither had she shouted at him. She began to worry; was there a law against yelling at someone in law enforcement? Yelling at him wasn't the same as yelling at a cop who'd stopped her for speeding—if she had ever speeded, that is—but he was, after all, the chief of police, and it might be even worse—
"You've gone off into the ether again," he growled.
"I was just wondering if there was any law against yelling at a chief of police," she admitted.
"You thought you were going to be thrown in the pokey for yelling?"
"It was disrespectful. I apologize. I don't usually yell, but then I'm not usually accused of wearing a hairnet, either."
"I can see the provocation."
"If you keep biting your jaw," she observed, "you're going to need stitches."
"I'll try not to do it again. And for your information, I call you Miss Daisy as a sign of respect."

"Respect?" She didn't know if that was good or not. On the one hand, of course she wanted him to respect her; on the other, that wasn't exactly the kind of reaction she wanted from a man who was, after all, at least several years older than she. Maybe last night at the club had been a fluke, and she wasn't as attractive now as she'd thought. Maybe men would dance with anyone at a club.
"You remind me of my aunt Bessie," he said.
Daisy nearly moaned aloud. Oh, dear, it was worse than she'd thought. His aunt! Now she knew last night had been a fluke. Stricken, she flipped the visor mirror down again to see if she could possibly have made that big a mistake.
"I won't even ask," he sighed.
"I look like your aunt?" She almost moaned the word.
He began laughing. He actually laughed at her. Mortified, she raised the visor and crossed her arms again.
"Great-aunt, actually. And I didn't say you looked like her; I said you remind me of her. She wasn't very worldly, either."
Naive. He meant naive. Unfortunately, he wasn't wrong. That's what happened when you spent your life with your nose buried in a book. You might know a lot of interesting facts, but when it came to real-world experience, you were pretty much in the dark.
He turned down the highway toward Fort Payne. "Why are we going to Fort Payne?" Daisy asked, looking around at the cedar trees and green mountains. The drive was a nice one, but she couldn't think of any reason why they should go there.
"We aren't. I'm just driving."
"You mean we aren't going anywhere in particular?"
"I said we'd go for a ride. That means riding."
Now she was back to the awful suspicion that he might be courting her, though if he was, he went about it in a strange way, telling her she reminded him of his great-aunt and laughing at her. On the other hand, he was a Yankee; maybe that was the way they did it up North. "I'd rather ride in the other direction," she said uneasily "Back toward home."
"Tough."
Well, that definitely wasn't very courteous, so he couldn't be courting her. Vastly relieved, she beamed at him.
"What?" he demanded, giving her a wary look.

"Oh, nothing."
"You're smiling at me. It's damn scary."
"My smile is scary?" The beam dimmed.
"No, the fact that you're smiling is scary That tells me your train of thought has gone off track again."
"It has not. I know exactly which track it's on. I'm just relieved that you don't." Darn, she wished she hadn't told him that. She had to remember that he was a cop, and cops were notoriously nosy.
"Oh?" Just as she had feared, now he was interested.
"Private stuff," she informed him. A gentleman would leave it at that.
She should have remembered that he wasn't a gentleman. "What kind of private stuff?" he demanded. "Sexy stuff?"
"No!" she said, horrified. And because having him think she might want to do that was worse than what she really had been thinking, she said, "I was just afraid you might be courting me, and when you told me 'tough,' I was relieved, because you wouldn't have said that if you had been. Courting me, that is."
"Courting?" His shoulders started shaking a little.
"Yes, well, whatever it's called these days. 'Dating' seems a little too high-schoolish, and besides, this isn't a date. It's more like a kidnaping."
"You haven't been kidnaped. I just wanted to talk to you, privately, about last night."
"What about last night? If I haven't broken any laws—"
"Would you stop yammering about that? I have some things to tell you about going to nightclubs."
"I'll have you know I'm an adult and can go to any nightclub I want. What's more, I'm going to, so you can—"
"Would you shut up for a minute!" he yelled. "I'm not telling you not to go; I'm just trying to tell you some things to watch out for!"
She sat silently for a moment. "I'm sorry," she finally said. "You just make me feel defensive. Maybe it's because you're the chief of police."
"Well, stop it, and listen to me. With what you've done to your hair and the way you're dressing, men are going to come on to you."
"Yes," she said with satisfaction. "They did."
He sighed. "Did you know any of them?"
"No, of course not."
"Then you can't trust them."

"Well, I wasn't about to go home with any of them or anything, and I had my own car, so no one could drive me home—"
He interrupted. "Have you ever heard of date-rape drugs?"
That silenced her. Shocked, she stared at him. "You mean . . . those men—"
"I don't know, and you don't either. That's my point. When you go out like that, don't let anyone bring you a drink except the waitress. Better yet, go to the bar and get your own. Don't leave your drink on the table while you dance, or go to the bathroom, or for any reason. If you do, then don't drink out of it again. Order a fresh one."
"Wh-what would it taste like? If someone doctored my drink, I mean."
"You couldn't taste it, not mixed in a drink."
"My goodness." She put her hands in her lap, upset to think that one of those nice men she'd danced with the night before might have deliberately drugged her so they could take her some place and have sex with her while she was unconscious. "Then— how would I tell?"
"Generally, you can't. By the time you start feeling the effects, you aren't thinking straight. It's better to always go to a club with a friend, so you can look out for each other. If one of you starts acting sleepy or dizzy, then the best thing to do is get to an emergency room. And for God's sake, don't let any of the men you've met drive you anywhere."
Dismayed, Daisy tried to think of a friend who would go with her to nightclubs. None sprang to mind; not that she didn't have friends, but they were all married with families, and going out to a nightclub without their husbands so she could meet men just wasn't the type of thing any of them would do. Her mother and Aunt Jo were both single, but. . . no, that didn't bear thinking about.
"There are several date-rape drugs," he continued. "You've probably heard of Rohypnol, but the one that really has cops concerned is GHB."
"What's that?" She'd never heard of it.
He gave her a grim smile. "Floor stripper mixed with drain cleaner."
"Oh, my God!" Aghast, she stared at him. "That would kill you!"
"In a large enough amount, yeah. And it doesn't take all that much, sometimes, because you never know how hard it's going to hit you."
"But—wouldn't it burn your throat when you swallowed it?"
He shook his head. "Nope. With an overdose, what happens is you go to sleep and just don't wake up. If it's mixed with alcohol, the effect is enhanced and even more unpredictable. If a guy slips you GHB, basically

he doesn't care if you die or not, so long as he can fu—ah, have sex with you while you're still warm."
Eyes wide, Daisy stared at the pretty countryside. To think things like that were going on in the world! He'd shone a far different light on the club scene, and she would never look at it the same way again. But if she didn't get out and mix, how would she ever meet single men? She chewed her lower lip while she pondered the situation, but the bottom line was, going out dancing at the clubs was the most efficient way to accomplish her aim. She would just have to be extra careful, and follow all his instructions.
"I'll be careful," she said fervently. "Thank you for warning me." It was very nice of him to go out of his way to warn her about the dangers she could face, nicer than she had expected of him. Maybe she'd been too harsh in her criticism, just because he was a bit brusque and too frank in his language.
He slowed down as they neared a church, then turned around in the parking lot and headed back toward Hillsboro. "When are you going out again?" he casually asked.
Gratitude only went so far. "Why?" she asked, her tone loaded with suspicion.
"So I can warn all the men to wear athletic cups, why else?" He sighed. "It was just a question, to make conversation."
"Oh. Well, of course I wouldn't go out on Sunday, or on a work night, so I suppose it'll be next weekend. I need to work on my house, anyway, so I can get moved in."
"You're moving?"
"I'm renting a place on Lassiter Avenue."
He slanted a quick look at her. "Lassiter? That isn't a great neighborhood."
"I know, but my choices were limited. And I'm going to get a dog."
"Get a big one. A German shepherd would be good. They're intelligent, loyal dogs, and would protect you from Godzilla himself."
German shepherds were the ones used in the K-9 units, so she supposed that was how he was acquainted with them. The dogs must be reliable and trustworthy, or police departments wouldn't use them.
She tried to form a picture of herself sitting in an easy chair reading while a big dog dozed at her feet, but the image just wouldn't form. She was more of a small-dog type person; a terrier, maybe, would be better than a huge German shepherd. She'd read that small dogs were just as likely to frighten

away a burglar because they barked at the slightest noise, and really all she wanted was an alarm system, not an all-out counteroffensive. Terriers were good at sounding the alarm. Or maybe she'd get one of those cute little Maltese, with a little bow tied in its topknot.
She mentally debated the merits of various small dogs on the drive home, and was surprised when he pulled to the curb in front of the house. She blinked for a moment at the minivan parked behind her car in the driveway, then recognized it.
"You have company," Chief Russo observed.
"My sister Beth and her family," Daisy said. They visited at least twice a month, usually on Sunday after church. She should have been expecting them, but it had totally slipped her mind.
As she reached for the door handle, Aunt Jo came out on the porch. "Y'all come on in," she called. "You're just in time for homemade ice cream."
Chief Russo was out of the car before Daisy could tell him he didn't have to stay. When he opened the car door for her, she sat where she was, staring up at him with huge eyes. "Well, come on," he said impatiently. "The ice cream's melting."
"This isn't a good idea," she whispered.
"Why?" he whispered back, but his eyes were gleaming.
"They think you're . . . that we're ..."
"Courting?" he helpfully supplied as he literally tugged her out of the car and began pushing her up the sidewalk.
"Don't joke about it! You know what gossip's like in a small town. Besides, I don't like misleading my family."
"Then tell them the truth, that I wanted to warn you about the dangers of date-rape drugs."
“And give my mother a heart attack?" Daisy said fiercely. "Don't you dare!"
"Then tell them we're just friends."
"Like they'd believe that."
"Why's it so unbelievable?"
"It just is." By that time they had reached the front door, and he opened it for her, ushering her inside. There was a small foyer, with the big living room immediately opening off to the left. The tangle of voices died away as they came inside, and ice-cream bowls were set down with a clatter; Daisy felt as if a hundred people were staring at her, though of course it was only her mother and Aunt Jo, Beth and Nathan, and her two nephews, William

and Wyatt. She was so seldom the focus of all eyes that even a little attention felt like a lot.
"Um . . . this is Chief Russo."
"Jack," he said, crossing to shake hands first with her mother, then Aunt Jo, as Daisy introduced them. Nathan rose to his feet when it was his turn, his hand extended, but his eyes narrowed in that expression men wore when they felt the need to protect their families. Why he should feel protective of her, Daisy had no idea.
Chief Russo must have been used to testosterone-driven displays, though, because he didn't acknowledge it by so much as the flicker of an eyelid.
"Let me get you some ice cream," Evelyn said. "It's just vanilla, but I can put some walnuts and fudge sauce on it if you like."
"Vanilla's my favorite," the chief said so sincerely that Daisy would have believed him even if she had known differently. He didn't seem like a vanilla type of person, but she wasn't about to argue. The faster he ate his ice cream and left, the better it suited her.
Beth wasn't paying any attention to the chief; she was staring at Daisy, her eyes wide and a little dazed. "You're blond," she said weakly. "Mama said you'd lightened your hair, but. . . but you're blond."
"You're pretty," ten-year-old Wyatt said, almost accusingly. He was at the age when he didn't like girls, and finding his favorite aunt turning into one was upsetting.
"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I'll try to do better."
"I like it," eleven-year-old William said, giving her the shy smile that would slay female hearts in another few years.
"And you're wearing jeans!" Beth almost wailed. She herself was wearing very chic walking shorts with a matching top, but the Daisy she knew had seldom worn slacks and hadn't even owned a pair of jeans.
"I went shopping," Daisy said uncomfortably as everyone, including the chief, looked her up and down. "And I got my ears pierced." She indicated the small hoops, hoping to draw their attention upward.
"I think you look great," Nathan said, smiling at her. She loved her brother-in-law, but she wished that he were a little more sensitive to Beth's mood right now, because Beth was more than a little shocked by her sister's transformation.
Beth was not, however, a selfish person. She managed a smile, then got to her feet and hugged Daisy. "You look great," she said as Evelyn returned to

the living room with two bowls rounded high with creamy white ice cream.
"Yes, she does," Evelyn said, smiling at both her daughters and handing the bowls to Daisy and the chief.
"So," Aunt Jo said brightly, "how long have you two been seeing each other?"
"We're not—" Daisy began, only to be overridden by a much deeper voice.
"A week or so," said the chief.

TEN

Jack laughed out loud as he drove away from the Minor residence; teasing Miss Daisy was becoming the highlight of his life. She responded to the least provocation as if he'd touched her with a cattle prod. When he'd said they'd been seeing each other for a week or so—which was, strictly speaking, true—she'd jumped and stared at him with undisguised horror before blurting, "We have not," in such appalled tones he'd had the urge to check his reflection in a mirror to see if he'd suddenly sprouted horns and a forked tail. Except for his ex-wife, he'd never had any complaints from a woman before, so Daisy's reaction pissed him off a little. And even his ex had never complained in bed. What was Miss Daisy's problem?
Then she'd turned beet red and began trying to explain things. "We're just friends—well, not really I mean, he's a Yankee. He was at the club with me last night—not with me, just there at the same time—so when the fight started—"
"Fight?" A harmony of voices echoed the word. Her mother and aunt looked horrified, her sister looked stunned, her brother-in-law was alarmed, and the two nephews were fascinated.
"I didn't start it," Daisy said hastily. "Not exactly. It wasn't my fault. But the chief—"
"Jack," he put in.
She gave him a harried glance. "—Jack carried me out, and today he came by to tell me about date-rape drugs and ... oh, dear," she finished, her odd-colored eyes widening as she realized her nephews were listening with sharp attention.
"Drugs," her mother said faintly, going pale. The bowl of ice cream wobbled in her hand.

Daisy took a deep breath and tried to be reassuring. "I didn't see any. And I'll be careful."
"What's wrong with being a Yankee?" Jack had demanded, his eyes shining with delight that he tried to hide.
She began spluttering again as she realized she'd been rude— in public, which seemed to be a big thing to her. "Well. . . nothing, except for—I mean, you aren't exactly..." Her thoughts evidently hit a wall, because her voice trailed off.
"I thought we were friends." He managed to keep a straight face and look solemn, even a little hurt. He wasn't exactly what? Her type? He'd go along with that. She was a naive prude, and he was a cop; enough said.
"You did?" she asked doubtfully, as he dug into his ice cream to distract himself. The cold, soft ice cream melted on his tongue, and he almost groaned with delight. There was nothing— nothing—like real homemade ice cream.
He swallowed and said, "Sure. You even gave me the mauve gay test. You don't do that to someone who isn't a friend."
Her family was listening in wide-eyed fascination. Both her mother and aunt gasped. "Oh, my," her aunt Joella said faintly. "Did you pass?"
He rubbed his jaw to hide his grin. So this was where she got it from. "I don't know. If you know the answer, does that mean you pass or fail?"
Aunt Joella blinked. "Well—neither, I guess. It just means you're gay" She paused. “Are you?"
“Aunt Jo!" Daisy moaned, covering her eyes with her free hand.
"No, ma'am." He took another bite of ice cream. "But that isn't a good test, because I know what color mauve is."
Aunt Jo nodded decisively. "Just what I thought. How about puce?"
"Daisy made me look it up in the dictionary," he said, unable to hide his grin any longer. "I accused her of making it up."
Aunt Jo leaned back, satisfaction written on her face. "I told you," she said to Daisy's mother, Evelyn.
Poor Daisy had taken her hand down and was looking around as if searching for the best escape route. Jack forestalled her by grabbing her arm and pulling her down with him onto the love seat, which was the only free seating left in the room, making him wonder if her mother had arranged things so they'd have to sit side by side. If so, it was fine with him.

He stayed for almost an hour, making small talk and eating another bowl of ice cream while Daisy swirled her spoon in hers until it melted. She kept giving him wary looks and trying to inch away. Very protective of her personal space, was Miss Daisy. He deliberately intruded on it, letting his thigh brush hers, sometimes leaning so that his big shoulders crowded her, occasionally putting his hand on her bare arm. She couldn't tear a strip off his hide in front of her family the way she had in the library, and he took full advantage of what Aunt Bessie would have called her "company manners."

By the time he left, Miss Daisy was almost ready to explode.

Well, let her fume, he thought as he drove home. So she didn't like him, huh? She didn't consider him a friend, she'd been horrified at the idea that he might be "courting" her, and she was plainly appalled at the idea her family might think they were even going out together.

Too fucking bad, he thought cheerfully. Part of it was because he couldn't resist a challenge and part of it was because she was so damn much fun, but he'd made up his mind: this particular Yankee was going to get in her pants. He had the feeling she'd be a real firecracker when she let go. Daisy wasn't frozen; she was just untried. If she'd ever had sex, she hadn't had much of it. He planned to change that state of affairs and really give her something to blush about.

He hadn't had a steady relationship since his divorce; he'd had sex, but been careful not to let a routine develop with any of the women. Relationships were a lot of work, and he hadn't been interested enough to make the effort. Until now, that is. Daisy was both innocent and complicated, naive and knowledgeable, sharp-tongued but without an ounce of malice in her—something that couldn't be said about many people. She appealed to him, with her different-colored eyes, old-fashioned ways, and utter openness. Daisy not only didn't play games, she didn't know what the games were. A man would always know where he stood with her. Right now he was on her shit list, but he planned to change that.

Unless he missed his guess, Daisy was looking for a man. All the signs were there: the sudden change in her hair and clothes, wearing makeup, and suddenly going to nightclubs. If a man was what she wanted, she needed to look no further. He volunteered for the job. Not that he was going to tell her; she'd likely run as fast as she could in the opposite direction. No, he'd

have to play his cards close to the vest for a while, until she got over the idea he wasn't her type.
Until then, he'd have to keep her out of trouble, which could be a full-time job. Now he'd not only have to cruise the bars and nightclubs looking for some bastard who liked to slip women a drug that could kill them, he'd have to make certain Daisy didn't let some other man get too close to her, much less drug her. The way she'd spruced herself up, that might be a problem. She looked good as a blonde, especially with that sexy new haircut. As for her clothes—who would ever have suspected she'd been hiding a pair of breasts like that under those frumpy blouses she'd always worn before? Plus she had great legs; he wasn't the only one who'd noticed them the night before, either. He had plans for those legs; he bet they'd look fine draped over his shoulders.
He'd thought she was kind of cute even before, not that he'd ever have noticed her if he hadn't sat so close to her in the library. But that close he'd been able to tell how fine and translucent her skin was, almost like a baby's, and he'd noted those strange eyes, one blue and one green. It made her gaze oddly piercing, as if she saw deeper than others did. And she'd been downright pretty when she got angry, with color in her cheeks and her eyes snapping and sparkling. He'd planned to stop by the library more often—and then he'd recognized her at the Buffalo Club last night and damn near trampled several people in his rush to get to her before she got hurt in the brawl, not to mention get her out of that jerk's lap.
She was definitely going to be trouble, but he could handle it—with pleasure.
Sykes was pissed. Mitchell had been at the Buffalo Club over near Huntsville last night, but by the time Sykes had got there, he was long gone and sheriff's deputies were swarming the place, sorting things out after a brawl. It was just bad luck, but he was still pissed; if he'd gotten there half an hour sooner, everything would have been handled and Mitchell would be out of their hair.
At least he knew Mitchell was out moving around now, instead of staying holed up somewhere. That increased the chances of getting a line on him, but Sykes still wasn't having any luck. The bastard was slicker than he'd thought, though not slick enough not to kill the merchandise in the first place.

But the bartender at the Buffalo Club, who had called him in the first place, owed him more than one favor. When Sykes showed up on his doorstep on Sunday, he wasn't happy, but he wasn't surprised, either.
"Hey, I called you as soon as I saw him," Jimmy said, darting his eyes from side to side as if worried about someone seeing them together. "But some idiot started a fight just right after that, and everybody cleared out."
"No problem," said Sykes. He wasn't here to make things rough on Jimmy. "Did you notice if he was with someone?"
"Not that I saw, but he bought two drinks. A beer for himself, and a Coke."
So old Mitchell had already hooked up with a girl, or was at least trying to; and since he'd failed, presumably, because of the brawl, he'd be out looking again as soon as possible. Not tonight; bars were closed on Sunday. But tomorrow night, for certain. Would he go back to the Buffalo Club so soon? Maybe, if he wanted that particular girl, but what were the odds the same girl would be there on Monday night? She'd have to be real dedicated to the club scene. Still, it was possible.
"Keep an eye out for him tomorrow night," Sykes said. "I don't think he'll be there, but he might, and it should be easier to spot him than it was this weekend." That gave Jimmy an excuse for not seeing Mitchell earlier.
Jimmy grinned, at ease now that he knew Sykes wasn't mad.
"You think? We're pretty busy all the time, but, yeah, this past weekend was really crowded."
Sykes passed him a folded hundred-dollar bill, with Ben's face showing. "You were on your toes, but you can't predict when a fight will start." A little palm grease was always welcome. Of course, when Mitchell "disappeared," Jimmy would have to go too, but those were the breaks. A smart man didn't leave loose ends.
A black Ford Explorer pulled into Todd Lawrence's driveway, and an older man got out. He strode up the sidewalk and mounted the steps; the front door opened before he reached the porch. "So how'd it go last night?" Todd asked as he led the way to the kitchen, where a pot of strong coffee had been freshly brewed.
"She's a good dancer," the older man said neutrally. He had graying brown hair and brown eyes, and an average build. He could and did blend in almost anywhere.
“Anybody come on to her?"

The man snorted. "Men were all over her. They wouldn't have paid nearly as much attention to her if she'd been dressed like the others, in jeans and a tube top. It was like Grace Kelly had walked in." He opened a cabinet door and took down a coffee cup, then filled it.
Todd grinned. That was exactly the effect he'd aimed for in Daisy's makeover. He was rather proud of his work. “Anybody buy her a drink?"
"She didn't have time to drink anything. She hit the dance floor and danced several dances; then a fight started right after that and some big guy grabbed her and carried her outside."
Todd's eyes narrowed. "Did you follow them?"
"Of course I followed," the other man said testily. "That's the idea, right? But this guy just put her in her car, and she drove off alone."
"Did you recognize him?"
The man shook his head. "He hadn't danced with her, but they knew each other. They had a little argument outside. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but you could tell she was mad at him." Taking his cup to the table, he pulled out a chair and sat down. "This isn't a good idea," he said flatly.
"I agree." Todd picked up his own cup and leaned against the cabinet while he sipped. "But it's better than no idea at all. And she's perfect; she's so naive she won't be as careful as most women are."
"Most women aren't. Damn it, you can't keep tabs on every move she makes. What's she going to do, ask your permission every time she goes out?"
"I'll start calling every day, just to check on her. Girl talk." Todd gave a thin smile, and the other man snorted. "She'll tell me if she's going out, and I can guide her to the places we suspect."
“And you really expect to find out something?"
"It's like fishing. You can't see the fish, but you know they're there. You just throw out the bait and hope something bites. Look, she was going to do this anyway. At least this way, you can keep an eye on her."
"I do have a life, you know. Going out every night and stomping my way through line dances isn't something I'm crazy about. I might miss an episode of Millionaire."
"I'll tape them for you."
"Fuck you."
"In your dreams, sweetheart."

The other man burst out laughing. "God, you're good! That was just right. Look, why don't we just concentrate on the job we were sent down here for, and leave your little private vendetta to
the local cops?"
"Because they haven't accomplished shit. This isn't interfering with the job __"
"The hell it isn't. I'm not at top speed if I've been out dancing into the wee hours every night."
"It won't be every night; just the weekends, if I read her right. She's too responsible to go out on a work night. Besides, she'll be busy getting her house ready to move into; she tells me all about it."
“Any man who thinks he knows what a woman will do is a fool."
"I'll give you that, but I told you, I'm going to call her every afternoon about the time she gets home from the library, just to check. I don't want anything to happen to her, either."
"So what happens if we get contacted when she's going out, Pygmalion? Who's going to watch her then?"
"We've been working this job for, what, a year and a half? What are the odds it's going to break anytime soon, and on one of the two nights a week when Daisy is most likely to go out?"
"Look, buddy, there's this big pile of shit just flying around looking for a place to happen. Just be prepared for it to dump on us, is what I'm saying. And she'll be the one who's hurt."
It occurred to Daisy she needed to do one last thing to change her image, so during her lunch hour on Monday she went to Clud's Pharmacy and bought some condoms.
Clud's was the best choice of the three pharmacies in town, because Cyrus Clud had lived in Hillsboro forever and knew everyone, and his wife, Barbara, worked as the cashier so he wouldn't have to pay anyone else a salary. Barbara Clud was at least as big a gossip as Beulah Wilson, and she didn't know what the word discretion meant; that was how it had become common knowledge that a certain city councilman took Viagra. The fact that Daisy Minor had bought condoms would spread far and wide to their circle of acquaintances.
Cruising nightclubs was fine, and nightclubs were probably the richest hunting ground, but Daisy didn't want to ignore the available men in Hillsboro, either; in fact, a local would be a much better choice for her,

since she wanted to live near her family. The problem was, she didn't know that many single local men; the few in her church were all younger than she was, and she didn't find them particularly interesting anyway. Hank Farris was single, but the Farrises were trashy and there was a reason why Hank had never been married: he stank. Badly. So Daisy didn't count him as eligible, in any way.

But people talked, especially in a small town like Hillsboro with its spiderweb of acquaintances and kin. Just let someone say, "You know Evelyn Minor's daughter, Daisy? The librarian? I hear she went into Clud's and bought a whole case of condoms. My lands, what's that girl up to?" Before she knew it, interested men would be crawling out of the woodwork. She'd have to weed out the undesirables, of course, but she figured a big portion of them would disappear when they found out she had no intention of actually using any of the condoms. They were merely a conversation piece, as it were.

On the other hand, she had never suspected buying condoms would be complicated. She stood in aisle five and stared at the stacks and rows of boxes. Who on earth knew there were so many choices? And what did the sexually hip young woman buy these days?

For instance, was something called a Rough Rider desirable or not? Daisy thought probably not, because that sounded like something a motorcycle gang would buy, assuming Hell's Angels wore condoms. And what about ribs? Did it matter if a condom was ribbed or unribbed? Lubricated or not? On second thought, she opted for lubricated.

And on third thought, Cyrus Clud had an enormous selection of condoms, far more than she would have expected for a small, independent pharmacy. Surely condom sales couldn't be that brisk, since one could find them in so many other places.

She picked up a pack labeled "Tickle Her Fancy," read the back, and hurriedly returned it to the shelf. Maybe Cyrus had a niche clientele. Maybe she needed to warn Chief Russo to keep a close eye on aisle five at Clud's Pharmacy, because judging by the variety offered here, there were some hinky things going on in Hillsboro.

At last, desperate, she picked up a box called the PartyPak— that should cover all bases—and marched up to the register, where she plunked the PartyPak down on the counter in front of Barbara Clud.

"I hope everything's all right with Evelyn and Joella," Barbara said sweetly as she picked up the box, which was her way of priming the pump to find out if anything was wrong with anyone; then she noticed what she was holding and gasped. "Daisy Minor!"
Someone came up behind her. Daisy didn't look around to see who it was. "Cash," she said, as if Barbara had asked, and fished some bills out of her wallet to hurry along the process before half of Hillsboro lined up at the register. She had thought she would be able to accomplish this with an air of sangfroid, but she could feel her face heating. One would think Barbara had never sold condoms before, from her expression of shock.
Barbara began to turn red, too. "Does your mother know about this?" she whispered, leaning forward in an effort to keep their conversation private. Thank goodness for that much, at least, Daisy thought.
"Not yet, but she will," Daisy mumbled, thinking the phone lines would be burning as soon as she walked out of the store. She extended the money, trying again to just get this process completed.
"I'm in a hurry," said a deep, grumbly voice behind and above her, and Daisy froze. "Just ring the damn things up."
She couldn't have moved if she'd wanted to. She knew that voice; she'd heard it much too often lately. If she could have, she'd have vanished on the spot.
Barbara's face took on a purple hue as she scanned the bar code, the register chirped, and a total appeared in the little window. She took Daisy's money, silently handed back the change, and shoved the PartyPak into a white paper sack emblazoned in red with the words Clud's Pharmacy. Daisy dropped the change into her purse, took the paper sack, and for the first time in her life left a store without saying thank you to the person who had waited on her.
To her absolute horror, Chief Russo didn't buy anything, just fell into step beside her. "What are you doing?" she hissed as they stepped onto the sidewalk. "Go back and buy something!" Maybe the redness of her face could be attributed to the heat rising in waves off the sidewalk. Maybe he wouldn't notice she was mortified.
"I don't need anything," he said.
"Then why did you go inside in the first place?"
"I saw you go in and I wanted to talk to you. Condoms, huh?" he said, eyeing the paper sack with interest. "That looks like a big box. How many

are in it?"
"Go away!" Daisy moaned, marching down the sidewalk with the PartyPak clutched to her chest. When she had hit on the plan of buying condoms to get men to notice her, she hadn't meant him and she certainly hadn't meant now. She had a half-hysterical vision of a line of men following her down the street, trying to peek into her sack. "She thought I was buying them for you!" By now at least one person, perhaps two, had heard the news of Chief Russo and Daisy Minor buying a huge box of condoms. The chief had even said he was in a hurry! She swallowed another moan.
"I can buy my own condoms, thank you," he said.
"You know what I mean! She thought they were for us—that we ..." She trailed off, unable to give voice to the idea.
"We'd have to be rabbits to use that many on our lunch hour," he observed. "I don't think it's possible. How many are in there, six dozen or so? That's seventy-two, so even if we had the entire hour, that means, roughly, using one about every fifty seconds." He paused and looked thoughtful. "That isn't the kind of record I want to set. One every hour, or every two hours, that would be different."
She actually felt faint with shock, though she supposed it could be from practically running in the noonday heat. With his longer legs, he was pretty much at his normal stride; he wasn't even panting.
Not that she was panting; she didn't want to even think about panting while he was talking about using a condom every hour. She was breathing fast, that was all.
"You're overheating," he said. "Let's stop in the Coffee Cup for something cold to drink, before you pass out on the sidewalk and I have to carry you."
Daisy whirled on him and said with muffled outrage, "She's probably already called my mother, and goodness knows who else, telling everyone that we bought a PartyPak of condoms on our lunch hour!"
"Then the best thing for you to do would be to go to the Coffee Cup with me so we'd have witnesses that we didn't go to my house and do our best to use them all. PartyPak, huh?" He grinned. "I bet there's an interesting variety. Let me see."
"No!" she shrieked, turning away when he reached for the sack.
He stroked his jaw. "There's probably an ordinance on the books against having pornographical items on the street."

"Condoms are not pornographical," she said, the bottom dropping out of her stomach. "They're birth control and health-aid items."
"Plain condoms, yeah, but there are probably some weird things in something called a PartyPak."
Daisy chewed her lip. He wouldn't arrest her; she was almost certain of it. On the other hand, this entire expedition had gotten out of hand so fast she was still reeling, and she wasn't ready to push her luck. Silently she handed over the sack.
He didn't just open the sack and look inside; he reached in and pulled out the PartyPak, right there on the street. Daisy looked around for a manhole to dive into, though any hole would have done. She'd made it half a step away from him before he seized her arm and hauled her back, all without looking up from the label on the back of the box.
" 'Ten different colors and flavors,'" he read aloud. "Including 'bubble gum, watermelon, and strawberry.' " He glanced up and clicked his tongue. "I'm surprised at you, Miss Daisy."
"I didn't know about the watermelon," she blurted, suddenly afraid there was a green-striped condom in the PartyPak box. This had been a terrible idea. Maybe Barbara would refund her money, unless there was a rule against letting people return condoms. You weren't supposed to return swimsuits and underwear, so Barbara might throw her out of the store if she tried to return the PartyPak.
"If I were you, I'd worry more about the bubble gum," he said absently, still reading.
She blinked, taken aback. "Oh, I wouldn't blow them," she said, then clapped her hand over her mouth and stared at him with wide, horrified eyes.
"Shut up," she said furiously a few minutes later, when he showed no signs of stopping laughing. He was all but howling, leaning weakly against a parked car and still clutching the box of condoms as he bent over to brace his hands on his knees. Tears were running down his face. She wished they were tears of pain.
No, she didn't; she didn't want to hurt anyone, even him. But enough was enough, and she wasn't going to put up with this another second. If he wanted to arrest her, he'd have to stop laughing to do it, because she was leaving, and taking her PartyPak with her.

He held up his left hand to ward her off as she approached, evidently thinking she was going to hit him, though that didn't stop the chortles and wheezes. Daisy snatched the box away from him and said, "Adolescent!" in her most freezing tones, and marched away.
"W-wait!" she heard him gasp. "Daisy!"
She didn't stop marching, or even turn around. Fury propelled her all the way across the square to the library and up the two marble steps to the front door. She paused there, taking deep breaths in an effort to appear composed, then breezed through the door and up to the checkout desk as if she were Miss America. It was only when she reached out to raise the counter barrier that she realized she held the PartyPak in her hand, and there was no white paper sack covering it.
Kendra was behind the desk, and of course she immediately looked at what Daisy was carrying. Her eyes popped open so wide, white showed all the way around the irises. "Daisy! What—" She stopped, remembering where they were and that she should lower her voice. She pointed mutely at the box.
Everything else had failed her, so Daisy tried for nonchalance. "This?" she asked, lifting the box as if she couldn't understand Kendra's reaction. "It's just a box of condoms." Then she sailed into her office, shut the door, and collapsed in her chair.
"I hear you bought some condoms," Todd said on the phone that evening, his amusement clear even through the telephone line.
"You, my mother and aunt, half the church, and all of the neighborhood," Daisy said, and sighed. After all, that had been her plan. Sort of.
"And that you and our illustrious chief used half the box during lunch hour."
"I went straight back to the library!" she wailed. "I knew that's what Barbara Clud would say, the gossiping busybody! He wasn't with me; he just came up while I was checking out."
"She also said he didn't buy anything, said he was in a hurry, and left with you."
"This is going to ruin everything." She sighed and sat down at the breakfast table, having taken the call in the kitchen. Her mother and Aunt Jo were watching television, as usual.
"How's that?"
"If everyone thinks Chief Russo and I are having a—a thing—"
"An affair," Todd supplied.

"—then no other men will come near me! How am I going to find a husband if no one will ask me out because they think the chief of police wouldn't like it?"
"I can see where that would be a problem. He's a big bruiser." .
"Well, that takes care of all the local men, so I bought those condoms for nothing."
"I'm not certain I understand. Are you saying only local men could use them?"
"Oh, I'm not planning on using them. I knew Barbara would get the word out I'd bought them, and then some of the single men in town would find out I'm available, and modern, and things like that, and they'd be interested enough to at least check me out. That's how it worked in theory," she said glumly. "In reality, the chief ruined everything. Now I'll have to concentrate on the nightclub men."
“Are you going out tonight?" he asked.
"No, there's too much to do getting my house ready. Buck Latham is finished painting, so now I have to clean and look for furniture, buy appliances, that sort of thing."
"What style of furniture are you looking for?"
"Well, the house is small, so I'm aiming for cozy and comfortable. Whatever style that is, that's what I want."
"Does it have to be new? Or would you like some individual older pieces? We can pick those up at auctions for a fraction of what you would pay in a furniture store for something new."
The idea of saving money always interested Daisy. "I've never been to an auction. Where is one, and when?"
"Everywhere, and always," he drawled. "Ill find one for tomorrow night, and well have that house decorated before you know it."
Daisy moved into her little house on Friday, after a whirlwind of preparations that left her no time to fume about the way Chief Russo had sabotaged her condom plan. She was so busy she didn't really mind the way some people whispered behind their hands when they saw her. This was the twenty-first century, after all; it was no big deal to buy condoms, even in Hillsboro. A lot of people did, or Cyrus Clud wouldn't carry such a large supply.
For the most part, she didn't have time to think about anything except the herculean task of moving. She had never let herself buy things to put away

for when she got married and had her own home, because that would have been like admitting she wasn't satisfied with her life. Well, she wasn't satisfied, but now she was admitting it—and doing something about it.
She still wasn't married, but she had her own house. So what if it was a tiny rental in a run-down neighborhood? It had a fenced backyard, she was going to get a dog, and it was her very own place. Unfortunately, because she'd never bought any household things beyond her own bed linens, that meant she had to endure some shopping marathons to get stocked up on the thousand and one items needed to set up housekeeping.
She bought curtains and cookware, stocked up on groceries and household items, bought brooms and a vacuum cleaner and a dust mop—her own vacuum cleaner! She was ecstatic—and worked every spare hour cleaning and getting things put away When she wasn't doing that, Todd kept her busy looking for furniture. She was a little surprised but deeply grateful that he exhibited such interest in her new life, because his aid was invaluable. He took her to a couple of auctions, and she discovered the joy of simply nodding her head until her competitors for any certain piece gave up and dropped out of the bidding; then she'd hold up a numbered card and the lamp or the rug or the end table would be hers. Winning gave her a thrill, so much so that Todd watched her with amusement whenever she decided to bid on a piece.
"You're like a shark going after raw bait," he said lazily, smiling at the color in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes.
She immediately blushed. "I am? My goodness." She folded her hands in her lap as if to keep them from flashing that little numbered card again.
He laughed. "Oh, don't stop. You're having more fun than I ever do."
"It is fun, isn't it?" She eyed the tea cart being offered for sale. She didn't have much room, and if she bought everything she liked, she wouldn't have room for the necessities, such as furniture. On the other hand, the tea cart would look wonderful in the corner of the living room, with plants on top of it and maybe photographs on the lower shelves . . .
Several minutes of furious bidding later, the tea cart was hers—along with a cozy little table and two chairs, a pair of lamps with translucent pink bases and creamy shades, a dark sage green rug, a big, squashy easy chair that rocked and was upholstered in dusty blue with cream pinstripes, and a small cabinet for her television. When they were ready to leave, Todd looked over

her booty and said, "I'm glad we borrowed a pickup; that big chair would never wedge into the trunk of your car."
"It's wonderful, isn't it?" she said blissfully, already imagining herself curled up in it.
"It certainly is, and I know just the piece to go with it. It's new, I'm afraid," he said apologetically. "But it's a perfect sofa, I promise."
The perfect sofa was covered with the most impractical cabbage roses on a dusty blue background that very nearly matched the blue of her big chair. She considered the sofa outrageously expensive, but fell in love with it on sight. No drab brown upholstery for her, no sir! She wanted the cabbage roses. And when everything was arranged in her little house, the effect was even cozier than she had imagined.
Friday night, Daisy's little house was full of people and furniture and boxes. Evelyn and Beth and Aunt Jo were sorting things out, putting boxes in the rooms where the contents would go but not unpacking them, because if they did, Daisy wouldn't know where anything was. Todd was putting the finishing touches on the decoration, hanging some prints, helping her arrange the furniture just so, and providing some much-needed muscle for the heavier pieces. Her clothes were in the closet, the curtains were all hung, her books were in the bookcase, food was in the refrigerator—everything was ready.
The house was a testament to what could be accomplished when some very determined women—and one antiques dealer— worked at it. Neighbors had been pressed into service moving her bedroom furniture over; the local appliance store had delivered and installed her stove, refrigerator, microwave, and washer and dryer the same day she bought them. She thought, considering the money she had spent, same-day delivery was the least they could do.
Evelyn had prepared a pot roast and brought it over for Daisy's first real meal in her own home. Daisy put her mother and Aunt Jo at the tiny table she'd bought, and she, Beth, and Todd sat on the floor, laughing and talking the way people do when they've accomplished something herculean.
"I can't believe it," she said, unable to stop beaming as she looked around her kitchen. "All of this has happened in only two weeks!"
"What can I say?" Todd drawled. "You're a slave-driver." He took another bite of roast and sighed with delight. "Mrs. Minor, you should open a restaurant. You'd make a fortune."

"I already have a fortune," she said serenely. "I have my family, and I'm healthy Everything else is just work."
"Besides," Beth said, "I'm just now getting over the shock of how Daisy's changed her looks. Give me a little while before you start turning my mother into a food mogul."
They all laughed, because after her stunned reaction on Sunday, Beth had been as enthusiastic as everyone else about Daisy's improvements. Evelyn had been greatly relieved, because she'd worried about her younger daughter's ego. Beth was a Minor, though, and the Minor women were made of stern stuff. Besides, Beth and Daisy truly loved each other and had always gotten along.
"I'll give you a few months to adjust," Todd said. "But I'm not giving up; food like this needs to be shared."
"And paid for," Aunt Jo said, pursing her mouth.
"That, too." He looked around, then said to Daisy, "I hope you changed the locks on the doors."
"That was the first thing I did. Actually, Buck Latham did it for me. I have two keys, Mother has an extra key, and the landlady has a key. I wasn't about to leave the old locks on the doors."
"And she's getting a dog," said Aunt Jo. "As a matter of fact, I have a friend whose dog had a litter several weeks ago. I'll check with her and see if she still has any of the puppies."
A puppy! Daisy felt a little spurt of delight. Somehow she'd only thought of finding a grown dog, but she'd love to have a puppy and raise it from babyhood.
“A puppy" Todd said, frowning a little. "Wouldn't a grown dog be better?"
"I want a puppy," Daisy said, already imagining the feel of the warm, wriggling little body in her arms. Okay, so it was probably transference from wanting a baby of her own, but for now a puppy would do just fine.
Todd lingered as the others were leaving, pausing on her front porch. "Are you going dancing tomorrow night?"
She thought of everything that needed to be done in the house; then she thought of the long hours she'd already put in this week. Last week at the Buffalo Club had been fun, at least until the fight started.
"I think I will. I really liked the dancing."
"Then be careful, and have fun."

"Thanks. I will." She smiled and waved at him as he drove away, thanking her lucky stars she'd found such a good friend as Todd Lawrence.

TWELVE

Saturday night was always the busiest night of the week at the Buffalo Club, so Jimmy, the bartender, wasn't sure how long Mitchell had been there before he saw him, holding a beer and leaning over a redhead with enough makeup on her face to cover the San Andreas Fault. The redhead didn't seem impressed; she kept turning back to her friend, an equally made-up platinum blonde, as if they were trying to carry on a conversation and Mitchell was intruding.

Jimmy didn't look at them again; the last thing he wanted was for Mitchell to notice he'd been noticed. Since Mitchell had a beer, he must have had one of the waitresses bring it to him, instead of bellying up to the bar the way he usually did. Jimmy picked up the phone under the bar, punched in the number, and said, "He's here."

"Well, damn," Sykes said genially on the other end of the line.

"I really need to talk to him, but I can't get away. Oh, well, another time."

"Sure," said Jimmy, and hung up.

Sykes broke the connection, then quickly called two men he knew and said, "Meet me at the Buffalo Club, forty minutes. Come prepared."

Then Sykes himself got prepared; he pulled on a baseball cap to hide his hair, boots to make himself seem taller, and stuffed a small pillow inside his shirt. In good light this effort at disguise would be obvious, but at night those small things would be enough to make it difficult to identify him if anything untoward happened at the club. Sykes didn't plan on doing anything at the club; he just wanted to get Mitchell and take him someplace where there weren't a couple of hundred potential witnesses, but something could always go wrong. That's why he wasn't driving his own car; he had borrowed one again, just in case, then replaced the license plate with one he'd taken off a car in Georgia.

Barring any unforseen occurrences, such as another brawl, their little problem with Mitchell should be taken care of tonight.

Daisy found that it took a lot of nerve to go back into a club where one had accidentally caused a brawl. There shouldn't be too many people who actually knew the cause: herself, Chief Russo, perhaps the guy whose testicles she had smashed—though she thought he hadn't been paying much attention to what was going on around him—and maybe one or two perceptive people who had been watching. So, five at the most. And what

were the odds any of the four other people were here tonight? She should be perfectly safe; no one was going to point at her as soon as she walked in the door and shout, "That's her!"
That's what logic said. Logic, however, had also told her buying condoms would be no big deal, so logic obviously was not infallible.
So she sat in her car in the dark parking lot, watching couples and groups and singles enter the Buffalo Club, which was swinging. Music poured out every time the door was opened, and she could feel the heavy beat of the bass drum throb even through the walls. She was all gussied up, without the nerve to go inside.
But she was working on it; every time she gave herself a pep talk, she got a little closer to actually opening the car door. She was wearing red, the first red dress she'd ever owned in her life, and she knew she looked good. Her blond hair still swung in its simple, sophisticated style, her makeup was subtle but flattering, and the red dress would make all the tube-top wearers look low-class, which was kind of a redundancy. The dress was almost like a sundress Sandra Dee would have worn back in the early sixties, with two-inch wide straps holding it up, a scooped neckline—but not too scooped—a slim fitted waist, and a full skirt that stopped just above her knees and swung around her legs when she walked. She was wearing the taupe heels again, and the gold anklet glittered around her ankle. That and her earrings were the only jewelry she wore, making her look very cool and uncluttered. She didn't just look good, she looked great, and if she didn't get out of the car and go inside, no one except herself would ever know it.
On the other hand, it might be best to let the place get completely full, to lessen the already small chance that someone might recognize her.
She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. She could feel the music, calling her to get on the dance floor and just dance. She'd loved that part of the night, loved the rhythm and feeling her body move and knowing she was doing it right, that the lessons she'd taken in college had paid off because she still knew the steps and men evidently loved dancing with someone who could do something other than stand in one place and jerk. Not that country nightclubs were much into the jerking; they were more into line dances and slow-swaying stuff—
"I'm stalling," she announced to the car. "What's more, I'm very good at it."
On the other hand, she had also always been very good at obeying the time limits she set for herself. "Ten more minutes," she said, turning on the

ignition to check the dash clock. "I'm going inside in ten minutes."
She turned the switch off again and checked the contents of her tiny purse. Driver's license, lipstick, tissue, and a twenty-dollar bill. Taking inventory didn't occupy more than, say, five seconds.
Three men came out of the club, the light from the overhead sign briefly illuminating their faces. The one in the middle looked familiar, but no name sprang to mind. She watched as they walked across the crowded parking lot, wending their way through the roughly formed lines of cars and trucks. Another man got out of a car as they neared, and the four of them headed toward a pickup truck parked under a tree.
Another car pulled into the parking lot, the lights slashing across the four standing near the pickup. Three of the men looked toward the new arrival, while the fourth turned to look at something in the bed of the pickup.
A man and a woman got out of the car and went inside. The music blared briefly as the door opened, then receded to a muffled throb when it closed. Except for the four men under the tree and herself, there was no one else in the parking lot.
Daisy turned on the ignition switch again to check the time. She had four minutes left. That was good; she didn't really want to get out of the car and walk across the parking lot by herself, not with those four men standing there. Maybe they would leave. She turned off the switch and glanced up. One of the men must have been really, really drunk, because two of the men were now supporting him, one on each side, and as she watched, they hefted him into the bed of the pickup, supporting his head as they did so. That was good; they weren't letting him try to drive home in his condition, though from the looks of him, he'd already passed out. All three of them had seemed to be walking okay when they left the club, but she'd heard of people who walked and talked okay up until the very second they passed out. She'd always thought that was so much malarkey, but there was proof of it, right before her eyes.
The two men who had helped their friend into the bed of the pickup got into the cab and drove off. The fourth man turned and walked back to his car.
Daisy checked the time again. Her ten minutes were up. Taking a deep breath, she took the keys out of the ignition, dropped them into her little purse, and got out, automatically hitting the Lock button as she opened the door.

" 'Cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left...' " she quoted as she marched across the parking lot, then wished she had thought of something else, because the Light Brigade had perished.
Nothing happened to her, however. She wasn't shot out of the saddle, nor did anyone point at her as soon as she opened the door. She stepped inside, paid her two dollars, and was swallowed up by the music.
Glenn Sykes sat in his car, his eyes cold and burning as he watched the woman walk into the club. Where in hell had she come from? She had to have been sitting in one of the cars, and in the dark they hadn't noticed her. It wasn't whether or not she had seen anything, but how much she had seen, and how much she realized. It was dark, details were difficult to make out, and there hadn't been any loud noises to alarm her. If Mitchell hadn't tried to call out to the couple who had driven up, there wouldn't have been anything for her to see. But, hell, as soon as he'd seen Sykes get out of the car, he'd known they were going to kill him, so what did he have to lose? Sykes didn't blame the bastard for giving it a try. Too bad Buddy was greased lightning with that knife; Mitchell hadn't gotten out more than a squeak.
She didn't know them; she evidently hadn't noticed anything unusual going on. But she was a loose end, and Sykes didn't like loose ends. His original plan had been to pour enough GHB down Mitchell's throat to kill three men, which had seemed like a fitting end to the bastard. He'd even decided to leave the body where it would be found before the GHB broke down so the cops would know exactly what killed him, and they'd think it was just another overdose. He couldn't do that now, not with that gash in Mitchell's throat, plus there was blood in the parking lot if anyone cared to look.
If she was a regular here, she might have recognized Mitchell, might know him—and might remember way too much when she heard his throat had been slashed.
He hadn't seen which car she got out of, but he could narrow it down. He got out of his car and walked over to that section of the parking lot, squatting down out of sight and quickly jotting down the tag numbers. He thought about going into the club and trying to find her. She had blond hair and had been wearing a red dress; he'd seen that much when the door opened. She should be easy to spot.
But he'd told Jimmy he couldn't get free tonight, and now that Mitchell was dead, he didn't want to show up after all, thereby placing himself at the scene of Mitchell's last known whereabouts.

Sykes sighed. He'd have to sit out here and wait for the woman to leave, then follow her home. He needed to be overseeing the disposal of Mitchell's remains, but he couldn't be in both places at once. He'd just have to trust Buddy and his pal to be smart about where they dumped the body After all, their asses were on the line, too. Taking care of the woman would have to be his priority.

The Buffalo Club was, if anything, even more crowded than it had been the week before. Daisy stood for a moment, letting her senses adjust to the overwhelming noise of voices and the band singing very loudly about someone named Earl needing to die, a song that a good many of the female customers were singing along with the band. Some man, probably named Earl, took exception to the song and hurled his beer at the band, which explained the chicken wire encircling the stage. Two very big men converged on the beer-hurler, and Daisy was pleased to see him escorted to the door. She'd just gotten here; she wanted to get in at least a few dances before a fight started.

"Hey, sweetheart, remember me?" a man said, appearing beside her. An arm went around her waist and she found herself being propelled toward the crowded dance floor.

She looked up at the tall blond man, who was trying to grow an Alan Jackson mustache. "No," she said.

"Aw, come on. We danced last week—"

"No," she said positively, "we didn't. I danced with Jeff, Denny, Howard, and Steven. You aren't any of them."

"You're right about that," he said cheerfully "I'm Harley, as in the motorcycle. Well, if we didn't dance last week, let's dance this week."

Since they were already on the dance floor, that seemed like a good idea. Earl had died and the band was singing something else, which didn't require half the audience to shout the lines along with them. People were twirling and dipping, so Daisy twirled and dipped right along with them, her hand in Harley's, her sassy skirt swirling around her legs. Next came Elvis Presley's "Kentucky Rain," and Harley retained possession of her hand for that number.

"Say, what's your name?" he asked, finally remembering that he didn't know.

"Daisy."

“Are you with someone? Can I buy you a drink?"

Oh, gracious, was he one of those men about whom Chief Russo had warned her? "I'm with some friends." She gestured vaguely toward the tangled cluster of tables, because that still seemed like a safe lie. She added, "Thank you, but I don't want anything to drink right now. I came to dance."
He shrugged. "Fine with me. I think I'll sit this one out." He wandered off as abruptly as he had appeared, and Daisy looked around. So far, not counting the man whose testicles she had smashed, she had met six different men, and not one of them had really appealed to her. Maybe she was being too picky; though, really, she didn't see how; she had danced with everyone who had asked her.
She saw Howard on the dance floor, and he waved. Maybe he would ask her to dance again; he'd been the best dancer of the bunch.
Then—oh, no—she saw him: the burly guy who had pulled her down onto his lap. He spotted her at about the same time and a horrified expression crossed his face before he turned sharply away.
She wanted to do the same thing, turn away and pretend she hadn't seen him, but her conscience gave a sharp twinge. He shouldn't have grabbed her and she hadn't meant to hurt him, but nevertheless he had been in a great deal of pain and she owed him an apology.
Determinedly she began fighting her way through the crowd, trying not to lose sight of him. He seemed to be heading just as determinedly toward the men's room, for all the world as if he intended to hide from her, though of course she had to be mistaken in her impression. He was at a club, he'd probably been drinking beer, so it stood to reason he had to urinate.
He made it to the short hallway leading to the bathrooms before she caught up to him, however, and disappeared through the scarred door as if the hounds of hell were after him. Daisy sighed and squirmed through a knot of people, ignoring both a protest (female) and an invitation (male); she felt like a salmon fighting its way upstream. At last, though, she managed to reach the wall near the bathrooms, where she planted her feet against all the nudges and shoves, and waited.
It seemed to take forever, and she had to refuse three offers to dance, before her quarry peered out from the hallway.
Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and tapped him on the shoulder. For a big guy, he sure could jump.

He backed away from her as if she were the Antichrist, his beefy face turning red. "You stay away from me, lady."
Daisy was taken aback; the man honestly seemed afraid of her. She blinked, then tried to reassure him. "Don't be afraid," she said as soothingly as possible. "I won't hurt you. I just wanted to apologize."
Now it was his turn to blink. He stopped backpedaling. "Apologize?"
"I'm very sorry I hurt you. It was an accident. I was just trying to get out of your lap, and I put my hand in the wrong place. I truly didn't mean to crush your—" My goodness, she couldn't say balls, though that seemed to be the most popular term, and neither did she want to call them his things, because after all she was trying to be more sophisticated about such matters. "—testicles," she finished, with more emphasis on the word than she'd intended.
He flinched as if she'd hit him, and she realized she'd said the last word loudly enough that, despite the noise from the band, the people nearby had heard her and heads were turning.
His face turned redder. "Apology accepted," he mumbled. "Just go away."
Daisy felt he could have been a little more gracious, considering the entire episode was his fault anyway; if he hadn't grabbed her, as if he had the right to pull strange women down onto his lap, then none of it would have happened. A touch indignant, she opened her mouth to tell him so, but abruptly a tall form materialized by her side and a deep voice said, "I'll keep her away from you."
And just like that, willy-nilly, Chief Russo picked her up much as he had the last time she was here and carried her, not outside, but onto the dance floor.
"You are just like a heat rash," she said irritably as he set her down.
One eyebrow rose in query. "I bother you?" He took her right hand in his, set her left hand on his shoulder, and put his arm around her. "Dance."
"You turn up everywhere." Automatically she followed his lead to the slow rhythm of another Elvis song. The band was very big on Elvis tonight, though perhaps this wasn't the same band that had been here the week before.
"Someone has to keep you out of trouble."
"Out of trouble? Out of trouble?" She tilted her head back and glared at him. Even though she was wearing heels, she still had to look up. As Todd had pointed out, Chief Russo was a big bruiser. "Thank you for getting me

out of here last week, but other than that, you've been the cause of all the trouble I've had."
"Don't blame me. I wasn't the one buying a year's supply of rubbers. Used any of them yet?"
Words failed her. Or rather, polite words failed her. She thought of several she wanted to say, but was afraid God would strike her dead if she did.
He grinned. "If you could see your face ..." His arm tightened around her and he swung her in a circle, forcing her to cling to his shoulder. Somehow she ended up much closer to him than she had been before, closer than she had danced with any of her other partners. Her breasts brushed his shirt, she felt the slide of his hip, and his legs moved against hers. They were—my goodness, one of his legs was between hers.
A rush of heat caught her unprepared. She felt as if she were melting on the inside, softening, her bones losing their stiffness and her muscles their tension. It was the most peculiar sensation, but also the most beguiling.
"Chief—"
"Jack." His arm tightened a little more, as if insisting she use his name.
"Jack." She really was melting. She was all but lying against him now, her feet still moving, following his lead, but he supported most of her weight.
"You're holding me too close."
He bent his head so his breath fanned her ear when he said, "I think I'm holding you just right."
Well, he was, if he liked melty women. And perhaps her protest had been more pro forma than sincere, because she wasn't making any effort to pull away. It felt too good to lie against him, the softness of her body conforming to the hard contours of his. Her breasts were slightly flattened against his chest, and she liked it. She liked it a lot. To her bemusement, she found herself reveling in the hard strength of the shoulder under her left hand, in the warmth of the arm around her waist. Warm . . . God, yes, he was warm. His heat and musky scent enveloped her, making her want to rub her nose against him.
She wanted to rub her nose against Jack Russo?
The shock of the thought gave her the strength to lift her head. He was watching her with a strangely intent expression; he didn't look stern, but neither was he smiling.
"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice unaccountably low.
He shook his head. "Not one thing."

"But you look—"
"Daisy. Shut up and dance."
She shut up and danced. Without the distraction of conversation she started sinking against him again. He didn't seem to mind, though. If anything, he gathered her even closer, so close she could feel his belt buckle against her stomach.
That wasn't all she could feel.
Her mind was still reeling from the realization that she could feel the chief of police's penis when the dance ended and the band swung into a lively little number about Bubba shooting the jukebox. Jack grimaced and led her from the floor, keeping a tight grip on her as he maneuvered his way through the crowd to a spot near the back wall, almost behind the band, which was probably why there were a couple of empty seats there. He all but plunked her in one, looked around at the scurrying waitresses, and said, "Stay here. I'll get you something to drink. What do you want?"
"Ginger ale with lemon, please."
He grinned and shook his head, then left her there while he waded into the throng around the bar.
Daisy, in a slight state of shock, stayed. Perhaps she was even more naive than she'd suspected, because he didn't act as if there was anything unusual in his partner feeling his penis while they danced. Maybe that was why people danced together. But she hadn't noticed any other penises when she danced, just Jack's.
She would never again be able to think of him as chief.
She had no idea how long he was gone, because she was lost in her thoughts. As luck would have it, no one asked her to dance until she saw Jack approaching, a beer in one hand and a glass of sparkling ginger ale in the other.
"Want to dance?"
The question came from a man leaning over from her left. He was wearing a "Party Hearty" T-shirt, so she would have refused anyway, but she didn't get the chance. Jack set the ginger ale on the table in front of her and said, "She's with me."
"Okay." The guy immediately turned to another woman. "Want to dance?"
Jack settled into the chair beside her and tilted the beer to his mouth. She watched his strong throat work as he swallowed, and began to feel too warm again. Gratefully she seized the cold ginger ale.

After a moment she noticed how his gaze constantly moved over the crowd, occasionally pausing briefly while he studied someone, then moving on. She felt another little shock of awareness, of a completely different type.
"You're working, aren't you?"
He shot her a quick glance, the gray-green of his eyes glittering. "I don't have any jurisdiction outside of Hillsboro."
"I know, but you're still watching the crowd."
He shrugged. "It's a habit."
"Don't you ever just relax?" Abruptly her whole outlook on law enforcement officers changed. Were they all always on guard, watchful, wary? Was constant vigilance, even when they were off duty, part of the price they paid for their jobs?
"Sure," he said, leaning back and hitching his right ankle onto his left knee. "When I'm at home."
She didn't know where he lived, couldn't picture his home. Hillsboro, though a small town, was still large enough that it was impossible to know everyone or be familiar with all the neighborhoods. "Where do you live?"
Again that quick glance. "Not all that far from your mother's house. Elmwood."
Elmwood was just four streets over. It was a section of Victorians, some in good repair and some not. She certainly hadn't pictured him in a Victorian, and said as much.
"I inherited the house, from my great-aunt. Aunt Bessie, the one I told you about."
She sat upright. She had known a Bessie on Elmwood. "Miss Bessie Childress?"
"That was her." He lifted his beer in salute to his dead great-aunt.
"You're Miss Bessie's nephew?"
"Great-nephew. I spent the best summers of my life with her when I was a lad."
"She brought over a coconut cake when Daddy died." Daisy was stunned; this was almost like going to Europe and running into your next-door neighbor. She had thought Jack a complete outsider, but instead when he was a boy he'd been spending summers just four streets away from her.
"Aunt Bessie made the best coconut cake in the world." He smiled, reminiscing about coconut cakes he had known.
"Why didn't I ever meet you?"

"For one, I only came during the summer, when school was out. For another, I'm older than you; we wouldn't have hung out with the same crowd. You would have been playing Barbie while I played baseball. And Aunt Bessie went to a different church."

That was true. Miss Bessie Childress had been solidly Methodist, while the Minors were Presbyterian. So it was logical they hadn't met when they were children, but it still gave her a jolt to realize he was . . . why, he was almost home-folk.

There was a sudden disruption in the flow on the dance floor. A man sprawled on the floor, making couples scatter. A woman screamed, "Danny, no!" Her shrill voice cut through the loud music, which crashed to a discordant stop. The man who had fallen — or been knocked down — jumped up, lowered his head, and plunged toward another man, who swiftly sidestepped and bumped into a woman, sending her sprawling. Her partner took immediate exception, and the dance floor erupted.

"Aw, shit." Jack heaved a sigh and grabbed her wrist, hauling her to her feet. "Here we go again. C'mon, we'll go out the back."

They joined the pack of bodies that was doing the same thing, but again Jack used his size and strength to bull his way through, and in just a moment they were in the humid night air, listening to the sound of shouts and breaking glass coming from inside.

"You're a catalyst," he said, shaking his head.

"This wasn't my fault," she said indignantly. "I wasn't anywhere near those people. I was sitting with you. "

"Yeah, but it's just something about you being here, like the universe is out of whack. Believe it or not, most nights there isn't any trouble at all. Where's your car?"

She led the way around the building to her car. People were pouring out of the front entrance, too. It was like an instant replay of the week before. She sighed. She'd danced only three dances this week. At the rate things were going, next time she'd be lucky to get in one dance before the fight started.

When she got her car key out of her purse, he took it from her, unlocked the door, then opened it for her before returning the key. He watched, his expression inscrutable, as she buckled her seat belt and reached for the door handle to close the door.

He stood in the way, frowning a little now. "I'll follow you home."

"Why?" Her surprise was plain.
He shrugged. "Because I just got an itch between my shoulder blades. Because I heard you've moved and I don't like the street. Just because."
"Thanks, but it isn't necessary. I left the porch light on."
He bared his teeth in a grin that wasn't a grin. "Humor me," he said, and it wasn't a suggestion.

THIRTEEN

Son of a bitch! When people started pouring out of the club like ants, Sykes would have pounded the steering wheel in frustration if it wouldn't have gained him attention he didn't want. What was it with these people? Couldn't they go to a goddamn dance without fighting?
He didn't like getting out of the car, but he did it anyway, searching in the turmoil for blond hair and a red dress. The scurrying crowd blocked his view of the section of the lot where she'd parked, so he worked his way in that direction, craning his head for a glimpse of her. In the dark, with people darting in every direction and headlights briefly slicing across the scene as cars left, the effect was almost like having a strobe light flashing.
Then he saw her, walking calmly across the gravel as if she'd just left a wedding instead of a brawl. He sidestepped as a car went by just inches from his toes, but never took his gaze off his quarry. Then he halted, swearing to himself. She had gone inside alone, but she came out with company, in the form of a guy who looked like he ate rocks for breakfast. Sykes was close enough to hear him say, "I'll follow you home," and he immediately swerved away, lingering only long enough to note which car was hers, so he could match it to one of the tag numbers and makes of car he'd written down. Okay, so he couldn't follow her home tonight; three cars would make a damn parade. But he had her tag number now, so essentially he had her. Swiftly returning to his car, he glanced down the list and immediately saw the description he wanted: eight-year-old Ford sedan, beige—which was a pretty blah car for a woman with such sexy class—with a 39 prefix on the license plate, meaning the car was registered in Jackson County.
That made it easy. He'd give the number to Temple Nolan, who could have someone in his police department run it. He could have the woman's name

and address within a matter of minutes from the time he talked to the mayor.
On the other hand, it was smarter to play it cool. If the mayor called his P.D. tonight, whoever he talked to would remember the license plate that was so important that the mayor had wanted it checked late on a Saturday night. It was always best not to call attention to yourself, even in the smallest detail. Monday morning would be plenty of time.
Everything was cool; nothing had to be done tonight. Waiting might even be better, give him time to make sure there were no mistakes. This really should be easy; the elements were already there. She did the bar scene, and he had a supply of GHB handy She'd be just another overdose, and since he had no intention of having sex with her, the cops would write her off as a user who tossed the dice one too many times.
Daisy pursed her lips as she glanced in the rearview mirror. The headlights behind her were way too close: Jack was tailgating her. She might have known he would. The man was constantly crowding into her personal space, and she didn't know if he did it just to annoy her or if that was his working style, to keep people off balance. She did know she didn't like it. She slowed, looking for a safe place to pull off the road, and turned on her blinker. By the time she got her car stopped, Jack's car was tucked in behind hers so closely she couldn't even see his headlights, and he was opening her car door before she could find the switch for the emergency flashers.
"What's wrong?" he demanded.
"I'll tell you what's wrong," she began, then said, "My goodness." He had a gun in his hand—a big one, held down against his leg. It was an automatic, probably a nine millimeter. She leaned over and peered at it. The night-sights on the barrel glowed despite the light coming from her car. "My goodness," she said again. "Those little suckers are bright, aren't they?"
He looked down. "What little suckers?" He was examining the ground as if he expected to find glow-in-the-dark ants.
"Your night-sights." She pointed at the weapon. "What kind is it? An H&K? A Sig?" In the dark, and with it in his big hand, she couldn't tell.
"It's a Sig, and what in hell do you know about handguns?"
He certainly was grouchy. "I helped Chief Reason research handguns when he wanted to upgrade the weapons the department carries. That was before your time," she added, just because she knew it would annoy him. Chief Reason was his predecessor.

Sure enough, she saw his jaw clench. She could almost hear his teeth grind.
"I know who Chief Reason is," he growled.
"He was very thorough. We spent months looking at all the models. In the end, though, the city council didn't vote the money to buy new weapons."
"I know." His teeth were definitely grinding. "I had to take care of that when I came on board, remember?" That had been his first act, to raise hell with the city council because they had let their police department become woefully outgunned. He'd gotten the weapons he wanted, too.
"To be fair," Daisy said, "at that time the city was spending a lot of money on the sewer system—"
"/ don't give a fuck about the sewer system!" He shoved his hand through his hair—or he would have, if it had been long enough. Daisy thought he really should let it grow a little. He drew a deep breath, as if struggling for control. "What's wrong? Why did you stop?"
"You were tailgating me."
He stood frozen in her open car door Another car went by, its tires whooshing on the pavement; then the red taillights disappeared around a curve and they were alone on the road again.
"What?" he finally said. He sounded as if he were strangling.
"You were tailgating me. It's dangerous."
There was another long moment of silence, then he stepped back. "Get out of the car."
"I will not." So long as the car was running and she had the steering wheel in her hands, she was in control. "You were wrong and you know—"
The sentence ended in a squeal as he leaned in, swiftly un-clipped her seat belt, and hauled her out of the car. Embarrassed by the squeal, because she thought she'd outgrown such noises, she was too distracted to be alarmed as he slammed the door and backed her against the car, his big body leaning in and pinning her to the cold metal. It was like being caught with fire on one side and ice on the other, and the fire was strongest because she immediately felt that peculiar internal melting again.
"I have two choices," he said conversationally. "I can either strangle you, or I can kiss you. Which one do you want?"
Alarmed at the prospect that he might kiss her, she said, "Those are your choices, not mine."
"Then you shouldn't have worn that red dress."
"What's wrong with my dress—uummph."

The rest of her indignant sentence was smothered by his mouth on hers. Daisy went still, her entire system thrown into a weird kind of suspended animation as her mind struggled to adjust expectation with reality. No, not expectation, because she'd never expected Jack Russo to kiss her. Such a thing was not on her mental list of Possible Happenings. Yet he was kissing her, and it was the most amazing thing she'd ever felt.

His lips were soft in touch, and firm in application. She could taste the beer he'd drunk, and something else .. . something sweet. Honey. He tasted like honey. One big fist was twined in her hair, holding her head tilted back, while he leisurely kissed her deeper than she'd ever been kissed before, his tongue in her mouth, and the honey taste of him dissolved her bones and turned her internal organs to mush.

She slowly went limp, held upright only by the pressure of his body all along hers. Vaguely she was aware that nothing in her life had ever felt as good, or as comfortable. It shouldn't have been comfortable, not with the cold metal of the car behind her, but she lifted her arms and twined them around his neck, and her body fit to his as if they had been custom-made to go together. Curves and mounds, angles and planes—they fit. The heat of his body seared her all the way through, the scent of his skin permeated her, and his honey taste beguiled her into wanting more, needing, demanding more. And he gave her more, holding her even closer, so that her hips cradled his pelvis and the ridge of his erection rode hard against the juncture of her thighs.

Another car went by, horn blaring. Jack raised his head long enough to mutter, "Bastard"; then he kissed her again, more of those deep, hungry kisses that fed her own hunger. Her heartbeat hammered wildly against her breastbone. Part of her mind—a tiny, distant part—was astonished that this was happening to her, that she was actually standing beside a road in the dark letting a man lass her as if he intended to strip her naked and take her right there, standing up, in public. And she wasn't just letting him kiss her, she was kissing him back, one hand clasped on the back of his head and the other slipped inside his collar to touch the back of his neck, that small touch of his bare skin making her almost dizzy with delight.

Finally he lifted his mouth, gasping for breath. She clung to him, bereft, needing more of those honey kisses. He rested his damp forehead against hers. "Miss Daisy," he murmured, "I really, really want to get naked with you."

Fifteen minutes ago—or maybe it was twenty—she would have told him in no uncertain terms that his attentions were unwelcome. Fifteen minutes ago, however, she hadn't known she was addicted to honey.
"Oh, this is bad," she said distractedly. The man was positively narcotic, and she had never suspected. No wonder so many of the women in town were nuts over him! They'd been tasting him, too. Suddenly she didn't like that idea at all.
"I thought it was damn good."
"It's totally ridiculous."
"But damn good."
"You aren't my type at all."
"Thank God for that. I'd never survive otherwise." He came back for another kiss, one that had her rising on tiptoe and straining to get closer. His right hand closed firmly over her breast, weighing and kneading, unerringly finding her nipple and rubbing it into a tight little point. The sensation splintered through her, making her moan. The sound of her own voice shocked her back into a small measure of sanity; she let herself revel in the feel of his hand on her breast for another few seconds, or twenty; then she dragged her hands from around his neck and braced them against his chest. Oh, goodness, even the feel of his chest was an enticement, so warm and hard with muscle, and with his heart thundering under her palm. Knowing he was just as excited as she, was as heady as her own arousal. She, Daisy Ann Minor, had done this to a man! And not just any man—Jack Russo, of all people!
He'd lifted his mouth as soon as she planted her hands against him. If his hand was slower to leave her breast, she didn't complain. As if every inch were agony, he eased away from her, putting a small space between them. Suddenly deprived of his heat, she felt as if the night had turned icy cold. It was a balmy summer night, but compared to Jack, the air felt almost wintry
"You're ruining all my plans."
"What plans are those?" He bent his head and began nibbling at her jawline, quick little biting kisses, as if he had to taste her again. He didn't touch her in any other way. He didn't have to. She caught herself automatically leaning toward him, and jerked upright again.
She was distracted enough to say, "I'm hunting for a man."
"I'm a man," he muttered against her collarbone. "What's wrong with me?"

Her neck was getting weak, too weak to hold up her head. It was as if she were Superwoman and he was Kryptonite, robbing her of strength.
Desperately she fought back. "I mean a relationship man."
"I'm single."
She burst out, "I want to get married and have babies!"
He straightened as if he'd been shot. "Whoa."
Now that he wasn't touching her, she could breathe more easily. "Yes, whoa. I'm husband-hunting, and you're getting in the way."
"Husband-hunting, huh?"
She didn't like his tone, but there was an oncoming car; she waited until it had passed before glaring up at him. "Thanks to you and your little show in the pharmacy, everyone in Hillsboro already thinks we have a—a thing, so no one there will ask me out. I have to go out to nightclubs now to find a man, but you're still doing the same thing, making people think we're together and keeping other men away from me."
"I've been keeping you out of trouble."
"Last week, yes, but this week I wasn't in any trouble, I wasn't causing any trouble, I wasn't even near any trouble. That man you ran off might have been the love of my life, but now I'll never know because you told him I was with you."
"He was wearing a ‘Party Hearty' T-shirt, and you think he was the love of your life?"
"Of course not," she snapped. "That isn't the point, and you know it. He was just an example. At the rate you're going, you'll have every man in north Alabama thinking I'm spoken for. I'll have to drive to Atlanta to find someone."
"Spoken for?" he echoed, with enough incredulousness in his tone to make her want to smack him. "Do you know what century this is?"
She knew her speech patterns were a little archaic; that's what happened when you lived with your mother and aunt, who were darlings but were definitely old-fashioned. She tried not to use their more dated expressions, but that was what she'd heard most of her life, so that was what came out of her mouth more often than not. She did not, however, appreciate his pointing that out. "It's the twenty-first, smart ass!"
Silence.
"Oh, my goodness," she whispered, hand to her mouth. "I'm so sorry. I never say things like that."

"Well, yes, you do," he replied. His voice sounded strained. "I heard you. You just don't say them very often."
"I'm sorry," she said again. "I have no excuse."
"Not even that I made you mad as hell?"
"You did, but I'm still responsible for my own actions."
"God," he said, looking up at the heavens, "why can't all the bad guys be like her?"
God didn't answer, and Jack shrugged. "It was worth a try. C'mon, get back in your car before I kiss you again."
Unfortunately, that wasn't much of a threat. Daisy caught herself hesitating, then resolutely reached for the door handle, to find his hand there before hers. She seated herself, arranged her red skirt just so, buckled her seat belt, then remembered why they had stopped in the first place and narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't tailgate me again."
He leaned forward, his eyes heavy-lidded and his mouth slightly swollen, reminding her what they'd been doing just a few minutes before. "I won't. At least, not in a car."
Her heart slopped a beat, then raced into double time. She licked her lips, trying not to form that image in her mind. It formed anyway. Her nipples tightened and peaked.
"Go!" he said harshly, slamming the door and stepping back, and she went. After a moment his car pulled onto the road behind hers.
He stayed a very safe distance behind her, all the way back to Hillsboro.

Fourteen

The next morning Daisy went to church as usual. She knew there had been talk about her during the week, thanks to Jack and the condom episode, and in a small town the best thing to do under those circumstances was to follow her normal routine.
Because she knew people would be watching her, she took extra pains with her hair and makeup; it was funny how fast it had become routine. The Weather Channel said that the day would be hot and humid, with temperatures climbing toward the century mark, so she dressed as coolly as possible, even leaving off her panty hose and dusting the insides of her pumps with baby powder so her feet wouldn't stick to them.

It was already hot, probably almost ninety, at nine-forty-five when she left the house. She turned the air-conditioning in her car on "high," but the church was only two miles away, so the blast of air was just getting cold when she arrived. The church was nice and cool, though, and she heaved a sigh of relief as she entered the sanctuary and took her customary seat beside her mother and Aunt Jo, who both turned to her with beaming smiles. "You look great," Aunt Jo said, leaning over to pat Daisy's hand. "How did last night go?"

Daisy sighed. "I only danced three times," she whispered. "There was another fight. I didn't have anything to do with it," she hastily added when both women's eyes rounded. "But I think I may have to find some other club."

"I should hope so," said her mother. "All those fights!"

It wasn't the fights that disturbed Daisy, but the fact that the Buffalo Club seemed to be Jack's hangout. She was an intelligent woman; she knew better than to borrow trouble, and after last night it was obvious that being anywhere in his vicinity was a big problem. If he went to the Buffalo Club, she would go elsewhere. Period.

Someone slid into the pew beside her, and she automatically turned her head to smile a greeting. The smile froze on her face. "What are you doing here?" she hissed.

Jack looked around at the altar and choir loft, the stained-glass windows, and asked, “Attending church?" then leaned forward to say hello to Evelyn and Aunt Jo. Answering smiles came his way, and Evelyn asked him to come to dinner after services. He pleaded a prior engagement, which saved his toes, because Daisy had been prepared to grind her heel down on his foot if he'd accepted.

Daisy imagined she could feel the gaze of everyone in church centered on her back. "What are you doing here?" she whispered again, more fiercely this time.

He dipped his head closer to hers so he couldn't be overheard. "You didn't want everyone to think you bought condoms for a one-night stand, did you?"

Her eyes widened. He was right. By his coming to church and sitting beside her, everyone would assume there was a full-fledged romance between them, because a man just didn't go to a woman's church and sit beside her unless they were seriously involved. By giving up one morning of his time,

he had changed her status from suspect to understandable. In this day and age, a sexual relationship between two romantically involved adults was the expected thing, even if organized religion did frown on it.

Two hours later, Daisy was a nervous wreck. Knowing that the chief of police wanted to get naked with her wasn't conducive to having a peaceful morning at church. She had tried her best to pay attention to the sermon, just in case it was aimed at her, but her attention had kept wandering. Specifically, it had wandered to the man sitting on her right.

Their intimacy of the night before had been startling. Even though they had done nothing more than kiss and a little light petting, it felt as if they had done so much more. She had felt almost incandescent in his arms, and there hadn't been anything halfhearted about his erection. She couldn't lie to herself; they had teetered on the brink of making love, and she had pulled back just in the nick of time.

She couldn't help wondering what would have happened if she'd forgotten her morals, forgotten that he wasn't her type, forgotten everything except satisfying herself. No, she didn't wonder what would have happened, she knew—she just wondered what it would have been like.

She couldn't get his taste out of her mind. Would the rest of his lovemaking have lived up to his kisses? He kissed like a dream, and tasted like a honeypot. Even if he were the world's worst lover, which she highly doubted, that would almost be worth putting up with just to get those kisses. On the other hand, going on the theory that a good kisser was also a good lover—she'd read it somewhere—then Jack Russo was something else between the sheets.

Those were not good thoughts to have during a church service. She fidgeted restlessly, and every time she moved, her leg seemed to brush against his. The air-conditioned church was very cool, but she was burning up again and she felt an almost overwhelming urge to kick off her shoes and tear off her dress. Either she was in premature menopause and having hot flashes, or she was hot in a far more basic sense.

She kept sneaking glances at him; she just couldn't help it. He dressed neatly, conservatively. His shoes were always polished, and that was important. After reading an article that said the state of a man's shoes reflected his general attitude about himself and others, she'd always looked at shoes and was careful to keep her own footwear clean and polished.

His graying hair was way too short, but it looked good on him. There was just a hint of curl on top, so she suspected he kept it short to keep that curl tamed. He was big, but there was nothing clumsy about him; he moved with a sort of controlled, animalistic grace. And there was no extra weight on him; she'd discovered that last night. He was all rock-solid muscle.
She was spending way too much time thinking about a man who wasn't her type.
He moved his hand, and the backs of his fingers subtly rubbed against her thigh. Daisy swallowed and stared hard at Reverend Bridges, trying to make sense of what he was saying, but the reverend might as well have been speaking a foreign language.
Jack was seducing her, right there in church, and she knew it. He wasn't doing anything much—though he was still rubbing her thigh—but then he didn't have to. He was there, and that was enough. She was doing a very good job of seducing herself, remembering last night and working herself into a lather.
She had to be blowing this all out of proportion, because logic told her no kiss could possibly be as potent as she'd thought last night. It was just that Jack was the first man to kiss her in ... she couldn't remember exactly how long. Years. Which was entirely her fault, because she'd been sitting at home instead of getting out and doing something about her unkissed situation. But it had still been years since she'd been kissed, and the fact was, she had gone overboard in her reaction. It probably hadn't been nearly as exciting to him.
Then she remembered the way his heartbeat had thundered under her hand, and the only way he could have faked that erection was if he'd had a flashlight stuffed in his pants. A big flashlight.
Oh, dear. These were not good thoughts to be having during a sermon.
At last, at last, the sermon was over and the last hymn had been sung. People milled around, shaking hands, smiling and talking. Jack stood at the end of the pew, blocking her exit, while everyone in the church, it seemed, came over to greet him. Aunt Jo and Evelyn turned around and went out the other end of the pew and Daisy turned to do the same, but without looking Jack reached back and caught her arm. "Hold on a minute," he said, then returned to shaking hands. The men wanted to talk about the police force and feel macho by association; the women merely flirted, even the great-grandmothers. Jack just had that kind of effect on women. Daisy had used

to think she was immune, but learned that feeling superior set you up for a big fall.
When the crowd had finally cleared out some and they could make their way out of the pew, Jack stepped aside and let Daisy exit in front of him, his hand going to her waist. Her heart jumped at his touch. He was really getting into the "we're a couple" act for everyone else's benefit, but his main objective was to get naked with her; forget the couple angle. He didn't want to get married and have children—come to think of it, he'd already been married, so he might already have children, too.
There was only one way to find out. She leaned forward and whispered, "Do you have any children?"
He gave her an appalled look. "Hell, no!" Then he remembered where he was and muttered, "Let's get out of here."
That was easier said than done. Reverend Bridges was still at the door, shaking hands and chatting with everyone as they left, and it seemed he had a lot to talk to Jack about. None of it seemed very important to Daisy as she patiently waited her turn, but the reverend was a man just like all the others, and he wanted to talk to the police chief. She wondered if it got on Jack's nerves. No one ever buttonholed her because of her job, and she was just as glad. Did all cops have to put up with this?
But at last her hand was shaken and small talk was made; Reverend Bridges gave her a speaking look, making her wonder if the sermon had been targeted toward her, which, after the talk of this past week, was certainly possible. She'd have to remember to ask her mother.
The heat was almost unbearable, rising off the street in waves. Men, Jack included, were shedding their coats and loosening their ties as soon as they left the church; the women, however, were stuck with bras and pantyhose, and Daisy was glad her legs were bare. The slight breeze was hot, but at least she could feel it.
He stripped his tie from around his neck and stuffed it in his coat pocket. “I’ll follow you."
"Where are we going?" she asked in bewilderment.
"To your house."
Her heart jumped again. "I always eat Sunday dinner with Mother and Aunt Jo."
"Call them and cancel. You've just moved in; you have things to do."

And one of those things was him, if she was correctly reading the intent look in his eyes. She cleared her throat. "I don't think that would be a good idea."
"I think it's the best damn idea I've had in years."
Swiftly she looked around. The church parking lot was mostly deserted now, with no one wanting to linger in the heat. Still she leaned closer so there was no chance of being overheard. "You know what would happen!"
"I'm counting on it."
"I don't want an affair!" she hissed. "I want a relationship, and you're getting in the way!"
"So until a relationship comes along, have an affair with me." He moved closer, looming over her. As hot as the day was, he was hotter; his heat wrapped around her. His gray-green eyes burned. "I'm healthy. I'm normal, nothing too kinky. I'll try not to get you pregnant."
"Try?" she echoed, outraged.
He shrugged. "Things happen. Rubbers break."
That should have been an appalling thought. It wasn't. The fact that it wasn't told her how far gone she was, when not even the thought of an accidental pregnancy could cool her down. And what was—
"What's too kinky?" she whispered.
A grin flashed across his hard face. "I'll show you."
The old Daisy would have stormed off in a huff. Well, maybe not, because the old Daisy would have been as powerfully tempted as the new Daisy was. But the old Daisy wouldn't have had the nerve to go with a man for the express purpose of having sex, and the new Daisy couldn't seem to think of anything else. She wanted this man, and she was afraid that if anyone else came along, she wouldn't pay any attention to him because she was too busy obsessing about Jack.
"C'mon, try me on for size," he murmured. "I dare you."
It wasn't the dare that did it; it was the thought of trying him on.
"If you get me pregnant," she said, "you have to marry me."
"Deal," he said, and they got in their respective cars and drove to Lassiter Avenue, with him keeping a respectful distance between their bumpers.
She should have been shaking like a leaf, she thought a few minutes later as she put her key in the lock, but her hands were steady. She was only shaking on the inside, where it didn't count.

Jack stood in the middle of her cozy little living room, looking around, while she went to the phone and called her mother. As usual, she wasn't very good at lying, and when her mother asked her why she wasn't coming to dinner, all Daisy could do was look at him and blurt, "Jack's here."
He grinned.
"Oh!" said her mother, and giggled. Her mother giggled. "I understand completely. You two have fun."
Daisy desperately hoped her mother didn't understand completely, but the way things had been going lately, maybe she did. She put the phone down and said, "She told us to have fun."
"I intend to." He still stood in the middle of the room, making it look even smaller. "Are you hungry? For food," he added, feeling the need to be specific.
She shook her head.
"Good," he said, and reached for her.
She had almost convinced herself she'd imagined how good he tasted, until he kissed her again. She made a little humming sound and twined her arms around his neck, going up on tiptoe to press against him and meet his demanding mouth with demands of her own.
The peculiar melting sensation spread through her again, weakening her knees so that she had to lean against him, let him support all of her weight, and that made the melting spread even faster. Oh, God, he felt good. Her entire body throbbed from the contact. The incredible hardness of his muscles, the heat that practically glowed from him, wrapped her in a cocoon of physical delight that also robbed her of strength and left her totally pliable to his touch.
His arms tightened, and he pulled her even closer, fitting her soft curves to all the hard angles of his body, tilting her so that her pelvis cradled the hard bulge of his erection. She made another little sound, and he deepened the kiss until her breath was no longer her own, until it didn't matter if she breathed or not.
This was desire. This. The heat and need, the deep throb of emptiness, the tension and lassitude and sharp tingles. This.
She moaned, her head falling weakly back. He took the opportunity offered, his hot mouth trailing down her throat to close on the exquisitely sensitive juncture between neck and shoulder, scraping the tendon with his teeth, sucking her skin. Her entire body jolted at the wild, uncontained pleasure;

her knees gave out completely, but it didn't matter, because he had her safe in his grasp.
His hands moved over her with slow, maddening purpose, stroking her breasts, unzipping her dress and pulling it down and off her arms, then unsnapping her bra and disposing of it. The dress bunched around her waist, unable to drop because there wasn't even a breath of space between their hips. At last his hands were on naked flesh, and he rubbed her nipples into hard, aching points, then tilted her back over his arm and bent his head to suck them. He wasn't gentle, but he didn't have to be. She clasped her hands around his head and held him there, gasping out cries of pleasure as the pressure of his mouth catapulted her to an even higher level of sensation. She was desperate to feel his skin, and she jerked at his shirt, trying to get it off over his head without unbuttoning it. He raised his head long enough to help her, using only one hand because he didn't release her. They both fought the garment, and a couple of buttons fell to the rug; then it was off and both arms were around her again, her breasts crushed against the crisp hair that rasped her nipples almost as deliciously as his thumbs. She ached all over, the most heated, wonderful ache she'd ever felt in her life. She felt as if her entire body pulsed with need and excitement and desire, even between her legs.
"I thought they were lying," she gasped, barely aware that she was even speaking.
"Who?" he asked against her throat.
"Women. About this."
"This?" He didn't sound very interested. He found that sensitive place on her neck again, and held it with his teeth.
"The way it feels. This."
"How does it feel?" he whispered.
"I... throb." She could barely get the words out. "Between my legs."
A rough sound burst out of his throat and a shudder ran through him, his erection pulsing against her. "I'll make it stop," he said, his tone so low and rough the words were barely intelligible.
He slid his hands up her legs, tugging the close-fitting dress up as he went until the fabric was bunched over his forearms and his hands were inside her panties, his hot palms cupping her bottom for a moment, just a moment; then he moved them down, down, his fingers delving into her closed cleft and finding her opening. Daisy gasped, the sound strangling in her throat as

her whole body seemed to seize, waiting, frozen in anticipation. Then he pushed two big fingers up into her and all her nerve endings rioted, arching her against him in a mindless search for more. Oh, God. She was stretched, penetrated—and it wasn't enough.

Her hips began to move, surging like the tide. "More," she managed to say, begging, whimpering the word. "More."

She couldn't seem to do anything except cling to him as he stripped her panties down and off, retrieved a condom from his pocket, then kicked off his shoes and fought his way out of the rest of his clothing. Naked, holding her to him, he stumbled back to sit on the couch and pull her over him, arranging her legs so that she straddled his lap. He put on the condom with quick, jerky movements, then grasped her hips and guided her into position.

Abruptly, time slowed. She gripped his shoulders at the feel of his penis probing between her legs, not inside her but nudging, as if enticing her to open and admit him.

Her breath came in quick little gasps; his bellowed out of his lungs. His jaw was set, his neck corded with strain, and yet he remained still and let her set the pace. The wonder of it suffused her. She moved back and forth in a subtle motion, caressing herself with the hard length, lifting and moving and—ah. He slipped into her, just a little, but enough to make him clench his teeth on another rough sound. His fingers bit into her buttocks, then relaxed.

Entranced, the expression in her eyes distant as she concentrated on the sensation of heat and stretching and fullness, Daisy lifted herself once more, settled, and took the broad head fully inside her. Jack groaned, his face twisted as if he were in pain. He shifted so his hips were on the edge of the cushion, stretching out his legs so she could take him at a deeper angle. She rose and fell, her eyes closing, savoring the slow, slow impalement as she squirmed and adjusted and finally, finally, he was completely inside her. Magic.

That's what it felt like, her body not her own anymore but moving with a will of its own, twisting, seeking. She reveled in his size and nakedness, in the way she felt him deep inside where she had never been touched before. She loved the harsh sounds he made, loved the growing desperation of his grip, loved the increasing tension and heat of her own body as sensation wound tighter and tighter, and she leaned forward to kiss him, as everything suddenly reached critical mass and her senses exploded. The world dimmed

around her. She heard herself shrieking and sobbing, felt her hips frantically surging against him; then abruptly she was on her back and he was pounding into her and she climaxed again just moments before he stiffened and heaved in his own orgasm.
In the aftermath she lay limply under his heavy body, comfortable on the overstuffed cabbage rose cushions. The cool air fanned against her sides, while perspiration glued their fronts together. She nuzzled her face against his throat, inhaling his heady, musky scent. He pressed a loss to her temple.
"You had a condom in your pocket in church," she managed to say weakly, suddenly bemused by the thought.
"Yeah. I kept waiting for lightning to strike." His voice sounded hoarse, as if he could barely speak.
She smoothed her hand down his muscled back, over the coolness of his buttocks. "Did you just have one?" she whispered.
He lifted his head and smiled down at her, his eyes heavy-lidded, his hair dark with sweat. "You still have the PartyPak, don't you?"

Fifteen

The afternoon was her dream come true. First he decided he needed sustenance, so she slapped an ice cream bar into his hand and led him to the bedroom. He licked the last bit of vanilla off the stick while she turned back the covers. Then she pushed and he toppled and she jumped on top of him, rubbing herself like a cat against his strong, naked body. She felt his reaction twitching between her legs and curiosity overtook her. She rolled off and knelt beside him, wrapping both hands around his erection and studying it in delight.
Because the afternoon was her dream and she had always wondered, she leaned down and took him in her mouth. He tasted salty and smelled of musk, and she loved the way his penis pulsed and thickened. Entranced, she experimented with licks and swirls, then began investigating the underside leading down to his testicles.
Maybe she was going too fast, because he said, "My turn," and dumped her on her back. In a flash he was on her, pinning her down, settling between her thighs. Then he propped on his elbows and grinned down at her. "I'll let you have your way with me later, I promise. Just not right now."

The weight of him was delicious. She squirmed just a little, loving the way his hips fit between her legs and how naturally her thighs had parted for him. The position was wonderful and comfortable and exciting. "Why not right now?"
"Because I want to do it to you, and I'm bigger."
So he did, kissing his way down her body and lingering at all the right places. When he finally worked down to where she really wanted him, she thought she would die from the intensity of her climax. Oral sex was every bit as stupendous as an article in Cosmo had said it was, and Jack was very good at what he did. While she was still quivering in the aftermath, he crawled up so that his penis was nudging her again. "Where's the PartyPak? We need it now."
"Let me up," she panted, both exhausted and eager. "I'll get it."
He rolled off, and she staggered to the closet, where she had put the PartyPak on the shelf under the box containing her sea shell collection. She pulled it free and began tearing at the cellophane wrapping,. Without looking, she grabbed out a condom and handed it to him.
A peculiar expression crossed his face. "I'm not wearing a purple condom," he said, handing it back.
She looked down at the condom. "It's grape."
"I don't care if it's tutti-frutti; I'm not wearing a purple condom."
She dropped the offending condom on the rug and took out another one. Blueberry. She looked at it and wrinkled her nose, then dropped it.
"What's wrong with blue?"
"It would make you look. . . frozen."
"Trust me, it isn't frozen." But he didn't pick up the blue condom. She took out a cherry one, of a particularly violent shade of red, and shook her head.
"What's wrong with that one?"
"Nothing, if you want to look infected."
"Jesus." He flopped back on the bed and stared imploringly at the ceiling. "Isn't there a nice pink one in there? The bubble gum flavor?"
"I guess that would be the fuchsia," she said doubtfully, taking it out and examining it. She'd never seen any bubble gum that particular shade. She sniffed it; a faint scent came through the wrapper. Definitely not bubble gum, though she wasn't certain, exactly what it was. Strawberry maybe; whatever it was, she didn't care for it. She rooted around in the box, but

couldn't find anything that could possibly be bubble gum flavored. "I've been stiffed. There's no bubble gum in here."
"Swear out a warrant tomorrow," he said in growing desperation. "Try the watermelon."
Sure enough, the watermelon condom was green. Daisy gave him an appalled look. "Gangrene."
He lunged off the bed, grabbed the purple condom from the floor, and tore off the clear wrapper. "If you ever tell anyone I wore a purple condom—"
"I won't," she promised, eyes wide; then he tossed her onto the bed and entered her with a quick, hard thrust, and they both forgot about colors.
It was so wonderful being naked with a man that she didn't even think of being modest. She simply enjoyed him and marveled at the pleasure she had been missing all these years, not just the intensity of making love but lying together afterward with her head cradled on his shoulder and his arms around her. She couldn't keep her hands off him; every time she tried, her palms started itching, so she just gave in and stroked him to her heart's content. "You're so hard," she marveled, sleeking her hand down his washboard stomach. "You must work out all the time."
"It gets to be a habit. When you're on the Teams, you have to stay in condition. And it isn't 'all the time'; I maintain with an hour a day."
" Teams'?"
"SWAT. In both Chicago and New York."
She propped up on an elbow. "SWAT? You mean the guys who wear black and carry big guns?"
He grinned. "Yeah, one of those."
"And you left that to come to a little town like Hillsboro?"
"I got tired of the pressure. Aunt Bessie died, I inherited her house, and I decided I wanted to try small-town life as an adult."
"No transition problems?"
"Just language problems," he said, and grinned again. "Now I can almost say 'y'all' like a native."
"Uh—no, you can't."
"What? Are you saying my 'y'all' isn't authentic?"
"I suppose it's an authentic Yankee trying to do a southern accent."
Just like that she found herself beneath him again; the man could move like a cat. "How about an authentic Yankee doing a southern woman?" he murmured against her throat.

She looped her arms around his neck. "You've got that down perfect."
He turned his head and looked at the "Froot Loops" array of condoms on the floor. "I don't want to wear purple again. How about the yellow? That would be banana flavored, wouldn't it?"
Daisy made a face. "Euww. Not yellow."
Exasperated, he said, "Why did you buy colored ones if you don't like the colors?"
"Oh, I never meant to use them," she said, blinking at him. "They were just for show. You know. For Mrs. Clud to tell her friends that I bought them, so they'd tell their friends, and some of the single men in town were bound to hear and be interested enough to ask me out. Then you ruined that by giving her the impression we were involved."
The expression on his face was indescribable. He coughed, strangled a little, and cleared his throat. "That was . . . ingenious."
"I thought so. It wouldn't have worked if I'd bought them at Wal-Mart or a chain pharmacy, but Barbara Clud is one of the biggest gossips in town, and she always tells what their customers bought. Did you know Mr. McGinnis takes Viagra?"
He coughed again, thinking of the bluff and hearty city councilman. "Uh, no, I didn't."
"Mrs. Clud told everyone. So I knew she'd tell about my condoms."
He buried his face against her shoulder, breathing deeply. He was shaking a little, and Daisy snuggled him close. "There, there. It's just small-town life. You'll adjust."
He lifted his head to see the humor sparkling in her eyes, and he gave up attempting to control his laughter. "If I ever need Viagra, remind me not to go to Clud's Pharmacy."
She considered the firmness pressed against her inner thigh. "I don't think you'll need it anytime soon. I didn't think you were supposed to be able to get hard again so fast. All the articles I read—"
He kissed her, and she stopped talking to taste the honey. His eyes were heavy-lidded when he lifted his head. "Maybe I've been inspired. Or provoked."
She took exception to that. "If anyone's been provoking, it's you—"
"/ didn't buy seventy-two condoms."
She was silent a moment, digesting the meaning behind that; then a satisfied smile broke across her face. "So my plan worked, didn't it? After a fashion."

"It worked," he said gruffly. "I kept thinking about the bubble gum flavor."
The phone rang, interrupting them. Daisy scowled; she didn't want to talk on the telephone; she wanted to play with Jack. She hesitated long enough that he said, "Answer it. It might be your mother, and we don't want them coming over to check on you."
She sighed and stretched beneath him, snagging the receiver and bringing it to her ear. "Daisy Minor."
"Hello, sweetie. How did the hunt go last night?"
It was Todd, and normally she loved gossiping with him, but not right now. "There was another fight, and I left early. I think I'll go to another club next time." Uh-oh; she hadn't meant to say that in front of Jack. She deliberately didn't look at him.
"I'll ask around, find out which places are best. So there weren't any prospects?"
"Not yet. I only got to dance three times." She turned her head away from the mouthpiece and said, as if she were talking to someone else in the room, "I won't be long. Y'all get started without me."
"I'm sorry, sweetie. I didn't mean to interrupt you while you have company," Todd said instantly. "I'll call back later."
"Oh, no, it's okay," Daisy said, feeling guilty about her little deception but definitely not wanting to talk on the telephone when she could be making love.
"Enjoy your company," he said gently. "Bye."
"Bye," she echoed, and fumbled the receiver back into place.
"Pretending to have company," Jack chided, propping himself on his elbows so he could look down at her. "Slick."
"I do have company. You."
"But you definitely don't want me to get started without you."
"Definitely not."
"So someone else is in on your husband-hunting scheme. Who is it?"
"Todd Lawrence," she said, stroking her hands over his arms and shoulders. "He helped me with my hair and makeup and clothes."
Jack lifted his eyebrows. "Todd."
If she wasn't mistaken, there was the slightest hint of jealousy in his tone. Daisy was thrilled, but at the same time she hastened to say, "Oh, he's gay."
"No he isn't," Jack said, startling her.
She blinked. "Of course he is."

"If it's the Todd Lawrence I know, lives in that big Victorian and owns an antiques store in Huntsville, he isn't gay."
"That's Todd," Daisy said, frowning. "But he's definitely gay."
"He's definitely not."
"How would you know?"
"Trust me. I know. And I don't care if he did pass the puce test."
"He's great at shopping," she said, defending her position.
"Hell, I'm great at shopping, too, so long as you're shopping for a car or a handgun, something like that."
"He's great at shopping for clothes. And he knows how to accessorize," she finished triumphantly.
"You've got me there," he admitted. "But he isn't gay"
"Yes, he is! What makes you think he isn't?"
Jack shrugged. "I saw him with a woman."
She was momentarily flabbergasted; then the explanation occurred to her. "He was probably going shopping with her. I'm a woman, and he spent the entire day with me."
"He had his tongue down her throat."
Her mouth fell open. "But—but why would he pretend to be gay if he isn't?"
"Beats me. He can pretend to be from Mars if he wants."
She shook her head, bewildered. "He even likes Barbra Streisand; I saw the CDs in his den."
"Straight guys can like Streisand."
"Really. What kind of music do you like?"
"Creedence Clearwater. Chicago. Three Dog Night. You know, the classics."
She buried her face against his shoulder and giggled. He smiled, liking the sound. "I'm a Golden Oldies kind of guy. What about you? No, let me guess: You like the old classics."
"No fair. You saw my music collection on the shelves in the living room."
"I was in there, what, a minute, while you called your mother? I didn't examine your music collection."
"You're a cop. You're trained to observe things."
"Give me a break. All I was thinking about was getting in your pants."
"What color is my couch?"

"Blue with big flowers on it. You think I wouldn't notice? We were naked on that couch."
She sighed blissfully. "I know."
"But you're right about one thing: because I'm a cop, I'm very observant. For instance, which club were you thinking about going to next time?"
Drat! He'd noticed. "I don't know," she said vaguely. "I haven't decided."
"Well, when you decide, I expect to know." There was a hard edge to his voice that she hadn't heard before. "I mean it, Daisy. If you're going out alone, I want to know where you are."
She chewed her bottom lip. What if he showed up wherever she went and scared off anyone who asked her to dance? On the other hand, he was right about the safety issue; she had to be intelligent about the matter. Besides, she was in a difficult position, literally: flat on her back, naked, pinned down.
"Promise me," he insisted.
"I promise."
He didn't ask if she would keep her promise; he knew she would. He pressed his forehead against hers. "I want you safe," he whispered, and kissed her.
As usual, one kiss led to another, and soon she was clinging to him, giddy with arousal. She wound her legs around his hips, and with a groan he sank into her, thrusting several times before suddenly cursing and pulling out. He leaned over the edge of the bed and blindly scrabbled for a condom. "I don't care what color it is," he said hoarsely.
Daisy didn't care either, didn't even look. She was shaken that they had almost made love without protection, that even those few thrusts carried a small amount of risk. Then he surged back into her, and she met his fierceness with her own, demanding everything he could give her.
Afterward, exhausted, Daisy dozed cuddled against his side while Jack stared at the ceiling and wondered what in hell Todd Lawrence was up to. Something was going on that made him feel antsy and he didn't like it worth a damn, especially when the uneasiness concerned Daisy. He had damn good ears, and Daisy had been lying under him at the time, the receiver only inches away; he'd heard every word of their telephone conversation. Maybe it was just the instincts of a cop prodding him, because there hadn't been anything he'd heard that he could honestly say struck him as suspicious, but

it seemed to him that Daisy was being guided to certain clubs. He didn't like that scenario at all.
He'd been in bars and nightclubs every night except for Sundays since talking to Petersen. He'd seen one episode of a possible date-rape drugging —and that had been at the Buffalo Club on Thursday night, so he'd gone back on both Friday and Saturday to see if he could spot something. As it was, the woman who had possibly been drugged had been with two female friends; Jack had discreetly questioned them, but they had not only allowed men to buy them drinks, they had also left the drinks unattended while they danced or went to the rest room, so there was no telling when or if the drinks had been drugged.
Both of the other women were sober enough to drive, which made him suspect the third woman had definitely been drugged. He helped them get their friend out to the car, quietly told them to get her to a hospital in case someone had put something in her drink, and saw them on their way before going back inside. Everything had been kept very low key; he didn't make a disturbance, didn't identify himself as a cop, because if some bastard was there slipping GHB or whatever into women's drinks, Jack didn't want to scare him off. He simply watched, trying to spot something or at least step in if another woman looked to be in trouble, and the next morning he'd called Petersen to tell him they maybe had a starting place.
Last night had been cut short by the fight, but his heart had almost stopped when he'd seen Daisy on the dance floor. She didn't seem to realize how she drew the eye with the contrast between her classy clothes and the way all the other women dressed; men watched her, and not just because she was a good dancer. They watched those legs, and the sparkling eyes that said she was having a ball. They noticed her breasts, and the way that red dress had clung to their shape. Even now, with her naked in his arms, just thinking about those breasts made his mouth water. His Miss Daisy was stacked; not overblown, but definitely stacked just right.
She wanted a husband and kids. He wasn't in the market for a wife, let alone kids, but he got a burning knot of what he recognized as pure masculine possessiveness at the thought of her actually meeting someone she really liked at one of those clubs, going out with him, sleeping with him, maybe even eventually getting married. He didn't like that scenario at all. And when he'd realized he had entered her without first putting on a condom, for an earth-tilting moment he had continued thrusting, tempted almost past

control at the thought of coming inside her. If he got her pregnant—hey he'd marry her. They'd made a deal. Being married to Miss Daisy would be a hell of a lot more fun than being married to Heather the Bitch, and look how long he'd stuck that out.

He knew he was in deep trouble when the thought of getting married didn't send him running. He glanced down at her sleeping face and gently stroked her bare back. So maybe he'd leave off a condom and see what happened. Naw, he couldn't do that to her—unless she showed signs of getting serious about someone else, in which case he would fight as dirty as necessary to win.

SIXTEEN

The English setter bounded happily through the knee-high weeds, ignoring her owner's shouted commands. She was a young dog, and this was only her second time in the field. He'd been training her in his yard to retrieve, using a variety of lures, and her hunting instincts usually held sway there. In the field, though, her youthful exuberance sometimes got the best of her. There were so many interesting smells to be investigated, the heady scents of birds, mice, insects, snakes, things she didn't know and wanted to follow.

A particularly intriguing odor lingered on the morning air, leading her out of the field and into the woods that lined the field. Behind her, her owner cursed. "Goddammit, Lulu, heel!"

Lulu didn't heel, merely wagged her tail and plunged into some underbrush where the scent was stronger. Her sensitive nose quivered as she nosed the earth. Her owner yelled, "Lulu! C'mere, girl! Where are you?" and she wagged her tail as she began digging.

He saw the waving plume and fought his way through the tangle of vines, briars, and bushes that grew under the trees, cursing with every breath.

Lulu grew more excited as the scent got stronger. She backed up and barked to signal her agitation, then plunged into the brush again. Her owner picked up his pace, suddenly alarmed, because she seldom barked. "What is it, girl? Is it a snake? Heel, Lulu, heel."

Lulu grabbed something with her teeth and began tugging. The thing was heavy and didn't want to move. She dug some more, dirt flying behind her.

"Lulu!" Her owner reached her and grabbed her collar, pulling her back, a broken limb in his hand in case he had to fend off a rattler. He stared down at what she had unearthed and staggered back a step, hauling her with him. "Jesus!"

He looked wildly around, afraid whoever had done this had waited. But the woods were quiet except for the breeze rustling the leaves; he and Lulu had disturbed the birds, and they had either flown off or fallen silent, but he could hear calls and singing in the distance. No shots disturbed the quiet, and no maniac with a big knife plunged out of the trees at him.

"Come on, girl. Come on," he said, snapping a leash to the dog's collar and patting her flank. "You did good. Let's go find a telephone."

Temple Nolan stared down at the piece of paper in his hand, at the tag number written there. He could feel the icy finger of panic tracing down his spine. Someone, a woman, had witnessed Mitchell's death, though Sykes seemed to think she had either not been paying attention at all or, in the dark, not understood what she was seeing, because she had continued calmly into the Buffalo Club.

He tried to believe that Sykes was right, but his gut kept twisting. All it took was one loose thread and someone tugging on it to unravel the whole setup. Sykes should have handled Mitchell himself, instead of taking along those two yahoos for help. They should have waited until he wasn't in a public place before grabbing him. They should have—fuck!—they should have done a lot of things, but now it was too late and all they could do was contain the damage and hope it stopped there.

He picked up his office phone and dialed Chief Russo's extension. Eva Fay answered on the first ring. "Eva Fay, this is Temple. Is the chief in?" He always used his first name; for one thing, it made people feel more cooperative. For another, this was a small town and word would get around that he thought he was better than everyone else if he insisted on using his title. He lived in a big house, belonged to the country club in Huntsville and to Hillsboro's pitiful little excuse for one, he moved in a very exclusive circle, but as long as he still acted like a good old boy, they kept reelecting him.

"Sure thing, Mayor," said Eva Fay

The chief picked up the line, his deep voice almost like a bark. "Russo."

"Jack, this is Temple." The first name business again. "Listen, on the way in this morning I spotted a car parked in the fire lane over at Dr. Bennett's

office. I wrote down the tag number, but I didn't want to cause any trouble for any sick folks by calling a deputy to give them a ticket. If you'll run the tag number for me and give me a name, I thought I'd just give them a call and ask them not to park there again." No one could play the good old boy the way he could.
"Sure. Let me grab a pen." The chief didn't even sound surprised. He was becoming used to their little town. "Okay, shoot."
Temple read off the tag number.
Chief Russo said, "It won't take a minute. Do you want to hold on?"
"Sure."
When the information popped up on the computer screen, Jack stared at it in disbelief. He sat for a minute, his face set in a hard mask; then he printed out the screen and took the sheet of paper back to his office.
He didn't pick up the phone receiver, though. Let the mayor wait.
The car was registered to Dacinda Ann Minor, and the address was the one from which Daisy had just moved. The car was an eight-year-old Ford, so it was definitely her car. He hadn't known her given name was Dacinda instead of Daisy, but, hell, if anyone had named him Dacinda he'd go by Daisy, too.
He didn't know what was going on, but he knew one thing: the bastard was lying. His Daisy would no more park in a fire lane than she would run naked across the square. The woman didn't speed, didn't jaywalk, didn't even cuss.
Not only that, she hadn't been at Dr. Bennett's office this morning. He knew because he'd ended up spending the night, and she'd been fine. Glowing. A big smile on her face. He'd had to swing by his house for a change of clothes, but her car had been in its usual parking slot behind the library when he got to the office.
So who was running Daisy's tag, and why?
He thought fast. He could lie and say it was a stolen tag and did the mayor have a description of the car? Or he could tell the mayor it was Daisy's car and try to find out what was going on.
First Todd Lawrence, and now Temple Nolan. Way too much attention was being paid to one little librarian, and too many details weren't adding up. The niggling uneasiness had turned into a real itch between his shoulder blades.

What were the odds any of the town gossip about him and Daisy had reached the mayor's ears? They didn't move in the same circles. For all his comradery, the mayor didn't socialize much with the townsfolk. He did the official stuff, but not much else. He was good enough at the common touch that most people didn't notice, or they attributed the mayor's absence from certain functions to his wife, Jennifer, who evidently spent most of her time sloshed. Jack had noticed that the mayor used his wife as a convenient excuse a lot of the time.

Jack picked up the phone and went with his instinct. "Sorry to take so long, but the computer is slow today."

"That's all right; I'm in no hurry," the mayor said genially. "So who's the culprit?"

"The name doesn't strike a bell with me. Dacinda Ann Minor."

"What?" the mayor said, clearly stunned.

"Dacinda Minor—hey, I'll bet that's the librarian. Her name is Minor. Her name isn't Dacinda, though—"

"Daisy." Temple sounded as if he were strangling. "Everyone calls her Daisy. My God! She—"

"I guess even librarians can illegally park, huh?"

"Uh—yeah."

"Want me to call and give her hell? She's a city employee; she should know better."

"No, I'll call," the mayor quickly said.

"Okay," said Jack, knowing no such call would be made. "Let me know if I can help you with anything again, Mayor."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

As soon as the mayor hung up, Jack ran his finger down the list of city departments and located the library's number, then punched it in.

"Hillsboro Public Library," said Daisy's crisp voice.

"Hi, sweetheart, how are you feeling?"

"Just fine." Her tone changed, became warmer, more intimate. “And you?"

'A little beat, but I think I can make it through the day. Listen, someone said they saw your car at Dr. Bennett's office."

"I don't think so," she said. "That quack. He pushes diet pills."

Jack scribbled Dr. Bennett's name on a pad so he'd remember to do some checking into the good doctor's prescription-writing habits.

"I also heard that your name is Dacinda. True or false?"

"You're hearing a lot of things today. True, as you would know if you ever bothered to look over the list of city employees. I was named after Granny Minor."
"You've never been called Dacinda?"
She gave a ladylike snort. "I should hope not. Mother said they called me Dacey when I was a baby, but within just a month or two they were slurring it into Daisy, so I've been Daisy as long as I can remember. Why are you so curious about my name?"
"Just making small talk. It's been a while since I've heard your voice."
"Oh, at least an hour and a half," she said.
"Seems like longer. Are you going home for lunch?"
"No, I just talked to Aunt Jo, and she's found a dog for me. I'm going to see the people at lunch; she already has it arranged." Regret tinged her tone.
He wondered if she felt half as regretful as he did. But Daisy getting a dog was important, and he'd use the time nosing around, maybe shadowing the mayor for a while and seeing where he went.
"Listen, there are some things I have to check out tonight, but I'll come by if I can. What time do you usually go to bed?"
"Ten. But you—"
"I'll call if I can't make it."
"All right, but you don't have to—"
"Yes," he said, his tone more grim than he'd intended, "I do."
He didn't have to sound so glum about it, Daisy thought as she hung up. She wasn't clinging to him, demanding his time. She'd been very careful not to ask when she would see him again, though she'd been certain she would. A man didn't spend all afternoon and most of the night making love to a woman if he didn't really like what they had together.
One good thing about living on Lassiter Avenue: no one was likely to care who spent the night with her. Since she had just moved in, no one knew her, or knew which cars were normally in the driveway. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel as if a hundred pairs of eyes were on her. She had felt free with Jack, free to be as uninhibited as she liked, to make noise when she climaxed, to stand naked in the kitchen eating peanut butter and crackers for quick energy. She could carry on her affair with him without the entire neighborhood watching to see what time he left her house, or clucking their tongues if his car remained in her driveway all night.

All in all, she was very satisfied with the way things had turned out, though one of the things on her to-do list today was buy more condoms—regular ones, without a hint of flavor. She was tempted to go back to Clud's Pharmacy to buy them; let Barbara make what she liked of that! Jack's stock with the women in town would certainly go up when Barbara spread the word that he'd used up six dozen in one week.

At lunchtime, Daisy drove to her mother's house, picked up Evelyn and Aunt Jo; then they all went to Miley Park's house to pick out her dog.

Mrs. Park lived several miles outside of Hillsboro, on a pretty section of land with a huge fenced yard around her small frame house. She came out to greet them, wiping her hands on her apron and smiling, accompanied by a grinning, tail-wagging golden retriever bouncing along at her side.

"Sadie, sit," she said, and the dog obediently sat, but she quivered with eagerness to greet the visitors. Mrs. Park opened the gate and said, "Hurry so I can close the gate before they get here."

"They?" asked Evelyn as they obediently hurried through the gate. Mrs. Park quickly closed it just as a tangle of puppies came bounding around the corner of the house.

"The little devils are fast as greased lightning," said Mrs. Park, bending to pat Sadie's head. “As soon as they hear the gate open, they come running."

Sadie got up to check her brood, nuzzling each of the puppies in turn as if counting noses. The puppies couldn't seem to decide what they wanted to do first, jump Mama and try to get some milk or check out the newcomers. They pounced and bounced back and forth, little tails wagging so hard their entire bodies seemed to be waving.

"Oh," said Daisy breathlessly, sinking onto the grass. "Oh!" There were only five of them, but they were so active it seemed as if there were a dozen. As soon as she sat down, they decided to check her out, and abruptly she had a lap full of puppies, puppies climbing over her legs and trying to lick her face, bite her hair, gnaw on her shoes.

Three of them were a mellow gold, and two were such a pale cream they were almost white. All of them were fat, bright-eyed balls of fur, with big, soft paws that seemed way too large for their bodies and baby fuzz so soft she just wanted to sink her hands in it.

"They'll be seven weeks old on Thursday," said Mrs. Park. "Sadie started weaning them two weeks ago; I've had them on just puppy food for a week

now. They've had their first round of shots. That was a fun trip to the vet's, I can tell you!"
"They're beautiful," Daisy said, already in love. Her eyes were dazed. “I’ll take them."
Everyone laughed, and she realized what she'd said. "Well, maybe just one would be better," she said, blushing and laughing at herself.
"I don't let Sadie's babies go unless I'm sure they'll have a good home," said Mrs. Parks. "Goldens are lively dogs and need a lot of exercise. If you don't have a safe place for it to run—"
"The backyard is fenced," said Daisy hastily, suddenly afraid she might not be allowed to buy one of these adorable babies.
"Is it a big yard?"
"Not huge, no."
"Well, that's fine for a puppy; when it grows, it'll need more exercise than it can get just playing in a small yard. Will you be able to take it for long walks, throw a ball for it, take it swimming?"
"Yes," promised Daisy, willing to promise anything and do anything.
"They like human companionship. No, they love human companionship. Will someone be home with it during the day, or were you planning on leaving it by itself in the yard all day while you're at work?"
Her thoughts hadn't gone that far at all; she turned-a beseeching look on her mother.
"We can keep it during the day," said Evelyn.
"Do you have a lot of patience? The little devils can get into more mischief than you'd believe. If you leave something lying around, you can bet it'll be chewed on, especially during teething. On the other hand, they're eager to learn and please you, and I've never had one that was hard to house-train."
"I'm very patient." That was true, or she would never have waited thirty-four years to get a life. She picked up a puppy and laughed as its little pink tongue began madly licking in an effort to reach her face.
Mrs. Park smiled and folded her hands. "They're four hundred dollars each."
"Okay," said Daisy without pause. Mrs. Park could have said a thousand and she probably still wouldn't have hesitated.
Sadie came over and licked her baby while Daisy held it, then licked Daisy. She settled down beside Daisy's legs and was immediately swarmed, fat puppies trying to root under her in search of a teat, but Sadie had learned how to protect herself and they were frustrated in their efforts.

"Which one do you choose?"
All the other questions had been easy; this one was agonizing. She stared at them, trying to decide.
"There are three males and two females—"
"No, don't tell me," said Daisy "I want to pick a personality, not a sex."
So she simply sat while puppies played around and over her. Then one of the pale-cream-colored ones yawned, its little mouth open wide, and its dark eyes with the absurdly long blond eyelashes began to close. Clumsily it climbed over her leg and turned around until it found a comfortable position on her lap, then settled down in a sleepy little ball.
"Well, I've been chosen," she said, picking up the puppy and cuddling it. "That's one of the males. Take good care of him, now. I'll be calling and checking on him, and bring him back to see Sadie anytime you want. I'll just go get the paperwork to fill out so you can register him."
"What are you going to name him?" Evelyn asked as they drove back to town. Jo was driving, while Daisy sat in back with the puppy asleep in her arms.
"I'll have to think about it. If the size of these feet are anything to go by, he's going to be huge, so I want something macho and tough."
Jo snorted. "He looks macho and tough. Fuzzball would be a good name."
"He won't be fuzzy forever." Already she felt sad at the thought of him growing out of his puppyhood. She stroked his little head and suddenly realized the enormity of the responsibility she had taken on. "My goodness, I haven't bought anything! We'll have to stop at Wal-Mart so I can get some puppy food, his food and water dishes, toys, a bed for him, and those house-training pads to put down. Am I forgetting anything?"
"Just double the supply," said Evelyn, "since we'll be keeping him during the day. There's no sense in carrying his things back and forth."
"I'll be late getting back to the library," said Daisy, and for the first time didn't care. She had a lover and a dog; could life get any better?

SEVENTEEN

Temple Nolan was more than stunned to find out the tag number belonged to Daisy Minor, he was disbelieving. Sykes had clearly said the woman was blonde, and Daisy's hair was brown. Moreover, he doubted she had ever

seen the inside of a nightclub; she was the very stereotype of the community old maid who lived at home her entire life, was beloved by the neighborhood kids because she gave out the best candy at Halloween, and went to church three times a week.

But then a vague memory tickled, a snippet of conversation between two of the city clerks he'd overheard when he passed them in the hallway, about Daisy turning over a new leaf or getting her petals plucked, something with a horticultural flavor. Maybe Daisy was kicking up her heels a little. It still sounded so out of character for her he couldn't quite believe it, but it was worth checking out.

He could have asked Nadine, his secretary, if she'd heard any gossip about Daisy, but that icy finger of fear made him more cautious. If Daisy was indeed the woman Sykes had seen, Temple didn't want Nadine to remember that he had asked questions about her just before her death or disappearance, whatever Sykes arranged. So he told Nadine he was stepping out for a minute, then walked over to the library. He didn't even have to go inside; he looked through the glass door and saw Daisy seated behind the checkout desk, her head bent over some paperwork—her blond head. Daisy had lightened her hair.

He felt almost sick to his stomach.

He walked back to his office, his head down. When he entered, Nadine said in alarm, "Mayor, are you all right? You look pale."

"An upset stomach," he said, telling the truth. "I thought some fresh air might help."

"Maybe you should go home," she said, looking worried. Nadine was the maternal type, always baby-sitting her grandchildren, and she tended to dispense more medical advice than the doctors in town.

He had lunch scheduled with the mayor of Scottsboro, so he shook his head. "No, it's just indigestion. I had a glass of orange juice this morning."

"That'll do it," she said, opening a desk drawer and pulling out a bottle. "Here, have some Maalox."

Meekly he accepted two tablets and obediently chewed them. "Thanks," he said, and went back into his office. One of these days Nadine was going to diagnose indigestion in someone who was really having a heart attack, but at least in his case he knew exactly why he had a sour stomach.

He made sure his door was securely shut, then went to his private phone and called Sykes. What had to be done ... had to be done.

Jack borrowed a pickup truck from one of his officers, pulled off his tie, put on sunglasses and a John Deere cap, and followed the mayor to his lunch with the mayor of Scottsboro. He saw nothing suspicious, but that didn't make him relax. Where Daisy was concerned, he couldn't relax. All his instincts, honed razor sharp by years in a dangerous job, were on the alert and scanning for a target.

Daisy, of course, was oblivious of the storm he could sense gathering around her. One of the things he enjoyed most about her was her absolute positiveness; it wasn't blindness to the bad things that could happen, just an acceptance that not everything was wonderful and a conviction that most things were. Look at her attitude toward Barbara Clud, the gossiping bitch: That was just the way Barbara was, so if you went to that pharmacy, you had to expect her to tell what you bought. Right now, however, he would have felt better if Daisy had a more suspicious view of the world; she might be a little more cautious. At least she was getting a dog for protection. If he couldn't be there at night, at least she'd have a sharp-toothed alarm system.

After lunch, the mayor went back to Hillsboro. Jack checked in with Eva Fay, then drove to Huntsville and located Todd Lawrence's antiques store, which was named, simply, Lawrence's, nothing cutesy. Jack went in still wearing the John Deere cap, which, judging from the cool look given him by an approaching salesman, marked him as the bull in the china shop.

The salesman was middle-aged, average in size, and disturbingly familiar. Jack seldom forgot a face; it came from years of studying everyone around him. This man had been at the Buffalo Club; in fact, if Jack wasn't mistaken, he had danced with Daisy on that first night. His suspicions locked into overdrive.

"Is Mr. Lawrence in?"

"I'm sorry, he's occupied at the moment," said the salesman in smooth tones. "May I help you with something?"

"No." Jack took out his ID and flipped it open. "Mr. Lawrence. Now. And you'll need to sit in, too."

The salesman took the ID and studied it, then coolly returned it. "Chief of police of the Hillsboro Police Department," he said sarcastically. "Impressive."

"Not as impressive as a broken arm, but what the hell, I'll go with what works."

An unwilling smile touched the salesman's mouth. "Tough, too." He shifted his balance just a little, but the subtle changes in his stance made Jack's eyes sharpen.
"Salesman, my ass," he muttered. "This is about Daisy Minor."
There was another change in expression, a sort of rueful resignation. The salesman sighed and said, "Oh, hell. Todd's in his office."
Todd looked up when Jack and the salesman entered the small private office. His eyebrows rose as he recognized Jack, and he gave the other man a swift questioning glance before shifting into pleasant-businessman mode, rising to his feet and extending his hand. "Chief Russo, isn't it? The cap threw me off for a minute." He looked quizzically at the green cap with the yellow John Deere logo. "How. . . retro."
Jack shook his hand and said amiably, "How full of bullshit. Why don't we all sit down, and you and the martial arts salesman here can tell me how I'm jumping to all the wrong conclusions, that you aren't sending Daisy around to certain targeted nightclubs and bars, and that Bruce Lee really isn't shadowing her to— what? Catch her doing something illegal? Not likely."
"Howard," said the salesman, grinning. "Not Bruce."
Todd steepled his fingers and tapped them against his lips, watching Jack. "I really don't know what you're talking about."
"Fine." Jack didn't have time to bullshit around. "Then let's talk about what possible reason a straight man could have for trying to convince everyone he's gay, and what would happen if I blew his cover."
Todd gave a light laugh. "You really are reaching now, Chief."
“Am I? You know, when I first moved here, I rambled around a lot, learning the roads and the country, so I was in a lot of places where normally you wouldn't expect to see Hillsboro's chief. I was also paying a lot of attention to Hillsboro's citizens, asking who people were and learning their faces, so I knew you by sight."
"Your point?"
"My point is, if you're posing as gay when you check into a motel with a woman, you shouldn't enter the room at the same time, and you really shouldn't try to suck her tonsils out while you're still trying to get the key card in the lock. Plays hell with the image. Want me to describe her?"
"Yes," said Howard, fascinated.
"Never mind," Todd said, his face suddenly impassive. "You get around to some out-of-the-way places, Chief."

"Don't I?" Jack agreed. "Let's get back to my original question: What in hell are you doing with Daisy?"
"I can tell you what I'm doing," said Howard. "I'm trying to make sure she doesn't get hurt in any way. The nightclub scene can be rough on women."
"Then why send her there? It's like sending a kitten into a bear cage."
"You make her sound totally helpless. She's an intelligent, observant woman who just wants to dance and meet men."
"Given what's out there in the bar scene these days, even intelligent women are ending up raped, maybe just by one man, maybe by all of his buddies, too—and that's if she's lucky and doesn't die. Did you warn Daisy about letting anyone buy her a drink? Or leaving a drink sitting on the table while she dances?"
Howard sighed. "That's where I come in. I keep an eye on her, watch to see if anyone salts her drink with something."
"So she's never out of your sight, right? You never go to the bathroom, or lose sight of her in the crowd."
"I do the best I can."
"Best isn't good enough, not when you're using her as some kind of shark bait." He leveled a hard stare at Todd. "So let's start hearing some details, and they'd better be good or you're outted."
Todd rubbed his jaw. "That threat usually works in reverse."
Jack merely waited. He had stated his intentions, and where Daisy was concerned, he didn't back down or negotiate. Her safety was too important.
Todd studied Jack's expression, evidently reading his determination. "It's personal, the reason I've been ... working with Daisy."
Jack said softly, "I'm taking the whole thing personally."
"So she got to you, huh?" Todd smiled. "I knew, with just a little sprucing up, she'd turn heads. All she needed was a boost in her self-confidence. She's so damned charming, with that sparkle in her eyes like a kid on a roller coaster, I figured all she needed was more flattering clothes to really pull in the men."
"Let's get to the facts," Jack growled.
"Okay, in a nutshell: A friend of mine went to the Buffalo Club with a couple of friends. She was bummed out, not in the mood for dancing. While her friends were dancing, a guy came on to her, offered to buy her a drink. Because she was bummed out, she let him. The last thing she remembered is getting sleepy She woke up the next morning in her own bed, naked,

alone, and it was obvious something had happened. She'd been raped and sodomized. She did the smart thing, didn't shower, called the cops, went to the hospital.
"From the evidence, at least six different men raped her. She had only a hazy memory of the guy who bought her the drink. The cops had nothing to go on but some blurry fingerprints in her apartment, none of which showed up in the files, so the men have no priors. Dead end. Unsolvable crime, unless one of the bastards is caught for the rape of another woman and his DNA matches the DNA in the evidence samples of semen."
It was a far too familiar story. Date-rape cases were difficult to prosecute even when the victim knew her assailant. When it was a stranger whom she couldn't remember because she'd been drugged, catching the bastards was almost impossible.
Rage had him grinding his teeth. "So you decided to try catching them yourselves, by using Daisy as bait. Don't you think the cops could have handled it better, with a female police officer trained for such situations?"
"Sure, except they weren't doing it. Budget limitations, low-priority case. You know how it works. There's way too much crime and not enough money, not enough officers, not enough jails or prisons. Every department has to prioritize."
"I'm tempted to really hurt you," Jack said, keeping his voice even with an effort. “And I could, despite Howard here. What were you going to do if some asshole did drug Daisy? Go vigilante and shoot him in the parking lot?"
"The idea has merit."
"What are the odds it would even be the same guy? There's a lot of that shit out there."
"I know it would be a long shot. But it would be a beginning. Someone to talk, name some names, who would name other names." Todd spread his hands on the desk and stared at them, his face grim. "There's more to the story. My friend was the same woman you saw me with that day. She was at the Buffalo Club in the first place because we'd quarreled. She wanted to get married, I told her I couldn't because of... other things—"
"Like this assignment you're working."
Todd flashed a quick glance up at Jack. "Yeah," he said flatly. "Like this assignment. Besides, marriage is a big step. I was kind of glad to have the

assignment as an excuse. I was crazy about her, but. . . hell, I guess I had cold feet. So that's why she was at the club."
Jack nodded, thinking he got the picture. Normal relationships were hard enough; when the woman had been raped, she understandably had a hard time trusting men again, or enjoying sex. "Did she get into therapy?"
"For a while. It didn't do any good. She killed herself."
The stark words fell like lead. All expression was gone from Todd's face, from his eyes.
Howard swore. "Jesus, man—you just said a friend was raped. God, I'm sorry."
"Yeah, so am I," said Jack. "You're grieving, you felt guilty, so you set Daisy up for exactly the same thing that happened to the woman you loved. You fucking bastard, I'd enjoy killing you." His clenched fists were shaking with the need to do just that.
"Don't go overboard with the sympathy, Russo," Howard said sarcastically.
Todd managed a faint smile, though there was no humor in it. "That was fast. You're in love with her; that's why you're so hot under the collar."
"Daisy doesn't deserve being used that way." Jack shoved away the comment about loving her. Whether or not he did was something he'd have to work out; he definitely cared about her and would do whatever it took to protect her. And whatever it took meant using whatever means necessary, with whatever weapons he had at hand. Something else was going on, something these two weren't involved in; alone, Jack would be hard-pressed to cover all the bases, but he figured he now had help.
"There's something else concerning Daisy, something I don't understand, but it's put me on edge."
A little expression filtered back into Todd's eyes. "What?"
"This assignment you're working ... are you federal, local, or private?"
Todd and Howard exchanged a quick glance. "Federal. It involves interstate fraud."
"Fine. I don't need the details. I just need your help and I wanted to know what level I'll be dealing with."
"We can't compromise this setup—"
"You won't have to. Something peculiar happened this morning. The mayor called me, wanted me to run a license plate number, said he'd seen the car parked in the fire lane at a doctor's office. He gave me the small-town

bullshit, how he didn't call a patrolman to write a ticket because he didn't want to upset someone who was sick—"
"Yeah, right, Temple Nolan with a big heart," Todd muttered.
"So I ran the number, and it was Daisy's. Not only would Daisy never park in a fire lane, she wasn't at the doctor's office. I know. So the mayor lied about where he got the number. If he'd seen the car himself, he'd have known it was Daisy's. Someone else wanted him to find out who the car belonged to."
"Maybe someone at the Buffalo Club saw her and was interested, wanted to find out where she lived and how to contact her."
"Someone who figured she'd never come back to the club and that was the only way he'd have of finding her? Someone who also happens to know the mayor?"
"Okay, so it's a thin idea. Do you have anything better?"
"No, all I have are the little hairs on the back of my neck, and they're standing straight up."
"That's good enough for me," said Howard. "From the accent, I know you're not from around here, but I can't quite place it. You're not just a small-town chief, though. What's your background?"
"SWAT, in Chicago and New York."
"Guess your little hairs have seen their share of action."
"They've never been wrong."
"So what do you want us to do?" asked Todd. "There's nothing to go on, no direction."
"Not yet. For now, I just want to make sure she's safe. The good news is, the address on the registration is for her mother's house. There's no official record now of her real address, unless someone has the strings to find out from the utilities—which the mayor does, with the city water department, but unless he knows she's moved, he has no reason to ask."
"Can you get into the files, take out that information?"
"The water bills are computerized. I'm no hacker, so I can't get into the system from outside, but maybe I can from the inside. What about the phone and electricity companies?"
"I'll see what I can do about blocking that information," Todd said. "And she needs to have her number unlisted, or any bozo can call information and get it."

"I'll handle that," said Jack. "I don't know what I'm looking for, I don't know why anyone would want to track her down, and until I do know, I want a shield around her."
"We've been working a situation for a couple of years now. If things come together, Howard and I will be busy and won't be able to help. You know how it works. But until and if the case breaks, we'll do what we can to help." Todd drummed his fingers on the desk. "Off the record, of course."
"Of course. Just friends helping friends."

EIGHTEEN

Jack drove back to Hillsboro, returned the truck to his officer, checked that Daisy was safe at the library, and filled the rest of the day handling the myriad details that cropped up every day in a police department, even a small one. He left the office at the usual time, drove home, cut his grass to kill some time, went in and showered, then called his office phone to make certain Eva Fay had gone home. Sometimes he thought she spent the night there, because she was always there when he arrived and no matter how late he stayed, she stayed later. As a secretary, she was damned intimidating. She was also so good at her job he'd have loved to see her transplanted to New York, to see what kind of miracle she could work on some of the precincts.
There was no answer at his office, so it was safe to go back. His car was in the driveway, plainly visible to anyone who looked. He left a bar light on in the kitchen, a lamp on in his bedroom upstairs, and one on in the living room. The television provided background noise, in case anyone listened. There was no reason for anyone to be watching his house, at least so long as whoever was after Daisy didn't find out about his involvement with her, but he wasn't taking chances.
At twilight, he got a few items he thought he might need and slipped them into his pockets. Wearing jeans, a black T-shirt, and another cap—this one plain black—he slipped out his back door and walked back to the police department. At this time of day almost everyone was inside for the night, having finished the chores around the house, eaten supper, and settled down in front of the tube. He could hear the high-pitched laughter of some youngsters chasing lightning bugs, but that was one street over. Maybe

there were some folks sitting on their front porches, enjoying the fresh air now that it wasn't as hot, but Jack knew he was virtually unrecognizable in the deepening twilight.

His second-shift desk sergeant, Scott Wylie, looked up in surprise when Jack entered by the back door, which was the way all the officers came in. It was a quiet night, no one else around, so Wylie didn't even try to hide the fishing magazine he was reading. Jack had come up through the ranks, so he knew what it was like to work long, boring shifts, and he never gave his men grief about their reading material. "Chief! Is something wrong?"

Jack grinned. "I thought I'd spend the night here, so I can find out what time Eva Fay comes to work."

The sergeant laughed. "Good luck. She has a sixth sense about things like that; she'll probably call in sick."

"I'll be in my office for a while, clearing up some paperwork. I was going to do it tomorrow, but something else came up."

"Sure thing." Wylie went back to his magazine, and Jack went through the glass doors into the office part of the building. The police department was two-storied, built in a back-facing L, with the offices in the short leg facing the street, while the officers' lockers and showers and the evidence, booking, and interrogation rooms were on the first floor of the long section, with the cells on the top floor.

Jack's office was on the second floor, facing the street. He went in and turned on the lamp on his desk, scattered some papers around the desk so it would look as if he'd been working— just in case someone came up, which he doubted would happen— then he got a key from his desk and silently went down to the basement, where a short tunnel connected the P.D. to city hall. The tunnel was used to transport prisoners from the jail to court for their trials and was securely locked at both ends. Jack had a key, the desk sergeant had a key, and the city manager had once had a key, but it was taken from him when it was discovered he was giving his girlfriends tours of the place.

He unlocked the door on the P.D. side, then relocked it when he was in the tunnel—again, just in case. The place was dark as a tomb, but Jack had a pencil flashlight with a narrow, powerful beam. He unlocked the door on the other end, and left this one unlocked, because there wasn't supposed to be anyone in city hall after five P.M. The basement was silent and dark, just the way it should be.

He soundlessly climbed the stairs; the door at the top had no lock. He eased it open, listened, then put his eye to the crack and looked for light where there shouldn't be any. Nothing. The place was empty.

More relaxed now, he opened the flimsy lock on the water department door—the city really needed to replace its locks, it only took him a few seconds to get in—and booted up the computer. The system wasn't password protected, because it wasn't on-line. He clicked on Programs, found Billing, and opened the file. Bless their tidy little hearts, everything was cross-referenced between account numbers and names. He simply found Daisy's name, clicked on it, changed her address to his, saved the change, and closed the file. Bingo.

That taken care of, he backed out of the operating system and turned off the computer, relocked the door behind him, then made his way upstairs to the mayor's office. He had no idea what he was looking for, but he sure wanted to look around.

Like his own office, there were two entrances to the mayor's: one through Nadine's outer sanctum, and a private, unmarked door a little farther down the hallway. The locks here were much better than the locks on the door at the water department.

Jack decided to use Nadine's door, on the theory that she might think she'd accidentally left it unlocked. Repeating the process he'd used at the water department, he took a small set of probes and picks from his pocket, then put the penlight in his mouth, crouched down, and went to work. He was good at picking locks, though until tonight he hadn't been called upon to do so since moving to Hillsboro. When people asked him about his SWAT training or any of the action he'd seen, they never asked about any specialty training he might have had on the side. He always downplayed the action part—hell, he wasn't a Rambo, none of them were, though there were always a few who let their heads get too far into the mystique—and kept quiet about some of the training, because it seemed smart to keep something in reserve.

The lock yielded in about thirty seconds. Normal citizens would be alarmed at how easy it was to open locked doors; they thought all they had to do was turn the key and they were safe. Unfortunately, the only people they were safe from were the people who obeyed laws and respected locked doors. A lowlife would break a window, kick in a door; Jack had even known them to crawl under houses and saw holes in the floor. Alarm systems and burglar

bars were good, but if someone was determined to get inside, he'd find a way.

Witness himself, breaking into the mayor's office. Jack grinned as he slipped through Nadine's office, holding the penlight down so the beam wouldn't flash across the windows, and tried the door into the mayor's office. It was unlocked; that meant one of three things: Either Temple had nothing to hide, he was so careless he didn't deserve to live, or he made certain there was nothing suspicious here to see. Jack hoped it was the first but figured it was the third.

Working fast but systematically, he went through the trash and found a wadded piece of paper with Daisy's tag number scribbled on it, but nothing else interesting. He smoothed out the paper; it was a sheet from the memo pad printed with Temple Nolan at the top, the same memo pad that now rested on top of Temple's desk. It followed, then, that the mayor had been here in his office when someone called asking him to run that tag number.

A quick search of the mayor's desk turned up nothing. Jack surveyed the office, but there were no file cabinets, just furniture. All the files were in Nadine's office. There were, however, two phones on Temple's desk. One was the office phone, with a list of extension numbers beside it. The other had to be a private line, so Temple could make and receive calls without Nadine knowing.

It was a long shot, but Jack took a tiny recorder out of his pocket, hit redial on the private phone, then held the recorder to the earpiece, recorded the tones, and quickly hung up. He had a pal who could listen to the tones and tell him what number had been dialed. Next he hit *69, and scribbled down the number the computer provided. It wasn't a local exchange, so the last call Temple had received had not been from his wife asking when he'd be home for supper. Jack tore off a few extra pages of the memo pad to make certain no impression was left behind, wadded up the extras, and dropped them into the wastebasket. The trash would be emptied before Nolan came to work, not that he was likely to go through his own trash, considering there was nothing interesting in there except Daisy's tag number, which Jack also dropped back in the trash.

That was all he could do tonight. Taking out a handkerchief, he carefully wiped all the surfaces he had touched; then let himself out through Nadine's office. He went back through the basement tunnel, up to his office, where he restacked all the papers he'd scattered on his desk so Eva Fay wouldn't

realize he'd been here when she wasn't, turned out the light, and locked up. Everything was just the way he'd found it.
He went out through the back; things were a little busier now than they had been before; an officer had brought in a drunk driver, a big guy who stood about six-six and weighed at least three-fifty. When Jack came through the doors, both Sergeant Wylie and the officer glanced at him, their attention momentarily distracted, and the drunk saw his chance for an escape, ramming his shoulder into the officer and sending him flying, then lowering his head and charging straight into Wylie's stomach.
It had been a while since Jack had seen any action. With a whoop of sheer joy, he joined the melee.
It took all three of them to subdue the big guy, and they had to resort to some rough stuff before they got him down. It was a good thing the guy had been cuffed, or someone would have been really hurt. As it was, once they had him down and hog-tied, Sergeant Wylie felt his ribs and winced.
"Anything broken?" Jack asked, wiping blood from his nose.
"I don't think so. Just bruised." But he winced again when he touched them. "Go get them checked out. I'll handle things here."
The officer, Enoch Stanfield, had a fat lip and a rapidly swelling eye. He was trembling slightly from adrenaline overload as he soaked his handkerchief at the watercooler and held the cold cloth to his eye. "God, I love this job," he said in an exhausted voice. "Nowhere else would I have the opportunity to get the shit kicked out of me every day." He eyed Jack. "You sounded like you were having fun, Chief."
Jack looked down at the big drunk, who had gone to sleep almost as soon as they got him hog-tied. Gargantuan snores issued from his open mouth. "I live for days like this." Jack was abruptly exhausted, too, though he wasn't shaking like Stanfield.
He had to call in another officer to help them drag the drunk into the tank to sleep it off. He also called in one of the medics to check him and make sure he was okay, that the big guy wasn't in insulin shock, or something like that, even though the Breathalyzer indicated that he was simply piss-assed drunk, a diagnosis with which the medic concurred. A cold pack was put on Stanfield's eye, a stitch in his lip, and another cold pack on Jack's left hand, which was beginning to swell. He had no idea what exactly had happened to hurt his hand, but that's the way it was with fights: you just threw yourself in and took stock afterward. By the time he had everything organized,

including a replacement for Wylie for the rest of the shift, it was almost ten-thirty; the third-shift officers were there to take over, the second-shift officers were all there except for Wylie, and a couple of the first-shift guys had heard the excitement on their scanners and had come over to take a look. After all, it wasn't every day the chief got involved in taking down a D and D, drunk and disorderly.

"There's no way Eva Fay won't hear about this," he said glumly, causing general laughter.

"She'll raise hell, you being here without her on duty," Officer Markham, a twenty-year veteran with the force, said tongue-in-cheek.

The men, Jack realized, were thoroughly enjoying the situation. It wasn't often the rank and file got to see their chief get down and dirty. There had always been a hint of reserve in them that wasn't due just to difference in rank; the biggest part had been that he was an outsider. His wrestling with a big drunk had made them feel he was one of them, a regular cop despite his rank.

To top it all off, he had to walk back home. He could have had one of the guys drive him home, but then he'd have had to come up with a reasonable explanation for why he'd walked over in the first place, and he didn't want to deal with it.

The house was just as he'd left it. Nothing seemed disturbed or out of place. He went straight to the phone and called information, to see if he could get the number of the mayor's private line in city hall. There was no such listing, which didn't surprise him. Next he called Todd Lawrence, who answered on the third ring with a sleepy "Hello."

"I got the address changed," he said. "And I used call return on the mayor's private line to get the number of the last call to him, and redial to record the tones of the last call he made."

"You've been a busy little boy." Todd sounded more alert.

"This gives us two numbers to check out. Think you can find out what the mayor's private number is and get those records, too?"

"Too? You want me to get telephone records on three numbers." It was stated as fact.

"What else are federal friends for?"

"You're going to get your federal friend's ass fired."

"I figure my federal friend owes it to Daisy."

Todd sighed. "You're right. Okay. I'll see what I can do, maybe call in some favors. This is completely off-record, though."
Next Jack called Daisy, though a quick look at his watch told him it was just after eleven. She'd probably gone to bed at ten on the dot, but after all his efforts on her behalf that day, he thought he deserved at least a brief chat.
"Hello." She didn't sound sleepy; she sounded tired, but not sleepy.
“Are you already in bed?"
"Not yet. It's been an ... eventful night."
"Why? What's happened?" He was instantly on alert.
"I can't turn my back on him for a second, or he's tearing something up."
" 'Him?' "
"The dog."
The dog. Jack heaved a sigh of relief. "He doesn't sound very well trained."
"He isn't trained at all. Killer, no! Put that down! I have to go," she said hurriedly.
"I'll be right over," he said, just before she hung up, and didn't know if she heard him or not. He didn't care. He grabbed his keys, turned off the lights, and went out the door.
Daisy was exhausted. Her mother had called her at three P.M. and said tiredly "Jo and I are taking the puppy over to your house. At least the yard is fenced in and he can run there. We'll stay there with him until you get home."
"Oh, dear." That didn't bode well. "What has he done?"
"What hasn't the little devil done? We're run ragged just trying to keep up with him. Anyway, we'll see you in a couple of hours."
When she got home at ten after five, both her mother and Aunt Jo were dozing in the living room, while the puppy slept between her mother's feet. He looked so adorable, lying on his belly with his back legs stretched out behind him, like a little bearskin rug, that her heart melted.
"Hello, sweetheart," she crooned. One heavy eyelid lifted, his little tail wagged; then he went back to sleep.
Aunt Jo roused. "Thank God you're home. Good luck; you'll need it with this little devil. Come on, Evelyn, let's git while the gitting's good."
Evelyn sat up and looked ruefully at the puppy between her feet. "We called Miley Park to see if maybe there was something wrong. She just laughed and said he might be a little excited at being in a new place, but that golden

retriever puppies are nonstop mischief until they're about four months old. Well, he does stop when he's sleepy."
"He has two speeds," said Aunt Jo. "He's either at a dead run, or he's asleep. That's it. Have fun. Come on, Evelyn."
"I think we'll go by Wal-Mart and buy some baby gates so we can at least hem him up in one room. Do you want us to pick up some for you, too?"
"We'll buy what they have in stock," said Aunt Jo. "Come on, Evelyn."
"Oh, dear, is he that bad?" Daisy asked, dismayed. He looked like such a little angel, lying there asleep.
"He seems to be mostly house-trained," said her mother. "But he needs to go outside every two hours, as regular as clockwork. He did piddle on the puppy pads—"
"When he wasn't tearing them to shreds," interrupted Aunt Jo. "Evelyn, come on."
"He likes his stuffed toys—"
"He likes everything, including his water dish. Evelyn, if you don't come on, I'll leave without you. He might wake up any minute."
The puppy lifted his head and yawned, his little pink tongue stretching out. Within ten seconds, her mother and aunt had their purses and were out the door. Daisy put her hands on her hips and looked at the little fluff ball. "Okay, mister, just what have you done?"
He rolled over on his back, stretching. She was unable to resist rubbing the warm little tummy, which he took as an invitation to begin licking her everywhere that pink, eager tongue could reach. She picked him up and cuddled him, loving the warmth and smallness of him under all that fuzz. His big, soft feet batted at her, and he wiggled, signaling that he wanted down. She set him down, then broke into a sprint when he darted for the kitchen.
All he wanted was some water. He lapped eagerly, then all of a sudden pounced into the bowl with both front feet, sending water flying.
She got the kitchen floor mopped up—which he thought was a great game, because he kept pouncing on the mop—fed him, and took him outside to do his business. He squatted as soon as his feet touched the grass; then he attacked a bush. Worried that the leaves might be poisonous to him, or at least upset his little tummy, she got him away from the bush and used the hose pipe to run water in the kids' wading pool she'd bought for him.

He was too little to climb over the rim of the pool, so she helped him in and watched him run and slide in the two inches of water until he was drenched, she was drenched, and her sides ached from laughing so much. Lifting him out of the pool, she wrapped him in a towel and carried him inside, hoping he'd take another nap so she could eat.

He pounced into his water bowl again. While she was mopping, he chased the mop. Then he grabbed the kitchen towel and made a run for it. She caught him as he dove under the bed, and hauled him out. Her efforts to take the towel away from him evidently convinced him she wanted to play tug-of-war and he pulled on the towel for all he was worth, emitting baby growls while his whole body quivered with effort.

She distracted him with a little stuffed duck. He threw the duck over his head, pounced on it, and managed to stuff it under the couch where he couldn't reach it. Then he stood there and yapped until she got down on her hands and knees and retrieved the duck. He immediately stuffed it under the couch again.

Next she tried a rubber chew toy as a distraction, and it worked for about ten minutes. He lay on his belly and held the chew toy between his front paws, gnawing with fierce concentration. Daisy took the opportunity to get out of her work clothes and begin making herself a sandwich. She heard a crash from the living room and ran in barefoot to find he'd somehow dislodged the television remote control from the lamp table and was busy trying to kill it. She took the remote away and put it in a safe place.

He loved her red toenails. He pounced on her bare feet. He kept jumping at her, trying to catch her fingers in his mouth; startled, she would jerk her hand back, and his sharp little baby teeth hurt. Finally, she just held her hand down and he mouthed her fingers as if tasting her, then, satisfied, released her.

At last, he got sleepy. He stopped practically in mid-run and collapsed on his belly, heaving a huge sigh as his eyes closed.

"I guess it was a big day for you, little guy," she murmured. "Do you miss your mama, and your brothers and sisters? You've always had someone to play with, haven't you? And now you're all by yourself."

It was after seven o'clock by then, and she was starving. She finished making her sandwich and ate it standing where she could keep an eye on him. He looked so sweet and tiny while he was asleep, but as soon as his eyes opened, he would be full speed again.

He slept on, with the absolute obliviousness of a baby. She decided to take a quick shower and left the bathroom door open so he could come in if he woke up. She undressed, dropping her clothes on the floor, and stepped into the tub. She had just gotten soaped when she heard something and parted the curtain to see a pale fuzz ball darting into the hall with her panties in his mouth.

Daisy leaped out of the tub and ran in naked, sliding pursuit. He somehow squeezed behind the couch with his captured treasure. She pulled the couch away from the wall and retrieved her panties. There was, of course, a hole in them. He wagged his tail.

"You little demon," she said, picking him up and carrying him into the bathroom with her. She closed the door so he couldn't get out, put her clothes on the back of the toilet where he couldn't reach them, and got back into the shower. He spent the whole time yapping and standing on his back legs, trying to crawl over into the tub with her.

She had learned from the mop episode; instead of stepping out onto the bath mat to towel off, she stood in the tub. He eyed the towel with longing, sitting on his haunches and looking angelic.

His little face was so happy, she thought, his mouth open in a perpetual smile. His dark eyes, the rims dark, as if someone had lined his eyes with kohl, were very exotic with his pale fur and long blond lashes. He was so curious and enthused about everything that his tail wagged nonstop, like a souped-up metronome.

"So what if you're a little devil," she said. "You're my little devil, and I fell in love with you when you climbed in my lap." His tail wagged even faster as he listened to her voice and the crooning note in it.

"I have to come up with a good name for you, something that sounds big and tough. You're supposed to protect me, you know. I don't think it would scare many burglars if I yelled, 'Sic 'im, Fluffy! do you? How about Brutus?"

He yawned.

"You're right; you aren't a Brutus. You're too pretty. How about Devil?" After a moment, watching him, she vetoed that choice herself. "No, I don't like that, because I just know you're going to be a sweetheart when you grow up."

She tried out names on him for the rest of the evening: Conan, Duke, King, Rambo, Rocky, Samson, Thor, Wolf. None of them were right. She just

couldn't look at that smiling little face and make a macho name fit.
She learned not to leave water in his water bowl, or it ended up on the kitchen floor. When he went to his bowl, she poured a little water in, and after he'd lapped that up, she poured some more, until he quit lapping. Unfortunately, there was usually some water left in the bowl when he finished, and he pounced into it. Daisy mopped up water seven times that night, with him in fierce pursuit of the mop head.
He was so intelligent she was amazed; in just that afternoon and night he had learned to go to the back door when he needed to go outside. Finally he seemed to be winding down, so Daisy introduced him to his dog bed, which she had placed in her bedroom so he wouldn't be lonely and cry at night. She closed the bedroom door to keep him corralled for the night, placed the stuffed duck in the bed with him, and wearily crawled into bed. She turned out the lamp, and exactly two seconds later he started whimpering.
Fifteen minutes later she gave up and lifted him into the bed with her. He was almost hysterical with joy, jumping and tugging at the covers and licking her in the face. She had just gotten him settled down when the phone rang. It was Jack. While he was talking, the puppy found her robe, which she'd tossed across the foot of the bed, and began tugging at the sleeve. She said, "Killer, no! Put that down! I have to go," and hung up to lunge across the bed and grab him just before he tumbled backward to the floor.
Not five minutes later, the doorbell rang. Sighing in fatigue, she got out of bed, picked up the puppy, and carried him with her to the door. That seemed the safest thing to do. A quick peek revealed Jack standing impatiently on the porch. She turned on the light and with one hand unlocked the dead bolt and let him in.
He stepped inside and froze, staring at the puppy "That's a puppy," he said in almost stunned astonishment, which was really observant of him considering she'd already told him she had a dog.
"No!" she said, pretending shock. "That lady lied to me."
"That's a golden retriever puppy."
She cuddled the baby to her. "So?"
With measured movements, Jack closed the door, locked it, then rhythmically beat his head against the frame.
"What's wrong with my puppy?" Daisy demanded.

In a strained voice he said, "The whole idea was to get a dog for protection."
"He'll grow," she said. "Look at the size of his feet. He's going to be huge."
"He'll still be a golden retriever."
"What's wrong with that? I think he's beautiful."
"He is. He's gorgeous. But goldens are so friendly they're no protection at all. They think everyone is their friend, placed on earth just to pet them. He might bark to let you know when someone comes up, but that's about it."
"That's okay. He's perfect for me." She kissed the top of the puppy's head. He was squirming, trying to get down so he could investigate this new human.
Sighing, Jack reached out and took the little guy in his big hands. The puppy began licking madly at every inch of skin he could reach. "So his name's Killer?"
"No, I've just been trying out names. Nothing seems to fit."
"Not if they're like Killer, they won't. You name goldens something like Lucky, or Fuzzbutt." He lifted the puppy until they were nose to nose, "How about Midas? Or Riley? Or—"
"Midas!" Daisy said, her eyes lighting as she stared from him to the puppy. "That's perfect!" She threw her arms around him, stretching up on tiptoe in an effort to kiss him, but the newly named Midas got there first and licked her on the mouth. She sputtered and wiped her mouth. "Thanks, sweetie, but you aren't half the kisser the guy is."
"Thanks," Jack said, holding Midas at a safe distance as he leaned down and their lips met. And clung. The kiss deepened. The melting started again.
"Do you mind if I spend the night?" he murmured, trailing his kisses down her throat.
"I'd love it," she said, and was overtaken by a huge, jaw-breaking yawn.
Jack gave a crack of laughter. "Liar. You're dead on your feet."
Daisy blushed. "I had a very active day yesterday. And last night." She glanced at Midas. "And tonight. I can't turn my back on him for a minute."
"How about if I stay and we do nothing but sleep?"
Blinking in astonishment, she said, "Why would you want to do that?"
"Just to make sure you're all right."
"I think you're going overboard with this protection business."
"Maybe, maybe not. Today the mayor got me to run a tag number; he said he'd seen the car parked in the fire lane at Dr. Bennett's office. Guess whose

tag it was?"
"Whose?"
"Yours."
"Mine!" she said indignantly. "I've never parked in a fire lane in my life!"
He hid a grin as he set Midas down. "I didn't think so. Do you have any idea why the mayor would want me to run your tag number?"
Slowly she shook her head.
"If he had seen your car, he'd have known it was you, so obviously someone else got him to do it. That has me a little worried. The good thing is, you've moved, so your address isn't the same as what's on your registration."
She gasped. "My goodness, I totally forgot about that! I'll go to the courthouse and change—"
"No, you will not," he said sternly. "Not until I find out what's going on."
"Why don't you just ask Temple?"
"Because I feel uneasy about the whole thing. Until I'm satisfied nothing suspicious is going on, I don't want you to give out your new address to anyone. Tell your family to keep it quiet, too."
"But if anyone wants to know where I live, all he has to do is follow me home from work—"
“After today, I'll handle that. I'll drive you home, and I guarantee no one will be able to tail us."
She stared up at him, at the hard cast of his expression, and realized he was deadly serious. For the first time, a frisson of alarm skittered up her spine. Jack was worried, and that worried her.
Midas scampered into the kitchen, and she heard the splat as he landed in his water bowl. "Get the puppy and take him out in the backyard while I mop up the water," she said, sighing. "Then we'll go to bed."
"With him?"
"He's a baby You don't want him to cry all night, do you?"
"Better him than me," Jack muttered, but he obediently took Midas outside and was back in five minutes with a sleepy puppy in his arms.
"I suppose he sleeps in the middle," he said, grumbling. Daisy sighed. "At this point, I'll let him sleep wherever he wants. And we have to take him out every two hours."
"Do what?" he said in disbelief. "I told you, he's a baby. Babies can't hold it."
"I can tell this is going to be a great night."

NINETEEN

If the blonde lived at the address Nolan had given him, Glenn Sykes had yet to see her today. Two older women had come and gone, but not the blonde. In that kind of residential neighborhood, it was difficult to keep watch without being spotted himself, because old folks sat out on their porches and watched everyone who went by.

He got a phone book and looked up Minor. There was only one listing, and that gave the same address the mayor had given him, so the blonde had to live there. Maybe she was off on a business trip or something. He was both worried and relieved: relieved because the woman evidently hadn't been paying much attention to them, and worried because it was on the news that a man's body had been found in the woods by a hunter—it was always those damned hunters—and if the newspaper ran a picture of Mitchell, the lady just might remember that she'd seen him Saturday night.

The mayor seemed unusually shaken by the whole situation, which also worried Sykes. He thought everything could be managed if no one lost his cool, but the mayor's hold seemed to be slipping a little. Because of that, he was reluctant to call Nolan and tell him the Minor woman hadn't shown up. He didn't want to send the mayor off the deep end, but neither did he want to just let the situation languish. He needed to find her and get things taken care of so that that loose end was tied off and the mayor would settle down. They had another shipment of girls coming in, Russians, and Sykes wanted everything handled before they arrived. They stood to make some big money off this batch; one was supposed to be only thirteen, and as pretty as a doll.

He drove by the Minor house several times after dark that night, when he wasn't as likely to be noticed, but the beige Ford still hadn't showed up. Finally it occurred to him to go to the Buffalo Club. Duh! He felt like smacking himself in the head. This Minor babe was into partying, not sitting at home nights with two old women. Feeling certain he'd find her there, Sykes made the drive to Madison County.

But when he scouted out the parking lot, the beige Ford wasn't there. The traffic was lighter on Mondays than it was on the weekend, so he was

certain he hadn't missed it. Either she had already hooked up with some guy and gone home with him, or she had gone to some other club.
Okay, it was beginning to look as if the best way to find her was to stake out where she worked. That should be easy to find out, in a small town like Hillsboro. Hell, the mayor might even know her. Come to think of it, he'd sounded unusually subdued when he'd called and given Sykes her name and address; maybe he did know her, and his conscience was acting up.
Sykes couldn't find the woman now, but he was damn sure where she'd be tomorrow: at work. He figured he might as well go home and get a good night's sleep, then call the mayor in the morning on the chance he knew the woman and knew where she worked—she was such a classy-looking babe, the mayor might even have the hots for her. Sykes hoped not. The mayor had become skittish enough already without Sykes's having to eliminate one of his playmates.
But everything would work out tomorrow. Tuesday looked like a busy day.
Daisy and Jack took turns getting up every two hours and taking Midas out. Like a little trooper, he did exactly what he was supposed to every time. Unfortunately, every time they brought him back in, he thought it was playtime and it took another half hour or so before he cuddled up and went back to sleep.
"This is like having a newborn," Jack said at seven o'clock, sitting at the table and sipping his second cup of coffee. His face was rough with stubble and his eyes had dark circles under them. Daisy lacked the stubble, but her eyes matched his.
She looked down at Midas, who was lying on his back with all four paws in the air, and the stuffed duck in his mouth. "Except you don't have to chase down newborns," she said. "They pretty much stay where you put them."
"I'll get him a ball. Chasing it should wear him out, so he'll nap longer—and more often."
Despite her fatigue, Daisy beamed at him. That was so sweet, buying her puppy a toy. He'd been very good natured about the whole thing last night, but then he had volunteered to stay. She would have loved to have made love with him, but at the same time, sleeping together and not having sex had been . . . kind of wonderful. They had even managed to cuddle, though Midas had been right there, squeezing his fat little body between them as if that was his natural place.

"Since you got a welcome mat instead of a guard dog," he said, with a pointed look at the puppy, "I want you to be especially careful until I satisfy myself there's nothing to worry about with this tag-number deal. There are a few things I want to check out. Until then, I'll drive you to and from work, and stay here at night."

"Okay," she said, a little astonished. It sounded as if he planned to move in, at least for the short term. What astonished her was how pleased she felt. She should be out trying to find a husband, but she didn't feel as enthusiastic about it as she had just a few days before. Of course, a few days before, she hadn't had a lover, and she hadn't watched him cradle her puppy in his strong arms to carry it out for a nature call in the middle of the night. Just remembering that made her feel squishy as if she had turned to mush inside.

Maybe Jack wasn't her type, but somehow she didn't much care.

"The city council meets tonight," he continued, "so I'll bring you home, then go to my house to shower and change clothes, and come back here when the meeting's over."

"Should I wait with supper?" she asked, just as if they did this all the time.

"No, go ahead and eat. If you have the chance." He gave Midas a wry glance, then began chuckling. The puppy had dozed off, still on his back with his feet in the air.

While she was thinking of it, she called her mother to see if she was still willing to puppy-sit.

"I'll come over there," Evelyn said. “As far as I'm concerned, that fenced back yard is priceless. I'll be over about eight-thirty, so you'll have plenty of time to get to work."

That taken care of, Daisy hung up the phone and immediately began to worry about how she would explain to her mother why Jack was driving her to work. As for explaining his presence—she was, after all, a thirty-four-year-old woman—she didn't owe explanations about her love life to anyone.

"You have to leave," she said. "My mother's coming over."

He seemed to be fighting a grin. "If you feed me breakfast, I'll be out of here by eight o'clock. I'll go home, shave and change clothes, and be back here in plenty of time to get you to the library."

"It's a deal," she said promptly. "It doesn't take long to whip up a bowl of cereal."

"Biscuits," he wheedled.

Exasperated, she turned on the oven.
"And eggs and bacon."
What was a home-cooked meal, compared to the trouble he was going to on her behalf? He was just lucky she had stocked up on all the necessary things out of habit before she realized she wouldn't be doing much cooking for herself. Cereal in the morning and a sandwich at night was much more practical when there was only one sitting down at the table.
She put the bacon in the frying pan, covered it with a screen so the grease wouldn't splatter all over her new stove, then got out the flour, oil, and milk and began mixing up the biscuit dough. Jack watched in amazement. "I thought you would use the canned kind."
"I don't have any"
"You actually know how to make homemade biscuits?"
"Of course I do." She stopped to take out her new biscuit pan and coat it with nonstick cooking spray. She didn't roll out the dough, but did it the way her mother had taught her: she pinched off a certain amount of dough, rolled it into a ball, flattened the ball with a quick pat, and placed it in the pan.
"Aunt Bessie did it that way," he said, fascinated. "She called them choke biscuits, because she choked off the dough instead of using a biscuit cutter."
"Biscuit cutters are for sissies." She had made as many biscuits as she, her mother, and Aunt Jo usually ate, but she figured Jack would eat as much as two of them put together. The oven was still heating, so she checked on the bacon and turned it.
Jack got up and poured himself another cup of coffee, grabbed the Huntsville morning paper off the counter, and went back to the table. Daisy hadn't had time to even glance at the paper the day before, because of Midas, but she could always read it at the library.
The oven beeped as it reached the pre-set temperature. Daisy put the biscuits in to bake and turned to get the eggs out of the refrigerator. As she did, a picture on the front page caught her eye. The man looked familiar, though she couldn't quite place him.
"Who's that?" she said, frowning a little as she pointed.
Jack read the caption. "His name was Chad Mitchell. A hunter found his body Sunday morning."
"I know him," she said.
He put down the paper, his gray-green eyes suddenly sharp. "How?"

"I don't know. I can't quite remember." She got out the eggs. "How do you want them, scrambled or fried?"
"Scrambled."
She cracked four eggs into a bowl, added a little milk, and beat them with a fork. "Set the table, please."
He got up and began opening cabinet doors and drawers until he found the plates and silverware. Daisy stared absently at the bacon as she turned it one last time.
"Oh, I know!" she said suddenly.
"He was a library patron?"
"No, he was at the Buffalo Club. He tried to dance with me, that first night, and wanted to buy me a Coke, but the fight started before he could get back."
Jack set the plates down and gave her his full attention. "That was the only time you saw him?"
She cocked her head as if studying a scene in her memory. "I don't think so."
"What do you mean? It either was or wasn't."
"I'm not certain," she said slowly, "but I think I saw him in the parking lot of the club on Saturday night, before I went inside. He was with two other men; then a third one got out of a car and joined them. He didn't seem all that drunk when he came out of the club, but then he passed out and they put him in the bed of a pickup."
Jack rubbed the back of his neck in an almost angry gesture. "Jesus," he muttered.
She stared at him, her cheeks a little pale. "Do you think I was the last person to see him alive?"
"I think you saw him get killed," he said harshly.
"But—but there wasn't a shot or anything. ..." Her voice trailed off, and she sagged against the cabinet.
Jack looked at the article, checking his facts. "He was stabbed."
She swallowed and turned even whiter. Jack started to reach for her, but she suddenly gathered herself and did what women have done for centuries when they were upset: they busied themselves doing normal stuff. She tore off a paper towel and lined a plate with it, then took up the bacon, placing it on the paper towel to drain.

Moving that frying pan out of the way, she took out a smaller one, sprayed it with cooking spray, then poured the beaten eggs into it and set it on the hot eye. She checked the biscuits, then got the butter and jam out of the refrigerator and set them on the table.
Jack looked around. "I don't want to use the cordless. Do you have a land line?"
"In the bedroom."
He got up and went into the bedroom. Daisy busied herself stirring the eggs and watching the biscuits as they rose and began to brown. After a minute he came back into the kitchen and said, "I have some people checking into some things, but I'm afraid one of the men in the parking lot saw you, and got your tag number."
She stirred the eggs even harder. "Then call the mayor and ask him who gave him the number."
"There's a slight problem with that."
"What?"
"The mayor lied to me when he asked me to run the number. He may be involved." Jack paused. "He's probably involved."
"What do we do?"
"I've already taken steps to make sure no one can find you. Don't tell anyone you've moved; tell your mother and aunt not to mention it—in fact, call your mother back and tell her to make certain no one follows her when she comes over here."
She gaped at him. "This is my mother, not James Bond!"
"Then tell her to let your aunt drive. I think that woman could outdo Bond."
In the end, he was the one who called her mother, and in a calm tone told her what he wanted her to do. Daisy concentrated on breakfast, which was about all she could handle right then. "Another thing," she heard him say, "do you have Caller ID? Then erase it. I don't want Daisy's number showing up anywhere."
"I need to give a statement," she said when he hung up. "Don't I?"
"As fast as possible." He picked up the phone again and hit re-dial. When her mother answered, he said, "Daisy won't be at work today. Call—"
He glanced at Daisy, who said, "Kendra."
"—Kendra and tell her to handle things. Make something up. Tell her Daisy has a toothache."

When he hung up again, he said, "If this guy is trying to get to you before you can give a statement and description, possibly even make a positive i.d. from police photos, then the thing to do is give it as fast as possible so he won't have anything to gain."
"Don't I have to be alive to testify?" she asked, and was proud her voice was so steady. She raked the fluffy scrambled eggs into a bowl, took the perfectly browned biscuits out of the oven and dumped them in a bread basket, then set everything on the table.
"You will be," he said. "That's a promise."

TWENTY

Sykes did something he'd never done before: he called Temple Nolan at home, bright and early Tuesday morning. Wherever the blonde worked, he wanted to be there in plenty of time to intercept her if possible, or in place to follow her home when she left. It would make for a long day, but he was a patient man.
Temple answered on the third ring, his voice fogged with sleep. "Y'ello?"
"It's me."
"Sykes!" Instantly, Temple sounded more alert. "For God's sake, what are you doing calling me here?"
"The Minor woman never showed up at the address you gave me. You sure she lives there?"
"I'm positive. She's lived there her whole life."
That answered one question, Sykes thought; the mayor definitely knew the woman personally.
"Then she stayed somewhere else last night. Maybe she has a boyfriend."
"Daisy Minor? Not likely," Temple scoffed.
"Hey, if she's hanging out at the Buffalo Club, she isn't Mother Teresa."
"I guess so," Temple said reluctantly. "And she's bleached her hair. Damn!"
"The good news is, she seems to be clueless."
"Then maybe we could forget about—"
"No." Sykes was decisive. "She's a loose end. The shipment of Russians will be here soon; do you want to take the chance this Minor woman doesn't screw up things? I don't think Phillips would take kindly to losing that much money. The Russians are worth three times any of our other shipments."

"Shit."
Hearing acceptance, Sykes said, "So where does she work? If I can, I'll grab her this morning, maybe at lunch. If not, I'll follow her this afternoon when she gets off and get her then."
"She's the damn librarian," Temple said.
"Librarian?"
"Hillsboro Public Library. She works next door to city hall. She opens the library at nine and she's the only one working until lunch, I think, but you can't grab her there. There are too many people going and coming from city hall and the police department, and you can see the library parking lot from both places."
"Then I'll follow her at lunch, see if I get a chance. Don't worry. One way or another, I'll get her today."
As the two men hung up, in her bedroom Jennifer Nolan quietly depressed the disconnect button and held it as she settled the receiver back into place. She had been listening in on Temple's calls for years now, a sick compulsion she couldn't resist. She had heard him make assignations with so many different women she had long since lost count, and yet every time he did, a little part of her still died. Over the years she had tried to muster enough self-respect to divorce him, but it was always easier to dull things with alcohol and other men. Sometimes she had even been able to drink enough that she could pretend the other men hurt him the way his women hurt her, but she had lost even that forlorn hope when he began asking her to sleep with men to whom he owed favors.
Elton Phillips was one of those men, and since then Jennifer had actively hated her husband, hated him with a fierceness that ate at her like acid. He knew, he had to have known, what Elton Phillips was like, and still Temple had sent her to him. In the privacy of Phillips's bedroom she had screamed and cried and begged, and in the end merely endured, praying that she wouldn't die—until she reached the point that she prayed she would die. But he hadn't intended to kill her; there was no need. He trusted Temple to keep her under control, not that she would have gone to the cops anyway. She never wanted her children to find out what had been done to her, or what part their father had played in it. Jason and Paige barely tolerated her anyway, because of the alcohol; they would turn their backs on her forever if they knew about all the other men, and Jennifer had no doubt Temple would make certain they knew.

Had Temple even noticed that she hadn't willingly had sex since she'd recovered from Phillips's assault? She could barely tolerate it now, and only if she'd had enough to drink beforehand. Temple had even stolen that pleasure, sordid as it had been, from her. She had nothing left now except her children.

And maybe Temple had just given her the means to get rid of him and keep Jason and Paige.

She struggled to remember all she'd heard. Temple had said the man's name, something like Lykes. No—it was Sykes. And something about a shipment of Russians, which didn't make sense. She couldn't imagine Temple being involved in bringing in illegal aliens; he was vociferous in his opinion about what the country needed to do to beef up its borders to stop the flow of wetbacks. She knew one thing, though: if Elton Phillips was involved, then it was nasty.

But that about Daisy Minor—Jennifer was certain she hadn't misunderstood that. Daisy was a "loose end," and loose ends were tied up. Jennifer knew what that meant, though how Daisy could be involved with Temple was also something that didn't make sense; Temple went for glossy women who knew the rules and never gave him any trouble. It sounded as if Daisy was causing a lot of trouble. That man, Sykes, was going to "get" her. He'd meant kill her.

She needed to tell someone about this, but who? The local police department would be the logical choice, but how likely were they to take her seriously? Their mayor was planning to kill the librarian? Plus he's smuggling in Russians? Sure. Very believable.

At the very least she needed to warn Daisy. Jennifer reached for the bedside phone, but stopped before lifting the receiver. If she could listen in on Temple's calls, he could listen in on hers.

She had until lunchtime; that was when Sykes was going to try to grab Daisy.

Whom to call? The Jackson County Sheriff's Department? The FBI in Huntsville? Or Immigration? Not the sheriff's department, she thought; with the kind of network Temple had built, they were too close for comfort. Temple spent a lot of time in Huntsville, though; could he have any influence on the federal level? Surely not. Still, the last thing she wanted to do was underestimate him; she'd have this one chance, and one chance only,

to get away from him and not completely lose what little affection her children had left for her.
She tried to think, something she hadn't let herself do in far too long. She had no friends whom she could call for help or advice. Her parents had moved to Florida, and her one brother hadn't spoken to her in years; she didn't think she even had his phone number. When had she become so isolated?
She had to do something, even if it was nothing more than drive to the library and warn Daisy. She wouldn't even have to do that. She could just wait until Temple left the house, so he couldn't overhear her, and then call to warn Daisy. That was okay for the short term, but she had to figure out something that would stop Elton Phillips and her husband, once and for all.
Evelyn dropped what she was doing, got dressed, and came right over. As soon as she arrived at Daisy's house, she fixed Jack with a mother's gimlet stare and said, "What's going on that you thought I might be followed, why shouldn't we tell anyone where Daisy's moved to, and why did I have to erase her number off my Caller ID?"
"It's possible she witnessed a murder," Jack said as he took his plate to the sink.
"My goodness," Evelyn said weakly, sinking down into the chair he had vacated. Midas bounced around her feet in exuberant greeting, and she automatically leaned down to pet him.
"The body was found in Madison County, so I'm taking her to Huntsville to give a statement. What has me worried is that someone got her tag number and had it traced, so someone may be trying to find her. I might be overreacting, but until this is settled, I'm keeping her hidden."
"This is my daughter you're talking about. You aren't overreacting. Do whatever you have to do to keep her safe, you hear me?"
"Yes, ma'am. In the meantime, warn everyone in your family not to answer any questions about her. Don't give anyone any information, not even the mayor. He may be involved."
"My goodness," Evelyn said again. "Temple Nolan?"
"He's the one who had me trace the tag number."
"There's probably a perfectly good explanation—"
"Would you risk Daisy's life on that possibility?"
"No, of course not."

While they had been talking, Daisy had been methodically cleaning up the kitchen, her brow furrowed with thought. "If Mayor Nolan's involved, then he knows all of us: Mother, Aunt Jo, Beth, me. None of them are safe, either, if the object is to get to me. He'd know I would do anything to protect them." She looked at Jack; the colors of her eyes intensified in her pale face. "Can you protect all of them? Not just Beth but Nathan and the boys, too?"

He hesitated, then told her the truth. "For a while. Then money problems start locking in. Deputies can't be indefinitely assigned to guard duty."

"Then unless I can make a positive identification of one of the three men from police photos, or they happen to solve the crime and it was someone else entirely, we're looking at a long-term situation."

He nodded, his gaze holding hers. He wished she hadn't made such an accurate assessment, but she was too intelligent and well read not to have eventually figured it out anyway. Watching her expressive face, he could practically read the thoughts chasing through her mind.

"Don't borrow trouble; we've got enough to handle right now. We'll do this one step at the time. You make the statement, give them descriptions of the three men, and we'll take it from there."

"All right, but for now, I don't just want my family guarded, I want them gone." She turned to Evelyn. "How about a week in the Smokies? You and Aunt Jo, and Beth's entire family."

"I'm not leaving you with this going on!" Evelyn said fiercely.

"I'll be safer if you do," Daisy pointed out, with irrefutable logic.

Evelyn hesitated, torn between common sense and a mother's instinct to fight for her child.

"For one thing," Daisy continued, "guarding one person would be much easier for the police than guarding seven. For another, I won't be distracted if I know you're safe, so I won't be as likely to make any mistakes."

"She's right," Jack said, throwing his weight behind her arguments. "Pack up and leave town as fast as you can. I can assign a couple of officers to guard you until you do, and have the Huntsville department do the same for Beth's family."

"What about the puppy?" Evelyn looked down at Midas, who was gnawing on one of the chair legs. "Who will take care of him?"

Daisy followed her gaze and swooped down on him. "Midas, no, no," she said sternly, picking him up. If her tone of voice registered with him, it

wasn't evident from the joyous wiggling, tail-wagging, and licking with which he welcomed her attention. "I'm obviously not going to work for the duration, so I'll take care of him."
Evelyn said, "Midas, huh?" in a tone that said she had accepted, however reluctantly, the need to leave her daughter in Jack's care.
Daisy brushed her nose against the plush fur to hide the sudden tears that welled in her eyes. "Jack named him. It was either that or Fuzzbutt."
Jack moved forward before the scene got uncomfortably emotional. "Ladies, you have a lot of preparations to make. I'll make some calls; Mrs. Minor, two of my officers will be waiting for you when you get home."
"Goodness," she said, reaching for the phone. "I'd better warn Jo."
Thirty seconds later, she was heading out the door. Jack said, "Call Beth and tell her to start packing. Would Nathan already be at work?"
"No, he's on second shift."
"Good. I'll call Huntsville and get some protection on them right away. If he has any problems reporting off with his employer, let me know and I'll get the okay."
Evelyn was nodding as she went down the porch steps. She suddenly stopped and turned back to him. "There's one thing I want you to know."
"What?" he asked warily, put on guard by the narrowing of her eyes.
"I make a darn good mother-in-law, if I do say so myself. But I'll make an even better enemy, if you let anything happen to my daughter."
"Yes, ma'am," he said, understanding completely.
Daisy stared after her mother, her eyes round with surprise. "She just threatened you," she said incredulously.
"And very well, too."
"Um . . . that thing about a mother-in-law—"
"We'll talk about it later. Go get ready." He rubbed a rough hand over his jaw, making a rasping sound. "Mind if I borrow your razor? I don't want to leave you to go home and shave."
Daisy got ready while he was on the phone in her bedroom. She kept leaning out of the bathroom trying to hear what he was saying, but couldn't make out many of the words. Finally she gave up and concentrated on what she was doing, staring at herself in the mirror and feeling as if none of this was real. She was ordinary Daisy Minor, a librarian who had lived her whole life in this little town. People like her didn't expect things like this to

ever happen to them. But she had decided to go husband-hunting, and now someone was hunting her. It was open season all around.
Jack came into the bathroom. "Okay, everything's set with your family. My officers will escort your mother and aunt to Beth's house. They should all be out of reach within a couple of hours."
"Good." She leaned forward and applied some lip gloss, then stepped back. "The bathroom's yours. The razor's in the medicine cabinet."
He looked down at Midas, who of course had followed them and was now plopped on his belly chewing on Jack's shoelaces. "You have a crate to put him in while we're gone, don't you?"
"No, but that's okay" She bent down to separate puppy and shoes. "We're takiing him with us," she said as she left to get dressed.
Temple lingered over his breakfast of freshly squeezed orange juice and a bagel with cream cheese. Usually he left the house by eight-thirty but by eight-forty-five he still hadn't left. Patricia, their cook and housekeeper, left the kitchen to tidy the bedrooms and do the laundry.
Jennifer didn't eat; she seldom did, but usually it was because her stomach was too queasy from her drinking the day before. Today the queasiness was caused by jagged nerves. She sat silently, drinking a cup of coffee and wishing she could add just a dash of whiskey to it, but she didn't dare. If she added one dash, she'd add two, and soon she'd leave out the coffee altogether. Her hands were shaking, and she clasped them around her cup, willing the shakes to stop, praying Temple would leave soon because she didn't know how much longer she could last.
He didn't speak to her, but then he seldom did. They lived in the same house, but their lives were almost completely separate. He no longer told her when there were social functions she might have been expected to attend as the mayor's wife; he no longer told her anything, not where he was going or when she could expect him back. He didn't tell her the details of his day; if one of the kids called him, he didn't even tell her that, though she knew from things they had said that they called him regularly. They must be calling him at work, she thought, because they never called here.
She might already have lost them beyond recovery she thought, and swallowed the nausea that welled up on a bubble of pain. Her babies . . . they were grown, now, but part of a mother always remembered that time when they had just come from her body, when they were so tiny and helpless and she was their entire world, and they were hers.

Her children were ashamed of her. They didn't want to talk to her, didn't want to be around her. Temple had done this, but he'd done it with her help. She had sought refuge in a bottle instead of facing the truth: the man she loved didn't love her, had never loved her, would never love her. She was a means to an end for him. She should have taken the children and left him, and no matter how nasty the divorce got—and it would have gotten nasty, she trusted Temple on that—at least she would have had her pride, and her children wouldn't look at her with contempt.

Jennifer looked at the clock. Five till nine. Why was he staying so long?

The phone rang, startling her. Temple got up and answered it on the cordless, taking it with him into his office and shutting the door.

So that was why: he'd been waiting for a phone call.

Shakily she took her cup of coffee upstairs to her bedroom, closing and locking the door. Patricia had already made the bed and tidied her bathroom. Jennifer sat down on the bed and looked at the telephone. If she picked up now, Temple would hear the click; when she listened in, she always picked up just as he did, and she covered the mouthpiece with her hand so no noise would leak through.

Her heart pounded. She lifted the receiver and started punching buttons, as if she were making a call. She didn't even put the receiver to her ear, and she heard Temple shouting, "Jennifer! Damn it, I'm already on the phone."

"W-what?" she stammered, slurring her voice just a little. Maybe he'd think she had started drinking before she came downstairs. "S-sorry I was just calling—"

"I don't give a damn. Get off the line."

She heard a chuckle on the other end, a deep laugh that made her go cold and every hair on her body lift in alarm. Elton Phillips.

"Sorry," she said again, then placed her hand over the mouthpiece and quickly clicked the button to make it sound as if she'd hung up.

"The stupid bitch," Temple muttered. "Sorry about that."

"That's all right," Phillips said, and laughed again. "You didn't marry her for her brain."

"That's for damn sure. If I had, I'd be shit out of luck, because she doesn't have one."

"I'm beginning to wonder if she's the only one whose bulb doesn't glow all that brightly. You've made several mistakes lately yourself."

"I know. I apologize, Mr. Phillips. Sykes has everything under control."

"That remains to be seen. The Russian girls will be here tomorrow morning, and I want Mr. Sykes's full attention on handling the shipment. If he doesn't take care of this librarian problem before then, I'll be very unhappy"
Belatedly, Jennifer remembered that the answering machine function built into the phone included a "call record." She blinked at the base unit, looking for the correct button. It had to be with the other function buttons. play, delete, pause—there it was: call RECORD. She depressed the little red button and prayed that it didn't make a noise or beep a warning.
"He'll grab her when she leaves the library for lunch, or when she goes home this afternoon. She'll just disappear. When Sykes handles something personally, there aren't any problems."
"Really? Then why was Mitchell's body found so fast?"
"Sykes didn't handle it. He stayed behind at the club to find out who had seen them in the parking lot. The other two were the ones who handled the body."
"A mistake on Mr. Sykes's part."
"Yes."
"Then this is his last chance. And yours."
Phillips abruptly hung up, and Jennifer almost cut the connection on her end. She waited, though, waited for a couple of long seconds. Why didn't Temple hang up? She sat with her finger poised on the button. Was he waiting to see if he heard a betraying click? Cold sweat trickled down her spine.
Finally the line clicked, and in the next split second she disconnected, too, returning the receiver to the hook. She dashed across the room to unlock her door, then ran into the bathroom and quickly squeezed some toothpaste on her toothbrush, turned on the water, and began brushing for all she was worth. Temple never came to her bedroom; she was panicking for no reason —
The bathroom door opened and Temple said, "What in hell—"
She jumped and shrieked, spewing toothpaste all over the sink. She was so shaky that she lost her balance and stumbled backward, colliding with the toilet and almost falling over it, but she managed to grab the tank and steady herself, sitting down hard on the lid.
Temple eyed her with disgust. "For God's sake, you haven't even had breakfast and already you're drinking."

With a trembling hand she wiped the toothpaste off her mouth and didn't say anything. Let him think she was drunk; that was safer

"Who were you calling?"

She indicated her hair, accidentally swiping the toothbrush against the side of her head. "I need my hair done."

"No joke. Next time, make sure I'm not using the phone before you pick up and just start punching numbers." He didn't wait to see if she agreed; he just turned around and left. Jennifer rested her head against the sink, taking deep breaths and trying to slow her pulse rate. When she felt steady enough, she got up and washed her face, rinsed out her mouth, then used a washcloth to wipe the toothpaste out of her hair.

She hadn't turned off the answering machine recorder. She went back into her bedroom; Temple had left the door open, so she went over and closed it again, then went to the phone and stopped the recording.

That little tape was golden. The question was, what did she do with it? Who could she take it to? Temple had often said that the new police chief, Russo, was "his" boy, meaning he had Russo in his pocket. He'd been glad when old Chief Reason retired, because Reason had been around a long time and had his nose poked into too many things, knew too many secrets. It remained to be seen if Russo was as blind as Temple thought him to be, but Jennifer couldn't take the chance right now. It was too important that she get this right.

She stayed in her room another half hour, then went downstairs to see if Temple had left. He wasn't in his office, so she checked the garage; his car was gone.

Finally! Seating herself at his desk, she looked up the number for the library and quickly dialed it.

"Hillsboro Public Library."

Jennifer took a calming breath. "May I speak to Daisy Minor, please? This is Jennifer Nolan."

"I'm sorry, but Daisy isn't working today. This is Kendra Owens; may I help you with something?"

“Dear Lord, now what? "Is she at home? Can I reach her there?"

"Well, I don't know. Her mother said she had a toothache, so she's probably at the dentist's office."

"Do you know which dentist she uses?" Jennifer felt her control slipping. She needed a drink so bad. No. No, she did not need a drink; she needed to concentrate on what she was doing.
"No, I don't."
"This is important, damn it! Think! I need to get in touch with her immediately; someone is going to try to kill her."
"Excuse me? Ma'am? What did you say?"
"You heard me!" Jennifer clenched the receiver so tightly her knuckles turned white. "You have to find her! I heard my husband on the phone talking to a man named Sykes who's going to kill her, unless I can warn her first."
"Maybe you'd better call the police—"
Jennifer slammed down the phone and buried her face in her hands. Now what? Dentists. How many dentists could there by in Hillsboro? Not many, but what if Daisy went to a dentist in, say, Fort Payne? Or Scottsboro?
No, wait. Call Daisy's mother and find out which dentist she used.
She looked up that number, but the phone rang and rang, and no one answered.
Jennifer flipped to the Yellow Pages, located Dentists-Dentistry, and began dialing. She couldn't give up now. She'd failed at a lot in her life, but she couldn't fail at this.

TWENTY-ONE

“Dogs aren't allowed in public buildings unless they're service dogs," he said for the fifth time when they were on their way to Huntsville.
Daisy looked over her shoulder at Midas, who was asleep on his blanket in the backseat. "They'll let him in unless they want to take my statement in the parking lot."
Jack had argued the whole time she was putting Midas's dishes in his car, along with a supply of food and water: He had argued when she clipped the leash to the puppy's tiny collar. He had argued when she spread the blanket on the backseat and deposited Midas on it, along with his stuffed duck and rubber chew toy. He had argued until she got into the passenger seat and fastened her seat belt, and then he'd gotten behind the wheel without another word.

As far as Daisy was concerned, the subject of Midas was closed. Anyone who would kill another human being wouldn't hesitate to kill a dog; Midas was under her guardianship now, and she wouldn't leave him in the house alone, helpless and unprotected.
"I've been thinking about that night," she said, absently watching the mountains as they drove. "I saw their faces when they came out of the club, because the neon sign was shining down on them. There were two of the men, with Mitchell between them. The third man was waiting in the parking lot. Then a car pulled in and the headlights caught them, and I saw the faces of all three because they looked at the car. I didn't know any of them, but I can describe them."
"Just get the details straight in your mind, and hold them there." He reached over and took her hand. "Everything will be all right."
"I know." She managed a smile. "You promised my mother."
They reached the building that housed the Madison County Sheriff's Investigation and Patrol offices at nine-thirty. It was a two-story sixties-type building, yellow brick on bottom and pebbled concrete on top, with long, narrow, vertical windows. The sign on top said Forensic Sciences Building. The departments of forensic sciences and public safety were also in the building.
"Huh," said Daisy. "I might have known it would be here." He looked puzzled. "Why?"
She turned and pointed. "Because you just passed a Krispy Kreme doughnut shop."
"Do me a favor," he said. "Don't mention it to them."
He put his cell phone in his pocket, then gathered Midas's paraphernalia while Daisy got the puppy out of the car and carried him to a little patch of grass. He obediently squatted, she praised him, and he pranced at her heels as if he knew he'd been a very good boy. He didn't like the leash, though, and caught it in his mouth. Every few steps he'd stop and bat at it. Finally she picked him up, cradling him on her shoulder as if he were a baby. Content, he licked her chin.
No sooner had they stepped inside the building than a female deputy said, "You can't bring the dog in here."
Daisy immediately stepped back outside and waited. Unwilling to leave her out there by herself even though he was certain they hadn't been followed, Jack said to the deputy "Please call Detective Morrison and tell him Chief

Russo is here with the witness," and went back outside himself to wait with her.
The summer heat was already broiling, and the humidity was so high the air felt thick and heavy. Daisy lifted her face to the sunshine anyway, as if she needed the light. They didn't say anything, just waited until Detective Morrison came outside with a quizzical expression on his dark face.
"Deputy Sasnett said you brought your dog—" He broke off when he saw the puppy, his expression changing to a grin. "That isn't a dog. That's a ball of fluff."
Jack offered his hand. "I'm Jack Russo, Hillsboro's chief. This is Daisy Minor, the witness I told you about. Where she goes, the ball of fluff goes."
He shook Jack's hand, scratched his head, and said, "I'll be right back." Five minutes later, having cleared the way, he led Jack, Daisy, and Midas to his office.
Midas was an angel, sitting on Daisy's lap while she calmly told the detective what she'd seen Saturday night. Yes, she was certain the man in the middle was the man who had introduced himself to her the week before as Mitchell, and, yes, she was certain that was his photograph in the paper. She described what he'd been wearing, to the best of her memory: jeans, boots, and a light-colored western-style shirt. Detective Morrison quietly passed Jack the crime scene photos. The clothes were dirty, since the body had been buried, but they were as Daisy had described them. That meant Mitchell hadn't changed clothes from the time Daisy saw him in the Buffalo Club parking lot, which definitely upped the chances that he had been killed that night.
"Do you want to see them?" Jack asked Daisy.
She shook her head, and he passed the photos back to Detective Morrison.
Jack's cell phone rang. He took it out of his pocket, looked at the number showing in the window, and said, "It's the office. I'll take it outside."
He stepped out into the hall before hitting the talk button. "Russo."
"Chief, this is Marvin." Tony Marvin was the first-shift desk sergeant. He sounded uneasy, as if he wasn't certain he should be calling. "Kendra Owens just called from the library. Jennifer Nolan, the mayor's wife, called wanting to speak to Miss Minor, and when Kendra told her she wasn't there, Mrs. Nolan became very agitated. She said Miss Minor's life was in danger, that she'd overheard the mayor on the phone with a man named Sykes. Mrs. Owens said Mrs. Nolan seemed convinced they intended to kill Miss Minor.

Since you had us put that protective detail on Miss Minor's mother and aunt this morning, I thought you should know about this."
The little hairs on the back of Jack's neck stood up. "You're exactly right, Tony. It's looking like the mayor's in trouble up to his ass. Have Mrs. Nolan picked up; take her statement." He paused, thinking. "Keep her there. Put her in one of the interview rooms and hold her."
"Mrs. Nolan, Chief?"
"Her life could be in danger, too."
"You mean this isn't just a case of Mrs. Nolan hitting the bottle way too early?"
"I wish it was. Get a deputy out to the Nolan house as fast as possible."
"Yes, sir," said the sergeant. "Uh, what do you want me to do when the mayor hears about this?" Tony said "when," not "if," because in a small town there was no "if."
"Stall him. Blow him off. Make it sound as if she's drunk and you don't believe a word she's said. I don't want to spook him until we have her statement."
"Okay, Chief."
"And don't put anything on the radio about it; telephone contact only. That'll buy us some time."
Jack disconnected and called Todd, and brought him up to speed. "Jennifer Nolan's statement will give us reasonable grounds for getting a court order on those phone records, so if you don't already have them, now we can get them legally. She gave us a name, too: Sykes."
"It's always nice to do it legally," Todd said dryly.
"Before, I was just curious and uneasy. It's different now." Now that he knew there was a crime involved, everything had to be by the book. He didn't mind bending the rules—or outright breaking them—when it was personal, but it was more than personal now. He didn't want this case thrown out of court because of a technicality.
"I'll see what I can find on Sykes. If he's had so much as a speeding ticket, I'll find him."
Jack stepped back into the detective's office and told them what was going on. Detective Morrison made quick notes, his left hand bent in that peculiar position so many lefties used. "If your mayor was involved with Chad Mitchell, he isn't particular about his friends. Mitchell was a bottom-feeder; we've had him on resisting, possession, attempted rape, theft, B and E. We

got him last year on date rape, but the prosecutor couldn't make it stick. He never did any major time, six months here, a year there."
"Possession," said Jack. "Of what, exactly?"
Morrison consulted his file. "Marijuana, mostly. A small amount of cocaine. Rohypnol, clonazepam, GHB."
"He was big on the date-rape drugs."
"How does Mayor Nolan fit in with this?" Daisy asked. "He wasn't one of the three men I saw with Mitchell, but he has to be involved somehow."
"My guess is Sykes was one of the three, though, and Sykes is tied to the mayor in some shady deal they're working."
"That's the most logical scenario," said Morrison, getting to his feet. "Miss Minor, you said you saw them briefly, but clearly. I know it'll take a lot of time, but I'd like you to look at our mug shots, see if you recognize anybody. Don't guess; be sure, because if you aren't, the defense lawyer will tear the case apart."
Midas had been an angel the whole time, sitting in Daisy's lap, but when she stood up to follow Detective Morrison, he decided it was time to do some exploring and began wriggling madly in his effort to get down. Daisy set him on his feet, and he immediately made a dive for the detective's shoes. "Quick, where's his duck?" she said as she rescued shoelaces, which was more difficult than it should have been because Detective Morrison started laughing and shuffling his feet, sending Midas into a spasm of joy at the new game.
"Here." Jack separated the duck from the rest of puppy things he'd brought in with him, and tossed the duck across the floor. Seeing a new target, and one that was evidently running from him, Midas abandoned Morrison's shoes and bounced after the duck. When he captured the escapee, he gave it a hard shake, then tossed it over his head and pounced again.
"I'm sorry," Daisy apologized. "I just got him yesterday, and he's only six weeks old, so I couldn't leave him alone, especially not knowing if whoever was looking for me might hurt Midas if he couldn't find me."
"Yes, ma'am, some folks are mean," the detective agreed. "It's best to be safe. Tell you what; since you have the puppy, I'll bring the mug shots in here for you to look at. That way he won't get too excited, seeing a lot of people at once."
"That's a real good idea," Jack said, grabbing the duck before Midas could get to it, and tossing it again. His black eyes bright with glee, Midas

bounced and pounced, then dragged the duck back to Jack and dropped it at his feet.
"Well, look at that," said Morrison, marveling. "Didn't take him long to catch on, did it?"
Jack was still throwing the duck when the detective came back, his arms laden with pages of mugshots. Entranced with the game, Midas ignored Morrison's return.
Daisy settled at the desk with the photographs in front her, for the first time realizing the enormity of the task. This wasn't a matter of looking at fifty pictures, or even a few hundred. There had to be thousands of them, and the photographer seemed to be particularly unskilled, because the photographs could scarcely have been more unflattering to the subjects.
She closed her eyes and pictured the three men she'd seen, then picked out the most distinctive face: long, narrow, with prominent brow ridges. He'd had long, dirty blond hair and long sideburns, a distinctly unappealing style. Hair could be changed, though—she was an expert on that—so she disregarded that and concentrated on face shapes. She could also automatically disregard anyone in a minority. By adapting the system she'd learned in a speed-reading course, she began skimming pages and turning them at a faster clip, occasionally pausing to study a face and then move on.
After fifteen minutes, Midas lay down on her feet to take a nap. Daisy stopped to glance down at him, and Jack used the opportunity to ask, "Do you want something to drink? Coffee? A soft drink?"
"I don't recommend the coffee," said Morrison.
Daisy shook her head. "I'm fine."
Morrison said, "Then I'll leave you to it. I have some calls to make, so I'll borrow an office and check back when I'm finished."
Minutes ticked by, marked only by the soft swish of the pages as she turned them. Midas eventually roused, and Jack took him outside. When he came back, with the puppy prancing on the end of the leash as if he'd done something wonderful, Jack said, "It's time for lunch, You need to take a break."
"I'm not hungry," she said absently.
“I am.”
She looked up in amusement. "You ate four times what I did at breakfast."
"Which is why you need to eat. If I'm hungry, you have to be."

"In a little while." She turned her attention back to the pages, blinked, put her finger on a photo, and said in a positive tone, "That's one of the men." The man's hair was shorter in the photo, but his sleazy sideburns were still long, the color was still dirty blond, and the Neanderthal brow ridges hadn't changed.

Jack briefly studied the photograph, said, "I'll get Morrison," and disappeared out the door.

Daisy sighed and gently rubbed her eyes. One down and two to go. The other two wouldn't be as easy as this one, either, since he was the most distinctive of the three.

Morrison came back on the double and looked at the photograph Daisy pointed out. "George 'Buddy' Lemmons. I know this joker. We've had him on B and E, assault, robbery, vandalism. He's another bottom-feeder. He usually pairs with... ah, hell, what's his name?" He went out of the office and they heard him call down the hall, "Hey, Banjo, you remember Buddy Lemmons? We got him for wrecking that old lady's house over on Bob Wallace last year. What was the name of the other perp?"

"Calvin . . . something Calvin."

"Yeah, that's right." Morrison came back into the office muttering, "Calvin, Calvin." He sat down at his computer and typed in the name. "Here he is. Dwight Calvin. Is he one of the other men?"

Daisy went around and looked at the photograph on the computer screen. "Yes," she said positively, studying the slight, dark-haired, big-nosed man.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I haven't seen anyone who looks like the third man, though."

"It would help if we had Sykes's first name, but we'll pick up these two birds and my guess is they'll start singing. Buddy and Dwight aren't big on taking the fall for anyone else. In the meantime, Miss Minor, where will you be?"

"At home," she began, but Jack shook his head.

"Until this is settled, I'm checking her into a hotel, and I'm not telling anyone where she is—not even you, Morrison. If you want to get in touch with her, call my cell phone, because that will be the only contact."

TWENTY-TWO

“Just where are you planning on stashing me?" Daisy asked when they were in the car. "I have the puppy with me, remember?"
"Like I could forget," Jack muttered. "I don't like the idea of stashing you anywhere, but it's the only logical thing to do. Some motels take pets; I'll call the local Triple A and find one."
"I don't have any clothes with me," she pointed out. "Or books."
"I'll send someone by your house to pack some things for you."
She thought about that. "Send Todd. He'll know what to get."
"I told you, Todd isn't gay."
"That doesn't matter. He knows what separates go together, and what makeup to bring."
"Eva Fay—"
"Todd."
"All right," he said under his breath. "I'll send Todd."
In the end, he didn't have to call Triple A to locate a motel that accepted pets; they drove by a new place that had just been built off 1-565, pulled in, and checked, and it did have two rooms allocated for people with small pets. Both rooms were empty at the time, so Jack chose the one that faced the rear. He checked her in under a false name—she was now Julia Patrick, he informed her when he got back into the car and drove around the building to her assigned room.
He unlocked the door and carried in Midas's things while Daisy let the puppy investigate a patch of grass and chase a butterfly. He was too young to do much chasing; after a few minutes, he flopped on his belly to rest. The heat was almost searing, too hot to let him play outside without any shade to shelter him. She carried him inside the blessedly cool room and gave him some water, and with a tired sigh he settled down on his blanket.
"I'll be back tonight with your things," he said. "I don't know what time, but I'll call first. Don't open the door to anyone except me."
She sat down on the king-size bed. "All right." She wouldn't beg him to stay, though she wanted to. She had been leaning on those strong shoulders all day long, she realized, letting him handle everything. Of course, murder was his field of expertise, so to speak; he knew exactly what to do.
She wanted to ask him how long she'd have to stay here, but that was a silly question: he had no real idea. Morrison might locate Lemmons and Calvin right away, or the two might have left town. They might locate Sykes, or they might not. Jennifer Nolan's testimony might be reliable, but everyone

in town knew she was an alcoholic; if she'd been drinking this morning, that had to call her statement into question. Everything was up in the air.
Jack had been a rock. Daisy knew she would have managed without him, but it had been nice to have him planning the course of action, taking care of her family, even keeping Midas occupied while she looked through the mountain of mug shots.
He sat down beside her and put his arm around her, hugging her close to his side. "Are you all right?"
"I'm still feeling a little stunned," she admitted. "This is so ... unreal. I watched a man die, and I didn't even realize."
"You don't expect to see a murder. Unless there's a shot or a big fight, most people wouldn't notice. It's too far outside their experience." He tilted her chin up and kissed her. "I'm glad it was outside your experience," he murmured.
Until he kissed her, she hadn't realized how much she had been craving him, his taste and touch, the hot male scent. She put her arms around his neck and whispered, "Don't go just yet."
"I need to," he said, but he didn't get up from the bed. Instead his arm tightened about her and his other hand slid down to her breasts, stroking over them before beginning to unbutton her blouse. Daisy closed her eyes as bliss began unfurling inside her, made all the stronger by the stress of the day. For a little while, so long as he touched her, she could forget and relax. She tugged his T-shirt free and slid her hands under it, flattening her palms against the heavy muscles of his back.
“All right, you convinced me," he said, shucking the shirt off over his head and standing to unfasten his belt. Jeans, underwear, socks, and shoes came off in one rough motion, and he left them on the floor, tumbling to the big bed and taking her with him. Her sandals dropped to the carpet. He wrestled her out of her blouse and bra, tossing both garments toward the dresser on the other side of the room.
He pressed kisses to her stomach as he unzipped her denim skirt and peeled it down, then trailed up to her breasts and sucked her nipples until they were hard and flushed with color, sticking out like raspberries. She felt dizzy, but was ravenous for more. She couldn't get enough of him, couldn't satisfy the urge to touch him, because every texture made her want more.
"It's my turn," she said, pushing on his shoulders.

He obediently rolled over onto his back and covered his eyes with a forearm. "This is going to kill me," he muttered.
"Maybe not."
Thoroughly delighted with this opportunity, she cupped his testicles in both hands, feeling the weight and softness of his scrotum, the hardness within. She buried her face against him, inhaling the musty scent, darting her tongue out to taste. His penis jerked against her cheek, enticing her, so she turned her head and took him in.
He groaned and his hands fisted in the bedspread.
She had no mercy, not that he asked for any. She tasted and licked and stroked until his powerful body was drawn like a bow, arching on the bed. Then she stopped, sat back, and said, "I think that's enough."
An almost inhuman sound rumbled in his chest and he jack-knifed, grabbing her and twisting and coming down on top of her. She laughed as he fiercely stripped her panties down and pushed her legs apart, settling between them and positioning himself for the strong, single thrust that took him to the hilt and changed her laughter to a groan. She drew her legs up, clasping them around his hips, trying to contain both the depth of his strokes and the wildness of her response. She wanted to savor every moment, not rush headlong into climax, but already she could feel the tension building.
He stopped, his muscles flexing with tension. "Fuck," he said between gritted teeth. "I don't have a condom."
Their eyes met, his narrowed with the savagery of the control he was trying to retain over his body, hers wide with sudden awareness.
His hips rocked as if he couldn't hold still another moment. "Do you want me to stop?" His face was grim with the effort it took him to make the offer. Sweat gleamed on his forehead and shoulders, despite the air conditioner blowing directly on the bed.
Common sense said yes. A lifetime of responsible behavior said yes. They shouldn't take the risk, or any more risk than they already had just in his unprotected penetration. Some deep, primitive instinct, however, craved the feel of him inside her, and her lips moved, forming the word No.
His control broke, and he began thrusting deep and hard, over and over, and what had begun as simple pleasure became something more, something wrenching and powerful. Daisy clung to him because she could do nothing else, because with that one word she had demanded everything he could

give her and could hold back none of herself. She arched in climax, her heels digging into his thighs, the shuddering starting deep and spreading out in convulsive waves. For a long moment she stopped breathing, stopped thinking, caught on a peak of sensation so sharp it blurred the world around her. Then it faded and slowly she went limp, muscle by muscle, legs and arms falling open and releasing him to move fast and strong in his own orgasm.

His heavy weight crushed her into the mattress, but she couldn't find either the strength or the will to protest. He was utterly limp, his heartbeat slamming against his rib cage, his breath rushing in and out of his heaving lungs. Maybe they dozed; time certainly seemed to disappear.

After a while, groaning with the effort, he withdrew and moved off her to lie on his side and hold her close. Daisy buried her face against his throat, acutely aware of the wetness between her legs. This could be a disaster. But it didn't feel like a disaster; it felt. . .right.

Gently he stroked her. She tried to think of something to say, but there didn't seem to be anything to say, nothing that needed saying. All she needed to do was come to terms with what lay between them, a sudden awareness that this was much more than an affair.

It couldn't be. Could it?

"God, I've got to get back to the office," he muttered. "I can't believe I let myself get sidetracked like this."

"I'm sure five minutes one way or another won't make much difference," she consoled.

He opened one eye and glared at her. "Five minutes? I beg your pardon. I've been better than five minutes since I was sixteen."

She twisted around to look at the clock on the bedside table. The problem was, she didn't know if they had dozed, or for how long. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Then I'm sure an hour one way or another—"

"An hour! Shit!"

He bolted out of bed and went into the bathroom. She heard the sound of water running, the toilet flushed, then he came back out and went to the foot of the bed, where he'd left his clothes on the floor. He looked down and froze.

Alarmed by his expression, Daisy struggled up on her elbows.

He looked up then, and in a very even tone said, "Your dog ate my shorts." She tried not to laugh; she really did. She managed to hold it in for about one second; then giggles started shaking her like little earthquakes. Once one erupted, they immediately morphed into a belly laugh that rolled her onto her side, holding her stomach as if she could contain them that way.
He bent down and picked up the puppy, holding him at eye level. It was impossible to deny Midas's guilt, because shreds of the dark green boxers were hanging from his mouth. He seemed very happy about it, too, wagging his tail at a frantic beat, paddling his feet as he tried to get within licking distance.
Jack said, "Fuzzbutt, you're a pain in the ass." But he said it in an almost crooning tone, and he cuddled the puppy to him as he removed the shreds from the little mouth.
Daisy looked at the fuzzy puppy and the big, naked man holding him so gently, and she thought her heart would leap right out of her chest. She had already been halfway there, but in that moment she fell completely, irrevocably in love.
No, this wasn't an affair, at least not on her part. It was much, much more.
He put Midas on the bed, leaving Daisy to deal with the puppy while he got dressed. As she fended off big feet and a madly licking tongue, Daisy watched the jeans slide up over his naked butt and had some very lascivious thoughts.
When he was dressed, he leaned over her and kissed her, and the kiss became longer and deeper than either of them had intended. Spots of color burned high on his cheekbones when he pulled back, and his eyes were narrowed again. "You're dangerous," he muttered.
“All I'm doing is lying here." She caught Midas as he began pulling on the bedspread, told him no, and removed the fabric from his mouth.
"That's what I said. A naked woman and a fuzzy puppy: what more can a man want? Well, maybe a beer. And a good ball game on the tube. And—"
She grabbed one of the pillows and threw it at him. "Go!"
"I'm going. Remember, don't open the door—"
"—to anyone but you," she finished.
"I don't know what time I'll be back. There's a Huddle House next door if you get hungry." He scribbled some numbers on the notepad by the bed. "This is my cell number, the number of my office, and Todd's numbers here and at home. Call any or all of them if you need anything."

"Why do you have Todd's numbers?" she asked curiously.
"I might have known you'd ask," he muttered.
"Well, why do you?"
"Because he's helping us locate Sykes. He has some good contacts we're using." He kissed her again, scratched Midas behind the ears, then was out the door and gone.
Daisy climbed slowly out of bed, her legs protesting. Midas went over to examine the big wet spot on the bedspread, and she hastily grabbed him, setting him on the carpet. He followed her to the bathroom, nosily sniffing around as she washed off.
Embarrassed by the thought of the motel maids finding the bedspread in that condition, Daisy industriously worked at the spot with a wet washcloth and a hand towel until she was certain nothing would show when the spot was dry.
Her first wet spot, she thought, staring at the dark circle. She hoped it was the first of many, because she wanted Jack Russo to be the father of her children.
It remained to be seen whether or not he wanted the same thing. He hadn't run when her mother had made that pointed comment about the kind of mother-in-law she was, but then he wouldn't, not with a murder investigation going on and her to protect. He wasn't a man who shirked his responsibilities.
She really should have made him stop, she thought as she dressed. She didn't want him to marry her because she got pregnant; she wanted him to love her. This time it would probably be okay—the timing wasn't right—but Mother Nature had a way of playing tricks and she wouldn't breathe easy until she got her period.
She sat down and looked around the motel room. As motel rooms went, she supposed, it was nice. It was larger than normal, maybe because it was one of the rooms for people with pets. There was a recliner for sitting, a round table with two chairs, and a tiny refrigerator with a four-cup coffeemaker sitting on top. The bathroom was functional but unremarkable.
Now what?
On impulse, she got out the phone book and looked up Sykes. She didn't know this particular Sykes's first name or where he lived, so there was no point in the exercise, but she looked at the list of Sykeses and thought about

calling each one. She could say something like, "Mr. Sykes, this is Daisy Minor. I hear you're trying to kill me."
Not a great idea. What if he had Caller ID? That would tell him where she was.
She didn't normally watch much television, but there was nothing else to do. Midas had decided to have another snooze; when he woke, she would carry him out again, but how much time would that occupy? She picked up the remote, settled in the recliner, and turned on the television.
She didn't like waiting and doing nothing. She didn't like it at all.
At least her family was out of reach. Daisy knew she would have been a nervous wreck if Jack hadn't gotten them out of town. Her mother was sure to call this evening to reassure herself Daisy was all right, and she'd be worried when there was no answer. On the other hand, Jack seemed to think of everything, so he had probably given her mother his cell phone number or another way she could check.
But what about Jack? She went cold. It was no secret they were involved, not after the way he had sat beside her in church. What if Mayor Nolan heard the gossip and told this Sykes to go after Jack as a way of flushing her out of hiding?
She made a dive for the telephone and called Jack's cell phone. He answered after one ring. "Russo."
"You have to be careful, too," she said fiercely.
"What?"
"If the mayor finds out we're involved, that makes you a target just the way my family was."
"There's a difference between your family and me."
She loved them all, so she couldn't see this difference. "Such as?"
"I'm armed."
"Just be careful. Promise me."
"I promise." He paused. "Are you all right?"
"Bored. Hurry back with those books."
Daisy fretted after she hung up, pacing around the room. She hated being stashed here out of the way not knowing what was going on, not being able to help. It wasn't in her nature to just sit and wait. Once she identified a chore or a problem, she couldn't rest until it was handled.
Something had to happen soon, or she'd go crazy.

Jack frowned as he broke the connection. Daisy already sounded restless, which wasn't good. He needed to know she was doing exactly as he'd told her; he needed to know she was safe so he could concentrate on finding Sykes.

The call he had received right before Daisy's had him worried, though. One of his detectives had gone out to the Nolan place, but Mrs. Nolan hadn't been there. They hadn't located her yet. If Kendra Owens had gossiped about that phone call, it could already have gotten back to the mayor.

The little hairs on the back of his neck were standing up again.

TWENTY-THREE

Nadine hesitated in the doorway of Temple's office, her indecision plain on her face. He looked up, irritated. He'd been on edge all day, waiting to hear from Sykes, wondering if he'd already accomplished the mission. The phone call from Mr. Phillips hadn't been a joy, either. People who disappointed or ran afoul of Elton Phillips wound up dead. If Sykes didn't succeed this time, Temple knew he'd have to do something to placate Phillips. Kill Sykes, maybe. The prospect of killing Sykes worried him, because Glenn Sykes wasn't a fool and he wouldn't be an easy man to kill.

Nadine still lingered in the doorway and Temple snapped, "For God's sake, Nadine, what is it?"

She looked taken aback at his unusual irritability. Temple almost never let himself show temper; it wasn't good for the image. Today, though, he had other things besides his damn image to worry about.

Nadine wrung her hands. "I've never said anything before. I think people's private lives are just that, private. But I think you should know what Mrs. Nolan did today"

Jesus, not now. Temple covered his eyes, massaging the ache that ran under his eyebrows. "Jennifer has . . . problems," he managed to say, the way he had so many times in the past when he wanted to elicit sympathy. It was his pat answer, one he didn't have to think about.

"Yes, sir, I know."

When she didn't continue, Temple sighed, realizing he'd have to prompt her rather than say what he really wanted to say—that he didn't give a good goddamn what the bitch did, he hoped she'd T-boned a power pole and killed herself.

"What has she done this time?" That was another pat response, showing his patience and weariness.

Now that he had asked, Nadine spat the words out as if she couldn't hold them in any longer. "She called the library and told Kendra Owens you were trying to have Daisy Minor killed."

"What?" Temple shot up from his chair, color leeching out of his face. His knees wobbled in shock, and he had to grab the edge of his desk. My God. Oh, my God. He remembered the sudden uneasy feeling he'd had this morning, the one that had made him check to see what Jennifer was doing.

The bitch had been listening in on her bedroom extension. Mr. Phillips would kill him. Literally.
"Kendra didn't take her seriously, of course, but she was worried in case Mrs. Nolan did something, you know, sort of foolish, so she called the police department and reported it."
"The fucking bitch!" Temple said fiercely, and he didn't know if he meant Jennifer or Kendra, or both.
Nadine stepped back, more than a little affronted by his language. "I thought you ought to know," she said stiffly, and closed the connecting door with a bang.
With a shaking hand Temple picked up his private line and called Sykes's number. After the sixth ring, he replaced the receiver. Sykes wasn't at home, of course; he was waiting to follow Daisy home from work. After Jennifer's stupid call, if Daisy had disappeared after lunch, the police department would have been on full alert, hunting for her, so the lack of action meant nothing had happened yet. He had to find Sykes and tell him to call off the whole thing. If anything happened to Daisy now, he, Temple, would be number one on the list of suspects.
Something had to be done about Jennifer. With her drinking history, though, it would be easy to set up an "accident." Bash her in the head, run her car into the river, and be done with it.
But not right away. Anything done right now would be too suspicious. They couldn't do anything to jeopardize the shipment of Russians.
First thing, though, he had to mend fences with Nadine. It wouldn't do to have her bad-mouthing him to her little circle of friends. Gossip like that had a way of spreading like kudzu vines.
He opened the door, mustered the charm, and said, "I'm sorry, Nadine. I had no right using language like that. Jennifer and I had an argument this morning, and I'm still on edge. Then to find out she did something like that..." He let his shoulders slump.
Nadine's expression softened a little. "That's all right. I understand."
He rubbed his forehead again. "Was Daisy upset when Kendra told her about the call?"
"Daisy isn't working today. Her mother called in and said she had a toothache. I have my own suspicions, but that's the story." She waggled her eyebrows, looking arch.

Nadine should never try to look arch, Temple thought; she resembled a flirtatious frog. "What do you mean, "suspicions'?"
"About where she is. Well, I don't know where she is, but I doubt she has a toothache."
"Why do you say that?"
"Because I had to call over to the police department right before lunch, and Eva Fay said Chief Russo hadn't been in all day either."
The throb behind Temple's eyebrows worsened, "What does that have to do with Daisy?"
"You mean you haven't heard? They're seeing each other." For Nadine her satisfaction at being the first to impart this news more than made up for his rudeness and bad language.
Temple felt as if he'd been hit between the eyes with a two-by-four. "What? Seeing each other?" He could barely say the words, the shock was so great. Disaster yawned at his feet.
"Barbara Clud said they bought—well, they bought intimate articles together. Chief Russo sat with her at church on Sunday, too."
"Then it has to be serious." His voice sounded hoarse, and he made a show of clearing his throat. "Got a tickle in my throat."
Nadine fished a cough drop out of her desk and gave it to him. "I'd say it's serious, him going to church with her."
Temple nodded and escaped back into his office, trying to grasp all the ramifications of what he'd just learned. Damn it! When Russo had run that tag number for him, he'd pretended not to know whose it was. Why would he do that? What had made him hide the fact that he knew Daisy? There was no reason to unless . . . unless he knew damn well Daisy hadn't been parked in a fire lane at Dr. Bennett's office, and the only way he could know that was if he'd been with her during the time in question.
The "intimate articles" bought at Clud's Pharmacy had to be condoms, which meant they were sleeping together. Russo obviously wouldn't have spent the night with Daisy at her mother's house, but he had his own house to which he could take her. Temple had never thought Daisy Minor would spend the night with a man, but then he'd never thought she'd bleach her hair and go to the Buffalo Club, either. Daisy had evidently run wild.
So Russo knew he'd been lying about seeing the car. Russo wasn't a fool; he'd figure out real quick that someone else had asked Temple to find out who the car belonged to. That wasn't so bad, except for the lie. That was

suspicious; Russo would wonder what was going on, and Temple didn't want a man like Russo wondering about anything he did.
Right now he had to do damage control. He had to find Sykes and call him off, he had to do something about Jennifer, and he had to make certain the shipment of Russians was handled smoothly, because the least hint of trouble at this point would be more than Mr. Phillips would tolerate.
Jennifer drove aimlessly, afraid to go home because surely Temple would have heard by now what she'd done. You couldn't keep things like that quiet in a small town. She couldn't stop crying, though she didn't know why she was crying at all, unless she was having a nervous breakdown and just didn't realize it. She couldn't do that, she thought; that would give Temple the chance to put her in a mental ward somewhere.
She had removed the little tape from the answering machine and dropped it in her purse. She would get someone to listen to it; she just didn't know who. Part of her wanted to just drive to the police department, walk in making as much noise and fuss as she could, and get someone to play the tape right there in front of everyone. That way it couldn't be disregarded, and no one would think she was drunk and imagining things. That would be the smart thing to do, but she couldn't seem to get her act together enough to do it.
She felt as if she were shaking apart on the inside; she needed a drink, needed one worse than she had ever needed one before in her life, and for the first time in her life, she was afraid to take one. Once she did, she wouldn't stop, and then she would be helpless. Her life depended on staying sober. She couldn't seem to think straight now, but she wouldn't be able to think at all if she drank.
Finally, almost automatically, she found herself on the road to Huntsville. It was the road she took to go shopping, to have her hair done. Whenever she left the house, it was to go to Huntsville. The road was nice and familiar.
Twice she stopped and threw up, though she hadn't eaten anything and it was mostly dry heaves. Withdrawal symptoms, she thought; her body was rebelling against not having its accustomed alcohol. She had been dried out before, but always in a clinic, where she'd been given drugs to ease the way.
Maybe that's what she should do. Maybe she should check herself into a clinic, if she could manage to get herself all the way to Huntsville. She had done what she could, tried to warn Daisy; if she checked into a clinic, when

she got out in a month, everything would be all over and she wouldn't have to deal with it.
Except she would have to deal with her conscience if anything happened to Daisy and she hadn't done everything she could to stop it.
She drove with both hands locked on the steering wheel, but still she couldn't seem to keep the car in the right lane. The dotted line seemed to wiggle back and forth, and she kept swerving, trying to stay on the right side of it. A big white car blew past, horn blaring, and she said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She was doing the best she could. That had never been good enough, though, not for Temple, not for Jason or Paige, not even for herself.
A horn kept blowing. She checked to make certain she wasn't accidentally leaning on her own horn, but her hands were nowhere near it. The white car had gone past, she hadn't hit it, so where was that horn coming from? Her vision swam and she wanted to lie down, but if she did, she might not be able to get up.
Where was that damn horn?
Then she saw a flash of blue, the strobe effect making her even dizzier, and the big white car was on her left, coming closer and closer, crowding her off the road. Desperately she stomped the brakes to keep from colliding with the white car, and the steering wheel jerked in her hands, tearing free of her grip. She screamed as her car began a sickening spin and her seat belt tightened with an almost brutal jerk, holding her as she left the road; the front axle plowed into a shallow ditch, and something hit her in the face, hard.
Haze filled the car, and in panic she began fighting to get free of the seat belt. The car was on fire, and she was going to die.
Then the car door was wrenched open and a big, olive-skinned man leaned in. "It's okay," he said in a calm tone. "That isn't smoke; it's just the dust from the air bag."
Jennifer stared at him, weeping, torn between despair and relief that it was all over. Now she wouldn't have to decide anything. If Chief Russo was working in cahoots with Temple, there was nothing she could do about it.
“Are you hurt anywhere?" he asked, squatting in the open door and examining her for any obvious injuries. "Other than your bloody nose."
Her nose was bleeding? She looked down and saw red drops splattering all over her clothing. "What caused that?" she asked, bewildered, as if there was nothing more important than finding out why she had a bloody nose.

"Air bags pack a strong wallop." He had a yellow first-aid kit in his hand and he opened it, took out a thick pad of gauze. "Here, hold it to your nose. It'll stop in a minute."
Obediently she held the pad to her nose, pinching her nostrils.
"You called the library this morning and reported a threat you overheard your husband making," Chief Russo continued, his voice still as calm as if they were discussing the weather. "I'd like you to make a statement about what you heard, if you feel like it."
Jennifer tiredly let her head fall back against the headrest. "Are you working with him?" she asked, all nasally. What did it matter? There was nothing she could do even if he said yes.
"No, ma'am, I'm not," he replied. "Maybe you haven't heard, but Daisy Minor is a special friend of mine. I take threats against her very seriously."
He could be lying. She knew that, but she didn't think so. She'd suffered too much pain at a man's hands not to notice the complete absence of threat from Chief Russo. Her purse had spilled all its contents on the floorboard when she hit the ditch; she unfastened her seat belt and slowly leaned forward, scrabbling through the mess until she found the tiny cassette tape.
"I didn't just hear it," she said. "I taped it."

TWENTY-FOUR

Mrs. Nolan was very shaky, but she was coherent. To cover all bases, Jack insisted she take a Breathalyzer test; nothing registered. She not only wasn't drunk, she hadn't had any alcohol that day. One of his investigators took her statement; then several of them listened to the answering machine tape. The mayor's voice sounded a little tinny, but recognizable.
"—grab her when she leaves the library for lunch, or when she goes home this afternoon. She'll just disappear. When Sykes handles something personally, there aren't any problems."
"Really?" That was the second man, the one Mrs. Nolan identified as Elton Phillips, a wealthy businessman in Scottsboro. "Then why was Mitchell's body found so fast?"
"Sykes didn't handle it. He stayed behind at the club to find out who had seen them in the parking lot. The other two were the ones who handled the body."

"A mistake on Mr. Sykes's part."
"Yes."
"Then this is his last chance. And yours."
Daisy hadn't been mentioned specifically, but with the mention of the library and Mrs. Nolan's testimony about the part of the conversation she hadn't taped, it wasn't necessary Mitchell had been mentioned, and someone's seeing them in the parking lot of the club. With Daisy's testimony and identification of two of the men who had killed Mitchell and Temple's own voice on this tape, the mayor was firmly implicated in a murder. Mrs. Nolan didn't understand the reference she'd overheard about a shipment of Russians, but Jack was beginning to have nasty suspicions. Regardless, the mayor and his friend were nailed.
Eva Fay was one of the people gathered around listening to the tape. She put her hands on her hips. "Why, that snake."
His people were angry, Jack saw. Investigators, patrol officers, and office personnel alike were incensed. He was no longer the outsider, but one of them, and his woman had been threatened. Not just any woman, but Daisy Minor, whom most of them had known for years. The bad thing about living in a small town was that everything became a personal issue. The good thing about living in a small town was that everything became a personal issue. During times of trouble, the support system was massive.
"Let's bring the mayor in for questioning," he said quietly, keeping a firm lid on his own anger. Daisy was safe; that was the important thing. "Contact the Scottsboro P.D. and have Mr. Phillips picked up, too." He would have liked to have thrown up a net to catch this Mr. Sykes, but he didn't have the manpower to block every street in town to check licenses. Sykes worried him, but as long as Daisy stayed put, Sykes couldn't find her.
"I've kept everything off radio," said Tony Marvin. "He won't have a clue we're on to him."
"Sure he will. Remember Kendra Owens? Do you think she's gone all day without mentioning Mrs. Nolan's call to anyone else?"
"Not Kendra," said Eva Fay. "She's sweet, but she loves to talk."
"Then we have to assume the mayor knows Mrs. Nolan called us. He'll be on guard, but he doesn't know about the tape, so he may not have bolted. C'mon, let's get this ball rolling."
The damn Minor woman wasn't anywhere in town, which made Sykes very nervous. She hadn't shown up at work; she hadn't been at home. She simply

wasn't there. When people veered so far out of their normal routine, something was up.
He even called the library, taking care to use a pay phone in case they had Caller ID—not likely in a municipal building, but possible, and that damn call-return service meant he had to be cautious all the time anyway—and asked for Miss Minor. The woman who answered gave him no information other than that Miss Minor wasn't in that day, but there was an underlying tension, a stiffness, in her voice that worried him even more.
Okay, he wasn't going to get the Minor woman today. That was a setback, not a catastrophe.
But what had the woman at the library so on edge?
It was a small detail, the nervousness in a woman's voice, but it was the little details that would jump up and bite you on the ass when you least expected it, if you didn't pay attention and take care of them. His instinct told him it was time to pay attention.
He called the mayor on his private line, but there was no answer. That was another worrisome detail. If he knew the mayor, he'd planned to stay in his office all day long, providing himself with an airtight alibi in regard to Miss Minor's disappearance, just in case.
His next call was to the mayor's cell phone. No answer. Really uneasy now, Sykes called the mayor's house. Nolan himself picked up on the second ring.
"The Minor woman isn't working today," Sykes said. "I'm calling it a day."
"Sykes! Thank God!"
The mayor sounded winded and on the verge of losing control, which wasn't good at all.
"Listen, we're in trouble. We have to get our stories straight, back each other up. All we have to do is lie low for a while and I think it'll blow over."
"Trouble? How?" Sykes kept his voice mild.
"Jennifer overheard me talking to Mr. Phillips this morning, and the drunk bitch called the library, asking for Daisy. She wasn't there, so Jennifer told Kendra Owens that I was plotting to have Daisy Minor killed."
Jesus. Sykes pinched the bridge of his nose between his eyes. If the mayor had just used an ounce of caution in his telephone conversation—
"What did Kendra Owens do?" His question was just a matter of form. He knew damn well what Kendra Owens had done.

"She called the police department. It's a good thing Jennifer's a drunk, because I don't think anyone believed her, but if you'd grabbed Daisy today, it would have raised all sorts of questions."
Great. Now the Hillsboro cops were alerted.
"There's one other thing."
With an effort, Sykes remained calm. "What else?"
"Chief Russo and Daisy are romantically involved."
“And this interests me, how?"
"Russo is the one I called to run the tag number for you yesterday. I told him I'd seen the car parked in a fire lane at a doctor's office. He knows I lied, because he knew she wasn't sick.
And when he gave me the information, he pretended not to know her."
Okay, so now we had a suspicious chief of police. It was those damn details again; Nolan had added too many, and they'd tripped him up. If he'd just asked the chief to run the license plate, without explanation, then the chief would want to know why the mayor was running his girlfriend's tag number, but he wouldn't know Nolan had lied. For that matter, why did Nolan have to get the damn chief of police to run a simple tag number? But, no, Nolan couldn't use a lowly peon; he had to get the head man, just to show his power.
"I came home to find Jennifer, shut her up, but the bitch isn't here."
"That's good. Her turning up dead after making a call like that wouldn't look good."
"She's a drunk," said Nolan dismissively "Drunks have wrecks all the time."
"Maybe they do, but the timing would still be suspicious. Just lay low."
Nolan didn't seem to hear him. "Maybe I'll take her for another visit to Mr. Phillips. He'd like that, but she wouldn't." The thought pleased him, because he laughed.
He was dealing with idiots. Sykes closed his eyes. "The police might be keeping an eye on her, so Phillips wouldn't like it if you led them straight to him."
"No. You're right. I have to find her, anyway She said something about having her hair done, and she's just stupid enough to make a call like that, then toddle off to the beauty salon."
Or the police had brought her in to make a statement, which was the most likely thing. Didn't Nolan know a damn thing about police procedure? They didn't just blow off a call like that, especially when the subject was the

chief's squeeze. Miss Minor had conveniently disappeared, Mrs. Nolan was also missing and probably at the police department, and the next step was to pick up the mayor for questioning.
This wasn't good at all. After Nolan's performance yesterday and today, Sykes had drastically revised downward his opinion of the mayor. He was cold-blooded, but he didn't hold up under pressure, and he let his ego get in the way of clear thinking. What would happen when the cops started asking him questions? Nolan might hold the line, but if he got rattled, Sykes figured he'd try to cut a deal and roll over on everyone else.
Well, he couldn't let that happen.
"How good a cop is the chief?" he asked.
"Damn good. He was a SWAT team member in Chicago, then in New York. I was lucky to get him for a small town like Hillsboro."
Yeah, lucky the way a turtle crossing a busy highway was lucky: it took a miracle to get him across unsquashed. Sykes didn't figure Nolan had any miracles coming. He'd picked a chief who was at home on the front lines, one who would act aggressively in dealing with a threat to his woman. The only thing working in their favor at this point, as far as he could see, was that Mitchell's death and the discovery of his body hadn't happened in Russo's jurisdiction.
Then a thought occurred to him. "Did you mention Mitchell this morning when you were talking to Mr. Phillips?"
"That was why Mr. Phillips called. He wasn't happy that the body had been found so fast, and I explained to him that it was because you hadn't handled it yourself."
So Nolan had mentioned not only Mitchell, but Sykes's name as well. Mrs. Nolan didn't know them, but now she had their names. This whole thing was unraveling so fast Sykes couldn't even begin to catch the threads.
"Tell you what," said Sykes. "Just sit tight, pretend nothing unusual is going on, and they can't touch us." Yeah, right. "Nothing has happened, no attempts have been made against Miss Minor, so no crime has been committed. Russo might wonder why you lied about her tag number, but so what? Stick to your story. Maybe you wrote the number down wrong, transposed some numbers or something."
"Good idea."
"If they question you about Mrs. Nolan's telephone call, tell them you have no idea what she's talking about. Was she drinking this morning?"

"She's always drinking," said Nolan.
"Did you see her have a drink?"
"No, but she was clumsy, falling over stuff."
The way things were going, if Nolan thought his wife was drunk, Sykes was willing to bet she'd been stone-cold sober.
"Do you think Russo will ask me any questions?"
Is the sun coming up tomorrow? "Probably. Don't sweat it; just follow the plan."
"Should I warn Mr. Phillips?"
"I wouldn't. Let this blow over, and he'll never know anything about it. We'll handle this shipment of Russians and he'll be happy as a clam."
"Shit, I forgot about the shipment."
"No problem. I've got it covered," said Sykes, and disconnected.
What he had here, he thought, was a major fuckup. The mayor's wife had his, Sykes's, name, and Mitchell's. If Russo was half the cop Nolan thought he was, he had Mrs. Nolan's statement and was checking out everything she said. Mitchell hadn't been found in his jurisdiction, but with goddamn computers everywhere, all Russo had to do was a search and, lo and behold, there was a dead man named Mitchell. That would really get things stirred up, and when they began wondering what a dead man named Mitchell had to do with Daisy Minor, they'd show her Mitchell's photograph and she just might remember where she'd seen him—and the three men who had been with him.
There were times when there was nothing else to do but cut your losses and do damage control. This was one of those times.
Sykes pondered his options. He could cut out; he had his alternate identity in place. But he'd always thought he'd save the alternate identity for a life-and-death situation, and this didn't qualify. He'd have to take a hit, maybe do a year or so of hard time, but maybe not even that. He hadn't been the guy with the knife; they could get him for conspiracy to commit, obstruction, things like that, but not murder one.
Besides, he had a powerful weapon to use: information. Information was what made the world go round, and prosecutors make deals.
He had no faith in Temple Nolan; the man would roll over on a dime.
Within a few hours, Glenn Sykes would be a wanted man.
But not if he rolled first.

Calmly, the way he did everything, Sykes drove to the Hills-boro Police Department. For a P.D. in a sleepy little town, the place looked unusually busy; there were a lot of cars in the parking lot. He walked in through the automatic glass doors, noting the officers standing in clumps talking in low voices, the air of tension. Patrol officers should be out in their cars, patrolling, so these guys were probably the first shift, hanging around. Again, a telling detail.

He went up to the desk sergeant, his hands at his sides, obviously empty. "I'd like to speak to Chief Russo, please."

"The chief's busy. What can I help you with?"

Sykes looked to his left, down a long hall. He briefly saw a very pretty woman, distraught, accepting a cup of coffee from a plainclothes guy probably an investigator. Because he'd made it his business to know things about Temple Nolan, he recognized Mrs. Nolan right off. She certainly didn't look or act drunk; so much for Nolan's theory.

He turned back to the desk sergeant. "I'm Glenn Sykes. I think y'all are looking for me."

TWENTY-FIVE

Of all the things Jack had never expected to happen, having Glenn Sykes walk into the station, introduce himself, and ask to speak to him was number two on the list. Number one was his reaction every time he got close to Miss Daisy, but he was learning to live with that. He was also beginning to think nothing was impossible.

Sykes was of average height, a little stocky, and neatly dressed. His sandy hair was short and neat; he was cleanshaven, his nails pared and clean, clothes pressed. He didn't look like anyone's version of a hit man, but then Ted Bundy hadn't looked like a monster, either. Criminals came in all shapes, sizes, colors, and could be wearing rags or diamonds. The smart ones wore diamonds. The really smart ones looked like this man.

Sykes was also very calm, and certain of what he wanted. "I want to cut a deal," he said. "I can give you Mayor Nolan, the man who stabbed Chad Mitchell, a man named Elton Phillips, and a lot more. Let's get the D.A. in here and talk."

"We know who stabbed Mitchell," Jack said, leaning back in his chair. "Buddy Lemmons."
Sykes didn't even blink. "Miss Minor identified him, didn't she?"
"She got a good look at all three of you."
"So you've got her stashed someplace safe."
Jack didn't respond, just watched Sykes. The man had an excellent poker face, giving away nothing.
"There's something a lot bigger than just a stupid piece of trash getting offed." Sykes leaned back, too, as relaxed as Jack.
"I was wondering how the mayor is tied in."
"There's a lot of money in the sex trade," Sykes said obliquely. "You going to call the D.A. or not? You need to move fast; there's something big going down tonight."
"The Russians," said Jack.
Sykes whistled softly through his teeth, not even trying to hide his surprise. "Guess you know a lot more than I thought. But you don't know where and you don't know who."
"I'm guessing Mayor Nolan does, though."
"He'll sing like Tweety Bird," Sykes agreed.
"So why would the D.A. want to deal with you?"
"Because trust is a rare commodity, and I don't have much of it."
Jack studied the sandy-haired man, the clear, cold eyes and utter calm of his manner. "You've got the goods on all of them, don't you? You documented everything."
"That's right." Sykes gave a thin smile. "Just in case. I like having a little leverage when things go wrong. And sooner or later, they always go wrong. You just gotta learn when to get out."
Jack left the room and placed the call to the district attorney in Scottsboro. If a deal had to be made, he thought Sykes would be a better state witness than Mayor Nolan, simply because Sykes struck him as more ruthless and organized. Sometimes you had to deal with the devil, and this was one of those times.
Then he called the motel where he'd left Daisy, wanting to give her the word that she was safe. The front desk switched him through to her room, and he listened to the ringing. Four rings. Five. Six. He began to sweat. Maybe the front desk had put him through to the wrong room; mistakes happened. He disconnected, called back, and asked for her room again. One

ring. Two. A cold fist knotted in his chest. She should be there. Three. Maybe she was getting something to eat at the Huddle House. Four. Sykes was here. There was no way Daisy was in any danger now.
Five.
She wouldn't have left for any reason, would she? She was safe there. But what if she'd come up with one of her off-the-wall plans and thought she could trap Sykes or the mayor?
Six.
Logic told him she was okay. The worst fear he'd ever known, however, whispered all sorts of scenarios to him, scenarios that ended with Daisy—
Seven.
He tried to imagine a life without Daisy in it, and it was like hitting a stone wall. Full stop. Nothing.
Eigh-
"Hello?" Her voice was a little breathless, as if she'd been running.
The relief that poured through him was almost as shattering as the fear had been. His hand tightened on the receiver, and he briefly closed his eyes, "What took you so long?" he growled.
"I was outside with Midas. Actually, the leash slipped out of my hand and I've been chasing him."
He hadn't meant to say anything, but he was still so shaken from those few moments of terror that the words slipped out. "I thought you'd left."
She paused. "Left? As in left left, rather than just stepped outside for a minute or gone to get something to eat?"
"I was afraid you'd come up with one of your plans—"
"Have I ever given you any reason to think I'm stupid?" she demanded angrily. "I'm safe here; why would I leave? That's what always happens in movies; either the woman or the kid disobeys instructions and does exactly what they've been told not to do, thereby putting both themselves and everyone else in danger. I've always thought that if they were that stupid, then let them die before they have a chance to breed. My goodness, you'd think I make a habit of—"
"Daisy," he said softly.
She paused in her tirade. "Are you about to apologize?"
Maybe that would speed things up. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I panicked."
"Apology accepted," she said in that prim voice that made him want to grin.

"I called with some good news, sweetheart. Sykes walked into the station a little while ago and gave himself up, wanting to make a deal. You're safe."
"You mean it's all over?"
"There's some mopping up to do. I've been in contact with Morrison, and they haven't found Lemmons and Calvin yet, but they will. The mayor's wife got him on tape making threats against you, and Sykes is ready to roll over on everybody. I don't know what time I'll get back to pick you up."
"So I don't have to stay here tonight?"
"You might. This could go on all night."
"When Todd brings my things, I'll just have him drive me home instead."
Guiltily, Jack glanced at his watch. It was after six, and he hadn't remembered to call Todd at all. "I'll try to catch him at his store, save him a trip."
"You forgot to call him, didn't you?"
He sighed. "Busted."
"Under the circumstances, you're forgiven. Has my mother called?"
He'd had his cell phone with him all day, even carrying it into the John with him, so he knew he hadn't missed any calls. "Not yet." Mrs. Minor wouldn't wait too much longer before checking on Daisy, though.
"Just get her number, and I'll call her back when I get home. Call Todd now," she reminded him.
"I will." He did, and luck was with him; Todd was still in Huntsville. Jack brought him up to date and asked him to pick up Daisy.
"Sure, no problem." Todd paused. "Sykes mentioned the sex trade. He may have some information on the men I'm looking for, or on the dealers who sell the date-rape drugs."
"The way this thing's spreading out, anything's possible. If you want to ask him some questions yourself, I can swing it."
Another pause. "I can't get officially involved."
"I know. I'll get the D.A. to question him about drugs, but if you want to talk to him personally later, just let me know."
"For now, I'll stay behind the scenes and see what the D.A. comes up with."
"It's your call. Just don't forget to pick up Daisy. By the way, she has her puppy with her."
Todd said warily, "You said that like you're warning me about something."
"You haven't met Midas, have you?"
"What is he, a half-grown Great Dane?"

"He's a six-week-old golden retriever. A ball of fuzz. Dogs don't come any cuter. He melts hearts left and right."
"And?"
"And don't turn your back on him."
Smiling, Jack hung up and went back into the room where his investigators were taking Sykes's statement. Another investigator and a patrol officer were on their way to pick up Mayor Nolan and bring him in for questioning. They had gone from not knowing anything that morning to pretty much having things sewn up tonight. Some of it had been pure luck, such as his noticing Mrs. Nolan on the road back from Huntsville because she was driving erratically, but most of the events had been the direct result of someone doing something stupid. Even Glenn Sykes, who was pretty damn sharp, had been stupid to get involved in the first place. It all came down to the choices they made, and criminals in general made stupid choices.
When the D.A. and his assistant got there from Scottsboro, the D.A. was noticeably upset. He took Jack aside and said, "Elton Phillips is a very respected member of the community. We
have to be very sure of what we have before I'm going to proceed
an inch with this."
"We have him on tape, and we have corroborating testimony from Mr. Sykes. I'm pretty damn sure."
"Was the tape legally obtained?"
"Mayor Nolan's wife taped it with the answering machine on
her bedroom extension."
The D.A. considered that. It was Mrs. Nolan's own phone, and the mayor obviously knew there were extension phones in his house, therefore he couldn't argue that he had an expectation of privacy concerning his telephone conversations. The legal ground seemed pretty solid.
"Okay, let's see what Mr. Sykes has to tell us."
When Temple Nolan saw the white city-owned car turn into his driveway, he took a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm. Everything would be all right. Sykes's suggestions had been reasonable; Jennifer's wild telephone call could be explained away, as could his asking Russo to run a tag number for him. As Sykes had pointed out, since he hadn't been able to find Daisy, no crime had been committed. If Daisy had realized she'd seen anything important in the parking lot of the Buffalo Club, she'd have already told someone. They were clear.

His doorbell rang. Quickly he took off his tie and rolled up his shirtsleeves, to give himself a casual, unworried look. Picking up a section of the Huntsville newspaper, he took it with him to answer the door; he looked like a man who had been reading the newspaper and unwinding, a man with nothing to hide.
He affected a look of mild surprise when he opened the door. "Richard," he said to the investigator. "What's up?"
"We'd like to ask you some questions about an allegation your wife made this morning," Investigator Richard Hill said, and he didn't sound apologetic, either. That was a little worrisome, Nolan thought.
"Sure. Come on in. Nadine told me about Jennifer calling the library, but I didn't think anyone would take it seriously Jennifer . . . has a little problem with alcohol, you know."
"Yes, sir," said Investigator Hill. He eyed the newspaper, the rolled-up sleeves. "Settling down for the evening, sir?"
"It was an upsetting day. I brought some paperwork home with me; after I finish the paper and have supper, I'll work on that for a while. Is something wrong?"
Hill looked at his wristwatch. "I'm just surprised you didn't remember the city council meeting tonight," he said calmly. "It started five minutes ago."
The mayor froze, aghast. He'd never, in nine years, missed a city council meeting. Richard Hill knew something drastic would have to be wrong for him to totally forget about it. "I remembered," he said, trying to cover himself. "But it seemed best to stay home with Jennifer tonight." Thank God he'd lowered the garage doors, so they couldn't see that Jennifer's car wasn't in the bay.
"Mrs. Nolan is at the station," said Investigator Hill, still very calm and polite. "If you'll come with us, sir, we'll drive you there."
"Jennifer's at the station?" God, what should he say now? How could he explain not knowing where she was? "Is she all right?" Good. A touch of concern. That was inspired.
"Mrs. Nolan's just fine, sir."
"That's a relief, because she was... over the top this morning, if you know what I mean."
"Please come with us."
"Sure. I'll take my car and follow you—"
"No, sir, I'd prefer you ride with us."

Nolan stepped back, but Hill and the patrol officer smoothly flanked him and grasped his arms, forcing them behind his back. Handcuffs were quickly snapped around his wrists.
Outraged, he stared at the two men. "Get these cuffs off me! What do you think you're doing? I'm not a criminal, and I refuse to be treated like one."
"It's procedure, sir, for your safety and ours. They'll be removed at the station." They physically shepherded him from the house, their grasps on his arms propelling him forward.
"You're fired!" he ground out, his face turning dark red. "Both of you. There's no excuse for this kind of treatment."
"Yes, sir," said Hill as they put him in the backseat of the car and closed the door.
Nolan could barely breathe, he was so furious. Jack Russo had to have instigated this, to get back at him for... surely not because he'd asked him to run Daisy's tag number; that was ludicrous. But what else could it be? Maybe Russo was the insanely jealous type who went off the deep end at the least attention anyone paid to his girlfriend.
The only other explanation was that they believed Jennifer.
He began hyperventilating and forced himself to slow his breathing. He could handle this; all he had to do was stay calm. No matter what Jennifer said, he could put a spin on it that threw everything she said into doubt. After all, she was a drunk, and the whole town knew it. She had no proof, just one side of a telephone conversation that she'd overheard, and she was bound to have garbled it.
When they reached the police department, he was astonished at the number of cars there. Something was going on, something more than the city council meeting. Then he saw three of the city councilmen standing outside the glass doors leading into the station, and his stomach knotted. The sun was going down and the fierce heat had abated, but sweat adhered his shirt to his back as Hill opened the car door and assisted him from the backseat.
The city councilmen looked at him, but they didn't make eye contact. It was as if they were watching an animal in a zoo, nothing more than a matter of curiosity.
"Take these cuffs off!" he said to Hill in a fierce undertone. "Goddamn it, the city council is watching."
"I'll take them off when we're inside, sir," said Hill, catching his arm.

Meaning when they had him where he couldn't get away. Dizzily he looked around, and a familiar-looking car caught his eye. It was a gray Dodge, and it was parked in one of the slots reserved for the patrol cars, but no one seemed to care.

Sykes drove a gray Dodge, an ordinary car that he said no one ever noticed. This car had a Madison County tag on it; Sykes lived in Madison County, just outside Huntsville.

Why was Sykes here? If they had arrested him, they wouldn't have let him drive here any more than they'd let Nolan. How had they even located him? There was no reason for Sykes to be here, unless—

Unless Sykes had turned on them.

He was hyperventilating again, colors running together in his vision.

"Sykes!" he roared, lowering his shoulder and ramming it into Investigator Hill, breaking his hold. "Sykes!" He began running toward the station. "You bastard, Sykes! You motherfucking bastard, I'll kill you!"

Investigator Hill and the patrol officer chased him, and the patrol officer made a diving tackle, wrapping both arms around the mayor's knees and bringing him down. With his hands cuffed behind him, Nolan couldn't catch himself, and he skidded face-first along the rough asphalt of the parking lot, leaving skin and blood behind. Mucus and blood poured from his broken nose as they hauled him to his feet. "Sykes," he said again, but his mouth was full of blood and the word was unintelligible.

The city councilmen stepped to the side as they half-carried him through the doors, the councilmen's expressions disgusted, as if they'd seen something nasty. Temple Nolan tried to think of something to say that would reassure them, some pat answer he'd rehearsed and used a hundred times before and which never failed to elicit the response he wanted, but nothing came to mind.

Nothing came to mind at all.

TWENTY-SIX

It was almost three o'clock in the morning. A multi-department task force waited in the night for the delivery of the Russian girls. Members of the Hillsboro Police Department, Jackson County Sheriff's Department, Madison County Sheriff's Department, the FBI, and the INS had hidden

themselves behind trees, bushes, the propane gas tank, and anything else they could find. They had parked their vehicles on another road and trekked over a mile across a field to reach the trailer.

Glenn Sykes was there, to fulfill his usual role. If anyone else had shown up to accept the shipment, the driver of the truck would have been spooked; since he was armed, no one wanted him spooked. The girls in the back of the truck had been through enough, without risking getting them killed by ricochets.

Jack lay under a big pine tree, his black clothing blending into the night shadows. The chief of any department seldom saw any action, but it had been decided that his expertise would be welcome. According to Sykes, usually there was only the driver to contend with, but the Russians were so expensive that Phillips had wanted an extra guard to make sure nothing went wrong. The two men were outnumbered fifteen to one, but there was always the chance that one of them would try something stupid; hell, it was almost a given, unless everything worked perfectly and the lawmen had the two overwhelmed before they knew anything was happening.

A black rifle lay cradled in Jack's arms. He knew exactly how much pressure was needed to pull the trigger and how much kick to expect. He'd burned thousands of rounds of ammunition in this weapon; he knew its every idiosyncracy the smell and feel and weight of it. It was an old friend, one he hadn't realized he'd missed until he had taken it from the cabinet in his house and felt the way it settled in his arms.

Sykes was inside the trailer, the lights on, watching television. They had carefully searched the trailer to make sure he had no means of contacting the driver, but Jack thought that even if they'd had a dozen telephones lined up for him to use, Sykes wouldn't have made the call. He had coolly decided to cut his losses by cooperating fully, and he'd keep to his bargain. The D.A. had almost wept with joy at the wealth of evidence Sykes offered him and had given him a real sweetheart deal. He wouldn't even do time; five years' probation, but that was nothing to a man like Sykes.

In the distance they heard the whine of a motor, rising above the nighttime cacophony of frogs, crickets, and night birds. Jack felt the kick of adrenaline and got a firm grip on his reactions. It wouldn't be smart to get too excited.

The truck, a Ford extended cab pickup with a camper on the back, turned into the gravel driveway, and the driver immediately lolled the lights. There

was no signal of any kind, no tapping of the horn or flashing of the headlights. Instead, Sykes turned on the porch light and opened the trailer door, stepping out to stand on the highest of the three wooden steps leading up to the door.
The driver turned off the motor and climbed out. "Hey, Sykes." The guard stayed in the cab.
"Have any trouble?" Sykes asked.
"One of the girls got sick, puked a couple of times, but I figure it was just from riding in the back. Stunk, though. I had to stop and hose out the back, to keep the other girls from puking."
"Let's get 'em inside, then, so they can clean up. Mr. Phillips is anxious to see this bunch."
"He's waiting on the young one, right? She's a pretty little thing, but she's the one been puking so much, so she's not real spry right now."
In the distance came the sound of another car, and everyone in hiding froze. The driver looked alarmed, and Sykes made a staying motion with his hand. "Hold what you got," he said softly. "It's nothing to worry about, just a car passing."
But the car seemed to be slowing. The driver stepped back toward the truck cab and opened the door, sliding half inside with one leg still on the ground, and the men under the trees knew he'd just armed himself. They all held their fire, though, waiting to see what happened.
The car turned into the driveway, headlights on bright. Glenn Sykes immediately turned to the side to save his night vision, his hand up to shield his eyes even more.
The car, a white Lexus, pulled up right behind the truck, and the headlights were turned off. A man got out from behind the wheel, a tall man with graying blond hair brushed straight back. He wore a suit, though the night was muggy, and who wore a suit at three o'clock in the morning, anyway?
"Mr. Sykes," said a smooth voice, with the hammy kind of southern accent that actors always used. After two years in the south, Jack could pick up some of the nuances now, and he knew that wasn't a north Alabama accent. Something about it struck him as fake; it was just too exaggerated.
"Mr. Phillips," Sykes said, surprised. "We didn't know to expect you."
That was true. The Scottsboro police hadn't been able to locate Mr. Phillips, though they'd been very low-key about their search. Until he was in custody, everything was being kept as quiet as possible, because they didn't

want him forewarned and perhaps able to destroy evidence, or even skip town completely. He had enough money to live very comfortably in Europe or the Caribbean, if he wanted.
Sykes glanced at the driver and guard. "It's all right. Mr. Phillips owns the operation." The two relaxed, getting out of the truck. Their hands were empty; both of them had left their weapons in the cab.
"There've been a series of mistakes lately," said Phillips, walking toward Sykes. "I wanted to personally supervise this shipment to make certain nothing went wrong."
Meaning he couldn't wait to get his hands on the thirteen-year-old girl in the back of the truck, Jack thought, and disgust curdled his stomach. Slowly he centered his sights on Phillips, because his presence was unexpected and in Jack's experience the unexpected meant trouble.
"Nothing will go wrong this time," said Sykes, his voice calm.
"I'm sure it won't," Phillips purred, and pulled a pistol from the right pocket of his suit jacket. He aimed and fired at Sykes before any of the men surrounding them could react; Sykes slammed back against the trailer, then toppled off the steps.
Jack's finger gently squeezed the trigger. His shot took Phillips exactly where he'd wanted it to, and Phillips went down screaming.
All hell broke loose.
To the uninitiated, the explosion of noise, lights, and motion as black-clad, heavily armed men burst from their hiding places, all shouting, "Police! Get your hands up!" or identifying themselves as FBI—whichever the case might be—would be nothing more than terrifying confusion. To Jack, it was a well-oiled operation, practiced over and over until each man knew what to do and what to expect. The two men still standing knew the drill: they froze, their arms automatically going up to lock their hands behind their heads.
The Russian girls inside the camper went into hysterics, screaming and crying and trying to escape, beating against the locked camper door. The INS agents got the key from the driver and opened the door, reeling back at the stench. The hysterical girls erupted from their prison, kicking and scratching as they were caught and held.
One girl managed to slip past everyone and run full speed down the dark country road before sheer exhaustion made her stumble and fall; the INS agent who gave chase picked her up and carried her like a baby in his arms, while she sobbed and made hysterical exclamations in her own language.

The INS, forewarned, had a Russian-speaking agent on hand, and she began trying to calm the girls, saying the same phrases over and over until they actually began to listen.

There were seven of them, none older than fifteen. They were thin, filthy, and exhausted. According to Sykes, though, none of them had been sexually assaulted; they were all virgins, and were to be sold for ridiculously high prices to gangs who would then charge wealthy, depraved men even more for the privilege of being the first to rape the girls. After that, they would be used as prostitutes, and sold over and over among gangs who would work them for a while, then sell them off. None of them spoke English; all of them had been told that if they didn't cooperate, their families in Russia would be shot.

The INS translator told them over and over that their families wouldn't be harmed, that they would be able to go home. Finally they calmed enough that, warily, they began to think she might be telling the truth. Their ordeal, the long trip from Russia and the brutal conditions they had endured, made it difficult for them to trust anyone right now. They huddled together, watching the black-clad people move around them, frightened by the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles as they arrived, but making no further effort to escape.

Jack stood over Sykes as the medics evaluated the wounded men. Blood from the chest wound soaked the entire left side of his body, but Sykes was conscious, his face ashen as the medics worked to stabilize him. In the background, Phillips's screams had deteriorated to guttural moans. Sykes looked up at Jack, his gaze vague with shock. "Will... he live?"

Jack glanced over his shoulder at the second knot of medics. "Maybe. If he doesn't die of sepsis. I didn't nick the femoral artery, but groin wounds can be a bitch when the colon is involved."

"Groin ..." Sykes almost managed a grin. "You shot... his balls off."

"I haven't checked. If there's anything left, though, it won't be in good working order."

Sykes gasped for breath, and the medic said, "We've radioed for a helicopter to transport him," meaning every minute counted if Sykes was to survive.

"I'll... come out... on top yet," said Sykes, and looking down at him, Jack figured that if sheer willpower could keep the man alive, then Sykes would be testifying at Nolan's and Phillips's trials.

At six-thirteen, Jack trudged into his office. He hadn't been home, hadn't showered, and still carried his black rifle. He was more tired than he'd been since . . . hell, since the last time he'd carried the rifle, but he felt good, too. All he wanted to do was take care of some details and go home to Daisy. Both Sykes and Phillips were in surgery at a hospital in Huntsville, but even if Sykes died, they had more than enough to prosecute.

Sykes had been a regular fountain of information. Mitchell had been killed because of his habit of dosing the girls with GHB; he'd killed two of them, so Nolan had decided he had to be dealt with. When questioned about the date-rape drugs, Sykes had rattled off the names of the dealers he knew. A dozen different investigations had been launched as a result of what Glenn Sykes had to say.

Having been given all the details by Todd, Jack had personally asked Sykes if he knew anything about the woman who had been given GHB at the Buffalo Club and raped by at least six men. That was one question for which Sykes didn't have any answers, though; Jack didn't think there ever would be any answers.

When he opened the office door, he stared in disbelief at Eva Fay, sitting at her desk. She looked up and held out a cup of fresh, hot coffee. "Here, you look like you need this."

He took the coffee and sipped it. Yep, it was so fresh he could still smell the coffee beans. He eyed her over the cup. "All right, Eva Fay, tell me how you do it."

"Do what?" she asked, a look of astonishment on her face.

"How do you know when I'm coming in? How do you always have hot coffee waiting for me? And what in hell are you doing here at six-fifteen in the morning?"

"Yesterday was a busy day," she said. "I had a lot of stuff I didn't get done, so I came in early to handle it."

"Explain the coffee."

She looked at him and smiled. "No."

" 'No'? What do you mean, 'No'? I'm your boss, and I want to know."

"Tough," she said, and swiveled back to her computer screen.

He knew he should go home and clean up first. He knew he desperately needed some sleep. But what he needed most was to see Daisy, to be in the company of a woman who would never park in a fire lane or even jaywalk. After the filth and sordidness he'd seen, he needed her cleanness, her simple

good-heartedness. And even though he knew she was all right, he needed to see her, to let his eyes reassure his brain. He wasn't sure exactly when she'd become so important to him, but there were some things a man couldn't fight. Besides, she'd let him use her shower.
She opened the door almost as soon as he knocked. "I heard you drive up," she said, then got a good look at him. "Goodness."
"It'll wash off," he said, swiping at the remnants of black face paint. He'd done a halfhearted job using paper towels in the men's rest room at the station, but there hadn't been any soap, and the job definitely called for soap.
She eyed him dubiously. "I hope so."
She was carrying Midas, and the puppy struggled madly to reach him. Midas didn't care what he looked like, Jack thought, reaching out to take the fuzzbutt in his arms. Midas began his frantic licking ritual, and Daisy frowned at him. "I don't know if you should let him do that," she said.
"Why not? He always does this."
"Yes, but you usually aren't covered with. . . stuff. I don't want him to get sick."
Jack thought about grabbing her and getting some of that stuff on her, but she'd probably smack him. She looked good enough to eat, he thought, with her blond hair tousled and her odd-colored eyes sleepy. Her skin was fresh and clear, and the thin pink robe she wore was almost thick enough to keep him from being able to tell she wore only a pair of panties underneath.
"I thought you'd like to know it's all wrapped up."
"I know. Todd called me."
"Todd." He growled the name. He liked Todd, even trusted him, but suddenly he felt the hot bite of jealousy. He didn't like Daisy's easy friendship with the man, because even if she still had doubts about Todd's sexual orientation, he didn't.
"Don't just stand there, come in," she said, taking Midas from him and setting the puppy on the floor, where he bounced off in search of recreation. "Go take a shower while I cook breakfast."
That sounded like heaven. He was already pulling off his clothes as he left the room, though he still had enough wit about him to take everything with him and not leave it on the floor for sharp puppy teeth to shred. Something, a sudden sharp need to get everything in order and nailed down, stopped him in the doorway. He looked back at her. "Daisy."

She paused at the kitchen door. "Yes?"
"Remember the deal we made?"
"Which deal?"
"That I'd marry you if you got pregnant."
Her cheeks got pink. He loved it that she could still blush. "Of course I remember. I wouldn't have begun this affair with you if you'd said no. People have to be responsible, and if you think you can weasel out of the deal now—"
"Let's go to Gatlinburg this weekend and get married."
Her eyes rounded and her lips parted in surprise. "But I'm not pregnant. At least, I don't think... It was just that once, and—"
"So we try again," he said, shrugging. "If you insist on being pregnant before we get married."
"My goodness, of course not! You mean you actually want—"
"Oh, yeah," he said softly "I want."
Midas pranced back into the living room, a dishcloth trailing from his mouth. Daisy stooped and caught him, and took the dishcloth away. "You don't mind having children? Because I really do want at least a couple of kids, and you seemed horrified when I asked you if you had any."
"I was horrified at the thought that I might have had any kids with my ex."
"Oh. That's good."
But she didn't give him a definite answer, just stood there looking preoccupied, and he began to get worried. He dropped his shirt to the floor and crossed the room to her. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he pulled her against him and put his other hand on her throat, using his thumb to tilt her chin up. "I know I'm dirty and smelly," he said, "but I'm not letting you go until I get the answer I want."
"Not just an answer, but the answer you want, hmm?"
"You got it."
"I have a question."
"Ask it."
"Do you love me?" She immediately blushed again. "I didn't think you were my type at all, but it didn't seem to matter. The more I was around you the more I wanted to be with you, and I'd love to marry you, but if you don't feel the same way I feel, then I don't think we should get married."
"I love you," he said clearly "That's as plain as I can make it. Now, will you marry me?"

She beamed at him, the million-watt smile he'd noticed the first time he'd ever spoken to her, when he'd gone to the library to sign up for the virtual library That smile did more for him than blond hair and makeup ever could.
"Yes, thank you."
Then he had to kiss her, and when he stopped, he didn't feel nearly as tired as he had when he'd arrived. He began dragging her toward the hall. "Forget about breakfast. Take a shower with me."
"Midas—" she began, looking around for the little demon.
"We'll take him with us." Jack scooped him up and removed his shirt from the puppy's mouth. "He needs a bath, too."
"He does not, and besides, I don't think I can do it with him in the tub with us, watching."
"I'll blindfold him." He tugged her into the bathroom.
"You'll do no such thing!"
"Then we'll close the door and let him play on the floor." He suited action to words and decided the sacrifice of a shirt was worth it for the peace. He dropped the shirt, and Midas pounced on it.
Daisy immediately leaned down to take it away from him, but Jack stopped her and efficiently stripped her out of her robe and panties, then bundled her into the tub. He shucked off the rest of his clothes and let them drop, too. Let Midas have a field day.
He got into the tub with her and turned on the water, then when it was hot, turned on the shower, shielding her with his body until the initial icy blast turned warm. As he lifted her, she put both arms around his neck, her expression serious. "Could we start trying right away?"
Maybe he was too tired to think clearly, or maybe he just had other things on his mind. "Trying what?"
"To have a baby," she said, exasperated, then gasped as he slipped into her. Her gaze immediately unfocused and her head drooped back as if it were suddenly too heavy for her neck.
"Sweetheart," he promised, "you'll never have to buy another PartyPak."

EPILOGUE

Evelyn and Aunt Jo had outdone themselves with Sunday dinner, a sort of celebration for Daisy and Jack. There had been a dinner in Gatlinburg the

week before, right after their wedding, but that had been at a restaurant and didn't count. Now the table fairly groaned under the weight of all the food. The whole family was there, as well as Todd and his friend Howard, whom Daisy had been astonished to recognize. She hadn't thought Howard was gay, because why would he have been at the Buffalo Club if he was? Of course, Jack was still adamant that Todd was straight, so maybe she wasn't a good judge of such matters.

Midas prowled under the table, unerringly locating her by her scent, and plopped down on her feet. His little tongue lapped at her ankles, and she peeked under the tablecloth to check on him. He had that sleepy look that meant he was settling down for a nap. He'd worn himself out, greeting so many different people, and of course each had to be played with before he moved on to the next.

Only a few short weeks ago she'd been agonized by how empty her life was, and now it was brimming over. Her family had always been there, of course, but she had found some very dear friends, she now had Midas—and then there was Jack.

How could she ever have thought jocks weren't her type? This particular jock was just what she needed. He always looked so tough, with his short-cropped graying hair and his broad shoulders and thick neck, and the cocky way he had of walking, like a man who took up all of his allotted space and then some. He still crowded her, in bed and out, but she had learned to adjust. If he took up more than his half of the bed, then she had no where else to sleep but on top of him, so if he wasn't getting enough sleep these days, it was his own fault.

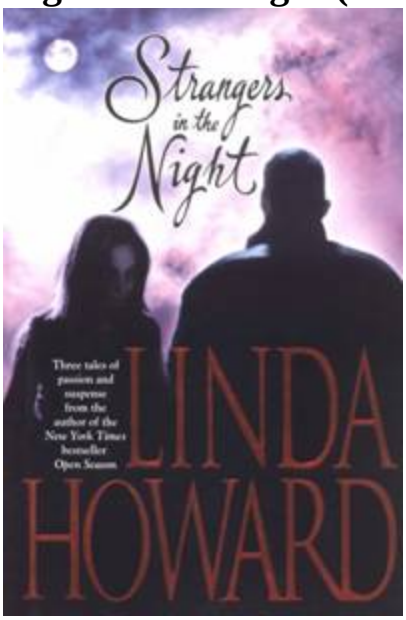
She felt almost incandescent with joy; so far her period was four days late. She was stunned by the possibility that she might have gotten pregnant so fast, but then Jack had certainly worked at his appointed duty. She had kept waiting for her period to start, but this morning hope had suddenly overwhelmed common sense and she was almost certain. When they left her mother's, they were going to buy a pregnancy test kit. Tomorrow morning, they would know for sure.

She couldn't decide which she wanted most, a son or a daughter. She thought of Jack throwing a football with a tough little guy, and her heart melted. Then she imagined a little girl, all dimples and ringlets, cradled in her daddy's muscular arms, and she shivered with delight. No matter which she had, though, she'd ask Todd to help her decorate the nursery, because he

had such wonderful taste in interior decorating. And she wanted to ask him if he would be the baby's godfather, though she'd have to talk that over with Jack first because he might have another friend in mind.
Todd commented on the lace tablecloth, asking her mother if she knew how old it was. Daisy tilted her head, studying him. He was as neatly dressed as always, today wearing a white silk shirt and pleated forest green trousers with a narrow black belt cinched around his waist.
Under the table, Jack's leg nudged hers, as if he couldn't bear not touching her any longer. She ignored him, her gaze locked on Todd.
Jack realized whom she was watching, and he suddenly shifted restlessly. "Daisy—" he began, but he was too late. Her voice rang out, clear and crisp. "Todd, do you know what color puce is?"
Caught off-guard, Todd turned to her with a startled look. "You're making that up, right?" he blurted.
Glenn Sykes had been out of the hospital for almost a month when he drove up to Temple Nolan's house, though the former mayor no longer lived there. He was out on bail and supposedly living in Scottsboro until his trial, but Sykes hadn't made any effort to find out where. For now, he was just concentrating on being alive and getting his strength back.
He'd been in an odd mood since getting shot, though maybe it wasn't so odd. Almost dying tended to change your outlook, at least temporarily. He still figured he'd handled things the best way possible for himself, even though it had gone bad there at the end, with Phillips showing up. He allowed himself a cold smile; he still enjoyed thinking about Russo's well-placed shot.
There was one other person who probably enjoyed thinking about that shot just as much as he did, and that was why he was here.
He rang the doorbell and waited. He heard footsteps; then Jennifer Nolan opened the door. She didn't know him, though, so she didn't unlatch the storm door. "Yes?"
She was a beautiful woman, he thought, more than merely pretty. He'd heard she had stopped drinking; maybe she had, maybe she hadn't, but today her eyes were clear, if full of shadows.
"I'm Glenn Sykes," he said.
She stared at him through the screen, and he knew what she was thinking. He had been in her husband's employ, privy to all the dirty secrets; he probably knew about Temple giving her to Phillips.

"Go away," she said, and started to shut the door.
"It doesn't matter," he said softly, and she froze, her hand still on the door.
"What. . . what doesn't matter?" Her voice was low and strained.
"What Phillips did. It doesn't matter. He didn't touch you, just your body."
She whirled, her eyes full of rage. "Yes, he did touch me! He killed part of me, so don't come here telling me what he did or didn't do."
He put his hands in his pockets. "Are you going to let him win?"
"He didn't win. I did. I'm here, and what's left of him will go to prison, where I'm sure he'll be very popular."
"Are you going to let him win?" Sykes repeated, his cool gaze locked on hers, and she hesitated.
The moment drew out, as if she was helpless to close the door and bring an end to it. Her breath came fast and shallow. "Why are you here?" she whispered.
"Because you need me," he said, and Jennifer opened the door.
End

Stangers in the Night (2001)



-- Lake of Dreams --

His eyes were like jewels, aquamarines as deep and vivid as the sea, burning through the mist that enveloped him. They glittered down at her, the expression in them so intense that she was frightened, and struggled briefly in his grasp. He soothed her, his voice rough with passion as he controlled her struggles, stroking and caressing until she was once more quivering with delight, straining upward to meet him. His hips hammered rhythmically at her, driving deep. His powerful body was bare, his iron muscles moving like oiled silk under his sweaty skin. The mist from the lake swirled so thickly around them that she couldn't see him clearly, could only feel him, inside and without, possessing her so fiercely and completely that she knew she would never be free of him. His features were lost in the mist, no matter how she trained her eyes to see him, no matter how she cried out in frustration. Only the hot jewels of his eyes burned through, eyes that she had seen before, through other mists—

Thea jerked awake, her body quivering with the echo of passion . . . and completion. Her skin was dewed with sweat, and she could hear her own breathing, coming hard and fast at first, then gradually slowing as her heartbeat settled into its normal pace. The dream always drained her of strength, left her wrung out and boneless from exhaustion.

She felt shattered, unable to think, overcome by both panic and passion. Her loins throbbed as if she had just made love; she twisted on the tangled sheets, pressing her thighs together to try to negate the sensation of still having him within her. Him. Nameless, faceless, but always him.

She stared at the dim early-morning light that pressed against the window, a graying so fragile that it scarcely penetrated the glass. There was no need to look at the clock; the dream always came in the dark, silent hour before dawn, and ended at the first approach of light.

It's just a dream, she told herself, reaching for any possible comfort. Only a dream.

But it was unlike any dream she'd ever had before.

She thought of it as a single dream, and yet the individual episodes were different. They—it—had begun almost a month before. At first she had simply thought of it as a weird dream, singularly vivid and frightening, but still only a dream. Then it had come again the next night.

And the next. And every night since, until she dreaded going to sleep. She had tried setting her alarm to go off early, to head the dream off at the pass, so to speak, but it hadn't worked. Oh, the alarm had gone off, all right; but as she'd been lying in bed grumpily mourning the lost sleep and steeling herself to actually get up, the dream had come anyway. She had felt awareness fade, had felt herself slipping beneath the surface of consciousness into that dark world where the vivid images held sway. She'd tried to fight, to stay awake, but it simply hadn't been possible. Her heavy eyes had drifted shut, and he was there again . . .

He was angry with her, furious that she'd tried to evade him. His long dark hair swirled around his shoulders, the strands almost alive with the force of his temper. His eyes . . . oh, God, his eyes, as vivid as the dream, a hot blue-green searing through the clouds of mosquito netting that draped her bed. She lay very still, acutely aware of the cool linen sheets beneath her, of the heavy scents of the tropical night, of the heat that made even her thin nightgown feel oppressive . . . and most of all of her flesh quivering in frightened awareness of the man standing in the night-shadowed bedroom, staring at her through the swath of netting.

Frightened, yes, but she also felt triumphant. She had known it would come to this. She had pushed him, dared him, taunted him to this very outcome, this devil's bargain she would make with him. He was her enemy. And tonight he would become her lover.

He came toward her, his warrior's training evident in the grace and power of his every move. "You tried to evade me," he said, his voice as dark as the evening thunder. His fury rippled around him, almost visible in its potency. "You played your games, deliberately arousing me to the mindlessness of a stallion covering a mare . . . and now you dare try to hide from me? I should strangle you."

She rose up on one elbow. Her heart was pounding in her chest, painfully thudding against her ribs, and she felt as if she might faint. But her flesh was awakening to his nearness, discounting the danger. "I was afraid," she said simply, disarming him with the truth.

He paused, and his eyes burned more vividly than before. "Damn you," he whispered. "Damn both of us." Then his powerful warrior's hands were on the netting, freeing it, draping it over her upper body. The insubstantial wisp settled over her like a dream itself, and yet it still blurred his features, preventing her from seeing him clearly. His touch, when it came, wrenched

a soft, surprised sound from her lips. His hands were rough and hot, sliding up her bare legs in a slow caress, lifting her nightgown out of the way. Violent hunger, all the more fierce for being unwilling, emanated from him as he stared at the shadowed juncture of her thighs.

So it was to be that way, then, she thought, and braced herself. He intended to take her virginity without preparing her. So be it. If he thought he could make her cry out in pain and shock, he would be disappointed. He was a warrior, but she would show him that she was his equal in courage.

He took her that way, pulled to the edge of the bed and with only her lower body bared, and the mosquito netting between them. He took her with anger, and with tenderness. He took her with a passion that seared her, with a completeness that marked her forever as his. And, in the end, she did cry out. That triumph was his, after all. But her cries weren't of pain, but of pleasure and fulfillment, and a glory she hadn't known existed.

That was the first time he'd made love to her, the first time she'd awakened still trembling from a climax so sweet and intense that she'd wept in the aftermath, huddled alone in her tangled bed and longing for more. The first time, but definitely not the last.

Thea got out of bed and walked to the window, restlessly rubbing her hands up and down her arms as she stared out at the quiet courtyard of her apartment building and waited for dawn to truly arrive, for the cheerful light to banish the lingering, eerie sense of unreality. Was she losing her mind? Was this how insanity began, this gradual erosion of reality until one was unable to tell what was real and what wasn't? Because the here and now was what didn't feel real to her anymore, not as real as the dreams that ushered in the dawn. Her work was suffering; her concentration was shot. If she worked for anyone but herself, she thought wryly, she would be in big trouble.

Nothing in her life had prepared her for this. Everything had been so normal, so Cleaverish. Great parents, a secure home life, two brothers who had, despite all earlier indications, grown up to be nice, interesting men whom she adored. Nothing traumatic had happened to her when she was growing up; there had been the tedium of school, the almost suffocating friendships youngsters seem to need, the usual wrangles and arguments, and the long, halcyon summer days spent at the lake. Every summer, her courageous mother would pack the station wagon and bravely set forth to the summer house, where she would ride herd on three energetic kids for

most of the summer. Her father would drive up every weekend, and would take some of his vacation there, too. Thea remembered long, hot days of swimming and fishing, of bees buzzing in the grass, birdsong, fireflies winking in the dusk, crickets and frogs chirping, the plop of a turtle into the water, the mouthwatering smell of hamburgers cooking over charcoal. She remembered being bored, and fretting to go back home, but by the time summer would come again she'd be in a fever to get back to the lake.

If anything in her life was unusual, it was her chosen occupation, but she enjoyed painting houses. She was willing to tackle any paint job, inside or out, and customers seemed to love her attention to detail. She was also getting more and more mural work, as customers learned of that particular talent and asked her to transform walls. Even her murals were cheerfully normal; nothing mystic or tortured there. So why had she suddenly begun having these weird time-period dreams, featuring the same faceless man, night after night after night?

In the dreams, his name varied. He was Marcus, and dressed as a Roman centurion. He was Luc, a Norman invader. He was Neill, he was Duncan ... he was so many different men she should never have been able to remember the names, and yet she did. He called her different names in the dreams, too: Judith, Willa, Moira, Anice.

She was all of those women, and all of those women were the same. And he was always the same, no matter his name.

He came to her in the dreams, and when he made love to her, he took more than her body. He invaded her soul, and filled her with a longing that never quite left, the sense that she was somehow incomplete without him. The pleasure was so shattering, the sensations so real, that when she had awakened the first time and lain there weeping, she had fearfully reached down to touch herself, expecting to feel the wetness of his seed. It hadn't been there, of course. He didn't exist, except in her mind.

Her thirtieth birthday was less than a week away, and in all those years she had never felt as intensely about a real man as she did about the chimera who haunted her dreams.

She couldn't keep her mind on her work. The mural she'd just finished for the Kalmans had lacked her customary attention to detail, though Mrs. Kalman had been happy with it. Thea knew it hadn't been up to her usual standards, even if Mrs. Kalman didn't. She had to stop dreaming about him. Maybe she should see a therapist, or perhaps even a psychiatrist. But

everything in her rebelled against that idea, against recounting those dreams to a stranger. It would be like making love in public.
But she had to do something. The dreams were becoming more intense, more frightening. She had developed such a fear of water that, yesterday, she had almost panicked when driving over a bridge. She, who had always loved water sports of any kind, and who swam like a fish! But now she had to steel herself to even look at a river or lake, and the fear was growing worse.
In the last three dreams, they had been at the lake. Her lake, where she had spent the wonderful summers of her childhood. He had invaded her home turf, and she was suddenly more frightened than she could ever remember being before. It was as if he had been stalking her in her dreams, inexorably moving closer and closer to a conclusion that she already knew.
Because, in her dreams, only sometimes did he make love to her.
Sometimes he killed her.
The summer house was the same, but oddly diminished by time. Seen through a child's eyes, it had been a spacious, slightly magical place, a house where fun and laughter were commonplace, a house made for the long, glorious summers. Thea sat in her car and stared at it, feeling love and a sense of peace well up to overcome her fear at actually being here, at the scene of her most recent dreams. Nothing but good times were associated with this place. At the age of fourteen, she had received her first kiss, standing with Sammy Somebody there in the shadow of the weeping willow. She'd had a wild crush on Sammy for that entire summer, and now she couldn't even remember his last name! So much for true love.
Now she saw that the house was small, and in need of a paint job. She smiled, thinking that she could take care of that little chore while she was here. The grass was knee-high, and the swing, hanging from a thick branch of the huge oak, had come down on one side. Thea steeled herself and quickly glanced in the direction of the lake. The dock was in need of repair, too, and she tried to concentrate on that, but the expanse of blue water stretching out beyond the dock brought a sheen of sweat to her forehead. Nausea roiled in her stomach and she swallowed convulsively as she jerked her gaze back to the house and concentrated instead on the peeling paint of the front porch.
Last night, he had killed her. The expression in those aquamarine eyes had been calm and terrifyingly remote as he held her beneath the cool lake

water, his arms like steel as her panicked struggles decreased in strength, until her tortured lungs had given up their last precious bit of oxygen and she had inhaled her own death.

She had awakened in the early dawn, sweating and trembling, and known that she couldn't go on like this much longer without having a nervous breakdown. She had gotten up, put on a pot of coffee, and spent the next several hours overloading on caffeine while she made her plans. She had no work going on right now, so mapping out free time for herself was easy. It probably wasn't smart, since summer was when she made the bulk of her income, but it was easy. At an hour when she could reasonably expect her parents to be awake, she'd called and asked their permission to spend a couple of weeks at the lake. As she had expected, they were delighted that she was finally going to take a vacation. Thea's brothers and their families regularly made use of the summer house, but for one reason or another, Thea hadn't been back to the lake since she was eighteen. Eleven years was a long time, but life had somehow gotten in the way. First there had been college and the need to work in the summer to finance it, then a couple of boring jobs in her chosen field that told her she had chosen the wrong field. She had stumbled onto her career as a housepainter by accident, when she had been out of a job and desperate for anything that would bring in some money. To her surprise, despite the hot, hard work, she had liked painting houses. As time went on, more and more jobs came her way. During the winters she got some inside jobs, but she usually worked like a fiend during the summers, and simply hadn't been able to get away to join the family at any of their outings to the lake.

"But what about your birthday?" her mother asked, suddenly remembering the upcoming event. "Aren't you going to be here?"

Thea hesitated. Her family was big on birthdays. Now that her brothers were married and had children, with their wives and kids thrown into the mix, there wasn't a single month in the year when someone's birthday wasn't being celebrated. "I don't know," she finally said. "I'm tired, Mom. I really need a rest." That wasn't why she wanted to go to the lake, but neither was it a lie.

She hadn't slept good for almost a month, and fatigue was pulling at her.

"How would a delayed party sit with you?"

"Well, I suppose that would be okay," her mother said doubtfully “I’ll have to let the boys know."

"Yeah, I'd hate for them to pull a birthday prank on the wrong day," Thea replied in a dry tone. "If they've already ordered a load of chicken manure to be delivered to me, they'll just have to hold it for a few days."
Her mother chuckled. "They've never gone quite that far."
"Only because they know I'd do something twice as bad to them."
"Have fun up at the lake, honey but be careful. I don't know if I like the idea of you being there all alone."
"I'll be careful," Thea promised. "Are there any supplies in the house?"
"I think there are a few cans of soup in the pantry, but that's about it. Check in when you get there, okay?"
"Check in" was code for what her father called Pick Up The Phone And Let Your Mother Know You're All Right So She Won't Call Missing Persons. Mrs. Marlow normally let her children get on with their lives, but when she said "check in" they all knew that she was a little anxious.
"I'll call as soon as I get to the grocery store."
Thea had kept her promise, calling in as soon as she arrived at the small grocery store where they'd always bought their supplies for the summer house. Now she sat in her car in front of the house, frozen with fear at the nearness of the lake, while bags of perishables slowly thawed in the backseat.
She forced herself to breathe deeply, beating down the fear. All right, so she couldn't look at the water. She would keep her eyes averted as she unloaded the car.
The screen door creaked as she opened it, a familiar sound that eased the strain in her expression. The screened front porch ran all the way across the front of the house, and in her childhood had been occupied by a collection of mismatched Adirondack, wicker, and lawn chairs. Her mother had often sat on the porch for hours, sewing or reading, and keeping an eye on Thea and the boys as they frolicked in the lake. The porch was bare now; the Adirondacks and wickers were long gone, and she'd heard her mother say that the lawn chairs were stored in the shed out back. Thea didn't know if she would bother to get them out; she certainly wouldn't be looking at the lake if she could help it.
No, that wasn't true. She had come up here to face the fear the dreams had caused. If that meant forcing herself to stare at the water for hours, then that's what she would do. She wouldn't let this nighttime madness rob her of a lifetime of enjoyment.

When she unlocked the front door, the heat and musti-ness of a closed house hit her in the face. She wrinkled her nose and plunged inside, unlocking and opening every window to let in fresh air. By the time she had carried in the groceries and stored the perishables in the refrigerator, the light breeze had gone a long way toward sweetening the air.

Out of habit, Thea started to put her clothes in the same bedroom she'd always used, but halted as soon as she opened the door. Her old iron-frame bed had been replaced by two twin beds. The room was much tinier than she remembered. A slight frown knit her brow as she looked around. The bare wood floors were the same, but the walls were painted a different color now, and blinds covered the window, rather than the ruffled curtains she'd preferred as a young girl.

The boys' room had always had twin beds—three of them, in fact—and she checked inside to see if that still held true. It did, though the number of beds had dwindled to two. Thea sighed. She would have liked to sleep in her old room, but probably her parents' room was the only one with a double bed, and she knew she'd appreciate the comfort even more. She had a queen-size bed in her apartment.

She felt like Goldilocks as she opened the door to the third bedroom, and she burst out laughing. Sure enough, here was the bed that was just right. The double bed was no more. In its place was a king-size bed that took up the majority of the floor space, leaving only enough room on either side to maneuver while making up the bed. A long double dresser occupied most of the remaining space. She would have to be careful about stubbing her toes in here, but she would definitely sleep in comfort.

As she hung her clothes in the closet, she heard the unmistakable creak of the screen door, heavy footsteps on the porch, and then two short, hard knocks on the frame of the open front door. Startled, Thea stood very still. A cold knot of fear began to form in her stomach. She had no idea who could be at the door. She had never been afraid here before—the crime rate was so low that it was almost nonexistent—but abruptly she was terrified. What if a vagrant had watched her unload the car, and knew she was here alone? She had already checked in with her mother, to let her know she'd arrived safely, so no one would expect to hear from her for another week or so. She'd told her mother that she intended to stay about two weeks. She could be murdered or kidnapped, and it might be two weeks or longer before anyone knew she was missing.

There were other houses on the lake, of course, but none within sight. The closest one, a rental, was about half a mile away, hidden behind a finger of land that jutted into the lake. Sammy What's-his-name's family had rented it that summer when she was fourteen, she remembered. Who knew who was renting it now, or if someone hadn't bothered with renting and had simply broken in.

She hadn't heard another car or a boat, so that meant whoever was on the porch had walked. Only the rental house was within realistic walking distance. That meant he was a stranger, rather than someone belonging to the families they had met here every summer.

Her imagination had run away with her, she thought, but she couldn't control her rapid, shallow breathing, or the hard pounding of her heartbeat. All she could do was stand there in the bedroom, like a small animal paralyzed by the approach of a predator.

The front door was open. There was another screen door there, but it wasn't latched. There was nothing to stop him, whoever he was, from simply walking in.

If she was in danger, then she was trapped. She had no weapon, other than one of the kitchen knives, but she couldn't get to them without being seen. She cast an agonized glance at the window. What were her chances of getting it open and climbing out without being heard? Given the silence in the house, she realized, not very good.

That hard double knock sounded again. At least he was still on the porch. Maybe she was crazy. How did she know it was even a man? By the heaviness of the footsteps? Maybe it was just a large woman.

No. It was a man. She was certain of it. Even his knocks had sounded masculine, too hard to have been made by a woman's softer hand.

"Hello? Is anyone home?"

Thea shuddered as the deep voice reverberated through the house, through her very bones. It was definitely a man's voice, and it sounded oddly familiar, even though she knew she'd never heard it before.

My God, she suddenly thought, disgusted with herself. What was wrong with her? If the man on the porch meant her any harm, cowering here in the bedroom wouldn't do her any good. And besides, a criminal would simply open the door and come on in, would already have done so. This was probably a perfectly nice man who was out for a walk and had seen a new neighbor arrive. Maybe he hadn't seen her at all, but noticed the car in the

driveway. She was making a fool out of herself with these stupid suspicions, this panic.
Still, logic could only go so far in calming her fears. It took a lot of self-control to straighten her shoulders and forcibly regulate her breathing, and even more to force her feet to move toward the bedroom door. She stopped once more, still just out of sight, to get an even firmer grip on her courage. Then she stepped out of the bedroom into the living room, and into the view of the man on the porch.
She looked at the open door, and her heart almost failed her. He was silhouetted against the bright light beyond and she couldn't make out his features, but he was big. Six-three, at least, with shoulders that filled the doorframe. It was only her imagination, it had to be, but there seemed to be an indefinable tension in the set of those shoulders, something at once wary and menacing.
There was no way she could make herself go any closer. If he made a move to open the screen, she would bolt for the back door in the kitchen. Her purse was in the bedroom behind her and she wouldn't be able to grab it, but her car keys were in her jeans pocket, so she should be able to dive into the car and lock the doors before he could reach her, then drive for help.
She cleared her throat. "Yes?" she managed to say. "May I help you?" Despite her effort, her voice came out low and husky. To her dismay, she sounded almost . . .inviting. Maybe that was better than terrified, but she was doubtful. Which was more likely to trigger an approach by a predator, fear or a perceived sexual invitation?
Stop it! she fiercely told herself. Her visitor hadn't said or done anything to warrant this kind of paranoia.
"I'm Richard Chance," the man said, his deep voice once again sinking through her skin, going all the way to her bones. "I'm renting the house next door for the summer. I saw your car in the driveway and stopped by to introduce myself."
Relief was almost as debilitating as terror, Thea realized as her muscles loosened and threatened to collapse altogether. She reached out an unsteady hand to brace herself against the wall.
"I—I'm glad to meet you. I'm Thea Marlow."
"Thea," he repeated softly. There was a subtle sensuality in the way he formed her name, almost as if he were tasting it. "Glad to meet you, Thea

Marlow. I know you're probably still unpacking, so I won't keep you. See you tomorrow."
He turned to go, and Thea took a hasty step toward the door, then another. By the time he reached out to open the screen, she was at the doorway.
"How do you know I'm still unpacking?" she blurted," tensing again.
He paused, though he didn't turn around. "Well, I take a long walk in the mornings, and your car wasn't here this morning. When I touched your car hood just now, it was still warm, so you haven't been here long. It was a reasonable assumption."
It was. Reasonable, logical. But why had he checked her car hood to see how hot it was? Suspicion kept her silent.
Then, slowly, he turned to face her. The bright sunlight glinted on the glossy darkness of his hair, thick and as lustrous as a mink's pelt, and clearly revealed every strong line of his face. His eyes met hers through the fine mesh of the screens, and a slow, unreadable smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "See you tomorrow, Thea Marlow."
Motionless again, Thea watched him walk away. Blood drained from her head and she thought she might faint. There was a buzzing in her ears, and her lips felt numb. Darkness began edging into her field of vision and she realized that she really was going to faint. Clumsily she dropped to her hands and knees and let her head hang forward until the dizziness began to fade.
My God. It was him!
There was no mistaking it. Though she'd never seen his face in her dreams, she recognized him. When he had turned to face her and those vivid aquamarine eyes had glinted at her, every cell in her body had tingled in recognition.
Richard Chance was the man in her dreams.
Thea was so shaken that she actually began loading all of her stuff back into the car, ready to flee back to White Plains and the dubious safety of her own apartment. In the end, though still trembling with reaction, she returned her supplies and clothes to the house and then resorted to her own time-honored remedy of coffee. What good would going home do? The problem was the dreams, which had her so on edge- that she had panicked when a neighbor came to call and then had immediately decided, on the basis of his vivid eye color, that he was the man in her dreams.

Okay, time for a reality check, she sternly told herself as she nursed her third cup of coffee. She had never been able to see Marcus-Neill-Duncan's face, because of the damn mist that always seemed to be between them. All she had been able to tell was that he had long, dark hair and aquamarine eyes. On the other hand, she knew his smell, his touch, every inch of his muscled body, the power with which he made love. What was she supposed to do, ask Richard Chance to strip down so she could inspect him for similarities?

A lot of people in the world had dark hair; most of them, as a matter of fact. A lot of dark-haired men had vivid eyes. It was merely chance that she had happened to meet Richard Chance at a time when she wasn't exactly logical on the subject of eye color. She winced at the play on words, and got up to pour her fourth cup of coffee.

She had come here with a purpose. She refused to let a dream, no matter how disturbing and realistic, destroy her enjoyment of something she had always loved. It wasn't just this new fear of water that she hated, but what the dreams were doing to her memories of the summers of her childhood. Losing that joy would be like losing the center of her being. Damn it, she would learn to love the water again. Maybe she couldn't look at the lake just yet, but by the time she left here, she swore, she would be swimming in it again. She couldn't let her stupid paranoia about Richard Chance frighten her away.

It didn't mean anything that he had said her name as if savoring it. Actually, it did mean something, but that something was connected to his sexual organs rather than to her dreams. Thea knew she wasn't a raving beauty, but neither was she blind to her attractiveness to men. She was often dissatisfied with her mop of thick, curly, chestnut hair, despairing of ever taming it into any discernible style, but men, for reasons of their own, liked it. Her eyes were green, her features even and clean-cut, and the rigors of her job kept her lean and in shape. Now that her nerves were settling down, she realized that the gleam in those memorable eyes had been interested rather than threatening.

That could be difficult, considering that she had come up here to work through some problems rather than indulge in a summer fling with a new neighbor. She wasn't in the mood for romance, even of the casual, two-week variety. She would be cool and uninterested in any invitations he might extend, he would get the hint, and that would be that

“COME. "
She turned, and saw him standing under the willow tree, his hand outstretched. She didn't want to go to him, every instinct shouted for her to run, but the compulsion to obey was a terrible need inside her, an ache and a hunger that he could satisfy.
"Come," he said again, and her unwilling feet began moving her across the cool, dewy grass. Her white nightdress swirled around her legs, and she felt her nakedness beneath the thin fabric. No matter how many layers of clothing covered her, he always made her feel unclothed and vulnerable. She knew she shouldn't be out here alone, especially with him, but she couldn't make herself go back inside. She knew he was a dangerous man, and it
didn't matter. All that mattered was being with him; the propriety that had ruled her life suddenly meant less to her than did the wet grass beneath her bare feet.
When she reached him, they stood facing each other like adversaries, neither moving nor speaking for a long moment that stretched out until she thought she would scream from the tension of it. Like the predator he was, he had been stalking her for weeks, and now he sensed, with unerring instinct, that she was within his grasp. He put his hand on her arm, his touch burning with vitality, and a smile lightly touched his hard mouth as he felt her betraying quiver. "Do you think I will hurt you?" he asked, his amusement evident.
She shivered again. "Yes," she said, looking up at him. "In one way or another. . . yes."
Inexorably he drew her closer, until her flimsily clad body rested against him and the animal heat of his flesh dispelled the chill of the night air. Automatically she put her hands up to rest against his chest, and the feel of the rock-hard sheets of muscle made her breath catch. No other man she'd ever touched was as hard and vital as this—this warrior, whose life was based on death and destruction. She wanted to deny him, to turn away from him, but was as helpless as a leaf on the wind to defy the currents that swept her toward him.
He brushed his lips against her hair in an oddly tender gesture, one she hadn't expected from such a man. "Then lie down with me," he murmured, "and I'll show you the sweetest pain of all."

Thea awoke, the echoes of her own cries still lingering in the darkness of the bedroom. He had; oh, he had. She was lying on her back, her nightgown twisted around her waist, her legs open and her knees raised. The last remnants of completion still throbbed delicately in her loins.

She put her hands over her face and burst into tears.

It was more than disturbing—it was humiliating. The damn man not only took over her dreams, he dominated her body as well. Her entire sense of self was grounded in her sturdy normality, her good common sense. Thea had always thought of herself as dependable, and suddenly that description no longer seemed to apply Because of the dreams, she had taken a two-week vacation right in the middle of her busiest time, which wasn't dependable. What was going on with her now defied common sense, defied all her efforts to understand what was happening. And it certainly wasn't normal to have frighteningly intense climaxes night after night, while sleeping alone.

Choking back her tears, she stumbled out of bed and down the hall to the bathroom, where she stood under the shower and tried to rid her body of the sensation of being touched by invisible hands. When she felt marginally calmer, she dried off and relocated to the kitchen, where she put on fresh coffee and then sat drinking it and watching the dawn progress into a radiantly sunny morning.

The kitchen was located at the back of the house, so the lake wasn't visible from the window, and Thea slowly relaxed as she watched tiny birds flitting from branch to branch in a nearby tree, twittering to each other and doing bird things.

She had to stop letting these dreams upset her so much. No matter how disturbing their content, they were still just dreams. When she looked at this rationally, the only thing about the dreams that had really affected her life was the unreasoning fear of water they had caused. She had come to the lake to work through that fear, to force herself to face it, and if she could overcome that she would be satisfied. Maybe it wasn't normal to have such sexually intense dreams, or for the same man who brought her such pleasure to kill her in some of those dreams, but she would handle it. Who knew what had triggered the dreams? They could have been triggered by her eclectic reading material, or some movie she'd watched, or a combination of both. Probably they would cease as mysteriously as they had appeared.

In the meantime, she had already wasted one day of her self-prescribed recovery period. Except for that one nauseating glance at the lake when she had first arrived, she had managed to completely ignore the water.
All right, Theadom, she silently scolded herself. Stop being such a wuss. Get off jour can and do what you came here to do.
In an unconscious gesture of preparation, she ran her fingers through her hair, which had almost dried in the time she had spent drinking coffee and postponing the inevitable. She could feel the unruly curls, thick and vibrant, taking shape under her fingers. She probably looked a fright, she thought, and was glad there was no one there to see. For this entire two weeks, she could largely ignore her appearance except for basic cleanliness, and she looked forward to the freedom.
For comfort, she poured one final cup of coffee and carried it with her out onto the porch, carefully keeping her gaze cast downward so she wouldn't spill the hot liquid. Yeah, she thought wryly, that was a great excuse to keep from seeing the lake first thing when she opened the door.
She kept her eyes downcast as she opened the front door and felt the cool morning air wash over her bare feet. She had simply pulled on her nightgown again after leaving the shower, and the thin material was no match for the chill that the sun hadn't quite dispelled.
All right. Time to do it. Firmly gripping the cup like a lifeline, she slowly raised her eyes so that her gaze slid first across the floor of the porch, then onto the overgrown grass, and then down the slight slope toward the lake. She deliberately concentrated on only a narrow field of vision, so that everything else was blurred. There was the willow tree off to the left, and—
He was standing beneath the spreading limbs, just as he had in her dream.
Thea's heart almost stopped. Dear God, now her dreams had started manifesting themselves during her waking hours, in the form of hallucinations. She tried to blink, tried to banish the vision, but all- she could do was stare in frozen horror at the man standing as motionless as a statue, his aquamarine eyes shining across the distance.
Then he moved, and she jerked in reaction as she simultaneously realized two things, each as disturbing in a different way as the other.
One, the "vision" was Richard Chance. The figure under the tree was a real human being, not a figment of her imagination.
Two, she hadn't realized it before, but last night she had been able to see her dream lover's face for the first time, and it had been Richard Chance's face.

She calmed her racing heartbeat. Of course her subconscious had chosen his features for those of the dream lover; after all, she had been startled that very day by the similarity of their eyes. This quirk of her dreams, at least, was logical.

They faced each other across the dewy grass, and a slow smile touched the hard line of his mouth, almost causing her heartbeat to start galloping again. For the sake of her circuits, she hoped he wouldn't smile too often.

Then Richard Chance held out his hand to her, and said, "Come."

What little color she had drained from Thea's face. "What did you say?" she whispered. He couldn't possibly have heard her. He was standing a good thirty yards away; she had barely been able to hear the one word he'd spoken, though somehow the sound had been perfectly clear, as if she had heard it inside herself as well as out. But the expression on his face changed subtly, to something more alert, his eyes more piercing. His outstretched hand suddenly seemed more imperious, though his tone became cajoling. "Thea. Come with me."

Shakily she stepped back, intending to close the door. This had to be pure chance, but it was spooky.

"Don't run," he said softly. "There's no need to. I won't hurt you."

Thea had never considered herself a coward. Her brothers would have described her as being a touch too foolhardy for her own good, stubbornly determined to climb any tree they could climb, or to swing out on a rope as high as they did before dropping into the lake. Despite the eerie similarity between the dream and what he'd just now said, her spine stiffened, and she stared at Richard Chance as he stood under the willow tree, surrounded by a slight mist. Once again, she was letting a weird coincidence spook her, and she was tired of being afraid. She knew instinctively that the best way to conquer any fear was to face it—hence her trip to the lake—so she decided to take a good, hard look at Mr. Chance to catalog the similarities between him and her dream lover. She looked, and almost wished she hadn't.

The resemblance wasn't just in his eyes and the color of his hair. She could see it now in the powerful lines of his body, so tall and rugged. He was wearing jeans and hiking boots and a short-sleeved chambray shirt that revealed the muscularity of his arms. She noticed the thickness of his wrists, the wrists of a man who regularly did hard physical work . . . the wrists of a swordsman.

She gasped, shaken by the thought. Where had it come from? What did she know about swordsmen? They weren't exactly thick on the ground; she'd never even met anyone who fenced. And even as she pictured the elegant moves of fencing, she discarded that comparison. No, by swordsman she meant someone who used a heavy broadsword in battle, slashing and hacking. A flash of memory darted through her, and she saw Richard Chance with a huge claymore in his hand, only he had called himself Neill... and then he was Marcus, and it was the short Roman sword he wielded—

No. She couldn't let herself think like that. The dreams were a subconscious fantasy, nothing more. She didn't really recognize anything about Richard Chance. She had simply met him at a time when she was emotionally vulnerable and off-balance, almost as if she were on the rebound from a failed romance. She had to get a grip, because there was no way this man had anything to do with her dreams.

He was still standing there, his hand outstretched as if only a second had gone by, rather than the full minute it felt like.

And then he smiled again, those vivid eyes crinkling at the corners. "Don't you want to see the baby turtles?" he asked.

Baby turtles. The prospect was disarming, and surprisingly charmed by the idea, somehow Thea found herself taking a couple of steps forward, until she was standing at the screen door to the porch. Only then did she stop and look down at her nightgown. "I need to change clothes."

His gaze swept down her. "You look great to me." He didn't try to disguise the huskiness of appreciation in his tone. "Besides, they might be gone if you don't come now."

Thea chewed her lip. The nightgown wasn't a racy number, after all; it was plain white cotton, with a modest neckline and little cap sleeves, and the hem reached her ankles. Caution warred with her desire to see the turtles. Suddenly she couldn't think of anything cuter than baby turtles. Making a quick decision, she pushed open the door and stepped out into the tall grass. She had to lift her nightgown hem to midcalf to keep it from dragging in the dew and getting wet. Carefully she picked her way across the overgrown yard to the tall man waiting for her.

She had almost reached him when she realized how close she was to the water.

She froze in midstep, unable to even glance to the right where the lake murmured so close to her feet. Instead, her panic-stricken gaze locked on his face, instinctively begging him for help.
He straightened, every muscle in his body tightening as he became alert in response to her reaction. His eyes narrowed, and his gaze swung sharply from side to side, looking for whatever had frightened her. "What is it?" he rasped as he caught her forearm and protectively pulled her nearer, into the heat and shelter of his body.
Thea shivered and opened her mouth to tell him, but the closeness of his body, at once comforting and alarming, confused her so she couldn't think what to say. She didn't know which alarmed her more, her nearness to the lake or her nearness to him. She had always loved the lake, and was very wary of him, but his automatic response to her distress jolted something inside her, and suddenly she wanted to press herself against him. The warm scent of his skin filled her nostrils, her lungs—a heady combination of soap, fresh air, clean sweat, and male muskiness. He had pulled her against his left side, leaving his right arm free, and she could feel the reassuring steadiness of his heartbeat thudding within the strong wall of his chest.
She was abruptly, acutely aware of her nakedness beneath the nightgown. Her breasts throbbed where they pressed against his side, and her thighs began trembling. My God, what was she doing out here, dressed like this? What had happened to her much-vaunted common sense? Since the dreams had begun, she didn't seem to have any sense at all. No way should she be this close to a man she'd just met the day before. She knew she should pull away from him, but from the moment he'd touched her she had felt an odd sense of intimacy, of Rightness, as if she had merely returned to a place she'd been many times before.
His free hand threaded through her damp curls. "Thea?" he prompted, some of the alertness relaxing from his muscles. "Did something scare you?"
She cleared her throat and fought off a wave of dizziness. His hand in her hair felt so familiar, as if ... She jerked her wayward thoughts from that impossible path. "The water," she finally said, her voice still tight with fear. "I—I'm afraid of the water, and I just noticed how close I was to the bank."
“Ah," he said in a slow sound of realization. "That's understandable. But how were you going to see the turtles if you're afraid of the water?"
Dismayed, she looked up at him. "I didn't think about that." How could she tell him that her fear of the water was so recent that she wasn't used to

thinking in terms of what she could or couldn't do based on the proximity of water. Her attention splintered again, caught by the angle of his jaw when viewed from below. It was a very strong jaw, she noticed, with a stubborn chin. He had a fairly heavy beard; despite the evident fact that he had just shaved, she could see the dark whiskers that would give him a heavy five-o'clock shadow. Again that nagging sense of familiarity touched her, and she wanted to put her hand to his face. She wondered if he was always considerate enough to shave before making love, and had a sudden powerful image of that stubbled chin being gently rubbed against the curve of her breast.

She gave a startled jerk, a small motion that he controlled almost before it began, his arm tightening around her and pulling her even more solidly against him. "The turtles are just over here, about fifty feet," he murmured, bending his head down so that his jaw just brushed her curls. "Could you look at them if I stay between you and the lake, and hold you so you know you won't fall in?"

Oh, he was good. She noticed it in a peripheral kind of way. Whenever he did something she might find alarming—something that should alarm her, like take her in his arms—he immediately distracted her with a diverting comment. She saw the ploy, but . . . baby turtles were so cute. She thought about his proposition. It was probably a dangerous illusion, but she felt safe in his arms, warmed by his heat and wrapped up in all that muscled power. Desire began in that moment, a delicate, delicious unfurling deep inside her ... or maybe it had begun before, at his first touch, and had just now grown strong enough for her to recognize it. Why else had she thought about the roughness of his chin against her body? She knew she should go back inside. She had already made the logical decision that she had no time for even lightweight romance. But logic had nothing to do with the wild mixture of reactions she had felt since first seeing this man, fear, panic, compulsion and desire all swirling together so she never knew from one minute to the next how she was going to react. She didn't like it, didn't like anything about it. She wanted to be the old Thea again, not this nervous, illogical creature she didn't recognize.

All right, so throw logic out the window. It hadn't done her much good since the dreams had begun anyway. She looked up into watchful aquamarine eyes and threw caution to the dogs, too, deciding instead to operate on pure instinct. "Maybe that would work. Let's try it."

She thought she saw a flare of triumph in those crystalline eyes, but when she looked more closely she saw only a certain male pleasure. "Let's go a couple of steps farther away from the water," he suggested, already steering her along with that solid arm around her waist. "We'll still be able to see the turtles. Tell me if we're still too close, okay? I don't want you to be nervous."

She chuckled, and was surprised at herself for being able to laugh. How could she not be nervous? She was too close to the water, and way too close to him. "If I were wearing shoes, I'd be shaking in them," she admitted.

He glanced down at her bare feet, and the way she was having to hold up her nightgown to keep it out of the wet grass. "There might be briers," he said by way of explanation as he bent down and hooked his other arm beneath her knees. Thea gave a little cry of surprise as he lifted her, grabbing at his shirt in an effort to steady herself. He grinned as he settled her high against his chest. "How's this?"

Frightening. Exciting. Her heart was thudding wildly, and that first pressure of desire was becoming more intense. She cast a look at the ground and said, "High."

"Are you afraid of heights, too?"

"No, just of water." And of you, big guy. But far more attracted than afraid, she realized.

He carried her along the bank, taking care not to get any closer to the water, while Thea looked everywhere but at the lake. The most convenient point of focus was his throat, strong and brown, with a small vulnerable hollow beneath the solid knot of his Adam's apple. The close proximity of his bare skin made her lips tingle, as if she had just pressed them into that little hollow where his pulse throbbed so invitingly.

"We have to be quiet," he whispered, and eased the last few steps. They had left the relative neatness of the overgrown yard and were in a tangle of bushes and weeds that probably did contain briers. Given her bare feet, she was just as glad he was carrying her. The trees grew more thickly here, greatly limiting the view of the lake. "They're still here, on a fallen log lying at the edge of the water. Don't make any sudden moves. I'm going to let you down, very slowly. Put your feet on my boots."

Before she could ask why, now that she was perfectly comfortable in his arms, he withdrew his arm from beneath her legs and let her lower body slide downward. Though he took care not to let her nightgown get caught

between them, the friction of her body moving over his could scarcely have been more enticing. She caught her breath, her breasts and thighs tingling with heat even as she sought his boot tops with her feet and let her weight come to rest on them. Nor was he unaffected; there was no mistaking the firm swelling in his groin.

He seemed more capable than she of ignoring it, however. He had both arms around her, holding her snugly against him, but his head was turned toward the lake. She could feel excitement humming through him, but it didn't seem to be sexual in nature, despite his semierection.

"There are seven of them," he whispered, his voice the husky murmur of a lover. "They're lined up on the log like silver-dollar pancakes with legs. Just turn your head and take a peek, and I'll hold you steady so you'll feel safe."

Thea hesitated, torn between her desire to see the little turtles and her fear of the water. Her hands were clutching his upper arms, and she could feel the hard biceps flex as he held her a little closer. "Take your time," he said, still whispering, and she felt his lips brush her curls.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself. Half a second later she convulsively buried her face against his chest, shaking, trying to fight back the rise of nausea. He cuddled her, comforting her with a slight rocking motion of his body while he murmured reassuring noises that weren't really words.

Two minutes later she tried again, with much the same result.

By the fourth try, tears of frustration were welling in her eyes. Richard tried to take her back to the house, but the stubbornness her brothers were well acquainted with came to the fore, and she refused to leave. By God, she was going to see those turtles.

Ten minutes later, she still hadn't managed more than a single peek before the panic and nausea would hit her, and she was getting furious with herself. The turtles were happily sunning themselves right now, but they could be gone in the next second.

"I'm going to do it this time," she announced, her tone one of angry determination.

Richard sighed. "All right." She was well aware that he could simply pick her up and stride away at any time, but somehow she sensed that he would stand there until she was ready to give up the effort. She braced herself and began to turn her head by slow degrees. "While you're torturing yourself, I'll

pass the time by remembering how I could see through your nightgown when you were walking across the yard," he said.
Stunned, Thea found herself blinking at the little turtles for two full seconds while she reeled under the impact of what he'd just said. When her head jerked back around, there was more outrage than panic in the motion.
"What?"
"I could see through your nightgown," he repeated helpfully. A smile tugged at his mouth, and his crystalline eyes revealed even more amusement as he looked down at her. "The sun was shining at an angle. I saw ..." He let the sentence trail off.
She pushed at his arms in an effort to loosen them, without results. "Just what did you see?"
"Everything." He seemed to enjoy the memory. He made a little humming sound of pleasure in his throat. "You have gorgeous little nipples."
Thea flushed brightly, even as she felt the aforementioned gorgeous little nipples tighten into hard buds. The reaction was matched by one in his pants.
"Look at the turtles," he said.
Distracted, she did just that. At the same time he stroked his right hand down her bottom, the touch searing her flesh through the thin fabric, and cupped and lifted her so that the notch of her thighs settled over the hard bulge beneath his fly. Thea's breath caught in her lungs. She stared blindly at the turtles, but her attention was on the apex of her thighs. She bit back a moan, and barely restrained the urge to rock herself against that bulge. She could feel herself alter inside, muscles tightening and loosening, growing moist as desire built to a strong throb.
He was a stranger. She had to be out of her mind to stand here with him in such a provocative position. But though her mind knew he was a stranger, her body accepted him as if she had known him forever. The resulting conflict rendered her all but incapable of action.
The little turtles were indeed the size of silver-dollar pancakes, with tiny reptilian heads and stubby legs. They were lined up on the half-submerged log, the water gently lapping just below them. Thea stared at the sheen of water for several seconds before she realized what she was doing, so successfully had he distracted her.
"Richard," she breathed.
"H'mmm?" His voice was deeper, his breathing slightly faster.

"I'm looking at the turtles."
"I know, sweetheart. I knew you could do it."
"I wouldn't want to go any closer, but I'm looking at the water."
"That's good." He paused. "As you learn to trust me, you'll gradually get over your fear."
What a strange thing to say, she thought. What did he have to do with her fear of the water? That was caused by the dreams, not him. She wanted to ask him what he meant, but it was difficult to think straight when he was holding her so intimately and when his erection was thrusting against her more insistently with each passing moment.
Then something unseen alarmed the little turtles, or perhaps one of them simply decided he'd had enough sun and the others followed suit, but all at once they slid off the log and plopped into the water, one by one, the entire action taking place so fast that it was over in a second. Ripples spread out from the log, resurrecting an echo of nausea in Thea's stomach. She swallowed and looked away, and the sensual spell was broken.
He knew it, too. Before she could speak, he matter-of-factly lifted her in his arms and carried her back to the yard.
Remembering what he'd said about her nightgown, she blushed hotly again as soon as he set her on her feet. He glanced at her hot cheeks, and amusement gleamed in his eyes.
"Don't laugh," she muttered crossly as she moved away from him. Though it was probably way too late, she tried for dignity. "Thank you for showing me the turtles, and for being so patient with me."
"You're welcome," he said in a grave tone that still managed to convey his hidden laughter.
She scowled. She didn't know whether to back away or to turn around and let him get a good view of her rear end, too. She didn't have enough hands to cover all her points of interest, and it was too late anyway. She compromised by sidling.
"Thea."
She paused, her brows lifted in question.
"Will you come on a picnic with me this afternoon?"
A picnic? She stared at him, wondering once again at the disturbing blend of strangeness and familiarity she felt about him. Like the baby turtles, a picnic sounded almost unbearably tempting; this whole thing was feeling as

if she had opened a book so compelling that she couldn't stop turning page after page. Still, she felt herself pulling back. "I don't—"
"There's a tree in a fallow field about a mile from here," he interrupted, and all amusement had left his ocean-colored eyes. "It's huge, with limbs bigger around than my waist. It looks as if it's been here forever. I'd like to lie on a blanket spread in its shade, put my head in your lap, and tell you about my dreams."
Thea wanted to run. Damn courage; discretion demanded that she flee. She wanted to, but her legs wouldn't move. Her whole body seemed to go numb. She let the hem of her nightgown drop into the wet grass, and she stared dumbly at him. "Who are you?" she finally whispered.
He studied the sudden terror in her eyes, and regret flashed across his face. "I told you," he finally answered, his tone mild. "Richard Chance."
"What—what did you mean about your dreams?" Again he paused, his sharp gaze still fastened on her so that not even the smallest nuance of expression could escape him. "Let's go inside," he suggested, approaching to gently take her arm and guide her stumbling steps toward the house. "Well talk there."
Thea stiffened her trembling legs and dug in her heels, dragging him to a stop. Or rather, he allowed her to do so. She had never before in her life been as aware of a man's strength as she was of his. He wasn't a muscle-bound hulk, but the steeliness of his body was evident. "What about your dreams?" she asked insistently. "What do you want?"
He sighed, and released his grip to lightly rub his fingers up and down the tender underside of her arm. "What I don't want is for you to be frightened," he replied. "I've just found you, Thea. The last thing I want is to scare you away."
His tone was quiet and sincere, and worked a strange kind of magic on her. How could a woman fail to be, if not reassured, at least calmed by the very evenness of his words? Her alarm faded somewhat, and Thea found herself being shepherded once again toward the house. This time she didn't try to stop him. At least she could change into something more suitable before they had this talk on which he was so insistent.
She pulled away from him as soon as they were inside, and gathered her tattered composure around herself like a cloak. "The kitchen is there," she said, pointing. "If you'll put on a fresh pot of coffee, I'll be with you as soon as I get dressed."

He gave her another of his open looks of pure male appreciation, his gaze sliding over her from head to foot. "Don't bother on my account," he murmured.
"Your account is exactly why I'm bothering," she retorted, and his quick grin sent butterflies on a giddy flight in her stomach. Despite her best efforts, she was warmed by his unabashed attraction. "The coffee's in the cupboard to the left of the sink."
"Yes, ma'am." He winked and ambled toward the kitchen. Thea escaped into the bedroom and closed the door, leaning against it in relief. Her legs were still trembling. What was going on? She felt as if she had tumbled down the rabbit hole. He was a stranger, she had met him only the day before, and yet there were moments, more and more of them, when she felt as if she knew him as well as she knew herself, times when his voice reverberated deep inside of her like an internal bell. Her body responded to him as it never had to anyone else, with an ease that was as if they had been lovers for years. He said and did things that eerily echoed her dreams. But how could she have dreamed about a man whom she hadn't met? This was totally outside her experience; she had no explanation for it, unless she had suddenly become clairvoyant.
Yeah, sure. Thea shook her head as she stripped out of the nightgown and opened a dresser drawer to get out bra and panties. She could just hear her brothers if she were to dare mention such a thing to them. "Woo, woo," they'd hoot, snorting with laughter. "Somebody find a turban for her to wear! Madam Theadora's going to tell our fortunes."
She pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and stuck her feet into a pair of sneakers. Comforted by the armor of clothing, she felt better prepared to face Richard Chance again. It was a loony idea to think she'd met him in her dreams, but she knew one sure way of finding out. In every incarnation, her dream warrior's left thigh had been scarred, a long, jagged red line that ended just a few inches above his knee. All she had to do was ask him to drop his pants so she could see his leg, and she'd settle this mystery once and for all.
Right. She could just see herself handing him a cup of coffee: "Do you take cream or sugar? Would you like a cinnamon roll? Would you please remove your pants?"
Her breasts tingled and her stomach muscles tightened. The prospect of seeing him nude was more tempting than it should have been. There was something dangerously appealing in the thought of asking him to remove

his clothing. He would do it, too, those vivid eyes glittering at her all the while. He was as aware as she that, if they were caught, he would be killed —

Thea jerked herself out of the disturbing fantasy. Killed? Why on earth had she thought that? It was probably just the dreams again—but she had never dreamed that he had been killed, only herself. And he had been the killer. Her stomach muscles tightened again, but this time with the return of that gut-level fear she'd felt from the moment she'd heard his step on the porch. She had feared him even before she'd met him. He was a man whose reputation preceded him—

Stop it! Thea fiercely admonished herself. What reputation? She'd never heard of Richard Chance. She looked around the bedroom, seeking to ground herself in the very normality of her surroundings. She felt as if things were blurring, but the outlines of the furniture were reassuringly sharp. No, the blurring was inside, and she was quietly terrified. She was truly slipping over that fine line between reality and dreamworld.

Maybe Richard Chance didn't exist. Maybe he was merely a figment of her imagination, brought to life by those thrice-damned dreams.

But the alluring scent of fresh coffee was no dream. Thea slipped out of the bedroom and crossed the living room to stand unnoticed in the doorway to the kitchen. Or she should have been unnoticed, because her sneak-ered feet hadn't made any noise. But Richard Chance, standing with the refrigerator door open while he peered at the contents, turned immediately to smile at her, and that unnerving aquamarine gaze slid over her jean-clad legs with just as much appreciation as when she'd worn only the nightgown. It didn't matter to him what she wore; he saw the female flesh, not the casing, Thea realized, as her body tightened again in automatic response to that warmly sexual survey.

“Are you real?" she asked, the faint words slipping out without plan. "Am I crazy?" Her fingers tightened into fists as she waited for his answer.

He closed the refrigerator door and quickly crossed to her, taking one of her tightly knotted fists in his much bigger hand and lifting it to his lips. "Of course you're not crazy," he reassured her. His warm mouth pressed tenderly to each white knuckle, easing the tension from her hand. "Things are happening too fast and you're a little disoriented. That's all."

The explanation, she realized, was another of his ambiguous but strangely comforting statements. And if he was a figment of her imagination, he was

a very solid one, all muscle and body heat, complete with the subtle scent of his skin.
She gave him a long, considering look. "But if I am crazy," she said reasonably, "then you don't exist, so why should I believe anything you say?"
He threw back his head with a crack of laughter. "Trust me, Thea. You aren't crazy, and you aren't dreaming."
Trust me. The words echoed in her mind and her face froze, a chill running down her back as she stared up at him. Trust me. He'd said that to her before. She hadn't remembered until just now, but he'd said that to her in her dreams—the dreams in which he had killed her.
He saw her expression change, and his own expression became guarded. He turned away and poured two cups of coffee, placing them on the table before guiding her into one of the chairs. He sat down across from her and cradled a cup in both hands, inhaling the rich aroma of the steam.
He hadn't asked her how she liked her coffee, Thea noticed. Nor had she offered cream or sugar to him. He drank coffee the same way he did tea: black.
How did she even know he drank tea? A faint dizziness assailed her, and she gripped the edge of the table as she stared at him. It was the oddest sensation, as if she were sensing multiple images while her eyes saw only one. And for the first time she was conscious of a sense of incompletion, as if part of herself was missing.
She wrapped her hands around the hot cup in front of her, but didn't drink. Instead she eyed him warily. "All right, Mr. Chance, cards on the table. What about your dreams?"
He smiled and started to say something, but then reconsidered, and his smile turned rueful. Finally he shrugged, as if he saw no point in further evasion. "I've been dreaming about you for almost a month."
She had expected it, and yet hearing him admit it was still a shock. Her hands trembled a bit. "I—I've been dreaming about you, too," she confessed. "What's happening? Do we have some sort of psychic link? I don't even believe in stuff like that!"
He sipped his coffee, watching her over the rim of the cup. "What do you believe in, Thea? Fate? Chance? Coincidence?"
“All of that, I think," she said slowly. "I think some things are meant to be ... and some things just happen."

"How do you categorize us? Did this just happen, or are we meant to be?"
"You're assuming that there is an 'us'" she pointed out. "We've been having weird dreams, but that isn't..."
"Intimate?" he suggested, his gaze sharpening.
The dreams had certainly been that. Her cheeks pinkened as she recalled some of the sexually graphic details. She hoped his dreams hadn't been mirrors of hers . . . but they had, she realized, seeing the knowledge in his eyes. Her face turned even hotter.
He burst out laughing. "If you could see your expression!"
"Stop it," she said crossly, fixing her gaze firmly on her cup because she was too embarrassed to look at him. She didn't know if she would ever be able to face him again.
"Thea, darling." His tone was patient, and achingly tender as he tried to soothe her. "I've made love to you in every way a man can love a woman . . . but only in my dreams. How can a dream possibly match reality?"
If reality was any more intense than the dreams, she thought, it would surely kill her. She traced a pattern on the tabletop with her finger, stalling while she tried to compose herself. Just how real were the dreams? How could he call her "darling" with such ease, and why did it sound so right to her ears? She tried to remind herself that it had been less than twenty-four hours since she had seen him for the first time, but found that the length of time meant less than nothing. There was a bone-deep recognition between them that had nothing to do with how many times the sun had risen and set. She still couldn't look at him, but she didn't have to see him for every cell in her body to be vibrantly aware of him. The only other times she had felt so painfully alive and sensitive to another's presence were in her dreams of this man. She didn't know how, or why, their dreams had become linked, but the evidence was too overwhelming for her to deny that it had happened. But just how closely did the dreams match reality? She cleared her throat. "I know this is a strange question . . . but do you have a scar on your left thigh?"
He was silent for several moments, but finally she heard him sigh. "Yes."
She closed her eyes as the shock of his answer rolled through her. If the dreams were that accurate, then she had another question for him, and this one was far more important. She braced herself and asked it, her voice choking over the words. "In your dreams, have you killed me?"

Again he was silent, so long that finally she couldn't bear the pressure and glanced up at him. He was watching her, his gaze steady. "Yes," he said.
Thea shoved away from the table and bolted for the front door. He caught her there, simply wrapping his arms around her from behind and holding her locked to him. "My God, don't be afraid of me," he whispered into her tousled curls, his voice rough with emotion. "I would never hurt you. Trust me."
"Trust you!" she echoed incredulously, near tears as she struggled against his grip. "Trust you? How can I? How could I ever?"
"You're right about that, at least," he said, a hard tone edging into the words. "You've lowered yourself to let me touch you, give you pleasure, but you've never trusted me to love you."
She laughed wildly, with building hysteria. "I just met you yesterday! You're crazy—we're both crazy. None of this makes any sense." She clawed at his hands, trying to loosen his grasp. He simply adjusted his hold, catching her hands and linking his fingers through hers so she couldn't do any damage, and still keeping his arms wrapped around her. She was so effectively subdued that all she could do was kick at his shins, but as she was wearing sneakers and he had on boots, she doubted she was causing him much discomfort. But even knowing it was useless, she writhed and bucked against his superior strength until she had exhausted herself. Panting, unable to sustain the effort another second, she let her trembling muscles go limp.
Instantly he cuddled her closer, bending his head to brush his mouth against her temple. He kept his lips pressed there, feeling her pulse beating through the fragile skin. "It wasn't just yesterday that we met," he muttered. "It was a lifetime ago—several lifetimes. I've been here waiting for you. I knew you would come."
His touch worked an insidious magic on her; it always had. The present was blurring, mixing with the past so that she wasn't certain what was happening now and what had happened before. Just so had he held her that night when he had slipped through the camp of her father's army and sneaked into her bedchamber. Terror had beaten through her like the wings of a vulture, but she had been as helpless then as she was now. He had gagged her, and carried her silently through the night to his own camp, where he'd held her hostage against her father's attack.

She had been a virgin when he'd kidnapped her. When he had returned her, a month later, she had no longer been untouched. And she had been so stupidly in love with her erstwhile captor that she had lied to protect him, and ultimately betrayed her father.
Thea's head fell back against his shoulder. "I don't know what's happening," she murmured, and the words sounded thick, her voice drugged. The scenes that were in her head couldn't possibly be memories.
His lips sought the small hollow below her ear. "We've found each other again. Thea." As he had the first time, he said her name as if tasting it. "Thea. I like this name best of all."
"It's—it's Theadora." She had always wondered why her parents had given her such an old-fashioned, unusual name, but when she'd asked her mother had only said, rather bemusedly that they had simply liked it. Thea's brothers, on the other hand, had the perfectly comfortable names of Lee and Jason.
"Ah. I like that even better." He nipped her earlobe, his sharp teeth gently tugging.
"Who was I before?" she heard herself ask, then hurriedly shook her head. "Never mind. I don't believe any of this."
"Of course you do," he chided, and delicately licked the exposed, vulnerable cord of her arched neck. He was aroused again, she noticed, or maybe he'd never settled down to begin with. His hard length nestled against her jean-clad bottom. No other man had ever responded to her with such blatant desire, had wanted her so strongly and incessantly. AH she had to do was move her hips against him in that little teasing roll that always maddened him with lust, and he would take her now, pushing her against the castle wall and lifting her skirts—
Thea jerked her drifting mind from the waking dream, but reality was scarcely less provocative, or precarious. "I don't know what's real anymore," she cried.
"We are, Thea. We're real. I know you're confused. As soon as I saw you, I knew you'd just begun remembering. I wanted to hold you, but I knew it was too soon, I knew you were frightened by what's been happening. Let's drink our coffee, and I'll answer any questions you have."
Cautiously he released her, leaving Thea feeling oddly cold and abandoned. She turned to face him, looking up at the strong bones of his features, the intense watchfulness of his vivid eyes. She felt his hunger emanating from

him like a force field, enwrapping her in a primal warmth that counteracted the chill of no longer being in his arms. Another memory assailed her, of another time when she had stood and looked into his face, and-seen the desire so plainly in his eyes. At that time she had been shocked and frightened, an innocent, sheltered young lady who had suddenly been thrust into harsh conditions, and she'd had only his dubious protection from danger. Dubious not because of any lack of competence, but because she thought she might be in greater danger from him than from any outside threat.

Thea drew in a slow, deep breath, feeling again that internal blurring as past and present merged, and abruptly she knew how futile it was to keep fighting the truth. As unbelievable as it was, she had to accept what was happening. She had spent her entire life—this life, anyway— secure in a tiny time frame, unaware of anything else, but now the blinders were gone and she was seeing far too much. The sheer enormity of it overwhelmed her, asked her to cast aside the comfortable boundaries of her life and step into danger, for that was what Richard Chance had brought with him when he had entered her life again. She had loved him in all his incarnations, no matter how she had struggled against him. And he had desired her, violently, arrogantly ignoring danger to come to her again and again. But for all his desire, she thought painfully, in the end he had always destroyed her. Her dreams had been warnings, acquainting her with the past so she would know to avoid him in the present.

Go. That was all she had to do, simply pack and go. Instead she let him lead her back to the kitchen, where their cups sat with coffee still gently steaming. She was disconcerted to realize how little time had passed since she had fled the table.

"How did you know where to find me?" she asked abruptly, taking a fortifying sip of coffee. "How long have you known about me?"

He gave her a considering look, as if gauging her willingness to accept his answers, and settled into the chair across from her. "To answer your second question first, I've known about you for most of my life. I've always had strange, very detailed dreams, of different lives and different times, so I accepted all of this long before I was old enough to think it was impossible." He gave a harsh laugh as he too sought fortitude in caffeine. "Knowing about you, waiting for you, ruined me for other women. I won't lie and say I've been as chaste as a monk, but I've never had even a teenage

crush." He looked up at her, and his gaze was stark. "How could a giggling teen girl compete?" he whispered. "When I had the other memories, when I knew what it was to be a man, and make love to you?"
She hadn't had those memories until recently, but still she had gone through life romantically unscathed, the deepest part of her unable to respond to the men who had been interested in her. From the first, though, she hadn't been able to maintain any buffer against Richard. Both mentally and physically, she was painfully aware of him. He had grown up with this awareness, and it couldn't have been easy. It was difficult to picture, but at one time he had been a child, and in effect he had been robbed of a normal childhood and adolescence, of a normal life.
"As to how I found you," he continued, "the dreams led me here. The details I saw helped me narrow down the location. The dreams were getting stronger, and I knew you couldn't be far away. As soon as I saw this place, I knew this was it. So I rented the neighboring house, and waited."
"Where is your home?" she asked curiously.
He gave her an odd little smile. "I've lived in North Carolina for some time now."
She had the definite feeling that he wasn't telling her the entire truth. She sat back and studied him, considering her next question before voicing it.
"What do you do for a living?"
He laughed, and there was a tone at once rueful and joyous in the sound, as if he'd expected her to pin him down. "God, some things never change. I'm in the military, what else?"
Of course. He was a warrior born, in whatever lifetime. Snippets of information, gleaned from news broadcasts, slipped into place. With her inborn knowledge of him directing her, she hazarded a guess. "Fort Bragg?"
He nodded.
Special Forces, then. She wouldn't have known where they were based, if it hadn't been for all the news coverage during the Gulf War. A sudden terror seized her. Had he been in that conflict? What if he had been killed, and she had never known about him—
Then she wouldn't now have to fear for her own life.
Somehow that didn't mitigate the fear she felt for him. She had always been afraid for him. He lived with danger, and shrugged at it, but she had never been able to do that, "How did you get leave?"

"I had a lot of time due. I don't have to go back for another month, unless something unexpected happens." But there was a strained expression deep in his eyes, a resignation that she couldn't quite read.
He reached across the table and took her hand. His long, callused fingers wrapped around her slimmer, smaller ones, folding them in warmth. "What about you? Where do you live, what do you do?"
The safest thing would be not to tell him, but she doubted there was any point in it. After all, he had her name, and he probably had her license plate number. If he wanted to, he would be able to find her. "I live in White Plains. I grew up there; all of my family lives there." She found herself rattling on, suddenly anxious to fill him in on the details of her life. "My parents are still alive, and I have two brothers, one older and one younger. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"
He shook his head, smiling at her. "I have a couple of aunts and uncles, and some cousins scattered around the country, but no one close."
He had always been a loner, allowing no one to get close to him—except for her. In that respect, he had been as helpless as she.
"I paint houses," she said, still driven by the compulsion to fill all the gaps in their knowledge of each other. "The actual houses, not pictures of them. And I do murals." She felt herself tense, wanting him to approve, rather than express the incredulity some people did.
His fingers tightened on hers, then relaxed. "That makes sense. You've always loved making our surroundings as beautiful and comfortable as possible, whether it was a fur on the floor of the tent or wildflowers in a metal cup."
Until he spoke, she'd had no memory of those things, but suddenly she saw the pelts she had used to make their pallet on the tent floor, and the way the wildflowers, which she had arranged in a metal cup, had nodded their heads in the rush of cold air every time the flap was opened.
"Do you remember everything?" she whispered.
"Every detail? No. I can't remember every detail that's happened in this life, either; no one does. But the important things, yes."
"How many times have we ..." Her voice trailed off as she was struck once again by the impossibility of it.
"Made love?" he suggested, though he knew darn well that wasn't what she had been about to say. Still, his eyes took on a heated, sleepy expression. "Times without number. I've never been able to get enough of you."

Her body jolted with responding desire. Sternly she controlled it. It would mean her life if she gave in to the aching need to become involved with him again. "Lived," she corrected.

She sensed his reluctance to tell her, but he had sworn he would answer all her questions, and his word was his bond. "Twelve," he said, tightening his hand on hers again. "This is our twelfth time."

She nearly jumped out of her chair. Twelve! The number echoed in her head. She had remembered only half of those times, and those memories were partial. Overwhelmed, she tried to pull away from him. She couldn't keep her sanity under such an overload.

Somehow she found herself drawn around the table, and settled on his lap. She accepted the familiarity of the position, knowing that he had held her this way many times. His thighs were hard under her bottom, his chest a solid bulwark to shield her, his arms supporting bands of living steel. It didn't make sense that she should feel so safe and protected in the embrace of a man who was so much of a danger to her, but the contact with his body was infinitely comforting.

He was saying something reassuring, but Thea couldn't concentrate on the words. She tilted her head back against his shoulder, dizzy with the tumult of warring emotions. He looked down at her and caught his breath, falling silent as his gaze settled on her mouth.

She knew she should turn away, but she didn't, couldn't. Instead her arm slipped up around his neck, holding tightly to him as he bent his head and covered her mouth with his.

The taste of him was like coming home, their mouths fitting together without any awkwardness or uncertainty. A growl of hunger rumbled in his throat, and his entire body tensed as he took her mouth with his tongue. With the ease of long familiarity he thrust his hand under her T-shirt and closed it over her breast, working his fingers beneath the lace of the bra cup so his hand was on her bare skin, her nipple beading against his palm. Thea shuddered under his touch, a paroxysm of mingled desire and relief, as if she had been holding herself tightly against the pain of his absence and could only now relax. There had never been another man for her, she thought dimly as she sank under the pleasure of his kiss, and never would be. Though they seemed to be caught in a hellish death-dance, she could no more stop loving him than she could stop her own heartbeat.

His response to her was as deep and uncontrollable as hers was to him. She felt it in the quivering tension of his body, the raggedness of his breathing, the desperate need so plain in his touch. Why then, in all of their lives together, had he destroyed her? Tears seeped from beneath her lashes as she clung to him. Was it because of the force of his need? Had he been unable to bear being so much at the mercy of someone else, found his vulnerability to be intolerable, and in a sudden fury lashed out to end that need? No; she rejected that scenario, because one of her clearest memories was of the calmness in his aquamarine eyes as he'd forced her deeper into the water, holding her down until there was no more oxygen in her lungs and her vision clouded over.

A teardrop ran into the corner of her mouth, and he tasted the saltiness. He groaned, and his lips left her mouth to slide over her cheek, sipping up the moisture. He didn't ask why she was crying, didn't become anxious or uneasy. Instead he simply held her closer, silently comforting her with his presence. He had never been discomfited by her tears, Thea remembered, past scenes sliding through her memory like silken scarves, wispy but detectable. Not that she had ever been a weepy kind of person anyway; and when she had cried, more often than not he had been the cause of her tears. His response then had always been exactly what it was now: he'd held her, let her cry it out, and seldom veered from his set course, no matter how upset he'd made her.

"You've never compromised worth a damn," Thea muttered, turning her face into his shoulder to use his shirt as a handkerchief.

He effortlessly followed her chain of thought. He sighed as his fingers gently kneaded her breast, savoring the silkiness of her skin, the pebbling of her nipple. "We were always on opposite sides. I couldn't betray my country, my friends."

"But you expected me to," she said bitterly.

"No, never. Your memories are still cloudy and incomplete, aren't they? Sweetheart, you made some difficult decisions, but they were based on your own sense of justice, not because I coerced you."

"So you say." She grasped his wrist and shoved his hand out from under her shirt. "Because my memory is cloudy, I can't argue that point, can I?"

"You could try trusting me." The statement was quiet, his gaze intent.

"You keep saying that." She stirred restlessly on his lap. "Under the circumstances, that seems to be asking a bit much, don't you think? Or am I

safe with you, as long as we stay away from water?"
His mouth took on a bitter curve. "Trust has always been our problem." Lifting his hand, the one that had so recently cupped her breast, he toyed with one of her wayward curls. "On my part, too, I admit. I was never certain you wouldn't change your mind and betray me, instead."
"Instead of my father, you mean." Suddenly furious, she tried to struggle out of his lap. He simply tightened his arms, holding her in place as he had many times before.
"Your temper never changes," he observed, delight breaking through the grimness of his mood.
"I don't have a temper," Thea snapped, knowing full well her brothers would instantly disagree with that statement. She didn't have a hair-trigger temper, but she didn't back down from much, either.
"Of course you don't," he crooned, cuddling her closer, and the absolute love in his voice nearly broke her heart. How could he feel so intensely about her and still do what he did? And how could she still love him so much in return?
He held her in silence for a while, his heartbeat thudding against the side of her breast. The sensation was one she had felt many times before, lying cuddled on his left arm so his right arm, the one that wielded his sword, was unencumbered.
She wanted this, she realized. She wanted him, for a lifetime. For forever. In all their previous lifetimes, their time together had been numbered in months or even mere weeks, their loving so painfully intense she had sometimes panicked at the sheer force of what she was feeling. They had never been able to grow old together, to love each other without desperation or fear. Now she had a vital decision to make: should she run, and protect her life . . . or stay, and fight for their life together? The common sense that had ruled her life, at least until the dreams had disrupted everything, said to run. Her heart told her to hold to him as tightly as she could. Maybe, just maybe, if she was very cautious, she could win this time. She would have to be extremely wary of situations involving water. With the perfection of hindsight, she knew now that going to see the turtles with him had been foolhardy; she was lucky nothing bad had happened. Probably it simply wasn't time, yet, for whatever had happened in the past to happen again.
Things were different this time, she realized. Their circumstances were different. A thrill went through her as she realized that this time could be

different. "We aren't on opposing sides, this time," she whispered. "My father is a wonderful, perfectly ordinary family man, without an army to his name."
Richard chuckled, but quickly sobered. When Thea looked up, she saw the grimness in his eyes. "We have to get it right," he said quietly. "This is our twelfth time. I don't think we'll have another chance."
Thea drew back from him a little. "It would help if I understood why you did . . . what you did. I've never known. Tell me, Richard. That way I can guard against—"
He shook his head. "I can't. It all comes down to trust. That's the key to it all. I have to trust you. You have to trust me ... even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary."
"That's asking a lot," she pointed out in a dry tone. "Do you have to trust me to the same extent?"
"I already have." One comer of his mouth twitched in a wry smile. "The last time. That's probably why our circumstances have changed."
"What happened?"
"I can't tell you that, either. That would be changing the order of things. You either remember or you don't. We either get it right this time, or we lose forever."
She didn't like the choices. She wanted to scream at him, vent her fury at the mercilessness of fate, but knew it wouldn't do any good. She could only fight her own battle, knowing that it would mean her life if she failed. Maybe that was the point of it all, that each person was ultimately responsible for his or her own life. If so, she didn't much care for the lesson.
He began kissing her again, tilting her head up and drinking deeply from her mouth. Thea could have reveled in his kisses for hours, but all too soon he was drawing back, his breath ragged and desire darkening his eyes. "Lie down with me," he whispered. "It's been so long. I need you, Thea."
He did. His erection was iron-hard against her bottom. Still, for all the intimacy of their past lives, in this life she had only just met him, and she was reluctant to let things go so far, so fast. He saw her refusal in her expression before she could speak, and muttered a curse under his breath. "You do this every time," he said in raw frustration. "You drive me crazy. Either you make me wait when I'm dying to have you, or you tease me into making love to you when I know damn well I shouldn't."

"Is that so?" Thea slipped off his lap and gave him a sultry glance over her shoulder. She had never given anyone a sultry glance before, and was mildly surprised at herself for even knowing how, but the gesture had come naturally. Perhaps, in the past, she had been a bit of a temptress. She liked the idea. It felt right. Richard's personality was so strong that she needed something to help keep him in line.

He glowered at her, and his hands clenched into fists. If they had been further along in their relationship, she thought, he wouldn't have taken no for an answer, at least not yet. First he would have made a damn good effort at seducing her—an effort that had usually succeeded. Whatever his name, and whatever the time, Richard had always been a devastatingly sensual lover. But he too felt the constraints of newness, knew that she was still too skittish for what he wanted.

Stiffly he got to his feet, wincing in discomfort. "In that case, we should get out of here, maybe drive into town for lunch. Or breakfast," he amended, glancing at his wristwatch.

Thea smiled, both amused and touched by his thoughtfulness. Being in public with him did seem a lot safer than staying here. "Just like a date," she said, and laughed. "We've never done that before."

it was A delightful day, full of the joy of rediscovery. After eating breakfast at the lone cafe in the small nearby town, they drove the back roads, stopping occasionally to get out and explore on foot. Richard carefully avoided all streams and ponds, so Thea was relaxed, and could devote herself to once again learning to know this man she had always loved. So many things he did triggered memories, some of them delicious and some disturbing. To say their past lives together had been tumultuous would have been to understate the matter. She was shocked to remember the time she had used a knife to defend herself from him, an encounter that had ended in bloodletting: his. And in lovemaking.

But with each new memory, she felt more complete, as the missing parts slipped into place. She felt as if she had been only one-dimensional for the twenty-nine years of her life, and only now was becoming a full, real person.

And there were new things to discover about him. He hadn't been freeze-dried; he was a modern man, with memories and experiences that didn't include her. Occasionally he used an archaic term or phrasing that amused her, until she caught herself doing the same thing.

"I wonder why we remember, this time," she mused as they strolled along a deserted lane, with the trees growing so thickly overhead that they formed a cool, dim tunnel. They had left his Jeep a hundred yards back, pulled to the side so it wouldn't block the nonexistent traffic. "We never did before."
"Maybe because this is the last time." He held her hand in his. She wanted to just stare at him, to absorb the details of his erect, military bearing, the arrogant angle of his dark head, the stubborn jut of his jaw. Panic filled her at the thought of this being the end, of losing him forever if she didn't manage to outwit fate.
She tightened her fingers on his. That was what she had to do: fight fate. If she won, she'd have a life with this man she had loved for two millennia. If she lost, she would die. It was that simple.
The next morning, Thea lay motionless in the predawn hour, her breath sighing in and out in the deep, easy rhythm of sleep. The dream began to unfold, as long-ago scenes played out in her unconsciousness.
The lake was silent and eerily beautiful in the dawn. She stood on the dock and watched the golden sun rise from behind the tall, dark trees, watched the lake turn from black to deep rose as it reflected the glow of the sky. She loved the lake in all its moods, but sunrise was her favorite. She waited, and was rewarded by the haunting cry of a loon as the lake awoke and greeted the day. Her child moved within her, a gentle fluttering as tiny limbs stretched. She smiled, and her hand slipped down to rest atop the delicate movement. She savored the feel of that precious life. Her child—and his. For five months now she had harbored it within her, delighting in each passing day as her body changed more and more. The slight swell of her belly was only now becoming noticeable. She had been in seclusion here at the lake, but soon her condition would be impossible to hide. She would face that problem, and her father's rage, when it became necessary, but she wouldn't let anything harm this child.
She still woke up aching for the presence of her lover, weeping for him, for what might have been had he been anyone else, had she been anyone else. Damn men, and damn their wars. She would have chosen him, had he given her the chance, but he hadn't. Instead he had simply ridden out of her life, not trusting her to love him enough. He didn't know about the new life he had left inside her.
The dock suddenly vibrated beneath her as booted feet thudded on the boards. Startled, she turned, and then stood motionless with shock,

wondering if she was dreaming or if her longing had somehow conjured him out of the dawn. Faint wisps of mist swirled around him as he strode toward her. Her heart squeezed painfully. Even if he wasn't real, she thanked God for this chance to see him so clearly again—his thick dark hair, his vibrant, sea-colored eyes, the muscular perfection of his body.
Five feet from her he stopped, as suddenly as if he had hit a wall. His incredulous gaze swept down her body, so clearly outlined in the thin nightgown that was all she wore, with the sun shining behind her. He saw her hand resting protectively on the swell of her belly, in the instinctive touch of a pregnant woman.
He was real. Dear God, he was real. He had come back to her. She saw his shock mirrored in his eyes as he confronted the reality of impending fatherhood. He stared at her belly for a long, silent moment before dragging his gaze back up to hers. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked hoarsely.
"I didn't know," she said. "Until after you'd gone."
He approached her, as cautiously as if confronting a wild animal, slowly reaching out his hand to rest it on her belly. She quivered at the heat and vitality of his touch, and nearly moaned aloud as the pain of months without him eased from her flesh. Couldn't he sense how much he had hurt her? Couldn't he tell that his absence had nearly killed her, that only the realization she was carrying his child had given her a reason to live?
And then she felt the quiver that ran through him, too, as his hands closed on her body. Pure heat sizzled between them. She drew a deep, shaky breath of desire, her body softening and warming, growing moist for him in instinctive preparation.
"Let me see you," he groaned, already tugging her nightgown upward.
Somehow she found herself lying on the dock, her naked body bathed in the pearly morning light. The discarded nightgown protected her soft skin from the rough wood beneath her. The water lapped softly around her, beneath her, yet not touching her. She felt as if she were floating, anchored only by those strong hands. She closed her eyes, giving him privacy to acquaint himself with all the changes in her body, the changes she knew so intimately. His rough hands slipped over her as lightly as silk, touching her darkened, swollen nipples, cupping the fuller weight of her breasts in his palms. Then they moved down to her belly, framing the small, taut mound of his child.

She didn't open her eyes, even when he parted her legs., raising her knees and spreading them wide so he could look at her. She caught her breath at the cool air washing over her most intimate flesh, and the longing for him intensified. Couldn't he sense how much she needed him, couldn't he feel the vibrancy of her body under his hands? Of course he could. She had never been able to disguise her desire for him, even when she had desperately tried. She heard the rhythm of his breathing become ragged, and glowed with the knowledge of his desire.

"You're so lovely, it hurts to look at you," he whispered. She felt one long, callused finger explore the delicacies between her legs, stroking and rubbing before sliding gently inward. Her senses spun with the shock of that small invasion; her back arched off the dock, and he soothed her with a deep murmur. And then she felt him moving closer, positioning himself between her legs, adjusting his clothing, and she lay there in an agony of anticipation waiting for the moment when they would be together again, one again, whole again. Refilled her so smoothly that he might have been part of her, and they both gasped at the perfection of it. Then the time for rational thought was past, and they could only move together, cling together, his strength complemented by her delicacy, male and female, forever mated.

Thea moaned in her sleep as her dream lover brought her to ecstasy, and then became still again as the dream altered, continued.

The water closed over her head, a froth of white marking the surface where she had gone under. The shock of it, after the ecstasy she had just known with him, paralyzed her for long, precious moments. Then she thought of the baby she carried, and silently screamed her fury that it should be endangered. She began struggling wildly against the inexorable grip that was tugging her downward, away from air, away from life. She couldn't let anything happen to this baby, no matter what its father had done. Despite everything, she loved him, loved his child.

But she couldn't kick free of the bond that dragged her down. Her nightgown kept twisting around her legs, instead of floating upward. Her lungs heaved in agony, trying to draw in air. She
fought the impulse, knowing that she would inhale only death. Fight. She had to fight for her baby.

Powerful hands were on her shoulders, pushing her deeper into the water. Despairing, her vision failing, she stared through the greenish water into the

cool, remote eyes of the man she loved so much she would willingly have followed him anywhere. He was
forcing her down, down, away from the life-giving air.
"Why?" she moaned, the word soundless. The deadly water
filled her mouth, her nostrils, rushed down her throat. She couldn't hold on much longer. Only the baby gave her the strength to continue fighting, as she struggled against those strong hands, trying to push him away. Her baby . . . she had to save her baby. But the darkness was increasing, clouding over her eyes, and she knew that she had lost. Her last thought in this life was a faint, internal cry of despair: "Why?"
Helpless sobs shook Thea's body as she woke. She curled on her side, overwhelmed by grief, grief for her unborn child, grief for the man she had loved so much that not even her destruction at his hands had been able to kill her feelings for him. It didn't make sense. He had made love to her, and then he had drowned her. How could a man feel his own child kicking in its mother's belly, and then deliberately snuff out that helpless life? Regardless of how he felt about her, how could he have killed his baby?
The pain was shattering. She heard the soft, keening sound of her sobs as she huddled there, unable to move, unable to think.
Then she heard the Jeep, sliding to a hard stop in the driveway, its tires slinging gravel. She froze, terror running like ice water through her veins. He was here. She should have remembered that he had the same dreams she did; he knew that she knew about those last nightmarish moments beneath the water. She couldn't begin to think what he was trying to accomplish by repeating her death over and over through the ages, but suddenly she had no doubt that, if she remained there, she would shortly suffer the same fate again. After that last dream, there was no way he could sweet-talk her out of her fear the way he had done before.
She jumped out of bed, not taking the time to grab her clothes. Her bare feet were silent as she raced from the bedroom, across the living room, and into the kitchen. She reached the back door just as his big fist thudded against the front one. "Thea." His deep voice was forceful, but restrained, as if he were trying to convince her she wasn't in any danger.
The deep shadows of early dawn still shrouded the rooms, the graying light too weak to penetrate beyond the windows. Like a small animal trying to escape notice by a predator, Thea held herself very still, her head cocked as she listened for the slightest sound of his movements.

Could she slip out the back door without making any betraying noise? Or was he even now moving silently around the house in order to try this very door? The thought of opening the door and coming face-to-face with him made her blood run even colder than it already was.
"Thea, listen to me."
He was still on the front porch. Thea fumbled for the chain, praying that her shaking hands wouldn't betray her. She found the slot and slowly, agonizingly, slid the chain free, holding the links in her hand so they wouldn't clink. Then she reached for the lock.
"It isn't what you think, sweetheart. Don't be afraid of me, please. Trust me."
Trust him! She almost laughed aloud, the hysterical bubble moving upward despite her best efforts. She finally choked the sound back. He'd said that so often that the two words had become a litany. Time and again she had trusted him—with her heart, her body, the life of her child—and each time he had turned on her.
She found the lock, silently turned it.
"Thea, I know you're awake. I know you can hear me."
She opened the door by increments, holding her breath against any squeaks that would alert him. An inch of space showed gray light coming through the slot. Dawn was coming closer by the second, bringing with it the bright light that would make it impossible for her to hide from him. She didn't have her car keys, she realized, and the knowledge almost froze her in place. But she didn't dare go back for them; she would have to escape on foot.
That might be best anyway. If she were in the car, he would easily be able to follow her. She felt far more vulnerable on foot, but hiding would be much easier.
Finally the door was open enough that she could slip through. She held her breath as she left the precarious safety of the house. She wanted to cower behind its walls, but knew that he would soon break a window and get in, or kick down the door. He was a warrior, a killer. He could get in. She wasn't safe there.
The back stoop wasn't enclosed, just a couple of steps with an awning overhead to keep out the rain. There was a screen door there, too. Cautiously she unlatched it, and began the torturous process of easing it open, nerves drawing tighter and tighter. Fiercely she concentrated, staring

at the spring coil, willing it to silence. There was a tiny creak, one that couldn't have been audible more than a few feet away, but sweat dampened her body. An inch, two inches, six. The opening grew wider. Eight inches. Nine. She began to slip through.

Richard came around the side of the house. He saw her and sprang forward, like a great hunting beast.

Thea cried out and jumped backward, slamming the kitchen door and fumbling with the lock. Too late! He would come through that door, lock or not. She sensed his determination and left the lock undone, choosing instead an extra second of time as she sprinted for the front door.

The back door slammed open just as she reached the front. It was still locked. Her chest heaved with panic, her breath catching just behind her breastbone and going no deeper. Her shaking, jerking fingers tried to manipulate the chain, the lock.

"Thea!" his voice boomed, reverberating with fury.

Sobbing, she jerked the door open and darted out onto the porch, shoving the outside screen door open, too, launching herself through it, stumbling, falling to her knees in the tall, wet grass.

He burst through the front door. She scrambled to her feet, pulled the hem of her nightgown to her knees, and ran for the road.

"Damn it, listen to me!" he shouted, sprinting to cut her off. She swerved as he lunged in front of her, but he managed once again to get between her and the road.

Despair clouded her vision; sobs choked her. She was cornered. He was going to kill her, and once again she was helpless to protect herself.

She let her nightgown drop, the folds covering her feet, as she stared at him with tear-blurred eyes. The gray light was stronger now; she could see the fierceness of his eyes, the set of his jaw, the sheen of perspiration on his skin. He wore only a pair of jeans. No shirt, no shoes. His powerful chest rose and fell with his breathing, but he wasn't winded at all, while she was exhausted. She had no chance against him.

Slowly she began to back away from him, the pain inside her unfurling until it was all she could do to breathe, for her heart to keep beating. "How could you?" she sobbed, choking on the words. "Our baby . . . How could you?"

"Thea, listen to me." He spread his hands in an open gesture meant to reassure her, but she knew too much about him to be fooled. He didn't need

a weapon; he could kill with his bare hands. "Calm down, sweetheart. I know you're upset, but come inside with me and we'll talk."
Angrily she dashed the tears from her cheeks. "Talk! What good would that do?" she shrieked. "Do you deny that it happened? You didn't just kill me, you killed our child, too!" Still she backed away, the pain too intense to let her remain even that close to him. She felt as if she were being torn apart inside, the grief so raw and unmanageable that she felt as if she would welcome death now, to escape this awful pain.
He looked beyond her, and his expression shifted, changed. A curious blankness settled in his eyes. His entire body tensed as he seemed to gather himself, as if he were about to spring. "You're getting too close to the water," he said in a flat, emotionless voice. "Come away from the bank."
Thea risked a quick glance over her shoulder, and saw that she was on the edge of the bank, the cool, deadly lake lapping close to her bare feet. Her tears blurred the image, but it was there, silently waiting to claim her.
The unreasoning fear of the lake gnawed at her, but was as nothing when measured against the unrelenting grief for her child. She changed the angle of her retreat, moving toward the dock. Richard kept pace with her, not advancing any closer, but not leaving her any avenue of escape, either. The inevitability of it all washed over her. She had thought she could outwit fate, but her efforts had been useless from the very beginning.
Her bare feet touched wood, and she retreated onto the dock. Richard halted, his aquamarine gaze fastened on her. "Don't go any farther," he said sharply. "The dock isn't safe. Some of the boards are rotten and loose. Come off the dock, baby. Come to me. I swear I won't hurt you."
Baby. Shards of pain splintered her insides, and she moaned aloud, her hand going to her belly as if her child still rested there. Desperately she backed away from him, shaking her head.
He set one foot on the dock. "I can't bring that child back," he said hoarsely. "But I'll give you another one. We'll have as many children as you want. Don't leave me this time, Thea. For God's sake, let's get off this dock."
"Why?" Tears were still blurring her vision, running down her cheeks, a bottomless well of grief. "Why put it off? Why not get it over with now?"
She moved back still more, feeling the boards creak and give beneath her bare feet. The water was quite deep at the end of the dock; it had been perfect for three boisterous kids to dive and frolic in, without fear of hitting their heads on the bottom. If she was destined to die here, then so be it.

Water. It was always water. She had always loved it, and it had always claimed her in the end.
Richard slowly stepped forward, never taking his eyes off her, his hand outstretched. "Please. Just take my hand, darling. Don't move back any more. It isn't safe."
"Stay away from me!" she shrieked.
"I can't." His lips barely moved. "I never could." He took another step. "Thea—"
Hastily, she stepped back. The board gave beneath her weight, then began to crack. She felt one side collapse beneath her, pitching her sideways into the water. She had only a blurred, confused image of Richard leaping forward, his face twisting with helpless rage, before the water closed over her head.
It was cool, murky. She went down, pulled by some unseen hand. The darkness of the dock pilings drifted in front of her as she went deeper, deeper. After all the terror and pain, it was almost a relief for it to end, and for a long moment she simply gave in to the inevitable. Then instinct took over, as irresistible as it was futile, and she began fighting, trying to kick her way to the surface. But her nightgown was twisted around her legs, pulling tighter and tighter the more she struggled, and she realized that she had caught it in the broken boards. The boards were pulling her down, and with her legs bound she couldn't generate enough energy to counteract their drag.
If she could have laughed, she would have. This time, Richard wouldn't have to do anything. She had managed to do the deed herself. Still, she didn't stop fighting, trying to swim against the pull of the boards.
The surface roiled with his dive, as he cut through the water just to her left. Visibility was poor, but she could see the gleam of his skin, the darkness of his hair. He spotted her immediately, the white of her nightgown giving away her position, and he twisted his body in her direction.
Anger speared through her. He just had to see it through; he couldn't let the lake do its work without his aid. Probably he wanted to make certain she didn't fight her way free.
She put up her hands to ward him off, redoubling her efforts to reach the surface. She was using up all her oxygen in her struggles, and her lungs were burning, heaving with the need to inhale. Richard caught her flailing

hands and began pushing her down, down, farther away from the light, from life.
Thea saw his eyes, calm and remote, every atom of his being concentrated on what he was doing. She had little time left, so very little. Pain swirled inside her, and anger at the fate that was hers, despite her best efforts. Desperately she tried to jerk free of him, using the last of her strength for one final effort. . . .
Despite everything, she had always loved him so much, beyond reason, even beyond death.
That was an even deeper pain: the knowledge that she was leaving him forever. Their gazes met through the veil of murky water, his face so close to hers that she could have kissed him, and through the growing darkness she saw her anguish mirrored in his eyes. Trust me, he'd said repeatedly. Trust me . . . even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Trust me. . . .
Trust him.
Realization spread through Thea like a sunburst. Trust.
She had never been able to trust him, or in his love for her. They had been like two wary animals, longing to be together, but not daring to let themselves be vulnerable to the other. They hadn't trusted. And they had paid the price.
Trust him.
She stopped struggling, letting herself go limp, letting him do what he would. She had no more strength anyway. Their gazes still held, and with her eyes she gave herself to him, her love shining through. Even if it was too late, she wanted him to know that in the end, no matter what, she loved him.
She saw his pupils flare, felt his renewed effort as he pushed her down, all the way to the bottom. Then, without the weight of the boards dragging at her, he was able to get enough slack in the fabric of her nightgown to work it free of the entangling wood. The last bubble of air escaped her lips as he wrapped his arm around her waist and used his powerful legs to propel them upward, to the surface and wonderful oxygen, to life.
"God, please, PLEASE, oh God, please." She heard his desperate, muttered prayer as he dragged her out of the water, but she couldn't respond, couldn't move, as she flopped like a rag doll in his arms. Her lungs weren't quite working; she couldn't drag in the deep, convulsive breaths that she needed.

Richard dropped her on the grass and began pounding her on the back. Her lungs jerked, then heaved, and she coughed up a quantity of lake water. He continued to beat her on the back, until she thought he would break her ribs.
"I'm ... all ... right," she managed to gasp, trying to evade that thumping fist. She coughed some more, gagging.
He collapsed beside her in his own paroxysm of coughing, his muscular chest heaving as he fought for air.
Thea struggled onto her side, reaching for him, needing to touch him. They lay in the grass, shivering and coughing, as the first warming rays of the sun crept across the lake to touch them. Convulsively he clasped her to him, tears running down his cheeks, muttering incoherently as he pressed desperate kisses to her face, her throat. His big body was taut, shaking with a tension that wouldn't relent. He rolled her beneath him, jerking the sodden folds of her nightgown to her waist. Thea felt his desperate, furious need, and lay still as he fought with the wet, stubborn fabric of his jeans, finally getting them open and peeling them down. He pushed her legs open and stabbed into her, big and hot and so hard that she cried out even as she held him as tightly as she could.
He rode her hard and fast, needing this affirmation that they both still lived, needing this link with her. Thea's response soared out of control and she climaxed almost immediately, crying out with the joy of having him there with her as she clung to him with arms and legs. He bucked wildly, shuddered, and she felt the warm flood of his orgasm within her, then he fell onto the grass beside her.
He lay there holding her for a long time, her head cradled on his shoulder, neither of them able to stop touching the other. He smoothed back her unruly tumble of curls; she stroked his chest, his arms. He kissed her temple; she nuzzled his jaw. He squeezed and stroked her breasts; her hands kept wandering down to his naked loins. She imagined they made quite a picture of debauchery, lying there on the ground with her nightgown hiked to her waist and his jeans down around his knees, but the sun was warm and she was drowsy, her body replete with satisfaction, and she didn't much care.
Eventually he moved, kicking his legs free of the damp jeans. She smiled as he stretched out, blissfully naked. He had never been blessed with an overabundance of modesty. But then, it was almost a crime to cover up a body like his. She sighed with her own bliss, thinking of the naughty things

she planned to do to him later, when they were sprawled out in that big bed. Some things required a mattress rather than grass. Though those pelts had been wonderful . . .
"All those times," she murmured, kissing his shoulder. "You were trying to save me."
His vivid eyes slitted open as he gathered her closer. "Of course," he said simply "I couldn't live without you."
But you did. The comment died on her lips as she stared at him, reading his expression. His eyes were calm, and accepting. Emotion swelled in her chest until she could barely breathe, and tears glittered in her eyes. "Damn you," she said shakily. He hadn't lived. Each time, when he had failed to save her, he had remained there with her, choosing to share her death rather than live without her. This had been his last chance as well as hers, and theirs. "Damn you," she said again, thumping him on the chest with her fist. "How could you do that? Why didn't you live?"
A slow smile touched his lips as he played with one of her curls. "Would you have?" he asked, and the smile grew when she scowled at him. No, she couldn't have left him in the water and gone on living. She would have remained with him.
"You little hellcat," he said contentedly, gathering her against his chest. "You've led me on quite a chase, but I've caught you now. We finally got it right."

Epilogue

Two days later Thea and Richard were sitting outside in the swing, which he had repaired, contentedly watching the lake. Her bare feet were in his lap and he was massaging them, saying he wanted to get in practice for when she was big with pregnancy and would need such services. Both of them were absurdly positive that their first lovemaking had been fertile, and her happiness was so intoxicating that she felt giddy.
Her fear of the water had disappeared as suddenly as it had formed. She hadn't been swimming yet, but that was more because of Richard's anxieties than her own. Whenever they walked, he still positioned himself between her and the water, and she wondered if he would ever relax his vigil.

Plans. They'd made a lot of plans for their life together. For one thing, she would be moving to North Carolina. Her warrior wasn't just "in" the Special Forces—he was a lieutenant colonel. Since he was only thirty-five, that meant he had a lot of time left to reach general, which was probably inevitable. Thea rather thought she would have to give up painting houses; it just wasn't the thing for a general's wife to do. The murals, though, were something else. . . .

For now, though, they were selfishly enjoying getting reac-quainted with each other, hugging every moment of privacy to themselves. They had cleaned up the yard, and this morning they had started preparing the house for its new coat of paint. Most of the time, though, they had spent in bed.

She tilted her face up to the sun, and gently cupped her hand over her belly. It was there. She knew it was. She didn't need either drugstore or lab test to confirm what she felt in every cell of her body. Too tiny almost to be seen, as yet, but indubitably there.

Richard's hand covered hers, and she opened her eyes to find him smiling at her. "Boy or girl?" he asked.

She hesitated. "What do you think?"

"I asked first."

"Let's say it together. You go first."

His mouth opened, then he stopped and narrowed his eyes at her. "Almost got you," she said smugly

"Smart-ass. All right, it's a boy."

She twined her fingers with his, sighing with contentment. "I agree." A son. Richard's son. The baby who had died with her had been a daughter. She blinked back tears for that child, wondering if it was forever lost, or if it too had been given another chance.

"She'll have another chance," Richard whispered, gathering Thea close. "Maybe next time. We'll know."

Yes, they would. Each night, her memory became more complete as the dreams continued. Richard still shared them, and they would awaken to find their bodies locked together, ecstasy still pulsing through them. They were linked, body and soul, the past revealed to them as it was to only a few lucky people.

They heard the cars before they could see them, and Thea sat up, swinging her feet to the ground. Richard stood, automatically moving to place himself between her and whoever approached. Thea tugged on his belt and

he looked around, a sheepish look crossing his face as he realized what he'd done.
"Old habits," he said, shrugging. "Real old."
Then the three cars came into view, and Thea watched in astonishment as her entire family drove up. It took her a moment to realize. "Today's my birthday!" she gasped. "I'd forgotten!"
"Birthday, huh?" He looped an arm over her shoulders. "How about that. That makes you . . . thirty, right? I have to tell you, this is the oldest you've ever been. But you're holding up good."
"Thankyou so much." Grinning, she caught his hand and began tugging him forward. She'd see if he was so sassy after being overwhelmed by her family. Nieces and nephews were spilling out of open doors, running toward her, while adults unfolded themselves at a slower pace. Lee and Cynthia, Jason and June, and her mom and dad all approached a bit warily, as if afraid they had intruded on a romantic getaway.
"I didn't realize you'd brought company with you, dear," her mom said, looking Richard up and down with a mother's critical assessment.
Richard laughed, the sound low and easy. "She didn't," he said, holding out his hand to Thea's father. "My name is Richard Chance. I'm renting the house next door."
Her father grinned. "I'm Paul Marlow, Thea's father. This is my wife, Emily." Polite introductions were made all around, and Thea had to bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud. Though her father was perfectly relaxed, and both Cynthia and June were smiling happily at Richard, her mom and brothers were scowling suspiciously at the warrior in their midst.
Before anything embarrassing could be said, she slipped her arm through Richard's. "Lieutenant Colonel Richard Chance," she said mildly. "On leave from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And, for the record, my future husband."
The words worked a sea change in her more pugnacious relatives. Amid a flurry of congratulations and squeals, plus tears from her mother, she heard her father say reflectively, "That's fast work, you've known each other, what, four or five days?"
"No," Richard said with perfect aplomb. "We've known each other off and on for years, but the timing wasn't right. Everything worked out this time, though. I guess it was just meant to be."

-- Blue Moon --

1

One full moon a month was bad enough, Sheriff Jackson Brody thought sourly; two should be outlawed. Nature's rule of survival of the fittest had been all but negated by humans, with advances in modern medicine and the generally held view that all life was worth saving, with the result that there were a lot of very weird, and/or stupid people out there, and they all seemed to surface during a full moon.

He was not in a good mood after working a car accident on a county road. As sheriff, his duties were not supposed to include working wrecks, but damned if every full moon he didn't find himself doing exactly that. The county was small and poor, mostly rural, and couldn't afford the number of deputies he needed, so he was always juggling schedules anyway. Add the madness of a full moon to an understaffed department, and the problems multiplied.

The accident he had just worked made him so furious he had been stretching the limits of his willpower not to cuss at the participants. He couldn't call them victims, unless it was of their own stupidity. The only victim was the poor little boy who had been in the passenger seat of the car. It all started when the driver of the first vehicle, a pickup truck, woke up and realized he had missed his turn by about a quarter of a mile. Instead of going on and finding a place to turn around, the idiot began backing up, going the wrong way down a narrow two-lane blacktop, around a blind curve. He was an accident waiting to happen, and he hadn't had to wait long. A woman came speeding around the curve, doing over sixty miles an hour on a road with a posted speed limit of thirty-five, and plowed into the rear of the pickup. She wasn't wearing a seatbelt. Neither was the four-year-old sitting in the front seat. For that matter, neither was the driver of the pickup. It was nothing less than a miracle that all three had survived, though the little boy was severely injured and Jackson had seen enough accident victims to know his chances were no better than fifty-fifty, at best. The car had had airbags, at least, which had kept the two in the car from going through the windshield.

He had given the woman citations for reckless driving, not wearing a seatbelt, and not properly securing her child, and she began screaming at him. Had he ever tried to make a four-year-old sit down and wear a

seatbelt? The blankety-blank things chafed her blankety-blank neck, and the state had no business telling people what they could do on their private property, which her car was, and the car had airbags anyway so there was no need for seat-belts, blah blah blah. There she was, with bulging eyes and unkempt hair, a living testament to the destructive power of recessive genes, throwing a hissy fit about getting traffic tickets while her screaming child was being carried away in an ambulance. Privately, Jackson thought people like her had no business having children in their care, but he made a heroic effort and kept the observation to himself.

Then the driver of the pickup, he of the bulging beer belly and breath that would fell a moose at fifty paces, added his opinion that he thought her driver's license should be taken away because this was all her fault for rear-ending him. When Jackson then gave him citations for reckless driving and driving in the wrong lane, he was enraged. This accident wasn't his fault, he bellowed, and damned if he was going to get stuck with higher insurance premiums because a stupid hick sheriff didn't know an accident was always the fault of the one doing the rear-ending. Any fool could look at where his truck was hit and tell who was at fault here.

Jackson didn't bother explaining the difference between the truck's hood being pointed in the right direction while the truck itself was going in reverse. He just wrote the tickets and in the accident report stated that both drivers were at fault, and seriously pondered whether or not he should lock these two up for the safety of the universe. Terminal stupidity wasn't on the books as a chargeable offense, but it should be, in his opinion.

But he restrained himself, and oversaw the transportation of both furious drivers to the local hospital to be checked out, and the removal of the damaged vehicles. When he finally crawled back into his Jeep Cherokee it was pushing four o'clock, long past lunch time. He was tired, hungry, and both angry and discouraged.

Generally he loved his work. It was a job where he could make a difference in people's lives, in society. Granted, it was usually scut work; he dealt with the worst of society, while having to maneuver on tippy-toes through a tangle of laws and regulations. But when everything worked and a drug dealer got sent away for a few years, or a murderer was put away forever, or a burglary gang was rounded up and an old lady on Social Security got her 19-inch television back, that made it all worthwhile.

He was a good sheriff, though he hated the political side of it, hated having to campaign for office. He was just thirty-five, young for the office, but the county was so poor it couldn't afford someone who was both good and with a lot of experience, because those people went where the pay was better. The citizens had taken a chance with him two years ago and he'd been doing his best at a job he loved. Not many people had that chance.

During full moons, however, he doubted his own sanity. He had to be a fool or an idiot, or both, to want a job that put him on the front lines during the periods of rampant weirdness. Cops and emergency room personnel could all testify to the craziness that went on during a full moon.

A nurse at the local hospital, after reading a report that the tales about full moons were just myths, that the accident rate didn't really go up, kept a record for a year. Not only did the number of accidents go up, but that was when they got the really strange ones, like the guy who had his buddy nail his hands together so his wife wouldn't ask him to help with the housework on his day off. It was obvious to them: a man couldn't very well work with his hands nailed together, now could he? The scariest thing about it was that both of them had been sober.

So one full moon a month was all Jackson felt any human should be called upon to endure. A blue moon, the second full moon in a single month, fell under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment.

And because it was a blue moon, he wasn't surprised, when he radioed in that he was finished with the accident and heading for a bite to eat, that the dispatcher said, "You might want to hold off on the food, and check in on a secure line."

Jackson stifled a groan. A couple of clues told him he really didn't want to know what this one was. For one thing, though the radio traffic was usually businesslike, for the benefit of the good citizens who listened in on their scanners, the dispatcher had fallen into a more personal tone. And they didn't bother to check in on a secure line unless there was something going on they didn't want the listeners to know about, which meant it was either something sensitive like one of the town fathers acting up, or something personal. He hoped the issue was sensitive, because he sure as hell didn't feel like dealing with anything personal, like his mother running amuck at her regular Wednesday bingo game.

He picked up his digital cell phone and checked whether or not he had service in this part of the county; he did, though it wasn't the strongest

signal. He flipped the cover open and dialed the dispatcher. "This is Brody What's up?"
Jo Vaughn had been the dispatcher for ten years, and he couldn't think of anyone he would rather have on the job. Not only did she know just about every inhabitant of the small south Alabama county, something that had been a tremendous aid to him, but she also had an eerily accurate instinct for what was urgent and what wasn't. Sometimes the citizens involved might not agree, but Jackson always did.
"I've got a bad feeling," she announced. "Shirley Waters saw Thaniel Vargas hauling his flat-bottom down Old Boggy Road. There's nothing out that way except the Jones's place, and you know how Thaniel is."
Jackson took a moment to reflect. This was one of those times when growing up in west Texas instead of south Alabama was a definite handicap. He knew where Old Boggy Road was, but only because he had spent days looking at county maps and memorizing the roads. He had never personally been on Old Boggy, though. And he knew who Thaniel Vargas was; a slightly thick-headed troublemaker, the type found in every community. Thaniel was hot-tempered, a bit of a bully, and he liked his beer a little too much. He'd been in some trouble with the law, but nothing serious enough to rate more than a few fines and warnings.
Other than that, though, Jackson drew a blank. "Refresh me."
"Well, you know how superstitious he is."
His eyebrows lifted. He hadn't expected that. "No, I didn't know," he said dryly. "What does that have to do with him taking his boat down Old Boggy Road, and who are the Joneses?"
"Jones," Jo corrected. "There's just one now, since old man Jones died four —no, let's see, it was right after Beatrice Marbut's husband died in his girlfriend's trailer, so that would make it five years ago—"
Jackson closed his eyes and refrained from asking what difference it made how long ago old man Jones died. Hurrying a Southerner through a conversation was like trying to push a rope, though sometimes he couldn't stop himself from trying.
"—and Delilah's been out there alone ever since."
He took a wild stab at getting to the point of Jo's anxiety. "And Thaniel Vargas dislikes Mrs. Jones?"
"Miss. She's never been married."
The wild stab hadn't worked. "Then old man Jones

was—"
"Her father."
"Okay." He tried again. "Why does Thaniel dislike Miss Jones?"
"Oh, I wouldn't say he dislikes her. It's more like he's scared to death of her."
He took a deep breath. "Because . . . ?"
"Because of the witch thing, of course."
That did it. Some things just weren't worth fighting. Jackson surrendered and let himself go with the flow. "Witch thing," he repeated. That was twice in one minute Jo had surprised him.
"You mean you never heard about that?" Jo sounded surprised.
"Not a word." He wished he wasn't hearing about it now.
"Well, folks think she's a witch. Not that I think so, mind, but I can see where some would be uneasy."
"Why is that?"
"Oh, she keeps to herself, hardly ever comes to town. And old man Jones was strange, didn't let anyone come around. Even the mail is delivered by boat, because there's no road going out to the Jones place. The only way to get there is to hike in, or by the river." Background established, she settled into her explanation. "Now, if Thaniel was going fishing, the best fishing is downriver, not up. There's no reason he'd be launching a boat from the Old Boggy ramp unless he was going upriver, and there's nothing up there but the Jones place. He wouldn't have the nerve unless he'd been drinking, because he's so afraid of Delilah, so I think you need to go out there and make sure he's not up to no good."
Jackson wondered how many sheriffs were bossed around by their dispatchers. He wondered just what the hell he was supposed to do, since Jo had just told him the only way to get to the Jones place was by boat. And he wondered, not for the first time, whether or not he was going to survive this damn blue moon.
Well, until it killed him, he had a job to do. He assessed the situation and began solving the most immediate problems. "Call Frank at the Rescue Squad and tell him to meet me at the launch ramp on Old Boggy—"
"You don't want one of the Rescue Squad boats," Jo interrupted. "They're too slow, and the guys are all helping with the clean-up at the tractor-trailer wreck out on the big highway, anyway I called Charlotte Watkins. Her husband's a bass fisherman—you know Jerry Watkins, don't you?"

"I've met both of them," Jackson said.
"He's got one of those real fast boats. He's gone to Chattanooga on business, but Charlotte was going to hook up the boat and take it to the ramp. She should be there by the time you get there."
"Okay," he said, "I'm on my way." He pinched the top of his nose, between his eyebrows, feeling a headache beginning to form. He wished he could ignore Jo's intuition, but it was too accurate for him to doubt her. "Send some backup as soon as someone comes available. And how in hell do I find the Jones place?"
"Just go upriver, you can't miss it. It's about five miles up. The house is hard to see, it kind of blends in, but it's dead ahead and you'll think you're going to run right into it, but then the river curves real sharp to the right and gets too shallow to go much farther. Oh, and be careful of the snags. Stay in the middle of the river." She paused. "You do know how to drive a boat, don't you?"
"I'll figure it out," he said, and flipped the phone cover down to end the call. Let her stew for a while, wondering if she had made a bad mistake sending the sheriff out alone into a possibly dangerous situation, on a river he didn't know and in a piece of powerful equipment he didn't know how to operate. He'd driven a boat for the first time at the age of eleven, but Jo didn't know that, and it would do her good to realize she wasn't omnipotent.
He didn't use his lights or siren, but he did jam his boot down on the accelerator and keep it there. By his estimation he was at least fifteen minutes from Old Boggy Road, and he had no idea how far down the road the launch ramp was. In a powerful boat he could easily go sixty miles an hour, putting him at the Jones place in five minutes or less, once he was on the water. That meant it would take him at least twenty minutes to get there, probably longer. If Thaniel Vargas was up to no good, Jackson was afraid he would have plenty of time to accomplish it.
He felt a surge of adrenaline, the surge every law enforcement officer felt when going into a potentially dangerous situation. He hoped he wouldn't find anything out of the ordinary, though. He hoped like hell he wouldn't, because if he did, that would mean Miss Jones—had Jo actually said her name was Delilah?—was either hurt or dead.
Witch? Why hadn't he heard anything about this before? He'd lived here for three years, been sheriff for two, and in that time he thought he'd learned about all the county's unusual citizens. There hadn't been a peep about

Delilah Jones, though, not from his deputies, not from the mayor or her secretary, who was the most gossipy person Jackson had ever met, not from the bar crowd or the women he dated, not from the blue-haired bingo circuit, not even from Jo. He hadn't missed the fact that Jo seemed well-informed on how to get to the Jones house. How would she know that, unless she'd been there? And why would she go, considering everything she'd said about the Jones woman being reclusive and her father being strange?

If anyone was practicing witchcraft in his county, he should have known about it. It was all bullshit, in his opinion, but if anyone else took it seriously then there could be trouble. From the sound of things, that was exactly what was happening.

First there was the general blue moon craziness, then the wreck between the two idiots, and now this. He was hungry, tired, and had a headache. He was beginning to get severely pissed.

2

Jackson reached Old Boggy Road in record time and churned down it, his tires digging in and throwing sand. The river was to his right so he kept an eye in that direction, looking for the launch ramp. The old road narrowed and became one rutted lane, with massive live oaks on each side intertwining their branches to form an almost solid canopy. The dense shade gave relief from the heat for about a hundred yards, then he drove out into the sunlight and there the ramp was, down a shallow slope that curved back to the right and was hidden from view by the thick trees until that moment. He spun the wheel and headed down the slope, the rear end of the Jeep slewing around before he deftly corrected, A blue Toyota pickup, with an empty boat trailer hooked to it, was pulled to the side. Another truck, a red extended-cab Chevy, was backed onto the ramp and Charlotte Watkins was standing on the bank, one hand holding the rope to a long, sleek, red and silver fishing boat and the other hand slapping at mosquitoes as they swarmed around her bare arms and legs.

Jackson grabbed his shotgun and Kevlar vest and vaulted out of the Cherokee. "Thanks, Mrs. Watkins," he said as he took the rope from her. He put his right foot on the nose of the boat and pushed off with his left, agilely

transferring his weight back to his right foot and stepping up into the boat as it floated away from the bank.
"Any time, Sheriff," she said, raising her hand to shade her eyes from the sun. "Mind the snags, now. If you get too far to the left, there are some mighty big stumps just under the water, and they'll rip the lower unit right off the boat."
"I'll watch," he promised as he carefully stowed the shotgun so it wouldn't bounce around, then slid into the driver's seat and hooked the kill switch to his shirt. As an afterthought, he tossed her the keys to his Jeep. "Drive the Cherokee home. I'll bring your truck and boat back as soon as I can."
She deftly caught the keys, but waved off any concern about the boat. "You just be careful upriver. I hope everything's all right." Worry etched her face.
Jackson turned the ignition switch and the big out board coughed into deep, rumbling life. He put it in reverse and backed away from the bank, turning the boat so he was headed upriver. Then he pushed the throttle down and the nose of the boat rose out of the water as it gained speed, before dropping down and settling on the plane, skimming across the water.
The river was slow-moving and marshy, filled with snags, shoals, and weed beds ready to snare anyone unfamiliar with its obstacles. Mindful of Charlotte Watkins's warning—another woman who seemed to know an awful lot about the way to the Jones place—Jackson kept the boat dead center and prayed as he tried to balance urgency with caution, but urgency kept getting the upper hand. Maybe Miss Jones was having a peaceful summer afternoon, but maybe she wasn't.
The rush of air cooled him, drying the sweat on his body and making the thick heat of summer feel almost comfortable. As he skimmed past the little sloughs and cuts in the river he looked at all of them, hoping to see Thaniel doing nothing more sinister than feeding worms to the fish. No such luck.
Then he rounded a bend in the river and saw a flat-bottom boat pulled up on the bank and tied to a tree. Thaniel was nowhere in sight.
Jackson didn't slow. The Jones place couldn't be much farther up the river, because it looked as if Thaniel had decided to walk the rest of the way, so he could approach unnoticed. That gave Jackson a little more time, maybe enough time to head off any trouble.
Even as he had the thought he heard the shot, a deep retort that boomed out over the water and was easily audible over the sound of the outboard motor.
Shotgun, he thought. He eased up on the throttle and reached for the Kevlar

vest, slipping it on and fastening the Velcro straps. Then he shoved the throttle down again, the boat leaping forward in response.
Fifteen seconds later the house was in sight, taking form dead ahead of him, just as Jo had said. The river seemed to end right there. The house was built of old, weathered wood that blended into the tall trees surrounding it, but in front of it was a short dock with an old flat-bottom tied to it, and that was what he saw first.
He had to back off the power to bring the boat into the dock. He reached for his shotgun as he did, holding it in his left hand as he steered the boat. "This is Sheriff Brody!" he bellowed. "Thaniel, you stop whatever the hell it is you're doing and get your ass out here." Not the most professional way of speaking, he supposed, but it served the purpose of announcing him and letting Thaniel know his identity wasn't a secret.
But he didn't really expect things to settle down just because he was there, and they didn't. Another shotgun blast boomed, answered by the flatter crack of a rifle.
The shots were coming from the back of the house. Jackson nosed the boat toward the dock and killed the engine. He leaped out while the dock was still a foot away, automatically looping the mooring rope around one of the posts as he did so, ingrained training taking hold so everything was accomplished while he was in motion.
He ran up the short dock, the thudding of his boots on the wood in time with the hard beating of his heart. The old familiar clarity swept over him, the by-product of adrenaline and experience. He'd felt the same thing every time he jumped out of a plane during airborne training. Lightning-fast, his brain processed the details he saw.
The front door of the old wooden house was standing open, a neatly patched screen door keeping out the insects. He could see straight through to the back door, but no one was in sight. The porch looked like a jungle, with huge potted plants and hanging baskets everywhere, but there wasn't any junk sitting around like there was at most houses, his included. He took with one leap the three steps up to the porch, and flattened himself against the wall.
The last thing he wanted was to get shot by the very person he was trying to help, so he repeated his identity. "This is Sheriff Brody! Miss Jones, are you all right?"

There was a moment of silence in which even the insects seemed to stop buzzing. Then a woman's voice came from somewhere out back. "I'm fine. I'll be even better when you get this jackass off my property."
She sounded remarkably cool for someone who was under attack, as if Thaniel was of no more importance than the mosquitoes.
Jackson eased around the corner of the wide, shady porch that wrapped around three sides of the house. He was now on the right side, with thick woods both to the right and ahead of him. He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, not a patch of color or a rustling of bushes. "Thaniel!" he yelled. "Put your weapon down before you get your stupid ass shot off, you hear me?"
There was another moment of silence. Then came a sullen, "I didn't do nothin', Sheriff. She shot at me first."
He still couldn't see Thaniel, but the voice had come from a stand of big pine trees behind the house, practically dead ahead. "I'll decide whose fault it is." He edged closer to the back of the house, his shotgun held ready. He was safe from Miss Jones's shots, for the moment, but Thaniel would have a straight bead on him if he chose. "Now do what I told you and pitch out your weapon."
"This crazy bitch will shoot me if I do."
"No, she won't."
"I might," came Delilah Jones's calm voice, not helping the situation at all.
"See, what'd I tell you!" Thaniel's voice was high with anxiety. Whatever he had planned, it had gone sadly awry.
Jackson swore under his breath, and tried to make his tone both calming and authoritative. "Miss Jones, where exactly are you?"
"I'm on the back porch, behind the washing machine."
"Put down your weapon and go back inside, so I can have a little talk with Thaniel."
Again that little pause, as if she were considering whether or not to pay any attention to him. Accustomed to instant response, be it positive or negative, that telling little hesitation set Jackson's teeth on edge. “I’ll go in the house," she finally said. "But I'm not putting this shotgun down until that fool's off my property."
He'd had enough. "Do as you're told," he said sharply. "Or I'll arrest both of you."

There was another of those maddening moments of silence, then the back door slammed. Jackson took a deep breath. Thaniel's whiny voice floated from the pine trees. "She didn't put down the shotgun like you told her to, Sheriff."
"Neither did you," Jackson reminded him in a grim tone. He eased to the corner of the house. "I have a shotgun, too, and I'm going to use it in three seconds if you don't throw down that rifle and come out." The mood he was in, it wasn't a bluff. "One . . . two . . . th—"
A rifle sailed out from behind a huge pine tree, landing with a thud on the pine-needle cushioned ground. After a few seconds, Thaniel slowly followed it, easing away from the tree with his hands up and his face sullen. A thin rivulet of blood ran down his right cheek. The wound didn't look like anything from a shotgun, so Jackson figured a splinter must have caught him. The tree trunk sported a great raw gouge level with his chin. Miss Jones hadn't been shooting over Thaniel's head; she had been aiming for him. And, from the look of that tree, she wasn't shooting bird shot.
Immediately the back screen door popped open and Delilah Jones stepped out, shotgun held ready. Thaniel hit the ground, braying in panic. He covered his head with his hands, as if that would do any good.
God, give me strength, Jackson prayed. The prayer didn't do any good. His temper shattered and he moved fast, so fast she didn't have time to do more than glance at him, certainly not time to react. In two long steps he reached her, his right hand locking around the barrel of her shotgun and wrenching it out of her hands. "Get back inside," he barked. "Now!"
She stood as rigid as a post, staring at Thaniel, paying Jackson no more mind than if he hadn't been there at all. "You're dead," she said to Thaniel, her voice flat and calm.
Thaniel jerked as if he'd been shot. "You heard her!" he howled. "She threatened me, Sheriff! Arrest her!"
"I'm of a mind to do just that," Jackson said between clenched teeth.
"I didn't threaten him," she said, still in that flat, monotonous tone. "I don't have to. He'll die without me lifting a finger to help." She looked up at Jackson then, and he found himself caught in eyes the dark green of a woodland forest, watchful, wary, knowing eyes.
He felt suddenly dizzy, and gave a short, sharp jerk of his head. The heat must be getting to him. Everything kind of faded, except her face at the center of his vision. She was younger than he'd expected, he thought dimly,

probably in her late twenties when he had expected a middle-aged, reclusive country woman, bypassed by modern inventions. Her skin was smooth, tanned, and unblemished. Her hair was a mass of brown curls, and her shorts stopped north of mid-thigh, revealing slim, shapely legs. He inhaled deeply, fighting off the dizziness, and as his head cleared he noticed that she had gone utterly white. She was staring at him as if he had two heads. Abruptly she turned and went inside, the screen door slamming shut behind her.

Jackson took a deep breath, gathering himself before turning back to the problem at hand. He propped her shotgun against the wall and cradled his on one arm as he finally turned his attention back to Thaniel.

"Son of a bitch!"

Thaniel had taken advantage of his splintered attention. The ground where he had lain was bare, and a quick glance told Jackson the rifle was gone, too.

He jumped off the porch, landing half-crouched, the shotgun now held ready in both hands. His head swiveled, but except for a slight waving of some bushes there was no sign of Thaniel. Silently Jackson slipped into the woods close to where the bushes swayed, then stood still and listened. Thaniel, for all his other faults, was good in the woods. It was about thirty seconds before Jackson heard the distant snap of a twig under a careless foot. He started to follow, then stopped. There was no point in chasing him through the woods; he knew where Thaniel lived, if Miss Jones wanted to file charges against him for trespass and any other charges Jackson thought were applicable.

He turned and looked back at the house, nestled among the trees and blending in so well it looked part of the woodland. He felt oddly reluctant to go in and talk to Miss Jones, a sense of things being subtly altered, out of control. He didn't want to know anything more about her, he only wanted to get in Jerry Watkins's boat and go back downriver, safely away from that strange woman with her spooky eyes.

But his job demanded he talk to her, and Jackson was a good sheriff. That was why he was here, and that was why he couldn't leave without seeing her.

The uneasy feeling followed him, though, all the way to the porch.

3

The washing machine she'd been hiding behind was an old-fashioned wringer-type model, he noticed with faint astonishment as he paused in front of the screen door. He couldn't see inside the house; there were no lights on, and the trees provided plenty of shade to keep the interior cool and dim.

He lifted his fist to knock, paused, then gave two firm taps. "Miss Jones?"

"Right here."

She was near, standing in the room just beyond the door. There was a strained quality to her voice that hadn't been there before.

She hadn't asked him to come in. He was glad, because he would just as soon never set foot in that house. And then, irrationally, it annoyed him that she hadn't asked him in. Without waiting for an invitation, he opened the screen door and stepped inside.

She was a pale figure in the dim room, standing very still, and staring at him. Maybe his vision needed to adjust a bit more, but he had the impression she was downright horrified by him. She even backed up a step.

He couldn't say why that pissed him off, but it did, big time. Adrenaline was pumping through him again, making his muscles feel tight and primed for action, but damned if he knew what he could do. He had to take her statement, read her the riot act about shooting at people, and leave. That was all. Nothing there to make him feel so edgy and angry.

But that was exactly how he did feel, whether or not there was rhyme or reason to it.

Silence stretched between them, silence in which they took each other's measure. He didn't know what conclusions she drew from his appearance, but he was a lawman, accustomed to taking in every detail about a person and making snap judgments. He had to, and he had to be pretty accurate, because his and others' lives depended on how he read people.

What he saw in the dim light was a slim, toned young woman, neat in a pale yellow, sleeveless shirt that was tucked into khaki shorts, which were snugly belted around a trim waist. Her bare arms were smoothly tanned, and sleekly muscled in a feminine way that told him she was stronger than she looked, and accustomed to work. She was clean, even her bare feet—which, he noticed, sported pale pink polish on the toes; toes that were curling, digging into the floor, as if she had to force herself to stand there.

Her hair was a brown, sun-streaked mass of curls. She didn't hurt the eye, though she wasn't beauty-queen material. She was pleasant-looking, healthy, with a sweet curve to her chin. Her eyes, though . . . those eyes were spooky. He was reluctant to meet them again, but finally he did. They were her best feature, large and clear, fringed with thick dark lashes. And she was watching him now with . . . resignation?
For God's sake, what did she think he was going to do?
He didn't know how long he'd been standing there staring at her. The same thing had happened on the porch, only this time he didn't feel dizzy. He needed to take care of business and get going. The summer days were long, but he wanted to be off the river well ahead of sundown.
"Thaniel slipped away," he said, his voice unaccountably rough.
She gave a brief, jerky nod.
"Do you make a habit of shooting at visitors?"
The green eyes narrowed. "When they stop downriver and sneak the rest of the way on foot, yes, that makes me a bit suspicious about their reason for calling on me."
"How do you know what he did?"
"Sound carries a long way over water. And I don't hear many boats coming my way except Harley Whisenant's, delivering the mail. Since Harley was here this morning, I knew it wasn't him."
"You shot first."
"He was trespassing. I fired in the air the first time, as a warning, and yelled at him to scat. He shot at me then. There's a bullet hole in my washing machine, damn him. My second shot was to defend myself."
"Maybe he thought he was defending himself, too, since you shot first."
She gave him a disbelieving look. "He sneaked onto my property up to my house, carrying a deer rifle, and when I yell at him to leave he fires from cover, and that's defending himself?"
He didn't know why he was giving her a hard time, except for the edginess that had him as prickly as a cactus. "You're right," he said abruptly.
"Well, thank you so much."
He ignored the sarcasm. "I need to take a statement."
"I'm not going to press charges."
She couldn't have picked anything to say more likely to rile him. In his opinion, a good deal of additional harm was done because people declined to bring charges against criminal actions. Whatever their reasoning, they

didn't want to "cause trouble," or they wanted to give the perp "another chance." In his experience all they were doing was letting a criminal go free to commit another crime. There were circumstances that called for a little mercy, but this wasn't one of them. Thaniel Vargas wasn't a teenager caught on his first misdemeanor; he was a thug who had intended serious harm to another person.

"I beg your pardon?" He said it softly, reining in his inclination to roar, giving her a chance to rethink the situation. When he'd been a sergeant in the Army, enlisted men had immediately recognized that softness for the danger sign it was.

Either Delilah Jones wasn't as attuned to his mood as his men had been, or she wasn't impressed by his authority. Whatever the reason, she shrugged. "There's no point in it."

"No point?"

She started to say something, then stopped and gave a slight shake of her head. "It doesn't matter," she said, as if to herself. She bit her lip. He had the impression she was arguing with herself. She sighed. "Sit down, Sheriff Brody. You'll feel better after you've had something to eat."

He didn't want to sit down, he just wanted to get out of here. If she wasn't going to press charges, fine. He didn't agree, but the decision was hers. There was no reason for him to stay a minute longer.

But she was moving quietly and efficiently around the old-timey kitchen, slicing what looked like homemade bread, then thick slices from a ham, and a big chunk of cheese. She dipped a glass of water from a bucket, and placed the simple meal on the table.

Jackson watched her with narrowed eyes. Despite himself, he admired the deft, feminine way she did things, without fuss or bother. She made herself a sandwich, too, though not as thick as his, and minus the cheese. She sat down across from the place she had set for him, and lifted her eyebrows in question at his hesitancy.

The sight of that sandwich made his mouth water. He was so hungry his stomach was churning. That was why he removed the Kevlar vest and set the shotgun aside, then sat down and put his boots under her table. Without a word they both began to eat.

The ham was succulent, the cheese mellow. He finished the sandwich before she had taken more than a few bites of hers. She got up and began

making another one for him. "No, one was plenty—" he lied, not wanting to put her to any more trouble, not wanting to stay any longer.
"I should have thought," she said, her voice low. "I'm not used to feeding a big man like you. Pops was a skinny little thing; he didn't eat much more than I do."
In thirty seconds another thick sandwich was set down in front of him. She sat down again and picked up her own sandwich.
He ate more slowly this time, savoring the tastes. As he chewed, he took stock of his surroundings. Something about this house bothered him, and now he realized what it was: the silence. There was no refrigerator humming, no television squawking in the background, no water heater thumping and hissing.
He looked around. There was no refrigerator, period. No lamps. No overhead lights. She had dipped the water from a bucket. He looked at the sink; there were no faucets. The evidence was all there, but he still asked, "You don't have electricity?" because it was so unbelievable that she didn't.
"No."
"No phone, no way of calling for help if you need it?"
"No. I've never needed help."
"Until today."
"I could have handled Thaniel. He's been trying to bully me since grade school."
"Has he ever come after you with a gun before?"
"Not that I remember, but then I don't pay much attention to him."
She was maddening. He wanted to shake her, wanted to put his hands on those bare arms and shake her until her teeth rattled. "You're lucky you weren't raped and murdered," he snapped.
"It wasn't luck," she corrected. "It was preparation."
Despite himself, he was interested. "What sort of preparation?"
She leaned back in her chair, looking around at the silent house. It struck Jackson that she was very comfortable here, alone in the woods, without any of the modern conveniences everyone else thought they had to have.
"To begin with, this is my home. I know every inch of the woods, every weed bed in the river. If I had to hide, Thaniel would never find me."
Watching her closely, Jackson saw the secret smile lurking in her green eyes and he knew, as sure as he knew his own name, that she doubted she would

ever be reduced to hiding. "What about the other stuff?" he asked, keeping his tone casual.
She gave him a slow smile, and he got the feeling she was pleased with his astuteness. "Oh, just a few little things that give me advance warning. There's nothing lethal out there, unless you step on a water moccasin or fall in the water and drown."
He stared at her mouth, and felt a little jolt, like another kick of adrenaline. Despite the coolness of the house he broke out in a light sweat. God almighty, he hoped she didn't smile again. Her smile was sleepy and sexy, womanly, the kind of smile a woman gave a man after they had made love, lying drowsy on tangled sheets while the rain beat down outside and there were only the two of them, cocooned in their private world.
The sexual awareness wasn't welcome. He had to be careful in situations like this. He was a man in a position of authority, alone with a woman to whose house he had gone in an official capacity. This wasn't the time or the place to come on to her.
Silence had fallen again, silence in which they faced each other across the table. She took a deep breath, and the inhalation lifted her breasts against the thin cotton of her blouse. Her nipples were plainly outlined, hard and erect, the darkness of the aureolas faintly visible where they pressed against the fabric. Was she cold, or aroused?
The skin on her arms was smooth; no chill bumps.
"I'd better go," he said, fighting the sudden thickness in his throat, and in his pants. "Thank you for the sandwiches. I was starving."
She looked both relieved and reluctant. "You're welcome. You had that hungry look, so I—" She stopped, and waved a dismissive hand. "Never mind. I was glad to have the company. And you're right about going; if I'm not mistaken, I heard thunder just a minute ago." She got up and gathered their glasses, taking them to the sink.
He got up, too. There was something about her unfinished sentence that pulled at him. He should have let it go, should have said good-bye and got into the boat and left. He hadn't heard any thunder, though his hearing was pretty good, but that was as good an excuse as any to get the hell out of there. He knew it, and still he said, "So you—what?"
Her gaze slid away from him, as if she were embarrassed. "So I ... thought you must have missed lunch."

How would she know that? Why would she even think it? He didn't normally miss a meal, and how in hell would she know if he looked hungry or not, when she had never seen him before today? For all she knew, ill-tempered was his normal expression.

Witch. The word whispered in his mind, even though he knew it was nonsense. Even if he believed in witchcraft, which he didn't, from what he'd read it had nothing to do with telling whether or not a man had missed lunch. She had noticed he was grouchy, and attributed it to an empty stomach. He didn't quite follow the reasoning, but he'd often seen his mother ply his father with food to gentle him out of a bad mood. It was a woman thing, not a witch thing.

"Meow."

He almost jumped a foot in the air. Now was not the time to find out she had a cat.

"There you are," she crooned, looking down at his feet. He looked down too, and saw a huge, fluffy white cat with black ears and a black tail, rubbing against his right boot.

"Poor kitty," she said, still crooning, and leaned down to pick up the creature, holding it in her arms as if it were a baby. It lay perfectly relaxed, belly up, eyes half-closed in a beatific expression as she rubbed its chest. "Did the noise scare you? The bad man's gone, and he won't bother us again, I promise." She looked up at Jackson. "Eleanor's pregnant. The kittens are due any time now, I think. She showed up about a week ago, but she's obviously tame and has had good care, so I guess someone just drove into the country and put her out, rather than take care of a litter."

The cat looked like a feline Buddha, fat and content. Familiars were supposed to be black, weren't they, or would any cat do, even fat white pregnant ones?

He couldn't resist reaching out and stroking that fat, round belly. The cat's eyes completely closed and she began purring so loudly she sounded like a motor idling.

Delilah smiled. "Careful, or you'll have a slave for life. Maybe you'd like to take her with you?"

"No, thanks," he said dryly. "My mother might like a kitten, though. Her old tom died last year and she doesn't have a pet now."

"Check back in six or seven weeks, then."

That wasn't exactly an invitation to come calling any time soon, he thought. He picked up the shotgun and vest. "I'll be on my way, Miss Jones. Thanks again for the sandwiches."
"Lilah."
"What?"
"Please call me Lilah. All my friends do." She gave him a distinctly warning look. "Not Delilah, please."
He chuckled. "Message received. I guess you got teased about it in school?"
"You have no idea," she said feelingly.
"My name's Jackson."
"I know." She smiled. "I voted for you. Jackson's a nice Texas-sounding name."
"I'm a nice Texas guy"
She made a noncommittal sound, as if she didn't agree with him but didn't want to come right out and say so. He grinned as he turned to the door. Meeting Delilah Jones had been interesting. He didn't know if it was good, but it was definitely interesting. The blue moon mojo was at full strength today. When things settled down and he had time to think things over, when he could be entirely rational about the weirdness and come up with a logical explanation, maybe he'd come back to visit—and not in any official capacity.
"Use the front door," she said. "It's closer."
He followed her through the small house. From what he could tell there were only four rooms: the kitchen and living room on one side, and each of those had another room opening off it. He figured the other two rooms were bedrooms. The living room was simply furnished with a couch and a rocking chair, arranged around a rag rug spread in front of the stone fireplace. Oil lamps sat on the mantel and on the pair of small tables set beside the couch and chair. In one corner was a treadle sewing machine. A handmade quilt hung on one of the walls, a brightly colored scene of trees and water that must have taken forever to do. On another wall a bookcase, also handmade from the looks of it, stretched from floor to ceiling, and was packed with books, both hardback and paper.
The whole house made him feel as if he had stepped back a century, or at least half of one. The only modern appliance he saw was a battery-operated weather radio, sitting beside one of the oil lamps on the mantel. He was glad she had it; both tornadoes and hurricanes were possible in this area.

He stepped out on the porch, Lilah right behind him, still holding the cat. He stopped dead still, staring at the dock. "The son of a bitch," he said softly.
"What?" She pushed at his shoulder, and he realized he was blocking her view.
"The boats are gone," he said, stepping aside so she could see.
She stared at the empty dock, too, her green eyes wide with dismay Her flat-bottom was gone, as well as Jerry Watkins's bass boat.
"He must have doubled back and cut the boats loose while we were eating. They can't have drifted far. If I walk along the bank, I'll probably find them."
"My boat had oars in it," she said. "I always have them in case I have motor trouble. He didn't have to cut them loose, he could have rowed mine out, and towed yours. That would save him the trouble of hiking back to his boat, and once he got to his boat he'd probably let the current take them. I figure they're at least a mile downstream by now, maybe more. That's if he doesn't decide to sink them."
"I'll call in—" he began, the notion so automatic that the words were out before he realized he didn't have his radio. He didn't have his cell phone. They were both in the Cherokee, which Charlotte Watkins had driven home. And Lilah Jones didn't have a phone.
He looked down at her. "I don't suppose you have a short-wave radio?"
"Afraid not." She was staring grimly at the river down which her boat had vanished, as if she could will it back. "You're stuck here. We both are."
"Not for long. The dispatcher—"
"Jo?"
"Jo." He wondered how well she knew Jo. Jo hadn't talked as if they were anything more than distant acquaintances, but Lilah not only knew who his dispatcher was, she had called her Jo instead of Jolene, which was her given name. "She knows where I am, and she was supposed to send backup as soon as some was available. A deputy should be along any time."
"Not unless he's already on his way," she said. "Look." She pointed to the southwest.
Jackson looked, and swore under his breath. A huge purplish black thunderhead had filled the late-afternoon sky. He could feel its breath now in the freshening wind that fanned him, hear its voice in the sullen bass rumble of thunder as it marched toward them.

"A thunderstorm probably won't last long." At least he hoped it wouldn't. The way things were going today, the storm's forward progress would stop just as it was on top of them.
She was staring worriedly at the cloud. "I think I'd better turn on the weather radio," she said, and went back inside, Eleanor cradled in her arms.
Jackson gave the empty river another frustrated glance. The air felt charged with electricity, raising the hair on his arms. The blade of lightning slashed down, flickering and flashing, and thunder rumbled again.
He was stuck here for at least a few hours, and maybe all night. If he had to be stuck anywhere, why couldn't it be in his own home? There was always a rash of accidents on a stormy night, and the deputies would need him. Instead he would be here, in a house in the back of nowhere, keeping company with a witch and her pregnant cat.

4

Lilah put Eleanor on the floor and turned on the weather radio, then went into her bedroom, which opened off the living room, and pulled down the side window. The front window was protected by the wide porch, so rain wasn't likely to come in there. With an ear cocked toward the radio, she then did the same in the back bedroom. She knew that Sheriff Brody had come in from the porch, but she deliberately ignored him, doing what needed to be done. He was entirely too big for her small house, too stern, too authoritative, too . . . too male.
He disrupted her peaceful life far more than Thaniel Vargas had ever dreamed of doing. What on earth had Jo been thinking, sending him out here? But of course Jo didn't know, and she had, rightly, been worried about Thaniel.
Well, poor Thaniel wouldn't be bothering her again, and there was nothing she could do about it. If he hadn't run she might have—well, whether or not she could have helped him was a moot point, because it was too late now. Still, regret filled her. Whatever Thaniel's faults—and they were many—she didn't wish him any harm. And though she would have tried to help if... if he hadn't run away, years of painful experience had taught her there was very little she could do to alter fate.

That was why the sheriff filled her with such panic. She had known, the moment she saw him, that he was fated to destroy her safe, comfortable, familiar life. She wanted to get as far away from him as she could, she wanted to push him out of her house and lock the door, she wanted . . . she wanted to walk into his arms and rest her head on a broad shoulder, let him hold her and kiss her and do anything else he wanted to her.

In all her life she'd never met a male, boy or man, who elicited even the slightest sexual response on her part. She had always felt isolated from the rest of the world, forever alone because of what she was. The thought of spending her life alone hadn't bothered her; quite the opposite. She enjoyed her solitude, her life, her sense of completion within herself. So many people never achieved wholeness, and spent their entire lives searching for someone or something to make them whole, never realizing that the answer was within themselves. She liked her own company, she trusted her own decisions, and she enjoyed the work she did. There was nothing—nothing—in her life that she wanted changed.

But Jackson Brody changed everything, whether she wanted him to or not. It wasn't just his aura that attracted her, though it was so rich she was almost spellbound by it. All his colors were clear: the dark red of sensuality, the blue of calm, the turquoise of a dynamic personality, the orange of power, with fluctuating spikes of spiritual purple and yellow, healing green. Nothing about him was murky. He was a straightforward, confident, healthy man.

What had so stunned her, however, was the sudden flash of precognition. She didn't have them often; her particular talent was her ability to see auras. But sometimes she had lightning bursts of insight and knowledge, and she had never been wrong. Not once. Just as she had looked at Thaniel and known he would soon die, when she first focused on Jackson Brody the wave of precognition had been so strong she had almost slumped to her knees. This man would be her lover. This man would be her love, the only one of her life.

She didn't want a lover! She didn't want a man hanging around, getting in her way, interfering with her business. He would; she knew he would. He struck her as impatient, used to giving orders, slightly domineering, and, oh my, sexy as all get out. He certainly wouldn't want to live out here, without any of the modern conveniences to which he was accustomed, while she much preferred her uncluttered life. She felt better without hustle and

bustle, without electrical machines incessantly humming in the background. Nevertheless, he would undoubtedly expect her to move to town, or at least to someplace less isolated and more accessible.

Once he realized she couldn't be relocated, he would give in, but with bad grace. He'd argue that he wouldn't be able to see her as often as he could if she lived closer. He would visit whenever it was convenient for him, and expect her to drop whatever she was doing whenever he pulled his boat up to the dock. In short, he would be very inconvenient for her, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. For all the success she'd had in evading or altering fate, she might as well strip off her clothes right now and lead him into the bedroom.

That was another worry. She was rather short on experience in the bedroom department. That hadn't been a bother before, because she hadn't felt even an inkling of desire to get that experience. Now she did. Just looking at him made her feel warm and sort of breathless; her breasts tingled, and she had to press her thighs together to contain the hot ache between her legs. So this was lust. She had wondered, and now she knew. No wonder people acted like fools when they were afflicted with it.

If Thaniel hadn't stolen the boats, the sheriff would have already been gone, and she likely wouldn't have seen him again for quite a while, if ever. She would have gone about her quiet, very satisfying life. But she should have expected that trick with the boats; how else could Fate have arranged for Jackson to stay here? And of course a storm was coming up, preventing any of his deputies from arriving. All of it was inevitable. No matter how inconceivable her visions, almost immediately there would set in motion a train of events that brought about the conclusion she had foreseen.

Not for the first time, she wished she wasn't different. She wished she didn't know things were going to happen before they did; that was asking a lot of a person. She couldn't regret seeing auras, though; her life would feel colorless and less interesting if she no longer saw them. She didn't have to speak to someone to know how he or she was feeling; she could see when someone was happy, or angry, or feeling ill. She could see bad intentions, dishonesty, meanness, but she could also see joy, and love, and goodness.

"Is something wrong?"

He was standing right behind her, and the sharpness of his tone told her she had been standing in one place, staring at nothing, for quite a while. Getting lost in her thoughts was no big deal when she was alone, but probably

looked strange to others. She blinked, pulling herself back to reality
"Sorry," she said, not turning to face him. "I was daydreaming."
"Daydreaming?" He sounded disbelieving, and she didn't blame him. A man had tried to kill her less than an hour ago, they were stranded, and a whopper of a storm was bearing down on them; that should be enough to keep her thoughts grounded. She should have said she was thinking, instead of daydreaming; at least that sounded productive.
"Never mind. Have there been any weather bulletins or warnings on the radio?"
"Severe thunderstorm warning until ten tonight. High winds, damaging hail."
Hours. They would be alone together for hours. He would probably be here until morning. What was she supposed to do with him, this man she was going to love but didn't yet? She had just met him, she knew nothing about him on a personal level. She was attracted to him, yes, but love? Not likely. Not yet, anyway.
Fresh, rain-fragrant wind gusted through the screen door. "Here it comes," he said, and she turned her head to watch sheets of rain sweeping upriver toward the house. Lightning speared straight downward, and a blast of thunder rattled the windows.
Eleanor meowed, and sought shelter in the cardboard box which Lilah had lined with old towels as a bed for the cat.
Jackson prowled restlessly around the small room. Lilah looked at him in exasperation, wondering if he ever just went with the flow. It was irritating to him that he couldn't affect the weather somehow, either postponing the storm or sending it speeding off, so one of his deputies could risk getting upriver to him.
She gave a mental shrug. Let him fret; she had work to do.
The first sheet of rain hit the house, drumming down on the tin roof. The late-afternoon sunlight was almost completely blotted out, darkening the rooms. She moved through the gloom to the oil lamps set on the mantel, her hand setting surely on the match box. The rasp of the match was unheard in the din of rain, but he turned at the sudden small bloom of light and watched as she lifted the globes of the lamps and touched the match to the wicks, then replaced the globes. She blew out the match and tossed it into the fireplace.

Without a word she went into the kitchen and duplicated the chore, though there were four oil lamps there because she liked more light when she was working. The fire in the stove had been banked; she opened the door, stirred the hot coals, and added more wood.
"What are you doing?" he asked from the doorway.
Mentally she rolled her eyes. "Cooking." Maybe he'd never seen the process before.
"But we just ate."
"So we did, but those sandwiches won't hold you for long, if I'm any judge."
She eyed him, measuring him against the doorframe. A little over six feet tall, she guessed, and at least two hundred pounds. He looked muscled, given the way his shoulders filled out his shirt, so he might weigh more. This man would eat a lot.
He came on into the room and settled at the table, turning the chair around so he faced her, his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. His fingers drummed on the table. "This irritates the hell out of me," he confessed.
Her tone was dry. "I noticed." She dipped some water into the washbowl and washed her hands.
"Usually I can do something. Usually, in bad weather, I have to do something, whether it's working a wreck or dragging people off of flooded roads. I need to be out there now, because my deputies will have their hands full."

So that was the cause of his restlessness and irritability; he knew his help was needed, but he couldn't leave here. She liked his sense of responsibility.
He watched in silence then as she prepared her biscuit pan, spraying it with nonstick spray. She got her mixing bowl and scooped some flour into it, added shortening and buttermilk, and plunged her hands into the bowl.
"I haven't seen anyone do that in years." He smiled as he kept his eyes on her hands, deftly mixing and kneading. "My grandmother used to, but I can't remember ever seeing my mother make biscuits by hand."
"I don't have a refrigerator," she said practically. "Frozen biscuits are out."
"Don't you want to have things like refrigerators and electric stoves? Doesn't it bother you, not having electricity?"
"Why should it? I don't depend on a wire for heat and light. If I had electricity, the power might be off right now and I wouldn't be able to cook."

He rubbed his jaw, brow furrowed as he thought. She liked the sight, she mused, eyeing him as she continued to knead. His brows were straight and dark, nicely shaped.
Everything about him was nicely shaped. She bet all the single women in town, and a few of the married ones, were hot for him. Short dark hair, bright blue eyes, strong jaw, soft lips—she didn't know how she knew his lips were soft, but she did. Oh, yeah, they were hot for him. She was a bit warm herself.
She thought of walking over to him and straddling his lap, and an instantaneous flush swept over her entire body. Warm, my foot; she thought she might break out in a sweat any minute now.
"Running a gas line would be even harder than running power lines," he mused, his mind still on the issue of modern conveniences. "I guess you could get a propane tank, but filling it would be a bitch, since there aren't any roads out here."
"The wood stove suits me fine. It's only a few years old, so it's very efficient. It heats the whole house, and it's easy to regulate." She began pinching off balls of dough and rolling them between her hands, shaping them into biscuits and placing them in the pan. If she kept her eyes on the dough, instead of him, the hot feeling cooled down somewhat.
"Where do you get your wood?"
She couldn't help it. She had to look at him, her expression incredulous. "I cut it myself." Where did he think she got it? Maybe he thought the wood fairies chopped it and piled it up for her.
To her surprise, he surged up out of the chair, looming over her with a scowl. "Chopping wood is too hard for you."
"Gee, I'm glad you told me, otherwise I'd have kept doing it and not known any better." She edged away from him, turning to the sink to wash the dough from her hands.
"I didn't mean you couldn't do it, I meant you shouldn't have to," he growled. His voice was right behind her. He was right behind her. Without warning, he reached around her and wrapped his fingers around her right wrist. His hand completely engulfed hers. "Look at that. My wrist is twice as thick as yours. You may be strong, for your size, but you can't tell me it isn't a struggle for you to chop wood."
"I manage." She wished he hadn't touched her. She wished he wasn't standing so close that she could feel the heat from his body, smell the hot

man smell of him.
"And it's dangerous. What if the ax slips, or the saw, or whatever you use? You're out here alone, a long way from medical help."
"A lot of things are dangerous." She struggled to keep her voice practical, and even. "But people do what they have to do, and I have to have wood."
Why hadn't he released her hand? Why hadn't she pulled it away herself? She could; he wasn't holding her tightly. But she liked the feel of his hand wrapped around hers, liked the warmth and strength, the roughness of the calluses on his palm.
"I'll chop it for you," he said abruptly.
"What!" She almost turned around; common sense stopped her at the last minute. If she turned around, she would be face to face, belly to belly, with him. She didn't dare. She swallowed. "You can't chop my wood."
"Why not?"
"Because—" Because, why? "Because you won't be here."
"I'm here now." He paused, and his tone dropped lower. "I can be again."
She went still. The only sound was the storm, the boom of thunder and wind lashing through the trees, the rain pounding down on the roof. Or maybe it was her heart, pounding against her rib cage.
"I have to be careful here," he said quietly. "I'm acting as a man, not a sheriff. If you tell me no, I'll go back to the table and sit down. I'll keep my distance from you for the rest of the night, and I won't bother you again. But if you don't tell me no, I'm going to kiss you."
Lilah inhaled, fighting for oxygen. She couldn't say a word, couldn't think of anything to say even if she had the air. She was feeling hot again, and weak, as if she might collapse against him.
"I'll take that as a yes," he said, and turned her into his arms.

5

His lips were soft, just the way she'd known they would be. And .he was gentle, rather than bruising her lips by pressing too hard. He didn't try to overwhelm her with a sudden display of passion. He simply kissed her, taking his time about it, tasting her and learning the shape and texture of her own lips. The leisurely pace was more seductive than anything else he could have done.

She sighed, a low hum of pleasure, and let herself relax against him. He gathered her up, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her onto her toes so that they fit together more intimately. The full press of his body against her made her catch her breath, and that now-familiar wave of heat swept over her again. She looped her arms around his neck, pressing even closer, shivering a little as his tongue moved slowly into her mouth, giving her time to pull away if she didn't want such a deep kiss. She did, more than she had ever thought she would want a man's kiss.

Her heart thudded wildly in her chest. Pleasure was a siren, luring her to experience more, to take everything he could give her. His erection was a hard ridge in his pants; she wanted to rub herself against it, open herself to it. Knowing herself to be on the verge of losing control, she forced herself to pull away from the slow, intoxicating kisses, burying her face instead in the warm column of his throat.

He wasn't unaffected. His pulse hammered through his veins; she felt it, there in his neck, just where her lips rested. His lungs pumped, dragging in air. His skin felt hot and damp, and he moved restlessly, as if he wanted to grind his hips against her.

He didn't say anything, for which she was grateful. Innate caution told her to slow down, while instinct screamed at her, urging her to mate with him; it was fated, anyway, so why wait? What would waiting accomplish? The outcome was the same, no matter the timetable. Torn between the two, she hesitated, not quite willing yet to take such a large step no matter what the fates said.

"This is scary," she muttered against his throat.

"No joke." He buried his face against her hair. "This must be what it feels like to get hit by that famous ton of bricks."

The knowledge that he was as rattled as she wasn't very reassuring, because she would have liked for one of them to be in control.

"We don't know each other." Neither did she know with whom she was arguing, him or herself. All she knew was that, for one of the few times in her life, she wasn't certain of herself. She didn't like the feeling. One of the foundation bricks of her life, her very self, was her knowledge of herself and other people; not to know was if that foundation was being shaken.

"We'll work on that." His lips brushed her temple. "We don't have to rush into anything."

But when he did know her, would he still want her? She worried at that, feeling, not for the first time, the weight of her differentness. She came with so much excess baggage that a lot of men would think she was more trouble than she was worth.
That thought gave her the strength to push gently at his shoulders. He released her immediately, stepping back. Lilah took a deep breath and pushed her hair out of her face, trying not to look at him, but the clear, dark red of passion emanating from him was almost impossible to ignore. "I'd better get those biscuits in the oven," she said, stepping around him. "Just sit down out of my way and I'll have supper ready in a jiffy."
"I'll stand, thank you," he said wryly.
She couldn't help it; she had to look, meeting his rueful blue gaze in perfect understanding. The dark red of his aura was still glowing hot and clear, especially in the groin area, though more blue was beginning to show through in the aura around his head.
But he did move out of her way, leaning against the wall by the door. She put the biscuits into the oven and opened a big can of beef stew, dumping the contents into a pot and placing that on top of the stove. The simple meal would have to be enough, because she wasn't about to go out into the storm to chase down a chicken for supper. The biscuits could cool, and the beef stew could simmer until he got hungry again.
He was watching her. She felt his gaze, his utter male focus on her. Being female wasn't something to which she gave a great deal of thought, but under that intent study she was suddenly, acutely aware of her body, of the way her breasts lifted with each breath, of the folds between her legs where he would enter. She didn't have to look down to know her nipples were tightly beaded, or at the front of his pants to know his erection hadn't yet subsided.
His unabashed arousal did more to turn her on than any sweet nothing he could have whispered. Something had to be done to lessen the sensual tension, or she would shortly find herself on her back. She cleared her throat, mentally searching for a neutral topic.
"How did a nice Texas boy end up in Alabama?" She already knew; Jo had told her. But it was the only thing she could think of, and at least the question would get him to talking.
"My mother was from Dothan."

No further explanation followed. Deciding he needed more prodding, Lilah said, "Why did she move to Texas?"
"She met my dad. He was from west Texas. Mom and a couple of friends from college were driving to California after graduation, and they had car trouble. My dad was a deputy then, and he stopped to help them. Mom never did get to California."
That was better; he was talking. She breathed an inner sigh of relief. "Why did she come back to Alabama, then?"
"Dad died a few years ago." He settled his shoulders more comfortably against the wall. "West Texas isn't for everyone; it can be hot as hell, and pretty damn empty. She never complained while Dad was alive, but after he died, the loneliness got to her. She wanted to move back to Alabama, close to her sister and her friends from college."
"So you came with her?"
"She's my mother," he said simply. "I can be in law enforcement here as easily as I could in Texas. Mom and I don't live together, haven't since I was eighteen and went away to college, but she knows I'm nearby if she needs anything."
"It didn't bother you at all to leave Texas?" She couldn't imagine such a thing. She loved her home, knew it as intimately as she knew herself. She loved the scent of the river in the early mornings, the way it turned gold when the dawn light struck it, she loved the dramatic weather that produced violent thunderstorms and torrents of rain, the hot, humid days when even the birds seemed lethargic, and the gray winter days when a fire in the fireplace and a cup of hot soup were the best she could ask of life.
He shrugged. "Home is family, not a place. I've got some aunts and uncles in Texas, a whole herd of cousins, but no one as close to me as Mom. I can always visit Texas if I feel the need."
He loved his mother, and was unabashed about it. Lilah swallowed, hard. Her own mother had died when she was five, but she cherished the few memories she had of the woman who had been the center of life in the isolated little house.
"What about you?" he asked. "Are you from here originally?"
"I was born in this house. I've lived here all my life."
He gave her a quizzical look, and she knew what he was thinking. Most babies were born in a hospital, and had been for the last fifty years. She was

obviously younger than that, but too old to have been part of the birth-at-home fashion that was making a comeback in some sections.
"Didn't your daddy have time to get her to the hospital?"
"She didn't want a hospital." Was now the time to explain that her mother had been a folk healer, like her? That she too had seen the bursts of color that surrounded people, and taught her daughter what they meant, how to read them? That she had known everything would be all right, and thus hadn't seen any purpose in spending their hard-earned money on a hospital and doctor she didn't need?
"That was one tough lady," he said, shaking his head. A small smile curved his mouth. "I delivered a baby when I was a rookie. Scared the hell out of me, and the mother wasn't too happy, either. But we got through it, and they were both okay" The smile turned into a grin. "My bedside manner must have been a tad off, though; she didn't name the baby after me. As I recall, her exact words were: 'No offense, but I never want to see you again for the rest of my life! "
Lilah threw back her head on a gusty laugh. She could just see a young, inexperienced rookie deputy, sweating and panicky, delivering a baby.
"What happened? Did the baby come early, or just fast?"
"Neither. West Texas does get snow, and that was one of the times. The roads were in really bad shape. She and her husband were on the way to the hospital, but their car slid off the road into a drift not a mile from their house, so they walked back home and called for help. I was in the area, and I had a four-wheel drive, but by the time I got to their house the weather was even worse, so bad I wouldn't risk the drive." He rubbed his ear. "She cussed me, called me every name I'd ever heard before, and a few that I hadn't. She wanted something for the pain, and I was the one keeping her from getting it, so she made sure I suffered right along with her."
His grin invited her to laugh at the image his words conjured. Lilah snickered as she checked on the biscuits. "What about her husband?"
"Useless. Every time he came around he got an even worse cussing than I did, so he stayed out of sight. I'm telling you, that was one unhappy lady."
"How long did her labor last?"
"Nineteen hours and twenty-four minutes," he promptly replied. "The longest nineteen hours and twenty-four minutes in the history of the world, according to her. She swore she'd been in labor at least three days."

Under the amusement in his tone was a thread of ... joy. She tilted her head, wondering if she read him correctly. "You liked it." The words weren't quite a question.
He laughed. "Yeah, I did. It was exciting, and funny, and amazing as hell. I've seen puppies and calves and foals being born, but I've never felt anything like when that baby slid into my hands. By the way, it was a girl. Jackson just didn't seem to suit her."
His aura was glowing now with more green in the mixture, shot through with joyful yellow. Lilah no longer had to wonder when she would fall in love with him. She did in that moment, something inside her melting, growing hotter. She knew her own aura would be showing pink, and she blushed, even though she knew he couldn't see it.
She felt trembly, and had to sit down. This was momentous. She'd never thought she would love the way others did, not romantically. She loved many people and many things, but not like this. Always, mixed in with her feelings, was the knowledge that she was set apart from them, a caretaker rather than a partner. Even with Pops she'd been the rock on which he leaned. But Jackson was a strong man, both mentally and physically. He didn't need anyone to take care of him; rather, he did the caring.
If she hadn't been able to see his aura, she would eventually have loved him anyway. But she could see it, and she knew the essence of the man. That, and her own pre-cognitive recognition of him as her mate, destroyed her sense of caution. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and let him do whatever he wanted. Instead she got up and checked the biscuits.
She stood there with the oven door open, letting heat escape, staring blindly at the biscuits. Jackson came up behind her. "Perfect," he said with approval.
She blinked. The biscuits were a golden brown, perfectly risen. She had a good hand with biscuits, or so Pops had always said. She took a deep breath, and, using a dishcloth, took the hot pan out of the oven and set it on a cooling rack.
"Why does Vargas think you're a witch?"
That brought her to earth with a thud. The change in his tone was subtle, but there: He was the sheriff, and he wanted to know if anyone in his county was practicing witchcraft.
"Several reasons, I suppose." She turned to face him, her expression cool and unreadable. "I live alone out in the woods, I seldom go into town, I

don't socialize. The witch rumor started when I was in fourth grade, I think."
"Fourth grade, huh?" He leaned against the cabinet, blue gaze sharp on her face. "I guess he'd been watching too many Bewitched reruns."
She lifted one eyebrow and waited.
"So you don't cast spells, or dance naked in the moonlight, or anything like that?"
"I'm not a witch," she said plainly. "I've never cast a spell, though I might dance naked in the moonlight, if the notion took me."
"Do tell." The gaze warmed, and moved slowly down her body. "Call me if you need a dancing partner."
"I'll do that."
He looked up, met her eyes, and as simply as that, there was no longer any need for caution.
"Are you hungry?" he asked, moving closer, stroking one finger up her bare arm.
"No."
"So the biscuits and beef stew can wait?"
"They can."
He took the dishcloth and set the pan of stew off the eye. "Will you go to bed with me, then, Lilah Jones?"
"I will."

6

Lilah lit the lamp in her bedroom and turned it low. The storm and heavy rain made the room as dark as night, lit briefly by the flashes of lightning. Jackson seemed to fill the small room, his shoulders throwing a huge shadow over the wall. His aura, visible even in the low light, pulsated with that deep, clear red again, the color of passion and sensuality.
He began unbuttoning his shirt, and she turned back the bedcovers, neatly folding the quilt and plumping the pillows. Her bed looked small, she thought, though it was a double. It was certainly too small for him. Perhaps she should see about getting a larger one, though she wasn't certain how long he would use hers. That was the problem with the flashes of precognition; they told her facts, but not circumstances. She knew only that

Jackson would be her lover, and her love. She had no idea if he would love her in return, if they would be together forever or only this one time.
"You look nervous." Despite the sharpness of his desire, which she could plainly see, his voice was quiet. His shirt was unbuttoned but he hadn't yet removed it. Instead he was watching her, his cop's eyes seeing too much.
"I am," she admitted.
"If you don't want to do this, just say so. No hard feelings—well, except for one place," he said wryly.
"I do want to do this. That's why I'm nervous." Looking him in the eye, she unfastened her shorts and let them drop, then began unbuttoning her shirt. "I've never been so ... attracted to anyone before. I'm always cautious, but —" She shook her head. "I don't want to be cautious with you."
He shrugged the shirt off and let it drop to the floor. Lamplight gleamed on his shoulders, delineating the smooth, powerful muscles, and the broad chest shadowed with dark hair. Lilah inhaled deeply through her nose, feeling the warmth of arousal spread through her. She forgot what she was doing, just stood there looking at him, greedily drinking in the sight of her man undressing.
He sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned forward to pull off his boots. Now she could admire the deep furrow of his spine, the rippling muscles in his back. Her heartbeat picked up in speed, and she got even warmer.
The boots thunked on the wooden floor. He stood and unfastened his pants, let them drop, and pushed down his shorts. Totally naked, he stepped out of the circle of clothing and turned to face her.
Oh, my.
She must have said the words aloud, breathing them in hunger and lust and maybe even some bit of fear, because he laughed as he came to her, brushing aside her stalled hands and finishing the job of unbuttoning her shirt. He put his hands inside the shirt and smoothed them over her shoulders and down her arms, slipping the shirt off so easily she scarcely knew when it left. She wasn't paying attention to her clothing anyway, only to the jutting penis that brushed her belly when he moved.
She wrapped her hands around it, lightly stroking, exploring, delighting in the heat and hardness and textures, so different from her own body. Now it was he who sucked in a breath, his eyes closing as he stilled for a moment. Then he moved even closer, pushing his hands inside her panties and gripping the globes of her bottom as he pulled her to him. She had to release

his penis and she made a sound of ... disappointment? Impatience? Both. But there was reward in the pressure of his hard, hairy chest on her breasts, in the rasping sensation to her nipples. Her entire body seemed to go boneless, melting into him, curving to fit his contours.

His breathing was ragged. "Let's get you naked so I can look at you," he muttered, releasing her bottom long enough to push her panties down her thighs. She wiggled until they dropped to her feet, and his breathing caught on a groan.

"God! You're a natural-born tease, aren't you?" He pulled her up on her toes, welding her to him.

"Am I?" She had never thought about teasing a man before, never wanted to; but if what she was doing was teasing him, then that was only fair, because she was driving herself crazy, too. The feel of their bare bodies brushing together was so delicious she wanted to moan. She kept moving against him, rubbing her nipples against his chest and turning them into hard, aching peaks.

He stroked his hands over her bottom and back, his hands so hot and rough she wanted to purr. Then one hand went lower, curving under her bottom, and his fingers dipped between her legs. She gasped, arching into him as an almost electric sensation sparked through her. One finger explored deeper, slipping a little way into her. A soft, wild noise erupted from her throat, and she all but climbed him, one leg wrapping around him as she levered herself up so he could have better access.

Panting, she buried her face in his throat, clinging for dear life while she waited in agony for him to deepen the caress. Slowly, so slowly, that big finger pressed deeper and she rocked under the impact. That wild little noise sounded again, and her hips surged, trying to take more of his finger. Pleasure and tension coiled in her, tighter and tighter, until it was pain and something more, something beyond anything she had imagined.

"Not yet," he said urgently. "Don't come yet." He turned and half-fell with her onto the bed, cradling her against the full impact of his weight as he landed on top of her. With a twist of his hips he settled between her thighs, and his erection prodded at her folds, briefly seeking her entrance before finding it and pressing inward. Her entire body contracted, tightening around that thick intrusion, though she couldn't tell whether her body's reaction was in welcome or an effort to limit the depth of his penetration.

His hips recoiled, his buttocks tightened, and he pushed deeper, deeper, until her inner resistance was gone and in one long slide he was all the way inside her.
She would have screamed, but her lungs were compressed with shock and she could barely breathe, much less scream. Her vision blurred and darkened. She hadn't realized. . . . His penis felt almost unbearably hot inside her, burning and stretching her. She ached deep inside, where he was. He lifted up on his elbows, panting, the expression in his blue eyes both incredulous and ferociously intent. "Lilah . . . God, I can't believe this—Are you a virgin?"
"Not now." Desperately she clutched his buttocks, her back arching as she tried to take him deeper. "Please. Oh, God, Jackson, please!" She bucked her hips at him, her head thrown back as she wrestled with the almost savage pleasure that held her on the edge of release. He was still hurting her, but her entire body was throbbing with a need that overrode any pain. She wanted him deep, she wanted him hard, she wanted him to pound into her and hurl her over that edge.
He gave in to her sensual imploring. "Shhh," he soothed, though his voice was rough with his own need. "Easy, darlin'. Let me help ..." He reached between their bodies, his callused fingertips finding the bud of her clitoris and gently pinching it up. Again and again he squeezed it, catching it between two of his fingers, and with a sharp cry she imploded, her body twisting and heaving in the paroxysm of climax.
A harsh sound tore from his throat. He gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her buttocks, and thrust hard, driving into her so fiercely the bed thudded against the wall. He climaxed convulsively, grinding down on her for long seconds before collapsing, shaking, on top of her.
She wrapped her arms around his sweaty shoulders and held on tight, partly to comfort him in the aftermath and partly to anchor herself. She felt as if she would fly into a hundred pieces if she let him go. Tears burned her eyelids, though she didn't know why. Her heart still galloped in a mad race to nowhere and her thoughts swam, a kaleidoscope of impressions and wishes and disbelief.
She hadn't known making love would be so hot, so uncontrolled. She had expected something slow and sweet, building to ecstasy, not that headlong dash into the fire.

His heart pounded against her breast, gradually slowing, as did his breathing. His weight crushed her into the mattress. Her thighs were still spread to accommodate him, and he was still inside her, though smaller and softer now.
Now that the storm within was over, she became aware again of the storm without. Lightning cracked so close by that the thunder rattled the entire house, and rain drummed on the roof, but that was nothing compared to what had just gone on in her bed. Storms came and went, but her entire life had just been changed.
Finally he lifted his head. His dark hair was matted with sweat, his expression strained and empty, the expression of release. "Okay." His voice sounded rusty, as if his vocal cords didn't want to work. "When you said 'not now' did you mean that you didn't want to talk, or that you had been a virgin until then, but now you weren't?"
She cleared her throat. "The second choice." Her own voice sounded rusty, too.
"Holy hell." He let his head drop again. "I never expected— Damn it, Lilah, that's something you should tell a man."
She moved her hands over his shoulders, closing her eyes in delight at the feel of his warm, sleek skin under her palms. "Things happened kind of fast. I didn't have a lot of time to consider the shoulds and should nots."
"There are no should nots, in this case."
"What would you have done differently, if you'd known?"
He considered that, and sighed against her shoulder. "Hell, probably nothing. There's no way in hell I would have stopped. But if I'd known, I'd have tried to slow things down, and given you more time."
"I couldn't have stood it," she said starkly. "Not one minute more."
"Yes you could. You will. And you'll like it."
If that was a threat, it failed miserably. A tingle of excitement shot through her, sending a spark of life into her exhausted muscles. She wiggled a little. "When?"
"God," he muttered. "Not right this minute. Give me an hour."
"Okay, an hour."
His head came up again and he gave her a long, level look. "Before we get carried away again, don't you think we need to talk about birth control? Specifically, our lack of it? I doubt you're on the pill, and I don't generally carry rubbers around with me."

"No, of course I'm not on the pill, but I won't get pregnant."
"You can't be sure."
"I just finished my period two days ago. We're safe."
"Famous last words."
She sighed. She knew she wouldn't get pregnant, though she didn't know how to explain to him how she knew. She wasn't certain, herself. It wasn't a flash of precognition, at least not like the usual flash. It was more a sense than a knowing, but there wasn't a pregnancy in her immediate future. Next month, maybe, but not now.
She sighed. "If you're so worried, then we won't do this again, all right?"
He regarded her for a minute, then grinned. "Some chances," he said, leaning down to kiss her, "are just meant to be taken."

7

They heard the outboard motor not long after dawn, when the sun had just turned the eastern sky a brilliant gold. The storms of the night had lasted longer than expected, until almost three o'clock in the morning, but now the morning sky was absolutely cloudless.
"Sounds like the cavalry is arriving," Lilah said, tilting her head to listen.
"Son of a bitch," Jackson said mildly. "I was hoping rescue would take a little longer." He took a sip of coffee. "Do I look like an enraged, frustrated sheriff who was left stranded by a turnip-brain two-bit thug, or a man who's had a night-long orgy and whose legs are as limp as noodles?"
She pretended to study him, then shook her head. "You could use some practice on the enraged and frustrated look."
"That's what I thought." Putting his cup down on the table, he stretched his arms over his head and gave her a lazy, contented grin. "Instead of arresting Thaniel, I may give him a commendation."
"What are you going to arrest him for?" she asked in surprise. "I told you I'm not pressing charges."
"Whether or not you do, he stole two boats, not just yours. What happens depends on what he's done with Jerry Watkins's boat, and what Jerry wants to do about it. If Thaniel was smart, he left the boats at the launch ramp, but then again, if he was smart he wouldn't have taken them in the first place."

"If he left them out, the amount of rain we had last night would have sunk them," Lilah pointed out. "It takes a lot of rain to swamp a boat, but I think we had enough to do the job, don't you?"
"Probably." Getting up from the table, he walked into the living room and looked out the window. "Yep, it's the cavalry."
Lilah stood beside him and watched the boat carrying two deputies approach her small dock. The river was high and muddy after the night's storms, so high her dock lacked only a few inches being underwater. They carefully tied the boat to the post and stepped out, both wearing Kevlar vests and carrying shotguns. They cautiously looked around.
Jackson quickly bent and kissed her, his mouth warm and lingering. The look he gave her was full of regret. "I'll come back as soon as I can," he said, keeping his voice pitched low. "I doubt it'll be today, and whether or not I can make it tomorrow depends on how much damage the storms did, and if there are any power outages or cleanup to do."
"I'll be here," she said, her manner calm. She smiled. "I have no way of going anywhere, without my boat."
"I'll either get it back, or I'll make damn certain Thaniel buys you a new one," he promised, and kissed her again. Then he picked up his vest and shotgun, which he had placed by the front door in anticipation of his "rescue," and walked out on the front porch.
Both of the deputies visibly relaxed when they saw him. "You okay, Sheriff?" the older of the two called.
"I'm fine, Lowell. But Thaniel Vargas won't be when I get my hands on him. He stole both the boat I was using, and Miss Jones's boat. But he'll wait; how much damage was there last night?"
Lilah stepped out on the porch behind him, because it would look strange if she didn't. "Good morning, Lowell." She nodded to the other deputy.
"Alvin. I just made the sheriff some coffee; would y'all like a cup?" She saw Jackson's brows rise in surprise that she knew his deputies, but he didn't comment.
"No thanks, Lilah," Lowell answered. "We need to get on back. Thanks for offering, but I've drunk so much coffee since midnight I doubt I'll sleep for two days."
"The damage?" Jackson prompted, taking charge of the conversation again.
"Power was out over most of the county, but it's back on now all except for Pine Flats. A lot of trees went down, and there's roof damage to a bunch of

houses, but only one actually went into a house, the LeCroy place out near Washington High School. Mrs. LeCroy was hurt pretty bad; she's in the hospital in Mobile."
“Any car wrecks?"
Lowell gave him a weary look. "More than you can count."
"Okay. Sorry I wasn't on hand to help."
"I'm just sorry it took us so long to get out here, but with the storms the way they were, only a fool would have gone out on the water."
"I didn't expect anybody to risk their lives coming after me. I was okay, just stranded."
"We weren't sure, what with Jo telling us she sent you here after Thaniel Vargas. But Thaniel seemed okay, not nervous or anything, and he played dumb, said he hadn't been up here and hadn't seen you."
"You saw him?" Jackson asked sharply.
"He helped us get a tree out of the highway. Anyway, we figured the storm had caught you. We didn't want to take any chances, since you could have run into some other kind of trouble out here, so we came looking."
Jackson shook his head. He never would have figured Thaniel capable of that much brass; maybe that thickheaded act was more of an act than fact. If so, he'd have to take Thaniel a lot more seriously than he had before.
Walking down to the dock, he handed the shotgun to Alvin and stepped into the boat. "Well, let's go to work," he said. He turned and raised his hand. "Thanks for feeding me, Miss Jones."
"You're welcome," she called, smiling as she hugged her arms against the early morning chill. She waved them good-bye, a wave both deputies returned, then went back into the house.
Jackson settled onto a boat seat. "Y'all seem to know Miss Jones pretty well," he said, driven by curiosity.
"Sure." Lowell got behind the wheel. "We went to school together."
It was such a prosaic answer that Jackson felt like smacking himself in the head. Of course she had attended school; she hadn't lived her entire life marooned upriver. He had a mental image of a small, solemn Lilah sitting in that little flat-bottom boat, clutching her schoolbooks, being ferried back and forth in all kinds of weather.
Because he wanted to know, he asked, "How did she get back and forth to school?"

"Boat," Alvin said. "Her daddy brought her. He'd take her to the park ramp, closest to school. If the weather was good, he'd walk her the rest of the way. If it was raining, a teacher would meet them and give her a ride."

At least he wouldn't have to fret about that young Lilah being left alone at the boat docks, Jackson thought; her father had been concerned for her safety. Though why he would fret about something so long in the past was beyond him.

The trip downriver was much more leisurely than his risky dash up it the day before. The swollen river was full of trash, making caution necessary. Jackson hoped he'd see two boats tied to the shore when they got to the ramp, but no such luck.

"I wonder what Thaniel did with Jerry Watkins's boat," he growled.

"No telling," Lowell said. "The damn fool probably just turned it loose. Jerry will be fit to be tied; he set a store by that boat."

At least Jerry Watkins would have insurance on his boat; Jackson very much doubted Lilah would have it on hers. How would she replace it? He gave his bank account a quick mental check; one way or the other, Lilah would have another boat—by tomorrow, if he couldn't find hers. He couldn't bear the thought of her being completely stranded out there, though she was so damn competent he could see her hiking into town if necessary, even though it had to be twenty, maybe thirty miles around. But what if she got sick, or injured herself. She chopped her own wood, for God's sake. He went cold at the thought of an ax buried in her foot.

She had become more important to him, faster than anyone he had ever known. Twenty-four hours ago he hadn't known she existed. Within two hours of meeting her, he'd been in bed with her, and he'd spent the most erotic, exciting night of his life in her arms. He had climaxed so many times he doubted he'd get a hard-on for days. Then he thought of Lilah, waiting for him, and a sudden pooling of heat in his groin told him he had miscalculated. He jerked his thoughts back to the day's work before he embarrassed himself.

The Watkins truck was still sitting where Charlotte had parked it, boat trailer still hitched to it. At least a tree hadn't come down on the truck during the storms; that would be the final insult to a good deed. He looked around; there were some small branches scattered around the parking area, but nothing substantial.

Lowell eased the boat into the bank and both Jackson and Alvin climbed out. While Alvin went to the truck to back the trailer into the water, Jackson surveyed the area. Yesterday he'd been in too much of a hurry to think about details, but now his cop's eye swept the launch ramp, not missing a thing. The parking area was surprisingly large, given how isolated and little-used the launch ramp was. But . . . was it little-used? The area was free of weeds, showing that there was a good bit of traffic. The sandy dirt showed evidence of a lot of different tire tracks, more than he expected. That was strange, given what Jo had said about the best fishing being downriver.
Lowell and Alvin competently took the boat out of the water. They had come in two vehicles, one county car and then the truck pulling the boat, which Jackson assumed they had borrowed from the Rescue Squad. That made five vehicles he could count since yesterday afternoon: his, Thaniel's, Charlotte Watkins's, and now these two.
The rain had destroyed all but the deepest tracks, but he could still make out at least three more sets of tracks besides the ones he knew about.
Now, why would there be so much river traffic up here? The fishing wasn't good, and right past Lilah's the river got too shallow for boat traffic. He tried to think of a logical explanation for the tracks. Being in law enforcement, his first thought was that maybe drug dealers were meeting here, but he discarded that idea. It was too open, and though Old Boggy Road wasn't the busiest road in the world, there was occasional traffic on it. As if to prove it, at that moment a farmer drove by in a pickup truck, and he craned his neck to see what was going on.
No, drug dealers would find a place where they were less likely to attract attention. So ... who was coming here, and why?
He strolled over to Lowell and Alvin. "This little ramp gets a lot of use, doesn't it?"
“A fair amount," Lowell agreed.
"Why?"
They both gaped at him. "Why?" Alvin echoed.
"Yeah. Why does it get so much use? Only someone who doesn't know the river would come up here to fish."
To his surprise, both deputies shifted uncomfortably. Lowell cleared his throat. "I guess folks go to visit Lilah."
"Miss Jones?" Jackson clarified, wanting to make certain there wasn't another Lilah in the area.

Lowell nodded.
Looking around the area, Jackson said, "From all these tire ruts, I'd say she gets a lot of company." He tried to picture a steady stream of visitors to Lilah's isolated little house upriver, but just couldn't.
"Some," Lowell agreed. "A lot of women go to see her." He coughed. "And —uh, some men, too, I guess."
"Why is that?" A variety of wild reasons ran through his mind. Marijuana? He couldn't see Lilah growing marijuana, but the place was certainly isolated enough. He didn't let himself seriously consider that. Women didn't go to backwoods women for abortions anymore, either, so that was out. Nothing illegal, for sure, because his deputies obviously knew about whatever was going on up there, and had done nothing to stop it. The only thing he could think of that made sense was so ridiculous he couldn't believe it.
"Don't tell me she really is a witch!" He could just see it now, boat after boat making its way upriver for spells and potions. She had denied the witch thing, said she didn't know anything about spells, but in his experience people lied all the time. He dealt with serial liars on a daily basis.
"Nothing like that," Alvin said hastily. "She's kind of an old-timey healer. You know, she makes poultices and stuff."
Poultices and stuff. Healer. Of course. It was so obvious, Jackson wondered that he hadn't seen it. Relief spread through him. His imagination had been running wild, a sick feeling congealing in his gut. He had just found her, a woman who appealed to him on every level, and he couldn't bear the thought of her being involved in something shifty. He didn't know where this thing between him and Lilah was going, but he intended to follow it to the end.
"It's how she makes her living," Lowell said. "People buy herbs and things from her. A lot of folks go to her rather than a doctor, because she's so good at telling them what's wrong."
He wanted to grin. Instead he collected his vest and shotgun from the boat and said, "Well, let's go round up Thaniel Vargas. Even if we get the boats back and Jerry Watkins doesn't press charges against him, I want to scare about ten years off the bastard's life."

8

Thaniel Vargas was nowhere to be found. He had gone to ground somewhere, Jackson figured, waiting for the trouble to blow over. Because things were still kind of busy in the county, with the continuing power outage in Pine Flats and cleaning up from the storm, Jackson couldn't devote a lot of time or manpower to finding him.

More than anything, he wanted to get back upriver to Lilah's house, but it just wasn't possible that day. Besides the problems from the storm, the blue moon craziness was still in full force. At traffic court that day, a woman totally lost it and tried to get out of paying a speeding ticket by holding the judge hostage. Why anyone in her right mind would want to trade a simple fine of fifty bucks for a felony charge was beyond Jackson. Getting the courthouse settled down took several hours out of his day, hours when he needed to be somewhere else.

He got home at midnight that night, tired and disgruntled and aching with frustration. He wanted Lilah. He needed Lilah, needed the simple serenity of her, the quietness of her home that was such a contrast to his hectic days. They had known each other for such a short period of time, he wasn't certain that they had anything more than a one-night stand, brought about as much by circumstance as by mutual attraction. But he had been her first lover, her only lover; Lilah wasn't the type of woman to have a one-night stand. For her, making love meant something. It had meant something to him, too, something more than any of his other love affairs.

Lilah was special: honest, witty, with the bite of irony he enjoyed, and gutsy. She was also sexy as hell, with her well-toned, femininely muscled body and her cloud of curly hair that just begged to have his hands in it. Though he was her first lover, she hadn't shrunk from anything he wanted to do. She had met him halfway in everything, enjoying what he did to her as much as he enjoyed doing it, and returning the favor. He couldn't imagine such uncomplicated joy ever getting boring.

Until now, his house had suited him perfectly. It was an older house, with high ceilings and cranky plumbing, but he'd had the main bathroom completely redone, and the kitchen, not that he was much on cooking. It had just seemed like a smart thing to do. His bed was big enough for him, not like Lilah's too-short, too-narrow bed. They'd had to sleep double-decker, when they slept—not a big sacrifice. He'd liked having her sprawled on top of him, when he wasn't on top of her.

But now his house felt. . . empty. And noisy. He hadn't realized until now how much noise a refrigerator made, or a water heater. The central air system blotted out the night's sounds of crickets and the occasional chirp of a bird.

He wanted Lilah.

He took a cold shower instead, and crawled into his big, cold, empty bed, where he lay awake, muscles aching, eyes burning with fatigue, and thought of that first searing, electric moment when he pushed into Lilah's body. That got him so hard he groaned, and he tried not to think about sex at all. But then her breasts came to mind, and he remembered the way her nipples had peaked in his mouth when he sucked her, and how she had moaned and squirmed when he went down on her.

Sweat sheened his body, despite the air conditioning. Swearing, he got out of bed and took another cold shower. He finally got to sleep about two o'clock, only to dream erotic dreams and wake up needing, wanting Lilah even more than before.

at eight twenty-one in the morning, Thaniel Vargas's body was found floating in the river. He was easily identified because his wallet was still stuffed in his jeans pocket, along with a can of chewing tobacco. If it hadn't been for his wallet, his own mother would have been hard-pressed to identify him, because he'd been shot in the face with a shotgun.

"I don't think he's been dead long," the coroner said, standing beside Jackson as the body was wrapped and loaded in a meat wagon. "The turtles and fish hadn't been at him much. As fast as the river's flowing, the current would have kept him on the surface, plus that dead branch his arm was tangled in gave him added buoyancy."

"How long?"

"It's just a guess, Jackson. I'd say . . . twelve hours or so. Hard to tell, when they've been in the water. But he was last seen night before last, so it couldn't have been much longer than half a day."

Jackson stared at the river, a sick feeling shredding his guts into confetti as he thought this through. He plainly remembered Lilah staring at Thaniel and saying, "You're dead," in that flat, unemotional tone that had been even more chilling than if she had screamed it at him. And now Thaniel was dead, from a shotgun blast. Lilah had a shotgun. Had Thaniel gone back to her house yesterday, or even last night? Had she made good on her threat, if it had indeed been one?

That was the best-case scenario, that Lilah had been forced to defend herself, or even that she had shot Thaniel at first sight. He didn't like it, but he could understand if a woman alone shot first and asked questions later when a thug who had been shooting at her the day before came back for more target practice. He doubted the district attorney would even indict under those circumstances.

Worst-case scenario, however, was the possibility that Lilah was lying in a pool of blood at her house, wounded or even dead. The thought galvanized him, sending pure panic racing through his bloodstream.

"Hal, I need that boat!" he roared at the captain of the Rescue Squad, referring to the boat they had used to retrieve Thaniel's body from the river. He was already striding toward the boat as he yelled.

Hal looked up, his homely face showing only mild surprise. "Okay, Sheriff," he said. "Anything I can help you with?"

"I'm going up to Lilah Jones's place. If Thaniel went back to shoot up the place again, she might be hurt." Or dead. But he didn't let himself dwell on that. He couldn't, and still function.

"If she's hurt, she'll need medical attention, and transport. I'll call for another boat and follow you." Hal unclipped the radio from his belt and rapped out instructions.

The Rescue Squad boats were built for stability, not speed, which was a good thing in the roiling river, with all the broken limbs and debris floating downstream, but Jackson still cursed the lack of speed. He needed to get to Lilah. Desperation gnawed at him, tearing at him with the knowledge that, if she had been shot, if she still lived, every second help was delayed could mean she wouldn't survive. He knew gunshot wounds; damn few of them were immediately fatal. A head or heart shot were about the only ones that could kill on contact, and that wasn't guaranteed.

He couldn't think of her lying bleeding and helpless, her life slowly ebbing away. He couldn't. And yet he couldn't stop, because his experience gave him graphic knowledge. Images rolled through his mind, an endless tape that made him sicker and sicker.

"Please. God, please." He heard himself praying aloud, saying the words into the wind.

Getting to Lilah's house took forever. He had started out much farther down the river than from the ramp on Old Boggy Road. He had to dodge debris, and a couple of times the boat shuddered over submerged limbs. The engine

stalled the last time, but it restarted on the first try If it hadn't, he probably would have jumped into the river and swam the rest of the way.
At last the house came into view, nestled under the trees. Heart pounding, he searched for any sign of life, but the morning was still and quiet. Surely Lilah would have come out on the porch when she heard the outboard motor, if she was there. But where else could she be? She had no means of transportation.
"Lilah!" he yelled. "Lilah!" She had to be there, but he found himself hoping she wasn't, hoping she had gone for a walk in the woods, or borrowed a boat from some of the multitude who evidently found their way to her house for folk remedies. He hoped—God, he hoped almost anything at all had taken her away from the house, rather than think she didn't come out on the porch because she was lying somewhere dead or dying.
He nosed the boat up to the dock and tied it to the post. "Lilah!"
Boots thudding, he raced up the dock just as he had two days before, but the adrenaline burn he'd felt then was nothing compared to the inferno he felt now, as if he might burst out of his skin.
He leaped onto the porch, bypassing the steps. The windows on this side of the house were intact, he noted. He wrenched open the screen door and turned the knob of the main door; it was unlocked, and swung inward.
He stepped into the cool, dim house, his head thrown up as he sniffed the air. The house smelled as before: fragrant and welcoming, the faint odor of biscuits lingering, probably from last night's supper. The windows were up and pristine white curtains fluttered in the slight morning breeze. No odor of death hung like a miasma, nor could he detect the flat, metallic smell of blood.
She wasn't in the house. He went through it anyway, checking all four rooms. The house seemed undisturbed.
He went outside, circling the house, looking for any signs of violence. Nothing. Chickens clucked contentedly, pecking at bugs. Birds sang. Eleanor waddled out from under the porch, still fat with kittens. He stooped to pet her, his head swiveling as he checked every detail of his surroundings. "Where is she, Eleanor?" he whispered. Eleanor purred, and rubbed her head against his hand.
"Lilah!" he roared. Eleanor started, and retreated under the porch again. "I'm coming."

The voice was faint, and came from behind the house. He jerked around, staring into the trees. The woods were almost impenetrable; he could be right on her, and not be able to see her.
"Where are you?" he called, striding rapidly to the back of the house.
"Almost there." Two seconds later she emerged from the trees, carrying a basket—and the shotgun. "I heard the outboard," she said as he reached her, "but I was a couple of hundred yards away and—uumph."
The rest of her words were lost under the fierce assault of his mouth. He hauled her up against him, unable to hold her close enough. He wanted to meld her into his very flesh, and never let her go. She was okay. She was alive, unharmed, warm and vibrant in his arms. The wind blew her soft curls around his face. He drank in her smell, fresh and soft, womanly. She tasted the same, her mouth answering his. He heard the basket drop to the ground, and the shotgun, then her arms were around him and she was clinging tightly to him.
Need roared through him like an inferno, born of his desperate fear and relief. He tore at her clothes, stripping down her jeans and panties and lifting her out of them.
"Jackson?" Her head lolled back, her breath coming in soft pants. "Let's go inside—"
"I can't wait," he muttered savagely, lifting her up and backing her against a tree. Her legs came up and locked around his hips as she automatically sought to balance herself. He wrenched his pants open, freed himself, and shoved into her. She was hot and damp and tight, her inner flesh enveloping and clasping. She wasn't ready for him; he heard her gasp, but he couldn't stop. He pulled back and thrust again and he went all the way in this time. On the fifth thrust he began coming, his body heaving against her as he spurted for what seemed like forever, until his head swam and his vision blurred and darkened, and still the spasms took a long time to die down, small bursts of sensation rocking him. He sank heavily against her, pinning her to the tree. His legs trembled, and his lungs heaved. "I love you," he heard himself muttering. "Oh, God, I was so scared."
Her hands were clasping his head, stroking, trying to soothe him. "Jackson? What's wrong? What happened?"
He couldn't speak for a minute, still in shock from what he had said. The words had just boiled out, without thought. He hadn't said those words to

any woman since his high school days, when he fell in love on a regular basis.
But they were true, he realized, and that shocked him almost as much as saying them. He loved her. He, Jackson Brody was in love. It had happened too fast for him to come to terms with it, to think about it as they gradually became enmeshed in each other's lives. Logic said he couldn't possibly love her after so short a time; emotion said to hell with logic, he loved her.
"Jackson?"
He tried to pull away from that emotional brink, to function as a sheriff instead of a man. He had come here because a man had been murdered, and somewhere along the line he had forgotten that and focused, instead, on the woman at the center of the situation. But he was still inside her, still dazed from the force of his orgasm, and all he could do was sink more heavily against her, pressing her into the tree trunk. Birds sang around him, insects buzzed, the river murmured. Bright morning sunlight worked its way through the thick canopy of leaves, dappling their skin.
"I'm sorry," he managed to say. "Did I hurt you?" He knew he had entered her far too roughly, and she hadn't been aroused and ready.
"Some." She sounded remarkably peaceful. “At first. Then I enjoyed it."
He snorted. "You couldn't have enjoyed it very much. I think I lasted about five seconds." The sheriff still hadn't made an appearance; the man held full sway.
"I enjoyed your pleasure." She kissed his neck. "It was actually rather . . . thrilling."
"I was scared to death," he admitted baldly.
"Scared? About what?"
Finally, belatedly, the sheriff lifted his head. Jackson discovered he couldn't question her, or even talk about Thaniel, while in his present position. Gently he withdrew from her and eased his weight back, holding her steady while her legs slipped from around his hips and she was once more standing on her own two feet.
"We'd better hurry," he said, picking up her clothes and handing them to her, then pulling up his own pants and getting everything tucked back in place. "The Rescue Squad could be here any minute."
"Rescue Squad?" she echoed, brows lifting in surprise.
He waited until she was dressed. "I was afraid you'd been hurt."
"Why would I be hurt?" She still looked totally bewildered.

As a man, he hated having to question her. As a sheriff, he knew he had to do it or resign today. "Thaniel Vargas's body was found this morning."
A stillness came over her, and she looked at him but somehow she wasn't seeing him, her gaze turned inward. "I knew he'd die," she finally said.
"He didn't die,' Jackson corrected. "He was murdered. Shot in the face with a shotgun."
She came back from wherever she had gone, and her green eyes focused sharply on him. "You think I did it," she said.

9

“I was afraid he'd come back and y'all started shooting at each other again. I was afraid I'd find you dead, or dying." His voice was remarkably calm, considering how shaken he felt.
She shook her head. "I haven't seen Thaniel since day before yesterday but I don't have any way to prove it."
"Lilah." He gripped her shoulders, shaking her a little to get her attention. "You seem to think I'm going to take you in for murder. Baby, even if you did kill him, after what happened no D.A. would prosecute, at least not the D.A. here. But I don't think you could murder anyone, not even Thaniel, and he was one worthless jackass. If you say you didn't kill him, then I believe you." The man was speaking again. The sheriff struggled to regain his detachment, though he thought it was a losing cause. He would never be detached when it came to Lilah.
She stared at him, a sense of wonderment coming to her eyes. In a flash of intuition he knew then she hadn't believed him when he blurted out that he loved her. Why should she? Men said "I love you" all the time in the heat of passion. And they had known each other less than two days. He was acutely aware that she hadn't said anything about love in return, but that would wait.
"But one thing keeps eating at me. Day before yesterday, you looked at him and said, 'You're dead,' and damn near scared him to death right then." He didn't ask anything, didn't try to form her answer in any way. He wanted her response to come from her own thoughts.
To his surprise, she went pale. She looked away, staring at the river. "I just —knew," she finally said, her voice stifled.

"Knew?"
"Jackson, I—" She half-turned away from him, then turned back. She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't know how to explain it."
"In English. That's my only requirement."
"I just know things. I get flashes."
"Flashes?"
Again the helpless gesture. "It isn't a vision, not exactly. I don't really see anything, I just know. Like intuition, only more."
"So you had one of these flashes about Thaniel?"
She nodded. "I looked at him when I came out on the porch and all of a sudden I knew he was going to die. I didn't know he was going to get killed. Just . . . that he wasn't going to be here anymore."
He rubbed the back of his neck. In the distance he could hear the droning of an outboard motor: the Rescue Squad was getting close.
"I've never been wrong," she said, almost apologetically.
"No one else knows what you said." His voice was as somber as he felt. "Just me."
She bent her head, and he saw her worrying her lower lip. She saw his dilemma. Then she raised her head and squared her shoulders. "You have to do your job. You can't keep this to yourself, and be a good sheriff."
If he hadn't already known he loved her, that moment would have done it for him. And suddenly he knew something else. "Are these 'flashes' the reason Thaniel thought you're a witch?"
She gave him a rueful little smile. "I wasn't very good at hiding things when I was young. I blabbed."
"Scared him, huh? And all these people who come to you for treatment—you just look at them and have flashes about what's wrong with them?"
"Of course not," she said, startled. Then she blushed. "That's something else."
The blush both intrigued and alarmed him. "What kind of something else?"
"You'll think I'm a freak," she said in dismay.
"But a sexy freak. Tell me." A little bit of the sheriff was in his tone, a quiet authority.
"I see auras. You know, the colors that everyone has around them. I know what the different colors mean, and if someone's sick I can see where and know what to do, whether or not I can help them or they need to see a doctor."

Auras. Jackson wanted to sit down. He'd heard all that New Age mumbo-jumbo, but that's just what it was, as far as he was concerned. He'd never seen a nimbus of color around anyone, never seen proof such a thing existed.

"I haven't told anyone about the auras," she said, her voice shaking. "They just think I'm a ... a medicine woman, like my mother. She saw them, too. I remember her telling me, when I was little, what the different colors meant. That's how I learned my colors." She gave a quick look at the river, where the boat had come into view. Tears welled in her eyes. "You have the most beautiful aura," she whispered. "So clean and rich and healthy. I knew as soon as I saw you that—"

She broke off, and he didn't pursue it. The Rescue Squad boat had reached her dock, and the two men in it were getting out. One was Hal, who had come along himself to take charge if the Squad was needed, and the other was a tall, thin man Jackson recognized as a medic, though he didn't know his name.

Lilah did, though. She left Jackson's side and walked out of the trees into the open, her hand lifted in a wave.

Both men waved back. "Glad to see you're okay," Hal called as they started up the dock.

"Just fine, thanks. Thaniel hadn't been here, though."

"Yeah, we know." Hal looked past Lilah to Jackson. "You left about a minute too soon, Sheriff. I still can't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"Jerry Watkins drove up just as you went out of sight. We were just getting the boat in the water. I tell you, Jerry looked like hell, like he'd been on a week-long bender. He looked at the body bag in the meat wagon and just broke down, crying like a baby. He's the one killed Thaniel, Sheriff. He jumped Thaniel about his boat, and you know how Thaniel was, too stupid to know when to back down. He told Jerry he sunk the son of a bitch. Beg pardon, Lilah. Jerry set a store by that boat. The way he tells it, he lost all control, grabbed the shotgun from his truck, and let Thaniel have it."

After years in law enforcement, little could surprise Jackson. He wasn't surprised now, because dumber things had happened. And though the full moon was waning, weird things would continue to happen for another couple of days. He did feel as if he'd dropped the ball, however. He should have thought of Jerry. Everyone who knew Jerry knew how he loved that

boat. Instead he'd been so focused on Lilah that he hadn't been able to see anything else.
"He sat down on the ground and put his hands on his head for your deputies to arrest him. Guess he saw that on television," Hal finished.
Well, that was that. Thaniel's murder was solved before it had time to become a real mystery. But one little detail struck him as strange. Jackson looked at the medic. "If you knew Lilah was okay, that Thaniel hadn't been killed in a fight here, why did you come along?"
"He came to see me," Lilah said. She shook her head. "I can't help you, Cory. You've got gallstones. You're going to have to see a doctor."
"Ah, hell, Lilah, I haven't even told you my symptoms!"
"You don't have to tell me, I can see how you look. It hurts like blue blazes every time you eat, doesn't it? Were you afraid you were having heart problems, maybe?"
Cory made a face. "How'd you know?"
"Just a hunch. Go see that doctor. There's a good gas-tro specialist in Montgomery. I'll give you his name."
"Okay," he said glumly. "I was hoping it was an ulcer and you could give me something for it."
"Nope. Surgery."
"Damn."
"Well, that's taken care of," Hal said. "We'd better get back, we still got some more work to do in Pine Flats. Will you be along soon, Jackson?"
"In a little while," Jackson said. From the way Hal winked, he figured the older man had cottoned on to the fact that there was something between him and Lilah. Frankly, Jackson didn't care if the whole county knew.
He and Lilah watched the two men get back into the boat and head back downriver. Jackson squinted his eyes in the bright sun. "Auras, huh?" What the hell. If he believed she could have flashes of precognition, why not auras? If you loved someone, he thought, you accepted a lot of stuff that you never would have considered before. Privately he'd check on Cory's diagnosis from a doctor, just to make sure, but for some reason he figured Lilah had been right. Auras were as good a reason as anything.
She reached for his hand. "I told you that you have a beautiful aura. I probably would have loved you just because of what I saw in it. But I had another flash when I saw you the first time."
He closed his hand warmly around hers. "What did that one tell you?"

She gave him a somber look. "That you were going to be the love of my life."
He felt a little light-headed. Maybe it was just the culmination of a very stressful morning, but he remembered that feeling of dizziness the first time he'd seen her. "Didn't you say those flashes had never been wrong?"
"That's right." She rose on tiptoe and kissed him. "They're one-hundred-percent accurate."
He needed to get back to work. He needed to do a lot of things. But he didn't need to do them as much as he needed to hold her, so he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, breathing in the essence of the love of his life, so happy he thought he might burst.
"We're going to do this up right," he said aloud. "The whole enchilada. Marriage. Kids."
"The whole enchilada," she agreed, and hand in hand they walked into the house.

-- White Out --

1

It was going to snow.

The sky was low and flat, an ominous purplish gray that blended into and obscured the mountaintops, so that it was difficult to tell where the earth stopped and the sky began. The air had a sharp, ammonia smell to it, and the icy edge of the wind cut through Hope Bradshaw's jeans as if they were made of gauze instead of thick denim. The trees moaned under the lash of the wind, branches rustling and whipping, the low, mournful sound settling in her bones.

She was too busy to stand around staring at the clouds, but she was nevertheless always aware of them hovering, pressing closer. A sense of urgency kept her moving, checking the generator and making sure she had plenty of fuel handy for it, carrying extra wood into her cabin and stacking even more on the broad, covered porch behind the kitchen. Maybe her instincts were wrong and the snow wouldn't amount to any more than the four to six inches the weather forecasters were predicting.

She trusted her instincts, though. This was her seventh winter in Idaho, and every time there had been a big snow, she had gotten this same crawly feeling just before it. The atmosphere was charged with energy, Mother Nature gathering herself for a real blast. Whether caused by static electricity or plain old foreboding, her spine was tingling from an uneasiness that wouldn't let her rest.

She wasn't worried about surviving: she had food, water, shelter. This was, however, the first time Hope had gone through a big snow alone. Dylan had been here the first two years; after he died, her dad had moved to Idaho to help her take care of the resort. But her uncle Pete had suffered a heart attack three days ago, and her dad had flown to Indianapolis to be with his oldest brother. Uncle Pete's prognosis was good: the heart attack was relatively mild, and he had gotten to the hospital soon enough to minimize the damage. Her dad planned to stay another week, since he hadn't seen any of his brothers or sisters in over a year.

She didn't mind being alone, but securing the cabins was a lot of work for one person. There were eight of them, single-storied, some with one bedroom and some with two, sheltered by towering trees. There were four on one side of her own, much larger A-frame cabin, and four on the other

side, the nine buildings curving around the bank of a picturesque lake that was teeming with fish. She had to make certain the doors and windows were securely fastened against what could be a violent wind, and water valves had to be turned off and pipes drained so they wouldn't freeze and burst when the power went off, which she had absolute faith would happen. Losing power wasn't a matter of if but when.

Actually, the weather had been mild this year; though it was December, there had been only one snow, a measly few inches, the remnants of which still lingered in the shaded areas and crunched under her boots. The ski resorts were hurting; their owners would welcome even a blizzard, if it left behind a good thick base.

Even the infamously optimistic slobber-hound, a golden retriever otherwise known as Tinkerbell even though he was neither female nor a fairy, seemed to be worrying about the weather. He stayed right behind her as she trudged from cabin to cabin, sitting on the porch while she worked inside, his tail thumping on the planks in relieved greeting when she reappeared. "Go chase a rabbit or something," she told him after she almost stumbled over him as she left the next to last cabin, but though his brown eyes lit with enthusiasm at the idea, he declined the invitation.

Those brown eyes were irresistible, staring up at her with love and boundless trust. Hope squatted down and rubbed behind his ears, sending him into twisting, whining ecstasy as he all but collapsed under the pleasure. "You big mutt," she said lovingly, and he responded to the tone with a swipe of his tongue on her hand.

Tink was five; she had gotten him the month after Dylan died, before her dad had come to live with her. The clumsy, adorable, loving ball of fuzz seemed to sense her sadness and had devoted himself to making her laugh with his antics. He smothered her with affection, licking whatever part of her was within reach, crying at night until she surrendered and lifted the puppy onto the bed with her, where he happily settled down against her, and the warmth of the little body in the night somehow made the loneliness more bearable.

Gradually the pain became less acute, her father arrived, and she was less lonely, and as he grew, Tink gradually distanced himself, moving from her bed to the rug beside it, then to the doorway, and finally down to the living room, as if he were weaning her from his presence. His accustomed sleeping spot now was on the rug in front of the fireplace, though he made

periodic tours of the house during the night to make certain everything in his doggy world was okay.
Hope looked at Tink, and her lungs suddenly constricted, compressing as an enormous sense of panic seized her. He was five. Dylan had been dead five years! The impossibility of it stunned her, rocked her back. Hope stared, unseeing, at the dog, her eyes wide and fixed, her hand still on his head. Five years. She was thirty-one, a widow who lived with her father and her dog, who hadn't been on a date in God, almost two years now, and there had been a grand total of only three dates anyway. There weren't any neighbors nearby, the motel kept her busy during the summer when travel was easier, and she made it a point not to get involved with any of the guests, not that she had met any with whom she wanted to get involved.
Stricken, she looked around as if she didn't recognize her surroundings. There had been moments before when the reality of Dylan's death hit hard, but this was different. This was like being kicked in the chest.
Five years. Thirty-one. The numbers kept echoing in her mind, chasing each other in circles like maddened squirrels. What was she doing here? She was living her life secluded in the mountains, so immersed in being Dylan Bradshaw's widow that she had forgotten to be herself, running the small, exclusive resort that had been Dylan's dream.
Dylans dream, not hers.
It had never been hers. Oh, she had been happy enough to come to Idaho with him, help him build his dream in the wilderness paradise, but her dream had been much simpler: a good marriage, kids, the kind of life her parents had enjoyed, piercingly sweet in its normalcy.
But Dylan was gone, his dream forever unfulfilled, and now hers was in danger too. She hadn't remarried, she had no children, and she was thirty-one.
"Oh, Tink," she whispered. For the first time she realized she might never remarry, might never have a family of her own. Where had the time gone? How had it slipped away, unnoticed?
As always, Tinkerbell sensed her mood and thrust himself closer to her, licking her hands, her cheek, her ear, almost knocking her down in his frenzy of sympathy. Hope grabbed him and regained her balance, laughing a little in spite of herself as she wiped away the slobber-hound's latest offering. "All right, all right, no more feeling sorry for myself. If I don't like what I've been doing, then change, right?"

His plumy tail wagged, his tongue lolled, and he grinned his doggy grin that said he approved of her speed in figuring out what she should do.
"Of course," she told him as she headed down the trail toward the last cabin, "I have others to consider. I can't forget Dad. After all, he sold his house and came out here because of me. It wouldn't be fair to uproot him again, to say, ‘Thanks for the support, but now it's time to move on.' And what about you, goofball? You're used to having plenty of room to roam, and let's face it, you aren't dainty."
Tink trotted after her, gamboling at her heels like an overgrown puppy, his ears pricked up as he listened to her tone. It was conversational, no longer sad, so his tail happily swished back and forth.
"Maybe I should just make an effort to get out more. The fact that I've only had three dates in five years could be my fault," Hope allowed wryly. "Let's face it, the drawback to living in a remote area is that there aren't many people around. Duhh."
Tink stopped dead, bright eyes fastening on a squirrel scampering across the path in front of them. Without even an apologetic look for abandoning her, he tore out in furious pursuit of the squirrel, barking madly. Clearing Idaho of the villainous squirrels was Tink's ambition in life; though he had never caught one, he never stopped trying. After fruitlessly trying to break him of the habit, fearing he would tangle with a rabid squirrel, Hope had given up the effort and instead made certain he always got his rabies vaccination.
The squirrel scrambled up the nearest tree and stopped just out of reach of Tink's lunges, chattering at him and spurring Tink to even more barking and jumping, as if he suspected the varmint was mocking him.
Leaving the dog to his fun, Hope went up the steps to the long front porch of the last cabin. Though the little resort had been Dylan's idea, his dream, going into one of the cabins always gave her a sense of pride. He had designed them, but she was the one who had decorated them, took care of them. The furnishings were different in each one, but similar in their simplicity and comfort. The walls were decorated with tasteful prints, rather than ratty deer heads bought at garage sales. The furniture was comfortable enough for a couple on a honeymoon and substantial enough for a hunting party.
She had tried to make each one feel like a home instead of a rented cabin, with rugs and lamps and books, as well as a fully equipped kitchen. There were radios but no televisions, because reception in the mountains was so

spotty and most of the guests mentioned how peaceful their stay was without it. There was a television in Hope's cabin, but it pulled in only one station during good weather and none at all during bad. She was considering investing in a satellite dish, because the winters were terribly long and often boring, and she and her dad could play only so many games of checkers.

If she did, she thought, she might add an extra receiver or two so a couple of the cabins could have television service to offer as an option. Things couldn't stay the same; if she kept the resort, she would have to continually make changes and improvements.

Taking a wrench from her hip pocket, she turned the valve that shut off the water to the cabin, then set about draining the pipes. The cabins were heated electrically, so when the power went off, they would quickly become icy inside. Each cabin did have a fireplace, but if a blizzard came, she certainly wouldn't be able to battle her way from cabin to cabin, building fires and keeping them fed.

That accomplished, she secured the shutters over the windows and locked the door. Tink had given up on the squirrel and was waiting for her on the porch. "That's it," she told him. "All finished. Just in time too," she added, as a snowflake drifted past her nose. "C'mon, let's go home."

He understood the word "home" and leaped to his feet, panting eagerly. A snowflake drifted past his nose, and he snapped at it, then was off on another manic tear, running back and forth, jumping at snowflakes and trying to catch them. His expression invited Hope to laugh at him, and she did, then joined him in a snowflake chase that turned into a game of tag, and ended with her running and jumping through the falling snow like a five-year-old herself. By the time she reached the big cabin, she was exhausted, panting harder than Tink and giggling at his antics.

He reached the door before she did, of course, and as always he was impatient to get inside. He turned his head to bark at her, demanding she hurry and open the door. "You're worse than having a child," she said, leaning over him to turn the doorknob. "You can't wait to get out, and once you're out, you can't wait to get back in. You'd better enjoy the outdoors while you can, because if this snow gets as bad as I think it will, it'll be a couple of days before you can go for a run."

Logic made no impression on Tink. He merely wagged his tail harder, and when the door opened, he lunged through the widening crack, yipping a

little as he trotted around the spacious, two-story great room, checking all the familiar scents before darting into the kitchen and out again, then coming over to Hope as if to say, "I've checked things out and everything's okay." She patted him, then shed her heavy shearling coat and hung it on the hall tree, sighing in relief at the immediate sense of freedom and coolness.
Her home was beautiful, she thought, looking around. Not grand, not luxurious, but definitely beautiful. The front of the A-frame was a wall of windows, giving a wonderful view of the lake and the mountains. A big rock fireplace soared the entire two stories, and twin ceiling fans hung from the exposed-beam ceiling, circulating the warm air that gathered at the top back to the ground floor. Hope had a green thumb, and luxurious ferns and other house-plants gave the interior of the house a lush freshness. The floor was wide wood planking, finished to a pale gold and covered with thick area rugs in rich shades of blue and green. Graceful curving stairs wound up to the second floor, and the white stair railing continued across the balcony. For Christmas she always wound lights and greenery up the stair banisters and across the balcony, and the effect was breathtaking.
There were two bedrooms upstairs—the master bed and bath and a smaller bedroom, which they had intended to use for a nursery—and a large bedroom downstairs off the kitchen. Her dad used the downstairs bedroom, saying the stairs were hard on his knees, but the truth was the arrangement gave them both more privacy. The kitchen was spacious and efficient, with more cabinet space than she would ever use, a cook island she loved, and an enormous side-by-side refrigerator-freezer that could hold enough food to feed an army. There was also a well-stocked pantry, a small laundry room, and a powder room, and after her dad had moved in, Hope had added a small full bath to connect to his bedroom.
The total effect was undeniably beautiful and comfortable, but every time the electricity went off, Hope wished they had made better decisions about what would or would not be hard-wired to the generator. The refrigerator, cooktop, and water heater were connected. To save money by buying a smaller generator, they had decided not to connect the heating unit, the lights, or any wall plugs except those in the kitchen. In a power outage, they had reasoned, the fireplace in the great room would provide enough heat. Unfortunately, without the ceiling fans working to keep the air circulated, most of the heat produced by the fireplace went straight to the second floor. The upstairs would be stifling hot, while the downstairs remained chilly.

The situation was livable, but not comfortable, especially for any length of time.
Forget the satellite dish, she thought. The money would be better spent on a larger generator and some electrical rewiring.
She looked out the windows; though it was only three o'clock, the clouds were so heavy it looked like twilight outside. The snow was falling faster now, fat, heavy flakes that had already dusted the ground with white just in the short time she had been inside.
She shivered suddenly, though the house was perfectly comfortable. A big pot of beef stew would hit the spot, she thought. And if the electricity was off for a long time, well, she might get awfully tired of beef stew, but reheating a bowl of it in the microwave drained a lot less power from the generator than cooking a small meal from scratch each time she got hungry.
But maybe she was wrong. Maybe it wouldn't snow that much.

2

She wasn't wrong.
The wind began howling, sweeping down from the icy mountain-tops, and the snowfall grew steadily heavier. With nightfall, Hope could no longer see out the windows, so she opened the front door to peek out, and the savage wind slammed the door into her, almost knocking her down. Snow all but exploded into the great room. She couldn't see anything out there but a wall of white.
Panting, she grabbed the door and braced all her weight against it, forcing it shut. The wind seeped around the edges in a high-pitched whine. Tink sniffed at her legs, assuring himself she was okay, then barked at the door.
Hope pushed her hair out of her face and blew out a deep breath. That was a full-fledged blizzard, a complete white out, where the wind whipped the snow around and blotted out visibility. Her shoulder ached where the door had hit her, and snow melted on her polished floor. "I won't do that again," she muttered, going in search of a mop and towel to dry the floor.
As she was cleaning up the water, the lights dimmed, then flickered brightly again. Ten seconds later they went off.

Having expected it, she had a flashlight close to hand, and switched it on. For a moment the house was eerily silent, then the generator automatically switched on and in the kitchen the refrigerator hummed to life. Just that faint noise was enough to banish the alarming sense of being disabled.
Anticipating, Hope had put out the oil lamps. She lit the lamp on the mantel, then put the match to the dry kindling and rolled newspapers under the logs she had already laid. Small blue-and-yellow flames licked at the paper, then curled up the sticks of kindling. She watched the fire for a moment to make certain it had caught, then moved around lighting the other lamps, turning the wicks low so they didn't smoke. Normally she wouldn't have lit so many lamps, but normally she wasn't alone, either. She had never thought herself timid and she wasn't afraid of the dark, but something about being alone in a blizzard was a little unnerving.
Tink settled down on his rug, his muzzle resting on his front paws. Perfectly content, he closed his eyes.
"You shouldn't get so worked up," Hope advised the dog, and he responded by rolling onto his side and stretching out.
Television reception had been nonexistent all afternoon, and the radio was picking up mostly static. She had turned it off earlier but now switched it over to battery operation and turned it on again, hoping the reception was better. It wasn't. Sighing, she switched it off. Why, at this rate, it might be a couple of days before she learned there was a blizzard.
It was too early to go to bed; she felt as if she should be doing something, but didn't know what. Restlessly she prowled around, the shrill whistle of the wind getting on her nerves. Maybe a bath would help. She climbed the stairs, peeling out of her clothes as she went. Already the heat was intensifying upstairs, and because her bedroom door was open, that room was toasty
Instead of showering, she ran a tub of water and lolled in it, her blond hair pinned on top of her head and the mellow light of a lamp flickering over her. Her naked flesh gleamed in the water, oddly different in lamplight; the curves were highlighted and shadows deepened, so that her breasts looked more voluptuous, the hair between her legs darker and more mysterious.
It wasn't a bad body, for thirty-one, she thought as she inspected herself. In fact, it was a damn good body. Hard work kept her slim and toned. Her breasts weren't large, but they were high and well-shaped; her belly was flat, and she had a nice butt.

It was a body that hadn't had sex in five long years.
Immediately she winced away from the thought. As much as she had enjoyed making love with Dylan, on the whole she wasn't tormented by horniness. For a couple of years after his death she hadn't felt even the slightest flicker of sexual need. That had gradually changed, but not to the extent that she felt frustrated enough to do something about it. Now, however, her loins clenched with a sharp surge of need. Maybe the tub bath had been a mistake, the warm water lapping at her naked body too much like a touch, a caress.
Tears stung her eyes and she closed them, leaning back and sinking even deeper into the water, letting it envelop her. She wanted sex. Hard-thrusting, sweaty, heart-pounding sex. And she wanted to love again, to be loved again. She wanted that closeness, that warmth, to be able to reach out in the night and know she wasn't alone. She wanted a baby. She wanted to waddle around with bloated breasts and an extended belly, her bladder under constant pressure, feeling their child squirming within her.
Oh, she wanted.
She allowed five minutes for a pity party, then sniffed and briskly sat up, using her toes to open the drain. Standing, she pulled the curtains closed and turned on the shower, rinsing away both soap and the blues.
Maybe she didn't have a man, but she did have nice, thick flannel pajamas, and she put them on, reveling in their warmth and comfort. Flannel pajamas possessed the same powers of reassurance as a hot bowl of soup on a cold day, a subliminal "there, there."
After brushing her teeth and hair, moisturizing her face, and pulling on an extra-thick pair of socks, she felt considerably better. Indulging in a hot bath, the sniffles, and a bout of self-pity was something she hadn't done in a long time, and it had been way overdue. Now that the ritual was behind her, she felt ready to deal with a blizzard.
Tink was lying at the foot of the stairs, waiting for her. He wagged a greeting, then stretched out in front of the bottom step so she had to step over him. "You could move," she informed him, as she did on a regular basis. He never took the hint, assuming it was his right to lie wherever he wanted.
After the warmth of the upstairs, the downstairs felt chilly. She poked up the fire, then microwaved herself a cup of hot chocolate. With the chocolate, a book, and a small battery-operated reading light, she installed

herself on the couch. Cushions behind her back and a throw over her legs added the perfect touch. Soothed, pampered, comfortable, she lost herself in the book.

The night hours drifted by. She dozed, woke, eyed the clock on the mantel: ten-fifty. She should go to bed, she thought, but getting up so she could lie down again seemed ridiculous. On the other hand, she had to get up anyway to tend the fire, which was low.

Yawning, she added a couple of logs to the fire. Tink came over to watch, and Hope scratched behind his ears. Suddenly he stiffened, his ears lifting, and a growl rumbled in his throat. He tore over to the front door and stood in front of it, barking furiously.

Something was out there.

She didn't know how Tink could hear anything over the howl of the wind, but she trusted the acuity of his senses. She had a pistol in the drawer of her nightstand, but that was upstairs and her father's rifle was much closer. Running into the bedroom, her socks sliding on the polished floor, she grabbed the rifle from its rack and the box of bullets from the shelf below it. Carrying both out into the great room where she could see, she racheted five bullets into place.

Between the wind and Tink's barking, she couldn't hear anything else. "Tink, quiet!" she commanded. "C'mere, boy." She patted her thigh, and with a worried look at the door, Tink trotted over to stand beside her. She stroked his head, whispering praise. He growled again, every muscle in his body tense as he shoved in front of her and pushed against her legs.

Was that a thump on the porch? Straining her ears, patting Tink so he would be quiet, she tilted her head and listened. The wind screamed.

Her mind raced, running through the possibilities. A bear? Normally they would be in their dens by now, but the weather had been mild. Cougar, wolf . . . they would avoid humans and a house, if possible; could a blizzard make them desperate enough for shelter that the shy, wary animals would ignore their instincts?

Something thumped against the door, hard. Tink tore away from her, charging at the door, barking his head off again.

Hope's heart was pounding, her hands sweating. She wiped her palms on her pajamas and gripped the rifle more securely. "Tink, be quiet!"

He ignored her, barking even louder as another thump came, this one hard enough to rattle the door. Oh, God, was it a bear? The door would probably

hold, but the windows wouldn't, not if the animal was determined to get in.
"Help."
She froze, not certain she had heard the muffled word. "Tink, shut up!" she yelled, and the tone of her voice briefly silenced the dog.
She hurried over to the door, the rifle ready in her hands. "Is anyone out there?" she called.
Another thump, much weaker, and what sounded like a groan.
"Dear God," she whispered, transferring the rifle to one hand and reaching to unbolt the door. There was a person out in this weather. She hadn't even considered that possibility, because she was so far from a main road. Anyone who left the protection of their vehicle shouldn't have been able to make it to her house, not in these conditions.
She opened the door and something white and heavy crashed into her legs. She screamed, staggering back. The door crashed against the wall, and the wind blew snow all over the floor, then sucked the warmth from the cabin with its icy breath.
The white thing on her floor was a man.
Hope set the rifle aside and grabbed him under the arms. She braced her legs, trying to drag him across the threshold so she could shut the door, and grunted as she moved him only a few inches. Damn, he was heavy! Ice pellets stung her face like bees, and the wind was unbelievably cold. She closed her eyes against the onslaught and braced herself for another effort. Desperation gave her strength; she threw herself backward, hauling the man with her. She fell, his weight pinning her to the floor, but his legs were over the threshold.
Tink was beside himself with worry, barking and lunging, then whining. He thrust his muzzle at her face for a quick lick of reassurance, for her or himself she couldn't begin to guess; then he sniffed at the stranger and resumed barking. Hope gathered herself for one more effort, and pulled the man all the way inside.
Panting, she crawled over to the door and wrestled it shut. The wind hammered at it, as if enraged at being shut out. She could feel the heavy door shuddering under the onslaught. Hope secured the bolt, then turned her attention to the man.
He had to be in bad shape. Frantically she knelt beside him, brushing away snow and ice that crusted his clothes and the towel he had wrapped over his face.

"Can you hear me?" she asked insistently. “Are you awake?"
He was silent, limp, not even shivering, which wasn't a good sign. She pushed back the hood of his heavy coat and unwrapped the towel from his face, then used it to wipe the snow from his eyes. His skin was white with cold, his lips blue. From the waist down, his clothes were wet and coated with a sheet of ice.
As swiftly as possible, given his size and the difficulty of wrestling an unconscious man out of wet clothing that had been frozen stiff, she began undressing him. Thick gloves came off first, then the coat. She didn't take the time to inspect his fingers for frostbite, but moved down to his feet and began unlacing the insulated boots, then tugged them off. He wore two pairs of socks, and she peeled them away. His feet were icy. Moving back up, she began unbuttoning his shirt and only then noticed that he wore a deputy sheriff's uniform, the shirt stretched tight across his chest and shoulders. Under the shirt he wore a thermal pullover, and under that a T-shirt. He had been prepared for cold weather, but not for being caught out in it. Maybe his vehicle had slid off the road, though she didn't see how he could have made his way such a distance under these drastic conditions. It was nothing less than a miracle, or sheer chance, that he'd managed to stumble onto the house. By all logic, he should be dead out in the snow. And unless she could get him warm, he might yet die.
She tossed the three shirts into a heap, then attacked his belt buckle. It was coated with ice, the belt itself frozen stiff. Even the zipper of his fly was iced over. Unable to see in the storm, he must have stepped into the lake; the wonder was that he had managed to stay on his feet and not completely submerge himself. If he had gone under and gotten his head wet, he wouldn't have been able to make it to the house; most of the body's heat was lost through the scalp surface.
She fought the stiff fabric, using sheer force to get his pants off. The thermal underwear underneath was even more difficult, because it clung. Finally he lay on her floor in a puddle of melting snow and ice, clad only in his white shorts. She started to leave them on, but they were wet too, and getting him warm was more important than preserving his modesty. She stripped them down his legs and tossed them onto the pile of wet clothes. Now she had to get him dried off and wrapped up. She ran to the downstairs bathroom and gathered up some towels, and then stripped the blankets off her father's bed. She raced back. The man hadn't moved from his sprawled

position on the floor. She dragged him out of the puddle, hastily dried him, then spread a blanket on the floor and rolled him onto it. Wrapping it around him, she then dragged him in front of the fire. Tink sniffed at him, whined, then lay down beside him.

"That's right, boy, snuggle close," Hope whispered. Her muscles were trembling with exertion, but she ran to the kitchen and stuffed one of the towels into the microwave. When she got it out, the cloth was so hot she could barely hold it.

She raced back to the great room and wrapped the hot towel around the man's head. Then, grimly, she stripped off her own clothes. She was naked beneath her pajamas, but when this man's life depended on how fast she could get him warm, she wasn't about to waste time running upstairs to put on underwear. Grabbing up the other blanket, she held it in front of the fire until it was toasty.

Throwing open the blanket wrapped around the man, she placed the warm blanket over him, tucking it around his cold feet; then she slid under it with him.

Shared body heat was the best way to combat hypothermia. Hope pressed herself close to his cold body, forcing herself not to flinch as his icy skin touched hers. Oh, God, he was so cold. She got on top of him, put her arms around him, pressed her warm face to his. She massaged his arms and shoulders, tucked his hands under her belly, cupped her hands over his ears until they warmed. She slid her feet up and down his legs, stroking away the cold, massaging the blood through his veins.

He moaned, a faint sound whispering past his parted lips.

"That's right," she murmured. "Wake up, sweetie." She stroked his face, his beard stubble scraping across her palm. His lips weren't as blue, she thought.

The towel around his head had cooled. Hope unwrapped it and slipped out from under the blanket, then ran to the kitchen and reheated the towel in the microwave. Back to the great room, put the towel around his head, crawl under the blanket with him again. He was tall, and she wasn't; she couldn't reach all of him at once. She slid down and warmed his feet with hers, curling her toes over his until his flesh caught some of her body heat. Slithering back up his body, she lay on top of him again. He was hard with muscle, and that was good, because muscles generated heat.

He began to shiver.

3

Hope held him, murmuring to him, trying to get him to talk to her. If she could get him awake enough to drink some coffee, the heat and caffeine would go a long way toward rousing him, but trying to pour hot coffee into an unconscious man was a good way to both choke him and burn him.

He moaned again, and sucked in a quick breath. He made a sharp movement with his head, dislodging the towel. The heat had dried his hair; it was dark, glistening with bronze lights in the glow of the fire. Hope tucked the towel back around his head to keep him from losing any of the precious body heat he had gained, and stroked his forehead, his cheeks. "Wake up, honey. Open your eyes and talk to me." She whispered to him, unconsciously using endearments to both reassure him and entice him to respond. Tink's ears perked up, because he was accustomed to that sweet tone being used when she spoke to him. He moved down to the man's feet, crowding against them when he lay down again. Maybe he could feel their chill through the blanket; with his thick fur, that would feel good to him. Or maybe it was instinct that led him to warm the man. Hope talked to Tink too, telling him what a good dog he was.

The faint, occasional shivers began to intensify. They wracked the man's body, roughening his skin, contorting his muscles. His teeth clenched and began chattering.

Hope held him through the convulsive shaking. He was in pain, barely conscious, groaning and breathing hard. He tried to curl into a ball, but she held him too tightly. "You're all right," she kept telling him. "Wake up, please. Open your eyes."

Unbelievably, he obeyed. His lids half lifted. His eyes were glazed, unfocused. Then they closed again, dark lashes resting on his cheeks. His arms swept up and locked around her, desperately clinging to her warmth as he was wracked by another bout of uncontrollable shaking. His entire body was tense, shuddering.

He was as strong as an ox; his arms were like steel bands around her. She murmured soothingly to him, rubbing his shoulders, pressing as close to him as she could. His skin definitely felt warmer now. She was hot, sweating from exertion and being swaddled in the heated blanket.

She was exhausted from the effort of dragging him inside and wrestling him out of his clothes, as well as from the stress of knowing he would die if she didn't get him warm.

He relaxed beneath her, the bout of shivering over. He was breathing hard. He moved restlessly, shifting his legs, shrugging the towel away from his head. The towel seemed to annoy him, so she didn't replace it. Instead she folded it and lifted his head to slide the towel underneath, giving him more padding between his head and the hard floor.

At first he had been too cold, and the situation too urgent, for her to notice, but for some moments now she had been growing more aware of the sensations produced by his naked body against hers. He was a tall, well-built man, with a nice hairy chest and even nicer hard muscles. Good-looking too, now that his features weren't pinched and blue. Her nipples tingled from the rasping of his chest hair, and Hope knew it was time to get up. She pushed gently against him, trying to rise, but he groaned and tightened his arms, shivering again, so she let herself relax.

The shaking wasn't as violent this time. He swallowed and licked his lips, and his eyes flickered open again, just for a second. Then he seemed to doze, and because he was warm now, Hope wasn't alarmed. Her own muscles quivered from exhaustion. She closed her eyes too, resting for just a minute.

Time drifted. Half-asleep, warm, boneless from fatigue, she didn't know if a minute had passed, or an hour. His hand moved down to her bottom, curving over one rounded cheek. He shifted beneath her, muscled legs moving, sliding between her thighs. His engorged penis prodded at her exposed opening.

It happened so fast that he was inside her before she was fully awake. He rolled, pinning her beneath him on the blanket, mounting her, squeezing his penis into her and driving it deep with quick, hard shoves. After five years of chastity the penetration hurt, stretching her around his thick shaft, but it felt good too. Disoriented, unbelievably aroused, Hope arched her hips and felt him prod deeply, nudging her cervix. She cried out, gasping, her neck arching back as the sensation rocketed through her nerve endings.

There was no finesse, no lingering arousal. He simply began thrusting, his heavy weight holding her down, and she wound her arms and legs around him and met his thrusts with mindless ones of her own. In the mellow light of fire and lamp she saw his face, his eyes open now, very blue and still

dazed, his expression set in the hardness of physical absorption. He was operating solely on animal instinct, his body aroused by the closeness of hers, by the naked intimacy that had been necessary to save his life. He was aware only of being warm and alive, and of her bare body in his arms.
On a purely physical level, the pleasure was more intense than any she had ever known. She had never felt more female, never been so acutely aware of her own body, or of the hard masculinity of a man's. She felt every inch of his smooth, hard shaft as he rocked back and forth inside her, felt the excited, welcoming cling of her inner flesh as each stroke took her closer and closer to climax. She was unbearably hot, her skin scorching, trembling pleasure lingering just out of reach. She grabbed his buttocks, holding him tight and grinding herself as deeply onto him as she could, crying out as the already intense pleasure became even more so. He gave a hoarse cry and convulsed, bucking, hips pumping, spurting hot semen, and Hope dissolved on an agonizing pulse of sensation.
He sank down on her, trembling in every muscle, his heart pounding violently, his breathing hard and fast. As shaken and dazed as he, she put her arms around him and held him close.
Unbelievably, they slept. Wrung out, emptied, hollowed, she felt the darkness descending on her and could do nothing to resist it. He was limp and heavy on top of her, already asleep. She managed to touch his cheek, stroke his dark hair back from his forehead, and then surrendered to the overwhelming need for rest.
the collapse OF A log woke her. She stirred, wincing as her muscles protested the hard floor beneath her, the heavy body weighing her down. Confused, at first she thought she was dreaming. This couldn't be real, she couldn't be lying naked on the floor with a strange man, who was also completely naked.
But Tink was snoozing in his accustomed place, and the howling wind, the gently flickering lamplight, recalled the blizzard. Everything clicked into place.
And just as abruptly she realized he was also awake. He was lying very still, but every muscle was tense, and the penis still nestled inside her was growing thicker and longer by the second.
If she was confused, she could only imagine how disoriented he was. Gently she touched his back, smoothing her palm up the muscled expanse.

"I'm awake," she murmured, her touch telling him she was there because she wanted to be, that everything was okay

He lifted his head, and their eyes met. She felt an almost tangible shock as she stared into those blue eyes, eyes that were completely aware and revealed the sharpness of the personality behind them, as well as his comprehension of the situation.

Hope blushed. Her cheeks heated and she almost groaned aloud. What should she say to a man she was meeting for the first time, when she was lying naked beneath him and his erection was firmly lodged inside her?

He trailed one fingertip across her lips, then lightly stroked her hot cheek. "Do you want me to stop?" he whispered.

The first time had caught her unawares, but Hope was always brutally honest with herself, and she didn't allow herself to pretend she had been unwilling. This time, however, they were both fully cognizant of what they were doing. She didn't stop to analyze or question her response; she simply gave it. "No," she whispered in return. "Don't stop."

He kissed her then, a kiss as gentle and searching as if nothing had ever passed between them, as if he wasn't already inside her. He wooed her as if it were the first time, kissing her for a long time until her mouth slanted eagerly under his, until their tongues twined together. His hands were tender on her breasts, learning how she liked to be touched, teasing her nipples into tight peaks. He stroked her belly, her hips, between her legs. He licked his fingertips and stroked them over the ultrasensitive bud of her clitoris, drawing it out, make her gasp and arch her hips upward. He grunted at the resulting sensation as she took him even deeper.

She thought she would die from sensual torment before he finally began moving, but she enjoyed it so much she didn't urge him to hurry. She hadn't realized how hungry she was for this, for a man's attention, for his body, for the exquisite release of lovemaking. Even her frustration earlier, in the bath, hadn't prepared her for her total surrender to sensuality. She reveled in every kiss, every touch, every stroke. She clung to him and returned the caresses, trying to return some of the pleasure he was giving her, and judging from his groans she succeeded.

The time came when they no longer needed the gentle touches, when nothing mattered but the pounding drive to orgasm. Hope let herself get lost in the urgency of the moment, let her body drown in pure pleasure . . . and

then he aroused her again, whispering, "Let me feel it again, let me feel you come."
His self-control held, barely. When the pulses of her third climax began, he made a deep, helpless sound in his throat and shuddered over her.
This time she didn't allow herself the luxury of sleep. This time he gently withdrew and collapsed on the blanket beside her. His hand sought hers, clasping her fingers against his callused palm.
"Tell me what happened," he finally said, his voice low and even. "Who are you?"
An introduction at this point seemed unbearably awkward. Hope blushed again, and cleared her throat. "Hope Bradshaw"
The blue eyes searched her face. "Tanner. Price Tanner."
The fire was getting too low. She needed to put another couple of logs on, but getting up and standing naked in front of him was somehow impossible. She looked around for her pajamas and, in an agony of embarrassment, realized she needed to bathe before putting them on.
He saw where she was looking, and he didn't suffer any such modesty. Unfolding his long length from the floor, he stepped over to the stack of wood and replenished the fire. Hope did exactly what she had been embarrassed to let him do to her, looked him over good, from head to foot. She liked what she saw, every inch of him. His muscles were delineated in the firelight, revealing the slope and curve of broad shoulders, wide chest, the long bulge of strong thigh muscles. His buttocks were round, firm. Even flaccid, his penis was intriguingly thick, and his testicles swung heavily below them. Price Tanner. She repeated his name in her mind, the syllables strong and brisk.
Tink looked a little grumpy at having had his sleep disturbed. He got up and sniffed at the stranger, and wagged his tail when the man leaned down and patted him. "I remember the dog barking," Price Tanner said.
"He heard you before I did. His name is Tinkerbell. Tink, for short."
"Tinkerbell?" He glanced at her, blue eyes incredulous. "He's gay?"
Hope sputtered with laughter. "No, he's just an eternally optimistic, goofy dog. He thinks the world is here to pet him."
"He may be right." He studied the sodden mass of his clothing, the water puddled on the floor. "How long have I been here?"
She looked at the clock. Two-thirty. "Three and a half hours." Too much had happened in such a short length of time, and yet she felt as if only an hour

or so had passed instead of almost twice that. "I dragged you in and got you out of your clothes. You must have stepped into the lake, because you were wet from the waist down. I dried you off and wrapped you in a blanket."
"Yeah, I remember going into the water. I knew this place was here, but I couldn't see a damn thing."
"I don't know how you made it this far. Why were you on foot? Did you have an accident? And why were you out in this weather anyway?"
"I was trying to make it down to Boise. The Blazer slid off the road and broke out the windshield, so I couldn't stay there. Like I said, I knew this place was here, and I had a compass. I didn't have much choice except try to get here."
"You're a walking miracle," she said frankly. "Logically, you should be dead out in the snow."
"But I'm not, thanks to you." He returned to the blanket and stretched out beside her, his gaze somber. He caught a tendril of blond hair, rubbing it between his fingers before smoothing it behind her ear. "I know when you got under the blanket to get me warm, you weren't expecting me to jump you as soon as I was half conscious. Tell me the truth, Hope: Were you willing?"
She cleared her throat. "I—I was surprised." She touched his hand. "I wasn't unwilling. Couldn't you tell?"
He briefly closed his eyes in relief. "I don't have a real clear memory of anything that happened until I woke up on top of you. Or rather, I remember what I did and what I felt, but I wasn't sure you felt the same." He spread his hand on her belly and lightly stroked upward to cover her breast. "I thought maybe I'd lost my head, waking up with such a pretty, brown-eyed little blonde naked next to me."
"Strictly speaking, I wasn't next to you. I was on top of you." Her face got hot again. Damn those blushes! "It seemed the best way to get you warm."
"It worked," he said, and for the first time a smile curved his mouth.
Hope almost lost her breath. He was ruggedly attractive rather than handsome, but when he smiled, her heart did a crazy loop. It must be chemistry, she thought dazedly. She had seen many better-looking men; Dylan had been better looking, in a clean-cut, classical way. But what her eyes saw and her body felt were two different things, and she had never experienced such a strong sexual response to any other man. She wanted to

make love again, and before she gave in to the need, she forced herself to remember he had been through a harrowing, physically exhausting ordeal.
"Do you want some coffee?" she asked hurriedly, getting to her feet. She carefully didn't look at him as she gathered up her pajamas. "Or something to eat? I made a big pot of stew yesterday. Or how about a hot bath? The water heater is wired to the generator, so there's plenty of hot water."
"That sounds good," he said, also standing. “All of it." He reached out and caught her arms, turning her so she faced him. Bending his head, he gave her another of those sweet, tender kisses. "I also want to make love to you again, if you'll let me."
Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Hope looked up at him. Her heart did another crazy loop, and she knew she wasn't going to call a halt to this now. For as long as the blizzard lasted, she and Price Tanner were together, and she might never have another chance like this.
"I'd like that too," she managed to say.
"Maybe on a bed instead of the floor?" He circled her nipple with his thumb, making it harden and stand erect.
"Upstairs." She swallowed. "It's warm up there, because all the heat rises. I couldn't get you up the stairs, though, so I put you in front of the fireplace."
"I'm not complaining." He tugged the pajamas from her arms and let them drop to the floor. "On second thought, let's forget the coffee and the stew. The bath too, unless you planned to be in the tub with me."
She hadn't, but it was a darn good idea. She went into his arms, forgetting everything except the earthy magic their bodies made together.

4

Hope woke beside him in the morning and lay watching him sleep, her body more deeply contented than she could remember it ever being before. She didn't wonder how or why she responded so strongly to a man about whom she knew little more than his name; she simply accepted the joy this chance encounter had brought her. The warmth of his body made the bed a cozy nest she didn't want to leave, especially since the chill in the room told her the fire in the fireplace had burned out. It had been so long since she had been able to enjoy such a simple pleasure as lying beside a sleeping man, listening to the slow, deep rhythm of his breathing. She wanted to cuddle close to him, but was reluctant to wake him. He was sleeping deeply, evidence of his exhaustion. After nearly freezing to death, he hadn't exactly spent a restful night.

One muscled arm lay draped over the pillow, and she could see the dark bruises on his wrist. On top of everything else, he had been in a car accident. The wonder wasn't that he slept now, but that he had been so energetic during the night.

She surveyed the other details available to her. He had beautiful hair, dark and thick, with streaks of bronze glinting through it as if he spent a lot of time in the sun. His face was turned toward her in his sleep, and she smiled, wanting to trace her finger along the bridge of his nose, which was high and a little crooked, maybe as the result of a fight. His mouth was wide and well-shaped, his lips soft. His jaw was angular, his chin nothing less than stubborn. Good-looking, rugged, attractive; definitely not handsome, as she had noticed before. Just looking at him made her breasts tighten.

She felt almost dizzy from the force of her attraction to him. She had forgotten how heady infatuation could be, and how powerful. If she had met him under normal circumstances, no doubt she would still have been attracted to him; but without the overwhelming physical intimacy that had been forced between them, she might not even have encouraged him. The necessary contact of their nude bodies, however, had established a link even before he had regained consciousness. She had stroked him, knew the textures of his skin, from the roughness of his beard-stubbled cheeks to the sleekness of his muscular shoulders. Her nipples had been tight from rubbing against his chest, her legs had tangled with his, and though she hadn't touched him sexually, she had inescapably felt his genitals against

her own. She hadn't let herself think about it, but nevertheless she had been almost unbearably aroused.
Her sexual attraction wasn't due to simple deprivation. If she had thought it was, before, now she knew differently, because she was certainly no longer deprived and she still felt the same. Their sexual fit was devastating in its perfection. It was as if he had been born knowing exactly how to touch her, as if his body had been crafted specifically to bring her maximum pleasure. She thought it must be the same, at least sexually, for him. As exhausted and drained as he had to have been, still he had turned to her time and again, his hands literally shaking with need as he drew her under him.
Her breath sighed gently, rapidly, between her lips.
The wind still blew, rattling the windows. She couldn't see anything beyond the glass but an impenetrable white curtain. While the blizzard raged, the world couldn't intrude, and he was hers.
What a difference one day made. Yesterday she had been panicked by the sense of time passing her by, thinking she had lost all opportunity to get out of life what she had always wanted most—a family. Then Price Tanner had blown in on a snowstorm, and abruptly the future was bright with promise. He was a deputy. He had said he was heading to Boise, so he could be from there, but he had known the resort was here, which meant he was familiar with the area, so he might be local. She would ask him when he woke. Despite the heady lovemaking of the night, and more she hoped to enjoy while he was here, she was afraid to automatically assume they were a couple. The circumstances that had brought them together were extreme, and once the weather cleared he might be on his way without a backward look. She had known that from the beginning, and accepted that risk. She, who had never had any lover other than her husband, had gone into this with her eyes open.
If this situation between them grew into something permanent, she would be happy beyond belief. She didn't let herself think the word "love," for how could she love someone she didn't really know? He was a tender, generous lover, and during the night she had seen signs of a sharp sense of humor, both qualities she liked, but she was too cautious to imagine either of them were in love.
The truth was, she had seized the opportunity to have a child.
Even beyond her own powerful attraction to him, the physical pleasure he had given her, she had been acutely aware of the lack of birth control. She

hadn't taken birth control pills in five years, and there wasn't a condom in the house. She was a healthy, fertile woman, the odds were he was equally fertile, and the time was roughly right. He had climaxed inside her five times during the night, with no barrier—chemical, hormonal, or otherwise—between her and his sperm, and the knowledge was so erotic she trembled with need.

This morning, her head clear and the stresses of the emergency behind her, she felt guilty about what she had done. She didn't even know if he was married! He didn't wear a ring, and the thought hadn't occurred to her the night before. She cringed inside at the thought of sleeping with a married man and didn't want to think how much it would hurt if he did turn out to be an unfaithful jerk. But even assuming he was unmarried, the hard truth was she hadn't had any right to take such an enormous step without his consent. He hadn't asked about birth control, but he had been through quite an ordeal and could be excused for having other things on his mind, such as being alive.

She felt as if she had stolen his free will from him. If she did get pregnant, he might be, justifiably, very angry. If there was such a thing as unauthorized use of sperm, then she had committed the offense.

Being a single mother wouldn't be easy, assuming she had gotten pregnant. If she had given herself time to think about it, caution would have prevented her from taking the chance. But she hadn't taken the time, Price hadn't given her the time, and all she could feel now was a guilty joy that a child might be the result of their lovemaking. Her father wouldn't like it, but he loved her, and it wasn't as if she was a teenager unable to support herself or her baby. She would prefer being married, but as she had so sharply realized the day before, time was running out. She had taken the chance.

Hope slid out of bed, careful not to waken him. Her thighs trembled, and she ached deep inside her body. Her first few steps were little more than a hobble, as long unused muscles and flesh protested their treatment during the night. Silently she gathered her clothes and tiptoed out of the room.

Tink trotted from the kitchen as she came downstairs, his eagerness telling her she was late, he was hungry, but he forgave everything for the joy of her company. She poured some food into his bowl, then immediately went to rebuild the fire. It had burned down to embers, and the house was cold. She relaid the fire, the kindling catching immediately from the glowing embers, and carefully stacked three logs on the grate. Then she put on a pot of

coffee and, while it was brewing, went into her father's bathroom and stepped into the shower. Thank God for hot water, because otherwise she couldn't have tolerated the cold!

The shower went a long way toward relieving her aches and pains. Feeling much better, she pulled on a pair of sweatpants and an oversize flannel shirt, put on two pairs of thick socks, and padded out to have her first cup of coffee.

Cup in hand, she went into the great room to mop up the water she had left puddled on the floor the night before and straighten Price's clothing.

The best way to dry them would be to hang them over the balcony railing, where the heat was. She hung his coat over a chair and set his boots beside the fireplace, because they needed to dry more slowly, but carried the rest of his clothes upstairs. Until Price's clothes dried, she supposed he would have to sit around naked. He was too tall for her father's clothes, and all she had left of Dylan's clothing was a couple of shirts she wore herself.

No—come to think of it, her dad had bought a pair of black sweatpants that had evidently had the wrong tag attached to them, because they were several inches too long for him. Returning them would have cost more in gasoline than the pants were worth, so he had just folded them away in the top of his closet. Buying by size being as iffy as it was, she was fairly certain she could lay her hands on an extra large sweatshirt too.

She straightened out the uniform to minimize wrinkles and, as she was doing so, noticed a tear in the left pants leg. Lifting the garment for a closer inspection, she saw the faded red stain below the tear, as if whatever had made the tear had also brought blood. But she had undressed Price, and she knew he wasn't hurt anywhere. She frowned at the stain, then mentally shrugged and draped the pants over the railing.

Something was missing. She stared at the uniform for a moment before it hit her: where was his pistol? Had he lost it somewhere? But he didn't have a holster, either, so he must have taken the gun off and . . . left it in the Blazer? That didn't make sense. He didn't have a wallet with him, either, but that was easier to understand. It could have fallen out of his pocket at any time during his hazardous trek through the blinding snow; it might even be in the lake.

Even if he had lost the pistol, would he then have removed the gun belt and holster and left them behind? They were part of his uniform. Of course, who knew what shape he had been in when he left the Blazer? He could

have hit his head and not realized it, though if he had been addled, it had taken an even bigger miracle than she had thought for him to find his way here.

Well, the missing pistol was only a small mystery, and one that would wait until he woke. The house was warming, the coffee was ready, and she was hungry.

Downstairs again, she picked up the phone just to check it, but the line was dead, not even static coming through. She turned on the radio and picked up the same thing—static. Given the conditions outside, she hadn't expected anything else, but she always checked periodically during power failures, just in case.

The rifle was where she had left it, propped beside the door. She retrieved it and returned it to the rack in her father's bedroom, before Tink knocked it down with an exuberant swish of his tail.

Carrying a cup of hot coffee with her, she then tidied the great room, putting the blankets and towels she had used in the laundry room to be washed whenever power returned. She cleaned up the puddles of melted snow and ice. Tink had been back and forth through the water several times, of course, leaving wet doggy tracks all over the house. She followed his trail, crawling on the floor and blotting up pawprints.

"I thought I smelled coffee."

Her head jerked up. He was standing at the balcony railing, his hair tousled, his jaw dark with beard stubble, his eyes still heavy-lidded from sleep. His voice was hoarse, and she wondered if he was getting sick.

"I'll bring a cup up to you," she said. "It's too cold down here for you to be walking around without clothes."

"Then I think I'll stay right here. I'm not ready to be cold again, just yet." He gave her a crooked smile, and turned to pet Tink, who had bounded up the stairs as soon as he heard a new voice.

Hope went into her dad's room and searched until she found the long sweatpants. Then she collected a pair of shorts and some thick hunting socks, but try as she might she couldn't locate the extra-large sweatshirt she knew was here, somewhere. It was a gray University of Idaho shirt, and she had worn it once with leggings, but the thing had been so big she looked as if she were lost inside it. What had she done with it?

Maybe it was in the closet of the extra bedroom upstairs. She rotated her winter and summer clothing between that closet and the one in her room,

but she didn't necessarily move everything.
With the small stack of clothes in her arms, she detoured to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee, then carried everything up the stairs.
The roaring fire had rapidly warmed the upstairs. The bathroom door was open, and Price was in the shower. Hope set the cup on the vanity. "Here's your coffee."
He pulled the curtain aside and stuck his head out.
Water streamed down his face. "Would you hand it to me, please. Thanks."
He drank deeply, sighing as the caffeine jolted through him.
"I brought you some clothes. I hope you don't mind wearing my father's shorts."
"I don't if he doesn't." Blue eyes regarded her over the rim of the cup. "I'm glad you said they belonged to your father and not your husband. I didn't ask, last night, but I don't fool around with married women, and I sure do want to fool around some more with you."
"I'm a widow." She paused. "I had the same thoughts about you this morning. That I hadn't thought to ask if you were married, I mean."
"I'm not. Divorced, no kids." He took another sip of coffee. "So where is your father?" he asked, his tone casual.
"Visiting his brother in Indianapolis. Uncle Pete had a heart attack, and Dad flew out. He's supposed to be gone another week."
Price handed the cup back to her, smiling. "Think the blizzard will last another week?"
She laughed. "I doubt it." Both his wrists were bruised, she noticed.
"Damn. At least there's no question of leaving today, though I guess I should let some people know where I am."
"You can't. The phone lines are down too. I just checked."
"What rotten luck." The blue eyes twinkled as he pulled the shower curtain closed. "Marooned with a sexy blond." From behind the curtain came the sound of cheerful whistling.
Hope felt like whistling a tune herself. She listened to the wind blow and hoped it would be days before he would be able to leave.
She remembered something. "Oh, I meant to ask, are you hurt anywhere? I didn't see any blood last night, but your uniform is torn and has blood on it, or at least I think it's blood."
A few seconds lapsed before he answered. "No, I'm not hurt. I don't know what the stain is."

"Your pistol and holster are missing too. Do you remember what happened to them?"
Again there was a pause, and when he spoke, he sounded as if he had his face turned up to the spray. "I must have left them in the Blazer."
"Why would you have taken off your gun belt?"
"Damn if I know. Ah ... do you have any weapons here? Other than the rifle I saw last night, that is."
"A pistol."
"Where do you keep it?"
"In my nightstand drawer. Why?"
"I might not be the only person to get stranded in the storm and come looking for shelter. It pays to be careful."

5

When he was finished, he came downstairs, he was freshly shaved, with her father's borrowed razor, and he looked alert and vital in the sweat clothes she had provided. The big sweatshirt had been in the other closet after all, and it fit him perfectly, just loose enough to be comfortable.
She would normally have just eaten cereal, but with him there she was cooking a breakfast of bacon and eggs. He came up behind her as she stood at the island, turning bacon with a fork, and wrapped his arms around her waist. He kissed the top of her head, then rested his chin there. "I don't know which smells best, the coffee, the bacon, or you."
"Wow, I'm impressed. I must really smell good, if I rank up there with coffee and bacon."
She felt him grin, his chin moving on top of her head. "I could eat you right up." His tone was both teasing and serious, sensual, and a wave of heat that had nothing to do with embarrassment swept over her. She leaned back against him, her knees weak. He had a serious swelling in the groin area, and she rubbed her bottom against it.
"I think we need to go back to bed." There was no teasing at all in his voice this time.
"Now?"
"Now." He reached around her and turned off the cooktop.

Ten minutes later she was naked, breathless, trembling on the verge of climax. Her thighs were draped over his shoulders, and he was driving her, with his tongue, to absolute madness. She tried to pull him up and over her, but he pinned her wrists to the bed and continued what he was doing. She surrendered, her hips lifting, her body shuddering with completion. Only when she was limp did he move upward, covering her, sliding his erection into her with a smooth thrust that took him all the way in.

She inhaled deeply, having already forgotten how completely he filled her. He began a gentle back-and-forth movement, gripping her shoulders, watching her face.

Guilt and her innate honesty nagged at her. "I'm not taking birth control pills," she blurted, knowing this wasn't exactly the best time to bring up her lack of protection.

He didn't stop. "I'm not wearing a rubber," he said equably. "I would stop, but that would be like closing the barn door after the horse is out, wouldn't it?"

Afterward, while she was in the bathroom, he finished dressing—again—and called out, "I'll go down and start breakfast again."

“I’ll be there in a minute." She still felt incredibly weak-kneed, and relieved. She stared at her face in the mirror, her brown eyes huge. She was going to get pregnant. She knew it, sensed it. The prospect both terrified and exhilarated her. From now on, her life would be changed.

She went out into the bedroom and collected her scattered garments, pulling them on again. After a lifetime of caution and careful behavior, taking such a deliberate risk was nerve-racking, like climbing on board a space shuttle without any previous training.

It pays to be careful, Price had said, but sometimes it paid to be careless too. And, anyway, she was doing this deliberately, not carelessly.

One of her socks had ended up between the bed and the nightstand. She got down on her knees to retrieve it, and because she was there, because she had just been remembering what Price had said, she opened the night-stand drawer to make certain the pistol was there.

It wasn't.

Slowly she stood, staring down at the empty drawer. She knew the pistol had been there. When her dad had left, she had checked to make certain it was loaded and returned it to the same place. Living in such an isolated place, where self-defense was sometimes necessary, she had learned how to

use the weapon. Idaho had more than its share of dangerous wildlife, both animal and human. The ruggedness of the mountains, the isolation, seemed to be a magnet for nut groups, from neo-Nazis to drug runners. She might happen upon a bear or a cougar, but she was more worried about happening upon a human predator.

The pistol had been there, and now it wasn't. Price had asked where she kept it, not that finding it would have been that difficult. But why hadn't he simply said he wanted it close to hand? He was a cop; she understood that he was more comfortable armed than unarmed, especially when he wasn't on his own turf.

She went downstairs, her expression thoughtful. He was standing at the island, taking up the bacon. "Price, do you have my pistol?"

He slanted a quick, assessing look at her, then turned back to the bacon. "Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me you were getting it?"

"I didn't want to worry you."

"Why would I be worried?"

"What I said about other people coming here."

"I wasn't worried, but you seem to be," she said pointedly.

"It's my job to worry. I feel more comfortable armed. I'll put the pistol back if it bothers you."

She looked around. She didn't see the weapon lying on the cabinet. "Where is it?"

"In my waistband."

She felt uneasy, but she didn't know why. She herself had thought that he would feel more comfortable armed, and he had said so himself. It was just —for a moment, his expression had been . . . hard. Distant. Maybe it was because he worked in law enforcement and saw a lot of things the average person never even dreamed of seeing that he expected the worst. But for a moment, just for a moment, he had looked as dangerous as any of the scum with whom he dealt. He had been so easy and approachable until then that the contrast rattled her.

She shoved the uneasiness away and didn't say anything more about the pistol.

Over breakfast she asked, "In what county do you work?"

"This one," he said. "But I haven't been here long. Like I said, I knew this place was here, but I hadn't had time to get up here and meet you and your

dad—and Tinkerbell, of course."
The dog, lying on the floor between their chairs in obvious hopes of doubling his chances of catching a stray tidbit, perked up when he heard his name.
"Table scraps aren't good for you," Hope said sternly. "Besides, you've already eaten."
Tink didn't look discouraged, and Price laughed.
"How long have you worked in law enforcement?"
"Eleven years. I worked in Boise before." His mouth quirked with amusement. "For the record, I'm thirty-four, I've been divorced eight years, I've been known to have a few drinks, and I enjoy an occasional cigar, but I'm not a regular smoker. I don't attend any church, but I believe in God."
Hope put down her fork. She could feel her face turning red in mortification. "I wasn't—"
"Yes you were, and I don't blame you. When a woman lets a man make love to her, she has a right to reassure herself about him, find out every detail right down to the size of his Fruit of the Looms."
"Jockeys," she corrected, and turned even redder.
He shrugged. "I just look at sizes, not brand names." The amusement turned into a grin. "Stop blushing. So you looked at my briefs; I looked at your panties this morning, didn't I? I bet you just hung mine over the railing to dry, instead of sniffing them the way I did yours."
He had sniffed, drawing an exaggeratedly deep breath and rolling his eyes in pretended ecstasy, making her laugh, before he had tossed the garment over his shoulder with a flourish.
"You were goofing around," she mumbled.
"Was I? Maybe I was turned on. What do you think? Was my dick hard?"
"It was hard before we went upstairs, so you can't use that argument."
"It got hard when I thought about sniffing your underwear."
She began to laugh, enjoying his teasing. She was beginning to suspect arguing with him would be like swatting at smoke.
"I do have a really bad habit," he confessed.
"Oh?"
"I'm addicted to remote controls."
"You and about a hundred million other men in America. We can pick up one station here—one—and when my dad watches television, he sits with the remote control in his hand."

"I don't think I'm that bad." He grinned and reached for her hand. "So, Hope Bradshaw, when conditions are back to normal, will you go out to dinner with me?"
"Gee, I don't know," she said. "A date, huh? I don't know if I'm ready for that."
He chuckled and started to answer, but a sunbeam fell across their hands. Startled, they both looked at the light, then out the window. The wind had stopped blowing, and patches of blue sky were visible.
"I'll be damned," he said, getting up to walk to the window and look out. "I thought the storm would last longer than this."
"So did I," Hope said, her disappointment more intense than she wanted to show. He had asked her out, after all. The clearing weather meant he would be leaving sooner than she had anticipated, but it wasn't as if she wouldn't see him again.
She went over to the window too, and gasped when she saw the amount of snow. "Good heavens!" The familiar terrain was completely transformed, disguised by drifts of snow that appeared to level out the landscape. The wind had piled snow to window level on the porch.
"It looks like at least three feet. The ski resort operators will love this, but it'll take the snowplows a while to clear the roads." He walked to the door and opened it, and the frigidity of the air seemed to suck the warmth from the room. "Jesus!" He slammed the door. "The temperature has to be below zero. No chance of any of this melting."
Oddly, the improved weather seemed to make Price uneasy. As the day progressed, Hope noticed several times that he went from window to window, looking out, though he would stand to one side as he did so. She was busy, as being confined to the house didn't mean there weren't any chores to do, such as laundry, but doing it without electricity was twice as hard and took twice as long.
Price helped her wring out the clothes she had washed by hand, then braved the cold long enough to carry in more firewood while she hung the clothes over the stair railings to dry. She checked his uniform, picking up the shirt and feeling the seams, which would be the last to dry. Another hour would do it, she thought, as hot as Price was keeping the fire. The temperature on the second level had to be close to ninety.
She started to drape the shirt over the railing again when her attention was caught by the tag. The shirt was a size fifteen and a half. That was odd. She

knew Price was bigger than that. The shirt had in fact been tight on him; she remembered how strained the buttons had been last night. Of course, he had been wearing a thermal shirt underneath, which would make the uniform seem tighter than it was. But if she had been buying a shirt for Price, she wouldn't have looked at anything smaller than a sixteen and a half.

He came in with a load of wood and stacked it on the fireplace. "I'm going to clear off the steps," he called up to her.

"That can wait until the weather's warmer."

"Now that the wind isn't blowing, it's bearable for a few minutes, and that's all it'll take to clear the steps." He buttoned his heavy coat and went back outside. At least he was wearing a pair of her dad's sturdy work gloves, and if his boots weren't completely dry, at least he had on three pairs of socks. Tink went with him, glad for the chance to do his business outside instead of on a pad.

With the weather clearing, perhaps she could pick up something on the radio now. Going downstairs, she switched it on; music filled the air, a welcome relief from static, and she listened to the song as she got the beef stew out of the refrigerator to warm it up for lunch.

The weather was the big news, of course, and as soon as the song ended the announcer began running down a list of closings. Her road was impassable, she heard, and the highway department estimated at least three days before all the roads in the county were cleared. Mail service was spotty, but utility crews were hard at work restoring service.

"Also in the news," the announcer continued, "a bus carrying six prisoners ran off County Road Twelve during

the storm. Three people were killed, including two sheriff's deputies. Five prisoners escaped; two have been recaptured, but three are still at large. It is unknown if they survived the blizzard. Be alert for strangers in your area, as one of the prisoners is described as extremely dangerous."

Hope went still. The bottom dropped out of her stomach. County Road 12 was just a few miles away. She reached over and turned off the radio, the announcer's voice suddenly grating on her nerves.

She had to think. Unfortunately, what she was thinking was almost too frightening to contemplate.

Price's uniform shirt was too small for him. He didn't have a wallet. He had blown it off, but she was certain now that the stain on his pants leg was

blood—and he had no corresponding wound. There were bruises on his wrists—from handcuffs? And he hadn't had a weapon.
He did now, though. Hers.

6

There was still the rifle. Hope left the stew sitting on the cabinet and went into her father's bedroom. She lifted the rifle from the rack, breathing a sigh of relief as the reassuring weight of it settled in her hands. Though she had loaded it just the night before, the lesson "always check your weapon" had been drilled into her so many times she automatically slid the bolt—and stared down into the empty chamber. He had unloaded it.
Swiftly, she searched for the bullets; he had to have hidden them somewhere. They were too heavy to carry around, and he didn't have pockets in his sweat clothes anyway. But before she had time to look in more than a couple of places, she heard the door open, and she straightened in alarm. Dear God, what should she do?
Three prisoners were still at large, the announcer had said, but only one was considered extremely dangerous. She had a two to one chance that he wasn't the dangerous one.
But he had taken her pistol and unloaded the rifle— both without telling her. He had obviously taken the uniform off one of the dead deputies. Damn it, why hadn't the announcer warned people that one of the escaped prisoners could be wearing a deputy's uniform?
Price was too intelligent to get thrown in jail over some penny-ante crime, and if by some chance he had, he wouldn't compound the offense by escaping. The common criminal was, by and large, uncommonly stupid. Price was neither common nor stupid.
Given her own observations, she now thought her estimated chance of being snowbound with an extremely dangerous escaped criminal had just flip-flopped. What could "extremely dangerous" mean other than he was a murderer? A criminal didn't get that description hung on him by taking someone's television.
"Hope?" he called.
Hastily she returned the rifle to the rack, trying to be as quiet as she could.
"I'm in Dad's room," she called, "putting up his underwear." She opened and

closed a dresser drawer for the sound effect, then plastered a smile on her face and stepped to the door. “Are you about frozen?"
"Cold enough," he said, shrugging out of his coat and hanging it up. Tink shook about ten pounds of snow off his fur onto the floor, then came bounding over to Hope to say hello after his extended absence of ten minutes.
Automatically she scolded him for getting the floor wet again, though bending over to pet him probably ruined the effect. She went to get the broom and mop, hoping her expression didn't give her away. Her face felt stiff from strain; any smile she attempted must look like a grimace.
What could she do? What options did she have?
At the moment, she wasn't in any danger, she didn't think. Price didn't know she had been listening to the radio, so he didn't feel threatened. He had no reason to kill her; she was providing him with food, shelter, and sex.
Her face went white. She couldn't bear having him touch her again. She simply couldn't.
She heard him in the kitchen, getting a cup of coffee to warm himself. Her hands began shaking. Oh, God. She hurt so much she thought she would fly apart. She had never been more attracted to a man in her life, not even Dylan. She had warmed him with her body, saved his life; in some primitive, basic way he was hers now. In just twelve short hours he had become the central focus of her mind and emotions, and that she didn't yet dare call it love was an effort at self-protection—too late. Part of her was being ripped away, and she didn't know if she could survive the agony. She might—dear God—she might even be pregnant with his child.
He had laughed with her, teased her, made love to her.
He had been so tender and considerate that, even now, she couldn't describe it as anything except making love. Of course, Ted Bundy had been an immensely charming man too, except to the women he raped and murdered. Hope had always thought herself a fairly good judge of character, and everything Price had shown her so far said he was a decent and likable person, the type of man who coached Little League teams and danced a mean two-step. He had even, good-humoredly, given her his "stats" and asked her out on a date, just as if he would be around for a long time, be part of her life.
Either it was just a big game to him, or he was totally delusional. She remembered the moment when his expression had suddenly altered to

something hard and frightening, and she knew he wasn't delusional.
He was dangerous.
She had to turn him in. She knew it, accepted the necessity, and the pain was so sharp she almost moaned aloud. She had always wondered why women would aid their husbands or boyfriends in eluding the law, and now she knew why; the thought of Price in jail for most of his life, perhaps even facing a death penalty, was devastating. And yet she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she did nothing and someone else died because she let him go.
Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she was jumping to the most ludicrous conclusion of her lifetime. The radio announcer hadn't said all the deputies on the bus had been killed, but that two of them had. On the other hand, neither had he said that one of the deputies was missing, which surely would have been in the news if that was the case.
And now she was grasping at straws, and she knew it. The deputy's uniform drying on the railing was too small for Price, and there was no logical reason for him to have exchanged his own uniform for one that didn't fit. Price was one of the escaped prisoners, not a deputy.
She had to keep him from knowing she knew about the bus wreck. She didn't have to worry about anything being on the television until the electric power was restored, and the next time he went to the bathroom, she would take the batteries out of the radio and hide them. All she had to do was periodically check the phone and, when service to it was restored, wait for the opportunity to call the sheriff's department.
If she kept her wits about her, everything would be all right.
"Hope?"
She jumped, her heart thundering with panic. Price was standing in the door, watching her, his gaze sharp. She fumbled with the broom and mop and almost dropped them. "You startled me!"
"So I see." Calmly he stepped forward and took the broom and mop from her hands. Hope took an involuntary step back, fighting a sense of suffocation. He seemed even bigger in the small laundry room, his shoulders totally blocking the door. She had reveled in his size and strength when they were making love, but now she was overwhelmed by the thought of her utter helplessness in a physical match against him. Not that she had entertained any idea of wrestling him into submission, but she had to be

prepared to fight him in any way possible, if necessary. Running would be the smartest thing to do, if she had the chance.
"What's wrong?" he asked. His expression was still, unreadable, and his gaze never left her face. He stood squarely in front of her, and there was no way past him, not in the narrow confines of the laundry room. "You look scared to death."
Considering how she must have looked, Hope knew she couldn't try to deny it; he would know she was lying. "I am," she confessed, her voice shaking. She didn't know what she was going to say until the words began tumbling out. "I don't... I mean, I've been widowed five years and I haven't... I've just met you, and we—I—oh, damn," she said helplessly, dwindling to an end.
His face relaxed, and a faint smile teased his mouth. "So you just had one of those moments when reality bites you on the ass, when you look around and everything hits all at once and you think, holy shit, what am I doing?"
She managed a nod. "Something like that," she said, and swallowed.
"Well, let's see. You're caught alone in a blizzard, an almost dead stranger falls in your front door, you save his life, and though you haven't had a lover in five years, somehow he ends up on top of you for most of the night. I can see how all that would be a little disconcerting, especially when you didn't use any birth control and might have gotten pregnant."
Hope felt as if there were no blood left in her face.
"Ah, honey." Gently he set the things aside and caught her arms, his big hands rubbing up and down as he eased her into his arms. "What happened, did you check the calendar and find out getting pregnant is a lot more likely than you'd thought?"
Oh, God, she thought she might faint at his touch, the combined terror and longing so intense she couldn't bear it. How could he be so tender and comforting when he was a criminal, an escaped prisoner? And how could the feel of his strong body against hers be so right? She wanted to be able to rest her head on his shoulder and forget about the rest of the world, just stay with him here in these remote mountains where nothing could ever touch them.
"Hope?" He tilted his head so he could better see her face.
She gasped for breath, because she didn't seem to be getting enough oxygen. "The wrong time—is now," she blurted.
He took a deep breath too, as if reality had just taken a nip out of his ass too. "That close, huh?"

"On the money." She sounded a little steadier now, and she was grateful. The sharp edge of panic was fading. She had already decided she wasn't in any immediate danger, so she should just stay cool instead of jumping every time he came near. That would definitely make him suspicious, given how willingly she had made love with him. She had been lucky that his insightfulness had given her a plausible reason for her upset, but at the same time she had to remember exactly how sharp he was. If he knew she had been listening to the radio, it wouldn't take him five seconds to put it all together and realize she was on to him.

"Okay." He blew out a breath. "Before, when you told me you weren't on the pill, I didn't realize the odds. So what do you want to do? Stop taking chances, or take our chances?" Suddenly, impossibly, she felt him tremble. "Jesus," he said, his voice shaking. "I've always been so fucking careful, and vice versa."

"Do you feel reality nibbling?" Hope mumbled against his chest.

"Nibbling, hell. I've got fang marks on my ass." He trembled again. "The hell of it is ... Hope—I like the idea."

Oh, God. In despair, Hope pressed her face tight against him. He couldn't be a killer, he simply couldn't, not and treat her so sweetly, and tremble at the thought of being a father. He would have to have a split personality, to be both the man she knew and the man she feared he could be.

"Your call," he said.

He was aroused. She could feel the hard bulge of his erection. Talking about the possibility of pregnancy hadn't scared him, it had turned him on, just the way she had felt earlier, knowing they were making love without protection. And her body was already so attuned to him, so responsive to his sexuality, that she felt the inner tightening of her own desire. She was shocked at herself, but helpless to kill her reaction. All she could do was refuse to satisfy her need.

Her mouth was dry from tension, and she tried to work up some saliva. "We—we should be careful," she managed to say, thankful he had given her this out. Even if he was one of the other escaped prisoners and not the one considered so dangerous, it would be criminally irresponsible of her to continue sleeping with him. She had already been irresponsible enough. She could live with what she had already done, but it couldn't continue.

"All right." Reluctantly he released her. His face was tense. "Call me when lunch is ready. I'm going to go shovel some more snow."

Hope stood where she was until she heard the door slam behind him; then she covered her face with her hands and weakly sagged against the washing machine. Please, please, she prayed, let the telephone service be restored soon. She didn't know if she could stand another hour of this, much less days. She wanted to weep. She wanted to scream. She wanted to grab him and slam him against the wall and yell at him for being stupid and getting himself in trouble to begin with. Most of all, she wanted none of this to be true. She wanted to be completely mistaken in every conclusion she had reached.

She wanted Price.

7

While the stew was warming in the microwave, Hope took the batteries out of the radio and hid them in one of her lidded saucepans. She checked the phone, but wasn't surprised when she didn't hear a dial tone. The wind had died only a couple of hours ago, so the utility crews wouldn't have had a chance yet to begin work in her area; they would have to work behind the road crews. The bus wreck, she thought, must have happened before the weather got so bad, otherwise no one would yet know about it. The authorities had had time to reach the scene and ascertain the two deputies were dead, as well as recapture two of the escaped prisoners. Price might not have eluded them if the blizzard hadn't interfered. The radio report had said the bus ran off the road during the storm, but what was reported wasn't always accurate, and the timing of events didn't really matter.

The microwave pinged. Hope checked the stew, then set the timer for another two minutes. She could hear the thud of the shovel against the wooden porch, but Price was working on a section that wasn't in view of the windows.

If she could hear the shovel, could he have heard the radio earlier?

Sweat broke out on her forehead, and she sank weakly into a chair. Was he that good an actor?

This was making her crazy. The only way she could make it through was to stop second-guessing herself. It didn't matter whether Price was a murderer or a more ordinary criminal, she had to turn him in. She couldn't torment

herself wondering what he knew or guessed, she had to proceed as best she could.
She thought of the rifle again and hastily left the chair to return to her father's bedroom, to search more thoroughly for the bullets. She couldn't afford to waste any of these precious minutes of privacy.
The box of cartridges wasn't in any of the bureau drawers. Hope looked around the room, hoping instinct would tell her the most likely hiding place —or the most unlikely. But the room was just an ordinary room, without secret panels or hidden drawers, or anything like that. She went to the bed and ran her hands under the pillows and mattress, but came up empty again. She was pushing her luck by remaining any longer, so she hurried back to the kitchen and began setting the table. She had just finished when she heard Price stomping the snow off his boots, and the door opened.
"Damn, it's cold!" he said, shuddering as he shed his coat and sat down to pull off his heavy boots. His face was red from exposure. Despite the cold he had worked up a sweat, and a frosting of ice coated his forehead. It melted immediately in the warmth of the house, trickling down his temples. He wiped the moisture away with his sleeve, then added another log to the fire and held his hands out to the blaze, rubbing them briskly to restore circulation.
"I'll make another pot of coffee, if you want some," Hope called as she set the large bowl of stew on the table. "Otherwise, you have a choice of milk or water."
"Water will do." He took the same kitchen chair he had used earlier. Tink, who hadn't been allowed out with Price the second time, left his spot by the fire and came to stand beside Price's chair. With a hopeful look in his eyes, he rested his muzzle on Price's thigh.
Price froze in the midst of ladling a large amount of beef stew into his bowl. He looked down at the soulful brown eyes watching him, and slanted a quick look at Hope. “Am I eating out of his bowl?"
"No, he's just giving you a guilt complex."
"It's working."
"He's had a lot of practice. Tink, come here." She patted her own thigh, but he ignored her, evidently having concluded Price was a softer touch.
Price spooned some of the stew to his mouth, but didn't take the bite. He looked down at Tink. Tink looked at him. Price returned the spoon to his bowl. "For God's sake, do something," he muttered to Hope.

"Tink, come here," she repeated, reaching for the stubborn dog.
Abruptly Tink whirled away from Price, his ears pricked forward as he faced the kitchen door. He didn't bark, but every muscle in his body quivered with alertness.
Price was out of his chair so fast Hope didn't have time to blink. With his left hand he dragged her out of her chair and whirled her behind him, at the same time reaching behind his back, drawing the pistol from his waistband. She stood paralyzed for a second, a second in which Price seemed to be listening as intently as Tink. Then he put one hand on her shoulder and forced her down on the floor beside the china cabinet, and with a motion of his hand told her to stay there. Noiseless in his stockinged feet, he moved over to the window in the dining area, flattening his back to the wall as he reached it. She watched as he eased his head to the edge of the window, moving just enough so that he could see out with one eye. He immediately drew back, then after a moment eased forward for another look.
A low growl began in Tink's throat. Price made another motion with his hand, and without thinking, Hope reached out and dragged her pet closer to her, wrapping her arms around him, though she didn't know what she could do to keep him from barking. Hold his muzzle, maybe, but he was strong enough that she wouldn't be able to hold him if he wanted to pull free.
What was she doing? she wondered wildly. What if it were law officers out there? They couldn't have tracked Price through the blizzard, but they could be searching any places where he might have found shelter.
But would deputies be on foot, or would they use snowmobiles? She hadn't heard the distinctive roar of the machines, and surely the cold was too dangerous for anyone to be out in it any length of time, anyway.
There were also two other escaped prisoners unaccounted for; would Price be as alarmed if one or both of them were out there? Had he seen anything? There might not be anything out there but a pine cone falling, or a squirrel venturing from its den and knocking some snow off a tree limb.
"I didn't check the cabins," Price muttered savagely to himself. "God damn it, I didn't check the cabins!"
"I locked them up yesterday," Hope said, keeping her voice low.
"Locks don't mean anything." He tilted his head, listening, then made another motion for her to be quiet.
Tink quivered under her hand. Hope trembled too, her thoughts racing. If anyone had stayed last night in one of the cabins, he wasn't a deputy,

because a deputy would already have come to the house. That left another escapee. Praying she was right, she clamped her hand around the dog's muzzle and hugged him close to her, whispering an apology.
Tink began fighting her immediately, squirming to get free. "Hold him," Price mouthed silently, easing toward the kitchen door.
From where she crouched beside the china cabinet, Hope couldn't see the door, and she had her hands full with Tink. The door exploded inward, crashing against the wall. She screamed and jumped, and lost her grip on Tink. He tore away from her, his paws sliding on the wood floor as he launched himself toward the unseen intruder.
The shot was deafening. Instinctively she hit the floor, still unable to see what was happening, her ears ringing, the sharp stench of burned cordite stinging her nostrils. A hard thud in the kitchen was followed by the shattering of glass. Her ears cleared enough for her to hear the savage sounds of two men fighting, the grunts and curses and thuds of fists on flesh. Tink's snarls added to the din, and she caught a flash of golden fur as he darted into the fray.
She scrambled to her feet and ran for the rifle. Price knew it was unloaded, but the other person wouldn't.
With the heavy weapon in her hands, she charged back toward the kitchen. As she rounded the cabinets, a heavy body slammed into her, knocking her down. The sharp edge of the counter dug into her shoulder, making her arm go numb, and the rifle slipped from her hand as she landed hard on her back. She cried out in angry pain, grabbing for the rifle and struggling up on one knee.
Price and a stranger strained together in vicious combat, sprawled half on the cabinets. Each man had a pistol, and each had their free hand locked around the other's wrist as they fought for control. They slammed sideways, knocking over her canister set and sending it to the floor. A cloud of flour flew over the room to settle like a powdery shroud over every surface.
Price's foot slipped on the flour, and he lost leverage; the stranger rolled, heaving Price to the side. The momentum tore Price's fingers from the stranger's wrist, freeing the pistol.
Hope felt herself moving, scrambling to grab the man's hand, but she felt half paralyzed with horror; everything was in slow motion, and she knew she wouldn't get there before the man could bring the pistol down and pull the trigger.

Tink shot forward, low to the ground, and sank his teeth into the man's leg. He screamed with pain and shock, and with his other foot kicked Tink in the head. The dog skidded across the floor, yelping.
Price gathered himself and lunged for the man, the impact carrying them both crashing into the table. The table overturned, chairs broke, chunks of meat and potatoes and carrots scattered across the floor. The two men went down, Price on top. The other man's head banged hard against the floor, momentarily stunning him. Price took swift advantage, driving his elbow into the man's solar plexus, and when the man convulsed, gasping, followed up with a short, savage punch under the chin that snapped the man's teeth together. Before he recovered from that, Price had the pistol barrel digging into the soft hollow below his ear.
The man froze.
"Drop the gun, Clinton," Price said in a very soft voice, between gulps of air. "Now, or I pull the trigger."
Clinton dropped the gun. Price reached out with his left hand and swiped the weapon back toward himself, pinning it under his left leg. Tucking his own pistol in his waistband, he grabbed Clinton with both hands and literally lifted him off the floor, turning him and slamming him down on his belly. Hope saw Clinton brace his hands, and she stepped forward, shoving the rifle barrel in his face. "Don't," she said.
Clinton slowly relaxed.
Price flicked a glance at the rifle, but he didn't say anything. He wasn't going to reveal it wasn't loaded, Hope realized, but neither would she let on that she knew it. Let him assume she didn't know.
Price dragged Clinton's arms behind his back and held them with one hand, then took the pistol out of his waistband, jamming the barrel against the base of Clinton's skull. "Move one inch," he said in a low, guttural tone, "and I'll blow your fucking head off. Hope." He didn't look at her. "Do you have any thin rope? Scarves will do, if you don't."
"I have some scarves."
"Get them."
She went upstairs and searched through her dresser until she found three scarves. Her knees were trembling, her heart thudding wildly against her ribs. She felt faintly nauseated.
She held on to the railing as she shakily made her way back down the stairs. The two men didn't look as if they had moved, Clinton lying on his belly,

Price straddling him. The carnage of wrecked furniture and food surrounded them. Tink was standing at Clinton's head, his muzzle down very close to the man's face, growling.
Price took one of the scarves, twisted it lengthwise, and wound it around Clinton's wrists. He jerked the fabric tight and tied it in a hard knot. Then he jabbed the pistol into his waistband once more, took Clinton's pistol from under his knee, and levered himself to his feet. Leaning down, he grabbed the collar of Clinton's coveralls and hauled him to his feet, then slammed him down into the only chair left standing upright. He crouched and secured Clinton's feet to the legs of the chair, using a scarf for each ankle.
Clinton's head lolled back. He was breathing hard, one eye swollen shut, blood leaking from both corners of his mouth. He looked at Hope, standing there pale and stricken, still holding the rifle as if she had forgotten she had it.
"Shoot him," he croaked. "For God's sake . . . shoot him. He's an escaped murderer. I'm a deputy sheriff . . . He took my uniform . . . Damn it, shoot the bastard!"
"Nice try, Clinton," Price said, straightening.
"Ma'am, I'm telling the truth," Clinton said. "Listen to me, please."
With one smooth movement Price reached out and tugged the rifle from Hope's nerveless hands. She let it go without a protest, because now that Clinton was tied up, there was no one she could intimidate with the empty weapon.
"Shit," Clinton said, closing his good eye in despair. He sagged against the chair, still breathing hard.
Hope stared at him, fighting off the dizziness that assailed her. He was almost Price's height, but not as muscular. If she was any judge of men's clothing—and after doing all the clothes shopping for first Dylan and now her dad, she had had plenty of experience—Clinton would wear a size fifteen and a half shirt.
Price wasn't unscathed. A lump was forming on his right cheekbone, his left eyebrow was clotted with blood, and his lips were cut in three separate places. He wiped the blood out of his eye and looked at Hope. "Are you all right?"
"Yes," she said, though her shoulder hurt like blue blazes where the cabinet edge had dug in, and she still wasn't at all certain she wasn't going to faint.

"You don't look it. Sit down." He looked around, spotted an unbroken chair, and set it upright. His hand on Hope's shoulder, he pressed her down onto the chair. "Adrenaline," he said briefly. "You always feel weak as hell when the scare's over."
"You broke into one of the cabins, didn't you?" Price asked Clinton. "Built a fire in the fireplace, stayed nice and warm. With the blizzard going on, we wouldn't be able to see the smoke from the chimney. When the weather cleared, though, you had to let the fire go out. Got damn cold, didn't it? But you couldn't head off into the mountains without heavier clothes and some food, so you knew you had to break into the house."
"Good scenario, Tanner," Clinton said. "Is that what you would've done if you hadn't stolen my uniform?" He opened his eye and flicked a look around. "Where's the old man? Did you kill him too?"
Hope felt Price looking at her, assessing her reaction to Clinton's tale, but she merely stared at the captured man without a change in her expression. Maintaining her composure wasn't difficult; she felt numb, absolutely drained. How did Clinton know about her father? Was he from the area? She was not, she thought, cut out to be an action hero.
"Hey." Price squatted in front of her, touching her cheek, folding her hands in his. She blinked, focusing her gaze on him. His brows were drawn together in a small frown, his blue eyes searching as he examined her. "Don't let him play mind games with you, honey. Everything's going to be all right; just relax and trust me."
"Don't listen to him, ma'am," Clinton said.
"You look pretty shaky," Price told her, ignoring Clinton. "Maybe you should lie down for a minute. Come on, let me help you to the couch." He urged her to her feet, his hand under her elbow. As she turned, he uttered a savage curse and hauled her to a halt.
"What?" she said, shaken by the abrupt change in him.
"You said you weren't hurt."
"I'm not."
"Your back is bleeding." His face grim, he force-marched her into her dad's bedroom. He paused to replace the rifle in the rack, then ushered her into the bathroom. After jerking open the curtains so he would have sufficient light, he began unbuttoning her shirt.
"Oh, that. I scraped it on the cabinet edge when I fell." She tried to grab his hands, but he brushed her hands aside and pulled off her shirt, whirling her

around so he could examine her back. She shivered, her nipples puckering as the cold air washed over her bare breasts.
He dampened a washcloth and dabbed it on her back, just below her shoulder blade. Hope flinched at the pain.
"You've got a gouge in your back, and from the looks of it, a monster bruise is forming." Gently he continued washing the wound. "You need an ice pack on it, but first I'm going to disinfect that gouge and put a gauze pad over it. Where are your first aid supplies?"
"In the cabinet door over the refrigerator."
"Lie down on the bed. I'll be right back."
He guided her to the bed, and Hope willingly collapsed facedown. She was cold without her shirt, though, and tugged the cover around her.
Price returned in just a moment with the first aid box. Blood was dripping in his eye again, and he paused a minute to wash his own face. Blood immediately trickled down again, and with an impatient curse he tore open an adhesive bandage and plastered it over his eyebrow.
Then, holding the box on his lap, he sat beside Hope and gently dabbed the wound with an antibiotic ointment. As gentle as he was, even the lightest touch was painful. She bore it, refusing to flinch again. He placed a gauze pad over the wound, then covered her with one of her dad's T-shirts.
"Just lie still," he ordered. "I'll get an ice pack."
He improvised an ice pack by filling a zip-lock plastic bag with ice cubes. Hope jumped when he gently laid it on her back. "That's too cold!"
"Okay, maybe the T-shirt's too thin. Let me get a towel."
He got a towel from the bathroom, and draped it over her in place of the T-shirt. The ice pack was tolerable then, barely.
He pulled the cover up over her, because the room was chilly. "Are you too cold?" he asked, smoothing her hair. "Do you want me to carry you upstairs?"
"No, I'm fine, with the cover over me," she murmured. "I'm sleepy, though."
"Reaction," he said, leaning over and brushing a kiss on her temple. "Take a nap, then. You'll feel fine when you wake up."
"I feel like a wuss right now," she admitted.
"Never been in a fight before?"
"Nope, that was my first one. I didn't like it. I acted like a girl, didn't I?"
He chuckled, his fingers gentle on her hair. "How does a girl act?"

"You know, the way they always do in the movies, screaming and getting in the way."
"Did you scream?"
"Yes. When he kicked in the door. It startled me."
"Fancy that. Did you get in the way?"
"I tried not to."
"You didn't, honey," he said reassuringly "You kept your head, got the rifle, and held it on him." He kissed her once more, his lips warm on her cool skin. "I'd choose you for my side in any fight. Go to sleep, now, and don't worry about the mess in the kitchen. Tink and I will clean it up. He's already taken care of the beef stew."
She smiled, as he had meant her to, and he eased up from the bed. She closed her eyes, and in a few seconds she heard the quiet click of the door closing.
Hope opened her eyes.
She lay quietly, because the ice pack was easing the soreness in her shoulder. Fifteen minutes on, fifteen minutes off—if she remembered accurately how ice therapy worked. She might need all the flexibility in the shoulder she could muster, and she estimated Price wouldn't check on her for at least an hour. She had a little time to take care of herself.
She heard him moving around in the kitchen. Broken glass tinkled as he swept it up, and she heard the crackle of shattered wood when he picked up the smashed remains of some of her chairs. She didn't hear the captured Clinton utter a sound.
The flour had made quite a mess. Cleaning it up would require vacuuming and mopping, and washing it off everything else would take a lot of time.
Hope threw back the covers and eased off the bed. Silently she opened the closet door and took down one of her dad's sweatshirts, gingerly pulling it on over her head and wincing as her abused shoulder and back muscles protested the movement.
Then she began searching for the bullets.
Half an hour later, she found the box, in the pocket of one of her dad's jackets.

Hope had several of her dad's old, no-longer-used neckties dangling from the waistband of her sweatpants when she left the bedroom. The rifle was in her hands.

Clinton was sitting silently, exactly as she had last seen him, not that he had much choice. He opened his good eye when he heard her, the single orb widening as he saw the rifle. He gave a faint, satisfied smile and nodded at her.

Price was standing at the sink, wringing out a dishcloth. He had most of the mess cleaned up, though she was woefully short of furniture now and there were still a few surfaces dusted with flour. He looked up, and whatever he had been about to say died on his lips when she raised the rifle.

"Keep your right hand where I can see it," she said calmly. "Use your left hand to get the pistol out of your waistband. Put it on the cabinet and slide it toward me."

He didn't move. His blue eyes turned hard and glacial. "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"Taking over," she replied. "Do what I said."

He didn't even glance at the rifle. His mouth set in a grim line, he started toward her.

"I found the bullets," Hope said quickly, before he got close enough to grab the rifle. "In a coat pocket," she added, just so he would know she really had found them.

He stopped. The fury that darkened his face would have terrified her if she hadn't had the rifle.

"The pistol," she prompted.

Slowly, keeping his right hand resting on the sink, he reached behind his back and drew out the pistol. Placing it on the cabinet, he shoved it toward her.

"Don't forget mine," Clinton said from behind her, the words slightly slurred; his damaged mouth and jaw were swelling and turning dark.

"The other one too," Hope said, not flinching from the sulfurous look Price gave her. Silently he obeyed.

"Now step back."

He did. She picked up her pistol and laid down the rifle, because the pistol was more convenient. "Okay, sit down in the chair and put your hands behind you."

"Don't do this, Hope," he said between clenched teeth.

"He's a murderer. Don't listen to him. Why would you believe him, for God's sake? Look at him! He's wearing prison coveralls."
"Only because you stole my uniform," Clinton snarled.
"Sit down," Hope told Price again.
"Damn it, why won't you listen to me?" he said furiously
"Because I heard on the radio about a bus wreck. Two deputies were killed, and five prisoners escaped." Hope didn't take her eyes off his face. She saw his pupils dilate, his jaw harden. "Because your uniform shirt is too small for you. Because you didn't have a wallet, and even though your uniform pants were torn and bloody, you weren't injured anywhere."
"Then what about the service revolver? If I took a deputy's clothes, why wouldn't I have also taken his weapon?"
"I don't know," she admitted. "Maybe you were knocked out during the wreck, and when you regained consciousness, the other prisoners had already escaped and taken the weapons with them. I don't know all the details. All I know is I have a lot of questions, and your answers don't add up. Why did you unload the rifle and hide the bullets?"
He didn't blink. "For safety reasons."
She didn't either. "Bull. Sit down."
He sat. He didn't like it, but her finger was on the trigger and her gaze didn't waver.
"Hands behind your back."
He put them behind his back. Steam was all but coming out of his ears. Staying out of his reach, in case he should whirl suddenly and try to knock the gun out of her hand, she pulled one of the neckties from her waistband and fashioned two loose loops with it. Moving in quickly then, she slipped the loops over his hands and jerked the ends tight. He was already moving, shifting his weight, but he froze in place as the fabric tightened around his wrists.
"Neat trick," he said emotionlessly. "What did you do?"
"Loops, like roping a calf. All I had to do was pull." She wrapped the loose ends between his wrists, tying off each of the loops, and then knotted the tie in place. "Okay, now your feet."
He sat without moving, letting her tie his feet to the chair legs. "Listen to me," he said urgently. "I really am a deputy sheriff. I haven't worked in this county very long and not many people know me."

"Yeah, sure," Clinton snarled, "You killed those two deputies, and you would probably have killed her before you left. Untie me, ma'am, my hands are numb."
"Don't! Listen to me, Hope. You've heard about this guy. He's from around here. That's how he knew you lived with your father. Clinton"—he jerked his head toward the other man—"kidnapped the daughter of a wealthy rancher from this area and asked for a million in ransom. They paid him the money, but he didn't keep his part of the bargain. The girl wasn't where he said he had left her. He was caught when he tried to spend the money, and he's never told where he hid the girl's body. It was all over the news. He was being transferred to a more secure jail, and we thought it was worth a try to put me in with him, maybe get him to talk about it. He can be convicted of murder on circumstantial evidence, but the parents want their child's body found. They've accepted that she's dead, but they want to give her a decent burial. She was seventeen, a pretty little girl he's got buried up in the mountains somewhere, or dumped in an abandoned mine."
"You know a lot of possibilities," Clinton charged, his tone savage. "Keep talking; tell me where you hid her body."
Hope walked into the great room and added more wood to the fire. Then she paused by the telephone, lifting the receiver to check for a dial tone. Nothing.
"What are you doing?" Clinton demanded. "Untie me."
"No," Hope said.
"What?" He sounded as if he couldn't believe what he had heard.
"No. Until the phone service is restored and I can call the sheriff to straighten this out, I figure the best thing to do is keep both of you just the way you are."
There was a stunned moment of silence; then Price threw back his head on a shout of laughter. Clinton stared at her, mouth agape; then his face flushed dark red and he yelled, "You stupid fucking bitch!"
"That's my girl," Price chortled, still laughing. "God, I love you! I'll even forgive you for this, though the guys are going to ride my ass for years about letting a sweet little brown-eyed blonde get the drop on me."
Hope looked at those laughing blue eyes, shiny with tears of mirth, and she couldn't help smiling. "I probably love you too, but that doesn't mean I'm going to untie you."

Clinton recovered himself enough to say, "He's playing you for a fool, ma'am."
" 'Ma'am'?" she repeated. "That isn't what you called me a second ago."
"I'm sorry. I lost my temper." He inhaled raggedly. "It galls me to see you falling for that sweet shit he deals out to every woman."
"I'm sure it does."
"What do I have to do to convince you he's lying?"
"You can't do anything, so you might as well save your breath," she said politely.
Half an hour later Clinton said, "I have to use the bathroom."
"Go in your pants," Hope replied. She hadn't thought about that complication, but she wasn't going to change her mind and untie either one of them. She gave Price an apologetic look, and he winked at her.
"I'm okay for right now. If the phone service isn't restored by nightfall, though, I'll probably be begging you for a fruit jar."
She would bring him one too, she thought. She wouldn't mind performing that service for him at all. She glanced at Clinton. No way; she wouldn't touch his with a pair of tongs.
She checked the phone every half hour, watching as the afternoon sun sank behind the mountains. Clinton squirmed, and she had no doubt he was in misery. Price had to be uncomfortable too, but he didn't let it show. He grinned at her every time he caught her eye, though with his bruised face the grin looked more like a grimace.
Just at twilight, when she lifted the receiver, she heard a dial tone. "Bingo!" she said triumphantly, picking up the phone book to look up the number of the sheriff's department.
Price rattled off the number for her, and though she had been almost certain he was telling the truth, in that moment she knew for certain. Light broke across her face, and she gave him a radiant smile as she punched in the number.
"Sheriff's Department," a brisk male voice said.
"Hello, this is Hope Bradshaw, at the Crescent Lake Resort. I have two men here. One is Price Tanner and the other's name is Clinton. They both claim to be deputies and that the other is a murderer. Can you tell me which is which?"
"Holy shit!" the voice bellowed. "Damn! Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. You say you have both Tanner and Clinton?"

"Yes, I do. Which one is your deputy?"
"Tanner is. How do you have them? I mean—"
"I'm holding a gun on them," she said. "What does Tanner look like? What color are his eyes?"
The deputy on the line sounded nonplussed. "His eyes? Ah . . . the subject is approximately six-two, two hundred pounds, dark hair, blue eyes."
"Thank you," Hope said, thankful that law officers were trained to give succinct descriptions. "Would you like to speak with Deputy Tanner?"
"Yes, ma'am, I would!"
Picking up the phone, she carried it as far as she could, but the cord wasn't long enough to reach. "Just a moment," she said, laying down the receiver. She dashed to the kitchen and got her paring knife. Running back to Price, she knelt and sawed through the fabric binding his wrists, then turned her attention to his ankles while he rubbed feeling back into his hands. "You need a cordless phone," he said. "Or one with a longer cord."
"I'll take care of that the next time I go shopping," she said as she freed his ankles. The kitchen phone was closer, though that cord wasn't long enough to reach either. He hobbled over to it, his muscles stiff from sitting so long in a strained position.
"This is Tanner. Yeah, everything's under control. I'll give a complete briefing when you get here. Are the roads passable yet? Okay." He hung up and hobbled toward her. "The road is still blocked, but they're going to grab a snowplow. They should be here in a couple of hours."
He hobbled past. Hope blinked. "Price?"
"Can't stop to talk," he said, speeding up his hobbling, heading straight toward the bathroom.
Hope couldn't smother her laugh. Clinton glared at her as she walked past him to hang up the phone in the great room. She still had the paring knife in her hand. She paused and looked at him consideringly, and something must have shown in her face because he blanched.
"Don't," he said as she started toward him, and then he began to yell.
"You CUT him," Price said, his tone disbelieving. "You really cut him."
"He had to know I meant business," Hope said. "It was just a teeny cut, nothing to make such a fuss about. Actually, it was an accident; I didn't intend to get that close, but he jumped."
That wasn't all Clinton had done; he had also lost control of his bladder. And then he had begun talking, babbling as fast as he could, yelling for

Price, saying anything to keep her from cutting him again. Price had called the sheriff's department and relayed the information, which they hoped was accurate.

it was after midnight. They lay in bed, their arms around each other. She held an ice pack to his cheek; he held another one on her back.

"I meant it, you know," Price said, kissing her forehead, "about loving you. I know everything happened too fast, but... I know what I feel. From the minute I opened my eyes and saw your face, I wanted you." He paused. "So . . . ?"

"So?" she repeated.

"So, you 'probably' love me too, huh?"

"Probably." She nestled more comfortably against him. "Definitely."

"Say it!" he ordered under his breath, his arms tightening around her.

"I love you. But we really should take our time, get to know each other—"

He gave a low laugh. "Take our time? It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

She had no answer, because too much had happened in too short a time. She felt as if the past day had been weeks long. Thrown together as they had been under extreme circumstances, she had seen him in a multitude of situations, and she knew her first dazed, deliriously joyous impression of him had been accurate. She felt as if she had known him immediately, primitive instinct recognizing him as her mate.

"Marry me, Hope. As soon as possible. The chances we've taken, we've probably hit the baby jackpot." His voice was lazy, seductive.

She lifted her head from his shoulder, staring at him through the darkness. She saw the gleam of his teeth as he smiled, and once again she felt that jolt of awareness, of recognition. "All right," she whispered. "You don't mind?"

"Mind?" He took her hand and carried it to his crotch. He was hard as a rock. "I'm raring to go, honey," he whispered, and his voice was trembling a little, as it had earlier when they discussed the possibility. "All you have to do is say the word, and I'll devote myself to the project."

"Word," she said, joyfully giving herself up to the inevitable.

End

Dying To Please (2002)

Chapter 1

THE CEILING FAN STOPPED.

Sarah Stevens was so accustomed to the slight whirring noise of the fan that the lack of it immediately awakened her. She cracked open one eye and peered at her digital clock, but there weren't any bright red numerals shining back at her. She blinked in sleepy confusion, then realized what was wrong. The electricity had gone off. Oh, great.

She rolled over onto her back, listening. The night was quiet; there was no rumble of thunder to signal a violent spring storm in the vicinity, which would have explained the loss of power. She didn't close the curtains at night, since her rooms faced the back where the grounds had privacy fencing, and through her bedroom windows she could see the faint gleam of starlight. Not only was it not raining, the sky wasn't even cloudy.

Maybe a transformer had blown. Or an auto accident might have taken down a utility pole. Any number of things could have caused the power outage.

Sighing, she sat up and reached for the flashlight she kept on the bedside table. Regardless of why the electricity was off, her job was to minimize the effect it would have on Judge Roberts, make certain he wouldn't be inconvenienced more than necessary. He didn't have any appointments in the morning, but the old dear was fussy about what time he had breakfast. Not that he'd be cranky about it, but any change in his routine upset him more now than it had even a year before. He was eighty-five; he deserved to have breakfast when he wanted it.

She picked up the receiver of the telephone; it was a land line, so the loss of power wouldn't affect it. Cordless phones were great, until the electricity went off. In addition to this one, Sarah had made certain a few strategically placed phones in the main house were land lines.

No dial tone buzzed in her ear.

Puzzled, and growing slightly worried, she got out of bed. Her two rooms were over the garage, with her combined living room and kitchen area facing the front, while her bedroom and bath faced the back. She didn't switch on the flashlight; this was her home, and she didn't need guidance to

make her way to the other room. She parted the curtains covering the front windows and looked out.
None of the strategically placed lights on the Judge's manicured lawn were lit, but to the right, the soft glow of the neighbor's security lights threw long, dense shadows across the lawn.
The electricity wasn't off, then. A breaker could have kicked, but that would have affected only part of the house, or the grounds, but not both. She stood very still, logic and intuition combining: (A) The electricity was off. (B) The phone lines were out. (C) The next-door neighbor had electricity. The conclusion she reached didn't require much of a leap: someone had cut the lines, and the only reason for doing so would be to break into the house.
Cat-silent in her bare feet, she ran back to the bedroom and got her nine-millimeter automatic from the bedside table. Her cell phone, damn it, was in her SW, which was parked under the portico in back. She raced for the door, only briefly consideringdetouring to get the phone from her vehicle; her first priority was to protect the Judge. She had to get to him, make certain he was safe. He'd had a couple of credible death threats made against him during his last year on the bench, and though he had always passed them off as nothing, Sarah couldn't afford to be so cavalier.
Her quarters connected to the house via a staircase, with doors at both top and bottom; she had to switch on the flashlight as she went down the stairs so she wouldn't miss a step and fall, but as soon as she reached the bottom, she turned off the light. She paused for a moment to let her eyes readjust to the darkness, and as she did she listened, straining her ears for any sound that didn't belong. Nothing. Silently she turned the knob and opened the door in increments, an inch at the time, every nerve in her body alert. No strange sounds greeted her, so she stepped forward.
She was standing in a short hall; to her left was the door to the garage. Silently she tried the knob, and found it still locked. One door down was the laundry room; then directly across the hall was the kitchen. The battery-operated wall clock in the kitchen ticked monotonously, very loud now without the hum of the refrigerator to mask the sound. She eased into the kitchen, the glazed ceramic tile cold beneath her feet. Skirting the huge cooking island, she paused again before entering the breakfast room. There was more light here, because of the big bay window that looked out into the rose garden, but that meant she was more likely to be seen if any intruder

was watching. Her pajamas were a pale blue cotton, as visible as white. She would be an easy target.
That was a chance she'd have to take.
Her heart slammed against her rib cage, and she took a slow, deep breath to calm herself, trying to control the adrenaline rushing through her system. She couldn't let herself get sucked under by the whirlpool of excitement; she had to ride it, keep her mind cool and disengaged, remember her training. She took another deep breath and eased forward, minimizing her exposure by hugging the wall as closely as she could get without actually brushing against it. Slow and easy, she thought. One step at a time, placing her bare feet carefully so she was always balanced, she worked her way around the room and to the door that opened into the back hall. She paused again, listening.
Silence.
No. A muffled sound, so slight she wasn't sure she'd heard anything at all. She waited, breathing halted, eyes deliberately unfocused so her peripheral vision could detect any movement. The hall was empty, but after a moment the sound came again, slightly louder, from . . . the sunroom?
Two formal parlors, and the dining room, were on the front side of the house; the kitchen, breakfast room, library, and sunroom were all on the back. The sunroom was a corner room, with two walls composed mostly of windows, and two pairs of sliding French doors opened onto the patio. If she had been planning to break into the house, Sarah thought, she would have picked the sunroom as the best entry point. Evidently some else had, too.
She sidled into the hall, paused half a heartbeat, then took two swift steps that carried her to the side of the huge, hundred-year old buffet that was now used to store table linens. She went to one knee on the thick carpet, concealed by the bulk of the buffet, just as someone came out of the library. He was dressed in dark clothes and carrying something big and bulky. The computer terminal, she thought, but the hall was too dark to be certain. He carried his burden into the sunroom, and she heard more of those muffled sounds, rather like the scuff of shoes on carpet.
Her heart was thudding, but all the same she felt a little relieved. The intruder was obviously a thief, rather than a criminal bent on revenge against the Judge. That wasn't to say they weren't in danger; the thief might be violent, but his movements so far were those of someone bent on stealing

what he could and sneaking away. He was organized and methodical, witness the disabled electrical and phone lines. He had probably cut the power in order to disarm the alarm system, then cut the phone lines as an added precaution.

The question was, what should she do?

She was very aware of the weapon in her hand, but the situation didn't call for lethal force. She would shoot if necessary to save the Judge's life, or her own, but she wasn't about to shoot someone over some electronic equipment. That did not, however, mean she was inclined to let him get away.

It was also possible he was armed. Burglars as a rule didn't carry weapons, because if luck wasn't with them, the jail sentence for armed robbery was so much stiffer than for a simple robbery. Just because most burglars weren't armed, though, didn't mean she could afford to assume this one wasn't.

He was big; from what she'd been able to tell in the dark hall, he was around six feet tall, and burly. She could probably handle him in a face-to-face situation-unless he was armed, and then all the training in the world wouldn't stop a bullet. There was a big difference, her father had told her, between being confident and being cocky; cocky would get you killed. The best thing to do would be take him by surprise, from behind, rather than risk getting shot.

A whisper of sound warned her, and she held still as he moved into the hallway, reversing his path from the sunroom to the library. Now would be a good time to make her move, catch him when he came back out with his arms full of stolen goods. She placed her flashlight on the floor, then transferred the pistol to her left hand and silently began rising from her crouch.

Another man came out of the sunroom.

Sarah froze, her head exposed above the edge of the buffet. Her heart kicked sickeningly hard, almost taking her breath. A11 the guy had to do was look in her direction; her face, pale and distinct in the darkness, would be clearly visible.

He didn't pause as he stealthily followed the first man into the library.

She sank back against the wall, shaking with relief. She took several deep, quiet breaths, holding each a few seconds to calm her racing heart. That had been entirely too close; another second and she would have been standing, fully revealed.

There being two men instead of just one definitely put a different spin on things. Her risk was now doubled, and her chance of success halved. Slipping outside to her SW and calling 911 on the cell phone was beginning to look like the best option, assuming she could get there undetected. The biggest problem for her was leaving the Judge unprotected. He didn't hear well; they could be in his room before he knew it; he wouldn't have a chance to hide. The old dear was valiant enough to fight any intruder, which would at the least get him hurt, and at the worst, killed.

Her job was to prevent that from happening. She couldn't if she was outside talking on the phone.

Her nerves gave one quiver, then settled down. She'd made her decision; now she had to forget everything else but her training.

There were scuffing sounds from the library and a faint grunt. Despite her tension, she began smiling. If they were trying to hoist the fifty-five-inch television, both of them would have more than they could handle and their hands would be occupied. Maybe there wouldn't be a better time to take them than right now.

She stood and stepped silently to the library, putting her back against the wall beside the door and daring a lightning-fast peek inside. One of the thieves had a penlight clamped in his teeth, allowing her to see that they were indeed wrestling with the behemoth television. Bless their hearts, they had also ruined their own night vision, making it difficult for them to see her.

She waited, and after a few more grunts and a whispered curse, one of the thieves began backing out of the library, using both hands to grip one side of the television while the other man held the opposite side. She could almost hear their bones creaking under the weight, and thanks to the thin beam of the penlight as it shone straight into the first man's sweaty face, she could see the strain in his expression.

Piece of cake.

Sarah smiled. As soon as the first thief was clear of the doorway, she stuck out her bare foot and caught his left ankle, flipping it upward. He gave a startled yelp and crashed to his back in the hallway. The huge television slammed sideways against the doorframe, then toppled forward. The man on the floor yelled in alarm, the sound changing abruptly to a high-pitched scream as the television crashed down on his pelvis and legs.

His partner tried to catch his balance, his arms flailing. The penlight dropped out of his mouth, and in the abrupt darkness he said, "Fuck!" as he pitched forward. Sarah helped him along, pivoting and landing a punch to his temple. The punch lacked her full force, as he was already going down, but it was enough to sting her knuckles and send him sprawling bonelessly across the bulk of the television, which elicited even more screams from underneath. The unconscious man slowly slid to one side, crumpled and limp; a blow to the temple usually had that effect.

"Sarah? What's going on? Why is the power off?" The Judge's voice came from the top of the back stairs, rising over the yells of the man pinned under the television.

Accurately judging that neither man was going anywhere in the next few minutes, Sarah went to the bottom of the steps. "Two men broke into the house," she said; between the Judge's partial deafness and the yowls of pain, she had to yell to make certain he heard her. "I have it handled. Stay there until I get the flashlight." The last thing she needed was to have him tumble down the stairs in the darkness, trying to come to her aid.

She retrieved the flashlight from the floor beside the buffet, then returned to the stairs to light the Judge's journey down, which he made with a speed that belied his eighty-five years. "Burglars? Have you called the police?"

"Not yet. They cut the phone lines, and I haven't had a chance to get my cell phone from my truck."

He reached the bottom of the steps and peered to the right, in the direction of all the racket. Obligingly, Sarah turned her flashlight on the scene, and after a second he chuckled. "If you'll give me that pistol, I believe I can keep these two under control while you make that call."

She handed him the pistol, butt first, then stripped the phone cord from the hall phone and bent over the unconscious thief. He was the big one, and she grunted with the effort it took to roll him over. Quickly she pulled his arms behind him, wrapped the phone cord around his wrists, then bent one leg backward and secured his wrists to his ankle. Unless he was extremely agile hopping on one foot-and with a concussion, no less-he wasn't going anywhere, regardless of whether or not there was a pistol trained on him; neither was the guy pinned under the television.

"I'll be right back," she said to the Judge, and handed him the flashlight. Gentleman to the core, he tried to return it to her. "No, you'll need the light."

"The truck lights will come on when I hit the remote to unlock it; that's all the light I'll need." She looked around. "One of them had a penlight, but he dropped it and I don't know where it went." She paused. "I don't think I'd want to touch it, anyway; he was holding it in his mouth."
He chuckled again. "I wouldn't, either." In the reflected glow of the flashlight, she could see the sparkle of his eyes, even through his eyeglasses. Why, he was enjoying this! Come to think of it, retirement couldn't be nearly as interesting as sitting on a federal bench. He must have been thirsting for adventure, or at least a little drama, and here it had landed neatly in his lap. He'd be relating the details of this to his cronies for the next month.
She left him to the job of guarding the two thieves and retraced her steps through the breakfast room and kitchen. Her keys were in her bag, so she held carefully to the stair rail as she made her way upstairs in almost total darkness. Thank goodness she had left the door at the top open; the pale rectangle gave her a sense of orientation. Once in her quarters, she detoured to the tiny kitchen area and retrieved another flashlight from a cabinet drawer, then hurried to her bedroom and got the keys.
Thanks to the flashlight, her trip down the stairs was much faster than going up. She unlocked the back door and hit the "un lock" button on her remote even as she stepped outside. The front and rear lights on her four-wheel-drive TrailBlazer came on, as did the interior lights. She crossed swiftly to it, the flagstones cold and rough on her bare feet; darn it, she hadn't thought to put on a pair of shoes while she was upstairs.
Sliding into the driver's seat, she grabbed the tiny cell phone from the cup holder where she kept it and pressed the "on" button, waiting impatiently as it cycled through its program, then pressing the numbers with her thumb as she gingerly retraced her steps over the flagstones and went back into the house.
"Nine-one-one." The answering voice was female, calm, and almost bored.
"There's a robbery at Twenty-seven-thirteen Briarwood Road," she said, and started to explain the situation, but the 911 operator interrupted.
"Where are you calling from?"
"At the same address. I'm on the cell phone because they cut the phone lines." She skirted the kitchen island and entered the breakfast room.
"You're in the house?"
"Yes. There are two men-"

"Are they still in the house?"
"Yes."
"Are they armed?"
"I don't know. I didn't see any weapons, but they cut the power line to the house, too, so I couldn't really tell in the dark if they were armed or not."
"Ma'am, if you can, get out of the house. I have patrol units en route to the location and they should arrive in a few minutes, but you should get out of the house now."
"Send an ambulance, too," Sarah said, ignoring the operator's advice as she entered the hall and added the beam of her flashlight to that of the Judge's, playing it over the two men on the floor. She doubted either of them was capable of leaving under his own steam. The cries of the one under the television had subsided into mingled moans and curses. The one she'd punched in the temple hadn't moved at all.
"An ambulance?"
"A big television fell on one of the men, and may have broken his legs. The other man is unconscious."
"A television fell on them?"
"Just one of them," Sarah said, strictly honest. She was beginning to enjoy the phone call. "It's a fifty-five-incher, so it's really heavy. Both of them were trying to carry it out when one guy tripped and the television fell on him. The other guy landed on top."
"And the man the television fell on is unconscious?"
"No, he's conscious. The other one is the one who's out of it."
"Why is he unconscious?"
"I hit him on the head."
Judge Roberts glanced around and grinned at her, and managed to give her a thumbs-up with the hand holding the flashlight.
"So both men are incapacitated?"
"Yes." As she spoke, the unconscious one moved his head a little and groaned. "I think he's coming around. He just moved."
"Ma'am-"
"I have him tied up with phone cord," she said.
There was a tiny pause. "I'm going to repeat what you said to make sure I have it straight. One man was unconscious, but now he's coming around, and you have him tied up with phone cord."
"That's correct."

"The other man is pinned by a fifty-five-inch television, and may have broken legs."
"Correct."
"Cool," Sarah heard someone in the background say.
The 911 operator remained professional. "I have medics and two ambulances en route. Is anyone else injured?"
"No."
"Do you have any weapons?"
"One, a pistol."
"You have a pistol?"
"Judge Roberts has the pistol."
"Please tell him to put the pistol away, ma'am."
"Yes, of course." No sane police officer wanted to walk into a dark house when someone inside was holding a pistol. She relayed the message to Judge Roberts, who briefly looked mutinous, then sighed and put the pistol in a drawer of the buffet. Considering the condition of the two thieves, holding a gun on them wasn't necessary, even if it did appeal to his macho instinct.
"The pistol has been put away in a drawer," Sarah reported.
"Thank you, ma'am. The patrol units will be there momentarily. They will want to secure the weapon, so please cooperate."
"No problem. I'm going to the door now to wait for them." Leaving Judge Roberts to watch their captives, she went into the front hallway and opened one of the nine-foot-tall double doors as two Mountain Brook black-and-whites with flashing roof lights pulled into the curving drive and stopped in front of the wide steps. "They're here," she reported to the emergency operator, stepping out so the officers could see her. Powerful flashlight beams played over her, and she held up one hand to shield her eyes from the glare. "Thank you."
"Glad to be of service, ma'am."
Sarah terminated the call as two uniformed officers approached her, hands on their weapons. From their car radios came a stream of static and staccato messages that she couldn't understand, and the rotating car lights made the manicured lawn look like a weird, deserted disco. To the right, the Cheatwoods' outside floodlights came on as the neighbors checked out the action. Before long, she figured, the entire neighborhood would be awake,

though only a few would be crass enough to personally investigate. The rest would use the telephone to garner information.
"There's a pistol in the buffet in the hall," she said, giving the two officers that information up front. They were edgy enough as it was; their weapons weren't out, but each of them had his hand on his gun just in case. "It belongs to me. I don't know whether or not the thieves are armed, but they're both incapacitated. Judge Roberts is watching them."
"What's your name, ma'am?" the stockier of the two asked as he edged inside the open front door, flashlight sweeping from side to side.
"Sarah Stevens. I'm Judge Roberts's butler."
She saw the glance they exchanged-a woman butler? She was used to that reaction, but all the stocky officer asked was, "Judge?"
"Lowell Roberts, retired federal judge."
He muttered something into the radio on his shoulder as Sarah led them through the dark entry, past the sweeping front staircase, and into the back hallway. Their flashlight beams played over the two men on the floor and the tall, thin, white-haired man standing watch at a safe distance.
The thief she had punched was conscious now, but definitely not with the program. He blinked several times and managed to mumble, "Wha' happened?" but no one bothered to answer. The one under the television was alternately sobbing and cursing, pushing at the weight on his legs, but he didn't have any leverage and he'd have been better off wiping his streaming nose; at least that would have accomplished something.
"What happened to that one?" the taller officer asked, shining his flashlight on the face of the one tied up.
"I hit him in the head."
"What with?" he asked, squatting beside the man and conducting a swift but thorough search.
"My fist."
He looked up in surprise, and she shrugged. "Caught him in the temple," she explained, and he nodded. A blow to the temple would addle King Kong. She didn't add that she had trained countless hours to be able to make that blow. If necessary she would elaborate, but until and unless a law enforcement officer asked her specifically about her skills, both she and her employer preferred to keep the bodyguard portion of her duties private.
The search produced a knife with a six-inch blade, secured in a sheath strapped to the man's ankle.

"They were carrying things out through there," she said, pointing to the sunroom door. "There are sliding glass doors and a patio outside."
In the distance came the shriek of sirens-many sirens-signaling the arrival of an entire fleet of policemen and medical personnel. Very shortly the house was going to be swarming with people, and she still had work to do.
"I'm going to sit over there out of the way," she said, pointing to the stairs.
The cop nodded, and Sarah took a seat on the fourth step, her bare feet tucked safely under her. First and foremost she needed to get power restored to the house, then phone service, though they could make do with cellular service. The burglar alarm had a battery reserve, so she had to assume the thieves had also done some damage there, or at least been smart enough to bypass it. Either way, the security people needed to check out everything. Probably the sliding glass doors would need to be replaced, too, but that could wait until morning.
With her list prioritized and firmly in mind and cell phone in hand, Sarah dialed Alabama Power to report a disruption in service. A good butler memorized all such pertinent numbers, and Sarah was a very good butler.

Chapter 2

IT WAS AFTER TWO IN THE MORNING WHEN THE RADIO alerted him to the call on Briarwood. Thompson Cahill was on his way home, but the call sounded a lot more interesting than anything he had waiting for him there, so he turned his pickup truck around and headed back up Highway 280. The patrol officers hadn't called for an investigator, but what the hell, the call sounded like fun and he could use a little amusement in his life.
He left 280 and got on Cherokee Road; at this time of morning there wasn't any traffic to speak of as he snaked his way through the quiet streets, so in just a few minutes he was on Briarwood. The address wasn't hard to find: it was the house with all the vehicles with flashing lights parked in front of it. That's why he was an investigator; he could figure out things like that. Duh.
He clipped his badge to his belt and got his sport jacket from the hook behind the seat, slipping it on over his faded black T-shirt. There was a tie in the pocket of the jacket; he left it there, since he didn't have a dress shirt to pull on over the T-shirt. He'd have to go for the Miami Vice look this time.

The usual assortment of uniforms were milling around: cops, firemen, medics, ambulance attendants. The windows in all the neighboring houses were ablaze with lights, and occupied by onlookers, but only a few had been curious enough to leave their houses and gather in the street. After all, this was Briarwood Road, and Briarwood meant old money.
The shift supervisor, George Plenty, greeted him. 'What are you doing here, Doc?"
"Good morning to you, too. I was on my way home and heard the call. It sounded like fun, so here I am. What happened?"
George hid a grin. The general public had no idea how much fun police work was. Parts of it, the parts that could drive a cop to drink, were grim and dangerous, but a lot of it was just damn funny. Plain and simple, people were nuts.
"The two guys were smart; cut the power and phone lines, and disabled the alarm system. Seems they thought only one old man lived here, so they figured he'd never even wake up. Turns out, though, he has a butler. The smart guys were busy carrying out a big-screen television when she tripped the one in the lead. He fell, the television fell on him, and for good measure she sucker punched the other one in the head as he was going down and knocked him cold. Then she tied him up with telephone cord." George chuckled. "He's come around, but he still isn't making a lot of sense."
"'She'?" Cahill asked, not certain George had his pronouns straight.
"She."
"A female butler?"
"So they say."
Cahill snorted. "yeah, right." The old guy might have a woman living with him, but he doubted she was his butler.
"That's their story and they're sticking to it." George looked around. "Since you're here, why don't you give the guys a hand with the statements, get this thing wrapped up."
"Sure."
He ambled into the huge house. Battery-powered lights had been set up in the hallway ahead, the spill of light-and the congestion of people-leading him to the scene. Automatically he sniffed the air; it was habit, a cop checking for alcohol or weed. What was it about the houses of rich people? They smelled different, as if the wood that framed the walls was different from the ordinary wood used to build ordinary houses. He detected fresh

flowers, furniture polish, a faint, lingering odor of dinner-something Italian-but neither alcohol nor smoke of any kind, legal or illegal.
He reached the hallway and stood to the side for a minute, studying the scene. A team of medics was crouched around a guy on the floor; the carcass of a huge, broken television lay nearby. The guy on the floor was moaning and carrying on as they immobilized his left leg. Another man, a big dude, was sitting on the floor with his hands cuffed behind him. He was answering questions asked by a medic shining a light in his eyes, but it was evident the little birdies were still circling his head.
A tall, skinny old man with a shock of disordered white hair was standing to the left, out of the way, calmly giving a statement to an officer. He wore his dignity like a cloak, despite the fact that he was in a robe and pajamas, with slippers on his feet. He kept an eye on the proceedings even while he was answering questions, as if he wanted to make certain everything was handled correctly.
To the right was a flight of stairs, and on the fourth step from the bottom sat a woman in light cotton pajamas, talking on a cell phone. Her feet were bare and pressed closely together, perfectly aligned; her thick dark hair was tousled, as if she had just gotten out of bed. Well, she probably had. In another example of astute detective work, he deduced that she was the live-in, otherwise why would she be in pajamas? Damn, he was sharp tonight. Even in pajamas, no makeup, hair a mess, she was a good-looking woman. No, better than just good-looking. She was downright fine-from what he could see maybe an eight, and that was without makeup. Money might not buy happiness, but it sure did buy old geezers some prime pussy, assuming he could still do anything other than reminisce.
The familiar anger bit at Cahill; he had lived, slept, and eaten with that anger for over two years now, and he was well aware he wasn't being fair to this woman. Finding out his wife was a lying, cheating bitch, then being dragged through a long, bitter divorce was enough to sour any man. He pushed the anger aside, though, to concentrate on the job. That was one thing he'd managed to do: the job.
He approached one of the patrol officers-Wilkins, fairly young, fairly new, and damn good, but then he had to be good to land a job with the Mountain Brook P.D. Wilkins was standing guard over the burly guy with the handcuffs and the concussion, watching as the medic checked him.
"Need a hand taking statements?"

Wilkins looked around, a little surprised to see him. In that split second of inattention the guy on the floor lunged forward, knocking down the medic and surging to his feet with surprising agility. Wilkins whirled, quick as a cat, but Cahill was quicker. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the woman on the stairs kind of flow to her feet as he pivoted on the ball of his left foot and planted his size eleven right boot square in the guy's solar plexus. He put just enough power in it to double the big guy over, gagging and gasping for breath. Wilkins was on the perp before he could hit the floor, and two other officers came up to help. Seeing they had him controlled-after all, he couldn't breathe yet-Cahill stepped back and glanced at the medic, who was wiping a bloody nose as he climbed to his feet. "Guess he wasn't hurt as bad as he acted."

"Guess not." Taking a pad of gauze from his supplies, the medic held it over his nose, then caught a deep breath. "Do you think he might be now?"

"He's just winded. I didn't kick him that hard." A full-power kick to the chest could stop the heart, crush the sternum, do all sorts of internal damage. He'd been careful not to even crack the guy's ribs.

Wilkins stood up, panting. "Do you still want to do some paperwork, Cahill?"

Paperwork was the bane of a cop's life; it was a measure of how bored Cahill was that he said, "Sure."

Wilkins nodded to the woman, who had resumed her seat on the stairs and her conversation on the cell phone. "Take her statement while we get Rambo here into a unit."

"Be glad to," Cahill murmured, and he meant it. The way she had moved when the robber tried to get away had piqued his interest. She hadn't screamed, hadn't scrambled to get out of the way; instead she had moved smoothly, totally balanced, her attention focused on the robber. If he himself hadn't stopped the guy, Cahill thought, she would have-or at least tried-which brought up a lot of questions he wanted to ask.

He approached the stairs, the glare of the battery-operated lights behind him and the stark light full on her face. She continued talking on the cell phone, her expression calm and focused, though she held up one finger at his approach to tell him she'd be finished in a moment.

He was a cop; he wasn't used to people telling him to wait. Faint irritation flashed through him, then instantly morphed into amusement. God, maybe he was an arrogant shithead, as his ex-wife had been fond of telling him.

Besides, even if this woman was an old man's arm decoration, she was definitely easy on the eyes.
Because looking at her was so easy, he did, automatically cataloging the details: dark hair, not quite shoulder length, and dark eyes. If he were taking down a description of her, he'd have to say "brown" and "brown," but that didn't come close to the actual color. The lights glinted on her hair, making it look like dark, rich chocolate-and her eyes were darker.
He pegged her age at late twenties, early thirties. Height . . . fivefive, maybe five-six. He was tempted to give her another couple of inches but realized it was her almost military posture that gave the impression of her being taller than she actually was. Weight between one-twenty and one-thirty. Her skin was smooth and flawless, with a creamy texture that made him think of licking an ice-cream cone.
She ended the call and extended her hand to him. "Thank you for waiting. I had waded through the phone company's computerized multiple-choice menu and didn't want to start over. I'm Sarah Stevens."
"Detective Cahill." Her hand felt small and cool in his, but her grip was surprisingly strong. "Could you walk me through what happened here tonight?" Her accent wasn't southern; it wasn't anything that he could nail down. Yeah, that was it: it wasn't anything. She didn't have any kind of accent.
'I'd be glad to." She indicated the stairs. "Would you like to sit down?"
He sure would, but then he'd be rubbing shoulders with her, and that wasn't a good idea while he was on the job. His thoughts since first seeing her had been way out of line, and that wasn't good. His mental brakes went on, and he pulled back from the edge, forcing himself to concentrate on the job.
"No, thanks, I'11 stand." He took his notebook from the pocket of his jacket and flipped to an empty page. "How do you spell your name?"
"Sarah with an h, Stevens with a v."
"Are you the one who discovered the break-in?"
"Yes, I am."
"Do you know approximately what time it was?"
"No, my bedside clock is electric, but I estimate it has been about thirty minutes since I woke."
'What woke you? Did you hear a noise?"
"No. My quarters are over the garage; I can't hear anything from there. When they cut the power line, my ceiling fan stopped. That's what woke

me."
"Then what happened?"
Sarah related the course of events as concisely as possible, though she was acutely aware of her thin pajamas and bare feet. She wished she had taken the time to put on a robe and slippers, or pull a brush through her hair. Or maybe even do a full makeup job and slip into a negligee, spray herself with perfume, and hang an "I'm available" sign around her neck. Then she could take Detective Cahill to her quarters and sit on the side of the bed while she gave him her statement.
She smiled inwardly at her own silliness, but her heartbeat had started racing at the sight of him and was still tripping along at too fast a pace. Through whatever quirk of chemistry or biology, or maybe a combination of the two, she felt an instant physical attraction to him. It happened occasionally-this sudden little buzz that made her remember what made the world go 'round-though not for a while, and never before this strongly. She enjoyed the private thrill; it was like riding a roller coaster without having to leave the ground.
She glanced at his left hand. It was bare, though that didn't necessarily mean he was single, or uninvolved. Men who looked like he did were seldom totally unattached. Not that he was handsome; his face was kind of rough, his beard was about eight hours past being a five-o'clock shadow, and his dark hair was too short. But he was one of those men who somehow seemed more male than the other men around him, almost as if he had testosterone oozing from his pores, and women definitely noticed that. Plus his body looked totally ripped; the jacket he wore over his black T-shirt disguised that somewhat, but she had grown up around men who made it a point to be in top physical condition, and she knew the way they moved and carried themselves. Unfortunately, he also looked as if his face would break if he smiled. She could appreciate his body, but from what she could see, his personality sucked.
'What's your relationship with Judge Roberts?" he asked, his tone so neutral as to border on uninterested. He glanced up at her, his face delineated by harsh shadows that made it impossible to read his expression.
"He's my employer."
'What do you do?"
"I'm a butler."
"A butler." He said it as if he'd never before heard the word.

"I manage the household," she explained.
"And that involves . . . ?"
"A lot, such as overseeing the rest of the staff; scheduling repairs and services; some cooking; making certain his clothes are clean and his shoes shined, his car serviced and washed regularly, bills are paid, and in general that he isn't bothered by anything that he doesn't want to bother him."
"Other staff?"
"No one full-time. I count as staff the cleaning service, two women who come in twice a week; the gardener, who works three days a week; his office temp, who comes in once a week; and the cook-Monday through Friday, lunch and dinner."
"I see." He consulted his notes, as if rechecking a detail. "Does being a butler also require you to study martial arts?"
Ah. She wondered what had given her away. She had noticed, of course, that beautifully judged kick with which he had taken down the big burglar and known immediately that he did his own share of training.
"No," she said mildly.
"It's an interest you pursue on your own time?"
"Not exactly."
"Can you be more specific?"
"I'm also a trained bodyguard." She kept her voice soft, so it wouldn't carry. "The Judge doesn't like it broadcast, but he's received some death threats in the past and his family insisted he have someone trained in personal security."
He had been totally professional before, but now he looked at her with frank interest, and a little surprise. "Have any of those threats been recent?"
"No. I honestly don't think he's in active danger. I've been with him for almost three years, and in that time he hasn't received any new threats. But when he was on the bench, several people did threaten to kill him, and his daughter in particular was uneasy about his safety."
He glanced at his notes again. "So that wasn't exactly a lucky punch you threw, was it?"
She smiled faintly. "I hope not. Just as your kick wasn't just luck."
"What discipline do you practice?"
"Karate, mainly, to stay in shape."
"What degree?"
"Brown."

He gave a brief nod. "Anything else? You said 'mainly.' "

"I do kick-boxing, too. How does this pertain to the investigation?"

"It doesn't. I was just curious." He closed the little notebook. "And there isn't an investigation; I was getting a preliminary statement. It all goes in the report."

'Why isn't there an investigation?" she asked indignantly.

"They were caught in the act, with Judge Roberts's property loaded in their pickup. There's nothing to investigate. All that's left to do is the paperwork."

For him, maybe; she still had to deal with the insurance company and getting the sliding glass doors in the sunroom repaired, not to mention replacing the broken television. The Judge, typical man, had loved his big screen and had already mentioned that he was thinking about getting a high-definition television this time.

"Does the fact that I'm also the Judge's bodyguard have to go in the report?" she asked.

He had been about to move away; he paused, looking down at her. 'Why?"

She lowered her voice even more. "The Judge prefers his friends don't know. I think it embarrasses him that his kids nagged him into hiring a bodyquard. As it is, he's the envy of his crowd because he has a female butler; you can imagine the jokes they make. Plus, if there is any sort of threat to him, it gives me an edge if no one knows I'm trained to guard him."

He tapped the notebook against his palm, his expression still unreadable, but then he shrugged and said, "It isn't relevant to the case. As I said, I was just curious."

He might never smile, but she did; she gave him a big, relieved one. "Thank you."

He nodded and walked away, and Sarah sighed in regret. The packaging was fine, but the contents were blah.

The morning was beyond hectic. Getting any more sleep was impossible, of course, but getting anything accomplished was equally so. Without electricity she couldn't prepare the Judge's preferred breakfast, cinnamon French toast, or do laundry or even iron his morning newspaper so the ink didn't rub off on his fingers. She served him cold cereal, fat-free yogurt, and fresh fruit, which made him grumble about healthy food being the death of him. Nor was there hot coffee, which made them both very unhappy.

An enterprising idea sent her next door to the Cheatwoods' house, where she made a trade with the cook, Martha: the inside skinny on the night's happenings for a thermos of fresh coffee. Armed with caffeine, she returned home and calmed the troubled waters. After her own second cup, she was ready to tackle the day's problems again.

She didn't mind making a pest of herself, if she got the desired results. Two more phone calls to the power company produced a repair truck and a lanky man who without haste set to work. Half an hour later, the house hummed to life and he moseyed away.

Harassing the phone company was more trouble; they-the unknown "they" in charge-had so arranged things that either one could leave a voice mail message, forgoing the comfort of speaking to a real human in favor of saving time, or one could tolerate being put on hold for an obscene amount of time waiting for said real human to become available for haranguing. Sarah was stubborn; her cell phone weighed only a few ounces, and she had unlimited minutes. She waited; but eventually her persistence was rewarded, right before noon, by another repair truck bearing that most precious of human beings, Someone Who Could Fix Things.

Of course, as soon as the phone line was restored, the phone began ringing off the hook. All of the Judge's friends had heard about the night's adventure and they wanted a blow-by-blow description. Some busybody called the Judge's oldest son, Randall, who called his two siblings, Jon and Barbara. The Judge didn't mind so much his sons knowing, but he wrinkled his nose in dismay when the Caller ID flashed his daughter's number. Not only did Barbara worry excessively about her father, but she had by far the most forceful personality of his three children. In Sarah's opinion, Barbara was more forceful than an armored tank. For all that, Sarah really liked the woman; Barbara was good-hearted and good-tempered, just relentless.

The insurance agent arrived while the Judge was still talking to his daughter, so Sarah showed him the damage and was in the process of giving him the pertinent information for filing the claim-she even had the Judge's receipt for the purchase of the television, which impressed the hell out of the insurance agent-when Judge Roberts came wandering into Sarah's tiny office, looking pleased with himself.

"Guess who called," he said.

"Barbara," Sarah said.

"After that. The call beeped in, thank God, or I'd still be talking to her. Some television reporter wants to come out and do a feature on us."
"Us?" Sarah asked blankly.
"You, mostly."
She stared at him, startled. 'Why?"
"Because you foiled a robbery, you're a young woman, and you're a butler. He wants to know all about butlering. He said it would be a wonderful human-interest piece. Silly phrase, isn't it? 'Human interest.' As if monkeys or giraffes would be remotely interested."
"That's wonderful," said the insurance agent enthusiastically. 'Which station is it?"
The Judge pursed his lips. "I forget," he said after a moment. "Does it matter? But they'll be here tomorrow morning at eight."
Sarah hid her dismay. Her daily routine would be totally destroyed for the second day in a row. The Judge, however, was clearly excited about the prospect of his butler being interviewed. He and his friends were all retired, so they had no outlets for their natural competitiveness other than themselves. They played poker and chess, they swapped tall tales, and they tried to one-up each other. This would be a major coup for him. And even if it wasn't, she could scarcely refuse; as much as she adored him, she never forgot he was her employer.
"I'll be ready," she said, already mentally reshuffling her day so everything would be as perfect as she could make it.

Chapter 3

HE ALWAYS WATCHED ONE OF THE LOCAL STATIONS IN THE mornings, while he drank his hot tea and read the financial section of the Birmingham News. He liked to keep abreast of community happenings and politics so he could discuss them with his associates. He was actually very interested in what happened in and around Birmingham. This was his home; he had a vested interest in how the area fared.
Mountain Brook was faring very well, indeed. He took immense pride in the fact that the small town just south of Birmingham had one of the highest per capita income levels in the nation. Part of the reason for that was all the doctors who lived there and practiced in and around Birmingham, which

had morphed from a steel city into an important medical center, with a disproportionate number of hospitals for its population. People came from all over the country, indeed, from all over the world, to be treated in Birmingham hospitals.

But it wasn't just doctors who lived in Mountain Brook. Professional people of all trades made their homes here. There was old money and there was new money. There were small starter houses, for young couples who wanted to live in Mountain Brook for the prestige and also for the school system for their children. There were mansions, and there were massive estates that made visitors gawk as they drove past.

His own home was his pride and joy, a three-story beauty fashioned of gray stone, lovingly furnished and maintained. It was eighteen thousand square feet, with six bedrooms and eight and a half baths. The four fireplaces were real, the marble was Italian, the two-inch-thick Berber carpeting the best money could buy. The pool was landscaped so it resembled a lovely grotto, with subtle underwater lighting and silver water trickling over stones before gently falling into the pool.

Five acres of land surrounded his home; five acres was a lot in Mountain Brook, with its astronomical land values. His property was completely walled in by a ten-foot gray stone wall. Huge wrought-iron gates guarded the entrance to his domain, and he was protected by the best security system available: motion sensors, cameras, and heat detectors, as well as the standard contact and breaking-glass alarms.

If he wanted to greet the world, he went to it; the world was not allowed to come to him.

A lawn service tended the grounds, and a pool service kept the pool sparkling. He employed a cook who came in at three P.M. and prepared dinner for him, then promptly left. He preferred to be alone in the mornings, with his tea and newspaper, and an English muffin. Muffins were civilized food, unlike the messy bacon, eggs, and biscuits so many people here seemed to prefer. Pop a muffin into the toaster and there was no mess afterward to be cleaned up, nor anyone required to prepare it for him.

All in all, he was very pleased with his world. He always got an extra measure of satisfaction from the secret knowledge of how he had acquired all this. If he had simply let things run their course, none of this would belong to him; but he had been insightful enough to realize that, left unchecked, his father would have made bad decision after bad decision until

nothing of the business was left. He had had no choice but to intervene. His mother had grieved at first, but ultimately she had been better off; she had lived in cushioned comfort until heart disease ended her life seven years later.

It was extremely comforting to know that one could do what one must. The only limits he recognized were those he imposed on himself.

The television was background noise while he perused the newspaper. He had the ability to concentrate on several things at once; if anything interesting was reported, he would notice. Every morning the station did a fluff piece, which he usually ignored, but occasionally there was something marginally original on, so he was always aware of what was being said.

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have a butler?" droned the morning anchor's smooth voice. "you don't have to be royalty. In fact, there's a butler employed at a home in Mountain Brook, and the butler is . . . a woman. Meet Super Butler, coming up next, after these messages."

His attention caught, he looked up. A butler? Well, that was . . . interesting. He had never considered live-in staff because such intrusions into his privacy were intolerable, but the idea of a female butler was intriguing. People would be certain to be talking about this, so he needed to watch the segment.

The commercials over, the anchor began the lead-in, and the screen changed to a shot of a large, Tudor-style home with lush grounds and an elaborate flower garden. The next shot was of a dark-haired young woman, trim in black trousers, white shirt, and a close-fitting black vest, ironing a . . . newspaper? "Her name is Sarah Stevens," said the reporter, "and her day is not your average workday."

"The heat sets the ink, so it doesn't smudge your fingers or dirty your clothes," she explained in a brisk, low-pitched voice as she smoothed the iron over the paper, sparing a brief glance for the reporter.

He straightened as if stung, his gaze unblinking as he stared at the screen. Sarah. Her name was Sarah. It was as perfect as she was, classic instead of flashy or trendy.

Her eyes were very dark, her skin pale and smooth. Her sleek dark hair was pulled back from her face and secured in a neat roll at the back of her neck. Electrified, he couldn't take his eyes from the televised image. She was . . . perfect. He had seldom seen such perfection in his life, and when he did, he made it a point to acquire it. For all the darkness of her hair and eyes, she

wasn't Hispanic or any other ethnic group he could recognize. She was simply a little exotic; not flashy, not voluptuous, just . . . perfect.
His heart was beating fast, and he had to swallow the saliva that pooled in his mouth. She was so neat and trim, her movements brisk and economical. He doubted anything as inane as a giggle had ever passed her lips.
The next shot was of her employer, a tall, thin, elderly man with white hair, glasses, and a narrow, lively face dominated by a large hooked nose. "I couldn't function without her," he said cheerfully. "Sarah handles all the household details. No matter what happens, she has it under control."
"She certainly had things under control earlier this week when there was a break-in here at the home," the reporter continued. "By herself, Sarah thwarted the robbery by tripping one of the thieves as they carried out a big-screen television."
The shot returned to her. "The television was very heavy, and they were off-balance," she said with simple modesty.
Chills of excitement ran down his back as he watched and listened, waiting for her to speak again. He wanted to hear more of her voice. The next shot was of her opening the back door of an S-Class Mercedes for her elderly employer, then going around to slide under the steering wheel.
"She is also a trained driver," the reporter intoned, "and has taken several defensive-driving courses."
"She takes care of me," said the old man, smiling from ear to ear. "She even cooks occasionally."
Back to her. "My job is to make my employer's life as comfort able as possible," she explained. "If he wants his newspaper at a certain time, then I'll have it there for him even if I have to get up at three A.M. and drive somewhere to collect it."
He had never envied anyone before in his life, but he envied that old man. Why should he have someone like her looking after him? He would be better off with a live-in nurse named Bruce, or Helga. How could he possibly appreciate the treasure of her, the sheer perfection?
Back to the reporter. "Being a butler is a highly specialized vocation, and there are very few women who enter the field. Topflight butlers train at a school in England, and they don't come cheap. To Judge Lowell Roberts in Mountain Brook, though, price doesn't matter."
"She's a member of the family," said the old man, and the final shot was of Sarah setting down a silver tray loaded with a coffee service.

She should be here, he thought violently. She should be serving him.
He remembered the old man's name: Lowell Roberts. So price didn't matter? Well. They would see. He would have her, one way or another.
Judge Roberts slapped his knees with satisfaction. "That was a good piece, don't you think?"
"It was less painful that I feared," Sarah said dryly as she cleared away his breakfast things. "They certainly took a long time to film about sixty seconds worth of story."
"Oh, you know how television is: they shoot miles of film, then edit most of it. At least they didn't get any details wrong. When I was on the bench, whenever I gave a statement or an interview, there was always at least one detail that was reported wrong."
'Will this give you bragging rights at your poker game?"
He looked a little embarrassed, but gleeful all the same. "For at least a couple of weeks," he confessed.
She had to smile. "Then it was worth it."
He turned off the VCR, because of course he had taped the segment. "I'll get copies of this made for the kids," he said.
Sarah glanced up. "I can make copies, if you'd like. My VCR is a twin-head."
"Don't start speaking technical jargon to me," he warned, waving a hand as he ejected the cassette. "Twin-head sounds like something teams of surgeons would have to correct, and one head would die in the attempt. I think I have a blank in the library-"
"I have plenty of blanks." She always kept a supply, just in case he needed one.
He slipped the cassette into the cardboard jacket and carefully wrote, "Sarah's television interview," on the adhesive strip before handing the tape to her.
"I'll get them in the mail today. And don't forget your doctor's appointment at two this afternoon."
He briefly looked mutinous. "I don't see why I need a blood test again. I've been eating better, and my cholesterol should be down."
He had been eating better than he knew; when making his French toast, Sarah substituted Egg-beaters for the eggs in the egg-and-milk mixture, spiced up a little with vanilla flavoring, and she used low-fat, high-fiber bread. She also bought two types of syrup-one was regular, the other fat-

free-and mixed just enough of the regular syrup with the fat-free that the taste of the blend didn't make him suspicious. He had agreed to eat a bacon substitute if he could just have his French toast, and she also served him fresh fruit every morning. In collaboration with the cook, she had managed to drastically reduce the amount of fat in his meals without his suspecting a thing.

Of course, he would credit any drop in his cholesterol level to eating the bacon substitute instead of real bacon, and resist any other changes if he knew about them. Outsmarting him was a constant, ongoing struggle.

"Two o'clock," she said again. "And if you cancel the appointment, I'll tell Barbara."

He put his hands on his hips. "Do your parents know what a bully they raised?"

"Of course," she said smugly. "My dad gave me lessons in bullying. I rated expert."

"I knew I shouldn't have hired you," he muttered as he retreated to the safety of his library. "As soon as I saw on your application that you're from a military family, I knew you'd be trouble."

Actually, it was her military family that had tipped his decision in her favor. The Judge was a former Marine; he had fought in the Pacific during World War II. The fact that her father was a retired Marine colonel, forced to leave the service because a car accident had severely damaged his right hip and leg, had weighed heavily with him.

She sighed. While she was making copies of the tape, she would have to make one for her parents, too. They were living in a posh retirement village in Florida, and they would love being able to show this to all their friends. She had no doubt her sister and two brothers would receive copies from their mother; then she would get a phone call from at least one brother, probably both, telling her about this buddy who wanted to go out with her. The good part of that was that she was in Alabama, while one brother was currently in California and the other was TDY- temporary duty-in Texas. Dating anyone they knew was geographically impossible. But she was thirty years old, and they were all beginning to visibly worry because she hadn't yet shown any inclination to get married and help produce the next generation. Sarah shook her head, smiling to herself. She hoped she would get married, someday, but for now she was working on her Plan.

A butler was well paid; a good butler was very well paid. A butler-bodyguard earned well over a hundred thousand a year. Her own salary was pushing a hundred and thirty thousand. Her living expenses were negligible; she bought her SW and her clothes, but that was it. Every year she salted away the vast majority of her salary in stocks and bonds, and though the stock market was down right now, she sat tight on her investments. By the time she was ready to put her Plan into effect, the market would be back up.
She would never leave the Judge, but, realistically, she knew he would live only a few more years. All the signs were there: she could get his cholesterol level down, but he had already had one severe heart attack, and his cardiologist, an old friend, was concerned. He was more visibly frail than he had been even six months ago. Though his mind remained sharp, this winter had seen one illness after another, each one taking a toll on his body. He would have maybe two more good years, she thought as tears stung her eyes, unless he had another heart attack.
But after the Judge was gone, Sarah wanted to take a year and travel the world. As a military brat, moving every two years or so, she had developed a real yen to see everything that was out there. Not being a masochist, she wanted to do it in comfort. She wanted to fly first class and stay in good hotels. With a healthy bank account and her investments as a cushion, she could go where she wanted whenever the mood took her. If she wanted to spend a month in Tahiti, she could.
It was a simple ambition, a yearlong treat in the middle of a lifetime of work. She liked her career, she wanted to get married someday and have one child, maybe two, but first she wanted that year just for herself. Since college she had resisted forming any romantic relationships of any depth, because in the back of her mind she was always aware that no man would like his girlfriend, fiancee, or wife heading off to wander the earth for a year-without him.
Her father didn't understand it. Her brothers certainly didn't understand it, because they were constantly being posted TDY all over the world. Her sister thought she was crazy for not getting married while she was still young and had her looks. Only her mother, she thought, understood her youngest child's wanderlust.
But the timing of her Plan depended on Judge Roberts, because for as long as he was alive, she intended to take care of him.

Chapter 4

HER FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME OVER, All THE STATEMENTS made and papers signed, Sarah gladly returned to her normal routine. She enjoyed the daily challenges of being in charge of a large home. She didn't have a large staff to oversee, but the house itself was an entity, in constant need of replenishing and small repairs, and she had to be on her toes to spot small problems before they developed into something major.

By the middle of the week, the phone calls from all the Judge's neighbors, friends, and family had dwindled, which was good because Wednesday was her day off. Wednesday was usually the slowest day of the week, the day in which very little happened; on Monday and Tuesday she handled the things that had cropped up over the weekend, and on Thursday and Friday she did whatever was necessary for any weekend plans the Judge had. In addition to Wednesday, she had half a day off on either Saturday or Sunday, depending on the Judge's schedule. She made herself very flexible to adjust to his needs, but in turn he was always mindful of her time off.

On her own time she dated occasionally-very occasionally, since she didn't intend to let a relationship develop beyond the casual-she shopped and did "girl things," as her brothers had always termed it, and she trained.

She had installed a set of free weights in the basement and hung a punching bag, and she managed to work out for at least half an hour every day, plus do a half-hour run. Some days she was pushed to do that much, but if she had to get up earlier than usual to get it done, she did. She considered staying in top shape part of her job, but she also loved the way she felt, toned and springy and full of energy.

In addition to karate and kick-boxing, she also studied judo and archery, and spent an hour every week at a local shooting range. She was good, but she wanted to be better, even if she was in competition only with herself. Okay, she also wanted to be better than her brothers. Daniel and Noel were both ranked expert in marksmanship, as had been their father before them, so if she intended to handle a weapon, she felt honor-bound to uphold the family standards. Whenever the entire family got together, which was usually once a year-at Christmas-she and her father and brothers would find themselves on a shooting range taking some target practice. Whoever won got possession of the Susan B. Anthony dollar coin with the perfectly centered

bullet hole in it. Noel had threaded a gold chain through the hole, and if he or Daniel won the year's marksmanship challenge, they were actually crass enough to wear the coin around their necks when they were off duty, and flaunt it whenever possible. As Sarah had loftily informed them, she and her father both had more class than that.

She didn't wear it, but she had it. The coin and chain were in her jewelry box. To her brothers' consternation, she had won it the past two years in a row. Since Daniel was an Army Ranger and Noel was in the Marine Force Recon, they didn't take the competition lightly. Come to think of it, maybe they wouldn't call with a buddy who wanted to meet her after seeing the videotape; they wouldn't like any of their pals learning that their little sister was a better shot than they were.

Sarah was certain that information would somehow slip past her lips in conversation, and neither of her brothers would ever believe it was an accident. Darn.

So on Wednesday, after giving herself a pedicure that morning and painting her toenails a dark iridescent pink, she sallied forth for her usual hour of sparring at a private gym. The guys might not get a thrill getting kicked by a bare foot with iridescent pink toenails, but the sight definitely gave her morning a lift. One could simply kick ass, or one could kick ass with style; she always preferred style.

Afterward, freshly showered and invigorated, she treated herself to lunch at the Summit, did some shopping, then went to an outdoor range for target practice. Only civilians used it; cops had their own range. There was an indoor range, but if you practiced indoors all the time, when you were outside-as she was at Christmas during the matches with the men in her family-then the varying weather and light conditions could throw you.

The day was warm and springlike, though it was only mid-March. The trees were in bloom; the jonquils and forsythia had long since bloomed; lawns were turning green and growing. Here in the sunny south, winter was abbreviated, about half as long as the calendar said it should be. It could get cold, there could be snow and ice, but for the most part, winter only lightly touched the south, just enough for the deciduous trees to lose their leaves and the lawns to turn brown. After about six weeks of such nonsense-usually by the middle or end of January-the jonquils began pushing their green feelers above ground and the trees began to blush with swelling buds. The white Bradford pear trees were now in full bloom, sprinkling lawns and

patches of woodland with explosions of color. All in all, this wasn't a bad place to live. Sarah could remember some of her dad's postings where it seemed as if she hadn't taken a coat off for six months. That was an exaggeration, of course, but they had lived through some long, cold winters.
There was a light breeze when she arrived at the range, but the temperature was in the high seventies and the breeze felt good even though she was wearing sandals and a short-sleeved knit top. A cold front was supposed to drop the temperatures tomorrow and trigger a round of thunderstorms during the night in advance of it, but for now the weather was perfect.
She paid her fee and selected her target, then slipped on her ear protectors and went to her bench. The range had been dug out of a slope; any bullets that missed their mark buried themselves in a twenty-foot high clay bank. Bales of hay had been stacked around as a further precaution against any stray shot, though since she had been coming there, she hadn't seen any accidents; people who practiced their marksmanship were generally serious about safety and what they were doing.
She was on her fourth target when someone walked up behind her and stood just behind her shoulder. Intent on what she was doing, she finished, ejected the empty clip, and triggered the target return before turning to her visitor.
A little shock hit her in the center of her chest as she recognized him. She removed her ear protectors. "Detective," she said, then for the life of her couldn't remember his last name. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name."
"Cahill."
"That's right. I'm sorry," she said again, and didn't offer an excuse about being distracted that night. She had been-by him more than the night's events and all the phone calls she had been making-but she certainly wasn't going to tell him that.
He was dressed pretty much as he had been then, minus the jacket but in boots and jeans and a T-shirt; today's choice was blue. The clingy knit of the T-shirt clung to broad shoulders, thick biceps, and the hard slabs of his pectorals. She hadn't been wrong in her assessment: the man was ripped, without in any way being muscle-bound.
She was going to have a difficult time looking him in the eye, because her own gaze didn't want to go that far north. From the neck down, he was the definition of eye candy.

The target, on the automatic line, had reached them. He reached out and pulled it from the clip, studied the pattern. "I've been watching you since you got here. You're pretty good."
"Thanks." She began reloading. 'What are you doing here? Cops usually use their own range."
"I'm here with a friend. Today's an off day, so I'm just bumming around."
Oh, dear. She didn't want to know that his day off coincided with hers. He seemed a tad friendlier today, though she had yet to see his face relax into anything close to a smile. She glanced at him in quick assessment. Seen in daylight, his face still looked rough, as if he had been hewn with a chain saw instead of the precision chisel of a sculptor. At least he was freshly shaved, but that more clearly revealed the granite lines of chin and jaw. He definitely wasn't a pretty boy. In fact, there wasn't anything the least boyish about him, pretty or otherwise.
"Are you off every Wednesday?" Damn, she wished she hadn't asked that. She didn't need to know.
"No, I swapped with another investigator. He had something special going on."
Thank you, Lord, she thought. She had never yet called a man for a date, but in his case she might give in to temptation and do it, even though he seemed to have the personality of a rock. She knew she wouldn't like it if a man dated her only for her body, so she didn't intend to let herself be guilty of the same offense.
"You could have shot them."
The growled statement was accompanied by a sudden direct look, and she almost blinked in shock. His eyes were blue, and the expression in them was hard and sharp. Cop's eyes, eyes that missed nothing. He was watching her, studying her reaction. She was so bemused that it took her a minute to realize he was talking about the robbers.
"I could have," she agreed.
'Why didn't you?"
"I didn't think the situation called for lethal force."
"They were both armed with knives."
"I didn't know that, and even if I had, they hadn't threatened the Judge or me; they hadn't even gone upstairs. If the situation had developed into one where I thought our lives were in danger, I would have shot." She paused.

"By the way, thank you for not putting anything in the report about my training."
"It wasn't relevant. And I didn't do the report; it wasn't my case."
"Thank you anyway." The reports were a matter of public record; the television reporter would have picked up in a heartbeat on the bodyguard aspect of her employment. But no questions of that type had been asked during the interview, and she and Judge Roberts certainly hadn't brought it up. Being his butler was high-profile enough without the general public knowing she was also a bodyguard. Not only would that knowledge take away her edge, but it would likely attract some of the very attention they both wanted to avoid.
"Your speech," he said, that hard gaze still locked on her face. "Law-enforcement background?"
Was following his conversation always like following a jackrabbit? Still, she knew exactly what he meant. Cops spoke a special language, with certain terms and phrasing, that was similar to the military's. Having grown up a military brat, she still thought of everyone else as civilians, and when she was with them, she automatically adjusted her phrasing to a more informal level. With Detective Cahill, however, she had just as automatically fallen into the old patterns.
She shook her head. "Military."
"You were military?"
"No, my father was. And both my brothers are in service. So if I say anything like 'target acquired,' I picked it up from them."
"What branch?"
"Dad was a Marine, Noel is a Marine, Daniel is Army."
He gave a brief nod. "I was Army."
Not "in the Army," but "was Army." That tiny difference in phrasing seemed to cover a huge difference in attitude. Some guys went in because they wanted the educational opportunity; they did their tours, then they got out. The ones who simply said they were Army were the dedicated ones, the lifers. Detective Cahill was too young though, to have put in his twenty in the military, then attended a law-enforcement academy and worked his way up the ranks to detective.
"How long were you in?"
"Eight years. "

She digested that as she placed another target in the clip and sent it on its way. Eight years. Why had he left the service? She knew he had not been booted out, because he wouldn't be on the Mountain Brook force if he had a dishonorable discharge. Could he have received some injury, as her dad had, that made it too difficult to continue? She glanced at him, at that hard, fit body. Nope, she doubted that was the answer.

She didn't know him well enough to ask, nor was she certain she wanted to get to know him that well. No, she was lying to herself; she definitely wanted to get to know him better, find out if there was any humor at all behind that sourpuss face and cop's eyes; but in this case, she would be better off not knowing. Something about him-and not just his body, though that was mouthwatering-elicited too strong a response from her. It was those darn chemicals, or hormones, or something, but she knew this man could get to her. He could suck her into a relationship, against her better judgment, that would interfere with both her job and her plans.

That said, maybe she was a fool not to go after him. Maybe, sour disposition and all, he was a man she could love. Should she stick to her Plan, or go for the hunk?

Decisions, decisions.

She smothered a private laugh. Here she was going through all these mental gymnastics, and for all she knew, he didn't feel the tiniest scintilla of attraction for her. For all she knew, he was married with five kids.

Just leave it alone, she advised herself. If he was single, and if he was interested enough to make a move, then she would decide what to do.

At peace with that, she slipped her ear protectors into place, and he did the same. Taking the pistol in her left hand, she wrapped her right hand around her wrist to brace it, and calmly, methodically emptied the clip at the target. She was accustomed to a critical audience-namely her father and brothers-so Cahill's presence didn't bother her.

He removed the protectors again as the automatic return sailed the target toward them. "You shot left-handed that time."

God, he noticed everything. "I practice left-handed at least half the time."

"Why?"

"Because I take my job seriously. In a crisis, if my right hand is injured, I should still be able to protect my charge."

He waited until the target reached them, and studied the pattern. She was almost as good with her left hand as she was her right. "You train hard for a

threat that you don't really think will materialize."
She shrugged. "I'm not paid to play the percentages; I'm paid to be ready. Period."
"Hey, Doc!"
He shifted his gaze down the line of shooters and lifted a hand in acknowledgment. "I think my buddy's ready to leave."
"'Doc?'" She was startled by the nickname.
"Long story." And one he didn't seem inclined to relate. "Miss Stevens." He nodded at her in good-bye and walked away before she could reply. He joined a husky guy in jeans, T-shirt, and baseball cap, who showed him a sheaf of paper targets, shaking his head in evident disgust. Detective Cahill examined the pistol, deftly reloaded it, then walked to the line and clipped on a new target.
Sarah didn't let herself watch. She had her own practicing to accomplish, so she burned three more clips left-handed, at different distances, before calling it a day. When she looked around, Detective Cahill and his buddy were gone.

Chapter 5

HAVING ESTABLISHED THAT RICK'S NEW PISTOL WAS INDEED a piece of shit, Cahill and his pal went to the gun shop where Rick had bought the pistol. Rick harangued the owner for almost an hour with no results: he had bought the pistol, it was registered in his name, the paperwork had been sent in the day he bought it, so his only recourse was with the manufacturer unless he wanted to resell the pistol to some other unsuspecting fool.
They repaired to a bar and grill for an early supper and some liquid comfort.
"Order me a beer, will you?" Rick said, and took off for the bathroom.
Cahill slid onto a barstool and placed the orders. He was already sipping his coffee when Rick returned.
"That was a sharp-looking woman you were talking to at the range. " Rick plopped onto the barstool beside him. "You banging her?"
Cahill slowly turned his head and regarded his friend as coolly as if he had never before seen him. 'Who the hell are you, and why the fuck would I care?"

Rick grinned in appreciation. "That was good. Very good. You almost scared me. Mind if I use it sometimes?"
"Feel free."
"So, are you banging her or not?"
"Not."
'Why not? She married or something?"
"Not that I know of."
"Then I repeat: Why not?"
"I haven't tried."
Rick shook his head and reached for his beer. "You gotta get over this, son. So you had a rough divorce; it's over. You're free now and you have to move on to the next flower."
Since Rick was a veteran of two divorces and was now looking for wife number three, Cahill sort of doubted the worth of any advice he gave concerning women. Rick was good at attracting them, but not at keeping them. But because he was also a good friend, Cahill didn't point out any of that. "Give me time," he said mildly.
"Hell, it's been a year!"
"So maybe I need a year and a half. Besides, I date."
Rick snorted. "Yeah, and they go nowhere."
"I don't want them to go anywhere. I just want sex." He stared morosely into his coffee. He definitely wanted sex, but getting it was a problem. The women who offered one-night, no-strings sex weren't the type of women he wanted. Sleaze had never appealed to him. The women who really attracted him were long-term types, and long term was exactly what he didn't need right now.
It wasn't that he hadn't gotten over Shannon; he'd gotten over her the minute he found out she was screwing a doctor from the hospital where she worked. But the divorce had been a bitch, with her fighting for everything she could get, as if she had to punish him for daring to not want her any longer. He didn't understand women, or at least he didn't understand women like Shannon; if she hadn't wanted out, then why screw around? Had she really thought he wouldn't kick her ass out if he found out? He did, he had, and she had reacted with an almost insane sense of vengeance.
He had tried to be fair. That said, he wasn't dumb; the first thing he'd done after finding out about her affair was take out half the money in their joint bank account and open an account in another bank under his name only. He

had also removed her name from all his credit card accounts, which wasn't a hardship on her because she had her own credit cards, but damn if she hadn't gone ballistic when she found out. He figured she'd found out when she tried to charge something on one of his cards- after he kicked her out-so he'd made the right call on that.

He'd beat her to the punch in filing for divorce, but she had counterfiled and asked for everything: house, car, furniture, for him to pay all the bills for said house, car, and furniture, even though she made more at her job in hospital administration than he did as a cop, and she wanted alimony.

The attorney Shannon hired was a divorce shark known for his scorched-earth tactics. The only thing that had saved Cahill's ass was a sharp attorney and an even sharper female judge who had seen through Shannon like glass. He had thought he was sunk when he heard the judge was a woman, but his attorney had smiled and said, "This is going to be fun."

Cahill wouldn't classify divorce proceedings as fun, but in his case the results had been a relief. Since no children were involved, the judge had divided everything in direct proportion to their incomes. Neither of them wanted the house, so she ruled it would be sold, the mortgage paid off, and the profits, if any, split between them. Since Shannon made twice what he did, he would get twice as much of the profit as she because she was better able to afford another house. Cahill had glanced at Shannon when that decree came down, and saw her flush with rage and disbelief. Whatever she had expected, that wasn't it. She had begun whispering furiously to her lawyer, causing the judge to bang her gavel and order her to shut up.

Shannon got her car, Cahill got his truck, and they split the household furnishings. He didn't want the bed, because he suspected her doctor had been in it with her. But when he bought another house and moved into it, at least he'd had chairs to sit in, a table to eat at and dishes to use, a television to watch, and a brand new bed to sleep in. After the money from the sale of the house came in, he had systematically gotten rid of everything he and Shannon had owned together. Not a single glass remained from his marriage, not a fork or a towel.

He just wished he could get rid of the bad taste in his mouth as easily as he had gotten rid of their possessions.

The worst aftereffect was that Shannon had made him doubt his own judgment. He had loved her and expected to spend the rest of his life with her. They'd had it all mapped out: though he had a good job with the

Mountain Brook Police Department- Mountain Brook officers were the highest paid in the state-after she had received her degree in hospital administration and landed a position with a hefty salary, which she had done with astonishing speed, the plan was for him to quit the force and enter medical school. Looking back, he wondered if Shannon just had a thing for doctors. He had received some medical training in the Army and loved the challenge of it, but after a couple of years on the job in Mountain Brook, he had realized he loved being a cop more than he would ever enjoy being a doctor.

Maybe that was when Shannon had started wandering, when he changed ambitions. Maybe she'd had her heart set on big bucks and glittering social events, and when he didn't come through with either one, she felt free to look for them elsewhere. But he'd thought she loved him, regardless of which object he held in his hand, a scalpel or a gun. Why hadn't he seen that something was missing? And what if he made that kind of mistake again? He had a knack for sizing up suspects immediately, but when it came to figuring out his own wife, forget it. Now he couldn't trust himself not to pick someone else just like Shannon, and be just as blind to it until he was smacked in the face with infidelity.

"You're brooding again," Rick said.

"I'm good at it," Cahill muttered.

"Well, practice does make perfect. Hell, no wonder; you didn't even order yourself a beer. I'd be brooding, too, if I had to stick to coffee. "

"I'll have a beer when we eat. I'm driving, remember?"

"Speaking of eating, I'm hungry." Rick looked around and spotted an empty booth. "Let's move over there and get some food." He grabbed his beer and slid from the barstool. Cahill got his coffee, signaled to the bartender where they were going, and joined Rick in the booth.

'Where did you meet her?" Rick asked.

'Who?"

"~7io?" he mimicked. "The woman at the range. The one with the pistol and the great ass, which, by the way, nearly stopped my heart the way it was packed in those jeans."

"The house where she works was robbed last week. I took her statement. "

"You just met her last week? There's still hope, then. You gonna ask her out?"

"Nope."

'Why the hell not?" Rick demanded, his voice rising. The waitress approached, and he broke off to grab the menu and open it. Cahill ordered a burger, fries, and a beer. After careful deliberation, Rick ordered the same thing. As soon as the waitress left, he leaned over and repeated, 'Why the hell not?"
"God, you're like a broken record," Cahill said irritably.
"Don't you think she's hot?"
He sighed. "Yeah, I think she's hot." In fact, he thought she was hotter than hot; she was scorching. The problem was, he'd already suffered third-degree burns in the relationship wars, and he didn't have any skin to spare in another losing round. Not yet, anyway. He knew that, being human, he would eventually grow enough new skin to risk another flame, but not yet.
'1hen ask her out! All she can say is no."
"She's not a one-nighter."
"So go for two."
"One night is no-strings-attached. Two is a relationship, and that's exactly what I don't want."
"Maybe not, but it's exactly what you need. When you fall off a horse, you get right back on, you don't brood about it. Get on that horse, pal, and ride."
Cahill groaned. "Give it a rest."
"Okay, okay." Rick drew lines in the condensation on his glass, then glanced up at Cahill. "You mind if I ask her out?"
He wanted to bang his head on the table. "Hell, no, I don't mind." He suspected this was where Rick had been heading all along, trying to make certain the way was clear.
"Okay. I just wanted to be sure. What's her name?"
"Sarah Stevens."
"Is she in the book? You have her number?"
"I don't know, and no."
"You didn't get her number? I thought you had to have that for your files, or something."
"She has private quarters in the house where she works. I don't know if she has a private number as well, but she probably does."
"She works in the house? Whose house? Where? What does she do?"
Sometimes talking with Rick was like conversing with a machine gun, the way he spat out questions. "She's a butler, and she works for a retired federal judge."

"I thought you said her name is 'Stevens,' not 'Butler.' "
"Rick. Pay attention. She's a buterler; like in an English mansion. With a napkin folded over her arm, and things like that."
"No shit." Rick sat back, amazed. "I didn't know we had butlers in Alabama. Oh, wait, we're talking about Mountain Brook."
"Right."
"A butler: Is that cool, or what? I didn't know women could be butlers. Wouldn't she be, like, a butleress?"
Despite himself, Cahill grinned. "I don't think so. I don't think butler has a gender, kind of like pilot."
Rick's jackrabbit brain had already moved on. "So I could call her at this old judge's number. What's his name?"
"Lowell Roberts."
"Is his number listed?"
"I don't know, and if it isn't, no, I won't get it out of the files for you."
"Some friend you are. Why the hell not?"
"Because if it's unlisted, then it's because he wants his privacy, and I won't get her in trouble by giving the number to men who call her asking for dates."
"Aha!"
"Aha, what?"
"You are interested in her!"
Cahill stared at him. "Your brain scans," he said, "must be scary." The waitress slid the beers in front of them and he took a fortifying gulp.
"That's what makes me so good with computers, pal; I think outside the box."
"In this case, there's no box."
"The hell there isn't. You think she's hot, and you won't give me her number. The evidence is in, and the prosecution rests."
"You're not harassing me into getting that number for you. Hell, for all I know, it's in the book. You haven't even looked yet."
'What good is having a friend who's a cop if he won't give me inside information?"
"So you can ask him to look at a piece of shit pistol after you've already bought it, and pronounce it a piece of shit."
Rick's quick grin flashed. 'Well, there is that, but don't get me sidetracked. I'm on a roll here. You're attracted to this woman. You went over to talk to

her, even though, in your own words, you know she isn't a one-nighter. My friend, you may not realize it yet, but you're on the road to recovery. Before you know it, you'll be smiling at her across the breakfast table."
"I don't smile," Cahill said, though he was having to fight his amusement.
"So you'll be scowling at her across the breakfast table. That isn't my point."
Cahill gave up on convincing Rick of anything. "Okay, you're right; she's so hot I could walk on three legs every time I see her."
"Now you're talkin'."
"I'll break your back and chop off your legs if you call her."
"That's my boy!"
"Now, what's taking so long on those burgers?" He looked around and, right on cue, there came the waitress carrying two plates almost smothered with spicy fries.
Rick stared at him, then mournfully shook his head. '1lou're hopeless, Doc. Hopeless."
"So I've heard."
Sarah arrived back at the house feeling both tired and jazzed after a hard workout with her karate instructor. Judge Roberts was having dinner out, as he usually did on Wednesday so she wouldn't feel any need to check on him, as she would if he was anywhere in the house. She did a quick tour of the house to check that all the windows were closed and the doors locked, then headed upstairs to her quarters.
The Judge had put her mail on the small table beside the door to the stairs. She leafed through it as she climbed the stairs: a Consumer Reports magazine, a couple of catalogs, and a letter.
She placed the mail on her small two-person kitchen table, put a cup of water in the microwave, then went to the bedroom and stripped off her clothes. She had showered after her workout, but her clothes still felt sticky; she sighed in relief as the ceiling fan sent cool air washing over her naked skin. She'd had two hard workouts today, and tonight she was going to pamper herself. A facial was on her agenda, as was a long, relaxing soak in lavender-scented water.
She turned on the water to fill the tub, dumped in a pack of bath salts, then pulled on a robe and returned to the kitchen to dunk a tea bag of Salada green tea in the cup of hot water. While it was steeping, she flipped through the mail-order catalogs, then dumped them in the trash. The first sip of tea was heavenly; sighing, she sat down and opened the letter.

Dear Miss Stevens:
I would like to offer you a position in my household, in the same capacity you now fill. My estate is large and would benefit from your competent management, but I believe the benefit would be mutual. Whatever your salary is now, I will increase it by ten thousand dollars. Please call me with your decision.
Hmm, that was interesting. She wasn't tempted, but it was interesting all the same. She checked the return address; it was a street in Mountain Brook. Judging from the date at the top of the letter, he must have sent it right after seeing the television spot.
Somehow she hadn't expected other offers of employment. It was flattering, but she had no intention of leaving the Judge, no matter how much money was offered.
The offer deserved immediate attention, though, so she picked up the phone and dialed the number on the letter. After two rings an answering machine picked up and a soft masculine recorded voice said, "You've reached 6785. Please leave a message."
Sarah hesitated. She didn't like leaving a message, but people who had answering machines usually intended them to be used. "This is Sarah Stevens. Thank you for your offer of employment, but I'm very happy in my present position and I don't foresee myself leaving. Again, thank you."
She disconnected and picked up her cup of tea, then remembered her bathwater. She hurried to the bathroom to find the water level high and steaming: just right. After turning off the taps, she turned on her Bose CD player, dropped the robe to the floor, and stepped into the water, sighing as she sank down in it to the level of her chin. The hot water went to work on her tired muscles; she could almost feel the tension oozing out of them. The soft strains of the meditation CD filled the bathroom with the sound of slow, relaxing piano and strings. After another sip of tea, she leaned back and closed her eyes, happy and content.
"This is Sarah Stevens. " He stopped the recording, hit replay, and listened again.
"This is Sarah Stevens."
Her voice sounded just as it had on television, low and warm. He had been standing beside the answering machine, listening, while she left the message.
"This is Sarah Stevens."

He couldn't believe she had turned down his offer. Ten thousand dollars! But that proved her loyalty, and loyalty was a precious commodity. She would be just as loyal to him, once he had her in his house.

"This is Sarah Stevens."

He had a talent for changing people's minds, arranging things to his own satisfaction. So she didn't foresee leaving her current position? He'd see about that.

Chapter 6

AS SHE SERVED HIS BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING, SARAH told the Judge, "I got a letter yesterday offering me a job. He must have seen the television spot."

For some reason, Judge Roberts was regarding his French toast with definite suspicion. He had put on his glasses and leaned down to peer closely at it. 'What are these red specks?" he demanded.

"Cinnamon. That's how you get cinnamon French toast."

"Humph. The doctor says my cholesterol is down twenty points. Switching to fake bacon wouldn't have brought it down that much, so I know you're doing something to my food."

"What can you do to French toast?" she asked rhetorically.

"Maybe it isn't the French toast. Maybe you're doctoring everything else."

She smiled as she placed a bowl of fresh sliced strawberries in front of him.

"I'm not doing anything different," she cheerfully lied.

"Humph," he said again. "Does this scum-sucking bottom-feeder who's trying to hire you away from me know he'd be bringing a tyrant into his home?"

She stifled a laugh. "Scum-sucking bottom-feeder?" He was so old-school she wouldn't have been surprised if he had described someone as "dastardly." Hearing slang from him was almost on a par with the idea of the Supreme Court justices doing a rap song on the steps of the Capitol.

"Grandkids."

"Ah." Barbara's two children were fifteen and nineteen; that explained everything. Sarah amused herself for a moment picturing fifteen-year-old Blair, with her pierced eyebrow, teaching the dignified old judge the top-ten teenage insults.

"Next thing I know, you'll be feeding me tofu," he grumbled, returning to his suspicions about his food. He began eating his French toast, red specks and all.

Since the cook had been feeding him skillfully disguised tofu for several months now, Sarah had to hide a grin.

"What exactly is tofu?"

"Curds and whey, minus the whey. Soy curds, to be specific."

"That sounds revolting." He studied his fake bacon. "My bacon isn't made from tofu, is it?"

"I don't think so. I think it's just fake meat."
'Well, that's all right, then."
She would have kissed him on top of his white head if that hadn't been totally against all her training. He was such a dear, dutifully eating his fake meat while keeping a sharp eye out for encroaching tofu.
'What did you tell the bottom-feeder?"
"I thanked him for his offer, but told him I'm very happy in my present position."
His bright eyes twinkled through the lenses of his glasses. "You said he saw you on television?"
"He must have, unless one of your friends told him my name."
"It wasn't one of them, was it?" he asked suspiciously.
"No, I didn't recognize the name."
"Maybe he's a handsome young man who fell in love as soon as he saw you."
She barely restrained a snort of disbelief. "People who make job offers to someone without knowing her qualifications or getting references are idiots."
"Don't hold back, Sarah; tell me how you really feel."
This time she did laugh, because that line had to have come from Blair, too.
"You should at least interview," he surprised her by saying.
She stopped in her tracks and stared at him. 'Why?"
"Because I'm old and won't be here many more years. This might be a good opportunity for you, and he might offer a higher salary."
"He did, but that doesn't matter. Unless you fire me, I intend to be here as long as you are."
"But more money would help you with your Plan." She had told him of her intentions to take a sabbatical and travel the world, and he had been enthused by the idea, studying the world atlas and researching different countries for things he thought would interest her.
"My Plan is in good shape, and people are more important than plans, anyway."
"Pardon an old man for getting personal, but you're a lovely young woman. What about marriage, a family?"
"I hope to have those, too, just not yet. And if I never get married, I still enjoy my life and I'm pleased with my career choice. I'm happy with myself, which isn't a bad thing."

"No, it isn't. In fact, it's a rare gift." His smile was gentle as he studied her. 'When you do get married-and notice I say when, not if, because one day you'll meet a man who's too smart to let you get away-he should get down on his knees every day and thank God for his good luck."
She wanted to hug him. Instead she smiled and said, "That's a lovely compliment. Thank you. Do you suppose he'd still feel that way if I fed him tofu?"
"He'll know you're doing it for his own good." Despite that gallant reply, he eyed his empty plate again.
"I promise: no tofu in your French toast."
He sighed in relief and began eating his bowl of strawberries, without pressing for a more extensive promise. He was sharp enough that the omission told her he suspected he had already been tofu-contaminated, and was submitting with good grace so long as his beloved French toast was safe.
After lunch she received the half-expected call from one of her brothers. It was Daniel, calling from Texas. "Hey, sweetie. That was a nice piece of tape; showed you to advantage. None of the guys can believe you're my sister, and they all want me to fix them up with you."
"Fat chance," she said, smiling.
"Why not? Some of them, I admit, I wouldn't set up with a two-bit hooker, but a couple are okay guys."
"Have I mentioned how proud I am of my Susan B. Anthony medallion?" she asked sweetly.
"You wouldn't."
"I believe the subject crops up every time I have a date."
"Moving right along here," he said hastily. "In her note with the tape Mom said you stopped a burglary with a fancy punch."
"It wasn't fancy. Straight to the temple."
"Ouch. Way to go, short stuff."
"Thank you." From an Army Ranger, that was high praise. "I was expecting either you or Noel to call, maybe both, when you saw the tape."
"Noel probably hasn't seen it yet. He isn't in-country."
That was enough said. She had grown up in a military family, and she knew what it meant. Noel was Force Recon; he had been in Afghanistan, then back in California, and only God and the Pentagon knew where he was

now. Well, Daniel probably knew; he and Noel had their ways of communicating.
'What about you?" she asked.
"I'm still in Texas."
"I know that." She rolled her eyes, exasperated, and knew he'd heard that tone of voice from her often enough to visualize the eye roll.
"I'll be here until the cows come home. I'm getting rusty from lack of use."
When the cows come home was family code for shipping out that day, since the cows came home every afternoon. She didn't bother asking where he was going, not that he would tell her anyway.
"Have you talked to Mom and Dad?"
"Last night. They're doing fine."
Meaning he had also told them he was shipping out. She sighed, rubbing her forehead. Worry had become a permanent fixture in all military families since September 11, but Daniel and Noel were both lifers, and both good at their jobs. Fighting terrorists wasn't like fighting a regular war, with ground lost and gained by foot soldiers. This particular war required the stealth and skill of the special forces, hitting with quick, devastating force and then vanishing.
"Take care, and don't trip over your own big feet. " That was sister code for I love you, and be careful.
"You too, Annie."
Despite her worry, as she hung up she smiled at his reference to her shooting skills. They had mercilessly called her Annie Oakley since the first time she won the competition. She couldn't have had two better brothers, even though when they were growing up, both of them had driven her nuts. She had been the tomboy of the family-their sister, Jennifer, had looked on roughhousing with disdain-and even though Sarah had been much smaller, that hadn't stopped her from inserting herself into their football games, sneaking along on their fishing trips, or wading in with her little fists whenever they tried to bully and tease her. In short, she had been a pest, and they loved her anyway.
She heard the little chime that signaled a door had opened, and glanced at the clock: straight up two o'clock. Right on schedule, the Judge was going out for his afternoon walk. On the way back he would stop at the mailbox and collect the mail; then he would want fresh coffee while he sat in his library and went through the day's haul. He loved mail, even junk mail, and

leafed through all the catalogs. Retirement was good for one thing, he said: it gave him time to read things that weren't important.
She put on the coffee and readied the tray. The cook, Leona Barksdale, looked up from the tomato aspic she was making. "Is it that time?"
"On the button." She paused. "He asked about tofu today."
"Then he'll be looking for it, won't he? I'll be creative today, and not serve any. Let's see, dinner will be grilled asparagus, roasted baby potatoes and carrots, and a lamb chop. Nothing there even remotely resembling tofu."
Leona checked on the rolls she had baking in the oven. "How was his cholesterol?"
"Down twenty points."
They gave each other satisfied smiles. Working in collusion to sneak healthy meals into someone who resisted the very idea was a lot more fun than feeding such food to someone who actually wanted to eat healthfully.
When she heard the door chime signaling his return, Sarah poured the coffee and filled a small four-cup carafe so he could refill his cup if he liked. Also on the tray was a plate with thin slices of Granny Smith apples, a wonderful fat-free caramel dip, and a few whole-wheat crackers, just in case he was feeling peckish. Before Sarah's arrival, his afternoon snack had often been a chocolate snack cake or a couple of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Getting him to give up the doughnuts had been a battle, and that was one in which she sympathized with him. Giving up Krispy Kreme was truly a hardship.
"Sarah?"
Instead of going into his library, he was coming toward the kitchen. She and Leona exchanged puzzled looks; then she said, "Here, sir," and stepped to the door.
Besides his usual bundle of magazines, catalogs, bills, and letters, he carried a small package. "This came for you."
He usually put her mail, if she had any, on the small table in the hall. "That's odd," she said, picking up the tray. "I haven't ordered anything."
'1here's no return address. I don't like this. It could be a letter bomb."
Several years ago, a judge in the Birmingham area had been killed by a letter bomb; that would make any judge cautious around suspicious packages; the anthrax-laced letters in Florida and then New York and Washington areas hadn't helped.

"Why would anyone send me a letter bomb?" she asked as she carried the tray down the hall, him trailing behind her with his mail and the package.
She set the coffee service on his desk where he liked it, but instead of sitting down, he put his own mail on the desk and stood holding the package, staring dubiously at it. Normally she would never open her mail until she was in her quarters for the night, but she sensed he wouldn't relax until he knew the package didn't contain anything lethal.
"Shall we see?" she asked, reaching for it.
To her surprise, he didn't hand the package to her. "Maybe we should call the bomb squad."
She didn't laugh. If he was that worried, then it wasn't a laughing matter. "If it was a bomb, wouldn't it have gone off when you picked it up?"
"No, because if it was motion sensitive, it would never make it through the mail system. Mail bombs use pressure or friction devices."
"Then let's think this through. Who knows me and would send something to me here?"
'We never should have done that television spot," he said, shaking his head. "It's brought the crazies out."
"First someone trying to hire me, and now someone sending me packages. Should we put it in water?"
Maybe it was that question, and a vision of them dunking the package in the tub and calling out the bomb squad, but he suddenly relaxed and smiled a little. "I'm being paranoid, aren't I? If anyone got a mail bomb, it would be me."
"It pays to be careful these days."
He sighed. "May I open it for you?"
She bit her lip. It was her duty to protect him, not the other way around. But he was of the generation that had been taught men protected women, and she could see this was important to him.
"Please," he said.
She nodded, moved more than she could say. "Yes, of course."
He stepped away from her, took a letter opener, and carefully slit the packing tape that sealed the seams of the small box. She found herself holding her breath as he opened the flaps, but nothing happened.
There was some brown wrapping paper concealing the contents. He pulled out the paper and looked inside, a faintly puzzled expression crossing his face.

'What is it?"
"A jewelry store box."
He set down the package and lifted out a small, flat box, about four inches square. It was white, with the store's name stamped on it in gold. He shook it, but there wasn't any noise.
"I think it's safe to say it definitely isn't a bomb," he said, handing the box to her.
She lifted the lid, and peeled back a thin layer of packed cotton. There, lying on another layer of packed cotton, was a gold teardrop pendant, with small diamonds circling a pigeon blood ruby. The gold chain was secured so it wouldn't rattle.
They both stared at the pendant. It was lovely, but disturbing. Who would send her such an exquisite piece of jewelry?
"That looks expensive."
Judge Roberts assessed it. "I'd place it at a couple of thousand dollars. Just a guess, of course, but the ruby is a good one."
'Who on earth would send me expensive jewelry?" Perplexed, she picked up the brown shipping box and pulled out the bottom layer of paper. A small white card fluttered to the floor.
"Aha." She bent and picked up the card, turning it over to read what had been written on one side. She flipped it and looked again at the other side, but it was blank.
"Does it say who sent it?"
She shook her head. "This gives me the willies."
He could see there was something written on the card. 'What does it say?"
She looked up, her dark eyes plainly revealing how puzzled and disturbed she was, and handed him the card. "It says, 'A small token of my esteem.' But who sent it?"

Chapter 7

IT HAD REAllY BEEN SO EASY, FINDING OUT HER SCHEDULE. He could have hired a private detective to watch the house, but he didn't want to involve a third party who might later make inconvenient connections. He drove down the street several times, looking for a place where he could park and watch; the traffic, while not heavy, was still busy enough that he knew

he wouldn't be noticed. The problem was that there wasn't any place where he could park. It was a residential street, with houses on both sides, and people coming and going from those houses throughout the day.
But all it took was time, and perseverance. Over the following days, during his hourly drive-bys, he noted when the gardeners came, and carefully jotted it down in a little notebook he'd bought especially for this; it had a buttery-soft leather cover, much more tasteful than those brightly colored cardboard covers schoolkids seemed to prefer. An older woman, whom he presumed to be the cook, came every day around ten o'clock and left at five. The arrival and departure of a maid service was also carefully noted.
On Wednesday Sarah had left the house in the morning and hadn't returned until early evening; he had tried to follow her, but she cut over to Highway 31 and he lost her in the traffic when he was caught by a red light. Rather than drive around fruitlessly, he stopped at a pay phone and called Judge Roberts's house. The number was unlisted, but he had attained the number soon after seeing Sarah on television. He knew people who knew people, and who were always eager to do favors for him. Really, all he had to do was ask, and within a few hours he had the number.
A woman answered the phone, and he asked for "Sarah," thinking that using her first name would imply a familiarity that wasn't there. Or rather, that wasn't there yet. He felt as if he knew her already, knew her dedication and loyalty and the utter perfection of how she looked, how she acted, even the way she sounded.
"Sarah isn't in today," the woman said cheerfully.
"Oh, that's right Wait-I'm confused. Is today her off day?" He deliberately used a more casual tone and speech pattern than normal.
"Yes, it is."
"Is today Wednesday? I've lost track of the days, I've been thinking all day that it's Thursday."
She laughed. "Sorry, but it's Wednesday."
"Okay, I'll call her tonight, then. Thanks." He hung up before she could ask his name and number, and wrote down the information in tiny, precise letters: WEDNESDAY-DAY OFF.
He felt a thrill of excitement. For his purposes she would have to be away from the house. He thought he already had most of the information he needed, but he would continue watching to be certain. That was the key to success: leave nothing to chance.

He would have liked to have followed her around all day and seen what she did, what interests she had or what hobbies she pursued, but perhaps this was better.

He thought of the way she had looked when she drove out of the driveway, her dark hair loose, classic dark sunglasses shielding her eyes. She gave the impression of being aloof, mysterious, and slightly exotic. She drove her SW with quick competence, as he had known she would; that was another measure of her dedication, that she had taken defensive-driving courses.

She had put herself totally at the service of that old man, who had never done anything to deserve such devotion. Why, he hadn't even earned his money, but had inherited it. Which wasn't the same as his own receipt of an inheritance, because he had saved it from his father's stupid decisions.

Judge Lowell had never done anything but sit on a bench and dispense opinions as if they were Pez.

His Sarah deserved more than that old man.

She deserved . . . everything.

He wanted to give her a gift, something that would make her think of him every time she saw it. And he wanted it to be something she wore, so he could imagine her wearing it every day, touching it, treasuring it. He couldn't give her clothing; that was too crass. Flowers faded and died, then were discarded.

Jewelry, then. Wasn't that what gentlemen had given their special ladies all through history? Special pieces of jewelry had been imbued with mystery, intrigue, even curses, though of course there wouldn't be anything cursed about his gift. He couldn't even make it as special as he wanted, because there wasn't time for him to have a piece made; he would have to buy something commercially produced, but even with that handicap he would find something out of the ordinary.

He would have to buy it from a store he hadn't patronized before, so there wouldn't be a chance of anyone recognizing him. And paying by check or credit card was out of the question; he didn't want anyone to be able to trace the gift back to him. In time, she would know, but that knowledge was for the two of them alone.

He drove to his bank and withdrew five thousand dollars, and left annoyed because the drive-through teller had asked to see his driver's license. On reflection, though, he decided she had done the correct thing. He hated to be

delayed or questioned, but sometimes one had to accept the burdens of society.

From there he went to the Galleria, where he could be certain he would be merely one face among many, even on a weekday. There were several jewelry stores, and he browsed through all of them before making his selection. Sarah needed something simple and classic; she would be as appalled as he by gaudiness, but anything paltry would be an insult.

He finally settled on a teardrop pendant, a lovely ruby surrounded by diamonds, and suspended from a gossamer chain. The combination of ruby and diamonds captured her essence, he thought, exotic warmth surrounded by perfect coolness.

He paid in cash, to the clerk's astonishment. With the square, flat box in his pocket he went into another jewelry store and bought a simple chain, secured in a box much like the one that contained the ruby pendant. That chain was a paltry hundred dollars, but it was the box he wanted, not the contents.

Next he had stopped at an office supply store and bought a small shipping box, filler paper to buffer the contents, and a roll of tape. He even remembered to buy scissors to cut the tape. Ordinarily it would have annoyed him no end to be put to so much trouble, but this time he was patient about all the steps he had to take. After all, this was for Sarah.

Once back in his car, he removed the cheap chain from its box and carefully replaced it with the pendant. There. Now if Sarah called the jewelry store whose name was on the box, she would find that no one there remembered selling a ruby-anddiamond pendant, that in fact they had no such item in stock. He pictured her lying in bed, tenderly touching the pendant around her neck and wondering who had sent her such a lovely gift.

He put the jeweler's box inside the shipping box, dropped in a small note to let her know how special she was, packed in the filler paper, and sealed the box. Too late he realized he hadn't bought a cheap pen for addressing the box. Scowling, he took his gold fountain pen back out of his jacket pocket. What would the rough cardboard do to the nib?

He could go to another store and buy a pen, but his patience was abruptly at an end. Unscrewing the cap from the expensive pen, he quickly printed her name and address on the box, in his irritation digging the nib into the cardboard. If necessary, he would buy another pen, but this box was going in the mail without any further delay.

The post office was busy, and despite the security concerns, the rushed postal clerk didn't notice that there wasn't a return address on the box. Besides, he knew his appearance inspired confidence. Mad bombers never looked distinguished and dignified; hairy and disgusting was more like it, from what he had seen. He was prepared even if the postal clerk had noticed the omission, having thought of a fictitious address, but he would rather the package be a total mystery when she received it.

He had noticed that Judge Roberts walked about the neighborhood every day at the same time and retrieved the mail from the mailbox when he returned home. Driving by at precisely the right time was difficult, and in fact he missed it by a few seconds, and short of stopping in the street to watch, he had to be content with what he could see through his rearview mirror. The old man took out the box and stood holding it in his hands, abruptly staring up and down the street.

The street curved and he lost sight of the old bastard. Damn him, why did he just stand there? What was he doing? Was he jealous that someone had sent a package to Sarah?

That was it. Of course he was jealous. He was old, but it had to stroke his ego to have a woman like her living with him, taking care of him. He probably told all of his cronies that he was sleeping with her.

The thought made him clench his hands in rage, until he was gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. He could almost hear those cronies, cackling and sniggering like filthy-minded teenagers.

He had to free her from all that.

Sarah had placed the box on the kitchen counter, and as she ate dinner, her gaze kept straying to it. The pendant was undeniably lovely, but she didn't want to touch it. A gift was one thing; an anonymous gift was something else entirely. It was somehow . . . ominous, as if someone had sent her a snake in disguise. She thought the Judge was right and the television spot had attracted a weirdo who had fixated on her.

She would certainly never wear the thing. She seldom wore much jewelry anyway, usually just a pair of small gold hoop earrings and her wristwatch. Not only would a lot of jewelry be inappropriate for the job, it wasn't to her personal taste. She didn't like feeling weighted down, and she particularly disliked necklaces.

In addition to that, she had no way of knowing who had sent the pendant. It could have been anyone, someone she would pass in the grocery store or

who could be standing beside her in the bookstore. If she only knew who he was, she could avoid him. But, not knowing, if she wore it and he saw her, he might take it as some kind of signal. A signal for what, she didn't want to imagine.

She was trained to spot anyone following her vehicle, and when she was driving the Judge, she was always vigilant. When she was alone was when she was able to relax, and now this bastard had stolen that from her. She would have to be on alert, watchful of everyone who came near her, and she hated that.

But maybe nothing else would happen. Some weirdos backed off when the object of their obsession didn't display the expected reaction. Or, if she spotted someone following her, maybe she wouldn't try to shake him; maybe she would lead him to the pistol range and let him watch her practice. That should cool his ardor.

All things considered, she would have rather he had sent her a death threat; at least she could take that to the police. A diamond-and-ruby pendant and a card saying A small token of my esteem couldn't be considered threatening. Weird, but not threatening. He had broken no laws, and, since he had chosen to remain anonymous, she couldn't even return the gift and tell him to leave her alone.

The jewelry store hadn't been any help. The first thing she'd done was call the store whose name was printed on the box. No one there had any recollection of selling the piece of jewelry; none of them remembered even having a pendant of that description. She thanked them and hung up, frustrated. He must have had an empty jewelry box lying around and put the pendant in it. That was a dead end; there were a lot of jewelry stores in the Birmingham area, plus pawn shops, where he could have bought it. He could have bought it anywhere. Tuscaloosa was just half an hour down Interstate 59; Montgomery was only about an hour away; even Atlanta could be reached in a couple of hours. Those were just the major towns; small towns had jewelry stores, too.

So there was nothing she could do, no way of finding this guy unless he walked up to her and asked why she wasn't wearing his present. She didn't know if she wanted that to happen, even if it would give her a chance to tell him to leave her alone. Since she was dealing with a weirdo, she didn't know what to do. Who knew what would trigger him to greater weirdness?

She didn't consider herself a martial arts expert, but she was better able to take care of herself, and protect her employer, than most people. She was in good physical condition; she was an excellent shot and a pretty good driver. That said, she didn't want to have to use those particular skills. She wanted to run the Judge's household and take care of him, period. But martial arts were useful only to a certain degree, and she was human enough to feel uneasy, even a little frightened, about this development. One episode, without any threat attached, did not mean she was being stalked, but now her mind was open to the possibility and it was all she could think about. Damn him, for stealing her peace of mind.

There was nothing she could do, other than take precautions and be on guard, and she hated that helplessness more than anything else. She wanted to do something, but what? By nature and training, she was geared to go on the offensive, and in this case all her options were defensive.

There was nothing she could do but play with the hand dealt to her, no matter how she disliked it. She had the skills to handle this; she just had to be on her toes. Maybe this was a one-shot deal. Maybe whoever it was would call tomorrow to see if she had received his gift, and she would be able to discourage him. By training she was courteous, but she was the daughter of one military man and the sister of two others, and she knew the art of forceful discouragement. If necessary, she could be nasty.

Okay, essentially this was up to her, unless he did something overtly threatening. She would be stupid, however, not to at least alert the police department and get their input.

Their input? She snorted. His input, was more like it.

She had his card, or rather, the Judge had his card. She went down the stairs and wound her way through the house to the library, where the Judge was kicked back in his leather recliner, blissfully watching his new wide-screen, high-definition television. He looked up at her polite knock.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but do you have Detective Cahill's card? I think it would be smart to notify the police about this gift, even if they can't do anything about it."

"Good idea. The card is in the file on my desk." He started to get up, but Sarah waved him back down. Bless his heart, he simply couldn't accustom himself to the idea that he shouldn't do things for her, that she was there to do for him. It was all right for her to serve his meals and take care of his clothes-to people of his generation, that was women's work-but if it

involved anything else, she continually had to be on her toes or he would be doing things like opening doors for her.
"I'll get it. Please don't get up." There was only one file on his desk, a manila folder marked ROBBERY ATTEMPT. She smiled as she opened it. The file contained the police report, the newspaper clipping of the report, some photographs he'd made himself, and a copy of the insurance claim. Detective Cahill's card was paper-clipped to the police report, along with two other cards.
She wrote down his number and closed the file. "Thank you. May I get anything else for you this evening?"
"No, no, I'm fine." He waved her away, engrossed in a police chase on Court TV. It must be a guy thing, she thought, sighing. Her dad liked that show, too.
She returned to her quarters and punched in Cahill's number on her cordless phone, then abruptly disconnected before it could even ring. People with receivers could pick up conversations on cordless phones. She didn't have anything private to say, but the idea that the weirdo might be listening to her calls was revolting.
And the idea that he had so invaded her life with one gesture made her even angrier. She shouldn't have to worry about talking on a cordless phone. She should be able to go about her life as normal, damn it.
She went into her bedroom and picked up the receiver on the land-line phone. While she punched the numbers again, she pulled a pillow out from under the cover, wadded it into a ball, and shoved it behind her back as she made herself comfortable on the bed.
Cahill answered on the third ring, his voice a little surly. "Cahill." Okay, a lot surly.
"Detective Cahill, this is Sarah Stevens."
There was a slight pause, as if he was trying to place the name. "Yeah, what can I do for you?"
She could hear a television in the background, but no other voices. No kids playing, no low murmur of a wife asking, "Who is it?" He sounded alone, which was a relief. Too much of a relief, when she thought about it.
"I know there isn't anything the department can do, but I received an anonymous gift in the mail this afternoon that makes me uneasy."
"Anonymous?"
"There wasn't a return address on the box, or anything inside with a name."

'What was it, a dead cat?"
She was silent, and he sighed. "Sorry. You'd be surprised how many people used to get dead cats in the mail. That stopped when the post offices quit accepting boxes without return addresses."
'Well, they did this time. It's postmarked, but there's no return address."
"What was in the box?"
"An expensive diamond-and-ruby pendant."
"How expensive?"
"Judge Roberts says at least a couple of thousand. The card said, A small token of my esteem, but it wasn't signed. There was nothing threatening, but . . . it made me uneasy. The Judge was alarmed; he thinks the television spot attracted a crazy guy who's fixated on me."
"That's possible, but are you certain it isn't from your boyfriend?"
"No boyfriend." She could have simply said she was positive it wasn't from a boyfriend, but she didn't. No boyfriend. She couldn't be any plainer. If he was at all interested, he would call.
There was another little pause. Then he said, "Look, you're right, there's nothing we can do-"
"I know that. I just want to know what I should do, or be doing, in case this turns into something serious."
"Keep everything you get that's relevant. Keep a record of any weird phone calls, such as hang-ups or heavy breathing. Do you have Caller ID?"
"No, not on my private line."
"Then get it. And if you don't already have a cell phone, get one. Don't go anywhere without it, and I mean anywhere."
"I have a cell phone. It's always in my truck."
"Don't leave it in your truck, or in your purse. Have it in your pocket, so you can get to it immediately if you need to. Ordinarily I'd say you probably don't have anything to worry about, but an expensive gift is . . . unusual."
"That's what I thought, too." She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "I hate this. Nothing really has happened, but I feel as if something awful is about to happen."
"Don't let it get to you. Use common sense, be careful, and call if anything else happens."
"Okay. Thanks for your advice."
"You're welcome." He hung up, and Sarah gave a little laugh as she disconnected, too. Okay, she had her answer about one thing, at least:

Detective Cahill might be single, but he was definitely not interested. His manner couldn't have been less personal, so that was that.
When she went back to the living room, she noticed that her curtains were open. She jerked them together, her heart pounding. Was he out there? Was he watching?

Chapter 8

NOTHING ELSE HAPPENED.THERE WERE NO PHONE CAllS, no more gifts, and if anyone had followed her, she hadn't spotted him. Once she thought someone might be following her, but if he was, he wasn't very good at it, and a white Jaguar wasn't the best car for following anyone, anyway; it was too noticeable. Before long the white Jaguar wasn't anywhere in sight in her rearview mirror, swallowed up by the bumper-to-bumper traffic. Probably it was someone who also lived in Mountain Brook, who just happened to be driving the same route for a while.
She heard from her mom, and Noel had called, so he was okay for the time being. Daniel still hadn't checked in since he left, but they would have heard if anything had happened to him, so everything was fine on the home front. Jennifer was thinking about having another child, her third, but her husband, Farrell, wasn't enthusiastic; he was perfectly happy with their two sons. Knowing Jennifer, Sarah made a mental bet she'd have another nephew- or a niece-within the year.
Just talking to her mom had made her feel better. Everything was normal at home, and that was what she needed to know. Everything seemed to be normal here, too, except for the existence of that pendant; whenever she looked at it, she was reminded that something wasn't right, that there was someone out there who thought it was okay to send an expensive gift to a woman he didn't know.
On her half-day off, on Saturday this particular week, she had her hair trimmed, got a manicure, then went to a movie. All the while she studied the people and traffic around her, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing. The same face didn't turn up at two different locations, no one followed her. She thought it was too soon to relax, but she did feel marginally better when she returned home.

Wednesday, her next off day, was much the same. No one followed her as she went to her karate class or kick-boxing workout. She spent a long time at the pistol range, just because it made her feel better, then went shopping at the Summit; that also made her feel better. There was just something about a new outfit that was good for the soul.

She browsed the bookstore for an hour, ate supper in one of the restaurants, then went to another movie. She liked movies and saw a new one at least every couple of weeks, but in the back of her mind she knew she was making it easy for anyone to approach her if he wanted. If he was still out there, she wanted to know who he was, what he looked like. She couldn't go through life worried that every man she saw might be him; she wanted a face on him, so he wasn't just a vague, threatening shape in her mind. Let him sit down next to her; let him approach her.

But she sat alone in the darkened theater, and no one spoke or even brushed against her when the movie was over and she made her way out of the theater, or even in the parking lot as she walked to her truck.

Everything looked normal at home when she drove up. The front-porch lights were on, the security lights were on, and she could see a light in the Judge's upstairs bedroom. The digital clock in the dashboard said it was almost ten o'clock, so he was probably getting ready for bed.

She parked in her usual place under the portico, and let herself in through the back door. After locking it, she began a quick tour of the house, as usual, to make certain everything was locked up. As she went toward the front of the house, she heard the television from the Judge's library, and a glance in that direction showed light spilling into the dim hallway. He must still be up, then.

The big double front doors weren't locked, which was unusual. She turned the dead bolt, then headed back to check the doors in the sunroom.

It wasn't like the Judge to leave the lights on upstairs; he automatically turned off the switch every time he left a room, even if he would be returning soon. She paused at the back staircase, a tiny frisson of unease prickling her spine. Maybe he had just gone upstairs for a moment and was coming back down to watch the ten o'clock news. She couldn't hear anything from upstairs, but then she wouldn't with the television in his library on.

She went to the open door of the library and peeked in. One lamp was on, the way he liked it when he watched television. He sat in his leather

recliner, as usual, his head tipped to the side. He must have fallen asleep watching television.
But why was the upstairs light on?
Then she noticed the smell. It was difficult to identify, combining what smelled like feces with . . . something else. Her nose wrinkling, all her instincts suddenly on alert-was he ill, had he had a stroke or something?-she stepped farther into the room.
Seeing him from a different angle, she froze.
No. Oh, no.
There were dark spots and splotches sprayed across the room, and even in the dimness she could tell that some of the splotches had matter in them.
She swallowed hard, standing still and listening for the intruder. She could hear the clock ticking, hear the thumping of her heartbeat, but there was no one else near . . . unless he was upstairs.
She wanted to go to the Judge. She wanted to straighten his neck, wipe the blood from his neck where it had trickled down from the small, neat wound in the side of his head. She wanted to cover . . . cover the gaping hole on the other side of his head where his skull was missing. She wanted to weep, to scream, to fly upstairs and search for his killer-a search-and-destroy mission, because no way would she let him live another minute, if she found him.
She didn't do any of those things. Instead she backed out of the library, careful not to touch anything else in case she smeared a fingerprint, and retraced her steps to the kitchen, where she had left her purse on the island. She had dropped her cell phone in it, not seeing a need to have the phone in her pocket when she was here, at home.
She'd been wrong.
She retrieved her pistol, too, and wedged her back into a corner so she couldn't be jumped from behind, in case he was still in the house. Her hands were shaking as she turned on the phone and waited for the service to connect. It seemed like ages, though probably only the normal few seconds passed, before the phone showed it was in service. She punched 911, and waited for the answer.
"Nine-one-one."
She wanted to close her eyes, but she didn't dare. She tried to speak, but no sound came out.
"Nine-one-one. Hello?"

She swallowed, and managed a thin sound. "This is . . . this is Twenty-seven-thirteen Briarwood. My employer has been shot. He's dead."
Unlike the first time Cahill had been here, the house was blazing with lights. The drive, the street, even the sidewalk was clogged with vehicles, most of them with flashing lights. Crime scene tape kept the neighbors at bay, and this was momentous enough that this time they had forgotten it wasn't genteel to gawk; all the houses on the street were lit, and people gathered beyond the line of tape, whispering to one another. An officer was filming the crowd, because a lot of times a murderer would wait around to watch the show.
The news vans from the city's television stations were pulling up, and Cahill ducked under the line before anyone could grab him.
The front door was closed, guarded by a uniformed officer who nodded at him and opened it to let him inside. The crime scene people were already at work, carefully dusting and cataloging and photographing. The EMT personnel were waiting, because there was obviously nothing they could do now. There was no life to be saved, no injuries to be treated, just a body to be transported.
A murder in Mountain Brook was big news. The last one had been . . . what, five years ago? When the murder victim was a retired federal judge, the news was even bigger. The pressure on this case would be intense.
'Who called it in?" he asked, though of course he knew.
"The butler. She's in that room there." The officer nodded toward a room to the left.
It was a breakfast room, he guessed it was called, with the kitchen connected to it. She sat at the table, a cup of coffee clasped between her hands. She was pale and still, staring at the tablecloth.
She wasn't in her pajamas this time. She wore street clothes, and she still had on lipstick. He said, "Is your car out back?"
She nodded without looking up. "It's parked under the portico." Her voice was thin, toneless.
'What kind is it?"
"A TrailBlazer." There was no interest, no curiosity in her voice.
He went through the kitchen and found the back door in a hallway. The SW was just outside. He placed his hand on the hood; still warm.
He went back inside and on the way through the kitchen, stopped to pour himself a cup of coffee. The pot was almost full, so she had evidently

poured herself a cup, sat down, then forgotten to drink it.
She was still sitting exactly as he'd left her. He took the lukewarm coffee from her unresisting hands, dumped it down the sink in the kitchen, and poured another cup.
He set it in front of her. "Drink it."
She obediently took a sip.
He sat down at the table, to her right, and took out his notebook and pen. "Tell me what happened. " That was an open-ended question, not pointing her in any particular direction.
"It's Wednesday," she said, still in that thin tone.
"Yes, it is."
"It's my day off. I did the usual things-"
'Which are?"
"My karate class, kick-boxing, the pistol range."
'What time was this?" She told him; he made a careful note of all the times and asked where she took the classes. He'd check them out, make certain she was where she said she was when she said she was. 'What then?"
"I went to the Summit, went shopping."
"Did you buy anything?"
"An outfit at Parisian's, a couple of books."
"Did you notice the time?"
"Between four and five, I think. The time will be on the sales receipts." She still hadn't looked up, though she did take another sip of coffee.
"Did you come home then?"
She gave a tiny shake of her head. "No, I ate dinner out. At the . . . I can't remember the name. There at the Summit. The Italian place. I should have come home then, I usually do, but tonight I went to a movie."
"Why should you have come home?"
"Because then I would have been here. It wouldn't have happened if I'd been here."
'What movie did you see?"
This time she did look up, her eyes blank. "I can't remember." She dug in her jeans pocket and pulled out half of a computer-printed ticket. "This one."
He noted the movie, and the time. "I've thought of seeing that one myself. Was it any good?" He kept his tone casual, easy.

"It was okay. I went so he'd have a chance to approach me, if he was watching."
'What?" She had lost him on that one. 'Who?"
"I don't know. The man who sent me the pendant."
"Okay, right." He'd get into that later. 'What time did you get home?"
"Almost ten. The Judge's bedroom light was on. He usually goes to bed about ten, though sometimes he'll watch the news first."
"Does he have a television in his bedroom?"
"No." Her lips quivered. "He said bedrooms were for sleeping."
"So he watched TV in . . .?"
"The library. Where I found him."
"Let's backtrack a little. What did you do when you got home?" He sipped his coffee, and she followed suit.
"I began checking to make sure the doors were locked. I always do, before I go to bed. The front door wasn't," she said. "Locked, that is. That was unusual, for it not to be locked. I could hear the television on, and I wondered why the light was on upstairs when he was still in the library."
'What did you do?"
"I went to the library door and looked in. He was in his recliner, his head tilted as if he'd fallen asleep."
He waited, not wanting to direct her now.
"I noticed the smell," she said faintly. He knew what smell she was talking about. "And I thought he might have had a stroke, or heart attack, and soiled himself. Just one lamp was on, so the light wasn't good; but when I stepped inside, the angle was different and I saw the . . . the blood. And the other side of his head. The splatters . . ." Her voice trailed off.
"I was afraid he was still in the house. Upstairs. That's why the light was on. I thought about going up there . . ." Again she trailed off.
"I hope you didn't."
"No. But I wanted to," she whispered. "I wanted to catch him. Instead I came back to the kitchen and got my pistol and cell phone, and stood in the corner while I called nine-one-one."
'Where's your pistol now?"
"In my purse. I put it there when the first car arrived."
"May I see it?"
"It's on the cooking island."
'Would you get it for me, please?"

She got up and went into the kitchen, moving like a zombie. He followed and watched as she retrieved the pistol. It was holstered, and when he checked the clip he saw that it was full. "I always reload after I've been to the range," she said, rubbing her forehead.
She hadn't cleaned it-not yet, though he bet she did on a regular basis-and the smell of burnt gunpowder still clung to it. The ballistics wouldn't match, he knew; she was too smart to make a mistake like that. He didn't think she had killed the old guy, but he couldn't afford to totally dismiss the possibility. People were most often killed by those closest to them, so until she could be ruled out as a suspect, she was definitely on his short list.
She watched him, her face expressionless, her eyes blank. She was totally closed in on herself; some people handled stress that way, by almost shutting down.
"Let's go sit down again," he suggested, and she obeyed. "Have you had any more gifts in the mail, or strange phone calls?"
"No, just that one gift. Nothing else. I did think someone was following me once, but he wasn't."
"Are you certain?"
"He turned off. And he was in a white Jaguar. You don't follow people in a white Jaguar."
"Not unless that's the only car you have." But if someone could afford a Jaguar, he could almost certainly afford some other kind of car, too. Jaguars were just too noticeable.
So she probably wasn't being stalked. That was the first thing she had thought of, though, when she came inside and found Judge Roberts's body.
"You mentioned before that Judge Roberts had received death threats. Do you know anything about them?"
"His family will have the details. I know the basics, but it all happened before I came to work for him. His family-God, I have to call them."
"We'll notify the family," he said, gentling his voice, because she suddenly looked shattered at the idea. "Do you have their names and numbers?"
"Yes, of course." She rubbed her forehead again. "He has two sons and one daughter." She gave him their names and numbers, then lapsed into silence, staring at the tablecloth again.
"I'll be back in a minute," he said, and got up. He wanted to check out the scene in the library himself and look through the rest of the house.
He was almost to the door when she asked, "Was he upstairs?"

He stopped. "No one else was in the house when the patrolmen checked." He already knew that from the report he'd received in transit.
"He didn't climb out an upstairs window, or something?"
"There wasn't any sign of anyone in the house. No open windows, nothing out of place." He couldn't tell her any more than that.
"I hope he wasn't upstairs," she said, almost to herself. "I hope I didn't let him get away. I should have gone up. I should have checked."
"No, you shouldn't-"
"I'd have killed him," she said flatly.

Chapter 9

SARAH WAS TENSE, EXHAUSTED, AND EMOTIONAlly DRAINED when she met Barbara and her family at the Birmingham airport at six the next morning. She waited downstairs in the luggage claim area, a cup of coffee in her hand. She had no idea how much coffee she'd had since finding the Judge's body, but she was absolutely certain caffeine was all that was keeping her going.
She hadn't slept; there hadn't been an opportunity to, even if she had been inclined. Cahill had kept coming back to her with questions, and she'd had so much else to do she hadn't had a spare minute. People had to be notified; the police department had taken care of the family, but she had called Leona and awakened her with the devastating news, rather than let her hear it on the early morning news. Then the calls from the family had started coming in, to such an extent that several times she had been on both the cordless phone and her cell phone.
Arrangements had to be made to house the family. Randall and his wife, Emily, had three children, all of whom were married with children of their own. Since they all lived in the Huntsville area, which was an easy drive, only Randall and Emily were coming down to stay until after the funeral, but everyone-three children and their spouses, plus four grandchildren-would be staying the night before the funeral.
Jon and his wife, Julia, lived in Mobile. They had two children, one married and one single. All of them were coming up to stay for the duration.
Barbara and Dwight and their two children lived in Dallas, and they were all staying until it was over. That meant Sarah had to arrange

accommodations for eleven people, including herself, in the middle of the night, available for early check-in . . . very early check-in. She would worry about the rest of Randall's family after the funeral arrangements were made. She had booked them all into the Wynfrey. They would probably be eating at odd hours, so they needed somewhere with room service, plus the teenagers would be able to distract themselves in the attached Galleria. She herself had taken a room at the Mountain Brook Inn. It had come as a shock to realize she wouldn't be allowed to stay in the house, or even gather her own clothing. She had given a list of what she needed to Cahill, and he had arranged for someone to collect the items for her.

Her pistol had been taken, as well as the Judge's old service revolver that he kept locked in a display case. Cahill said they would be returned after the investigation was completed, meaning when it was determined whether or not either weapon had been used to commit the murder.

It was obvious she was a suspect, if only because of proximity. She had unlimited access to the house, she had a pistol, and Cahill himself had seen how proficient she was with it. She could account for her whereabouts, if only by receipts and tickets, but most of all she had no motive, so she didn't worry about herself; she couldn't, not with the constant memory of the Judge's body playing like a silent movie in her mind.

He had looked so frail in death, as if his spirit had kept one from realizing how heavily time had laid its hand on him. She was fiercely glad no one else had found him, that there'd been one last final moment between just the two of them, before strangers arrived and his body was taken over by them. The dead have no dignity, but she knew he would have hated having lost control of his bowels, hated his family seeing him like that. He would have hated her seeing him like that, too, but that was the least upsetting of all the possibilities.

The escalator began spitting out people from the newly arrived plane; Barbara and her family were among the first. Barbara was a slim, pretty woman with attractive gray streaks in her short blond hair; she was red-eyed and pale, but holding together. She spotted Sarah while she was still on the escalator, and when she stepped off, she immediately crossed to her, and the two women embraced. Tears stung Sarah's eyes; all through this awful night she had desperately needed someone to hug her so she wouldn't feel so horribly alone.

"Have you heard from Jon?" Barbara asked, pulling back and dabbing her eyes with a tattered tissue.
"They left Mobile about two this morning, so they should get to the hotel at any time."
"I hope he's careful driving."
"I talked him into letting Julia drive."
"Bless you." Barbara hugged her again. "You're still on top of things. Have the police found out anything?"
Sarah shook her head. "I don't know. I'm not family, so they won't tell me anything." Not that Cahill would tell her anything anyway, with her a suspect.
"I knew one of those rotten bastards would get out of jail and come after him," Barbara said tensely. "I knew it."
A fresh wave of guilt assailed Sarah. "I should have been there."
"Nonsense." Barbara fiercely turned on her. "It was your off day; there was no reason for you to be there. You couldn't stay with him twenty-four hours a day. Probably the monster watched the house and saw you leave. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine, for not hiring a full-time guard service. It isn't your fault, and I won't let you even think it, do you hear?"
Too late for that. Sarah thought it at least every five minutes. And what if, as she had thought in those first awful, stunned minutes, he'd been killed by the creep who had sent her the pendant? What if he'd actually come looking for her? Killing the Judge wasn't logical, but then people like that weren't logical, so why would their actions be? Knowing a weirdo was out there, she should have been at home instead of out trying to bait him into revealing himself.
It wasn't until Cahill asked about the death threats that she realized that was the most likely answer. Logically she realized it, anyway; emotionally, she hadn't shaken that first impression.
"It isn't your fault, either," she said firmly. "It's the fault of the man who pulled the trigger, no one else. We have to remember that." And she still should have been there. If it hadn't been for that double-damned pendant, she would have been.
Dwight, Barbara's husband, was over at the carousel collecting their luggage, helped by nineteen-year-old Shaw. Blair, fifteen, stood by herself, looking miserable as only teenagers can. Her honey-blond hair had metallic blue streaks in it, and her left eyebrow now sported two gold hoops.

'Wow," Sarah said, moving to reach out and to hug the girl. "Two hoops. When did you get the other one?"
"It's fake," she said. "I wanted to make Granddaddy freak out the next time we saw him, but-but now I won't get the chance!" Her face crumpled, and she hurled herself against Sarah, burying her face in her shoulder. Her slender body shook with sobs.
Barbara took charge of her daughter, taking her into her own arms and cuddling her as if she were still a toddler. Dwight and Shaw approached, loaded down with luggage and looking uncomfortable at the naked emotional display of the women. Barbara got Blair calmed down, and they all trundled out to Sarah's vehicle. Barbara got into the backseat with her kids, and Dwight buckled himself into the front passenger seat.
'What time are Randall and Emily supposed to be here?" he asked.
"Around eleven. He has a copy of the Judge's will in his safe deposit box, and his bank doesn't open until nine. He thought it might be needed."
Barbara rubbed her forehead. "I don't want to think about his will just now."
"There might be instructions for his funeral service," Dwight said gently.
"I still wish-" She sighed. "Never mind. Wishing won't accomplish anything." She took a deep breath as Sarah began winding her way through the parking deck toward the exit. "Sarah, do you know when the police will let us into the house?"
"It will probably be a few days, at least." And she would have to arrange for the library to be cleaned before the family went in; she didn't want them seeing the scene the way it was now, with the blood splatters and smears. She would give anything if she hadn't seen it, if the past twelve hours had never happened. If she could go back, she would do things differently; instead of dawdling at the Summit, she would go home, and whoever the killer was, when he arrived, she would handle it, and the Judge would still be alive.
But she couldn't go back. No one could.
"The detective will be in touch with you at the hotel," she said evenly. "Try to get some sleep, if you can."
'Will you be there? When the detective talks to us?" Barbara's voice wavered a little.
"If you want me to be." As desperately as she had needed to be hugged a little while ago, she just as desperately needed to be alone so she could release the pent-up grief and tears. She had held everything in, mostly from

shock, but now the shock was wearing off and the awful reality was setting in.
"Please. I'm so-I can't think clearly."
Sarah didn't know how clearly she was thinking herself, but if Barbara wanted her present, she'd be there. If Cahill gave them a few hours, at least she'd be able to take a shower and change clothes, maybe even grab a nap, have breakfast. As soon as she thought of food, her stomach heaved and her throat tightened. No food, then, not yet. Maybe tomorrow.
Tomorrow. What was she supposed to do tomorrow? Whatever the family needed, she supposed. Whatever they didn't feel they could handle, she would do for them. And when the last service for them had been performed, then what?
She wasn't ready. She had thought she'd have another couple of years, getting things ready to put her Plan in motion. She had thought the Judge would gradually become more frail, or perhaps a heart attack or stroke would take him, but that his death would be natural. She would still have grieved, they all would have, but there wouldn't be this tearing pain at a life cut short. No one had been ready for him to leave, not like that.
She got the family settled in the hotel, and just as she was about to leave Jon and his family arrived. So she stayed, helping them, answering Jon's questions. Finding comfort in numbers, Barbara and Dwight and their kids joined them, and when Sarah finally left, they were all crowded into the suite's parlor, crying a little, but pulling together. Final arrangements would have to wait until Randall arrived, so they could all decide together, but Barbara already had out a sheet of the hotel stationery and was making a list of things that needed to be done.
Barbara would be all right. She was hurting, but she was making a list. That was the way women always coped, by doing what needed to be done.
The day was overcast, and cooler than it had been lately. Sarah welcomed the brisk air on her face as she walked to the TrailBlazer. For the moment she had nothing to do, and it felt odd. Barbara had her cell phone number and her room number at the Mountain Brook Inn, and would call her when it was time to meet with Cahill. Sarah had, probably, a couple of hours to herself. She could take that shower.
When she was finally in her room, the silence was almost overwhelming. For hours now she had been busy, surrounded by people, voices, lights. Even when she had been sitting and answering questions, she had been

occupied. Now she was alone, and she had nothing to do for anyone else right now.

Methodically she unpacked the few clothes she had with her, hung the dress in the bathroom to steam out wrinkles while she showered, then finally stepped under the warm, relaxing spray. And there, finally, she cried.

She cried long and hard, crumpled against the side of the tub enclosure with her face buried in her hands and the water beating down on her head. The accumulation of hours of stress and grief tore at her. She wanted to destroy something, she wanted to hit and maim, she wanted . . . she wanted the Judge back, and that wasn't going to happen.

Finally, nature took its course and the violent weeping subsided into dull acceptance. She finished showering, wrapped her wet hair in a thick hotel towel, and fell naked into bed. The room was dim and cool, she was exhausted, and she slept almost immediately.

The phone woke her at ten o'clock. She fumbled for it, fighting to sound alert.

"Hello, this is Sarah."

"Sarah, it's Barbara. Detective Cahill will be here at eleven. Can you make it by then?"

"I'll be there," she promised, already rolling out of bed.

Her hair was a mess, still damp and tangled. She put on the small pot of hotel in-room coffee, then quickly blow-dried her hair and brushed her teeth. The coffee had finished brewing by then, so she grabbed a cup and sipped it while she returned to the bathroom and finished getting ready. There wasn't much to do; she didn't really care how she looked today, so she settled for moisturizer and a sheen of lip gloss, and let the rest go.

She didn't have much choice in the way of clothing. One dress, and two of her everyday butler's outfits. She didn't even have a jacket, and she thought she would need one today. Her normal white shirt, black pants, and black vest would have to do. Maybe Cahill could arrange for someone to get more clothes for her, if she wasn't going to be allowed back in the house by at least tomorrow.

The overcast was beginning to produce a light drizzle, and the chill went right through her on the short walk to her vehicle. The first thing she did after starting the engine was turn on the seat heater; the second was slide on sunglasses to cover her raw, swollen eyes.

Normally the drive to the Wynfrey was a short one, ten to fifteen minutes, but an accident on 280 slowed her and she arrived at the Wynfrey at about five of. As luck would have it, Cahill was entering the lobby at the same time. "Why are you here?" he asked brusquely.
"Because the family wanted me to be." She was a little surprised at how hoarse her voice was.
He nodded, then didn't speak again as they walked to the elevators. She was too tired and empty to say anything pertinent, or even not pertinent. Anything else he had to say to her would pro~ ably be more questions, so she was just as glad he refrained. To give him his due, he had to be as tired as she was, maybe more so.
She slanted a quick glance at him. Somewhere along the line he'd showered and shaved, and changed clothes. If he was exhausted, he didn't show it. Maybe he'd grabbed some sleep, too.
He was wearing a jacket and tie. The jacket reminded her that she was cold. "Could you have someone get a coat from the house for me?" she asked. "It doesn't matter which one."
He looked at her, a swift assessment that took in every detail. Maybe he noticed she was shivering. "I'll take care of it."
"Thanks."
The family was all gathered in Barbara's suite. Randall and Emily had arrived, and Sarah felt a moment of sharp guilt. She should have been here when they arrived, helped them get settled. Randall shook her hand, and reserved Emily hugged her, which made her eyes sting with tears again. Barbara, a hostess to the core, had arranged for a selection of fruit and cheese and pastries to be brought to the suite's parlor. Bottles of water and a fresh pot of coffee stood ready. Sarah asked what everyone wanted to drink, and quietly set about providing them with it. It was a knack she had, remembering how everyone requested his coffee, honed by the courses she'd taken in the school for butlers. Some butlers could do it in small groups of five or six, some needed to write it down, but for some reason in her brain the information was filed differently. When she was asked to describe Randall, for instance, she would say six feet tall, gray hair, hazel eyes, likes his coffee heavy with cream. Emily was five-seven, dark red hair helped along every two weeks by her hairdresser, brown eyes, two sugars, no cream.

Cahill, she remembered from the endless cups of coffee he drank the night before, was as simple as it could get: black.
When she gave him his requested cup of coffee, he nodded his thanks, then said, "Is it too bright in here for you?"
She had forgotten she was still wearing her sunglasses. "Sorry," she murmured, removing them. "I forgot." Her red, swollen eyes were par for the course in this room.
"Have you eaten anything?" Barbara asked, coming up to put her hand on Sarah's shoulder.
"Not yet."
"Then sit down and eat. Now. If I can, you can."
At Barbara's insistence, she put some fruit and Danish on a small plate, then looked around for a seat. Barbara had requested the hotel bring in extra chairs to accommodate everyone; the families were grouped together, of course, leaving the only empty seat beside Cahill. She sat down, and under Barbara's eagle eye forked a small square of fresh pineapple and carried it to her mouth.
She forced herself to chew, and the piece of pineapple began to expand. If she had been alone, she would have spit it out. Briefly she closed her eyes and fought the tightening of her throat. And she chewed.
"Swallow," Cahill said in a low tone that only she could hear.
She tried. On the second try, the pineapple actually went down.
Because eating was only common sense, she tackled that with the same determination she did everything else. While she listened to the family's questions and Cahill's matter-of-fact answers, she broke off tiny pieces of the Danish and concentrated on chewing and swallowing.
Something about Cahill's presence was reassuring. Though she couldn't remember any murders in Mountain Brook in the almost three years she had lived here, he came across as a man who had seen violent death before and knew how to handle it, knew what needed to be done. His matter-of-factness pulled the family away from any highly emotional displays as they unconsciously emulated him. Even Sarah could find a measure of gratitude for his presence; while he was there, he was in charge. All she had to do was chew and swallow.
She listened to his quiet, to-the-point questions about the death threats the Judge had received in the past. Barbara actually had a file on that, reminding Sarah of how much the daughter resembled the father in traits

and mannerisms. She handed it over to Cahill, who looked through it, then glanced up. "May I keep this for a while?"
"Yes, of course." Barbara pressed her hands down hard on her knees. "It's so hard to ask this, but . . . where is Daddy? We need to make funeral arrangements."
"The coroner's office took charge of him," Cahill said. "After an autopsy is performed, he'll be released to you."
Heads came up all over the room. "Autopsy?" Randall said. "Why is there an autopsy?"
"It's automatic for a homicide. State law requires it."
"That's ridiculous," Barbara said. "If you don't know why someone is dead, it makes sense, but Daddy was shot. The reason why he's dead is obvious." Her voice trembled a bit on the word "dead," but she quickly firmed it again.
"The cause of death seems obvious, but sometimes a victim is shot or burned to hide the true cause, such as poison or strangulation."
"Does it really matter, at this point?" Julia asked.
"The manner of death tells us things about the perpetrator. For instance, who would have access to a particular poison? Who was strong enough to strangle a man? I think the cause of death in your father's case is clear-cut, a gunshot wound, but the final decision is the medical examiner's."
"So when will we be able to . . . to get Daddy?"
"I can't say for certain, ma'am, but tomorrow would be my best guess."
"Okay." She pinched the bridge of her nose, then looked at her brothers. "This is Thursday. If he's released tomorrow, we can have the funeral service on either Sunday or Monday. What do you think?"
"Sunday," Randall said immediately. "That will make it easier for people to attend the service."
"I agree," Jon put in.
"Then Sunday it is." She wrote that on her list.
Cahill looked at Randall. "Mr. Roberts, you mentioned you have a copy of your father's will. Do you have it with you?"
"Yes, it's in my briefcase."
"Do you know the contents?"
"No, it's sealed. I mean, we all know the general contents, but not the specifics."
"May I see it, please?"

Randall's eyebrows went up. "May I ask why?"
"Sometimes inheritances play a part in motive."
Barbara sucked in a sharp breath. "Are you suggesting one of us killed our daddy?" All over the room, people were bristling.
"No, ma'am; there's no evidence to suggest that. I'm just covering all bases. I don't want to overlook something that may help me solve the case."
Randall fetched the legal-size envelope. As he'd said, it was firmly sealed. Cahill glanced up for permission, Randall nodded, and with a firm motion he tore the flap open and pulled out the thick document.
He quickly scanned it, flipping the pages. Suddenly he paused, and his head came up, sharp blue eyes fastening on Sarah.
"Miss Stevens, did you know under the terms of this will you inherit a substantial sum of money?"

Chapter 10

SARAH BLINKED, MORE BEMUSED THAN STUNNED.SHE WAS a little punchy and so tired that she wasn't certain she had heard him correctly. She even looked around, as if there might be another Miss Stevens in the room. Not finding anyone, she looked back at Cahill to find him still focused on her. "Do you mean me?" she asked, still not quite making the connection.
"Judge Roberts's butler, Sarah Stevens. That's you."
She nodded, and in the middle of a nod brought her hand up to rub her forehead. Maybe it was lack of sleep, maybe it was too much caffeine, but she was developing a wall-banger of a headache. "He left something to me?" To her distress, her voice wavered, and she felt her lower lip begin to quiver before she sternly bit down on it. She couldn't do anything, however, to hide the bright sheen of tears in her eyes.
"Of course he did," Barbara said. "He told us he was going to."
"He . . . he never mentioned anything to me."
"He thought you'd argue," Jon explained.
"Excuse me," Sarah said abruptly, and fled to the bathroom before she disgraced herself by breaking down and sobbing like a child.
Her face crumpled as soon as she shut the bathroom door, and she grabbed a towel to hold over her mouth to muffle the sound.

By sheer force of will she brought herself back under control, choked back the sobs, and with a tissue blotted her eyes before the tears could fall. A few deep breaths brought a small measure of calm.
She didn't think anything had ever touched her so much as learning the Judge had left a bequest to her. She was well paid, and she had loved taking care of him. She had loved him, for his sweetness and humor, his old-fashioned manners, his basic goodness. She hadn't expected any inheritance, and in truth would indeed have argued against it. She had been with him not quite three years; how could that in any way supplant his children, his lifetime friends?
But evidently he hadn't thought the same, and neither did his family. The thought of their generosity brought the tears welling again, and she determinedly blotted them away. She would not cry, not here and not now. The family had enough to bear without her adding her own emotional distress to the load.
A cold wet washcloth cooled her cheeks, and felt good to her aching head when she pressed it to her forehead. She would have liked to lie down with an ice pack on her head, but, like crying, that, too, would have to be postponed.
Feeling more in control, she rejoined them in the parlor. "I'm sorry," she murmured, resuming her seat beside Cahill.
"I take it you didn't know.'
She shook her head. He either believed her or he didn't. She couldn't work up enough energy to care.
"Daddy swore us to secrecy," Barbara said. A tiny, sad smile wavered on her mouth. "He got a kick out of sneaking something by you. He said it was the only thing he ever got by you."
"He said you confiscated his Snickers bars," Shaw put in, a real smile breaking over his face and banishing the sadness and tension. "He always gorged on them when he came to visit, because he knew he couldn't have them when he got home."
"And his Twinkies. I'd sneak Twinkies to him when I came," Blair confessed.
Sarah groaned, looking at a roomful of guilty, suddenly smiling faces. "No wonder I had such a time getting his cholesterol level down!"
Barbara patted her knee. "He loved you for taking care of him. We love you for taking care of him. When he mentioned putting you in his will, we were

all for it."
Cahill cleared his throat, drawing attention back to him. "Thank you for the information," he said, getting to his feet. "I know this is a difficult time for you all, and I appreciate your help. I want you to know I'm sorry about your father, and we're doing everything we can to find the perpetrator. I'll run these names, and with any luck we'll find one of these guys in the area."
Like lemmings, everyone else stood, and a flurry of handshakes and thank-yous broke out as Cahill slowly but inexorably inched his way toward the door. Somehow he had Sarah by the elbow and was pulling her with him. "I'll walk you to your truck," he said.
Inwardly she sighed. He probably had some more questions to ask her. Since she was included in the will, in his mind she was probably that much more suspect. But he was doing his job, so she grabbed her bag and sunglasses and managed a quick good-bye to everyone, with instructions to call her if they needed anything, before he had her out the door.
There was a couple in the elevator, so he didn't say anything on the ride down to the lobby. They stepped outside, and the cold, damp wind slapped her in the face, making her shiver. The temperature seemed to be dropping, and the drizzle had progressed to a steady light rain. She hugged her arms and said, "I didn't kill him."
"I'm fairly sure of that myself," he said mildly.
Startled, she looked up at him. "Then why all the suspicious questions?"
"Because it's my job. You'll be checked out, you'll be looked at, and you'll be questioned."
"Cross every t and dot every i."
"You got it." He took off his jacket and held it over her head. "Come on."
She shivered and hurried her steps as he strode across the parking lot, with her huddled under his jacket like a chick under his wing. The first thing she was going to do when she got into the TrailBlazer was turn on the seat heater.
"What's your room number?" he asked. "I'll have someone bring a jacket to you. That's if you're going back to the inn now, that is."
She gave him her room number and added wryly, "I hope I make it back there without falling asleep."
His hand abruptly tightened on her elbow, hauling her to a stop. "I'll drive you."

"And then I'd be stranded. Thanks, but I'll make it. I'm punchy and I have a killer headache, but the coffee will keep me awake for a little while."
"You need to eat."
"I ate," she said, startled by all this concern. "You watched me."
"You ate four bites. I counted."
"And it was all I could do to swallow those. Don't push, Cahill."
He had shifted so that he was between her and the truck, the breadth of his shoulders blocking some of the wind from her. The rain was soaking his back, but he ignored it as he stared silently down at her, his expression unreadable. Even through her fatigue, she felt something uneasy begin to stir. hat?" she demanded, moving back half a step.
He shook his head. "Nothing. You're out on your feet. Go get some sleep."
"That sounds like a plan." He moved out of the way, and Sarah hit the remote to unlock the door, hurrying to get out of the wind and rain.
"Sarah," he said as she put the key in the ignition. He still held his jacket, rather than putting it back on.
"Yes?"
"I probably don't have to say this, but don't leave town."
Cahill followed her to the Mountain Brook Inn, just to make certain she got there, and that she didn't endanger herself or any other motorist. When she turned left into the inn's parking lot, he tapped his horn lightly in good-bye, and she lifted one hand in acknowledgment but she didn't turn her head to look.
She was holding up okay, but the stunned, desolate expression in her dark eyes was arousing his protective instincts. Not cop instincts, but man-woman instincts, exactly what he didn't need.
For one thing, he'd been telling the truth when he said he was fairly certain she hadn't killed the Judge. Fairly certain, though, was a long way from completely certain. She hadn't even asked how much money she would inherit, which wasn't normal. Maybe she would have held off in front of the family, but when they were alone, she should have asked . . . unless she already knew. And if she knew she stood to inherit a hundred grand, that could be a motive to off the old guy; God knows a lot of people had been killed for a lot less money.
Balanced against that, her grief and shock seemed genuine. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying; either that, or she had sprayed herself in the

eyes with something to make it look as if she'd been crying. She was either a smart killer and a very good actress, or she was grieving.
His gut said she was genuinely grieving. But since his gut was also insisting he try to get her into bed, he had to take into consideration the lust factor, which had clouded his judgment before. Shannon, Sarah. Both names started with S; that couldn't be good.
He'd tried to ignore his attraction to Sarah, but it hadn't gone away. Her face had an annoying habit of popping into his mind whenever he tried to relax. He was fine when he was at work, but let him sit down in the evening to watch the news or read the paper and Bam!-there she was. He'd see her sitting on the stairs in her thin cotton pajamas, or standing on the pistol range with her concentration totally focused on the target, the sunshine picking out red and gold glints in her hair. A man knew he was in trouble when he noticed the glints in a woman's hair. Boobs, yeah; he was supposed to notice boobs. But hair glints?
When he was lifting weights in his basement, he'd think about lifting Sarah, up and down, astride him, and he'd get a hard-on while he was bench-pressing. Or when he was doing push-ups, he'd think about having Sarah beneath him, with the same result.
The truth was, he couldn't think about much else. It was a miracle he'd managed to keep his distance from her, because he hadn't been this obsessed with sex since he was sixteen. Naw, it wasn't a miracle; it was plain fear. He wanted her too much. He didn't think he'd been this desperate to fuck Shannon even in those first falling-in-love days. Of course, he'd already been fucking Shannon, so maybe that wasn't a good comparison.
The investigation was all that kept him from turning the car around and heading back to the Mountain Brook Inn. Until Sarah was cleared, she was off-limits. She had the sales receipts, she had the merchandise to match the sales receipts, the signature on her credit card matched the ones on the charge slips, and she had the movie ticket. A little more verification, some checking into her financial status, and she would be in the clear. Hell, Judge Roberts's kids stood to inherit a hell of a lot more than Sarah did; they all had alibis, too, but killers could be hired.
Cahill didn't have a good feeling about this one. Most murders were committed by someone close to the victim, a family member, a neighbor, a friend. This felt like the toughest of all cases, a killing by a stranger. What was the link? What had brought the killer to the house? Was it someone

Judge Roberts had sentenced? On the surface that made the most sense, except for the fact there was no sign of forced entry or of a struggle. It was as if he had opened the door to the killer, invited him in, and chatted with him in the library.

As if he knew him.

So maybe they were back to the neighbor, family member, or friend scenario.

Cahill tried to mentally walk through it. None of the neighbors had noticed a car in the driveway, but it was dark. Sarah had arrived home just before ten and found the body shortly afterward; she had called 911 at 10:03, the patrol cars had gotten there within five minutes, and he himself had arrived about fifteen minutes after her call. Rigor had just been starting in the body, which roughly placed the time of death, say, between six and eight, maybe eight-thirty. He thought it would be later rather than sooner, because it wasn't dark at six P.M.

Judge Roberts had opened the door to his killer. No shots had been fired right then, which would have been the most likely time and place for the shooting if the killer was someone who had done prison time because of the Judge and was out for vengeance. Instead they had walked into the library and sat down, or at least the Judge sat. He hadn't been alarmed; he'd been relaxed, the footrest of his recliner up.

The killer wasn't a stranger, wasn't someone who had threatened the Judge in the past.

It would be interesting to see what fingerprints the technicians had collected. The Judge's, Sarah's, possibly the cook's, definitely the cleaning ladies': those should be there. Sarah had given her fingerprints in the wee hours, for comparison. The cook, Leona Barksdale, had been scheduled to come in this morning to be printed, though she'd tearfully said she hadn't been inside that room in a few weeks. The cleaning ladies were set for this afternoon. Who else? The house was cleaned regularly, so any prints should be new ones.

The neighborhood would have to be canvassed; anyone could have walked over under cover of darkness, shot Judge Roberts, and calmly walked back home. Again, he ran into the question of motive. From what he'd found out so far, the old judge had been well liked. There weren't any skeletons hanging in his closet, no nastiness that surfaced in private. He didn't cheat, in either cards or business. He didn't gamble, didn't drink to excess, and so

far as Cahill had been able to find out, hadn't romanced anyone since his wife died eight years before.
So why would someone who hadn't run afoul of him in his court want to kill him?
If the motive wasn't revenge, sex, or money, what was left?
Nothing, that was what was left. So the motive still had to be one of the three. He doubted it was revenge, because the Judge had known his killer, invited him in. Sex? The man was eighty-five, hadn't dated, and from what everyone said, had been completely faithful to his wife while she was alive.
That left money.
Somehow, it always came back to money.
And that brought him full circle, back to Sarah.
His kids had grown up rich. They had always known the money was there. So why kill him now? Why not ten years ago, or last year? Why not wait a few years more and let him die of natural causes? Unless one of them was in financial difficulty-which he would find out-there was no reason for any of them to set up his murder. One of the adult grandchildren, perhaps? That bore looking into.
But Sarah was the most likely suspect.
Shit.
Sarah woke at three, disoriented and groggy. She lay there listening to the muted rumble of the air-conditioning, blinking at the thick curtains pulled over the window, and trying to remember where she was. Her head felt as if it were stuffed with cotton; it was an effort to think, much less move.
Then she remembered, and for a long moment the grief clawed at her throat, her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut, but that didn't help. She still saw the Judge sitting so peacefully in his leather recliner, with his blood and parts of his brain splattered across the room. She still smelled the awful, mingled smell of blood and body waste, and with a smothered sound, she opened her eyes.
Slowly, every muscle aching, she sat up. She was naked, pajamas not having been on the list of clothes she'd given Cahill. She had cried herself to sleep, and her eyelids felt gritty and raw. All in all, she thought, she didn't look very much like an ultracapable butler-or even an incompetent one.
The room was cold. Despite the chilly day, she'd turned on the air when she got back to the room, because her nose was stuffy and heat would have made breathing even more difficult. All she had wanted to do was fall into

bed, so she had put the DO NOT DTSTURB sign on the door and unplugged the phone. She'd placed her cell phone on the table beside the bed, so the family could get in touch with her if she was needed, but other than that, she hadn't want to talk to anyone.
The room was too cold. Actually, it was freezing. Sarah darted out of the warm nest of covers, swiftly switched the thermostat over to Heat, then dived back into bed and huddled under the covers, shivering.
There was something white on the floor just inside the door. Message slips. Sighing, she retrieved them-there were two-and once more retreated to the bed. This time, though, she switched on the lamp and stuffed the pillow behind her back so she could read the messages.
One was from the front desk. A jacket had been delivered for her, and they were holding it at the desk. The other was from Cahill, and was brief: "Call me." The time was listed as two-thirty.
Sighing, she picked up her cell phone and called the number listed.
He answered almost immediately. "Cahill." His deep voice was alert; he was probably buzzed on caffeine.
'1his is Sarah Stevens. I got your message."
'Were you asleep?"
"Mmm. I slept about four hours. By the way, thanks for sending the jacket over."
'~You're welcome. Listen, do you by any chance know if anyone owed Judge Roberts some money? Was he worried about any of his investments?"
Sarah rubbed her hand over her face. "He loaned money on a regular basis, but they were more like gifts, because if anyone tried to repay him, he'd just wave it away."
"Did anyone in the neighborhood borrow money from him?"
"Not that I know of. In that neighborhood? Who would need a loan?"
"Depends on whether or not anyone has a gambling problem, or is into drugs. Maybe someone wants to hide the money he spends on his honey. There are all sorts of possibilities. What about his family? Any of them having financial difficulty?"
"He never mentioned it if they were. I don't think there's a bad apple in the bunch." She paused, synapses firing as she followed this line of questioning and saw where it was leading. Coolly she said, "I'll get a copy of my own bank statement to you, and my investment portfolio. Do you want canceled checks, too?"

"Please." His tone remained brisk and professional.
"Actually, you'll have to get them. They're at the house."
"Where?"
"There's a fire safe in the closet. Everything is in there."
"Thank you." He disconnected, and Sarah growled as she disconnected her own phone. For a while this morning he had seemed a bit warmer, more human, but he was back to his old brusque self. To her dismay, it didn't matter whether he was friendly or not; there was something about him that made her want to lean on him. It didn't even matter that he was checking into her finances, trying to find a motive for her to have killed the Judge; the same process would clear her. He was doing his job. She wouldn't have felt nearly as confident if he'd blown off the possibility that she was guilty. He had to consider everyone, or something crucial might slip through the cracks.
Barbara and the rest of the family were convinced the killer was some ex-con from the Judge's past. After her first panicked assumption that her weirdo had done it, she had gone with logic and agreed with the others. Cahill didn't seem to be on the same page, though; he was concentrating more on her and the family. What had the cops found that he hadn't told? She knew she was innocent, and she knew the family was innocent. She had observed all of them over the past years, at holidays and on vacation, and one and all they had loved the Judge. He adored his children and grandchildren, and got on well with all of the in-laws. So what did Cahill know that she had missed?
The room was warmer now, and she got out of bed, grimacing when she caught sight of herself in the dresser mirror. Her face was drawn and colorless, her eyes swollen. She felt weak and shaky, the result of almost twenty-four hours without much food. Four tiny bites of Danish and fruit didn't provide a lot of nourishment. She needed to eat something, even if she had to choke it down. Maybe she would go down to the hotel restaurant, later. For now, though, she put on another pot of coffee and turned on the television, then crawled back into bed. She needed to be distracted by something mindless more than she needed food.
She had nothing to do. She was accustomed to there always being something to do. Her life was very organized for that reason, so every chore would be accomplished. She should be doing paperwork now, keeping track of the household expenses; she always did that on Thursdays.

She could go buy some pajamas. She was close to three major shopping centers: Brookwood, the Summit, and the Galleria. But it was still raining, she was exhausted and groggy, and frankly she didn't give a damn whether or not she had pajamas to sleep in.
She discovered that the Weather Channel was the most interesting program on at three-thirty in the afternoon. She turned off the television, turned off the bedside light, and pulled up the covers. As soon as she closed her eyes, though, she saw the Judge in his recliner, his head lolled to the side-and she smelled the odor. Hastily she sat up again and turned on the lamp.
What was she thinking? She had just made a pot of coffee. She couldn't believe she'd put on the coffee, then gone back to bed. Nothing drastic would happen, of course, other than the coffee getting old and bitter.
Neither she nor the Judge could stand old coffee-
He always came into the kitchen early in the morning, not waiting for her to bring the coffee to him. They would stand there chatting, leisurely sipping and sharing what they both considered one of life's finest little pleasures.
They would never share that first blissful cup of coffee again.
Like a loop of film that never stopped running, she saw him again: his white head tilted to the side, that thin dark streak running down his neck. His hair was a little mussed, but in the dim light that was, at first, the only thing she noted that was different. His hands were relaxed on the arms of the recliner, the footrest was up, as if he had just dozed off.
His hands were relaxed. The footrest was up.
Sarah stared across the room, seeing nothing but the awful scene from the night before. She had the feeling of the ground tilting beneath her, as if she had stepped out of reality into quicksand.
The footrest was up.
He was in his recliner-actually reclining.
The front door wasn't locked.
But the front door was always locked. He locked it himself as soon as he came in from his afternoon walk. In all the time Sarah had worked for him, she couldn't remember him ever leaving the front door unlocked.
What were the odds that the one time he did leave it unlocked, his killer walked in? Not very likely. Hell, the odds were astronomical against such a thing happening. He was very safety conscious, after the threats against him, and especially after the robbery.

So he hadn't forgotten to lock the door; he had unlocked it. To let someone in?
Why would he let a stranger come in? The answer was simple: He wouldn't. There was no sign of a struggle. No sign of forced entry-at least, none that Cahill had mentioned to her or the family, and she was certain he would have told them if there had been.
The bottom dropped out of her stomach. It made sense, in an awful way. The Judge had let someone he knew into the house. They had gone into the library . . . to talk? He'd been sitting in his favorite chair, the big leather recliner; he was relaxed, the footrest in the up position. And this acquaintance had pulled a gun and shot him in the head.
This was what Cahill had figured out, what he hadn't told them. Whoever the killer was, the Judge hadn't felt threatened. He had known his killer, felt comfortable and relaxed in his presence.
She almost vomited, because that meant she likely knew him, too.

Chapter 11

HE FELT GOOD. HE'D FORGOTTEN HOW GOOD IT REAllY DID feel, to hold all that power in his own hands, to take charge of his own destiny. It had been . . . how long? Seven years? That was proof he was in control, that he wasn't one of those maniacs who were slaves to compulsion. In the almost thirty years since he had taken care of the problem of his father, this was only the third time he'd been forced to act. Four times, total, in almost thirty years.
All in all, he felt justifiably proud of himself. Not many men could control themselves so well, not if they knew the rush, the sheer joy, of the act. Even more important, not many men were intelligent enough to get away with it. But the old man was out of the way now, and Sarah was free. Nothing stood in her way; she could come to him now.
Cahill sat in his cubicle, slowly leafing through the files and bank statements retrieved from the fireproof safe in Sarah's closet. Finally he dumped everything in an oversized padded bag and sat back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. Holy shit. The woman wasn't hurting for money.
Not that a hundred grand wasn't a lot of money, but she didn't need it. Must be nice, he thought, to be in a position where you didn't need a hundred

grand. Some people would grab for everything they could get, and no amount would ever be enough, but people like that didn't devote themselves to training for a well-paying job, then devote themselves to the job and save like mad. No, people who were just out for the money would steal it, commit fraud, marry old people and then in an effort to kill them, fiddle with the multitude of drugs old people always seemed to take, but they wouldn't work for it.

Sarah had evidently saved the vast majority of her salary from the time she started work. She'd invested it, and from what he could see she'd been smart about it. She hadn't gone heavily into tech stocks, and those she'd had she'd sold just as they started crashing, while she could still make some profit. She had blue-chip stocks, she had mutual funds, she had some workhorse stocks. She'd salted money away in a retirement fund, planning for the future. She had just turned thirty, and with everything added together she was knocking on the door of the millionaires' club.

That was one smart woman.

And being so smart, would she risk everything to add another hundred large to her account? Money was relative. If you were working a minimum-wage job and barely scraping by, with nothing left over for extras, then a hundred thousand was an enormous amount of money. He'd known mothers to kill their kids for a five-thousand-dollar insurance policy. But if you already had way over a hundred thousand, then in comparison it wasn't nearly as impressive. In this case, the risk outweighed the gain.

So there went her possible motive.

Good.

"You got anything?" his lieutenant asked, pausing by his desk. "The butler didn't do it."

"I thought she was top of your list."

"The motive evaporated."

"Money? How does money evaporate?"

"She has plenty of it. You know how much butlers make?"

The lieutenant scratched his nose. "I gather it's more than we thought."

"She makes more than you and me combined."

"No shit!"

"My thoughts exactly." Cahill shook his head. "She had everything to lose and, comparatively, not that much to gain. Not anything, when you consider that she earned more in a year working for him than she'll get in his will.

She'd be better off with him still alive. So there goes the motive. Not only that, she thought the world of the old man."
The lieutenant was a good guy, and he trusted his investigators. "So what else do we have?"
"Not much. The neighbors didn't see anything, and they all have alibis. The family all checks out, so far. Unless forensics turns up a smoking gun, this isn't looking good."
"It's been less than twenty-four hours."
But it was knocking hard on twenty-four hours, and if murders weren't solved quickly, they tended not to be solved at all.
'What about the cons he received death threats from? Anything turned up on them?"
"None of them are known to be in this area. One is currently a ward of the state, in the St. Clair facility, living off taxpayer money. One is in federal lockup. Only two are at large, and one of them is in Eugene, Oregon. The last known location of the last one was Chicago, in January." Cahill flipped a photo onto his desk of a heavyset man with a mustache. "Carl Jarmond. I don't think it's him."
"But he's a possibility."
Cahill shook his head. "Would Judge Roberts have let this man in his house? I don't think so. Every outside door in that house has a peephole, so he didn't open the door blind. He knew whoever it was."
"What numbers were on call return and redial?"
"I checked redial from every phone in the house. Nothing suspicious. The butler called her folks, and the phones the victim would have used showed calls to his banker, and another to an old friend of his-who also has an alibi. Call return was interesting. The phone in the library returned a call from a pay phone in the Galleria."
"Have you found out what time the call was made?"
'We're working on getting a list of all calls, both in and out."
"No way of telling who made it, though."
Cahill shook his head. The time of the call would tell them some things, such as if it was made close to the time of the murder, but that was about it. The Galleria was a busy mall; unless you were green-haired, spike-collared, and wore a Bozo suit-or, alternatively, were naked-the chances were small anyone would pay much attention to you. The chances of getting a viable fingerprint from the phone were somewhere between zero and laughable.

Video cameras from nearby stores trained on the store entrances might have caught something, though. That was worth checking. He said as much to the lieutenant.
"Good idea, Doc." He checked his watch. "Get started on that in the morning. For now, go home and get some sleep. You were up all night last night, and you haven't stopped today."
"I grabbed about three hours early this morning. I'm okay." His training in the Army had taught him how to function with a lot less rest than that, and for a longer time. "But I think I will call it a day." He definitely had something else to do, something he didn't think he could put off much longer. He might as well test the waters now.
At eight o'clock that night, the Weather Channel was still on, and Sarah had watched the same weather fronts for almost five hours now. Nothing had changed. She still felt sick, mentally running through all the Judge's acquaintances, the neighbors, anyone whom he wouldn't hesitate to let into the house. The problem was, he knew a lot of people whom she didn't know. She knew his immediate circle of friends, the immediate neighbors and some of the others, but of course he had old school chums, friends in law practice, college buddies, whom she'd never met. But why would any of them want to kill him?
The why of it was driving her crazy.
If they only knew why, she thought, they could figure out who. Why would anyone want to kill him, other than someone he'd sentenced to prison? And if it was an ex-con, why would the Judge have let him in the house, sat down, and relaxed? He wouldn't have.
Why ?
The phone rang and she grabbed it, glad for the distraction; maybe Barbara needed something done that would occupy her for a couple of hours.
"Have you had supper yet?"
She didn't need him to identify himself; Cahill's deep voice and abrupt tone was identification enough.
"Supper?"
"Or lunch?"
"I slept through lunch, remember."
"Then let's go to Milo's and get a hamburger."
Sarah dragged her hand through her hair. She needed to eat, but her stomach was still tied in knots. She hesitated long enough that he said, "Sarah?"

"I'm here. It's . . . I really don't feel like eating."
"Get ready anyway. I'll be there in ten minutes." He hung up, and she stared at the phone in astonishment.
Ten minutes!
Despite her shakiness, in ten minutes she was dressed, had brushed her teeth and washed her face, and was dragging a brush through her hair when he knocked on the door.
"You look like hell," he said by way of greeting.
"You're pretty, too," she said coolly, stepping back to let him in. Just because she was dressed didn't mean she was going anywhere with him. After all, she hadn't had on any clothes at all when he called.
He looked down at her bare feet. "Get your shoes on. Socks, too. The temperature's in the forties."
"I don't feel like eating," she repeated.
"Then you can watch me eat."
"Your charm is enormous." Despite the sarcasm, despite everything, for the first time that day she found herself smiling. It wasn't much of a smile, but it was real. He was like a Sherman tank, without finesse, but packing a great deal of power.
"Yeah, I know. It's exceeded only by the size of my-" He caught himself, flicking a quick glance at her. "---ego," he finished, and she could have sworn color stained his cheekbones. Evidently cops weren't supposed to make risque comments to suspects. He bent down and picked up her shoes, extending them to her. She got the impression he'd put them on her if she didn't do it herself.
She sat down on the bed and put on her socks and shoes. "I assume you're hungry and you want to talk to me, so you're killing two birds with one stone."
He shrugged. 'You can assume whatever you want."
Well, what on earth did that mean? As it happened, she wanted to talk to him, too, about her conclusions on the Judge's murder; she didn't mind watching him eat while they were talking.
They stopped at the front desk for her to get the jacket being held for her there. It was her Berber fleece, and she gratefully pulled it on as they left the hotel. The rain had stopped, but very recently, because the trees were still dripping. The pavement was dark and shiny.

Instead of the car he'd been driving earlier, he led her to a pickup truck, dark blue in color. The truck looked like something he'd drive, being short on fancy extras but with plenty of power. At least it had running boards, so she could get in without help. He opened the door for her and waited until she was settled in the seat before closing it and going around to his side.

Milo's was a hamburger tradition in the Birmingham area, with what most locals swore was the best hamburger in the world, and the best iced tea. The hamburger didn't have all the fancy stuff, like lettuce and tomato and pickles-though you could get cheese on it if you wanted-but it did have a dark sauce that almost defied the taste buds to decipher what was in it. That was it. Double meat, chopped onions, and the sauce. The burgers dripped with sauce. People bought extra containers of the sauce. They dipped their spicy fries in it, they poured more on their burgers, they used it at home on their own grilled burgers.

Needless to say, a Milo's hamburger was a messy affair. Even if her stomach had been cooperating, Sarah wouldn't have felt like dealing with the mess. When Cahill asked if she was sure she didn't want anything, she said, "I'm sure," and went to a table against the wall to wait for him.

When he joined her, he carried a tray with two tall paper cups of iced tea, three hamburgers, and two orders of fries. The tray was also loaded with little paper cups full of ketchup and packets of salt. She stared at the bounty with disbelieving eyes. "You said you were hungry, but I thought you were talking normal, human hungry, not Koko the gorilla hungry."

He set the tray on the table and took the seat across from her. "Part of it is for you. I hope you like onions, because I do. Eat." He put a cup of tea, a burger, and an order of fries in front of her.

"What does the fact that you like onions have to do with whether or not I like onions?" she murmured, trying to convince her stomach to unknot. She really did need to eat, and normally she liked a Milo's as well as anyone else. She just wasn't certain she could swallow, or that any food would stay down even if she could.

"In case I break down and kiss you, I wouldn't want to gross you out with onion breath." Without looking up, he began salting his fries.

Just like that, the world tilted on its axis. Sarah looked wildly around the restaurant, wondering if she had stepped into some alternate universe.

"What did you say?" she asked faintly. Surely she had misheard him.

"You heard me. " He glanced up, and snorted. "If you could see your face. You act as if a man's never been attracted to you before. "
Okay, she'd risk a stomach in revolt. She had to do something to give herself time to adjust to this sudden shift. She plucked out a fry, dipped it in ketchup, and took a bite. The hot, spicy taste slapped her taste buds awake. She took her time chewing and swallowing, so she was then able to reply in an even tone. "Let's just say few men could have made it plainer than you that you aren't attracted."
"When I run scared, I do it right." He unwrapped his first burger, doctored it with salt, and took a big bite.
She took refuge in another french fry. After three or four of them, she decided she needed something bigger, so she unwrapped her burger. Dark sauce coated the waxed paper, dripped from between the two halves of bun. She took a bite-God, heaven-while she thought this through. His turnabout was too abrupt; there had to be something behind it. Ah, she had it.
"You think I killed the Judge," she said, "but you don't have any evidence, so you think if you get close to me, I might let something incriminating slip."
"Good try." He looked up at her, his hard cop's gaze very blue, very direct. "Look, my ex-wife would tell you in a heartbeat that I'm an asshole, and, hell, she may be right. I'll tell you, up front, that I haven't been fit company since the divorce. It was vicious, and getting over something like that takes awhile. I haven't wanted to get involved with anyone, other than-"
He stopped, and she said, "For sex," filling in the blank.
"I wasn't going to be that blunt, but, yeah."
So he was divorced, and the process had been nasty. Healing from a split like that was like healing from any other trauma; it took time, and it wasn't easy. That made him a bad risk right now, not that she was in the market for a relationship, either. "How long has it been?"
"Two years since I caught her cheating on me, a year since the divorce was final."
"Ouch. Very nasty." What kind of idiot would cheat on a man like him? Not that she had any way of judging, but if her feminine instincts had been cats, they'd all have been purring right now in response to the testosterone she could practically smell on him.
"Yeah, it was. But it's over, maybe more over than I realized. I'm attracted to you, I tried to ignore it, and it didn't work. By the way, I've already seen

your bank statement and investment portfolio; you don't need Judge Roberts's money."
"So I'm not a suspect now?"
"Let's just say as far as I'm concerned, you're in the clear."
That called for another bite or two of hamburger, chased by a french fry.
"Some people might think you're after me because of the money. The timing is a tad suspicious."
"A tad," he agreed. "You make almost three times as much money as I do, and Mountain Brook cops are well paid. But I'd say you usually make more than anyone you date, so you're used to it."
"My dates don't usually see my bank statement first," she said dryly.
"Look, money's nice, but I'm not hurting. My ego isn't hurt by a woman making more than I do, either."
"I know, you told me; it's enormous."
There it was again, that flush of color on his cheekbones. Fascinated, she watched it fade as he devoted himself to his second hamburger. Despite the circumstances, she was really beginning to enjoy herself.
He wiped his mouth. "Okay, you've accused me of trying to get close to you so I can get enough evidence to convict you of murder-a little undercover work, I guess-and of wanting your money. Anything else?"
"I'll let you know if anything comes to mind."
"You do that. In the meantime, on my side of the table is a lot of attraction. How about your side?"
He definitely had the finesse of a tank. On the other hand, that blunt honesty was somehow reassuring. A woman would always know where she stood with this man, for good or ill.
The big question was, what did she want to do about it?
His honesty forced her to be at least as straightforward as he was. "My side looks pretty much like your side. That doesn't mean getting involved would be a good idea."
A very male smile of satisfaction curved his mouth. "Getting involved is what it's all about. Millions of people work hard to get involved, actively search for it. Think of all the hours of hard labor put in in singles' bars."
"I've never been to a singles' bar. That should tell you something."
"That you've never needed to. I figure any time you don't have a man, it's because you don't want one."

She didn't say anything, staring down at the table. She saw that she'd eaten half of the burger, and all of the fries. His method of distracting her had certainly worked. On the other hand, she definitely felt better with some food in her stomach, even fast food. She could almost feel her energy level rising.

'We can take this as slow as you want," he said. '1his isn't a good time for you, and I have a couple of speed bumps in my way, too. I just wanted you to know I'm interested." He shrugged. "You don't have to get through this alone, unless that's the way you want it."

Oh, damn. She'd been doing so well, pushing her grief to the background for a little while. Just like that her eyes began swimming, and she blinked rapidly, trying to hold back the tears.

"Ah, hell, I didn't mean to-Let's get out of here." He began gathering paper and napkins, dumping the trash into a bin and placing the tray on top.

Blindly she followed him out of the restaurant, and as they walked to his truck, he put his arm around her.

"I'm sorry," he said, thrusting a handkerchief into her hands.

She wiped her eyes, leaning into the strength and warmth of his body. His arm felt good around her. She wanted to put her head on his shoulder and weep; instead she took a deep breath. "He was a sweet man. I'll cry a lot for him before this is over."

He unlocked the door and she climbed inside, reaching for the seat belt. He stopped her, his hand over hers, and he leaned inside.

She made no move to evade the kiss. She didn't want to evade it. She wanted to know how he kissed, how he tasted. His mouth was warm, the contact light, almost gentle, as if his intent was more to comfort than arouse.

That lasted about two seconds. Then he slanted his head, his lips parted, and he deepened the kiss until his tongue was in her mouth and her arms were around his neck. The bottom dropped out of her stomach and her entire body clenched, and she knew her purring instincts hadn't been wrong. Good Lord, the man could kiss.

He lifted his head, running his tongue along his lower lip as if savoring the taste of her. "That was good." His tone was so low it almost rumbled.

"Yes, it was." Her own tone was a tad . . . breathy. Where had that come from? She had never sounded breathy before in her life.

"Do you want to do it again?"

'We'd better not."
"Okay," he said, and kissed her again.
This man was dangerous. If she wasn't careful, she'd be involved in a full-fledged affair with him before she knew it-maybe even before morning. Now was definitely not the time, and she had to get herself under control while she still could. After giving her the cold shoulder, now he was moving at light speed in the opposite direction, and she was a little shell-shocked.
It took some effort, but she pulled her mouth away, gasping for air. "Red light, Detective. Stop."
He was breathing hard, too, but he stepped back. "Permanently?" The word was raw with disbelief.
"No!" Her answer was embarrassingly forceful. "Just . . . for now." She took a deep breath. '1here are more important things to talk about."
"Such as?"
"Such as, I think the Judge knew the killer."
His face went blank. He closed her door and went around to the driver's side, getting behind the wheel and starting the truck. A light drizzle had started again, and he turned on the windshield wipers.
"I know he did," he said. "But what makes you think so?"

Chapter 12

MAYBE HE WASN'T SO CONVINCED OF HER INNOCENCE, after all. The thought cooled her down, gave her a bit of much needed mental distance from him. "I know the Judge.... knew him," she corrected herself. "He never, never left the doors unlocked. I checked the house every night before going to bed and not once did he leave any door unsecured. It was automatic for him; when he came inside, he locked the door behind him. I guess he got in the habit after he got the first death threat, when Mrs. Roberts was still alive. But last night"-God, was it only last night, it felt like a week-"the front door was unlocked."
"Could be coincidence."
"That he'd leave the door unlocked on the one night a killer came looking for him?" She threw Cahill a derisive glance. "I don't think so. I think this person came to the door, and the Judge knew him and let him in. When I

found him, the Judge was sitting in his recliner, with the footrest up. He was relaxed. He didn't feel he was in any danger. So he knew the guy."
'Why are you so certain it was a man?"
That question gave her pause. "I suppose I'm thinking in general terms. It's easier than saying 'the killer' every time. And the cons who made the death threats were all men, so the idea stuck. Plus the weirdo who sent me the pendant is most likely a man, and my first thought was that he had done it."
"Hmm." Cahill scratched his jaw, as if considering that possibility. "Has he contacted you again? Sent anything else? Have you had any hang-ups on the phone, or any other kind of strange call?"
"No, nothing else at all. Just the pendant. One incident doesn't establish a pattern, does it?"
"You know the saying. Once in a row doesn't mean shit."
"That's what I figured."
Deftly he steered through the traffic on 280. "Last night, you said you went to the movie so he'd have a chance to approach you, if he was watching."
She'd been in shock the night before, but she thought that was pretty much verbatim what she'd said. Cahill was sharp, very sharp. "That's right."
He glanced at her. "What made you think he'd be watching?"
"Nothing, except the gift made me feel so uneasy. I hadn't been able to put it out of my mind. Something like that is . . . It put me on edge. That's the only way I can describe it." She shuddered. "Just the thought that he might be following me, watching me, gives me the creeps. And not knowing who he is made it worse, so I thought I'd give him the opportunity to introduce himself. At least then I'd know what he looks like."
"But no one approached?"
"No one tried to sit next to me, no one spoke to me, no one even looked at me a second time that I could tell."
"You know, if someone was fixated on you, and crazy enough to start following you around, giving him an opportunity like that wasn't a great idea."
"Probably not," she agreed. "But if he tried anything, I thought I'd be able to take him by surprise."
"The karate, you mean? What if he'd had training, too?"
"Then I'd be in trouble. I thought the odds were in my favor, though."
He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "I don't like the idea of you trying to draw anyone out like that. That's my personal reaction. My

reaction as a cop is, don't ask for trouble."
"That's basically the same thing," she said, amused.
"How about that. Look, if anything strange happens, if you think you're being followed, if you get another gift, or a funny phone call, let me know. Immediately. Day or night."
"I don't think you'd be very thrilled if I called you at three A.M. to tell you some drunk had just called the wrong number."
"I said to call me, and I meant it. Who knows? Maybe all you'll need to do will be to roll over and punch me."
She rubbed her forehead. Light speed? He was moving at warp speed now. The biggest problem she had was that it didn't turn her off. No matter how fast he moved, her hormones were keeping pace. For her own sanity, she needed him to again suspect her of murder, so she could pull back. Otherwise . . . she didn't want to think about otherwise.
She had always been cautious about dating, about serious relationships. Part of it was because being tied down didn't fit in with her life plans right now, but another big part of it was something inside herself that was intensely private and self-sufficient. Letting someone in on a romantic level wasn't easy, because that meant letting go of some of her personal control. She could and did make friends easily, she loved the Judge, liked his family, but there had always been another level of intimacy that she hadn't let anyone reach. Cahill, she thought, might reach that level.
It was a case of good chemistry, but bad timing. She wasn't ready to settle down, and Cahill was recovering from a rocky divorce. He might be looking for a relationship, but she seriously doubted he put the word "permanent" in front of it. Rebound romances weren't a good idea at any time. In another year or so . . . maybe he'd be a better risk. As for where she would be in another year or so, that was anyone's guess.
So letting this thing go any further wasn't a good idea.
He waved a hand in front of her face. "Are you in there?"
She batted his hand away. "I'm thinking."
"That's a relief. I was afraid the idea of sleeping with me put you in a catatonic state."
She was surprised into laughing, an actual, honest laugh. "That happens often, does it?"
"I hadn't thought so, but looking back, there may have been one or two times-" He grinned and shrugged, and Sarah laughed again.

"It must be your enormous charm."
"I thought that was my ego."
"That, too." It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what other enormous qualities he had, but she stopped herself in time. Sexy banter was always fun, but with him she sensed the situation could get out of control before she knew it, as fast as he moved. He could take a quip and move her right into bed with it, if she wasn't on her guard. She was too damned susceptible to him, but at least she knew it.
"Cahill-"
"My name's Thompson. Some people call me Tom, some call me Doc. You can call me sweetheart."
A sound dangerously close to a giggle bubbled in her throat. "Are you always this sure of yourself?"
"Faint hearts, and all that. If you don't like me, you'll slap me down, or just plain slap me. You said the attraction is mutual, so I'm taking you at your word." He turned into the parking lot and slotted the truck into an empty space, turning off the engine and headlights. The drizzle immediately began to dot the windshield, distorting the lights and images.
"I don't rush into any relationship, especially not one with a man who's newly divorced and still carrying around a lot of baggage. "
He shifted, angling his upper body toward her, his left arm draped over the steering wheel and the right one stretched out along the back of the seat, inviting her to slide closer. Why couldn't the truck have nice, safe bucket seats, instead of a bench seat? She could have sworn the truck tilted to the left, too, because staying on her own side was more difficult than it should have been.
"Baggage is normal," he said. "It's what makes us who we are. Granted, I'd rather not be an embittered woman-hater, but-"
He stopped, because she was definitely giggling. "Good," he said, his expression softening as he used one finger to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "You sounded as if you were convincing yourself of something with that baggage argument. Don't think too much, Sarah. Let's just see where this goes. We may bore each other to tears within a week."
She snorted. "Yeah, right."
"Stranger things have happened." That one finger touched her cheek, lightly stroked. Without thinking she turned her face and nestled it against his hand, and just that simple touch made her nipples harden. He smiled, as if

he knew the effect he had on her. "Once you get over this weird hang-up you have about having wild monkey sex with a man you barely know, we can have a lot of fun."

She bailed out of the truck, and was still laughing as she strode into the hotel lobby, sending him off with a backward wave. Laughing felt strange, with everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, but it also felt good. Laughter didn't stop the grief, but it made the weight of it a little easier to bear.

In one fell swoop, Cahill had fed her, distracted her, aroused her, and amused her. Not many men were that versatile, she thought as she rode the elevator upward. His sly sense of humor was astonishing when she remembered how dour he'd seemed the night he interviewed her about the robbery.

Which left her . . . where?

She really, really wanted to forget caution and common sense, and have a flaming hot affair with him. The sex would be . . . She couldn't even begin to imagine the sex, because she'd never before had such a strong physical reaction to anyone. And therein was the big problem. Not the sex, but the way she felt. She could get in over her head before she knew it, and letting herself care too much about him was just asking for a heartache.

The smart thing to do would be to start hunting for a job in another state. Florida, maybe, on one of those huge Palm Beach estates. She'd be closer to her parents, too. There was always California, or the Hamptons; she wasn't worried about finding another job. She had to update her resume anyway; she no longer had a job, or a place to live. She hadn't really absorbed that before, with all her attention focused on what had happened, but the shock had lessened a little and she was beginning to think of all the ramifications. She probably wouldn't have the option of having a flaming hot affair with him, unless it was a short one-or a long-distance one. Cahill didn't strike her as a long-distance-type man. So all of this angst and indecision was a waste of time; she had to deal with reality, and reality dictated she get a job. She had chosen a very specialized field in which to make her living, so that meant she couldn't find a position just anywhere; she was limited to the moneyed communities, such as Beverly Hills, Buckhead, Mountain Brook. It was possible she would stay on in Mountain Brook; she'd already had the one job offer, though she doubted it was still open now, after she had so definitely turned it down. That was assuming she would take the position,

anyway; the interview process was a two-way street. The employer had to feel comfortable with her, but she also had to feel comfortable with the employer. After all, she would be fitting herself into the home, forming the structure of routine and comfort. If she didn't like the employer, then the level of dedication she demanded of herself would be difficult to maintain, and she would be miserable.

She felt better now that she was focused on the hard facts, rather than the tantalizing possibilities of a relationship with Cahill; the ground beneath her had solidified. She could deal with him, so long as she kept her head. For the next few days, anyway, she had more serious things to consider.

The rain continued the next day, heavier and colder. The medical examiner released Judge Roberts's body to his family and they began the task of making the final arrangements. Sarah handled placing the obituary in the newspapers, and she put herself completely at the disposal of the family. She drove them to the funeral home they'd chosen, to deal with casket selection and the financial matters. The Judge had wanted to be buried beside his wife, had even bought a double tombstone when she died with his name already chiseled on it, so at least they didn't have to deal with that decision. Selecting a casket, however, shattered them. Randall and Jon held together, but they seemed incapable of making a decision; they kept looking to Barbara, and Barbara began silently crying.

Sarah stepped out of the background and gave Barbara a hug. "I know," she murmured in sympathy. "But it has to be done."

Barbara turned to her, eyes blinded by tears. "Which one do you like?"

The question floored her. Stunned, Sarah looked around at the caskets, and at Randall and Jon. They were both watching her now with a sort of desperate plea in their expressions. It couldn't be plainer that they couldn't handle this.

Sarah took a deep breath. "I like the bronze one." It was expensive, but they could easily afford it, and they would feel better thinking they'd bought the best for their father.

"I like that one best, too," Randall said quickly.

Barbara blotted her eyes. "The bronze?" she asked, her voice quivering. She looked at it. "It's very nice, isn't it?"

"The best," the funeral director put in. After all, business was business.

"I like the color." Barbara took a deep breath and turned to Sarah again. "I think you're right. We'll take the bronze."

From there they visited a florist to order flowers. The service would be at two o'clock on Sunday, at the huge church the Judge had attended. Sarah had already gotten rooms for the rest of Randall's family, who were driving down that day, Friday, after work and school. Visitation for friends would be at the funeral home on Saturday night, and before that, there was shopping to be done.

Sarah had had the presence of mind to request a charcoal suit and black pumps from her closet, but she needed panty hose and a few other small items. Barbara decided the clothes she'd brought wouldn't do at all, and Blair tearfully confided she didn't even own any dark clothes. Julia, Jon's wife, also decided she needed something different. Only Emily had come fully prepared.

The most logical thing to do was to begin at the Galleria, since it was attached to the hotel, but Blair had already roamed the mall from end to end, both stories, and wasn't satisfied with anything. Barbara did find some shoes she liked at Parisian, and Sarah quickly picked up the items she needed, including several black umbrellas, since it appeared they would be going back out in the rain after all.

By evening, they had exhausted the contents of the Summit, Brookwood, and Sarah had driven them to all the exclusive boutiques that she knew of in the area. Barbara finally settled on a stylish black suit with a long, slim skirt, which, given the weather forecast, was a good idea. Blair selected a black skirt that ended just above her knees, and a slim-fitting, short jacket in eggplant; she had removed the ring from her eyebrow and washed the colored streaks from her hair. Funerals were serious business, both emotionally and fashionwise. Julia had been much more decisive than the other two, making her selection, a navy blue dress with a matching tunic jacket, at the first department store they visited in the Summit.

Sarah's feet were so tired she was almost limping by the time she herded her charges back to the hotel. The rain had fallen unceasingly all day long, making shopping even more difficult, as they'd had to juggle umbrellas along with everything else. Her shoes were wet, her pants were damp, and despite the Berber jacket she was cold. All she wanted to do was take a hot shower and sit down with her feet elevated. Her cell phone hadn't rung all day long, and there were no messages waiting for her when she reached the inn. Maybe, she thought, she could rest now.

The room phone rang as she was peeling off her damp socks. She groaned and flopped back on the bed, considering not answering it. But it might be one of the family, so she picked it up on the sixth ring.
"Ms. Stevens, this is Greg Holbrook with the News. I'd like to interview you about the tragic murder-"
"I'm not giving interviews," she said firmly. "Good-bye." She disconnected, then immediately rang the front desk and asked for a different room, booked under a false name. The next hour was spent handling that and getting her things switched to a room four doors down. She should have thought of the press before and taken those same precautions.
Her new room was cold, having been empty all day. She turned the heat on full blast, and when the chill was gone, began stripping for that hot shower that she needed desperately now. Right on cue, her cell phone rang.
At least this wasn't likely to be the press. But if it was someone in the Judge's family, then it meant something had come up she needed to handle.
"Where are you?" Cahill demanded irritably. "The front desk said you'd checked out."
"Bless them," she said with deep gratitude. "A reporter called my room, so I changed rooms and booked it under a different name. "
"Good. Have you had supper?"
"I've eaten today, if that's what you're asking."
"It isn't. I'm asking specifically about supper."
"Then, no, I haven't, and you couldn't blow me out of this room with dynamite. I took three of the ladies shopping. My feet hurt, I'm cold, and I want a hot shower. Period."
"Poor baby," he said, and she could tell he was smiling. 'What's your room number?"
"I'm not telling. I don't want company."
"I give a great foot massage."
The thought of having her feet massaged almost made her moan. She had the presence of mind, though, to say, "I'll take a rain check. I'm exhausted, and dealing with you takes a lot of energy. I'm not up to it tonight."
"That's probably the best kiss-off I've ever had. Okay, I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep tight."
"Tomorrow?" Tomorrow was Saturday. She had . . . nothing to do. The realization was so strange as to be disorienting. Her Saturdays were always busy. If she took her half day on Saturday, then the mornings were spent

getting the Judge's day arranged and everything taken care of. If she didn't take her half day on Saturday, that was because something was going on that required her supervision. Either way, Saturdays were busy days.
"I'll be working," Cahill said. "Checking out some things. But I'll see you tomorrow night at the funeral home."
That should be safe enough.
'When will we be able to get into the house?"
"Maybe Sunday. I think we've about done everything we can there."
'Will you let me know ahead of time? I want to have the library cleaned before the family sees it."
"Of course," he said gently, and repeated, "Sleep tight," before hanging up.
The day of the funeral dawned clear and cold, with a wind that sliced through jackets. This was probably winter's last hurrah, Sarah thought- blackberry winter, the cool spell that came right after the blackberry bushes had bloomed. Indeed, the forecast called for a fast warming trend. On Monday the temperature was supposed to reach sixty-two; on Tuesday, seventy-five. By week's end it was forecast to be in the low eighties.
At the family's insistence she sat with them in church. Cahill sat somewhere behind her; he'd said hello when he came in, briefly touched her hand, then pulled back to the fringes to watch. She wasn't certain exactly what he was watching for, but no detail escaped his attention.
In her mind, she said good-bye to the Judge. She could almost feel his spirit hovering nearby, perhaps taking leave of his loved ones. Her lips trembled as she remembered all the funny things he'd said, the twinkle in his eyes, the joy he'd had in life. Losing him was like losing a grandfather, and there would always be a tiny gap in her heart, in her life, that only he could fill.
The church was filled to overflowing. His old friends were devastated by his loss, and they all looked more frail than they had just a few days before, as if some of their spirit was gone, too. The air was heavy with the scent of flowers, roses and carnations and mums, and hothouse gardenias with their hauntingly sweet smell. There couldn't be many flowers left in Birmingham, Sarah thought, looking at the huge wall of floral offerings behind the casket.
Southern funerals were maudlin and ultimately comforting, with their ceremony and tradition. Because the Judge was a war veteran, his VFW chapter posted an honor guard. During the funeral procession to the cemetery, all traffic they met stopped, with most people turning on their

headlights in sympathy and pulling off the highway if they could. Police cars blocked intersections for the procession to go through unimpeded. Sarah had always been amused by the traffic etiquette for a funeral, but today, now that she was in the procession, she was grateful for the consideration.

There was an additional brief service at the grave; then the family pulled back and the somber work of burial began. After the grave was filled in and covered with the huge array of flowers, Barbara and Blair each selected a perfect rose from one of the arrangements for a keepsake. Randall and Jon looked uncomfortable, as if they, too, wanted a rose; but they were men, so they stood back rather than admit to such sentimentality. Their wives, though, exchanged glances with Barbara and made their own floral selections.

Normally there was food served after a funeral, at the bereaved's home. With the Judge's house still off-limits-and having guests there in the house where he had been murdered didn't seem right, anyway-one of his friends had offered the hospitality of his house. Many of the funeral attendees trooped off for food, drink, and reminiscing, but Sarah slipped away to her SW. A couple of reporters were in the crowd, and she wanted to get away before they could buttonhole her.

Cahill caught up with her as she got behind the steering wheel. "You can arrange for those cleaners," he said. "I'll hold the family off until tomorrow, give you time to take care of things."

"Thanks." Now that the funeral was over, she was at a loss. There was nothing else to do, other than handle the cleaning. "Is it okay if I get some of my stuff out?" She was thinking specifically of her laptop, so she could begin updating her resume.

He looked surprised. "You can stay there, if you want."

She shuddered at the thought. "Not now. Not until the library is cleaned."

He nodded in understanding, and gave her a card. "This firm specializes in hard-to-remove stains." Meaning blood, and brain matter.

She glanced at the name. "Thank you. I'll call them first thing in the morning."

"You can call now; that second number is the guy's home phone. They're geared for emergencies."

That couldn't be a great job, cleaning up after murders. On the other hand, someone had to do it, and in cases like this it was best to hand the chore off

to professionals. She knew she couldn't bear tackling the job herself, even though she was trained to handle all types of stain removal.
'Will you be all right?" Cahill asked, blue eyes very clear and direct as he studied her tired face. He shifted so his shoulders blocked the open door, giving them the illusion of privacy. "I have some things to do, but if you need company, I'll-"
"No. " She touched his hand, then swiftly withdrew because just that brief touch was sharp temptation. "Thanks, but I'm okay. I have some things to take care of, too."
"I'll call you tomorrow, then." He leaned into the SW and kissed her on the cheek. "Keep your cell phone on so I don't have to hunt you down."
"Are you planning to arrest me?"
'We still need to discuss some things, make some decisions. I'11 take you into custody if I have to." He walked away, and she stared at his broad back, tiny shivers prickling her spine.
If she intended to run, she needed to do it soon. Very soon.

Chapter 13

CAHILL HATED SURVEILLANCE VIDEOTAPES. THE ANGLES WERE weird, the quality was very iffy, and mostly they were boring. They were also invaluable if anything interesting happened within the camera's range. So far, he hadn't found anything interesting.
The pay phones in the Galleria were located all through the mall, some of them close to the parking decks, some of them around the escalators. The one from which Judge Roberts had been called was near one of the escalators. If the gods had been smiling on him, the Galleria would have had surveillance cameras aimed at the huge main concourse; no such luck. He'd had to settle for the stores near that particular pay phone. The security cameras aimed at the store entrances were the only ones that could possibly pick up the traffic at that pay phone.
Most of them were complete washouts. The angle was wrong; one camera had malfunctioned and showed nothing new on the tape for a couple of weeks, which told Cahill how often it was checked. Most surveillance tapes ran on loops; if you didn't get to them before the loop was completed, they

would begin taping over whatever was at the beginning. Wait too long, and everything in the desired time period was gone.
The best part about them was that they were timed and dated. He had the exact time of the call made to Judge Roberts, so he didn't have to watch each entire tape. Allowing for discrepancies in the timers, he began fifteen minutes before the targeted time, and watched for fifteen minutes afterward. That was half an hour on each tape, taking note of the people who walked past the store entrances, comparing them to the next tape, and the next one. He finally hit paydirt: a man in a light-colored suit used that particular phone and the digital time on the tape put it within two minutes of what the telephone company said was the time of the call. Cahill continued watching, and no one else used that phone for at least five minutes. The next user was a young girl in baggy jeans and huge, clunky boots.
Bingo. The man in the light-colored suit was the most likely suspect.
That was the good news. The bad news was that the angle was awful, and showed only the lower two-thirds of the body.
Back to all the other tapes, trying to catch a glimpse of a man wearing a light-colored suit as he walked past the stores on his way to that phone. Finally he came up with an image, blurred, the face turned away, but at least he had something. When the picture was enhanced, maybe they would be able to pick out something that would lead them to the guy. Maybe Sarah or one of the family would recognize him.
"Sarah, please, stay," Barbara said, leaning over to take both of Sarah's hands in hers. They were in the suite's parlor, alone, amazingly. "The house will have to be closed up and sold, and none of us can spare the time right now. We talked it over, and all of us are strapped for time. There's so much to be done with the legal aspects, Blair is still in school, Randall's granddaughter has to have open-heart surgery-we need you. Your salary will be the same."
Sarah squeezed Barbara's hands. "Of course I'll stay. You don't have to convince me. I'll be here as long as you need me."
"You've been a godsend; you have no idea. If you hadn't been here, I don't think I could have coped." Barbara was tired, her face drawn with grief, but she was dry-eyed.
"Do you have any idea how long-"
"At least a month, maybe more. We have to settle his affairs, his personal effects have to be packed, things put in storage. We don't want the house to

sit empty until it sells; houses deteriorate so fast without someone living in them. It may sell immediately, but it may not."
A house on Briarwood, in the old-money section? Some people would be reluctant to buy a house in which a murder had occurred, but the location and the house itself would probably overcome that. Sarah would be surprised if it was on the market for a full month before someone snapped it up. This was a perfect interim situation for her: she could afford to take her time looking for a new position anyway, but this way she wouldn't have to dip into her savings. She wouldn't have to pack in a rush, but could do that gradually, too. Instead of an abrupt uprooting, she could ease into a new job, new quarters, new responsibilities.
"I assume you want the grounds kept up, and the house cleaners in on a regular basis."
"Oh, of course; the house will be much easier to sell if it's looking well kept. It's so difficult to think of selling it," Barbara said, her voice trailing away. "He lived there almost fifty years. I grew up there. It's a wonderful old house, full of memories, and he took such good care of it. Mother designed it, you know. It's her dream house."
"Is there no way you could keep it in the family?"
"I don't think so. None of us want to move back here, and of course the estate taxes are horrendous, even divided three ways. The house will have to be sold to help pay them. None of us can afford to keep the house and pay that much additional tax. I know Daddy would have liked for one of us to have it, but the way things are-" She shrugged helplessly, and moved on to another topic.
"When the police let us into the house tomorrow, Randall and Jon and I are going to select some mementos. Daddy left directions for the main things, of course, but there are some smaller items that we want. Randall and Jon can take their selections home with them, since they're driving, but would you box mine up and ship them to me?"
Sarah got out the small pad that was always in her bag, and made a note.
"Do you want me to arrange a meal there tomorrow? Leona will be more than happy to prepare any meal you like."
Barbara hesitated, then shook her head. "I don't know exactly what time we'll be there, or how long it will take us to go through things. I don't even know how many of us will be there."

"I can arrange something," Sarah said. "A big pot of soup, and sandwiches, if nothing else."
"That would be wonderful. Or we could all go to Milo's. Shaw is beginning to complain because he hasn't had a hamburger yet."
Sarah felt a private little zing at the mention of Milo's. Maybe one day she wouldn't associate Cahill's kisses with the hamburgers, but right now the two were closely linked in her mind. She felt a sudden intense craving for a hamburger herself.
Staying in Mountain Brook meant she would be seeing him again. She didn't know if that was good or bad, but she definitely knew the idea was exciting.
Barbara didn't know it, but the cleaners were at the house now. The rate for cleaning on Sunday night was higher than during the week, but Sarah thought it was well worth it for the Judge's family to be able to get into the house as early as possible tomorrow, since Barbara and her brood had a late-afternoon flight back to Dallas. Sarah planned, after leaving the Wynfrey, to go to the house to check that the cleaning job was adequate, but then she was going back to the inn to spend the night. Even though her quarters were totally separate, she wasn't ready yet to be alone there. Going back wouldn't be easy, she thought.
Nor was it. The cleaners were already gone when she got there later that night, and she had to force herself to go inside, to walk down the hall and look into the library. A strong sense of deja vu seized her just outside the door, and she froze; when she looked inside, would the Judge be sitting there in his recliner, his blood and brains splattered against the far wall, and on the carpet? Would the smell still be there?
No, the smell was gone. She would be able to tell from here if it lingered, wouldn't she? The odor had been pervasive, finding its way down the hall, into the breakfast room, even the kitchen. A11 she could smell now was something clean and citrusy.
Steeling herself, she entered the library. The cleaners had done a good job with the carpet and wall; they had evidently cleaned the carpet in the entire room, so no one could tell by a clean spot exactly where they had removed a stain. The recliner was gone; she had no idea where it was. Maybe the police had it, though what they would want with the recliner, she couldn't imagine. Or perhaps the cleaners had removed it from the room for some reason; maybe the odor was impossible to remove from leather.

Tomorrow she would ask the whereabouts of the recliner. It might be in the garage, but she wasn't going to look for it tonight. Slowly she backed out of the room, turning out the light and closing the door. She didn't imagine she would ever again enter that room, for any reason.

She hadn't collected the mail since Wednesday, but someone, probably Cahill, had brought it in and put it on the kitchen island. He'd have gone through the mail, of course, to see if there was anything suspicious, any correspondence that bore looking into. She flipped through the stack; if there had been anything unusual, Cahill had taken it with him, because all she saw was the normal bills, catalogs, and magazines.

She left the mail on the island and went upstairs to her quarters. Everything was subtly wrong, out of place; someone had searched every inch, so she supposed she should be grateful for the relative neatness. At least the contents of drawers hadn't been dumped on the floor and left. She straightened the books in the bookcase, neatly stacked the few magazines, put the potted plants back in place, adjusted the position of a vase, some framed pictures.

In the bedroom, her bed had been stripped. She gathered the discarded sheets to put in the wash, then went into the bathroom and began methodically putting it to rights. She couldn't put her life back the way it was, but she could reconstruct her immediate surroundings.

She put out fresh towels, and arranged all her cosmetics the way she preferred.

Back in the bedroom, she remade the bed, then opened the double closet doors and began rehanging her clothes, arranging them so what she wore most often was close to hand. Her shoes were a jumbled mess; she pulled all of them out of the closet, then sat down on the floor and paired them up, putting them back in the closet in neat rows.

She really hated that someone had gone through her underwear drawer. She was a bit of a fanatic about her underwear, courtesy of two brothers who had loved to tease her by hiding it, or by tying her bra to a forked stick to make a slingshot. Older brothers were a real trial. She wished now she had a video of Noel with her very first pair of lacy panties stuck on his head; she'd love to show it to his Marine buddies. Her brothers had never treated Jennifer like that, but then she would only have cried, and that was no fun. Sarah had chased after them with fury in her eyes and murder in her heart; if she'd ever caught them, blood would have been shed.

Sarah had been forced to hide her underwear for years, stuffing it in unlikely places so Daniel and Noel couldn't find it. Once they were gone, she had reveled in being able to have a real underwear drawer. She always neatly folded each garment, and the lacy, sexy stuff was in its own drawer. She didn't segregate by color-she wasn't that far gone-but it truly annoyed her to see her careful stacks all messed up and mixed together.

Cahill had probably searched her underwear drawer personally. He looked like the type who would enjoy something like that. She could just see him holding up a pair of black lace-

Oh, yes, she could see him. A wave of heat washed over her. She knew she was in real trouble, when the idea of him going through her underwear turned her on instead of making her angry.

Maybe she should forget caution and just go for broke. She'd never devoted herself to a relationship before, but maybe Cahill was someone she could truly love. Maybe there could be something real and permanent between them, and she was in danger of losing it because she couldn't stop listening to her head instead of her heart. Yes, he'd just come through a rough divorce; a year wasn't enough time to emotionally recover; he'd admitted as much himself. Yes, the odds said he was a bad risk right now. But sometimes you lucked out, and won by going against the odds.

So the real question was did she have the guts to give it all she had, to stop holding back? She had always used the Plan as an excuse for walking away before a relationship could really go anywhere; that excuse was real, because she truly wanted to execute the Plan; but the other part of her reason was that loving someone meant giving away some of your personal control, and she had always prized that above any man she was dating.

If she became involved with Cahill, she might eventually walk away from him, but she wouldn't walk away heart-whole. He could do some damage to her. She suspected she could love him as she had never loved anyone before, if she let him get close.

No matter what she decided, there were risks-big ones. She could either risk loving him and losing him, or she could risk missing out on the love of her life because she was afraid.

Sarah didn't like thinking herself cowardly, in anything.

"Do you recognize this man?" Cahill asked the next morning, letting a blurry photograph slide from a big envelope down onto the breakfast table.

The photograph had been enhanced and enlarged, and it was still piss-poor. It was, however, all he had.
Sarah looked at the photograph and gave a decisive shake of her head. Randall, Barbara, and Jon all crowded around and stared at it. "I don't think so," Randall said doubtfully. "Not without seeing his face. He doesn't ring any bells, though. Why?"
"He made the last call to your father, from a pay phone in the Galleria."
Barbara jerked back as if stung. "You mean he might be the killer?"
"I can't make that assumption," Cahill said evenly. "I'd like to, but I can't. But your father might have said something to this man about a visitor he was expecting, or any other detail that might help. I'd definitely like to talk to this guy."
They all stared at the photograph again, as if concentration would wrest an elusive memory from their brains. The man in the photograph was trim, wearing a light-colored suit, with neat pale hair, either blond or gray. His head was turned so that the camera caught only the line of his left jaw and cheekbone. Unless you knew the man well, it would be impossible to recognize him from that picture.
Sarah handed Cahill a cup of coffee and tilted her head for another look at the photograph. "He's wearing a suit," she said. "The weather was warm last Wednesday."
Both Randall and Jon looked up, their attention caught. "It was too warm to wear a jacket," Jon said, "unless you were wearing a suit for work."
Barbara looked puzzled. "So what?"
"So he's white-collar," Cahill explained. "Professional."
She sighed. "All of Daddy's friends were white-collar professionals."
"Retired," Sarah put in. "That man isn't retired."
"He's younger than Daddy, then, but that's obvious from the picture. Either that or he's had a face-lift." Barbara pointed to the fairly firm jawline.
"Take what you know," Cahill prompted. "Younger than your father-say, no older than early fifties-professional. The hair is probably gray, or blond that's going gray. He's in good shape, trim, I estimate about six feet tall. No one comes to mind?"
They all shook their heads, regretfully.
'Well, if you think of anything, let me know." Cahill replaced the photograph in the envelope. "Don't concentrate on his close friends, but on someone he would know only casually."

"Sarah would be more help there than any of us," Jon said. 'We've all lived away from the area for years, so we don't know anyone he may have met recently." He made a wry face. "By 'recently' I mean the last ten years, at least."
"Longer than that." Barbara sighed. "Dwight and I moved to Dallas before Shaw was born, and he's nineteen. Make that twenty years. I'm afraid we won't be any help there, Detective. Sarah is your only hope."
Everyone looked at Sarah, who shook her head. "He knew so many people. He was forever nodding to someone, then saying he didn't remember his name but he worked with so-and-so. He never really talked about anyone other than his close circle of buddies."
"So unless this guy"-Cahill tapped the envelope-"calls again, he's a dead end."
"I'm afraid so, at least as far as I'm concerned. One of the neighbors might recognize him, or you might try the Judge's friends. They were a pretty close group."
"I'll do that." He looked at the others. "I need to get back to work, but is there anything I can do for you here?"
Barbara gave him a sad, gentle smile. 'We're just packing up photographs and personal items that we want to keep. Thank you for all you've done, the advice you've given. I know you'll do everything possible to find whoever killed Daddy."
"Yes, ma'am, I will." He glanced at Sarah. 'Would you walk out to the car, Miss Stevens?"
The day was warmer than the day before, but still chilly enough that she grabbed a jacket on the way out. The sun was bright, picking out the fresh, bright colors of spring, the pink of the azaleas, the tender green of new leaves, the white and pink dogwoods. Sarah squinted at the brightness, lifting her hand to shade her eyes.
'What is it, Detective Cahill?"
"Nothing much, I just wanted a minute alone with you. What are your plans for now? They'll be selling the house, right? What are you going to do?"
"I'm staying here, for now. They all have to leave this afternoon, so I'll handle all the packing, getting things ready for the house to be put on the market."
"You're staying here? In the house?"
"I can look after things better if I'm here, on-site."

"Will it bother you to be here alone?"
"It bothers me that the Judge is dead. It bothers me to go into the library, because I keep seeing his body there, and smelling . . . smelling things. But it doesn't bother me to be alone. I think what happened was targeted specifically at him, though I have no idea why. So I'm not in any danger." She paused, struck by a fleeting expression on his tough face. "Am I? Is there something you haven't told me?"
"No, nothing. I think you're safe. It's just that you have more guts than most people. A lot of men I know wouldn't want to stay here by themselves."
"So who says men have more guts than women?"
He grinned at the challenge in her voice. "No one. Men just tend to do stupid things out of pride. Now that I've admitted we're all idiots, will you have dinner with me tonight?"
"What? Go out with an idiot?"
'1hink of the entertainment value."
"You have a point." She smiled up at him. "I'd like that, then. What time, and where are we going?"
"Six-thirty, and we'll go someplace casual, if that's all right with you. "
"Casual is great."
He winked at her as he got in the car. "See you at six-thirty."
Her heart was lighter as she went back inside the house. She still grieved, but life did go on; the awful thing about cliches was that they were usually right. The terrible pain and depression had lifted, and she was already looking ahead, focusing on the future. She had chores to accomplish, affairs to be put in order, a job to find.
But more immediately, she had a date with Cahill.

Chapter 14

"YOU'LL NEVER GUESS," SHE SAID BY WAY OF GREETING when she opened the door to him that night, "what came in the mail today."
He tensed. "Another gift?"
"Something almost worse," she grumbled. "Two job offers."
His dark, level brows knotted. "And that's bad, how?"
"They were postmarked Saturday. These people must have written the letters almost immediately after they heard about the Judge."

"I repeat: That's bad, how?"
She gave him an impatient glance. "Vultures. It's like people who read the obituaries and call the surviving spouse for a date immediately after the funeral."
"I think it's smart, if they want you. Get an offer in first, and you might take it before any others come in."
"Too late, since I had one week before last, right after that segment aired."
"But they didn't know that. I'd do the same thing," he said reasonably. "I see you, I want you, I make my move and try to cut out anyone else thinking the same thing."
She snorted as she pulled on her jacket. "Really bad analogy, Cahill. You saw, and you ran."
"Don't I get brownie points for working up enough courage to come back?"
"No. I don't work on the points system."
"Then I guess I'll have to rely on physical coercion." He caught the front of her jacket in his fist and pulled her to him. Sarah lifted her head to meet his kiss; it wasn't until his mouth touched hers that she realized how sharp was her need to feel this again, to have him hold her. Their tongues engaged in slow combat, sliding, probing, twining. He wasn't in any hurry, and neither was she.
He lifted his mouth enough to murmur, "Are you coerced yet?"
"Not yet. Keep trying."
His mouth curled in a smile as he rested his forehead against hers. "I don't want to overstep my bounds. Give me some ground rules, here. If I get rowdy and out of control, at what point do you slap my face? The trick is to stop just short of that point."
Sarah lifted her brows. "I don't slap faces; I kick asses."
'Wow. That sounds interesting. Pants up, or down?"
She buried her face against his jacket, snickering. "I should have guessed you'd be a pervert."
"A boy just wants to have fun. " His big, warm hand slid up and down her back in a restless movement that told her he didn't like restraining himself, but was doing it anyway. "And if we don't get going, I may get my ass kicked. I've never been very good at knowing when to stop."
On the contrary, he had wooing down to a fine art-for wooing her, anyway. He made it very plain he was attracted, but didn't come on too hot and heavy for the early stages of getting to know each other. She was

thoroughly charmed by his wry humor, more charmed than she wanted him to know. If he pushed his luck, she thought, she might very well end up in bed with him, and she deeply appreciated that he was restraining himself because she suspected he knew exactly how charmed she was. Cahill was one sharp cookie.
"Did either of the job offers look interesting?" he asked as he opened the door of his truck for her.
"No, they both wanted me to start immediately, and that's out. I'll be here at least another month; when the house is ready to close up, I doubt the family will want to continue paying my salary just to sit in my quarters, so I don't expect it to last much more than a month, but I'm not free until then."
"You don't think they'll hold the position open? It isn't as if butlers are thick on the ground around here."
She shrugged. '1hey might, they might not. I think they only want me because of the so-called celebrity factor, and I don't like the idea of that."
"Since you're trained as a bodyguard, too, will you consider only jobs with that need?"
"That would be nice," she said wryly. '1he pay is a lot higher. But, no, a lot of things come into consideration. How much I like the family, for one thing. Whether or not there are any positions open for both butler and bodyguard, where in the country the job is, things like that."
"You don't like certain parts of the country?"
"It isn't that. I'm a military brat; I'm used to living just about anywhere. But my parents and sister live in Florida, and I like for visiting them to be fairly convenient."
"You're close to your folks?"
"We talk on the phone a lot. I don't get to see them as much as I'd like, maybe three or four times a year, but I'd say we're close. Even though my brothers are both in the military and are sent all over the world, still, we manage phone calls. How about you?"
'Well, we're originally from this area, so I have aunts and uncles and cousins scattered all over central Alabama. My sister, DeeDee, lives in Redneck Riviera-that's Gulf Shores, to outsiders-and my brother, Dudley Do-Right, lives in Montgomery."
"DeeDee and Do-Right?" she asked, amused.
"She was named after the two grandmothers, Devonna and Darnelle. Which one would you like to be called?"

"DeeDee, hands down."
"No joke. Dudley, now-his real name is Thane-is a state cop, so he wears the Do-Right uniform. Between the two of them, they've made me an uncle five times. DeeDee's the oldest, by two years. I'm thirty-six, by the way."
"You don't have any kids?"
"No, thank God. That's the only good thing about my divorce, that we didn't have any kids whose lives we wrecked. The rest of the family always thought I was a slacker for not reproducing, but now they're glad, too."
'What about your parents?"
"They thought I was a slacker, too."
She punched his arm. "Smart aleck."
He grinned, then frowned a little and rubbed his arm. "Ow. You pack a punch."
"I pulled it. You're just a wuss." Yeah, right. His arm was so hard, she could have seriously damaged her knuckles. "Your parents," she prompted.
"They live in Kentucky. They had a reason for moving there, but I don't know what it was."
'What's wrong with Kentucky?"
"It snows there."
'What's wrong with snow?"
"I've been a patrol cop, you know. Have you ever seen what happens down here when it snows?"
She began to laugh, because one inch of snow could and did cause havoc with traffic. Southerners didn't deal well with snow; it was a giant headache for patrol cops, with all the accidents. For someone who had spent one memorable winter in upstate New York, the alarm caused by a snow flurry down here was hilarious.
Abruptly she noticed that they were heading south, away from town.
"Where are we going?"
"How do you feel about high school baseball?"
She paused. "Is that a rhetorical question, or are you telling me something?"
"One of my cousins has a game tonight, a doubleheader. We'll miss the first game, but by the time we get something to eat and get to the field, we should be just in time for the second game. JoJo plays shortstop."
JoJo was evidently the cousin. "I like baseball, but this jacket isn't heavy enough for sitting out for hours in the cold."

"I have a blanket behind the seat, a thick wool one. We can cuddle on the bleachers, and with the blanket wrapped around us no one will know if I sneak a feel every now and then."
"I'll know."
"God, I hope so. If you don't, then I've either lost my touch or my aim."
Maybe a public place was the safest place to be with him. "A11 right," she said. "I'm willing. We can even grab a hot dog at the game if you want to catch some of the first one."
"I knew you were good folk," he said happily.
Sitting on cold bleachers on a chilly night, surrounded by yelling, laughing, chatting parents and siblings, a few teachers, and clumps of students, turned out to be more fun than she remembered from the days when Daniel and Noel had played baseball. For one thing, Cahill's cousins-there were about ten of them there-were all loony. She had to wonder if the sense of humor was a family trait. For another, cuddling under that blanket with him was . . . more than fun.
The king-size blanket, as he promised, was thick wool. He wrapped it around both of them before they even sat down, so even her legs were protected from the chill. His body heat and the blanket combined to keep her toasty warm, even though the April night was so chilly their breaths fogged. He was pressed all along her left side, his hard thigh rubbing hers, and he kept his right arm around her except for those times when he felt compelled to leap to his feet and yell insults at the home plate umpire who, as it turned out, was yet another cousin.
A few times he even managed to cop a feel, as he had promised. The caress was subtle, just his thumb rubbing against the side of her right breast, but it was deliberate and she knew it. The first time it happened, she glanced sharply up at him to find him innocently watching the game, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. She retaliated by trailing her left hand up his thigh, oh, so slowly, stopping just south of the bull's-eye. He tensed, the smile leaving his mouth, and though he kept his gaze on the game, he had that unfocused look that told her he'd lost track of the action on the field.
She felt terribly naughty, doing such things in public, even though they were wrapped like mummies in that wonderful blanket and no one could tell a thing. She wanted to forget about teasing him and go for the gold with a

stroke that would make his eyes roll back in his head; she wanted to twist her body a little so his hand was fully cupping her breast.
She didn't have to twist her body. He managed just fine without her help. She caught her breath at the warm pressure of his hand, at the stroke of his thumb over her nipple. It didn't matter that the triple layers of bra, shirt, and jacket protected her skin from his touch; her breasts tightened, her nipples drawing into hard little peaks, and her entire lower body clenched in response.
"Are you okay?" he asked, his tone casual, as if he were asking if she was cold.
She really, really wanted to grab him, but squeezing a man's genitals on the first date was way out of her league. She settled for burrowing her right hand inside his shirt and pulling his chest hair. Hard. He couldn't control a flinch.
"I'm a little hot," she said, just as casually. "Maybe we can loosen the blanket."
"Good idea," he said, sounding a little strangled now, and they both shrugged the blanket down to their waists. They resorted to coffee to fight the chill for the remainder of the ball game.
Because he had to work the next day, after the game was over he drove her straight home. When he kissed her good night, she was smart enough to hold his hands while he did. He was grinning when he lifted his head. "I haven't had my hands held during a kiss since high school."
"I haven't been groped at a ball game since high school, either."
"It was fun, wasn't it?"
She found herself smiling. "Yeah, it was."
"Do you have plans for tomorrow night? And every night this week?"
"You're asking me out every night?"
"I have to wear you down. How else am I going to get to second base without getting tagged out? Here's the agenda: tomorrow night we go bowling-"
"Bowling'"
"Cosmic bowling. It's a hoot."
She didn't bother asking what cosmic bowling was. "What about Wednesday?"
"Movie."
"Thursday?"

"Symphony."
From the ridiculous to the sublime. She shook her head in amazement; at least she wouldn't be bored. "Friday?"
"I'm hoping by that time we'll have moved on to the wild monkey sex."
She hooted with laughter, and he smiled as he leaned against the doorjamb.
"Is it a date?" he asked. "Or dates."
"Up until Friday."
'We'll see," he said, and whistled as he walked back to his truck.
He was positively Machiavellian.

Chapter 15

THERE WAS AN ARTICLE IN THE NEWSPAPER TUESDAY MORNING under the headline EACK OF EVIDENCE HAMPERS POEICE IN MOUNTAIN BROOK MURDER. Cahill grunted in disgust as he read the article.
The Mountain Brook Police Department is offering no information other than "no comment" on their investigation into the murder of retired federal Judge Lowell Roberts. The investigation seems to have stalled, and concerned citizens are wondering if the department, which hasn't investigated a murder in five years, is experienced enough to handle this type of case.
"That's bullshit," he growled, tossing the paper onto his desk. All of the investigators in the detective division were pissed. The lieutenant was pissed. Basically, everyone was pissed. The investigation was stalled, all right, but it had nothing to do with incompetence or lack of experience. If the idiot who wrote that article had done his research, he'd have known that the Mountain Brook department was top-notch, with excellent people and excellent equipment. The head evidence technician had handled the gathering of evidence, and he'd done it right. Cahill himself had done a tour of duty with the Birmingham Police Department, where murder investigations were much more commonplace; all of the detectives were experienced. They knew how to run an investigation, but they couldn't manufacture evidence that wasn't there.
It came back to lack of motive. When Judge Roberts had been murdered he hadn't been walking down the street and been a victim of a drive-by

shooting, a for-kicks murder. His murder was deliberate, planned, and executed with precision-an assassination, in fact. Whoever had killed him had known it was Sarah's day off and the Judge would be alone in the house. The mystery phone call by the mystery man from the pay phone in the Galleria was the only lead they had, but no one so far had recognized anything about the man in the photograph. They'd talked to friends, neighbors, family, and come up with exactly zilch.

The easy way hadn't panned out. Things would have been a lot simpler if Judge Roberts had been gunned down as he opened the door, or walking to his car; then the revenge scenario would have played. Instead Cahill kept coming back to the inescapable conclusion that the Judge had known his killer and willingly let him into the house.

And that brought Cahill right back to the mystery man in the surveillance photo. The timing of that phone call was right. Someone whom the Judge knew, from out of town maybe, who had called and said, Hey, I'm in the area; and the Judge invited him to the house, and the guy killed him. That was the scenario the circumstances supported. But who, and why? That was the old truism-find out why, and you'll know who.

Too bad he didn't have any fucking idea.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. His bad feeling about this case hadn't gone away. The answer was out there, but they weren't getting any closer to it and he was afraid they wouldn't. This one was going to be filed under "Unsolved." He hated unsolved crimes of any sort, but a murder really ate at him. Even as a kid puzzles had nagged at him, and he couldn't stop until they were solved. The damned Rubik's Cube had driven him up the wall until he got it figured out. On a scale of one to ten, the Rubik's Cube was like a five, and a murder was like ten zillion. That's how bad it nagged at him. He could easily become obsessed with this case if he wasn't careful.

This one was more personal than it should have been, because it had touched Sarah. If she'd been at home instead of at the movie, she might have been killed, too. She felt guilty because she thought she could have prevented it, but Cahill got a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach every time he thought of her there in the house with a killer. She would have gone to her quarters and left the two . . . friends? acquaintances? talking in the Judge's library; she might not even have heard the shot, if it was silenced. Then, because she had seen him, the killer would have quietly gone up those stairs to her quarters. She wouldn't have been expecting him, she

wouldn't have been armed, and he would have killed her. It was that simple, and he broke out in a sweat every time he played it through in his mind. Going to the movie had saved her life, and she had gone because she wanted to give the idiot who sent her the fancy pendant an opportunity to approach her. Funny how things worked out; by sending her the pendant and making her so uneasy, the weirdo had saved her life.

Sarah was . . . he didn't know what Sarah was. Fascinating. Sexy. Strong and tender at the same time. He didn't know what would happen between them; he wasn't even letting himself think about what might or might not happen. With her, he was living totally in the present. When he was with her, he didn't think about the past, and he didn't care about the future. Hell, that was a lie, because if he had anything to say about it, the future included getting her clothes off and having some really hot, wet, wrecking-the-bed sex. Now that was some real planning for the future.

It felt good to focus on one woman, rather than have more of those ships-that-pass-in-the-night encounters that took some of the pressure off his balls but left him still feeling alone the next day. He enjoyed playing with Sarah, and that was exactly what they were doing: playing. Having fun. It had been too damn long since he'd had fun, too long since he'd felt the particular thrill of watching a woman's face and feeling in sync with her.

Like last night, for instance; she had seriously thought about grabbing his balls as payback, but had decided not to ratchet up the intimacy between them to that degree. Her dark eyes had been cool and challenging, but still he'd known what she was thinking, read it in the slight tensing of her very toned body. He'd been ready to endure a certain amount of pain-he doubted she'd cripple him, but she would still have made him hurt-in order to speed things up between them. Too bad she'd thought better of grabbing him, because from the way he looked at it, if she'd hurt him, she would have had to kiss it to make it better. Worked for him.

Getting a hard-on at work wasn't a good idea. Cahill wrenched his thoughts upward.

He had a month to get her, the month she estimated it would take her to get everything packed and to close up the house. She would be taking another job; he hoped she would still be in this area, but nothing was guaranteed. As she had said, if someone needed her combined services of butler and bodyguard, the pay was much better, and how many people around here needed a bodyguard? He figured the odds were at least fifty-fifty she'd be

leaving the area, so he had to work fast. Who knows? Maybe if they were having an affair, she'd take a job nearby and they could take their time with each other, see where this thing went.

That thought edged too far into the future, and he pulled back from it. All he could handle right now was right now. He would see Sarah every night, and every second in between the murder he had to investigate, plus the other investigations that came up.

The newspaper said the police didn't have a clue in the Roberts murder. What a shame.

He was pleased; once again, he had proven himself more intelligent than others. Of course there were no clues. First he had seen Sarah safely in the movie, then he had driven to the Galleria and made the phone call from a pay phone. Thousands of people were in the Galleria every day; there was no way to pick him out. Judge Roberts, the old fool, had been happy to talk to the friend of a friend about a point of law, and as easy as that he was in the house.

Though his fingerprints weren't in any AFIS data banks for the simple reason that he'd never been fingerprinted, he had still made certain to note everything he touched while he was in the house, and he had carefully wiped those surfaces before leaving. He had refused anything to drink, so there was no cup or glass to be taken care of. He had also picked up the spent cartridge shell from the carpet where the automatic had ejected it, and disposed of it in the trash the next day. The trash had since been picked up, so that was gone.

He was safe. Now he could concentrate on Sarah.

He didn't want to repeat his offer too soon. She wouldn't like that; her sense of propriety would be offended. But neither could he afford to wait too long, because her services would be in demand. He had discovered through his network of acquaintances in the neighborhood-really, one couldn't call them friends--that the Roberts family was putting the house up for sale and had arranged for her to stay on to oversee that, for the time being.

Things couldn't have been more perfect. He had time, a grace period as it were, to carefully think through how he would word the next offer. He'd made a mistake the last time, not taking her sense of loyalty into account and reducing her worth to merely that of money. Of course she was worth that amount, she was worth much more, but a woman of her conscientious nature would need something in addition to money: a sense of purpose.

She had to think he needed her. He did need her, so much more than she could imagine. Since first seeing her, he had come to realize she was the perfect woman for him, the woman he'd been waiting for his entire life, and he wouldn't be complete without her.

He felt almost dizzy, thinking of her here, in his home. He would give her everything she could possibly want, protect her from a world that couldn't possibly appreciate her sheer perfection. It had to be a trial to her, forced constantly to deal with people who weren't worthy of her. When she was with him, there would be none of that. She wouldn't need other people. Together, they would be perfection.

Tuesday was an incredibly sad and lonely day. It was the first day she had been entirely alone in the house; yesterday the family had been here until the early afternoon; then she had gone out with Cahill, which took her mind off the emptiness. Cahill, she suspected, could take her mind off dying. Today, however, he wasn't there. The knowledge that she would see him that night was a beacon she kept in the back of her mind, a bit of brightness against the gloom. She kept herself busy. She didn't have to hunt for things to do; there was a huge amount of work to be done.

She began the work of methodically packing up each room, with a master inventory she devised and entered into her laptop, to show what contents were in which box and from which room they were taken. The boxes would be numbered, and on each box she'd tape an envelope containing a packing list for that particular box. The chore was time-consuming and exhausting, but that wasn't enough to keep her mind off the fact that she was alone in this huge house, or to keep her from remembering every time she passed the library what had happened in there.

The phone rang incessantly. The callers didn't mean any harm, with their questions about the family and what they intended to do, but the constant interruptions meant Sarah didn't accomplish as much as she'd planned, and the questions kept the Judge fresh in her mind. She didn't want to forget him, but she would have liked a little distance from the pain.

Thinking about Cahill provided that distance. Maybe she was thinking about him too much for her own well-being, but . . . well, she'd just have to deal with that.

Far from being the humorless man she'd first thought him, he had a lighthearted streak that made her laugh and kept her on her toes. She sensed

that he was being careful with her-not because she was fragile, but rather because she wasn't.
Sarah knew her own worth, her own strength; she was neither a Kleenex to be used and casually tossed away, nor a butterfly who would gaily flit away on her own. Cahill wanted her, but he was wary of anything except a sexual, superficial relationship with anyone, and he wasn't certain exactly how serious he wanted to get with her. They had fun together, but on a certain level they were like two heavyweight boxers, circling, each testing the other's strength, not committing until they knew whether or not they were going to get hammered.
She liked him more than anyone she had dated before-but then how could she not like someone who would take her to both a bowling alley and a symphony? She had known from the beginning that the physical chemistry was great; overwhelming was a better word. Still, she could resist physical attraction if that was all there was. In Cahill's case, the total package was as seductive as a Lorelei, pulling her to him.
Lunch was a sandwich and a glass of water, eaten in her quarters. The silence beat at her, until she thought she could hear her own heartbeat. She washed the knife she had used, and the glass, and put them away. Then she burst into tears.
Half an hour later she found herself sitting on the steps leading from the portico to the flower garden. The bright sunshine beat down on her upturned face, her bare arms, and the air was redolent with the sweet freshness of spring. Birds chirped madly in the trees, their colors flashing as they darted about. Bees zipped from bloom to bloom, drunk on nectar. Inside the house was sadness, but out here was life and warmth.
Footsteps sounded on the stones behind her, and she turned her head to see Cahill. "Hi," he said, dropping down to sit beside her. "You didn't answer the doorbell, so I walked around to see if your truck was here."
"I'm here," she said, unnecessarily. "I'm just . . . taking a break."
He studied her taut face and swollen eyes, then gently eased her into his arms and cradled her head against his shoulder. "Bad day, huh?"
"So far, it sucks." God, being held felt so good. He was solid and strong, and she turned her face against his neck so she could inhale the heated aroma of his body. She put her arms around him, one arm looped around his neck and the other pressed to his back; her fingers dug into the layered muscles there, traced the indentation of his spine.

He tilted her head back and kissed her, and his palm settled warmly over her right breast. She allowed the caress, leaning into him and surrendering to the kiss. Just now she needed cuddling, needed the physical comfort of his presence, so she didn't protest when he unbuttoned her sleeveless blouse and unhooked the front closure of her bra, pushing it aside. Fresh air gently brushed over her bare flesh, puckering her nipples; then they were covered by the hot slide of his callus-roughened palm. "God, you're pretty," he said, his tone low and rough. "Look at this."

She opened her eyes and looked. Her breasts were the color of warm cream, with small, pinkish brown nipples. She wasn't overly endowed, but her breasts plumped in his palm, his hard, tanned fingers in sharp male contrast to the very womanly curves. He stroked his thumb over one nipple and it beaded more tightly, flushing with color.

A sound like far-off thunder rumbled in his throat, and she looked up to see a sheen of sweat on his forehead. "I'm working," he said hoarsely.

"You couldn't prove it by me," she murmured. She thought she could sit here in the sunshine for hours, letting him fondle her. Except she wouldn't be sitting here for hours, she would very shortly find herself on her back, on the stones of the portico; not exactly a comfortable place for lovemaking.

"I just stopped by to check on you. I can't stay." He kissed her again, his hand still working its warm magic on her breasts; then he reluctantly released her. Actually, he released her as if it tore his skin off to separate from her. "Just remember where we were, and we'll pick up there tonight."

Feeling much better, she rehooked her bra and began buttoning her blouse. "Sorry, it doesn't work that way. You'll have to start over."

"Not a problem," he said, smiling.

She snorted. "I didn't think it would be." Then she smiled, too, a little mistily. "Thanks for stopping by. I was feeling blue."

"I noticed. Six-thirty again?"

She nodded. "I'll be ready."

"So will I."

"That wasn't what I meant."

'Well, hell," he said in disgust.

Already she could feel her smile edging into a grin, feel laughter beginning to bubble. "Go back to work, Cahill, and remember: Never take anything for granted."

'Well, hell," he said again.

Chapter 16

ON WEDNESDAY, A WEEK AFTER THE MURDER, SARAH FOUND herself following her old schedule. She had forgotten to reschedule her karate and kick-boxing sessions anyway, so she worked in the house until it was time for the classes, then devoted herself to the hardest workouts she had put herself through in a long time. It's exactly a week today, she kept thinking. Exactly a week. A week ago, the most important thing in her life had been finding out who'd sent her that pendant. Today, she couldn't remember exactly how the pendant looked. It had been relegated to unimportance by what had happened later that night.

She was supposed to go to a movie with Cahill that night. Remembering that she'd gone to a movie last Wednesday, too, she knew she couldn't do it. She called the number Cahill had given her, and he answered immediately.

"This is Sarah. I'm sorry, but I can't do a movie tonight."

He paused. "Has something come up?"

"No, it's just . . . it was a week ago today, and I went to a movie then, too."

"Okay." His tone was gentle. 'We'll do something else."

"No, I-" She wanted to be with him, but maybe after last night a cooling-down period was in order. She had managed to keep things from getting out of hand, or even progressing any further than they already had, but he was making serious inroads in her resolve. The cooling-down period was for her. "Not tonight. We're still on for tomorrow night, but I won't be good company tonight."

"Are you getting cold feet?"

Trust him to bypass sympathy and politeness, and go straight to the heart of the matter! "Trust me," she said wryly. "If my feet are cold, it's the only part of me that is."

He blew out a short, sharp breath. "You just made it impossible for me to sit down."

"I hope no one can overhear you."

He ignored that. "I'll be at home if you change your mind, or if you decide you want company."

"Thanks, Cahill." Her voice was soft. "You're a sweetheart."

"Told you you'd be calling me that," he said smugly.

No matter what, he could lift her spirits. She hung up feeling slightly elated, the way she always felt around him. The fizz saw her through the rest of that difficult day.
On Thursday night, on the way to the symphony, he said, "I have a friend who's dying to meet you. He's lowlife scum who thinks he can charm you away from me, but if you don't mind feeling dirty by association, he really, really wants to do some target practice with you. I have an extra weapon you can use, since we still have yours."
She laughed. "He's a lowlife scum who makes you feel dirty by association? Sure, I'd like to meet him."
"Thought so. How about tomorrow afternoon, about two o'clock, at that range you were at before."
"Two o'clock? Don't you have to work? Or are you sending me out to get dirty by association all on my own?"
"I'm off half a day tomorrow, and all of the weekend." He slanted an appraising glance at her. 'Wear that dress."
If that wasn't just like a man. "To target practice? In your dreams."
"You have no idea about my dreams," he said feelingly. In one of those swings of temperature so common to spring, the day had seen the mid-eighties and hadn't cooled down much with sunset. Sarah had dressed accordingly, in an sleeveless aqua sheath that made her warm coloring glow, and brought along a shawl to drape over her arms if she became chilled. The sheath clung in all the right places and skimmed others, and was cut low enough in front to show a hint of cleavage. Cahill had been eyeing that hint since he picked her up.
Prudently she didn't ask him about his dreams, because she was fairly certain he'd tell her. If Cahill had a shy bone in his body, she hadn't found it yet.
The symphony was wonderful; she loved classical music, and Cahill talked knowledgeably about the program, proving that he hadn't picked the symphony just to impress her. "Do you come to the symphony often?" she asked.
"Not as often as I'd like, but a couple of times a year, at least. I have to work it into my schedule."
"I can see how it would be tough making time for the symphony, what with all the ball games and the bowling."
He grinned. "Admit it. You liked cosmic bowling."

"I'd never bowled in the dark before." In fact, she'd had a ball Tuesday night; cosmic bowling was a hoot. The balls and pins were painted with glow-in-the-dark paint; the regular lights were turned off and the black lights turned on. Anything white, such as teeth or shoes, or a shirt, had taken on an unearthly glow. It was a little disconcerting to suddenly see teeth flashing at you in the darkness. The next time they went, though, she would make Cahill wear a white shirt so she could keep track of him.
She worked that night after he took her home and got up early the next morning to get in some extra time packing so that she could take off early to meet Cahill's friend. If anything, she was putting in more hours now than she had while the Judge was alive, but she was so wary of short-timing the family that she was doing the opposite. Cahill had a way of consuming time-witness this afternoon-so she wanted to have extra hours built up during the week as a cushion.
It was another warm day, eighty-seven degrees. She wore a pair of tan knit slacks with an elastic waistband for comfort, since she would be sweating on the practice range, a short-sleeved, V-necked T, and sandals, with heavy-duty sunscreen slathered on all exposed skin. "Damn," Cahill said when he picked her up. "I hoped you'd change your mind about the dress."
"Yeah, I could just see me bending over to pick up cartridges in that dress."
"Man, so could I," he said, sighing.
His friend, Rick Mancil, was the stocky man she'd seen him with at the range before. Rick had black hair, pale green eyes, and was as irrepressible as the Energizer Bunny. His opening line to her was, "If you get tired of putting up with this jackass, just give me a call and I'll have you at the altar before you can say 'Mrs. Mancil.'"
"Believe him," Cahill drawled. "He's done it twice already."
Sarah blinked. "Married women you've dated?"
"Just married," Rick corrected. "But we won't talk about that."
She sensed that Cahill wanted her to show off her marksmanship for Rick, so she obliged. She and Rick got side-by-side targets; he exclaimed at length about his pistol, how accurate it was, how it had never jammed, and so on; she glanced at Cahill, who was leaning negligently against a post with his ankles crossed, and he shrugged, smiling. "He never runs down," he said.
"That's a good thing in a man," Rick said, winking at her.
Sarah looked back at Cahill. "Aren't you going to shoot?"

He gave a brief shake of his head. Rick said, '`e won't bring him into this. He beats me every time, the damn show-off. It's that military training of his, gives him an unfair advantage."
As far as that went, so did her own military training. Hers had been private, courtesy of her father, but training was training.
They began with the targets fairly close, moving them back after every clip. Sarah fired steadily, concentrating as she did when she was competing against her brothers. The buck of the pistol in her hand was as familiar to her as driving a car; she almost didn't have to think about what she was doing, the habit was so ingrained.
"I can't believe this," Rick complained good-naturedly. "Doc said you were good, but I'm good, and you're beating me on every target."
"Shoot left-handed," Cahill said to Sarah, and Rick gawked at him.
"Left-handed? She shoots both ways?"
Sarah simply switched hands and proceeded to empty the clip at the target. As usual, you could have covered all the holes in the target with a playing card.
"You son of a bitch," Rick said to Cahill, his tone disbelieving. "You brought in a ringer! She's a professional, isn't she?"
"I'm a butler," Sarah corrected. She had to admit she was enjoying herself, especially the byplay between the two men.
"Pay up," Cahill said, holding out his hand.
Growling, Rick pulled out his wallet and laid five twenties in Cahill's palm.
'Wait a minute," she said indignantly. "You made a side bet and didn't cut me in on the action?"
'What did I tell you?" Rick asked. "He's a jackass. "
"You didn't cut me in, either," she pointed out, carefully putting down her weapon and crossing her arms, glaring at them.
"Uh . . . "
"Say, 'I'm a jackass, too,"' Cahill prompted in an almost-whisper.
"I'm a jackass, too!" Rick repeated loudly. His pale eyes sparkled with laughter.
'Were you two in high school together?" she asked. "Just wondering."
"God, no. Can you imagine?" Cahill grinned as he put the money in his pocket.
"Not without shuddering, no."

Cahill clapped Rick on the shoulder. 'Well, buddy, it's been fun. We'll do this again when I need extra money, okay? We're going to leave you now; I have steaks marinating at home. We'll think of you with every bite."
"You do that," Rick said, managing a forlorn look. He even gave them a sad wave as they left, like a little kid being left behind while the other kids go off to play.
"God, he's exhausting!" Sarah said when they were in the truck. "Fun, but exhausting."
"Two ex-wives said the same thing. If there's such a thing as a manic-depressive who's always manic, that's Rick."
'What does he say about you? Other than that you're a jackass?"
"That I'm sneaky. And stubborn."
"I agree; they're good traits in a cop."
"Mmm. So you think I'm sneaky?"
Sarah looked at him, at ease behind the wheel, long legs encased in boots and tight jeans, a crisp white T-shirt molded to his torso. His lips were slightly curled in amusement, as if he knew where this was going. Oh, yes, he was sneaky.
'What's this about 'steaks marinating at home'? That's the first I've heard about these steaks, much less their location."
"I have a built-in grill, it's Friday, the weather's warm. What else does a red-blooded southern boy do but cook out? Besides, I know where you live; don't you want to know where I live?"
She did, damn it. She wanted to know if he was a slob, if he had one chair and a huge television, if his refrigerator had nothing but frozen dinners, cheese, and beer in it. She wanted to know if he left whiskers in the sink when he shaved, if he made his bed in the mornings or left the covers tossed on the floor. She definitely had it bad, so bad she wanted to groan.
'Where exactly do you live?" she asked, and he smiled at her capitulation.
"Down 280, in Shelby County."
The Birmingham metro area was spreading fast to the south; Shelby was the fastest growing county in Alabama, with businesses and subdivisions springing up almost overnight, which was why traffic on 280, the main artery into Birmingham, was such a nightmare. Property values in Shelby were soaring.
"How long have you lived there?"

"Just a year, since the divorce was final. I lucked out finding this house; actually, it belonged to a cousin who was transferred to Tucson. The house Shannon and I lived in sold almost immediately, so I had my split of the money from that as a hefty down payment and that got the mortgage payments down into the reasonable range."
"I suppose I thought you'd have an apartment, or live in a condo."
"I like the privacy of my own house. It's not a new house; it was built in the late seventies and needed some work done on it. I'm pretty good with my hands, so I've been doing the repairs, fixing it up."
She could see him as a handyman; he had that air of capability that said he could do pretty much whatever interested him. Maybe it was just her, but she thought men with hammers were sexy.
She didn't know what she'd expected, but it wasn't a traditional brick house, with a yard that sloped away at the back, and a neat sidewalk bordered by trimmed hedges. The brick was a soft red, and the shutters were dark blue, the front door painted a shade or two lighter. The driveway curved around to the back of the house. "There's a full basement," he said. "The garage used to be there, but my cousin turned it into a playroom for his kids. Actually, it's a lot of house for just one person, but I like the room."
He parked beside the walkway, and let her in the front door. Either he'd just had in a cleaning service, she thought, or he wasn't a slob. The hardwood in the entry gleamed, and there was a fresh, lemony smell in the air.
His hand was a warm weight in the small of her back. "The living room," he said, gesturing to the left. The room was completely empty, the carpet spotless, and the curtains drawn. "I don't have any use for it, so I haven't bothered with furniture. Same with the dining room. The kitchen has a breakfast nook, and that's where I eat. The den is here."
The den was cozy, with a large fireplace, big windows looking out over the backyard, and an entertainment center with a big television. She felt gratified at that evidence of his guy-ness. He had furniture, though: an overstuffed sofa and two big recliners, plus the requisite number of end tables and lamps. All in all, it looked fairly civilized. The den was separated from the kitchen by a half-wall topped off with a row of white wooden spindles. "The kitchen needed work," he said. "I refinished the cabinets, put in that island." The wood cabinets had a natural finish that glowed with a soft golden color. The island was made of the same wood, with a smooth-surface cooktop surrounded by ceramic tile.

There weren't any dirty dishes in the sink. The counter surface held a block of knives, a microwave, and a coffeemaker, but that was it. The breakfast nook at the other end of the kitchen held a white table with a ceramic tile top in a yellow-and-blue pattern, and the four chairs grouped around the table were painted the same shade of yellow, while the rug underneath was blue.

"Are you sure you weren't in the Navy?" she asked, looking around at the spotless kitchen. Navy people learned to put everything in its assigned place, because there wasn't any spare room aboard a ship.

He grinned. 'What did you expect, a pigsty? The laundry may pile up, but I'm fairly neat. I do have someone who comes in every other week and does the basic cleaning, because I don't think of things like dusting. C'mon, I'll show you the rest of the house."

The rest of the house was a half-bath next to the kitchen, two good-sized bedrooms at the front of the house, separated by a nice large bathroom, and the master bedroom and bathroom suite at the back. His bed was king-sized, but then she would have put money on that. And it was made up. The room was neat, but it wasn't spotless; one of his shirts hung over the back of a chair, and a coffee cup with an inch of cold coffee in it sat on the dresser.

"So that's where I left it," he said, picking up the cup. "I looked all over for the damn thing this morning."

She liked it that he hadn't straightened up the place, not that it needed much. He didn't have to have things perfect, and he wasn't trying to impress her. Perversely, she was impressed anyway, with his confidence and sense of self.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I'm hungry. Let's fire up the grill and get those steaks on."

The steaks were filets, two inches thick and so tender she almost didn't need a knife. While the steaks were cooking, she microwaved two potatoes, tossed the salad, and heated the rolls. Instead of wine, he produced a jug of iced tea.

If he had put on some soft, gauzy, romantic music, she might have had a chance, but instead he turned on the television to Fox News Channel and had the news playing in the background. Maybe he wasn't trying to seduce her-at least not actively trying-but he was succeeding anyway.

After they had cleaned up the few dishes and put the kitchen to rights, working quickly and easily together, he said, "I want to show you the

basement. I think you'll like it."
He led the way down the stairs and turned on the bright overhead lights. The first thing she noticed was that the walls were very utilitarian, with bare pipes against the brick. The second was that he did some serious workouts down here.
To her left was an impressive set of free weights, and a punching bag hung motionless from a beam. There was a weight machine, the type that converted to accommodate all types of exercises, and a treadmill.
He stayed by the door while she wandered over to the free weights and ran her fingers over the cold metal of the dumbbells, then examined the weight machine and the computerized treadmill. He put a good deal of effort and money into staying in shape, though she bet the treadmill was used only during really nasty weather. A little rain wouldn't keep this man indoors; it probably took a downpour with a lot of lightning to do the trick. Idly she wondered how many miles a day he ran, but what interested her the most was the large exercise mat that covered a full half of the basement floor. There was only one use for a mat like that.
She knew he'd studied karate from the way he had leveled the robber with a kick, but he'd never mentioned it again, and with everything that had happened since then, she'd forgotten about it. She wondered why he hadn't brought up the subject, since he knew she studied karate. His silence couldn't be because he was at a lower level than she; Tom Cahill didn't have a fragile ego. Quite the opposite, in fact.
"You do your karate workouts here?"
He was leaning against the doorframe, one ankle hooked over the other, his arms crossed; his eyes were lazy and hooded as he watched her. He lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. "It isn't karate so much as a mixture of a lot of stuff."
"What kind of stuff?"
"I've studied karate, judo, dim mak, silat. What works best in the real world, though, is a combination of wrestling and good old dirty street fighting."
He was probably very good at fighting dirty, she thought, her heart kicking into a slightly faster beat. Why on earth would she find that sexy? But, damn it, everything about him was sexy, from the sleek, muscled power of his body to that unnerving stillness he was using to such good effect. It was like being watched by a great cat; his motionlessness only served to underline the sense of tension, as if he was preparing to pounce.

The mood between them while they ate had been light, teasing, but now she could feel that molten attraction throbbing between them. The air was thick and heavy, as if a storm were building-not outside, but in here. She wasn't naive; she knew exactly what kind of storm it was, and if she intended to escape, she needed to move now. 'Well," she said briskly, swinging toward the door and, unfortunately, toward him, "it's getting late, and I should be-"
"Stay," he said.
Stay. His voice was low, the single word slow and dark, like velvet rubbing against her skin. She froze, held motionless by the promise of his tone, the temptation contained in that single word. There was no teasing now, no lightness.
Sex with him would be good. Better than good-better even than ice cream. It would be mind-emptying. She was very much afraid it would be shattering.
She swung around yet again, facing away from him. She stared at the punching bag, feeling her heart thumping against her breastbone, sending her blood racing and making her feel hot, jittery . . . excited. Involuntarily her loins clenched as if she already held him inside her. She wanted that, wanted it with an intensity that almost swamped her common sense. Desperately she tried to think of all the reasons why he wasn't a good bet for any kind of relationship except a sexual one, but, my God, the sex . . . The physical chemistry between them had grown even stronger, stronger than she had ever imagined it could be, like an electrical field she could sense through every pore of her skin.
She didn't dare turn around, didn't dare look at him or let him look at her. He would know at a glance, if he didn't already, how close to the edge she was. And she didn't want to see the open sexual hunger that was certain to be in his gaze, didn't want to read the signs of arousal in his face and body. Stay . . . not just for coffee, or for more talk. He meant stay the night, in his bed.
"No," she said, and almost wept at the effort it took to say that one word.
His hand closed lightly, gently over the nape of her neck, his fingers sliding under the thick fall of her hair. She hadn't heard him move, hadn't known he was so close, and her nerves skittered wildly. He wasn't trying to hold her; his touch was more of a caress than a grip. She could move away if she really wanted to. And that was the problem, because what she really wanted was him. Her skin tingled from his warm, hard hand, the slight rasp of his

roughened fingers on the sensitive cords of her neck. Involuntarily she imagined how those rough hands would feel on the rest of her body, and a shiver ran down her spine.
He was big, dwarfing her with his size, her head tucked neatly under his chin. His furnacelike heat wrapped around her. He would be heavy, and probably dominating, but she could also imagine him lying back and letting her set the pace-
"Stay," he said again, as if she hadn't refused.
She hung on to her sanity, barely. "That wouldn't be smart."
"Fuck smart." His hot breath stirred over the fine hairs on the back of her neck, making her shiver again. His low voice made the word a weapon to be used, a deeper level of intimacy between them. "It would sure as hell be good." He stroked her neck where his breath had warmed her skin. "If you like it slow, I'll be slow. If you like it hard and fast, then that's the way you'll get it." His mouth replaced his fingers, his tongue slowly licking, and the shiver became a fine tremor that shook her entire body.
"Which is it?" he murmured. "Slow . . . or fast? Slow . . ." He licked the tendons in the curve of her neck and shoulder, then gently bit down. The sensation was electric; she jolted, a moan escaping her as her head, like a daisy too heavy for its stem, fell back to rest against his shoulder. ". . . or fast?"
His hands closed over her breasts, his thumbs rubbing over her nipples. His erection was a rock-hard bulk in his jeans, pushing against her bottom. Her legs threatened to give way beneath her, and she heard her own breathing, shallow and rapid, almost panting.
"Easy?" he whispered in her ear. "Or hard?"
Hard. Dear God, hard.
She pushed away from him and turned, bracing her hands against the wall behind her. He watched her like a patient tiger: hungry, but certain the prey was his. And she was. He knew it; she knew it. The only thing left to negotiate was the degree of difficulty, and pride demanded she make his victory as difficult as possible.
"I have a rule," she said.
Wariness entered his eyes. "Do I want to know?"
She managed a shrug. "Probably not."
He scrubbed a hand over his jaw, five o'clock shadow rasping his rough palm. "Tell me anyway."

She smiled, slow and sure. "I don't sleep with anyone I can beat in a fight."
The wariness slowly edged into disbelief. He stared at her. "Shit! You want me to fight you for it?"
She shrugged again and strolled toward the mat. "I wouldn't put it quite so crudely, but . . . yeah."
He took a deep breath. "Sarah, this isn't a good idea. I don't want to hurt you."
"You won't," she said confidently.
His eyes began to narrow. "You really think you're that good?"
She angled a smile at him over her shoulder, and the smile was almost a smirk. She might be defeated, but she was going to enjoy the process. "I think you'll bend over backward to keep from hurting me."
He got it now, and he didn't like it. "You're that sure I'll pull my punches and let you turn me into a punching bag? Let you win?"
She heaved a sigh. "If you break my jaw or knock me out, I'11 be in too much pain-not to mention a really bad mood-for what you have in mind."
"Yeah, well, if I let you kick the shit out of me, I won't be in any shape to do anything anyway."
She lifted one shoulder in a delicate movement. 'What a dilemma."
He scrubbed his hand over his face again. "Fuck."
"Maybe." She paused, and couldn't resist taunting him. "If you're good enough."
He studied her for a moment, then came to a decision, his expression hardening. "Okay, here's how we'll do it: strip wrestling."
Strip urrestling? He was diabolical, she thought. "No fair. I've never studied wrestling. and you outweigh me by seventy-five pounds."
"Closer to a hundred," he said, and she secretly gulped. That meant he was even more muscled than she'd thought. "C'mon, this was your idea. You know we aren't going to stand toe-to-toe and slug it out, so this is the alternative. At least you aren't likely to get hurt. I'll take a handicap, too."
With a handicap, she could probably make it interesting. She had no delusions that she could win, but she could make him put out the effort. "It's a deal."
He put his hands on his hips and studied her. "Here's what we'll do: I have to pin you, but all you have to do is knock me down, and you can use whatever method you like. The first one completely naked loses."

Her heart was definitely going to jump out of her chest. The thought of wrestling naked with him was almost enough to make her dizzy with sexual hunger.
"And, " he continued, "we decide now what counts as wearing apparel, and we both start out with the same number of items."
She nodded. "That's fair."
He studied her. "The earrings have to go. The posts will dig into your head."
Silently she removed the gold studs and laid them aside.
"Your bracelet and my wristwatch balance each other out." He glanced at her sandaled feet. "No socks, so I'm two up on you there."
"Let's both start out barefooted," she said, slipping out of her sandals.
He removed his boots and socks. "Okay, how many pieces of clothing do you have left?"
"Four, not counting the bracelet." Pants, shirt, bra, panties.
"I'm only wearing three."
"Put your socks back on and they'll count as one."
He put his socks on again and stepped onto the mat. "That makes us even at five. Five throws won't take long."
He was that certain of victory, the smug bastard. Well, she was also certain he'd win-she was counting on it-but if he thought he'd win in five straight throws, he was seriously underestimating his woman. Speed was her strength, and she moved like lightning, whipping her leg behind his and dumping him on his ass before he could counter the move. She smiled down at him and moved out of reach. "The socks," she said.
Silently he stripped them off and tossed them aside, then climbed to his feet.
"You're fast." He was much more alert now.
She smiled. "That's what my sensei always said."
Fifteen minutes later he said, "Pin." Breathing raggedly, he crawled off her. His hard gaze swept over her bare breasts, lingered on the tightly puckered nipples. 'We're tied again. Take off your panties."
Her stomach tightened with anticipation. Panting, trying to control the rapid gasps, she held up her wrist. 'What about my bracelet?"
"I'm saving it for last."
Sarah climbed shakily to her feet. She had been putting every ounce of effort she could into resisting him, and he'd probably been holding back to make certain she wasn't hurt. This match was going on longer than she'd imagined it would, and she didn't know how much longer she could stand

the rub of his mostly naked body against hers. But then, looking at him, she didn't know how much longer he could stand it either. His erection bulged against the front of his shorts, and his skin was covered with sweat. There was a set to his jaw that made her stomach tighten in delight.
She took a few deep breaths, then hooked her fingers in the elastic of her bikini panties and shimmied them down to drop around her ankles. He made a raw, smothered sound, his gaze locked on the triangle of dark pubic curls between her legs. Without looking away, he pushed his shorts down and stepped out of them.
Now it was her turn to smother the sound that rose in her throat. His penis thrust out, thick and pulsing, so big she couldn't decide whether to worry or celebrate. Wow. She wavered, then caught herself.
"Wait," she said, her voice sounding thick to her own ears. "I haven't won your shorts yet."
"Just pretend they're still on," he said, and pounced.
She was on the mat before she could blink, but at the last second she managed to twist just enough to avoid being pinned. His heavy weight bore her down, overwhelming her, the way it had all the previous times he'd pinned her. While she appreciated his efforts not to hurt her, she was as helpless now against him as she had been the first time he'd pinned her. Her only hope had been to remain on her feet, evade him and look for her chance, but he'd already taken her down.
Desperately she braced one foot on the mat and pushed, seeking leverage. He shifted to counter her move, and his hips slid between the open V of her legs, the smooth heat of his penis pressing into her labia. He froze, a sound almost like a growl rumbling in his throat. As if he couldn't help himself he pushed, and the thick bulbous head began to enter her.
For just a split second she forgot everything but the burning need in her body to lift, to take. She waited almost too long, but at the last possible moment she twisted frantically, dislodging him, and managed to roll closer to the wall. He gave another growl, this one more like a snarl, and was on her again before she could get to her feet.
That overwhelming weight hit her, smothered her, took her down. His hands were on her shoulders, pushing them down. "Pin," he said hoarsely, and the match was over.
Panting, he lifted his weight off her and climbed to his feet. "Stay there."

She stayed. She was too exhausted to do otherwise, and too turned on to move even if she'd been able. She closed her eyes, gulping in air as she listened to the rustle of his clothing. He was getting a condom, she thought, and opened her mouth to tell him he didn't need one, but he was already back, lifting her arms over her head. Cool, smooth metal clamped around her wrists. There was a snick, and she was caught.

Bemused, she stared at him. Handcuffs? She angled her head back to look. He'd looped the cuffs around a pipe before fastening them to her wrists. Experimentally she moved her hands. He hadn't closed them tightly, but they were tight enough that she couldn't pull her hands out. "Are these necessary?"

"Yeah." His chest heaved as he reached out and slowly rubbed his hand over her breasts. "Just in case you decide to go for two out of three matches."

"I don't renege, Cahill." She arched her torso into that hand, loving the feel of it on her nipples.

"And I don't take chances." He bent his dark head and kissed her. It was a marauding kiss, deep and hard, but she had known when she taunted him into a fight it would arouse all those male, conquering-warrior instincts. She softened beneath him, giving him what he demanded, which was nothing short of unconditional surrender.

He spread her legs and moved over her, and she braced herself for his immediate penetration. She caught her breath, waiting, trembling with need, her hips automatically lifting.

"Not yet," he growled. "I'm too close. I wouldn't last ten seconds."

Neither will I, she thought, but didn't say anything. She wasn't a fool; if he wanted to dawdle, then let him.

Not that there was any letting to it; he was in control, and all she could do was lie there and enjoy the dawdling.

God, he was heavy. His body was rock hard, sweaty from exertion. She opened her legs wider to give him a more comfortable cradle, sliding her thighs up his hips and tilting her pelvis, seeking. His erection nudged her again, and instinctively she wiggled, trying to take it in.

He swore and slid down her body, removing temptation from her reach. "Damn, you can't give up, can you?" he muttered. "I said not yet."

"Sadist." She couldn't lie still; desire rode her like an unbearable itch, an implacable hunger. Her body moved under him, dancing its need, calling to him with her open thighs and the hot scent of her body.

"More like a masochist." He kissed his way down her throat, over the slope of her breast, then clamped his mouth over one tight nipple and strongly sucked at it. Electricity arced from breast to loins, bowing her upward; he slipped his left arm around her hips and held her in that position as he moved to her other breast.

He wasn't being gentle with her. The pressure of his mouth verged on pain, but it wasn't quite there, teetering on that exquisite edge between pain and pleasure. Just as it began to tilt over the edge, he moved, sliding down her torso, kissing and nipping. His tongue probed her shallow navel, and a surprised cry burst from her throat, her body arching again. God, he was going to make her come just by kissing her navel. But then he was gone from there, too, his mouth sliding lower as he smoothed his free hand over her hips and abdomen, before slipping it between her legs.

Yes. There. That was what she wanted, almost. She squirmed against his hand, but he just held it there, covering her with his palm, letting her feel the heat and strength. Her hips lifted, riding a wave of painful anticipation. She wanted his fingers inside her, she wanted his mouth on her.

"Do it," she gritted, pushing herself against his hand. "Please!"

He gave a low, raw laugh, his head pressed against her inner thigh and his breath hot on her flesh. With his thumb he probed her, dragging it up the closed folds of her labia and opening them so he could see all of her. She panted, her head tossing back and forth on the mat as he circled her clitoris, teasing it to fullness. Just when she thought she'd scream in frustration, he closed his mouth on her and his tongue began circling and flicking as he dragged his thumb down and pressed it deep inside.

Desperately she grabbed the pipe behind her and held on. Spots swam in front of her eyes and her entire body bucked as she came. She heard her own hoarse cries, but they sounded distant, as if someone else made them. For a long, magic moment nothing existed but her body and the firestorm of sensation as her inner contractions peaked, then slowly began to ebb. Her thighs had been clenched around his head but now her legs fell limply open. He was licking her.

At first the leisurely caresses were soothing. She made a little humming sound of pleasure as his tongue probed her entrance. But the probing and licking continued, and the glorious lassitude began to fade, replaced by a familiar heat and tension. "What are you waiting for?" she gasped, twisting a little.

"I want you ready again." Gently he blew on her, his breath cool on her overheated flesh.

"I am ready!" The need had rebuilt so fast she was breathless.

"Not quite," he murmured, gently catching her clitoris between his teeth, then torturing her with lightning flicks of his tongue. She groaned under the lash of pleasure, but as good as this felt, she wanted more. She wanted him inside her. Now.

'Just a little closer," he crooned, slipping his thumb inside her again. Then he replaced his hand with his mouth and he kissed her, deeply, his tongue probing, while his wet thumb moved farther down and pushed into her in a bold, shocking thrust that made stars explode in her head. She came again, convulsing, screaming, trying to fight him because the sensations were too sharp to be borne. He held her down, drawing out the moment, holding her at the peak.

Finally she collapsed, trembling, her ears ringing as she struggled to find some measure of control.

"Damn it," he said, slow and deep, as he moved up her limp body. "There's no way in hell I can wait until you're ready again."

She didn't care. She was beyond caring, beyond even opening her eyes as he positioned himself between her legs and guided his penis to her wet entrance, then began sinking into her.

Oh God oh God. Sarah pressed her head hard against the mat, forcing herself to breathe deeply. He was big enough that his penetration wasn't easy; if she hadn't been so wet from two climaxes, so utterly relaxed, taking him would have been painful. As it was, though, their fit was perfect, so perfect that tears sprang to her eyes. She was tight around him; he was deep within her. He pushed one more time and he was there, touching a place inside her that, impossibly, rekindled the heat of desire. She hadn't thought she could climax again, but as he began to thrust she realized differently. The heat inside her began to grow, became hunger, lifting her body to him. He held her legs wide and hammered into her, driven now by his own blind urgency. Every inward stroke forced her closer and closer to that moment when the tension would become too much, when the heat was scalding and nerve endings couldn't endure any more. He thrust harder and harder, their loins slapping together, and she was almost there, almost there, almost . . .

He came, his powerful body bowing and bucking, shuddering, pumping. Hoarse, rough cries tore from his throat as he gripped her hips and pulled

her groin tight against him. Then, slowly, he collapsed on top of her.
A small, wild sound vibrated in her throat. Almost . . . there.
She needed him to move, needed him deeper. Frantically she tugged at the handcuffs. "Take them off," she panted.
'Wha-" He didn't lift his head. His entire body was shaking, a fine tremor from muscles taxed to the limit.
"The handcuffs." She could barely speak; her voice was guttural. She surged upward, seeking the final touch that would send her over the edge. He was still hard, still inside her, but she needed him deeper, wanted him deeper. "Take them off."
"God," he gasped. "Give me a minute."
"Nowinshe shrieked, maddened by the completion that lurked just out of her grasp. She fought the cuffs like a madwoman. "Take them off!"
"All right, just hold still!" He subdued her, holding her down as he got the key from under the edge of the mat where he'd stashed it. He stretched higher on her body as he reached for the cuffs, forcing his penis deeper, and something very close to a howl erupted from her throat. Alarmed, afraid he'd injured her, he hastily unlocked the handcuffs and started to draw back from her.
Sarah lunged upward, locking her legs around his in a vise as she grabbed his ass and pulled him in tighter, as deep as she could take him. There, right there-ah! Her hips pumped as she pistoned herself on him, and she felt the peak coming closer . . . closer . . . She screamed, caught in an orgasm more intense than the others, so intense she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't see. She heard him make an inhuman sound; then he was thrusting hard, groaning, his arms locked around her as he began coming again.
She either passed out or slept; she wasn't certain which. Slowly she became aware of the whisper of cool air on her damp skin, of the mat sticking to her naked body, of the man sprawled so heavily on top of her. His heaving breaths had slowed to a more normal pace, telling her that at least a few minutes had passed. The sticky moisture of his semen had seeped out of her to pool uncomfortably beneath her bare bottom.
Was he asleep? She managed to lift her arm and touch his shoulder. He stirred and turned his head so his face pressed into the curve of her neck.
"God," he muttered, his voice muffled. "That's the first time I've ever come twice with one hard-on. It damn near killed me."

That was such a guy thing to say that she smiled. She would have laughed if she'd had the energy, but the fact was, she was damn near dead herself.
Slowly, every movement an effort, he levered himself off her and collapsed by her side. He lay on his back with his arm covering his eyes, breathing deeply. After a minute he cursed. "Please tell me you're on the pill."
"I'm on the pill," she parroted obediently.
He groaned, long and heartfelt. "Fuck."
This time she did laugh, though it was a little weak. "No, I really am on the pill."
He lifted his arm enough to peer at her with one eye. "You are?"
"I am."
"You wouldn't joke with a poor, crippled wreck of a man?"
"I would, but not about this."
"Thank God." He tried to sit up, wavered, then fell back. "I'11 get up in a minute."
Bully for him. Sarah knew for a fact her legs wouldn't support her. "Are you sure about that?"
"No," he admitted, and closed his eyes.

Chapter 17

CAHILL LAY HEAVILY ON HER, HIS BIG BODY TREMBLING IN the aftermath of orgasm. They were in his bed, the room cool and dark around them. Sarah had no idea what time it was; she could have lifted her head to peer at the digital alarm clock on the bedside table, but she didn't have the energy. Nor did the time matter; what mattered was the shattering realization that she was in trouble.

She couldn't say she hadn't known what she was doing. She had walked into the situation with her eyes open, knowing that she was already way too vulnerable to him,-too close to falling in love, and that making love with him would only increase her vulnerability.

She had known, and she'd done it anyway.

It wasn't the sex-though God knows the word that best described it was too: too hot, too raunchy, too powerful. This wasn't just sex, this was mating . . . at least on her part. And that was the problem.

She hadn't wanted to love him. She'd thought-hoped-that she could keep that core part of herself separate, and inviolate. She'd failed miserably, or maybe spectacularly, because she hadn't been prepared for the inescapable fact that on every level he was her match. Not just physically, but emotionally, even in their personalities, they came together as equals. She might never in her lifetime find another man who matched her as well as Cahill did, and if this didn't work out, it was going to hurt her for a long, long time.

Her arms were still looped around his neck, her legs still hugged him close. Since the moment they had come upstairs and fallen into bed, and that had to be hours ago, she didn't think they had been out of physical contact with each other for more than five minutes, total. They had cuddled and stroked and kissed, dozed in a tangle of legs and arms, and made love with an almost savage hunger. This wasn't just the result of sexual deprivation, though it had been a long time for her; nor was it that first fascination with a new love. This was different. This was more.

As they rested, their heartbeats had slowed, become synchronized. Cahill nuzzled her neck, then gently pulled out of her body and fell on his side. "God, I'm hungry."

Just like that he banished her malaise, and she sputtered with laughter. "You're supposed to say something romantic and lover-like, Cahill. What

happened to, at least, 'That was great'?"
He yawned and stretched. "It fell by the wayside somewhere around the fourth time." Reaching out one long arm, he switched on the bedside lamp and propped up on one elbow, looking down at her with a sleepy, sated gaze. "If you listen hard, I think you'll hear a chocolate chip cookie calling you, too."
"Chocolate chip? Why didn't you say so?" She scrambled out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. "I'll meet you in the kitchen."
"Do you like 'em hot or cold?" he called as he pulled on a pair of black boxers.
"Gooey."
"Hot it is."
She entered the kitchen just as he was pouring two glasses of milk. The microwave dinged, and he removed a plate piled high with chocolate chip cookies.
"I borrowed a T-shirt," she said as she sat down. "I hope you don't mind." The shirt came almost to mid-thigh, covering all the important parts.
He eyed her. "It looks better on you than it does on me." He sat down across from her, and put the plate between them. "Dig in."
She did. The cookies were warm and soft, the chocolate chips melted just enough to be gooey, the way she preferred. Midway through the second one she asked, "What time is it?"
"Almost four. "
She groaned. "It's almost dawn and we haven't had any sleep. Or much, anyway."
'What difference does it make? It's Saturday. We can sleep as long as we like."
"No, I can't. I need to go home."
"Why?"
She stared at the cookie, at the crumbs that fell when she pinched off a bite. "Do you mean other than that's where my birth control pills are?"
He watched her over the rim of the glass as he downed a healthy slug of milk. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Other than that. Not that the pills aren't important."
"You know the saying: Miss one and you're an idiot. Miss two, and you're a mommy." She took a deep breath. She had been honest with herself, and he deserved no less. "And I need to regroup."

"Regroup from what?"
"From this. You. Sex. This is . . . this is-"
"-pretty powerful stuff," he said, completing the sentence. "For me, too. So why is it making you run?"
"I'm not running, just retreating a little." She circled the top of her glass with her finger, then looked up at him, sitting there watching her with his cop's eyes, his jaw darkened with a day's growth of beard. "I think this is more powerful stuff to me than it is to you, and that's a big risk for me to take."
"You aren't in this alone, Sarah. You can't talk degrees of feeling like you're comparing thermometers."
"I can when I'm the one registering the high number."
"You don't know that for certain."
She blinked at him as he continued eating a cookie. 'What are you saying?"
"Is this confession time?" He rubbed the back of his neck. "Shit, I'm no good at this kind of talk at any time, much less at four in the morning. Okay, here it is: I don't know exactly what we have, but I know we have something. I know I don't want you to leave. I know I want you in a way I've never wanted anyone else, and I know you're not a woman who plays games. This isn't a game to me, either. You can pull back from me because you're afraid of taking a risk, or we can see where this goes."
She stared at him, feeling the quiet unfurling of happiness inside, like a flower blooming. She had expected him to retreat when she confessed to being emotionally involved. She hadn't said the "L" word, but she might as well have; he couldn't have missed her meaning. Not that the basic situation had changed- he hadn't said the "L" word, either. But he hadn't got that uncomfortable expression guys got when a woman started clinging and all they really wanted was to get the hell away from her.
Cahill had been burned; she, on the other hand, was relatively free of scars. Maybe the fact that this was uncharted territory for her was why she was frightened she'd get hurt. If Cahill could risk it, then so could she.
"All right," she said calmly. "So now what happens?"
"I suggest we finish our milk and cookies, and go back to bed."
"And then what?"
The look he gave her was faintly exasperated. "Are you going to write this down in an appointment book or something?"
"I'm big on organization. Humor me."

"All right. I know you have your job to do. I have mine. Some days I won't have much free time, some days you won't. Unless you want to move in with me-No?" he asked when she shook her head. "I didn't think so. Not yet, anyway. But failing that, then we continue as we have this week, together in our free time. We probably won't get much cosmic bowling done-"
"But I so enjoyed it," she murmured, earning an appreciative grin from him.
"-but I can promise I'll do my best to keep you entertained. How does that sound?"
"Hmm, I don't know. What do you have in mind?"
'Well, for starters I thought I'd fuck your brains out. Then, as an encore, I thought I'd fuck your brains out."
"Just what I like," she said. "Variety."
He set the plate of cookies on the counter and put the empty milk glasses in the sink. "If it's variety you want," he said, turning to pull her to her feet, "what do you think about the table?"
Her heart began hammering at the expression on his face, that heavy-lidded, intent look that meant he was aroused. "It's a very nice table."
"Glad you like it," he said, and lifted her onto it.
They spent the weekend together. She insisted on spending some time at the Judge's house, working on the packing and inventory, so he helped her. Because the house wasn't hers, she didn't feel free to invite him to stay the night, so she packed a few clothes and toiletries and drove herself back to his house with him, where they spent the rest of the day in bed. Sunday was pretty much a rerun of Saturday, to her delight. She put her worries on hold and let things between them develop as they would. What else could she do, other than run? Caution was in her nature, but running wasn't.
Early Monday morning, she drove back home and determinedly set to work. Barbara called at ten, pulling her from the chore of folding and packing more towels and washcloths than a small army could use.
"I've talked to a realtor," Barbara said. "He'll be there sometime today to put up a sign, so don't be surprised if you see someone in the front yard. Actually, I've already had a couple of people call me here at home-you know, acquaintances who know someone who's looking for a house in Mountain Brook, so maybe it won't be a problem to sell."
"I don't think it will," Sarah replied, thinking that she might not have a full month here after all.

"I'm flying in this weekend to help you pack up Daddy's clothes and personal things." Her voice wobbled a little. "I'm not looking forward to it, but I need to do it. This still doesn't seem real, and maybe . . . maybe putting his things away will help."
"Do you want me to pick you up at the airport?"
"No, I'll rent a car so I can come and go without bothering you. And would you book a room at the Wynfrey for me? I don't think I can stay in the house."
"I'll be glad to. Do you want a suite?"
"Just a room will do, since I'll be alone. Sarah, you know how long it takes a will to go through probate. I've talked to Randall and Jon about this, and we all agree. If you need the money Daddy left you, we'll go ahead and give it to you now out of our accounts, and take it back out of the estate when everything is settled."
"Oh, no, don't do that," Sarah said, shocked. "I don't need the money, and I really wish you wouldn't-"
"Don't argue," Barbara said firmly. "Daddy left you the money, and that's that."
There was nothing Sarah could do but say, "Thank you. Truly, though, I don't need the money now."
"All right, but if you change your mind, all you have to do is tell me. Oh, by the way, I've written a letter of recommendation for you, too; I'm bringing it with me, so don't let me forget to give it to you. You've been wonderful; I don't know what we would have done without you."
"It's been my pleasure," Sarah said sadly, because it truly had been a pleasure to serve the Judge and his family.
There was another job offer in the mail that day. She read it and put it with the others. This one didn't require her to start immediately, so it was a possibility. She made a mental note to call later, to set up an appointment for an interview.
To her astonishment, every day there was another job offer in the mail, and a couple of offers were made by phone. She disregarded those immediately, preferring the more formal approach. Still, she was amazed at the number of offers coming in; her salary wasn't cheap, so she hadn't expected what was almost a cornucopia of opportunities.
"It's that television spot," Cahill said when she told him about it Thursday night. They were watching television, sitting together in his big recliner

with her in his lap. She was proud they were actually watching television; this was the first night they hadn't gone straight to bed after eating dinner.
"You're a celebrity, of sorts, so some people will want to hire you whether they really need you or not."
"That isn't the type of job I want, just to be someone's status symbol. Judge Roberts needed someone to organize and run the household for him. He was elderly, he lived alone, he had some health problems, and he simply didn't want to be bothered by the details."
"Plus he needed your bodyguard skills."
Sarah fell silent, because her skills hadn't done any good. When the Judge had needed her, she hadn't been there.
"Hey," Cahill said softly. "It wasn't your fault. You couldn't have stopped it. There would have been no reason for you to be suspicious of this guy, whoever he is, because the Judge knew him, asked him to come in. Would you have stayed in the room with them while they talked?"
"No, of course not."
"Then how could you have stopped it? The guy probably used a silencer; you wouldn't even have heard the shot."
"At least I could have identified him-" She stopped, thinking it through. "He'd have killed me, too."
Cahill's arms tightened around her. "He'd have to, because you'd know his name, what he looked like. Thank God you went to a movie." He kissed her forehead, then tilted her head back and kissed her mouth, lingering until she began to think they wouldn't be watching television much longer.
"When did you say Mrs. Pearson is flying in?" he asked, lifting his head.
"Tomorrow night."
"Does this mean you won't be sleeping here?"
"I can't," she said, regretfully.
"Then why are we wasting time?"
Later, when he'd turned out the light and they were lying drowsily together, he said, "If you don't mind, let me check out the people who sent you those job offers."
"Why?" she asked, startled into lifting her head. "Do you think something's wrong?" She didn't see how anything could be.
"No, nothing in particular. It's just a precaution. Humor me. "
"Okay, if you want."
"I do," he said firmly.

Chapter 18

"WE DO A LOT OF ENTERTAINING." MERILYN LANKFORD TOOK A sip of coffee from a cup of translucent bone china, the huge yellow diamond on her hand glittering as it caught the sunlight. "And we travel, so we need someone to look after the house while we're gone." She suddenly smiled, her eyes twinkling. "I've always told Sonny I need a wife. Miss Stevens, will you marry me?"

Sarah had to laugh. Mrs. Lankford was a petite, energetic brunette with artfully done highlights to hide the growing gray in her hair, bright green eyes that invited the world to laugh with her, and a nonstop schedule. Her two daughters were grown, the older one married and the younger one a senior in college. She had a job in real estate, an interest in several charities, and a husband who ran two thriving businesses that depended on contacts for sales, hence the entertaining. Judge Roberts had been old money; the Lankfords were unabashedly new money, and they were enjoying every penny.

Two years before, they had built a rambling, ostentatious Spanish-style house, with nooks and crannies everywhere, arched alcoves, bricked courtyards, a center fountain, and anything else they could think of. The pool was Olympic size. Mr. Lankford had what he called a media room, crammed with whatever he could think of in the way of electronics, from computer to stereo, including the big-screen television that all men seemed to need to feel complete-and this was in addition to the home theater, with the drop-down projection screen, the ten reclining theater seats upholstered in lush velvet, and the wraparound stereo sound system. The Lankfords had his-and-her marble bathrooms, closets the size of most people's houses, ten bathrooms, eight bedrooms, and what was obviously more money than they knew what to do with.

The whole setup made Sarah want to laugh, it was so over-the-top. It was also obvious that Merilyn enjoyed everything about her new house, from the silly to the luxurious. She knew it was ostentatious, and she didn't care. She had wanted the sunken marble tub, she could afford it, so she got one; it was that simple.

Sarah liked the Lankfords, Merilyn especially. From her point of view, the setup was good; there were separate quarters for her use, an actual little Spanish-style, fully furnished bungalow set back behind the pool and half hidden from view by a lush wall of trailing ivy. Merilyn must have paid the earth to have the mature ivy transplanted, but the effect was wonderful. Even more important, Sarah thought, Merilyn truly needed her. The other prospective employers had, she sensed, wanted her more as a trophy or a status symbol than anything else. She had even received a second offer from the man who had tried to hire her after seeing her on television. People like that didn't really need her. Attitude went a long way in her consideration.
The entire process had become a little weird. She was supposed to be the one being interviewed, not the other way around, but she kept getting the feeling that people were almost auditioning for her. This certainly hadn't been addressed in training, so she pretended not to notice. Regardless of which job she took, after a while things would adjust to their natural state and her employers would become accustomed to treating her as they should.
The Lankfords were the fourth interview she'd had, and she thought they might be the last. Matters had progressed with the Judge's estate faster than the family had anticipated; only a week after listing the house for sale, the realtor had a serious offer on the table, and the buyers wanted to close immediately. In order to get the house ready for them, on Barbara's instructions, Sarah had brought in extra labor to help with packing and moving. The house was almost empty; all that was left was what was in her own quarters.
The furniture wasn't hers; neither were the dishes or cookware. She did have her own bed linens, because she preferred silky sheets, but for the most part, all she had to move were her personal effects-her clothes and toiletries and books, a music system, and her collection of cassettes and CDs. Cahill had told her she didn't have to rush into a job, she could always move in with him and take her time looking, but she didn't feel right doing that. She wanted a bit more independence than that, regardless of how much time she had been spending at his house.
After she and Merilyn discussed salary, duties, benefits, and off-days, Merilyn beamed a high-wattage, cheerleader smile at her. "So, when can you start?"
Sarah made the decision right then. "Two days. If you don't mind, I'll move my things into the bungalow tomorrow. I'll need to sit down with you and

Mr. Lankford to go over your schedules and needs, and if possible, I'd like a diagram of the house."
"It's awful, isn't it? I'll just give you a set of the blueprints; we have at least ten, fifteen copies left," Merilyn said cheerfully. 'We built this house, and I still sometimes get turned around and have to look out a window to see where I am. You know, if it's Tuesday this must be the den, that type of thing. Only in the movies it was Belgium, not the den, but you know what I mean."
"It must be fun," Sarah said, smiling.
"It's more fun than you can imagine. Building the house was like an adventure; we drove the builder crazy, because we'd come up with new ideas for what we wanted almost every day, but we kept paying him bonuses, so he made out okay. This is probably the only house we'll ever build, unless, God forbid, it burns down or something, so we went all out. The first night we lived here, we played hide-and-seek like two kids. I can't wait until we have grandchildren so I can play hide-and-seek with them, there are so many good places to hide." Suddenly she smacked herself in the head. 'What am I saying? I'm too young to be a grandmother! I don't know what's wrong with me; comments like that have been popping out of my mouth for the last year or so. Do you think I need estrogen, or something?"
Sarah laughed. "Or grandchildren."
"Bethany, my oldest, is just twenty-four, and that seems so young, too young to start a family, so I hope she'll wait another few years. But I was just twenty when I had her, and I didn't think I was too young."
"We never do," Sarah murmured.
They agreed on the terms of a very simple contract; then Merilyn gave her a set of keys for both the bungalow and the house, the codes for the gate and security systems, and a copy of the blueprints, which was a huge roll consisting of at least thirty pages, and weighed about five pounds. Feeling a bit bemused by the speed with which Merilyn accomplished things, Sarah drove home and called Barbara to let her know that, unless something unforeseen had come up, she was finished clearing and packing and would be moving out tomorrow, clearing the way for the new owners.
'Where will you be?" Barbara asked. "I don't want to lose track of you, Sarah. You've been a part of our family for almost three years, and I can't imagine not knowing where you are or how to get in touch with you."

"I've taken a position with Sonny and Merilyn Lankford, on Brookwood."
"Oh," said Barbara. "New money." Location, location, location; it told everything.
"Very new, and having a lot of fun with it."
"Then God bless them. Do you have their number handy?"
"Actually, I'll have a private line, so let me give you that number." She had already memorized it, so she rattled it off. "And you still have my cell phone number, don't you?"
"In my address book. I'll call the bank and have the balance of this month's salary paid into your account tomorrow. You take care of yourself, you hear?"
"You, too."
After hanging up, Sarah allowed herself a moment to look around the two cozy rooms that had been hers, then shook off the sadness and nostalgia and briskly began packing up her books. As she packed, she called her mom and gave her the details of her new job, as well as the telephone number and address. Dad was well; Jennifer thought she might be pregnant-big surprise there, she'd been trying for, what, a whole month?-and Daniel was back on his home base in Kentucky. Everyone was safe and accounted for.
She worked steadily, her mind already going over what she had seen of the Lankfords' house, working out schedules for having the hundreds of windows washed and cleaning what had to be hundreds of miles of grout. The cleaning itself was the job of the housekeeper, or the cleaning service, but arranging and overseeing was Sarah's job. The house was easily twice as large as Judge Roberts's house, so she'd have her hands full just with domestic responsibilities.
Her cell phone rang, startling her. She grabbed it out of her bag. "Hello."
"Just checking to see when you'll be home," Cahill said, his deep voice easy and relaxed.
Sarah glanced at her watch and grimaced. The time had gotten away from her; it was almost seven o'clock. "I'm sorry; I was packing my things and didn't pay attention to the time. Are you at home? "
"On my way; I'm running late, too. Do you want to meet me somewhere for dinner?"
She looked down at her clothes; she'd changed into jeans be fore she started packing, and they were stained and dusty. "I'm too dirty to eat out. Do you want me to pick up something on the way home?"

"I can do that. How about a plate from Jimmie's?"
Jimmie's was a mom-and-pop restaurant that served plate lunches-a meat and three vegetables for five-ninety-five, or four veggies for four-eighty-five; your choice of dinner roll or corn bread. The weekly menu never varied. This was Tuesday, but it wasn't Belgium; it was meat loaf day at Jimmie's.
"That sounds good. Just vegetables for me, and corn bread. You know which veggies I like." He should; they had been there something like seven times in the past two weeks.
"How much longer are you going to stay?"
"I'll stop now. I'm almost finished, anyway."
"See you in about half an hour, then. If you get home before I do, leave the things in the truck and I'll take them in for you when I get home."
He hung up, and Sarah made a wry face at the phone. "Damn," she muttered. He thought she would be staying with him, though every time he'd mentioned her moving in, she had resisted the idea.
Maybe it was old-fashioned, even silly of her, but she didn't like the idea of living with him. A sleep-over was one thing; in fact, she had slept over with him almost every night since they became lovers. But the only way she would consider actually living with a man was if they were married or at least engaged. Cahill had asked her to do a lot of things, but marry him wasn't one of them. Until then-
Until then?
She jerked herself up short. Was her subconscious planning to marry him? Had it not listened to all her lectures about the dangers of getting involved with a man who had gone through a vicious divorce in his recent past? Despite everything, was she so in love with him that she was already dreaming of happily-ever-after?
Hell, yes, she was.
Her stupidity was surpassed only by her optimism. She closed her eyes, a little amused at herself, a little despairing. Hope sprang eternal, all right, and there was nothing she could do but play out the hand and see what happened.
She loaded some of the boxes in the SUV, then washed her face and hands and locked up, as usual checking all the doors and windows in the house and making certain the alarm was set. That would be her duty only one

more time; then she would focus solely on the Lankfords and their comfort, their routine.
Jimmie's must have been busy, because Cahill still wasn't home when she got there. She let herself in with the spare key he'd given her, and jumped into the shower to rinse off the rest of the grime from the boxes. She wrapped herself in the terry-cloth robe she'd left there and walked out of the bedroom just as she heard the back door open.
"Honey, I'm home!" he called, making her grin as she entered the kitchen. He had set the takeout plates on the table and was getting the jug of tea from the fridge. "And I'm starving," he added.
"So am I. Why were you so late?"
"A woman took her three-year-old to his pediatrician, and the doc noticed the kid was covered with bruises. She said he fell down the stairs. The doc was suspicious and called it in, we investigated, and they don't have stairs. Bastards. Plus we were going over some old cases."
Meaning they were still sifting through the evidence taken from the Judge's house, going over it again and again, trying to spot something they'd missed. The case was cold, and getting colder by the minute, but they were still trying. He looked tired, but who wouldn't be after dealing with people who would beat up a three-year-old?
"I had another interview today," she said as they sat down. "Sonny and Merilyn Lankford, on Brookwood; big Spanish-type house."
"Yeah, I know the place. How did it go?"
"I took the job."
He paused with his fork on the way to his mouth, his gaze sharpening as he studied her. "Same setup you had with Judge Roberts? On-site quarters?"
"Yes, a separate little bungalow. I have the weekends off unless they have a party planned, in which case I'll substitute one of the other days."
'When do you start?"
He had on his cop face, and that was his cop voice, cool and dispassionate. He'd been expecting her to move in with him, and he didn't like it that things weren't going his way.
"Day after tomorrow."
"So tomorrow night is the last night you'll be spending here."
Her appetite was fading fast. "Tomorrow is the last night I'll be spending every night with you. Whether or not it's the last night, period, is up to you."
"Meaning?"

"Meaning I have a job to do, and I won't short-time them. But when I'm free, if you want me, I'll be here."
"Oh, yeah," he said softly. "I want you."
"But you're angry because I took the job."
"No, I know you had to find another job. I don't like it because you won't be here. That's two different things."
"I've loved being here with you, Cahill." Love being the operative word.
"But we both knew it was temporary. My staying here at night, I mean."
"Okay, okay." He looked frustrated. 'We'll manage. I just don't like it. And before you stay a single night at this place, I want to check these people out. Remember our agreement?"
"I don't think Merilyn Lankford's a terrorist or a money launderer for the mob," she said, relieved he wasn't trying to talk her out of taking the job.
"You never know. People have all kinds of dirty laundry in their closets. For my peace of mind, okay?" He reached behind him where he'd hung his jacket on the back of the chair and took out his notebook. "Give me their full names again, and address."
Sighing, she did.
"Sonny's his real name? Not a nickname?"
"I suppose."
"Never mind, I can find out. If they've ever even had a traffic ticket, I'll know about it." He slipped the notebook back into his pocket and resumed eating.
A disruption in his domestic arrangements wasn't enough to kill his appetite, she noticed with amusement and made herself begin eating again, too.
Inevitably her mind slipped back to the Judge; how could it not, when what had happened to him was the reason Cahill wanted to check out the Lankfords? Tomorrow would be four weeks since the murder; every Wednesday was a sad anniversary. She didn't know if she would ever be able to live through another Wednesday without remembering.
"There's nothing new on the case, is there?" she asked, though she thought he'd tell her if there was. But maybe not; he kept most things about his work pretty close to his chest.
"No. We're not giving up, though. There had to be a reason, and sooner or later we'll find out what it was. Someone will talk, let something slip, and it'll get back to us. Or someone will get pissed and give us a call, tell what

they know. We're still talking to people, showing that picture around, trying to shake some memories. It'll come. Sooner or later, it'll come."

Chapter 19

HE COULDN'T BELIEVE IT, WHEN HE HEARD, AND OF COURSE he did hear; Mountain Brook was a small town, and people knew people; someone always talked. She had gone to work for those nouveau riche Lankfords, with the ghastly house that proved just how nouveau their riches truly were. He received a nice little letter from her, politely telling him she had taken another position, but by the time the letter arrived, he had already heard the news.

He held the letter in his hand, staring at her neat, firm signature. He had read it over dozens of times since receiving it, though the words never changed. He thought he could almost smell her on the paper, a light, fresh scent that hit him with a shaft of pain, because she should be here. She should be with him. Every day the pain of her absence became more acute, as if something vital in his life was lacking. It was intolerable.

He rubbed the sheet of paper over his face, seeking comfort in knowing that she had touched this, had sent it personally to him.

How could she do this to him? Didn't she know-? No, of course not. She couldn't know, he reminded himself. He mustn't get angry with her, because, after all, she hadn't yet met him. As soon as she did, she would know how perfect their lives would be together. She probably felt sorry for those nasty Lankfords and would try to bring a touch of class to their tacky lives. It was a useless effort, but his Sarah was a valiant creature. She would try, and keep trying, until her heart broke at the futility of it.

He actually knew the Lankfords, because, after all, business was business. He'd never been to their house, though; perhaps it was time he visited. Getting an invitation wouldn't be difficult; they entertained with vaudevillian gusto, as if they had no idea of the pleasure of solitude, or quiet.

What a wonderful idea, visiting the Lankfords; he would be able to see Sarah close at hand, because obviously she would be overseeing everything. Perhaps she would even be introduced to him. One didn't normally introduce the servants to the guests, but Merilyn Lankford was just gauche

enough to do it. Not that Sarah was an ordinary servant; in her own way she was queen, but the world she ruled was always behind-the-scenes. She deserved to have his world to rule, rather than that monument to tackiness. For Sarah's own sake, not to mention his, he had to get her out of there. He had to act, the sooner the better. He mustn't be careless, though. This would require planning and thought, and no small degree of skill. He looked forward to the challenge.

People were creatures of habit; they wore their little rut of routine in the fabric of their lives; then they stayed in the rut because it was easier than climbing out. According to psychologists, it was fact that most people preferred what they knew, even if it was horrible, to the uncertainty of the unknown. Women stayed with abusive husbands, not out of hope, but out of fear of being on their own. It was the great unknown. Only daring souls, or desperate ones, broke out of their ruts.

People tended to follow the same patterns day after day, week after week. The same people would be at the same place at roughly the same time. Cahill didn't expect the man in the photograph to show up and use the same pay phone at the same time of night; but maybe, just maybe, someone would be in the Galleria who was in the habit of being there then and had been there the night Judge Roberts was killed, and had noticed . . . what? Something. Anything.

None of the store clerks had noticed anything, but then they were trained to watch what went on in their stores, not out in the mall concourse. But what about the people sitting on the benches, strolling around, the clutch of teenagers giggling and trying to act cool, the young woman slowly pushing a baby stroller back and forth with her foot while she ate a cinnamon roll? Were they there every night? Every Wednesday night? What was their routine?

At about the same time of night the call had been made, on a hunch Cahill went to the Galleria and stopped every shopper he met in the area of that particular pay phone and showed them the photograph. Did anything about this man ring any bells? Did they know someone who resembled him? Was it possible they'd seen him before, here in the Galleria?

He got a lot of funny looks, no's, and shakes of the head. Some people merely glanced at the photograph before saying, "Naw," and walking on. Some people took the time to study it before handing it back. No, he didn't look familiar. Sorry.

Cahill kept at it. Nothing was breaking in the case; there were no rumors, no one was dropping a dime to get back at someone- nothing. The wall they'd hit was high and wide. They had the slug that killed the Judge, but not the cartridge. They didn't have any prints that scored a hit on AFIS; they didn't have the murder weapon; they didn't have a witness; they didn't have a motive. They didn't have shit.

He was getting angry. No one should be able to commit murder and walk away. It happened, but it offended him on a deep level, in that part of him that made him a cop.

He stopped a twenty-something guy who had a black-lipsticked girl hanging on him like a window-unit air conditioner.

They both had attitude, but they looked at the photograph anyway. "I dunno," the guy said, frowning a little. "He reminds me of somebody, but I can't place him, y'know?"

Cahill kept his own demeanor and voice neutral. He could be a badass when he needed to be, but tonight he'd deliberately been very low-key so if anyone had anything to say, he or she would feel comfortable talking to him. "Is it someone you've seen here in the Galleria before?"

"Naw, it ain't that. Hey, I know! He looks like my banker!"

"Your banker?"

"Yeah-William Teller!"

They walked away laughing. "Cute," Cahill said under his breath, turning away and not letting himself respond to the smart-ass, but the guy had better hope they never crossed paths if he was doing something he shouldn't-and he looked like the type who would.

Cahill worked the shoppers until the announcement came that the mall was closing. This had been another dead end, but if he kept coming back, kept showing the photograph, maybe sooner or later something would pop.

The house was dark when he got home. He sat in the driveway for a minute staring at the windows. "Shit," he muttered. Coming home to a dark house had never bothered him before, but now he wanted to punch something because he didn't like this worth a damn. In just a couple of weeks he'd gotten so accustomed to having Sarah there that not having her there felt almost as bad as when he'd first broken up with Shannon.

Hell, in a way it was worse. He hadn't missed Shannon. Finding out she was screwing around had killed everything he felt for her except anger. He missed Sarah, though; it was a constant ache. He could forget about it while

he was working, but the knowledge that she wouldn't be there when he got home was always there in the back of his mind, waiting for a moment when he wasn't occupied to punch him in the gut.

He finally got out of the truck and went inside, flipping on lights, turning on the television, getting himself something to drink. It was his normal routine, and it wasn't enough. The emptiness of the house made him furious.

Sarah had spent Saturday night with him, and the sex had been so hot he'd thought his head would explode. He couldn't get enough of her, and that was damn scary. She was openly, honestly sensual, giving freely of herself and delighting in his body as fiercely as he delighted in hers. It almost scared him sometimes, the way they were in such perfect sync, in bed and out.

He was suspicious when something seemed perfect, but the way he and Sarah fit together was . . . perfect. Even when they argued, he knew he didn't intimidate her-hell, he wasn't certain she could be intimidated. And that was perfect. He didn't have to handle her with kid gloves. The sex was hot and raunchy: perfect. They made each other laugh: perfect. Maybe it was because she was from a military family, but she seemed to get him in a way no other woman had: perfect.

What wasn't perfect was that she wasn't with him.

He hated her living in that damn bungalow. He hated it with a savagery that he tried hard to keep hidden. He'd been reasonable about her career; hell, he'd even been sensitive. When she told him she'd taken the job and would live on-site, he hadn't roared, "Fuck that! Over my dead body!" Which was exactly what he'd felt like saying. Being reasonable was a pain in the ass. What really pissed him off, though, was he didn't have any right to argue with her about it.

They were lovers, nothing more. He'd never said anything other than something along the lines of, "Let's see where this goes." He hadn't made any commitment, hadn't asked her for one, though he thought it was mutually understood neither of them would see anyone else. That lack of commitment gnawed at him now. He should have said something before, and he didn't know if speaking up now would do any good. She had agreed to terms and signed a contract, and, knowing Sarah, she wouldn't even try to amend the terms-not for just a live-in lover.

That chapped his ass, too. He didn't want to be "just" anything to her. He wanted to be her center.

She was a very easy person to live with, but he'd always been aware that she had an ironclad set of personal standards. That was part of what so attracted him to her. If she said she would do something, she'd either do it or try everything humanly possible to keep her word. If Sarah made a commitment, she kept it. When she married, her husband would never have to worry about Sarah sleeping around. She might kick his ass out and divorce him, but she wouldn't cheat on him-and only a fool would cheat on her.

The two weeks of intense, no-commitment sex had been great, but he'd been a fool to think it would hold her. She had never allowed herself to lose focus on her job with the Roberts family, or on interviewing for another job. He'd just assumed she wasn't in any hurry to find another job, that they'd have more time together.

To what end? The conclusion would have been the same. Whether she was here two weeks or two months, she'd still been looking for another job. He guessed he should be grateful she'd found one fast, because if she'd kept looking, she might have gone farther afield and ended up working in Atlanta or some place even farther away, which would really suck.

If he'd wanted to keep her here, he should have raised the bar-the commitment bar. But, God, the only thing that would have held her would have been a marriage proposal and just the thought of getting married again made him break out in a cold sweat. Maybe they could have a long engagement.

No, she'd see through that in a heartbeat. And that was assuming she'd say yes to a proposal, anyway. She had her big plan for traveling the world, and she was actively working to achieve that ambition. She really wanted to do it, and she'd structured her life to achieve that goal, keeping herself free and unencumbered. He didn't know how the plan would work within the structure of a marriage, if it could work, if she'd be willing to get married beforehand or if she'd insist on waiting until afterward.

She'd all but told him she loved him. Hell, he knew she loved him. But he hadn't done anything about it, hadn't solidified or formalized their relationship; he'd been happily coasting along, seeing "where this thing goes," and it had cost him. Big time.

Sarah wasn't a woman to take lightly, or for granted. He didn't think he'd committed either of those crimes, but neither had he shown how her how deeply important to him she'd become.

He could let things rock on as they were now; they'd have the weekends together, which was as much as a lot of couples had. He could talk to her on the phone, maybe even grab lunch together sometimes if their schedules meshed. And he'd have the weekends.
It wasn't enough. He wanted to be with her every night. He wanted to sit at the table and talk about their days while they ate. He wanted to share the morning newspaper with her, and fight over who got the front-page section first. He wanted those sparring sessions they'd had; she wasn't up to his weight, but she was fast enough to almost make up for the difference. And whether it had been karate, kick-boxing-or his favorite, naked wrestling- the session had always ended in grinding, explosive sex. He couldn't work out now without getting a hard-on. The basement gym was permeated with the scent of her, the smell of sex, the memories of what they'd done and how often they'd done it.
Hell, even his breakfast table carried memories.
He missed her.
He did a quick check of the time, then picked up the phone and dialed her number.
"Hi," he said when she answered.
"Hi, yourself." He could almost hear the smile in her voice.
"Did I wake you?" Sarah wasn't a night owl; she was often up early, so she was usually in bed by ten at the latest, and sometimes by nine. He'd been taking a chance by calling her.
"No. I'm in bed, but I've been reading."
"What are you wearing?"
She laughed. "Is this one of those heavy-breathing calls?"
"It could be."
"I'm wearing cotton pajamas. You've seen them."
"I have?" He couldn't remember her wearing anything at all to bed, not even one of his T-shirts.
"The first time we met. You may remember the occasion. I was sitting on the stairs, the electricity was off, two bad guys were lying on the floor."
"Oh, yeah, I vaguely remember that. I thought you were Judge Roberts's bed warmer."
"What?" She sounded outraged.
"Gorgeous young hottie living with an old guy; what else was a cop to think?"

"Umm, maybe that she was a butler just as she said?"
"Cops don't believe anything right off the bat. By the time I talked to you a few minutes, I knew the score."
"It's a good thing you didn't mention this to me at the time."
"I'm smart that way. I miss you, Sarah."
She paused. "I miss you, too. Can't be helped."
"Not right now, no. But there has to be some fine-tuning we can do to this situation, some way of working things out so we have more time together. We'll talk about it this weekend."
"I can't spend Saturday with you; the Lankfords are having a party, so I'll have to be here. I'll be off on Sunday and Monday instead."
He ground his teeth together. That robbed them of a day, because he had to work Monday. But at least he'd get to wake up with her. "Okay, I'll see you Sunday, then-unless you want to come over Saturday night after the party."
"It'll be late. Really late. Early Sunday morning, probably."
"I don't care. Wake me up."
"I'll do that," she said.

Chapter 20

THE DRIVEWAY WAS LINED WITH CARS, AND EVERY LIGHT IN the huge house seemed to be on. Guests milled through the rooms, on the patios, around the pool. Merilyn had a favorite caterer, so Sarah had arranged everything with the owner, a slim, sixtyish woman named Brenda Nelson who handled the behind-the-scenes madness with aplomb. Waiters circulated among the guests, carrying trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres. A huge buffet table had been set up by the pool, and it groaned under the weight of food; two bars had been set up, one by the pool and one inside. There were the inevitable spills and splashes. Sarah circulated unobtrusively, trying to spot the accidents as soon as they occurred so they could be wiped up. The real cleaning would have to wait until Monday morning, when she already had a cleaning service set to come in and do the heavy stuff, but liquids and food had to be wiped up immediately before someone slipped in the mess and fell.
Brenda made certain there were plates and glasses aplenty; but there were myriad other details for Sarah to check, such as ashtrays in abundance for

the smokers, who didn't number that many and went outside anyway, despite Merilyn's cheery, "Oh, pooh, go ahead and smoke; it doesn't bother me." The ashtrays had to be emptied, cleaned, and put out for reuse. The supply of monogrammed paper hand towels in the bathrooms had to be watched, the guests' personal belongings monitored, a tryst between a drunken lady and her not-so-drunken would-be lover interrupted before it reached an embarrassing stage, lost car keys found-and when, inevitably, a woman tottered on her high heels and fell into the pool, Sarah made certain she had suffered no harm and was dried off, provided with makeup and hair dryer if she wished to repair things and rejoin the party, and found clothes to wear. Luckily the lady was good-natured, normal-sized, and having too much fun to leave.

Merilyn was everywhere, chatting and laughing. She was one of those hostesses who loved a party, and her pleasure was infectious. At one point she was standing with a group of men- flirting, actually-when she spied Sarah and beckoned her over. Sighing inside, because it looked as if she were going to be put on display, Sarah put on her bland, professional expression and approached.

"Sarah, I just found out both of these gentlemen also tried to hire you after the awful thing that happened to Judge Roberts," Merilyn said. "Carl Barnes, Trevor Densmore, this is Sarah Stevens, domestic organization specialist."

"How do you do?" she murmured with a modified bow. She didn't offer to shake hands; that was usually a woman's prerogative, but not a butler's. If someone offered to shake her hand, she would, but she waited on their preference.

Trevor Densmore was a tall, slim man with gray hair and a shy smile; he actually blushed when she gave him a slight smile. Carl Barnes, however, a blond man with harsh features and cold eyes, looked at her with hooded speculation, as if he was wondering if Sonny Lankford found his way out to the little bungalow at night. She recognized both names; Trevor Densmore was the man who had sent her two letters offering employment. Carl Barnes's offer had been so high she'd had to wonder exactly what duties he expected her to perform in addition to running the household. Probably he'd thought his offer was preemptive; instead it had made her suspicious.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Mr. Densmore said in a voice as soft and shy as his smile. He blushed again and looked down at his shoes.

"If I were you, Merilyn, I'd keep an eye on Sonny," Carl Barnes said in a voice that was just a little too loud. 'With a woman who looks like this around, a man might get some ideas."
Implying that she herself would go along with any such ideas, Sarah thought, hiding her temper. She shouldn't let herself respond, but when Merilyn looked startled and temporarily speechless, Sarah murmured, "A gentleman wouldn't." She could make some implications of her own.
Mr. Barnes flushed, and his cold eyes glared at her. Merilyn recovered enough to slap him on the arm. "Carl, if you're going to be nasty, go stand somewhere alone so you won't bother the other guests. I didn't introduce Sarah just so you could insult her, as well as both Sonny and me." She managed to make her tone just firm enough that he knew she was serious, without being nasty in return.
"I was just joking," he muttered, taking refuge in the classic passive-aggressive response.
"I'm sure you were." This time she patted his arm. "Come on, let's find Georgia; there's something I need to tell her." She towed him away with her, in search of his wife. Watching them go, Sarah had to hide a smile. He thought everything was just fine, glossed over; instead Merilyn was remanding him into his wife's custody.
"I'm sorry," Mr. Densmore said. "Carl can be crude when he's had too much to drink."
"No offense taken," Sarah said, lying without compunction. "It was so nice to meet you, Mr. Densmore. I remember your letters; your offer was very kind."
"Thank you." He smiled shyly. "I wasn't certain if I should . . . I mean, I didn't know how I should contact you. I hope you didn't mind. "
Mind a job offer? "I was flattered." She glanced around. "Excuse me, Mr. Densmore, but I have duties I have to attend to."
"I understand. It was nice meeting you, too, Miss Stevens."
She was glad to escape and return to more familiar territory. She made certain to stay away from Carl Barnes, however.
She was beautiful. He'd wondered how she would dress, if she would wear pants, perhaps a feminine version of a tuxedo, though the Lankford party wasn't formal. Her choice was understated and severely elegant: a long, narrow black skirt, slim but not confining, teamed with a tailored white shirt and a short, fitted black jacket. The outfit looked vaguely military, though

without the brass buttons or braid. Her thick dark hair was pulled back in a very neat bun, and she wore small gold hoops in her ears. She wasn't wearing the pendant.

At first he'd been a bit insulted, until he realized it would be out of place for the function she was performing. What had the Lankford woman called her? Oh, yes-a domestic organization specialist. She wouldn't be wearing diamonds and rubies in that capacity. The pendant was for when they were alone.

Though perhaps he'd been a bit stingy with the pendant. When compared with the monstrous canary diamond ring Merilyn Lankford wore, the pendant was insignificant. He wasn't in the habit of buying jewelry, so he might have erred. How humiliating, to think that perhaps Sarah wasn't wearing the pendant, not because it was inappropriate, but because it was paltry!

No, she'd never think anything like that. She was too much a lady. Why, look how she had handled that crass boor, Carl Barnes. Not by a flicker of an eyelid had she betrayed any expression, giving only that murmured reply about "a gentleman"-which, obviously, Barnes wasn't. He'd been so proud of her.

He had watched her all evening. She was unobtrusive, discreet, and paid excruciating attention to detail. Any mishap, no matter how small, was dealt with immediately and with a minimum amount of fuss and embarrassment. Her dedication to her job was heartwarming in this age when clerks acted as if it was an imposition to help customers.

Could Merilyn Lankford even begin to appreciate the honor Sarah did her by being there? Of course not. Merilyn had no idea what a jewel she had, or how briefly she would have her.

The situation was even more intolerable than he had supposed. His Sarah shouldn't be exposed to crude remarks such as the one Carl Barnes had made. When she was at his house, she would be shielded from that. He would protect her from the world. Things were almost ready to his satisfaction; a few more preparations, and then it would be time to bring Sarah home.

The party broke up around one-thirty, which wasn't all that late. These people were businesspeople, pillars of the community, and most of them were regular churchgoers; they couldn't sleep very late the next morning and still attend services.

Merilyn still looked as fresh as she had when the party started, her green eyes sparkling. 'Well, that was a success!" she declared, looking around the wreck of her ballroom-size living room. Nothing was actually destroyed, but nothing seemed to be in the correct place, either. "No one threw up, no one set anything on fire, and no fights were started. That's pretty good, if I do say so myself!"

Sonny regarded his wife with fond, if weary, indulgence. He was a stocky man with graying dark hair and a collection of laugh lines. "You can say it on our way upstairs," he said, spreading his arms and pretending to herd her in the direction of the stairs. "I'm bushed. Let's go to bed."

"But there's still-"

"Nothing that Brenda and I can't handle," Sarah said, smiling. "I'll lock up and set the alarm when I leave."

Merilyn hated to go to bed when anyone else was still awake, afraid she might miss something, even if that something was cleaning and loading a multitude of plates and glassware. "But-"

"But, but, but," Sonny said, no longer pretending to herd her but actually doing it, crowding her with his body and gradually forcing her toward the stairs. "No matter what you think of, there's nothing that won't wait until morning."

She backed up, but she peeked around him like a child being torn away from the playground. When he succeeded in getting her started up the stairs, Sarah waved good night, then joined Brenda and her crew in the kitchen. Things were well in hand, because Brenda had had someone washing dishes from the very beginning. As they were brought in soiled, they were washed. That way there was always a fresh supply if needed, and when the evening was over, there wasn't an avalanche of dirty dishware to be cleaned before it could be packed in the boxes and taken back to the shop. As a result, the last wave of dirty plates and glasses had already been washed, and the crew was busy packing up the chafing dishes and folding a small mountain of table linens.

With everything going well there, Sarah went on a tour of the house, righting a tipped-over potted plant here, picking up a dropped spoon there, gathering towels and-oops-someone's underwear. Either someone was very forgetful, or a tryst had occurred in the bathroom.

She threw away the underwear, emptied the trash cans, sprayed air freshener all through the rooms, and straightened cushions and chairs.

Brenda came in to report they had everything loaded in the vans and were leaving. After seeing them off, Sarah did one more tour of the house, checking windows and doors. Finally, a little after three, she set the alarm, stepped out into the courtyard, locked the door behind her, and traipsed past the pool and down a short path to her little bungalow.

She was so tired she ached all over, but she was wide awake. She took a shower to freshen up; usually a warm shower relaxed her, but tonight she felt even more awake than she had before. She thought of sitting down to read, but Cahill had told her to come over no matter what time the party was over.

She was officially off-duty until Tuesday. She was freshly showered, wide awake, and a naked man whom she happened to be crazy about was just a short drive away.

"Decisions, decisions," she said to herself. Sure. Like there was any doubt.

She picked up the phone. She had a key, but only a fool would walk in unannounced on a sleeping man who happened to keep a loaded pistol on the bedside table.

"Cahill."

She knew she'd woken him up, but his voice was clear and cool; since all the detectives were essentially on call twenty-four hours a day, he'd had his share of middle-of-the-night calls.

"The party's over. I'm on my way."

"I'll be waiting."

Humming, she quickly got the small bag she'd packed earlier, which contained a couple of changes of clothes and her makeup and toiletries, plus a book or two. Not that she had much time to read when she was with Cahill, but it might happen. She secured the bungalow, loaded her things in the TrailBlazer, and in twenty minutes was pulling into his driveway. The kitchen light was on.

She all but danced up the steps to the back door, which opened before she got there. Cahill stood outlined in the light, tall and broad-shouldered, and wearing only a pair of his sexy boxers, which he had put on solely because he knew he'd be opening the door.

"Hubba hubba," she said in a growly tone; then she dropped her purse and overnight bag and hurled herself into his arms. He caught her, lifting her so her legs could curl around his waist, and they sank into a long, deep, hungry kiss.

When they surfaced, he licked his lower lip in that way he had of tasting her. '~You didn't plan this right," he said, nibbling at her mouth.
"I didn't?" She pulled back a little, frowning at him. 'What did I do wrong?"
"For one thing, you're wearing jeans." He kissed her again as he kicked her bags inside and shut the door, then fumbled with the lock. "If you'd been thinking straight, you'd have on a skirt but no panties."
"Sounds breezy." She went back for another kiss.
Gripping her hips, he moved her against his rock-hard erection as he carried her down the hall to the bedroom. "But if you had," he whispered, "I'd already be inside you."
"You're right; I was incredibly stupid." She squirmed, rubbing herself up and down on him and making her own breath catch as the familiar hot rush began spreading through her.
"You can make it up to me." He dumped her on the bed and unfastened her jeans, then began stripping them down her legs.
"Really? Got any ideas?"
"Plenty."
"Are they legal in this state?"
"Nope."
"I'm shocked," she said. "Shocked. You're sworn to uphold the law."
"You can make a citizen's arrest afterward." He pulled her knit top off over her head and tossed it aside. Since she wasn't wearing a bra, she was naked. When it came to removing her clothes, he set world speed records.
"A citizen's arrest," she mused. "Does this mean I get to handcuff you?"
"You mean you like the kinky stuff, too?" He shoved down his boxers and stepped out of them, pulled her to the edge of the bed and put his hands behind her thighs, pushing them up and apart. She held her breath as he made the connection and began wedging the broad head of his penis into her, past the tightness of her opening. Then he was in, leaning over her as he pushed slow and deep, and she began breathing again. She arched her hips, taking him in to the hilt.
The hall light was still on, silhouetting him as he leaned over her, his wide shoulders blocking out the light. They fell silent, con centrating on the rhythm and sensations, the heat and moisture, the fullness she felt, the tightness he felt. He wet his thumb and gently rubbed it over her clitoris, bringing her body up to him in a tight arch. Sarah gasped, reaching for him, wanting the heaviness of his weight on her. He gave her what she wanted,

coming down on top of her and crushing her into the mattress with the force of his thrusts, his hands under her hips grinding her even harder on him. She came, bowing under him, her heels digging into the backs of his thighs while her nails sank into his shoulders. It was always fast the first time, fast and hard, raw in its intensity. He climaxed right after she did, and as they lay together in the aftermath, she felt herself begin to drift to sleep, so deeply content it went all the way down to a molecular level. This was where she belonged, right here with him. The "here" didn't matter; it could be anywhere, so long as she was with Cahill.

Chapter 21

SARAH AWOKE AT TEN TO THE SMELL OF FRESH COFFEE. SHE rolled over, stretching and yawning. She hadn't been sleeping all that well since moving into the bungalow, but she always slept like a rock at Cahill's . . . for what time he let her sleep, that is.

She'd missed him, both mentally and physically. It wasn't just the sex, though there was no 'just" to sex with him; it was too raw and exciting. But more than that, she missed his physical presence beside her in bed, the heat and weight and comfort. As often as not she had slept with her head pillowed on his shoulder, or pressed against his back. If she wasn't touching him, then he was touching her, a subconscious signal even in sleep that they weren't alone.

He came into the bedroom wearing only jeans and carrying a cup of coffee. She sat up and pushed her hair out of her face. "If that's for me, I'll be your sex slave forever."

"It's yours, so I guess we need to talk terms of servitude." He handed her the cup, and she sipped, half-closing her eyes in delight at the first taste. The mattress dipped as he sat down beside her.

She took another sip. "For starters, I don't get time off for good behavior."

"Definitely not," he agreed, stroking her arm. "No parole, though I guess you could get . . . special privileges for sucking up to the warden."

"In more ways than one," she murmured, rubbing one finger over the bulge in his jeans. 'When do I start?"

The corners of his mouth were kicking up at her boldness. "I think you already have. And if you don't stop that and get your butt out of bed, your

breakfast will get cold."
"You have breakfast ready? Great, I'm starving." Dropping the sex-kitten act, she balanced the coffee cup as she climbed out of the nest of covers and headed for the bathroom. "What am I having?"
"Cereal."
"You jerk! That's already cold! " she called after him. She could hear him laughing softly as he went toward the kitchen.
Her reflection in the bathroom mirror wasn't that of a woman who had worked most of the night and was still a few hours short of the recommended eight hours of sleep. Her hair was tousled, her eyelids a little swollen, but she looked rested . . . and glowing. Sex with Cahill could do that for a woman, she thought, smiling as she brushed her hair.
Cahill had brought in her overnight bag and purse. She washed her face, brushed her teeth and got dressed. Dressed much as he had been, barefoot and in jeans-though she did pull on a shirt-she and her coffee cup made their way to the kitchen.
Breakfast was cereal, but he had also sliced some fresh peaches and put a cup of her favorite vanilla yogurt beside the bowl. He'd prepared the same thing for himself, but doubled the amounts. "Yum," she said, sitting down. "But it's so late, you shouldn't have waited for me, you could have already eaten. You must be even hungrier than I am."
"I had a bagel about eight o'clock."
"What time did you get up?"
"Almost seven. I went for a run, ate the bagel, read the paper, twiddled my thumbs."
"Poor baby." She picked up her spoon and dug in. "What else did you do?"
"You still weren't awake, so I had sex with your unconscious body-"
"Did not."
"Did, too."
"Okay, so you dozed off and were dreaming. What time did you wake up?"
"Nine-thirty." He forked a slice of juicy peach into his mouth. "I was tired. My sleep got interrupted last night."
"How are you feeling now?"
"Rarin' to go."
"Good, because I feel great." She stopped eating to stretch, raising her arms high over her head. Cahill's gaze followed the movement of her breasts.

"After breakfast settles, I think I'll go for a run, too. Are you up for another one?"
"I'm up for several things. I think I can fit in another run."
She eyed him appreciatively as they finished breakfast. He'd told her he'd started working out a lot when he and his wife split up; physical exercise was a great stress-reliever. He'd been in good shape before, but not like he was now. His abs and pecs were like rocks. He was a big man, but he hadn't bulked up all that much, just hardened and defined. Touching him was a tactile marvel- smooth, warm skin covering muscles so hard there was almost no give to his flesh.
He got up to carry his empty dishes to the sink. Sarah propped her chin on her hand to watch him, her eyes half closed and a tiny smile on her face.
"Your ex-wife has to be the biggest idiot walking the earth."
He gave her a startled look, then shrugged. "Make that a twotiming, vindictive idiot. What made you think of her?"
"You. You're neat, domesticated, intelligent-"
"Keep going," he said.
"-good-looking, sense of humor, sexy-"
"And yours."
She stopped, her stomach suddenly flip-flopping. "Are you?" she whispered.
He put the milk in the refrigerator and gave her a wry smile. "Oh, yeah."
She took a deep breath. "Wow."
"That's kind of the way it takes me, too." He refilled their coffee cups and sat down. "So that's what we need to talk about. I want more than what we have now. If you do, too, then we need to figure out how to work this."
She nodded.
"Sarah. Let me hear you say it."
"I want more," she managed. She couldn't believe this was happening, so fast, and at the breakfast table on a sunny Sunday morning.
"Okay. Your job-for now-requires you to live on-site. My hours right now are longer than usual. If weekends are all we can manage, then we'll deal with that, but . . . how long are you on duty at night?"
"Until they're ready to go to bed or tell me they won't need me for anything else that night. So far, they usually tell me to call it a day right after dinner. I think they like to have their evenings alone, unless they're entertaining."

"Are you allowed to have visitors? God, this sounds like Victorian England."
She laughed. "Of course I can have visitors during my own time. I wouldn't feel comfortable with you sleeping over-"
He waved that away. "Sex is secondary. Well, almost secondary. The point is we need to see more of each other than we have since you started work there. It's been driving me crazy, not seeing you. Let's just handle this right now, and later on we'll handle your world tour. Somehow. I won't ask you to give it up, because you really want to do it. I'll just whine a lot."
She did really want to have her year of travel, but she really wanted Cahill, too. "I'm a reasonable woman," she said. "I know how to compromise." She had always remained heart-whole and free because she'd never before met anyone who was important enough to her to get in the way of her plans. Cahill was that important. She would travel some, but a whole year away from him? No way. She wasn't willing to do that.
He cleared his throat. 'We-uh . . . we'll probably get married."
"Ya think?" she asked, then started laughing. She couldn't help it. If the man got any more unromantic, the people in charge of Valentine's Day would put a bounty on him.
He grabbed her and hauled her into his lap. "Is that a yes or a no?"
"You haven't asked a question. You stated a probability."
'Well, then, do you agree with the probability?"
She might never hear the question, she thought, amused. She'd have to work on him. She intended to be married only once in her life, so she wanted to hear that question. "I agree with the probability." She gave him a serene smile and kissed him on the cheek. 'When you're thinking in more black-and-white terms, we'll talk about it again."
He groaned and dropped his head onto her shoulder. "You're going to put me through the wringer, aren't you?"
"Of course, sweetheart. That's what women are for."
He didn't know where Sarah was. When he'd checked early Sunday morning, her SW was gone, and she hadn't been back to the Lankfords' house since. At the party, casual questions had elicited the information from Merilyn that Sarah's weekends were normally free, but when they entertained on the weekend, she would take a different day off. In this case, when the party ended, she wouldn't be back on duty until Tuesday morning.

Thinking she might go somewhere, he'd gotten up early and driven by the monstrosity; having already checked, he knew her usual parking spot was visible from the street-just the rear quarter panel, but enough to tell the vehicle was hers. But she must have gotten a very early start, because when he drove by right after dawn, she had already left.

Did she have family in the area? He kicked himself for not asking. Of course, her family didn't have to be in the area; she could have flown to visit them, and taken the first flight of the morning.

For a brief moment he entertained the unpleasant idea that she might have a boyfriend-juvenile term-but, no, Sarah had too much class to spend the weekend with some local yokel. The times he'd followed her before, she had shopped and run errands, but never had she met a man anywhere. The problem was, there had been long stretches when he hadn't been able to find her, so he didn't know whom she might know in the area. She was likely visiting family or friends, but he would have liked to have known exactly where; he hated not knowing.

After he took care of Roberts, for instance, he hadn't stayed to watch the excitement because he knew criminals often couldn't resist watching the show and police these days routinely filmed the spectators. When he had driven by the next morning, after the hullabaloo had died down, the driveway had been barricaded and the house sealed off with yellow tape. He had no idea where she had gone. A friend's house, a hotel? The Wynfrey was the most likely hotel, so he'd gone straight there but hadn't seen her SW. It had been raining, anyway, and he disliked driving in the rain, so he'd gone home.

After the funeral, she had gone back to the house. She had then stayed there almost all day, every day, so he had relaxed and stopped driving by so often. According to the grapevine, she was getting the house ready to close, packing everything up for the family. Then one night he happened to check, and she wasn't there; there were no lights on at the house. Where had she gone?

The problem was, there was no place in the neighborhood where he could park and watch for her. If an unfamiliar car stopped, it was immediately noticed. Nor could he continually drive by; he had business to attend to, meetings, phone calls. He had to do all the monitoring himself to avoid the risk of bringing in a stranger who might talk, so he eventually had to accept

that he simply wouldn't be able to keep track of her all the time. He didn't like it, but he was a reasonable, patient man; he could wait.
The most important thing was that he knew she wasn't supposed to be back until Tuesday morning.
The other time had worked like a charm, so Sunday night he followed the same routine. He drove to the Galleria in the dark blue Ford he had bought only a little over a month before; after all, the Jaguar was so noticeable. The Ford was so ordinary as to be almost invisible. It didn't compare to the Jaguar, of course, but it was perfect for its purpose. But when he called there was no answer. Frustrated, he tried several more times before giving up in disgust.
The next night, though, he knew the Lankfords were at home, because he'd checked, and there weren't any extra cars in the driveway, either. They were alone. He made the call, and of course Sonny was glad to see him. Sonny was always willing to talk business, and when one owned a bank . . . well, people liked to see him. Sonny was too stupid to see anything unusual in his coming to him, rather than the other way around. The fool was probably flattered.
The silenced pistol was tucked in his waistband at the small of his back, covered by his jacket, when Sonny let him into the house. The man hadn't even bothered to put on a jacket, he saw with contempt. He was dressed in slacks and pullover knit shirt, and he was wearing house slippers, for God's sake. Totally classless.
'Where's Merilyn?" he asked easily. People talked to him, told him things. They trusted him. Why shouldn't they?
"Upstairs. She'll be down in a minute. You said you wanted to talk to both of us?"
"Yes. Thank you for seeing me tonight. I won't take up much of your time." Sonny still didn't see the ludicrousness of that statement.
"Nonsense, it's a pleasure. Would you like something to drink? We have hard, soft, and everything in between." Sonny led the way into the den; thank God he hadn't taken him into that horrible room with the gargantuan television. There was a television in the den, of course, but it was normal-sized.
"A glass of wine would be nice." He had no intention of drinking it, but the pretense of accepting his hospitality would keep Sonny relaxed.

They made small talk, and still Merilyn didn't appear. He began to get a little concerned. He didn't want to spend a lot of time here; the longer he waited, the more likely it was someone would notice the car, as bland as it was, or the phone would ring and Sonny-or Merilyn-would say, sorry, we can't talk, our banker is visiting. Wouldn't that be just lovely.
He glanced at his watch, and Sonny said, "I don't know what's keeping Merilyn. I'll go check-"
"No, don't bother," he said, getting to his feet. In a smooth motion he reached behind his back, took out the pistol, and pointed it at Sonny's head. He was so close that Sonny could have reached out and swatted it away-if he'd had time, but he was slow to react. Pity.
Calmly he pulled the trigger.
The bullet entered Sonny's head just above his left eyebrow, angling back and to the right, taking out both hemispheres of his brain. He was always amazed at how small and neat the entry wound was; when the bullet exited, however, it had flattened, and it took a huge chunk of skull and brain with it. Amazing.
The sound of the shot was just a little cough; it wouldn't even have been heard in the next room.
He turned to go in search of Merilyn, and froze. She stood just outside the doorway, her face drained of color, her eyes wide and horrified. He lifted the pistol once more, and she ran.
He didn't have time to get off another shot. Grimly he ran after her; he couldn't afford to let her escape, even briefly. She might run screaming from the house, which would attract attention. But, no, the dear ran into another room and slammed the door; he heard the lock click.
He shook his head and put a bullet in the lock; the door swung uselessly open. Merilyn whirled, the phone in her hand. He shook his head again.
"Bad girl," he said softly, and pulled the trigger.
She slumped to the carpet, eyes popped out from the force of the bullet that had entered right between them. He stepped over to her and removed the cordless phone from her hand. He listened, but there was no one on the line; either she hadn't had time to dial 911 or she'd been too flustered to think. He calmly wiped the phone with his handkerchief and replaced it on the charger.
Merilyn's hand lay outstretched, as if she were reaching for him. The canary diamond glittered at him, and he had an idea-a brilliant one, if he did say so

himself. If he took the ring, it would look as if a burglary had occurred. The ring had to be worth a small fortune; he had investigated the cost of jewelry more closely today and discovered that a good stone was hideously expensive. This ring, for instance, had probably set Sonny back close to a quarter of a million dollars. Really.

He was embarrassed that he'd given Sarah such a small token in comparison. This was a particularly fine stone, and the color would look wonderful on her, with her warm skin tones. Not in this setting, of course; she wouldn't like such gaudiness. But after a certain amount of time had passed, when the police weren't actively looking for a large yellow diamond ring, he could remove the stone from the setting and take it to a jeweler in, say, Atlanta, and have a wonderful piece fashioned for her, with the canary diamond as the center stone. Yes, he could just see it now.

He leaned down and tugged the ring from Merilyn's finger. It was a tight fit; the dear must have gained a little weight. He'd saved her from having to have the ring resized.

Pleased with himself, he carefully retraced his steps through the house and wiped everything he might have touched. After he let himself out the front door, he wiped the door handle and the doorbell button. As he drove away, he smiled.

That had gone very nicely.

Chapter 22

ON MONDAY MORNING AFTER CAHILL WENT TO WORK, SARAH worked out, booked herself a manicure and pedicure for that afternoon, then spent a few blissful hours doing absolutely nothing. After visiting the salon to get her nails done, she bought groceries and cooked a spaghetti supper.

Cahill had just eaten his third slice of butter-dripping garlic bread when his phone rang. He squinted at the number in the little window, and sighed. "Yeah. Cahill." He listened for a minute, then said, "I'm on my way."

He sighed as he got up. He was still wearing his holster, so all he had to do was knot his tie and slip on his jacket. "I gotta go," he said unnecessarily.

"I know." She got up and kissed him. "Is it something that you can finish fast, or will it take a while?"

He sighed again. "I'll probably be a few hours, maybe longer."

"Okay. I'll be here when you get back."
He looked down at her, blue eyes heavy-lidded and sensual. "I like hearing that," he said, bending down to give her a long, slow kiss that made her heart begin pounding. Damn, the man knew how to kiss.
After he left, she cleaned up the kitchen, then watched television for a while. An ad for a fast-food joint showed a picture-perfect banana split, and her saliva buds started working overtime. She didn't need a banana split; it was something like six weeks worth of calories. She'd have to run a hundred miles to work it off.
She told herself all that. Usually she was very good about resisting cravings, because usually she didn't have cravings. She ate a healthy, well-balanced diet, and didn't think about food all that much. It was almost time for her period, though-and when it was that time of the month, she craved ice cream.
She resisted the craving for over an hour, then surrendered.
She got up and looked in the freezer section of the refrigerator. Aha! There was a half-gallon carton of Breyers Natural Vanilla with flecks of real vanilla bean. She reached in to get it, and her heart sank. The carton was way too light. She pried off the top and groaned; there was barely a tablespoon of ice cream left. Why on earth hadn't he eaten that last tablespoon and thrown the carton away? Or better yet, remembered to buy more?
Growling to herself, she got her purse and drove back to the supermarket. If she had known she was going to start craving ice cream, she could have bought it while she was there earlier.
She decided that if she was going to indulge, she might as well do it right and make the mother of all banana splits. Then the craving would be gone, and she could return to eating nice, sensible, healthy foods. Besides, when you added the bananas, that made the ice cream more healthy, right?
She did it right. She picked out the best-looking bananas she could find. She bought maraschino cherries. She bought pineapple sauce. Chocolate syrup. Chopped pecans in caramel sauce, and, while she was at it, caramel sauce. She bought vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate ice cream, because a real banana split had all three flavors. What else? Oh, yeah, whipped cream. And vanilla wafers to hold it all together.
Man, she could hardly wait.

To her surprise, Cahill was home when she got back. She carried in her haul. 'What are you doing back so soon? I thought you wouldn't be back until ten or later."
He shrugged. "Things just went faster than I thought. Where have you been?"
"The grocery store. I would have left a note, but I didn't think you'd be here to read it, so there didn't seem much point."
He leaned against the cabinet and watched as she unloaded the bags. 'What's going on? Are we having an ice cream party?"
"Banana split. I saw one on television and my mouth started watering. You didn't even have any ice cream," she said accusingly.
"I did, too."
"One spoonful that's almost dehydrated does not count as having ice cream."
He eyed the three cartons. 'Well, I certainly have ice cream now."
"You certainly do."
He waited a minute. "May I have some, too?"
"You want in on this banana split lovefest?"
"You betcha. If it's a lovefest, I'm interested. I bet I can think of more things to do with this chocolate syrup than you can."
"You can keep your hands off my chocolate syrup. I have plans for it."
"All of it?"
She winked at him. "Maybe not."
She got two shallow bowls from the cabinet, lined up all her ingredients, and set to work peeling and slicing the bananas lengthwise. She put the slices in the bowls, and shored them up with vanilla wafers. Next came the ice cream.
"Just vanilla in mine," Cahill said, watching in fascination. "I don't get fancy with my ice cream."
"You're missing out on a great culinary experience."
"I'll taste you afterward."
Three scoops of vanilla for him, one each of the vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate for her. "Pineapple and pecans?" she asked, holding out the little jars, and he nodded. She added liberal helpings to both bowls. Next came the caramel sauce, then the chocolate syrup. She topped the growing mound with generous globs of whipped cream, and crowned it all with maraschino cherries. She put two cherries on hers, just because she liked them.

"Holy shit," Cahill said when he took the bowl. "This weighs at least two pounds."
"Enjoy," she said, taking hers to the table and digging in.
"My God," he groaned half an hour later. Y can't believe you ate all of that."
"You ate all of yours," she replied, looking pointedly at his empty bowl.
"I'm bigger than you. And I'm stuffed."
"So am I," she admitted. "But it was good, and that took care of my craving." She carried the bowls to the sink and rinsed them out, then put them in the dishwasher. She was so full she thought she might burst, and she didn't want to see ice cream again for another millennium . . . or at least another month.
"Now," he said. "About that chocolate syrup . . ."
"Don't even think it."
He did think it, of course, and say it as well. What's more, after a couple of hours, they ended up trying it. Chocolate syrup on her, chocolate syrup on him . . . It was a shame she'd wasted so much on the banana splits. It boggled her mind, what they could have done with a full bottle.
She was still smiling early the next morning when she drove back to the Lankford house. It was not quite six o'clock, but she wanted to be there bright and early and get started on the day. She stopped at the gate and retrieved the morning newspaper from the box, then keyed in the code, and the gates swung smoothly open. She drove in and parked as usual beside the little bungalow. After carrying in her things, she hurriedly changed clothes and walked across the courtyard to the main house, letting herself in with her key.
She turned to punch in the code on the security panel and stopped when she realized it wasn't beeping the little warning that a door had been opened while the alarm was set. Frowning, she examined the lights. No wonder it hadn't beeped; the alarm wasn't set. Merilyn must have forgotten it. She and Sonny both were a bit lax about the house's security system, since the property was walled and gated. They figured if the outside property was secure, so was the house.
She went into the kitchen and started the coffee, then carried the newspaper through the tangle of halls and rooms to Sonny's den, where he liked to read it while he caught the morning news. He didn't like to hurry, so he was usually awake and downstairs by six-thirty, giving him plenty of time for the newspaper and breakfast before he left for the office at eight-forty.

The low-level lights were on in the hallway, as were the lamps. Come to think of it, the light over the front door had also been on. Sarah frowned, suddenly uneasy. Something was wrong; maybe one of them had gotten sick during the night, because she thought she smelled-

The smell.

Panic hit her like a tidal wave, sending her reeling back toward the kitchen. That smell! It couldn't mean what she thought; it was just that she associated the scent with something terrible. Anything similar brought back the nightmare. Either Sonny or Merilyn had a digestive virus, that was all. They had her cell phone number, they should have called, and she'd have come back immediately to handle things.

She swallowed the bile in her throat. "Mr. Lankford?" she called. "Hello?"

There wasn't an answer. The house was silent around her, except for the almost inaudible hum of electricity that said the house was wired and everything was working.

"Hello," she called again.

She didn't have her pistol; it still hadn't been returned to her. Since she wasn't performing any bodyguard function for the Lankfords, she hadn't worried about it. The police department would eventually return it to her. Now, with every tiny hair on her body lifting in alarm, she wished she had it.

She should retreat, maybe call Cahill and get him to come check out the house. But the house felt . . . empty, just as the Judge's house had felt-as if there was no life inside it.

She eased down the hallway, then halted, gagging a little.

The smell. That damn smell.

I can't do this again. The thought burned through her mind. This couldn't be happening. Not again. She was imagining things. Maybe not the smell, but she was letting it panic her. She should find out what was wrong, who was sick. She should be calm, and take charge. That was part of her job, handling whatever crisis arose here.

She took two more steps. The door to the den was maybe three more steps away. She forced herself to take those steps, practically throwing herself forward like someone who had finally worked up enough nerve to leap off a tower bungee-jumping. The odor had an almost oily quality to it, sticking to her throat, coating her tongue. She gagged again, and covered her nose and mouth with her hand as she looked inside the den.

He was sprawled on the floor in a half-sitting position, his head and shoulders supported by the heavy coffee table. His head was bent at an unnatural angle, as if he hadn't had room to lie flat. The wound was . . .
She didn't look for Merilyn. As she had done once before, she backed away, slowly, shaking, little mewling sounds coming from her throat. She was vaguely shocked at herself for making such sounds. They sounded so weak, and she was strong. She had always been strong.
She didn't feel strong now. She wanted to run screaming from this house, find someplace safe and dark and cower inside it, until this horror was gone. She wanted . . . she wanted Cahill. Yes. When he was here, she wouldn't feel so helpless, so shaken. She had to call Cahill.
She kept backing down the hall, and as she had once before, she found herself standing in the kitchen. She was shaking violently now, and she knew she was on the verge of hysteria.
No. She wouldn't give in to it. Couldn't. There were things to be done, that all-important call to make.
Not Cahill. Not first. The first call had to be 911. She had to do things right. Maybe Merilyn was still alive, maybe the medics could get here in time to save her, if she made the 911 call first.
Her hand was shaking so hard she couldn't hit the right numbers on the keypad. She disconnected and tried again, with the same result. Weeping, cursing, she banged the phone against the counter. 'Work, damn it! Work!" The phone came apart in her hand, plastic sections flying. She threw what was left of it against the wall. She needed another phone. She needed . . . another . . . damn . . . phone!
She tried to think. Phones were all over this house, but where exactly? She hadn't worked here long enough for the knowledge to be automatic, not now when she could barely form a single coherent thought.
And she couldn't hunt for one. She might find Merilyn instead.
She couldn't think about it, couldn't think of that energetic, cheerful, good-hearted woman lying in a pool of blood somewhere. Concentrate. Find a phone.
The bungalow. She knew where the phone was in there.
She tried to run, but her legs wobbled beneath her and she staggered, falling to one knee on the courtyard pavers. She didn't notice any pain, but bounded up and staggered the rest of the way to the bungalow door.

There was a phone just inside, in the living room. She grabbed it and started to jab at the buttons, but stopped herself and managed to drag in a few deep, shaky breaths. It was hard won, but she found a small measure of calm. She had to get herself under control; she was no good to anyone if she let herself fall apart.

Her hands were still trembling, but she managed to push 911, and she waited.

Cahill couldn't believe it. He fucking couldn't believe it. At first he thought he'd heard wrong, that the report was a hoax, or that the address was wrong. Something. For one murder to occur in Mountain Brook was unusual enough, but a double murder only a matter of weeks after the first one? And discovered by the same woman who had called in the first one? Un-fucking-believable.

He had an icy feeling in the pit of his stomach, a cold hard knot of dread that had nothing to do with Sarah's safety-she'd called the murder in, so she was okay-and everything to do with being a cop. He was a damn good cop, combining experience, intuition, and a talent for analyzing cold hard facts without letting his emotions cloud the issue. Intuition was telling him now that this stretched coincidence way the hell too far.

When he got to the house, the scene made the one at Judge Roberts's house look organized. Squad cars, unmarked cars, vans, medics, and a fire engine clogged the driveway and street, but at least they belonged. The curious, the sightseers, the media vans, the print reporters, all formed a crowd that had brought traffic to a grinding halt. Hell, there was even a helicopter overhead.

He clipped his badge to his belt where it could be seen and waded through the clog of onlookers, ducking under the crime scene tape and asking the first uniform he came to, "Have you seen the lieutenant?"

"He's inside."

"Thanks."

Sarah was somewhere inside, or in that little house behind the pool. He didn't search for her, though; he had to see the lieutenant first.

The house was a warren; a big warren, but a warren nevertheless, as if the architect had been both schizophrenic and dyslexic. He finally found the lieutenant standing in a hallway peering inside a room, but not stepping inside and carefully not touching anything. The room would be the crime scene, then, or one of them.

"I need to talk to you," he said to the lieutenant, motioning his head to the side.
"This is a fucking mess," the lieutenant muttered under his breath, still staring inside the room. He looked tired, though the day had just begun.
"Yeah, what is it?"
"You may want to keep me clear of this case. Conflict of interest. I'm involved with Sarah Stevens."
"The butler?" Lieutenant Wester said sharply. "Involved, how? You've been out a couple of times?"
'We're practically living together." That was an exaggeration, but not by much.
"I thought she lives in that little house out back."
"That's her quarters when she's on duty. When she isn't, she's at my house."
"Shit." The lieutenant rubbed his hand over his head. He didn't have much hair and what he did have he kept very short, so he wasn't disturbing anything. "How long has this been going on?"
"Since she was dropped from the suspect list in the Roberts murder."
"Shit. I gotta tell you, Doc, I have a bad feeling about this. Maybe we cleared her too soon in the other case. What are the fucking odds, huh?" he asked in a furious whisper. "We don't have a murder here in years; then she comes to town and whoever she goes to work for gets popped in the head, clean shot, professional. The first guy left her a hundred grand in his will. A big diamond worth a quarter of a million is missing now, and, get this: She's the one who noticed, when she ID'd the woman's body. Coincidence, my ass. Coincidences like this don't happen. My gut says it isn't looking good for your girlfriend."
"Yeah," Cahill said bleakly. "I know."

Chapter 23

LIEUTENANT WESTER WAS IN A QUANDARY. HE NEEDED EVERY detective he had, but he didn't want to jeopardize the case by muddying the waters with a conflict of interest. The conflict came only if Cahill allowed emotion to get in the way of his job. He figured Cahill could do the job; Cahill knew he could. It would hurt, but he could do it. It was best, though, if he was assigned to something else.

Cahill knew it was best, but it still pissed him off. Not that the lieutenant made the decision, but that there was a decision to be made at all. Cahill figured he should have been smarter than this; he'd missed something, somewhere. If Sarah had done all the killings-or had them done, he couldn't forget that possibility- then he'd screwed up by not following his initial thought, and two more people were dead.
And if Sarah was innocent-a possibility that was looking more remote by the minute-then there was something colossally wrong. That thing with the pendant: had she picked up a stalker, or had she sent it to herself as a means of deflecting suspicion, if necessary?
Maybe he wasn't on the case, but his brain was working anyway, sifting through all the possible scenarios.
He asked permission to see her. Part of him wanted to make certain she was all right, but the cop part of him wanted to see how she looked, how she acted. Body language and physical responses said a lot.
Sarah was in the bungalow, sitting on the sofa in the cozy living room while a medic put a dressing on her right knee and a patrol officer watched from the doorway. Her pants leg was torn, and Cahill could see the bloodstains, like rust, on her leg. Her face was paper white.
'What happened?" he asked, standing back and watching.
"She fell in the courtyard and hurt her knee," the medic said matter-of-factly, taping a bandage over the bluish, oozing wound. "It'll be sore tomorrow," he told Sarah.
She nodded absently.
'When did you fall?" Cahill asked her. "And how?"
"I didn't fall." Sarah's voice was so wispy it was almost transparent, and without inflection. She didn't look at him. "I wobbled and went down on one knee."
'When?" he repeated.
She made a vague gesture. 'When I was hunting for a telephone."
'Why were you hunting for a telephone?" From what he'd seen, there were telephones all through the house, including a shattered one in the kitchen.
"To call. About-" She made another vague gesture, this time toward the house.
"There are telephones in the house. Why did you come out here?"
"I didn't know where she was. I didn't . . . want to see her." She paused, and for the first time made eye contact. "But I saw her anyway. They asked me

to identify her. I saw her anyway."
The symptoms of mental shock were very good, very convincing. Hell, maybe they were real. Her body language was consistent with shock, too, sitting motionless unless something was required of her, and then her movements were slow, sluggish. She was very pale. Makeup? Her pupils were dilated, too, but eyedrops could produce that effect.
He hated what he was thinking, but he couldn't let himself be blinded. He might not he on the case, but that didn't mean his analysis couldn't be used. Another thought occurred: Had she developed a relationship with him as a means of deflecting suspicion, maybe, or keeping tabs on any progress with the Roberts killing? If so, she must have been congratulating herself on her success, because the Roberts case was going exactly nowhere.
He wanted to keep questioning her, but it would be better if he backed off now, let the detectives assigned to the case ask the questions. Besides, there was something he needed to check.
He nodded to the patrolman and stepped out of the bungalow, taking a deep breath of the fresh warm air. He sought out Lieutenant Wester again. "Do we have a rough time of death?"
"The ME hasn't made a determination yet, but I saw the bodies myself and rigor is pretty far advanced. I'd say"-he rocked his hand-"twelve hours. In that neighborhood."
Fuck. That fell in the time span when he'd been out on call and she had made that sudden trip to the supermarket, even though she had bought groceries earlier in the day. The trip was nicely explained by a sudden, convenient craving for a banana split. Was she cold-blooded enough that she had come back here, killed two people, then stopped off for ice cream on the way back to his house? Or had she bought the ice cream as an excuse for being out? An alibi, so she could show him the receipt and say, "See? I was here. I couldn't have been there."
This was practically a mirror situation of the Roberts murder. She had no eyewitness alibi to definitely say she was somewhere else at the time of the killing, but she had the receipt from where she'd been shopping.
On the other hand, she couldn't have known he'd be called out last night. She couldn't have planned anything ahead of time. Had she just been waiting, knowing he would eventually be called out at night, and when he did, she'd make her move? She wouldn't have been in any hurry; she could afford to wait for the right moment. After all, she was collecting that hefty

salary, and if she had her eye on the missing yellow diamond ring, it wasn't going anywhere.
She hadn't kept the receipt from the supermarket. He clearly remembered her putting the plastic bags and the receipt in the trash. If she was that sharp, that organized a killer, throwing away the receipt was a sloppy thing to do. Or a smart one. She could then say, "If I thought I'd need an alibi, why would I have thrown away the receipt?"
God, this was driving him crazy. No matter what angle he came up with, a tiny shift put an entirely different light on the most significant, or insignificant, actions.
He went home and went through his kitchen trash can. The plastic bags were right there, practically on top, with only the fruit peelings and empty yogurt container from breakfast on top of them. He pulled out the bags- there were two of them- straightened them out, and looked inside. There was the receipt, crumpled but nice and dry, without any smears.
He looked at the time on it. Eight-fifty-seven. That was about the time he'd gotten home. Where had she been for the rest of the time he'd been gone?
The interview room was small, utilitarian, nonthreatening, with a camera attached to the ceiling recording the interview.
The detective, Rusty Ahern, was a good interviewer. He was about five-nine, with sandy hair and freckles and an open expression that invited confessions. Very nonthreatening, very sympathetic. No matter how neutral Cahill made his expression and his voice, he could never be as nonthreatening as Rusty. He was too big, and as Rusty himself had pointed out, "Your eyes always look like a shark's." Rusty was particularly good with women; they trusted that Howdy Doody expression.
Cahill, along with the lieutenant and two other detectives, watched the interview on a monitor as it was recording. Sarah sat practically motionless, for the most part staring at nothing, as if she had shut down emotionally. Cahill remembered she'd acted the same after the first killing. A protective response, maybe? A way of distancing herself? Or a very good act?
"Where were you last night?" Rusty asked gently.
"Cahill's house."
"Detective Cahill?"
"Yes."
'Why were you there?"
"I spent the weekend with him."

"The entire weekend?"
"Not Saturday. There was a party Saturday night. I worked."
"What time did you get to Detective Cahill's house? After the party on Saturday."
"Four o'clock?" she said, making it a question. "I don't remember exactly. Early. Before dawn."
"Why did you go so early in the morning?"
"So we could be together."
Rusty didn't ask any questions about their relationship, thank God. He moved right on with establishing a time line. 'Were you together all day Sunday?"
"Yes."
"And you spent Sunday night with Detective Cahill?"
"Yes."
"What about yesterday? Monday. When Detective Cahill went to work, what did you do?"
"Damn, Rusty must think he's a lawyer," Detective Nolan muttered. "Listen to those questions."
The questions were unusually detailed, step-by-step. Usually an interview was less structured, inviting the suspect to just talk. But Sarah wasn't chattering; she was answering only the questions asked, and most of those as briefly as possible. Since she wasn't volunteering information, Rusty was dragging it out of her.
"I worked out. Bought groceries."
"Is that all?"
"I had a manicure."
"Where did you work out?"
"The basement."
"The basement, where?"
"Cahill's house."
On and on, establishing when and where she got the manicure, where she bought groceries, what time she was there. What did she do then? Cooked supper. Spaghetti. Had it ready when Cahill got home. Then he got a call and had to leave. He said he'd be gone for several hours.
Rusty looked down at his notes. He had the exact time of the call to Cahill, as well as what time he'd arrived back home. He had the checkout time of

the receipt for the ice cream. If she tried to screw with the timing, he'd know. 'What did you do then?"
"I cleaned up the kitchen, and watched television."
"Is that all you did?"
"I went for ice cream." 'What time was this?"
"I don't know. After eight." 'Where did you go?"
She told him the name of the supermarket. 'What time did you leave the supermarket?"
"I don't know."
"Can you estimate how long you were there?" She lifted one shoulder.
"Fifteen minutes."
'Where did you go when you left the supermarket?"
"Back to Cahill's house."
'Was he there?"
"Yes. He got back sooner than he'd expected." 'What time was this?"
"I don't know. I didn't look at the time."
"Did you stop anywhere else between the supermarket and Detective Cahill's house?"
"No."
"You said you bought groceries earlier in the day. Why didn't you buy the ice cream then?"
"I wasn't craving it then."
"You had a sudden craving for ice cream?"
"Yes."
"Do you crave ice cream very often?"
"Once a month."
Rusty looked a little puzzled. 'Why just once a month?"
"Right before my menstrual period. I want ice cream then."
'Whoa," Nolan said in Cahill's ear. "TMI." Too much information. He didn't want to hear about menstrual cycles.
Rusty looked a little nonplussed, too, as if he didn't know where to go with that information. Cahill kept his expression impassive as he watched. This was tough enough as it was, having his private life brought into an investigation. What was she thinking? What was going on behind those dark eyes?
Hell, what did he know? When it came to women, he was evidently both blind and stupid; he was a detective, and it had still taken him over a year to

realize Shannon was cheating on him. But it was one thing to be duped by a cheating wife, and another to so totally miss the boat with a killer. He'd had sex with this woman. Slept beside her. Laughed with her. He'd have bet his life that she was one of the straightest arrows he'd ever met, and he was having a tough time reconciling what he knew of her as a woman with the circumstances that said she might be a stone-cold killer.
That was the bitch. Everything was circumstantial. The coincidences stretched beyond credulity, yet they didn't have a shred of physical evidence to tie her to the murders.
"My wife craves chocolate," Lieutenant Wester said. "I always know when she's going to start her period, because she's shoving Hershey's Kisses in her mouth like a squirrel stocking up for the winter."
"God, can't we talk about something else?" Nolan groaned.
Rusty had her up to the time she arrived at the Lankford house. 'What did you do then?"
"I went to the main house to start the coffee."
"Did you notice anything unusual?"
"The alarm wasn't set. It didn't beep when I unlocked the kitchen door and went in."
'Was that unusual?"
'When I'm there, I always set the alarm. Mrs. Lankford sometimes forgets, though."
"So it wasn't unusual."
"Not really."
'What did you do then?"
"I started the coffeemaker, then took the newspaper . . . I was taking the newspaper to the den. Mr. Lankford liked to read it there, while he watched the news. The lights were on," she said, and her voice trailed away to nothing.
"The lights?"
"The hallway lights. They were on. And the lamps. They shouldn't have been on that early."
'Why not?"
"I'm the only one up that early, and I had just gotten there."
'What did you think?"
"I thought . . . I thought someone must be sick."
'Why did you think that?"

"The smell. I noticed the smell." She gripped her arms tightly, holding herself, and she began to rock a little, back and forth. The rocking was a sign of distress, the automatic attempt of the body to find comfort. Someone should be holding her, Cahill thought, his stomach knotting even tighter than it already was.

'What smell was that?"

She stared blankly at him, then abruptly stopped rocking and clapped a hand over her mouth. Rusty sprang for the trash can and got it to her just in time. She leaned over the can, retching violently, though nothing but fluid came up. Cahill clenched his teeth. She must not have eaten anything since breakfast, and that was hours ago. She kept retching, straining, even after her stomach was empty, and the sounds she made were painful to hear.

"I'll get you a paper towel," Rusty said, stepping to the door.

Sarah remained bent over the trash can, her body occasionally heaving in spasm. The monitoring room was silent as they watched. Cahill fought the need to go to her, take care of her. He had to stay out of this. He had to let Rusty do his job.

Rusty came back with a wet paper towel. Sarah took it with violently trembling hands, and washed her face. "I'm sorry," she said in a muffled voice, then buried her face in her hands and began to weep in long, shuddering sobs that reminded Cahill of how she had wept after Judge Roberts was killed.

God. He couldn't watch this. He got up and paced around the room, rubbing the back of his neck to ease the kinks.

If she had done those killings, then she was the world's best actress, bar none. What he saw on the screen was a woman in shock and grieving. People sometimes reacted that way if they had killed in the heat of the moment, then realized with horror what they had done. Killers who coldly executed their victims with well-placed shots to the head didn't grieve for them afterward. The circumstances were so suspicious they stank to high heaven, but the details didn't fit. She didn't fit.

She didn't fit. No matter what the circumstances were, she didn't fit. "She didn't do it," he said softly, suddenly, completely certain. Okay, so he could be blind when it came to romantic shit, and he'd taken a hard kick in the chops because of it; as a cop, he saw very clearly, and she wasn't guilty.

Lieutenant Wester gave him a sympathetic look. "Doc, you're sleeping with her. Don't let your little head do the thinking for your big head."

"You can mark it down," Cahill said. "I know her. She couldn't have done it."
"You're too involved," Nolan said. "Just let us do our jobs. If she didn't do it, we'll find out. And if she did do it, we'll find that out, too."
They all looked back at the monitor. Rusty had waited silently as the storm of weeping subsided, and now he asked softly, "Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Water? A Coke?"
'Water," she managed to say, her voice thick. "Thank you."
He got a cup of water for her, and Cahill turned to watch the screen again as she took a couple of sips, cautiously, as if she wasn't certain the water would stay down.
'What happened after you noticed the smell?"
The rocking started again, subtle and heartbreaking. "I . . . I almost ran. I remembered the smell. When the Judge was murdered, the smell was . . . was the same. I couldn't go in there. I wanted to run."
At least she was talking a little more, rather than answering the questions with monosyllables.
"Did you run?"
She shook her head. "I kept telling myself it was just that someone was sick. A stomach virus. It was my job to handle things, clean
up any mess . . ." She trailed off again.
'What did you do?"
"I went to the door of the den and looked in. He was . . . lying there. His neck was bent." Unconsciously she cocked her head to show the position Sonny Lankford had been in. Rusty waited to see if she would continue talking, but she lapsed into silence until prodded by another question.
'What did you do then?"
"I b-backed to the kitchen and tried to call nine-one-one. I wanted to call Cahill first. I wanted him there. But nine-oneone . . . the medics . . . maybe they could help. So I tried to call nine-one-one first."
"Tried to call?"
"I couldn't-I was shaking so hard I hit the wrong buttons.
The phone wouldn't work. I banged it down on the counter and it broke. The phone broke."
"You banged the phone down on the counter?"
"Yes. "
'Why?"

"It wouldn't work. It wouldn't work!"
"Then what?"
"I threw it."
Sarah was the most self-possessed person he knew, Cahill thought. If she had lost control to that extent, she had been hysterical. She was frightened, and hurting, and he hadn't so much as touched her hand when he'd gone to see her in the bungalow. No wonder she was hugging herself; someone needed to do it.
"I needed another phone," she said, for the first time speaking without being prompted by a question. "I couldn't think, couldn't remember where one was. I haven't worked there very long, and the house is complicated. I didn't want to hunt for a phone, because I didn't know where Mrs. Lankford was and I didn't want to find her, I didn't want to see her." New tears streaked down her face. "So I went to my quarters, the bungalow. I know where the phone is in there. I didn't have to hunt for it. I called nine-one-one and they kept me on the line. I wanted to hang up, but they wouldn't let me. They kept me on the line."
'Why did you want to hang up?"
"Cahill," Sarah said, her voice wobbling, her eyes blind with tears. "I wanted to call Cahill. I needed him."
Cahill abruptly left the room. He went into the bathroom, locked the door, then bent over the toilet and vomited.

Chapter 24

IT TOOK A WHILE BEFORE SHE BEGAN THINKING COHERENTLY, logically, but Sarah had nothing but time on her hands. She sat alone in the interview room for long stretches of time, broken by periods when the detective with sandy hair and freckles would ask her a lot of questions. If she had to go to the bathroom, she was escorted. If she asked for something to drink, it was brought to her.
She wondered if they would let her leave, if she tried. She hadn't been arrested, hadn't been handcuffed, she had come here voluntarily. Besides, she had no place else to go. She couldn't stay in the bungalow, she hadn't been able to think clearly enough was murdered; she had been under suspicion then, too, until he'd checked out her story, but it hadn't been

personal. She'd understood. But now . . . he knew her now, as no one else had ever known her. Last night, except for when he'd gone on that call, she had been with him all night. They'd made love, several times. And yet he thought she had left the house soon after he did, driven to the Lankfords' house, shot both of them in the head, then stopped by the grocery store and bought ice cream on the way back to his house.

She would have understood him doing his job. It would have hurt, but she'd have understood. She didn't understand him actually believing she was guilty.

That cut, so deeply and cruelly she wasn't certain the wounds would ever heal. With one slash he'd severed the bonds between them, leaving her adrift. She felt like an astronaut whose safety line has snapped, only no one from the mother ship was making any effort to retrieve her. She was lost, floating farther and farther away, and she didn't much care.

The grief she'd felt when the Judge was killed was nothing compared to this. It wasn't just over the violent death of the Lankfords, those friendly, down-to-earth people whom she'd liked very much; it was for the loss of Cahill as well, of the magic she'd thought they shared. She loved him, but he didn't, couldn't love her, because to really love someone you had to know that person, know what made her tick, how she was put together as a human being. Cahill obviously had no clue about her. If he had, he'd have come to her and said, "I know it looks bad, but I believe in you. I'm behind you." Instead he'd looked at her as if she were dirt, and then he'd walked away. That wasn't love. He'd wanted to screw her, that was all. And, boy, had he ever.

She understood now why he was so bitter and distrustful after finding out his wife had betrayed him. She didn't know if she'd ever be able to really trust anyone again, either. Her family, yes; she could rely on them through thick and thin, hell and high water, and every other applicable cliche. But anyone else? She didn't think so. The lessons learned hardest were the lessons learned best.

In the meantime, she did something that was foreign to her nature: she endured. She had always been one of those people who, when something wasn't to their liking, didn't rest until they had wrestled, pummeled, and otherwise whipped whatever it was into a shape more to their liking. In this instance, however, there was nothing she could do. She couldn't change the

past. Cahill had walked away from her when she needed him most, and no amount of wrestling or pummeling on her part would alter that.
It was a funny type of love that talked marriage one day, and turned its back the next. So why wasn't she laughing?
Instead she sat in the armless chair in the windowless little interview room, and let time wash around her. She was in no hurry. She had nothing to do, and nowhere to go.
Lieutenant Wester rubbed his hand over his nearly bald head. "Okay," he said wearily. "What do we have? Do we hold her, book her, or let her go?"
Everyone was exhausted. The media was in an uproar, the mayor was in an uproar, city hall was in an uproar, and the citizens of Mountain Brook were frightened. Three of their number had been murdered in their homes in the past month, which would have been big news in any community but in Mountain Brook was horrifying. The murder victims had thought they were safe, with their security systems and walled estates, electric gates and floodlights. Instead they had been no safer than a young mother in a drug-ridden neighborhood, cowering with her children in the bathtub at night because the walls were too thin to stop the bullets that regularly whined through the streets.
People paid a high price to live in Mountain Brook, with its crushing property tax. They paid through the nose for the astronomical real estate values, the excellent school system, the illusion of safety. The property taxes bought them a town without slums, and a police department that they expected to keep crime to a minimum, and solve the ones that did occur. When the people in multimillion-dollar homes lost that illusion of safety, they were vocal in their unhappiness. That made the mayor unhappy, which made the captain unhappy, et cetera, et cetera. The pressure was on the investigative division to produce results, or else.
Rusty Ahern consulted the papers before him. "Okay. Here's what I think: We have three spent shell casings, which on preliminary testing appear to match the bullet that killed Judge Roberts. We don't have any viable fingerprints, in either case. We have no physical evidence other than the three shell casings, period. We also have no sign of forced entry at either location, indicating the victims knew the perp and opened the door. We have a busted lock on an interior door. Call-back on the Lankfords' phone went to a pay phone in the Galleria, the same pay phone that showed up as

the last call to Judge Roberts. I don't know about you guys, but that right there leads me to think Miss Stevens didn't do either murder."
"How so?" Nolan asked. "I'm not following."
"She wouldn't have any reason to call ahead, to make certain the electric gates were open, or the victims were at home, or whatever," Cahill said. "She had full access to both homes. All she had to do was go in, at any time."
"Right. And what would be the motive?" Ahern asked. "That's what's driving me crazy. Nothing was taken in the Roberts killing. Miss Stevens got a hefty chunk in his will, but that's in probate, it isn't as if you're handed a check as soon as the body's planted. And like you pointed out, Doc, she isn't hurting for money."
"That doesn't mean anything," Nolan said. "Some people always want more. And don't forget that big diamond ring that's missing. A rock worth a quarter of a million will get a lot of people's attention. Plus some people are just fucking crazy."
Cahill held on to his temper. "But she isn't. She's as sane and even-tempered as anyone I've ever met, and, Nolan, if you say one more time she has me pussy-whipped, I'm going to feed you your teeth." They'd been in each other's faces a couple of times already today. Both of them were tired and irritable, and Nolan had a habit of carrying teasing too far.
"Let's cool it, guys," Wester said. "Doc, what about that photo you came up with from the pay phone on the Roberts case? Has it been shown around the Lankfords' neighborhood?"
"Not yet. We've been concentrating on Sarah."
'Well, get it out and circulate it. Since the last call to the Lankfords' came from the same pay phone, that guy has to be our man."
"But it still doesn't make sense," Nolan argued. "Why kill Judge Roberts and not take anything, unless it was for the money in the will? So it's in probate; she'll get it eventually. Look at it this way: she works for Roberts and he gets popped. She goes to work for the Lankfords and they get popped. Does anybody else see a pattern here?"
"Then what's your theory on the guy in the picture?" Wester asked.
"It's simple. They're working together. Has to be. She goes inside and gets all the information, the alarm codes, the keys, whatever is needed. I don't know how they'd decide when-I mean, she worked for Judge Roberts for almost three years, so why wait so long to off him? Then she's with the

Lankfords only a little over a week and they get offed. Maybe it's whenever they need the money. Who knows? But she makes sure she has an alibi, and he waltzes in and does the job. They never even know he's in the house until he walks up on them and pulls the trigger. He has no known connection to the victims, so it's essentially a stranger killing, and they're damn hard to solve."
"Do you have an alarm system in your house?" Cahill asked.
"Yeah, it's called a dog."
"Well, the victims would hear the killer come in. In both houses, whenever an outside door or window was opened, an alert is beeped. If you weren't expecting anyone to be there, you'd check it out, right? You wouldn't sit in your recliner and wait."
"Unless they thought it was Stevens."
"In the Lankfords' case, they knew she was gone until Tuesday morning." Wester frowned. "You're saying in both cases the victims knew the killer."
"Looks like it to me."
"And the killer in both cases is the same guy."
They all looked at one another.
'We're still missing something," Ahern said. "Motive."
"I keep telling you, it's the money," said Nolan.
"And I keep telling you," Cahill said impatiently, "the only way money makes sense is if Sarah is doing the killing."
"Or is having it done."
"But the victims knew the killer, who is very probably the man who made the calls from the pay phone. You yourself said her so-called partner wouldn't have any connection to the victims, so it can't be both ways. They either knew him, or they didn't. If they didn't know him, why did they let him in the house? Why did Judge Roberts sit down to talk to him? The killer was an acquaintance of both Roberts and the Lankfords."
'Well, shit." Nolan frowned at the surface of the table, thinking hard.
"So our guy is someone they knew in business, or moved in the same circles. My guess is business," Cahill said. 'Judge Roberts was in his mid-eighties, and he didn't do the party circuit. He had his circle of poker-playing cronies, and that was it. But he still had business concerns that he stayed on top of, and Sonny Lankford had more irons in the fire than a blacksmith."

"Looking at it that way, the motive may be money after all," said Ahern. 'We need to find out what business ventures or financial concerns they had in common, some deal that went bad but they came out of okay, while someone else lost his shirt."
"But then it would be sheer coincidence that Sarah Stevens happened to be working for both Roberts and the Lankfords when each was murdered," Wester said. "That's bullshit. Coincidences like that don't happen."
"Maybe it's not as far-fetched as you'd think," Ahern said, doodling furiously on his legal pad as he chased his thoughts. "How many people can afford a butler, especially one who makes in the range that Sarah Stevens makes? Not many. It would be a small circle, even in Mountain Brook. Most people here work like hell to pay the property taxes and their mortgages, and keep their kids in school. But these rich folks who can afford her, they probably all know one another, through business if not socially. They had to get rich somehow, didn't they? I say business dealings are the link."
"A lot of companies have had problems this past year. It's possible someone took a soaking and is holding a grudge about it." Wester considered the scenario. So far, it made more sense than any other theory they'd considered. "Okay, I'll take this to the captain. We'll put out some statement that's vague enough it won't spook this guy. He's already killed three people, and he may have started liking it. We don't want any more bodies in this town."
He looked at Ahern. "You can release Miss Stevens, have someone collect some clothes for her and drive her to a motel. And, no, she can't stay at your house," he said pointedly to Cahill. "I want you to stay away from her for the time being. The press is going to be all over us for turning her loose, and if one of those guys follows her and finds out she's living with a Mountain Brook detective, our collective asses will go up in flames. Is that clear?"
Cahill saw the wisdom of Sarah's not living in his house. Staying away from her, though, wasn't in the cards. He had some major bridge repair to do, and he wasn't going to wait until they broke this case to do it. All day it had been burning in his gut, the way she'd cried when she said she needed him. She had walked in on a horror this morning, made all the worse by being a repeat of the scene with Judge Roberts. She'd been a walking basket case, and he hadn't gone to her, hadn't held her. She'd been alone all day,

slowly rocking back and forth, hugging herself. Even worse, she knew he'd thought she was the killer.
This wasn't merely doing his job; this was a lack of trust so gargantuan he didn't know if he'd be able to regain his lost ground. He'd die trying, though. If he had to crawl to her on his hands and knees, literally as well as figuratively, to get her forgiveness, then he'd wear out the knees in every pair of pants he owned if that was what it took.
She was in a fragile state right now. He remembered that when the Judge was killed she hadn't been able to eat; today she certainly hadn't had anything since breakfast, which was at least a thousand years ago from the way he felt. They had offered her food, but she had refused it with a silent shake of her head. She was usually the strong one, the go-to person in a crisis, but now she needed someone to take care of her.
The first order of business was to get her things from the bungalow and get her checked into a hotel under an assumed name so she could rest. Ahern would take care of that.
There was no way in hell, though, that Cahill intended to let her leave without apologizing, for whatever good that would do.
He walked down the short hall and opened the door to the interview room. She looked up, then quickly averted her gaze when she recognized him. She was still pale, her face drawn and her dark eyes dull. Coming so soon after the Judge's murder, this had knocked her flat.
He stepped inside and closed the door. The ceiling-mounted camera wasn't on right now; they were private. If she wanted to slap his face, he'd take it. If she wanted to kick him in the balls, he guessed he'd take that, too. He'd take anything from her if she would forgive him afterward. But she didn't move, even when he crouched beside the chair so he could see her face.
"Ahern is going to take you to a hotel so you can rest," he said quietly. 'We'll pick up your clothes and bring them to you. Let him check you in; you'll be under an assumed name, so the press can't find you."
"I'm not being arrested?" she asked, her voice thin and colorless.
"Sarah . . . we know you didn't do it."
'Why? Did some evidence turn up today? You thought I was guilty this morning." There was no accusation, no heat in the words, just a statement of fact. He felt as if she had put miles of mental distance between them, between herself and everyone else. It was the only way she could cope.

"I was wrong," he said simply. "I'm sorry. God, I can't tell you how sorry I am. The coincidence slapped me in the face, and all I could think was that you'd gone out last night after I left on the call."
"I understand."
The lack of inflection in her voice made him wince. "Do you forgive, too?"
"No."
"Sarah-" He reached out, and she pulled back, her expression frantic.
"Don't touch me."
He dropped his hand. "All right. For now. I know I fucked up big time, but I won't let you go. We think we're getting this thing figured out, and-"
"It isn't up to you," she interrupted.
'What? What isn't up to me?"
"Letting me go. You don't have a choice."
There was a big black hole yawning at his feet, and he felt as if he were being sucked down into it. If he lost her-well, that wasn't going to happen. He refused to let it. Once she was over the initial shock, she would at least listen to him. Sarah was the most reasonable person he'd ever met. And if she wouldn't listen, then he didn't mind fighting dirty. He'd do whatever it took to keep her.
'We'll talk later," he said, stepping back to give her the space she needed right now.
"There's no point."
"There's every point. I'll give you some room and time now, but don't ever think I've given up. Ever."
"You should," she said, and went back to staring at the wall.
Fifteen minutes later, Ahern hurried her out the back door and across the parking lot to his car. The print and television reporters camped out by the front saw them and the cameramen got some footage, but that was it. One enterprising guy jumped into his car and started to follow, but his way was blocked when a white Jaguar swung in front of him, and by the time he pulled into traffic, both the unmarked cop car and the white Jaguar had vanished from sight.

Chapter 25

TREVOR DENSMORE HAD NEVER BEEN MORE SHOCKED IN HIS life than when the news reports made it plain Sarah was being held as a suspect. This was terrible. How could they possibly . . . why, there wasn't a shred of evidence against her. Not a shred. How could there be? He'd been careless last night and left behind the shell casings, causing himself a moment of worry, but they could in no way be linked to Sarah. As for himself, all he had to do next was dispose of the pistol-after first filing off the registration number, of course. He hated taking care of such menial details himself, but he could hardly ask his secretary to handle it, now could he?

The most important thing was to make certain Sarah was all right. She was so pale, in the news footage shown. She had discovered the bodies of both Judge Lowell Roberts, her previous employer, and the Lankfords, which suggested she was like the miscreants who set fires, then called in the report, pretending they had discovered it so they could deflect suspicion from themselves. The police were wise to such tactics, which he supposed explained why she was under suspicion, but, oh, dear . . . he'd done her such a terrible wrong.

Not once had he considered that she would be the one who found the bodies. Not once. He should have realized it, because of course she was the most logical person to do so; she was conscientious, meaning she would be the first one on duty in the morning. The shocks he'd made her endure had to have been terrible. He couldn't think how he could have arranged for someone else to discover the bodies, but he could have thrown a blanket over them or something. People nowadays always had those throw things draped everywhere, like shawls for furniture; he detested such clutter himself. He could have used them, however, to spare Sarah a measure of shock.

He was so distressed by his thoughtlessness that he had his secretary cancel his appointments and left his office early. What to do, what to do?

The first order of business was to get her released, but how? He could scarcely call the police department and demand her release, not without explanations he didn't care to make. Then the brilliant idea occurred. It was risky, but worth the gamble if it freed Sarah.

Even as efficient as he was, it still took him a few hours to accomplish the deed. Then, not knowing what else to do, he drove to city hall and parked in the parking lot of the nearby bank and waited. He didn't want to join the

jackals who were lingering with their satellite-dish-equipped vans and videocameras, and, really, he had no idea how long it would be before the effects of his plan were discovered. But when Sarah was released, he intended to be there to offer his support.

Why, in retrospect, things couldn't have worked out better. She would be upset, in need of a safe haven. He could give her that, and more . . . so much more.

He had carefully chosen his vantage point, and when he needed to change the angle of vision to better see what was going on-it was so frustrating not to know exactly; he hated being kept in the dark like this-he would simply walk down the sidewalk as if he were going to the dry cleaners, or whatever.

Luck was on his side, but then, it always was. He became more and more exasperated as he waited; the incompetent yokels, what was taking them so long? Just as he reached his limit and decided to go home-after all, no one would expect him to wait forever- he saw Sarah leave the police department by a side door at the back of the building. She was with a man, probably a detective, since he was escorting her across the narrow drive to the parking lot the police used. The news crews spotted them, of course, as they got into an unmarked city car of common lineage. One reporter ran to his car and jumped in, but Trevor timed things perfectly, smoothly swinging the Jaguar into traffic at just the right moment to block the reporter from pulling out. There was more traffic behind him, inadvertently performing the same blocking maneuver.

Trevor kept his eye on the unmarked car as he followed, keeping at least one car between them. Really, he was getting very good at this.

Where was he taking her? Back to the Lankfords' house? Surely not. But she had no other home. To a friend's home, then, or a hotel. The good news was that she obviously had not been arrested, just detained and questioned, and now they had decided they had no reason to hold her. He wasn't certain exactly how police procedure worked, but he did know that if she had been arrested, she would have been detained until a bond hearing, where bail would either be set or denied.

All he had to do was follow to see where she was being taken; then he would decide how best to approach her. This time she would come to him. He was certain of it.

"Do you have any preferences?" Detective Ahern asked her. 'Which hotel, I mean."
"I don't care."
Ahern glanced at her, at a loss. He'd gone into the interview room thinking, like everyone else, that she was guilty. Her reactions during the interview, plus some logical thinking, had convinced him she wasn't. Normally he didn't concern himself much if someone was upset; in his line of work, it was to be expected, and unless they were hysterical and throwing punches or objects, he left them to handle things on their own. This was different, though; because of her connection to Cahill, she was one of theirs. This was more personal.
"The lieutenant told Doc to stay away from you until things settle down. The press would go crazy if they found out you're living with him."
"I'm not," she said flatly.
He was about to step knee-deep in shit, he just knew it, but he plowed on. "So if Doc isn't around much, that's why. He wants to be. By the way, he's been arguing us into the ground all day about your innocence. He believes in you, Sarah. We're working our butts off to get this thing figured out, but he-"
"Detective Ahern," she said.
"What?"
"Shut up." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.
Now what?
He was saved by a call coming in on his phone. Eyes widening, he listened in disbelief.
"Shit!" he said explosively.
She jerked upright, and he had the impression she had actually dozed off in those few seconds. "What?"
"There's been another killing." He stepped on the gas. "If you don't mind, I'm taking you to the Mountain Brook Inn. It's close by, and I need to get to the scene."
"That's fine."
He was agitated. "It sounds like the same MO, Sarah. We'll know more when we investigate, but if it is, you're totally clear. The press won't bother you."
"Why?" She shook her head. "Who?"

"I don't know; I just have the address. But evidently the kill is recent, just a few hours old. You couldn't have done it." His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Shit. We have a maniac on our hands."
When they reached the inn, she said, "Just let me out in front. I'll check myself in." She shrugged. "Now it doesn't matter if they know I'm here, does it? I may get some phone calls, but they won't be beating down my door." With this latest development, she had gone from suspect to . . . what? Material witness? Incredibly unlucky?
"Do me a favor," Ahern said. "Use a false name anyway. Use 'Geraldine Ahern,' that's my mother's name. That way we can find you."
"Okay," she agreed. This wasn't something she cared about. Right now, nothing was. She just wanted to be alone, and she wanted to sleep.
She got her purse and got out of the car. Before she closed the door, Ahern leaned over and said, "We'll have your clothes brought to you. Just sit tight. "
She'd have to sit tight, she thought as she watched Ahern drive away, unless she called a taxi, because she didn't have a way of going anywhere. The TrailBlazer was still at the Lankfords' house.
She was so exhausted that for long moments she simply stood there in the late afternoon warmth, trying to dissipate the chill that seemed to go all the way through to her bones. What would she do if the staff at the front desk refused to let her stay here? If they had been watching television today, her face and name would have been all over the news. They might even think she had escaped custody, though why she would then try to check into a nearby hotel was more than she could imagine.
The events of the day crashed down on her, sapping what little strength she had left, swaying her on her feet. She closed her eyes, struggling for control.
"Miss Stevens?" asked a softly hesitant voice. "Sarah?"
Dazed, she opened her eyes and found herself staring at a man who looked familiar, though she couldn't quite place him. He stood a few feet from her, watching her with concern. She hadn't heard his footsteps, hadn't realized anyone was near.
"Are you all right?" he asked shyly; and then she placed him. Saturday night. The party.
"Mr. Densmore," she said.

He looked pleased that she remembered him. "Please call me Trevor. My dear, I've been thinking about you all day. This is terrible, what's happened. You must have been so afraid."
Her throat locked, and she stared at him. After the events of the day, this gentle sympathy was almost her undoing.
"The newscasters made it sound as if the police suspect you, but that's ridiculous. You couldn't possibly have done such a thing; the very idea. Are you staying here for the time being?"
"I-" She swallowed. "I haven't checked in yet."
"Then let's go in and get you a room so you can rest. Have you eaten anything today? There's a cafe here, I believe. I'd be honored if you'd join me for a meal."
He was a virtual stranger, but after only one meeting he had more faith in her than Cahill had. The difference between them slapped her in the face, sent her reeling. She didn't realize she had swayed again until Mr. Densmore reached out to touch her arm. "My dear, you're on the verge of collapse. Come with me. You'll feel better after you've had something to eat, I promise."
It was so easy just to let him take charge. All but the most simple actions seemed beyond her capability now; it was a relief not to make decisions, not even about what she ate. Before she knew it they were in the cafe and he was quietly ordering hot tea and soup for her, making soft comments that didn't require replies but nevertheless wove a sort of buffer zone around her and gave her something else to concentrate on. All day the same scenes had been replaying in her mind, all day the same horrible thoughts had chased around and around, and he offered surcease from that. She listened to him, and she allowed herself to forget, just for a little while.
He was gentle in his insistence that she eat, but relentless. After a day of feeling battered, it was good to be taken care of. She made herself eat half the bowl of soup, and sip the hot tea. At least she began to feel a little warmer, but her mind was still in a fog and she was surprised when she suddenly focused on what Mr. Densmore was saying.
"You still want to hire me?" she asked in dazed astonishment.
He blushed, and fiddled with his teaspoon, unnecessarily stirring the already stirred tea, then precisely placing the spoon on the rim of the saucer. "I know this is terrible timing," he said. "I'm sorry. This is so embarrassing."

"No, it isn't that," she said quickly. "It's just-I apologize. I'm so tired I can't concentrate. Thank you very much for your offer, but, Mr. Densmore . . . it may not be safe. My employers seem to be-" She stopped, her lips suddenly trembling, unable to go on.
"That can 't have anything to do with you, " he said firmly. "It's just a horrible coincidence. It's been on the news that there's been another incident, so that proves you aren't involved in any way."
The media was on top of things today if it was already on the news about this latest killing, she thought tiredly. But they were in a high state of alert, monitoring the police radios and 911 calls, so it was possible they were at this latest scene almost before the cops were.
Another person was dead. She should be horrified for the victim's sake, for the family's sake, but all she could feel was grateful that she wasn't there.
"My offer still stands," he said, his shy smile beginning to form. "I was impressed with your abilities when I saw you on television, and again last Saturday. Please think about it. My estate is extensive; I've been coping with part-time staff, but it would really benefit from permanent, expert supervision. It's very quiet, and I have excellent security."
Her mind felt filled with cotton, but one thought at least was clear: the job offers wouldn't be pouring in this time, the way they had after the Judge was killed. After what happened to the Lankfords, she would at the least be regarded as a jinx, though this last killing would at least prove she wasn't a murderer. Not many people would want someone like her in the house. Probably Mr. Densmore wouldn't have, either, if he hadn't already met her and formed his own opinion about her character.
She should take her time finding another position. She should advertise in the papers in Atlanta and Palm Beach, maybe even New Orleans. She could stay with her parents while she searched, assuming the police would let her leave the area. Right now, even with this newest development, that was a big assumption.
Since this job was falling into her lap, the simplest thing would be to take it. She would have somewhere to live, and something to occupy her mind. When she felt better, when she was more herself, then she could decide what to do on a permanent basis.
"I have to be honest with you, Mr. Densmore. After what's happened, I don't think I want to stay in this area. I'm grateful for your offer, and if you're still interested in hiring me knowing that it may be temporary-"

"I am," he said quickly. "I understand completely how you feel. But after things have settled down and you see the arrangements at my estate, I hope you'll change your mind about leaving."
She took a deep breath. "In that case, I accept your offer."

Chapter 26

THE VICTIM'S NAME WAS JACOB WANETTA, FIFTY-SIX YEARS old, the president and CEO of Wanetta Advertising. He lived on Cherokee Road, and he and his wife were golfing enthusiasts. He was working at home that day, and he'd been hale and hearty when his wife was picked up by a friend a little after lunch to play nine holes at the Mountain Brook Country Club, then have cocktails. He'd waved them off from the front door, so it wasn't a matter of the wife saying he was alive then, the friend had seen him, too. When the wife arrived home after a fun afternoon of golf and gin, she found her husband sprawled beside the hearth in his den, a bullet through his brain.
The evidence technicians found the shell casing where it had rolled under the sofa, and immediate comparisons were being made to see if it matched the three found at the Lankfords. From the damage done, the bullet looked to be the same caliber as the others, though the ME would have to weigh the slug to be certain. The shot appeared to have been delivered in the same manner as two of the others. Except for Mrs. Lankford, who had been shot between the eyes, the other killing wounds had all entered from the left, indicating the killer had been standing to the left of the victim and was right-handed. That had to be sheer coincidence, where he stood, but maybe not. Maybe, being right-handed, he deliberately maneuvered so he was on the victim's left, giving himself an unencumbered shot. If he stood to the victim's right, shooting would require swiveling his body, and might give the victim time to react.
As it was, none of the victims had stood a chance. They hadn't had time to do more than blink, if that. Except for Merilyn Lankford; she had obviously been trying to call for help.
Jacob Wanetta had been a hefty, athletic guy. If any of them could have fought, he would have been the one. But he'd gone down just like the

others, without resistance. There were no overturned chairs, no lamps knocked askew, nothing . . . just that very efficient killing.
He had been killed while Sarah was safely at the police department. There was no question of her innocence, and since by all indications he and the Lankfords had been killed by the same person, that effectively removed the media focus from her. The chief put out a statement that they had been concerned for Miss Stevens's safety, but they had at no time considered her a suspect. That was a flat-out lie, but who cared, if it killed the media's interest in her?
Ahern said he'd left her at the Mountain Brook Inn, with instructions to check in under Geraldine Ahern, his mother's name. Cahill wished Ahern had actually gone inside with her and seen to it himself, but he understood the urgency to get to the scene. When Mrs. Wanetta's hysterical phone call had come into 911, there in the police department, everyone had scrambled like fighter pilots racing to meet an oncoming wave of bombers.
They were stretched thin, trying to handle the normal problems that cropped up plus three murders in one day. With this latest development, Lieutenant Wester decided there wasn't any reason to keep Cahill separate from the Lankford case; Wester had only five investigators to begin with, so he needed every one of them concentrating on this. As far as Cahill was concerned, that also lifted the restrictions on him involving Sarah, not that he'd intended to pay much attention to them anyway. Still, it was nice to know his ass wasn't going to get busted for doing it.
It was close to midnight when Wester decided they were all so tired they were losing their effectiveness. They'd have to wait and see if the evidence techs came up with any new physical evidence. They had already interviewed as many friends and neighbors as they could-unless they started dragging people from their beds-and, as Nolan put it, they were starting to get "the stupids."
Sarah hadn't been far from Cahill's mind all day, and abruptly he remembered to ask, "Ahern, did you have anyone take Sarah's clothes to her?"
Ahern gave him a blank look, then groaned. "Shit, I forgot." He glanced at his watch. He had called his wife two hours ago and told her he'd be home soon.
"I'll do it," Cahill said. Wester was listening to them and when he didn't say anything, Cahill knew he was cleared.

"Are you sure about that?" Ahern asked, giving him a shrewd look. "You might want to stay out of reach for a few days."
"No, that's exactly what I don't need to do."
He was as short on sleep as everyone else-probably shorter, considering what he and Sarah had done with the chocolate syrup the night before-but he had no interest in going home without seeing her first. She, on the other hand, probably wouldn't be glad to see him at any time, much less in the wee hours of the morning.
Tough shit.
He picked up her clothes first, figuring she wouldn't refuse to see him if he had her things. He got everything, digging out her suitcases and cleaning out the closet, because he assumed she wouldn't be coming back here to stay anyway. In just the short time she'd been here, though, she had already put her personal touches on the bungalow, with her books and photographs, and her music collection. He thought about packing those up, too, but she wouldn't have room for them in a hotel room, and he didn't want to take the time right now. She needed her clothes; the other things could wait.
He was fast, but thorough, remembering to get all her toiletries and makeup from the tiled bathroom, and her underwear from the built-in drawers in the closet. Packing her things was easy; she was very neat, which made things go faster. Maybe she hadn't been here long enough for her things to have developed a life of their own. He had a stubborn hope that one day her clothes would push his out of the closet, and he'd complain about needing a bigger house just for the closet space. He had a stubborn hope for a lot of things, and they all revolved around Sarah.
Finally he had everything packed in his truck, and as he wound his way over to 280, he called Sarah's cell phone number, but the recording came on immediately informing him that the customer was not in service at this time. He was used to her keeping it on the entire time she was at his house, putting it on the charger every night, but now there was no reason for her to make it easy for anyone to get in touch with her. Growling, he got the number of the Mountain Brook Inn from Information, was put through, and asked for Geraldine Ahern.
Sarah was one of those people who woke instantly when disturbed, springing from bed ready to do battle, thwart burglars, or cook breakfast. He began to worry when she hadn't answered by the fourth ring. She did answer on the sixth one, though, and her voice sounded dull. "Hello."

"I'm bringing your clothes over," he said. 'What's your room number?"
She paused. "Just leave them at the front desk."
"No."
"What?"
There, that was better; there was a little life in her voice. "If you want your clothes, you'll have to see me."
"Are you holding my clothes hostage?" More life. It was outrage, but at least it was life.
"If you don't want them now, I'll take them home with me and you can pick them up there."
"Damn you, Cahill-" She stopped, and he could hear her exhaling through her nose in exasperation. "All right." She told him her room number and slammed down the phone.
Progress was being made.
He didn't mind arguing. It was not talking at all that drove him crazy. As long as she was talking to him, even if by dint of coercion, then he had a chance.
At the inn, he got a luggage cart and loaded all of her things on it, then wheeled it to the elevator past the watchful eye of the clerk manning the desk. Cahill opened his jacket a little, flashing the tin on his belt, and the clerk became interested in other things.
Sarah must have been standing at the door, because she jerked it open before he could even knock. The squeaking of the luggage cart must have alerted her. She already had a hand extended to take one bag when she registered the load on the luggage cart.
"I brought everything," he said, keeping his voice down because of the other guests sleeping on this floor. It was a wonder he remembered the courtesy, because Sarah was naked, clutching a sheet around her. "I didn't figure you'd be staying there again."
"No," she said, shuddering. "But what about my-"
"You can get the rest of your stuff later." He wasn't above using his size to get what he wanted; he grabbed two of the suitcases and moved forward, and she was forced to step back from the door. He set down the suitcases, planting himself in the doorway, and swiveled to get the other bags. Before she could get the two suitcases hauled to the side, he had the others inside and he stepped forward, closing the door behind him. She had turned on every light in the place, making certain the room was as far from intimate as

she could make it, even smoothing the bedspread back over the bed after she'd removed the sheet that was now wrapped around her.
But she hadn't put on her clothes, and she'd had time to do so. Instead she was wrapped in a sheet, and she was naked beneath it. He wondered if she even realized what that revealed about her emotions. Normally he would have said yes, but after the day she'd had, she probably didn't realize.
She clutched the sheet tighter, lifting her chin. "Thank you. Now get out."
"You look like a Victorian maiden protecting her virtue," he said, shifting the suitcases himself.
She had still been pale, her features pinched, but now her eyes narrowed and color washed into her cheeks. She was a good strategist, though; she must have sensed that a good fight to clear the air was just what he wanted, because she bit back whatever she had been about to say and moved several feet away. "Leave."
He moved closer. Maybe he could make her mad enough to swing at him; she'd have to let go of that sheet then. "Make me," he invited.
"I'm not doing this," she said, briefly closing her eyes and shaking her head. "If I have to, I'll call your supervisor and make a harassment charge against you. It's over. We didn't work out. End of story."
"No," he said. Shannon had once said he could give stubborn lessons to a jackass, and he intended to live up to his reputation. "Sarah, I love you."
Her head snapped up, and the expression in her eyes was furious. "No you don't. "
His eyes narrowed. "The hell I don't."
Then she was advancing on him, holding the sheet with one hand and poking at him with a stiffened finger with the other. "You don't even know who I am," she snapped, breathing fire. "If you did, if you had paid the slightest amount of attention to me other than when you wanted to screw me, you'd never, not for one damn second, have thought I murdered anyone, much less someone I liked as much as I did M-Merilyn." Her chin wobbled, and her face began to crumple. "And-and I loved the Judge," she said in a trembling voice, trying hard not to cry. "You can't love someone you don't know, and you don't k-know me."
It wasn't just her voice trembling; she was shaking all over. Cahill felt something clench in his chest. Damn it, he hadn't liked it when she said he screwed her. He didn't like the term, didn't like what it implied. Fucking, yeah; when they made love, it was earthy and hot and sweaty, and that was

fucking. But it had always been making love, too. It had never been just screwing.
She was falling apart in front of him. Cahill breathed a curse and pulled her into his arms, easily subduing the feeble girlypounding she did on his chest; then she sort of crumpled against him and began to cry as she had earlier, in great, heaving sobs.
He picked her up and sat down on the bed, holding her on his lap and murmuring soft things to her, doing the things he should have done this morning. She wasn't holding the sheet now, her hands were fisted on his jacket, and the sheet began to loosen around her slender body. Ruthlessly he helped it along, pulling his jacket out of her grip and shrugging out of it at the same time as he tugged on the sheet, exposing more and more of her warm skin.
He fell back on the bed, twisting so she was on her back and he was leaning over her as he pulled the sheet completely free. She was still crying and she made a weak grab for the sheet, but he caught her hand and held it as he bent his head to kiss her, at the same time stroking his free hand over her smooth breasts, down her flat belly, then finally to the ultrasoft folds between her legs.
Her mouth was salty from her tears. She whimpered a protest, but she was arching toward him, and when he released her hand, it slid around his neck.
He moved fast, opening his pants and shifting on top of her, parting her legs and settling between them. He guided his penis to her, and pushed. She wasn't wet but she was moist enough, though he had to rock several times to get all the way inside her.
She whimpered again, and went still, staring up at him with drenched, heartbreaking eyes.
"Shhh," he murmured, moving gently inside her. Usually she gave as good as she got, standing toe-to-toe with him whether they were sparring or making love, and this vulnerability hurt him deep inside. Maybe this was wrong, loving her now when her defenses were down, but it was the fastest way he knew to reestablish the connection between them. The bonds of the flesh . . . not just sex but the linking of two bodies, the most primitive way of seeking comfort and not feeling alone.
He would have made it last the rest of the night, if he could have. As it was he stopped whenever he felt his orgasm building, lying still until the urge subsided then slowly stroking again. All the while he was kissing her,

caressing her, telling her he loved her as he coaxed her from acceptance to response. He had never concentrated on a woman before as he concentrated now on Sarah, alert for every nuance, every caught breath, every shift of her legs. He'd always been hyperaware of her when they made love, but this was even more so. He felt as if his very survival depended on loving her now, on reforging the link his suspicion had broken.

It was a long time happening, but finally her hips began to move to meet him, and her fingers dug into his shoulders. He kept his pace slow, loving the feel of her tightening around him as if she was trying to hold him inside. The pulse at the base of her throat was hammering, and her nipples were tight, flushed with color. Tension coiled in her finely honed body, lifting her to every inward thrust, her legs sliding around his and locking in that way she had of holding him in, as if she couldn't get enough of him.

Her head tilted back, a groan sounding deep in her throat.

He pushed deep, held there, and felt her begin coming. He was so close, had been on the edge for so long, that he began coming, too, as soon as he felt the first contraction around him. He tried not to thrust, tried to hold himself still and deep for her pleasure, and his own pleasure spread through him like hot melted wax.

She lay beneath him, breathing hard, and tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes to streak into the hair at her temples. "I can't believe I did that," she choked out.

Struggling for breath, he propped on his elbow and wiped his thumb across her wet cheek. "I'd undo the day if I could," he said hoarsely. "God, I'm so sorry. It isn't just that I'm a cop; after I was such a stupid fool trusting Shannon, I-"

"I'm not your ex-wife!" she shouted furiously, and shoved against his shoulders. "I don't give a damn what she did. Get . . . off me, damn it; your badge is scratching my stomach!"

Ah, shit. He rolled off her and flopped on his back. He was still wearing his holster, too. He guessed he was lucky she hadn't pulled his pistol and shot him.

She jackknifed to a sitting position and glared down at him, her face still wet with tears. "I'll say this for you," she said bitterly, "you've taught me a lesson. It'll be a cold day in hell before I trust-" She stopped herself, letting her breath out in a long, weary sigh. "Oh, God. I sound just like you."

He got up and went into the bathroom, washing and straightening, tucking his shirt into his pants. Sarah got up and came to stand beside him, unconcerned about her nakedness as she washed her face, then wiped away the results of their lovemaking. Their eyes met in the mirror.
"I love you," he said. "That isn't going to change."
Her shoulders slumped. "The hell of it is, I still love you, too. I just can't get past this right now."
"I can wait." He smoothed her hair back, stroked her cheek. "As long as it takes. But don't throw us away. Don't make any drastic decisions. Give it time, and let's see what happens."
She stared at him in the mirror, and sighed as if in defeat. "All right. For now. I hope I wouldn't have let you make love to me if there was nothing left, so I have to think maybe there is. Just . . . give me some room, okay? Let me get some of myself back."
He took a deep breath. He felt as if he'd won the lottery, or a stay of execution. Something.
She made a wry face. "I don't know if it's drastic, but I've already made a hasty decision. I already have another job."
He felt blank with shock. "What? How? Here?"
"Yes, here. It's someone I'd already met, and he'd offered me the job. He was coming into the hotel this afternoon and saw me, and he made the offer again on the spot. I took it."
"What's his name?"
"Trevor Densmore." Her voice was weary, all her temporary energy fading fast.
He didn't remember the name. "Have I already checked him out?"
"No, his name wasn't on my list of possibles."
"Then why take the job now, if you wouldn't consider it before?"
"It's a place to hide," she said simply.

Chapter 27

SARAH WOKE THE NEXT MORNING ACHING FROM HEAD TO toe. She lay in bed, trying to think of a reason why she should get up today. Though she had slept deeply, she felt as exhausted as she had when she'd

gone to bed the night before. The wee-hours visit from Cahill hadn't helped, either.

She'd sent him home, afterward. He hadn't wanted to go, but she supposed he thought he'd won all the victories he was going to win that night. He did take her truck keys so that he could have it picked up and delivered to her. She suspected he'd do it himself; he was in major suck-up mode, and she didn't know if that made her happy or made her want to cry. Maybe both. She still couldn't believe she'd let him make love to her, not with things the way they were between them. But he'd been achingly gentle, and she had so badly needed to be held. The scent of his body was warm and familiar, excitingly male; she knew all the details of that body so well, from the sandpaper texture of his jaw to the shape of his toes. She'd wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and find oblivion, so when he actually did take her in his arms, she caved with embarrassing speed.

He'd never before been so gentle, or so slow. She had gone to sleep with her body still tingling deep inside. But now she ached, her muscles knotting into cramps.

"Damn," she muttered, wanting to roll over and bury her face in the pillow again. Her menstrual period had started; that's why she was cramping, why she felt so achy. It was right on time, so she shouldn't have been caught unawares, but the trauma of the day before had knocked everything else out of her mind.

Groaning, she rolled out of bed. Thank goodness Cahill had brought over all her personal stuff, or else she'd have been in a pickle. She sorted through the bags until she found the one containing the supplies she needed, then she shuffled into the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

She felt as if she should be doing something, but there was nothing to be done. This wasn't the same situation she'd been in with Judge Roberts's family; she had known them, grown close to them, and they'd depended on her. She had never even met the Lankfords' two daughters, Bethany and Merrill. Her heart ached for them, but she was an outsider, and even if they had wanted her to help she didn't know if she was capable of giving it. Not this time. Not now. She was too emotionally battered, too drained.

After she finished showering, she was shaking with exhaustion, but more than sleep, she needed to be with someone who loved her unconditionally, someone who was always there. She dug her cell phone from her purse, turned it on, and called her mother.

"Oh, hi, sweetie," her mother said. She sounded unusually frazzled. Sarah's mother was normally an oasis of calm, a master of organization. Sarah was instantly alert.
"Mom? What's wrong?"
To her dismay, her mother burst into tears, but she controlled them almost immediately. By that time, though, Sarah was on her feet in alarm. "Mom?"
"I wasn't going to call any of you just yet, but your father had some chest pains last night. We spent the night in the ER; they did some tests and they said he didn't have a heart attack-"
Sarah's breath whooshed out of her, and she sat back down. "Then what's wrong with him?"
"We don't know. He's still hurting a little, though you know him, he still has that Marine mentality that he's going to tough this out. I've made him an appointment with an internist for later this afternoon for a physical and to schedule some more tests." Her mother took a deep breath. "I suppose I wouldn't be so scared if he hadn't always been so healthy. I've never seen him in pain the way he was last night."
"I can be there on an afternoon flight-" Sarah began, then stopped, wondering if she could leave. What had Cahill told her before, after Judge Roberts was murdered? Don't leave town. But she'd been cleared, so there shouldn't be a problem. Then she remembered Mr. Densmore and groaned; she was supposed to begin the job there.
"No, don't be silly," her mother said, her voice more brisk now. "It wasn't a heart attack; all the enzymes or whatever were normal. There's no point in flying down here for what may be nothing more than a severe case of heartburn. If the doctor seems at all concerned this afternoon, I'll call you."
"Are you sure?"
"Of course I'm sure. Now, enough about that. How are things going with your new job?"
Sarah had been aching to cry on her mother's shoulder, figuratively speaking, but no way was she going to add to her mother's worries right now. "It didn't work out," she said. "Actually, I have a new position already, and I wanted you to have the phone number."
"I thought you really liked the new people, the Lankfords."
She had. Her throat tightened, and she had to swallow. "It wasn't that. Something unexpected came up and they had to relocate." She wished she

had been able to think of some other lie, because that one was too horribly true; it wasn't a lie at all.
"These things happen." As a military wife, her mother was a past master at relocating. "Okay, I have a pen. What's the new telephone number?"
Sarah had written it down the night before. She got out her little notebook and flipped to the correct page, then read off the number. "And there's always my cell phone, but I wanted to let you know the new developments."
"You concentrate on settling in. I'm sure he'll be okay, he's feeling better and already making growling noises about not needing a doctor. I'll have to twist his arm to get him to the doctor's office this afternoon."
"Call me, okay? If there's the least thing wrong."
"I will."
Sarah hung up and sat there for a long time, trying to come to grips with this added worry. There was nothing she could do, at least not right now; she needed to take care of herself so she would be in shape to act if she was needed.
She searched for the aspirin among her scattered effects, found the bottle, and took two. Then she fell back into bed, and was asleep in minutes.
It was almost two o'clock when the phone rang. She rolled over and blinked at the clock in disbelief, then fumbled for the phone.
"I'm bringing your truck over," Cahill said. "I had a patrolman drop me off at the Lankfords to pick it up, so you'll have to take me back to the station."
She blinked sleepily. "Okay." Her voice sounded fuzzy even to herself.
"Did I wake you up?" he asked suspiciously.
"Yeah. I had a rough night," she said, and let him make of that what he wanted.
"I'll be there in ten minutes or so," he said, and hung up.
She hauled herself out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. All her clothes were packed in suitcases, so they were wrinkled. She herself looked like the Wicked Witch of the West on a bad day. Cahill could just wait until she put herself to rights.
He did, but not patiently. She refused to let him into the room, so he went back down to the lobby. When she was ready and started to leave the room, she discovered why she hadn't been awakened by housekeeping: the DO NOT DISTURB sign was out. Cahill must have put it out when he left. She left the sign where it was and took the elevator down to the lobby.

"Have you found out anything new today?" she asked during the drive to the police station.
"Nothing except the same weapon was used to kill all four people. Have you watched any news today, or read the newspaper?"
"No, why?"
"I wondered if you could remember ever seeing Jacob Wanetta anywhere."
"He's the fourth victim?"
"Yeah."
"The name isn't familiar."
A moment later he stopped at a service station and stuck some change in a newspaper vending machine, pulling out the last remaining copy of the morning paper. Getting back behind the wheel, he tossed the paper onto her lap.
She didn't read the story, didn't let herself focus on the headlines. Instead she focused on the grainy black-and-white photo of a dark-haired, heavy-jawed man who gave the impression of bull-like strength. Nothing about him was familiar. "I've never seen him before that I can remember," she said, laying the paper aside. She couldn't help feeling relieved; at least she had no connection with this killing.
He stopped before they reached city hall and the police department, pulling into a parking lot and turning off the ignition. "Reporters have been hanging around," he said. "I'll walk the rest of the way, so they don't see you." He half turned in the seat, the back of his right hand brushing her cheek. "I'll call you tonight. I'll try to see you, but we're working our asses off and I don't know what time we'll call it a night."
"You don't have to check on me. I'm okay." She was lying, right now, but she would be okay in the future. She needed to regroup, get a lot of sleep, and let time put a little more distance between her and the murders. She needed a little distance between herself and Cahill, too, some time in which she didn't have to deal with him. She didn't want to think things over; she didn't want to think at all.
"It's for my peace of mind, okay?" he muttered. "I know things aren't straight between us, not yet, so I need to see you every so often to make sure you're still here."
"I'm not running, Cahill," she said, stung that he thought she might. "If I leave, you'll know beforehand. And I've already accepted the job with Mr. Densmore, remember?"

He grunted. Even with everything that was going on, he'd made the time to run a check on Trevor Densmore. "For what it's worth, he doesn't have any type of record."
"I didn't think he would have. I might as well call him and arrange a time to move over there."
He gave her a worried glance. 'Why don't you give it another day? You still look exhausted."
She knew how she looked: chalky white, with dark circles under her eyes. She felt exhausted, even after all the hours of sleep. Physical tiredness wasn't her problem; it was the overload of stress that was doing her in.
"Maybe I'd feel better if I had something to do. It can't hurt."
The move into Mr. Densmore's house was accomplished in little time and with little effort. House wasn't the right term, though; it was an estate, a fortress, five acres of prime real estate protected by a high gray stone wall. The entrance was guarded by huge wrought-iron gates that operated automatically and were watched over by cameras positioned at regular intervals.
The house itself was three stories high, made of the same gray stone, which gave it a medieval look. Inside the walls, the grounds were carefully manicured, not a shrub or a leaf out of place, not a blade of grass poking a little higher than the blades around it.
Inside was more of the same. Either shy Mr. Densmore liked a monochromatic color scheme, or his decorator was frigid and lacked imagination. It was more gray, everywhere. The marble in the sleek bathrooms was gray. The plush carpeting was a pale, icy gray. The furniture all seemed to be gray and white, with darker grays thrown in for contrast. The effect was of being in an ice cave.
But he was proud of his home, almost boyish in his eagerness to show it to her, so she had to acquit the decorator. He truly loved the sterile atmosphere that surrounded him. She made appropriate noises of admiration, wondering why he cared what she thought. She was a butler, not a prospective buyer.
She was glad she had been up front with him about it being a temporary position, because she didn't like her accommodations at all. She preferred separate quarters, a small oasis that was hers and gave her a life beyond the job. The room he escorted her to was large and lavishly appointed, like a pricey hotel room. The room was too large, making it seem cavernous. There was a king-size four-poster bed and a sitting area, and the furniture

didn't begin to fill up the space. She felt cold just looking at the room. The attached bathroom was sleek, dark gray marble, almost black, with polished chrome faucets and handles. Even the thick towels were dark gray. She hated it on sight.

He was almost pink with excitement. "I'll make us some tea," he said, rubbing his hands together as if he couldn't contain himself. "We can have it while we go over your duties."

She hoped there were a lot of duties, something to keep her busy. A place this large should have a staff; the Judge's house hadn't been half this big, but it had seemed to pulse with life. This stone mausoleum felt empty.

She carried in her suitcases, but didn't start unpacking. He instructed her to park her TrailBlazer in the four-car attached garage, in the empty bay next to a surprisingly nondescript dark blue Ford. The white Jaguar that sat in the bay closest to the house seemed much more Mr. Densmore's type, or the white S(lass Mercedes parked beside it. When she came through into the kitchen-more dark gray marble, and stainless steel appliances-he was just pouring hot tea into two cups sitting side by side.

"There," he said, fussing with the sugar bowl and tiny pitcher of cream as if he were an aged spinster entertaining a suitor. It struck her that he might be lonely, here in this huge house by himself, and that made her uneasy.

She was trained to run establishments, not provide emotional or physical companionship. Over time she and the Judge had developed a close, caring relationship, but the circumstances had been entirely different. Mr. Densmore wasn't just a banker, he owned a bank, and though she didn't know his age, she guessed him to be no older than his early sixties at the most. He was young enough to be going to an office every day; banking was a complicated business, and even with capable management there would still be a lot to oversee, decisions to be made. She knew he socialized, because she had met him at a party. So this sterile, empty home life was discordant, somehow, as if his business life didn't bleed over into his private life-as if he didn't have a private life. During the tour of the house, she hadn't seen a single family photograph or any of the individual touches that marked a home.

She couldn't work here. She hated to leave him in the lurch, but she didn't think she would be; she felt as if there was no real need for her here, or at least not a need she wanted to consider. Exhaustion and desperation had led her to a bad decision, but it wasn't a permanent one.

"There," he said, bringing the tea tray over to the table and setting it down. He placed a cup and saucer before her. "I hope you like it; it's a blend I get from England. The taste is a bit unusual, but I find it's quite addictive."
She sipped the tea; the taste was unusual, but not unpleasant. It was slightly more bitter than she was accustomed to, so she added a thin slice of lemon to adjust the taste.
He was watching her with an eager, expectant expression, so she said, "It's very good."
He beamed. "I knew you'd like it." He picked up his own cup, and she sipped again as she tried to think of the right words.
After a few moments, she realized there were no right words, just honest ones. "Mr. Densmore, I've made a mistake."
He set down his cup, blinking at her. "How so, my dear?"
"I should never have accepted your offer. I deeply appreciate it, but the decision was too hasty and there were several factors I didn't take into account. I can't tell you how very sorry I am, but I won't be able to take the position."
He blinked a little faster. "But you brought your luggage."
"I know. I'm sorry," she repeated. "If I've inconvenienced you in any way, if you've made plans based on my presence, of course I'11 see that through, and I wouldn't feel right, under these circumstances, accepting any salary for doing so. I haven't been thinking clearly, or I would never have made such a hasty decision."
In silence he drank his tea, his head down. Then he sighed. "You mustn't distress yourself; mistakes happen, and you've handled yourself with dignity. But, yes, I have made plans for the coming weekend, so if you wouldn't mind staying until then?"
"Of course not. Is it a party?"
There was a tiny pause. "Yes, you know the sort, reciprocation for the invitations I've received. Catered, of course. About fifty people."
She could handle that. Since this was already late on Wednesday afternoon, there should be a fair amount of work to keep her busy, getting ready for a party on such short notice. She only hoped he had a regular caterer who would accommodate him, even if it meant bringing in extra staff. If he didn't, she would have to move heaven and earth both to find a caterer at this late date.
"I'll take care of everything," she said.

He sighed. "I really wish things could have worked out differently."

Chapter 28

HE WAS VERY DISPLEASED WITH SARAH, THOUGH HE supposed he should make allowances for the upset she had suffered, part of which was his fault. He simply hadn't expected her to be so . . . flighty, though perhaps that was the wrong word. Indecisive. Yes, that was a better description.

He couldn't really be angry with her, because it was so obvious she had suffered over the past day and a half, but he could definitely be displeased. Why, how could she even think of leaving here? Couldn't she see how perfect his house was for her, a fit, wonderful setting for her own crisp perfection? She wouldn't be leaving, of course; he couldn't allow that. He had fantasized about her taking care of him, but it was obvious that, for the time being at least, he would have to take care of her.

Hmm. That must be what was wrong. Sarah wasn't herself. She was very pale, and the serene glow that had first attracted him was gone. He would keep her here and take care of her, and when she felt better, she would be more rational.

Luckily he had planned for all exigencies. No, not luck at all: careful planning and attention to detail. That was the key to suc- cess, whether it was in business or in personal matters. He hadn't thought it likely Sarah would be unhappy here, but he had allowed for that remote possibility, and as a result he was now capable of handling it. If he had made any oversight, it was that he hadn't predicted this after seeing yesterday how obviously distraught she was. Soon she would feel much better, and there would be no more foolish talk about leaving.

The printout from the phone company showed three calls to the Lankfords from that pay phone in the Galleria-on Sunday night. There had been a fourth call on Monday night, at roughly the same time as the murders. It was impossible to pinpoint a time of death without a witness; all they could get was a time frame. But it looked as if the killer had intended to go to the Lankfords' house on Sunday night. According to the youngest Lankford daughter, Merrill, who was in college in Tuscaloosa, her parents had driven down to have dinner with her that night and stayed until almost eleven. That had extended their lives by twenty-four hours, and given their daughter one last opportunity to see them.

Cahill wished to hell they'd had this printout on Tuesday, because Sarah couldn't possibly have made those phone calls; she'd been with him every minute Sunday. He wished a lot of things, number one of which was that he'd never met his ex-wife and let her fuck with his mind. That was the final analysis: he'd let his experience with her affect him. No more. No matter what happened now, he would focus on the person concerned, and not filter everything through his memory of Shannon. He'd been emotionally free of her for two years, but for the first time he felt mentally free. She had no influence on him now.

Those multiple phone calls opened up an avenue of opportunity that hadn't existed before. He'd gone back to the shop in the mall that had the camera with the best angle, and got the tape for Sunday and Monday nights. The angles were still piss-poor and none of the images were good, but it was the same man. Same hair, same body build, same style of dress.

That was the bastard. That was the killer. There was no doubt in his mind now, or in anyone else's in the department.

The problem was, no one seemed to recognize him. Granted, the stills taken from the tape and enlarged were poor quality, grainy, and never really showed his face. But you could get an impression of him, and still no one had said, "Hey, he reminds me of so-and-so." The police needed a break, a stroke of fate, a miracle. They needed someone with an artist's eye who would note the line of the jaw, the way the ear was set, and make the connection to a live human being.

Mrs. Wanetta didn't recognize the man, but she was so tranquilized she might not have known her own mother. None of their three grown children found anything familiar about him, so that eliminated the possibility of his being a friend of the family; same thing with the Lankford daughters. It had to be a business connection, but again, none of Jacob Wanetta's employees recognized the man in the photos.

Somewhere, someone had to know this bastard.

Leif Strickland, the department's resident electronic genius, stuck his head in the door. His eyes were wide with excitement, his hair sticking up where he'd run his hands through it. "Hey, Doc, come listen. I think I've got the son of a bitch on tape!"

Everyone within hearing distance quickly crammed into his electronic lair. "This is from the Lankford answering machine," Leif said. All answering

machine tapes were seized as a matter of course; if the machines were digital, the whole thing was taken.
"Don't tell me he left a message," Cahill said.
"No, not quite. See, the phone Mrs. Lankford was trying to use had one of those buttons for instant record, you know, like if who you're talking to starts threatening to kill you, you can, like, press this little button and bingo, it records on your answering machine. Now, she probably wasn't trying to record anything, she was trying to call for help, but she was nervous, right? She's grabbing at the phone, punching buttons she doesn't mean to punch. I listened to all the messages, but there was this one space with a funny noise on it. Not . . . I don't know, it just sounded funny. So I isolated it and ran it through some enhancement programs, and-"
"For God's sake, we don't need to know how," Cahill interrupted. "Let's listen to it."
Leif gave him the wounded look of a true techie dealing with philistines who didn't appreciate the beauty of electronics. "Okay, here it is. It's not very plain, I need to enhance it some more, eliminate static-" He broke off as Cahill glared at him, and silently punched a button.
Static, fumbling, the harsh rasp of panicked breathing. Then there was a soft sound, and a tiny whoosh and pop.
'What was that?"
"The sound at the last was the shot being fired," Leif said matter-of-factly. "Silencer. But listen to it again, listen to what comes right before that."
They all listened again, and to Cahill it sounded like a voice.
"He said something. The bastard said something. What was it? Can you isolate it?"
"I'll work on it. Listen again, and you can make out the words."
There wasn't another sound in the room, not even breathing, as he replayed the tape one more time.
How soft the voice was, how gentle. Cahill narrowed his eyes to slits, concentrating. "Something 'girl.'"
"Give the man a prize!" Leif crowed. "It's 'bad girl.'" He played the tape again, and now that they all knew what they were listening for, it was understandable, and chilling.
"Bad girl." Almost an admonishing tone, tenderly scolding. Then the pop of the silenced bullet, and nothing else.

They had an audible record of Merilyn Lankford's murder. If they could get an ID-when they got an ID-they'd be able to match voiceprints and put him at the scene.
"Bingo," Leif said cheerfully.
"My dear, if you don't mind my saying so, you look as if you're at the end of your rope," Mr. Densmore said gently. "You've been through an extraordinarily difficult experience. Lightning won't strike if you sit down and have another cup of tea, will it? Tea is a wonderful restorative. I'll brew a fresh pot," he offered.
She needed something to eat more than she needed tea, Sarah realized belatedly, trying to think when she had last eaten anything. It had to have been the soup she'd had with Mr. Densmore late yesterday afternoon, making it more than twentyfour hours since she'd had a meal.
She had just served his dinner. Mr. Densmore's cook came in at three and prepared his evening meal; she had already come and gone by the time Sarah arrived. Obviously she had prepared only for Mr. Densmore, but that didn't matter. As soon as Sarah had Mr. Densmore fed and his dishes cleared away, she would find something to eat.
He had hovered anxiously near her, making her uneasy, but now she realized he was afraid she might collapse. The thought broke through her depression and made her smile. "Mr. Densmore, has anyone ever told you how sweet you are?"
His eyes widened, and he blushed. "Oh . . . my-well, no."
Sweet and lonely; she felt sorry for him, but not enough to stay in this ghastly house and provide him the companionship he so obviously needed. Still, maybe the caffeine in the tea would give her a boost, keep her going until she had an opportunity to eat.
"Tea sounds wonderful," she said, and he beamed at her.
"Excellent! I know you'll feel a lot better."
He stood up from the table, and Sarah said hastily, "Please, finish your dinner first. I'll put on the tea."
"No, I'll do it. I'm very particular about my tea."
Since his tea appeared to be so important to him and his dinner was a cold one anyway, fresh chicken salad with pecans and red grapes-and because even if she didn't intend to take any pay for her stay here, this was his house and he was still the boss-she stopped protesting.

He went into the kitchen and put the water on to heat, then returned to the dining room and sat down at the enormous chrome-and-glass table to finish his meal. With nothing to do until he finished, Sarah retreated to a corner. She had seldom felt so useless as she did here; she got the impression he didn't expect her to do any actual work, just . . . be there. The respite she craved wasn't here; there wasn't any peace, any calm, just boredom and a vague sense of uneasiness.

She was so tired she could barely stand, and she had developed a raging headache, probably from not eating. It could also be caffeine deprivation, since she hadn't had her coffee that morning; if that was the case, the tea was doubly welcome. She might even have two cups.

He finished just as the kettle in the kitchen began whistling. "Ah! The water's ready," he said, just in case she couldn't hear that piercing noise. He strode into the kitchen, and Sarah busied herself collecting his dishes and carrying them through to rinse and put in the dishwasher.

By the time she finished with that and a few other odds and ends, he was pouring the steeped tea into the cups. '7here!" he said with satisfaction, carrying the tray through to the dining room. She was forced to follow him and, at his insistence, sit at the table.

"Tell me," he said as she sipped the hot, fragrant brew. "How did you decide to become a butler?"

She could talk about her work, she thought with relief. "My father was a colonel in the Marines," she said. "Growing up, I watched the stewards and how they handled all the functions, and it was fascinating. They knew protocol, they handled the guest lists, emergencies, they smoothed over any embarrassing moments . . . they're a marvel in action. I liked the way they were trained to handle anything."

"But obviously you weren't a steward in the military, were you?"

"Oh, no, there's actually a school where you train as a butler." He asked question after question, and she gratefully focused on answering him. Here at last was something her tired mind could latch on to, something that didn't require a lot of thought.

Maybe it was just the giddiness that comes with extreme fatigue, but she began to feel . . . almost tipsy. Her head swam suddenly, and she clutched at the table. 'Wow. Excuse me, Mr. Densmore. I'm dizzy all of a sudden. I haven't eaten today, and I think it's catching up with me."

He looked alarmed. "You haven't eaten? My dear, why didn't you say so? You shouldn't have been standing there waiting on me; you should be taking care of yourself. Here, you sit right there and I'll bring you something. What would you like?"
She blinked at him, owl-like. How could she tell him what she'd like when she didn't know what was available here? Anyway, she wouldn't "like" anything; she would eat because she needed to, but the last thing she had really wanted was-
"Ice cream," she mumbled. The words were alarmingly hard to pronounce.
"Ice cream?" He paused, blinking at her in that way of his. "I don't believe I have any ice cream. Would you like anything else?"
"No," she said, trying to explain. "Not what I want. Last thing I . . ." She lost the thread of what she was saying and stared at him, bewildered. Everything was beginning to slowly rotate around her, and she had the vague, surprising idea that she might be about to faint. She had never fainted before.
He was beginning to move away from her, or seemed as if he was. She couldn't be certain, the way things were whirling. "Wait," she said, trying to stand up, but her legs buckled under her.
He rushed forward and grabbed her before she hit the floor, his grip surprisingly strong. "Don't worry," she heard him say as her vision faded and her ears began to feel as if cotton were stuffed in them. "I'll take care of you."

Chapter 29

THE FIRST THING SHE BECAME AWARE OF WAS A HEADACHE, a literal throbbing inside her skull. Oh, that's right . . . she'd gone to bed with a headache. She was in an uncomfortable position, but she was afraid to move, afraid the least twitch would set the hammers to pounding even harder than they already were. She was queasy, too, and she thought she might vomit. Something was wrong, but the fuzziness in her brain kept her from figuring out what.
She tried to remember . . . something. Anything. For a sickening moment there was nothing there, no sense of place or time, just a horrifying lurch into the unknown. Then the texture of the fabric beneath her made sense,

and she knew she was in bed. Yes, that made sense. She had a headache, and she was in bed. She remembered going . . . no, she didn't remember going to bed. The last clear memory was . . . but that eluded her, too, and she stopped fighting for it, letting the darkness and oblivion claim her again.
When next she woke, she thought she must have the flu. What else could account for this overwhelming sense of illness? She was seldom ill, even with the sniffles, but surely only something as serious as the flu could make her feel so sick. For the first time, she understood what people meant when they said they felt too sick to go to a doctor. There was no way she could get to a doctor; one would have to come to her.
Something was tugging on her head. It was a gentle, rhythmic tugging, and instead of making her headache worse, it actually soothed it, as if the sensation dulled her perception of the throbbing.
Her arms ached. She tried to move them and found she couldn't.
Alarm pierced through the fogginess in her brain. She tried again to move her arms, with the same lack of result. "My arms," she whimpered, and her voice sounded awful, so hoarse it was unrecognizable.
"Poor dear," a soft voice murmured. "You'll be all right. There, doesn't this feel good?"
The rhythmic tugging continued, slow and easy, and after a moment she realized someone was brushing her hair.
It did feel good, but she didn't want her hair brushed. She wanted to move her arms. Despite the headache, despite her queasy stomach, she shifted uneasily in the bed and found she couldn't move her legs, either.
Panic, hard and bright, made her eyes flare open. Her vision swam with fuzzy images that didn't quite make sense. There was a man . . . but he wasn't Cahill, and that wasn't possible. Why was a man who wasn't Cahill brushing her hair?
"I'll get you some water," the soft voice crooned. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, dear? Nice, cold water will feel so good on your throat. You've been asleep for such a long time I've been worried about you."
A cool hand slipped behind her neck and lifted her head, and a glass was put against her lips. The cold water hit her mouth in a rush, soaking into parched tissues, loosening her tongue from the roof of her mouth. Her stomach heaved as she swallowed, but thank God she didn't vomit. She swallowed again, then again, before the glass was taken away.
"Not too much, dear. You've been very sick."

She was still very sick if she was paralyzed, but maybe this man didn't know she couldn't move. She closed her eyes, fighting for strength, but, dear God, she didn't have any. She was so weak that she felt almost boneless.
"I'll bring you some soup in a little while. You need to eat something. I didn't realize you hadn't eaten, and I'm afraid I accidentally made you ill."
The softness of the voice clicked, and memory crept back. "Mr. Densmore?"
"Yes, dear, I'm right here."
"I feel so sick," she whispered, opening her eyes and blinking. This time she found her vision had cleared a little, and she could plainly see his face, full of concern.
"I know, and I'm sorry for that."
"I can't move."
"Of course not. I couldn't have you hurting yourself, now could I?"
"H-hurting myself?" She was winning the battle against the fog; with every passing second she felt less confused, more aware of her surroundings. She felt as if she were surfacing from anesthesia, which she remembered well from when she broke her left arm when she was six years old, and she'd been put under general anesthesia when it was set. She'd hated the anesthesia a lot more than she'd hated the cast.
"If you tried to leave," Mr. Densmore explained, but that didn't make any sense.
"I can't. I haven't." Tried to leave? She had tried to get up from the table, and that was the last thing she remembered.
"I know, I know. Don't get upset. Just stay calm, and everything will be all right." The brush moved slowly through her hair. "You have such lovely hair, Sarah. Overall I'm very pleased with you, though your indecisiveness was an unpleasant surprise. Still, you've been through a lot of upset. I'm sure you'll settle down with time."
He wasn't making any sense. Settle down? She frowned, her brow wrinkling, and he smoothed the creases with his fingertip. "Don't frown, you'll wrinkle your pretty skin. I was right about how lovely a ruby would look against your skin. But I've looked all through your things, and I can't find the pendant. Why aren't you wearing it?"
Pendant?

A chill ran through her, and she went very still as an awful suspicion seized her. Her stomach heaved again, but this time with fear.
'Why aren't you wearing the pendant I sent to you?" he asked, sounding a little petulant.
He was the one. He was the stalker, the weirdo whose presence she'd sensed, like a hidden cancer. He'd waited, and seized his chance. She wasn't sick at all, she realized; the bastard had drugged her, and since she hadn't eaten anything in over a day, the drug had hit her hard.
She had to answer him. Don't annoy him, she thought. Don't do anything to make him wary. Think. She needed an excuse that wasn't her fault. Think!
"Allergic," she whispered.
The brush paused in its motion. "My dear, I'm so sorry," he said contritely. "I had no idea. Of course you shouldn't wear something that will give you a rash. But where is it? Perhaps you could put it on for just a moment, so I could see you wearing it."
"Jewelry box," she whispered. "Could I have more water?"
"Of course, dear, since the first has stayed down." He lifted her head and held the glass to her lips again, and she gulped as much as she could.
"There," he said as he let her head rest on the pillow again. 'Where's your jewelry box?"
"At the bungalow. Lankford estate. Crime scene . . . police have it sealed. I can't get in."
He made an exasperated noise. "I should have realized. Don't worry, dear, I'll take care of collecting the rest of your things. You'll feel so much more comfortable with your own possessions around you."
Sarah tried once again to move her arms, and this time she felt something wrapped around her wrists. The truth occurred to her in a sickening rush: she was tied to the bed. She fought the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't give in to it, she had to think, she had to concentrate. If she panicked she was helpless, but if she kept her wits, she might outsmart him. She had one big advantage: she knew he was dangerous, but he didn't know she was.
Cahill. He knew she was here. Sooner or later he would call and want to see her, talk to her. All she had to do was keep things calm and under control until then. She didn't want to do anything to agitate Densmore, prod him into violence. He was a stalker, obsessed with her; he was happy now because she was here, under his control. So long as he believed that, she

was safe. She hoped she was safe. But if he thought she was trying to escape from him, he was likely to explode into violence. If that happened, if she couldn't make a clean escape, then she had to make certain she was ready to handle him.
But there was no telling how long it would take Cahill to try to contact her. He knew she was here, but all the cops were working almost around the clock trying to find the killer. He would try her cell phone first, and if she didn't answer, he would try again later. "Later," however, could be days later.
No, Cahill wouldn't wait that long. He was too tenacious.
But in the meantime she had to help herself. The first order of business was to convince Densmore to untie her.
She made her voice weaker than it truly was. If he wanted her sweet and helpless, she'd give him sweet and helpless, at least until she could kick his ass. "Mr. Densmore?"
"Yes, dear?"
"I . . . I'm so embarrassed to say this."
"You don't have to be embarrassed about anything. I'm here to take care of you."
"I need to use the bathroom," she whispered, and she had the benefit of that being so true she was on the verge of really embarrassing herself. Add in the fact that she was having her menstrual period, and the situation was not good.
"Dear me. That does present a problem."
"I-I think I'm paralyzed," she said, and let her voice wobble. It was better that he thought she was more incapacitated than she really was. Not that she would be able to fight or run even if she was untied, at this point, but she wanted him to think she was recovering very slowly.
"Of course you aren't," he exclaimed, his voice warm with sympathy. "I just used restraints to keep you from harming yourself. Now, let me see, how can we work this?"
She squirmed a little; her distress was becoming so acute that it was no problem to let a tear leak out of her eye. She needed to see if she could walk, or if too much of the drug he'd given her was still in her system.
"Yes, that will work, " he murmured to himself, and folded back the covers. To her immense relief she saw that she was still wearing her clothes; he'd removed her shoes, but that was all. He worked diligently, untying her

ankles and then refashioning the thin, woven nylon restraints into a sort of hobble, with an extra length attached to it and held in his hand. If she could walk at all, it would be in very short steps, and if she tried anything, all he had to do was jerk the rope in his hand and she'd fall flat on her face.
She was truly crying by the time he got all that worked out and began releasing her hands.
"I'm sorry, I know you have to be miserable," he crooned. "Just a few more minutes, and I'll help you to the bathroom."
"Please hurry," she croaked, squeezing her eyes shut.
At last he was helping her to sit up, and she saw immediately that even if she were untied, she wouldn't be able to accomplish much. Better to do nothing to arouse his suspicions this time, and wait until she was in better shape. She had to remember that he was stronger than he looked, if he'd managed to get her upstairs all by himself. Unconscious people, since they were totally limp, were a bitch to move.
She was so woozy that she could barely sit up; in fact, she couldn't, not without help, and she leaned heavily into him. It turned her stomach to touch him, but she had to concentrate on allaying his suspicions, and if that meant accepting his help, she'd grit her teeth and do it.
He got her on her feet. Her knees immediately buckled, and he was supporting her entire weight. She clung to him as he half walked, half dragged her, to the big gray marble bathroom that was part of her quarters.
All of her toiletries were set out on the vanity; since he'd unpacked for her, she hoped her personal supplies were in the vanity drawers. Yes, there was the bag she had packed everything in, sitting on a shelf; even if he'd left the tampons in the bag, she could get to them.
He eased her over to the toilet, and stood there a moment looking uncomfortable. "Er . . . do you need any help?"
She braced her hand against the wall, panting. "I think I can manage." He should feel safe leaving her in here; there was a window, but it was glass block; she couldn't see out, no one could see in, and it didn't open. Even if she could break it out, the room he'd given her was on the second floor; the first floor in this house, she'd noticed, had what appeared to be sixteen-foot ceilings, so the drop would be much higher than from the ordinary second-story window.
She'd risk it, though, if that turned out to be her only chance.

He looked around, and she could see him mentally cataloging the contents of the room to see if there was anything she could use as a weapon or to escape. He was very careful, and he didn't trust her. She leaned heavily against the wall, underscoring her weakness.
"All right," he finally said. "I'll be right outside if you need me. "
"Could you leave the door open a little?" she asked. "Please? So you can hear me in case I fall." Talk about reverse psychology, asking him to do the very thing he intended to do anyway; perhaps that would convince him she wasn't making a break for it.
He looked pleased and gave her his shy smile as he left the bathroom and pulled the door half-closed. That was all the privacy she was going to get, but at this point she didn't give a damn.
The relief was almost painful, and those damn weak tears leaked down her face again. She found the box of tampons in the bottom vanity drawer and took care of that problem, too. Feeling much better and not nearly as desperate, but still very weak, she hobbled to the sink and leaned against it while she wet a washcloth and washed her face and private areas. If he peeped, then he peeped; she didn't give a damn. She needed to freshen up more than she needed to worry about her modesty.
She drank more water, greedily gulping it down, then made her slow and wobbly way to the door. "Please," she said weakly. "Help me back to bed."
Densmore rushed to her side. "Lean on me," he said tenderly. "Poor dear."
He supported her on the trek back to the bed and helped her lie down again. She was trembling, and it wasn't a pretense; her legs felt as if they wouldn't have supported her another minute. He caressed her cheek, smoothed her hair back from her face, then began fastening the restraints around her arms and ankles. She had to bite her lip when he touched her, but she didn't protest, just lay limply, her eyes closed. Cahill did that sometimes, pushing back her hair and stroking her cheek, and she hated that Densmore had so closely mirrored the action. "I'll be right back with some food," he murmured, and left the room, closing the door behind him.
There was nothing she could do, trussed as she was, so she didn't even tug against the nylon restraints. She wouldn't put it past the bastard to have this place wired for both video and audio, and if he was watching her on camera, she didn't intend to do anything that would put him on alert.
That brief excursion had exhausted her small store of strength. She took a deep breath and let herself sink into the waiting darkness. She would use the

darkness this time, to get stronger.
"Sarah?"
The voice seemed to come from far away, but she was instantly alert, instantly aware. She lay still, letting herself appear to awake gradually.
"Sarah, wake up. I have soup."
She shifted restlessly and rolled her head to the side. "Wha-?"
"You need to eat. Wake, up, dear."
She opened her eyes as he set a tray on the bedside table. "Good, good," he said, smiling at her. "Let's see, what would be the best way to do this? I think I should feed you, don't you? I'11 put another pillow behind you to raise your head more, and here's a towel to catch any spills."
He suited actions to words, lifting her head and stuffing an extra pillow behind her head and shoulders, raising her to a more reclining position, then draping a towel over her chest and tucking it under her chin.
"This is a nice chicken soup," he said, and chuckled to himself. "Could I have made a more cliched choice? But it is very good, and hearty. You don't need red meat for a hearty soup or stew, though a lot of people seem to think so. I don't eat red meat, just chicken, turkey, and fish."
In that case, considering how he'd turned out, he should beat a path to Milo's and hope he could be saved, she thought sarcastically as he brought the spoon to her lips and she obediently opened them, like a child. Sarcasm felt good; outwardly she had to be meek, but inside she was still fierce, still herself.
The soup was good, though, and she forced herself to eat every bite. She had to concentrate on recovering as fast as possible; she would need her strength.
After she had finished the soup, she blinked drowsily at him. "Thank you," she murmured. "That was good." She yawned. "Excuse me. I'm still so sleepy."
"Of course." He patted her lips with a napkin and removed the towel from under her chin. "I'll leave you alone and let you rest, but I'll check back occasionally to see if you need anything. I have a surprise for you," he said slyly.
"A surprise?"
"It'll be waiting for you when you wake up."
That assurance wasn't conducive to sleep, and after he left, she carefully examined the ceiling and walls, looking for anything that could possibly be

a camera. Without looking closer it was impossible to tell, so she had to go on the assumption that she was being watched. She didn't overtly tug on her restraints, but she began tensing and releasing her muscles, starting in her legs and working up. She had to fight off the lingering effects of whatever drug he'd given her, and keep her circulation going and her muscles limber. If an opportunity for escape presented itself, she had to be ready to take it.

Why in hell wasn't Sarah answering her cell phone? Cahill had called her repeatedly, unwilling to stay out of touch for very long with matters so tenuous between them. Yes, they'd made love and she'd agreed to give him some time, a chance to see if they could work things out, but the temporary nature of the agreement nagged at him. He didn't want temporary; he wanted permanent.

She had gone to Densmore's house late yesterday afternoon. Okay, he could understand her not answering her cell phone while she was getting settled in, but the phone had been on and when she checked it, she would see that she'd had some calls. She should have called him back by now. Today, the phone hadn't been on; he'd been getting the "customer not in service" message.

Densmore's phone number was unlisted, but if you had the right software and search engine, that didn't matter. Cahill pulled up the information and called the estate, only to get an answering machine that answered in a computerized voice. He left a simple message: Call Detective Cahill at the Mountain Brook Police Department. It wasn't personal, and it was the type of message that people tended to deliver immediately. Still she hadn't called.

A frightened public was calling in tips and leads that led nowhere, but every one of them had to be checked out, and he literally didn't have time to eat. He was frustrated enough in his efforts to contact Sarah, though, that he made time to actually drive by the estate like a lovesick teenager, to see if he could spot her SW parked there. The wrought-iron gates were securely shut, and he couldn't see any type of vehicle.

The damn place looked like a fortress, anyway, with that high stone wall surrounding it. The wall by itself had to have cost a fortune, and from what he could see, it was wired like Fort Knox. Mr. Densmore evidently valued his privacy.

He called the estate number and left another message, this time letting his impatience show, and leaving the impression that Miss Stevens should get

in touch with the department, for her own good. That should get some response, if anyone at all was inside the house.
His phone rang a short time later and he snatched it up. "Cahill."
"Detective Cahill." It was a man's voice, kind of soft, like you'd expect a priest's to be, but full of authority, too. "This is Trevor Densmore. You've left two messages for Miss Stevens and it sounded imperative that she contact you. I'm sorry, but Miss Stevens is ill, and is unable to talk."
"Ill?" Cahill asked sharply, alarm prickling his spine. "In what way?"
"Laryngitis." Densmore chuckled. "I meant it literally that she's unable to talk. Perhaps in a few days she'll be able to call."
The son of a bitch disconnected before Cahill could say anything else. Damn it! He wanted to see her, but the estate was walled and gated; he couldn't enter without either an invitation or a search warrant, neither of which was likely to be forthcoming.
Sarah was sick? She'd told him that she almost never even caught a cold, so for her to suddenly catch some bug seemed ironic. She'd been under a lot of stress, and that played hell with the immune system, but . . . that fast? Literally the next day? Bullshit. She might be avoiding him, though.
No, that wasn't Sarah, either. Sarah didn't avoid; she faced things head-on. Even if she did have laryngitis, she'd have gotten on the phone and croaked a reply to him.
He had the feeling that guy Densmore was lying. He didn't know the man and Sarah seemed to like him, or at least appreciate his offer, but Cahill's gut said something was wrong. Why would Densmore lie? There was no reason to, which made Cahill feel even more uneasy. But it wasn't that there was no reason for lying; it was just that Cahill didn't know the reason.
Well, one way or another, if Sarah didn't get in touch with him soon, he was going to see her if he had to climb over the damn wall. He'd probably get arrested for trespassing, but at least he'd know whether or not she was okay.
When Sarah woke again, her head was still pounding, worse than it had been when she went to sleep. That awful foggy feeling was back, but this time she didn't have to wonder what was wrong. She knew; Densmore had drugged her again. Whatever it was had to have been in the soup.
But why drug her again? He had her tied, and helpless.
She lay very still, fighting the grogginess, willing herself to throw off the effects of the drug. She mustn't let this happen again.

She couldn't afford to lose any more strength by refusing to eat or drink, but she couldn't escape if she was unconscious all the time, either.
She was too cool, and she shifted uncomfortably but, with her hands tied, was unable to pull the covers up around her shoulders. She could feel air moving on her bare skin-
Her mind seized, paralyzed by the awful realization. Densmore had removed her clothes. She was naked.

Chapter 30

"SURPRISE!" HIS VOICE WAS GAY, PRACTICALLY BUBBLING with good humor. "I know you're awake, I didn't give you nearly as much this time. Stop playing possum and open those pretty eyes. "
Filled with a horror she could barely even begin to comprehend, Sarah opened her eyes and stared at him. Night pressed against the windows, telling her hours had passed, hours in which she'd been unconscious and totally at his mercy. All thoughts of placating him, of pretending to go along with him, had utterly vanished. "What have you done to me'" she asked hoarsely.
He was sitting beside her on the bed, fully clothed. He blinked at her. "Done? Why, nothing. Why do you ask?"
"My clothes-"
"Oh, that. They were dirty. My goodness, this was the second day you'd worn them, plus you slept in them. Pulling them off . . . let's just say the logistics were complicated, so I cut them off. They were ruined, anyway."
She held her horror, her gut-wrenching fear, at bay and stared down the length of her naked body. The covers were all thrown back, exposing her. But her legs were still together, still tied so she couldn't move them. She hadn't thought she would ever be grateful she was restrained in such a manner, but in this case . . .
She took several heaving breaths, fighting free of the nightmare that had begun sucking her down. "Ruined?" she managed to gasp.
He made a face, and gestured toward her groin. "You know. You really should have told me you were in the flowers. I wouldn't have allowed myself to become so excited. It was a disappointment to have to wait, but I made do."

In the flowers . . . ? He must mean because she was menstruating. If that had put him off, she had never before been so grateful for her cycle. But that also meant he had looked at her, and she wanted to weep with humiliation. She didn't, she fought off the urge, fiercely reclaiming her control. Then she looked down at herself again; she saw the wet, sticky drops on her stomach, splashed across her thighs, and she almost vomited. She forgot about control, her mind going blank and her body arching, madly fighting the restraints in her need to get his unspeakable filth off her body.
"Get it off!" she shrieked. "How dare you! How dare you!"
He actually looked bewildered. 'What's wrong? What is it?"
"You jerked off on me, you miserable bastard!" She began to sob, futilely straining to break the nylon cords. "Wash . . . it . . .off!" She screamed the last word at him.
"Don't take that tone with me, young lady," he said sharply.
"You touched me!" She was roaring in her fury, her utter outrage. "You looked at me! You had no right!"
"Stop that. Stop it right now. I understand your modesty, but surely you realize your current state has only delayed the natural progression of our relationship. I knew the moment I saw you that you were meant for me. You belong here, with me. We'll be so happy, my dear. You'll see. I'll give you anything you want; I'll treat you like a queen. Look, I've already given you this ring. The stone needs to be reset, but the color and shape are perfect for you. I knew as soon as I saw it that this stone was too good for that tacky woman. I'll take it off in just a minute because I know you're allergic to jewelry, but I wanted you to see it first. When I have it reset, I'll have the band lined with something that's hypoallergenic, so you can wear it. " He lifted her left hand as far from the mattress as he could, given the bonds around her wrists. "See. Isn't it gorgeous?"
She stared at the ring he'd slipped on her finger, at the huge yellow diamond surrounded by smaller white diamonds. She knew that ring. She had marveled at the size of the center stone every time she had seen it, on Merilyn Lankford's finger.
The bottom dropped out of her stomach in a sickening rush, as she looked into the smiling face of a killer.
Cahill checked his watch, scowling. It was getting late, almost time for the mall to close, and he was damn tired of showing these photographs to tired shoppers and shop employees. Something was nagging at him, something

he couldn't quite place. He'd been without sleep more hours than he cared to count, reminding him of certain missions he'd been on in the Army, and all he wanted was a chance to sit down somewhere quiet and think. There was something Densmore had said that bothered him, but he'd gone over the conversation again and again in his mind, and nothing had clicked. Still, it was there. He knew it-whatever "it" was.

Thursday was ticking to a close. Sarah had been at the Densmore estate only a little more than twenty-four hours-okay, closer to thirty hours, not that he was counting-but it felt as if days had passed since he'd talked to her, and the lack of contact was gnawing at him. Maybe that, rather than anything Densmore had actually said, was what bothered him. He was worried about her, he knew she was there, so he naturally associated his uneasiness with Densmore. Yeah, yeah, he knew the psychology. Too bad he didn't believe it.

He stopped a well-preserved woman, probably in her sixties, with that put-together look that shouted "money."

"Excuse me, ma'am, but we're trying to locate this man. Do you recognize him?"

He'd try calling Sarah one more time, he thought. If he didn't get to talk to her, he would present himself at the gate and demand to be let in. He could say he had a warrant for her arrest. Something.

The woman took the photograph and briefly studied it, then handed it back to Cahill. 'Why, yes, I do," she said coolly. "I believe it's my banker."

"Thank you," Cahill said automatically, biting back what he really wanted to say. Another William Teller fan. Ha-ha. He was too tired for this shit-

'Wait a minute. What did you say?"

Her eyebrows slightly lifted to suggest she was less than impressed with his attitude in particular and himself in general; she repeated, "I believe that's my banker. He has a certain distinction, a way of carrying himself. And of course there's the hair."

Cahill wasn't tired anymore. Adrenaline was surging through his system.

'What's his name?"

"Trevor Densmore. He owns-"

Cahill didn't wait to hear what Trevor Densmore owned. He was running for the exit, his heart pounding in sheer terror as he dialed Wester. He burst into the night air and sprinted across the parking lot to the city Impala he was driving.

"I've got an ID," he barked into the phone when Wester answered. "Trevor Densmore. He's a banker. He has Sarah, God damn it. He has Sarah." He unlocked the car and got in, starting the motor and putting the transmission in drive before he had the door closed. The tires squealed on the asphalt as the car rocketed across the lot toward the exit.
'What do you mean, 'he has Sarah'?" Wester snapped.
"He hired her. She went to the estate yesterday afternoon, and I haven't been able to get in touch with her since. I'm on my way over there now."
"Doc, don't you go off half-cocked, God damn it! We have to do this right. I'll get a search warrant-"
"I talked to him on the phone this afternoon," Cahill snarled. "It's the same voice that's on the Lankford tape. I knew something was wrong, something bothered me about him, but I didn't fucking put it together." When he reached Highway 31, the light was red. He turned on his lights and bulled through the intersection, turning left toward I-459. He hit the on-ramp topping sixty miles an hour.
Wester was still talking when Cahill tossed the phone aside. If he got busted, he got busted. Nothing and no one was keeping him on the outside of that gray wall.
It all made sense now, the why that had eluded them and kept all the pieces from falling into place. The killings hadn't been about business, or revenge, or money. They had been about Sarah. He remembered her calling him weeks ago, before the first killing, telling him she'd received an anonymous gift in the mail. That was the bastard's first contact, the first sign of his obsession. Cahill hadn't given it much thought since then because that had been the only contact; there hadn't been any letters or phone calls that would normally signal a stalker's escalating obsession.
But Sarah had known, had sensed something was seriously wrong. She'd been trying to lure her unknown admirer into the open. When Judge Roberts was killed, her first thought was that her so-called stalker had done it.
And she'd been right.
First he'd tried to hire her away from the Judge. When that didn't work, he eliminated the obstacle and once more offered her a job. When she went to work for the Lankfords, he moved swiftly and took them out of the picture, making her once more available. This time there wouldn't be a small rush of job offers, the way there had been before; after all, who wanted to hire someone who appeared to be the kiss of death and was under suspicion

herself for the murders? Trevor Densmore did, that's who. He wasn't worried about the murders. He had no reason to be.
All he wanted was Sarah. When the media was running wild after the Lankfords had been killed, saying Sarah had been ar- rested, Densmore had solved that little problem by immediately going out and killing someone else to prove she couldn't possibly be the killer. As soon as she was released, he made his move, and this time it had worked.
He had Sarah. Son of a bitch, he had Sarah.
There was an expression on his face, in his eyes, that made her shudder. He looked at her naked body and reached out, his hand sliding over her breast. Sarah said jerkily, "I can't wear the ring. Please take it off. It's already itching."
He stopped, lifting his hand as he blinked at her. "Of course! I'm so sorry; I merely wanted you to see it. I should have realized how sensitive your skin is." He slipped the ring off her finger and put it in his pocket. His eyes went dreamy again. "You're so perfect," he crooned, reaching out to touch her breast again, and Sarah cringed.
She had to stop him. She couldn't bear it if he kept touching her. She would rather he killed her than touch her.
Stalkers did that, when the object of their obsession didn't measure up to the fantasy they had built up in their minds. The obsession turned to rage and they struck out, destroying the person who had so painfully failed them by not adhering to the fiction.
She would drive him to that rage before she'd let him rape her. 13ut he wasn't at that stage yet; because of her menses, she had a little time. She had no idea how long she could hold him off, but she would do it as long as possible. She knew Cahill; he would be knocking on the gate before long. It might be tomorrow morning, it might be tomorrow night, but he would be there. If she couldn't escape, then all she had to do was hold out, and keep Densmore at bay.
"I don't like to be touched," she said, shrinking away from his fingers as they tweaked her nipple. She made her voice innocent and distressed, the way he seemed to like.
He did that blinking thing again, really fast several times in a row, as if he were connecting with reality. He looked confused. "But . . . it's all right when I touch you. We're supposed to be together."
"I don't like being touched," she repeated. "It hurts. It hurts my skin."

He drew back, staring at her in consternation. "Oh, dear. I hadn't realized your skin is so sensitive. That's a problem I hadn't considered. But you aren't allergic to being touched; it's more of an acute sensitivity to being touched. Am I right? I'll be very gentle, my dear, and you'll gradually become accustomed to-"
Oh, God. She clenched her teeth. "No," she said, keeping her voice soft. "I'm sorry. It's a medical condition; it won't go away."
"A medical condition?" He had been reaching out to her again, but he paused, the dreaminess in his eyes morphing into something hard and ugly. "I've never heard of such a thing."
"You're right, it's an acute sensitivity. My nerve endings are permanently inflamed. I can tolerate clothing, if it's made from certain material, but I have to take pain medication even for that-" She was babbling and she didn't care if it made sense or not, so long as he believed it enough not to touch her again. "-and anti-inflammatories. I'm out of my anti-inflammatory medication. With everything that happened I was so upset I forgot to get my prescription refilled. Every time you touch me it feels as if you're burning me with a hot iron."
"Well, my word." That seemed to have stymied him. If he'd had a firmer grip on reality, it would never have worked, but he was so caught up in his fantasy world that he couldn't concentrate on anything else. "I certainly don't want to do anything that causes you pain." He smiled at her. "Unless you need to be punished, of course. But you'll never do anything to make me angry, will you? You'll iron my newspaper and prepare my breakfast for me, just the way you did for that old goat, Lowell Roberts."
"If you like," she managed, hurting inside at the thought of the poor Judge, of the Lankfords, and that other man this lunatic had killed.
"You'll take care of me," he crooned. "And I'll take care of you." He leaned down and pressed his mouth to her forehead.
Sarah gagged, and her control broke. "Don't touch me!" she screamed.
Like lightning his hand was on her throat, pressing hard, and he bent over so his face was close to hers. He was livid with rage. "Do not ever speak to me that way again," he ground out.
He was cutting off her air. She gagged again, choking, frantically trying to think what to do. She'd pushed him too far; she had to hold him off but keep him as calm as possible until Cahill could get here. Surely he would be here

soon. She could make it to morning. "I'm . . . sorry!" she managed to gasp. "Hurts."
His face was still red as he released her throat and stood. Desperately she sucked in deep breaths, fighting the darkness that had begun to edge her vision.
"You have to learn," he hissed, dragging his belt from his pant loops. "You must be disciplined until you learn proper behavior. You . . . do . . . not . . . speak to me . . . that way."
Sarah choked back another scream and tried to roll away as the belt whistled down.
Those fucking gates had to be twelve feet high; the wall was at least ten. He thought about ramming the gates with the car, but that would set off an alarm and warn the bastard he was coming. Cahill pulled the car as close to the wall as he could get it, then climbed on top of it. Standing on the roof of the car, he jumped and caught the top of the wall.
Pain seared his hands. The top of the wall was embedded with glass, or barbed wire. Something. He dropped back, took off his jacket, and tossed it so it draped over the wall. He jumped again, hoping the jacket would snag and stay in place instead of sliding to the ground. It did. He braced his bleeding hands on the jacket and hoisted himself the rest of the way up and over, landing on the grass and rolling. He came to his feet with coiled balance, and took his pistol from its holster. Then he set out across the wide expanse of lawn, toward the gray stone mansion that loomed in the night like a hulking beast.
A shrill beeping split the air. Densmore halted the belt in mid-swing, his head coming up. "I do believe we have company," he said mildly. "I wonder who it could possibly be. Excuse me, my dear."
Sarah choked, sobbing, as the door closed behind him. He'd wielded the belt with savage fury, raising bloody, stinging welts all along her back and sides. She'd managed to roll over, to protect her breasts and belly, but not before he'd hit her across the stomach at least twice. She was crying so hard she couldn't catch her breath, but as soon as the door closed she flipped onto her back.
One of the restraints holding her hands had come loose. She would never have been able to roll over if it hadn't, but her panicked lunge had pulled it free from the bed frame where he'd secured it. In his rage, Densmore hadn't noticed.

Her right hand was free, but the way the restraints were looped and crossed to restrict movement, she needed to reach under the bed to free her left hand-and with her legs bound she didn't have enough range of movement to do so. Ignoring the searing pain in her back, she jerked frantically against the nylon cord, hoping the one around her left hand would give, too.
It didn't.
There was a glass of water sitting on the bedside table. She grabbed the glass and slammed it against the edge of the table. Water splashed the bed, her bare flesh, and the fine crystal shattered, sending shards of glass flying. She was left clutching most of the base of the glass, her hand bleeding from a dozen tiny cuts. Frantically she began slicing at the nylon cords, not caring if she sliced skin, too. Her left hand jerked free, and she turned her attention to the cords binding her ankles.
When she was free, she bounded to her feet; her knees promptly gave way and she sprawled on the carpet. Cursing, sobbing, she stood again, and staggered toward the door. By the time she reached the hall, she was running.
That's when the first shot was fired. Then another.
Cahill.
Cahill was beyond caring about his job, about his own possible stay behind bars; by the time he reached the house, his only thought was of getting to Sarah. He didn't politely ring the doorbell, he put two forty-caliber bullets in the dead-bolt lock, then kicked the door open. He went in low, rolling across the floor, but the bastard was waiting for him, hidden in the darkness of the hallway.
The first shot barely missed Cahill's head. He fired at the muzzle flash, then the second shot caught him high on the chest, with a kick like a mule. He was wearing his body armor, but the impact knocked his breath out and he sprawled across the floor, unconscious.
"Cahill," she whispered, standing at the top of the stairs and staring down at the wide expanse of the foyer, and Cahill's body lying limp and unmoving on the granite floor.
She went numb. This wasn't happening. Not Cahill. The bastard couldn't have taken Cahill from her, too.
She swayed, reaching out, and half stumbled against a gray metal floor lamp standing sentry beside a black enameled table.
Not Cahill.

The rage was a red tidal wave, rising in one massive surge and seizing her in its grip. She wasn't aware of pulling the floor lamp free from the plug. She wasn't aware of moving. She went down the stairs with a steady, purposeful stride, gaining speed as she went.
"Densmore. " That wasn't her voice. It sounded like something from The Exorcist, deep and raw. She reached the bottom of the stairs. "You bastard, where are you ?"
There was movement to her right, in the shadows. She swung in that direction and saw Densmore materializing from the darkness into the dim light, like a phantom, a demon. His face was twisted with fury. "I told you not to speak to me that way," he hissed, his hand rising.
She didn't care. The rage suffusing her made the heavy floor lamp feel like nothing in her hands as she stepped forward, into the pistol, into the bullet, swinging the lamp like a baseball bat. If Cahill was dead, she simply didn't care anymore what happened. The explosion of the shot was deafening in the cavernous foyer, a blast of hot wind along her left side just as she slammed the base of the floor lamp into Densmore's skull. He crashed backward into the wall, a fine spray of blood flying from his head, his chest, and she swung the lamp again, and again, screaming wordlessly.
"Sarah! Sarah!"
The bellow finally pierced her consciousness. The lamp was suddenly too heavy to hold, and dropped from her nerveless fingers. Slowly, numbly, she turned as Cahill struggled to stand. He was holding a hand to his chest and wheezing, but she didn't see any blood.
"Easy, sweetheart," he said. "The son of a bitch can't die more than once."
E P I L 0 G U E
CAHILL SLUNG HIS JACKET OVER HIS SHOULDER AS HE entered the house. He was in a good mood; the review board had ruled the shooting a righteous one, and he was no longer on administrative leave. He'd missed doing his job, though for the first week he'd been glad enough to take it easy; even through body armor, a slug gave the body a beating and left a hell of a bruise. At first he thought it had cracked a couple of ribs, too, but they were just bruised-as if there were any 'just" to it. He'd felt as if the mule had not only kicked him, it had then turned around and stomped on him.
He and Sarah had recuperated together. He was fine, and Sarah's mother had called to let her know that her father had indeed had a bad case of

heartburn, so she didn't have that to worry about. And physically Sarah was fine. She'd been living with him since they were released from the hospital early the next morning, after he'd been x-rayed and poked, and the cuts on his hands sutured. His wounds were simple in nature. Sarah though-
On the surface, she wasn't badly hurt. Some cuts on her hand, one requiring four stitches, but the others had been minor. The welts that striped her smooth skin and left raw, bleeding patches had been treated the way you'd treat a skinned knee, with cleaning and an antibiotic ointment over the worst patches. No matter how long he lived, he'd never forget the sight of her coming down those stairs, steady and unstoppable, naked and so covered with blood his heartbeat had faltered, but her eyes had glittered like black fire in her white face. She'd been carrying that heavy floor lamp in one hand, roaring for Densmore, and when the bastard started to shoot her, she hadn't paused, just waded in with that lamp like she was DiMaggio going for the long one. Cahill, struggling for breath, still woozy, was amazed he'd been able to make the shot. He'd barely missed Sarah, and the bullet had exploded Densmore's heart. Densmore had been dead before the lamp ever hit his skull, not that a little thing like that had stopped Sarah.
By the time Cahill could get to her, he could hear sirens as squad cars converged on the house. He'd have to open the gates for them, he thought, but right now he needed to take care of Sarah. He'd taken off his shirt and put it on her, and she'd just stood there staring down at Densmore and the hole in his chest. She'd turned then, her expression already growing remote as she said, "Damn you, Cahill; I wanted to kill him."
He'd wanted to hold her, but there wasn't any way he could put his arms around her without causing her pain. Instead he'd held her left hand, the one that wasn't cut, getting blood all over her from his own cuts. He'd moved the lamp aside, and been astonished at its weight. Most people would have needed two hands to lift it, much less swing it.
After he opened the gates, he and Sarah were carted off to the hospital, and since then he'd been on administrative leave, so he hadn't been involved in any of the investigation or mop-up. The other guys, though, had kept him informed.
Densmore had planned that Sarah wouldn't ever leave that room. They'd found tiny cameras everywhere, even in the bathroom. She'd have had no privacy at all. The room, like the house, was a fortress. Its windows were unbreakable, and didn't open. The door had been reinforced steel. The only

reason Sarah had been able to escape that night was that, in his hurry to see about the intruder, Densmore had left the door unlocked.

Who knew what made a sick bastard like that tick? Everyone who knew him said he seemed like such a nice man-yeah, they always were-on the quiet side, a little shy, but a shark when it came to business. He did tend to become obsessed with little things, though, and could turn nasty if everything wasn't done to his satisfaction. According to his secretary, he'd gotten more obsessive over the years, to the point that she had to have her chair sitting in one precise spot or he went into a rant.

His personal papers had been more revealing. Evidently sweet, shy Trevor Densmore had killed his own father over a business disagreement. Why he'd document a thing like that was anyone's guess, since if he hadn't already been dead, it would have been one more nail in his coffin-Alabama was a death penalty state, and this would have been a death penalty case-but the department psychologist read the papers and said the contents were an almost perfect example of how the mind of an egomaniac worked. Trevor Densmore thought he was smarter than everyone else, better than everyone else, and deserved only the best. That was it in a simplistic nutshell: Densmore thought he should have whatever he wanted, and he had no internal brakes when it came to getting it. If there was an obstacle, he either moved it, or he destroyed it.

Evidently, when he'd seen Sarah on television, he'd developed an instant obsession with her-Cahill could kind of understand that, given his own feelings about her-and had set out to obtain her. When she refused his first offer out of loyalty to the Judge, he'd removed that obstacle by killing Judge Roberts. But she still hadn't accepted his offer; she'd gone to work for the Lankfords, which had enraged him because he thought the Lankfords were so far beneath him. Killing people meant no more to him than stepping on a bug; they were unimportant, nothing. What mattered was getting what he wanted.

Cahill wished he could kill the son of a bitch again. What he'd done to Sarah . . .

She'd been withdrawn since then, and he couldn't reach her, even though it had been over three weeks; the bruises and welts had faded and healed, the sutures had been removed, and they'd lived together under the same roof the entire time, but he couldn't reach her. She'd retreated to someplace inside herself where he couldn't go, and it was driving him crazy.

When he'd first seen her, naked and bloody, he'd taken a second kick to the chest, thinking Densmore had raped her. He'd asked her if that was so, before the first patrolman came in with weapon drawn, and she'd shaken her head. But the assault she'd suffered had bruised her inside, in her mind, and that hadn't healed.
It wasn't just the brutality of the beating, or coming face-to-face with death; it was everything, the accumulation of shock and grief and horror. She'd been helpless, in the control of a madman, and she couldn't forget it or get past it.
They hadn't slept together since then; she slept in one of the other bedrooms. At first he hadn't minded. They'd both been sore and wounded, and she hadn't been able to bear the slightest touch for several days. But now after three weeks, he definitely minded. He wanted her, he needed her, and he wanted to put their lives back together. Sarah had simply ignored everything he said.
"Sarah?" he called now, wanting to tell her the news about the inquest. There was no answer, but the door to the basement stood open. He went down the stairs; the solid thunk of fists hitting the punching bag telling him she was working out some major hostility.
She was wearing gray sweatpants and a black sports bra, and she'd evidently been beating the hell out of the punching bag for quite a while, because her shoulders gleamed with sweat and the waistband of the sweatpants was dark. The expression on her face was grimly intent.
He leaned against the wall and watched her. There was still some pink discoloration showing the location of the newly healed stripes, but in a few months they would be completely gone. She'd lost some weight, a few pounds, making her sleek muscles a little more pronounced. She looked lean and fit, kind of like Linda Hamilton in T2, and he felt a serious hard-on growing.
She glanced over at him. "How did it go?"
"I'm off administrative leave. They ruled it a righteous shooting. I go back to work tomorrow."
"Good." She threw a flurry of punches that impressed him with their fury. He was glad she was taking it out on the punching bag and not on him.
He took a chance and said, "What about you?"
'When am I going back to work, do you mean?"
``Yeah."

"I don't know that I will, at least not for a while. And I don't know if I can find a position in this area again; I sort of have a bad rep with employers right now."
"Are you going to look for a job somewhere else?" he asked, as casually as possible, though his lungs felt as if they were decompressing.
"That depends."
"On what?"
She stopped punching the bag and mopped off her face and arms with a towel. "He took something from me," she said quietly. "He didn't have to rape me to do his damage. Every time I think of sex, I think of being helpless, and hating, and being so disgusted and repulsed I can barely breathe. I think of all the time I've put into my training, and when it came down to crunch time, it was totally useless. I was helpless against him. "
"Not quite," he said. "You bashed his head in."
"That doesn't count. He was already dead." She gave him a feral smile. "But it felt good anyway."
"It damn sure did." He hadn't said it out loud before, but the thought was there. "I enjoyed killing him."
The look in her eyes said she understood, and envied him the privilege.
"So where does this leave us?" he asked. With everything that had happened, that was still the most important question.
She walked up to him with a prowling, dangerous, totally feminine rhythm that set his heart to racing. "That depends."
He felt like a broken record. "On what?" She was close enough now that he could smell her, sweaty and hot and all female. He was so hard he was hurting.
She slid her hands around his waist, and he felt the tug as she pulled his handcuffs free. "On you," she said, and for the first time in three weeks, she smiled. "Let's see if we still fit."
He lay on the exercise mat, his arms stretched over his head and handcuffed to a pipe. He was naked, and sweating, and so desperate he was begging. The woman was killing him.
She was in no hurry. She sat astride him, but she wasn't riding him. She had tucked him in, slid down to the hilt, then just sat there. At first he wondered what she was doing, and then he'd known; he'd felt her internal muscles clenching him, releasing, clenching, milking him while she sat virtually

motionless. The sensation had been electric, and maddening, taking him to the edge of orgasm without pushing him over.
She'd already come twice. The first time had seemed to take her by surprise as she convulsed around him, but she'd determinedly chased the second one. By then he'd been begging, dying to thrust, but every time his hips moved she stopped.
God, she was something. Just looking at her made his heart feel like bursting. She was magnificent, naked and totally given over to what she was doing, her head thrown back and her eyes half-closed, her nipples red and tight. Surely by now she had all the bad memories replaced with good ones, but if she hadn't, Lord, he'd die happy.
She leaned over and kissed him, her mouth hot, her tongue promising wild things. 'We still fit," she murmured.
"I never doubted it," he managed to say, but the words ended in a groan.
"I did, but I couldn't let him win. You're too important to me, Cahill. I had to make certain I could push him away."
"Did you? Is he gone?"
She rotated her hips. "Oh, yeah."
"Then for God's sake," he whimpered, "put me out of my misery."
To his everlasting relief, she did. When he could think and hear and speak again, she was lying propped on her elbow beside him, leisurely stroking his chest.
"I love you, Cahill," she said seriously.
"I love you, too, and don't you think it's about time you started calling me Tom?"
"I'll think about it. Maybe on our fifth anniversary."
Now, that sounded good. 'When's our first one going to be?" he asked as casually as possible.
"Hmm, let me see. What do you think about July of next year?"
Since they were now in the last week of May, it sounded fine.
She stretched above him, unlocking the cuffs; as soon as he was free, he rolled, tucking her beneath him. She tensed for just a moment, then relaxed beneath his weight, her hands sliding up his back. "I thought he'd killed you," she whispered fiercely, burying her face in his shoulder. "I hate him for what he's done to our lives, for the damage he did to so many lives."
"He wins only if we let him, sweetheart." He kissed her, slowly, lingering. "Did you mean it, or was I reading more into your answer than I should?

Are you going to marry me?"
"Oh, yeah," she said, grinning. "At least he clarified that issue for me. When I thought you were dead, I knew that nothing was more important than loving you: not traveling the world, not even if he shot me, too. I got over being mad at you in a hurry."
"I'm not going to make a practice of getting shot every time you get mad at me," he muttered.
"You won't have to, sweetheart." She kissed his shoulder and snuggled against him. "You won't have to.

Cry No More (2003)

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To my friends Beverly Barton, who has smashed her share of dishes, and Linda Jones, both of whom cried when I told them what this story is about.
To Kate Collins, my editor, and the Ballantine production team, for work above and beyond the call of duty. You guys are great.
To Robin Rue, my agent, who sniffled along with me. *Do you realize we've been together almost twenty years???* Some marriages don't last that long.
And to William Gage Wiemann, who's supposed to make his appearance on January 5, 2004. I'm betting he'll arrive on the eighth.

1

Mexico, 1993

Milla had fallen asleep while the baby was nursing. David Boone stood over his wife and child and watched them, aware of the silly grin on his face, of the fullness in his chest. His wife. His child.

God, his world.

The old fascination, the obsession, with medicine remained, but it was tempered now by something equally as fascinating. He'd never suspected that the process of pregnancy and childbirth, of the rapid development of the infant, could be so engrossing. He'd chosen the field of surgery because of the sheer challenge of it; obstetrics, in comparison, had seemed kind of like watching grass grow. Well, sometimes things went wrong and the obstetrician had to be on top of things, but for the most part babies grew and were born, and that was that.

He'd thought that until it came to his own child. Clinically, he'd known every detail of fetal growth, but he hadn't been prepared for the sheer emotion of watching Milla round out, of feeling the small kicks and flutters of the baby grow into stronger, more demanding ones. And if the sheer emotionalism had blindsided him, how had Milla felt? Sometimes, even during the physical misery of the last month of pregnancy, he'd caught an expression on her face, a rapt, absorbed look as she unconsciously stroked her belly, that told him she was lost in a world inhabited only by herself and the baby.

And then Justin had arrived, squalling and healthy, and David had felt light-headed with relief and euphoria. In the six weeks since, each day seemed to bring some small change as the infant grew; the dark fuzz on his head had become blond, his eyes were more blue and alert. He was noticing things, recognizing voices, waving his arms and legs in a jerky, uncoordinated rhythm as his little muscles grew in strength. He loved his bath. He had an angry cry, a hungry cry, an uncomfortable cry, and a cranky cry. Milla had been able to tell the difference within days.

The changes in his wife were fascinating, too. Milla had always had a way of holding herself apart from the world, as if she were more an observer than a participant. She'd been a challenge from the moment he'd first seen her, but he had stubbornly courted her until she couldn't help but notice him as a person rather than a moving part of the scenery. He could remember perfectly the exact moment when he'd won: they had been at a New Year's Eve party and in the middle of all the laughter and drinking and general

silliness, Milla had looked at him and blinked, a faintly startled expression crossing her face as if he had suddenly come into focus. That was it; no hot kiss, no heartfelt exchanges in the night, just a sudden clarity in her gaze as she finally, truly *saw* him. Then she smiled and took his hand, and with that simple touch they were linked.

Amazing.

Okay, it was also amazing that he'd surfaced from his studies and work long enough to notice her at one of the deadly dull staff parties his professor parents often hosted, but once he had, he couldn't get her face out of his mind. She wasn't beautiful; maybe she barely qualified as pretty. But there was something about her, in the strong, clean lines of her face and the way she walked, an almost gliding stride that made him think maybe her feet didn't quite touch the ground, that had kept consciousness of her nagging at him like a persistent mosquito.

Learning about her had fascinated him. He liked knowing that her favorite color was green, that she didn't want pepperoni on her pizza, that she enjoyed action movies and, thank God, yawned at the idea of chick flicks, which was surprising because she was so essentially feminine. As she explained it, she already knew about woman stuff, so why would she want to watch more of the same? Trivial stuff, mostly. He was beguiled by her serenity; if she had a temper, he'd never seen it. She was the most evenly balanced person he'd ever met, and even after two years of marriage he still couldn't quite believe his luck.

She yawned and stretched, the move popping her nipple out of the baby's slack mouth, who grunted and made a few sucking motions, then was still. Fascinated, David reached out and stroked one gentle finger over the plump mound of her bare breast. He admitted it; he was delighted with the new size of her breasts. Prepregnancy, Milla's shape had been lean, like a long-distance runner's. Now she was rounder, softer, and the postbirth moratorium on sex was driving him crazy. He couldn't wait until tomorrow, when she had her six-week checkup from Susanna Kosper, the team's ob-gyn. Actually, because of a couple of emergencies that played havoc with Susanna's schedule, it was almost seven weeks now, and he was close to howling at the moon. Jerking off relieved the tension, but was a long way from being as satisfying as making love to his wife.

She opened her eyes and drowsily smiled at him. "Hey, Doogie," she murmured. "Thinking about tomorrow night?"

He laughed, both at the nickname and how she'd read his mind—not that reading his mind was any great feat. He'd had little else besides sex on the brain for two months now. "Nothing else."
"Maybe Doogie Jr. will sleep all night." She stroked a gentle hand over the baby's fuzzy head, and he responded by making more sucking motions with his mouth. Simultaneously both adults said, "I doubt it," and David laughed again. Justin had a voracious appetite; he wanted feeding at least every two hours. Milla had been concerned that her breast milk wasn't rich enough, or that she didn't have enough, but Justin was clearly thriving and Susanna said there was nothing to worry about, the baby was just a pig.
Milla yawned again, and, concerned, David touched her cheek. "Just because Susanna will give you the all-clear tomorrow doesn't mean we *have* to make love. If you're too tired, we can wait." Susanna had made damn certain he understood how exhausted a new mother was, especially if she was breast-feeding.
Interrupted in mid-yawn, Milla glared at him. "Oh, yes, we do," she said fiercely. "If you think I'm going to wait another minute—Justin will be lucky if I don't leave him with Susanna while I hunt you down at the clinic."
"Gonna hold a scalpel on me and make me strip?" he asked, grinning.
"It's a thought." She caught his hand and pulled it to her breast again, rubbing her nipple against his fingers. "It's been over six weeks. We don't have to wait for Susanna's official okay."
He wanted to go with that idea. It had, in fact, occurred to him before, but he hadn't wanted Milla to think that all he cared about was sex. He was relieved she had brought up the idea first, and temptation gnawed at him. He glanced at his wristwatch and the time made him groan. "I have to be at the clinic in ten minutes." Already people would be lining up outside the clinic doors, prepared to patiently wait for hours to see a doctor. He was the team surgeon, and in fact had a surgery scheduled in half an hour. He barely had enough time to get to the clinic, change, and get scrubbed. Not that he'd need more than ten seconds to climax, the way he felt, but Milla definitely needed more time than that.
"Tonight, then," Milla said, turning on her side and smiling at him. "I'll keep Justin awake as much as possible so he'll sleep."
"Good plan." He stood and reached for his keys. "What are you doing today?"

“Nothing much. I’m going to the market this morning before it gets so hot.”
“Get some oranges.” He’d been on an orange kick lately, as if his body craved the vitamin C. He’d been spending long hours in surgery, so maybe he did. He leaned down and kissed Milla, then brushed his lips against Justin’s satiny cheek. “Take good care of Mommy,” he told his sleeping son, and hurried out the door.

Milla stayed in bed a few more minutes, luxuriating in the peace and quiet. Right this moment, no one was wanting anything of her. She had thought she was prepared to care for a baby, but somehow she hadn’t realized the work would be practically nonstop. When Justin wasn’t needing to be fed or changed, she was rushing around trying to keep up with all the other chores, and she was so tired that every step was like slogging through water. She hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in what felt like months. No, it *had* been months; about four of them, since the growing baby had gotten large enough to press on her bladder and she’d had to pee practically every half hour. She had carried him low, which Susanna said made it easier to breathe, but the trade-off was peeing a lot. Being a mother was anything but glamorous; rewarding, but definitely not glamorous.

She knew she was beaming as she examined her sleeping son. He was so gorgeous; everyone said so, exclaiming at his blond hair and blue eyes and the sweetness of his mouth. He looked like the Gerber baby, that idealized, big-eyed infant whose image graced millions of baby-care items. Milla was entranced by everything about him, from the tiny fingernails to the dimples that were forming as he gained weight. She could just sit and watch him all day long . . . if she didn’t have so much else to do.

Immediately her mind switched into work mode as she remembered everything that needed to be done today, such as laundry, cleaning, cooking, and, whenever she had a spare moment to sit down, catching up on the clinic’s paperwork. And sometime today she needed to take care of girly things like washing her hair and shaving her legs, because she had a hot date with her husband tonight. She would never get tired of being a mother, but she was definitely ready to be something else, too, like a sexually desirable woman. She missed sex; David made love with the same total concentration he gave to everything else that interested him, which was very nice when one was the recipient of said concentration. Actually, it was better than nice. It was pretty damn wonderful.

First, though, she would go to the market, before the day got too hot.

Only two more months here, she thought. She would miss Mexico: the people, the sunshine, the slowness of time. The year David and his colleagues had donated to the free-care clinic was almost over; then it would be back to the rat race of practicing medicine in the States. Not that she wouldn't be glad to be home, back with family and friends and such niceties as an air-conditioned supermarket. She wanted to do things like take Justin for walks in the park or visit with her mom during the day. She had missed her mother a lot during the long months of her pregnancy, and sporadic phone calls plus one quick visit home just hadn't filled the need. She had almost decided not to come to Mexico with David; she found out she was pregnant just before they were scheduled to leave. But she hadn't wanted to spend such a long time away from him, especially while she was carrying their first child. After meeting Susanna, the ob-gyn part of the medical team, she had decided to stick to their original plan. Her mother had been horrified—her grandchild would be born in another country!—but the pregnancy had gone by the book, without any medical problems arising. Justin had arrived almost on time, just two days past her due date, and since then Milla had felt as if she existed in a fog composed of equal parts love and fatigue.

This was so completely opposite to how she had imagined her life would be that she couldn't help but feel amused. Armed with her grand liberal arts degree, she had planned to change the world, one person at a time. She was going to be the kind of teacher people remembered when they themselves were grandparents, the kind of teacher who made a real difference in her students' lives. She was comfortable in academia, even the highly political side of it; she had planned to continue her education until she received her doctorate, then teach at a university. Marriage—yes, after a while. Maybe when she was thirty or thirty-five. Children—maybe.

Instead she had met David, a wunderkind of medicine. He was the son of her history professor, and when she became the professor's student assistant, she learned all about him. David's IQ was way above genius level; he'd finished high school at fourteen, college at seventeen, blew through medical school, and was already a practicing surgeon at the age of twenty-five when she met him. She'd expected him to be either an arrogant know-it-all—with some justification—or a total egghead.

He was neither. Instead he was a good-looking young man whose face was often lined with exhaustion from long hours in surgery and augmented by a

bottomless need for more knowledge that kept him poring over medical books long after he should have been asleep. His smile was sweet and sexy, his blue eyes full of good humor, his blond hair usually shaggy and disordered. He was tall, which she liked, since she was five-seven and liked to wear high heels. Actually, she liked everything about him, and when he asked her out she hadn't hesitated at all.

Still, she'd been surprised, at a New Year's Eve party, to catch him staring at her with dark, potent desire in his eyes. Realization had hit her like a blow to the stomach, as if Joshua had blown his horn and all the walls had come tumbling down. David loved her, and she loved him. It was that simple.

She had become his wife at twenty-one, as soon as she got her degree, and now at twenty-three she was a mother. She didn't regret a minute of it. She still planned to teach, when they returned to the States, and she still planned to further her education, but she wouldn't undo a single decision that had led to the small miracle that was her son. From the moment she'd realized she was pregnant, she'd been consumed by the process, and so in love with the baby that she felt as if she were lit from the inside with a powerful, incandescent glow. That feeling was even stronger now, to the point that she felt the tug between her and Justin even if he was just in the next room sleeping. No matter how tired she was, she reveled in that connection.

She got out of bed and carefully placed the pillows around the baby, even though he couldn't yet roll over. He didn't move while she quickly washed, dragged a brush through her short, curly hair, and then dressed in one of the loose sundresses she had brought specifically to wear after giving birth. She was still fifteen pounds heavier than she'd been before getting pregnant, but the extra weight didn't bother her . . . much. She kind of liked the motherly softness, and David certainly liked the way her breasts had expanded from a B cup to a D.

She thought of the coming night and shivered with anticipation. A week ago David had brought home a box of condoms from the clinic, and the mere presence of the box had made them both a little crazy. They had used condoms for a short while when they first became lovers; then she had been on birth control pills until they had decided to have a baby. Having to use the condoms again made her feel as if it were the first time all over again, when they were in a frenzy to have each other and everything was so new and intense and scary.

Justin began squirming a little, his mouth pursing as if searching for her breast. His blue eyes opened, his tiny fists began waving, and he made the grunting sound that preceded his “I’m wet, change me,” cry. Pulled from a daydream about making love with his daddy, Milla got a clean diaper and bent over him, cooing as she changed him. He managed to focus his gaze on her face, and he stared at her as if nothing else existed in his universe, his mouth open with delight, his arms and legs pumping.

“There’s mommy’s baby,” she crooned as she lifted him. As soon as she settled him in the crook of her arm, he began rooting at her breast. “Make that ‘mommy’s pig,’” she amended, sitting down and unbuttoning the front of her dress. Her breasts tingled in response, and she sighed with pure pleasure as the baby latched onto her nipple and began sucking. Gently she rocked back and forth, playing with his fingers and toes as he nursed. Her eyes closed dreamily, and she hummed a lullaby, drifting in the moment. She could do without the dirty diapers and loss of sleep, but she loved this part of being a mother. When she held him like this, nothing else mattered.

He finished nursing, and she put him down again while she grabbed a quick bite of breakfast. After brushing her teeth, she draped a blue denim sling over her head and put the baby in it. He settled down with his head resting where he could hear her heartbeat, his blue eyes already drooping shut as he dozed. Grabbing a hat and a basket, with money in her pocket, she set out for the market.

The walk was only about half a mile. The bright morning sun promised to deliver scorching heat by midday, but for now the air was cool and dry, and the small open-air village market was busy with early shoppers. There were oranges and brightly colored peppers, bananas and melons, yellow onions on strings. Milla browsed, occasionally chatting with some of the village women as they stopped to admire the baby, taking her time in picking out the produce she wanted.

Justin was curled in the ball shape of the very young, his legs still automatically drawing up into his prebirth position. She held her hat so it shielded him from the sun. A soft, pleasant breeze played in her short, light brown curls and lifted the baby’s wispy blond fuzz. He stirred, his rosebud mouth making sucking motions. Milla set down her basket and patted his tiny back, and he lapsed back into sleep.

She stopped at a display of fruit and began carrying on an animated, if fractured, conversation with the old woman behind the stacks of oranges

and melons. Her understanding was better than her speech, but she managed to make herself understood. She used her free hand to point to the oranges she wanted.

She didn't see them coming. Suddenly two men were bracketing her, their body heat and odor assailing her. Instinctively she started to step back, only to find herself blocked by their bodies closing in on her. The one on the right pulled a knife from the sheath at his waist and grasped the straps of the sling, hastily slicing through them before Milla could do more than give a startled cry. Time seemed to stutter, giving her freeze-frame impressions of the next few seconds. The old woman fell back, her expression alarmed. Milla felt the sling that held Justin to her begin to drop, and in panic she grabbed for her baby. The man on her left snatched the baby from her with one hand, and shoved at her with the other.

Somehow she kept her balance, terror twisting in her chest as she leapt at the man, screaming, fighting to wrest her baby from him. Her clawing nails scratched down his face, leaving bloody furrows, and he reeled back from the assault.

The baby, startled awake, was wailing. The milling crowd scattered, alarmed by the sudden violence. "Help!" she shrieked over and over as she tried to grab Justin, but everyone seemed to be running away from her rather than to her. The man tried to shove her away again, his hand on her face. Milla bit him, sinking her teeth into his hand and grinding down until she felt blood in her mouth and he was yelling in pain. She clawed for his eyes, her nails sinking into spongy softness. His yells turned into shocked bellows, and his grip on Justin loosened. Desperately she grabbed at the baby, managing to catch one tiny, flailing arm, and for one heart-bursting moment she thought she had him. Then she felt the other man moving in close behind her, and a searing, paralyzing pain shot through her back.

Her body convulsed and she dropped like a rock to the ground, her fingers scrabbling helplessly in the grit. With the baby clutched like a football under one assailant's arm, the two men raced away, one holding a bloody hand over his face and screaming curses as he fled. Milla lay sprawled in the dirt as she tried to fight through the agony that gripped her body, fight for breath to scream. Her lungs pumped wildly but didn't seem to be dragging in any air. She tried to get up; her body didn't respond. A black veil began closing over her vision, and she managed to whimper, over and over, "My baby! My baby! Someone get my baby!"

No one did.

David had already repaired a hernia and was washing up while Rip Kosper, Susanna's husband and the team anesthesiologist, did a final check of the patient's blood pressure and heart rate to make sure he was okay before turning him over to Anneli Lansky, the nurse, for monitoring. They had a good group working here; he'd miss them when the year was up and they all returned to regular practice in the States. He wouldn't miss the cramped, one-story concrete-block clinic, with its cracked tile floors and barely adequate equipment, but he'd definitely miss the group as well as his patients—and he'd miss Mexico itself.

He was thinking about the next case, a gallbladder, when he heard a commotion in the hallway just outside the door. There was shouting and cursing, some scuffling sounds, and high-pitched wails. He dried his hands and started for the door just as Juana Mendoza, another nurse, began yelling for him.

He hit the door, already running, and skidded to a halt in the hallway before he rammed into a knot of people that included Juana, Susanna Kosper, and two men and a woman who were clumsily carrying another woman. The crush of bodies hid the wounded woman's face, but David could see that her dress was drenched with blood and he immediately switched into emergency mode. "What happened?" he asked as he kicked a box out of the way and dragged over a gurney.

"David." Susanna's voice was tight and sharp. "It's Milla."

For a moment the words didn't make sense and he looked around, expecting to see his wife behind him. Then Susanna's meaning kicked in and he saw the wounded woman's unconscious, paper-white face, saw the froth of soft brown curls around her face, and everything tilted out of kilter. Milla? This couldn't be Milla. She was at home with Justin, safe and sound. This woman who looked as if she'd bled out just resembled his wife, that was all. It wasn't really Milla.

"David!" This time Susanna's tone was even sharper. "Snap out of it! Help us get her on the gurney."

Only his training enabled him to function, to step in and lift the woman who looked like Milla onto the gurney. Her dress was bloody, her arms and hands were bloody, her legs and feet and even her shoes were bloody. No—just one shoe, a sandal that looked just like a pair Milla often wore. He saw

the pink nail polish on her toenails, and the delicate gold chain around her right ankle, and he felt as if all his insides caved in.
“What happened?” he asked, his voice hoarse and faraway and not his own, even as his body moved into action and they rapidly wheeled Milla into the surgical bay he had just left.
“Knife wound to the lower back,” Juana said, listening to the babble of voices around them before they closed the door and shut out most of the noise. “Two men attacked her at the market.” She caught a shuddering breath. “They took Justin. Milla fought them, and one of the men stabbed her.”
Rip, alerted by the hubbub, burst back into the room. “My God,” he blurted when he saw Milla; then he fell silent and began readying his equipment.
Justin! David reeled from the second shock, and he half turned toward the door. Two bastards had stolen his son! He actually took a step away from the gurney, toward the door, to race out and search for his baby. Then he hesitated, and looked back at his wife.
They hadn’t had time to clean the operating room, or restock the supplies on the trays. Anneli ran in and began grabbing what they’d need. Juana wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Milla’s limp arm and swiftly pumped it up, while Susanna used the shears to cut away Milla’s clothing. “Blood type O positive,” Susanna was saying. How did she know? Oh, yeah, she’d typed Milla’s blood before Justin’s delivery.
“Sixty over forty,” Juana reported. Moving so fast her actions were a blur, she started an IV line in Milla’s arm and hooked up a bag of blood plasma.
He was losing her, David thought. Milla would die right in front of him, unless he snapped out of his shock and acted. From the position of the wound, the knife had probably hit her left kidney, and God knows what other damage had been done. She was bleeding out; she had only a few minutes left before her internal organs began shutting down—
He pushed everything else out of his mind, and shoved his hands into the fresh pair of gloves Anneli held out for him. He didn’t have time to scrub up; he didn’t have time to search for Justin; all he had time to do was reach for the scalpel that was promptly slapped into his palm and call on every ounce of skill he had. He prayed, he cursed, and he fought time as he cut into his wife’s body. As he’d suspected, the knife blade had hit her left kidney. Hit it, hell; it had all but sliced the organ in half. There was no

saving the kidney, and if he didn't get it out and the blood vessels tied off in record time, there would be no saving Milla, either.
It was a race, savage and merciless. If he made one misstep, if he hesitated, if anything was dropped or even fumbled, then he lost, and Milla lost. It wasn't surgery as he was accustomed to doing it; it was battlefield surgery, fast and brutal, with her life hanging on every split-second decision and action. While they poured all of their available blood into her, he fought to keep it from pouring out of her just as fast as it went in. Moment by moment he stemmed the bleeding, searched out every severed vessel, and slowly he began to win the race. He didn't know how long it took; he never asked, never found out. *How long* didn't matter. All that mattered was winning, because the alternative was more than he could bear.

2

Ten years later
Chihuahua, Mexico

Paige Sisk leaned against her fiancé, Colton Rawls, her eyes drifting shut as she took a big hit of weed and passed the joint to Colton. Oh, man, all those dweebs who had gone on and on about the bad things that could happen to her in Mexico were so totally wrong. Mexico was the best. I mean, she wasn't an idiot, she knew better than to score weed in front of some Mexican cop, though she'd heard all you had to do was flash them some green and the problem went away. Like she wanted to waste her money on bribes.
They had been here four days already. Colton thought Chihuahua was the coolest. He had some serious thing going about Pancho Villa; until they got here she thought it was, like, some house where ponchos were made. The only Pancho she'd ever heard of was in an old, old western where this silly-looking dude kept saying, "Oh, Pancho," to an even sillier dude in a big hat, but Colton said no, this Pancho was the real thing. Like there were fake Panchos. But whatever. Colton dug it. They had gone twice to see this shot-up old Dodge where supposedly the real Pancho had been turned into Swiss cheese, just like Bonnie and Clyde.
As far as she was concerned, Pancho Villa was just a dead old fart. She didn't care about his stupid Dodge. Now, if he'd driven a Hummer, that

would have been cool.
“If he’d driven a Hummer,” she said, “he could have run right over those assholes who were shooting at him.”
Colton surfaced from his fog to blink in confusion. “Who drives a Hummer?”
“Pancho Villa.”
“No, it was a Dodge.”
“That’s what I’m saying.” Impatient, she elbowed him. “If he’d been driving a Hummer, he could have smashed them flat.”
“No such thing as a Hummer back then.”
“God!” she said in exasperation. “You are so literal. I said *if*!” She grabbed the joint and took another hit, then got up from the bed. “I’m going to the bathroom.”
“Okay.” Happy to have sole possession of the joint, Colton settled back on the pillows and gave her a little wave as she left the room. She didn’t wave back. Going to the bathroom didn’t make her happy; there was only one on this floor, there was a magazine instead of toilet paper for wiping, and it smelled really bad. But Colton had insisted on staying here instead of in one of the nicer hotels, because the rooms were so cheap. Well, of course they were cheap; what fool would pay top price to stay here? And it was really close to the marketplace, which was neat.
She felt really mellow from the weed, but not so mellow that the bathroom didn’t bother her. The lock was broken, too. A shoelace had been tied around the knob, a nail driven into the frame right beside the knob, and to latch the door you wrapped the loose end of the shoelace around the nail. It did hold the door shut, but she didn’t put a lot of faith in the method. So whenever she had to be in there, she absolutely raced to finish her business. Oh, shit; she’d forgotten to bring the flashlight. The lights hadn’t gone off yet when she was in the bathroom, but everyone insisted it *did* happen occasionally, and she was afraid of the dark, so that was one warning she’d listened to. She tried to hurry, but really, you can piss only so fast and she had waited until she was miserably full because she hated using this bathroom. Crouched over the toilet—no way was she going to sit on that thing—she kept going and going and going, and her legs began to ache so bad she thought she might actually have to sit down after all, and then what could she do, boil her butt?

But finally she finished, blotted herself with a page from the magazine, and groaned in relief as she stood from her awkward, crouched position. If she could ever get Colton away from Chihuahua and Pancho Villa's bullet-riddled Dodge so they could continue their vacation tour, she was going to insist that they stay at better places.

She pulled up her shorts, rinsed her hands, and dried them on her bottom because she'd forgotten to bring a towel with her, then unwound the shoelace from the nail. The door swung open and she turned out the dim light as she stepped into the dark hallway. She faltered, coming to a stop. There was supposed to be a light on in the hallway. There had been when she went into the bathroom. The bulb must have blown.

Chills ran down her back. She *so* didn't like the dark. How was she supposed to make it back to their room when she couldn't see a thing?

A board creaked, to her left. She jumped a foot high and tried to scream, but her heart was in her throat and all she could manage was a squeal.

A rough hand clamped over her mouth; she got a dose of really bad B.O., then something hard slammed into her head and she slumped, unconscious.

El Paso, Texas

Milla's cell phone rang. For a moment she thought about not answering it; she was dead tired, dispirited, and had a throbbing headache. The temperature outside was 107, and even with the air-conditioning in the SUV set on high, the heat coming through the windshield burned her arms. The image of Tiera Alverson's battered face and the fourteen-year-old's sightless blue eyes staring up at nothing wouldn't leave her mind. In her dreams tonight she would hear the sound of Regina Alverson's harsh sobbing when she heard that her little girl was never coming home again. Sometimes Finders succeeded, but sometimes they were too late. Today, they had been too late.

The last thing Milla wanted to do right now was take on someone else's heartache; she had enough aches of her own. But she never knew who might be calling, or why, and after all, she herself had made finding people her personal crusade. So she opened her eyes just enough to find the right button to punch, then immediately closed them again to shut out the ferociously bright late-afternoon sun. "Hello."

"*Señora* Boone?" The accented voice on the speakerphone filled the Chevy SUV. Milla didn't recognize it, but she spoke to so many different people every day that there was no way she could recognize everyone. This was

definitely business, though, because only when it concerned Finders was she known as Milla Boone. After the divorce, she had taken back her maiden name of Edge, but the public so associated the name Boone with the cause of finding missing children that she'd been forced to use it in all publicity and anything to do with Finders.
"Yes, this is she."
"There is a meeting tonight. Guadalupe, at ten-thirty. Behind the church."
"What kind of meeting—" she began, but the voice cut her off.
"Diaz will be there."
The phone went dead. Milla sat up, her headache forgotten as adrenaline buzzed through her system. She clicked off the phone and sat very still, thoughts racing.
"*Which* Guadalupe?" Brian Cusack said from the driver's seat, mostly in frustration, because he'd heard everything.
"If it isn't the closest one, then it doesn't matter." There were several Guadalupes in Mexico, ranging in population from about fifty thousand down to a collection of only a couple of hundred souls. The one closest to the border qualified as a village.
"Shit," Brian Cusack said. *"Shit."*
"No joke." It was after six; no one would be at the office to provide backup. She could try to track down people at home, but there wasn't time to spare. If the meeting was at ten-thirty, then they needed to be in position at least an hour beforehand. Guadalupe was about fifty miles from El Paso and Juarez. In this traffic it would take them forty-five minutes to an hour to get to the border. It would be less hassle to park the SUV, walk across the bridge into Mexico, and pick up transportation there, rather than go through the paperwork involved in driving across, but the operative phrase was "*less* hassle," not "*no* hassle." When time was short, any hassle at all could mean the difference between success and failure.
They both had their passports and their multiple-entry tourist cards for Mexico; that was standard procedure, because they never knew when they'd be called on to cross borders. That was about all they had, though, other than a couple of night-vision devices that they had used searching for little Dylan Peterson—a successful find, thank God—and that had been left in the duffel as they then swung immediately into the search for Tiera Alverson. They hadn't needed a lot of stuff in the Alverson case; the job

had taken them to Carlsbad, New Mexico, and had required patience and time, not survival gear.

They would have to make do with what they had, because there was no way she could pass up an opportunity to get Diaz.

Diaz. The man was as elusive as smoke on a windy day, but maybe this time they'd be lucky.

"We won't have time to pick up any weapons," Brian said evenly as he seized an opening and muscled the big SUV around a poky white Toyota with huge rust spots on the door.

"We'll have to make time." They never took the chance of smuggling weapons through at the border; instead they had arrangements to buy weapons once they were across. Most of the time she didn't need weapons—all she was doing was talking to people—but sometimes common sense dictated they be able to protect themselves.

She tried Joann Westfall's number, hoping she could catch her second-in-command at home, but the answering machine came on. Quickly Milla left a message filling Jo in on the admittedly sketchy details of where they were going and why. It was her own rule that none of the Finders went off by themselves, or without letting someone else know where they were.

After two years, her first real shot at Diaz!

Her heartbeat thudded in her chest. Maybe this was the break she'd been hunting for ten years.

Justin's kidnapping was shrouded in mystery, rumors, suspicion. No ransom had ever been demanded, and the men who had stolen the baby from her in the tiny village market that day had disappeared. But eventually she began hearing snippets of information about a one-eyed man who was never there when she tried to track him down. Then, two years ago, a woman had whispered to her that a man named Diaz perhaps knew about the matter. For the past twenty-five months Milla had stayed on his trail like a bloodhound, and except for maddening rumors, she'd come up empty.

To find Diaz, said an old man warning her away from her quest, was to find death. Best to stay far away from him. Diaz knew about, or was behind, the disappearance of many. She heard that the one-eyed man's name was Diaz. No, that was wrong; the one-eyed man worked for Diaz. Or Diaz had killed the one-eyed man for mistakenly snatching an American baby and causing such a furor.

Milla had heard all of that, and more. People seemed afraid to talk about him, but she asked questions and waited, and eventually some sort of muttered reply would come. Even after all this time, she still had no clear idea of who or what he was, only that he was somehow involved in Justin's disappearance.

"Someone's setting Diaz up for a fall," Brian said suddenly.

"I know." There was no other reason for that phone call, and that worried her. She didn't want to get involved in a plot of betrayal and revenge. First and foremost, she wanted to find Justin. That was what Finders concentrated on, finding the lost ones, the stolen ones; if justice was served, fine, but that was police business. She never hindered an investigation, in fact often helped, but her objective was simply to return children to their families.

"If things turn ugly, we'll just stay low and out of sight," she said.

"What if it turns out he's the one you've been looking for all these years?"

Milla closed her eyes, unable to answer. It was one thing to say they'd stay out of whatever trouble was brewing, but what if Diaz was indeed the one-eyed man who had stolen Justin? She didn't know if she could control her rage, which still seethed and bubbled inside her like a hidden volcano. She couldn't just kill him; she needed to talk to the man, even if he *was* the one, to find out what he'd done with her baby. But oh, how she wanted to kill him. She wanted to tear him apart as surely as he'd torn her apart.

Because she had no answer, she concentrated on the here and now. She could do that; she'd gotten by for ten years by focusing just on what she could do right *now*. She and Brian were tired, hungry, and they faced a long night. Nothing she could do about the last point, but she dug into their stash of PayDay candy bars and opened one for each of them. The peanuts in the candy bar would give them energy. Now that he knew the candy was going to be his supper, instead of the steak he'd been fantasizing aloud about all the way home, Brian grabbed the PayDay and downed it in three bites. Milla handed him another one, which lasted slightly longer.

She always carried fruit on the jobs, too, but because they thought they were headed home, she'd allowed the supply to get low. They were down to one banana. She peeled it and broke it in half. Brian was already reaching for it before she got the thing peeled.

"Anything else?" he asked after he'd allowed her to eat her half.

“Let’s see. Two more PayDays. A roll of Life Savers. And two bottles of water. That’s it.”
He grunted. They’d need the PayDays to keep them going on the trip home. “Guess that’s supper, then.” He was clearly unhappy. Brian was a big boy who required constant refueling.
She wasn’t thrilled with the idea, herself. She opened the bottles of water, but they drank only a few sips each. The last thing either one wanted now was an overloaded bladder.
They had been to Guadalupe before, but she went through the box of maps until she found one that included the town, and studied the layout of the place. “I wonder how many churches are in Guadalupe. I can’t remember.”
“I hope to God only one, since that guy didn’t give us a name. Give me that roll of Life Savers.”
She handed over the Life Savers and Brian tore into the roll. He didn’t let the candy melt in his mouth; he put in three or four at the time, and crunched.
Milla got out her cell phone and called their contact in Juarez, Benito—no last name had ever been given. Benito was a whiz at providing them with wheels whenever they needed them, and not the rental agency variety of wheels, either. Benito specialized in beat-up, rickety pickup trucks that no one paid attention to, and which weren’t likely to be vandalized if left on the street unattended. That was because there was nothing left to vandalize in Benito’s vehicles. They were bare-bones, really not worth stealing. But they ran, and the one he delivered to them on his side of the border would be full of gas. The paperwork was always in order, too, in case they were stopped by the police.
Arranging for weapons was trickier. The Finders didn’t often have a need for weapons, and doing this always made her uneasy. Mexico had strict weapons laws; not that there weren’t plenty of weapons to be had; it was just that if they were caught with guns, they’d be in very deep doo-doo. She didn’t like breaking the law, but when you were dealing with human snakes, you had to be prepared. She reached their contact for illegal weapons and placed her order: nothing fancy, just basic self-protection. She never knew exactly what would be provided, but she expected cheap .22 revolvers, which they would dispose of before they returned to the States.
As she had expected, it was seven-thirty and getting dark by the time they parked the SUV, walked across the bridge, and cleared their paperwork.

Benito was waiting patiently for them with a truly remarkable excuse for a truck, an ancient Ford that was more rust than painted metal. There was no tailgate, the passenger door was wired shut—presumably to keep it on the truck—and the windshield was held in place with duct tape. Literally. Despite their hurry, both Milla and Brian had to stop and blink at the derelict.

"You've outdone yourself this time, Benito," Brian said in awe.

Benito grinned broadly, showing the gap where he was missing a tooth. He was short and wiry, age anywhere between forty and seventy, and he had the most consistently cheerful expression Milla had ever seen. "I try," he said, with a New York accent. Benito had been born in Mexico, but his parents had crossed the border with him when he was small, and he had very few early memories of the land of his birth. Later he returned to his roots and settled down very happily, but he couldn't shake his accent. "The horn doesn't work, and if the headlights don't come on when you pull out the knob, push it back in real hard and then kind of ease it out again. You gotta get the knot in just the right position."

"Does it have a motor, or do we have to push it with our feet?" Milla asked, peering inside. She was only half joking, because part of the floor had rusted out and she could see the ground.

"Now, the motor's a work of art. It purrs like a kitten, and there's more power than you'd expect. Might come in handy." He never asked questions about where they were going or what they were doing, but he knew what the Finders did.

Milla opened the driver's door and climbed in, gingerly scooting across the seat and avoiding the hole in the floor. Brian handed her the case containing the two nightscopes, the one blanket, dark green, they'd had in the SUV, and the two bottles of water; she securely stowed everything while he slid behind the wheel.

The truck was so old there weren't any seat belts; if the traffic police stopped them, they would almost certainly have to pay a fine. As Benito had promised, however, the engine turned over at the first turn of the key. Brian maneuvered through Juarez's busy streets, then stopped in front of a *farmacia*, a drugstore. Milla waited in the truck while he went inside, where he met their contact, a woman they knew only as Chela. She was very distinguished-looking, neatly dressed, and looked to be in her late forties. She gave Brian a Sanborn's shopping bag; he passed her some money so

slickly that no one knew the transaction had taken place; then he was back in the truck and they were on their way to Guadalupe.

Darkness had fallen by then, and he fiddled with the knob for the headlights until they came on. Driving in Mexico at night wasn't recommended, for anyone. Not only was that when most highway robberies occurred, but the heat retained in the pavement drew livestock to the highways. Hitting a horse or a cow was never good, for either animal or vehicle. There were also potholes and other hazards, which were more difficult to see at night. To make driving even more adventurous, Mexicans sometimes deliberately drove at night without their own lights, the better to see oncoming cars on hills and curves and avoid them, which was okay unless two cars traveling in opposite directions *both* had their headlights off. Then it became more like a game of blind chicken.

Brian loved driving in Mexico. He was still young enough, only twenty-five, that he enjoyed pitting his night vision and reflexes against whatever waited for him on the road. He was steady as a rock and didn't know the meaning of the word "panic," so Milla gladly left the driving to him, while she held on with a death grip and prayed.

It was almost ten o'clock when they finally reached Guadalupe, perilously close to the time for the meeting. It was a small village of maybe four hundred people, with a single main street that was closely lined with shops, the inevitable cantina, and a variety of other buildings. Here and there hitching posts still stood in position. The road had deteriorated to mostly dirt and gravel, though there were patches of pavement.

They drove down the main street, verifying that there was indeed just one church; behind it was a cemetery, closely dotted with crosses and tombstones. Milla wasn't able to see much during the drive-by; she couldn't tell if there was an alley between the church and the cemetery, though she assumed there had to be room enough for a car to drive.

"No place to park," Brian muttered, and she turned her attention back to the street. He was right; while there was physical space for parking, there wasn't anywhere that wouldn't attract the attention of men who didn't like being spied on.

"We'll have to go back to the cantina," she said. Several cars and trucks had been parked there, providing camouflage for their truck. Brian nodded and continued past the church, keeping his speed slow and steady. He took the

next right, down a narrow lane. When it intersected, he took the right turn, then worked his way back to the cantina.

He parked the truck between a 1978 Chevrolet Monte Carlo and an original-style Volkswagen Beetle. They waited and watched, looking for people on the street. Noise poured from the cantina, but a dog nosing curiously around doorways provided the only movement they could see. They each took a pistol and night-vision scope. Before Brian opened the door, Milla automatically reached up to turn off the dome light, only to discover it had been removed.

They slid from the truck and quickly blended into the shadows. The dog looked their way and gave an inquisitive bark, waited a moment to see if they responded, then returned to its search-and-eat mission.

There was no sidewalk, just the street with its obstacle course of potholes and chunks of pavement. By chance they were dressed fairly well for nighttime clandestine work, Brian in green cargo pants and a black T-shirt, and Milla in jeans and a sleeveless burgundy blouse, and they both were wearing rubber-soled work boots as well as dark green baseball caps with "FA," for *Finders Association*, in light blue on the front. Brian was darkly tanned, but Milla's bare arms were noticeable, so she draped the blanket around her shoulders. Now that night had fallen the temperature had cooled dramatically, and the blanket felt good.

They didn't run, or slink from doorway to doorway; either would attract the attention of anyone watching. They walked purposefully, but without obvious haste. The bad news was that it was less than fifteen minutes until the meeting was supposed to take place. The good news was that only tourists were on time in Mexico, where punctuality was considered bad manners. That didn't mean no one would be watching the church, but it improved their chances of getting into place unseen.

Seventy-five yards from the church, they left the main street and ducked down a tiny alley that brought them out on the near side of the cemetery.

"What's the plan?" Brian whispered as he slipped one of the pistols into his pocket, then took out one of the night-vision scopes. "Do we get the jump on them, find out which one is Diaz, and take him away for questioning?"

"I doubt it'll be that easy," she said dryly. Because Brian was young and big and strong, and running over with testosterone, he had so far been able to handle everything that came his way. The crucial phrase was "so far." She

was much more aware of how quickly things could go horribly wrong. “We do exactly that if there are only two men, but if there are more, we don’t.”
“Not even if there are just three?”
“Not even.” If there were two men, she and Brian could catch them by surprise and keep both of them covered. Milla didn’t mind holding them at gunpoint while Diaz answered her questions. If there were more than two . . . she was neither stupid nor suicidal, and she certainly wouldn’t risk Brian’s life. It might be two more years before she had another shot at talking to Diaz, but that was better than having to bury someone. “Can you work your way around to the other side of the cemetery?”
“Has a cat got a tail?” Brian was not only ex-military, having joined the army straight out of high school, but an east Texas farm boy who had grown up ghosting through the woods while deer hunting.
“Then pick a spot where you have a clear view of the entire back of the church, and I’ll do the same on this end. Remember, if there’re more than two, all we do is watch.”
“Got it. But if there are only two, what’s the signal for moving in on them?”
She hesitated. Normally they used radios, but they’d been caught without much of their equipment. “Exactly three minutes after they both show up and begin talking, we move. If the meeting is shorter than that, we move when they do.” If the men meeting here were on the alert, the three minutes would give them time to settle down—she hoped. This wasn’t the best method of synchronization, but it was the best she could come up with under the circumstances. God only knows how long they would have to wait.
Brian faded away into the darkness, and Milla edged in the opposite direction, first away from the cemetery, then around it to the back. Taking cover behind a tall tombstone, she used the night-vision scope to look all around her, searching for someone—other than Brian—who was doing the same thing she was doing. There was no one lurking around the church that she could spot, nor was there anyone hiding behind another tombstone. Still, she waited a few minutes and scanned the area again. Still nothing. She cautiously moved up to another tombstone. This part of Chihuahua State was desert, with cactus and brush, so there was no grass to muffle any sound she made. She went down on one knee and a rock dug into her leg, making her wince, but she controlled her reaction and didn’t make any sudden movements, just carefully shifted her position.

Something crawled across her hand. It felt tiny, like an ant or a fly. Again she controlled her flinch, but her skin crawled, and she had to fight the urge to shriek and jump up and down to fling the bug away from her. She hated insects. She hated being dirty. She hated lying on the ground, in close proximity to both dirt and insects. She did it anyway, and had trained herself to ignore the dirt and bugs. What she was doing was dangerous and she knew it; her heart was already pounding with sickening force, but that, too, she had learned to ignore. She might cringe inside, but no timidity at all showed on the outside.

She picked up the rock that had been digging into her knee, her fingers sliding over the smooth, triangular shape, kind of like a small pyramid. Hmm, that was interesting. Automatically she slipped it into her front jeans pocket. After a moment she realized what she'd done and started to dig the rock out of her jeans, to toss it aside, but she couldn't make herself do it. She had been picking up rocks for years now, always on the lookout for smooth ones or ones with unusual shapes. She had quite a collection of them at home. Little boys liked rocks, didn't they?

After once again surveilling the cemetery and surrounding area, she moved in a crouch up and to the right, then again to the next tombstone, slowly working her way into position. Cupping her hand over her wristwatch, she pressed the button that illuminated the face: ten thirty-nine. Either the caller's information was bogus, or the people were in no hurry to get here. She hoped it was the latter, and she and Brian hadn't gone to all this trouble for nothing.

No. It wasn't for nothing. Sooner or later, she would find her son. All she had to do was keep running down all leads. She had been doing this for ten years and she would do it for another ten, if necessary. Or twenty years. She couldn't imagine ever giving up on her little boy.

Through the years she had tried to imagine what Justin's interests would be, how they would change as he grew, and she had bought toys she'd thought he would like. Would he be fascinated by balls and toy trucks? Would he make motor noises as he crawled along? When he was three, she imagined him on a tricycle. By four, she thought, he would be picking up rocks and worms and things like that, putting them into his pocket. She couldn't make herself pick up a worm, but the rocks . . . she could do rocks. That was when she'd begun collecting them.

When he was six, she wondered if he was learning how to play soccer, or T-ball. He would probably still like rocks at that age, too. But just in case, she'd bought a baseball and a small bat.

When he was eight, she imagined him with his adult teeth growing in, too big for his face just yet, though his cheeks would be losing the chubbiness of childhood. At what age did children start playing Little League? He'd have his own bat and glove by now, surely. And maybe someone had taught him how to skip a flat stone on the water; she began looking for the smooth, flat ones, so she'd have them for him just in case.

He was ten now, maybe too old for throwing rocks. He'd have a ten-speed bicycle—a gear for each year, she thought. Perhaps he was into computers. He was definitely old enough now for Little League. And maybe he had an aquarium. Maybe he could put a few of the prettier rocks in his aquarium. She had stopped buying toys, and though she did have a computer, she didn't buy a bicycle, or an aquarium. The fish would just die, because she wasn't home often enough to keep them fed.

Milla's jaw set and she stared blindly across the night-darkened cemetery. She couldn't let herself think that he might not be alive, so instead she imagined that he was living a normal, happy life, that he'd been found or bought or adopted by people who loved him and were taking good care of him.

That was the theory, anyway, that he'd been stolen and sold to an illegal adoption ring that provided black-market babies to people in the States and Canada who wanted to adopt. These people had no idea the children they'd adopted had been stolen, that families had been devastated and parents left bereft. She tried to believe that. She tried to comfort herself by imagining Justin playing, growing, laughing. The not knowing for certain what had happened to him was the worst, and anything was better than thinking he was dead.

So many of the stolen babies *did* die. They were stuffed into car trunks to be smuggled across the border, and if the heat killed eight out of ten, well, the ten hadn't cost anything but effort, and the two remaining ones could be sold for ten, twenty thousand dollars each, maybe even more, depending on who wanted a baby and how much they could afford. The Federales had tried to comfort her by telling her that extra care would be taken with Justin because he was blond and blue-eyed, and therefore worth more. Oddly, it

was a comfort, though her heart ached for the tiny Hispanic babies who wouldn't receive that extra care because they were dark.

But what if—what if he was one of the unlucky ones? Did the bastards who trafficked in stolen babies and ruptured lives even take the time to bury their tiny victims? Or did they just toss them in a ditch somewhere, to be eaten by—

No. She couldn't go there. She couldn't let the gruesome thought finish forming in her mind. If she did, then she would lose control, and that was the one thing she absolutely couldn't do right now. If the tip played out and someone actually showed up at this secret rendezvous, she had to be ready.

Scanning the cemetery once more, she picked out her destination tombstone, one heavier and more ornate than the others, with a nice thick base that would completely conceal her if she was lying down. She got down on her stomach and belly-crawled the rest of the way, lying prone and positioning herself behind the tombstone so that she was at a slight angle and could easily move her head just a little to the right and see the entire width of the church, as well as down the right side of it. Now all she had to do was wait.

The minute hand on her watch crawled around. The hour hand moved to eleven, then past. Finally, at eleven thirty-five, she heard the sound of a car engine. She was immediately alert, though she knew it could just be a farmer heading home from the cantina. She watched closely, but there was no flash of headlights, just the sound of the engine growing closer and closer.

The dark hulk of a car turned at the far back corner of the church, and crawled to a stop about a third of the way down.

Milla drew a deep breath and tried to control the sudden leap of her heart. Most of the time these tips led to nothing but a wild-goose chase, but this time the geese were actually within reach. With any luck, she was about to get her hands on Diaz.

3

With the scope she could see there were two men in the car, and her heart sank. Obviously others were supposed to join them, unless the meeting consisted of the two men sitting in the car talking to each other, which she

doubted. She studied the two in the weird green light of the scope, but they remained in the car and she couldn't get a good look at their features.
She hoped Brian followed the same reasoning that she had and stayed in place. She hadn't spotted him, though she had looked. Wherever he'd hidden himself, he had done a good job of it.
The minutes ticked past, and she still didn't see Brian. Good. He thought the same thing she did, that someone else would be arriving soon.
Almost ten minutes later, she heard another car engine. The vehicle pulled slightly past the church, then backed into the narrow lane so it was trunk to trunk with the other car.
Two men got out of the second car. The doors on the first car opened, and those two men got out as well.
Milla trained her scope on the newcomers as they approached, facing her. The driver was a tall, thin mestizo, his black hair worn long and slicked back in a ponytail. The passenger was somewhat shorter, stockier. The moment she focused on him, her blood ran cold.
For ten years she'd tracked the bastard. The day Justin had been stolen was mostly a blurred horror in her mind; the days afterward, as she fought for her life in the tiny rural clinic, were lost forever. But in the strange way time had of sometimes standing still, she had a few perfect, freeze-frame memories of the attack, and especially the face of the man who had wrenched Justin from her arms.
She wouldn't recognize her little boy now, but the man who had taken him . . . she'd recognize him anywhere. She clearly remembered the sensation of his eyeball popping under her digging, clawing fingernails, remembered the bloody furrows she had raked down his left cheek. She had maimed him, marked him, and she was viciously glad. No matter how the bastard aged, she would always know him by the damage she had done to his face.
After ten years, he was walking straight toward her. His left eye socket was empty, the lid scarred and twisted. Two deep lines were clawed straight down his face.
It was *him*.
She could barely breathe. Her lungs ached; her throat ached; her vision blurred with rage.
Don't move if there are more than two of them, she'd told Brian. He was smart; no way would he figure just the two of them could handle four men, all of whom were possibly, probably, armed.

But the bastard was *here*, right in front of her. She'd known this could happen, and still the force of her reaction was so violent it almost blinded her. Red mist swam in her vision, and there was a roaring in her ears.
Her muscles were shaking with intensity. She wanted to tear him apart with her bare hands. A small part of her brain knew it was insanity, but almost as if her hand didn't belong to her, she felt it reaching for the pistol in her pocket, and she began to rise.
She never even made it to her knees. Something hard and heavy hit her in the middle of the back and smashed her to the ground, smothering all movement. Several things happened simultaneously, so fast she had no time to react. Legs hooked around her legs and held them tight, a hand clamped over her mouth and jerked her head back, and an iron-hard arm locked around her throat. In what felt like a fraction of a second, she was immobilized.
"Move or make a sound, and I'll snap your neck."
The voice was cold and menacing, the words spoken so low she could barely hear them, but she understood them perfectly. The arm cutting off her oxygen was plain enough on its own. She was pinned to the ground, unable even to bring her hands up to defend herself.
Dizzily she tried to think. Was this a scout, maybe, sent ahead to make certain the meeting place was unobserved? But if it was, he would have seen Brian, too, and common sense would have dictated he take out Brian first. Maybe he had. Maybe Brian was lying dead on the other side of the cemetery, his throat cut or his neck broken. But if this was a scout, why had he told her not to make any noise?
He couldn't be with the four men. Whatever his interest was in the meeting, he was there for his own reasons. So maybe Brian was still alive, and maybe, if she was very still, she'd make it through with her spinal cord still intact.
She couldn't breathe. Her vision blurred and she managed a small gasp. The arm around her throat loosened the tiniest fraction, but it was enough for her to drag in some air.
Her head was arched back at such an angle she could see the four men only out of the corners of her eyes, and without the night-vision scope she couldn't make out details. They had opened the trunks on both cars, and two of them now were dragging something out of the trunk of the second car and transferring it to the other trunk.

The rock in her pocket was digging into the sensitive area where her leg joined her hip. Her breasts were flattened painfully into the dirt, and her back ached from her neck being so forcefully arched. There was no softness in the man's weight bearing down on her, no give; he felt like iron. In this position the side of his face was pressed to her head, but though she could feel his chest moving in slow, even breaths—the bastard wasn't the least bit winded or nervous—there was no movement of air on her skin as he exhaled. It was creepy, as if he weren't quite human.

He wasn't paying any attention to her. Now that he had her subdued, he was completely focused on the four men behind the church.

With whatever transaction they had made completed, they were getting back into their respective cars. The man who had stolen Justin was leaving. After ten years she'd finally found him, and now he was getting away. She strained upward against the man holding her, her entire body tightening in protest, and he pressed harder on her throat with his arm. When her vision blurred again, she went limp in despair, a sob convulsing in her chest. In this position she was as helpless as a turtle on its back.

The second car slowly pulled away, turned the corner, and disappeared. The first car began reversing down the narrow lane. The man holding her suddenly lifted his weight and flipped her over on her back. "Take a nap," he growled, and his fingers pressed hard on the base of her neck.

She tried to struggle, but she was already oxygen-deprived and teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. He leaned over her, a black, featureless weight oozing menace, and the world went blank.

She came to lying propped against Brian's knee, while he anxiously patted her face, her shoulder, her arm. "Milla? Milla! Wake up!"

"I'm awake," she mumbled, the words slurred. "Nap."

"Nap? You took a *nap*?" Disbelief made his voice get louder.

She fought to gather her scattered wits, but she felt as if she were underwater, every movement an effort. "No. Man—jumped me."

"What? Shit!" Brian's head came up and he glared around him. "They must have had a lookout that we didn't spot."

Slowly she heaved her weight off his knee and sat up. Her entire body ached, as if she'd been slammed to the ground. Oh, wait—she had been.

"No, he wasn't one of them."

"How do you know?"

“He told me he’d break my neck if I made a sound.” And he’d come close to doing it anyway, if the way her throat felt was any measure of his intent.
“Why would he do that, unless—”
“—he was watching them, too,” Milla finished, when Brian broke off the sentence as he worked through the logic.
“But why jump you? We were just watching. He could have stayed where he was and we’d never have known.”
Anguish tore through her as she remembered how close she’d been to the man who’d taken Justin. She closed her eyes. “I was about to do something stupid.”
“Like what? You don’t do stupid things.”
“One of the men in the second car—the passenger—is the one who stole Justin.”
Brian drew in a long breath, then blew it out. “Shit. Damn.” He was silent a moment. “I guess you were going to go for him, huh? Even though there were *four* of them?”
Her silence was answer enough. She pulled off her baseball cap and ran her hands through her matted curls. “I’ve dreamed of seeing him again. I’ve thought of it for ten years, imagined getting my hands on him. I was going to choke answers out of him, if I died doing it.”
“And you would have; all four of them were packing, in case you didn’t notice.”
She hadn’t; after seeing the face that had haunted her dreams for a decade, she hadn’t noticed anything else. Evidently the guy who’d jumped her had inadvertently saved her life.
Groaning, she got to her feet. The blanket she’d had draped over her was lying a few feet away, and she retrieved it. The night-vision scope had rolled against the base of the adjacent tombstone. The pistol that had been in her pocket, however, was gone. Her assailant must have taken it.
The headache she’d had earlier was back with sickening force, pounding in her temples, and she felt slightly nauseated. “Let’s go home,” she said tiredly. She’d come so close, but achieved nothing. The bitterness of it was an ashy taste in her mouth.
Silently they made their way back to the truck. As they passed the cantina, fury rose in her again and impulsively she turned, shoving the door open so hard it banged against the wall. Rough, startled faces turned toward her, hazy in the dim light of the smoke-filled little room.

She didn’t step inside. Instead she said, in the Spanish she’d honed over the years, “My name is Milla Edge. I work for Finders in El Paso. I will pay ten thousand American dollars to anyone who can tell me how to find Diaz.”
There had to be a million Diazes in Mexico, but judging from the sudden stillness of the men in the cantina, they all knew who she meant. Rewards had been offered before, of course; ten years ago, there had been one for any information about the kidnapping of Justin Boone. She also regularly handed out bribes, *mordidas,* and paid what seemed like a small army of informants. Announcing a reward in a dingy little cantina in a tiny village probably wouldn’t produce any different results, but at least she felt as if she was doing *something*. The man who’d destroyed her life ten years ago had just been here in this village, behind the church, and “Diaz” was the only possibility she had for his name. A stab in the dark sometimes brought blood.
Women weren’t welcome in Mexican cantinas unless they were prostitutes. One of the men began to get to his feet, and Brian stepped up close behind her, making his imposing presence known. “Let’s go,” he said, taking her arm, and the force of his grip said he wasn’t kidding.
She climbed into the disreputable truck and Brian got in behind her. The motor fired as soon as he turned the key, and they were already in motion when two of the cantina’s patrons stepped to the door and watched them drive away.
“What was that for?” Brian demanded hotly. “You always tell us not to take chances, then you walk into a cantina? That’s just asking for trouble.”
“I didn’t go inside.” She rubbed her forehead and sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking. The sight of him—after all these years . . .” Her voice thickened and she swallowed. “I’m sorry,” she said again, staring through the duct-taped windshield into the night.
Having said his piece, Brian didn’t keep on nagging at her. He concentrated on his driving, on the lookout for potholes, cows, and people driving without headlights.
Milla’s nails dug into her palms. Ten years had passed since she’d seen his evil face. She hoped they had been long, miserable years for him, though there was no way they could have been as long and as miserable as they’d been for her. She hoped he suffered from some medical condition that was incurable and hideously painful, but nonfatal. She wanted him to live a horrible existence, but she didn’t want him to die. Not yet. Not until she got

the information she needed from him, and found Justin. Then she would gladly kill him herself. He had destroyed her, so why shouldn't she destroy him in return?

The years ticked themselves down in her mind, like a countdown.

Ten years ago, Justin had been stolen from her.

Nine years ago, David divorced her. She couldn't blame him. Losing a child put so much stress and strain on the parents that marriages often dissolved. In their case, David hadn't just lost his son, he'd also lost his wife. From the time she'd regained consciousness after being stabbed, her every thought, her life, had focused on finding Justin. There simply hadn't been anything left in her for David.

Eight years ago, while following yet another lead that had produced no information about Justin, she had recovered a stolen baby. The infant had been more dead than alive at the time, but had survived, and Milla had found some comfort for herself in seeing the mother's hysterical joy on having the child returned. She herself didn't have a happy ending, but perhaps she could produce happy endings for others.

Seven years ago, she had organized Finders. It was a group, some paid employees but mostly volunteers, who mobilized to hunt missing children, whether they were simply lost or had been stolen. Police departments across the country were underfunded and understaffed, and they simply didn't have the time or manpower to adequately devote to the problem. The difference between finding a lost child dead or alive sometimes boiled down to how many bodies could be brought into the search. Milla was good at mobilizing. Thanks to her high visibility after Justin's kidnapping, she was also very good at fund-raising.

Six years ago, David had remarried. It hurt more than she could have imagined. Part of her resented that he had rebuilt his life without her, without Justin, but for the most part she simply hurt. She'd loved David so much. She still loved him, though their time for being *in* love had ended the day Justin was stolen. David was, simply, the best man she'd ever known. Everyone handled grief differently, and David had handled his by throwing himself into his work, by saving lives that would otherwise have been lost. He'd had the practice of medicine to get him through the pain. And Milla had continued her unrelenting search for her son.

Five years ago, Finders had accepted its first missing persons case. They didn't just search for lost children now, they would look for anyone who

was lost. The pain of those left behind, wondering what had happened, was too great for her to ignore.
Four years ago, David and his new wife had had a child. Milla had been agonized when she heard his wife was pregnant. What if it was a boy, another son? It was small of her and she knew it, but she didn't think she could bear it if David's child was a boy. To her immeasurable relief, they'd had a daughter. And Milla kept looking for her own child.
Three years ago, at the family Christmas celebration at her parents' home in Ohio, her brother, Ross, had brusquely told her it was time to get on with her life and stop letting something that had happened seven years before dominate all their family get-togethers. To her horror, her sister, Julia, hadn't spoken up in her defense, and had refused to meet her gaze. Since then, Milla saw her parents only when her siblings weren't also visiting. The holidays were lonely, but she didn't think she'd ever be able to forgive Ross for his callousness.
Two years ago, she'd heard the name Diaz for the first time. After eight years of nothing, finally, there was a whisper of information that could possibly have a connection to Justin.
A year ago, David and his wife had a second child, a son. When she heard, Milla cried herself to sleep that night.
Tonight . . . tonight, she'd seen him, the monster who had destroyed her. She'd been so close, only to come up empty-handed once again.
But he was still alive. That had been a deeply buried fear, that he would die before she could talk to him. She didn't care what happened to him, so long as she could find out from him what he'd done with her baby. And now that she knew for certain he was alive, and what area he was in, she would intensify her search. She'd hunt him down like a rabid dog, or die herself in the effort.

4

A little after four-thirty, Milla let herself into her condo. She was bone-tired, and so dispirited she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and hide under the covers.
So close.

She couldn’t get the refrain out of her head. For years she’d kept her hope and determination alive with almost nothing to go on, yet now that she’d actually seen the man and knew he was still alive, knew what area he was in, she felt nothing but despair for having failed to capture him.

“I won’t let it get me down,” she said aloud, going into the bathroom and stripping off her filthy clothes. “I won’t.” That was how she’d gotten through the hell of the past ten years, by simply refusing to give in. Sometimes she felt like one of the Japanese soldiers after World War II, fighting on long after the war was over because they couldn’t accept the outcome.

You’ll never find him, people had said. Get on with your life, her own brother had told her. Justin had been so young when he was taken that she had no idea of how he would look, no way of identifying him short of DNA tests, and she couldn’t go around the country demanding that all ten-year-old boys have DNA tests. That was assuming he was even in the United States. He could be anywhere. He could be in Canada, or still in Mexico. One well-meaning but totally demented woman had even told her it might help to have a funeral for him, and lay him to rest.

The fact that the woman was still alive was a testament to Milla’s self-control.

Justin was *not* dead. If she ceased believing that, she wouldn’t be able to function.

Her bathroom mirror reflected back a face that was drawn and pale with exhaustion, with dark circles under her brown eyes and a grim set to her mouth. Tonight, she looked older than her thirty-three years. The streak in her untidy hair was stark under the fluorescent lights. Within days of the kidnapping, one of the nurses at the clinic had noticed that a strand of her hair was growing in white. The streak always stood out in the photographs that were taken at fund-raisers, a reminder to everyone that she knew all too well the agony parents went through when their child was lost. The rest of her hair had remained the same, light brown, curly, but the streak was what drew the gaze.

There was another fund-raiser tomorrow night, she thought; her tired brain caught itself. No, *tonight*. Just because she hadn’t been to bed yet didn’t mean another day hadn’t arrived.

But after she’d showered and pulled on a nightgown, then fallen into bed, sleep wouldn’t come. Tonight she hadn’t just come close to the man who’d

stolen Justin, she had come close to getting both herself and Brian killed. If she had charged those four men, pistol in hand, they would have shot her and, inevitably, Brian, who would have charged to her aid. In retrospect, her lack of control horrified her. Brian had been right to be so upset with her. The Finders weren't vigilantes; they weren't trained to go into gunfights. The core group all had some firearms training, just so they would know how to protect themselves if necessary, but that was all. Brian, with his military background, was the most qualified of them all when it came to weapons.

But because it involved Justin, she had lost all reason, all sense of caution. She would have to do better than that, or she'd never find him, because she would be dead.

She finally dozed, and she dreamed of Justin. It was a recurring dream, one that she'd often had in the first few years after he was stolen, but now her subconscious seldom produced it. As dreams went it was but a small snapshot, and heartbreakingly realistic. She was rocking him while he nursed, and in the dream she felt the small weight of him in her arms, the warmth of his little body against hers. She smelled the sweet baby smell, touched his blond hair and felt the softness, stroked her finger over his cheek and reveled in the velvety texture of his skin. She felt the release of her milk, the tug of his rosebud mouth on her nipple . . . and she was at peace.

She woke crying, as she always did. In the perverse way the body had when it was really tired, she wasn't able to go back to sleep. After trying for half an hour to put the dream out of her mind, she gave in, got up, and put on some coffee; then, while it was brewing, she stripped off her nightgown and did some stretching and yoga, which was her favorite form of exercise. Because she never knew what a case would demand of her, whether it was running down a city street or climbing rocks, she worked hard at staying in good physical condition, but none of it came easily or naturally to her. She intensely disliked sweating, almost as much as she disliked bugs and getting dirty. She did it, though, because she had to, just as she had learned how to handle firearms even though she hated the noise, the smoke, the smell, everything about them. She was at best mediocre in her marksmanship, but she had kept practicing until she had achieved at least that. To track the men who had stolen Justin, she had learned to deal with many things that she disliked, had turned herself into someone else. The woman she'd been

before couldn’t have dealt with these things, so Milla had forced herself to change.

No, it was those bastards who had changed her. She had been changed the instant Justin was wrenched from her. From the moment she’d regained consciousness in that little clinic, too weak to move, racked with pain, she had been a different woman, focused on only one thing: finding her child. That was why David had divorced her.

Divorced her, yes, but he hadn’t walked away from her. He’d insisted on buying this condo for her in El Paso’s Westside, and he paid her forty thousand dollars a year in alimony. Both gestures enabled her to concentrate full-time on Finders rather than having to find a conventional job that would, of necessity, have severely curtailed her ability to track down any and all leads that came her way.

If she had let him, David would have beggared himself buying a lavish mansion for her and giving her a ridiculous amount of money each year. This condo was strictly middle-class, about two thousand square feet, with two bedrooms and two baths upstairs, and a half bath downstairs. It was twenty years old, cozy without being lavish. The forty thousand dollars was about fifteen thousand dollars a year more than she was comfortable with, but she understood it was David’s way of helping her in the search. He couldn’t do what she did, so he did what he could, and considering he had another family now, that was more than generous.

Her exercises done, she poured a cup of coffee and took it upstairs with her to dress. No jeans and boots were necessary today, thank goodness; she could dress in a skirt and sandals, which were much cooler. Because small luxuries helped get her through the hard times, she always took advantage of nontravel days by taking the time to smooth her skin with moisturizers, take extra care with her hair and makeup, wear perfume; just little things, things she did for herself, but they soothed a need within her. Though some days she might look like a cross between GI Jane and Thelma and Louise right before they drove over the canyon lip, inside she was still a woman who enjoyed feminine things.

Because she took that time with her appearance, she was late getting into the office. Finders was located on the top floor of a warehouse, the space donated by True Gallagher, an El Paso businessman who in the past few years had become involved in helping bankroll Finders. The bottom floor of the warehouse was still in use, and she was accustomed to the sound of tow

motors zipping around below, the shouts of the workers, the rumble of eighteen-wheelers arriving to pick up or deliver machinery.

Upstairs, the offices were bare-bones. Naked fluorescent bulbs, cracked linoleum tile on the floor, and industrial green paint were the predominant features. The secondhand metal desks were battered, most of the office chairs were patched with duct tape, and there were only two private offices —semiprivate, that is, since the top half of the front wall in each office was a huge window.

The phone system, however, was state-of-the-art. Finders put its money where it would do the most good.

Milla loved her staff. God knows they didn't work there for the pay, which was barely adequate. They worked long hours, including most Saturdays, and sometimes even on Sunday. She herself took no pay, not even a nominal amount. Most of the people in the Finders network were volunteers, spread out all over the nation, who offered themselves and their time whenever they were needed to look for people who were lost in their particular area. The core of Finders, however, the group of people here in El Paso, devoted themselves full-time to the job and were on the payroll.

Most of the volunteers did it out of the goodness of their hearts. Some of her full-time staff were the same, but some of them had personal reasons for being there. Joann Westfall's best friend in grade school had become lost while on a family camping trip and died of exposure before she was found. Debra Schmale's ex-husband had disappeared with her two daughters, and it had taken her over two years to locate them and retrieve her children. Olivia Meyer, Harvard-educated, staunch New Yorker, chose to live in hell —her term for El Paso, which greatly offended the locals on staff—because her elderly, senile grandfather had wandered away from his house one November day and spent hours walking the cold city streets without even a sweater for warmth before a cop picked him up and took him to a precinct station.

The best way to find lost people was to flood the area with searchers. All of her people understood that and devoted themselves to the task.

Brian was at the coffee machine when Milla entered. "Want a cup?" he called, and she nodded.

Joann looked up with an anxious gaze. "How did it go last night? Did you find out anything?"

“The man who took Justin was there,” Milla said baldly, and there was a collective gasp from everyone within hearing distance. People shoved back chairs and hurried over.
“What happened?” Debra asked, her blue eyes huge. “Did you talk to him?”
Brian approached and shoved a polystyrene coffee cup into Milla’s hand.
“No. There were four of them, just two of us.” He flicked a glance at her that said he wasn’t going to spill the beans about her loss of judgment.
She wasn’t about to dissemble, though, so she came clean. “That was the idea, anyway, that we wouldn’t try to talk to them if there were more than two people. When I saw him, though, I lost my head. All I wanted was to get my hands around his throat.”
“Omigod,” Olivia blurted. “What happened? Did they shoot at you?”
“They never knew we were there. I was jumped and knocked out by another man.”
“Omigod,” Olivia said again. “Were you hurt? Did you see a doctor?”
“No, to both questions.”
“I don’t get it,” Joann said. “This other man obviously knew you were there, so why didn’t he tell the others?”
“He wasn’t with them. He was watching them, too.”
“Well, that’s a twist,” someone else muttered.
“Any idea who he might be?” Debra asked.
“Not a clue. I didn’t get a look at him. Whatever he was up to, though, he saved our lives by jumping me. And since I’m confessing, I also went in a cantina and offered ten thousand dollars to anyone who could tell me where to find Diaz. So if you get any phone calls asking about a reward, that’s why.”
“That explains that,” Olivia said, her eyebrows rising. “First thing this morning I got a threatening call, telling me to stay away from Diaz or die. I think that’s what she said, anyway. That was pre-coffee, so my Spanish comprehension wasn’t up to full speed yet. I told her I don’t have a boyfriend named Diaz.”
“Her?” Milla asked, her own eyebrows going north.
“Definitely a ‘her.’ That’s why I was thinking angry girlfriend. Sounds like you pulled on someone’s chain, for sure.”
Yes, it did. This was interesting, and exciting. “Did you get the number?”
“Sure.” Olivia went over to her desk and checked Caller ID. “It says ‘El Paso,’ but I don’t recognize the exchange.”

Brian ambled over and looked at the number. “Phone card,” he said. “Untraceable.”

There was something about Brian that always got on every last New Yorker nerve Olivia possessed. “Really.” Her tone was ice cold. “I suppose you can tell age, sex, and weight from the phone number, too, O Great White Hunter.” The last was a subtle dig at his military background; Olivia was a staunch dove who had only with the greatest reluctance learned anything at all about firearms.

“Not sex,” he said, grinning. “I use another method for that.” He topped things off by ruffling her hair before prudently retreating out of reach. “Not only that, I buy phone cards to use for long-distance calls, so I know how the numbers show up on Caller ID. With my vast expertise, I’d say that’s an AT&T card, easily purchased at any Wal-Mart and a gazillion other places.”

Milla had often bought phone cards to use while she was on the road and cell phone service was spotty, but she doubted Olivia, with her moneyed background, had ever even noticed the cards for sale practically everywhere. If she needed to make a call and didn’t have cell service, she would simply charge the call to her credit card or her home phone, thereby guaranteeing astronomical rates.

Getting back to the subject, Milla said, “Let’s lay out the facts. Late yesterday afternoon, I got a call on my cell phone giving me the tip on Diaz. The caller was a man. I didn’t notice the number, but I’ll check it, see if it matches up with today’s call. Brian and I both thought it might be a setup, not for us, but for Diaz. Someone wanting him out of the way.

“We get to the meeting place, and the man who took Justin is one of the men who show up. He’s the only one I recognized. The odds are *he’s* Diaz, because the coincidence is fairly large.”

Milla noticed that as she talked, Joann was busily writing down each point.

“The four men arrived in two cars, two in each car, and took something out of one car trunk and transferred it to the other. I couldn’t see what it was—” Because her head had been pulled back at a painful angle.

“A body,” said Brian, his tone flat. “Wrapped in a tarp or blanket.”

A chill went down Milla’s spine. She should have realized, but she’d been too focused on the one-eyed man. This was yet another illustration that she had to get control of her emotions; she was missing things that should have been obvious to her.

“I was knocked down by an unseen assailant who was also very interested in the four men, and not at all interested in what I was doing there. When the four men drove away, he used the carotid-artery thingie to knock me out __”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Brian interrupted, his gaze sharpening.

“Knocked out is knocked out. At least I didn’t have a concussion.”

“No, but unless you know what you’re doing, you can cause brain damage if you press too long. Though I guess in most cases you wouldn’t care, considering you’re cutting off someone’s blood supply to his brain. Or her brain, in your case.”

That was a perspective she could have done without, to realize how easily she could have been left impaired. Not that there was anything she could have done to protect herself, other than not be there in the first place, and withdrawing from the search simply wasn’t an option.

She shook away her retrospective alarm. “I assume the man then followed one of the cars, but he might not have. He might have followed Brian and me. I can’t think of any reason why he would, other than curiosity, but it’s still a possibility. I offered a ten-thousand-dollar reward to a cantina full of men, for information leading to Diaz, and this morning a woman calls telling us to stay away from Diaz or die.” She paused. “Does anyone else have anything to add to this hodgepodge?”

No one answered. Joann studied the flow of facts. “I’d say the only anomaly is this guy who assaulted you. Everything else connects. I’d say the one-eyed man is Diaz and someone tried to set him up. When you went into the cantina and made that announcement, he heard about it, obviously figured out you’d been very close to him that night, since you were in the same village at the same time, and he had someone call to warn you off.”

Milla had already formed the same opinion, but not as concisely. Joann had a knack for clarity that made Milla prize her even more.

“It’s obvious someone—my original caller—wants us to find Diaz, for whatever reason. Probably a rivalry, but I don’t care why. All we can do now is wait for him to contact me again.”

That went against the grain. She wanted to scour the area around Guadalupe, even though logic told her it would be a waste of time. She wanted to be actively doing something, anything, instead of waiting around for a call that might not come for days, weeks, if it ever came at all.

The phone rang right then, and a staffer hurried to answer it. After listening for a minute, he looked up and said, “Amber Alert in California, San Clemente area.”

It was a call to battle stations. Within seconds, they were all on the phone, raising their army of volunteers in the San Clemente and surrounding sectors, getting people on the freeways and highways, searching for the vehicle in question, a blue Honda Accord. According to witnesses, a man had grabbed a twelve-year-old girl in a fast-food parking lot and shoved her into his car. One woman had managed to get a partial on the license plate as the car fishtailed out of the parking lot.

With that information, the Finders would set up observation points, people with binoculars who searched for blue Honda Accords with a man driving. When one was spotted, information was relayed to the Finders in vehicles who would zero in on the car and check the license plate. Finders didn’t try to apprehend; if they located the vehicle, they would in turn notify the area law enforcement and let them take over.

Milla checked the time: eight forty-three in California. Traffic would be very heavy, which might or might not help. If a commuter was listening to his radio, he would hear the Amber Alert, but if he was playing a CD or listening to an MP5, he wouldn’t; he would just be in the way.

She shoved last night’s events away, and concentrated on recovering the little girl in California while she was still alive.

She hadn’t been able to do this for her own child, but she could do it for someone else’s.

5

The fund-raiser that night was held in a local high school gymnasium. Finders generally didn’t rate a black-tie event, which suited Milla, though occasionally she found herself at more ritzy affairs. She had invested in one suitable evening gown, which meant it cost the earth, but she didn’t want to spend the money to buy more than that one. She did have several good cocktail dresses, and tonight she wore her favorite, needing that pick-me-up to keep her going when she was so tired. The ice blue did wonders for her warm complexion, and the shoes that went with the dress were comfortable enough that she wasn’t in agony by evening’s end.

She had left the office a couple of hours early and spent the time pampering herself: facial, manicure, pedicure. She even fit in a short nap, which would keep her going for several more hours. She fussed with her curly hair and, though she never quite managed to tame it, did at least achieve a style that said it was intentional. The facial had brightened her complexion and made her look less tired, and she used a gentle makeup job to soften her face even more. Perfume, hosiery, jewelry—she loved the ritual of it all, the way it made her feel. She so seldom had the opportunity to indulge in being overtly feminine that she reveled in the fund-raiser occasions. They were crucial to Finders' financial health, but in a more subtle way they were just as crucial to her mental health.

She drove her six-year-old white Toyota SUV to the high school, where the parking lot was already filling with an assortment of cars, trucks, and SUVs, with the latter two far outnumbering the cars. Well-dressed people were walking purposefully toward the gym, because only an idiot stood out in the heat in El Paso in August. Even though the sun had gone down and twilight was gathering, in the short walk to the gym Milla felt perspiration gathering between her breasts.

She always came alone to these fund-raisers, though she could easily have asked Brian or any of the other men who worked at Finders to accompany her. For one thing, fund-raisers were deadly dull and she didn't want to inflict them on anyone else. For another, she was always painfully aware of how she appeared to the people whom she was asking to give money to her cause.

The facts of her particular case were well known, that her baby had been stolen and a year later her marriage had broken under the strain, that she had devoted her life since to searching not only for her child but for other lost ones, too. For some reason, the fact that she was solitary seemed to loosen purse strings. If she started attending fund-raisers with a different man every time, people might begin to think she was spending more time dating than attending to business. When you stayed in business by begging money from these same people, what they thought was important.

She opened one of the heavy double doors to the gym and stepped into blessed cool air. Round tables that seated eight to ten each had been set up on the gymnasium floor, which had been covered with green felt to prevent it from being scuffed and dented. The tables had been covered with white tablecloths, the place settings and napkins precisely arranged, and fresh

flowers stood in the middle of each table. At the head of the room was a long table on a makeshift dais, and a podium. She would be sitting up there with the organizers of the event, the mayor, and the social lights of El Paso who made an effort to help.

She always spoke at these events, and after so many years she no longer needed prepared notes. Her speech was always essentially the same, though details might change; she always told about searches Finders had made, with both good and bad endings. The good ending was to illustrate that Finders provided a beneficial service; the bad ending was to illustrate that, with proper funding, they could do even better. Tonight, Tiera Alverson was very much on her mind. A fourteen-year-old girl shouldn't end her life in a dingy, roach-infested dump, her veins fried with drugs.

Smiling, speaking to people she knew, she began making her way toward the dais. She was about halfway there when a hard, warm hand closed over her elbow to bring her to a halt, then immediately released her. She turned and smiled when she met True Gallagher's narrow, dark gaze. "Hello, True, how are you?"

"You look tired," he said bluntly, ignoring the social niceties.

"Thanks," she replied, her tone wry. "Now I know I wasted a lot of effort."

"I didn't say you look bad. I said you look tired."

"Yeah, but the effort was to make me look less tired."

"Maybe it worked." He surveyed her with his shrewd gaze. "Just how tired are you?"

"Exhausted," she said, and smiled.

"Then it worked."

True was a self-made businessman, a man who had clawed his way out of poverty, and the struggle had made him into a powerful man. That power was still more in the force of his personality than it was in his financial base, but she had no doubt True Gallagher would die a multimillionaire. He was determined and ruthless, and he didn't allow anything to get in his way. Yet from the time he first began enjoying some success, he had been interested in Finders and was one of their steadiest donors.

She didn't know how old True was; he could have been anywhere between thirty-five and forty-five. His face was darkly tanned and weathered by long hours in the west Texas sun, his build was still lean and strong. He was tall, about six-three or -four, and possessed of an animal magnetism that women automatically noticed. Sometimes he brought a date to these events, but just

as often he attended alone. Since he didn't have Miss August clinging to his arm, Milla assumed this was one of his stag appearances.
"Long night?" he asked, a hand on her back urging her to continue to the front of the room and falling into step beside her.
"Last night was. I hope tonight is quieter."
"What happened?"
She wasn't about to do a recital of the entire evening. Instead she said, "It was a bad day. We found the runaway we were looking for, but she was dead."
"Yeah, that's tough. How old was she?"
"Fourteen."
"That's a hard age. Everything feels like the end of the world, and you can't reason with someone who can't see tomorrow."
She couldn't imagine True Gallagher ever suffering from teenage angst, or drug addiction, or any other weakness. She was surprised he even knew about them. He was like ironwood, impervious to his surroundings.
His strength drew her. She enjoyed the not-quite-flirting banter with him, though she was always careful to keep from crossing the line. He was an influential sponsor, and ever letting their relationship become personal would be immensely stupid of her. Business didn't mix very well with pleasure under the best of circumstances; when she depended in part on his largesse to keep Finders operating, having a brief fling with him would have been a recipe for disaster.
Besides, right now she didn't have time for a fling, brief or otherwise. Not only was she incapable of giving her full attention to a romance, her job dictated that she travel a lot. She had tried dating, off and on, since her divorce; if the man was remotely interested in her, he didn't like the amount of time she spent out of town. Unfortunately, that wasn't something she would compromise on, period. She had tried having a couple of affairs, only to have them wither from neglect. She had eventually come to the conclusion that it wasn't fair to either the man or herself to waste his time and hers until the day came when she could devote herself to something other than searching for Justin.
And in her heart, she knew she hadn't yet met a man who could measure up to David in her affections. She was no longer *in* love with him—time and life had taken care of that—but a part of her would always love him for the man he was. She didn't pine for him; she didn't lie awake at night yearning

for him. There was a stark line of demarcation in her life, and David belonged on the other side of the line. But she knew what it was to love, and no one since had kindled that kind of emotion in her.

True Gallagher was thinking of trying. She sensed it, the way women always know those things. The truth was in the way he touched her—always in a public, proper way—but still *touching* her. He hadn't yet made the effort to take their relationship further, but the thought lay there, in the back of his mind. She had no doubt he would eventually get around to trying.

And she would have to find some graceful way of refusing him that wouldn't harm Finders.

The gym was rapidly filling, and Marcia Gonzalez, the chief organizer of the event, was motioning to her and True to take their seats. Milla slid into the seat True held out for her, next to the podium, and somehow she wasn't surprised when he took the seat next to hers. She automatically tucked her legs to the side so there couldn't be any accidental brushes of his leg against hers.

The catering service began delivering the plates of rubber chicken and green beans that were de rigueur for fund-raisers. The chicken was roasted, the green beans had slivers of almonds in them, the rolls were dry. She would have preferred a taco, a hamburger, anything other than more chicken and green beans. At least it was a relatively healthy diet, and she was never tempted to overeat.

True stabbed his chicken as if he were imagining killing it. "Why aren't we ever served roast?" he grumbled. "Or steak?"

"Because a lot of people don't eat red meat."

"This is El Paso. Everyone here eats red meat."

He was probably right, but if anyone in the city didn't eat red meat, they would be in the crowd who attended charity events. The organizers had wisely played it safe. Unfortunately, safe meant chicken and green beans.

True pulled a small shaker from his suit pocket and began sprinkling something red over his food.

"What's that?" Milla asked.

"Southwestern spices. Want some?"

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, please."

She wasn't as liberal with the shaker as True had been, but her taste buds wept with gratitude.

“I’ve been carrying that shaker around for a couple of years now,” he admitted. “It’s saved my life.”
The woman on the other side of him leaned around. “May I borrow it?” she asked, and soon the shaker was making its way down the table, people were smiling, and the level of enthusiasm visibly lifted.
Milla eyed his strong face as they ate. There was something about the cast of his features that made her wonder if he was part Hispanic. She did know that he had strong contacts with the Hispanic community, on both sides of the border.
True had grown up in the mean streets. His contacts weren’t with just the movers and shakers, but with the seamier elements as well. She wondered if he would be able to find out anything about Diaz that she couldn’t.
“Have you ever heard anything about a man named Diaz?” she asked.
Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought he froze for a split second.
“Diaz?” he said. “It’s a common name. I know probably fifty, sixty people named that.”
“This one works the other side of the border. He’s somehow involved with smuggling people across.”
“A coyote.”
“I don’t think so. I don’t think he actually does it himself.” She hesitated, thinking of Brian’s certainty that the four men last night had been handling a body. “He’s probably a killer, too.”
True took a sip of his water. “Why are you asking about someone like that?”
Because she thought he was the son of a bitch who had stolen her baby. She bit back the words and resorted to her own water glass. “I’ll track anyone who might lead me to Justin,” she finally said.
“So you think this Diaz was involved?”
“I *know* the man who took Justin has only one eye, because I clawed out the other one.” She drew a deep, trembling breath. “And I *think* his name is Diaz. It may not be, but the name keeps surfacing. If you could find out anything about a one-eyed man named Diaz, I’d appreciate it.”
“Just having one eye narrows it down. I’ll see what I can learn.”
“Thank you.” She was aware he might use her request as a bridge to other things, but that was a situation she’d have to handle if and when it occurred.
He’d heard the name, she thought. Yes, he probably knew a lot of people with the last name of Diaz, but still, it had meant something to him in the context she meant. For some reason he was being cautious, hiding his cards.

Maybe he'd had dealings with Diaz in his more disreputable past, and he didn't want it known.
Dessert was being served, yellow cake with chocolate icing. She waved hers away but accepted coffee. The time was approaching when she would have to speak, and she wanted to gather her thoughts. These people had paid forty dollars a plate for some truly unremarkable food, and some of them would write a separate check to Finders afterward; she could at least give them a coherent speech.

By ten-thirty, speech made, thank-yous offered, and hands shaken, Milla wearily climbed into her vehicle. As she was about to close the door, True called her name and strode over to her.
"Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?" he asked, with no lead-up or preparational flirting, which she greatly appreciated, because she was so tired now she didn't think she could handle even a mild verbal dance.
"Thank you, but I have another fund-raiser in Dallas tomorrow night." And she looked forward to it almost as much as she would have looked forward to having a tooth pulled.
"And the day after tomorrow?"
She smiled wryly. "The day after tomorrow, I have no idea where I'll be. I can't guarantee anything."
He let a few moments of silence tick by. "That's a hard life, Milla. There's no time for anything personal."
"Believe me, I know." She sighed. "I couldn't go to dinner with you anyway, because of the situation."
"Which is . . . ?"
"You're a sponsor of Finders. I can't risk damaging the organization with my social life."
Another moment of silence. "You're honest," he finally said. "And up front. I admire it, even though I think I'm going to change your mind."
"I think you'll try," she corrected gently.
He laughed, the sound deep and masculine and delicious. "Is that a challenge?"
"No, it's the truth. Nothing on this earth means as much to me as finding my son, and I won't do anything to jeopardize that. Period."
"It's been ten years."

“I don’t care if it’s been twenty.” Because she was so tired, her voice was sharper than she’d intended. What he’d stated was too much along the lines of what her brother, Ross, had said to her, that it was time to put it behind her and get on with her life, as if *Justin’s* life was over and done with, as if love had a time limit on it. “I don’t care if it takes the rest of my life.”
“It’s a hard road you’ve set for yourself to travel.”
“It’s the only road I can see.”
He lightly slapped her door and stepped back. “For now. I’ll find out what I can about this Diaz you’re hunting, and get back to you. Until then, be careful.”
That was an odd thing to say. She stared at him, the words penetrating her bone-deep weariness. “You know something, don’t you? About Diaz.”
He didn’t answer directly, instead saying, “I’ll see what I can find out.” He walked toward his own car, and Milla stared after him.
Yes, he definitely knew something. And what he knew must not be good, for him to be warning her to be careful.
A chill ran down her spine despite the heat that lingered even this late at night. She was on the right track. She knew it. And following it might well get her killed.

6

Sometime during the night, Milla woke with a thought crystal clear in her mind: she hadn’t looked at the cell phone display of the number for the call telling her about the meeting in Guadalupe. The number might not be important, but then again . . . it might. Still groggy from fatigue and sleep, she stumbled out of bed and turned on the overhead light, blinking in the painful brightness. She retrieved the phone from her purse, turned it on, then went through the menu to the most recent calls. There it was, and it was an El Paso exchange.
She had already hit *redial* when she glanced at the clock and saw it was twenty after two. Hastily she pressed the *end* button. Whoever it was would wait until the morning, and probably be more cooperative for it.
She wrote the number down, turned out the light, and went back to bed. This time she dreamed disjointed fragments that made no sense and were immediately forgotten each time she roused enough to realize she was

dreaming. Despite her restless sleep she woke at her usual time, five-thirty, feeling almost normal. Today was Sunday, she realized, the one day of the week she didn't go to the office—unless something came up. At least half the time, though, something came up. Children didn't care what day of the week it was when they wandered away from home, nor did kidnappers fret about it.

She stayed in bed another fifteen minutes, luxuriating in the lack of urgency. She so seldom got to sleep late that she almost never *did*, even when she had the chance, but it was nice not to have to leap out of bed and get a start on the day.

Just as she was about to get up, the phone rang. She groaned as she threw back the covers and jumped up. She was accustomed to calls at all hours of the night—and early morning—but they almost always meant a job and her stomach tightened as she answered the call.

"Milla, this is True Gallagher. Did I wake you?"

Surprise had her sitting down on the bed. "No, I'm an early riser. So are you, I see."

"Actually, I've been up all night gathering information for you, and I wanted to talk to you before I go to the office."

"You stayed up all night?" She hadn't intended for him to put himself out that much. Then she said, "You go to the office on Sunday?"

He chuckled. "Not usually, but there's something I have to deal with today."

"I hate that you stayed awake all night on my account. I'm sorry. It wasn't urgent; you could have waited until tomorrow."

"The people I needed to talk to aren't people you can catch during the daytime."

"I understand. I should have realized that." She herself certainly dealt with that sort of character often enough.

"I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that I did dig up some info on the Diaz I think you're hunting, but the bad news is it probably won't do you any good."

"What do you mean?"

"You're looking for the man who took your baby, aren't you? That would mean he was operational in Chihuahua ten years ago. This Diaz wasn't. He started popping up about five years ago."

Sharp disappointment speared her, because that name was the only one she'd ever heard mentioned in connection with kidnapping. "Are you

certain?”
“As certain as I can be, under the circumstances. This guy doesn’t exactly leave a paper trail. But be glad he isn’t the one you’re looking for, because he’s bad news all the way. The word is he’s an assassin. If you want somebody to disappear, you put the word out, and Diaz will contact you. He tracks down his target and takes care of your problem. He’s supposed to be damn good at it, too. People hear he’s on their track and they run, but he always finds them. In some circles that’s the only name he has, the Tracker.”
“Are you sure this Diaz isn’t one-eyed?”
“Positive.”
She grasped at the only other straw she had. “I heard a rumor that perhaps he employs a gang of coyotes, so maybe the man who took Justin works for him.”
“I doubt it. I didn’t turn up anything like that. As far as I was able to find out, Diaz always works alone.”
She could almost feel another opportunity dying away like bubbles under her fingers, just as previous ones had, for ten years. She would hear something, get her hopes up that she was finally making progress, then—nothing. No new information, no progress, and no Justin.
“Could there be another Diaz?” She was grabbing at another bubble and she knew it, but what else could she do? Stop grabbing?
He blew out a weary breath. “Too many of them. I know a few of them myself, men I wouldn’t want to turn my back on. But I was able to eliminate some because they were otherwise accounted for during the pertinent time period.”
In jail, he meant. “And the others? Do any of them have just one eye?”
“I still have a few inquiries out. But when people these days say ‘Diaz,’ they’re talking about the killer. I’m not surprised his name surfaced when you asked questions, but I’m damn glad you won’t have to deal with him.”
She would gladly deal with Satan himself if it would help her find Justin.
“All I want is information,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “I don’t even care about justice anymore. I just want to ask some questions. If you do find a Diaz who might have been involved ten years ago, can you get word to him that I won’t turn him in, that I just want to talk?” That was a lie. Regardless of what the one-eyed man’s name was, she wanted to kill him. After she talked to him, of course. But she would do whatever she had to

do, and if letting him walk was necessary, she'd let him walk. She would hate it, but she'd do it.
"I can give it a shot, but don't get your hopes up. And do me a favor."
"If I can."
"Go through me if you need to contact anyone, or find out anything. It's too dangerous for you to be going after these guys yourself. It would be better to keep your name out of it entirely, so you aren't on their radar."
"My name isn't in the phone book. The address on my business cards is Finders' address."
"That helps, but it wouldn't hurt to put another layer of protection between you and them. I know how to deal with them."
"But isn't that putting you in danger? I've built a reputation through Finders for years now that all we're interested in is recovery of people, not in police work, so why would they trust you more than they would me?"
"Because of some people I know," he said flatly. His voice softened. "Let me help, Milla. Let me do this."
Instinct told her not to take his offer, that doing so would allow him to get closer to her than she knew was smart. He wasn't couching his offer in personal terms, but the tone of his voice was very personal. On the other hand, he was an asset she could use; he'd found out more about Diaz—assuming they were talking about the same man—in one night than she had in two years.
"All right," she said, letting her reluctance show. "But I don't like it."
"I can tell." There was a smile in his voice now that he had gotten his way. "Trust me, it's the smart thing to do."
"I know it's smart for me; I just hope it isn't a bad move for you. I can't thank you enough for going to all this trouble—"
"Sure you can. If you're in town tomorrow night, have dinner with me."
"No," she said firmly. "The reason I gave you last night still stands."
"Ah well, it was worth a try." He smoothly changed subjects. "When is your flight to Dallas?"
"Two something."
"Are you coming back tonight?"
"No, I'll stay the night and catch the first flight out tomorrow morning."
"Take care, then, and I'll talk to you when you get back."
"I will. And thank you. Oh—" she said, abruptly thinking of something. "Did you find out Diaz's first name? The assassin Diaz, that is. We can use

that to sort out all these rumors we hear, and discard the ones pertaining to him."

"No, I didn't get his first name," he said, but there was the tiniest hesitation that again made her think he knew more than he was telling.

Since he was going out of his way to help her, though, she wasn't about to give him grief about his overprotectiveness. She thanked him again, said good-bye, and began preparing for her trip to Dallas.

She had laundry to do, bills to write checks for, some light housekeeping; outside of laundry, dust was her biggest cleaning problem. But she liked her house to look nice and smell nice, so she made the effort. Every week she freshened the potpourri she had in each room, so whenever she came home she was greeted by a wonderful scent. Sometimes that was the only comfort she could find.

By nine-thirty, her last load of laundry was in the clothes dryer. She put stamps on the envelopes she was mailing and decided to take them to the post office rather than leave them in her box overnight, since her credit card payment was among the bunch. She grabbed her car keys, then at the last minute checked to make certain the phone number the tipster used was still on her cell phone. Sometimes the numbers disappeared, and she didn't know why. Perhaps she was hitting some combination of keys that told numbers to go away, but for whatever reason, it happened. Sure enough, when she pulled up the menu and accessed her incoming call log, nothing was there. Nothing. Not a single number.

She puffed out her cheeks in frustration, then ran upstairs to get the scrap of paper on which she'd scribbled the number last night. Thank goodness she'd written it down. She could go by the office, take care of some paperwork, and check the number on the computer there.

The warehouse was closed on Sunday, the gravel parking lot usually empty. Today, however, Joann's red Jeep Cherokee was parked right next to the door. Milla parked beside the Cherokee and climbed the steep flight of exterior stairs that led to the second floor. When she tried to open the door, she found it locked, which was good, since Joann had been here alone. Milla unlocked the heavy steel door and went in, calling, "Joann?" both to locate her friend and to let her know someone else was here. To be on the safe side, she locked the door behind her.

"In here," Joann called, and came out of the break room. "I'm nuking some popcorn, but I've got another bag. Want some?"

“No, thanks, I had a real breakfast.”
“Popcorn is real. And I had a Pop-Tart, too.”
Joann was a junk-food junkie, which made it all the more amazing that she was so trim. She was forty, divorced, had an eighteen-year-old son, who had left the week before to spend what was left of the summer with his dad before heading off to college, and she looked no older than thirty. She wore her blond hair cut almost boy-short, and her blue eyes held a permanent twinkle. Joann was often the voice of reason when emotions erupted out of control in the office, which happened on a regular basis. The job they did was so intense, and sometimes so heartbreaking, that mini-crises were the rule rather than the exception.
“Why are you here today?” Milla asked.
“Paperwork, what else? How about you?”
Milla sighed. “Paperwork. And I wanted to run a phone number through the computer.”
“What phone number?”
“The one that came in on my cell phone Friday afternoon, with the tip about Diaz. It’s an El Paso exchange, so I’m curious.”
“Have you called it?”
“Not yet. I started to last night, but it was late—or early—and I decided to wait. And if I can find out who I’m calling beforehand, so much the better.”
She went into her office and booted up her computer. While the machine was going through its digital contortions, she turned around to her desk and flipped through the stack of paperwork to pull out those things she could get finished in the short amount of time she had.
Their computer system needed updating, she thought as she listened to the beeps and whirs behind her. That was one more expense that was continually shoved to the back burner, because there was always something more important, more urgent, that took their funds. As long as their current system still worked, she couldn’t justify spending thousands to upgrade.
When the booting was complete, she swiveled her chair around, went on-line, pulled up Google, and typed in the phone number. In two seconds, she had the name of the service station where the call had been placed, and the address. Behind her, she heard Joann come into the office.
“Find anything?”
“It’s a service station.”

Joann leaned her hip on the desk and waited as Milla dialed the number. It was answered on the fifth ring. “Service station.”
An informative greeting, Milla thought. “Hello, this is Milla with Finders, and we received a call from your location about six P.M. Friday afternoon. Can you tell me—”
“Sorry,” the man said impatiently. “This is a pay phone. I don’t have time to watch everybody who uses it. You get a crank call?”
“No, it was a legitimate call; I’m just trying to get in touch with the man who made it.”
“I can’t help ya. Sorry.” He hung up, and Milla blew out a frustrated breath as she followed suit.
“What did he say?” Joann asked impatiently.
“Yes,” said a low, emotionless voice behind them. “What did he say?”
Joann jumped and gave a startled little squeak as she whirled. Milla stood up so abruptly her chair shot backward and crashed into her desk, and somehow she ended up standing beside Joann, frozen, staring at the man who blocked her office door. Chills ran up and down her spine, and her heart thundered in her chest. They had been alone in the office. The door was locked. How had he gotten in? What did he want?
He wasn’t carrying a weapon, at least none that she could see. But though his hands were empty, she wasn’t reassured, because his eyes were the coldest, most remote eyes she’d ever seen. She was looking into the eyes of a killer, and though she was so frightened she was shaking, there was something mesmerizing about that gaze and she found herself unable to look away. Like a cobra, she thought, hypnotizing its prey before it struck. There was a preternatural stillness about him, as if he wasn’t quite human. Beside her, Joann was breathing in rapid little gasps, her eyes round as she stared unblinkingly at the intruder. Milla touched Joann’s hand in reassurance and Joann immediately grabbed her hand in a death grip.
The man looked briefly at their clasped hands, then back up to their faces. “Don’t make me ask again,” he said, still in that totally empty tone.
That voice. She knew that voice. But panic was still beating through her veins, and she couldn’t solidify the memory. Milla swallowed and managed to get the words out of her tight throat, but her voice was strained. “It was a pay phone. The man said he didn’t know who used it, that he was too busy to pay attention.”

A slight dip of his eyelids was the only acknowledgment the intruder gave of her answer.
There was no way they could get past him. He wasn't a huge man, but he was big enough, about six-one, maybe six-two, with a lean, hard build that said he was all muscle and strength, with a dash of rattlesnake quickness thrown in. He was darkness, a shadow filled with almost palpable menace.
Then she knew, and she felt dizzy as blood rushed from her head. She reached out and grabbed the edge of the desk for support. "You're the man who knocked me down," she said, the words thin and shocked. And in that instant she realized something else, something that made her knees shake and almost give way. *"You're Diaz."*
Still his expression didn't change. "I heard you wanted to talk to me," he said.

7

Oh, God. *Diaz.* She remembered what True had said, that Diaz was an assassin, and she believed him. She had no doubt at all.
She should have expected this. True had told her just a few hours ago that people would put out the word they wanted Diaz, and he would find them. She had announced to a cantina full of men that she would pay a reward to anyone who could give her information about Diaz, knowing he was in the area, maybe even listening. Maybe she should be surprised it had taken Diaz thirty-six hours to show up; he could have been waiting for her yesterday morning. Then she remembered giving the men in the cantina her real name, *Milla Edge,* instead of *Milla Boone* as she usually did. Her telephone was listed under "Edge"; when she'd told True that her name wasn't listed in the phone book, she'd meant "Milla Boone." True himself had her home number only because she'd scribbled it on the back of one of her business cards. If Diaz had been on the ball, he could have broken into her condo before she'd even gotten up that morning.
Or maybe he'd just had something more interesting to do.
He stepped inside the office and closed the door, then moved to the side so his back wasn't to all that glass. In doing so he blocked their exit past the open end of Milla's U-shaped desk; if they wanted out from behind the desk, they would have to vault over it.

He dragged one of the chairs over and sat down, then stretched his legs out and crossed one booted foot over the other. “I’m here,” he said. “Talk.”
Part of Milla’s mind was blank; what did one say to an assassin? Hello, nice to meet you? But the other half of her brain was connecting dots and reaching obvious conclusions. Obviously, Diaz wasn’t the one-eyed man. But he had been observing the meeting on Friday night, so he was either hunting one of the men involved or was following them, expecting them to lead him to his target. She suspected the latter, because all he had done was watch them. And if anyone could find the one-eyed man, it was Diaz. He might know where the bastard was at this very moment.
Slowly she pulled Joann to the side, and stepped in front of her. It wasn’t fair that Joann should be dragged into the middle of this when it was all Milla’s doing, and her problem to solve. Milla pulled her chair out of the protective U of her desk and sat down, her knees almost touching his legs, though she was careful to keep that precious inch of space between them.
“I’m Milla Edge,” she began.
“I know.”
His complete lack of facial expression was unnerving. Everything about him was unnerving, yet she knew she could have walked past him on the street and not looked twice. He wasn’t a slavering madman, as would have befitted a homicidal maniac; instead he seemed very controlled and detached. His black hair was cropped short and his jaw was covered with a day’s worth of stubble, but that wasn’t disreputable. His olive drab T-shirt was clean, as were his black jeans and black rubber-soled boots. The short sleeves of the T-shirt clung to his biceps, but his arms were sinewy rather than bulky, roped with muscles and veins. If he had a weapon on him, she thought, it had to be tucked into one of his boots. That wasn’t terribly reassuring, nor was the fact that he was sitting in such a relaxed posture. A snake could strike without warning, but the line of poetry that began running through her head wasn’t about snakes; it was about a panther. Ogden Nash had said, “If called by a panther, don’t anther.” And yet she had called one to her, and now she had to deal with it.
Except for the brief time he’d glanced at Joann’s grip on her hand, he hadn’t once looked away from Milla’s face, and that was the most unnerving thing of all.
“I’m told you find people,” she said softly.

Behind her, Joann made an abrupt movement. “Milla—” she began sharply, and Milla knew she was going to say this wasn’t a good idea, maybe she should reconsider, and all the other sensible things that could be said. Diaz’s gaze didn’t waver, and Milla lifted her hand to forestall her friend’s objections.
“Sometimes,” Diaz said.
“The one-eyed man, at that meeting Friday night. I want to find him.”
“He’s nothing. He isn’t important.” There was a slight inflection to his speech, not in his tone but in the way he shaped his words, as if perhaps English wasn’t his first language. He spoke English perfectly and with a west Texas accent, but there was still something, beyond his name, that spoke of Mexico. If he’d been born in the United States, she’d find a hat and eat it.
“He’s important to me,” she said, and drew a breath. Success was once again singing its Lorelei song, beckoning to her. This man gave her a real shot at finding out what had happened to her son, and if she was dealing with the devil, then so be it. “Ten years ago, my six-week-old son was stolen from me. My ex-husband is a doctor; he and some of his colleagues had set up a free clinic in one of the poorer areas of Chihuahua and we lived there for a year. My baby was born there. I was at the market and two men jerked him away from me, but I fought back, and clawed out the left eye of the man who had my son. The other man stabbed me in the back, and they both escaped. I haven’t seen my baby since.”
Something was glimmering in his gaze, some minute change that signaled a sharpening of his attention. “So you’re the one.”
“The one?” she parroted.
“Who blinded that pig Pavón.”
Pavón. Oh, my God, that was his name. After ten years, *she knew his name*. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, her hands clenching into fists. Her heartbeat had been settling down a bit, but now it was thundering even harder in her chest, deafening her with the roar of blood through her veins. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. She wanted to jump up and find him *right now*; she wanted to slam his head against a wall until he gave her the answers she wanted. But two of those things she couldn’t do, and one she refused to do, so instead she pressed her violently trembling fists against her eyes and fought for control.
“Do you know his first name?” she asked in a constricted voice.

“Arturo.”
Arturo Pavón. The letters branded themselves in her mind. Just as she had never forgotten his face, she would never forget his name, or this moment. For so long she had struggled and persisted with practically nothing to go on; now all of a sudden things were changing so fast she felt as if her world had tilted on its axis. Logically, she had known she would likely never find Justin. Emotionally, she had been unable to stop looking. Now, at last, the real possibility existed that she might at least be able to find out if he had *lived*. And if she could actually find him, find her little boy . . .
“Can you find him?” she asked, leaning forward as if by sheer force of will she could bend events to her wishes. “I want to talk to him. I want to find out what he did with my son—”
“Your baby was sold,” he said flatly. “Pavón wouldn’t know to who. He’s a *pendejo*, a *gañan.*”
Milla blinked. *Gañan* she understood: “thug.” But unless she was mistaken, Diaz had also called Pavón a pubic hair. Obviously she missed some of the nuances of idiomatic Mexican Spanish. “He’s a what?”
“He’s nothing. He’s a little man who follows orders.” Diaz shrugged. “He’s also a mean, worthless son of a bitch, but the bottom line is he doesn’t have any authority.”
“He’s still my only link, and I have to follow the chain to find my son.”
“You can follow the chain, but the odds are it won’t lead anywhere except back on itself. Smugglers don’t keep records. He’ll remember *you*, of course, and probably your baby, but all he’ll know is that the baby was taken across the border and sold. That’s it.”
She couldn’t accept that the trail led nowhere. Pavón wouldn’t have been in any shape to take Justin to the border himself; the most likely person to have done that was the second man, the one who stabbed her. Pavón would know that man’s name. And when she found that man, he would know another name. If she just kept digging, eventually she would find Justin.
“I still want to find him,” she said stubbornly. “You were watching him that night, you kept me from—”
“—getting yourself killed.”
“Yes,” she admitted. “Probably. Not that protecting me was your intention, you just didn’t want them to know anyone was watching. But since you’re trailing him anyway, why can’t you—”

“I’m not tracking him in particular,” Diaz interrupted. “I’m following the snake back to its head.”
“But you know where he is.”
“No. I don’t.”
She felt like screaming in frustration. She wouldn’t accept a dead end now; she simply wouldn’t. “You can find him.”
“I can find anyone. Eventually.”
“Because you don’t give up. I can’t give up, either. If it’s a matter of money, of course I’ll pay you.” She couldn’t in good conscience let Finders foot the bill, but she would give him every penny she had in savings, and beg more from David if she had to. Not that there would be any begging to it; David would do anything to help her find Justin.
Diaz regarded her with a faint gleam of curiosity in his eyes, as if she were an alien species and he couldn’t figure out what made her tick. He was a man who evidently felt very little; she was a woman who felt, perhaps, too much. Since she couldn’t appeal to his emotions, she tried instead to appeal to his logic. “Finders has a huge network of people, contacts you can’t imagine. If you help me, I’ll help you.”
“I don’t need help.” His gaze was cold and remote again. “And I work alone.”
There had to be something she could offer him. “A green card?” She could pull in some favors, get some corners cut.
For the first time there was a real expression on his face: amusement. “I’m an American citizen.”
“What, then?” she asked in frustration. “Why won’t you take the job? I’m not asking you to kill anyone; just help me find him.” Or maybe that was it; maybe he got off on the thrill of the hunt, the struggle to the death.
“What makes you think I would kill anyone for you?” His voice had gone soft again, his face hard and blank.
Normally she was discreet about her informants, but her nerves were like jagged shards of glass slicing at her. Somehow, any way she could, she had to convince Diaz to help her. “True Gallagher pulled together some information for me, on anyone named Diaz who could have been connected to my son’s kidnapping.”
“True Gallagher . . .” he repeated, as if trying out the name on his tongue.
“He’s one of our sponsors.”
“And this information said . . . ?” he prompted.

“That you’re an assassin.” She didn’t hide the truth, or try to be coy about it. Perhaps he wasn’t an assassin, but she still had no doubt he could kill and had killed. And if he was, knowing that she had both eyes wide open concerning him and was still willing to hire him might make a difference in his decision.

Joann made a small sound of shock, but he didn’t look at her.

“Your informant is wrong. There are reasons for which I would kill. I may get paid, but the money isn’t why I kill.”

Which in no way said that he hadn’t killed, or that he wouldn’t kill again. But oddly enough, she believed him, and felt reassured. At least he had some sort of moral compass, a standard to which he held himself.

He steepled his hands, watching her over his fingertips as he seemed to be contemplating something. Finally he said, “Tell me about this tip you got about me on Friday night.”

“I don’t have a lot to tell. The caller was a Hispanic man. All he said was that you would be at a meeting behind the church in Guadalupe, at ten-thirty. The call was made from that service station, and the owner doesn’t know anything about it.”

She couldn’t read what was going on behind those cold, dark eyes, but she could imagine he was sorting through acquaintances and possibilities.

“At the time, I thought Pavón’s name could be Diaz,” she explained. “All I had were vague rumors that a man named Diaz was involved in some disappearances. I thought you could be the one-eyed man, because your name kept coming up in connection with him.”

“I have no connection with him.”

“I heard that he works for you.”

His eyes went even colder.

“The point is, I’ve had feelers out for information about you for two years. Anyone could have called.” She paused, another point occurring to her. “Though, since I’ve been offering rewards from the beginning, it’s strange that I’d get an anonymous tip and there wasn’t any effort to collect on the offer.”

“Not just anyone would have information about my whereabouts.”

And he didn’t like it.

“Who knew where you would be?” she asked. “Anyone you told, obviously. And the person who gave *you* the tip about the meeting.”

“I didn’t tell anyone, so that narrows the list of possibilities. The question is, why?”
“Brian and I thought you were being set up, but that obviously wasn’t the case. Pavón and the others had no idea you were there.”
“Brian,” he said. “That would be the man hiding on the other side of the cemetery?”
So he’d seen Brian, too. She nodded. “He works for Finders, too. We’d been out on a case and were on our way home when I got the call.”
Something was going on. It was almost as if she had been deliberately thrown in Diaz’s path. She didn’t have to read his expression to know what was going through his mind, because she was having the same thoughts.
“I’ll help you,” he said abruptly, and flowed to his feet. “I’ll be in touch.”
He left the office and a few seconds later they heard the sound of the outer door closing. Milla and Joann stared at each other, then turned as one and raced to the window to see where he went.
The stairs to the office were empty. So was the parking lot. There was no sign of him, and though Milla opened the door and listened for the sound of a car engine being cranked, she heard nothing. It was as if he’d disappeared.
“I know how he got out,” she said, bemused. “But how did he get in?”
“I don’t know,” Joann moaned, collapsing into the nearest chair. “My God, I’ve never been so scared in my life! He was probably already in here when I arrived. If he’d wanted, he could have done anything.”
Milla went from window to window, checking to see if any of them showed signs of being forced. She wasn’t a detective; nevertheless, she didn’t see any new scratch marks on the latches, nor were any of the windows broken. Whatever method he’d used for gaining entrance, he hadn’t left any obvious evidence of it.
Joann was visibly trembling. “I can’t believe you sat down and talked to him, as cool as pie. That’s the scariest man I’ve ever seen.”
“Did I look cool?” Milla swallowed and found herself a chair, too. “I couldn’t have. I was shaking so hard I could barely stand, so I had to sit down.”
“I didn’t notice. I thought he was going to kill us. His eyes—it was like looking at my own death.”
“But he didn’t kill us, and he gave us information I’ve been trying for ten years to get.” Milla closed her eyes. “Arturo Pavón. I have a name. Finally, I have a name! Do you know what this means?” Tears scorched her eyes

and seeped from beneath her closed lids. “I have a real chance now of finding my baby; for the first time I have a chance!”

8

The fund-raiser in Dallas was more successful than she'd hoped; not only did the event produce money, but Finders also picked up a corporate sponsor, a software company that had promised to upgrade their computer system. Visions of new computers danced in Milla's head, but that wasn't what kept her awake in her hotel bed that night.

Excitement zinged through her every time she thought of what had happened that morning. She felt as if she had plunged headlong into a fire and emerged unscathed; she was almost giddy with hope. She wanted to call David, wanted to tell him that at last she was making real progress, that she had the kidnapper's name and an expert—what else could she call Diaz?—was helping her locate him. She wanted to share her elation with someone, and who better than Justin's father?

But that was a call she refused to let herself make. David wasn't her husband now. He had another family, and Milla was very wary about intruding on it. She didn't know, and wouldn't ask, if David's wife had a problem with the money he gave her every year. As much as possible Milla had tried to make the break a clean one, to not give the new Mrs. Boone any reason for anger.

The *new* Mrs. Boone? Milla had to laugh at herself. David's wife's name was Jenna, she was a very nice woman, and she had been married to David twice as long as Milla had been.

When she had something concrete about Justin, then she'd call David. She didn't keep him abreast of every rumor and development. He called her about twice a year, and that was when she brought him up to date on any progress, which for ten years had been precious little. To keep things as smooth as possible in his private live, she never called him. Period. A surgeon's wife had enough everyday hassle, with her husband's long hours and emergencies that seemed timed for whenever he sat down to dinner or they were about to leave for vacation. There was no need to add calls from an ex-wife to the turmoil.

She couldn't contain the excitement, the sense of expectation, so she gave up trying to will herself to sleep and instead went over and over everything that had happened and been said that morning, from the time of True's call to the moment Diaz had vanished.

The biggest mystery for her—though perhaps not for Diaz—was who had called her about the meeting in Guadalupe, and why. The reason couldn't be the reward, since the call was anonymous. But someone had put her in Diaz's way, and she didn't know if the intent had been to help or to harm. Diaz could just as easily have killed her, rather than knocking her out. And after meeting him, she didn't think killing her would have cost him any sleep.

She wracked her brain but couldn't come up with any logical reason for the call, and finally she decided to simply count her blessings. Perhaps Diaz was a mixed blessing, but still, in the space of a few minutes he had given her priceless information and offered her the best chance she'd had yet of finding Justin.

She couldn't believe she'd actually talked him into helping them. She couldn't believe she had sat down so close to him that only a couple of inches had been separating their knees, and pretended she wasn't terrified of him. His were the coldest, emptiest eyes she'd ever seen, as if no emotion touched him. She would almost call him a sociopath, except he did seem to have some internal braking mechanism on his inherent violence. He *knew* right from wrong, she thought, but he didn't *feel* it. If he chose to do what he perceived as right, it was a mental decision rather than an emotional one. But because of that, she thought she could deal with him. They—the Finders—weren't in danger from him. He could have killed her and Brian that night in Guadalupe, simply for being in his way, but he hadn't because they weren't a threat to him—to his purpose, maybe, but not to *him*. So long as she was fairly certain of his boundaries, she thought she could trust him and work with him.

She hoped.

Considering True's reaction to Diaz's name, she decided to keep it quiet that the man himself had turned up in her office. True had a protective streak that she found charming even though she knew she had to keep her distance from him. He might call the police, which was the last thing she wanted. She thought about asking True to find out what he could on Arturo Pavón, but decided against it. For one thing, he would want to know how she came up with the name, and she didn't like the idea of outright lying to him, when he had been so helpful. For another, Diaz wouldn't like it. She didn't know how she knew that, but she was certain of it. Diaz liked to work alone, with very few people, if any, knowing his whereabouts or what he was doing. If

both he and True were searching for Pavón, they might very well cross trails. No, he wouldn't like that at all. He might even stop helping her, and no way would she risk that.
So, the fewer people who knew about Diaz, the better. She made a mental note to call Joann first thing in the morning, before she went to the office, and tell her not to mention Diaz to anyone.

She caught the first flight out of Dallas for El Paso, swung by the condo to leave her luggage, then continued on to the office. As early as it was, the heat was already becoming oppressive, reminding her of how much she looked forward to winter.
When she entered the office, she saw at once that Brian was in a playful mood, which always took the form of teasing Olivia and trying to drive her mad. Today he was giving her fashion advice, and it wasn't going over well at all, much to the amusement of everyone else within hearing distance, which was most of the staff.
"You should try a new hairstyle," he was saying as he lounged on the corner of her desk. "Something flirty. And bigger. You know, with waves and swoops and things."
Every feminist principle she possessed insulted, Olivia gave him a long, cold stare. "Who do I look like, Farrah fucking Fawcett?"
"No, but you could try," he said seriously.
Brian was young and big and fast, but for a moment Milla thought that might not be enough to save his life. Olivia slowly stood up until they were almost nose to nose, which, at five-two, she was able to do only because he was sitting on her desk. "Little boy," she said deliberately, "I've destroyed better men than you: used them up, wrung them dry, and thrown them away. Don't try playing out of your league."
Brian did *obtuse* really well. "What?" he said, looking bewildered. "I'm just trying to help. You know, give you some pointers and stuff."
"Really. I didn't know Neanderthals were fashion experts."
He grinned. "A little fur goes a long way."
"I'm sure you'd know."
Joann caught Milla's eye and gestured toward Milla's office. Milla looked and almost groaned aloud when she saw who was waiting for her. Mrs. Roberta Hatcher was searching for her missing husband, who had disappeared one weekend several weeks ago while she was in Austin

visiting her sister. Since Mr. Hatcher's clothing was also missing, as well as his car and half the money in their checking account, the police had correctly concluded foul play wasn't involved, that Mr. Hatcher had left of his own free will, and there was nothing they could do. She had then turned to Finders for help, and refused to take no for an answer.

Casting a cautious look at Brian and Olivia—Milla hoped Olivia's antiviolence philosophy would continue to hold—she stepped into her office and smiled at Mrs. Hatcher. "Good morning, Roberta. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Roberta shook her head. She was a pleasant, graying dumpling of a woman, in her late fifties, with the kind of round, cheerful face that looked most natural when wreathed in a smile. Since Benny Hatcher had disappeared one sunny afternoon, however, her eyes were often red-rimmed from weeping and Milla had yet to see the woman smile.

If she could get her hands on Mr. Hatcher, Milla thought, she would gladly strangle him. How dare he put his wife through this? If he wanted to leave, he should at least have had the guts and the courtesy to *tell* her, instead of leaving her twisting in the wind like this. Her heart would still be broken, of course, but at least she would know what was going on, that he was alive, and what her legal status was. She was in limbo, she was suffering, and Mr. Hatcher needed to have his ass kicked.

"Please help me," Roberta said in a low, scratchy voice, as if she had cried so much her throat was raw and swollen. Milla knew all too well how that felt. "I know you said he isn't a missing person, that he walked away under his own power and of his own accord, but don't you see, I don't *know* that, not for certain. What if some con man talked him into something, and now he's lost all his money and he's ashamed to come home, or he's hurt or even dead? I checked into a few private detective agencies like you told me to do, but I can't afford them. Even the cheapest one is way out of my budget. Please."

"I can't," Milla said, just as upset as Mrs. Hatcher. "We're in the same boat you're in. We don't have unlimited funding; we pinch every penny and make do with what we have or we do without. Look at this office. You can see we save most of our funds for our searches. The odds are that Mr. Hatcher left you and didn't have the courage to tell you. How can I justify using our resources to locate someone who almost certainly left of his own free will?"

“But can’t you check his social security records to find out if he’s working somewhere?”
“That takes a special subscription service, and we don’t have it. The people we track are lost, not hiding.” She rubbed her forehead, trying to think of a solution. “Have you tried the Salvation Army? They locate lost relatives. I believe it’s a one-time-only free service and I don’t know if they do it under these circumstances, but perhaps they can help.”
“The Salvation Army?” Roberta murmured. “I didn’t know they did things like that.”
“They do, but as I said, I don’t know their requirements. If they can’t help you, then please see a lawyer. Do what you can to protect yourself legally.”
A single tear dripped down Roberta’s cheek. “I haven’t told the children,” she said raggedly. “How do I tell them their father just walked away?”
She had two sons, both married and with their own children. “You just tell them,” Milla said. “You have to, rather than letting them find out some other way. What if he calls them? Then they’ll be angry at you for not telling them what was going on.”
“I suppose.” She wiped her cheek. “I guess I keep hoping he’ll come home and they’ll never have to know.”
“It’s been almost three weeks,” Milla said gently. “Even if he did come back now, would you take him back? Do you still want him?”
Another tear rolled down. “He doesn’t love me, does he? If he did, he wouldn’t have done this. He *couldn’t* have. I know I’ve let myself go a tad, but I’m almost sixty and it’s all right to be gray-haired when you’re sixty, isn’t it? Benny always kept himself in good shape, though. And he has only a little gray in his hair.”
“Could he have a girlfriend?” Milla hated to say it, even though she knew the police had already asked Roberta the same question. At the time, in shock, worried out of her mind and terrified that her life was falling apart, Roberta had automatically rejected the idea.
Now, however, her face crumpled and she put her hand over her eyes. “I don’t know,” she sobbed. “He could have. He played golf almost every day. I never checked up on him. I *trusted* him.”
Milla supposed there were people who willingly played golf even in the most searing heat, but every day? She doubted it. And so did Roberta, now that she was seeing things from a different perspective.

“Please, see a lawyer,” Milla said again. “And change your bank account. I bet you haven’t done that, have you? His name is still on the account. What if he empties it out? What will you do then?”
“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Roberta moaned, rocking back and forth a little in her distress. She began blindly pawing through her purse. Guessing what she needed, Milla pulled a tissue from the box on her desk and pressed it into Roberta’s hand.
After a few moments of wiping and blowing, Roberta took a deep breath. “I guess I’ve been acting like an old fool these past few weeks. I need to wake up and see what’s what. He left me. I might try the Salvation Army thing, but you’re right: first off, I need to change the bank account and protect what’s left.” Her chin quivered. “I’ll call the boys tonight and tell them what’s happening. I can’t believe he’s done this. Leaving me is one thing, but what about the boys? He’s always had such a good relationship with them. He has to know this will change everything, so I guess he doesn’t care about that, either.”
Milla didn’t say anything to that, though she suspected that eventually Mr. Hatcher would contact his sons, say he was sorry and so on, and expect everything to be as it was before. Some people simply didn’t see the consequences of their actions, or they figured they could work things out. She didn’t think this could ever be worked out, but it wasn’t her call.
Roberta’s eyes were red and swollen but her head was up and her stride brisk as she left the office. The door was barely closed behind her when Milla’s phone rang. She punched the button and sank into her chair, feeling exhausted already.
“This is Milla.”
“Hi, sweetie. Are you free for lunch today?”
It was Susanna Kosper, the obstetrician who had delivered Justin at the tiny free clinic in Mexico. Life was funny sometimes; Susanna and Rip, her husband, had liked the Mexican people so much that they had settled in El Paso to practice. That way they were still in the United States but close to the culture they enjoyed. They still made at least two trips a year into different parts of Mexico.
Susanna made an effort to stay in touch with Milla, and considering an obstetrician’s busy schedule, that was saying something. There was a link between them because Susanna had been in the clinic that awful day, and she and Rip had been part of David’s desperate struggle to save Milla’s life.

Sometimes a couple of months would slip by without contact between the two women, because of their hectic schedules, but whenever they could they'd have lunch together. Such plans had to be spur-of-the-moment, but somehow they usually made it work.
"Unless something comes up," Milla said. "Where and when?"
"Twelve-thirty. Dolly's."
Dolly's was a trendy little café that served chick food and was always busy at lunch, packed with women who wanted something lighter than the usual fare. A few businessmen ate there, but for the most part men stayed far, far away from the dainty chairs and tables in Dolly's.
As Milla hung up, Joann stuck her head in the door. "I haven't mentioned him," she said in a low voice, and she didn't have to elaborate. "He called first thing this morning. At least I think it was him. His voice gives me the creeps, and I got big-time goose bumps with this call, so I'm pretty sure who it was."
Milla wasn't even hearing his voice, and her skin roughened with a chill. Absently she rubbed her arms. "What did he want?"
"He didn't say. He asked if you were here. I said no, told him what time your flight would be in and what time I expected you, and he hung up."
"Did you give him my cell phone number?"
Joann looked worried. "No. I started to, but I didn't know if you wanted him to have it."
Since he probably already had her home phone and address, thanks to her slipup of using her real name instead of her business name, Milla couldn't see how giving him her cell phone number could hurt. "I'll give it to him when I see him again."
"See who?" Brian asked from the doorway.
Their office could use a tad more formality, Milla thought as she looked around. On the other hand, Finders was a partnership of people dedicated to what they did, not a corporation. She was the figurehead and the operational head, but other than that, the structure was very loose, and she had encouraged that feeling. While she might tell Brian about Diaz later—she wasn't sure how to explain how she had entered into an agreement with a man who was essentially a vigilante, and that was being charitable—she wasn't ready to tell him now, so she deflected him by changing the subject.
"Brian, I know you're only teasing when you start ragging on Olivia, but I'm not certain *she* knows. I don't want the office upset—"

“She knows,” he said, stuffing his fingers into his jeans pockets and grinning at her, that wide, white aw-shucks-I’m-just-a-country-boy grin that he used to keep people off guard. “We’re having fun.”
“If you say so,” Joann said doubtfully. “From the way things looked a minute ago, you were about to get clocked.”
“Nah. She’s a pacifist; she doesn’t believe in hitting.”
“Unless you push her to her limit,” Milla said. “And I think you’re getting close.”
“Trust me.” He winked at her. “What did you say to Mrs. Hatcher? She looked like a woman marching off to war when she left here.”
“I convinced her to change her bank account and see a lawyer.”
“Thank God,” Joann said. “She should have done that as soon as she realized he’d taken half their money.”
“She wasn’t ready to hear it. The shock had to wear off before she could listen.”
“I hope he comes crawling back in a few months and finds out she’s divorced his ass,” Brian said. “The shithead.”
“Amen.” Milla looked at the pile of paperwork on her desk and sighed. “I’m having lunch with Susanna, unless something comes up. Is everything quiet?”
“Under control. First thing this morning I got a group in Vermont out looking for an elderly lady with Alzheimer’s who wandered away from home, but they found her within the hour. And some college kids hiking in the Sierra Nevada didn’t come home on schedule, so things are getting organized there.”
“How late are they?”
“One day. They were supposed to be home last night, but the families haven’t heard from them.”
“Let’s just hope they have sense enough to stick together.” And that none of them were injured. And that at least one of them had given their itinerary to a parent or a friend. Milla was always amazed at how many people set off into the wilderness without telling someone where they were going.
She told the staff the news about their new sponsor from Dallas, and the promise of a new computer system, then she settled down to wade through the growing stack of paper.
An hour later, Olivia stuck her head in the door to ask a question, and Milla took advantage of the opportunity. “If Brian’s teasing gets to be too much,

just let me know."
"I can handle him," Olivia said, smiling. "It's okay, really. He thinks he's getting a rise out of me and I enjoy busting his chops. When he stops dancing around and works up the nerve to ask me out, I'll make him forget about big hair and small brains."
Ask her out? Milla's eyes opened wide. Was that what was going on? "He's ex-military," Milla blurted. "He's conservative. He's macho to the max—"
"He's also ten years younger," said Olivia, the smile widening to a grin. "Sounds good, doesn't it? I doubt we'll get around to discussing social issues, but if we do, I can hold my own with him. Who knows? I might convert him to my way of thinking."
Bewildered, Milla stared after Olivia as she walked away with a real bounce in her step. Sexual chemistry was an amazing thing. She had to adjust her thinking to see Olivia and Brian together, but in an odd way they meshed, because they were both strong-minded enough that neither could be dominated by the other.
Well. This had been an interesting morning.
Lunch with Susanna was as pleasant as usual. Susanna always asked about Finders; from the beginning she had shown real interest and occasionally turned up at fund-raisers. She never pried, never rehashed that awful day when Justin was taken, but she always asked how things were going. If Milla had any new leads, she'd tell her about them, but for the most part she had nothing to tell. Today, she did, but when Susanna asked, Milla just shook her head. Because Susanna sometimes attended fund-raisers, she was in the same general social circle with True Gallagher, and Milla didn't want to take the chance her friend might say something to him. Even if she asked Susanna to keep the news private, Milla knew it wouldn't be. Susanna would tell Rip, Rip would tell someone, and before Milla knew it, True would be on the phone raising hell and Diaz would disappear. She couldn't risk that, so she kept quiet.
The meal was almost finished when Susanna dipped her spoon into her papaya sorbet and casually asked, "Are you seeing anyone lately?"
Milla burst out laughing. The rumor mill had certainly been efficient! "If you mean True Gallagher, the answer is no."
"That's not what I hear." A tiny smile was playing around Susanna's well-shaped mouth, and her blue eyes were laughing.
"He asked, I refused. That's all there is."

“I hear he walked you to your car Saturday night.”
“But that’s all he did.”
“For goodness’ sake, why won’t you go out with him? He’s a . . .” Susanna paused, and gave a delicate little shiver. “He’s a *man*, with a capital *M*.”
“I know. He’s also one of Finders’ sponsors.”
“Which means?”
“That I won’t do anything to jeopardize our funding, whether it’s from True or someone who wouldn’t like the way it looked if I dated one of the sponsors.”
“You didn’t take a vow of chastity,” Susanna said, annoyed.
“I know. It’s my own choice. Finders is more important to me than my social life, even if the man in question wasn’t part of our funding.”
“Is that why you keep breaking up with the guys you date?”
Milla smiled. “Actually, they broke up with me, not the other way around. And there have really only been two since David and I divorced.”
Susanna’s mouth fell open. “Two? You’ve dated only two men?”
“I didn’t say that. I’ve dated, some, when I can. Which isn’t all that often, and not at all lately. But there’ve been only two quasi-relationships. Do you remember Clint Tidemore?”
“Vaguely. You dated him once or twice.”
“More than that. He was one of my quasies.”
“Cute guy.”
“Yes, he is. He wanted me around more than I could manage, and I wasn’t willing to delegate, so we parted ways.”
“You didn’t say anything. I thought he was just a casual date.”
“There wasn’t any point in rehashing everything when I wasn’t willing to compromise.”
“But you have to.” Susanna’s gaze turned serious. “Sooner or later, you’ll have to. Everyone compromises. It’s the only way to get along.”
“Maybe someday,” Milla said. Someday when she’d found Justin, and the devil was no longer flicking his whip at her heels. Until that day, she couldn’t rest, couldn’t let anything else matter to her.
“Make it sooner rather than later,” Susanna advised as she glanced at her watch and picked up her bill. “I have to run. Appointments start at two.”
Milla stood also, and they hugged. Then Susanna dashed off, her mind already on work. Milla lagged behind, gathering her bag and leaving the tip, since Susanna had forgotten. Two other patrons got between her and

Susanna at the cash register, and when Milla finally emerged from the café, Susanna's red Mercedes was already two blocks down the street. Milla crossed the street to where she had parked her Toyota SUV, her head down as she searched the bottom of her bag for her car keys. Usually she just put the keys in her pocket, but the slim skirt she was wearing today didn't have pockets.

There they were. She was almost at the Toyota when she finally spotted them. She pulled the keys out, looked up, and barely choked back a startled shriek when she almost collided with the man who had appeared out of nowhere and was now between her and her vehicle.

"I've been waiting," Diaz said.

9

"Don't you know you shouldn't walk with your head down like that?" he continued, his dark eyes narrowed in the shadow of his hat brim. "And you should always have your keys in your hand before you leave a building."

Thank goodness she was wearing her sunglasses, she thought a trifle wildly, so he couldn't see how her eyes had bugged out with fright. Her heart was still galloping, and a cold sweat had broken out on her skin. She had to stop reacting to him like this, before he realized she practically jumped out of her skin every time he moved a muscle.

That wasn't to say he didn't already realize it, because she saw the tiniest twitch of his mouth. The twitch could never have been called a smile, but maybe it wanted to be one.

"I usually do," she found herself explaining as she tried to fit the key into the lock. Her hand was shaking slightly and she had to try again before she succeeded. The next vehicle she bought, she promised herself, would have remote-operated locks. As she opened the door, she said, "Joann said you called."

"Yeah." He leaned past her and hit the unlock button that released all the locks, then went around and got into the passenger seat.

Evidently he was riding with her. Either that or he didn't want to talk while standing on the sidewalk. Taking a deep breath, she got behind the wheel and started the motor, then turned the air-conditioning on high and lowered

the windows to help dissipate the stifling heat that had built up in the closed vehicle.
He'd had to remove his hat when he got in, and he twisted to toss the dark brown Stetson onto the backseat. Then he buckled his seat belt.
For a moment she was so startled by the image of an assassin wearing his seat belt that the significance of his action escaped her. She blinked as she realized that he wouldn't have fastened the belt unless he expected the vehicle to be moving soon.
She put her bag on the back floorboard and fastened her own seat belt.
"Where to?" she asked, in case he had any specific ideas about their destination.
He shrugged. "You're driving."
"I was going back to the office."
"Fine."
"Where's your car?"
"In a safe place. I'll tell you when to let me out."
She shrugged, checked her mirrors, and when she saw a gap in traffic, she pulled out of her parking space. The air blowing from the vents was becoming cool, so she raised the windows, sealing the two of them inside the small private space. She'd never before realized just how small and just how private a vehicle was, but even though Diaz was the most *still* person she'd ever met, he had a way of taking up space and making it his own. She felt both crowded and smothered, even though he was doing nothing more than sitting quietly beside her.
"Why did you call?" she finally asked, since he wasn't volunteering any information.
"Pavón isn't in the area now. He's gone to ground somewhere."
Disappointment hit her in the stomach like a sledgehammer. She tightened her hands on the steering wheel. "You know that already?"
"Yes. Don't worry, he'll turn up. Did you tell anyone about me?" He was checking the side-view mirror, she realized, keeping watch on the vehicles around them. He wasn't overt about it, but he hadn't relaxed his guard one iota since getting into the SUV with her.
"No, and I told Joann not to mention you, either."
"Can you trust her?"
"More than most." Until the moment those words left her mouth, Milla would have said she trusted Joann absolutely. But Diaz wouldn't believe in

absolutes; to him people would be more trustworthy or less trustworthy, but not completely trustworthy. And he was right, she thought. As much as she trusted Joann, there was always the possibility something would slip during conversation.

He continued to watch the traffic, and she watched him as much as she could while she was driving. He was a neat man; his clothes weren't stained, his fingernails were short and clean. Today he was wearing dark brown jeans and a T-shirt that looked as if it had once been beige but had been washed so often it had faded to a soft cream. He wore a wristwatch, one of those highly technical things that looked as if it could plot a course to the stars, but no other jewelry. His hands, resting quietly on his thighs, were strong and lean, with prominent veins that laced upward on his arms. His profile was tough, contained, a little grim. His jaw was still covered with stubble, his lips compressed as if he found nothing in his life to be joyous. Maybe there wasn't anything joyous, she thought. Joy came from people, from the web of relationships that bound people together, and Diaz was profoundly solitary. He might be sitting right beside her, but she felt as if part of him wasn't there at all.

"Did you find out who called me Friday night?" she asked after the silence had stretched several minutes beyond comfortable.

"No. I hit a dead end."

Did he mean that literally? Was his contact now dead?

"I'll find him eventually," he continued, and she blew out a tiny breath of relief.

Her cell phone rang. He looked around, located her bag, and hauled it up from the back floorboard. "Thanks," Milla said, fishing the phone out of its pocket. The office number was showing in the window. "Hello."

"We've got a missing four-year-old boy," Debra Schmale said without preamble. "He lives close to the state park. He's been missing from home for at least two hours." She gave his address. "The police department are the first responders. The family and neighbors looked for the boy for two hours before they called. The PD called and asked for our assistance. We're getting people in the street as fast as possible. Most of the office staff are on their way."

"I'll meet them at the boy's house," Milla said, and ended the call. She glanced at the traffic and changed lanes, accelerating to catch the next

traffic signal on green. She hung a right, then another right, and headed in the opposite direction. “Where should I let you out?” she asked Diaz. “What’s wrong?”

“Lost four-year-old, close to Franklin Mountains.” The string of hundred-plus temperatures had continued today; unless the little boy found shelter from the sun, he could die of heatstroke. And if he had found shelter, that could just make it more difficult to find him.

Diaz shrugged. “I’ll go with you. I know the area.”

Somehow she’d never expected that. Not only was he putting himself out, but a lot of people would see him. She had thought he would shun crowds.

“What’s your name?” she asked. “If you want to keep your identity quiet, I shouldn’t call you Diaz.”

He had a way of not answering questions immediately. He always paused a second or two, as if considering both the question and his possible answers. That little pause was unnerving.

“James,” he finally said.

She punched the Toyota into passing gear and powered ahead of a sports car. “Is that your real name?”

“Yes.”

Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t. But as long as he answered to the name, if it was his real one or not didn’t matter.

She was glad the police department had called them. In cases like this, Finders always worked under the direction of either police departments or county sheriffs, depending on who had jurisdiction and were the first responders. Searches did better when they were organized, rather than having a bunch of panicked people taking off in all directions without anyone knowing where they were going. Both the city and the county had search-and-rescue teams, but when manpower was short and time was critical, sometimes they would call Finders. Her people knew how to search, how to follow orders and stick to the grid.

The street where the little boy lived was clogged with cars, both official and private, and people walked up and down both sides of the street calling his name. A cluster of people was in front of his home, and Milla saw a distraught young woman sobbing into an older woman’s shoulder.

Her stomach clenched. She had once been that young woman. No matter how many times she saw a sobbing mother, no matter how many times a child was found safe and returned home, for one horrible moment she

always flashed back to that little open market and the last time she'd heard her baby's cry.

She found a place to park, jumped out, and retrieved her emergency kit from the back. The Finders all carried a change of clothing with them, because they never knew where they would be or how they would be dressed when a call came in. She climbed into the backseat and hurriedly stripped off her skirt, then pulled on a pair of cargo pants and put on her socks and sneakers. While she was changing, Diaz planted himself at the door with his back turned to her, blocking anyone from seeing in and surprising her with his consideration.

Baseball cap and sunglasses went on, then she filled her pockets with a few items: one of the walkie-talkies that all the Finders carried, a whistle, a bottle of water, a roll of gauze, and a pack of chewing gum. The whistle was to alert anyone nearby in case the radio failed, and the other items were for the little boy. He might not be hurt when they found him—she never let herself think that he might *not* be found in time—but he would definitely need water, and would probably like some chewing gum.

Her group had spotted her SUV and were coming toward her. Brian was in the lead, and even though he was wearing sunglasses, too, Milla could tell his attention was riveted on Diaz.

She climbed out of the backseat and locked the doors, slipping her keys into her front pocket. "This is James," she said by way of introduction, before Brian could ask any questions. "He's going to help us. Who's in charge?"

"Baxter," said Brian.

"Good." Lieutenant Phillip Baxter was a veteran of these searches, a steady, commonsensical man who could be counted on to be thorough.

"What's the little boy's name?" She could hear people calling what sounded like "Mac" or "Mike," and she wanted to be certain.

"Max. He's in general good health, but wasn't in day care today because he has an ear infection and was feverish. His mother thought he was taking a nap while she did laundry, but when she went to check on him, he wasn't in his bed."

Children did that, wandered outside to play without telling anyone. Milla had once searched for an enterprising toddler who had watched his parents latch the door, then had waited for his moment, pushed a chair over to the door and climbed up on it, and used his toy truck to help him reach the last few inches he needed to push up the latch. They knew all that only because

after he was found, he proceeded to make another bid for freedom and demonstrated his tactic. Children were horribly inventive, and oblivious of danger.

It was worrisome that little Max was ill; a fever would make him even more susceptible to the heat. They needed to find him really fast. She had been out in the heat only a few minutes, and she was already dripping with sweat.

They all went to the front yard and reported in to Baxter, who held a clipboard and was coordinating the effort so that no area would be left unsearched while others were searched over and over again by different groups. His men, steady professionals, were in charge of each sector.

Baxter gave her a nod as her group approached. “Milla,” he said by way of greeting. “Glad your group could make it. They waited such a long time before calling 911 that the kid’s had time to put some distance between home and wherever he is now. He wanted to go to his grandmother’s earlier, but because he was sick his mom said no, and he was mad.”

“Where does his grandmother live?”

“A couple of miles from here. His mother says he does know the way to Granny’s house, so we’re concentrating most of our efforts between the two points.”

Diaz, lurking behind her but always near, asked, “What door did he use?”

She was surprised that he’d brought attention to himself, but evidently he wasn’t worried about the El Paso cops seeing him. That was somewhat reassuring; the odds were he wasn’t wanted on this side of the border.

Baxter gave him a sharp look, then indicated the direction with his hand. “The back door. Come see.”

Milla was sure Baxter had already inspected the backyard, but if he was willing to take them back there, she wanted to see things for herself, too, so they went around the side of the house to the back.

The backyard was neat and enclosed with chain-link fencing. There was a swing set and slide, several toy dump trucks where the little boy had evidently spent a lot of time moving dirt from one place to another, and a plastic tricycle against the fence.

“I figure he climbed on the tricycle, got a handhold, then made it the rest of the way over the fence,” Baxter said. “It’s the only way out that I can see.”

Diaz gave an absent nod, his cold gaze inspecting the surrounding area for anything that would attract a little boy’s attention. “A dog, maybe,” he said almost to himself. “A puppy, a kitten. Hope it wasn’t a coyote.”

Milla’s throat tightened. She hoped it wasn’t any kind of predator, animal or human, that had lured the little boy from the safety of his backyard.
“You don’t think he was going to Granny’s house?” Baxter asked.
“Probably. But if a little dog or cat wandered by, he could have taken off after it. You know how kids are.”
“Afraid so.” Baxter sighed, his eyes worried.
Diaz went to the point of the fence where Max had climbed over, and squatted down as he surveyed the ground, then lifted his head and slowly surveyed the surroundings. It was something the Finders often did, got down on the missing child’s level, to see things as he saw them. Adults, looking down, would sometimes miss a hidey-hole or the interesting shape of a rock.
“A lot of people have trampled the ground here,” Diaz said, meaning they had obliterated any tiny sign he might have seen. “You have a dog on the way?”
“He’ll be here in about an hour.” To Baxter’s credit, he wasn’t getting sideways with Diaz’s questions. But then Baxter didn’t feel he had anything to prove; his goal was to find the missing child, nothing else. If Diaz could help, that was fine with him.
Diaz grunted. The little boy had already been missing for over two hours. Another hour to get the dog here, get him oriented, give him the scent—they could be looking at four hours for the little boy to be out in this heat, sick, no water.
Baxter consulted his clipboard. “Okay, Milla, let’s get your people organized.” Joann gave him a list of their names and he added it to his sheaf of information, then began calling off names two by two, and ticking them off the list as he gave them their instructions. He pointed to Diaz and Milla. “I want you two to head straight for the mountain.” He eyed Diaz. “You strike me as a tracker, and Milla has a sixth sense where lost kids are concerned. Maybe he did follow a dog, or something.”
He gave everyone Max’s general description—black hair, brown eyes, wearing a white Blues Clues T-shirt, denim shorts, and sandals—then sent them on their way.
She and Diaz fell into step as they threaded their way through mostly grassless lawns and alleys, often getting down on their hands and knees and crawling as they peered under cars, bushes, structures, anything that a small boy could squeeze under. Every few feet Milla would call Max’s name, then

stop and listen. A sharp rock dug into her knee; a piece of glass cut her hand. She ignored all those physical discomforts, ignored the heat, concentrated on looking, calling, and listening. She had done this more times than she could remember, and yet every time her sense of urgency was just as great.

They were half a mile from the house when Diaz found a child's footprint in the dust. They had no way of knowing if it was Max's, but it was something. Milla crouched beside him and examined the print. It looked small enough to belong to a four-year-old, and the print was made by a shoe with smooth soles, rather than a sneaker.

"You're bleeding," he said abruptly.

Milla glanced at her hand. "It's just a shallow cut. I'll take care of it when we get back."

"Wrap it now. Don't contaminate the trail with your blood scent."

She hadn't thought of that. She stopped, drew the roll of gauze out of one of her cargo pockets, and began wrapping her hand. She could wrap it efficiently enough, but with just one hand she couldn't tie off the bandage. Diaz pulled a wicked knife from his boot and cut the gauze, then sliced the end into two long strips that he then wrapped around her hand and tied in a firm knot.

"Thanks," Milla said. She looked around. "Have you seen any coyote prints?"

"No."

That was good. Small animals were a coyote's food, anything from a rat to a pet to a child.

They went back down on their hands and knees, thoroughly searching everything. "Max!" Milla called. "Max!" She listened. No answer.

She was so hot she was getting a little sick to her stomach, so she took a drink of water and handed the bottle to Diaz, who also drank. If she felt like this after half an hour, how did Max feel, after almost three hours? If he was anywhere near, he should have heard them calling.

An idea struck her, and she fished out her walkie-talkie, keyed it. "This is Milla. What's Max's full name?"

A few minutes later the answer crackled over the radio: "Max Rodriguez Galarza." She slipped the radio back into her pocket, put her hands on her hips, took a deep breath, and channeled her own mother. "Max Rodriguez

Galarza, you come here right now," she called in the sternest voice she could muster.
Diaz flashed her a surprised glance, and a tiny hint of amusement kicked up one corner of his mouth.
"M-mommy? Mommy!"
The little voice was faint, but understandable. Shock jolted through her that the tactic had actually worked; then the sweet flash of success made her turn a huge grin on Diaz. "Got him!" she crowed. She raised her voice again. "Max! Where are you, young man?"
"Here," said the little voice.
That was helpful, she thought. But Diaz suddenly cut across a backyard to the right of them, so maybe it *was* helpful.
"Come here this minute!" she called, so he would say something else. He seemed to respond to the voice of authority.
"I can't! I'm stuck."
A pickup truck was parked in the backyard two houses over, and Diaz went down on his knees beside it, peering under it. "Here he is," he said. "The back of his shorts is snagged."
Milla grabbed her radio and broadcast the good news, while Diaz went down on his belly and snaked under the truck. She got down on her knees, removed her sunglasses, and watched as he used his knife to cut the belt loop on the little denim shorts that held Max to the undercarriage of the truck. She thought of what would have happened if anyone had got into the truck and driven it away, and shuddered. Max would have been dragged to death, and if the truck's radio was on very loud, the driver wouldn't even have heard him scream.
"Gotcha," Diaz said, taking a firm hold on the little boy with one hand while he slipped his knife back into his boot; then he slithered out from under the truck with Max in tow.
Max was soaking with sweat, his little face was pale, and dark circles lay under his eyes, but he stared up at them and announced, "I can't talk to you. You're strangers."
"That's exactly right," Milla said, going down on one knee beside him and taking the bottle of water out of her pocket. "Are you thirsty? You don't have to say a thing, just nod your head if you are."
He nodded, his dark eyes round with apprehension as he stared at her. She twisted the cap off the bottle and handed it to him. "Here you go."

He grabbed the bottle in both hands, which still bore some of the dimples of babyhood but were showing signs of becoming big-boy hands. He gulped the water, tilting the bottle so high that some of it spilled down the front of his shirt. When he'd emptied half the bottle, Diaz reached out and stopped him. "Slowly, *chiquis*. You'll be sick if you drink too fast or too much."
Max stared up at him. "What does that mean?"
"Chiquis?" Max nodded and Diaz said, "Squirt."
Max giggled, then clapped his hand over his mouth. "I talked," he said.
"Be sure and tell your mommy." Diaz leaned down and scooped the little boy up in his arms. "Now, let's go see her. She's been looking for you."
"I was trying to catch a kitty," Max said, looping an arm around Diaz's neck. "It went under the truck and I did, too, but then I got stuck."
"It happens to the best of us."
"You didn't get stuck."
"Almost."
Milla listened to Max's chatter, and Diaz's relaxed answers. He was at ease with Max, and she realized he wasn't as solitary as she had imagined. At some point he'd had contact with children, knew how to talk to them, and he'd picked Max up as if he had done so hundreds of times. Max certainly wasn't afraid of him. This was a side of Diaz she would never have suspected, and it intrigued her.
Baxter and a couple of his men, plus a couple of medics, met them halfway, with Max's mother running along with them. She shrieked when she saw her little boy, and Max yelled, "Mommy! I got stuck!"
The woman grabbed Max out of Diaz's arms, hugging him close and kissing him all over his face and head, wherever she could reach. She was crying and laughing and scolding all at the same time, and Max was trying to tell her about the kitty, and the big knife the man had used to cut his shorts, and that he knew he wasn't supposed to talk to strangers.
They took Max away to be checked out, but since he'd been under the shelter of the truck, he'd escaped sunburn and the worst of the heat. Milla herself was feeling the need for some water and air-conditioning, as were all of the searchers.
They trudged back to the staging area. Her people all reported in and dispersed in various cars and trucks, and she was on the verge of getting into her own SUV when a local TV reporter stopped her for a comment. Milla gave her standard best wishes to the family, praised the El Paso

police, got in a plug for Finders, and briefly explained how Max had crawled under a pickup and his clothing got snagged. She noticed that Diaz had faded out of sight, and she didn't mention him. The last thing he would want was for his face and name to be broadcast on television.
The reporter left, Milla got into her vehicle and started it, and waited to see if Diaz would reappear. He did, opening the door and sliding into the passenger seat. They buckled up, and she executed a U-turn.
It was several minutes before he spoke. "You didn't get to have that moment."
She knew the moment he was talking about, when Max's mother had seen her child alive and unharmed, and incandescent joy had lit her face. "No," she said, her throat suddenly tight. "The last time I saw my baby, he was crying. He'd been napping against my chest, and all of a sudden he was jerked away from me. He screamed his head off." She saw that tiny outraged face as clearly now as she had at the time. She locked her jaw, fighting the burn of tears.
"I see why you do this," Diaz said after another long pause. "It was a good feeling."
She cleared her throat. "The best."
He said in a casual voice, "I don't think you'll ever find your boy, but I'll kill Pavón for you."

10

"No!" she yelled, so startled that the steering wheel jerked in her hands. "Not yet!" Then, appalled at herself, she said, "Oh, God," and pulled to the curb because she was suddenly shaking so hard she was afraid to drive.
"Don't you want him dead?" Diaz asked in the same tone he might have used to ask if she wanted fries with her order—disinterested, flat, eerily remote.
"Yes!" Her tone wasn't flat, it was fierce. "I want him dead; I want to kill him myself; I want to scratch out his other eye and cut out *his* kidney; I want to hurt him so much he's screaming for me to end it before he dies. But I *can't*. I have to find out what he knows about my baby. After that, I don't care what happens to him."
He waited those few unnerving beats before he asked, "'Kidney'?"

She stared at him, eyes wide, her attention totally derailed by that one word. Out of her entire tirade he had picked up on the one detail that didn't fit in with the rest. From the moment she'd awakened from surgery in that little clinic, her entire life, her very being, had been concentrated on finding Justin. She hadn't let her focus waver, had gritted her teeth and charged through her physical rehabilitation, had almost literally set her life aside because nothing else was as important to her as her son. She hadn't dwelt on what the attack had done to her body. Until those enraged words, she hadn't realized how furious she was at what had been done to *her*, the pain she'd endured, the physical cost.

She turned away, staring woodenly out the windshield. "I told you I was stabbed," she said. "I lost a kidney."

"Good thing you had two."

"I liked having both of them," she snapped. She remembered the searing agony, remembered convulsing in the dirt as the pain hurled her body out of control. She functioned perfectly well with just one kidney, of course. But what if something went wrong with it?

She drew a deep breath and forced her attention back to the original subject. "Don't kill him," she said. "Please. I have to talk to him."

He shrugged. "Your choice. As long as he doesn't fuck with me, I'll leave him alone."

Milla wasn't a prude, but his use of the word "fuck" made her uncomfortable. For her it was primarily a sex word, regardless of how it was used as an adjective, adverb, interjection, and exclamation these days. Her dealings with Diaz were already dicey enough; she didn't want anything sexual, even language, to make matters more tense. Odd how Olivia could use the word and be funny; hearing it from Diaz made Milla want to squirm.

She pulled back into traffic, concentrating on her driving so she wouldn't have to think about anything else right now. Silence reigned, and she let it lengthen, let the minutes add up. There were times when even an uncomfortable silence was better than words.

"Don't go after him yourself," he said as he checked the traffic around them. "No matter what, don't go by yourself. Not even if you hear he's sitting outside your office, and you haven't seen me in a week. Don't go yourself."

“I never go by myself,” she said, startled. “There’s always someone with me when I go on assignment. But if Pavón is outside my office, I’m not making any promises.”
“You were alone in Guadalupe.”
“Brian was there and you know it.”
“He was on the other side of the cemetery. He had no idea I was anywhere around. I could have snapped your neck, and there was nothing he could have done about it.”
That was inarguable. *She* hadn’t known he was there until he was on her. Besides, he wasn’t telling her to do anything she didn’t already practice.
“I’m as careful as possible,” she told him. “I know my limitations.”
“Another missing woman turned up in Juarez last night. Her body did, anyway. This one was an American college student named Paige Sisk. She and her boyfriend were in Chihuahua; she went to the bathroom one night and never came back.”
There was a serial killer in Juarez, she knew; numerous articles had been in the newspaper. The FBI had worked with the Mexican authorities—the first time they had ever been asked to help with a Mexican investigation—and concluded that all the murders were single homicides. If so, a lot of young women had gone missing and turned up dead since 1993. A couple of criminologists agreed: it wasn’t a serial killer, it was two serial killers, possibly more. The pickings were rich in Juarez.
Finally, two bus drivers had been arrested, and supposedly the killings had stopped. Now Diaz was telling her they hadn’t.
“Is it the same M.O.?”
“No.” He checked the traffic again. “She was eviscerated.”
Nausea roiled in Milla’s stomach. “My God.”
“Yeah. So do what I tell you, and stay out of Mexico right now. Let me handle this.”
“If I can,” she murmured, and he had to be content with that, because she wasn’t going to promise him she would play it safe, not when getting some information about Justin was at stake. She wouldn’t be foolish, she wouldn’t lie, but neither would she let an opportunity pass by.
“It’s going to rain,” Diaz said in a complete change of subject, staring at the purple edge of clouds just showing on the western horizon.
“Good. Maybe it’ll break the heat.” The heat wave was killing old people and driving everyone else insane with misery. Granted, El Paso was usually

hot during the summer, but not this hot.
“Yes, maybe,” he murmured. “Let me out here.”
“Here?” They were in the middle of a busy intersection.
“Here.”
She put on her brakes and turned on her right signal at the same time, wedged her way into the right-hand lane, then pulled to the side. A horn blared at her, but she didn’t blame the offended driver, so she didn’t bother looking. Diaz unhooked his seat belt, got out, and walked away without a word of good-bye or a hint of when he would turn up next. Milla watched to see where he went, noticing the catlike way he walked, as if his legs were spring-loaded. He disappeared behind a utility truck, and didn’t reappear. Still she waited, but somehow he used the utility truck, traffic signs, and other vehicles for cover, because she didn’t see him again. Either that or he went down a manhole. Or had slithered under the utility truck and was clinging to the undercarriage. Or—
She had no idea where he’d gone, and she wished he’d stop doing that.

Diaz made his way back to where he’d parked his dusty blue pickup. There was absolutely nothing remarkable about the vehicle, except perhaps that it was in perfect working condition. It wasn’t pretty, but it could run. He could afford a newer model but he didn’t see any reason to get rid of this one. It suited him, and didn’t attract attention.
He’d spent most of his life not attracting attention. He instinctively knew the best camouflage, and whenever anyone noticed him, it was because he wanted them to. Even as a child he had been silent and solitary, prompting his mother to have him tested for autism, mental retardation, anything that would explain the way he just sat and stared at the people around him but seldom joined in any conversation or activity. Even knowing that his mother had worried about him at first and later was simply uneasy around him hadn’t stirred any emotion or response in him.
He watched people. He watched how their faces, their bodies, would tell a different story from their words. And contrary to his mother’s belief, he wasn’t an inactive child. When she wasn’t there to see, or when she was asleep, he roamed the house, or—depending on where they were at the time—the neighborhood or the countryside. He was as at home in the night as the other predators. From the time he was so small he had to stand on tiptoe to reach the doorknob, he had slipped outside at night and explored. He

liked animals better than he did people. Animals were honest; no animal, not even a snake, knew what it was to lie. Their body language expressed exactly what they were thinking and feeling, and he respected that.
Eventually, when he was about ten, his mother got tired of dealing with him and sent him to his father in Mexico. His old man was less concerned about socialization than he was about how much Diaz could help with the chores, so the boy fit right in. But it was with his grandfather, his father's father, that Diaz had found a like soul. His *abuelo* was as remote as a mountain snowcap, content to watch rather than participate, his sense of privacy like an iron fence around him. Mexicans in general were a friendly, highly social bunch, but not his grandfather. He was proud and remote, and fierce when crossed. It was said that he was of Aztec lineage. Thousands of people were, of course, or said they were. Diaz's *abuelo* never said any such thing, but other people did. It was their way of explaining him. And it was how, in turn, they explained Diaz.
Diaz had tried not to be any trouble. He made good grades in school, both in the United States and Mexico. He didn't act out. He didn't smoke, didn't drink, not out of any sense of social responsibility but because he saw both as weaknesses and distractions, and he couldn't afford to have any.
He liked living in Mexico. Whenever he visited his mother in the States, he felt hemmed in. Not that he visited all that often; she was too busy with her social life, with finding another husband. Diaz's father had been her third, he thought. He wasn't certain they had ever actually been married. If they had married at all, it hadn't been in the Church, because by the time Diaz went to live with him, his father had another wife and four children. His father regularly went to confession and mass, too, so he was in good standing with the Church.
When Diaz was fourteen, she took him back. She wanted him to finish school in America, she said. He did. She moved so often he spent his last four years in six different schools, but he graduated. He didn't date; teenage girls had great bodies, but their personalities left him cold. He thought he was probably the only virgin in his class. He was twenty before he lost his virginity, and he'd been with only a handful of women since. Sex was great, but it required a voluntary vulnerability on his part that he had a difficult time accepting. Not only that, women tended to be afraid of him. He tried never to be rough, but nevertheless there was a fierceness to his lovemaking that seemed to intimidate them.

Maybe if he tried it more often, he thought with black humor, he wouldn't seem so hungry. But taking care of the matter himself was easiest, so he did. It had been a couple of years since he'd seen a woman he was attracted to enough to consider having sex with—until he saw Milla Edge.

He liked the way she moved, so smooth and fluid. She wasn't pretty, not that bright American prettiness that made him think of cheerleaders. Her face was strongly molded, with high cheekbones, a firm jawline, dramatic dark brows and lashes. Her hair, worn not quite shoulder length, was a froth of light brown curls, with that startling streak of white in front. Her mouth was completely feminine, soft and full and pink. And her eyes . . . her brown eyes were the saddest eyes he'd ever seen.

Those eyes made him want to put himself between her and the world, and kill anyone who caused her one more iota of pain. Many women would have been broken by what had happened to her. Instead she fought, and she wouldn't let herself stop fighting, no matter how hopeless the cause or how difficult it was for her to keep going. Such gallantry humbled him in a way he'd never before felt. Here, he thought, was a woman he truly wanted to know. For a while, at least.

If he could keep her alive, that is. Arturo Pavón might be a *chingadera*, a fuckup, but he was a vicious fuckup. She would break her heart and her spirit trying to find her kid, and that was the best-case scenario. He couldn't let her track Pavón on her own, even though the odds were she'd learn nothing of value from him. That was if Pavón didn't kill her; it was well known he harbored a deep hatred for the *gringa* who had torn out his eye. He would love to sell her body on the black market.

Pavón was now involved in something much worse than baby snatching, and the stakes were proportionally higher. Before, getting caught would have meant a prison sentence; now it would be the death penalty. Mexico didn't have the death penalty, but Texas sure as hell did, and from what he'd been able to find out so far, the gang was headquartered in El Paso. Pavón might not be executed, but the higher-ups would be. Diaz didn't know exactly how international law shook out on that one. If Pavón was caught on American soil, though, he thought American laws would prevail. That was what happened in Mexico whenever a stupid tourist believed the old tales about what a free and open country Mexico was when it came to drugs. If you got caught in Mexico, then you went to a Mexican prison.

The matter of law might be a moot point, though. When he was certain who was running the operation, if he couldn't get enough evidence to turn it over to law enforcement and be sure of a conviction, then he would take care of the matter in other ways.

He'd told Milla he didn't kill for money, and he'd told the truth, as far as it went. He'd killed, and he'd been paid for it, but money was never the reason he did it. There were some people whose crimes were sickening, yet if they were ever brought to trial, they would be given either light prison sentences or probation—and that was assuming they'd even been found guilty. Maybe killing them wasn't his decision to make, and maybe he'd answer for it in the hereafter, but he'd never felt bad about it afterward. A child molester, a serial rapist, a murderer—those people didn't deserve to live. To some people that would make him a murderer, too, but he didn't feel like one. He was the executioner. He could live with that.

He would help Milla find Pavón, because she would keep trying anyway and she would be safer with Diaz. But even more important, Pavón was a link to the head of the snake. If he kept following the little fish, eventually he would find the big fish.

People were dying in Juarez, and all over the state of Chihuahua. That in itself wasn't unusual. Some of these were the work of the serial killer. But more and more bodies were being found with the organs removed, and that didn't fit the pattern. Different killing methods were used. Some had been shot, some had been stabbed, some had been strangled. In a few horrible cases, evidently the organs had been removed while the victims were still alive, though he hoped they were at least unconscious when the process began. The victims were both male and female, mostly Mexican, though three of the unfortunates, like Paige Sisk, had been tourists. The bodies were found in different parts of Juarez, carelessly dumped as if they were no longer of any value. And they weren't.

How much was a heart worth on the black market?

A liver? Kidneys? Lungs?

People on transplant lists died every day, waiting for an organ to become available. What if some of those people had money, though, and didn't want to wait? What if they could put in an order for, say, a heart, from a donor with a particular blood type? What if they were willing to pay millions?

What if the donor not only wasn't willing, but wasn't dead?

Easy. Make the donor dead.

Diaz's job was to find whoever was behind this. Not the peons, the grunt soldiers like Pavón—and he was far from the only one—who kidnapped the victims. There was likely a central place where the organs were removed and refrigerated, then immediately transferred to the waiting recipient, but he hadn't located it yet. He might be wrong; the organ removal could be carried out wherever it was most convenient at the time. What was needed other than a cutter and some coolers of ice?

Whoever was doing the actual organ removal had to have some training, so that the organs weren't damaged. Perhaps not a doctor, but at least someone with a level of medical expertise. Diaz thought of the unknown person as "the Doctor," though. Kept things simpler in his mind. The Doctor might be the head of the gang; who else was in a better position to know about the transplant lists, who was on it, and who had enough money to privately arrange for an organ?

On Friday night, behind the church in Guadalupe, he'd watched the transfer of what he was sure was another victim. It might even have been the Sisk girl. The presence of two other people watching the transfer had been a hindrance, especially when the woman started to blow the whole scenario wide open by attacking. He'd admired her guts, if not her brains, but he'd had to stop her. The last thing he wanted was for Pavón and his cohorts to know someone was onto them; they would become more careful, and that much harder to trace.

Taking care of the woman had cost him precious seconds, and he'd lost them. He'd known the person he jumped was a woman because of the curls sticking out from under the cap, and her general shape, as well as the slenderness of her arms and hands. From his vantage point, and with his own night-vision device, he'd watched the two from the moment they arrived. The guy was pretty good at ghosting around, the woman less accomplished but still competent.

He didn't know what they were doing there, but it was obvious they weren't part of Pavón's gang, so he didn't intend to harm them, even though just by being there they were fucking him up. He'd have other chances with Pavón; it was the victim who wouldn't have another chance. He could have intervened and maybe saved that one person, but he'd have had to kill probably three of the men and there was no guarantee the one remaining would tell him anything, or even know anything *to* tell him. Until he had seen which car left with the victim, he'd had no idea whom to follow.

He'd had a tip about that meeting behind the church. Then Milla had received a tip telling her that *he* would be there. Who could have known other than the person who had tipped him off? And who the hell was it? His caller had been female; a man had called Milla. What was going on? Was it coincidence that they were both sent to the church in Guadalupe at the same time, or deliberate?

He didn't believe in coincidences. It was safer that way.

11

It was almost nine o'clock when Susanna Kosper pulled into her driveway and punched the button on the garage door opener. Even before the door slid up and she saw the other parking bay was empty, she knew Rip wasn't home yet, because the big, cream stucco house was dark. When Rip was home, the house was lit up like downtown; he turned on the lights in every room he entered, then forgot to turn them off again when he left.

More often than not, now, Rip wasn't home when she got home. And even when he was, he barely spoke.

Twenty years of marriage were going down the drain, and she didn't know how to stop it. They had so much in common that she wasn't quite able to grasp how they could drift so far apart. They both loved their careers, and they enjoyed the healthy salaries they pulled down. Even though her malpractice insurance rate had skyrocketed, along with that of every other ob-gyn in the country, together they did very well.

She had once gone through a scare when she thought they might lose everything they'd worked so hard for, but she had been doubly cautious about money since then, and her caution had paid off. Their house was a showplace, they had healthy retirement funds, and Rip made no pretense of not enjoying their success. They liked the same movies, the same kind of music; they voted the same way most of the time; they even liked the same college football team, the Ohio State Buckeyes. So what had gone wrong?

Susanna lowered the garage door behind her and let herself into the house, then keyed the code into the alarm system. She loved this moment when she first came home, when she saw the tastefully decorated rooms, smelled how clean and fresh it was, with the sweetness of potpourri that wiped out the

smells of hospitals and antiseptics. She loved it even more when Rip was there waiting for her, but that seldom happened these days.
The most probable—the most clichéd—cause was another woman. A nurse, of course. Wasn't that what usually happened? A successful doctor hits middle age, starts feeling less than vital, and looks around for a younger woman to give his sex drive a boost. The only difference in their situation was that in case of a divorce, Rip wouldn't have to pay Susanna alimony, since her earning power equaled his, and she wouldn't ask for alimony anyway. But his standard of living would go down, because of the loss of her salary. Susanna thought her own standard of living would stay about the same; she would, of course, keep the house. And insist that Rip pay it off. Divorce wouldn't be a smart move on Rip's part.
She didn't want a divorce. She loved Rip. Even after all these years, she still loved him. He was funny and intelligent and warm, and though anesthesiologists usually had only brief contact with patients, he could establish a rapport and relax the patient better than anyone else she'd ever seen.
Maybe they should have had children. But when they were younger and struggling to establish their practices while still paying off their student loans, there simply hadn't been either the time or the money for children. Especially no money; she shuddered to remember how tight things had been, how desperate. People thought doctors were rolling in cash, but that generally wasn't true, at least for most. It took years to become a doctor, all the while taking on more and more debt to finance your education, then years more to establish a good practice. You struggled to pay the salaries of your office staff, your nurses, the overhead of rent and utilities and supplies, equipment, insurance. Sometimes the debt had seemed mountainous. But they had done it: paid off their student loans, gradually became more profitable, and finally had enough money to enjoy life.
But here she was, almost fifty years old, and it was too late for children. She hadn't had a menstrual period in almost six months, which was a bit sooner than average for menopause, but not drastically so. She had scheduled a checkup with another doctor, of course, just to make certain nothing was wrong. Everything was normal, she was in excellent shape, but she was definitely going through menopause. Even that was going well: no hot flashes, no sweats, no disturbed sleep or emotional swings. Not yet,

anyway. Some women sailed through, some women really suffered, then there were all degrees in between. Maybe she would be one of the sailors. She and Rip hadn't had sex in . . . four months? She wasn't certain. It had been a while. Of course, he was fifty himself, and people did slow down. But their sex life had been fairly regular, enjoyable, and then—nothing. There had to be another woman.

She was in the bedroom changing clothes when she heard the alarm beep as the garage door opened. Rip was home. She didn't know if she was glad or dreaded seeing him. She was just stepping into the pants of her lounging pajamas when he came into the bedroom, his face lined and tired.

"Where have you been?" she snapped, though until she saw him she had planned to say not a word. "You were supposed to be home at five."

"What difference does it make?" he asked without inflection. "You weren't home, either."

"I'd like to know where you are, in case there's an emergency."

He shrugged out of his jacket. "Then you should check your messages more often."

"I checked my messages—" She stopped. She hadn't checked them since she'd left the office.

"Obviously not." He walked over to the answering machine and played the messages. There were two hang-ups, a long distance company, a friend inviting them to a party on Saturday night, then Rip's own voice telling her his partner, Miguel Cárdenas, had come down with a stomach virus and was puking his guts up, so he was having to fill in on an emergency surgery. Susanna almost felt ashamed. Almost. Just because he was innocent this time didn't mean he was innocent all those other times he'd been out late.

"What kind of emergency?"

"Car accident. Crushed pelvis, broken ribs, deflated lung, severely bruised heart." He paused. "He died."

He sounded as tired as he looked. He rotated his neck and flexed his shoulders, trying to get the kinks out as she had so often seen him do after a long day at the hospital. "Where were you?"

"Doing rounds. Felicia D'Angelo started spotting, thought she was having contractions, so I had her come in. I checked her out, ran some tests. She's fine. Who's your girlfriend?"

He didn't miss a beat, didn't even act surprised by the question. "I don't have a girlfriend."

“Of course you don’t. That’s why you’re seldom at home, why we don’t have sex anymore, why you act like you can barely stand to speak to me. Because of this girlfriend you don’t have. Is it someone in your office? A nurse at the hospital?”
His eyes narrowed as heat came into them. “I’m not fucking around, Suze. Period.”
“Then what’s wrong?” Susanna didn’t want to beg, refused to beg, but the distance between them was killing her. “Is it because I’m going through menopause?”
“I didn’t know you were,” he said, and somehow that hurt as much as anything, that he’d paid so little attention to her.
“If it isn’t that, what?”
He was silent for a long moment; then he shrugged. “We’re just different people now. That’s all.”
“That’s *all*?” She thought she would explode from the emotions that swelled up in her, anger and frustration and pain mixing together and each feeding the other. “We’re *different people*? Just when did we become *different*? Who changed, me or you?”
“Neither of us,” he said softly. “That’s the kicker. Maybe I just found out we’ve been different all along.”
“Would you stop with the fucking riddles?” she yelled, clenching her fists. “I don’t know what’s going on! I don’t know what you’re talking about! All I know is we’re falling apart and it’s killing me! For god’s sake, just say it in plain language!”
“Leave it alone.” He sounded totally unmoved by her fury. “Just—leave it alone. I don’t plan on leaving you; we can rock on the way we always have, keep our lives the same.”
“Are you crazy? How can it be the same? How can you love someone one day and the next day it’s like we haven’t even been introduced?”
“I’ll tell you how.” Venom suddenly laced his tone. “I’ll tell you in two words: True Gallagher.”
Susanna actually fell back a pace, her mind going blank. “What?” Shock paralyzed her thought processes, leaving her standing there with her mouth open and nothing else coming out. Surely not. Surely he didn’t—
Rip didn’t say anything else, just watched her.
Then with an almost audible click her mind began working again, racing along at a feverish pace. “I’m not seeing True Gallagher! You think *I’m*

having an affair with him? My God, Rip, I'm trying to set him up with Milla!"

Something moved in his eyes, flashed across his expression, so fast she couldn't read it. "Leave Milla alone," he said flatly. "She deserves better than him."

"Why do you have such a hard-on for True? What's he done to you? I swear, I *promise* you, I'm not cheating on you with anyone and certainly not with him!" She tried to think of the times she'd spoken with True in public, which weren't many, tried to think of anything they had said or done that would give an onlooker the impression they were having an affair.

"Let's just say I don't believe you," Rip said. "And leave it at that."

He turned and left the room, and somehow Susanna knew he wouldn't be sleeping in the same room with her anymore. Until now they had at least done that, though he'd been on his side and she'd been on hers, and not so much as a hand had strayed into the neutral territory between them.

She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. She wanted to throw something; she wanted to hit something; she wanted to hit *Rip* for being such a dumb asshole. He was being a jerk because he was jealous, of all things.

She couldn't believe how backward she'd had it. While she was suspecting him of having an affair, he was suspecting her of the same thing. She knew *she* wasn't. Unless Rip had accused her as a sly method of throwing her off his track, he wasn't having an affair, either.

Her marriage wasn't over, after all. It was just going through a rough patch. If she hung in there, things would eventually smooth over and he'd realize he was totally out of bounds with his suspicions, and they would gradually regain the warmth between them. Until then, she'd have to be very, very careful.

She didn't use the landline phone, any extension of which Rip could look at and see she was on the phone. Instead she fished her cell phone out of her bag, closed the bedroom door, then went into the bathroom and closed that door, too. Then she dialed True's number.

"Rip thinks we've having an affair," she said in a low voice when he answered. "He's very suspicious."

"So soothe his ruffled feathers. We can't afford to have him doing something stupid like following you around."

"I know. I told him I was trying to set you up with Milla, but he's so pissed he didn't like that idea, either."

“Just keep playing him. Did you make any progress with Milla?”
“I don’t think so. You know how stubborn she is when it comes to that foundation of hers. She’s afraid that if she goes out with you, she’ll lose a dollar in funding from some old biddy who doesn’t think it looks good for her to be dating a sponsor.”
“Yeah, that’s what she told me, too. Keep working on her, though. I don’t want to push too hard and make myself obnoxious.”
“I’ll do my best. With our schedules, sometimes it’s tough getting together for girl talk.”
“Then make an opportunity. All of a sudden she’s coming up with information she shouldn’t have. I need to know how she’s getting it, and I need to know every move she’s going to make before she makes it. I can’t do that unless I get close to her.”
“I know, I know. Like I said, I’ll do my best. I can’t twist her arm and *make* her go out with you.”
“Why not?” He sounded amused. “Get her to go out to dinner with you and Rip, and I’ll just happen along. How does that sound?”
“I don’t know if I can get Rip to do anything right now. I’ll have to work on him.”
“You do that, and make it good.” The phone clicked as he hung up, and Susanna turned off her phone.
She took a deep breath. Well, the plan was simple: seduce her husband. Executing the plan, though, was going to be a bitch.

12

A week went by in which Milla didn’t hear anything from either True or Diaz; she didn’t expect to learn anything from True, now that she knew she’d been on the wrong track thinking Diaz had been involved in Justin’s kidnapping, but she did expect True to at least call and *tell* her he didn’t have any new information.
She felt constantly on edge, expecting to see Diaz every time she turned a corner or opened a door. Sometimes she had the sensation of being watched and she would look around, but if he was there, she never spotted him. Why would he be trailing her anyway? He was probably somewhere in Mexico, doing whatever it was he did, legal or otherwise.

She should feel more relaxed, with him gone. Whenever he was anywhere near, all her senses were on high alert, as if she were in the presence of a half-tamed animal that she couldn't fully trust. But when he wasn't there and her sense of danger faded, then her guard dropped and she would sometimes be blindsided by an insidious pang of desire.

It was insane. She'd been attracted to other men since David, had tried to have other relationships. She was aware that there was some chemistry between her and True Gallagher, though her reasons for not responding to it were valid and she didn't have even the smallest temptation to change her mind. Being physically attracted to Diaz, however, was alarming. He was the most *unsafe* man she'd ever met, and she didn't mean in terms of sexually transmitted diseases. He could be devastatingly violent. She hadn't seen it, had tasted only a small fraction of his potential the night he'd jumped her in Guadalupe, but she could read it in his eyes, in the reactions of people who had heard of him or had anything to do with him.

She would have to be a fool to consider anything other than a working relationship with him—and that was assuming he was capable of *having* a relationship. Sex, yes—relationship, no. That would require an emotional bond she didn't think he wanted to make, or was even capable of making. Besides, did she really want to crawl into bed with a man she was half afraid of?

Maybe just once, her libido whispered, which told her how tempted she truly was, because she'd never before had a problem refusing personal gratification if it interfered with her relentless search for Justin. Diaz was the best shot she'd ever had at finding out what had happened to her son, and she didn't dare do anything to upset the status quo.

Once she acknowledged the dangerous attraction she felt for him, she became even more nervous as she waited for him to turn up in that unexpected way he had. Part of her, the deeply feminine part that yearned for the touch of a strong male, wanted to see if the tug of desire was there in person, or if she had just imagined it in the safety of his absence. Logically, however, she knew she should never give him the slightest indication that she saw him as a sexual being, and the best way to do that was to stay away from him. Since that wasn't possible, the big question was could she clamp down on her response and keep him from seeing the slightest glimmer of interest? In view of his acute awareness of his surroundings and the intense way he watched people, she would have to be doubly careful.

After he located Pavón for her, perhaps—

No. She couldn't let herself even think that. She couldn't hang the possibility out there like a constant temptation, a reward at the end of the trail. She had to put her physical responses in deep freeze and concentrate on only one thing: Justin. That had worked for ten years, and it would work again. The only relationships she had allowed herself to have were with men who didn't elicit a strong enough attraction that she wasn't always in complete control. She could and had put them in second place without a moment's thought. With Diaz she was afraid she wouldn't have that control, and now of all times, when she finally had a concrete lead to Justin, she couldn't afford to give that control up.

Because she was so nervous, when Susanna happened to catch her on a night when she didn't have anything to do and asked her out to dinner with them, she gladly seized the chance to get away from her own thoughts for a while. Normally she preferred to enjoy her rare free evenings at home, but she felt as if the other shoe was waiting to drop and the mental tension was driving her crazy.

Determined to enjoy the evening, she put on one of her favorite dresses, a pale, creamy yellow sleeveless silk, with a swingy skirt that flirted with her knees when she walked. Though rain had indeed broken the heat wave and eased temperatures back down to normal, normal in El Paso in August was still hot, and the dress was wonderfully cool. Back when she and David were dating, they had often gone dancing, and this dress reminded her of the dresses she had worn then. Now that she was older, she realized what an effort David had made in his courtship of her, because he'd been in his residency program then and perpetually short of sleep. She loved to dance, though, so he had used his precious off-time to take her dancing.

The memory had her smiling as she opened the door to Rip when he and Susanna came to collect her. She had offered to drive herself and meet them at the restaurant, but Rip was protective of her, had been since the day Justin was stolen and she herself had nearly died from her wounds. He nearly always insisted on picking her up and making certain she was safely home whenever she had dinner with them.

"Hi there," he said, smiling at her. "Spiffy dress."

"Thanks." She returned his smile as she switched on a lamp in the small foyer for her return; then they stepped outside and she locked the door. "It's nice to dress up sometimes and not have to make a speech."

“You’ve been doing this a long time.” He opened the back passenger door for her, and she slid inside. As he got under the wheel he said, “Can’t someone else at Finders take on some of the PR duty?”
“I wish. I’m the face everyone associates with lost children, though, so I’m the one they ask for.”
“But you need a life of your own,” Susanna said, turning around in the front seat and regarding her with somber eyes.
“I have a life,” Milla said. “This is it. This is what I’ve chosen.”
“Or what was chosen for you. You don’t have to keep doing it, you know. You could step down from the day-to-day grind at Finders, only do fund-raisers. The stress you’re under . . .” Susanna shook her head. “I don’t know how you’ve gone on as long as you have. You should at least take regular breaks.”
“Not yet,” she said. Not until she found Justin.
Susanna sighed. “At least get regular checkups, and take vitamins. Prenatal vitamins would be a good choice for you, since you’re under so much stress.”
“Yes, Mother,” Milla parroted, making both Rip and Susanna smile. Vitamins were a good idea, though. She didn’t want to get sick now, when she had the feeling that some breakthrough could happen any day. She had to be ready, had to be in good physical condition.
Susanna gave up nagging, and they began talking about mutual friends, catching up on gossip. Rip made a few comments, but it didn’t take long for Milla to notice that he wasn’t his usual self. His voice and smile were warm whenever he spoke to her, but there was an almost palpable tension between him and Susanna. They had obviously had an argument, which made her uncomfortable. She would rather they had canceled than force her and themselves to sit through a stiff, awkward dinner, but she was caught now.
The restaurant they chose was casually elegant, the type where a tie wasn’t required but jeans were definitely unwelcome. It was, in fact, one of Milla’s favorite places to eat, because they had a wonderful grill. She chose the salmon, which was grilled on a cedar plank, and set about plowing through the evening with relentless small talk. She could enjoy their company even if they didn’t enjoy each other’s.
The meal dragged on, but at last they were almost finished and had just ordered coffee when Milla felt a presence beside her and glanced up into True Gallagher’s lean, weathered face. “True!” she and Susanna said

simultaneously. She shot a suspicious look at her friend. Had Susanna set this up, when Milla had specifically told her she wasn't going to go out with True?

"I just happened to see you," he said, putting his hand on the back of her chair and touching the back of her shoulder. "Susanna, Rip, how're y'all doing? Too bad I didn't spot you earlier, or you could have joined me."

"We're fine," Susanna said, smiling. "Overworked, as usual. You?"

"The same."

"We just ordered coffee; why don't you join us, if you aren't in a hurry?"

"Thanks, I think I will." He settled his tall frame into the empty chair between Milla and Susanna and slanted one of his intense looks at Milla. "I haven't seen you lately; is anything new going on? You look—"

"If you say 'tired,' I'm going to swat you," she said firmly.

He grinned. "I was going to say you look great."

"Um-hmm." She wasn't convinced. "And, no, nothing new is going on. Looking for lost people, trying to raise money. I did pick up a new sponsor in Dallas, a software company."

True said, "That's good."

Rip hadn't contributed anything to the conversation, hadn't even greeted True. Milla glanced at him and saw that his expression had lost all its usual warmth; his gaze was hooded in a way that reminded her of Diaz.

Damn. She had gone out with the intention of forgetting about Diaz, not being reminded of him. But what was going on with Rip? He was normally a very friendly man. What had True done to get sideways with him?

A beeping noise suddenly erupted in Susanna's purse. She groaned. "At least it waited until I was finished eating." She dug her pager out and glanced at the readout. "It's the hospital. Let me just step outside and call in, and I'll be right back." Taking her cell phone, she hurried toward the door.

"A page is never good when you're a doctor," True said. His hand was once more on the back of Milla's chair, and his thumb rubbed gently over her shoulder before he seemed to think better of it and moved his hand back into his own space. Or maybe he was just sneaky, and didn't want to give her time to move away.

Rip's jaw was tight, and he didn't respond to True's comment. Rather than sit in silence until Susanna returned, Milla said, "Did you find out any more information for me?" If she didn't ask, he'd be curious.

“Nothing that fits the time frame. I’m afraid it’s a dead end.”
“Information about what?” Rip asked abruptly, and though his question was uncharacteristically rude, Milla realized she had been just as rude in excluding him.
“I thought I’d finally found a name connected with the kidnapping, and I asked True to check it out.” She didn’t have to specify *which* kidnapping, even though Finders had been involved in many. That awful day was a center of reference for them all.
Rip didn’t even glance at True. “Why not ask the police to run the name? You know they’d do it for you.”
“I know, but True has contacts on the other side of the border—”
Susanna hurried back in, her expression tense as she interrupted them. “I’m sorry, I have to go. Felicia D’Angelo has a fever and her blood pressure is up. She’s only twenty weeks along. I’m meeting her at the hospital.”
“Which one?” Rip asked, since she had privileges at two.
She told him, then leaned down and kissed Rip’s cheek, ignoring the way he stiffened. “I’m taking the car. You can get a cab, can’t you?”
“Don’t bother with a cab,” True said, looking from Milla to Rip. “I can drive both of you home.”
“No, that’s too much trouble,” Milla said. “We live on opposite sides of town.”
“I knew that when I offered. It’s no problem.”
Rip said, “We’ll take a cab. I’d like to see Milla safely home, so I’ll have the cab drop her off and then take me home.”
“That’s rid—” Susanna began, then cut herself off and gave Rip a frustrated look, which made Milla think she had indeed been set up. “Never mind. Arrange things however you want. I have to go; I’ll see you later tonight, I hope.” She grabbed her bag and hurried out the door.
The waiter brought the coffee and poured it, and Milla sat uncomfortably between the two men while she sipped her coffee, they ignored theirs, and the polite tug of war over her continued. True was determined to take her home; Rip was just as determined that he wouldn’t. She saw Rip’s hold on his temper start to shred, and decided she’d better step in.
“Hold it,” she said calmly. “Neither of you have asked me what *I* want to do.”
Both of them immediately turned to her, and Rip’s expression was faintly apologetic. “Sorry. Were you feeling like a wishbone?”

“A bit.” She smiled at him, because she knew he wasn’t going to like what she said. “I need to talk to True, so I’ll go with him.”
She was right; Rip didn’t like that at all, though he had the grace not to argue once she made her decision. True didn’t look triumphant, but then maybe he was smart enough to realize he wasn’t going to like their talk.
“Whatever you want,” Rip said as the waiter brought their bills, and he fished a credit card out of his pocket, placing it in one of the folders. True made a motion as if to take the folder containing Milla’s bill, but she stopped him with a glance. She slipped several bills in that folder.
They waited until the waiter had taken both folders away, then returned with Rip’s credit card and receipt for his signature. He asked the waiter to have a cab called for him, and while that was being done, he added a hefty tip, then scrawled his name and pocketed his card.
“The cab company said ten minutes,” the waiter said when he returned.
“We’ll wait,” Milla began, but Rip shook his head.
“No, go on. It’s just a few minutes. I’ll finish my coffee while I wait.” He stood as she and True did, and kissed Milla’s cheek. “It’s been too long since we did this. Don’t be such a stranger.”
She chuckled. “Like yours and Susanna’s schedules are any better than mine.”
“Ain’t it the truth. Be careful going home.” He nodded a good-bye to True, and sat back down as she and True left the restaurant.
“My truck’s this way,” he said, indicating the left and gently steering her in that direction with his hand on her back. “I get the feeling Rip doesn’t like me.”
She made a noncommittal sound, and waited until they were in True’s silver Lincoln Navigator before saying, “I’m not very happy with you, myself. I don’t like being maneuvered and manipulated.”
He sat silently for a moment, the keys in his hand. Finally he said, “That obvious, huh?” as he put the key in the ignition and started the motor.
“Obvious enough.” If he had denied that his being there was a setup, she might have believed him, but she respected him for not trying to weasel out of telling the truth. Something else occurred to her, and she said, “How do you know where I live?” When she had said she and the Kospers lived on opposite sides of the town, he’d said that he’d known that in advance.
“I don’t, exactly. I know you live in the Westside, because I asked Susanna. What’s your address?”

She told him, and he nodded. “I know how to get there.” He was a native El Pasoan; he knew his way around the city.
“Was Susanna’s page a real one?”
He shrugged. “So far as I know. I intended to offer to drive you home regardless.”
“I meant what I said, True. I won’t go out with you. I appreciate the lift home, but that’s all it’s going to be.”
The traffic was fairly light and they caught several green lights in a row. She watched the streetlights cast changing shadows on his face, watched the way his expression hardened and his fingers drummed on the steering wheel. “You don’t have to bury yourself,” he finally said, his tone sharp with frustration. “God knows, I understand what drives you, but it doesn’t have to be either-or. You can search for your son and still have something for yourself. You’ve closed yourself off emotionally; you don’t let anyone in—”
“Because it isn’t fair to let people expect something I’m not willing to give,” she interrupted. “I won’t give you one minute of my time if I think that minute could make the difference between finding out any information that could lead me to Justin, or missing the boat.”
“You take the time to have dinner with Susanna and Rip.”
“That’s a different relationship from the one you’re talking about, and you know it. If I had canceled at the last minute because I had to meet someone—and I would have, if anything had come up—they wouldn’t have been upset. There’s friendship, but our lives only intersect every now and then; they aren’t all wound together.”
“So you’re saying we can’t even be friends.”
She snorted. “As if I believe that’s what you want.”
Despite his annoyance, he grinned. “Damn, you’re tough. But I like a challenge.”
“I’m not challenging you. This isn’t a dance for position. I resent that you’re putting me in exactly the spot I wanted to avoid, which is making you angry by not doing what you want. If I don’t go out with you, you won’t like it; but if I go out with you but don’t put you first, you won’t like that either. It’s a lose-lose situation.”
His jaw set. “What if I promise to help you look for your son? What if I go along with you when you’re chasing down whatever rumor you hear? If

you’re dealing with coyotes and other slimy bastards like that, you need protection anyway.”
“I never go alone to any meeting.” She stared through the windshield. Less than two weeks ago she would have jumped at any chance to have his aid, but that was before she met Diaz. Despite his money and connections, she simply didn’t think True would be as effective as Diaz in finding Pavón. Maybe she was wrong. She might be making the mistake of a lifetime, but she had made her choice and she would stick with it, no matter how inherently dangerous that choice was.
He swore under his breath, then said, “If you take someone with you anyway, then why shouldn’t that someone be me?”
“Because you have strings attached. Tell me the truth: Will you stop sponsoring Finders if I don’t go out with you now?”
He drew back as if she’d slapped him. “Hell, no!”
“Then my final answer is no.”
His hands tightened on the steering wheel, but he didn’t say another word until he turned on her street and said, “Which house is yours?”
She directed him to her condo, which was the last unit on the left, and he pulled into the short driveway, the headlight beams flashing over her front door. Her neighbor’s garage butted up against hers and their driveways were separated only by the line where the sections of concrete were poured. Because she was the last unit, the right side of her condo was graced with trees and shrubbery that somewhat softened the blocky lines of the residences. Her small backyard had privacy fencing around it, to separate it from her neighbor’s. Her front door was recessed in a small alcove, and she had put planters of bright flowers on each side. The yellow porch light made the flowers look more orange than red. Her house was neat and well maintained, but she knew True was comparing it with his own house and probably wondering what she used for brains.
“Thank you for bringing me home,” she said as she unfastened her seat belt and opened the door.
He shoved the gear lever into park and got out of the big SUV, but he wasn’t fast enough to make it around before she got out. His hand closed around her elbow as he walked with her to the front door.
“All right,” he said abruptly. “I’ll back off. But if you need anything, call me. Day or night. I mean it. No strings attached.”
The offer touched her, and she smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

He stared down at her; then he swore softly again and before she could step back she was in his arms. Even with her three-inch heels he was about six inches taller than she was, and when he bent over her, she felt overwhelmed. His hand flattened against her back and his mouth covered hers.

She put her hands against his shoulders and pushed, trying to lever herself away from him. Under other circumstances, she might have liked his kiss, might have returned it. He knew how to kiss; his mouth was warm, his breath was pleasant, his tongue intimately teased but didn't intrude. Where her hips were molded to his, she felt his erection grow.

She pulled her mouth away and shoved even harder; he dropped his arms and stepped back.

"I thought you said you'd back off," she said, angry that he evidently wouldn't take no for an answer.

"I am backing off." His expression was hard, his eyes narrow. "But I wanted a taste of you, and I wanted you to taste me. If you change your mind, all you have to do is tell me."

That male arrogance wasn't completely unattractive, but his intensity made her wary and she wasn't at all tempted to linger. She took out her keys and unlocked the door. "Good night," she said as she stepped inside, and she closed the door and locked it in practically one motion.

She was so unsettled that it took her a moment to realize the lamp wasn't on. She froze, and as the darkness pressed down on her she realized that she wasn't alone.

13

Instead of going home, Rip had the cabdriver take him to the hospital. He used his parking card to gain entrance to the physician's parking lot, and he told the driver to wait. As he got out of the cab, he checked the vehicles in the lot, and wasn't surprised to see that his own car wasn't there. He was disappointed, but not surprised. Still, he clipped on his identity badge and went inside to the emergency department.

"Has Felicia D'Angelo checked in?" he asked the admissions clerk, who checked the computer.

"No, sir, we have a Ramon D'Angelo, but not a Felicia."

Just to be certain, Rip had the driver take him to the other hospital where he and Susanna had privileges, and he went through the same routine. His car wasn't in the parking lot, and Felicia D'Angelo hadn't been admitted to the hospital.

He hoped like hell Susanna would be at home when he got there, that the false page and her story had just been part of her misguided effort to throw Milla and Gallagher together. Despite everything, he still hoped.

But when he got home, the windows were dark. He paid the cabdriver the rather hefty fee, then trudged up the sidewalk and unlocked the front door. He automatically turned off the alarm and flipped on the light switch.

He wondered what tale Susanna would have when she got home. He wondered where she was. And he wondered what in hell he was going to do.

True might not have gotten into his truck yet; he might hear her scream. The thought burned through her mind as Milla tried to force air past her constricted throat, but it was like in a nightmare, when you try and try to scream but can't. All she could manage was a strangled sound that was cut off when a hard hand clamped over her mouth and a steel-muscled body pushed her against the wall, holding her there.

"Hush," said that low voice. "Don't scream. It's just me."

Just him? Even knowing it was Diaz didn't lessen her panic a lot. Her heart was slamming against her breastbone so hard she felt ill from the force of it. She was almost grateful he was holding her against the wall, because otherwise she didn't think her knees would have supported her.

She felt him lean to the side, heard the click as he switched on the lamp and mellow light flooded the foyer. From outside came the sound of an engine starting, then the whine of tires on pavement as True drove off.

Diaz took his hand away. His face was expressionless, his eyes cold. "You got something going on with Gallagher?"

She hit him. She slapped his arm and his shoulder; then she took her purse and swatted him on the side of the head. "Damn it, you scared the life out of me!" she shrieked, and tears of fright and relief trickled down her cheeks. Trembling, she sank down in the chair beside the lamp table while she fumbled in her purse for a tissue.

Diaz was no longer expressionless; he looked absolutely floored that she had hit him—and, probably, that he had let her. She couldn't believe it

herself, not only that she had so lost control, but that he'd just stood there instead of breaking her arm or at least tossing her to the floor. She opened her mouth to apologize, and instead found herself swatting him on the knee.
"Damn it," she said weakly, as more tears trickled down. She scrubbed at them with a tissue. Her makeup was probably a mess, and that made her want to swat him again.
He crouched in front of her, his eyes almost level with hers. "I didn't mean to—I'm sorry." Cautiously he reached out and took her hand, as if making such contact wasn't something he normally did and he wasn't quite sure how to go about it. His fingers were hard and hot, his palm was callused; he cradled her hand in his and stroked his thumb over her knuckles. "Are you okay?"
"You mean if my heart ever starts beating normally again?" she snapped, then abruptly found herself laughing. She was so weak from adrenaline overload that she couldn't stand up, so she just leaned her head back against the wall and chuckled while she wiped her face with her free hand.
An incredible thing happened. The corners of his mouth moved upward. She was so astonished at the sight of Diaz smiling that she stopped laughing and stared at him. Her heart had begun to settle down, but now it started thumping wildly again, and this time it wasn't because of fear. Her entire body flushed with heat and she began trembling again. Diaz holding her hand, smiling—*now* was when she should scream, because she was in far greater danger than she'd been a moment ago.
"What?" he asked, bewildered by the way she was staring at him.
"You're smiling." It was as if he had dropped part of his mask and was letting her see past the blankness he usually presented to the world. Astonishment, bewilderment, concern, amusement had all been visible in his expression during the past minute. The one thing she was most terrified she would see was desire, so she pulled her hand from his and began making the feminine motions of neatening herself: pushing her hair out of her face, straightening her skirt, blotting under her eyes to remove any melted mascara.
"I smile," he said, as if he couldn't understand why such a small thing would startle her.
"When?"
"Hell, I don't keep a log. I laugh, too."
"This year?"

He started to say something, then reconsidered and shrugged. “Maybe not.”
Amusement began curling the corners of his mouth again. “You hit me with your purse.”
“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I was so scared, I lost it. Did I hurt you?”
“You’re joking.”
“Not really. I mean, I hit you in the head.”
“Those were girl slaps.”
They had been. She felt a twinge of despair. She trained and trained and trained, trying to get herself in a sort of warrior state of mind so she could handle situations exactly like that, and instead of doing anything effective, she had automatically fallen back into a purely feminine response. If this happened with, say, Pavón, then she was a dead woman.
He was still crouched in front of her, so close she could feel his body heat against her legs. His short black hair was spiked and untidy, as if he’d run his fingers through his hair while it was wet. For the first time since she’d met him he was clean-shaven, though he was dressed in his usual uniform of T-shirt and jeans, with black boots. The lamplight emphasized the stark bone structure of his severe face, made his dark eyes seem more deep-set, and his usually grim mouth was softer, fuller.
Desperately she hid her inner quiver. She had held out hope that her physical response to him was mostly in her imagination, fueled by his deadly aura. Women daydreamed about dangerous men, when in reality a nice, normal guy was far preferable. But this was no daydream, and she had to clench her hands to keep from reaching out and stroking that mouth. Diaz wasn’t a bad boy, he was a bad *man*, and she would do well to remember the difference. He didn’t walk on the side of the angels.
But they were alone in her house, isolated in this small pool of light, and she knew that all she had to do was part her knees and he would be between them. He hadn’t made a pass or even indicated he was thinking about it, but she knew he wouldn’t turn her down. He would oblige her, and then he would disappear again, the encounter having meant no more to him than a drink of water when he was thirsty.
So she remained in the chair, and kept her legs together. She refused to be nothing more than convenient sex for anyone, even herself.
“Gallagher kissed you,” he said, letting her know that he’d watched them from a window, since her door was solid. Even as she watched, his face was

changing, losing its brief animation and settling back into the familiar stone mask.
“I didn’t want him to.” For some reason, she felt as if she owed Diaz an explanation. “He keeps asking me out, and I keep refusing.”
“Why were you with him tonight?”
“I had dinner with some friends and True stopped by our table. My friends are both doctors, and one of them was called to the hospital on an emergency. She took their car, so True drove me home while Rip took a cab home.”
He was silent as he considered that, then shook his head. “I won’t help you unless you stay away from him.”
She didn’t bridle at the ultimatum, because it jibed with her own feelings.
“All right.”
“Just like that?”
“Just like that. You know him, don’t you?”
“We’ve met.”
And yet True, when she’d asked him about Diaz, hadn’t said anything of the sort. Instead he’d pretended to be looking for information. It was possible he thought she would be safer if she never crossed paths with Diaz, and if so then he was right, but she made her own decisions and took her own chances. By trying to keep her from Diaz, he’d been blocking her from information she desperately needed.
“Did you find Pavón?”
“Working on it. Got a lead. He may stay out of sight for a month or so, though, since he got word I was looking for him.”
Any sane person would stay out of sight longer than that, like for a lifetime.
“Then why are you here, if you don’t have any new information?”
“To tell you I did run across something that might interest you. One of my informants knew something about a baby-smuggling ring going on about ten years ago.”
She stiffened, chills running up and down her spine and over her scalp. She felt as if her lungs suddenly constricted, preventing her from breathing.
“What did he say?” she asked, her voice stifled.
“It was a fairly high-class operation, as these things go. The kids were flown across the border in a small private plane, rather than stuffed in car trunks and driven across.”

She still couldn’t quite catch her breath; all she could do was gasp. A plane! She’d had nightmares, thinking of Justin dying of heatstroke in some car trunk and being tossed aside like so much garbage.
“This doesn’t mean it was the same ring that kidnapped your baby,” he warned. “But the time is about right, and they operated in southern Chihuahua and Coahuila. They had a contact here in Texas who arranged for birth certificates for the kids, so they could be legally adopted.”
“Birth certificates.” Then it had to be someone who worked in a county courthouse, or a hospital. Since Justin had been born in Mexico and all the paperwork had been done there, she wasn’t sure exactly how birth certificates were issued, and she had never thought to check.
“Things wouldn’t work the same way now,” he said, reading her mind. “Everything is on computer. And the birth certificates could have come from any state.”
“I know.” Adoption records were also private, unless otherwise directed by the birth parent. That was a huge obstacle. Nor could she look for a noticeable spike in a certain county’s birth rate, because the number of extra certificates would far more likely be a few hundred for one year, rather than thousands. In a county that contained a large city, with a transient population, those extra birth certificates wouldn’t even be noticed. But the larger cities would also have been more likely to be computerized ten years ago, she thought. A small rural county, with limited funds that didn’t cover full computerized record-keeping, would be a better bet. She said as much to Diaz, who nodded.
“What would you look for?”
“Birth certificates issued in clumps. How many babies would be born in a small county on the same day, or the same week? Even the same month? If the total in some months was noticeably higher than in other months, I’d concentrate there.”
He was silent, and she waited while he processed whatever he was thinking. Finally he glanced up at her. “Supposedly, the smuggling ring stopped operating when the private plane crashed.”
Her lips went numb as the feverish hope in her turned into yet another nightmare. “When?”
“Roughly ten years ago. Everyone on board died, including the six babies.”

She sat staring at her hands long after he'd gone. Life couldn't be so cruel, *God* couldn't be so cruel, to let her go for so long and get this far, then snatch everything away from her. She knew Justin wasn't necessarily on that plane, that a different smuggling ring might have taken him. But this was another nightmare possibility that she had to deal with, another horrible ending to innocent little lives.

She might never find her baby, though she'd never stop looking. But she *would* find the people behind this—no, not "people," *monsters*—and she'd bring them down if it was the last thing she ever did. Something in her was changing, and she was no longer willing to overlook anything in exchange for information on her lost baby, on any lost baby. She wanted justice, and she wanted vengeance.

14

Susanna was so tired her movements were sluggish as she pulled into the garage. She sat for a moment with the door open and her eyes closed, trying to summon the energy to get out of the car. It had been a very, very long night, and now she'd get maybe two hours of sleep before she'd have to get up and do her rounds at the hospital, followed by seeing patients in the office all day, then evening rounds before she could come home and fall into bed. Coffee might wake her up, but it wouldn't make her feel any less tired.

She wondered how True had made out with Milla the night before. She knew Milla well enough to tell that she'd seen through their subterfuge, and was annoyed.

True thought he could get around Milla, but he didn't know her the way Susanna did. Milla looked like, and was, the type of woman who preferred to wear a dress instead of pants, who liked cooking and decorating and working with children. She had once even planned to teach, which to Susanna's way of thinking was taking a fondness for children to ridiculous extremes. Milla's nails were always manicured, and not once in the eleven years she'd known her had Susanna seen Milla when her toenails weren't polished. Even when she'd given birth, her toenails had been painted a delicate shell pink. Probably she'd had David paint them for her, because there was no way a nine-months-pregnant woman could bend down that far.

And David would have done it without hesitation; he'd been absolutely crazy about Milla.

But the villagers who had witnessed the kidnapping said Milla had fought like a tigress for her baby. And even though she'd just come within a hairsbreadth of dying from a vicious stab wound, from the moment she'd regained consciousness, she'd been like a woman possessed, with only one thought in her mind, only one purpose in her life: finding her child.

She had sublimated her personality, forged herself into someone tougher. She had gone into places where armed men would have hesitated to go, talked to thugs and drug addicts, thieves and murderers—and for some reason, though none of them had given her any real information, neither had they harmed her. Maybe, on some cellular level that never reached conscious thought, they hoped their own mothers would have searched so relentlessly for them. Perhaps even those who knew better had wished that their mothers had been like Milla.

It hadn't hurt that she was so young, with a world of heartbreak in those big brown eyes. The silver streak in her hair drew the eye, reminded everyone of her suffering. She had been everywhere: on television, in magazines, in the Mexican president's office, talking to the Federales and the Border Patrol, talking to anyone and everyone who might be of help. She'd become the personification of bereaved, outraged mothers, the face of heartbreak—and of determination. She'd even broken with her own family over her dedication to searching for Justin.

David had fallen by the wayside. It must have been damn hard to be married to a crusader, Susanna thought. Milla had revealed a backbone of steel, and a stubborn streak that went all the way to her core. She had adored David, and yet she had walked away from him.

And True thought he could do better? Susanna didn't think so. But he'd insisted, and what True wanted, True got. She wasn't fool enough to turn him down. She knew better than most how ruthless he could be, and she'd always been careful not to run afoul of him.

The door leading from the house into the garage opened, and Rip appeared. "Are you going to sit there all night?" he asked.

Oh, God. Why was he still up? Normally she would have been gratified that he'd waited up for her, but not now, not tonight. He was probably pissed about True and Milla, and she was too exhausted to dance a verbal fandango with him.

“I’m so tired I could sleep right here,” she said as she got out of the car. “I probably should have stayed at the hospital.”
“Probably,” he agreed, stepping aside so she could enter the house. “Then you would have been there when I checked.”
She froze in mid-step, then continued through the house and up the stairs, all but hauling herself up them. Damn it! She should have covered herself somehow, but since he’d accused her of having an affair with True, and he knew True wasn’t with her, she hadn’t even considered he would check up on her.
“Nothing to say?” Rip asked behind her.
“No. If you’re going to have a shit fit because I didn’t hear a page, or the staff didn’t know where I was, there’s nothing I can do about it. I’m going to shower and go to bed.”
“I didn’t call. I went to both hospitals. You weren’t there. Neither was Felicia D’Angelo. So I looked in your patient Rolodex and got Felicia’s number, and called to check on her. She said she’s feeling fine, in case you’re wondering.”
Damn. Double damn. Fuck. She always kept a record of her current patients’ home phone numbers here at the house, for her convenience. When had Rip turned into fucking Sherlock Holmes?
“We’ll talk tomorrow,” she said, because she couldn’t think of anything to say tonight. She needed to talk to True. She was losing control and she knew it, because she didn’t swear, even to herself, unless she was pushed to the wall. She didn’t dare get into an argument with Rip now, or she’d say more than she should.
She went into the bedroom and closed the door, leaning back against it while she waited to see if Rip would follow, if a push would send her stumbling across the room. But after a moment she heard his footsteps continue down the hall to the room where he was sleeping, and with a sigh of relief she locked the door and went into the bathroom.
She used her cell phone to call True. He answered on the second ring, his voice alert and full of authority, as always.
“Rip checked up on me,” she said. “He knows I wasn’t at either hospital. He even called the patient I said I was meeting.”
“Find someone and let Rip catch you fucking him, and he won’t check any further.”

She closed her eyes at True's crude reply. The hell of it was, he was right: if she did that, Rip would think he'd solved the mystery and would stop prying. But she'd never cheated on Rip, and she wasn't going to start now, no matter what he thought or what True said.
"How did things go with Milla?"
"They didn't." She could hear the banked fury in his voice, and she knew Milla had reacted just the way she'd expected.
She was too smart to say "I told you so" to True. Instead she said, "She's obsessed with finding her kid. Nothing else touches her."
"Not even reason, apparently. I have to have some way of keeping tabs on her. She was never a threat before, but she is now. Who told her about Diaz? I've headed her off, but she might decide to do some investigating on her own, and the last thing we need is Diaz in the picture."
Susanna didn't know Diaz, but she knew *of* him. She also knew that True Gallagher wasn't afraid of the devil himself, but he was wary of this Diaz guy. There was history between them, there had to be. She got the feeling Diaz would be more than happy to do anything that caused trouble for True. Diaz's reputation was downright scary; if Milla somehow made contact with him and talked him into helping her, they'd have to take steps to protect themselves.
"Feed her some more false leads," she suggested. "Get her busy chasing ghosts."
True chuckled. "Good idea." He paused. "I just realized. It wasn't your home phone that showed up on Caller ID."
"I'm on my cell phone."
"Shit! You know they can be intercepted."
"If I call from the home phone, Rip can pick up and listen."
"Then find some other way, but don't use your cell." The receiver clanged in her ear.
Grimacing, Susanna ended the call. "Fuck you, too," she muttered. There she went again with the swearing. She stood for a moment, swaying with exhaustion; she was tempted to fall into bed and shower when she got up, but after what she'd been doing, she didn't want to go to bed without bathing. She'd washed up before coming home, of course, but that wasn't the same as an all-over bath. Perhaps this was how Lady Macbeth had felt, scrubbing out invisible spots of blood.

True got out of bed after hanging up on Susanna. He trusted her as much as he trusted most people, but sometimes she could do things that were incredibly stupid. He'd told her over and over, no cell phones or cordless phones. Use landlines. They were safest. He had cordless phones for convenience, of course, but the phones by his bed and in his office were corded.

He'd have to update his security eventually, he thought. Scramblers on his phones. Electronic countermeasures to prevent anyone from eavesdropping with a parabolic mike. Right now, though, he wasn't a big enough fish for anyone to go to that much trouble to catch him. He was still medium-sized, but growing. He intended to keep on growing. Give him another year, two years at the most, and he'd be able to walk away clean with a sizable fortune that would require overseeing and investing, but would grow under its own momentum.

If he could just get through those couple of years without things blowing up under him.

Milla had never been very worrisome, despite her persistence. He'd made certain no one would tell her anything. He'd kept tabs on her through Susanna and other contacts, and he even—somewhat to his bemusement—admired the way she never gave up. Certainly his own mother had never been that devoted. Eventually, when Milla got into fund-raising for that group of hers, he'd made a point of showing up, contributing, and slowly getting to know her and getting her to trust him. What better way to stay on top of her efforts? He was a sponsor. She talked to him, and though she normally limited her conversation to what Finders was doing, if he asked about her personal situation, she would tell him. He'd made a point of always asking.

The unwelcome surprise was that he liked her.

Hell, he wanted to sleep with her. He wanted her naked. He wanted to tangle his hands in that soft curly hair and hold her while he fucked her. He didn't understand it, because she wasn't his usual type. She wasn't voluptuous, or flashy, or even really pretty. But she had style, and presence, and brown eyes that invited a man to get lost in them.

It would be a bitch if he had to have her killed.

He didn't want to. For one thing, she was too high-profile. People knew her name, her face, her story. It would be national news if anything happened to her, which meant the cops would go all out on the investigation.

She was enough of a threat that he'd had her watched, had kept watch on her himself, for ten years. He'd minimized her effectiveness, and taking her out now would be like using an elephant gun to shoot a bird. He didn't want to overreact and bring unnecessary attention his way. There were other ways to keep her in check.

Having an affair with her would have been the best way to keep tabs on her every movement and control the situation until he was ready to get out. He knew she was attracted to him, knew she'd had a couple of short-lived affairs that proved she hadn't completely given up living. But he'd underestimated the strength of her devotion to her cause, and after the way she'd stiffened in his arms when he kissed her, he had to accept that she wasn't going to change her mind. If he persisted, he would completely turn her off and she'd stop regarding him as a personal friend.

He'd have to cut his losses there, but he didn't like it. He'd felt almost like a teenager again, in a lather of anticipation. He saw now that he'd handled things clumsily with that "accidental" meeting at the restaurant, Susanna knowing she'd have to leave and arranging for a watcher in the restaurant to call her pager as soon as Rip sat down at their table. Very high-school-ish, and Milla had immediately seen through it.

So he'd back off. That didn't mean he'd give up. Eventually, he'd have her, because he was like her in one critical area: he never gave up.

* * *

Milla noticed when she changed her birth control patch the next morning that she had only a month's supply left, with no refill, so she made a note to call Susanna's office and get a prescription called in. She was always careful about birth control because she was aware of the risks she ran of being assaulted. She literally made a note, writing it down, because she didn't trust herself to remember otherwise. She felt both lethargic and nervous, wiped out from the stress of the night before and yet oddly on edge, waiting for something to happen.

She had slept like the dead. Handling True had been stressful, but Diaz—the short time she'd been with Diaz had left her feeling as if she'd been caught up in a tornado and hurled over half the country before being dumped into an ice-cold bath. Terror, fury, laughter, desire, despair—all had chased through her in rapid succession. The effects of so much adrenaline dumping into her system had left her shaky, and then she'd crashed.

And yet, the first thing she thought of when she awoke was how Diaz had looked crouched before her, smiling in the lamplight. And because she wasn't completely awake, her imagination had then drifted and placed them in different positions altogether, with him crouched *over* her, his eyes heavy-lidded and that same small smile on his lips as he slowly penetrated —

She blocked the fantasy, shuddering with delight even though she refused to let her imagination take her any further. That was far enough, anyway, to shock her. She had desired other men before, imagined making love with them. But none of them, not even David, had ever tempted her to veer from the course she had set herself.

Diaz did. Sleeping with him would be a mistake on a personal level, but what scared her was the chaos it could cause in their working relationship. For Justin's sake, she didn't dare change their status. And yet, knowing that, she still *wanted* to, yearned to taste him and touch him and feel him inside her.

Diaz had never kissed her, had scarcely touched her hand, but with one smile he had completely wiped out her memory of True's taste.

She had to get herself under control before she did something stupid. If she read him right, Diaz would disappear if she got clingy and started making any emotional demands on him, and she didn't trust herself not to do that. She hadn't felt this way since . . . well, she'd never felt this way. With David, she had felt absolutely secure in his love. There hadn't been any reason for emotional insecurity. Diaz, however, was David's polar opposite, and he might offer her a few things, but emotional security wasn't in his repertoire.

She was doing what women always did, she realized: obsessing. She should put him out of her mind, concentrate on controlling herself and doing what had to be done every day. The day-to-day business at Finders was way more important than her libido.

While driving to work, she put in a call to Susanna's office, only to be told, after holding for five minutes while she threaded her way through heavy morning traffic, that Susanna wanted her to come in for a checkup, since it had been two years since the last one.

Damn. Sighing, Milla made an appointment, scribbled the date on her note reminding her to call Susanna in the first place, and hoped she'd be in town to keep the appointment.

The first thing she saw when she entered the office was Brian hanging over Olivia's desk. But his voice was only a murmur, and his eyes had that intent, sleepy look men got when they—

Her eyes widened, and she shot a disbelieving look at Olivia, who was leaning forward with her arms folded on top of her desk, which pushed her breasts together and upward. She was smiling up at Brian.

So it wasn't just her, Milla thought. Lust was busting out all over.

Joann stuck her head out of her office. "Amber Alert in Lubbock!"

Within a minute they all had descriptions of the child, a three-year-old girl snatched from her front yard; the vehicle, a dark green, late model Ford pickup; and the driver, white male, early thirties, long blond hair. The Lubbock police would handle the actual apprehension, but Finders called all their associates in the Lubbock area and got them on the streets and highways, armed with cell phones and a description of the truck and driver. People going about their daily business might be listening to tapes or CDs and not hear the alert over the radio, or just be remarkably inattentive to what was going on around them.

Forty-five tense minutes later, the truck was spotted and police notified. The driver, when a cruiser flashed his lights at him, pulled over without fuss. It turned out to be a dispute between a divorced couple, the little girl was his daughter, and not only was she happy to be with her daddy, she began crying when the officers took her away from him.

"People," Milla said in disgust, lightly banging her head against her desk. "Why do they do that to their kids?"

"Because," was Joann's informative answer. Then she caught her breath in an audible gasp. "Guess who just walked in," she said in a high, squeaky tone.

Milla raised her head, her heart already thumping as she watched Diaz walk toward her office with that catlike tread of his. Heads were turning, watching him, and conversation stuttered to a halt in his wake. Brian stood up, his attention on high alert as he automatically reacted to the presence of a predator in his group. He recognized Diaz, surely, from the search for little Max the week before, but that didn't seem to make any difference.

Diaz stopped in her office doorway, turning slightly to the side so he couldn't be approached unawares from the rear. "Let's take a trip over the border," he said. His face was set in its usual emotionless mask.

"Right now?"

He shrugged. “If you’re interested.”
She started to ask, “In what?” but he wouldn’t have been here if it wasn’t something that concerned Justin.
“I’ll change clothes,” she said, getting to her feet. She was wearing a sundress and sandals.
“You’re fine as you are. We’ll be in Juarez.”
She got her purse, checked to make certain everything she needed was in it, just in case, and said, “Let’s go.”
As they reached the bottom of the outside stairs, he said, “We’ll use my truck,” pointing her toward the dusty blue pickup.
“Are we driving across, or walking?”
“Walking. It’s faster.”
“Should I call and arrange for another car?” she asked as she gathered her skirt and clambered up into the high cab.
“No need. I’ve got another one on the other side.”
“What are we doing? Who are we seeing?”
“Maybe the sister of the man who stabbed you.”

15

They walked across one of the bridges and presented their drivers’ licenses, which was all that was required for tourists staying inside the border free-zone. He hooked his cell phone off his belt and made a brief call; within ten minutes, a grinning teenager drove up in a slightly rusted brown Chevrolet pickup. Diaz passed him a folded twenty-peso banknote, and the teenager tossed him the keys, then turned and took off into the crowd.
This truck sat higher than the other one did, and when she opened the door, she looked for a handle to help her pull herself up. Before she could manage the feat in a skirt, Diaz stepped behind her, put his hands on her waist, and lifted her onto the seat.
She settled herself in the seat and buckled up while he went around and vaulted behind the wheel. She was shaking inside, her nerves knotted.
“*Maybe* the man’s sister?” she asked.
“I don’t know for certain. We’ll find out.” He leaned over and opened the glove box, took out a big, holstered automatic and laid it on the seat beside him.

“How did you find her?”
“It doesn’t matter how,” he said briefly, and she understood. His informants were his own, as were his methods. She didn’t want to look too closely at either.
He deftly navigated through Juarez’s noisy, crowded streets, going deeper and deeper into a neighborhood so rough she didn’t know whether to weep with pity or duck down in the seat and hide. She was glad Diaz was armed, and she wished she were, too. The streets were narrow and crowded, with ramshackle buildings and shanties pressing in on each side, and trash littering the ground. Sullen-faced men and teenage boys stared at her with unconcealed resentment and vicious intent, but when they noticed the man driving the truck, they quickly looked away.
She said, “I think your reputation precedes you.”
“I’ve been here before.”
And done considerable damage, judging from the way these people were reacting to the sight of him.
Battered and rusty vehicles lined the street Diaz drove on now, but he found a gap big enough to wedge the truck in. He got out, strapped the holster around his thigh, and checked how the automatic was seated. Satisfied, he came around the truck and opened her door. After he lifted Milla down from the seat and locked the doors, he made eye contact with a man sullenly watching them from ten yards away, and made a brief motion with his head. Warily the man approached. “If my truck is unharmed when we return,” Diaz said in rapid Spanish, “I’ll pay you a hundred dollars, American. If it is harmed, I will find you.”
The man nodded rapidly, and took up his sentry position guarding the truck. Milla didn’t ask if the precaution was necessary; she knew it was. The pistol, however—“Should you wear the pistol out in the open? What if the Preventivos see you?” They were the Mexican equivalent of regular beat cops.
He snorted. “Look around. Do you think they come here very often? Besides, I want it where everyone can see it, and where I can get to it in a hurry.”
The thigh holster made him look like some modern-day outlaw; even the way he walked—loose-limbed, perfectly balanced—seemed like a throwback to some rougher, more violent time. She could easily imagine

him with bandoliers crisscrossed on his chest and a bandanna pulled up to cover the lower half of his face.

He set an easy pace as he wound through a warren of increasingly small and nasty alleys. She clutched her bag tightly in front of her and stayed close to him, but he must not have thought she was staying close enough, because he reached out with his left hand and caught her right wrist, pulling her to him. He tucked her hand inside his belt. “Hold on, and don’t stray.”

As if, she thought.

She tried to watch where she stepped; since she was wearing sandals, she was doubly concerned. Evidently his definition of “You’re fine as you are” differed from hers. She would much rather be wearing pants and boots—and a Kevlar vest, if she had the choice—while she waded through trash and other things she didn’t stop to identify.

His right hand was on the butt of the pistol, not gripping it, just resting lightly in a way that said he was ready to use it. He turned down an alley even narrower than all the rest and came to a door that had once been painted blue, but only specks of paint remained, and some holes in it had been patched with pieces of cardboard that were duct-taped in place. He rapped on the rotted wood frame, and waited.

She heard scuffling noises from inside; then the door opened a tiny crack and one dark eye peered out. The owner of the eye made a muffled sound of alarm, as if she recognized him.

“Lola Guerrero,” he said, the tone of his voice making it a command.

“Si,” the woman said cautiously.

Diaz reached out and pushed the door open. The woman squeaked a protest and retreated a few steps, but when he didn’t come into her home, she hesitated, looking back at him. He didn’t say anything, just waited. The light was dim inside the little room, but still Milla could see the anxious look the woman darted at her. Perhaps she was reassured by the presence of another woman, though, because she muttered, *“Pase,”* and motioned them inside.

The smell inside was sour. A single naked lightbulb burned in a small lamp in a corner, and an old electric fan with metal blades and no guard whirred noisily as it stirred the air. Lola herself looked to be in her mid- to late sixties, with plump, shiny skin that said her room might be a dump but she was getting enough to eat.

More money appeared in Diaz's hand, and he offered it to the woman. Warily she eyed his outstretched hand, then snatched the money as if afraid he would think better of offering it. "You have a brother," he said in Spanish. "Lorenzo."

He had an interesting interrogation technique, Milla thought. He didn't ask questions; he made statements, as if he already knew the facts.

A bitter expression crossed the woman's face. "He is dead."

Milla was still holding Diaz's belt, and her hand tightened convulsively on the leather. So this was another trail that led only to a blank wall. She bowed her head, fighting the urge to howl in pain and protest. As if sensing her distress, Diaz reached back and pulled her to his side, tucking her within the circle of his arm and absently patting her shoulder.

"Lorenzo worked with a man named Arturo Pavón."

Lola nodded, and spat on the floor, which made Milla think even less of her housekeeping than before. Hatred darkened Lola's face. A flood of Spanish poured out, too fast for Milla to completely follow, but she gathered that Pavón had either killed Lorenzo or been the cause of his death, and that Pavón was one of any number of unsavory animals who performed sexual acts with assorted other animals and also with his mother.

Lola Guerrero didn't like Pavón.

When Lola's invective finally ran down, Diaz said, "Ten years ago this woman's baby was stolen by Pavón."

Lola's gaze darted to Milla, and Lola said softly, "I am sorry, señora."

"Gracias." Lola must have children of her own; her gaze had carried the instant, almost universal link between mothers that said, *I understand this pain*.

"She was injured in the attack, stabbed in the back by a man I believe was Lorenzo," Diaz continued. "Your brother was known for his knife work; his specialty was going for a kidney."

Oh, my God. Milla shuddered at the realization that the man who'd stabbed her had been *trying* to hit her kidney. She wanted to bury her face in Diaz's shoulder, shut out the ugliness that surrounded her.

Diaz paused, his cold eyes raking over Lola. "You used to care for the babies who were stolen," he said. Milla went rigid, her head snapping up. Lola had been *part* of the gang? The woman's expression hadn't been one of commiseration, but of guilt. Milla heard a low growl, and in shock

realized it came from her own throat. Diaz's arm tightened around her, clamping her to his side and preventing her from moving.
"My friend clawed out Pavón's eye as she was fighting for her baby. Lorenzo would at least have told you about it, even if you did not see Pavón yourself. You would remember this, remember the baby."
Lola's gaze darted from Diaz to Milla and back, as if she was trying to decide who was the greatest threat. Like all rodents, she had a sound instinct for preservation, and decided on Diaz. She stared at him, frozen in alarm that he knew so much. She would have lied; Milla saw her consider it, saw the thoughts chasing across her expression as clearly as if she spoke aloud. But Diaz stood as still as a rock, waiting, and Lola had no way of knowing what he already knew and what he didn't. Either way, she must have figured he would see through any lie. She swallowed, and muttered, "I remember."
"What did you do with the baby?"
Milla's nails dug into his chest as she waited, unable to breathe, for the answer.
"There were five of them," Lola said. "They were flown across the border that day. The gringo baby was the last one brought in." She spared a cautious look at Milla. "There was much trouble about him; the police were looking for him; we could not wait."
Flown out. Milla squeezed her eyes shut. "Did the plane crash?" she asked in a hoarse tone.
Lola brightened at being able to impart some good news. "No, no, that was later. Different babies."
Not Justin. He was alive. Alive! After all these years, she finally knew for certain. A sob caught in her throat and now she did bury her head against Diaz, almost breaking down at the release of an unspoken, unceasing tension that had held her for ten years. He made a low, wordless sound of comfort, then returned his attention to Lola.
"Who was in charge of stealing the babies? Who owned the plane? Who paid you?"
She blinked at the barrage of questions. "Lorenzo paid me. I was paid from his portion."
"Who was the boss?"
She shook her head. "That I do not know. He was a rich gringo; he owned the plane. But I never saw him, or heard his name. Lorenzo was very

careful; he said his throat would be cut if he told. This gringo, he told Pavón how many babies he needed, and Pavón found them."
"*Stole* them," Milla corrected violently, her voice muffled against Diaz's shirt.
"What happened to Lorenzo?" Diaz asked.
"His throat was cut, *señor*. By Pavón. Just as he said it would be. He did not talk to me, but he must have said something to someone else. Lorenzo, he was always stupid. His throat was cut as a warning to others not to talk."
"Who else knew anything about the rich gringo?"
Lola shook her head. "I knew only Lorenzo, and Pavón. They said it was best. I do know there was another woman helping them, a *gringa*, but they never said her name. She did something with the paperwork that said where the babies were born."
"Do you know where she was? What state?"
Lola waved a vague hand. "Across the border. Not Texas."
"New Mexico?"
"Perhaps. I don't remember. Sometimes I tried not to listen, *señor*."
"Do you know where the rich gringo lived?"
Alarm flashed across her face. "No, no. I know nothing about him."
"You heard something."
"Truly, no. Lorenzo thought he lived in Texas, perhaps even El Paso, but he did not know for certain. Pavón knows, but Lorenzo never did."
"Have you heard where Pavón might be?"
Lola spat again. "I have no interest in that pig."
"Take an interest," Diaz advised her. "I will perhaps feel more friendly if you have information about Pavón when I return."
Lola looked horrified at the idea of Diaz returning. She looked wildly around her cluttered, nasty, dark little room, as if wondering how fast she could pack up her things and disappear.
Diaz gave a slight shrug. "You can run," he said. "But why bother? If I want to find you, Lola Guerrero, I will. Eventually. And I never forget who helps me, and who does not."
Lola nodded her head very fast. "I understand, *señor*. I will be here. And I will listen for news."
"Do that." Diaz loosened his arm that was around Milla, turning her toward the door.

Milla dug in her heels, glancing back at the woman who had helped steal her baby. “How could you do it?” she asked, pain lacing every word. “How could you help them steal children from their mothers?”
Lola shrugged. “I am a mother, too, *señora*. I am poor. I needed the money to feed my own babies.”
She was lying. As old as Lola was now, even ten years ago her youngest child would have been, if not grown, at least an adolescent. Milla stared at her, frozen in place by fury that roared through her with the force of an avalanche. She could have at least understood if there *had* been babies to feed, but obviously Lola had done it purely for the money. This was no victim, no poor and desperate mother doing whatever she could to feed her children. This woman was as bad as her brother Lorenzo, as Pavón. She had been part and parcel of the scheme, a willing participant in robbing grieving mothers all over Mexico of their babies.
“You lying *bitch*,” Milla said through clenched teeth, and hurled herself toward the woman.
She must have telegraphed her intentions, because Lola sidestepped and quick as a flash had Milla’s arm twisted up behind her and a knife at her neck. “Stupid,” she hissed in Milla’s ear, and the knife pressed harder. Milla felt the cold sting on her neck.
Then there was a faint *snick*, the sound of a safety being thumbed off, and Lola froze in place.
“It seems your family has a propensity for the knife,” Diaz said very softly, his voice scarcely more than a rustle. “Mine, however, has a propensity for bullets.”
Off balance in more ways than one, Milla cut her eyes to the left and saw Diaz holding that big pistol flush against Lola’s temple. There was no quiver in his hand, no uncertainty in his eyes; instead they were narrowed in cold rage. “You have to the count of one to drop the knife. On—”
He didn’t wait even that long for her to drop it. His left hand snaked out, caught Lola’s hand, and twisted it down and away from Milla. There was an odd sound like a brittle branch snapping and Lola went rigid, a long, strangled moan reverberating in her throat. The knife clattered to the filthy floor and that lightning-fast hand transferred to Milla, snatching her to his side, holding her there with an iron grip on her arm. All the while the pistol in his right hand remained pointed at Lola’s head.

Lola reeled backward, keening and holding her hand. “You broke it,” she moaned, sinking down on a rickety chair.
“You’re lucky I didn’t take the knife from you and carve out your eyes,” he said, still in that soft, soft tone. “You cut my friend. That makes me unhappy. Are we even, do you think? Or do I owe you more, perhaps another bone—”
“I will find out whatever you need to know,” Lola babbled, rocking back and forth and staring at him in horror. She was no longer watching the pistol, but him, and Milla could understand why. His face was terrifying in its stillness, with only his eyes alive, glittering with rage. She could feel the force of his anger in the coiled strength of his body, hear it in the almost inaudible softness of his tone. He wasn’t a man who lost control in his anger; he gained it to an even greater degree.
“You will do that anyway, *señora*. So I think there must be something else.”
“No, no,” Lola moaned. “Please, *señor*. I will do anything you ask.”
He tilted his head as if considering. “I don’t know what I want, yet. I’ll think about it and let you know.”
“Anything,” she said again, half weeping. “I swear.”
“Remember this,” he said, “and remember that I don’t like it when anyone harms my friends.”
“I will, *señor*! I will!”
Diaz all but dragged Milla out of the room, and hustled her down the alley. She grabbed his belt again, hooking her fingers in it in a death grip, and pressed her other hand to her stinging throat. Warm blood wet her fingers, dripped through them. He glanced over his shoulder at her, his gaze going to her neck. “We need to get that cut cleaned and bandaged. It isn’t deep, but it’s making a mess of your dress. Keep your hand over it.”
The truck was right where they’d left it, with the sullen man standing guard. He straightened when he saw them coming, and his expression changed to alarm when he noticed the blood on Milla’s neck and dress, as if he might somehow be found at fault for whatever had happened. Diaz handed over the folded hundred dollars, then fished out his keys and unlocked the door. He lifted her in, nodded to the man, and went around to the driver’s side.
“We’ll go to Wal-Mart,” he said. “I can pick up something for you to wear as well as an antibiotic and bandages.”
The Wal-Mart was on Avenue Ejército Nacional. She sat with her fingers pressed to the cut on her throat as he worked their way out of the slum.

“What exactly did you do to her hand?” she asked. He’d moved so fast she wasn’t certain, plus she’d been a tad distracted; had he crushed it with a quick, hard squeeze?
Diaz glanced at her. “I broke her right thumb. It’ll be a while before she can hold a knife again.”
Milla shivered, sharply aware all over again of the kind of man he was.
“I had to,” he said briefly, and she understood. Fear was his greatest ally. Fear was what made people talk to him when they wouldn’t talk to anyone else. Fear gave him an edge, an opening; it was a weapon in itself. And to earn that fear, he had to be willing to back it up with action.
“She’ll run,” she said.
“Maybe. But I’ll find her if she does, and she knows it.”
They reached the Wal-Mart, and she sat in the truck with the motor running and the air-conditioning on—and the doors locked—while he went in to buy what he needed. He returned in no more than ten minutes, proving that the shoppers inside had taken one look at him and realized he belonged at the front of the checkout line. At least he’d removed the thigh holster before he went in, she thought, or there would have been wholesale panic.
He had a bottle of water, a package of gauze pads, a tube of antibiotic salve, first-aid tape, some butterfly bandages, and a cheap skirt and blouse. She started to say she’d just put the blouse on over her dress to cover the bloodstains; then she looked down and realized the blood had dripped on her skirt, too.
He drove into the parking lot behind the store, away from the crowd of shoppers, and parked the truck facing away from the lot to give them as much privacy as possible. She started to tear open the package of gauze, but he took everything from her and said, “Just sit still.”
He wet one of the gauze pads and put it over the cut, then took her hand and pressed it there. “Hold that.” She did, pressing firmly to staunch the bleeding that had slowed but not completely stopped. He wet several more of the pads and began wiping her neck and chest, washing away the dried blood. His fingers dipped impersonally down the front of her dress, down to the edge of her bra.
“Okay, now let me see,” he said, taking her hand away from the cut. He peeled back the gauze pad and grunted with satisfaction. “It isn’t bad. You don’t need any stitches, but I bought some butterfly bandages just to be on the safe side.”

He applied the antibiotic salve, then a couple of butterfly bandages to hold the edges of the cut together. Then he taped a gauze pad over the butterflies to further protect the cut. When he was finished, he said, “Use the rest of these pads to wash your hands and arms before you change clothes.”
She complied, glad to get the blood off of her, but she said, “I don’t need to change clothes; I can go home like this.”
“You’re going to cross the border in bloody clothes? I don’t think so. And we’re going to get something to eat before we cross back over.”
She was so frazzled she’d forgotten about the border crossing. She finished cleaning her arms, then took the skirt and blouse out of the bag and tore off the price tags. “Turn your back.”
He gave a low laugh and got out of the truck, standing with his back to the window. She sat for a moment, blinking in astonishment. Had he actually *laughed*? He’d said he did, but she hadn’t really believed him, and now she’d heard it for herself.
Dear God. He’d had his arm around her, his hand down the front of her dress. She’d had her head on his shoulder, her nails digging into his chest. Intimacy was a slippery slope, with one thing leading to another, and without thinking, today she had slid dangerously close to peril. His arm around her had felt too natural; his shoulder had been too comforting and right *there*, as if meant for her use.
Hurriedly, she pulled her dress up and skimmed it off over her head, then donned the blouse and wiggled into the skirt. Both were a little tight, but they would do until she could get home. When she was dressed, she leaned over and rapped her knuckles on the window, and he got back into the truck.
“What would you like to eat?”
Her insides were shaky, telling her that she needed to eat something, even if she wasn’t certain she could hold a fork. “Anything. Fast food will do.”
Instead of a fast-food restaurant, he stopped at a *fonda*, one of the many small, family-run restaurants. There were three tables outside on a small shaded patio, and he led her there. The waiter, a tallish young man, politely did not look at the bandage on Milla’s neck. She ordered tuna empanaditas and bottled water; Diaz went for the enchiladas and a dark beer.
While they waited for their food, she played with her napkin, folding and refolding it. She fidgeted with her blouse, because it was tighter than she liked. Then, because she couldn’t ignore him and she knew he was silently watching her, she said, “You’re very at home here.”

“I was born in Mexico.”
“But you said you’re an American citizen. When did you get your citizenship?”
“I was born with it. My mother was American. She just happened to be in Mexico when I was born.”
So he had dual citizenship, just like Justin.
“And your father?”
“Is Mexican.”
She’d noticed he said “was” when talking about his mother, and “is” when it concerned his father. “Your mother is dead?”
“She died a couple of years ago. I’m fairly certain they weren’t married.”
“Do you know your father very well?”
“I lived with him half the time when I was growing up. That was better than living with my mother. What about you?”
Evidently that was all the small talk he was prepared to make about himself. Tit for tat, though, so she told him about her family, and the rift between her and her brother and sister. “It’s hard on Mom and Dad,” she said. “I know it is. But I just can’t be around Ross or Julia now without—” She shook her head, unable to find the right word. She didn’t want to hurt either of them, yet at the same time she wanted to bang their heads against something.
“Do they have children?” he asked.
“Both of them. Ross has three, Julia has two.”
“Then they should be able to understand how you feel.”
“But they don’t. Maybe they can’t. Maybe you have to actually lose a child before you really understand. It’s as if part of *me* is missing, as if there’s nothing but a great big hole where he used to be.” She bit her lip, refusing to cry in public. “I can no more stop looking for him than I can stop breathing.”
Diaz regarded her with those somber eyes, eyes that saw straight through to the core. Then he leaned over the small table, cupped her chin in his hand, and kissed her.

16

It was just a small kiss, but it was so damnably unfair of him that she just sat there, stunned. Too much had happened in too short a time; she felt

dazed, off balance, totally unable to cope. She caught his wrist with both hands, then didn't know what to do or say when he released her chin and lifted his mouth, leaving her still hanging on to his arm.
That grim mouth was softer than she'd expected, and gentler than she'd ever imagined. The kiss hadn't been passionate; it had, in fact, been more comforting than anything else. She hated him for that. She shouldn't want any kiss from him, but if she had to have one, she certainly didn't want it to be for comfort.
She glared at him. "What was that for?"
One corner of his mouth quirked in his equivalent of a chuckle. "I don't guess," he said, "that you've ever seen what other people see in your eyes."
"No, of course not." When he didn't say anything else, she waited a minute, then, goaded, said, *"What?"*
He shrugged, and seemed to be considering the matter, picking his way through various words and discarding them. Finally he said, "Suffering."
The word punched her, hard. *Suffering*. God, yes, she had suffered. Only parents who had lost a child could possibly understand. Yet this man, whose contact with emotion seemed tenuous at best, had seen and responded. And she had slipped even further down that blasted slope.
The waiter brought their meals, and she was glad to devote herself to the empanaditas, which were one of her favorite Mexican dishes. The tuna-stuffed pastries suited her taste today, and she plowed through them, not stopping until her plate was clean. Getting her throat sliced seemed to have really revved up her appetite. There was nothing like a brush with death to make you appreciate food.
Diaz made equally short work of his enchiladas, though he drank only half his beer.
"Don't you like it?" she asked, indicating the bottle.
"Well enough. I just don't drink much."
"Do you smoke?"
"Never have."
"Vote?"
"In every election since I was of age."
And he wore his seat belt, too. She regarded him with exasperation. Had there ever before been such a sober, civic-minded assassin?
At some point during the day, she had lost her fear of him. She didn't know exactly when or why, but she couldn't have found comfort in his arms if

she'd still been afraid of him. He hadn't changed. Had *she*? The past week and a half had been nothing but an emotional roller coaster, and the strain had to be taking a toll. She had to be losing her mind for her to be attracted to someone like Diaz.

She had at least kept him from realizing what she was feeling, she thought. She hadn't responded to his light kiss; in fact, her reaction had been perfect, though unplanned.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

She looked at her empty plate. "I am unless I lick it."

Again that little quirk of his mouth. "I mean, would you like something else?"

"No, nothing else, thank you."

He paid for their meal, and as they were walking to the truck, she realized how much money he had spent today. "I'll reimburse you for your expenses," she said. Let him think Finders was reimbursing him; she intended to pay with her own money.

He didn't say anything, and she wondered if she had offended him. He was half Mexican, after all, and had spent part of his formative years here. The machismo of the culture had to have affected him at least a little.

"Give me an itemized statement," she continued, unable to leave it alone.

His expression was blank again. "How should I list the bribe?"

"As a bribe. We pay them all the time. How else would we get information?"

"There are other methods. But sometimes a bribe will work." He took out his cell phone and called someone, presumably the same boy, to meet him and collect the truck. But it was a different boy who showed up, somewhat younger than the first one, and with an engagingly roguish grin. Diaz gave him the keys and some money, and the kid hopped behind the wheel and roared off.

"Brothers?" she asked.

"Not mine."

"I mean, are the two boys brothers?"

"Probably. They live in the same house, but they could be cousins."

Milla and Diaz walked across the bridge to El Paso and collected his other truck. "Where to?" he asked. "Back to the office, or home?"

"Home." She wanted to change clothes, because the skirt had become uncomfortably tight after she'd eaten. "Then, if you don't mind, take me

back to the office." She had to pick up her car. "If you don't have time, I'll just call a cab."
"No problem."
"By the way, how did you get into my house the other night? I *know* the doors and windows were locked."
"They were. I unlocked one. You need a security system."
She hadn't before; her neighborhood was very low-crime. "Would that stop you?"
"Not if I wanted in."
He waited downstairs in the living room while she ran upstairs to change. She didn't bother looking for anything that would hide the bandage on her neck, because the weather was too hot. Instead she put on crisp yellow slacks and a white sleeveless blouse, and ran back downstairs.
He was examining the rocks scattered around the living room; she had used the prettiest ones as decorations. The rest were in various containers: a big blue bowl on the coffee table, two clear vases, a huge glass piggy bank.
"What's with all the rocks?" he asked, his head tilted to the side like a quizzical dog's.
"I picked them up for Justin," she said, going very still. "I thought he'd probably like rocks. Don't little boys like to throw rocks, and carry them around in their pockets? I guess he's too old for that now, though. But sometimes I'll see an unusual rock and pick it up anyway. Habit."
"I liked bugs," he said. "And worms."
"Gross!" She wrinkled her nose and shuddered, imagining a pocket full of worms. Then she sighed. "I suppose I should get rid of the rocks, but I just haven't been able to make myself do it. Maybe one day."
"If nothing else, you could throw them at anyone who breaks in."
"*You're* the only one who has broken in."
"You probably throw like a girl, anyway."
Despite herself, Milla found herself smiling at him. "Well, of course. What else?"

What else, indeed? Diaz mused as he walked back across the bridge into Juarez. She was a girly girl. She tried to be tough, and was certainly competent and willing, but her instincts were completely female. Her bedroom was froufrou, with sheets that felt like satin, mounds of pillows,

soft rugs underfoot, and crystal things hanging off her lamp shades. Her bathroom smelled sweet and perfumey.
She wouldn't like knowing that he'd touched her sheets and looked in her closet, but he'd been curious. He'd wanted to know about her, read her in the clothes and scents she preferred. She had jeans and pants and shirts, but for the most part her clothes were dresses and skirts, delicate blouses. Today, when she'd come back downstairs after changing, she'd looked neat and cool in yellow and white, with a couple of white freshwater pearl bracelets on her wrist. She'd somehow managed to make the bandage on her neck look more like an accessory than a necessity.
Because she tried to be tough but was inherently soft, he was going back to Juarez without her. Lola wouldn't be expecting him back so soon, so now was the perfect time to be there.
He would be surprised if Lola didn't have at least a couple of kids. Grown, now, of course, but it was possible one or more of them had still been living with her when she was taking care of the stolen babies for her brother and Pavón. Kids were nosy, and they heard things even when you thought they were nowhere around. Hers might well have overheard some conversation between Lorenzo and Pavón, something that would give him another thread to follow.
Very little scared him; he was stoic about pain and death, figuring very few people escaped the first and no one escaped the second. But when Lola had held the knife to Milla's throat and he'd seen the blood trickling down her neck, for the first time in a very long while he'd been scared. He could have killed Lola right there, had been within a hairsbreadth of pulling the trigger, but the thought of Milla's reaction if he blew Lola's brains all over her had stopped him. He'd reined in the impulse, though Lola had been able to see in his eyes how close he was to doing it.
He'd known going in that Lola Guerrero was a stone-cold bitch, with a reputation for meanness and a taste for drugs. But she had information Milla wanted, and he'd known he could get it. Taking Milla, though, had been a mistake, which was why he was going back alone.
He'd had to think very fast, before. If he didn't kill Lola at that point, he was in a quandary. He couldn't just walk away, not after she'd cut his woman. He'd called Milla his friend, but no one would believe that. Everyone who had seen them, everyone who would hear about the incident, would think she was his; he couldn't let anyone cut her and go unpunished.

If he did, people would think he was going soft. They would think they could get away with crossing him, get away with the flood of killings and drugs that he was trying to help stem. And because they would think they could get away with it, innocents would die. Then he would have to kill even more people to convince them that they still didn't want to cross him.
All of that, and more, and had flashed through his mind in a split second.
What should he do about Lola, if not kill her? Beat the hell out of her? That would have taken too long, Milla would have been in hysterics, and he had a distaste for such brutality against women, even scum like Lola. Shoot her? With a nine millimeter, there was no such thing as a minor wound. The big slug tore out flesh, ripped nerves and blood vessels. Cut her? Unless he sliced her to pieces, cuts were easily healed, and he hadn't wanted to remove any body parts, minor or otherwise.
The only option that had been left was breaking a bone, which would cause her trouble for a good length of time. He'd chosen the thumb because of the knife, because he was so enraged that she'd cut Milla. With a broken thumb, she wouldn't be holding that knife for quite a while. And there was something cold about the chosen punishment that fit the crime, and that let people know he hadn't gone soft. As soon as he'd thought it, the deed was done.
He realized the absurdity of trying to choose a punishment that was bad enough to make a statement on the street but wouldn't permanently cripple the woman. He didn't want to hit her, so he'd just break her thumb. Having been beaten himself on more than one occasion, he knew how long the pain lasted, how utterly debilitating it was. Lola's thumb would pain her, but she wouldn't be seriously handicapped—except for knife handling, of course. He wanted her mobile, able to get around; she couldn't find out anything for him if she was half dead from a beating.
He could have killed her without the faintest twinge of remorse; breaking her thumb had made his stomach knot with nausea, even though he hadn't shown a flicker of hesitation. If he had, Milla might now be dead, or at least seriously hurt.
Milla had been upset, but she had understood immediately why he'd had to do *something*.
He needed to get his hands on Pavón. Wasn't it interesting that the same person was connected to smuggling babies ten years ago and smuggling

involuntary organ donors now? Maybe Pavón was just a man who got around, but maybe he was still working for the same boss.

Diaz got a nice warm feeling in the pit of his stomach at the thought of tying up both problems with the same bow.

Milla's son was gone. Only fools would keep a paper trail, and since adoption files were, for the most part, private, he didn't see how she would ever be able to track him down even if they did crack the ring and discover the fake birth certificate that had been issued for him. But it had meant a lot to her to find out that at least he hadn't been in that plane crash, or smothered in a car trunk. He'd seen the look in her eyes, the joy that had temporarily banished the sadness.

The plane crash was another avenue he could investigate. The FAA would have a record of things like that. He didn't remember anything in the news about a plane crash killing six babies, and he was certain a story like that would have stuck with him. So either the crash site had been sanitized and the little bodies removed before rescuers and investigators arrived, leaving only the pilot, or the site had never been discovered by authorities. New Mexico was a big, mostly empty state. There were thousands of square miles in which a small plane could go down without being seen.

The owner of the plane would have known it was missing, though, and mounted a search for it. If he'd found it, what then? Completely disposing of a plane, even a small one, would take quite a bit of effort. The best bet would have been to remove the bodies, strip the plane, remove all markings and serial numbers, and set fire to it. There were a number of accelerants that would produce a very hot fire.

That's how *he* would have done it, anyway.

He had a pretty good instinct for how the bad guys worked. All he had to do was figure out how he would do something, and most of the time he was right on the money. That didn't say much for his personality, but it said a lot for his effectiveness.

He had to be more careful now, because Milla softened him. He didn't know why, but he knew it happened. He found himself doing things he shouldn't be wasting his time with, because of her. Conversation didn't come easily to him, but he could talk to her, tell her things about himself. It amazed him that she told him about herself in return. At first she had been afraid of him, but he was used to that. Now she wasn't, and he was pleased. She wouldn't sleep with him if she was afraid of him.

Maybe she didn't know yet how he felt. He held himself back, not wanting to push too hard and make her run. When he'd kissed her, he had wanted to deepen the contact, taste her with his tongue, but he'd felt the way she'd gone still and she hadn't returned the kiss, so he'd kept it gentle and light. She might not know yet how *she* felt, either, but he could read people and he knew she reacted to him. She too easily accepted his touch, had too easily leaned against him today, buried her head on his shoulder. As a woman she totally responded to him.

It had been a long time since he'd had a woman, but he intended to have Milla. He'd be patient, give her time to get used to him, but he had no doubt of the outcome. She was his.

He didn't call for his truck this time, but took a cab and had it let him out while he was still a fair distance from Lola's place. Then he walked, moving quietly, easily, approaching from a different direction, aware that his only weapon this time was the knife in his boot. She'd had time by now to have her thumb taken care of. She should be back at home, cradling her hand, popping pain pills, and cursing him. He was the last person she would want to see, which was why she would be so eager to get rid of him by telling him what he wanted to know. She would give up her own kids to him without even a protest.

He didn't knock on the sorry door this time. He tried to open it and found it was secured from the inside, so he simply kicked it in.

Lola was lying on her cot, her hand bandaged with her thumb stuck rigidly outward. She was dressed in only a dingy nightgown; evidently she had taken her pain medication and decided to turn in for the night, even though it wasn't dark yet. She gasped when she saw him, her face going slack with terror.

"I thought of another question," he said softly.

True wasn't in a good mood, so when his phone rang for about the thousandth time that day, he snatched it up with a snarl. "What?"

There was a hesitation; then a timid voice with a Spanish accent said, "*Señor* Gallagher?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"You said you wished to know if anyone saw the man Diaz."

True straightened, all his irritation gone, his attention totally focused. "Yes, that's right."

“The reward, you are still offering it?”
“In cash. American.” He never welshed on promises to pay. Money kept the information pipeline flowing.
“He was in Ciudad Juarez today.”
Juarez. The son of a bitch was close, too close.
“He was not alone,” the timid voice continued.
“Who was he with?”
“A woman. They came to our *fonda*. I served them myself. I am sure it was Diaz.”
“Did you recognize the woman?”
“No, *señor*. But she was a *gringa*. She had a bandage on her neck.”
True didn’t see how a bandage on her neck meant the woman was American. “What else?”
“She had curly brown hair with a white streak on top.”
True went cold. Automatically he got the information for where he should send the money and made arrangements for payment to be made that very night. With one sentence, Diaz’s presence in Juarez had gone from annoying to catastrophic.
Milla was with him. Milla and Diaz, together.
Son of a *bitch*.
He had to start tying up loose ends immediately. He had to locate Pavón and make certain the stupid bastard didn’t talk.

17

True was very good at analyzing his options. he knew whom he was up against, and Diaz was nobody’s fool; on the contrary, the bastard was one of the most cunning people True had ever met or heard about. Just his name was enough to send a certain element scurrying for cover, because Diaz always found his quarry, but he didn’t always bring it back alive.
The word was that Diaz was government-sanctioned—both governments, United States and Mexico. Since Mexico didn’t extradite criminals who might receive the death penalty, the country inadvertently became the safe haven of some very unsavory characters. The United States wanted these people either caught or dealt with by other methods. Mexico just wanted them to disappear and stop being a problem. So it was possible Diaz was

being paid by both governments. Maybe. Maybe he was just a very good bounty hunter who was also very good at projecting an image. But he definitely had contacts and resources, and the nose of a bloodhound.

True had been able to keep Milla stonewalled all these years, but Diaz was different. For one thing, people were afraid of him. If it came down to a question of who they feared most, him or Diaz, True wasn't certain what the answer would be.

The key, he thought, was misdirection. Keep Diaz occupied chasing down bogus rumors while he himself found and eliminated Pavón, which was something he probably should have done years ago. Pavón was the one person, other than himself, who knew everything—and True had certainly never intended that to happen. People underestimated Pavón; True had been guilty of the same misjudgment. Pavón was a vicious thug, but he had an instinct for survival and for handling things just right.

That had made him a valuable asset. Pavón could get things done. Tell him what you wanted, and it happened. But valuable asset or not, with Diaz on his trail Pavón's personal scale had tipped over to the liability side.

The good news was that Pavón had heard Diaz was after him and had gone to ground. The bad news was that Diaz never gave up and would eventually find Pavón. Which meant True himself had to find Pavón first. No one would care enough about Pavón to do more than a cursory investigation into his death.

True's other option—his *only* other option—was to have Diaz eliminated. Problem was, that was easier said than done. And if Diaz truly was government-sanctioned, that would bring down more heat than True was prepared to handle. You could hide only so much, and that was as long as no one was looking very closely. The Feds tended to look closely. He had to be very, very careful in how he arranged things.

So—buy some time by leaking bogus rumors and names, and keep Diaz occupied. Find Pavón and get rid of that problem, which would buy him even more time and allow him to finish covering his tracks. This was probably the end of a very lucrative business, which was a shame, because he had only about half as much as he'd wanted to accumulate before he got out.

But he would find some other moneymaking deal. He always did. And if the price was right, he could always do some special collections.

He smiled, thinking of all the people whose names he could drop into the rumor mill and get Diaz pointed in their direction. He could have some fun with this. Payback was always hell, wasn't it?

August slipped into September, bringing a slight lessening of the heat, noticeably shorter days, and a tantalizing hint of crispness in the air. School had started, and it seemed as if kids were swarming everywhere. Though it was painful, she had always compulsively watched the kids in Justin's age group, from kindergarten on up. He would be in fifth grade this year, she thought. Somewhere, he was starting school just like all these youngsters, yelling and running, full of energy and devilment. Were his eyes still blue, or had they darkened to the brown of her eyes? She thought they would be blue, because they had been the exact shade of David's eyes.

Diaz seemed to have disappeared—again. That day they'd gone to Juarez she'd felt such a connection with him, but she hadn't heard from him since. Of course, just because she'd felt a connection didn't mean *he* had, and no matter what she felt the truth remained that she knew very little about him. She wasn't even certain what his first name was, if he'd pulled "James" out of thin air that day or if it really was his name. She'd never thought to ask him, because in her mind he was "Diaz," not "James."

She didn't know where he lived, how old he was, if he'd ever been married—my God, what if he was married now? The thought of Diaz being married made her sick to her stomach. What if he had children? He'd been at ease with little Max that day, so it was possible he had a child somewhere. Perhaps that was where he was, at home with his family.

Milla knew she was being ridiculous. She'd never seen anyone less likely to be a family man than Diaz. He was so clamped down and solitary that she couldn't imagine him living with anyone, which in turn told her how foolish she was to be attracted to him in the first place. But chemistry was what it was, and it seemed she could no more stop thinking about him than she could flap her arms and fly.

Diaz wasn't the only one who seemed to have disappeared. To her relief, she hadn't seen True at all. Not that she'd seen him all that regularly before, but after the last time, she'd been afraid he would become even more persistent. He'd said he would back off, but she doubted he knew how. But relieved as she was, she'd still expected to run into him at some of the city's society functions she had to attend. He was either out of town, or he'd

found a Miss September who was unusually engrossing. She hoped it was the latter, to deflect his attention elsewhere.

The second week of September, her mother called and asked her to come for a visit. Milla hadn't seen her parents since spring break, when both Ross and Julia had gone on vacation with their respective families and there hadn't been any chance of running into them at her parents' house. Right now, with school just starting and all the extracurricular activities, they would be busy and weren't likely to pop over to their parents' house. In addition, her mom would call and warn them that Milla was visiting.

Glad for the chance to get away and have something besides Diaz to think about, she took a few days off and flew to Louisville, Kentucky. There she rented a car and drove across the Ohio River to the small town in southern Indiana where they lived.

Her dad was sixty-five and newly retired from an accounting firm; her mother, at sixty-three, had retired from teaching grade school the year before. Already her dad was making grumbling noises about moving to Florida, where he wouldn't have to deal with shoveling snow ever again, but her mother was firmly planted in the house where she had lived for over forty years and where she had raised her three children.

The house was synonymous with "home" in Milla's mind. It wasn't fancy, just a fifty-year-old two-story frame house, with a deep porch, steep roof, and memories in every room. There were three bedrooms upstairs, and during a remodeling in the seventies, a large downstairs parlor had been turned into a master bedroom with connecting bath. The eat-in kitchen was large enough that they'd all been able to sit at the table, and they'd had many wonderful, exciting Christmases tearing into a mountain of wrapped gifts under the decorated tree in the living room. In the future they might hire someone to shovel the snow from their driveway, but Milla couldn't imagine her parents ever moving from this spot.

Milla had once thought her life would be a lot like her mother's: teaching and raising a family. Now she couldn't even imagine so peaceful a life. Hers had been torn apart so completely that the *After* bore no resemblance to the *Before*. She hated that there was a rift between her and her siblings, but they couldn't seem to grasp how deeply she had been changed. They wanted her to go with the flow, and it simply wasn't possible. She couldn't imagine giving up on Justin, and she couldn't forgive them for thinking she should.

Still, when she and her mother were gossiping in the kitchen and Mrs. Edge caught herself for the third time mentioning either Ross or Julia and then lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, Milla sighed. “Mom, I don’t expect you to never mention them. Talk about them if you want; I’d like to hear what the kids are up to, keep up to date on what’s happening.”
Mrs. Edge sighed, too. “I just wish you three would settle things between you. I hate not having you here for the holidays.”
“Maybe someday, after I find Justin. Though I doubt I’ll ever completely forgive them for saying I should just forget about him.”
Her mother’s eyes filled with tears. “Oh, honey . . . Do you still really think you’ll ever find him? I don’t see how it’s possible.”
“I’ll find him,” she said fiercely. It hurt that her mother had given up, too. Was Milla the only one who still hoped? “I have leads now that I didn’t have before. I know he was flown out of Mexico, probably to New Mexico. I know a woman falsified a birth certificate for him. I know the name of the men who stole him from me. One of them is dead, but the other one—” She stopped. Without Diaz, her chances of finding Pavón had dwindled alarmingly. But maybe that’s what Diaz was doing: tracking. It was what he did best.
Mrs. Edge looked stunned. “You—you’ve actually found out all that? Just recently? I know you haven’t said anything when you called.”
“Within the last month.” She felt ashamed that she hadn’t called her parents in over a month, at least. There was no excuse, no matter how busy she was. “Things have been”—she searched for a word that was accurate but unalarming—“hectic.”
“I imagine so.” Mrs. Edge glanced at the thin red scar on her daughter’s throat. “How did you get that scar?”
Self-consciously Milla touched the scar. It wasn’t a bad scar at all, and in time would probably fade completely. She doubted her mother would appreciate that little detail. “From a cut,” she finally said.
“I see. You were shaving?”
Milla smiled appreciatively, then gave up. “No. A woman did it. She was part of the smuggling ring; she took care of the babies who’d been kidnapped, until they could be flown out of the country.”
Mrs. Edge sat down hard in the nearest chair. Her cheeks were pale at the thought of her youngest being attacked, yet at the same time she was almost

beside herself at the other news. “She—she saw Justin? She actually saw him? She remembered him?”
“She remembered. He was alive. He was okay.”
“She—but why did she cut you?”
“Because I did something stupid.” Trying to attack Lola had been very stupid, but she’d been blinded by emotion, the same way she had been in the cemetery when she’d first crossed paths with Diaz. Scolding herself hadn’t worked; she’d done exactly the same thing again, and this last time she hadn’t come out of it unscathed. She was good at several things, but evidently fighting wasn’t one of them.
“Stupid, how?”
“I jumped her.” Milla made a helpless gesture. “I was just so angry at her, I couldn’t help it. She had a knife.”
“You could have been killed!”
She could have been killed numerous times in the past ten years. Thank heavens, her mother had no idea of the type of places she had gone into, the people she had talked to, the things she’d done. She supposed she was lucky she hadn’t been shot, beaten, or raped, but her personal safety had somehow never mattered. Her guardian angels must have been working overtime—that was the only reason she could come up with for none of those things having happened.
And if Diaz hadn’t been there in Juarez, Milla had no doubt Lola would have sliced her throat from ear to ear, just because she could. Diaz was the most unlikely guardian angel she could imagine, but he’d served the purpose.
She’d come to Indiana so she could stop thinking about him for a while, but every subject seemed to bring her right back to him. It was almost like having a painful adolescent crush, she decided, though she’d escaped her teenager years largely unscathed. Maybe if she’d gone through the usual emotional upheaval then, she wouldn’t be so hung up on Diaz now. He was the ultimate bad boy, she was in lust, and she needed to forget about him and concentrate on more important things.
“What are you thinking about?” her mother asked suspiciously. “You got the most peculiar expression on your face. Has something like that happened before, and you didn’t tell me about it?”
“What? Oh, no—no. Nothing like that. I was actually thinking how lucky I’d been that nothing *had* happened before.”

“Lucky? You mean you’ve done things that—”
“I mean I’ve been in some really rough places, trying to find someone who knew anything about the baby smugglers. I never go alone, though,” she hastened to add. “Never.”
“That’s something, at least.” Mrs. Edge blew out a shaky breath. “But how I’ll sleep at night now knowing you make a habit of doing things like that, I don’t know.”
“I guess that’s why I haven’t told you before,” Milla said, feeling guilty. There was nothing like a visit with your parents to make you feel twelve years old again.
A car pulled into the driveway, and Mrs. Edge got to her feet, peering out the kitchen window to see who it was. She gave a small gasp of dismay. “It’s Julia. What on earth? I told her you were here.”
“It’s okay,” Milla said to reassure her mom. She thought of going up to her room to avoid her older sister, but that seemed so cowardly she remained where she was. Their relationship was strained, not violent; she didn’t care to be around either her brother or sister now, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be polite.
Listening, they heard Mr. Edge open the front door, heard Julia say, “Hi, Dad. Where are Mom and Milla?”
“In the kitchen.” His tone was that of a man who planned to absent himself from a likely unpleasant scene as soon as possible.
Then there were Julia’s crisp footsteps on the hardwood floor in the hallway. Milla just stood and waited, leaning against the cabinets, declining to do anything that would make her look busy and casual.
Julia was three years older than Milla and two years younger than Ross. Instead of being the stereotypical middle child who got lost when the family’s attention was doled out, Julia had always claimed attention as her due. She paused in the kitchen doorway, looking as stylish, collected, and determined as always. She had always been the pretty one of the family, with their mother’s delicate features. Her hair was the same color as Milla’s, but had great body and a hint of wave instead of Milla’s crop of curls. Whenever she had time, Milla actually had a perm to tone *down* her curls and make them more manageable; Julia had never had to resort to a perm for anything.
They were both around the same height, five-seven, with the same general build. No one looking at them could ever mistake them for anything other

than sisters, despite the stronger, more severe structure of Milla's face. Their styles were completely different: Milla moved with a floaty grace that was completely in tune with her love for rich fabrics and feminine clothes, while Julia strode through life, preferred tailored suits for work, and at home was often in sweatpants and a T-shirt.

Julia would have been much more suited for the life Milla had been living. *She* would never have lost control of her emotions and charged into danger.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Edge asked, a trifle nervously.

"Wrong? Nothing. You said Milla would be here, so I came by." Julia was staring hard at Milla, as if daring her to say something to start a fight.

"You're looking good," Milla said with perfect civility, and truth. She wouldn't say she was glad to see her sister, because she wasn't.

As usual, Julia charged right to the point. "Don't you think this has gone on long enough? It's silly that we can't come over when you're here, and you're doing nothing but hurting Mom and Dad by staying away during the holidays."

There were a lot of things that Milla wanted to say, but she took a page from Diaz's book and remained silent, letting Julia have her say. This was distressing enough for their mother, without descending into a hurtful argument.

"It's been three years," Julia continued. "Don't you think that's long enough to pout?"

Had she been pouting? Milla wondered. Funny, she had considered her anger to be far more serious than that. The word "enraged" came to mind. Evidently their mother took issue with Julia's word choice, too, because she said, "Julia!" in a sharp tone as she got to her feet.

Julia said, "You know it's true, Mom. We told her the truth, and she got in a snit about it. Milla, honey, I'm so sorry your baby was stolen, I would do anything in the world to undo it, but it's been *ten years*. He's gone. You're never going to find him. At some point, you have to start living again. It's better to do it now while you're still young. Get remarried, have a family. No one will ever replace your baby, but this isn't about replacing him, it's about *living*."

"No, it's about making life more comfortable for you and Ross, because you feel guilty whenever I'm around," Milla said.

"Guilty!" Julia drew back, her pretty face astonished. "What do we have to feel guilty about?"

“Having your children safe and sound. Being happy. Being whole. It’s a form of survivor’s guilt.”
“That isn’t true.”
“Then what does it matter to you how I live my life? If I were a drug dealer or a prostitute, I could see your point, but I look for lost people—children, mostly. And I still look for my son. How on earth is that harming you? What if it were Chloe?” Chloe was Julia’s five-year-old daughter, an impish pixie of a child who lit up the world with her smile. “If some stranger snatched her away from you at, say, the mall, how long would it take before you said, ‘Oh, well, I’ve looked long enough, time to get on with my life’? Would there ever be a night when you didn’t go to bed wondering where she was, if she was hungry or cold, if some pervert was using her in unspeakable ways? And even then would you pray that she still be alive, so you at least had a chance of seeing her again? How long would you give yourself, Julia?”
The color washed out of Julia’s cheeks. She wasn’t the most imaginative of women, but she could picture how she would feel if anything happened to Chloe.
“So imagine how I felt when you and Ross said, ‘Hey, it’s been a while, you might as well give it up and stop bothering us with your sad face.’ I personally don’t give a damn how you feel about my sad face, and I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive you for saying Justin doesn’t matter!” Despite her attempt to remain calm, Milla’s voice was fierce as she finished.
“We never said that!” Julia was appalled. “Of course he matters! But he’s gone, and you can’t change that. We just want you to accept it.”
“If I’d accepted it three years ago, I wouldn’t have found the people who took him,” she snapped. “Just last month, as a matter of fact. I finally have some solid leads, and even if all I can find out is that he was adopted, using a fake birth certificate, can’t you see that’s more than I’ve had before? Until two weeks ago, I didn’t even know if he was alive when he was taken out of Mexico! So let’s just say you and Ross made an error in judgment, and leave it at that.”
“Leave it, period,” said Mrs. Edge, a stern, angry look on her face. “That’s enough. Julia, I love you dearly, but this isn’t your home anymore; how dare you come here knowing you were going to start a ruckus? I can see the points both of you are making. As a mother, I know I would never stop

looking if one of you went missing. Also as a mother, I hate to see my child tearing herself apart for a hopeless cause."
"But it isn't hopeless," Milla said.
"We know that now, but we didn't know it before! We have to go with what we can see, and what we saw was your life in ruins. You and David divorced, and you buried yourself in this Finders work until it seemed that there was nothing left of *you*, the person we all love. Milla, you have no idea how we've worried—"
"Uh." Mr. Edge hesitantly stuck his head through the doorway. "I hate to bother you, but Milla's purse is ringing." He held out his hand, and in it was Milla's purse, which, from the habit of a lifetime, she'd placed on top of the piano when she'd come in. The cell phone inside was both ringing and vibrating, making it sound as if the noise had disturbed a rattlesnake.
She hurried across the kitchen to take her purse and dig out her phone. The office had her parents' number, and normally when she was on vacation she turned off her cell phone, but she'd turned it on while driving over from the airport to let her folks know she was on her way, and had forgotten to turn it off again. The call was probably related to Finders, but unless it was an emergency, she'd just refer the caller to the office number.
She punched the *talk* button and said, "Milla Edge."
"How soon can you meet me in Idaho?" The voice was low and rough, almost rusty sounding, as if the owner didn't use it very often. He didn't have to identify himself.
Milla sucked in her breath. She was already upset, already tense, and hearing Diaz's voice was like receiving a mild electrical shock. "What is it? What's wrong?"
"I found a name. I don't like taking you along, not after what happened with Lola, but I figure you have a right."
"That was my fault," she admitted. "I lost control. I promise it won't happen again." Her heart was racing and she was all but quivering with excitement. "I'll call the airline and see what's available, then get back to you. Where exactly am I going?"
"Boise. Plan on spending one night; then we'll fly home the next day."
"I'll get right back to you. Will you be at the number on Caller ID?"
"Yeah."
She pulled her return ticket out of her purse and looked at the phone number on it. Her fare was nonrefundable, but sometimes it could be transferred to a

different flight.
“What’s going on?” Mrs. Edge asked, coming to stand beside Milla as she dialed the number for her travel agency. She always used an agency instead of booking the flights herself, because last-minute changes had had to be made often enough that she’d found a travel agent could handle things much easier, having all the information for all the airlines right there.
“That was one of my contacts.” Explaining exactly who and what Diaz was would take far too much time. “He’s been tracking the men who took Justin, and he’s located someone who might know something. I’m meeting him in Idaho.”
“But you just got here!”
“This can’t wait.”
“I can’t believe you’re doing this again,” Julia said.
Milla spared her a brief glance. “I can’t believe you think I should pass up a chance to find out anything I can—Yes, hello.” She turned her attention to the travel agent on the other end of the line. What she found was that, because it was late afternoon now, if she left today the only flights available would involve a couple of layovers, changing airlines, and still not get her into Boise until tomorrow morning. Or she could wait until tomorrow morning and take the first flight out; she would still have to change airlines, but she would arrive in Idaho only an hour later than she would if she left right now.
That was a no-brainer. Milla chose the second option, got all the details, then called Diaz back. “I can’t make it today; tomorrow morning is the best I can do. If the flight’s on time, I’ll be getting in at eleven-oh-three.” She gave him the airline and flight number.
“Are you checking your luggage?”
She thought of all she had brought, since she’d planned to spend several days here. “I’ll have to, or have most of it shipped home.”
He didn’t gripe about having to wait for her luggage, just said, “I’ll meet you in baggage claim. See you in the morning.”
“Yes,” she echoed. “I’ll see you then.” She hung up, her attention already far away from the people in the room. She brushed past Julia without really seeing her and made her way up the stairs, her mind on repacking her bags so her essentials were in one small bag that she could carry on with her, in case her checked luggage went missing.
“Milla!” Julia called after her, but Milla kept climbing the stairs.

18

Catching the first flight out meant getting up at three A.M. so she would have time to drive to the airport in Kentucky, turn in her rental car, and still have plenty of time to get through security. She bought some snacks out of vending machines in the Louisville airport, because it was a safe bet the airline wasn't going to serve anything and she was already hungry. From Louisville she flew to Chicago, then from Chicago to Salt Lake City, where she changed airlines and flew to Boise.

Diaz was waiting for her, and her heart gave a huge thump at the sight of him. He was dressed much as usual, in jeans and those rubber-soled boots, though in deference to the changing season he wore a long-sleeved denim shirt over his dark T-shirt, with the sleeves rolled up over his forearms. He stood apart from the small crowd, his expression as remote as ever. Several people darted vaguely uneasy glances at him, though he wasn't doing anything other than just standing there.

"What did you find out?" she asked anxiously as she reached him. She'd been fretting during the entire trip, wondering who they were going to see and what he or she knew about the kidnapping.

"I'll tell you on the way. I have two rooms booked for us at a hotel," he said. "We'll drop off your luggage and you can change clothes before we leave."

"Why do I need to change clothes?" She looked down at herself. She was dressed for comfort, in slacks and a blouse, with a lightweight sweater thrown over her shoulders to keep off the chill. For someone used to El Paso's climate, both airplanes and Idaho were too cold for her.

"You need something sturdier, like jeans and boots, since we don't know what we'll find. I've done some advance scouting and the terrain looks rough." They collected her luggage; he took her heaviest bag and shifted it to his left hand, then used his right to guide her in the direction of the parking lot.

"How long have you been here?"

"I got here last night."

She hadn't seen him for three weeks, and until this moment she hadn't realized how starved she felt. Just his physical presence sent a wave of

longing through her. He was like the pain of childbirth: away from him, she remembered that almost electric aura of danger, but she didn't *feel* it. Being near him made her heartbeat rev up, all her senses heighten; it was almost as if the fight-or-flight response kicked in—or maybe that was exactly what happened.

She recognized the giddy sense of euphoria, the butterflies in her stomach; she hadn't felt this way since David. She'd loved David and she most assuredly did *not* love Diaz, but she had also wanted David sexually. No other man she'd met since then had gotten that reaction from her, no matter how much she might like the man himself, until Diaz. She wanted him. She needed her head examined, but she wanted him.

She was expecting a rental car, or maybe an SUV, but the vehicle he led her to was an enormous, black four-wheel-drive pickup, with the frame sitting so high she wondered how she could climb into the cab, even though she was wearing slacks.

Diaz put her bags in the bed of the truck, then unlocked the doors. "Where on earth did you get this thing?" she asked, looking up at the lights mounted on top of the cab. "I know you didn't rent it."

He put his hands on her waist and lifted her onto the seat. "It belongs to an acquaintance."

When he got behind the wheel, she said, "An 'acquaintance,' huh? Not a friend?"

"I don't have friends."

The blunt statement rattled her, hit her in the chest, and made her ache inside. How could he bear to live such a solitary life? "You have me," she said before she thought.

He froze in the act of putting the key in the ignition, and slowly turned his head to look at her. She couldn't read the expression in his dark eyes; she knew only that they burned. "Do I?" he asked softly.

For a moment she felt off balance, as if he'd asked one thing but meant another. Was he asking if she was his on an entirely different level, or was he expressing doubt? She had no idea; he was so unreadable she was left floundering, so she instinctively went to shallow water. "If you want a friend, you do. How can you live without friendship?"

He shrugged and turned the key, firing up the big motor. "Easy."

Yes, that was what he'd meant, that he doubted he had any real friends. She was both disappointed and relieved. However much she might want him,

she wasn't certain she'd ever have the nerve to do anything about it. That would be like stepping into a cage with a tiger, no matter how tame the handler said it was. The doubt and fear would always remain.
She sought refuge in the original subject. "This 'acquaintance' knows and trusts you well enough to put this monster at your disposal?"
"He trusts me."
She noticed that he didn't say the man knew him. This was a dead-end subject, though, and she was anxious to find out what Diaz knew and why they were in Idaho.
"Okay, we're on the way. What did you find out?"
"Nothing, yet," he said, and she almost wilted in disappointment.
"But I thought—"
"After we talk to this guy, we might know something more. What I heard was that his brother was the pilot of the plane that crashed."
"You got the pilot's name?"
"Maybe." At her frustrated look, he said, "It's like a string. We'll pull on it and see if it goes anywhere. Most of the time it doesn't, but negative knowledge is almost as good as positive knowledge."
"Meaning then you know where *not* to look."
"It also tells you something about the person who put the string in your hand, too."
"But *maybe* you have the pilot's name?"
"I heard that a guy named Gilliland would fly any cargo out of Mexico, but that he crashed and was killed seven or eight years ago. The only thing anyone knew about him was that he had a brother named Norman Gilliland who lived in the Sawtooth Wilderness close to Lowman."
She stared at him, suddenly uneasy; after a moment, she realized why. "So no one knew anything about the pilot, but all of a sudden someone remembers his brother's first name and exactly where he lived? That's very specific knowledge for someone who didn't know anything else about the pilot."
He gave her an approving glance. "You might make a pretty good tracker yourself. You have good instincts."
She knotted her fists. "This is another wild-goose chase, isn't it? Why are we even bothering?"
He paused. " 'Another'?"

“That’s what I’ve been doing for ten years, running in circles and getting nowhere.” She stared out the window, her jaw set.
“Like someone’s been feeding you false information?”
Slowly she turned her head to look at him. “You think that’s it? I’ve been deliberately led away from the right track?”
“You’re too smart and too good at what you do for it to be otherwise. When it’s someone else’s kid, you have damn good luck finding them, don’t you?”
Mutely she nodded. She had an almost eerie knack for success, as if she could put herself in the mind of a lost child or runaway and figure out where they’d gone. That had made it doubly frustrating for her, that she could find other children but not her own child.
“That’s another string I can follow,” he said. “Maybe I’ve been asking the wrong questions. Maybe I should ask who’s been telling people to give you the wrong answers.”
She really had been chasing in circles all these years, and someone had made certain she stayed in the same rut by dangling a carrot in front of her nose. The only real lead she’d ever had was the one that had taken her to Guadalupe that night when Diaz was there, and she had no idea who her informant had been. Nor had Diaz ever found out, or he would have told her. On second thought—“Did you ever find out who tipped me that you’d be in Guadalupe?”
“No.”
Another mystery, but evidently this one was in their favor. She was having a hard time dealing with this new slant on all the frustrations and dead ends, the constant rise of hope only to have it dashed on the rocks. She could understand if no one had told her anything, just stonewalled her, but to deliberately have her chasing wild story after wild story smacked of a deep malevolence.
She was so mired in thought she didn’t realize they’d stopped in front of a small hotel until he opened the door and vaulted out. By the time she got her purse hooked on her shoulder and her own door open, he was there, reaching up to grasp her waist and lift her out of the seat. He set her on the ground in front of him, hemmed in by the truck, the open door, and his body. There were a good six inches between them, but abruptly she felt blasted by his body heat, carrying with it the warm, clean smell of his skin. He hadn’t shaved; at least two or three days’ growth of beard stubbled his

jaw. She wanted to reach up and stroke his face, feel the bristles against her palm.

"Don't let it get you down," he said. She struggled to pull her mind back to reality. "Misdirection takes money and influence. Knowing that gives me another string. Hell, I've almost got a whole ball of yarn now."

She managed a smile, and he turned to lift her bag out of the truck bed. He led the way inside, past a small reception area, where the man on duty gave them a cursory glance, then went back to what he was doing. Everything was clean and well maintained, including the smallish elevator, which arrived with a smooth whooshing sound.

Diaz pushed the button for the third floor, and after the doors closed and the elevator began gliding upward, he said, "Your room number is 323; I'm in 325." He fished in his pocket and pulled out an electronic door card, which he handed to her. "Here's your card. Take a left out of the elevator."

He took both her Pullman case and carry-on bag, while she walked ahead of him and unlocked the door to room 323. The heavy curtains over the windows were closed so the room was dark, and she flipped the light switch. It was a standard hotel room, clean and unimaginative, with a king-sized bed, a twenty-five-inch television in an armoire, an easy chair with an ottoman, and another chair at a desk. The connecting door to the next room stood open, revealing a mirror image of her room.

Maybe he walked in his sleep.

"Where do you want this?" he asked, indicating her heavy suitcase.

"On the bed. I'll dig out my clothes and be with you in a minute."

"I'll wait outside." He left by her door, and Milla hurried to unzip her suitcase and search through it for her jeans, socks, and sneakers. Three minutes later she grabbed her purse, put her room card in it, and was out the door.

They retraced their steps to the parking lot. He boosted her into the truck, and as she buckled herself in, she said, with a touch of irritation, "Why did you get a truck so high I need a stepladder to get into it?"

"Where we're going, we'll need the extra clearance."

She gaped at him. "What are we doing, stump-jumping?"

"Part of the way."

The ride was going to be a rough one, then. Before they left Boise he said, "Hungry?" Thinking she needed to fortify herself, she nodded, and he

pulled into a fast-food place. Less than five minutes later they were back on the highway, hamburgers in hand.
“We’ll drive as far as we can, but we’ll have to walk the last leg,” he said. “This guy is a survivalist, and he made damn sure he isn’t easy to get to.”
“Will he shoot at us?” she asked, a little alarmed.
“He might, but from what I’ve been able to find out he isn’t generally violent, just a little crazy.”
Which was better than being a lot crazy, but anyone with a survivalist mind-set might get a little anxious at being approached by two strangers, especially if he’d gone to a lot of trouble to make sure people couldn’t easily get to his house.
Three hours later, she realized “house” had been a generous term. After leaving the real road, Diaz had driven the truck over terrain so rough and mountainous Milla had simply closed her eyes and held on to the strap, certain they were going to overturn at any minute. When the trail finally ended—and “trail” was another generous term—at a mountain that seemed to go straight up, Diaz turned off the engine and said, “Here’s where we start walking.”
Milla stuffed her purse under the seat, then jumped out of the truck without waiting for his aid, and turned in a slow circle, staring up at the mountains surrounding her. From what she’d seen so far, Idaho was one of the most beautiful places in the world. The sky was the deep vivid blue of autumn, the trees were a glorious mix of evergreens and color, and the air was crisp and clean.
He took a backpack out from behind the seat and slipped his arms through the loops. “This way,” he said, stepping into the silent forest.
“How do you know the exact way?”
“I told you, I scouted around some yesterday.”
“But if you came this far, you could have already talked to him.”
“It was night. I didn’t want to spook him.”
He’d come up here last night? The wilderness was so rugged and . . . absolute that she couldn’t imagine how he’d found the track, much less managed to stay on it. She knew he was totally at home in the southwestern desert regions, but had vaguely expected him to be more of a fish out of water up here in the mountains. Not so; he seemed to unerringly know the direction he wanted, and he moved through the massive trees like a silent ghost.

“Have you done mountain hiking before?” she asked, glad she’d made a point of keeping in shape. This wasn’t terrain for a couch potato.
“The Sierra Madre. I’ve been in the Rockies before, too.”
“What’s in the backpack?”
“Water. Food. Ground sheet. The basics.”
“Are we spending the night out here?” she asked in astonishment.
“No, we should be back to the truck before dark. I just don’t take chances in terrain like this.”
Following behind him as she was, she noticed the bulge under his loose shirt. Being armed was natural for him, but she hadn’t seen him get the weapon out of the glove box, nor had he gone into his own room at the hotel. Surely he hadn’t—“Did you have that pistol with you in the *airport*?”
He glanced over his shoulder at her. “I didn’t have to go through a metal detector.”
“My God, isn’t that a federal offense, though?”
He shrugged. “They might get upset if they caught me.”
“How did you get it up here?”
“I didn’t. I got it here.”
“I guess I shouldn’t ask if it’s registered.”
“It’s registered. Just not to me.”
“It’s stolen?”
He sighed. “No, it isn’t stolen. It belongs to the man who owns the truck. And even if I did get caught at the airport with it, I wouldn’t be arrested. They’d *want* to arrest me, but it wouldn’t happen.”
“Why not?”
“I know some people with Homeland Security. I’ve—uh—done some work for them. Freelance.”
She was amazed that he was answering her questions, because he was usually so reticent. She hurried a bit until she was more or less abreast with him. “You find terrorists?” she asked in amazement, her voice rising on the last word.
“Sometimes,” he said, with that vague tone in his voice that said he wasn’t going into any detail on that particular subject.
“You’re a *Fed*?”
He stopped in his tracks and looked at her, his head cocked in mild exasperation. “No, I just said I’ve done some freelance stuff. That’s all. I’ve done jobs for individuals, corporations, governments. I guess I’m kind of a

bounty hunter, though I don’t go after bail jumpers. Usually. Now, are we done with the questions?”
She made a derisive noise in her throat. “In your dreams.”
His slow smile began transforming his face. “Then can they wait until we’re heading back? I want to listen to what’s around us.”
“Okay, but only because you have a good reason.” She fell back behind him and they continued the hike in silence, with only their muffled footsteps breaking the peace of the mountains. It was just as well; within minutes the trail went sharply upward, and she needed her breath for the climb.
After half an hour they heard the sound of rushing water. The almost invisible trail led them straight to the river. The water had cut a small gorge through the mountain; at this point, the sheer rock walls were about eight feet high and the river was narrow, no more than twenty feet wide, which forced the water along at a faster pace. The rapid current frothed and boiled over underwater rocks, whitecapping the surface and occasionally sending up a spray of diamond drops.
Diaz led them along the bank, with the sound of the rushing water growing louder and louder as the stream gradually narrowed until the width was about twelve feet. He stopped, raised his voice, and said, “Here we are.”
Only then did she see the tiny shack on the other side of the river. “Shack” was a complimentary description. It appeared to be made out of rough plywood, with black tar paper nailed over it. The forest was making an effort to reclaim its territory, because moss was growing up the sides of the shack, and vines were growing down from the roof. The tar paper and vegetation did a good job of camouflage; the one tiny window and rough rock chimney were almost the only details that gave away the shack’s location.
“Hello!” Diaz yelled.
After a minute the rough door opened and a grizzled head stuck out. The man regarded them with suspicion for a moment; then he stared hard at Milla. Her presence seemed to reassure him, because he eased out of the door with a shotgun cradled in his arms. He looked bearlike, standing about six-foot-six and weighing close to three hundred pounds. His long gray hair was in a ponytail that hung halfway down his back, but his beard was only a few inches long, proving that he did some personal upkeep. The beard was the only evidence of that, though. He wore camouflage pants in a forest pattern, and a green flannel shirt.

“Yeah? Who are you?”
“My name is Diaz. Are you Norman Gilliland?”
“That’s right. What about it?”
“If you don’t mind, we have some questions about your brother that we’d like to ask.”
“Which brother?”
Diaz paused, because they had no first name. “The pilot.”
Norman shifted a wad of chewing tobacco to his other jaw and pondered the matter. “That would be Virgil, I guess. He’s dead.”
“Yes, we know. Did you know anything about his—”
“Smuggling? Some.” Norman heaved a sigh. “Guess you might as well come over. You carrying?”
“Pistol,” Diaz replied.
“Just keep it holstered, son, and we’ll do all right.”
Norman carefully propped the shotgun against the shack, then lifted a long, rough plank that looked to be hand-hewn, about fifteen feet long, three or four inches thick, and a foot wide. It had to be heavy, but Norman handled it as if it were a two-by-four wall stud. He positioned one end of the plank into a notch that had been carved into the riverbank, then got down on his knees and let the other end tilt down until it fit into a corresponding notch on their side of the river. “There you are,” he said. “Come on over.”
Milla looked at the plank, at the rushing water foaming beneath it, and drew a deep breath. “Ready if you are,” she said to Diaz.
He caught her hand and carried it to his belt. “Hold on to me for balance.”
She pulled her hand back. “No way. If I fall, I don’t want to take you with me.”
“As if I wouldn’t go in after you anyway.” He took her hand once more and put it on his belt. “Hang on.”
“Are you coming or not?” Norman called irritably.
“Yes.” Diaz stepped calmly onto the plank, and Milla followed. Twelve inches was really pretty wide; as a kid she’d balanced on much narrower edges. But now that she was an adult, she knew how reckless kids were, and she’d never walked across a roaring river even as a child. She did remember that you had to just do it, that a sure step was much better than a hesitant one. She didn’t crowd Diaz, just maintained a grip on his belt, and it did help with balance. In no time they were across the plank and stepping onto solid ground.

Neither Diaz nor Norman offered to shake hands, so Milla steeled herself and held out her hand. “I’m Milla Edge. Thank you for talking to us.”
Norman eyed her hand as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do, then gingerly folded his big paw around her fingers and gave it a barely noticeable shake. “Glad to meet you. I don’t get many visitors.”
No joke. He’d made damn sure of that by living where he did.
He didn’t invite them inside, and she was just as glad he hadn’t. Not only was the shack tiny, but she’d bet Norman hadn’t won any housekeeping awards lately. There were a couple of nice-sized rocks nearby, though, and he indicated they should sit there. Norman himself took a seat on a stump.
“Now, what can I do for you folks?”
“You said you knew about your brother’s smuggling,” Diaz said.
“Course I did. Marijuana. He made a bunch of money, but Virgil never did have any sense about money and I guess he blew it all. God knows, when he died there wasn’t anything left.”
“He died in a plane crash?”
“Virgil? Naw. He died of liver cancer, in November of ninety.”
Before Justin was kidnapped. Milla sighed in sharp disappointment, even though after their conversation in the truck, she hadn’t really been expecting any useful information.
“Did he ever smuggle anything except weed?”
“That was pretty much it, I reckon, though there could have been some cocaine runs.”
“How about people? Babies?”
“Not that I ever heard.”
“Did he work for just one man?”
“He never was that steady. He moved around a lot, until he got sick. The cancer took him fast. By the time he knew he had it, he only had a couple of months left.”
“Where was he when he died?”
“Why, right here. I got him buried back in the woods. Nobody wanted to foot the bill for his funeral, so I took care of it myself.”
There wasn’t anything else to be said. They thanked Norman, Diaz slickly passed him some folded green for his time, and they went back to the plank bridge.
Milla felt confident enough not to hold on to Diaz’s belt on the return crossing, though he insisted. As long as she didn’t look down at the water,

which gave her a mild sense of vertigo as it rushed past, she was fine. They were almost halfway across when Diaz made a sharp sound of warning. The board tilted wildly beneath their feet; Milla released Diaz, both arms waving as she scrambled for balance. It happened so fast she didn’t even scream as they both plunged down into the swift, icy river.

19

The water was so cold it was numbing, and deeper than she'd expected. The current pushed her below the surface even as it tumbled her along, tossing her like a rag doll in a child's careless grip. Instinctively she began kicking, trying to go with the current rather than fighting it, and as if rewarding her, it promptly shot her upward.

Her head broke the surface and she gasped in air. Her hair hung in her face, blinding her. She thought she heard a distant shout; then the current tumbled her under again. Rolling, she took a glancing blow to her left shoulder, but it scarcely stung; what it did do was tilt her back to the right, toward the middle of the river, and she fought for the surface once more. Somehow she got turned so she was going with the current again, swimming as hard as she could, and she popped up like a cork.

"Milla!"

The voice calling her name was rough from strain, but she knew it. She turned her head and saw Diaz behind her and to the right, swimming toward her with desperate, powerful strokes. "I'm all right!" she yelled, then felt the current tug at her again. She kicked harder, concentrating on keeping her head above water.

Diaz was a stronger swimmer, but he was heavier, and he couldn't gain any ground on her. If she stopped swimming so hard, in order to let him catch up, the current would pull her under again. The banks rose steep and high on both sides of the river, and the water swept them along as if they were in a chute, with no way out even if they could fight their way to the side. Ahead, the river curved to the left. A tree had fallen on the right bank, its limbs reaching almost to the water.

"Tree!" she heard Diaz roar behind her, and understood. She angled to the right, fighting to get within reaching distance of one of the limbs. Her head went under just as she gasped for air and she choked on a mouthful of water. She fought to the surface once more, but the effort and the cold were taking their toll. Her arm and leg muscles ached, and her lungs were burning. Maybe if she could catch one of the limbs, she could rest there for a minute; maybe they could even climb out that way.

It wasn't by her efforts that she succeeded; the current obligingly pushed her to the right, where the bank was hollowed out by the water's force.

Desperately she reached up and caught a limb; the water jerked at her and the dead limb broke off in her hand, and she went under.
She was tiring rapidly, her kicks becoming less forceful, her arm motions jerky instead of smooth. Still she once more gained the surface and sucked in much-needed air, and just before the roil of water pulled her under again for what was probably the last time, a hard arm wrapped around her and held her up. The tree hadn't stopped her, but it had slowed her enough for Diaz to catch up.
"Angle to the right!" he yelled. "That's the side the truck is on!"
It was comforting to know that he thought they'd make it, at least, otherwise he wouldn't have cared which side they got out on, just that they got out.
She had no idea how far the water had carried them, but the current was so swift they could already be half a mile downstream from Norman's shack. Then, abruptly, the river widened and the current slowed.
It was still a fast current, so fast she couldn't fight it, but at least the water smoothed out and stopped battering at her. The riverbanks were less steep, but choked with huge boulders. She could stay on top with less effort and give her burning muscles some rest, but the cold was going bone deep, and she knew they didn't have much time left before they became too sluggish to swim.
"Catch the end of my belt and wrap it around your wrist," Diaz said hoarsely, and a length of leather slapped the water in front of her.
She caught the belt, but said, "I'll drag you under."
"No you won't. We can't be separated. Do it!"
What he meant was, if they got separated, she was a dead woman. On the other hand, if she dragged him down, they'd both be dead.
"We don't have much time!" he yelled. "We have to get out before we go over a waterfall!"
There was a waterfall on this river? Her blood chilled even colder. The force of the water would push them to the bottom and they'd drown, assuming they weren't battered to death on rocks. She didn't know what he had in mind, but she was game for anything. She clutched the belt and twisted her hand several times, wrapping the leather around her wrist.
"There's a right bend!" He coughed, and spat out water. "Just ahead. The current is slower on the inside of a curve, so that's our chance. Just hang on, and I'll get us out."

“I can kick,” she said, surprised at how guttural her tone was.
“Then kick like hell.”
She kicked like hell.
Her thigh muscles had gone beyond tired, beyond burning. Her legs were in agony, but she kicked. Diaz’s arms scissored like an automaton’s, dragging them on a diagonal through the water. Forward progress was swift, his diagonal progress was measured in inches, and the bend was coming up much too fast; they were going to get swept past it before they could make it to the slower current. She growled like an animal as a burst of adrenaline sent her surging forward, almost even with Diaz. Without the drag of her on his arm, he gained even more ground as the current swept them into the bend.
A big tree was clinging to the earth right at the water’s edge. As they passed it, Diaz reached out with his right hand and caught one of the big roots.
He stopped, but the water didn’t and neither did she. When the belt reached the end of its length, her entire body snapped backward like the end of a whip, but she didn’t lose her grip on the leather. Diaz’s face was twisted with effort, his teeth gritted, as he hung on to the root with his right hand and with the left tried to pull her against the current. She kicked, swinging her body, and suddenly the grasp of the water eased and seemed to push her against the bank on the far side of the tree. They were stretched out with the tree between them, tethered by the belt.
Milla caught one of the roots, too, and managed to wedge her feet against an underwater rock that was just past the tree. The current still pushed at her, but she locked her trembling knees and managed to hold her position.
“I’m letting go of the belt,” she managed to say. “I’m braced. How about you?”
“I’m good,” he said. She untwisted the belt and the leather floated free. For a split second she panicked as the water seemed to tug at her, as if it had just been waiting for her to release her lifeline. But she pushed back harder against the tree and held her position.
Her lungs were pumping like bellows, dragging in air for her oxygen-starved muscles. She couldn’t hear anything now except the water and her own heartbeat thundering in her ears.
Diaz hooked his hands under her arms from behind, and dragged her up and back, onto a shelf of rock and out of the water.

The effort seemed to take all his remaining strength, because he collapsed on his hands and knees on the rock, wheezing and groaning. Milla lay facedown where he'd let her drop, too exhausted to move. Her body felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds, as if even twitching a finger would take gargantuan effort.

The rock was in full sunshine and felt warm under her chilled body. Water streamed from their clothes and hair. She closed her eyes and listened to their laboring breaths, listened to the pound of blood through her veins. They were alive.

Maybe she dozed, or fainted, or both. After a while she managed to turn over, onto her back, and let the sunshine wash over her face. Still breathing hard, almost giddy with relief, Milla tilted her face up to the warmth.

That had been so close. She still couldn't quite believe they'd managed to make it to the bank; she definitely knew she wouldn't have been able to make it on her own. The water rushed and swirled only a foot beyond where Diaz lay, sucking at the rock and the stubborn tree, knowing that eventually it would claim them. Time, after all, was on the water's side. Only Diaz's strength had enabled them to break free of its clutch.

Still gasping a little, she said, "What happened? Why did we fall?"

He said, "The ground crumbled under the other end of the plank and tilted it."

Her next question was "How did you know there's a waterfall on this river?"

He was silent a minute; then he said, "There's always a waterfall. Don't you watch any movies?"

Overwhelmed by relief and an almost effervescent joy at being alive, she began to laugh.

Diaz had rolled onto his back beside her, his own chest heaving as he fought for breath, but now he turned his head toward her and the hard line of his mouth moved in a slight smile. He watched her for a minute, his dark eyes narrowed against the glare of the afternoon sun. Then he said, "I'd give my left nut to be inside you right now."

Her laughter vanished as if it had never been, sucked away by the shock of his words. She'd daydreamed and fantasized and obsessed, but she'd never thought she'd have to deal with reality, and here it was, staring her in the face. Diaz? And *her*? The hard fact of what he'd said was so jarring that reality tilted for a moment, leaving her adrift on that warm rock with her

head buzzing and adrenaline still burning through her veins. Then everything slammed back into place, and with it came a rush of carnal hunger that stunned her with its force. Diaz—and her. Her insides clenched at the thought of him on top of her, between her legs. She wanted him. She had wanted him the moment she saw him, and she wanted him now.

He'd never even really kissed her. That light comfort kiss in Juarez didn't count.

She'd wanted this, and now reasons for backing away swarmed through her mind like locusts. If all he wanted was a quick fuck, she wasn't the woman he was looking for, and she couldn't imagine him wanting anything other than that. This was *Diaz*, after all; he wasn't the hang-around type of man, and she wasn't stupid enough to think she could change him. She'd been so careful not to give him any sexual reaction, any hint that she found him attractive; she'd kept it all inside, in her daydreams. But he'd known anyway; it was in those shrewd dark eyes, that knowledge.

"You're thinking too much," he said lazily. "It was just an observation, not a declaration of war."

"Women always think too much." She sniffed. "We have to, to keep things balanced." Odd that he'd chosen "war" as a metaphor . . . or perhaps it was fitting. Squinting up at the sun, trying to find something solid to hold on to, since the ground had just shifted beneath her, she said, "Why do men always offer their left nut and never their right one? Is something wrong with it? Or is the right one somehow more important?"

"You wrong us." He closed his eyes with a tired sigh, and that slight smile touched his mouth again. "A man takes both his nuts seriously."

"In that case, I'm flattered."

"But not interested."

Here was where she could lightly say "Sorry" and that would be the end of it. Instead, unable to lie, she closed her own eyes and let the silence grow between them.

She felt him move as he heaved himself up; then he was propped on his elbow, leaning over her and blocking the sun. "You'd better say no," he murmured, flattening his hand on her stomach. The heat from his palm burned through her wet clothing to her chilled skin; then he slipped his fingertips under the waistband of her jeans and she felt the heat go all the way through *her*.

“Not that I intend to do anything right now, anyway,” he continued. “We need to get back to the truck. A rock’s a damn uncomfortable place for what I want to do, our clothes are wet, my balls are so cold it may take me a week to find them, and we don’t have any condoms. But in a few hours things will be different, and if you don’t want to go anywhere with this, you’d better say no right now.”

He was right. She should say no.

But she didn’t. Despite all the good reasons she’d given herself just a moment before . . . she didn’t.

Instead she opened her eyes and turned her head toward him as he bent down to her. His lips were cold; hers were colder. But his tongue was warm, and the kiss was almost shy as he gently explored her mouth. His left hand tangled in her wet hair and he slowly deepened the kiss as he caught her waist and rolled her toward him.

The touch of that whipcord body sent a pool of warmth spreading through her insides. It was almost enough to dispel the chill, but still she suddenly shivered as the aftermath began to catch up to her.

He lifted his mouth and smoothed her hair back from her face, his gaze intent as he watched her. “We have to get to the truck and get warm. The sun will be going down soon, and we don’t want to get caught out here in wet clothes.”

“All right.” He moved back, and she struggled to a sitting position. “Do you think Norman will call the authorities, have them looking for our bodies or something?”

“I doubt it. I don’t guess you heard what he yelled.”

“I heard someone yell something, but I couldn’t tell what it was.”

“He yelled, ‘Good luck.’ “

Astounded, she blinked at him. Then she began snickering as she slowly climbed to her feet. She guessed Norman wasn’t the type to worry about what happened to anyone except himself.

Swaying, she took stock. The backpack he’d been carrying was long gone, of course. She was aching from head to foot, but she couldn’t tell if it was from the battering force of the water or if it was sheer muscle fatigue. She was lucky; she didn’t think she’d hit anything hard enough to injure herself, and she thanked God for the depth of the river, which had probably saved their lives. If it had been shallower, they likely would have been killed on some rocks.

Both her sneakers were gone, as was one sock. How that other sock had stayed on she couldn't imagine. Her wristwatch was ruined, the face crushed. Likewise her sweater was gone, but she'd only had it around her shoulders, not buttoned.

Diaz was looking down at her feet. "You can't walk like that," he said, and began unbuttoning his denim shirt. He stripped it off, then took a knife from his pocket and sliced off the sleeves. Going down on one knee in front of her, he draped a sleeve over his thigh and patted it. "Put your foot here."

Gingerly balancing on one foot, she placed her other foot on the sleeve, and he swiftly wrapped the ends of the sleeve around and around it, then tied a knot on top. After repeating the process with her other foot, he said, "How does that feel? It isn't like having a leather sole, but is it enough protection for you to walk? If it isn't, say so instead of tearing up your feet."

She walked across the rock, testing the thickness of the fabric. Like he'd said, it wasn't like leather. She could feel every pebble. "How far do you think it is to the truck?"

He glanced at the sun. "If I'm right, we're not all that far. The truck was downstream, and the river carried us in that direction."

"But there was that bend to the left."

"And then this bend to the right. I'd say . . . maybe a mile."

A mile through a mountainous forest, virtually barefoot. He evidently came to the same conclusion she'd reached, because he shook his head, then looked around. Abruptly he took out his knife again, and went to the tree. He stabbed the point into the bark, then began slicing downward.

"What are you doing?"

"Cutting off a sheet of bark to use as a sole."

She stood to the side and watched with interest as he carved off a square of bark roughly ten inches by ten inches. She sat down and began unwrapping her feet. He split the square of bark in half, then knelt on one knee in front of her again. He balanced one slab of bark on his other knee, with the smooth underside up, and laid the sleeve over it so she'd have a double layer of cloth between her foot and the wood. Then he rewrapped her foot, binding the bark to the bottom with two swaths of cloth, and tied the knot on top again. After repeating the process with her other foot, he stood and pulled her to her feet. "How does that feel?"

"Much sturdier, though I don't know how long the bark will hold together."

"Anything is better than nothing. If it falls apart, I'll cut some more."

They left the riverbank and set out at a right angle into the forest. She had to walk gingerly, because the makeshift shoes didn't give her feet any support, but the bark at least protected their tender bottoms from the worst abuse. She tried not to step on sticks or rocks, tried not to make the bark flex very much, which would cause it to break apart. That made their pace necessarily slow, when they couldn't afford any delay.

Under the canopy of the trees they didn't have the sun's warmth, and within minutes Milla was shivering violently. Her wet clothes felt like ice on her, and she realized they were in as much danger from hypothermia as they had been from the water. Diaz, with his greater muscle mass, would do better than she at producing body heat, but he, too, was shivering.

He stopped once and wrapped her in his arms, hugging her close so they could share what meager heat they could generate between them. They stood pressed against each other, and she tiredly rested her head on his shoulder. He felt so hard and vital, but he was as vulnerable as anyone else to the chill of these conditions. She could hear his heart thumping steadily, strongly in his chest, sending warming blood through his veins, and after a while she began to feel a little warmer.

"We'll make it," he murmured against her temple. "We have a lot to look forward to tonight. Besides, I have a couple of sweatshirts behind the seat of the truck."

"Why didn't you say so?" With effort, she straightened away from him. "The promise of a sweatshirt will work miracles."

The "mile" he'd estimated was a straight line, but unfortunately they couldn't walk in a straight line. They climbed up slopes, down slopes, always working their way around to the direction he wanted. They had to hold on to trees when the mountainous terrain grew so steep they couldn't stand upright. What would have taken them twenty minutes on the flat took them over two hours, and twice he had to replace the bark in her improvised sandals. His sense of direction was unerring, though, and eventually they cut the trail that led them back to the truck.

By the time they reached it, the sun had set and twilight was deep, and the day's warmth had long since fled. Milla could barely walk, she was so cold. She shuffled along like an old woman, every muscle screaming in pain. She kept thinking longingly of the missing backpack and the ground sheet in it; they could have wrapped it around themselves and huddled together, and replenished their body heat that way. Food wouldn't have been amiss,

either; it had a way of revving up the system. She thought of coffee, a big steaming cup of it. Or maybe hot chocolate. Any form of chocolate.
She thought of Diaz, and what would happen between them tonight—if they made it back to the hotel.
Just when she thought she couldn't go any farther, she looked up and there it was, that monstrosity of a truck. Nothing had ever looked more welcome.
"The keys," she suddenly croaked. "Are they still in your pocket?"
That was the good thing about jeans when they became wet: they clung. What was in the pockets tended to stay in the pockets, even in river rapids. With difficulty, Diaz dug his fingers into his cold wet pocket, and came out with the keys. "Thank God," she breathed.
The next hurdle was getting *into* the damn truck.
Diaz tried to pick her up, but couldn't. Finally he boosted her enough that she could crawl, giggling, onto the floorboard and from there up onto the seat. The situation wasn't funny, but the choice was either laugh or cry. He had to hold the steering wheel to haul himself up, and he was shaking so hard it took him three tries to get the key into the ignition. But it was warmer in the truck than it was outside, and after it had idled a few minutes, warm air began blowing from the vents. He pulled two sweatshirts from behind the seat; they were new, with the tags still on them, so he must have bought them today to have just in case. His caution amazed her, because there was no way he could have known they'd fall in the river.
He stripped off the sleeveless remnant of his denim shirt and his T-shirt. Milla wasn't so far gone that she wasn't interested in the rock-hard expanse of his lightly haired chest, or his ridged abdomen. She pulled off her own blouse and her wet bra, and suddenly he hauled her across the truck seat, wedging her between the steering wheel and his chest as he kissed her. Their bare torsos rubbed together, his chest hair rasping over her chill-tightened nipples and making them tingle. She wrapped one arm around his neck and snaked the other one around his back, pressing her palm to the smooth, thick muscles she found there. This kiss wasn't shy, or gentle. He kissed her as if he might not wait until they got back to the hotel, his tongue stroking, his teeth nibbling. He rubbed his hand over her breasts, stroking them, learning their shape and softness and how they fit in his palm.
She whimpered into his mouth. It had been a long time since she'd felt this, too long. She still couldn't quite believe it was actually happening, that Diaz wanted her as she wanted him.

He was shaking when he drew back, but no longer from the cold. “We’d better get dressed,” he said gruffly, and pulled one of the sweatshirts over her head himself. It was a man’s shirt and there was far too much fabric, but she didn’t care. The garment was thick and dry, and she almost wept at the warmth. He pulled on his own shirt, then took off his wet boots and socks and stuck his bloodless feet up to the floor vent so the truck’s heater could blow right on them. She followed suit on the passenger side. The cab quickly heated, but it was at least fifteen minutes before her shivering subsided and her numb feet began to tingle with warmth. Finally he felt warm enough to drive, and by then the darkness was thick around them. They had a long drive ahead of them back to Boise, and even though she was warm now, she felt drained. He had to feel the same. She put her hand on his arm. “Can you make it, or do we need to stop somewhere?”

“I can make it. When we get back to the highway, we’ll stop at the first restaurant we see, no matter what kind, and get something hot in our stomachs.”

That sounded like heaven. She pushed at her wild crown of curls. Her hair had dried, but she knew she had to look like a wild woman. She’d be surprised if any restaurant other than a motorcycle gang hangout would let her in. “The pistol is long gone, huh?”

“Bottom of the river.”

“Too bad. You might need one to make a restaurant serve us.”

He glanced at her and smiled. “I’ll manage.”

They lucked out and found a hamburger joint with a drive-through window. After getting their food, he pulled over and parked so they could eat. By then she had recovered enough to be starving, and she chowed down on her second hamburger of the day. He’d ordered each of them a large cup of coffee, and they settled back in bliss.

“We have to find a place that sells condoms,” he said abruptly. “I don’t have any.”

There was tension in his voice, and she glanced over at him. He ran a nervous hand over his face.

Suddenly uneasy, she said, “We can wait. This doesn’t have to happen if you’re having second thoughts—”

“No. It isn’t that.” He took his hand down and gave her a somber look. “It’s just—I haven’t had sex with anything other than my fist in two or three years and I—”

“Two or three years?” she echoed, then shook her head. “It’s been longer than that for me. I’m not exactly a red-hot mama.”
“I want to make it good for you, but I probably won’t last long.”
“I probably won’t, either,” she said truthfully. Since that last kiss, her body had been humming with anticipation.
Doggedly he plowed ahead. “But then I’m good for the rest of the night, and I’ll make it up to you.”
His nervousness was appealing; her nature was fastidious, and she didn’t like promiscuity. His confession was reassuring, too. “Are you healthy?” she asked, because she’d be stupid not to.
“Yeah. I haven’t been with many women, and never with a whore or a drug-user. And I give blood at the Red Cross, every three months, so I’m tested regularly.” He said it with an earnestness that touched her. Diaz was so sure of himself in every other way; she liked this more human side of him. She sensed that he really had to trust a woman before he’d let down his guard enough to be intimate with her, and even then he probably kept a tight rein on his emotions.
Tonight, she would find out.
She leaned over and kissed him. “Forget the condoms. I’m on birth control.”
He took control of the kiss, and he might not have had a great deal of sexual experience, but he knew what he was doing. He kissed her deeply, a little roughly, and with growing urgency. When he set her back from him, his eyes were narrowed and fierce. Without a word he put the truck in gear, and they roared down the highway toward Boise.

20

The tension between them grew more the closer they got to the hotel, until it was thick and smothering. She tingled from head to foot, her thoughts feverish as she thought about what she was going to do. Against all common sense, she was going to bed with Diaz. This might just be a very human reaction to the danger they’d survived together, she might regret it in the morning, but she was going to do it.
She was so hungry for him that she ached with need, so desperate to feel him inside her that she thought she might climax as soon as he touched her.

She wanted to tell him to pull over to the side of the road so she could straddle his lap and get it done, now, before she died from tension. But, like him, she wanted a bed for what was going to happen between them, so she kept silent and gritted her teeth against the sheer lust that gnawed at her.
Finally they were there. He stuffed his feet into his wet boots, left his socks on the floorboard, and got out. Milla wasn't about to hop out with only fabric and pieces of bark to protect her feet, so she sat there while he came around and opened the door to lift her out. She thought that this time he might let her slide along his body, but he held her at least six inches away and set her gently on her feet. She looked up into his face, expecting the hard, remote expression so natural to him, and finding exactly that. But he tucked her against his side and walked with her into the hotel.
The night desk clerk looked at them with curiosity as they approached, and she knew he didn't often see a woman with rags wrapped around her feet. At least with the new sweatshirts they didn't look homeless. If it hadn't been for that, she suspected the desk clerk might have called security.
On the way up in the elevator, she and Diaz stood side by side, not talking. She could feel every heartbeat; even her fingertips were tingling.
He tried his key card and wonder of wonders it still worked.
He unlocked his door and ushered her inside, turning on the light in the tiny entrance. Suddenly feeling like Little Orphan Annie, Milla sidled toward the open connecting door to her room. "Uh—let me get my feet unwrapped and take a shower, and I'll—"
"Sit down," he said.
She blinked at him.
He pulled out a chair and pushed her down into it. After turning on the bedside lamp, he knelt and began untying the knots that held the sleeves around her feet. When her feet were bare, he carefully examined them, looking for scrapes or cuts, but she'd come through the ordeal in good shape.
When he was finished, he stood up and she did likewise, shoving a hand through her unruly hair. "I'll take a shower," she said again, trying to step past him, but he curved a hand around her waist and pulled her back to him.
"The shower can wait."
"My hair—the river water—"
"The water was clean."

“But I’d rather be fresh.” She didn’t know why she was making excuses now to delay what was going to happen, but she was suddenly nervous. It had been a long time for her, and Diaz wasn’t an ordinary man. Both facts were staring her in the face, and she wanted to slow this down.

He unsnapped her jeans and said, “I want you just like this.” Then he kissed her.

There was nothing romantic about Diaz, no murmured sweet things, no gallant gestures, just this kiss that went on and on, deep and voracious. She’d never been kissed like this before, with an intensity that stripped everything down to the simplest components: male, female. He held her with his hand burrowed into her hair, her skull gripped in his palm, her head tilted back while he fed from her mouth. That was what it felt like, a taking. And yet he gave, too. He gave pleasure. She burned with it, the flames fueled by nothing more than his mouth and tongue.

His erection bulged in the crotch of his jeans. It was a rock-hard presence pushing against her stomach, and her loins tightened with need. Frenzied now, she pulled back a little, fought with button and zipper and won, wrenching the damp cloth aside so she could grasp the hard length that thrust outward. She wrapped her fingers around him, delighting in the thickness, the silky slide of his skin. She moved her hand up and down, circling the thick crown of his penis and dragging a deep, raw sound from his throat as he shuddered convulsively.

His arms tightened and he bore her down on the bed and, in twenty tumultuous seconds, had her stripped naked. Another ten had his own clothes on the floor. He put his hands on her knees and pushed them apart, not waiting for her compliance, and moved into place over her. Milla put her hands on his ribs, holding on as he braced his weight on one arm while with his other hand he guided his penis to her and in the same rough motion pushed deep inside.

He froze in place, his breath panting between his parted lips as they stared at each other. She couldn’t move; the feel of him inside her was too sharp, almost painful in its intensity. Their gazes met in the mellow lamplight, and she was mesmerized by the tension in his face, the way his steely muscles were locked as if he didn’t dare move. It built and built, that clawing need, and yet she remained poised on the razor’s edge of something she knew she couldn’t control. His chest suddenly heaved on a convulsive breath, and he moved in a long, deep stroke that took him all the way to the hilt.

She clenched: her vagina, her entire body. She clenched around him and her vision blurred and she began to come, wave after wave of almost blinding pleasure. She had never come like that before, so totally lost in the physical that she had no sense of self, of surroundings, of anything beyond the moment and the ecstasy that spasmed in her belly, down her legs, along her nerve endings. He rode her through it, thrusting hard, demanding his own release and in doing so prolonging hers. He made that raw sound again and arched back, shaking convulsively as his hips jerked and plunged before, long seconds later and trembling in every muscle, he slowly collapsed on top of her.

The aftermath was like a wasteland, desolate and empty. She lay beneath him, too exhausted to move, barely able to breathe, and fought the urge to cry. She had never before been weepy after sex and didn't know why she should be now, but she felt a haunting need for comfort. She wanted to bury her face against his shoulder and sob like a child.

Because this had been a monumental mistake? Or because it was over? Even though he lay heavily on her, sucking deep breaths into his lungs, she could still feel a fine, subtle tension running through his every muscle, as if he never quite relaxed—as if he was already thinking of moving on.

What did one say after an experience like this? "Wow" seemed both inadequate and out of place. "Do it again" was what she wanted to say. Right at this moment, she never wanted to be separated from his body again. Sanity would return, she was certain. Maybe in another few minutes. Maybe tomorrow. Until then, she wanted him inside her. She wanted to feel again what she had felt moments before, though she didn't know if she could muster the energy to try, or survive it if she did.

"Do it again." She said it anyway, because she couldn't *not* say it. She slid her legs up his sides and coiled them around him, clung to him with her arms, tilted her pelvis in an effort to hold his softening penis.

He laughed, that low, rusty growl of sound, and his breath was warm in her hair. "I'm not sixteen. You've gotta give me a few more minutes than this." He still sounded a bit breathless. But he didn't withdraw from her; he settled down a bit more heavily, as if he finally relaxed that last little bit, and snuggled in so that as long as they didn't move, his penis would remain inside her. "I think that lasted about fifteen seconds."

"I didn't last that long," she murmured, closing her eyes and inhaling the warm male scent of his skin.

“Thank God.” He nuzzled her temple, then whispered, “Take a nap,” and he closed his eyes and proceeded to do just that.
This was nothing like the first time he’d told her to do that. This time, the feel of him on top of her was so wonderful she was still fighting tears. How could he expect her to sleep when he weighed a ton and she could barely breathe, when she wanted to cling to him and cry and laugh at the same time? How could she sleep when she was afraid to relax her muscles, lest she lose him? And yet she did, too exhausted to do otherwise.
She woke to long, slow strokes that went deep into her, to his hard hands gripping her bottom as he tilted her up and ground her clitoris against his pubic bone. He might not have had vast experience, but he knew what he was doing, knew all the hot spots and pleasure points of her body, and he used that knowledge to push her high and keep her there, without letting her go over the edge. This time was as prolonged as the first time had been brief. After a while she began struggling with him for supremacy, fighting him for her release, but he was too strong and controlled her until he was ready. Then he rode her hard and fast and hurled them both into orgasm.
She finally got her shower, though with him in there with her it was more orgy than shower. He paused once, with the water pouring over them, and touched the patch on her hip. “What’s this?”
“My birth control patch.”
He regarded it with interest. “I’ve never seen one before. What if it comes off?”
“I’ve never had one come off until I take it off. They stick pretty good. But I check it every time I shower, just to make sure.”
He trailed his fingertips over the slope of her breasts, then lightly circled her nipples. His expression was serious. “I’ve never had sex without wearing a condom before.”
“Never?”
He shook his head. He watched his fingers as they moved down her stomach, over the gentle curve of her belly, before curving into the notch between her legs. His two middle fingers slid between her folds and up into her. Milla’s breath hissed between her teeth and she lifted onto her toes, clinging to his shoulders for balance.
“I liked it,” he murmured.
“What?” She had totally lost the thread of their conversation.
“Coming inside you. So don’t lose that patch.”

She had never been into kinky sex; oral was as far as she would go. But Diaz knew no boundaries on her body and she was drunk with physical pleasure; she let him do whatever he wanted. He took her in the shower, on the floor, sitting on the vanity. He put her against the wall and took her standing up. It was sex as she had never known it before, raw and powerful, surprisingly sophisticated in execution but primitive in design and intent. And she kept coming back for more, arousing him with his penis in her mouth, her hands cupping his heavy balls and feeling them tighten, and doing some of the same things to him that he'd done to her, just to hear the thick groans he gave.

By morning, she was raw and sore, and knew walking would be an effort. By morning, she could barely remember what it had been like to *not* know his body, not to have felt him inside her and held him in her arms and absorbed the power of his thrusts as he came. By morning, she was his.

She woke to see light seeping around the edges of the pulled curtains. He lay behind her, one heavy arm draped over her waist, his breath warm on her shoulder. She felt stupid. She was more than a little shocked at herself, but there it was: she was his, in a way she had never been David's. The knowledge hurt her. Though until the day Justin was stolen, her marriage had been a happy one, she had remained her own person and David had remained his. He had been absorbed in his work, of course, as he still was, and she had been content to have that small, almost imperceptible distance between them. It had felt good, that sense of autonomy, of controlling her own life.

But David was a civilized man, and Diaz . . . wasn't. He hadn't let her maintain that tiny sense of distance.

She knew very well she had bedded down with a predator. He was dangerous, unpredictable, and she had never felt safer than when she was in his arms. He had used her for his pleasure, but he had also let her use him in return. Last night hadn't been just sex, though she had thought it would be. Instead it had been a . . . claiming, raw and raunchy and unexpected.

How could she have known he wanted that? She could have handled her emotions better if it *had* been only sex. But he had known what he was doing, and ruthlessly used the physical to cement the emotional. Claimed, and bonded. No matter what, now, they were linked, and not just by memories of what had passed between them. No, there was something else, something primitive and elemental that she couldn't quite grasp.

Love? She couldn’t call it that. There was a powerful attraction between them that seemed to go all the way down to the cellular level, but it wasn’t love. She was damn certain he didn’t love her. It was almost a case of like calling to like, a sense of ease as if they were two halves fitting into one perfect whole, and that made her even more uneasy than thinking about love. Was she like Diaz? Was she that ruthless? Had she become like him, in her relentless search for Justin?

He stirred and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “We need to get to the airport,” he said sleepily.

She didn’t want to move. “I have two more days of vacation left.” She should go back to El Paso, she knew. Diaz should renew his search for Pavón, and now that they were fairly certain someone had been misdirecting her all these years, they had another angle to explore. But for ten years she had been battering herself against a blank wall, and she was tired. Yesterday she had nearly died in that river. Would it be so horrible of her if she stole two days just for herself, away from the constant struggle? Two days, that was all she was asking. She had never even considered doing such a thing before.

“What will happen if we go home?”

“I’ll probably go back to work,” she said honestly. Things would be different when she was home. El Paso was the center of it all; she couldn’t be there and *not* work. Boise was a different world, away from everyone she knew.

He rolled over and picked up the phone. “I’ll cancel our flight reservations.”

21

Arturo Pavón liked to tell everyone that he never forgot an insult. He enjoyed seeing the caution in their faces, the way their gazes skittered away from him. And it was true; he forgot no slight, real or imagined. There was only one who had harmed him and gotten away with it, and the knowledge was a bitter little knot in the pit of his stomach, a knot he lived with every day. But he hadn’t forgotten, hadn’t given up on vengeance. His time was slow in coming, but come it would. One day their paths would cross, and he would make the American bitch regret the very day she was born.

For ten years he had waited to make her pay for the loss of his eye.

He could have had her any number of times, the way she constantly came into his country with her silly questions, her prying. But Gallagher had said no, she was too visible, if she disappeared that would raise too many questions and would, at the least, cost them a great deal of money to ensure certain officials looked the other way; at worst, they would end their days in either an American or Mexican jail, depending on where they were caught. If it came to that, Pavón very much wished for an American jail, where they had air-conditioning, cigarettes, and color television.

Gallagher. Pavón didn't trust him, but only because he trusted no one. Their association was a long and profitable one. Gallagher let nothing get between him and money. He'd been dirt poor when Pavón first met him, but full of fire and nerve and ideas, powered by an absolute lack of scruples. Gallagher knew how to make money; if he couldn't make it, he would steal it, and he didn't care how many people he trampled into the dust in the process. A man like that would go far.

Pavón had known it would be better to ally himself with such as Gallagher than to go his own way and perhaps become a rival that had to be eliminated, so he had made himself indispensable. If Gallagher needed someone to disappear, Pavón handled it. If he needed something stolen, Pavón stole it. If someone needed to be taught a lesson, Pavón took great pleasure in making certain this person never forgot it wasn't wise to cross *Señor* Gallagher.

Things had gone well for Arturo, until ten years ago. The assignment was so simple: take the blond baby from the young *gringa* who visited a small village marketplace at least three mornings of the week. So he and Lorenzo had gone to the village, and waited, and they were lucky: the very first morning, she had been there.

It would be easy, they thought. The only problem was that she carried the baby in a sling across her chest, rather than in her arms or in a basket. But Lorenzo always had his knife, and the plan was that they would flank the *gringa*; Lorenzo would slice the strap of the sling, Pavón would grab the baby, and they would run. Some rich Americans had agreed to pay a lot of money for a blond baby to adopt, and this one was an easy target. The young *gringa* was distracted by her shopping, and she was a typical American, soft and unprepared for danger.

They had underestimated her. Instead of becoming hysterical and helplessly screaming, as they had expected, the woman had fought with unexpected

fierceness. He still woke from nightmares, feeling her fingers clawing at his eye, reeling from the bursting pain and horror, his entire face feeling as if it were on fire. Lorenzo had stabbed the bitch in the back and they had escaped, but unfortunately she had lived. He himself had spent many days recovering, cursing her and swearing vengeance. Where his eye had once been was now a scarred pit; his cheek was permanently furrowed from her claws. When he had recovered enough to begin moving around again, he'd found that his depth perception was altered, that he could no longer shoot so well. And he could no longer blend into a crowd without being noticed; people stared at his ruined face.

She had caused him a great deal of trouble, and he would never forget.

But he had bigger trouble now, trouble that alarmed him. The matter of the woman, he would settle in his own good time. The matter of Diaz . . . he must be doubly cautious now, with Diaz on his trail, or he was a dead man. Everyone knew Diaz hunted for money; Pavón, while proud of his justly deserved reputation, had still taken care not to come too much to the attention of the authorities. Under the radar, as Gallagher liked to say. So whose ire had Pavón drawn who also had the money to hire someone like Diaz? He had thought and thought, and there was only one answer.

It had disturbed him afterward when he heard that Milla Boone had been in Guadalupe the same night they had transferred the Sisk woman for her trip to heaven. She had been very close to him, in the same area at the same time, which for the past ten years, on Gallagher's orders, he had taken care would not happen. Was it coincidence that she had announced then, to an entire crowded cantina, that she would pay ten thousand American dollars to anyone who could give her information leading her to Diaz? If she had ten thousand just for information, how many more thousands did she have? And why would she want Diaz, if not to hire him? Diaz was not a man one called simply to say you admired his work, and one certainly did not pay ten thousand dollars for that.

Pavón had put two and two together. It was obvious Milla Boone had hired Diaz to find him, because shortly thereafter he had received word that Diaz was looking for him. Pavón hadn't lingered to find out why; Diaz didn't hunt people just to chat with them. The people he hunted simply . . . disappeared. Except for the dead ones. They were always easy to find. The others were simply never seen or heard from again. What Diaz did with them was a matter of great speculation.

Pavón had immediately left Chihuahua, and his future was now uncertain. Diaz did not give up; time made no difference to him.

For the first time in his life, Pavón was frightened.

He had gone to the Mexican Gulf Coast, where a distant cousin kept a small fishing boat for him. The area, with the jungles and wetlands, the mosquitoes and the offshore oil fields, was not crowded with tourists, as the rest of Mexico seemed to be. He had supplied his boat and put out into the gulf, where no one could approach him unseen—unless Diaz had taken up scuba diving, which Pavón wished he had not thought of, because since then he had been uneasily watching the depths around his boat as well as the surface.

The weather was miserably humid and he, a child of the desert, hated the heaviness of the air. This was also the prime time of the year for hurricanes, so he made a point of listening to his weather radio every day. If one of the huge storms got into the gulf, he wanted to be far inland at the time.

Once a week, he went to shore for supplies, and also to call Gallagher. Gallagher did not trust cell phones, though he had one; he simply never conducted any business over one. He was so careful he did not even use a cordless phone. Pavón had tried to tell him he could get a secure cell phone, one whose conversations could not be intercepted, but it was one of Gallagher's quirks that he was so distrustful.

Since learning Diaz was asking about him, Pavón appreciated such caution. Perhaps it would keep him alive.

The only long-term solution he could think of was if he killed both Diaz and Milla Boone: Diaz because he was the immediate, and strongest threat, and the woman because she would just keep hiring people until one of them succeeded. How she had finally linked Pavón with the kidnapping, he didn't know; someone had obviously talked, despite Gallagher's influence.

To kill them would require a game of delicate balance, at least where Diaz was concerned. The woman would be easier, so he would take her last. Perhaps he would even show her what a real man was, before she died. Ah, he knew the perfect ending for her! After he finished using her, he would *donate* her to the cause, an act of tremendous goodwill on his part. He chuckled at his own play on words, then quickly sobered.

The difficult part would be getting close to Diaz; the man was like smoke, appearing and disappearing with the wind and leaving no trace of his movements. To find Diaz, Pavón would have to offer himself up like a

tethered goat, and it must be done carefully. He would have to lead Diaz into a place and situation in which he, Pavón, had the control—and he would have to prevent Diaz from realizing that the tethered goat was armed and ready until it was too late to save himself.

This required much consideration and planning; it wasn't something that could be done overnight. Everything must be perfect—or he himself would be dead.

No one was more cautious and meticulous about detail than Gallagher, so when Pavón went to shore that week and made his regular call, he broached his plan. "We must lure Diaz to me," he said, "but in such a way that he doesn't know he's being lured."

Gallagher paused, then said, "That's a good idea. Let me think about it. Where are you now?"

"In a safe place." Gallagher wasn't the only one who could be cautious. "We need to meet."

Ah. That meant there was something he didn't wish to say over the phone.

"I cannot get there today." He could, but he preferred to have Gallagher think he was much farther away, perhaps even in Chiapas, the southernmost Mexican state.

"When, then?" Gallagher sounded annoyed, and . . . something else. Worried, perhaps? But why should Gallagher sound worried? Diaz was not after *him*—in an instant, Pavón perceived that he was in danger not only from Diaz. He was a link, not only between Gallagher and what was going on now, but between Gallagher and Milla Boone's kidnapped child, ten years ago. The best way for Gallagher to protect himself was to break that link.

"Perhaps . . . two weeks from now?" Pavón said slyly.

"Two—goddamnit, you can get here faster than that."

"Perhaps I don't want to leave this wonderful place. I have everything I need here, and no one knows how to find me. If I come there, many people know my face. I have to ask myself, who will people be most afraid of: *Señor* Gallagher or *Señor* Diaz? If *Señor* Diaz has a knife to a man's throat and asks if he has seen me, will that man lie, or will he tell the truth? I think he will piss himself, but he will tell the truth."

Gallagher dragged in a long, exasperated breath. "All right. If you're afraid, then you're afraid. When you find your *cojones*, call me and we'll set up a meeting."

An insult to his machismo was supposed to suddenly make him stupid? Pavón smiled to himself as he hung up the phone. The smile quickly faded, though; what did he do, now that he couldn't count on Gallagher's help? He would have to take care of Diaz by himself. There was no other option. How to do it, though, was a problem. Perhaps he could take the woman and use her as bait? If Diaz was working for her, he would come to her aid, so long as he didn't suspect a trap. How could he take her and make it look like something unrelated?

He kept coming back to using himself as bait. But for *her*, not Diaz. He would somehow have to make certain Diaz was occupied elsewhere, then get a message to the Boone woman that he knew she wouldn't ignore, nor would she wait until Diaz was available. She would come by herself, and then he would have her. When he had her, he would also have Diaz. Perhaps not right away, but he could enjoy himself while he was waiting.

Yes. It was a good plan.

The days slipped past and cooler weather settled in. Except for that one heat wave the summer hadn't been a hot one, but Milla was still glad to see it go and autumn arrive. She kept her appointment with Susanna and got a new prescription for the birth control patches just before she used up her supply, which was a good thing considering the drastic change in her love life.

"I want to apologize for what happened," Susanna said contritely. "I was out of line. I should have listened to you and not thought I knew best."

Milla blinked at her, totally at sea for a moment. She never felt chatty when her feet were in stirrups, and she'd been determinedly thinking of other things. These days, to an alarming degree, "other things" meant Diaz.

The world clicked back into place, and she remembered the scene with True. "It's okay," she said. "Everything's fine. He didn't like taking no for an answer, and I guess he needed to hear it one more time. He hasn't called since."

"That's good. That he isn't bothering you, I mean. But what about Finders? Is he still one of your sponsors? You can sit up now."

Clutching the paper sheet for the meager modesty it provided, Milla took her feet down and scooted back so she could sit up. The nurse began doing the paperwork for the Pap smear, and Susanna turned away to wash her hands.

“He said that turning him down wouldn’t affect his support, so I have to take him at his word.”
“That’s good. I don’t think he’d be petty. I don’t know him that well, but he doesn’t seem to be a man who pouts.”
Milla laughed. No, True didn’t strike her as a pouter. She hadn’t thought about him at all recently, she realized. Two things had occupied her mind: work and Diaz.
“I called and apologized to him, too,” Susanna continued. “We got to talking about other things, and he said you had a lead on the man you think took Justin. Diego? Diaz?”
“No, nothing that panned out,” Milla said, instinctively not wanting to say anything about Diaz. Now that she knew what kind of work he did, the less said about him the better.
“Damn. I was hoping this time—well, never mind. Keep me up-to-date if you do get any information, though.”
“I will.” But she already knew a lot more that she was keeping to herself. Given Diaz’s theory that she had been deliberately led down blind alleys all these years, she thought that the less said the better. She trusted Susanna, but did she trust everyone Susanna knew? Or everyone Susanna’s other friends knew? Not likely. So she borrowed a page from Diaz and kept her mouth shut.
Susanna picked up her pad and scribbled the prescription. “Everything looks fine. We’ll call when the results come in.”
“Leave the message on my answering machine if I’m not at home.”
Susanna made a note on Milla’s chart, smiled, and said, “If I can wrangle any free time for lunch, I’ll give you a call.”
Milla smiled in return; then Susanna and the nurse left the examination room to let her get dressed. As soon as they were gone, her smile vanished. Worry nagged at her. Since they’d returned from Idaho, Diaz had been prowling Mexico. On two nights he’d shown up at her condo, scruffy and snarly, lean from the hunt. A wise woman would have stayed far away from him when he was so lethally edgy, but Milla had decided that where he was concerned, she wasn’t wise at all. Both times she’d fed him, put him in the shower, and washed his clothes. Both times he’d let her, though he’d watched her with narrowed, feral eyes that made her knees go weak, because she knew he was biding his time. And both times, as soon as he was out of the shower, he was on her before the towel hit the floor.

After his sexual appetite was slaked, he was usually hungry again. Whatever he was doing, he wasn't getting enough to eat. She would make him a sandwich and they would sit at the table while he ate and told her anything new he'd learned, which was precious little. Still, she at least felt that those tidbits were solid information, not a smoke screen.

"The word I get is that Pavón has been working for the same man from the beginning," Diaz had said the last time she'd seen him, four days before. "They smuggled babies; now they smuggle body parts. But the information on the street is thin; they've done a good job of scaring the hell out of everyone."

"Did you find Lola's children?"

"The oldest, a son, was killed in a knife fight over fifteen years ago. Lola hasn't seen her youngest in eight years, but I've tracked him to Matamoros. He's a commercial fisherman, and was out in the gulf. He's supposed to be back three days from now. I'll be there waiting for him."

When she'd awakened the next morning, she had lain there for a moment, so . . . *content,* feeling him there beside her, that it frightened her. Almost as soon as she woke, he seemed to sense it and stirred, pulling her close before his eyes were even open. He was relaxed with her, she thought—as much as he ever relaxed, anyway.

She slid her hand over his chest, feeling the hair rough under her palm, the warmth of his skin, the strong, steady beat of his heart. His morning erection rose, inviting her touch, and obligingly she slipped her hand beneath the cover to envelop him. "I can't believe this," she murmured as she kissed his shoulder. "I don't even know your first name."

"Yes you do," he said, frowning. "James."

"Really? I thought you made that up."

"James Alejandro Xavier Diaz, if you want the American version."

" 'Xavier'? I've never met anyone named Xavier before. What's the Mexican version?"

"Pretty much the same. Ouch!" he said, giving his rusty laugh and dodging when she darted her hand to pinch him in a very tender place. It always melted her when he laughed, because he did it so rarely.

While she had him weakened with hysteria, she slithered on top of him, positioned his penis, and slid down to take him tenderly inside. He took a deep breath and let his eyes close, both hands going to her bottom and kneading. Milla adored morning loving, when she was still sleepy and

lethargic, when time didn't seem to matter and in a way climaxing didn't either. It was enough, almost, to just lie there and hold him with arms and body. Almost. Eventually she had to move, or he had to move, and it was as if that first stroke broke the bands of self-control. She rode him hard and fast, and when her climax shook her and left her collapsed on his chest, he rolled over with her and took his own satisfaction.

After breakfast he was gone, and she hadn't heard from him in four days. The first week of October was almost behind them. Was he all right? Had he found Lola's son?

After Milla left, Susanna went into her private office and called True. "I just saw Milla. We're still safe; she doesn't know anything about Diaz. She thinks it was bad information."

True was silent; then he cursed luridly. "She's *met* Diaz, you fool! They were seen together last month in Juarez."

Susanna's blood ran cold. "She lied to me?"

"If she denied knowing anything about him, she did."

"But why would she do that? We've been friends for years."

True snorted at that. Friends? God save him from friends like Susanna Kosper.

"Maybe she suspects *you*," he snapped. "Maybe Diaz is closer to us than I thought."

For once he didn't have the chance to hang up; Susanna dropped the receiver into its cradle and sat staring at the phone as if it were a snake. She'd always thought Milla, while admirable in so many ways, was a touch naive. Now she wondered if *she* wasn't the naive one. Was Milla playing her?

Panic rose in her throat, threatening to choke her. She'd worked too hard to let things fall apart now. She had to do something, and she had to do it fast.

22

Diaz entered the smoky cantina and found himself a place against the wall, partly shadowed, where he could watch the patrons come and go. The music was loud, the metal tables were crowded with empty bottles, and the urinal consisted of a barrel in a back corner. Two prostitutes were doing a lively

business; the Mexican farmers and fishermen were relaxed and having a good time, singing along with a folk song, giving one another numerous and enthusiastic toasts, which called for more bottles, which called for more toasts. The *cantinero*, the bartender, looked like a man who kept a loaded shotgun close to hand, but in the convivial little cantina Diaz doubted he needed it very often.

Running Enrique Guerrero to earth had taken a lot of time and patience. Diaz thought he'd probably chased him over half of Mexico. But he'd finally caught up with the little fucker, in the port city of Veracruz, in this crowded, aromatic cantina where he felt safe, surrounded by all his *compadres*.

Lola must have warned him, Diaz thought, or his friends in Matamoros had. Enrique had run. Now why would he do such a thing, unless he had something to hide? Watching him, Diaz figured he had a lot to hide. Enrique was one of those furtive weasels who watched the people around him and, when they were too drunk to notice, relieved them of some of their cash. He was slick, but the cantina was dark and smoky, and there was some serious drinking going on; a five-year-old would have had some success doing the same thing. Enrique was drinking, but not much, which gave him a huge advantage. Still, not a few of the *campesinos* carried machetes; it was their weapon of choice, and hacking at one another was almost a national sport. Enrique was risking more than a black eye if he got caught.

Diaz wasn't drinking at all. He stood very still, and most people never even noticed him. He didn't make eye contact with anyone. He just watched Enrique, and waited for his chance.

Because he wasn't drinking very much, Enrique didn't have to make any visits to the barrel in the corner. If he had, Diaz could have moved up behind him and gently escorted him out the nearby door that led into the *callejón*, the alley. In this crowd, no one would have noticed or given a damn even if they had. So Diaz waited, moving deeper into the shadows, his attention never wavering.

Dawn was only minutes away when Enrique stood and slapped his pals' backs, trading loud and hilarious insults if the drunken laughter was anything to go by. Probably he'd lifted all he could reasonably expect to get; it was a good gig, because when everyone sobered up, they would simply think they'd had a very good time and spent all their money.

When Enrique opened the door, the fresh air outside didn't even make a dent in the almost palpable wall of smoke that filled the room. Diaz moved without haste from his post, timing his arrival so he stepped through the door right behind Enrique. No one seeing him would have thought there was any purpose at all to his leaving right then, because his gait had been leisurely.

As soon as the door closed behind him, he had his hand over Enrique's mouth and his knife point sticking just under his ear as he dragged the weasel into the darkness of a narrow alley.

"Talk, and you will live," he said in Spanish. "Fight, and you will die." He removed his hand from Enrique's mouth. Just to make certain Enrique got the point, Diaz gave him the point, about an eighth of an inch. It stung like hell and blood began pouring, but Diaz had taken care not to cut anything major.

Enrique was already slobbering with fear, promising anything, everything, whatever the *señor* wanted. Here, he had money—

"Don't move your hands, *cabrón*." Diaz dug the knife point in a little deeper. With his other hand he did a swift search and relieved Enrique of the blade he'd been trying to pull out of his pocket. "I don't want your friends' money, just answers to a few questions."

"Yes, anything."

"Your mother sent me. My name is Diaz."

Enrique's knees wobbled. He let loose with a number of colorful curses at Lola, who, even if she'd heard them, likely wouldn't have cared. Diaz figured there wasn't any love lost between mother and son, or she would never have told Diaz how to find Enrique. Essentially, Lola cared about no one but herself, a trait she had passed on to her son.

"Ten years ago you were living with Lola when she was caring for the stolen babies."

"I know nothing about the babies—"

"Shut up. I'm not asking about the babies. Who did Arturo Pavón and your uncle Lorenzo work for? Did you ever hear a name?"

"A *yanqui*," Enrique babbled.

"Not his nationality, *cabrón*; his name."

"No . . . no name. All I heard was that he lived in El Paso."

"Is that all?"

"I swear!"

“I’m disappointed. I already knew that much.”
Enrique began to shake. “I never saw him. Pavón was very careful to never mention his name.”
“But was Lorenzo as careful? Or did Lorenzo like to brag?”
“He bragged, *señor,* but it was empty noise. He knew nothing!”
“Tell me some of the things he said. I’ll decide if it is nothing.”
“That was a long time ago; I don’t remember—”
Diaz made a *tsk*ing sound. He didn’t move the knife at all; he didn’t have to. Terrified beyond reason by that regretful *tsk*, Enrique shuddered and began to sob. The strong odor of urine wafted up.
“Do you remember when Pavón lost his eye, stealing a gringo baby? The mother clawed out his eye, tore it from his head. Surely you remember that.”
“I remember,” Enrique said, weeping.
“Ah, I knew you didn’t have amnesia. What is it you have recalled?”
“Not about the man in El Paso, I know nothing about him! But that baby, the gringo baby . . . Lorenzo said the woman doctor helped them.”
The woman doctor.
Milla’s friend Dr. Kosper had delivered her baby, and had kept in touch all these years. She even lived in El Paso.
A big piece of the puzzle clicked into place.
The eviscerated victims hadn’t been butchered; their organs had been neatly removed, indicating some surgical skill was used. A damaged organ had no value. An undertaker could be doing the organ removal, but a doctor was the more likely choice.
Who was the one doctor who had lived nearby at both the little village where Milla’s baby was stolen and the border where the bodies were being found?
None other than Susanna Kosper.
He had to warn Milla.

By the middle of October, Diaz still hadn’t returned and Milla was so worried she couldn’t seem to concentrate on anything. Had anything happened to him? Mexico was, by and large, an extremely friendly and hospitable country, but like every other country in the world, it also had a very rough element. She would have bet on Diaz against almost anyone, but

even the most efficient predator could be outnumbered and overwhelmed. He wasn't proof against a high-caliber rifle, either.

When she wasn't sick with worry, she was furious. Didn't he have any idea how it would make her feel to have someone else she cared about just disappear? There was no comparison between Diaz and Justin, of course, except for their ties to her heart. Her son and her lover: surely she couldn't lose them both in such a cruel way, with no closure, just pain and emptiness and uncertainty. When Diaz did show up again, she'd give him a piece of her mind he wouldn't soon forget, and if he didn't like it, that was just tough. He could sever their relationship if he wanted, but as long as there *was* a relationship she refused to be treated like nothing more than a sexual convenience whenever he got around to visiting.

She had tried his cell phone number several times without luck. He was either unavailable, according to the canned message, or not in a service area. If he had a voice mail option with his service, he hadn't activated it.

She kept busy. Unfortunately, Finders kept busy. There was a rash of runaways and kids being snatched, as well as the inevitable hikers getting lost in the mountains. The reason didn't matter; if feet on the ground were what mattered, Finders provided them. In just one week, Milla flew from Seattle to Jacksonville, Florida, to Kansas City, then San Diego, and finally back to El Paso. She was exhausted when she got back, but the first thing she did when she got home was check her answering machine for messages. There were plenty of them, but none from Diaz. She didn't think he'd called on her cell phone, either, but the caller log feature had totally stopped working and she had no way of telling if she'd missed a call or not.

Come to think of it, she'd had no calls on it at all for a couple of days. She hadn't thought anything of it because she'd been on so many different flights, and she had always called the office as soon as she could. She'd had no trouble making calls, but what if she couldn't receive them?

She picked up her home phone and called her cell number. She listened to the ringing in the earpiece, but the cell phone in her hand did absolutely nothing.

In disgust she hung up and tossed the cell phone back into her purse. First thing in the morning she would drop it off for repairs and pick up a loaner, or even buy a new one if necessary. She couldn't bear thinking that Diaz might have tried to get in touch and that stupid phone wasn't working. Did he have her home phone number? She couldn't remember ever giving it to

him. Surely, though, if he'd needed to get in touch with her and couldn't get her on the cell, he'd have called Finders and left a message, or called Information and got her home phone number and left a message here. Where in hell *was* he?

Her home phone rang and she snatched up the receiver. Maybe—

"*Señora* Boone."

"Yes, this is she." Milla didn't recognize the voice. This reminded her of the call back in August, telling her where she could find Diaz. But the voice wasn't the same; she was certain of it. The first voice had been lighter, smoother; this voice was coarse, and the accent was different.

"You are interested in Arturo Pavón?"

My God. Milla swallowed hard to contain the sharp rise of excitement. Please, please let this be some real information and not another false lead, she prayed. "Yes, I am."

"He will be in Ciudad Juarez tonight. At the Blue Pig Cantina."

"What time?" she asked, but the caller had already hung up. She checked Caller ID; it said, "Unavailable."

Desperately she called Diaz's cell phone again. After three rings the canned voice said the customer was not in a service area.

She checked the time: four-thirty. Because this past week had been so busy, the office staff was scattered over the country. Brian was in Tennessee. Joann was in Arizona. Debra Schmale and Olivia were both sick with a vicious stomach virus.

She knew better than to go alone. She didn't know what kind of place the Blue Pig was, if it was a regular cantina, in which case she wouldn't be welcome in there, or if it was a club where women *were* allowed without it automatically being assumed they were prostitutes. She couldn't see Pavón going into any of the more exclusive clubs; no, if he was there, then this was a regular cantina. For her to step foot inside one of them was to invite big trouble.

She racked her brain, trying to think of someone who was both available and capable.

Only one name surfaced.

Diaz had told her to stay away from True Gallagher, and she assumed he had a good reason other than just being territorial. He'd said that before they became lovers, as more of a warning than anything else. She should have asked specifically why he mistrusted True. But other than Diaz and

Brian, he was the only man she could think of who would be capable in a situation like this.
She realized that it didn't matter. Diaz wouldn't have said what he had without reason, so she had to trust him. Just as soon as she saw him she'd find out exactly what he had against True, but until then she had to rely on her own sense of trust, and that lay with Diaz.
There had to be someone else. The problem with concentrating on work and on her quest to find Justin was that her social life was limited; she knew a lot of people, but none intimately, and in circumstances like this she needed someone she knew she could rely on.
Then she drew a quick breath of relief. There was one other, if she could just get in touch with him: Rip Kosper. Quickly she looked up his office number; of course he didn't see patients in the office, since he was an anesthesiologist, but he and his partner had an office for handling the paperwork and billing, and taking messages.
He hadn't yet left the hospital, the woman who answered said. Milla said it was urgent, gave her name and number, and the woman promised to page him. While she waited for him to return her call, Milla ran upstairs and changed into jeans and sneakers.
More than an hour passed before Rip called. In that time Milla paced, tried Diaz's cell phone three more times, and forced herself to eat a sandwich. The caller hadn't given a time, so this could well be an all-nighter.
"Milla?" Rip sounded concerned when he finally called. "What's wrong?"
"I need someone to go with me into Juarez tonight," she said. "My regular crew is either gone or sick, and this isn't something I can do by myself. Can you go with me? I know this is way out in left field, but you're the only friend I can think of."
"Sure, no problem. Where and what time?"
She told him which bridge to meet her at, and when. "You'll need to change clothes, if you can. The cantina we're going to will probably be on the rough side."
"All *riiight*," he said with relish. "It's been a while since I've done any cantina crawling."
"Oh, one more thing: I have no idea how long this will take. It could be all night."
"I have a light schedule tomorrow anyway. Nothing until almost noon. I'm good."

“Thanks, Rip. You’re a doll.”
“I know,” he said smugly.
An hour later they walked across into Juarez. Milla had previously used Chela’s services only if they were leaving the border zone, but under no circumstances would she ever willingly be near Pavón without being armed, so she had placed a call to the arms dealer and arranged to meet her. “Do you know how to use a pistol?” she asked Rip when they were on the Juarez side.
“Never have. I’ve hunted, but with a rifle. Haven’t hit anything yet.” He gave her a concerned look. “You really think we’ll need guns?”
“I know I’d rather have them and not need them, than vice versa. I didn’t tell you, but the man who took Justin is supposed to be at this cantina tonight. If he is, you can bet he’ll be armed.”
Rip stopped in his tracks, an uneasy expression crossing his face. “Don’t you think you should call the cops? The PJF or the PJE, whichever would handle things like this.”
“And tell them what? I think he’s the man I saw very briefly ten years ago?” She didn’t want to deal with either the state or the federal judicial police. Both were highly unpopular in Mexico.
“You took out his eye. That makes him easy to identify.”
“Unless I think all one-eyed men could be the same man. I don’t even know that he’ll be here. I had an anonymous call that said he would be. Do you know how many other calls I’ve had over the years? Take a guess how many of them have actually been worth anything.”
“I’m guessing not any,” he said, relaxing.
“One, actually.”
“So this is more of a wait-and-see.”
“Probably. I won’t know unless I show up. But I definitely don’t want to hang around a rough cantina without some means of protection.”
Rip knew the score on cantinas, knew she couldn’t go inside—which meant she would be on the street. Even sitting in a car, as she intended to do, had its risks.
Her old friend Benito met them with a grin and a Ford Taurus in fairly good shape. He also knew where the Blue Pig was and gave her careful directions, along with a warning. The Blue Pig had a very bad reputation. Most cantinas were friendly places where men relaxed and got shit-faced drunk, but the Blue Pig was where the very rough element gathered.

Milla began to think Pavón might actually be there, if the place was that bad.
They met Chela, who silently handed over a shopping bag, took her money, and walked away. “Is it always that easy?” Rip asked in surprise.
“So far. If a policeman ever wants to look in the bag, though, I’m dropping it and running.”
“I’ll run with you,” he said, grinning.
They got back into the Taurus, with Milla behind the wheel. Without hope, before they went to the Blue Pig, Milla tried Diaz’s number one more time. To her absolute astonishment, he answered.
“Where have you been?” she all but shouted at him, then caught herself and felt her face getting hot. She’d said that as if she had a right to know. Then she thought briefly and decided she *did* have a right to know. They were lovers, and she’d been worried about him.
There were three beats of silence; then he said, “I was going to ask you the same thing.”
“My cell phone won’t receive calls. I can call out, but that’s it.”
“I’ve had my phone turned off most of the time.”
“Why?”
“Because I didn’t want it to ring.”
This time she was the one who waited before she spoke, fighting the urge to beat her head against the car’s dashboard. She had the feeling that if she could see him, he’d be wearing that tiny smile of his. “Why not?”
“I didn’t want the noise to attract attention.”
He’d been on stakeout, then. “Did you find out anything?”
“Something very interesting. Where are you?”
“Juarez. That’s why I’ve been trying to reach you. I got a call this afternoon saying Pavón will be at the Blue Pig Cantina tonight.”
“I know the place. Stay where you are until I can get there. Don’t go there alone.”
“I’m not alone. Rip Kosper is with me.”
His voice was suddenly tense. “Kosper?”
“Remember my friends Susanna and Rip?”
“She’s involved, Milla. She’s part of it. Get away from him, go back to El Paso. Do it now.”
She actually took the phone away and stared at it in astonishment for a second before putting it back to her ear. “What did you say?”

“Susanna. She set up Justin’s kidnapping. She’s probably neck-deep in the organ smuggling, too. Someone with skill has been removing the organs, and a doctor is the most likely bet.”
She was so stunned she couldn’t think. Susanna? The idea was preposterous. Susanna was her friend, she had delivered Justin, she had made a point of staying in touch all these years and offering support and friendship. *She had kept track of Milla’s efforts to find the kidnappers*.
Milla was hyperventilating. She caught her breath and held it before she got dizzy, her eyes squeezed shut.
“Milla?” Rip asked, his voice worried. “Are you all right?”
“Get away from him,” Diaz’s voice said in her ear, the tone deadly.
“How soon can you be here?” she asked with a calm that took every ounce of control she possessed.
“I’m seventy kilometers away. An hour, at least.”
“I won’t pass up a chance at Pavón. We know he probably won’t show, but maybe he will.”
Evidently realizing the futility of telling her to go home, Diaz took a deep breath. “Are you armed?”
“Yes.”
“Is he?”
“Not at the moment.”
“Keep it that way. What kind of car are you driving?”
She described the Taurus to him.
“Stay in the car. Keep the doors locked. Park on the street where I can find you. I’ll be there as fast as possible. And if Kosper does anything the least bit suspicious, shoot his ass.”
“Yes. Okay,” she said to the staccato list of commands.
He disconnected the call, and she did the same. She felt shell-shocked, and she didn’t dare look at Rip. He couldn’t be involved. Not Rip. He had a gentle heart, that of a true gentleman. The only time she had ever seen him be less than friendly was the night Susanna had tried to set her up with True; he’d made it obvious that he didn’t like the man.
Neither did Diaz. How odd that both of them would so intensely dislike the same man, and knowing that Rip disliked True, how odd that Susanna would try to throw Milla at him anyway. Why would she do such a thing?
True and Susanna talked. Nothing incriminating about that. He was wealthy now, but he’d dragged himself out of poverty. She had heard that he’d come

from El Paso's meanest, toughest section. She knew that he still had contacts in that world, that he knew all sorts of unsavory characters such as smugglers.

Susanna . . . and *True*?

It made sense. She was going solely on instinct now, without a shred of corroborating evidence, but it made sense.

She took one of the pistols out of the shopping bag, then put the shopping bag in the floorboard on the other side of her legs.

"What's wrong?" Rip asked. "Who was that?"

"A man named Diaz."

He heaved a weary sigh. "I've heard about him."

"How?"

"I overheard Susanna and True talking." Rip stared out the window. "I'm guessing he knows about Susanna."

Startled, Milla stared at him, and kept her hand on the pistol. He rubbed his eyes. "She's careless sometimes. She says things she shouldn't, forgets how sound carries. Her home office, for example, seems to amplify sound. I've overheard conversations for years, but only in the past few months have things started to come together for me. She was talking to him on the phone one day, and—I don't remember exactly what she said, but the meaning was pretty clear. Something about how much money they'd earned with the babies, though the hullabaloo about Justin had nearly gotten them caught. *Earned*. She actually said they *earned* the money."

"Why didn't you say something?" Milla asked. "Go to the cops?"

"Lack of evidence. Hell, *no* evidence. Just some phone calls that I heard only her side of. She asked True if he was sure this Diaz guy was coming up empty and they didn't have to worry. I don't know what True said, but it was obvious he took Diaz seriously. So I did some investigating on my own, did more eavesdropping, and found out there was going to be a transfer of some kind of cargo behind the church in Guadalupe. I know a few hard-asses in Mexico myself. I contacted one of them, told him Diaz would appreciate knowing about this, hoped it worked. Then I called you, used a fake accent and told you Diaz would be there. I didn't know for sure, but there was a possibility. Guess I was right, huh?"

Rip was the anonymous caller. He had to be; otherwise he couldn't have known about that night. "He was there," she said, her throat tight.

Rip bowed his head. “When I found out what she’d done . . . I’ve loved that woman for twenty years, and I never knew her. It was the money, I guess. We were almost bankrupted paying back our student loans, credit card bills, you name it. She isn’t good with a budget. I’m not either, truth be told. That’s why we went to Mexico, to get away from the bill collectors for a year. The money situation got much better that year, and now I know why. She was selling babies. Hell, she delivered them, she knew their sex, age, general health.”

And the poor Mexican women had traveled considerable distances to reach the clinic so they could have a real doctor in attendance during birth. The kidnappings would have been spread out over a sizable area, and who would ever think to ask who had delivered the babies? Since Susanna had had no contact with them once they left the clinic, she had never even blipped on the radar of suspicion.

“She sold Justin,” Rip continued. “They got a lot of money for him. I’m sorry, Milla, I don’t know where they sent him. I’ve gone through all of her paperwork, but there’s nothing about what happened to the babies. I don’t think she cared.” Tears gathered in his eyes. “She said they’d kept you busy chasing your own tail for ten years. They’ve been hindering you every way they could.”

“What are *you* going to do?” Milla asked, her voice thin. This hurt. She was shocked and hurt and angry. Susanna was lucky she wasn’t within reach at that moment, or Milla would have done physical damage to her.

“I don’t know. Divorce, obviously. I haven’t left her because I wanted to be in a position to snoop. Can I testify against her? I don’t know if I can make myself do it.”

“Diaz thinks she’s involved with black market organ transplants, that they’re killing people and selling their organs.”

Rip stared at her, his mouth working soundlessly. Finally he managed to say, “She—she couldn’t do that. That’s beyond—”

“The ‘cargo’ that was transferred in Guadalupe that night was a person.”

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” All color washed out of Rip’s face and he closed his eyes. He looked as if he was going to vomit.

Milla felt as if she might be sick, too. She checked the time and a spurt of adrenaline had her starting the car with quick, jerky movements. “We have to get to the cantina. Pavón might already be there.”

“I thought you said he probably wouldn’t—”

“There’s always a chance.”

23

Pavón reached the Blue Pig early; he wanted to be here when the bitch arrived, he wanted to watch her wait for him. Talking to her on the telephone had made his heart beat faster, and the excitement had given him an ache in the crotch that he wanted to rub. He had waited and waited, hiding out in that foul boat, every day that he spent cowering like a little girl eating at his soul. He needed to find out where Diaz was before he made a move on the woman, and that was not easy.

But fortune had at last smiled on him. One of the fishermen mentioned to his cousin that the tracker Diaz had been to Matamoros looking for Enrique Guerrero. The news was both frightening and reassuring: it was good because this fisherman also said that Enrique had fled south, from which Pavón could assume that Diaz had followed; it was bad because he had no doubt Diaz would find Enrique, who could not be trusted to keep his mouth shut about anything. He would sell his mother to the devil to keep himself safe, though with Lola as a mother, one couldn’t truly blame him. Still, Pavón had to assume that what Lorenzo had known, Enrique knew. And what Enrique knew, Diaz would shortly know.

There could not be a better time to sever the relationship with Gallagher, and disappear for good. There was a chance that Diaz would be content to go after the bigger fish, and leave the minnows alone. But he had a reputation for being both ruthless and relentless, letting no one escape, and Pavón couldn’t take the chance of looking up one day and coming face-to-face with that devil. His original plan was better, to take the woman and use her as bait to catch and kill Diaz. Only then would he truly be safe.

So he sat in the cantina and waited—and waited, consoling himself with several bottles of Victoria beer. Where was she? Was he so unimportant to her that she wouldn’t bother to walk across the border to see him? He’d made it as easy for her as possible, short of presenting himself at her front door.

He was on his fourth bottle of beer before he realized that perhaps she would not come into the cantina. Only whores did, or women looking for trouble. A good woman did not, and the bitch was a good woman.

Swearing to himself, he got to his feet and was halfway across the floor to the front door when he suddenly reversed himself and went to the back. Fool! What if she was parked directly outside? That would be foolish of her, but it was possible. He definitely wanted to see her before she saw him, so he would go out the back door.

He worked his way around, which was not easy, because here the buildings had been built flush against one another and he had to walk through the narrow, smelly back alley to the end of the street, then double back. He stayed in the shadows against the buildings and near other people as well; she would be looking for a lone man, not a group. Luckily this street teemed with people, especially at night, and most of them were men of the type a good woman would not like to meet.

He moved carefully. She might be parked on the other side of the street, or facing him. He had to examine each vehicle—there! And so conveniently parked, on this side of the street, with her back to him.

It had to be her. It was a woman with light-colored curly hair, so light a brown that it was almost blond. And the curls; he especially remembered the curls. Even at night and in silhouette they seemed to float around her head with a life of their own; they looked as soft and feathery as a baby chick. He wondered if her lower hair was as curly, and chuckled to himself because he would soon find out.

For ten years he had not fucked a woman who was not a whore—not a willing woman, anyway—because this curly-haired bitch had ruined his face. She would pay for that. He would use her until she screamed for mercy.

Perhaps he would keep her for a while, even after he killed Diaz. He could charge others to use her. He did, after all, need to make a living.

There was someone else in the car with her. A man.

He stopped, his blood turning to ice. Diaz—how could he have returned so fast? *Idiota!* He mentally slapped himself. Just because he himself would not go in an airplane—too much security and checking of papers—didn't mean others had the same need for secrecy. Diaz could return from anywhere in the country in a matter of hours.

But this could be to his advantage. Both of them together, and oblivious of his presence behind them. He could kill Diaz right now. A bullet through the window into his head; that would do the job. The woman . . . he would probably have to kill her now, too, and he sighed with regret. Ah, well.

Shooting Diaz first, as he had to do, would give her time to react. He didn't dare approach from the front, which would give him two quick shots at both of them; he would have to move in from behind and to the side, out of the view of the side mirror, until he had an angle on Diaz's head. After shooting Diaz, he would have to move forward even more to be able to see the woman and have a decent shot at her. She would be screaming, moving around, perhaps even trying to drive away. He would have to be fast, and accurate, which was not so easy now with only one eye. To make things worse, it was his left eye that was missing, and they were on his left.

The man got out of the car. Pavón froze in place. This was not Diaz! This man had light-colored hair. He was older, shorter, stockier. Shocked, he recognized him. It was Dr. Kosper's husband, the other Dr. Kosper.

Son of the great whore! What was he doing here?

Whatever the reason, it didn't matter. This Dr. Kosper was going into the Blue Pig, presumably to look for him, Pavón. This could not be better. The woman was watching Dr. Kosper; she wasn't paying attention to—she looked into the rearview mirror, checked her side mirror, and Pavón froze. She couldn't see him in the mirrors, but she was more alert, more cautious, than he'd believed. He needed to come at her from her left, his right, so he would be best able to see her. But if he did, she would be able to see him. He had underestimated her once, to his cost. He would not do so again.

She would have the car doors locked; she wasn't stupid. The windows were up. But had she relocked the passenger door after Dr. Kosper got out?

The four beers he'd had to drink said there was only one way to find out. He strode forward at an angle, staying away from the mirrors until he was right at the car. He pulled on the door handle, the door opened—miracle!—and he leaned in with his pistol pointing right at her head.

"Hola!" he said, grinning as he slid into the passenger seat and closed the door. "Remember me?"

He saw her eyes grow huge, a most satisfying response—then quick as a snake her hand snapped up and he found himself also staring down the barrel of a pistol that was pointed at his good eye.

"*Hijo de la chingada*, do you remember *me*?" she said in slow, careful Spanish. *Son of a bitch, do you remember me?*

Her hand wasn't shaking. Her eyes were cold with hate. Pavón looked at her and saw his death, unless he could pull the trigger faster—

The door beside him opened again and another pistol jammed under his right ear. “Pavón, you pig,” said a soft voice so laden with menace that he nearly pissed himself with terror, because he knew whom the voice belonged to and he also knew beyond a doubt that he had fucked up beyond all chance of recovery. “You threaten my woman? That makes me very angry.”

Rip stood off to the side, shaking uncontrollably. When he’d returned to the car, he’d almost passed out at the sight of Milla holding one of the pistols to a man’s head, that man also holding a pistol pointed at *her*, and a second, dark, lethal-looking man standing in the open door also with a pistol to the man’s head. By Rip’s panicked count, that was three pistols and two threatened heads. Someone was going to die.

Things had then happened fast. The man in the front seat with Milla was disarmed, and Rip found himself in the backseat sitting beside that living, breathing weapon who simultaneously held one pistol to the back of Pavón’s head and another trained on Rip himself. He’d figured out that this was the infamous Diaz, and after seeing the man, he understood completely the rather gory reputation that followed him. He was absolutely the scariest person Rip had ever seen, and it wasn’t anything he said or did; it was just that aura of lethal competence. He himself had been speechless with fear at having that pistol pointed at him, but Milla had talked fast as she drove out of Juarez, following the stranger’s directions, telling him everything that Rip and Milla had discussed. At hearing that Rip was the anonymous informant who had brought them together, and everything he had to say about True Gallagher, Diaz shoved the pistol he’d been holding on Rip into a holster strapped to his leg like an honest-to-God gunslinger.

Now they were in the desert, far from the lights of Juarez and El Paso, and he was shaking not from the cold or from any lethal aura. He was shaking because he had watched Diaz at work with Pavón, and now he knew Diaz’s reputation was well-deserved, even understated.

Pavón was, quite literally, scared shitless. He was naked and staked out, spread-eagled, on the ground. At first he had cursed long and loud; then he had tried to bargain, and now he was simply begging. Diaz kept asking questions in that soft voice, and what Rip heard made him turn away and vomit. Pavón told it all, starting with the babies who were sold like so many cattle, how the smuggling ring had worked, Susanna’s role in it, the name of

the woman in New Mexico who worked at the rural county courthouse and who had stolen blank birth certificates and falsified them. With birth certificates bearing new names, the babies had immediately become different people.

Pavón had told everything he knew about True Gallagher, and Rip shook with rage. Diaz, if anything, became even colder and his work with the knife more diabolical. The people who had been murdered for their internal organs that were sold for millions on the black market—Susanna was doing the organ removal, and Gallagher was getting rich. That was when Rip turned aside and vomited, shaken to the core by the knowledge that his wife was as cold a murderer as this disgusting thug staked to the ground and spewing out his filth.

When Diaz had asked all his questions, he stopped and wiped off his knife and slipped it into a sheath inside his boot. He stood looking down at the sniveling, sobbing mess at his feet, then pulled the pistol from his thigh holster.

Pavón began begging again.

Diaz reversed the pistol in his hand and extended it to Milla butt first. “Do you want to do it?” he asked with grave courtesy. “It’s your right.”

Milla stared at the pistol for a long moment, then slowly stretched out her hand to take it.

“Milla!” Rip said in shock. “This is murder!”

“No,” Diaz corrected, his tone going hard and giving Rip a searing look that told him to keep out of it. “What they do is murder. This is an execution.”

Milla looked down at Pavón, the weight of the pistol heavy in her hand. This was a larger caliber weapon than the ones she’d bought from Chela, guaranteed to do the job, which was probably why Diaz had given it to her. She had wanted Pavón dead for the past ten years, dreamed about killing him. She had dreamed about choking him to death with her bare hands. But she had always seen herself killing him in a rage, not in cool deliberation. Pavón was going to die here tonight. It was a given. If she didn’t kill him, Diaz would. Because of what Pavón had done to her, Diaz was offering her retribution.

Slowly she lifted the pistol and aimed it. Pavón closed his eyes and flinched, waiting for a sound that he wouldn’t be alive to hear.

She didn’t pull the trigger, and her hand began to tremble from the weight.

Pavón opened his eyes and began to laugh. One way or another he would die here tonight, and he knew it. It made no difference to him who pulled the trigger, but if he had one last chance to torment her, he would take it. "You stupid whore," he jeered, then coughed on his own blood. "You are too soft, too useless. Your stupid little boy was soft and useless, too, but the buyer wanted a pretty baby boy. He loved little boys. Do you understand, slut? Your baby was sold to a boy lover who wanted to raise his own little love slave. Your baby boy probably likes it by now; he likes getting it in his __"

Those last disgusting words were never said.

Diaz handled everything. He left Pavón's body there to be found, his clothes and identification neatly folded and placed on the ground beside him, with a large rock on top to hold everything in place.

There were the pistols to be taken care of—he didn't destroy them, as Milla and Brian always did; instead they were put away for future use. His own vehicle was there; he had flown into Chihuahua and taken care of some detail he didn't explain, then driven to Juarez. It wasn't one of the pickups Milla had seen before; he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply. He arranged for it to be picked up at the border crossing as before; he called Benito and told him where he could pick up the car Milla and Rip had used; then he got them back across the border.

Rip and Milla were totally silent, in shock at the events of the night. It was only when Rip was unlocking his car that he looked up with agony in his eyes. "I can't go home," he said. "I can't look at her again. What happens now? Will she be arrested?"

"We have no proof," Diaz said. "If we were in Mexico—" He broke off and shrugged. If they were in Mexico, True and Susanna would already be in jail, and charges didn't have to be filed for seventy-two hours . . . or as long as was necessary. But this was the States, and what a dead Mexican thug had supposedly told them wouldn't get them the time of day in a police station. "But we know where to look now, and there are people here who are much better at this than I am; I'll turn it over to them."

Rip looked startled. "Whaddaya mean? You're some kind of—I mean, you're *official*?"

Diaz ignored that. "Stay in a hotel. Don't speak to your wife; you're too emotional. Don't spook her into running. If she runs, I'll have to go after

her.”
Rip had seen what happened to someone Diaz went after, and he shuddered. Diaz ignored him after that, putting Milla in the passenger seat of her SUV and then driving off without speaking again. Rip stared after them for a moment, then shuddered again. He got behind the wheel of his car and sat there for a minute, different scenarios running through his mind and none of them pleasant. He thought of Susanna. Then he bowed his head against the steering wheel and cried.

There was such a storm of emotions roiling through Milla that she couldn’t pin one down long enough to examine it. There were both relief and regret, triumph and sorrow, shame and grim satisfaction. She leaned her head back and watched the streetlights loom and then recede in a dizzying parade. The dash clock said the time was only eleven P.M.; she had thought surely it was almost dawn.
Tonight she had seen in action what she’d always sensed about Diaz, from the very first moment he’d knocked her down and threatened to snap her neck. The destruction he was capable of was truly frightening—and yet she wasn’t frightened. He had taken those aspects of his own character and molded them into a weapon to be used against the enemy, the dregs of society who ignored its laws and wreaked their own destruction. He won by being even more brutal, even more ruthless. What he didn’t do was turn that force against those he perceived as innocent. Ever. She felt safer with him than she’d have felt sitting in the middle of a police station.
“Thank you,” she said.
“For what?”
“Helping me.” She didn’t know if she could have finished it without him. When Pavón started spewing his poison, Diaz had simply put his hand over Milla’s and together they’d pulled the trigger; his hand had steadied hers, his finger had added its strength to hers. She was ashamed that she hadn’t been able to do it herself, and yet so relieved that she hadn’t had to.
“You’d have done it,” he said with cool confidence. “I just didn’t want you to hear any more of what the bastard had to say.”
“Do you think he was lying?” She squeezed her eyes together, because his filthy words had spread cold horror through her heart.
“He didn’t know what happened to any of the babies; he just wanted to say something to hurt you.”

And he'd succeeded, all too well.

They reached her home and a touch of a button raised the garage door; he slotted the Toyota inside before the door had finished lifting, and had it lowered again almost before Milla could get out of her seat belt and open the door. She dug out her keys and unlocked the door from the garage into the kitchen, stepping inside and turning on the lights.

He whirled her against the refrigerator, his hands hard on her waist. Startled, she dropped her purse and keys to the floor and looked up at his set face and narrowed savage eyes. "Don't *ever* do that to me again," he said with clenched teeth.

She didn't have to ask what he meant. Those moments when Pavón's pistol had been trained directly at her head had been long and terrifying.

"I stayed in the—" she began, but he cut her off with a kiss that was wild and hungry and deep. He lifted her onto her toes and pressed in hard against her, grinding his erection into the softness of her mound. She yielded immediately to that outraged male aggression, wrapping her arms around him and transforming it into sheer lust. He moved one hand to the waistband of her jeans and unsnapped them, dragged down the zipper, then thrust his hand inside her panties and curled his fingers up into her while his palm rode her clitoris. She bucked under the lash of abrupt desire, growing wet around his fingers, hugging them with her body.

He took her there, shucking her out of her jeans and dropping his own, then bending her over the kitchen table. Milla clutched the edge of the table to brace herself against his hard thrusts, pushing back to take all of him. He reached around and under to fondle her, his talented fingers wringing a fast orgasm from her. Then he simply gripped her hips and pumped into her until he began coming, slumping over her as he jerked and thrust. He shuddered with completion, his mouth hot on the back of her neck. "God," he muttered indistinctly, "when I saw him with that pistol in your face—"

"I had one in his, too."

"Would that make you any less dead if he'd pulled the trigger?" He bit her shoulder, then gently pulled out of her and turned her around. He buried his fingers in her hair, holding her head as he sank into a kiss as hungry and devouring as if they hadn't just made love. She gripped his wrists and let that steely strength wrap around her, soaking it up and using it to bolster her own. There was so much still to be done . . . tomorrow. She would spend the rest of the night just being with her lover.

Tomorrow she would go to New Mexico. Only part of her mission had been accomplished. She still had to find her son.

24

In the night, while she drowsed with her head on his shoulder and one arm draped across his stomach, he said absently, “I think I should tell you something.”

She woke enough to murmur, “What?”

“True’s my half brother.”

She sat straight up in bed. *“What?”*

“Get back down here,” he said, tugging her down into place once more on his shoulder.

“Neither of you go out of your way to broadcast the relationship, do you?” she demanded sarcastically.

“He hates my guts and I hate his. That’s the relationship.”

“So he knew exactly who you were and where to find you when I first asked!”

“No. He’s never known where to find me.”

Wow. They were *really* close, weren’t they? “You have the same mother, obviously.”

“Had. She’s dead. But, yeah. He was around five, I guess, when she left him and her husband and went to Mexico with my father. She had me, she left *my* father, she found another guy.”

“But she took you with her when she left him.”

“For a while, until I was about ten. Then she sent me to live with him. I doubt they were ever married, and now that I think of it, unless True’s father divorced her before I was born, my last name might legally be Gallagher.” He sounded only mildly interested, and she knew he’d never go to the trouble of looking up the legal documents to find out.

“Why does he hate you? Does he even know you?”

“We’ve met,” he said briefly. “As for hating me, his mother left him for my father. Then when she left my father, she took me along. She didn’t take True when she left his father. Old-fashioned resentment, I guess. And I’m half Mexican. He hates Mexicans, period.”

She had never picked up on any prejudice from True, but that would be something he kept hidden, wouldn't it? Especially in El Paso. He was a man intent on climbing as high as he could go, and it wasn't smart to offend the people who would help him along the way.

"What happens now? Shouldn't you tell whoever you deal with"—she waved a hand to indicate the universe—"about Susanna and True?"

"I did that as soon as I talked to Enrique Guerrero. They're being watched to make certain they don't try to leave the country. As for gathering the hard evidence, I leave that to the other guys. They have the crime labs, the forensics experts. Normally I just find people for them; I don't get involved in the crime solving."

She felt flat. Perhaps she'd watched too many crime dramas on television, but she wanted a big showdown, with violence and a full confession and True being led away in handcuffs. Played out this way, she wouldn't even get to ask him the question that burned in her mind: *Why?* She couldn't go near him now, not without tipping him off, because there was no way she could act normally around him, and she probably wouldn't be allowed to see him later.

She didn't care about his confession, about the careful gathering of evidence. She wanted to see him staked out the way Pavón had been staked out. She wanted him to suffer the way she had suffered. She wondered what it said about her as a person that she wasn't suffering agonies of the conscience about Pavón, but she wasn't. She was glad he was dead. She was glad she'd been involved.

"Tomorrow I'll try to find this woman in New Mexico," she said, changing the subject because she couldn't let herself focus on True right now. Her job wasn't finished. "She's the next link in the chain. She knows which birth certificates are false."

"Adoption papers are usually sealed. In these cases, you can bet they are. It's a dead-end road."

She shook her head. "I can't accept that. I still haven't found my son, so I have to keep trying. Finding the people who took him—that was just part of it, the smallest part."

Diaz fell silent, his hand rubbing up and down her bare back. Milla breathed in his scent and warmth, and felt comforted, strengthened by this short lull before she once again had to throw herself into what seemed like a never-

ending effort. She nestled closer against him, feeling herself lapse back into sleep, and this time he let her.

He was gone when she woke in the morning. She sat up in bed and stared in bewilderment at the empty space beside her. He was gone. He wasn't just downstairs making coffee, or in the bathroom; she could sense that the condo was empty except for herself.

She got out of bed and looked around for a note, but of course there wasn't one. His communication skills were rusty, to say the least. Or rather, he communicated just fine when he wanted to, but a lot of times he simply didn't feel the need. She tried his cell phone number. The irritating voice said the customer was not available, meaning he didn't have the damn thing turned on. She growled in frustration.

Thinking about his cell phone reminded her of her nonworking one. She had to do something about it today before she went to New Mexico. She put on coffee and got out her atlas to locate the town where Pavón had said the woman falsified the birth certificates. It was located exactly where it needed to be to make getting to it from El Paso difficult. She glanced at the clock; the travel agency wasn't open yet. Depending on what the airline schedules were, she might well be able to get there faster by driving. "Fast" was a comparative term, of course. The earliest she could get there was probably late afternoon. Even if she did fly, she would have to either go to Roswell, rent a car, and drive north, or go to Albuquerque and drive east.

She had waited ten years. If she didn't find the woman today, she'd find her tomorrow.

As it turned out, that was exactly what happened. When the travel agency opened, she learned there were no direct flights to Albuquerque or Roswell at the time she needed, on any airline. Of course. The next direct flight with an available seat was late afternoon. She'd have to either spend the night in Albuquerque and get an early start the next morning, or drive across lonely, unknown territory at night, not knowing if this little town even had a motel where she could stay.

Or she could forget about flying and drive. It was a hefty distance but still easily done in one day, if she'd been able to get an early start. By the time she could get away today, though, she'd be able to get to Roswell before dark—barely—then spend the night there and finish the trip tomorrow morning. The decision was a no-brainer.

Rip called her as she was packing for the short trip. “Are you okay?” he asked in a subdued voice.
“I’m fine.” She was; she hadn’t had nightmares, hadn’t dreamed at all that she could recall. “How about you?”
“Exhausted. I can’t believe last night actually happened. Is there . . . will there be any repercussions?”
The way Rip saw it, he had participated in a murder. Milla’s view was more like Diaz’s: it had been an execution. Considering what Diaz’s job was, doing pretty much what he’d done last night—though maybe without the questioning session first—she doubted there would even be an investigation. “No, I don’t think so. You’re safe.” She would have gone into greater detail, but she was mindful of saying too much over a telephone. Rip was being careful, too; with Susanna’s example of saying too much in a nonprivate situation, he knew what a mistake that could be.
“I spent the night in a hotel, then got my partner to cover for me today. Good thing my schedule was light, huh? I just couldn’t—she would probably make an effort to track me down at the hospital, since I didn’t go home last night. I can’t talk to her right now. Maybe tomorrow.”
Poor Rip. His life had been torn apart, his marriage of twenty years was shot, his view of the world turned upside down. But he was soldiering on, because that was what most people did.
Milla made a fast decision. If no one from Finders was available to go with her today—she had no idea if anyone had returned last night or this morning—then she’d ask Rip. That would get him far away from Susanna, give him time to get his composure back. Though after last night, he might refuse to go anywhere with Milla ever again, and if so she couldn’t blame him.
She’d prefer to take someone from Finders, though, so she wanted to check out the situation there before she asked him. “How can I reach you today?” He gave her his cell phone number, plus his hotel and room number. He didn’t intend to check out of the hotel today, but he was going home after he was certain Susanna had left, to get some clothes and toiletries.
After hanging up with him, she called the office. Olivia answered the phone, sounding dragged out. “I’m functional,” she said when Milla asked. “But I’m weak and I still don’t feel great. I talked to Debra and she’s still puking her guts out.”
“How are we looking today?”

“Joann’s search is still going on. It isn’t looking good for the kid; this is the fourth day. Brian will be home about six tonight.”
“What happened there?”
“Bad outcome.”
Milla sighed; she didn’t ask the details. “I’m driving to Roswell this afternoon, spending the night there. I have another lead on Justin, the woman who supposedly falsified the birth certificates so the babies could be adopted.”
“That’s great!” Olivia said, her tone perking up. “Who’s going with you?”
“I’ll ask a friend to go, since we’re still so understaffed. Rip Kosper. I don’t know if he’ll be willing, but he and Susanna are having trouble and he may want to get away.”
“Oh, no,” Olivia said. Most of the staff knew Rip and Susanna, since they’d been Milla’s friends for years and Susanna often called Finders to talk to Milla. Now that she knew why Susanna had stayed in such close touch, Milla wanted to scream with rage.
She told Olivia about her cell phone situation; then after hanging up she called Rip and explained her plans to him, asking if he wanted to go.
“Let me call my partner,” he said. “I’ll get back to you.”
Of course he had to clear it, she thought. He had a medical practice; he couldn’t just leave whenever he wanted. But the day was not getting off to a fast start; it was grinding along, ignoring her impatience.
She turned in her cell phone, and found that since the phone was out of warranty, the repairs would cost almost as much as a new phone, so she bought a new one and extra battery packs, plus the home and car rechargers. Doing so, for one reason and another, took over an hour. The need to be on her way ate at her, demanding she hurry, and there was nothing she could do about the situation.
As soon as she was in her Toyota, she plugged in the phone to charge the battery and also to use the car’s power to call Diaz again. He still wasn’t available. She wanted to wring his neck. Why couldn’t he have left her a damn *note*?
Rip called; he’d cleared things with his partner and taken off the rest of the week. He could leave anytime she was ready.
Deep twilight had fallen by the time they drove into Roswell, and Milla felt as if she’d been nibbled to death by ducks. The entire day had been filled with delays and irritations, and Diaz still wasn’t answering his phone. She

and Rip checked into a motel, went for supper at a steakhouse, then returned to their separate rooms and turned in for the night.

They left Roswell early the next morning, heading north. Rip was quieter than usual, lost in his thoughts. He'd left a message with Susanna's office that he was going out of town and wouldn't be back for a couple of days; then he'd turned off his phone.

The country they were heading into was dry, but not desert. The morning was cool and clear, and didn't get a lot warmer as the day progressed. She lost her cell phone service, which wasn't surprising considering the emptiness around them. New Mexico was a big, beautiful state with fewer than two million people living in it, but the vast majority of them were grouped around the cities. This section averaged something like two people per square mile, which didn't mean each square mile had two people in it. In fact, she saw many square miles that had zero population. She was glad she hadn't done this trip the night before.

The small town where the county seat was located had a population of around three thousand. The courthouse was a small adobe building, with the sheriff's department occupying an adjacent adobe building. Milla's first step was to find out if the woman, Ellin Daugette, still worked at the courthouse in the probate office.

The probate office was the first door on the right, and when they approached the counter a smiling, overweight woman with an improbable shade of red hair came over and said, "May I help you?" Her name tag said she was Ellin Daugette, and Milla had to grip the edge of the counter.

"My name is Milla Boone," she said, using the name she always used when on a search. "This is Rip Kosper. May we speak privately with you?"

Ellin looked around the office. They were the only people there. "This looks pretty private to me."

"It concerns kidnapped babies and falsified birth certificates."

Ellin's face changed, the friendly smile vanishing. She stared at them a second, then sighed and said, "Let's go into the judge's office. He won't be back from lunch for another hour, at least."

She led them to a small, crowded office and closed the door behind them. There were only three chairs in there, including the one behind the judge's desk, so she took it and heaved another sigh. "Now, what's this you're asking about falsified birth certificates? I don't know that it's possible, with everything computerized now."

“When was this office computerized?”
“I don’t know exactly.”
“Ten years ago?”
Ellin surveyed Milla, the look assessing. “No, not that long ago. Five or six years, maybe.”
Ellin was keeping her composure, trying to find out how much they knew. Milla decided to oblige her. “My son was one of the babies kidnapped.”
“I’m sorry to hear that.”
“It’s taken a long time, but we’ve finally broken the smuggling ring. Let me name some names for you: Arturo Pavón.” She watched closely as she said each name. Ellin showed no sign of recognition. “Susanna Kosper.” Still nothing. “True Gallagher was the boss.” Ah, there was a telltale flicker.
“Ellin Daugette.”
“Damn it!” Ellin slammed her hand down on the desk. “Damn it all! I thought all that was over with. I thought it was over.”
“You thought you’d gotten away with it.”
“It’s been a long time, of course I thought that!” She seemed to realize there was no use in prevaricating now. “Are you two cops?”
“No. I don’t know that any cops are coming. I can’t promise you that they won’t, but I don’t intend to tell them anything about you—in exchange for information.”
“You’re looking for your baby, aren’t you?”
“That’s more important to me than anything else.”
“What makes you think I’d keep incriminating evidence around? Do I look stupid to you?”
On the contrary, Ellin looked like a cagey woman who knew how to look out for number one. “Yes, I think you’d keep it. It would give you an edge, wouldn’t it? Something to bargain with, whether it’s with someone private like me, or a district attorney, or even True Gallagher. If you ever felt that you couldn’t trust him, you’d need some way of keeping him in line.”
“You’re right about one thing. I wouldn’t trust Gallagher as far as I could throw him.”
Milla leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, pinning Ellin with a cool look. “I really, really hope you have what I need, because otherwise you’re no use to me.”
“You’re threatening to turn me in.”

“No, I’m promising it. Just as I promise not to if you help me. Like I said, I don’t know if the cops will come calling or not. The people you dealt with are involved in a series of murders, and they’re going down. The investigation will probably concentrate only on that.” She felt Rip tense beside her, and wanted to pat his arm in comfort. Instead she concentrated on Ellin, pouring all her force of will into her face and voice. “If they hadn’t been the same people running the smuggling ring all those years ago, I wouldn’t have made the connection to you. But I *will* turn you in, in a heartbeat, if you don’t help me.”
Ellin said “All right” so easily Milla could scarcely believe what she was hearing. “I believe you. Let me get my list.”
“You kept a list?” Milla couldn’t believe it.
“Well, how else would I remember which birth certificates were legitimate and which weren’t? It’s not like I wrote ‘FAKE’ across the bad ones.”
They went into the outer office, and Ellin sat down at a battered metal desk. “See, I’ve had this job for almost thirty years; it’s not like I had to worry about anyone going through my desk, finding this list, and getting suspicious. It’s just a list of names, doesn’t say anything about them. And if I get killed in a car wreck or drop dead from a heart attack, then I guess I don’t care if anybody finds it, right?”
“No worries,” Milla said, shaking her head.
“You got it.” She opened a desk drawer, pulled out a fat file, and placed it in front of her on the desk.
Milla was astonished. “That many?”
“Hmm? No, of course not. This is a bunch of other stuff.” She began thumbing through the papers. She reached the end, grunted, and started back at the beginning. “Must have overlooked it.” She didn’t find what she was looking for on the second thumb-through, either. An alarmed expression crossing her face, she went through the file a third time, one sheet of paper at a time. “It isn’t here. Damn it, I know it was here!”
For some reason, Milla believed her. Ellin’s upset was too genuine. A new worry crept into her mind. “Could someone—like perhaps True—have broken in and taken the list?”
“He didn’t know it existed. Why would he do something like that? The sheriff’s department is right next door; it isn’t like breaking in would be an easy thing to do. Besides, we’re on camera.” She nodded toward a huge metal shelving unit that was stacked high with huge ledgers.

Milla looked, but didn't see any cameras. "Where?"
"Tiny little bastard; the upper-left-hand corner. See the holes in the braces for moving the shelves around? Third hole down."
Ah. Now she saw where the third hole looked as if it had been blocked.
"That's the camera?"
"Sneaky, isn't it? See, one of the county commissioners suspected his wife was having an affair with the probate judge before the one we got now, coming down here at night for some private, extracurricular activity. So one weekend he sneaked in a security company and had the offices wired. Caught them, too."
"Can we look at the tape? Or is it possible you moved the list?"
"I never moved the list," Ellin said flatly. "Ever. And it was here just a month or so ago, I saw it when I was going through the file looking for something else. But all is not lost, as Shakespeare would say. Like I said, do I look stupid? There's a copy in my safe-deposit box."
Milla went weak with relief. Thank God, thank God, she thought fervently. To come this close and hit a wall was more than she thought she could bear.
"Let's have a look at that tape, though; I'm curious if someone came snooping around." Plus Ellin needed to know exactly where she stood, so she could protect herself if maybe True had known about her list after all, and decided he needed some leverage in his present situation. The same thought occurred to Milla. If that was the case, Ellin would do better to come forward immediately and use the list for her own protection, before True could use it.
She led them down a set of narrow stairs to the dusty, musty basement level. An older Hispanic man sat at a metal desk reading a newspaper. "Ellin," he said in greeting.
"Morning, Jesus. We want to take a look at the security tapes."
"Sure, no problem. Or is there?"
"We don't know. Someone could have been in my office."
"Last night?"
"Have no idea. Could have been any time in the last month or so."
"The tape resets and records over itself every seven days. If it was that long ago, you won't find anything."
He fetched the tape from the security system's recorder, and slapped it into a VCR hooked up to a thirteen-inch television. He punched *Play*, then *Rewind*, and they all gathered around to watch everything in reverse. Milla

and Rip were the most recent visitors, of course. There had been several more during the morning, plus one fairly busy stretch when there was actually a line three people deep waiting for Ellin's help.

Then there was a long stretch, before the office opened, when nothing happened. They watched daylight reverse into night, with only one light left burning in the office. Then, suddenly, there was a dark figure in Ellin's office.

"There!"

"Well, how about that," Jesus said, sitting up alertly. "How did that rascal get in? There's no sign of a break-in, everything was locked up tight as a drum when I got here this morning." He let the tape continue to rewind until it picked up the dark figure coming in the door, then he stopped it and played it forward.

Milla's heart skipped a beat, then another. Beside her, Rip said, "Son of a bitch!"

They watched the man, dressed head to foot in black, walk calmly around the office orienting himself. He came to Ellin's desk, saw her name plaque on it, and sat down in her chair. He began opening drawers, taking out files and going through them as casually as if he had all the time in the world, as if there wasn't a nerve in his body. Eventually he came to the correct file, and leafed through it one page at a time. When he reached a certain page, he paused and seemed to read it, then pulled it out of the file and laid it aside. He continued his systematic search of the desk, but pulled out no other papers. He even examined the undersides of the drawers.

"What in tarnation is he looking for?" Jesus said. No one answered.

Then the man extended his search to the rest of the office. Finally, evidently satisfied he'd found what he wanted, he went back to Ellin's desk and picked up the single page. He took the sheet over to a machine and fed it into it.

"That's the shredder!" Ellin said.

Then, thorough to the end, he lifted the shredder off the trash can and pulled out the shredded paper, stuffing it into a small plastic bag he'd pulled out of his pocket. He put the shredder back in place, restored Ellin's desk to order, then left as quietly as he'd entered.

Pain expanded in Milla's chest, smothering her. Rage followed, and she had to clench her fists to hold herself in.

The man was Diaz.

* * *

No wonder he'd had his phone turned off. No wonder he'd slipped out in the middle of the night. There wasn't any possibility he'd gotten the list to search for Justin himself, to do this for Milla, because he'd destroyed the paper. For whatever reason in his convoluted brain, he didn't want Milla to find her son.

Jesus wanted to call the sheriff, but Ellin said no, it was a personal paper she was missing and not anything she wanted to pursue. Milla pulled herself together and shoved everything she was feeling to the back burner. There were still things to do.

The small community bank closed for lunch from one until two, after everyone else's lunch hour, so people could do their banking then if needed. Promptly at two, Ellin was there with Milla and Rip to get into her safe-deposit box.

There it was, a single sheet of paper with three rows of single-spaced names. They returned to the car and looked over the list. Each name had a numerical code next to it. "Is that the birth certificate number?" Milla asked.

"No, that's the date, so I know exactly where to look. Only I wrote the date backward. See, December 13, 1992, is 29913121. Easy."

Milla told her the date Justin was stolen and that she'd found he was flown out of Mexico right away.

"Huh," said Ellin, running her finger down the list of dates. "That narrows it down, because there's only one Caucasian male name during the next week. The babies were moved fast, you know. The adoptions went through almost right away. Anyway, there are two Hispanic male names, and three females. That's gotta be your boy. The name I gave him was Michael Grady, 'Michael' because it's the most popular boy's name. That's the name he was adopted under, though of course the adoptive parents would rename him."

They returned to the courthouse basement, where Ellin looked through the microfiche files and came up with the birth certificate for Michael Grady.

"There. The father is listed as unknown. I made up the mother's name, too."

"What about the mother's social security number?" Rip asked, staring at the microfiche screen.

"You think that's actually checked out? Especially in a private adoption, ten years ago? Things like that may be checked now, but as long as the mother's signed and notarized consent is provided, who's going to check if

that's her correct social security number? Besides, the adoptive parents get the baby's social security number for him."
Hoping against hope, Milla asked, "Do you have any idea where the babies went? What attorney handled the private adoptions? Anything?" Without that information, she wasn't in a much better position than she'd been in before.
Ellin grinned. "Well, now. For that list to be much good, you gotta have some backup information, don't you? There's a lawyer here in town who handled the legal stuff on this end. He knew there were a lot of adoptions, but he didn't ask a lot of questions as long as he got paid, and he was told an adoption service was working with poor Hispanic families to ease their burden, plus you know Hispanics frown on their unmarried girls messing around. It's a real social no-no for them, so any Hispanic girl who got pregnant was likely to give up her baby. At least, that's what we told Harden. We'll go see him now; at the very least, he should have the name of the lawyers on the other end of the adoptions."
Two hours later, Rip drove them back to Roswell, because Milla was crying too hard to see. She was holding a copy of Justin's fake birth certificate, as well as a copy of everything Harden Sims had had in his file concerning that particular adoption. The attorney on the other end practiced in Charlotte, North Carolina.
As everyone had kept telling her, the adoption records were probably sealed, and she would have to get a court order to unseal them. But she'd get the information she needed from the attorney in North Carolina, even if she had to sue him to get it, and then she'd get that court order. Considering the circumstances and how well publicized her own case had been, she knew she'd win.
The future wasn't a fog of heartbreak now. She'd done it. A lot of legwork remained, but at the end of it she knew she'd find her son.

When they got to Roswell, they decided to drive straight through. It was a long drive, they wouldn't get home until late, but both of them wanted to get home.
"What are you going to do?" Rip asked soberly. He was talking about Diaz.
"I don't know." She couldn't let herself think about it too much, or she would break down. His betrayal sliced through her, so much more painful than the sense of betrayal she'd felt about Susanna. She had trusted Diaz

more than she'd ever trusted anyone, trusted him with her life and her body and her heart. Why would he do such a thing, knowing how long and hard she'd searched for Justin? He might as well have stabbed her in the back himself. Looking back, she examined their times together, looking for some clue, but there was nothing. He'd either gone absolutely crazy during the last night they'd spent together, or he'd had a different agenda the entire time.

They were exhausted when they reached El Paso. It was after midnight, and they'd had an early start that morning and been on the go for over eighteen hours. She had taken over the driving at Carlsbad, so she dropped Rip off at his hotel and drove home, taking extra care because she was so tired.

When she opened her garage door and drove inside, she almost didn't notice the pickup truck parked in the other bay of the double garage. Slowly she slid out of her seat, staring at it. The bastard had his nerve, after what he'd done. She hadn't wanted to have this scene now, while she was almost punch-drunk with fatigue, but she wanted him out of her house and out of her life.

She let herself in through the garage and went into the kitchen, dropping her purse and the file on the table. A light was on in the living room, and then he was there, leaning against the door frame and watching her.

She didn't look at him. She couldn't. A tremor ran through her every muscle and she leaned against the table.

"Susanna rolled," he finally said. "She's been arrested. True, too. Just a few hours ago."

"Good," she said briefly, noting that there wasn't a word of explanation about where he'd been, why he'd left in the middle of the night, or any questions about what she'd been doing for the past two days. Finally she looked at him, her fury and hatred clear in her eyes. "Get out."

He straightened from the door frame. His expression had been faintly quizzical, but now it shut down, in an instant as blank and remote as she'd ever seen it.

"You didn't check closely enough," she said. "There was a security camera. Caught you in the act."

He was silent for a moment, watching her, letting the time tick by. Then he said softly, "It was the best thing to do. It's time to let him go. It's been ten years. He isn't your kid now, Milla, he's someone else's. It would have wrecked his life if you'd shown up."

“Don’t *talk* to me!” she said fiercely. He didn’t understand; he had no idea about her or how she felt. “*You . . . had . . . no . . . right!* He’s my child, you bastard!” She screamed it at him, then caught herself and knotted her hands into fists.

“Not now, he isn’t.” He stood there like judge and jury combined, untouched by human emotion, and she wanted to kill him.

Tears began running down her face, tears of rage and hurt and from the superhuman effort it took to keep from attacking him. “It didn’t work. She had copies.” She swiped at the tears on her cheeks. “I’ve got all the information I need now to find him, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Now get out of my house. I never want to see you again.”

Because he was Diaz, he didn’t stand there arguing his side. He didn’t even shrug, as if to say, *If that’s what you want.* He simply walked past her and left. She heard the garage door open; then his truck started, and he was gone. Just like that.

She sat down at the table, laid her head on her crossed arms, and sobbed like a child.

25

He looked like David.

Milla kept the field glasses trained on him as he darted around the fenced schoolyard with an excess of energy that seemed to be shared by most of the boys his age. He seemed to have three or four particular buddies, and they shoved one another, laughed uproariously at one another's jokes, and generally postured and strutted all the while they pretended they were cool. Maybe, to other ten-year-olds, they *were* cool.

Her heart was right in her throat, pounding so hard she could barely breathe. Her eyes kept stinging with tears and she kept blinking them back, because she couldn't bear to miss a single second of watching him. She picked up the expensive camera from the seat beside her, and focused the zoom lens on him, then snapped several shots in rapid succession.

She had parked far enough away from the private school that no one would notice her. She didn't want to alarm anyone, least of all Justin. But she'd had to see him, had to watch him just a little longer to feed these memories into her starving heart. This morning she had parked down the street from the Winborns' house and noted what he wore when he skipped and hopped down the steps to meet the bus that took him to school. Rhonda Winborn had stood at the front door and watched until he was safely on the bus, and he'd given her a cursory wave. He'd been wearing the khaki pants and blue shirt that was the school uniform, and a bright red windbreaker. The windbreaker, which he wore now as protection against the chill breeze, helped her pick him out from the other boys.

She had sobbed aloud this morning when she'd watched him get on the bus, watched him wave to another woman. Everything about him was so familiar, from the color of his hair to the shape of his head, even the way he walked. His face was still a child's face, but it was taking on the stronger lines of approaching adolescence even now. His hair was blond, his eyes were blue, and his grin was pure David.

Milla was so shaken and ecstatic that she wanted to get out of the rental car and throw her head back on the loudest, longest yell she could muster. She wanted to run up to the fence and scream his name, though of course everyone would think she was crazy and the school authorities would immediately call the cops. She wanted to dance, she wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry. There were so many emotions storming inside her that she

didn’t know what to do. She wanted to stop strangers and point to him and say, “That’s my son!”
She’d never been able to do that, claim him in public, and she couldn’t do it now. Protecting him was the most important thing in the world to her, and she wouldn’t mess this up by scaring him, by breaking the news to him in the worst possible way.
The past week had been a nonstop roller coaster of emotions. Events had happened so fast that she could barely react to one before another was upon her. Once she’d found the information Diaz had tried to destroy, she’d been able to follow the trail that led straight to Justin.
Rhonda and Lee Winborn were both blond, and they had wanted a blond child, preferably a boy, to adopt. They were desperate for children, having lost three to miscarriages and a fourth had died only a few hours after birth. They weren’t rich people who went out to buy a child much as they would buy a car; they had all but beggared themselves to come up with the amount of money True had charged, and both their families had chipped in to make up the difference. Since then Lee had done very well in business; four years ago they had moved to this upper-middle-class neighborhood in Charlotte, and they could afford to send Justin to private school, but from everything Milla had been able to find out they were nice, likable, solid people who adored their son and were doing their best to raise him to be a decent human being.
They couldn’t have had any idea he’d been stolen from her arms. They’d been told that his mother wasn’t able to support him, and she needed so much money because she had other children to support, one of whom needed corrective eye surgery. The violin strings had been singing when that tale was told, but they’d had no reason to disbelieve it. The lawyer who’d handled the private adoption hadn’t known, so there was no way the Winborns could have known. All they knew was that they finally had their son.
Not their son. *Her* son. Her heart whispered it, insisted on it. *Hers*.
If there was anything of her in him, she thought as she watched him, it was perhaps his nose and jawline. Everything else about him resembled David. Joy bubbled in her veins. He was alive, he was well, he was loved. Her baby was all right.
The Winborns had named him Zachary Tanner, for each grandfather. They called him Zack. He was Justin to her; that was the name that had been in

her desperate prayers all these years, the name engraved on heart and mind and memory.
She had to tell David. Until she actually saw him and knew for certain it was Justin, she hadn't wanted to get his hopes up. She could have been wrong; it could have been another child. Even after seeing the paperwork and knowing with her brain that this child was Justin, she had still needed to see him with her eyes before she could let herself believe.
It was Justin. And he looked like David.
Milla dropped the field glasses and buried her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking with sobs. Laughter kept mixing with the sobs, until even she didn't know if she was laughing or crying. She sat there until play period was over and the teachers herded the boisterous youngsters back into the neat, yellow-brick building. She watched him go inside, the November sun glistening on his blond hair; he jumped the last step and was laughing as he went through the double doors and disappeared from her sight.
When she could, when she'd stopped shaking enough to hold the cell phone, when her throat wasn't so clogged with tears that she couldn't speak, she called David's office and made an appointment to see him the next day. If she'd been a patient, she never would have seen him that soon, but he'd always told her he would see her any time, any day, and evidently he had instructed his office staff to accommodate her, because as soon as she told the receptionist her name, the woman had given her a noon appointment. She would be intruding on David's lunch hour, but she didn't think he would mind.
This wasn't something she wanted to tell him over the phone. She wanted to see his face, wanted to share this with him as they had shared Justin's birth. She could have called his home, gone there rather than his office, but she was selfish enough to want this just between herself and David, rather than sharing it with Jenna and his two other children. For this one time only, this one last time, she wanted just the two of them.
She had the legal papers in her briefcase. She'd had them drawn up before she even came here, because she wanted to have everything ready.
Taking a deep breath, she drove to the Charlotte airport and turned in her rental car, then caught a flight to Chicago.

David's office was in a professional building adjacent to the hospital where he practiced. The decorations were tasteful and fairly shouted "money." The

surgical group he was in featured all heavy hitters, and David was one of their stars. He was young, he was handsome, he was brilliant. At just thirty-eight, he had many years left in which to shine.

Evidently he'd had his secretary clear his appointment calendar when he was told she'd called, because the waiting room was empty. Milla closed the door to the hallway and started across the taupe carpet to the receptionist's desk, where a middle-aged blonde and a perky brunette wearing a nurse's uniform were avidly watching her. Before she reached them, however, the door to the left opened and David stood there, tall and better-looking now than he had been when he was in his twenties. Age sat well on most men, and David was no exception. His face was stronger, with a few lines at the corners of his eyes, and his shoulders seemed a little heavier.

"Milla," he said, extending his hand toward her and smiling the great smile that just yesterday she'd seen on their son's face, the one that lit him up like a Christmas tree. His blue eyes were warm. "You look great. Come on into my office."

He held the door for her and she stepped into the interior hallway, which was lined with examination and treatment rooms. Three different women, of diverse race and age, looked up from various tasks and watched as she walked by. The two in the reception area also poked their heads out.

"Don't look now," she said to David out of the side of her mouth, "but your harem is curious."

He laughed as he ushered her into his private office and closed the door. "That's what Jenna calls them, too. I call 'em my bodyguards. I feel very safe when they're around."

"They keep the wild women away from you, huh?"

He grinned. "They won't even let me do surgery on one. They send the wild ones to my partners. I get the old farts and battleaxes."

Her heart lightened to see him so basically unchanged. She could understand his office staff being protective of him; David was one of the good guys. She knew beyond a shadow of doubt that he was completely faithful to his wife, that no flirtatious nurse or patient had a chance with him, because she knew *him*. He threw himself heart and soul into his work and into his family. Whatever wonderful happened in his life, he deserved it.

There was a small grouping of photographs on his desk. Knowing what she'd see, she walked around to look at them. One was of a pretty redhead with an infectious grin, who had to be Jenna because there was another candid photo of the same woman and David with their arms around each other, hamming it up for the camera. There was a small heart-shaped frame that contained a photo of a plump toddler with smooth, shiny hair, holding a doll by its hair and looking like a little doll herself in a long lace dress. Another shot was of Jenna holding a baby and looking radiant, and Milla assumed that was their newest addition. "They're gorgeous," she said honestly, and she smiled because she was happy for him. "What are their names?"

"The little princess is Cameron Rose, called Cammy, and the baby is William Gage. We plan to call him Liam, but he hasn't quite grown into the name yet. For some reason, Cammy calls him Dot."

Milla snorted with laughter; then, while she was still smiling, she couldn't hold it in any longer and said, "I found him. I found Justin."

David's legs visibly wobbled, and he sat down hard in one of his visitors chairs. He stared at her, pale with shock and unable to say anything. Slowly, tears welled in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. His lips trembled and he finally choked out, "You're sure?"

Milla bit her lower lip, fighting her own tears, and nodded. "We broke the smuggling ring. The woman who falsified the birth certificates kept detailed records, I suppose for either protection or blackmail."

"Is he—" He gulped and fought back a sob, but his voice was thin and shaky as he asked the parent's universal question: "Is he okay?"

Milla nodded again; then David lunged toward her and somehow they were clinging to each other as they both wept, his body heaving with sobs. She tried to comfort him, patting his shoulder, his hair, saying, "It's okay. He's fine. He's safe," but she was crying, too, so she didn't know how much he understood of what she was trying to say. Then he did what she'd done, and burst into uncontrolled laughter. He alternated between laughter and sobs, swinging her around, releasing her to wipe his face, then grabbing her again.

"I can't believe it," he kept saying. "My God. All these years . . ."

Finally Milla pulled herself away from him. "I have pictures," she said, fumbling with her briefcase in her eagerness to show him. "I took them yesterday."

She pulled out the snapshots she'd taken, and handed them to David. He looked at the first one and froze, his expression that of a starving man as he stared at his son. His hands were trembling as he looked at each photograph in turn, then went through them again. Delight began breaking through, like the sun on a stormy day. "He looks like me," he said triumphantly.
She burst out laughing at such blatant maleness. "Dummy, he's *always* looked like you, from the day he was born. Don't you remember what Susanna—" She broke off abruptly, remembering that he didn't know about Susanna.
He was still staring at the pictures. "She said I'd cloned myself."
"She was in on it," Milla blurted.
David looked up, shocked. "What?"
"She's the one who told the smugglers about Justin, and that I went to the market several days a week. They were waiting for me. They had an order for a blond baby boy."
"But . . . *why*?" His voice was full of bewilderment that a woman he had considered a friend would do such a thing.
"Money," Milla said bitterly. "It was all about money."
His right hand tightened into a fist. "The fucking bitch. There was a reward! I'd have given her everything I had to get him back!"
"The reward didn't come near matching what they'd charged the adoptive parents for him."
"He was *sold*? What kind of people would buy a baby they knew was—"
"They didn't know," Milla said quickly. "Don't blame them. They were totally in the dark."
"How do you know?"
"Because the lawyer who brokered the deal didn't know. It was a slick operation, with falsified birth certificates and legal documents from the fake mothers. The people who adopted the babies all thought it was legal."
"Where is he?" David asked. "Who adopted him?"
"Their names are Lee and Rhonda Winborn. They live in Charlotte, North Carolina. I've checked them out, and they're good people. Honest, upstanding. They named him Zachary."
"His name is Justin," David said fiercely. Still clutching the pictures, he sat down at his desk and looked at them again, examining every detail of Justin's face. "I didn't believe you'd ever find him," he said absently, as if to himself. "I thought you were breaking your heart in a worthless cause."

“I couldn’t stop.” The words were simple, the truth behind them fathoms deep.
“I know.” He looked up at her, studying her face as intently as he’d studied the pictures. “I didn’t know you, afterward,” he murmured. “I was devastated, but the basic *me* didn’t change. You . . . you turned into . . .” He paused as if searching for the right word. “An Amazon. I couldn’t keep up with you, couldn’t even touch you. You were so fierce, so determined, that you left me in the dust.”
“I didn’t mean to,” she said, and sighed. “But I couldn’t see anything else, couldn’t listen to anything else. I knew he was out there, and I had to find him.”
“I wish I’d had that conviction. I envied you your focus, your belief that he was still alive. I couldn’t believe it. I’ve had him dead and buried for years, and I thought I’d handled it, b-but now I know he’s alive and I feel like such a shit because I gave up on him.” He buried his face in his hands.
“No, don’t.” Moving swiftly to him, Milla put her arm around his shoulder. “My biggest fear was that he was dead, and I couldn’t stop looking for him because I had to know for certain. There was nothing you could have done that you didn’t do—”
“I could have looked for him! I could have been beside you, helping you.”
“Don’t be silly, of course you couldn’t. David, how many people would have died if you had stopped performing surgery?”
He considered that. “Maybe none. There are a lot of good surgeons in this town.” Then his natural surgeon’s ego kicked in. “Okay, maybe twenty or so. Or thirty.”
She smiled. “There’s your answer, Doogie. You did what you had to do. I did what I had to do. There’s no right, no wrong, no woulda coulda shoulda. So get off the pity train, and let’s talk about the future.”
Five minutes later, after she’d explained what she wanted, what they had to do, his face was once again white with shock.

26

The time with David was wrenching but necessary. When she walked out of his office, Milla knew she would probably never see him again, so she told him good-bye, kissed his cheek, and wished him a wonderful life. “You can

stop with the alimony payments, too," she'd said, smiling at him through her tears. "There's your reason for practicing medicine: you funded the search. I couldn't have done it without you in the background, supporting me and making sure I had the financial freedom to look for him."
"But what will you do now?" he asked, looking troubled.
"The same thing, I guess. Look for lost kids. I'll have to draw some kind of salary, though." The truth was, she had no idea what she was going to do. For so long her life had revolved around one thing, finding Justin, and now that she had, she felt as if she had hit a wall that she couldn't see over. She was exhausted in every way, mentally, physically, and emotionally. She thought of going back to El Paso and felt nothing but blankness. So much had happened there, maybe too much. After she went back to North Carolina and handled matters there, then she would sleep for maybe a couple of days, and when she woke up she would feel better. Then she'd be able to think about the future. She was good at finding the lost ones. How could she stop now, just because she'd found *her* lost one?
David caught her as she started out the door, and fiercely hugged her to him as if he, too, knew that the last tie binding them had been severed. "Now you can move on, too," he said.
Move on to where? she wanted to ask. Maybe one day she would know. For now, all she could focus on was what she had to do next.
She had booked a return flight to Charlotte late that afternoon, and by the time the flight landed she wanted nothing more than to check into her hotel, crawl into bed, and not move for at least twelve hours. Instead she ordered room service and unpacked while she was waiting for her sandwich to be delivered. She even had time to iron the outfit she planned to wear tomorrow.
After she ate, she put the room service tray outside the door and paced around the limited space, getting her thoughts in order. Finally, cell phone in hand, she looked up the Winborns' number in the local telephone book and dialed it.
A woman's pleasant voice answered on the fourth ring, with the particular *ooo* sound to her *o*'s that Milla already recognized as Carolinian. "Hello?"
"Mrs. Winborn?"
"Yes, it is."
"My name is Milla Edge. I'm the founder of an organization called Finders, which helps locate lost or kidnapped children."

“Yes, of course,” Rhonda said kindly. “That’s such a worthy cause; I’ll be glad to donate—”
“No, this isn’t a telemarketing call,” Milla quickly interrupted. “It concerns your adopted son.”
There was utter silence on the other end. She couldn’t even hear Rhonda breathing.
“What do you mean?” Rhonda finally choked. “How can it concern—He’s *adopted*,” she said in a fierce whisper. “We went through a lawyer to make certain everything was legal. Don’t you dare—”
“It’s a complicated matter,” Milla said, and hurried to reassure her. “There’s some paperwork that needs to be done. Could I make an appointment to meet with both you and your husband tomorrow? I promise it won’t take long.”
“What kind of paperwork?”
“Legal,” Milla said, unwilling to go into more detail on the phone. She didn’t want to spook the Winborns into grabbing Justin and disappearing in the middle of the night. She knew that’s what *she* would do, rather than risk her son. “It’s just some signatures. No one is questioning the adoption.”
“Then why—How is Finders involved?”
“That’s complicated, too. I’ll explain all of it tomorrow. What time would be convenient?”
“Just a minute.” Rhonda’s voice was faint; there was a clatter as she laid down the receiver, and Milla closed her eyes as she pictured Rhonda whispering to Lee where Justin—Zack—couldn’t hear her. Lee would pick up on his wife’s panic, alarmed that something seemed to be threatening his son, and he would hurry to the phone—
“This is Lee Winborn. What can I do for you?”
“I’m afraid I’ve frightened your wife,” Milla said apologetically, “and I didn’t mean to. It’s important that I meet with the both of you to explain something about your son’s adoption, and give you some legal papers.”
“You can explain over the phone—”
“No, I’m sorry, I can’t. It’s complicated, as I told Mrs. Winborn. You’ll understand much more when you read the papers. Is there a convenient time tomorrow? While your son is in school would be best.” She softened her voice. “Please. It’s nothing threatening.”
“All right,” he said abruptly. “One o’clock. Do you need our address?”

“No, I have it. Thank you for seeing me. I’ll be there at one sharp.” She clicked off the phone and closed her eyes, and realized she was shaking in every muscle. She’d done it. Now all she had to do was hold together through the next step. Since she had been able to get an appointment so early, she called the airlines and managed to get on a six o’clock flight out of Charlotte. Tomorrow night, she thought as she went to bed, she would be back in her own home for the first time since . . . she couldn’t remember, exactly. Longer than a week, she thought.

The next day she slept as late as possible, ate a late breakfast, watched some morning talk shows, showered and washed her hair and took extra care styling it, as well as with her makeup, keeping the effect subtle. It was vain of her, but she wanted to make a good impression.

She dressed carefully, in a trim navy skirt and a fitted, long-sleeved blouse in seafoam green, with matching navy buttons. The outfit was both feminine and professional. It was an old trick; the more nervous she was, the more attention she paid to how she looked. By concentrating on her clothes, she could ignore the screaming of her nerves, the nausea that knotted her stomach, the tension that pounded in her temples. She had learned how to remain calm in the face of unspeakable pain, and she did so now, at least on the surface—and that was all that mattered, anyway. The mirror reflected back a face that was almost expressionless, like Diaz—No, don’t think about him, she thought fiercely. He was out of her life.

The Weather Channel said Charlotte’s high temperature today would be sixty-three, but with a brisk north breeze, so she laid her camel coat aside as she packed. She did the video checkout on the television, and then it was time. Twelve-fifteen. She took a deep breath, made certain her lipstick was even, left the room key on the bedside table with a tip for the maid, then checked once more that all the necessary papers were in her briefcase. Satisfied that she hadn’t left anything undone, she squared her shoulders, balanced her coat and briefcase on top of the suitcase, slung her purse on her shoulder, and opened the door. And stopped dead, all her momentum lost.

Diaz leaned against the wall beside her door.

So many thoughts and emotions stormed through her that she could scarcely focus on any of them. Shock was uppermost; she’d thought, hoped, that she would never see him again. And, somehow, she’d forgotten all over again

how powerful his physical impact was, what it was to have those cold, dark eyes leveled on you.
They hadn't been cold when she was lying naked beneath him, whispered the animal in her, and she wrenched her thoughts from that dark pathway.
My God, why hadn't someone called hotel security? Men didn't just lurk outside hotel rooms for God only knows how long without *someone* noticing. Even if another guest hadn't been suspicious, the hotel maids definitely should have been. She glanced wildly up and down the long corridor; a housekeeping cart was parked about a third of the way down the hall to the right. With just the one maid on the floor, perhaps he'd been able to avoid detection. Or perhaps he'd had a quiet word with her and scared the hell out of her, and she was hiding in that room waiting for him to leave.
"What are *you* doing here?" she asked, her tone cool and hostile, not at all like the tumult going on inside her.
He straightened and shrugged. "Curiosity. Like rubbernecking at a car wreck."
"How did you know where to find me?"
"That's what I do."
And that was explanation enough, she supposed. He'd known where Justin was, and that gave him a start. Even though Charlotte was a city of half a million people, he'd found her—probably with a few phone calls. The hotel wasn't supposed to give out room numbers, either, but he'd been waiting outside her door. How did he know where she was going? And how did he know she was going today? She burned to know the answers, but she would bite off her own tongue before she asked him. She didn't want to talk to him at all.
She pulled the hotel door shut and walked down the carpeted hallway to the elevator, pulling her suitcase behind her. Diaz fell into step beside her, as she had known he would. She didn't waste time trying to talk him out of going. She couldn't evade him, couldn't convince him to butt out; all she could do was ignore him, so she did—as much as one could ignore a wolf.
Details of his appearance registered with her. He had shaved, and he wore a decent suit in a dark blue-gray; his hair actually looked brushed, instead of looking as if he'd run his fingers through it and left it at that. Some people might think he looked respectable. She knew better, knew that the cold, enigmatic dark eyes in no way reflected the streak of violence that ran just beneath his surface. He probably had a knife strapped to his leg, a pistol

holstered in the small of his back, and God only knows what other weapons hidden on his body.

But why *was* he here? This didn't concern him. They had parted on bitter terms, and he was the last person Milla wanted with her during the wrenching hour she faced. She was still so *furious* she could barely tolerate being this close to him. She felt the rage bubbling up all over again, tightening her throat. How *dare* he—?

She stopped the thought before it could completely form. Going over and over things wasn't going to change what he'd done, wasn't going to make her change her mind. Oh, she could try explaining things to him, but what would that accomplish? He had totally misjudged her, he was wrong, and even if he apologized she doubted she could ever forgive him. He knew—*knew*—how important Justin was to her, knew the hell she'd gone through searching for him, and still he'd kept her son's location secret from her. How could she ever forgive him?

It enraged her even more that Diaz was still convinced she was in the wrong. She wanted to slap him so hard his teeth rattled. Instead she ignored him.

"Do you need to check out?" he asked.

"No." If she had to talk to him at all, it would be as briefly as possible.

They left the hotel by the front door, and she started to give her car receipt to the parking attendant, but Diaz said, "Leave it here. I'll drive."

"I don't want to ride with you."

"You can do it the easy way, or the hard way. Up to you."

She didn't even glance at him, just continued walking beside him as he led the way to a dark blue Jeep Liberty. The easy way was hard enough; she didn't want to contemplate what the hard way would do to her. The north wind the weather forecaster had talked about bit through her clothes, and she wished she'd put her coat on before coming outside; she concentrated on how chilled she was, anything rather than think about him or what she was facing.

He put her suitcase in the back with his battered duffel, then opened the passenger door and put her inside. The sun had warmed the interior of the Jeep, and once she was out of the wind she was comfortable. She preferred being chilled, preferred being anywhere else, with anyone else. She prayed for strength, for control, for help in doing this right. She had to put Diaz out of her mind and concentrate on Justin, or she'd never be able to do this.

“Do you know where they live?” she asked distantly as he got behind the wheel and started the motor, then put the vehicle in gear and pulled out of his parking slot.
“Yes. I drove by there yesterday.”
So he’d been a day behind her. She was surprised he hadn’t been closer, that he hadn’t shown up at her hotel in Chicago. But unless he was here to prevent her from talking to the Winborns, why bother? She went rigid as it occurred to her she was now locked in a vehicle with him, helpless to do anything but go where he took her. Stupid!
She whipped around as far as her seat belt would allow, her gaze lethal. “If you take me anywhere but to the Winborn house, I swear I’ll—”
“That’s where I’m taking you,” he said grimly. “Though it’s a little late for you to think of that, if I’d decided otherwise.”
“So I’m not as good at being dirty and underhanded as you are,” she snapped, and turned back to face the windshield. She paid close attention to the turns he took, making certain she didn’t look up and find herself on a highway heading out of Charlotte. If he took one wrong turn, she would scream, she’d hit him, she’d pull on the steering wheel—anything to attract attention.
Though if he really intended to kidnap her, she realized, none of that would stop him. He’d just knock her out and do as he’d intended. But what use would that be, unless he intended to keep her locked up somewhere for the rest of her life? She was never going to change her mind about seeing the Winborns. She had set her course, and she would keep to it.
The rest of the drive was made in silence. At twelve fifty-seven he pulled the Jeep into the Winborns’ short concrete driveway. Rhonda’s champagne Infiniti SUV was in the right bay, Lee’s more serviceable extended-cab Ford pickup in the left. Milla’s heartbeat suddenly doubled, leaving her feeling weak and light-headed. Don’t let me faint, she silently begged. Please don’t let me faint. She took slow, deep breaths, forcing her heart rate to calm.
Diaz got out and came around to open the door for her. His dark eyes narrowed as he surveyed her, but he didn’t say anything, just took her arm and all but levered her out of the seat. If it hadn’t been for him, she didn’t know if she’d have had the strength. She grabbed the briefcase but left her purse on the floorboard. Diaz noticed, of course, and locked the doors behind them.

The small front yard was immaculately kept, with thick grass that had turned brown, and pots of bright red chrysanthemums. More potted plants were on the steps leading up to the sheltered front entry; someone, probably Rhonda, had a green thumb. Milla found she liked the picture of Rhonda humming as she carefully repotted plants, or trimming away the dead leaves and branches.

Before she could reach out to ring the doorbell, the door opened, and both of them stood there looking almost haggard with worry. Pity squeezed Milla's heart. She had tried to reassure them, but maybe she had handled this all wrong. If she had, it was too late now to change. Lee reached out and opened the glass storm door.

She managed, if not quite a smile, at least a friendly expression. "Hello, I'm Milla Edge. We spoke on the phone last night. This is James Diaz."

"I'm Lee Winborn, and this is my wife, Rhonda," Lee said, automatically reaching out to shake her hand, then Diaz's. Lee's hands were strong and slightly rough; he liked playing golf, fishing, occasionally hunting. He had coached Justin—*Zack's*—T-ball team, and helped coach his PeeWee football team. He was forty-four, eleven years older than Milla, a vital man with a few sun wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes and no visible gray in his dark blond hair.

Rhonda was average height, her pale blond hair cut in a chic style, her makeup tasteful. She was slim, dressed in tailored trousers and a pretty French blue sweater that reflected color into her gray eyes. With their coloring, Milla thought, no one would suspect Justin wasn't their natural son unless they told. *Zack*. She had to remember his name was now Zack.

"Come in," Lee said, his voice nervous. He and his wife stepped back, and he gestured Milla and Diaz inside. Rhonda reached out and took his hand, lacing her fingers with his as if she needed his strength.

They went into the living room, which had the comfortable, lived-in feeling that meant they actually used it. There was a cozy fire going in the gas-log fireplace. There were shelves that held a number of books, children's mixed in with adult fiction, as well as the small mementos a family collected over the years: a starfish, a signed baseball in a Plexiglas box, photos and boxes and—

Photos. Milla looked around, and held a moan inside. Pictures of Justin as a fat baby, with one tiny white tooth gleaming as he laughed, his blond hair sticking straight up like a dandelion. She saw his chubby little feet, the fat

dimpled hands, the rosy cheeks. There was one of him crawling, wearing nothing but a diaper. Another of him as an adorable toddler, holding a plastic baseball bat like a club; at the beach, with his little shovel and pail, wearing a small red baseball cap. A birthday party. What had to be his first day of school, beaming proudly as he clutched his little backpack. Missing his two front teeth, and wearing such a wide, mischievous grin that she almost whimpered. Her baby, and she had missed all of this. There he was in his T-ball uniform, looking fierce now as he held his bat the way he'd seen the big boys do. Another picture showed him in his football uniform, with his helmet threatening to completely obscure his face. He was so little, and so vital, so happy.

There were his school pictures, and other studio photographs that were more posed. Another was of him at perhaps one year, clutching a teddy bear that showed signs of severe wear. Sitting on a little John Deere tractor, gripping the steering wheel hard and pretending he was driving. She could just hear him making motor sounds.

"That's Zack," Rhonda said nervously, noticing how Milla was staring at all the photographs. "I know we went overboard taking pictures of him, but—" She broke off and bit her lip.

"Please, let's sit down," Lee said, indicating Milla and Diaz should take the two occasional chairs, while he and Rhonda sat side by side on the couch. "Tell us what this is all about. I don't mind telling you neither of us slept a wink last night, worrying that something has gone wrong. We can't think what, but—well, we're worried."

Milla set the briefcase down by her feet and took a deep breath, clasping her hands together. She had tried practicing what she would say, but the words never seemed right, so she fell back on the story she had told so many times, to so many audiences. But this time, she had an ending to the story.

"My ex-husband is a surgeon," she said, "a real Doogie Howser." She managed a tiny smile, thinking of David. "Eleven years ago, he and some other doctors took a sabbatical to work at a small rural clinic in Mexico. I had just learned I was pregnant when we went, but the team included an obstetrician I trusted, so we kept to our original plan and our son, Justin, was born in Mexico. I was at the village market one day when he was six weeks old, and two men grabbed him from me and ran. I had been stabbed in the back and nearly bled to death; by the time I recovered, there was no trace of our baby."

Rhonda reached out and grabbed Lee's hand again. "That's awful," she said, looking sick. Perhaps she was identifying with Milla as a mother, or perhaps she had a premonition.

"I looked for him anyway. I couldn't give up, when I didn't know what had happened to him. So many stolen babies are smuggled out of Mexico in car trunks, in the heat of the day, and a lot of them die. I couldn't stop looking until I knew for certain what happened to Justin, if he died, if . . ." She stopped and swallowed.

"My husband and I divorced a year after Justin was stolen. A lot of marriages break up after a child dies or is lost. The divorce was mostly my fault—no, *all* my fault, because I wasn't interested in being David's wife. I was too busy searching for Justin. Along the way I founded an organization of mostly volunteers, all over the country, who mobilize to help search whenever someone gets lost, or drive the highways during an Amber Alert. We look for runaways that the police don't have the money or the manpower to devote to the case. We—" She was going into her regular speech, she realized. She took another deep breath.

"Enough about that. The short of it is, all of this time I kept looking for Justin, for clues to who had taken him, what had happened to him. Just recently, with Mr. Diaz's help, the smuggling ring was broken and we found paperwork that allowed us to trace the stolen children."

This was it. Now. Her throat clogged and her hands clenched together so hard they were bloodless. "Zack is my son, Justin."

Rhonda fell back with a cry, her face paper white. Lee surged to his feet, his hands knotted into fists. "That's a lie," he said violently. "We didn't buy a black market baby; we adopted Zack through an attorney, and if you think you're going to take our son from us you're in for the fight of your life."

She'd already had the fight of her life, she thought. And it had lasted for ten long years. "Your attorney didn't know. The birth certificates were forged. The woman who forged them is the one who kept the records. I don't expect you to take my word for it; I brought copies of everything." She leaned down and picked up the briefcase, opened it, and handed a sheaf of papers across to them. Lee took the papers and rapidly thumbed through them. A rough sound of denial rumbled in his throat.

Her hands trembling, Milla drew out two more documents. "These are the papers where David and I both relinquish our parental rights to Justin—Zack—to you."

Rhonda and Lee both froze, staring at the papers in her hand as if they couldn't believe what she'd just said. Milla tamped down on the agony rising in her throat, fought for control. Just a little while longer. . . .
"There are no conditions. To take him from you would be devastating to him, and we l-love him too much to do that. What you tell him about us, if you tell him, is totally up to you. You've raised him, you love him, you know him better than anyone else on earth. Does . . . does he know he's adopted?"
Mutely Rhonda nodded. Lee said, "But he's never asked any questions."
He was happy, healthy, well adjusted, and secure in his parents' love for him. He felt no need for anything else, Milla thought. One day he might ask, but only out of curiosity.
She took a thick manila envelope from the briefcase and also handed it over. "This is personal information about David and me, our medical histories, blood types, anything you might need if there's some medical emergency with Zack. There are phone numbers, addresses, and if either of us moves or changes numbers we'll send the information to you. Our parents' addresses are also included. There are some pictures, if . . . if he's ever interested, and you decide to tell him. Newspaper clippings about what happened. I don't want him to ever think we didn't want him." She dragged in oxygen. "His father has a genius IQ, and is one of the best men I've ever met. He's blond and blue-eyed; Zack favors him. We're both healthy, no genetic problems that we know about."
Dear God, how much longer could she hold out? Rhonda had both fists pressed to her mouth, and tears ran down her cheeks as she stared at Milla. Lee was audibly gulping as he fought for composure. Diaz, beside her, was a still, dark presence. She hadn't looked at him, hadn't glanced once at him. Raggedly she continued, "I hope, one day, he'll want to know about us, meet us. But if he doesn't, don't feel you have to look over your shoulder. We'll never contact you except for updates on necessary information, if needed. You're his parents. If you decide never to tell him about us, we'll accept that." That was it. She couldn't go on any longer. She surged to her feet and held out her hand. "Thank you for loving him."
Lee took it, his chin trembling, and wordlessly folded his other hand over hers. Diaz stood, too, bending down to close the briefcase and lift it.
Rhonda jumped up. She was sobbing so hard she could barely speak. "Wait —you were looking . . . Would you like some of his pictures? To take with

you?”

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Somehow Milla said good-bye to them, shook hands, made it out to the Jeep clutching one of the photographs; others were in the briefcase that Diaz carried. She sat frozen as he drove her away from her son’s life, her gaze fixed straight ahead, her face as still as a statue’s. She’d done it. Somehow, she had managed to hold together. She had given her son away, and she felt as if there were a great gaping wound inside her from which her life’s blood was pumping. Pain was already gnawing away at her control, as great a beast as it had been when Justin was first taken from her; the quality of the pain was different, more poignant—and more bitter, because she’d been forced to this point as the years had crept inexorably past—but the beast itself was the same.

There was no hope left. She couldn’t turn back the years and have Justin back as a baby, couldn’t fill her walls with pictures of him as he grew. He was someone else’s child now, and she had to live the rest of her life without him.

In a remote, almost casual tone, Diaz said, “Nothing much impresses me, but that was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen.”

She felt rage building inside her, like steam forming in a kettle as water heated. Helpless to stop it, she felt it build and build and build, rising up, choking her; her vision blurred with red haze and she heard an animal sound coming from her throat. Then the rage burst free, and despite the seat belt holding her in, she launched herself across the console at him, screaming and punching him, slapping any part of him she could reach. “Shut up! You bastard, you tried to keep me from finding him! I could *kill* you, I hate you—”

He jerked the steering wheel to the right, pulling them out of traffic and to the side of the street while he fended her off with his right arm. His features were blurred by her fury and tears, but she could see enough to tell that his expression hadn’t changed, that he was still so damned *untouched*—

He put the gear in park, then just sat while she pounded on him. The sounds coming from her had deteriorated into wordless screaming, the raw, wounded sound of unbearable pain that started from deep inside and tore its

way out of her throat. She wanted to destroy something, she wanted someone else, anyone else to feel just a portion of what she was feeling. She felt as if she would burst from the force of it, as if her heart would give out under the immense pressure.

Then she collapsed forward on herself, sobbing so hard she couldn't draw a breath. She hadn't known she could cry like this, not even in the early, desperate days. She'd had a goal then, a cause. Now she had nothing. Her voice broke and she choked, began coughing convulsively. Diaz seized her shoulders and hauled her upright, propped her against the door. Distantly she heard him say "Drink this," and he put a bottle of water to her lips. She managed to swallow a sip, though she was vaguely surprised at how difficult swallowing was with her throat so raw and swollen.

The storm passed as abruptly as it had come on, and she slumped in exhaustion, her eyes closing. She heard Diaz on the phone, talking quietly, but she was too numb to listen. She wanted to go to ground somewhere and die, because there was no way she could live with this pain.

She didn't die. Instead she sank into a stupor, so emotionally drained that she was unaware of anything except being on the move again, Diaz driving in silence. She thought they stopped once, maybe twice, but she wasn't certain. She slept, starting awake occasionally to stare out the windshield in total blankness, not knowing where they were now or where they were going, not caring, not even fully comprehending.

Darkness fell, and the headlights of oncoming traffic hypnotized her to sleep again. She roused when he stopped the Jeep and got out, watching dully as a man got out of the car parked beside them and handed something to Diaz, then gave a tiny salute and got back into his car and left.

Diaz came around to the passenger side and opened the door. "Come on."

Milla got out, moving slowly, like a very old woman. They were parked at what looked like the tiny back porch of a small clapboard house. A cold wind whipped at her legs, went through her clothes. The ground beneath her feet was fine and gritty, and there was a strange roaring sound in her ears. She had no idea where they were. She said, "I have a six o'clock flight," and was surprised at how raspy her voice was.

"You didn't make it," Diaz said briefly, taking her arm and leading her up the three steps to the door. He opened the storm door and held it open with his body while he unlocked the wooden one, pushing it wide and reaching in to feel for a light switch. He found it, and bright light from an overhead

fixture made her blink. He ushered her inside and she found herself standing in a smallish kitchen. Permeating everything was a peculiar smell that was somehow familiar, a not unclean smell, just . . . peculiar.
Diaz went back outside and she stood there, too tired and beaten and apathetic to care where he was going. She heard doors slam; then he was back, carrying both his duffel and her suitcase.
He walked through the kitchen into another room and more lights came on. Milla closed her eyes and waited for him to come back. He always came back. . . .
He took her arm and led her forward. “I figure you need the bathroom,” he said.
Vaguely surprised, she realized she did. The bathroom she found herself standing in had green and gray ceramic tile on the floor and in the rather large shower. Diaz closed the door and let her have the necessary privacy, but he must have been standing right outside, because as soon as she began washing her hands, he opened the door again.
“I’ll put on some soup to heat,” he said, and led her back to the kitchen. She sat at the table and looked vaguely around while he poked through the cabinets and found what he needed. After a while she said in her croaky voice, “Where are we?”
“The Outer Banks.”
For a moment she had no idea where that was. A tiny frown knit her brow as she tried to get her tired mind to sort through the available information. Finally she remembered that she was in North Carolina, and the Outer Banks was part of the coast. In another moment, she realized that the roaring sound was the ocean. They were right on the beach. The peculiar smell she’d noticed was the tang of salt water.
Diaz set a bowl of steaming vegetable soup and a glass of milk in front of her. Dipping a bowl full for himself, he sat down across from her and dug in.
Cautiously Milla dipped her spoon into the soup and sipped at the broth. It burned her raw throat, but at the same time the heat felt good. She had never before in her life lost her appetite, but the very act of lifting the spoon was almost too much effort and she had to make herself continue. She kept her head down, her gaze focused on the bowl of soup. She couldn’t let herself look at anything else, think about anything else; right now she was

numb, but the pain waited just on the edge of her consciousness, ready to consume her again.
When she was finished, Diaz cleaned the kitchen, then led her back to the bathroom, where he'd laid out a couple of towels and washcloths. "Strip," he ordered. "Get in the shower. I'll bring your nightgown."
If she'd had more energy, she might have argued with him, or even locked the door while he was gone. Instead she ran the water in the sink and obediently took off her clothes while it was getting hot, then turned off the faucet and stepped into the shower. The glass door was clear, which gave no privacy at all. She couldn't bring herself to care.
She had just finished drying off when he returned with his hands full, carrying everything she could possibly need. He set her toiletries and cosmetics on the vanity, put her blow dryer in one of the cabinet drawers, laid her nightgown on the vanity stool.
She put on the nightgown, then sat down on the stool and stared at the toiletries, trying to remember her normal skin care routine. "This one," Diaz said, nudging the toner forward. He had watched her get ready for bed on more than one occasion, leaning against the bathroom door frame and waiting patiently enough, but watching her with narrowed, hungry eyes.
Lethargically she poured toner on a cotton pad and wiped it on her face. Diaz pushed the moisturizer forward, and obediently she smoothed the cream on her face and neck. Then he leaned down and lifted her in his arms, carried her out of the bathroom and down the short hall to a bedroom. The bedside lamp was on, the covers turned down. He placed her between the sheets, pulled up the covers, and turned off the lamp. "Good night," he said as he walked out and closed the door behind him.
She slept immediately, as if her brain simply switched off, and several hours later woke crying. She touched the tears on her face and stared at them in bewilderment for a moment, then memory rushed back and brought with it that clawing pain.
The agony was so sharp she couldn't lie in bed. She got up and paced the small bedroom, her arms folded over her middle as if she could hold the pain in, but the same deep, tearing sounds she'd made earlier tore free from her chest and throat. She almost howled in her grief, and for the first time understood why in some cultures the bereaved tore out their hair and ripped their garments. She wanted to smash the furniture, throw something. She

wanted to run screaming down the beach and throw herself into the ocean. Drowning had to be less painful than this.

Eventually exhaustion and that odd numbness claimed her again, and she fell back into bed.

Morning dawned clear and slightly warmer. She got out of bed, dressed, and looked out the window. Now that it was daylight, she could see the Atlantic looming just over a sand dune, all that water seeming to come right at her in an endless procession of waves. There was a row of houses much like this one marching up and down the beach; some were newer and bigger, others were older and smaller. During the summer the beach would be crowded with vacationers, but this morning it was devoid of people. After a while, she trudged to the kitchen.

Diaz had made coffee. He himself was nowhere in sight, nor was the Jeep parked outside. There was a note on the kitchen table that said, “Gone for food.”

Milla poured herself a cup of coffee and walked about the small house, familiarizing herself with it. Besides the kitchen, bathroom, and her bedroom, there were two more bedrooms, equally small. The one Diaz had slept in was right next to hers, the pillow dented, the bed unmade. The kitchen was an eat-in, with a laundry alcove off it that was just large enough to fit in a washer and dryer. In front was the living room, filled with cozy, overstuffed furniture and a twenty-five-inch television. Across the front of the house was a screened porch with a set of white wicker furniture with colorful floral cushions. From the porch she looked straight out over the ocean, blue today from the reflected sky. The morning air was cold, and after a few minutes she went back inside to sit at the kitchen table and drink another cup of coffee.

Desolation filled her. For over ten years she’d kept herself focused; there had been pain, yes, but also purpose. Now there was nothing.

She would have to get rid of the rocks in her house. Justin wouldn’t be needing them.

She had known for over three years now that even if she found him, she would still never have him. On his seventh birthday, she had awakened to the realization that he was irrevocably gone. Even if she found him that very day, his life and security were centered around other people, and to take him away from that would be devastating to him. Because she loved him, she knew she would have to let him go. She still had to search, she had

to make certain he was okay . . . but he was gone. He would never be hers again.

She had hoped she would find comfort in the fact that he'd had a good life, good parents. And she did—she *did*—but the grief was still so immense she didn't know how she could survive it.

It was as if he had died, as if she had lost him all over again. What she had done was irrevocable. David had been aghast when she told him what they had to do. He'd wept, he'd raged—all the stages she had gone through in private. "We've just found him!" he'd shouted. "How can we do this? Without even seeing him, talking to him?"

"Look at his face," she'd said gently, once more directing him to the photographs she'd taken. "He's happy. How can we take that away from him?"

"We could still meet him," David had insisted, desperate. "He doesn't have to know who we are. I—damn it, Milla, I agree we can't totally disrupt his life by taking him away from these people, but we finally have a chance now to—"

"No. If we show up without giving his adoptive parents this security of knowing he's irrevocably theirs, what are they likely to do? I know what I'd do. I'd take him and run."

"But we could see him," he pleaded, worn down by the truth in her argument.

"That will have to be up to his parents. It *has* to be. This is what's best for Justin, not what's best for us. David, you have a family you love. You have to think about them, too. We can't tear up everyone else's life because of our own selfishness."

"Is it selfish to want to see our son? You, at least—you've sacrificed your own life to look for him, you've done so much more than I ever could. How can you not want to at least talk to him?"

"I do," she said fiercely. "I want to grab him and never let him go. But it's too late now, it's been too late for years. We aren't his family now. If we ever know him, it'll have to be his choice. Otherwise the damage to him will be terrible, and I haven't fought so hard and so long to find him just so *I* would be happy. I had to know if he was safe, if he was loved. He is." She swallowed and repeated, "He is."

In the end, his vision blurred with tears, David had signed the papers, then scribbled a handwritten letter to Justin telling him how much he loved him

and hoped that one day they'd meet, and given the letter to Milla to put in with the other papers, which included her own letter.

She only hoped that one day Justin—Zack—would read the letters and be curious enough about David and her to get in touch. She hoped the Winborns wouldn't destroy the papers. She didn't think they would, especially the legal papers, but they might well put them in a safe-deposit box and never tell Zack about his natural parents. She hoped not, but she wouldn't blame them if they did. She knew how fiercely she herself had fought to protect him, so why should she expect them to do less?

She had accomplished what she'd set out to do, all those long years ago. She had done it knowing that she would be left with ashes. She just hadn't known the taste of them would be so bitter in her mouth.

The kitchen door opened and Diaz came in, carrying some paper bags. She'd been so preoccupied that she hadn't heard him drive up. He gave her a sharp look but didn't say anything, instead concentrating on putting up the groceries he'd bought.

She wasn't fully aware of him, certainly not with the hyperawareness she normally felt around him. He was just there, like part of the furniture. The grief and pain that filled her blotted out everything except a peripheral acknowledgment of his presence.

"Which do you want?" he asked. "Cereal or bagel?"

He wanted her to decide? What difference did it make what she ate?

"Bagel," she finally said listlessly, because it wouldn't involve having to deal with a spoon.

He toasted the bagel and even spread the cream cheese on it, then put it on a saucer in front of her. She tore off a piece and chewed. And chewed. The bite kept growing bigger and bigger in her mouth until she thought she was going to choke.

She was sitting here eating just as if she hadn't given her son away yesterday.

She shoved back from the table, overturning her chair. Catlike, Diaz whirled to face her, balanced to respond to any attack she might level at him. In a sudden burst of blind fury, she grabbed from the dish drainer the pot he'd used to heat the soup the night before, and threw it as hard as she could at the wall. It hit with a clang and crashed back to the floor. She grabbed the spoons and threw them, then the bowls. The bowls broke with a satisfying crash.

Sobbing, she wrenched open the cabinet doors and began grabbing out whatever she could reach: plates, saucers, bowls, cups, and glasses. She threw each one with as much force as she could muster, screaming in wordless agony as she hurled plate after plate, sending shards of glass flying around the room.

Diaz didn't move except when a thrown missile came flying too close; then he merely ducked a little to the side and stood his ground. Silently he watched her systematically destroy the kitchen, staying out of her way until the enraged burst of energy was abruptly spent and she collapsed to her knees, sobbing.

Then he picked her up and carried her back to her bedroom, placing her on the bed. Milla curled on her side and cried herself to sleep.

When she woke several hours later and stumbled out of the room, the kitchen had been cleaned and swept, and once again Diaz was gone.

He finally returned, carrying a cardboard box containing a mismatched set of dishes, including saucers and coffee cups. He went back outside and returned with another box, from which he unloaded about a dozen drinking glasses and several bowls. Nothing matched. He unpacked everything, then put it all in the dishwasher and turned it on.

Her head pounded with a dull headache, her eyes were sore and swollen, and her throat ached. "I'm sorry," she croaked.

"No problem."

She took a breath. "Where did you get the dishes?"

"I found a yard sale. It was either that or drive to Kitty Hawk to a Wal-Mart store."

Considering how deserted the Outer Banks were this time of year, finding a yard sale was nothing short of a miracle. In a moment of clarity, she had a sudden image of this dark-clothed predator prowling through a yard sale and buying up old dishes. He wouldn't even notice how out of place he seemed, but anyone else who happened to be there certainly would have.

He made sandwiches and she ate hers, then she put on her sneakers and coat and headed out to the beach. She walked for what felt like hours, with a cool breeze blowing in her face and her mind so numb she could barely think. Not thinking was good. At last she turned around to go back, and when she did she stopped short at the sight of Diaz following her. He had stayed back about thirty or forty yards, giving her privacy but still watching over her.

He stopped and waited. He had his hands stuffed in the pockets of a black jacket, and his dark eyes were narrowed against the breeze as he watched her approach. She knew it was irrational, but his following her made her angry. As she walked by she snapped, “Afraid I’ll drown myself?”

She was being sarcastic, but his quiet “Yes” stung her to silence. She walked on, blinking back tears. She didn’t want to cry. Her eyelids were so puffy and sore that she wanted never to cry again. She remembered thinking the night before about running into the ocean, and though the grief and pain were so agonizing almost any relief would be welcome, she knew she’d never do that. Surrendering wasn’t in her nature. If it had been, she wouldn’t have been able to hold on to her determination all those years. She’d always been the idealistic dreamer in her family. Who would ever have thought that just beneath her skin was a layer of stubbornness that went all the way to the bone?

By the time they made it back to the house, her steps were dragging, and the sun was sinking low, taking the temperature with it. Exhausted, she lay down for a nap and woke only when Diaz shook her and told her it was time to eat.

The succeeding days passed like that, in a blur of grief and numbness, punctuated by bursts of rage. The sameness blended them all together in her tired mind, so it seemed as if time was merely creeping. She ate, she slept, she cried. The fits of rage would take her unawares, exploding when she least expected it, and afterward she was always ashamed of her lack of control. She screamed, she beat on the wall with her fists, she cursed the fate that had let her find her son, but too late.

She walked long miles on the deserted beaches, trying her best not to think of anything. At some point she realized she hadn’t called in to the office, and mentioned it to Diaz. “I called them,” he said. “When we were on our way here.”

She remembered very little about the trip, except being mired in hellish misery.

Some days she hated Diaz with an intensity that prevented her from even looking at him. Rage seethed through her, and the fact that they had both wanted the same thing for Justin in no way mitigated his actions. Keeping her from Justin hadn’t been his right, his decision. He seemed to know exactly what she was feeling on those days, because he would keep his

distance from her, not speaking except for what was necessary when he called her for meals.
He made certain she ate and slept. He did the laundry, because the thought of it never even crossed her mind. She would hear the washing machine or the dryer running, and it meant absolutely nothing to her. It was just background noise. Clean clothes would reappear in her bedroom, and she would wear them. It was no more complicated than that.
One day she asked how long they'd been there, and he said, "Three weeks." The answer stunned her, shook her up a little. She stared at him without the dullness in her eyes that had characterized her over these past weeks. "But . . . what about Thanksgiving?" Her comment was stupid, but it was the only thing she could think of.
"They had it without us."
Three weeks. That meant this was . . . the first week of December. "I don't have anyone to have Thanksgiving with," she blurted.
"You have your family."
"I don't spend holidays with them, you know that." Then she fell silent, because she'd found Justin and she hadn't called her mom, who might expect her to forget and forgive all concerning Ross and Julia, and she just couldn't. Not yet. Whether she ever could remained to be seen.
Diaz shrugged. "Then you just spent your first Thanksgiving with me." Doing what? Screaming? Crying? Beating the wall? She hoped it wasn't the start of a new tradition.
The days were very short now, and the temperature had dropped even more. Diaz brought her some thicker socks to wear when she was out walking. Being outside helped, even though the sunshine was weak. Staring at the ocean helped. Sometimes it was gray, sometimes it was blue, but it was a constant, immense presence.
The periods of rage became less and less frequent, as did the bouts of horrible, devastating weeping. She was so tired mentally and emotionally that she functioned within a very narrow range. She didn't know what she would have done if Diaz hadn't brought her here. She hated being beholden to him, but maybe this was his way of making amends. The thing was, she didn't know if his efforts made any difference in the way she felt about him. She could only deal with one thing at a time, and right now was not his time.

Sometimes she tilted her face up to the winter sun in search of its meager warmth, and knew that she had survived.

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Milla was always aware, on the dimmest edge of her consciousness, that Diaz constantly watched her. She also knew that he was a man who never gave up, who never lost sight of his goal. Exactly what his goal was wasn't always clear to her, but she had no doubt he was perfectly clear in his own mind what he wanted.

He wanted *her*. She knew it, and yet she couldn't imagine how they could ever be together again. The rift between them, to her, was final and absolute. He'd betrayed her in the most wounding way possible, and forgiveness evidently wasn't her strong suit. She had found that grudges weren't heavy at all; she could carry them for a very long time.

Diaz wasn't taking care of her out of the goodness of his heart. He was taking care of her the way a wolf cared for its wounded mate.

She had sensed that claim the first time he made love to her, that bonding of like to like. He wouldn't willingly relinquish it.

She knew she was in danger from him; she *knew* it. Not physically. Physically, Diaz wouldn't harm her. But emotionally he could devastate her, and she didn't think she could bear any more devastation right now. She knew she should start making a push to leave this little house that had seen the total breakdown of her soul and then the first tentative steps toward healing. Finders needed her. She needed to be doing something, anything, rather than vegetating. She needed to get away from Diaz. But insisting on anything took more mental energy than she could spare; she was so horribly tired of thinking, of feeling. She had her hands full just existing.

One day while Diaz was outside she actually tried to call Finders, just to check in with Joann, but she had evidently left her cell phone on when they came here and the battery was dead. Next she tried the house phone, and discovered that long distance calls were blocked on it. She sat staring at the phone, trying to remember her code for charging a call to her home phone, but the only number that came to mind was her social security number and she knew it wasn't that.

Diaz came in and noticed her sitting beside the phone. “What are you doing?”
“I’m trying to call the office.”
“Why?” he asked simply.
She stared at him, because the answer seemed obvious to her. “Because it’s been over three weeks and I need to check in.”
“They’re doing okay without you.”
“How do you know?” she asked with a flash of irritation.
“I called.”
“When? Why didn’t you let me talk to Joann?”
“I’ve called a couple of times, once to let them know where we are and another time to say we’d be here a while yet.”
She noticed he had totally ignored her question about talking to Joann. “It’s time to go home.”
He rubbed his neck. “Not yet.”
“Yes, it is!” To her surprise, she began crying. She said, “Damn it,” and went to her bedroom. She hadn’t cried in a couple of days, not even about Justin, so why was she crying now over something so inconsequential? This just proved Diaz right, and she didn’t want him to be right. She wanted to have something to do, to get back into a routine where she would *have* to think about something besides her own misery.
Did she really want to fly home if a flight attendant asking her if she wanted peanuts might easily reduce her to a sobbing heap?
After an hour of wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she decided to take a walk before dark. She put on two pairs of socks and her coat; when she emerged from the short hallway, Diaz looked up and said, “Where’re you going?”
“For a walk,” she replied. Wasn’t it obvious? Then she opened the back door and realized why he’d asked. A slow, steady, gray rain was falling. She checked the clock on the wall and discovered the time wasn’t as late as she’d thought; it was the low cloud cover that made the day so dark. “Or not,” she said with a sigh.
He turned on the gas-log fireplace in the living room, and the coziness of it drew her. She didn’t want to sit in there with him, but the alternative was to return to her bedroom and stare at the four walls. The television was on satellite, which meant there was a multitude of channels available. To her surprise, Diaz was watching a decorating show on the Home and Garden

Television channel with all the puzzlement of someone from another planet, as if he couldn't figure out why anyone would want to glue tasseled fringe to a lamp shade.

"Are you thinking of taking up interior decorating as an alternate career?" she asked, surprising both of them by initiating the conversation.

"Only if someone holds a gun to my head."

Milla surprised herself again by smiling. It was just a tiny smile, and it vanished immediately when she realized with astonishment what she'd done.

A smile, when she'd thought she would never smile or laugh again. He hadn't noticed, but she had. She curled in a chair and watched the rest of the program with him, but the rain made her sleepy and she dozed on and off for the rest of the afternoon.

They ate an early supper; then Milla showered while Diaz took a last turn around the property. There was no threat for him to guard against, but watchfulness was ingrained in his nature, and every night he walked around checking to make certain the Jeep was locked up and no strangers were lurking around. *They* were the only strangers on the Outer Banks at this time of year, but that made no difference to him.

Milla had just pulled on her nightgown when the bathroom door opened without warning and Diaz said, "Put your coat and shoes on and come outside."

Without question, spurred by the urgency in his tone, Milla hurried to put on her coat over her nightgown and slip her bare feet into her shoes. She stepped out onto the back porch with him and said, "Oh!" in hushed delight. The rain had changed over to snow flurries. There was no chance of having an accumulation; the temperature, cold as it was, was still above freezing and the ground was still too warm and too wet. But the snow looked magical, swirling down out of a black sky.

Diaz looked down at her sockless feet, shook his head, then simply swung her up in his arms and went down the steps with her. Milla automatically clutched his shoulders for support. "Where are we going?"

"To the beach."

He carried her over the low dunes to the beach, right to the ocean's edge, and stood there in the darkness, the silence broken only by the rhythmic rush of the waves. Tiny snowflakes swirled around them and disappeared as soon as they touched down. She had grown up accustomed to seeing snow

every winter, but since moving to El Paso snow was generally something she saw only if she was traveling. She certainly hadn't expected to see it here, on a southern beach. She started shivering almost immediately, but she didn't want to go inside and miss a minute of this.

The snow shower was of short duration, and after it ended she spent several minutes staring up at the black sky waiting for more, without success. "I guess that's it," she said, and sighed.

Diaz's arms tightened around her, and he carried her back into the house.

Milla went to bed soon afterward and went right to sleep. Since coming here she had slept twice as much as she normally did, as if her body was trying to make up for years and years of erratic hours and unending stress, and also to give her battered mind a rest. Her dreams were slowly becoming more normal, so she didn't wake up crying every night. She wasn't dreaming at all that night when she started abruptly awake to find a dark shadow looming over her, and a naked, heavy weight pressing down on her.

"Shh," Diaz said as he pulled her nightgown up to her waist and spread her legs. "Don't think."

"What—" she began, then inhaled sharply as he rubbed the head of his penis around her opening to moisten it, and pushed inside. Her nails dug into his biceps. She was moist, yes, but not ready; she felt every inch of him as he stretched her soft tissues and settled deep.

Don't think? How could she not think? But her mind was so tired, so bruised from the long weeks of grieving, and with intense relief she felt herself sinking into purely physical sensation. She should tell him no, but she didn't. When he kissed her, she tilted her head and kissed him in return. She needed this escape from herself, and he had known it.

She moved her hands to his shoulders and clutched them as he settled into a slow rhythm. Because she wasn't already aroused, her body only gradually responded to his hands on her breasts, his kisses, the back and forth motion inside her. She felt tension grow in him as he fought the rise of his own climax; sweat gleamed on his hard shoulders and along his back, making her palms slippery, but he didn't falter in the rhythm. There was just enough hallway light coming through her open bedroom door for her to see the glitter in his eyes as he watched her, waiting for and reading each tiny response in the quickening of her breath and heartbeat, the way her legs climbed to hug his hips. Her body began lifting to his to meet each slow thrust, and her arms slid around his neck.

She didn’t want this to end. She knew it had to, knew he couldn’t last forever, but as long as he was inside her the world was held at bay. What he was giving her, besides pleasure, was surcease. He had watched her for weeks, waiting, and tonight he had acted. She’d known he would, eventually. The only wonder was that he’d waited so long.

She felt both relaxed and protected with him, at least from outside forces. Nothing, it seemed, could protect her from him, and tonight she wasn’t even certain she wanted to be. Claimed, and mated. She was his, but was he hers? And if he was, what in hell did they do about it?

“I don’t even know what you want,” she said fretfully, beginning to lose herself in rising sensation.

“This,” he muttered in a dark, rough tone. “You. Everything.”

Her head tilted back, her spine arched, and she began climaxing. He cradled her close and kept up his slow rhythm until her unconscious cries had faded, her fingers had stopped digging into his back, and her legs loosened around his hips. Milla relaxed against the pillows, her eyes closing, her muscles limp and her body replete.

Diaz gently kissed her forehead, then withdrew and tucked the covers around her again, and left as quietly as he’d entered.

Milla lay there, drowsing and trying to decide what was different, for about a minute. She needed to get up and clean herself as she usually did after they made love, but she was so sleepy now and, really, she didn’t feel wet—

She came fully awake, aware of what had happened. Or rather, what hadn’t happened. He hadn’t come. He’d seen to her pleasure, then left without taking his own.

She was out of bed and moving before the thought finished. As soon as she entered the short hallway, she heard the shower running in the bathroom. She pushed open the door and saw him through the clear shower door. He stood with his head bowed and one arm braced against the shower wall in front of him, water beating down on him as he slowly worked his other fist up and down.

No. As she pulled her nightgown over her head and dropped it to the floor, everything in her rebelled at leaving him to this lonely release after he’d so unselfishly seen to hers. She jerked the shower door open and stepped in. “I believe that’s mine,” she said, reaching out to still his fist, then replacing it with her own.

Slowly he raised his head, and she was taken aback by the fierceness in his dark gaze. “Don’t do this unless you mean it,” he rasped.
She didn’t hesitate at the ultimatum. She shook her hair back out of her face as the warm water rained down on her head. His shaft was iron hard in her hand, and in her hand wasn’t where she wanted it. She didn’t let herself think; she just reached up and gripped the shower pipe and used it to lever herself up so she could wrap her legs around his hips. She wasn’t high enough, so she braced one arm on his shoulders and pushed herself higher, trying to maneuver so she could ease down on his thrusting erection.
With a growl he wrapped one arm around her hips and pulled her against him, dipping his head down to close his mouth over her left nipple. His penis pushed up between her legs; gasping, she adjusted her position just a little, then let herself begin to slide down, stretching, enveloping him in her wet heat. He released her nipple as she slowly dropped down, a rough sound catching in his throat.
Just as he’d done to her, she slowly moved up and down, caressing him with her body, drawing out his response. He ground his teeth together, fighting not to come when she was just as determined he would. Frustrated, she wondered why he was holding back—until she heard herself moan, and realized the friction was working on her, too.
The battle there in the shower was in close-combat conditions. With the clinging grip of her body she tried to wring a climax from him, locking her legs around him and pumping hard. He slowed her down with that one arm around her hips, grinding her against him and sending her response rocketing.
The warm water began to go, but the heat generated by their bodies was so intense she scarcely noticed. Diaz turned her so they were out of the spray, breaking her grip on the shower pipe and bracing her against the tile wall. Milla gripped his head with both hands, kissing him with all the fierceness she could muster; then she lost the battle and her head arched back as she began to climax. With an inhuman sound, as if he’d been pushed beyond his limits, he jerked convulsively and began pumping into her with short, hard thrusts that took him to the hilt and made her cry out.
Afterward he slumped against the wall, pinning her to the tile. She was beyond limp, beyond drowsy. He kissed her shoulder, then let his legs bend so that they slid down the wall to sprawl on the shower floor.

Again, silence fell. She didn’t know how to explain what she’d just done, and in any case, she was acutely aware of his stated condition: *Don’t do this unless you mean it.* Don’t do it unless she accepted him as her lover, though arguably what had just passed between them made that a moot point. Don’t do it unless she tore down the wall she’d erected between them. Don’t do it unless she was his and he was hers, with all the ramifications of what that meant. She’d done it, and God help her, she meant it.

Somewhere along the way she’d been stupid enough to fall in love with him. If she hadn’t loved him, his betrayal wouldn’t have hurt so much. Enraged her, yes, but not *hurt*. She couldn’t imagine how, in her lifetime, she’d managed to love two such different men as David and Diaz. One was sunshine, the other was darkness. Perhaps, though, it made sense: the woman she’d been before couldn’t have loved Diaz, but she was no longer that woman. She’d wanted to be, but she wasn’t. The terrible things that had happened had changed her, and there was no going back. She would always love dressing up and fussing with her hair, love decorating her surroundings, the way people did in that program that had so bewildered him, but she was a stronger, harder, fiercer woman than she’d been when Justin was snatched from her arms.

The big question now was: Where did they go from here? She was just as lost now as she’d been that morning. The difference was, now she wasn’t alone.

29

Milla woke the next morning cuddled in Diaz’s arms, her head on his shoulder, the warmth of his body a source of comfort in the cold, gray December morning. Rain was pouring down, much heavier than the day before. As usual, he woke almost simultaneously, either too attuned to her to sleep after she was awake, or too inherently cautious to leave himself so vulnerable. Knowing him as she did, she assumed it was the latter.

She sat up and stretched, easing muscles that were stiff from lying in the same position too long. Still lying beside her, he reached up and rubbed one hand over her bare back. Her hair hung in her eyes and she pushed it back, aware of what a mess it must be, since it had still been wet when they’d tumbled back into bed last night. His bed this time, not hers. Though she

doubted there would be any *his* and *hers* after last night, just *theirs*. The prospect made her uneasy, knowing that while one essential question had been answered last night, a multitude remained undecided.

"I'll turn on the heat," he said. She sat with her arms propped on her drawn-up knees and looked out the window, while he got up and left the bedroom. The house next door was empty, as was the one on the other side. In fact, theirs was the only inhabited house in this entire stretch of rental property. It made her feel as alone as if they were the only people on the planet, though she knew the locals were still here. A few times when she'd been walking on the beach, she'd passed one or two people who were also out getting their exercise, but for the most part she'd had the beach to herself. The windswept desolation had appealed to her aching heart, and in a way the pouring rain did now, too. Her mood was somber; had she made a colossal mistake last night? And even if she had, was there any going back?

Diaz returned with her robe and slippers, then left to put on the coffee. He wasn't very talkative in the morning—or any other time—and that suited her. She crawled out of bed and hurriedly pulled the robe around her, then dashed to the bathroom.

The bathroom had its own radiant heater, and he'd also turned that one on. Because the bathroom was so much smaller, it heated more rapidly, and it was already almost comfortable. Milla stared at her reflection in the mirror and made a face; her hair was definitely a mess. For the first time in a long while, though, her eyes weren't dull with misery. They weren't exactly sparkling, but there was life in them.

She turned on the shower and let the water heat, then got in and briskly washed her hair. The hot water felt good on her sore muscles, reminding her how demanding Diaz had been during the night. He'd been a patient lover but, after the first time, not a gentle one. He'd been hungry in a way he hadn't been even the first time they'd made love, in a way that wasn't completely physical. She tried to analyze the difference, but it eluded her, and she wondered if it wasn't because Diaz himself was so elusive and remote. What was startling was that he'd been neither the night before.

As she was drying off, she automatically touched her hip to make certain her birth control patch was there, and froze. Her fingers found only smooth skin. Horrified, she stared at herself in the mirror as she realized that not only was the patch not there, it hadn't been there for quite some time. For about three weeks, in fact.

She'd had a period. She remembered that, vaguely, because Diaz had gone out to buy tampons for her. Normally she wore the patches for three weeks, putting on a new one every week, then went without for one week, and that was when she'd have her period. That meant she had either removed the patch or it had fallen off after having been on for way longer than it was meant to be; it would have lost its effectiveness after a week anyway and she'd have had a period then. She had absolutely no memory of dealing with the patch, and putting on a new one hadn't crossed her mind.

None of which would have mattered, if it hadn't been for last night. Realistically she knew her chance of getting pregnant was very small; her body wouldn't return to normal for a couple of months after going off the patches. But accidents happened, and women got pregnant all the time when it wasn't supposed to be likely.

Troubled, she dried her hair and actually took some pains styling it before the smell of coffee lured her out. She went to the bedroom and dressed in the warmest clothes she had, sweatpants and a flannel shirt, and frowned as she realized for the first time that she hadn't brought them with her. Diaz must have gotten them. She hadn't paid much attention to his comings and goings—or anything else—over the past few weeks. She just hoped that inattention didn't come back to haunt her.

He was cooking breakfast when she left the bedroom. She poured herself a cup of coffee and said, "I'm not wearing a birth control patch."

He turned the bacon with a fork. "I know."

Of all the things he could have said, that flabbergasted her the most. She gaped at him. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I figured you knew."

"No, I hadn't realized." She sipped her coffee. "This could be a problem."

"Not for me, it isn't."

For a moment the callousness of the remark made her mute with surprise; then the truth struck her: the idea of her getting pregnant didn't upset him at all.

She didn't want to go there.

"It's probably all right," she said. "It takes a while for the system to get back to normal."

"When will you know?"

She groaned and rubbed her face. "I don't know exactly. Do you remember when I had my period?"

“It started two days after we got here.”
She should have put on a new patch before going to see David, she realized, but she’d totally forgotten about it. Mentally she worked out the timing; if she was going to ovulate this month—which she hoped she wouldn’t—the time for it, midcycle, would be right about . . . now. Perhaps. She’d worn the patches for so long that she had no idea of the exact timing of her natural cycle now. But she wasn’t going to take any additional chances; if—when—they had sex again, they’d have to take precautions.
“I’ll get some condoms,” he said as he broke eggs into a mixing bowl, added a little milk, then stirred the mixture with a fork. He was either reading her mind or had been following the same path of logic.
He finished cooking breakfast with the same competency he did everything, and as she tucked into the scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast, she realized she had done absolutely nothing while they’d been here, other than bathe and feed herself. Diaz had done everything else, from the shopping to the cleaning. Uneasily she shied from examining his motives, because she was just now becoming capable of dealing with herself again, on a very limited basis. She wasn’t ready to start thinking about what he wanted.
She helped him clean up afterward, though, and other than a faintly surprised look he showed no reaction. Right after breakfast he showered and left on his condom-hunting expedition; he wasn’t likely to leave something that important to the last minute.
After he left, she wandered around straightening the house, rearranging the decorative pillows on the living room furniture so they were color-coordinated, making his bed, stripping hers and putting the sheets in the wash, since she doubted she’d be sleeping there again. She didn’t know how she felt about that, if she was worried or relieved. Just yesterday she had thought she’d never forgive him for what he’d done, that the breach between them was total and final. Then with one blow he’d smashed down the wall dividing them and she was right back where she’d been: flat on her back beneath him.
Last night, she hadn’t wanted to be anywhere else.
At last, with nothing else to do in the house, she made some fresh coffee and got a blanket from the closet, then carried that and a cup of coffee out onto the screened front porch. She wrapped herself in the blanket and sat down on the wicker love seat, pulling up her feet for warmth. The darkly overcast sky, the gray and turbulent Atlantic, and the cold gray rain all

blended together, robbing the day of both sunlight and color. She wrapped her hands around the warm coffee cup and inhaled the fragrant steam, staring into the curtain of rain as she tried to bring order to the multitude of thoughts swirling around her brain.

Today, for the first time, she realized how much the sharp edge of agony had dulled in the last few days. She could function, she could think of other things, she could carry on a conversation. She could smile. The hurt would never go away, but it had become manageable, and would become more so in the weeks, years ahead.

She wondered what she would have done if Diaz hadn't been there. Even though she had cursed his existence, she'd been totally dependent on him. Mostly he'd left her alone, staying in the background and going hours without even speaking to her, while taking care of the basics of life. At first he had followed her during her walks, but lately he hadn't even done that. He had, uncomplainingly and silently, done everything he could to help her through this.

He loved her.

The realization was almost blinding, and she bowed her head to rest her forehead against her updrawn knees. How on earth was she supposed to reconcile what he'd done concerning Justin with the care he'd given her these past few weeks?

She heard the sound of a motor; then it stopped and was followed by the slam of a door. He was back. She listened to the sound of his progress as he opened the back door and came inside, but then she lost track of his movements because his walk was so damned catlike and she couldn't hear a sound.

The door to the front porch opened and he stepped outside, his sharp gaze sweeping over her in a lightning assessment, as if checking that she was all right. He put his hands in his pockets and moved to lean against the frame of the screen door, his profile somber as he stared out at the gray ocean.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice.

The words lay there between them. He wasn't apologizing for last night—she couldn't imagine that—but for Justin. She doubted he'd ever apologized to anyone before in his life, but there was a simple grace to the offering that told her it was sincere.

"I know you meant to protect him," she said, and wondered why she was making his argument for him.

“I didn’t know what you planned to do. It never occurred to me.”
“You could have asked.”
Except he wasn’t a man who easily trusted, who opened himself up and let people get close to him. How could he have predicted how she would react? His own mother had virtually abandoned him, dragging him back into her life whenever it was convenient to her. What he knew of mothers came from his own experience, and though intellectually he knew, had seen, that most mothers truly loved their children, he’d had no personal connection with that kind of love.
Until she’d handed those legal papers over to the Winborns, she hadn’t been certain herself that she could actually go through with it, and her soul had wept. If she hadn’t been certain, how could she expect him to have intuitively known that she would never harm Justin in any way?
But she was still unable to let it go. She said, “One night while we were in bed you could have asked me. ‘Milla, what will you do if you find Justin? How can you take him away from the only family he’s ever known?’ Then you’d have known what I felt, what I’d already realized.”
He glanced at her over his shoulder. “It never occurred to me,” he repeated. “I—when you turned over those papers, I felt like I’d been shot. I wanted to get down on my knees and kiss your feet, but I figured you’d probably kick me.”
“No ‘probably’ to it. I would have.”
He nodded and turned back to once more watch the ocean. “I didn’t love you.” His tone was low and almost absent, as if he were musing over the words. “Or I don’t think I did. Not at first. But when you kicked me out, I felt”—he paused, and frowned as he considered his own feelings—“cut in half.”
“I know,” she said, remembering her own sense of loss.
“Looking back, I know when it happened. When I tilted over.” He rocked his hand, demonstrating the slight degree between loving and not loving. “In Idaho. I dragged you out of the river and you rolled over on your back and started laughing. Right then.”
And he’d done something about it right then, too. Until then the attraction had been building between them—she’d been half-crazy with wanting him—but neither of them had acted on it. Until that moment, with the sun beating down on them and the relief of being alive sweeping through them, when he’d looked at her and said—

She chuckled. “Some declaration of love that was. Offering your left nut.”
“That wasn’t a declaration of love; that was a declaration of intent. *This* is a declaration of love.” He had his head tilted in that quizzical way she loved, and for a man who found communication difficult, he wasn’t doing badly at all.
Silence fell between them as they both digested what had been said. She felt him waiting to hear her say that she forgave him, that she loved him, too, but though she was certain of the one she didn’t know if she’d ever be able to do the other. The hurt and anger were still there, but no longer on boil. The most she’d be able to do, she thought, was put it behind her and say, okay, we go on from this point. If one wanted to argue the quality of forgiveness, perhaps that *was* forgiveness, just the willingness to go on. But this was Diaz, not your average blue-collar Joe, or even your white-collar Joe. With Diaz, where did they go on *to*?
She couldn’t see a future with him, but neither could she see one without him.
“You might as well say it,” he murmured, still looking out at the ocean. He hadn’t looked at her once since telling her he loved her. “I know you do.”
“Love you? Yes.” She sighed and sipped her coffee. It had gone cold and she grimaced, setting the cup aside. “I do love you.”
“Enough to marry me and have my kids?”
Her breath left her and she felt herself tilt sideways before she caught her balance. “What?” she asked, her voice reedy with shock.
“Marriage. Will you marry me?”
“How could that possibly work out between us?”
“I love you. You love me. It’s a natural progression.”
She raked her hand through her hair, more upset than she’d thought possible at a marriage proposal from him. It was unexpected, and tantalizingly sweet, but the enormity of the problems facing them if they got married was almost too much to comprehend. And part of her was terrified. He’d mentioned not just marriage, but children, too. How could she?
“Getting married wouldn’t be smart,” she said.
He turned and watched her with those dark, grave eyes, studying her, waiting for her to continue.
“Between us, we have enough emotional baggage to fill an airliner. I probably need to be in therapy.” She gave a cracked laugh. “And you’re an assassin. What kind of job security is that? I don’t even know what I want

to do, if I should keep on with Finders or go into teaching the way I'd always planned. Part of me wants to quit, but how can I? I'm good at what I do. I'm just so tired and—"
"Afraid," he said.
"Of the future? You bet."
"No. You're afraid to be happy."
She stared at him, frozen by the accuracy with which he'd seen behind the smoke screen of solid reasoning.
"Have you really convinced yourself that you don't deserve anything because you let Justin be taken from you?" he asked, relentlessly pinning her down. "You think you can't have a husband, another baby, because—what?—you were a bad mother and didn't hold on to him tight enough?"
Her throat worked as she tried to swallow. She felt as if her lungs had seized, her heart stopped. No one had ever said it was her fault; she'd fought for her baby, had fought nearly to the death. Only a knife in her back had stopped her. And yet, for over ten years, she'd struggled with the bone-deep knowledge that she'd failed to protect her child. "I . . . I shouldn't have had him at the market," she said, her voice stifled. "He was just six weeks old. He was too young—"
"You couldn't have left him by himself. What else were you going to do?"
Her lips trembled. God, how that question had gone around and around in her mind! What else could she have done? There had to be something else, something she hadn't thought of, hadn't seen, because she'd let those men take Justin from her.
"Haven't you bought enough redemption for yourself, with all the other lost kids you've found? What will it take for you to forgive yourself?"
Her baby home, safe and sound, and that was never going to be.
Diaz left his post by the door and squatted down in front of her, folding her hands in his. A cold, wet wind tangled her hair, lifted the curls. "Is that why you gave him up? To make yourself pay?"
"No. I gave him up because it was the right thing to do." She saw him shiver, and realized he'd been outside all this time without even a jacket. Impulsively she opened up the blanket and invited him inside its warmth. He was fast to accept, but when they settled back down, she was somehow sprawled half across his lap, with the blanket tucked over and around them and her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder. Their combined body heat quickly chased away the chill.

“It’s okay to live,” he said softly, stroking her face, tracing the lines of it with one finger. “It’s okay to be happy again.”
Just the idea made her feel as if she were balancing on the edge of a cliff, with a stiff wind trying to push her over. “It’s too soon.”
Even admitting that she might one day allow herself to be happy, to get on with life, was like lifting one foot and letting it dangle over the cliff.
“It’s been ten years. You’ve found your son, and you’ve done what was right by him. How is it ‘too soon’?”
“It just is.” Once again, she sought refuge in logic. “By being happy, you mean getting married to you.”
“I can make you happy.”
And she could make him happy, she thought, feeling dizzy at the prospect. He was a complicated, difficult man; if she turned him down, given his solitary nature, he would in all likelihood never marry. She was his one shot at a family, at a halfway normal life.
As if any life with James Diaz could ever be normal.
“How can we get married? What do we know about each other? I don’t even know how old you are.”
“Thirty-three.”
She paused, taken aback and immediately sidetracked from the other salient points she’d been about to make. He seemed older, even though there was no gray in his hair and his face was unlined. “That’s my age. When’s your birthday?”
“August seventh.”
“Oh, my God, I’m older than you! My birthday is April twenty-seventh.”
She was so dismayed that the corners of his mouth kicked up. “I’ve always wanted to sleep with an older woman.”
She thumped him on the chest, which earned her a kiss that was deeper than she’d expected, and longer. When he released her she buried her cold nose against his throat, inhaling the warm scent of him. She wanted to say yes. She loved him, more than she’d thought she would ever love a man again. As difficult as he was, in so many ways they perfectly complemented each other. With her he talked, he joked, he even laughed. Something about her opened him up; something about him pulled her away from the rigid path she’d set for herself.
But she was right about the problems they’d face, and she knew it. Getting married would only compound those problems. “What would you do for a

job? If we got married, you couldn’t keep chasing all over Mexico looking for the bad guys, maybe getting killed—” She stopped, because she couldn’t continue with that thread.

“I don’t know what else I could do, but I’ll find something.”

There weren’t many job openings for retired bounty hunters/assassins. She couldn’t see him in any kind of office setting, or doing anything that required him to work with the public. Just what kind of job could he do?

She was thinking about the future, she realized. Things were moving too fast, and she still didn’t have her feet under her, emotionally speaking. “I can’t say yes,” she said. “Not yet. There are too many problems we have to work through.”

He kissed her again, closing his eyes as he hugged her to him. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll ask again next year,” he said, standing up with her in his arms and maneuvering to open the door.

Ten minutes later, as he moved between her opened legs and settled into place, she realized that this was December. Next year was in three weeks.

30

"Mama! Thane's tearing up my homework! Make him *stop*!"

Milla stirred the spaghetti sauce and cast a harried eye toward the living room, where the shrieks were growing louder. "James! Get Thane away from Linnea."

He was already on his way. The screams grew louder, evidently while he was in the process of peeling Thane away from his eight-year-old sister's homework, but in just a few minutes blessed peace settled over the household, except for an occasional grumble from Linnea as she set about redoing her pages. Diaz appeared in the doorway with a giggling Thane draped around his neck. "What do I do with him now?"

"Play with him. Or tie him to a chair. Something."

Six-year-old Zara was sitting at the kitchen table industriously practicing her letters, working to get them exactly right. Her dark eyes were serious as she said, "He won't like being tied to a chair."

"I was joking, honey." Of their three children, Zara was the most like Diaz, with his somberness and intensity. Linnea was bustling and confident, meeting life head-on, while Zara stood back and watched. Milla took the time to give her youngest daughter a reassuring hug, while Diaz carried Thane outside to distract him with something energetic and, Milla hoped, nondestructive.

Thane was a surprise baby, born two days after her forty-first birthday. They hadn't intended to have any more children, content with their two daughters, but a broken condom had resulted in a little boy that they should more accurately have named Hurricane. Even before he could crawl, Thane had been squirming to be put down so he could explore. When he learned to crawl, the entire household was off and running, trying to catch him before he could get into whatever mischief he'd found. Now that he was two, Milla was beginning to consider a straitjacket—for herself.

It was funny how things had worked out. She and Diaz—she still had to remind herself to refer to him as James—had been married for nine years now. She'd held out on marriage until some of their problems had been worked out, namely her own work and his. She was still executive director of Finders, but the day-to-day operation had been turned over to Joann Westfall, while Milla herself concentrated mostly on fund-raising, which

never ended. She drew a salary now, her hours were more regulated, and she was never away from her children overnight.

Diaz field-tested weapons for a firearms manufacturer and did some consulting work with the El Paso police department, the sheriff's department, and private security firms. She'd been relieved almost to the point of tears when he told her what he was doing, because she'd been worried to death there was no legitimate job where he could use his particular skills. They would never be rich, but they had enough money to support their children and afford a few luxuries, so that was fine.

Living in her condo, with so many close neighbors, had made him antsy. He hadn't complained, but Milla had seen how restless he was, and increasingly jumpy. By the time she was five months pregnant with Linnea, he was getting on *her* nerves so much she knew they had to do something, so Diaz had scouted around and found a house far enough away from other people that he could relax, but not so far away that Milla felt isolated. It was an older house, pleasant, with shade trees in the yard and four roomy bedrooms. At the time, they hadn't known they would need all four of them. They had bought the house, fenced in the yard for the baby's safety, and settled in.

She'd been happy. Though she'd still had her doubts when they finally did get married, almost a year after he first asked her, she'd been almost deliriously happy with him.

Watching him with their children was a delight that still made her heart squeeze. He'd approached Linnea cautiously, as if she were a time bomb, but he'd doggedly learned how to change diapers and all the other things one needed to know with a baby. Discipline was a theory he hadn't quite managed to understand; he'd explained to Milla, with complete and rather baffled seriousness, that the kids cried if he scolded them, so he'd had to stop. The situation had to be dire for him to get stern, with the result that all three children were shocked into instant obedience if he so much as raised his voice. It wasn't fair; Milla sometimes felt she could scream her head off and the children wouldn't pay the least bit of attention to her. That was an exaggeration, because they were normal, bright, inquisitive, generally obedient kids, which meant that some days they were a real pain.

She loved that she could be exasperated with them. One of her greatest fears, while she'd been pregnant, was that the tragedy of the past had turned her into an obsessive, overprotective, stifling sort of mother. She hadn't

been certain she was fit to be a mother. Thank God Linnea had been such a capable child; by the time Zara had arrived, Milla had relaxed. Then they'd had four peaceful, mostly idyllic years—until Thane. The two years since his birth had been joyous, but definitely not peaceful.

"Want to wash your hands and help me set the table?" she asked Zara, who obediently moved her homework off the table and ran off to wash her hands.

Linnea said, "I want to help," and rushed out of the living room, following Zara to the downstairs bathroom to wash her hands, too.

Milla set the big bowl of salad on the table, then checked on the rolls in the oven. They were a nice golden brown, so she took them out and put them in the bread basket. Diaz came back in with Thane, and took him to wash the worst of the dirt from his face and hands while Milla poured the spaghetti in a colander to drain.

The girls were busy putting out the plates and flatware when the doorbell rang. Milla sighed. It never failed; if there was going to be an interruption, it invariably happened as they were sitting down to eat. "I'll get it," she said, passing Diaz as he came out of the bathroom with Thane tucked under his arm.

She opened the door and looked up at a tall young man, with blond hair and blue eyes. Her knees went weak and she sagged against the door, tears burning her eyes.

She knew. From the instant she saw his face, she knew.

He was nervous. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I—are you Milla Edge?"

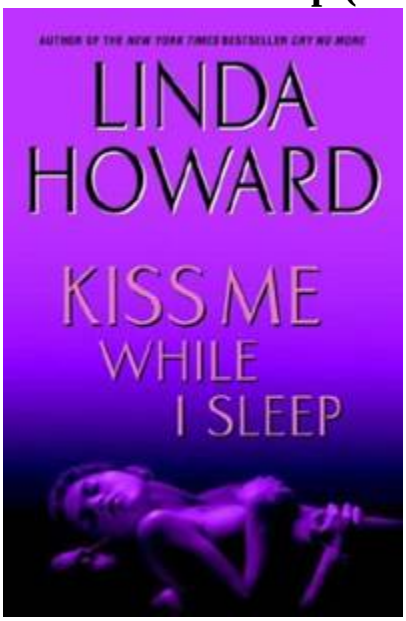
"Milla Diaz, now," she managed to say.

He cleared his throat again, and darted a wary look over her shoulder. She knew Diaz had come up even before his strong hand slid around her waist and drew her against him in support.

"I—uh—I'm Zack Winborn. Justin. Your son," he added, unnecessarily.

Her face was wet, her eyes overflowing; the tears blurred his features. A sob burst out of her before she could stop it, and an alarmed expression crossed his face. Just as suddenly the sob turned into laughter, and she reached out and took his hand. "I've waited so long," she said, and drew him into the house.

Kiss Me While I Sleep (2004)



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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Chapter One

Paris

Lily tilted her head and smiled at her companion, Salvatore Nervi, as the maitre d' silently and with grace seated her at the best table in the restaurant; her smile, at least, was genuine, though almost nothing else about her was. The pale arctic blue of her eyes was warmed to a hazel brown by colored contact lenses; her blond hair had been darkened to a rich mink brown, then subtly streaked with lighter shades. She touched up the roots every few days, so no telltale blond showed. To Salvatore Nervi she was Denise Morel, which was a common enough surname for there to be plenty of Morels in France, but not so common that the name set off subconscious alarms. Salvatore Nervi was suspicious by nature, a fact that had saved his life so many times he probably didn't remember all of the occasions. But if everything worked right tonight, at last he was caught-by his dick, as it were. How ironic.

Her manufactured background was only a few layers deep; she hadn't had time to prepare more. She had gambled that he wouldn't have his people dig any deeper than that, that he would run out of the patience required to wait for the answers before he made a move on her. Normally if a background was required, Langley prepared it for her, but she was on her own this time. She'd done the best she could in the time she had. Probably Rodrigo, Salvatore's oldest son and number two in the Nervi organization, was still digging; her time was limited before he found out that this particular Denise Morel had appeared out of thin air only a few months before.

"Ah!" Salvatore settled in his chair with a contented sigh, returning her smile. He was a handsome man in his early fifties; his looks were classic Italian, with glossy dark hair and liquid dark eyes, and a sensuous mouth. He made a point of keeping himself in shape, and his hair hadn't yet started to gray-either that or he was as skilled as she at touch-ups. "You look especially lovely tonight; have I told you that yet?"

He also had the classic Italian charm. Too bad he was a cold-blooded killer. Well, so was she. In that they were well-matched, though she hoped they weren't an exact match. She needed an edge, however small.

"You have," she said, but her gaze was warm. Her accent was Parisian; she had trained long and hard to acquire it. "Thank you again."

The restaurant manager, M. Durand, approached the table and gave a deferential bow. "It is so nice to see you again, monsieur. I have good news: we have procured a bottle of Chateau Maximilien eighty-two. It arrived just yesterday, and when I saw your name, I put it aside for you."

"Excellent!" Salvatore said, beaming. The '82 Bordeaux was an exceptional vintage, and very few bottles remained. Those that did commanded premium prices. Salvatore was a wine connoisseur and was willing to pay any price to acquire a rare wine. More than that, he loved wine. He didn't acquire bottles just to have them; he drank the wine, enjoyed it, waxed poetic about the different flavors and aromas. He turned that beaming smile on Lily. "This wine is ambrosia; you will see."

"That is doubtful," she calmly replied. "I have never liked any wine." She'd made that plain from the start, that she was an unnatural Frenchwoman who disliked the taste of wine. Her taste buds were deplorably plebeian. Lily, in fact, enjoyed a glass of wine, but when she was with Salvatore, she wasn't Lily; she was Denise Morel, and Denise drank only coffee or bottled water.

Salvatore chuckled and said, “We shall see.” He did, however, order coffee for her.

This was her third date with Salvatore; from the beginning she had played it cooler than he wanted, refusing him the first two times he’d asked her out. That had been a calculated risk, one designed to allay his caution. Salvatore was accustomed to people seeking his attention, his favor; he wasn’t accustomed at all to being turned down. Her seeming lack of interest in him had piqued his own interest, because that was the thing about powerful people: they expected others to pay attention to them. She also refused to cater to his tastes, as in the wine. On their two previous dates he had tried to cajole her into tasting his wine, and she had adamantly refused. He had never before been with a woman who didn’t automatically try to please him, and he was intrigued by her aloofness.

She hated being with him, hated having to smile at him, chat with him, endure even his most casual touch. For the most part she’d managed to control her grief, forcing herself to concentrate on her course of action, but sometimes she was so sick with anger and pain that it was all she could do not to attack him with her bare hands.

She’d have shot him if she could, but his protection was excellent. She was routinely searched before being allowed anywhere near him; even their first two meetings had been at social occasions where all the guests were searched beforehand. Salvatore never got into a car in the open; his driver always pulled under a protected portico for him to enter, and he never went anywhere that required him to make an unprotected exit from the vehicle. If such an exit wasn’t possible, then he didn’t go. Lily thought he must have a secure, secret exit from his house here in Paris, so that he could move about without anyone knowing, but if he did, she hadn’t spotted it yet.

This restaurant was his favorite, because it had a private, covered entrance that most of the patrons used. The establishment was also exclusive; the waiting list was long, and mostly ignored. The diners here paid well for a place that was familiar and safe, and the manager went to some lengths to ensure that safety. There were no tables by the front windows; instead there were banks of flowers. Brick columns throughout the dining floor broke up the space, interfering with any direct line of sight through the windows. The effect was both cozy and expensive. An army of black-suited waiters wove in and out among the tables, topping off wineglasses, emptying ashtrays, scraping away crumbs, and generally fulfilling every wish before most of

them were even voiced. Outside, the street was lined with cars that had reinforced steel doors, bulletproof glass, and armored bottoms. Inside the cars were armed bodyguards who zealously watched the street and the windows of the neighboring buildings for any threat, real or otherwise.
The easiest way to take out this restaurant, and all its infamous patrons, would be with a guided missile. Anything short of that would depend on luck, and at best be unpredictable. Unfortunately, she didn't have a guided missile.
The poison was in the Bordeaux that would shortly be served, and it was so potent that even half a glass of the wine would be deadly. The manager had gone to extraordinary lengths to procure this wine for Salvatore, but Lily had gone to extraordinary lengths to get her hands on it first, and arrange for it to come to M. Durand's notice. Once she had known she and Salvatore were coming here for dinner, she had let the bottle be delivered. Salvatore would try to cajole her into sharing the wine with him, but he wouldn't really expect her to do so.
He probably *would* expect her to share his bed tonight, but he was destined to be disappointed once again. Her hatred was so strong she had barely been able to force herself to let him kiss her and accept his touch with some warmth. There was no way in hell she could let him do more than that. Besides, she didn't want to be with him when the poison began to act, which should be between four to eight hours after ingestion if Dr. Speer was right in his estimation; during that time she would be busy getting out of the country.
By the time Salvatore knew anything was wrong, it would be too late; the poison would already have done most of its damage, shutting down his kidneys, his liver, affecting his heart. He would go into massive, multisystem failure. He might live a few hours after that, perhaps even a full day, until his body finally shut down. Rodrigo would tear France apart looking for Denise Morel, but she would have disappeared into thin air-for a while, at least. She had no intention of staying gone.
Poison wasn't the weapon she would normally have chosen; it was the one she had been reduced to by Salvatore's own obsession with security. Her preferred method was a pistol, and she would have used that even knowing she herself would be shot down on the spot, but she hadn't been able to devise any method of getting a weapon anywhere near him. If she hadn't been working alone, perhaps… but perhaps not. Salvatore had survived

several assassination attempts, and had learned from each of them. Not even a sniper could get a clear shot at him. Killing Salvatore Nervi meant using either poison, or a massive weapon that would also kill any others nearby. Lily wouldn't have minded killing Rodrigo or anyone else in Salvatore's organization, but Salvatore was smart enough to always ensure there were innocents nearby. She couldn't kill so casually and indiscriminately; in that, she was different from Salvatore. Perhaps that was the only difference, but for her own sanity, it was one she had to preserve.

She was thirty-seven years old. She'd been doing this since she was eighteen, so for over half her life she'd been an assassin, and a damn good one at that, hence her longevity in the business. At first her age had been an asset: she had been so obviously young and fresh-faced that almost no one had seen her as a threat. She no longer had that asset, but experience had given her other advantages. That same experience, though, had also worn on her until she sometimes felt as fragile as a cracked eggshell: one more good thump would shatter her.

Or maybe she was already shattered, and just hadn't realized it yet She knew that she felt as if she had nothing left, that her life was a desolate wasteland. She could see only the goal in front of her: Salvatore Nervi was going down, and so was the rest of his organization. But he was the first, the most important, because he was the one who had given the order to murder the people she'd loved most. Beyond this one aim, she could see nothing, no hope, no laughter, no sunshine. It meant almost nothing to her that she probably wouldn't survive the task she'd set for herself.

This in no way meant she would give up. She wasn't suicidal; it was a matter of professional pride that she not only do the job, but get away clean. And there still lurked in her heart the very human hope that if she could just endure, one day this bleak pain would lessen and she would again find joy. The hope was a small flame, but a bright one. She supposed that hope was what kept most people plugging along even in the face of crushing despair, why so relatively few actually gave up.

That said, she had no illusions about the difficulty of what she wanted to do, or her chances both during and after. After she'd finished the job, she would have to completely disappear, assuming she was still alive. The suits in Washington wouldn't be happy with her for taking out Nervi. Not only would Rodrigo be searching for her, but so would her own people, and she didn't figure the outcome would be much different if either caught her.

She'd gone off the reservation, so to speak, which meant she was not only expendable-she'd always been that-but her demise would be desirable. All in all, this wasn't a good situation.

She couldn't go home, not that she really had a home anymore. She couldn't endanger her mother and sister, not to mention her sister's family. She hadn't spoken to either of them in a couple of years anyway… no, it was more like four years since she'd last called her mother. Or five. She knew they were okay, because she kept tabs on them, but the hard fact was she no longer belonged in their world, nor could they comprehend hers. She hadn't actually seen her family in almost a decade. They were part of Before, and she was irrevocably in After. Her friends in the business had become her family-and they had been slaughtered.

From the time that the word on the street had said that Salvatore Nervi was behind her friends' deaths, she had focused on only one thing: getting close enough to Salvatore to kill him. He hadn't even tried to hide the fact that he'd had them killed; he had used the deed to drive home the lesson that crossing him wasn't a good idea. He wasn't afraid of the police; with his connections, he was untouchable on that front. Salvatore owned so many people in high positions, not just in France but all across Europe, that he could and did act exactly as he pleased.

She became aware that Salvatore was speaking to her, and looking annoyed because she so obviously wasn't paying attention. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I'm worried about my mother. She called today, and told me she had fallen down the steps at her home. She said she wasn't injured, but I think I should go there tomorrow to see for myself. She *is* in her seventies, and old people break their bones so easily, don't they?"

It was an agile lie, and not just because she'd been thinking about her real mother. Salvatore was Italian to the bone; he had worshipped his own mother, and understood family devotion. His expression immediately became concerned. "Yes, of course you must. Where does she live?"

"Toulouse," she replied, naming a city just about as far from Paris as you could get and still remain in France. If he mentioned Toulouse to Rodrigo, that might buy her a few hours while Rodrigo searched in the south. Of course, Rodrigo might just as easily assume she had mentioned Toulouse as a diversion; whether or not the ploy worked was a crapshoot. She couldn't worry about second-guessing the second-guessers. She would follow her plan, and hope it worked.

“When will you return?”
“Day after tomorrow, if all is well. If not-” She shrugged.
“Then we must make the most of tonight.” The heat in his dark eyes told her exactly what he was thinking about.
She didn’t dissemble. Instead she drew back slightly, and raised her eyebrows. “Perhaps,” she said coolly. “Perhaps not.” Her tone told him she wasn’t quivering with eagerness to sleep with him.
If anything, her withdrawal sharpened his interest, deepened the heat in his eyes. She thought perhaps her reluctance reminded him of his salad days, when he had courted his late wife, the mother of his children. Young Italian girls of his generation had very closely guarded their virtue, perhaps still did, for all she knew. She hadn’t had much contact with young girls from any country.
Two waiters approached, one bearing the bottle of wine as if a priceless treasure, the other bringing her coffee. She smiled her thanks as the coffee was placed in front of her, then occupied herself with adding rich cream to the brew and ostensibly paying no attention to Salvatore as the waiter made a production of uncorking the bottle and presenting the cork to be sniffed. In fact, her attention was sharply trained on that bottle and the ritual that was being played out. Wine connoisseurs were so earnest about these rituals; she didn’t understand it herself. For her, the only ritual pertaining to wine was pouring it into the glass and drinking it. She didn’t want to smell a cork.
After Salvatore nodded his pleased acceptance, the waiter, solemnly and with great awareness of his audience, poured the red wine into Salvatore’s glass. Lily held her breath while Salvatore swirled the wine, sniffed its bouquet, then took an appreciative taste. “Ah!” he said, closing his eyes in pleasure. “Wonderful.”
The waiter bowed, as if he were personally responsible for the wine’s wonderfulness, then left the bottle on the table and took himself off.
“You must taste this,” Salvatore told Lily.
“It would be a waste,” she said, sipping her coffee. “For me, this is a pleasant taste.” She indicated the coffee. “Wine… bah!”
“This wine will change your mind, I promise.”
“So others have promised me before. They have been wrong.”
“Just a sip, the merest taste,” he cajoled, and for the first time she saw the flare of temper in his eyes. He was Salvatore Nervi, and he wasn’t

accustomed to anyone naysaying him, especially not a woman he had honored with his attention.
“I dislike wine-”
“You haven’t tried *this* wine,” he said, seizing the bottle and pouring a measure in another glass, then extending the glass to her. “If you don’t think this is heaven, I will never again ask you to taste another wine. I give you my word.”
That was true enough, since he would be dead. And so would she, if she drank that wine.
When she shook her head, his temper flared, and he set the glass on the table with a sharp click. “You will do nothing I ask of you,” he said, glaring at her. “I wonder why you are even here. Perhaps I should relieve you of my company and call an end to this evening, eh?”
She would have liked nothing better-if only he had drunk more of the wine. She didn’t think one sip would deliver enough of the poison to do the job. The poison was supposed to be supertoxic, and she had injected enough of it through the cork into the bottle to fell several men his size. If he left in a temper, what would happen to that uncorked bottle of wine? Would he take it with him, or would he storm out and leave it sitting on the table? As expensive as this wine was, she knew it wouldn’t be poured out. No, either another customer would drink it, or the staff would share it
“Very well,” she said, seizing the glass. Without hesitation she carried it to her mouth and tilted it, letting the wine wash against her closed lips, but she didn’t swallow any. Could the poison be absorbed through the skin? She was almost certain it could; Dr. Speer had told her to wear latex gloves when she was handling it. She was afraid her night might now be very interesting, in a way she hadn’t planned, but there was nothing else she could do. She couldn’t even knock the bottle to the floor, because the wait staff would inevitably come in contact with the wine while they were cleaning up.
She didn’t bother to repress the shudder that rolled through her at the thought, and hastily set the glass down before patting her lips with her napkin, then carefully folded the napkin so she wouldn’t touch the damp spot.
“Well?” Salvatore asked impatiently, even though he’d seen the shudder.
“Rotten grapes,” she said, and shuddered again.

He looked thunderstruck. “Rotten-?” He couldn’t believe she didn’t like his wonderful wine.
“Yes. I taste its antecedents, which unfortunately are rotten grapes. Are you satisfied?” She let a hint of temper show in her own eyes. “I dislike being bullied.”
“I didn’t-”
“You did. With the threat of not seeing me again.”
He took another sip of wine, buying time before answering. “I apologize,” he said carefully. “I am not accustomed to-”
“Being told ‘no’?” she asked, mimicking him by sipping her coffee. Would the caffeine speed the poison? Would the cream in the coffee slow it down? She would have been willing to sacrifice herself in order to take just one well-placed shot at his head; how was this any different? She had minimized the risk as much as she could, but it was still a risk, and poison was a nasty way to die.
He shrugged his burly shoulders and gave her a rueful look. “Exactly,” he said, showing her some of his legendary charm. He could be a very charming man, when he chose. If she hadn’t known what he was, she might have been taken in; if she hadn’t stood beside three graves that contained two close friends and their adopted daughter, she might have philosophically decided that, in this business, death was a fairly normal outcome. Averill and Tina had known the risks when they got into the game, just as she had; thirteen-year-old Zia, however, had been an innocent Lily couldn’t forget Zia, or forgive. She couldn’t be philosophic.
Three hours later, the leisurely meal consumed, the entire bottle of wine now sloshing in Salvatore’s stomach, they rose to leave. It was just after midnight, and the November night sky was spitting out swirls of snowflakes that melted immediately on contact with the wet streets. Lily felt nauseated, but that could well have been from the unrelenting tension rather than the poison, which was supposed to take longer than just three hours before the effects began to be felt.
“I think something I ate isn’t agreeing with me,” she said when they were in the car.
Salvatore heaved a sigh. “You do not have to pretend illness in order to not go home with me.”
“I’m not pretending,” she said sharply. He turned his head and stared at the Parisian lights sliding by. It was a good thing he’d drunk all the wine,

because she was fairly certain that he would have written her off as a lost cause in any case.
She leaned her head back against the cushion and closed her eyes. No, this wasn't tension. The nausea was increasing by the moment. She felt the pressure increase in the back of her throat and she said, "Stop the car, I'm going to be sick!"
The driver slammed on the brakes-odd how that particular threat made him instinctively go against his training-and she threw the car door open before the tires had rolled to a stop, then leaned out and vomited into the gutter. She felt Salvatore's hand on her back and another on her arm, holding her, though he was careful not to lean so far that he exposed himself to the line of fire.
After the spasms had emptied her stomach, she slumped back into the car and wiped her mouth with the handkerchief Salvatore silently passed to her.
"I do beg your pardon," she said, hearing with shock how weak and trembly her voice sounded.
"It is I who must beg yours," he said. "I didn't think you were truly ill. Should I take you to a doctor? I could call my own doctor-"
"No, I feel somewhat better now," she lied. "Please just take me home."
He did, with many solicitous questions and a promise to call her first thing in the morning. When the driver finally pulled to a stop in front of the building where she rented a flat, she patted Salvatore's hand and said, "Yes, please call me tomorrow, but don't kiss me; I might have caught a virus."
With that handy excuse, she pulled her coat around her and dashed through the thickening snowfall to her door, not looking back as the car pulled away.
She made it to her flat, where she collapsed into the nearest chair. There was no way she could grab her necessities and make it to the airport, as she had originally planned. Perhaps this was best, after all. Endangering herself was the best cover of all. If she was also ill from poisoning, Rodrigo wouldn't suspect her, wouldn't care what happened to her when she recovered.
Assuming she survived, that is.
She felt very calm as she waited for whatever would happen, to happen.

Chapter Two

Her door was kicked open with a splintering crash shortly after nine o'clock the next morning. Three men entered, all with weapons drawn. Lily tried to lift her head, but with a low moan let it drop back to the rug that covered the polished dark wood of the floor.

The faces of the three men swam in front of her as one knelt beside her and roughly turned her face toward him. She blinked and tried to focus. Rodrigo. She swallowed and reached for him with one hand, a silent plea for help.

She wasn't faking. The night had been long and difficult She had vomited several times, and had been seized by alternating waves of hot and cold. Sharp pains had stabbed through her stomach, leaving her curled in a fetal ball, whimpering with distress. For a while she thought her dose must have been lethal after all, but now it seemed the pains were abating. She was still too weak and sick to climb from the floor onto the couch, or even to phone for help. Once last night she'd tried to get to the phone, but her effort had come too late, and she hadn't been able to reach it.

Rodrigo swore softly in Italian, then holstered his weapon and rapped out an order to one of his men.

Lily gathered her strength and managed to whisper, "Do not… get so close. I may be… contagious."

"No," he said in his very excellent French. "You aren't contagious."

Moments later a soft blanket settled over her, and Rodrigo briskly wrapped it around her before gathering her into his arms and, with easy strength, rising to his feet.

He strode out of the flat and down the back stairs, where his car waited with the motor idling. The driver jumped out when he saw Rodrigo, and opened the rear door.

Lily was roughly bundled into the car, with Rodrigo on one side of her and one of the other men on the other. Her head lolled against the back of the car seat and she closed her eyes, whimpering in her throat as sharp pain once more daggered through her stomach. She didn't have the strength to stay upright and felt herself slowly begin to topple. Rodrigo made an exasperated sound, but shifted around so she could recline against him.

Most of her consciousness was taken up by her sheer physical misery, but one clear, cold portion of her brain remained separate and alert. She wasn't out of the woods yet, with either the poison or Rodrigo. For now, he was withholding judgment, but that was all. At least he was taking her

somewhere for medical treatment-she hoped. He probably wasn't taking her anywhere to kill her and dump her body, because killing her in the apartment and walking away would have been far easier. She didn't know if anyone had seen him carrying her out, but the odds that someone had were good, even though he'd taken her out the back way. Not that he cared if anyone saw him, at least not much. She assumed Salvatore was either dead or dying, and Rodrigo was now the head of the Nervi organization; as such, he'd inherited a lot of power, both financial and political. Salvatore'd had a lot of people in his pocket.

She fought to keep her eyes open, to pay attention to the route the driver was taking, but her lids kept drifting shut Finally she thought to hell with it and gave up the effort. No matter where Rodrigo was taking her, there was literally nothing she could do about it.

The men in the car were silent, not making even idle comments. The atmosphere seemed heavy and strained, with grief or worry or even rage. She couldn't tell which, and since they weren't talking, she couldn't eavesdrop. Even the outside noise of the traffic seemed to fade away, until at last there was nothing.

The gate to the compound slid open as the car approached, and the driver, Tadeo, slotted the white Mercedes through the gap with only inches to spare on each side. Rodrigo waited until they were stopped under the portico and Tadeo had jumped out to open the passenger door before he shifted Denise Morel around. Her head lolled back and he realized she was unconscious. Her face was a pasty yellowish-white, her eyes sunk back in her head, and an odor clung to her-the same odor he'd noticed on his father.

Rodrigo's stomach clenched as he fought to contain his grief. He still couldn't quite believe it-Salvatore was dead. Just that fast, he was gone. The news hadn't got out yet, but it was only a matter of time. Rodrigo wouldn't be allowed the luxury of grieving; he had to move fast, consolidate his position and take up the reins, before their rivals moved in like a pack of jackals.

When the family doctor had said Salvatore's ailment looked like mushroom poisoning, Rodrigo had moved quickly. He dispatched three men to take M. Durand from the restaurant and bring him to the house, while he himself, with Tadeo driving, took Lamberto and Cesare to find Denise Morel. She was the last person his father had been with before falling ill, and poison

was a woman's weapon, indirect and indefinite, depending on guesswork and happenstance. In this case, though, the weapon had been effective. But if his father had died at her hand, she had then poisoned herself, too, instead of fleeing the country. He hadn't truly expected her to be at her flat, since Salvatore had said she was going to Toulouse to visit her ailing mother; Rodrigo had taken that as a handy excuse. It seemed he'd been wrong-or at least the possibility of error was strong enough that he hadn't shot the woman on sight

He slid out of the car and hooked his hands under her arms, then dragged her out behind him. Tadeo helped support her until Rodrigo could slide his arm under her knees and lift her against his chest. She was of normal height, about five and a half feet, but on the lanky side; even though she was dead weight, he handled her easily as he carried her inside.

"Is Dr. Giordano still here?" he asked, and received an affirmative reply. "Tell him I need him, please." He took her upstairs to one of the guest bedrooms. She would be better off in a hospital, but Rodrigo wasn't in the mood to answer questions. Officials could be so annoyingly *official.* And if she died, then she died; he had made all the effort he was willing to make. It wasn't as if Vincenzo Giordano wasn't a real medical doctor, even if he no longer had a practice and instead spent all his time in the lab on the outskirts of Paris that Salvatore had funded-though, perhaps if Salvatore had called for help earlier and asked to be taken to a hospital, he would still be alive. Still, Rodrigo hadn't questioned his father's decision to have Dr. Giordano brought in, had even understood it. Discretion was everything, when vulnerability was involved.

He laid Denise on the bed and stood looking down at her, wondering why his father had been so besotted with her. Not that Salvatore hadn't always had an eye for the ladies, but this one was nothing out of the ordinary. Today she looked awful, her hair lank and uncombed, her color as terrible as if she were already dead, but even at her best she wasn't beautiful. Her face was a bit too thin, too austere, and she had a slight overbite. The overbite, however, made her upper lip look fuller than the lower one, and that alone gave her features a piquancy she would otherwise have lacked. Paris was full of women who were better looking and had a better sense of style than Denise Morel, but Salvatore had wanted this one, to the point that he'd been too impatient to completely investigate her background before approaching her. To his astonishment, she'd refused his first two invitations,

and Salvatore's impatience had turned into obsession. Had his preoccupation with her caused him to relax his guard? Was this woman indirectly responsible for his death?

So great was Rodrigo's pain and rage that he might have strangled her just because of the possibility, but beneath those feelings was the cool voice that said she might be able to tell him something that would lead him to the poisoner.

He would have to find out who had done this, and eliminate him-or her. The Nervi organization could not let this go without retaliation, or his reputation would suffer. Since he was just now stepping into Salvatore's shoes, he couldn't afford the least doubt about his ability, or his resolve. He had to find his enemy. Unfortunately, the possibilities were endless. When one dealt in death and money, all the world was involved. Because Denise had also been poisoned, he even had to consider whether the perpetrator could be a jealous ex-lover of his father's-or one of Denise's old lovers.

Dr. Vincenzo Giordano tapped politely on the frame of the open door, then stepped inside. Rodrigo glanced at him; the man looked haggard, his usually neat salt-and-pepper curls disordered, as if he'd been pulling at them. The good doctor had been his father's friend since boyhood, and he'd wept unashamedly when Salvatore had died not two hours ago.

"Why isn't she dead, too?" Rodrigo asked, indicating the woman on the bed.

Vincenzo took Denise's pulse, and listened to her heart. "She might still die," he said, rubbing a hand over his weary face. "Her heartbeat is too fast, too weak. But perhaps she didn't ingest as much of the poison as your father did."

"Do you still think it's mushrooms?"

"I said it *looked* like mushroom poisoning-for the most part. But there are differences. The speed with which it acted, for one thing. Salvatore was a big, robust man; he wasn't feeling ill when he returned home last night at almost one o'clock, he died just six hours later. Mushrooms are slower acting; even the deadliest will take almost two days to kill. The symptoms were very similar; the speed was not"

"It wasn't cyanide or strychnine?"

"Not strychnine. The symptoms weren't the same. And cyanide kills within minutes, and causes convulsions. Salvatore wasn't convulsive. The

symptoms of arsenic poisoning are somewhat similar, but different enough to rule that out also."
"Is there any way to tell for certain what was used?"
Vincenzo sighed. "I'm not certain it is a poison at all. It could be a virulence, in which case we have all been exposed."
"Then why hasn't my father's driver become ill? If this is a virus that works within hours, then he, too, should be ill by now."
"I said it *could* be, not that it *is.* I can do tests, with your permission examine Salvatore's liver and kidneys. I can compare his blood analysis with that of… What is her name?"
"Denise Morel."
"Ah, yes, I remember. He talked about her." Vincenzo's dark eyes were sad. "I think he was in love."
"Bah. He would have lost interest in her eventually. He always did."
Rodrigo shook his head, as if clearing his mind. "Enough of that. Can you save her?"
"No. She will either survive, or she will not. There is nothing I can do."
Rodrigo left Vincenzo to his tests and went to the basement room where his men were holding M. Durand. The Frenchman was already the worse for wear, with thin rivulets of blood trickling from his nose, but for the most part Rodrigo's men had concentrated on punches to the body, which hurt more and weren't as readily visible.
"Monsieur Nervi!" the restaurant manager croaked when he saw Rodrigo, and began weeping with relief. "Please, whatever has happened, I know nothing about it. I swear to you!"
Rodrigo pulled up a chair and sat down in front of M. Durand, leaning back and crossing his long legs. "My father ate something in your restaurant last night that disagreed with him," he said with massive understatement.
An expression of total bewilderment and astonishment crossed the Frenchman's face. Rodrigo could read his thoughts: He was being beaten to a pulp because Salvatore Nervi had *indigestion?* "Rut-but," M. Durand sputtered. "I will refund his money, of course, he had only to ask." Then he dared to say, "This wasn't necessary."
"Did he eat mushrooms?" Rodrigo asked.
Another look of bewilderment "He knows he did not. He ordered chicken in wine sauce, with asparagus, and Mademoiselle Morel had the halibut. No, there were no mushrooms."

One of the men in the room was Salvatore's regular driver, Fronte; he bent down and whispered in Rodrigo's ear. Rodrigo nodded.
"Fronte says that Mademoiselle Morel became ill just after leaving your restaurant." So she'd been stricken first, Rodrigo thought. Had she been the first to take whatever poison they'd ingested? Or had it worked faster on her, because of her lower body weight?
"It was not my food, monsieur." Durand was highly insulted. "None of the other patrons became ill, or had any complaint The halibut had not gone bad, and even if it had, Monsieur Nervi didn't have it."
"What food did they share?"
"Nothing," M. Durand replied promptly. "Except perhaps the bread, though I didn't see Mademoiselle Morel eat any. Monsieur drank wine, an exceptional Bordeaux, Chateau Maximilien's eighty-two vintage, and Mademoiselle drank coffee as usual. Monsieur did prevail upon her to taste the wine, but it wasn't to her liking."
"So they shared the wine."
"A small sip only. As I said, she didn't care for it. Mademoiselle does not drink wine." Durand's very Gallic shrug said he didn't understand such peculiarity, but there it was.
But last night she had drunk wine, even if it was only a small sip. Was the poison so potent that one sip would threaten her life?
"Was there any wine left?"
"No. Monsieur Nervi drank it all."
That wasn't unusual. Salvatore's head had been remarkably hard, with the result that he drank more than most Italians.
"The bottle. Do you still have the bottle?"
"It will be in the refuse box, I'm certain. Behind the restaurant"
Rodrigo ordered two men to go search through the trash and find the empty Bordeaux bottle, then turned back to M. Durand. "Very well. You will remain my guest"-he gave a humorless smile-"until this bottle and the dregs have been analyzed."
"But that can-"
"Take days, yes. I'm sure you understand." Perhaps Vincenzo could get his answers faster than that, in his own lab, but that remained to be seen.
M. Durand hesitated. "Your father… he is very ill?"
"No," said Rodrigo, rising to his feet. "He is dead." And once more the words arrowed straight through his heart.

* * *

By the next day, Lily knew she would live; it took Dr. Giordano another two days to make the same pronouncement. She needed the entire three days before she felt well enough to get out of bed and take a much-needed bath. Her legs were so shaky she had to hold on to furniture to make her way to the bathroom, her head swam and her vision was still a little blurry, but she knew the worst was past.

She had fought desperately for consciousness, refusing the drugs Dr. Giordano tried to give her to ease her pain, give her sleep. Even though she had passed out during the drive over to what was obviously the Nervi compound, she hadn't been drugged. Despite the excellence of her French, it wasn't her first language; if she were sedated, her native American English might slip out. She had pretended to be afraid she would die in her sleep, that she felt she could fight the poison so long as she remained alert, and though Dr. Giordano knew that was medically ridiculous, he had nevertheless bowed to her wishes. Sometimes, he'd said, the patient's mental condition meant more to recovery than the physical condition.

When she slowly, laboriously made her way out of the lavishly appointed marble bathroom, Rodrigo was sitting in the chair by the bed, waiting for her. He was dressed all in black, turtleneck and trousers, a dark omen in the white-and-cream bedroom.

Immediately all her instincts went to a higher stage of alertness. She couldn't play Rodrigo the way she had Salvatore. For one thing, as wily as Salvatore had been, his son was smarter, tougher, more cunning-and that was saying something. For another, Salvatore had been attracted to her, and Rodrigo wasn't.

For the father she had been a younger woman, a conquest, but she was three years older than Rodrigo and he had plenty of conquests of his own.

She was wearing a set of her own pajamas, brought from her flat yesterday, but she was glad of the extra covering of the thick Turkish robe she'd found hanging on a hook in the bathroom. Rodrigo was one of those overtly sexual men who made women very aware of him, and she wasn't immune to that facet of his personality, even though she knew enough about him to make her cold with disgust. He wasn't innocent of the majority of Salvatore's sins, though he *was* innocent of the murders that had moved her to vengeance; by chance, Rodrigo had been in South America at the time.

She struggled to the bed and sat on it, clinging to one of the posts at the foot for support. She swallowed and said, “You saved my life.” Her voice was thin and weak. *She* was thin and weak, in no shape to protect herself.
He shrugged. “As it happens, no. Vincenzo-Dr. Giordano-says there was nothing he could do to help. You recovered on your own, though not without some damage. A heart valve, I believe he said.”
She already knew that, because Dr. Giordano had told her the same thing that very morning. She had known the possibilities when she took the risk.
“Your liver, though, will recover. Already your color is much better.”
“No one has told me what was wrong. How did you know I was sick? Did Salvatore become ill, too?”
“Yes,” he said. “He didn’t recover.”
Some reaction other than, “Oh, good,” was expected of her, so Lily deliberately thought of Averill and Tina, of Zia with her adolescent gangliness, her bright, cheerful face and nonstop chatter. Oh, God, she missed Zia so much; it was an ache in the center of her chest. Tears filled her eyes, and she let them drip down her cheeks.
“It was poison,” Rodrigo said, both his expression and tone as calm as if he’d commented on the weather. She wasn’t deceived; he had to be in a rage. “In the bottle of wine he drank. It appears to be a synthetic, designer poison, very potent; by the time the symptoms occur, it’s already too late. Monsieur Durand from the restaurant said you tasted the wine.”
“Yes, one sip.” She wiped the tears from her face. “I dislike wine, but Salvatore was insistent, and he was becoming angry because I didn’t want to taste it, so I did… just one very small sip, to please him. It was nasty.”
“You are lucky. According to Vincenzo, the poison is so potent that had you drunk any more than that, if the sip hadn’t been very small, you would be dead.”
She shuddered, remembering the pain and vomiting; she had been that sick without actually swallowing any of the wine, just letting it touch her lips.
“Who did this? Anyone could have drunk that wine; was it some terrorist who didn’t care who he killed?”
“I think my father was the target; his love of wine was well-known. The eighty-two Chateau Maximilien is very rare, yet a bottle mysteriously became available to Monsieur Durand the day before my father’s reservation at his restaurant.”
“But he might have offered the wine to anyone.”

“And taken the risk that my father would hear about it and take umbrage that this rare wine wasn’t offered to him? I think not. This tells me the poisoner is very familiar with Monsieur Durand and his restaurant, and the clientele.”
“How was it done? The bottle was uncorked in front of us. How was the wine poisoned?”
“I imagine a very thin hypodermic needle was used to inject the poison through the cork. It wouldn’t have been noticeable. Or the bottle could have been uncorked, then resealed if the proper equipment was available. To Monsieur Durand’s extreme relief, I don’t believe either he or the waiter who served you are culpable.”
Lily had been out of bed so long that she was trembling with weakness. Rodrigo noticed the tremors that shook her entire body. “You may stay here until you are fully recovered,” he said politely, rising to his feet. “If you need anything, you have only to ask.”
“Thank you,” she said, then uttered the biggest lie of her life: “Rodrigo, I’m so sorry about Salvatore. He was… he was—” He was a murdering asshole son of a bitch, but now he was a dead murdering asshole son of a bitch. She managed to produce one more tear, thinking of Zia’s little face.
“Thank you for your condolences,” he said without expression, and left the room.
She didn’t do a victory dance; she was too weak, and for all she knew there were hidden cameras in the room. Instead she climbed back into bed and tried to seek refuge in strength-restoring sleep, but she was feeling too triumphant to do more than doze.
Part of her mission was accomplished. Now all she had to do was disappear before Rodrigo discovered Denise Morel didn’t exist.

Chapter Three

Two days later, Rodrigo and his younger brother, Damone, stood beside their parents’ graves at their boyhood home in Italy. Their mother and father were once more side by side in death as they had been in life. Salvatore’s grave was covered in flowers, but both Rodrigo and Damone had taken some of the flowers and put them on their mother’s grave, too.

The weather was cool but sunny, and a light breeze was blowing. Damone put his hands in his pockets and stared up && the blue sky, his handsome face drawn with grief. “What will you do now?” he asked.
“Find who did this and kill him,” Rodrigo said without hesitation. Together they turned and began walking away from the gravesite. “I’ll also put out a press release about Papa’s death; ft can’t be kept quiet much longer. The news will make some people nervous, wondering about the status of various agreements now that I am in charge, and I will have to deal with that. We may lose some revenue, but nothing that we can’t absorb. And the losses will be short-term. The revenues from the vaccine will make up the difference, and more. Much more.”
Damone said, “Vincenzo has made up the lost time?” He was more of a businessman than Rodrigo, and it was he who handled the majority of their finances from his own headquarters in Switzerland.
“Not as much as we had hoped, but work is progressing. He assures me he will be finished by next summer.”
“Then he is doing better than I’d expected, considering how much was lost.” An incident at Vincenzo’s lab had destroyed much of his current project.
“He and his people are working very long hours.” And would be working even longer ones if Rodrigo saw they were falling behind schedule. The vaccine was too important to let Vincenzo miss the deadline.
“Keep me abreast of the situation,” said Damone. By agreement, because of security issues, they wouldn’t be together again until after the poisoner was identified and apprehended. He turned and looked back at the new grave, his dark eyes filled with the same pain and rage Rodrigo felt. “It’s still so hard to believe,” he said, almost inaudibly.
“I know.” The two brothers hugged, unashamed of their emotion, then got into separate cars for the trip back to their private airfield, where they would each take a corporate jet home. Rodrigo had taken comfort in his younger brother’s presence, in having what was left of his immediate family next to him. Despite the sadness of their purpose for being together, there had also been an ease of companionship. Now each returned to their linked but separate empires, Damone to watch over the money, Rodrigo to find their father’s killer and exact revenge. Whatever steps he took, he knew, Damone would support him.

But the fact was, he hadn’t been able to make any progress in finding who had killed Salvatore. Vincenzo was still analyzing the poison, which might give them an idea of its origin, and Rodrigo had been closely watching his rivals for any hint of knowledge that Salvatore had died, any aberration in their usual pattern of doing business. One might think their less legitimate associates would be seen as the most likely suspects, but Rodrigo didn’t eliminate anyone from suspicion. It could even be someone within their own organization, or someone in the government. Salvatore had had his fingers in many pies, and evidently someone had got greedy enough to want the whole pie to himself. Rodrigo just had to discover which one.

“Drive Mademoiselle Morel home,” Rodrigo told Tadeo after she had been there a week. She was steady on her feet now, and though she seldom left her bedroom, he wasn’t comfortable having a stranger under his roof. He was still busy consolidating his position-unfortunately, a couple of people had felt he wasn’t the man his father had been and were impelled to challenge his authority, which had in turn impelled him to have them killed-and there were some things a stranger shouldn’t accidentally see or hear. He would feel more comfortable when the house was once more a total haven.

It took only a matter of minutes for the car to be brought around and the woman and her few belongings loaded inside. After Tadeo had left with the Frenchwoman, Rodrigo went into Salvatore’s study-his study now-and sat behind the huge carved desk that Salvatore had loved. Vincenzo’s report on the poison, analyzed from the dregs in the wine bottle recovered from the restaurant’s refuse, lay in front of him. He had looked over the report when he first received it, but now he picked it up again and thoroughly studied it, going over every detail.

According to Vincenzo, the poison was chemically engineered. It contained some of the properties of orellanine, the poison in the deadly galerina mushroom, which was why he had first suspected mushrooms. Orellanine attacked several internal organs, most notably the liver, kidneys, heart, and the nervous system, but orellanine was also notoriously slow. Symptoms wouldn’t appear for ten hours or more, then the victim would appear to recover, only to die several months later. There was no known treatment or antidote for orellanine. The poison had also shown some relation to minoxidil, with the effects of bradycardia, heart failure, hypotension, and depressed respiration-which would help to render the victim unable to recover from the orellanine look alike. Minoxidil worked fast, orellanine

worked slowly; somehow the two properties had been combined in such a way that there was a delay, but of only a few hours.
Also according to Vincenzo, there were only a few chemists in the world capable of doing this work, and none of them worked in reputable drug corporations. Because of the nature of their work, they were both expensive to hire and difficult to contact. This particular poison, at such a potency that less than an ounce would kill a hundred-and-fifty-pound man-or woman-would cost a small fortune to produce.
Rodrigo steepled his fingers and thoughtfully tapped them against his lips. Logic told him the killer he sought would almost certainly be a business rival or someone seeking to avenge a past grievance, but instinct kept him looking at Denise Morel. There was something about her that nagged at him. He couldn't identify the source of his faint discomfort; so far his investigations had told him she was exactly what she purported to be. Moreover, she, too, had been poisoned and very nearly died, which any logical man would say proved she wasn't the villain. And she had wept when he told her of Salvatore's death.
Nothing pointed to her. The waiter who had served the wine was a far more likely suspect, but exhaustive questioning of both M. Durand and the waiter had produced nothing but the information that M. Durand himself had put the bottle in the waiter's hands and watched him take it, without detour, to the Nervi table. No, the person he sought was the one who had brought the availability of the bottle of wine to M. Durand's attention, and so far there was no record of that person. The bottle had been bought from a company that didn't exist.
Therefore, the killer was fairly sophisticated in the trade, with the means of procuring both the poison and the wine. He-for convenience' sake Rodrigo thought of the killer as a "he"-had researched both his victim and his victim's habits; he had known Salvatore frequented that particular restaurant, known when he had a reservation, and known with some certainty that M. Durand would of course hold this particular bottle for his very important customer. The killer also had the skill to present a believable facsimile of a legitimate company. All of this pointed to a level of professionalism that practically screamed "competitor."
And yet, he still couldn't quite disregard Denise.
It wasn't likely, but this could still be a crime of passion. No one was beyond suspicion until he knew for certain who had killed his father.

Whatever his father had seen in Denise, perhaps some other man had seen the same thing, and been just as obsessed.
As for Salvatore's past lovers… Rodrigo mentally reviewed them, and all but categorically dismissed them from contention. For one thing, Salvatore had been like a honey bee, never staying long enough with one lover for any real connection to be formed. Since his wife's death, some twenty years before, he had been amazingly active in the romance department, but no woman had come close to joining his wife in his regard.
Moreover, Rodrigo had investigated every woman who spent time with his father. Not one of them had shown any signs of obsessive behavior, nor would they have had the knowledge of such an exotic poison, or the means of acquiring it, much less the hideously expensive wine. He would investigate them again, just to be certain, but he thought they would all check out clean. However, what about the people in *Denise's* past?
He had questioned her about that, but she hadn't provided any names, merely saying, "No, there's no one."
Did that mean she'd lived virtuous and nunlike all her life? He didn't think so, though he did know for a fact that she'd refused Salvatore's propositions. Or did it mean there had been lovers but no one she considered capable of such a thing? He didn't care what she thought; he wanted to draw his own conclusions.
Ah, there it was. Why wouldn't she tell him about anyone in her past? Why was she so secretive? *That* was what bothered him about her; there was no reason for her not to give him the name of everyone she had been with since adolescence. Was she protecting someone? Did she have an idea of who could have put the poison in that bottle, knowing her dislike of wine and never dreaming she might drink some of it?
He hadn't investigated her as thoroughly as he would have liked; first Salvatore had been too impatient to wait, and then their dates had been so no eventful-until the last one-that Rodrigo had basically put the matter aside. Now, however, he would find out everything there was to know about Denise Morel; if she had ever even thought about sleeping with anyone, he would know it. If anyone was in love with her, he would find the man.
He picked up the telephone and dialed a number. "I want Mademoiselle Morel watched at all times. If she moves an inch outside her door, I want to know about it If anyone calls her, or she places any calls, I want the call traced. Is that understood? Good."

In the privacy of the guest bedroom's bathroom, Lily had worked hard to regain her strength. A thorough search of the room had revealed neither camera nor microphone, so she knew she was safe from observation there. At first she'd been able to do only stretching exercises, but she'd pushed herself hard, jogging in place even when she had to hold on to the marble vanity to keep her balance, doing push-ups and sit-ups and ab crunches. She forced herself to eat as much as she could, fueling her recovery. She knew pushing herself could be dangerous, with her damaged heart valve, but it was a calculated risk, as was almost everything else in her life.

The first thing she did once she was back in her flat was subject it to the same exhaustive search that the bathroom had received. To her relief, she didn't find anything. Rodrigo must not suspect her, or he would have had the place bugged seven ways from Sunday while she'd been incapacitated. No, he would have killed her on just suspicion alone.

That didn't mean she was safe. When he asked about her past lovers, she'd known she had only a few days to get away, because he would be digging deeper into Denise's past and finding out there *was* no past.

If her flat had been searched-and she had to assume it had been-the searchers had been very neat. But they hadn't found her stash of getaway items, or she wouldn't be standing here now.

The old building had once been heated by fireplaces, which at some time after World War II had been replaced by radiators. The fireplace in her flat had been bricked over, and a chest shoved in front of it. She had put a cheap rug under the chest, not to prevent the floor from being scarred, but so she could silently move the chest about by pulling the rug. She pulled the rug away from the wall now, and got down on her belly to inspect the bricks. Her repair job wasn't noticeable; she'd dirtied the mortar so it looked as aged as the mortar around it. There wasn't any mortar dust on the floor, either, to indicate that anyone had tapped on the bricks.

She got a hammer and chisel, lay down on her belly again, and began gently tapping the mortar from around one of the bricks. When it was loosened, she worked it free, then another, then another. Reaching her hand into the cavity of the old fireplace, she pulled out an array of boxes and bags, each item safely wrapped in plastic to keep it clean.

One small box held her alternate identities: passports, credit cards, driver's licenses, ID cards, depending on which nationality she chose. A bag held three wigs. There were distinctive changes of clothes, kept hidden because

they were so memorable. Shoes were a different matter; she'd simply put the shoes she'd need in her closet, dumped in a pile with all her other shoes. How many men would pay any attention at all to a tangle of shoes? She also had a supply of cash, in euros, pounds sterling, and American dollars.

In the last box was a secure cell phone. She turned it on and checked the battery: low. Taking out the charger, she plugged it into a wall outlet and set the phone in the cradle.

She was exhausted, sweat beading her forehead. She wouldn't go tomorrow, she thought; she was still too weak. But day after tomorrow, she would have to move, and move fast.

So far she'd been lucky. Rodrigo had kept the news of Salvatore's death quiet for several days, which had bought her some time, but with every minute that passed, the danger grew that someone in Langley would see a photograph of Denise Morel, scan it into a computer, and the computer would spit out the report that, hair and eye color aside, Denise Morel's features matched those of one Liliane Mansfield, contract agent for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Then the CIA would be hot on her trail, and the Agency had resources Rodrigo Nervi could only dream about. For practical reasons, Salvatore had been left in place with the Agency's blessings; no one there would look kindly on her for taking him out.

It was a toss-up who would come after her first, Rodrigo or someone sent by the CIA. She would have a better chance against Rodrigo, because he would probably underestimate her. The Agency wouldn't make that mistake.

Because it would look odd if she didn't, and also because she wanted to see if she was under surveillance, she bundled up against the chill and walked to the neighborhood market. She'd spotted one guard as soon as she came out of her building; he was sitting in a nondescript gray car parked halfway down the block, and as soon as she walked out, he lifted a newspaper to cover his face. Amateur. But if there was one in front, she could assume there was also one in back. The good news was there wasn't a guard inside her building, which would have made matters a bit more iffy. She didn't want to have to go out a third-story window, as weak as she was.

She carried a cloth shopping bag into which she put some produce and fruit. An Italian-looking man-who didn't really stand out unless you were specifically looking for him-meandered around in her wake, always keeping

her in view. Okay, that made three. Three were enough to do a competent job, but weren't so many that she couldn't handle them.

After paying for her selections, she walked back to her flat, careful to keep her gait rather slow and laborious. She walked with her head down, the picture of dejection, and not the way anyone who was the least alert would walk. Her watchers would think she was completely unaware of them and, moreover, that her health was still so precarious she could scarcely get around. Since they weren't extraordinarily skilled in surveillance, that meant they would somewhat relax their guard without realizing it, because she was such a poor challenge.

When her cell phone was fully charged, she took it into the bathroom and turned on the tap water to mask sound, in case a Parabolic microphone was aimed at her flat. The chance of that was admittedly small, but in her business paranoia saved lives. She booked a first-class one-way ticket to London, disconnected, then called back and, under another identity, booked a flight out of London that left within half an hour of her arrival, headed back to Paris, where absolutely no one would expect her to go. After that, she would see, but that little maneuver should buy her some more time.

Langley, Virginia

Early the next morning, a junior analyst named Susie Pollard blinked at what the computer facial-recognition program had just told her. She printed out the report, then wove her way through a maze of cubicles to stick her head inside another cubicle. "This looks interesting," she said, handing the report to a senior analyst, Wilona Jackson.

Wilona slid her glasses into place and swiftly looked over the document. "You're right," she said. "Good catch, Susie. I'll kick this upstairs." She stood, a six-foot-tall black woman with austere features and a no-bullshit attitude honed to perfection on her husband and five rowdy sons. Without another woman in the household for backup, she said, she had to stay on top of things. That carried over to her work, where she tolerated no nonsense. Anything she kicked upstairs was given proper consideration, or else.

By noon, Franklin Vinay, director of operations, was reading the report. Salvatore Nervi, the head of the Nervi organization-he couldn't call it a corporation, though corporations were involved-was dead of an undisclosed ailment. The exact date of his death was unknown, but Nervi's sons had buried him at their home in Italy before releasing the news. His last sighting was at a Parisian restaurant, with a lapse of four days between then and the

announcement of his death. He had apparently been in perfect health, so the unknown ailment had occurred rather abruptly. It happened, of course; heart attacks or strokes struck down seemingly healthy people every day.
What set the alarm bells to clanging was the facial-recognition program, which said that, without doubt, Nervi's newest lady friend had been none other than one of the CIA's best contract agents in disguise. Liliane Mansfield had darkened her wheat-blond hair and put in dark contacts to hide her distinctive pale blue eyes, but it was undoubtedly her.
Even more alarming was the fact that, a few months ago, two of her closest friends and their adopted daughter had died at Nervi's hands. All of the indications were that Lily had gone off the reservation and taken matters into her own hands.
She'd known the CIA wouldn't sanction the kill. Salvatore Nervi was a disgusting example of humanity who deserved killing, but he'd been smart enough to play both ends against the middle and make himself useful, as insurance against just this sort of thing. He had passed along extremely useful information, and done so for years. That information pipeline was now lost, perhaps irrevocably; it would take them years, if they could at all, to develop the same relationship with the heir apparent. Rodrigo Nervi was notoriously suspicious, and not apt to jump at any partnership. Frank's only hope in that direction was that Rodrigo would prove to be as pragmatic as his father.
Frank hated working with the Nervis. They had some legitimate business concerns, yes, but they were like Janus: everything they did had two faces, a good side and a bad side. If their researchers were working on a cancer vaccine, another group in the same building was working to develop a biological weapon. They gave huge amounts of money to charitable organizations that did a lot of good work, but they also funded terrorists groups that killed indiscriminately.
Playing in the pool of world politics was like playing in a sewer. You had to get dirty in order to play. Privately, Frank thought the end of Salvatore Nervi was good riddance. In the realm of his work, though, if Liliane Mansfield was responsible, he had to do something about it.
He pulled up her security-coded file and read it. Her psychological profile said that she'd been operating under some strain for a couple of years now. In his experience there were two types of contract agents: those who did their work with no more emotion than they would expend on swatting a fly,

and those who were convinced of the good they did but whose souls, nevertheless, wore thin under the constant assault. Lily was in the latter group. She was very good, one of the best, but each hit had left its mark on her.

She had stopped contacting her family years ago, and that wasn't good. She would feel isolated, cut off from the very world she'd worked to protect Under those circumstances, her friends in the business had become more than just friends; they'd become her surrogate family. When they were hit, her tattered soul had perhaps taken one blow too many.

Frank knew some of his colleagues would laugh at him, thinking in terms of souls, but he'd been in this business a long time and he not only knew what he saw, he *understood* it.

Poor Lily. Perhaps he should have pulled her out of the field when she first started showing signs of psychological strain, but it was too late now. He had to deal with the situation that existed.

He picked up the phone and had his assistant locate Lucas Swain, who, wonder of wonders, was actually in the building. The fickle Fates must have decided to smile on Frank.

Some forty-five minutes later, his assistant buzzed him. "Mr. Swain is here."

"Send him in."

The door opened and Swain sauntered in. Actually, he sauntered everywhere. He walked like a cowboy who had nowhere to go and wasn't in any hurry to get there. Ladies seemed to like that about him.

Swain was one of those good-looking people who seemed to be perpetually good-natured, too. There was a goofy smile on his face as he said hello and took the chair Frank indicated. For some reason, the smile worked in the same way as the walk: people liked him. He was a devastatingly effective field officer because he went in under people's radar. He might be a happy man, he might have a walk that looked like the definition of laziness, but he got the job done. He'd been getting the job done in South America for the better part of a decade, which explained the deep tan and rock-hard leanness.

He was beginning to show his age, Frank thought, but then, weren't they all? There was gray at the temples and along the hairline of Swain's brown hair, which was kept cropped short because of an unruly cowlick in front There were lines bracketing his eyes and on his forehead, creases in his

cheeks, but with his luck, the ladies probably thought that was as cute as his walk. *Cute.* It was a sad day in hell, Frank reflected, when he was mentally describing one of his best male field officers as *cute.*
“What’s up?” Swain asked, stretching his long legs out as he relaxed, his spine curving so he sank down in his chair. Formality wasn’t Swain’s way.
“A delicate situation in Europe. One of our contract agents has gone off the reservation, killed a valuable asset We need her stopped.”
“Her?”
Frank handed the report over the desk. Swain took it and swiftly read through it, then passed it back. “The deed’s done. What’s there to stop?”
“Salvatore Nervi wasn’t alone in the situation that ended with the death of Lily’s friends. If she’s on a rampage to get all of them, she could wreck our entire network. She’s already done considerable damage by eliminating Nervi.”
Swain screwed up his face and briskly rubbed both hands over it. “Don’t you have some irascible rogue agent, forcibly retired under a cloud, with some special skill that makes him the only choice possible for locating Ms. Mansfield and stopping her killing ways?”
Frank bit the inside of his cheek to control a smile. “Does this look like a movie production to you?”
“A man can hope.”
“Consider your hopes dashed.”
“Okay, then, how about John Medina?” Swain’s blue eyes were full of laughter as he got into the spirit of deviling Frank.
“John’s busy in the Middle East,” Frank said calmly.
His reply brought Swain upright in his seat, all hint of laziness gone. “Wait a minute. Are you saying there really is a Medina?”
“There really is a Medina.”
“There’s no file on him-” Swain began, then caught himself, grinned, and said, “Oops.”
“Meaning you’ve checked.”
“Hell, everyone in the business has checked.”
“That’s why there’s no file in the computer system. For his protection. Now, as I was saying, John’s deep cover in the Middle East, and in any case, I wouldn’t use him for a retrieval.”
“Meaning he’s way more important than I am.” Swain had that goofy grin again, meaning he took no offense.

“Or that he has different talents. You’re the man I want, and you’ll be on a plane to Paris tonight. Here’s what I want you to do.”

Chapter Four

After spending an entire day eating, resting, and doing light workouts to increase her stamina, Lily got up the morning of her departure feeling much better. She carefully packed her carry-on bag and shopping tote, making sure she was leaving nothing crucial behind. Most of her clothes were left hanging in the closet; the odd photographs of complete strangers that she had put in cheap frames and set around the flat, to give herself the appearance of a background, were left in place.

She didn’t strip the bed linens or wash the single bowl and spoon she’d used for breakfast, though she did take the precaution of thoroughly wiping the place down with oil-dissolving disinfectant, to destroy her fingerprints. That was something she’d been doing for nineteen years, and the habit was strongly ingrained. She had even wiped down her surroundings before leaving the Nervi compound, though she hadn’t been able to use a disinfectant She had also always wiped her eating utensils and drinking glasses with a napkin before they were collected, and cleaned her hairbrush every morning, flushing the stray hairs that collected in the bristles.

She was uncomfortably aware she couldn’t do anything about the blood Dr. Giordano had drawn for analyzing, but DNA wasn’t used for identification the same way that fingerprints were; there was no extensive database. Her fingerprints were on file in Langley, but nowhere else; except for the occasional assassination, she’d been a model citizen. Even fingerprints were no good unless there was a file somewhere to match them to, and get a name. One slipup meant nothing. Two provided a means of identification. To the best of her ability, she tried never to provide even a starting point. Probably Dr. Giordano would find it odd in the extreme if she called him and asked for the return of any leftover blood. If she were in California, now, she could claim she was a member of a weird religious cult and needed the blood, or even that she was a vampire, and probably get any remnants returned.

The ghoulish thought made her mouth curve into a wan smile, and she wished she could share that thought with Zia, who’d had a rich sense of the

absurd. With Averill and Tina, and especially with Zia, she'd been able to relax and act silly occasionally, like a normal person. For someone in her line of work, relaxation was a luxury, and done only with others of her kind. The faint smile faded. Their absence left such a huge void in her life that she didn't think she'd ever be able to fill it. Over the years her affection had been given to an ever-shrinking circle, until finally there had been just five people in it: her mother and sister-and she no longer dared visit them for fear of bringing the danger of her job to their doorsteps-and three friends. Averill had once been her lover; for a very brief time they had staved off the loneliness together. Then they had drifted apart, and she met Tina during a job that required two agents. She had never bonded instantly with anyone before the way she had with Tina, as if they had been twins meeting for the first time. They had only to look at each other to know they were thinking the same things at the same times. They had the same sense of humor, the same silly dreams that someday, when they weren't in this line of work any longer, they'd get married and own their own businesses-not necessarily in that order-and maybe even have a kid or two.

Someday had come for Tina when, like helium balloons floating around in a closed room, Averill eventually floated across her path. Lily and Tina might have had tons in common, but chemistry was one thing that was different; Averill took one look at slim, brunette Tina and fell in love, and the feeling was mutual. For a while, between jobs, they had bummed around together and generally had a blast They were young and healthy and good at their jobs; admittedly, being assassins made them feel tough and invincible. They were professional enough not to swagger, but young enough to feel the rush.

Then Tina was shot, and reality crashed down on them. The job was deadly. The rush was no longer there. Their own mortality stared them in the face. Averill and Tina reacted to it by getting married, as soon as Tina was well enough to walk down the aisle. They set up housekeeping together, first in a flat here in Paris, then they bought a small house on the outskirts. They began taking fewer and fewer jobs.

Lily usually came back to visit whenever she could, and one day she brought Zia with her. She'd found the baby, abandoned and starving to death, in Croatia, just after Croatia had declared its independence from Yugoslavia, when the Serb army was already decimating pockets of the new country in the beginning of the bitter war. No one Lily had asked seemed to

have any knowledge of the baby's mother, or none they'd admit to, and they had even less interest. It was either take the baby with her or know she was leaving it to die a miserable death.

Within two days she loved the infant as fiercely as if she'd given birth to it herself. Getting out of Croatia hadn't been exactly easy, especially since she was lugging a baby. She'd had to find milk, and diapers, and blankets. She hadn't worried about clothes at that point, just some means, any means, of keeping the baby fed and dry and warm. She named her Zia, just because she liked the name.

Then there was the problem of getting paperwork for Zia, finding a forger good enough, and getting her into Italy. Once out of Croatia, caring for her was less difficult, the supplies Lily needed more readily available. The task of caring for her was never easy, though. The baby jerked and went rigid whenever Lily touched her, and often spat up almost as much milk as she swallowed. Rather than subject the infant to even more travel, when she'd had so few constants in her very short life, Lily decided to stay in Italy for a while.

She thought Zia had been only a few weeks old when she'd found her, though it was possible lack of food and care had made her smaller than average. After staying in Italy for three months, though, Zia had gained enough weight to have dimples on her plump little hands and legs, she was drooling incessantly as she began to cut teeth, and she looked at Lily with the openmouthed, wide-eyed expression of sheer joy that only the very young could achieve and not look like total idiots.

Finally she took Zia to France to meet Uncle Averill and Aunt Tina.

The changeover in custody happened very gradually. Whenever Lily had a job, she would leave Zia with them; they loved the baby and she was content with them, though it still broke Lily's heart every time she had to leave her, and she lived for the moment when she returned and Zia saw her for the first time. That little face would light up and she'd squeal in delight, and Lily thought she'd never heard a sound so beautiful.

But then the inevitable happened: Zia was growing up. She needed to attend school. Lily was sometimes gone for weeks at a time. It was only logical that Zia spend more and more time with Averill and Tina, until finally they all realized they had to get some more papers forged, showing the couple as Zia's parents. By the time Zia was four, Averill and Tina were Daddy and Mom to her, and Lily was Aunt Lil.

For thirteen years Zia had been the emotional center of Lily's life, and now she was gone.

What on earth had caused Averill and Tina to get back into a game they were well out of? Had they needed money? Surely they had known all they had to do was ask Lily, and she'd have given them every euro and dollar she had-and after nineteen years of the very lucrative work she did, she'd had a hefty balance in a Swiss bank. But something had lured them out of retirement, and they'd paid with their lives. And so had Zia.

Now Lily had used up most of her savings getting that poison and setting up the situation. Good papers cost money, and the better they were the more they cost. She'd had to rent the flat, get an actual job-because not having one would have been suspicious-then put herself in Salvatore Nervi's path and hope he took the bait. That hadn't been a sure bet, by any means. She could make herself look very attractive, but she knew she wasn't a beauty. If that hadn't worked, she would have thought of something else; she always did. But it *had* worked, beautifully, right up until the moment Salvatore insisted she taste his wine.

Now she had one-tenth the money she'd had before, she had a damaged heart valve that, as Dr. Giordano had explained, would eventually have to be replaced, her stamina was laughable, and her time was running out. From a logical standpoint, she knew her odds weren't good. This time not only did she not have Langley's resources behind her, the Agency would actually be working against her. She wouldn't be able to use any of her known safe havens, she couldn't call for either backup or extraction, and she would have to be on guard against… everyone. She had no idea whom Langley would send after her; they might simply locate her and have a sharpshooter take her out, in which case she had nothing to worry about, because there was no way she could protect herself from something she couldn't see. She wasn't Salvatore Nervi, with a fleet of steel-reinforced cars and protected entrances. Her only hope was not to let them locate her. On the plus side… Well, there was no plus side.

That didn't mean she'd walk out into the open and make herself an easy target. They might take her down, but she'd make it as difficult for them as possible. Her professional pride was at stake. With Zia and the others gone, pride was just about all she had left.

She waited as long as she dared before using her cell phone to call for a taxi to the airport. She had to cut it as close as possible, to limit the time

Rodrigo would have to get people in place. At first the men tailing her wouldn't know where she was going, but as soon as they realized she was headed to the airport, they'd call Rodrigo for instructions. The chance of Rodrigo already having someone-or several someones-on the payroll at the airport was at least fifty-fifty, but de Gaulle was a large airport and, without knowing exactly which airline she was taking or her destination, heading her off would be difficult All they could do was follow, but only so far before security would stop them.

If Rodrigo had the passenger list checked, the jig would be up, because she wasn't flying under the name of Denise Morel, or even her own name. She had no doubt he'd check; the only question was how soon he'd do it. At first, he might not even be suspicious enough to do more than have her followed.

By leaving so openly, and taking so little luggage, she hoped he'd be curious but not suspicious, at least not for the short amount of time it would take her to disappear.

If the gods were smiling on her, he wouldn't be unduly suspicious even when his men lost track of her in busy Heathrow. He might wonder why she flew instead of taking a ferry or tunnel, but a lot of people flew the short hop from Paris to London, and vice versa, if they were short of time.

In the best possible scenario, he wouldn't think anything of her trip for at least a couple of days, until she failed to return home. The worst possible scenario would be if he had his men grab her in de Gaulle airport, regardless of witnesses and possible repercussions. Rodrigo wouldn't worry about either of those. She was betting he wouldn't go to that extent; so far he hadn't discovered she wasn't who she said she was, because he hadn't had his men storm her flat. In the absence of that knowledge, there was no reason for him to cause a public disturbance.

Lily went downstairs to wait for the taxi, standing where she could see the street but her watchers couldn't see her. She had thought about walking the several blocks to a taxi rank and waiting in line, but that would have given Rodrigo time she didn't want him to have, and also tired her. Once-only a little over a week ago-she could have sprinted the distance and not even been winded.

Perhaps her heart had sustained little damage, just enough for Dr. Giordano to detect the murmur, and this insidious weakness would eventually go away. She'd been very sick for over three days, eating nothing, flat on her

back. The human body lost strength much faster than it gained it She'd give it a month; if she wasn't back to normal in that length of time, she'd have some tests run on her heart. She didn't know where, or how she'd pay for it, but she'd manage.

Of course, that was assuming she was still alive a month from now. Even after she escaped from Rodrigo, she'd still have to evade her former employer. She hadn't computed those odds yet; she didn't want to discourage herself.

A black taxi stopped outside. Picking up her carry-on bag, Lily murmured, "Show time," and calmly stepped outside. She didn't hurry, didn't in any way appear nervous. When she was seated, she took a mirrored compact out of her tote and angled it so she could watch her watchers.

As the taxi pulled away, so did a silver Mercedes. It slowed, a man darted over and practically leaped into the passenger seat, then the Mercedes accelerated until it was right behind the taxi. In the mirror, Lily could see the passenger talking on a cell phone.

The airport was about thirty kilometers out of the city; the Mercedes stayed behind the taxi all the way. Lily didn't know if she should be insulted or not; did Rodrigo think she was too stupid to notice, or that she would simply not care if she did? On the other hand, normal people didn't check to see if they were being followed, so the fact that her watchers were so blatant could mean Rodrigo still didn't really suspect her of anything, despite having her watched and followed. Judging from what she knew about him, she thought he would do that until he discovered who killed his father. Rodrigo wasn't one to let a loose end go untied.

When they reached the airport, she walked calmly to the British Airways desk to check in. Her passport said her name was Alexandra Wesley, British citizen, and the passport photo matched her current coloring. She was flying first class, she wasn't checking any luggage, and she had carefully built up this identity, over several years, with numerous stamps on her passport showing she visited France several times a year. She had several such identities, prudently kept private even from her contacts at Langley, for just such emergencies.

Boarding for the flight had already been called by the time she went through all the security checks and got to the designated jjate. She didn't look around her, instead carefully studying her surroundings with her

peripheral vision. Yes, that man there; he was watching her, and he held a cell phone in his hand.
He didn't make any move toward her, just made a call. Her luck was holding.
Then she was safely on the plane, effectively in the hands of the British government Her designated seat was next to the window; the aisle seat was already occupied by a stylishly dressed woman who looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. Lily murmured an apology as she slid past the woman to the window seat.
Within half an hour they were in the air for the hour's flight to London. She and her seatmate exchanged pleasantries, Lily using a public-school accent that seemed to put the woman at ease. The British accent was easier to maintain than the Parisian one, and she almost sighed with relief as her brain seemed to relax. She dozed briefly, tired from all the airport walking.
When they were fifteen minutes out of London, she leaned over and pulled her carry-on bag from underneath the seat. "I'm sorry to disturb you," she said hesitantly to the woman beside her, "but I've a bit of a problem."
"Yes?" the woman said politely.
"My name is Alexandra Wesley, perhaps you've heard of Wesley Engineering? That's my husband, Gerald. The thing is-" Lily looked down, as if embarrassed. "Well, the thing is, I'm leaving him and he isn't taking it at all well. He's set men to following me, and I'm afraid he'll have them grab me. He's a bit abusive, set on having his way, and… and I really can't go back."
The woman looked both uncomfortable and intrigued, as if she didn't like hearing such intimate details from a stranger but was fascinated in spite of herself. "You poor dear. Of course you can't go back. But how can I help?"
"When we leave the plane, will you take this bag for me and go to the nearest public loo? I'll follow you and take it back. It has a disguise in it," she said quickly, when the woman's face showed alarm at being asked to take a stranger's bag in this age of terrorism. "See, look through it." She quickly unzipped the bag. "Clothes, shoes, wigs. Nothing else. The thing is, they might think of that-that I'd disguise myself, I mean-and pay attention to the bags I take into the loo with me. I read a book on how to evade a stalker and it mentioned this. He'll have men at Heathrow waiting for me, I know it; as soon as I step out for transportation they'll take me." She wrung her hands, hoping she looked suitably distressed. It helped that her face was

still thin and drawn from illness, and that she was normally lanky anyway, making her look more frail than she was.
The woman took the bag from Lily and carefully went through every item. A smile broke over her face when she examined one of the wigs. “Hiding in plain sight, are you?”
Lily smiled back. “I hope it works.”
“We’ll see. If not, we’ll share a taxi. Safety in numbers, and all that” The woman was getting into the spirit of things now.
If her seatmate hadn’t been a woman, Lily would have improvised, taken her chances, but this gambit slightly increased her chances, and at this point she was willing to grab at the least advantage. Agency men could be waiting for her, as well as Rodrigo’s goons, and they wouldn’t be as easy to fool.
Depending on how they wanted to play it, they could have her arrested as soon as she stepped off the plane, in which case there was nothing she could do. They usually played it much closer to the vest than that, though. If they could avoid involving the British government in what was essentially a housekeeping chore to them, then they would.
The plane landed and went to the gate with a minimum of fuss. Lily took a deep breath, and her cohort patted her hand. “Don’t worry,” she said cheerfully. “This will work, you’ll see. How will I know if they’ve spotted you?”
“I’ll tell you where the men are standing. I’ll look for them when I go into the loo. Then I’ll leave before you, and when you come out, if they’re still there, then you’ll know it worked.”
“Oh, this is exciting!”
Lily really hoped not.
The woman took the carry-on bag and exited the plane two people ahead of Lily. She walked briskly, looking at the signs but not staring at the people waiting at the gate. Good girl, Lily thought, hiding a smile. She was a natural.
There were two of them waiting for her, and again they made no particular effort to disguise their interest. Glee rose in her. Rodrigo still didn’t suspect anything truly unusual, didn’t think she would notice she was being followed. This might really work.
The two men trailed in her wake, staying about twenty or thirty feet back. Up ahead, her cohort went into the first public restroom. Lily paused just

outside at a water fountain, giving her followers time to choose their positions, then entered.
The woman was waiting just inside and handed over the bag. “Is anyone there?” she asked.
Lily nodded. “Two of them. One is about six feet tall, largish, and he’s wearing a light gray suit. He’s standing directly across from the door, against the wall. The other is smaller, short dark hair, double-breasted blue suit, and he’s in position about fifteen feet ahead.“
“Hurry and change. I can’t wait to see you.”
Lily went into a stall and swiftly began her identity change. The severe dark suit and low heels came off; in their place went a bright pink tank top, painted-on turquoise leggings, stiletto knee-high boots, a fringed turquoise jacket, and a short, spiky red wig. She dumped the clothes she’d removed into the carry-on, and stepped out of the stall.
A huge smile lit the woman’s face, and she clapped her hands. “Wonderful!”
Lily couldn’t help grinning. She swiftly added blusher to her pale cheeks, a thick coating of pink lipstick, and dangling feathered earrings. Slipping a pair of pink shades over her eyes, she said, “What do you think?”
“My dear, /wouldn’t have recognized you, and I knew what you were about. I’m Rebecca, by the way. Rebecca Scott.”
They shook hands, each delighted for different reasons. Lily took a deep breath. “Here I go,” she murmured, and strode boldly out of the restroom. Both of her followers involuntarily stared at her; everyone did. Looking directly beyond the dark-haired man who stood practically in front of her, Lily waved enthusiastically. “I’m here!” she squealed to no one in particular, though in this crowd that would have been difficult to determine. This time she used her own distinctly American accent, and dashed past her watchers as if joining someone.
As she went by the dark-haired man, she saw him jerk his gaze back to the restroom entrance, as if afraid that moment of inattention had allowed his quarry to escape.
Lily walked as rapidly as she could, losing herself in the crowd. The five-inch heels put her close to six feet tall, but there was no way she intended to wear them any longer than necessary. As she neared her departure gate, she ducked into yet another public restroom, and changed out of the eye-grabbing disguise. When she left that bathroom, she had long black hair and

wore black jeans and a thick black turtleneck sweater, with the same low-heeled shoes she'd worn on the flight over. She had wiped off the pink lipstick, replaced it with red gloss, and exchanged the pink shades for gray ones. Her papers as Alexandra Wesley were stowed in her tote, and the ticket and passport in her hand stated she was Mariel St. Clair.
Soon she was on a plane headed back across the Channel to Paris, this time in coach. She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. So far, so good.

Chapter Five

Rodrigo was furious. He said, carefully, "how, precisely, did you manage to lose her?"
"She was followed from the moment she exited the plane," replied the British voice on the phone. "She entered the public facilities, and never came out."
"Did you send someone in to look for her?"
"After some length of time, yes."
"Exactly *what* length of time?"
"Perhaps twenty minutes passed before my men became alarmed, sir. Then I had to wait until a female could be brought to the location to enter the facilities and search."
Rodrigo closed his eyes as he tried to rein in his temper. Bumblers! The men following Denise must have become distracted and not noticed her leaving the facilities. There were no other exits, no windows or trash chutes or anything else. She could only have left the same way she entered, yet these idiots had somehow completely overlooked her.
The matter wasn't terribly important, but inefficiency annoyed him. Until he got the answers he wanted about Denise's background, he wanted to know exactly where she was and what she was doing. In fact, he'd expected to have those answers the day before, but the bureaucracy was being as inefficient as usual.
"One thing is puzzling, sir."
"And that is?"
"When my men lost her, I immediately checked with Customs, but we have no record of her."

Rodrigo sat upright, a sudden frown drawing his brows together. “What does that mean?”
“It means she disappeared. When I checked the passenger list of the inbound flight, there was no Denise Morel listed. She did get off the plane, but then she somehow disappeared. The only plausible explanation is that she got on another plane, but I have no record of her doing that.”
Alarm bells rang in Rodrigo’s head so loudly they were almost deafening. He went cold, frozen by the sudden horrible suspicion. “Check the records again, Mr. Murray. She must have done.”
“I have already double-checked, sir. There is no record of her entering or leaving London. I was very thorough with my search.”
“Thank you,” Rodrigo said, and hung up the phone. He was so enraged he was dizzy from the force of his emotions. The bitch had played him for a fool!
Just to make certain, he called his contact in the Ministry. “I need that information immediately,“ he barked, not identifying either himself or the information in question. He didn’t need to.
“Yes, of course, but there is a problem.”
“You can’t find where this particular Denise Morel exists?” Rodrigo asked sarcastically.
“How did you know? I’m certain I can-”
“Don’t trouble yourself. You won’t find her.” His suspicions confirmed, Rodrigo hung up again and sat behind the desk trying to contain the sulfuric rage that blasted through him. He had to think clearly, and at the moment that was beyond him.
She was the poisoner. How clever of her, to also poison herself, but with such a small dose that she would be sick for a time but would survive. Or perhaps she hadn’t intended to sip the wine at all, but his father had insisted and she accidentally took a larger swallow than she’d intended. That part didn’t matter; what mattered was that, ultimately, she had succeeded in killing his father.
He couldn’t believe how she had fooled him, fooled them all. Her paperwork had been perfect, as far as it went. Now that it was too late, he saw with perfect clarity how it had worked. Salvatore had been lulled into carelessness by her apparent indifference to his advances, and Rodrigo, too, had allowed himself to relax after Salvatore’s first few meetings with her were so ordinary. If she had appeared eager for his father’s company, he

would have been much more vigorous in demanding answers, but she had played them all perfectly.
She was obviously a professional, no doubt paid by one of his rivals. As a professional, she had other identities to use when she disappeared afterward, or perhaps she simply used her own real name, since *Denise Morel* was an alias. She had definitely been on that plane to London-his men had seen her there-therefore, one of the passengers listed was her. He simply had to discover which one, and follow the path from there. The task before him now-or rather, before his people who would be doing the actual work-was daunting, but he had a starting point He would have them investigate every person on that plane, and he would find her.
No matter how long it took, he *would* find her. And then he would make her suffer far more than his poor father had suffered. Before he finished with her, she would not only tell him everything she knew about who had hired her, she would also die cursing her own mother for giving birth to her. This he swore on the memory of his father.
Lucas Swain moved silently about the flat that Liliane Mansfield, aka Denise Morel, had abandoned.
Oh, her clothes were still here, or most of them, anyway. Food still in the cupboard, a bowl and spoon in the sink. It looked as if she'd gone to work, or was just out shopping, but he knew better. He knew a professional job when he saw one. There wasn't a fingerprint in the place, not even on the spoon left in the sink. The wipe-down was perfect.
Judging from the file he'd read on her, the clothes she'd left behind weren't her type, anyway. The clothes belonged to Denise Morel, and now that Denise had served her purpose, Lily had shed her like a snake shedding its skin. Salvatore Nervi was dead; there was no reason for Denise to exist any longer.
What puzzled him was why she'd hung around for so long. Nervi had evidently been dead for a week or longer, but the landlord reported Mile. Morel had taken a taxi this very morning. No, he did not know to where, but she was carrying a small bag. A weekend trip, perhaps.
Hours. He'd missed her by mere hours.
The landlord hadn't let him into the flat, of course; Swain'd had to sneak in, then quietly spring the lock on Lily's flat. The landlord had obligingly told him which flat it was, saving Swain from having to break in during the night and look at the records, which would have wasted time.

As it was, this was wasted time anyway. She wasn't here, and she wasn't coming back.

There was a bowl of fruit on the table. He selected an apple, polished it on his shirt, and bit into it Damn, he was hungry, and if she'd wanted the apple, she'd have taken it with her. Curious, he opened the icebox to see what else she had in the way of food, and closed the door again in disappointment. Chick food: fruit, some fresh produce, and what was either cottage cheese or yogurt that was way too old. Why didn't women who lived alone ever have real food around? He'd kill for a pizza, loaded with pepperoni. Or a grilled steak, with a huge baked potato dripping with butter and sour cream. Now, that was *food*.

While he pondered what his next step should be in locating his quarry, he ate another apple.

According to her file, Lily was very comfortable in France and spoke the language like a native. She supposedly had a talent for accents, too. She had spent some time in Italy and traveled all over the civilized world, but when she settled down for a rest, it was in either France or Great Britain, where she felt most at home. Logic would say she had got the hell out of Dodge, meaning she was no longer in France. That left Great Britain as the most likely place to start looking.

Of course, since she was very good at her job, she might have considered the same logic and gone someplace else entirely, such as Japan. He grimaced. He hated it when he out-thought himself. Well, he might as well play it by the numbers and start with the most likely place first; even a blind hog sometimes found an acorn.

There were three common ways to cross the Channel: ferry, train, and airplane. He picked air, because it was the fastest, and she'd be wanting to put some space between her and the Nervi organization. London wasn't the only G.B. destination she could have chosen, of course, but it was the closest, and she'd want to give any pursuers the shortest length of time possible in which to organize an interception. Information could be relayed instantly, but moving human beings around still took time. That made London the logical destination, which left him with two major airports to cover, Heathrow and Gatwick. He opted for Heathrow first, because it was the busiest and most crowded.

He took a seat in the cozy little parlor-no recliners, damn it-and pulled out his trusty secure cell phone. After punching in a long series of numbers, he

pressed the *send* button and waited to connect. A brisk British voice said, “Murray here.”
“Swain. I need some info. A woman named Denise Morel may or may not have-”
“This is certainly a coincidence.”
Adrenaline surged through Swain, the kick felt by a hunter who has suddenly found the trail he’d been seeking. “Someone else has asked about her?”
“Rodrigo Nervi himself. We were told to follow her when she deplaned. I put two men on it; they tailed her as far as the first public facility. She went in, and never came out. She didn’t go through Customs, and I show no record of her taking another flight out. She’s a very resourceful woman.“
“More than you know,” Swain said. “You told Nervi all of this?”
“Yes. It’s my standing order to cooperate with him-up to a point. He didn’t ask to have her killed, just followed.”
But the fact that she had disappeared so thoroughly would have tipped Nervi off to her capabilities, which in turn would put her in an entirely new light. By now Nervi would have discovered there was no Denise Morel of this particular description, and worked out for himself that she was almost certainly the person who had killed his father. The heat on Lily had just been turned up a couple of thousand degrees.
How had she slipped away in Heathrow? A secure-access door? First she would have had to slip out of the restroom undetected, and that meant a disguise. A clever woman like Lily would have figured out how to do that, been prepared for it. And she would have had an alternate identification to use, too.
“A disguise,” he said.
“I thought the same, though I didn’t say so to Mr. Nervi. He’s a smart man, so he’ll eventually think of it, even though airport security isn’t his milieu. Then he’ll want me to look at all the film.”
“Have you?” If the answer wasn’t yes, then Murray wasn’t as sharp as he used to be.
“Immediately after my men failed to spot her when she left the facility. I can’t fault them, however, because I’ve been over the film twice and I haven’t spotted her yet, either.”
“I’ll be there on the next available flight”

Because of travel time to the airport, the availability of seats, et cetera, that was some six hours later. Swain passed the time by catching a nap, but he was aware that every passing minute was to Lily's advantage. She knew how they worked, what their resources were; she'd be building herself a tidy little hidey-hole, adding more and more layers to her camouflage. The delay was also giving her time to procure funds from some unknown bank account that he assumed she had. If he'd been in her line of work, he sure as hell would have had several numbered accounts. As it happened, he himself had a little liquid security deposited offshore. You just never knew when something like that might come in handy. And if it never needed to be used, well, it would make retirement a trifle more comfortable. He was all for a comfortable retirement.

As promised, Charles Murray was waiting at the gate when Swain finally arrived at Heathrow. Murray was of medium height, trim, with short iron-gray hair and hazel eyes. His bearing said he was ex-military; his demeanor was always calm and capable. He'd been unofficially on Nervi's payroll for seven years, and on the government's for a lot longer than that. Over the years Swain had occasionally dealt with Murray, enough so that they were fairly informal with each other. That is, Swain was informal; Murray was a Brit.

"This way," said Murray after a brief handshake.

"How are the wife and kids?" Swain asked, talking to Murray's back as he ambled along in the British wake.

"Victoria is beautiful, as always. The children are teenagers."

"Enough said."

"Quite. And you?"

"Chrissy is a junior in college now; Sam's a freshman.

They're both great. Technically Sam's still a teenager, but he's out of the worst of it" Actually, both of them had turned out pretty damned good, considering their parents had been divorced for a dozen years and their father was out of the country a lot. To a large degree that was because their mother, bless her heart, had steadfastly refused to make him the bad guy in their breakup. He and Amy had sat the kids down, told them the divorce was for a lot of reasons, including getting married way too young, blah blah blah. Which was all perfectly true. The bottom line, though, was that Amy was tired of having a husband who was mostly somewhere else, and she wanted to be free to look for someone else. Ironically, she hadn't remarried,

though she dated some. The kids' lives hadn't changed all that much from when he and Amy were still married: they lived in the same house, went to the same school, and saw their father just about as often as they had before. If he and Amy had been older and wiser when they married, they never would have had kids together, knowing how his work would affect their marriage, but unfortunately age and wisdom seem to increase at about the same rate and by the time they were old enough to know better, it was too late. Still, he couldn't regret having his kids. He loved them with every cell in his body, even if he got to see them only a few times a year, and he accepted that he wasn't nearly as important in their lives as their mother was.

"One can only do one's best, and pray the demon seed eventually morph back into human beings," Murray observed as he turned down a short corridor. "Here we are." He blocked the view of a keypad and punched in a code, then opened a plain steel door. Inside was a vast array of monitors and sharp-eyed personnel watching the ebb and flow of people inside the huge airport.

From there they went into a smaller room, which also had several monitors, as well as equipment for reviewing what the numerous array of cameras caught on film. Murray seated himself in a blue chair on wheels and invited Swain to pull up another one just like it. He typed in a keyboard command and the monitor directly in front of them glowed to life. Frozen on it was a frame of Lily Mansfield getting off the plane from Paris that morning. Swain studied every detail, noting that she didn't wear any jewelry at all, not even a wristwatch. Smart girl. Sometimes people would change everything except their wristwatch, and that one detail would trip them up. She was dressed in a plain dark suit and wore low-heeled black pumps. He thought she looked thin and pale, as if she'd been sick or something.

She didn't look left or right, just walked with the rest of the crowd getting off the plane, and went into the first restroom she came to. A steady parade of women came out of the rest-room, but none of them looked like Lily.

"I'll be damned," he said. "Run it again. In slow motion."

Murray obligingly set the video back to the beginning. Swain watched her come off the plane carrying a medium-sized black tote, the kind that didn't stand out because millions of women carried them every day. He focused on the tote, looking for any means of identifying it: a buckle, the way the straps fit, anything. After Lily vanished into the restroom, he looked for that tote

coming out. He saw a lot of black bags of all sizes and shapes, but only one looked as if it might be that particular one. It was carried by a six-foot-tall woman whose clothes, hair, makeup all shouted, “Look at me!” But she wasn’t carrying just that tote, she was also hauling around a carry-on bag, and Lily hadn’t had one of those.
Huh.
“Run it again,” he said. “From the beginning. I want to see everyone who got off that plane.”
Murray obliged. Swain studied every face, and particularly noted what bags they carried.
Then he saw it. “There!” he said, leaning closer to the screen.
Murray froze the image. “What? She hasn’t come into view yet”
“No, but look at this woman.” Swain jabbed his finger at the screen. “Look at her carry-on bag. Okay, let’s pay attention to what she does, too.”
The stylishly dressed woman was several passengers ahead of Lily. She walked straight to the restroom, which wasn’t unusual. A fair number of women from that flight did the same thing. Swain watched the video until the woman left the restroom-without the carry-on bag.
“Bingo,” he said. “She took the bag in; the clothes for the disguise were in it. Back it up some. There. That’s our girl. She has the bag now.”
Murray blinked at the fantastic creature on the monitor. “My word,” he said. “Are you certain?”
“Did you see this particular woman go into the rest-room?”
“No, but I wasn’t looking for her.” Murray paused. “I could scarcely have missed her, could I?”
“Not in that get-up.” The feathered earrings alone would pull a second look. From the short red spiky hair to the stiletto boots, that woman was an attention-getter. If Murray hadn’t seen her enter the restroom, it was because she hadn’t. But no wonder Murray‘s men hadn’t seen beneath the disguise; how many people, trying to hide their true self, would invite scrutiny like that?
“Look at the nose and mouth. That’s her.” Lily’s nose wasn’t exactly hooked, but it was the closest it could get and still be feminine. It was thin but strong, and oddly appealing when paired with that mouth, with the full upper lip.
“So it is,” Murray said, and shook his head. “I’m off my game, not to have seen it before.”

“It’s a good disguise. Smart. Okay, let’s see where our Technicolor cowgirl goes.”
Murray worked the keyboard, pulling up the necessary video to follow Lily’s progress through the airport. She walked for a while, then went into another restroom. And didn’t come back out.
Swain rubbed his eyes. “Here we go again. Just concentrate on finding those particular bags.”
Because of the swarm of foot traffic occasionally blocking the camera’s view, they had to watch the tape several times to narrow their list of possibilities down to three women, and track them until they could get a better view. At last they had her, though. She had long black hair now, and was wearing black pants and a black turtleneck. She was shorter, the stiletto boots gone. The sunglasses were different, too, and the feathered earrings had been replaced with gold hoops. She still had those two particular bags, though.
The cameras tracked her to another gate, where she boarded another plane. Murray swiftly checked which flight had left the gate at that particular time. “Paris,” he said.
“Son of a bitch,” Swain uttered in astonishment She’d gone back. “Can you get that passenger list for me?” It was a rhetorical question; of course Murray could. It was in his hands a few minutes later. He skimmed down the names, noting that neither Denise Morel nor Lily Mansfield was listed, meaning she had yet another identity going.
Now would come the fun part, going back to Paris and going through this same process with the authorities at de Gaulle airport. The prickly French might not be as accommodating as Murray, but Swain wasn’t without a few resources.
“Do me a favor,” he said to Murray. “Don’t pass this information along to Rodrigo Nervi.” He didn’t want that bunch getting in his way, plus he had a natural dislike of doing anything to help people like that. Circumstances might force the United States government to occasionally look the other way about the dirtier parts of the Nervi organization, but he didn’t have to help them out one bit.
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Murray blandly. “What information?”
It would be, of course, just as much hassle getting back across the Channel as it had been getting to London. He couldn’t get off one plane and get right

back on another the way she had done; oh, no, it was never that simple. She had planned ahead; he was scrambling around behind her, trying to find an available seat. She'd known exactly what would confuse and delay anyone tracking her, of course.
Still, it was discouraging to find out he had another long wait before the next flight with an empty seat.
Murray clapped him on the shoulder. "I know someone who can get you there much faster than that."
"Thank God," said Swain. "Bring him on."
"You don't mind flying backseat, do you? He's a NATO pilot."
"Holy shit," Swain blurted. "You're putting me in *a fighter?*" "I did say touch faster,' didn't I?"

Chapter Six

Lily let herself into the sublet apartment in Montmartre that she had rented several months ago, before she had assumed the Denise Morel identity. The apartment was tiny, really more a studio than a true apartment, but had its own minuscule bathroom. She had her own clothes here, plus privacy and relative safety. Because the sublet predated Denise's appearance, no computer search was likely to go back far enough to put her on any sort of list, plus she had concocted yet another identity: Claudia Weber, a German national.
Because Claudia was a blonde, Lily had stopped at a hairdresser and had the artificial coloring removed from her hair. She would have bought the products and done it herself, but removing color was much more complicated than adding it and she was afraid she might do all sorts of damage to her hair. An inch had had to be trimmed as it was, to get rid of the dry ends after the bleaching process.
But when she looked in the mirror, she saw herself again, at last. The colored contact lenses were gone and her own pale blue eyes looked back at her. Her straight hair was once more wheat blond, reaching just to her shoulders. She could walk right past Rodrigo Nervi and he probably wouldn't recognize her-she hoped, because she might be doing exactly that.
Wearily she set her bags on the neatly made fold-out bed, then tumbled down beside them. She knew she should check to make certain the

apartment hadn’t been bugged, but she had been pushing herself relentlessly all day and she was shaking with fatigue. If she could sleep for just an hour, that would make a world of difference.

All in all, though, she was pleased with how her stamina had held out today. She was tired, yes, but not gasping for breath, as Dr. Giordano had warned she would be if that heart valve was severely damaged. Of course, she hadn’t been unduly exerting herself, either; she hadn’t been sprinting. So the jury was still out on the heart thing.

She closed her eyes and in the quiet concentrated on her heartbeat; it seemed normal to her. *Thump-thump, thump-thump.* With his stethoscope Dr. Giordano could hear a murmur, but she didn’t have a stethoscope and as far as she could tell the rhythm was completely normal. So maybe the damage was minimal, just enough to produce a faint murmur. She had other things to worry about.

She drifted into a half-doze in which her body relaxed while her mind began to circle around the situation, probing and rearranging facts as she knew them, trying to find answers to the unknown factors.

She didn’t know what Averill and Tina had stumbled across, or what they’d been told, but it was something they felt strongly enough about to bring them back into a business they’d abandoned. She didn’t even know who had hired them. Not the CIA, she was almost certain. Probably not MI-6 either. While they didn’t live in each other’s pockets, the two governments and agencies maintained a strong degree of cooperation between them, and in any case, there were plenty of active agents available to them, so there wouldn’t have been any need to bring in two inactive ones.

In fact, she didn’t think any government had hired them; instead, it looked like a private hire. Somewhere along the way-hell, *all* along the way-Salvatore Nervi had stepped on toes, bullied, brutalized, and killed. Finding his enemies wouldn’t be difficult; sorting them out could take a year or longer. But who had gone to the trouble of hiring two professionals, albeit retired ones, to hit back? Moreover, who had known about her friends’ backgrounds? Averill and Tina had lived ordinary lives, had gone out of their way to provide that kind of life for Zia; they hadn’t exactly advertised their pasts.

But someone had known about them, known their capabilities. That suggested someone who had been in the business, too, she thought, or at least been in a position to know names. Whoever it was had also known not

to approach an active contract agent, not to bring attention to himself or herself in that manner. Instead the unknown someone had picked Averill and Tina because… why? Why them? And with Zia to consider, why had they accepted?

Her friends had been young enough to still be in good physical shape-that was one possible reason for their selection that came to mind. They had also been skilled at what they did, coolheaded, experienced. She could see why they had been tapped, but what had swayed them to get involved? Money? They had been doing okay, not rich but not hurting for cash, either. A truly astronomical amount could have swayed them, but over the years they'd developed the same casual attitude about money that she had. From the time she'd begun her career, money had always been there. She didn't worry about it, and neither had Averill and Tina. She knew for a fact that between them the two agents had salted away enough cash to live in relative comfort for the rest of their lives, plus Averill had been doing okay for himself with a computer-repair shop.

She wished one of them had picked up the telephone and called her, told her what they were considering. Their motivation had to have been strong and she wanted to know what it was, because then she'd know how to attack. Her revenge wasn't complete just because Salvatore was dead; he was just the first act. She wouldn't be satisfied until she found out what was bad enough that her friends had become involved, something that would make the entire world turn against the Nervi organization, and even the people in power who had been in Salvatore's pocket would rush to distance themselves. She wanted to bring down the entire rotten deck of cards.

She had the fleeting thought that if Tina had told her about the job they were taking, if it had been something important enough to bring them out of retirement, she might well have joined them. She might have made the difference between success and failure-or she herself might be dead alongside them.

But they hadn't mentioned a thing, even though she'd had dinner with them not a week before their murders. She had been going out of town on a job that would take a few days or a little longer, yes, but she'd told them when she expected to be back. Had they already known then, or had this job offer come out of the blue and needed doing immediately? Averill and Tina didn't operate that way. Neither did she. Anything involving the Nervi

organization required study and preparation, because the layers of security were so dense.

None of this was anything she hadn't mentally gone over and over during many sleepless nights since they had been killed. Sometimes, when Zia's cheerful little face formed in her mind's eye, she wept with a violence that frightened her. In her grief she'd needed to strike back immediately, to cut off the head of the snake. She'd done that, focusing on nothing else for three months, and now she would concentrate on the rest of it.

First, she needed to find out who had hired Averill and Tina. A private hire meant someone with money… or maybe not. Maybe the need had been the motivating factor. Maybe this person had come to them with proof of something particularly nasty in which Salvatore was involved. With Salvatore, that could be anything; she couldn't imagine anything so low and dirty that he would balk at it His only requirement had been that he make money.

But Averill and Tina had both retained an idealistic core, and she could see them being so alarmed at something that they were moved to action, even though in their former occupations they'd seen so much that it was difficult to shock them. What could that have been?

Zia. *Something that threatened Zia.* To protect her, they would have fought tigers bare-handed. Anything involving her would explain both their urgency and their motivation.

Lily sat up, blinking. Of course. Why hadn't she seen it before? If it wasn't money that drew them back in, then what else had been important to them? Their marriage, their love for each other, Lily herself… but most of all, Zia. She had no proof. She didn't need it. She had known her friends, known how much they loved their daughter, known what was important in their lives. This conclusion was an intuitive leap, but it felt right. Nothing else had.

This gave her a direction. Among the Nervi holdings were several labs, engaged in all sorts of medical, chemical, and biological research. Since Averill and Tina had evidently felt this was something that had to be taken care of immediately, whatever it was had been imminent. But even though they'd failed, nothing unusual that had happened since then came to mind; no catastrophes locally. She couldn't think of anything other than the usual terrorist bombings, which seemed to need no reason.

But maybe they hadn't failed. Maybe they had succeeded in their mission, but Salvatore had discovered who they were and had them killed, to teach others not to interfere with the Nervis.

The target might not have been one of the laboratories, though they seemed the most likely targets. Salvatore had many properties, scattered all over Europe. She needed to search the back issues of some newspapers, to see if any incidents involving a Nervi property had been reported during the week between when she'd last seen her friends alive and their deaths. Salvatore had been powerful enough to keep media attention to a minimum, even black it out completely if he saw the need, but there might still be a small mention of… something.

Her friends hadn't taken any trips immediately prior to their deaths. She had talked to their neighbors; Averill and Tina had been at home, Zia had been in school. So whatever was involved was local, or at least close by.

She would go to an Internet cafe tomorrow and do a search. She could do it now, but common sense told her to rest after such a long day. She was relatively safe here, even from the Agency. No one knew about Claudia Weber, and she wasn't doing anything to attract attention. She'd had the foresight to grab something to eat at the airport, knowing she was in for a long session with the hairdresser, and she'd also bought a few snacks for tonight, plus enough coffee for tomorrow. She was set for right now. Tomorrow she'd need to shop for food, something best done early in the morning before all the best choices were taken. After that, she'd hit an Internet cafe and get started.

The Internet was a wonderful thing, Rodrigo thought. If one knew the right people-and he did-almost nothing on it was safe from scrutiny.

First his people had created a list of the rogue chemists available for hire who had the skill to create such a lethal poison. That last requirement had shrunk the list from several hundred down to nine, which was a much more manageable number.

From there it had simply been a matter of investigating finances. Someone would have received a large amount of money recently. Perhaps the person in question would be intelligent enough to put the money in a numbered account, but perhaps not. Even so, there would be evidence of an influx of cash.

He found that evidence with Dr. Walter Speer, a German national who lived in Amsterdam. Dr. Speer had been fired from a reputable company in

Berlin, then from another in Hamburg. He had then relocated to Amsterdam, where he had been getting by but not making a fortune. Dr. Speer, however, had recently purchased a silver Porsche, and paid for it in full. It was child's play to discover where Dr. Speer banked, and not much more difficult than that for the experts on Rodrigo's staff to get into the bank's computer system. A little more than a month ago, Dr. Speer had deposited a million American dollars. The conversion rate had made him a very happy man.

American. Rodrigo was stunned. The *Americans* had paid to have his father killed? That didn't make sense. Their agreement was too valuable to the Americans for them to interfere; Salvatore had seen to that. Rodrigo hadn't necessarily agreed with his father on their dealings with the Americans, but it had worked for a number of years and nothing had happened to upset the status quo.

Denise-or whoever she was-had effectively disappeared today, but now he had another link to her, to finding out who she really was and whom she was working for.

Rodrigo wasn't a man who wasted time; that very night he flew in his private jet to Amsterdam. Locating Dr. Speer's apartment was child's play, as was forcing the lock on the door. He was waiting in the dark when Dr. Walter Speer finally came home.

From the moment the door opened, Rodrigo smelled the strong odor of alcohol, and Dr. Speer stumbled a bit as he turned to switch on a lamp. Rodrigo hit him from behind a split second later, slamming him into the wall to stun him, then throwing him to the floor and straddling him, his fists delivering powerful one-two punches to the doctor's face. Explosive violence stuns the inexperienced, throws them into such a state of confusion and shock that they are helpless. Dr. Speer was not only inexperienced but inebriated. He couldn't manage anything in the way of self-defense, not that it would have done any good. Rodrigo was bigger, younger, faster, and skilled at what he did.

Rodrigo hauled him to a sitting position and thrust him against the wall, making sure that his head once more banged hard. Then he gripped the doctor's coat and pulled him closer for a good look. He liked what he saw. Huge red lumps were already swelling on the doctor's face, and blood trickled from both his nose and mouth. His glasses had been broken and

hung askew from one ear. The expression in his eyes was one of total incomprehension.
Other than that, Dr. Speer looked to be in his early forties. He had a shock of thick brown hair and was stocky in build, making him slightly bearlike. Before Rodrigo's art work on them, his features had probably been ordinary.
"Let me introduce myself," Rodrigo said in accented German. He didn't speak it well, but could make himself understood. "I am Rodrigo Nervi." He wanted to let the doctor know exactly with whom he was dealing. He saw the doctor's eyes widen in alarm; he wasn't so drunk that he was beyond all good sense.
"A month ago, you received a payment of a million American dollars. Who paid you, and why?"
"I-I… What?" Dr. Speer stammered.
"The money. Who gave it to you?"
"A woman. I don't know her name."
Rodrigo shook him so hard his head wobbled on his neck, and his broken glasses went flying. "Are you certain of that?"
"She-she never told me," Speer gasped.
"What did she look like?"
"Ah-" Speer blinked as he tried to focus his thoughts. "Brown hair. Brown eyes, I think. I did not care how she looked, you understand?"
"Old? Young?"
Again Speer blinked, several times. "Thirties?" he said, making it a question, as if he wasn't certain of his memory.
So. It had definitely been Denise who had given him the million dollars. Speer didn't know who had given her the money-that was another trail to follow-but this confirmed everything. Rodrigo had known instinctively from the moment she disappeared that she was the killer, but it was good to know he wasn't wasting time chasing down false leads.
"You made a poison for her."
Speer swallowed convulsively, but a spark of professional pride lit his blurry gaze. He didn't even deny it. "A masterpiece, if I do say so. I took the properties of several deadly toxins and combined them. One hundred percent lethal, if even a half ounce is taken. By the time the delayed symptoms are presented, the damage is so severe there is no effective treatment. I suppose one could try a multiorgan transplant, assuming there

just happened to be that many organs available at one time and they were all a match, but if there was any toxin left in the system it would attack those organs, too. No, I don't think that would work."
"Thank you, Doctor." Rodrigo smiled, a cold smile that, if the doctor had been more sober, would have frightened him senseless. Instead he smiled back.
"You're welcome," he said. The words were still hanging in the air when Rodrigo broke his neck and let him drop like a rag doll.

Chapter Seven

Swain lay in his hotel bed the next morning staring at the ceiling and trying to logically connect the dots. Outside a cold November rain was pelting the windows; he hadn't yet adjusted from the much warmer climate of South America, so he was definitely feeling a chill, even though he was snug in bed. Between the rain and jet lag, he figured he deserved a rest. Besides, it wasn't as if he was totally slacking off; he was thinking. He didn't know Lily, so he was hampered in his effort to figure out what she would do. So far she'd proven herself to be inventive, bold, and coolheaded; he'd have to be on top of his game to outthink her. But he did love a challenge, so instead of running around Paris flashing a photograph of her and asking strangers on the street if they'd seen this woman-yeah, like that would work-he tried instead to anticipate what she would do next, so he could get just that one half-step ahead of her that he needed.
Mentally he listed what he knew so far, which wasn't much.
Point A: Salvatore Nervi had killed her friends. Point B: She had then killed Salvatore Nervi.
Logically, that should be the end of it. Mission accomplished, except for the little detail of getting away from Rodrigo Nervi alive. But she'd managed that; she had made her escape to London, pulled that slick disguise switcheroo and then doubled back. She could possibly have gone to ground here in Paris, using yet another of her seemingly endless supply of alternate identities. It was also possible she'd left the airport, changed her appearance yet again, then returned and taken yet another flight out. She had to know that everything any passenger did in an airport, outside of the restrooms, was caught on some camera somewhere, so she would expect that

eventually anyone looking for her would nail down the switches she'd made, and from there be able to run the passenger list and deduce the identities she'd used. She had been forced to do her quick changes to throw off Rodrigo Nervi and buy some time, even though that meant she'd burned three aliases and wouldn't be able to use them again without raising all sorts of red flags that would get her caught.

With that time, however, she could have left the airport and assumed yet another name and appearance, one that hadn't been caught on the airport cameras. Her paperwork was good; she knew some talented people. She'd be able to sail through security checkpoints and Customs with no problem. She could be anywhere by now. She could be back in London, snoozing on a red-eye flight back to the States, or even sleeping in the room next to his.

She'd come back to Paris. There had to be some significance in that. Logistically, it made sense; the flight was short, giving her time to land and get away before security could painstakingly go over and over the video to tell how she'd done it, then by process of elimination narrow the list of passenger names down to the one she'd used. By coming back to Paris, she'd also involved yet another government and bureaucracy, slowing the process even more. She could, however, have done the same thing by flying to any other European country. Though the London-to-Paris flight was just an hour, Brussels was even closer. So were Amsterdam and The Hague.

Swain locked his hands behind his head and scowled at the ceiling. There was a great big gaping hole in that reasoning. She could have gone through Customs in London and walked out of the airport long before there was any chance of someone watching the security tapes and figuring out which disguise she'd used. If she didn't want to stay in London, she could then have simply changed her disguise and gone back a few hours later to catch another flight, and absolutely no one would have made the connection. She'd have been home free. In fact, that would have been a much smarter move than staying in the airport with all those surveillance cameras. So why hadn't she done that? Either she didn't think anyone would be able to pick up her identity switch, or she'd had a compelling reason for coming back to Paris at that particular time.

Granted, she wasn't a field officer, trained in espionage; contract agents were hired for each individual job, sent in to perform a specific duty. Her file mentioned nothing about her being schooled in disguise or evasion techniques. She had to know the Agency would be after her for screwing up

the Nervi deal, but it was possible she didn't know the extent of surveillance in major airports.
He wouldn't bet the farm on it.
She was too smart, too on top of things. She'd known cameras were watching her every move, though she'd thrown enough curve balls at them to keep them occupied for a while. And she might have decided that giving them more time, by leaving Heathrow and returning later, would give them a chance to… do something. He didn't know what. Scan her face into the facial-recognition data bank, maybe? She *was* in the Agency's data bank, but not anywhere else. If, however, someone had scanned her facial structure into Interpol's database, the cameras at the airport entrances would then have been able to come up with a match before she could get to her gate. Yeah, that could be it. She could have been afraid Rodrigo Nervi would try to have her entered into Interpol's data.
How could she avoid that danger? By having cosmetic surgery, for one thing. Again, that would be the smart thing for a woman on the run to do. She hadn't opted for that, though; instead she'd come back to Paris. Maybe going into hiding and not coming out until after she'd had cosmetic alterations would have taken too long. Maybe there was some kind of time limit for something she wanted to get accomplished.
Such as? See Disneyland Paris? Tour the Louvre?
Maybe killing Salvatore Nervi was just the opening act, instead of an end unto itself. Maybe she knew the Agency's best of the best-namely himself, not that she knew him from Adam's house cat-was on the job, and it was only a matter of time before she was grabbed. That kind of faith in his abilities made him feel all warm inside. At any rate, say his thinking was on the right track: she had something she wanted to do, something so urgent that hours counted, and she was afraid she wouldn't have time to do it.
Swain groaned and sat up, rubbing his hands over his face. There was a flaw in that logic, too. She'd have had a better chance of accomplishing whatever it was if she'd gone to ground and had the cosmetic surgery. He kept coming back to that. The only thing that made sense of her actions was if there was a metaphoric time bomb somewhere, something that wouldn't wait a few months and had to be accomplished *right now,* or at least in a short period of time. But if there really was something along those lines, something that posed a world danger, all she had to do was pick up a phone

and call it in, let a group of experts handle whatever it was rather than her trying to pull a Lone Ranger.
Scratch “world danger” as a motivation.
Something personal, then. Something she wanted to do herself, and felt a compelling urge to get done as soon as possible.
He thought about the contents of her file. Her motivation for killing Salvatore Nervi was the deaths of a couple of her friends and their adopted daughter a few months ago. She’d done the smart thing and laid her groundwork for that, taken her time, got close enough to Nervi to do the job. So why wasn’t she doing the smart thing now? Why was an intelligent, professional agent doing something so dumb it would ultimately get her caught?
Forget motivation, he suddenly thought. He was a man; he’d go crazy trying to figure out what was going through a woman’s mind. If he had to pick the most likely scenario, he’d say she wasn’t finished with the Nervi family. She’d struck them hard, but now she’d circled back for a killing blow. They had pissed her off big-time, and she was going to make them pay-
He heaved a sigh of satisfaction. There. That felt right And damn if it didn’t provide motivation, too. She’d lost people she loved, and she was striking back no matter what the cost to herself. He could understand that. The reasoning was simple and clean, without all the why-do-this and not-do-that second-guessing.
He’d run it by Frank Vinay in a few hours when sunrise hit D.C., but his gut told him he was on the right track and he’d start nosing around before he talked to Vinay. He just needed to decide on a starting point
It all went back to her friends. Whatever they’d been doing that got on Nervi’s bad side, that same thing would be her target as a sort of poetic justice.
He thought back to the file he’d read in Vinay’s office. He hadn’t brought any paperwork with him, because it could compromise security; unsanctioned eyes couldn’t read what wasn’t there. He relied instead on his excellent memory, which produced the names *Averill* and *Christina Joubran*, retired contract agents. Averill had been Canadian, Christina from the States, but they’d lived in France full-time and been completely retired for over twelve years. What could have spurred Salvatore Nervi to kill them?

Okay, first he had to find out where they'd lived, how they'd died, who their friends were other than Lily Mansfield, and if they'd talked to anyone about something unusual going on. Maybe Nervi was manufacturing biological weapons and selling them to the North Koreans, though again, if Lily's friend had stumbled across something like that, why the hell wouldn't they have simply called their old bosses and reported it? Idiots might try to handle things themselves, but successful contract agents weren't idiots, because if they were, they'd be dead.

That wasn't a good thought, because the Joubrans *were* dead. Uh-oh.

Before he thought himself in circles again, Swain got out of bed and showered, then called room service for breakfast. He'd elected to stay at the Bristol in the Champs-Elysees district because it had hotel parking space and twenty-four-hour room service. It was also expensive, but he needed the parking for the car he'd rented last night, and the room service because he might be keeping some very odd hours. Besides, the marble bathrooms were cool.

It was while he was eating his croissant and jam that something obvious occurred to him: the Joubrans hadn't stumbled across anything. They'd been *hired* to do a job and either it had gone bad on them or they'd succeeded at it and been killed afterward when Nervi struck back.

Lily might already know what that something was, in which case he was still playing catch-up. But if she didn't-and he thought that was likely, since she'd been away on a job when the kills went down-then she'd be trying to find out who had hired her friends, and why. Essentially, she'd be asking the same questions of the same people that Swain intended to interview. What were the odds that their paths would cross at some point?

He hadn't liked those odds before, but they were looking better and better by the minute. A good starting point would be finding out what, if anything, had happened to any Nervi-owned facility in the week preceding the Joubrans' deaths. Lily would be checking newspaper reports, which might or might not have any mention of a problem pertaining to the Nervis; he was in a position to go straight to the French police, but he'd just as soon they not know who he was or where he was staying. Frank Vinay wanted this kept as quiet as possible; it wouldn't be good for diplomatic relations for the French to know that a CIA contract agent had apparently assassinated someone as politically connected as Salvatore Nervi, who

hadn’t been a French citizen, but had nevertheless lived in Paris and had many friends in the government.
He checked in the phone directory for the Joubrans’ address, but there was nothing listed. No surprise there.
Swain’s good luck was that he worked for an agency that collected the most minute bits of news from all over the world, then cataloged and analyzed everything. Another bit of good luck was that the information highway in that agency was open twenty-four hours a day.
He used his secure cell phone to call Langley, going through the usual process of identification and verification, but within a minute he was talking to a person in the know, by the name of Patrick Washington. Swain told him who he was and what he needed, Patrick said, “Hold on,” and Swain waited. And waited.
Ten minutes later Patrick came back on the line. “Sorry it took so long, I had to double-check something.” Meaning he’d checked on Swain. “Yeah, there was an incident at a lab on August twenty-fifth, a contained explosion and fire. According to the reports, the damage was minimal.”
The Joubrans had been killed on August 28. The lab incident had to be the trigger.
“Do you have an address on the lab?”
“Coming up.”
Swain heard computer keys clicking; then Patrick said, “Number Seven Rue des Capucines, just outside Paris.”
That covered a lot of ground. “North, east, south, or west?”
“Uh-let me pull up a street-finder-” More clicking keys. “East.”
“What’s the name of the lab?”
“Nothing fancy. Nervi Laboratories.”
Yeah, right. Mentally Swain translated the name into French.
“Need anything else?”
“Yeah. The street address of Averill and Christina Joubran. They were retired contract agents. We used them occasionally.”
“How long ago?”
“Early nineties.”
“Just a minute.” More clicking keys. Patrick said, “Here it is,” and recited the address. “Anything else?”
“No, that’s it. You’re a good man, Mr. Washington.”
“Thank you, sir.”

The “sir” verified that Patrick had indeed double-checked Swain’s identity and clearance. He put Patrick’s name down in his mental file of go-to people, because he liked that the man was cautious enough that he didn’t take anything for granted.

Swain looked out the window: still raining. He hated that. He’d spent too many hours in the steaming tropical heat after a sudden downpour had drenched him to the skin, and the experience had given him an intense dislike of getting his clothes wet. It had been a long time since he’d been cold and wet, but as he remembered, it was even more miserable than being hot and wet. He hadn’t brought a raincoat with him, either. He wasn’t even certain he owned one, and he didn’t have time to go shopping.

He checked his watch. Ten after eight; shops weren’t open yet, anyway. He solved that problem by calling down to the front desk and arranging to have a raincoat in his size delivered to his room and charged to his account. That wouldn’t prevent him from getting wet this morning, since he couldn’t wait for it to arrive. At least he would be in the rain only going to and from his rental car, not slogging through miles of jungle.

He’d rented a Jaguar because he’d always wanted to drive one, and also because only the more expensive cars had been available by the time he got to the rental office last night, even though he’d crossed the Channel “much faster” than usual, thanks to Murray’s NATO friend. He figured he’d write off the usual amount of a rental on expenses and eat the rest of it himself. He’d never seen a rule he didn’t like to finesse, but he was scrupulously honest on his expenses. He figured his ass was more likely to be raked over the coals because of money than for any other reason. Being fond of his ass, he tried to spare it unnecessary stress.

He left the Bristol behind the wheel of the Jaguar, deeply inhaling the rich leather scent of the upholstery. If women really wanted to smell good to men, he thought, they’d wear perfume that smelled like a new car.

With that happy idea lingering in his mind, he plunged headlong into Parisian traffic. He hadn’t been in Paris in years, but he remembered that the bravest and most foolhardy won the right-of-way. The rule was you yield to traffic on the right, but screw the rule. He deftly cut off a taxi whose driver slammed on the brakes and screamed Gallic curses, but Swain accelerated and shot through a gap. Damn, this was fun! The wet streets raised the unpredictability factor, adding to his adrenaline level.

He battled his way south of the Montparnasse district to where the Joubrans had lived, occasionally consulting a city map. Later in the day he would check out the Nervi lab, eyeball the layout and more obvious security measures, but right now he wanted to go where he figured Lily Mansfield was most likely to be.

It was time to get this show on the road. After the merry chase she'd led him the day before, he couldn't wait to match wits with her again. He had no doubt he'd win-eventually-but all the fun was in the run

Chapter Eight

Rodrigo slammed down the phone, then propped his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. The urge to strangle someone was strong. Murray and his band of merry idiots had evidently gone both blind and stupid, to let one woman so thoroughly make fools of them all. Murray swore he'd had experts look at the airport video, and none could tell where Denise Morel had gone. She had effectively vanished into thin air, though Murray was gracious enough to admit that she must have used a disguise, but one so clever and professional that there were no visible similarities for them to track.

She could *not* be allowed to get away with killing his father. Not only would his reputation suffer, but everything in him demanded vengeance. Grief and wounded pride roiled together, giving him no peace. He and his father had always been so careful, so thorough, but this one woman had somehow slipped under their defenses and dealt Salvatore a nasty, painful death. She hadn't even given him the dignity of a bullet, but had chosen poison, a coward's weapon.

Murray might have lost her, but he, Rodrigo, hadn't given up. He refused to give up.

Think! he commanded himself. To find her he first had to identify her. Who was she, where did she live, where did her *family live?*

What were the usual means of identification? Fingerprints, obviously. Dental records. The last wasn't an option, because he would need to know not only who she was but who her dentist was, and at any rate, that method was used mainly for identifying someone already dead. To find someone alive… how to do that?

Fingerprints. The room where she'd slept while she was here had been thoroughly cleaned by his staff the day she went back to her flat, destroying any prints, nor had he thought to lift a print from any of the drinking glasses or silverware she'd used. Her flat was a possibility, though. Feeling faintly heartened, he contacted a friend in the Parisian police department who didn't ask questions, just said that he would take care of it immediately himself.

The friend called within the hour. He hadn't gone over every inch of the flat, but he'd checked the most obvious places and there were no prints at all, not even smudged ones. The flat had been thoroughly wiped down.

Rodrigo swallowed his rage at being so completely thwarted by this woman. "What other means are there of finding someone's identity?"

"None that are guaranteed, my friend. Fingerprints are of use only if the subject has previously been arrested and his prints are in the database. It is the same with every method. DNA, as accurate as it is, is good only if there is another DNA sample to which it can be compared so you can say, yes, these two samples did or did not come from the same person. The facial recognition programs will identify only those people who are already in the database, and is targeted mostly toward terrorists. It is the same with voice recognition, retina patterns, everything. There must be a database from which matches can be made."

"I understand." Rodrigo rubbed his forehead, thoughts racing. Security video! He had Denise's face on security video, plus much clearer pictures on her identity paperwork and the investigations he'd done. "Who has these facial-recognition programs?"

"Interpol, of course. All the major organizations such as Scotland Yard, the American FBI and CIA."

"Are their data banks shared?"

"To some extent, yes. In a perfect world, speaking from an investigational standpoint, everything would be shared, but everyone likes to keep some secrets, no? If this woman is a criminal, then Interpol might very well have her in their data banks. And one other thing-"

"Yes?"

"The landlord said that a man, an American, was here yesterday asking about the woman. The landlord didn't get a name, and his description is so vague as to be useless."

“Thank you,” said Rodrigo, trying to think what this meant. The woman had been paid in American dollars. An American man was looking for her. But it followed that if this man had been the one to hire her, he would already know where she was-and why search for her anyway, when she had completed her mission? No, this had to be something totally unconnected, an acquaintance perhaps.

He disconnected the call, a grim smile twisting his lips, and punched in a number he’d called many times before. The Nervi organization had contacts all over Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and were expanding into the Orient. As an intelligent man, it behooved him to make certain one of those contacts was very conveniently placed within Interpol itself.

“Georges Blanc,” said a quiet, steady voice, which was indicative of the man himself. Rodrigo had seldom met anyone more competent than Blanc, whom he’d never met face-to-face.

“If I scan a photograph and send it to your computer, can you run it through your facial identification program?” He had no need to identify himself. Blanc knew his voice.

There was a short pause; then Blanc said, “Yes.” There were no qualifications, no explanation of the security measures he might have to sidestep, just that brief affirmative.

“I will have it to you within five minutes,” Rodrigo said, and hung up. From the file on his desk he took the photo of Denise Morel-or whoever she was-and scanned it into his computer, which was properly safeguarded with every security measure known. He typed a few lines, and the photograph was on the way to Lyon, where Interpol was headquartered.

The phone rang. Rodrigo picked up the receiver. “Yes.”

“I have it,” said Blanc’s quiet voice. “I will call you as soon as I have an answer, but as to how long it will take…” His voice trailed off, and Rodrigo imagined him shrugging.

“As soon as possible,” said Rodrigo. “One other thing.”

“Yes?”

“Your contact with the Americans-”

“Yes?”

“There’s a possibility the person I’m seeking is an American.” Or had been hired by an American, thus the payment in United States dollars. While he didn’t think the United States government had anything to do with his father’s murder, until he knew for certain who had hired the bitch, he

intended to keep his cards close to his chest where they were concerned. He could have gone directly to his American liaison and asked the same favor he was asking of Blanc, but it was better, perhaps, that he approach this from a more oblique angle.
“I will have my contact check their data banks,” Blanc said.
“Discreetly.”
“Of course.”

Chapter Nine

Despite the cold rain blowing in under the protection of her umbrella, Lily kept her head high so she could see what was going on around her. She strode briskly, pushing herself to see how her stamina held up. She was gloved, booted, and wrapped against the chill, but she left her head uncovered so her blond hair was visible. If by chance Rodrigo’s men were looking for her here in Paris, they’d be looking for a brunette. She doubted Rodrigo had followed her path back here, though, at least not yet.
The Agency, however, was a different matter entirely. She was almost surprised she hadn’t been detained in London as soon as she got off the plane. But she hadn’t been, and she hadn’t spotted a tail, either when she’d left de Gaulle airport or this morning.
She began to think that she might have been incredibly lucky. Rodrigo had kept Salvatore’s death secret for several days, then released the news only after Salvatore’s funeral. There hadn’t been any mention of poison, just that he had died after a brief illness. Was it possible the dots hadn’t been connected?
She didn’t dare let herself hope, couldn’t afford to let down her guard. Until she’d finished the job, she would stay alert for trouble from every corner. After the job-well, she really had no idea. At this point, all she hoped for was survival.
She hadn’t chosen an Internet cafe close to her sublet studio, because for all she knew there might be a trap on any online requests for information pertaining to anything about the Nervi organization. Instead she had taken the Metro to the Latin Quarter, and opted to walk the rest of the way. She had never used this particular Internet cafe before, which was one of the reasons she’d chosen it. One of the basic rules for evasion was to not follow

a set routine, not be predictable. People got caught because they went where they were most comfortable, where things were familiar.
Lily had spent quite a lot of time in Paris, so that meant there were a lot of places and people that she would now have to avoid. She'd never actually had a residence here, instead staying with friends-usually Averill and Tina-or at a B and B. Once, for about a year, she'd rented a flat in London but gave it up because she'd spent twice as much time traveling as she had at the flat and it was just an added expense.
Her theater of work had been primarily in Europe, so going home to the States hadn't happened very often, either. As much as she liked Europe and was familiar with it, truly settling down there had never occurred to her. If she ever bought a home-a very big "if'-it would be in the States.
Sometimes she thought longingly of retiring as Averill and Tina had, of living a normal life with a nine-to-five job, of staying in a community and becoming part of its fabric, knowing her neighbors, visiting with relatives, chatting on the phone. She didn't know how she had come to this, to being able to snuff out a human life as easily as most people would step on an insect, to being afraid to even call her mother, for God's sake. She had started so young, and that first time hadn't been easy at all-she'd been shaking like a leaf-but she'd gotten the job done, and the next time had been easier, and the time after that easier still. After a while the targets had become less than human to her, an emotional remoteness that was necessary for her to be able to do the job. Perhaps it was naive of her, but she trusted her government not to send her after any of the good guys; it was a necessary belief, the only way she could work. And still she had become someone she feared, this woman who probably couldn't be trusted to enter normal society.
It was still there, that dream of retiring and settling down, but Lily recognized it as just that, a dream, and unlikely ever to happen. Even if she got through this situation alive, settling down was something normal people did, and Lily was afraid she herself had become less than human. Killing had become too easy, too instinctive. What would happen to her if she had to deal with the same frustrations every day, a nasty boss or a vicious neighbor? What if someone tried to mug her? Could she control her instincts, or would people die?
Even worse, what if she inadvertently brought danger to someone she loved? She knew she literally wouldn't be able to bear it if anyone in her

family was harmed because of her, because of what she was.
A car horn beeped, and Lily started, jerking her attention back to her surroundings. She was appalled that she'd let her thoughts wander, instead of keeping herself alert and focused. If she couldn't hold her concentration, there was no way she'd be able to successfully pull this off.
She might have squeaked under the Agency's radar so far-she hoped-but that couldn't last. Eventually someone would come for her, and she thought sooner rather than later.
Looked at realistically, there were four possible outcomes for this situation. In the best-case scenario, she would discover what it was that had lured Averill and Tina out of retirement, and whatever it was, would be so horrible that the civilized world would distance itself from the Nervis and they would be put out of business. The Agency would never use her again, of course; no matter how justified, a contract agent who went around killing assets was too unstable for the job. So she'd win, but be unemployed, which threw her back to her earlier concern about whether she could actually live a normal life.
In the next-best-case scenario, she wouldn't find anything suitably incriminating-selling weapons to terrorists wouldn't be bad enough, because everyone knew about it anyway-and would be forced to live out her life under an alias, in which case she'd be unemployed, and back to the question of whether she could hold down a regular job and be Jane Citizen.
The last two possibilities were bleak. She might accomplish her aim, but get killed. Finally, worst of all, she might get killed before she got anything accomplished.
She would have liked to say the odds were fifty-fifty that she'd have one of the first two outcomes, but the four possibilities weren't equal in *probability.* She thought there was something like an eighty percent chance she wasn't going to survive this, and that might be an optimistic guess. She was going to try like hell for the twenty percent, though. She couldn't let Zia down by giving up.
The Latin Quarter was a maze of narrow cobbled streets, usually teeming with students from the nearby Sorbonne and shoppers who came for the odd boutiques and ethnic stores, but today the cold rain had thinned the crowds. The Internet cafe, however, was already busy. Lily surveyed the cafe as she closed her umbrella and removed her raincoat, scarf, and gloves, looking for an unoccupied computer where she was least likely to be observed. Beneath

the lined raincoat she wore a thick turtleneck sweater in a rich blue that darkened the shade of her eyes and drapey knit slacks over low boots. An ankle holster carrying a .22 caliber revolver was strapped around her right ankle, easily accessible in the low boot, and the drapey fit of the trousers hid any telltale line. She had felt horribly defenseless during the weeks when she hadn't been able to carry a weapon because of those damn searches every time she got close to Salvatore; this was better.

She located a machine situated at such an angle that she could watch the door while she was there, plus it was as private as she was likely to get in this particular cafe. It was, however, being used by a teenage American girl who was evidently checking her e-mail. It was usually easy to spot Americans, Lily thought; it wasn't just their clothing or style, it was something about them, an innate confidence that often edged into arrogance, and had to be irritating as hell to a European. She herself might still have the attitude-she was almost certain of it-but over the years her style of dress and outward manners had changed. Most people mistook her for Scandinavian, given her coloring, or perhaps German. No one, looking at her now, would automatically think of apple pie and baseball.

She waited until the teenager had finished with her e-mail and left, then slid into the vacated seat. The rate per hour here was very reasonable, doubtless because of the hordes of college students. She paid for an hour, expecting to take at least that long or longer.

She began with *Le Monde,* the biggest newspaper, searching the archives between August 21, when she had dinner with the Joubrans for the last time, and the 28th, when they were murdered. The only mention of "Nervi" was of Salvatore in connection with a story on international finances. She read the article twice, searching for any detail that might indicate an underlying story, but either she was in the dark concerning financial matters or there was nothing.

There were fifteen newspapers in the Parisian area, some small, some not. She had to research all of them, covering the archives for those seven days in question. The task was time-consuming and sometimes the computer would take forever to download a page. Sometimes the connection was broken and she would have to log on again. She had been there three hours when she logged on to *Investir,* a financial newspaper, and hit the jackpot. The item was just a sidebar, only two paragraphs long. On August 25, a Nervi research laboratory had suffered an explosion and subsequent fire that

was described as “small” and “contained,” with “minimal damage” that would in no way affect the lab’s ongoing research in vaccines.
Averill had specialized in explosives, to the point of being a true artist. He’d seen no point in wanton destruction when, with care and planning, it was possible to design a charge that would take out only what was needed. Why blow up an entire building when one room would do? Or a city block when one building would do? “Contained” was a word often used to describe his work. And Tina had been skilled at bypassing security systems, in addition to being talented with a pistol.
Lily couldn’t know for certain it was their work, but it felt right. At least this was a lead she could follow, and hope it went down the correct path.
While she was online, she pulled up what information there was on the research laboratory, and found precious little more than the address and the name of the director, her pal Dr. Vincenzo Giordano. Well, well. She typed his name into the search engine and came up dry, but then she hadn’t really expected he would have his home phone number published. That would have been the easiest way to locate him, but it certainly wasn’t the only way.
Logging off line, she flexed her shoulders and rolled her head back and forth to loosen the tight muscles in her neck. She hadn’t moved from the computer terminal in over three hours and every muscle felt stiff, plus she really needed to use the facilities. She was tired, but not as tired as she’d been the day before, and she was satisfied with the way her stamina had held up during the brisk walk from the Metro.
The rain was still falling when she left the cafe, but had slowed to little more than a drizzle. She opened her umbrella, thought for a moment, then struck out in the opposite direction from which she’d come earlier. She was hungry, and though she hadn’t had one in years, she knew exactly what she wanted for lunch: a Big Mac.
Swain second-guessed himself again. He was getting damn tired of doing that, but couldn’t seem to help himself.
He’d located the Joubrans’ old address, and found that the space had evidently been cleaned up, cleaned out, and either rented or sold to another family. He’d had a vague notion that he might break in and see what he could find, but that would have been useful only if no one else had moved there in the meantime. He had watched a young mother welcome a babysitter-her mother, from the resemblance-and two preschool children

erupt out of the door into the rain before she could stop them. The two adults had, with much clucking and shooing, rounded up the two giggling curtain-climbers and got them indoors; then the young woman had dashed out again, clutching an umbrella and bag. Whether she was going to work or going shopping didn't matter to him. What mattered was the residence was no longer empty.

That's where he second-guessed himself. He'd also planned to question the neighbors and the proprietors of the local markets about the Joubrans, who their friends were, that kind of thing. But it occurred to him that if he beat Lily to the punch with those questions, when she did come around, someone was bound to tell her an American man had asked those same questions just the day before, or even a few hours before. She wasn't stupid; she'd know exactly what that meant, and go to ground somewhere.

He'd been chasing around after her the day before, trying to catch up, but now he had to adjust his thinking. He was no longer necessarily behind her, which was good only if he knew what her next move would be. Until then, he couldn't afford to alarm her or she would disappear on him again.

Through channels-with Murray dealing with the French-he knew that Lily had flown back to Paris using the identity of Mariel St Clair, but the address listed on her passport had turned out to be a fish market. Just a little humor on her part, he thought. She wouldn't be using the St. Clair identity again; she had probably slid effortlessly into yet another persona, one he had no way of finding. Paris was a big city, with over two million inhabitants, and she was far more familiar with it than he was. He had only this one chance where their paths might intersect, and he didn't want to ruin it by jumping in too fast.

Disgruntled, he drove around the neighborhood getting the lay of the land, so to speak, and more than casually studying pedestrians as they hurried up and down the streets. Unfortunately, most of them carried umbrellas that partially hid their features, and even if they hadn't, he had no idea what disguise Lily might be using now. She'd been just about everything except an elderly nun, so maybe he should start looking for those.

In the meantime, maybe he should take a look at that Nervi lab, eyeball the outward security measures. Who knew when he might need to get inside?

After an unhealthy and extremely satisfying lunch, Lily took the SNCF train to the suburb where Averill and Tina had lived. By the time she arrived there, the rain had stopped and a weak sun was making fitful efforts to peek

through the dull gray clouds. The day wasn't any warmer, but at least the rain wasn't making everyone miserable. She remembered the brief snow flurry the night Salvatore had died, and wondered if Paris would see more snow this winter. Snow events didn't happen in Paris all that often. How Zia had loved playing in the snow! They'd taken her skiing in the Alps almost every winter, the three adults who'd loved her more than life itself. Lily herself never skied, because an accident could put her out of commission for months, but after they'd retired, both her friends had taken to the sport like fiends.

Memories flashed in her mind like postcards: Zia as an adorable, chubby three-year-old in a bright red snowsuit, patting a small and extremely lopsided snowman. That was her first trip to the Alps. Zia on the bunny trails, shrieking, "Watch me! Watch me!" Tina taking a header into a snow bank and emerging laughing, looking more like the Abominable Snowman than a woman. The three of them enjoying drinks around a roaring fireplace while Zia slept upstairs. Zia losing her first tooth, starting school, her first dance recital, showing the first signs of changing from child to adolescent, getting her period last year, fussing with her hair, wanting to wear mascara.

Lily briefly closed her eyes, shaking with pain and rage. Desolation filled her, the way it often had since she'd learned they were all dead. Since then she could see the sunshine but hadn't been able to feel it, as if its warmth never touched her. Killing Salvatore had been satisfying, but it wasn't enough to bring back the sun.

She stopped outside the place where her friends had lived. There was someone else living in the house now, and she wondered if they knew three people had died there just a few months before. She felt violated, as if everything should have been left the way it had been, their things untouched.

That very first day she'd returned to Paris and discovered they'd been murdered, she herself had taken some of the photographs, some of Zia's games and books, a few of her childhood toys, the baby album she had started and Tina had lovingly continued. The house had been cordoned off, of course, and locked up, but that hadn't stopped her. For one thing, she had her own key. For another, if necessary she would have torn the roof off with her bare hands to gain entrance. But what had happened to the rest of their belongings? Where were their clothes, their personal treasures, their ski equipment? After that first day she had been busy for a couple of weeks

finding out who had killed them, and beginning her plan for vengeance; when she'd returned, the house had been cleaned out.
Averill and Tina had each had some family, cousins and such, though no one close. Perhaps the authorities had notified those family members, and they had come to pack up everything. She hoped so. It was okay if family had their possessions, but she hated the idea of some impersonal cleaning service coming and boxing things up to be disposed of.
Lily began knocking on doors, talking to neighbors, asking if they'd seen anyone visiting that week before her friends were murdered. She had questioned them before, but hadn't known the right question to ask. She was known to them, of course; she'd been visiting for years, had nodded hello, stopped for brief chats. Tina had been a friendly person, Averill more aloof, but to Zia there'd been no such thing as a stranger. She'd been on very friendly terms with all the neighbors.
Only one had seen anything that she remembered, though; it was Mme. Bonnet, who lived two doors down. She was in her mid-eighties, grumpy with age, but she liked to sit by the front window while she knitted-and she was constantly knitting-so she saw almost everything that happened on the street.
"But I have already told all of this to the police," she said impatiently when she answered the door and Lily posed her hi question. "No, I saw no one the night they were killed. I am old; I don't see so well, I don't hear so well. And I close my curtains at night. How could I have seen anything?"
"What about before that night? Any time that week?"
"That, too, I told the police." She glared at Lily.
"The police have done nothing."
"Of course they have done nothing! Worthless, the lot of them." With a disgusted wave of her hand she dismissed a small army of public servants who every day did the best they could.
"Did you see anyone you didn't know?" Lily repeated patiently.
"Just that one young man. He was very handsome, like a movie star. He visited one day, for several hours. I hadn't seen him before."
Lily's pulse leaped. "Can you describe him? Please, Madame Bonnet."
The old lady glared some more, muttered a few uncomplimentary phrases like "incompetent idiots" and "bumbling fools," then barked, "I told you, he was handsome. Tall, slim, black-haired. Very well dressed. He arrived by taxi, and another came for him when he left. That is all."

“Could you guess his age?”
“Young! To me, anyone under fifty is young! Don’t bother me with these silly questions.” And with that, she stepped back and closed the door with a bang.
Lily took a deep breath. A young, handsome, dark-haired man. And well-dressed. There were thousands who met that description in Paris, which abounded with handsome young men. It was a start, a piece of the puzzle, but as a stand-alone clue it meant absolutely nothing. She had no list of usual suspects, nor a selection of photographs she could show Mme. Bonnet and hope the old lady could pick out one and say, “This one. This is the man.”
And what did this tell her, really? This handsome young man could have hired them to blow up something at the Nervi lab, or he could have been no more than a friendly acquaintance who happened to visit. Averill and Tina could have gone somewhere else to meet the person who hired them, rather than letting him come to their home. In fact, that would have been more likely.
She rubbed her forehead. She hadn’t thought this out, but she didn’t know if it could *be* thought out. She didn’t know if it mattered why they’d taken the job, or what the job was. She couldn’t even be certain there *was* a job, but it was the only scenario that made sense and she had to go with her instinct on that. If she started doubting herself now, she might as well pack it in.
Deep in thought, she walked back to the train platform.

Chapter Ten

Georges Blanc believed strongly in law and order, but he was also a pragmatic man who accepted that sometimes there were difficult choices and one just did the best one could.

He didn't like providing information to Rodrigo Nervi. He did, however, have a family to protect and an older son who was in his first year at Johns Hopkins University, in the United States. The tuition at Johns Hopkins was almost thirty thousand American dollars every year; that alone would have beggared him. But he would have managed, somehow, if Salvatore Nervi hadn't approached him over ten years ago and genially suggested that Georges would greatly benefit from a second, very generous income, for which he would have to do nothing but share information now and then, and perhaps do some small favors. When Georges had politely refused, Salvatore had kept smiling, and had begun reciting a bone-chilling list of misfortunes that could befall his family, such as his house burning down, his children being kidnapped or perhaps even physically harmed. He told how a gang of thugs had broken into an old woman's house and blinded her by throwing acid in her face, how savings could disappear like smoke, how automobiles had accidents.

Georges had understood. Salvatore had just outlined the things that *would* happen to him and his family if he refused to do what Salvatore demanded. So he had nodded, and tried over the years to limit the damage he did with the information he passed on and the favors he did. With those threats as motivation, Salvatore could have had the information for free, but he had established an account for Georges in Switzerland, and the equivalent of twice his yearly salary was paid into it every year.

Georges was careful to outwardly live on his Interpol salary, but pragmatic enough to dip into the Switzerland account to pay for his son's education. There was a healthy amount in the account now, having accumulated for ten years and drawn interest as well. The money was there; he wouldn't use it to buy luxuries for himself, but he would use it for his family. Eventually, he knew, he would have to do something with the money, but he didn't know what.

Over the years he had dealt mostly with Rodrigo Nervi, Salvatore's heir apparent, and now heir in fact. He would almost rather have dealt with Salvatore. Rodrigo was colder than Salvatore, smarter, and, Georges

thought, probably more ruthless. The only advantage Salvatore had had over his son was experience, and more years in which to accumulate a devil's list of sins.

Georges checked the time: one pm. With the six hours time difference between Paris and Washington, that made it seven am there, just the right time for reaching someone on a cell phone.

He used his own cellular phone, not wanting a record of the call on Interpol's records. Marvelous inventions, cell phones; they made pay phones almost obsolete. They weren't as anonymous, of course, but his was secure against eavesdropping and far more convenient.

"Hello," a man said after the second ring. In the background Georges could hear a television, the modulated tones of newscasters.

"I'll be sending you a photograph," Georges said. "Would you please run it through your facial-recognition program as soon as possible?" He never used a name, and neither did the other man. Whenever one of them needed information, he would call on a personal phone, rather than going through channels, which kept their official contact at a minimum.

"Sure thing."

"Please send all pertinent information to me by the usual channel."

They each rang off; conversations were always kept to a minimum as well. Georges knew nothing about his contact, not even his name. For all he knew, his counterpart in Washington cooperated for the same reason he himself did, out of fear. There was never any hint of friendliness between them. This was business, which they understood all too well.

"I need a definite answer. Will you have the vaccine ready by the next influenza season?" Rodrigo asked Dr. Giordano. There was a huge report on Rodrigo's desk, but he was concerned with the bottom line, and that was whether the vaccine could be produced in the volume needed, before it was needed.

Dr. Giordano had a hefty grant from several world health organizations to develop a reliable vaccination against avian influenza. Theirs wasn't the only laboratory working on this problem, but it was the only one that had Dr. Giordano. Vincenzo had become fascinated with viruses and had left his private practice behind for a chance to study them, becoming an acknowledged expert and seen as someone who was either a remarkable genius or remarkably lucky in working with the microscopic nasties.

A vaccine for any strain of avian flu was difficult to develop, because avian flu was fatal to birds and vaccines were made by growing the influenza virus in eggs. Avian flu, however, killed the eggs; therefore, no vaccine. The developer of a process for producing an effective, reliable vaccine against avian flu would have a huge cash cow.

This was, potentially, the biggest moneymaker in the entire Nervi corporate structure, more lucrative even than opiates. So far avian flu itself was following dead-end paths: The virus would pass from an infected bird to a human, but it lacked the means of human-to-human infection. The human host would either die or get well, but without infecting anyone else. Avian flu, as it was now, was still incapable of causing an epidemic, but the American CDC and the World Health Organization were greatly alarmed by certain changes in the virus. The experts were betting that the next influenza pandemic, the influenza virus against which humans had no immunity because they'd never come in contact with it before, would be an avian influenza virus-and they were holding their breaths with each successive flu season. So far, the world had been lucky.

If the virus made the necessary genetic changes that would enable it to jump from human to human, the company that could make a vaccine for that influenza would be able to name its price.

Dr. Giordano sighed. "If there are no more setbacks, the vaccine can be ready by the end of next summer. I cannot, however, guarantee there will be no more setbacks."

The explosion in the lab last August had destroyed several years of work. Vincenzo had isolated a recombinant avian virus and painstakingly developed a means of producing a reliable vaccine. The explosion had not only destroyed the product, it had also taken out a huge amount of information. Computers, files, hard copy notes-gone. Vincenzo had started again from scratch.

The process was going faster this time, because Vincenzo knew more about what worked and what didn't, but Rodrigo was concerned. This season's influenza was of the ordinary variety, but what about next season? Producing a batch of vaccine took about six months, and a large quantity of it had to be ready by the end of next summer. If they missed that deadline and next season the avian virus made the genetic mutation it needed to jump from human to human, they would have missed the opportunity to make an incredible fortune. The infection would flash around the world, millions

would die, but in that one season the immune systems of those who survived would adjust and that particular virus would reach the end of its brief success. The company that was ready with a vaccine when the virus mutated was the company that would reap the benefits.

They might be lucky once again, and the avian virus Wouldn't mutate in time for the next influenza season, but Rodrigo refused to rely on luck. The mutation could happen at anytime. He was in a race with the virus, and he was determined to win.

"It's your job to make certain there aren't any more setbacks," he told Vincenzo. "An opportunity such as this comes once in a lifetime. We will *not* miss it." Left unsaid was that if Vincenzo couldn't get the work done, Rodrigo would bring in someone who could. Vincenzo was an old friend, yes-of his father's. Rodrigo wasn't burdened by the same sentimentality. Vincenzo had done the most important work, but it was at a point where others could take over.

"Perhaps it isn't once in a lifetime," said Vincenzo. "What I have done with this virus, I can do again."

"But in these particular circumstances? This is perfect. If all goes well, no one will ever know and, in fact, we'll be praised as saviors. We're perfectly positioned to take advantage *this one time.* With the WHO funding your research, no one will be amazed that we have the vaccine. But if we go to the well too many times, my friend, the water will become muddied and questions will be asked that we don't want answered. There cannot be a pandemic every year, or even every five years, without someone becoming suspicious."

"Things change," Vincenzo argued. "The world's population is living in closer contact with animals than ever before."

"And no disease has ever been studied as thoroughly as influenza. Any variation is examined by thousands of microscopes. You're a doctor, you know this." Influenza was the great killer; more people had died in the 1918 pandemic than during the four-year Great Plague that had devastated Europe during the Middle Ages. The 1918 influenza had killed, it was estimated, between forty and fifty million people. Even in normal years influenza killed thousands, hundreds of thousands. Every year two hundred and fifty million doses of vaccine were produced, and that was only a fraction of what would be needed during a pandemic.

Labs in the United States, Australia, and the U.K. worked under strict regulations to produce the vaccine that targeted the virus researchers said would most likely be dominant in each influenza season. The thing about a pandemic, however, was that it was always caused by a virus that hadn't been predicted, hadn't been seen before, and thus the available vaccine wouldn't be effective against it. The whole process was a giant guessing game, with millions of lives at stake. Most of the time, the researchers guessed right. But about once every thirty years or so, a virus would mutate and catch them flat-footed. It had been thirty-five years since the Hong Kong influenza pandemic of 1968-69; the next pandemic was overdue, and the clock was ticking.

Salvatore had used all his influence and contacts to win the WHO grant to develop a reliable method of vaccine production for avian influenza. The selected labs that normally produced vaccine would be focusing on the usual strains of viruses, not the avian virus, so their vaccines would be useless. Because of the grant and Vincenzo's research, only the Nervi labs would have the know-how to produce the avian vaccine and-here was the important part-have doses ready to ship. With millions of people worldwide dropping like flies from the new strain, any effective vaccine against it would be priceless. The sky was literally the limit to how much profit could be made in a few short months.

There was no way to produce enough to protect everyone, of course, but the world's population would benefit by some judicious thinning, Rodrigo thought.

The explosion in August had threatened all of that, and Salvatore had moved swiftly to control the damage. The ones who had set the explosion had been eliminated, and a new security system installed, since obviously the old one had huge flaws. But despite all his efforts, Rodrigo had never been able to discover who hired the husband-and-wife team to destroy the lab. A rival for the vaccine? There was no rival, no other laboratory working on this particular project. A general business rival? There had been bigger targets that could have been selected, but were ignored.

First the explosion, then three months later Salvatore was murdered. Could the two be linked? Over the years there had been many attempts on Salvatore's life, so perhaps there was no connection between the two events. Perhaps this was simply a very bad year. And yet… the Joubrans had been professionals, the husband a demolitions expert and the wife an

assassin; Denise Morel was probably also a professional assassin. Was it beyond the realm of possibility that they'd been hired by the same person? But the two events were very different in nature. In the first, Vincenzo's work had been deliberately targeted and destroyed. Since it was no secret he was working on a different method of producing influenza vaccine, who would benefit from that destruction? Only someone who was also working on the same project, knew Vincenzo was close, and wanted to steal a march on him. Undoubtedly there were private laboratories that were trying to develop an avian flu vaccine, but who among the many researchers would not only know how close Vincenzo was but have the financial wherewithal to hire two professionals to stop him?

One of the regular sanctioned laboratories that produced influenza vaccines, perhaps?

Killing Salvatore, on the other hand, in no way affected Vincenzo's work. Rodrigo had simply stepped into Salvatore's place. No, his father's murder served no purpose in that arena, so he couldn't see a connection.

The phone rang. Vincenzo got up to leave, but Rodrigo stayed him with a lifted hand; he had more questions about the vaccine. He picked up the receiver. "Yes."

"I have an answer to your question." Again, no names were used, but he recognized Blanc's quiet voice. "There was nothing in our data banks. Our friends, however, came up with a match. Her name is Liliane Mansfield, she is American, and she is a contract agent, a professional assassin."

Rodrigo's blood ran cold. "*They* hired her?" If the Americans had turned on him, matters had just become enormously complicated.

"No. My contact says our friends are greatly disturbed and are themselves trying to find her."

Reading between the lines, Rodrigo interpreted that to mean that the CIA was trying to find her to eliminate her. Ah! That explained the American man who had been to her flat searching for her. It was a relief to have that mystery explained, as well; Rodrigo liked to know who all the players were on his chessboard. With the vast American resources and extensive knowledge they must have about her, they were far more likely to succeed before he did… but he wanted to personally oversee the solution to her breathing problem. She breathed, therefore she was a problem.

"Is there any way your contact can share their knowledge with you, as they receive it?" If he knew what the CIA knew, he could let them do the

legwork for him.
“Perhaps. There is one other thing that I thought would be of great interest to you. This woman was a very close friend of the Joubrans.”
Rodrigo closed his eyes. There it was, the one detail that made sense of everything, that tied it all together. “Thank you,” he said. “Please let me know if you can work out this other matter with our friends.”
“Yes, of course.”
“I’d like a copy of all the information you have on her.”
“I will fax it to you as soon as I am able,” Blanc replied, meaning when he returned home that night. He would never send information to Rodrigo from the Interpol building itself.
Rodrigo hung up and leaned his head back against his chair. The two events were connected, after all, but not in any way he’d imagined. Vengeance. So simple, and something he understood with every cell in his body. Salvatore had killed her friends, so she had killed Salvatore. Whoever had hired the Joubrans to destroy Vincenzo’s work had set in motion a chain of events that had ended with his father’s murder.
“Her name is Liliane Mansfield,” he told Vincenzo. “Denise Morel’s real name, that is. She is a professional assassin, and she was friends with the Joubrans.”
Vincenzo’s eyes widened. “And she took the poison herself? Knowing what it was? Brilliant! Foolhardy, but brilliant.”
Rodrigo didn’t share in Vincenzo’s admiration for this Liliane Mansfield’s actions. His father had died a very painful, difficult death, robbed of dignity and control, and he would never forget that. So. She had accomplished her mission and fled the country. She was perhaps out of his reach now, but she wasn’t out of the reach of her own countrymen. With Blanc on the job, he would be able to stay abreast of their search for her, and when they were closing in on her, he would step in and do the honors himself. With great pleasure.

Chapter Eleven

When Rodrigo received the faxed papers, he stared for a long time at the picture of the woman who had killed his father. His machine was a color printer, so he received the full impact of the skillfulness of her disguise. Her

hair was wheat blond and very straight, her eyes a piercing pale blue. She was very Nordic in looks, with a strong, lean face and high cheekbones. He was amazed at how changing her coloring to dark hair and brown eyes had softened her face; her facial structure had remained unchanged, but one's perception of her was definitely altered. He thought she could have walked into the room and sat next to him, and it would have taken him a moment to recognize her.

He had wondered what his father had seen in her. As a brunette, she had left Rodrigo cold; his reaction to her a? a blonde was very different. It wasn't just the normal Italian reaction to blond hair, either. It was as if he was truly seeing her for the first time, seeing the intellect and strong will so evident in those pale eyes. Perhaps Salvatore had been more perceptive than he himself was, because his father had respected strength as he'd respected nothing else. This woman was strong. Once she had crossed his path, it was almost inevitable that Salvatore would have been attracted to her.

Rodrigo leafed through the other pages Blanc had sent him. He was interested in the Mansfield woman's employment history with the American CIA; she was a hired killer, period. He wasn't shocked that governments used such people; he would have been shocked if they *didn't.* This was information he could use at a later date if he needed a particular favor from the American government, but nothing that would help him right now.

He was more interested in the information about her family: a mother and a sister. The mother, Elizabeth Mansfield, lived in Chicago; the younger sister, Diandra, lived with her husband and two children in Toledo, Ohio. If he couldn't locate Liliane, he thought, he could use her family to flush her out of hiding. Then he read that she hadn't been in contact with her family in years, and had to allow for the possibility that she might not care about their welfare.

The last page indicated what Blanc had told him, that his father's murder had not been ordered by the Americans. She had acted alone, seeking vengeance for the deaths of her friends the Joubrans. The CIA had dispatched an operative to terminate the problem.

Terminate. That was a very good word, but he wanted to do the terminating himself. If possible, he would have that satisfaction. If not, he would accept with good grace that the Americans had handled the situation.

The very last paragraph made him sit up straight. The subject had fled to London using an alias, then evidently switched identities once again and

returned to Paris. Search efforts were focusing there. The operative on location believed she was preparing for yet another strike against the Nervi organization.

Rodrigo felt as if he'd been electrified; every fine hair on his body lifted, and chills ran down his spine.

She had come back to Paris. She was *here*, within his reach. It was a bold move, and if not for M. Blanc, he would have been caught unawares. His personal security was as tight as he could humanly make it, but what about the Nervi holdings scattered around Europe? More particularly, what about the ones here in the Paris area? The security systems in place were good, yes, but where this woman was concerned, extra precautions were called for.

What was her most likely target? The answer came immediately to mind: Vincenzo's laboratory. He *knew* it; the flash of intuition too strong to ignore. That was where her friends had struck, and gotten shot for their efforts. She would see it as poetic justice if she completed the job, perhaps setting a series of explosive charges and completely demolishing the laboratory complex.

Losing the projected profits from the influenza vaccine wouldn't bankrupt him, but he was looking forward to that huge influx of cash. Money was the real power in the world, behind the kings and oil princes, the presidents and prime ministers, with each group trying to get more than the other. But even greater than the lost profits would be the insult, the loss of face. Another incident at the lab and the WHO would begin questioning the security, at best simply withdrawing the funding, at worst insisting on on-site inspections. He didn't want anyone from the outside looking through the laboratory. Vincenzo could probably hide or disguise what he was doing, but any further delay would wreck their plans.

He couldn't let her win. Aside from everything else, word would reach the streets that Rodrigo Nervi had been bested-and by a woman. He could perhaps keep it quiet for a time, but eventually someone would talk. Someone always talked.

This could not have happened at a worse time. He had just buried his father no more than a week before. As well as he knew what needed to be done, nevertheless he was aware that on some fronts there was still a lingering doubt that he could step into Salvatore's shoes. And he himself had taken

over a lot of the everyday work of Salvatore's; he had no one in position to do the same for him.
He was in the middle of arranging a shipment of weapons-grade plutonium to Syria. There were opiates to funnel into various countries, arms deals to be made, in addition to all the legitimate work of running a multifaceted corporation. He had to attend board meetings.
But to apprehend Liliane Mansfield, he would make the time, if he had to clear his slate of everything else. By tomorrow morning, every employee of his in France would have a photograph of her. If she walked down the street, eventually someone would recognize her.
The security at the laboratory was common, at least on the outside. Fenced and gated-with one entrance in front and one in back, both manned by two guards-the lab itself was a series of connected buildings that were mostly windowless. The architecture was graceless, the buildings themselves constructed of ordinary red brick. The parking lot on the left contained about fifty vehicles.
Swain noted all of this on one drive-by. The Jaguar was kind of noticeable, so he couldn't do an immediate repeat without the guards noticing. Instead he waited until the next day to do another drive-by, and in the meantime, he used all his contacts to locate the building specs so he could figure out how Lily was most likely to try to gain entrance. For the exterior grounds, security was pretty much what he could see: the fence, the gated entrances, the guards. At night, the grounds were patrolled by a guard with a leashed German shepherd, and the grounds were well-lit.
For obvious reasons, he thought she would try for a night entrance, despite the dog. The night lighting was good, but created shadows that provided concealment There weren't as many people around at night, plus people naturally got tired in the wee hours. She was an expert with a pistol, and could take out both the guard and the dog with well-placed sedation darts. Not instantaneously, true, and the guard might be able to yell or otherwise attract attention. Of course, she could also kill them; if she used a silencer, the guards at the gate wouldn't hear a thing.
Swain didn't like that thought. He wouldn't bat an eyelash if she killed the guard, but it made him queasy to think about harming the dog. He was a sucker for dogs, even trained attack dogs. People were a different story; some of them just cried out for killing. He excluded most kids from that theory, lumping them in with dogs, though he'd met some kids he'd thought

the world would be better off without. He was just glad his own kids hadn’t turned out to be jerks, because it would’ve been embarrassing.
He just hoped Lily didn’t shoot dogs. A lot of his natural sympathy for her would go down the drain if she did.
There was a nice little park across the street from the laboratory. On warm summer days, a lot of the employees from the nearby shops would find their way there to relax during their lunch breaks. There were a few hardy souls there even on a brisk November day, walking their dogs, reading; enough of them, in fact that one more man wouldn’t be noticeable.
The streets here were wider than in the older parts of Paris, but parking was still at a premium. Finally Swain found a parking space nearby, and walked to the park. He bought a cup of coffee and found himself a nice bench in the sun where he could watch the comings and goings at the lab, familiarize himself with the routine, maybe notice some security weakness he hadn’t already spotted. If he was lucky, Lily might choose today to do the same thing. There was no telling what garb she’d be wearing, or what color wig, so he might wander around and study the park-goers’ noses and mouths. He thought he’d recognize the shape of Lily’s mouth anywhere.
The laboratory complex looked ordinary enough; the external security was what one would expect at any manufacturing facility: a perimeter of fencing, limited access, uniformed guards at the gates. Anything more, such as twelve-foot concrete walls “With barbed wire on the top, would only attract attention.
The sophisticated security, Lily thought, would be inside.
Fingerprint scans or retinal scans for entry into the most restricted areas. Motion sensors. Laser beams. Sensors for broken glass, weight sensors, you name it She needed to know exactly what was inside, and she might have to hire someone who could bypass those systems. She knew several people in the business, but she wanted to stay away from acquaintances. If the word had gone out that she was now persona non-grata at the Agency, none of them would be inclined to help her. They might even actively work against her, dropping a word in interested ears about her location and intentions.
The neighborhood was an interesting mix of ethnic shops, trendy little boutiques-like there was ever any other kind-cafes, coffee shops, and cheap apartment housing. A small park gave the eye a break from the urban sprawl, though most of the trees had been denuded by approaching winter and the brisk wind made the limbs rattle like bones against each other.

She felt much better today, almost normal. Her legs had held up well on the brisk walk from the train, and she wasn't breathless. Tomorrow, she thought, she would try a slow jog, but today she was content to walk.
She stopped in a coffee shop and bought a cup of strong black coffee, as well as a pastry with a buttery, flaky crust that almost melted in her mouth as soon as she took a bite. The park was just fifty meters distant, so she walked there and selected a bench in the sun, where she devoted herself to the sinful pastry and her coffee. When she was finished, she licked her fingers, then took a thin notebook from her tote, opened it in her lap, and bent her head over it. She pretended to be engrossed in what she was reading, but in reality her eyes were busy, her gaze moving from point to point, noting the people in the park and the placement of certain things. There was a score of people in the little park; a young mother with an energetic toddler, an elderly man walking an elderly dog. Another man sat alone, sipping a cup of coffee and looking at his wrist watch several times, as if he was waiting, none too patiently, for someone to join him. Others walked among the trees: a young couple holding hands, two young men kicking a soccer ball back and forth as they went, people enjoying the sunny day.
Lily took a pen from her tote and drew a rough diagram of the park, marking the locations of benches, trees, shrubbery, the concrete trash receptacles, the small fountain in the middle. Then she flipped a page and did the same with the laboratory complex, marking where the doors were in relation to the gate, the windows. She would need to do the same for all four sides of the complex. This afternoon she would rent a motorbike and wait for Dr. Giordano to leave the complex, assuming he was even there, of course-she had no idea what hours he kept She didn't even know what model and make of car he drove. She was betting, however, that he would keep fairly regular hours, close to the national average. When he left, she would follow him home. Simple. His phone number might not be published, but old-fashioned methods still worked.
Again, she knew nothing about the man's family life, or if he even had family here in Paris. He was her ace in the hole. He knew about the complex's security and, as director, would have access to every part of it; what wasn't certain was how easily he would divulge that information. She preferred not to use him, however, because once she grabbed him, she would have to move quickly, before anyone noticed he was missing. She

would try to find out about the internal security methods by other means, try to pet in without using Dr. Giordano. But she wanted to know where he lived sooner rather than later, just in case.

Lily was sharply aware of her shortcomings in this area. She'd never dealt with anything more than the most basic security systems. She wasn't an expert in anything, except reading her target and getting close enough to execute the mission. The more she thought about this undertaking, the more she realized how uneven the odds were, but that didn't lessen her determination. There was no perfect security system in the world; there was always someone who knew how to bypass it. She would find that someone, or she would learn how to do it herself.

The two young men were no longer kicking the soccer ball. Instead they were talking on a mobile phone as they looked at a sheet of paper, then at her.

Alarm skittered through her. She slid the notebook and pen back into her tote, then pretended to accidentally knock the tote to the ground beside her right leg. She bent down and, using the tote to hide her movements, slid her hand inside the top of her boot and pulled out her weapon.

She used the tote to keep the weapon concealed as she got to her feet, moving at an angle away from the two men. Her heart was thumping in her chest. She was accustomed to being the hunter, but this time she was the prey.

Chapter Twelve

Lily sprinted, her sudden burst of speed catching them by surprise. She heard a shout, and instinctively dived to the ground a split second before the sharp, deep crack of a large-caliber pistol shattered the drone of everyday business. She rolled behind one of the concrete trash receptacles and came up on one knee.

She wasn't fool enough to stick her head up, though most people weren't all that accurate with a pistol. Instead she took a quick peek around the side and squeezed off a shot of her own. At that distance, some thirty or thirty-five meters, she wasn't all that accurate herself; her bullet went into the ground just in front of the two men, kicking up a spray of dirt and sending both of them diving for cover.

She heard tires squealing, people screaming as they realized the sharp sounds were those of gunfire. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the young mother swoop down on her toddler and snatch him up as if he were a football, holding him under her arm as she scrambled for safety. The little boy squealed with joy, thinking it was a game. The old man stumbled and fell, losing his hold on the leash. The old dog, however, was long past making a dash for freedom, and it sat down on the grass.

Quickly she looked around for any threat coming at her from the rear, but all she saw was people running away, not toward her. Safe from that quarter, at least for right now, she looked around the other side of the receptacle and saw two uniformed guards running from the complex gate, weapons in their hands.

She squeezed off a shot at the guards and made them dive for the pavement, though again they were too far away for accuracy. She used a modified Beretta model 87, shooting .22-caliber long rifle bullets, with a ten-round clip. She had just used two rounds, and she hadn't brought any extra ammo with her, because she hadn't been expecting to use it *Fool!* she berated herself. She didn't know if these two guys were Agency or some of Rodrigo's men, but she was betting on Agency, for them to have found her so fast. She should have been better prepared, instead of underestimating them and perhaps overestimating herself.

She snapped her attention back to the two soccer players. They both had weapons, and when she peeked around again, both fired off shots; one shot missed completely, and she heard glass shatter behind her, followed by more screams and the sudden shocked cries of someone who had been wounded. The other bullet struck the trash receptacle, sending a chunk of concrete into the air and peppering her face with stinging shards. She fired a shot *herself-three-and* checked the guards. They had both found cover, one behind a tree and the other behind a trash receptacle like the one she crouched behind.

They weren't changing their position, so she turned back to the soccer players. The one to her left had moved even further to her left, hampering her aim at him, since she was right-handed and the concrete that protected her was to some extent also protecting him.

This was *not* good. There were four weapons to her one, therefore theoretically at least four times as much ammunition as she had. They could keep her pinned here until she ran out of ammo, or until the French police

arrived-which should be any minute now, because even with the ringing in her ears from the gunfire, she could hear the sirens-and took care of her themselves.

Behind her, traffic had snarled as drivers stopped their cars and jumped out to hide behind them. Her only chance was to run for the cover of the cars and use them to hide her movements; she'd have to shortcut through a shop, probably, or hope someone came by on a bicycle, so she could relieve them of it. She didn't think she could trust her ability to run for any distance.

The old man who had fallen was trying to get up and at the same time gather his trembling pet to him. "Stay down!" Lily yelled at him. He looked at her with terrified incomprehension on his face, his white hair wildly disordered. "Stay down!" she yelled again, making a downward motion with her hand.

Thank God, he finally understood, and flattened himself on the ground. His little dog crept to him and lay down by his head, getting as close to him as it could.

For a moment, time seemed frozen, the sharp smell of cordite seeming to hang over the park despite the chill breeze. She heard the two soccer players say something to each other, but she couldn't make out the words.

From her right came the purr of a well-tuned, powerful engine. She glanced in that direction and saw a gray Jaguar jump the curb, heading straight toward her.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, almost deafening her. She had only a few seconds; she had to time her jump perfectly or the car would crush her. She gathered her legs under her, preparing to spring-

The driver spun the wheel and the Jaguar slid sideways between her and the soccer players, the tires slinging clots of dirt and grass as they tried to grab traction, the rear end of the car swinging around so that it ended up facing in the same direction from which it had come. The driver leaned over and thrust open the passenger door.

"Get in!" he yelled in English, and Lily dived into the front seat Over her head came the deep boom of a large-caliber weapon, and the spent cartridge bounced off the seat into her face. She swatted the hot shell away.

He floored the accelerator and the Jaguar leaped forward. There were more shots, several of them, the cracks and booms of different caliber weapons overlapping. The driver's side rear window splintered, and the driver

ducked as glass sprayed behind him. “Shit!” He grinned, then swerved to miss a tree.
Lily had a dizzying image of a tangle of cars as they shot forward into the street. The driver spun the wheel again and the Jaguar once more swapped ends, throwing Lily onto the floorboard. She tried to grab the seat, the door handle, anything with which to anchor herself. The driver was laughing like a maniac as the car once more leaped a curb, fishtailed, then shot through a gap and briefly went airborne before coming down on the street with a hard thump that rattled her teeth and made the chassis groan. Lily gulped for air.
He slammed on the brakes, made a hard left turn, and accelerated out of it. The G-force pressed Lily into the floorboard, preventing her from climbing into the seat. She closed her eyes as squealing brakes sounded directly beside her door, but there was no collision. Instead he made a right turn, bumping along a very uneven surface; with the buildings looming so close on each side that she thought they were going to lose the side-view mirrors, Lily knew they must be in an alley. Dear God, she’d gotten into a car with a maniac.
At the end of the alley he slowed, stopped, then smoothly pulled out into traffic and measured his speed to that of the other cars around him, driving as sedately as any grandmother on Sunday morning.
But he was grinning, and he threw back his head on a full-throated laugh. “Damn, that was fun!”
He had both hands on the wheel, the big automatic lying on the seat beside him. This was likely the best chance she’d have. Lily stayed in the close confines of the floorboard. She fished around for her pistol, which she’d dropped when he was slinging her around as if she were on a carnival ride. She found it under the passenger seat and, with a smooth, economical motion, brought the weapon up and aimed it between his eyes. “Pull over and let me out,” she said.
He glanced at the pistol, then turned his attention back to the traffic. “Put that peashooter away before you piss me off. Hell, lady, I just saved your life!”
“No, just some glass cut the back of my neck. It’s minor.” He reached back and swiped his right hand across his neck. His fingers came away smeared with blood, but not a lot of it. “See?”
“Okay.” Smooth as silk, she reached out her left hand to confiscate the weapon lying beside his leg.

Without looking down, he snapped his right hand around her wrist. “Uh-uh,” he said, all playfulness gone from his voice. “That’s mine.”
He was fast, amazingly so. In a flash the good-natured goofiness had vanished, replaced by a cool, hard look that said he meant business.
Oddly, she was reassured by this glimpse, as if now she was seeing the real man and knew what she had to deal with. She moved farther away from him, as close to the door as she could get, not because she was afraid of him but to make it more difficult for him to grab her weapon with one of those lightning moves. And maybe she *was* a little afraid of him; he was an unknown, and in her business what she didn’t know could get her killed. Fear was good; it kept her on her toes.
He rolled his eyes at her action. “Look, you don’t have to act like I’m psycho or something. I’ll let you out safe and sound, I promise-unless you shoot me, in which case we’ll crash into something and I can’t make any guarantees.”
“Who are you?” she asked in a flat tone.
“Lucas Swain, at your service. Most people just call me Swain. For some reason, *Lucas* never really caught on.”
“I didn’t mean your name. Who do you work for?”
“Myself. I’m not real good at the nine-to-five routine. I’d been in South America for ten years or so and things got kind of tense there, so I thought taking in the sights in Europe for a while would be a good idea.”
He *was* darkly tanned, she noticed. If she read between the lines, he was telling her he was either an adventurer, a mercenary, or a contract agent She was still betting on the latter. But then why had he intervened? That was what made no sense. If his orders were to kill her, he could have done that when she first dived into the car if he hadn’t wanted to let Rodrigo’s goons do the deed for him.
“Whatever you’re involved in,” he said, “from the looks of it you’re outnumbered and could use some help. I’m available, I’m good, and I’m bored. So what was going on back there?”
Lily wasn’t an impulsive person, at least not in her work. She was careful, she did her homework, and she planned. But she’d already realized she’d need help in getting into the laboratory complex, and despite his unsettling good humor, Lucas Swain had proven himself to be skilled at a lot of things. She had been so alone these past few months that her solitude was a

constant ache in her heart. There was something about this man that invited trust, something that eased the ache of loneliness.
She didn't answer his question. Instead she said, "Are you any good with security systems?"

Chapter Thirteen

He pursed his lips, considering her question. "I know enough to get by, but I'm no expert. Depends on the actual system. I do, however, know some real experts who can tell me anything I need to know." He paused. "Are you talking about doing something illegal?"
"Yes."
"Oh, good. I'm feeling more cheerful by the minute."
If he got any more cheerful, she thought, she'd have to shoot him to protect her own sanity.
He made another turn, looked around, then said thoughtfully, "Do you know where the hell we are?"
Lily turned sideways and swung her legs up in the seat, blocking any move he might make to grab her pistol, then dared a quick glance around. "Yes. At the next traffic signal turn right, then about a mile farther turn left. I'll tell you when."
"Where will we be then?"
"At the train station. That's where you can let me out."
"Aw, come on. We've been getting along so great. Don't abandon me so soon. I had my hopes up we were going to be partners."
"Without checking you out?" she asked incredulously.
"I guess that would be stupid."
"No joke." Ten minutes with an American and she found herself easily falling back into the vernacular, like putting on comfortable slippers.
"Where are you staying? I'll call you."
"At the Bristol." He took the right turn she'd indicated. "Room seven-twelve."
She lifted her brows. "You rented a Jag, you stay at one of the most expensive hotels in Paris. Your day job must pay well."
"All of my jobs have paid well, plus I had to have somewhere to park the Jag. Damn. Now I have to rent another car, and I can't turn this one in yet or

I'll be busted when the damage is reported."
She glanced back at the broken window, through which cold air was rushing. "Break it out the rest of the way and tell the rental company some punk broke it with a bat."
"That'll work, unless someone got the license number."
"The way you were fishtailing?"
"There is that, but why take the chance? In France you're assumed guilty unless you can prove otherwise. I'll just try to stay out of the clutches of the gendarmes, thank you."
"Your choice," she said indifferently. "You're the one who'll be paying for two rental cars."
"Don't sound so sympathetic; I'll start thinking you care."
That quip pulled an unwilling smile from her. He didn't take himself seriously; she didn't know if that was an asset or a liability, but he was definitely amusing. He'd all but fallen into her lap just when she'd been trying to decide whom she should pull in to help her, so she'd have to be a fool to categorically turn him down. She would check him out, and if there was the slightest hint of Agency or untrustworthiness, then she would simply never contact him. He hadn't acted as if he'd been hired to kill her; she was beginning to feel easy about that As for whether or not he was any good, or reliable, that remained to be seen. She couldn't call her normal source with the Agency and have him investigated, but she knew a couple of shady guys who could find out for her.
She used the short time left before they reached the train station to study him. He was a good-looking man, she noticed with faint surprise; when he'd been talking, that was what she'd paid attention to, not his face. He was tallish, around six-one or so, and lean. His hands were sinewy, long-fingered, ringless, with prominent veins and short, clean nails. His hair was short, brown with gray around his temples; his eyes were blue, much bluer than her own. Lips a bit thin, but well-shaped. Strong chin that stopped just short of being cleft. A noble nose, thin and high-bridged. Except for the gray in his hair, he looked younger than he probably was. She guessed his age to be close to her own, late thirties, possible early forties.
He was dressed the way millions of men on the Continent dressed, nothing that would make him stand out or shout "American," no Levi's or Nikes or a sweatshirt imprinted with his favorite professional football team. Instead

he wore taupe slacks, a blue shirt, and a great black leather blazer. She envied him that blazer. And his Italian leather loafers were clean and shiny. If he was newly arrived from South America, he'd adopted the style of the locals pretty fast.

"The next left," she said as they neared the turn.

He'd also picked up the Parisian style of driving pretty fast, too; he drove with nerve, verve, and reckless abandon. As someone tried to cut him off, she saw that he'd also been fast to pick up some of the local gestures. He was smiling as he cut in front of the other car; a glint in his eyes that said he enjoyed the challenge of Parisian traffic. He was definitely a lunatic.

"How long have you been in Paris?" she asked.

"Three days. Why?"

"Pull over there." She directed him to the curb in front of the train platform.

"You already drive like a native."

"When you swim with the sharks, you gotta show your teeth so they know you mean business." He pulled to the curb. "It's been a pleasure, Ms… ?"

Lily didn't leap into the opening. Instead she returned her pistol to its holster in her boot and continued the movement, opening the door and sliding out. She leaned in to look at him. "I'll call you," she said, then closed the door and strode away.

He wasn't in a parking slot, so he couldn't wait to see which train she got on; he had to pull away, and though he looked back, already her blond head was gone from view. He didn't think she'd pulled a wig out of her pocket and clapped it on, so he assumed she had deliberately lost herself behind some taller passengers.

He could have pushed it, left the car where it was and followed her, but his gut told him that persistence right now Wasn't a smart idea. If he tried to follow her, she would bolt. Let her come to him.

She was going to check him out. Shit. He pulled out his cell phone and made an urgent call stateside so some computer geek could earn his salary and make sure no one could learn anything about Lucas Swain except for some highly edited, and mostly fabricated, details.

That taken care of, Swain put his mind to solving another less pressing problem: the Jag. That window needed to be replaced before he turned it in to the rental company, because he'd been serious about not wanting the French cops to know about him. It wasn't good politics, and he also had to

figure an organization like the Nervis' would have informants everywhere it mattered, which certainly included the cops.

He loved the Jag, but it would have to go. It was just too damn noticeable. Maybe a Mercedes-no, still too noticeable. A French-made car, then, a Renault or something like that; though, come to think of it, he'd love to drive an Italian sports car. He had to think of the job first, damn it, and Lily might balk at running around with him if he was driving something flashy.

God, he'd almost choked on his coffee when he saw her walking casually into the park as if she weren't being hunted all over Europe. He'd always been a lucky son of a bitch, and that luck was holding. Forget any fancy computer work, deductive reasoning, shit like that-all he'd had to do was sit down on a bench in a dinky park and she walked up before he'd been there fifteen minutes. Okay, so deductive reasoning had helped him pick out the laboratory complex as the place where she was most likely to show; he was still lucky.

He hadn't been shot, either, which was damn lucky. Too bad about the Jag. Vinay would say he'd been hotdogging again, and the charge would be true. He liked a little excitement in his life. Vinay would also ask him what the hell he was thinking, playing games like this instead of doing the job he'd been sent to do, but he'd always been curious as well as lucky. He wanted to know what Lily was planning to do, what there was at that laboratory that was so interesting. Besides, she'd got the drop on him.

Strange, but he hadn't been worried. Lily Mansfield was a hired assassin, and just because she hired out to the good guys didn't make her any less dangerous. But she hadn't wanted that old guy in the park to get hurt, and she hadn't recklessly fired where innocent bystanders could have been hurt-unlike the soccer guys, who had done exactly that. Just because of that, he'd have been inclined to help her even if she hadn't been his quarry.

He guessed he wouldn't tell Vinay anything just yet, because Vinay might not understand his letting Lily go without getting any idea of how to get in touch with her again.

In betting that she'd call him in a day or so, he was trusting in human nature. He'd helped her, he'd made her laugh, and he hadn't done anything threatening. He'd offered to help her further. He'd given her information about himself. The reason she hadn't put down that damn pistol of hers was that she'd been expecting him to use his weapon on her, and by not even trying to, he'd muddied the waters of suspicion.

She was just good enough, just dangerous enough, that if he made a move too soon, he might end up with some extra ventilation holes, which would spoil his reputation for being lucky. And if he was wrong about her calling him, then he'd have to go back to the boring way of finding people: computers and deductive reasoning.

He spent the rest of the day locating someone who would replace the Jaguar's side window, then renting another car. He started to get one of the ordinary little Renaults, but at the last moment decided on the Megane Renault Sport, a hot little turbo-charged number with a six-speed transmission. It wasn't exactly a nondescript car, but he figured there might be another occasion when he needed speed and handling and he didn't want to get caught a few horses short. The rental office had had a red one that really caught his eye, but he went with the silver. There was no sense in waving a red flag and shouting, "Here I am, look at me!"

He ended up back at the Bristol just as daylight faded completely. He was hungry, but he wasn't in the mood for company, so he went up to his room and called room service. While he waited for his food to be delivered, he took off his shoes and jacket and flopped on the bed, where he lay staring at the ceiling-he'd done some good thinking while looking at that ceiling-and thinking about Lily Mansfield.

He'd recognized her immediately from the color photo in her file. No photograph, however, could have conveyed the energy and intensity that permeated every move she made. He liked her face, almost thin but strongly structured, with very high cheekbones, that proud nose, and Lord God Almighty, that mouth. Just looking at that mouth gave him a woody. Her eyes were like pieces of blue ice, but her mouth was tender and vulnerable and sexy and a lot of other things he could feel but couldn't put into words. He hadn't been kidding when he told her he hoped she'd jump his bones. If she'd said the word, he'd have had her back here at the Bristol in record time.

He could remember exactly how she'd looked, what she was wearing: dark gray pants with black boots, a blue oxford-cloth shirt, and a dark blue pea jacket. He should probably also commit to memory that when she was wearing those boots, she was armed. Her hair was simply cut, just to her shoulders, and framed her face with long wisps. Even though the pea jacket had hidden most of her figure, from the length and build of her legs, he figured she was on the lean side. She had also looked a little frail, with

bluish circles under her eyes, as if she'd been sick or wasn't getting enough rest.
Having the hots for her wouldn't make his job any easier; in fact, he felt a little sick at what he had to do. He'd finesse the rules, but he wouldn't break them. Well, not much. He'd accomplish the job on his own timetable, and if there were a couple of detours along the way, so be it. It wouldn't hurt to find out what was behind the Joubrans' murders, who had hired them and why. The Nervis were scum, and if he could get some really nasty goods on them, so much the better.
That would buy him time with Lily. Too bad in the end he'd have to betray her.

Chapter Fourteen

There was trouble yesterday," Damone said softly from the library doorway. "Tell me what is happening."
"You shouldn't be here," Rodrigo said instead, rising to greet his brother. He'd been astonished when the guards had called to announce Damone's arrival. The agreement was that they wouldn't be together again until after their father's murderer had been caught. Learning that Liliane Mansfield, alias Denise Morel, had killed Salvatore in revenge for the deaths of her friends, in no way abrogated that agreement. In fact, other than telling Damone the woman's identity, Rodrigo hadn't passed along any other information other than to say they were searching for her.
Damone wasn't a weak man, but Rodrigo had always felt protective of his younger brother, first because he *was* younger, and second because Damone had never been in the trenches with their father the way Rodrigo had. Rodrigo knew the ways of urban and corporate warfare, while Damone knew the ways of stock markets and mutual funds.
"You have no one to help you the way you helped Papa," Damone replied, sitting down in the chair Rodrigo had always used when Salvatore was alive. "It isn't right that I should spend my time studying money markets and moving funds around when you're shouldering the entire responsibility for operations." He spread his hands. "I also receive news from both the Internet and print sources. The item I read early this morning wasn't very informative, just a small mention of an incident at a park yesterday, of

several people exchanging gunfire. None of the culprits were identified, other than two guards from a nearby laboratory who heard the shots and ran to help.” His intelligent dark eyes narrowed. “The name of the park was given.”
Rodrigo said, “But why are you here? The incident was handled.”
“Because this is the second incident at Vincenzo’s lab. Am I supposed to think that is coincidence? We are depending on the influx of profits from the influenza vaccine. There are several opportunities pending that I’ll have to let go by if the funds aren’t there. I want to know what’s going on.”
“A phone call wouldn’t have sufficed?”
“I can’t see your face over the phone,” Damone replied, and smiled. “You’re a talented liar, but I know you too well. I’ve watched you from the time we were small, looking up at Papa and denying we had done whatever thing had happened, though of course we were always guilty. If you lie to me in person, I’ll know it. So. I am capable of adding more than two digits together. There is an ongoing problem at Vincenzo’s laboratory, and in the middle of this, our father is murdered. Are the two connected?“
That was the problem with Damone, Rodrigo thought; he was too damned intelligent, and intuitive into the bargain. It annoyed Rodrigo that he’d never been able to successfully lie to his younger brother; everyone else in the world, yes, but not to Damone. And perhaps being protective of his younger brother had been good when they were seven and four, but they were both grown men now. That was a habit he should perhaps break.
“Yes,” he finally said. “They are.”
“How so?”
“The woman who killed Papa, Liliane Mansfield, was a close friend of the Joubrans, the couple who broke into the laboratory in August and destroyed a great portion of Vincenzo’s work.”
Damone rubbed his eyes as if he was tired, then pinched the bridge of his nose before lowering his hand. “So it was vengeance.”
“That part of it, yes.”
“And the other part?”
Rodrigo sighed. “I still don’t know who hired the Joubrans in the beginning. Whoever it is could well hire someone else to attack the laboratory again. We cannot afford another such delay. This woman who killed Papa wasn’t working for anyone at the time, I don’t think, but she could well be by now. My men spotted her at the park yesterday; she was surveilling the grounds

of the complex. Whether she was hired or is doing this on her own, the result is the same. She will try to sabotage the vaccine."
"Can she possibly know what the vaccine is?"
Rodrigo spread his hands. "There is always the possibility of betrayal from within, someone who works at the laboratory, in which case she would know. Supposedly mercenaries such as the Joubrans don't work cheaply, so I'm investigating the financial circumstances of all the laboratory employees, to see if any of them had the means of hiring them."
"What do you know about this woman?"
"She is an American, and she was a hired killer, a contract agent, for their CIA."
Damone paled. "The Americans hired her?"
"Not to kill Papa, no. She did that on her own and, as you can imagine, they are very upset with her. They have, in fact, dispatched someone to 'terminate the problem,' I believe is the phrase that was used."
"And in the meantime she is trying to devise a way to get inside the laboratory. How did she get away yesterday?"
"She has an accomplice, a man driving a Jaguar. He drove the car between her and my men, shielding her while he returned fire."
"License plate?"
"No; the angle was wrong for my men to see it. There were witnesses, of course, but they were too busy cowering to take down a license number."
"The most important question: *Has she tried to harm you personally?"*
"No." Rodrigo blinked in surprise.
"Then it follows that I am in less danger than you. Therefore I will stay here, and you may delegate some of your duties to me. I will oversee the search for this woman, or any of your other problems if you would rather see to that yourself. Or we can work together on everything. I wish to be of help. He was my father, too."
Rodrigo sighed, realizing he had been wrong to keep Damone away from everything; his brother was, after all, a Nervi. He must long for vengeance as deeply as did Rodrigo himself.
"There is another reason I want this matter taken care of," Damone continued. "I am thinking of getting married."
Astonished, Rodrigo stared at him in silence for a moment, then burst into laughter. "Married! When? You haven't said anything about a special woman!"

Damone laughed, too, and color darkened his cheeks. “I don’t know when, because I haven’t asked her yet. But I think she will say yes. We have been seeing each other for over a year-”
“And you didn’t tell us?” *Us* included Salvatore, who would have been delighted that one of his sons intended to settle down and provide him with grandchildren.
“-but exclusively only in the past few months. I wanted to be certain before I said anything. She is Swiss, of a very good family; her father is a banker. Her name is Giselle.” His voice deepened when he said her name. “I have known from the very first that she is the one.”
“But she took longer, eh?” Rodrigo laughed again. “She didn’t take one look at your handsome face and decide you would make beautiful babies with her?”
“She knew that immediately, yes,” Damone said with cool confidence. “It was my ability to be a good husband that she doubted.”
“All Nervis make good husbands,” Rodrigo said, and it was true, if the wife didn’t mind the occasional mistress. Damone, though, would probably be faithful; he was just that type.
This happy news did explain why Damone was anxious to put this problem of Liliane Mansfield to rest. While it was true that wanting retribution was also part of it, he might well have been patient enough to let Rodrigo handle things had events in his personal life not spurred him to action.
Damone looked at Rodrigo’s desk and saw the photograph lying on it Walking over, he turned the file around and studied the woman’s face.
“She’s attractive,” he said. “Not pretty, but… attractive.”
He flipped through the rest of the file, reading rapidly. He looked up in astonishment. “This is the CIA’s file on her. How did you get it?”
“We have someone there on our payroll, of course. Also in Interpol, and Scotland Yard. It has, on occasion, been convenient to know certain things in advance.”
“The CIA calls here? You call them?”
“No, of course not; every call going in or out of there is logged and perhaps recorded. I have a private number for our Interpol contact, Georges Blanc, and he contacts the CIA or FBI through normal channels.”
“Have you thought of asking Blanc to get the mobile phone number of the person the CIA has sent to track Mansfield? The CIA doesn’t do this itself; it hires others to do the work, am I correct? I’m certain he or she would

have a mobile, everyone does. Perhaps this person would be interested in making a considerable sum of money in addition to what the CIA pays, if certain information comes our way first."

Intrigued by the idea, chagrined that he hadn't thought of it himself, Rodrigo stared at his brother in admiration. "Fresh eyes," he murmured to himself. And Damone was a Nervi; some things were inborn. "You have a devious mind," he said, and laughed. "Between the two of us, this woman has no chance."

Chapter Fifteen

Frank Vinay always rose early, before dawn. Since the death of his wife, Dodie, fifteen years before, it had been increasingly difficult for him to find reasons *not* to work. He still missed her, dreadfully at times; at other times it felt more like a distant ache, as if something in his life wasn't quite right. He'd never considered remarrying, because he thought it would be grossly unfair to a woman to marry her when he still loved his dead wife with all his heart and soul.

He wasn't alone, anyway; he had Raiser for company. The big German shepherd's chosen sleeping place was in a corner of the kitchen-maybe the kitchen felt like home to him, since that was where he'd been kept as a puppy until he became accustomed to his new surroundings-and he rose from his bed, tail wagging, as soon as he heard Frank's footsteps coming down the stairs.

Frank entered the kitchen and rubbed Raiser behind the ears, murmuring silly things that he felt safe in saying because Raiser never betrayed a secret He gave the dog a treat, checked the water in the bowl, then switched on the coffeepot that Bridget, his housekeeper, had prepared the evening before. Frank himself had no domestic skills at all; it was a complete mystery to him how he could take water, coffee, and filter and concoct an undrinkable brew, while Bridget could use the same components to make a pot of coffee that was so good it almost made him weep. He'd watched her do it, tried to do the same things, and ended up with sludge. Accepting that any further efforts of his to make coffee would fit the definition of insanity, Frank had acknowledged defeat and saved himself from further humiliation.

Dodie had made things easy for him, and he still followed her guidelines. All his socks were black, so he wouldn't have to worry about matching them. All his suits were neutral in color, his shirts either white or blue so they'd go with any suit, and his ties were likewise of the mix-and-match variety. He could pull out any item of clothing and be assured that it would go with anything else in his closet. He'd never win any awards for style, but at least he wouldn't embarrass himself.

He'd tried to vacuum the house… once. He still wasn't certain how he'd managed to explode the vacuum cleaner.

All in all, it was best to leave the domestic front to Bridget, while he concentrated on paperwork. That was what he did now, paperwork. He read, he digested facts, he gave his learned opinion-which was another phrase for "best guess"-to the director, who then gave it to the president, and he made decisions about operations based on what he'd read.

While the coffee was brewing, he turned off the outside security lights and let Raiser out into the backyard to do a perimeter patrol and also take care of nature's call. Raiser was getting old, Frank realized as he watched his pet, but then so was he. Maybe both of them should think about retiring, so that Frank could read something besides intelligence reports and Raiser could give up his guard duties and just be a companion.

Frank had been thinking about retiring for several years now. The only thing that held him back was the fact that John Medina wasn't ready to come in from the field, and Frank couldn't think of anyone else he wanted to see fill his shoes. Not that the position was his to bestow, but his choice would carry a lot of weight when the decision was made.

Maybe soon, Frank thought. Niema, John's wife of the past two years, had commented rather testily to Frank that she wanted to get pregnant and she'd like for John to be there when she did. They had done a lot of operations together, but John's current assignment was one in which she couldn't participate, and the long separation was grating on both of them. Add that to the ticking of Niema's biological clock, and Frank rather thought that John would finally be turning over his spurs to someone else.

Someone like Lucas Swain, perhaps, though Swain had spent a long time in the field, too, and his temperament was totally different from John's. John was patience itself; Swain was the type who would prod a tiger with a stick, just to get some action going. John had trained from the time he was eighteen-in truth, even before that-to become as superlative at his job as he

was. They needed someone young to replace him, someone who could stand up under the rigorous physical and mental discipline. Swain was a genius at getting results-though he usually got those results in surprising ways-but he was thirty-nine, not nineteen.

Raiser trotted up to the back door, his tail wagging. Frank let the dog in and gave him another treat, then poured himself a cup of coffee and carried it into his library, where he sat down and began catching up on the news of the day. By that time his morning papers had been delivered and he read them while he sat at the table eating a bowl of cereal-he could manage that without Bridget's aid-and drinking more coffee. Breakfast was followed by a shower and shave, and at seven-thirty on the dot he was heading out the door just as his driver pulled to the curb.

Frank had resisted being driven for a long time, preferring to take the wheel himself. But D.C. traffic was a nightmare, and driving tied up time he could devote to work, so he'd finally given in. His driver, Keenan, had been his regular driver for six years now, and they'd settled into a comfortable routine, like an old married couple. Frank rode up front-it made him nauseous to sit in back and read-but other than greeting each other, they never talked during the morning commute. The afternoon drive was different; that was when Frank had found out Keenan had six kids, that his wife, Trisha, was a concert pianist, and that his youngest child's cooking experiment had almost burned down the house. With Keenan, Frank could talk about Dodie, about the good times they'd had together, and what it was like growing up before the advent of television.

"Morning, Mr. Vinay," Reenan said, waiting until Frank was buckled in before pulling smoothly away from the curb.

"Good morning," Frank absently replied, already absorbed in the report he was reading.

He glanced up occasionally, a precaution against getting carsick, but for the most part he was oblivious of the thick traffic as people in the hundreds of thousands poured into the capital for the day's work.

They were in an intersection, in the right lane of two turn lanes making a left turn on a green arrow, hemmed in by vehicles directly ahead, behind, and to the left, when a screech of brakes to his right made him lift his head and search out the sound. Frank saw a white-paneled florist delivery truck barreling through the intersection, ignoring the double lanes of traffic turning left, with the flashing lights of a police car directly behind him. The

grill of the truck loomed in his vision, heading directly toward him. He heard Reenan say, “Shit!” as he fought the wheel to angle the car to the left, into the line of traffic beside them. Then there was a bone-jarring crash, as if he’d been picked up and flung to the ground by a giant, his entire body assaulted all at once.

Reenan regained consciousness with the taste of blood in his mouth. Smoke seemed to fill the car, and what looked like an enormous condom spilled profanely from the steering wheel. There was a buzzing in his head, and every movement was such an effort that he couldn’t lift his head off his chest. He stared at the huge condom, wondering what in hell it was doing there. An irritating blare was sounding in his left ear, making his head feel as if it might explode, and there was some other noise that sounded like shouting.

For what seemed like forever Reenan stared blankly at the steering-wheel condom, though it was only a few moments. Awareness seeped back into him, and he realized that the condom was an air bag and the “smoke” was powder from the bag.

With an almost audible pop, reality snapped back into place.

The car was in the middle of a tangle of metal. To his left were two other cars, steam rising from the broken radiator of one. A panel truck of some kind was squashed against the right side. He remembered trying to turn the car so they wouldn’t be T-boned, then an impact harder than anything he’d ever imagined. The truck had been aimed right at Mr. Vinay’s passenger door-

Oh, my God.

“Mr. Vinay,” he croaked, the sound nothing like his own voice. He turned his head and stared at the director of operations. The entire right side of the car was smashed in, and Mr. Vinay lay in an impossible tangle of metal, seat, and man.

Someone finally silenced the maddening car horn, and in the sudden relative quiet he could hear a distant siren.

“Help!” he yelled, though again it was nothing more than a croak. He spat blood out of his mouth, drew a deep breath that hurt like hell, and tried again. “Help!”

“Just hold on, buddy,” someone called. A uniformed officer climbed over the hood of one of the vehicles on the left, but the two were so crunched together that he couldn’t get between them. Instead he got on his hands and

knees on the hood and peered at Reenan's face. "Help's on the way, buddy. Are you hurt bad?"
"I need a phone," Keenan gasped, realizing the cop couldn't see their license plates. His cell phone was somewhere in the wreckage.
"Don't worry about making any calls-"
"I need a damn phone!" Keenan repeated, his tone fierce.
He fought for another breath. CIA people never identified themselves as working for the CIA, but this was an emergency. "The man beside me is the director of operations-"
He didn't need to say more. The cop had worked in the capitol area a long time, and he didn't ask, "What kind of operations?" Instead he whipped out his radio and barked a few terse words into it, then turned around and yelled, "Anyone have a cell phone?"
Silly question. Everyone did. In just a moment the cop was stretching out on the hood to hand Keenan a tiny flip-phone. Reenan reached out a shaky, bloodstained hand and took the phone. He punched in a few numbers, realized this wasn't a secure phone, then mentally said, "Shit," and punched the rest of them.
"Sir," he said, fighting back the black edges of unconsciousness. He still had a job to do. "This is Keenan. The director and I have been in an accident and the director is severely injured. We're at…" His voice trailed off. He had no idea where they were. He held the phone out to the cop. "Tell him where we are," he said, and closed his eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

Even though her regular contacts were out of the question, over the years Lily had met a number of people of questionable character with unquestionable skills who, for the right amount of money, would dig up dirt on their mothers. She still had some money left but not a huge amount, so she hoped that "right" translated to "reasonable."
If Swain checked out okay, that would help her financial situation, because he'd volunteered to work with her. If she had to hire someone, that would put a serious dent in her bank account. Of course, she had to remember that Swain had admitted he wasn't an expert at security systems, but he said that he knew people who were. The big question was, would those people want

to be paid? If they did, then she'd be better off hiring someone from the beginning, rather than wasting money having Swain investigated. Unfortunately, that was something she wouldn't know until it was too late to do anything about it. She wanted Swain to check out okay. She wanted to find out he hadn't escaped from a psychiatric ward somewhere or, even more important, he hadn't been hired by the CIA.

It was as she was going to an Internet cafe that she realized she'd made a tactical error in walking away from Swain the day before. If the CIA *had* hired him, Swain had now had the opportunity to call and have his file sanitized to fit whatever story he told. No matter what she or anyone else was able to find out about him, she couldn't be certain the information was correct.

She stopped dead in her tracks. A woman bumped into her from behind and gave her a nasty look for stopping so abruptly. *"Excusez-moi,"* Lily said, detouring to a small bench so she could sit while she thought this out. Damn it, there was so much about spy craft that she didn't know; she was at a huge disadvantage here. There was now no point in investigating Swain; he either was or wasn't CIA. She simply had to make up her mind to contact him or not.

The safest thing to do was not call him. He didn't know where she lived, didn't know what name she was using. But if he was CIA, then he had somehow figured out that she'd be after the Nervi laboratory complex and he had staked it out, waiting for her to appear. Either she abandoned her plan completely, or he'd eventually find her there again.

As far as the laboratory went, the circumstances there had become enormously complicated. Rodrigo had obviously found out who she really was and somehow gotten a photo of her sans disguise, otherwise the soccer players wouldn't have recognized her so readily. The little fracas at the park would put him on double alert, and security at the complex had undoubtedly been doubled.

She needed help. There was no way now she could accomplish anything on her own. The way she saw it, she could either walk away and let Rodrigo Nervi continue to flourish, without making any more effort to find out what had been so important to Averill and Tina that it had cost them their lives, or she could cross her fingers for luck and accept Swain's aid.

She wanted him to be on the level, she realized with a jolt. He seemed to get so much *enjoyment* out of life, and joy had been in short supply in her life

for several long months. He'd made her laugh. He might not realize how long it had been since that had happened, but she did. The tiny human spark in her that grief hadn't extinguished wanted to laugh again. She wanted to be happy again, and Swain radiated happiness like the sun. Okay, so he might be certifiable, but the hint of steel he'd shown when he stopped her from getting his weapon reassured her. If he could make her laugh, if she could find joy again, perhaps that alone was worth the risk of taking him as a partner.

There was also an element of physical attraction. That aspect took her a little by surprise, but she recognized the little flare of interest for what it was. She had to factor that into any decision she made concerning him, not let it cloud her mind. But did it make any difference if she wanted to accept his offer of help because he made her laugh or because she found him attractive? The fact was, the emotional need was greater than the physical. Besides, she doubted she would act on the physical attraction. She hadn't had many lovers in her life, going through long periods of abstinence and not minding at all. Her last lover, Dimitri, had tried to kill her. That had been six years ago, and since then, trust had been a real issue for her.

So the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question was, since she had no way of reliably determining if he was CIA and her only alternative now was to walk away and do nothing else about the Nervis, did she call him because he was cute and made her laugh?

"What the hell. Why not?" she muttered, and gave a rueful laugh that earned her a startled glance from a passerby.

He was staying at the Bristol, in the Champs-Elysees. On impulse she went into a cafe and ordered a cup of coffee, then asked to look up a number in their telephone directory. She scribbled down the Bristol's number, then finished her coffee and left.

She could have called and had him meet her somewhere, but instead she took the train, and was just up the street from the hotel when she stopped at a public phone and used her Telecarte phone card to call the hotel. If he was CIA and had all of his incoming calls traced, this would deny him not only her cell phone number but any hint of where she was staying.

She gave his room number to the clerk who answered, and Swain answered on the third ring-a sleepy "Yeah," followed by a yawn. She felt a glow of pleasure at his accent, the pure American informality of his greeting.

“Can you meet me at Palais de l’Elysee in fifteen minutes?” she asked without identifying herself.
“Wha-? Where? Wait a minute.” She heard another jaw-cracking yawn; then he said unnecessarily, “I’ve been asleep. Is this who I think it is? Are you blond and blue-eyed?”
“And I tote a peashooter.”
“I’ll be there. Wait a minute. Where in hell is this place?” he asked.
“Just down the street. Ask the doorman.” She hung up, and positioned herself so she could watch the front door of the hotel. The palace was close enough that only a fool would drive instead of walk, but just distant enough that he wouldn’t be able to tarry and still make the fifteen-minute deadline. When he came out of the hotel, he would turn in the opposite direction from where she was positioned, and she could fall in behind him.
He was out the door in five minutes; if he’d made any calls, they had been on his cell phone as he walked down the hall, because otherwise he hadn’t had time. He stopped to speak to the doorman, nodded, then set off down the street. Or rather, he ambled down the street, a loose-hipped gait that made her wish she could see his butt while he walked. Unfortunately he was wearing that great leather blazer again, and it covered his rear.
Lily walked swiftly, the sound of her soft-soled boots covered by the traffic. No one was with Swain, and he wasn’t talking on the phone as he walked, so that was good. Maybe he really was on his own. She closed the distance between them, and with one long stride fell into step beside him. “Swain.”
He glanced at her. “Hi, there. I spotted you when I came out of the hotel. Any reason why we’re going to the Palais?”
Caught, she had to smile and shrug. “None at all. Let’s walk and talk.”
“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the weather’s cold and the sun has almost set. Remember I told you I’ve been in South America? That means I’m used to warmth.” He shivered. “Let’s find a cafe and you can tell me what’s going on over a nice cup of hot coffee.”
She hesitated. Though she knew she was being paranoid, that Rodrigo couldn’t possibly have someone on his payroll in every shop and cafe in Paris, his influence was broad enough that she didn’t want to take the chance. “I don’t want to talk in public.”
“Okay, let’s go back to the hotel. My room is private, and it’s warm. And there’s room service. Or, if you’re afraid you can’t control yourself if you’re

in the same room with me and a bed, we can get the car and drive aimlessly around Paris, burning gas that costs forty bucks a gallon."
She rolled her eyes. "It does not. And it's liters, not gallons."
"I notice you didn't deny the part about controlling yourself." He wasn't smirking, but it was close.
"I'll manage," she said drily. "The hotel it is." If she was going to trust him, she might as well start now. Besides, seeing his hotel room without him having time to neaten it and put away things he didn't want to be seen might be enlightening-not that he would have asked her back to his room if there was anything incriminating lying about anyway.
They retraced their steps, and when they reached the hotel, the impassive doorman opened the door for them. Swain led the way to the elevators, stepping aside to let her enter first.
He unlocked his door, and she stepped into a bright, cheerful room with two floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a courtyard. The walls were cream colored, the bed had a soft-blue-and-yellow spread, and to her relief there was a fairly spacious sitting area, with two chairs and a sofa arranged around a coffee table. The bed was made, but one of the pillows bore the imprint of his head and the spread was wrinkled where he'd been napping. His suitcase wasn't in sight, so she assumed it was tucked away in the closet. Other than a water glass on the bedside table and the rumpled condition of the spread, the room was as neat as if no one was staying there.
"May I see your passport?" she asked as soon as he'd closed the door behind him.
He gave her a quizzical glance, but reached inside his coat. Lily tensed; she barely moved, but he caught her sudden tension and froze in the act of pulling out his hand. Very deliberately he reached up with his left hand and pulled his coat open so she could see that his right hand was filled with nothing more than his blue passport
"Why do you want to see my passport?" he asked as he handed it over. "I thought you were going to check me out."
She flipped open the cover, not bothering to check the photo, but instead looking at the entry stamps. He had indeed been in South America-all over it, in fact-and had returned to the States about a month ago. He'd been in France four days. "I didn't bother," she said briefly.
"Why the hell not?" He sounded indignant, as if she'd said he wasn't worth checking out.

“Because I made a mistake in letting you go yesterday.”
“You let *me* go?” he asked, lifting his brows.
“Who had the gun on whom?” She mirrored his expression as she gave the passport back to him.
“You have a point” He tucked the folder in his inside coat pocket, then shrugged out of the coat and tossed it across the bed. “Have a seat. How was *letting me go* a mistake?”
Lily sat on the sofa, which put a wall at her back. “Because if you’re CIA, or were hired by the CIA, that gave you time to have them sanitize whatever information on you is out there.”
He put his hands on his hips and glared at her. “If you know that, then what in hell are you doing here in my hotel room? My God, woman, I could be anyone!”
For some reason, his scolding struck her as funny, and she began to smile. If he’d been hired to kill her, would he be fussing about her not being careful enough?
“It’s not funny,” he groused. “If the CIA’s after you, you have to be on your toes. Are you a spy or something?”
She shook her head. “No. I killed someone they didn’t want killed.”
He didn’t blink an eye at the fact that she’d killed someone. Instead he picked up the room menu and tossed it into her lap. “Let’s order some food,” he said. “My stomach hasn’t adjusted to this time zone, either.”
Though it was very early for supper, Lily briefly glanced through the menu and made her choice, then listened as Swain phoned in the order. His French was passable, but no one would ever mistake him for a native speaker. He hung up the phone, then came to sit down in one of the blue-patterned chairs. Pulling up his right leg to prop his ankle on top of his left knee, he asked, “Who did you kill?”
“An Italian businessman-slash-hoodlum named Salvatore Nervi.”
“Did he need killing?”
“Oh, yes,” she said softly.
“Then what’s the problem?”
“It wasn’t a sanctioned hit.”
“Sanctioned by whom?”
“The CIA.” Her tone was ironic.
He gave her a thoughtful glance. “*You’re* CIA?”
“Not exactly. Fm-I *was* a contract agent.”

“So you’ve put your killing ways behind you?”
“Let’s just say I doubt any more jobs will be coming my way.”
“You could hire out to someone else.”
She shook her head.
“No? Why not?”
“Because the only way I could do the job was if I thought it was right,” she said in a low tone. “Maybe it was naive, but I trusted my government in this. If it sent me out, then I had to believe the hit was righteous. I wouldn’t have that same trust with anyone else.”
“Not naive, but definitely idealistic.” His blue eyes were kind. “Don’t you trust them to overlook this Nervi thing?” he asked, and again she shook her head.
“I knew he was an asset. He passed information to them.”
“So why’d you kill him?”
“Because he had some of my friends killed. There’s a lot I don’t know, but-they were retired from the business, raising their daughter, being normal. For some reason they broke into the laboratory complex where we were yesterday-or I think they did-and he had them killed.” Her voice thickened. “Also their thirteen-year-old daughter, Zia. She was killed, too.”
Swain blew out a breath. “You have no idea why they broke in?”
“Like I said, I’m not even certain they did. But they crossed Salvatore somehow, and that’s the only thing I can find happening to any of the Nervi holdings that falls in that time frame. I think someone hired them to do it, but I don’t know who or why.”
“I don’t mean to sound callous, but they were pros. They had to know the risks.”
“Them, yes. If it was just them, I’d be angry, I’d miss them terribly, but I wouldn’t-I don’t know if I’d have gone after Salvatore. But Zia… no way could I let that go.” She cleared her throat, and the words seem to pour out of her. She hadn’t been able to talk about Zia to anyone since the murders, and now it was like water going over a spill gate. “I found Zia when she was just a few weeks old. She was starving, abandoned, almost dead. She was *mine*, she was *my* daughter even though I let Averill and Tina adopt her because there was no way I could take care of her or provide her with a stable home while I was off on a job. Salvatore killed my little girl.”
Despite her best effort to hold them back, tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

“Hey,” he said in alarm. With the tears blurring her vision, she didn’t see him move, but suddenly he was beside her on the sofa, putting his arm around her and pulling her close so her head nestled in the curve of his shoulder. “I don’t blame you. I’d have killed the son of a bitch, too. He should have known you don’t touch the innocents.” He was rubbing her back, the motion comforting.

Lily let herself be held for a moment, closing her eyes as she savored his closeness, the heat of his body, the man-smell of his skin. She was starved for human contact, for the touch of someone who cared. He might not care, but he sympathized, and that was close enough.

Because she wanted to stay where she was just a little too much, she sat up out of his embrace and briskly rubbed her cheeks dry. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to cry on your shoulder-literally.”

“You can use my shoulder anytime. So, you killed Salvatore Nervi. I assume the guys trying to kill you yesterday are after you because of that Why are you still here? You’ve done what you set out to do.“

“Only part of it I want to know why Averill and Tina did what they did, what was so important to them that they took the job when they’d been retired for so long. It had to be bad, and if it was bad enough for them to act, I want the whole world to know what that something is. I want the Nervi organization broken up, destroyed, made a pariah in the business world.”

“So you’re planning on breaking into that lab and seeing what you can find?”

She nodded. “I don’t have a firm plan on how to do it; I’ve just started gathering information.”

“You know the security had to be upgraded after your friends broke in.”

“I know, but I also know there’s no foolproof system. There’s always a weakness, if I can just find what it is.”

“You’re right about that. I’d say the first step is finding out who did the security work, then getting your hands on the specs.”

“Assuming they haven’t been destroyed.”

“Only an idiot would do that, when the system might need repair sometime. If Nervi was really smart, though, he would have the specs instead of letting the security company keep them.”

“He was smart, and suspicious enough that he probably thought of that.”

“Not *quite* suspicious enough, or he wouldn’t be dead,” Swain pointed out. “I’ve heard of Nervi, even though I’ve been in a different hemisphere for ten years. How did you get close enough to him to use that peashooter of yours?”
“I didn’t use it,” she replied. “I poisoned his wine, and almost killed myself in the bargain, because he insisted I taste it, too.”
“Holy shit. You knew it was poison and you still drank it? Your balls must be bigger than mine, because I wouldn’t have done it.”
“It was either that or let him storm out without drinking enough for me to be sure it would kill him. I’m okay, except for some damage to a heart valve, but I don’t think it’s serious.” Except, yesterday she’d been gasping for breath in his car, which wasn’t good. She hadn’t even been running, though she guessed being shot at would get the adrenaline flowing and speed up her heartbeat just as running would.
He was looking at her in astonishment, but before he said anything else, there was a knock on the door. “Good, the food’s here,” he said, getting up and going to the door. Lily slipped her hand into her boot, ready to act if the room service waiter made a wrong move, but he wheeled in the cart and set out the food with swift precision; Swain signed the ticket and the waiter let himself out.
“You can take your hand off the peashooter,” Swain said as he pulled two chairs up to the cart. “Why don’t you carry something with some stopping power?”
“My peashooter gets the job done.”
“Assuming you put the shot right where it counts. If you miss, someone’s gonna be pissed and still able to come after you.”
“I don’t miss,” she said mildly.
He glanced at her, then grinned. “Ever?”
“Never when it counts.”

* * *

News that the director of operations had been critically injured in a car accident didn’t send ripples through the intelligence community, it sent tsunamis. The first possibility to investigate was that the accident wasn’t an accident at all. There were more efficient ways to kill someone than an automobile accident, but still, the idea had to be considered. That suspicion was laid to rest after swift but thorough interviews with the cop who had been chasing the florist van for speeding through a red traffic light. The

driver of the van, who was killed in the accident, had an outstanding warrant for unpaid speeding tickets.
The director was taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital, where the security would be tighter, and rushed into surgery. Simultaneously, his house was secured, arrangements made for the director's housekeeper, Bridget, to take care of Kaiser, and the deputy director stepped up to take Mr. Vinay's place until, and if, he returned. The accident site was carefully combed for any sensitive papers, but Mr. Vinay was extremely careful about paperwork and nothing classified was found.
For long hours in surgery, his survival was very much in question. If Keenan hadn't managed to angle the car slightly away just before the van collided with them, the director would have died on the spot. His right arm suffered two compound fractures, his collarbone was broken, five ribs were broken, and his right femur was broken. His heart and lungs were severely bruised, his right kidney ruptured. A shard of glass had pierced his throat like an arrow, and he had a concussion that had to be watched closely for signs of developing pressure in his skull. That he was alive at all was because the side air bag had deployed, shielding his head from part of the impact.
He survived the various surgeries needed to repair his broken body and was taken to SICU, where he was kept heavily sedated and closely monitored. The surgeons had done the best they could; the rest was up to Mr. Vinay.

Chapter Seventeen

M. Blanc wasn't happy to hear from Rodrigo again so soon. "How may I be of service?" he asked somewhat stiffly. He disliked what he did anyway; to have to do it very often was salt in an open wound. He was at home, and receiving a call there made him feel as if he'd brought evil much too close to his loved ones.
"First, my brother, Damone, will be working with me," Rodrigo said. "There may be times when he will call instead of me. I trust there will be no problem?"
"No, monsieur."
"Excellent. This problem I asked your help with the other day. The report said that our friends in America had dispatched someone to handle it. I

would like very much to contact this person."
"Contact him?" Blanc echoed, suddenly uneasy. If Rodrigo met with the contract agent-at least Blanc assumed it was a contract agent, that was usually how a "problem" was handled-it was possible Rodrigo would say something that the contract agent would then carry back to his employers, and that wouldn't do at all.
"Yes. I'd like his mobile phone number, if you please. I'm certain there is some way of contacting him. Do you know this person's name?"
"Ah… no. I don't believe it was listed in the report I received."
"Of course it wasn't," Rodrigo snapped. "Or I wouldn't ask, would I?"
He actually thought, Blanc realized, that he had been sent everything Blanc received. That wasn't the case, however, and had never been. To minimize the damage he did, Blanc always removed important pieces of information. He knew that if he was found out, the Nervis would have him killed, but he'd become very skillful at balancing on that high wire. "If the information is available, I will get it," he assured Rodrigo.
"I'll be waiting for your call."
Blanc checked the time and calculated the time in Washington. It was the middle of the workday there, perhaps his contact was even having lunch. After disconnecting the call from Rodrigo, he walked outside so no one-mainly his wife, who was an insatiably curious woman-could overhear, then punched in the required sequence of numbers.
"Yes." The voice wasn't as friendly as it was when Blanc caught him still at home, so he was probably where someone could hear his side of the conversation.
"In the matter I spoke to you about before, is it possible to have the mobile phone number of the person who was dispatched here?"
"I'll see what I can do."
No questions, no hesitation. Perhaps there wouldn't be a number, Blanc thought, walking back inside. The temperature had dropped with the sun, and he was shivering slightly, not having put on a coat
"Who was that?" his wife asked.
"It was work," he said, dropping a kiss on her forehead. Sometimes he could talk about what he did, sometimes not, so although she clearly wanted to ask more questions, she did not.
"You could at least have put on a coat before going outside," she scolded in a fond tone.

Less than two hours later Blanc's mobile phone rang. Quickly he grabbed a pen, but couldn't find a scrap of paper. "This wasn't easy, buddy," his contact said. "Something about different cell phone systems. I had to dig deep to find the number." He read off the number, and Blanc scribbled it on his left palm.

"Thank you," he said. After hanging up, he found some paper and wrote down the number, then washed his hands.

He should call Rodrigo Nervi immediately, he knew, but he didn't. Instead he folded the paper and put it in his pocket. Perhaps he would call him tomorrow.

When Lily left his hotel room, Swain started to follow her back to her lair but decided against it. It wasn't that he thought she would spot him; he knew she wouldn't. She was good, but he was damn good. He didn't follow her because it just didn't feel right. It was crazy, but he wanted her to trust him. She had come to him, and that was a start. She had also given him her cell phone number, and he'd given her his. Funny how that felt the same as giving a friendship ring to a girlfriend in high school.

He hadn't done what Vinay had told him to do. He kept putting it off, partly out of curiosity, partly because she was battling giants and needed all the help she could get, and partly because he was seriously interested in getting her into bed. She was playing a dangerous game with Rodrigo Nervi, and Swain was enough of a risk-taker to be intrigued and want to play, too. He was supposed to take her out of the equation, but instead he wanted to know what was going on in that lab. If he could find out, maybe Vinay wouldn't demote him to desk jockey for not doing his job the first time he got close to Lily.

But all in all, he was enjoying himself. He was staying in a great hotel, driving a spitfire of a car, and eating French food. After some of the shit holes he'd stayed in during the past ten years, he needed some fun.

Lily was quite a challenge. She was wary and clever, with a streak of recklessness in her, and he never forgot that she was one of the best assassins working in Europe. Never mind that she'd had some pie-in-the-sky ideal about only making sanctioned hits until she'd gone after Salvatore Nervi; he was aware that he couldn't afford a single misstep around her. She was also sad, grieving for her friends and the young girl she'd thought of as her own. Swain thought of his own kids, and how he'd feel if one of them was murdered. No way would the murderer escape, or even make it to

trial-no matter who it was. He was totally in sympathy with her on that score, not that it changed the final outcome.

He lay in bed that night and thought of her drinking the wine she knew was poisoned, just so Salvatore Nervi would continue drinking it. Damn, she'd skated close to the edge. From what she'd told him about the poison, how potent it was, he knew she'd had a very rough time and was probably still weak. There was no way she could get into that lab on her own, not in her shape, so that was probably why she'd called him. He didn't care what her reason was; he was just glad she'd done it.

She was beginning to trust him. She'd cried in his arms, and he got the feeling she didn't often let anyone get that close to her. She gave off a strong DO NOT TOUCH signal, but from what he could tell, that was more out of self-defense than coldness. She wasn't a cold person at all, just wary. Maybe he was crazy for being so attracted to her, but, hell, some male spiders willingly let their mates chew their heads off while they are going at it, so he figured he was ahead of the game in that respect: Lily hadn't killed him yet.

He wanted to know what made her tick, what made her laugh. Yeah, he definitely wanted her to laugh. She looked as if she hadn't had much fun lately, and a person should always have something to enjoy. He wanted her to relax and drop her guard around him, laugh and tease, make jokes, make love. He'd seen flashes of a dry sense of humor, and he wanted more.

He was well on his way to being obsessed, no doubt about it He might lose his head yet, and die happy.

A gentleman wouldn't plan the seduction of a woman he'd been sent to take down, but he'd never been a gentleman. He'd grown up a rowdy west Texas shit-kicker, refused to listen to adults who knew better and married Amy when they were both eighteen and fresh out of high school, was a father at nineteen, but he'd never quite got the hang of settling down. He'd never cheated on Amy, because she was a great girl, but he hadn't exactly been there for her, either. Now that he was older, he was more responsible and felt ashamed of how he'd basically left her to raise their two kids by herself. The best he could say for himself was that he'd supported his family, even after the divorce.

Over the years he'd traveled a lot, become more sophisticated, but good manners and knowing how to order off a menu in three different languages didn't make a gentleman. He was still rowdy, he still didn't like rules, and

he did like Lily Mansfield. He hadn't often met women who could hold their own with him, but Lily could; her personality was as forceful as his. She decided what she was going to do and did it, come hell or high water. She had a steel backbone, but at the same time she had a real feminine warmth and tenderness. Finding out everything about her would take a man a lifetime. He didn't have a lifetime, but he'd take what he could get. He was beginning to think that a few days with Lily would pack more of a punch than ten years with any other woman.

The big question was: What would he do afterward?

Blanc tensed when his phone rang early the next morning. "Who could that be?" his wife asked, annoyed that their breakfast was interrupted.

"It will be the office," he said, and got up to take the phone outside. He punched the *talk* button and said, "This is Blanc."

"Monsieur Blanc." The voice was smooth and calm, one he had never heard before. "I am Damone Nervi. Do you have the number my brother requested?"

"No names," Blanc said.

"Of course. This one time it seemed necessary, as we haven't spoken before. Do you have the number?"

"Not yet. Evidently there is some difficulty-"

"Get it. Today."

"There is a six-hour time difference. It will be afternoon at the earliest."

"I'll be waiting."

Blanc hung up and for a moment stood with his fists clenched. Damn the Nervis! This one spoke better French than the other one, he sounded smoother, but underneath they were all the same: barbarians.

He would have to give them the number, but he would try to impress upon Rodrigo that it would be ill-advised to call the CIA's man, that it could easily result in both him and his contact being prosecuted. Perhaps not, perhaps the man the CIA had sent didn't care about who hired him, but that wasn't something Blanc felt confident about.

He went back inside and looked at his wife, her dark hair still tousled from bed, a robe cinched around her trim waist. She slept in flimsy, low-cut nighties because she knew he liked it, though in the winter she put an extra blanket on her side of the bed because she felt the cold. What if something happened to her? What if Rodrigo Nervi followed through on the threats that had been made years ago? He couldn't bear it.

He would have to give them the number. He would stall as long as he could, but in the end he had no choice.

Chapter Eighteen

Swain had a brilliant idea in the middle of the night: instead of finding who had installed the Nervi security system, breaking into the office, and somehow getting the schematics, why not just use the resources at his fingertips? The boys-and girls-and their toys could find and access just about anything. If it was on a computer somewhere, and that computer was online, they could get it. It stood to reason that any security company Nervi used would be up to snuff on all the latest bells and whistles, which meant they were probably computerized. Password protected, yeah, but how tough was that? The hackers on the payroll in Langley would consider that no more worrisome than a mosquito bite.

Resides, that meant they'd have to do the work, and he wouldn't. All in all, he thought it was a great idea. He was so Pleased with it that he sat up and switched on the bedside lamp, plucked his cell phone from the charger, and called right then. Going through the security checks seemed to take longer than ever, but finally he was talking to someone who had some authority.

"I'll see what I can do," the woman said. She'd identified herself, but Swain had been preoccupied and hadn't caught her name. "Things are in an uproar around here, though, so I don't know when-wait a minute. This is listed as a holding of Salvatore Nervi, deceased, and now Rodrigo and Damone Nervi. They're listed as assets. Why do you need the breakdown on their security system?"

"They may not be assets much longer," Swain said. "The word is they've just received a shipment of weapons-grade plutonium." That sounded ominous enough to stir some action.

"Have you generated a report on this?"

"Earlier today, but then no one got back to me-"

"That's because of Mr. Vinay. I told you things were in an uproar."

"What about Mr. Vinay?" Jesus, had Frank been replaced?

"You haven't heard?"

Obviously not, or he wouldn't have asked. "Heard what?"

“He was in a car accident this morning. He’s in critical condition at Bethesda. The DDO is taking over until and if he comes back. Word is the doctors aren’t optimistic.”
“Shit.” The news hit him like a blow to the solar plexus. He’d worked for Frank Vinay for years, and respected him as he did no one else in the pickle factory. Frank might dance through the daisies when he was dealing with politicians, but with the field officers under him, he’d never been anything but straight, and willing to stand up for them. In Washington, that was not only unusual but almost suicidal, career wise. That Frank had not only survived but advanced in his job, first as DDO and now as director, was a testament to his worth-and his skill as a dancer.
“Anyway,” the woman said, “I’ll see what I can do.”
Swain had to be satisfied with that, because he could imagine the uncertainty and jockeying for position that was going on across the pond. He knew the deputy director, Garvin Reed; Garvin was a good man, but he wasn’t Frank Vinay. Frank had forgotten more about spy craft than Reed had ever known, plus Frank was a genius at reading people and seeing layers, patterns, where no one else did.
Swain felt uneasy about his own status, as well. Frank’s solution for handling the Lily problem might not be the same as Garvin’s. Garvin’s view of the Nervis might not be the same as Frank’s. Swain felt as if his tether to the mother ship had been cut and he was drifting away; or, to use another metaphor, he had already been skating on thin ice by delaying the purpose of his mission, and now he could hear the ice cracking beneath him.
Fuck it. He’d keep to the same course until he was either jerked off the mission or told to alter it-not that he hadn’t already altered it, or at least delayed it, but no one knew that except him. When in doubt, plow ahead. Of course, the captain of the *Titanic had* probably had the same philosophy.
He didn’t sleep well the rest of the night, which made him crabby when he woke up the next morning. Until, and if, the computer geeks came through for him, he didn’t have anything to do, other than driving by the lab and mooning the guards. Since the weather was chilly, his ass would get cold, so mooning was out unless he was really provoked.
On impulse he grabbed his cell phone and dialed Lily’s cell number, just to see if she’d answer.
“Bonjour,” she said, making him wonder if perhaps she didn’t have Caller ID on her cell phone. He couldn’t imagine her *not* having it, but maybe she

answered in French out of habit, or precaution.
“Hi, there. Have you had breakfast yet?”
“I’m still in bed, so no, I haven’t eaten.”
He glanced at his watch: not quite six. He’d forgive her for being lazy. In fact, he was glad he’d caught her in bed because she sounded sleepy and soft, without the usual crispness to her voice. He wondered what she wore to bed, maybe a skinny little tank top and her panties, maybe nothing at all. She definitely wouldn’t wear something slinky and see-through. He tried to imagine her in a long nightgown or a sleep shirt, and couldn’t. He could, however, imagine her naked. He imagined it so well that his Johnson perked up and began to swell, requiring a firm hand to keep it under control.
“What are you wearing?” His own voice came out slower and deeper than usual.
She laughed, a startled sound that seemed to burst out of her. “Is this an obscene phone call?”
“It could be. I think I feel some heavy breathing coming on. Tell me what you’re wearing.” He imagined her sitting up against the pillows, tucking the covers under her arms, pushing her tousled hair out of her face.
“A flannel granny gown.”
“Liar. You aren’t a granny-gown type of woman.”
“Did you call for any reason other than to wake me up and find out what I’m wearing?”
“I did, but I got sidetracked. C’mon, tell me.”
“I don’t do phone sex.” She sounded amused.
“Pretty please with sugar on top.”
She laughed again. “Why do you want to know?”
“Because my imagination is killing me. You sounded so sleepy when you answered, and I pictured you all soft and warm under the covers. Everything grew out of that.” He gave his erection a wry glance.
“You can stop imagining. I don’t sleep raw, if that’s what you’re asking.”
“Then what are you wearing? I really need to know, so I can be accurate in my fantasies.”
“Pajamas.”
Damn, he’d forgotten about pajamas. “Shorty pajamas?” he asked hopefully.
“I switch to long ones in October, and back to short ones in April.”

She was bursting all of his bubbles. He pictured her in tailored pajamas, and the effect just wasn't the same. He sighed. "You could have said you were bare-assed naked," he groused. "What would it have hurt? I was having fun here."
"Maybe a little too much," she said drily.
"Not enough, though." His erection was subsiding, a wasted effort.
"Sorry I couldn't be more accommodating."
"That's okay. You can make it up to me in person."
"You *wish*."
"Honey, you don't know how much I wish. Now, about why I called-"
She chuckled, and he felt a kind of squirrely feeling in the pit of his stomach. His insides were actually jumping around just because he'd made her laugh. Again.
"I don't have anything to do today, and I'm bored. Why don't we go to Disneyland?"
"What?" she asked blankly, as if he'd been speaking a foreign language.
"Disneyland. You know, the one right outside the city. I've never been to either one in the States. Have you been to this one?"
"Twice," she said. "Tina and I took Zia twice. Averill wouldn't go, because he didn't like standing in lines."
"It takes a real man to stand in lines."
"And not bitch about it," she added.
"And not bitch about it." What else could he do but agree? "I have someone looking into the security system thing, but I'm not likely to find out anything today. I have time to kill, you have time to kill, so why should we stare at the walls when we can see Cinderella's castle?"
"Sleeping Beauty, not Cinderella."
"Whatever. Myself, I always thought Cinderella was prettier than Sleeping Beauty, because she was blond. I have a thing for blondes."
"I hadn't noticed." She sounded as if she might laugh again.
"Look at it this way: Will anyone be looking for you in Disneyland?"
There was a small silence as she considered the real truth behind his proposal. He couldn't tell her that he was restless and worried about Frank, and that he thought he'd go crazy if he had to sit around his hotel room all day. He wasn't big on amusement parks, but it was something to do and they wouldn't have to watch their backs. Nervi would never think to have people watching the entrances to Disneyland, because what idiot would stop

in the middle of a deadly cat-and-mouse game to go ride Thunder Mountain?
“The weather is supposed to be sunny today. Let’s go,” he cajoled. “It’ll be fun. We can ride the teacups and get dizzy and puke.”
“It sounds marvelous, I can’t wait.” She was snickering and trying to control it, but he could hear the little gulping sounds she was making.
“Then you’ll go?”
She sighed. “Why not? It’s either a dumb idea or a brilliant one, and I’m not certain which.”
“Great. Why don’t you put on a hat and sunglasses and sneak over here, and we’ll have breakfast before we start out? I’ve been itching to let the hammer down on this little car I got to replace the Jag. It has two hundred and twenty-five horses, and I want to let at least two hundred of them run.”
“Ah-ha. Now I know why you called. You want to drive like a maniac with a woman along to watch you show off, and to make appropriate oohing and aahing noises.”
“Indulge me. I’ve been a little short on those kinds of noises lately.”
“I’ll try my best. I’ll be there around eight; if you get hungry before then, go ahead and order. I can eat later.”
Her two-hour time limit didn’t tell him squat about where she was. In two hours, she could get here from anywhere in the area. Hell, she could probably get here from Calais in that length of time. “I’ll wait for you. Tell me what you want and I’ll order it about twenty minutes before eight”
All she wanted was a pastry and coffee, and he made a mental note to add some protein to the order. Just as she started to hang up he said, “By the way-” She paused and said, “What?”
“In case you’re wondering, I *do* sleep naked.”
Lily closed her flip-top phone, stared at it, then flopped back on the pillows and burst into laughter. She didn’t know when she’d last been teased and flirted with so relentlessly, maybe never. It felt good; just as it felt good to laugh. She *was* alive, then, after all. She even felt a little guilty for laughing, because Zia would never laugh again.
She sobered on that thought, and the familiar pain squeezed her heart The pain would never go away, she thought, but there would be times when perhaps she could forget for just a little while. Today, she would try to forget.

She got out of bed and stretched, then did the set of exercises she'd been doing every day in an effort to regain her strength. She was getting better, her stamina improved a bit every day. After thirty minutes of exercise she was damp with sweat but not breathless; the old ticker was holding up. She got into the shower without having to take off any clothes, because she slept nude. Lying to Swain had seemed like a good idea, plus it was fun.

Fun. There was that word again. It seemed to come up often in connection with him.

She hadn't wondered before about whether he slept raw, but now her imagination supplied an image of *him* just waking up, stretching, his jaw dark with stubble. His skin smelled warm and musky, and his morning erection jutted up, demanding attention.

For a moment she could almost smell that warm man-scent, the memory so fresh and so specific she was briefly puzzled that she knew how he smelled. Then she remembered crying on his shoulder, with his arms around her. She must have subconsciously noticed his scent then, and her brain had filed the memory away for future reference.

She couldn't believe she'd agreed to spend the day with him-at Disneyland, of all places. She hadn't thought she would ever go back there. This past summer Zia hadn't wanted to go; she was too old for that baby stuff, she'd said with the withering scorn only a thirteen-year-old could muster and completely ignoring the fact that most of the people who went to the amusement park were older than she.

There were always a lot of Americans there, too, which always surprised Lily, because she'd have thought if any American wanted to go to a Disney attraction, one of those back home would have been closer than Paris. She and Swain wouldn't be noticed; they would be just two more Americans.

She blow-dried her hair, then found herself picking through her makeup bag for just the right items. She was primping for him, she thought with equal parts amusement and amazement-and she was enjoying it. She had always made herself up for her dates with Salvatore, but that had been more like applying a theater mask. This felt like a date, and she felt as nervous with excitement as she had in high school.

She had good skin, having never been a sun worshipper. She didn't need a base, though she did need mascara if she didn't want her lashes to look nonexistent. She had nice long lashes, but without mascara they were a light brown that made them almost invisible. She lined her eyes with a light

touch, dusted on shadow, rubbed just a hint of a rose-hued liquid tint on her cheeks and more on her mouth. A dusting of transparent powder and a coat of ego-saving mascara finished the job.
Lily looked at herself in the mirror as she put on her earrings, tiny gold hoops that seemed appropriate for a day at the amusement park. She would never be really pretty, but on her good days she was more than passable. Today was a good day.
With luck, it would get better.

Chapter Nineteen

The closer they got to Disneyland, the more tense Lily became as her excitement began to fade and memories shoved their way back to the forefront. “Let’s not go to Disneyland,” she blurted.
He quirked his brows. “Why not?”
“Too many memories of Zia.”
“Are you going to avoid everything that reminds you of her?”
His tone was practical, nonchallenging. Lily stared out the window. “Not everything. Not forever. Just not… right now.”
“Okay. Where do you want to go instead?”
“I’m not certain I want to go anywhere. There should be *something* we can do other than wait for your friend to dig up something on the lab’s security system.”
“Other than driving back and forth in front of the lab and giving the guards a good look at this car, I can’t think of anything.“
Was the man incapable of picking out a car that wasn’t noticeable? Yes, this Renault was gray, just as the Jag had been, but the Megane Renault Sport wasn’t exactly a run-of-the-mill car. At least he hadn’t got a red one.
“How many ways are there to get into a building?” she asked reasonably.
“Doors and windows, obviously. You could also go in through a hole in the roof-”
“No one would notice you on top of the building with a chain saw?”
“-but that isn’t feasible,” she finished, giving him a dirty look. “How about from underneath? The complex has to be connected to the sewer system.”
He looked thoughtful. “That’s a possibility. I don’t like it, but it’s a possibility. In the movies it always looks like they’re splashing around in

water, but when you think about what goes into sewers, I'll bet they're splashing around in something else."
"Historic Paris is riddled with underground tunnels, but the lab is on the outskirts, so there probably isn't a decent tunnel anywhere near there."
"Just out of curiosity, in case we do end up in the sewer, what kind of laboratory is this? What do they do?"
"Medical research."
"And how is their waste dumped? Is it treated first? All the nasty little critters killed?"
She sighed. Common sense said the waste would be treated before it was dumped into the sewer, in which case there wouldn't be a direct connection between the complex and the sewer system. Instead, the waste material would go into some sort of holding tank where it was treated, and from there to the sewer. Common sense also said they didn't want to come in contact with any of the raw sewage.
He said, "I vote we stay out of the sewer."
"Agreed. Doors and windows are best. Or… we could find some big boxes and have ourselves shipped to the lab." That idea came out of nowhere.
"Huh." He considered the idea. "We'd have to find out if all packages and boxes are x-rayed or something, if they're opened immediately, if they ever get large shipments-things like that. See, we wouldn't want to come out of our boxes until late at night, at least after midnight, when there are fewer people around. Or does the lab operate on an around-the-clock basis?"
"I don't know, but that's something for us to check out. We'll have to know anyway, even if we get the specs on the security system."
"I'll drive by tonight, check out how many cars are in the parking lot, try and get an idea of how many people work there at night. I'm sorry, I should have done that last night," he apologized. "In the meantime, we have today. Disneyland's out. Do we just turn around and go back to our respective rooms, where we spend the day being bored? What else is there to do? Now that you've been made, I wouldn't advise walking around Paris, shopping."
No, she didn't want to go back to her little studio apartment. It didn't even have the advantage of being old and interesting; it was just convenient and safe. "Let's just drive. We can stop to have lunch when we get hungry."
They kept driving east, and when they were well away from Paris and the heavy traffic, he picked a straight stretch of road and let the horses run. It had been a long time since Lily had gone fast just for the enjoyment of it,

and she settled back in her seat, securely buckled in, while a pleasant sense of faint alarm made her pulse quicken. She felt like a teenager again, when she and seven or eight of her friends would cram into one car and bullet down the highway. It was a miracle all of them made it through high school alive.

“How did you get in this business?” he asked.

Startled, she looked at him. “You’re driving too fast to talk. Pay attention to the road.”

He grinned and let up on the gas pedal, and the needle dropped down to a hundred kph. “I can walk and chew gum at the same time,” he said in mild protest.

“Neither of which requires much in the way of a brain. Talking and driving are different.”

He said thoughtfully, “For someone in this business who takes as many risks as you do, you aren’t really much of a risk-taker, are you?”

She watched the scenery zipping by. “I’m not a risk-taker at all, I don’t think. I plan carefully; I don’t take chances.”

“Who drank wine she knew was poisoned, taking the chance that the dose wasn’t lethal? Who is being hunted all over Paris but stays there anyway because she’s got a vendetta going?”

“These are unusual circumstances.” She didn’t mention the risk she had taken in deciding to trust him, but he was smart enough to figure out that one, too.

“Was it something unusual that got you started killing people?”

She was silent for a moment. “I don’t think of myself as a murderer,” she said quietly. “I’ve never harmed an innocent. I’ve made the sanctioned hits that I was hired by my country to make, and I don’t believe the decision was ever lightly made. I never thought so when I was young, but now I know there are people who are so inherently evil they don’t deserve to live. Hitler wasn’t a one-time phenomenon, you know. Look at Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Baby Doc, bin Laden. Can you say the world isn’t or wouldn’t be better off without them in it?”

“And hundreds of other tin-pot dictators, plus the drug lords, the perverts and pedophiles. I know. I agree. But had you already decided this when you made your first hit?”

“No. Eighteen-year-olds generally don’t get into heavy philosophy.”

“Eighteen. Man, that’s young.”

“I know. I think that’s why I was chosen. I used to look like such a rube,” she said, smiling a little. “All fresh-faced and innocent, not an ounce of sophistication to me, though at the time I thought I was cool and world-weary. I was even flattered that I was approached.”
He shook his head at such naiveté. When she didn’t continue, he said, “Go on.”
“I came to their notice because I joined a shooting club. The boy I had a huge crush on at the time was an avid hunter and I wanted to impress him by being able to talk about different makes of weapons, caliber, range, all that stuff. But I turned out to be darn good; a pistol felt natural in my hand. Before long I was out shooting almost everyone else in the club. I don’t know where that came from,” she said, looking at her hands as if they held the answer. “My dad wasn’t a hunter, had never been in
the military. My mother’s father was a lawyer, not at all an out-doorsman, and my other grandfather worked in a Ford factory in Detroit. He went fishing sometimes, but he never hunted that I knew of.“
“It’s just a particular blend of DNA, I guess. Maybe your dad wasn’t interested in hunting, but that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t have found he had a natural talent for shooting. Hell, you could have gotten it from your *mother.”*
Lily blinked, then chuckled. “I never even thought of that. Mom’s a peacemaker, but personality doesn’t have anything to do with physical skill, does it?”
“Not that I ever noticed. Back to the shooting club.”
“There isn’t much to tell. Someone noticed how I shot, mentioned it to someone else, and one day a nice middle-aged man came to talk to me. First he told me about this person, a man, everything he’d done and the people he’d killed, and backed it up with newspaper clippings and copies of police reports, things like that. When I was properly horrified, the nice man offered me a lot of money. I was horrified all over again, told him no, but I couldn’t stop thinking about everything he’d told me. He must have known, because he called me two days later and I said yes, I’d do it. I was *eighteen.‘”*
She shrugged. “I went through a cram course on what to do, and like I said, I looked like such a wet-behind-the-ears baby that no one saw me as a threat. I got close to the guy with no trouble, did the job, walked away. I

threw up for a week every time I thought about it. I had nightmares for longer than that."
"But when the nice man offered you another job, you took it."
"I took it He told me what a service I'd done for my country with the first job, and the thing is, he wasn't lying or manipulating me. He was sincere."
"But was he right?"
"Yes," she said softly. "He was. What I've done is illegal, I know that, and I have to live with what I am. But he was right, and what it comes down to is I was willing to do the dirty work. Someone has to do it, so why not me? After the first time I was already muddy anyway."
Swain reached over and took her hand, raised it to his mouth, and pressed a gentle kiss on her fingers.
Lily blinked in astonishment, opened her mouth to say something, then shut it and stared wide-eyed out the window instead. Swain chuckled and laid her hand back in her lap, then for thirty exhilarating minutes devoted himself to driving as fast as he could.
They stopped for lunch at a small sidewalk cafe in the next town they came to. He asked for a table in the sun but out of the slight breeze, and they were quite comfortable sitting outside. She had a salad topped with grilled goat cheese, he had lamb chops, and they each had a glass of wine followed by strong coffee. As they lingered over the coffee she said, "What about you? What's your story?"
"Nothing unusual. Wild west Texas boy who couldn't settle down, which is a real shame because I got married and had two kids."
Startled, she said, "You're married?"
He shook his head. "Divorced. Amy-that's my ex-wife-finally decided I was never going to settle down, and she got tired of raising the kids by herself while I was off in some other country doing things she didn't want to know about. I don't blame her. Hell, I'd have divorced me, too. Now that I'm older I know what an ass I was, and I could kick myself for missing my kids growing up. I can't get those years back. Thank God, Amy did a good job with them . They turned out great, no thanks to me."
He pulled out his wallet and fished out two small photographs, put them on the table in front of her. They were both high school graduation pictures, of a boy and a girl, and both of them looked a lot like the man sitting across from her. "My daughter Chrissy and my son Sam."
"They're good-looking kids."

“Thank you,” he said with a grin. He knew very well they strongly resembled him. He picked up the photographs and studied them before putting them back in his wallet “Chrissy was born when I was nineteen. I was way too young and too stupid to get married, much less have a baby, but being young and stupid means you don’t listen to people who know more than you. And if it comes to that, I’d do it over again, because I can’t imagine not having my kids.”
“Are you close to them now?”
“I doubt I’ll ever be as close to them as their mother is, because she’s way more important to them than I am. She was there when I wasn’t. They like me, they even love me because I’m their dad, but they don’t know me the way they know Amy. I was a lousy husband and father,” he said frankly. “Not abusive or lazy or anything like that, but just never at home. The best that can be said is that I always supported them.”
“That’s more than some men do.”
He muttered his opinion of those men, something that started with “stupid” and ended with “sons of bitches,” with several even more uncomplimentary words in between.
Lily was touched by the way he didn’t cut himself any slack. He’d made mistakes and with maturity he could both see them and regret them. As the years had passed he’d been able to appreciate all the things in his children’s lives that he’d missed out on, and he was grateful to his ex-wife for minimizing the damage he’d done to them with his absence.
“Are you thinking about settling down now, going home and living near your children? Is that why you left South America?”
“Nah, I left because I was ass-deep in alligators and they were all hungry.” He grinned. “I like a little excitement in my life, but sometimes a man needs to climb a tree and reassess the situation.”
“So what exactly do you do? For a living, I mean.”
“I’m kind of a jack-of-all-trades. People want something to happen, they hire me to make it happen.”
There was a lot of room in that statement, she thought, but sensed he’d been as specific as he was willing to be. She was comfortable not knowing every detail of his life. She knew he loved his kids, that he walked on the shady side but had a conscience, liked fast cars, and made her laugh. And he was willing to help her. For now, that was enough.

After lunch they walked around for a while. He spotted a small chocolate shop and immediately developed a craving for chocolate, even though they'd just left the cafe. He bought a dozen pieces in different flavors, and as they walked around he alternately fed her and himself until the chocolate was gone. Somewhere along the way, he caught her hand and simply held it in his for the rest of their walk.

In a way the day felt strangely disconnected from reality, as if they were in a bubble. Instead of pitting her wits against Rodrigo's, she was walking around a small town with nothing more pressing to do than window-shop. She had no worries here, no stress; a handsome man was holding her hand and probably planning to make a move on her before the day was over. She hadn't yet decided if she was okay with that or not, but wasn't worried about it. If she said no, he wouldn't sulk. She didn't think Swain had ever sulked in his life. He would simply shrug and move on to the next entertainment.

She had been under unremitting stress for months, and it was only now, when she could relax, that she realized what a mental toll it had taken. She didn't want to think today, didn't want to dredge up hurtful memories. She just wanted to be.

By the time they walked back to the car, the sun was low and the brisk day was turning cold as the temperature dropped. She reached to open the car door, but he caught her hand and gently tugged, turning her around, and in one smooth move he released her hand and cupped her face in both of his big warm hands, tilting her chin up as he lowered his mouth.

She didn't say no. Instead Lily grasped his wrists and simply held him while he was holding her. His mouth was surprisingly gentle, the kiss tender rather than demanding. He tasted like chocolate.

She sensed that the kiss was an end unto itself, that he had no further agenda-not at this moment, anyway. She could kiss him in return and he wouldn't try to tear off her clothes or pin her against the car. Leaning into him a little, she felt the warmth of his body, enjoyed the closeness. It was she who lightly teased him with her tongue, asking for more. He gave it, not plunging deep but teasing in return as they learned each other's taste and feel, how their mouths fit together. Then he re-leased her lips, smiled, and wiped his thumb across her mouth before opening the car door and letting her slide inside.

"Where to now?" he asked as he got in the car. "Back to Paris?"

“Yes,” she said, with obvious regret. The day had been a welcome escape, but it was almost at an end. She had decided something important, however: Swain couldn’t be CIA, in any capacity, because she was still alive. It was always a bonus if, at the end of a date, the guy didn’t kill you.

Chapter Twenty

Late that afternoon, Georges Blanc received another call from Damone Nervi. He knew who was calling and his stomach tightened with dread. He was in his car, so he wasn’t in danger of being overheard, which was a small blessing and the only one he’d found so far in this situation. He pulled to the side of the road and answered the call.

Damone’s tone was very even. “I am a more reasonable man than my brother. I am not, however, one who can be safely ignored. Do you have the information I requested?”

“Yes, but-” Blanc hesitated, and took the plunge. “My advice, my hope, is that you do not use this number.”

“Why is that?”

To Blanc’s relief, Damone sounded more curious than angry. He took a deep breath. Maybe there was hope. “There is only one way you could get this number, and that is if someone in the American CIA gave it out. This man you want to call works for them. Do you think he won’t wonder how you came to have his mobile phone number? Do you think he is, perhaps, so stupid he cannot add two and two? The question you must ask yourself is if he is loyal to his employers, will he not report this to his superiors? And will they not investigate? If you use this number, monsieur, you may very well destroy both my contact and me.”

“I see.” The connection was silent for a moment as Damone considered all of the ramifications. After a moment he said, “Rodrigo is impatient; I think it’s best if he doesn’t know this. Sometimes his desire for action can outweigh prudence. I will tell him that this person was to rent a mobile phone here, and hasn’t contacted anyone yet.”

“Thank you, monsieur. Thank you.” Blanc closed his eyes in relief.

“But,” Damone said, “it now occurs to me that you owe me a favor.”

Blanc was reminded that, reasonable or not, Damone was still a Nervi, and therefore dangerous. Tension knotted his stomach again. What else could he

do except agree? “Yes,” he said heavily.
“This is private. There’s something I want you to do for me, something you can never tell anyone. The lives of your children depend on it.”
Tears burned Blanc’s eyes and he rubbed them away. His heart was pounding so hard he thought he might faint. He had never made the error of underestimating the brutality of which the Nervis were capable. “I understand. What is it I am to do?”
They were near the hotel when Swain said, “Let me take you home. You shouldn’t have to take the Metro when you’re so much safer in a car no one recognizes.”
Lily hesitated, instinctively not wanting to disclose the location of her apartment. “I took the Metro this morning,” she pointed out. “The trains are faster, anyway.” She had put her hair up under a cloche and worn sunglasses, as he’d suggested, just in case Rodrigo had people watching the train stations. There were a lot of stations in Paris; covering them would require a lot of manpower, but of course Rodrigo wouldn’t have to supply the men. With his influence, he could have others do the job.
“Yeah, but this morning the sun was shining, and now it’s dark. The sunglasses will make you conspicuous.” He grinned. “Plus I want to check out your bed and make sure it’s big enough for me.”
•he rolled her eyes. One kiss and he expected her to fall into bed with him? She enjoyed kissing him, but she had merely been charmed, not rendered stupid. “It isn’t,” she said, “so there’s no point in you seeing it.”
“That depends. Is it narrow, or short? If it’s just narrow that’s no problem, because we’ll be double-decker anyway. But if it’s a short bed, I’ll have to rethink my infatuation with you, because there’s something wrong with a woman who doesn’t buy a bed long enough for a man to stretch out his legs.”
“It’s both,” she said, trying to control a giggle. She hadn’t giggled since she was eighteen, but one was building in her throat. “Short *and* narrow. I bought it from a convent.”
“Nuns sell their beds?”
“They had a huge garage sale as a fund-raiser.”
He threw back his head and laughed, not at all put out by her refusal. All of his lines and proposals were so outrageous she thought he must be at least half-joking, though if she took him up on any of them, like most men he’d jump at the opportunity to have sex.

He'd distracted her from his original suggestion, but she hadn't forgotten it She had to weigh her natural caution about divulging the location of her apartment against the risk of taking the Metro. Sometimes she wouldn't be able to avoid taking the train, but why push her luck if she didn't have to? What it came down to was, who did she think was more of a danger to her, Swain or Rodrigo? No contest there. So far, Swain had been solidly on her side, even though he didn't have a compelling reason for helping her other than boredom and wanting to sleep with her. "I live in Montmartre," she said. "It's out of your way."
He shrugged. "So what?"
If he didn't care, why should she? The safety factor was the only reason to let him drive her, because the trains were a much more convenient way of getting around Paris, but it was a big reason.
She gave him directions and settled back in her seat; let him worry about fighting the traffic. He did it with his usual verve, shouted insults, and assorted gestures. He got a little too much into the spirit of things, actually accelerating once when a group of tourists tried to cross a street in front of him. Because this was Paris, naturally the car beside him speeded up, too. They barreled down on a portly middle-aged woman, and Lily gasped in horror. The woman's eyes bugged out as the two cars bore down on her.
"Shit!" Swain yelled. "You son of a bitch!" He swerved sharply toward the car beside them, and its panicked driver jerked the steering wheel to the left as he slammed on his brakes. Swain downshifted into a lower gear and shot into the gap between the pedestrian and the fishtailing car, even as the woman scrambled to get back on the curb.
Brakes were screeching behind them, and Lily twisted in her seat to see what sort of carnage they were leaving behind. The car that had tried to block them from getting into the left lane was turned sideways in the broad street, with other vehicles at various angles around it. Horns were blaring, and angry drivers were already jumping out of their cars waving their arms and shaking their fists. She didn't see any bodies on the ground, so evidently all the pedestrians were safe.
"Let me out," she said furiously. "It'll be safer on the trains with Rodrigo's men than riding in a car that you're driving!"
£1 had room to swerve around them until that asshole beside me speeded up," he said in sheepish defense.

“Of course he speeded up!” she yelled. “This is Paris! He’d have died before he just *let* you cut in front of him.”
She sank back, breathing hard in her fury. A few minutes later she said, “I told you to let me out.”
“I’m sorry,” he said contritely. “I’ll be more careful. I promise.”
Since he showed no signs of slowing down to let her out, she supposed she’d have to stay in the car with the lunatic. Her only other option was to shoot him, and that was looking more attractive by the minute. That poor woman! If she’d had a bad heart, the fright might have killed her. She’d *looked* okay, though, because she had been one of the fist-shakers, stepping back into the street to glare at their taillights as they sped away from the mayhem Swain had caused.
After five minutes of careful driving and total silence in the car, Swain said, “Did you see her face?”
Lily burst out laughing. It was awful of her, she knew, but the image of the woman’s red, choleric face going bug-eyed with panic would stay with her forever. She tried to control herself, because what he’d done wasn’t funny at all and she didn’t want him to think he’d got away with it.
“I can’t believe you’re laughing,” he said in disapproval, though the corners of his mouth were twitching. “That’s cold.”
It was, even though he was teasing. She gulped, wiped her eyes, and with sheer willpower forced herself to stop laughing.
She made the mistake of looking at him. As though he’d been waiting for her to do just that, he bugged out his eyes at her in perfect imitation of the woman’s expression, and Lily went off into whoops again. She rocked against the constraint of her seat belt, holding her stomach. To punish him she punched him in the arm, but she was laughing so hard there wasn’t any force behind the blow.
He turned sharply, off the main boulevard, and by some miracle found a place to pull the car off the road. Lily stopped laughing. “What’s happening?” she asked in alarm, looking around for a threat even as she reached down to her ankle holster.
Swain turned off the engine and grabbed her shoulders. “You don’t need a weapon,” he said in a rough tone as he dragged her as far over the console as her seat belt would allow. He kissed her hungrily, fiercely, cupping the back of her head in his left hand while with his right he kneaded and stroked her breasts. After an initial squeak of surprise, Lily let herself sink

against him. The gearshift was digging into her hip, one knee was awkwardly bent, and she didn't care.
She hadn't felt passion in so long that it took her by surprise, both his and her own. She hadn't realized how starved she was, how much she'd wanted someone to hold her. Needing more, she opened her mouth for him and wrapped her arms around his neck.
He made love the same way he drove, fast and with great enthusiasm. He barely paused at second base, then drove for third, slipping his hand between her legs and gently massaging. In sheer reflex she grabbed his wrist, but she couldn't make herself push his hand away. He set the heel of his palm against the center seam of her pants and rocked it back and forth, and Lily went boneless.
Only the fact that they were in the car saved her. Her bent leg began cramping under her and with a gasp she pulled away from his mouth, clumsily trying to twist so she could straighten out her leg, hampered by the seat belt and his arms. She gave one hoarse cry of pain, then ground her teeth together.
"What's wrong?" he asked sharply as he tried to right her in the seat They flailed around, elbows banging steering wheel, console, and dashboard, getting in each other's way and generally looking like idiots. Finally Lily managed to fight her way back into her seat and with a groan of relief stretched out her aching leg as far as she could. It wasn't far enough; she released the seat latch and pushed the seat back as far as it would go. Panting, she tried to catch her breath as she massaged her thigh. "Cramp," she muttered in explanation. Her knotted muscles began to relax and the pain receded. "I'm too old to be making out in a sports car," she said, heaving a sigh. Leaning her head back against the seat, she gave a tired laugh. "I hope no one videotaped that little comedy."
He was still turned toward her, the streetlights illuminating his face. He was smiling, his expression strangely tender. "You think we could be blackmailed with it?"
"Oh, yeah. Think how our reputations would suffer. What brought that on, anyway?"
His smile turned wry. "Have I mentioned that I get turned on when you laugh?"
"No, I don't believe you have. I'm sure I'd have remembered." He was wrong; she had definitely needed her weapon. She should have shot him

before letting him kiss her like that, because now she wasn't sure she could get through a day without having more of his kisses.
She returned her seat to its original position and smoothed her hair. "If you try, do you think you can manage the rest of the trip without scaring any more pedestrians half to death, almost killing us, or making another detour to attack me? I'd like to get home before midnight."
"You liked being attacked. Admit it." He reached for her left hand and took it, lacing her fingers with his. "If it hadn't been for that cramp in your leg, you'd have liked it a lot more."
"We'll never know now, will we?" she asked.
"Wanna bet?"
"No matter how much I liked it, I'm not sleeping with someone I met just a few days ago. Period. So don't get your hopes up, or anything else for that matter."
"Too late, on both accounts."
She swallowed a laugh, sucking hard on the insides of her cheeks. He gently squeezed her hand, then released it and restarted the engine. A U-turn put them back on the main boulevard.
Montmartre used to be thick on the ground with artists of all descriptions, but a lot of the area had deteriorated since its salad days. There were narrow, twisting one-lane streets with a groove down the middle for water to run off, buildings crowded close on each side, and a lot of tourists in search of nightlife. Lily guided him through the maze and finally said, "There, the blue door. That's my apartment building."
He pulled up outside the door. There was no place to park the car without blocking the street, so there was no question of him coming upstairs with her. She leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, then his mouth. "Thank you for today. It's been fun."
"It was my pleasure. Tomorrow?"
She hesitated, then said, "Call me. We'll see." Perhaps his friend would come through with the information they needed about the lab's security. Swain was just as likely to come up with yet another impractical invitation that would for some reason appeal to her, though she thought they'd be safer if she drove instead of him-and *her* driving skills were sadly rusty.
He watched until she was inside the building, then lightly tapped the horn before driving away. Lily climbed the stairs, taking them slower than she once would have, pleased that she was only a little out of breath when she

reached her little apartment on the third floor. She let herself in and locked the door behind her, then heaved a big sigh.
Damn him. He was getting inside her defenses and they both knew it.
As soon as Swain picked his way out of the maze that was Montmartre and could pay attention to something other than where he was, he turned on his cell phone to check for messages. There weren't any, so he called Langley as he drove, and asked for Director Vinay's office; maybe his assistant was still at her desk, though the time there was pushing five o'clock. When he recognized her voice, he was relieved. "This is Lucas Swain. Can you tell me the director's condition?" Then he held his breath, praying that Frank was still alive.
"He's still in critical condition," she said. She sounded shaken. "He doesn't have any immediate family, just two nieces and a nephew who live in Oregon. I contacted them, but I don't know if any of them will be able to come."
"Do you know the prognosis?"
"The doctors are saying that if he makes it through twenty-four hours, his odds get better."
"Will you mind if I call you again for an update?"
"Of course not. I don't have to tell you that this is being kept very quiet, do I?"
"No, ma'am."
He thanked her and hung up, then breathed a combined thank-you and prayer. He had succeeded in distracting both himself and Lily today, but the knowledge that Frank could die had stayed in the back of his mind, gnawing at him. He didn't know what he might have done, if it hadn't been for Lily. Just being with her, devoting himself to making her laugh, had given him something to focus on other than his worries.
It broke his heart to think of her as an eighteen-year-old, just the age his son Sam was now, being recruited to kill someone in cold blood. God, whoever had done that should be taken out and shot. That man had robbed her of a normal life when she was still too young to realize how high the cost would be to herself. He could see how she would have been the perfect weapon, young and fresh and largely innocent, but that didn't make it right. If he ever got the man's name from her-assuming she'd been given his correct name and not an alias-he'd make it a point to hunt the bastard down.

His cell phone rang. He frowned, the bottom dropping out of his stomach. Surely to God, Frank's assistant wasn't calling him to say that Frank had just died-

He grabbed the phone and glanced at the number showing in the window. It was a French number, and he wondered who in hell could be calling, because it wasn't Lily-she'd have used her own cell phone-and no one else here had his number.

He flipped it open and cradled it between his jaw and shoulder as he pushed in the clutch and downshifted for a turn. "Yeah."

A man said in a quiet, even tone, "There is a mole in your CIA headquarters feeding information to Rodrigo Nervi. I thought you should know."

"Who is this?" Swain asked, stunned, but there was no answer. The call had been disconnected.

Swearing, he closed the phone and slipped it back into his pocket. A mole? Shit! He couldn't doubt it, though, because otherwise how had the Frenchman gotten this number? And the caller had definitely been a Frenchman; he'd spoken in English, but the accent was French. Not Parisian, though; Swain'd picked up on the Parisian accent within a day.

A chill ran down his spine. Had everything he'd requested been fed straight to Rodrigo Nervi? If so, any action he and Lily took could be taking them straight into a trap.

Chapter Twenty-One

Swain paced back and forth in his hotel room, his usual good-humored expression replaced by one that was cold and hard. No matter how he looked at it, he was literally on his own. The mole at Langley could be anyone: Frank's assistant; Patrick Washington, whom Swain had liked so much that one time he'd talked to him; any of the analysts; the case officers-hell, even the DDO, Garvin Reed. The only person there Swain totally trusted was Frank Vinay, who was in critical condition and might not live. With this revelation from his mysterious caller, Swain had to consider that Frank's automobile accident might not have been accidental, after all. But if he had thought of that, then probably several thousand others at Langley had thought the same thing. What if the mole was conveniently placed to divert suspicion from the accident?

The thing was, though, auto accidents were tricky, definitely not the most reliable method of eliminating someone; people had been known to walk away from accidents that totaled their cars. On the other hand, if you killed someone and didn't want anyone to know it was deliberate, you staged events to make it *look* like an accident. How well it was staged depended on the reliability of the parties involved, and the amount of money behind it. But how could anyone stage an auto accident that would take out the DO? Logically, predicting where someone would be at any given moment in the D.C. traffic was impossible, what with the fender benders, mechanical troubles, and flat tires all over the city that delayed and diverted traffic to other routes. Add in the human factor, such as oversleeping, stopping for a latte-he didn't see how it could be done, how anyone could time things so perfectly.

At any rate, surely to God, Frank's driver hadn't taken the same route to work every day. That was basic. Frank wouldn't have allowed it

So-logically, the accident had to be just what it seemed: an accident.

The result was the same. Whether or not Frank lived, he was out of commission, unreachable. Swain had been a field officer for a long time, but he'd been *in* the field, working with various insurgents and military groups in South America; he hadn't actually spent much time in CIA headquarters. He didn't know very many people there, and they didn't know him. He'd always considered it a bonus that he was seldom at headquarters,

but now that put him in a bind, because he had no one he knew well enough to trust.

So there would be no more help from Langley, no more requests for information. He tried to work the angles on what this meant to his particular situation. The way he saw it, he had two options: he could pull the plug on Lily right now and complete his stated mission, then hope to God that Frank lived so he could root out this damned mole-or he could stay here, work with Lily in cracking the Nervis' security, and try to find out from this end who the mole was. Of the two, he preferred staying here. For one thing, he was already here, and no matter how good the security was at the Nervi complex, it wouldn't be anything compared to the security at Langley.

Then there was Lily. She touched him and amused him and turned him on way more than he'd expected. Yeah, he'd found her attractive from the get-go, but the more time he spent with her, the better he knew her, the more intense the attraction became. He was getting in deeper with her than he'd ever planned, but it still wasn't deep enough. He wanted more.

So he'd stay here and do the best he could to work things from this end, totally on his own. He'd been playing along with Lily's scheme to break into the lab complex out of his own curiosity-that, and a strong desire to get into her pants-but now he needed to get serious about it. And he wasn't totally alone; he had Lily, who was no novice, and he also had his unknown caller. Whoever he was, the man was well-placed enough to know what was going on, and by warning Swain he'd placed himself on the side of the angels.

Thanks to the handy-dandy little cell-phone feature that listed incoming calls, Swain had the guy's number, both literally and figuratively. A person almost couldn't make a move today without leaving an electronic or paper footprint somewhere. Sometimes that was a blessing, sometimes a curse, depending on whether you were searching or hiding.

It was possible the guy even knew the name of the mole, but Swain doubted it. Otherwise, why give him a generic heads-up? If it had mattered enough for him to warn Swain, then he'd have given the name if he'd had it

But you never knew how much information anyone had that they didn't know they had, bits and pieces they simply hadn't put together yet into a cohesive whole. The only way to find out was by asking.

He didn't want to call his unknown informant back using his cell phone, on the off chance that the guy didn't want to talk to him and wouldn't answer

after seeing his phone number listed as incoming. Likewise, he didn't want this guy to know he was staying at the Bristol; just seemed safer that way. He'd bought a telephone card the day he'd arrived in France, figuring he'd never use it but wanting to have it just in case his cell phone batteries died unexpectedly or something. Leaving the hotel, he walked down Faubourg-Saint-Honore, bypassing the first public phone for one farther down the street.

He was smiling as he dialed the number, but this smile was totally lacking in humor. It was more like the smile of a shark as it closed in on lunch. He glanced at his wristwatch as he listened to the phone ringing: 1:43 am. Good. He was probably getting the guy out of bed, which is what he deserved for hanging up the way he had.

"Yes?"

The tone was wary, but Swain recognized the voice. "Hi there," he said cheerfully, in English. "I didn't disturb anyone, did I? Don't hang up, now. Play along and all you'll get is a phone call. Hang up on me and you'll get a visit."

There was a pause. "What do you want?" Unlike Swain, the guy on the other end spoke in French; Swain was glad he knew enough of the language to get by.

"Nothing much. I just want to know everything you know."

"One moment, please." Swain heard the man speaking quietly to someone, a woman. Though it was difficult to tell what he was saying with the phone away from his mouth, Swain thought he caught something about "taking the call downstairs."

Ah. So he was at home.

Then the man returned to the phone, saying briskly, "Yes, what may I do for you?"

Smoke screen for the wife's sake, Swain thought. "You can give me a name, for starters."

"The mole's?" He must be out of earshot of his wife, because the guy had switched to English.

"Definitely, but I was thinking of yours."

The man paused again. "It would be better if you do not know."

"Better for you, yes, but I'm not worried about making things better for you."

“But I am, monsieur.” Firmness there now; the man wasn’t a milquetoast. “I am risking my life and the lives of my family. Rodrigo Nervi is not one to take betrayal lightly.”
“You work for him?”
“No. Not in that sense.”
“I’m feeling a little dense, here. Either he pays you or he doesn’t. Which is it?”
“If I give him certain information, monsieur, he does not kill my family. Yes, he pays me; the money further incriminates me, yes?” Bitterness entered the quiet voice. “It is an insurance that I will not talk.”
“I see.” Swain eased off on the smart-ass tough-guy act-or at least he racheted down his behavior-though, it came so naturally to him, it probably wasn’t an act. “Something puzzles me. How did Nervi even know I was here, that he would be asking about me? I assume that’s how my name came up, and how you got my phone number.”
“He was searching for the identity of one of your contract agents. I believe it was a facial-recognition computer program that identified her. The mole accessed her file, and there was a notation that you had been dispatched to handle the problem she caused.”
“How did he know she was a contract agent?”
“He did not. He was exploring several different means of identifying her.” So that was how Rodrigo had acquired a photo of Lily without the disguise she had used when she was with Salvatore. He knew what Lily looked like, and he knew her real name. Swain asked, “Does Nervi know my name?”
“I cannot say. I am the conduit between the CIA and Nervi, but I haven’t given your name to him. He did ask for a way to contact you.”
“In God’s name, why?”
“To offer you a deal, I believe. A lot of money in exchange for any information you have about the whereabouts of the woman he is seeking.”
“What made him think I would take the deal?”
“You are for hire, yes?”
“No,” Swain said briefly.
“You are not a contract agent?”
“No.” He didn’t say more. If the CIA had sent him, and he wasn’t a contract agent, then there was only one other category for him: field officer. He suspected this guy was bright enough to figure it out.

“Ah.” There was the sound of a sharply drawn breath. “Then I have made the correct decision.”
“Which is?”
“I did not give him your phone number.”
“Even though your family is in danger?”
“I have a cover. There is another Nervi, a younger brother, Damone, who is… not quite in the family mold. He is intelligent, and reasonable. When I pointed out the inherent dangers in contacting someone who worked for the CIA, that this person would realize the only way Rodrigo could have his telephone number was if someone with the CIA had given it to him-moreover, this person could be very loyal to his country-Damone saw the wisdom of what I was saying. He said he would report to Rodrigo that the CIA person-that is yourself, of course-had rented a mobile here and had not yet contacted headquarters, so there was no current number available.”
That made sense, even though the explanation was a tad convoluted. Rodrigo likely didn’t know that field officers, when outside their own country, would use either secure international cell phones or satellite phones.
Another piece also fit neatly into this little piece. For information to be routed from the CIA through this man to Rodrigo Nervi, then the man Swain was talking to had to be in a position to request such sensitive information-and have quite a lot to lose if anyone found out. “What are you?” he asked. “Interpol?”
He heard a quick intake of breath and triumphantly thought, *Bingo!* Got it in one. Looked as if Salvatore Nervi had poked his fingers into a lot of pies that he shouldn’t have.
“So what you’re doing,” he said, “is getting back at Nervi without endangering your family. You can’t overtly refuse to do anything he asks, can you?“
“I have children, monsieur. Perhaps you don’t understand-”
“I have two of my own, so, yes, I understand perfectly.”
“He would kill them without hesitation if I don’t cooperate. In this matter with his brother, I did not refuse a request; his brother made a decision concerning it”
“But since you had my number anyway, you thought you’d put it to good use by making an anonymous call to warn me of the mole.”

"Oui. An investigation prompted by an internal suspicion is far different from one instigated from outside, no?"
"Agreed." This guy wanted the mole caught; he wanted that contact closed off. He must be feeling guilty about the information he'd passed along over the years and was trying to somewhat atone. "How much damage have you done?"
"To national security, very little, monsieur. When asked I must provide at least a *soupgon* of reliable information, but always I have removed more sensitive items."
Swain accepted that. After all, the guy had a conscience or he wouldn't have called him with a warning. "Do you know the mole's name?"
"No, we have never used names. He does not know mine, either. By that I mean our real names. We have identifiers, of course."
"Then how does he get information to you? I assume he sends it through channels, so anything that is faxed or scanned would have to be sent to your attention."
"I set up a fictitious identity on my home computer for those things that must be sent electronically, which is most things.
Only rarely is anything faxed. Such a thing could be traced, of course-assuming one knew what to look for. I can access the account from my… the word escapes me. The small hand-computer in which one puts one's appointments-"
"PDA," Swain said.
"*Oui*. The PDA." Said with a French accent, it was *pei d'ay*.
"The number you use to contact him-"
"It is a mobile number, I believe, as I am always able to reach him on it"
"Have you had the number traced?"
"We do not investigate, monsieur; we coordinate."
Swain was well aware that Interpol's constitution directly prohibited the organization from conducting its own investigations. His guy had just confirmed that he was indeed Interpol, not that Swain had doubted it
"I am certain the mobile phone would be registered under a false name," the Frenchman continued. "That would be easy for him to do, I think."
"A snap of the fingers," Swain agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose. A fake driver's license was easy to come by, especially for people in their line of work. Lily had used three sets of identification running from Rodrigo. For someone who worked at Langley, how hard could it be?

He tried to think of the various means available for nabbing this guy. “How often are you in contact?”
“Sometimes not for months. Twice in the past few days.”
“So a third contact so soon would be unusual?”
“Very unusual. But would he be suspicious? Perhaps, perhaps not. What are you thinking?”
“I’m thinking, monsieur, that you’re between a rock and a hard place and would like to get out. Am I right?”
“A rock and a-? Ah, I understand. I would like that very much.”
“What I need is a recording of your next conversation with him. Turn off the recorder while you’re talking, if you want. The content of the conversation isn’t important, just his voice.”
“You will get a voiceprint.”
“Yeah. I’ll also need the recorder you use. Then all I have to do is find a match.” Voiceprint analysis was fairly exact; that and facial-recognition programs had been used to differentiate Saddam Hussein from his doubles. A voice was a product of the structure of each individual’s throat, nasal passages, and mouth, and hard to fake. Even impressionists couldn’t exactly match a voice. Variables came in with the differences between microphones, recorders, audio feed, and so on. By having the same recorder, he took that variable out of the equation.
“I am willing to do this,” the Frenchman said. “It is a danger to me and my loved ones, but I think the risk is manageable, with your cooperation.”
“Thank you,” Swain said sincerely. “Are you willing to go a step further, and perhaps remove the threat from existence?”
There was a very long pause; then he said, “How would you do this?”
“You have contacts you trust?”
“But of course.”
“Someone who could maybe find out the specs of the security system at a certain complex?”
“Specs…?”
“Blueprint. Technical details.”
“I assume this complex belongs to the Nervi organization?”
“It does.” Swain gave him the name of the laboratory, and the address.
“I will see what I can do.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lily smiled when her cell phone rang the next morning. Expecting another half-humorous half-serious obscene call from Swain, she didn't check the number of the incoming call before she answered. Just to jerk his chain, she changed her voice to a deep, almost masculine tone, and barked an impatient, "Hello!" into the phone.

"Mademoiselle Mansfield?" The voice she heard wasn't Swain's; it was one that had been electronically altered so the voice was distorted, and the words sounded as if they were coming out of a drum.

Lily went cold with shock and without thinking she started to disconnect the call, but calm reason reasserted itself. Just because someone had her cell phone number didn't mean he knew where to locate her. The phone was registered in her real name; the apartment and everything connected to it was in

Claudia Weber's name. It was, in fact, reassuring that the caller had referred to her as "Mansfield"; her *Claudia* persona was still secure.

Who had access to this phone number? It was her private cell phone, one she used only for personal business. Tina and Averill had had the number, of course, and Zia; Swain had it. Who else? Once she'd had a large circle of acquaintances, but that had practically been pre-cell phone; since the day she'd found Zia, the circle had grown smaller and smaller as she devoted herself to the baby, and smaller still after the debacle with Dimitri. She couldn't think of anyone now who had this number other than Swain.

"Mademoiselle Mansfield?"‘ the distorted voice asked again.

"Yes?" Lily replied, forcing herself to sound calm. "How did you get this number?"

He didn't answer, instead saying in French, *"You do not know me, but I knew your friends, the Joubrans."*

The words sounded strange, above and beyond the distortion that disguised the voice, as if the speaker had difficulty talking. She tensed even more at the mention of her friends. "Who are you?"

"Forgive me, but that must remain private."

"Why?"

"It is safer."

"Safer for whom?" she asked drily.

"Both of us."

Okay, she could go with that "Why did you call?"

“It is I who hired your friends to destroy the laboratory. I never intended for what happened, to happen. No one was supposed to die.”
Shocked once more, Lily groped behind her for a chair, sank down onto it She had wanted answers, and without warning they were dropping into her lap. The phrase “never look a gift horse in the mouth” warred with “beware of Greeks bearing gifts.” So which was the caller, figuratively, a horse or a Greek?
“Why did you hire them?” she finally asked. “More to the point, why are you calling me?”
“Your friends succeeded in their mission-temporarily. Unfortunately, research has resumed, and it must be stopped. You have reason to want to succeed: revenge. That is why you killed Salvatore Nervi. Therefore, I would like to hire you to complete the mission.”
A cold sweat trickled down her spine. How did he know she’d killed Salvatore? She licked suddenly dry lips, but didn’t explore that avenue. Instead she focused on the rest of his statement. This man wanted to hire her to do what she planned to do anyway. The irony of it almost made her laugh, except she felt more bitter than amused. “What exactly is this mission?”
“There is a virus, an avion influenza virus. Dr. Giordano has altered it so it may be passed from human to human, to create a pandemic and therefore a huge demand for the vaccine he has also developed. People do not have a resistance to this virus; mankind has not encountered it before. To create even greater panic, Dr. Giordano has somehow specifically engineered this virus to cause the greatest harm to children, who do not have immune systems as fully developed as adults. Millions will die, mademoiselle. It will be a pandemic greater than the one in 1918, which is believed to have killed between twenty and fifty million people.”
Cause the greatest harm to children. Zia. Lily felt sick that she had been right, that it was something concerning Zia that had spurred Averill and Tina to the act that had eventually resulted in their deaths. In trying to protect Zia, they had caused her death. She wanted to scream at the unfairness of it, at the ultimate irony. She clenched her fist, fighting for control, fighting to contain the fury and pain that rose into her throat like lava.
“The virus has been perfected. As soon as the vaccine is ready, packages will be delivered worldwide to the largest cities in the world, where human

contact is greatest. The influenza will spread rapidly. By the time there is worldwide panic, thousands, perhaps millions, will have died. Then Dr. Giordano will announce that he has developed a vaccine for avian influenza, and the Nervi organization will be able to name its price for it. They will make an enormous fortune."

Yes, they would. It was classic. Control the supply, then create a demand for it. De Beers did it with diamonds; by carefully limiting the diamonds available on the market, they kept the price artificially high. Diamonds weren't rare at all, but the supply was controlled. It was roughly the same situation with crude oil and OPEC, except in the case of oil, the world had created its own demand.

"How do you know all this?" she asked angrily. "Why haven't you told the authorities?"

There was a pause; then the distorted voice said, *"Salvatore Nervi had many political connections, people in high positions who owed him many favors. This same laboratory is developing the vaccine against the virus, so the virus's existence there is explained. There is no proof that would outweigh his influence. That is why I was forced to hire professionals."*

Unfortunately, that was true; there were many influential politicians who had set up housekeeping in Salvatore's pocket, making him all but untouchable.

It was also true that she had no idea whom she was talking to, if he was on the level, or if Rodrigo had found her cell phone number and was using this as a ruse to draw her out. She would have to be a fool to take everything this man said at face value.

'Will you do it?" he asked.

"How can I say yes when I don't know who you are? How can I possibly trust you?"

"I understand the difficulty, but I have no solution."

"I am not the only person you could hire."

"No, *but your motivation is greater, perhaps, and also you are here now. I do not have to waste time looking for someone else."*

"Tina Joubran was an expert with security systems. I am not"

"You do not need to be. It was I who provided the Joubrans with the details of the security system in place at the laboratory."

"It would have been changed after the incident in August."

"Yes, it was. I have acquired that information, also."

“If you know all of this, you must work at the laboratory. You could destroy the virus yourself.”
“There are reasons why I could not.”
Again she caught some strange difficulty in his speech, and abruptly she wondered if perhaps the speaker was handicapped in some fashion.
“*I will pay you one million American dollars to do this.”*
Lily rubbed her forehead. That was wrong, the amount was way too much. Her inner alarm bells began ringing.
‘t’t hen she didn’t say anything, the man continued, *“There is one other thing. Dr. Giordano must also be killed. If he lives, he will replicate his success with some other virus. Everything must be destroyed: the doctor, his research papers, computer files, the virus. Everything. That is a mistake I made the first time, not being thorough.“*
Abruptly one million dollars didn’t seem so far out of line. Everything he had said so far was reasonable and answered many of the questions she’d had, but innate caution held her back. There had to be some way she could safeguard herself in case this was a trap, but this entire conversation had taken her unawares and she hadn’t been able to properly marshal her thoughts. She needed to think everything out before she made a decision.
“I can’t give you an answer now,” she said. “I have several things to consider.”
“*I understand. This could be a trap. You are wise to consider all possibilities, and yet time is a factor. I believe the job I have offered you is a goal you have in any case, one that you have a greater chance of attaining with my help. The longer you wait, the greater the odds that Rodrigo Nervi will locate you. He is intelligent and ruthless, and money is no object. He has people all over Paris, all over Europe, in shops and police departments. Given enough time, he* will *find you. With the money I will pay you, you will have the means to effectively disappear.”*
He was right. A million dollars would improve her situation beyond all measure. Yet she still couldn’t jump at the offer, couldn’t ignore the possibility that the bait might blind her to the trap.
“Consider these things. I will call you again tomorrow. I must have your answer then, or pursue other avenues.”
The connection was broken. Automatically Lily checked her incoming call log for the number, but she wasn’t surprised to see that the information had

been blocked; a man who had a million dollars available to hire a saboteur would also be able to afford layers of security.
But would someone that wealthy *work* at the laboratory? Not likely. So how did he have this information? How could he get the schematics of the security system?
Who he was, and how he got his information, was all-important. He could be a partner in Salvatore's scheme who got cold feet when he thought about all the innocents who would die-though in Lily's experience, people like the Nervis and their ilk simply didn't care who or how many died, so long as they achieved their aim.
Or had the caller been Rodrigo Nervi himself, telling her the truth about what was going on in order to draw her into a trap? He was intelligent enough, bold enough, to conceive and enact such a plot, to make it realistic down to the last detail, such as telling her he wanted her to kill Dr. Giordano.
Rodrigo Nervi also had the means to acquire her cell phone number, which for the sake of privacy she had not had listed in the *Pages Blanches.*
Her fingers were trembling as she punched in Swain's number.
On the third ring she heard his sleepy, "Good morning, sexy."
"Something has happened," she said in a tense voice, ignoring his greeting. "I need to see you."
"Do you want me to pick you up, or do you want to come here?" He sounded instantly alert.
"Pick me up," she said; her caller's warning about Rodrigo having people everywhere had made her nervous. She had *known* that, had felt safe riding the trains by covering her hair and wearing sunglasses, yet having been tracked down so easily by someone who evidently knew everything made her nervous. Most Parisians used the train service, because traffic was such a nightmare. Having people watch the trains for someone of her description was a no-brainer.
"Depending on the traffic, I'll be there in… oh, anywhere between an hour and two days."
"Call when you get close and I'll meet you on the street," she said, and disconnected without responding to his joke.
She showered and dressed, in her usual pants and boots. A peek out the window showed a sunny sky, thank goodness, so she wouldn't look odd wearing sunglasses. She pinned up her hair so she could cover it with a hat,

then sat down at the small eating table and meticulously checked her weapon, then put extra ammunition in her bag. That call had definitely spooked her, something that didn't often happen.
"I'm five minutes away," Swain announced an hour and fifteen minutes later.
"I'll be waiting," Lily replied. She put on her coat and hat, then slipped on her sunglasses, grabbed her bag, and hurried downstairs. She could hear the sound of a powerful car engine prowling up the narrow, winding street at a reckless speed, then the silver car rocketed into view and screeched to a halt directly in front of her. It was moving again almost before she got the door closed.
"What's up?" Swain asked, without any of the usual teasing in his voice. He wore sunglasses, too, and the way he handled the car was fast but businesslike, with no goofing around.
"I had a call on my cell phone," she said as she buckled up. "I haven't given the number to anyone but you, so I answered without checking the number. It wouldn't have done me any good, anyway, because it was blocked. The voice was electronically disguised, but it was a man, and he offered me a million dollars-American-to destroy the Nervi lab and kill the doctor in charge."
"Go on," he said, downshifting through a sharp curve.
She spelled out the rest of it for him, including every detail she could remember. When she got to the part about the avian influenza virus, he very softly said, "Son of a bitch," then listened to the rest without comment. When she was finished, he said, "How long did you talk?"
"Five minutes or so. Maybe a little longer."
"Long enough to triangulate your position, then. Not an exact location, but the general area. If it was Nervi, he could blanket the area with people showing your photograph, and eventually he'd get a hit."
"I haven't made any acquaintances here. The apartment is sublet from someone who's out of the country."
"That helps, but your eyes are very distinctive. You must be part husky. Anyone who sees you will remember those eyes."
"Thanks," she said drily.
"I think you need to get what you need from the apartment, and stay with me instead. Definitely until he calls back. If it is Nervi and he does get

another triangulation on your phone, it will be in a totally different district and that will throw him off."
"So he'll think I'm moving around, not staying in any one place."
"With luck. It's possible interference from the hotel itself would prevent anyone from locking on to the signal. Big buildings really screw up the electronics."
Stay with him. It was a sound plan; they would be together, she wouldn't have to check in, and who would look for her in a luxury hotel?
There were several pluses to the plan, and only one minus that she could see. Silly of her to get hung up on it, but she was still reluctant to be intimate with him and she wasn't naive enough to think it wouldn't happen if they were sleeping in the same room. There were bigger things here to worry about than whether they would have sex, yet still she hesitated.
He gave her a hard, clear look that said he was reading her mind, but he didn't jump in to reassure her he'd keep his hands to himself and not try to take advantage of the situation. Of course he'd take advantage. That was a given.
"All right," she said.
He didn't gloat, didn't even smile. He just said, "Good. Now run through all that about the influenza virus again. I actually know someone in Atlanta who can tell me whether or not this is all feasible, before we rush in to save the world from some half-baked scheme that wouldn't work anyway."
She repeated everything she remembered while he worked his way through the narrow streets back to her apartment. Pulling up to the curb, he said, "You want to drive around for a few minutes while I go up and check that no one's in your apartment?"
Lily tapped the side of her boot. "Thank you, but I can do it."
"I'll be circling as best I can, given nothing seems to be laid out in a block. And while I'm circling, I'll be making that call."
"Sounds good to me." She climbed the stairs she had descended not half an hour before. When she'd left, she had pulled out a hair, wet it, and stuck it across the door and doorframe just an inch above the floor. The blond hair was as invisible as fishing line against the wood. She bent down close to look, and breathed a sigh of relief. The hair was still there. The apartment was safe. Unlocking the door, she went in and hurried around gathering her clothes and toiletries, everything she thought she would need. God only knew when or even if she'd ever be able to return for the rest of her things.

Chapter Twenty-Three

There were some old friends whose telephone numbers remained with you forever. Micah Sumner wasn't one of them, however, so while Lily was in her apartment gathering her clothes, Swain was trying to negotiate the narrow streets, shift gears, and punch in what felt like an endless series of numbers as he waded through the electronic mire required to reach information in the States, all at the same time. Then he didn't have anything to write the number down on, much less the fourth hand he needed to do it with, so when the computerized voice asked if he would like to be connected, he muttered, "Shit, yes," then pressed the number that corresponded to "Shit, yes."

By the fifth ring, Swain was beginning to doubt anyone was going to answer. But on the sixth one, there was some fumbling and a sleep-fogged voice said, "Yeah, hello."

"Micah, this is Lucas Swain."

"Well, son of a bitch." There was the sound of a huge yawn. "Haven't heard from you in a coon's age. Wish I wasn't hearing from you right now, either. Do you know what fucking time it is?"

Swain looked at his watch. "Let's see; it's nine am here, so that would make it… three am, right?"

"Bastard." That was said around another yawn. "Okay, why'd you wake me up? This had better be good."

"I don't know if it is or not." Swain cradled the phone between his jaw and shoulder as he changed gears. "What do you know about avian influenza?"

"Bird flu? You're shittin' me, right?"

"Nope, I'm serious as a heart attack. Is bird flu dangerous?"

"Not to wild fowl, but it is to domesticated birds. Remember seeing on the news several years back… 1997, I think… where there was an outbreak of bird flu in Hong Kong and they killed almost two million chickens to get rid of it?"

"Television was kind of hard to come by where I was. So it kills birds?"

"Yeah. Not a hundred percent of them, but enough. The problem is, sometimes the virus mutates and is transmitted from birds to humans."

"Is that more dangerous than regular flu?"

“Way more. If it’s a virus the human body hasn’t seen before, then there’s no immune system resistance to it and you get sick as hell. Then you either die or you don’t”
“That’s comforting.”
“We’ve been lucky so far. We’ve had a few mutations that allow bird-to-human infection, but none of the avian influenza viruses have made the magic leap that allows for human-to-human transmission. Like I said, so far. We’re way overdue for a recombinant virus to hit us hard, but the avian flu that’s been hitting Hong Kong doesn’t look like a recombinant; it looks like a true avian virus. But it’s infecting people, too. If it mutates that little bit needed for human-to-human infection, then we’re in big trouble, because we’d have even less resistance to it than we would have to a recombinant virus that we’d seen at least a part of before.”
“What about vaccines for it?” Swain drove around a curve and there was Lily’s apartment building, but she wasn’t standing on the street with all her worldly goods around her, so he drove past it to make another convoluted loop.
“We wouldn’t have one. New viruses hit hard and fast; vaccines take months to test, to get them out to the general populace. By the time we could get an effective vaccine against an avian virus, a lot of people will have died. It’s even harder to get one for avian influenza than it is for regular influenza viruses, because vaccines are cultured in eggs and-guess what-avian influenza will kill the eggs.”
“Is this something the CDC is really worried about?”
“You’re kidding, right? Flu kills a hell of a lot more people than the exotics that get all the sexy press, like the hemorrhagic fevers.”
“So if some lab or something developed the vaccine ahead of time, then let the virus loose, they could make some serious money?”
“Hey, wait a minute.” All sleepiness had fled Micah’s tone. “Swain, are you telling me what I think you’re telling me? That’s a possible scenario?”
“I’ve just heard about it; I haven’t checked it out yet I don’t know if there’s anything to it I wanted to see if it’s feasible first“
“Feasible? It’s brilliant, but it’s a fucking nightmare. We’ve dodged the bullet the past few years, only regular influenza viruses have made the rounds, but we’re holding our breaths and trying to get a reliable method of producing the vaccine before one of these damn bugs turns on us.

Worldwide, even with antiviral drugs and medications to treat the complications, millions would die."
"Would it hit kids hardest?"
"Sure. Rids don't have the fully-developed immune system adults have. They haven't been exposed to as many bugs."
"Thanks, Micah, that's what I needed to know." It wasn't what he'd wanted to hear, but at least now he knew what he was dealing with.
"Don't hang up! Swain, is something like that going on? You have to tell me, man, you can't let us get caught flat-footed by something like this."
"I won't." He hoped; he'd have to take some fail-safe precautions. "It's just a rumor, nothing concrete. Flu season has already started, hasn't it?"
"Yeah, it's looking like a normal season so far. But if you find out there's some bastard looking to make a fortune with a virus like this, we need to know."
"You'll be the first," Swain lied. "I'll call you next week and let you know what's going on, good or bad." He *would* call, but Micah probably wouldn't be the first.
"Even at three fucking am," Micah groused.
"You got it Thanks, pal."
Swain disconnected, then dropped the phone in his pocket. Damn. Okay, so this scheme Lily's caller had told her about was not only feasible, but a real problem. Swain tried to think of alternate means of handling it. He couldn't call Langley because Frank was out of commission, there was a fucking mole in place who was feeding information to Rodrigo Nervi, and he had no idea whom he could trust If Frank was there… well, one phone call and the whole damn laboratory complex would be toast tomorrow morning, but Frank wasn't there, so Swain had to turn it into toast himself. Somehow.
He could have given Micah the particulars, but what could the CDC do? Nothing more than alert the World Health Organization. Even if the WHO had the place raided without someone in the local police structure tipping off Nervi first, yeah, they'd find the virus, but the Nervi lab was working on a vaccine *for* the virus, so of course the virus would have to be there for testing, et cetera. It was a neat scheme, logically explaining away the smoking gun. He had to admire it.
He made it back to the apartment building, and this time Lily was there, carrying two carpet bags and with a familiar-looking tote hanging on her

shoulder. He grinned as he looked fondly at the tote bag. Without it, he might never have found her.
He got out to stow the bags for her. They were on the heavy side, and he noticed she was a little breathless, which reminded him she'd said the poison had done some damage to a heart valve. He tended not to remember that, because she was such a capable person, but the fact was that only about two weeks had passed since she'd killed Salvatore Nervi and almost died herself. Even if the damage to her heart was minimal, there was no way she could have fully recovered her strength in such a short length of time.
He studied her as he opened the car door for her. Her lips weren't blue, and her unpainted fingernails were pink. She was getting enough oxygen. She'd been rushing around, up and down three flights of stairs, so of course she was breathless. He would be, too. Relieved, he stopped her as she was about to get into the car. She looked up with a questioning expression, and he kissed her.
Her mouth was soft, and she leaned into him with such easy acceptance that his heartbeat kicked into a gallop. The street was no place for how he wanted to kiss her, however, so he contented himself with that brief taste. She smiled, one of those completely feminine smiles that left a man feeling drunk and confused and happy all at the same time, then slid into the seat and pulled the car door shut.
"Shit," he said as he got in the driver's seat. "I'm probably gonna have to dump this car."
"Because I could have been seen getting into it?"
"Yeah. Though we probably look like a couple going away on vacation, it's better not to take the chance. *Now* what will I get?"
"Maybe something a little less noticeable, like a red Lamborghini?" That wasn't fair, since the Megane Renault wasn't in any way in the same class with a Lamborghini, but it was still a noticeable car.
He chuckled at the dig. "So I like good cars. Sue me."
"Did you get in touch with your friend in the States?"
"Yeah, but he was bitchy about the time difference. The bad news is, not only is this virus thing feasible, it's the CDC's worst nightmare."
"What's the good news?"
"There isn't any. Except Nervi isn't going to release the virus until the vaccine is available, because of course he wants to be the first one

innoculated, right? And it takes months to develop a vaccine. Since your friends did some damage to the program in August and presumably the mad doctor had to start over, I think we're safe in thinking they aren't going to release the virus during this flu season. They'll wait until next year."
She blew out a relieved breath. "That makes sense to me." She hesitated. "I've been thinking. I didn't know about the virus before, but now… This isn't something we have to do alone. Even though I'm not in good standing with the CIA right now, I could still use a pay phone and call my former contact there, let him know what's going on. They could handle something on this magnitude much better than just the two of us can."
Swain almost jumped out of his skin. "For God's sake, don't do that!" Her reasoning was sound, but she didn't know about the mole and he couldn't tell her without blowing the whistle on himself.
"Why not?" Her tone was more curious than anything else, but he could feel that pale blue gaze boring into him like lasers. She could cut steel with that look.
He didn't have a good reason on the tip of his tongue, and for a split second he thought the whole thing was going to blow up in his face, but then he had a flash of genius. He could pretty much tell her everything essential, without giving anything away. It was all in how he phrased it. "You know Nervi has contacts and influence there."
"He's an asset, an informer, but-"
"But he's also a very wealthy man. What are the odds someone there is on his payroll?" It was a simple explanation, and a true one. He was just leaving out a few details.
She turned back in her seat and scowled. "It's good odds. Salvatore was thorough, and Rodrigo is even more so. So we don't dare go to anyone, do we?"
"No one I've been able to think of, that he wouldn't have someone there on his payroll. Not the French police, not Interpol…" He let his voice trail off and shrugged. "I guess we have to save the world ourselves."
"I don't want to save the world," she said grumpily. "I like things on a smaller scale. I want it to be *personal,"*
He had to laugh, because he knew what she meant. As much as she'd wanted to bring down the Nervi organization before, now they *had* to do it. The job was much tougher than he'd imagined at the beginning. With a virus like that having to be contained, the security would be on a par with

that at the CDC in Atlanta. Getting in would require more than just having information about the security system; they would need inside help. Just how they got that help was going to be a bitch.
“We may have to take the chance that the guy who called you is on the up and up,” he said. “Otherwise, we’re screwed.”
“I was thinking the same thing,” she said, surprising him. Sometimes it was scary the way their brains seemed to work the same way and at the same pace. “The security in place because of the virus will be layered, and the virus itself kept in strict quarantine. We need someone inside.”
“You’ll have to meet with him. That’s the only way we can know it isn’t Rodrigo Nervi. If it is Rodrigo, he’ll jump at the chance to have you come to him. He doesn’t know about me-well, he might have an idea after the shoot-out the other day, but he doesn’t know what I look like or anything-so I can watch your back.”
She gave a grim smile. “If it *is* Rodrigo, he’ll have so many men watching that you won’t be able to do a thing about it But I agree, that’s the only way. I’ll have to do it. But if it’s Rodrigo and they grab me, do me a favor and kill me. Don’t let them take me alive, because I expect Rodrigo will want to have some fun and games with me before he kills me. I’d just as soon skip that part”
Swain’s stomach knotted at the thought of Nervi getting his hands on her. There were hard decisions he had to make, but that wasn’t one of them. “I won’t let that happen,” he said quietly.
“Thanks.” Her smile turned a little brighter, as if he’d given her a gift, and his stomach knotted even tighter.
Neither of them had eaten yet that morning, so with Lily’s sunglasses and hat in place they stopped at a sidewalk cafe and had brioches and coffee. He watched her eat, his heart thudding as he wondered if this was the last day he’d have with her. He’d thought he could put if off longer, but circumstances were piling up on them. If her mystery caller was Rodrigo Nervi, there was no way they could know until the meeting, and then it would be too late.
He wished there was some other way they could do it, but there wasn’t. The meeting had to take place. She had to accept the guy’s proposal when he called tomorrow, set up a meeting, and be there. Then… the caller would either turn out to be Nervi, or someone else. God, he prayed it was someone

else. He wanted more than one more day with her. He wanted more than one night.
He himself had gone into every job knowing it might be his last, that when you worked with violent people sometimes the violence turned on you. Lily was the same; she had put herself in the front lines and accepted the odds. That didn't make it any easier, knowing she was there by choice.
But if Nervi and his goons were the ones who showed up and he lost Lily, he swore to God the bastard would pay. Big time.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Swain turned in his Megane and, at Lily's insistence, got a little blue four-cylinder Fiat from a different rental company. "No!" he moaned in horror when she told him what she wanted him to get. "Let's get a Mercedes instead. There are a lot of Mercedes around." He brightened. "I know. Let's get a Porsche. We might need the horses. Or a BMW. Both of those sound good."
"Fiat," she said.
"Gesundheit."
Her lips twitched, but she managed not to laugh. "You don't want anything noticeable."
"Yes, I do," he said stubbornly. "It doesn't matter who notices me because no one knows who I am. If I were looking for someone, I'd look at people who were driving Fiats, because that's what you get if you don't want to be noticed."
Using that same theory, she had put on a bright red wig as a disguise, so he actually made sense. But by now the amusement value was so great she wanted to see him drive one of the smaller Fiats for at least a day, just to hear how creative he could get with his complaining.
"You started out driving a Jaguar, then today you picked me up in a Megane-if anyone saw us-so anyone looking for you would already know you like fast cars. A Fiat would be the last thing anyone would look for."
"No joke," he grumbled.
"A Fiat's a good car. We can get a Stilo three-door; it's fairly sporty-"
"Meaning, I can pedal it at ten miles an hour instead of five?"

She had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing, so ridiculous was the mental picture she had of him on a tricycle, his long legs folded up around his ears while he pedaled like mad.
He was sulking so much he wouldn't even approach the rental counter until she turned around and hissed, "Do you want me to put it on *my* credit card? Rodrigo would know about it before the hour's up."
"*My* credit card might expire from embarrassment at having something like this charged to it," he snapped, but then he squared his shoulders and stepped up like a man. He didn't flinch even when the car was brought around and the features pointed out. The Fiat Stilo was a quick little car, with nice acceleration, but she could tell he judged it woefully short on horsepower.
He put her bags in the back while Lily got in the passenger seat and buckled the seat belt. Swain slid the driver's seat back before he got in, making room for his legs.
He turned the key and started the engine. "It has a navigation system," Lily pointed out.
"I don't need a navigation system. I can read a map." He put the car in gear, then made a high-pitched whining noise through his nose as he accelerated. Unfortunately, the noise exactly matched the pitch of the engine noise, and Lily lost her battle not to laugh. She tried to hide it, pinching her nose and turning her head to look out the window, but he saw her heaving shoulders and said sourly, "I'm glad *someone* thinks this is funny. I'm staying at the Bristol; don't you think someone there might think it's odd that I'm driving a Fiat instead of something flashier?"
"You're such a car snob. A lot of people rent cars that have good gas mileage. It's a smart thing to do."
"Unless they might have to make a quick getaway and they're being chased by cars with bigger engines." His expression was grim. "I think I've been emasculated. I probably won't be able to get a hard-on while I'm driving this."
"Don't worry," she soothed. "If you can't, I'll let you get whatever kind of car you want tomorrow."
Like magic his expression lightened and he started to grin, only to have the grin morph into a grimace of acute pain as he realized the choice she'd just given him. "Ah, shit," he groaned. "That's diabolical. You're going to hell for thinking of something that evil."

She gave him an innocent look and lifted one shoulder in a gesture that said, "So?" He was the one who had taken the issue down the sexual path; if he didn't like where he'd ended up, it was his own fault.
She was amazed that she could be so entertained, considering what they were up against, but it was as if by tacit agreement they had decided to have today just for themselves, because today might be all they had. She had known some contract agents who, because of the nature of their work, lived totally in the moment. She never had, but today she saw the appeal of not worrying about tomorrow. There was a poignancy that hit home as she watched his expressions, an acknowledgment of what could be between them if she had the chance to let it grow. He made her feel soft inside, and warm with an affection that held so much promise it was almost frightening. She could love him, she thought. She might already, just a little bit, for his sense of humor and sheer *joie de vivreihat* lifted her own spirits from the depths. She had needed to laugh, and he'd given her that. "Let's renegotiate," he said. "If I can get it up, as a reward I get to pick out a different car tomorrow."

"And if you can't, you have to drive this one for the duration?"
He snorted and said smugly, "Yeah, like that's gonna happen."
"Then where's the negotiation?" She stroked the seat. "I like this car. I'm becoming very fond of it. Unlike you, my sexuality isn't linked to a machine."
"Guys can't help it. We're born with a stick shift, and it's our favorite toy from the time our arms are long enough to reach it."
"This car has a stick shift," she pointed out.
"Don't get technical. There's no testosterone here." He made the high-pitched whining sound again. "See? It's a soprano. A four-cylinder soprano."
"It's a great car for city driving. It's highly maneuverable, economical, reliable."
He gave up. "All right. You win. I'll drive it, but I'll need therapy afterwards for the emotional damage you're inflicting on me."
She stared straight ahead through the windshield. "Massage therapy?"
"H'mmm." He considered it "Yeah, that'll do it. But I'll need a lot of it."
"I think I can handle that."

He grinned and winked at her, and abruptly she wondered if she hadn't outsmarted herself and let him talk her into something she hadn't one hundred percent decided to do. Ninety-eight percent, yes, but not a hundred percent. That old sense of caution still nagged at her.
In that uncanny way he had of picking up on her wavelength, he turned totally serious. "Don't let me pressure you into anything you don't want to do," he said quietly. "If you don't want to sleep with me, all you have to do is say no."
She looked out the window. "Have you ever wanted anything and been afraid of it at the same time?"
"You mean like getting on a roller coaster, when you really want the ride but your stomach's already in your throat thinking about that first big drop?"
Even his anxieties were fun-related, she thought, and smiled a little. "The last time I was involved with someone, he tried to kill me." She said it casually, but the sorrow and tension that still gripped her to this day were anything but casual.
He whistled between his teeth. "That would ruin your day, all right. Was he crazy jealous or something?"
"No, he'd been hired to do it."
"Ah, honey," he said, with real sadness in his tone, as if he grieved for her. "I'm sorry. I can see where that would make you cautious."
"That's an understatement," she muttered.
"Gun-shy?"
"In a big way."
He hesitated, as if he wasn't certain he wanted to know. "How big?"
She shrugged and said, "That was six years ago."
The steering wheel jerked in his hands and the car swerved, prompting the driver beside them to blow his horn in warning. "Six-years?" He sounded incredulous. "You haven't been involved with anyone for *six years?* Holy shit. That's-that's taking caution to the extreme."
He might think so, but then he hadn't almost been killed by someone he loved. She hadn't thought anything could hurt worse than Dimitri's betrayal, until Zia's death.
He thought about it another minute, then said, "I'm honored."
"Don't be. I wouldn't be this involved with you if circumstance hadn't thrown us together," she pointed out. "If we'd met socially, I'd have blown

you off like yesterday's news."
He scratched the side of his nose. "You wouldn't have been tempted by my charm?"
She made a rude sound. "You wouldn't have got close enough for me to know you were charming."
"This may sound callous, but if that's the case, I'm glad you were getting shot at the other day. If you believe in fate, then it was meant to be that I'd be sitting there, at loose ends, just when you were on the losing side of a gun battle."
"Or it was sheer chance. It remains to be seen whether that was good luck or bad luck-for you, I mean." And perhaps for her, as well, though she thought she should count her blessings, that even if events went drastically sour, at least she'd had laughter in her life again for a short while.
"I can tell you that," he said lazily. "It was the best luck I've had in a long time."
She watched his face and wondered what it was like to live inside his skin, to be so optimistic and at peace with one's self. She couldn't remember feeling that way since she was a teenager, though she'd been happy while she had Zia.
After Zia's death, peace and happiness had been totally alien. She had been so focused; all she'd thought about was vengeance for her friends, for Zia. Now Swain was in her life, and her goal had been transformed from something personal to something so hugely important that she had to struggle to grasp the scope of it. Her personal feelings had been made insignificant, and reality had swept her to a different perspective. She knew that although a person never stopped grieving for lost loved ones, the quality of grief changed from gut-gnawing agony to dull pain, to acceptance, to remembering the good times-and sometimes all of those things were felt within a very short time, in no particular order. Her focus had been shifted from herself, her loss, to something outside herself, and with that shift the pain had changed, become less immediate and all-consuming.
She didn't know how long the surcease would endure, but she was grateful for every moment of it. Swain was responsible, she knew, for a lot of her shift in mood just by being his brash, very American self. Of course, he could lift a woman's mood just by walking down the street with that lazy,

loose-hipped gait of his. She knew because she had seen women watching him, and she knew the effect he had on *her.*
He reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Stop worrying so much. Everything will be okay.”
She gave a rueful laugh. “You mean: my mystery caller will turn out *not to* be Rodrigo; he can tell us everything we need to know about the lab’s security; we get in without any trouble, totally destroy the virus, kill Dr. Giordano so he can’t do this again, and get away without anyone the wiser?”
He thought about it. “Maybe not everything; that’s a big laundry list But you have to have faith things will work out for the better one way or the other. We can’t fail, therefore we won’t.”
“The power of positive thinking?”
“Don’t knock it. It’s worked for me so far. For instance, I was positive I’d get in your pants from the minute I saw you, and look at us now.”
They were once more at a standstill, with a thousand things that needed doing and nothing they could do that day. Swain’s security system expert didn’t get in touch, but now that they knew what they were up against, they both thought the security measures in place would be far more complex than any the run-of-the-mill expert would ever see.
Just to see what they could find, they went to an Internet cafe to research influenza, before they went to the hotel. There was so much to read that in the interest of saving time, they each paid for computer time and divided the hits between them.
At one point during the afternoon, Swain checked his wrist-watch, then took out his cell phone and punched in a long series of numbers. From where she was Lily couldn’t hear what he was saying, but his expression was serious. His conversation was brief, and when it was over, he rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache.
While the computer was loading a large file, she went over to him. “Is something wrong?”
“A friend was in a car accident in the States. I called to check his condition.”
“How is he?”
“Unchanged. The doctors say that’s actually good. He lived through the first twenty-four hours, so they’re a little more optimistic than they were before.” He rocked his hand. “He could still go either way.”

“Do you need to go there?” she asked. She didn’t know what she would do without him, but if this was a really close friend-
“I can’t,” he said briefly.
She took that to mean he literally couldn’t, that he was persona non grata in the States and wouldn’t be allowed in. She touched his shoulder in sympathy, because she knew how he felt. She probably wouldn’t ever be able to go home again, either.
He was scrolling through the CDC Web site. The first time he’d pulled it up, he hadn’t found anything really interesting, but he’d kept clicking on related sites that had links to the CDC, and he gave a satisfied grunt as a long list popped on the screen. “Finally.” He clicked on *Print.*
“What do you have?” Lily asked, bending down to read over his shoulder.
He lowered his voice so no one could overhear what they were saying. “A list of infectious agents and the safety precautions taken with each one.” He nodded at the computer she was using. “What do you have over there?”
“A projection of illnesses and deaths during the next pandemic. Nothing useful, I don’t think.”
“This should tell us what we need. If it doesn’t, my friend in Atlanta can fill in the blanks. I should have asked him a bunch of these questions this morning, but I hadn’t had time to think about it and he called me a bastard anyway, since it was three am there when I called him.”
“Understandable.”
“I thought so, too.” Her hand was still on his shoulder, and he covered it with one of his. “Let’s take this stuff back to the hotel to read. We can order room service, and you can get unpacked and settled in.”
“We’ll have to tell the hotel there are now two people staying in your room, instead of just one.”
“I’ll just say my wife has joined me. Not a problem. Keep your sunglasses on and don’t let any of the staff see your eyes, and we should be in the clear.”
“I’ll look pretty silly sitting around a hotel room wearing sunglasses. Colored contacts will be easier.”
“It isn’t just your eyes that are so identifiable. It’s the entire package, the color of your hair, your facial structure. Just duck into the bathroom when room service is delivered. Other than maid service, that’s the only time we’ll be interrupted.” He logged off, then gathered all the pages that had

been printed out. He paid for the service while Lily logged off her computer and did the same.

They stepped out into the street, and the wind whipped at them. Though the day was sunny, it was cool enough, and the windchill cold enough, that a lot of people were wearing hats and scarves. Lily pulled her own hat down so it covered all her hair as they walked to where Swain had parked the car. He seemed to have remarkable luck in finding parking space in a city that was notorious for difficult parking, but she was beginning to think Swain was just one of those people born under a lucky horseshoe. If he'd leased a Hummer, somehow he'd have found a place to park it.

He forwent making any more disparaging comments about the Fiat, though she heard him making that high-pitched whining noise under his breath a few times. The days had gotten really short, with winter only a few weeks away, so the sun had already set by the time they got to the hotel and twilight was fading fast, making Lily's sunglasses unnecessary. She pulled them off but remembered that she still had a pair of pink-lensed sunglasses that she'd used as part of her disguise in London, and fished them out of her bag. The tint was light enough that she could see with the glasses on and wouldn't look like a total idiot for wearing sunglasses at night but was sufficient to hide the color of her eyes.

She slipped them in place and turned to Swain. "How do I look?"

"Sexy and stylish." He gave her a thumbs-up. "Just keep your eyelids at half-mast, as if you're jet-lagged, and we're home free."

He was right; no one paid any attention to them at all as he carried her bags through the lobby with her trailing behind. When they were in his room, he called the front desk and told them his wife had arrived, so there were now two occupants in his room; then he called housekeeping and requested extra towels. Lily busied herself unpacking, putting her clothing away in drawers or hanging it in the closet beside Swain's clothes, and her toiletries in the bathroom.

She got a jolt as she set a pair of her shoes beside his in the bottom of the closet There was something intimate about the sight, her shoes so much smaller and daintier than his, that brought home to her the fact that she was now, for all intents and purposes, living with him.

She looked up to find him watching her, reading her discomfort.

"It'll be all right," he said gently, and opened his arms to her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lily went to him, burrowed herself close to the comforting warmth of his body, nestled her head in the hollow of his shoulder, and felt some of her tension ease as he wrapped his arms around her. He kissed the top of her head. “I repeat, we don’t have to have sex tonight. If you’re that uncomfortable with the idea, we can wait.”

“Can we?” she asked softly. “Normally I’d wait a lot longer than this, because two kisses and one grope do not a relationship make-”

He gave a bark of laughter. “I guess not, but even though logically I know we’ve known each other only a few days, part of me feels as if it’s been a lot longer than that. A week, maybe,” he teased. “Have I really groped you just once?”

“Once is all that I remember.”

“Then it’s definitely just once, because you’d remember my gropes.” He rubbed his hand up and down her back, coaxing her tense muscles to relax.

“Tonight may be the only night we have,” she said, trying for a matter-of-fact tone but unable to keep out a hint of wistfulness. The truth of that had been in the back of her mind all day. She couldn’t afford to take her time, get to know him, ease into a relationship. Seen in that light, her decision was simple: she might well die tomorrow, and she didn’t want her last night on earth to be spent alone. She didn’t want to die without having made love with him, without sleeping so close in his arms that she could hear his heartbeat. She wanted him to be her love, even if she wouldn’t have a chance to discover if he was *the* love. At least she would have the hope that he was.

“Hey,” he chided. “Remember the power of positive thinking. Tonight is the first night, not the only night.”

“Have you always been a Pollyanna?”

“Pollyanna saw something good in everything. I see nothing good at all about that Fiat.”

Taken by surprise at his abrupt change of subject, she snickered. “I do. I got a good laugh out of your reaction to it”

He stiffened. “You mean you deliberately picked out that car just to jerk my chain?”

She didn’t bother denying it, just gave a satisfied sigh as she rubbed her cheek against his chest. “I wanted to see you drive it for just one day. It’s a perfectly good car; I once owned a Fiat, so I know how reliable and economical they are, but you act as if you’re in agony.”
“You’ll have to pay for this,” he said, shaking his head. “And not with all that massaging you promised, either. This is big. I’ll have to think about this one for a while.”
“Just don’t take too long.”
“You’ll know tonight,” he promised, tilting her head up for a warm kiss that lingered, multiplied, deepened. Unlike the night before, he took his time stroking her breasts, cupping them, thumbing her nipples through the layers of clothing. Lily half expected to be tumbled onto the bed, but he didn’t even slip his hand under her top. She was glad; she wasn’t anywhere near aroused. His caresses felt good, though, and when he released her, she was warmer and more fluid than she’d been before.
A brisk knock on the door signaled the arrival of housekeeping with an armful of towels. Swain went to the door and took the towels in the same motion with which he handed over a tip, not letting the maid in, though she would have gladly arranged the towels in the bathroom for them.
“Let’s read over all these papers and see what we’ve got,” he said after he put the towels away, indicating everything they’d printed out at the Internet cafe. “There’s a lot of extra stuff in the articles that we won’t need.”
She liked that he wanted to take care of business before fun and games, so she joined him in the sitting area, where he had all the papers scattered out on the coffee table.
“Ebola… Marburg… We don’t need all this,” he muttered, dropping page after page on the floor. Lily picked up a stack of paper and began sorting through it, looking for any information on influenza.
“Here,” she said a moment later. “ ‘How influenza viruses are treated in the laboratory.’ Let’s see… ‘laboratory-associated infections aren’t documented,’ but watch out for ferrets.”
“What?” he asked, startled.
“That’s what it says. Evidently infected ferrets pass the virus along to humans fairly easily, and vice versa. They make us sick, we make them sick. That’s fair,” she said judiciously. “What else… ‘a genetically altered virus… unknown potential. Biosafety Level 2 is recommended.’ What’s Biosafety Level 2?”

“I have that here… somewhere.” Rapidly he flipped through a section of papers. “Here. Okay. The threat is considered moderate. ‘Laboratory personnel must be trained in handling the viruses, access to the lab is limited when work is being done,’ but I guess we can safely say access to the Nervi lab is limited at all times. ‘People have to wash their hands… no eating or drinking in the area… wastes are decontaminated before disposal’-that’s good to know. I guess we could have safely gone in the sewer, after all.”
“I’m just as glad we didn’t.”
“We may have to yet”
She wrinkled her nose at the thought. Even though the sewer had been her idea and she would go that route if there was no other way, she’d rather not.
“ ‘A biohazard sign must be posted,’ ” he continued. “ ‘Extra care taken when handling sharp instruments’-duh-these are all precautions the laboratory personnel take while handling the bugs. ‘The lab must have lockable doors; no specific ventilation system is required.’ Huh.” He put down the papers and scratched his jaw. “This sounds like a basic lab, no airlock entrances, retina scans, thumbprint locks, or anything else. Looks as if we were borrowing trouble, because if Dr. Giordano follows these instructions, all we have to deal with is a locked door.”
“And a lot of people with weapons.”
He waved his hand. “That’s straightforward.” He tossed the papers on the coffee table and leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. “I’m surprised. I thought when you were dealing with infectious bugs, you had all sorts of hoops to jump through; but it’s mostly personal security, not external.”
They looked at each other and shrugged. “We’re back where we started,” Lily said. “We need information about the external security system. Once we get in, we look around for the door with the biohazard sign on it”
“X marks the spot,” he agreed. They both knew it wouldn’t be that simple; for one thing, the laboratory could be anywhere within the large complex. It could even be underground, which would limit their available exit routes.
Having found out what they needed to know, which was a lot less than they’d expected, there was no need to keep all the copies they’d printed. Swain picked up the ones he’d dropped on the floor while Lily gathered up all the other sheets; then they dumped everything in the trash.

She was at a loss for something to do now. The hour was still fairly early; they hadn't even had dinner. She didn't want to take a shower yet, and thankfully he didn't seem inclined to rush her into bed. Finally she picked up the book she'd brought and kicked off her boots, then curled up on the sofa to read.

Swain picked up his room key. "I'm going down to the lobby to pick up some newspapers. Do you want anything?"

"Nothing, thanks."

He let himself out. Lily waited to a count of thirty, then got up and swiftly went through his things. His underwear was neatly stacked in a drawer, with nothing hidden between the folded boxer-style briefs. She patted the pockets of everything he had hanging in the closet, finding nothing. There wasn't a briefcase, but she pulled out his leather duffel bag and searched it. There didn't seem to be any hidden pockets or a false bottom to it; his Heckler and Koch nine-millimeter weapon was there, neatly holstered. The bedside table yielded a thriller that was dog-eared at about the halfway point She fanned the pages, but nothing had been slipped between them. She ran her hand under the mattress, all the way around, and looked under the bed. His leather blazer was lying on the bed where he'd thrown it. She searched his pockets, and found his passport in a zippered inside pocket, but she'd already seen it, so she didn't take it out.

There was nothing to indicate he was anything other than what he'd told her. Relieved, she returned to the sofa and resumed reading.

He let himself back in five minutes later, carrying two thick newspapers and a small plastic bag. "I had a vasectomy after my second kid was born," he said, "but I bought some condoms, anyway, in case they'll make you feel more secure."

His concern touched her. "Have you done anything risky? Sexually, I mean."

"I did it standing up in a hammock once, but that was when I was seventeen."

"You did not. *Hammock* maybe, *standing up* a definite no."

He grinned. "Actually, the hammock dumped me out on my ass, and I haven't tried that again. It did a real number on the mood. I didn't get laid that day, after all."

"I can imagine. She must have laughed herself silly."

“No, she screamed. I was the one laughing. Even a seventeen-year-old can’t keep it up when he’s doing belly laughs. Not to mention I looked like an idiot, and girls that age are real sensitive about image and things like that. She decided I was very uncool and went off in a huff.”
She should have known he’d be the one laughing. Smiling, she propped her chin in her palm. “Anything else risky?”
He settled in the chair closest to her and stretched out his legs, propping his feet on the coffee table. “Let’s see. Right after that is when Amy and I started going together, and I was faithful to her from day one until we got divorced. I’ve had a few close friends since then, relationships lasting from a couple of months to two years, but nothing casual. I’ve mostly been in places where there was no wild nightlife, unless you count the four-legged kind. Whenever I was in a civilized area, I didn’t want to spend my time nightclubbing.”
“For someone who’s been in the wilds most of his adult life, you’re very sophisticated,” she murmured, suddenly uneasy as that discordant detail registered with her. She should have noticed before, but she wasn’t greatly alarmed because she knew his weapon was in his duffel in the closet-and hers wasn’t
“Because I speak French and stay in luxury hotels? I stay in places like this when I can, because there’ve been times when all I had between me and the sky was air. I like driving fancy cars because sometimes I’ve had to get around on horseback-and that’s assuming there were even horses.”
“I wouldn’t think French was very common in South America, though.”
“You’d be surprised. I learned most of it from a French expatriate in Colombia. Now, my Spanish is much better than my French, and I also speak Portuguese, plus a smattering of German.“ He gave her a crooked smile. ”Mercenaries are a polyglot group by necessity.“
He’d never actually come right out before and said he was a mercenary, though of course she’d understood he was either that or something close to it. *People hired him to make things happen* was what he’d said, and she hadn’t for one minute thought he was talking about corporate takeovers. Her uneasiness faded; of course he would speak several languages.
“Being married to you must have been hell,” she said, thinking of his ex-wife at home with two little kids, not knowing where he was or what he was doing, if he’d ever return or die in some remote region and his body never be found.

“Thanks a lot,” he said, starting to grin. His blue eyes twinkled at her. “I’m a lot of fun when I’m around, though.”
There was no doubt about that. On impulse she got up and deposited herself on his lap, slipping her hand inside the collar of his shirt and cupping the back of his neck as she leaned into him. His skin was warm, his neck hard with muscle. He supported her with his left arm behind her back, while his right hand immediately began stroking her thigh and hip. She kissed the underside of his jaw, feeling the stubble of his beard rough against her lips and inhaling his scent, man mixed with the faint remnants of the aftershave he’d used that morning.
“What’s this for?” he asked, though he didn’t wait for the answer before giving her one of those slow, deep kisses that made her feel as if her bones were melting.
“For being a lot of fun,” she murmured when he lifted his mouth; then she went back for seconds. His lips were more forceful this time, his tongue more demanding. His hand shaped her waist, slid under her shirt and up to her breasts. She caught her breath as he pushed her bra up and molded her bare breast with his palm. His hand was hot on her cool skin, his thumb gentle on her nipple.
She pulled her mouth free and took a deep breath, burying her face against his throat as warm pleasure began tightening her loins. She hadn’t felt desire in such a long time that she had forgotten how it slowly unfurled, spreading throughout her body, making her skin ultra sensitive, so that she wanted to rub against him like a cat.
She wanted him to hurry, to get the awkward first time over with so she could relax, but for all his love of speed, hurrying didn’t seem to be on his agenda tonight. He stroked her breasts until they were so sensitive the sensation bordered on pain; then he tugged her bra back into place and hugged her tightly to him. She knew he was aroused; either that, or he had a backup pistol shoved in his pocket, a big ten-round forty-five caliber from the feel of it. But he eased her back, kissed the tip of her nose, and said, “There’s no hurry, we’ll eat dinner, relax for a while. It won’t kill me to wait.”
“No, but me it might,” she snapped, sitting up and glaring at him.
His mouth quirked into a smile. “Just be patient. You know the saying, ‘All good things come to those to wait’? I have my own version of that.”
“Yeah? What?”

“Those who wait, come good.”
He needed slapping, he really did. “I’ll hold you to that,” she said, rising from his lap. She picked up the room service menu and tossed it at him. “Order.”
He did, lobster and scallops, a bottle of Beaujolais, chilled, and apple tart. Determined to play it as casually as he did, she resumed reading while they waited for room service to deliver their order. He leafed through both newspapers, used his cell phone to call the States and check on the condition of his friend who had been in the car accident-unchanged, which caused his expression to set in lines of worry.
He wasn’t carefree, she thought, watching his face. No matter how much he laughed and teased, his emotions weren’t all on the surface. There were moments when he was lost in thought and there was no humor at all on his face or in his eyes; she had seen flashes of cold, grim determination in him. There had to be more to him than just good times, or he wouldn’t have succeeded in his chosen field, though she wondered if someone actually chose to be a mercenary or gradually fell into it. He’d evidently made some money at it, so that meant he was good. That likeable, charming manner was just part of who he was; the other part would be fast and lethal.
Lily had shied away from relationships with normal men over the years, men who held ordinary jobs and had normal concerns. Not only would someone like that never understand how she did what she did, she had always been concerned that she would overpower a man like that in an intimate relationship. She *had* to be forceful and decisive, and that wasn’t something she could turn on and off like a water tap. When it came to romance, she didn’t want to dominate, she wanted to be a partner, but that meant by necessity she needed someone as strong in personality as she was. In Swain she sensed an easiness, a self-confidence that wasn’t at all threatened by her. She didn’t have to pander to his ego, or dampen her own personality so he wouldn’t be intimidated. If Swain had ever been intimidated in his life, she would be surprised. He’d probably been gutsy and a hell-raiser even when he was a little boy.
The more she observed of him, the more she respected him. She was falling fast and hard, and there was no net beneath her.

Chapter Twenty-Six

After they ate, he watched Sky News for a while, and Lily read some more. They could have been a couple for years for all the impatience he was showing, but she remembered the erection that had thrust against her hip and knew otherwise. A man didn't get painfully hard when he wasn't interested. He was giving her time to relax, not pressuring her; he knew, of course, that eventually they would be going to bed together and the inevitable would happen then. She knew it, too, and knowledge was its own seduction. She couldn't look at him without thinking that soon he would be naked and so would she, soon she would feel him inside her, soon this coiling tension inside her would find a release.

At ten she said, "I'm going to take a shower," and left him to Sky News. The complimentary toiletries in the marble bathroom were designer brands, and smelled heavenly. She took her time, washing her hair, shaving her underarms and legs-an American habit she'd never lost-then smoothing scented lotion all over herself before blow-drying her hair and brushing her teeth. Feeling as ready as she ever would, and having killed most of an hour, she put on one of the thick hotel robes and tightly tied the belt around her before walking barefoot back into the room.

"You're a bathroom hog," he accused, turning off the television and rising to his feet. His gaze went over her from her shiny hair down to the tips of her toes. "I expected you to come out wearing your pajamas. I've been thinking about getting them off of you."

"I don't wear pajamas," she said, and yawned.

His brows snapped together. "You said you wore pajamas."

"I lied. I sleep nude."

"You mean you ruined a perfectly good fantasy just for the hell of it?"

"It was none of your business what I wore to bed." She gave him a smug smile and went to the sofa, where she picked up her book and sat down, curling her legs under her. She was pretty sure she'd flashed him all the way to Christmas-she tried, anyway-because he abruptly turned around and went into the bathroom without another word, and about thirty seconds later she heard the shower running. He was in a hurry now.

Watching the clock on the bedside table, she timed him. His shower lasted just shy of two minutes. Then she heard the water running in the basin for forty-seven seconds. Twenty-two seconds after that he walked out of the bathroom wearing a damp towel knotted around his waist, and nothing else.

Lily stared at his freshly shaven jaw. “I can’t believe you shaved that fast. It’s a wonder you didn’t slit your throat”
“What’s a severed jugular compared to getting you in bed?” he asked, walking to the sofa and taking her hand, then pulling her to her feet. He switched off the lamp and towed her to the bed, turning off lights as he went until the room was dark except for one bedside lamp. He threw back the bedcovers, then turned to her.
Standing beside the bed, he cupped her face and kissed her. She tasted toothpaste; somehow in that race through the bathroom he’d managed to brush his teeth, too. She was in awe of his dexterity, because moving at that speed, if he hadn’t cut his throat shaving, he should have at least jabbed himself in the eye with his toothbrush.
Despite that evidence of his urgency, he took his time kissing her. She put her arms around him and pressed her palms to his back, feeling the smooth damp skin, the flexing of muscles. During the kiss he lost the towel, and the belt of her robe came undone. Lily let her arms drop to her sides, and the robe slid off her shoulders, down her arms to pool around her feet. Then there was nothing between them except sighs and anticipation, and he switched out the last light, then lowered her to the cool sheets.
She reached for him as he got into bed beside her, letting her hands learn him until her eyes adjusted to the dark. She felt the crisp hair on his chest, his hard abdomen and sleek sides, slid her palms up his muscled arms and over the thick curves of his shoulders. He was busy with his own exploration, stroking her bottom, her thighs, then rolling her to her back and stringing kisses from her lips down her jaw and throat, then sliding his open mouth across her breast until one aching nipple slipped into it. He sucked leisurely, gently, and Lily made a soft sound of pleasure.
“I like that,” she whispered, putting her hand on the back of his head to keep him there.
“So I see.” He gave her other nipple equal time, leaving them both wet and hard, standing up like berries.
“What do you like?” She moved her hand lightly across his belly, just brushing across the tip of his straining erection, then reversed direction and searched out his flat nipples, teasing them until tiny points stood out
“Yeah,” he said roughly. “All of that.” He shivered as ripples of sensation washed over him. Not at all reticent, he took her hand and moved it down to where he wanted it. She closed her fingers around his penis and he jerked, it

jerked, pulsing in her grip. Experimentally she gave him a few lingering strokes; her fingers barely reached around him and her inner muscles clenched in response to that thickness.

He blew out a whistling breath and forcibly removed her hand. Lily growled a protest and reached for him with her other hand, managing another couple of strokes before he grabbed that hand, too. “You’d better let me cool down, or this will be over with before it gets started.”

“After all the bragging you’ve done, you’re good for only one round?” she murmured. “I’m shocked.”

“Sassy, aren’t you?” He pinned a hand on each side of her head, then levered himself over her. “I’ll show you one round.” At last, at last, his weight settled on her and her legs automatically parted to cradle him between them, her legs bending so her thighs gripped his hips. She could feel herself opening to him; he released her left hand to reach between them and position his penis. There was heavy pressure at the entrance to her body and she lifted herself into it, wanting to feel that first long, penetrating slide of flesh into flesh, but the pressure began to burn and nothing happened. He drew back a little and pushed again. This time she couldn’t help a small gasp of pain as once again her flesh refused to accept him.

Chagrined, she felt her face begin to burn. “I’m sorry.” She was embarrassed by her dryness. “It’s always been difficult for me to just go with the moment. I can’t seem to stop thinking.”

He gave a rough little laugh, the sound puffing against her hair. He nuzzled her temple. “If *not thinking’s* a requirement, then I’m not doing it right, because I don’t think I’ve ever stopped thinking. I take that back. For about ten seconds, I definitely don’t think.” His lips moved to her earlobe, and he nipped her with his teeth. “I’m the one who should apologize, darlin‘, for rushing you like this.” His accent was stronger, a west Texas drawl slowing his speech. “A woman who hasn’t made love in six years needs tender loving care, and I just skipped right over some mighty important steps.”

“Steps?” He made it sound like programming a VCR. She thought about being indignant, but the little biting kisses he was giving her broke her concentration.

“Um-hmm.” He was nipping at her neck now, then her collarbone. “Or rather, spots. Like this one right here.” He lightly bit down on the ligament where her neck and shoulder joined, and Lily caught her breath as surprising pleasure roared through her.

She clutched his sides. “Do that again.”
He was nothing but obedient, kissing and biting her neck until she was arching beneath him, her breath coming in quick pants. Those little bites were so arousing she thought she could almost climax just from them. He pinched her nipple, a hard.
steady pressure that would have hurt just a few moments ago but now made her moan and push her breast against his hand.
He moved down her body, putting the tip of his little finger in her navel, biting the side of her waist, her hip, slipping his hands beneath her and squeezing her buttocks in a rhythmic motion. She tried to reach him to reciprocate some of the pleasure he was giving her, but he pushed her hands away. “Uh uh,” he said in a rough, breathless tone. “I only have one step, and it’s already been taken care of.”
“What is it?” she managed to ask, though it was an effort to be coherent.
“Breathing.”
She couldn’t help herself, she had to laugh, and he punished her with a bite on the inside of her thigh that had the effect of stealing her breath and making her legs part even more. She knew what he was going to do, she’d been dying of anticipation as he worked his way down, but still, the first lick of his tongue shot sensation though her like electricity. She cried out, digging her heels into the mattress and arching her back off the bed. He captured her and dragged her closer for a deeper taste, a deeper probing with both tongue and fingers. The sense of penetration was acute, shivering through all her nerve endings like tiny shock waves that intensified with every slow in-and-out motion.
Oh, he was good. Even when she was ready for him, when she could feel the wetness between her legs, he seemed content to linger with kisses and caresses until she was writhing on the bed and all but begging him to stop, or not stop, it all seemed the same. Finally she grabbed his ears and rasped, “I’m ready,” just in case he was in any doubt
He lowered his head and kissed her palm. “Are you certain?”
Infuriated, she sat up in bed. “Either do it now, or don’t do it at all! You’re driving me insane!”
He laughed and tumbled her back on the bed. Before she could recover her equilibrium, he was on her, pushing into her with a slow, inexorable pressure that made her breath hiss out of her lungs as he filled her. She held

herself very still, her eyes closed as she tried to absorb all the sensations, the pressure and heat and heaviness.
He began a subtle back-and-forth motion, rocking inside her. Instinctively she tensed, tightening her inner muscles in an effort to contain him and control the act. He groaned, froze, then rasped out, “Do that again.” This time it was he who held himself still while she loved him with that internal clasping. The act of tightening on him then consciously relaxing, then tightening again, brought her almost to the edge of climax-but not close enough.
He hooked his arms under her legs and held them high, taking total control. She couldn’t limit the depth of his penetration in this position, couldn’t lift herself to meet his thrusts, couldn’t do anything except feel the long, slow strokes as he settled into a steady rhythm. He held himself positioned just high enough, in the perfect position for her to feel the maximum friction, yet the minutes passed and orgasm remained maddeningly just out of reach. Lily felt as if she were being pulled apart, the tension gripping her was so intense. His arms began trembling, his entire body was trembling, and she almost burst into tears as she realized he wouldn’t be able to last much longer and she still hadn’t been able to climax.
“I want to do it from behind you,” he murmured, and pulled out. Before she could change positions, he lay down beside her and pulled her on top of him, on her back, with her head tilted back over his left shoulder. His hot breath teased her ear, and his hands stroked over her breasts, down her belly. He spread her legs, arranging them on either side of his, and reaching down, he held his penis in position while he pushed upward. She groaned as the thick length squeezed into her, shimmying in a paroxysm that carried her close to completion but stopped short yet again. She felt terribly exposed without him covering her. Cool air washed all down her heated body, her legs were spread wide, and with her head tilted backward, she was strangely disoriented, off balance.
“Shhh, I have you,” he said in a reassuring rumble, and she realized she must have made a panicked sound. His hips flexed and rolled beneath her, working himself back and forth inside her. There was more of a tug in this position, a sharper sense of movement. He slid his right hand down her belly and curved his fingers down, between her legs, catching her clitoris in the fork of his first two fingers. He gently closed his fingers together, just

enough, and held her as his strokes moved her up and down, back and forth, and the hot coil of sensation tightened inside her to an unbearable degree. She made a strangled sound and dug her heels into the mattress, shuddering, tilting her hips down to take every inch of him she could, then surging upward against those maddening fingers. She was shaking from head to toe, her thighs quivering, her breath nothing more than sobs that caught in her throat. Closer, closer…

A low cry tore from her throat as she was abruptly hurled past the point of no return. Great pulsing waves radiated from her loins, ripping away her last vestiges of control. Finally, *finally-she* was there and it was happening, more powerful than she remembered, blinding her to everything except the pleasure that held her racked and pierced.

Vaguely she realized she was crying, though she didn't know why. She was still shaking, so wrung out and limp she couldn't even lift an arm. She didn't have to. Swain slid out of and from under her, rolling on top of her and roughly pushing inside. His thrusts were hard and fast, taking him to the hilt each time. Sweat dampened his skin and he was shaking now, the way she had shaken, every muscle trembling as he drove deep and reached for his own pleasure. His rhythm frayed, disintegrated, and a long, deep groan rumbled in his chest, his throat, and with a harsh cry he arched back, pulsing inside her as he gripped her hips so hard his fingers left their marks on her skin. Then slowly he folded forward, still shuddering, jerking, his eyes closed as his trembling arms let his weight down on her.

His lungs were pumping like bellows, huge breaths going in and out. Lily still struggled for her own breath, trying to regain some use of her limbs, while her heart pounded so hard and fast she thought she might faint. She could feel her pulse even in her fingertips.

She had the dim thought that if this was to be her last orgasm, at least it had been a world-class one.

Finally she was able to lift her hand and weakly wipe the tears from her cheeks. Why on earth was she crying? Getting there had been a Herculean effort, but the end result had been worth it.

Face down beside her left ear, Swain groaned. "God. I felt that all the way down to my toes." He didn't lever himself off her, just lay there getting heavier and heavier. Lily didn't care. She wrapped her arms around him and held him as tight as she could.

"I'll get up in a minute," he promised in an exhausted voice.

“No,” Lily said, but he was already laboriously moving off her to lie on his side facing her. He put one hand on her waist and pulled her to him, cradling her close, her head lying on his shoulder and arm.
“The first round is now officially over,” he mumbled.
“I take it back. I don’t think I can handle a second round,” she managed to gasp, but his deep, even breathing told her he was already asleep. She took two deep breaths and felt herself sinking, joining him. For the first time in forever, she felt safe, wrapped tight in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lily woke in Swain’s arms, and felt as if she belonged there. She wished she could freeze time at that exact moment, so she never lost the sense of contentment and security. She didn’t let herself think about the possible disaster the day might bring; she would do what she had to do, so there was no point in worrying about it. If she was lucky, tonight would be spent the same way last night had been.
To her surprise, she’d been up for two more rounds, though she was so sore now she almost regretted it. Almost. He’d awakened her at two o’clock by turning on the lamp, because this time he wanted to see her. She’d been embarrassed by the state she was in, sticky from going to sleep without having cleaned up, but he’d proved beyond a doubt that other than where cars were concerned, he didn’t have a finicky bone in his body. “Sex is messy,” he’d said with a slow smile as he’d hauled her back when she’d tried to leave the bed to go clean up. “And I’m the cause of it, so why should I mind?”
Having the lamp on didn’t bother her, though somehow he’d known the first time would be easier for her in the darkness. She was thirty-seven, not a spring chicken, but she stayed in shape and her body type was naturally lean and small-breasted, so even when some parts started sagging, as they inevitably would, they couldn’t sag very far. Certainly Swain seemed to appreciate every inch of her.
Climaxing the second time was easier, as if her body had remembered how. She wasn’t as tense or desperate, plus Swain made it fun with his unabashed pleasure and very vocal appreciation. Afterward they had showered

together, and she spread towels over the wet spots on the sheets before they got back into bed and slept for another couple of hours.
The third time, just after five o'clock, had been long and slow, all sense of urgency gone. She barely remembered stumbling back to bed afterward, and she had slept so soundly that if she dreamed, she didn't recall. Sunlight now spilled around the edges of the heavy curtains, making her wonder what time it was, but she didn't care enough to roll over and look at the clock.
He made an indistinct noise that was half sleepy man and half grumbly bear, then lifted her hair and kissed the back of her neck. "Morning," he rumbled, then nestled her closer.
"Good morning." She loved feeling all that muscular warmth at her back, loved the feel of his leg thrust between hers and the weight of his arm as he settled it back around her waist.
"Do I still have to drive that Fiat?" He sounded as if he were only half-conscious, but the subject had to be important to him for it to be the first thing he thought about upon awakening.
She patted his arm, glad her back was to him so he couldn't see her smile. "No, you get to drive any type of car you want."
"I was that good, huh?" he asked smugly, more awake now.
He deserved something better than a pat on the arm for that, so she reached back and patted his butt. "You were spectacular," she said with a faintly monotonous, mechanical drone in her voice. "Your technique was fabulous, and your penis is the largest I've ever seen. I am the luckiest woman in the world. This is a recording-"
He rolled over on his back and shouted with laughter. Lily slid out of bed and escaped to the bathroom while he was laughing, before he could retaliate. She looked at herself in the mirror and halted, struck by the softness of her features. One night of sex and she looked rejuvenated?
It wasn't the sex, she realized, though the deep relaxation of her body was a wonderful plus. It was Swain himself, the tenderness and consideration with which he'd treated her, and the feeling that she mattered to someone. It was the closeness, the link, the not being alone. For months now she had felt totally alone, removed from the world she could see around her as if nothing and no one could touch her, surrounded by a moat of pain and grief. Swain's enthusiasm, his personality, had pulled her out of that solitude, once again connected her with life.

Oh, damn, she was definitely falling in love with him. What a silly thing for her to do right now, with everything that was happening, but how could she stop it? She couldn't walk away, she needed his help, but even more she didn't *want* to walk away. She wanted everything he could give her, every minute. She couldn't even worry about whether he would be there forever, because what was forever? Today might be the extent of it for her, or tomorrow. All she had was now, and that was good enough.

Because there was only the one bathroom, she hurried so he could get in there. She didn't have any clothes in the bathroom and the bathrobe was on the floor beside the bed, so she had to walk out as naked as she'd walked in, which didn't matter because Swain hadn't yet bothered with clothes, either. He got up from the bed when she came out of the bathroom, his sleepy eyes lingering on her points of interest before he pulled her close for a long hug. His morning erection prodded her stomach, making her wish she wasn't so sore.

"Wanna take a shower together?" he said against the top of her head.

"I think I'd better take a long soak in the tub instead," she said ruefully.

He massaged her bottom, lifting her on her toes. "Sore, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. Twice was enough, I should've kept my hands to myself that last time."

"It was that third time that earned you your freedom from the Fiat." She stroked his ribs, moved her hands around to his back, and dug her fingers into the deep groove of his spine.

She felt his lips move against her hair. "In that case, consider your sacrifice worth it."

"Somehow I thought you'd say something like that." But she was smiling, too, as she rubbed her nose against his shoulder. "It's nice to know where I stand in your priorities."

He paused, then asked cautiously, "Was I supposed to say something really sweet right there?"

"You were, and you've failed in the romance department."

Another pause; then he nudged her with his erection. "Doesn't this count?"

"Considering you'd have that even if you were alone, no."

"It would already have gone down by now. You're what's keeping it up. See, I *am* romantic."

He was getting her back for her crack about the recording, but the slight shaking of his shoulders gave him away. She looked up into blue eyes that were sparkling with barely contained laughter, but since she was about to disgrace herself by giggling, she forgave him for it. She gave him a slap on the butt, then moved away to pick up the robe. “Get cracking, big boy. Are you hungry now, should I order room service?”

“I could definitely use some coffee, so you might as well order food at the same time.” He checked the clock. “It’s almost ten, anyway.”

That late! She marveled at how well she had slept, but it also reminded her that her mystery caller could call at any time. While Swain was in the bathroom, she checked her cell phone, which she’d put in the charger the night before. The phone was on, and the service line showed a nice strong signal, so she hadn’t inadvertently missed a call. She took the phone off the charger and slipped it into the pocket of the robe.

She called room service and put in an order for croissants and jam, with coffee and fresh orange juice. Swain hadn’t professed a preference for anything other than traditional French fare for breakfast, so she went with that. In food, too, he’d proven to be remarkably sophisticated and adaptable. There was a lot he hadn’t told her about his past, but then, she hadn’t told him everything about herself, either, and probably never would. He was healthy, he was heart-whole, and for the moment he was hers. That was enough.

He poked his head out of the bathroom. “Do you want that soak now while I wait for room service, or do you want to wait until afterward?”

“Afterward. I don’t want my soak interrupted by food.”

“I’ll shower now, then.” He disappeared back into the bathroom, and a moment later she heard the shower running.

He came out just ahead of the arrival of their food, looking spiffy in black trousers and a simple white collarless shirt with the cuffs rolled up over his muscular forearms. He signed the check, while Lily stood with her back to the room looking out the window, then he showed the waiter out. He had just turned back from the door when Lily’s cell phone rang.

She sucked in a deep breath and took the phone out of her pocket. A quick look at the window showed that the caller’s number had been blocked. “I think this is it,” she said, and flipped the phone open. “Yes, hello,” she said, switching to French.

“Have you reached your decision?”

On hearing the mechanically distorted voice, she signaled to Swain with a quick nod and he came over to put his head right next to hers. She lifted the phone the tiniest bit away from her ear, so he could hear, too.
“I have. I’ll do it, but on one condition. We must meet face-to-face.”
There was a pause. *“That is not possible.”*
“It will have to be possible. You’re asking me to risk my life, but you aren’t risking anything.”
“You do not know me. I fail to see what a meeting would accomplish in the way of reassurance.”
He was right about that, but she was already reassured. If Rodrigo bad been the one making the call, he’d have jumped at her proposal for a meeting. Sending someone else to meet her, drawing her into the trap by using someone she didn’t recognize, would have been a simple matter. This man was not Rodrigo, and wasn’t working with Rodrigo.
She started to say that he was right, a meeting wasn’t necessary, but Swain made an urgent signal and mouthed, “Meeting,” then nodded his head. He wanted her to insist on the meeting.
She couldn’t think of any reason why, but she shrugged and went along with him. “I want to see your face. You know mine, don’t you?”
The caller hesitated, and she knew she’d guessed right. *“What does it matter if you know my face? I could tell you any name and you would not know the truth.”*
That, too, was true, and she couldn’t think of any logical reason for continuing to insist, so she went with illogic. “That’s my condition,” she said abruptly. “Accept or decline.”
She heard him draw a deep, frustrated breath. *“I accept. I will be in front of the Jardin du Palais Royal tomorrow at two o’clock. Wear a red scarf and I will find you. Come alone.”*
Swain shook his head, a determined expression on his face that told Lily he wouldn’t budge on this.
“No,” she said. “A friend will be with me. He insists. You are in no danger from me, monsieur, and he wants to be certain I am in no danger from *you.”*
The man laughed, which was transformed by electronics into a harsh, barking sound. *“You are difficult. Very well, mademoiselle. Are there any other conditions?”*
“Yes,” she said, just to be contrary. “You wear a red scarf, too.”

He laughed again and cut the connection. Lily closed the phone and blew out a breath. “It isn’t Rodrigo,” she said unnecessarily.
“Seems not. That’s good. We may actually be getting a break.”
“Why do you want to be there?”
“Because a man that reluctant to meet has something to hide, and I don’t trust him.” He picked up her coffee and handed it to her, then winked. “Guess what this means.”
Lily blinked, still so focused on the call and its implications that she was at sea. “What?” she asked, bewildered.
“It means we have today.” He clicked his coffee cup against hers in a salute. “And tonight”
With nothing to do but enjoy each other, he meant. A slow smile curved her lips. Moving to the window, she opened the curtains and looked out at the brightly sunny day. “If you get bored, we can make that trip to Disneyland,” she said. She thought she could do it now, and enjoy the memories of Zia rather than suffering from them.
“Can you go naked there?” he asked, sipping his coffee.
Knowing exactly where this conversation was going, she pursed her lips and said, “Not likely.”
“Then I’m not leaving this room.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The next day, Saturday, was another cool, sunny day that brought the tourists out in droves. Swain had thought tourists would have been thin on the ground this time of year, but evidently not. A lot of them had evidently felt the need to see the Royal Palace gardens, or maybe there was some sort of festival going on. There had to be something to account for the crowds. Unfortunately, “in front of” the gardens turned out to be a rather vague instruction. The ornate garden park was large and bordered on three sides by shops, restaurants, and art galleries. One entered the park through a large courtyard dotted with striped stone columns, which he supposed was some artist’s idea of… something, but they looked jarringly modern and out of place among the architecture of the 1600s. There was a long line of taller, more stately columns, too, which further reduced lines of sight. Between the

columns and the throngs of people, many of whom seemed to be wearing a red scarf, spotting any one person was more difficult than he'd expected. All in all, he considered this a piss-poor way to make contact, but it was somewhat reassuring. A professional would have picked a better way, which meant the guy they were dealing with was a rank amateur, possibly someone who worked at the Nervi laboratory and was alarmed by what was happening there. They would have a definite advantage over him.

Lily stood beside Swain, looking around. She was wearing sunglasses to disguise her eyes, as well as brown contacts in case she needed to remove the glasses, and the same cloche she usually wore to cover her hair. Swain looked down at her and caught her hand, pulling her closer to his side.

He thought of himself as an uncomplicated man in his wants and needs, his likes and dislikes, but there was nothing uncomplicated about this situation with Lily or the way she made him feel. He was caught in a hell of a dilemma, and he knew it. The best he could do was take care of one thing at a time, in order of importance, and hope to hell everything worked out. It couldn't work out with Lily, of course, and he felt a fist squeeze his heart every time he thought of what he had to do.

If only he could talk to Frank. Frank was alive, conscious, but heavily sedated, and still in ICU. In Swain's opinion "conscious" didn't exactly describe his condition, because according to Frank's assistant he could respond to such requests as "squeeze my hand" and occasionally mouth the word "water." To Swain, conscious meant you were holding conversations and having a rational thought process. Frank was a long way from there. He was in no shape for a phone call even if his cubicle had a telephone, which it didn't

There had to be some other solution for Lily. He wanted to talk to her: sit her down, hold her hands, and tell her exactly what was going on. Things didn't have to go down the way Frank had decreed.

He didn't because he knew beyond a doubt how she would react. At best, she would walk away from him and disappear. At worst, she would try to kill him. Given her past and how wary and untrusting she was in general, he'd bet on the worst-case option. If she hadn't already been betrayed by a lover who had tried to kill her… maybe he'd have had a chance. He'd almost groaned aloud when she told him about that episode, because he knew it had set a terrible precedent in her mind. After barely escaping with

her life that time, she wouldn't be inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt and talk before shooting.

Her emotions were on a hair trigger, and he knew it. She had been battered by loss and betrayal to the point that she had almost totally withdrawn, because she couldn't bear another blow. He knew very well that only circumstance had forced her to him, though he'd been quick to take advantage of the situation. She'd been starved for human contact even while she shunned it, her life totally devoid of laughter, fun, enjoyment. At least he could give her that, for a little while, and as he'd told her, he was one lucky son of a bitch because that was exactly what she could least resist. The way she'd bloomed in the last few days broke his heart. He didn't flatter himself that the cause was his superior love-making technique or even his winning personality; it was the simple human touch that had done it, drawn her out of her shell, let her laugh and tease and accept affection as well as give it. But there was no way a few days could offset months, years of conditioning; she was still so delicately balanced that the least hint of betrayal would undo the trust he'd been building between them.

He was in a hell of a mess, because he was as caught as she was. If he'd touched her, she had also touched him. These past two nights, making love to her, had been… hell, they'd been the best time of his life. Losing her was going to rip his guts out, and he'd let things progress to the point that he'd lose her no matter what he did, because if he told her what he was and that he'd tracked her down, all she'd see would be betrayal. Son of a *bitch.* He'd thought he could handle it, have a good time and show her a good time for a little while, but he hadn't allowed for how important she would become to him. Nor had he known how emotionally battered she'd been, which would pretty much dictate her response if he spilled his guts to her now. He'd been stupid and arrogant, thinking with his little brain instead of his big one, and now he and Lily were both going to pay.

Okay, *he* deserved to pay, but Lily didn't. If anything, she was the good guy in this situation. So she'd killed a CIA asset; the son of a bitch had deserved to die, especially in light of what he'd been planning with the flu bug. Not that she'd known about that at the time, her motive had been pure revenge, but to Swain that was splitting hairs. What it came down to was, Lily hadn't quit. She just kept on throwing herself into the breach, willing to sacrifice herself to do what she thought was right. Not many people had that sort of moral fortitude, or plain stubbornness, whatever you wanted to call it.

The bottom of his stomach dropped out, and his heart started pounding as he realized exactly what had happened, how he'd been blindsided. "Jesus God," he said aloud. Despite the cool day, he broke out in a sweat.
Lily looked up at him, puzzled. "What?"
"I'm in love with you." He said it starkly, in shock at the realization of what he was feeling and the disaster looming in front of him. He ground his teeth together, his jaw locked as he fought to keep from blurting out everything. What he'd just said was enough to make him feel as if he'd leaped off a cliff.
Because of the sunglasses, he couldn't see her eyes very well, but he could tell she was blinking rapidly, and her mouth fell open a little. "What?" she repeated, but this time the word was very faint
Her cell phone rang.
A fierce scowl twisted her face. "I'm *so* tired of these damn phone calls!" she muttered as she fished the phone out of her pocket.
Frustrated by the interruption, he grabbed the phone. "I know what you mean," he growled as he glanced at the little view window. He paused, staring at the number. He knew that number; it was one he'd called just a few days ago. What in hell-? "We have a number this time," he said to cover his pause; then he flipped the phone open and snapped, "Yeah, what is it?"
"Ah… perhaps I have the wrong number."
"I don't think so," Swain said, thinking furiously as the quiet voice confirmed his suspicion. "You were calling about a meeting?"
Perhaps the caller caught his voice, too, because there was a long moment of silence, so long that Swain began to wonder if he'd cut the connection. Finally the caller said, *"Oui."*
"I'm the friend you were told about," Swain said, hoping this guy wasn't going to blow the whistle on him. He knew Swain was CIA; if he asked Lily about that, the jig was up.
"I do not understand."
No, he wouldn't, because his assumption-a correct assumption-was that Swain had been sent to France to take care of a problem, namely Lily. Yet here Swain was apparently working with her.
"You don't have to understand," Swain replied, "just tell us if the meeting is still on."

"Oui. I did not realize this park would be so-I am at the basin in the center. That is an easier meeting place. I will be sitting on the rim of the basin."
"We'll be there within five minutes," Swain said, and closed the phone.
Lily snatched the phone out of his hand. "Why did you do that?" she snapped.
"So he'd know for certain you weren't alone," Swain said. That was as good a reason as any, plus it was the only one that came to mind. "He's waiting for us at the center of the park, at the basin." He took her arm to lead her into the park.
She pulled her arm free. "Hold it."
He stopped in his tracks and looked back at her. "What?" He was afraid she was going to insist on talking about his out-of-the-blue statement, because in his experience women loved to talk things to death; but her mind was going in a completely different direction.
"I think we should stick to the original plan. You stay back, where you can watch me. Rodrigo may be slick enough to have known we'd be suspicious if he jumped at the chance for a meeting."
Let her meet alone with a guy who knew he was CIA? That wasn't going to happen.
"It wasn't Rodrigo," he said.
"How do you know?"
"Because the guy wasn't familiar with this park; he didn't know the entrance on a busy Saturday wasn't a great place to meet. Do you think Rodrigo wouldn't have checked that out? And look around you; would Rodrigo be likely to try kidnapping a woman with all these people around? This is someone who's probably on the level."
"Probably, but not certainly," she pointed out.
"Okay, look at it this way. If it *is* Rodrigo, would the presence of one person stop him from what he wanted to do?"
"No, but it would be impossible for him to do what he wanted without attracting notice."
"Exactly. Trust me, I'm not risking your life, or even my own. Rodrigo would have chosen somewhere secluded for a meet, because it would be stupid not to."
She mulled that over and finally nodded her head. "You're right. Rodrigo isn't a stupid man at all."

He laced his fingers with hers and started her moving. The feel of her slim hand in his made the bottom drop out of his stomach again, and her trust weighed on him like an anvil. God, what was he going to do?
“Just so you know, I heard what you said.” She peered at him over the upper rim of her sunglasses. It gave him a jolt to see brown eyes looking back at him instead of pale blue ones, as if he’d been sucked into an alternate universe.
He briefly tightened his fingers on hers. “And?”
“And… I’m glad.” It was simply said, and arrowed through him. Most women found it easy to say “I love you,” much easier than men, but Lily wasn’t most women. For her, loving and admitting to it must have taken every ounce of courage she possessed-and that was a lot of courage. She humbled him in a way he’d never expected, and had no idea how to handle.
They walked hand in hand into the huge formal park, which had once belonged to Cardinal Richelieu. The large basin with its center fountain sat in the middle. People strolled around, some just enjoying the gardens even though in November they weren’t as lush as they would have been a few months ago, some sitting on the rim of the basin having their photographs taken to go in an album of vacation memories when they returned home. Swain and Lily strolled around the basin, looking for a lone man wearing a red scarf.
He rose to his feet as they approached. Swiftly Swain appraised him. He was a neat, trim man, about five-ten, with dark hair and eyes and the bony facial structure that shouted “French!” From the way his tailored jacket fit him, he either was unarmed or, like Lily, wore an ankle holster. He carried a briefcase, a detail that made him stand out from the rest of the park-goers; this was Saturday, not a time for office workers. He had no spy craft, Swain thought, or he’d know that he should . blend in rather than stand out.
Their contact’s dark eyes searched his face first, then went to Lily’s. Surprisingly, his features softened. “Mademoiselle,” he said, and he gave a little half-bow that was completely natural and respectful. Yeah, that was definitely the quiet voice Swain remembered. He didn’t like the way the guy was looking at Lily, though, and he pulled her a little closer to his side in one of those gestures guys use to signal other men that they are edging into personal territory.
The Interpol man already knew his name, but to prevent a slipup in front of Lily that couldn’t be explained, Swain said, “Call me Swain. Now, you

know her name and you know mine. What's yours?"
The shrewd dark eyes studied him. The Interpol man didn't hesitate because he was unsure what to do, but because he was considering every angle. Evidently he must have decided there was no reason to be secretive, since Swain had his cell phone number and the resources to put a name with it if he chose. "Georges Blanc," the man said. He indicated the briefcase. "Everything you need to know about the system is in there, but after careful consideration I realize that a clandestine entrance is probably not feasible now."
Swain looked sharply around, making sure no one was within hearing. It was a good thing the man's voice was naturally quiet. "We should go somewhere more private," he said.
Blanc also looked around, and nodded his understanding. "I apologize," he said. "I'm not well-versed in procedure."
They walked toward a line of carefully manicured trees. Swain didn't care for formal gardens himself, preferring his nature in a more unruly state, but there were stone benches scattered about the park and he supposed on a quiet day there would be something serene about the setting. It seemed to appeal to a lot of other people, though this wasn't his cup of tea. They found one of those stone benches, and Blanc invited Lily to sit. He placed the briefcase beside her.
Suddenly alarmed, Swain stepped forward and seized the briefcase, moving it away from Lily. He thrust it back at Blanc. "Open it," he ordered, his tone crisp and hard. A briefcase could easily contain a bomb.
Lily was on her feet and Swain moved so that she was behind him, at the same time reaching his hand inside his jacket. If the briefcase *did* contain a bomb, maybe he could shield her, though he doubted Blanc would explode a bomb while he himself was still standing so close. But what if Blanc didn't have the detonator, and someone watching them did?
Alarm flashed across Blanc's face, both at how fast Swain had moved and at the hardness of his expression. "There are only papers," he said, taking the briefcase and thumbing the catch releases. They sprang open and he lifted the lid, showing the sheaf of papers inside. There was an inner pocket and he held it open for Swain's appraisal, then riffled the papers. "You can trust me." He held Swain's gaze as he spoke, and Swain got the message. Tension eased from his shoulders and he removed his hand from the butt of his weapon. "Sorry," he said. "I don't put anything past Rodrigo Nervi."

Lily punched him in the back. “What do you think you’re doing?”
Trust her to get pissed because he’d tried to protect her. If she’d known what might be going on, she would have shoved in front of him to protect *him*, but she wasn’t trained in this type of shit any more than Blanc was and for a couple of seconds she hadn’t realized what Swain was doing. He’d be damned before he’d apologize for doing something she’d have done. He angled a narrow-eyed look at her over his shoulder. “Live with it.”
She glared at him, then deliberately stepped around him and once more sat down on the bench. “Please sit down, Monsieur Blanc,” she said in her perfect French.
With an amused glance at Swain, Blanc did so.
“You said a clandestine approach might not be feasible now,” Lily said, prompting him.
“Yes, the additional external security measures have made that difficult- especially at night, when there are additional guards at every entrance, in every hallway. There is actually less security during the day, when there are more workers.”
That was logical, Swain thought. It wasn’t good for their purpose, but it was logical.
“I propose to get you inside during the day.”
“How are you going to do that?” Swain asked.
“I have arranged for you to be hired by the younger Nervi, Damone, who has arrived from Switzerland to aid his brother. Have you ever met him, mademoiselle?” he asked Lily.
She shook her head. “No, he was always in Switzerland. I gather he’s something of a financial wizard. But why would he need to hire anyone for anything? Wouldn’t Rodrigo do that, anyway?”
“As I said, he is here to shoulder some of the administrative burden. He wishes to have an outside firm look at the security measures and make certain they are as impregnable as it is possible to make them. Because this is for the protection of the laboratory, Rodrigo agrees.”
“Rodrigo knows what I look like,” Lily pointed out. “All of his employees do.”
“But he does not know Monsieur Swain, does he?” Blanc said. “That is fortuitous. And I believe you are somewhat skilled at disguise?”
“To some degree,” Lily said, surprised that he knew anything about that.
“So this Damone is going to hire us, sight unseen?” Swain asked doubtfully.

Blanc gave a slight smile. “I have been given the task of locating someone for him. He trusts me, and will not question my judgment. Damone Nervi himself will take you through security, into the laboratory.” He spread his hands. “What could be better?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“This isn’t a simple job,” Swain said. For the sake of privacy, the three had repaired to a small cafe, where they sat at the most isolated table with their coffee and went over the briefcase’s contents. They were using both French and English, having discovered this worked well for them. Blanc could express himself better in French, but Swain could understand it, and vice versa. Without appearing to think about it, Lily used both depending on whom she was speaking to. “It’ll take at least a week to complete my shopping list,” he continued.

To Swain’s annoyance, Blanc immediately looked at Lily as if for confirmation. She shrugged and said, “I know nothing about explosives and demolition. Swain is the expert.”

He hadn’t told her he was an expert, but he appreciated the vote of confidence. As it happened, he did know his way around a detonator.

“The cover story you set up for Damone is good,” he explained, “but now we have to back it up. From what you’ve said this Damone isn’t stupid-”

“No,” Blanc murmured. “Far from it.”

“-and you can bet Rodrigo will at least be curious enough to check our credentials.”

“At the least,” Lily said wryly. “If he has time, he’ll do a full-scale investigation.”

“We’ll have to make sure he doesn’t have that time. We’ll have to plant the explosives the first time we’re in, because there might not be a second chance. Does Damone trust you enough that he’ll take us into the laboratory *before* Rodrigo has a chance to investigate us?”

“He does,” Blanc replied without hesitation. “I will tell him I did a thorough investigation myself.”

Swain started to ask if Damone didn’t know Interpol did no investigations, but swallowed the words because there was no way in hell he could explain

to Lily how he knew Blanc was Interpol. Blanc wasn't the only one who had to tread lightly in these conversational waters.
"We'll need a panel truck or van, business cards, stationery, coveralls-all the outer requirements of a business. The van can carry everything we need; at least these blueprints of the complex give me an idea of the area we might have to cover. I don't suppose you know exactly where the lab in question is in the complex?"
Blanc shook his head. "Nor do I know if everything pertinent is in one area. Records may be scattered throughout the complex, though that would be shoddy record-keeping, wouldn't it?"
"Or smart, if there are now built-in redundancies, so if one set of records is destroyed there are backups. That's something we'll have to find out while we're there. Can Damone have Dr. Giordano himself give us a tour? Since it involves security for his own work, he would likely show us any redundancies so we could make certain they're properly protected," Lily said.
They were working with a lot of uncertainties here, but Swain remembered that Lily had a reputation for being able to read people. That was why, except for one thing, he'd been totally himself with her. He hadn't wanted her to detect any phoniness about him. Lily had met Dr. Giordano, gotten a sense of the man. He was proud of his work, she said; professionally it was sheer genius. So, yeah, he might well show them all of the safety measures in place for his research material. It had already been destroyed once; he wouldn't want that to happen again.
A worried expression grew in Blanc's eyes. "Will you set off the explosives with so many people around, or wait until night when there are fewer present?"
"We can't take the chance that someone will spot the packages if we leave them until night. They'll have to be detonated as soon as possible after placement."
"We could have a mock bomb-threat drill," Lily suggested. "Announce it immediately that at some undisclosed time during the day, the alarm will sound and they will be required to make a fast, orderly exit. If anyone sees something suspicious, they'll probably think it's part of the drill. In fact, we can make that part of the exercise: tell them that mock explosives are being planted throughout the building, and the test will be if all of them are spotted while the workers are going about their normal routine. They're not

to conduct searches, just be alert, that sort of thing. A bonus to anyone who spots an explosive device. They're not to touch them, just report the location."
"Make the workers part of the plot?" Swain half-closed his eyes as he considered it That would take a lot of uncertainty out of the plan, because then he and Lily would be *expected* to skulk around planting ominous-looking packages. Dr. Giordano might even show them some good hiding places for the explosives. The plan was so sneaky and brash that no one would be on guard against it The biggest challenge would probably be disguising Lily well enough that Dr. Giordano didn't recognize her. "That's diabolical. I like it. We'd even have an excuse for taking in the explosives, if it's detected; we could show the workers exactly what Semtex or C-4 looks like, so they can recognize it in the future."
"You will use plastique?" Blanc asked.
"It's safest"-safest for the handler, that is-"and the most stable." Swain didn't know which he'd be able to get, Semtex or C-4, but as far as handling went, there wasn't a lot of difference between them. Both were stable, both were powerful, and both required detonators to go boom. Semtex might be more readily available here, since it was manufactured in the Czech Republic, but the new version also lost its plasticity after three years, so if Semtex was what he got, he'd have to make certain it wasn't too old to work.
"Set us up to meet with Damone a week from today," Swain told Blanc. "I'll be in touch with you if there's a delay in getting everything we need."
"You wish to meet with him on a Saturday?"
"If there are fewer workers in the complex on Saturday, that would be all the better."
"Yes, I see. I will try to arrange the meeting for that day."
"There is one other thing," Lily said.
"Yes, mademoiselle?"
"The million-dollar fee. I want it deposited in my account before we act. For one thing, we'll need the funds to buy everything we need."
Blanc looked startled.
"American," Lily specified. "That was the deal."
"Yes, of course. I will… see that it is done."
"This is my numbered account, and my bank." She scribbled down a name and number and gave it to him. "On Monday afternoon I will check my

balance.”
Blanc took the scrap of paper. Swain thought he still had a rather stunned look in his eyes, as if he couldn’t believe Lily would actually take the money instead of acting out of the goodness of her heart. Swain figured she’d do the job even if she had to pay for the privilege, but since Blanc had offered to pay her, she wasn’t fool enough to turn down that much money.
Swain paid for the coffee while Lily neatly placed everything back in the briefcase. She held out her hand to shake hands with Blanc, but the Frenchman instead carried her hand to his lips and kissed it. Exasperated, Swain reached out and freed her hand from Blanc’s grip. “Cut it out. She’s taken.”
“So am I, monsieur,” Blanc murmured. “I am not, however, unappreciative.”
“I’m glad. Now go appreciate someone else.”
“I understand,” said Blanc, and again there was a deeper meaning behind his words.
Lily was chuckling as they walked away. “Frenchmen kiss hands. They don’t mean anything by it.”
“Bullshit. He’s a man, isn’t he? He means something by it.”
“You’d know that from experience?”
“Oh, yeah.” He took her hand himself. “Damn Frenchmen kiss everything they can. There’s no telling where his lips have been.”
“Does that mean I should boil my hand to get rid of the germs?”
“No, but if he kisses you again, I’ll boil his lips.”
She laughed softly, leaning against his arm. There was a slight blush on her cheeks, telling him that some part of her was enjoying his petulance. He put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her to him as they walked.
A week! Even though they would be busy the entire week, Swain felt as if he’d been given a reprieve. He’d have Lily for seven more nights, at least. In a week, Frank might be well enough to talk on the phone-if he didn’t have any setbacks.
“I wasn’t trying to cut you out of the money,” Lily said abruptly, bringing his attention snapping back to her. “I’ll transfer half to you.”
“I didn’t even think about the money,” he said with total truthfulness. He was operating on Uncle Sam’s time, here, even though his actions weren’t sanctioned; he was already being paid. “Keep it. I have money, and from

what you said you need to rebuild your savings.” That also was the truth. Whether she would be alive to enjoy those savings was up in the air. She’d have to be. He couldn’t bear it any other way. Frank would just have to see reason.

That night when they were in the hotel room, she came up to him while he was sitting at the desk going over the blueprints and schematics that had been in the briefcase. Blanc had very helpfully marked the function of each room on the blueprint of the laboratory complex, so Swain was able to narrow down the area they would need to cover. They wouldn’t need to level the entire place, just select parts of it. For instance, there was no need for them to take out the bathrooms or meeting rooms; that would be a waste of plastique. When Swain had the total area condensed into square feet, then he’d be able to estimate how much plastique they needed.

Lily leaned against his back and draped her arms loosely around him, then planted a kiss below his ear. “I love you, too,” she said in a somber tone. “I think. I’m pretty sure, though. It’s scary, isn’t it?”

“Damn terrifying.” He dropped the pen he’d been using to figure the square footage of the rooms and turned in his chair so he could haul her down onto his lap. “I thought we’d just have some fun together; then the next thing I knew I was worrying if you ate enough for breakfast You’re like a Stealth bomber. My radar never showed a blip.” He frowned down at her.

“Don’t look at me,” she protested. “None of this was my fault. I was minding my own business, having a little shoot-out in which I was outnumbered, when you charged into the middle of it. By the way, that was good driving, the way you slid the Jaguar around.”

“I miss that car,” he said reflectively. “And thank you, ma’am. That’s called a state-trooper turnaround, for when you need to reverse directions and don’t want to fool with details like stopping and backing.”

“I thought you were happy with the Mercedes.”

The afternoon before, they had returned the Fiat and he’d gone for yet another luxury car with a powerful motor, a Mer-cedes S-Class. Lily had actually been more comfortable in the Fiat, but evidently Swain’s ego was directly connected to how many cylinders were under the hood of whatever car he was driving, so she’d gone along with it. The Fiat had been fun while it lasted, and since he was paying for it, she supposed he might as well drive what he wanted. She was just glad a Rolls hadn’t been available.

“I am,” he said. “Nobody makes a motor like the Germans. But the Jag was cool, too. And the Megane handled good.”
Lily wondered how they had segued from a discussion about being in love into one about cars. She looped her arms around his neck and nestled against him. Where did they go from here? And was there any point in worrying about the future until they were sure they had one?
“Stay in the-” Swain began.
“Don’t even start,” Lily interrupted. “There’s no way I’m staying in the car.”
“You’ll be safer,” he pointed out with impeccable logic.
“But you won’t,” she returned just as logically. He scowled at her. He hated that her logic was as impeccable as his. She scowled back, twisting her face into an exaggerated expression to mock him.
“I don’t need anyone to cover me.”
“Fine. Then I’ll do it, since there’s no danger.”
“Shit.” He scrubbed his hand over his face, then drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. At least the steering wheel belonged to a real car, a black Mercedes S-Class; that was the only comfort he could find at the moment. This buy had him as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. He had a prickling feeling on the back of his neck, from all his instincts screaming at him that this could get nasty. If he had been the only one involved, he could have handled it better, looked at it more as a challenge to his talents, but Lily was involved and that changed everything. It had taken him three days to find a supplier for as much plastique as they needed, and the guy had insisted they meet in a bad section of Paris, where the explosives and money were supposed to change hands. As far as bad sections went, Swain supposed this was the pits. Slums were slums, and he’d been in a lot of them, but there was a bad smell here that put his back up.
The supplier’s name was, supposedly, Bernard. It was a common enough name, so maybe it was his. Swain doubted it, but he didn’t care if that was the guy’s real name or not. All he cared about was making sure the plastique was usable, handing over the money, then getting out of there alive. Some unsavory characters made a very good living selling the same illegal merchandise over and over again; just kill the purchaser, then keep the merchandise and take the money.

Very probably some purchasers showed up with the reverse idea in mind: kill the seller, keep the money, and take the merchandise. Profit went both ways. That meant this Bernard would likely be as edgy as Swain. That was not good.

"I can't guard your back from here in the car," Lily said, checking what she could see of her reflection in the visor mirror. She was practicing her disguises. Tonight she was wearing black from head to foot under a black leather coat that had a boxy fit and disguised her lean but definitely female figure. Instead of her usual stylish boots she was wearing motorcycle boots with two-inch heels, which increased her height and were also clunky enough to obscure the size of her feet. She had bought skin-colored latex from a specialty store and was learning how to build up the lines of her jaw and brow to look more masculine. She was also wearing the brown contact lenses, and her blond hair was covered by a black knit cap that was pulled down almost to her eyebrows, which had been blackened to match the medium-size fake mustache she had glued under her nose.

He'd burst out laughing when he first saw her, but now that the only light was from the car's dash lights, the getup looked much more genuine. She looked masculine and scary. She had started to trim her eyelashes shorter so they wouldn't look so feminine after she put mascara on them to darken them, but Swain had stopped her. If anyone looked at her closely enough to notice her eyelashes, they were in trouble anyway.

She was holding her pistol in her hand. If she needed to use it, the seconds it took to pull it from her boot or from a pocket could be too long.

Swain was in a sweat about her stepping foot outside the car. If he'd had his way, he'd have had her encased in body armor, and maybe worn a vest himself. Unfortunately, he'd lost the argument about whether she should come with him or stay in the hotel, and now he'd lost the one about her staying in the .car. It seemed as if he was losing every argument with her lately, and he didn't know what to do about it. He'd thought about tying her to the bed at the hotel, but he'd have to untie her eventually-and this was Lily Mansfield, not some soccer mom on vacation. He didn't know what she'd do, but he was sure he'd be in pain because of it.

A cold front had rolled in during the day, and what had been cool but pleasant had turned cloudy and downright cold as the sun set. Nevertheless, Swain had the windows partially down so they could hear anyone approaching the car, and he had angled the outside mirrors down, to catch

anyone coming in low. As for the rest of the area, he and Lily just had to keep watch. The only direction from which he didn't expect attack was straight up, but that was only because he'd parked far enough away from the derelict buildings that no one could jump the distance.

He turned off the dash lights so there was complete darkness in the car, and reached for Lily's hand. She was wearing gloves, because her hands were another giveaway that she was a woman-and that was a problem they'd have to solve if she entered the laboratory as a man. He squeezed her fingers. She was steady as a rock, not showing a hint of nerves. When it came down to it, he'd rather have her at his back than anyone else who came to mind.

A car turned a corner, moving slowly toward them. The headlights were on bright, and he heard a familiar high-pitched whining noise. Bernard, the son of a bitch, was driving a Fiat.

Swain immediately started the engine and turned his headlights on bright, too. If Bernard didn't want them to see how many others were in the car with him, Swain returned the sentiment

Since he had turned off the car's interior lights, too, there was no telltale light when Lily opened her door just enough for her to slide out; she sort of slithered, rather than getting out and standing up the way she normally would. With his brights blinding the occupants of the Fiat to that slight movement, they didn't see her leave the car and, still crouching down, move around to the rear.

Swain slipped low behind the steering wheel, positioning it so it blocked the top part of the headlights shining in his eyes. With that small difference in the glare, he could see the shapes of three heads in the Fiat.

The Fiat crept closer. When twenty feet separated the two cars, it stopped. To see if he could get Bernard to follow suit, he killed the brights on the Mercedes. The bright headlights had played a part, but now that part was finished. A few seconds later, the lights on the Fiat dimmed.

Well, thank God. At least now they weren't all blinded. He checked his rearview mirrors, but couldn't spot Lily anywhere.

The passenger door of the Fiat opened and a tall, heavyset man with a short dark beard got out. "Who are you?"

Swain stepped out of the Mercedes, George Blanc's briefcase in his left hand. He didn't like not having the engine block for cover, but took some comfort in the fact that the other guy had only a car door between him and a

bullet, too-which wasn't saying much. A bullet went through a car door like a hot knife through butter. The only part of a car that provided much protection was the motor. "Swain. Who are you?"
"Bernard."
Swain said, "I have the money."
Bernard said, "I have the merchandise."
Jesus. It was all Swain could do not to roll his eyes. They sounded like a bad spy movie.
He wore his weapon in a shoulder holster under his leather coat, which was why he'd kept his right hand free. He was acutely aware, though, of the two other men sitting in the Fiat.
Bernard didn't have a weapon in his hands, but Swain was damn certain the two men in the car did.
Bernard didn't have *anything* in his hands. "Where's the merchandise?" Swain asked.
"In the car."
"Let's see it."
Bernard turned back to the car and opened one of the passenger doors. He pulled out a small duffel bag that was bulging with something. Until Swain saw for himself, he wasn't assuming the bag was full of plastique.
"Open the bag," he instructed.
Bernard grunted and set the bag on the ground, then unzipped it. The headlights from the two cars plainly showed the bricklike contents, wrapped in cellophane. "Take one out," Swain said. "From the bottom, please. Then unwrap it."
Bernard made an impatient sound, but he reached into the duffel, scrabbled around, and pulled out one of the bricks. He tore off the cellophane covering.
"Now pinch off a corner and roll it between your fingers," Swain instructed.
"It's new," Bernard said resentfully.
"I don't know that, do I?"
Another impatient noise. Bernard tore a corner from the brick of plastique and rolled it into a ball. "There, you see? It is still malleable."
"Good. I appreciate your honesty," Swain said with heavy irony. He opened the briefcase to show the money inside. American dollars, as specified, eighty thousand of them. Why did no one want payment in euros? He closed the briefcase and latched it.

Bernard stuck the ball of plastique back on its mother brick, and dropped it into the duffel. A slow smile moved across his face. “Thank you, monsieur. I will take the money now, and if you’re very careful, all will go well-”
“Monsieur.” The voice was Lily’s, so quiet that only he and Bernard could hear it. “Look down.”
He froze at the intrusion of that unexpected voice. He glanced down, but couldn’t see anything; the headlights prevented it.
“You can’t see me, can you?” Lily’s voice was so low that if he hadn’t known she was a woman, Swain wouldn’t have been able to tell. “But I can see you. At this angle, I am afraid that my best shot is at your testicles. The bullet would angle upward, of course, tear out your bladder and colon, part of your intestines. You might live, but the question is, would you want to?”
“What do you want?” Bernard croaked, though of course he knew.
“Just the merchandise,” Swain said. He felt as if he might croak the words himself. Lily’s threat had made his blood run cold. “The money is yours. We aren’t cheats, and we don’t like to be cheated. Very calmly, we will make the exchange. Then you will tell your driver to back the car away, and you will walk beside it. Do not get in the car until it is at the end of the block. Is that understood?”
As long as Bernard wasn’t in the car, he was a clear target. -Walking alongside it was a guarantee that his driver wouldn’t ram the Mercedes while Lily was still under it. The Mercedes was heavier, but a solid blow by the Fiat would still slide it some distance.
Warily Bernard approached. “Do not do anything!” he said, raising his voice for the benefit of his cohorts in the Fiat.
Swain extended the briefcase with his left hand, and Bernard extended the duffel bag with his left. Swain let go of the briefcase and for a split second Bernard was holding both briefcase and bag, but then Swain’s left hand closed over the duffel’s strap and he took custody of the bag. His right hand was inside his coat.
Bernard backed away, clutching the briefcase. “We have honored our agreement,” he babbled. “There is no need to panic.”
“I’m not panicking,” Swain said calmly. “But your car isn’t backing up, either, so a panic attack could be coming on.”
“Idiot!” Bernard said fiercely, whether to his driver or Swain was a toss-up. “Back up to the corner, slowly. Do not shoot!” He was probably imagining a hot bullet plowing into his crotch.

“Lily,” Swain hissed. “Get out from under the car, now!”
“I already am,” she said from the other side of the car as she opened the door and slid inside.
Shit, she hadn’t waited to see if Bernard did what he was told, but then how many men would ignore that particular threat? Swain tossed the duffel bag into her lap, then swiftly got in and slammed the transmission in reverse, spinning the car around with a sharp turn of the wheel, then accelerating with a squeal of rubber. Behind them, a car door slammed; there was a high-pitched whine as the Fiat’s engine was revved up and it took off in pursuit. Swain thought it sounded like a sewing machine. Then a sharp crack sounded behind them.
“The fucker’s shooting at us,” Swain said grimly. If he had to change cars again, he was going to be seriously pissed.
“That’s okay,” Lily said, lowering the window and rising to her knees. “I’m shooting back.” Shooting from a moving platform at a moving target was more along the line of asking for a miracle than using any real skill, but she levered herself half out of the window, steadied herself as best she was able, and squeezed off a carefully aimed shot. Behind them, the Fiat swerved wildly before once more straightening out, telling them that she’d scored at least a windshield.
Swain put the gas pedal to the floorboard and let all the horses run. The Fiat rapidly fell behind, and Swain snickered as he imagined them all pedaling frantically, knees working up and down.
“What’s so funny?” Lily asked.
“If I’d still been driving the sewing machine, we’d never have made it.”

Chapter Thirty

“You scare the hell out of me,” swain said crossly, stripping off his leather coat and tossing it across the bed, then shrugging out of his shoulder holster.
“Why is that?” Lily asked mildly, succumbing to an impulse she had every time she saw his coat. She picked it up and stroked the butter-soft leather, then slipped it on. The garment was too large, of course, hanging off her shoulders, and the sleeves reached way past her hands, but it was warm from his body and the feel of the leather was so scrumptious she almost purred.

“What are you doing?” he asked, diverted.
“Trying on your coat,” she replied, giving him a look that said *Duh.* What did it look like she was doing?
“Like there was any way it was going to fit?”
“No, I just wanted to feel it.” She pulled the edges together and stepped in front of the mirror, then had to laugh at her reflection. She was still wearing the mustache and black street clothes, and the knit cap pulled down over her hair. She looked like a cross between a street punk and Charlie Chaplin. Gingerly she peeled off the mustache and latex, then removed the knit cap and ran her hands through her hair to fluff it. She still looked like a clown, so she removed the coat and tossed it back on the bed, then sat down and began removing her boots.
“Why do I scare you?” she asked, returning to his previous statement.
“ *You* don’t scare me; I’m scared *for* you. Though my balls did draw up when you told Bernard where you were going to shoot him, but I guess any man would have that reaction. Scared the hell out of *him,* anyway. Jesus, Lily, what if the Fiat had rammed the car while you were under it? Do you know how-What are you doing?”
“Taking off my clothes,” she said with that *Duh* look again. She was down to her underwear and she unhooked her bra and dropped it on the bed, then skimmed out of her panties. Totally naked, she picked up his coat again and slipped it on, then walked back to the mirror.
There, that was more like it. The coat still swallowed her, but now it looked sexy, with her tousled hair and bare legs. She put her hands into the pockets and hunched her shoulders, then rolled her neck. She turned around to get a back view. “I love this coat,” she crooned, lifting the hem just enough to show the beginning curve of her ass. She felt breathless and a little too hot, as if someone had raised the thermostat setting in the room. She lifted the hem higher.
“You can have it,” he said hoarsely. His eyes were glazed. He came up behind her and gripped her buttocks in both hands. “You just can’t ever wear it when you have other clothes on.”
“That’s awfully limiting.” She had all she could do not to pant Her nipples were so hard they ached, and he hadn’t even touched them. Where had this intense sexual need come from? She didn’t know, but she felt as if she would die if he didn’t enter her.
“Take it or leave it.” His palms were hot as he kneaded the rounded cheeks.

“Well, okay, I’ll take it.” She took her hands out of the pockets and stroked the sleeves. “You drive a hard bargain.”
“That’s not all I drive that’s hard,” he muttered, reaching between them to unzip his fly. “Bend over.”
Because she was all but melting, her inner muscles clenched tight against the surging lust that gripped her, she bent over and braced her hands against the wall, going up on her tiptoes while he bent his knees. She caught her breath as he worked the broad head of his penis into her, then with a long, steady push sank to the hilt. He gripped her hips, anchoring her as he pulled back and thrust again.
Her feet almost came off the floor, and her head bumped the wall. He swore and slid one arm around her hips, holding her to him as he swung her around and took her to the bed. He didn’t pull out, didn’t change their basic positions, just bent her over the bed and began pumping.
Normally she needed direct stimulation in order to climax, but she was so ready for him just the friction of those long strokes was doing it for her. There was something about the combination of adrenaline, the sensuous leather on her bare skin, the knowledge that she was naked except for his coat, while he was still fully clothed, the primitive position, that was sending her responses soaring. She clenched her legs together, tightening herself around him, and the feel of that next stroke squeezing him deep into her was all that was needed. Choking back a scream, she buried her face against the bedspread and gripped fistfuls of fabric as the spasms of release shook every muscle in her body.
Swain leaned over her, bracing his hands on each side of her shoulders, driving so strongly that the impact of each thrust shuddered through her. He made a guttural sound, his penis growing impossibly hard; then he began short-stroking and his back arched and he began to climax, gripping her hips hard and grinding against her.
Five minutes later, they both managed to stir. “Don’t move,” he said thickly, drawing back and sliding the leather coat up so he could look at her bottom. He groaned and shuddered. “Oh, yeah, I think I’ve just discovered a fetish.”
“Mine or yours?” she managed to say. Little lightning bolts were still zinging through her and she suspected the same thing was happening to him, because he hadn’t softened very much.
“God, who cares?” He blew out a breath and gripped her buttocks hard, spreading the cheeks and dragging his thumbs down the crease until they

met where her sensitive flesh was stretched tightly around his erection. Her entire body flexed at the sensation as he massaged her; then gradually she relaxed under the soothing ministration. “This is depraved,” she murmured sleepily. “We were shot at tonight; we should be upset, not turned on.”

“Adrenaline does funny things to the system, and you have to burn it off somehow. But if this is how you react, I’ll start shooting at you myself.”

She shook with laughter, making him slip out of her. Groaning, he straightened and began to pull off his clothes. “C’mon, let’s take a quick shower. I worked up a sweat.”

She shrugged out of the leather coat and went with him into the bathroom. She’d have liked a long soak in the tub, but was afraid she’d fall asleep, so she settled for a shower. Refreshed, she put on clean underwear and one of his shirts, and a pair of socks so her feet wouldn’t get cold. The room was untidy, with clothes scattered everywhere, but she wasn’t in the mood to pick them up, and other than hanging up his leather coat-he had to take care of that coat-evidently neither was he. Instead, after pulling on a pair of pants and nothing else, he opened the duffel bag and began testing the bars of Semtex.

The good bars went on one side of him, the bad ones on the other. After all the bars were out of the duffel, there were only five bars that were too old to be used. “We’re okay,” he said. “There’s enough of the good stuff. I allowed for some of it to be bad, just in case.” He began packing the good bars back into the duffel.

Lily nudged an old bar with her toe. “What are we going to do with these?”

“I guess putting them in the trash might not be too smart. The only way I know of to dispose of plastique is burn it or blow it up, so I guess we’ll have to take them with us to the laboratory, try to detonate them with the others. Even if they don’t blow, they’ll burn in the fire.” He had acquired a combination tool-knife, pliers, miniature saw, and she didn’t know what else, all in one handy-dandy implement that was banned on all airlines-and he used the blade to notch the old blocks so he wouldn’t get them confused with the others. Then he replaced them in the duffel, and stowed the duffel on the top shelf of the closet.

“I hope the hotel’s too classy to have nosy maids,” he said, then yawned. “I could use some sleep. How about you?”

Lily had gotten progressively sleepier since getting out of the shower, and his yawn triggered hers. “Fading fast. What’s our next step?”
“Detonators, radio controlled. We’ll have to be a safe distance away when I set off the charges, and running hundreds of yards of det cord all through the lab might make someone suspicious. Once we have the hardware, then we’ll work on the peripherals: the business cards and coveralls, the van. They won’t be that hard to get, and a magnetic sign on the side of the van will take care of the customization.”
“There’s nothing else we can do tonight, then.” She yawned again. “I definitely vote for bed.” Now that the adrenaline rush was gone and the bout of earthy sex had relaxed her, she felt as if her bones were turning rubbery. She turned toward the bed and left him to take care of the lights. She was so tired all she did was pull off her socks; then she fell into bed. She was vaguely aware of him peeling her out of his shirt, then skimming her panties down and off. She could have slept comfortably in both, but liked being naked in his arms. She sighed as he got into bed and cuddled her close to him. Her hand drifted across his chest. “Love you,” she mumbled. His arms tightened around her. “I love you, too.” She felt his lips brush her temple; then it was lights-out for her.
Swain lay awake for a long time that night, holding her close and staring into the dark.
On Saturday, D-day, Lily took her time in front of the makeup mirror. The disguise had to be as good as she could make it, or this wouldn’t work. If Dr. Giordano spotted her, all bets were off.
Her options had been either to cut her hair short and dye it or to buy another wig. She didn’t mind coloring her hair, but she didn’t want to cut it as short as a man’s unless there was nothing else to be done. Luckily, very good wigs were available in Paris. The one she bought was longish for a man, but not inordinately so. Nor had she wanted to duplicate the brown color she had used as Denise Morel, or her own blond color. That left black or red. She had opted for black, as it was a much more common color than red. In fact, most of the world’s population had black hair. Over the wig she wore a cap printed with the initials of the fictitious security company Swain had invented, Swain Security Contractors, SSC. He had gone with an American name, since there was no way he could convince anyone he was anything but American.

She had practiced with the latex of the sort used in movie makeup. She was nowhere near as good as a makeup artist, but she didn't have the luxury of years of practice to perfect her technique. She could widen her jaw a tad, build up the bridge of her nose so she had a classic Roman profile instead of a near-beak-which was the only way she could think of to disguise her profile, which was every bit as distinctive as her eye color-darken her brows and lashes, and add the mustache to hide her full upper lip. She had decided against building up her brow ridge, because she never could get it right and al-ways looked Neanderthal. Dark brown contacts-darker than the hazel brown she had worn as Denise Morel-and wire-framed glasses completed the facial disguise. She had to be skillful with the base that colored the latex the same shade as her skin, because she didn't want anyone to notice that she was wearing makeup.

She had even covered the tiny holes in her pierced earlobes with the latex. A man might have one ear pierced, might even wear an earring to work, but most men definitely did *not* have both ears pierced. She supposed some did, but she didn't want anything about her to attract attention.

The cold spell that had ushered in December was still with them, which was a blessing. To hide her figure she had wound a wide elastic bandage around her breasts, and the dark blue coveralls she wore were loose enough to disguise the shape of her hips. The weather was cold enough that she added a lightweight fiber-fill vest over the coveralls, and that last touch completely hid her figure. Thick-soled work boots with lifts added three inches to her height.

Her hands were a problem. Her nails weren't polished and she had clipped them very short, but her fingers were slender and undeniably feminine. Because of the weather she could wear gloves while she was outside, but what about inside? She couldn't help Swain plant the charges and keep her hands in her pockets at the same time. The best she could do was use blue eye shadow to outline the veins on the backs of her hands and make them look more prominent and, as a crowning touch, add adhesive bandages to two of her fingers to give the impression that she sported the nicks and cuts of someone who did work with her-his-hands.

At least she wouldn't have to talk much. Swain was the mouthpiece; she was the labor. She could pitch her voice into a lower register, but that was hard to maintain. To coarsen her voice for when she *did* have to talk, she had forced herself to cough enough to irritate her throat.

Swain, of course, thought her hoarse voice was sexy. She was beginning to think she could sneeze and he would find it sexy. As often as he'd made love to her over the past week and a half, she suspected he'd lied about his age and was really just twenty-two, with premature gray in his hair. Not that his attention wasn't flattering; in fact, she soaked it up like a plant starved for rain.

However, it wasn't as if they hadn't been doing anything other than going at it like bunny rabbits. Either Swain had a talent for locating the sleazoids in the city, or he had some really questionable acquaintances. While Lily-always disguised-had handled the peripheral things they needed, such as locating a van that fit their requirements and having two magnetic signs made, getting the business cards printed up as well as forms with very official-looking technical checklists on them and "SSC" at the top, clipboards, a variety of tools, their coveralls and boots, Swain had been associating with some very rough characters in order to buy the detonators they needed.

He had wanted to build the remote control himself, something he said was easily done with the remote-control system from any radio-controlled toy-such as a car or an airplane, available in any good toy or electronics store-but decided that using a custom control would look more professional, so he had forked over the money required, and bitched about the cost for days. Then, going by the information contained in the blueprints, he had set about determining where the charges should be placed, and how strong they should be. Lily had never really thought about demolitions from a mathematical standpoint, though she'd known Averill had taken pride in calculating the strength of his charges to exactly what was required to do the job, and nothing more. Swain had explained it all, reeling off numbers as if they were general knowledge: this much Semtex would do this much damage. He used the terms *plastique* and *Semtex* interchangeably, but when she asked, he acknowledged that they weren't exactly the same. C-4, plastique, and Semtex were all in the same family of explosives, but *plastique* was the more widely known term and was used ail-inclusively, but incorrectly. Lily hated when details were wrong; too often her life had depended on getting the details right, so she insisted he say Semtex when he meant Semtex. He'd rolled his eyes, but humored her.

He'd spent hours showing her how and where to place a charge and set the detonator. The detonator was the easy part, but he was very particular about

where the charges went. He had numbered the locations, then prepared the charges for each and labeled each charge with the number corresponding to where he wanted it to go. They had studied until they could reel off each location and its number without hesitation, memorized the blueprints, then driven out into the country, where he had marked off the distances to give them a better feel of the size of the complex and how long the job would take.

The good news was, they had a cover for being in the complex. The bad news was, depending on what they found when they got in there, placing all the charges could take a couple of hours or more. The longer they were in there, the better the chance of discovery. Swain was safe; Lily was not, especially if for some reason Rodrigo showed up. He would know from Damone that "security experts" were touring the facility, and he might be curious. If he did appear, Swain would handle the meet-and-greet while Lily busied herself elsewhere and hoped Rodrigo wouldn't insist on meeting the other "expert."

Dr. Giordano was the other danger, as far as recognizing Lily was concerned. Likewise, she would try not to attract his attention, though that would be more difficult. After all, the facility was his and his work was his pride and joy. He would be very interested in Swain's opinion of the security measures in place. Since Swain was supposedly the owner of SSC, he would be more the focus of attention than Lily, but she couldn't hope to escape completely.

Neither of them had forgotten that this was to be Dr. Giordano's last day on earth. Lily remembered how kind he'd been to her when she'd been so ill, but at the same time she knew he was at the heart of an evil scheme. So long as Giordano was alive, the knowledge of how to mutate a virus so it would pass from human to human could be used to produce a pandemic. If not avian influenza, then it would be something else. Viruses were deadly enough without his help. The pandemic might occur anyway, at any time, but she'd be damned if she would let it be deliberately timed so someone would make a lot of money.

The plan was, after the charges were set, they would hold a mock bomb-threat drill, timing how fast the buildings could be emptied. When everyone was outside, Swain would detonate the charges and almost simultaneously Lily would execute Dr. Giordano. The percussion and fire from the explosions would certainly cause panic, perhaps some injuries. They

themselves would slip in earplugs before detonation, and make certain they were standing behind something for shelter. In the confusion they would get into the van and drive away-they hoped. Nothing was taken for granted.
A luxury hotel wasn't the best place they could have chosen to prepare explosive charges. Everything had to be tidied away every day before the arrival of the housekeeping service, and they didn't want to put the charges in the van as they were completed, in case the van was broken into. The last thing in the world they wanted was some punk in possession of that much Semtex.
"Are you ready, Charles?" Swain asked. *Charles Fournier* was the name they had chosen for Lily. Swain got such a kick out of it he'd been calling her Charles even when they were alone.
"I think this is the best it's going to get," she said, getting up from the vanity and pirouetting for him as best she could in the heavy work boots. "Do I look okay?"
"Depends on your definition of 'okay,' " he said. "I wouldn't ask you out on a date, if that's what you mean."
"That'll do," she said, satisfied.
He grinned. "I don't even want to kiss you. That mustache gives me the willies." He had just finished packing the charges, some in the duffel bag and some in a box. The detonators were in a separate box, and as a precaution he'd taken the batteries out of the remote control.
He was dressed in coveralls that matched hers, with *SSC* embroidered on the left breast pocket, but underneath he wore a white dress shirt and a tie, to denote he was the boss and draw attention his way. The coveralls were unzipped enough to reveal the tie, and they were loose enough to hide the line of the shoulder holster he wore. She had opted for her familiar ankle holster, though with these boots, getting to her pistol was more difficult than usual. They weren't entering a fast-draw competition, though; when the time came, if everything was working right, she'd have plenty of time to pull her weapon.
He carried the duffel bag and the box containing the charges, while she carried the box with the detonators. They had the elevator to themselves, but they didn't indulge in any small talk, or go over the plan one more time. They each knew what they had to do.
"You drive," Swain said when they reached the van, taking the keys from his pocket and tossing them to her.

Her eyebrows went up. “You’re trusting me to drive?”
“A: I’m the boss and I’m the driven, not the driver. B: a van’s no fun to drive.”
“That’s what I thought,” she said drily. The van must handle as agilely as a beached whale for Lucas Swain to have willingly turned over the keys.
They were supposed to meet Damone Nervi at the complex at three pm. Swain had chosen that time because in the afternoon people are tired and less alert than they are in the morning. When they reached the complex, Lily couldn’t help looking at the small park where the gun battle had erupted just two weeks before. The incident had been mentioned in the news; then when no additional excitement was added by someone dying, it had been completely dropped the next day. She was pleased to see that even though it was a weekend, the cold weather had kept most people from enjoying the park. It was mostly deserted, except for the very occasional hardy soul walking a dog. The fewer people who were about, the better.
As they approached the gate where two guards waited, she coughed several times again, to roughen her voice. One guard held up his hand and she obligingly eased to a stop, then lowered her window. A blast of frigid air made her glad she was wearing the vest. “Monsieur Lucas Swain to see Monsieur Nervi.” Before she could ask, Swain handed over his international driver’s license for the guard to check. She fished out her new fake license and handed it over, as well.
“Fournier,” the guard said, reading the name off the license. They checked the names against a list, which, she noticed, had only the two names on it, so completing their task didn’t take very long.
“Go to the main entrance on the left,” the guard instructed, returning the licenses to them. “Park in the slot marked for visitors. I will call Monsieur Nervi and notify him of your arrival. Beside the door is a buzzer; press it and someone inside will release the lock for you to enter.”
Lily nodded as she slipped the license back into her pocket, and raised the van window to shut out the cold air. She coughed several more times, because she didn’t think she had sounded hoarse enough when talking to the guard. The more she coughed, the worse the cough sounded, as if her throat was getting into the spirit of things. It was already a little sore, so she needed to be careful not to overdo.
Two men stepped out of the entrance. One was Dr. Giordano. “That’s the doctor on the left,” she said to Swain. “The other man must be Damone

Nervi."
There was, in fact, a strong family resemblance, but where Rodrigo was a very good looking man, Damone Nervi was probably the most handsome man she had ever seen, though in no way was he effeminate. His looks were classic, from his thick black hair to his smooth olive-toned skin. He was tall and trim, elegantly dressed in a double-breasted charcoal gray suit that draped on him the way only the Italians could get a suit to fit. Dr. Giordano was smiling in welcome, but Damone's face was set in an aloof, rather stern expression.
"Something's off," Lily murmured.
"How?" Swain asked.
"Supposedly we're here at Damone's insistence, so he shouldn't look as if we're as welcome as the plague."
"An apt simile," he observed. "Yeah, I see what you mean. The doctor's smiling, Damone isn't. Maybe he isn't a smiley type of guy."
Sometimes the most simple explanation was the best one, but Lily couldn't shake her vague uneasiness. She parked the van in the appropriate slot and tried not to be obvious as she studied the two men.
Swain didn't wait. He left the van and strode confidently to the entrance, where he gave both men a brisk handshake. His bearing had changed, Lily realized, the habitual lazy saunter had been replaced by a walk that said, "get out of my way." Everything about his body language had subtly changed, and he looked like an aggressive, no-nonsense businessman.
According to their plan, she got out and went to the back of the van, opening the doors and getting out two clipboards that each held a thick sheaf of printed forms, plus two circuit testers that were totally useless for anything they were supposed to be doing but which Swain had decided looked impressive. They might even test a circuit or two, just to look as if they were doing something.
Laden with this paraphernalia, taking care she held everything as a man would hold it rather than clutching the clip-boards to her chest as women did, she approached the three men. "My associate, Charles Fournier," Swain said, indicating her. "Damone Nervi, Dr. Giordano. The doctor has agreed to give us a tour, show us all the security measures in place in order to save time."
Her hands were occupied to prevent her from shaking hands, so everyone contented themselves with nods and greetings. Dr. Giordano was still

relaxed and welcoming; if anything, Damone's expression had gotten more stern. Lily's uneasiness grew in proportion. Why was Damone acting as if this "inspection" hadn't been his idea from the beginning?
Damn. Could all of this have been orchestrated simply to draw her into a trap, into a private building where anything could happen to her and no one would ever be the wiser? Was Rodrigo even more cunning than she'd imagined? She had to admit that if so, he'd merely borrowed a page from her own book and drawn her into the trap by not jumping at the first few chances to capture her. Taking her off the street would have been noticed, and while Rodrigo had the political capital to make an incident go away, why spend it when he could simply be patient and lure her into a place where no one would notice anything? For all she knew, the lab was empty of personnel and the vehicles in the parking lot were just window dressing. If she had miscalculated, she had caused not only her own death but Swain's also. She thought of all that laughter and zest for life being snuffed out, and went cold inside. The world would be a darker place without Lucas Swain in it If anything happened to him because of her-
But now Damone had turned away, and Dr. Giordano was chiding him for being so morose because his fiancée had cancelled a scheduled visit.
"Perhaps you should visit her," the doctor teased, slapping Damone on the back. "Women like it when we men come to them."
"Perhaps tomorrow," Damone said, shrugging and looking faintly sheepish.
Lily relaxed. Her imagination had been running away with her; Damone was simply in a bad mood because his girlfriend hadn't visited.
Dr. Giordano pressed a series of numbers on a keypad at the door, and it buzzed open. "We used to each have a card which we slid through a scanner, but people were forever losing their cards and the security company decided a keypad would be more secure," he said as he stepped inside and they followed.
"That's true," Swain said, "so long as no one gives the entry number to unauthorized people. However, I've been here two minutes, and I can already tell you that the number sequence for entry is six-nine-eight-three-one-five. You didn't block the keypad with your body when you keyed in the number. Even worse, the keypad is tonal. I could hear it." He pulled a tiny digital recorder from his pocket "I activated this when you started to unlock the door, just in case." He pressed the *play* button and a series of six

different-toned little beeps sounded. “With this, I could open the door even if I didn’t know what the numbers were.”
Dr. Giordano looked acutely embarrassed. “I assure you, I’m not usually so careless. I did not think I should be on guard against you.”
“You should be on guard against everyone,” Swain replied, really getting into his role. “And the keypad should be changed so you don’t hear the tones. That’s the real weakness.”
“Yes, I see.” Dr. Giordano pulled a notebook from the pocket of his lab coat and made a notation in it. “I will have this taken care of immediately.”
“Good. After the tour, there are two exercises I’d like to conduct, if I may. My associate and I will plant fake explosives in various parts of the complex, and we will see how long it takes any of the workers here to spot something they consider suspicious. If no one notices anything, I’d like to make an announcement about what we have done, and invite them to look around, and notify you whenever they spot anything out of the ordinary. That raises their awareness, first knowing that these packages were put in place without being noticed, and again by in effect teaching them where to look and what to look for. Lastly, I’d like to conduct a bomb-threat evacuation, to time how long it takes everyone to clear the buildings, see what routes they use, and possible alternate routes. This would really be best done when your workforce is at its maximum number, but today was the only day available, so we’ll work with what we have.”
Lily was impressed. Swain was doing a hell of an acting job. Not only that, she hadn’t known he had that tiny recorder. He must have acquired it while he was picking up the other electronics he thought they’d need.
“Of course, that’s brilliant,” Dr. Giordano said. “Now, if you’ll please follow me?”
To Lily’s consternation, Damone fell in step beside her while Swain walked beside Dr. Giordano. The last thing she wanted was one-on-one conversation with anyone. Because her hands were full, she couldn’t cover her mouth, but she turned her head into her shoulder and gave two hard coughs.
Swain looked back at her. “Charles, that cough is sounding worse. You should take something for it”
“Later,” she croaked, and for good measure coughed again.
“You are ill?” Damone inquired politely.
“A cough only, monsieur.”

“Perhaps you should wear a mask. Dr. Giordano is working with influenza viruses, and anyone who is already sick would be especially vulnerable.”
Dr. Giordano turned his head and said with concern, “No, no, we won’t enter that lab.”
“Do your workers often fall sick from the viruses and bacteria they’re working with?” Swain inquired.
“It happens, of course-so often that no one keeps records. But I am trying to develop a vaccine for a particularly virulent strain, and anyone who enters that lab must show no signs of illness, plus I instituted strict measures requiring the wearing of masks and gloves.”
It was good to know the doctor was taking care his bug didn’t spread to the general populace before the vaccine was available to make them millions of dollars, Lily thought. She stared at his back, at his well-shaped head. He seemed such a nice man, but he was the cause of it all. Because of him, Zia was dead.
Lately-since Swain-she had been able to sometimes think of Zia without the crippling pain of grief, with more a fond and sad remembrance. But looking at Dr. Giordano and knowing he was the reason she no longer had Zia, everything rushed back at her in full force. She clenched her jaw to keep from moaning aloud, and fought the burn of tears. It wouldn’t do for “Charles” to start weeping.
They had all-she and Averill and Tina-fretted because Zia seemed to catch every bug that went around. By the age of ten she had already had pneumonia twice. Whether her immune system had been weakened by the deprivation of her first few weeks of life, or she was just unlucky, didn’t matter. Every winter Zia had been ill several times, and she had always caught at least one summer cold that would inevitably turn into bronchitis. She would have been almost certain to catch such an influenza as Dr. Giordano was planning to unleash on the world, and what were the odds she would have been one of the unlucky ones who died?
In trying to stop that from happening, Averill and Tina had set in motion a train of events that had led to that very outcome anyway. The irony of it was bitter.
Hard on the heels of pain came a hot rush of hatred, so strong that she shook with it. She sucked in a harsh breath, trying to wrestle her emotions back under control before she did something stupid and blew everything.

Walking beside her, Damone gave her a curious look. Lily covered for herself by turning her head and giving another cough. She just hoped the latex on her jaw held up under all this stress. Even more, she hoped that Damone didn't notice that she had a mustache, but not even a hint of a five o'clock shadow on her face.

They walked down a long hall and turned right. "This is my office," Dr. Giordano said, indicating a door with his name lettered on it in gold, and another keypad entry. "Next to it is the main laboratory, which I would like to show you. It is where I do my most important work. Monsieur Fournier, you should perhaps remain outside."

Lily nodded. Swain took one of the notebooks and circuit testers from her and said, "We won't be long." She leaned against the wall the way she'd seen men do, the picture of patience as the three men went into the laboratory. She was just glad Damone hadn't chosen to remain with her.

They were out within ten minutes, Swain making notes. She hoped he'd used his trusty little recorder to get the tonal codes of the keypad when Dr. Giordano had entered it, because that time the doctor had been very careful to shield the keypad with his body when he was punching in the sequence. They would need to get into both the lab and the office to set charges.

"Charles," Swain said absently, "I want you to check the GF modulator on the 365 BS detector in the doctor's office."

"Yes, sir," Lily croaked, diligently writing down the gibberish. Slate had no idea what a GF modulator was, or if such a thing even existed, and the only BS she knew of was what was coming out of Swain's mouth almost every time he opened it. It sounded impressive, though, and gave her an excuse for being in Dr. Giordano's office.

It was that way throughout the tour; whenever they "inspected" an area that Swain deemed on their hit list, he would reel off a set of instructions designed to get either himself or Lily back in that area. Not once did he repeat himself, probably because he couldn't remember all the numbers and initials he'd used before. Dr. Giordano was obviously impressed by Swain's comprehensive knowledge, though Damone's expression was more enigmatic. Lily suspected Damone would be a hard sell on anything, which further underscored how much he must have trusted Georges Blanc, in order for him to have accepted Blanc's recommendation.

At last they were finished, and Swain gave a brief smile. "That will do, I think. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse us, we'll check those items I

mentioned to Charles, and then we'll sneak around hiding our little surprise packages. This will probably take… an hour, perhaps a little longer. Then we'll have some fun with your employees that I hope will impress on them how vigilant they should be, and then we'll have that evacuation drill."
"Of course," Damone said, and gave a very Continental little bow. "Thank you both for coming. If you don't mind, I won't remain here. Dr. Giordano knows far more about the facility than I, and he is the heart of all the research here. It has been very good to meet you." He shook hands with Swain, then extended his hand to Lily and she had no choice but to accept his handshake. She tried to grip his hand firmly, and gave it one brisk shake before letting go and slipping her hands into her pockets.
Damone gave her a long, unreadable look, but said nothing and took his leave. Something in her relaxed a little in his absence. He'd been nothing but polite, but she had often felt his gaze boring into her as if he sensed something odd about her but couldn't quite decide what it was.
After Damone had left, Lily and Swain returned to the van and began dividing the charges between them. Her notes told them where the charges needed to go. Swain had shown her how to use the detonators; there was nothing to it. Destruction was always a lot easier than construction.
"Almost finished," Swain said. "You okay? You almost lost it there at the beginning."
So he'd noticed that her emotions were getting the best of her. "Yes," she said, her eyes dry and her hands steady. "I'm ready."
"Here we go, then. I'd kiss you for good luck, but your upper lip is hairy."
"Just for that, I'm going to wear the mustache to bed tonight." Joking felt strange, given what they were about to do, but in a way the humor anchored her. She just hoped that, come night, they both would be still alive and together.
"That's a scary thought." He shrugged his shoulders, as if working out the tension. His blue eyes were deadly serious as he surveyed her. "Be careful. Don't let anything happen to you."
"Same here."
He looked at his watch. "Okay, let's hustle. I want all of these planted within half an hour."
They reentered the building and, after one long look, went in opposite directions. Neither of them looked back.

Chapter Thirty-One

Because Swain had numbered the rooms on the blueprint and marked the charges accordingly, Lily knew which charges went where. He'd shown her where to place them for maximum effect, but hidden well enough that they were likely to stay hidden until they could get the buildings evacuated.

It's almost over. The thought kept running through her mind as she walked the hallways of the complex, not making any attempt to avoid detection. Almost no one paid her any attention, and no one questioned her. It was as if, just by being inside the complex, she'd proved her right to be there. The Nervis and Dr. Giordano had become acutely aware of security after the first incident, but for everyone else it seemed to be business as usual. The workforce was light, anyway, since it was the weekend. Those who were there were probably dedicated to the point of being blind to everything else, or tired and resentful that they were working when most others weren't The end of the workday was growing near, and a lot of people were just killing time.

It's almost over. For four long months she'd had one aim: vengeance. But this had grown into something larger than her personal vendetta against the Nervis, something more important. What Averill and Tina had started, she was about to finish, in honor of a young girl who had died while she was still trembling on the cusp between childhood and adolescence.

Lily's own life had taken a bizarre turn when she was eighteen, but she'd hoped to see Zia live a normal, happy life: marry, have children, be in step with most of the world's population. Those who went with the flow, who fit in with the crowd, often had no idea how very lucky they were. They belonged. She had wanted Zia to belong, to have the things she herself either had never had or had been forced to give up.

What a special child Zia had been! As if she had somehow known her life would be short, she had spent it in a fizz of effervescence. Everything had been a source of wonder and joy to her. And she'd been a chatterbox, trying to get everything said that could be said, talking at a mad pace until they'd had to laugh and tell her to slow down.

It was almost over, Lily's quest. She placed a charge against the wall behind the filing cabinets that held Dr. Giordano's documentation of his

experiments and results, and stuck a detonator in the mound of Semtex. Soon all of this would be nothing but ashes.

Almost over, she thought as she placed the explosives in the office where all the records were put on computer disk and stored. A small charge under each computer, and another big-ger charge where the disks were stored. Everything had to go. There could be nothing left of Dr. Giordano's research.

Swain was taking care of the doctor's office, and the two laboratories in which the live virus was kept Unfortunately, that was also the area where the vaccine was being developed.

Lily wished there were some way the vaccine process could be saved, because in a year or so there could very well be a desperate need for it. There was nothing they could do, no way they could protect that part of Dr. Giordano's research. She just hoped that when the time came, some other lab had been working on the same thing and would be able to step up to the plate.

She went down a long, steep flight of stairs to the basement and set the largest charges under critical walls, to make certain the destruction was complete. By the time she climbed back to the top, she was out of breath and her heart was pounding.

She could no longer tell herself she was still recovering her strength. There was no doubt about it: any exertion made her short of breath. She couldn't tell if the breathlessness was getting any worse, but she faced the truth: when she was able she would have to find a good cardiac specialist somewhere and see about getting that pesky valve fixed.

A lot of what she would do next depended on Rodrigo Nervi. She would have to leave France; there was no question of that. Leave Europe, in fact. Swain hadn't said anything about afterward, and neither had she. First they would see if there *was* an afterward. She tried to imagine a future by herself, and couldn't. Whenever she saw herself now, she was with Swain. Where would it be safe for him to go? Not back to South America, and neither of them would be safe going back to the United States. Mexico, perhaps, or Canada. That would get them close to home. Jamaica was a possibility. Swain didn't like cold weather, so she didn't think he would choose Canada, though that would have been her first choice. Perhaps they could summer in Canada and spend the winter farther south.

A harried-looking man wearing a lab coat and carrying a thick notebook went past her with only a nod. Glancing out through a window, she saw that the sun was setting; the short December day was almost over. Their timing was good; at this time of day, everyone was thinking of home.
The charges had all been placed, with no problems or interference from anyone. It had been so easy it was almost frightening.
She made her way back to Dr. Giordano's office. Swain was already there, sitting on the comfortable sofa in the office and drinking a cup of coffee.
Dr. Giordano indicated the carafe. "Please, help yourself," he said. "The coffee will be good for your throat."
"Merci," she said. She had coughed so much she had definitely irritated her throat. The first sip of hot coffee soothed the membranes and she almost sighed with pleasure.
"You have a definite problem," Swain was telling the doctor. "We planted the charges without anyone asking us what we were doing, or becoming alarmed. Awareness is your first defense, and your people are so absorbed in their work they are thinking of nothing else."
"But scientists are like that," Dr. Giordano protested, lifting his hands in a very Italian gesture. "What can I do? Tell them not to think about their work?"
Swain shook his head. "The obvious solution is to have peo-ple inside who *aren't* scientists-trained security personnel-rather than relying so completely on electronics. You should have both. I'm surprised your security company didn't suggest that"
"But they did. Our work here is so sensitive I elected not to have people in the complex who didn't understand the safety measures we must take with these viruses."
"Then that's a trade-off you have decided to make. It does leave a big hole in your security, but if you are aware of it-" Swain shrugged, as if to say there was nothing he could do. "I'll have my recommendations put in a report to you. Implement the ones you want. Now, are you ready to have your people see if they can spot the charges?"
Dr. Giordano looked at his watch. "Their time is short. I am afraid this must be a brief lesson."
"Of course."
They went to the intercom system, and Dr. Giordano pressed the switch that opened the loudspeakers. He cleared his throat, then began an explanation

of what had been going on that afternoon. Lily imagined that all over the complex workers were looking at each other, then uneasily examining their surroundings.

Dr. Giordano checked the time again. “You have five minutes in which to see if you can spot any of these mock explosives. Don’t touch them, just call me and report.”

He clicked off the loudspeaker and asked Swain, “How many of these charges are there?”

“Fifteen.”

They waited, watching the time. Four calls came in during the allotted five minutes. Dr. Giordano sighed, looking sad, and announced the results over the loudspeaker. He turned back to Swain with a “what can I do?” expression on his face.

Lily sat down and rubbed her right leg as if it were aching. She felt an unaccountable sadness, now that the time was here. Considering her earlier rage and hatred, why should she feel sad now? But she did.

She was so tired of killing. She wondered if there would ever be an end to it. Rodrigo Nervi would search for her until the end of his days; she would have to look at every stranger as a possible threat, never relaxing in public.

Swain got up. “You didn’t tell them about the bomb threat drill. That’s good, I think. Your people have been remarkably unaware, so let’s see if I can perhaps stir them to a little more action. May I?” He indicated the intercom system, and Dr. Giordano waved a hand in permission, smiling.

Swain turned on the loudspeaker again and in his rough French said urgently, “The explosives are real! There has been a mistake! Get out, get out, *get out!”*

He turned and began swiftly ushering Dr. Giordano out the door. Behind them, Lily started to retrieve her pistol from her boot, but Swain looked over his shoulder and gave a sharp shake of his head. “*Move the van*,” he mouthed.

She couldn’t believe they hadn’t thought of that before. The van was parked too close to the building. If she didn’t move it to a safer distance, they wouldn’t have transportation. Swain couldn’t do it because she had the keys, and he was already busy taking the batteries for the remote control from his pocket, trying to insert them while he was moving at a fast clip-

People were hurrying out of various rooms and laboratories, confusion on their faces. “What is it?” one woman asked. “This is a joke?”

“No,” Lily said briefly. “Hurry!”
As they went out the door, for Dr. Giordano’s benefit she said, “I have to get something from the van,” and ran for the vehicle.
Evidently taking her action as something they themselves were supposed to do, those lab workers who drove instead of taking the train began running for their own vehicles. The guards at the gate, seeing this unusual activity, stepped out of their little building with their hands on the butts of their weapons, leaving them still holstered but ready to draw on a second’s notice.
Lily started the van and rapidly backed it out of the parking space. Dr. Giordano gave her a startled look, but Swain said something and distracted him by pointing at what the workers were doing, at the same time walking at a fast clip to a safer distance and urging Dr. Giordano along with him. She pulled the van between Swain and the guards, blocking their view but also positioned in such a way that it gave them some protection from the coming blast. As she got out, she heard Swain say, “Is that everyone, do you think?”
“I don’t know,” Dr. Giordano replied. “Not many were working today, but as to how many-?” He shrugged.
“You should always know, otherwise how can you get a head count?” Swain asked reasonably, and, to Lily’s surprise, turned and handed the remote control to her.
“You do the honors,” he said.
She had watched him test the device, and he’d explained to her how it worked, but why was he deviating from the plan? She didn’t have time to ask, because Dr. Giordano was already looking puzzled. Before he could ask questions or become alarmed, she activated the device. A little green light glowed, showing it was on, and she pressed the button that sent the radio signal to the detonators.
There was a sort of deep, muffled *whoomph;* then all hell broke loose. Parts of the complex blew up and out, the percussion of the blast hitting them like a blow. Black smoke and fire billowed, and a dark cloud of debris arced overhead. People screamed, ducking and protecting themselves as best they could. Flying glass pierced several people like arrows. One man went down under a chunk of the debris that rained down on them like rocks thrown by a giant.

Dr. Giordano turned to Swain with an expression of horror on his face. Lily reached down for her weapon, but Swain already had his hand inside his coveralls. He pulled out the big H & R, shoved it directly against Dr. Giordano's chest, and pulled the trigger twice. Dr. Giordano slumped to the ground, already dead.

Moving swiftly, Swain pushed Lily toward the van. She climbed into the driver's seat, but he kept pushing, so she clambered over into the passenger's seat, and he took the place behind the wheel. The engine was still running. He slammed the door, put the vehicle in gear, and started it rolling forward as one of the guards ran past them. The other was on the phone in their little building, shouting frantically into the receiver. He was still on the phone when they went out the gate.

Damone was in Rodrigo's office when the phone rang. Rodrigo answered it, and his olive complexion turned a strange ashen color.

Damone got to his feet. "What is it?" he asked when Rodrigo hung up.

Rodrigo's head was bowed, his shoulders slumped. "The laboratory has been destroyed," he said hoarsely. "Explosives. Vincenzo is dead." Slowly he raised his head, horror dawning in his eyes. "He was killed by the security consultants *you* took into the complex."

Damone took several deep breaths. Then, very quietly, he said, "I couldn't let you release that virus."

" 'Couldn't'-?" Rodrigo blinked rapidly, trying to make the words mean something else. But they remained the same, and Damone stood there with a very calm expression. "You-you *knew* what they were going to do?"

"I paid them to do it."

Rodrigo felt as if the world had shifted on its axis, that nothing he had thought was real had any substance. In a blinding moment of clarity, he knew. "You were behind the first explosion. *You* hired the Joubrans!"

"Unfortunately, Vincenzo was able to duplicate his work, so I had to take more drastic measures."

"Because of you, *Papa is dead!"* Rodrigo roared, surging to his feet and reaching for the weapon that was always in the desk drawer.

Damone was faster, his own weapon much closer to hand. He didn't hesitate. He pulled the trigger three times, putting two holes in Rodrigo's chest and an insurance shot to the head. His brother sprawled over the desk, then crashed to the floor, overturning the wastebasket.

Damone let his hand drop to his side, and a tear rolled down his face.

It had come to this, from events he had set in motion back in August. He sucked in a deep breath and wiped his eyes. The road to hell was truly paved with good intentions. All he had wanted was for that virus to be destroyed. He couldn't let his father go through with his plans to release it. Giselle, his wonderful, brave, fragile Giselle, would never have survived if she had contracted the influenza. She had had a kidney transplant just the year before, and had to take drugs that suppressed her immune system, and even the vaccine could not have saved her. She had been reluctant to accept his proposal because she couldn't give him children, and she knew how important family was to Italians in general, but he had eventually convinced her. He loved her more than he could express, more than he could explain even to himself. For her, he had taken steps to destroy the virus.

He had never thought his father would discover who had set the first explosion, and he'd been heartsick when he learned the Joubrans and their daughter had been executed, as a lesson to those who would cross Salvatore Nervi.

But the Joubrans had had a friend, this Lily Mansfield, and their deaths had sent her on a quest for vengeance that put his papa in the grave.

She had been the perfect choice to complete the Joubrans' mission. With George Blanc's help-Damone had almost panicked when she demanded a meeting, but an urgent call to Blanc had persuaded him to appear in Damone's place-he had devised a plan to get her and her friend inside the complex.

He hadn't been prepared for how he would feel when he actually saw her, the woman who had killed his father. For a moment he had wanted to kill *her,* punish her for his anguish at what he himself had caused. He was certain that "Charles Fournier" was this woman in disguise, though it was such a good disguise he'd been taken aback and unsure that there wasn't a third person involved. But he had deliberately forced her to shake hands with him, and the feel of that slender, feminine hand in his had convinced him.

So. She had accomplished the mission-and forced him to pay her a million American dollars to do it. He hadn't intended to follow through on the payment, but she had outsmarted him by insisting on payment in advance. He wished she had died in the explosion. Perhaps she had; he didn't know yet if there were any fatalities other than Vincenzo. But if she had escaped alive, he would call a truce. Lily Mansfield was safe from the Nervi

organization. She had reacted to an event he had caused, and in the same way that a snowball rolling downhill becomes an avalanche, so things had proceeded to this point.

He had murdered his brother. His immortal soul was perhaps damned for this, but he thought the lives he had saved by destroying the virus would be weighed in the balance. And he had saved Giselle.

Damone stepped to the door. The sound of the shots had of course been heard, but no one had entered. He opened the door and saw several nervous men standing just outside, wearing uncertain expressions. He looked over the faces and picked out that of Tadeo, Rodrigo's man. "Rodrigo is dead," he said gently. "I have assumed control of all operations. Tadeo, would you please make certain my brother's body is treated with all due respect? I will take him home, bury him next to Papa."

His face pale, Tadeo nodded. He knew the way things worked. He could become Damone's man, or he could die.

He chose to live. He murmured some quiet words to the other men, and they went inside the office to take care of Rod-rigo's body.

Damone went into another room and placed a call. "Monsieur Blanc. It is over. Your service to me has ended."

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Why Greece?” Lily asked as she swiftly gathered her things in Swain’s hotel room.

“Because it’s warm, and because it’s the first flight out that I could get us on. Do you have your passport?”

“Several.”

He stopped what he was doing and gave her an oddly tender smile. “The one in your real name. That’s what I booked your ticket under.”

She winced. “That might cause problems.” She hadn’t forgotten that she had to be on guard against the CIA, too, though so far she seemed to have gone in under the radar on that one. After what had happened today, whether that would remain true was anyone’s guess. “Turn on the television. Let’s see if anything is being reported on the news.”

Either the explosion was being kept quiet or they had missed the story in the news item rotation, and they didn’t have time to wait through another segment. Rather than call a bellman, Swain carried their luggage down himself, then checked them out of the hotel.

“We have to go to my apartment,” Lily said when they were in the car. They had ditched the van several blocks away from the hotel, and walked the rest of the way.

Swain gave her a disbelieving look. “Do you know how long that will take us?”

“I have to get my pictures of Zia. I don’t know when or if I’ll be able to come back, so I’m not leaving them behind. If I see we’re going to miss our flight, I’ll call and cancel the reservations and book us on the next one.”

“Maybe we can make it,” he said, a devilish grin on his face, and Lily braced herself for the ride of a lifetime.

They did make it to her apartment building in one piece, but Lily kept her eyes* closed most of the way and didn’t open them no matter how close the screeching brakes and blasting horns were. “I won’t be a minute,” she said when he pulled to a stop.

“I’m coming up with you.”

She gave him an incredulous look as he climbed out of the car and locked it. “But you’re blocking the street. What if someone wants to get by?”

“Then they can damn well wait.”

He climbed the stairs with her, his left hand on the small of her back and his right hand on his pistol butt. Lily unlocked the door, and Swain went in first as she reached in and flipped on the light switch, sweeping right to left with his pistol until he was certain no one was waiting for them.
Lily stepped inside and closed the door. “We can leave our weapons here.” She dragged a lockbox out of a cabinet “This is sublet for a year, and I have eight months left.”
They both put their weapons in the box, and she locked it, then put it back into the cabinet. They could have put the weapons in their checked luggage, disassembled and in a lockbox, declared them to the airline, and perhaps had no trouble collecting them on the other end, but she doubted things would go that smoothly. It was always easier to acquire weapons once she got to where she was going than to try to take one with her. Besides, they didn’t want the airline personnel paying any particular attention to them.
She got Zia’s photographs and added them to her tote bag, and they were out the door. As they were going down the stairs, Swain said, grinning, “Was that the bed you bought from a nun?”
Lily snickered. “No, it came with the apartment”
“I didn’t buy the nun story for a minute.”
Though he drove like a demented bat out of hell, it became obvious they weren’t going to make it to the airport in time to catch the flight Lily called and canceled their reservations and made new ones for another flight, and after that he actually took his foot off the gas pedal occasionally, so she dared to keep her eyes open.
“Why did you shoot Dr. Giordano?” she asked, watching the traffic instead of him, because the fact that he’d deviated from the plan bothered her. Had he noticed that moment when she’d become emotional, and been afraid she might botch the shot?
“I wondered when that subject would come up,” he muttered, and sighed. “I did it because it was personal to you, and because you didn’t need the guilt I knew you’d feel afterward.”
“Salvatore Nervi was a personal hit, too,” she pointed out. “I don’t feel one shred of guilt about him.”
“That was different. You actually liked Dr. Giordano, before you found out what he was doing. Killing him would have hurt you.”
He was probably right, she thought, leaning her head back against the headrest. In setting up the hit on Salvatore, she had been carried along on a

tide of pain so great it had overwhelmed everything else. But between then and today, she had found sunshine again; somehow, killing Dr. Giordano would have blotted out some of the sun. She didn't understand it. Giordano was a righteous hit, perhaps the most righteous of ail-but she was glad she hadn't done it. It was that gladness that both puzzled and upset her. Was she losing her edge… and had Swain noticed? Was that why he'd done it?

He reached over and took her hand. "Stop fretting about it. It's done."

It was done. Over. Finished. She felt as if a door had closed behind her, sealing off her past. Other than go to Greece with Swain, she had no idea what she would do next For the first time in her life, she was adrift.

They reached the airport and turned in the Mercedes to the rental company, then made their way to the ticket counter and checked in. They had a couple of hours to kill before their flight and they were both hungry, so they went into one of the airport restaurants. They chose one of the rear booths from which they could watch the entrance, though checking in had been totally uneventful. No one had tried to detain them; no one blinked an eye at Lily's name. It was unnerving.

The restaurant was one with multiple televisions on the wall so the patrons could keep up with news, sports, and weather while they ate. They both looked up when they heard the name "Nervi" mentioned.

"In shocking news tonight, Damone Nervi has announced that the explosion that devastated one of the Nervi properties late this afternoon has resulted in the death of his older brother, Rodrigo Nervi. The brothers lost their father, Salvatore Nervi, less than a month ago. Damone Nervi has assumed leadership of all the Nervi holdings. The explosion that killed Rodrigo Nervi is believed to have been caused by a faulty gas line. Authorities are investigating."

Lily and Swain looked at each other. "Rodrigo wasn't there," she hissed.

"I know." He looked thoughtful. "Son of a bitch. I believe there's been a coup."

Lily had to agree. Damone had evidently seized the opportunity to kill Rodrigo and make the murder look like an accident. It must have been an impulse, a spur-of-the-moment decision precipitated by the destruction of the laboratory. But Damone was widely reckoned as the brilliant one, the one with the Midas touch; would he have acted so impulsively, when the outcome could just as easily have resulted in his own death?

The only other possibility was that Rodrigo's death wasn't an impulse at all. And that could be only if-"My God," she blurted. "He planned the whole thing."

Three weeks later, Lily woke from a late afternoon nap to hear Swain out on the terrace, talking on the satellite telephone he'd wrangled from somewhere, saying angrily, "Damn it, Frank-No. No. Fuck it, *no.* All right. I said *all right,* but I don't like it You owe me, big-time. Yeah, I said *you* owe *me,* so you'd better be damn sure you're right." He slammed down the phone and walked to the low wall of the terrace, where he planted his hands on his hips and glared out at the blue Aegean.

She slipped from the bed and went out through the double doors onto the terrace, walking up behind him and sliding her arms around his waist. She laid her head against his bare back and kissed his warm shoulder blade.

"You finally got to talk to Frank?" Frank was his friend who had been in the car accident. Two weeks earlier Frank had been moved out of ICU into a regular hospital bed, but he'd evidently been guarded by someone who had been adamant that he not be disturbed. The day before he'd been moved into a rehab facility, but judging from the way Swain had sounded, their first conversation hadn't been to his liking.

"The hardheaded son of a bitch," he growled, but he caught one of her hands and pressed it to his chest.

"What's wrong?"

"He wants me to do something I don't want to do."

"Such as?"

"Take a job I don't like."

That wasn't welcome news. In the three weeks they'd been in Greece, on the island of Ewoia, they had slipped into a lazy routine that felt like heaven. The days were often cloudy but definitely warmer than in Paris, with highs often reaching into the seventies. The nights got cold, but that was all the better for cuddling in bed. Today had been almost perfect, sunny all day long, and so warm Swain had been shirtless most of the day. Now that the sun was setting, the temperature would drop like a rock, but for just a few minutes more they were comfortable.

They made love; they slept late; they ate whenever they wanted; they strolled through town. They were staying in a house on the mountain slope above the port town of Rarystos, with a spectacular view of the sea. Lily had fallen in love with the house, a simple white house with bright blue

shutters and an air of peace. She could have stayed there with him forever, though she knew the idyll would eventually end.
Evidently it was going to end sooner than she'd expected. If Swain took this job he didn't want to take-and Frank was obviously twisting his arm to take it-he would have to leave the island. She could stay here without him, of course, but the big question was: Did she want to? An even bigger question was whether she'd have the option of going with him. They still hadn't discussed the future; the present had been so very pleasant she had luxuriated in it, letting the days drift past.
"If you take the job, where will you have to go?"
"I don't know yet"
"Then how do you know you don't want it?"
"Because I won't be here." He turned in the circle of her arms and kissed her forehead. "I don't want to leave."
"Then don't."
"Frank's pulling one of those 'do it for me' deals."
"It's obvious he can't do it himself. How long will he be in rehab?"
"At least a month, he said, and God only knows how long it'll be before he's back to normal."
"If you take the job, how long will you be gone?"
He was silent, and her heart sank. A long time, then. "I could go with you," she offered, though she hadn't meant to. If he wanted her with him, he would say so. Surely he did, didn't he? He said "I love you" every day, several times a day. He showed it in the obvious enjoyment he took from being in her company, in the attention he paid to her, the way he touched her.
"You can't," he finally said. "If I take it, that won't be an option."
That was that, then. "When do you have to decide?"
"In a few days. Not right now, at any rate." He cupped her chin and turned her face up, studying her features in the growing twilight as if he were trying to memorize them. His blue eyes were darkly intent. "I don't know that I can do it," he whispered. "I don't want to leave here."
"Then don't," she said simply, and he laughed.
"I wish it was that easy. Frank… well, he's a hard man to turn down."
"Does he have something on you?"
He laughed, though the sound was more wry than humorous. "It isn't that. He's just one of those persuasive people. And I hate to admit it, but I trust

him more than any other man I know." He shivered suddenly, as the dropping temperature finally got the best of him. "Let's go inside. I can think of several things I'd rather be doing than worrying about a job I might not take."

He didn't mention it again, and because he didn't, Lily left the subject alone. They went inside to a simple supper of new potatoes cooked with dill and capers, feta cheese in olive oil, bread, and Boutari wine. They had hired a woman from town named Chrisoula to come up and do the cooking for them every day; at first she had wanted to prepare large evening meals, in the Greek tradition, but they had impressed on her that they preferred to eel more lightly ;it night She didn't like it. bill she complied. For one thing, this meant she got home at an earlier hour, where she could enjoy the long evening meal with her own family.

The house had no television, and neither of them missed it. In the three weeks they'd been there, Swain had bought a newspaper twice. That lack of outside interference had been just what she needed, a chance to just *be*, no pressures, no looking over her shoulder. On the warmer days she sat on the terrace for hours, soaking up the sunshine, letting her psyche heal. She had put one of Zia's pictures out in the bedroom where she could see it, and a day later Swain had taken the pictures of his kids out of his wallet and propped them up beside Zia's. Chrisoula thought all three kids were theirs, and they didn't disabuse her of the notion, which wouldn't have been that easy in any case, because neither of them had a good grasp of the Greek language and Chrisoula's English wasn't much better. They managed to eventually communicate on most things, but it was an effort.

That night, knowing that Swain might leave soon, Zia was very much on Lily's mind. Some days were like that, with memories ambushing her at every turn, though now she would go days without crying. And because she was thinking so much about Zia, she wondered if Swain had days when all he could think about was his kids.

"Don't you miss them?" she asked. "Chrissy and Sam?"

"So much it hurts," he readily replied. "I figure it's what I deserve."

She had known he felt guilty about his kids; she just hadn't realized he embraced the guilt. "Instead of wearing that hair shirt, why don't you move closer to them? You missed most of their childhood, but that doesn't mean you have to miss their adulthood, too. One of these days you'll be a

grandfather. Are you going to keep yourself away from your grandchildren?“
He turned his glass of wine around and around, staring thoughtfully at it. “I’d love to see more of them. I just don’t know if they’d like to see more of *me.* When I do see them, they’re friendly, they’re fond of me, but maybe that’s because I’m on the periphery of their lives. If I try to horn in… who knows?”
“So ask them.”
He gave a quick grin. “A simple answer for a simple problem, huh? To a little kid, nothing matters as much as just being there, and I let them down. That’s the hard truth.”
“Yes, it is. Are you going to let it go on being the hard truth for the rest of your life?”
He stared at her for a long minute, then drank the rest of his wine and set the glass down on the table. “Maybe not. Maybe one day I’ll work up the nerve to ask them.”
“If Zia was still alive, there’s no way I wouldn’t be there.” That was another hard truth, and implicit in the statement was *She isn’t alive, but your children are.* She didn’t know why she was hammering at him about this, except that she’d been thinking of Zia and Swain might not be here much longer for her to say this to him. They had covered this ground once before, but it didn’t seem have to sunk in with him-either that or he was so acutely aware of the mistakes he’d made that he was punishing himself by staying away from his kids. The more she knew about him, the more she suspected the latter.
“All right,” he said with a wry smile. “I’ll think about it.”
“You’ve been thinking about it for years. When are you going to *do* something?”
The smile turned to a bark of laughter. “God, you’re as bad as a snapping turtle.”
“Turtles nag?”
“The old saying is that if a snapping turtle bites you, it won’t turn loose until it hears thunder.”
She tilted her head. “I don’t think I’ve heard thunder since we’ve been here.”
“I know we haven’t. Okay, I promise I’ll call my kids.”
“And-?”

“And tell them I know I was a lousy father, but ask would they hate it if I saw them more often?” He made it a question, as if he wasn’t certain that was the correct answer, but his blue eyes were dancing.
She clapped her hands, like someone applauding a performing child.
“Smart-ass.” He was laughing aloud now, getting to his feet and taking her hand to pull her up and into his arms. “I was going to show you something special tonight, but now I think you’ll just get the same old, same old.”
If he thought that was punishment, he was way off target. Lily hid a smile as she pressed her face into his shoulder. She loved him so much she would enjoy her time with him down to the last minute, and not worry about whether or not he took this job his friend Frank wanted him to take. Wasn’t that part of what she’d just been talking to him about, making the most of your time with the people you love, because you don’t know how long that time will be?
She wouldn’t think how unlucky she was to love him and lose him. Instead she would consider herself lucky for having met him at a time in her life when she had needed him so much.
The next day was another unusually sunny day, with the temperature warming as rapidly as it cooled down at night By April, the daytime temperature would be in the nineties; by July, soaring over a hundred wouldn’t be unusual. But the weather in early January was pleasant, if sometimes a bit rainy, especially when compared to Paris at this time of year.
Chrisoula prepared them a lunch of meat patties, flavored with herbs and fried in olive oil, served on saffron rice. They ate on the terrace, enjoying the weather. Because the stones of the terrace reflected the sun’s heat, Lily wore a loose, gauzy white dress that she’d bought in town, though she had a shawl nearby in case she needed it. She liked being able to wear whatever she wanted without having to worry about whether it concealed her ankle holster, and she had embraced the island’s tourist fashions with enthusiasm. The locals probably thought she was crazy for wearing summer fashions in January, but she didn’t care. She wanted to wear sandals, and she had bought a silver anklet that made her feel feminine and carefree. She might stay on Ewoia even if Swain left, she thought. She loved it here.
“Who was your handler?” he asked abruptly, telling her that his thoughts had been far different from her lazy enjoyment of the day. “The guy who got you into the business. What was his name?”

“Mr. Rogers,” she said, smiling ironically.
He almost choked on his wine.
“He never gave me his first name, but you can bet it wasn’t Fred. It doesn’t matter; I doubt that was his real name anyway. Why are you asking?”
“I was watching you and thinking how young you look, and wondering what kind of bastard could approach a kid with a job like that”
“The kind who gets the job done, regardless.”
After lunch she napped on one of the chaises on the terrace, and woke to incredible pleasure brought by Swain’s tongue. He had lifted her skirt to her waist and removed her underwear and knelt with his head between her spread thighs. lily gasped, her body arching in delight even as she choked, “Chrisoula will see-”
“She left a few minutes ago,” Swain murmured, and gently slipped two of his fingers into her. She climaxed rapidly under that double stimulation, and was still quivering with the last spasms when he loosened his pants and covered her with his body. His penetration was smooth and slow, the fit perfect now after making love so many times during the past month. He was tender and attentive, holding off until she had climaxed a second time, then going deep and holding himself there while he shuddered with his own release.
Making love alfresco was wonderful, she thought after they had tidied themselves and she was once more completely dressed. The air had felt like silk on her skin, heightening her response. She stretched, utterly relaxed, and smiled at Swain when he brought over their glasses of wine. She took hers and he sat down on the chaise beside her legs, his warm hand sliding under her skirt to lazily caress her thigh.
“Why did Chrisoula leave so early?” she asked as she sipped the fragrant wine, thinking she hadn’t slept that long. Chrisoula hadn’t had time to prepare their dinner.
“She wanted to go to the market for something. I think.” Swain smiled. “Either that or a pig was on top of her house.”
“I’m betting it was the market.” Sometimes their attempts at communication had laughable results, but Swain threw himself into it with enthusiasm.
“Probably.” His stroking hand had worked its way down to her ankle. He played with the silver anklet, then lifted her foot and pressed a kiss to her

ankle. “We could be having the pig for dinner, though, so we’ll see how far off I was in my translation.”
“What do you want to do for the rest of the afternoon?” she asked, finishing her wine and setting the glass aside. She didn’t know that she would be able to move a muscle. Two orgasms had left her bones feeling like butter. She hated to waste such a gorgeous day, though, so if he wanted to go into Rarystos, she would make the effort.
He shook his head. “Nothing. Maybe read for a while. Sit right here and watch the bay. Count the clouds.” He patted her ankle, then stood up and walked to the terrace wall, where he stood, sipping occasionally from his own glass. She watched him, everything female in her appreciating the width of his shoulders and the narrowness? of his ass, but especially enjoying that lazy, sexy saunter of his that said this was a man who took his time at what he did. Even Chrisoula responded to him, flirting and laughing, and she was a good twenty years older. Not to mention that when she flirted, he usually had no idea what she was saying, though that in no way kept him from replying to what he thought she’d said. Lily had no idea of the exact meaning, either, but she could tell from Chrisoula’s blushes and body language that she was definitely flirting.
A feeling of great lassitude swept over her and she let her eyes close. She was so sleepy, so relaxed… she shouldn’t have had that last glass of wine… it was putting her to sleep.
She forced her eyes open, and found Swain watching her with an expression on his face that she didn’t recognize, alert and watchful, no hint of humor at all.
Fool, an inner voice said. She had been caught in exactly the same way she had caught Salvatore Nervi.
She could feel the numbness now, spreading through her body. She tried to stand up, but she barely managed to sit before collapsing back against the chaise. What could she do, anyway? She couldn’t outrun what was already inside her.
Swain came back to squat beside the chaise. “Don’t fight it,” he said gently.
“Who are you?” she managed to ask, though she could still think clearly enough to figure it out. He wasn’t a Nervi employee, so there was only one other possibility. He was CIA; whether one of their black-ops personnel or a contract agent himself; the end result was the same. Whatever his reason was for helping her with the Nervis, after that was finished, he had

completed his own mission. She had completely fallen for his act, but then she'd noticed before what a superb actor he was, and that should have been a warning. By then, however, she had already been in love with him.
"I think you know."
"Yes." Her eyelids were so heavy, and the numbness had spread to her lips. She fought for coherency. "What happens now?"
He stroked a strand of hair back from her face, his touch gentle. "You just go to sleep," he whispered. She had never heard him sound so tender before.
No pain, then. That was good. She wasn't going to die in agony. "Was it real? Any of it?" Or had every touch, every kiss, been a lie?
His eyes darkened, or she thought they did. It could be that her eyesight was fading. "It was real."
"Then…" She lost her train of thought, fought to get it back. What was she-? Yes, she remembered now. "Will you…" She could barely speak, and she couldn't see him at all. She swallowed, made an effort: "… ?"
She wasn't certain, but she thought she heard him say, "Always." She tried to reach out her hand to him, and in her mind she did. Her last thought was that she wanted to touch him.
Swain stroked her cheek, and watched a light breeze flirt with her hair. The pale strands stirred and lifted, fell back, lifted again as if they were alive. He bent down and kissed her warm lips, then sat holding her hand for a long time.
Tears burned his eyes. God damn Frank. He wouldn't listen, wouldn't budge from his original plan, and if Swain couldn't do the job, he'd by God send someone who could.
Yeah, well. If it hadn't been for the small matter of a mole that still had to be located, Swain would have told him what he could do with his fucking job. But he had the recording Blanc had gotten to him during that week of preparation for taking down the Nervi lab, and when he got back to Washington, he had that to take care of. He'd heard Lily stirring in the bedroom yesterday afternoon and hadn't been able to tell Frank everything that was going on, just the gist of what Dr. Giordano had been doing and a brief argument about what Frank wanted him to do with Lily.
He had sent Chrisoula away this afternoon because he had wanted one more time with Lily, wanted to hold her close and look into those remarkable eyes as she came, wanted to feel her arms around him.

It was over now.
He kissed her one last time, then made the call.
Soon the unmistakable *whump whump whump* of a helicopter sounded over the mountain slope. It sat down on a flat spot just off the terrace, and three men and a woman got out. They worked silently, competently, wrapping Lily and preparing her for transport. Then one of the men said to the woman, “Get the feet,” and Swain whirled on him.
“*Her* feet,” he said savagely. “She’s a woman, not a thing. And she’s a fucking patriot. If you treat her with anything but respect, I’ll rip your guts out.”
The man eyed him with consternation. “Sure, man. I didn’t mean anything by it.”
Swain clenched his fist. “I know. Just… go on.”
A few minutes later, the helicopter lifted off. Swain stood and watched it until it was a tiny black speck; then, his expression set and blank, he turned and went into the house.

Epilogue

Six months later
Lily walked down the hallway toward Dr. Shay’s office for what she hoped was the last time. Six months of intensive deprogramming, therapy, and counseling was enough. After her initial rage at waking and finding herself in custody, she had been grateful for this second chance and had been as cooperative as possible, but she was ready to leave.
The entire six months hadn’t been taken up with therapy, though. Two months in, she’d had surgery to repair that leaky, damaged valve in her heart, and recovery from that hadn’t happened overnight. She felt completely well now, but the first few weeks after the surgery had been rough, even though the cardiac surgeon had used the minimally invasive technique. Any surgery on the heart required that the heart not be beating, so she’d been placed on a heart-lung machine while the work was being done. She still felt uneasy about that, even though it was in the past.
Dr. Shay wasn’t Lily’s idea of a typical shrink, assuming there was such an animal. She was a short, chubby, jolly elf of a person, with the kindest eyes

Lily could imagine. Lily would have killed for Dr. Shay, and that was part of the reason she was still at the private clinic.
She had herself worried about whether she would ever be able to fit into a normal life, but the therapies Dr. Shay had designed had shown Lily how far she'd been from that normality. Until she had gone through those exercises that tested her impulses, she hadn't realized how ready she was to kill, how that was always-*always-her* initial reaction to confrontation. Over the years she had become very good at avoiding confrontation because of that, without ever realizing that was what she was doing. She had minimized the risk by not associating with many people.
She had gone through the exercises again and again until she retrained herself, and through many sessions with Dr. Shay until her anger and pain were more manageable. Grief was a terrible thing, but so was isolation, and she had made things worse on herself by being so isolated. She needed her family, and with Dr. Shay's encouragement she had worked up the nerve to call her mother a few weeks before. They had both cried, but Lily had felt a sense of incredible relief at once more connecting with that part of her life.
Swain was the only part of her life that she hadn't discussed with Dr. Shay. She hadn't been allowed visitors or any contact with the outside world until she'd called her mother, so it wasn't surprising that she hadn't seen him or heard from him since that day on Ewoia when she'd thought he'd killed her. She wondered if he even realized that had been what she'd thought.
She didn't know if he would get in trouble for the way he'd conducted his mission, how much the Agency even knew about it, so she simply hadn't mentioned him and neither had Dr. Shay.
She knocked on Dr. Shay's door, and a voice she didn't recognize said, "Come in."
She opened the door and stared at the man who sat behind the desk. "Come in," he repeated, smiling.
Lily entered the office and closed the door behind her. Silently she sat down in the seat she usually took.
"I'm Frank Vinay," the man said. He looked to be in his early seventies, maybe, and he had a kind face but the sharpest gaze she'd ever encountered.
She recognized the name with a sense of shock. This was the Agency's director of operations himself.
A few dots connected, and she said, "Swain's Frank?"
He nodded. "I'll admit to that."

“You were really in a car accident?”
“I really was. I don’t remember anything about it, of course, but I’ve read all the reports. It put Swain in a bind, because he found out there was a mole who was reporting to Rodrigo Nervi, but he didn’t know who it was and I was the only person he could say for sure *wasn’t* the mole, so he had no one to call. He was totally on his own with that operation-except for you, of course. Please accept your country’s thanks for what you did.”
Whatever she had expected to hear, that wasn’t it. She said, “I thought you would have me killed.”
The kind face turned somber. “After all your years of service to the country? I don’t operate that way. I read the reports, you know; I saw the signs that you were stretched thin, but I didn’t pull you in the way I should have. After you killed Salvatore Nervi, I was afraid you were going to disrupt the complete network, but I still never contemplated having you terminated unless you gave me no choice. This was my first option,” he said, indicating Dr. Shay’s office. “But I knew there was no way you would believe it if the plan was presented to you. You would either run, or kill, or both. You had to be taken, so I sent my best hunter after you. It was a fortuitous selection, because another field officer might not have worked the situation as capably as he did when circumstances changed.”
“When he found out about the mole, and I found out what was really going on at that laboratory.”
“Exactly. It was a complicated situation. When Damone Nervi discovered what his father and brother were planning, he took steps to prevent the virus from being released by hiring Averill Joubran and his wife to destroy the work, and that set the whole ball of wax into motion.”
A man as handsome as a movie star, was how Mme. Bonnet had described her friends’ visitor. That was Damone Nervi, all right.
“So he knew all along who I was, that day at the laboratory,” she murmured. “And he knew I killed his father.”
“Yes. He’s an amazing man. He wouldn’t have minded if you’d been killed in the explosion, mind you, or if one of the guards had shot you as you and Swain were leaving, but he did nothing to compromise your mission.”
He was a bigger person than she was, Lily silently admitted. She had almost lost control and attacked Dr. Giordano—but she hadn’t, she realized. That was how Damone Nervi must have felt. Hah. He *wasn’t* a bigger person, after all.

“The thing is, we may not have done any good at all,” she said. “The avian flu virus may mutate on its own, at any time.”
“That’s true, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it. But the CDC and the WHO are working hard to develop a reliable method of producing the vaccine, and if the virus mutates before that happens-” He spread his hands. “At least no one is releasing it deliberately, and making a fortune from the deaths of millions. Which brings me to another health issue,” he said, smoothly switching subjects. “How are *you* doing?”
“I feel well, finally. The surgery wasn’t a picnic, but it worked.”
“I’m glad. Swain was there, you know.”
She felt as if he’d thrown a body block at her. “What?” The word came out as a weak gasp.
“For your surgery. He wanted to be there. When you were placed on the heart-lung machine, he almost fainted.”
“How… how do you know that?” She almost couldn’t speak, so profound was her shock.
“I was there, too, of course. I was… concerned. It wasn’t a minor surgery. He saw you in recovery, but had to leave before you were awake.”
Or he’d *wanted* to leave before she was awake. She didn’t know how to take all this in, or what to think.
“You can leave here anytime you want,” Mr. Vinay continued. “Do you know what you want to do?”
“See my mother and sister, first of all. After that… I don’t know. I need a new line of work,” she said wryly.
“If there’s any field in which you’d like to be trained…We can always use someone who’s dedicated and resourceful, and loyal.”
“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll have to think about it. I honestly have no idea what I want to do.”
“Maybe I can help out a little,” he said, getting to his feet with some difficulty. He used a cane now, she saw, leaning his weight heavily on it. “He’s waiting. Do you want to see him?”
There was no need to ask who was waiting. Her heart leaped, and her pulse began racing. “Yes,” she said without hesitation.
He smiled. “I’m glad. I didn’t know if you understood how difficult things were for him.”
“I didn’t at first,” she said honestly. “I was so shocked to realize… but then I began to think.”

He laboriously made his way around the desk, and patted her shoulder.
“Have a good life, Liliane.”
“I will, thank you… Mr. Rogers.”
Frank Vinay smiled, and left the office. Ten seconds later, the door opened again and Lucas Swain stood there, as good-looking as always, but now he wasn’t laughing. The expression in his blue eyes was almost… scared.
“Lily,” he began. “I-”
“I know,” she interrupted, and with a laugh launched herself at him. His reflexes were excellent; he opened his arms and caught her.

To Die For (2005)

To Die For is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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Dedication

This is to my dear high-maintenance friend, who killed a monitor in just such a fashion, and who provided me with so much inspiration for this story. I won't name names—this time.

Chapter One

Most people don't take cheerleading seriously. If they only knew . . .
All-American girl, that's me. If you look at the pictures in my high school yearbooks, you'll see a girl with long blond hair, a tan, and a wide grin that shows off her perfect white teeth, courtesy of thousands of dollars spent on braces and fluoride washes. The teeth, that is, not the hair and the tan. I had the effortless confidence of the upper-middle-class American teenage princess; nothing bad could happen to me. After all, I was a cheerleader.
I admit it. Actually, I'm proud of it. A lot of people think cheerleaders are both brainless and snooty, but that's only people who have never been a

cheerleader. I forgive them their ignorance. Cheerleading is hard work, a demanding blend of skill and strength, and it's dangerous. People frequently get injured, sometimes even killed, doing the cheers. Usually it's girls getting injured: guys are the tossers; girls are the tossees. Technically we're called "flyers," which is really silly because of course we can't fly. We're *tossed.* The tossees are the ones who fall on their heads and break their necks.

Well, I never broke my neck, but I did break my left arm, and my collarbone, and dislocated my right knee once. I can't count the sprains and bruises. But I've got great balance, strong legs, and I can still do a backflip and the splits. Plus, I went to college on a cheerleading scholarship. Is this a cool country, or what?

So, anyway, my name is Blair Mallory. Yes, I know: It's a fluff name. It goes with the cheerleading and the blond hair. I can't help it; it's what my parents named me. My father's name is Blair, so I guess I'm just glad they didn't tag me as a junior. I don't think I would have been Homecoming Queen if my name had been Blair Henry Mallory, Jr. I'm happy enough with Blair Elizabeth, thank you. I mean, show-business people are naming their kids things like *Homer,* for God's sake. When those kids grow up and kill their parents, I think all the cases should be ruled justifiable homicide.

Which brings up the murder I saw.

Actually it doesn't, but at least it's kind of logical. The connection, I mean. And bad things do too happen to all-American princess cheerleaders. I got married, didn't I?

That kind of ties in to the murder, too. I married Jason Carson right out of college, so for four years my name was Blair Carson. I should have known better than to marry someone whose first and last name rhymed, but some things you learn only from experience. Jason was big into politics: the student council, campaigning for his dad the state congressman, his uncle the mayor, blah blah blah. Jason was so good-looking he could literally make girls stutter. Too bad he knew it. He had thick, sun-kissed hair (that's poetic for *blond*), chiseled features, dark blue eyes, and a body kept in excellent shape. Think John Kennedy, Jr. The body, I mean.

So there we were, the poster couple for blond hair and white teeth. And my body was pretty fine, too, if I do say so myself. What else could we do but get married?

Four years later, we got unmarried, to our mutual great relief. After all, we had nothing in common but our looks, and I really don't think that's a good basis for marriage, do you? Jason wanted to have a baby so we'd look like the all-American couple while he campaigned to become the youngest state congressman, which really, if you want to know, irritated the hell out of me because he'd refused to have a baby before and now all of a sudden it was a campaign plus? I told him to kiss my ass. Not that he hadn't kissed it before, but the context was different, you know?

I made out like a bandit in the divorce settlement. Maybe I should feel guilty; I mean, it isn't exactly a feminist thing to do. Stand on your own two feet, make it with your own accomplishments, that kind of stuff. And actually I do believe in all that; I just wanted to make Jason suffer. I wanted to punish him. Why? Because I caught him kissing my youngest sister, Jennifer, on New Year's Day while the rest of the family was in the den totally zonking out on bowl games. Jenni was seventeen at the time.

Well, being furious doesn't slow me down any. When I saw them in the dining room, I tiptoed away and found one of the disposable cameras we'd been using that day to record the occasion for Jason's campaign album—family stuff, celebrating a holiday, pigging out around a table loaded with all sorts of artery-clogging goodies, watching football. He liked to have pictures of my family get-togethers because my family is so much better looking than his. Jason used any edge he could get in a campaign.

Anyway, I snapped a really good picture of Jason and Jenni, with flash and all, so he knew I had him by the short hairs. What was he going to do, chase me down and tackle me in front of my father, and wrestle the camera away from me? Not likely. For one thing, he'd have to explain, and he knew he couldn't count on me to go along with his story. For another, my father would have drop-kicked him over the televison for daring to harm a hair on his namesake's head. Did I also mention that I'm Daddy's girl?

So I filed for divorce, and Jason gave me everything I asked for, on one condition: that I give him the photograph and negative of him and Jenni. Well, sure, why not? It isn't as if I hadn't had more than one copy made. Maybe Jason thought I was too stupid to do that. It never pays to underestimate how dirty your competition will play. For that reason, I really don't think Jason will do well in politics.

I also told Mom that Jenni had let Jason kiss her. You didn't think I'd let the backstabbing little hussy get away with it, did you? Not that I don't love

Jenni, but she's the baby of the family, and she thinks she should get anything and everything she wants. Occasionally she has to be shown differently. I've also noticed that *her* name rhymes, too: Jenni Mallory. It's really *Jennifer,* but she's never been called that, so it doesn't count. I don't know what it is about rhyming names, but they're bad news for me. The difference is, I forgave Jenni, because she's blood. No way in hell was I forgiving Jason.

So Mom took care of Jenni, who tearfully apologized and promised to be a good girl or at least show better taste, and my middle sister, Siana, who was in law school, handled the negotiations with Jason. The name "Siana" is supposedly the Welsh form of "Jane," but take it from me, the name really means "man-eating shark with dimples." That's Siana.

With the Mallory women in action, the divorce went through in record time without Daddy ever finding out exactly why we were all mad at Jason. Not that he cared; if we were mad, then he was mad, too, on our behalf. Wasn't that sweet of him?

What I got from Jason in the divorce settlement was a very nice little chunk of change, thank you. I also got the red Mercedes convertible, of course, but the money was the most important because of what I did with it. I bought a gym. A fitness center. After all, you go with your strength, and I know all about staying in shape. Siana suggested calling it "Blair's Beautiful Butts," but I thought that would limit the clientele and maybe give people the impression I also did liposuction. Mom came up with "Great Bods" and we all liked it, so that's what the former Halloran's Gym became.

I blew a bundle on remodeling and refurbishing, but when I was finished, the place practically screamed "high class." The mirrors were polished; the equipment was the best available; the bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers were completely redone; two saunas and a lap pool were added, plus a private room for massages. A member of Great Bods had a choice of yoga, aerobics, Tae Bo, or kick-boxing classes. If the yoga didn't mellow you out, then you could go kick ass without ever leaving the building. I also insisted all of my staff be trained in CPR, because you never know when an out-of-shape executive with high cholesterol will hit the weight machines in an effort to get back his teenage body overnight so he can impress his new secretary, and there you go: heart attack for the asking. Besides, it was an impressive thing to see in an ad.

All the money and the CPR training was worth it. Within a month of opening our doors, Great Bods was going great guns. I sold memberships by the month or by the year—with a discount if you paid for a year of course, which was smart because it hooked you in and most people will use the facility then because they don't want to waste their money. Cars in the parking lot give the perception of success, and, well, you know what they say about perception. Anyway, success breeds like a bunny rabbit. I was thrilled all the way down to my leg warmers—which some of those not in the know consider *passé*, but they're seriously out of touch with what makes your legs look great. High heels top the list, but leg warmers are a close second. I wear both. Not together, of course. Puh-leeze.

Great Bods is open from six in the morning until nine at night, making it convenient for anyone to fit a visit into his or her schedule. My yoga classes languished, at first, with only a few women enrolled, so I hired some buff and handsome college football players to attend yoga classes for a week. The weightlifting and Tae Bo crowd, macho to the teeth, rushed to do whatever it was my handsome young guys did to stay in such good shape, and the women rushed to be in the same class with those same young guys. By the time the week was over, yoga enrollment had quadrupled. Once the macho crowd discovered how tough yoga was, and its benefits, most of them remained—and so did the women.

Did I mention I took some psychology classes in college?

So here I am, several years later: thirty years old and the owner of a successful business that keeps me busy but also makes very nice profits. I traded the red convertible in for a white one, because I wanted to lower my profile a tad. It isn't smart for a single woman living alone to attract too much attention. Besides, I wanted a new car. Love that smell. Yes, I know I could have bought a Ford or something, but it really griped Jason's ass that I drove around town in a Mercedes convertible, which he couldn't do now because it would be bad for his campaign image. He'll probably die begrudging me that Mercedes. I hope.

Anyway, I didn't park the convertible in the public parking lot in front, because I didn't want dings all up and down the car. I had a private parking lot paved in back of the gym for the staff, with our own, much more convenient entrance; my reserved parking slot—which was plenty big so no other cars could get close—was right in front of the door. Being the owner has its perks. Being a gracious owner, however, I also had a large metal

awning installed completely across the back of the gym, so we could park under it and be sheltered coming and going to our cars. When it rained, everyone was very appreciative.

I'm the boss, but I don't believe in lording it over my employees. Except for the parking slot, I didn't claim any special privileges. Well, I guess signing their paychecks gave me a huge advantage, and I *did* handle all the money and make all the final decisions, but I took care of them. We had a nice medical insurance package that included dental, I paid them a decent wage—plus they were free to teach private classes on their off days for extra money—and I gave them plenty of vacation time. For that reason, I didn't have a big turnover in staff. Some turnover is inevitable, because lives change and people move away, things like that, but I seldom had anyone leaving for another job in the same field. Continuity in the staff is good for business. Clients like to feel they know their trainers and teachers.

Closing time was nine P.M. and I usually stayed to lock up so my staff could get home to their families or social life or whatever. Don't take that as a sign that *I* have no social life. True, I don't date as much now as I did right after my divorce, but Great Bods takes a lot of my time and is important to me, so I take care of the business. And I get creative with my dates: we'll go for lunch, which is good if the guy turns out to be not as great as I'd hoped, because "lunch" is finite. You meet, you eat, you leave. That way if I don't care for my date, I don't have to fend him off or make lame excuses for not inviting him in. Lunch is a good concept, dating-wise. If I *do* like him, then other options open up, such as a real date after hours or on Sunday, when Great Bods is closed.

Anyway, on the night in question—I did mention that I witnessed a murder, didn't I?—I locked up, as usual. I was a bit late, because I'd been working on my gymnastic skills; you never know when you might need to do a backflip. I'd worked up a good sweat, so I had then showered and washed my hair before grabbing my stuff and heading toward the employees' door. I turned out the lights, then opened the door and stepped outside under the awning.

Oh, wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. I haven't explained about Nicole. Nicole "call me Nikki" Goodwin was a thorn in my side. She joined Great Bods about a year ago and immediately began driving me crazy, though it took me a couple of months to notice. Nicole had one of those breathy little voices that make strong men melt. It made *me* want to strangle her. What *is*

it about that fake Marilyn Monroe coo that men seem to like? Some men, anyway. Nicole laid on the false sweetness, too, when she talked; it's a wonder everyone around her wasn't bouncing off the walls on a sugar high. At least she didn't do the finger-twisting-in-the-hair thing.

But that was because *I* don't do it—unless I'm ragging someone, that is. Generally I'm more professional.

See, Nicole was a copycat. And I'm the cat she copied.

First it was the hair. Her natural color was kind of blondish, but within two weeks of joining Great Bods she went golden blond, with pale streaks. Like mine, in fact. I didn't really notice at the time because her hair wasn't as long as mine; it was only later when all the little details started falling into place that I realized her hair was the same color as mine. Then she started pulling it into a ponytail on top of her head to keep it out of her way while she worked out. Guess who also pulled her hair up like that while working out?

I don't wear much makeup while at work because it's a waste of time; if a girl glows enough, the makeup disappears. Besides, I've got good skin and nice dark brows and lashes, so I don't worry about going bare-faced. I do, however, have a fondness for glistening lotion that makes my skin take on a subtle sheen. Nicole asked me what kind of lotion I used and, like an idiot, I told her. The next day, Nicole's skin had a sheen.

Her workout clothes began to look like mine: leotards and leg warmers while I'm actually in the gym, with yoga pants pulled on when I was cruising around overseeing operations. Nicole began to wear leotards and leg warmers, otherwise bouncing around in yoga pants. And I do mean bouncing. I don't believe she owned a bra. Unfortunately, she was one of those women who *should.* My male members (I love saying that) seemed to like the spectacle, but all that jiggling and swaying gave me vertigo, so if I had to talk to her, I concentrated on maintaining eye contact.

Then she got a white convertible.

It wasn't a Mercedes, it was a Mustang, but still—it was white, it was a convertible. How much more obvious could she get?

Maybe I should have been flattered, but I wasn't. It wasn't as if Nicole liked me and was copying me out of admiration. I think she hated my guts. She overdid the fake sweetness when she talked to me, you know? In Nicole-speak, "Oh, honey, that's just the greatest pair of earrings!" really meant "I want to rip them out of your ears and leave bleeding stumps, you bitch."

One of the other gym members—a woman, of course—even commented once, after watching Nicole sashay away, body parts bouncing, “That woman would like to slit your throat, pour gasoline over you, set you on fire, and leave you lying in the gutter. Then she’d come back and dance on your ashes after the fire was out.”

See? I’m not just making it up.

Because I was open to the public, I pretty much had to allow anyone who wanted to join admittance, which was generally okay, though perhaps I should have made some of the more hairy members submit to electrolysis first, but there was a proviso in the membership agreement—which all members signed upon joining—that if three other members complained about said member’s behavior, dressing-room etiquette, or a number of other transgressions, in any single calendar year, then the one being complained about wouldn’t be allowed to rejoin when his/her membership expired.

Being the professional that I am, I wouldn’t have booted Nicole’s ass out just because she annoyed the hell out of me. It griped me, having to be that professional, but I managed. Being Nicole, however, she regularly annoyed, insulted, or generally pissed off just about every woman she dealt with during the day. She made messes in the locker room and left them for others to clean up. She made snide remarks to other women who weren’t in the best of shape, and hogged the machines even though there was supposed to be a thirty-minute limit to an individual session.

The complaints were mostly in the form of bitching, but a few women came up to me with fire in their eyes and insisted on filing a formal complaint. Thank you, Jesus.

The number of filed complaints in Nicole’s file was way more than three when her membership expired, and I was able to tell her—gently, of course—that her membership wasn’t open for renewal and she should clean out her locker.

The resulting screech probably scared cows grazing in the next county. She called me a bitch, a whore, a slut, and that was just as a warm-up. The shrill invective got louder and louder, drawing the attention of just about everyone in Great Bods, and I think she would have slugged me if she hadn’t known I was in better shape than she was and would definitely slug her in return, only harder. She settled for sweeping everything off the countertop—a couple of potted plants, membership applications, a couple

of pens—onto the floor and flounced out with the parting shot that her lawyer would be in touch with me.
Fine. Whatever. I'd match my lawyer against hers any day. Siana was young, but she was lethal, and she didn't mind fighting dirty. We get that from our mother.
The women who had gathered to watch Nicole's tantrum broke into applause as the door closed behind her. The men merely looked bewildered.
I was pissed because Nicole hadn't cleaned out her locker, which meant I'd have to let her back inside once more to retrieve her belongings. I thought about asking Siana if I could insist on Nicole making an appointment to empty her locker, and having a cop present to both witness the removal of her personal belongings and prevent another tantrum.
The rest of the day passed in a golden glow. I was free from Nicole! I didn't even mind cleaning up the mess she'd made, because she was gone, gone, gone.
Okay. That's the deal with Nicole.
Back to me leaving that night by the back entrance, et cetera, et cetra.
The streetlight on the corner illuminated the parking lot, but the shadows were deep. A steady drizzle was falling, which made me mutter a swear word because the street crud would get my car dirty, and the night was turning misty on top of that. Rain and fog are not a good combination.
Thank goodness I don't have curly hair, so I never have to worry about frizz in circumstances like these.
If you ever have the opportunity to be an eyewitness to a newsworthy event, you at least want to look your best.
I had locked the door and turned around before I noticed the car at the back corner of the parking lot. It was a white Mustang. Nicole was waiting for me, damn it.
Instantly alert and faintly alarmed—after all, she *had* turned violent earlier—I stepped back so the wall was at my back and she couldn't catch me from behind. I looked in both directions, expecting her to come at me from out of the shadows, but nothing happened and I looked at the Mustang again, wondering if she was sitting in it waiting for me to leave. What was she going to do, follow me? Try to run me off the road? Pull alongside me and fire some shots? I didn't put anything past her.
The rain and fog made it impossible to tell if anyone was in the Mustang, but then I made out a figure standing on the far side of the car, and I saw

blond hair. I reached into my bag for my cell phone, and turned it on. If she made one step toward me, I was calling 911.
Then the figure on the far side of the Mustang wavered and moved, and a bigger, darker shadow separated itself from Nicole. A man. Oh, hell, she'd brought someone to beat me up.
I punched in the 9 and the first 1.
A loud crack of noise made me jump a foot high, and my first thought was that lightning had struck nearby. But there hadn't been a blinding flash, nor did the ground shake. Then I realized the noise was probably a gunshot, and I was probably the target, and I squeaked in panic as I dropped to all fours behind the car. Actually, I was trying to scream, but all that would come out was this Minnie Mouse noise that would have embarrassed me if I hadn't been scared half to death. Nicole hadn't brought muscle; she'd brought a hit man.
I'd dropped my cell phone, and in the dark I couldn't see it. It didn't help that I was trying to watch all around me and so I couldn't really take the time to look for the phone. I just began sweeping the pavement with my hand, trying to locate it. Oh, shit, what if the hit man was coming over to see if he'd hit me with that first shot? I mean, I'd dropped to the ground, so thinking I'd been hit was reasonable. Should I lie flat and play dead? Crawl under the car? Try to get back inside the building and lock the door?
I heard a car engine start, and I looked up just as a dark four-door sedan cruised up the narrow side street and out of sight alongside the building. I heard it slow and stop at the intersection with the four-lane street, Parker, in front, then pull out into the fairly sparse traffic. I couldn't tell which way it turned.
Was that the hit man? If anyone else had been in the parking lot, surely he or she had heard the shot and therefore wouldn't be driving sedately away. The only sedate driver would be the shooter, right? Anyone else would have been getting the hell out of there, just like I desperately wanted to do.
Typical of Nicole to hire a sorry excuse for a hit man; he hadn't even checked to make certain I was dead. But even if the hit man had left, where was Nicole? I waited and listened, but there weren't any footsteps, nor the sound of the Mustang starting.
I got down on my stomach and peeked around one of my front tires. The white Mustang was still sitting in the parking lot, but there wasn't any sign of Nicole.

Nor were there any passersby rushing to investigate the shot or see if anyone was hurt. Great Bods was located in a good district, with small shops and restaurants nearby, but no houses—and the shops and restaurants catered mostly to the surrounding businesses, so all of the restaurants closed by six and the shops not long afterward. If anyone leaving Great Bods later than that wanted a sandwich, the closest place was about five blocks away. Until now, I hadn't realized how isolated that made the employees' parking lot at closing time.

No one else had heard the shot. I was on my own.

I had two choices. My car keys were in my pocket. I had two key rings because the sheer number of the keys I needed for the gym made the ring too bulky to carry around while I did errands or shopped. I could get to my car keys without delay, unlock the car with the remote, and hop in before Nicole could get to me—unless she was standing right on the other side of my car, which I didn't think she was, but anything was possible. But a car, especially a convertible, didn't feel substantial enough to hold off a psycho copycat. What if she was the one with the gun? A ragtop won't stop a bullet.

My other choice was to fish the big set of gym keys out of my bag, feel for the door key, unlock the door, and get inside. That would take more time, but I'd be much safer behind a locked door.

Well, I guess there was a third option, which was to look for Nicole and try to get the jump on her, and I might have if I'd known for certain she didn't have the gun. I didn't know, though, so no way was I playing hero. I may be blond, but I'm not stupid.

Also, fighting like that will break at least two fingernails. It's a given.

So I felt around in my bag until I located my keys. The key ring had a thingamabob in the middle that kept the keys from sliding completely around, so they were always in order. The door key was the first one to the left of the middle thingie. I isolated it, then, staying low, duck-walked backward to the door. The motion looks really awful but is a great exercise for the thighs and butt.

No one jumped out at me. There wasn't any sound at all except for the distant noise of occasional traffic over on Parker, and that was somehow spookier than if she had leaped, shrieking, over the roof of my car at me. Not that I thought Nicole could jump that far, unless her gymnastic skills were way, *way* better than she had let on, and I knew better than that

because she was the type to show off. She couldn't even do a split, and if she'd tried to do a backflip, the weight of her boobs would have dumped her on her face.
God, I wished she'd tried a backflip at least once.
My hands were shaking only a little—okay, more than a little—but I managed to unlock the door on the first try. I practically shot through the opening, and really, I wish I had given myself another inch or two of clearance because I bruised my right arm on the doorjamb. But then I was inside, and I slammed the door and turned the dead bolt, then crawled away in case she shot through the door.
I always leave a couple of low-wattage lights burning at night, but they're both in front. The light switch for the back hallway was just inside the door, of course, and no way was I going so close to the door. Because I couldn't see where I was going, I continued to crawl along the hallway, feeling my way past the female employees' bathroom—the men's room was on the other side of the hallway—then the break room, and finally reached the third door, which was my office.
I felt like a base runner sliding into home. Safe!
Now that there were walls and a locked door between me and the psycho-bitch, I stood up and turned on the overhead lights, then picked up the phone and angrily jabbed 911. If she thought I wouldn't have her arrested for this, she had seriously underestimated how thoroughly pissed I was.

Chapter Two

A black-and-white pulled, lights flashing, to a stop in the front parking lot exactly four minutes and twenty-seven seconds later. I know because I timed them. When I tell a 911 operator that someone is shooting at me, I expect fast service from the police department my taxes help support, and I had decided that anything under five minutes was reasonable. There's a little bit of diva in me that I try to keep bitch-slapped into submission, because it's true that people are more cooperative if you aren't snapping their heads off (go figure), and I make it a point to be as nice to people as I can—my ex-husband excluded—but all bets are off when I fear for my life. Not that I was hysterical or anything. I didn't charge out the front door and throw myself into the arms of the boys in blue—I wanted to, but they

emerged from their patrol car with their hands on their pistol butts, and I suspected they'd shoot at me, too, if I ran at them. I'd had enough of that for one night, so though I turned on the lights and unlocked the front door, I stayed just inside the door, where they could see me but I was protected from any lurking psycho-bitch. Also, the drizzle had turned into rain and I didn't want to get wet.

I was calm. I wasn't jumping up and down and shrieking. Granted, the adrenaline and stress had caught up with me and I was shaking from head to toe, and I really wanted to call Mom, but I toughed it out and didn't even cry.

"We have a report of shots being fired at this location, ma'am," one of the cops said as I stepped back and let them enter. His alert gaze was studying every detail of the empty reception area, probably searching for people with weapons. He looked to be in his late twenties, with a buzz cut and a thick neck that told me he worked out. He wasn't one of my clients, though, because I knew them all. Maybe I could show him around the facilities while he was here, after they had arrested Nicole's ass and hauled her off to the psych ward. Hey, never miss an opportunity to expand your client base, right?

"Just one shot," I said. I held out my hand. "I'm Blair Mallory, and I own Great Bods."

I don't think many people properly introduce themselves to cops, because both of them looked taken aback. The other cop looked even younger, a baby cop, but he recovered first and actually shook my hand. "Ma'am," he said politely, then took a little notebook out of his pocket and wrote down my name. "I'm Officer Barstow, and this is Officer Spangler."

"Thank you for coming," I said, giving them my best smile. Yes, I was still shaking, but good manners are good manners.

They were subtly less wary, since I was obviously not armed. I was wearing a midriff-baring pink halter-top and black yoga pants, so I didn't even have any pockets where I might hide anything. Office Spangler removed his hand from his pistol. "What's going on?" he asked.

"This afternoon I had some trouble with a client, Nicole Goodwin"—her name was dutifully noted in Officer Barstow's little notebook—"when I refused to renew her membership based on numerous complaints filed by other members. She became violent, knocked things off the desk, called me names, things like that—"

“Did she strike you?” Spangler asked.
“No, but she was waiting for me tonight when I locked up. Her car was in the parking lot in back, where the employees park. It was still there when I called nine-one-one, though she’s probably gone by now. I could see her and someone else, I think a man, by her car. I heard a shot and dropped to the ground behind my car, then someone—I think the man—drove off, but Nicole stayed, or at least her car did. I stayed low, got back inside the building, and called nine-one-one.”
“Are you sure it was a gunshot you heard?”
“Yes, of course.” Please. This was the south, North Carolina, specifically. Of course I knew how gunshots sounded. I had even shot a .22 rifle myself. Grampie—my grandfather on my mother’s side—used to take me with him squirrel hunting when we visited them in the country. He died from a heart attack when I was ten, and no one ever took me squirrel hunting again. Still, that isn’t a sound you forget, even if a television program weren’t reminding you every few seconds.
Now, cops don’t go blithely walking up to a car where supposedly an armed psycho-bitch is sitting. After ascertaining that the white Mustang was indeed still parked out back, Officers Barstow and Spangler talked into their cute little radios that were attached to their shoulders somehow—Velcro, maybe—and very shortly another black-and-white unit arrived, from which emerged Officers Washington and Vyskosigh. I had gone to school with DeMarius Washington, and he gave me a brief smile before his chiseled dark face once more set into businesslike lines. Vyskosigh was short and broad, mostly bald, and he was Not From Around Here, which is how southerners describe Yankees. To a southerner, that phrase explains everything, from taste in food and clothing to manners.
I was told to stay inside—no problem there—while the four cautiously went out into the darkness and rain to ask Nicole what the hell she was doing.
I was so very obedient—which shows how rattled I was—that I was still standing in exactly the same spot when Officer Vyskosigh came back inside and gave me a very sharp once-over. I was a bit taken aback. This just wasn’t the time for ogling, you know?
“Ma’am,” he said politely, “would you like to sit down?”
“Yes, I would,” I replied, just as politely, and sat down in one of the visitors’ chairs. I wondered what was going on outside. How much longer could this take?

After a few more minutes, more cars arrived outside, lights flashing. My parking lot was beginning to look like a cop convention. Good Lord, couldn't four cops handle Nicole? They'd had to call in reinforcements? She must be even more psycho than I'd realized. I've heard that when people go nuts, they have superhuman strength. Nicole was definitely nuts. I had a mental picture of her tossing cops left and right as she strode toward me, and wondered if I should barricade myself inside my office.

Officer Vyskosigh didn't look as if he would let me do the barricade thing. In fact, I was beginning to think Officer Vyskosigh wasn't so much protecting me—as I'd originally thought—as *guarding* me. As in, making sure I didn't do . . . something.

Uh-oh.

Various scenarios began racing through my mind. If he was here to prevent me from doing something, what could that something be? Peeing? Paperwork? Both of which I did actually need to do, which is why they were first on my mental list, but I doubted the police department was interested in either of them. At least I hoped Officer Vyskosigh wasn't interested, particularly in the first item.

I didn't want to go there, so I jerked my thoughts back on track.

Neither were they concerned *I* might suddenly go berserk, rush out, and attack Nicole before they could stop me. I'm not the violent type, unless I'm extremely provoked; what's more, if any of them had been paying the least attention to me, they'd have noticed that I had a fresh manicure—the color was Iced Poppy, which was my newest favorite color. My hands looked really nice, if I do say so myself. Nicole wasn't worth a broken nail, so obviously she was safe from me.

By now it must be fairly clear that I can mentally dance around a subject for pretty much eternity, if there's something I really don't want to think about. I really didn't want to think about why Officer Vyskosigh was standing guard over me. I really, *really* didn't.

Unfortunately, some things are just too big to ignore, and the truth cut into my mental do-si-do. The shock was almost like a physical blow; I actually jerked back in my chair.

"Oh, my God. That shot wasn't fired at *me,* was it?" I blurted. "Nicole—The man shot at her, didn't he? He shot—" *Her,* I started to say, but instead nausea welled hot and insistent in my throat and I had to swallow, hard. My ears started ringing and I realized I was about to do something ungraceful,

such as fall out of the chair flat on my face, so I quickly bent over and put my head between my knees, and took deep breaths.
“Are you all right?” Office Vyskosigh asked, his voice barely audible above the ringing in my ears. I waved a hand at him to let him know I was conscious, and concentrated on breathing. In, out. In, out. I tried to pretend I was in a yoga class.
The ringing in my ears began to fade. I heard the front door open, heard multiple footsteps.
“She okay?” someone asked.
I waved my hand again. “Just give me a minute,” I managed to say, though the words were directed at the floor. Another thirty seconds of controlled breathing pushed the nausea away, and cautiously I sat up.
The newcomers, two men, were dressed in street clothes, and they were each peeling off plastic gloves. Their clothes were damp from the rain, and their wet shoes had made tracks on my nice shiny floor. I glimpsed something red and wet on one glove, and the room spun around me. Quickly I bent back over.
Okay, I’m not usually such a fragile flower, but I hadn’t had anything to eat since lunch and the time now had to be ten o’clock or even later, so my blood sugar was probably low.
“Do you need a medic?” one of the men asked.
I shook my head. “I’ll be okay, but I’d be grateful if one of you would get me something to drink from the refrigerator in the break room.” I pointed in the general direction. “It’s back there, past my office. There should be a soft drink, or a bottle of sweet tea.”
Officer Vyskosigh started in that direction, but one of the other men said, “Wait. I want to check that entrance.”
So off he went, and Vyskosigh remained where he was. The other newcomer sat down beside me. I didn’t like his shoes. I had a good view of them, since I was still bent over. They were black wingtips, the shoe equivalent of a polyester housedress. I’m sure there are really good quality black wingtips out there, but the style is awful. I don’t know why men like them. Anyway, this guy’s wingtips were wet, with water actually beaded on them. The hems of his pants legs were damp, too.
“I’m Detective Forester,” he began.
Cautiously I raised my head a little, and held out my right hand. “I’m Blair Mallory.” I almost said, *Pleased to meet you*, which of course I wasn’t, at

least not under these circumstances.
Like Officer Barstow, he took my hand and gave it one brief shake. I might not have liked his shoes, but he had a nice handshake, neither too tight nor too limp. You can tell a lot about a man by the way he shakes hands.
“Ma’am, can you tell me what went on here tonight?”
He had manners, too. I eased into an upright position. The red-stained plastic gloves were nowhere in sight, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I launched into a replay of what I’d told Officers Barstow and Spangler; the other man returned with a bottle of sweet tea and even twisted the cap off for me before handing it over. I interrupted myself long enough to say thank you and take a long swallow of the cold tea, then resumed the tale.
When I was finished, Detective Forester introduced the other man—Detective MacInnes—and we did the social thing again. Detective MacInnes pulled one of the visitors’ chairs around so that he was sitting at an angle to me. He was a tad older than Detective Forester, a little heavier, with graying hair and a heavy beard shadow. But though he looked chunky, I got the impression he was solid rather than soft.
“When you unlocked the back door and stepped out, why didn’t the person you saw with Ms. Goodwin see you?” he asked.
“I turned off the hall light when I opened the door.”
“How can you see what you’re doing, if you turn off the light?”
“It’s kind of a simultaneous thing,” I said. “I guess sometimes the light is still on for a split second when I open the door, and sometimes it isn’t. Tonight, I locked the dead bolt after my last employee left, because I stayed late and I don’t want just anyone walking in. So, my keys are in my right hand, and I used my left to unlock the dead bolt and open the door while I’m turning out the lights with the edge of my hand.” I made a downward motion with my right hand, showing him how I did it. You have something in your hands, that’s how you do it. Everyone does it that way. If you have hands, that is, and most people do, right? Some people don’t, and I guess they use whatever they can, but I obviously had hands—Never mind. It’s that mental dance thing again. I took a deep breath and brought my mind back to order. “It depends on the exact timing, but the odds are that half the time there aren’t any lights on when I open the door. Want me to show you?”
“Maybe later,” Detective MacInnes said. “What happened after you opened the door?”

“I stepped out, locked the door, and turned around. That’s when I saw the Mustang.”
“You didn’t see it before?”
“No. My car is right in front of the door, plus when I step out, I’m already turning back to lock it.”
He asked question after question, nitpicking details, and I answered patiently. I told him how I’d hit the ground when I heard the shot, and showed him the dirt stains on my clothes. That was also when I noticed that I’d skinned the palm of my left hand. I wish someone would explain to me how something I hadn’t even noticed before began stinging like hell the moment I *did* notice it. I frowned at my palm, and picked at the loosened skin. “I need to wash my hands,” I said, interrupting the endless questions. Both detectives looked at me with cop eyes. “Not yet,” MacInnes finally said. “I’d like to get this interview finished.”
Okay, fine. I understood. Nicole was dead, we’d had an altercation earlier in the day, and I was the only one there. They had to cover all bases, and on the face of things I was first base, so they were covering me.
I suddenly thought of my cell phone. “Oh, I meant to tell you; I was in the middle of dialing nine-one-one when I heard the shot and hit the dirt, and I dropped my cell phone. I felt around but couldn’t find it. Could you have someone check around my car? It has to be there.”
MacInnes nodded to Vyskosigh, and the officer took himself off, flashlight in hand. He returned just a few moments later with my cell phone, which he gave to Detective MacInnes. “It was lying facedown under the car,” he said.
The detective looked at the little screen on the phone. When you start to make a call, the screen lights up, but it doesn’t stay lit; after thirty seconds or so—and I’m guessing, because, while I might time the arrival of cops, I haven’t yet timed the light on my cell phone—the screen goes dark, but if you’ve actually pressed any numbers, they stay on the screen. Sitting in my well-lit reception area, the numbers would be visible even without the backlighting.
I was tired, I was shaken up, and I was sick at the thought of Nicole being shot basically right in front of me. I wanted them to hurry up and get past first base—me—and move on so I could go somewhere private and cry. So I said, “I know I’m the only one here and all you have is my word that things happened the way I said, but isn’t there something you can do to speed this up? A lie detector test, maybe?” That wasn’t the best idea I’ve

ever had, because I felt as if my heart were trying to run the Kentucky Derby, which is bound to screw up a polygraph. I tried to think of something else to distract the detectives, in case they decided that, yeah, a polygraph administered on the spot might be just the ticket. I don't know if they do things like that, but I didn't want to take the chance. Besides, I've watched cop shows on television, and I know they have ways of proving if someone has fired a gun. "Or how about one of those thingie tests?"
Detective MacInnes sucked in one cheek, which made his face look lopsided. " 'Thingie test'?" he asked in a careful tone of voice.
"You know. On my hands. So you can tell if I've fired a gun."
"Ohhh," he said knowingly, nodding his head and shooting a quick, quelling glance at his partner, who had made a muffled noise. "*That* thingie test. You mean for gunpowder residue?"
"That's it," I said. Yes, I know they were trying hard not to laugh at me, but sometimes the dumb-blond stereotype has its uses. The less threatening I could appear, the better.
Well, Detective MacInnes took me at my word. A crime scene technician came with a tackle box full of stuff, and did an Instant Shooter I.D. test, rubbing my palms with fiberglass swabs, then putting the swabs in some chemical that was supposed to change colors if I had any gunpowder on my hands. I didn't. I had expected them to spray my hands with something and hold them under a black light, but when I asked the technician, he said that was old hat. You learn something new every day.
Not that MacInnes and Forester relaxed procedure in any way after that. They kept asking questions—could I see the man's features, tell what make of car he was driving, and so forth—while my car, the entire building, and adjacent properties were diligently searched, and only after they turned up nothing in the way of wet clothing did they conclude the interview, without even telling me not to leave town.
I knew Nicole had been shot at close range, because I had seen the man standing with her. Since she was lying beside her car at the far end of the parking lot, in the rain, and since I was the only completely dry person there—which was why they had looked for wet clothing, to make certain I hadn't changed clothes—I therefore had not been out in the rain and couldn't have done the deed myself. There were no wet prints other than those made by the officers coming in the front door; the back entrance was dry. My shoes were dry. My hands were dirty—indicating I hadn't washed them—and my

clothes were soiled. My cell phone had been under the car, with the 9-1 clearly visible in the window to show I had started to dial 911. In short, what they saw jibed with what I said, which is always a good thing.

I escaped to the bathroom, where I took care of a pressing problem, then washed my hands. The skinned patch on my palm was stinging, so then I went into my office and took out my first-aid kit. I squirted some antibiotic salve on the scrape, then covered it with a giant-size adhesive bandage.

I thought about calling Mom, just in case someone had heard something on their police scanner and called her, which would scare her and Dad to death, but figured it would be smarter to first ask the detectives if making calls was okay. I went to my office door and looked out, but they were busy and I didn't interrupt.

Frankly, my butt was dragging. I was exhausted. The rain was pouring down and the sound made me even more tired, while the flashing lights outside gave me a headache. The cops looked tired, too, and miserably wet despite their rain gear. The best thing I could do, I decided, was make coffee. What cop didn't like coffee?

I like flavored coffees, and always kept a variety of flavors in my office for my personal use, but in my experience men aren't very adventurous when it comes to coffee—at least, southern men aren't. A man from Seattle might not turn a hair at chocolate-almond-flavored coffee, or raspberry chocolate, but southern men generally want their coffee to taste like coffee and nothing else. I keep a nice, smooth breakfast blend for those with Y chromosomes, so I got it out of my supply cabinet and began scooping it into a paper filter. Then I added a dash of salt, which counteracts the natural bitterness of coffee, and just for good measure added one scoop of my chocolate-almond. That wouldn't be enough for them to taste, but would give the brew an added mellowness.

My coffeemaker is one of those two-pot Bunn machines that makes an entire pot of coffee in about two minutes flat. No, I haven't timed it, but I can go pee while it's making and it'll be finished when I am, which means it's pretty damn fast.

I put one pot under the spout and used the other pot to pour in the water. While the coffee was making, I got out a supply of polystyrene coffee cups, creamer, sugar, red plastic stirrers, and arranged them beside the coffeemaker.

Very shortly Detective Forester followed his nose into my office, his sharp gaze noting the coffeemaker as soon as he entered.
“I just made a fresh pot of coffee,” I said as I sipped from my own cup, which was a nice cheerful yellow with the words “FORGIVE YOUR ENEMIES—IT MESSES WITH THEIR HEADS” emblazoned in purple around the bottom. Polystyrene is hell on lipstick, so I always use a real pottery cup—not that I had on any lipstick, but that’s beside the point.
“Would you like some?”
“Has a cat got a tail?” he asked rhetorically, moving toward the pot.
“Depends on whether or not it’s a Manx.”
“Not.”
“Then, yes, the cat has a tail. Barring any unfortunate accidents, that is.”
He was smiling as he poured himself a cup. Cops must use telepathy to pass along the word that there’s fresh coffee in the vicinity, because within minutes there was a steady stream of both uniformed and plainclothes peacekeepers coming to my door. I put the first pot on the warmer on top, and began making a second pot. Soon I was switching pots again, and the third batch of coffee was brewing.
Making coffee kept me busy, and made the night a little less miserable for the cops. I actually got to drink a second cup myself. I probably wouldn’t be able to sleep that night anyway, so why not?
I asked Detective MacInnes if I could I call my mom, and he didn’t say no, he just said he’d appreciate it if I waited a while, because if he knew mothers, she’d come rushing down and he’d like to get the crime scene wrapped up first. Put like that—he was a man who understood mothers, all right—I just sat at my desk and sipped my coffee and tried to stop the trembling that kept seizing me at unexpected moments.
I should have called Mom anyway, so she could rush down and take care of me. The night had been bad enough already, right? Well, it got worse.

Chapter Three

I should have known he’d show up. He was, after all, a lieutenant with the police department, and in a fairly small town like ours—sixty-odd thousand people—murders weren’t an everyday occurrence. Probably most of the cops on duty were there, and a good many who weren’t.

I heard his voice before I saw him, and even after two years I recognized the deep timbre, the slight briskness that said he hadn't spent his entire life in the south. It had been two years since I'd last seen the back of his head as he walked away from me without so much as a "Have a nice life," and still I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach as if I were riding a Ferris wheel and just beginning the downward arc. *Two damn years*—and still my heartbeat speeded up.

At least I was still in my office when I heard his voice; he was just outside the door talking to a knot of cops, so I had a moment to prepare myself before he saw me.

Yes, we had a history, Lieutenant J. W. Bloodsworth and I. Two years ago, we had dated—three times, to be exact. His promotion to lieutenant was fairly recent, no more than a year ago, so then he'd been Sergeant Bloodsworth.

Have you ever met someone and every instinct, every hormone, sat up and took notice and whispered in your ear, *"Oh, my God, this is it, this is the real thing, grab him and do it NOW!"*? That was the way it had been from the first hello. The chemistry between us was incredible. From the moment we met—we were introduced by his mother, who belonged to Great Bods at the time—my heart literally fluttered whenever I saw him, and maybe his didn't flutter, but he zeroed his attention in on me the way guys do when they see something they really really want, whether it's a woman or a big-screen plasma TV, and there was that flare of heightened awareness between us that made me feel slightly electrified.

In retrospect, I'm sure a bug feels just the same way as it flies into a zapper.

Our first date passed in a blur of anticipation. Our first kiss was explosive. The only thing that kept me from sleeping with him on the first date was: (A) it's so tacky, and (B) I wasn't on birth control pills. I hate to say it, but (A) was almost more compelling than (B), because my rioting hormones were screeching, *"Yes! I want to have his baby!"*

Stupid hormones. They should at least wait and see how things turn out before doing their mating dance.

Our second date was even more intense. The kissing became heavy making out, with most of our clothes off. See (B) above for my reason for stopping, even though he produced a condom. I don't trust condoms because when Jason and I were engaged, one *shredded* on him and I sweated bullets for two weeks until my period came right on schedule. My wedding gown was

ready for the final fitting, and Mom would have blown a gasket if my waistline had started expanding. Normally I don't worry about Mom's gaskets, because she can handle just about anything, but planning a big wedding will stress out even a woman with ironclad nerves.

So, no condoms for me, except for entertainment purposes; you know what I mean. I fully intended to go on birth control pills as soon as I got my next period, though, because I could see into my future and a naked Jefferson Wyatt Bloodsworth figured very large in it . . . very large, indeed. I just hoped I could hold out long enough for the pills to take effect.

On our third date, it was as if he'd been taken over by the Pod people. He was inattentive, restless, constantly checking his watch as if he couldn't get away from me fast enough. He ended the date with an obviously reluctant peck on the lips, and walked away without saying he'd call—which would have been a lie, because he didn't—or that he'd had a good time, or *anything.* And that was the last I'd seen of him, the bastard.

I was furious with him, and two years hadn't done anything to dilute my fury. How *could* he have walked away from something that promised to be so special? And if he hadn't felt the same way I did, then he'd had no business taking off my clothes. Yes, I know that's what guys *do,* and God bless them for it, but when you get out of the teenage years, you expect something else to go along with the lust, for the shallowness of a puddle to have deepened into at least . . . a deeper puddle, I guess. If he had walked away because I'd twice stopped him from consummation, then I was better off without him. I certainly hadn't called him later to ask what was wrong, because I was so angry I wasn't certain I could control myself. I intended to call him when I was calmer.

Flash forward two years. I still hadn't called.

That was my state of mind when he walked into my office in Great Bods, all six feet two inches of him. He was wearing his dark hair just a little longer, but his green eyes were just the same: observant, sharp with intelligence, hard with the hardness that cops have to acquire or get a different job. That hard cop gaze raked over me, and appeared to sharpen even more.

I wasn't happy to see him. I wanted to kick his shins, and I might have if I hadn't been pretty sure he'd arrest me for assaulting a police officer, so I did the only thing any self-respecting woman would do: I pretended not to recognize him.

“Blair,” he said, coming over to stand way too close. “Are you all right?”
What did he care? I gave him a startled, faintly alarmed look, like the one women get when some strange man is getting too close and too familiar, and discreetly hitched my chair just an inch away from him. “Uh . . . yes, I’m fine,” I said warily, then subtly changed my expression to one of puzzlement as I stared at him, as if I half-recognized his face but couldn’t pull a name out of my memory banks to match it.
I was surprised by the flash of potent anger in his green eyes. “Wyatt,” he said curtly.
I backed up a little more. “Why what?” I leaned to the side and looked around him, as if making certain there were still cops within calling distance to protect me if he turned violent—which, to be honest, he looked as if he might.
“Wyatt Bloodsworth.” The words dropped from his grim mouth like lead balloons. He wasn’t finding my little charade at all funny, but I was having a great time.
I repeated the name silently to myself, moving my lips just a little, then let enlightenment dawn on my face. “Oh! *Oh!* I remember now. I’m so sorry, I’m terrible with names. How’s your mother?”
Mrs. Bloodsworth had fallen off her bicycle onto the sidewalk in front of her house and broken her left collarbone as well as a couple of ribs. Her membership at Great Bods had lapsed while she was recuperating, and she hadn’t rejoined.
He didn’t look any happier to hear that his mother was my foremost connection to him. What had he thought, that I’d throw myself into his arms, either crying in hysteria or begging him to take me back? Fat chance. The Mallory women are made of sterner stuff than that.
“She’s almost back up to speed. I think what hurt her even more than breaking bones was finding out that she doesn’t bounce back as fast as she used to do.”
“When you see her, tell her I said hello. I’ve missed her.” Then, because he was wearing his badge on his belt, I lightly smacked myself on the forehead. “Duh! If I’d noticed your badge, I’d have made the connection faster, but I’m a little distracted right now. Detective MacInnes didn’t want me to call my mom before, but I notice half the town seems to be in the parking lot, so do you think he’d mind if I called her now?”

He still didn’t look very pleased with me. Oh dear, had I hurt his little ego? Wasn’t that just too damn bad? “No civilians have been allowed on the scene yet,” he replied. “The press is being held off, too, until the preliminary investigation is finished. We’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk to anyone until the interviews are finished.”

“I understand.” And I did, truly. Murder was serious business. I just wished it weren’t serious enough to have required Lieutenant Bloodsworth’s presence. I stood up and stepped around him—giving him the same amount of personal space I would a stranger—and poured myself another cup of coffee. “How much longer will it take?”

“That’s hard to say.”

Which was a good nonanswer. I noticed him looking at the coffee and said, “Please, help yourself.” I grabbed the plastic pitcher I’d been using to fill the coffeemaker now that both pots were occupied. “I’ll just get some water to start another pot.” Then I whisked myself out of the office and down to the bathroom, where I filled the pitcher and basked in satisfaction.

He certainly hadn’t liked the idea that he’d been so unmemorable that I hadn’t even recognized him. If he’d thought I’d spent the last two years mooning over him and mourning all the might-have-beens, his thinking had now been properly adjusted. And what had he expected, anyway? A rehash of old times?

No, not under these circumstances, not while he was working. He was way too professional for that. But he had definitely expected me to react to him with the unconscious intimacy you use when you’ve known someone personally, even if the relationship had ended. Too bad for him I wasn’t unconscious.

When I came out of the bathroom, Detectives MacInnes and Forester were talking with Wyatt in the hallway, their voices pitched low. He was standing with his back to me, and while he was distracted by their conversation, I had an opportunity to really look at him, and damn if it didn’t happen again, the heart-flutter thing. I stopped in my tracks, staring at him.

He wasn’t a handsome man, not the way my ex was handsome. Jason was model handsome, all chiseled bone structure; Wyatt looked sort of battered, which was to be expected, since he’d spent a couple of years playing defensive end in pro football, but even if he hadn’t, his features were basically on the rough side. His jaw was solid, his broken nose had a bump in the middle and was just slightly off-center, and his brows were straight

black lines above his eyes. He'd kept the honed physique of an athlete to whom both speed and strength were equally important, but while Jason's body had the streamlined, strong elegance of a swimmer, Wyatt's body was meant to be used as a weapon.

Most of all, he practically dripped testosterone. Good looks are almost totally irrelevant when a man has sex appeal, and Wyatt Bloodsworth had it in spades, at least for me he did. Chemistry. There's no other way to explain it.

I hate chemistry. I hadn't been able to get serious about anyone else in the past two years because of stupid chemistry.

Like the detectives, he was dressed in slacks and sport coat, with a tie that was loosened at the throat. I wondered what had taken him so long to get here; had he been out on a date, with his pager or cell phone turned off? No, he was too conscientious for that, so it followed that he had been far enough away that getting here had taken roughly two hours. He had also been outside in the rain, because his shoes and the bottom six inches of his pants legs were wet. He must have taken a look at the crime scene before coming inside.

The two detectives were both shorter than he, and Detective MacInnes's face was carefully impassive. The older men must not be happy, I thought, to have a younger man promoted so fast. Wyatt had risen through the ranks like a comet, only partly because he was a good cop. He was also a Name, a local boy made good, a celebrity who had made All-Pro in the NFL his rookie year, then walked away to become a cop in his hometown after just a couple of years in the pros. Law enforcement was his first love, he'd told the media.

Everyone in town knew why he'd played pro ball: for the money. The Bloodsworths were Old Money, meaning they had once had money but were now broke. His mother lived in a four-thousand-square-foot, hundred-year-old Victorian house that she loved, but the upkeep was a constant drain. His older sister, Lisa, had two children, and though she and her husband had a solid marriage and did okay with day-to-day expenses, college tuition would be beyond them. Wyatt had pragmatically decided that replenishing the family bank account would be up to him, so he put off his planned career in law enforcement to play pro ball. A couple of million dollars a year would go a long way toward repairing finances so that he could take care of his mother, send his nephews to college, and so on.

The older guys on the force had to resent him, at least a little. At the same time, they were glad to have him, because he *was* a good cop, and he wasn't a glory hound. He used his name when it was for the benefit of the force, not for his personal gain. And he knew people whom it was important to know, which was another reason why he'd been promoted so fast. Wyatt could pick up the phone and talk to the governor. The chief of police and the mayor would have to be stupid not to see the benefits of that.

I'd stood there long enough. I started toward them, and the movement caught MacInnes's eye, causing him to break off in midsentence and making me wonder what they were saying that I wasn't supposed to hear. All three men turned to look at me, staring hard. "Excuse me," I murmured, sliding past them to enter my office. I busied myself making another pot of coffee, and wondered if for some reason I had regained my position as Suspect Number One.

Maybe I didn't need to call Mom. Maybe I needed to call Siana. She wasn't a criminal defense attorney, but that didn't matter. She was smart, she was ruthless, and she was my sister. Enough said.

I marched to my office door, crossed my arms, and glared at Detective MacInnes. "If you're going to arrest me, I want to call my lawyer. And my mother."

He scratched his jaw and darted a glance at Wyatt, as if saying, *You handle this one.* "Lieutenant Bloodsworth will answer your questions, ma'am."

Wyatt reached out and caught my right elbow, smoothly turning me around and ushering me back into my office. "Why don't you sit down," he suggested as he poured himself another cup of coffee. He must have downed the first cup in one gulp.

"I want to call—"

"You don't need an attorney," he interrupted. "Please. Sit down."

There was something in his tone, other than the flat tone of authority, that made me sit.

He pulled the guest chair around so it was facing me and sat down, so close that his legs were almost touching mine. I backed up just a little, in that automatic way people have when someone gets too close. He didn't have the right to invade my personal space, not anymore.

He noticed my action, of course, and his mouth thinned. Whatever he thought about it, though, he was all business when he spoke. "Blair, are you in any trouble that we need to know about?"

Okay, so maybe that wasn't exactly coplike, and totally unexpected. I blinked at him. "You mean, other than thinking I was being shot at and instead finding out I witnessed a murder? Isn't that enough?"
"You said in your statement that you'd had an incident with the victim earlier this afternoon when you told her that her membership wouldn't be renewed, and that she'd become violent—"
"That's right. And there were witnesses. I've already given their names to Detective MacInnes."
"Yes, I know," he said patiently. "Did she threaten you?"
"No. Well, she said she was going to sic her lawyer on me, but I wasn't sweating that."
"She didn't make any threats to harm you physically?"
"No. I've already told all this to the detectives."
"I know. Just be patient. If she didn't make any threats, why, when you saw her car parked in the back lot, did you assume you were in physical danger from her?"
"Because she's—she *was*—a psycho. She copied everything I did. She colored her hair to match mine; she started wearing clothes like mine; she got the same hairstyle, the same style earrings. She even bought a white convertible because I have one. She gave me the creeps."
"So she admired you?"
"I don't think so. I think she hated my guts. Several of the other members thought so, too."
"Then why did she imitate you?"
"Who knows? Maybe she wasn't able to put together a look on her own, so she just copied someone else. She wasn't very bright. Cunning, but not bright."
"I see. Has anyone else threatened you?"
"Not since my divorce." Impatiently I checked my wristwatch. "Lieutenant, I'm exhausted. How much longer do I have to stay here?" Until all the cops had left the building, that was for certain, so I could lock up. They would be stringing yellow crime-scene tape all over the back lot, but surely they'd let me get my car out first—
That's when it hit me that they would probably cordon off the entire building and two parking lots. I wouldn't be able to open tomorrow, and maybe not the next day either. Or maybe not for a lot longer than that.

“Not much longer,” he said, drawing my attention back to him. When was your divorce?”
“Five years ago. Why are you asking?”
“Does your ex-husband cause you any trouble?”
“Jason? Goodness, no. I haven’t even seen him since the divorce.”
“But he threatened you then?”
“It was a divorce. He threatened to trash my car. He never did, of course.” Actually, he’d threatened to trash my car if I ever made certain information public. I had then threatened to make certain information public if he didn’t shut up and give me everything I asked for—or at least, Siana had threatened it. I didn’t think Wyatt needed to hear all of that, though. That comes under the heading of Too Much Information.
“Do you have any reason to think he might hold a grudge?”
Oh, I hoped so. That was why I still drove a Mercedes convertible. But I shook my head. “I don’t see why. He remarried a few years ago, and from what I hear he’s very happy.”
“And no one else has threatened you in any way?”
“No. Why are you asking me all these questions?”
His expression was unreadable. “The victim is dressed almost identically to you. She was in a white convertible. It occurred to me, when I saw you and realized the similarities, that it was possible you were the intended victim after all.”
I gaped at him in astonishment. “No way. I mean, I *thought* I was being shot at, but only because I knew Nicole was bananas. She’s the only person I’ve had any trouble with.”
“You haven’t had any confrontations that maybe you passed off as minor but someone else could have taken more seriously?”
“No. Not even a snippet of an argument.” Because I live alone, my life tends to be fairly peaceful.
“Could any of your employees be angry with you about something?”
“Not that I know of, and anyway, they all know me personally—and they know Nicole. There’s no way any of them could mistake her for me. Plus, they all know where I park, and it isn’t at the back of the lot. I don’t think I’m involved in this at all, other than just being there by an accident of timing. I can’t help you by pointing a finger at someone who might have it in for me. Besides, Nicole was the type of person who regularly pissed people off.”

“Do you know any of those people?”
“She annoyed every woman who belongs to Great Bods, but men tended to like her because she had this syrupy sex-kitten act. It was definitely a man who shot her, though, which seems wrong, but brings up the question of jealousy. Nicole is—was—the type who’d play the jealousy game.”
“Did you know any of her boyfriends, or was there one in particular?”
“No, I don’t know anything about her private life. We weren’t best buds; we never chatted about personal things.”
He hadn’t once taken his gaze off my face, which was beginning to make me nervous. See, his eyes are kind of pale, that shade of green that leaps out at you if the person’s hair and brows are dark, which his were. On a blond you wouldn’t notice eyes like that so much, unless he wore black mascara—never mind. Wyatt wasn’t the mascara type. The point is, his gaze was piercing. When he stared at me, I felt sort of pinned.
I didn’t like him this close. I functioned much better when he was at a distance. If we had been in a relationship, it would have been different, but we weren’t, and after my last experience with him I wasn’t willing to put myself on the emotional line with someone who blew so hot and cold. But he was so close I could feel the heat coming from his legs, so I moved back another inch or so. Better. Not perfect, but better.
Damn him, why couldn’t he have stayed outside in the rain? Detective MacInnes had things handled in here. If Wyatt had just stayed outside, I wouldn’t be having these very acute memories of how his skin smelled, how he tasted, the sounds he made when he was so turned on—
Nope. Don’t go down that path. Because when he’d been turned on, *I* had been turned on, too.
“Blair!” he said, a little forcefully.
I jumped and refocused, and hoped he hadn’t been able to tell where my thoughts had wandered. “What?”
“I asked if you got a good look at the man’s face.”
“No. I’ve already told all this to Detective MacInnes,” I repeated. How long was he going to keep asking me questions I’d already answered? “It was dark, it was raining. I could tell he was a man, but that was it. The car was a dark four-door, but I can’t tell you the make or the model. I’m sorry, but if he walked into this office right now, I wouldn’t be able to identify him.”
He watched me for a minute longer, then stood and said, “I’ll be in touch.”

“Why?” I asked in obvious bewilderment. He was a lieutenant. The detectives would be handling the case; he’d just be overseeing the big picture, distribution of manpower, okaying stuff, things like that.
His mouth thinned again as he stood looking down at me. No doubt about it, I was irritating the hell out of him tonight, which gave me a great deal of satisfaction.
“Just don’t go out of town,” he finally said, though he actually *growled* the sentence instead of *saying* it.
“So I *am* a suspect!” I glared at him, then reached for the phone. “I’m calling my lawyer.”
His hand slammed down on mine before I could lift the phone. “You aren’t a suspect.” He was still growling, and now he was way too close, bent over me the way he was, his green eyes fairly snapping with temper as he glared back at me.
Ask me if I know how to leave well enough alone.
“Then I’ll damn well go out of town if I want to,” I said, pulling my hand out from under his and crossing my arms.

Chapter Four

So that’s how I wound up at the police station at midnight, in the custody of a very irate police lieutenant.
He hauled me into his office, plunked me into a chair, barked, “Now, stay there!” and stalked out.
I was fairly bouncing with temper myself. I’d given him what-for all the way down to the station—without using swear words or threatening him, of course, which would probably have given him a reason to arrest me for real, which I’m sure he would have done because he was that mad—but now I’d run out of things to say without getting into personal territory and I didn’t want to do that, so I was frustrated on top of being mad.
I surged to my feet as soon as he closed the door behind him, and just to show him what’s what I went behind the desk and sat in *his* chair. Hah!
I know. It was childish. And I knew that, childish or not, it would get his goat. Getting his goat was turning out to be almost as much fun as making out with him.
The chair was a big one. It needed to be, because he was a big man. It was leather, too, which I liked. I swiveled all the way around in it. I looked through the files on his desk, but I did it fast, because that was probably a

misdemeanor or something. I didn't see anything interesting about anyone I knew.

I opened the middle drawer of his desk and got out a pen, then searched the other drawers for a notepad. I finally found one, plopped it on top of the files, and began writing a list of his transgressions. Not all of them, of course; just the ones he'd committed that night.

He came in with a Diet Coke in his hand, stopped dead when he saw me sitting at his desk, then very carefully and deliberately closed the door and in a low voice of doom said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Writing down all the things you did so I won't forget any of them when I talk to my lawyer."

He plunked the Diet Coke down on the desk and jerked the pad away from me. Turning it around, he looked at the first item and his dark brows snapped together. " 'Manhandled the witness and caused bruises to her arm,' " he quoted. "That's a load of bullsh—"

I lifted my left arm and showed him the bruises on the underside where he'd gripped my arm while he was bodily forcing me into his car, and he stopped in midword. "Ah, hell," he said softly, temper fading. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

Yeah, sure; that's why he'd dropped me like a hot potato two years ago. He had definitely hurt me, no denying that. And then he hadn't even had the decency to tell me *why,* which was what had really made me mad.

He hitched one hip on the edge of the desk and continued reading. " 'Unlawful detainment. Kidnapping'—*kidnapping*?"

"You forcibly took me away from my place of business and drove me to another location where I didn't want to be. Sounds like kidnapping to me."

He snorted and continued reading my list of grievances, which included bad language, a snotty attitude, and poor manners. He hadn't even thanked me for the coffee. Oh, there were other legal terms in there, too, like *coercion, badgering,* and *harassment,* refusing to let me contact my lawyer, but I hadn't let any detail slide.

Damn his hide, he was smiling by the time he got to the end of the list. I didn't want him to smile. I wanted him to realize what an asshole he'd been.

"I brought you a Diet Coke," he said, sliding the can toward me. "You've probably had enough coffee."

"Thank you," I said, to underscore the difference between his manners and mine. I didn't open the can, though. My stomach was already jittery from

too much caffeine. Also, as a peace offering, the Diet Coke didn't make the grade, especially since I was well aware he'd left the room more to give himself some breathing space before he snapped and tried to strangle me. The Diet Coke was a last-minute thought, to make it look as if he was being considerate when in fact it was his own skin he'd been protecting, because I'm sure it would be hell on his career if he strangled a witness. Not that I was much of a witness, but in this case I was all they had.

"Now get out of my chair."

I blew my hair out of my eyes. "I'm not finished with my list. Let me have the pad back."

"Blair. Get out of my chair."

I wish I could say I behaved like an adult, but I was already way past the point where I could do that. I clamped my hands on the arms of the chair, glared at him, and said, "Make me."

Damn, I wish I hadn't said that.

A very short and humiliating struggle later, I was back in the chair where he'd originally put me, and he was in his chair, looking angry again.

"Damn it." He scrubbed his hand over his whiskery jaw, where his five o'clock shadow had long ago become darker than that. "If you don't behave — Do you know how close you came to being in my lap instead of that chair?"

Whoa. Where had that come from? I pulled back in alarm. *"What?"*

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. And I don't buy your earlier act, either. You remember me, all right. I've had you naked."

"You have not!" I said, shocked. Did he have me confused with someone else? I was pretty sure I'd have remembered *that.* Yes, clothing had been shed, but I definitely had not been naked.

He gave a grim smile. "Honey, trust me: when all you have on is a skimpy little skirt pulled up around your waist, that's naked."

I trembled a little, because this was indeed familiar. I remembered the occasion well. It was the second date. He'd been on the couch; I'd been astride him, his fingers had been inside me, and I'd been an inch away from saying to hell with the concept of birth control, and taking my chances.

I blushed, not in embarrassment, but because the office was becoming uncomfortably warm. The thermostat for the air-conditioning in the building needed to be bumped down just a notch. Just because I felt all squirmy inside, however, didn't mean I was giving up the fight. "Naked

means totally without clothes, so therefore by your own description I definitely wasn't naked."
"So you do remember," he said with satisfaction. "And don't split hairs. You were as good as naked."
"There's still a difference," I insisted stubbornly. "And, yeah, I remember that we made out. So what?"
"You mean you get naked with a man so often it doesn't mean anything anymore?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.
I was tired of pretending. He wasn't buying it, anyway. I looked him in the eye and said, "Evidently it didn't mean anything that time, either."
He grimaced. "Ouch. I know I owe you an explanation. I'm sorry—"
"Save your breath. The time for explanations passed a long time ago."
"Did it?"
"I moved on. Haven't you?"
"I thought I had," he said, scowling. "But when I got the call that there'd been a murder at Great Bods and the victim was a blond female, I—" He broke off, then said, "Shit."
I blinked at him, honestly surprised. Come to think of it, his first words to me *had* been *Are you all right?* And he'd gone out in the rain to the crime scene to see Nicole's body before coming inside. Surely by then her name had been broadcast, but maybe not, until her family could be notified. I had no idea who or where her family was, but there was probably a next-of-kin listed in her paperwork at Great Bods, which Detective MacInnes had taken.
Poor Nicole. She'd been a psycho-bitch copycat, but it bothered me that her body had been lying out in the rain for such a long time while the cops worked the crime scene. I knew crime scene investigations took a while, and the rain had hindered the cops as well, but still, she'd lain there for a good three hours before they let her be moved.
He snapped his fingers in my face. "You keep wandering off."
Man, I wanted to bite those fingers. I hate it when people do things like that, when a little wave will suffice to get my attention. "Well, excuse me. I'm exhausted and I witnessed a murder tonight, but it's terribly rude of me not to stay focused on personal matters. You were saying?"
He studied me for a moment, then shook his head. "Never mind. You *are* exhausted, and I have a murder investigation to oversee. I wish you weren't involved in it, but you are, so you'll be seeing more of me whether you

want to or not. Just stop pushing, will you? Let me do my job. I admit it, I can't concentrate when you're in my face making me crazy."
"I don't make you crazy," I snapped, incensed. "You were evidently crazy before I ever met you. *May I go home now?*"
He rubbed his eyes and visibly reined in his temper. "In a few minutes. I'll take you home."
"Someone can give me a ride back to Great Bods. I need my car."
"I said I'll take you home."
"And I said I need my car."
"I'll have it brought to you tomorrow. I don't want you messing around the crime scene."
"Fine. I'll take a cab home. No need to put yourself out." I stood and grabbed my bag, ready to head out the door. I'd stand on the sidewalk, even though it was still pouring down rain, while I waited for the cab.
"Blair. *Sit down.*"
That was the bad thing about him being a cop. I didn't know exactly where his official authority ended and the personal stuff began. I didn't know exactly what legal ground I was standing on. I was pretty sure I could walk out and there wouldn't be a thing he could do about it—legally—but there was always the tiny possibility I was wrong, and the big possibility that he'd force me to stay whether it was legal or not, and I didn't want to have another tussle with him. Tussling was bad for my self-control.
I sat down, and contented myself with glaring mulishly. I had a niggling suspicion he intended to get back on a personal footing with me, and I didn't want to go down that road again. With that in mind, the less contact I had with him, the better.
I have a rule: Walk out, crawl back. If a man does the first, then he has to do the second to get back on good terms with me. I can handle an argument, because at least then you're communicating, but to just walk out and not give me a chance to work things out—that's a big no-no.
I know that sounds as if I need to get over myself, but the truth is—and I know I blew it off as the divorce being the best thing for both of us—it hurt like hell when I caught Jason kissing my sister Jenni. Not just because Jenni had betrayed me, but because I had truly loved Jason. Our first couple of years together had been very happy. At least, I'd been happy, and I think he was, too. We did grow apart and I fell out of love with him, but that didn't mean I had given up on our marriage. I was willing to work on it, to try to

get close to him again. When I saw him kissing Jenni, it was like a punch in the stomach, and I realized he must have been cheating on me for some time. Not with Jenni; I pretty much thought that was the first time he'd touched her. But he wasn't in love with her, so that meant he'd done it just because she was pretty and available, and *that* meant he'd very likely done it with other women, too.

He hadn't even tried to make our marriage work. He'd dumped me emotionally a long time before, and I hadn't realized it. Once I did realize it, though, I cut my losses. I didn't go crying on everyone's shoulders; instead I built myself a very satisfying new life, but that doesn't mean I'd escaped without some very deep emotional bruises.

Bruises heal, and I wasn't the type to mope around anyway. I learned from the experience, and set new guidelines and standards for myself. One of those guidelines was that if a man walked out without even trying to work things out, then he wasn't worth my effort unless he proved he was serious about getting another chance.

Wyatt hadn't proved a thing yet. And he wasn't the crawling type. So that meant the idea of us getting together again was pretty much a nonstarter.

He pushed the Diet Coke toward me. "Drink it. Maybe it'll cool you down."

What the hell. No way would I be able to sleep tonight anyway. I popped the top on the can and took a sip, then steered my thoughts to a more practical subject. "I assume there's no way I can be open for business tomorrow."

"Good assumption."

"How long will it be before I *can* open? One day? Two?"

"The time varies. I'll try to move things as fast as possible, but I won't cut corners. A couple of days, probably. I'm sorry for your financial loss, but __"

"Oh, I won't lose any money. The vast majority of the membership pays by the year because it's cheaper than paying by the month. I don't offer any memberships shorter than a month. It's the inconvenience to the members that I don't like, and I know that's minor in comparison to a murder, but as the owner of a business it's a hard fact that I have to take care of my customers or the business will suffer."

He eyed me consideringly, as if he hadn't expected me to be that practical. That irritated me, because he'd spent three dates in my company and if he'd

been paying any attention at all to anything other than my body, he'd have realized I'm no airhead.
Maybe I should have been surprised he'd recognized *me,* because two years ago he evidently hadn't looked any higher than my breasts.
Bad thought, because he'd definitely looked at my breasts. And touched them. And sucked them. Now, I'm not much on breasts—they're more of an irritant to me than a source of pleasure—but there was no getting away from the intimacy of the memory, and that was what had me blushing again.
"My God," he said, "what are you thinking this time?"
"Why? What do you mean?" Like I was going to tell him what I was thinking.
"You're blushing again."
"I am? Oh. Sorry. I'm going through premature menopause, and I have hot flashes." Anything to regain lost ground.
He grinned, a quick flash of white teeth. "Hot flashes, huh?"
"Premature menopause isn't for sissies."
He laughed out loud, and leaned back in his big leather chair to watch me for a moment. The longer he watched, the more uneasy I became.
Remember what I said about how his eyes looked? I felt like a mouse being stared down by a cat . . . a mean, hungry cat. In all this time I hadn't given two thoughts about what I was wearing, but I was abruptly conscious of my pink halter top that bared my midriff, and the formfitting yoga pants. The way he was looking at me made me feel as if way too much of my skin was exposed, and that he was remembering seeing even more of it than he was seeing right now. Even worse, that he was planning on seeing more of me again.
That was the effect he'd always had on me: when he looked at me, I became acutely aware of being female—and that he was male, with all the corresponding bits and parts. You know: Tab A fits into Slot B. If I got close to him, all I could think about were tabs and slots.
He picked up the pen I'd been writing with and tapped it in a rapid tattoo on his desktop. "You're not going to like what I'm about to say."
"I haven't liked anything you've said, so that isn't a big surprise."
"Give it a rest," he advised in a hard tone. "This isn't about us."
"I didn't assume it was. And there is no 'us.' " I just could *not* give him an inch, the benefit of the doubt, or a break. I didn't want to deal with him. I wanted Detective MacInnes back.

Evidently Wyatt decided that trying to reason with me was a lost cause. It isn't; I'm normally very reasonable . . . except where he's concerned. For whatever reason, he didn't pick up that verbal gauntlet. "We try to control all the information that's given to the press about a murder, but sometimes it isn't possible. To do an investigation, we have to talk to people and ask if anyone saw a man driving a dark four-door sedan in the vicinity of the crime. That's already begun. Now, we kept the reporters away from the crime scene, but they were right outside the tape with their telephoto lenses and cameras."
"And?" I wasn't getting his point.
"It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together and come up with you as a witness. We were in your place of business, you were with us, you left in my car—"
"Considering *that* scene, they probably think I'm the suspect."
One corner of his mouth quirked as he remembered the struggle to put me in his car. "No, they probably just think you were very upset by what happened." He tapped the pen against the desk again. "I can't keep them from naming you. If a suspect was seen, obviously there was a witness. Your identity is just as obvious. It'll be in the papers tomorrow."
"Why is that a prob— Oh." I was being named in the newspapers as the witness to a murder. The person who would most likely worry was none other than the murderer himself. What do killers do to protect themselves? They kill whoever is threatening them, that's what.
I stared at him, appalled. "Oh, *shit.*"
"Yeah," he said. "My thoughts exactly."

Chapter Five

A thousand thoughts ran through my mind. Well, at least six or seven, anyway, because a thousand thoughts are a lot. Try counting your own thoughts and see how long it takes you to get to a thousand. Regardless of that, none of my thoughts were good.
"But I'm not even a good witness!" I wailed. "I couldn't identify him if my life depended on it." Again, not a good thought, because it just might.
"He doesn't know that."

“Maybe he was her boyfriend. It’s usually the boyfriend or husband, isn’t it? Maybe it was a crime of passion and he isn’t really a murderer at heart, and when you pick him up he’ll confess .” That wasn’t impossible, was it? Or too much to ask?

“Maybe,” he said, but his expression wasn’t all that hopeful.

“But what if he wasn’t her boyfriend? What if it’s drugs or something?” I got up and began to pace his office, which didn’t have enough room for serious pacing and had way too many obstacles, like file cabinets and stacks of books. I dodged around things more than paced. “I can’t leave the country. You won’t let me even leave town, which under these circumstances is a really crappy position to hold, you know.”

Not that he could stop me, I realized, not without arresting me or taking me into protective custody, and since I couldn’t identify the killer, I don’t think he could justify that to a judge. So why had he even told me not to leave town? And why was he telling me this when the most obvious, most intelligent response would be to get the hell out of Dodge?

He ignored my comment on his edict. “The odds are you’re right, and the reason Ms. Goodwin was murdered was a personal one. With luck we’ll have this wrapped up in a day or two.”

“A day or two,” I repeated. A lot could happen in a day or two. For one thing, I could get dead. No way was I going to hang around for that to happen. Despite what Lieutenant Bloodsworth had told me, I was leaving town. To hell with his permission, which I was fairly certain I didn’t need anyway; by the time he found out I was gone, it would be too late. I would tell Siana to get in touch with him and tell him that if he needed me, he could contact Siana, because of course I’d tell my family where I was. Great Bods would be closed for a day or so anyway, so I might as well take a short vacation. I hadn’t indulged my inner beach bunny in a couple of years; she was due.

When I got home I’d grab a couple of hours’ sleep, if I could. If I couldn’t, I’d pack. I’d be ready to go whenever my car was delivered to me.

“I can’t spare any patrolmen for guard duty, and I couldn’t justify it anyway in the absence of a credible threat—not to mention you aren’t exactly a witness, since you can’t identify anyone.” He leaned back in his chair and gave me a brooding look. “I’ll issue a statement to the press that ‘unnamed witnesses’ saw a man leaving the scene. That should take any focus off of you.”

“Hey, that’ll work!” I said, cheering up. If there was more than one witness, then killing me wouldn’t serve any purpose, right? Not that I intended to hang around to find out. Now that I’d thought of it, a few nice, lazy days at the beach sounded great. I had this great turquoise bikini I’d bought last year and hadn’t had a chance to wear. Tiffany—my inner beach bunny—was practically purring in anticipation.

I stood up, picked up the notepad before he could stop me, and ripped off the top page. Like I was going to forget his list of transgressions, right? As I neatly folded the page I said, “I’m ready to go home now. Really, Lieutenant Bloodsworth, you could have told me all this at Great Bods, you know. You didn’t have to manhandle me in front of everyone and drag me down here just to prove you’re a big macho cop.” I made grunting noises like Tim Allen, which I probably shouldn’t have.

He just looked amused, and motioned with his fingers. “Hand it over.”

I snorted. “Get real. Even if you tore it up, do you think I wouldn’t remember what’s on the list?”

“That isn’t the point. Hand it over.”

Instead I tucked the list into my bag and zipped it. “Then what *is* the point, because I’m missing something here.”

He got to his feet with a smooth, powerful grace that reminded me what an athlete he was. “The point,” he said as he came around the desk and calmly took my bag away from me, “is that the men in your life probably let you get away with murder—figuratively speaking—because you’re so damned cute, but I’m not going to go down that road. You’re in my territory and I said hand over the list, so if you don’t do it, I’ll have to take it away from you. *That’s* the point.”

I watched as he unzipped my bag and took out the list, which he slipped into his pants pocket. I could have gone for another undignified struggle, but even if I’d won—which wasn’t likely—retrieving the list would have meant putting my hand in his pocket and I wasn’t born yesterday. This was one battle I’d be smarter not to fight. Instead I shrugged. “So I’ll write one when I get home, where, by the way, I would like to have been an hour ago. You should also really work on this problem you have of making everything personal, Lieutenant Bloodsworth.” I kept calling him that instead of *Wyatt* because I knew it irritated the hell out of him. “In your job, that could be a real problem.”

“What’s between us is definitely personal,” he retorted as he gave my bag back to me.
“Nope. Not interested. Sorry. May I go home, please?” Maybe if I said it often enough, he’d get tired of hearing it. A big yawn punctuated the end of my sentence, and I swear I didn’t fake it. I covered it with my hand, but it was one of those jaw-cracker yawns that just took over and seemed to go on forever. My eyes were watering when it finally ended. “I’m sorry,” I said again, and rubbed my eyes.
Damn his eyes, he grinned. “Just keep saying you aren’t interested often enough, and maybe by the time you’re ninety you’ll believe it. Come on, I’ll take you home before you collapse,” he said before I could respond to his first statement, putting his hand on my waist and urging me toward the door.
Finally! I was so glad to be making progress toward home that I didn’t pay proper attention to where his hand was or how it looked. He leaned forward and opened the door for me, and as I stepped through it, what seemed like a hundred pairs of eyes turned toward us. Patrol officers in uniform, detectives in street clothes, a few people who were obviously there under protest—the department was a beehive of activity despite the lateness of the hour. If I’d been paying attention, I’d have noticed the hum of voices and ringing of telephones outside that closed door, but I’d been focused on my battle with Wyatt.
I saw a multitude of expressions: curiosity, amusement, prurient interest. The one expression I didn’t see, I realized, was surprise. I spotted Detective MacInnes hiding a grin as he looked back down at the paperwork on his desk.
Well, what had I expected? Not only had they witnessed our very public disagreement that ended with him putting me in his car—only the public part had ended, not our disagreement—but now I realized Wyatt must have said something that indicated we had a personal relationship. The sneaky rat was trying an end run around my objections, but more important, he had made certain none of his people would interfere in our argument.
“You think you’re so smart,” I muttered as we stepped into the elevator.
“I must not be, or I’d stay the hell away from you,” he replied calmly as he punched the button for the bottom floor.
“Then why don’t you up your IQ and go after someone who wants you?”
“Oh, you want me, all right. You don’t like it, but you want me.”

“Want*ed.* Past tense. As in, not now. You had your chance.”
“I still have it. All we did was take a breather.”
My mouth was open in astonishment as I stared up at him. “You call two years a *breather*? I’ve got news for you, big boy: your chance was over by the end of our last date.”
The elevator stopped and the doors slid open—it doesn’t take long to travel three floors—and Wyatt did the hand-on-my-waist thing again, ushering me out of a small foyer and into the parking lot. The rain had stopped, thank goodness, though the trees and power lines still dripped. His white Crown Vic was parked in the fourth slot down, where a sign saying, “Lt. Bloodsworth,” was posted. The parking lot was fenced and gated, so there weren’t any reporters waiting outside that entrance. Not that there would be a lot, anyway; our town had one daily newspaper and one weekly, four radio stations, and one ABC affiliate television station. Even if every station and newspaper sent a reporter, which they wouldn’t, that was a grand total of seven.
Just to be a smart-ass, I reached for the back door handle. Wyatt growled and pulled me forward as he opened the front passenger door. “You’re a pain, you know that?”
“In what way?” I seated myself and buckled the seat belt.
“You don’t know when to stop pushing.” He closed the door with a solid thunk, and went around to the driver’s side. He got in and started the car, then turned in the seat to face me and draped one arm along the back of the seat. “We aren’t in an elevator now with a camera watching every move, so tell me again how my chance with you is over and you don’t want me.”
He was challenging me, actually egging me on so I’d say something rash and give him a reason to do something just as rash, such as kiss me. The parking lot lights were bright enough for me to see the glint in his eyes as he waited for my response. I wanted to fire a verbal blast back at him, but that would have been playing his game and I was so tired I knew I wasn’t at the top of my form. So I yawned in his face and mumbled, “Can’t this wait? I’m so tired I can’t see straight.”
He chuckled as he turned around and buckled his own seat belt. “Coward.”
Okay, so he didn’t buy it. What mattered was that he’d decided not to push the issue.
Well, I showed him. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, and despite the amount of caffeine I’d had that night, I was asleep before we were out

of the parking lot. That was a gift I had; my dad called it Lights Out Blair. I've never been one to toss and turn at night, but with all the stress and coffee I thought this would be one night when sleep wouldn't come. Not to worry; the lights went out as usual.

I woke when he opened the car door and leaned in to unbuckle my seat belt. I blinked sleepily at him, trying to bring him into focus. "Are we there yet?"

"We're there. Come on, Sleeping Beauty." He picked up my bag from the floorboard, then tugged me out of the car.

I live in the Beacon Hills area—the condos are called Beacon Hills, which is so original—meaning all the streets march up and down hills. Beacon Hills Condominiums comprises eleven separate buildings, each containing four three-story units. I live in the third building, first unit, which means I have windows opening to the outside on three sides, not just two. The end units cost more than the middle units, but to me the windows were worth it. Another big plus was the side portico under which I could park my car. Middle dwellers had to park at the curb. Yes, the side portico also upped the price of the end units. So what? I didn't have to park my Mercedes in the weather, so the portico was worth the cost. Having been there before, Wyatt had parked under the portico.

There was a front entrance, of course, but there was a door connecting the portico and a small entrance nook that also contained my washer and dryer and then led into the kitchen. I almost never used the front entrance unless a date was bringing me home, and the lights beside the side door were on a timer. They came on at nine **P.M.**, so I never had to fumble my way inside in the dark.

I took my bag from him and dug out my keys. "Thank you for bringing me home," I said politely. I didn't even point out that I would have preferred taking a taxi.

He loomed over me, standing too close, and I automatically tightened my grip on my keys in case he tried to take them from me. "I want to check the locks on your doors and windows."

"Dad can do it tomorrow. I'll be fine tonight, because no one will know I witnessed anything until the papers come out."

"Is your dad knowledgeable about security?"

No more than I was, but, hey, I had an alarm system, and I could check my own doors and windows. "Lieutenant Bloodsworth," I said as firmly as I

could around another yawn. “Go home. Leave me alone.” As I spoke I unlocked the door and moved so I was blocking him.
He leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb and smiled down at me. “I wasn’t intending to force my way in, you know.”
“That’s good. Why don’t we pretend you’re a vampire and can’t ever come in unless I invite you?”
“You already have invited me, remember?”
Oh. Well, there was that. “I’ve redecorated since then. That starts everything over. Go home.”
“I am. I’m pretty beat, myself. You redecorated, huh? What was wrong with the way things looked before?”
I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure you’re so interested in interior decorating. *Go home.* Leave. But make sure you have someone bring my car to me first thing in the morning, okay? I can’t be stuck here without it.”
“I’ll take care of it.” He reached out and cupped my face, his thumb lightly tracing my lips. I drew back, glaring at him, and he laughed. “I wasn’t going to kiss you. Not yet, anyway. There might not be anyone around to see at this time of night—or morning, rather—but since your clothes tend to come off when I kiss you, we’d better wait until we’re more private and have both had some sleep.”
He made it sound as if I started stripping whenever he touched me. I gave him a poisonously sweet smile. “I have a better idea. Why don’t you cram __”
“Uh-uh,” he cautioned, putting a finger over my lips. “You don’t want to let that sassy mouth get you in trouble. Just go inside, lock the door behind you, and go to bed. I’ll see you later.”
Never let it be said that I don’t recognize good advice when I hear it. I always *recognize* it; actually following it is a different category. In this instance, however, I did the wise thing and slipped inside, and locked the door just as he’d directed. Yeah, he might think I was actually following his orders, but it just so happened his orders coincided with my survival instinct.
I turned on my kitchen light and stood at the door waiting until his car pulled away before I turned off the outside lights. Then I stood in the middle of my familiar, cozy kitchen and let everything that had happened that night crash in on me.

There was a sense of unreality to everything, as if I had disconnected from the universe. My surroundings were my own, yet they seemed somehow alien, as if they belonged to someone else. I was both exhausted and jittery, which is not a good combination.

First thing, I turned on all the lights on the ground floor and checked all the windows, which were securely locked. Likewise with the doors. The dining alcove had double French doors leading onto my covered patio, where I keep strands of little white lights outlining the posts and roof edge, and entwined through the young Bradford pear trees. I turn the lights on almost every night that I'm home, because I love how they look, but tonight I felt vulnerable with all that glass and I pulled the heavy curtains closed over the French doors.

After setting the security system, I did what I had been wanting to do for *hours*. I called Mom.

Dad answered, of course. The telephone was on his side of the bed because Mom didn't like answering it. "Hello." His voice was a sleepy mumble.

"Dad, it's Blair. There was a murder at the gym tonight, and I wanted to let you know I'm all right."

"A—*what*? Did you say murder?" He sounded much more awake now.

"One of the members was killed in the back parking lot"—I heard Mom in the background saying fiercely, *"Give me the phone!"* and I knew his possession of the phone was numbered in seconds—"a little after nine, and I— Hi, Mom."

"Blair. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I wouldn't have called, but I was afraid someone else would, and I wanted you to know that I'm okay."

"Thank God you did," she said, and we both shuddered at what she might have done if she'd thought any of her children had been hurt. "Who was killed?"

"Nicole Goodwin."

"The copycat?"

"That's her." I might have complained about Nicole a time or two to my family. "She was parked in the back parking lot, waiting for me—we had a slight altercation this afternoon—"

"Do the police think you did it?"

"No, no," I soothed, though for a while I had definitely been Suspect Number One. Mom didn't need to know that, though. "I had just stepped

outside tonight and locked up when this man shot her, and he didn't see me. He left in a dark sedan."
"Oh, my God, *you're a witness*?"
"Not really," I said ruefully. "It was dark and raining, and there's no way I could ever identify him. I called nine-one-one, the cops came, and that's all I know. They have just brought me home."
"What took them so long?"
"The crime scene. It took *forever* for them to go over everything." Not to mention I probably would have been home a couple of hours earlier if it hadn't been for a certain lieutenant.
"Um . . . they brought you home? Why didn't you drive?"
"Because my car is inside the area they have taped off, so they wouldn't let me go back there. An officer is supposed to bring it to me in the morning." Morning meant some time after daylight, because technically it was already morning. I expected to see my car between eight and ten, and I would be *so* lucky if an officer and not Wyatt delivered it. "Great Bods will have to be closed for a couple of days, too, maybe longer. I think I'll go to the beach."
"That's a great idea," she said firmly. "Get out of Dodge."
It's scary sometimes how my mom and I think alike.
I reassured her again that I was okay, that I was going to bed because I was exhausted, and hung up feeling much better. She hadn't made any there-there noises, which is so not my mom, but I had headed off any well-meaning gossips who would have upset her.
I thought about calling Siana, but I was too tired to remember my list of grievances off the top of my head. After I'd had some sleep, I'd write them all down again. Siana would get a kick out of my run-in with Lieutenant Bloodsworth, because she knew about our past connection.
There was nothing I wanted more than sleep, so I turned off all the lights except for the dim sconces that lit the stairs; then I climbed up to my bedroom, where I pulled off my clothes and collapsed naked in my cloud of a bed. I groaned aloud with relief as I stretched out—then I ruined the moment of bliss by imagining Wyatt naked and stretching out on top of me. The damn man was a menace. Before my wayward imagination went any further, I made myself recall and go over every detail of our last date, when he had acted like such a horse's ass.
There. That worked.
Feeling peaceful, I rolled over and went to sleep. Lights Out, Blair.

Chapter Six

He'd remembered that I drank Diet Coke. That was the first thought on my mind when I woke at eight-thirty. Lying there in bed blinking sleepily at the slowly whirling ceiling fan, I tried to decide whether the Diet Coke was significant. The romantic in me wanted to believe he remembered every little detail about me, but levelheaded me said he probably just had a very good memory, period. A cop had to have a good memory, right? It was part of the job description, reciting Miranda and all of that.

So the Diet Coke thing wasn't important. For all I knew, he just assumed a woman would drink a diet soft drink, which was a really sexist thing to assume, never mind that he'd be right most of the time.

I'd fallen into bed instead of packing, so there went my planned early start for the beach. Not that it mattered, because I didn't have a car. But someone—namely Wyatt—could show up with my car at any time, so I jumped out of bed and into the shower. The shower was a fast one, because I was so hungry I thought I'd be sick. Somehow I hadn't gotten around to eating anything the night before.

Yeah, yeah, I know I shouldn't complain about being hungry when poor Nicole will never eat again. Tough. Nicole was dead and I wasn't, and I didn't like her any more now that she was dead than I did while she was alive.

Even worse, she was the cause of Great Bods being closed for an indefinite length of time. If she hadn't been such a bitch, waiting for me in the parking lot to do whatever damage she'd planned, she wouldn't have been killed on my property. To take this conclusion to the very end, it was also Nicole's fault that I'd been forced to see Wyatt Bloodsworth again.

Last night, I'd felt sorry for Nicole. Today I was thinking more clearly, and I figured it was just like her that, even dead, she was causing trouble for me.

I put on the coffee, grabbed a cup of yogurt from the refrigerator because that was fast, and ate it while I popped two slices of whole wheat bread into the toaster and peeled a banana. One peanut butter, honey, and banana sandwich—and two cups of coffee—later, I was much happier. Sometimes, when I'm really busy at Great Bods, I'll make do with an apple or

something like that for lunch, but when I have the time to sit down, I like to *eat.*

Once I felt as if I wouldn't collapse from hunger, I got the morning newspaper from the front steps and, over another cup of coffee, absorbed just how big the paper was playing Nicole's murder. The article was on the bottom half of the front page, and included a picture of Wyatt and me when he was hauling me out of Great Bods to stuff me in his car. He looked big and grim, and I looked in really great shape, with the pink halter top revealing my toned abs. I didn't have a six-pack, but I didn't go for the really muscular look, so that was fine. I was thinking that my abs were a good advertisement for Great Bods when I read the caption under the photo: *"Lieutenant J.W. Bloodsworth leads witness Blair Mallory from the crime scene."*

"Leads," my ass! *Hauled* was more like it. And why did they have to identify me in the big color photo on the first page, huh? Why couldn't the reporter have stuck my name somewhere toward the end of the article?

I read the entire article, and nowhere did I find Wyatt's official statement about witness*es*, plural. The only mention of a witness was singular—little old me. Probably by the time he'd made the statement, the paper had already gone to press. There would probably be another article in tomorrow's paper, but I was afraid the damage was done.

Right on cue, my phone rang. I looked at the Caller ID and saw the name of the newspaper. No way was I talking to a reporter, so I let the answering machine pick up the call.

Yes, indeed, this looked like a great day to leave town.

I dashed upstairs and dried my hair, then put on pink capri pants, a white tank, and the cutest flip-flops with little pink and yellow shells on the straps. Is that the best beach outfit, or what? I brushed my teeth, put on moisturizer and mascara, then added a little bit of blush and lip gloss just in case. In case what? In case Wyatt delivered the car, of course. Just because I didn't want him back didn't mean I wouldn't take joy in showing him just exactly what he'd turned down before.

The phone kept ringing. I talked to Mom, who was just checking to see how I was doing. I talked to Siana, who was wildly curious about both the murder and the photograph of me with Wyatt, since she had listened to me rant about him two years ago. Other than that, I didn't answer any of the

calls. I didn't want to talk to any reporters, nosy acquaintances, or possible murderers.

Traffic on the street outside my condo seemed to be unusually heavy. Maybe it was a good thing my car wasn't parked under the portico; from the street, it must have looked as if no one was home. Still, I had things to do and places to go; I needed wheels.

By ten, my car still hadn't been delivered. I was doing a slow burn as I looked up the number for the police department.

Whoever answered the phone, sergeant somebody, was polite but ultimately unhelpful. I asked for Lieutenant Bloodsworth. He wasn't available. Neither was Detective MacInnes. The sergeant transferred me to someone else, who transferred me to someone else. I had to explain the entire situation each time. Finally—*finally*—I got Detective Forester and went through my spiel again.

"Let me check. I don't think the lieutenant is in the building, but I'll see what I can find out about your car," he said, and put the phone down.

I could hear noise, the kind of noise made by a lot of different voices. I could hear telephones ringing, papers rustling. Days were evidently as busy at the police department as nights were. I waited. I examined my manicure, which was holding up nicely. I began to think about lunch, which could be a problem unless someone—anyone!—delivered my car. I seldom eat lunch at home; I have mostly breakfast food, and I was getting low on that because I hadn't bought groceries in a couple of weeks. I guessed I could have a pizza delivered, but I wasn't in the mood for pizza. I was in the mood to strangle one police lieutenant.

Finally Detective Forester came back to the phone. "Ma'am, Lieutenant Bloodsworth is taking care of your car."

"*When?*" I asked with clenched teeth. "I'm stranded here without it. He was supposed to have it brought to me early this morning."

"I'm sorry for that, ma'am. He's been very busy today."

"Then why can't a patrolman bring the car to me? Or—I know!—I'll take a taxi to Great Bods and someone can meet me there, and move the car from the back parking lot. That would save time and trouble for everyone."

"Hold on," he said, and I held. And held. And held. About ten minutes later he picked up the phone and said, "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I can't get anything arranged right now."

Okay, this wasn't his fault. I managed to make my tone calm. "I understand. Thank you for checking. Oh—do you have Lieutenant Bloodsworth's cell phone number? I misplaced it, or I'd have called him directly instead of bothering you."
"It's no bother," Detective Forester said gallantly, and rattled off the number.
Heh heh heh. Thanks to Wyatt's high-handed actions the night before, all the cops thought we were involved. Why wouldn't the detective give Wyatt's cell number to me? That was a tactical error on Wyatt's part. Wyatt might be in the middle of something important, and calling him would be a big distraction. Damn, I hoped so. I started punching in the numbers, then stopped. He probably had Caller ID on his cell, and he might not answer a call he knew was from me.
Smirking, I put down the cordless and retrieved my own cell phone from my bag. Yes, Detective MacInnes had been kind enough to return it to me last night, once he had determined I hadn't shot Nicole. I turned it on and called Wyatt.
He answered on the third ring. "Bloodsworth."
"Where's my car?" I demanded in as menacing a tone as I could muster.
He sighed. "Blair. I'll get to it. I've been a little busy today."
"I'm *stranded. If* you had listened to reason last night, you could have retrieved my car then and we wouldn't be having this conversation, but, no, you had to throw your weight around—"
He hung up on me.
I shrieked in fury, but I didn't call him back, which he probably expected. Okay, he was going to be a jerk. Fuck him. Well, not literally. Though once upon a time I—never mind. I wasn't going there.
I drummed my fingers and considered my options. I could call Mom and Dad and they would gladly give me a ride to a grocery store, or even lend me one of their cars, which would be an inconvenience for them. Siana would also ferry me around. Jenni *might,* if she didn't have anything else going on, but her social calendar made me exhausted just to think about it. On the other hand, I could simply rent a car. Several of the name-brand rental agencies would pick you up and take you back to their office to sign the papers and get the car.
I don't dillydally around when I come up with a plan of action. I looked up the number of a rental agency, called them, and arranged to be picked up in

an hour. Then I raced around watering plants and packing what clothes I thought I'd need for a few days at the beach, which wasn't many. Makeup and toiletries took up way more room than my clothes in the duffel bag. I added a couple of books in case I felt like reading, then stood at the front door impatiently waiting for the rental car guy to show up.

The traffic had lessened; maybe all the gawkers and/or reporters had decided I was in hiding somewhere, or had maybe gone shopping. Still, when my ride appeared I didn't want to dally around on the front steps, an easy target for either an eager reporter or a desperate killer. I got my keys out to have them ready to lock the dead bolt on the front door, and that was when I noticed I still had my car keys. I was surprised into laughing; there was no way Wyatt could have had my car delivered, because I hadn't given him the keys and he hadn't thought to ask for them.

The car would be all right at Great Bods until I got back. It was locked, and it was under the awning. At worst, Wyatt would have it towed to the city impound lot, which he had better not do because if my car was damaged in any way, I'd definitely sue him.

A red Pontiac with a magnetic sign on the side announcing it belonged to the rental agency pulled to the curb. I grabbed my duffel and was out the door before the guy could get out of the car. I paused only to lock my door, then hurried down the steps to meet him. "Let's go before someone shows up," I said, opening the rear passenger door and tossing my duffel inside, then sliding into the front seat.

The man got behind the steering wheel, blinking in confusion. "Who? Is someone after you?"

"Maybe." If he didn't know who I was, that was all to the good. Maybe no one much read the newspaper anymore. "An ex-boyfriend is really making a nuisance of himself, you know?"

"He's violent?" The man threw me an alarmed look.

"No, he just whines a lot. It's embarrassing."

Relieved, he put the car in gear and drove to our small regional airport, where all the rental agencies were located. After some discussion about the type of car they wanted to put me in—I nixed the bare-bones economy models because they were *too* bare bones (one even had roll-up windows, which I didn't know Detroit still made)—I settled on a sharp black Chevy short-bed pickup. Black isn't the most sensible color in the south, because

of the heat, but it's undeniably sharp. If I couldn't have my Mercedes, I thought riding around in a pickup truck would be cool.

I have good memories associated with pickup trucks. Grampie had owned one, and during my junior year in high school, for two whole months I'd dated a senior, Tad Bickerstaff, who drove a pickup. Tad had let me drive his truck, which I thought was the best thing ever. Our romance faded as fast as it had bloomed, though, and Tad and his truck had moved on to another girl.

All the papers signed and the gas tank filled, I tossed my duffel in the seat of the pickup and buckled myself in. Beach, here I come!

I admit, summer isn't the best time to head to the beach if you don't have reservations. Even worse, it was Friday, when all the weekenders were doing the same. But since it was only noon, I figured I had a good head start on the weekend crowd, and among them had to be people like me who trusted they'd be able to get a motel room once they reached the shore. People do that only because—duh—it usually works.

Driving from the western part of the state to the eastern shore takes several hours, especially since I had to stop for lunch. I decided I loved driving a pickup, because sitting higher meant I could see so much better, plus this particular truck had plenty of power and all the extras I could want. The ride was smooth, the air-conditioning was top-notch, the sun was shining, and Wyatt Bloodsworth had no idea where I was. Things were looking up.

Around three, my cell phone rang. I looked at the number that showed in the little window; I had dialed it just that morning, so I knew very well who was calling. I let the voice mail answer, and kept on truckin' down the road.

I was getting very excited about my mini-vacation. A couple of days on the beach would do me a world of good, plus take me away from town while interest in Nicole's murder was so high. Normally I'm very responsible, because Great Bods is my baby, but just this once I thought circumstances warranted that I take a break. Probably I should have posted a sign on the front door at Great Bods, though, telling my members when we might reopen. Oh, my God, I hadn't given a thought to my employees! I should have personally called each of them.

Angry at myself, I called Siana. "I can't believe I did this," I said as soon as she answered the phone. "I didn't call everyone and tell them when I expected to reopen Great Bods."

The great thing about Siana is, growing up with me, she learned to read between the lines and fill in the gaps. She immediately knew I wasn't talking about the members because there were so many of them that calling each and every one would take, like, until Great Bods actually reopened, so obviously I was talking about my employees.
"Do you have a list of their numbers at your place?" she asked.
"There's a printed list folded in my address book, in the top left drawer of my desk. If you'll get it, I'll call you back when I get settled and can write all the numbers down."
"Don't bother with that; I'll call them. Since I'm right here and the calls are local, that makes more sense than using your cell phone minutes. I'll also have Lynn update the voice mail message."
"I owe you. Be thinking about what you'd like to have." I love that girl; it's great having a sister like her. I was calling her at work, and she could easily have said she was tied up and she'd get to it as soon as she could, but it might be tomorrow. Not Siana, though; she handled everything thrown at her as if she had all the time in the world. You'll notice I don't say that about Jenni, who still thinks she's privileged. Besides, I have *not* forgotten that I caught her willingly kissing my husband. I don't bring it up and for the most part get along with her, but it's always there in the back of my mind.
"Don't make open-ended promises like that; I might ask for something more than borrowing your best dress. By the way, someone is looking for you, and he sounds angry. Want to guess his name? Hint: he's a police lieutenant."
I was flabbergasted, not that he was looking for me and that he was angry, but that he had called Siana. I'd told him during one of our dates that I had two sisters, but I'm certain I didn't tell him their names or anything about them. On the other hand, it was silly to be surprised: he was a cop; he knew how to find out things about people.
"Wow. He didn't give you any grief, did he?"
"No, he was very controlled. He did say something about betting that I was your lawyer. What was that about?"
"I have a list of grievances against him. I told him I was taking the list to my lawyer."
Siana chuckled. "What would those grievances be?"

“Oh, things like manhandling me, kidnapping me, snotty attitude. He took my list away from me, so I have to write another one. I’ll add to it as time goes along, I’m sure.”
She was outright laughing now. “I bet he loved the ‘snotty attitude’ item. Uh—are you going to need me for real? Are you in any trouble?”
“I don’t think so. He told me not to leave town, but I’m not a suspect, so I don’t think he can do that, can he?”
“If you’re not a suspect, why did he say that?”
“I think he’s decided he’s interested again. Then again, maybe he was just getting back at me because I pretended not to recognize him. I had him going for a while.”
“Then it’s probably both. He’s interested, and he’s getting back at you. Plus he’s making certain you stay where he can get to you.”
“I don’t think it worked,” I said as I cruised down Highway 74 toward Wilmington.

Chapter Seven

I could have gone to the Outer Banks, but I figured I’d have a better chance of getting a room along the southern coast. Heck, I could always keep going south until I reached Myrtle Beach, if necessary. I wasn’t looking for entertainment, though, just a place where I could relax for a couple of days until things cooled down at home.
I rolled into Wilmington around six **P.M.**, and worked my way through the city toward Wrightsville Beach. As soon as I saw the Atlantic, Tiffany—my inner beach bunny, remember?—sighed in contentment. She is so easy.
I lucked out and found a cozy little beach cottage at the first place I stopped; the family that had rented it had just canceled. Wasn’t that great? I’d rather have a cottage than a motel room any day, because of the privacy. It was the most darling place, a little blue clapboard bungalow with a screened porch and fire pit on the left side. It was just three rooms, sort of; the front half of the house was a tiny kitchen and eating area, which was open to the living room. The back half of the house was a nice bedroom and bath, and whoever had decorated the bedroom had me in mind, because the bed was wreathed in mosquito netting. I love little touches like that, froufrou feminine things.

While I was unpacking, my cell phone rang again. It was the third time Wyatt's number had shown up on Caller ID, and once again I let the call go to voice mail. The phone kept beeping at me, to tell me there were messages, but I hadn't retrieved any of them yet. I figured if I didn't know what he was saying, I wasn't technically defying him, right? He might be threatening me with arrest or something, in which case I would only be upset if I knew about it, so I was better off not listening to his messages.
After unpacking, I went to this great seafood restaurant and absolutely pigged out on boiled shrimp, which I love. It was one of those places where the atmosphere is casual and the service is fast, and I got there right ahead of the supper crowd. I was in and out in forty-five minutes. By the time I got back to my little cottage, twilight was creeping across the beach and the heat was fading; what better time to take a walk?
Color me contented. After my walk, I called home and let Mom know where she could reach me. She didn't say anything about Lieutenant Bloodsworth calling, so maybe he hadn't bothered them.
I slept like a rock that night, and was up at dawn for a run on the beach. I hadn't had any exercise the day before, and I get antsy if I go longer than that without working my muscles. I did a brisk three miles in the sand, which is great for the legs, then showered and searched out a store where I could buy cereal, milk, and fruit.
After breakfast, I put on my turquoise bikini and slathered on waterproof sunscreen, then took a book and a beach towel, slipped my sunglasses on my nose, and hit the beach.
I read for a while; then when the sun got hot, I took a cooling dip in the ocean, and after that read a while longer. By eleven, the heat was too much for me, so I put on my flip-flops and a beach cover-up, got my bag, and went shopping. I love that about beach towns; no one turns a hair if you go shopping in your bathing suit.
I found a really cute pair of blue shorts with a blue-and-white matching top, and a straw bag with a fish embroidered on it with metallic thread, so it glittered in the sunlight. The bag was great for holding all of my beach stuff. I ate lunch on an open deck looking out over the ocean, where a good-looking guy tried to pick me up. I was there to rest, though, not to look for love of the transient variety, so he was out of luck.
Finally I wandered back to my cottage. I'd left my cell phone on the charger, and when I checked it, there were no new missed calls, so evidently

Wyatt had given up. After renewing my sunscreen, I hit the beach again. Same routine: read, cool off in the ocean, read some more. By three-thirty, I was so drowsy I couldn't keep my eyes open. Putting my book aside, I stretched out on the towel and went to sleep.

The next thing I knew, someone was picking me up. I mean literally. The odd thing was, I wasn't alarmed, at least not that I was being kidnapped by some beach maniac. I blinked my eyes open and stared up at a hard, angry face that I knew very well. But even before I'd opened my eyes I'd *known*, whether by some weird skin chemistry or subconsciously recognizing the scent of him; my heart did that crazy dance.

He was carrying me toward the cottage. "Lieutenant Bloodsworth," I said in acknowledgment, as if he needed any.

He scowled down at me. "Jesus. Just shut up, okay?"

I don't like being told to shut up. "How did you find me?" I knew Mom wouldn't tell him, just because she's Mom and would figure if he couldn't keep track of me, that wasn't her problem, and if I'd wanted him to know where I was, *I'd* have told him.

"You paid by credit card." He reached the cottage, which wasn't locked, since I'd been lying on the beach right in front of it, and turned sideways to get me through the door. The air-conditioning raised goose bumps on my bare, sun-heated flesh.

"You mean you *tracked* my credit card as if I was a common criminal—"

He released my legs but kept his grip on my upper body, and I grabbed at his shirt for balance. The next thing I knew, he had me lifted off my feet again and his mouth was on mine.

I think I've mentioned that I went into major meltdown whenever he touched me. Two years down the road, that hadn't changed. His mouth felt the same and tasted the same; his body was hard and hot against me, his muscled arms like living steel around me. Every nerve ending in me revved to immediate attention; it was like a mild electrical current running through me, magnetizing me so that I was pulled to him. I actually whimpered as I wound my arms around his neck and my legs around his hips, and kissed him back as hungrily as he was kissing me.

There were a thousand reasons why I should have stopped him right there, and I didn't listen to any of them. The only coherent thought I had was: *Thank God I'm on birth control pills*, which I had gone on and stayed on after my previous experience with him.

My bikini top came off on the way to the bedroom. Frantic to feel his bare skin against me, I yanked and jerked at his shirt, and he obliged me by raising first one arm and then the other so I could pull it off over his head. His chest was broad and hairy, and hard with muscle. I rubbed against him like a cat as he fought to unbuckle his belt and unfasten his jeans. I guess I didn't help any, but I didn't want to stop.

Then he tossed me on the bed and peeled off my bikini bottom. His eyes were glittering as he stared down at me, stretched naked across the bed. He visually searched every inch of my skin, that hot look lingering on my breasts and hips. He pushed my legs apart and looked at me, making me blush, but then he eased two big fingers into me and I forgot about blushing. My knees came up and my hips lifted as sheer delight fizzed through me.

He said, "Fuck," in a strained voice, and pushed his jeans down, letting them drop to the floor. I don't know how he got rid of his shoes; for all I know, he took them off before walking down on the beach to get me, which would have been the best thing to do. But he stepped out of his jeans and then he was on top of me, and the diabolical fiend bit the side of my neck as he entered me with a hard push that took him all the way in.

I went off like a rocket. If I'd had any self-control left, it was destroyed by that bite.

When I settled, I opened my heavy eyelids to find him looking down at me with a fiercely triumphant expression in his eyes. He stroked my hair out of my face and nuzzled my temple with his lips. "Do I need a condom?"

He was already inside me, so it was a little too late to be asking. I managed to say, "No. I'm on the pill."

"Good," he said, and got started on me all over again.

That was the good part about letting passion override common sense. The bad part was when common sense returned. No matter how many orgasms you have, if you have any common sense to begin with, it always comes back.

Daylight was almost gone when I woke from an exhausted, satiated nap to stare in disconcertion at the naked man beside me. Not that he wasn't great to look at, with that strongly muscled body, but I had not only gone against my own rules, I had also lost a huge amount of tactical ground. Yes, the battle of the sexes is like fighting a war. If everything works out, you both win. If it doesn't work out, you want to be the one who loses the least.

Now what? I'd just made love with a man I wasn't even dating! *Used* to date, yes—very briefly. Absolutely nothing between us had been settled, and I had given in like a total surrender-monkey. He hadn't even had to ask. How humiliating that he was right: all he had to do was touch me, and I started shedding clothes. It didn't help that actually making love with him had been just as good—better—as that damn chemistry reaction between us had promised. That shouldn't happen. It should be illegal or something, because how was I supposed to ignore him the way I wanted to when actually *knowing* how good we were together was so much worse than imagining how it might be? If I'd been tempted before, the feeling would be ten times worse now.

I realized I'd been staring at his penis for a good ten minutes, and in that length of time it had changed from soft and relaxed to not so soft. I looked up to find him watching me, his green eyes both sleepy and hungry.

"We can't do this again," I said firmly, before he could reach for me and undermine my resistance. "Once was enough."

"Must not have been," he said lazily, trailing a finger over my nipple.

He had me there. Damn it. Never go back for seconds.

I brushed his finger away. "I mean it. This was a mistake."

"I don't agree. I think it was a great idea." He raised up on his elbow and leaned over me. A little panicked, I turned my head away before he could kiss me, but he wasn't going for my mouth.

Instead he pressed his lips just under my ear and trailed sucking little kisses down the side of my neck, following the ligaments that led straight to the soft little hollow where my neck joined my shoulder. Heat flooded through me, and though I opened my mouth to say "no," or something like it, nothing came out except a moan.

He licked and bit and sucked and kissed, and I shuddered and squirmed and generally went crazy. When he slid on top of me again, I was too far gone to do anything except grab him and hold on for the ride.

"That isn't fair!" I stormed at him as I stomped into the bathroom half an hour later. "How did you know that? *Don't do it again!*"

Laughing, he followed me into the shower. I couldn't throw him out unless he let me, so I turned my back on him and concentrated on showering off the heady combination of sunscreen, saltwater, and man.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice, or remember?" He put one big warm hand on the back of my neck, and his thumb stroked up and down. I shuddered.

“You were naked in my lap—”
“I had on a skirt. I was *not* naked.”
“Close enough. At any rate, honey, I paid attention. If I touched your breasts, you barely noticed, but when I kissed your neck, you’d almost come. What was so tough about figuring *that* out?”
I didn’t like him knowing so much about me. Most men assume that if they touch or kiss your breasts, they’re turning you on and can maybe talk you into doing something you don’t really want to do. My breasts are pretty much nothing to me, pleasure-wise. Sometimes I envy women who get pleasure from their breasts, but I’m not one of them, and anyway, I figure keeping a cool head more than offsets the lack.
Kiss my neck, however, and I melt. It’s a weakness, because a man can kiss your neck without taking your clothes off, so I don’t go around blabbing about it. How had Wyatt noticed so fast?
He was a cop. Noticing details was part of who and what he was. That’s fine when he’s after a criminal, but he shouldn’t be allowed to use that skill in a sexual situation.
“Keep your hands *and* your mouth off my neck,” I said, turning around to glare at him. “We are *so* not doing this.”
“You have a remarkable talent for ignoring the obvious,” he said, grinning down at me.
“I’m not ignoring it; I’m making an executive decision. I don’t want to have sex with you again. It’s not a good thing for me—”
“Liar.”
“—in any way other than sexually,” I finished, glaring harder. “Just go back to your life and I’ll go back to mine, and we’ll forget this ever happened.”
“That’s not going to happen. Why are you so dead set against us getting together again?”
“We were never *together.* The term implies a relationship, and we never got that far.”
“Stop splitting hairs. I couldn’t forget about you and you couldn’t forget about me. Okay, I give up: not seeing you didn’t work.”
I turned my back and began shampooing my hair, so angry I couldn’t think of anything to say. He *wanted* to forget about me? I’d be glad to help him. Maybe if I hit him in the head with something hard—
“Don’t you want to know why?” he asked, sliding his fingers into my hair and massaging my scalp.

“No,” I said stonily.
He moved closer, so close his naked body was pressed against me as he worked the suds through my hair. “Then I won’t tell you. One day you’ll want to know, and we’ll talk about it then.”
He was the most exasperating man I’d ever seen. I clamped my teeth together to keep from asking him to tell me.
Frustration and resentment built, and finally I relieved it by saying, “You’re such an asshole jerk.”
He laughed and pushed my head under the shower.

Chapter Eight

I don’t know how I ended up going to dinner with him. Actually, I do. He wouldn’t leave.

I had to eat, and I was starving. So after I got out of the shower, I totally ignored him while I dried my hair and got ready, which actually doesn’t take all that long because I didn’t bother with anything more than the basic makeup—mascara and lipstick. The summer heat meant I’d just sweat off anything more, so why go to the trouble?

He irritated me no end by actually bumping me away from the bathroom sink with his hip so he could shave. I stared at him openmouthed, because that just isn’t the way things work. He looked at me in the mirror and winked. In a snit, I marched into the bedroom and threw on some clothes, which again didn’t take long because I didn’t bring much in the first place, and what I did bring was color coordinated. Now that I wasn’t in a fog of lust, I saw a small black duffel sitting open on the floor at the foot of the bed; that was evidently where the razor and shaving cream came from. Come to think of it, the closet was fuller . . .

I whirled and opened the closet again. Yes, pushed to the side were a pair of jeans and a polo shirt.

I grabbed them off the hangers and turned to stuff them back into that duffel where they belonged. He came out of the bathroom in time to say, “Thanks for getting these out for me,” as he took them from my hands and put them on.

That was when I realized he was out of control, and the best thing I could do was escape.

While he was pulling on his jeans, I rushed through the living room and grabbed my bag and keys on the way out. A rental sedan—a white Saturn—was parked beside the truck, another little detail I’d missed in my earlier delirium. I opened the truck door and slid behind the steering wheel . . . and just kept on sliding, pushed by his big body as he forcibly took my place behind the wheel.

I shrieked and tried to push him out; when he didn’t budge, I pulled my feet up and pushed with them, too. I’m strong for a woman, but he was like a rock sitting there. And the jackass was smiling.

“Going somewhere?” he asked as he neatly filched the keys from the floorboard where I’d dropped them.

“Yes,” I said, and opened the passenger door. I was sliding out when he caught me under both arms and hauled me back into the truck.
“There are two ways we can do this,” he said calmly. “You can sit there like a good girl, or I can handcuff you. Which do you choose?”
“That isn’t a choice,” I said indignantly. “That’s an ultimatum. Neither is what *I* want to do!”
“Those’re the only two alternatives I’m offering. Look at it this way: you put me to the trouble of chasing after you, so you’re damned lucky I’m giving you even this much of a choice.”
“Hah! You didn’t have to follow me and you know it. You had no reason other than being an arrogant jackass for telling me not to leave town, so don’t act so put upon. You got laid, didn’t you? I didn’t notice you acting like I was a lot of trouble when you were tossing me on the bed.”
He reached across me and grabbed the seat belt, pulling it around to buckle it. “I’m not the only person in this truck who got laid. Fun was had. Rocks were got off. It was a mutual thing.”
“Which shouldn’t have happened. Casual sex is stupid.”
“Agreed. But what’s between us isn’t casual.”
“I keep telling you there is no ‘us.’ ”
“Sure there is. You just don’t want to admit it yet.” He started the truck and put it in gear. “Nice truck, by the way. It surprised me. You strike me as a luxury-car kind of person.”
I loudly cleared my throat, and he looked at me with raised brows. I stared pointedly at his seat belt, which he hadn’t fastened. He grunted and put the truck back in park. “Yes, ma’am,” he said while he buckled himself in.
As he backed out of the driveway I returned to the argument. “See? You don’t know what kind of person I am. I like driving pickups. You really don’t know anything at all about me, so therefore we have nothing between us except for physical attraction. That makes the sex casual.”
“I beg to differ. Casual sex is scratching an itch, and nothing more.”
“Bingo! My itch has been scratched. You can go now.”
“Are you always like this when your feelings get hurt?”
I set my jaw and stared out the windshield. I wished he hadn’t realized that hurt feelings *were* behind my hostility and resistance to him. You have to care about someone before he can hurt your feelings, because otherwise what he said or did wouldn’t even blip on the old radar screen. I didn’t want to care about him; I didn’t want to care about what he did or whom he saw,

if he was eating properly or getting enough sleep. I didn't want to be hurt again, because this man could hurt me big-time if I let him get really close. Jason had hurt me bad enough, but Wyatt could break my heart.

He reached out and put his hand on the back of my neck, gently massaging. "I'm sorry," he said gently.

I could tell I was going to have trouble with him when it came to my neck. He was like a vampire, going straight for it whenever he wanted to influence me. The apology wasn't playing fair, either. I wanted him to crawl, and here he was undermining my resolve with that simple apology. The man was sneaky.

The best thing to do was fight fire with fire, and tell him exactly where he stood and what the problem was. I reached up and removed his hand from the back of my neck, because I couldn't think straight while he was touching me there.

"Okay, here it is," I said steadily, still focusing on what was outside rather than in the truck with me. "How can I trust you not to hurt me again? You cut and ran instead of telling me what the problem was, instead of working on it or giving *me* a chance to work on it. My marriage failed because my husband, instead of telling me something was wrong and working with me to fix it, started running around on me. So I'm not real big on trying to build relationships with people who aren't willing to put some effort into maintaining it and repairing the breakdowns. You do that for a car, right? So my standard is, a man has to care as much about me as he does about his car. You failed."

He was silent as he absorbed all of that. I expected him to start arguing, explaining how the situation looked from his side of the fence, but he didn't. "So it's a trust thing," he finally said. "Good. That's something I can work with." He slanted a hard look at me. "That means you'll be seeing a lot of me. I can't earn your trust back if I'm not around. So from now on, we're together. Got it?"

I blinked. Somehow I hadn't foreseen he would take a lack of trust and make it seem as if that meant I *had* to be in a relationship with him so he could re-earn my trust. I'm telling you, the man is diabolical.

"You've had a brain fart," I pointed out as kindly as possible. "Not trusting you means I don't *want* to be with you."

He snorted. "Yeah, right. That's why we tear each other's clothes off every time we get within touching distance."

“That’s a chemical imbalance, nothing more. A good multivitamin will take care of that.”
“We’ll talk about it over dinner. Where do you want to eat?”
That’s right, distract me with food. If I hadn’t been so hungry, his ploy would never have worked. “Someplace with champion air-conditioning where I can sit down and some nice person will bring me a margarita.”
“That works for me,” he said.
Wrightsville Beach is actually on an island, so we drove across the bridge to Wilmington, where, in short order, he was escorting me into a crowded Mexican restaurant where the air-conditioning was cranked up on high and the menu boasted a huge margarita. I don’t know how he knew about the restaurant unless he’d been to Wilmington before, which I guess isn’t that much of a stretch. People go to beaches the way lemmings do whatever it is that lemmings do. There are a lot of beaches in North Carolina, but he’d probably been from one end of the coast to the other back in his hell-raising, college-ball-playing days. I’d been a cheerleader, and *I* certainly had hit almost every beach in the southeast, from North Carolina down to the Florida Keys and back up the Gulf Coast.
A young Hispanic man brought our menus and waited to take our drink orders. Wyatt ordered a beer for himself and a frozen Cuervo Gold margarita for me. I didn’t know what Cuervo Gold was, and I didn’t care. I assumed it was a special kind of tequila, but it could have been regular tequila, for all I knew about it.
The glass they brought it in wasn’t a glass. It was a vase. This thing was *huge*. It wasn’t actually a vase, but I wouldn’t call it a glass, either. It was more like a gigantic clear bowl perched on a skinny pedestal.
“Uh-oh,” Wyatt said.
I ignored him and gripped my margarita with both hands, which I needed to lift it. The huge bowl of the glass was frosty, and salt sparkled around the rim. Two slices of lime were perched on top, and a bright red plastic straw provided access to the contents.
“We’d better order,” he said.
I sucked on the straw and downed a sizable gulp of margarita. The tequila taste wasn’t very strong, which was fortunate, or I’d have been on my butt before I was halfway finished with the thing. “I like burritos rancheros. Beef.”

It was amusing watching him watch me while he gave the order. I took another big sip through the straw.
“If you get drunk,” he warned, “I’m going to take pictures.”
“Why, thank you. I’ve been told I’m a very cute drunk.” I hadn’t, but he didn’t know that. I had actually never been drunk before, which probably means I had an abnormal college experience. But I’d always had cheerleading practice, or gymnastics—or something unexpected, like an exam to take—and I didn’t think any of those would be a happy experience while suffering a hangover, so I simply stopped drinking before I got drunk.
The waiter brought a basket of hot, salty tortilla chips and two bowls of salsa, hot and mild. I resalted half the tortilla chips and dug one into the hot salsa, which was delicious and definitely hot. Three chips later I broke out into a sweat and had to reach for my margarita again.
Wyatt reached out and moved my vase—my glass—out of reach.
“Hey!” I said indignantly.
“I don’t want you getting pickled.”
“I’ll get pickled if I want.”
“I need to ask you some more questions, which is why I didn’t want you to leave town.”
“Nice try, Lieutenant.” I leaned forward and retrieved my margarita. “For one thing, the detectives are working the case, not you. For another, I didn’t see *anything* other than a man was with Nicole, and he left driving a dark sedan. That’s it. Nothing else.”
“That you know of,” he said, snatching away my margarita just as I guided the straw to my mouth for another sip. “Sometimes details will surface days later. For instance, the car’s headlights. Or the taillights. Did you see them?”
“I didn’t see the headlights,” I said positively, intrigued by the question.
“The taillights . . . hmm. Maybe.” I closed my eyes and replayed the scene in my head. It was shockingly detailed and vivid. In my imagination I saw the dark car sliding past, and to my surprise my heartbeat picked up in response. “The street is at a right angle to me, remember, so anything will be a side view. The taillight is . . . long. It isn’t one of those round ones; it’s a long skinny one.” My eyes popped open. “I think some models of Cadillac have taillights that shape.”
“Among others,” he said. He was writing down what I’d said, in this little notepad he’d evidently dug out of his pocket, because it was bent like a

pocket dweller.
“You could have asked me this over the phone,” I pointed out acerbically.
“Yes, if you were answering your phone,” he replied in the same tone.
“*You* hung up on me.”
“*I* was busy. Yesterday was a ballbuster. I didn’t have time to worry about your car, which, by the way, I couldn’t get anyway because you didn’t bother giving your keys to me.”
“I know. I mean, I didn’t know then. I found them a little later. But the paper only identified *me* as a witness and that made me feel uneasy, and Tiffany was whining, so I rented wheels and came to the beach.”
He paused. “Tiffany?”
“My inner beach bunny. I haven’t had a vacation in a long time.”
He looked at me as if I’d grown two heads, or had admitted to having multiple personalities or something. Finally he asked, “Is there anyone besides Tiffany living inside you?”
“Well, I don’t have a snow bunny, if that’s what you’re asking. I’ve been snow skiing once. Almost. I tried on those boots and they’re so uncomfortable I can’t believe people actually wear them without having a gun held to their heads.” I drummed my fingers. “I used to have Black Bart, but he hasn’t shown up in a while, so maybe that was just a kid thing.”
“Black Bart? He was your inner . . . gunfighter?” He’d started grinning.
“No, he was my inner maniac who would go berserk and try to kill you if you hurt one of my Barbies.”
“You must have been hell on the playground.”
“You don’t mess with a girl’s Barbies.”
“I’ll remember that the next time I have the urge to grab a Barbie and stomp it.”
I stared at him, aghast. “You’d actually do that?”
“Haven’t in a long time. I must have gotten the Barbie-stomping out of my system by the time I was five.”
“Black Bart would have hurt you bad.”
He seemed to notice his little notebook on the table and got a puzzled expression on his face, as if he couldn’t figure out how the conversation had devolved from headlights to Barbies. Before he could reroute, however, the waiter brought our plates and set them down in front of us with the admonition to be careful because the plates were hot.

The tortilla chips had kept me from total starvation, but I was still mega-hungry, so I dug into the burritos with one hand while I took advantage of his distraction to retrieve my margarita with the other. Being ambidextrous has its uses. Not that I can write or anything with my left hand, but I can definitely retrieve kidnapped margaritas.

Like I said, the drink wasn't strong. There was a lot of it, though. By the time I finished my burritos, I'd downed about half the drink, and I was feeling very happy. Wyatt paid for the meal and kept his arm around me as we walked to the truck. I don't know why; I wasn't staggering or anything. I wasn't even singing.

He lifted me into the truck as though I wasn't capable of sliding in on my own. I gave him a bright smile and hooked one leg around his. "Want to get it on, big boy?"

He choked on a laugh. "Can you hold that thought until we get back to the cottage?"

"I may be sober by then, and remember why I shouldn't."

"I'll take my chances." He gave me a lingering kiss. "I think I can get around that."

Oh, right. My neck. He knew about my neck. I could see I'd have to invest in some turtleneck sweaters.

By the time we got back across the bridge to Wrightsville Beach, the happy glow had indeed faded, leaving me sleepy. I slid out of the truck under my own steam, however, and was walking toward the front door of the cottage when Wyatt scooped me up. "Does that offer still stand?"

"Sorry. The glow has faded. Alcohol-induced lust is a transient thing." He carried me as if he barely noticed my weight, which, by the way, since I'm toned and muscled, is more than you'd think. But he was ten inches taller and muscled himself, which meant he outweighed me by at least eighty pounds or more.

"Good. I'd rather you want me for reasons other than being looped."

"My brain is back in control, and my earlier reasoning still stands. I don't want to have sex with you." Boy, was that a lie. I wanted him like crazy, which didn't mean I should have him or that things would work out between us. Our little talk hadn't reassured me in any way, because actions matter way more than talk and one afternoon together didn't amount to much.

“I bet I can change your mind,” he said as he opened the door, which was unlocked because I’d been in a hurry to escape and he’d been in a hurry to catch me.
An hour later, a thought surfaced just as I drifted off to sleep. Forget turtlenecks. To hold him at bay, I needed full body armor.

Chapter Nine

I woke during the night, cold and disoriented. The cold wasn’t surprising, because Wyatt had the window air conditioner in the bedroom turned on the “Frost” setting. I must have been dreaming, because a loud noise like a gunshot startled me awake, and for a moment I didn’t know where I was. Maybe I made a sound, or jerked the way you do when you’re startled. Wyatt said, “Are you all right?” in an instantly alert voice as he sat up in bed, and the question jerked me out of the weird moment. I stared at him in the darkness, able to make out only the outline of his body framed against the slightly lighter background of the window. I reached out and touched him, my hand finding the warmth of his bare stomach just above the sheet pooled around his hips. Touching him was automatic, an instinctive need for contact.
“I’m cold,” I muttered, and he lay back down, pulling me against him and tucking the covers up around my shoulders. I cradled my head on his shoulder and put my hand on his chest, comforted by the warmth and hardness of his body, the substantial presence of him beside me. I hadn’t wanted to sleep with him—I mean in the literal sense, because I was still desperately trying to preserve my boundaries—but I’d fallen asleep in the middle of the argument and he’d obviously taken advantage of my unconscious state. I suspected it was a deliberate tactic: exhaust me with sex, so I couldn’t stay awake. But now I was glad he was here beside me in the night, snuggling me close and keeping the chill away. This was exactly what I had wanted from him before, this intimacy, the companionship, the link. The depth of my contentment now, in his arms, was frightening.
“What were you dreaming?” he asked, rubbing my back with a slow, soothing stroke. His deep voice was roughened by sleep, and the sweetness of lying there like that with him wrapped itself around me like a quilt.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember anything. I woke up, and it was one of those creepy times when I didn’t know where I was, plus I was cold. Did I say something?”
“No, you just made a funny sound, like you were scared.”
“I think I heard a loud noise, but it may have been in my dream. If I was dreaming.”
“I didn’t hear anything. What kind of loud noise?”
“Like a gunshot.”
“No, there definitely wasn’t anything like that.” He sounded absolutely certain. I supposed, since he was a cop, he was attuned to things like that.
“Then I must have been dreaming about the murder. I don’t remember.” I yawned and cuddled closer, and as I did a wisp of memory floated back. I hadn’t been dreaming about Nicole’s murder, but about *mine*, because before the cops found Nicole’s body, I’d thought the shot had been aimed at me. For about ten minutes, until the cops arrived, I’d been terrified.
“Wait, I *do* remember a little. I dreamed I was being shot at, which at first I thought was what had happened. I guess my subconscious is working that out.”
His arms tightened around me. “What did you do? That night.”
“Stayed down, duck-walked back to the door and got inside the building, then locked the door and called nine-one-one.”
“Good girl. That was exactly the right thing to do.”
“I left out the panicking part. I was scared to death.”
“Which proves you aren’t an idiot.”
“And it also proved I didn’t shoot Nicole myself, because I didn’t go out into the rain to check things out. I was completely dry. I asked them to do a gunpowder residue test, though, because I was tired and didn’t want to be taken in for questioning, which as it turned out was a wasted effort because you dragged me in anyway.” That was still a sore point with me.
“Yeah, I heard about the ‘thingie’ test.” His tone was dry. Evidently he thought I’d played like a dumb blond to allay the detectives’ suspicions. I can’t imagine where he got an idea like that.
“I couldn’t think of the name right then,” I said innocently. “I was rattled.” Half of that was the truth.
“Uh-huh.”
I think he didn’t believe me. Moving right along, I said, “I don’t know why I’d dream about being shot now. Why not the first night? That was when I

was so shaken up."
"You were exhausted. You probably did dream, but you didn't wake up enough to remember them."
"Then what about last night? I didn't dream then, either."
"Same theory. You'd had a long drive on not much sleep. You were tired."
I snorted. "Hah! You think I wasn't tired tonight?"
"Different kind of tired." He sounded amused now. "The other was stress. Tonight was pleasure."
That was for certain. Even fighting with him was pleasure on some level, because I got so much enjoyment out of it. I was alarmed because he seemed to be winning all the battles, but I was still exhilarated by the fight. I imagine moths are happy while they're flying right into the fire, too. If Wyatt burned me again, I didn't know what I'd do. He'd already gotten to me way more than he had before, witness the fact that I was in bed with him.
I pinched him. Just because.
He jumped. "Ow! What was that for?"
"For not even courting me before you got me into bed," I said indignantly. "You make me feel as if I'm easy."
"Honey, nothing about you is easy. Trust me." His tone was wry.
"I must be." I managed to put some tears into my voice. Hey, if I can't win the battles, at least I can mess with him, right?
"Are you crying?" He definitely sounded suspicious.
"No." That was the truth. Can I help it if the word quivered a little?
His big hand touched my face. "You are not."
"I said I wasn't." Damn, did he accept nothing on face value? We definitely had an issue with trust here. How was I supposed to get away with anything?
"Yeah, but you were doing that little guilt-trip act. You know damn good and well that all you had to say at any time was 'no' if you really didn't want it."
"You sabotaged me with the neck thing. That has to stop."
"What are you going to do, get rid of your neck?"
"Does that mean you won't promise to leave my neck alone?"
"Are you kidding? Have I ever struck you as the type to cut my own throat?" He sounded lazily amused.

“I’m serious about not having sex. I think it’s the wrong thing to do this soon. We should have waited to see if a relationship gets going between us.”
“ ‘*Gets* going’?” he echoed. “Seems to me we’re halfway around the track already.”
“Not really. We haven’t left the starting line yet. We haven’t even been out on a date. This time, I mean. Two years ago doesn’t count.”
“We had dinner tonight.”
“That doesn’t count, either. You used your physical strength against me, then coerced me with threats.”
He snorted. “Like that would have stopped you from screaming your head off if you hadn’t decided you were hungry and I might as well pay for it.”
There was that, of course. Plus I was never in the least worried that he might actually hurt me. I felt remarkably safe and secure when I was with him—from everything except *him,* of course.
“So here’s the deal. I go out with you the way I would if we were starting all over again. That’s what you want, isn’t it? Another chance? That means no sex, because sex clouds the issue.”
“The hell it does.”
“Okay, it clouds *my* issues. Maybe when I get to know you better, and you get to know me, we’ll decide we don’t like each other that much, after all. Or maybe you decide you don’t like me nearly as much as I like you, because like I said, sex clouds the issue for me. Maybe men aren’t that influenced by having sex with someone, but women are. You’ll be saving me a lot of possible heartbreak if we back off and take our time with this.”
“You’re asking me to close the barn door after the horse is already out.”
“So round it up and put it back in your pants—barn, I mean.”
“That’s your point of view. In mine, it goes against every instinct to *not* make love to you as often as possible, because that’s how a man makes sure a woman is his.”
From his voice I could tell he was getting testy now. I sort of wished a light were on so I could read his expression, but that would have meant he’d be able to read mine, too, so I left well enough alone. “*If* we were that far along in our relationship, I’d agree with you.”
“From the evidence at hand, I’d say we are.”
So we were both naked and in bed together. So what?
“But we aren’t. We’re very much physically attracted to each other, but we don’t *know* each other. For instance, what’s my favorite color?”

“Hell, I was married for three years and I never knew her favorite color. Men don’t think about colors.”
“You don’t have to think about something to just kind of notice it.” I glossed over the fact that he’d been married before. I’d known it, of course, because his mother had told me before she ever introduced us, but I didn’t like thinking about it any more than I liked thinking about my own failed marriage. In Wyatt’s case, however, I was just plain jealous.
“Pink,” he said.
“Close, but no cigar. That’s my second favorite color.”
“Good God, you have more than one?”
“Teal.”
“Teal’s a color? I thought it was a duck.”
“Maybe the color comes from a duck. I don’t know. The point is, if we had spent a lot of time together and really gotten to know each other, you’d have noticed that I wear a lot of teal and you might have guessed it. But you couldn’t, because we *haven’t* spent a lot of time together.”
“The solution to that is to spend more time together.”
“Agreed. But without sex.”
“I feel as if I’m banging my head against a brick wall,” he said to the ceiling.
“I know the feeling.” I was beginning to get exasperated. “*The point is,* I’m afraid you’ll break my heart if I let you get too close to me. I’m afraid I’ll fall in love with you and then you’ll walk away again. I want to know you’re with me every step of the way if I *do* fall in love with you. How can I know that if we’re having sex, when sex means so much to a woman and it doesn’t mean much more to a man than just jerking off? It’s chemistry, and it short-circuits a woman’s brain, sort of drugs her, so she doesn’t notice she’s sleeping with a rat until it’s too late.”
There was a long pause; then he said, “What if I’m already in love with you, and I’m using sex to show you that, and to get closer to you?”
“If you’d said ‘infatuated,’ I might have believed you. I repeat, you don’t really know me, therefore you can’t truly love me. We’re in lust, not love. Not yet, and maybe not ever.”
Another long pause. “I understand what you’re saying. I don’t agree with it, but I understand it. Did you understand what *I* said, about using sex to show you I care?”
“Yes,” I said guardedly. What was he leading up to? “And I don’t agree.”

“Then we’re at a stalemate. You don’t want to have sex and I do. So let’s make a deal: any time I put the move on you, all you have to do is say no and I promise I’ll stop, regardless. I may be on top of you about to put it in, but if you say no, I’ll stop.”
“That’s not fair!” I wailed. “What’s my record so far in saying no to you?”
“Two years ago, you were two for oh. This time, it’s four-zip in my favor.”
“See! You’re two-thirds better at this than I am. I need a handicap.”
“How in hell do you handicap sex?”
“You can’t touch my neck.”
“Uh-uh. No way in hell are you putting your neck out-of-bounds.” Just to prove his point, he hauled me up his body so I was level with him, and before I could stop him, he buried his face in the curve of my neck and shoulders and lightly bit me. Lightning pleasure shot through me and my eyes rolled back in my head.
Yes, he cheated.
A while later, bracing himself over me on his arms, both of us sweaty and our lungs pumping like mad, he said, with great satisfaction, “Make that *five*-zip.”
I *hate* it when a man gloats, don’t you? Especially when he cheats.

“We’ll fly home,” he said as we packed our bags after breakfast.
“But my truck—”
“We’ll turn the rentals in here. My car’s at the airport at home. I’ll take you to pick up your car.”
Finally I was getting my car back! That part of it was a good plan. But I don’t like flying all that much; I do it, occasionally, but I’d much rather drive. “I don’t like to fly,” I said.
He straightened and stared at me. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid.”
“I’m not *afraid*, exactly, not gasping for breath and things like that, but it isn’t my favorite thing. The squad was flying to the West Coast once for a ball game, and we hit some turbulence and dropped far enough that I thought the pilot would never be able to pull us out. Since then I’ve been uneasy about it.”
He watched me for another minute, then said, “Okay, we’ll drive. Follow me to the airport so I can turn in my rental.”
Well, blow me down. For a minute there I’d expected to be strong-armed onto a plane; I’d told him so many fibs these past few days, why should he

believe the truth? But he evidently had a Blair Truth Detector like the one Mom had, and realized that if anything, I was understating a little how much it bothered me to fly. Just a little, because I truly don't panic or anything.

So I followed him to the airport, where he turned in his rental, and then waited behind the wheel while he stored his gear beside mine in the bed of the truck. He surprised me yet again by getting in on the passenger side and buckling himself in without even asking to drive. Only a man secure in his own masculinity will let a woman do the driving in a pickup truck . . . either that or he was very sneakily buttering me up. Whatever. It worked. I was feeling much more mellow with him during the long drive back home.

It was late afternoon when we got to our small regional airport, where he'd left his car. I turned in the rental truck and we transferred everything to his Crown Vic; then he drove me to Great Bods to get my car.

To my dismay, the yellow crime-scene tape was still strung around most of my property. About half of the front parking lot was taped off, and all of the building and the back parking lot. He pulled into the section of parking lot that was open. "When will I be able to reopen?" I asked as I handed over my car keys to him.

"I'll try to get the scene closed tomorrow. If I do, you'll be able to open on Tuesday—but I'm not making any promises."

I stood beside his car while he walked around back, and a moment later he reappeared driving my Mercedes. He pulled in on the other side of the Crown Vic, closest to the street, and stopped beside his car. Leaving the Mercedes running, he got out and transferred my duffel to my small backseat, then stepped back only a little, so that he was standing very close beside me when I started to get into the car. He caught my arm, his big hand warm on my skin.

"I have to work tonight, shuffle some papers around. Will you be at your parents' house?"

Thoughts of him had so completely consumed me for two days that my nervousness about being named as *the* witness to Nicole's murder had almost completely calmed down. "I don't want to do anything stupid, but is there really much of a chance this guy will try to eliminate the witness, namely me?"

"I can't discount the possibility," he said, looking grim. "It isn't likely, but it isn't impossible. I'd feel better if you were either at your parents' or if you

came home with me.”
“I’ll go to their house,” I decided, because if he thought I should be worried, then I was worried. “But I need to go home and get more clothes, pay bills, that sort of thing.”
“I’ll go with you. Get what you need, and do your paperwork when you get to your parents’. Better yet, tell me what you need; I’ll get it and bring it to you.”
Right, like I was going to let him go through my underwear drawer?
No sooner did I have that thought than I mentally shrugged. Not only had he seen my underwear—some of it, anyway—he’d taken it off me. Besides, I like pretty underwear, so it wasn’t as if there was anything there I’d be embarrassed for him to see.
“Give me your little notepad and a pen,” I said, and when he produced them from his pocket, I wrote down detailed descriptions of exactly what clothes I wanted him to get for me, and where my unpaid bills were filed. Since I already had my makeup and hair products with me, he was getting off easy.
When I gave him my house key, he looked down at it with a strange expression on his face.
“What?” I asked. “Is something wrong with the key?”
“No, everything’s fine,” he said, and bent his head. The kiss was warm and lingering, and before I knew it, I was on tiptoe with my arms laced around his neck, kissing him back with enthusiasm, plus interest.
When he lifted his head, he slowly licked his lips, tasting me. My toes curled and I almost told him to take me home with him, but common sense resurfaced at the last moment. He stepped back to give me room to get into the car.
“Oh, I need to give you directions to Mom and Dad’s house,” I said, remembering at the last moment.
“I know where they live.”
“How do— Oh, yeah, I forgot. You’re a cop. You checked.”
“When I couldn’t find you on Friday, yeah.”
I gave him the old Beady Eye, which is what Siana called it when Mom knew we had been up to something and would try to stare a confession out of us. “I think you have an unfair advantage, and you throw your cop weight around. That has to stop.”
“Not likely. That’s what we do,” he said, smiling as he turned to go to his car.

“Wait! Are you going to my house now and bringing my things, or are you going to work and bringing them later?”
“I’ll bring them now. I don’t know how long I’ll have to work.”
“Okay. See you there.” I tossed my bag into the passenger seat, but the toss fell short and the bag hit the console, falling back into the driver’s seat. I leaned down to pick up the bag and give it another toss, and a sharp crack reverberated on the street. Startled, I jumped sideways, and a sharp knife of pain sliced through my left arm.
Then a ton of concrete hit me and knocked me to the pavement.

Chapter Ten

The concrete was hard and warm, and was swearing a blue streak. And as I said, he also weighed a ton. “Son of a fucking bitch!” he said between clenched teeth, spitting out each word like a bullet. “Blair, are you all right?”
Well, I didn’t know. I’d hit the pavement pretty hard and banged my head, and I was kind of breathless from being squashed beneath him, plus my arm hurt like a mother. I felt sort of boneless from shock, because I’d heard that same crack before and I pretty much knew what was wrong with my arm. “I guess,” I said without much conviction.
His head moving from side to side as he kept a watch out for any approaching killers, Wyatt levered himself off me, then hauled me to a sitting position and propped me against the front tire, saying, “Stay!” as if I were Fido. Didn’t matter. I wasn’t going anywhere.
He pulled his cell phone off his belt and pressed a button. Talking into it as if it were a handheld radio, he said something hard and fast, of which I understood only “Shots fired,” and then our location. Still swearing, he moved at a fast crouch to his car and wrenched the back door open. He reached in, and came out with a big automatic pistol in his hand.
“I *cannot* fucking believe I forgot to get my weapon out of my bag,” he growled as he plastered himself, his back to me, against the rear tire of my car and risked a quick look over the trunk, then ducked back down. “Of all the fucking times—”
“Do you see him?” I interrupted his muttered stream of profanity.
“Nothing.”

My mouth was dry, and my heartbeat was hammering wildly at the thought of the shooter rounding the car and firing at both of us. We were sandwiched between the two cars, which should have seemed secure, but instead I felt horribly exposed and vulnerable, with those unprotected spaces at each end of the cars.

The shot had come from across the street. Very few of the shops that lined the street were open on Sunday, especially this late in the afternoon, and traffic was almost nonexistent. I listened, but didn't hear the sound of a car leaving, which to my way of thinking wasn't good. Leaving was good; staying was bad. I wanted the man to leave. I wanted to cry. And I was seriously thinking about throwing up.

Wyatt glanced over his shoulder at me, his expression grim and focused, and for the first time, got a good look at me. His whole body stiffened. "Ah, shit, honey," he said softly. He took another quick look over the trunk, then moved in a crouch to my side. "Why didn't you say something? You're bleeding like a stuck hog. Let me see how bad it is."

"Not very, I don't think. It just sliced my arm." I thought I sounded just like a cowboy in an old western movie, bravely reassuring the pretty farm-woman his wound was just a scratch. Maybe I should get Wyatt's pistol and return fire across the street, just to complete the illusion. On the other hand, maybe I should just sit here; it took less effort.

His big hand was gentle as he turned my arm so he could examine the wound. Personally, I didn't look. With my peripheral vision I could see way too much blood anyway, and knowing it was all mine wasn't a good feeling.

"It isn't too bad," he murmured. He took another look around, then briefly put his weapon down to take a handkerchief from his pocket and place it, folded, against my wound. He had the big pistol in his hand again less than five seconds after he'd put it down. "Hold this as tight as you can against your arm," he said, and I reached up with my right hand to do as he'd directed.

I struggled not to feel indignant. *Not too bad?* It was one thing for me to be brave and dismissive about being shot, but how dare he? I wondered if he'd be that blasé if it were *his* arm that felt as if it were on fire, if *his* blood was soaking his clothes and beginning to pool on the pavement.

Huh. That pooling on the pavement part couldn't be good. Maybe that was why I felt light-headed and hot and nauseated. Maybe I'd better lie down.

I let myself slide sideways, and Wyatt grabbed me with his free hand.
“Blair!”
“I’m just lying down,” I said fretfully. “I feel sick.”
Supporting me one-handed, he helped me to lie down on the pavement. The asphalt was hot and gritty, and I didn’t care. I concentrated on taking deep breaths and staring at the blueness of the late-afternoon sky overhead, and gradually the nausea began to fade. Wyatt was talking on his cell phone/radio, whatever it was, requesting medics and an ambulance. Already I could hear sirens as units responded to a call that their lieutenant was under fire. How much time had lapsed since the shot? A minute? No more than two, I was certain of that.
To one part of me, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, but another part of me felt as if too much was happening simultaneously. The result was a total sense of unreality, but one in which everything seemed to be crystal clear. I couldn’t decide if that was good or not. Probably a little fuzziness would be nice, because I really didn’t want to have clear memories of this.
Wyatt crouched over me and put his left hand to my neck. Good God, was he coming on to me *now*? I glared up at him, but he didn’t notice because his head was up and he was checking in all directions, his weapon steady in his right hand. Belatedly, I realized he was checking my pulse, and he looked even more grim than before.
I wasn’t dying, was I? People didn’t die from gunshot wounds to the arm. That was silly. I was just a little shocky from losing blood so fast, the way I got whenever I gave blood at the Red Cross. It was no big deal. But he’d radioed for an ambulance, which to my way of thinking was for serious stuff, and I wondered if he could see something I couldn’t, like maybe an artery spurting out blood like Old Faithful. Not that I had really looked, because I’d been afraid I’d see exactly that.
I pulled the folded handkerchief away from my arm and looked at it. It was totally soaked with blood.
“Blair,” he said sharply, “put that back over your wound.”
Okay, so maybe I might die. I added up the pieces—a lot of blood, shock, ambulance—and didn’t like the picture. “Call my mom,” I said. She would be so royally pissed if I had a medical crisis and no one let her know.
“I will,” he replied, and now he was trying to sound soothing.
“Now. I need her now.”

“You’re going to be all right, honey. We’ll call her from the hospital.”
I was outraged. I was lying there bleeding to death and he refused to call my mother?! If I’d had more energy, I might have done something about it, but as things were, all I could do was lie there and glare, which wasn’t having much effect because he wasn’t watching me.
Two patrol units, lights flashing and sirens blaring, slid into the parking lot, and two officers, weapons drawn, bailed out of each. Thank goodness each officer driving killed the sirens just before stopping, otherwise we’d have been deafened. There were other units on the way, though; I could hear more sirens, and they seemed to be coming from all directions.
Oh, man, this was going to be so bad for business. I tried to imagine how I would feel if I belonged to a fitness center where there were two shootings in four days. Safe? Definitely not. Of course, if I died, I wouldn’t have to worry about it, but what about my employees? They’d be out of a job that paid above the average, plus benefits.
I had visions of the empty parking lot sprouting weeds through the pavement, windows broken, roof sagging. Yellow crime-scene tape would forlornly droop from poles and trees, and kids would walk by and point at the decaying building.
“Do *not*,” I said loudly from flat on my back, “string even one inch of that yellow tape in my parking lot. Enough’s enough. No more tape.”
Wyatt was busy giving instructions to the four officers, but he glanced down at me and I thought he struggled not to smile. “I’ll see what I can do.”
Here I was bleeding to death, and he was smiling. *Smiling.* I needed to start another list. Come to think of it, I needed to rewrite the one he’d confiscated. He’d distracted me with sex, but now I was thinking clearly again and the list of his transgressions would probably take up two pages—assuming I lived to write them.
This was all his fault.
“*If* a certain lieutenant *had listened to me* and brought my car to me on Friday *the way I asked*, this wouldn’t have happened. I’m *bleeding*, and my clothes are *ruined*, and it’s *all your fault.*”
Wyatt paused briefly in the middle of my condemnation, then continued talking to his men just as if I hadn’t said anything.
Now he was ignoring me.
A couple of the officers seemed to be coming down with something, because they had simultaneous coughing fits—either that or they were

trying not to laugh in their lieutenant's face, which I didn't like because, again, I was the one lying there bleeding to death and they were laughing? Excuse me, but was I the only one who didn't think it was funny that I'd been shot?
"*Some* people," I announced to the sky, "have better manners than to laugh at someone who's been shot and is bleeding to death."
"You aren't bleeding to death," Wyatt said, his voice showing some strain.
Maybe, maybe not, but you'd think they'd give me the benefit of the doubt, wouldn't you? I was almost tempted to bleed to death just to show him, but where's the profit in that? Besides, if I died, then I wouldn't be around to make his life miserable, now would I? You have to think these things out.
More vehicles arrived. I heard Wyatt organizing a search-and-destroy mission, though he didn't call it that. It was more like, "Find this bastard," but I knew what he meant. A couple of medics, a young black woman with cornrowed hair and the prettiest chocolate eyes I'd ever seen, and a stocky red-haired man who reminded me of Red Buttons, arrived toting tackle boxes full of medical supplies and gear, and hunkered down next to me. They quickly did the basics, such as checking my pulse and blood pressure, and slapped a pressure bandage on my arm.
"I need a cookie," I told them.
"Don't we all," said the woman with some sympathy.
"To get my blood sugar up," I explained. "The Red Cross gives cookies to people who give blood. So a cookie would be nice. Chocolate chip. And a Coke."
"I hear you," she said, but no one was making any effort to put the requested items in my hand. I made allowances, because it was Sunday and none of the nearby shops were open. I guess they didn't carry cookies and soft drinks in the medic truck with them, but, really, why didn't they?
"With all these people around, you'd think at least one person would have some cookies in the car. Or a doughnut. They *are* cops."
She grinned and said, "You're right." Raising her voice, she yelled, "Hey! Does anyone have anything sweet to eat in his car?"
"You don't need to eat anything," the red-haired man said. I didn't like him nearly as well as I did her, despite his sweet Red Buttons face.
"Why? I don't need to have surgery, do I?" That was the only reason I could think of not to eat.
"I don't know; that's for the doctors to decide."

“Naw, you won’t need surgery,” she said, and Red glared at her.
“You don’t know that.”
I could tell he thought she was being way too free with the rules, and actually I understood his point. *She*, however, understood *me*. I needed reassurance, and a cookie would be just that, putting my blood loss on the same plane as giving blood at the Red Cross. If there were sweets available and they wouldn’t let me have any, then that meant I was in Serious Condition.
A patrolman appeared, duck-walking between the cars even though no other shots had been fired and any murderer with an ounce of sense would have left the scene as soon as reinforcements arrived. He held a package in his hand. “I got Fig Newtons,” he said. He looked puzzled, as if he couldn’t understand why the medics needed something to eat and just couldn’t wait.
“That’ll do,” she said, taking the package and tearing it open.
“Keisha,” Red said in warning.
“Oh, hush,” I said, and took a Fig Newton from the proffered pack. I smiled at Keisha. “Thanks. I think I’ll live, now.”
Three more Fig Newtons later, I wasn’t feeling dizzy at all, and I sat up to prop myself against the tire once more. Red objected to that, too, but he had my well-being in mind, so I also forgave him for wanting to deny me the Newtons. I noticed that the multitude of cops milling around were walking upright now, so evidently the shooter had long since disappeared.
Wyatt was nowhere in sight. He had joined the search-and-destroy mission, and hadn’t yet returned. Maybe this time they’d found some clues, though, that would lead them right to the shooter’s door.
I was loaded into the back of the boxy ambulance. The back part of the gurney was raised instead of lying flat, so I was in a sitting position. I didn’t feel like walking anywhere, but I was definitely up to the task of sitting.
It seems as if nothing at a crime or accident scene is ever done with any haste. Honest. There were a lot of people walking around, most of them uniformed, and most of them not actively doing anything other than talking to other people who were doing the same thing. Radios squawked, and people talked into them. Evidently they’d found the spot from which the shot was fired, and forensics people were going over the area. Red talked on his radio. Keisha repacked stuff. No one was in any hurry, and that was reassuring, too.

“I need my bag,” I said, and Keisha retrieved it from my car to set it on the gurney beside me. Being a woman, she understood how much a woman needed her bag.
I fished in the bag for a pen and my date book. I flipped to the back to the blank pages for taking notes, and began writing. Man, this list was getting *long.*
Wyatt appeared at the open doors of the ambulance. His badge was clipped to his belt, and his pistol was in a shoulder holster worn over his polo shirt. Lines bracketed his mouth. “How are you feeling?”
“Fine,” I said politely. I wasn’t, not really, because my arm was really, really throbbing and I felt weak from blood loss, but I was still mad at him and not inclined to lean on him. See, men *want* you to lean on them, because it satisfies their protective instincts, which are pretty much hardwired, and by refusing his sympathy, I was telling him he was in the dog house. You have to read between the lines on these things.
His green eyes narrowed. He got the message all right. “I’ll follow the ambulance to the hospital.”
“Thank you, but there’s no need. I’ll call my family.”
The eyes got even more narrow. “I said I’ll follow you. I’ll call your parents on the way.”
“Fine. Do what you want.” Which meant, *I’ll still be mad.*
He got that message, too. He put his hands on his hips, looking all macho and masculine and disgruntled. “What has you in such a snit?”
“You mean, other than being shot?” I asked sweetly.
“I’ve been shot. It didn’t make me act like a—” He stopped himself, evidently thinking better of what he’d been about to say.
“Bitch? Spoiled brat? Diva?” I supplied the choices myself. Up front, Red was sitting very still as he listened to the argument. Standing off to the side, waiting to close the doors, Keisha was pretending to look at a bird in the sky.
He gave a grim smile. “You choose the ones that fit.”
“No problem. I can do that.” I wrote another item on my list.
His gaze arrowed in on the date book. “What are you doing?”
“Making a list.”
“Jesus Christ, another one?”
“The same one. I’m just adding to it.”

“Give me that.” He leaned forward into the ambulance as if to snatch the date book away from me.
I jerked it back. “This is my book, not yours. Don’t touch it.” Over my shoulder I said to Red, “Come on, let’s get this show on the road.”
“Blair, you’re pouting—”
Well, yes, I was. When I felt better I might relent, but until then I felt my pouting was well-deserved. You tell me, if you can’t pout when you’re shot, just when is it called for?
As Keisha closed the ambulance doors, I said, “Just see if I ever sleep with you again!”

Chapter Eleven

“You’re sleeping with Lieutenant Bloodsworth, huh?” Keisha asked, grinning.
“I have in the past,” I said, and sniffed. So what if the past was just that morning? “He shouldn’t hold his breath waiting for the next time.” I was a bit chagrined that I had blurted out something as personal as details of my love life, but I’d been provoked.
It seemed to me that Red was driving inordinately slow. I didn’t know if he was always that careful—which might not be a good thing when you have someone dying in your ambulance—or if he just wanted to listen to as much of our conversation as possible before we arrived at the hospital. Other than Keisha, no one, absolutely *no one,* seemed to think my condition was worth any extra worry or attention.
Keisha, however, was a woman after my own heart. She’d given me Fig Newtons, and she’d got my bag for me. Keisha understood.
“That would be one hard man to turn down,” she commented thoughtfully. “No pun intended.”
“A woman’s gotta do what a woman’s gotta do.”
“I hear you, sister.” We shared a look of total understanding. Men are difficult creatures; you can’t let them get the upper hand. And thank God Wyatt was being difficult, because that gave me something to think about other than that someone was trying to kill me. I just wasn’t ready to deal with it yet. I was safe for the time being, and that gave me some breathing

space, which was all I needed. I would concentrate on Wyatt and my list until I felt better able to handle the situation.

At the hospital, I was whisked away and put in a private little cubicle—well, as private as anything can be that has a curtain for a door—and a couple of friendly, cheerfully efficient nurses cut away my blood-soaked top and bra. I really hated that the bra had to be sacrificed, because it was this beautiful seafoam lace and matched my underpants, which I would now be unable to wear unless I bought another matching bra. Ah, well. The bra was ruined anyway, because I doubted any treatment would get bloodstains out of silk, plus I now had bad memories associated with it and probably wouldn't have worn it again anyway. I was draped in a blue-and-white hospital gown, which was in no way fashionable, and made to lie down while they did a preliminary workup.

They also peeled the bandage off my arm, and by now I felt steady enough to get a look at the damage myself. "Ewww," I said, wrinkling my nose. Now, there's no place you can get shot that you won't have muscle damage, except maybe in the eye, in which case you don't have to worry about it because you're probably dead. The bullet had torn a deep gouge in the outside of my upper arm, just under the shoulder joint. If it had gone any higher, it would likely have shattered the joint, which would have been much more serious. This looked bad enough, because I didn't see how the gouge could be closed with a few stitches.

"It isn't so bad," said one of the nurses. Her name tag said Cynthia. "It's a flesh wound; nothing structural's damaged. Hurts like the dickens, though, doesn't it?"

Amen to that.

My vital signs were taken—my pulse was a bit fast, but whose wouldn't be? Respirations normal. Blood pressure a little elevated over my norm, but not by much. All in all, my body was having a rather mild reaction to being shot. It helped that I was healthy as a horse, and in great shape.

There was no telling what sort of shape I'd be in by the time this arm was well enough for me to work out again, I thought glumly. In a couple of days I'd start doing cardio, then yoga, but there wouldn't be any gymnastics or weight training for at least a month. If getting shot was anything like the other injuries I'd had in the past, muscles took a while to get over the trauma even after the initial symptoms were gone.

They gave the wound a thorough cleaning, which didn't make it hurt any worse than it was already hurting. I was lucky in that my top had been sleeveless and there weren't any fabric fibers caught in the wound. That greatly simplified things.
The doctor finally came in, a lanky guy with wrinkles in his forehead and cheerful blue eyes. His name tag said MacDuff. No joke. "Rough date, huh?" he asked jokingly as he pulled on plastic gloves.
Startled, I blinked at him. "How did you know?"
He paused, startled in turn. "You mean—I was told it was a sniper."
"It was. But it happened at the end of my date." If you could call being followed to the beach and taken by surprise a "date."
He laughed. "I see. Gotcha now."
He took a look at my arm and rubbed his chin. "I can suture this for you, but if you're worried about a scar, we can call in a cosmetic surgeon to do the honors. Dr. Homes here in town has a nice touch with scars; he can make them practically go away. You'll be here a while longer, though."
I was vain enough not to be crazy about the idea of a long scar on my arm, but I also hated the idea of being shot and not having anything to show for it. Think about it. Would this be a great show-and-tell for my future children and grandchildren, or what? I also didn't want to hang around the hospital any longer than necessary, either.
"Go for it," I told him.
He looked a tad surprised, but he went for it. After numbing my arm, he painstakingly pulled the edges of the gash together and began stitching them closed. I think my choice appealed to his pride, and he set about doing an exemplary job.
In the middle of the procedure, I heard a commotion outside and said, "There's my mom."
Dr. MacDuff glanced up at one of the nurses. "Ask everyone to stay outside until I get finished here. Just another few minutes."
Cynthia slipped out of the cubicle, pulling the curtain firmly closed behind her. The commotion got louder; then I heard Mom's voice rising above everything, saying in that tone of finality, "I want to see my daughter. Now."
"Brace yourself," I told Dr. MacDuff. "I don't think Cynthia can hold up against Mom. She won't scream or faint or anything; she just wants to see for herself that I'm alive. It's a mom thing."

He grinned, blue eyes twinkling. He seemed to be an easygoing kind of guy. "They're funny that way, aren't they?"
"Blair!" That was Mom again, disturbing everyone else in the emergency department in her frantic need to find her wounded offspring, namely me.
I lifted my voice. "I'm okay, Mom; I'm just getting some stitches here. We'll be finished in a minute."
Did that reassure her? Of course not. I had also assured her, at the age of fourteen, that my broken collarbone was just a bad bruise. I'd had some lamebrained idea that I could wrap an Ace bandage around my shoulder and still perform, never mind that I couldn't move my arm without screaming. That wasn't one of my better judgment calls.
I'm much better now about assessing my injuries, but Mom would never forget and now wanted to See For Herself. Therefore, I wasn't surprised when the curtain was whisked open—thanks for preserving my privacy, Mom—and my entire family stood there. Mom, Dad, Siana, even Jenni. Nor was I surprised that Wyatt was there with them, still looking both grim and irritated.
Dr. MacDuff looked up and started to say something along the lines of, "Get out," though he probably would have phrased it more like, "If you people will step outside, we'll be finished in a minute," but he never got that far. He saw Mom and forgot what he was about to say.
That was a common reaction. Mom was fifty-four and looked maybe forty. She was a former Miss North Carolina, tall and slender, blond, and gorgeous. That's just the only word for her. Dad was nuts about her, but that was okay because she was nuts about him, too.
She rushed to my side, but once she saw that I really was mostly in one piece, she calmed and brushed my forehead with her cool hand just as if I were five years old again. "Shot, huh?" she asked gently. "What a tale to tell your grandchildren."
I told you. It's scary.
She switched her attention to Dr. MacDuff. "Hello, I'm Tina Mallory, Blair's mother. Is there any permanent damage?"
He blinked and resumed suturing. "Ah, no. She won't be doing much with this arm for a week or so, but in a couple of months she'll be as good as new. I'll give you some instructions for the next few days."
"I know the drill," she said, smiling faintly. "Rest, keep an ice pack on the arm, antibiotics."

“That’s it,” he said, smiling back at her. “I’ll write her a prescription for pain, but she may be able to handle it with just OTC meds. No aspirin, though; I don’t want this bleeding.”
You notice he was talking to Mom now instead of me. She has that effect on men.
The rest of my family had crowded into the cubicle, too. Dad moved to Mom’s side and slipped his arm around her waist, consoling her through yet another crisis involving one of their children. Jenni moved to the lone visitor’s chair and sat down, crossing her long legs. Dr. MacDuff looked at her and started blinking again. Jennifer has Mom’s looks, though her hair is darker.
I cleared my throat and brought Dr. MacDuff back to earth. “Suture,” I whispered to him.
“Oh—yeah.” He winked at me. “Forgot where I was for a minute.”
“It happens,” Dad said in sympathy.
Dad is tall and lanky, with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. He’s calm and laid-back, with this really nutty sense of humor that came in handy a lot during our childhoods. He played baseball in college but majored in electronics, and he handled just fine the pressure of being the only man in a house with four females. I know he was anxious during the drive to the hospital, but now that he knew I was basically all right, he’d settled back into his usual unruffled demeanor.
I grinned at Siana, who was standing by the bed. She grinned back, and cut her eyes to the right. Then she looked back at me with raised brows, which is sister shorthand for: *What’s with the hunk?*
The hunk in question, Wyatt, was standing at the foot of the exam table practically glaring at me. No, not glaring, and not even staring. He was *focused* on me, his eyes narrowed, his jaw set. He was leaning forward a little, gripping the footrail, and the powerful muscles in his forearms were taut. He was still wearing his shoulder holster, and the big black weapon rode under his left arm.
My family might have relaxed, but Wyatt hadn’t. He was in a very bad mood.
Dr. MacDuff tied off the last stitch, then slid his rolling stool over to a counter, where he scribbled on a prescription pad and tore off the top page.
“That’s it,” he said, “except for the paperwork. The scrip is for both an

antibiotic and pain medication. Take all of the antibiotic, even if you feel fine. That's it. We'll get you bandaged up and you can go."
The nurses took care of the bandaging, applying a huge amount of gauze and tape that wrapped around my upper arm and shoulder and would make it virtually impossible for me to get into any of my own clothes. I grimaced and said, "This is so not going to work."
"How long before we can change the bandage?" Mom asked Cynthia.
"Give it twenty-four hours. You can shower tomorrow night," she said to me. "I'll give you a list of instructions. And unless you want to wait while someone goes to get some clothes for you, you can wear this beautiful gown home."
"The gown," I said.
"That's what they all say. I don't understand it myself, but, hey, when you like something you like it." She left to go do whatever paperwork needed to be done, pulling the curtain closed behind her with a practiced jerk.
The gown in question was half on, half off, with my right arm threaded through one of the armholes but my left arm bare. I'd been preserving my modesty by holding the gown in place over my breasts, but no way could I get the thing the rest of the way on without flashing everyone.
"If you men don't mind stepping out," I began, only to be interrupted when Mom picked up my date book, which was lying beside my leg because that's where Keisha had put it.
"What's this?" she said, frowning a little as she read. " 'Unlawful detainment. Kidnapping. Manhandled the witness. Snotty attitude—' "
"That's my list of Wyatt's transgressions. Mom, Dad, meet Lieutenant J. W. Bloodsworth. The *J* stands for *Jefferson*, the *W* for *Wyatt.* Wyatt, my parents —Blair and Tina Mallory—and my sisters—Siana and Jennifer."
He nodded at my parents while Siana reached for the list. "Let me see that." She and Mom put their heads together. "Some of the things on this list are prosecutable," Siana said, her dimples nowhere in sight as she leveled her lawyer's stare at him.
" 'Refused to call my mom,' " Mom read, and turned an accusing look on him. "That's indefensible."
" 'Laughed while I was lying on the ground bleeding,' " Siana continued.
"I did not," Wyatt said, frowning at me.
"You smiled. Close enough."
"Let's see, there's coercion, badgering, stalking—"

“Stalking?” he said, doing a wonderful imitation of a thundercloud.
“ ‘Casual about severity of my wound.’ ” Siana was having a great time. “ ‘Called me names.’ ”
“I did *not.*”
“I like the idea of a list,” Mom said, taking the date book back from Siana. “It’s very efficient, and that way you don’t forget anything.”
“She never forgets anything anyway,” Wyatt said, aggrieved.
“Thank you very much for putting this list thing in Tina’s head,” Dad said to Wyatt, and he wasn’t being sincere. “Way to go.” He put his hand on Wyatt’s arm and pulled him around. “Let’s go outside so they can get Blair dressed, and I’ll explain a few things to you. Looks to me like you need the help.”
Wyatt didn’t want to go—I could see it in his face—but neither did he want to pull any of his snotty attitude with my dad. No, he saved all of that for me. The two men walked out, and of course didn’t pull the curtain closed again. Jenni got up and did the honors. She was holding her nose in an effort not to laugh out loud until they were out of hearing distance.
“I’m particularly fond of the ‘snotty attitude,’ ” Siana said, then slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle the giggles.
“Did you see his face?” Mom whispered, grinning. “Poor man.”
Poor man, indeed.
“He deserved it,” I groused, sitting up and trying to find the left armhole in the gown.
“Just be still; I’ll do it,” Mom said.
“Don’t move your arm at all.” That was from Jenni, who had moved around behind me. “Let Mom thread the gown up your arm instead.”
Mom did, being very careful around the huge bandage, though it was so thick I doubt I could have felt anything through it anyway, even if Dr. MacDuff hadn’t numbed my arm before he started stitching. Jenni pulled the gown’s edges together in back, and tied the little strings.
“You aren’t going to be able to use that arm for at least a couple of days,” Mom said. “We’ll pick up some of your clothes and take you home with us.”
That was what I’d already figured, so I nodded. A few days of being coddled by my parents was just what the doctor ordered. Well, he hadn’t, but he should have.

By the time Cynthia returned with forms for me to sign, a list of instructions, and an aide with a wheelchair, Dad and Wyatt had also returned. Wyatt may not have been in a better mood, but at least he wasn't scowling at everyone.
"I'll go get the car," Dad said when the aide appeared with the wheelchair.
Wyatt stopped him. "I'll get my car. She's going home with me."
"What?" I said in surprise.
"You're going home with me. In case you've forgotten, honey, someone is trying to kill you. Your folks' house is the first place anyone would look. Not only is it not safe for you, are you willing to endanger them, too?"
"What do you mean, someone's trying to kill her?" Mom demanded fiercely. "I thought it was a random—"
"I guess there's a slight chance the shooting could have been random. But she witnessed a murder last Thursday, and her name was in the paper. If you were a murderer, what would you want to do about a witness? She'll be safe at my house."
"The killer saw you, too," I said, thinking fast. *Saw you kissing me.* "What makes you think he wouldn't track me to your place, too?"
"He wouldn't know who I am, so how could he find out where I live? The only way he'd even know I'm a cop was if he hung around afterward, and trust me, no one was there."
Darn it, he made sense. I didn't want to endanger any of my family—or Wyatt either, come to that—so the last thing I should do was go home with them.
"She can't go home with you," Mom said. "She needs someone to take care of her until she can use her arm."
"Ma'am," said Wyatt, steadily meeting her gaze, "I'll take care of her."
Okay, so he'd just told my family we were sleeping together, because we all knew that "taking care of" meant bathing, dressing, and so on. Maybe I had shouted in front of all his men that I wouldn't sleep with him again, but that was different. For me, anyway. This was my *parents,* and this was the south, where of course such things went on, but you generally didn't announce it to the world or your family. I expected Dad to take him by the arm and lead him out again, for another little talk, but instead Dad nodded.
"Tina, who better to take care of her than a cop?" he asked.
"He has a list of transgressions two pages long," she replied, indicating her doubt that he was capable of taking care of me.

“He also has a gun.”
“There is that,” Mom said, and turned to me. “You’re going with him.”

Chapter Twelve

“You know,” I said as Wyatt drove me to his place after stopping to get my prescriptions filled, “this guy saw your car, and it has ‘cop’ written all over it. Who else drives a Crown Vic—I mean, who under the age of sixty drives a Crown Vic except for cops?”
“So?”
“You kissed me there in the parking lot, remember? So he might very well figure we have a thing, you’re a cop, and work it from there. How hard can it be?”
“We have over two hundred people in the department; narrowing down which one I am could take time. Then he’d have to find me. My home phone number isn’t listed, and sure as hell no one in the department would give out information on me or any other member. If anyone wants to contact me about work, they call this,” he said, tapping his cell phone. “And it’s registered with the city.”
“All right,” I conceded. “I’m safer at your place. Not totally safe, but safer.”
Someone was trying to kill me. Despite my best efforts not to think about it just yet, the hard truth of that was pushing in on me. I knew I’d have to come to grips with it pretty soon—say, sometime tomorrow. I’d been sort of expecting it . . . not really, but the possibility had been in the back of my mind . . . but I hadn’t factored in the shock of actually being shot. That was totally unexpected.
Just like that—boom!—my life had gone out of control. I couldn’t go home, I didn’t have my clothes with me, I was in pain, I felt weak and shaky, and God only knew what would happen to my business. I needed to get that control back.
I looked over at Wyatt. He was driving out of the city proper; we had left all the streetlights behind, so his face was lit only by the dash lights, and I shivered a little at how tough he looked. This whole situation with him was out of control, too. I’d tried my best to put on the brakes, and instead here I was, going home with him. He’d seen an opportunity and grabbed it, though I was really surprised, considering how pissed he’d been about my list.

Who would have thought a little thing like that would annoy him so much? Touchy, touchy. And here I was, totally at his mercy. There wouldn't be anyone else around—

I had a horrible thought. "How are you at doing hair?"

"What?" he asked, as if I'd said something in a foreign language.

"Hair. You'll have to do my hair."

He gave a quick glance at my hair. "You were wearing it in a ponytail Thursday night. I can do that."

Okay, that was acceptable, and was probably best until I was more functional. "That'll do. I don't even have my hair dryer with me, anyway. It's still in my car."

"I got your bag. It's in back with mine."

I could have kissed him, I was so relieved. Most of the clothes in the bag needed washing, of course, but to be on the safe side I'd taken an extra outfit to the beach. I had underwear, something to sleep in, and even makeup if I felt like putting some on. I had my birth control pills, thank God, though I figured I was safe from him tonight, at least. All in all, things were looking up. Until Siana could pack more clothes for me tomorrow and meet Wyatt with them, I had enough to get by.

We'd been driving for miles, and now there was nothing around except for the occasional house, but they were spaced far apart. I was getting impatient to get there and see how this was going to work out. "Where on earth do you live?"

"We're almost there. I was making certain no one followed us, so I've been taking some extra turns. I live just inside the city limits."

I was dying to see his house. I had no idea what to expect, and part of me was braced for the typical bachelor den. He had made some money playing pro ball; he could have built anything from a log-cabin-style lodge to a fake château.

"I'm surprised you don't live with your mother," I said, and I was. Mrs. Bloodsworth was a nice old lady with a wicked sense of humor, and Lord knows she had enough room to house half the block in that big old Victorian she loved.

"Why? You don't live with your mother," he pointed out.

"It's different for women."

"How so?"

“We don’t need anyone to cook for us or pick up after us or do the laundry for us.”
“News flash, honey: I don’t either.”
“You do your own laundry?”
“It’s not exactly rocket science, is it? I can read labels and set the controls on a washer.”
“And cook? You can actually cook?” I was getting excited.
“Nothing fancy, but yeah, I can get by.” He glanced at me. “What about it?”
“Think, Lieutenant. Do you remember eating at any time during the past”—I checked the time on the dashboard clock—“five hours? I’m starving.”
“I heard you had a cookie.”
“Fig Newton. I had four of them, and it was an emergency. That doesn’t qualify as eating.”
“It’s four Fig Newtons more than I’ve had, so to me it qualifies.”
“That’s beside the point. Feeding me is now your duty.”
His lips twitched. “Duty? How do you figure that?”
“You commandeered me, didn’t you?”
“Some people might think it was more along the lines of saving your life.”
“Details. Mom would have fed me extremely well. You took me away from her, so now you have to step up to the plate.”
“Interesting woman, your mother. You came by the attitude honestly, didn’t you?”
“What attitude?” I asked in bewilderment.
He reached across and patted my knee. “It doesn’t matter. Your dad told me his secret to handling you.”
“He didn’t!” I was appalled. Dad wouldn’t have sided with the enemy, would he? Of course, he didn’t know Wyatt was the enemy. For all I knew, Wyatt had told him we were engaged or something and that was why Dad hadn’t batted an eye about Wyatt taking me home with him.
“Of course he did. We men have to stick together, you know.”
“He wouldn’t *do* that! He never told Jason any secret. There isn’t any secret. You just made that up.”
“Did not.”
I fished out my cell phone and furiously punched in Mom and Dad’s number. Wyatt reached over and neatly confiscated the phone, punching the *end* button, then slipping it in his pocket.

“Give me that!” I was seriously hampered by my wounded arm, since he was sitting to my left. I tried to turn in the seat, but I couldn’t move my arm much at all and it sort of got in the way, and I bumped my shoulder against the back of the seat. For a moment I saw stars.
“Easy, honey, easy.” Wyatt’s crooning voice reached me through the waves of pain, but it was coming from the right, which was very disorienting.
I took a few deep breaths and opened my eyes, and found that his voice was coming from the right because he was leaning into the car from the open passenger door. The car was stopped in a driveway, the motor still running, and a dark house loomed in front of us.
“Are you going to pass out on me?” he asked as he gently straightened me in the seat.
“No, but I might throw up on you,” I answered honestly, and let my head drop back while I closed my eyes again. The nausea and pain receded at the same rate.
“Try not to.”
“It was probably an empty threat. I haven’t eaten, remember?”
“Except for four Fig Newtons.”
“They’re long gone. You’re safe.”
He brushed his hand over my forehead. “Good deal.” He closed the car door, then came back around and got behind the wheel.
“Isn’t this your house?” I asked in confusion. Had he pulled into the first driveway he came to?
“Sure is, but I’ll park in the garage.” He hit a button on the garage-door opener clipped to the sun visor, and simultaneously an exterior light came on and a double garage door in the side of the house began sliding upward. He put the car in gear and pulled forward, then turned to the right and smoothly slotted the car into its place. He punched the button again, and the door began sliding down behind us.
His garage was neat, which impressed me. Garages tend to be catchalls, getting choked with everything except the cars they were meant to house. Not Wyatt’s. To my right was a tool bench, with one of those big, red, multidrawered tool chests like mechanics have parked off to one side. An array of hammers, saws, and other guy stuff hung neatly on the pegboard wall. I stared at them, wondering if he knew what to do with all of them. Men and their toys. Huh.
“I have a hammer, too,” I told him.

“I bet you do.”
I hate being condescended to. You could tell he thought my hammer was nowhere in the ballpark with his collection. “It’s pink.”
He froze in the act of getting out of the car, staring at me with an appalled expression. “That’s perverted. That’s just not right.”
“Oh, please. There’s no law that says a tool has to be ugly.”
“Tools aren’t ugly. They’re strong and functional. They look like they mean business. They aren’t *pink*.”
“Mine is, and it’s just as good as yours. It isn’t as big, but it does the job. I bet you’re against women joining the police force, too, aren’t you?”
“Of course not. What does that have to do with a friggin’ pink hammer?”
“Women are mostly prettier than men and mostly not as big, but that doesn’t mean they can’t get the job done, does it?”
“We’re talking *hammers* here, not people!” He got out of the car and slammed the door, then stalked around to my side.
I opened the door and raised my voice so he could hear me. “I think your aversion to a tool that’s attractive as well as functional—mmmph.” I glared at him over the hand he’d clapped over my mouth.
“Give it a rest. We’ll argue about hammers when you don’t look like you’re about to fall over.” He raised his eyebrows in question, waiting for me to agree, and he kept his hand over my mouth while he waited.
Disgruntled, I nodded, and he removed his hand, then released my seat belt and gently lifted me out of the car. He hadn’t thought this through, because if he had, he would have unlocked the door leading into the house before he picked me up, but he handled it with only a little juggling. I couldn’t help him because my right arm was trapped between my body and his, and my left arm was useless. Tomorrow I would be able to use it a little, but I knew from experience that right after a trauma the damaged muscle just refuses to work.
He got me inside, turning on light switches with his elbow, and deposited me in a chair in a breakfast nook. “Don’t try to get up for any reason. I’ll get the bags out of the car, then carry you wherever you want to go.”
He disappeared down the short hallway that led into the garage, and I wondered if the doctor had told him something about my condition that hadn’t been passed along to me, because I was perfectly capable of walking. Yes, I had gone all woozy in the car, but that was because I’d hit my arm. Other than feeling a little shaky—and my arm hurting like blue blazes—I

was okay. The shaky feeling would be gone tomorrow, because this was how I always felt when I gave blood. It wasn't even bad shaky, just a little shaky. So what was up with the "Don't try to get up for any reason?"
Hah! The phone.
I looked around and saw an actual corded phone hanging on the wall, with a really long cord that would reach anywhere in the kitchen. Please. Why not just get a cordless? The units are so much more attractive.
I already had the number dialed and it was ringing by the time Wyatt, carrying both bags, reappeared at the other end of the little hallway. I gave him a "you didn't fool me" smirk, and he rolled his eyes.
"Daddy," I said when Dad answered the phone. I call him Daddy when I mean business, sort of like using someone's full name. "Just what did you say to Wyatt that he thinks is the secret to handling me? How *could* you?" I was in full indignant wail by the time I finished.
Dad burst out laughing. "It's okay, baby." He calls all of us baby because, well, we did used to be his babies. He never calls Mom that, though. Uh-uh. He knows better. "It's nothing that'll undermine you; it was just something he needed to know right now."
"Like what?"
"He'll tell you."
"Probably not. He's stubborn that way."
"No, he'll tell you this. I promise."
"You'll beat him up for me if he doesn't?" That was an old Dad-joke, that he'd beat up any man who made any of his girls unhappy. That's why I didn't tell him about Jason kissing Jenni, because I figured in that case he would really do it.
"No, but I'll beat him up if he hurts you."
Reassured, I said good-bye and turned to find Wyatt leaning against the cabinets with his arms crossed, regarding me with amusement. "He didn't tell you, did he?"
"He said you would, and that he'd beat you up if you didn't." So I stretched the truth a little. Wyatt hadn't been able to hear what Dad had actually said.
"It wasn't anything bad." Straightening, he went to the refrigerator. "How about some breakfast? That's the fastest thing I can do. Eggs, bacon, toast."
"That sounds great. What can I do to help?"
"With that arm, not much. Sit down and stay out of the way. That'll be a big help."

I sat, and looked around the breakfast nook and kitchen while he got out what he needed and started the bacon cooking in the microwave. To my surprise, the kitchen looked kind of old. The appliances were top-notch and fairly new and there was an island with a cooktop occupied the center, but the room itself had that solid, established feel to it.
“How old is this house?”
“Turn of the century. The last century. So it’s a little over a hundred years old. It was a farmhouse, and it’s been remodeled a couple of times. When I bought it, I did a major remodeling, tore down some interior walls, opened it up for a more modern look, added a couple of bathrooms. There are three bathrooms upstairs, a half bath down here. It’s a nice-size house, a little over three thousand square feet. I’ll show you around tomorrow.”
“How many bedrooms?”
“Four. There used to be six small ones, with just one bathroom, so I took that extra space to make the other bathrooms and enlarge the bedrooms and closets. That’ll make it easier to sell if I ever decide to move.”
“Why would you?” That was a lot of room for just one person, but from what I could see, there was a nice, homey feel to it. The kitchen cabinets were a warm golden color, the countertops were a greenish granite, and the floor was polished pine with colorful rugs strewn about. It wasn’t a fancy kitchen, despite the granite, but one that looked well-arranged and comfortable.
He shrugged. “This is my hometown and I’m comfortable here, plus this is where my family is, but a better job may open up somewhere else. You never know. I may spend the rest of my life here; I may not.”
It was a sensible outlook and one I held myself. I loved my home, but who knew what might happen? A smart person was flexible.
In short order he had plates of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast set on the table, with glasses of milk poured for both of us. He also opened the bottle of antibiotic pills and put two of them beside my plate, plus one of the pain relievers.
I didn’t fuss about taking the pain reliever. I’m no idiot. I wanted to quit hurting.
By the time I finished eating, I was yawning. Wyatt rinsed the plates and put them in the dishwasher, then plucked me out of my chair and sat down in it himself, with me in his lap.

“What?” I asked, surprised by my perch. I’m not much for sitting on men’s laps—it strikes me as ungainly—but Wyatt was tall enough that our faces were level and his arm around my back was wonderfully supporting.
“Your dad said that when you get scared, you get mouthy. How mouthy and demanding you get is in direct proportion to how scared you are.” His big hand rubbed my back. “He said it’s how you cope until you aren’t as scared anymore.”
It’s no secret in my family, that’s for sure. I let myself lean against him. “I was petrified.”
“All except for your mouth.” He chuckled. “Here we were, conducting a search for an armed murderer, and I hear you behind the car loudly demanding a cookie.”
“I wasn’t loud.”
“You were loud. I thought I’d have to kick my men’s asses to make them stop snickering.”
“It’s tough to get my mind around the fact that someone tried to kill me. It’s impossible. Things like that just don’t happen. I live a nice, quiet life, and within the space of a few days everything has turned upside down. I want my nice, quiet life back. I want you to catch this guy, and do it now.”
“We will. We’ll get this nailed. MacInnes and Forester were working all weekend, following leads. They have a couple of good ones.”
“Is it Nicole’s boyfriend?”
“I can’t say.”
“You don’t know, or you literally can’t say?”
“I literally can’t talk about an ongoing investigation.” He kissed my temple. “Let’s get you upstairs and tucked into bed.”
It’s a good thing I fully expected him to take me to his bedroom instead of one of the guest rooms, because that’s exactly what he did. I could have walked, even gone up the stairs, but he seemed to want to carry me around and, hey, why not? He set me down in the roomy master bathroom, with its double vanity, garden tub, and large shower. “I’ll get your bag. The towels and washcloths are in there,” he said, pointing to the door of the linen closet.
I got a towel and washcloth, and managed to untie the neck of the hospital gown with just my right hand. I couldn’t manage the second tie, though, which was halfway down my back. Didn’t matter. I let the huge thing drop off of me, and stepped out of the circle of fabric.

I surveyed my half-naked form in the mirror. Ugh. My left arm was mostly orange with Betadine, but there were still dried streaks of blood on my back and under my arm. I wet the washcloth and had removed all the blood I could reach by the time Wyatt returned. He took the cloth from me and finished the job, then helped me out of the rest of my clothes. It was a good thing I had gotten used to being naked with him, or I'd have been embarrassed. I looked longingly at the shower, but that was off-limits. The tub, though, was an option. "I could take a tub bath," I said with obvious hope.

He didn't even argue. Instead he ran the water, and helped me into it. While I was happily soaking, he stripped down himself and took a quick shower. I leaned back in the tub and watched as he stepped out and toweled dry. A naked Wyatt Bloodsworth was a fine sight, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped, with long, muscled legs and a very nice package. Even better, he knew how to use that package.

"Have you finished lolling around?" he asked.

I can loll with the best of them, but I had finished bathing, so I nodded and he helped me to stand, then steadied me to make certain I didn't slip as I stepped out of the big tub. I could have dried myself one-handed, maybe a bit awkwardly, but he took the towel and gently wiped me down, then got my toiletries out of the duffel so I could tone and moisturize. Skin care is important, even when a murderer is after you.

I had a T-shirt to sleep in, but when I dug it out, I saw that no way was it going to go over the bulk of that huge bandage, not to mention I couldn't lift my arm to put it on anyway.

"I'll get one of my shirts," Wyatt said, and disappeared into the big walk-in closet that opened off the bedroom. He came back with a button-up white dress shirt, and gently worked the sleeve up over my arm. The shirt hung halfway down my thighs, and the shoulder seams drooped down my arms. He had to put three turns into the cuffs before my hands poked out. I turned in front of the mirror and checked out the fit. I just love the way men's shirts look on women.

"Yes, you look hot," he said, smiling. He slipped his hand under the shirt and rested it on my bare butt. "If you're a good girl for the rest of the night, tomorrow I'll kiss your neck and make you happy."

"No neck kissing. Remember our deal. We aren't having sex again."

“That’s your deal, not mine.” Then he picked me up and took me to bed. He settled me between the covers of the king-size bed, I rolled onto my right side, and it was Lights Out, Blair.

Chapter Thirteen

I woke some hours later shivering with cold, hurting, and generally miserable. I couldn’t get comfortable no matter how I squirmed. Wyatt woke and stretched to turn on the lamp, and mellow light flooded the room.
“What’s wrong?” he asked, putting his hand on my face. “Ah.”
“Ah, what?” I asked fretfully as he got out of bed and walked into the bathroom.
He came back with a glass of water and two tablets. “You’re feverish. The doctor said you probably would be. Take these; then I’ll get another pain pill for you.”
I sat up to take the two tablets, then huddled under the covers until he came back with the other pill. After I took it, he turned out the light and got back into bed, cuddling me close and sharing his body warmth with me. I pressed my nose against his shoulder, inhaling the heat and scent, and my heart turned over. No doubt about it: he cranked my tractor. I could probably be near death and he’d still turn me on.
I was still too cold and uncomfortable to go back to sleep, so I decided I might as well talk.
“Why did you get divorced?”
“I wondered when you’d get around to that,” he observed in a lazy tone.
“Do you mind talking about it? Just until I get sleepy?”
“No, it’s no big deal. She filed for divorce the day I quit pro ball. She thought I was crazy to walk out on millions of dollars to be a cop.”
“Not many people would disagree with her.”
“Do you?”
“Well, see, I’m from your hometown, so I’ve read the articles in the newspaper and I know that being a cop was what you always wanted, that you majored in criminal justice in college. I would have expected it. She was surprised, I take it?”
“Big-time. I don’t blame her. She signed on to be the wife of a pro football player, with the money and the glamour, not the wife of a cop, with never

enough money and never knowing if he's going to come home or die on the job."
"You didn't talk about the future before you got married? What you wanted?"
He snorted. "I was twenty-one when we got married; she was twenty. At that age, the future is something that happens in five minutes, not five years. Throw in rioting hormones, and there you go, one divorce in the making. It just took us a couple of years to get there. She was a good kid, but we wanted different things out of life."
"But everyone knows—everyone *assumes*—you made millions while you were playing ball. Wasn't that enough?"
"I did make millions—I had four of them when I quit, to be exact. That didn't exactly turn me into Donald Trump, but it was enough to turn things around for the family. I took care of all the repairs and renovations on Mom's home, set up college funds for my sister's kids, bought this place and remodeled it, then invested the rest. There wasn't a huge amount left, but if I can leave it untouched until I retire, it should give me a comfortable retirement. I took a hit when the stock market bottomed out five, six years ago, but my stocks have come back all the way, so things look okay."
I yawned and settled my head more comfortably on his shoulder. "Why didn't you buy a smaller place? One that didn't need so much work?"
"I really like the location, and I thought it would be a good house someday for a family."
"You want a family?" I was a little startled. That usually isn't something you hear a bachelor say.
"Sure. I'll get married again someday, and two or three kids would be nice. What about you?"
The bottom dropped out of my stomach, and it was a moment before I realized that wasn't a very offhand proposal. The pain medication must be kicking in, if I was getting that punchy. "Sure, I want to get married again," I said sleepily. "And have a munchkin. I have the perfect setup. I could take a baby with me to work, because it's my business and it's an informal, relaxed setting. There's music, no television, and lots of adult supervision. What could be better?"
"You have it all planned out, huh?"
"Well, no. I'm neither married nor pregnant, so everything is still hypothetical. And I'm flexible. If circumstances change, I'll adjust."

He said something else, but I was in the middle of another yawn and missed it. “What?” I asked when I could talk.
“Never mind.” He kissed my temple. “You’re fading fast. I thought it would take the pill half an hour or so to work.”
“I didn’t get much sleep last night,” I mumbled. “Accumulative effect.” He was the reason I hadn’t had much sleep the night before, because he kept waking me every couple of hours to have sex. My toes curled at the memory, and for a moment I flashed to how it felt when his big body settled on mine. Wow. I definitely wasn’t cold now.
I wanted to climb on top of him and take care of matters, but I’d told him no sex, so I couldn’t violate my own edict. Probably I should have put on underwear before getting in bed with him, though, because of course the shirt had ridden up to my waist. That’s what shirts do when you sleep in them. He’d been very gentlemanly, not feeling me up or anything, but that was only because I was hurt. I expected that would change, because being a gentleman was probably a strain for him. Not that he didn’t have great manners, because he did, but his instincts were aggressive and competitive. That was what had made him such a good athlete. Besides the physical ability, he had that ruthless drive to come out on top. I wondered how long he would be considerate because of my arm.
I went to sleep on that thought, and found out the answer around six in the morning when he gently turned me on my back and settled between my legs. I was barely awake when he started, but wide awake when he finished. He was careful with my arm, but ruthless in his attack on my neck.
When he finally let me up, I stormed into the bathroom. “That was so not fair!” Delicious, but not fair. “That was a sneak attack!”
He was laughing when I slammed the door. Just to be on the safe side, I also locked it. He could use one of the other bathrooms.
I definitely felt better this morning, not as shaky, and the pain in my arm was more of a dull throb now. Checking myself in the mirror, I saw that I didn’t even look pale. How could I, when Wyatt had just done me? My cheeks were flushed and it wasn’t from fever.
I cleaned up, then rummaged one-handed through my duffel, which was still parked in the middle of the bathroom floor. I found my clean underwear and managed to pull it on, then brushed my teeth and hair. That was the limit of what I could do by myself, though. My clean clothes were wrinkled and needed to be run through the clothes dryer, but even if they had been newly

pressed, I couldn't have coped. I couldn't put on a bra. I could move my arm a little more this morning, but not enough to extend to dressing.
I unlocked the door and stomped out. He was nowhere to be seen. Just how did he expect me to harangue him if he didn't stay where he could hear me? Fuming, I gathered my clean clothes in my right arm and went downstairs. The stairs led me to a great room with ten-foot ceilings, leather furniture, and the required big-screen television. There wasn't a plant in sight.
The smell of coffee made me turn to the left, which led through the breakfast room and into the kitchen. Wyatt, barefoot and shirtless, was busy at the cooktop. I looked at that muscled back and brawny arms, the deep furrow of his spine and the slight indentations on each side, just above the waistband of his jeans, and my heart turned over again. I was in deep trouble here, and not just because some idiot murderer was after me.
"Where's the laundry room?" I asked.
He pointed to a door that opened off the short hall leading to the garage.
"Need any help?"
"I can manage. I just need to get the wrinkles out of my clothes." I went into the laundry room and put my clothes in the dryer, then turned it on. Then I went back to the kitchen and took up the battle. Well, first I poured myself a cup of coffee, using the cup he had set out for me. A woman needs to be alert when she's dealing with a man as underhanded and sneaky as Wyatt Bloodsworth.
"You have to stop doing that."
"Doing what?" he asked as he flipped a buckwheat pancake.
"The sneak attacks. I told you no."
"You didn't tell me no while I was doing it. You said some interesting things, but *no* wasn't among them."
My cheeks got hot, but I brushed that aside with a wave of my hand. "What I say during doesn't count. It's that chemistry thing, and you shouldn't take advantage of it."
"Why not?" He turned aside and lifted his own coffee cup. He was smiling.
"It's almost date rape."
He spewed coffee all over the floor. Thank goodness he'd turned away from the pancakes. Outraged, he glared at me. "Don't you even start down that road, because it isn't funny. Date rape, my ass. We have a deal, and you know it. All you have to do is say no and I'll stop. So far, you haven't said it."

“I said a blanket no beforehand.”
“Those aren’t our rules of engagement. You can’t stop me before I get started. You have to say it after I’ve made a move on you, to prove you really don’t want me.” He was still scowling, but he turned to rescue the pancakes before they burned. He buttered them, then got a paper towel and mopped up the coffee. Then he very calmly went back to the skillet he was using and poured more batter into it.
“That’s the point! You keep short-circuiting my brain, and it isn’t fair. It’s not as if I can short-circuit your brain, too.”
“Want to bet?”
“Then why are you winning and I’m losing?” I wailed.
“Because you want me, and you’re just being stubborn.”
“Hah. *Hah!* Using that logic, your brain should be just as fried as mine if we were on the same footing, in which case you wouldn’t be winning all the time. But you are, so that means you don’t want me.” Okay, I knew there were holes in the argument, but it was all I could think of to sidetrack him.
He cocked his head. “Wait a minute. Are you saying I’m fucking you because I don’t want you?”
Trust him to immediately see the holes, and drive a verbal truck through the argument. I didn’t see anywhere to go with that, so I backtracked. “The thing is, whatever the reasoning, I don’t want to have sex anymore. You should respect that.”
“I will. When you say no.”
“I’m saying no now.”
“Now doesn’t count. You have to wait until I touch you.”
“Who made these stupid-ass rules?” I bellowed, frustrated beyond control.
He grinned. “I did.”
“Well, I’m not playing by them, understand? Flip the pancakes.”
He glanced at the skillet and flipped the pancakes. “You can’t change the rules just because you’re losing.”
“Yes, I can. I can go home and not see you again.”
“You can’t go home, because someone’s trying to kill you.”
There was that. Fuming, I sat down at the table, which he had already set with two places.
He walked over with the spatula in his hand, and bent down to kiss me warmly on the mouth. “You’re still scared, aren’t you? That’s what this is all about.”

Just wait until I saw Dad again. I was going to tell him a thing or two about giving information to the enemy camp.
“Yes. No. It doesn’t matter. I still have a valid point.”
He ruffled my hair, then returned to his pancakes.
I could see arguing with him wasn’t going to work. Somehow, I’d have to keep my wits about me enough to tell him no when he got started again, but how could I do that if he kept jumping me when I was asleep? By the time I was awake enough to think, it was already too late because by then I didn’t *want* to say no.
He took the bacon out of the microwave, divided it between our plates, then dished out the buttery pancakes. Before sitting down, he freshened our cups of coffee, and also got a glass of water for me and set out the antibiotic and a pain pill.
I took both pills. Though my arm felt better, I wanted to stay ahead of the pain.
“What am I doing today?” I asked as I dug into breakfast. “Staying here while you go to work?”
“Nope. Not until you can use that arm. I’m taking you to my mother’s house. I’ve already called her.”
“Cool.” I liked his mother, and I really wanted to see the inside of that giant Victorian she lived in. “I assume I can talk to my family whenever I want, right?”
“I don’t see why not. You just can’t go see them, and I don’t want them coming to see you, either, because they could lead this guy straight to you.”
“I don’t see why y’all are having such a hard time finding out who he is. He has to be a boyfriend.”
“Don’t tell me how to do my job,” he warned. “She didn’t have an exclusive relationship going on. We’ve checked out the guys she was dating, and they’re clear. There are some other angles we’re exploring.”
“It wasn’t drugs, or anything like that.” I ignored his rude comment about telling him how to do his job.
He looked up. “How do you figure?”
“She belonged to Great Bods, remember? She didn’t have any of the signs, and she was in good shape. Not great; she couldn’t have done a backflip if her life had depended on it, but she wasn’t a druggie, either. It has to be a boyfriend. She came on to all the guys, so I figure it’s a jealousy thing. I can talk to my employees, find out if they noticed anything—”

“No. Stay out of it. That’s an order. We’ve already interviewed all your employees.”
Insulted that he seemed to be totally dismissing my views on the subject, I finished eating in silence. Typical man, he didn’t like that either.
“Stop sulking.”
“I’m not sulking. Realizing that there’s no point in talking is not the same as sulking.”
The dryer dinged, and I got my clothes out while he cleaned up the table.
“Go on upstairs,” he said. “I’ll be up in a minute to help you get dressed.”
He came up while I was brushing my teeth again, because pancakes make my teeth feel sticky, and he stood beside me at the vanity, using the other basin while he did the same. Brushing our teeth together made me feel strange. That was something married people did. I wondered if one day I’d do all my tooth-brushing here in this bathroom, or if some other woman would be standing in my place.
He crouched down and held my capri pants for me, and I balanced myself with one hand on his shoulder while I stepped into them. He zipped and buttoned, then eased his shirt off me and slipped my bra in place and hooked it.
My blouse was sleeveless, which was good, but the bandage was so big the armhole was just barely big enough. He had to tug the cloth across it, which had me wincing and mentally thanking Dr. MacDuff for the dope. He buttoned the tiny buttons that marched up the front of the blouse, then I sat on the bed and eased my feet into sandals. I continued to sit there, watching him as he dressed. The suit, the white dress shirt, the tie. The shoulder holster. The badge. The handcuffs clipped to the back of his belt. The cell phone clipped to the front. Oh, man. My heart was jumping like crazy, just watching him.
“Are you ready?” he asked.
“No. You haven’t put up my hair yet.” I could have gone with it down, since I wasn’t working out today, but I was still pissed at him.
“Okay.” He got the brush, and I turned so he could gather my hair in a ponytail at the back of my head. When he had it all caught in one hand, he said, “What do I put around it?”
“A scrunchie.”
“A *whatie*?”
“Scrunchie. Don’t tell me you don’t have a scrunchie.”

“I don’t even know what the hell a scrunchie is.”
“It’s what you use to hold up ponytails. Duh.”
“I haven’t worn a ponytail lately,” he said drily. “Will a rubber band do?”
“No! Rubber bands break the hair. It has to be a scrunchie.”
“Where do I get a scrunchie?”
“Look in my bag.”
He was very still behind me. After a few seconds, without saying a word, he let go of my hair and went into the bathroom. Now that he couldn’t see me, I grinned to myself.
“What the hell,” he said about half a minute later, “does a scrunchie look like?”
“Like a big rubber band with cloth on it.”
More silence. Finally he came out of the bathroom with my white scrunchie in his hand. “Is this it?”
I nodded.
He started the process of gathering my hair again.
“Put the scrunchie on your wrist,” I directed. “Then you can just slide it off around the ponytail.”
His thick wrist just about stretched my scrunchie to the limits, but he grasped the theory at once and got my hair in a decent ponytail without any more delay. I went into the bathroom and checked out the results. “That’s good. I think I can go without earrings today, if that’s all right with you.”
He rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. “Thank you, Lord.”
“Don’t be sarcastic. This was your idea, remember.”
As we went down the stairs, I heard him mutter behind me, “You little shit,” and I grinned to myself again. It was good that he knew I’d got back at him, because otherwise what would be the point?

Chapter Fourteen

I loved Mrs. Bloodsworth’s house. It was white, the gingerbread and trim were painted lavender, and her front door was robin’s egg blue. You have to respect, and possibly fear, any woman who has the guts to paint her house those colors. The porch, which wrapped around two sides of the house, was wide and gracious, filled with ferns and palms, and ceiling fans had been installed to provide a breeze whenever nature fell down on the job. Roses of

various hues provided explosions of color. Dark green gardenia bushes, heavy with the fragrant white blooms, punctuated each side of the wide steps leading up to the porch.

Wyatt didn't park so we could go up the front walk, though; he continued down the driveway and parked behind the house. I was escorted to the back door, which opened into a small back foyer and then into the kitchen, which had been modernized without sacrificing the style. His mother was waiting for us there.

Roberta Bloodsworth wasn't the type of woman who is ever described as matronly. She was tall and slim, with a short, chic hairstyle. Wyatt had inherited his sharp green eyes from her, and his dark hair. Hers wasn't dark now, though; instead of doing gray, she'd gone blond. As early as it was, not even eight o'clock, she already had on makeup and earrings. She hadn't dressed up, though; she was wearing tan walking shorts with an untucked aqua T-shirt, and regular flip-flops. Her toenails were painted fire-engine red, and the left foot sported a toe ring.

She was my kind of woman.

"Blair, honey, I couldn't believe it when Wyatt said you'd been shot," she said, putting a careful arm around me for a hug. "How are you feeling? Would you like some coffee, or hot tea?"

Just like that, I was in the mood to be mothered. Since my own mom was forbidden to do it, Wyatt's mom had stepped into the breach. "Tea sounds wonderful," I said fervently, and she immediately turned to the sink to fill an old-fashioned kettle with water and put it on the stove to start heating.

Wyatt frowned. "I'd have made tea for you if you'd said you wanted it. I thought you liked coffee."

"I do like coffee, but I like tea, too. And I've already had coffee."

"Tea gives you a feeling that coffee doesn't," Mrs. Bloodsworth explained. "You just sit at the table, Blair, and don't try to do anything. You must still be feeling shaky."

"I'm a lot better than I was last night," I said as I obeyed her and took a seat at the wooden kitchen table. "I actually feel fairly normal today. Last night was—" I made a rocking motion with my hand.

"I imagine so. Wyatt, you go on to work. You need to catch that creep and you can't do it standing in my kitchen. Blair will be just fine."

He seemed reluctant to leave. "If you have to go anywhere, she should probably stay here," he said to his mother. "I don't want her seen out in

public right now."
"I know; you've already told me."
"She doesn't need to do anything strenuous, after losing that much blood yesterday."
"I know; you've already told me."
"She'll probably try to talk you into—"
"Wyatt! I *know*!" she said in exasperation. "We went over all of this on the phone. Do you think I've gone senile?"
He was smart enough to say, "Of course not. It's just—"
"It's just you being overprotective. I get it. Blair and I will do just fine, and I'll exercise my God-given common sense by not parading her down the middle of Main Street, okay?"
"Okay." He grinned and kissed her cheek, then came to me and rubbed his hand down my back before squatting beside me. "Try to stay out of trouble while I'm gone," he said.
"Excuse me, but how is any of this my fault?"
"It isn't, but you do have a talent for the unexpected." He reversed the direction of his hand, sweeping it up my spine to brush the side of my neck with his thumb, then laughing at my alarmed expression. "Be good, will you? I'll check in during the day, and pick you up late this afternoon."
He kissed me, tugged on my ponytail, then rose to his feet and went to the back door. Pausing there with his hand on the doorknob, he looked again at his mother, and this time he was wearing his cop face. "Take *very* good care of her, because she's the mother of your future grandchildren."
"I am not!" I shrieked after a split second of pure shock.
"I thought so," his mother said at the same time.
He was out the door by the time I got there. I wrenched it open and yelled at him, "I am *not*! That is *so* underhanded, and you know you're lying!"
He paused with the car door open. "Last night, did we or did we not talk about having children?"
"Yes, but not *each other's*!"
"Don't fool yourself, honey," he advised, then got in the car and drove away.
I was so mad I did a Rumpelstiltskin, punctuating each stomp with "Shit!" and of course the jumping up and down hurt my arm, so it went like this: "Shit! Ow! Shit! Shit! Shit! *Ow!*"

Then I realized I was doing this in front of his mother, and I turned a horrified look on her. “Omigod, I’m so sorry—”
Except she was leaning against the sink laughing her head off. “You should have seen yourself! *’Shit! Ow! Shit! Ow!’* I wish I’d had a video camera.”
I could feel my face burning. “I’m so sorry—” I began again.
“For what? Do you think I’ve never said ‘shit’ before, or a lot worse? Besides, it does me good to see a woman not rolling over for Wyatt, if you know what I mean. It’s against the natural order of the world for a man to always get what he wants, and Wyatt always has.”
Holding my arm, I went back to the table. “Not really. His wife divorced him.”
“And he walked away without a single backward look. It was his way or nothing, no compromising. She—her name is Megan, by the way, but I don’t know her last name because she remarried within the year—always deferred to him. I suppose she had stars in her eyes because he was this big football star, and as rough and dirty as football is, the NFL is a glamour job. She didn’t understand it and couldn’t handle it when, without talking things over with her, he quit playing ball and walked away from everything she expected out of life. What she wanted didn’t matter to him. It’s always been like that; he’s never had to work for a woman, and it has driven me crazy. So it’s nice to see someone standing up to him.”
“For all the good it’s doing,” I said glumly. “He seems to be winning every battle.”
“But at least there *is* a battle, and he’s aware there’s resistance. What made you so mad about what he said?”
“Because he’s trying to do an end run around me, and I’m not certain it means anything. I told him ‘no’—for all the good it did—and he’s so frickin’ competitive it’s like waving a red flag at a bull. So did he say that because he loves me, or because he can’t stand to lose? I vote for number two, because he doesn’t know me well enough to love me, and I’ve told him that I don’t know how many times.”
“Good for you.” The water for the tea began boiling, the kettle making a whistling sound. She turned off the stove, and the whistle slowly died while she put tea bags in two cups, then poured the hot water over the bags. “How do you take your tea?”
“Two sugars, black.”

She put sugar in mine, and sugar and cream in hers, then brought both cups to the table. I thanked her as she set my cup in front of me, and she sat down across from me. A thoughtful frown between her brows, she stirred her tea. “I think you’re handling him exactly right. Make him work for you, and he’ll appreciate you a lot more.”
“Like I said, he’s winning all the battles.” Dispirited, I sipped my hot tea.
“Honey, ask him if he would rather have played in a hard, close-fought game, or a runaway. He *loved* the games where it was toe-to-toe until the very end, and he loved making those bone-crunching tackles to stop the ball carrier. He’d be bored within a week if you made things easy for him.”
“He’s still winning all the time. It isn’t fair. *I* want to win every now and then.”
“If he’s sneaky, you have to be sneakier.”
“That’s like saying I have to be more of a Hun than Attila.” But I suddenly felt more cheerful, because I could do it. I might not win the battle of the neck, but there were other battles where we were more evenly matched.
“I have faith in you,” Mrs. Bloodsworth said. “You’re a smart, savvy young woman; you have to be, to make such a success of Great Bods at your age. And you’re a hottie. He’s dying to get in your pants, but take my advice and don’t let him.”
I managed to keep from choking on my tea. There was no way I was going to tell his mother he’d already been in my pants. I was sure *my* parents had already figured it out, since Wyatt insisted on taking me home with him last night, but I couldn’t admit it to *his* mother.
Out of guilt, I steered the conversation away from Wyatt and my pants, and asked if she’d mind showing me through her house. It was a good choice. She beamed and jumped up, and we were off.
My best guess is the house had at least twenty rooms, most of them with those lovely octagonal lines that must have been a nightmare to build. The formal parlor was done in cheerful yellow and white, the dining room had cream-and-green-striped wallpaper, with the table and chairs in a very dark wood. Each room had a very definite color scheme, and I had to admire her resourcefulness in coming up with so many different schemes, because after all there are only so many colors from which to choose. The entire house showed the love she had poured into it, the effort.
“If you get tired during the day and want a nap, use this room,” she said, showing me into a bedroom with polished hardwood floors, mauve paint on

the walls, and a four-poster bed with a mattress that looked like a cloud. “It has it’s own bathroom.”
About that time she noticed the way I was cradling my arm, which was still throbbing from the jarring it took. “I bet your arm will feel better if it’s supported in a sling. I have the perfect thing for it.”
She went to her bedroom—done in shades of white—and returned with a beautiful soft blue shawl. She folded it and fashioned a very comfortable sling for me, which did indeed take some of the stress off the stitches.
I was certain I was hindering her, getting in the way of her normal routine, but she seemed happy to have my company and chattered away. We watched television some, read some. I called Mom and talked to her, and told her what Dad had done. That would fix him. After lunch I did get tired, and went upstairs for a nap.
“Wyatt called to check on you,” Mrs. Bloodsworth said when I woke an hour later and came back downstairs. “He was worried when I told him you were lying down. He said you had a fever last night.”
“That’s normal after you get a wound, and it was just high enough to make me uncomfortable.”
“I hate that, don’t you? It’s such a miserable feeling. But you aren’t feverish now?”
“No, I was just tired.”
While I’d been half-dozing, I’d been thinking about Nicole, and how Wyatt had brushed off my ideas about her murderer. Where did he get off, thinking he knew more about her than I did, just because he was a cop and could investigate people? He was wrong, and I knew it.
I called my assistant manager, Lynn Hill, and got her at home. When she heard my voice she gasped. “Omigod, I heard you were shot! Is that true?”
“Sort of. It kind of grazed my arm. I’m okay; I didn’t even have to stay overnight at the hospital. But I have to stay mostly out of sight until they catch the guy who murdered Nicole, and I’m ready for this to be over. If Great Bods reopens tomorrow morning, can you handle things?”
“Sure, no problem. I can do everything except meet payroll.”
“I’ll handle that, and get the checks to you. Listen—you talked to Nicole some.”
“When I had to,” she said drily.
I understood that completely. “Did she say anything about a special boyfriend?”

“She was always making mysterious hints. My guess is she was running around with married men, because you know how she was. She always wanted what some other woman had. She wouldn’t have been interested in some single guy, other than as a temporary boost to her ego. You’re not supposed to speak ill of the dead, but she was a piece of work.”
“Married men. That makes perfect sense,” I said, and it did. Lynn had nailed Nicole’s personality.
I said good-bye, and called Wyatt’s cell phone. He answered immediately, not even saying hello. “Is something wrong?”
“Do you mean other than being shot and someone trying to kill me? Not really.” How could I have resisted that line? “Anyway, I checked out something and the word is Nicole was seeing a married man.”
He paused. “I thought I told you to stay out of police business.” There was an edge of anger to his voice.
“Kind of hard to, in this situation. Are you going to be so stubborn you aren’t going to check this out?”
“You didn’t leave the house, did you?” He didn’t answer my question, instead asking one of his own.
“No, of course not. I’m still tucked away nice and safe.”
“Good. Stay there. And, yes, I will have this checked out.”
“It isn’t exactly something the guy will admit to, running around on his wife. Want me to try finding out—”
“No! No. I want you to do nothing, understand? Let us handle the investigations. You’ve already been shot once, wasn’t that enough?” He hung up.
He hadn’t exactly been gracious about my pointer. Okay, so he was worried something else would happen to me, and I wasn’t crazy about the idea of putting myself in danger, either. But I could call people, couldn’t I? I was using my cell phone, so there was no way I could give away my location. The ordinary person didn’t have cell-phone tracing capabilities.
And if you can’t win one battle, go find a battle you *can* win.

Chapter Fifteen

Belatedly it occurred to me that the detectives had already questioned all my employees, so Lynn should have already told them her married-man

theory. In that case, had Wyatt been trying to spare my feelings by saying he'd have it checked out? Oh, that was galling.
I called Lynn back. "What you said about Nicole seeing married men, did you tell that to the police?"
"Well, no," she admitted. "For one thing, I don't *know* anything; I'm just saying she's the type. Actually, what the detective asked was if I knew who she had been seeing, romantically speaking, and I said no, because I don't. He didn't chat and say, hey, was she likely to do this or this, you know? But I was thinking about it later, and that's when it hit me that she was always flirting with the married guys at Great Bods, you know, and while she came on to every man breathing, there was still something about the way she went after the married ones. You saw her in action; you know what I'm talking about."
I knew exactly. Nicole had been forever *touching*, whether it was to ostensibly straighten a collar or a pat on the arm or an arm around the waist as she walked beside a guy—touching. Men aren't stupid; they knew exactly what she was offering. The smart ones had maybe been flattered, but they hadn't been hooked. The ones who weren't so smart, or who were sleazeballs, had responded, so you just knew there was contact going on away from Great Bods. Once she bagged a guy, though, Nicole had always been ready to move on.
"Did you notice any one guy in particular who paid a lot of attention to her?" I asked Lynn because at Great Bods I was tied up doing office work a lot, so she saw more than I did. "It would also be great if you knew what color car he drives."
"Let me think. No one recently, because it's been mostly our regulars and they were wise to her. A couple of months ago I did spot Nicole coming out of the men's bathroom, looking so smug I just wanted to bitch-slap her, and a few minutes later one of the guys came out, so I figure they were getting it on in the john."
"Why didn't you tell me?" I shrieked. "I'd have tossed her ass out right then!"
"You could do that? For doing it in the john?"
"She was in the *men's* john. I'm surprised they didn't get caught."
"I doubt she would have cared. They were probably in a stall. Maybe she was giving him a blow job, but that wasn't her style, either. At a guess, I'd say she did all the taking and none of the giving."

“Do you remember the man’s name?”
“Not offhand. He didn’t come often, and I don’t think he’s been in at all since then. He wasn’t one of the regulars; he paid for a month and worked out a couple of times, then didn’t renew. I’d recognize his name if I saw it, though. Do you keep a separate file on the ones who didn’t renew?”
“Not a paper one. He’d be in the computer, though. Do you have any plans for the rest of the day? I’m going to put a call in to the cops”—*my* cop, specifically—“and they might want you to meet them at Great Bods to go through the computer files.”
“No, I’ll be around. If I do happen to be out, you can catch me on the cell phone.”
“Okay. I’ll get back to you.”
“That sounded interesting,” Mrs. Bloodsworth said, her green eyes bright with interest. She didn’t bother to pretend that she hadn’t been eavesdropping. After all, I was sitting in the same room with her.
“I hope so. Now, if Wyatt just won’t hang up on me again—”
“He hung up on you?” Now the green eyes fired. “I taught him better manners than that. Let me drop a little word in his ear—”
“Oh, no, don’t do that. Come to think of it, it would be best if I didn’t call him again. I’ll just call Detective MacInnes.” I found the detective’s card, and dialed the number on it.
When he answered, I said cheerfully, “Hello, this is Blair Mallory—”
“Uh—wait just a minute, Ms. Mallory, and I’ll get the lieutenant—”
“Oh, there’s no need. I’ll just talk to you. The thing is, I was just now talking to my assistant manager, Lynn Hill, about her taking over for me at Great Bods when it reopens tomorrow—it *is* reopening, isn’t it? You have all of that ugly yellow tape down?”
“Uh—let me get back to you on that—”
“Never mind. I’ll find out about that later. Anyway, Lynn is the one who mentioned that she thought Nicole had a sort of thing for married men. You know—the challenge, taking something away from another woman. Lynn said she didn’t say anything about that to the detective who interviewed her because she didn’t think of it at the time, but later on she was running things through her mind and thinks it’s very likely, because of the way Nicole acted.”
“Uh—” He tried to interrupt again, but I just plowed right over him.

“Lynn and I were talking about possibles, and she said a couple of months ago she caught Nicole and this guy in the men’s john doing, well, each other. She can’t remember the man’s name, because he only came to Great Bods a couple of times and hasn’t been back, but she’s sure she’ll recognize the name when she sees it, and if you want, she can meet you over at Great Bods and she’ll go through the computer files of the members who didn’t renew. Are you following this?”
“Yeah,” he said, sounding much more involved and with me now.
“Good. It’s a place to start. That particular guy may not pan out, but knowing she liked married men puts a different spin on things, doesn’t it?”
“Sure does.” Now he sounded almost cheerful.
“Just in case you don’t have Lynn’s number handy, here it is.” I rattled it off. “She’s waiting to hear from you. And if she isn’t at home, here’s her cell number.” Rattled off another one. Then I chirped, “Have a nice day, Detective,” and hung up after he mumbled an automatic reply.
“I’m impressed,” Mrs. Bloodsworth said, grinning from ear to ear. “You’re doing a good imitation of a ditzy blond, but you’re spewing out information so fast he probably couldn’t write it all down.”
“Then he’ll call back,” I said airily. “Or someone will.”
Someone did, of course, within about five minutes. He was royally pissed, too. “If you have information about the case, you call me, not one of my men,” he said very tersely.
“Are you the same man who has hung up on me twice now? I can’t imagine *ever* calling you again, about anything.”
Silence as deep as the Grand Canyon fell between us. Then he muttered, “Oh, shit,” in the tone of a man who has just realized he’s gonna have to suck it up and apologize, because, no doubt about it, he’d been rude. Not only that, he knew that I was with the mother who had raised him to have better manners than that. This was just one teeny little battle, but he’d been outflanked and I got a great deal of satisfaction out of it.
Finally he heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry. I’ll never hang up on you again. I promise.”
“Apology accepted,” I said briskly. “Now, will Lynn be able to open Great Bods tomorrow?” There’s no sense in beating a horse to death, now is there? I’d won, so I’d be an adult and move on.
“I’m ninety percent certain she will.”
“Good. Is my car still sitting in front of it?”

“No. I got your keys out of your bag and had it moved to your condo this morning. It’s safe and sound.”
“When did you get my keys?” I asked curiously, because I hadn’t seen him do it.
“Last night. You were already sound asleep.”
“I’m guessing everything was all right at my house, no windows shot out or anything?”
“The patrolman checked, said everything was still locked up, the windows were locked, no bullet holes that he could see.”
“Did he climb the fence and check the French doors in back?”
“He said he checked all the doors. Let me buzz him and ask about that particular door.” He left the phone, and came back a minute later.
“Simmons said he didn’t have to climb the fence; he just opened the gate and walked in.”
A chill ran down my spine. “I always keep my gate locked.” My fingers tightened on the phone. “I *know* it was locked.”
“Shit. I’ll get someone back out there right now. You sit tight.”
“Like I could do anything else,” I said wryly. We both very politely said good-bye, so neither could accuse the other of hanging up on anyone; then I reported the latest happening to Mrs. Bloodsworth.
That was when I remembered Siana. She was supposed to go to my place today and pack clothes for me. What if by some awful coincidence she was at my house when whoever unlocked my gate—which could only be unlocked from the inside—was there? Siana was blond. She was a little taller than I was, but Nicole’s killer wouldn’t know that. She had her own set of keys to the place, in case I lost mine.
She could have gone at any time to get my clothes: first thing this morning, or at lunch, or she might wait until she was finished with work for the day—but I didn’t think she would wait that long, because she had to meet Wyatt somewhere to give the bag to him and sometimes she had to work until eight, nine o’clock at night.
“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Bloodsworth asked, watching my face.
“My sister,” I said in a faint tone. “She was supposed to pack a bag for me today and give it to Wyatt. He didn’t mention it, so she might have been—” She might have been mistaken for me. Oh, dear God.
Praying harder than I’d ever prayed in my life, I dialed Wyatt again. He sounded wary when he answered. “Siana was supposed to be at my house

getting my clothes," I said rapidly. "Have you heard from her today?"
"Calm down," he said, his tone switching to soothing. "She's fine. She brought your bag over first thing this morning."
"Thank God. Oh, thank God." Tears burned my eyes. "I just realized . . . She's blond; she's about my size; the killer wouldn't know the difference between us." I was appalled that I hadn't thought of that before, and judging from the muttered curse I heard, our resemblance hadn't registered with Wyatt, either, at least not in that context. People who knew us would never get us mixed up, because we don't favor each other all that strongly, but on the surface, to the casual observer . . .
Because Wyatt was a cop, he asked, "Could Siana have opened your gate?"
I wiped the tears away. "I'll call and ask her, but I can't imagine any reason why she would."
"I'll call. I have more questions I need to ask her. I have a question for you, too: Is your security system set?"
I opened my mouth to automatically say, "Yes, of course," but abruptly shut it as I remembered the last time I'd been at home, on Friday, waiting for the rental car company to come pick me up. I'd waited at the door, and when the man drove up, I had bolted. I had a distinct memory of locking the door, but none at all of setting the alarm.
"It wasn't," I finally said. "Unless Siana set it this morning when she left. She has the code."
"All right. I'll handle things here. Stay calm, and with any luck I'll pick you up in a couple of hours. Okay?"
"Okay." I was grateful he hadn't lectured me about forgetting to set the security alarm. What on earth had I been thinking? Oh, yeah: the beach. I'd been in a hurry to get away.
The killer could have gotten in at any time during the weekend, and made himself comfortable while he waited for me to come home. Only, he hadn't. Maybe he'd staked out my place and, when my car was never there, decided I must be staying with someone. But if he'd gone back to Great Bods, he would have seen my car and then maybe figured that was the best place to wait for me, because I was sure to collect my car.
That plan had worked, up to a point; it was only by chance that I was still alive. What would he have done next? No, wait—he might have thought the plan *had* worked yesterday evening, because I'd hit the ground and obviously he hadn't hung around to check things out. He must have thought

he’d killed me, until the news at ten told him otherwise—or maybe not even then. The hospital didn’t give out condition statements the way it used to. The police would have held their cards close to their chests last night, until Wyatt had me stuffed somewhere safe—like his bed was safe, but whatever. The morning news, though, would probably have said I was treated at the hospital and released.

So what would be his next move? Maybe he was in my house now, waiting for me. Maybe he’d just been checking things out, looking for a way to get inside. The French doors were the best bet, and the privacy fence would give him concealment while he jimmied them open, or whatever.

That would be stupid of him, though. The security company’s sign was plainly posted on my front window. He wouldn’t have any way of telling whether or not the system was on, so he wouldn’t chance it—not if he had a brain in his head.

I jerked out of my thoughts when Mrs. Bloodsworth finally got my attention, anxiously asking if Siana was all right. “She’s fine,” I said, and wiped the last tear away. “She packed my clothes early this morning, and gave the bag to Wyatt. He’s calling her to see if she turned on the security system.”

The odds were she had. Siana wouldn’t have left my house unguarded, even if the system had been off when she arrived. So, since no alarm had gone off, my home hadn’t been invaded. No killer waited there. He might have jumped the fence and tried to look in the French doors, but I had pulled the curtains closed over them and he wouldn’t have been able to see a thing. Everything was all right.

I breathed a huge, mental sigh of relief.

“There’s no telling what time Wyatt will get here,” Mrs. Bloodsworth said. “I’m going to go ahead and start supper for us. If he doesn’t make it in time to eat with us, I’ll just keep things warm for him.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked, hoping there was, because it was getting kind of old just sitting around all day and letting someone wait on me.

“One-handed?” she asked, and laughed. “Other than setting the table, I can’t think of a thing. Just come into the kitchen and keep me company. I don’t get to cook all that often now, with just me in the house. There’s no point, is there? I’ll eat a sandwich for supper, and sometimes in the winter I’ll open a can of soup, but food’s pretty boring if you don’t have company.”

I followed her into the kitchen, and took a seat at the table. There was a formal dining room, of course, all true Victorians had them, but you could tell most of the Bloodsworth meals had been eaten at this very table. “You sound a little bored. Have you thought about rejoining Great Bods? We have some great new programs.”
“I’ve thought about it, but you know how it is. Thinking about something and actually getting around to doing it are two different things. After my bicycle accident, I’m afraid I became a bit of a slug.”
“Who took care of you when you were hurt?”
“My daughter, Lisa. It was misery. The collarbone was bad enough, but the ribs—that was agony. I couldn’t move without hurting, and I couldn’t find a comfortable position, so I was constantly moving. My left arm is still weak, but I’ve been exercising it and I’m almost back up to normal. Six months! It’s ridiculous to take that long to recover, but I suppose that shows my age.”
I snorted. It wasn’t an elegant sound, but it got my point across. “I’ve broken a collarbone, too, when I was on the high school cheerleading squad. I had to work hard to get back in shape for the next year. It’s a good thing the squad didn’t do pyramids and flying stunts for the basketball games, or I couldn’t have managed. Six months sounds like a good recovery time to me.”
She smiled. “But I’m not doing handstands, am I? You were.”
“Not then, I wasn’t. I couldn’t; my shoulder just wouldn’t hold up.”
“Can you still do a handstand?”
“Sure. And a backflip, cartwheel, splits. I try to work on my gymnastics at least twice a week.”
“Could you teach me how to do a handstand?”
“I don’t see why not. It’s balance and strength, and practice. You need to do some light weight-lifting to get your arm and shoulder stronger, though, before you start. The last thing you need is to fall and break something else.”
“Agreed,” she said fervently.
“I can do a one-handed handstand,” I said, bragging a little.
“You can?” She turned from the stove and stared at my injured arm, wrapped in the blue-shawl sling. “Not now, you can’t.”
“I probably can, because I use my right arm, since it’s strongest and because I’m right-handed. I always tuck my left arm behind my back, anyway, so it

won’t wave around and upset my balance.”
Well, the upshot of that conversation was that by the time the pork chops, green beans, mashed potatoes, and biscuits were finished, we were both dying to see if I could manage the handstand. Mrs. Bloodsworth kept saying no, I shouldn’t take the chance of injuring myself even more, since the stitches were new and I’d lost blood, things like that, but I pointed out that in a handstand what blood I had left would be rushing to my head, so I wasn’t likely to faint.
“But you’re weak.”
“I don’t feel weak. I was shaky last night, just a little shaky this morning, and now I feel fine.” To prove it, of course, then I *had* to do the handstand. She fussed around me like she wanted to stop me but didn’t know how, and at the same time I could tell she was really interested. We took the sling off my left arm, and though I could move the arm a little today, I still didn’t have a lot of range, so she moved it for me and tucked it behind my back. Then, in a stroke of genius, she tied the shawl around my hips and over the arm to keep it in position.
I got on the other side of the table, away from the stove and in the wide entry into the dining room, so there was plenty of space. I bent over, placed my hand on the floor with my elbow braced against my right knee, centered my gravity over my arm, and slowly slowly slowly began to curl, lifting my feet off the ground.
So that’s what Wyatt saw when he came in the back door. We’d been so engrossed we hadn’t heard the car in the driveway.
“Holy shit!” he said, the words exploding out of him and making his mother and me both jump.
That wasn’t a good thing, because it ruined my balance. I began to topple, Mrs. Bloodsworth grabbed for me, and Wyatt vaulted the table. Somehow he caught my legs, keeping me from tipping over, then wrapped a brawny arm around my waist and gently flipped me upright.
There was nothing gentle about his tongue, though. “What in hell do you think you’re doing?” he roared at me, his face dark with temper, then turned to Mrs. Bloodsworth. “Mother, you’re supposed to stop her from doing something stupid, not *help* her!”
“I was just showing—” I began.
“I saw what you were ‘just’ doing! For God’s sake, Blair, you were shot just twenty-four hours ago! You lost a lot of blood! Tell me how, under those

conditions, doing a handstand is even remotely reasonable?"
"Since I did it, I'd say it was within the realm of possibility. If you hadn't startled me, I'd have been just fine." My tone was remarkably mild, because we had frightened him. I understood. I patted his arm. "Everything's okay. Why don't you just sit down and I'll get you something to drink. Iced tea? Milk?"
"You'll be okay," his mother said soothingly. "I know you had a scare, but really, we had everything under control."
"*Under control?* She—you . . ." He stopped sputtering and shook his head. "She isn't any safer here than she would be at home. A broken neck can kill her just as dead as a bullet can. That's it. I'm going to have to handcuff her to the vanity in the bathroom, and leave her at my house all day."

Chapter Sixteen

Needless to say, supper wasn't a very cheerful occasion. We were mad at Wyatt, and he was mad at us. That didn't interfere with my appetite; I had to rebuild my blood supply, you know.
His mood didn't improve when, as we were leaving after he'd helped his mother clean up the kitchen, she delivered a parting shot by hugging me and then saying, "Take my advice, honey, and don't sleep with him."
"Gee, Mother, thanks," he said sarcastically, which earned him a sniff and a cold shoulder.
"I completely agree with you," I told her.
"Will you be back tomorrow?" she asked me.
"No," he sourly replied, even though she hadn't asked *him.* "You're a bad influence on each other. I'm going to chain her in the bathroom just like I said."
"I don't want to go with you," I said, scowling at him. "I want to stay with her."
"Tough. You're going with me, and that's that." He clamped a strong hand around my right wrist and, on that note, hauled me out to the car.
It was a silent drive to his house while I ruminated on what this latest show of temper meant. From him, not from us. I knew what was up with us, so there was no point in thinking about it.

I'd scared him. Not just momentarily, as I'd thought at first, the way someone is startled by something unexpected, but all the way to the bone. He'd been stricken with fear.

That was it, plain and simple. He'd seen me shot right in front of him; then the very next day he'd stashed me at what he thought was the safest place in town, his mother's house, and after a stressful day he'd walked in to find me trying my level best, in his view, to break my neck or at least tear out all my new stitches.

In *my* view, one adult apology deserved another. If he could do it, so could I.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to scare you, and we shouldn't have teamed up on you."

He gave me a brooding glance and didn't reply. Okay, so he wasn't as gracious about accepting apologies as I was. I let that slide, because his surliness meant he did care for me, after all; he wasn't driven just by sexual chemistry and that competitive streak of his. Whether he cared about me enough for us to have something to build on was still up in the air, but at least I wasn't in this alone.

Just before we reached his house, he muttered, "Don't ever do that again."

"What?" I asked in bewilderment. "Scare you, or team up on you? You can't mean doing a handstand, because you, like, know what I do for a living, right? I practice gymnastics every week. The members of Great Bods see me practicing and they're reassured that I know what I'm doing. It's good business."

"You could kill yourself," he growled, and with shock I realized that in fact he was, in a very manlike way, seizing on what he saw as the cause of his scare.

"Wyatt, you're a cop, and you want to lecture me on how dangerous *my* job is?"

"I'm a lieutenant, not a patrol officer. I don't serve warrants, make traffic stops, or do undercover drug buys. The guys on the street are the ones in danger."

"You may not do them now, but you did. You weren't hatched out of the academy as a lieutenant, after all." I paused. "And if you were still a beat cop and I pitched a fit because of the danger, what would you do?"

He didn't say anything as he turned into his driveway and pulled into the garage. As the door was coming down behind us, he said grudgingly, "I'd

tell you it was my job and I'd do it to the best of my ability. Which has absolutely nothing in common with you doing a handstand in my mother's kitchen the day after being shot."
"That's true," I agreed. "I'm glad you realize it. Just stay focused on what you're mad at so we don't get sidetracked into arguments about how I run my business."
He came around to open the door for me and help me out of the car, then got the bag with my clothes Siana had packed from the backseat, and led the way inside. Then he dropped the bag on the floor, put his arm around my waist, and pulled me to him for a long, hard kiss.
I was kissing him back with enthusiasm when, belatedly, my danger signals began buzzing at me. Breathless, I managed to pull back. "You can kiss me, but we can't have sex. There. I said it after you touched me, so it counts."
"Maybe all I planned on was kissing," he murmured, and kissed me again.
Yeah, and Napoleon's venture into Russia was just a little day trip. Uh-huh. Did he really think I was buying that?
He kissed me until my knees were wobbly and my toes were curled, then released me with a smug look on his face. He couldn't hide the woody in his pants, though, so I felt pretty good myself.
"Did Lynn find the name of that man in the files?" I asked. Maybe I should have asked that much earlier, but the handstand thing had kind of thrown us into a no-talking zone for a while. We were over that, so I wanted to know.
"Not yet. MacInnes was going to call me as soon as they got the name and he did some preliminary checking. Lynn was having some trouble with the computer."
"What trouble? Why didn't she call? She knows how to use the programs, so what's wrong?"
"It crashed."
"Oh, no. The computer can't crash. We're supposed to open again tomorrow. We *are* opening tomorrow, aren't we?"
He nodded. "We finished processing the crime scene, and all the ugly yellow tape is down." He put little verbal quotation marks around "ugly yellow tape," and I knew MacInnes had probably given him—and the entire department—a verbatim replay of our conversation.
I waved that aside. "The computer," I said urgently.
"I sent one of our computer guys over to see what he could do. That was right before I left work, and I haven't heard anything since."

I dug out my cell phone and called Lynn's cell. When she answered, she sounded a little distracted. "Blair, we have to get another computer. This one's possessed."
"What do you mean, possessed?"
"It's doing weird stuff. It's speaking in tongues. Typing in tongues, anyway. This is gibberish. It isn't even English."
"What does the computer cop say?"
"I'll let him tell you."
A moment later a man said, "It's a major crash, but I can salvage most if not all of your files. I'm going to uninstall your programs and reinstall them; then we'll see what we have. Do you have a backup?"
"No, but I'll get one there tonight if you say we need it. What caused the crash?"
"It's what they do," he said cheerfully. "Right now, other than the gibberish on the screen, it's totally frozen. Mouse won't work, keyboard won't work, nothing will work. Don't worry, though; I'll unfreeze it again—this is the third time it's frozen—and we'll dig those files out."
"What about the new computer tonight?"
"Wouldn't hurt," he said.
After we hung up, I explained the situation to Wyatt. Then I called one of the big office supply superstores, told them what I wanted, gave them my credit card number, and told them to get it ready because a policeman was coming by to pick it up. Wyatt was on his phone already getting that arranged. Then I called Lynn back and told her a new computer was on the way. There was nothing we could do after that except wait for the cop computer-guru to work his magic.
"That was a couple of thousand dollars I hadn't planned on spending," I grumbled. "At least it's tax deductible."
I looked up to find Wyatt grinning. "What's so funny?"
"You. You're such a piece of fluff; it's funny hearing anything businesslike coming out of your mouth."
I was so appalled and taken aback that I'm sure my mouth fell open. "Piece of *fluff*?"
"Fluff," he said firmly. "You have a pink hammer. If that isn't fluffy, I don't know what is."
"I am *not* a piece of fluff! I own a business, and I'm good at what I do! Fluffs don't do that; fluffs let other people take care of them." I could feel a

really serious snit coming on, because I hate being put down, and being called a piece of fluff definitely felt like a put-down to me.
He framed my waist with both hands, still grinning. “Everything about you is fluffy, from that Pebbles hairdo to your fancy little flip-flops with the shells on them. You wear an anklet all the time, your toenails are hot pink, and your bras match your panties. You look like an ice cream cone, and I could just lick you all over.”
Hey, I’m human; I’ll admit to being a bit distracted by that part about licking. By the time I dragged my mind back to the argument—at least I was arguing, he was evidently having fun—he was kissing me again, and before I knew it he was licking and biting my neck and my willpower crumbled. Again. Right there in the kitchen, I lost my pants and my control. I *hate* it when that happens. Even worse, he had to help me back into my pants afterward.
“I’m starting another list,” I said furiously to his back as he made his smug way up the stairs afterward, carrying my bag. “And I’m showing this one to your mother!”
He stopped and looked at me over his shoulder, a wary look entering his eyes. “Are you talking to my mother about our sex life?”
“I’m talking to her about you being an absolute manipulative *snot*!”
He grinned and shook his head, then said, “Fluff,” and continued upstairs.
“Not only that,” I yelled after him, “you don’t have a single plant in this house and it depresses me to be here!”
“I’ll buy you a bush tomorrow,” he called back over his shoulder.
“If you’re any kind of cop at all, I won’t need to be here tomorrow!” There. Let him top that, if he could.
When he came back downstairs, he had changed out of his suit and was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. By that time I’d found a pad of paper and had settled in the big leather recliner in the great room, and I had the television remote tucked into my sling. The television was on the Lifetime channel.
He looked at the television and winced. Then he looked at me. “You’re in my chair.”
“The lamp is here. I need light.”
“We’ve been through this before. That’s *my* chair.” He purposefully advanced on me.

“If you hurt my arm, I’ll—” I broke off and shrieked as he lifted me high in his arms, then sat down in his chair with me on his lap.
“There,” he said, nuzzling the back of my neck. “Now we both have the chair. Where’s the remote?”
Still in my sling, by the grace of God, and that was where it was staying. I was clinging to the pad and pen with my right hand while I tried to ignore what he was doing to my neck. At least I was fairly safe right now, because I doubted he could get it up again so soon after the kitchen episode. “It was right here,” I said truthfully, looking around. “Did it fall behind the cushion?”
He had to check, of course, so I got removed from his lap and he stood to check behind the cushion. He looked all around the recliner; then he turned it upside down to see if the remote had worked its way into the recliner’s innards. He turned a gimlet eye on me. “Blair. Where’s my remote?”
“It was right there!” I said indignantly. “Honest!” Again, I wasn’t lying. It had been right there until he moved me.
Unfortunately, he was a cop, and he knew all about hiding places. His gaze fell on my sling. “Hand it over, you little sneak.”
“Sneak?” I began to back away. “I thought I was just a harmless little piece of fluff.”
“I never said you were harmless.” He took a step toward me, and I broke and ran.
I’m a good runner, but his legs are longer and my sandals didn’t get good traction, so that didn’t last long. I was giggling as he caught me in one arm and rooted the remote out of its hiding place.
He wanted to watch a baseball game, of course. I’m not into baseball. So far as I know, baseball doesn’t have cheerleaders, so I never learned anything about the game. I know football and basketball, but baseball is probably a snooty sport, so I don’t want anything to do with it. But we both sat in the big recliner with me draped across his lap working on my list while he watched the game, and except for occasionally grunting when he saw an item that he considered questionable on my list, he did his thing and I did mine.
After I finished my list I was bored—how long do those stupid games last, anyway?!—and I got sleepy. His shoulder was right there, his arm was supporting my back, so I cuddled up and went to sleep.

I woke as he was carrying me upstairs. The lights were off downstairs, and I assumed it was bedtime. “I get a shower tonight,” I said, yawning. “And a new bandage.”

“I know. I’ll get everything ready before we get in the shower.”

He got the gauze and sterile pads ready, then carefully cut and unwound the thick layers of gauze until he got to the pad that was stuck directly over the stitches—and I do mean stuck. After a careful tug, I decided to get in the shower and let the water loosen the gauze from the stitches.

He turned on the shower so the water would get warm, then stripped me and then himself. Considering my stance about not having sex with him—yeah, like that was even slowing him down—I probably shouldn’t have been naked with him, but the truth was I liked it. A lot. I liked seeing him naked and I liked the way he looked at me when I was naked. I liked the way he touched me, as if he couldn’t help himself, cupping my breasts and rubbing his thumbs over the nipples. He hadn’t paid much attention to my breasts since he’d found out about my neck, but I could tell he did my neck for my benefit, and my breasts were for his. He liked them, and he showed it.

When we got in the shower and our bodies were all wet and slippery, and we had to stand close together so he could peel the pad off my arm, we wound up belly to belly and slowly moving against each other in a sensual water dance. I found out that enough time had lapsed for him to get it up again, and I quickly said, “No sex!” He laughed, as if it didn’t matter, and began washing me. And I found out why he thought it didn’t matter. Look, I tried. I really did. I just hadn’t been prepared for all the places he washed me, or how long he took.

“Don’t pout,” he said afterward, as I sat on the vanity chair and he rebandaged my arm in a much more sensible manner. “I like that you can’t resist me.”

“I’m working on it, though,” I muttered. “I’ll manage it yet.”

He took my hair down out of the ponytail and brushed it, though I could have done the brushing. I handled brushing my teeth, didn’t I? But he wanted to, so I let him. I did the skin-care routine, then asked for the drawstring pants and tank top I wanted to wear to bed. He snorted. “Like you’ll need them,” he said, picking me up and taking me to bed just the way I was, which was bare.

Poor Detective MacInnes, I’d forgotten about him, putting in long hours while Wyatt was at home with me. The phone rang just as Wyatt was

getting into bed beside me; he had the receiver in his hand before the first ring had finished. “Bloodsworth. You got it?” He looked at me and said, “Dwayne Bailey. Ring a bell with you?”
An image shot to mind, that of a burly man about six feet tall, with a lot of body hair. “I remember him,” I said. “He needed electrolysis.”
“Could he have been the man you saw?”
I have very good visual spatial skills, and I could mentally place Dwayne Bailey standing beside Nicole’s car, comparing him to the man I had seen. “There’s no way I could recognize his face, but he’s about the right size. About six feet, a little on the heavy side. He was kind of surly, too, like he had a bad temper.” I remembered that because he’d been in an argument with another of our members, a regular, over using one of the weight machines. Evidently he’d been in a hurry and hadn’t liked waiting while the other man finished his sets.
“Good enough. We’ll go see him tomorrow,” Wyatt said. “MacInnes, grab what sleep you can.”
“Why don’t you roust Bailey out tonight?” I asked, a little indignant. They might have found the man who killed Nicole and shot me, and they weren’t going to pick him up right away?
“We can’t just arrest him,” Wyatt explained as he turned out the light and slid under the covers. “We don’t have probable cause, and no judge in town would sign a warrant. We’ll interview him, see what shakes loose. That’s how you investigate, honey, by talking to people.”
“And in the meantime, he’s running around shooting at innocent pieces of fluff. Something’s wrong with this picture.”
He chuckled and ruffled my hair, then settled me against him. “I never said you were innocent, either.”
I pinched his side. “Just think,” I said with fake anticipation. “This time tomorrow night, I could be in my own bed.”
“But you won’t be.”
“Why not?”
He chuckled again. “Because the piece of fluff can’t dress herself.”

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning I could move my arm more, though very gingerly. While Wyatt was downstairs cooking breakfast, I brushed my teeth and hair, and just to show him, even got partially dressed. I found my clothes hanging in the closet next to his, which gave me butterflies in my stomach, seeing them together like that. He must have unpacked my bag when he brought it up last night, because I certainly hadn't. I searched for my underwear and found it in a dresser drawer, all neatly laid out the way I would have done it instead of jumbled together the way I'd expected. The man had depth to him.

I looked through the rest of the drawers to see how he treated his underwear, and found that he was neat. His T-shirts were folded and stacked, his boxers were folded, his socks were matched and mated. There was nothing unusual about his underwear, just regular guy stuff. I liked that, because a relationship between two vain people can really cut into mirror time. One needed to be normal.

I admit that I'm vain. A little. I'm not as bad as I used to be, when I was a teenager, because as I got older I guess I got a little more confident about how I looked. Strange, isn't it? When I was sixteen, which you have to admit is probably a peak year for body and beauty, I would spend hours fixing my hair and putting on makeup, trying on outfit after outfit, because I wasn't sure I looked good enough. Now that I'm thirty, I'm much more comfortable, even though I know I don't look as good as I did at sixteen. Having dewy skin takes an effort now. I have to work out like mad to keep my weight under control. When I'm going out for a big date or something more formal than my usual stuff, I can still make a big deal out of hair and makeup, but for the most part I don't bother. A little mascara, a little lip gloss, and that's about it.

I still loved clothes, though, and was perfectly capable of trying on every item of clothing I had in an effort to find just the right combination. And some days I couldn't decide what color underwear I wanted. Was it a blue day, or a pink day? Or red? Or black? White, maybe?

Today was one of those days. First I had to decide what I was wearing, because that determines the color of your underwear. No dark underwear under white pants, right? I was feeling colorful, so I finally picked out a pair of aqua shorts, and teamed it with a pink tank top. My tank tops have wide shoulder straps, by the way, because I can't stand the bra-strap-peeking-out style. I think it's just tacky. Anyway, the pink tank top dictated that I

couldn’t wear anything really dark underneath, so that meant a pastel. Pink would have been the obvious choice, but maybe too obvious.
Wyatt appeared in the bedroom door. “What’s taking you so long? Breakfast is ready.”
“I’m deciding what color underwear I want today.”
“Jesus,” he said, and left.
Yellow! That was it! Maybe you think yellow wouldn’t look good with pink, but the lingerie set was a pale yellow, and it looked great under the pink. Not that anyone other than me would see it—well, Wyatt would, because I still couldn’t manage a bra—but it made me feel like the ice cream cone he had mentioned yesterday. Maybe it would put licking in his mind again.
Food was calling, so I carefully pulled on the underpants and shorts, but I got one of Wyatt’s button-up shirts from the closet to wear until he could help me with the tops. I slid my feet into flip-flops—these had aqua sequins on the straps—and went downstairs.
He eyed me as I entered the kitchen. “Flip-flops and one of my shirts took half an hour to choose?”
“I’m wearing shorts, too.” I lifted the hem of the shirt to show him. “You’ll have to help me with the rest.” I sat down at the table, and he took a plate of eggs, sausage, and whole wheat toast off the warmer and set it in front of me. A small glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee completed my feast.
“I could get used to this,” I said as I dug in.
“Do you cook at all?”
“Well, of course. I just don’t get waited on all that often. And I usually eat on the run, because Great Bods opens so early.”
“You open *and* close?” He took his own plate and sat down across from me. “That makes for a long day.”
“From six in the morning to nine at night. But I don’t do both every day. Lynn and I work it out between us; if I need to stay late, she’ll open, and vice versa. One day a week, on Monday, I do both so Lynn can have a two-day weekend. All of my employees get two days off, but they’re staggered. That’s why yoga classes aren’t offered every day, things like that.”
“Why Monday? Why not Saturday, if she wants a two-day weekend?”
“Because Saturday is our busiest day, and Monday is our slowest. I don’t know why, but it’s that way for beauty shops, too. Most of them are closed on Monday.”

He looked as if he didn't know where to go with that bit of information. As a cop, you'd think he would see the value in knowing things like that. What if someday he had to arrest a mad hair stylist? He could save time by not going to the shop, if it was Monday.
"So," I said, changing the subject, "why did I even bother to get dressed today if you're chaining me in the bathroom? I hope you've thought this out, because besides the obvious benefit of being there, just how am I going to get something to eat?"
"I'll make some sandwiches and put them in a cooler for you." His eyes held a glint of laughter.
"Just for the record, I do *not* eat in the bathroom. Yuck. Just think of all the bathroom cooties waiting to jump all over your food."
"I'll make it a long chain so you can stand just outside the door."
"You're all heart. A warning, though: when I get bored, I get into trouble."
"Now, what trouble could you get into in the bathroom?"
Right off the bat I could think of several things, but I didn't share them with him. He must have read something in my face, though, because he shook his head. "It's tempting, but no way would I leave you on your own all day."
"So it's back to your mother's, right?"
"I'm afraid so. I've already called her this morning."
"And apologized for being a sorehead, I hope."
"Yes, I apologized," he said wearily. "I think I might as well make a recording and give it to you so you can play it whenever you think it's needed."
I thought that totally missed out on the spirit of an apology, and told him so.
"That's the idea," he replied, and I saw I hadn't gained as much ground as I'd thought.
This time I helped him clean up the kitchen. I was very careful when I moved my arm, but it was time to start giving it some gentle movement and exercise. Then we went upstairs to get ready, and again it had that comfortable, intimate feeling, as if we'd been doing this together for years. He liked the yellow bra, and insisted on pulling down my shorts so he could see my matching yellow underpants. That was his excuse, anyway. The hand he slid inside my underpants gave away his true intentions, though. I swear, the man was a lech.

I quickly said, “No!”; and with a wink, a pinch, a pat, and a teasing probe of his finger that put me on my tiptoes, he withdrew his hand.
Oh, damn him. My heart was pounding and I felt flushed. Now I had to deal with being horny all day at his mother’s house.
I got back at him. I bent down and lovingly kissed my way down his zipper. He jerked, and threaded his hand through my hair. “Just think,” I purred, “how it would feel if these pants weren’t in my way.” His hand tightened, and he shuddered.
I straightened and said briskly, “But they are, and you need to get to work.”
“That’s dirty,” he growled, eyes hot.
“That’s payback. If I’m going to be horny all day, so are you.”
“Gonna be interesting tonight,” he mused as he restored my clothes to proper order.
“It might not. I’m getting better at heading you off,” I said with satisfaction.
“Then I’ll just have to get to your neck faster.”

I had another uneventful day at Mrs. Bloodsworth’s house. I talked to Lynn and she gave me an update on the computer situation, plus how many members had returned now that we were reopened. I was gratified when she told me, because I’d expected a slow couple of weeks. Evidently the weight room was full, the cardio machines were occupied, and almost everyone had asked if I was okay. The comments about Nicole’s murder ranged from “I didn’t care for her, but she didn’t deserve that” to “I’m not surprised.” One person asked for his membership to be extended because our facilities hadn’t been available for his use for three days. I told Lynn to give him a four-day extension. There’s an asshole in every crowd. When she told me who he was, I wasn’t surprised. He was one of the city bigwigs who thought he was privileged. What he was, was tolerated. Barely.
I called Mom, and brought her up to date. I didn’t tell her Dwayne Bailey’s name, just in case he was innocent. I did tell her about my computer woes, and she filled me in on hers. Mom’s in real estate, and she keeps all her records on a computer in her little office at home. Her electronics were evidently in a state of revolt against her. In less than a week, her printer had died, her copy machine had to be taken in for repairs, and her computer had experienced two mini-crashes. She was in the middle of preparing her quarterly taxes, and her frustration level was high. I hadn’t helped by getting shot.

I made soothing noises to her, and promised to keep her apprised of my situation. She asked after Wyatt, which I guess is normal, since he'd insisted on taking her daughter home with him. She liked him. She said he was a hottie. I thought about him naked, and agreed with her.

Business taken care of and the home front covered, Mrs. Bloodsworth and I settled in for another uneventful day. She worked in her flower garden for a while, and to be on the safe side, I didn't. I doubted Nicole's murderer was going to drive by Mrs. Bloodsworth's house and spot me pulling weeds in her flower garden, but until Wyatt sounded the all clear, I wasn't taking any chances. I had a very sore arm to remind me of how dangerous this guy was.

I read. I watched television. I watched the clock. I didn't call Wyatt, though I was tempted. I knew he'd call when he had anything, so there wasn't any point in harassing him.

I did some light yoga, to keep my muscles limber. Mrs. Bloodsworth came in while I was doing it, and was intrigued. She changed into less restrictive clothing, got her exercise mat, and got on the floor beside me. I showed her some basic yoga positions, and we stretched our muscles and entertained ourselves until it was time for lunch.

Around two, Wyatt called. "MacInnes and Forester interviewed Dwayne Bailey this morning, in the presence of his wife. Evidently she'd had some suspicions he was cheating on her, and the family scene got intense. Bailey broke down and confessed on the spot; his story is that Ms. Goodwin was threatening to tell his wife if he didn't come through with some money she needed, so he shot her. He's in custody."

I went weak with relief, and collapsed back against the sofa. "Thank goodness! I don't like this hiding-out stuff. So I can go home? And go back to Great Bods? It's all over?"

"Looks like."

"Was he the one who opened my gate?"

"He denies that. He also denies shooting you, which is smart on his part. A good lawyer can get him second-degree on Ms. Goodwin's murder, but shooting you would be premeditated and automatically carry a longer sentence."

"But you can prove it, right? Ballistics and all that."

"Actually, we can't. Two different weapons were used. We found the weapon he used to kill Ms. Goodwin, but nothing that matches the caliber

of the slug that hit you. That just means he ditched the second weapon, but without it we can't prove squat."
I didn't like that, because I guess I wanted official vengeance or something. If he wasn't charged with shooting me, then it was like he got away with it. I wanted him to get that longer sentence.
"Will he get out on bail?"
"Probably. Now that the jig is up, though, there's no point in killing the witness, right?"
He was right, but I was still unhappy about the man wandering around loose. He might snap, and decide he needed to finish the job.
"If it helps," Wyatt said, "he isn't a homicidal maniac. He was a man desperate to keep his wife from finding out he cheated on her; then he was desperate to keep from getting charged with murder. Both of those things have already happened, so he isn't desperate anymore. He's cooperating."
Okay, I could understand that. You only fear something that hasn't happened. Once it has happened, all you can do is deal with it.
"Is it okay if I tell Mom and Dad?"
"Sure. It'll be on television tonight anyway, and in the papers tomorrow."
"That's wonderful news," Mrs. Bloodsworth said, when I told her about Dwayne Bailey. "But I'll miss having your company during the day. I think I'll rejoin Great Bods; I've been bored since my accident, and I didn't realize how much."
I called Mom and gave her the good news, then Siana, then Lynn. I told her I'd be back at work tomorrow, but asked her to open up again in the morning. Until I could use my arm more, doing anything in a hurry was off the table.
I thought Wyatt would take me to Mom's house, which was logical. She could spoil me for a couple of days until I could handle dressing by myself, and then things would get back to normal.
I was ready for a little normalcy. For almost a week my entire life had been topsy-turvy, and I wanted everything to settle down. I evidently had a lover, try as I might to keep him under control, and he was bound to complicate things. But now with this threat out of the way, we could settle down into the routine of real life and find out if we had something lasting between us, or if the chemistry would go flat with time.
Things were looking up. I could hardly wait to get started on this new situation between us: routine.

Chapter Eighteen

I felt like a bird out of a cage. Even though I'd been under constraints for less than forty-eight hours, it felt much longer than that. I still wasn't able to do everything for myself, but at least my movements weren't hampered. I could *go* somewhere if I wanted; I didn't have to stay indoors; I didn't have to sneak in back doors.

"I'm free, I'm free, I'm free," I sang as I practically boogied out to Wyatt's car when he came to pick me up. It was later than it had been the day before; the sun was almost down, so it was after eight.

"Not exactly," Wyatt said as he buckled me into the seat.

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'?" I yelled at him. I yelled because he was walking around the car, and he wouldn't have heard me otherwise.

"You still look incapacitated to me," he said as he got behind the wheel. "You can't dress yourself, you can't wash your hair, and you can't drive with both hands on the wheel."

"*You* don't drive with both hands on the wheel," I pointed out.

"I don't have to, because I'm in charge. You're not."

I snorted, but let that bit of provocation slide past. "As for all of that, the only reason I didn't go to Mom's in the first place is because you said Dwayne Bailey might look for me there and I could be endangering Mom and Dad as well as myself. Well, Dwayne Bailey's been arrested, and there's no reason for him to look for me anymore. So I can go to Mom's."

"Not tonight," he said.

"I'd like to know why not."

"Because I'm not taking you there."

"Do you have something you have to do tonight? She can come pick me up."

"Stop being deliberately obtuse. I'm not buying it. I've got you right where I want you, and I'm keeping you there."

My temper began to fray. "I am *not* going to be your little sex toy for you to play with whenever you get the urge. I have a life to get back to. I have to go to work tomorrow."

"You can go to work tomorrow. But I'll take you, not your mother."

“That makes no sense whatsoever. What if something happens and you have to work? I’m correct that you can be called in at any time, right?”
“It’s possible, but I’m not called on to go to the crime scenes very often. That’s what my detectives are for.”
“I don’t need to be taken to work anyway. My car has an automatic transmission, and I can buckle my seat belt one-handed. I’m perfectly capable of driving, and don’t start with that two-hands-on-the-wheel stuff again.” I was as determined now to leave as he was determined for me to stay. I hadn’t been before, but he was calmly assuming he could tell me what to do, and I had to nip that in the bud, now didn’t I?
He was silent for a moment; then he completely undermined me with a quiet, “Don’t you want to be with me?”
I stared at him, mouth open. “Of course I do,” I blurted before I could catch myself; then reason reasserted itself and I said indignantly, “I can’t believe you’re that underhanded and sneaky. That was a *girl* argument, and you used it against me!”
“Doesn’t matter. You admitted it.” He gave me a smugly triumphant smirk, then blinked. “What’s a girl argument?”
“You know, appeal to the emotion.”
“Damn, if I’d known it worked that well, I’d have used it before.” He reached over and squeezed my knee. “Thanks for the tip.”
He winked at me and I couldn’t help laughing. I swatted his hand away. “I realize circumstances got in the way, but you haven’t lived up to our bargain. You haven’t courted me at all. So I want to go home.”
“I seem to remember having this discussion before. Your idea of courting and mine aren’t the same.”
“I want to go out on dates. I want to go to movies, to dinner, dancing—You do dance, don’t you?”
“Under great protest.”
“Oh, dear.” I gave him the BSE—big sad eyes. BSEs are just one step below tears in the arsenal. “I love dancing.”
He darted an alarmed look at me, then muttered, “Shit. All right. I’ll take you dancing.” He said it with a long-suffering air.
“I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to.” If that wasn’t the perfect place for the classic feminine low-blow, I’d never seen one before. If he took me at my word, he knew he was disappointing me, but if he did take

me dancing, he had to pretend he was enjoying it. This is one of the ways women get back at men for not having periods, you know.
"*But*—after the date is over, we do what I want to do."
Two guesses what *that* was. I pulled a shocked look. "You want me to *pay* for a date with *sex*?"
"Works for me," he said, and squeezed my knee again.
"Not going to happen."
"Good. Then I don't have to go dancing."
Mentally I added *Uncooperative and not willing to do things for me* to his list of transgressions. The way that list was going, it was going to be in volumes like the encyclopedia.
"No comeback?" he prodded.
"I was just thinking of things to put on your list."
"Would you forget about that damn list! How would you like it if I made a list of all *your* mistakes and shortcomings?"
"I'd read it and try to work on my problem areas," I said righteously. Well, I'd read it, anyway. What he considered a problem and what I considered a problem might be two very different things.
"That's a crock. I think you actively cultivate your problem areas."
"Such as?" My voice took on a very sweet tone.
"Your smart-ass mouth, for one thing."
I blew him a kiss. "You liked my mouth this morning when I was kissing my way down your zipper."
That reminded him, all right, and he visibly shuddered in response. "You're right," he said thickly. "I liked it a lot."
I knew what he meant. All day, I'd been harboring some longings myself. I wanted to forget all this jockeying about as we fought for the upper hand and for once just eat him up, enjoy him, wallow in sex and pleasure. Maybe when I got him home—Until then, though, there was no point in letting him think he'd won.
"You also like my Pebbles hairdo, even though you made fun of it."
"I didn't make fun of it. And, yeah, I like it. I like everything about you, even when you're being a pain in the ass. You're a walking wet dream, you know."
I gave him a doubtful look. "I don't know if that's good or not." The image in my mind was decidedly sticky and icky.

“From my point of view, it is. Personally speaking, not professionally. You’re playing hell with my concentration at work. All I can think about is getting you naked. Probably when we’ve been married a year or two that’ll slack off, but right now it’s pretty intense.”
“I haven’t said I’ll marry you,” I said automatically, but my heart was doing a tap dance and my own concentration kept wanting to slide off our conversation and instead focus on getting *him* naked.
“It’s gonna happen and we both know it. We still have some details to get ironed out, like this trust thing you’re so worried about, but I figure in a couple of months I’ll have that under control and we can maybe have a Christmas wedding.”
“Definitely *not* gonna happen. Even if I said yes, which I haven’t, do you have the tiniest clue of how long it takes to plan a wedding? This Christmas would be impossible. Next Christmas, maybe—I mean, it would be possible to plan a wedding in that length of time, not that I want to get married next Christmas, because even if we did get married, it wouldn’t be at Christmas because our anniversary would get lost in all the holiday hoopla and I’d *hate* that. Anniversaries should be special.”
He grinned at me. “You said ‘our anniversary.’ That’s tantamount to an acceptance.”
“Only if you don’t understand the English language. I said ‘if,’ not ‘when.’ ”
“The Freudian slip overrode that. It’s a done deal.”
“Not yet it isn’t. Until and *if* I say those three little words, I haven’t committed myself to anything.”
He gave me a thoughtful look, as if until now he hadn’t realized that neither of us had said “I love you.” I don’t think men put as much importance into saying “I love you” as women do. For them, it was more about doing than it was about saying, but while they might not understand why it’s important, at least they get that it *is* important to women. The fact that I hadn’t said it to him got his attention, though, made him realize that perhaps things weren’t as cut-and-dried between us as he assumed.
“We’ll get there,” he finally said, and I was relieved that he hadn’t said “I love you” as a means of prompting me to say it too, because then I would have known he didn’t mean it. Lord, this man-woman stuff was complicated; it was like a game of chess, and we were equally matched opponents. I knew what I wanted: total reassurance that he was in this for

the long haul. I *hoped*, but until I *knew*, I was holding back a little part of myself. He was having fun, I thought; I was having fun, even when we argued. At some point the chess game would be over and then we would see where we stood.
He took my hand. It was my left hand, of course, since he was driving, so I couldn't move my arm very much. He gently slid his hand under mine, and laced our fingers. No doubt about it, he was a damn fine strategist.

That night was far different from the first two nights. He did laundry, both his and mine, and impressed me by not messing up. He cut the grass, even though it was dark by the time he got around to it. His riding lawn mower had headlights on it and he also turned on his outside spotlights. I felt as if I were Ms. Bower Bird, watching Mr. Bower Bird build his nest with all sorts of interesting sparklies to show what a good provider he was, then parading in front of it, hoping to lure Ms. Bower Bird inside. This was Domestic Wyatt in action. To be fair, though, his yard was well-maintained anyway; I could tell he regularly mowed the grass.
It was ten o'clock when he came in, shirtless and dirty, sweat gleaming on his chest because it was still hot outside even though it was dark. He went straight to the sink and downed a big glass of water, his strong throat working as he swallowed. I wanted to jump on his back and wrestle him to the ground, but my darned arm wasn't up to the action.
He set the glass in the sink and turned to me. "You ready for your shower?"
Maybe it was a tactical error, but tonight I didn't feel very hard to get—well, not that I'd ever been all that difficult for him anyway. Give me points for *trying* though. Tonight I didn't even want to try. "Can we wash my hair tonight, too?"
"Sure."
"Blow-drying it won't take long."
"Doesn't matter." He gave a slow smile. "I'll enjoy the scenery while I'm working."
It doesn't take a genius to figure out how the next hour went. We were both wet and slippery and turned on, and I said to hell with controlling myself—just this once—and threw myself into our lovemaking. It started in the shower—then a panting time-out was called while he dried my hair—and ended in the bed.

He rolled off me with a groan and lay on his back, one arm thrown over his eyes while he sucked in huge gulping breaths. I was breathing fast and hard myself, and I was almost limp with mingled pleasure and exhaustion. Almost. I found the energy to climb on top of him and stretch out while I kissed his jaw, his mouth, his neck, and any other place I could reach.
“Uncle,” he said weakly.
“You’re giving up before you even know what I want?”
“Whatever it is, I can’t. I’m mostly dead.” His hand settled on my bare butt, patted once, then dropped limply to the bed.
“It’s postcoital glow. I want to cuddle.”
“Cuddling I can manage.” His lips twitched in a smile. “Maybe.”
“You can just lie there and I’ll do the work.”
“Why didn’t you say that ten minutes ago?”
“Do I look stupid?” I settled my head in the hollow of his shoulder and sighed with contentment.
“No, I told you, you look like an ice cream cone.”
And he’d licked me right up, too. I shivered as I remembered. If I’d been standing up, my knees would have wobbled. His knees had wobbled, too, I thought with satisfaction. He wasn’t the only one who could play that card. I smiled, thinking of doing it again. Not right now, though. After a while. I yawned, and the lights went out in mid-cuddle.
Mom called while we were eating breakfast the next morning. I didn’t know it was her, though. Wyatt answered the phone, said, “Yes, ma’am,” twice, then said “Seven,” and “Yes, ma’am,” again before hanging up.
“Your mother?” I asked as he returned to his food.
“No, yours.”
“My mom? What did she want? Why didn’t you let me talk to her?”
“She didn’t ask to speak to you. She invited us to supper tonight at seven. I said we’d be there.”
“We will? What if you have to work late?”
“To quote you, do I look stupid? I’ll be there. And so will you, if I have to drag you kicking and screaming out of Great Bods. Make arrangements with Lynn for her to stay until closing.”
I rolled my eyes, prompting him to say, “What?” in a testy tone.
“Before you start issuing orders, Lieutenant, you might ask what arrangements I’ve already made.”
“Okay, what arrangements have you already made?”

He was such a smart-ass. “Lynn opened, then she goes home when I get there, and I work the middle chunk of the day. She comes in again at five and stays until closing. So she’s working three hours this morning, and four tonight. That’s just until my arm is better, because there’s stuff that has to be done in the mornings and at night that would be hard to do with just one good arm. So your orders weren’t necessary.”
“Good deal.” He winked at me.
It was easy to figure out why Mom invited us. Half of it was to get in some coddling of her injured firstborn, and the other half was to check out Wyatt. She must be half mad with curiosity, and having to wait because he’d had me hidden out would have made it worse. Mom deals with frustration just fine—up to a point. Beyond that point, she causes tsunamis.
I was filled with excitement over the coming day. I was getting my car—finally!—and I was going to work, and after work, I was going to my own home. I had packed my bags and Wyatt hadn’t argued, though he hadn’t looked pleased. That morning I had managed to dress myself, even my bra. I still couldn’t twist my arm up behind my back to fasten the bra that way, but I had turned it backward so the hooks were in front, fastened it, then turned the bra around on my body and worked the straps up my arms. That method didn’t look as sexy as the other way, but it worked.
“Take it easy today,” he instructed as he drove me to my house so I could get my car. “Maybe we should stop at a medical supply store and get a sling for you, so you’ll remember not to move your arm very much.”
“I’ll remember,” I said wryly. “Trust me.” If I tried a fast movement, the stitched-together muscle reminded me in a hurry.
A few minutes later he said, “I don’t like you being away from me.”
“But you knew my staying at your house was just temporary.”
“It doesn’t have to be temporary. You could move in with me.”
“Uh-uh,” I said without hesitation. “That wouldn’t be a good idea.”
“Why not?”
“Because.”
“Well, that’s enlightening,” he said sarcastically. “Because why?”
“A lot of reasons. That would be rushing things way too fast. I think we need to back off and give ourselves some breathing room.”
“You gotta be kidding me. After the past five days, you think moving in with me would be *rushing things*?”

“Well, look at everything that’s happened. Nothing has been normal, not one single minute has been routine since last Thursday night. We’ve sort of been in an emergency situation, but that’s over. Now our real lives kick in, and we need to see how things go under those conditions.”

He didn’t like it at all. I wasn’t crazy about the idea myself, but I knew moving in with him would be a big mistake. I personally don’t think a woman should ever live with a man unless they’re married. I guess there are some really great guys out there who wouldn’t take advantage of having a live-in cook and maid, but guess how those arrangements usually turn out? No, sir. That’s not for me.

I was raised by a woman who knows her own worth, and her daughters firmly believe that life is much better for a woman when a man has to work really hard to get her. It’s human nature to take better care of something you’ve worked for, whether it’s a car or a wife. In my opinion, Wyatt hadn’t worked nearly hard enough for me to make up for what he’d done two years ago. Yes, I was still mad at him for that. I was beginning to get over it, but not enough to move in with him even if I hadn’t thought that it was, in general, not a good thing for a woman to do.

We got to my condo, and there was my sweet little white convertible parked under the portico where it belonged. Wyatt pulled in behind it, and then got both my bags from his back seat. He still had a disgruntled expression, but he wasn’t arguing. At least, right then he wasn’t arguing. I knew I hadn’t heard the last of it, but right then he was backing off the way I’d asked. He was probably busy planning a sneak attack.

I unlocked the side door and went in; the beeping noise from the security system proved that Siana had indeed set it when she left after packing my clothes. I disarmed it, then stood in my kitchen gloriously surrounded by my own Stuff, which I had missed dreadfully. Stuff is important in a woman’s life.

I told Wyatt which bedroom upstairs was mine, if he wasn’t capable of simply looking in the door and telling. He’d been in my condo, but had never been upstairs. Our scene of passion had been played out on my couch, which I had since had reupholstered, not because of stains or anything, because the scene of passion hadn’t gone that far, but because it was my version of washing that man right out of my hair. I had also changed the furniture around and painted the walls a different color. Nothing in my living room looked the same as when he had been there.

The message light on my answering machine was blinking. I walked over and saw that there were twenty-seven messages, which isn't a lot considering how long I had been gone and that the day I'd left reporters had been trying to find me. I punched the play button and started deleting messages as soon as I verified they were from reporters. There were a couple of personal messages, employees wanting to know when Great Bods would reopen, but Siana had called everyone Friday afternoon and it was now a moot point anyway.

Then a familiar voice came out of the machine, and I listened in disbelief. *"Blair . . . this is Jason. Pick up if you're there."* There was a pause, then he continued. *"It was on the news this morning that you'd been shot. Sweetheart, that's awful, though the reporter said you'd been treated and released, so I guess it isn't too bad. Anyway, I was worried about you and just wanted to see how you're doing. Give me a call."*

Behind me, Wyatt said, *"Sweetheart?"* in a dangerous tone.

"Sweetheart?" I echoed, but my tone was totally bewildered.

"I thought you said you haven't seen him since the divorce."

"I haven't." I turned and gave him a puzzled look. "Unless you want to count the time I saw him and his wife shopping in the mall, but since we didn't speak, I don't think that qualifies."

"Why would he call you sweetheart? Is he trying to get something started between the two of you again?"

"I don't know. You heard the same message I did. As for calling me sweetheart, that's what he called me when we were married, so maybe it was just an unconscious thing."

He made a disbelieving noise. "Yeah, right. After five years?"

"I don't know what's going on. He knows I'd never get back with him, period, so I have no idea why he'd call. Unless—Knowing Jason, he was just doing something for his political résumé. You know: 'The candidate has remained on friendly terms with his former wife, phoning her after an incident in which she was wounded by gunfire.' That sort of thing. Setting it up so, if a reporter happened to ask me, I'd say yes, that he'd called. He does stuff like that, always thinking about future campaigns." I hit the delete button and erased his noxious voice from my answering machine.

He put his hands on my waist and pulled me to him. "Don't you dare call him back. The bastard." His green eyes were narrow, and his face had that hard look a man gets when he's feeling territorial.

“I wasn’t going to.” Now was the time for mildness, not for zinging him, because I knew how I’d feel if his ex-wife suddenly got in touch with him and left a message like that. I put my arms around him and nestled my head in the hollow of his shoulder. “I’m not interested in anything he has to say, anything he feels, and when he dies, I won’t go to the funeral. I won’t even send flowers. The bastard.”

He rubbed his chin against my temple. “If he calls you again, *I’ll* give him a call.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The bastard.”

He chuckled. “It’s okay, you can let up on the *bastard*s. I get the idea.” He kissed me and patted my butt.

“Good,” I said cheerfully. “Now may I go to work?”

We both went out and got into our respective cars—I remembered to set the security system on my way out—and Wyatt reversed out of my short driveway into the street, backing up far enough to give me room to back out in front of him. I wondered if he intended to follow me all the way to Great Bods, maybe to make certain no ex-husband was lurking, waiting to talk to me.

I backed out of the driveway and shifted the gear lever to *Drive.* The engine purred as I gave it the gas, and Wyatt fell in behind me.

A hundred yards down the street was a stop sign, where the street intersected with a busy four-lane. I put on the brakes, and the pedal went right to the floor. I sailed through the stop sign and straight into four lanes of traffic.

Chapter Nineteen

My life didn't flash before my eyes. I was too busy fighting the steering wheel and screaming *"Shit!"* to pause for any navel-gazing.

I wasted a precious few seconds desperately pumping the brake pedal, praying it would suddenly, miraculously work. It didn't. Just before I went past the stop sign, as a last-ditch effort I stomped on the emergency brake pedal, and the car went into a hard spin, tires screaming and smoking, as I shot into the intersection. My seat belt snapped tight, jerking me back against my seat. I tried to get control of the spin, but an oncoming car, its own tires screaming as it tried to stop, clipped my right rear bumper and added to the momentum. It was like riding a very fast merry-go-round. In the split second I was facing traffic, I had a lightning flash of a red pickup coming right at me; then there was a hard jolt as my car hit the concrete bumper of the median and jumped it, backward, before slewing sideways across the grass and into the other two lanes of traffic. Terror-stricken, I glanced to the right and, through the passenger window, saw a woman's face frozen in horror, and time itself seemed to freeze, too, in the instant before the impact. An enormous shock wave hit me like a body blow, and the world went black.

The blackness lasted for only a few seconds. I opened my eyes and blinked, both aware and surprised that I was still alive, but I couldn't seem to move and even if I'd been able to, I would have been too afraid to check out what damage I'd sustained. I couldn't hear anything; it was as if I was alone in the world. My vision was misty, and my face felt numb, but at the same time it *hurt.* "Ouch," I said aloud into the strange silence, and with that sound everything popped back into focus.

The good news was: the air bag worked. The bad news was: it needed to. I looked around me at my car and almost moaned aloud. My beautiful little car looked like a twisted pile of scrap metal. I was alive, but my car wasn't. Oh, my God, *Wyatt.* He'd been right behind me; he'd seen everything. He had to think I was dead. I fumbled with my right hand for the seat belt and unclipped it, but when I tried to open my door, it wouldn't budge and I couldn't throw my weight against it because my hurt arm was on that side. Then I noticed the windshield had been popped out, so I laboriously hauled myself out from behind the steering wheel—it was like playing Twister—and gingerly crawled through the space where the windshield had been,

careful of the broken glass, and out onto the hood, just as Wyatt reached me.
“Blair,” he said hoarsely, reaching for me, but he froze with his hands outstretched as if he was afraid to touch me. His face was paper white. “Are you all right? Is anything broken?”
“I don’t think so.” My voice was thin and shaky, and my nose was running. Embarrassed, I swiped at it, then saw the bright smear of red on my hand and the additional red dripping from my nose. “Oh. I’m bleeding. Again.”
“I know.” He gently lifted me off the hood and carried me to the grassy median, picking his way through a tangle of cars. Traffic in both directions had come to a complete halt. Steam rose from the crumpled hood of the car that had hit me, and other motorists were helping the woman inside. On the other side of the four-lane, two or three cars rested at weird angles in the road, but the damage there seemed to be mostly in the fender-bender range. Wyatt set me down on the grass and pressed a handkerchief into my hand. “If you’re all right, I’ll go see about the other driver.” I nodded and waved a hand, indicating he should see what he could do. “Are you certain?” he asked, and I nodded again. He briefly touched my arm, then strode off, talking into his cell phone, and I lay back on the grass with the handkerchief pressed to my nose to stop the bleeding. I remembered being hit in the face really hard; that must have been the air bag deploying. My life was well worth a bloody nose.
A man in a suit came over and squatted down beside me, positioning himself so he blocked the sun out of my face. “Are you all right?” he asked kindly.
“I dink so,” I said nasally, holding my nose pinched together.
“You lie right there and don’t try to get up, just in case you’re hurt worse than you realize and don’t feel it yet. Is your nose broken?”
“I don’t dink so.” It hurt; my whole face hurt. But my nose didn’t hurt worse than anything else, and all in all, I thought it was just a bloody nose. Good Samaritans came out of the woodwork, offering aid in a variety of means: bottles of water and baby wipes, even a few alcohol wipes from someone’s first aid kit, to help clean up the cuts and wipe away blood so you could tell how bad a cut actually was; emergency ice packs; Band-Aids and gauze; cell phones and sympathy. There were seven walking-wounded with minor injuries, including me, but the driver of the car that had T-boned me was injured severely enough that they hadn’t taken her out of the car. I

could hear Wyatt talking, his voice calm and authoritative, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.
Reaction seized me and I began trembling. I slowly sat up and looked around at the chaos, at the bloody people sitting on the median with me, and I wanted to cry. I had done this? It was an accident, I knew it was, but still . . . I was the cause. My car. Me. Guilt ate at me. I kept my car in good running condition, but had I overlooked some key maintenance? Not paid attention to a warning sign that my brakes were about to fail?
Sirens were shrieking in the distance and I realized only a few minutes had passed. Time was crawling so slowly it felt as if I'd been lying there on the grass for at least half an hour. I closed my eyes and prayed hard that the woman who had hit me would be okay. Because I felt weak and a little dizzy, I lay back down and stared up at the blue sky.
Suddenly I had a weird sense of déjà vu, and I realized how similar this scene was to the one Sunday afternoon, only then I'd been lying on the warm parking lot instead of fragrant green grass. But sirens had been shrieking and cops swarming, just the way they were now. Maybe more time had passed than I thought; when had the cops got here?
A medic went down on one knee beside me. I didn't know him. I wanted Keisha, who gave me cookies. "Let's see what we have here," he said, but he was reaching for my left arm. He must have thought the bandage was covering a new cut.
"I'm okay," I said. "That's stitches from minor surgery."
"Where's all this blood from?" He was taking my pulse, then flicking a tiny penlight from eye to eye.
"My nose. The air bag gave me a bloody nose."
"Considering what could have happened, God bless air bags," he said. "Were you wearing your seat belt?"
I nodded, so then he checked me for seat-belt injuries, and wrapped a cuff around my right arm to check my blood pressure. Guess what? It was elevated. Since I was structurally all right, he moved on to someone else.
While other medics were working with the woman in the car, stabilizing her, Wyatt came back and squatted beside me. "What happened?" he asked quietly. "I was right behind you, and I didn't see anything unusual, but all of a sudden you started spinning." He still looked pale and grim, but the sun was in my eyes again and I couldn't be sure.

“I put on my brakes for the stop sign, and the pedal went all the way to floor. There was nothing. So I put on the emergency brake, and that’s when I started to spin.”
He glanced over at my car where it rested in the far lane, the two front wheels up on the curb. I followed his gaze, stared a moment at the wreckage, and shuddered. I’d been hit so hard the frame had wrapped in a U shape, and the passenger side was nonexistent. No wonder the windshield had popped out. If it hadn’t been for my seat belt, I probably would have popped out, too.
“Have you had trouble with your brakes lately?”
I shook my head. “Nothing. And I have it serviced regularly.”
“The patrolman who drove it to your place didn’t report any problems with it. You go on to the hospital and get checked out—”
“I’m okay. Honest. My vitals are steady, and other than getting popped in the face by the air bag, I don’t think anything else is wrong.”
He rubbed his thumb over my cheekbone, the touch light. “All right. Should I call your mother to come get you? I’d rather you not be alone for the next few hours, at least.”
“After the cars are moved. I don’t want her to see my car; it’ll give her nightmares. I know you need my insurance card and registration,” I said woefully, still staring at the tangle of sheet metal. “They’re in the glove compartment, if you can find the glove compartment. And my bag is in there, too.”
Briefly he touched my shoulder, then stood and walked across the two lanes to my car. He looked in the window, walked around the car to the other side and back, then did something odd: he got down on the pavement, on his back, and slid his head and shoulders under the car just behind the front wheels. I winced, thinking of all the glass that must be on the pavement and hoping he wouldn’t get cut. What was he looking for?
He slid out from beneath the car, but didn’t come back over to me. Instead he went to one of the uniformed officers and said something to him, and the officer went over to my car and he, too, slid underneath it, just the way Wyatt had. I saw Wyatt talking on his cell phone again.
A small convoy of wreckers began arriving, to tow the damaged vehicles away. An ambulance arrived, and the medics began the process of gently removing the woman from her car. One of them held an IV bag over her.

Her face was drenched in blood, and they'd fitted a cervical collar on her. I whispered another prayer.
Sawhorse barricades were put on the street, and officers in both directions were directing traffic in a detour. The wreckers sat there idling, but none of the cars were moved. More police cars arrived, driving down the median to reach the accident scene. These were unmarked cars, and to my surprise I saw my pals MacInnes and Forester. What were detectives doing working an accident scene?
They talked to Wyatt and the officer who had been under my car. MacInnes got down on his back and slid under my car himself. What was up with that? Why was everyone looking under my car? He slid out, said something to Wyatt; Wyatt said something to an officer; and before I knew it, the officer came over and helped me to my feet, then led me to a patrol car. Good God, I was being arrested.
But he put me in the front seat; the motor was running and the air-conditioning was on, and I turned a vent to blow right on my face. I didn't adjust the rearview mirror to see how I looked. My whole face might be black-and-blue, but I didn't want to know.
At first the blowing air felt good, but within a minute chill bumps were popping out on my skin. I closed the vent, but that didn't help much. I hugged my arms.
I don't know how long I sat there, freezing to death. Normally I would have adjusted the air-conditioning controls, but somehow I didn't have the initiative needed to mess with a cop's car. If it had been Wyatt's car, yeah, but not a patrol officer's. Or maybe I was just too dazed to take action.
After a while Wyatt came over and opened the door. "How are you feeling?"
"Fine." Except for a growing stiffness, and a general feeling of having been bludgeoned. "I'm cold, though."
He pulled off his jacket and leaned in, tucking the garment around me. The fabric was warm from his body and felt blissful to my cold skin. I hugged the jacket to me, and stared wide-eyed at him. "Am I under arrest?"
"Of course not," he said, cupping my face and running his thumb over my lips. He kept touching me, as if reassuring himself that I was all in one piece. He hunkered in the V of the open door. "Do you feel up to going to the station, giving us a statement?"
"Are you sure I'm not under arrest?" I said in alarm.

“Positive.”
“Then why do I have to go to the station? Is that woman dead? Will I be charged with vehicular homicide?” Growing horror consumed me, and I felt my lips tremble.
“No, honey, calm down. The woman will be all right. She was conscious, and talking sensibly to the medics. There’s a possibility of a neck injury, so they were being very careful moving her.”
“It’s all my fault,” I said miserably, fighting tears.
He shook his head. “Not unless you cut your own brake line, it isn’t,” he said in a hard tone.

Dwayne Bailey had posted bond, but he was hauled in again and questioned. I wasn’t allowed to be in on the questioning, which is probably a good thing because by then I’d worked myself into a state. My brake line had been cut. My car had been deliberately sabotaged. I could have been killed; others who had nothing to do with witnessing Nicole’s murder could have been killed. I was furious. Wyatt wouldn’t let me anywhere near Dwayne Bailey.
Now I knew why Wyatt had the patrol officer put me in his car: to protect me. I’d been totally exposed, sitting there on the grassy median, in case someone—namely Dwayne Bailey—wanted to take another shot at me. I couldn’t think why he would, or why he would sabotage my car, since he’d already confessed and there was no need to kill me—not that there ever had been, but he didn’t know that. Well, maybe now he did, though I doubted the cops would have told him that I couldn’t have identified him anyway.
I washed off in the ladies’ restroom, using paper towels to scrub the dried blood off my face and out of my hair as best I could. I have no idea how blood from a nosebleed got in my hair, but it was there. I had blood in my ears, behind my ears, on my neck, my arms—and another bra was ruined, damn it! I even had blood on my feet.
There was a small cut across the bridge of my nose, and both cheekbones were red and swollen. I suspected I would have two black eyes in the morning. I also suspected I would have so many other aches and pains that I wouldn’t care about a black eye, or eyes.
Wyatt hadn’t found my bag, so I didn’t have my cell phone. The bag had to be in the car . . . somewhere . . . and the car was in the police lot, secured behind a locked fence. The forensics team had gone over the car there at the

scene, at least the exterior, so the wrecker could haul it in without destroying any evidence. They would do their best to check out the interior, too, and Wyatt said they'd find my bag then. I could do without everything that was in it, except my wallet and checkbook. Having to replace all my credit cards, my driver's license, insurance cards and all the others, would be a pain, so I hoped they found it.

I hadn't called Mom yet, because telling her someone had tried to kill me—again—was infinitely worse than telling her I'd been in an accident.

The cops kept bringing me stuff to drink and eat. I guess, having heard tales of the cookie situation on Sunday, they thought I needed sustenance. One woman, who looked stern and businesslike in her blue uniform and with her hair tightly braided, brought me a bag of microwave popcorn and apologized because she didn't have anything sweet to offer. I drank coffee. I drank Diet Coke. I was offered chewing gum, and cheese crackers. Potato chips. Peanuts. I ate the peanuts and the popcorn, and refused everything else or I'd have been bloated. They did not, however, offer me the one thing I was waiting for. Excuse me, but just where were the doughnuts??? This was a cop station, for crying out loud. Everyone knows cops eat doughnuts. Of course, considering it was now lunchtime, probably the doughnuts were long gone.

The officer, Adams, who had been the primary accident-scene investigator, went over the sequence of events at length with me. He had me draw diagrams. He drew diagrams. I got bored and drew smiley faces, too.

They were keeping me occupied, of course. I knew that. It was probably on Wyatt's orders, so I wouldn't be tempted to interfere in Dwayne Bailey's interrogation, as if I would. Hard as it may be to believe, I know when to butt out. Wyatt, however, evidently had doubts.

Around two, Wyatt came to collect me. "I'm taking you to your place to get cleaned up and your clothes changed; then I'm taking you to your mom's for right now. It's a good thing your bags are still packed, because you're going back to my house with me."

"Why?" I asked as I got to my feet. I'd been sitting in his chair, at his desk, making a list of everything I needed to do. Wyatt frowned a little when he saw the list and turned it around so he could read it. His brow cleared when he realized the list wasn't about him.

"Bailey swears he didn't touch your car," he said. "He says he doesn't even know where you live, and that he has an alibi for his time from Thursday

night on. MacInnes and Forester are checking things out, but just to be on the safe side, we're going back to Plan A, which is keep you hidden."
"Bailey is here, right? Is he under arrest?"
Wyatt shook his head. "He's in custody, but he isn't under arrest. We can hold him for a little while without officially filing charges against him."
"Well, if he's here, then who am I hiding from?"
He regarded me soberly. "Bailey's the most obvious person—if the sabotage was done before yesterday and he didn't tell us about the car because then we'd figure he was the shooter on Sunday and the car was just another attempt to kill you. On the other hand, if his alibi checks out, then we have to consider that someone else is trying to kill you and used this opportunity while someone else had the motive for doing it. We had this conversation the night Ms. Goodwin was murdered, but we need to have it again—have you been in an argument with anyone?"
"You," I said, pointing out the obvious.
"Other than me."
"No. Believe it or not, I don't get in many arguments. You're the exception."
"Lucky me," he muttered.
"Hey. How many people have *you* had arguments with in the past month, other than me?" I asked indignantly.
He rubbed his face. "Good point. All right, let's get moving. I'm having your ex-husband interviewed, too, by the way."
"Jason? Why?"
"It struck me as a little odd that he'd call you like that, after five years of no contact at all. I don't believe in coincidence."
"But why would Jason try to kill me? It isn't as if he's the beneficiary of any insurance policy I have, or that I know anything he wouldn't want—" I stopped, because I did know something about Jason that would hurt his political career—and I had the picture to prove it. He didn't know I had the picture, though, and I wasn't the only one who knew he was a cheating scumbag.
Wyatt's eyes had that hard, piercing cop look. "What?" he said. "What do you know?"
"It can't be that I know about him cheating on me," I said. "That doesn't make sense. For one thing, I haven't said anything for five years, so why

would he all of a sudden get worried about it? And I'm not the only person who knows, so bumping me off wouldn't accomplish anything."
"Who else knows?"
"Mom. Siana and Jenni. Dad knows Jason cheated; Mom eventually told him that much, but he doesn't know any specifics. The women he cheated *with* certainly know. Probably his family. And it isn't as if knowledge that he cheated on his first wife, over five years ago and with someone who isn't his current wife, would wreck his political career. Dent it, maybe, but not wreck it." Now, if it were generally known that he'd been caught coming on to my seventeen-year-old sister, *that* would wreck his career, because that put him in the category of pervert.
"Okay, I'll give you that. Anything else?"
"Not that I can think of." Like I said, Jason didn't know I had copies of those pictures, so I was safe on that count. "Anyway, Jason isn't violent."
"I thought you said he threatened to trash your car. To me, this is definitely in the same ballpark."
"But that was five years ago. And he threatened to trash my car if I went public about him cheating on me. He was running for the state legislature at the time, so that would definitely have hurt him. And to be fair, he only did that when I threatened to go public on him if he didn't give me everything I wanted in the divorce settlement."
Wyatt tilted his head back and surveyed the ceiling. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"
"Because you're a smart man," I said, and patted his butt.
"Okay, if you don't think it's your ex-husband—I'm going to check him out anyway—do you have any other ideas?"
I shook my head. "Dwayne Bailey has the only reason I can think of."
"C'mon, Blair. Think."
"I am thinking!" I said in exasperation.
He was getting exasperated, too. He put his hands on his hips and looked down at me. "Then think harder. You're a cheerleader; there must be hundreds of people who'd like to kill you."

Chapter Twenty

My resultant shriek stopped the hum of voices that came from outside his closed office door. *"You take that back!"*
"All right, all right. Pipe down," he muttered. "Shit. I take it back."
"No you don't. You *meant* it." As a rule of thumb, you never let a man take something back on the first attempt. Section three, paragraph ten, of the Southern Women's Code states that if one (meaning a man) is going to be a shithead, one must pay for it.
"I didn't mean it. I'm just frustrated." He reached for me.
I drew back before he could touch me, jerked the door open, and swept out. Just as I had thought: everyone in the big, busy open room was staring at us, some openly, some pretending not to. I stalked silently to the elevator, and let me tell you, various aches and pains were making themselves felt, so stalking *hurt.* Creeping would have been better, but there's just no way to creep with attitude. My feelings were hurt, and I wanted him to know it.
The elevator doors opened and two uniforms got out. Well, the uniforms had men in them, but you know what I mean. Silently Wyatt and I entered the elevator, and he punched the button.
"I *didn't* mean it," he said as soon as the elevator doors closed.
I shot him a dirty look but didn't say anything.
"I've seen you get nearly killed twice in four days," he said raggedly. "If Bailey didn't do it, then you have an enemy somewhere. There has to be a reason. You know something, but you may not know that you know it. I'm trying to dig out some information that will point me in the right direction."
I said, "Don't you think you should check out Bailey's alibi before assuming there are *'hundreds'* of people who want to kill me?"
"Maybe that was an exaggeration."
Maybe? An *exaggeration*? "Oh? Just how many people do you *really* think want to kill me?"
He shot me a glittering glance. "I've wanted to strangle you myself a time or two."
The elevator stopped, the door opened, and we stepped out. I didn't respond to that last statement because I figured he was trying to get me mad enough to say something rash myself, like maybe accuse him of tampering with my brakes, since he admitted having wanted to kill me, and then I'd have to apologize because of course he didn't really mean that, either, and I knew it. Rather than surrender the high ground, I played dirty and kept my mouth shut.

When we walked out into the parking lot, Wyatt caught me around the waist and turned me to face him. “I really am sorry,” he said, lightly kissing my forehead. “You’ve been through a lot these past few days, especially today, and I shouldn’t have teased you, no matter how frustrated I am.” He kissed me again, and his voice roughened. “When you spun into the intersection and that first car hit you, I thought my heart would stop.”

Well, hell, there was no point in being petty, was there? I leaned my head against him and tried not to think about the sickening terror I’d felt this morning. If it was that bad for me, what had it been like for him? I know how I would have felt if I’d been behind him and watched him get killed, which is what I’m sure he thought had happened to me.

“Your poor little face,” he murmured, stroking my hair back as he examined me.

I hadn’t been just sitting in the police station all day waiting for my face to swell up and my eyes to turn black. One of the cops had given me a plastic sandwich bag, and I’d filled it with ice and applied it, off and on, to my face, so however bad I looked wasn’t as bad as it could have been. I’d also put an adhesive strip across the cut on the bridge of my nose. I thought I looked like a boxer who’d just finished a fight.

“J. W.,” someone said, and we both looked around as a gray-haired man in a gray suit approached. With his hair, I personally thought he should have worn a suit with more color in it, or at least a nice blue shirt, so he wouldn’t have given such a blah impression. I wondered if his wife had no fashion sense. He was short and stocky, and looked like a businessman, except that when he got closer, I could see he had that distinctive sharp gaze.

“Chief,” Wyatt said, from which I deduced (duh!) that this was the chief of police, Wyatt’s boss. If I’d ever seen him before, I didn’t remember it; in fact, at that moment, I couldn’t even remember his name.

“Is this the young lady the entire force is talking about?” the chief asked, studying me with great curiosity.

“I’m afraid so,” Wyatt said. “Chief, this is my fiancée, Blair Mallory. Blair, this is William Gray, chief of police.”

I resisted the urge to kick him—Wyatt, not the chief—and instead shook hands. Well, I would have shaken hands, but instead Chief Gray just sort of gently held my hand as if he were afraid of hurting me. *I* was afraid I looked a lot worse now than I had the last time I’d checked myself in a

mirror, what with Wyatt's "poor little face" and now the chief treating me like a piece of fragile glass.
"It was a terrible thing that happened this morning," the chief said solemnly. "We don't have a lot of homicide in this town and we want to keep it that way. We'll get this solved, Miss Mallory; I promise you."
"Thank you," I said. What else could I say? Hurry up? The detectives knew what they were doing, and I trusted they were good at it—just as I was good at certain things. I said, "Your hair is a really great color. I bet it looks fantastic when you wear a blue shirt, doesn't it?"
He looked startled, and Wyatt surreptitiously pinched my waist. I ignored him.
"Well, I don't know about that," Chief Gray said, giving the laugh that men do when they're both flattered and a little uncomfortable.
"I do," I assured him. "French blue. You probably have ten shirts that color, don't you, because it looks so good on you?"
"French blue?" he murmured. "I don't—"
"I know." I laughed. "To a man, blue is blue is blue, and don't bother you with all those fancy names, right?"
"Right," he agreed. He cleared his throat and took a step back. "J. W., keep me up-to-date on how the investigation is going. The mayor is asking about it."
"Will do," Wyatt said, and hurriedly turned me toward his car while the chief continued on into the building. Wyatt hissed, "Were you actually giving the chief of police *fashion advice*?"
"Someone needed to," I said in self-defense. "The poor man."
"Wait until news of this gets around," he said under his breath as he opened the passenger door and helped me ease into the seat. I was becoming more stiff and sore by the minute.
"Why's that?"
He shook his head. "You're practically all everyone in the department has talked about since last Thursday night. They either think I'm getting my comeuppance, or that I'm the bravest man walking."
Well. I didn't know what to think about that.
* * *
I closed my eyes when we got to the intersection where the wreck had taken place. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to stop at that stop sign again

without reliving everything. Wyatt turned onto the street that led to my condo and said, “You can open your eyes now.”
I shook away the memory of screaming tires and opened my eyes. With the intersection behind me, everything looked normal and familiar and safe. My building loomed on the right, and Wyatt pulled under the portico. I looked around, remembering that my fence gate had been unlocked when the officer brought my car home. Had whoever tampered with my brakes—I still thought Dwayne Bailey was the most likely suspect—been lurking around then? Had he seen my car being delivered and figured if he couldn’t get to me in one way, he would in another?
“I think I’m going to move,” I said vaguely. “I don’t feel safe here anymore.”
Wyatt got out and came around to open the door for me, and helped me out. “That’s a good idea,” he said. “While you’re recuperating, we’ll get your stuff packed up and moved out to my house. What do you want to do with your furniture?”
I looked at him as if he were an alien. “What do you mean, what do I want to do with my furniture? I need my furniture for wherever I move to.”
“I already have furniture at my house. We don’t need more.”
Ah. I was a little slow on the uptake, because I just then realized what he was saying. “I didn’t mean move in with you. I just meant . . . move. Sell the condo and buy another one. I’m not ready for a house, I don’t think, because I don’t have time to take care of yards and flower beds and things.”
“Why make two moves when one will do?”
Now that I knew what track he was on, I could easily follow him. “Just because you told Chief Gray I’m your fiancée doesn’t make it so. You not only have the cart before the horse, you forgot to get the poor thing out of the stable. We haven’t even gone on a date yet, remember?”
“We’ve barely been apart for five days. We bypassed the dating thing.”
“You wish.” I stopped in front of the door and in that moment, like a blow, realized that I couldn’t get in my own house. I didn’t have my bag, didn’t have my keys, didn’t have control of my life. I gave him an appalled look, then sat down on the stoop and burst into tears.
“Blair . . . honey,” he said, but didn’t ask what was wrong. I think I would have hit him if he had. Instead he sat down beside me and put his arm around me, cradling me close to him.
“I can’t get in,” I sobbed. “I don’t have my keys.”

“Siana has a set, doesn’t she? I’ll call her.”
“I want my own keys. I want my bag.” After everything that had happened that day, not having my bag was the crowning blow, the one that sent me over the edge. Evidently realizing I wasn’t capable of being reasonable, he simply held me, rocking me back and forth while I cried.
While he rocked, he unclipped his cell phone and called Siana. Because of the investigation none of my family had yet been told what happened that morning, and Wyatt kept the explanation brief: I’d been in a car accident that morning, the air bag had deployed and I wasn’t hurt, hadn’t even gone to the hospital, but my bag hadn’t yet been retrieved from my car and I couldn’t get in my house. Could she come unlock the door for me? If she couldn’t, Wyatt said he would have a patrolman stop by to get the keys.
I could hear Siana’s voice, the tone of alarm, but I couldn’t make out exactly what she was saying. Wyatt’s calm responses reassured her, though, and when he disconnected the call, he said, “She’ll be here in about twenty minutes. Do you want to get back in the car in the air-conditioning?”
I did. I wiped my face—very gingerly—and asked him if he had a tissue. He didn’t. Men are so unprepared.
“I have a roll of toilet paper in the trunk, though, if that will do.”
Okay, I didn’t want to know why he had the toilet paper, but I changed my mind about him being unprepared. Diverted from my tears, I went to stand beside him as he popped the trunk, to see what else he had back there.
The main thing was a large cardboard box, which contained the toilet paper, a pretty extensive first aid kit, a box of plastic gloves, several rolls of duct tape, folded sheets of plastic, a magnifying glass, measuring tape, paper bags, plastic bags, tweezers, scissors, and a bunch of other stuff. There was also a shovel, a pickax, and a saw. “What’s with the tweezers?” I asked.
“You just keep them handy in case someone’s eyebrows need plucking?”
“Evidence collection,” he replied as he unrolled some toilet paper and gave it to me. “I had to have it when I was a detective.”
“But you aren’t a detective now,” I pointed out. I folded the toilet paper, then wiped my eyes and blew my nose.
“Habits die hard. I keep thinking I might need some of this.”
“And the shovel?”
“You never know when you’ll need to dig a hole.”
“Uh-huh.” I understood that, at least. “I always carry a brick in my trunk,” I confided, then felt a twinge as I remembered what shape my car was in.

He closed the trunk, a frown between his eyes. “A brick? Why do you need a brick?”
“In case I need to break out a window.”
He paused, then said to himself, “I don’t want to know.”
We sat in the car until Siana arrived, driving a new model Camry. She got out, looking smart and sexy in a taupe suit with a red lace tank under the jacket. Her shoes were taupe sling-backs with three-inch Lucite heels. Her golden blond hair was cut in a sleek shoulder-length bob, the simple lines doing great things for her heart-shaped face. Despite her great dimples, Siana had a look about her that said, “Be afraid. Be very afraid.” Between us, my sisters and I pretty much had all the bases covered. I was pretty enough, but mostly I was athletic and business-oriented. Siana was maybe less even-featured, but her intelligence shone in her face like a beacon, plus she had great boobs. Jenni was taller than either of us, with darker hair, and drop-dead gorgeous. She couldn’t settle on a career, but she was making good money doing local modeling jobs. She could have gone to New York and tried her luck there, but she wasn’t interested enough.
Wyatt and I both got out of the car. Siana took one look at me, gave a low cry, and burst into tears as she rushed toward me.
She looked as if she wanted to throw her arms around me, but she stopped short, started to pat me, then drew her hand back. Tears dripped down her face.
I looked at Wyatt. “Do I look that bad?” I asked uncertainly.
“Yeah,” was his answer, which perversely reassured me, because if I’d been in truly bad shape, he would have been coddling me.
“I do not.” I began reassuring Siana, patting her.
“What happened?” she asked, blotting her eyes.
“My brakes failed.” The full explanation could come later.
“What did you hit? A power pole?”
“Another car hit me. On the passenger side.”
“Where’s your car? Can it be fixed?”
“No,” said Wyatt. “It’s totaled.”
Siana looked horrified all over again.
I sidetracked her by saying, “Mom invited us to supper tonight, and I need to get cleaned up before I go over there.”
She nodded. “That’s for sure. She’d freak out if she saw you like this, with blood all over your clothes. I hope you have some real good concealer, too.

You've got a raccoon thing going on."
"Air bag," I explained.
My condo key was on her key ring, mixed in with all her other keys. She separated it, unlocked the door, then stepped back while I went in first and disarmed the security system. She followed Wyatt and me inside. "Mom invited me tonight, too. I figured by the time I got here and back to the office, it would be time to leave anyway, so I left for the day. Do you need me for anything? I'm available."
"No, I think everything's under control."
"Does your insurance company provide a rental until the claim can be settled?"
"Yes, thank goodness. My agent said she'll make arrangements for me to get the rental tomorrow."
Siana was a lawyer; her mind was already moving ahead. "Do you have a mechanic lined up to go over your car, do a postmortem? You'll need a notarized statement—"
"No," Wyatt said. "It wasn't mechanical failure."
"Blair said her brakes failed."
"They did, but they had help. The brake line was severed."
She blinked; then she went pale. She stared at me. "Someone tried to kill you," she blurted. "Again."
I sighed. "I know. Wyatt says it's because I'm a cheerleader." I slanted him a "gotcha" look and took myself upstairs to shower, smiling as I listened to Siana swing to my defense. The smile faded as I climbed the stairs, though. Two attempts on my life were enough. This whole situation was getting on my nerves. MacInnes and Forester had better find that Dwayne Bailey had unaccounted-for chunks of time, and a nice set of fingerprints on my poor car would come in handy, too.
I eased out of my stiff, bloody clothing and let every garment fall to the floor. They were all ruined, anyway. I was amazed that a simple bloody nose could make such a mess. Finally I went into the bathroom and took a good look at myself in the full-length mirror. Bruises were definitely forming across my cheekbones, and across my nose. And on both knees, my shoulders, the inside of my right arm, and my right hip. I ached in every muscle; even my feet ached. Looking down, I saw a big bruise on top of my right foot.

Wyatt came into the bathroom while I was standing there surveying the damage. Without saying anything, he looked me over from head to toe, then gently folded me in his arms and rocked me back and forth for a while. For once, there was nothing sexual in his embrace, but he'd have had to be one sick puppy to be turned on by such an array of bruises. "You need ice packs," he said. "A lot of them."
"What I need," I replied, "is a doughnut. About two dozen of them. I have some cooking to do."
"What?"
"Doughnuts. I need to stop at Krispy Kreme and get two dozen doughnuts."
"Won't a cookie do?"
I eased away from him and turned on the shower. "Everyone was so sweet to me today; I'm going to make a bread pudding to take to them tomorrow. I have a recipe using Krispy Kreme doughnuts for the bread."
He stood frozen, his taste buds already imagining the taste. "Maybe we should get four dozen, so you can make two. That way we'll have one at home."
"Sorry. I can't work out right now, so I really have to watch what I eat. The temptation would be too much if there was a bread pudding sitting there calling to me."
"I'm a cop. I can protect you from it. I'll take it into custody."
"I don't feel up to making two," I said as I stepped into the shower.
He raised his voice to be heard over the running water. "I'll help."
I smiled again at the plea in his voice. He shouldn't have let me know he had such a sweet tooth; now I had him. I thought about torturing him by not letting him taste the pudding until tomorrow at the police station with everyone else, and that kept my mind off the problem of someone trying to kill me. It's just mental dancing, but it works for me.
I heard his cell phone ring while I was rinsing the shampoo from my hair. It was a slow go, since my left arm wasn't really in the game, but I was managing. I listened to him talking, though I couldn't understand what he was saying. Finished, I turned off the water and hooked the towel off the top of the shower door, then began drying myself as best I could.
"Come on out and I'll finish the job," he said, so I stepped out. The first thing I noticed was that he had that grim expression again.
"What's wrong?"

“That was MacInnes,” he said, taking the towel from me and gently wiping me down. “Bailey’s alibi checks out. Every bit of it. He was either at home with his wife, or at work, with only enough time allowed in between for him to make the drive there and back. According to MacInnes, Bailey’s wife has filed for divorce, so she isn’t inclined to lie for him. They’ll check further, but it looks as if he’s clean. Someone else is trying to kill you.”

Chapter Twenty-one

We were early getting to Mom and Dad’s, even though we stopped for the doughnuts and condensed milk I needed for the bread pudding. Wyatt had everything else at his house, including the size pans I needed. Yes, *pans.* Plural. We bought four-dozen glazed doughnuts. The smell of them made my mouth water, but I was strong and didn’t even open the box.

Dad opened the door, paused while he studied my face, then said, “What happened?” in a very quiet tone.

“I totaled my car,” I said, going to him for a hug; then I went on into the kitchen to face Mom. Behind me, I heard Dad and Wyatt carrying on a low-voiced conversation and I figured Wyatt was giving Dad the skinny.

In the end, I hadn’t tried to conceal the bruises. Well, I did have on a pair of long pants, a light-weave cotton with pink and white stripes, and a white T-shirt tied in a knot at my waist, because if I’d worn shorts that showed the bruises on my legs, someone would have thought Wyatt was beating me and I didn’t feel up to defending his honor. But I hadn’t put any concealer on the bruises under my eyes, because I figured any makeup would make a mess when Mom did whatever she was bound to do to my face.

She was standing with the freezer door open, staring inside. “I meant to do a roast,” she said without looking up when she heard me come in. I’m not certain she knew it was me and not Dad, but it didn’t matter. “But I’ve been fighting with that damn computer for so long I don’t have time now. What do you think about grilling—” She looked up and saw me, and her eyes went round. “Blair Mallory,” she said in an accusing tone, as if I’d done this to myself.

“Car accident,” I said, sitting down on one of the tall barstools at the eating bar. “My poor little car is totaled. Someone cut my brake line and I went

through the stop sign into the traffic at that busy intersection just down from my house."
"This has to stop," she said, her voice tight and angry as she closed the freezer door and opened the refrigerator portion instead. "I thought the police caught the man who killed Nicole."
"They did. He didn't do it. He didn't shoot at me, either; after he shot Nicole, he didn't leave his house except to go to work. His wife alibied him, and since she's found out he was cheating on her, she's filed for divorce, so it isn't as if she's protecting him."
Mom closed the refrigerator door without taking anything out, and opened the freezer door again. Mom is scarily efficient, so this dithering told me how upset she was. This time, she pulled out a package of frozen peas and wrapped them in a clean kitchen towel. "Hold this over the bruises," she said, handing the peas to me. "What other damage do you have?"
"Just bruises. And I'm sore in every muscle. A car T-boned my car on the passenger side, so I took a huge jolt. The air bag hit me in the face and gave me a bloody nose."
"Be glad you don't wear glasses. Sally"—Sally Arledge is one of Mom's closest friends—"drove her car into the side of the house, and when the air bag hit her, it broke her glasses and her nose."
I couldn't remember Sally driving into the side of her house, and I'm sure Mom would have told me. My sisters and I had all called her "Aunt Sally" when we were little, and they palled around together—Mom and the three of us, Sally and her five. That was quite a group when we all went somewhere. Sally had four boys, then a daughter. She'd named the four boys after the Gospels, but didn't find any biblical girl's name that she liked, so they were Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Tammy. Tammy always felt left out because she didn't have a biblical name, so we'd called her Rizpah for a while, but she didn't like that either. Personally, I thought *Rizpah Arledge* had a ring to it, but Tammy decided to go back to being Tammy and didn't even have to have counseling.
"When did Sally drive into the house? You didn't tell me about this."
"Put the peas on your face," she said, and I obediently tilted my head back and draped the bag of frozen peas over my face. It was big enough to cover my eyes, cheekbones, and nose, and, damn, it was cold. "As for why I didn't tell you, it just happened on Saturday, while you were at the beach, and there hasn't been an opportunity since then."

Ah, the beach. I remembered it with longing. It was just a few short days ago, but then my only problem had been Wyatt. No one had been trying to kill me while I was at the beach. Maybe I should go back. Tiffany would like that. So would I, if no one would shoot me or tamper with my car while I was there.
“Did she hit the gas instead of the brake pedal?” I asked.
“No, she did it on purpose. She was mad at Jazz.” Sally’s husband’s name is Jasper, which is likewise a biblical name, only no one calls him that; he’s always been Jazz.
“So she rammed her house? That doesn’t sound cost-effective.”
“She was aiming for Jazz, but he dodged.”
I took the bag of peas off my face and stared at Mom in astonishment.
“Sally tried to kill Jazz?”
“No, she just wanted to maim him a little.”
“Then she should use, like, a riding lawn mower or something, not a *car.*”
“I’m pretty sure he could outrun a lawn mower,” Mom said thoughtfully. “Though he *has* put on a little weight. No, I’m certain he could, because he was fast enough to get out of the way when she drove the car at him. So a lawn mower wouldn’t work.”
“What did he do?” I had visions of Sally catching him in the act with some other woman, like maybe her worst enemy, which would make the betrayal doubly bad.
“You know those shows on television where a husband or a wife invites these interior decorators to come into the house and redecorate a room as a surprise for the other one? While Sally was visiting her mother in Mobile last week, he did that.”
“Oh. My. God.” Mom and I looked at each other in horror. The thought of someone else coming into our houses and undoing what we had done, plus redecorating without having a clue what we like or dislike, was awful. I shuddered. “He got a television show decorator?”
“Not even that. He hired Monica Stevens from Sticks and Stones.”
There was nothing to say to that. I was mute in the face of such a calamity. Monica Stevens had a predilection for glass and steel, which I guess was fine if you lived in an laboratory, and she liked black. A lot of black. Unfortunately, Sally’s taste runs more toward cozy cottage.
I knew how Jazz had picked Monica, though: she had the biggest ad in the phone book, so poor Jazz would have figured she was very successful and

popular if she could afford the biggest ad. That's just how Jazz thinks. He was also hampered by having no clue about a woman's boundaries, despite having been married for thirty-five years. If he'd just thought beforehand to ask Dad if redecorating was a good idea, this whole problem could have been avoided, because Dad has more than a clue, he has it down to an exact science. My daddy's a smart man.
"Which room did Monica do?" I asked faintly.
"Put the peas back on your face." I obeyed, and Mom said, "The bedroom."
I moaned. Sally had worked hard finding just the right pieces for her bedroom, haunting estate sales and auctions to find the perfect antiques. Some of them had been heirloom quality. "What did Jazz do with Sally's furniture?" Technically I guess it was his furniture, too, but Sally was the one who was emotionally invested in it.
"That was the kicker. Monica talked him into putting it in her consignment shop, where of course it sold right away."
"What?" I dropped the peas to stare openmouthed at Mom. I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. Poor Sally couldn't even re-create her bedroom.
"Forget the car, I'd have rented a *bulldozer* and gone after him! Why didn't she back up and take another go?"
"Well, she was hurt. I told you it broke her nose. And her glasses, so she couldn't see, either. I don't know what's going to happen to them. I don't see how she can ever forgive him— Hello, Wyatt. I didn't see you standing there. Blair, I didn't have time to put on the roast, so we're going to grill hamburgers."
I looked around at where the two men were standing in the doorway, listening. The expression on Wyatt's face was priceless. Dad took it all in stride.
"Fine with me," Dad said affably. "I'll get the charcoal started." He went through the kitchen and out onto the deck, where he kept his monster grill.
Wyatt was a cop. He'd just heard about an attempted murder, though I knew Sally had really intended more to break Jazz's legs than to kill him. He also looked as if he'd just stepped into an alternate universe. "*She* can't forgive *him*?" he asked in a strained tone. "She tried to kill him!"
"Well, yeah," I said.
Mom said, "He *redecorated* her bedroom." Did we have to draw him a picture?

“I’m going outside,” he said warily, and followed Dad. Actually, it sort of looked as if he was escaping. I don’t know what he expected. Maybe he thought we should be discussing my personal situation, but you know that thing I have about dancing around and not thinking about something? I got it from Mom. It was much better for us to talk about Sally trying to run over Jazz than it was to think about someone trying to kill me.

The topic was like a nine-hundred-pound gorilla, though; we might put it in a corner, but we couldn’t forget about it.

Siana arrived, having gone home and changed into shorts and a T-shirt. Jenni breezed in, cheerful in a pale yellow dress that went great with her skin tone, and she had to be brought up to speed on the car accident. That was the topic of conversation at the dinner table, over juicy grilled hamburgers. Actually the dinner table was the picnic table out on the deck, but the principle is the same.

“I’m going to talk to Blair’s ex-husband tomorrow,” Wyatt said when Mom asked what the plan of action was. “Blair says it isn’t him, but statistics say I’d better have a talk with him.”

I shrugged. “Knock yourself out. Like I said, I haven’t seen or talked to him since the divorce.”

“But he called and left a message on her answering machine when it was on the news that she’d been shot,” Wyatt told my intensely interested family.

Siana leaned back and said thoughtfully to me, “It’s not beyond the realm of possibility that he wants to get back together with you. He may be having trouble with his second wife.”

“All the more reason for me to have a word with him,” Wyatt said, with a snap in his words.

“I can’t see Jason doing anything violent,” Mom said. “He’d be too concerned with how it would look. He’d do anything to protect his political career.”

“Would he kill to protect it?” Wyatt asked, and everyone fell silent. Jenni toyed with her silverware and didn’t look at any of us.

“But I’m not threatening his political career,” I pointed out. “Whatever I know about Jason is the same thing I’ve known about him all along; there’s nothing new. So why would he suddenly decide, after five years, that he needs to kill me?”

“Maybe it isn’t your situation that’s changed; maybe it’s his. Maybe he’s planning to run for something more important than the state legislature,

such as governor, or congressman."
"So he thinks he'll commit murder and get away with it? How likely is that?"
"Depends. Is he a man who's smart, or a man who just thinks he's smart?"
We all looked at each other. The problem was, Jason wasn't a dummy but neither was he anywhere near as sharp as he thought he was. "I'll give you that," I finally said. "But there's still no motive that I can see."
"You can't see any motive, period, for anyone, so that doesn't rule him out."
"I see. Since I can't point you to any specific person, you have to consider everyone."
"But in the meantime, Wyatt, until you catch this person," Mom said, "how are you going to keep Blair safe? She can't go to work; she can't stay in her own home. I'm surprised you even let her come here."
"I thought about canceling," he admitted. "But I had to balance that against other needs. I can guard her coming and going to the car, and I can make certain no one follows us when we leave. Unless this person knows Blair and I are involved, and knows where I live, we're in the clear there. Have any of you told anyone?"
"I didn't even tell Sally," Mom said. "She isn't in any state to listen right now."
"I haven't," Siana said. "We talked about Blair getting shot, but we didn't get into personal stuff."
Jenni shook her head. "Same here."
"Then we're clear," Dad said. "It never occurred to me to talk about her private life."
"Good. Keep it that way. I know my mother hasn't said anything, either. Blair, have you told anyone?"
"Not even Lynn. We've had other stuff to talk about, you know?"
"So we'll go back to the previous arrangement. She'll stay with me, she won't go to work, and after tonight you won't see her until we catch this guy. Talk on the phone all you want, but nothing in person. Got it?"
Everyone nodded. He looked satisfied. "The detectives are canvassing Blair's neighborhood, talking to everyone, even the little kids. Maybe someone was seen around your car, and no one thought anything about it at the time."
I wasn't real hopeful on that front. Because I didn't park at the curb in the front of the building, my car wasn't as readily visible as most of the others.

Someone could have approached from the rear unseen, unless a neighbor just happened to be looking out a back window at that exact time, and slid under my car without anyone seeing him from the street.
I hated it, but I'd been banking on Dwayne Bailey being the one who was trying to kill me. He was the only person I knew of with a motive, and even then he hadn't really had one; he just didn't know that I couldn't have identified him. Finding out he had an alibi that was likely legitimate left me mentally floundering, because I couldn't think of any other reason why someone would want me dead. I didn't mess around with other women's men, I didn't cheat anyone, and unless provoked, I tried to be nice to everyone. I didn't even wear white shoes after Labor Day or before Easter. Hey, I saw that movie with Kathleen Turner, and I took it to heart. I don't want the fashion Nazis coming after me.
"If it isn't personal," I said, thinking aloud, "then it's about business, right? Money. What else is there? But I haven't cheated anyone, and I didn't drive anyone out of business when I opened Great Bods. Halloran's Gym had already closed down when I bought the building and renovated it. Does anyone have any ideas here?"
All around the picnic table, heads shook from side to side. "It's a mystery," Siana said.
"What are the usual motives?" Dad asked, and started ticking them off on his fingers. "Jealousy, revenge, greed. What else? I'm discounting politics and religion, because as far as I know Blair isn't political, and she isn't a religious hothead. This isn't a case where someone gets mad and acts without thinking, right, Wyatt?"
Wyatt shook his head. "Both of the attempts were premeditated. If we play percentages, both attempts were made by a man—"
"How do you figure that?" Siana asked, intrigued as always by any intellectual discussion, even one that involved someone trying to kill me.
"The weapon used wasn't a handgun, not from that distance. We know where the shooter positioned himself, because we found the shell casing. It was a twenty-two rifle, which is common as grass in these parts, not a lot of stopping power to it, but with an accurate shot it'll kill. It's also a subsonic round. Blair bent down as the shot was fired, which is why it hit her arm instead of a vital area. Women may use handguns, but they seldom use rifles, which require practice and skill for distance shooting, and that generally isn't something a woman's interested in."

“What about the brakes?” Mom asked.
“There are four women sitting here. Do any of you know where the brake line is?”
Mom, Siana, and Jenni all looked blank. “Beneath the car,” I said. “I saw you looking.”
“But did you before that?”
“No, of course not.”
“There are several lines and cables beneath the car. How would you know which one to cut?”
“I guess I’d have to ask someone. More likely I’d just cut everything.”
“Which proves my point. Women aren’t likely to know enough about a car to cut a brake line.”
“*Or* I would get a book that showed me where the brake line is,” I said. “If I really wanted to cut a brake line, I’d figure out some way to do it.”
“Okay, let me ask you another question. If you wanted to kill someone, is that a method you would even think of? How would you do it?”
“If I wanted to kill someone,” I mused. “First, I’d have to be really, really angry or really, really scared, like if I had to protect myself or someone I loved. Then I’d use whatever weapon was handy, whether it was a tire tool, a rock, or my bare hands.”
“That’s the way most women are, and there goes the premeditation down the drain. I said *most* women, not all, but statistically we’re looking for a man. Agreed?”
Everyone nodded agreement.
“Now, if I were just pissed at someone, that’s different,” I said.
Wyatt got a look on his face that said he knew he shouldn’t ask, but he did anyway. “How so?”
“Well, that would take some planning. Like maybe I would bribe her hairdresser to do something really awful to her hair. Things like that.”
He propped his chin in his palm and stared at me, half smiling. “You’re a scary, vicious woman,” he said. Dad snorted with laughter and clapped him on the shoulder.
“Yeah,” I said. “And don’t you forget it.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Mom wouldn’t let me leave until she worked on my bruises. Siana and Jenni helped, plastering me with cold packs, vitamin K cream, cucumber slices, and tea bags soaked in ice water. Other than the vitamin K cream, everything else seemed to be just a variation on an ice pack, but doing it made them feel better and being coddled and fussed over made me feel better. Dad and Wyatt were smart enough to stay out of the way while this was going on, entertaining themselves with some ball game.

“I was in an accident once,” Mom said. “When I was fifteen. I was on a hayride; the hay wagon was pulled by a pickup truck. Paul Harrison was driving; he was sixteen and was one of the few people in our school who had something to drive. The only problem was, Carolyn Deale was beside him in the truck. I don’t know what all she was doing, but Paul forgot to pay attention to the road and ran off in a ditch and turned the hay wagon over. I wasn’t hurt at all, I didn’t think, but the next morning I was so stiff and sore I could barely move.”

“I’m already that way,” I said ruefully. “And I haven’t even had a hayride. I’m missing out.”

“Whatever you do, don’t take any aspirin, because that’ll make the bruises worse. Try ibuprofen,” said Siana. “Massage. A whirlpool tub. Things like that.”

“And stretching exercises,” Jenni added. She was carefully kneading my shoulders as she spoke. She took some massage classes once—she said just for the fun of it—so she was our go-to girl for sore muscles. Normally Jenni was a chatterbox, but she’d been unusually quiet tonight. Not pouty or anything like that, though she can be on occasion, just sort of thoughtful and withdrawn. I was actually surprised that she’d stayed around to do the massage, because usually she had a group of friends she was meeting, or a date, or some party.

I loved being with my family; I stayed so busy with Great Bods that I didn’t have a lot of opportunity to do that. Mom told us all about her problems with her computer, which involved a lot of nontechnical language like “doohickey” and “little thingie.” Mom operates computers just fine, but she sees no need to learn terms that she considers silly or stupid, such as “motherboard,” and for which other normal words will do just as well. In her version, a motherboard is “that main deal.” I totally understand that. Technical support (what a laugh) wasn’t living up to her expectations, because evidently they’d had her uninstall everything, then reinstall, and

that hadn’t solved a damn thing. Mom said they’d made her take everything out and put it back in.
But finally we had to leave. Wyatt came to the doorway; he didn’t say anything, just looked at me with that look men have when they want to go, the impatient, “Are you ready yet?” expression.
Siana glanced at him and said, “The look’s here.”
“I know,” I said, and gingerly got up.
“The ‘look’?” Wyatt glanced over his shoulder, as if expecting something to be standing behind him.
All four of us instantly mimicked the expression and body language. He muttered something, wheeled, and went back to where Dad was. We could hear them talking. I think Dad was telling Wyatt some of the finer points of how to live in a household with four females. Wyatt was a smart man; Jason had thought he already knew all he needed to know.
But Wyatt was right, and we did need to leave. I wanted to get the bread puddings made tonight, because I knew I’d feel even worse in the morning. Which brought up the subject of what he intended to do with me the next day, because I had my own ideas. “I don’t want to go to your mother’s,” I said when we were in the car. “Not that I don’t like her—I think she’s adorable—but I figure I’m going to be so sore and miserable tomorrow I’d rather just stay at your house so I can lie in bed all day if I want.”
By the dash lights I saw him give me a worried look. “I don’t like the idea of you being alone.”
“If you didn’t think I was safe at your house, you wouldn’t be taking me there.”
“It isn’t that. It’s your physical condition.”
“I know how to handle sore muscles. I’ve had them before. How did you usually feel after the first day of full-contact practice?”
“As if I’d been beaten with a club.”
“Cheerleader practice was the same. After the first time, I learned to stay in shape all year long, so it was never that bad again, but the first week of practice was still not a lot of fun.” Then I remembered something and sighed. “Scratch staying at home and resting. My insurance agent is supposed to arrange a rental car for me, so I’ll have to pick it up.”
“Give me your agent’s name and number, and I’ll take care of that.”
“How?”

“Deliver the car to me. I’ll drive it home, then have your Dad come pick me up and take me back to work to pick up my car. I don’t want you in town again until I find this bastard.”
A really bad thought struck me. “Is my family in danger? Could this man use them to get to me?”
“Don’t borrow trouble. So far this seems targeted specifically toward you. Someone thinks you’ve done ’em wrong, and he wants vengeance. That’s what this feels like, honey: vengeance. Whether it was something in business or a personal matter, he wants revenge.”
I honestly couldn’t think of a thing, and in a way not knowing *why* someone wanted to kill me was almost as bad as the actual attempts. Okay, so it wasn’t as bad; it didn’t even come close. I’d still have liked to know. If I’d known why, then I’d have known who.
It couldn’t be business. It just couldn’t. I’d been scrupulous, because I was afraid the IRS would get me if I wasn’t. The IRS left all the other bogeymen in the dust, as far as I was concerned. I usually even fudged my returns and didn’t claim all my deductions, just to give myself some leeway if I was ever audited. I figured if they ever did audit me and had to pay *me,* that would put an end to the auditing stuff as far as my business was concerned. I’d never fired anyone. A couple of people had quit, moved on to other jobs, but I’d been careful about whom I hired, instead of just picking any warm body that could fill a slot. I hired good people and I treated them well. None of my employees would kill me, because then there would go their 401Ks. So that left personal. And I drew a huge blank on that.
“I’m ruling out anything that happened in high school,” I told Wyatt.
He coughed. “That’s probably safe, though sometimes those teenage things can really fester. Were you in a clique?”
Wyatt and I had gone to different high schools, plus he was a few years older, so he didn’t know anything about my school years. “I guess,” I said. “I was a cheerleader. I hung out with the other cheerleaders, though I did have this one friend who wasn’t a cheerleader and didn’t even go to the ball games.”
“Who was it?”
“Her name was Cleo Cleland. Say that three times real fast. Her parents must have been stoned on pot when they named her. They were from California, so she didn’t fit in real good when they moved here. Her mother was one of those natural-beauty-earth-mother types, with some feminist

stuff thrown in, so she refused to let Cleo wear makeup or anything like that. So Cleo and I would both go to school early, and I'd take my makeup with me. We'd go into the girl's restroom and I'd fix Cleo up for the day so no one would make fun of her. She had *no clue* about makeup when she moved here. It was awful."
"I can imagine," he murmured.
"Things got tricky when she started dating, because she'd have to figure out a way to put on her makeup without her mother seeing it. By that time she'd learned how, so I didn't have to put it on for her anymore. But she couldn't wait until she was out with her date, because then he'd see her without it, and that would be a disaster."
"I don't know about that. You're cute without makeup."
"I'm not sixteen now, either. At sixteen, I'd rather have died than let anyone see my natural face. You get convinced that it's the makeup that's pretty, not you. Well, I know some girls who felt that way. I never did, because I had Mom. She taught all three of us how to use makeup when we were still in grade school, so it was no big deal to us. See, makeup isn't camouflage; it's a weapon."
"Do I want to know this?" he wondered aloud.
"Probably not. Most men just don't get it. But at sixteen I did go through an insecure stage, because I had to fight so hard to keep my weight down."
He gave me an incredulous look. "You were pudgy?"
I slapped his arm. "Of course not. I was a cheerleader, so I worked off my weight, but I was also a flyer."
"A flyer."
"You know. One of the ones who gets tossed by the other cheerleaders. The top of the pyramid. See, I'm five-four, so I'm tall for a flyer. Most flyers are five-two, something like that, and they keep their weight around a hundred pounds so it'll be easier to throw them. I could be that slim, and be fifteen pounds heavier, because I'm taller. I had to really watch it."
"My God, you must have been a toothpick." He looked me over again. I weigh about one twenty-five now, but I'm strong and muscled, so that means I look as if I weigh ten or fifteen pounds lighter than that.
"But I also had to be strong," I pointed out. "I had to have muscle. You can't have muscle and be a toothpick. I had about a five-pound range where I had muscle but wasn't too heavy, so I was constantly balancing my weight."

“Was it really worth it, to jump around and wave pom-poms during a football game?”
See, he knew absolutely nothing about cheerleading. I glared at him. “I went to college on a cheerleading scholarship, so I’d say, yeah, it was worth it.”
“They give scholarships for that?”
“They give scholarships to guys who carry around a piece of pigskin, so why not?”
He had the wisdom to detour off that path. “Back to your high school days. You didn’t steal anyone’s boyfriend?”
I made a scornful noise. “I had my own boyfriends, thank you.”
“Other guys weren’t attracted to you?”
“So what if they were? I had a steady, and I didn’t pay any attention to anyone else.”
“Who was your steady? Jason?”
“No, Jason was my college guy. In high school it was Patrick Haley. He got killed in a motorcycle accident when he was twenty. We didn’t keep in touch after we broke up, so I don’t know if he was dating anyone special or not.”
“Scratch Patrick. Where’s Cleo Cleland now?”
“In Raleigh-Durham. She’s an industrial chemist. Once a year or so we get together for lunch and a movie. She’s married and has a four-year-old.”
He could scratch Cleo, too. Not because she was dead, but because Cleo was my pal. Besides, she was a woman, and he’d said the person trying to kill me was most likely a man.
“There has to be someone,” he said. “Someone you maybe haven’t thought about in years.”
He was right. This was personal, so it was someone I knew. And I was totally drawing a blank on anyone who might want to kill me.
Then inspiration hit.
“I know!” I crowed.
He jerked, instantly alert. “Who?”
“It has to be one of *your* girlfriends!”

Chapter Twenty-three

The car swerved. Wyatt brought it back into the lane and glared over at me. "How did you come up with an idea like that?"
"Well, if it isn't me, then it has to be you. I'm a nice person, and I don't have any enemies that I know of. *However,* when was the first attempt? Right after we came back from the beach. How many people know you followed me there? After the way you acted Thursday night when Nicole was killed—"
"The way *I* acted?" he echoed in outraged astonishment.
"You told your guys that we were involved, right? Even though we weren't. I saw the way they looked at me, and *not one* out of about fifty cops came to my rescue when you were manhandling me. So I figure you lied to them and said we were dating."
His teeth were set. "I wasn't manhandling you."
"Stop latching on to insignificant details. And you were, too. But am I right so far? You told them we were seeing each other?"
"Yeah. Because we are."
"That's debatable—"
"We're living together. We're sleeping together. How in hell is it debatable whether or not we're seeing each other?"
"Because we haven't started dating yet and this is just temporary. *Will you stop interrupting me?* My point is, who were you seeing that you dropped like a hot potato to chase after me?"
He ground his teeth for a few seconds. I know because I could hear them. Then he said, "What makes you think I was seeing anyone?"
I rolled my eyes. "Oh, please. You know you're to die for. You probably have women lined up."
"I don't have women— You think I'm to die for, huh?"
Now he sounded pleased. I wanted to beat my head against the dash, only it would hurt and I had enough aches and pains at the moment. "Wyatt!" I yelled. "Who were you dating?"
"No one in particular."
"It doesn't have to be 'in particular'; it just has to be dating. Because some women have unrealistic expectations, you know. One date and they're picking out a wedding gown. So who was the last person you dated, and who maybe thought there was something serious going on, then went totally postal when you followed me to the beach? Had you been on a date last

Thursday, the night Nicole was killed?" Notice how I slipped that in, because I'd been wondering.
By this time we had reached his house, and he slowed to turn in to the driveway. "No, that night I'd been teaching a women's self-defense class," he said absently, to my great satisfaction. "I don't think your theory holds water because it's been . . . God, almost two months since I've gone out with anyone. My social life hasn't been as hot as you evidently think."
"This last person you were with. Did you go out with her more than once?"
"A couple of times, yeah." He pulled into the garage.
"Did you sleep with her?"
He gave me an impatient look. "I see where this little interrogation is going now. No, I didn't sleep with her. And, trust me, we didn't click."
"You didn't, but maybe she did."
"No," he repeated. "She didn't. Instead of digging into my past, you should be thinking about your own. You're a flirt, and some man might have thought you were serious—"
"I'm not a flirt! Stop trying to throw this back on me."
He came around and opened the car door for me, leaning in to scoop me up in his arms so my stiff and sore muscles wouldn't have to go to the effort of climbing out of the car, then gently setting me on my feet. "You're a flirt," he said grimly. "You can't help it. It's in your genes."
He had a lot of "f" words to describe me, and I was getting tired of hearing them. Yes, I flirt occasionally, but that doesn't make me a flirt. Nor am I fluffy. I don't think of myself as a lightweight person, and Wyatt was making me sound like the most frivolous—another "f" word—nitwit walking.
"And now you're pouting," he said, rubbing his thumb over my lower lip, which might have started to stick out just the tiniest bit. Then he bent and kissed me, a slow, warm kiss that for some reason really melted me, maybe because I knew there was no way he was going anywhere with it, and he knew it, too, so that meant he was kissing me just to kiss me, not to get me into bed.
"What was that for?" I asked a tad peevishly, to hide the fact that I'd melted, when he lifted his mouth.
"Because you've had a bad day," he said, and did it again. I sighed and relaxed against him, because, yes, I'd had a very bad day. This time when the kiss was over, he held me close for a moment, his cheek resting on top

of my head. “Leave the police work to us,” he said. “Unless you all of a sudden remember a deadly enemy who’s been threatening to kill you, in which case, I definitely want to hear about it.”
I pulled back and scowled at him. “Meaning I’m such a dumb blond I wouldn’t remember something like that right away?”
He sighed. “I didn’t say that. I wouldn’t say it, because you aren’t dumb. You’re a lot of things, but dumb isn’t one of them.”
“Oh, yeah? Just what ‘things’ am I?” I was feeling truculent, because I was hurt and scared and I had to take it out on someone, didn’t I? Wyatt was a big boy; he could handle it.
“Frustrating,” he said, and I almost kicked him, because he’d come up with another “f” word. “Annoying. Stubborn. Slick, because you use the dumb-blond routine when you think it’ll get you what you want, and I figure it usually does. Your thought processes scare the hell out of me. Reckless. Funny. Sexy. Adorable.” He touched my cheek, his hand gentle. “Definitely adorable. And this is *not* temporary.”
Man, I wasn’t the only slick one around, was I? I’d been on the verge of a major snit; then he’d undercut me with the last three items. So he found me adorable, huh? That’s a good thing to know, so I decided to ignore that part about this not being temporary. He leaned down and kissed me again, then added, “To die for.”
I blinked at him. “That’s a girl thing to say. Guys shouldn’t say it.”
He straightened. “Why not?”
“It’s too girlie. You should say something macho, like ‘I’d take a bullet for you.’ See the difference?”
He was fighting a grin. “Got it. C’mon, let’s go inside.”
I sighed. I had two bread puddings to make, and I didn’t really feel like it, but a promise is a promise. No, the people at the police department didn’t know I was making it, but I had mentally promised it to them, so there you go.
Wyatt got the doughnuts and condensed milk from the backseat, then unlocked his trunk and took out a burlap bag with green strings hanging from it. He closed the trunk, frowning at the burlap bag.
“What’s that?” I asked.
“I told you I’d get you a bush. Here it is.”
I stared at the poor bedraggled plant. The green strings had to be its limp little limbs. “What will I do with a bush?”

“You said the house didn’t have a single plant in it, like that somehow made it unlivable or something. So here’s your plant.”
“That isn’t a houseplant! That’s *shrubbery.* You bought shrubbery for me?”
“A plant’s a plant. Put it in the house and it’s a houseplant.”
“You are *so* clueless,” I snapped, reaching to take the poor thing from him. “You’ve had it in your trunk all day in this heat? You’ve *cooked* it. It may not live. Maybe I can revive it, though, with some TLC. Open the door, will you? You bought some food for it, didn’t you?”
He unlocked the door before he answered with a cautious, “Plants eat?”
I gave him an incredulous look. “Of course plants eat. If anything’s alive, it eats.” Then I looked at the plant I held and shook my head. “This poor thing may never eat again, though.”
My injured arm was protesting holding the weight of the plant, even though I was using my right arm to do most of the work and was mostly balancing the thing with my left hand. I could have given it to Wyatt, but I didn’t trust him with it. He’d already proven himself capable of major plant brutality.
While he was bringing in my bags, I had the plant in the sink, gently spraying it with cool water in an attempt to revive it. “I need a bucket,” I told him. “Something you won’t miss, because I’m going to poke holes in the bottom.”
He was in the process of fetching a blue plastic mop bucket from the laundry, but he paused at my last words. “Why are you going to ruin a perfectly good bucket?”
“Because *you* have abused this plant to the point that it may not live. It needs water, but the roots don’t need to stand in water. So—it needs to drain. Unless you have a nice planter with drain holes in it, which I doubt because you don’t have any houseplants, then I’ll have to poke holes in a container.”
“See, this is why men don’t have houseplants. They’re too much trouble, and too damn complicated.”
“They make a house look nice, feel nice, and they keep the air fresh. I don’t think I could ever live in a house without plants.”
He sighed. “All right, all right. I’ll punch holes in the bucket.”
My hero.
He used a long screwdriver to stab through the plastic, and in short order the bedraggled plant was sitting in the bucket in the laundry room sink, the root-ball soaked and draining. I hoped by morning it would have perked up

some. Then I turned on his double ovens and started assembling what I would need to make the bread puddings.
He clasped my shoulders and gently forced me down onto a chair. “Sit,” he said, which was totally unnecessary, since he’d already made certain I was. “I’ll make the bread pudding. Just tell me what to do.”
“Why? You never listen.” Now, is there any way I could have resisted saying that?
“I’ll make an effort,” he said drily. “This one time.”
Big of him, wasn’t it? The least he could have done, considering the day I’d had, was solemnly promise that from then on he’d pay attention to what I was saying.
So I supervised the making of the bread pudding, which is really simple, and while he was tearing the doughnuts into chunks, he said, “Explain something to me. Those people your mother was talking about: the man tried to do something nice for his wife, and she tried to kill him, so why were y’all on her side?”
“Something nice?” I echoed, staring at him in horror.
“He had their bedroom professionally decorated as a present for her. Even if she didn’t like the style, why didn’t she thank him for the thought?”
“You think it’s nice that, even though they’ve been married thirty-five years, he paid so little attention to her that he didn’t know how long and hard she worked to get their bedroom just right, and how much she loved it just the way it was? Some of the antique pieces she had, and which were sold before she could retrieve them, were heirloom quality and can’t be replaced.”
“Regardless of how much she loved it, it was just furniture. He’s her husband; don’t you think he deserved better than her trying to hit him with her car?”
“She’s his wife,” I returned. “Don’t you think she deserved better than to have something she loved destroyed, and replaced with something she absolutely hates? After thirty-five years, don’t you think he should at least have been able to tell the decorator that Sally didn’t like metal and glass?”
The look on his face said he didn’t care for the ultramodern look himself, though he wouldn’t have phrased it that way. “So she’s mad because he hadn’t noticed what style she likes?”
“No, she’s *hurt* because she’s realized he doesn’t pay any real attention to her. She’s mad because he sold her things.”

“Weren’t they his things, too?”
“Did he spend months searching for each piece? Did he refinish each one by hand? I’d say they were hers.”
“Okay. That still doesn’t justify trying to kill him.”
“Well, you see, she wasn’t trying to *kill* him. She just wanted him to hurt a fraction as much as she’s hurting.”
“Then, like you said, she should have used a riding lawn mower instead of a car. Regardless of how hurt she is, if she’d killed him I’d have arrested her for murder.”
I thought about it, then said, “Some things are worth being arrested for.” Personally, I wouldn’t have gone as far as Sally, but no way would I tell Wyatt that. Women have to stick together, and I thought this would be a good object lesson for him: you don’t mess with a woman’s things. If he could just get past his tendency to categorize things according to what laws were broken, I was sure he’d see reason. “A woman’s stuff is important to her, like a man’s toys are important to him. Is there anything you really treasure, like something that belonged to your father, or maybe a car—” It struck me. I stared at him, aghast. “You don’t have a car!” The only car in the garage was the Crown Vic, which was city-owned and practically yelled, *Cop!*
“Of course I have a car,” he said mildly, looking down at the two big bowls in which he had divided the four-dozen doughnuts, pinched into bite-size chunks. “What do I do now?”
“Beat the eggs. I’m not talking about the city car,” I said. “What happened to your Tahoe?” When I’d gone out with him two years ago, he’d been driving a big black Tahoe.
“Traded it in.” He swiftly beat two eggs, then broke two more into a separate little bowl and beat them, too.
“For what? There’s nothing in the garage.”
“An Avalanche. I got it three months ago. It’s black, too.”
“But where is it?”
“My sister, Lisa, borrowed it two weeks ago while hers was in the shop.” He frowned. “I expected to have it back before now.” He picked up the cordless phone, dialed a number, and tucked the phone between his chin and shoulder. “Hey, Lise. I just remembered you have my truck. Is your car still in the shop? What’s the holdup?” He listened for a moment. “Okay, no problem. Like I said, I just remembered.” He paused, and I could hear a

woman’s voice, but I couldn’t tell what she was saying. “She did, huh? Could be.” Then he laughed. “Yeah, it’s true. I’ll give you the details when we get them ironed out. Okay. Yeah. See ya.”
He punched the *off* button and put the phone back on the table, then surveyed what he’d done so far. “What comes next?”
“A can of condensed milk for each batch.” I stared suspiciously at him. “What’s ‘true’?”
“Just a problem I’m working on.”
I had a hunch I was the problem he was working on, but I needed to be at full speed to win an argument with him, so I let it go. “When will her car be ready?”
“She hopes by Friday. I suspect she likes driving my truck, though. It has all the bells and whistles.” He winked at me. “Since you like driving pickups, too, you’ll love my truck. You’ll be cute as hell in it.”
If I wasn’t, then I seriously needed to work on my image. Because I was fading fast, I directed the addition of the remaining ingredients: salt, cinnamon, more milk, and a touch of vanilla flavoring. He mixed it all together, then poured each bowlful out into a baking pan. The ovens had already preheated, so he put both pans in to cook and set the timer for thirty minutes. “That’s it?” he asked, looking surprised because it was so simple.
“That’s it. If you don’t mind, I’m going to brush my teeth and go to bed. When the timer dings, take the pans out and cover them with foil and put them in the refrigerator. I’ll do the butter sauce icing in the morning.”
Tiredly I got to my feet. I was almost at the end of my physical rope.
His expression softened and without a word he lifted me in his arms.
I laid my head on his shoulder. “You’re doing this a lot,” I said as he carried me upstairs. “Carrying me around, I mean.”
“It’s a pleasure. I just wish it wasn’t under these circumstances.” The soft expression faded from his face, leaving his expression grim. “It makes me sick that you’re hurt. I want to kill the son of a bitch who did this to you.”
“Ah-ha! Now you know how Sally feels,” I said triumphantly. Anything to score a point, though I don’t generally recommend getting shot and having a car accident to do it. On the other hand, since those things had happened, why not use them? It’s silly to throw away a trump card, no matter how it got in your hand.
I brushed my teeth; then he helped me undress and actually tucked me into bed. I was asleep before he left the room.

I slept all night, not even waking when he came to bed. I woke when his alarm went off, and sleepily reached out to stroke his side as he stretched to shut off the clock. “How do you feel this morning?” he asked, rolling onto his back and turning his head toward me.

“Not as bad as I thought I would. Better than last night. Of course, I haven’t tried to get out of bed yet. Are my eyes black?” I held my breath, waiting for the answer.

“Not really,” he said, studying me. “The bruising isn’t any worse than it was last night. All of that voodoo y’all were doing in the kitchen must have worked.”

Thank God. I’d do the ice-pack thing again today, just to be on the safe side. I wasn’t very fond of the raccoon look.

He didn’t get out of bed right away, and neither did I. He stretched and yawned, then sleepily settled down again. There was an interesting tent thing going on just below his waist, and I wanted to check it out, but that seemed cruel considering my stated position of not wanting to have sex with him. No, that wasn’t accurate; it wasn’t that I didn’t *want* to, but that I knew we shouldn’t until we had a lot of things settled between us. I really, really wanted to, though.

Before I succumbed to temptation—again—I forced my attention away and gingerly sat up. Sitting up hurt. A lot. Biting my lip, I slid my legs off the side of the bed, stood up, and took a step. Another. Hunched over and hobbling like a very old person, I made it to the bathroom.

The bad news was, my muscles hurt worse today than they had the night before, but that was to be expected. The good news was, I knew how to deal with it. Tomorrow I would feel much better.

A warm soak in the tub while Wyatt was cooking breakfast helped. So did a couple of ibuprofen, some gentle stretching movements, and that first cup of coffee. The coffee helped my feelings more than it helped my muscles, but feelings are important, too, right?

After breakfast I made the butter sauce to pour over the bread puddings. It was fast and simple, just a stick of butter and a box of powdered sugar, with rum flavoring. The sugar content had to be off the charts, but my mouth watered just thinking about that first bite. Wyatt didn’t resist temptation; the butter sauce wasn’t cool before he’d dipped a large spoonful onto a saucer and dug in. He half closed his eyes and made an appreciative humming sound. “Man, this is good. I may keep both pans for myself.”

“If you do, I’ll tell.”
He sighed. “All right, all right. But you can make this for me on my birthday every year, okay?”
“But you know how to make it for yourself,” I said, wide-eyed, but my heart was doing a little happy dance at the thought of being with him for all of his birthdays, year after year. “When is your birthday, exactly?”
“November third. When’s yours?”
“August fifteenth.” Oh, dear. Not that I believe in astrology or anything, but a Scorpio and a Leo can be a pretty explosive combination. Both are stubborn and hot-tempered, though I’m out of the norm there because I’m not hot-tempered at all. I plead the Fifth on the stubbornness part, though.
“What’s the frown for?” he asked, lightly rubbing between my eyebrows.
“You’re a Scorpio.”
“So? That’s a scorpion, right?” He put his hand on my waist and pulled me close, leaning down to kiss under my right ear. “Wanna see my stinger?”
“Don’t you want to know what’s bad about being a Scorpio? Not that I believe in astrology.”
“If you don’t believe in it, why should I care what’s bad about Scorpios?” I hated when he was logical. “So you’ll know what’s wrong with you.”
“I know what’s wrong with me.” He cupped my breast and nipped the side of my neck. “It’s a five-four blond with an attitude, a smart mouth, and a round, bouncy ass that drives me crazy.”
“My ass does not bounce,” I said, instantly indignant. I worked hard to keep my butt tight. I also had to work hard to stay indignant, because of what he was doing to my neck.
“You haven’t seen it from behind when you’re walking.”
“Well, duh.”
I felt him smile against my neck. Somehow my head had tipped back and I was clinging to his shoulders, and I was forgetting how much it hurt to move. “It moves up and down like two balls bouncing. Haven’t you ever turned around and noticed men wiping the drool off their chins?”
“Well, yeah, but I thought that was an evolutionary problem.”
He chuckled. “Could be. Damn, I wish you weren’t so bruised and sore.”
“You’d be late to work.” I didn’t bother protesting that I wouldn’t let him make love to me, because I’d proven to have truly pitiful self-control where he was concerned. I could try, but—

“Yeah, and everyone would know what I’d been doing, because I’d have a big grin on my face.”
“Then it’s a good thing I’m bruised and sore, because I really frown on being late to work.” And if my self-control wouldn’t work against him, maybe I could play this hurt-and-bruised thing for all it was worth. Yes, that’s a tad manipulative, but this was war—and he was winning.
He nibbled on my neck again, just to show me what I was missing in case I needed reminding. I didn’t. “What will you do today while I’m gone?”
“Sleep. Maybe do a little yoga, to stretch and loosen my muscles. Prowl through your house and snoop through everything. Then, if I have time, I may alphabetize your canned goods, rearrange your closet, and program your remote control so it turns the television to the Lifetime channel whenever it’s turned on.” I didn’t know if that was possible, but the threat sounded good.
“Dear God.” His tone was full of horror. “Get dressed. You’re going to the station with me.”
“You can’t put it off forever. If you insist I stay here, you have to suffer the consequences.”
“Now I see how this works.” He lifted his head and looked down at me, narrow-eyed. “All right, do your worst. I’ll get my revenge tonight.”
“I’m hurt, remember?”
“If you can do all that, you’re in better shape than you’re letting on. Guess I’ll find out tonight, won’t I?” He lightly rubbed my butt. “I’ll look forward to it.” Oh, he was so sure of himself.
I followed him upstairs and watched him shower and shave, then sat on the bed while he dressed. Today’s choice was a navy suit, white shirt, and a yellow tie with narrow navy and red stripes. He was a spiffy dresser, which I really like in a man; then when he topped the outfit off with the shoulder holster and the badge clipped to his belt, it was almost too much for my self-control. All of that authority and power turned me on, which is not very feminist of me, but what the hell. You take your turn-ons where you find them, and Wyatt was mine—no matter what he was wearing.
“I’m taking your bread pudding to the boys and girls—which will make them very happy—then I’m going to see your ex,” he said as he shrugged into his jacket.
“It’s a waste of time.”
“Maybe, but I want to see for myself.”

“Why aren’t MacInnes and Forester talking to him? How do they feel about you horning in on their case?”
“I’m saving them some legwork, and besides, they know it’s personal, so they’re cutting me some slack.”
“Were the others very resentful when you were promoted over them?”
“Of course they were. Hell, they wouldn’t have been human if they weren’t. I try not to tread on their toes, but at the same time, I’m their boss and they know it.”
And he didn’t worry if he had to tread on their toes. He didn’t say it, but he didn’t have to. Wyatt wouldn’t take any crap from them.
I walked with him to the garage, and he kissed me good-bye at the door.
“Don’t throw away anything you find when you’re snooping and prowling, got it?”
“Got it. Unless it’s letters from an old girlfriend or something; then I might accidentally set them on fire. You know how things like that happen.” He should; he was interrogating Jason for suspicion of attempted murder mainly because he’d heard the message Jason had left on my answering machine.
He grinned. “There aren’t any letters,” he said as he got into the car.
I looked, of course. The day stretched peacefully before me; I didn’t have to go anywhere or do anything, didn’t have to talk to anyone. With that much time on my hands, I *had* to look. I didn’t organize his closet or arrange his canned goods, though, because that required moving and lifting.
Instead I pampered myself that day. I watched television; I napped. I put in a load of laundry, and moved the somewhat recovered bush near a window so it could get some sunshine. That also required lifting and moving, which hurt, but I did it anyway because the bush needed all the help it could get. I also called Wyatt on his cell phone and got his voice mail. I left him a message to pick up some plant food.
He called at lunch. “How’re you feeling?”
“Still stiff, still sore, but otherwise okay.”
“You were right about Jason.”
“Told you.”
“He has one hell of an alibi: Chief Gray. Your ex and the chief were in a foursome playing golf at the Little Creek Country Club on Sunday afternoon, so there was no way he could have taken a shot at you. I don’t guess you’ve thought of anyone else who might like to kill you?”

“Not a clue.” I’d been thinking about it, too, but hadn’t been able to come up with anything. I’d come to the conclusion that someone was trying to kill me because of a reason I knew nothing about, and that’s not a good thing at all.

Chapter Twenty-four

When Wyatt came home late that afternoon, he was followed by a green Taurus. I stepped out into the garage, expecting to see Dad get out of the rental, but instead Jenni climbed out. “Hi,” I said in surprise. “I thought Dad was going to drive the rental here.”

“I volunteered,” Jenni said, pushing her long hair behind her ears. She stood back as Wyatt kissed me hello. His mouth was warm, his touch gentle, as he held me against him.

“How did the day go?” he asked, cupping my cheek.

“Uneventful. Just what I needed.” The peace had been wonderful. Not one thing had happened to make me think I might die, which was a nice change of pace. I smiled at Jenni. “Come in and have something cold to drink. I didn’t realize how hot it is until I came out.”

Wyatt stepped aside for Jenni to enter. She looked around, her gaze frankly curious. “This is a great house,” she said. “It looks old and modern at the same time. How many bedrooms are there?”

“Four,” he answered, shrugging out of his suit jacket and draping it over the back of a chair. He tugged the knot of his tie loose, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. “Nine rooms total, three and a half baths. Do you want the nickel tour?”

“Just downstairs,” she said, smiling. “That way if Mom asks me anything about your sleeping arrangements, I can honestly say I don’t know.”

Mom wasn’t a prude—far from it—but she had impressed on her daughters that a smart woman didn’t sleep with a man unless they had a committed relationship, and by committed she meant at least an engagement ring on the finger. She was of the opinion that men, simple creatures that they are, value most that for which they work the hardest. I agree in principle, though maybe not completely in application. I mean, look at my current situation. Wyatt didn’t have to work hard for me at all; all he had to do was kiss my neck, and I rued the day he’d discovered that weakness of mine. To be fair

to myself, though, he was the only man I'd ever met who could so easily undermine my self-control.

Jenni dropped the keys to the rental on the kitchen counter, and followed Wyatt as he gave her the short tour around the ground floor of the house, which consisted of the kitchen, breakfast room, formal dining room (which was empty), living room (ditto), and family room. He had a small office just off the kitchen, as I had discovered that day, but he didn't bother with that; it was very small, maybe six-by-six, more suited for a pantry or a walk-in closet than an office, but he had the essentials in there: desk, filing cabinet, computer, printer, phone. There was nothing interesting in the filing cabinet. I'd played some games on his computer, but hadn't investigated any of his folders. I do have *some* limits.

I didn't follow the two of them, but I heard him pause in the family room and turn on the television—checking to see if I'd messed with his remote, huh? I grinned to myself. I'd thought about removing the batteries, but I figured I'd save that for when we had an argument. No, he probably had a huge supply of batteries, just in case. Instead it would be smarter if I just went shopping . . . and accidentally dropped the remote in my bag before I left. You should think of these things ahead of time, so you won't have to hesitate. She who hesitates gets caught.

I had glasses of iced tea sitting on the table when they came back to the breakfast room. Wyatt picked up one of them and chugged down half of it without pausing for breath, his tanned throat working. As affable as he'd been with Jenni, I could see the lines of frustration in his face. Evidently the police were getting nowhere in finding out who was trying to kill me, or why.

When he finally lowered the glass, he looked at me and smiled. "Your bread pudding was a hit. The pan was empty within thirty minutes, and everyone was on a sugar high."

"Did you make doughnut bread pudding?" Jenni asked, then groaned. "And there isn't any left?"

Wyatt smirked. "It just so happens *two* were made, and one of them is still in the refrigerator. Want some?"

She accepted with all the enthusiasm of a hungry wolf, and Wyatt pulled the pan out of the fridge. I turned to the cabinet and got out two saucers and two spoons. "Aren't you having some?" Jenni asked with a little frown.

“No. I can’t work out right now, so I have to watch what I eat.” I wasn’t having any fun doing it, either; I would much rather work out for an hour or two every day instead of counting calories. I wanted some of that bread pudding, but it wasn’t as if I’d never again have any—just not right now.
We all sat at the table while Wyatt and Jenni ate. I asked Wyatt if they had any leads at all, and he sighed.
“The forensics team did find a footprint in the dirt behind your condo, and we ran it through analysis. It’s a woman’s athletic shoe—”
“Probably mine, then,” I said, but he shook his head.
“Not unless you wear size eight and a half, and I know damn well you don’t.”
He was right. I wore six and a half; none of the women in my family wore that size shoe. Mom was a six, and Siana and Jenni both wore size seven. I tried to think of any of my friends who might wear an eight and a half and who might also have been behind my condo, but no one sprang to mind.
“I thought you said it probably wasn’t a woman trying to kill me,” I said accusingly.
“I still don’t think it is. Sniper fire and tampering with a car’s brakes just aren’t generally the way a woman would go about it.”
“So the shoe print probably doesn’t mean anything?”
“Probably not. I wish it did.” He rubbed his eyes.
“I can’t hide out forever.” I didn’t say it accusingly, just stating a fact. I had a life, and if I couldn’t live it, then this creep had killed me in one sense even if he hadn’t managed to kill my body.
“Maybe you won’t have to,” Jenni said hesitantly, staring at her spoon as if the meaning of life was written on it. “What I mean is—I volunteered to drive your rental out because I’ve been thinking and I’ve come up with a plan. I could wear a blond wig and pretend to be you and be the bait in a trap so Wyatt can catch this creep and you’ll be safe again,” she finished in such a rush that she ran her words together.
My jaw dropped so far it almost hit the floor. “What?” I squeaked. Never in a hundred years would I have expected Jenni to make such a preposterous offer. Jenni was really good at looking out for number one, and no way was that *my* number. “I can be my own bait, and I won’t even need a wig!”
“Let me do this for you,” she begged, and to my surprise tears welled in her eyes. “Let me make it up to you for what I did. I know you’ve never forgiven me and I don’t blame you; I was a selfish bitch and didn’t think

how much I'd be hurting you, but I've grown up, I truly have, and I want us to be close the way you and Siana are close."
I was so flabbergasted I couldn't think of anything to say, and that's not an everyday occurrence. I opened my mouth, then closed it again when my brain remained in neutral.
"I was jealous of you," she continued, still talking fast, as if she had to get it all out before her courage failed. "You were always so popular and even *my* friends thought you were the coolest person they knew; they all tried to do their hair like yours, and buy the shade of lipstick you wore. It was sickening."
Now *there* was the Jenni I knew. I felt comforted, knowing the aliens hadn't taken over my little sister's body. Wyatt was sitting quietly, taking in every word, his gaze sharp. I wished he would go into another room, but I figured I had a better chance of growing wings and flying.
"You were the best cheerleader, you were cute, you were athletic, you were the class salutatorian, you went to college on a cheerleading scholarship, you pulled down really good grades and got a degree in business administration, and you married the handsomest guy I'd ever seen," she wailed. "He's going to be governor someday, maybe a senator or even president, and he fell into your hand like a ripe plum! I was so *jealous*, because no matter how pretty I am I'll never be able to do everything you did and I thought Mom and Dad loved you more. Even Siana loves you more! So that's why when Jason made a pass at me, I took him up on it; because if he was looking at me, then it must be because you weren't that great after all, and I *was*."
"What happened?" Wyatt interjected quietly.
"Blair caught Jason and me kissing," she confessed in a wretched tone. "That's all it was, and that was the first time, but everything blew up at once and they got divorced. It's all my fault, and I want to make it up to her."
"You'll have to find another way," he said, his words matter-of-fact. "There's no way in hell I'd set up either you or Blair as bait. If we used that plan at all, one of our female officers would masquerade as Blair. We'd never risk a civilian."
Jenni looked stricken that her grand plan should be so summarily turned down, not just by me but by Wyatt, too; in the end, his was the approval that counted, because he had the authority to either nix the plan or put it into motion. He'd nixed it.

“There must be something I can do,” she said, and a tear streaked down her face. She looked pleadingly at me.
“Well, let’s see.” By this time I’d found my voice. I tapped my bottom lip with a fingernail while I thought. “You could wash my car every Saturday for the next year—after I get a car, that is. Or you could regrout my bathroom, because I really hate doing that.”
She blinked at me as if she couldn’t quite make her mind wrap itself around what I was saying. Then she giggled. In the middle of the giggle she hiccuped a sob, and that was a very strange sound combination. It startled me into my own giggle—which I’ve tried hard to stop doing because of the image thing. I’m blond; I really shouldn’t giggle.
Anyway, we ended up hugging and laughing, and she apologized five or six times, and I told her she was family and I’d choose her over Jason Carson any day because he was a lowlife bastard who made a pass at his seventeen-year-old sister-in-law and I was better off without him.
Whew. Family dramas wear me out.
Wyatt had to take Jenni home. They asked me to come along, but I elected to stay because I felt that I needed some alone time to get my emotions settled. I had tried to forgive Jenni and to some extent I had, because the lion’s share of blame belonged to Jason; he’d been an adult, and married, while teenagers aren’t the best in the world at making rational decisions. Still, it had always been there in the back of my mind that my own sister had betrayed me. I had tried to act normally toward her, but I guess she knew there was a difference between Before and After. What surprised me most was that she cared. No, what really surprised me most was that she’d ever been jealous of me; Jenni is gorgeous, and has always been gorgeous, from the day she was born. I’m smart, but not as smart as Siana. I’m pretty, but not in the same class with Jenni. I was sort of middle-of-the-road in our family. Why on earth would she be jealous?
I started to call Siana to talk things over with her, but decided that I’d keep this private between Jenni and me. If she was serious about mending our relationship—*really* mending it—then I wasn’t going to sabotage the opportunity by maybe blabbing something she wasn’t comfortable with others knowing.
Wyatt was back within the hour. His dark brows were drawn down in a scowl when he came in the door. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me you blackmailed your ex into giving you everything you asked for in the

divorce? Don't you think that's something that could be considered as motive?"
"Except Jason didn't shoot at me," I pointed out. "And he thinks he got the negative."
He did the green-eyed laser look. "He *thinks*?"
I blinked my eyes at him, and put on my most innocent expression. "I mean, he knows he got the negative."
"Uh-huh. Does he *know* he got all of the copies?"
"Um . . . he thinks he did, and that's what's important, right?"
"So you blackmailed him, then double-crossed him."
"I look at it more as insurance. Anyway, I've never needed to use the picture and he doesn't know it still exists. I haven't had any contact with him since our divorce was final, and that was five years ago. That was why I knew Jason wasn't trying to kill me, because he wouldn't have any reason to."
"Except he does have reason to."
"Well, he would if he knew, but he doesn't."
He pinched the bridge of his nose, as if I'd given him a headache. "Where are the copies?"
"In my safe deposit box. There's no way anyone saw them by accident, and no one else knows I have them, not even my family."
"Okay. I strongly suggest that, when this is over and you can come out of hiding, that you get those copies and destroy them."
"I can do that," I allowed.
"I know you can. The question is: Will you? Promise me."
I scowled at him. "I said I would."
"No, you said you could. There's a difference. Promise me."
"Oh, all right. I promise I'll destroy the pictures."
"Without making any extra copies."
Sheesh, he wasn't the most trusting guy in the world. It pissed me off that he'd thought of that, too. Either Dad had been giving him advice again, or he had an unnaturally suspicious mind.
"Without making any extra copies," he repeated.
"All right!" I snapped, and made plans to maybe accidentally drop his television remote in the toilet.
"Good." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Now, are there any other little secrets you're keeping from me, anyone else you're blackmailing, any

revenge thing going on that you neglected to mention because you didn't think it was relevant?"
"No, Jason's the only person I've ever blackmailed. And he deserved it."
"He deserved worse than that. He needed to have his ass kicked up around his shoulders."
Slightly mollified by those sentiments, I shrugged. "Daddy would have done it, so we didn't tell him why Jason and I got divorced. That was to protect Daddy, not Jason." No way was stomping Jason worth my dad spending even one minute under arrest for assault, which is what would have happened, because Jason is the petulant type and he'd have filed charges.
"Agreed." Wyatt watched me for a moment, then gave a rueful little shake of his head and pulled me into his arms. Comforted, I slid my arms around his waist and laid my head on his chest, and he rested his cheek on top of my head. "Now I understand why you need so much reassurance," he murmured. "That was a big hit you took, finding your husband kissing your sister."
If there's anything I hate, it's people feeling sorry for me. In this case, there was no need. I'd moved on, and left Jason in my dust. But I couldn't say, "Oh, it didn't really bother me," because that would have been a big fat lie and he'd have known it and thought I still hurt so much I couldn't let myself admit it. So I muttered, "I got over it. And I got the Mercedes." Except I didn't have my Mercedes now, because it was just a hunk of crushed and twisted metal.
"You may have gotten over the hurt, but you didn't get over the experience. It made you wary."
Now he was making me sound like some poor wounded bird. I pulled back and scowled up at him. "I'm not wary; I'm smart. There's a difference. I want to be sure there's something solid between us before I sleep with you __"
"Too late," he said, and grinned.
I sighed. "I know," I said, and laid my head back on his chest. "Gentlemen don't gloat."
"What does that tell you?"
It told me he was way too cocky, and I needed to shore up my defenses. There was a big problem, though: I didn't want to shore them up; I wanted to tear them down. Common sense said I might as well abandon my stance

on not sleeping with him, since I was doing nothing but wasting my breath. On the other hand, it went against the grain to let him have his way in everything.
“It tells me I should probably go stay in a motel in another town,” I said, just to wipe the smile off his face.
It worked.
“What?” he snapped. “What gave you a harebrained idea like that?”
“I should be perfectly safe in another town, right? I could check in under a fake name, and—”
“Forget it,” he said. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you run away.”
Then he realized that I now had wheels, and he had no control over what I did during the day while he was at work. He didn’t anyway, because if I wanted to leave, all I had to do was pick up the phone and call any of my family and they would come pick me up. For that matter, his own mother would, too. “Ah, shit,” he finished.
He was so eloquent.

Chapter Twenty-five

I had a nightmare that night, which isn’t surprising considering all that had happened. Probably I should already have had several nightmares, but my subconscious is as good at ignoring things as my conscious is. I don’t have many nightmares; my dreams are usually about everyday stuff, with weird little details, because that’s what dreams are for, right? Like I’d be at Great Bods trying to take care of a mountain of paperwork, but the members would keep interrupting me because half of them wanted to be able to ride the stationary bikes in the nude, and the other half thought this would be a total gross-out, which it would. Stuff like that.
I didn’t dream about being shot. There was nothing to dream about that, except the sound and then the burning in my arm, which isn’t very much to build on, but the auto accident had a wealth of details for my subconscious to resurrect. I didn’t dream about going through another stop sign; instead I was in my red Mercedes, the one I had got when Jason and I divorced and had since traded in for the white one, and I was driving over a high, arching bridge when all of a sudden the car went out of control and started spinning. Car after car kept hitting me, and each hit knocked me closer and closer to

the rail, and then I knew the next one would push me over. I saw that last car coming at me, in slow motion; then there was a horrible jolt and my red Mercedes hit the guardrail and tipped over it.

I woke with a start, my heart pounding, and shaking all over. I was shaking, not my heart. Maybe my heart was, too, but I didn't have any way of knowing; all I could feel was pounding. And Wyatt was leaning over me, a big, protective shadow in the darkness of the room.

He stroked my belly, then gripped my waist and eased me into his arms. "Bad dream?"

"My car was knocked off a bridge," I muttered, still half asleep. "Bummer."

"Yeah, I can see where it would be." He had his own technique of comforting, and it involved tucking me under him. I wrapped my legs around his hips and pulled him close.

"Do you feel okay enough for this?" he murmured, but he was a tad late with the question because he was already sliding inside me.

"Yes," I answered anyway.

He was careful, or tried to be. He kept his weight braced on his forearms and his strokes were slow and even—until the very end, when there was nothing slow or even about it. But he didn't hurt me, or if he did, I was too turned on to notice.

The next day was sort of a repeat of the one before, except I did more stretching and yoga and felt lots better. My left arm still hurt if I tried to pick up anything and put strain on the muscle, but I had pretty much full use of it if I kept the motions slow and didn't do any jerking around.

The bush Wyatt had bought for me was going to live, I thought, though it needed a full week of TLC before it would be able to stand the shock of being planted in the yard. Wyatt might not understand the concept of *house*plants, but he had bought it for me and I treasured the poor thing. I was getting cabin fever from my enforced inactivity, so I walked around outside and selected the spot where I wanted the bush planted. Because of the age of the house, the landscaping around it was mature and lush, but it was all shrubbery and no flowers, so it would benefit from some color. It was too late in the season now to plant flowers. Next year, though . . .

The heat and sun felt good on my skin. I was bored with being an invalid and craved the high of a good workout. I wanted to go to work so much I ached, and it made me angry that I couldn't.

The dream from the night before kept nagging at me. Not the part about going over the bridge, but the fact that it was the red Mercedes, which I had traded over two years ago. If you believe in the prophetic nature of dreams, that probably meant something, but I didn't have a clue what it could be. That I regretted not getting another red car, maybe? That I thought white was too boring? I don't, and anyway white was more practical in the south because of the heat.

In terms of coolness—the quality, not the temperature—I would even rank red third, with white second, and black first. There's just something about a black car that makes a statement of power. Red was sporty, white was sexy and elegant, and black was powerful. Maybe my new car would be black, if I ever got a chance to shop for one.

Because I was bored, I rearranged the furniture in the family room, pushing the furniture around with my legs and my right arm, and just for the hell of it moved Wyatt's recliner from its place of honor in front of the television. There was nothing wrong with the way he'd had it arranged and I didn't care if his recliner took the prime spot, but like I said, I was bored.

Since I'd opened Great Bods, I seldom had the time to watch much television, except for maybe the eleven o'clock news at night, so I'd gotten out of the habit. Wyatt didn't know that, though. I might be able to have some fun whining about missing my favorite shows, which of course would be on the channels like Lifetime, Home and Garden, and Oxygen. The bad part about that was, if I won the battle for the remote, I'd have to watch the shows, too. There's always a catch.

I went out to the road and fetched the newspaper from the box, and then sat down in the kitchen and read every item. I needed some books. I needed to go shopping and buy some makeup or shoes. New makeup and shoes always lift my spirits. I needed to find out what Britney was doing these days, because that girl's life was such a mess she made getting shot at look downright sane.

Wyatt didn't even have any flavored coffee. All in all, his house was woefully ill-equipped to keep me satisfied.

By the time he came home that afternoon, I was ready to climb the walls. Out of sheer frustration I had even started another list of his transgressions, and the number one item was his lack of my favorite coffee. If I was going to stay there for the duration, I wanted to be comfortable. I also needed

more of my clothes, and my favorite bath gel, and my scented shampoo, and all sorts of things.
He kissed me hello, then said he was going upstairs to change clothes. To get to the stairs, you have to go through the family room. I stayed in the kitchen, and listened to his footsteps come to a dead stop as he registered the change in his living environment.
He raised his voice and called, “What’s with the furniture?”
“I was bored,” I called back.
He muttered something that I couldn’t understand, and I heard him continue upstairs.
I’m not a helpless decoration. I had also gone through the contents of his refrigerator and found some hamburger meat in the freezer section. I’d browned the meat and made spaghetti sauce. Because he never came home at the same time two days in a row, I hadn’t put on the spaghetti to boil, so I did that now. He didn’t have rolls, but he did have loaf bread, and I buttered the slices and sprinkled them with garlic powder and cheese. Something else he didn’t have was the makings for a green salad. This was not what I considered a healthy meal, but considering the contents of his pantry and refrigerator, it was either that or beans from a can.
He came downstairs wearing only a pair of jeans, and my mouth watered when I saw him, with those tight abs and that muscled, hairy chest. To keep from drooling and embarrassing myself, I turned away and slid the baking sheet with the slices of bread on it into the oven. By the time they were nicely browned, the spaghetti would be done.
“This smells good,” he said as he set the table.
“Thank you. But unless we go grocery shopping, there’s nothing else to cook. What do you usually eat for supper?”
“I usually eat out. Breakfast here, supper out. It’s easier that way, because by the end of the day I’m tired and don’t want to fool with cooking.”
“I can’t eat out,” I said grumpily.
“Well, you could, if we go to another town. Want to do that tomorrow? That would count as a date, right?”
“No, it won’t.” I thought we’d covered that ground at the beach. “You eat anyway. A date would be if we did something you don’t normally do, like go to a play or a ballroom dancing exhibition.”
“How about a ball game?” he countered.

“There’s nothing going on now except baseball, and it’s stupid. There aren’t any cheerleaders. When it’s football season, then we’ll talk.”
He let my insult to baseball pass and instead filled our glasses with ice, then poured tea into them. “Forensics found something today,” he said abruptly.
I turned off the heat under the spaghetti. He sounded puzzled, as if he didn’t know what to make of whatever it was forensics had found. “What?”
“A couple of hairs, caught in the underside of your car. It’s a miracle they’re still there, considering the shape your car is in.”
“What can a couple of hairs tell you?” I asked. “If you had a suspect you could test for DNA, they would come in handy, but you don’t.”
“They’re dark, so they tell us the person is a brunette. And they’re about ten inches long, so that raises the strong possibility that we’re looking for a woman after all. Not a certainty, because a lot of men have long hair, but they’re testing the hairs for hair spray and styling gel, that sort of stuff. That should help, because not many men around here use stuff like that.”
“Jason does,” I pointed out.
“Jason is a girlie bastard with more vanity than brains,” was his succinctly delivered opinion.
Man, he didn’t like Jason. It warmed my heart.
“Do you know any women with dark hair who might want to kill you?” he asked.
“I know a lot of women with dark hair. It’s the last part that throws me.” I shrugged helplessly. The whole thing was a puzzle. “I haven’t even had a parking lot incident in years.”
“The reason may not be anything recent,” Wyatt said. “When Nicole Goodwin was murdered and you were named as a witness, someone probably saw an opportunity to kill you and blame it on Nicole’s killer. But Dwayne Bailey confessed to the murder, so there’s no reason for him to kill you.”
“Then why didn’t this person stop when he was arrested? Obviously it can’t be blamed on him, now.”
“Maybe, since she didn’t get caught, she figures she can do it and get away with it.”
“Have you thought about your dates for this past year or so?” I asked. “Were any of them brunette?”
“Yeah, sure, but I’m telling you, there was nothing serious going on.”

“Haul ’em all in and question them anyway,” I said in exasperation. This had to be personal, because I hadn’t done any of the other things that provide the usual motives for murder.
“How about the guys you’ve dated? Maybe one of them had an ex who was crazy about him—’crazy’ being the important word here—and got a real hate going for you when her guy started dating you.”
“That’s possible, I suppose.” I mulled it over. “I don’t remember anyone mentioning a crazy ex-girlfriend, though. No one said anything about being stalked, and this type of person would be a stalker, right?”
“Maybe, maybe not. We have to look at everything now, so I’ll need a list of everyone you’ve dated in the past couple of years.”
“Okay. Let’s start with you.” I smiled sweetly at him. “Let’s check out your girlfriends.”
You can see we weren’t going anywhere with that subject, so we abandoned it while we ate supper and cleaned up the dishes afterward. Then Wyatt shoved his recliner back in front of the television and settled in it with the newspaper, happy as a clam. I stood in front of him and glowered until he finally put the paper down and said, “What?”
“I’m bored. I haven’t left this house in two days.”
“That’s because you’re smart. Someone is trying to kill you, so you should stay where you can’t be seen.”
Did he think *that* was going to deflect me? “I could have gone somewhere today, to other towns, but I thought you would worry if I went out by myself.”
He gave a brief nod. “You’re right.”
“You’re here now.”
He sighed. “All right. What do you want to do?”
“I don’t know. Something.”
“That narrows it down. How about a movie? We can make the nine o’clock showing in Henderson. That’ll count as a date, right?”
“Right.” Henderson was a town about thirty miles away. It was almost seven now, so I went upstairs to get ready. The bruising on my face was already turning yellowish, thanks to Mom, and I used enough concealer to hide most of it. Then I dressed in long pants and a short-sleeved blouse, and tied the ends of the blouse at my waist. I brushed my hair, put on earrings, and I was set.

Wyatt, of course, was still reading the newspaper. And he was still half-naked.
“I’m ready,” I announced.
He glanced at his wristwatch. “We have plenty of time.” He went back to reading.
I found my list and added *inattentive.* You’d think he’d have wanted to make a better impression on our first date in two years. See, I knew sleeping with him so soon had been a big mistake. Already he was taking me for granted.
“I think I’ll move into one of the other bedrooms,” I mused aloud.
“Jesus. Okay. We’ll leave.” He dropped the paper to the floor and took the stairs two at a time.
I picked up the paper and sat down in his recliner. I’d already read it, of course, but I had no idea what movies were currently out. The listings were for our town, but I figured Henderson would have the same ones.
I was in the mood to laugh, and there was a new romantic comedy out that looked both cute and sexy. Wyatt came down the stairs, buttoning a white shirt. He stopped and unzipped, then tucked in his shirttail and zipped back up. “What do you want to see?” he asked.
“*Prenup.* It looks funny.”
He groaned. “I’m not going to see a chick flick.”
“Well, what do you want to see?”
“That one about the mob after the survivalist guy looks good.”
“End of the Road?”
“Yeah, that’s it.”
“We’re set, then.” Wyatt’s choice was a typical shoot-em-up, with the hero fighting for his life in the mountains, and of course there was the requisite half-naked beautiful woman whom he rescues, though why he’d bother when she’s always so cosmically stupid was beyond me. But if Wyatt liked it, that was his choice.
We went in the Taurus, and I breathed a sigh of relief at the change of scenery. The sun was very low, the afternoon shadows long, and the heat still intense enough that the car’s air-conditioning was working full blast. I angled the cold air toward my face because I didn’t want to sweat off the concealer over my bruises.
We arrived at the theater almost half an hour before showtime, so Wyatt cruised the streets for a little while. Henderson was about fifteen thousand

people, just big enough to have the one four-screen theater. It was a nice theater, though, renovated a couple of years back to stadium seating. Being a typical man, Wyatt hated waiting for a movie to start, so we made it back to the theater with just five minutes to spare.

"My treat," I said, taking out my money and stepping up to the ticket window. "One for *Prenup* and one for *End of the Road*." I slid a twenty in the window.

"What?" I heard Wyatt say in outraged tones behind me, but I ignored him. The ticket clerk tore both tickets and pushed the two stubs through the window, along with my change.

I turned and gave him his ticket. "This way we can both see what we want," I said reasonably, and led the way inside. Luckily, both movies started within minutes of each other.

He looked furious, but he went off to watch his choice and I sat in the dark by myself and had a very nice time, watching silly antics and not worrying about whether or not he was bored. The sex scenes were nice and hot, too, just the way I like them. They made me think about jumping Wyatt's bones on the way home; I hadn't made out in a car since I was a teenager, and the Taurus had a respectable backseat. Not a great one, but respectable. Nice suspension, too.

When the movie was over, I walked out smiling, having enjoyed the hour and fifty minutes. I had to wait a little while for Wyatt's movie to finish, but I passed the time by looking at all the posters.

The movie hadn't improved his mood any; he was still scowling like a thundercloud when he came out about ten minutes later. Without a word he seized my arm and marched me to the car.

"What in hell was that about?" he barked when we were in the car and no one else could hear him. "I thought we were going to see the same movie."

"No, you didn't want to see the movie I was interested in, and I didn't want to see the one you liked. We're both adults; we can go into movie theaters by ourselves."

"The whole idea was to spend time together, to go out on a *date*," he said between clenched teeth. "If you didn't want to see the movie with me, we could have stayed at home."

"But I wanted to see *Prenup*."

"You could have seen it later; it'll be on television in a few months."

“The same goes for *End of the Road.* You didn’t have to sit in there if you didn’t want to; you could have watched the other one with me.”
“And been bored out of my mind by a chick flick?”
His attitude was getting to me. I crossed my arms and glared at him. “If you won’t watch a chick flick with me, give me one good reason why I should watch a dick flick with you. Unless I want to see it, too, that is.”
“And everything has to be your way, huh?”
“Now wait just a damn minute. I was perfectly happy watching the movie on my own; I didn’t insist you go with me. If anyone is insisting on things being her way, it’s you. ‘His way,’ I mean.”
He ground his teeth together. “I knew it would be like this. I knew it. You’re so damned high maintenance—”
“I am *not*!” I was abruptly so furious with him I could have smacked him, except I’m a nonviolent person. Most of the time.
“Honey, if you look up ‘high maintenance’ in the dictionary, your picture is there. You want to know why I walked away two years ago? Because I knew it would be like this, and I figured I could save myself a lot of trouble by getting out early.”
He was so angry he was practically spitting out the words. My mouth fell open. “You threw us away because I’m *high maintenance*?” I shrieked the words. I’d thought his reason would be something deep, something important, like maybe he’d been going on an undercover job and he’d made a clean break with me in case he got killed, or something. But he’d dumped me because he thought I was high maintenance?
I grabbed the shoulder strap of my seat belt and twisted it as hard as I could, to keep myself from doing the same thing to his neck, or trying to. Since he outweighed me by about eighty pounds, I didn’t know how that would turn out. Well, I did know, and that’s why I strangled my seat belt instead of him.
“If I am high maintenance, you don’t have to worry about it!” I shouted at him. “Because I don’t depend on anyone; I take care of myself and do my own maintenance! I’ll get out of your hair and you can go back to your nice peaceful life—”
“Fuck that,” he said savagely, and kissed me. I was so angry I tried to bite him. He jerked back, laughed, and kissed me again. He threaded his fingers through my hair and tugged my head back, exposing my neck.
“Don’t you dare!” I tried to wriggle away from him, releasing my grip on the seat belt to push against his shoulders.

He dared, of course.
“I don’t want a nice peaceful life,” he said against my throat a few minutes later. “You’re a lot of trouble, but I love you and that’s that.”
Then he settled me back in my seat, started the car, and drove out of the parking lot before we drew someone’s attention and the cops were called to us. I was still pouting and near tears, and I don’t know how far he drove before he pulled off the road and parked the car behind some big trees where it couldn’t be seen from the road.
Oh, a Taurus has very nice suspension.

Chapter Twenty-six

You’d think that because he said he loved me I’d be happy as a lark, but he’d made it sound as if I were a dose of nasty-tasting medicine that he had to take or die. Never mind that he’d made love to me in the backseat of the car as if he couldn’t get enough of me; my feelings were hurt. Not only that, after I had a chance to think about it, I was very uneasy about the state of that backseat. I mean, the car’s a rental; there was no telling *what* had been back there, and now my bare butt had been added to the list.
I didn’t speak to him all the way home, and as soon as we were inside, I raced up the stairs to take a shower, just in case I’d picked up some rental-car cooties. Well, I hurried up the stairs; I still wasn’t in racing shape. I also locked the bathroom door so he couldn’t join me in the shower, because I knew how that would end and I hate being a pushover.
I should have planned ahead and taken some clean clothes into the bathroom with me, but I didn’t, so I had to put on what I had just taken off. No way was I walking out with only a towel wrapped around me. I knew Wyatt Bloodsworth, and his motto was: Take Advantage.
He was waiting for me when I came out of the bathroom, of course, leaning against the wall as patiently as if he didn’t have anything else in the world to do. He didn’t shy from an argument; I’d noticed that about him.
“This isn’t going to work,” I said, forestalling him. “We can’t even go to the movies without getting in a major argument, which you then try to solve with sex.”
His brows lifted. “There’s a better way?”
“That’s just like a man. Women don’t like to have sex when they’re angry.”

The brows went even higher. “You could have fooled me,” he drawled, which wasn’t the smartest thing he could have said.
My lower lip quivered. “You shouldn’t throw that up to me. It isn’t my fault you have my number, but when you know I can’t resist you, it’s really snotty of you to take advantage the way you do.”
A slow smile curved his lips and he straightened from the wall. “Do you have any idea what a major turn-on it is when you admit you can’t resist me?” Quick as a snake he coiled one arm around my waist and locked me to him. “Do you know what I think about during the day?”
“Sex,” I said, staring straight ahead at his chest.
“Well, yeah. Some of the time. A lot of the time. But also how you make me laugh, and how good it is to wake up beside you in the morning and come home to you at night. I love you, and swapping you for the most even-tempered, uncomplicated, low-maintenance woman in the world wouldn’t make me happy because the spark wouldn’t be there.”
“Uh-huh,” I said sarcastically. “That’s why you dumped me and stayed away for two whole years.”
“I got cold feet.” He shrugged. “I admit it. After just two dates I could tell there would never be a peaceful minute around you, so I decided to cut my losses before I got in too deep. At the speed we were going, I figured we’d be in bed within a week, and married before I knew what was going on.”
“So what’s different this time around? *I’m* not.”
“Thank God. I love you just the way you are. I guess I faced the fact that no matter how much trouble you are, to me you’re worth it. That’s why I’ll chase after you when you go to the beach, why I didn’t walk out of the movie theater even though I was so mad I don’t remember a single thing about the movie, and why I’ll move heaven and earth to keep you safe.”
I wasn’t ready to stop being mad, but I could feel my temper slipping away. I tried to hold on to it, and scowled at his shirt so he wouldn’t know his sweet-talking was working.
“Every day I learn a little more about you,” he murmured, pulling me closer so he could nuzzle my temple. I hunched my shoulders to keep him from getting at my neck, and he laughed softly. “And every day I fall a little more in love. You’ve also eased some tension in the department, because the guys who resented me before are now sympathizing with me.”
I scowled harder, but this time it was real. He needed sympathy because he loved me? “I’m not that bad.”

“You’re hell on wheels, honey, and they figure I’m going to spend the rest of my life scrambling to put out your forest fires. They’re right, too.” He kissed my forehead. “But I’ll never be bored, and I’ll have your dad to teach me the finer points of surviving in the middle of a tornado. C’mon,” he cajoled, moving his lips to my ear. “I bit the bullet first. You might as well say it: you love me, too. I know you do.”

I fidgeted and fussed, but his arms were warm and the smell of his skin was making me dizzy with want. Finally I heaved a sigh. “All right,” I said sulkily. “I love you. But don’t think for a minute that means I’m going to turn into a Stepford wife.”

“Like there was ever a snowball’s chance in hell of that happening,” he said wryly. “But you can bet the farm that you’re going to be my wife. I’ve been serious about that from the beginning . . . the second beginning, that is. Thinking you might have been killed was a real eye-opener for me.”

“Which time?” I asked, blinking at him. “There’ve been three.”

He squeezed me. “The first time. I’ve had enough scares in the past week to last me a lifetime.”

“Oh, yeah? You should try it from my side of the situation.” I gave up and leaned my head on his chest. My heart was doing that flutter thing he could make it do, but in stereo. Confused, I concentrated, and abruptly realized that I was hearing his heartbeat while I was feeling mine—and his was racing, too.

Delight bloomed in me, filled me like water in a balloon until I felt all swollen with it, which may not be a really great description but kind of fits, because I felt as if my insides were too big for my skin. I tilted my head back and gave him a huge beaming smile. “You love me!” I said triumphantly.

He looked faintly wary. “I know. I said so, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but you really do!”

“You thought I was lying?”

“No, but hearing and feeling are two different things.”

“And you’re feeling . . .” He let the words trail off, inviting me to fill in the blank.

“Your heartbeat.” I patted his chest. “It’s jumping around just like mine.”

His expression changed, became tender. “It does that whenever I’m anywhere near you. At first I thought I was developing arrhythmia, but then I realized it acts up only when you’re around. I was about to go in for tests.”

He was exaggerating, but I didn't care. He loved me. I had longed for and hoped for and dreamed of this practically from the moment I'd met him, and he had devastated me by dumping me the way he had. Oh, I'd have been devastated no matter how he'd done it, but he'd really done a number on me by not telling me *why.* I'd made things as difficult as possible for him this past week because he deserved it for treating me the way he had, and I didn't regret one moment of it. I just wished I could have made things even tougher by not rolling over for him every time he touched me, but what the hell; sometimes you just have to go with the flow.

"Do you want to get married as soon as we can, or do you want to plan some sort of shindig?" he asked.

There wasn't any doubt which one he'd prefer. I cocked my head and thought about it for a minute. I'd had the big church wedding and loved every minute of it, but church weddings are a lot of trouble and cost a lot of money—and they take time to plan. I was glad I'd gone through it once, even though the marriage itself hadn't held up, but I didn't feel any need to go through all of that pomp and ceremony again. On the other hand, I wanted more than just a quickie marriage.

"Shindig," I said, and he managed to stifle his groan. I patted his arm. "But not a big one. We have to think of our families and have some sort of to-do, but we don't have to do a big deal with ice sculptures and a champagne fountain. Something small, no more than thirty people—if that many—maybe in your mother's garden. Would she like that, or would she be terrified her flowers would get trampled?"

"She'd love it. She loves showing off that house."

"Good. Wait, what if you can't find out who's shooting at me and tampering with my car? What if I have to stay in hiding until *Christmas*? There won't be any flowers then, and besides, it'll be too cold to have a garden wedding. We can't even pick out a date!" I wailed. "We can't plan anything until this is settled."

"If we have to, we'll take the entire family to Gatlinburg and get married in one of those little wedding chapels."

"You want me to get ready in a motel?" I asked, my tone letting him know I wasn't crazy about that idea.

"Don't see why not. You aren't planning on wearing one of those long, big-skirted things, are you?"

I wasn't, but still . . . I wanted my stuff around me when I was getting ready. What if I needed something and had forgotten to pack it? Things like that can ruin a woman's memories of her wedding.
"I have to call Mom," I said, pulling away from him and going to the phone.
"Blair . . . it's after midnight."
"I know. But she'll be hurt if I don't tell her right away."
"How will she know? Call her in the morning and tell her we decided over breakfast."
"She'll see through that in a heartbeat. You don't decide to get married over breakfast; you decide to get married after a hot date with making out and stuff."
"Yeah, I really liked that 'stuff' part," he said reminiscently. "It's been eighteen, nineteen years since I'd done it in the backseat of a car. I'd forgotten how fucking uncomfortable it is, and vice versa."
I started dialing.
"Do you want your mom to know about the 'stuff' part?"
I gave him a "you're kidding me" look. "Like there's any way she doesn't already know."
Mom answered on the first ring, sounded harassed. "Blair? Is something wrong?"
Caller ID is a wonderful thing. It saved so much time, bypassing the need for identification. "No, I just wanted to tell you that Wyatt and I have decided to get married."
"What's the big surprise about that? He told us when we first met him in the hospital, when you were shot, that y'all were getting married."
My head whipped around and I glared at him. "He did, huh? Funny thing, he didn't mention it to me until tonight."
Wyatt shrugged and looked totally unrepentant. I could tell I was going to have my hands full with him over the years. He was way too sure of himself.
"Well, I wondered why you hadn't said anything," Mom said. "I was beginning to feel hurt."
"He'll pay for that," I said grimly.
"Oh, shit," Wyatt said, knowing good and well I was talking about him, but without knowing exactly what his transgression was. He could probably get in the ballpark, since he knew what we were talking about, but he hadn't yet realized what a no-no it was to hurt Mom's feelings.

“There are two schools of thought concerning these situations,” Mom said, meaning she had considered two angles of approach. “One is that you come down hard on him, so he’ll learn how to handle things and won’t make that mistake again. The second is that you cut him some slack because he’s new to this.”
“ ‘Slack’? What’s that?”
“That’s my girl,” she said approvingly.
“Why are you still awake? You answered the phone so fast you must have been sleeping with it.” I was a tad curious, because Mom always slept with the phone when she was anxious about any of us. It was a habit she developed when I started dating at the age of fifteen.
“I haven’t slept with the phone since Jenni graduated high school. No, I’m still working on these damn quarterly taxes, and this stupid computer keeps freezing on me, then losing touch with its parts. Now it’s typing gibberish. I’d love to send in the taxes typed in code, since the IRS instructions and rules are so clear even they don’t know what they’re doing. How do you think that would fly?”
“It wouldn’t. The IRS has no sense of humor.”
“I know,” she said glumly. “I could have done this by hand much faster if I’d known this stupid machine was going to go bananas, but all of my files are in the computer. From now on I’m going to keep a paper copy.”
“Don’t you have a backup disk?”
“Well, of course. Ask me if it’ll work.”
“I think you’ve got a major problem.”
“I know I do, and I’m just about fed up with the whole mess. But it’s become a point of honor now not to let this demented monster win.” Meaning she would keep at it way past the point where any normal person would have thrown in the towel and taken the thing to a computer hospital.
Then I thought of something, and looked at Wyatt. “Is it okay if I tell Mom about the hair y’all found?”
He briefly thought about it, then nodded.
“What hair?” Mom asked.
“Forensics found some dark hair, about ten inches long, stuck under my car. Can you think of anyone with dark hair about that length who might want to kill me?”
“Hmmm.” That was Mom’s thinking sound. “Is it black hair, or just dark?”

I relayed the question to Wyatt. He got that expression that said he wanted to ask what the difference was, but then he thought about it and realized the difference. “I’d say black,” he said.
“Black,” I relayed.
“Natural or dyed?”
Mom was on a roll here. I said to him, “Natural or dyed?”
“We don’t know yet. The evidence will have to be analyzed.”
“The jury’s still out on that,” I said to Mom. “Have you thought of someone?”
“Well, there’s Malinda Connors.”
“That was thirteen years ago, when I beat her out for Homecoming Queen. Surely she’s over it by now.”
“I don’t know about that; she always struck me as a vindictive girl.”
“But too impatient. She couldn’t have waited this long.”
“That’s true. Hmmm. It has to be someone who’s jealous of you about something. Ask Wyatt who he was dating before y’all started going together.”
“I’ve already thought of that. He says there aren’t any candidates.”
“Unless he lived like a monk, there are candidates.”
“I know, but he won’t even give me their names for me to check out on my own.”
He came to sit beside me on the bed, looking worried. “What are y’all talking about?”
“You and your women,” I said, turning my shoulder to him and scooting farther away so he couldn’t eavesdrop.
“I don’t *have* any women,” he said in exasperation.
“Did you hear that?” I asked Mom.
“I heard it; I just don’t believe it. Ask him how long he was celibate before he met you.”
Notice my mother assumed he was no longer celibate. The fact that she was so unconcerned about my current love life told me that she thoroughly approved of him, which is a big thing. Having Mom’s approval goes a long way toward keeping our family life smooth and happy.
I looked over my shoulder at him. “Mom wants to know how long it had been since you’d had any, prior to our engagement.”
He looked deeply alarmed. “She does not. She didn’t say that.”
“Yes, she did. Here. She’ll tell you herself.”

I extended the phone to him, and warily he took it. “Hello,” he said; then he listened. I watched two spots of color start to burn on his cheekbones. He put his hand over his eyes as if he wanted to hide from the question. “Uh . . . six weeks?” he said sheepishly. “Maybe. Could be a little longer. Here’s Blair.”

He couldn’t hand the phone back to me fast enough. I took it and asked, “What do you think?”

“Six weeks is a long time to wait if you’re crazy and fixated on someone,” Mom said. “He’s probably in the clear. What about you? Have you had any former semi-boyfriends who have since hooked up with some nutcase who may have developed intense jealousy over his former relationships?”

Semi-boyfriend means a couple of dates, maybe several, but nothing serious developed and we both sort of drifted out of each other’s orbit. Since Wyatt, I’d had a few of those, and at the moment I wasn’t certain I could even remember their names.

“I haven’t kept in touch, but I guess I can find out,” I said. If I could remember their names, that is.

“That’s the only other possibility I can think of,” Mom said. “Tell Wyatt he’d better get this settled in a hurry, because your grandmother’s birthday is coming up and we can’t celebrate if you’re still hiding out.”

After I hung up the phone, I relayed that message to him and he nodded his head as if he got it, but I’m pretty sure he was still in the dark about Grammy. He had no idea of the wrath that would come down on our heads if she felt the least slighted. She said that at her age she didn’t have many more birthdays left, so if we loved her, we’d better make the most of them. Grammy is Mom’s mother, if you haven’t already guessed. She’ll be seventy-four on her birthday, so she isn’t even all that old, but she plays on her age to get what she wants.

Huh. Genetics is a funny thing, isn’t it?

I gave him the beady eye. “So. What’s her name?”

He knew exactly whom I was talking about. “I knew it,” he said, shaking his head. “I knew you’d latch onto that like a leech. It was nothing. I ran into an old acquaintance at a conference and—it was nothing.”

“Except you slept with her,” I said accusingly.

“She has red hair,” he said. “And she’s a detective in—no, hell no, I’m not saying where she works. I know better than that. You’d be on the phone

with her tomorrow, either accusing her of attempted murder or comparing notes on me."
"If she's a cop, she knows how to shoot."
"Blair, trust me in this. Please. If I thought there was the slightest possibility she would do something like that, do you think I'd hesitate for a second before hauling her in for questioning?"
I sighed. He had a real knack for phrasing things in a way that left me little wiggle room, and he'd picked it up fast.
"But it's someone who's jealous of me," I said. "Mom's right. I'm right. It's something personal."
"I agree." He stood up and began stripping off his clothes. "But it's after midnight, I'm tired, you're tired, and we can talk about this after we get the analysis on the hair. Then we'll know if we're dealing with a real brunette or someone who may have dyed her hair as a disguise before acting."
He was right about the tired part, so I decided he was right about that, too. I pulled off my clothes and crawled naked between the cool sheets. He turned the thermostat down to Stage Two Hypothermia, turned out the lights, and got under the covers with me, which is when I found out he'd been lying about the tired part.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I dreamed about my red Mercedes again that night. There wasn't a bridge in this dream, just a woman standing in front of the car pointing a pistol at me. She didn't have black hair, though. Her hair was a light brown, the shade that is almost blond but doesn't quite get there. The weird thing was, I was parked at the curb in front of the apartment where Jason and I had lived when we first got married. We hadn't lived there long, maybe a year, before buying a house. When we divorced, I was happy to let Jason have the house and the attendant payments, in exchange for the capital to start Great Bods. Even though the woman was pointing a pistol at me, in my dream I wasn't very frightened. I was more exasperated with her for being so stupid than I was scared. Finally I just got out of the car and walked away, which shows you how silly dreams can be, because I would never have abandoned my Mercedes.

I woke up feeling puzzled, which is a strange way to feel when you just wake up. I was still in bed—obviously—so nothing had happened yet to puzzle me.

The room was so cold I was afraid my butt would get frostbite if I got out of bed. I don't know why Wyatt liked to turn the air-conditioning so cold at night, unless he was part Eskimo. I lifted my head so I could see the clock: five oh five. The alarm wouldn't go off for another twenty-five minutes, but if I was awake, I saw no reason why he shouldn't be awake, too. I poked him in the side.

"Uh. Ouch," he said groggily, and rolled over. His big hand rubbed my stomach. "Are you okay? Another bad dream?"

"No, I had a dream, but it wasn't a nightmare. I'm awake and the room feels like a meat locker. I'm afraid to get up."

He made a half-grunting, half-yawning noise, then got a look at the clock. "It isn't time to get up yet," he said, and burrowed back into the pillow.

I poked him again. "Yes, it is. I need to think about something."

"Can't you think while I sleep?"

"I could, if you didn't insist on putting a layer of frost on everything at night, and if I had a cup of coffee. I think you should turn the thermostat up to, say, forty, so I can start thawing out, and while you're up, you could get one of your flannel shirts or something for me to wear."

He groaned again, and flopped over on his back. "Okay, okay." Muttering something under his breath, he got out of bed and walked out into the hall where the upstairs thermostat was located. Within seconds, the blower stopped. The air was still cold, but at least it wasn't moving around. Then he came back into the bedroom and reached deep into his closet, coming out with something long and dark. He tossed it across the bed, then crawled back under the covers. "See you in twenty minutes," he mumbled, and just that easily went back to sleep.

I grabbed the long dark thing and pulled it around me. It was a robe, nice and thick. When I got out of bed and stood up, the heavy folds of fabric fell to my ankles. I belted it around me as I tiptoed out of the bedroom—I didn't want to disturb him—and turned on the light over the stairs so I wouldn't break my neck on the way down.

The coffeemaker was set to come on automatically at five twenty-five, but I didn't intend to wait that long. I flipped the switch, the little red light came

on, and the thing began the hissing and popping sounds that signal help is on the way.
I got a cup from the cabinet and stood there waiting. The floor was cold beneath my bare feet, making my toes curl. When we had kids, I thought, Wyatt would have to get out of the habit of turning the air-conditioning so low at night.
The bottom dropped out of my stomach, just the way it happens when you go over that first steep hill in a roller coaster, and a sense of unreality seized me. I felt as if I were occupying two planes of existence at the same time: the real world, and the dream world. My dream was Wyatt, had been from the moment I met him, but I had accepted that I'd lost my chance. Now, all of a sudden, the dream world was also the real world, and I was having a hard time taking it all in.
In a little over a week's time, everything had reversed. He said he loved me. He said we were getting married. I believed him on both counts, because he'd told my parents the same thing, and his mother, and the whole police force. Not only that, if his feelings for me were anything like my feelings for him, I could understand getting cold feet at first, because how do you deal with something like that?
Women can handle those things more easily than men, because we're tougher. After all, most of us grow up expecting to get pregnant and have kids, and when you think about what that really means to the female body, it's a wonder any woman ever lets a man within a country mile of her.
Men feel put upon because they have to shave their faces every day. Now, I ask you: In comparison to what women go through, is that wussy, or what?
Wyatt had wasted two *years* because he thought I was high maintenance. I'm not high maintenance. *Grammy* is high maintenance. Of course, she's had a lot more practice. I hope I'm just like her when I'm that age. What I am now is a reasonable, logical, adult woman who runs her own business and believes in a fifty-fifty relationship. It just so happens there'll be times when I'll have both fifties, such as when I'm shot or when I'm pregnant. But those are special occasions, right?
Enough coffee had dripped into the carafe to fill my cup. Thank heavens for the automatic cutoff on coffeemakers today. I pulled out the carafe, and only one little drop escaped to sizzle on the hot pad. After pouring the coffee, I slid the carafe back into place and leaned against the cabinets while I began to mentally worry at what had been puzzling me in my dream.

My feet were freezing, so after a moment I went into the family room and got the notebook in which I'd been listing Wyatt's transgressions, then curled up in his recliner with the robe tucked around my feet.

What Mom had said last night—well, a few hours ago—had triggered some chain of thought. The problem was, the links weren't connected yet; so technically, I guess, there wasn't a chain, because they have to be linked to make a chain, but the individual little chunks were lying there waiting for someone to put them together.

The thing was, she had said pretty much what I'd already been thinking, but phrased it just a little differently. And she had gone way back, all the way to my senior year in high school when Malinda Connors threw a screaming hissy fit because I was voted Homecoming Queen even though I was already Head Cheerleader and she thought it wasn't fair for me to be both. Not that Malinda would have gotten Homecoming Queen anyway, because she was, like, the poster girl for Skanks Unlimited, but she had a real high opinion of herself and thought I was the only obstacle in her path.

She hadn't tried to kill me, however. Malinda had married some moron and moved to Minneapolis. There's a song in there somewhere.

But Mom had started me thinking that the roots of this could go back quite a while. I'd been trying to think of something recent, such as Wyatt's last girlfriend, or my last boyfriend, which didn't make sense at all because *Wyatt* had been the last one who mattered and he hadn't even technically been a boyfriend, because he got cold feet so fast.

I started writing items down in the notebook. They were still the individual links, but sooner or later I'd hit on the one thing that turned them into a chain.

I heard the shower running upstairs and knew Wyatt was up. I turned on the television to check the local weather—hot, fancy that—then stared at the notebook some more while I pondered what I was going to do that day. I'd had enough of sitting in the house. The first day had been great; yesterday had been not so great. If I had to stay here all day again, I might get into all sorts of trouble, out of sheer boredom.

Besides, I felt fine. The stitches in my left arm had been in for seven days and the muscle was healing nicely. I could even dress myself. The soreness from the car accident was mostly gone, taken care of by yoga, ice packs, and general experience with sore muscles.

After about fifteen minutes Wyatt came down the stairs and saw me sitting in front of the television. “Making another list?” he asked warily as he approached.
“Yeah, but it isn’t yours.”
“You make lists of other people’s transgressions?” He sounded a little insulted, as if he thought he was the only one who deserved a list.
“No, I’m making a list of the evidence.”
He leaned over and kissed me good morning, then read the list. “Why is your red Mercedes on the list?”
“Because I’ve dreamed about it twice. That has to mean something.”
“Maybe that the white one is a total wreck and you wish you had the red one back?” He kissed me again. “What would you like for breakfast this morning? Pancakes again? French toast? Eggs and sausage?”
“I’m tired of guy food,” I said, getting to my feet and following him into the kitchen. “Why don’t you have any girl food? I need some girl food.”
He froze with the coffee carafe in his hand. “Women don’t eat the same things that men eat?” he asked cautiously.
Really, he was so exasperating. “Are you sure you were married? Don’t you know anything?”
He finished pouring his coffee and set the pot back on the hot pad. “I didn’t pay that much attention back then. *You’ve* been eating what I eat.”
“Just to be polite, because you were going to so much trouble to feed me.”
He thought about that for a minute, then said, “Let me drink my coffee and I’ll get back to you on this. In the meantime, I’m going to cook breakfast, and you’ll eat it because that’s all I have and I refuse to let you starve yourself.”
Man, he gets testy over the least little thing.
“Fruit,” I said helpfully. “Peaches. Grapefruit. Whole wheat bread for toast. And yogurt. Sometimes a cereal. That’s girl food.”
“I have cereal,” he said.
“A *healthy* cereal.” His taste in cereal ran to Froot Loops and Cap’n Crunch.
“Why worry about eating anything healthy? If you can eat yogurt and live, you can eat anything. That stuff’s disgusting. It’s almost as bad as cottage cheese.”
I agreed with him about the cottage cheese, so I didn’t leap to its defense. Instead I said, “You don’t have to eat it; you just need to have girl food here

for me to eat. If I'm going to stay, that is."
"You're staying, all right." He fished in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out something, which he tossed to me. "Here."
It was a small velvet box. I turned it over in my hand but didn't open it. If this was what I thought it was—I tossed the box right back at him. He fielded it one-handed and frowned at me. "Don't you want it?"
"Want what?"
"The engagement ring."
"Oh, is that what's in the box? You *threw* my engagement ring at me?" Boy, this was such a big transgression I would have to write it in block letters on its own page, and show it to our children when they grew up as an example of how *not* to do something.
He cocked his head while he gave this a brief consideration, then looked at me standing there barefoot, dwarfed by his robe, waiting narrow-eyed to see what he would do. He gave a quick little grin and came to me, catching my right hand in his and lifting it to his mouth. Then he went down gracefully on one knee and kissed my hand again. "I love you," he said gravely. "Will you marry me?"
"Yes, I will," I replied just as gravely. "I love you, too." Then I threw myself at him, which of course knocked him off balance, and we sprawled on the kitchen floor, except he was on bottom, so that was okay. We kissed for a while; then I sort of came unwrapped from the robe and what you might have expected to happen, happened.
Afterward he retrieved the velvet box from near the door, where it had skittered when he dropped it, and flipped the top open. Taking out a simple, breathtaking solitaire diamond, he took my left hand and gently slid the ring onto my ring finger.
I looked at the diamond and tears welled in my eyes. "Hey, don't cry," he cajoled, tilting my chin up to kiss me. "Why are you crying?"
"Because I love you and it's beautiful," I said, and gulped back my tears. Sometimes he did things just right, and when he did, it was almost more than I could bear. "When did you get it? I can't think when you would have had the time."
He snorted. "Last Friday. I've been carrying it around for a week."
Last *Friday*? The day after Nicole was murdered? Before he followed me to the beach? My mouth fell open.

He put a finger under my chin and pushed up, closing my mouth. “I was certain then. I was certain as soon as I saw you on Thursday night, sitting in your office with your hair up in a ponytail and wearing that little pink halter top that had all the men’s tongues dragging the ground. I was so relieved to find out you weren’t the one who’d been murdered that my knees nearly buckled, and I knew right then that all I’d been doing for two years was avoiding the inevitable. I made up my mind right then to get you corralled as soon as possible, and I bought the ring the next day.”

I tried to take this in. While I’d been busy protecting myself until he decided he loved me the way I knew he would if he just let himself, he’d already made up his mind and had been trying to convince *me.* Reality altered once more. At this rate, by the end of the day I wouldn’t have a real good grasp on what was real and what wasn’t.

Men and women may belong to the same species, but this was proof positive to me that we are Not Alike. That doesn’t really matter, though, because he was trying. He bought a bush for me, didn’t he? And a gorgeous ring.

“What are you doing today?” he asked over breakfast, which consisted of scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage. I ate about a third of what he did.

“I don’t know.” I twined my feet around the legs of the chair. “I’m bored. I’ll do something.”

He winced. “That’s what I was afraid of. Get ready and go to work with me. At least then I’ll know you’re safe.”

“No offense, but sitting in your office is even more boring than sitting here.”

“You’re tough,” he said unsympathetically. “You can take it.”

He wouldn’t take “no” for an answer; his track record on that so far was pretty damn consistent. So I decided my arm hurt after all our rolling around on the floor and he had to help me put on some makeup to cover my bruised cheekbones; then my hair just wouldn’t do what I wanted it to do and I told him he’d have to braid it. After two attempts, he growled something obscene and said, “All right, that’s it. You’ve punished me enough. We need to leave or I’ll be late.”

“You might as well learn how to braid hair,” I said, giving him the Big Eyes. “I just know our little girl will wear her hair in braids sometimes, and she’ll want her daddy to do it for her.”

He almost melted under the onslaught of Big Eyes and mention of a little girl; then he caught himself. He was made of some stern stuff, to withstand the double whammy. “We’re having all boys,” he said as he hauled me to my feet. “No girls. I’ll need all the reinforcements I can get without you bringing in a ringer.”
I grabbed my notebook before he hustled me out to the garage and practically stuffed me into the Crown Vic. If I had to sit in a police station, I might as well work on my clues.
When we got to City Hall and he ushered me into the police station, the first person I saw was Officer Vyskosigh. He was wearing street clothes, so I guessed he had just finished his shift. He stopped and gave me a little salute. “I enjoyed the dessert you sent, Ms. Mallory,” he said. “If I hadn’t been late getting off my shift, I wouldn’t have gotten any. Sometimes things work out for the better.”
“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I said, smiling at him. “If you don’t mind my asking, where do you work out? I can tell you do.”
He looked faintly startled, then preened a little. “The YMCA.”
“When this is over and I can go back to work, I’d like to show you around Great Bods. We offer some programs that the Y doesn’t, and my facilities are first-rate.”
“I looked around last week,” he said, nodding his head. “I was impressed with what I saw.”
Wyatt was gently herding me forward with his body, and as we turned the corner to the elevator, I looked past him and called, “Bye, now,” to Officer Vyskosigh.
“Would you stop flirting?” Wyatt growled.
“I wasn’t flirting. I was drumming up business.” The elevator doors opened and we stepped inside.
He pressed the button for his floor. “That was flirting. So cut it out.”
Chief Gray was talking with a group of detectives that included MacInnes and Forester, and he looked up when Wyatt steered me toward his office. The Chief was wearing a dark taupe suit and a French blue dress shirt. I gave him a big smile and a thumbs-up, and he self-consciously stroked his tie.
“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Wyatt muttered as he parked me in his chair. “But it’s too late now to change my mind, so just sit there and make lists, okay? There are some guys here who have high cholesterol, so

try not to smile at them and give them heart attacks. Don't flirt with anyone who's over forty, or overweight, or married, or under forty, or single. Got it?"
"I'm not a flirt," I said defensively, and pulled out my notebook. I couldn't believe he was being so dog-in-the-mangerish. That might be list-worthy.
"The evidence says otherwise. Since you told him he'd look good in blue, Chief Gray has worn a blue shirt every day. Maybe you should clue him in on some other colors."
"Oh, how sweet," I said, beaming. "He must have gone shopping that very day."
Wyatt studied the ceiling for a moment, then said, "Do you want some coffee? Or a Diet Coke?"
"No, I'm fine right now. Thank you. Where will you be, since I have your desk?"
"Around," he said unhelpfully, and left.
I didn't have time to get bored. Several people popped into the office to thank me for the bread pudding, and ask for the recipe. The women asked, that is; I don't think it occurred to the men. Between interruptions, I doodled in my notebook and wrote down other things that might or might not be relevant, but didn't hit on that magic detail that would tie everything together.
Around lunchtime, Wyatt returned with a white sack containing two barbecue sandwiches, and with two soft drinks hooked in his fingers. He moved me out of his chair—I don't know what it is about him and his chairs, that he can't share—and looked over my list of clues and my doodles while we ate lunch. He didn't seem impressed by my progress. He did like where I'd written his name, then drawn a heart around it and an arrow through the heart. He scowled, though, when he found his new list of transgressions.
After we had eaten he said, "The lab guys say that the black hairs are original, not dyed. And that they're Asian, which is a big break. How many Asians do you know?"
Now I was really puzzled. There aren't many Asians in this part of the country, and though I'd had some Asian friends in college, we hadn't kept in touch. "None since college, that I remember."
"Remember, Native Americans are of Asian heritage."

That put a whole new light on things, because this close to the Eastern Cherokee Reservation, there were a lot of Cherokees around. I knew a lot of people with Cherokee heritage, but I couldn't think of one who might want to kill me.

"I'll have to think about this," I said. "I'll make a list."

After he left, I did make a list of all the Native Americans I knew, but even as I was writing the names, I knew this was a waste of time. None of them had any reason to kill me.

I went back to my clues. I wrote down: *Asian hair.* Wasn't that what all good-quality human-hair wigs were made of? Asian hair was heavy and straight and glossy; anything could be done to it, in terms of color and curl. I wrote down *wig*, then circled the word.

If the person trying to kill me had been smart enough to wear a wig, then we shouldn't be paying any attention to the color of the hair. This threw the field of suspects wide open again. A wild idea struck me and I wrote down a name, with a question mark beside it. This was taking jealousy to the extreme, but I wanted to think about this person some more.

Around two o'clock, Wyatt stuck his head in the door. "Stay here," he said brusquely. "We have a call about a murder/suicide. Turn your cell phone on and I'll call you when I can."

If my cell phone is with me, it's always on. The big question was, when would he be back? I'd seen how long it takes to work crime scenes; he might not be back to fetch me until midnight. There is no good that comes of not having your own wheels.

The constant noise in the big room outside Wyatt's office had lessened considerably; when I went to the door, I saw that almost everyone had left. They were all probably going to the scene of the murder/suicide. If I'd been given the choice, I would have gone, too.

To my right, the elevator dinged, signaling someone's arrival. I looked around just as the person stepped out, and I froze in shock as Jason, of all people, came into view. Well, not shock; that's too strong a reaction. More like surprise. And I wasn't frozen, either, if you want to get literal about things.

I thought about ducking back into Wyatt's office, but Jason had already seen me. A big smile lit his face and he came toward me with long steps. "Blair. Did you get my message?"

“Hello,” I said with a lot less than enthusiasm, and didn’t bother answering his question. “What are you doing here?”
“Looking for Chief Gray. Same question back atcha.”
“There were some details to clear up,” I said vaguely. This was the first time I’d spoken to him in five years, and I felt uneasy about speaking at all. He was so firmly out of my life I could barely remember anything about our time together.
He was still handsome, but his looks didn’t speak to me at all. The state legislature wasn’t in session, but now that he was a state representative, he did things like play golf with the chief of police, and even when he was casually dressed, as now, he went for a higher fashion statement than he had before. Though he was wearing jeans and docksiders—no socks, of course—he also had on an oatmeal-colored linen jacket. Some linen blends now don’t wrinkle so horrifically; he hadn’t been smart enough to find one. His jacket looked as if he’d slept in it for a week even though he’d probably put it on fresh just that morning.
“I haven’t seen the chief since this morning,” I said, stepping back so I could terminate the conversation by closing the office door. “Good luck.”
Instead of going on his way, he stepped forward into the office doorway. “Is there something like a break room where he’d go for coffee, or anything?”
“He’s the chief,” I said drily. “He probably has his own coffeemaker. And someone to pour it for him.”
“Why don’t you walk with me while I look for him? We could catch up on old times.”
“No, thanks. I have paperwork to do.” I gestured toward Wyatt’s desk, where the paperwork was all his except for my notebook, but of course I’d gone through all his paperwork again, so in a way it was mine.
“Aw, come on,” Jason cajoled. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a snub-nosed pistol. “Walk with me. We have a lot to talk about.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

Obviously I would never have gone with him if he hadn’t had that pistol jammed in my side, but he did, so I did. I was sort of in shock, trying to wrap my mind around what was happening. Thinking about something else

until my subconscious felt ready to face this obviously wasn't going to work this time. By the time I realized he wouldn't have shot me in front of witnesses—and there had been a couple of other people still in the department—it was too late; I was already in his car with him.

He made me drive, while he kept the pistol trained on me. I thought about driving him into a telephone pole or something, but I flinched at the idea of being in yet another car accident. My poor body was just now recovering from the last one. I didn't want to get hit in the face by another air bag, either. Yeah, I know, a bruise is temporary but a bullet can be forever, so maybe I didn't make the best choice. Just in case I had to drive into a telephone pole, though, as a last resort, I glanced down at the steering wheel to make certain there was an air bag there. The car was a late model Chevrolet, so of course it had one, but after the week I'd had, I wanted to double-check.

The funny thing is, I was alarmed but not terrified. See, the main thing to know about Jason is that he'll do anything to protect his image. His whole life is built around his political career, polls, and his ambition. How he thought he could get away with murder when at least two people had seen me leaving with him, I don't know.

I followed his directions while I waited for him to realize this, but somehow he seemed to be in his own alternate reality. I didn't know where he was taking me; in fact, we seemed to be driving aimlessly around town while he tried to think of somewhere to go. He kept pulling at his lower lip, which, I remembered, was a habit he had when he was worrying about something.

"You wore a black wig, right?" I casually asked. "When you cut my brake line?"

He shot me a nervous glance. "How did you know?"

"Some hairs got caught on the undercarriage. The forensics team found them."

He looked faintly puzzled, then nodded. "Oh, yeah, I remember sort of catching the wig on something. I didn't think about any hair coming out because I couldn't feel anything pulling."

"They're checking now for a list of people who bought black wigs," I lied.

He gave me another nervous glance. Actually, it wasn't much of a lie. When Wyatt found my notebook with the word *wig* circled, he would definitely check it out.

“People saw me leaving with you,” I pointed out. “If you kill me, how are you going to explain that?”
“I’ll think of something,” he muttered.
“What? How can you dispose of my body? Besides, they’ll hook you up to a lie detector so fast your head will spin. Even if they can’t find enough evidence to bring you to trial, the publicity will ruin your career.” See, I know Jason; he has nightmares about anything that might threaten his career. And even though he’d cut my brake lines, I simply couldn’t see him killing me in person.
“You might as well just let me go,” I continued. “I don’t know why you’re trying to kill me—*wait a minute*! You might have cut my brake lines, but you definitely didn’t shoot at me last Sunday. What’s going on here?” I jerked around to stare at him and the car swerved. He cursed and I hurriedly straightened the wheel.
“I don’t know what you mean,” he said, staring straight ahead and forgetting to keep me covered with the pistol. See? Jason is just not cut out for a life of crime.
“Someone else shot at me.” My brain was racing, and all the separate little links were knotting together, forming a chain. “*Your wife!* Your wife tried to kill me, didn’t she?”
“She’s crazy jealous,” he blurted. “I can’t stop her; I can’t reason with her. This will ruin me if she gets caught, and she will, because she doesn’t know what she’s doing.”
That made two of them.
“So you thought you’d sort of kill me yourself so she wouldn’t have to? Beat her to the punch?”
“Something like that.” Frazzled, he raked a hand through his blond hair. “If you’re dead, she’ll stop obsessing about you.”
“Why on earth would she obsess about me? I am so totally out of your life; this is the first time I’ve spoken to you since our divorce.”
He mumbled something, and I threw a glare his way. “What? Speak up.” He mumbles when he feels guilty about something.
“It might be my fault,” he mumbled, slightly louder.
“Oh? How’s that?” I tried to sound encouraging, when what I really wanted to do was beat his head against the pavement or something.
“When we argue, I might say something about you,” he confessed, and now he was staring out the passenger window. Really. I thought about simply

reaching over and taking the pistol away from him, except he had his finger on the trigger, which is so totally stupid if you aren't an expert, and Jason wasn't. If he had been, he would have been watching me like a hawk instead of staring out the window.
"Jason, you dummy," I groaned. "Why would you do something stupid like that?"
"She's always trying to make me jealous," he said defensively. "I love Debra, I really do, but she isn't like you. She's clingy and insecure, and I got tired of the way she tried to make me jealous and I started firing back. I knew it made her mad, but I didn't know she'd flipped out about it. Last Sunday night, when I got home from playing golf and found out she'd actually shot at you, we had this huge argument and she swore she'd kill you if it was the last thing she did. I think she's been staking out your house or something, trying to find out if there's something going on between us. Nothing I said made any difference to her. She's crazy jealous, and if she kills you, I probably won't even be reelected as state representative. I can kiss the governorship good-bye."
I mulled all this over for a minute.
"Jason, I hate to tell you this, but you married a nitwit. That's fair, though," I added judiciously.
He looked at me. "How's that?"
"So did she."
That made him sulk for a few minutes, but finally he groaned and said, "I don't know what to do. I don't want to kill you, but if I don't, Debra is going to keep trying and she'll ruin my career."
"I have an idea. How about you have her committed to a mental institution," I suggested sarcastically. I meant it, too. She was a danger to others—namely, me—so she met the criteria. Or criterion. Whatever.
"I can't do that! I love her."
"Look. It seems to me you have a choice: if she kills me, it may ruin your career; but if you kill me, the results will be way more serious because you've made a prior attempt and this shows premeditation, which will get you in serious hot water. Not only that, I'm engaged to a cop, and he'll kill you." I took my left hand off the steering wheel and held it over for him to see the ring.
"Wow, that's a rock," he said admiringly. "I didn't think cops had that kind of money. Who is he?"

“Wyatt Bloodsworth. He questioned you the other day, remember?”
“So that’s why he was so nasty. I get it now. He was the football player, wasn’t he? I guess he has plenty of money.”
“He gets by,” I said. “But if anything happens to me, he’ll not only kill you—and the other cops would look the other way, because they like me—he’ll burn your village and sow your fields with salt.” I thought I’d throw in a little biblical warning just to impress him with the seriousness of the consequences.
“I don’t have any fields,” he said. “Or a village.”
Sometimes Jason could be stupendously literal. “I know that,” I said patiently. “It was a metaphor. What I meant was, he’ll totally destroy you.”
He nodded his head. “Yeah, I can see that. You’re looking hot these days.”
He tilted his head back against the seat and groaned. “What can I do? I can’t think of anything that will work. I called in that murder/suicide to get the cops out of the building, but not all of them left. You were right; there were witnesses. If I kill you, I’d have to kill them, too, and I don’t think that would work because by now the cops have probably found out that call was a false alarm and they’re back at the station.”
As if on cue, my cell phone rang. Jason jumped a foot. I started to fish around in my bag for the phone, but Jason said, “Don’t answer it!” and I pulled my hand out.
“That will be Wyatt,” I said. “He’ll go ape shit when he finds out I left with you.” That wasn’t biblical, but it was accurate.
Sweat beaded on Jason’s brow. “You can tell him we were just talking, right?”
“Jason. Get a clue. You’ve been trying to kill me. We have to get this settled or I’m telling Wyatt you made a pass at me, and he’ll take you apart all the way down to your molecules.”
“I know,” he groaned. “Let’s go to my house so we can talk, come up with a plan.”
“Is Debra there?”
“No, she’s watching your folks’ house, figuring you’ll turn up there sooner or later.”
She was stalking my parents? I’d scalp the bitch for that. Hot fury zipped through me, but I controlled it, because I needed to keep my head. I had talked Jason around, but I knew Jason and I wasn’t the least bit afraid of

him. Evidently his wife was crazy as a loon though, and I didn't know what we could do about her.

I drove to Jason's house, which of course is the one we'd bought together, and which I'd given him in the divorce. It hadn't changed much in five years; the landscaping was more mature, but that was about it. The house was red brick, two-story, with white shutters and trim. The style was modern, with interesting architectural details, but there was nothing about it to make it stand out from the rest of the neighborhood. I think developers have at the most five house plans and styles that they use, so subdivisions have a cookie-cutter look to them. The garage doors were down, so Debra wasn't at home.

When I pulled into the driveway, I said thoughtfully, "You know, it might have been smart to move rather than expect Debra to live here."

"Why's that?"

Like I said: clueless. "Because this is where we lived when we were married," I said patiently. "She probably feels like this is my house instead of hers. She needs her own house." Weird, but for the first time I felt a gleam of sympathy for her.

"There's nothing wrong with this house," he protested. "It's a good house, nice and modern."

"Jason. Buy the woman her own house!" I yelled. Sometimes that's the only way to get his attention.

"All right, all right. You don't have to yell," he said sulkily.

If I'd had a wall right there, I'd have beat my head against it.

We went inside, and I rolled my eyes when I saw he still had the same furniture. The man was dense beyond saving. *He* was the one Debra should kill.

Now, I knew the cavalry was on the way; the first place Wyatt and the guys would check would be Jason's house, right? They knew Jason wasn't the one who had shot me, but Wyatt would also see my notes and put two and two together the way I had. The person who was jealous of me was my ex-husband's new wife, only she wasn't so new, since they'd been married four years. How much more obvious could it be? Jason hadn't shot at me, but he'd left that worried message the next morning—after five years of no contact at all. Wyatt might not catch on immediately that Jason was the one who had cut my brake lines, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that I

could probably expect the first patrol car to come rolling up within five minutes.
“So,” Jason said, looking at me as if I had all the answers, “what can we do about Debra?”
“What do you mean, what can you do about me?”
The shriek made me jump about a foot straight up, not only because I hadn’t been expecting it, but because it obviously meant Debra was home, after all. On the list of things that were not good, that was at the top.
Jason jumped, too, and dropped the pistol, which didn’t go off—thank you, Jesus—because my heart probably would have stopped. It came close to stopping anyway when I turned around and faced the former Debra Schmale, now Mrs. Jason Carson, who appeared to be dead serious about her status. She was holding a rifle, and she had the stock up to her shoulder and her cheek against the stock as if she knew what she was doing.
I swallowed and put my tongue in gear, though my brain was still stuck in park. “He meant how could we convince you that you don’t have any reason to be jealous of me. This is the first time I’ve talked to Jason since our divorce, so he was just trying to get back at you for trying to make him jealous, by throwing me in your face to make you jealous, and really you should shoot him instead of me because I think that was a really shitty thing for him to do, don’t you?”
Under the circumstances I think that was a masterpiece of a speech, if I do say so myself, but she didn’t even blink. She kept that rifle aimed right at my chest. “I hate your guts,” she said in a low, vicious tone. “That’s all I hear—’Blair, Blair, Blair.’ Blair this and Blair that until I want to throw up.”
“Which, I’d like to point out, isn’t my fault. I had no idea he was doing that. I’m telling you, shoot him instead of me.”
For the first time Jason seemed to realize what I was saying. “Hey!” he said indignantly.
“Don’t ‘hey’ me,” I snapped. “You’re the one who caused this. You should get down on your knees and apologize to both of us. You’ve driven this poor woman almost crazy, and you’ve caused me to almost get killed. This is all your fault.”
“I’m not a *poor woman*,” Debra snapped. “I’m pretty and I’m smart, and he should appreciate me, but instead he’s still so in love with you he can’t think straight.”

“No, I’m not,” Jason said instantly, taking a step toward her. “I love *you*. I haven’t loved Blair in years, since way before we got divorced.”
“That’s true,” I said. “Has he ever told you he was cheating on me? Doesn’t sound to me as if he loved me, does it to you?”
“He loves you,” she repeated. Obviously she wasn’t about to listen to reason. “He insisted we live in this house—”
“Told you,” I said in an aside to Jason.
“*Stop talking to him*. I don’t want you to ever speak to him again. I don’t want you to ever *breathe* again.” Furiously she stepped closer, so close the rifle barrel was almost jabbing me in the nose. I drew back a little, because the bruises from the air bag were fading and I didn’t want a fresh set. “You got everything,” she breathed on a sob. “Oh, I know he kept the house, but he can’t bear to change it, so you might as well still have it. You got the Mercedes. You drive around town with the top down like you’re hot shit, and I have to drive a *Taurus* because he says it’s good for his image that we drive American cars.”
“A Taurus has really good suspension,” I said, trying to deflect her. See? Somehow my subconscious knew the car was important.
“I don’t give a shit about the suspension!”
Huh. She really should try it out before being so dismissive.
I thought I heard something outside, but I didn’t dare turn my head to look. Besides the obvious points of entry into the house—the front door and the back door and the windows—there was a set of French doors leading onto the patio from the breakfast room. From where I was standing, I could catch a glimpse of the French doors and I thought I saw movement there, but I couldn’t look directly at them or she would know something was up.
Jason, standing to my right, didn’t have the same angle and couldn’t see anything except the stairs. Debra could see out the living room window, but her view was restricted because of the angle of the house and the sheer curtains that were drawn over the windows to let in light but provide a measure of privacy. I was the only one who knew rescue was at hand.
But what if they busted in the way cops do and scared Debra, and she pulled the trigger? I was dead, that was “what if.”
“How did you learn how to use a rifle?” I asked, not because I cared but just to keep her talking, keep her focused on something besides shooting me right now.

“I used to go hunting with my father. I also shoot skeet, so I’m very accurate.” She gave a fleeting glance at the bandage on my upper arm. “If you hadn’t bent down when you did, you’d have seen how accurate I am. No, wait—you wouldn’t. Because you’d be dead.”
“I wish you’d get off this dead stuff,” I said. “It’s boring. Not only that, you won’t get away with it.”
“Sure I will. Jason won’t tell, because he doesn’t like negative publicity.”
“He won’t have to tell. Two cops saw him kidnap me.”
“Kidnap?” Her eyes rounded.
“He’s been trying to kill me, too,” I said. “So you won’t get caught. See, he does love you, because I wouldn’t do that for anyone.”
She glanced at him. “Is that true?” she asked hesitantly.
“I cut her brake line,” he admitted.
She stood very still for a moment, then tears began to well in her eyes. “You do love me,” she finally said. “You really love me.”
“Of course I do. I’m crazy about you,” he assured her.
Crazy was a very apt word under the circumstances, don’t you think?
I blew out a relieved breath. “Good, that’s settled,” I said. “Y’all have a nice life. I think I’ll just be going—”
I took a half step back, and several things kind of happened all at once. When I moved, Debra reacted automatically and swung the rifle at me. Behind her came a crashing sound as the French doors were kicked in, and as if in slow motion, I saw her jump, startled. When she swung the rifle at me, my body sort of reacted all on its own, without any command from me. Muscle memory, you know? She swung, I jerked back, and years of training took over. I kept on going, my body bending back, legs tensing for the spring that would take me over, my arms going out for balance. The room turned upside down; then my legs and back muscles took over and provided the thrust and twist.
As a backflip, it was a disaster. Both my legs came up and Debra was way too close: my left foot caught her under the chin and the other knocked the rifle flying. Unfortunately, her finger was on the trigger and the motion pulled it; the sharp crack was deafening. Because she was in the way, my legs couldn’t complete their proper rotation and I fell flat on my back, hard. My kick under her chin sent her stumbling backward, completely off balance, her arms windmilling. She lost the battle to regain her balance and hit on her butt, skidding across the polished hardwood floor.

“Ouch!” I shrieked, grabbing my left big toe. I was wearing sandals, which is not the best choice of footwear for kicking someone in the chin.
“Blair!” The house was suddenly full of cops, pouring in from every opening. Uniformed cops, plainclothes cops—and Wyatt. He was the one who had literally burst through the French doors when he thought she was about to shoot me, and he scooped me up off the floor, holding me so tight to his chest I could barely breathe. “Are you all right? Did she hit you? I don’t see any blood—”
“I’m fine,” I managed to say. “Except you’re squeezing me to death.” The iron band of his arms loosened just a bit, and I added, “I hurt my toe.”
He drew back and stared at me, as if he couldn’t believe I was all in one piece and had come out of this without even a scratch. After the example of this past week, he must have been expecting me to be bleeding from a dozen bullet wounds.
“A hurt toe?” he said. “Good God. This calls for a cookie.”
See? I told you he was a fast learner.

Epilogue

You know who got shot? Jason. Can you think of anyone more deserving? Debra’s wild shot creased his head, since the rifle barrel had been flying upward when she pulled the trigger, and he’d hit the floor as if he’d been poleaxed. Everyone says that, but I don’t really know what a poleax is. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s something to do with cutting timber, but if that was the Final Jeopardy! answer, I wouldn’t bet all of my money on that question.
She didn’t kill him, but he was bleeding like a stuck pig, because heads do that when something tears up the scalp. Both of them started blabbering away, sort of blaming each other but at the same time trying to take the blame on themselves, and none of it made any sense, so I explained everything to MacInnes and Forester, and Wyatt, and even Chief Gray, who for some reason had come along. I think almost the entire police department was there. The SWAT team was, in their cool black fatigues, and when the medics came, my pal Keisha was one of them. We greeted each other like long-lost girlfriends.

Getting things sorted out took a while, so I went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee for everyone. I hobbled a little bit because my toe hurt, but I didn't think it was broken.

About six o'clock, Wyatt took me home.

"Do me a favor," he said during the drive. "For the rest of our lives together, don't put me through another week that's anything like this past one, okay?"

"None of this was my fault," I said indignantly. "And I'm the one who's had the worst of it, you know. I've been shot and bruised and battered, and if you hadn't kept my mind off how much I hurt, I probably would have cried a lot."

He reached over and caught my hand, held it tight. "God, I love you. The guys are going to be talking about that karate kick you gave her for the rest of their lives. Even the SWAT guys were impressed, and they try to be real hard-asses. Where did you take lessons?"

"I provide all sorts of lessons at Great Bods," I said demurely. What, you thought I was going to tell him I sort of automatically did a backflip and didn't intend to do what I did? Not in this lifetime.

This proves beyond a doubt, however, that you never know when you'll need to do a backflip.

We called all the family and told them the crisis was over, which involved lots of explaining, but Wyatt and I didn't want any company. My latest close shave had been a hair too close, because there's something more immediate about a rifle in your face than a car accident, even though the accident had been horrific enough and that was what I dreamed about. I didn't dream about the rifle at all, maybe because Jason was the one who got shot, so that made it a good outcome, right? But we spent that evening cuddling and kissing and making plans for the future, sort of giddy with relief. Plans weren't all we made, of course. I'm talking about Wyatt, the horniest guy in the county. If he was happy, he wanted sex. If he was mad, he wanted sex. He celebrated everything with sex.

I foresaw a very happy and contented life with him.

The next day he took me car shopping. His sister, Lisa, delivered his Chevy Avalanche to him, thanked him for the loan of it, and asked me a million questions. Thank goodness I liked her immediately, but she was a lot like his mother, so there was no reason why I wouldn't have. I also liked his truck, and that's what we drove to the Mercedes dealership.

Of course I wanted another Mercedes. You don't think I'd let Jason and his nitwit wife stop me from buying my favorite car, do you? Picture me in a black convertible. Black is a statement of power, remember. The insurance company hadn't come through with the check yet and since it was Sunday, my bank wasn't open, but the salesman promised to hold my car until Monday evening. I was a happy camper when we arrived at Mom and Dad's house.

Dad answered the door, and held his finger up to his lips. "Shhh," he cautioned. "We've had another computer disaster and Tina has gone quiet."

"Uh-oh," I said, pulling Wyatt inside. "What happened?"

"She finally got her computer straightened out, she thinks, and this morning her monitor went blank. I just got back from the computer store with a new monitor, and she's in her office hooking it up."

Jenni came into the family room, and gave me a big hug. "I can't believe that stupid Jason," she said.

"I can. When you came by Mom's office, could you hear anything?"

"Not a word," Jenni said, looking worried. When Mom's mad, she mutters to herself. When she's beyond mad, she gets very, very quiet.

We heard Mom coming down the hall, and we all sat silently as she marched past without saying a word, or even glancing in our direction. She was carrying a large roll of plastic, which she took out into the garage. She came back in empty-handed, and again marched past us without saying anything.

"What's up with the plastic?" Wyatt asked, and we all shrugged in the classic "Who knows?" gesture.

There was a heavy thump, then a strange sliding noise. Mom came back down the hall, her expression grim and set. She had a thick cord clutched in her hands, and she was dragging the offending monitor behind her. We watched in silence as she dragged it to the garage door, down the two steps with more heavy thumps, and into the middle of the plastic she had spread on the garage floor.

She went to where Dad had his tools, attached to a big pegboard on one wall of the garage. She selected a hammer, weighed it in her hand, then returned it to its spot. She moved to what looked like a small sledgehammer or a mallet of some sort. I don't know tools, so I can't say for certain what it was. She took it down from the wall, considered it, and evidently decided it would meet her requirements. Then she returned to where the monitor was

sitting on the plastic, and beat it to smithereens. She hammered it until it was nothing more than a pile of pieces. Glass flew; plastic splintered. She beat it almost out of existence. Then she very calmly returned the sledgehammer to its place, dusted her hands, and walked back into the house with a smile on her face.

Wyatt had the weirdest expression in his eyes, as if he didn't know whether to laugh or run for the hills. Dad clapped him on the shoulder. "You're a smart man," he said encouragingly. "Just keep a regular check on your list of transgressions so you'll know if there are any major problems you need to handle, and you'll be okay."

"You promise?" Wyatt asked drily.

Dad laughed. "Hell, no. I have all I can handle; if you get in trouble, you're on your own."

Wyatt turned and winked at me. No, he wasn't on his own; we were in this together.